

Temperature to drop

MUSCAT: A significant decrease in the maximum and minimum temperatures is expected starting for the next three days in the country till Monday. The minimum temperature will be 11 and 16 degrees Celsius on the coasts of the Sea of Oman, and between 6 to 12 degrees in the interior and desert regions. It is expected to reach zero degrees Celsius in the mountain tops



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FORMER INDIA CAPTAIN GANGULY STABLE AFTER HEART OPERATION



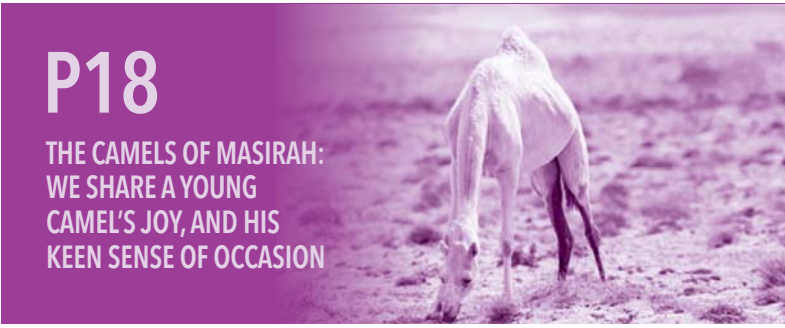
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RAYSUT CABLE PLANT BOOSTS ANNUAL OUTPUT TO 10,000 TONS



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THE CAMELS OF MASIRAH: WE SHARE A YOUNG CAMEL'S JOY, AND HIS KEEN SENSE OF OCCASION



MUSCAT

VACCINATION GAINS MOMENTUM

The nationwide vaccination campaign for COVID-19 launched in the country will complete a week tomorrow.

Despite the scepticism and concerns over its side effects, several frontline workers and elderly citizens have got vaccinated over the past seven days.

As of Friday, a total of 6,516 people have got vaccinated, of which 1,875 from Muscat, 1,445 from North Al Batinah and 613 from South Al Batinah.

“My father is 80 years old and he was invited by a health centre for vaccination, but he refused. It was his decision and we cannot force him.” SEE P6

WASHINGTON

US CONGRESS SLAPS TRUMP BID

The US Congress on Friday dealt Donald Trump a humiliating blow in his last days in office with the Senate voting overwhelmingly to override his veto of a sweeping defence bill — the first time lawmakers have done so during his presidency.

By a lopsided vote of 81-13, well more than the two-thirds of the 100-member chamber required, the Republican-controlled Senate approved the \$740.5 billion National Defence Authorisation Act to fund the military for fiscal year 2021.

The Democratic-led House of Representatives had voted 322 to 87 on Monday to override Trump's veto. SEE P8

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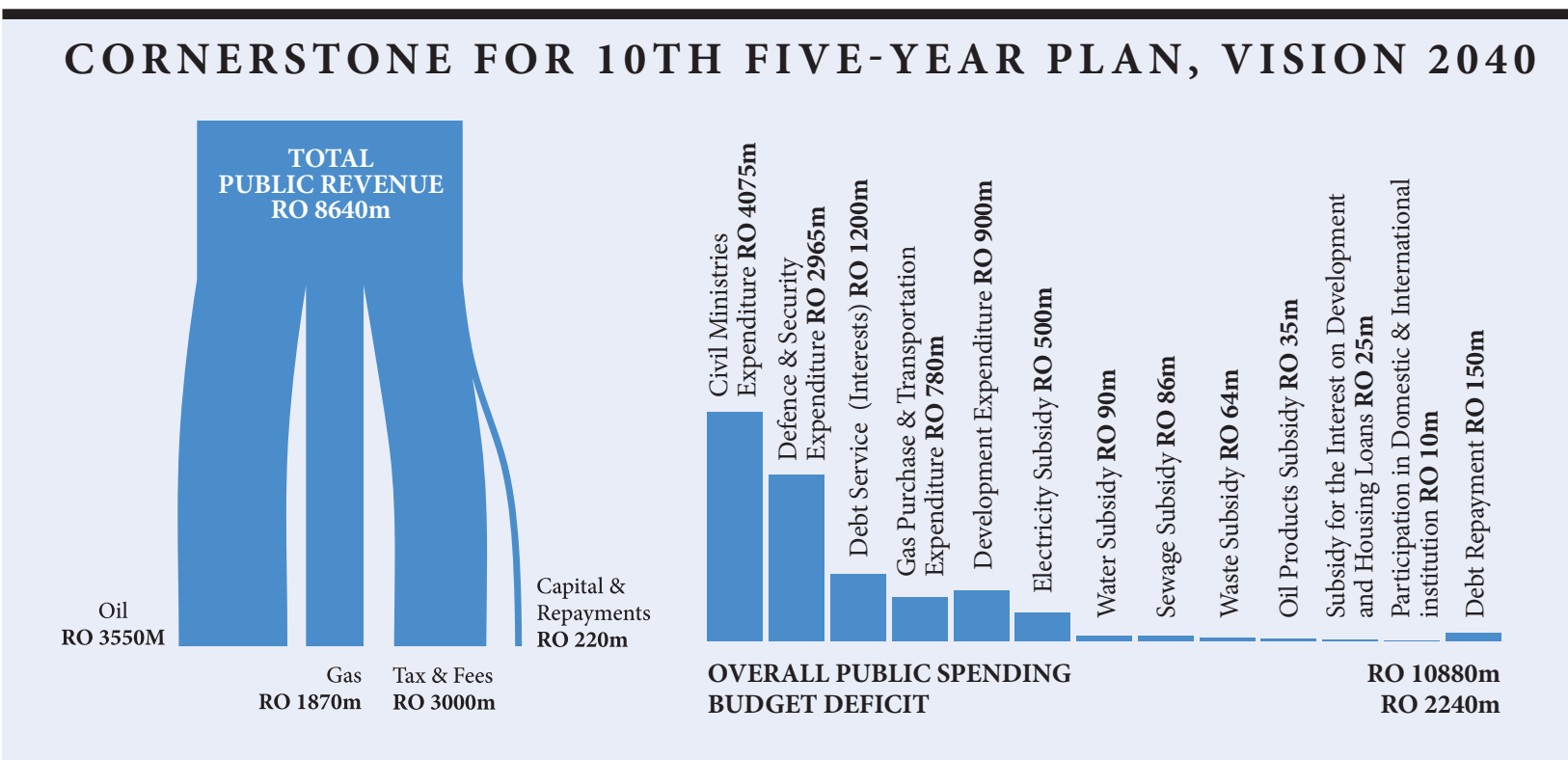
BUDGET TO BOOST GROWTH

RO 8.64 BN REVENUES, RO 10.88 BN SPENDING, RO 2.24 BN DEFICIT

MUSCAT: Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, said that the State General Budget for Fiscal Year 2021 has been prepared in such a manner as to be compatible with the priorities of Oman Vision 2040 in accordance with the financial framework of the 10th Five-Year Plan, taking into consideration the main objectives and trends aimed at achieving fiscal sustainability, reducing public debt and achieving economic growth rates that contribute to the employment of nationals and continue to reinforce the role of the private sector in the development march.

In an interview with Oman News Agency (ONA), the minister said that a package of initiatives has been adopted with the aim of improving and sustaining financial performance for 2021, boosting economic growth in line with the government's aim to achieve in medium and long terms fiscal balance.

This includes continuation on the implementation of the Medium-Term Fiscal Balance Plan (2020-2024) initiatives, studying the preparation of a general framework for the Public Debt Law in addition to setting up the unified treasury account and complementing the implementation stages of balancing programmes and performance and



rolling out a tender for unified government financial system.

INCENTIVES

The minister added that the government's plan for 2021 encompasses several measures aimed at enhancing economic incentives promulgated by His Majesty's Royal directives. These incentives are hoped to create job opportunities. These incentives are housing loans provided by Oman Housing Bank, distribution of residential plots for citizens, exempting bor-

rowers from Oman Development Bank and Authority for SME development from loan interests for one year (2021), exemption from licence fees for small and medium enterprises for one year (2021), reducing rental agreement fees to 3 per cent from 5 per cent.

NEW MEASURES

The minister affirmed that, beside these economic incentives, the government seeks to issue a set of measures related to regulating the labour market and incentivising

the business climate.

Al Habsi explained that the Medium-Term Fiscal Balance Plan (2020-2024), which earned the Royal blessing of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, aims at achieving financial sustainability and fiscal balance between revenues and expenditures by the end of 2024, creating financial conditions supportive of the launch of Oman Vision 2040. He noted that the Sultanate seeks to avoid the continuation of financial deficits and the declining credit rating.

OMAN VISION 2040 KEY TO DIVERSIFICATION

The priorities of Oman Vision 2040 related to the Sultanate's financial strategy represented by economic diversification, financial sustainability, the private sector, investment, international cooperation, the governance of the state administrative apparatus, resources, projects, social welfare and community protection, were taken into consideration while formulating the fiscal balance plan.

10th Five-Year Plan stepping stone to Oman Vision 2040

SAMUEL KUTTY

@samkutttyp

The 10th Five-Year Development Plan, approved by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, marks the beginning of the launch of the ambitious Oman Vision 2040.

With priority for “a creative human society” with education, learning, scientific research, national capabilities, health, welfare and social protection, youth development and preserving national heritage and culture, the plan gives equal importance for an economy with a competitive



The 10th Five-Year Plan has identified priority national goals, which will shape the features of development during the next five years

MINISTRY OF ECONOMY

environment.

“Based on the strategic directions of Oman Vision 2040, the 10th Five-Year Plan has

identified priority national goals, which will shape the features of development during the next five years,” said the plan statement issued by the Ministry of Economy.

SOCIAL PRIORITY

The plan seeks to achieve many priority economic and social goals, which are primarily concerned with stimulating economic activity, developing the macroeconomic environment, raising the efficiency of public finance management, and achieving balance between measures to control and rationalise public spending.

135,000 jobs to be generated in five years

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

The 10th Five-Year Plan will create 135,000 jobs in five years in the public and private sectors, the Minister of Economy said on Friday in an interview to Oman TV.

Generating jobs at the rate of 25,000 annually, the plan will also seek to find global markets for the products generated by small and medium enterprises.

Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, said the 10th Five-Year Plan aims to generate job opportunities, increase social welfare and improve the level of per capita income.

The employment of national manpower figures among the most formidable socio-economic challenges, said Dr Al Saqri, noting that the labour market could not cope with the steadily increasing number of job-seekers.

To address this challenge and to regulate labour market discrepancies, the 10th Five Year Development Plan endorses policies that contribute to modifying the structure of employment (which now relies on a wide base of non-skilled manpower) and introducing a new structure based on a wide base of skilled manpower through recruitment of skilled labour and by offering incentives.

BUDGET AIMS TO ENHANCE NON-OIL REVENUE, REDUCE SPENDING

The State's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2021 has been prepared in a way that goes in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and Tenth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025). In addition to, the measures, endorsed by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, aiming at enhancing non-oil revenue and reducing spending on government units, leading to fiscal sustainability. The 2021 Budget also seeks to achieve a set of objectives, notably fiscal sustainability so as to continue achieving economic growth targets, a diversified economy, and targeted rates of domestic investment and foreign direct investment (FDI). Furthermore, the 2021 Budget endeavours to enable the private sector to play a greater role in accelerating economic growth, and to create more job opportunities.

The government has undertaken a set of fiscal and economic measures with the aim to alleviate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and a sharp decline in oil prices, so as to minimise the burden on public spending. Therefore, the government has cut 10 per cent from the approved allocations of

Preliminary results of 2020 VS Estimates of 2021 Budget			
	2020	2021	(RO Billion)
Revenue	8.46	8.64	2%
Spending	12.66	10.88	(14%)
Deficit	(4.19)	(2.24)	(47%)

government units and development budget. In addition to reduce capital expenditures (CapEx) and operating expenditures (OPEX) of State-owned Enterprises (SOEs) by no less than 10 per cent. Moreover, widen the tax base such as excise tax.

As a result of fiscal and economic measures implemented in 2020 and economic diversification efforts including subsidy reforms to be implemented in 2021, public spending is estimated to be as low as RO 10.88 billion in 2021, decreased by 14 per cent

as compared with the expected spending of RO 12.66 billion in 2020. Aggregate public revenue is also projected to increase to RO 8.6 billion in 2021, based on assumed oil price of US\$ 45 per barrel, up by 2 per cent as compared with the preliminary results of 2020.

2021 Budget deficit is estimated at about RO 2.2 billion i.e. 8 per cent of gross domestic production (GDP). A 73-per cent of this deficit will be financed through external and domestic borrowing i.e. RO 1.6 billion, while the rest of the deficit, estimated to nearly RO 600

million, will be covered by drawing on reserves.

Public debt is projected to reach RO 21.7 billion by the end of 2021, and external borrowing represents 76 per cent of overall public debt.

The government will continue building the infrastructure required to spur economic growth, and giving priority to the highly needed projects that serve economic and social objectives. In addition to expanding the participation of private sector by enhancing its role in implementing and managing some projects and services.



will reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. IIF also pointed out that Oman has shown a strong financial response to maintain the resilience of the economy during the current crisis.

The World Bank pointed out in Global Economic Prospects (June, 2020) that Oman's GDP is expected to shrink by 4 per cent in 2020, but will grow by 2 per cent in 2021, the highest percentage over the last five years. During the past three years, Oman has recorded growth rates of 0.3 per cent, 1.8 per cent and 0.5 per cent in 2017, 2018 and 2019, respectively.

period of 2019.

Oman trade balance showed a surplus of RO 2.7 billion by the end of third quarter of 2020, down by 38 per cent as compared with the same period of 2019. This decline is mainly attributed to a sharp decrease in the value of commodity exports, which totalled RO 8.7 billion, dropped by 21.5 per cent as compared with the same period of 2019. The value of commodity imports decreased by 11 per cent by the end of third quarter of 2020, reaching RO 6.0 billion as against RO 6.8 billion recorded during the same period in 2019.

By the end of November of 2020, Muscat Securities Market (MSM) index closed at 3,643.5 points, while the market value amounted to RO 20.42 billion.

GOVERNMENT MEASURES AND INITIATIVES IN 2020

The government has undertaken a number of measures and initiatives to stimulate the economy, sustain public finance in alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and Tenth Five-Year Plan.

Moreover, the Ministry of Economy issued a Ministerial decision No (148/2020) on the formation of a working group that aims to suggest policies and initiatives required to stimulate national economy in light of the consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESTRUCTURING THE STATE'S ADMINISTRATIVE APPARATUS

In line with the standards outlined by Oman Vision 2040 to improve government performance and efficiency, service delivery, and to eliminate duplication of functions, the State's administrative apparatus has been restructured. This will help to streamline and integrate government procedures, which would lead to enhanced performance and efficiency, and accelerate development process.

The restructure of the State's administrative apparatus represents a paradigm shift towards a change for the future of Oman. It came in tandem with the standards outlined by Oman Vision 2040 as several ministries and government units have been merged.

Ten ministries have been merged with each other, whereas six ministries have been renamed. Furthermore, five councils have been cancelled and transferred its tasks to the Council of Ministers. Also, one council has been established, namely Governorates Affairs Council.

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ZAKAT AL-SEEB COMMITTEE
UNDER SUPERVISION OF MINISTRY
OF ENDOWMENTS & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS





THE FIRST ENDOWMENT FOR THE ZAKAT AL-SEEB COMMITTEE
DEDICATED FOR THE NEEDY AND UNDERPRIVILEGED PEOPLE
THE COLLECTED FUNDS ARE ALLOCATED FOR INSOLVENT FAMILIES AND VARIOUS CHARITIES PROJECTS

ABU HURAIRAH (MAY ALLAH BE PLEASED WITH HIM) REPORTED:
THE MESSENGER OF ALLAH (ﷺ) SAID, "WHEN A MAN DIES, HIS DEEDS COME TO AN END EXCEPT FOR THREE THINGS: SADAQAH JARIYAH (CEASELESS CHARITY); A KNOWLEDGE WHICH IS BENEFICIAL, OR A VIRTUOUS DESCENDANT WHO PRAYS FOR HIM (FOR THE DECEASED)."

THE ENDOWMENT AMOUNT: 600,000 OMR
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PRICE PER SHARE: 30 OMR

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MEDIUM-TERM FISCAL PLAN (2020-2024)

The Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (2020-2024), which has been endorsed by His Majesty the Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, aims at achieving fiscal sustainability and striking a balance between revenue and expenditures by the end of 2024. The plan also seeks to create favourable conditions for Oman Vision 2040. Moreover, the government endeavours, through the plan, to implement a set of measures and initiatives with the aim to bring the deficit under control and to avoid the deterioration of the credit rating. In addition to, achieve sustainable levels and create favourable investment climate.

The plan was developed based on the priorities of Oman Vision 2040, which is closely linked to Oman's fiscal strategy. These include:

- Economic diversification and fiscal sustainability.
- Private sector, investment and international cooperation.
- Governance of the state's administrative bodies, resources and projects.
- Social protection and well-being.

The Medium-Term Fiscal Plan is based on five pillars, namely:

- Supporting economic growth.
- Revitalising and diversifying sources of government revenues.
- Improving public spending efficiency.
- Enhancing social security net.
- Enhancing the efficiency of public financial management.

These pillars include a number of initiatives that will help to achieve fiscal sustainability over the medium term. The initiatives will be implemented during the period from 2020 to 2024 with the aim to gradually reduce budget deficit to less than 1.7 per cent of GDP in 2024.

Some of the aforesaid initiatives have already been under implementation stage. The remaining initiatives will be phased based on priority and readiness, taking into account any economic or social effects that may arise from such initiatives. The plan seeks to develop a comprehensive social safety net geared towards vulnerable people.

The financial impact of the measures and initiatives undertaken during 2020 generated around a total of RO 1.4 billion. Such measures and initiatives contributed to public revenue by RO 486 million, generated from the privatisation of Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) by RO 478 million and from expanding the excise tax that recorded an amount of RO 8 million. The same measures and initiatives helped to reduce public spending by RO 870 million, by reducing the approved allocations of government units by 10 per cent . In addition, development expenditures reduced by RO 170 million, and SOEs subsidy was cut by around RO 135 million.

NEW RETIREMENT POLICY

In line with the government's efforts to achieve efficiency and financial sustainability for pension funds, and to overcome challenges faced by these funds, the government has decided to establish two pension funds. One fund for civil units and private sector while the other one for defence and security units. The minimum years of service have been raised to 30 years. Moreover, a new unified approach to

THE CONTRIBUTION OF DIVERSIFIED ECONOMIC SECTORS TO (OIL/NON-OIL) GDP AT CONSTANT PRICES (According to the Ministry of Economy data)			
Statement	2019	2020	2021
GDP growth rate at constant prices (%)	-0.8	-4.3	2.3
Oil GDP growth rate (%)	0.2	-1.7	1.1
Non-oil GDP growth rate (%)	0.4	-5.6	2.9
Average Oil Price (\$/Barrel)	65	47.6	45

Tenth Five-Year Plan: Financial Framework (2021-2025) (RO Million)					
Statement	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Average Daily Oil Production (000 b/d)	960	1107	1133	1140	1140
Average Price (\$/bbl.)	45	45	50	50	50
Total Revenue	8640	9490	10815	11315	11500
Total Public Expenditure	10880	11150	11420	11480	11435
Surplus/Deficit	(2240)	(1660)	(605)	(165)	65

retirement will be placed for those employed in government units and private sector.

EARLY RETIREMENT

In accordance with the initiatives of Medium-Term Fiscal Plan, the government required 70 per cent of employees who exceeded 30 years of service to retire in 2020. This is in addition to those who worked as advisors, experts and competent directors in all government units and SOEs.

REDIRECTING SUBSIDY OF ELECTRICITY AND WATER SECTORS

Subsidy reform in electricity and water sectors aims at sustaining and enhancing the efficiency of these two sectors. The subsidy will then be redirected to the vulnerable households. The increase in tariff will be phased, while government subsidy will be kept for those registered in the National Subsidy System (NSS) as per the rules. Thus, new tariff will be applied gradually starting from 2021.

