

P12

OMAN TO GEAR UP FOR BEACH SOCCER WC AFTER EID BREAK



P15

FRANCE TO REOPEN CAFES AND MUSEUMS FROM MAY 19



P20

BLOW-OUT US EARNINGS SUGGEST MARKET HAS ROOM TO RUN



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO POLAND PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Andrzej Duda of the Republic of Poland on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings along with his best wishes of good health and happiness to President Duda and the friendly people of Poland further progress and prosperity.

— ONA

WASHINGTON

US DENIES REPORTS OF PRISONER SWAP

The US State Department on Sunday denied reports of a prisoner swap with Iran after Tehran confirmed a Lebanese television report that an exchange was in the works. "Reports that a prisoner swap deal has been reached are not true", State Department spokesman Ned Price said. "As we have said, we always raise the cases of Americans detained or missing in Iran. We will not stop until we are able to reunite them with their families." Earlier, Iranian state television said that Tehran would free four Americans accused of spying in exchange for four Iranians held in the United States and the release of \$7 billion in frozen Iranian funds.

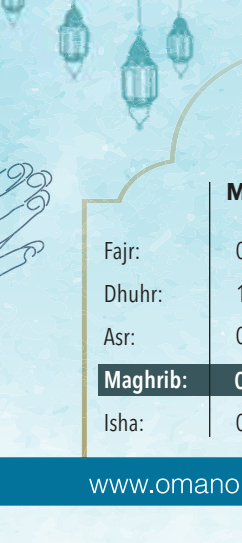
SEE ALSO P6

INSIDE



NORTH KOREA SAYS BIDEN POLICY SHOWS HOSTILE INTENT

P7



US REPUBLICANS GRAPPLE WITH WAY OUT OF LIMBO

P9

HM gets message from Saudi King



HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, on Sunday received Prince Faisal Farhan al Saud, Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia. The guest handed over a written message for His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik from King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia. The message is related to the bilateral relations and supporting fields of the joint cooperation between the two brotherly countries, as well as countries of the region. Prince Faisal conveyed greetings and best wishes of Saudi King to His Majesty the Sultan. DETAILS ON P2

PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI



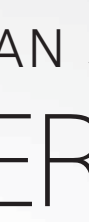
WASH HANDS



DISINFECT SURFACES



DISINFECT HANDS



USE FACE MASK



USE RUBBER GLOVES

PREVENTION ALONE CAN SAVE ALL OF US

ALL COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES TO CLOSE FROM MAY 8-15

MUSCAT: The Supreme Committee in charge of discussing the mechanism for dealing with developments resulting from the spread of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) held a meeting chaired by Hammoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, to follow up the developments of the pandemic, measures to prevent it and ways to avoid its spread, and deal with its various effects.

The Supreme Committee has issued new decisions to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

The lockdown hours have been extended to between 7 pm and 4 am from Saturday

(May 8) until May 15. All commercial activities will be prohibited throughout the day, with the exception of food stores, gas stations and healthcare centres.

The Supreme Committee has also decided to suspend the attendance of employees at their places of work and to adopt a remote work system in the various units of the state's administrative apparatus and other public legal persons, starting from Sunday (May 9) until Tuesday (May 11).

The Supreme Committee urges private sector companies to implement business continuity plans

by working remotely and reducing the number of employees who are required to come to the workplace.

Supreme Committee allows home delivery during the lockdown period between May 8 and May 15.

The Supreme Committee has decided not to hold Eid prayers and traditional Eid markets and to prohibit gatherings of all kinds in various locations, including beaches, parks, and public places, during the days of Eid al Fitr, and include gatherings of families, greeting gatherings and collective celebrations of Eid. — ONA

SEE ALSO P3

Malls told to follow Omanisation norms

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

The Ministry of Labour has reaffirmed that shopping malls and supermarkets will have to adhere to ministerial decision No 8/2021, which stipulates that the practice of some professions in shopping malls and supermarkets will be restricted to Omanis from July 20, 2021.

The following professions in shopping malls and supermarkets will be limited to Omanis — professions in customer service, cashier, currency exchange, administration and shelf-stackers.

The ministry has urged everyone to adhere to the decision mentioned above to avoid penalties against violators.

Work permits for the above-mentioned occupations will not be renewed for non-Omani workers after expiry.

Omanisation in large commercial establishments is feasible, and it has been well-received, said the Minister of Manpower recently in an interview.

"Some other countries have also completely nationalised these sectors, and after a study,



The following professions will be limited to Omanis — professions in customer service, cashier, currency exchange, administration and shelf-stackers

we found that it is easy to apply in Oman. Even if there is a need for training, there are solutions and we have opened part-time work students in universities and also for housewives", Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali al Baowain, Minister of Labour.

TURN TO P3

ISS astronauts splash down off Florida on SpaceX

WASHINGTON: A SpaceX Crew Dragon capsule carrying four astronauts back to Earth splashed down off Florida early on Sunday in Nasa's first night-time ocean landing in more than 50 years.

The crew reported they were feeling well after their arrival back on Earth following a nearly six-month mission aboard the International Space Station, Nasa said.

The capsule splashed down at



Support teams work around the spacecraft shortly after it landed with Nasa astronauts in the Gulf of Mexico. — Reuters

2:56 am in the dark in the Gulf of Mexico off Panama City after a six-and-a-half-hour flight from the ISS, night-vision images relayed by Nasa's WB-57 high-altitude research aircraft showed.

Teams aboard the Go Navigator recovery ship retrieved the capsule and hoisted it onto the deck about half-an-hour later. It was the first night-time splashdown for Nasa since the crew of Apollo 8 arrived in the Pacific Ocean on December 27, 1968.

Commander Michael Hopkins was the first to emerge after the hatch was opened, doing a little jig as he set foot on deck, followed shortly after by fellow Nasa astronaut Victor Glover.

"On behalf of Crew-1 and our families, we just want to say thank you... It's amazing what can be accomplished when people come together. Y'all are changing the world. Congratulations. It's great to be back", Hopkins said in a Nasa tweet.

— AFP



FOR NATURE LOVERS!

The distinctive rock formations in Ras Al Jinz attract a wide range of professional photographers, amateurs, geologists and students researching in this sector. In this regard, photographer Hussein bin Ali al Amri pointed out that Ras Al Jinz beach is a major tourist attraction, especially for photography enthusiasts, stressing that the diversity in nature around us allows anyone who carries a camera to capture the most beautiful pictures and the most wonderful moments, from sunrise, sunset and views of mountains, waterfalls, green spaces, lakes, sea waves, lighthouses, desert and other charming views. DETAILS ON P2

Oman and Saudi Arabia review growing ties



MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, on Sunday received Prince Faisal bin Farhan al Saud, Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

At the beginning of the meeting, the guest handed over a written message for His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik from the Custodian of the Two Holy

Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the KSA. The message is related to the bilateral relations and supporting fields of the joint cooperation between the two brotherly countries, as well as countries of the region. Prince Faisal conveyed greetings and best wishes of the King to His Majesty the Sultan. The meeting reviewed the strong, growing relations between the Sultanate and the Saudi

Arabia stemming from the firm bonds binding the two countries' brotherly peoples.

The meeting also reviewed current issues pertaining to supporting the GCC march and the latest regional and international developments, as well as issues of common concern.

HH Sayyid Fahd asked Prince Faisal to convey greetings and best wishes of His Majesty the Sultan to

King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud.

Prince Faisal reaffirmed the deep, historic relations between Oman and KSA and the constructive cooperation between them. He underscored the importance of the fields of joint cooperation between the two sides in various spheres in support of the strong, fraternal ties.

The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. — ONA



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, receives Prince Faisal Farhan al Saud, Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and his delegation upon their arrival on a one-day visit to the Sultanate. — ONA

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Ras Al Jinz through the lens

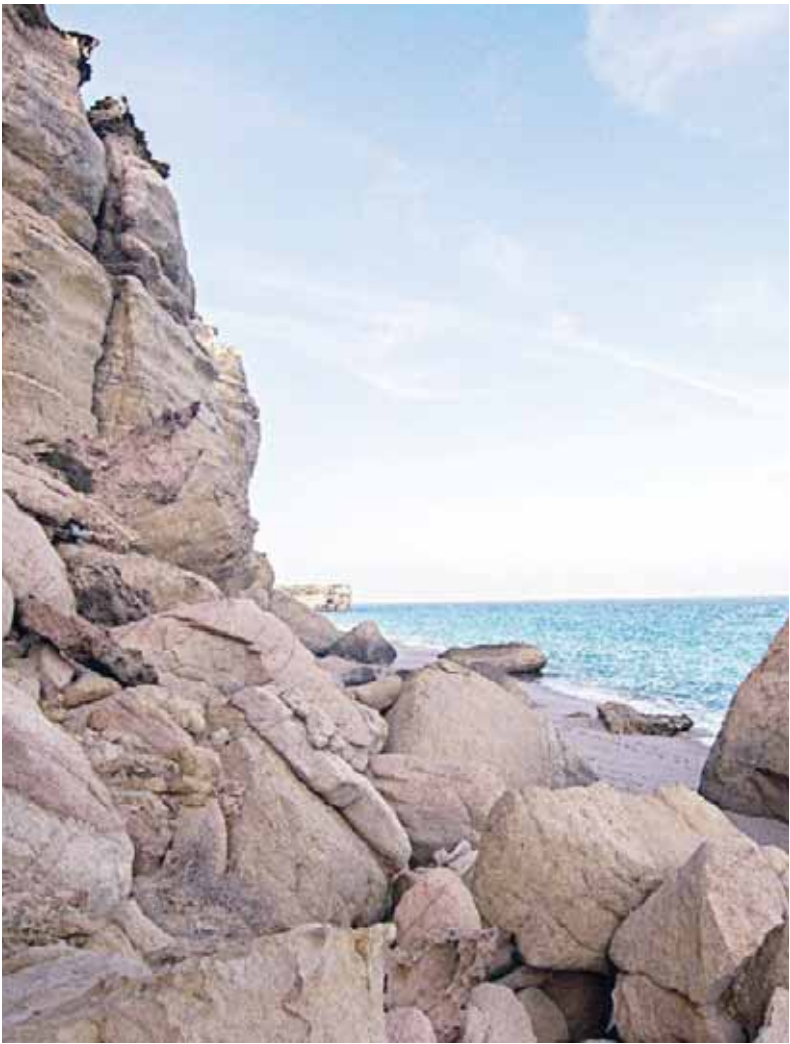


MUSCAT: The rare rock formations in Ras Al Jinz in the Wilayat of Sur have been attracting the interest of professional photographers, geologists and student researchers.

“Ras Al Jinz Beach is a tourist attraction, especially for photography enthusiasts. The diversity in nature around us allows anyone who carries a camera to capture the most beautiful pictures and the most wonderful moments,” said photographer Hussein bin Ali al Amri.

He added that “Ras Al Jinz is distinguished by its rock formations, which are attractive to the lenses of photographers.”

The Ras al Hadd coast is one of the most important and



prominent tourist attractions and is the first spot on which the sun shines in the Sultanate and the Arabian Peninsula, and is characterised by the availability of many natural places and moderate weather throughout the year.

— ONA



Respite in Coronavirus cases after a massive surge in April

Daily deaths continue to be a concern

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

The Ministry of Health on Sunday announced 2,554 new cases of Coronavirus (Covid-19) and 33 deaths in the last three days.

The total number of positive cases registered in the Sultanate has now reached 195,807, including 2,043 deaths.

The total number of recoveries is 176,833, while the recovery rate is 90.3 per cent. 101 people were admitted to hospitals across the country, taking the total number of inpatients to 821, including 276 in intensive care units.

Keeping with the recent trends, 1,313 of 2,554 cases were reported from Muscat, 323 from Dhofar and 213 from North al Batinah.

Of the 33 deaths reported, 14 were from Muscat, 10 from Dhofar, and four from North Batinah.

According to analysis, Oman started recording more than five deaths on a regular basis (not including the three-day figures Sundays) from March 1.

The single most daily deaths of 16 (not including Sunday figures) was reported during this new third wave (starting March 1) was reported on April 20 (19 deaths), April 21 (17 deaths) April 22 (16 deaths).

The single daily infection cases started crossing the 1,000-mark during this wave from March 15 and less than 1,000 daily cases were reported two consecutive days on April 27 (928) and April 28 (927).

According to statistics available



to the Observer, Oman on Sunday was ranked 20th for both daily infections and deaths, 15th in terms of recoveries and 104th for the mortality rate of 1.04 per cent.

The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic had warned that the period from April 1 to May 31 will be an extremely difficult stage in the pandemic's development in the Sultanate.

"To avoid the worse, the Supreme Committee might take a series of tougher and more comprehensive measures that might culminate into lockdown and total ban on movement during the above-mentioned period."

The supreme committee started imposing gradual restrictions from March 4 when it ordered that commercial activities across the country be suspended between 8 pm and 5 am.

Prevention alone can save all of us

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

The news emerging from countries around the world on Covid-19 indicates that 'no one is safe till everyone is safe'. Prevention alone can save us from the clutches of the virus, according to the Ministry of Health.

It was initially thought that the old and sick are the only vulnerable and for young and fit it's not dangerous. In fact, no one is safe from this disease, and its severity and mortality seem to be unpredictable.

The fatalities of physically fit trainers in India, the emergence of Indian variant from other countries and children, and elders falling sick are signs to be taken seriously, medics based in Oman advise.

According to them, as long as people do not follow the Covid-19 preventive measures, they are not safe from getting infected.

"It is sad to learn that three bodybuilders lost their life due to the virus. They were physically fit, and their immunity was high. Still, no

one can predict which organ the virus can destroy in your body even though you are healthy.

We need to take all precautions and do our best to follow the protocols and leave the rest to our creator. We will depart this world once our predetermined time comes around", Dr Abood al Sawafi, Vice-Chancellor of Buraimi University, said.

Dr Raaji Narayanan Kutty, an expert in lifestyle medicine, says, "With coronavirus, the only thing that helps is, following self-protection norms, wearing mask, social distancing when you are outdoors."

"Also, take steam inhalation at least once a day or best twice a day. Drinking warm water with few cumin seeds, ginger, garlic, little turmeric, some black pepper, and keeping immunity strong with fruits and vegetables helps," adds Dr Raaji.

"Younger populations and children are vulnerable to the new variants. Apart from the bodybuilders, we lost a young doctor in her twenties last week in Kerala. Even vaccinated individuals get infected, and that too sometimes fatally. It underscores the need for

taking precautions in every possible way," reminds Dr Benny Panakkan of a group of hospitals.

"Most importantly, the speed with which the patients are getting severe, they require ventilatory support for 24 to 48 hours, and some are collapsing very fast, even people with good immunity, good nutrition, are ending up with severe symptoms which is the case in people like bodybuilders who take good nutritious diet, but still could have inadequate immunity to fight the infection," says Dr Dilip Singhvi, a specialist in internal medicine.

"The virulence is very high and that's why it is of paramount importance for people not to lower guards against the virus, follow covid guidelines and keep wearing mask, social distancing, and hand hygiene," he added.

Medics advise people not to panic or be stressed. They suggest having relaxing activities, interact with family and friends. A systematic lifestyle without the above precautions against Covid-19 is not going to help at all.

■ FROM PAGE 1

Malls told to follow Omanisation directive

In the first quarter of 2021, the number of Omanis who were appointed for the first time in the private sector is 3,010, which include 677 citizens without a General Education Diploma, 909 citizens with a General Education Diploma and its equivalent, 390 citizens with a university diploma,

1,011 university graduates, and 23 citizens with a master's and doctorate degrees.

In addition, 110 job opportunities were provided through the Ministry of Labour initiatives resulting from the decisions of localisation of professions, the initiative to finance educational qualification

and partial work initiatives, and 2,974 job opportunities resulting from training and qualification in the human resources development and via training associated with employment, on-the-job training, and the entrepreneurship programme for small and medium enterprises.

