

Oman participates in 147th session of GCC Ministerial Council

The Sultanate took part in the 147th session of the GCC Ministerial Council held in Riyadh on Wednesday. The Sultanate's delegation was headed by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. The Council discussed reports on following up implementation of the Supreme Council's decisions made at Sultan Qaboos and Shaikh Sabah Summit, as well as memoranda and reports raised by various committees. **DETAILS ON P3**



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OMAN OBSERVER

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HOW COLLECTING COINS AND GEMS LED TO HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL DISCOVERIES



MUSCAT

WINNERS OF WATER RESEARCH NAMED

The Middle East Desalination Research Centre on Wednesday announced the names of winners of ‘Omani Young Water Researchers Award 2020’ and the ‘Eco School Prize’. The competition seeks to encourage Omani youth to conduct studies in the field of water use and water resources. The prize for the higher studies category went to Ibtihal al Manthri of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), whose entry was titled “Water, Land and Energy Use Efficiencies of AC-cooled Greenhouses Based on Field Experiments”.

DETAILS ON P3

ATLANTA

EIGHT KILLED IN ATLANTA SHOOTINGS

Eight people, six of them women of Asian descent, were shot dead in a string of attacks at day spas in and around Atlanta, and a man suspected of carrying out the shootings was arrested in southern Georgia, police said. Although authorities declined to offer a motive for the violence, the attacks prompted the New York Police Department's counter-terrorism unit to announce the deployment of additional patrols in Asian communities there as a precaution. South Korea's foreign ministry said its consulate-general in Atlanta had confirmed that the victims included four women of Korean descent but was verifying their nationality.

DETAILS ON P8



INSIDE



YEMEN FIGHTERS' VOICE 'REGRET' OVER MIGRANT DEATHS

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EGYPT PREPARES TO START MOVE TO NEW CAPITAL

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PLAN FOR MUSIC LIBRARY AT ROYAL OPERA HOUSE



The Higher Committee of the Royal Opera House Muscat held a meeting on Wednesday under the chairmanship of HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, during which it reviewed the progress of work at the opera house. During the meeting, a presentation was made about the permanent exhibition and the music library of the House of Musical Arts at the opera house. **DETAILS ON P2**

PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI

Not more than 70% attendance in govt offices: Supreme Committee

BAN ON ALL DIRECT FLIGHTS FROM BRITAIN

MUSCAT: The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic held a meeting on Wednesday under the chairmanship of Sayyid Hamoud Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, to follow updates on Covid-19 and ways to curb its spread and deal with its impacts.

The committee listened to a briefing from the technical team about the epidemiological situation in the Sultanate and noted the steady rise in the number of Covid-19 infections and deaths in different governorates of the Sultanate. It also studied the common causes of this serious surge, including familial and social gatherings. It noted the alarming surge in travel-related infections from some countries at a time the world is experiencing rapid propagation of the disease.

TURN TO P2

Home visits for vaccination drive

The Directorate-General of Health Services in Muscat Governorate on Wednesday started providing home visits service (immunisation against Covid-19) for target groups registered in the community health programme.

With a rise in the number of cases recorded daily, the Ministry of Health has intensified steps to get many people vaccinated and limit the spread of the pandemic.

The ministry has reported 548 new cases on Wednesday. The vaccination will begin in the Wilayats of Muscat



and Muttrah to be followed by the other areas in the governorate. The goal of the home visits service is to reach

the largest target group in the community to get the vaccine against Covid-19.

SEE ALSO P5

HM CONFERS ORDER OF MERIT



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq has conferred the Order of Merit, First Class, on Professor Fred Scholz in appreciation from His Majesty for Scholz's efforts and scholarly contributions in the Sultanate during the past years. The order was handed over by Yousef Said al Amri, Oman's Ambassador to Germany, when he received Professor Fred Scholz at the Sultanate's Embassy in Berlin on Wednesday. — **ONA**

Mars long ago was wet. You may be surprised where the water went!

WASHINGTON: Mars was once a wet world, with abundant bodies of water on its surface. But this changed dramatically billions of years ago, leaving behind the desolate landscape known today. So what happened to the water? Scientists have a new hypothesis.

Researchers said this week that somewhere between about 30 per cent and 99 per cent of it may now be trapped within minerals in the Martian crust, running counter to the long-held notion that it simply was lost into space by escaping



through the upper atmosphere.

“We find the majority of Mars’ water was lost to the crust. The water was lost by 3 billion years ago, meaning Mars has been the dry planet it is today for the past 3 billion years,” said California

Institute of Technology PhD candidate Eva Scheller.

Early in its history, Mars may have possessed liquid water on its surface approximately equivalent in volume to half of the Atlantic Ocean, enough to have covered the entire planet with water perhaps up to nearly 1.5 km deep.

Water is made up of one oxygen and two hydrogen atoms. The amount of a hydrogen isotope, or variant, called deuterium present on Mars provided some clues about the water loss. — **Reuters**

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 31°C Min 23°C SALALAH: Max 32°C Min 22°C NIZWA: Max 36°C Min 22°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 06:13 FAJR: 04:58 DHUHR: 12:20 ASR: 15:45 MAGHRIB: 18:22 ISHA: 19:32

■ ROHM COMMITTEE REVIEWS PROGRESS ON EXHIBITION, MUSIC LIBRARY



MUSCAT: The Higher Committee of the Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) held a meeting on Wednesday under the chairmanship of His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, during which it reviewed the progress of work at ROHM. During the meeting, a presentation was made about the permanent exhibition and the music library of the House of Musical Arts at the ROHM. The technical equipment of the exhibition and the library will be completed after the summer vacation. It is hoped that the ROHM will gradually launch activities of the new season prior to the end of this year. — ONA
(Photo by Mohamed al Rashdi)

Experiment to combat date palm pests

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has launched an experiment to use parasites of the genus trichogramma to combat red weevil pests that nestle in date palms and damage their crop.

Fifteen farms in the Wilayat of Barka have been selected for the experiment, setting a precedent in the use of biological control agents and the calculation of the number of fighter parasites needed for every tree.

Red palm weevil is considered the most prevalent, most dangerous pest in countries producing dates. It is common



in humid and coastal areas in the Sultanate and many Arab countries. It causes considerable damage to date palms' economic output, with losses constituting 80% in some Arab countries' crops where the larva spoil large quantities of unripe fruits. — ONA

Not more than 70% attendance in govt offices

NIGHT CLOSURE OF COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES EXTENDED * EXERCISE, INDIVIDUAL SPORTS ONLY ALLOWED ON BEACHES



FROM PAGE 1

In pursuance of efforts to protect individuals and society and to address the risks that might peak to death and to ensure the health sector's ability to perform its duty in handling Covid-19 cases and other cases which need medical attention, the Supreme Committee decided to take the following measures.

To Impose a ban on all direct flights from the United Kingdom (UK), except cargo flights, and prohibiting entry of passengers arriving from the UK or who were in transit there over the past 14 days. The ban takes effect from 12 pm on Friday (March 19) continues till further notice. Omani citizens are exempted from the ban.

To downsize to 70 per cent the number of employees at the workplace in units of the state administrative apparatus and other legal entities with effect from Sunday (March 21) till Thursday (April 1). The Supreme Committee urges all departments to continue to take precautionary and preventive measures to curb the spread of the disease and to follow up the commitment of all to the instructions.

To extend the closure of all commercial activities in all governorates of the Sultanate from 8 pm to 5 am till Saturday (April 3). Exemption from this covers fuel filling stations, health establishments, private pharmacies, tyre sale and repair

outlets at filling stations, transport, cargo and unloading services and the operation of factories without the option of receiving clients and customers, home deliveries, the handing over of food orders to customers in their vehicles from restaurants, cafes, mobile cafeterias and licensed street vendors, as well as offering "guests-only service" at restaurants located within hotel establishments.



The Supreme Committee on Wednesday decided to extend the night closure of commercial activities until April 3 across all the governorates.

To activate the role of volunteers in all wilayats of the Sultanate in coordination with the respective walis.

To permit the use of beaches to practise 'individual' sports, while at the same time maintaining a total ban on gatherings at beaches and elsewhere.

The Supreme Committee urges all to stick to precautionary measures endorsed by the departments concerned everywhere — in residences, workplaces and public places.

In particular, the Supreme Committee laid emphasis on the prohibition of gatherings and assembling for whatever purpose and irrespective of their nature or whereabouts — be it familial or social gatherings or assembling in houses or in farms or anywhere.

The committee also exhorts the public and private sectors to devise necessary mechanisms for the implementation of the above-mentioned instructions. The committee warned that there will be no lenience with offenders who breach the instructions.

The committee reaffirmed that the authorities concerned will continue to monitor and apprehend offenders and impose penalties against them to help protect individuals and society.

Concluding its statement, the Supreme Committee prayed to the Almighty Allah to protect all people against all harm. — ONA

Ignore hoax messages, alerts ROP

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The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has urged people to ignore the hoax messages while using ROP online services. It has been noticed that that hoax messengers misguide the users by suggesting that their "computer has been blocked and they needed to pay some money online."

"When a spam message is noticed, kindly ignore it or report to the cyber department of the ROP and alert others. Do

not fall prey to these kinds of unscrupulous cyber frauds," a source at the ROP said.

There have been incidents on the official websites where the user is advised to pay the amount online should he or she wanted to get going.

"When I opened my laptop, a window got opened with a message and a siren saying the message was from the ROP and I had to pay some money. But it disappeared when I switched the PC off and later turned it on," Abdul Nasser, an official of

a construction company told the *Observer*.

"One should be careful in the cyber world as one small precaution can protect you from many dangers," Faisal al Shehhi, an IT expert told the *Observer*.

This theory is equally applicable to downloading apps and material from suspect sites, accessing dubious websites.

There were attempts of cyber blackmail using extortion attempts by suspected international online criminals wanting money.

"Cybersecurity is every individual's responsibility. We should be aware of risks involved while living in the era of social media, as every click forward is an opportunity for cyber fraudsters to dupe someone online," Al Shehhi, an award-winning cyber expert said.

"Added to it, updating oneself should be an ongoing process and everyone on the virtual world needs to constantly update on the risks involved and take the necessary precautions," Al shehhi adds.

Expats urged to make use of exit scheme

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Labour has urged the private sector companies and their expatriate workforce to take advantage of the last few days before the deadline for various facilities and schemes expires.

The Ministry of Labour said that all employers and expatriate workforce wishing

to leave the Sultanate can take advantage of the exit scheme until March 31. Applications received after this date will not be considered. Expatriate workforce benefiting from the grace period should leave by June 31. All requests and approvals will be cancelled after the expiration of the period granted to them.

Oman participates in session of GCC Ministerial Council



RIYADH: The Sultanate took part in the 147th session of the GCC Ministerial Council held in Riyadh on Wednesday. The Sultanate's delegation was headed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. The Council discussed some reports on following up the implementation of the Supreme Council's decisions made at Sultan Qaboos and Shaikh Sabah Summit, as well as memoranda and reports raised by the ministerial committees and the Secretariat General. It also discussed topics pertaining to strategic dialogues among the GCC countries, other countries and international blocs. It also reviewed the latest regional and international developments. — **ONA**

Registration for admission to HEIs opens on April 1

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Registration for study programmes in higher education institutions (HEIs) for the academic year 2021-2022 will start from April 1 and continue till June 1, according to Higher Education Admission Centre.

Since the grades will be determined at the end of this year, the programmes open for admission will be based on academic subjects and not grades.

The Centre also clarified that the programmes being offered by the formerly Colleges of Applied Sciences (CAS) and Colleges of Technology have been merged and they will be offered under one centralised system of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS).

Students' Guide for this year

is limited only to an electronic version.

To create awareness among the students about the registration process the Higher Education Admission Centre is preparing video clips explaining the registration mechanism for Omani students inside and outside the Sultanate.

It is also preparing educational publications and posting them on social media.

The Centre has already started conducting online awareness meetings with career guidance specialists in coordination with the Career Guidance and Student Counseling Center of the Ministry of Education.

The meetings that started on March 7 concluded on Wednesday (March 17) covering all governorates of the Sultanate targeting more than 900 guidance specialists.

Winners of water research, eco school prizes announced



MUSCAT: The Middle East Desalination Research Centre (MEDRC) on Wednesday announced the names of winners of "Omani Young Water Researchers Award 2020" and the 'Eco School Prize'.

The competition seeks to encourage Omani youths to conduct studies in the field of water use and water resources.

The prize for the higher studies category went to Ibtihal al Manthri of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), whose entry was titled "Water, Land and Energy Use Efficiencies of AC-cooled Greenhouses Based on Field Experiments".

In the undergraduate

category, SQU student Kawther al Ismaili won the first place through her research project titled "Microwave-Assisted Synthesis of CdS Sub-Microspheres for the Degradation of Chlorophenols Under Solar Light Irradiation".

The Wastewater Research Prize was won by Aziza al Hinai and Halima al Haimli of SQU for a research paper titled "Comparison between two and three-chamber MDC performance using buffered and non-buffered anolyte".

The Omani water researchers award was founded by MEDRC in cooperation with the

Embassy of the Netherlands in the Sultanate, Omar Al Zawawi Establishment and Haya Water.

The Eco School Prize was won by Al Maabela al Shamalia School. The prize was sponsored by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Oman LNG Development Foundation, and supported by the Ministry of Education, SQU College of Engineering and Oman Film and Theatre Society.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim bin Said al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

OMC helps innovators transform ideas into products

MUSCAT: Oman Makers Centre (OMC) — a joint initiative between the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and the Ministry of Finance — serves as an open workshop for the manufacture of models and the application of applications devised by students and other Omani individuals.

In this context, Oman News Agency (ONA) conducted a number of interviews with people concerned who shed light on the role of the centre, based at Muscat Innovation Complex which was founded in 2017 and affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

Eng Hilal Nassir al Shibli, Director-General of Oman Makers Centre, said that the facility comprises various workshops for steel, timber, 3D printers, laser cutters and study halls.

Al Shibli added that the centre enables participants to make the prototype and then opt for commercial and non-commercial production.

The project seeks to enhance innovation and encourage innovators to carry out their projects and transform them into commercial ventures. In particular, OMC focuses on highlighting project of economic feasibility and encourages transformation into a cognitive economy, said Al Shibli, who outlined the OMC's projects in educational, health and agricultural domains.

"Safe4online" is a platform based on student projects at Sohar University of Technology and Applied Sciences. The platform aims to rectify errors made by individuals who deal with phones and hand-held devices.

Speaking about the platform, a student named Fatma Kahdoun al Saeedi told ONA that "Safe4online" smart platform aims to spread the culture of information security and the concept of cybersecurity among users.

Fatma Khadoun explained that the platform seeks to raise



An open workshop for the manufacture of models and the application of applications devised by students and other Omani individuals

The project targets people interested in producing artefacts from wood to make furniture for homes and cafeterias, Al Bimani added.

Speaking about another OMC project called "iFeed", Ibrahim Khamis al Jahwari, said that the project automates fish feeding in aquaculture pools through the use of smartphones.

Al Jahwari told ONA that the idea of the project was inspired by a graduation research about electronic devices for feeding fish at fish farms.

Meanwhile, Hajir Moosa al Balushi, Ocean Sciences Specialist, who was a member of the water probe working team, said that the team aims to develop a marine robot and a self-guided vehicle to be used to collect marine environment data in the sectors of oil, gas, fisheries and logistics services.