ENERGY DEVELOPMENT OMAN

Energy Development Oman (EDO) company has been established in pursuant to the Royal Decree No (128/2020), whereby government's share in Block 6 has been transferred to EDO. Such share would be managed by EDO in accordance with the best international practices in energy assets management. EDO will also be entrusted with the collection of oil and gas revenue, payment of CAPEX and OPEX of annual production, and development of oil and gas sector. In addition to injection of more investments into this sector, in order to enhance financial and economic returns.

After the establishment of EDO, expenses of PDO have been removed from the State's General Budget and this would result in the following:

- 1- Self-dependence for PDO in terms of financing its



In line with the government's efforts to achieve efficiency and financial sustainability for pension funds, and to overcome challenges faced by these funds, the government has decided to establish two pension funds

- development projects.
- 2- Reducing deficit.
 - 3- Improving Oman's financial performance indicator and sovereign credit rating.
 - 4- Raising economic activities and value added of oil activities.
 - 5- Reflecting the real value of oil and gas sector.

OMAN INVESTMENT AUTHORITY

Pursuant to the Royal Decree No (61/2020) on the establishment of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the ownership of SOEs and investments has been transferred from Ministry of Finance (MoF) to OIA, with the exception of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). Therefore, OIA will be responsible to transfer the dividends to the public treasury on annual basis. On the other hand, OIA launched "Rawabet", a special programme, to link SOEs' policies and systems with corporate governance in line with

Oman Vision 2040, which focuses on economic diversification, enhancing non-oil revenues, and attract more FDI.

HOUSING SECTOR

- Increasing the allocations of housing loans provided by Oman Housing Bank.
- Increasing the number of residential lands to be granted to the citizens.

PRIVATE SECTOR

- Removing interests of loans, for one year, offered by Oman Development Bank and Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority.
- Removing licence fees of SMEs owned by Omani citizens (holders of Riyadh Card) within the first three years of setting up their businesses (specific activities).

REAL-ESTATE SECTOR

- Reducing rental contract fee from 5 per cent to 3 per cent.

JOB SECURITY SYSTEM

The Job Security System (JSS) is a national initiative stems from social solidarity, with the aim to provide social protection for the Omanis who lost their jobs against their will. The JSS will provide aid to those people until they get other job opportunities, and it will assist them in getting new jobs. Moreover, the JSS will also provide temporary aid to those seeking jobs for the first time.

His Majesty the Sultan has generously financed the Job Security Fund, which has been established under the JSS, with an amount of RO 10 million. The fund will be financed by the following:

- The employers will pay 1 per cent of the insured's monthly subscription wage.
- The insured will pay 1 per cent of his monthly subscription wage.
- A 5-per cent will be added to the fee of each licence or licence renewal of bringing expat manpower for business purposes.

The Job Security System was launched in November 2020. Number of beneficiaries in November 2020 (2,901).

EXCISE TAX

In the framework of the Common Excise Tax Agreement of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and in light of its application by some GCC countries, the government has introduced the excise tax in mid-2019. The excise tax is imposed on specific consumer products that are harmful to human health, society or the environment. The excise tax is classified as an indirect tax that are imposed once at one of the stages of the supply chain (import or production), and it is borne by the final consumer.

This tax aims at promoting a healthy life and addressing negative practices by modifying the consumption pattern of individuals. The tax is imposed on tobacco and its derivatives, energy drinks, alcoholic beverages and pork at 100 per cent , and carbonated drinks at 50 per cent.

In 2020, the excise tax was applied to alcoholic beverages at a rate of 100 per cent. The tax base of the excise tax was expanded to include sweetened drinks at a rate of 50 per cent, as of the beginning of October 2020.

VALUE ADDED TAX

The Value Added Tax (VAT) is an indirect tax on consumption so that the final consumers will ultimately bear the cost of VAT. The tax will be imposed on goods and services in Oman starting from April 2021, with exception of the education and health sectors and some basic commodities. According to the Royal Decree No (121/2020), a 6-month grace period granted for the taxpayer to register and prepare their internal system to implement the VAT. The value added tax rate of 5 per cent to be applied in Oman is among the lowest rates at the international level. Therefore, it is expected that the impact of VAT on the cost of living in Oman will be minimal. The VAT will have a positive impact on the economic and social development and the international competitiveness of Oman. The financial resources obtained from this tax will contribute to building a sustainable economy for future generations, and it will also contribute to improving public services and continuing the development of infrastructure in future.

ANNUAL ALLOWANCE

The annual allowance for 2021 has been approved for all

employees in the government units and SOEs, in accordance with the following:

- 1- Employees whose total salary less than RO 900 shall get 100 per cent of the entitled annual allowance.
- 2- Employees whose total salary equal to or more than RO 900 shall get 50 per cent of the entitled annual allowance.

ALLOWANCES AND BENEFITS

- Equalising non-basic allowances and benefits in the State's Administrative Apparatus, with exceptions to jobs with specific functions.

TENTH FIVE-YEAR PLAN: FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

The Tenth Five-Year Plan has a significance importance as it is the first executive financial program of Oman Vision 2040. It is also considered as the cornerstone and springboard to achieve fiscal sustainability and economic growth. Therefore, the plan has prioritised spending in accordance with the changes in the local and global economic environment, in order to achieve higher economic growth.

In accordance with the financial framework, the fiscal measures would achieve positive results by the end of the Tenth Five-Year Plan, wherein a surplus of RO 65 million is projected to be achieved.

GOVERNMENT MEASURES AND INITIATIVES IN 2021

In the current unfavourable economic and fiscal conditions, the government is keen on enhancing the efficiency of public finance management through a set of initiatives. Such initiatives aim at improving and sustaining fiscal position, and advancing economic growth in consistency with government objectives and priorities pertaining to economic and fiscal policies. These initiatives will help to strike fiscal balance over the long term.

FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (2020-2024)

This plan will implement a number of initiatives, seeking to achieve sustainable levels of financial resources. Such initiatives fall under the following:

- Supporting economic growth.
- Revitalising and diversifying sources of income.
- Improving public spending efficiency.
- Enhancing the efficiency of public financial management.
- Enhancing social security net.

The financial impact of measures and initiatives taken under the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan has been estimated at RO 3.5 billion in 2021, with an increase in revenue by RO 565 million resulting from VAT which is expected to generate RO 300 million, government investments to yield up to RO 195 million, excise tax RO 20 million and taxes RO 50 million.

On the other hand, the adopted measures will help to reduce public spending by RO 2.9 billion, through 5 per cent cut in all government units which will generate savings of around RO 1.1 billion, a reduction in development spending of civil units by RO 300 million, and subsidy reforms in the electricity and water sector that will save around RO 215 million. In addition to a reduction in investment expenditures of oil and gas sector by RO 1.3 billion.

PUBLIC DEBT LAW

The Public Debt Law was enacted to manage the funds borrowed by the government from individuals or institutions to finance public spending. This Law aims at:

- Planning and managing government debt.
- Diversifying funding sources.
- Monitoring public debt and associated risks.
- Enhancing the mechanisms of cash flow management in public treasury.

SINGLE TREASURY ACCOUNT:

A bank account which includes the government liquidity fund in order to optimise the use of government cash resources. The account aims at:

- Increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of managing the government's cash balances and enhancing risk management processes.
- Improving quality and accuracy of financial accounts.
- Minimising costs of bank transactions.
- Facilitating payment processes.
- Simplifying bank reconciliation processes.

PROGRAMME-BASED BUDGET (PBB)

An advanced approach of fiscal planning that identifies public spending priorities and links spending to objectives and activities serving the society.

Advantages of the PBB:

- Translate public policies and objectives into the budget.
- Provide authenticated data on government performance.
- Raise the efficiency of financial and administrative control.
- Organise government programmes and activities, and integrate the efforts to prevent duplication.
- Flexibility to allocate resources as per tasks and activities.
- Enhance and prioritise public spending.

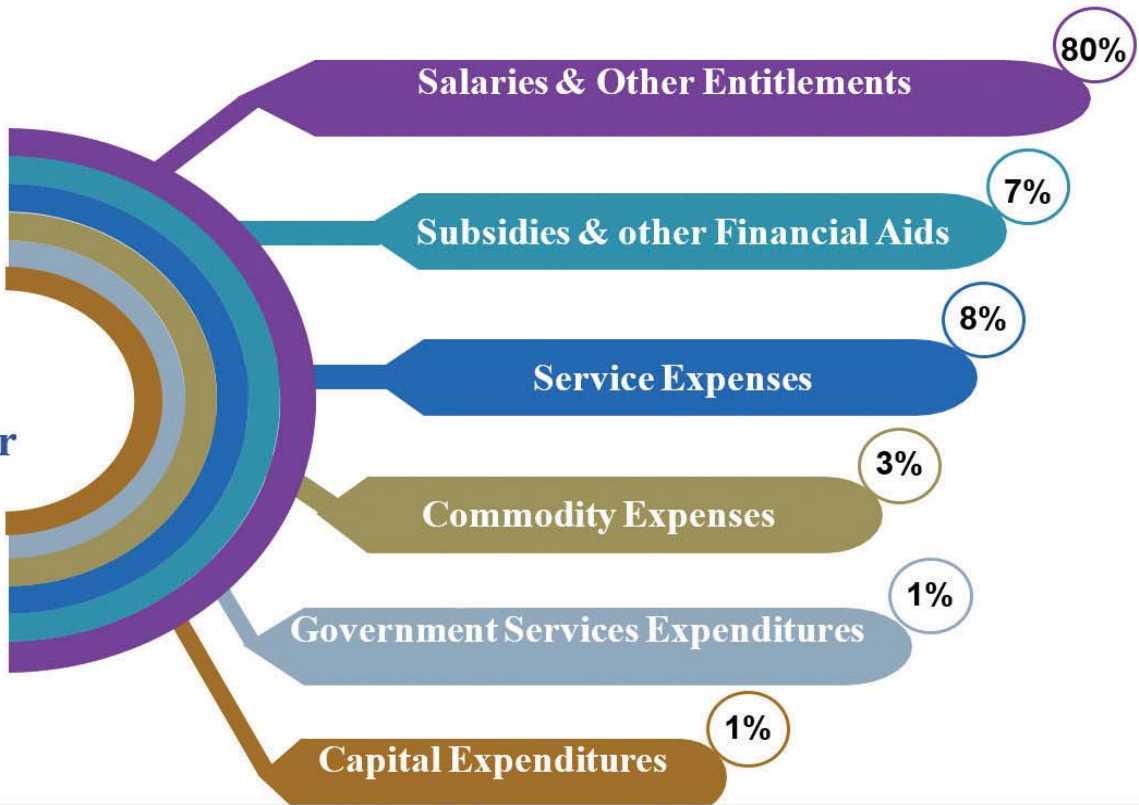
GOVERNMENT FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS (GFMS)

GFMS is a financial system that presents financial data in a systematic manner and helps improve public spending management efficiency.

Objectives:

- Provide accurate financial data

Government
Current
Expenditures for
FY 2021



and information to enhance financial planning and control.

- Develop and integrate financial systems and processes of all government units.
- Adopt the best international practices in public finance management.
- Facilitate data exchange and reduce paperwork.

LABOUR SECTOR

- Issuance of Labour Law and Civil Service during 2021.
- Provide training linked to jobs, and training for entrepreneurs.
- Provide training courses aiming at developing youths' skills, which are required by the labour market.
- Issuance of a number of rules that regulate the labour market.

Restructuring SOEs and revising the payroll

STATE'S GENERAL BUDGET FOR FY 2021

2021 Budget has been prepared in alignment with the priorities of Oman Vision 2040, and in tandem with the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025). The 2021 Budget seeks to achieve fiscal sustainability, a stable economic growth, and to reduce public debt to GDP. In addition to further strengthen the role of private sector in the development process.

Oil production is projected to be 960,000 barrels per day, taking into accounts Oman's commitment to cut oil production in compliance with OPEC plus deal, for a period from May 2020 to April 2022

2021 Budget builds on the following pillars:

- Setting a ceiling for all government units that the budget of each unit should not exceed the 2020 revised budget.
- To continue to rationalise public spending while enhancing its efficiency.
- Implementing the first phase of fiscal measures geared towards fiscal sustainability.
- Controlling the deficit and maintaining its downward trend.
- Completion of shifting process to PBB by increasing the number of government units applying PBB.
- Identifying innovative means for funding some of government projects and services.

2021 BUDGET ESTIMATES:

Aggregate revenue is estimated to amount to RO 8.64 billion in 2021, while public spending is projected to stand at 10.88 in 2021. This will lead the budget deficit to stand at RO 2.24 billion.

PUBLIC REVENUE:

Aggregate revenue is estimated at RO 8.6 billion in 2021, increased by 2 per cent as compared with the preliminary results of 2020, representing 33 per cent of GDP at current prices. Such revenue consists of oil and gas revenue of RO 5.4 billion, accounting for 63 per cent of total revenue. Non-hydrocarbon revenue is estimated at RO 3.2 billion i.e. 37 per cent of total revenue.

Revenue estimates are based on the following considerations:

- 2020 Budget assumes oil price of \$45 per barrel.
- Transferring proceeds from selling 20,000 oil barrels per day to the Oil Reserve Fund so as to repay partial of the loans due over the upcoming years.
- Oil production is projected to be 960,000 barrels per day, taking into accounts Oman's commitment to cut oil production in compliance with OPEC plus deal, for a period from May 2020 to April 2022.
- Revenue generated from gas.

HYDROCARBON REVENUE:

Oil Revenue
Oil revenue is projected to amount to RO 3.6 billion i.e. 41 per cent of total revenue, down by 19 per cent as compared with the preliminary results of 2020.

Gas Revenue

Gas revenue estimated to stand at RO 1.8 billion i.e. 22 per cent of total revenue, decreased by 6 per cent as compared with the preliminary results of 2020.

NON-HYDROCARBON REVENUE:

The non-hydrocarbon revenue is projected to reach RO 3.2 billion, up by 33 per cent as compared with the preliminary results of 2020. This is in light of the actual results of 2018 and 2019, and preliminary results of 2020 which have been affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Current Revenue

The current revenue is anticipated to amount to RO 3 billion in 2021. Excise tax and VAT revenue are expected to stand at RO 413 million in 2021, increased by threefold when compared with budgeted figure of RO 100 million in 2020.

Corporate income tax revenue is estimated at RO 400 million in 2021, decreased by 27 per cent as compared with 2020 Budget. This decline is mainly due to consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Government revenue from Oman Investment Authority, estimated at about RO 800 million. The remaining current revenue is projected to be around RO 1.4 billion in 2021.

Capital revenue and repayments

Capital revenue is expected to amount to RO 200 million in 2021, while capital repayments are anticipated to be around RO 20 million in 2021.

PUBLIC SPENDING:

In light of the policies adopted by the government to enhance spending efficiency and in line with the initiatives undertaken in 2020, public spending for 2021 Budget was estimated based on the following considerations:

- Reducing current expenditures of government units in 2021 Budget by 5 per cent, taking into account the financial impact of fiscal measures, such as retirement order, restructure of State's administrative apparatus, and revision of the financial grades of new employees. In addition to the government contribution to Job Security Fund by 1 per cent.
- Removal of oil and gas production expenditures of PDO from the budget after the establishment of EDO.
- Allocations for gas expenditures will be in accordance with the expected cost.
- Allocations of electricity subsidy, taking into account the subsidy reform outcomes.
- Allocating subsidies for water sector, sewage and waste sector as per the estimates made by the relevant entities.
- Cost of public debt service in accordance to the existing loans and the planned ones.

Therefore, total public spending is budgeted at about RO 10.8 billion in 2021 Budget, decreased by RO 1.8 billion i.e. 14 per cent as compared with the preliminary results of 2020, as follow:

	RO	%
Current Expenditures	9,020	83
Investment Expenditures	900	8
Subsidies and others	960	9
Total	10,880	

CURRENT EXPENDITURES OF MINISTRIES AND GOVERNMENT UNITS

These expenditures are estimated at RO 4.1 billion. The salaries and entitlements account for 80 per cent of total current expenditures of ministries and government units, with an amount of RO 3.3 billion.	
Sectors	Overall Spending
Education	17 per cent
Health	11 per cent
Housing	5 per cent
Social Welfare	7 per cent
Total	40 per cent

Spending on basic services such as education, health care, housing and social welfare will be maintained. The spending on such basic services represents about 40 per cent of current spending, which is the largest in the budget. The following table illustrates appropriations allocated for the social services:

>> TO P5

Omantel and the Ministry of Education conclude Omantel Olympics for Coding

The Olympics aim to increasing youth awareness of the importance of technology in development and digital innovation

Muscat, December 31, 2020- Omantel, the leading telecommunication services provider in the Sultanate, and in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, has recently concluded the second version of Omantel Olympics for Coding, which was held, online this year due to COVID-19 pandemic, during the period 28-29 December for the qualified students from previous stages of the competition.

The Omantel Olympics for Coding awards went to Yasin Ahsan Uganeh from Hafs bin Rashid School in Muscat Governorate, Said bin Saud bin Sulaiman Al Qasabi from Balarab bin Sultan School, Dkhaliya Governorate, Mohamed bin Abdulhamid bin Hamed Al Hinal from Saleh bin AL Mutawkel School in Dhakhliya Governorate, Ghaith Mohamed Abdulwahab from Sheikh Nasser bin Rashid Al Kharusi School in Muscat Governorate, Abdulmalik bin Sulaiman bin Salim AL Lamki from Moosa bin Nasir School for basic education in Muscat Governorate, Moanis bin Hilal Al Khusaibi from Shujaa bin Wahab School in Muscat Governorate, Ghaida bint Salim bin Sulaiman AL Kindi from Hail Al Awamer School for basic education in Muscat Governorate, Mohamed bin Hasan bin Abdullah Al Ajmi from Ibn AL Nafis School in Muscat Governorate, Ahmed bin Ibrahim bin Yahya Al Abri from Abu Said Al Kudmi School in Dhakhliya Governorate, Elaph bint Ahmed bin Khalfan Al Shidi from Saham School for Girls in Al Batinah North Governorate.

Omantel Olympics for Coding aims at building a generation of talented students through enabling them to understand the general foundations of software and information technology.

The Olympics also aimed to enabling students to keep pace with the rapidly developing IT systems, enhancing the

educational process in the Sultanate, and creating a conducive environment for innovation and creativity.

The Omantel Olympics for Coding is based on the procedural coding which serves as an introduction to the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) technologies



such as artificial intelligence, robotics, cloud computing, Internet of things (IoT), big data among others. A number of students have in fact already qualified to participate in the international competitions.

Laila Mohammad Al Wahaibi, Manager of Corporate Social Responsibility at Omantel, indicated that Omantel Olympics for Coding is one of the most important CSR initiatives of Omantel saying: "The objective of the Olympics is to raise the technical capabilities of Omani youth and enable them to participate and contribute to the digital transformation process in the Sultanate during the next stage. It also aims to increase awareness of the importance of technology in the development and innovation journey in Oman, as well as encourage students to benefit from the digital world".

"Moreover, the competition is one of the means to discover talented students who will together form a national team

that can participate in international coding competitions", she added.

"We are working at Omantel to harness technology with the aim to serve the community and to cultivate digital knowledge in the new generation, by developing the level of skills and



knowledge they have acquired, assessing their readiness to deal with various technological advancements and the Internet of Things. Such initiatives enable our students to use these technologies more efficiently and prepare them to be in line with rapid technological developments", she furthered.

On her part, Maya Said Al-Azaria, Director of the Innovation and Scientific Olympics Directorate at the Ministry of Education, emphasized the role Omantel played in the success of this edition of the Olympics, at which a group of students representing various schools of the Sultanate took part.

"Due to the Corona pandemic, this year's edition was implemented virtually, which had a great impact on emphasizing the importance of employing technology and programming in all aspects of life", she added.

"Omantel is a major partner with the

Ministry of Education in several programs, especially those related to technology. Omantel serves as a role model for other companies in the field of CSR programs as it invests heavily in youth development. Omantel initiatives complement the role of the Ministry of Education in enhancing students' experiences by allowing them to participate in international programs and competitions that help them share their experiences with others, in addition to refining their skills and digital knowledge at the same time. Such initiatives support the Sultanate's digital transformation efforts by creating a generation capable of embracing innovation, development and employment of technology in various aspects of life".