Work on Muscat Pavilion smart offices to start soon

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAY 2

Asawer Real Estate Company has signed an agreement with Muscat Hills Joint Development Company, the real estate developer of Muscat Pavilion smart office project located in Muscat Hills.

Muscat Hills Joint Development Company is the real estate developer of the project, which comes after the merger of Tathmeer Development Company and Al Mokhtar Real Estate Company.

The agreement was signed by Siham al Harthy from Asawer Real Estate Company, and by Dawood Sulaiman al Hinai and Abdul Rahim al Kharousi, on the part of Muscat Hills Joint Development Company.

"The unique Pavilion smart offices project achieves a shift in investment and an attractive business environment," said Siham al Harthy

Al Hinai said the value of the project is RO 33 million and the construction works will start next week.



STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAY 2

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in India on Saturday announced a policy for the tabulation of marks for Class 10 board exams which have been cancelled in view of the Covid-19 pandemic situation in the country, the local Indian media quoting the board said.

Twenty marks for each subject will be for internal assessment as every year, 80 marks will be calculated on basis of the students' performance in various tests or exams throughout the year.

The students will be assessed out of a maximum of 100 marks for each subject. As per the policy of the board, 20 marks are for internal assessment and 80 marks are for year-end board examinations.

The weightage in terms of maximum marks for schools that have conducted the tests and exams through the year will be — periodic test/unit test (10 marks), Haly year exam (30 marks) and pre-board exams (40 marks).

The board has asked schools to form a result committee consisting of a principal and seven teachers for finalising the results. Five teachers from the school should be from Mathematics, Social Science, Science, and two languages, and

CBSE announces marking scheme for Class 10, results by June 20



Schools will also have to ensure that the marks awarded by them should be in consonance with past performance of the school in Class 10 board exams. — AFP

two teachers from neighbouring schools should be co-opted by the school as the external members of the committee.

Schools will also have to ensure that the marks awarded by them should be in consonance with past performance of the school in Class 10 board exams.

Schools are expected to provide a fair and objective assessment of the student and have been given the autonomy and flexibility to do so. However, to take care of

the variations in school-level evaluation processes, there is a need to standardise the scores across schools through a process of moderation of marks.

CBSE has also warned schools against indulging in unfair and biased practices for assessment or they will have to face penalty or disaffiliation.

The board said that the result will be announced by June 20. The schools will form eight-member result committees by

May 5. The provision for school-wise distribution of marks as well as the finalisation of the rationale document will happen by May 10. For candidates who have not appeared in enough tests through the year, the schools will conduct an online or telephonic assessment for them by May 15 and will have to finalise the result by May 25.

The controller said that the marks will have to be submitted to the CBSE by June 11 and the result will be declared by June 20.



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

@lakshmioman

Twenty days into Ramadhan and one more day make it 21 days. Good deeds of Ramdhan becomes a habit. If you have not set a goal yet, it is still never too late.

Many would have seen the difference on the weighing scale. The holy month of Ramadhan is known for the detoxification process due to the fast from Fajr prayer till sunset until Maghrib.

Breaking the fast is to rehydrate and regain the energy from the food and drinks consumed.

Why is it important to maintain a slow pace of eating while breaking the fast? That is a question we do not think about much as we sit for Iftar.

After being on an empty stomach for so many hours, it is helpful to start eating slowly.

"We should eat slowly while breaking the fast and ensure that we start with fluid, low-fat fluid rich food. I advise you to take fruits and vegetables instead of sweets and food that contain sugar and fat," said Dr Mariam al Waili, Senior Consultant in Nutritional Medicine, Director of Supportive Services, Ministry of Health.

Although deep-fried food items, creamy sweets are an attraction, they could be the cause of weight gain during Ramadhan.

"Because of the change in food timings and lack of fluid during the day, some people might suffer from constipation. So when they eat, they are supposed to eat high fibre food such as whole grain, bran, high fibre cereals, fruits, lentils, vegetables, dry fruits and nuts alongside plenty of fluid might help in constipation as well. They must also do some physical activity such as going for a walk after Taraweeh, that is two hours after eating," Dr Mariam explained.

She added that the Covid-19 pandemic has made Ramadhan



HEALTH BENEFITS OF FASTING

BREAKING THE FAST IS TO REHYDRATE AND REGAIN THE ENERGY FROM THE FOOD AND DRINKS CONSUMED

very important this year because the virus has affected millions of people worldwide and killed thousands, unfortunately, especially people with immune deficiency.

"So indeed we should maintain good hygiene and support the immune system along with moderate exercise. Training and proper nutrition are the most important factors to support immune functioning. So consuming high-calorie food leads to obesity, causing chronic inflammatory diseases, which is known as low-grade inflammation. Many human and animal studies have shown that diets, especially that mimic fasting, improve many health indicators both in healthy people and people with chronic diseases," noted Dr Mariam.

According to Dr Mariam, the benefits of fasting such as reduction in meal frequency, diets with meal frequencies such as meals every other day fasting or calorie restriction and others have shown to increase life span and improve insulin resistance and continuous energy restriction amongst obese and non-diabetic subjects. Therefore it might have an important role in protecting against obesity-related cancer.

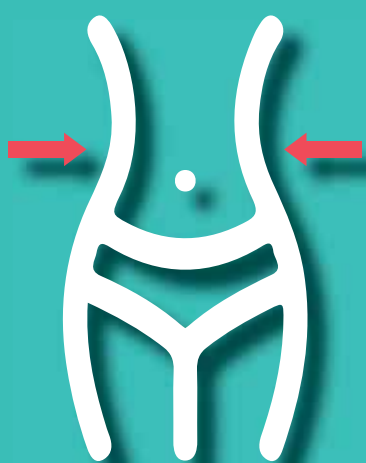
"There is also a decrease in resting heart rate, insulin, circulating level of glucose, which is favourable in bringing down risks of cardiovascular diseases. It also reduces fat mass, cholesterol and also there is a reduction in blood pressure. This is why fasting is highly recommended because it reduces many types of inflammation.

But if people are sick and unable to fast, it is better to eat a well-nourished diet containing vitamin C, protein and take food that is rich in vitamin D and Zinc to boost the immune system. Some people who have recovered from Covid-19 might still feel weak to perform fast.

Once they have built up their strength, they can continue to fast," she advised.

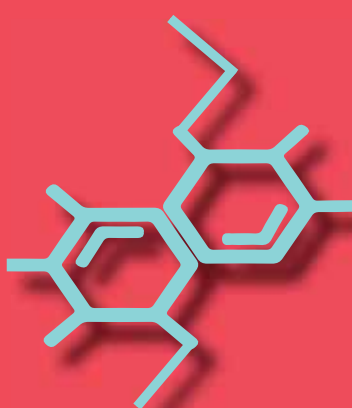
1

CAN HELP LOSE WEIGHT



2

REDUCES INSULIN RESISTANCE



3

IMPROVES HEART HEALTH



4

INITIATES CELLULAR REPAIR PROCESSES



5

MAY HELP PREVENT CANCER



UK: G7 to look at rapid response against Russian ‘propaganda’

LONDON: The Group of Seven richest countries will look at a proposal to build a rapid response mechanism to counter Russian “propaganda” and disinformation, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said.

Speaking ahead of a G7 foreign ministers’ meeting in London, the first such in-person meeting for two years, Raab said the United Kingdom was “getting the G7 to come together with a rapid rebuttal mechanism” to counter Russian misinformation.

“So that when we see these lies and propaganda or fake news being put out there, we can — not just individually, but come together to provide a rebuttal and frankly to provide the truth, for the people of this country but also in Russia or China or around the world,” Raab said.

Russia and China are trying to sow mistrust across the West, whether by spreading disinformation in elections or by spreading lies about Covid-19 vaccines, according to British, US and European security officials.



Britain's Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab attends BBC TV's *The Andrew Marr Show* in London. — Reuters

Russia denies it is meddling beyond its borders and says the West is gripped by anti-Russian hysteria. China says the West is a bully and that its leaders have a post-imperial mindset that

makes them feel they can act like global policemen.

Britain has identified Russia as the biggest threat to its security though it views China as its greatest long-term

challenge, militarily, economically and technologically.

Raab will meet US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday, kicking off a week of diplomacy aimed at reinvigorating the G7’s role and forming a wider bulwark against those it sees as undermining the rules-based international order.

“The scope for intense global cooperation, international cooperation with our American partners and indeed the wider G7, that we’re convening this week has never been greater”, Raab said.

He stressed that meeting in person — something only possible due to measures like daily testing of attendees — would make diplomacy much easier: “You can only do so much by Zoom.”

The G7 members are Britain, the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan and their combined gross domestic product is about \$40 trillion — a little less than half of the global economy. — Reuters

Chad junta lifts curfew imposed after Deby death

N'DJAMENA: Chad’s new ruling junta announced on Sunday that it has lifted a curfew introduced after the shock death of longtime leader Idriss Deby Itno and the installation of a military council led by his son.

An overnight curfew, barring people from leaving their homes between 6 pm and 5 am, was introduced on April 20, hours after the military announced that Deby had died from wounds sustained in fighting with rebel forces. The start of the curfew was later pushed back to 8 pm.

A decree signed by the military council’s spokesman Azem Bermandoa Agouna said the curfew had been lifted “after evaluating the steps initially taken by the transitional military council (CMT) across the country and the security situation”.

Chad has remained tense since Deby’s death, with the military saying that six people were killed last week during demonstrations in N’Djamena and the south against what the opposition have branded an “institutional coup d’etat”. A local non-governmental organisation has put the death toll at nine. More than 650 people were arrested during the protests, which had been banned by the authorities. — AFP

South Africa to ban breeding lions in captivity for hunting

PRETORIA: South Africa on Sunday revealed plans to ban the breeding of lions in captivity for trophy hunting or for tourists to pet, in a bid to promote a more “authentic” experience.

The decision was reached following recommendations contained in a study by a special government-appointed panel into the controversial practice.

The panel was studying the management and rules governing the hunting, trade and keeping in captivity of lions, elephants, rhino and leopards.

Environment Minister Barbara Creecy told a news conference that the report said, “We must halt and reverse the domestication of lions through captive breeding and keeping.”

“We don’t want captive breeding, captive hunting, captive (cubs) petting, captive use of lions,” the minister said.

The decision, which is yet to be formulated into policy, is likely to set the government on a collision course with the powerful multi-million dollar lion captive breeding industry.

The minister cautioned that the recommendations were not aimed at stifling the hunting industry.

“Legal regulated hunting of the iconic species under the regulatory environment will continue to be permitted, we are not banning legal regulated permitted hunting”, she said.

Creecy added that the report was advising that action be “taken immediately to stop tourists’ interaction with captive lions, including cub petting”.

The practice of hunting lions raised in captivity has long been controversial in South Africa, where a large number of animals are confined to pens ringed with electric fences.

Campaigns to ban the importation of captive-bred lion trophies have in recent years gathered steam in the United States, Australia and several countries in Europe. — AFP



We don’t want captive breeding, captive hunting, captive (cubs) petting, captive use of lions

BARBARA CREECY
Environment Minister

الشركة المتحدة للطاقة (ش.م.ع.) UNITED POWER COMPANY (SAOG)



P.O. Box 147, PC 134, Jawharat A'Shatti, Sultanate of Oman, Tel: 24698498, Fax: 24698496, Website: www.upcmanah.com

UNAUDITED CONDENSED FINANCIAL STATEMENT FOR THE QUARTER ENDED 31 MARCH 2021.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS’ REPORT

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of United Power Company SAOG (“UPC” or the “Company”), I am glad to present you with the Report of the Company for the quarter ended 31 March 2021.

UPC was incorporated in 1995 following the execution of the Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) entered with Ministry of Electricity and Water (Novated to OPWPC after promulgation of the Sector Law in 2005) for Phase 1 in June 1994. This covered generation of 90 MW of power and its transmission to designated centers identified in the PPA. The Phase 1 facilities started commercial operations in September 1996 for the period of 20 years ending in September.

2016. Subsequently, in 1999, a Supplemental Agreement to the Power Purchase Agreement (SAPPA) was executed for Phase 2, which augmented the power generation by an additional 180 MW, which commenced commercial operations in May 2000 for the term ending in May 2020. Both the PPA and SAPPA were designed based on Build-Own-Operate Transfer (BOOT) whereby the Plant and Transmission assets would be transferred back to the Government at the end of their respective terms. To align with Phase 2 term which ended in May 2020, the Phase 1 generating plant term was also extended from September 2016 to May 2020. The transmission assets of Phase 1 were transferred back to the government owned Companies (OETC and Mazoon Electricity Distribution) in 2016 on completion of 20 years.

In April 2020, we were advised by OPWP to transfer the UPC power generating assets (Manah Plant) to one of the NAMA group Company Al Ghubrah Power and Desalination Company SAOC (GPDCo). The actual handover of the Manah Plant happened on 1 May 2020 in accordance with the terms of the PPA and SAPPA. A separate Transfer Agreement was executed between UPC, OPWPC and GPDCo in this regard. Accordingly, UPC does not have any operating assets in the Company now.

Furthermore, the electricity regulator Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR formerly AER) has informed UPC of the revocation of the Generation License granted by them to operate the Plant, which effectively means that UPC cannot continue its power generating business.

Since 1 May 2020 to date, the Company through several disclosures have kept abreast its shareholders, of the actions taken by the Company towards resolving pending matters.

On 24 November 2020, the Capital Market Authority (CMA) was informed that the Board of Directors of the Company have approved to convert the Company from a SAOG to a SAOC in their meeting held on 27 October 2020. The letter to the CMA committed to pursue the CMA Circular No. E/8/2017, titled ‘controls regulating the transformation of public joint stock companies. One of the key requirements of this circular was to get support of major shareholders of holding 75% of the share capital and determination of offer price as per an independent professional firm.

Both requirements were met and after the audited financial statements for the year 2020 and the valuation report to determine the revised offer price was submitted to the CMA, we had received on 28th March 2021 an initial approval from the Authority for the conversion. This was appropriately disclosed to the shareholders instantly. Accordingly, the

preference shareholders have initiated the purchase of shares of minority shareholders. The process of acquisition commenced on 12th April 2021 and will end on 12th May 2021. The exit price fixed by the valuer in consultation with the Authority is RO 1.015 per share. This is an opportunity for minority shareholder to exit from UPC and avoid the risk of losing the value of their holding.

Furthermore, the Company has asked MCDC to send reminder messages by WhatsApp. For those shareholders who have not updated their records in MCDC, we have also decided to publish the reminders in Arabic newspaper as well.

To re-iterate, the essential purpose of the conversion to a SAOC is to expedite the shareholders’ access to their equity in the Company, and not wait till lengthy liquidation proceedings are completed. The Company will not be able to start liquidation proceedings till some of the key technical and commercial issues are resolved with its client and its operator. This is expected to be addressed in the second quarter of 2022.

We expect the legal process of the conversion and eventual delisting will happen before end of the third quarter of 2021.

During the three months of Q1 the Company continued to follow up with NAMA for removing the spare parts from Manah site that belonged to UPC. This is expected to complete by end of May 2021 and incurring contractual costs including staff and management related expenses.

The current capital of the Company is OMR 2,000,000 (OMR Two million). Once the conversion is completed, it is the intention of the Company to reduce the capital to OMR 500,000 (OMR 0.5 Million). This was discussed and approved in the AGM of the shareholders held on 31st March 2021.

A limited management and staff have been retained till the liquidation of the Company.

We thank His Majesty, the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said for opening up the electricity sector to the private sector, a first of its kind in Oman and the greater Middle East in 1994 and entrusting it to our Company to build, own, operate and transfer the Manah Plant.

The Company wishes to thank all the stakeholders involved in the Project in making it a success - our associates, suppliers, contractors, and our Operator and the Plant staff, whose diligence and application has led Manah Power Plant to establish records in Health & Safety (zero LTI since inception) that will be an industry standard.

The Company wishes to place on record its gratitude to all directors, management, and staff of the Company, both past and present, for their service.