Hajir said in her statement to ONA that the water probe uses wave power and solar power to operate control apparatus and remote sensing machines manufactured by Liquid Robotics, one of Boeing companies. Its systems are integrated and developed as part of a project to study groundwater drainage below the sea surface in the Governorate of Dhofar, she added. — **ONA**

Oman Air bolsters pharmaceutical products handling capabilities

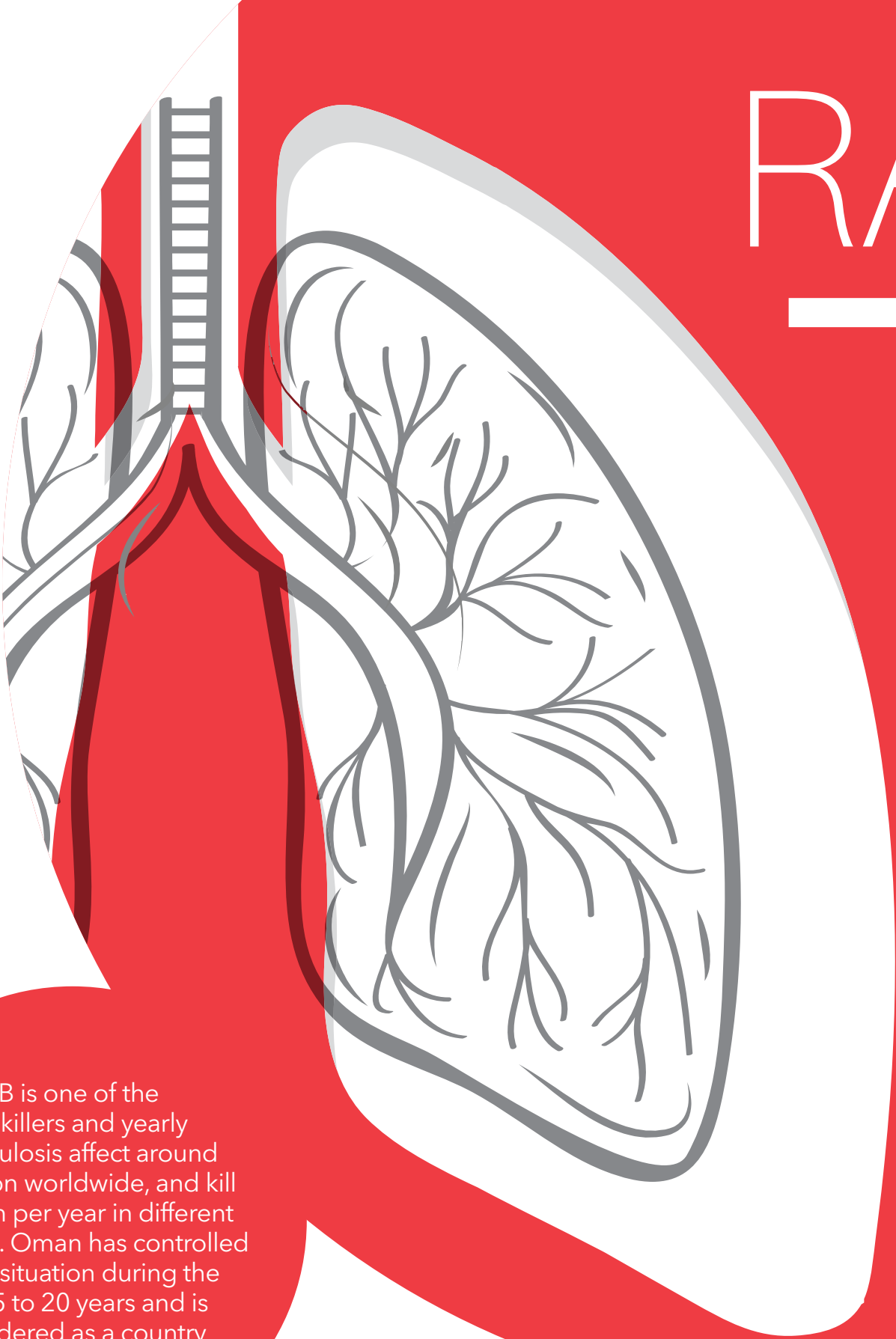
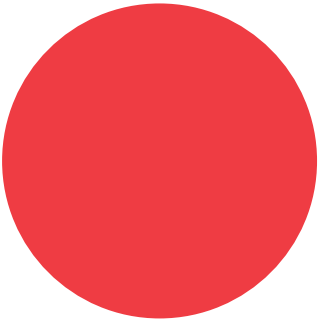
MUSCAT: Oman Air, the national carrier of the Sultanate, has been certified IATA Center of Excellence for Independent Validators for Pharmaceutical Logistics (CEIV Pharma), confirming the airline's capabilities for safeguarding the integrity of time- and temperature-sensitive pharmaceutical products from point of origin to destination. In successfully obtaining the industry-wide standard, Oman Air now aims to grow its participation as an important

carrier for the global biopharma industry.

Abdulaziz al Raisi, CEO of Oman Air, commented, "I am delighted to announce that Oman Air has been certified by IATA for CEIV Pharma. The certification underpins our capabilities as a global cargo carrier for the quality handling of time- and temperature-sensitive healthcare products. This is especially significant during the current Covid crisis, a time when the integrity of vital medications, including vaccines, relies entirely

on safe and dependable cold chain expertise both in the air and on the ground. To do so, our customers can benefit from our state-of-the-art facilities at the Muscat International Air Cargo HUB."

Earlier this year, Oman Air obtained IATA CEIV Fresh Certification for the handling and transport of perishable products. "Being certified both CEIV Pharma and CEIV Fresh positions Oman Air as a leading airline for the integrity of cold chain logistics," explained Al Raisi.



RAISING TB AWARENESS

TB is one of the top killers and yearly tuberculosis affect around 10 million worldwide, and kill 1 million per year in different countries. Oman has controlled the TB situation during the last 15 to 20 years and is considered as a country with low incidents



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Many initiatives have been taken to control tuberculosis, but some countries are still struggling to control it.

Oman is one of the countries that has nicely controlled the TB situation during the last 15 to 20 years and is considered as a country with low incidents. Currently, the Ministry of Health is conducting a survey via telephone and the target is to reach 1,000 participants.

It was in 1881 when the bacterium was discovered but tuberculosis continues to exist affecting different age groups and nationalities.

“No one can stop it if anyone is exposed to it. TB is one of the top killers and yearly tuberculosis affect around 10 million worldwide, and

kill 1 million per year in different countries,” said Dr Fatma al Yaqoubi, Head of TB and Acute Respiratory Diseases, Directorate General of Disease Surveillance and Control, Ministry of Health.

Series of activities to fight tuberculosis have been organised over the years, now the World Health Organisation has called upon countries to end tuberculosis.

“The reality is that some countries are suffering because the number of TB cases is huge while some countries have been able to reduce. Oman’s incident rate is 10 in 100,000 in the last 15 to 20 years. Oman is implementing an anti-TB strategy and working hard to reduce the incidents further,” she explained.

And one of the initiatives is the survey to analyse the understanding of public awareness

and knowledge on tuberculosis and its treatment.

The aim is to reach out to at least 1,000 people to complete. The data will be analysed to come up with various plans.

The survey will be conducted over the phone in Arabic, English and Urdu. The survey is important because it will determine the next action path.

Tuberculosis is contagious and is transmitted through air and one can be exposed to it if he/she is in the proximity of an infected individual while coughing.

“Another issue is when the person is asymptomatic. The bacteria remain in the lungs for a very long time or the patient can have symptoms such as cough, sputum with blood, fever, night sweats and loss of weight.

Improvement in housing and

reduction in the number of people living in one place, overcoming poverty, practising cough etiquette and generally avoiding crowded have all reduced the number of incidents,” Dr Fatma pointed out.

“As part of the TB strategy to end tuberculosis we wanted to know what is the knowledge and what are the practices in the community amongst various nationalities. What are the practices if someone has been diagnosed with tuberculosis? We also would like to know the sources of information they are using to understand the disease. This is very crucial if you want to know how to reduce the incidents further, improve the services and find out if there is any wrong information and find ways to correct it. This way we can convey the correct information,” she

explained. Random numbers have been chosen of Omanis and non-Omanis across all the governorates and the age group which is more than 18 years.

This is to get the right indication of people’s awareness of tuberculosis. A group from the Ministry of Health will conduct the phone calls with the questionnaire after verbal consent.

“We encourage them to participate,” said Dr Fatma. “It doesn’t matter if you do not have all the information. We just want to know the reality. We just want to know how much people know about the disease, its transmission and treatment as well as the prevention,” she added.

(The programme of Oman Observer ‘Note It’ looks at this in depth and can be viewed on YouTube @omanobserver.)

38 per cent rise in fish landing in December

MUSCAT: The total quantity of fish landed in the Sultanate at the end of December 2020 rose by 38 per cent to stand at 799,366 tonnes, compared to 579,184 tonnes during the same period of 2019.

According to statistics released by

the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the total value of the fish landed during December 2020 stood at RO 349,832,000, marking a rise by 15.6 per cent compared to December 2019 when it valued RO 302,679,000. — **ONA**

AstraZeneca vaccination must continue: WHO

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAR 17

The World Health Organization (WHO) said that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine outweigh its risks and that vaccinations must continue.

“Some countries in the European Union have temporarily suspended use of the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine as a precautionary measure based on reports of rare blood coagulation disorders in persons who had received the vaccine. Other countries in the EU — having considered the same information — have decided to continue using the vaccine in their immunisation programs.”

Vaccination against Covid-19 will not reduce illness or deaths from other causes. Thromboembolic events are known to occur frequently. Venous thromboembolism is the third most common cardiovascular disease globally, WHO said.

“During extensive vaccination campaigns, it is routine for countries to signal potential adverse events following immunisation. This does not



necessarily mean that the events are linked to the vaccination itself, but it is good practice to investigate them. It also shows that the surveillance system works and that effective controls are in place,” WHO said.

WHO said it is in regular contact with the European Medicines Agency and regulators around the world for the latest information on Covid-19 vaccine safety. “The global advisory committee

on vaccine safety is carefully assessing the latest available safety data for the AstraZeneca vaccine. Once that review is completed, WHO will immediately communicate the findings to the public.”



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ANNUAL ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING AGENDA

The Board of Directors of **Mazoon Dairy Company SAOC** is pleased to invite the Company's shareholders to attend the company's ordinary Annual General Meetings, to be held at 2:00 pm on Monday, 29/03/2021, via the electronic platform to hold general meetings which can be accessed through the website of the Muscat Clearing and Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om) if the quorum of the meeting is not completed, a second annual ordinary general meeting will be held on Sunday 04/04/2021 at the same time and place to discuss the following agenda:

- 1- To consider and approve the Report of the Board of Directors for the financial year ended on 31/12/2020.
- 2- To consider the auditor's report and approve the balance sheet and profit and loss account for the financial year ended on 31/12/2020.
- 3- To approve the sitting fees paid to the board of directors' meetings and its sub-committees for the previous financial year and to determine the fees for the forthcoming financial year (as per the Annexure).
- 4- To consider and approve the transactions entered into by the Company with related parties during the fiscal year ended December 31, 2020 (as per the Annexure).
- 5- To consider and approve the transactions the company will enter into with related parties during the financial year ending on December 31, 2021 (as per the Annexure).
- 6- To elect a new Board of Directors for the Company from amongst Shareholders or non-shareholders. Any person who wishes to be nominated to the Board of Directors of the Company is required to fill in a Director's Nomination Form; the form can be obtained from the Company. The completed Form should be delivered to the Company at least five (5) days prior to the date of the Annual Ordinary General Meeting of the Company (no later than the end of the business hours on Tuesday, 23/3/2021). The company won't accept any nomination form after that date.
- 7- The appointment of the Auditors for the Company for the financial year ending 31/12/2021 and approve their fees.

According to the Company's Articles of Association and the controls of holding General Meetings using electronic platform, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- a) Juristic persons only, have the right to appoint a natural person as a proxy to attend the General Meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MDCD.
- b) Voting on any of the agenda items begins no more than three days before the date of the General Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the General Meeting. If the shareholder's shares are increased or decreased, the voting process will be canceled, and the shareholder will have to vote again on the day of the General Meeting.

For further information, please contact **Ms. Suzan Nassir** on **Phone No. 24210300**.

Chairman

Auditor

Legal Advisor



Invitation to attend the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of AMAN Real Estate Investment Fund ("Fund")

The Fund Management Body of the Fund are pleased to invite the unitholders to attend the Annual General Meeting ("AGM"), which takes place on 31/03/2021, 3 PM to be held via the electronic platform to convene The General Meetings which is accessible through Muscat Clearing and Depository website (www.mcd.gov.om). If the quorum is not quorate, the meeting shall be re-scheduled to 7/04/2021 at 3:00 PM. To discuss the following Agenda:

1. To consider and Approve the Chairman's Report for the financial year ended 31 December 2020.
2. To consider the Audit's Report and to approve the financial statement Balance Sheet and Profit & Loss Account, for the financial year ended on 31 December.
3. To consider and approve the distribution of cash dividend to the unit holders as per the AGM date with a percentage of 3.56% (an amount of 3.56 baiza per unit), for the financial year ended on 31 December 2020.
4. To approve sitting fees to the meeting of the Fund Management Body for the year ended and determine the fees for the forthcoming financial year (Annex 1).
5. To brief the General Meeting of the related party transaction entered into by the Fund during the financial year ended 31 December 2020 (Annex 2).
6. To appoint an auditor for the fiscal year that will end on 31 December 2021 and determine their fees.

In accordance with the Fund's articles of association and the regulations for holding General Meetings, using modern technology issued by the authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- I. A Juristic person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person, to attend the assembly meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in the MCDC.
- II. Voting on any of the items on the agenda begins no more than three days before the date of the Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the meeting, and if the shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be cancelled, and he must re-vote again on the day of the meeting.

In case of any inquiries about the above agenda items, please contact

Shaima Al Balushi at **phone number 24625819**
or send an email to **s.albalushi@tharaglobal.com**

Legal Advisor

Financial Auditor

Chairman of the Fund

Webinar on supply chain management

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAR 17

The virtual training workshop on 'Supply Chain Management' focused on strengthening the leadership competencies of the participants from the health sector and providing them with the knowledge and skills that support them in increasing the efficiency of supply operations.

The workshop that is to continue till April 7, is being conducted by the Ministry of Health's General Directorate of Medical Supplies (DGMS).

The workshop is in line with the ministry's vision to upgrade the skills and understanding of the health workers. It is moderated by certified regional trainers and consultants from international training and consultancy companies. Pharmacists, assistant pharmacists, nurses, and laboratory technicians from the General Directorate of Medical Supplies and from various health units at the MoH are taking part in the webinar.

This workshop is part of the professional development programmes for health cadres at the Ministry of Health that tends to qualify and train workers of the pharmaceutical sector. Oman Medical Specialties Board (OMSB) has accredited this workshop.



Muscat Finance (SAOG)

Director's Report 2020

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to present the Annual Report for the year ended December 31, 2020.

The year 2020 started on a disconsolate note of the sad demise of our revered HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said. This followed by the outbreak of COVID-19 and its consequential lock down caused an unplanned slowdown of the economy. The operating cash flows for the corporate sector in general came under stress, while economic activity receded through 2020. This resulted in new lending opportunities to be limited, also causing an increase in non-performing loans for the Company.

The Company reorganized its resources towards proactively managing its customers through concerted collection efforts. The Company also ensured that services continue for its customers during the pandemic. Remedial and legal functions were strengthened to continue the focus on recoveries through 2021.

Muscat Finance is optimistic about the Sultanate's vision 2040 of diversifying the economy into non-hydrocarbon areas, resulting in a diverse source of revenue streams and a more vibrant economy going forward. This will translate into a wider opportunity for Muscat Finance SAOG and the finance sector in general.

Business Results

Due to the prevailing conditions through the year, Muscat Finance has been selective in new lending. This has resulted in the portfolio growth to be below budgeted levels. The Company stood by existing clients in offering payment deferrals where merited and helping them navigate a difficult year.

In Retail finance, signs of improvement in business activity towards the latter half of the year have been observed. The Company has positioned well with its partners through initiatives such as 'Intif Tamweel' wherein the end customer receives additional value for the borrowing relationship with the Company. Such alliances will go a long way in capturing lending opportunities as the market activity improves further. On the corporate front, the Company also proactively accommodated our clients through the year.