Hilal bin Khalfan Al-Khuzairi, Head of the Scientific Competitions Department at the Ministry of Education pointed out that coding competitions help us discover talented students who are passionate about IT and 4IR technologies. He noted that the competition electronic platform provided by the Coding Academy helped us to follow the results of the students' solutions live.

"Our participation in international competitions gave us insights on how to manage and implement such competitions electronically and provided in-depth details of all competition centers".

Omantel is the Sultanate's first and leading integrated telecommunications services provider, enabling the digital society to flourish, allowing new ways of doing business and delivering a world of information, news and entertainment. While seeking to get optimum customer satisfaction, Omantel plays a key social role to provide the required support and subsidy to all sectors of the Omani society.

3- Oil Price Outlook (Brent Crude Oil)

	Institution	Forecast Date	Projected Price	
			2020	2021
1	IMF	October 2020	41.7	46.7
2	Fitch	September 2020	41.0	45.0
3	World Bank	October 2020	41	44
4	Energy Information Administration	December 2020	41.43	48.53
5	Energy Aspects	October 2020	44.0	58.0
6	Reuters Oil Poll	October 2020	42.45	49.76
7	Futures Markets	November 2020	40.1	49.6

DEVELOPMENT EXPENDITURES

Spending on development projects is estimated at RO 900 million in 2021 Budget, representing the estimated amount to be paid during the year as per the actual work in progress for the projects. The development projects have been reprioritised in terms of its urgency, cost, and economic and social return.

GAS PURCHASE AND TRANSPORT

The expense of purchasing and transporting gas estimated at RO 780 million in 2021 Budget, accounting for 8 per cent of total current expenditures.

SUBSIDIES

The appropriations allocated for subsidies are estimated at RO 800 million, including subsidies for electricity, water, sewage and waste sectors. In addition to subsidies for oil products, housing and development loans.

HOUSING AID, SOCIAL HOUSING SCHEME AND HOUSING LOANS

Oman Housing Bank will continue providing housing loans, with a total allocated amount of RO 100 million.

OIL PRODUCTS SUBSIDY

The total appropriations allocated for oil products subsidy are estimated at about RO 35 million.

PUBLIC DEBT SERVICE

Expenses of servicing public debt are estimated to reach RO 1.2 billion in 2021, due to higher public debt and interests. Moreover, an amount of RO 150 million has been allocated in the budget to partially repay future loans.

DEFICIT:

According to budget estimates, the fiscal deficit for 2021 Budget is projected to be around RO 2.2 billion i.e. 8 per cent of GDP, lower than the preliminary results of 2020 by 47 per cent.

The deficit will be financed through external and domestic

The deficit will be financed through external and domestic borrowing by 73 per cent i.e. RO 1.6 billion. The remaining deficit, estimated to nearly RO 600 million, will be covered by drawing on reserves

borrowing by 73 per cent i.e. RO 1.6 billion. The remaining deficit, estimated to nearly RO 600 million, will be covered by drawing on reserves.

PROJECTS BEING FINANCED OUTSIDE 2021 BUDGET

The private sector, side by side the investments, is among the priorities of Oman Vision 2040. This vision seeks to place Oman into the ranks of advanced nations, by creating competitive business environment that is attractive to investment. In addition to enable the private sector to play a greater role in accelerating economic growth.

OMAN INVESTMENT AUTHORITY

Local investments, carried out by OIA, are expected to total RO 2.9 billion in 2021. These investments will be put on a track that goes in line with the wider governance and priorities of Oman Vision 2040.

ENERGY DEVELOPMENT OMAN

The EDO will contribute by RO 1.3 billion to the investment projects related to oil and gas production in 2021. This will help to raise net revenue collected from oil and gas sector, and narrow the deficit.

PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Partnership for Development (PFD) Programme, known as Offset worldwide, is an economic tool applied over more than 100 countries for various purposes, including economic development, implementation of

economic and industrial projects, and transfer state-of-the-art technologies and knowledge. The MoF focuses on PFD in order to enhance and support three main sectors, as follow:

- Defence and Security Capability
- Human Resources Development and Knowledge Transfer
- Private Sector Development

The MoF has launched until now 17 projects including Oman Aviation Academy, in collaboration with Airbus, CAE and other government and private funds. In addition to Advanced Cybersecurity Academy, youth skills development programme, STEM Oman, and others.

Moreover, MoF is conducting a feasibility study for 14 proposed projects. Currently, 7 projects are underway out of which 5 projects are expected to be launched during 2021, including Leaders Development Centre in collaboration with Arizona State University.

MoF is also setting out a strategic plan to implement the projects, which fall within the Partnership for Development Programme, in industry sector and knowledge transfer area in alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and Tenth Five-Year Plan.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS

The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) is considered as one of the economic policies that aim at developing national economy and diversifying sources of income. The MoF is responsible for the enforcement of PPP Law in order to encourage private sector to invest in the infrastructure and public services, in order to reduce the burden on public spending.

KEY SECTORS OF PPP PROJECTS:

- Seaports
- Education
- Environment
- Transport
- Health Care
- Municipalities
- Government Services

should be done in accordance with policies that would attract skilled workers and grant them incentives.

Also, new investments based on the knowledge economy should be encouraged, while developing the education system, providing a skilled local workforce, and raising women's participation in the labour market.

out. To address this challenge and correct labour market imbalances, the 10th Five-Year Development Plan adopted policies that contribute to changing the composition of work from its current situation, which is based on a broad base of unskilled workers to a new structure based on a broad base of qualified workers.

This, according to the plan,

Budget to boost growth, jobs

FROM PAGE 1

The medium term fiscal balance plan lies on five major themes namely: supporting economic growths, stimulating and diversifying the government's sources of revenue, rationalising and boosting the efficiency of the government spending, enhancing the social protection system and enhancing the efficiency of the public financial management, the minister said, noting that these themes encompass a number of initiatives that would achieve financial sustainability in the medium term.

The implementation of these initiatives began in 2020 and are expected to reduce the budget deficit gradually down to 1.7 per cent of GDP in 2024. The Sultanate is planned to achieve a surplus of RO 65 million in 2025 under the current trend and the fiscal adjustment measures of the state administrative apparatus.

The minister stated that the overall financial effect of the measures taken as part of the fiscal balance plan during 2020 amounted to RO 1.4 billion in terms of both revenues and expenditure, the minister said.

The total financial effect of the measures due to be taken in 2021 are estimated at RO 3.5 billion with an estimated revenues of RO 565 million of which RO 300 million from value added tax (VAT) in addition to an improvement in revenues from government investments, expanding the selective tax and improving tax collection. These measures are expected to reduce the budget spending by RO 2.9 billion through cutting an additional 5 per cent, the minister said.

The minister stated that the state general budget for fiscal year 2021 lies on setting a budget threshold to all entities which should not surpass the budget amended in 2020. He noted that the reduction in real non-hydrocarbon revenues for 2020 by RO 600 million was due to COVID-19, and the financial effect of the government's measures to mitigate its negative economic impact. These measures included tax and fees exemptions such as tourism tax, municipality tax on restaurants, municipal tax on commercial establishments, among others.

According to the minister, the government revenues in 2021 are expected to reach RO 3 billion whilst revenues from value added tax and selective tax are expected to reach RO 413 million, a fourfold increase compared with 2020 budget estimates. Revenues from corporate taxes are projected to reach RO 400 million, a decrease of 27 per cent compared to 2020 budget estimates due to the economic impact of COVID-19 and the influence of the economic conditions that of the previous year.

The other current revenues are projected at RO 1.4 billion. Responding to a question about the cost



of public debt service and its impact on the budget, the minister said that the total expenditure approved for 2021 budget is estimated at RO 1.2 billion due to the increase in public debt and interest cost. He noted that a new item was introduced to the budget under the title (debt repayment allocation) with an amount of RO 150 million as part of the public expenditure items in order to handle future budget deficits. This in addition to setting aside sale revenues of 20,000 barrels of oil and transferring them to the oil reserve fund.

Al Habsi stated that Oman Investment Authority (OIA) continues revising the organisational and operational structures of the holding groups as well as the restructuring, merging and liquidating of affiliate companies.

OIA has taken reform measures by dissolving Oman Aviation Group and Transom and restoring the former status prior to establishing the group with only two companies to continue to exist which are Oman Air and Oman Airports Management Company. Regarding the employees, the minister said efforts will be made to distribute the available human resources and priority will be given to Omanis to be absorbed in Oman Air and Oman Airports Management Company. — ONA

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ANNOUNCEMENT OF TENDER

The Rural Areas Electricity Company (S.A.O.C (announce for Tender No. TANWEER- 01/2021

Supply and Implementation of Industrial Anomaly based Intrusion Detection System (IDS)

The Conditions:

- 1- Collection of Tender:** Interested and Specialized Companies and Establishments registered with Tanweer may obtain the Tender documents from Procurement & Contracts Department till date of **07 JAN 2021**, against non-refundable payment as amount of RO (175/-). The fees for the tender shall be deposited on Tanweer account on Tanweer account 0423010783090041 – Bank Muscat and for more information please contact via email address i.e. tender.purchase@tanweer.nama.om, or call us on phone number: 24250824.
- 2- Bank Guarantee:** The Tenderer should enclose original bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value with a validity of (90) Days from the last date of submission and addressed to Rural Areas Electricity Company (Tanweer).
- 3- Offers Submission:**
 - A-** Original bid bond along Cover letters shall be placed by bidders inside the red waxed Tender's envelopes as communicated to bidders by Tanweer. Tender soft copy must be serialized according to the numbers of the tender items.
 - B-** Tender bids shall be provided separately on a CD Roms , along with original cover letters in each envelop. Bids and cover letters shall bear the bidder's official seal and must be signed in either blue or red ink, but not black. A true soft copy of the bids shall be provided on a CD in an inner envelope marked "Copy". Bids who do not comply with these requirements will be overlooked.
 - C-** Bidders shall write the following details on the cover of CD:
 - Tender name and number.
 - Addressed it to the **Chairman of Purchase Committee, Tanweer.**
 - Technical Proposal / Commercial Proposal / Bid Bond.
- 4- Submission Location:** The Completed bids in CD should be deposited in the Tender Box at Tanweer Main Office at Wilayat Al Seeb, before 12:00 PM on the date of **14 January 2021**.
- 5- Tanweer** without mentioning the reason is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.



Tanweer
P.O Box 1166, P.C. 133, A'seeb, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: +968 24250800, Fax: +968 24250892
info@tanweer.nama.om | www.tanweer.om



Plan stepping stone to Oman Vision 2040

FROM P1

The employment of the national workforce is one of the most important economic and social challenges in the country.

"Although the rates of performance in the national economy guarantee the provision of sufficient job opportunities, the labour market has not been able to absorb and employ the increasing numbers," it points

Vaccination gains momentum

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The nationwide vaccination campaign for COVID-19 launched in the country will complete a week tomorrow. Despite the scepticism and concerns over its side effects, several frontline workers and elderly citizens have got vaccinated over the past seven days.

As of Friday, a total of 6,516 people have got vaccinated, of which 1,875 from Muscat, 1,445 from North Batinah and 613 from South Batinah.

“My father is 80 years old and he was invited by a health centre for vaccination, but he refused. It was his decision and we cannot force him. Since many countries have given approvals for the same vaccine, I feel there is no harm in taking it if available,” said Hamad, a banking sector executive based in Muscat.

“Vaccination is the only weapon that is available in the world today and I think we should trust the governments and companies that have a lot of things at stake,” said Lubina, whose mother of 70 years got herself vaccinated from Bausher last week.

According to government sources, COVID-19 recovered people will be offered vaccines in the later phases, and the side effects, if any, will be noticed only after seven days.

Total coverage of the target groups has been in North Batinah (41.5%), Muscat (22.1%), South Batinah (28.7%) and Musandam (45.7%).

The government has urged both citizens and residents in target groups to take advantage of the available COVID-19 doses by visiting the nearest health centres specified by the ministry for this



purpose.

“Both citizens and residents should visit the nearest health institutions designated for giving the vaccine across the governorates without adhering to the scheduled appointments for taking the vaccine depending upon the working hours in each institution,” said the ministry.

TARGET GROUPS

Meanwhile, 1,717 people have been vaccinated in the first two days of phase 1 of the national campaign to fight the virus, of

which frontline workers and other members of the target groups constituted around 11 per cent.

Target groups identified by the government are senior citizens (65 years of age and above), those with diabetes, people with kidney failure and who are on dialysis, and those with chronic lung diseases namely, the Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Syndrome (COPD), asthma (with the severity of the disease varies between medium and high), Interstitial lung disease (ILD).

The target groups include the health workers including the ICU staff, staff working in COVID-19 wards, and employees who have any of the following: diabetes, obesity (BMI more than or equal to 40), patients on dialysis and chronic lung diseases are also detailed in the target groups in the community.

The government recently said that the first batch of the Pfizer/BioNtech vaccine (15,600 doses) arrived on December 24, and the second batch of 28,000 doses are expected to arrive early January.

Other shipments will be received gradually. As for this vaccine, two doses are required to be administered 21 days apart, therefore, the first batch will be administered to 7,500 persons.

Oman business wins Shell Global Innovation prize

MUSCAT: Ahmed al Jabri has won the second place at the 2020 Shell LiveWIRE Top Ten Innovators Awards, a global competition that rewards businesses that demonstrate excellence in innovation and gives entrepreneurs a chance to shine on a global platform.

This year, Shell LiveWIRE has partnered again with Shell Global Commercial to deliver a competition focused on Creating a More Liveable World. Three separate award categories within this theme have been identified: Energy Transition, Environment and Circular Economy, and Local Prosperity.

The winner of each category took home a top prize of \$20,000, and the two runners-up from each category received a prize of \$10,000. In addition, the judges awarded an Outstanding Achievement Award of \$10,000 to an enterprise that has significantly contributed to combating the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, as part of Shell's commitment to respond to changing global needs. The award package for all ten winners also included mentoring support from a Shell expert, the opportunity to benefit from Shell market linkages and the possibility to be considered as a vendor to Shell or Shell's customers.

The winners faced stiff



Congratulations to our Winners Top Ten Innovators 2020



competition, with Shell receiving 136 applications from 15 countries around the world. Twenty-one finalists then had to compete in a public vote, which drew in more than 27,000 votes from over 170 countries.

“Congratulations to the winners. I'm truly impressed by the quality and creativity of the entries,” said Carlos Maurer, Executive Vice-President, Shell Global Commercial. “In business and in life, we need the innovators and those with passion and drive to solve the problems posed by an increasingly complex world and the multiple challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm glad the winners will receive not just a cash prize, but access to senior Shell experts for mentoring support. Shell was founded on a culture of innovation and ingenuity, and we want to see the Top Ten Innovators' technologies

and solutions thrive in the years to come.”

Walid Hadi, Country Chairman, Oman Shell, said, “We're thrilled to see that Ahmed al Jabri from Oman takes home the Top Ten Innovators prize. This is a great opportunity not only to highlight him as an entrepreneur, but also showcase the talent and innovations we see every day across Oman.”

Shell Intilaqaq, a part of Shell LiveWire International, was launched in Oman in 1995. Since its establishment, it has provided training for more than 15,000 young Omanis. Every year Shell LiveWire supports thousands of individuals to access the knowledge, skills, networks and resources to turn their business ideas into successful enterprises which provide a sustainable income, create jobs and drive innovation.

EA: Ban on plastic bags based on studies

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The ban on single-use plastic shopping bags was implemented after a group of environmental studies proved its environmental impact that affected human life, said Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of the Environment Authority (EA).

Al Amri said in an interview, “Based on these studies and following discussions with partners in the public and private sectors, it was decided on March 9, 2020, to impose the ban in Oman. All stakeholders were given as much as ten months to implement the decision.”

At the same time, both citizens and residents have expressed concern over the lack of alternatives in the market. “Despite the announcement in March, the alternative is still available in limited quantities. Secondly, the customer has to pay the costs of the alternative bags after every shopping.”

Speaking to the *Observer*, a merchant said, “The decision has not implemented in full on Friday as I assume we have some grace period to clear our stocks. I expect the ministry supervisors to intensify checks from the first working day.”

Speaking to the *Observer* Ananth A V, Director of the Lulu Group in Oman, said, “We have been following the guidelines of the authorities and have been promoting reusable bags in all stores. We have enough stocks of them available to help customers to follow the decision.”

Al Amri said, “We monitored a positive interaction among community members that often suggested implementing this



- Shoppers lament lack of affordable alternatives
- Confusion over use of garbage bags, plastic cutlery

decision on its due time.”

The chairman pointed out that there are some challenges that faced the implementation of the decision on the first day, but the awareness among community members helped moving forward with implementing this important environmental decision.

Ahmed bin Zahir al Hinai, Director-General of Environmental Affairs, said, “The authority will implement the decision to ban as part of the plan set by the authority to preserve the Omani environment from pollution and waste that is harmful to the rich environment and wildlife.”

The decision 23/2020 says that companies and establishments

are prohibited from using single-use plastic shopping bags to preserve the Omani environment, provided that an administrative fine of not less than RO 100 and no more than RO 2,000 is imposed on whoever violates the provisions of this decision, and it will be doubled if the violation is repeated.

One resident wanted to know about the use of plastic garbage bags and while another citizen wanted to know whether single-use plastic cutlery like spoons and bottles are also involved in the list

The Environment Authority said that light plastic bags are one of the most important factors for polluting open and public spaces inside and outside cities and on the seashore and its depths.

Yayah asked about the alternatives. “There must be provisions for small shops in villages to mitigate the effects? Tiny shops do not have the capacity to import huge quantities of bags that are non-Omani made. Have you helped producers of PE bags in Oman to shift production to other bags?”

Some citizens were also worried about the fate of hundreds of Omanis currently working in related factories as distributors and drivers.

Ministry clarifies on delay of tablets delivery for social security students

KHALID AL ADAWI
MUSCAT, JAN 2

In a statement on Twitter, the Ministry of Education affirmed that in reference to queries received by the ministry from students' parents regarding the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to provide tablet computers to students of the social security segment, and stemming from transparency principle adopted by the ministry to disclose the procedures taken in this regard, the Ministry of Education would like to explain that soon after the issuance of the Royal directives, on November 3, 2020 the ministry laid down appropriate technical standards for tablets that would be used by the students in coordination with the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) and the Ministry of Social Development in order to identify the targeted students and distribute the tablets to schools to all governorates of the Sultanate.

The Ministry of Education has coordinated with the Tender Board to roll out a tender, requesting a reduction of the legal tendering period from 45 days to two weeks stemming from the ministry's keenness to accelerate the delivery.



The ministry then made an announcement to specialised companies willing to submit their bids according to the specified timeframe. However, due to the short timeframe designated for bid receipt, the bidders requested deadline extension for another two weeks. The ministry responded to the bidders' request given the difficulty involved in providing 60,000 tablets from the local market.

In its statement, the Ministry of Education said it has divided the supply of tablets among a number of local companies so that the

devices would be supplied within a short time, expressing its hope that samples of the devices would be received by the ministry on January 3-4. The successful bidders will then begin delivering the devices gradually in accordance to the specified deadline after obtaining the approval of the Tender Board.

The Ministry of Education has valued the fruitful cooperation and efforts exerted by the relevant authorities to provide the tablets, commending the attention and follow-up by the society in general and the students' parents in particular.

In brief

■ SEOUL



SOUTH KOREA EXTENDS PANDEMIC CURBS AROUND SEOUL

With the coronavirus pandemic resurging in and around South Korea's capital, authorities on Saturday decided to maintain current restrictions on public life until January 17, the Yonhap news agency reported. Restrictions will remain at their second-highest level, 2.5, in the Seoul area, as well as Incheon and Gyeonggi provinces. All daily routines, except vital social and economic activities, are restricted and gatherings of 50 or more people are banned, while businesses such as gyms, concert and dance venues will have to close. Restaurants can serve guests only until 9 pm, at which point cinemas and large stores must close. — dpa

■ ISLAMABAD



PAKISTAN ARRESTS ALLEGED MUMBAI ATTACKS LEADER

Pakistani authorities on Saturday arrested an alleged leader of the militant group blamed for the deadly 2008 Mumbai attacks, on charges of terrorist financing. Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi was taken into custody by counter-terrorism authorities in Lahore, a spokesperson for the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of Punjab said. Lakhvi is accused of running a medical dispensary and using the collected funds for terrorist financing as well as personal expenses. His trial will be held before an anti-terrorism court in Lahore, the spokesperson said.