United Power Company thanks His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik, his Government, APSR, OPWPC, MEM 1 Statutory entities like Environment Authority (formerly MECA) the CMA for the opportunity to serve the community through the Manah Power Plant. The Company is proud to be part of this historical journey in contributing to the security and stability of the Sector.

May Allah protect them for all of us.

Murtadha Ahmed Sultan
Chairman of the Board

Unaudited condensed Financial statements of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the Quarter ended 31 March 2021.

	31 March 2021	31 Dec 2020
Income		
Revenue	-	1,128
Financial income	-	185
Interest & Other income	10	196
	10	1,509
Expenses		
General and administrative expenses	(140)	(2,369)
	(140)	(2,369)
(loss) before tax for the period	(130)	(860)
Income tax expense	-	(370)
Net (loss) after tax	(130)	(1,230)
Basic (loss) per share (RO)	(0.065)	(0.615)

Unaudited condensed Balance Sheet for the Quarter ended 31 March 2021.

	31 March 2021	31 Dec 2020
Current assets		
Inventories	53	53
Trade and other receivables	7	182
Cash and bank balances	3,298	3,151
Total current assets	3,358	3,386
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
Capital and reserves		
Share capital	2,000	2,000
Legal reserve	667	667
Retained earnings (Accumulated losses)	(592)	(462)
Total capital and reserves	2,075	2,205
Current liabilities		
Trade and other payables	1,115	1,012
Taxation	168	169
Total current liabilities	1,283	1,181
Total equity and liabilities	3,358	3,386
Net assets per share (RO)	1.038	1.103

Note: The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests the company in either Arabic or English as requested within 7 days.

Iran negotiator: US sanctions on oil, banks would be lifted

VIENNA: Iran's chief nuclear negotiator said on Saturday Tehran expects US sanctions on oil, banks and most individuals and institutions to be lifted based on agreements so far in Vienna talks, Iranian media reported, while Washington again played down the prospect of an imminent breakthrough.

Russia and Western European powers meanwhile gave contrasting accounts of the task ahead in the talks to bring Iran and the United States fully back into compliance with a 2015 nuclear deal, as the talks adjourned for six days.

"Sanctions ... on Iran's energy sector, which include oil and gas, or those on the automotive industry, financial, banking and port sanctions, all should be lifted based on agreements reached so far," Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi was quoted as saying by Iranian state media.

Araqchi did not say under which mechanism sanctions would be lifted or refer to how Tehran would meet Washington's demands and return to its commitments under the deal.

"We will negotiate until the two sides' positions come closer and our demands are met," he said. "If they are met there will be an agreement, if not there will naturally be no agreement."

Asked to comment, the US State Department referred back to past statements, including remarks on Friday from the US national security adviser, Jake Sulli-



European External Action Service Deputy Secretary General Enrique Mora and Iranian Deputy at Ministry of Foreign Affairs Abbas Araqchi at the meeting of the JCPOA Joint Commission in Vienna. — Reuters

van, who said the talks were in "an unclear place."

"We've seen willingness of all sides, including the Iranians, to talk seriously about sanctions relief restrictions and a pathway back into the JCPOA," Sullivan said, referring to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the nuclear deal's title.

"But it is still uncertain as to whether this will culminate in a deal in Vienna," he said.

The State Department also referred to remarks by State Department spokesman Ned Price on Thursday, when he said the

Iran Deputy Foreign Minister did not say under which mechanism sanctions would be lifted or refer to how Iran would meet US demands and return to its commitments under the deal

sides were "not on the cusp of any breakthrough" and there was "a potentially long road ahead."

President Joe Biden is seeking

to return to the deal that former President Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018. Trump reimposed sanctions against Tehran and Iran responded by breaching many of the deal's limits on its nuclear activities.

Talks began last month in Vienna with the remaining parties to the deal — Iran, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany — meeting in the basement of a luxury hotel, and the United States based in another hotel across the street. Iran has refused to hold direct meetings with US officials.

— Reuters

Israel observes day of mourning for stampede victims

TEL AVIV: Israel observed a day of mourning on Sunday for 45 people crushed to death at a Jewish religious festival, with flags lowered to half-staff and questions raised about accountability for one of the country's worst civilian disasters.

In accordance with Jewish tradition, funerals were held with as little delay as possible. More than 20 of the victims of Friday's disaster on Mount Meron were buried overnight after official identification was completed.

"I only wish that we achieve even a small fraction of your stature in studies and holy devotion," Avigdor Chayut said, eulogising his 13-year-old son, Yedidya, at a funeral in the town of Bnei Brak, near Tel Aviv.

The victims died when an

overnight annual pilgrimage by large crowds of ultra-Orthodox faithful to the tomb of a second-century Jewish mystic, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, in northern Israel ended in a stampede.

Witnesses described a pyramid of bodies, including several children, in a packed and slippery metal-floored passageway.

Israeli media outlets estimated that some 100,000 people attended the event, numbers that underscored a relaxing of coronavirus restrictions in a country that had sped ahead of others in its vaccination rollout.

Evidence was mounting that it was a disaster waiting to happen at a pilgrimage site that state investigators had labelled years ago as hazardous. — Reuters



Emergency workers react upon revisiting the site where dozens were crushed to death in a stampede at a religious festival at Mount Meron. — Reuters

Sudan's basic income scheme aims to ease economic pain

KHARTOUM: For Intisar Altayib, who ekes out a living drawing henna tattoos in Khartoum, soaring prices in Sudan mean running up tabs at local stores and cutting back on evening feasts during Ramadan.

She is one of millions struggling through an economic crisis that has deepened as Sudan tries to emerge from decades of isolation and conflict. Inflation has risen to more than 340 per cent and there are shortages of everything from power to medicines.

To ease the pain of reforms the government is introducing a donor-funded scheme that aims to provide a temporary \$5 basic monthly income to 80 per cent of its population of 43 million.

The roll-out, which began

in February, is a test for the transitional civilian-military partnership that is due to govern Sudan until 2023. Many Sudanese complain they have not seen the benefits of an uprising, triggered by the deteriorating economy, that overthrew former President Omar al Bashir two years ago.

Altayib, who has registered for the welfare programme but is yet to receive money, says that in her neighbourhood of Al Kalakla, prices are four or five times higher than a year ago and her family has all but stopped buying meat.

Fuel price increases have put public transport beyond reach. "Ramadhan is expensive, we have to rely on God," she said.

The family support programme came about as the government



Left: Sudanese women Arafa Mohammed and Magda Ahmed who applied for Sudan's Thamarat Family Support Programme in South Khartoum. — Reuters

pursues an aggressive economic reform programme monitored by the International Monetary Fund, hoping to win relief on at least \$50 billion in debt and access funding from international lenders.



The ongoing reforms have included a sharp currency devaluation in February and fuel subsidy cuts over the second half of last year. The IMF said in an October report on the reforms

that they could lead to economic contraction, higher inflation and social tensions in the short term.

The basic income scheme, known as Thamarat (fruits) or the Sudan Family Support Programme, is an effort to soften the blow, officials say.

A survey of more than 3,000 families across Sudan from November to January showed that 30 per cent were unable to buy staples like bread and milk, with price increases worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic, said Milena Stefanova, country manager for the World Bank. The start of the support programme was pushed back to late February because donors conditioned the release of funds they had pledged last year on the closing of the gap between

the official and black market exchange rates.

"The delay in implementing the programme reduces its impact because of the racing inflation in Sudan," said Mohammed al Jak, a University of Khartoum economics professor.

Sudan has received \$820 million from the World Bank and donor countries for the programme's first two phases, which aim to cover 24 million people in 12 states for six months, the World Bank says.

The programme is not yet funded to reach the remainder of the targeted 32.5 million, or for a potential extension of payments to a year. Some beneficiaries said they would use the money to pay off debts, or cover rent or home maintenance. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

ALGIERS

Egypt's Orthodox Christians mark low-key Easter

For a second year, Egypt's Orthodox Christians were celebrating Easter Sunday under restrictions prompted by the global pandemic. Coptic Pope Tawadros II led a service attended by a small crowd on Saturday night on the eve of Orthodox Easter at a main cathedral in Cairo.



He said that in compliance with precautions against Covid-19, only 10 per cent of the usual attendance in the cathedral was allowed. "We are praying for an end to this pandemic that has

TEHRAN

Iran FM asks Soleimani family for 'forgiveness'

Iran's foreign minister on Sunday asked the family of Qasem Soleimani for "forgiveness" following his leaked comments that the revered late commander had played too big a role in diplomacy.

Soleimani, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' foreign operations arm, was killed in a US air strike in neighbouring Iraq last year.

Media outside Iran published the three-hour recording of Foreign Minister Mohammad



Javad Zarif (pictured) last Sunday, triggering a heated debate ahead of presidential elections and amid talks with world powers in Vienna to revive a nuclear deal. — AFP

SANAA

Flooding kills at least 10 people in Yemen

Flash floods have left at least 10 people, including two children, dead in the past 24 hours in war-devastated Yemen, according to local sources. The heavy rains have lashed several Yemeni provinces, including the capital, Sana'a, Ibb, Lahj, Mareb and Shabwa. The rain has also caused heavy damage to houses and crops, the sources added.

Resulting floods swept away dozens of cars and cut off main roads for long hours in the affected areas, they said. The annual



rainy season in Yemen usually lasts from April until August. The UN considers the conflict a humanitarian disaster that has pushed the country to the brink of famine. — dpa

In brief

■ KABUL



LARGE FUEL TRUCK FIRE IN KABUL KILLS 7, INJURES 14

Gasoline tanker trucks burst into flames in Kabul overnight, killing at least seven people and starting large fires that caused power cuts to some parts of the Afghan capital, officials said. The tankers were parked in northern Kabul and burst into flames. Fourteen people were injured.

The cause of ignition was not immediately known but the fires come as the city remains on “high alert” with officials bracing for attacks from the insurgent Taliban over the foreign troops’ continued presence in the country. Two security sources had earlier said they believed it was caused by a Taliban rocket fired in the area, however, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has said they were not involved. — Reuters

■ ISLAMABAD



LARGE FUEL TRUCK FIRE IN KABUL KILLS 7, INJURES 14

Pakistan will reduce the number of international flights into and out of its airports by 80 per cent to help curb rising Covid-19 cases, the government said.

The restrictions will come into effect on May 5 and will run to May 20, Pakistan’s Civil Aviation Authority said in a statement, though it did not specify which flights or destinations would be affected by the measure. The controls will be reviewed on May 18, the government said in a statement endorsed by the National Command Operation Center (NCOC), which oversees Pakistan’s response to the pandemic. — Reuters

■ JAPAN



OSAKA CONFIRMS RECORD OF 1,262 NEW CORONAVIRUS CASES

Japan’s western prefecture of Osaka confirmed a record daily total of 1,262 new coronavirus cases last week, along with 41 deaths, national broadcaster NHK reported. Osaka’s previous high was 1,260 infections, announced on Wednesday, NHK said.

Tokyo has also seen a surge in infections, with 1,050 new cases on Saturday, according to the broadcaster, after reporting in excess of 1,000 cases as well. The worsening situation has sharpened focus on whether the postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games can or should go ahead, with the opening ceremony only 12 weeks away. — Reuters

N Korea says Biden policy shows hostile US intent, vows response

SEOUL: North Korea lashed out at the United States and its allies in South Korea on Sunday in a series of statements saying recent comments from Washington are proof of a hostile policy that requires a corresponding response from Pyongyang.

The statements, carried on state news agency KCNA, come after the White House on Friday said US officials had completed a months-long review of North Korean policy, and underscore the challenges US President Joe Biden faces as he seeks to distance his approach from the failures of his predecessors.

In one statement, a Foreign Ministry spokesman accused Washington of insulting the dignity of the country’s supreme leadership by criticising North Korea’s human rights situation.

The human rights criticism is a provocation that shows the United States is “girding itself up for an all-out showdown” with North Korea, and will be answered accordingly, the unnamed spokesman said.

In a separate statement, Kwon Jong Gun, director-general of the Department of US Affairs of the Foreign Ministry, cited



US and North Korean national flags are seen at the Capella Hotel on Sentosa island in Singapore. — Reuters File Photo

Biden’s first policy speech to Congress on Wednesday, where the new president said nuclear programmes in North Korea and Iran posed threats that would be addressed through “diplomacy and stern deterrence.”

Kwon said it is illogical and encroachment upon North Korea’s right to self-defence for

An analyst says rhetoric between Kim regime and the US shows two sides have ‘fundamental differences’

— Reuters

Ceasefire with Tajikistan holding after clashes

BISHKEK: Kyrgyzstan said a ceasefire with Tajikistan was holding on Sunday, as it accused citizens from its Central Asian neighbour of crimes during the pair’s worst clashes at their contested border in decades. The Kyrgyz interior ministry said that casualties on its side had risen to over 160 with 34 deaths, 31 of whom were civilians.

The ministry also said it had opened 11 criminal cases targeting citizens of Tajikistan in connection with the violence, including investigations into murder and illegal border crossings. Clashes between communities over land and water along the long-contested border are regular occurrences, with border guards often getting involved.

But the violence that erupted was by far the most serious during the ex-Soviet pair’s 30 years of independence. Tajikistan, a closed authoritarian state, is understood to have also suffered casualties and damages, but has made far statements on the conflict. A ceasefire deal had been drawn up, but Kyrgyzstan acknowledged that both sides had continued shooting on Friday and Saturday. — AFP

Thousands rally against Myanmar military



People protest in Hlaing Township, Yangon. — Reuters

YANGON: Thousands of anti-coup protesters marched in Myanmar Sunday, calling for a “spring revolution” with the country in its fourth month under a military regime.

Cities, rural areas, remote mountainous regions and even Myanmar’s rebel-controlled border territories have been in an uproar since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a February 1 coup.

The junta has aimed to suppress dissent through a brutal crackdown that has seen mass arrests and an escalating death toll.

Demonstrations kicked off early in commercial hub Yangon as activists called for a show of force and a “spring revolution.”

Youths gathered on a street corner before marching swiftly down the streets in a flash mob -- dispersing soon after to avoid clashing with authorities.

“To get democracy is our course!” they chanted, waving a three-finger salute of resistance.

“To bring down the military dictatorship is our course!”

Central Mandalay region saw hundreds take the streets led by monks in saffron-coloured robes,

carrying the flag of Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy.

In northern Shan state, youths carried a banner that read: “We cannot be ruled at all.”

By 10 am, violence erupted in the state’s Hsipaw township, when security forces cracked down on protesters there, killing at least one.

“He was shot in the head and died immediately,” said one protester, who said he rushed to hide his friend’s body in case authorities tried to take it away.

“They are asking for his dead body, but we will not give them... We will have his funeral today,” he said. By midday, local media reported that security forces were chasing protesters down and arresting them.

“They are arresting every young person they see,” a source in Yangon said, adding that he was hiding at the moment.

“Now I am trapped.”

Bomb blasts also went off across different parts of the city in the morning.