A detailed review of the operational results of the Company has been covered in the Management Discussion and Analysis Report.

Capital Management & Dividend

The Company's history of dividend payments over the last 5 years is as follows:

Year	Cash Dividend %	Stock Dividend %	Total %
2015	10.00	6.00	16.00
2016	10.00	7.00	17.00
2017	8.00	5.00	13.00
2018	6.25	2.50	8.75
2019	-	-	-
2020	-	-	-

Change in the Composition of the Board

During the year, one member of the Board did not offer himself for re-appointment, one was appointed and resigned, and three new members have joined the Board. Mr. Mohamed Redha, Mr. Hitham Al Busaidi, and Mr. Sultan Al Kaabi bring a wealth of experience to the Board.

The Board believes that it has the diversity required to overcome the challenges of the current external environment and take advantage of the prevailing opportunities through relooking at its processes and resources available.

Accordingly, the Sub-Committees of the Board have been reconstituted. The details are provided in the Report on Corporate Governance.

The Board would like to record its thanks and appreciation to Mr. Abdul Amir Saied Mohammed who decided not to run for election and Mr. Ahmed Mohammed Al Abri who resigned during the year.

Rating Update

Capital Intelligence, an independent credit rating agency, which has been rating our company in the past, has maintained a National Scale rating of omBB+ Long Term and omA2 Short Term, with a Stable Outlook for our company in 2020.

HR and Our People

The Omanisation ratio at 86.8% for the year ended December 31, 2020, continues to be above the 80% requirement of the Central Bank of Oman.

Employee welfare and safety was a primary concern during the year due to the pandemic. The Company facilitated staff schedules in order to protect the staff in accordance with the government guidelines. The company stays invested in nurturing Omani talent through to senior roles, in partnership with ACOA and its CAT program.

The company has reinforced its senior management through the appointment of Mr. Mahmood Al Subeili as AGM, HR and Admin, Mr. Ali Taqi as Head of Compliance, Mr. Rajeev Arora as DGM, Business Transformation and Strategy and Mr. Pratik Punjabi as CFO during the year. Mr. Fahd Bin Amjad has joined as DCEO to strengthen the leadership.

Re-engineering and Innovation committee has been tasked to relook at the organisation structure to come up with a lean structure with stronger controls and accountability, targeting reduced processing times.

Information Technology

In November 2020, a new state-of-the-art Credit Bureau System called 'Mala's' was launched to support the financial services sector in Oman. Muscat Finance was amongst the early subscribers for the service as a member of the Credit Bureau and now exchanges data information through the Mala's system. This improves our risk management capabilities, as well as providing our customers complete information on their credit facilities.

The company is in the process of upgrading its Enterprise Resource Planning software. This is expected to achieve improvements both in customer experience and process efficiency, leapfrogging the way the company conducts its business. The company will upgrade its capabilities to serve customer digitally across channels through the new system.

NOTE :- The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder or other interested party who requests them, in either Arabic or English, within 7 days of such request addressed to: **Chief Executive Officer, Muscat Finance (SAOG) P.O.Box 108, PC 112 Sultanate of Oman**

Audited Financials for the Period Ended December 2020

Statement of Financial Position at 31st December 2020

	2020 RO ' 000	2019 RO ' 000
Assets		
Debtors arising from financing activities	119,704	135,480
Cash & Bank balances	1,377	2,378
Other assets	1,523	994
	122,604	138,852
Liabilities		
Bank borrowings, Bonds & Corp. Deposit	79,061	91,012
Creditors & other liabilities	6,913	7,635
	85,974	98,647
Net Assets	36,630	40,205
Shareholders' funds		
Share capital	30,715	30,715
Legal reserve	6,960	6,960
Special reserve	0	801
Impairment reserve	3,955	4,792
Cumulative changes in fair value	90	52
Retained Earnings	(5,090)	(3,115)
	36,630	40,205

Statement of Comprehensive Income for the Period ended 31st December 2020

	2020 RO ' 000	2019 RO ' 000
Lease and Interest income	10,696	12,086
Interest expense	(5,089)	(4,848)
Net interest income	5,607	7,238
Other Income	501	540
Operating Expenses	(3,141)	(3,054)
Loss on litigation	(2,018)	-
Provision for Impairment	(5,074)	(4,211)
(Loss) / Profit before taxation	(4,125)	513
Provision for taxation	512	(82)
(Loss) / Profit for the period	(3,613)	431

Corporate Social Responsibility

The company acknowledges its responsibility towards contributing to the community, stemming from its strong belief that the society at large is the reason for the success of Muscat Finance.

During 2020, your company made a financial contribution of RO 60,000/- towards government institutions involved in combating the outbreak of COVID-19, in order to complement their efforts.

Corporate Governance

Your Company has always supported the highest levels of Corporate Governance. Details of our Corporate Governance philosophy and processes are described in the Corporate Governance Report included in the Annual Report

Business outlook for 2021

Due to the uncertainty related to COVID-19, reviving the pace of economic recovery remains challenging. It is expected that with a successful vaccination drive in the Sultanate, the operating environment may slowly improve through the year. In such times, your Company will remain vigilant in identifying lending opportunities while continuing its focus on recovery of non-performing loans. The company will seek to enhance the use of technology in improving customer acquisition and servicing. It will continue to upskill its people and processes to strengthen its reputation as a customer focused lender. The changes will reflect in the Company's business performance during the year.

Acknowledgement

On behalf of the Board, I would like to offer our best wishes and unfaltering loyalty and obedience to His Majesty Sultan Hitham Bin Tariq as he takes forward the legacy of Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, whose Leadership and Vision provided the foundation for the economic, political and social progress of the Sultanate of Oman. I would also like to thank His Majesty's Government, the Central Bank of Oman, the Capital Market Authority, Ministry of Commerce and Industry and other Regulatory Authorities for their continued support and guidance.

The Board would like to thank all our customers for their continued patronage and support, to our local and overseas bankers for their active co-operation, and to all the shareholders for the confidence reposed in its Board.

Finally, the Board would also like to thank the management and the staff.

On Behalf of the Board of Directors

Faisal bin Mohamed Al Youssef
CHAIRMAN



Tunisian President Kais Saied (C-L) meets with Libya's new interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah (C-R), in the Libyan capital Tripoli, on Wednesday. – AFP

Tunisian president in Libya for talks with new unity govt

TRIPOLI: Tunisian President Kais Saied on Wednesday visited neighbouring Libya, where a UN-backed unity government is seeking to restore stability after a decade of violent turmoil.

On the first such visit since 2012, the Tunisian president met Libya's new interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, who has been tasked with governing until December elections.

Saied's trip aims to show "Tunisia's support for the democratic process in Libya" and for greater "stability and prosperity", his office said.

Libya descended into chaos after Muammar Gaddafi was toppled and killed in a Nato-backed

uprising in 2011, with an array of forces battling to fill the void.

The turmoil has impacted Tunisia by sharply reducing cross-border trade and because militants used lawless Libya as a staging area for a series of bloody attacks in Tunisia.

Saied was welcomed at the airport in Tripoli by Presidential Council Chairman Mohamed al Manfi. He later met Dbeibah, who was sworn in on Monday.

Libya's new transitional executive emerged from a UN process that was launched in November in Tunis, then voted on in Geneva and confirmed by Libya's parliament on March 10. — AFP

Yemen fighters voice 'deep regret' over migrant deaths, say 44 killed

SANAA: Yemen's Ansar Allah expressed "deep regret" on Wednesday over the deaths of dozens of migrants in a fire which Human Rights Watch said started when the fighters fired projectiles into a detention centre.

A senior official in the fighter movement, which is locked in a six-year campaign against the internationally recognised government, said that an investigation into the March 7 incident was under way.

"We express our deep regret over the accidental incident at the migrant detention centre in Sanaa," said Ansar Allah official Hussein Al Azi, according to the fighters' Al Masirah television.

"The victims are 44 migrants and the wounded are 193, most of whom have gone to hospital, and there is an investigation into the reasons for the incident"

The United Nations called on Tuesday for an independent investigation into the blaze, shortly after Human Rights Watch blamed it on "unidentified projectiles" fired by the Ansar Allah fighters.

"There must be an independent investigation into the cause of the fire," the UN envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, told the Security Council.

He added that the "extraordinary, horrific fire" had reminded the world "of the plight



Members representing African communities in Yemen gather to speak in front of the offices of the International Organisation for Migration in Sanaa, following last weekend's fire in a holding facility, on March 13. – AFP file photo

of the migrant community".

The fighters control much of northern Yemen, including the capital Sanaa which was captured from the government in 2014, sparking the devastating conflict.

HRW said detainees — most of them Ethiopian — had been protesting against overcrowding when camp guards rounded up hundreds of them into a hangar and fired two projectiles into the building.

"The migrants said the first projectile produced a lot of smoke and made their eyes water and sting. The second, which the migrants called a 'bomb', exploded loudly and started a fire," it said in a report.

Footage of the aftermath, which AFP obtained from a survivor, showed dozens of charred bodies piled on top of one another and strewn across the ground. One person was heard crying out in

prayer.

The rights group said hundreds of injured migrants were being treated in hospitals in Sanaa where a "heavy security presence" had posed problems for humanitarian agencies seeking access.

A video published by HRW showed security forces walking among survivors outside the facility as the fire raged inside, sending black smoke billowing into the sky. — AFP

Palestinians get first batch of UN vaccines

TEL AVIV: The Palestinian Authority on Wednesday received its first batch of vaccines from the global Covax sharing initiative, in a boost to inoculations in the occupied West Bank and Gaza lagging far behind Israel's campaign.

A Palestinian Health Ministry spokesman said 38,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine would be used for inoculations as of Sunday, while 24,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine would be stored "until there is a scientific decision from the World Health Organization".

The vaccines shipped to Tel Aviv were the first sent by the WHO to the Palestinians under the Covax drive it set up with the GAVI vaccine alliance to ensure equitable access to Covid-19 vaccinations globally.

Further Covax shipments are expected in a few months.

A truck brought the initial



A worker unloads a refrigerated truck carrying the first delivery of coronavirus vaccine via the UN Covax programme supporting poorer areas, to be kept at Palestinian Authority's storage facility in the West Bank city of Nablus. – AFP

shipment from Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport to the Palestinian city of Ramallah in the West Bank. About a third of the doses have been allocated for Gaza.

An official in the office of the UN special coordinator

for the Middle East peace process said the vaccines "will be critical tools in our fight against the pandemic and for socioeconomic recovery".

The Palestinian Authority hopes to cover about 20 per cent

of the Palestinian population through the Covax initiative. It said the initial doses from Covax would be given to health workers, cancer and kidney patients and people over the age of 75.

The West Bank, where 3.1 million Palestinians live, has reported 146,359 coronavirus cases, with 1,667 deaths. Gaza, with a population of two million, has registered more than 57,891 cases with 572 deaths.

Health officials in Gaza said some 8,500 people had received the first dose of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. In the West Bank, about 5,000 have had their first shot.

About 90,000 of the 120,000 Palestinian labourers who have Israeli work permits have been vaccinated by Israel, which has been a world leader in its vaccination rollout.

— Reuters

Lebanon protesters try to storm ministry

BEIRUT: Lebanese protesters briefly attempted to storm the economy ministry on Wednesday to denounce exploding prices of basic goods as the local currency collapses.

Around 20 protesters had gathered outside the ministry's Beirut headquarters after the Lebanese pound hit a new-low of 15,000 to the greenback a day earlier, according to an AFP correspondent.

Some tried to enter the building, causing tension with security forces, the official National News Agency reported.

"We are killing each other

for a bag of diapers and a carton of milk" one protester told a local TV station.

The political class "have humiliated us," he said, denouncing hikes in consumer prices which rose by almost 146 per cent during 2020, according to official statistics.

Lebanon is in the grips of its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war.

The pound, officially pegged at 1,507 to the greenback since 1997, has lost almost 90 per cent of its value on the black market.

It was changing hands for around 14,000 to the dollar on Wednesday. — AFP

AMMAN

Six sentenced to death for maiming teen

Jordan's state security court sentenced six men to death on Wednesday after convicting them of maiming a 16-year-old boy in a case that triggered public outrage, a court official said. The victim has since regained the use of one eye after receiving treatment at Amman's King Hussein Hospital ordered by King Abdullah II but he lost both hands to his assailants' vendetta against his father. A total of 17 people were implicated in the teenager's abduction from Zarqa



last October. The gang wanted to make the boy suffer to punish his father, who had been detained on suspicion of killing the brother of four of them following an argument about money. — AFP

TEHRAN

Final report blames air defence operator error

Iran's civil aviation body has blamed an error by an air defence operator in a final report on the cause of a Ukrainian passenger plane crash in January 2020 that killed all 176 people aboard, the agency said on Wednesday. "The plane was identified as a hostile target due to a mistake by the air defence operator... near Tehran and two missiles were fired at it," the report said.

"The flight's operation did not have a role in creating the error by the air defence battery,"



Iran's Revolutionary Guards shot down the Ukraine International Airlines flight with ground-to-air missiles on January 8, 2020 shortly after it took off from Tehran. — Reuters

DAMASCUS

Assad and wife recovering from Covid-19

Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his wife Asma are recovering from Covid-19 and will soon resume their full duties after ending a period of isolation at home, the president's office said on Wednesday. The office had said on March 8 that Assad, 55, and his 45-year-old wife, who announced her recovery from breast cancer in 2019, had tested positive for Covid-19 after showing minor symptoms and that they would work at home.

"The laboratory and X-ray



indications related to their health condition are returning gradually to normal," the office said in a statement, the first public update on the couple's condition since they fell ill. — Reuters

Myanmar Buddhist group signals break with authorities

YANGON: Myanmar's most powerful Buddhist monks' association called on the junta to end violence against protesters and accused an "armed minority" of torture and killing innocent civilians since last month's coup, media said on Wednesday.

In its most forthright condemnation of the military's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations, the government-appointed organisation also said in a draft statement its members intended to halt activities, in an apparent protest.

The State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee planned to release a final statement after consulting the religious affairs minister on Thursday, the Myanmar Now news portal said, citing a monk who attended a meeting of the committee.

Monks have a long history of activism in Myanmar and were at the forefront of a 2007 "Saffron Revolution" against military rule, an uprising that, although suppressed, helped usher in democratic reforms.

Committee members could not immediately be reached



Men ride a scooter past a burning barricade in Yangon on Wednesday as security forces continued a crackdown on demonstrations against the military coup. — AFP

for comment, but their reported stance would signal a significant rift between authorities and a group that usually works closely with the government.

Pope Francis also appealed for an end to the bloodshed, saying: "Even I kneel on the streets of Myanmar and say 'stop the violence.'"

Myanmar has been in

“Even I kneel on the streets of Myanmar and say 'stop the violence'”

POPE FRANCIS

turmoil since the military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government on February 1, detaining her and members of her party.

More than 180 protesters have been killed as security forces try to crush a wave of demonstrations, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners activist group says. — Reuters

Beijing raps US, Japan for 'collusion'

BEIJING: China on Wednesday accused the United States and Japan of colluding to interfere in its internal affairs after the two countries joined forces to warn of "destabilising behaviour" by Beijing in the region.

Beijing's response comes just a day before China's top diplomats are set to meet top US officials in Alaska in their first face-to-face talks since President Joe Biden's administration came to power.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday China was acting aggressively and repressively, and accused North Korea of committing "systemic and widespread abuses" against its own people.

Blinken is visiting Japan and South Korea alongside Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, in a first overseas trip by top-level members of Biden's administration aimed at rebuilding US alliances in Asia. — AFP/Reuters

India reports highest daily spike

NEW DELHI: India needs to take big, decisive steps to stop an emerging second peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Wednesday as the country reported its highest daily spike in three months.

"If we don't stop this pandemic right now, then there could be a nationwide outbreak," Modi said at a virtual meeting with heads of

regional governments.