Lakhvi is said to be the operational commander of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). — dpa

■ MANILA



PHILIPPINES ADDS TRAVELLERS FROM US TO ENTRY BAN LIST

The Philippines on Friday temporarily banned the entry of foreigners from the United States, as part of efforts to prevent the spread of a new strain of the coronavirus in the country. The restrictions will be in effect from January 3 to January 15, according to presidential spokesman Harry Roque. The Philippine government earlier banned the entry of foreign visitors from 20 countries where the new strain has been reported.

Filipinos coming from the identified countries are allowed to come home but will also have to undergo the 14-day facility-based quarantine. — dpa

India holds nationwide vaccine drills

NEW DELHI: India on Saturday staged nationwide drills to start one of the world's biggest coronavirus vaccination programmes as the drug regulator prepared to approve the first vaccine.

A government panel on Friday recommended emergency use of the AstraZeneca-Oxford University shot and the first injections could be given in the coming week after the Drugs Control Authority of India gives final approval. India, which has the world's second-highest number of pandemic cases — more than 10.2 million — has set an ambitious target of inoculating 300 million of its 1.3 billion people by mid-2021.

Serum Institute of India, the world's biggest vaccine producer, has already stockpiled tens of millions of doses of AstraZeneca's Covishield ready for the campaign and 96,000 health workers have been trained for the inoculation drive.

The drills saw 25 health workers receive dummy vaccines at each of the centres to be used across the country in a test run ahead of the launch.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said the exercise would help build expertise "so that the upcoming vaccination drive may proceed without any glitch." He has also called for a campaign to counter "misleading rumours" that may scare people off getting



A health official and a volunteer take part in a dry run or a mock drill for COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine delivery at a health centre in New Delhi on Saturday. — AFP

■ SMOG ENVELOPES DELHI



A policeman walks along the Rajpath street amid smoggy conditions in New Delhi on Saturday. — AFP

Taliban is not ready for truce: Afghan negotiator

KABUL: Hafiz Mansour, a member of the Afghan government team negotiating with the Taliban, said on Saturday that the militant group is not yet ready for any ceasefire, as both teams prepare to resume talks next week. Mansour added that a majority of the Taliban forces believe they could seize power militarily, a "dangerous mindset," he warned the government.

The two sides began talks last year with the goal of establishing a ceasefire, paving the way for a democratic government whenever foreign forces leave the country.

The US had previously reached a deal with the Taliban whereby US and Taliban forces would try to limit attacks. Although Kabul is leading the current talks, the US continues to play a coordinating role as a major military occupier.

Mansour said that some countries that have helped Afghanistan during the past two decades were willing to help establish an

interim government, which would help the government transition from its current form to whatever is agreed upon in peace talks.

However, some regional countries oppose the idea, saying the idea of forming an interim government is an 'American plan.'

In the meantime, Mansour said that the US would try to help the negotiating team reach an agreement before the planned full withdrawal of US forces in May, as per an agreement struck with the Taliban in Doha in February.

Mansour said there was no choice but to accept an interim government in the interest of preserving basic human rights. He said the team would get its final guidance from the government on Monday, before leaving Kabul to Doha for a new round of talks set to start on Tuesday.

Earlier, Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh said that Afghanistan is a complicated country, where the rule of one group was impossible. — dpa

Masks mandatory in Sydney as cases rise

SYDNEY: Australia's most populous city, Sydney, has made face masks mandatory in some indoor settings, amid a growing number of coronavirus cases, New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian said on Saturday.

The move comes as the state recorded a further seven locally acquired cases of COVID-19, as clusters of infections have emerged in western Sydney and the Northern Beaches region in the last two weeks. The new cases

led to new restrictions imposed across Greater Sydney including a ban of more than five visitors to a home on New Year's Eve.

The lockdown that was imposed on residents of the Northern Beaches was eased for residents in the southern part of the region on Saturday. While the mask mandate will begin at midnight Saturday, enforcement won't begin until midnight Monday. Anyone caught not wearing a face mask or covering

in the required settings will be fined 200 Australian dollars (140 US dollars), Berejiklian said.

The settings include shopping centres, public transport, attending an entertainment venue such as a cinema, places of worship, hair and beauty salons and gaming areas of establishments. Staff at hospitality venues will also have to wear a mask. Additional restrictions will also be put in place for other venues. — dpa

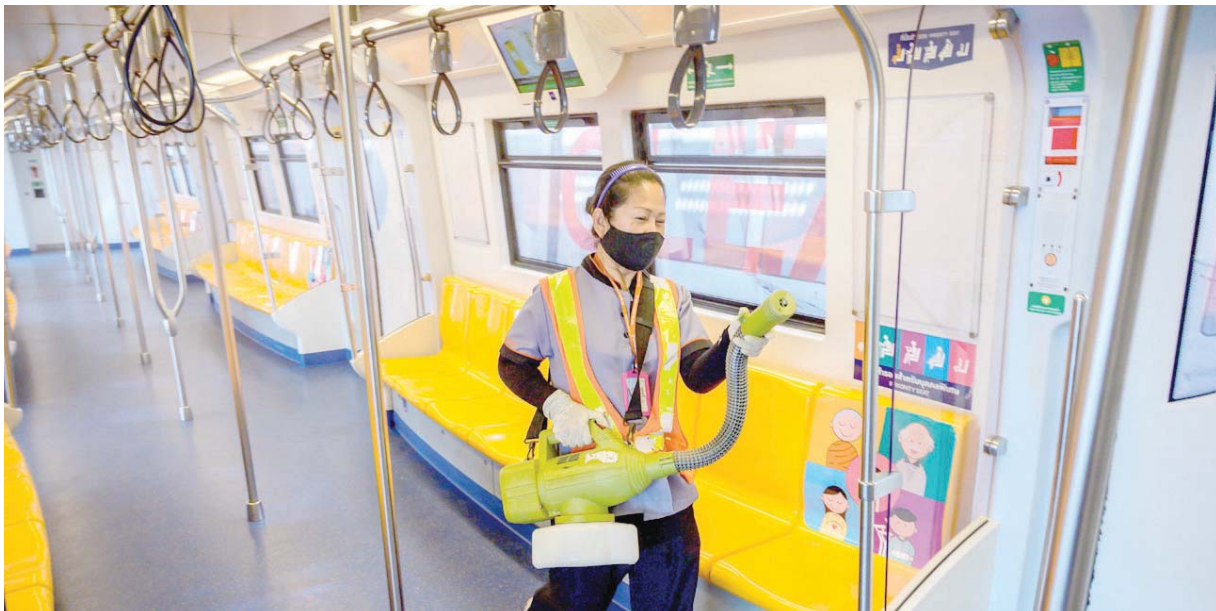
Bangkok imposes partial lockdown to combat virus

BANGKOK: Bangkok's nightlife will go quiet as a ban on pubs, nightclubs and restaurant alcohol sales goes into effect on Saturday, among a raft of restrictions aimed at curbing the kingdom's rising coronavirus toll.

Thailand initially appeared to have escaped the worst of the virus, registering just under 4,000 total cases in November, despite becoming the second country to detect an infection, early last year.

But an outbreak last month at a massive seafood market has spiralled into a resurgence, with infections now detected in 53 of the kingdom's 77 provinces. By Saturday the caseload had jumped to over 7,300.

In Bangkok, where more than 2,600 active cases have been detected, city authorities acted swiftly and announced a partial lockdown to go into effect



An employee sprays disinfectant through a carriage of a BTS commuter train in Bangkok on Saturday. — AFP

Saturday.

Pubs and nightclubs, boxing stadiums, cockfighting rings and massage parlours — as well as beauty salons and gyms — will be among a slew of businesses

affected.

The capital also announced on Friday that public schools would close for two weeks, while more than a dozen virus checkpoints were set up on Saturday across the

city. "We don't want to use extreme measures like a lockdown and putting up a curfew, but we need a stronger medicine to prevent the new surge," said Taweessin Visanuyothin, a spokesman for

Thailand's COVID-19 task force.

Nationwide restrictions and closures are expected to go into effect from January 4 to February 1, he added, allowing a two-day "grace period" for business owners to prepare. Authorities worried about inciting alarm nationwide had been reluctant to classify the new emergence of the virus as a "second wave".

But anger resounded across Thai social media Saturday on the renewed restrictions, with business owners expressing frustration with the partial lockdown.

"I comply with the measures strictly, yet I now need to close my business while there are many people scrambling on the SkyTrain every day," wrote Aksika Chantarawinji, a spa owner, on the official Facebook page of Bangkok's governor. — AFP



French Gendarmes evacuate the last partygoers who attended a rave in a disused hangar in Lieuron, about 40 km south of Rennes, on Saturday. — AFP

Hundreds booked as mass illegal French rave ends

RENNES, France: Hundreds of revellers were booked for breaking coronavirus restrictions as an illegal rave in northwestern France ended on Saturday after more than two days of partying that saw clashes with police.

Police had failed to stop the underground event, which drew around 2,500 people from Thursday night in two disused warehouses in Lieuron, south of the city of Rennes in Brittany.

Such mass gatherings are banned across France to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and a nationwide 8:00 pm curfew — which was not lifted for New Year — has been in force across the country. Techno music blared out during the night from the warehouses, which had been transformed into illegal nightclubs for partygoers who had flocked to the site from across France and even from abroad.

The local prefecture said on Saturday the music had been switched off and sound systems dismantled after two nights, and the first revellers began leaving the site before dawn. — AFP

Five women die in Yemen blast

HODEIDA: Five women were killed and children were among the wounded when a projectile exploded at a New Year's Day wedding party in Yemen's Red Sea city of Hodeida, the latest atrocity in the war-torn nation.

The government and Ansar Allah fighters blamed each other for the suspected artillery shell attack on Friday night near Hodeida's airport, a frontline between their forces on the edge of the key Ansar Allah-held port.

It came just two days after at least 26 people were killed in blasts that rocked the airport of the southern city of Aden as government ministers got off a plane there.



A damaged van is pictured following an explosion at a nearby wedding hall during the night in Hodeida, on Saturday. — AFP

In Hodeida, "the explosion struck at the entrance to a complex of several wedding halls", a witness said, as a party was being held for a newly-married Ansar Allah supporter.

Local officials said five women were killed, and children were among the seven others wounded, when the shell hit the wedding venue. — AFP

US Congress slaps Trump by overriding veto of defence bill

WASHINGTON: The US Congress on Friday dealt Donald Trump a humiliating blow in his last days in office with the Senate voting overwhelmingly to override his veto of a sweeping defence bill — the first time lawmakers have done so during his presidency.

By a lopsided vote of 81-13, well more than the two-thirds of the 100-member chamber required, the Republican-controlled Senate approved the \$740.5 billion National Defence Authorisation Act to fund the military for fiscal year 2021.

The Democratic-led House of Representatives had voted 322 to 87 on Monday to override Trump's veto.

Both houses of Congress had easily passed the legislation in early December by strong majorities, but Trump, citing a litany of objections, vetoed it on December 23.

"It's time for us to deliver this bill," Republican Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell said at the start of Friday's session.

"It's our chance to remind brave service members and their families that we have their backs."

The vote completed a stunning rebuke in the waning weeks of Trump's presidency.

It came in an extraordinary New Year's Day session necessitated by his veto, possibly the final act of the outgoing Congress.

New members will be sworn in on Sunday, just 17 days before Democrat Joe Biden is inaugurated to succeed Trump.

TRUMP'S COMPLAINTS

Breaking with members of his party, Trump had criticised the defence bill on numerous grounds.

He called it a "gift" to China and Russia and said it restricted



President Donald Trump arrives for the Operation Warp Speed Vaccine Summit in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House in Washington, DC, on Friday. — AFP

his ability to lower troop numbers in Afghanistan, South Korea and elsewhere.

Trump had bristled at language to rename military installations that currently honour leaders of the breakaway Civil War-era, pro-slavery Confederacy.

He also insisted the bill should include a repeal of a federal law, known as Section 230, that provides liability protection to Internet companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google, which he regularly accuses of anti-conservative bias.

"Our Republican Senate just missed the opportunity to get rid of Section 230, which gives unlimited power to Big Tech companies," Trump tweeted after the vote. "Pathetic!!!"

Referring to the Senate's refusal to vote first on a motion to increase pandemic aid checks, he added,

By a lopsided vote of 81-13, well more than the two-thirds of the 100-member chamber required, the Republican-controlled Senate approved the \$740.5 billion National Defence Authorisation Act to fund the military for fiscal year 2021

"Now they want to give people ravaged by the China Virus \$600, rather than the \$2000 which they so desperately need," using a term he applies to the coronavirus that has been widely decried as racist and fanning conspiracy theories.

But members of the president's own Republican Party — which

traditionally prides itself as strong on defence — underscored the importance of the bill.

"It's absolutely vital to our national security and our troops," said Republican Senator Jim Inhofe, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

"Our men and women who volunteer to wear the uniform shouldn't be denied what they need — ever."

Democrats in both chambers had slammed Trump's veto.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi hailed the "resounding rebuke" that both houses of Congress delivered by overwhelmingly overriding Trump's veto.

"Instead of keeping Americans safe, the President continues to use his final moments in office to sow chaos and undermine our security," she said in a statement. — AFP

Pope recalls his youth playing football, dubs Maradona 'poet'

ROME: With a ball made from rags and surging adrenaline, the young Jorge Bergoglio and his friends pulled off "miracles" playing football in the street, Pope Francis recalled on Saturday.

Now 84, the Argentine pope remembered "the joy, the happiness on everyone's faces," after the 1946 victory of his Buenos Aires team, San Lorenzo, in a 31-page interview about sport published on Saturday in Italy's *La Gazzetta dello Sport*.

The first pope from Latin

America called Diego Maradona a "poet" on the field, as he weighed in on the joys of sport.

Expounding on themes of hard work, sacrifice and camaraderie, Francis shared memories of the makeshift footballs that sufficed to exhilarate him and his boyhood friends.

"Leather cost too much and we were poor, rubber wasn't used so much yet, but for us all we needed was a ball of rags to amuse ourselves and to create miracles, almost, playing in the little square



Pope Francis leads Angelus prayer inside a library, amid COVID-19 outbreak, at the Vatican, on December 26, 2020. — Reuters

near home," Francis said.

Acknowledging he was "not among the best" of the footballers, Bergoglio played goalkeeper, which he characterised as a good school for learning how to respond to "dangers that could arrive from anywhere". The pontiff — described by the paper as "a pope of the people in the most noble sense of the term" — touched on the need for teamwork and working towards a shared goal.

"Either you play together, or you risk crashing. That's how

small groups, capable of staying united, succeed in taking down bigger teams incapable of working together," he said.

FRAGILE POET

He recalled meeting Argentine footballer Maradona, who died in November, during a "match for peace" in Rome in 2014.

"On the field he was a poet, a great champion who brought joy to millions of people, in Argentina as well as Naples. He was also a very fragile man," Francis said. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

MOSCOW

Over 800,000 people vaccinated in Russia

More than 800,000 people in Russia have received a coronavirus vaccine, health officials announced on Saturday, about a month after a massive campaign featuring the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine kicked off in early December. A total of 1.5 million doses of Sputnik V have been delivered to regions across the country, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said. That amount is significantly less than promised by President Vladimir Putin at the start



of mass vaccinations, when he had expected 2 million doses. Russia, with 146 million inhabitants, has had problems producing the vaccine in large quantities. — dpa

NORWAY

Second body found at site of landslide

Rescue workers on Saturday recovered a second body and continued searching for another eight people still missing days after a landslide buried homes in a Norwegian village. "We still have hope of finding survivors," rescue operations chief Roy Alkvist told reporters. A whole hillside collapsed in the village of Ask, 25 kilometres northeast of the capital Oslo, in the early hours of Wednesday morning, injuring 10 people, one of them seriously. Homes were buried



under mud, others cut in two and some houses left teetering over a crater caused by the mudslide, with several subsequently falling over the edge. — AFP

WASHINGTON

US passes 20 million virus cases: Johns Hopkins

The United States has recorded more than 20 million cases of COVID-19, Johns Hopkins University said on Friday in its real-time tally, as the New Year brought another grim milestone underlining the country's struggle to quell the virus. The US has so far registered 20,007,149 cases and 346,408 deaths in the pandemic, the Baltimore-based university said, making it the country with by far the highest official number of cases and the highest death toll.



On Wednesday alone, more than 3,900 people died of COVID-19 in the US, a new daily record, and experts believe the worst is yet to come as healthcare workers brace for a surge. — AFP

2020, goodbye, good riddance, and never darken our doorstep

Here we go again! It has become a tradition across the last eight years for me to have some fun with family and friends here and elsewhere, trawling for laughs I guess, and if ever a New Year has issued a clarion call for fun and laughter, it is this one. One of my genius, techie friends created an online bar, ‘The Lonesome Blues’, for a ‘select’ crew of us to meet and chat over a ‘lemonade’ or two, for a couple of hours once a week, and that has been fun. We give each other a hard time, share our ‘wins and losses’ from our different perspectives in Oman, Italy, Saudi Arabia, and Ireland, and right the wrongs of the world.

Andrew is our resident Scot, a cycling fanatic who has more bikes than he has hairs on his legs. He shaves them you see! He alternates between eating to gain weight, and cycling to lose it, as if being an Aberdeen fan was not enough of a rollercoaster. Meanwhile Bernie is the quiet man... well, unless he is on one of his five or six motorbikes! He is a genuine caricature of an Irishman though, always smiling, happy, and good fun. Wilhelm has been quiet, for him, as COVID-19 has adversely affected his social- read Brai- life, and the ‘Italian stallion’ Marcello, left mid-year. He was last sighted on a yacht in the Mediterranean. The New Zealand branch of the family has had a year of recovery from



Ray Petersen
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CLASSROOM TEACHING HAS BEEN THE MOST FULFILLING WORK I HAVE EVER DONE, AND WHILE I KNOW WE DO NOT REALLY HAVE ANY OTHER OPTION THAN ONLINE... IT IS NOT THE SAME.

setbacks during 2019, but gosh they have responded. Prime Minister Ardern, and Health boss Bloomfield acted quickly, decisively, and effectively to head off COVID-19. Now the ‘Kiwis’ are living as ‘normal’ a life as is possible! Those 5 million people in New Zealand do not agree on everything, are diverse in every conceivable way... but have achieved an amazing result. Kevin, Kathy, Susan, and David are our ‘kiwi’ stalwarts, and often through them, we remain positive.

The UK branch is a select one, and Sasha, recuperating from a skiing mishap in the French Alps, is due for an operation next week. She cannot wait! Her partner Chris is now the Medical Officer at a UK racecourse, and he is finding that exciting and different from his clinical work. His Dad Les retired but has suffered health reverses in recent times, and hopefully he and Norma can put those behind them in ’21. The Irish connection with Eoin, Eoin and Helen, Joanne and Tony remain strong too, though we all missed UTMB this year. I miss my SAFA rugby mate Mathys during rugby season too.

Speaking of the pandemic, you know I always take the ‘mick’ out of my doctor and great friend Vishal, but it is not in my heart to this year. Why? Because I will never forget the night, he called me to say he had COVID-19. Having lost a

good friend Steven during 2019, I was knocked ‘for sixpence.’ Thanks to God, Vishal has recovered completely, and his wife Yesha, and charming daughter Anvisha, have stayed safe throughout what must have been challenging times.

More than anything, I have missed the classroom and academic interactions of teaching. Mohammed, Shatha, and Sulieman from Bahla have been great, as were Saud, Khalfan and Chahrazed in Nizwa, but I miss my students... Rawaa, Asma, Nasra, Anwaar, Nagwa, Muzna, Rawan, Sara, and so many more. Classroom teaching has been the most fulfilling work I have ever done, and while I know we do not really have any other option than online... it is not the same.

Szepan and Gosia remain ‘close’ and have welcomed Julian to their gorgeous family this year. Mila is a star, Jarek, Joanna, Andrea, Franz, Sandeep, Ritu, Ghada and Assim are only a phone call away. Abdullah, Koshy, Rajesh, Mai, Liju and Yeru have kept the wheels turning in the office, Aneesh keeps everything working in the house, while Vijay, must be singled out for his enthusiasm.