The explosions have been happening with increasing frequency in the former capital, and authorities have blamed it on “instigators”. — AFP

 الشركة المتحدة للتمويل ش.م.ع.و United Finance Company SAOG			
Board of Directors' Report for the period ended 31st March 2021 Report on material events covering the interim financials			
Overview The COVID-19 pandemic has continued posing challenges as has been the case from the beginning of year 2020. Despite certain relaxations in terms of lifting of lockdowns and movement restrictions which were implemented to curtail the spread of coronavirus, the market continued to remain subdued and impacted normal economic activity in Q1 2021. Though there was a modest revival in the demand for private vehicles, the demand for commercial assets was restrained resulting in limited prospects for business. The government has again extended the period for availing the concessions to borrowers up to September 2021 for deferment of loan instalments, to help them overcome the hardships faced due to the impact of the pandemic. The market witnessed tight liquidity, triggering higher interest rates and contraction in income spreads. Businesses continued to experience long delays in settlement of contractual dues, but we have managed to maintain our close follow up and have not allowed deterioration in the non-performing loans.	UN-AUDITED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AT 31 MARCH 2021		
	31 March 2021 RO	31 March 2020 RO	
ASSETS			
Property and equipment	2,383,995	2,402,646	
Investment securities	554,150	554,150	
Deposit with the Central Bank of Oman	250,000	250,000	
Installment finance debtors	82,776,541	96,086,695	
Deferred tax asset	16,923	13,989	
Other receivables and prepaid expenses	200,325	204,409	
Cash and cash equivalents	1,135,194	1,101,921	
Total assets	87,317,128	100,613,719	
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
Equity			
Share capital	34,914,441	34,914,441	
Share premium reserve	528,402	528,402	
Legal reserve	4,900,439	4,822,835	
Special reserve	2,368,989	2,368,989	
Foreign currency reserve	294,514	294,514	
Impairment Reserve	1,911,736	1,156,245	
Retained earnings	646,971	760,891	
Total shareholders' equity	45,565,492	44,846,317	
Liabilities			
Borrowings	33,883,342	43,289,650	
Corporate deposits	3,000,000	8,000,000	
Creditors and other payables	4,754,942	4,283,488	
Taxation	113,352	194,264	
Total liabilities	41,751,636	55,767,402	
Total equity and liabilities	87,317,128	100,613,719	
UN-AUDITED STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE PERIOD ENDED 31 MARCH 2021			
	31 March 2021 RO	31 March 2020 RO	
Installment finance income	1,727,387	1,977,485	
Interest expense	(553,089)	(670,981)	
Net installment finance income	1,174,298	1,306,504	
Other income	92,963	122,927	
Other expenses	(804,044)	(843,340)	
Depreciation	(24,030)	(24,401)	
Impairment on installment finance debtors - net	(259,059)	(314,661)	
Profit before tax	180,128	247,029	
Income tax expense	(27,019)	(37,054)	
Profit for the period	153,109	209,975	
The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests them, in either Arabic or English within 7 days of the receipt of such request addressed to:			
Chief Executive Officer, United Finance Co. SAOG P O Box 3652, PC 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman. Tel: 24577300, Fax 24561557 E-mail: ufc@ufcoman.com, Website: www.ufcoman.com			
Mohamed Abdulla Mohamed Al Khonji Chairman			

Oxygen aid arrives in India, death toll hits new record

NEW DELHI: More emergency medical aid from foreign donors to alleviate a dire oxygen shortage arrived in India on Sunday, as Covid-19 deaths in the South Asian nation rose to a new record.

India is setting almost-daily records for new infections and deaths as the virus crisis engulfs overstretched hospitals in cities and spreads into rural regions.

The country of 1.3 billion reported 3,689 deaths on Sunday — the highest single-day rise yet in the pandemic, to take the overall toll to more than 215,000.

Just under 400,000 infections were added, bringing the total number of cases past 19.5 million.

The latest figures came as medical equipment, including oxygen-generation plants, was flown into the capital New Delhi from France and Germany as part of a huge international effort.

“We are here because we are bringing help that... will save lives,” Germany’s Ambassador to India, Walter J Lindner, said as 120 ventilators arrived late on Saturday.

“Out there the hospitals are full. People are sometimes dying in front of the hospitals. They have no more oxygen. Sometimes (they are dying) in their cars.”

French Ambassador Emmanuel Lenain said his country wanted to show solidarity with India.

“The epidemic is still going on in one country. The world won’t be safe until we are all safe. So it’s a matter of urgency,” he said early on Sunday following the delivery of eight oxygen-generation plants and



Ground staff unload Linde tankers from the Antonov An-124 Ruslan plane after they arrived to help with coronavirus disease crisis at Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport in Kolkata. — Reuters

dozens of ventilators from France.

India’s eastern state of Odisha on Sunday became the latest region to order a lockdown to slow the spread of the pathogen.

The nation’s worst-hit city, Delhi, reported just over 25,000 cases on Saturday as it extended its own lockdown by another week.

Hospitals in the capital continued to issue SOS calls for oxygen on social media, with the latest appeal posted by a children’s hospital on Twitter on Sunday.

The plea came a day after up to a dozen patients died at a Delhi hospital amid an oxygen shortage, local media reported. There are also growing fears about the surge of the virus in small cities, towns

and rural regions where health infrastructure is already patchy and limited.

India on Saturday opened up its inoculation drive to all adults, but supplies are running low and only online enrolments are allowed for those aged under 45.

“It is a necessity now. We are seeing so many people testing positive,” data scientist Megha Srivastava, 35, said outside a Delhi vaccination centre as she waited for her shot.

The head of the world’s largest vaccine maker, Serum Institute chief Adar Poonawalla, told *The Times* newspaper on Saturday during a business trip to Britain that he was being hounded by

political and business leaders for more supplies.

“‘Threats’ is an understatement,” he told the paper. “The level of expectation and aggression is really unprecedented. It’s overwhelming. Everyone feels they should get the vaccine.”

Experts have called on the government to allow more flexibility in India’s vaccine rollout, particularly in poorer rural areas where there is lower Internet penetration.

“We should procure sufficient vaccines, then plan bottom-up through... the primary health centre level,” Bangalore-based public health expert Hemant Shewade said. — AFP

Modi’s ruling party loses Indian state election



A member of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam with the image of DMK leader M K Stalin celebrates with others the results on the 2021 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly election in Chennai. — AFP

KOLKATA: The incumbent chief minister’s party in India’s West Bengal state has defeated Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s party in a state election held as the coronavirus pandemic surged to crisis levels. Modi has been criticised for focusing on the elections instead of making the pandemic his top priority.

Some experts blame the federal election commission for allowing rallies and voting in which large crowds flouted rules on social distancing and mask-wearing.

Mamata Banerjee, 66, is set to be the chief of West Bengal for the third time after her Trinamool Congress party (TMC) won a two-thirds majority, taking more than 200 seats in the 294-seat state assembly, election commission officials said. Final counting for some seats was still under way.

Banerjee is now India’s only woman chief minister. Despite

the defeat, Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made substantial gains, making it the main opposition party as its tally in the state legislature went to nearly 80 seats from just three seats won in 2016.

The results are seen as a test of the impact the pandemic’s second wave is having on support for him and BJP.

Banerjee, a sharp critic of Modi, largely conducted a one-woman campaign to retain power by leading scores of public rallies.

“It is a stupendous performance by Mamata Banerjee because Modi was determined to win Bengal, but it’s clear that his entire political machinery and strategy was unable to defeat her,” said Diptendu Bhaskar, a political analyst in Kolkata, West Bengal’s capital.

In Assam state, the BJP managed to retain political power. — Reuters

UK’s Johnson faces more questions over personal spending

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson faced more allegations on Sunday about his expenditure on the refurbishment of his apartment and on childcare for his young son, which his foreign minister dismissed as baseless gossip.

Johnson has repeatedly weathered gaffes, crises over Brexit and disclosures of his life, but the revelation that he and his fiancée, Carrie Symonds, spent lavishly to redecorate their residence with a designer feted by royalty has touched a nerve.

One of the leaders of the 2016 campaign to leave the European Union, Johnson is grappling with a stream of allegations about both his expenditure and the management of his core team at the centre of the

British government that opponents say show he is unfit for office.

Johnson has repeatedly said that he paid for the refurbishment of his Downing Street apartment, but the Electoral Commission says it has grounds to suspect an offence has been committed in the funding of the work.

The *Sunday Times* said the total cost of the work was around £200,000 (\$276,000) and that one invoice was settled by a Conservative Party donor directly — a benefit-in-kind that would need to be declared to tax authorities.

The newspaper also reported that a Conservative Party donor had been asked to pay for a nanny for Johnson’s young son, Wilfred.

“I don’t mind paying for leaflets



Britain’s Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures as he takes part in a science lesson during a visit at King Solomon Academy in London. — Reuters

but I resent being asked to pay to literally wipe the prime minister’s baby’s bottom,” the unidentified donor was quoted as saying.

Johnson’s Downing Street office did not address the reported refurbishment costs, but said in a statement: “The Prime Minister has covered the costs of all childcare.”

The Conservative Party declined to comment on the report. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab declined to answer directly who initially paid for the work and said he had “no idea” if a donor had been asked to pay for Johnson’s childcare.

“The last issue you asked about is an example of tittle tattle,” Raab told Sky TV. He said Johnson had been “crystal clear” about the expenditure on the refurbishment

of the apartment.

Before local elections on Thursday across most of Britain, some opinion surveys show Johnson’s ratings have dipped. His party also faces a parliamentary by-election in Hartlepool, northern England, which the opposition Labour Party has controlled for decades.

Such is uproar over the cost of the Downing Street refurbishment that Johnson last week even expressed his “love” for John Lewis, a retailer adored by millions of British voters. *Tatler* magazine had cited an unidentified source as saying the work had improved the apartment after the “John Lewis furniture nightmare” inherited from former prime minister Theresa May. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

Britain’s Princess Charlotte celebrates 6th birthday

A photograph of Princess Charlotte looking happy and relaxed in a floral summer dress has been released to mark her sixth birthday on Sunday. Charlotte’s long hair is loose and tousled in the picture taken by her mother the Duchess of Cambridge. Kensington Palace said the photograph was taken this weekend in Norfolk.



Cambridge’s 10th wedding anniversary on Thursday. It showed the family enjoying time outdoors at their Norfolk residence Anmer Hall and on sand dunes at a nearby beach. — dpa

BRUSSELS

Brussels police crackdown on anti-lockdown party

Belgian police arrested 132 people as they used tear gas and water cannon to break up a banned anti-lockdown party in a Brussels park on the weekend, said an official report. One partygoer was knocked out by a water cannon and 14 others were slightly injured — including one struck by a police horse — as riot police brutally dispersed the party on Saturday in scenes echoing a similar gathering in the park a month before.

Five of those arrested were



taken into police custody, the police said.

Three officers were hospitalised and a dozen slightly injured during clashes with the protesters. — AFP

KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia reports first case of Indian Covid-19 variant

Malaysia has detected its first case of a highly infectious coronavirus variant first identified in India, Health Minister Adham Baba said days after imposing a ban on flights from India. The variant, named B.1.617, was detected in an Indian national screened at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, he said.

The World Health Organisation has described it as a “variant of interest”, suggesting it may have mutations that would make the virus more transmissible, cause more



severe disease or evade vaccine immunity. “We advise the public to remain calm... All public health efforts will continue in order to break the chain of infection and ensure public safety,” Adham said.

— Reuters

Unusual rejoicing and sharing of moments...

Human beings are born to be sociable by nature, so they could openly mingle with one another! Usually, they like to get together as friends, colleagues or family, celebrating different occasions, commemorating anniversaries and enjoying good moments. Throughout lifespan, people live various moments and days, some of which are very special either to oneself or loved ones whom we live with or close to.

Thus, people commonly join their family, friends, colleagues or neighbours as well to commemorate a certain occasion or just for the sake of enjoying themselves in a social gathering. Such kind of those special days and great moments are many of course; they undoubtedly imprint a positive impact on minds and memories. However, for certain seasonal or spiritual occasions, people experience a different impression with memorable moments perhaps.

Case in a point, the month of Ramadhan comes on top of these distinct seasons of celebration. Ramadhan signifies the high importance to people as it brings them together more than other times of the year. In fact, it marks the time of solidarity and social reunion for various Muslim communities in particular. Further, it is the month of appreciating, reviving and strengthening relations between people. The spirit of Ramadhan essentially brings the strong feeling of sharing togetherness and being mostly



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RAMADHAN
SIGNIFIES
THE HIGH
IMPORTANCE
TO PEOPLE AS IT
BRINGS THEM
TOGETHER MORE
THAN OTHER
TIMES OF THE
YEAR

close to family. The importance of sharing moments in Ramadhan is reflected in different images of gatherings. The daily iftar get-together, Taraweeh prayers (a special ritual performed in Ramadhan) and evening meetings where most people are spending their time together by exchanging visits are just to name a few examples. All these stand as different faces of a similar coin, which is celebrating togetherness in Ramadhan, marking a special characteristic of the month of fasting.

However, these great moments of celebrations have been observed differently over the past two seasons of Ramadhan. Having the 2-year-long fight with Covid-19 had interrupted the casual and usual togetherness of people during Ramadhan. Hence, the spirit of sharing memorable moments is being observed differently. People are taking extra caution to avoid catching the coronavirus and combat the virus spread too.

Therefore, people have stopped breaking their fast together in mosque with other Muslims like before. They used to share not only food while breaking their fast, but their moments, feelings and prayers. What used to bring them all together is being all brothers of Islam and practising their worship and religious rituals together as Muslim brothers. This daily image of getting together in all mosque was reflecting the admirable unity and harmony of Muslims.

This is the second year in row during Ramadhan where Muslims are forced to change their habits of observing the month of fasting with their communities. They have been breaking their fast at home with their smaller family instead of sharing this moment with their friends, colleagues or bigger families too. The common visits, which were exchanged between friends, families and neighbours are no more there nowadays. People are shunning themselves and keeping social distance from others to stay safe.

Their Taraweeh prayers have also been performed separately at home unlike before when mosque used to be extremely crowded with Muslims of different cultures and origins. In addition to the regular daily prayers, Ramadhan special prayers are also performed at home, where every family enjoy special moments of prayers together. Families now are sharing their prayers and other religious rituals at home, parents and children.

Unfortunately, the spirit of togetherness has got broken in these two seasons of Ramadhan, though it is still reflected in some rituals that are observed in small groups at home. Ramadhan is a significant occasion to strengthen ties with family and society alike. It stands as a great time for togetherness and experiencing the tradition of sharing unforgettable moments with loved ones. Have enjoyable moments with your loved ones at home and stay safe!

AFGHAN RETREAT

Uncertain future as US formally withdraws forces

JAY DESHMUKH AND USMAN SHARIFI

The United States formally begins withdrawing its last troops from Afghanistan, bringing its longest war nearer to an end but also heralding an uncertain future for a country in the tightening grip of an emboldened Taliban.

US officials on the ground say the withdrawal is already a work in progress — and May 1 is just a continuation — but Washington has made an issue of the date because it is a deadline agreed with the Taliban in 2020 to complete the pullout.

The skies above Kabul and nearby Bagram airbase have been buzzing with more US helicopter activity than usual as the pullout gears up, following the start last Thursday of a concurrent Nato withdrawal.

Afghan security forces were on high alert for any possible Taliban attacks on retreating American troops.

The US military said it had carried out a “precision strike” after an airfield in the southern province of Kandahar where it has a base was attacked.

The strike, which the military said destroyed more rockets aimed at the airfield, came after

the base “received ineffective indirect fire” on Saturday afternoon that caused no damages.

“The Americans will formally begin their withdrawal from Afghanistan starting May 1 and the Taliban might increase the violence”, Acting Interior Minister Hayatullah Hayat told top police

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The Americans will formally begin their withdrawal from Afghanistan starting May 1 and the Taliban might increase the violence

HAYATULLAH HAYAT
Acting Interior Minister

commanders, according to an audio clip given to reporters.

Afghan Acting Defence Minister Zia Yasin said US and allied troops will be leaving their bases and will gather at Bagram, the biggest American base in Afghanistan.

From there “they will go to their respective countries”, Yasin told reporters.

The prospect of an end to the US presence after 20 years comes despite fighting raging across the countryside in the absence of a peace deal. A stark reminder of what remains came late on Friday with a car bomb in Pul-e-Alam, south of the capital, killing at least 24 people and wounding 110 more.

US President Joe Biden is determined to end what he called “the forever war”, announcing last month that the withdrawal of the remaining 2,500 American forces would be complete by the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks. “A horrific attack 20 years ago... cannot explain why we should remain there in 2021”, he said.

The Taliban said the US troop withdrawal was to be completed by May 1 as agreed in last year’s accord with Washington, and warned it was a “clear violation” that the troops were not fully out.

“This in principle opens the way for our fighters to take appropriate action against the invading forces”, Mohammad Naeem, a Taliban spokesman said, adding that the group was awaiting orders from its leaders.

Since the US withdrawal deal was struck the Taliban have not directly engaged foreign troops, but have mercilessly attacked government forces in the countryside and waged a terror campaign in urban areas.