Modi said the fact that the disease was now emerging in tier two and three towns — unlike the first wave when it was concentrated in big urban centres — was worrying as this could lead to its spread in adjoining rural hinterlands.

After a peak of more than 90,000 new cases daily in mid-September, the trajectory of the

disease had dipped till February 9 when it reached its lowest point of just 9,110 cases.

But it has been rising since then and there had been a 37-per cent increase in just the past two weeks, federal Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan said. A total of 28,903 new cases and 188 deaths have been reported in 24 hours between Tuesday and Wednesday mornings. — dpa

Thai sniffer dogs can detect Covid-19 in sweat: Study

BANGKOK: Thai sniffer dogs trained to detect Covid-19 in human sweat proved nearly 95 per cent accurate during training and could be used to identify coronavirus infections at busy transport hubs within seconds, the head of a pilot project said.

Six Labrador Retrievers participated in a six-month project that included unleashing them to test an infected patient's sweat on a spinning wheel of six canned vessels.

"The dogs take only one to two seconds to detect the virus," Professor Kaywalee Chatdarong, the leader of the project at the veterinary faculty of Thailand's Chulalongkorn University, said.

"Within a minute, they will manage to go through 60 samples."

The dogs can detect a volatile organic compound secreted in the sweat of Covid-19 sufferers, even in the absence of disease symptoms, the Thai researcher said.

The dogs would not need to



A dog is seen during its training to detect Covid-19 in Songkhla, Thailand.

— Reuters

directly sniff people, but could screen samples of sweat, a task that should not be difficult in a tropical country such as Thailand, she added.

Chile, Finland and India are other countries that have also launched efforts to get sniffer dogs to detect the virus, with a German veterinary clinic saying last month its sniffer dogs had achieved 94 per cent detection accuracy in human saliva.

"The next step is we will

put them out in the field," said Kaywalee.

"In the future, when we send them to airports or ports, where there is an influx of commuters, they will be much faster and more precise in detecting the virus than temperature checks."

Thailand has been relatively successful in containing the virus, with a new wave of infections in the first two months of the year now levelling off and after recording 88 deaths. — Reuters



National Finance
Co. SAOG

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Invitation to attend the Annual Ordinary General Meeting

The Board of Directors of NATIONAL FINANCE {the "Company"} has the pleasure to invite the shareholders to attend the Annual General Meeting, which will be held at 4.00 PM on 30-03-2021, via the electronic platform to hold general meetings which can be assessed through the website of Muscat Clearing & Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om). If the quorum requirement for holding the Annual General Meeting is not fulfilled, a second Annual General Meeting shall be held at 3.00 PM on 05-04-2021, to discuss the following agenda:

Ordinary Agendas Annual:

To consider and approve the report of the Board of Directors' on Company's activity and its financial position for the financial year ended 31st December 2020.

1. To consider and approve the report of the Board of Directors' on corporate governance for the financial year ended 31st December 2020.
2. To consider the statutory auditors' report and to approve the financial statements and the profit and loss account for the financial year ended 31st December 2020.
3. To consider and approve the proposed cash dividend to the shareholders, as on the date of the meeting, amounting to 6 baiza for each share for the financial year ended 31 December 2020.
4. To approve the sitting fees paid to Directors' for attending meetings of the Board and sub committees for the previous financial year and to determine the Directors' sitting fees for the upcoming financial year, as per (Annexure '1').
5. To consider and approve the proposed Directors Remuneration of RO 150,000 for the financial year ended on 31st December 2020.
6. To consider the transactions carried out with related parties during the financial year ended 31st December 2020 (Annexure '2').
7. To consider the allocation of an amount of RO 150,000 for Corporate Social Responsibility for the financial year ending 31st December 2021.
8. To appoint statutory auditors for the financial year ending 31st December 2021 and determine their fees.
9. To elect one (1) Director to fill the vacant seat in the Board of Directors (from the shareholders and/or non-shareholders). Any person wishes to nominate himself/herself to the Board of Director may fill out the nomination form that can be obtained from the Company's head office. The completed form should be delivered to the Company's head office at least 5 working days prior to the Annual Ordinary General Meeting, not later than Monday, 22nd March 2021.

According Company's Articles of Association and General Meeting regulations, through modern technology means issued by the Capital Market Authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- (a) Legal person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person to attend General Meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MCD.
- (b) Voting on any of the items on the agenda begins no more than three days before the date set for the Meeting until the end of the voting process on the day of the Meeting, and in the event that the shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be invalid, and he must re-vote again on the day of the Meeting.

Any questions relating to this Notice should be addressed to Mr. R. Panneerselvam
(Telephone No. +968 24470000/24470102 or email: r.panneerselvam@nationalfinance.co.om)

Chairman

Auditors

Legal Advisors

8 killed in shootings at Atlanta day spas

SIX WOMEN OF ASIAN DESCENT WERE AMONG THE VICTIMS IN THE LATEST INSTANCE OF GUN VIOLENCE

ATLANTA: Eight people, six of them women of Asian descent, were shot dead in a string of attacks at day spas in and around Atlanta, and a man suspected of carrying out the killings was in custody on Wednesday in southern Georgia, police said.

Although authorities in the southern US state declined to offer a motive for the violence, the attacks on Tuesday prompted the New York Police Department's counter-terrorism unit to announce the deployment of additional patrols in Asian communities there as a precaution.

South Korea's foreign ministry said its consulate-general in Atlanta had confirmed that the victims included four women of Korean descent but was verifying their nationality.

It was the latest instance of gun violence involving numerous deaths in the United States. Authorities said it was not determined whether the victims were targeted because of their race or ethnicity.

Robert Aaron Long, 21, of Woodstock in Cherokee County, was taken into custody in Crisp County, about 240 km south of Atlanta. A photo of Long, who is white, was released by authorities.

"A motive is still not clear, but a crime against any community is a crime against us all," Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms said in a statement on Wednesday.



Law enforcement personnel are seen outside a massage parlour where a person was shot and killed on Tuesday, in Atlanta, Georgia. — AFP

The bloodshed began about 5 pm on Tuesday when four people were killed and another was wounded in a shooting at Young's Asian Massage in Cherokee County, about 64 km north of Atlanta, Captain Jay Baker of the Cherokee County Sheriff's Department said.

Two women of Asian descent were among the dead there, along with a white woman and a white man, Baker said, adding that the surviving victim was a Hispanic man.

In Atlanta, the state capital, police officers responding to a call

South Korea's foreign ministry said its consulate-general in Atlanta had confirmed that the victims included four women of Korean descent but was verifying their nationality

of a "robbery in progress" shortly before 6 pm arrived at the Gold Spa beauty salon and found three women shot dead, Police Chief

Rodney Bryant told reporters.

While investigating the initial report, the officers were called to a separate aromatherapy spa across the street where another woman was found dead from a gunshot wound, Bryant said. All four women killed in Atlanta were of Asian descent.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was visiting South Korea on Wednesday, offered his condolences.

"We are horrified by this violence which has no place in America or anywhere," Blinken told South Korean Foreign

Minister Chung Eui-yong.

The violence unfolded days after US President Joe Biden used a nationally televised speech to condemn a surge in hate crimes and discrimination against Asian-Americans. Civil rights groups have accused former President Donald Trump of contributing to the trend by referring to the coronavirus as the "China virus" and "China plague" because the pathogen first emerged there.

"The president has been briefed overnight about the horrific shootings in Atlanta. White House officials have been in touch with the mayor's office and will remain in touch with the FBI," White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in a statement.

US Attorney General Merrick Garland was also briefed on the events, according to a Justice Department official.

SUSPECT IN CUSTODY

Baker told Reuters that investigators were "very confident" that the same suspect was the gunman in all three shootings. The Atlanta Police Department said the suspect was connected to all the attacks by video evidence from the crime scenes.

Long was spotted in southern Georgia, far from the crime scenes, after police in Cherokee County issued a bulletin providing a description and license plates of the vehicle involved in the attacks, Baker said. — Reuters

Kremlin says US report on election interference 'groundless'

MOSCOW: The Kremlin on Wednesday dismissed as "absolutely groundless" a US report saying that Russia targeted election infrastructure during the 2020 polls.

"We consider this report to be wrong, it is absolutely groundless and unsubstantiated," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists on Wednesday.

He added that the Kremlin "regrets" the decision to publish such materials and called it an "excuse" to consider new sanctions on Moscow.

His words were echoed by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who also called the conclusions of the US report "groundless".

The US intelligence report published on Tuesday said that Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior officials "were aware of and probably directed" Russia's influence operation to sway the vote in Donald Trump's favour.

— AFP

EU puts brake on vaccine exports to cope with crisis

BRUSSELS: The European Union may get more restrictive in exporting Covid-19 vaccines to safeguard essential jabs for its own citizens facing a third wave of the pandemic, the head of the bloc's executive said on Wednesday.

Ursula von der Leyen's announcement risks escalating tensions with the United Kingdom and the United States over their restrictive approach to deliveries of vaccines to the 27-nation bloc.

She spoke as six EU countries complained to Brussels about reduced deliveries that are hampering the bloc's already troubled inoculation campaign and could stall plans to restart travel this summer and support the battered tourism sector.

The EU faces an acute shortage of Covid-19 jabs due to reduced



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen removes her protective mask at the start of a press conference in Brussels on Wednesday. — Reuters

deliveries by AstraZeneca.

"We are in the crisis of the century," von der Leyen said as Covid-related deaths in the EU top 550,000 and less than a tenth of the bloc's population has been inoculated. "If this situation does not change, we will have to reflect on how to make exports to vaccine-producing countries dependent on their level of openness," she said. — Reuters

Two jurors dismissed in Floyd murder trial after news of \$27m settlement

NEW YORK: Two jurors seated in the trial of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer facing murder charges over his arrest of George Floyd, were dismissed on Wednesday after they said news of a \$27 million settlement with Floyd's family meant they could no longer be impartial.

Hennepin County District Judge Peter Cahill had set aside three weeks for jury selection, beginning last week, and was back down to seven seated jurors after the two dismissals.

Mayor Jacob Frey joined some of Floyd's relatives at a news conference on Friday to announce the city would pay them \$27 million to settle their federal wrongful-death lawsuit



A pedestrian walks past community murals painted on the side of what was the Lake Street Kmart, which was destroyed in the wake of George Floyd's death. — Reuters

against the city, one of the largest settlements of its kind.

One of the jurors selected last week told the judge on Wednesday morning that the

settlement's size shocked him and "kind of swayed me a little bit."

"It kind of sent a message that the city of Minneapolis felt that

something was wrong, and they wanted to make it right, to the tune of that dollar amount," the juror, a white man in his 30s, told the court.

Cahill dismissed him and a Hispanic man in his 20s who expressed similar views.

Some of the other seated jurors, who have been promised anonymity by the judge for the trial's duration, said they had seen headlines about the settlement, but were able to assure the court it would not influence them.

Chauvin's lead lawyer, Eric Nelson, has complained to the court that publicity around the settlement makes it harder to seat a jury that can be impartial. — Reuters

PARIS

France to impose tougher restrictions on Paris

The French government will impose tougher restrictions for some regions including Paris from this weekend to counter the accelerating spread of Covid-19 infections, spokesman Gabriel Attal said on Wednesday after a cabinet meeting.

The announcement paves the way for new curbs in the greater Paris region, where intensive care wards are full and the hospital system is buckling with an incident rate of more than 400 cases per 100,000 inhabitants.



New curbs for Paris could include some form of confinement. Weekend lockdowns have already been imposed on top of a nationwide nightly curfew in some areas. — Reuters

BRUSSELS

EU diplomats agree on first China sanctions

The European Union agreed on Wednesday to blacklist Chinese officials for "human rights abuses", two diplomats said, the first sanctions against Beijing since an EU arms embargo in 1989 following the Tiananmen Square crackdown.

EU ambassadors approved the travel bans and asset freezes on four Chinese individuals and one entity, whose names will not be made public until formal approval by EU foreign ministers on March 22, as part of a new



and wider rights sanctions list.

While the sanctions are mainly symbolic, the adoption marks a significant hardening in the EU's policy towards China. — Reuters

AMSTERDAM

Dutch PM Rutte expected to stay in office

Dutch citizens cast the final votes on Wednesday in a national election fought during the coronavirus pandemic, with conservative Prime Minister Mark Rutte expected to win a fourth term in office.

The election is widely seen as a referendum on the government's performance during the crisis, in which more than 16,000 people have died of Covid-related illnesses and police clashed with protesters opposed to strict lockdown measures.



With a night-time curfew in place due to continuing high infection rates, and a ban on public gatherings during the day, the campaign was conducted mostly through television debates. — Reuters

Skill tests for all job-seekers!

When the citizens of the country apply for jobs, they have to take tests and a series of interviews in both public and private sectors. On the contrary, I do not know why the expatriates, do not need to go through the same process conducted by international agencies which are accredited by us. Why there is no similar mechanism so that the expatriate job applicants take examinations covering their specialisations, skills and experience. This is important to ensure that the manpower which reaches Oman is up to the mark to play the role they are assigned to do. This is important for the sustainable economic growth of Oman. After taking up the job, they should not become a burden to the country and do not drain the financial resources of the country.

Ignoring the necessity of examination for expatriate job-seekers and just imposing the same on the local manpower is neither fair, nor serves the purpose of the economic development. The current practice tilts the balance in favour of expatriates. This practice should end without any delay. This is particularly where certain level of specialisation is required and where there are local cadre available for the job. It is the requirement of justice and rationale to make the job-seekers to take tests to prove that they have the required capabilities, skills and experience. This process should be based on principles



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IN MEDICAL
AND HEALTH
SECTOR, BOTH
LOCAL AND
EXPATRIATE JOB-
SEEKERS TAKE
EXAMINATIONS
BEFORE
THEY CAN
PRACTICE THEIR
PROFESSION

of equality which needs faith, ethics, employment and professionalism. What is happening today is that if you ask that if a citizen is to be recruited in either public or private sector without any tests or interview process, the answer will be ‘no, not at all.’ But expatriates are being hired without going through this process. If this is the case, where is justice, equality and impartiality. Everyday we are told that there are very limited job opportunities available for which tens of thousands of youth in the country are competing. There are certain standards under which these jobs are classified. Then there is the process for employment. But in the case of hiring an expatriate there are no standards.

The situation was different in the past. In certain job categories, availability of local manpower was limited or non-existent at all. But the country has crossed that phase. It has come a long way. Currently, parity is required in jobs offered for citizens and expatriates. The country now has its own trained cadre to fill the positions for which earlier only expatriates were available. In medical and health sector, both local and expatriate job-seekers take examinations before they can practice their profession. This is because any mistakes or errors could cause loss of life. Therefore, it is considered crucial

to make them go through the process of tests to check their capabilities, skills and experience. Only after that process, they get the license to practice their profession. But same process is not there for other professions. This is despite the fact that any weakness in skills and capabilities of other professions could harm the economy or in some cases obstruct development. If there are skill and experience tests for other professions, it will make them stronger and finer as well as more productive for the national economy. These tests will help in the enhancement of the level of services given to the people living in the country. All professions or vocations require certain skills and capabilities. If there are more and better skills, it will be better for the future of the country. Of course, contract workers, farmers and some other professions can be excluded from the professional examinations. But it should be made must for all other professions. There should be approved standard examinations for hiring cadre, and it does not matter it comes from within the country or abroad. We hope that there will be similar professional examinations for both local and expatriate job-seekers. This is a necessity to ensure equality in the process and quality in the work force.

WRITE FOR US

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

FACING EVICTION

Land grabbing law hurting women, poor

RINA CHANDRAN

A new law to curb illegal land occupation in the western Indian state of Gujarat is hurting the urban poor, women and lower-caste Dalits, land rights groups said on Wednesday, with thousands facing eviction and loss of their livelihoods.

Under the Gujarat Land Grabbing (Prohibition) Act, enacted in December, anyone found to be illegally occupying public or private land can be charged and tried in special courts, with penalties including fines and jail sentences of up to 14 years.