Most of all though, my wife Lena has been my star, my best friend, my rock, and my love, “to the moon and back.”

POLL DEBATE

Germany at odds over armed drones

MATHIEU FOULKES

Should the German army be equipped with killer drones? With less than a year to go before a general election, it’s a question that has bitterly divided Chancellor Angela Merkel’s coalition government, testing Nato’s patience.

German armed forces have so far only been allowed to use reconnaissance drones as part of military missions in Mali and Afghanistan, leaving it to other international partners to deploy armed drones.

In 2018, Germany signed a contract to lease five new Heron TP drones from Israeli manufacturer IAI with the initial purpose of using them only for surveillance, although they can be equipped with missiles if desired.

Merkel’s conservatives and their centre-left Social Democratic (SPD) coalition partners agreed at the time that parliament would have the final say on any future arming of the drones.

Any kind of military action remains a sensitive issue in Germany, a nation scarred by its past as the instigator of two world wars.

But calls have also grown louder in recent years for Germany, as a major European country with considerable political and economic clout, to take on more international responsibility in matters of defence and security.

Merkel’s CDU/CSU conservatives have backed arming the remote-control drones,

along with some SPD members. The liberal FDP and far-right AfD opposition parties are also in favour.

The opposition Greens and the far-left Die Linke are fiercely opposed.

The debate came to a head in mid-December when SPD co-leader Norbert Walter-Borjans and the chairman of SPD’s parliamentary group, Rolf Muetzenich, unexpectedly spoke out against the arming of the unmanned aerial vehicles.

A vote in the German parliament has now been postponed indefinitely.

“The line between defending the lives and limbs of our soldiers and killing with a joystick is very thin,” Walter-Borjans said.

But the chairman of the prestigious annual Munich Security Conference, Wolfgang Ischinger, disagrees.

“What does a pilot (of a fighter plane) do, if not kill by joystick, by pressing a button 50 kilometres away, without seeing his target, and firing an air-to-ground missile?”

Muetzenich said he wants a comprehensive ethical debate on “automated killing” by the Bundeswehr armed forces, which he says half of Germans oppose.

“It disturbs me that almost only the military — those responsible for armaments and defence — have a say, but never doctors or Church representatives,” he said.

Andre Wuestner, the head of Germany’s armed forces union, said there had been several years “of discussions on five, I stress, five armed drones.”

The blockage has been criticised even within the SPD. The party’s defence spokesman, Fritz Felgentreu, resigned in protest at the SPD’s decision. German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, a close Merkel ally, has accused the junior coalition partner of “cowardice”. — AFP



The line between defending the lives and limbs of our soldiers and killing with a joystick is very thin

NORBERT WALTER-BORJANS
SPD co-leader

EXTRA RULES

COVID woes, not new checks, weigh on post-Brexit passengers

ARTHUR CONNAN

Travellers braving trains between London and Paris on the first day after Britain’s exit from the EU customs union experienced additional checks but were more worried by the extra rules required for travel in a pandemic-haunted world.

A much reduced Eurostar service is taking passengers between the French and British capitals during the pandemic, with London-bound travellers needing to quarantine on arrival and those heading to Paris requiring a negative COVID-19 test.

Those stepping off the train from London onto the platform at Gare du Nord in Paris found new customs checks awaiting them, with limits, taxes and even bans on bringing in some goods. British travellers who are not resident in France however can now also enjoy tax rebates on their shopping when leaving Paris.

“In the first days of Brexit, there will be a lot of explaining to do,” acknowledged Jean-Roald L’Hermitte, the head of customs for the Paris region.

“We will gradually get travellers used to these services and these controls,” he said, emphasising that checks should not slow down flows and will not target every traveller.

He said some 700 new French customs officers had been recruited to deal with Brexit, adding the service had been “innovative” in rising to the challenge, with automated kiosks be-



People stand on the beach as a P&O ferry arrives at the Port of Dover, southeast England on Friday. — AFP

BRITISH TRAVELLERS WHO ARE NOT RESIDENT IN FRANCE HOWEVER CAN NOW ALSO ENJOY TAX REBATES ON THEIR SHOPPING WHEN LEAVING PARIS

ing set up for British passengers to get their VAT rebates.

As the passengers emerged from the newly-arrived train in Paris, some were called by the customs to stop and say what they were carrying.

“When I arrived, they asked me if I had any goods or food worth up to 300 euros. If so, I had to pay taxes,” said Stephanie Bapes, a 35-year-old Frenchwoman who lives in London.

“Like all French people, I bring meat, cheese or wine when I return to London. Meat will now be banned from our luggage and we will have to

pay attention to what we’re carrying and check on the government website. For the return, I will bring nothing at all. It’s ruined,” she sighed.

Apart from meat, milk and dairy products will also be barred, with a few exceptions. Flowers, fruit, vegetables and plants will undergo health checks upon entry to the EU. “I come home once a year, I wasn’t supposed to be home for the holidays but there was an emergency. I bought my ticket at the last minute, with a test (for COVID-19) costing £200 (225 euros),” Stephanie Bapes added. — AFP

sport



MUSANNAH, AL ITTIHAD ADVANCE TO PRE-QUARTERS

Al Suwaiq, Oman club, Al Rustaq in HM Cup last 16

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 2

Oman club sailed into the last-16 of the HM Cup after they beat Jaalan 2-1 at the Seeb Stadium on Saturday. Saud al Farsi and Janio Osibni netted Oman club's goals while Marwan al Sawai struck the only goal for the guests.

Advancing to the round-of-16, Al Rustaq trounced Masirah 3-1 at the former home at Sur Sports Complex on Saturday. Mohammed al Ghafri was the man-of-the-match as he scored two goals in the game in the 56th and 92nd minutes while the third goal struck by his team-mate Mohammed al Ghafri.

Masirah's Mazin al Buraiki registered the consolation goal for Masirah. At Al Saada Sports

Complex, Al Ittihad thumped Al Ettifaq 5-2 to move into round 16. Oman's former national team player, Jameel al Yahmadi, scored an own goal for the hosts in the 18th minute.

Azan al Musalami found the net in the 26th minute to score the equaliser. Rushdi Rajab, Abdulmajeed Dada and Mohammed Sadoon lead Al Ittihad team again as they scored the second, third and fourth goals respectively.

Khalil al Musalahi reduced the margin as he netted the second goal for the guests. Abdulla Zaher confirmed Al Ittihad moving to the next round as he scored the fifth goal in the dying minute.

Musannah snatched a crucial 1-0 victory over Al Shabab at Al Rustaq Sports Complex to

At Al Saada Sports Complex, Al Ittihad thumped Al Ettifaq 5-2 to move into round of 16. Oman's former national team player, Jameel al Yahmadi, scored an own goal for the hosts in the 18th minute

advance into the last 16. The winner was struck in the extra time by Ismail Kukao as the regulation time ended in a goalless draw.

Three-time winner Al Suwaiq booked a slot in the last 16 round as they clinched a tough triumph against the fighting, Al Bashayer 2-1 in penalty after the match ended 3-3 in the real time and extra half.

The former national goalkeeper Mazin al Kaasbi was the star of the match as he saved four penalties and assisted

his team to secure a slot in the upcoming round.

On Friday, the Omantel League club, Muscat, was knocked out by the first division league representative, Samayil, 2-1 in the round of 32 of the HM Cup in a thrilling match at Seeb Stadium.

AbdulQader Fall put Muscat ahead and Samayil bounced back strongly in the second half as they got the equaliser and winning goal through John Franko.

The 2019/2020 HM Cup runner up, Al Oruba, trounced

Salalah club 2-0 at the latter's home in Al Saada Sports Complex. Omran al Farsi and Khalid al Alawi netted the goals for the guest.

The triumph meant moving of Sur-based team to round 16.

Al Mudhaibi club were very closed to advance to the next stage of the prestigious His Majesty's Cup.

However, they suffered a 4-2 penalty loss against Saham. The regulation time ended in 1-1 draw. Saham took lead as Falo Galas scored own goal while Nasser al Rawahi found the net and score the equaliser.

Ibri thrashed Mirbat 4-0 at Ibri Sports Complex to advance into round last 16. Despite that the first half ended in a goalless draw, Al Dhahirah representative team

registered a comfortable win in the second half as Emerson began the scoring campaign after eight minutes from the break.

Silva added the second goal in the 70th minute while Said al Dahbouni increased the margin to three. Abdulmajeed al Owaisi ended the campaign as he stuck the fourth goal in the dying minutes.

The Round of 32 will conclude on Sunday with five games as three-time winners Seeb will take on Al Talieah at Seeb Stadium. Four times winners Sur will meet Bahla at Sur Sports Complex while Ahli Sidab will clash against Al Nahda at the ROP Stadium.

Former champions Al Nasr (2017-18) will meet Bausher at Al Saada Sports Complex. Majees will take on Nizwa at Sohar Sports Complex.

Former India captain Ganguly stable after heart operation

KOLKATA: Indian cricket legend Sourav Ganguly was rushed to hospital on Saturday where he underwent a heart operation, doctors said.

The 48-year-old, who now heads the country's cricket board, suffered a heart attack while exercising at his personal gym in the morning and was immediately taken to Woodlands hospital in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal state.

"Sourav Ganguly has undergone an angioplasty and he is completely stable now," doctor

Saroj Mandal told reporters outside the hospital, where crowds had gathered after hearing the news about their beloved former captain.

A medical team comprising five doctors has been set up to monitor his condition.

Jay Shah, secretary of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), said he had spoken to Ganguly's family, and he was stable and "responding well to the treatment".

In 2019, Ganguly was unanimously elected president



India cricketer Shikhar Dhawan (R) interacts with Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) President Sourav Ganguly during a ceremony. — AFP

of the BCCI, the sport's most powerful body.

After a successful playing career during which he captained his country's team, Ganguly was instrumental in organising the Indian Premier League in the United Arab Emirates last year.

The left-handed opener retired from Test cricket in 2008 having accumulated 7,212 runs including 16 centuries — his first made at Lord's on debut.

He also scored 11,363 runs in 311 one-day internationals.

Ganguly — popularly referred

to as Dada, which means "elder brother" in Bengali — enjoys massive popularity in the cricket-crazy nation and the news of his hospitalisation was the top trending news on Twitter.

Ajinkya Rahane, who is currently the national side's stand-in captain, tweeted: "Wishing you a speedy recovery Dada, @SGanguly99. Praying that you get well soon." "My thoughts are with his family and fans at this hour. Hope to see him back soon," India coach Ravi Shastri posted on Twitter. — AFP

Khalid tonks another ton as Al Turki, Muscat seal big wins

SUPER KHALID: RENAISSANCE FAILED TO CAPITALISE ON ITS DECISION TO BOWL FIRST AS AL TURKI AMASSED 337/9 THANKS TO KHALID'S SUPERB 157 OFF 122 BALLS

Khalid Kail of Al Turki NMC



MUSCAT: Al Turki NMC's batting sensation Khalid Kail struck another big hundred as it overpowered Renaissance by 156 runs in a 50-over Premier Division League lopsided contest at Oman Cricket Ground in Al Amerat on Friday.

Renaissance failed to capitalise on its decision to bowl first as Al Turki amassed 337 for 9 thanks to Khalid's superb 157 off 122 and Karan Sonavala's 64 off 60. Syed Muzamil and Arjun Rajesh claimed three wickets each.

Renaissance crawled to 86 for 5 in 31 overs, literally ending its chances of a successful chase and closed its innings at 186 for 7 in 50 overs. Asif Khan topscored with 75 while Abdul Rauf and Sufyan Mahmood chipped in with 29 and 28 respectively. Hemalkumar Tandel bagged 3 for 29.

BRIEF SCORES (PREMIER DIVISION): Al Turki NMC 337 for 9 in 50 overs (Khalid Kail 157 - 24x4, 2x6, Karan Sonavala 64 - 6x4, 3x6, Syed Muzamil 3-41, Arjun Suresh 3-56, Bilal Muhammad 2-66) beat Renaissance 181 for 7 in 50 overs (Asif Khan 75 - 9x4, Abdul Rauf 29 - 3x4, Hemalkumar Tandel 3-29) by 156 runs.

MUNIS BOWLS MUSCAT TO VICTORY

In another one-sided Premier Division game at the same venue, veteran pacer Munis

Ansari picked up 4 for 19 to power Muscat CT to a thumping 10-wicket win over AER on Saturday.

Finding seaming deliveries from Munis and Ganesh Chandrashekher (2 for 24) too hot to handle on a cold morning AER folded up for a dismal 85 in just 26.4 overs. Sandeep Goud bowled well too, taking 2 for 16. Sachin Kumar contributed a fighting 38.

Muscat raced to the target in only 43 balls, scoring 86 without loss thanks to brilliant batting by Kashyapkumar Prajapati (57 not out) and Jatinder Singh (28 not out).

BRIEF SCORES (PREMIER DIVISION 50 OVERS): AER 85 all out in 26.4 overs (Sachin Kumar 38 - 3x4, 2x6, Munis Ansari 4-19, Sandeep Goud 2-16, Ganesh Chandrashekher 2-24, Wasim Ali 2-26) lost to Muscat CT 86 for no loss in 7.1 overs (Kashyapkumar Prajapati 57 not out - 8x4, 3x6, Jatinder Singh 28 not out - 6x4) by 10 wickets.

NISHAD SHINES AGAIN IN ZAWAWI WIN

Zawawi Powertech rode on yet another top-notch all-round performance from Nishad K S to beat Awtad International by 54 runs in an A Division 50-over League game at OC Turf 2 on Friday.

Sajeev Thamarath's 61 and Nishad's 51 were the highlight of Zawawi's 219 all out as Mohammed Irfan picked up three wickets.

Nishad was brilliant with the ball too, taking 3 for 38 as Awtad was dismissed for a dismal 165 in 46 overs despite Mohammed Waqas' superb 63. Suhil Kanagaraj and Prabhakaran Kannan bagged two wickets each.

BRIEF SCORES (A DIVISION): Zawawi Powertech 219 all out in 49.3 overs (Sajeev Thamarath 61 - 8x4, Nishad K S 51 - 2x4, 1x6, Mohammed Irfan 3-60, Parameswaran Shankar 2-46, Arun Pushpan 2-23) beat Awtad International 165 all out in 46 overs (Mohammad Waqas 63 - 7x4, 2x6, Nishad K S 3-38, Suhil Kanagaraj 2-22, Prabhakaran Kannan 2-35) by 54 runs.



Pakistan's captain Babar Azam trains during the team's training session the day before the second Test against New Zealand in Christchurch. — AFP

Babar cleared but not confirmed for Pakistan in second Test

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, NZ: Pakistan's talismanic captain Babar Azam has been cleared to play in the second Test against New Zealand starting in Christchurch on Sunday but has not been confirmed in the team.

"He has batted very well in the nets and he's fine now but he wants to hit some more today and we'll find out tomorrow," Mohammad Rizwan, who captained the side in the first Test, said as the team practised on Saturday.

Babar has not played on the tour since breaking a thumb during a practice session after completing their Covid-enforced 14-day quarantine on arrival in New Zealand.

Rizwan described Babar as Pakistan's Kane Williamson, the New Zealand captain whose first-innings century laid the foundation for their 101-run victory in the first Test.

"He's cleared but he wants to take some more time. If he plays he has a great impact on our team. Williamson batted very solid... Babar Azam has the same role in our team. The result may have been different if Babar was playing." In a tense finish, New Zealand won the first Test with

27 balls to spare and Williamson acknowledged Azam would have strengthened Pakistan.

"He's one of the best players in the world. He obviously adds a lot," Williamson said. "We saw how challenging it is against this Pakistan side. You add Babar to that and it strengthens it."

There is a lot at stake for New Zealand in the second Test where they need to win to have a chance of making the World Test Championship final at Lords in June. New Zealand are vying with Australia, India and England to make the final two.

A draw or better will confirm New Zealand as number one in the world rankings, extend their unbeaten home record to 17 Tests and a win will see New Zealand win six consecutive Tests for the first time. But Williamson, newly installed as the number one batsman in the world, said rankings and accolades were not a focus.

"You know these are very difficult things to control and these rankings sort of move every day," Williamson said while adding there was something special about the current Black Caps squad. — AFP

Five Indian players in quarantine after dinner date

MELBOURNE: Five Indian cricket players currently touring Australia were self-isolating on Saturday after dining inside a Melbourne restaurant put them in potential breach of strict COVID-19 health measures.

The players — Rohit Sharma, Rishabh Pant, Shubman Gill, Prithvi Shaw and Navdeep Saini — are being kept away from the rest of the Indian and Australian squads ahead of the third Test

starting in Sydney on Thursday.

The Australian state of Victoria, which contains Melbourne, is currently working to stem a cluster of virus cases tied to a wider outbreak in neighbouring New South Wales.

In response authorities now require all restaurant-goers to dine outdoors and maintain social distancing.

The cricketing quintet were



filmed inside the restaurant by a fan, who then posted the clip on Twitter.

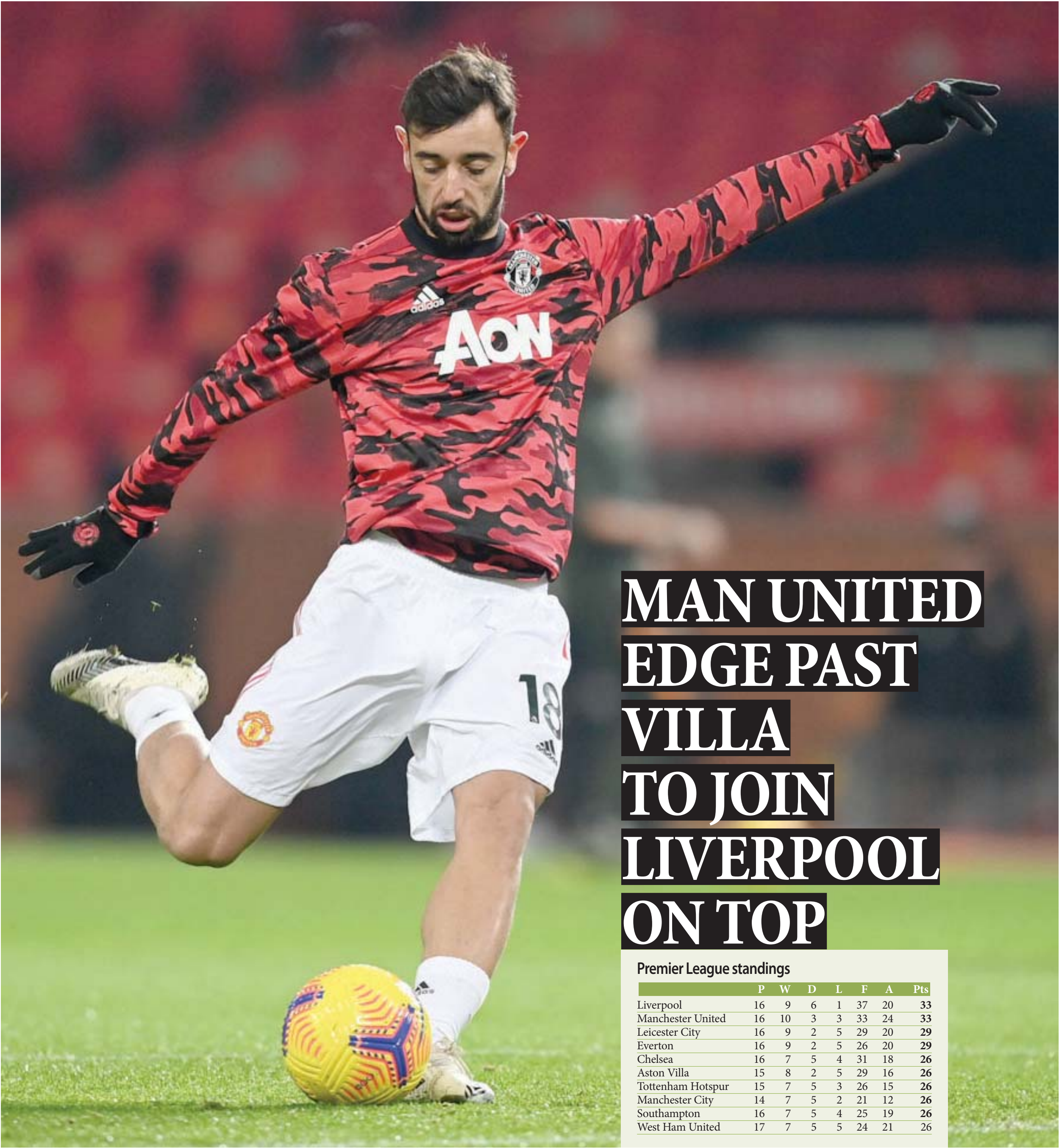
"The BCCI and CA are investigating the matter and seeking to determine whether the outing constitutes a breach of biosecurity protocols," a statement from Cricket Australia said.

