

Sultanate backs Saudi stance on US report

The Foreign Ministry expressed Oman's solidarity with the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regarding its attitude towards the report submitted to the US Congress on the killing of Saudi citizen Jamal Khashoggi, may Allah Almighty have mercy on him. The Sultanate valued the efforts and procedures taken by the Saudi judicial authorities towards the case. — ONA



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SWIATEK CLAIMS SECOND CAREER TITLE WITH ADELAIDE CROWN



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OVER 80 PER CENT OF OMANI MUSHROOMS EXPORTED



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GERMAN BAND TURN VAN INTO CLUB SO FANS CAN ROCK OUT ONE AT A TIME



MUSCAT

HM CONDOLENCES TO SAUDI KING

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on the death of Prince Fahd bin Muhammad bin Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Faisal al Saud. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to Allah the Almighty to rest the departed soul in peace and grant his family patience and fortitude. — ONA

HM GREETINGS TO DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Luis Abinader of the Dominican Republic on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings along with his best wishes to the President and the friendly Dominican people further progress and prosperity. — ONA

KUWAIT FOREIGN MINISTER ARRIVES

Shaikh Dr Ahmed Nasser Al Mohammed al Sabah, Foreign Minister of the sisterly State of Kuwait, and his accompanying delegation, arrived here on a two-day official visit to the Sultanate. He was received upon arrival by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. — ONA



INSIDE



LIBYA SPEAKER FLAGS MARCH 8 FOR GOVT CONFIDENCE VOTE

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BY TARGETING SCHOOLS, KIDNAPERS PUT COUNTRY AT RISK

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Oman to set up model farms



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources is currently implementing model fields for plantation of lemon, mango and date palm trees in various governorates to boost food security and to achieve self-sufficiency.

The project is also aimed at providing high-quality dates, providing good income for the farm owners as well as establishing exemplary farms with high quality and excellent productivity.

The project targets to set up organised farms with a minimum area of 5 acres and is aimed at boosting the produce of mango, lemon and date palm trees with support from the ministry.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources supports the farmers by distributing quality seedlings of mango, lemon and date palm in coordination with the authorities in various governorates. A total of 73,000 date palm seedlings which were cultivated in 2020-2021 on a 120-acre with 26 farmers benefited in the first phase. These farms are expected to yield 370 tonnes of dates worth RO 365,000.

Besides, a total of 4,326 lemon seedlings were planted on a 50-acre area in addition to 3,182 mango seedlings planted on a 37-acre area.

It can be noted that the success of cultivating a number of date palms and fruit crops comes through the interest of the ministry in producing and increasing date palms and fruit seedlings in its research centres, introducing new varieties, improving agricultural operations and conducting a number of research studies during the past years to boost agricultural produce. — ONA

Clashes in Yemen's Marib kill 50 fighters

SANAA: Fierce fighting in war-torn Yemen's Marib province between government forces and Ansar Allah fighters killed around 50 combatants, including a special forces commander, a government source said on Saturday.

"Twenty-two members of the government forces and more than 28 fighters have died in the last 24 hours in the fighting that continues unabated on the fronts in Marib province", a government source said.

Ansar Allah fighters, who have been trying to capture Marib for more than a year, resumed their offensive against the last major stronghold in the north for Yemen's government on February 8.

Meanwhile, UN aid chief Mark Lowcock warned that 16 million Yemenis — more than half the population of the Arabian Peninsula country — are going hungry. Of those, five million are on the brink of famine.

On Monday the United Nations hopes to raise some \$3.85 billion at a virtual pledging event to avert what Lowcock says would be a large-scale "man-made" famine, the worst the world will have seen for decades.

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

More than six years of war in Yemen has sent the country spiralling into what the United Nations describes as the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

Some 80 per cent of Yemenis need help, with 400,000 children under the age of five severely malnourished, according to UN data. For much of its food, the country relies on imports that have been badly disrupted over the years by all warring parties. **SEE ALSO P6**

More restrictions to curb Covid-19 if necessary

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There is a possibility of taking more precautionary measures "if necessary" to curb the spread of Covid-19 virus in the country.

This was stated by Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, while addressing a press conference last week. He indicated that the Supreme Committee is examining the situation on daily basis.

The minister said that specific categories are exempted from institutional quarantine and are not exempted from isolation and other associated procedures applied to all travellers coming to the Sultanate, and noted that around 1,700 citizens entered through air and land ports and have been quarantined in institutions since the decision



We have worked to attract hundreds of nurses and doctors to support the medical staff in the Sultanate since the start of the pandemic

DR AHMED AL SAEEDI
Minister of Health

on institutional quarantine came into force.

Due to delay in approaching health centres on time, some 10 cases were transferred directly to intensive care units, the minister said.

"We have worked to attract hundreds of nurses and doctors to support the medical staff in the Sultanate since the start of the pandemic", he added.

With regard to the "modest" numbers of reserved doses of vaccines, he said that the financial aspect is not an obstacle in obtaining more vaccines, "but rather the inability of companies to produce needed quantities for all countries around the world."

Latest climate pledges 'very far' from Paris goals: UN

PARIS: Renewed promises to slash greenhouse gas emissions from countries as part of the Paris climate deal are "very far" from what is required to avert catastrophic global warming, the United Nations said.

In its assessment of the pledges made in recent months by around 75 countries and the European Union, UN Climate Change said that only around 30 per cent of global emissions were covered in the commitments.

"It's incredible to think that just when nations are facing an emergency that could eventually end human life on this planet — despite every study, every report and clear warnings from scientists throughout the world — many nations are sticking to



their business as usual approach", said the UN's climate chief Patricia Espinosa.

Under the landmark 2015 Paris deal, nations promised to work to limit global temperature rises to "well below" two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. To achieve this nations committed to slash emissions, as well as to provide assistance to the most climate-vulnerable countries.

The deal included a "ratchet" mechanism in which signatories agreed to a rolling five-year review of their climate pledges — known as Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDCs — in which they are supposed to display ever greater ambition for action. — AFP

Hospital and hotel staff can use in-house quarantine

KABEER YOUSUF

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Employees of hotels as well as hospitals can choose to stay in their work premises to fulfil institutional quarantine rule, according to the Relief and Shelter Operations Sector.

This is besides the announcement that labour camps can provide quarantine facility to workers provided the sponsor takes the responsibility for the

same. However, strict monitoring of people in quarantine should be carried out and the managements will be held responsible for any breach of quarantine rules set by the authorities.

An exit alarm should be installed at hospital and hotel premises where the staff is quarantined, and any attempt to break the isolation will be construed as an act against the quarantine rule. Besides, regular checks are conducted by health authorities to ensure that

the rules are strictly maintained.

“We have been advised that our staff coming from abroad can be quarantined in one of our rooms with strict Covid-19 protocols,” a representative of a private hospital said.

Earlier, the Ministry of Health (MoH) had clarified on the formalities that a person should follow upon his arrival at the Sultanate’s airports.

Accordingly, a person above the age of 15 who arrives at the

international borders of Oman needs to take a PCR test at the arrival terminal, wear the tracking bracelet on the hand following which he/she should be quarantined at any hotel.

DEMAND

The quarantine centres in Muscat are full with an ever-increasing number of inbound travellers and additional requirement for quarantine rooms are pushed to other governorates, according to hoteliers and those

who run quarantine centres.

“We are receiving a good number of people needing institutional quarantine and at times, and they are above the capacity so we outsource them to quarantine centres in interiors,” said a representative of a leading quarantine centre.

Based on the increasing demand for institutional quarantine, some star hotels have changed their business model and instead are offering a double room to a single

person who might not be able to afford it. They have divided it into a 3-bed sharing model with each one being charged RO 80 or so including airport transfer, second PCR test and bracelet removal packages or without them.

“But, once any one of the three is diagnosed positive, we will shift him/her to a single room keeping the remaining two in surveillance. This is to follow the quarantine rules,” a five-star hotel representative told the *Observer*.



OHB offers RO 1.2 billion worth of housing loans

MUSCAT: Oman Housing Bank (OHB) disclosed that it will accomplish 2,066 housing loan applications that were presented between June 2017 and April 2018 to the tune of RO 100 million.

This was stated by Adnan bin Haider Darwish, CEO, Oman Housing Bank. He added that the government’s decision to raise the bank’s allocations for the current year to RO 100 million, has had a positive effect and had cut down waiting time.

Since its foundation to the end of 2020, OHB has granted a total of 46,605 housing loans at an overall value exceeding RO 1.2 billion. Last year, a total of 911 housing loans were approved at a value of RO 40.2 million, the official said.

Regarding the effect of Covid-19 on the bank, the CEO affirmed the housing loans are a top priority and they will be processed in accordance with the new situation. He added that the Covid-19 pandemic has left a limited effect on the bank’s lending

portfolio affirming that the bank is capable of handling that effect owing to its efficient management of the financial resources.

The OHB has completed the preparation of the financial and strategic plan for the next five years. The plan will allow for the activation of some activities in accordance with the basic system of the bank as well as uplifting the existing operations to keep pace with the best practices. This will boost the bank’s financial resources

and enable it to meet clients’ needs, said the CEO.

The OHB is currently executing a plan to enhance its electronic services. During the upcoming period the bank will provide registration service on its website beside some other services such as, receiving loan application documents, the e-payment, balance inquiry, obtaining an account statement and obtaining the borrower’s information.

— ONA

New target groups to receive vaccination

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, FEB 27

Vaccines will be offered to a new target group of 60 years and above from this week, the Ministry of Health announced at the press conference on Thursday.

The Sultanate has reserved 200,000 doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which is likely to get approval in the coming days.

Oman is one of the top 30 countries that have started to provide vaccination and nearly 95 per cent of the target population for vaccination was covered in the first stage, the ministry said.

The Sultanate has no reservations about any vaccine manufactured in any country. Rather, the main criterion is the availability of studies that confirm the safety of the vaccine.

Any vaccine whose safety has not been confirmed will not be used in the Sultanate.

As of next week, the targeted groups will be expanded to include everyone aged 60 years and above, as well as a larger number of healthcare workers.



The school staff is among the target groups for vaccination, and when vaccines are available in sufficient quantities, the target groups will be expanded.

The current goal is to immunise the groups most vulnerable to the virus, including those with chronic diseases.

There is a significant decrease in the percentage of the elderly who need intensive care after vaccination is given to them.

Overall, the government intends to vaccinate 60 per cent of society and for the moment it is to vaccinate 20 per cent of the target groups.

YAHYA AL SALMANI

Sidr tree (scientific name: Ziziphus spina-christi) is ranked as one of the perennial trees in the Sultanate. This tree is distributed all over the regions and particularly within wadis and their banks. It grows intensively and is planted along roads. It can reach up to 12 metres tall.

It is one of the trees which the prophet, peace be upon him, prohibited to be cut off unless for necessity. These trees are of economic value and lovable to many people. Besides their usefulness for shade, their fruits and leaves were used for washing and ritual ablution before the advent of industrial detergents.

Bees extract one of the best quality honey from their flowers. Moreover, Sidr trees host various species of local birds and their woods are used commonly for cooking and timber.

Today, both children and adults are descending to the valleys near their homes to harvest the sweet fruit of the Sidr tree (locally called Nabq). The fruits are now available in the local markets at very reasonable prices.

Omanis, predominantly in



the northern part, are also eager to enjoy the summer fruits. “We are eagerly waiting for the mango date fruit harvest. Mango and palm trees have begun to flower, and the harvest of their fruits will coincide with the blessed month of Ramadhan, which falls in April”, one of the villagers pointed out.

“The fruit harvest season that characterises the northern regions of the Sultanate is an economic resource for the majority of Omani families. The coming days are marked by exceptional agricultural activities,” he added.



Madayn continues efforts to prevent coronavirus

MUSCAT: In line with the efforts made to prevent the spread of Covid-19 within the industrial cities, the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates — Madayn is continuing with its monitoring action to ensure the procedures are implemented in accordance with the enforced measures in Madayn to deal with cases of coronavirus (covid-19).

Madayn also monitors the duration of closure procedures according to the situation assessment in coordination with the epidemiological investigation team formed by the Ministry of Health.

Madayn officials conducted 4,415 inspection visits to various industrial units until February 18. From these visits, 3,487 industrial units were found adhering to the precautionary measures, while warnings and practice correction notices were issued to 928 industrial units. Moreover, violations were filed in 152 industrial units, of which 133 were closed.

During the same period, Madayn, in cooperation with Oman Investment and Development Holding Company (Mubadrah), implemented sterilisation and disinfection operations for 224 industrial



units in addition to sterilisation operations that included all the administration buildings in the industrial cities, Knowledge Oasis Muscat and Al Mazunah Free Zone. It is worthwhile mentioning that Madayn Emergency Room has received 2,088 communications during the same period.

During their field visits, Madayn officials aim at spreading awareness on workplace safety and healthy practices among the workers in the companies and factories, and imposing penalties on the industrial

units that are not adhering to the precautionary procedures. Such violations include the lack of personal protection tools; absence of physical distance between workers, especially those operating in production lines, and during rest areas; invalidity of temperature measurement devices with inaccurate readings; and insufficient quantities of hand sanitisers at the workplace. Madayn Emergency Room receives coronavirus related enquiries and complaints through 24449685 or via WhatsApp: 92389609.

India extends international flight ban, Kerala to offer free PCR tests

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 27

India on Friday extended the ban on international commercial flights till March 31. Meanwhile, the Kerala state in the country will conduct PCR tests free of cost for expatriates returning to the state.

India has given instructions regarding the conduct of PCR tests for those coming from abroad, the tests cannot be avoided. The traveller will be allowed to leave the airport after giving the sample with results sent within 6-8 hours to the mobile number.

An announcement to this effect was made by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). The development comes as the earlier ban on international flights was to end on February 28.