“Everyone is a potential land grabber, a criminal, under this law — no one has protection, particularly those who are already vulnerable,” said Varsha Ganguly, a board member of the non-profit Working Group for Women and Land Ownership.

“It is not their fault that the land they have been on for decades has not been regularised, that land records are not updated, or that there are no conclusive land titles. These are failures on the part of the government.”

VIJAY RUPANI
Gujarat Chief Minister

The law, which is modelled after similar laws in the states of Karnataka and Assam, has been challenged in Gujarat's high court, with the petition filed last month by two residents, who say they were unfairly charged under the law, ongoing.

Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani has defended the law, telling reporters that it would bring “peace and security” and ensure “time-bound and speedy disposal of complaints, and protect the interests of farmers and the common man”.

There are nearly 800 ongoing land conflicts in India, according to Land Conflict Watch, a network of researchers, largely driven by rising demands for land for industry, infrastructure, power and conservation.

A growing number of informal settlements and slums have been cleared for housing and office blocks, with more than 107,600 people evicted in 2019, according to Housing and Land Rights Network, a non-profit.

In Gujarat, authorities have said the law will expedite resolution of land conflicts, and that about 700 cases are being investigated. Human rights groups say the law is being used against the landless poor, and other marginalised groups.

Ganguly said Dalit women who have been farming wasteland for decades face eviction, while Gujarat parliamentarian Mukesh Patel has voiced concern that the law could be used to penalise nearly 2,000 widows shrimp farming on government land.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

BIRTH OF A NEW STATE

Egypt prepares to start move to new capital, away from the chaos

AIDAN LEWIS AND MOHAMED ABDELLAH

Egypt is racing to prepare a grandiose new capital city in the desert east of Cairo before the first civil servants move in this summer and ahead of the delayed official opening of President Abdel Fattah el Sisi's flagship project.

At the heart of the city, workers are putting finishing touches to an avenue of ministries that echo the architecture of pharaonic temples and adjoin a raised Islamic complex, two domed parliament buildings and a sprawling presidential compound.

There will be a monorail passing through a business district where a 385-metre central tower is close to completion. Beyond, the contours of a 10 km park stretching to a giant mosque are taking shape.

The city, known simply as the New Administrative Capital, is designed to operate with smart technology on virgin land away from the clutter and chaos of Cairo. It will boast universities, leisure facilities and a diplomatic quarter.

But it has made halting progress, and after Emirati funding fell through shortly after it was announced in 2015, the military and government took on the estimated \$25 billion cost of the first phase, injecting off-budget investment.

Some foreign loans and financing have been secured.

The coronavirus pandemic also slowed progress, and the first of three planned phases, covering 168 square kilometres, will not be completed when



Residential buildings are seen in the New Administrative Capital (NAC) east of Cairo, Egypt, last week. — Reuters

THE PANDEMIC
SLOWED PROGRESS,
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THREE PLANNED
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BEGINS TO MOVE IN

the government begins to move in. “The rate of completion of the first phase has passed 60 per cent across all projects,” said Khaled el Husseiny, spokesman for the new capital. He added that the delayed transfer of civil servants would begin in July, ahead of an official opening planned for the end of 2021. The city is being designed as a high-tech model for Egypt's future. Control centres will monitor infrastructure and security electronically, roofs will be covered in solar panels, payments will be cashless and 15 square metres

of green space are allocated per inhabitant, officials said. “We are trying to solve all the problems we had in the past in the new capital,” said Husseiny. The finished city is expected to house at least 6 million residents, its second and third phases largely residential. That will take decades to complete, although the government will be able to function normally while construction goes on, said Amr Khattab, spokesman for the Housing Ministry which is responsible for executing parts of the city. — Reuters

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TEAM NZ RETAIN AMERICA'S CUP IN HOME WATERS



Team New Zealand crew celebrates their victory in the 36th America's Cup against Luna Rossa Prada in Auckland. – AFP



AUCKLAND: Team New Zealand won the 36th America's Cup on Wednesday, wrapping up a 7-3 victory over challenger Luna Rossa to savour a triumphant defence of the 'Auld Mug' in sparkling home waters off the coast of Auckland.

The final race 10 ended up a victory lap for the hosts as they notched their fifth race win in succession, the peerless 'Te Rehutai' yacht roaring to a 46-second win to trigger partying on spectator yachts and among crowds on the foreshore.

TNZ helmsman Peter Burling soaked up his second America's Cup triumph, having reclaimed the sport's oldest international trophy with a 7-1 win over Oracle Team USA at the 2017 match in Bermuda.

The 30-year-old Olympic champion sprayed his teammates with champagne as they celebrated on deck after delivering the country its fourth America's Cup.

"It's unreal. Seeing all the people involved over three-four years, how many Kiwis out here supporting the campaign — messages from everyone, from the Prime Minister to high school kids, it means the world to us," said Burling.

"We're blown away by what we've achieved as a group."

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern wasted little time pledging the government's commitment to another defence.

"Team New Zealand has once again made us all so proud by retaining America's Cup as New Zealand's cup," Ardern said in a statement.

"We want to see it all over again in 2023."

A fleet of yachts escorted TNZ back to shore as foghorns blared and thousands of fans cheered on Auckland's sunbathed Viaduct Harbour.

Beaten 5-0 by TNZ in 2000 and

America's Cup		
Last 10 winners		
2021	Emirates Team NZ	NZL
2017	Emirates Team NZ	NZL
2013	Oracle Team USA	USA
2010	BMW Oracle Racing	USA
2007	Alinghi	SUI
2003	Alinghi	SUI
2000	Team New Zealand	NZL
1995	Team New Zealand	NZL
1992	America 3	USA
1988	Stars and Stripes	USA

Source: americascup.com

4-1 by the United States in 1992, Luna Rossa fought bravely for much of the best-of-13 series and secured Italy's best result in its

“It's unreal. Seeing all the people involved over three-four years, how many Kiwis out here supporting the campaign — messages from everyone, from the Prime Minister to high school kids, it means the world to us

PETER BURLING
TNZ helmsman

third America's Cup match.

But up against a faster boat, errors in tactics and execution proved decisive as Luna Rossa

gave up a 3-2 advantage. Luna Rossa co-helmsman Jimmy Spithill lost a second successive America's Cup to TNZ, having broken New Zealand hearts in the 2013 match by captaining Oracle Team USA to eight successive race wins for a 9-8 victory in San Francisco.

"Obviously, pretty disappointed," said the Australian.

"I felt like we could have won a few more races against the Kiwis, but to be quite honest, at times it felt we were taking a knife to a gunfight."

"They did an incredible job, developed an incredible tool and package there ... All you can do is tip your hat."

NO MISTAKES

In contrast to race nine's thrilling battle on Tuesday, the decider proved little more than a procession after getting underway following a short postponement.

Team New Zealand threw down the gauntlet straight out of the start gate with a tack to the right, which proved a masterstroke as they claimed a slender lead and extended it to nine seconds by the second mark.

Luna Rossa had a poor exit from the second gate and TNZ blew the race open with a dominant third leg.

The Italians needed a mistake from the New Zealanders but none were forthcoming as 'Te Rehutai', some four-five knots quicker on the downwind legs, rounded the final mark 49 seconds clear and cruised to victory.

"We got better and better every race and today just showed the speed of the boat," said TNZ flight controller Blair Tuke.

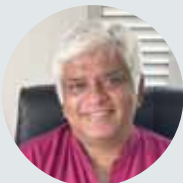
"Really happy to get a good start, we were on the right side of the race track."

"From there we never really gave them a chance." — Reuters



Lillard's 50 seals Blazers comeback in win over Pelicans

Damian Lillard delivered a 50-point performance and led a remarkable fourth quarter comeback as the Portland Trail Blazers defeated the New Orleans Pelicans 125-124 on Tuesday. Lillard drained six three pointers and made 13-of-20 from the field with six rebounds and 10 assists.



Sri Lanka ignoring local talent for 'garbage' foreign coaches

Former World Cup-winning skipper Arjuna Ranatunga slammed Sri Lanka Cricket, accusing it of hiring "garbage" foreign coaches while ignoring local talent. "We spend huge amounts to import garbage coaches," Ranatunga said, adding that the foreign imports were partly responsible for the low ranking of Lankan team.



England's Jos Buttler bats against India during the third T20 at the Narendra Modi Stadium, Ahmedabad. — Reuters

KOHLI'S 77-RUN BLITZ
REVIVED INDIA AFTER
QUICK STRIKES
BY ENGLISH PACERS

Brilliant Buttler puts England ahead

AHMEDABAD, India: Jos Buttler powered England to an eight-wicket victory over India on Tuesday, with the tourists taking a 2-1 lead in their five-match Twenty20 series despite a sparkling innings from Virat Kohli.

The home skipper's 77-run blitz revived India after a poor start and saw them to 156-6 at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, which was kept empty because of the rising number of coronavirus cases in India.

Buttler carried his bat through the run chase to score 83 not out, smashing four sixes and five fours, to guide England to 158 for two with 10 balls to spare.

Jonny Bairstow contributed an unbeaten 40 — taking him past 1,000 runs in T20 internationals — to give England an emphatic win in captain Eoin Morgan's 100th T20I.

Morgan won a crucial toss. The side that has batted first has lost every game so far.

England's pace attack quickly stunned the Indian batters with

Mark Wood dismissing openers Rohit Sharma and KL Rahul and Chris Jordan claiming the wicket of Ishan Kishan in a crucial three-over spell.

Wood, returning from a foot injury that kept him out of the second game, took three for 31 and only Kohli's hard-hitting at the end of the game spoiled his run figures.

Wood, Jordan and Jofra Archer were consistently firing down balls at 150 kilometres an hour.

Kohli took charge with the innings looking rocky at 24-3. He put on 70 for the sixth wicket with Hardik Pandya, who contributed just 17.

BAD 'BODY LANGUAGE'

The India captain hit 49 off his last 17 balls.

The renowned disciplinarian praised England's pace bowlers who "made it more difficult" but said his side's attitude had let them down.

"If you lose the toss, embrace what has been asked of you as a team. To be honest I think the England bowlers were absolutely

SCOREBOARD

INDIA	
R Sharma c Archer b Wood	15
KL Rahul b Wood	0
I Kishan c Buttler b Jordan	4
V Kohli (c) not out	77
R Pant run out	25
S Iyer c Malan b Wood	9
H Pandya c Archer b Jordan	17
Extras (b1, lb5, w3)	9
Total (6 wkts - 20 overs)	156
Fall of wickets: 7-1, 20-2, 24-3, 64-4, 86-5, 156-6	
Bowling: Rashid 4-0-26-0, Archer 4-0-32-0, Wood 4-0-31-3, Jordan 4-1-35-2, Stokes 2-0-12-0, S Curran 2-0-14-0	
England	
J Roy c Sharma b Chahal	9
J Buttler not out	83
D Malan st Pant b Sundar	18
J Bairstow not out	40
Extras (b4, lb2, w2)	8
Total (2 wkts, 18.2 overs)	158
Fall of wickets: 23-1, 81-2	
Bowling: Bhuvneshwar 4-0-27-0, Thakur 3-2-0-36-0, Chahal 4-0-41-1, Pandya 3-0-22-0, Sundar 4-0-26-1	

brilliant with the new ball," he said.

"We definitely tried to come into the game as well as we could but I don't think our body language in the second half was acceptable in the field.

"Defending 160 you need a bit more intensity and energy and that was lacking tonight."

Buttler attacked India's pace and spin bowlers from the start, hitting 93-metre sixes off leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal over the boundaries in the world's biggest cricket stadium.

"Sometimes people don't expect me to attack the spinners so I thought I would like to try to take it on," said Buttler.

"Chahal is a fantastic bowler and I have had some good battles against him but it was nice to chance my arm a bit today."

He singled out his first six off Chahal as "the one that got me up and running and gave me confidence to take the game on even more".

Morgan singled out his star opener and close friend for praise.

"He has been in incredible form, he is a great leader within our group and obviously he has been around for an incredibly long time," said Morgan. "He has a great influence in the changing room."

The fourth match of the series is on Thursday, also in Ahmedabad. — AFP

Oman Cricket to host T10
Ramadhan tourney in April



MUSCAT: Oman Cricket will organise first T10 Ramadhan Bash Floodlight MRI-ball cricket tournament on its famed OC Turf 1 green ground in Al Amerat from April 10 to 21.

Country's top 16 softball teams, to be registered on first come, first served basis, are likely to participate in Ramadhan's biggest cricket bonanza that guarantees each team a minimum of two league games before moving on to the knockout stage.

As per the tournament format, two matches will be played daily, first starting at 7.15 pm, to be followed by the second at 9 pm. Each team must pay RO 140 as the registration fee and fill up the Google form at <https://forms.>

gle/BLkghe5QQ9Dd6vEE9 .

A maximum of two players from the Premier Division are allowed to play for one team. All the teams will be required to arrange their own jersey (t-shirt and trouser) of a colour of their choice. The OC-organised tournament, to be supervised by qualified umpires, offers an array of cash and other prizes including RO 10 as man of the match prize for each game till the semifinals. The amount will be doubled for the final. Player of the series will also be rewarded with a cash prize of RO 20.

The champions will walk away with the winner's trophy and a cash prize of RO 250 with the runners-up receiving a trophy and a cash prize of RO 150.

Pitspot, Vanderlande, Israr
advance in junior knockout

MUSCAT: Wajid Ali's superb half century and Mohazin Moosa's brilliant bowling powered Pitspot to a thumping 75-run victory against Team Coorg Muscat (TCM) in a Junior Division Knockout tournament game at Muscat Municipality ground 4 in Al Amerat on Friday.

Wahid's 27-ball 50 was the highlight of Pitspot's total of 222 for 6. TCM failed to bat with the same flourish, managing only 147 for 8 due largely to Mohazin's superb 3 for 21 off 4 overs including a maiden.

BRIEF SCORES (Knockout - Junior)
Pitspot 222 for 6 in 20 overs (Wajid Ali 50 - 6x4, 1x6, Gopakumar Gopalakrishnan 30 - 3x4, Banwari Lal 2-51) thrashed Team Coorg Muscat (TCM) 147 for 8 in 20 overs (Prabakaran Ranganathan 59 - 8x4, 1x6, Mohazin Moosa 3-21, Aneesh Chaziyottil 2-34) by 75 runs.

KCA Deutag 118 all out in 19 overs (Balushi Arayaf 27 - 4x4, Vignesh Kumar 3-28, Irtaza

2-26, Joseph Navin 2-20) lost to Vanderlande 120 for 2 in 13.1 overs (Barathwaj Vinayagam 54 - 5x4, Aasim Mohammed 32 - 4x4) by 8 wickets.

Israr Ghala 159 for 9 in 20 overs (Ahmed Tahir 45 - 4x4, 2x6, Sagheer Muhammad 37 - 4x4, 1x6, Asanka Deepal 4-25, Alif Khan 3-17) beat Landmark Group 150 for 9 in 20 overs (Mohamed Farzan 44 - 6x4, Yasir Jamal 3-22, Amir Munir 2-28) by 9 runs.

Mazoon Up 161 for 6 in 20 overs (Feisal Babu 40 - 5x4, Ali Akbar 2-24) lost to Safara International 162 for 1 in 16.2 overs (Adeel Anwar 67 - 10x4, 2x6, Shameel Mohamed 25 - 2x4) by 9 wickets.

Sketch International 197 for 4 in 20 overs (Manish Bhatia 83 - 11x4) beat Danmark CC 148 all out in 17.5 overs (Mohammed Samil 36 - 4x4, Yusuf Patanwala 3-17, Ameer Hussain 2-37, Issam Othman 2-26) by 49 runs.

BSI CT 185 for 4 in 20 overs (Mohammad Arfath 56 - 6x4, Sanket Cyril 37 - 2x4, Vijith Ravi 2-27) lost to Sam Royals 186 for 5 in 19.5 overs (Pranod Kumar 40 - 4x4, 1x6, Arjun Rajesh 35 - 4x4, Arafath Ahmed 2-11) by 5 wickets.