— AFP

Freedom of press... reality, challenges

The world’s celebration of freedom of the press, which falls on May 3 this year and the corona pandemic that is sweeping the countries of the world casts its shadows. Repercussions on various aspects of health, social and economic life, and the world’s governments prevent the most important requirement of “freedom” that countries need to return to their normal life and practice on developmental, economic and social. This is what takes us to a universal truth, which is that the concept and space of “freedom” guaranteed by the general conditions that people live in the places of the world.

Returning to the slogan of World Press Freedom Day 2021, we find that “information as a public good” is its top priority. As I read on the Unesco’s website, it “is a call to affirm the importance of cherishing information as a public good, and to explore what we can do when producing, distributing and receiving content for the sake of enhancing journalism and improving transparency and enabling capabilities, while working to ensure that no one is left behind. These are the matters that the authorities are looking to achieve through steps to ensure the economic continuity of the media and the mechanisms to ensure the transparency of the telecommunications companies providing Internet service. In addition to enhancing the capabilities of know-how. Information and information technology that enables people to acknowledge, value, defend and claim



Mohammed bin Isa al Balushi

IN OMAN, AS AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE, THE GOVERNMENT HAS DEALT WITH THE PANDEMIC WHICH BEGAN TO APPEAR IN MARCH 2020 WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF TRANSPARENCY

journalism as a vital part of information as a public good.”

In Oman, as an illustrative example, the Omani government has dealt with the pandemic which began to appear in March 2020 with a high degree of transparency by providing up-to-date information, permanently and accurately through various local and international channels and platforms. To manage this situation, it organised a permanent weekly press conference through which it provides the necessary data on the developments of the pandemic and clarifies all inquiries in health, social and economic fields and other implications which have affected the various aspects of public life, in order to achieve the principle of the right to information as a general prohibition.

The pandemic revealed one aspect of the economic weakness of some press institutions. Not only in Oman but also at the level of companies and international press institutions through the decline in their revenues for commercial and marketing reasons related to decline in their paper sales. Also the decline in advertising market, which is one of the main pillars of commercial and economic income. This is in addition to the entry of the “flexible” competitor, which is the news accounts through social media, on the news and information line, which constituted a high percentage of follow-up among the general public — especially last year with the cessation of printing of newspapers — due to

its characteristics represented in the speed of information transmission in multiple forms and methods. Its ease of access, follow-up, retrieval and low cost, and this is what prompted some media institutions in general to reconsider the ways of its spread by introducing new tools such as digital, television and electronic radio stations, and re-presenting news in interesting, innovative and attractive ways.

These quick steps and improvements in the media have not been forgiven to increase the number of followers and interested parties, as there is a generation of smart mobile phone campaigners who obtain news and information through accounts, electronic newspapers and websites that they access through their own phone. Yet the Ministry of Information has made a positive steps regarding the need to register newspapers — electronic and news accounts and granting them a licence to practice media activity to ensure their professional performance in accordance with the laws of publications and publishing until the issuance of a law on electronic media, which we hope will be released soon.

The issue of “enhancing the capabilities of media and information literacy that enables people to acknowledge, value, defend and demand the press as a vital part of information as a public good” may require global efforts and practice led by the Unesco with the International Federation of Journalists.

sport

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f t i s y o



Ducati Lenovo Team's Australian rider Jack Miller rides during the MotoGP race of the Spanish Grand Prix at the Jerez Circuit in Jerez de la Frontera. — AFP

Miller cruises to second MotoGP victory in Jerez

DUCATI TEAM-MATE BAGNAIA TAKES CHAMPIONSHIP LEAD

JEREZ DE LA FRONTERA, Spain: Australian Jack Miller rode to only his second MotoGP victory in Jerez on Sunday as Ducati team-mate Francesco Bagnaia finished second to take the overall championship lead. Miller, who underwent surgery early in April, took the lead when pre-race championship leader Fabio Quartararo started to lose pace midway through the race. On a track where Ducati had not won since 2006, Bagnaia followed Miller home to take the championship lead from

Quartararo. Italian Franco Morbidelli was third on a Yamaha. Frenchman Quartararo finished 13th and doubled over, seemingly in pain, at the finish. Miller started and finished his immediate post-race interview in tears. "It's a flood of emotions: happy sad, everything," he said. "I thought when Fabio went past OK he's got a bit better pace," Miller said. "I thought he was going to bolt." "I didn't expect him to come back to me he did."



Ducati Lenovo Team's Australian rider Jack Miller celebrates on the podium after winning the MotoGP race of the Spanish Grand Prix at the Jerez Circuit in Jerez de la Frontera. — AFP

"He started to drop really off when I passed him." "There were still 12-13 laps left and I was thinking that's a long time out in front by myself but I was able to do it." Bagnaia followed Miller home to give Ducati the first two places and take the championship lead. "I'm happy," he said. "This was a really tough track for us, so to finish one two is a really big result for us," he said. Japanese rider Takaaki Nakagami (Honda-LCR) was fourth and Spanish world champion Joan Mir (Suzuki)

was fifth. Spaniard Marc Marquez, who after crashing his Honda in practice on Saturday, crashed again in the warm-up on Sunday, finished a creditable ninth in his second Grand Prix after nine months out with injury. Morbidelli scored his first podium of the season. "It was pretty easy," he said. "I just gave more than the maximum, always. I was really on the limit. I risk a lot. Finally we were rewarded. This podium feels just like a victory," Morbidelli added. — AFP

Inter Milan clinch 19th Serie A crown

CONTE'S OBSESSION WITH WINNING PAYS OFF



Inter Milan's danish midfielder Christian Eriksen celebrates after scoring against Crotone during the match against Crotone. — AFP

MILAN: Inter Milan clinched the Serie A title for the first time since 2010 on Sunday when nearest rivals Atalanta were held 1-1 at Sassuolo. Atalanta played most of the match a man down after goalkeeper Pierluigi Gollini saw red after 22 minutes at the Mapei Stadium. Luis Muriel missed a late penalty that could have given Atalanta a win that would have put Inter's celebrations on hold but the second-placed Bergamo side are now 13 points behind Inter with four games remaining. Inter, who beat Crotone 2-0 on Saturday, denied Juventus a 10th

straight league title with Andrea Pirlo's side now fighting for a Champions League spot. Juventus president Andrea Agnelli congratulated his Inter counterpart Steven Zhang on the Chinese-owned club's success. "Well done Steven! Happy for you and proud of being your loyal opponent on the pitch and friend off the pitch. We'll be back," Agnelli wrote on Twitter. Atalanta are equal on 69 points with third-placed AC Milan, who beat Benevento 2-0 on Saturday, and two points ahead of Napoli, who were held 1-1 at home against Cagliari. Juventus are fifth before they



Inter Milan coach Antonio Conte celebrates after winning a match against Hellas Verona in San Siro, Milan. — Reuters

play later Sunday at Udinese. In Emilia-Romagna, Robin Gosens scored 10 minutes after Gollini's sending off for recklessly bringing down Jeremie Boga. Domenico Berardi pulled Sassuolo level from the penalty spot seven minutes after the break after Hamed Traore went down in the penalty box under pressure from Rafael Toloi. Sassuolo also played the final quarter of an hour a man down after Brazilian defender Marlon was sent off for a second yellow card, but goalkeeper Andrea Consigli saved Muriel's penalty. In Naples, Nahitan Nandez got a late equaliser for Cagliari to

cancel out Victor Osimhen's 13th-minute opener. Napoli are still in the running for the Champions League while Cagliari move one point clear of the relegation zone. Lazio also stayed in the Champions League chase with a thrilling 4-3 win over Genoa for a club record 11th consecutive win. Joaquin Correa scored a brace, breaking the deadlock after half an hour and striking again 11 minutes after the break. Ciro Immobile added the second from the penalty spot before half-time after an Ivan Radovanovic foul. — AFP

HAMILTON WINS PORTUGUESE GP

PORTIMAO, Portugal: Lewis Hamilton delivered a flawless drive in his Mercedes to win the Portuguese Grand Prix on Sunday from his arch title rival Max Verstappen. Seven-time world champion Hamilton's 97th Grand Prix triumph extended his early season lead over Red Bull's Verstappen in the Formula One drivers' standings to eight points. In third place in Portimao was pole-sitter Valtteri Bottas in the other Mercedes with Sergio Perez in the second Red Bull in fourth. "That was such a tough race physically and mentally. I didn't get a good start and also lost out

at the restart but it was a great result in the end," said Hamilton. "Today wasn't all perfect and we need to get ready now for the quick turnaround for Spain." The Red Bulls are emerging as serious challengers to Mercedes' supremacy but the world champions have evidently worked hard to redress any imbalance in performance between the two teams. And after three legs of this record 23-race season it is Hamilton in his quest for a record eighth world crown that has won twice, adding this to his opening success in Bahrain, with Verstappen the winner in Imola. — AFP





Sri Lanka smell victory against Bangladesh

Sri Lanka were five wickets away from a series win against Bangladesh after the tourists were restricted to 177 for five at stumps on day four of the second Test at Pallekele on Sunday. Chasing a daunting 437 to win, Bangladesh batsmen were troubled by Sri Lanka spinners Praveen Jayawickrama and Ramesh Mendis.



El Ghazi stunner gives Villa 2-1 win at Everton

A superb late goal from Aston Villa's Anwar El Ghazi condemned Everton to a 2-1 defeat in an action-packed clash and hit their hopes of a top-four finish in the Premier League on Saturday. The result left the Merseyside club eighth on 52 points while Villa moved two places up to ninth on 48 points.

Buttler's maiden T20 ton powers Royals

SRH LOSE BY 55 RUNS WITHOUT DROPPED CAPTAIN WARNER

NEW DELHI: England's Jos Buttler struck his maiden Twenty20 hundred as the Rajasthan Royals beat a Sunrisers Hyderabad without dropped captain David Warner by 55 runs in the Indian Premier League on Sunday.

Buttler's 124 was the centrepiece of the Royals' 220-3, his century against fellow strugglers Hyderabad coming off 56 balls including 10 fours and five sixes.

The Sunrisers only managed 165-8 in reply at Delhi's Arun Jaitley Stadium as the bottom side in the eight-team franchise competition lost to a Royals team who started the day in seventh place.

Kane Williamson, the new Sunrisers captain, won the toss and elected to field in a match again played without spectators because of Covid-19, with the coronavirus pandemic responsible for more than 215,000 deaths in India. After Yashasvi Jaiswal was lbw early on to Afghanistan leg-spinner Rashid Khan, opener Buttler shared a stand of exactly 150 with Rajasthan captain Sanju Samson (48).

Buttler, long regarded as one of the best white-ball batsmen in world cricket, eventually played on as he tried to slog Sandeep Sharma in the 19th over.

In all, he faced 64 balls, with 92 of his runs in boundaries — 11 fours and eight sixes.

"Obviously, I really enjoyed that," Buttler told Star Sports. "I didn't find it easy and haven't been



in my best form for a while now.

"I just tried to stay in against Rashid. He has had my number for a long time, so thankful to not get out to him. I spent the most

of my career in the middle order, where hundreds are not easy to come by."

The Sunrisers' Manish Pandey opened in place of Warner.

Together with Jonny Bairstow, he put on 57 before he was bowled by Mustafizur Rahman for 31.

That turned out to be the top score of the innings, with England's Bairstow out for 30 and star batsman Williamson falling for 20.

Bangladesh's Mustafizur (3-20) and South Africa's Chris Morris (3-29) led the Royals' attack.

WARNER 'SHOCKED AND DISAPPOINTED'

While it was already known that New Zealand captain Williamson would replace Warner as skipper after the Australia star had overseen five defeats from six matches, the Sunrisers surprised many by dropping the dynamic opener from their XI.

Although Warner has hit two fifties this season, the usually free-scoring left-hander rued his slow batting in the Sunrisers' previous match against Chennai Super Kings and took "full responsibility" for the defeat.

Hyderabad brought in Afghan all-rounder Mohammad Nabi as the fourth overseas player in their XI. Never before has Australia opener Warner lost his place with an IPL franchise for reasons of form. Sunrisers director of cricket Tom Moody, himself a former Australia all-rounder, defended the decision by saying before the match: "We had to make the hard call, somebody has to miss out and unfortunately it's him (Warner)."

"He's shocked and disappointed. Anyone would be disappointed."

— AFP



Pollard proves credentials at IPL's 'El Clasico'

NEW DELHI: For someone keen to produce memorable knocks in big matches, Mumbai Indians player Kieron Pollard is particularly pleased with the one he conjured in Saturday's 'El Clasico' victory against Chennai Super Kings in the Indian Premier League (IPL).

The clash between IPL's two most successful franchises who share eight titles between them resulted in a runfest as the sides amassed a combined score of 437 runs, including 30 sixes.

Eight of those sixes flew from Pollard's bat as Mumbai's middle-order Lynchpin smashed an unbeaten 87 off just 34 balls, his first fifty this season, to secure Mumbai's last-ball victory by four wickets.

"World-class players at the CSK team," Pollard said of table-toppers Chennai, led by former India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni.

"We built this match as El Clasico of the IPL. When you

have international guys with so much experience...guys who have done it time and again, you want to be able to come out and perform (against them) in these sort of matches."

"For me, it's just a matter of doing what I can do — playing to my strengths and doing what the team requires at any given time," the 33-year-old said after his spectacular power-hitting earned him player-of-the-match award. Since joining the franchise in 2010, Pollard has been a crucial cog in Mumbai's five triumphant IPL campaigns and the all-rounder said familiarity with the franchise has helped.

"Over a period of time, you're comfortable in a franchise and they believe in you after so many years. You just want to continue to come out and perform."

"So for me, it's just a matter of coming out day in, day out trying to evolve as a cricketer and trying to do my best." — Reuters



Struggling KKR face Herculean task

IPL STROKES PRANAV MEHTA

KKR are struggling with 4 points from 7 games and now they need to win 6 games out of 7 to have a slot in play-offs. It is definitely a position, where any franchise would have pressed the panic button, but such is not the case for KKR so far.

Although last IPL, around the same time, the management changed the captain from Dinesh Karthik to Eoin Morgan. And now Morgan is in a much tougher spot than what Karthik was.

On the other hand, RCB have issues of their own. After getting off to a flying start, RCB have lost 2 of the last 3 games, with these match barely even being a contest. One match which they won was by a mere 1 run.

What's wrong with RCB?

RCB miss a solid lower middle order, because of which Glenn Maxwell bats 4 and Ab de Villiers at 5. But there is absolutely no one like Andrew Russell or a Keiron Pollard or a Hardik Pandya. A free-flowing, strong natural striker allows the top order to take the game deep, without the fear of the required run-rate increasing.

Kohli needs to bat till the 14th over, this will allow everyone else around to play attacking cricket. The number 3 is another big concern, and wonder why Mohammed Azharuddeen is not given an opportunity?

The bowling has been another big issue. With Yuzi Chahal being in poor form and leaking a lot of easy runs, the middle overs are a big concern. Shabbaz Ahmed has bowled brilliantly so far, but Kohli has not shown sufficient

confidence in him. There is a possibility that Scott Kuggeleijn might be brought in for Kyle Jamieson.

What's wrong KKR?

Everything is wrong with KKR currently and the main issue has been the form of Eoin Morgan. They have a long batting order, where a majority of players are not clicking. Yet, Shubman Gill, Morgan and Narine have not contributed at all. Russell, Karthik and cummins are not getting sufficient number of balls to make a good impact.

If there is a restructured batting order for KKR, where Sheldon Jackson is brought in for Shubman Gill, and the performing players are brought in slightly higher then a big difference would be seen in the performance.

KKR have nothing wrong with their bowling. Although, their

fielding has been way below par and possibly it's because of the batsman not being in form and thinking too much.

What to expect?

KKR might look to choke RCB and try to start a comeback. KKR are a star-studded team and it's only a matter of a spark that KKR needs. A moment of inspiration needs to come from Karthik, Russell or Rana. RCB need a moment of brilliance from Kohli, ABD or Maxi.