"In partial modification of circular dated June 26, 2020, the competent authority has extended the validity of circular issued on the subject cited above regarding scheduled international commercial passenger services to/ from India till 11.59 pm of March 31, 2021", said a circular issued by Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) in this regard.

The ban on international flight services comes as India recorded 16,577 fresh Covid-19 cases on Friday.

In the circular, the DGCA, however, said that dedicated cargo



The ban on international flight services comes as India recorded 16,577 fresh Covid-19 cases on Friday

flights and flight services under the bilateral air bubble pacts with select countries will continue to operate.

India has a bilateral air bubble agreement with about 27 countries, which include countries such as Afghanistan, Bahrain,

Bangladesh, Bhutan, Canada, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Iraq, Japan, Kenya, Kuwait, Maldives, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Oman, Qatar, Rwanda, Seychelles, Tanzania, Ukraine, the UAE, the UK, Uzbekistan and the US.

According to DGCA, a bilateral air bubble is an agreement with which flights between India and other nations can operate with preconditions during the pandemic.

It must be noted here that the international commercial passenger flights have been suspended since March 23, 2020, when the pandemic forced the country into complete lockdown.

Timing is everything.



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Quality of Service Indicators of 2020

Performance Indicators		Target Value as per the license	Actual Quality Achieved			
Mobile			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Percentage of Calls Dropped	Less than 0.8%	0.17%	0.17%	0.16%	0.15%	
Percentage of Calls Blocked due to Congestion	Less than 1.1%	0.01%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	
Percentage of billing complaints resolved within 10 working days	Greater than 90%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
Fixed						
Percentage of faults to be cleared within 24 hours	Greater than 90%	98.58%	98.57%	99.34%	98.86%	
Unsuccessful call ratio for local and national fixed calls	Less than 1%	0.26%	0.07%	0.01%	0.48%	
Percentage of billing complaints resolved within 10 working days	Greater than 90%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
International Voice Service						
Unsuccessful Call Ratio during busy hours	Less than 3%	0.14	0.16	0.31	0.19	

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THE IMPACT OF WORK FROM HOME ON REAL ESTATE



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While work from home has been partially encouraged by many corporates over the past few years, it was never seen as a full alternative to attending offices and daily meetings.

The past year of the global pandemic made work from home (WFH) not only a safe but also an equally popular option.

At the same time, WFH has cast doubts on the minds of real estate developers who invest millions of riyals on huge towers and dollars with glass windows that are a symbol of a smart and prosperous society.

Compare to residential properties, real estate is more profitable for developers with businesses are willing to take spend little extra to make their offices presentable, iconic and different from

their competitors. “It also narrates the story of a long journey that a company has taken from its humble beginnings,” sources in the property consultant market told the *Observer*.

OFFICE SPACE

But the work-from-home culture can rewrite the nature of the real estate market as large companies do not need so much office space in the years to come.

“The nature of businesses in Oman are not suited to WFH like in other countries which are more of trading and contracting in nature. But still, real estate developers and planners will be forced to take such factors into account in the future,” said the executive of a leading real estate office.

WFH is also likely to affect banks as businesses are less likely to take financing or loans for buying or expanding



workspaces. According to a report, some finance companies are getting rid of as much as 40 per cent of their office space to make savings.

The same report said that WFH is not beneficial to young and fresh employees who will miss the interaction and on-the-job learning with senior colleagues.

Here in Oman, a new type of businesses has developed over the past year and most of them do not need large investment in properties.

These are homemakers and small-time budding entrepreneurs who cannot afford to take risks with huge loans for office spaces. They can easily invest the same money in getting good manpower and raw materials to prepare a good product.

“I could easily start my investment in my sweets and cake-making business

without having to open a fancy boutique or shop in a prime area. I agree to attain visibility is a challenge with so many competitors, but the stakes are less. We can easily diversify into a new business without getting into anyone’s notice,” said Zahara, whose business flourished in the past year.

The staff most likely to go back to the office are traders, bank executives, while back-office functions such as finance, risk management and IT will spend more time working remotely. “It is not all over for office spaces and remote working cannot be universally applicable. Sprawling office spaces will be gradually replaced by small cubes or facilities such as gyms and for recreation to attract people to offices,” said a senior executive associated with business complexes in the GCC, including Oman.

Armenian president rejects army chief's dismissal

YEREVAN: Armenian President Armen Sarkisian said on Saturday he had refused to sign a prime ministerial order to dismiss the army's chief of staff, deepening a national political crisis.

The ex-Soviet nation has faced turmoil since Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed a Moscow-brokered peace accord in November, sealing a humiliating defeat to Azerbaijan after six weeks of fighting over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Divisions widened on Thursday when Pashinyan defied a call by the military to resign, accused the army of an attempted coup, and ordered the chief of the general staff Onik Gasparyan to be fired.

On Saturday, Armenian President Sarkisian said in a statement that he would not back the sacking.

"The president of the republic, within the framework of his constitutional powers, returned the draft decree with objections," the presidency said.

Earlier in the day, 5,000 opposition protesters waving Armenian flags and calling for Pashinyan's resignation gathered for the third day running outside the parliament in Yerevan. — **AFP**



An employee of Panama's sanitation service is inoculated with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against Covid-19 at the Torrijos Carter Park in Panama City. — **AFP**

US SET TO APPROVE THIRD VACCINE

WASHINGTON: A US panel on Friday recommended Johnson & Johnson's one-dose Covid-19 shot for emergency approval, as some of the world's most powerful countries issued a unified call for better vaccine access for poorer nations.

The United States is the world's hardest-hit country, and its emergency use authorisation — which is now expected shortly — of the J&J vaccine would follow those for the Pfizer and Moderna doses.

"We're going to use every conceivable way to expand manufacturing of the vaccine... and make even more rapid progress," said President Joe Biden as the country tries to finally get on top of the virus that has already claimed 510,000 US lives.

J&J stressed its vaccine was proven to work with a single shot, and could be stored long-term at standard fridge

temperatures, which "offers logistical and practical advantages."

As inoculation campaigns ramp up in wealthier nations, there was unanimous support for a resolution at the UN Security Council calling for improved access to vaccines in conflict-hit and impoverished countries.

In a rare gesture, it was co-sponsored by all 15 members of the council, diplomats said, and required just a week of negotiations to draft.

"We are all facing the same threat, the same pandemic, and international cooperation and multilateral action is needed," one diplomat said.

But Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, head of the World Health Organization, reacted by saying richer countries must waive intellectual property rights on vaccines so more manufacturers can start production. The idea is fiercely opposed by many wealthy countries

and the pharmaceutical industry.

Another diplomatic gathering on Friday looked further ahead, with G20 countries discussing post-pandemic economic recovery in a video conference.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has signalled openness to new assistance to less developed countries through the International Monetary Fund.

Also in Washington, Democratic leaders expressed confidence that Biden's \$1.9 trillion Covid relief package would pass the House of Representatives overnight on Friday.

The bill — which will still need to pass in the Senate — is on track to be the second-largest US stimulus ever, after the \$2 trillion package that Donald Trump signed into law last March to help the coronavirus-battered economy. — **AFP**

One killed in oxygen explosion at Ukraine hospital

KYIV: One person was killed and another wounded in an oxygen explosion at a hospital in the western Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi, Ukraine's emergency service said on Saturday.

The explosion occurred on the second floor of the hospital at lunchtime on Saturday and 20 people were evacuated, the service said in a statement, which did not specify the cause of the incident.

This is the second incident this month in which patients have died in hospitals due to oxygen flaring.

Earlier in February, three intensive care patients and a ward doctor died in a fire in a hospital treating coronavirus cases in Zaporizhzhya in southeastern Ukraine.

Ukraine has registered more 1.3 million coronavirus cases with 25,893 deaths so far. Chernivtsi is currently among the regions with most new Covid-19 cases.

Coronavirus cases have picked up after a lull during a tight lockdown at the start of the year. The government has set up mobile hospitals in western Ukraine to cope with a sharp spike in cases.

Ukraine on Wednesday started its Covid-19 vaccination campaign, with 159 medical workers getting the initial dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine, the first batch of which came to Ukraine on Tuesday from India. — **Reuters**



Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos Private School

Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos PVT School is currently seeking teachers to fill the following vacancies for the academic year 2021/2022:

1. Female English Teacher (Primary).
2. Female Science Teacher (Primary).
3. Female Math Teacher (Primary) & (5-10).
4. Female Chemistry Teacher.
5. Female IT Teacher (knowledge in programming languages).

Requirements: candidates must have

- B.A. in the subject /B.Ed.
- Minimum 3 Years experience.
- Must be resident in Oman.
- Minimum score 6 in IELTS.

Please submit your CVs in via E-mail

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No hand-resumes will be received due to the precautionary measures.

Note:- CV from outside Oman will not be considered

Lebanon begins cleaning beaches after oil spill



A man shows a dead turtle on a beach in the aftermath of an oil spill that drenched much of the Mediterranean shoreline in Tyre nature reserve. (Right): Young volunteers clean a contaminated beach in the southern Lebanese city of Tyre. — **Reuters/AFP**



BEIRUT: Lebanon began cleaning its beaches on Saturday after an oil spill deposited tar over large stretches of the coast in the southern part of the country.

Tar from an offshore oil spill that polluted Israel's beaches has also stained the sandy coast of Lebanon's port city of Tyre.

Hassan Hamze, director of the Tyre nature reserve, said the cleaning operation will

take at least 15 days.

"We will begin to remove the tar spots starting from the reserve coast, and hundreds of volunteers will help in the cleaning operation," he said.

United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) spokesperson Andrea Tenenti said that UNIFIL is studying ways to possibly help Lebanon counter the threat of an oil spill.

"UNIFIL has been

contacted by local authorities to see what help can be provided within our available capabilities and equipment.

We are studying these requests to see how we can help," Tenenti said.

In recent days, an oil spill had caused severe damage to Israel's beaches.

Last Sunday, Israel shut down all its beaches after stormy weather washed huge quantities of tar onto

the country's Mediterranean coastline.

Many animals, among them sea turtles, were found dead on the 160-kilometre stretch of coastline affected by the spill.

Volunteers in Israel have also launched clean-up operations to rid the beaches of chunks of tar from an estimated hundreds of tonnes of leaked fuel, amid warnings of toxic fumes. — **dpa**



MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

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

against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	E- Tender No.	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the Tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/21/010	(2021/HQ-8)	RFP for Annual Maintenance Contract (AMC) of Oracle E-Business HRMS and Financial System (E-Tender)	25 Rial	27/03/2021	08/04/2021	Specialized

Tender Conditions:-

1. Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
2. Original Tender Bond envelope should be sealed with red wax and entitled to His Excellency/ Head of Internal Tender Committee and to be placed in the Tender Box at Muscat Municipality HQ, Third Floor, before 10:00 am as per the date mentioned in the above table. All envelopes are to be clearly marked with the name of the Tender being presented and no other marks.
3. For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
4. For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@ita.gov.om) or call (+96824166670).

Libyan Parliament to seek trust vote on March 8

TRIPOLI: The Libyan parliament will discuss holding a vote of confidence on a new unified government for the divided country on March 8, its powerful speaker Aguila Saleh said.

Oil-rich Libya has been mired in chaos since ruler Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and killed in a popular uprising backed by a Nato air campaign a decade ago.

Its UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) is based in Tripoli, while eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar supports a parallel administration based in the east.

“Parliament will convene to discuss a vote of confidence on the government on Monday, March 8, at 11 am in Sirte if the 5+5 Joint Military Commission guarantees the security of the meeting”, Saleh said in a statement late on Friday, referring to a city halfway between east and west.

The military commission is a

forum bringing together five representatives from each side.

“If that proves impossible, the session will be held in the temporary seat of parliament in Tobruk at the same date and time”, he said, adding that the military committee would need to advise the parliament in advance.

It was unclear whether the vote itself would take place on March 8 or whether the meeting would be limited to talks.

Interim prime minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah on Thursday said he faced a Friday deadline to form his government according to a UN road map.

He said he had submitted to Saleh a “vision” for a cabinet line-up that would help steer Libya to elections in December, and that the names of proposed ministers would be disclosed in parliament during the confidence vote. Parliament has 21 days to vote on the line-up, according to the road



Libya's new Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh speaks during a news conference in Tripoli. — Reuters

map.

Dbeibah was selected early this month in a UN-sponsored inter-Libyan dialogue, the latest internationally backed bid to salvage the country from a decade of conflict and fragmented political fiefdoms.

The premier will then face the giant task of unifying Libya's proliferating institutions and leading the transition up to December 24 polls

ed so that (Libya) can emerge from the tunnel”, Saleh said. If approved, a new cabinet would replace the Tripoli-based GNA, headed by Fayez al Sarraj, and the parallel administration in the east.

The premier will then face the giant task of unifying Libya's proliferating institutions and leading the transition up to December 24 polls.

Meanwhile, the head of Libya's parliament called on the country's interim prime minister to form a government that represents all factions in the crisis-hit nation to

overcome “differences”.

Interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah on Thursday said he had submitted a “vision” for a cabinet line-up that would help steer Libya to elections in December.

Powerful parliament speaker Aguila Saleh said Dbeibah should choose “competent people with integrity, from across the country, in order to achieve (national) consensus” for his government.

“There are differences”, Saleh told reporters in Rabat, after talks with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita. “Everyone should be represented so that (Libya) can emerge from the tunnel”, Saleh added.

Dbeibah on Thursday said he faced a Friday deadline to form his government. He also told reporters the names of proposed ministers will be disclosed in parliament during a vote of confidence for his line-up. — AFP

UN seeks billions to avoid vast ‘man-made’ famine in Yemen

SANAA/NEW YORK: Ahmadiya Juaidi's eyes are wide as she drinks a nutrition shake from a large orange mug, her thin fingers grasping the handle. Her hair is pulled back and around her neck hangs a silver necklace with a heart and the letter A.