Y Horizon 171 for 7 in 20 overs (Rudhi Rasheed 49 - 4x1, 1x6, Jatin Patel 34 - 3x4, Muhammed Muslim 2-26, Sooraj A Raj 2-26) lost to Ideal Technology 172 for 7 in 19.5 overs (Vijesh Vijayakumaran 73 - 13x4, Ali Zubair 3-25, Sanjay Makwana 2-31) by 3 wickets.

Gurbaz stars in Afghanistan's T20 win over Zimbabwe

ABU DHABI: Opener Rahmanullah Gurbaz smashed a fiery half century to anchor Afghanistan's convincing 48-run win over Zimbabwe in the first Twenty20 international in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday.

The dashing right-hander cracked seven towering sixes and six boundaries in his dominating 45-ball 87 to steer Afghanistan to an imperious 198-5 in 20 overs after they won the toss and batted at Sheikh Zayed Stadium.

Ace spinner Rashid Khan (3-28), Karim Janat (2-14) and Fareed Ahmad (2-31) then restricted Zimbabwe to 150-7 in their 20 overs to give Afghanistan a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

The second match is on Friday

and the third on Saturday, both also in Abu Dhabi.

It was Gurbaz who gave the cavalier Afghanistan the robust start of 80 in just eight overs and continued after Janat (26) fell, adding another 74 for the second wicket with skipper Asghar Afghan who made a 38-ball 55.

Asghar hit six boundaries and two sixes.

Gurbaz holed out to leg-spinner Ryan Burl while Asghar fell to pacer Blessing Muzarabani in the final over as Afghanistan added 42 in the last five overs.

Muzarabani was the pick of Zimbabwe bowlers with 2-38 while Richard Ngarava took 2-43.

Asghar hailed the team's spirit. "The first game of the series



is very important," said Asghar. "If you win, the morale is high. Rahmanullah and Janat partnership was good. Then bowlers were very good."

Zimbabwe were also off the track rapidly, putting 38 by 4.5 overs but then lost wickets at regular intervals to lose the momentum required for the big chase.

SCOREBOARD	
AFGHANISTAN	
R Gurbaz c Tiripano b Burl	87
K Janat c Mutumbami b Ngarava	26
A Afghan c Raza b Muzarabani	55
M Nabi c Mavuta b Ngarava	7
R Khan c Mutumbami b Muzarabani	7
N Zadran not out	0
U Ghani not out	0
Extras: (lb4, w12)	16
Total: (Overs 20; for five wkts)	198
Fall of wickets: 1-80, 2-154, 3-185, 4-192, 5-198	
Bowling: Raza 2-0-16-0, Ngarava 4-0-43-2, Muzarabani 4-0-38-2, Tiripano 4-0-46-0, Williams 1-0-14-0, Mavuta 2-0-13-0, Burl 3-0-24-1	
ZIMBABWE	
T Kamunhukamwe b Rashid	44
T Musakanda c sub b Fareed	18
S Williams c Shahidi b Janat	22
Sikandar c sub b Fareed	22
R Burl b Janat	2
R Mutumbami b Rashid	15
W Madhevere lbw Rashid	2
D Tiripano not out	6
B Mavuta not out	10
Extras: (b4, lb3, w2)	9
Total: (Overs 20; for seven wkts)	150
Fall of wickets: 1-38, 2-83, 3-106, 4-111, 5-124, 6-133, 7-134	
Bowling: Haq 3-0-27-0, Hamza 3-0-19-0, Fareed 4-0-31-2, Nabi 2-0-24-0, Janat 4-0-14-2, Rashid 4-0-28-3	

Opener Tinashe Kamunhukamwe scored a quick 37-ball 44 with four boundaries while Sikandar Raza and skipper Sean Williams made 22 each which

were not enough. This becomes Afghanistan's ninth win in 10 Twenty20 internationals against Zimbabwe, with just one defeat. — AFP



Rublev wins in Dubai, slams ranking system

Top seed Thiem crashed out to rock-solid Harris

DUBAI: Andrey Rublev has added his voice to criticism of the current ATP ranking system with the Russian world No 8 suggesting after winning his opening match in Dubai on Tuesday that it does not work in his favour.

Alexander Zverev, the German world No 7, recently described the revised system as “absurd” because he is ranked lower than Roger Federer even though the Swiss missed an entire year due to knee surgery.

The system was introduced to protect players who are unable to travel and compete because of the coronavirus pandemic.

While players can add points to their tally, they do not drop the points accumulated from the previous season.

“If we would have the normal system, I would be like No 4 in the world I think. So what do you think is better for me, to be No 8 or No 4?” said Rublev when asked if he agreed with Zverev’s statements.

“With the system that we’re having now, for me, it’s much tougher to be No 4, so here is the answer.”

Rublev extended his winning streak at 500-level tournaments to 21 matches after he beat Finnish qualifier Emil Ruusuvuori 6-4, 6-4 in the second round in Dubai.

The second-seeded Russian, who has won his last four events at this level dating back to Hamburg last September, will next tackle American 15th seed Taylor Fritz in the last-16 stage.

Meanwhile, reigning US Open champion and Dubai top seed Dominic Thiem crashed out of the tournament to a rock-solid Lloyd Harris, who earned the first top-10 win of his career with a 6-3, 6-4 result

against the Austrian.

The South African qualifier, who recorded his maiden top-20 victory last week over Stan Wawrinka in Doha, continues to hit new heights in the Middle East as he set up a third-round meeting with Serbian 14th seed Filip Krajinovic.

THIEM TO SKIP MIAMI

The world No 81 was unstoppable on serve, dropping just one point behind his first serve throughout the 72-minute encounter.

Thiem will skip the upcoming Miami Open and says he needs some time to “regroup” ahead of the clay swing in April.

“I just need to reset myself a little bit to really go fresh into the clay season. Obviously right now I’m in a tough period and just it wouldn’t be the right thing to go to Miami,” explained the world No 4.

“Just make a little reset, regroup and hopefully have a good clay season. After these tough weeks, that’s my main goal now.

“Right now I’m not in the greatest shape in any way.”

Canadian third seed Denis Shapovalov said he plans to compete in fewer tournaments this season if the tennis tour continues to operate under strict coronavirus bubble conditions for players.

Shapovalov, who enjoyed a winning debut in Dubai thanks to a 6-1, 6-3 second-round success over German big-server Jan-Lennard Struff, says being confined to a hotel room at every tournament due to Covid-19 restrictions can take a mental toll on players.

“I definitely don’t want to play too much this year if it’s going to be a bubble life because it is extremely difficult

mentally to be locked up like this,” the 21-year-old said.

“Of course it’s amazing to play, but as the weeks go on, you kind of lose that passion for tennis and a lot of players are struggling with that. So we’re trying to take the approach of minimising that as much as possible.”

Kei Nishikori maintained his undefeated record against last month’s Montpellier champion David Goffin by defeating the Belgian fifth seed 6-3, 7-6 (7/3).

The Japanese former world No.4 failed to serve out the match twice before grabbing the 79-minute second set in a tiebreak to post a fourth career victory over Goffin, who remains winless from three appearances in the Emirates. Nishikori faces Slovenian Aljaz Bedene next. — AFP

DUBAI ATP RESULTS

Second round

Lloyd Harris (RSA) bt Dominic Thiem (AUT x1) 6-3, 6-4; Filip Krajinovic (SRB x14) bt Alejandro Davidovich Fokina (ESP) 7-5, 6-4; Aljaz Bedene (SLO) bt Lorenzo Giustino (ITA) 6-4, 6-3; Kei Nishikori (JPN) bt David Goffin (BEL x5) 6-3, 7-6 (7/3); Denis Shapovalov (CAN x3) bt Jan-Lennard Struff (GER) 6-1, 6-3; Hubert Hurkacz (POL x13) bt Richard Gasquet (FRA) 6-3, 6-4; Karen Khachanov (RUS x8) bt Alexei Popyrin (AUS) 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7/4); Lorenzo Sonego (ITA x17) bt Bernabe Zapata Miralles (ESP) 6-2, 6-2; Aslan Karatsev (RUS) bt Dan Evans (GBR x12) 6-4, 4-6, 6-4; Jannik Sinner (ITA x16) bt Alexander Bublik (KAZ) 2-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4; Roberto Bautista Agut (ESP x4) bt Matthew Ebden (AUS) 4-1 - retired; Marton Fucsovics (HUN) bt Pablo Carreno Busta (ESP x6) 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 6-2; Dusan Lajovic (SRB x11) bt Malek Jaziri (TUN) 7-5, 6-2; Taylor Fritz (USA x15) bt Nikoloz Basilashvili (GEO) 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/4); Andrey Rublev (RUS x2) bt Emil Ruusuvuori (FIN) 6-4, 6-4

Japanese rookie Tsunoda vows to attack in F1 debut

TOKYO: Japanese Formula One rookie Yuki Tsunoda plans to throw caution to the wind when he makes his race debut next week in Bahrain, vowing to “give everything” in the season-opener.

New AlphaTauri recruit Tsunoda outperformed his hero Lewis Hamilton and a host of others to clock the second-best time in preseason testing last week, beaten only by Red Bull’s Max Verstappen.

And the 20-year-old doesn’t plan to let up when he makes his Formula One debut in Bahrain on March 28, promising to attack even if his mistakes ending up costing him.

“I just want to give everything I’ve got in my performance,” Tsunoda, who replaced Russian Daniil Kvyat at AlphaTauri, said during an online press conference on Wednesday.

“I want to push from the start. I don’t want to worry about



AlphaTauri’s Japanese driver Yuki Tsunoda drives during the third day of the F1 pre-season testing at the Bahrain International Circuit in Sakhir. — AFP

making mistakes. I just want to go for it and attack.”

Tsunoda set his best time of 1min 29.053sec from 91 laps on Sunday during the three-day test session at Sakhir, the venue for the Bahrain Grand Prix.

That was quicker than seven-

time world champion Hamilton, who was fifth-fastest overall in the all-conquering Mercedes.

Tsunoda is reading nothing into the test results as he prepares to make his race debut, but he admits it has put a spring in his step.

Formula 1 rookies in 2021

Mick Schumacher GERMANY Haas Age: 21	Yuki Tsunoda JAPAN AlphaTauri Age: 21	Nikita Mazepin RUSSIA Haas Age: 22
Son of seven-time world champion and racing legend Michael Schumacher. Won the Formula 2 drivers' championship title in 2020. Will have to deal with the huge media attention	Rookie of the Year in 2020 after finishing third in his debut season with British team Carlin in the F2 championship. The first Japanese racer in F1 since Kamui Kobayashi in 2014	Son of billionaire businessman Dmitry Mazepin. Solid record in Formula 2. Had a wobbly start in F1: Haas investigated an "inappropriate" video inquiry featuring the young Russian, before clearing him

I want to push from the start. I don’t want to worry about making mistakes. I just want to go for it and attack.

YUKI TSUNODA
Japanese F1 rookie

December he would have to hit the gym over the winter to cope with the Formula One car’s superior power and downforce.

He complained that he “couldn’t even lift” his head after driving 123 laps during his Formula One test in Abu Dhabi in December, but the extra training appears to be paying off already.

“I didn’t feel so tired in Bahrain, and I think that’s a big step forward for me,” he said. — AFP

“It was just a test, but I’m happy to finish in the top three and that gives me confidence,” said Tsunoda, who will become the first Japanese driver to compete in Formula One since Kamui Kobayashi in 2014.

“Each team does things

differently so I don’t know what form anyone is in, but I was able to improve my times and concentrate on my driving. I’m feeling quietly confident after finishing in the top three.”

The diminutive 1.59 metre (5ft 3in) Tsunoda admitted in

business

MUSCAT STOCK MARKET

3,738.01



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44 sq km earmarked for gas-based projects in Duqm

Clean energy: Green hydrogen projects planned in Duqm SEZ, Sohar Freezone

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 17

The Board of Directors of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) held its first meeting of the year on Wednesday, chaired by Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Board Chairman.

During the meeting, held in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), the Board of Directors touched on the progress made over the past few months in regards to urging local and international companies to localise investments of producing clean energy in SEZAD, through two potential projects for producing green hydrogen and another in Sohar Free Zone, Sohar Solar Energy Project.



The Board called on all local and international companies, which are interested to invest in the Zone and require gas for operations, to submit their studies related to their requests to provide gas in Duqm upon the completion of gas pipeline

Eng Yahya bin Khamis al Zadjali, In-Charge of Managing Operations of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), explained that the Board approved the allocation of two sites in the Special Economic

Zone at Duqm for gas-based industries.

These sites include the first block, covering an area of 11.1 square kilometres and the second block with an area of 33.5 square kilometres.

In view of this, the Board called on all local and international companies, which are interested to invest in the Zone and require gas for operations, to submit their studies related to their requests to provide gas in Duqm upon the completion of gas pipeline.

Moreover, Al Zadjali noted that the Board initially approved allocating a site for the uses of modern technologies including artificial intelligence such as drone experiments.

The Board also directed the Zone's Management to complete studies regarding technical and legal aspects, and to assess the required Internet speed and initial cost to attract local and foreign companies interested in developing future technologies.

Furthermore, the Board of Directors of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) paid a visit to the two sites designated for the gas-dependent industries and other existing projects in SEZAD to get familiarised with the latest progress.

CMA to boost insurance sector's Omanisation



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 17

The Capital Market Authority will commence implementation of Tamkeen training plan this year by organising long term specialised training programmes in collaboration with the College of Banking and Financial Studies. The first programme will be the Branch Manager Certificate.

This year's plan focuses on the quality of the presented programmes and their importance for providing specialised qualified Omanis and the Omanisation of key managerial positions through long term and short terms specialised training programmes.

Specialised programmes aim to prepare the national cadres to take the available positions in the management of insurance companies through acquainting them with the knowledge and skills required for dealing with customers and in sales, marketing and customer service and empowering them to transfer knowledge and

team leadership in insurance companies.

The first programme will be for the managers and assistant managers in the various branches of insurance companies operating in Oman with the participation of 30 persons via remote learning techniques.

The 30-day programme will comprise 90 training hours at an average of 3 hours daily for 4 days per week. The first part covers subjects such as insurance principles, underwriting practices, insurance products, insurance claims, understanding financial statements, operational risk management, marketing, sales team management and customer services.

The second part covers management and leadership. The Omanisation ratio in the insurance sector reached 79 per cent with 51.7 per cent Omanisation in senior management, 72.4 per cent in medium technical and administrative positions and 85.7 per cent in operational positions, according to the insurance sector statistics for the year 2020.

Madayn unveils new incentive packages to attract investors

ENHANCING VALUE:
Rental value exempted for a period of two years for all new projects, followed by a reduction in the rental value for a period of three years by 50 per cent for contracts concluded during 2021 to 2024

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 17

The Board of Directors of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) has approved during its second meeting this year a lineup of incentives to support and boost the investment climate in Madayn's various industrial cities.

This comes in line with the efforts made to mitigate the economic consequences resulting from Covid-19 pandemic and the global drop of oil prices.

To enhance investment opportunities in Al Buraimi, Ibri, Al Mudhaibi and Thamrait Industrial Cities and any industrial city to be announced later, the new incentives include exemption from rental value for a period of two years for all new projects, followed by a reduction in the rental value for a period of three years by 50 per cent for contracts concluded during the



The new incentives come along the lines of the recently announced incentives covered by the Economic Stimulus Plan (ESP) endorsed by the Council of Ministers to support efforts of enhancing economic recovery and boosting national economy performance

HILAL AL HASANI
Madayn CEO

period from 2021 to 2024, in addition to reducing all other fees listed in Annex (1) of the Investment Regulations by 50 per cent for all new projects during the period from 2021 to 2024.

The incentives also include reducing fees for IT activity license by 50 per cent for a period of two years during the period from January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2022 for the existing and new projects in the Knowledge Oasis Muscat; in addition to not imposing fines for the delay in payments for the years 2020 and 2021.