"In the interim, on the advice of the Australian and Indian medical teams, the

forementioned players have been placed in isolation as a precaution."

Australia won the opening Test in Adelaide by eight wickets, with India levelling the series on Tuesday with an eight wicket win in Melbourne.

The third Test will go ahead in Sydney despite a coronavirus outbreak in the city, with Brisbane holding the final clash as scheduled. — AFP



MAN UNITED EDGE PAST VILLA TO JOIN LIVERPOOL ON TOP

Premier League standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	16	9	6	1	37	20	33
Manchester United	16	10	3	3	33	24	33
Leicester City	16	9	2	5	29	20	29
Everton	16	9	2	5	26	20	29
Chelsea	16	7	5	4	31	18	26
Aston Villa	15	8	2	5	29	16	26
Tottenham Hotspur	15	7	5	3	26	15	26
Manchester City	14	7	5	2	21	12	26
Southampton	16	7	5	4	25	19	26
West Ham United	17	7	5	5	24	21	26

LONDON: Manchester United moved level on points with Liverpool at the top of the Premier League as Bruno Fernandes's penalty saw off Aston Villa 2-1 in an entertaining clash at Old Trafford.

Anthony Martial's header five minutes before the break was a just reward for a bright start by Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men, but they were pegged back by Bertrand Traore's equaliser just before the hour mark.

Just three minutes later, though, United's talisman Fernandes won the game from the spot after Paul Pogba had been upended inside the area.

Another season just contending for a top-four finish looked in store for United after winning just two of their opening six league games.

But as all the other contenders have stumbled in recent weeks, the Red Devils have now taken 26

from a possible 30 points to mount an unexpected title challenge.

Solskjaer's side needed a 93rd-minute winner to beat Wolves on Tuesday, but were far faster out the blocks this time around.

Martial forced Emiliano Martinez into an excellent save high to his left inside 10 minutes before Fred, Pogba and Fernandes fired efforts just off target.

The breakthrough came five minutes before the break and owed much to Pogba's ingenuity with the Frenchman finally starting to find form despite the speculation over his future.

Pogba and Marcus Rashford combined to send Aaron Wan-Bissaka free down the right and his cross was headed home by Martial at the near post.

Villa were on a five-game unbeaten run themselves to earn a place in the top six and showed why with their start to the second-

As all the other contenders have stumbled in recent weeks, the Red Devils have now taken 26 from a possible 30 points to mount an unexpected title challenge



half as United were forced back.

Jack Grealish was again at the heart of all the visitors' best work going forward and it was from his cross that Ollie Watkins's header produced a fine reflex save from David De Gea.

From Grealish's next dangerous delivery, Villa deservedly equalised as this time Traore took a touch and slotted low past De Gea.

However, Dean Smith's men quickly undid their good work as a soft challenge from Douglas Luiz on Pogba was deemed enough for a penalty by referee Michael Oliver.

Fernandes's near-perfect penalty record continued as he slotted the spot-kick just out of the reach of Martinez for his 15th goal of the season.

Pogba should have rounded off a promising performance by sealing the points when he side-footed just wide when unmarked inside

the area before more Martinez heroics denied Fernandes a double as he turned the Portuguese's fierce effort onto the crossbar.

And United needed a big save from their own goalkeeper in stoppage time to hang on as De Gea sprang to his right to turn Matty Cash's long-range effort behind.

EVERTON LACK 'QUALITY'

Earlier, Everton missed the chance to close to within a point of the top two as they were beaten 1-0 at home by West Ham.

The Toffees failed to exert themselves on a West Ham side playing their third game in six days and were punished when Tomas Soucek slotted home the winner four minutes from time.

"It was not a good game," said Everton boss Carlo Ancelotti.

"We didn't have opportunities and we didn't concede opportu-

nities, they had a lucky deflection and we lost the game. We could play with more intensity and more quality up front."

David Moyes's men had the toughest festive fixture schedule in the Premier League in terms of rest and he said there has been a change in mindset with the Hammers this season to battle through adversity. "The players have played three games in six games, they are amazing," said Moyes, who won for the first time as a visiting manager at Goodison Park, where he made his name in 11 years in charge of Everton.

"I don't think there was any difference in the fitness levels so great credit to the players, there has been a big change in the mentality here at West Ham." Victory took West Ham to within three points of third, although they remain in 10th in a tight Premier League table. — AFP



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Six sectors to drive GDP growth in Oman’s 10th Plan

KEY PILLARS: Manufacturing & Industries, Transport & Logistics, Tourism, Fisheries, Mining, and Education will play a pivotal role in helping deliver real GDP growth targeted at the rate of 3.5 pc per annum over the five-year plan

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

MUSCAT: The Omani government is banking on six key sectors to contribute incrementally to the country’s GDP growth as well as drive economic diversification over the course of the 10th Five Year Plan spanning the 2021-2025 period, which officially began on New Year’s Day, January 1, 2021.

According to details tweeted by the Ministry of Finance over the weekend, the sectors in question are: Manufacturing & Industries, Transport & Logistics, Tourism, Fisheries, Mining, and Education. Collectively, they will play a pivotal role in helping deliver real GDP growth targeted at the rate of 3.5 per cent per annum over the five-year plan.

The Manufacturing & Industries segment is set to play a significant role in the achievement of this goal with its GDP contribution projected to rise from 10.8 per cent presently to



12.2 per cent by 2025.

Fisheries, currently the focus on an ambitious investment strategy driven primarily by Fisheries Development Oman (FDO) — part of Oman Investment Authority (OIA, will see its share more than double from 0.9 per cent presently to 2 per cent at the end of the 10th Plan.

Notable increases in GDP growth are also anticipated from Transport & Logistics — 7.5 per cent (up from 6.4 per cent presently), Tourism — 3 per cent (up from 2.5 per cent presently),

and Mining — 0.7 per cent (0.5 per cent presently).

But Education, long categorised as a service sector, is being shaped up to become an important driver of GDP growth with its current share of 4.9 per cent projected to climb to 6.2 per cent by the end of the Plan.

The 10th Five Year Plan, which effectively kicks off implementation of the Oman 2040 Vision, offers a clear-cut roadmap for the achievement of modest, yet sustainable, development following

a protracted economic downturn wrought by low oil prices and aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic.

It encapsulates efforts enumerated in recent months by the government to reduce the annual budget deficit, rein in soaring public debt, rationalise public spending, roll back subsidies, diversify revenue sources, improve efficiency and governance, and ensure greater accountability in the stewardship of public monies and resources.

Given that Oman’s economy is on the cusp of a recovery characterised by buoyant oil prices and a dramatically pared deficit in the 2021 General Budget, macroeconomic targets set for the 10th Five Year Plan are modest at best.

The Plan seeks to achieve real GDP growth at the rate of not less than 3.5 per cent on average throughout the Plan. At current prices, GDP growth is projected to average 5.5 per cent during the 2021-2025 timeframe.

Equally ambitious is the Plan’s goal to increase the investment rate to reach 27 per cent of GDP on average, while also enhancing the efficiency of investment and available resources.

Furthermore, the Plan aims to enhance the private sector’s contribute to investment to reach 60 per cent on average.

In particular, Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) inflows into the oil and non-oil sectors are projected to reach 10 per cent of GDP by the end of the plan. The non-oil sector itself is expected to grow at the rate of around 3.2 per cent on average during this period.

Raysut cable plant boosts annual output to 10,000 tons



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 2

Despite the challenges by COVID-19, National Cable Factory — a factory based at Raysut Industrial City — continued to sustain production to help provide electrical and flexible cables for the domestic market.

This success has encouraged the firm to explore foreign markets in the near future, according to Nayef bin Hamid Fadel, CEO of National Cable Factory.

Commencing operations in 2018, NCF currently has a production volume of 10,000 tons of all types of electrical cables per annum, said the CEO, adding that new production lines have been added to cater to the demands of a fast-moving market.

NCF is also offering employment and training opportunities for Omanis, he noted.

“The National Cable Factory, in cooperation with the Technical and Administrative Training Institute, which is supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, will train a number of diploma holders as part of the Training for Employment initiative,” he added.

Drive to weed out defective weighing scales

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 1

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) is continuing its inspection campaign (verification of trade and goldsmiths scales), which aims to verify if the scales in all commercial stores, showrooms and all stores that sell precious jewellery meet all the legal requirements for trade as well as comply with the specified technical regulations.

Commenting on the campaign, Eng Majid bin Nasser al Senawi (pictured), Head of the Control and Inspection Department of Precious Metals at the Directorate-General for Standards and Metrology at the ministry, said: “Ever since the inspection campaign kicked off, and till now, the number of the inspected commercial and goldsmiths scales exceeded 2,350.



The inspection campaign seeks to implement the Measurement and Calibration Law in order to ensure that users of scales and measuring devices subject to legal control comply with the mandatory requirements.”

The Measurement and Calibration Law issued by Royal Decree No 17/2013 empowers the ministry to monitor all devices subject to legal control, including commercial scales, where a sticker is placed on every verified scale indicating its validity. Specialists from the ministry verify that the scales are accurate and are not been tampered.

MSM posts weekly gain, led by all sectors

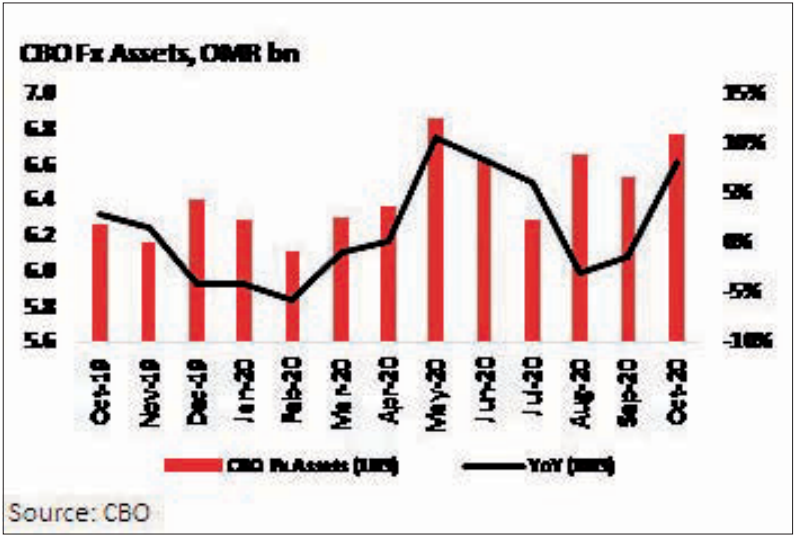
The MSM30 Index ended the week up by 1.64 per cent. All sectors ended positively.

The Industrial Index ended the highest and up by 2.46 per cent. Services Index was higher by 1.72 per cent and the financial Index was up by 1.56 per cent. The MSM Shariah Index rose by 1.89 per cent.

Takaful Oman announced on the bourse that it is in the process of issuing a perpetual Sukuk worth RO 6 million through private placement. The issue manager is Sohar Islamic. This is subject to the approval of CMA.

OIFC disclosed important decisions taken at the EGM and OGM held during the week. The proposed merger between OIFC and GIS under which GIS will merge into OIFC was approved and the proposed increase in the company’s authorised capital RO 20 million to RO 30 million was also approved. Further, the proposed increase in the paid-up capital of the company from MR 20 million to RO 23.7 million was also approved.

The increased paid-up capital shall be allocated to GIS’s



shareholders on the pro-rata of their shareholding in GIS. The issuance of secondary unsecured bonds with a value of RO 750k for a term of 5 years with 5 per cent interest was approved. The bonds shall be allocated to GIS’s shareholders on the pro-rata of shareholding in GIS.

Oman’s central bank said it approved a recommendation that would provide more flexibility for banks in financing stock market investments. The regulator’s board reviewed the prospects and challenges facing the economy

and approved a recommendation to amend some of the provisions in granting of loans against shares.

“The amendment is expected to provide greater flexibility and enhanced opportunities to banks in financing investments in shares or against the security of shares,” according to a statement posted on its website.

CBO’s foreign assets stood at RO 6.77 billion as at the end of October 20, having increased by 8.1 per cent YoY and 3.6 per cent MoM or RO 232.3 million during the month.

The MoM increase is brought on by a 7.4 per cent MoM increase in placements abroad (which account for about 49 per cent of the total foreign assets). Bullion was flat while IMF Reserve Assets increased 0.2 per cent MoM and securities abroad rose 0.1 per cent MoM.

CBO’s foreign assets are above the trailing 12-month simple average of RO 6.45 billion. CBO’s foreign assets include bullion, IMF reserve assets, placements abroad and foreign securities.

The RO overnight domestic inter-bank lending rate expanded by 7.9bps on month-on-month (MoM) basis to 0.859 per cent in October 20. The rate had been roughly on a downtrend since the Fed funds rate cuts began last year and increased slightly during June ’20 before easing again in July. It is well below 2.397 per cent recorded a year ago.

The highest ever recorded was 2.770 per cent in July 19. Furthermore, overnight interbank lending amount touched RO 24.57 million, down by 51.8 per cent YoY but up by 16.5 per cent MoM. (Courtesy: U-Capital)

Observer Year-End Special (Part II)

A CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF KEY MILESTONES, EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS OF SIGNIFICANCE TO OMAN'S BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE DURING AN EVENTFUL YEAR ROILED BY THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF A GLOBAL ECONOMIC SLOWDOWN AND MADE WORSE BY THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

CONRAD PRABHU

@CONRADPRABHU

JULY

July 1: Majority state-owned Oman LNG achieves revenues of \$3.485 billion in 2019 — a year characterised by a new production high, record cargo deliveries and the start of a landmark rejuvenation programme targeting the company's Qalhat liquefaction complex.

July 1: The Board of Directors of Fisheries Development Oman (FDO), part of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), has approved the company's five-year plan (2020-2025), the centerpiece of which is a strategy to invest several hundred million Omani riyals in strategic fisheries and aquaculture schemes.

July 4: For the third consecutive year, Oman maintained its dominant position as the world's biggest exporter of gypsum — shipping an estimated 9.01 million tons of the commodity last year primarily to the Indian subcontinent.

July 5: The Omani government has signed an Exploration and Production Sharing Agreement (EPSA) with Tethys Oil Qatbeet Limited, a wholly owned subsidiary of Swedish energy firm Tethys Oil, for Block 58 onshore Oman.

July 8: Oman has deposited its instrument of ratification of the Multilateral Convention (MLI), thereby formally affirming its commitment to a global effort to combat tax avoidance by multinational corporations.

July 18: Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals approves the Field Development Plan (FDP) for



Company.

AUGUST

August 18: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issues a record twenty-eight Royal Decrees in support of a dramatic reshuffle of the cabinet, revamp of government ministries and departments, and other measures aimed at improving governance and rationalizing public expenditure.

August 18: A new Royal Decree establishes the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ).

August 24: Oman is the latest country in the Gulf region to become TIR operational, unlocking its regional and international trade potential.

SEPTEMBER

September 5: The Sultanate has been placed 84th among a total of 131 economies ranked in the latest edition of the Global

oil and natural gas exploration and production companies in the United States, has signed an Exploration and Production Sharing Agreement (EPSA) with the government of the Sultanate of Oman to explore for hydrocarbons in Block 36 in the southwest of the country.

September 20: The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has directed commercial banks, as well as finance and leasing companies (FLCs), operating in the Sultanate to begin scrupulously implementing the provisions of the Multilateral Competent Authority Agreement on the Exchange of Financial Information — an international convention that seeks to, among other things, combat offshore tax evasion.

September 22: The Omani government has successfully

October 12: BP, in partnership with OQ, Petronas and the Ministry of Energy & Minerals in Oman, announced production has begun from its Block 61 Phase 2 Ghazeer gas field, 33 months after the development was approved.

October 13: Oman's decision to exempt a number of basic goods and services from the purview of Value Added Tax (VAT), slated to come into force with effect from April 2021, has been hailed as a reflection of the government's commitment to minimising the financial impact of the new levy on the general population of the Sultanate.

October 20: Al Taher Group, a diversified business group in the Sultanate, signed on Tuesday a strategic agreement with the UAE based conglomerate, Al-Futtaim Group, to introduce globally renowned furniture brand IKEA, at Oman Avenues Mall, in Muscat.

October 21: The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has approved a special code for the governance of state-owned companies.

October 22: His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik has approved a Medium-Term Fiscal Balance Plan (2020-2024).

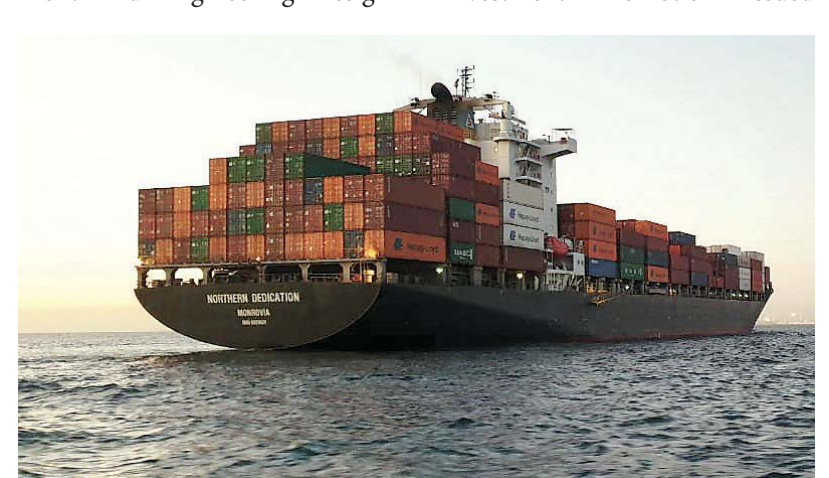
October 27: Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC), member of Nama Group, signs contracts worth RO 183 million as part of the landmark 'Rab' project, which seeks to connect the National Grid in the north with Petroleum Development Oman's electricity transmission network along with the Tanweer network in Al Wusta Governorate and the local Duqm SEZ network.

NOVEMBER

November 1: A first-of-its-kind Unemployment Insurance Scheme is launched on the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik — an initiative that will help encourage Omanis to strongly consider risk-free employment in the private sector.

November 2: Oman's government is weighing plans to tax the personal incomes of high net-worth individuals as part of a sweeping package of measures designed, on the one hand, to help shore up state revenues battered by low oil prices and the pandemic, and on the other, to plug a widening budget deficit.

November 3: Duqm Refinery and Petrochemicals Industries Company (DRPIC) has announced the suspension of the Front End Engineering Design



(FEED) work for its proposed Duqm Petrochemical Project (DPP), as it seeks to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the DPP's economics.

November 12: The high-powered National Committee on Anti-Money Laundering & Combating Financing of Terrorism (AML-CFT) formally approved measures to sustain its ongoing fight against money laundering and terror-financing activities.

November 12: The Omani government has opened Series 5 of the Omani Rial Sukuk Issuance Programme for public investment — a move that provides retail investors with an opportunity to purchase sukuk certificates at attractive terms.

November 16: A new month-long Made in Oman campaign launches in stores, supermarkets

and malls across the Sultanate.

November 29: The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) represented by the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) has awarded the tender for the development, management and operation of a Multipurpose Fishing Port and the related projects at Duqm SEZ to a strategic alliance of Oman and international companies led by Fisheries Development Oman, a state-owned group supervised by Oman Investment Authority.

DECEMBER

December 5: Oman has broadly welcomes the decision by OPEC+ to keep production cuts substantially in place, save for a minimal output increase, as a positive step to help bolster international oil prices.