Three weeks ago the 13-year-old weighed just nine kilograms when she was admitted to Al Sabeen Hospital in Yemen's capital Sanaa with malnutrition that sickened her for at least the past four years. Now she weighs 15 kilograms.

“I am afraid when we go back to the countryside her condition will deteriorate again due to lack of nutritional food. We have no income”, her older brother, Muhammad Abdo Taher Shami, said.

They are among some 16 million Yemenis — more than half the population of the Arabian Peninsula country — that the United Nations says are going hungry. Of those, five million are on the brink of famine, UN aid chief Mark Lowcock warns.

On Monday the United Nations hopes to raise some \$3.85 billion at a virtual pledging event to avert what Lowcock says would be a large-scale “man-made” famine, the worst the world will have seen for decades.



A child cries at malnutrition treatment ward of Al Sabeen Hospital in Sanaa. — Reuters

More than six years of war in Yemen have sent the impoverished country spiralling into what the United Nations describes as the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

Some 80 per cent of Yemenis need help, with 400,000 children under the age of five severely malnourished, according to UN data. For much of its food, the country relies on imports that

have been badly disrupted over the years by all warring parties.

“Before the war Yemen was a poor country with a malnutrition problem, but it was one which had a functioning economy, a government that provided services to quite a lot of its people, a national infrastructure and an export base”, Lowcock told reporters. “The war has largely destroyed all of that.” — Reuters

Tunisia's main party holds protest

TUNIS: Tunisia's biggest political party rallied tens of thousands of supporters in the capital on Saturday in a show of strength that could fuel a dispute between the president and prime minister that has paralysed the government.

It is the biggest demonstration in Tunisia for years, and party faithful bussed in from across the country chanted “the people want to protect institutions” and “the people want national unity” as they marched in the centre of Tunis.

The moderate party Ennahda, led by Parliament Speaker Rached Ghannouchi, has backed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi in his standoff with President Kais Saied over a cabinet reshuffle.

The dispute has brought to a head months of wrangling between the three men in Tunisia's latest political crisis since a 2019 election delivered a fragmented parliament while propelling Saied, an independent, to the presidency.

It has played out against a grim backdrop of economic anxiety, angry protests, widespread disillusionment with democracy and competing reform demands from foreign lenders and the powerful labour union as sovereign debt repayments loom.

Saied nominated Mechichi as prime minister last summer when the government collapsed after only five months in office, but the two men soon fell out.



A supporter of Tunisia's biggest political party chants slogans during a rally in opposition to President Kais Saied in Tunis. — Reuters

Mechichi then turned for support to the two biggest parties in parliament — Ennahda and jailed media mogul Nabil Karoui's Heart of Tunisia.

Last month, Mechichi changed 11 ministers in a reshuffle seen as replacing allies of Saied with those of Ennahda and Heart of Tunisia.

The president has refused to swear four of them in, however, saying they had conflicts of interest.

Meanwhile, during protests last month over inequality and police abuses, demonstrators focused most of their anger against Mechichi and Ennahda.

Ennahda billed Saturday's march as “in support of

democracy”, but it was widely seen as an effort to mobilise popular backing against Saied — raising the spectre of competing protest movements that could lead to polarisation or violence.

Tunisia's 2021 budget forecasts borrowing needs of 19.5 billion Tunisian dinars (\$7.2 billion), including about \$5 billion in foreign loans. It puts debt repayments due this year at 16 billion dinars.

The country's credit rating has fallen since the coronavirus pandemic began and Tunisian credit default swaps — insurance against sovereign debt defaults — have soared in recent weeks, showing market concerns about its ability to raise funds. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

AMMAN

Jordan says vaccination drive to accelerate

Jordan's national inoculation programme will speed up significantly in coming weeks as more vaccines arrive, the health minister said. The country is battling a steep spike in cases from the variant of the coronavirus first identified in Britain. In all, Jordan has reported 380,268 cases and 4,627 deaths.

“Inoculation will speed up in the next few weeks and coming few months”, Nathir Obeidat told state-funded public broadcaster al Mamlaka. Jordan



has administered 150,000 doses since it began its vaccination programme over a month ago.

Only 400,000 people has so far signed up for the free shots since the government-run registration began in December. — Reuters

TUNIS

IMF urges Tunisia to cut wage bill, energy subsidies

The International Monetary Fund urged Tunisia to cut its wage bill and limit energy subsidies to reduce a fiscal deficit, putting more pressure on the fragile government amid a severe financial and political crisis.

With the coronavirus pandemic, political infighting and protests since last month over social inequality, it is a time of unprecedented economic hardship in the North Africa country that ran a fiscal deficit of 11.5 per cent of GDP in 2020.



The IMF said in statement that monetary policy should focus on inflation by steering short-term interest rates, while preserving exchange rate flexibility. — Reuters

THE HAGUE

UN court to try Hizbul member for attacks

A fugitive Hizbullah suspect will go on trial in June accused of three attacks on Lebanese politicians in the mid-2000s, a UN-backed tribunal announced.

Salim Ayyash, 57, will be tried in absentia by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which in December sentenced him to life in prison for the 2005 murder of Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri. Hariri and 21 others died in a massive suicide bomb explosion in Beirut in early 2005 and Ayyash was one of four suspects tried by



the Netherlands-based court.

Ayyash's sentence is currently under appeal, while the three other suspects were acquitted as the court ruled there was not enough evidence against them. — AFP

In brief

HANOI



VIETNAM SAYS PANEL CLEARS SPUTNIK V, MODERNA VACCINES

Vietnam plans to acquire 150 million doses for its Covid-19 vaccination programme, as the health ministry said a medical panel had recommended it approve Russia's Sputnik V vaccine and the Moderna vaccine for use in the Southeast Asian country.

The 150 million doses will include both those directly purchased and doses obtained via the Covax vaccine-sharing scheme, according to a ruling posted on the government's website. On Wednesday, Vietnam received its first batch of 117,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine ahead of the planned rollout of its inoculation programme from next month. — Reuters

MANILA



PARTIAL CORONAVIRUS CURBS IN MANILA UNTIL END-MARCH

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has extended partial coronavirus curbs in the capital until the end of March, as the country awaits the arrival of vaccines, the presidential spokesman said.

With southeast Asia's second-highest tally of infections and deaths, the Philippines has suffered lengthy, strict lockdowns in Manila and provinces, hitting an economy that was among Asia's fastest growing before the pandemic.

Curbs will stay for another month in Manila, which accounts for 40 per cent of national economic output, the spokesman, Harry Roque, said in a statement. — Reuters

WELLINGTON



AUCKLAND BACK TO LOCKDOWN AFTER COVID-19 CASE

New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Saturday that the country's biggest city, Auckland, will be put into a seven-day lockdown from Sunday after a coronavirus community case of unknown origin was recorded.

The rest of New Zealand will be put into Level 2 restrictions that limit public gatherings, among others, she told a news conference on Saturday.

In mid-February, Auckland's nearly 2 million residents were plunged into a snap three-day lockdown after a family of three were diagnosed with the more transmissible UK variant of Covid-19. — Reuters

ANNUAL TRADITIONAL FAIR



An aerial view shows devotees at the Sangam area, the confluence of rivers Ganges, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati, on the auspicious day of 'Maghi Purnima' during the annual traditional fair Magh Mela Festival in Allahabad. — AFP

South Korea starts ambitious Covid-19 campaign

SEOUL: South Korea said 18,489 people received their first doses of AstraZeneca PLC's vaccine by midnight on Friday as it launched an ambitious Covid-19 inoculation campaign, and will begin using Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines on Saturday.

The first to receive the shots are healthcare workers, staffers at assisted care facilities and other high-risk people, with a goal of vaccinating 32 million to 36 million people — some 60 per cent to 70 per cent of the population — by September.

The government hopes to reach herd immunity, defined as at least a 70 per cent vaccine take-up, by November, as health authorities remain on alert for signs of sporadic infections.



A medical worker receives the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 coronavirus vaccine at a vaccination centre in Seoul. — AFP

The first AstraZeneca vaccines are to be administered to 289,000 people, while about 55,000 healthcare workers in

coronavirus treatment facilities will receive first batch of the vaccine developed by Pfizer Inc and BioNTech SE supplied

through the COVAX global vaccine-sharing programme.

Aside from AstraZeneca, Pfizer and COVAX, South Korea has also reached agreements with Moderna Inc, Novavax Inc and Johnson & Johnson for vaccines.

South Korea reported 415 infections of the new coronavirus for Friday.

The country has recorded 89,321 infections and 1,595 Covid-19 deaths, the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said.

The authorities are extending social distancing rules by two weeks nationwide, including a ban on private gatherings of more than four, to blunt the coronavirus surge.

— Reuters

Australia moves closer to pre-pandemic life

MELBOURNE: Life across Australia inched towards pre-pandemic normal on Saturday, with New South Wales and South Australia states allowing some dancing and Victoria permitting larger crowds at sporting events.

The three states, home to nearly two-thirds of Australia's 25 million people, recorded no community transmissions on Saturday of the new coronavirus that causes Covid-19.

For New South Wales, the most populous state, it was 41st straight day without a local case.

The state, in addition to allowing up to 30 people to dance at weddings, eased further restrictions on the number of visitors at home. South Australia state allowed some club dancing from Friday.

People in Victoria, which this month imposed a five-day strict lockdown after a small outbreak of the coronavirus, woke up on Saturday to rules allowing stadiums to seat 50 per cent of capacity for sporting events.

Australia has fared better than most advanced economies thanks to swift border closures, high community compliance with public health measures and aggressive testing and tracing. It has reported fewer than 29,000 coronavirus infections and 909 Covid-19 deaths.

On Monday, the country began vaccinations programme, with about 60,000 Pfizer/BioNTech doses administered to priority populations, such as aged-care and disability staff, and border protection and quarantine workers. — Reuters

Anger brews over prison death of Bangladesh writer

DHAKA: Hundreds of people in Bangladesh took part on Saturday in a second day of demonstrations sparked by the death of a writer at a high security prison in a case that has drawn international concern.

Protesters marched at the University of Dhaka chanting slogans condemning the government's treatment of Mushtaq Ahmed as well as other dissident writers, journalists and activists.

Another protest was staged at the National Press Club.

Demonstrators demanded the scrapping of Bangladesh's headline Digital Security Act (DSA) under which Ahmed was imprisoned. The law has been used to crack down on dissent since it was enacted in 2018.

Security forces clashed with students in Dhaka on Friday night. Police said six people were



Activists march during a demonstration in Dhaka following the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed in jail months after his arrest under Internet laws which critics say are used to muzzle dissent. — AFP

arrested while activists said at least 30 were injured.

Ahmed collapsed and died at Kashimpur High Security Prison late on Thursday. He was first detained in May after criticising on Facebook the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Myanmar police launch most extensive crackdown

YANGON: Police in Myanmar launched their most sweeping crackdown in three weeks of protests against military rule on Saturday in towns and cities across the country, with media reports of a woman shot dead and dozens of people detained.

The violence came after Myanmar's UN envoy urged the United Nations to use "any means necessary" to stop the coup.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the army seized power and detained elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and much of her party leadership, alleging fraud in a November election her party won in a landslide.

Uncertainty has grown over Suu Kyi's whereabouts, as the independent Myanmar Now website on Friday quoted officials of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party as saying she had been moved this week from house arrest to an undisclosed location.

The coup has brought hundreds of thousands of protesters onto the streets and drawn condemnation from Western countries, with some imposing limited sanctions.

Police were out in force in cities and towns from early on Saturday in their most determined bid to stamp out the protests.

In the main city of Yangon, police took up positions at usual protest sites and detained people as they congregated, witnesses said. Several journalists were detained.

— Reuters

The 53-year-old, a crocodile farmer and a writer known for his satirical style, was charged with spreading rumours and conducting "anti-state activities". Protesters have called his death a "custodial murder" after he was denied bail six times in 10 months. — AFP

US House approves Biden’s \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 aid

WASHINGTON: The US House passed an enormous, \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package early on Saturday, hailed by Democrats as a critical step in funneling new funding towards vaccinations, overburdened local governments, and millions of families devastated by the pandemic.

Four days after the Covid-19 death toll surpassed 500,000 in the United States, the sprawling measure backed by President Joe Biden and seen as a moral imperative by many now heads to the Senate for consideration next week.

“After 12 months of death and despair, the American recovery begins tonight,” congressman Brendan Boyle told the House chamber shortly before lawmakers approved the package on an rare post-midnight vote of 219 to 212.

No Republicans voted for the bill.

The sharply partisan result comes weeks after Biden’s January 20 inauguration, when he called for unity in the face of a once-in-a-century health crisis.

The package cleared the House despite a major setback for Democrats, when a key Senate official ruled on Thursday that the final version of the bill cannot include a minimum wage hike.

Biden had campaigned extensively on raising the national minimum wage to \$15 an hour, from a rate of \$7.25 that has stood since 2009.

He aimed to include it in the rescue plan, which directly



US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi during a news conference on the day the House of Representatives is expected to vote on legislation to provide \$1.9 trillion in new coronavirus relief at the US Capitol in Washington. — Reuters

provides \$1,400 checks to most Americans and allots billions of dollars to boost vaccine delivery, help schools re-open and fund state and local governments.

It extends unemployment benefits, set to expire mid-March, by about six months, as well as a moratorium on evictions for millions of people struggling to pay rent.

The bill is on track to be the second largest US stimulus ever, after the \$2-trillion package Donald Trump signed last March to fight the pandemic’s devastating spread.