Commenting on the announced incentives, Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, Chief Executive Officer of Madayn, stated that the new incentives stem from Madayn's responsibility towards supporting the investors and industrialists in the Sultanate and boosting an ideal investment

environment that attracts new investments.

Al Hasani emphasised that Madayn's new incentives come along the lines of the recently announced incentives covered by the Economic Stimulus Plan (ESP) endorsed by the Council of Ministers to support efforts of enhancing economic recovery and boosting national economy performance.

Al Hasani added that Madayn's incentives shall support its vision in enhancing the Sultanate's position as a leading regional centre of manufacturing, ICT, innovation and entrepreneurship excellence, and its mission in attracting industrial investments and providing continued support, through regionally and globally competitive strategies, good infrastructure, value adding services, and easy governmental processes.

How business was enabled by Zoom amid pandemic

The Zoom application enabled the world to do conduct business at a time when the Covid-19 epidemic disrupted the work of the commercial, tourism, educational and other sectors. Zoom technologies played a key role in helping people overcome challenges posed by the pandemic in advancing their work. Zoom is an American company created in 2011, and its founder (Eric S. Yuan) is an American Chinese origin. He is one of the experts in the field of collaborative software.

The Zoom application works via phone and video calls to enable customers to participate and talk to each other, and to present their notes and data without any difficulty, thus making it easy for those taking part in conferences and other activities, such as health services, to achieve their goals. Over the past years, the company has become one of the leading providers of tech-communications, generate large profits as a result of millions of people relying daily on the application. As a result of its success, other rivals have come together to offer



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ZOOM TECHNOLOGIES
PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN
HELPING PEOPLE OVER-
COME CHALLENGES
POSED BY THE PANDEMIC
IN ADVANCING THEIR
WORK

similar apps and technologies. The application has many advantages by enabling people to work from several screens and devices at the same time, and from across the world. Zoom was able to open external offices, which helped in increasing annual revenues, the number of customers and to achieve several partnerships through the introduction of new features and improvements to the platform. It has since emerged as one of the successful companies in the US, as well as on the global stage, following its listing on the US stock market in 2019. *Forbes* magazine estimated the personal wealth of its owner, Eric Yuan, at \$13.7 billion. In 2019, the company's market value exceeded \$100 billion. It has now been revealed that the owner has proposed to transfer a third of his wealth to some of the company's shareholders. He plans to distribute 18 million shares valued at \$6 billion, according to the company's data. The shares will be a gift to unspecified beneficiaries. Some experts believe that the decision is a hasty step especially in the event of the easing of the Covid-19 epidemic, while Yuan himself confirms that work from

home will continue even after the easing of closure measures and the introduction of vaccines. He believes that the company will continue its strong growth during the next stage, since the world has become accustomed to working remotely and from any location. Zoom expects its video conference platform will record a growth in sales of more than 40 per cent this year to reach more than \$3.7 billion while its growth will continue at the same pace during the year. The application is today considered the preferred application by millions of people.

Key appointments this week

NEW HEAD OF PRIVATE BANKING AT NBO



National Bank of Oman (NBO) announced the appointment of Ali bin

Mustafa al Lawati as its new Head of Private Banking. An industry veteran with a career spanning 27 years, he has held several prominent roles in brokerage, private banking and wealth management. A finance leader with a successful track record in achieving business transformations in challenging operating environments, he is anticipated to strengthen the bank's efforts to expand its digital offerings, while catering to the ever-evolving needs of the affluent segment.

GDA APPOINTS ACTING SECRETARY-GENERAL



The Gulf Downstream Association (GDA) has announced the appointment

of Khalid Hadi as Acting Secretary-General. Hadi is a seasoned industry veteran who will lead the Association's continued efforts to foster collaboration and learning across the region's oil and gas sector with the aim of accelerating development and supporting sustainable industry growth. In assuming GDA's leadership, Hadi brings to the Association deep knowledge and relationships across the regional and international oil and gas sector.

PARK INN RADISSON APPOINTS F&B MANAGER



Park Inn by Radisson Muscat has appoints Ajay Dhoundiyal as the new F&B Manager

in-charge of Food & Beverages and Kitchen departments. With over two decades' experience in the culinary industry, he operates seamlessly to enhance the dining experience for hotel guests. Dhoundiyal, an Indian national, is also the Executive Chef of the hotel since September of 2012. His career has taken him across various hotel brands like Hyatt, Kempinski, Starwood and Radisson. He specialises in international cuisine and strives to create interesting menus.

PRESS RELEASES

OWN KIA SPORTAGE AND SAVE WITH EXCLUSIVE BENEFITS

Kia Sportage is now available with cash gift up to RO 2,900 (Varies on MY / grade selected), 0 per cent interest rate for 2 years, 3.49 per cent interest rate from 2 years up to 5 years, insurance (comprehensive & private) up to 8 years/80,000 kms service package and registration 1 year. (Conditions apply. Please visit your nearest Kia showroom for details.) The stylish and powerful Kia Sportage makes a mark with its advanced features, fuel-efficient performance and inspiring technology. The Sportage features front and rear fog lamps and projection headlamps with bulb type LED daytime running lights, 17" alloy wheels and Continental tyres that enhance the SUV's overall looks for a more modern appearance. The Sportage also features power outer side mirrors, keyless entry system, auto cruise control, side repeater lamps in outside mirror, roof rack and cargo screen among others. The Sportage's cabin exhibits a sense of modernity.



BAIC X65 NOW AVAILABLE ON LOW EMI OF RO 80

An urban crossover based on SAAB technology, the Baic X65 which combines superior performance and innovation is available on low EMI. Customers can avail as easy monthly instalment of RO 80 on Baic X65 2WD Crossover Basic variant (2.0T, 174 HP 6AT) for six years loan tenure (Terms and conditions apply). Gulf Great Sands LLC, the exclusive importer of Baic in Oman, is extending a low EMI on Baic X65 basic to make the ownership journey pleasant. A spokesperson for Gulf Great Sands LLC said, "The stylish and spacious urban crossover offers a host of safety and comfort technologies. The Baic X65 is entrenched with limitless features which offer the needs of today's car buyers. We are delighted to extend these affordable EMI rates on the extraordinary Baic X65." Demanding attention with its energetic attributes, the attractive SUV is equipped with 2.0L turbo engine which produces 174hp mated with six speed automatic transmission.



Sharakah holds Annual General Meeting



BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, MARCH 17

Sharakah held its virtual Annual General Meeting for the financial year ended on December 31, 2020 yesterday. The meeting was presided over by Hani bin Mohamed al Zubair,

Chairman of the Board of Directors, and attended by shareholders, representatives of shareholders, board members, statutory auditors, and the representative of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. Al Zubair gave a brief of

the Director's Report and Sharakah's achievements of last year despite the restrictions caused by the pandemic. As Covid-19 has affected economies throughout the world, Oman is no exception! Businesses and institutions, including Sharakah, have

modified their business models and working approaches; embracing modern technology to keep moving forward and serving SMEs, he said. He further added: "Small businesses have been worst hit by the lockdowns and restrictions. The

Government of Oman, as well as the Central Bank, have been trying to help businesses during these unprecedented times. Sharakah stands committed to supporting SMEs overcome the hardship and rebound to normalcy as soon as possible.

MEDRC awards celebrate achievements of Omani students

BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, MARCH 17

MEDRC has announced the winners of the 'Omani Young Water Researchers Award 2020' and the 'Eco School Prize' at an official ceremony held under the auspices of Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation. Established by MEDRC and sponsored by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Oman, the Omar Zawawi Establishment LLC and Haya Water, the Omani Young Water Researchers Award aims to celebrate the world class water research being undertaken by young Omani students at undergraduate and postgraduate level at universities. Speaking at the award ceremony, Eng Suleiman al Qasmi, Acting CEO of Haya Water, said:

"Providing a platform to encourage academic research, taking part in water research projects and supporting the Omani youth to come up with smart solutions to supply sufficient and high quality water has been among the primary concerns of Haya Water because we appreciate the value of research and understand its role in supporting the community." Laetitia van Asch, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Oman, said: "Water is life, it's an essential resource for our survival, but we must not forget that water is a finite resource. In the Netherlands we managed to turn our water challenges into opportunities. We make use of innovative solutions. Youth is important. We want to pass on skills and knowledge to the next generation." MEDRC Center Director, Ciarán Ó Cuinn, commented saying: "The Omani Young



Water Researchers Award is a celebration of the academic excellence of the new generation of Omani scientists who use their talents to improve life and society by creating more sustainable, affordable and plentiful access to water. "They are a credit to Oman and we salute them. Through the Eco School Prize we are working

together to ensure that scientific and sustainable spirit is passed to the next generation." The full list of winners announced this year is as follows: Postgraduate Category: 1st Place: Ibtihal al Manthri, Sultan Qaboos University; 2nd Place: Tahani Bait Suwailam, Sultan Qaboos University; Undergraduate Category: 1st

Place: Kawther al Ismaili, Sultan Qaboos University; 2nd Place: Matar al Maqbali, Sultan Qaboos University. Wastewater Research Prize: 1st Place: Aziza al Hinai and Halima al Haimali, Sultan Qaboos University. In addition to announcing the winners, the ceremony marked the launch of the fifth edition of the

Omani Young Water Researchers Award and the third edition of the MEDRC Eco school prize. The Eco School Prize ceremony was held jointly on the same day, where North Al Mabella School was announced as the overall winner of the prize. Jazia al Ismaili, grade 10 student of Baraka bint Thalaba School, won the award for best video for her work on a thoughtful and educational animation with Rahma al Hadidi from Baraka bint Thalaba and Maryam al Zedjali from Atika bint Zaid School coming second and third respectively. The Young Omani water Researchers Award winners received a RO 400 voucher while the winning prizes for the Eco school prize included trophies, certificates, an assortment of stationery and vouchers of up to RO 200 that students can utilise to buy devices for online learning.

**European new car sales drop**

New car registrations dropped by 20.3 per cent year-on-year to 850,170 vehicles in the European Union, Britain and the countries of the European Free Trade Association. — **Reuters**

**Dollar firms as US yields tick up**

The United States dollar firmed on Wednesday with 10-year Treasury yields close to 13-month highs ahead of a Federal Reserve policy meeting. — **Reuters**

**Indian shares higher on IT boost**

Indian shares inched higher on Wednesday, helped by gains in heavyweight information technology stocks, while investors awaited the outcome of the US Fed's meeting. — **Reuters**

Honda to cut production at all US and Canada plants

People work at Honda's technical centre in Marysville, Ohio. — **Reuters**

WASHINGTON: Honda Motor Co said late on Tuesday supply chain issues will force a halt to production at a majority of US and Canadian auto plants for a week.

The Japanese automaker added the issue will result in some production cuts next week at all US and Canadian plants, citing "the impact from Covid-19, congestion at various ports, the microchip shortage and severe winter weather over the past several weeks."

"In some way, all of our auto plants in the US and Canada will be impacted," Honda said.

Some US and Canadian plants are expected to have smaller production cuts next week, but a spokesman for Honda added "the timing and length of production adjustments could change." The company did not specify the volume of vehicles impacted. — **AFP**

Chinese firms eye lawsuits after Xiaomi win against Trump ban

BEIJING: Chinese companies targeted by a sweeping investment ban imposed by former President Donald Trump are considering suing the US government after a federal judge on Friday suspended a similar blacklisting for Beijing-based smartphone maker Xiaomi.

Lawyers familiar with the matter said some of the banned Chinese companies are in talks with law firms including Steptoe & Johnson and Hogan Lovells, emboldened by US District Judge Rudolph Contreras' preliminary order halting Xiaomi's inclusion on a US list of alleged Communist Chinese military companies that are subject to an investment ban.

The Trump administration's move to blacklist Xiaomi Corp, which knocked \$10 billion off its market share and sent its shares down 9.5 per cent in January, would have forced investors to completely divest their stakes in the company.

"Companies are reaching out to lawyers to challenge the listings and the grounds for the listings," said Wendy Wysong, managing partner of the Hong Kong office of Steptoe & Johnson, a worldwide law firm headquartered in Washington. Wysong and a person familiar with Hogan Lovells, another global law firm, declined to name the companies involved in discussions.

Contreras flagged the US government's "deeply flawed" process for including the company in the investment ban, based on just two key criteria: its development of 5G technology and artificial intelligence, which the Defence Department alleges



Lei Jun, founder and CEO of Xiaomi, speaks during a product launch in Beijing. — **Reuters**

The Trump administration's move to blacklist Xiaomi Corp, which knocked \$10 billion off its market share and sent its shares down 9.5 per cent in January, would have forced investors to completely divest their stakes in the company

are "essential to modern military operations," and an award given to Xiaomi founder and Chief Executive Lei Jun from an organisation said to help the

Chinese government eliminate barriers between commercial and military sectors.

The judge noted that 5G and AI technologies were fast becoming standard in consumer electronics, and that over 500 entrepreneurs had received the same award as Lei since 2004, including the leaders of an infant formula company.

"The facts that led to Xiaomi's designation are almost laughable, and I think it absolutely is going to lead to additional companies seeking relief," said Washington lawyer Brian Egan, a former legal adviser in both the White House and State Department who also works at Steptoe.

In a joint filing on Tuesday,

the government said it had not decided on the "appropriate path forward" in the Xiaomi case in light of the judge's decision.

A spokeswoman for the US Department of Justice, which is defending the case, declined to comment. A spokeswoman for the Department of Defence referred questions to the White House, which has not responded.

Xiaomi and 43 other companies were added here in the waning months of the Trump administration to the blacklist, which was mandated by a 1999 law requiring the Defence Department to publish a compilation of companies "owned or controlled" by the Chinese military. — **Reuters**

Apple Inc spending from 'green bonds' hits \$2.8 billion

CALIFORNIA: Apple Inc said on Wednesday it allotted \$2.8 billion raised from "green bonds" that last year funded 17 projects that will generate 1.2 gigawatts of renewable energy.

It said the projects will avoid an average of 921,000 metric tonnes of carbon emissions each year, which it said is equal to removing nearly 200,000 cars from the road.

Green bonds are a category of fixed-income securities that raise capital for projects with environmental benefits, such as renewable energy or low-carbon transport.

Apple, one of the largest private-sector issuers of such bonds, is using the capital as part of its effort to become carbon neutral across its sprawling manufacturing supply chain by 2030. The company has issued three sets of green bonds since 2016 totalling \$4.7 billion.

"We all have a responsibility to do everything we can to fight against the impacts of climate change, and our \$4.7 billion investment of the proceeds from our Green Bond sales are an important driver in our efforts," Apple said. — **Reuters**



The logo of Apple is seen in Los Angeles, California. — **Reuters**

Airlines face headache over 'use-by' date on some jet parts



Technicians build engines for jetliners at a General Electric (GE) factory in Lafayette, Indiana. — **Reuters**

WASHINGTON: Airlines with planes idled by the pandemic are cutting costs by delaying some maintenance tasks like changing life vests, testing oxygen bottles and checking emergency exits under Covid-19 waivers from airplane manufacturers and

regulators.

The move allows airlines to stop the clock on a category of parts that would otherwise need checks or pass their "use-by" date without leaving the ground because of the huge number of planes parked during the pandemic.

In special guidance to airlines, Airbus SE, Boeing Co, Brazil's Embraer SA and turboprop manufacturer ATR say there is no risk to safety because the work will be done before the planes return to the skies.

But there are concerns that

Prior to an aircraft return to service from storage, all scheduled maintenance tasks that were scheduled during the non-operational status must be performed

US FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION

delays could trigger commercial disputes between airlines and their lessors and financiers if they breach contractual maintenance agreements.

"I think there is going to be some argument," said Phil Seymour, president of aviation intelligence and advisory firm IBA. Delayed checks also mean it will take longer to reactivate planes.

In the highly regulated world of airplane maintenance, the frequency of many tasks is determined by the number of take-offs and landings or flight

hours. But others, such as life vests and portable oxygen bottles, have a fixed schedule for replacement.