Surgery may keep Rahul out of IPL

KL Rahul is almost supposed to be out of the remaining IPL with acute appendicitis. He has earlier taken to the hospital and now be treated surgically. On recovery from his surgical process, he will have to serve a quarantine period as well. A lot of KL Rahul fans and cricket lovers sent - "Get Well Soon Greetings to KL!"

FRENCH OPEN CHAMPIONS BARTY AND SWIATEK SET UP CLASH

MUCHOVA UPSETS OSAKA IN MADRID



Iga Swiatek

MADRID: Naomi Osaka suffered a second-round exit at the Madrid Open on Sunday as the Japanese second seed lost 6-4, 3-6, 6-1 to Karolina Muchova.

Osaka, the reigning US and Australian Open champion, has seven career hard-court titles, but has never managed to lift a clay-court trophy.

Playing her first clay-court event since the 2019 French Open, Osaka beat compatriot Misaki Doi in the first round, but she came unstuck against an opponent making her top 20 debut this week.

Muchova, who reached the last four in Melbourne this year, used a single break of serve to claim the opening set against the world number two.

Osaka, a quarterfinalist at Madrid two years ago, fell 3-1 behind in the second set but rallied to win the next

five games and force a decider.

Muchova regrouped and broke Osaka early in the third set, and then again for a 5-1 lead, before sealing victory in just under two hours.

The Czech will meet Greek 16th seed Maria Sakkari or Estonia's Anett Kontaveit for a place in the quarterfinals.

BARTY, SWIATEK THROUGH

The last two women's French Open champions will meet at the Madrid Open after Ashleigh Barty and Iga Swiatek both made it through to the third round on Saturday.

World number one Barty survived a scare to beat Tamara Zidansek in three sets before Poland's Swiatek saw off Laura Siegemund 6-3, 6-3 to set up an intriguing clash on Monday at the Caja Magica.

Despite her straight-sets win, the 14th seeded Pole needed 11 match points to secure victory in the final game. Barty won her first and to date only Grand Slam singles title at Roland Garros in 2019 before Swiatek sprung an even bigger surprise last year in Paris, after knocking out the 2018 champion Simona Halep. "It's real exciting," said Barty. "A match that I look forward to. I've hit with her once in Melbourne a few months ago."

"She's got a seriously impressive game. She moves very well on the clay court, can slide off both legs, controls her body really well on clay."

"It's a challenge that we go into with a clean slate, a little bit of a period of trying to figure each other out and how our games match up."

Another battle of two former Grand

Slam champions saw Petra Kvitova edge out Angelique Kerber 6-4, 7-5. Kvitova broke at the end of each set and reach the last 16. — AFP

MADRID OPEN RESULTS

Second round

Karolina Muchova (CZE) bt Naomi Osaka (JPN x2) 6-4, 3-6, 6-1; Ashleigh Barty (AUS x1) bt Tamara Zidansek (SLO) 6-4, 1-6, 6-3; Iga Swiatek (POL x14) bt Laura Siegemund (GER) 6-3, 6-3; Petra Kvitova (CZE x9) bt Angelique Kerber (GER) 6-4, 7-5; Veronika Kudermetova (RUS) bt Kiki Bertens (NED x7) 6-4, 6-3; Paula Badosa (ESP) bt Jil Teichmann (SUI) 5-7, 6-1, 6-2; Anastasija Sevastova (LAT) bt Johanna Konta (GBR x15) 6-3, 6-3; Ons Jabeur (TUN) bt Sloane Stephens (USA) 4-6, 6-1, 6-3; Belinda Bencic (SUI x8) bt Bernarda Pera (USA) 3-6, 6-1, 7-6 (7/5)

Oman to gear up for Beach Soccer WC after Eid break

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAY 2

The Oman national beach soccer team will begin its preparation for the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup Russia 2021 after the Eid al Fitr break.

The beach soccer technical staff has proposed a comprehensive preparatory plan for the World Beach Soccer to the national team directorate at the Oman Football Association for final approval.

The warm-up plan featured many overseas camps as the national sporting activities remain banned by the government due to the rapid raise in positive cases of the Covid-19. It is expected that one of the camps will be in Dubai due to the better travel procedures during Covid-19 pandemic as many other countries



implemented tough restrictions for travelling.

The other external camps will be in Morocco in June and Oman will also play Morocco team. The remaining duration for kick off of the World Cup Russia 2021 is three months only as the event will be held from August 19 to 29.

The Asian football body, Asian Football Confederation (AFC) announced on April 21 that AFC Beach Soccer Committee has recommended that Asian representatives in Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup Russia 2021 will be from utilising the point system, which ranks the performances of



the continent's top eight teams in the last three editions of the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup.

Based on the ranking of the point system, Japan, Oman and United Arab Emirates will represent the AFC in the World Cup in Russia.

The Oman team had stopped

training since four months ago as the last appearance of the team was in December. It was planned the team will begin the training for the AFC Beach Soccer Championship 2021 finals in Thailand and GCC beach soccer cup in Bahrain in February through an external camp in Iran but both events were

cancelled due to the pandemic.

The OFA and Oman football lovers will be looking for different show in the fourth participation of the team at the high-profile event in Russia. Despite exiting at the group stage, the Sultanate's beach soccer team had impressed in the last edition of Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup in Paraguay in December 2019. Oman had registered a crucial win against Nigeria. The national team had suffered two losses against Portugal and Brazil.

OMAN PROBABLES: Khalid al Orami, Mishal al Orami, Munther al Orami, Yahya al Orami, Jalal al Sinani, Nohu al Zadjali, Abdullah al Souti, Abdulaziz al Raqadi, Salim al Orami, Abdullah al Balushi, Amjad al Hamdani, Shareef al Balushi, Younis al Oaisi, Sami al Balushi and Eid al Farsi.



Shah Pilaf: Traditional iftar dish of Azerbaijan

Oman is very proud of its Shuwa and it's a dish that continues to transcend celebrations becoming a staple of almost every event. For the people of Azerbaijan, that dish that defines an iftar celebration is Shah Pilaf. And here's how they prepare it.. **P14**



QURAN VERSE OF THE DAY

Say, "O disbelievers. I do not worship what you worship. Nor do you worship what I worship. Nor do I serve what you serve. Nor do you serve what I serve. You have your way, and I have my way.

al Kafirun

FATWA QUESTION & ANSWER



HIS EMINENCE
SHAIKH AHMED BIN
HAMAD AL KHALILI
GRAND MUFTI OF OMAN

QUESTION

Is external usage of ointment considered breaking the fast?

ANSWER

External usage does not affect fasting. Just like bathing during days of Ramadhan is acceptable, in the same context, using external ointments is also permissible.

HADITH A GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Sahl b. Sa'd (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger as saying:

In Paradise there is a gate which is called Rayyan through which only the people who fast would enter on the Day on Resurrection. None else would enter along with them. It would be proclaimed: Where are the people who fast that they should be admitted into it? And when the last of them would enter, it would be closed and no one would enter it.



Shah Pilaf: Traditional iftar dish of Azerbaijan

BY LIJU CHERIAN

"We have been celebrating Ramadhan in the Sultanate for more than 10 years now. I like to spend Ramadhan in Muscat as it is calmer and comfortable. During iftar we have all sorts of dishes on the table ranging from cold soup called Dovgha to traditional foods like Shah Pilav. Our hope is that we will be able to hold iftar gatherings and spend the next Ramadhan together with family and friends more freely"

Dr Saida Khalilova,
Director, Muscat Music
& Art Academy (MMAA)

"Life in Oman is very peaceful. Ramadhan here is very quiet this year due to the pandemic situation. Every year we used to come together with Azerbaijani families as a community around the iftar table. But this year is different due to the pandemic from Coronavirus. We are trying to keep in touch and at the same time following the restrictions of social gathering"

Emilya Abdullayeva
Chemical Engineer
PDO contract,
ChampionX Company

THE AZERBAIJANI expatriate community in the Sultanate is a close and tight-knit

community. The sparse community includes working professionals based in Muscat who spend their time together with everyone knowing each other well.

Azerbaijan has a colourful and delicious cuisine due to its unique nature and favourable climate with the influence of other minorities. With its unique cooking methods, there are juicy, dry, dough dishes such as roasting, boiling, barbecue and other cooking methods. Usually rich in calories, these dishes are remembered for their amazing taste.

Two of their main dishes prepared for iftar are the Pilaf or Pilov, the national cuisine of Azerbaijan.

No Azerbaijani holiday or celebration of springtime and special occasions such as wedding ceremonies or iftars are complete without Pilaf or 'Ash'. With another name called 'Shah Pilaf' (Sultan's pilaf) this is a meal rich in calories with rice, meat and covered with the fried dough. The name of the pilaf already declares it as the 'king of pilafs'. Some people count 40 different types of pilaf (or plov), though there are probably many more. Rice is usually cooked separately from the rest of the ingredients, and only mixed when served.

The most distinctive detail of Shah plov is the crust, made of light and flaky flat-bread that lines the dish where the pilaf is cooked. There are different ways of making Shah plov, but all start with a base of saffron-infused rice. Chicken, meat, rice, raisins, nuts, dried apricots, roasted chestnuts, prunes and other dried fruits and seasonings are used as toppings and additions on the top.

RECIPE FOR SHAH PILAF

INGREDIENTS

Rishta plov – Noodle pilaf
Lamb stew with chestnuts and dried fruit
Chicken pilaf
Lobya Chilo – Bean pilaf

Sweet pilaf
Parcha doshama – Lamb under rice
Fsinjan pilaf
Plov with pumpkin
Plov – Rice with accompaniments
Necessary Products: For 2 persons
1 cup = 220 ml
1 cup of Basmati Rice to 2 persons
3 cup of water
2 teaspoon of salt
100 gram Butter (not oil)
15 thread of saffron

PREPARATION:

Begin with the rice from evening before preparing. Rinse the rice in cold water several times to remove excess starch. Pour cold water into the bowl with the cleaned rice. Let it be for 8 hours or overnight.

Before you begin with rice cooking, about 1-2 hours, prepare saffron extract. Put a few threads of saffron in a cup and add boiling water. Cover and leave to infuse.

Fill a large, heavy pot with water and add salt. Bring to the boil. Add the rice to the boiling water. Cook the rice for approximately 5-10 minutes. Be careful not to cook for too long or the finished rice will be sticky. To see if the rice is ready, take a couple of grains out of the pot and test them on your finger. The grain should be soft on the outside, but still firm on the inside. When you bite into the grain or break it with a fingernail, the hard white interior should still be visible.

Strain the rice through a rice colander. Take the same pot, put some butter in the bottom of the pot and put gazmakh or lavash. You can also use potatoes instead of gazmakh or lavash. Add the parboiled rice into the pot. Put several knobs of butter on top. Make holes in the rice with the handle of a wooden spoon to allow the steam to escape. Place a well-fitting lid on top of the pot, covered underneath with a clean tea towel. The towel helps to absorb the steam. Set the cooker on the lowest flame. After 5-10 minutes open the pot, put the remaining butter on the rice, pour saffron extract and place the lid again on the pot.

Continue steaming of the rice for 45-60 minutes. Plov is ready when the rice is stuck out.

Serve Plov on a large dish. Pour the golden rice on the top of the remaining rice. The rice should be an attractive combination of yellow and white. Serve the qazmaq in pieces on top of the rice or separately.

The filling is completed by pouring a small amount of saffron water into the bowl, after which it is covered with lavash and baked until golden brown.

Because the dish can remain warm for up to several hours, it is a favourite at weddings, dinner parties and other special occasions.

Omani students raise awareness about environmental issues in ESO's Green Schools competition



ALL OVER THE WORLD, more and more young people are leading environmental causes, putting their voices, skills and ideas towards making positive change. Tapping into the vast potential of Oman's own youth population, and supported by the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) and its partners, Veolia Oman and Emily's Garden, came up with an idea to put students' innovation to the test with a competition called Green Schools. In its first phase, a total of 25 schools from every governorate participated, submitting an exciting range of projects that aimed to combat one of three key environmental issues; energy, waste and water.

After an unanticipated hiatus due to the pandemic, the judges have finally been able to identify the winners, with nine schools taking away titles and up to RO 1,000 in cash prizes, which will be spent on developing and maintaining the projects that range from recycling water for irrigation to monitoring energy consumption using the Internet of Things (IoT).

"The competition was a fun and engaging way for us to teach young Omanis about pertinent environmental issues, while encouraging them to transfer this knowledge to tangible activities. We're delighted to say that the students have exceeded our expectations and have worked diligently, with great enthusiasm and a commendable positive spirit to implement their projects. Their incredible work deserves to be recognized and so we are pleased to have recently been able to convene the judging panel and review the projects completed by each of the participating schools", said Jawaher al Ghafri, Education Coordinator at ESO.

Wadi Bani Omar School in North Al Batinah, Hafsa bint Omar School in Al Dakhiliyah and Khawla bint Thalaba School in South Al Batinah took first, second and third place respectively for their projects on energy management. Nadia al Siyabi, team supervisor at Hafsa bint Omar School, whose project focused on using IoT through smartphones to monitor energy consumption in the school, said, "The competition was hugely beneficial to the students, the wider school and the community, addressing many of the challenges associated with energy conservation including lack of awareness, lack of financial support, and the absence of specialised staff. We look forward to seeing the students implement their project, and continuing to raise awareness while exploring more ways to use modern technologies to save energy."

Suliman bin Abbad School in North Al Batinah, Raihana School, also in North Al Batinah and Qufaifa School in North Al Sharqiyah, took the top three places for their projects on Waste Management. Adnan al Bahrani, team supervisor for Suliman bin Abbad School's project, which found a way to recycle the grass from the school field and use it to feed the animals in local farms, said, "A big part of the students' efforts was to garner support from the community about their project and their goals, something that they worked really hard to do. Building on their success, this competition is just the starting point for the school and we are committed to continuing to develop innovations and expand in the field of waste management, encouraging our students to find more ways to use the resources we have for the benefit of the environment and society."

Muscat's Al Amal School for the Deaf took first place in the Water Management category, while Al Khalil bin Shazan School in South Al Batinah and Al Hasan bin Al Haitham School in Al Dhahirah followed in second and third. "This was a fantastic opportunity for our students, not only to contribute to environmental conservation but to demonstrate to the rest of society the huge potential of those with hearing disabilities", said Alia al Hinai, team supervisor at Al Amal School, whose project recycled ablution water to irrigate the school garden. "This was not an easy task for the students, who had to overcome various obstacles that were totally new to them, such as analysing samples, since there is no special laboratory in the school. Yet with out-of-the-box thinking they persevered and were able to acquire the help of the Higher College of Technology to analyse the samples for them. They are excited to work on the next phase of the project and determined to continue to work on promoting sustainability in the school and community."

Buoyant from the success of the first competition, ESO plans to re-engage with the students in the next school year. "We would like to thank our sponsors, Veolia and Emily's Garden Grown, without whose efforts to raise funds this competition would not have been possible. We also thank the National Commission for Education, Culture and Science for their continuous support of the programme from school visits to communication with the regional directorates as well as judging. We hope that with this, and our many other youth initiatives, we continue to prove just how capable, and caring, Oman's next generation are when it comes to the environment", concluded Jawaher.