Even as the Senate parliamentarian ruled against including the minimum wage

The bill is on track to be the second largest US stimulus ever, after the \$2-trillion package Donald Trump signed last March to fight the pandemic

language in the bill as written under budget reconciliation rules, Democrats kept the provision, highlighting their “fight for 15” as a top party priority.

“We will not rest until we pass the \$15 minimum wage,” Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said.

Even without the wage hike, she said the bill was critical and it would be “catastrophic” if it does not become law.

“The American people need to know that their government is there for them,” she told the chamber. “As President Biden has said, help is on the way.” Republicans fumed over the bill’s historically high cost — and the optics of holding such a consequential vote in pre-dawn hours.

“Democrats are so embarrassed by all the non-Covid waste in this bill that they are jamming it through in the dead of night,” House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said. — AFP



Photograph taken in central Moscow shows flowers and tributes at the site where late opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was fatally shot on a bridge near The Kremlin in 2015. — AFP

Russians mark anniversary of Nemtsov assassination

MOSCOW: Several thousand Russians along with Western diplomats gathered in Moscow on Saturday to mark the sixth anniversary of the assassination of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov.

Nemtsov was one of President Vladimir Putin’s loudest critics until he was shot and killed on a Moscow bridge near the Kremlin on February 27, 2015.

The sixth anniversary of his death comes after Putin’s current most prominent critic Alexei Navalny was sent to a penal colony this week to serve a nearly three-year term he denounces as politically motivated.

Beginning on Saturday morning, a steady stream of Russians and Western diplomats took turns laying flowers at a makeshift memorial at the spot where Nemtsov was felled with four bullets.

“We come together in this place on this day every year to show the authorities that we have not forgotten and will not forget,” former prime minister and op-

position politician Mikhail Kasyanov told journalists at the rally.

“I am sure that what Boris fought for — freedom for Russians, their well-being and a dignified life — will soon come about,” he added.

Usually marked by a march through central Moscow, the opposition this year rallied instead at the makeshift memorial at the spot of his death that is regularly dismantled by the authorities, as restrictions on mass gatherings are still in place due to the pandemic. The White Counter monitor, which tallies attendance at rallies, said 3,700 people had gathered by 3 pm.

Also laying flowers on Saturday were the US, UK and EU ambassadors to Russia, among other Western representatives.

US Embassy spokeswoman Rebecca Ross wrote on Twitter that US Ambassador John Sullivan had marked the “brutal murder” of Nemtsov, whom she described as having been “dedicated to pursuing a better future for his country”. — AFP

Kidnappers free 42 abducted Nigerian school victims

LAGOS: Kidnappers have freed 42 people, including 27 children, snatched from a school in central Nigeria 10 days ago, officials said on Saturday, a day after gunmen abducted more than 300 school-girls in the northwest.

“The abducted students, staff and relatives of Government Science College Kagara have regained their freedom and have been received by the Niger state government,” Niger state governor Abubakar Sani Bello said on Twitter.

In mid-February, gunmen in military uniforms raided the college, killing one student and taking 42 others. They included 27 schoolboys, three teachers and

other relatives of school staff, officials said.

Northwest and central Nigeria have seen a surge in attacks by heavily armed criminal gangs raiding villages, killing and abducting residents after looting and torching homes.

On Friday, in the Jangebe, a village in Zamfara state, a gang attacked the Government Girls Science Secondary School.

It was the country’s third school attack in less than three months — a series that has revived traumatic memories of the “Chibok girls” kidnapped by militants nearly seven years ago. Zamfara State Police Command, working with the mili-



Discarded school furniture is seen within the premises of Government Science College in Niger state, Nigeria. — Reuters

tary, “commenced a joint search and rescue operations with a view to rescuing the 317 students”, police spokesman Mohammed Shehu said.

Local parents, angry at the abductions attacked an official convoy travelling to the site of the raid, seriously injuring a journalist.

Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari condemned the latest kidnapping as “inhuman and totally unacceptable”.

“This administration will not succumb to blackmail by bandits who target innocent school students in the expectations of huge ransom payments,” he said in a statement on Friday. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

Farewell to pandemic hero Capt Tom

Britain bid farewell on Saturday to Captain Tom Moore with a televised funeral for the 100-year-old war veteran who became a global hero for his extraordinary fundraising efforts during the pandemic. Soldiers formed a guard of honour at the small ceremony held by Moore’s family at a crematorium in Bedford in central England.

Six soldiers from the Yorkshire Regiment, the successor to the one Moore served in during World War II, carried his coffin,



draped with the Union Jack and his military cap and sword as 14 soldiers gave a firing salute. A World War II-era plane from a nearby RAF base flew over the crematorium and later a bugler sounded the Last Post, followed by a minute’s silence. — AFP

ROME

Italy tightens Covid-19 curbs in several regions

Italy’s government ramped up restrictions in five of the country’s 20 regions in an effort to head off a rise in Covid-19 cases as scientists warned of a growing prevalence of highly contagious new variants. Italy has established a four-tier colour-coded system (white, yellow, orange and red) which allows for measures to be calibrated according to infection levels, with assessments revised every week.

For the first time since the end of January, two regions — Basilica-



cata and Molise — were shunted into the strictest red zone. This means bars and restaurants must be shuttered, movement severely restricted and all but essential shops closed. — Reuters

MOSCOW

Putin, Biden should aim for more arms curbs

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev urged Russian President Vladimir Putin and new US President Joe Biden to push for deeper restrictions on nuclear weapons. Tensions soared between the two nations under previous US leader Donald Trump, fuelled by allegations of sweeping cyber attacks and a litany of other disagreements.

But soon after Biden took office, the two powers extended a pact that limits each side to 1,550 nuclear warheads, which Putin



hailed as a positive development. Gorbachev told the Interfax news agency that the two leaders — who spoke by phone after Biden’s inauguration last month — should meet and discuss further arms curbs. — AFP

Online learning tried hard, but it’s not ‘the answer’

Having interacted with significant numbers of teachers and learners across the entire educational sector, all I am seeing is frustration and disappointment. Teachers have been forced to go, to paraphrase Star Trek, “where few have gone before,” in engaging with online learning and specially its technological requirements. Learners though, are just “getting what we can out of it.” Worse, the sector is, in real terms, ‘asleep at the wheel,’ in failing to address the many emergent teacher and learner concerns.

Look at the sector. Whether a pupil, student, teacher, lecturer, educational administrator, institution owner, or a ministry official, the reality is that the current learner experience right now, is in freefall. The sector cannot hide behind developing blended learning and online educational opportunities within mainstream education, as neither was ever intended to be anything other than complementary to classroom teaching.

Something had to be done, quickly, but having made that decision, further options should have still been explored. Simple solutions such as socially distanced class options, morning, and afternoon shifts, paying teachers more to split shift, would have been a logistical challenge, but you don’t not do something because it’s difficult, do you? These would have left the learners with a less scarred educational experience, but no, all your eggs went into one basket, you dropped it, and now what a mess!



Ray Petersen
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ERADICATING
BARRIERS
TO GIRLS’
EDUCATION
HOLD THE KEY
TO ACHIEVING
UN SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS

The entire concept of educational psychology in a 2020 pedagogical world was never predicated upon Zoom, Teams, Meet, or any other platform being a single method of learning delivery, but was of continuously enhancing the classroom learning experience, and providing more effective avenues of academic support. We cannot think that online learning is ‘the answer.’ It is nothing more than an educational sticking plaster, a McGyver duct tape solution to a short-term need, and Covid-19 is not short term!

Asking “How do we learn something we do not know anything about?” Educators have sought the answer for centuries, and the reality is that the psychology of learning is incredibly complex. Teaching has resolved that we must understand the theory, to understand the process of learning, the acquisition, retention, and recollection of knowledge, can happen. These theories never evolved in the progressive style of manned flight, or the internal combustion engine, but have emerged from research rather like a jigsaw puzzle of teaching and learning with each bringing greater clarity.

Teachers learn to teach, by learning how learners learn, by forming knowledge bases that include Benjamin Bloom’s ‘Taxonomy,’ in which he creates a cognitive roadmap for learning, and ‘domains.’ Through the behavioural stimulus of Ivan Pavlov’s dogs and their ‘conditioned reflexes,’ the cognitivism of Wolfgang Kohler’s ‘Gestalt’ psychology, and Jean Piaget’s ‘schema.’ David Kolb’s recent ‘Experiential Learning Cycle,’

encourages us to understand knowledge through experiences, while B Frederic Skinner theorised on ‘conditioned learning,’ and ‘positive reinforcement’ as elementary.

The incredible John Dewey’s ‘whole child,’ approaches to the learner and their environment is sustained through our understanding of Abraham Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs,’ while Erik Erikson’s ‘Eight Stages of Development,’ are deeply unsettling, but deeply rationalised in understanding the psychosocial experience. The effects of social education through Lev Vygotsky’s ‘Zones of Proximal Development,’ and ‘scaffolded’ learning are immense, while Robert Gagne’s framework for ‘differentiation,’ ensures all learners learn. Further, Jerome Bruner’s ‘spiral curriculum’ idea identified structural learning, and Howard Gardner’s ‘Multiple Intelligences’ affect deeply the ways we teach and learn.

Such are the elements of understanding this ‘holy grail,’ this pedagogical concoction, that where you ‘find’ them is in your recognition and response abilities, the ‘lightbulb moments,’ in a classroom. The ability to implement the theories upon which teaching has its foundations is beyond compromised. I don’t doubt the sector’s intent and will to find a Covid responsive solution, however, this society, in failing to respond to Covid-19 measures, is perpetuating it, and the blinkers must come off. To say further change is ‘difficult,’ is an understatement, and I empathise with the sector, but online classes flunk the learner test!

WRITE FOR US

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

A DIVISIVE SUBJECT

Urban states come out ahead in Covid relief bill

ANDY SULLIVAN AND JASON LANGE

The \$1.9-trillion Covid-19 relief package now making its way through the US Congress would provide \$350 billion to help pandemic-hit state and local governments balance their budgets, more than twice the amount lawmakers approved last year.

But not every state comes out ahead: urban, Democratic-leaning states like Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts that took drastic steps to stop the coronavirus’ spread would get about three times as much money per person as they did in the package passed at the beginning of the health crisis in March.

Rural, Republican-led states including Wyoming, North Dakota and South Dakota that did less would see less cash.

That’s because Congress is giving greater weight to poverty and unemployment this time as it considers how to distribute money to keep police, firefighters and other public employees on the job during a pandemic that has killed more than 500,000 Americans and thrown millions out of work.

“The real reason for this bill is to send billions to bail out blue-state governors and reward their harmful lockdown policies”

JASON SMITH
Representative

Advocates say the new formula ensures the money goes where it is needed, as Covid-19’s toll has been uneven across the country. Unemployment in December topped 9 per cent in tourism-dependent Nevada and Hawaii, triple the 3 per cent in Nebraska and

South Dakota.

“This is a more targeted approach,” said Michael Leachman, a budget expert at the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, who supports additional state and local aid.

Republicans say the bill short-changes states that have imposed fewer coronavirus-related restrictions. “The real reason for this bill is to send billions to bail out blue-state governors and reward their harmful lockdown policies,” Representative Jason Smith of Missouri said at a House Budget Committee hearing on Monday.

It also reflects the fact that Democrats who control both chambers of Congress drafted the package for their fellow Democrat President Joe Biden without Republican input.

Under the new bill, named the American Rescue Plan, 61 per cent of the aid would end up in states that voted for Biden in November, up from 56 per cent in the bipartisan CARES Act passed last March.

Reuters examined House Oversight Committee projections on how much direct fiscal aid each state would receive in the bill, which is set for a vote in the House of Representatives this week before moving to the Senate. — Reuters

NONE IS SAFE

By targeting schools, Nigerian kidnappers put country at risk

CAMILLE MALPLAT & LOUISE DEWAST

Militants in northeastern Nigeria have long outraged the world with mass abductions of schoolchildren but now armed gangs in search of income are using the same tactic in other parts of the country, sparking warnings that no school is safe.

More than 300 schoolgirls were snatched from dormitories by gunmen in the middle of the night in northwestern Zamfara state on Friday, in the third known mass kidnapping of students since December.

Until lately, such attacks were the hallmark of militants who have waged a decade-long insurgency in the northeast, and where the kidnap of 276 girls in Chibok in 2014 sparked global outrage.

But mass abductions of civilians — including schoolchildren — for ransom are now on the rise in northwest and central Nigeria.

“The easiest way to get money from the government is now to kidnap schoolchildren,” warned Idayat Hassan, director of the Abuja-based Centre for Democracy and Development think tank, after the



In this file photo Musa Maina holds a picture of her kidnapped daughter, Hauwa, in Chibok. — AFP

MORE THAN 300
SCHOOLGIRLS WERE
SNATCHED FROM
DORMITORIES
BY GUNMEN IN
THE MIDDLE OF
THE NIGHT IN
NORTHWESTERN
ZAMFARA STATE

abduction of 27 students last week in Kagara in the central Niger state.

“When kidnappers see they are not being sanctioned, that they are given amnesty in a grand ceremony, it becomes a good opportunity for them,” said Yan St-Pierre, consultant with the Berlin-based Modern Security Consulting Group. He referred to the case of a gang leader

behind the kidnapping of more than 300 schoolboys in northwestern Katsina state in December. He gave himself up, with officials saying they had struck an amnesty deal and denying a ransom was paid.

But “whatever the government says”, St-Pierre argued, “ransoms are paid, whether it is by families of victims or the authorities”. — Reuters

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sport



AHLI SIDAB vs SEEB (6 PM), BAUSHER vs SOHAR (8 PM)

BAUSHER AND SOHAR WILL PLAY THE SECOND SEMI

AHLI SIDAB SET UP SEMIFINAL CLASH WITH SEEB

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, FEB 27

Last edition’s runner-up Ahli Sidab wreaked havoc on a clueless Majees outfit with a 4-1 victory to set up a semifinal clash with Seeb while Bausher and Sohar will lock horns in the second semi of the 50th HM Cup hockey championship, later today.