December 6: The Omani government has announced the formal establishment of Energy Development Oman SAOC (EDO) as an Omani joint stock company that will, among other things, acquire a shareholding in majority government-owned Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), presently the largest producer of crude oil and natural gas in the Sultanate.

December 12: The Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion issued



the Yumna Field in Block 50, an offshore concession encompassing the waters around Masirah Island off the Sultanate's east coast. A Declaration of Commerciality has also been announced for the field, effectively marking the start of commercial production for the first time from the Block.

July 18: Oman has fully lived up to its commitments under the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), according to the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

July 20: Oman Investment Authority restructures the boards of 15 companies in its portfolio as part of a comprehensive review of its assets, as it looks to boost efficiencies amid the global pandemic.

July 29: Omani Investment Authority (OIA) has revamped its ICT holding arm — Oman ICT Group — to currently comprise four entities: Oman Broadband Company, Oman Technology Fund (OTF), Space Communication Technologies Company, and Oman Tower

Innovation Index (GII) — the world's foremost indicator of the importance accorded by nations to innovation as a driver of economic development.

September 7: The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has unveiled a slew of policy measures — the second since March this year — designed to strengthen the ability of banks and Finance & Leasing Companies (FLCs) to support the country's economic revival.

September 8: Oman Aviation Group (OAG) has announced a strategic partnership with global logistics giant DHL to support the development of air logistics at Muscat Airport City.

September 16: The Government of Oman ratified its accession to the Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Good by Road (CMR) and the Additional Protocol on the Electronic Consignment Note (e-CMR) under the Royal Decree No. 114/2020.

September 17: EOG Resources Inc, one of the largest crude

completed the issuance of local sovereign sukuk worth RO 200 million as part of the government's plan to finance the 2020 State Budget.

September 24: Oman's revamped Minimum Wage policy, which does away with the tiered structure of base salaries linked to educational qualifications, has the potential to spur job growth targeted at Omanis, place a greater premium of experience and skills development, and incentivise businesses to invest in local talent.

September 25: Oman's Minister of Energy and Minerals signs an new Exploration and Production Sharing Agreement (EPSA) with Maha Energy (Oman) Limited, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Sweden's Maha Energy AB, covering the exploration and development of hydrocarbons in Block 70 in central Oman.

OCTOBER

October 6: Oman is removed from the EU list of non-cooperative jurisdictions for tax purposes.



(Concluded)



COVID-19 and other new trends in shopping

Around June 2020, economists started wondering what kind of effect the pandemic would have had on the shopping season, most notably on 11.11 (particularly in Asia), Thanksgiving (mostly in the US), Black Friday, Cyber Monday, 12.12 and Christmas.

Usually, this season has seen an enormous amount of transactions both online and offline, but the pattern has varied in 2020.

Despite the grim scenarios painted, the shopping season was more than ever alive. Starting from some of the best sellers — and most awaited tech gadgets — such as PlayStation 5 and iPhone 12.

Although iPhone 11 remains the most gifted phone, for now,

the growth in gifting iPhone 12 — in all forms and sizes — saw a spike of over 20 per cent in activations on the December 25th alone.

PlayStation 5, through a clever teasing marketing campaign — that included augmented reality PlayStation boxes to be added on Instagram — was able to sell out in just a few days.

Notoriously these devices get more expensive at every new release, yet they manage to attract an ever-growing amount of eager buyers.

According to a survey dated end of October 2020, in the US, 51 per cent of the shoppers were worried about getting infected by COVID-19 while shopping during the season.

That did not stop the massive sales; on the contrary, it



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MANY SHOP OWNERS
AGREED TO OFFER
'BUY ONLINE, PICK-UP
IN STORE' (BOPIS) —
PREFERRED BY OVER
ONE IN THREE
AMERICANS
SHOPPERS

accelerated the growth of online shopping, while retailers hit rock

bottom.

However, not all the blame for the offline shopping decadence has to be attributed to COVID. In fact, with or without pandemic, 64 per cent of the shoppers considered it both easier and faster to shop online from the comfort of home.

As a consequence, given the inability to see and touch the products before purchasing online, one of the main concerns for shoppers was the return policy. Even those who agreed to buy remotely, yet from physical shops, were requesting hassle-free return and refund.

Therefore many shop owners agreed to offer "Buy Online, Pick-up in Store" (BOPIS) — preferred by over one in three Americans shoppers — and even "curbside pick-up" — an option

indicated as the preferred one by 27 per cent of the same sample.

In the US the average planned spending for the shopping season was in excess of \$1,500 to be spread over the period spanning from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

One in 3 Americans has shopped during the Black Friday — Cyber Monday long weekend, having a 48 per cent of the sample considering purchasing a gift card as a present.

Many have decided to self-gift more this year, including purchases of clothes, food and beverage and big-ticket items for the household, such as refurbishing their properties.

Another spike in sales was seen for items designed to work-from-home, such as gaming chairs, selfie light rings and secondary PC monitors — for

the never-ending Zoom calls — as well as soundbars and television sets.

According to Stephen Rogers, Executive Director at Deloitte Insights Consumer Industry Centre, "More than ever, shoppers are looking for safe and convenient ways to keep the season fun and festive. As a result, more shoppers are turning to contactless shopping options like home delivery and curbside pickup for safety and convenience."

This holiday season is going to test even the best supply chains and logistics. Retailers who successfully address last-mile requirements this season will like what they find in their own holiday stocking."

(The writer is a member of the International Press Association)

OPEC+ meeting to decide production levels

LONDON: Members of the Opec group of oil producers and their partners will meet via videoconference on Monday to decide on production levels for February, hoping to turn the corner on a difficult year.

The Opec+ ministerial meeting comes after oil consumption tanked in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Despite a pick up in prices towards the end of last year, the market levels for black gold remain uncertain.

After their last summit, from November 30-December 3, the Opec+ members agreed to increase production by half a million barrels per day in January.



Also at that meeting, the 13 members of the Opec cartel, led by Saudi Arabia, and their six allies, led by Russia, agreed to meet at the beginning of each month in order to decide on any adjustments to production volumes for the following month.

Russia and Saudi Arabia are respectively the second and third-biggest oil producers in the world after the United States.

The decision illustrates Opec's desire to maintain a strong influence on the oil market and the gravity of the situation for

crude producers last year.

Before the pandemic, Opec members were content with two summits per year at the organisation's headquarters in Vienna.

"Finally, we saw a strong demonstration of Opec+ will and capability to manage the market, laying the groundwork for Brent's recovery to over \$50 per barrel despite remaining demand uncertainty in the market," JBC Energy analysts said in a statement.

The two contracts of reference, North Sea Brent Crude and West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude both ended the week around the \$50 per barrel level, far lower than the prices seen at the start of 2020 but well up on the lows seen last year. — AFP

Cubans wary as currency reform begins



People show Cuban bank notes while standing in line to buy fish in Havana. — Reuters

HAVANA: Cubans awoke on New Year's Day to a new currency structure under long-awaited economic reforms that come with a double-edged sword of salary increases and price hikes.

The reforms entered into force on the communist island on Friday — dubbed "Day Zero" — just weeks after they were announced by President Miguel Diaz-Canel.

The policy is intended to make the Cuban economy more efficient and easier to understand for foreign investors 62 years after Fidel Castro's communist revolution.

The plan will see the convertible peso, which is pinned to the dollar and was introduced in 1994 to replace the US currency, phased out over six months.

This will leave only the

regular peso, worth about 24 times less.

Inflation will soar as a result, and authorities have warned of a 160-per cent average hike in prices.

Bread and electricity costs will rise, and in an added blow, the government has said it will also curb subsidies on some consumer goods as part of the reforms.

In exchange, the minimum wage will be hiked from Pesos 400 pesos to 2,100 (about \$15 to \$80.)

Many are concerned higher salaries will not make up for inflation.

"Everyone is worried. The Cuban lives in fear," said 36-year-old merchant Yusbel Pozo.

"The future is uncertain," he added. "We don't know what is going to happen. The electricity (price) is going up, food will follow." — AFP

New era opens in Dover

DOVER: As dawn broke on Friday over Dover, Britain's trading gateway to the European Union, the first ferry sailings to and from France of the new post-Brexit era left without delay or drama in holiday-thinned traffic.

A small but steady stream of lorries arrived through the morning at the port in southeast England — Europe's busiest for roll-on, roll-off freight — with new customs processes appearing to work smoothly.

As drivers approached its eastern ferry docks, they were met by police officers checking that they had completed COVID-19 tests, before being waved through if they showed a negative result.



People walk up a jetty with the Port of Dover in the background in Dover, southeast England. — AFP

The driver of a red van with Polish number plates was one of very few turned away for not having a test result and redirected

to sites north of the port where rapid testing is being conducted.

"It's good to see the port's done its job and there's no backlog,"

Alan Leigh, 52, of nearby Folkestone, said while taking an early New Year's Day stroll on the famous white cliffs above the docks.

Beneath him, P&O's "Pride of Kent" vessel sailed out of Dover on time at 0750 GMT, as Britain began life outside the EU's single market and customs union.

"They've had plenty of time to prepare," Leigh said of officials and government departments. "They're experts — you've got to have faith in them."

A last-ditch trade deal between London and Brussels, signed only on Christmas Eve, has averted the need for tariffs and quotas that could have severely disrupted trade. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

SEATTLE

Amazon to buy podcast startup Wondery

Amazon.com has agreed to buy West Hollywood-based podcast company Wondery. The financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, but reports said the deal might be valued about \$300 million.

With this acquisition, Wondery would become part of Amazon Music, which launched podcasts in September 2020. Amazon said that Wondery podcasts will continue to be available to listeners on a variety of platforms for free when the deal



closes. Wondery was launched in 2016 by Hernan Lopez, the exiting Fox International Channels chief executive with backing from 20th Century Fox.

— dpa

NEW YORK

Bitcoin touches record above \$29,000

The price of Bitcoin topped \$29,000 for the first time, with the digital currency almost quadrupling in value this year amid heightened interest from investors big and small alike.

The world's most popular cryptocurrency touched \$29,300 before pulling back, most recently down 0.67 per cent at \$28,774.36.

It has surged by nearly half since breaking \$20,000 for the first time on December 16.

Bitcoin's potential for quick



gains, as well as expectations it could become a mainstream payment method, has attracted demand from larger US investors, as well as from traders who normally stick to equities.

— Reuters

SAN JOSE

Facebook's advt integrity chief leaves company

Facebook Inc's chief of advertising integrity, who handled the company's ad products around sensitive subjects such as politics and coronavirus misinformation, departed this week, according to an internal company post viewed by Reuters on Friday.

Rob Leathern, director of product management, said earlier this month on Facebook's internal network that he would be leaving the company on December 30.

His exit had not been



previously reported. Facebook could not immediately be reached for comment.

Leathern said in the post that he was 'leaving Facebook to work on consumer privacy beyond just ads and social media,' without disclosing where he was headed.

— Reuters

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features



The Camels of Masirah: We share a young camel's joy and his keen sense of occasion

It is weird, I know, but it is almost as if, on the ferry across to Masirah Island, you lose the awareness that there will be camels on the island. I guess it is similar in a way to when we get back to New Zealand during our Summer vacation most years... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

CINEMA



'Wonder Woman' box office hits a pandemic high in cinema

"Wonder Woman 1984" pulled in \$36.1 million at worldwide theatres over the Christmas holiday weekend and boosted streaming viewership on HBO Max, Warner Bros. Said on Sunday as it confirmed plans... **Story on Page P19**

MUSIC



MEXICO MOURNS MAESTRO ARMANDO MANZANERO

Mexican singer-songwriter Armando Manzanero died on Monday at the age of 86 after being hospitalised with the coronavirus, sparking an outpouring of tributes for one of the country's best-loved musicians. The composer and crooner of romantic Latin ballads, who became the first Mexican to receive a Grammy lifetime... **Story on Page 19**

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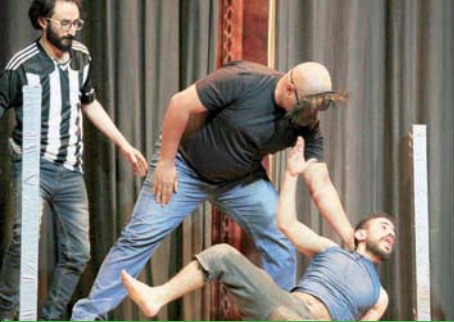


THE OLD WOMAN AND THE RIVER

BY ISMAIL FAHD ISMAIL

The story follows Um Qasem as she is evacuated from her Iraqi hometown along with her extended family but sneaks back in with her trusty donkey, Good Omen.

HUMAN INTEREST



STRUGGLING ARTISTS BRING SMILES IN WAR-WEARY YEMEN

Yemeni men, women and children filled a hall earlier this month in rebel-held Sanaa, laughing and clapping as actors took to the stage with comic relief for their war-ravaged country. Yemen's conflict has sparked the world's worst humanitarian crisis... **Story on Page 20**

CELEBRITIES NEWS

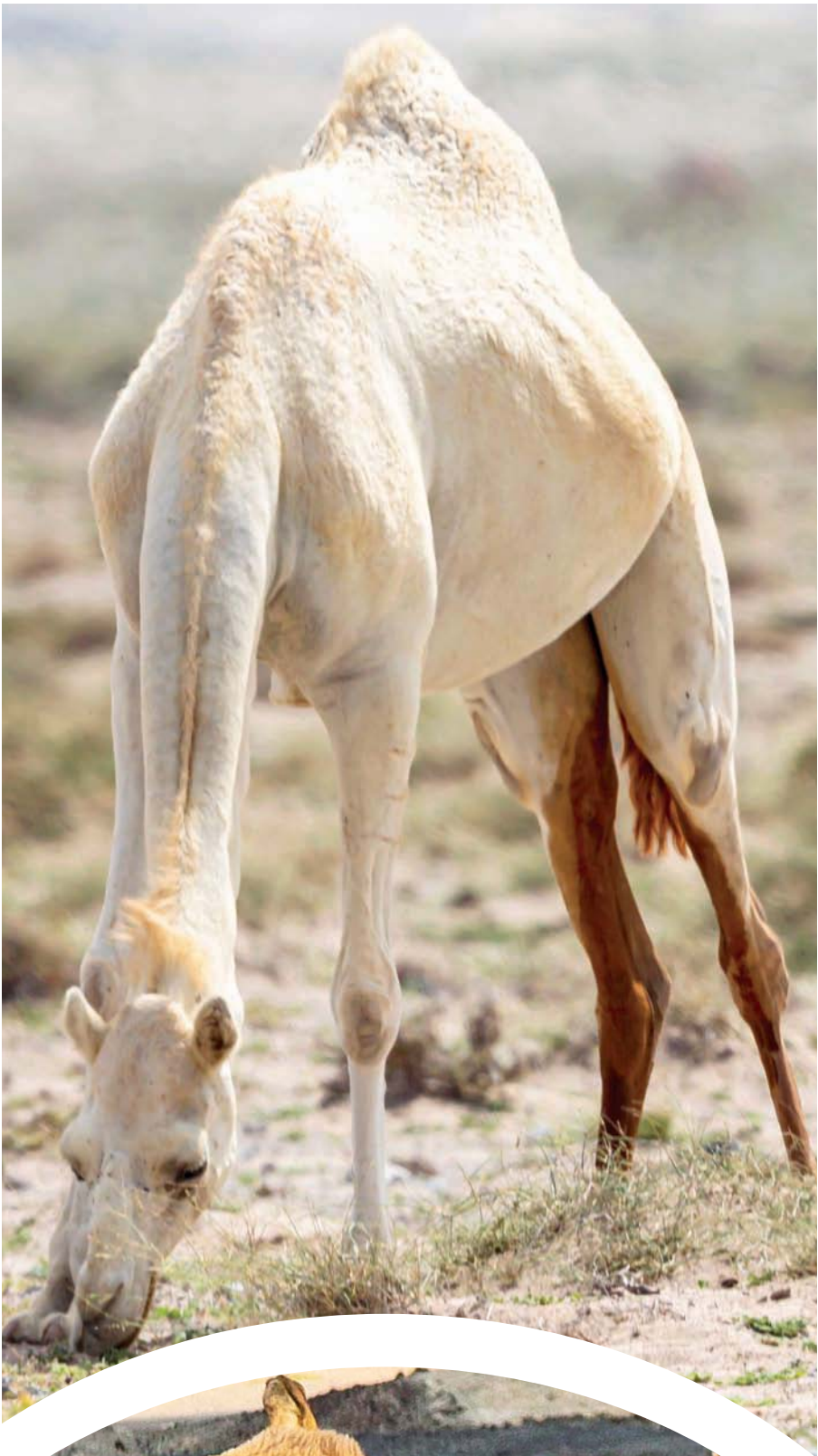
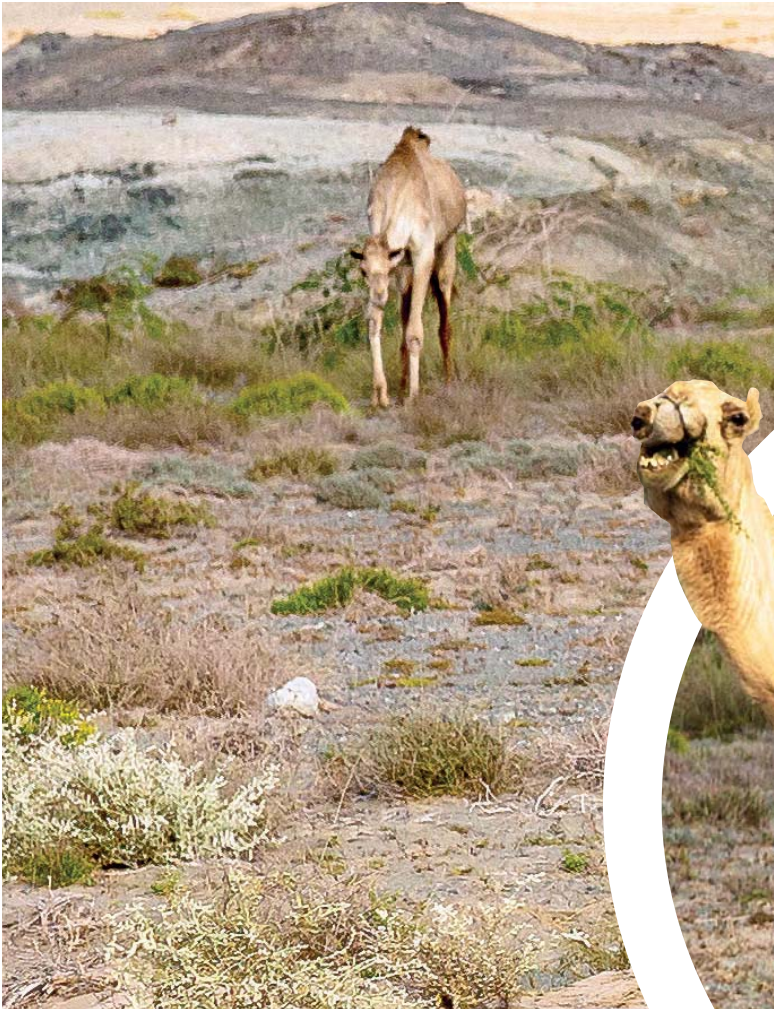


MICHAEL JACKSON'S NEVERLAND RANCH SOLD

Michael Jackson's famed Neverland Ranch in California has finally sold, more than 10 years after the death of the pop star. Billionaire investor Ron Burkle recently bought the sprawling 2,700 acres (1,100 hectares) estate, his spokesman said on Thursday.



The Camels of Masirah: We share a young camel's joy, and his keen sense of occasion



BY RAY PETERSEN
PHOTOS BY LENA PETERSEN

It is weird, I know, but it is almost as if, on the ferry across to Masirah Island, you lose the awareness that there will be camels on the island. I guess it is similar in a way to when we get back to New Zealand during our Summer vacation most years, we do not expect to encounter wandering camels, sheep, or goats on our travels, yet as soon as we are back in Oman, not only is it a possibility, but a probability!

Anyway, mostly on Masirah Island for a spot of fishing from its beautiful beaches, we decided to spend the 'non-fishing' hours in the middle of the day by taking in the sights of the wonderful little micro-climate, its unique geology, its flora, fauna, and its people, mindful however of the distancing requirements of the COVID-19 reality.