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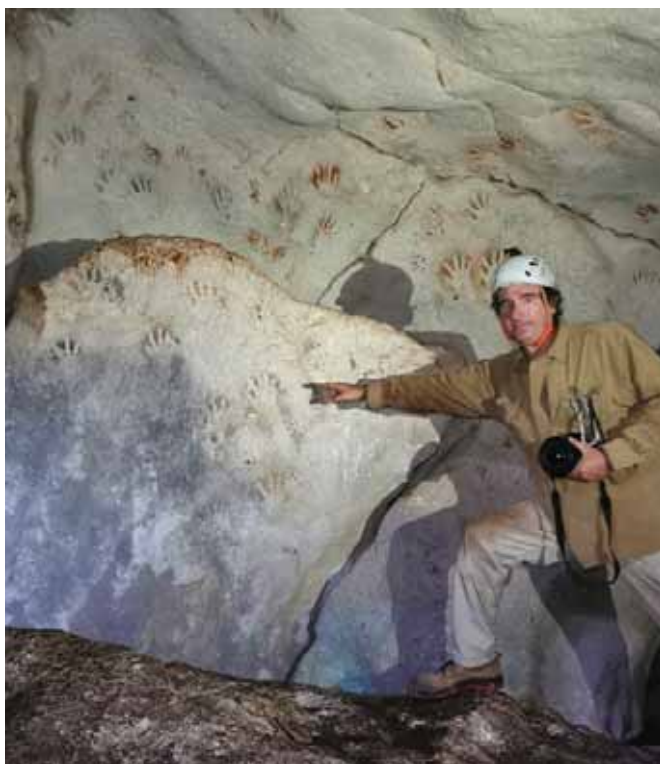
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DISCOVERY



In Mexico, ancient Maya cave reveals mysterious painted handprints

MERIDA: Dozens of black and red handprints cover the walls of a cave in Mexico, believed to be associated with a coming-of-age ritual of the ancient Maya, according to an archaeologist who has explored and studied the subterranean cavern.

The 137 prints, mostly made by the hands of children, are more than 1,200 years old, which would date them near the end of the ancient Maya's classical zenith when major cities across present-day southern Mexico and Central America thrived amid major human achievements in math and art.

The cave is located near the northern tip of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, where the towering pyramids of urban centres like Uxmal and Chichen Itza still stand, and lies some 33 feet (10 metres) below a large ceiba tree, which the Maya consider sacred.

Archaeologist Sergio Grosjean argues that the handprints were likely made by children as they entered puberty, due to analysis of their size, with the colours providing a clue to their meaning.

"They imprinted their hands on the walls in black... which symbolised death, but that didn't mean they were going to be killed, but rather died from a ritual perspective," he said.

"Afterwards, these children imprinted their hands in red, which was a reference to war or life," he added.

Other Mayan artefacts found in the cave include a carved face and six painted relief sculptures, which date from between 800-1,000 AD, a time when severe drought struck the region and may have contributed to the classical Maya's sudden abandonment of major cities.

While the first Mayan settlements date back nearly 4,000 years, there were still large centres when Spanish conquerors arrived in the early 1500s.

Several million Maya continue to live in communities scattered across southeastern Mexican states like Chiapas and Campeche, in addition to Guatemala and Belize. — **Reuters**

GASTRONOMY

France to reopen cafes and museums from May



PARIS: French cafes, cultural venues and businesses that have been closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic will reopen in several phases from May 19, President Emmanuel Macron said Thursday, as he announced a four-stage calendar for reopening the country.

Museums, theatres, cinemas and concert halls will reopen on May 19, along with non-essential shops and outdoor seating at cafes and restaurants, Macron told regional French newspapers in a highly-anticipated announcement.

Cafes and restaurants will have to wait until June 9, however, to be allowed to serve clients indoors, he added.

Macron also gave a timetable for lifting an unpopular night-time curfew which has turned French cities into ghost towns after 7:00 pm.

He said that the curfew would be progressively eased — to 9:00 pm on May 19 and 11:00 pm on June 9 — before being fully lifted on June 30.

France is nearing the end of a third national lockdown imposed to try and tame a severe third wave of infections.

A further 324 deaths were reported in the past 24 hours, bringing the total number killed by the pandemic to 103,947.

The number of new cases reported daily has fallen in the past month, from around 40,000 to 27,000 on average over the past week.

'FRENCH WAY OF LIFE'

While Macron said he hoped the easing measures would be nationwide, an "emergency brake" could be applied in areas where the virus is circulating too actively, he said.

Some restrictions have already been relaxed in recent days.

Primary schools reopened on Monday after a three-week shutdown, with secondary schools to follow next week, when restrictions on travel around the country will also be lifted.

But the French had been partic-

ularly anxious to know when the cafes and museums, which have been closed since October 30, would reopen.

Macron said it was time to start "resuming our French-style way of life", citing the need for "conviviality", culture and sport.

But people needed to remain "careful and responsible", he said.

The centrist president, who is expected to seek re-election next year, drew strong criticism for rejecting calls by medical experts for a third national lockdown in late January when the caseload was already stubbornly high.

Two months later he relented, but the third lockdown period has been more relaxed than the previous two.

In the interview with regional media, he defended his handling of the health crisis.

"We were enlightened by science and took the decision to prioritise the human aspect above all," he said.

But some health experts had warned against lifting restrictions on gatherings too soon, fearing the gains of recent weeks could be reversed.

Catherine Hill, an epidemiologist at a Paris clinic, warned that a large-scale lifting of restrictions would be "absolutely unwise", noting that at 5,879, the number of Covid-19 patients in intensive care remained higher than at the peak of the second wave in November.

'LIVE WITH THE VIRUS?'

The government is hoping that an accelerated vaccination drive will help keep the virus in check.

But only nine per cent of the population have been fully immunised, with the government prioritising the old and health workers.

Macron said France was not yet ready to open vaccination to all. But he added that there were enough doses in stock to offer jabs from May 1 to people aged over 18 who are classified as obese, a move which he said applied to 2.3 million people in the country. — **AFP**

CELEBRATION

Thousands of revellers attend Wuhan music festival



WUHAN, CHINA: Thousands of people attended the first day of the Wuhan Strawberry Music Festival on Saturday.

In warm conditions on the first day of a five-day May Day national holiday revellers in the central Chinese city danced, bounced and screamed with delight as some of their favourite acts took the stage.

The festival was making a return in Wuhan after it was forced to be online only last year due to Covid-19 restrictions.

A representative for the organisers told Reuters that numbers were being restricted this year, adding that around 11,000 people were there on Saturday. Barriers were set up in front of each stage and security personnel restricted numbers in those areas. Some spectators wore masks, but many did not.

People in Wuhan, where Covid-19 first emerged, lived through more than two months of stringent restrictions during the world's first coronavirus-induced lockdown. Since then the city has been almost completely virus-free, according to official data. That and the general trend in recent months in the country, which has only reported a few sporadic outbreaks, has greatly eased fears in China about the virus.

"Last year we (in Wuhan) suffered from the coronavirus," said 23-year-old student and Wuhan resident Gao Yuchen.

"It has not been easy to get to where we are today. People here have put in huge efforts and paid a big price (for being hit with the virus). So I feel very excited to be here (at the festival)," Gao said.

The two-day event brings together well-known and not so well-known domestic singers and bands across three stages in Wuhan's Garden Expo park. Sister "Strawberry Music Festival" events are being held in other cities, including Beijing, during the national holiday. Attendees came to Wuhan from all over the country, like 29-year-old Zhang Hongkai, from Shijiazhuang in Hebei province.

"This is my first time at an event like this held outdoors," Zhang said. "I really like the atmosphere."

Mainland China reported 16 new Covid-19 cases on Friday, down from 13 a day earlier, the country's national health authority said on Saturday.

All the new cases were imported infections originating overseas, the National Health Commission said in a statement.

The total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases in mainland China now stands at 90,671, while the death toll remains unchanged at 4,636, many of whom were Wuhan residents.

China carried out about 11.6 million vaccinations against Covid-19 on Friday, bringing the total number administered to more than 265 million, according to data released by the National Health Commission on Saturday. — **Reuters**



How donkeys digging wells help life thrive in the desert

A new study published on Thursday shows that horses and donkeys are also friends to desert animals and plants, by digging deep wells that provide a vital source of water, especially at the height of summer.

For thousands of years, horses and donkeys have been some of our species' most important partners.

A new study published on Thursday shows they're also friends to desert animals and plants, by digging deep wells that provide a vital source of water, especially at the height of summer.

Biologist Erick Lundgren, lead author of the paper in *Science*, said he first began noticing the phenomenon while working in western Arizona as a field technician studying river systems.

"People just didn't think it was worthy of scientific attention," said the scientist, who is now at the University of Technology Sydney.

Lundgren had read about African elephants digging wells that were the only source of water for other animals during the dry season, and wanted to know if horses and donkeys might play a similar role in America.

The idea was intriguing, "especially since donkeys and horses are considered agents of biodiversity harm" as they are not native species in the region, he said.

Over the course of three summers, he and his team surveyed sites in the Sonoran Desert that stretches across Arizona and California.

They documented the relative contribution of wells dug by horses and donkeys compared to the surface water that was available to animals from desert streams, some of which are intermittent while others are permanent.

The team also set up camera traps to learn how other animals were utilising the wells.

'INVASION BIOLOGY'?

They found that wells dug by the "equids" to depths of up to six feet (two metres) increased water availability for many native desert species, and decreased the distances between important water sources during dry periods.

The wells were especially

important during the hottest and driest parts of summer, when they provided the only available water source at some sites.

Lundgren said the horses and donkeys acted as "buffers" against the extreme variability of desert streams from year to year.

"The donkey wells kept water in the system. And these features were used by pretty much every species you could picture, including some surprising ones like black bears, that we didn't expect to see in the desert," he said.

Other species that flocked to the wells and were caught on camera included mule deer, bobcats, Woodhouse's scrub jay and javelinas.

The team even spotted some river tree species sprouting from abandoned wells, indicating they also serve a role as plant nurseries.

Horses and donkeys were introduced to the Americas by Europeans to assist with the colonisation of the continent, but their use declined with the advent of the internal combustion engine.

Since then, they have been studied as "invasion biology," said Lundgren, which does not consider them to be a part of the local wildlife.

But this thinking is too tunnel-visioned and has prevented scientists from having a more nuanced understanding of their effects on their ecosystems, he argued.

Lundgren and his colleagues said in their paper that the wells will be increasingly important as human activity and climate change reduces the number of perennial streams in these regions.

Another element to the story is that the behaviour of modern horses and donkeys might have an "ancient precedent," said Lundgren.

Horses, elephants and other large animals that roamed North America until a mysterious extinction event around 12,000 years ago could have once fulfilled a similar role. — **AFP**





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Consumers urged to use e-payment channels

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 2

Encouraging customers to adopt innovative and accessible technologies, Mazoon Electricity Company has advised customers to use its e-payments platforms to pay bills for the ease and convenience it offers.

It has reminded its customers that e-payments can help fight Covid-19 and further the effectiveness of the social distancing measures announced by Oman's Supreme Committee dealing with the pandemic situation.

Advising them to switch to a virtual payment method like online payments or payment links, Mazoon Electricity reminds customers that it will keep users safe and help them observe social responsibility.

Mazoon Electricity offers several smart, hassle-free and interactive options to pay bills.

Customers can pay their bill online from anywhere by accessing their account through Mazoon Electricity's e-channels. They can pay their electricity bills through mobile applications of companies such as ONEIC Bill & Pay, OIFC Khedmah or any self-service kiosks available at Mazoon Electricity, ONEIC or OIFC premises.

Oman's fiscal stimulus measures 'persistent, timely and targeted'

POST-COVID-19 RECOVERY:
Government's pandemic response initiatives and policies well-received internationally, says Under-Secretary

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

An Economic Stimulus Plan, unveiled recently by the Omani government to help the economy and people tide over the effects of the pandemic and downturn, has been well-received internationally, a top official has stated.

Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary for Investment Promotion at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), described the government's pandemic responses and fiscal policies as "persistent, timely and targeted".

"We remain focused not just on protecting people's health, but rolling out policies and initiatives that safeguard livelihoods and help business pull through the pandemic", the Under-Secretary stressed.

The official made the comments at the opening of a recent webinar on the theme, 'Connecting UK to Oman's Procurement and Investment Opportunities', organised by Business Gateways



These important policies are designed to support the economy by offering free emergency loans, tax and fee reductions and waivers, flexibility to pay taxes in instalments and the establishment of Job Security Fund for citizens who have lost their jobs

International, a Muscat-based IT services provider with the mandate to manage the Joint Supplier Registration System (JSRS), a single-window vendor certification system for the Sultanate's Oil & Gas industry.

The event was also supported by the Department for International Trade (UK), Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), Daleel Petroleum and well-known legal firm Addleshaw Goddard.

A succession of policy measures and initiatives announced by the Omani government in recent months are aimed at spurring the country's post-pandemic recovery, said the official.

"Looking ahead, we are putting in place measures that aid the post-Covid-19 recovery and boost Oman's competitiveness.

In particular, this includes the recently announced Economic Stimulus Plan, the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (2020-2024), and the 10th Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025). These important policies are designed to support the economy by offering free emergency loans, tax and fee reductions and waivers, flexibility to pay taxes in instalments and the establishment of Job Security Fund for citizens who have lost their jobs."

Furthermore, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has taken steps

to ease financial conditions by lowering interest rates, facilitating liquidity injections, deferring loan payments and relaxing requirements with regard to capital buffers and liquidity ratios, she noted.

Earlier, Al Samsamiyah praised Oman-UK bilateral ties, highlighting in particular Britain's important contribution to FDI inflows into the Sultanate.

"Over the years, our trade and investment partnership has flourished, expanding into a range of sectors most notably oil and gas, technology, infrastructure, defence and education.

As a longstanding trade partner, the UK knows well the many advantages offered by Oman as an investment destination, such as its strategic location, stability, world class infrastructure, skilled multi-lingual talent, natural resources, and so on. As a result, the UK is the Sultanate's largest foreign direct investor", she added.

Climate finance targets top agenda for G7 meetings

LONDON: Targets for climate finance and girls' education will top the agenda at a meeting this week of foreign ministers from the Group of Seven advanced economies, this year's chair Britain said on Sunday.

The London summit will be the first attended in person by G7 foreign ministers for two years. Britain has also invited representatives from Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa as guests for some of the meetings.

"We'll be taking action to ensure fair access to vaccines around the world, setting global girls' education targets, agreeing ambitious action on climate change and developing new measures to prevent famine", British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said.

Raab will meet with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday, when they will talk about trade, China, Afghanistan and Iran.

He will also host the Japanese and Indian foreign ministers at his country residence later in the week. — Reuters

Covid surge, lockdown threat cast shadow on dry bulk exports

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 2

General cargo exports — a thriving activity at Salalah Port underpinned by dry bulk commodities such as limestone and gypsum — could be impacted should the resurgence of the coronavirus pandemic in markets like India, a key destination for Omani mineral exports, result in lockdowns, the port has warned.

Volumes handled at the General Cargo Terminal (GCT) totaled 4,339K tonnes during Q1 2021, as compared to 4,350K tonnes in Q1 2020.

The positive volume development of general cargo seen in the last quarter of 2020 continued in the first quarter of 2021 with volumes on par with the first quarter of last year, said the port, noting that limestone, gypsum, methanol and cement were among the major commodities exported from Salalah to nearby markets.

However, the short-term outlook is overshadowed by the Covid situation in markets,



such as India, that are important destinations for bulk exports.

"On the dry bulk, while the demand side is strong in Asia for limestone and gypsum, rising Covid cases in markets like India could impact the demand negatively, should they resort to lockdown similar to 2020", said Shaikh Braik bin Musallam al Amri, Chairman — Salalah

Port Services Co SAOG, in the Directors' report for the quarter ended on March 31, 2021.

"The shortage and high charter rates of tonnage are expected to negatively impact dry bulk markets in Q2 and Q3 2021, if the situation persists. Commodities like grain and liquid bulk is only expected to gain momentum from Q3 due to

influence in international pricing trends", he further added.

Meanwhile, container throughput handled by the port dipped slightly to 1,095K TEUs during the first quarter of this year, down from 1,167K TEUs in the corresponding period of 2020, a decrease of six per cent.

"Container throughput for the first quarter of 2021 was lower



The shortage and high charter rates of tonnage are expected to negatively impact dry bulk markets in Q2 and Q3 2021, if the situation persists. Commodities like grain and liquid bulk is only expected to gain momentum from Q3 due to influence in international pricing trends

SHAIKH BRAIK BIN MUSALLAM AL AMRI
Chairman, Salalah Port Services Co SAOG

than the same period last year, mainly because the port saw exceptionally strong volumes in the first quarter of 2020. The company has retained all major customers and Maersk our major business partner has maintained

consistent volumes", said the Chairman.