Ahli Sidab, who lost in the final of the 49th edition to Al Nasr, will be looking to go two steps further and annex the much sought after crown in Oman hockey.

As a result of their crushing win over Majees, Ahli Sidab topped the points table handsomely in Group A with nine points while Sohar progressed as the second team with six points.

In Group B, Bausher managed to emerge toppers despite their 3-2 defeat to Dhofar, who registered a win that was of no consequence in the end.

Seeb held on and scraped



HM CUP points table

- Group A
Ahli Sidab 9
Sohar 6
Majees 3
Nizwa 0
- Group B
Bausher 6
Seeb 4
Al Nasr 4
Dhofar 3

through to the semifinals after a 2-2 draw with holders Al Nasr as a result of a superior goal difference in comparison to the defending champions.

The 11-times champions’ 6-3 victory over Dhofar on Wednesday night proved to be the key difference in their progress to the last four. The high scoring thriller coupled with the draw against Al Nasr ensured Seeb

booked a clash with Ahli Sidab.

Bausher’s stunning 1-0 victory against Al Nasr on the same day and their 4-2 triumph against Seeb on Tuesday helped them garner six points and advance to the semis.

Sohar’s 10-0 drubbing of Nizwa early on Thursday had helped them gain a strong foothold in the semis, which was confirmed later after Majees’ defeat to Ahli Sidab.

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS TO GRACE SEMIS

Oman Hockey Association (OHA) Chairman Talib al Wahaibi stated that couple of highly distinguished guests would grace the semifinals on Sunday.

“Shaikh Said bin Saleh al Hinai, first captain of Al Ahli club and the man who received the first Sultan’s Cup (HM Cup) in 1971, will be the chief guest for the second semifinal. We were also planning to get Ahmed al Riyami who was the captain of Oman club in 1971 to be our chief guest for the first semifinal. However, due to health reasons, he will not be able to make it, and since the Asian Hockey Federation (AHF) Chairman Dato Tayyib Ikram is in Oman, we decided to invite him as chief guest for the first semifinal.”

Results (Friday): Dhofar: 3 bt Bausher: 2; Seeb: 2 drew with Al Nasr: 2

(Thursday): Ahli Sidab: 4 bt Majees: 1



Bumrah leaves Test squad for ‘personal reasons’

India said on Saturday that star fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah has left the squad for the England Test series for “personal reasons”. The surprise move came only two days after India, with Bumrah in the side, thrashed England in the third Test inside two days to take a 2-1 series lead. The final match starts on Thursday.



Popyrin crushes Cilic’s Singapore title hopes

Australia’s Alexei Popyrin took out third seed Marin Cilic in an absorbing contest at the Singapore Tennis Open on Saturday, prevailing 7-6 (5),7-6 (2) over the Croat to make it to his first ATP Tour final. Popyrin let out a huge roar after sealing his victory in front of 250 fans.

Seeb-Dhofar game ends in stalemate

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 27

The return match between the defending champions Dhofar and the league leaders Seeb will decide the first arrival to the final fixture of the 2020-21 His Majesty’s Cup Football Championship as the first-leg match ended in a goalless draw on Friday at Seeb Stadium.

Al Ittihad put one foot in the final match of coveted cup as they recorded a 2-1 convincing victory over Al Suwaiq at Al Saada Sports Complex late on Friday.

Back to the champions clash, the referee Omar al Yaqoobi showed six yellow cards during the match due to the toughness between both parties.

In the dying minutes of the first half, the match saw some exciting action and hard tussle including the cancellation of Abdulaziz al Maqbali’s goal by the first assistant referee as he was standing in the offside position.

Dhofar’s Omar al Malki spoiled a golden chance as he missed the panty shootout in the additional time of the first half. Earlier in the first half, Seeb’s Salah al Yahyai was very close to scoring as he hit a strong ball that went above the net

Al Ittihad put one foot in the final match of coveted cup as they recorded a 2-1 convincing victory over Al Suwaiq at Al Saada Sports Complex late on Friday

in the 15th minute.

Two minutes later, the striker Abdulaziz al Maqbali missed another scoring attempt as he shot the ball towards Faye al Rushaidi and the ball went beside the net.

In the second half, Rasheed Jaber’s men began with exploring the opening goal as Khalid al Jabri and Abdullah Fawazi tried but both attempts failed to convert into a goal in the first ten minutes.

Despite the replacement made by coaches Bruno Miguel and Rasheed Jaber, the result remained the same until the end of the match. The decision will be made in the return match at Al Saada Sports Complex on Tuesday. Seeb may have a better chance if they score a goal and the match ended in a draw.

The head coach of Seeb, Bruno Miguel, affirmed that the match was



very tough between both teams. “The win was the target for both teams and both of them missed the chances. Still we have one more game and we are confident to end it with positive result,” he added in the post-match press conference.

On the other hand, coach Rasheed Jaber said that team made many scoring attempts but unfortunately not converted to goals. “Missing the penalty in the first half impacted in the team. In the second half, we had showed different style but acceleration and absence of the control were behind non scoring goals,” he ended.

Al Ittihad made the right move towards their presence at the final encounter after beating Al Suwaiq 2-1 at Al Saada Sports Complex. Junior gave hosts Al Ittihad the lead in the ninth minute.

Essam al Subhi equalised for Al Suwaiq as he netted the goal ten minutes later.

Al Suwaiq’s defender Yusef al Saadi scored an own goal in a lapse of concentration in the 63rd minute which delivered the triumph for the hosts. Despite the loss, Iraqi coach Hakeem Shaker’s team have the chance in the return match which will take place on Tuesday at Al Rustaq Sports Complex.

Mehran bowls Al Turki to victory, Asif helps Renaissance to easy win

MUSCAT: Oman all-rounder Mehran Khan’s 5 for 23 was the highlight of Al Turki’s 4-wicket win against IT Works in a Premier Division 50-over League game at OC Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Friday.

IT Works was shot out for a disappointing 121 in 41 overs as Mehran picked up five wickets while Jay Odedara and Hemalkumar Tandel claimed two wickets each.

Al Turki stuttered before surpassing the modest total in 26 overs, scoring 122 for 6 thanks to Akshaykumar Patel’s superb 66-ball 58. Oman all-rounder Muhammed Nadeem picked up 4 for 48.

BRIEF SCORES (PREMIER DIVISION 50 OVERS): IT Works 121 all out in 41 overs (Rana Naeem 37 - 2x4, 2x6, Mehran Khan 5-23, Odedara Jay 2-29, Hemalkumar Tandel 2-31) lost to Al Turki NMC 122 for 6 in 26 overs (Akshaykumar Patel 58 - 8x1, 1x6, Twinkal Bhandari 28 - 4x4, Muhammed Nadeem 4-48) by 4 wickets.

ASIF HELPS RENAISSANCE TO VICTORY

Asif Khan’s excellent all-round show powered Renaissance to an emphatic 65-run victory against AER in a Premier Division T20 League match at OC Turf 1 on Friday. Renaissance posted a robust 176 for 7 on the board thanks to Asif’s 44-ball 51 and Rafiullah’s whirlwind 39 off 18. Muzahir Raza took 2 for 34.

AER failed to make a match of it, folding up for a paltry 111 in 19.2 overs as Faizal Jerome picked up 4 for 15 while Asif Khan bagged 2 for 21. Mahbub Alam topscored with 34.



Mehran Khan and Akshay Patel of Al Turki NMC

BRIEF SCORES (PREMIER DIVISION T20): Renaissance 176 for 7 in 20 overs (Asif Khan 51 - 5x4, 1x6, Rafi Ullah 39 - 3x4, 3x6, Muzahir Raza 2-34) beat AER 111 all out in 19.2 overs (Mahbub Alam 34 - 3x4, 1x6, Faizal Jerome 4-15, Asif Khan 2-21) by 65 runs.

PRASAD STARS IN BASTA WIN

Prasad Peruli struck a solid 83 to steer Basta CT to a tense 12-run win over OCT Muscat in a 50-over A Division game at OC Turf 2 on

Friday.

Apart from Prasad’s superb knock, fellow opener Chirag batted well too for his 41 in Basta’s 204 all out in 47 overs. Khalid al Balushi, Mohammed Aslam and Shaed Ali took two wickets each.

OCT Muscat gave it a good chase but fell short by 12 runs, getting dismissed for 192 in the 47th over due to brilliant bowling by Shaheer Najeeb and

Mohammed Abbas who claimed three wickets each while Nazish Mohammed bagged 2 for 34. Munthir al Balushi and Shaed Ali scored 36 and 25 respectively.

BRIEF SCORES (A DIVISION): Basta CT 204 all out in 47 overs (Prasad Peruli 83 - 5x4, 1x6, Chirag 41 - 7x4, Khalid al Balushi 2-25, Mohammed Aslam 2-28, Shaed Ali 2-38) defeated OCT Muscat 192 all out in 46.2 overs (Munthir al Balushi 36 - 5x4, Shaed Ali 25- 3x4, Shaheer Najeeb 3-22, Mohammed Abbas 3-24, Nazish Mohammed 2-34) by 12 runs.

‘Motera pitch pushed England to extremes’

AHMEDABAD, India: The Indian Test pitch on which England lost in two days pushed the players to “extremes” but the experience will toughen them for the final clash of the series, coach Chris Silverwood said on Friday.

Trailing 2-1 to India after the 10-wicket mauling in Ahmedabad, Silverwood said captain Joe Root and his players must now find a way to “come out fighting”.

The pitch has faced criticism from pundits though the England management have said nothing publicly.

“Whatever the pitch did or didn’t do, India ultimately played better than us on that surface,” said Silverwood.

“But it probably pushed us to the extremes... have experienced.”

The conditions have clearly rankled within the England camp.

“We will be talking about certain things behind the scenes. Joe and I have to sit down, have a conversation and see where we go with it,” the coach added.

After scoring just 193 runs in two innings, Silverwood acknowledged that England will have to work hard on their confidence before the fourth and final Test starts on March 4 at the same 110,000 capacity stadium.

The coach said the team must aim to “make amends and come out fighting for the next one and hopefully draw the series.”

Many of the young side, ranging from Zak Crawley to Olly Pope and Dom Sibley, on their first tour of South Asia,



have come through a traumatic experience in Ahmedabad.

- ‘Hungry’ - “As tough as it is at the moment, hopefully this will galvanise them,” said Silverwood.

“When they do get on flat surfaces, better surfaces, it will make them even more hungry and desperate to make sure they get runs.

“When we travel to other countries, such as Australia, hopefully if they get themselves in they’ll get greedy and go big. This experience will just harden them towards that.

“Equally, the next time they experience a situation like this, it won’t be as much of a shock to them. As tough as it is and as painful as it is at this moment, hopefully we can take some good lessons.”

Silverwood backed India captain Virat Kohli’s assertion that the batting on both sides had suffered.

He said the coaching staff were coming up for “counter-actions” for the next time they have to face spin duo Axar Patel, who took 11 wickets in the match, and Ravichandran Ashwin, whose seven wickets took him past 400 in Tests.

— AFP



Miami Heat's Jimmy Butler (22) drives towards the basket as Utah Jazz' Royce O'Neale (23) defends in the first quarter at American Airlines Arena. — USA Today Sports

Heat cool off red-hot Jazz, Celtics snap losing streak

LOS ANGELES: Jimmy Butler scored a season high 33 points as the Miami Heat beat the NBA-leading Utah Jazz 124-116 on Friday to extend their winning streak to five games.

Butler also added 10 rebounds and eight assists to lead giant-killers Miami, who have toppled the NBA's two most recent champions in the past week — the Toronto Raptors and the defending champion Los Angeles Lakers.

“I don't want to say that we're good yet,” Butler said. “We've got so much more that we can be better at. Myself, anybody, I don't want us to get complacent and think that we're cool.”

Goran Dragic scored 26 points, centre Bam Adebayo had 19 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists in the win. “We just tried to take away their easy shots,” Dragic said. “And we did.”

Donovan Mitchell shot 11-of-26 from the field and finished with 30 points for the Jazz, who dropped to 26-7 overall but still have the best record in the NBA.

The Jazz also got 17 points from Bojan Bogdanovic as well as 15 points and 12 rebounds from Rudy Gobert. They missed their last seven shots and were three-for-16 from the floor in the final eight minutes.

“We just made a lot of mistakes, had too many breakdowns on both ends,” Jazz coach Quin Snyder said.

Utah beat Miami 112-94 in

“
I don't want to say that we're good yet. We've got so much more that we can be better at. Myself, anybody, I don't want us to get complacent and think that we're cool

JIMMY BUTLER

Miami Heat

RESULTS:	
Detroit: 107	lt to Sacramento: 110
Miami: 124	bt Utah: 116
Boston: 118	bt Indiana: 112
Toronto: 122	bt Houston: 111
Golden State: 130	bt Charlotte: 121
LA Lakers: 102	bt Portland: 93
Chicago: 97	lt to Phoenix: 106
Memphis: 99	lt to LA Clippers: 119
Oklahoma City: 118	bt Atlanta: 109

Utah earlier this month in the only previous meeting between the teams this season.

- Celtics snap streak - In Tampa, Kyle Lowry recorded a triple double as the Toronto Raptors beat the Houston Rockets 122-111 despite missing six members

of their coaching staff, including head coach Nick Nurse.

The Raptors announced just prior to the game that the six would be unavailable for the NBA contest because of Covid-19 health and safety protocols. Toronto forward Pascal Siakam also sat out the game due to the same protocols.