We encountered this small herd of wandering camels about halfway up the Western side of the island as we returned towards Al Hilf after a quiet morning's fishing, and so much looking and learning, being tourists, that it was late-ish in the afternoon. The flicking of his headlights by an oncoming motorist gave warning of 'something' ahead, and it was almost with amusement and surprise we saw this relaxed, almost amused herd wander from our right towards the road.

Of course, it was another photo opportunity, so Lena went into action, diving into the back of our trusty Hummer to fetch her Canon camera for some 'click action'. The light offered subtle colour and contrast you could never produce artificially as the herd languidly gazed at us, interested yet not, aware yet not worried, it was almost a beautiful meeting of minds as they gave Lena all the action she needed, gave me the chance to admire them close-up, and gave them the opportunity to pose for the camera, no selfies, but for a camel, the next best thing.

Our amusement was complete when one young beast 'folded' himself down, and looking directly at Lena as if he were saying, "Here, get this... I'll bet you've never seen a camel do this before?" With that, he (maybe, I didn't check), rolled and frolicked around on the ground, stretching, rolling, shaking, and having a 'right little one-camel-party,' for about two minutes.

Lena 'snapped' away merrily, and the young one only stopped when an elder wandered over and must have given him the camel equivalent of a 'telling-off,' as he awkwardly got to his feet and in his gangly, uncoordinated gait, ambled away to join the larger part of the herd who had waited patiently as if he does 'this sort of showing-off, all the time.

These camels appeared, to the un-camel-trained eye, to be in excellent condition, and very... contented. They were a nice little interaction, a nice diversion from COVID-19, and that young, gamboling, gangly character of a camel left us with smiles on our faces for the whole of the day.

I know, some of you are thinking, "Well you are easily pleased then!" But really, no we are not, it was just a one-off experience, one you could not bottle, and one we felt we should share.



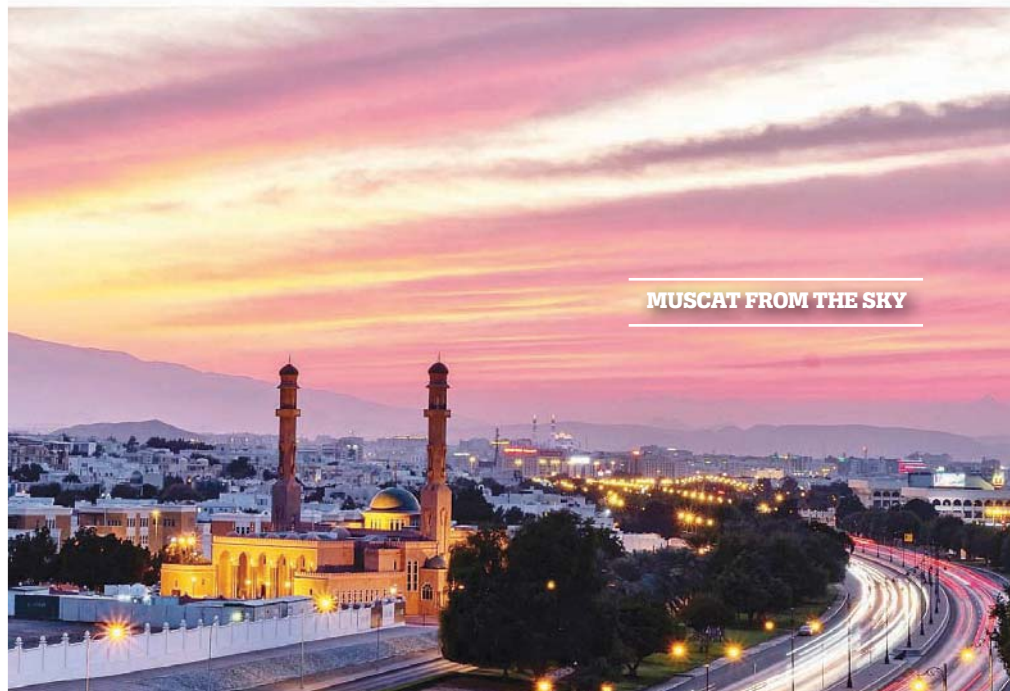


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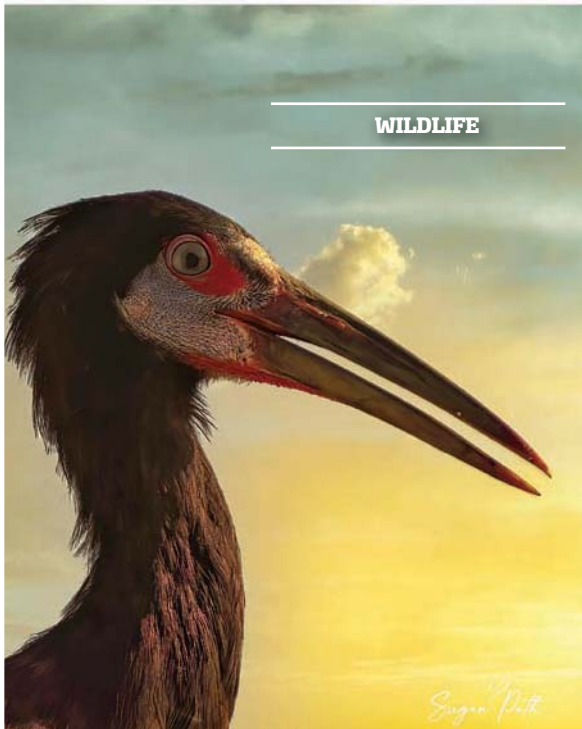
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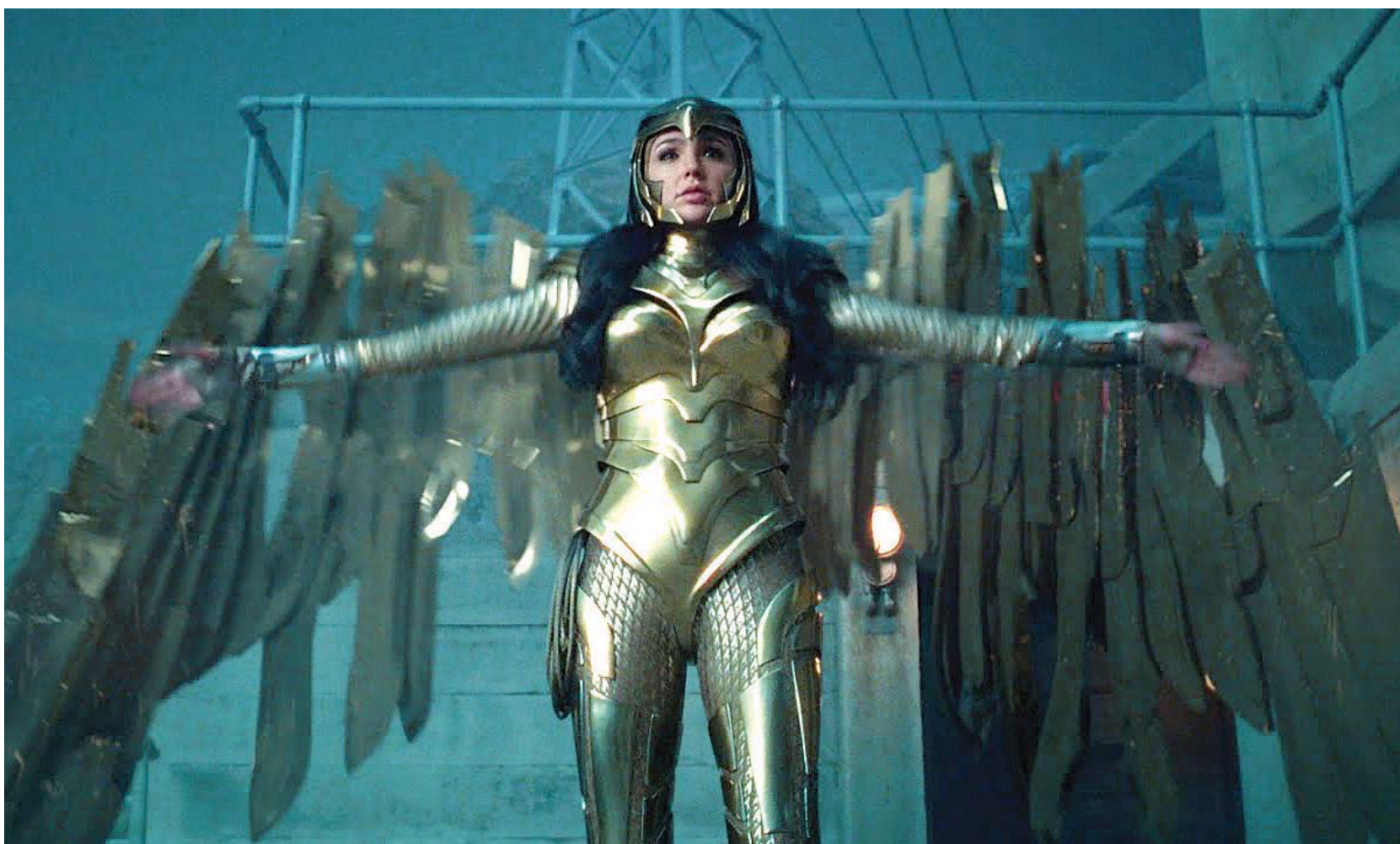
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CINEMA

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'Wonder Woman' box office hits a pandemic high in cinema



“Wonder Woman 1984” pulled in \$36.1 million at worldwide theatres over the Christmas holiday weekend and boosted streaming viewership on HBO Max, Warner Bros. said on Sunday as it confirmed plans for a third film in the superhero franchise. An estimated \$16.7 million of the box office total came from US and Canadian theatres, the AT&T Inc.-owned studio said on Sunday. That ranked as the highest domestic opening since the COVID pandemic shuttered theatres in March, though the numbers were a fraction of usual receipts for a big-budget action flick.

The 2017 “Wonder Woman” film opened with \$103.2 million domestically. With two-thirds of North American theatres closed, Warner Bros. opted for an unusual arrangement, making “WW84” available at the same time to US customers of AT&T’s HBO Max streaming serv-

ice. Millions watched the film on HBO Max, the company said in a statement, but it did not specify how long they tuned in.

Total viewing hours on the platform tripled on Friday compared with a typical day in the previous month, the statement said. The movie “exceeded our expectations across all of our key viewing and subscriber metrics in its first 24 hours on the service,” said Andy Forsell, executive vice president and general manager of WarnerMedia Direct-to-Consumer. Warner Bros. said it would accelerate the development of a third “Wonder Woman” movie also written and directed by Patty Jenkins and starring Gal Gadot as the lasso-wielding warrior.

The studio did not announce a release date. Paul Dergarabedian, a senior media analyst at research firm Comscore, said “WW84” performed well in theatres given “an extremely challenging marketplace.” “Considering the

availability of this blockbuster film at home, the numbers for the theatrical debut of ‘WW 1984’ should actually be encouraging to the theatrical exhibition,” he said.

“WW84” faced competition from critically praised Pixar animated movie “Soul,” which Walt Disney Co delivered to the Disney+ streaming service and some theatres overseas.

The story of a music teacher seeking his life’s purpose took in \$7.6 million in theatres, Disney said.

It did not disclose how many people watched “Soul” via streaming. Warner Bros. has announced the same hybrid release strategy for its 17 theatrical movies in 2021, sparking a backlash from some top Hollywood directors and cinema operators, who hope for a rebound after COVID-19 vaccinations increase. Through Sunday, 2020 domestic box office receipts totalled \$2.3 billion, down 80 per cent from a year earlier, according to Comscore. — **Reuters**

Mexico mourns maestro Armando Manzanero



MEXICAN SINGER-SONGWRITER Armando Manzanero died on Monday at the age of 86 after being hospitalised with the coronavirus, sparking an outpouring of tributes for one of the country’s best-loved musicians.

The composer and crooner of romantic Latin ballads, who became the first Mexican to receive a Grammy lifetime achievement award in 2014, suffered a cardiac arrest, his publicist said.

Manzanero’s songs, which include “Adoro” (I Adore) and “Voy a apagar la luz” (I’m Going to Turn Off the Lights), are known across Latin America.

His lyrics, some of them translated into English, have also been sung by international stars including Frank Sinatra, Christina Aguilera, Andrea Bocelli and Elvis Presley.

The artist was admitted to hospital on December 17 and later intubated, although news from his entourage over the weekend that his health was improving had sparked hope that he would beat the virus.

A visibly moved President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador cut short his daily news conference on Monday after showing a video of Manzanero

performing “Adoro”.

He hailed the musician as “a great composer, one of the best in the country.”

The Latin Recording Academy, which also presented Manzanero with a lifetime achievement award in 2010, described his death as an “irreparable loss for the world of Latin music”.

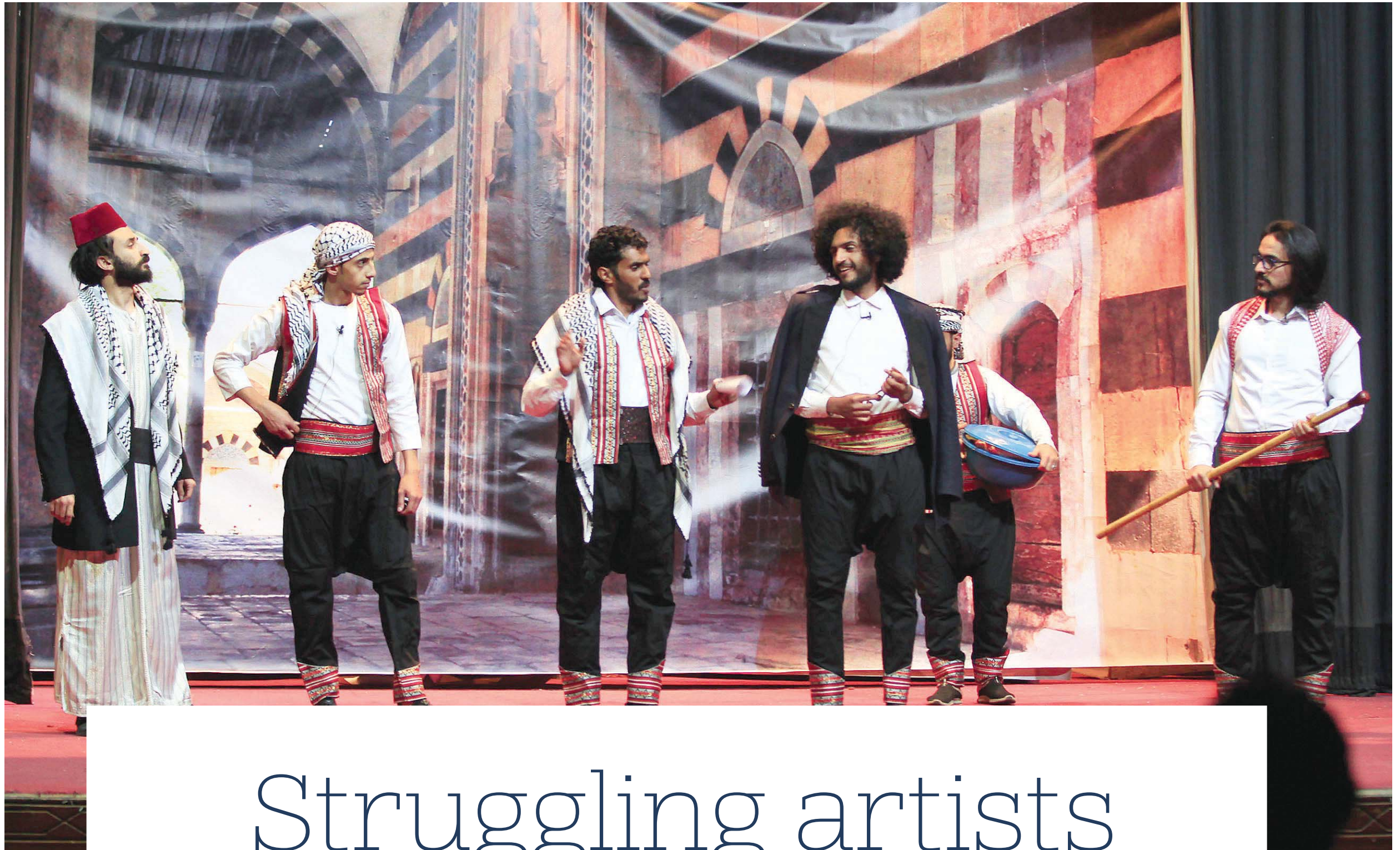
Spanish singer Alejandro Sanz said the Mexican maestro had “taught us to adore in the most beautiful way.”

‘Noble soul’

Argentine singer-songwriter Fito Paez said Manzanero “was above all an example for future artists to follow. A noble soul and a beautiful person.”

Manzanero was born in Merida in the south-eastern state of Yucatan on December 7, 1934, although his birth was only registered a year later. He recorded around 30 albums and some 400 songs over a career spanning six decades.

Music was in his blood — his father was also a singer, although Manzanero credited his grandmother for his romanticism. The songwriter was honoured in person by the Yucatan authorities this month with the opening of a museum dedicated to his life and work. — **AFP**



Struggling artists bring smiles in war-weary Yemen

Yemeni men, women and children filled a hall earlier this month in rebel-held Sanaa, laughing and clapping as actors took to the stage with comic relief for their war-racked country.

Yemen's conflict has sparked the world's worst humanitarian crisis, the UN says, and the Arab world's poorest country has also been hit hard by the novel coronavirus.

Hoping to provide entertainment to the embattled population, a troupe of struggling artists performed in the capital Sanaa a play called "Yemeni Film", which showcased the country's hardships.

It revolved around young people who want to produce a film but face a mountain of challenges, including violence, airstrikes, a lack of funding and a shortage of trained actors.

In an effort to avoid the minefields of political sensitivities and any backlash, the actors turned to comedy to paint a picture of their ordeal.

For the dozens of men, women and children who packed a Sanaa cultural centre, it was a welcome respite from their daily struggles.

They cheered, whistled and laughed openly, as they sat side by side with no face masks, despite coronavirus dangers.

"We, as struggling artists, cannot provide food aid or stop the ongoing conflict," Mohammed Khaled, the direc-



tor of the play, said.

"All we can do is offer the people entertainment to take them out of their current situation and an artistic message that they can enjoy."

Tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, have been killed and millions displaced in the Yemen war, which erupted after the Iran-backed Huthis took control of Sanaa in 2014.

The conflict has deepened since 2015 when a Saudi-led coalition intervened to support the government against the rebels.

After five years of war, malnutrition has reached record levels and pushed the country further to the brink of famine, the United Nations World Food Programme warned in early December.

Despite a UN-brokered agreement reached two years ago between the warring parties, a peaceful settlement has yet to materialise.

No infrastructure

The conflict-affected everywhere and everything in Yemen, said Khaled, and the art scene is no exception.

"This play talks about me, and all the artists and filmmakers in Yemen who are struggling," he said.

Before the war, Yemen had a small but budding film and theatre industry but there were only a handful of makeshift cinemas that showed old films, while often cultural centres or schools provided the backdrop for plays that spoke of politics or significant moments in Yemeni history.

Over the years, some films produced by Yemenis grabbed headlines.

"Karama Has No Walls", a documentary short by Sara Ishaq, was an Oscar-nominated movie in 2014 that told the story of 2011 protests in Sanaa.

The documentary "I am Nojoom, Age 10 and Divorced" — the real story of a child bride — was submitted for consideration at the 2017 Academy Awards but not selected.

The 2018 drama "10 Days Before the Wedding" that told the story of a couple trying to tie the knot during the war was selected as Yemen's entry for Best Foreign Language Film the following year, but it was not nominated.

"The biggest problem that we face is that there are no movie theatres," said Khaled.

Today filmmakers produce their work but "upload it online only", he said.

"There is no financial return and this undermines (our) ability to sustain the industry."

A 'Yemen that we miss'

But these are not the only challenges.

Huthi authorities that control Sanaa — whose Old City is one of Yemen's four Unesco World Heritage sites — have imposed strict rules on dress, gender segregation and entertainment in the capital.

Although Yemeni society has always been conservative, it has traditionally allowed space for personal freedom and for cultural events, including concerts. — AFP