The world's two major aviation regulators in the United States and Europe have both provided Covid-19 related guidance on extending some time-related tasks while a plane is stored.

"Prior to an aircraft return to service from storage, all scheduled maintenance tasks that were scheduled during the non-operational status must be performed," a US Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman said.

In a sign of the scale of the issue, Boeing put an engineering team to work analysing all of the roughly 1,400 tasks per model to help airlines keep costs down and delay work that was not deemed urgent or safety-critical.

That allowed the maximum extension of 10 per cent beyond the scheduled time to be increased to as much as 12 months for grounded planes not subject to passenger foot traffic, cargo carriage, and other wear and tear.

"The unique, individual

assessments for each Boeing model accounted for all climates around the world and can support all operators," a Boeing spokesman said.

Airbus also analysed calendar-driven tasks to give more flexibility to customers, said Airbus head of scheduled maintenance services Claire Kauffmann.

"This ensures that the task is performed in a safe way and that they have proper time and staff to do that," she said.

An ATR spokesman said airlines had used a three-month "clock stoppage" on parked planes to ensure time-driven tasks were not scattered over a longer schedule. Consulting group Oliver Wyman said in a recent report that the mass return to service of grounded aircraft expected over the next two years could create a maintenance-demand bubble.

Although the airline industry does not expect passenger traffic to rebound to 2019 levels until 2024, Oliver Wyman forecasts spending on airframe maintenance will recover to 2019 levels by 2022.

— **Reuters**

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The image displays three smartphones side-by-side, each showing a different screen of the 'Oman Observer' mobile application. The leftmost phone shows the user's profile page, featuring a large circular logo with the letter 'O', statistics for 3,295 followers and 39.1k posts, and a bio section. The middle phone shows a post with the text 'we shall overcc' and the app's name 'Oman Observer'. The rightmost phone shows a news article titled 'BREAKING' with a sub-headline about a crash in Oman.



features



How collecting coins and gems led to important historical and cultural discoveries

Jamal al Balushi started collecting coins in 1991. Back then, his interest was focused on the coins produced and can be found in Oman. The more he learned about coins, the more his interest branch out. He now collects coins and gemstones valuing them for their cultural and historical importance... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

CONSERVATION

MILLION-TREE MISSION HOPES TO FIX REFORESTATION FLAWS

It's an environmental policy embraced by heads of state, multinational businesses and even leading climate sceptic Donald Trump: plant more trees to help the planet and slow global warming... **Story on P20**

ENTERTAINMENT

TUNISIA FILM-MAKER HAILS 'HISTORIC' OSCAR NOMINATION

The director of the first ever Tunisian film to be tipped for an Oscar has hailed the "historical" nomination and urged the North African country's authorities to support homegrown cinema... **Story on P19**

READ

MEN ARE FROM MARS, WOMEN ARE FROM VENUS

BY JOHN GRAY

The book states that most common relationship problems between men and women are a result of fundamental psychological differences between the sexes, which the author exemplifies by means of its eponymous metaphor.

LOCAL SCENE

AN EVENING OF ARABIC AND ENGLISH POETRY AT THE BAIT AL ZUBAIR PLATFORMS

On March 21, the world will be celebrating International Poetry Day. This day will also be celebrated by literati and poets in the country... **Story on P19**

HUMAN INTEREST

ARAK TREE: NATURE'S TOOTHBRUSH AND MEDICINAL WONDER

The Arak tree is a wild evergreen tree that grows in clusters with intertwining leaves and smooth surfaces. They have multiple benefits for humans and animals and are spread in wide areas in the Wilayat of Al Musannah in Al Batinah South Governorate, where it is also used in its slogan... **Story on P19**



How collecting coins and gems led to important historical and cultural discoveries

BY THALIB AL WUHAIBI

The importance of hobbies has become more pronounced during the series of lockdowns caused by the ongoing fight against Covid-19. Hobbies are a form of escape that according to therapists help individuals enhance people's lives. Hobbies allow you to keep your mind busy and is a great way to de-stress. Having a productive hobby not only helps promote better

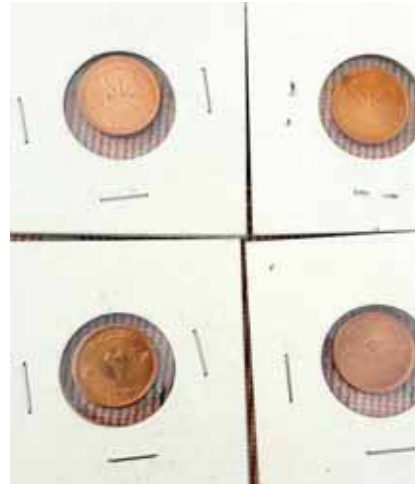
health, it also helps lower the risk of high blood pressure. Enjoying a few hours of your hobby a week can also reduce the risk of depression. But how can you find the proper hobby for you? For Jamal al Balushi, a hobby can be anything you decide to engage yourself with and something that you find worthy of your time. "I love drawings and searching for old inscriptions. There is something about historical writings that pique my curiosity," he said. Combining both drawings and

He said, "Collecting coins is one of the hobbies that introduces us to different cultures. When we have old coins in our hands, we always wonder about their origin and thus start the thirst for knowledge. Collecting these coins allow for knowledge to spread. We are able to know about the history of different countries and in relation to this, also allow us to learn other things like heritage, language and traditions."

old inscriptions eventually led him to find enjoyment in collecting old coins. While he won't necessarily call himself a numismatist — the term that applies to collectors and coin dealers as well as scholars using coins as source or studying coins, he said his interest may actually led him to become one as he decided to seriously pursue the interest. He said, "Collecting coins is one of the hobbies that introduces us to different cultures. When we have old coins in our hands, we always wonder about their origin and thus start the thirst for knowledge. Collecting these coins allow for knowledge to spread. We are able to know about the history of different countries and in relation to

this, also allow us to learn other things like heritage, language and traditions." "When I look at coins, I pay attention to almost every detail. Not only are the inscriptions or drawings on them but their makeup and composition give away a lot of their historical importance," he said. Jamal started collecting coins in 1991. Back then, his interest was focused on the coins produced and can be found in Oman. This will eventually branch out until he became vested in collecting coins from other countries. "I discovered a lot of things through this coin. For the Sultanate for example, it educated me which periods Oman has the most fortunes or which times were the most trying. In the same context, coins from other countries is a gateway of knowing the income sources of those countries, how wealthy they are, what kind of people or form of government they have and the way of life of the people," he said. "The oldest coin I have is from the Umayyad era. I also have coins from Muscat, Dubai and Qatar from 1966 to 1971," he shared. Just like other hobbies, Jamal said that collecting coins can also be an expensive affair depending on how far you are willing to go for your passion. "The storage of the coins, currencies and gemstones are costly. I have to provide albums, containers and special envelopes to keep them on," he said. He added, "There are also some special steps on how to store these coins. For example, you have to hold coins by the edge so that the

oils and acids of your skin do not come in contact with the faces of the coin. This also means that you have to wash your hands before working with your collection to minimise the possibility of damaging them. You also have to make sure you hold the coin over a soft cloth or pad." From collecting coins, Jamal has also ventured into collecting gemstones. He shared that he is quite drawn by their beauty and colours. "I have gemstones such as hematite and amethyst. These are natural and beautiful gemstones. They are exported from several countries, including Afghanistan, Brazil, India and Malaysia," he said. "The finest gemstones to collect are quartz and pink quartz. Once you know more about gems, you'd also love moonstone and sunstone because of their beauty. I have a shiny volcanic stone called azurite. I have a stone that is as beautiful and mesmerising as a peacock feather," he said. Jamal said that learning about them can occupy your mind and may demand some time. Just when you thought you have discovered everything you have to know about a gemstone, you will realise there is more. "There is a stone called the sand rose from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and these stones are usually formed only in the shape of roses. I would like to acquire opal stone, which is a beautiful natural stones," he said. In summary, Jamal said that trying to be productive during one's downtime is easy. He shared that whatever interest you, you should pursue it.





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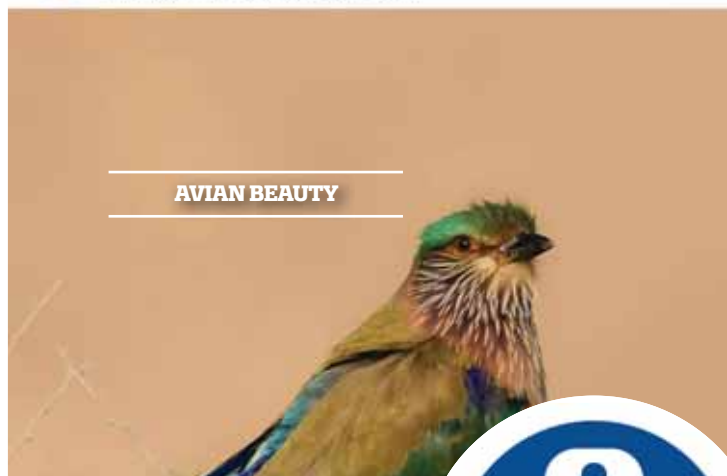
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Tunisia film-maker hails 'historic' Oscar nomination



THE DIRECTOR of the first ever Tunisian film to be tipped for an Oscar has hailed the "historic" nomination and urged the North African country's authorities to support homegrown cinema.

Kaouther Ben Hania's film "The Man Who Sold His Skin" was put forward for best foreign language film ahead of the April 25 Oscars ceremony in Hollywood.

"It's a historic event, a first for Tunisia," said Ben Hania via phone from France.

"It's a dream come true,"

The film, starring Italian actress Monica Bellucci alongside Syrian Yahya Mahyani and Belgian Koen De Bouw, tells the story of a Syrian refugee who allows a tattoo artist to use his back as a canvas in order to get to Europe.

Ben Hania said she hoped the Oscar nomination would lead to more support for cinema and film-makers in Tunisia.

The French-Tunisian director, 43, was born in the marginalised rural town of Sidi Bouzid which in late 2010 was the site of the events that sparked the Arab Spring uprisings.

She won plaudits at the Cannes Film Festival in 2017 for her feature-length film Beauty and the Dogs, the story of a Tunisian woman who pushes for justice after being raped.

Tunisian cinema, in the doldrums in the early years of the century, was given a boost by the country's 2011 revolution and new-found freedom of speech.

A new generation of screenwriters and directors have since focused their efforts on social and political topics that were long taboo under the dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. — **AFP**



An evening of Arabic and English poetry at the Bait Al Zubair platforms

ON MARCH 21, the world will be celebrating International Poetry Day. This day will also be celebrated by literati and poets in the country.

Bait Al Zubair Foundation will hold a poetry evening entitled: In the shirts of our poems, we can convey the World.

Poets from America, Africa, and Asia will gather to in a virtual event that will be opened to the public.

Poets Vangel Gantsho from South Africa, Sumaya Mahnesh from Algeria, and Omani poet Khalid al Maamari will read some of their finest works to the participants of the events of which they will showcase the very things that make them different and what makes them the same.

The night is expected to be a kaleidoscope of different experiences when the poets will take everyone on a jour-

ney towards plains, mountains and oceans that helped shape their souls and also allowing everyone a glimpse into colours, smell, sounds that had been hugely part of their growth as creatives.

The evening will be moderated by poet Aisha al Saifi.

The celebration is in conjunction with International Poetry Day, as it is a manifestation of linguistic and cultural identity and a method of expression that was and still has an impact on the hearts of its recipients. The recited poems will be accompanied by a translation from English into Arabic by the Omani translator Mohammad al Sarmi where he also will read his Arabic translation for ancient English poems. You can attend the evening on Bait Al Zubair's social media accounts, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.



Arak tree: Nature's toothbrush and medicinal wonder

THE ARAK tree is a wild evergreen tree that grows in clusters with intertwining leaves and smooth surfaces. They have multiple benefits for humans and animals and are spread in wide areas in the Wilayat of Al Musannah in Al Batinah South Governorate, where it is also used in its slogan.

Scientifically speaking, the arak tree is called *Salvadora persica*, and some people call it "teeth tree". The red fruits of the arak tree are locally called "boot", while they are known in the past as "Kubath", where the leaves of the tree are distinguished by their pleasant aroma and good taste. Its deep roots extend for great distances underground.

Omanis have benefited from Arak tree since ancient times. From its stems, Miswak (toothbrush) sticks are extracted that are used to disinfect and clean teeth and maintain the health of the gum. It has been proven by recent medical discoveries that the miswak has an effective result on the elimination of harmful bacteria and enhances medical and preventive immunity to the mouth and teeth health.

The leaves and fruits of the arak tree are a favourite food for camels and birds. Its leaves can be used as fertiliser in farms, in addition to their medicinal benefits and different nutritional properties. It is used in prescriptions of alternative medicine to treat many internal diseases such as stomach, back pain, haemorrhoid pain, and Urinary Tract. It is eaten cooked to aid in diuresis, and to get rid of flatulence. Once boiled, arak leaves is good for a laxative for the intestine; to relieve constipation, and is useful in reducing joint pain and rheumatism. "



Million-tree mission hopes to fix reforestation flaws

It's an environmental policy embraced by heads of state, multinational businesses and even leading climate sceptic Donald Trump: plant more trees to help the planet and slow global warming.

But experts claim some recent mass tree-planting schemes have failed to reduce greenhouse gases when not done properly, and even harmed the environment.

Now a pair of Finnish environmentalists believe they have created a reforestation initiative that will avoid these problems and allow for millions of new trees every year, tracked by a smartphone app.

Former schoolteacher Mika Vanhanen has overseen the planting of 30 million trees across the globe via a network of 10,000 schools, the result of two decades work.

But "some of the trees died because we didn't have the resources to care for them", Vanhanen, founder of tree-planting charity ENO, said in his hometown of Joensuu, eastern Finland.

Last year Turkey's forestry trade union said almost all of the 11 million trees planted during the country's National Forestation Day in 2019 had died after just a few months.

And in Chile, a study found landowners were taking advantage of financial tree-planting incentives by cutting down established, carbon-absorbing forests and replacing them with new ones.

25-YEAR TREE CARE

So last year Vanhanen teamed up with "environmental technology" expert Pekka Harju-Autti to launch an innovative model for large-scale tree-planting with the emphasis on sustainability.

Their "TreeBuddy" scheme invites businesses and individuals to "buy" one or more trees, for instance as a gift to customers, employees or friends.

But unlike other initiatives, the consumer also pays for the upkeep of the tree for up to 25 years.

"When they plant a tree,

locals take a photo which is geo-positioned and get one euro for the community. After one year ... they make a status update of the tree with another photo and they get again one euro, the same after five years and 10 years and so on," Harju-Autti said.

The euro covers upkeep during the year, with care ranging from watering to, in Tibet for example, protecting the trees from yaks and wild horses.

A smartphone app enables users to keep track of their own "virtual forest", but most importantly the maintenance payments incentivise communities to keep their forests alive, Harju-Autti said.

MILLIONS A YEAR

With each community seeing 7,000 to 10,000 trees planted, the sums add up over time.

"One reason the Amazon is burning is that locals do not always feel they get economic benefits from their forests, so some not-so-wise decisions are made."

So far TreeBuddy has seen 30,000 trees planted in the Philippines, Tibet and India, and has secured investment to scale up to "millions a year" in the near future, across Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Vanhanen and Harju-Autti say that because they already have a relationship with their 10,000 tree-planting communities around the globe, the scheme should also avoid problems such as introducing non-native species or damage to the existing ecosystem.

In January, a British study set out 10 'golden rules' of tree-planting to avoid the failures of some large-scale schemes, including for local people to be at the heart of projects and for the natural regrowth of forest to be prioritised wherever possible.

"We are getting questions from tree-planting organisations all over the world that would like to adopt the TreeBuddy model," Harju-Autti said, adding that he expects the focus to move away from planting towards "giving locals their fair share for efforts to preserve their trees". — AFP

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