The 53-year-old Nurse, who is the reigning league coach of the year, is in his third season as Toronto's head coach. Assistant coach Sergio Scariolo took charge of the Raptors bench against the Rockets. The Raptors led by eight points at the half, had a 23-point lead at one stage in the third and took a 15-point lead into the final quarter.

Lowry finished with 20 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists to post his 16th career triple-double as a Raptor.

Victor Oladipo had 27 points and John Wall had 21 points and 12 assists for the Rockets, who lost their 10th straight game. Eric Gordon had 17 points and PJ Tucker and Danuel House each scored 11 points.

Elsewhere, Kemba Walker scored a season-high 32 points as the Boston Celtics recovered from a slow start to defeat the Indiana Pacers 118-112.

Daniel Theis had 17 points and Jaylen Brown 15 as the Celtics snapped a three-game losing streak, winning for just the fourth time in their last 12 games. — AFP

Swiatek claims second career title with Adelaide crown

ADELAIDE: French Open champion Iga Swiatek breezed past second seed Belinda Bencic 6-2 6-2 in the Adelaide International final on Saturday to claim the second title of her career.

The 19-year-old Pole shot out of relative obscurity last year when she became the youngest woman to win the Roland Garros title since Monica Seles in 1992.

The world number 18 showed again why she is so highly rated with a superb week in Adelaide.

Swiatek did not drop a set throughout the WTA 500 tournament and lost only 22 games in all. She fired 22 winners and made only six unforced errors in the final.

“For sure, there is something that clicks,” Swiatek, who will rise to a new career-high ranking of number 15 on Monday, said of her good form during her title runs.

“Not only in my head but also tennis-wise. I feel pretty good on court. I feel sometimes I have weeks when everything clicks and that's the effect of the work we're doing.

“It's good because I can see that I can play good tennis for the whole week. It wasn't like one time during the French Open. It gives me more confidence that I'm more developed (as a) player... It gives me motivation.”

Swiatek went ahead 3-2 in the opening set of the final and broke Bencic's serve when the Swiss double-faulted three times before switching gears to gain the early advantage in the contest at Memorial Drive Park. The fifth seed then surged ahead 3-1 in the second set before closing out a comfortable victory. — Reuters



Poland's Iga Swiatek

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Oman's biggest private hospital set for launch

STATE-OF-THE-ART: Oman International Hospital prepares to offer multi-super-specialty healthcare services

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 27

Oman International Hospital will soon open its doors to Oman's public sector. The hospital, backed by Oman Brunei Investment Company together with Suhail Bahwan Group and Idealmed GHS, is a state-of-the-art multidisciplinary hospital focusing on women and children excellence.

The OIH is the largest private health entity in Oman, with an area of 42,000 sqm built from the ground up, as per the highest standards of quality, and it's ready to allocate +200 beds, have 41 medical consultation offices, 73 observation/treatment/exam rooms, five operating theatres, three delivery rooms, an emergency department, full range of intensive care units, a radiology department, a medical SPA, R&D facilities and four laboratories",



said Dr José Alexandre Cunha, Chairman of Idealmed GHS and Board Member of OIH.

Integrated into the same complex, OIH has four main Excellence Centres, namely the Women's & Children's Centre, the Heart & Vascular Centre, Ortho & Spine Centre and the Oman Vision Centre.

Each Centre adopts the latest

medical practices and state-of-the-art medical technologies.

Idealmed GHS, which operates the hospital, is an integrated European Health Group based in Coimbra, Portugal, operating hospitals and clinics across the globe, and has been recognised for its mission to provide the highest standard of healthcare by incorporating the latest medical

technology in the most modern and sophisticated facilities with highly skilled and trained Human Resources.

Commenting on the new landmark in Oman's healthcare sector, Sheikha Amal Suhail Bahwan, Chairperson of Oman International Hospital, said, "At Oman International Hospital, we are committed to extending world-

Oman International Hospital was established with the objective of creating a unique environment for the implementation of clinical and research activity in Oman.

pharmaceutical domains, as well as IT, Architecture, Certification Companies, offering the best services, while keeping in mind patients' well-being and comfort.

The OIH has recognised institutions as partners, such as the University of Coimbra, which is considered to be one of the oldest and the most prestigious Academic Institutions in the world, Siemens, IBM and Ciberbit among many other well-known organisations that will add value to this outstanding hospital and make the difference in the healthcare scenario of the Gulf region.

Highlighting the strategic importance of the hospital, Fathi al Balushi, Chief Executive Officer, Oman Brunei Investment Company (OBIC) and Vice-Chairman of the OIH Board said, "We are proud and honoured to play our part in contributing to the country's healthcare sector, in line with the objectives of the Omani government to develop integrated medical services and medical training. With the government encouraging the private healthcare sector, we look forward to being recognised as the reference private hospital in the entire region."

Over 80 per cent of Omani mushrooms exported

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

The Sultanate's leading producer of fresh mushrooms secured export markets for more than 80 per cent of its total output last year, adding locally grown mushrooms to a growing list of 'Made in Oman' products that are quintessentially Omani in their appeal.

Publicly traded Gulf Mushroom Products Co SAOG, which operates the Middle East's largest high-tech mushroom farm at Barka in South Al Batinah Governorate, said it earned over RO 5 million in revenues from exports of around 84 per cent of its total fresh mushroom production of 3,859 metric tonnes last year

Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) represent the predominant market for a range of the company's fresh mushroom varieties, including the popular white button mushroom (also known as champignon de Paris), giant white mushroom, brown button mushroom, portabella mushroom, baby white button mushroom, oyster, shiitake, Vitamin-D and sliced mushrooms.

However, the pandemic did have an impact on the company's output and sales, said Gulf Mushroom's Chairman.



Disruptions caused to the airline, travel, tourism and hospitality sectors — all of which represent important constituent markets for Gulf Mushroom's products — had a knock-on effect on the company's overall performance during the year, he noted.

"(Gulf Mushroom) was able to minimise the impact by proactively securing its supply chain, protecting its human resources by implementing plans to control the pandemic spread among the employees and finding alternative transport logistics to export mushrooms to GCC markets after the disruption of airfreight logistics. Production and sales were reduced, but there was no interruption, and the

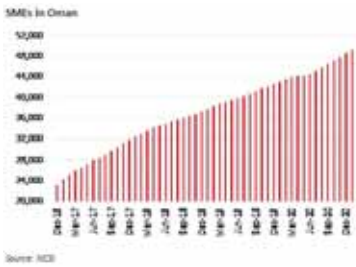
company's cash flows remained positive despite the effect of the pandemic," he stated in the Chairman's Report for fiscal 2020.

Output slumped 15 per cent to 3,859 metric tonnes last year, down from 4,545 metric tonnes a year earlier, primarily due to the pandemic. Revenues also declined 19 per cent to RO 6.087 million in 2020, compared to RO 7.522 million a year earlier. Net profit after tax dropped 55 per cent to RO 272K for 2020, down from RO 600K in 2019, the company said.

Established in 1997, Gulf Mushroom operates a modern, climate controlled facility at Barka with a capacity to produce 15 metric tonnes per day of the vegetable all year-round.

MSM30 Index climbs 1.02 per cent

MUSCAT: The MSM30 Index ended the week up by 1.02 per cent, supported by the Financial index, which rose by 1.44 per cent. The Services Index, however, declined by 0.51 per cent and the Industrial Index declined by 0.36 per cent. The MSM Shariah Index was higher by 0.79 per cent.



Omanis and foreigners absorbed selling pressure from GCC Investors.

SMN Power disclosed in its annual report that excess cash generated by the project companies will be paid to lenders and will not flow to the shareholders. TURN TO P15

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2020-QoS Indicators (Mobile, Fixed and International Voice Service)

Quality of Service Indicators		License Requirement	Achievement			
Services	KPI	Target Value	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Mobile Services	Call Drop Rate	Less than 0.8 %	0.21 %	0.21 %	0.19 %	0.18 %
	Call Block Rate	Less than 1.1 %	0.17 %	0.15 %	0.14 %	0.15 %
	Percentage of billing complaints resolved within 10 working days	More than 90 %	95.995 %	98.067 %	97.500 %	94.933 %
Fixed Services	Unsuccessful Call Ratio for Local and National Calls	Less than 1 %	0.01 %	0.002 %	0.004 %	0.002 %
	Percentage of Faults to be cleared within 24 hours	More than 90 %	97.28 %	99.4 %	98.85 %	98.13 %
	Percentage of billing complaints resolved within 10 working days	More than 90 %	94.143 %	94.667 %	95.067 %	93.667 %
International Voice Services	Unsuccessful Call Ratio during busy hour	Less than 3 %	0.1 %	0.005 %	0.003 %	0.001 %

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Crypto art as a form of investment?

In late December I wrote a column about investing in art. As always, I must and I want to clarify that I am in no position to give any investment advice to anyone. The content of my articles are for pure informative purpose and the reader shall always seek professional advice before investing on anything found on the Internet or in a newspaper. Having said so, I could not miss the crazy — and I use this word with purpose — volatility of the crypto art market. Let us move one step back and see what is all about. First of all, almost everything that is preceded by the prefix crypto implies that what follows is based on some sort of blockchain and as such is believed to be immutable. This last sentence alone would deserve an entire article on its

own, but let us — as usual — oversimplify the concept to make it accessible to every reader, regardless of their background. Technically speaking, in order for anything to be on a blockchain, there should be a token. The reason why this happens is because blockchain transactions are validated by a collectivity acknowledging — thus permanently write on the blockchain — that the ownership of a digital asset moved from one owner to another. When it comes to art — in its traditional form — it moves as a physical asset, therefore it is clear who owns a painting: The one that has it on the wall, in simple terms. Similarly with digital art — let us say a digital picture for example — the file can be moved at will from one device to another, but because duplication is a matter of a simple copy and paste, anyone



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FIRST OF ALL, ALMOST EVERYTHING THAT IS PRECEDED BY THE PREFIX CRYPTO IMPLIES THAT WHAT FOLLOWS IS BASED ON SOME SORT OF BLOCKCHAIN AND AS SUCH IS BELIEVED TO BE IMMUTABLE

can have the same digital painting in virtually infinite copies. But when it comes to crypto art things are substantially different. Because the blockchain is able to state without a doubt who is the owner of any digital asset, the ownership is absolutely unique. And so the latest craze is to stock up crypto-paintings that are bought and sold at light speed. Through digital auctions or making direct offers to the owner, anyone can buy and sell art in minutes. Artists are now creating pieces that are sold in limited editions, so that the supply is scarce. For instance, the first crypto-painting that I have ever bought from a fellow Italian artist, was number 18 of 51 available in the world. Right now, as the cryptocurrency market is precipitating after one of the fastest “bull run” in history, many

are exchanging their cryptocurrencies into crypto art. A crypto-painting is called NFT, Non Fungible Token. In other words, the painting and the token are the same think. To simplify this to its maximum, imagine someone who buys an ancient coin. That coin is not spendable in the market, yet it is a coin and it has its own value. That value of crypto art is skyrocketing as I am writing this column. On January 7, 2021, world famous auction house Christie’s sold for \$3.5m a digital collage made by Mike Winkelmann, aka Beeple. The painting contained 5,000 pictures that the artist created every day since May 1, 2007. “The sky is the limit” said the confident investor, while others fall on the floor. [The writer is a member of the International Press Association]

Global law firm advises BP on \$2.6 bn Oman Block 62 stake sale

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 27

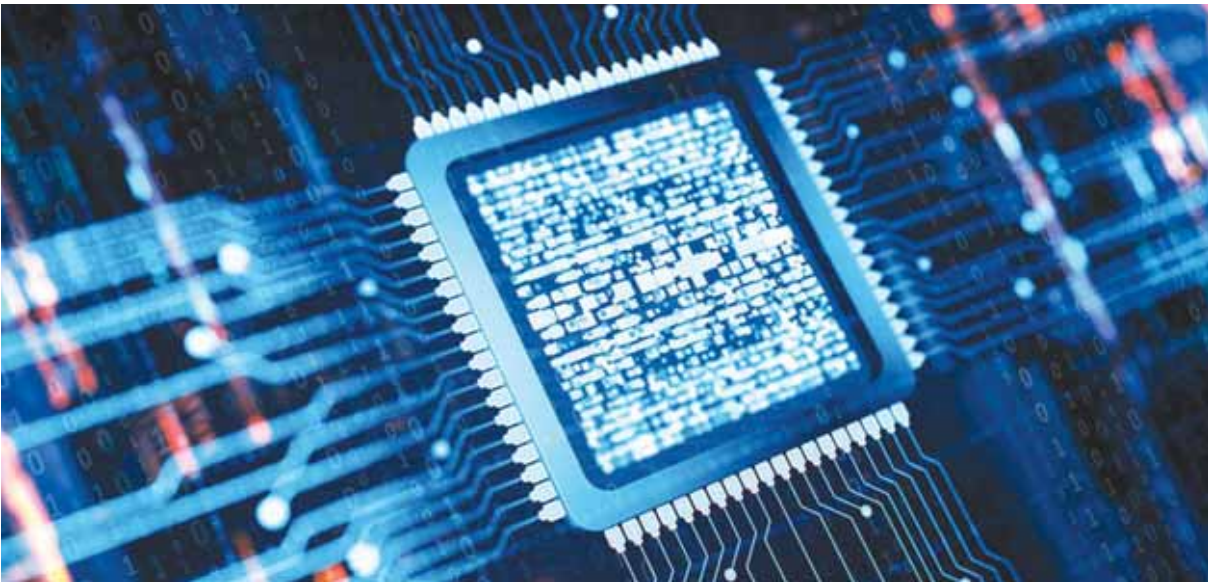
US-based international law firm Norton Rose Fulbright has advised energy major BP on its \$2.6 billion sale of a 20 per cent stake in Oman’s Block 61 to PTTEP MENA Limited, a subsidiary of Thailand’s PTT Exploration and Production Public Company Limited. Block 61 is one of the largest gas developments in the Middle East. It is a producing onshore gas field with enormous resources and significant importance to Oman’s natural gas market. Block 61 has the capacity to deliver approximately 35 per cent of total gas output in Oman.