Salalah Port posted a consolidated net profit for Q1, 2021 of RO 1.631 million, as compared to the corresponding period last year at profit of RO 10.232 million. Consolidated EBITDA was recorded at RO 4.471 million during Q1, 2021, as compared to RO 14.655 million during same period last year. (This includes an insurance claim amount of RO 11.25 million).

The underlying net result of Q1, 2020 excluding insurance settlement was RO 1.887 million compared to RO 1.789 million this year, the port said. Container Terminal revenue fell 9.4 per cent as compared to corresponding period last year due to the lower container throughput.

Revenues earned by the General Cargo Terminal (GCT) increased 11.4 per cent compared to the same period last year mainly due to an increase in additional terminal services (amongst other RoRo services) and lower volumes handled at Berth 31 compared to same period last year.

Toyota unveils biggest excitement campaign

MUSCAT: Own a Toyota this season and get a chance to win a Supra as grand raffle and raffle of two new Camry. Customers walking in to Toyota showroom too have a chance to win seven iPhone 12 in Walk-in & Win Raffle.

Besides these are cash gifts from RO 700 up to RO 5400, service 2 years / 20,000 kms, 5 years / 50,000 kms (whichever is earlier), 1 year insurance, interest 0 per cent up to 2 years or 1.99 per cent up to 4 years and 2.99 per cent up to 5 years (On Yaris sedan and Yaris hatchback models) and an assured gift voucher.

Locations: Wattayah, Barka, Bidaya, Ibra, Maabela, Nizwa, Al Rustaq, Al Seeb Al Mawaleh, Sinaw and Suhar).

In Oman, the Toyota range



includes:

Yaris: The Yaris sedan delivers a dynamic driving experience, with a choice of 1.3-litre and 1.5-litre engines.

Corolla: The Toyota Corolla is

built on the Toyota New Global Architecture, called TNGA platform. The Corolla is also available in a Hybrid option.

Camry: The Camry has been one of the best-sellers owing

to its design, driving dynamics, fuel-efficiency and ownership experiences. The Camry is also available in a Hybrid option.

Avalon: The Avalon is a statement of luxury. The Avalon is equipped with 3.5L V6 engine, LED headlamps with adaptive cornering lamps, premium leather seat material, 9" navigation system with 14 JBL speakers, head up display, Toyota safety sense and more.

C-HR: Toyota C-HR, represents a leap forward in design, manufacturing and engineering for Toyota.

Highlander: Toyota Highlander offers an impressive fuel economy of 20 kms/l (GLE Grade) & 19.3 kms/l (LTD Grade) as per GSO conformity certificate and comes with 8 years/160,000

kms hybrid battery warranty.

RAV4: Toyota's sporty, and stylish RAV4 ticks all the boxes when it comes to enjoying extraordinary moments.

Fortuner: The Fortuner is equipped with 4.0L, V6 engine, 18" alloy wheels, LED projector headlamps with DRL, navigation system, power & ventilated driver & front passenger seats, power back door and more.

Prado: The Prado includes 4.0L, V6 engine, LED headlamps & fog lamp, 9" navigation system, ventilated front seats, moonroof, airbags: driver + front passenger + curtain + side (front) + knee (driver) and more.

Land Cruiser: The Pride of the Land, the Toyota Land Cruiser is a symbol of strength, durability and reliability.

JCDecaux Oman lights up walkway with innovative concept



MUSCAT: Celebrating the Holy Month of Ramadhan, JCDecaux Oman lights up a prominent walkway with an innovative concept of street furniture.

As though being seen through a traditional a MUPI Billboard presents a golden crescent moon hovering over a modest mosque and conveying greetings to all. Thus, reflecting this most peaceful time of spirituality and sparsity through its simplicity combined with innovation.

According to Bechir Chehab, Managing Director of JCDecaux Oman, "The key is innovation, you have to be daring in the market while keeping the traditional values. I have seen this throughout this Ramadhan with our clients adapting their artwork for campaigns and working with us to create something different and new yet recognisable and familiar."

Enjoy a more exciting Ramadhan experience with 5G-powered stream on HD

MUSCAT: Providing entertainment around the clock this Ramadhan, Ooredoo's Stream On HD service offers access to a world of unlimited HD streaming. Exclusive to Shababiah customers, users can subscribe daily and enjoy content from some of the most popular sites including YouTube and VIU. The fantastic service can be activated on the Ooredoo App for an unbeatable rate of just RO 1.050 per day.

Whether on the go or staying at home, Shababiah customers can unwind and watch their favourite movies, shows and music videos from their smartphones, worry-free.

It's also available using Ooredoo's fast 5G network. Stream On HD is the perfect solution, allowing users to enjoy their favourite entertainment when they want, without the worry of exceeding their data quota.

Baic Oman announces special price offer

MUSCAT: Gulf Great Sands LLC, the exclusive importer of Baic in Oman, has announced an attractive offer on Baic vehicles 2020 model of X65 and X35 as part of its "Time for Giving" Ramadhan promotion. Baic's Ramadhan promotion, which has already begun will go on till June 14, 2021.

The offer is available on X65 crossover (2.0 Turbo Engine, 174 hp) and X35 crossover (1.5 litre engine, 111hp). The starting price of Baic X65 is RO 4999 and Baic X35 is RO 4599. The prices mentioned are for the basic model



variant after adjusting the cash gift amount mentioned below.

In addition, VAT 5 per cent will be charged at the time of vehicle purchase as per government directives.

One of China's top three auto groups, Baic boasts of 60-years of engineering expertise. The company, which was established in 1958, has eight major production bases and a cumulative output of 12 million cars. Part of the Bahwan International Group Company (BIG), Gulf Great Sands LLC (GGS) is an exclusive distributor of Baic and many other reputed international automotive brands in Oman.

Nissan Oman launches 'book a home test drive' service for all its models

MUSCAT: Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), is extending a 'book a home test drive' service for its prospective customers. The service enables potential customers to schedule their test drive online as per their convenience.

The 'book a home test drive' service is applicable only in the Muscat governorate. While customers will be charged RO 5 for home test drive service, upon sales conversion a sum of RO 10 will be passed on to them as cash gift.

A senior official of Nissan Oman said, "Nissan is committed to extending outstanding pre-sales services to its customers. This is yet another unique move from



our side to make the experience of buying Nissan cars more convenient. To avail our home test drive service, customers have to just let us know what vehicle they are interested in and we will it take it to their homes."

He added, "We are offering the test drive at home to customers after following all the Covid-19 safety protocols. All test drive vehicles are completely sanitised before delivery at customers' homes for test drives."

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Also get assured Scratch N Win, Cash for Fuel from RO 20 to RO 1000 & 0 per cent interest on Sportage 1.6L & Niro. Conditions apply. Please visit Kia showroom for details.

Kia's range in Oman has remained popular owing to its stylish designs, advanced technology, impressive safety features and more.



NBO continues to extend support towards fight against Covid-19

MUSCAT: Committed to putting its resources, people and infrastructure behind the Ministry of Health efforts, National Bank of Oman (NBO) pledged more support to Oman's fight against Covid-19.

The latest contribution by the bank includes the provision of fully equipped fleet of ambulances for the Governorates of Muscat and Dhofar, purchase of medical equipment for the most strained hospitals in the Governorate of Dhofar and a vaccine roll-out for staff and their spouses.

It's one of a string of measures the bank has activated since the beginning of last year, lending vital support to the country's healthcare

services as they continue to work to control the spread of the virus.

Since 2020, NBO has delivered on its promise to support Oman's frontline health workers and their efforts to keep communities safe during the pandemic. As well as donating to the Ministry of Health's Endowment Fund, the bank's contributions were used to purchase critical and life-saving equipment and supplies for Royal Hospital, Al Nahdha Hospital, and Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.

The bank also purchased vital medical equipment for the Ministry's field hospital, based at the old Muscat airport site, which was purpose-built for taking care



of Covid-19 patients.

Abdullah bin Zahran al Hinai, Chief Executive Officer of NBO said, "Since the beginning of the pandemic, NBO has worked closely with the Ministry of Health so that we can make targeted donations where it is needed most, and provide sustainable solutions

Our employees are at the heart of what we do and it is our utmost priority to keep them and their families safe

ABDULLAH BIN ZAHARAN AL HINAI
CEO, NBO

that have a long-term positive impact on the community and the country's healthcare system. This time, these resources have been directed towards a fleet of fully equipped ambulances and

other vital medical equipment for the Governorates of Muscat and Dhofar, where the majority of Covid-19 patients are being treated, as well as for vaccinations for our 1500+ workforce and their spouses."

He added, "Our employees are at the heart of what we do and it is our utmost priority to keep them and their families safe. Our aim is to make sure that vaccinations are rolled out throughout the bank so that we can limit the further impact of the pandemic. We cannot forget our healthcare workers and all of those on the frontlines who are working day in, day out, to keep us all safe. We are grateful for all they do and salute

their efforts for going over and beyond. We will continue to lend our support wherever needed and with this spirit, we will overcome these difficult times."

Since the beginning of the pandemic, NBO has been active in supporting the nation as it overcomes both the health impacts and the wider economic impacts.

Through a series of measures including donations, and targeted communication advising the community of the benefits of banking digitally, the bank has reiterated its care for the community, all while encouraging its customers to bank from the safety and comfort of their homes.

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ROMINOV CORP.
(IBC N° 59999)
(In Voluntary Dissolution)

NOTICE is hereby given that in accordance
under Section 286(b) of the International
Business Companies Act 2016:

- ROMINOV CORP. is in dissolution;
- The date of commencement of dissolution is 21st day of April 2021.
- The Liquidator of the Company is
Mr. Serge Jean-Luc Rouillon of Suite 14,
First Floor Kinsgate House,
PO Box 1075, Victoria, Mahe, Seychelles.

Dated 23rd day of April 2021
Mr. Serge Jean-Luc Rouillon
Liquidator

Blow-out US earnings suggest market has room to run

NEW YORK: US companies are leaping above expectations on first-quarter earnings, giving investors stronger confirmation that profit growth will be able to support the market this year.

A big piece of that growth is coming once again from technology and growth companies, which suggests greater durability in companies that underperformed more economically focused value names for months.

Earnings are rebounding from last year's pandemic-fueled lows. With results in more than half of the S&P 500 companies, earnings are now expected to have risen 46 per cent in the first quarter from the previous year, compared with forecasts of 24 per cent growth at the start of the month, according to IBES data from Refinitiv.

About 87 per cent of reports have come in ahead of analysts' estimates for earnings per share, putting the quarter on track to have the highest beat rate on record going back to 1994, when Refinitiv began tracking the data.

Some strategists say the stronger-than-expected earnings could drive a richly valued market higher still. The benchmark S&P 500 is trading at about 23 times forward earnings, above the long-average of about 15, based on Refinitiv's data.

"The earnings results are really not being fully priced in yet, and that's because you're seeing estimates for the back half of the year start to pick up now in response to this better-than-expected environment. That says to us there's still more room," said Eric Freedman, chief investment officer at US Bank Wealth Management.



The 'Fearless Girl' sculpture is seen outside the New York Stock Exchange during a snowstorm in New York City. — Reuters

The high percentage of beats also follows many quarters where companies were holding off on giving guidance on the future, making it harder for analysts to estimate results for this year.

Citing stronger earnings, Jonathan Golub, chief US equity strategist and head of quantitative research at Credit Suisse Securities, on Friday raised his 2021 S&P 500 price target to 4,600 from 4,300. The S&P 500 index was last at about 4,180.

Stocks have had little reaction to results overall so far. The S&P 500 is up more than 11 per cent since Dec. 31. The index is up less than 2 per cent since mid-April when the earnings period kicked in to high gear but remains near record highs.

Earnings also are raising some fresh questions in the debate over growth versus value. After a decade of steadily underperforming the overall

market, value has been a favorite among some investors as a bet on the reopening of the economy.

However, "tech is showing an ability ... to still create as good, if not superior, sales growth to cyclicals. That's what I find amazing," said David Bianco, Americas chief investment officer for DWS.

"Tech is as much as of a reopening play as everybody else," he said.

Investors will be watching reports in the weeks ahead to see if the trend continues. Results are expected next week from a wide range of companies including Activision Blizzard, Cummins Inc, ConocoPhillips and Pfizer Inc.

The first-quarter results come after a months-long rally in value stocks as investors bet on the reopening of businesses as Covid-19 vaccines became more available.

Value has outperformed

growth names that include heavily weighted technology stocks, and for the year so far, the Russell 1000 value index (.RLV) remains up about 15 per cent, while the Russell 1000 growth index (.RLG) is up about 8 per cent in that time.

Technology-related companies as well as banks - value trade favourites - have had the largest percentage point contribution to estimated first-quarter S&P 500 earnings, with JPMorgan Chase & Co and Apple Inc at the top of the list, based on Refinitiv's data.

Tech is also among the strongest sectors for year-over-year sales growth for the quarter, Bianco noted.

While the risks of higher inflation and possibly higher taxes have given some investors reason to become more cautious on growth shares, earnings may make them think twice about avoiding the group. — Reuters

Buffett touts US economy's unexpected strength as Berkshire rebounds

CALIFORNIA: Warren Buffett said on Saturday that Berkshire Hathaway Inc is being lifted by a US economy faring far better than he predicted early in the coronavirus pandemic, though investor euphoria is making it hard to deploy cash.

Speaking at Berkshire's annual meeting, Buffett said the economy has been "resurrected in an extraordinarily effective way" by monetary stimulus from the Federal Reserve and fiscal stimulus from the US Congress.

"It did the job," Buffett said. "This economy, right now, 85 per cent of it is running in super high gear."

Buffett lamented how an influx of so-called special purpose acquisition companies and inexperienced investors hoping for quick riches have made markets feel like a casino, making it hard for Berkshire to deploy more of its \$145.4 billion cash hoard.

But the 90-year-old retained his optimism for the future of the company he has run since 1965, including after he's gone.

"We've seen some strange things happen in the world in the last year, 15 months," Buffett said.

"It has reinforced our desire to figure out everything possible to make sure that Berkshire is, 50 or 100 years from now, every bit the organisation and then some that it is now."

The annual meeting was



The economy has been "resurrected in an extraordinarily effective way" by monetary stimulus from the Federal Reserve and fiscal stimulus from the US Congress

held in Los Angeles, where Buffett joined Berkshire's 97-year-old vice chairman Charlie Munger, to answer more than three hours of shareholder questions.

Greg Abel and Ajit Jain, Berkshire's other vice chairmen and potentially successors to Buffett as chief executive, also fielded several questions.

Asked about their rapport, Jain said that they don't interact as much as Munger and Buffett, but they talk every quarter about businesses they oversee.

Berkshire scrapped for a second year its annual shareholder weekend in its Omaha, Nebraska, hometown, an extravaganza that normally attracts around 40,000 shareholders.

— Reuters

China's home prices maintain momentum



Residential and office buildings are seen in Beijing. — AFP

BEIJING: Chinese new home prices rose again in April, fuelled by hot demand in smaller coastal cities as housing market strength in major centres tapered off due to tighter restrictions, a private survey showed on Saturday.

New home prices in 100 cities rose 0.23 per cent in April from a month earlier, up marginally from 0.2 per cent in March, according to data from China Index Academy, one of the country's largest independent real estate research firms.

The strength was mainly contributed by tier-2 and 3 cities in the eastern and southern coastal regions. Monthly new home price growth in 10 major cities including Beijing and Shanghai cooled slightly last month, the data showed, as waves of stringent curbs took some heat out of the market.

"In Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta, as core cities instituted tighter restrictions, the demand is now flowing into nearby tier-3 and 4 cities with a large population base and promising industries," said China Index Academy Research Director Cao Jingjing.

Price growth in second-hand homes, a market more opaque and less regulated than the new home sector, quickened to 0.5 per cent in April from previous month, compared with 0.44 per cent in March. — Reuters

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