Energy firms’ digital focus pays off



BADAR CHAUDHRY

\$2.6 trillion. This is the staggering sum that can be unlocked via digitalisation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by 2025 — a very short four years away. As market pressures intensify, no energy firm can afford to ignore this potential. The Middle East’s interest in digital tools that fall under the umbrella of the 4th Industrial Revolution has been gradually increasing. But now appetite is soaring; energy stakeholders not investing in digitalisation are fast becoming outliers. This is especially true in times of strain — and have no doubt, this is certainly one of them. Oil prices continue to hover in the \$50s/bl range and the International Energy Agency says at least \$1 billion must be spent per year in the near-term to create an environmentally friendly energy economy. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund warns of a ‘long and difficult ascent’ out of the global economic plunge that is being spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. The squeeze on economics, operational norms and talent development is very real, particularly for nations that have had restricted travel and lockdowns over the last year. Pandemic bounce-back? These difficulties only emphasise the value of investing in digitalisation. For example, digital tools and technologies thread into each of the three traits that the Boston Consulting Group said the companies best able to rebound from the pandemic have: end-to-end supply chain transparency, agile operations and quickly digitised customer interactions. The unpredictability wrought by Covid-19 has put many energy companies on a level playing field in the Middle East and beyond. But it has made it clearer than



The Middle East’s interest in digital tools that fall under the umbrella of the 4th Industrial Revolution has been gradually increasing. But now appetite is soaring; energy stakeholders not investing in digitalisation are fast becoming outliers

ever that the size of an energy company is not everything — its smarts are. With that, firms’ growing appetite to ramp up digital growth together as they rebuild their economic robustness could organically nurture a digital ecosystem in the region. It makes sense to leverage each other’s expertise to accelerate progress as the global clock for energy security and decarbonisation ticks on relentlessly. Therein lies the rapid rise of digitally orientated partnerships across the region. A+ for progress Many are now vigorously walking what has long been just digital talk in the GCC. In January, Saudi Aramco — the world’s biggest oil producer — launched Dammam 7, a new supercomputer which is among the top ten most powerful in the world. This boost for exploration and development marks the next step in Aramco’s digital transformation. Plus, Saudi Aramco Development Company, a subsidiary of Aramco, signed a deal with Cognite to establish a new company that will focus on digitalisation in Saudi Arabia and the broader MENA. In the UAE, energy leader ADNOC has saved \$2 billion over the past five years by leveraging advanced technologies and digitalisation to enhance

drilling efficiencies and optimise operations. It has also recently awarded a \$519 million contract to further expand the world’s largest 3D seismic survey. And most recently, ADNOC teamed up with ExxonMobil to jointly identify areas where advanced technologies can further increase operational efficiencies and unlock value. To the east, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), the Sultanate’s largest oil and gas exploration and production company, has wrapped up phase three of its Information Management digital transformation journey with Hexagon. This includes a single platform where all the lifecycle information is centralised for more than 4,100 employees and contractors — bolstering transparency and efficiency in one go. Keeping pace The Middle East’s push is well-timed, for its progress is key to sustaining global competitiveness on both the energy and digital stage. For example, 50 per cent of oil and gas respondents of a survey by Deloitte said their company is already investing in energy efficiency, cleaner fuels to power field operations, and acquiring businesses outside their core focus. And another 50 per cent of industry respondents said they would invest in digital technologies

to boost energy efficiency and in operational technologies, such as carbon capture to reduce future emissions. Another area that the region needs to keep abreast of? Cyberthreats. Globally, across all industries, a staggering 36 billion records were exposed in data breaches in the first half of 2020, according to a report detailed by Risk Based. And last year was already the “worst year on record” by the end of Q2 in terms of the total number of records exposed. Plus, Saudi Aramco was just one of many energy firms that has reported a recent rise in attempted cyberattacks. Far more digital sheriffs are needed to safeguard operations, especially as cybersecurity is fast being woven into energy companies’ competitiveness. Greater transparency and accountability are increasingly coveted by digitally aware investors. What were daily, or even weekly, checks must now be done on a minute-by-minute or second-by-second basis. Especially in these times of both uncertainty and great growth, there is no such thing as excessive diligence. The same applies to exploring and applying digital solutions. Considering 1 billion people worldwide still lack access to electricity and that we are lagging on the Paris Agreement goals, our exploration of digitalisation to streamline efficiency and bolster scalability should know no bounds. [Badar Chaudhry is Senior Vice President, Sector Head – Energy, Mashreq Bank]

Bank Muscat wins Best Investment Bank in Oman Award from Global Finance

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat has been awarded the Best Investment Bank in Oman award by Global Finance magazine for 2021. The prestigious award recognises Bank Muscat’s market leading investment banking offerings. Global Finance editors used a series of criteria including entries from banks, market share, number and size of deals, service and advice, structuring capabilities, distribution network, efforts to address market conditions, innovation, pricing, after-market performance of underwritings and market reputation along with inputs from industry experts to score

and select winners. The magazine added that deals announced or completed in 2020 were considered for the awards. Commenting on the achievements, Saleh bin Nasser al Habsi (pictured), Deputy General Manager, Investment Banking, said: “Bank Muscat is delighted to be ranked by Global Finance as the Best Investment Bank in Oman. The bank is synonymous with innovation, customer-centricity, agility and trustworthiness and always aims to deliver reliable, dynamic and customised solutions, which suit the unique requirements of our customers.”



Own a Ford Explorer and save with exclusive benefits

MUSCAT: Here’s a good opportunity for Ford Explorer fans to make the most of. Own a Ford Explorer and benefit with cash gift RO 6,000 to RO 6,500, service 3 yrs/60,000 kms and registration. (Conditions apply. For More details, customers are advised to visit their nearest Ford showroom.) The Explorer is a complete redesign with more power and space than ever, and smart new technologies to help tackle life’s adventures. Explorer is now more capable, comfortable, sportier and roomier in all three rows thanks to Ford’s flexible new chassis architecture. Improved off-road capability comes courtesy of intelligent four-wheel drive and an available new Terrain Management System that features seven easy-to-engage drive modes. Standard features include a power liftgate, 8-inch digital touch screen with SYNC 3, and a comprehensive package of driver assist and safety technologies.



The Explorer is equipped with a revised 2.3-litre turbocharged EcoBoost engine that produces 300 horsepower and 420Nm of torque. The engine is matched to an all-new 10-speed transmission and Intelligent All-Wheel-Drive system. The Explorer features design and engineering updates throughout that deliver comfort and SUV functionality. Explorer’s stylish, sloped-roof silhouette protects rear-seat headroom, while its comfort-enhanced second-row seats slide to improve access to the third row. In Oman, Ford vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co LLC.



Malaysian pension fund EPF assets grow to value of \$252 bn in 2020



A woman walks past the Employees Provident Fund office in Kuala Lumpur. — Reuters

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's Employees Provident Fund (EPF) saw its investment assets grew 7.9 per cent from a year earlier to a market value of 1.02 trillion ringgit (\$252 billion) at the end of 2020, the fund said on Saturday.

At that growth rate, assets under management grew to 998 billion ringgit, said the 70-year-old government-linked pension fund.

The fund said it achieved a record gross investment income of 60.98 billion ringgit, despite market volatility last year. The fund said equities remain its main driver of returns while fixed income assets provided stability.

Equities, particularly foreign stocks, brought in 28.71 billion ringgit while fixed income instruments provided 25.42 billion ringgit. "While leading stock indices lost as much as 40 per cent in the first quarter, the EPF took the opportunity to rebalance its portfolio by acquiring shares that were fundamentally strong at attractive prices", it said.

Thirty-three per cent of the EPF's investments across all asset classes were overseas as of December. — Reuters

Fiscal stimulus fires up consumer spending in US; inflation benign

WASHINGTON: US consumer spending increased by the most in seven months in January as the government doled out more pandemic relief money to low-income households and new COVID-19 infections dropped, positioning the economy for faster growth in the first quarter.

Despite the strong rebound in consumer spending reported by the Commerce Department on Friday, price pressures were muted. Inflation is being closely watched amid concerns from some quarters that President Joe Biden's proposed \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 recovery package could cause the economy to overheat.

The plan, being considered by the US Congress, would be on top of a rescue package worth nearly \$900 billion approved by the government in late December. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell has played down the inflation fears, citing three decades of lower and stable prices.

"Thanks to Washington, the economic outlook in the near future is sunny", said Sung Won Sohn, finance and economics professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Consumer spending, which accounts for more than two-thirds of US economic activity, jumped 2.4 per cent last month.

That was the biggest gain since last June and ended two-straight monthly declines.

Personal income shot up 10 per cent, the largest increase since last April when the government disbursed the first round of



A delivery person passes by a sign for a new Best Buy store in New York, in this file photo. — Reuters

stimulus checks. Income rose 0.6 per cent in December. The recent stimulus package included \$600 cheques to mostly low-income and some middle-income Americans.

The package also extended a government-funded weekly unemployment subsidy as well as benefits for millions of people who do not qualify for state unemployment programmes as well as those who have exhausted their six months of eligibility. These benefits expire in mid-March.

The consumer spending report added to upbeat data this month on manufacturing output, building permits and home sales. Consumers bought motor vehicles, recreation goods,

food and beverages. They also boosted spending on services such as hotel accommodations and restaurants, as well as doctor visits.

Economists had forecast consumer spending rebounding 2.5 per cent in January and income accelerating 9.5 per cent. US stocks were trading lower.

When adjusted for inflation, consumer spending increased 2 per cent last month after decreasing 0.8 per cent in December. But robust consumer spending is drawing in imports.

In a separate report on Friday, the Commerce Department said the goods trade deficit increased 0.7 per cent to \$83.7 billion last month, with imports outpacing a rise in exports. The department

also reported a 0.6 per cent decrease in retail inventories, though stocks at wholesalers surged 1.3 per cent.

The drag on economic growth from the widening goods trade deficit and slower pace of inventory accumulation will likely be blunted by the strong consumer spending.

Following this month's slew of solid reports, Morgan Stanley raised its first-quarter gross domestic product growth estimate to an 8.1 per cent annualised rate from a 7.3 per cent pace. Growth forecasts for the quarter were boosted last week from as low as a 2.3 per cent pace. The economy grew at a 4.1 per cent rate in the fourth quarter.

— Reuters

G20 promises no let-up in stimulus, sees tax deal by summer

ROME/BRUSSELS: The world's financial leaders agreed on Friday to maintain expansionary policies to help economies survive the effects of Covid-19, and committed to a more multilateral approach to the twin coronavirus and economic crises.

The Italian presidency of the G20 group of the world's top economies said the gathering of finance chiefs had pledged to

work more closely to accelerate a still fragile and uneven recovery. "We agreed that any premature withdrawal of fiscal and monetary support should be avoided", Daniele Franco (pictured), Italy's Finance Minister, told a news conference after the videolinked meeting held by the G20 finance ministers and central bankers.

The United States is readying \$1.9 trillion in fiscal stimulus and the European Union has already



put together more than 3 trillion euros (\$3.63 trillion) to keep its

economies through lockdowns. But despite the large sums, problems with the global rollout of vaccines and the emergence of new coronavirus variants mean the future path of the recovery remains uncertain.

The G20 is "committed to scaling up international coordination to tackle current global challenges by adopting a stronger multilateral approach and focusing on a set of core

priorities", the Italian presidency said in a statement.

The meeting was the first since Joe Biden — who pledged to rebuild US cooperation in international bodies — US president, and significant progress appeared to have been made on the thorny issue of taxation of multinational companies, particularly web giants like Google, Amazon and Facebook. — Reuters

CEOs urge White House support for greener aviation fuel

WASHINGTON: The CEOs of American Airlines, United Airlines and Delta Air Lines and other airline officials met virtually with White House officials to discuss tackling aviation pollution and urge US support for greener aviation fuel.

United Chief Executive Scott Kirby made clear the carrier was fully committed to confronting the climate crisis and sought White House support for "incentives for sustainable aviation fuel and carbon capture in the forthcoming economic stimulus proposal."

White House National Climate Adviser Gina McCarthy, economic adviser Brian Deese



Delta Air Lines passenger planes are seen parked at Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport in Birmingham, Alabama. — Reuters

US airlines and renewables companies have been lobbying the Biden administration to back a big increase in subsidies for lower-carbon aviation fuel, arguing new incentives are needed to help fight climate change and will also make their recovery from the pandemic much greener.

and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg took part in the meeting, including discussion of using biofuels to power air travel and

reduce carbon emissions.

US airlines and renewables companies have been lobbying the Biden administration to back a big increase in subsidies for lower-carbon aviation fuel, arguing new incentives are needed to help fight climate change and will also make their recovery from the pandemic much greener.

The White House said in a statement the officials were "optimistic to hear airline leaders share information about the industry's ongoing and future efforts to address climate change, and they offered the administration's support to strengthen and advance the

airlines' climate goals."

Currently, Airlines for America (A4A) uses only about 1.5 million gallons of green plane fuel in the United States a year, out of a total commercial jet fuel market that exceeds 620 million barrels.

The price of sustainable aviation fuel can be three or four times higher than traditional jet fuel, making it uneconomical without government support.

A4A CEO Nick Calio said airlines had "a positive, constructive conversation about our shared commitment to fighting climate change. Airlines are ready, willing and able partners." — Reuters

MSM30 Index climbs 1.02 per cent

FROM PAGE 13

This is until the loans are fully settled or until the time the loans can be restructured. The power/water purchase agreement extension projects for both Al Rusayil and SMN Barka will be a key factor to potentially restructure the debt in the coming years and allow further dividend.

The Capital Market Authority has approved the results of the Initial Public Offering (IPO) of Oman REIT Fund. A total of 49.9 million units valued at around RO 5 million were subscribed, out of 261.9 million units offered for subscription.

The Authority gave its green light for the allocation of the subscribed units. Oman REIT Fund offered 40 per cent of its issued capital of RO 65 million for public subscription at an issue price of 120 baisas comprising 100 baisas per unit and 2 baisas as issue expenses.

The total number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) at the end of January 2021 were 49,337 which is an increase by 14 per cent compared to the same period of 2020.

Among the governorates, Muscat topped the list with 34 per cent SMEs registered in January 2021, followed by North Al Batinah with 16 per cent, Al Dakhiliyah with 12 per cent, Dhofar with 8 per cent and the rest of governorates with 30 per cent.

The Governorate of Muscat had 16,583 SMEs registered at the end of January 2021, followed by North Al Batinah with 7,750, Al Dakhiliyah with 6,217, Dhofar with 4,111, South Al Batinah with 3,704 and North Al Sharqiyah with 3,309 SMEs registered. This was followed by Al Dhahirah with 2,839 SMEs, South Al Sharqiyah with 2,938 SMEs and Al Buraimi with 1,052 registered SMEs.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

features



Seeking refuge in water as a therapy

Tariq Jawad al Khabouri has been promoting wider acceptance of society of the physically and mentally challenged. While he dreams that one day this will happen, he is taking action by turning to water for therapy to help the physically-challenged gain better control of their limbs... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

FASHION



BORN IN AFRICA, MADE IN ITALY: FIVE DESIGNERS IN MILAN

Born in different parts of Africa but all operating under the Made in Italy brand, here are the five designers who opened Milan Fashion Week as part of a collective last Wednesday... **Story on Page 20**

WILDLIFE



IT'S ALIVE! BLACK-BROWED BABBLER EMERGES AFTER 170 YEARS

A bird last seen more than 170 years ago in the rainforests of Borneo has been rediscovered, amazing conservationists who have long assumed it was extinct... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY

BY MATT HAIG

Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.

DISCOVERY



KANGAROO PAINTING IS AUSTRALIA'S OLDEST ABORIGINAL ROCK ART

A kangaroo painting created over 17,000 years ago by Aboriginal artists has been identified – with a little help from some ancient wasps – as Australia's oldest intact rock art... **Story on Page 19**

ENTERTAINMENT



GERMAN BAND TURN VAN INTO CLUB SO FANS CAN ROCK OUT ONE AT A TIME

German two-piece rock band Milliarden have turned a van into a club where they stage gigs for one fan at a time as a way of reaching music-lovers during the pandemic... **Story on Page 19**



Seeking refuge in water as a therapy

BY ANWAH MUSALLAM AL AAMRI

Tariq Jawad al Khabouri is a man of dreams who struggles to fulfil them. His dream is to see a society where physically and mentally challenged people will be considered effective members who can contribute productively in their own capacities. How can this dream be achieved? Tariq is also a man of action who believes in finding new ways to help the differently-abled people living in Oman to be treated respectfully and also make them competent.

Tariq found the answer for this in water. "Yes water," he quipped when asked for clarification. Tariq has sought refuge in water as a therapy for the differently-abled people who are unable to lead a normal life and also get the self-respect that they deserve.

He and his like-minded friends thought of bringing such people together in a swimming pool to shed their fears and thoughts of feeling inferior. It was a spark kindled by his friend Stephanie Trier with an idea of making such people swim. And thus 'Oman Disabled Divers' (ODD) was born. "I wanted to do something for our handicapped friends. ODD is not an organisation, rather it's a team of few friends who have collaborated. We have been given permission by the competent authorities in sports and social development,"

he explains.

Tariq, the founder member and team coordinator says, "Water is a great healer as it helps the disabled people to feel normal when they do so many activities underwater, which is almost impossible in other situations."

The ODD was able to attract target group from all parts of the Sultanate to enable them to undergo training from professional trainers and to practice scuba diving in the Arabian Sea.

"Establishing an association from scratch without initial assistance from the government requires faith, courage and to believe that will resonate with the society," says Tariq.

He continues, "The first activity for ODD was a Dive Challenge in 2009 held at Oman Dive Centre in Qantab, Muscat."

He says with pride about the positive responses he received from the participants, and "this encouraged us to do more and try to reach more people across the Sultanate. We have organised events in Oman from Khasab to Salalah along with other activities like getting an office space for Autism Society." After the success of this event, there was no looking back for Tariq.

He organised similar events in different cities which were successful in bringing a smile on the swimmers' faces and lighting a ray of hope among their family members. Soon he was able to connect with organisations that were willing to sponsor the events and support his mission.

With this strong support, ODD was able to organise diving events and races for the handicapped under the supervision of a team consisting of diving instructors and physiotherapists. The mission of this association is to dedicate itself to improve the physical and social well-being of people with disabilities through an adventurous sport like scuba diving.

Another aim is to develop a network of professional facilities for disabled divers in the Sultanate of Oman.

The ODD launched a diving challenge tour between 2011 and 2017 in different cities of Oman. This was supported by the International Association of Handicapped Divers (IAHD), along with the then Ministry of Sports Affairs, Ministry of Social Development and the National Youth Commission.

"For the first time, in 2012 ODD had 15 disabled Omanis who were prepared for scuba diving at Marina al Rowdah," Tariq recollects with a sense of contentment.

Such activities have led people with physical challenges, low vision, blind and down's syndrome to be a part of the ODD family over some time.

Tariq appeals to the local swimming experts to come forward to help in his mission. He says, "Omanis are good swimmers and I appeal to the professional swimmers and local trainers to come forward and support our association because it is not easy to organise such activities alone. We have trainers who come from other countries every time we organise activities." He also requests social welfare groups and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to "come together under one umbrella and work together to build Oman". The government has played its role in providing us with the infrastructure, "now it is the duty of the society to come forward and do its bit" he adds.

Presently due to the pandemic, "our activities have slowed down" but that doesn't dampen the spirits of Tariq. When asked about the plans of ODD, he says, "to make sure they (the physically challenged people) get a job." To achieve this, "we are now in the process of discussing to set up a vocational training centre," Tariq says with a lot of hope.

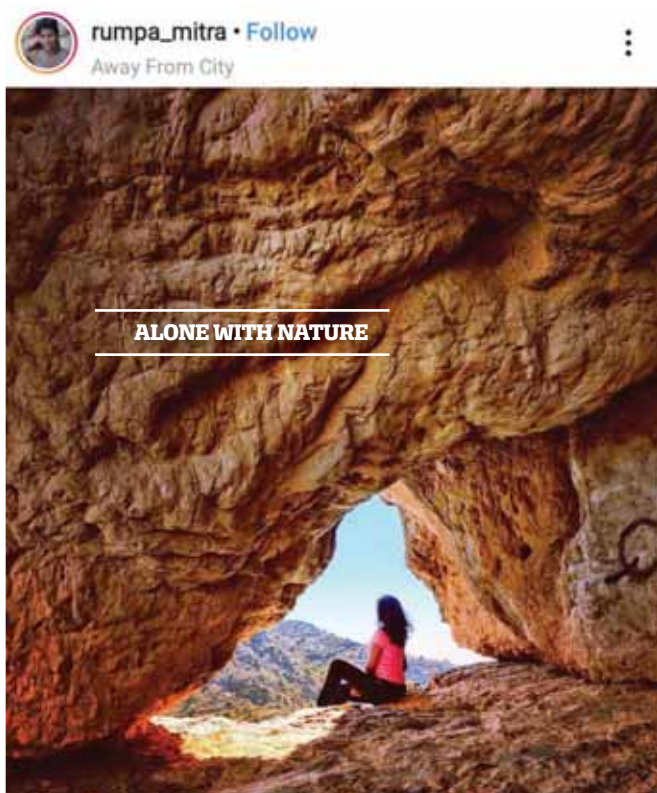
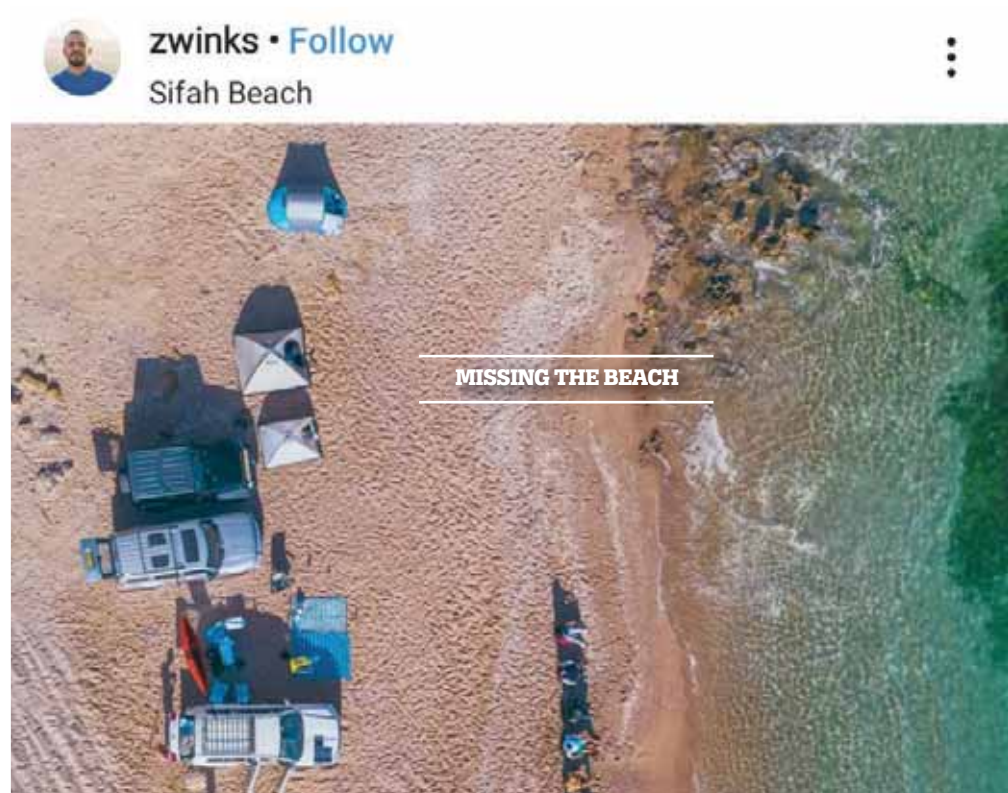
A collaborative effort will help ODD to overcome all challenges and help contribute to Oman Vision 2040. It will be an attempt to kindle hope among the differently-abled and feel useful for society. For Tariq, it will give him wings to dream new dreams to bring a smile and confidence.





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It's alive! Black-browed Babbler emerges after 170 years

A BIRD LAST seen more than 170 years ago in the rainforests of Borneo has been rediscovered, amazing conservationists who have long assumed it was extinct.

The Black-browed Babbler has only ever been documented once — when it was first described by scientists around 1848 — eluding all subsequent efforts to find it.

But late last year, two men in Indonesian Borneo saw a bird they didn't recognise and snapped photos of it before releasing the palm-sized creature back into the forest, according to Global Wildlife Conservation.

Ornithologists were astounded to find that the Black-browed Babbler was alive and well, despite not having been seen since before Charles Darwin published "On the Origin of Species".

"It was a bit like a 'Eureka!' moment," said Panji Gusti Akbar, lead author of a paper on the discovery published on Thursday in the journal *BirdingASIA*.

"This bird is often called 'the biggest enigma in Indonesian ornithology.' It's mind-blowing to think that it's not extinct and it's still living in these lowland forests."

Little is known about the creature with brown and grey feathers, which has been "missing" longer than any other Asian bird, according to the paper.

Researchers hoped to go back to the area where it was recently spotted, but Covid-19 travel restrictions could slow the effort.

"There is now a critical window of opportunity for conservationists to secure these forests to protect the babbler and other species," said Ding Li Yong, a co-author on the paper and a Singapore-based conservationist with BirdLife International.

More than 150 species of birds around the world are considered "lost" with no confirmed sightings in the past decade, conservationists say.

"Discoveries like this are incredible and give us so much hope that it's possible to find other species that have been lost to science for decades or longer," said Barney Long, Global Wildlife Conservation's senior director of species conservation. — **AFP**

Kangaroo painting is Australia's oldest Aboriginal rock art



A kangaroo painting created over 17,000 years ago by Aboriginal artists has been identified — with a little help from some ancient wasps — as Australia's oldest intact rock art.

The two-metre-long (six-foot) artwork on the sloped ceiling of a rock shelter in Western Australia's Kimberley region was painted in an early naturalistic style, which often features life-sized renderings of animals, according to research published on Monday.

Scientists worked with the local Aboriginal community, who can trace their heritage in the region back tens of thousands of years, to establish the age of original rock artworks, many of them worked and reworked over millennia.

"The main challenge, globally, in dating ancient paintings is that they very rarely employed a pigment that can be dated with any of the current, quantitative dating techniques," lead author Damien Finch, a geochronologist at the University of Melbourne, said.

To get around this the researchers identified a way to work out the age of the painting using ancient mud wasp nests.

Finch and his colleagues found that some of the rock paintings had the remains of these nests — which can be radiocarbon dated — above and below the images.

They estimated that the kangaroo painting was between 17,500 and 17,100 years old, the oldest discovered to date.

"It's important that Indigenous knowledge and stories are not lost and continue to be shared for generations to come," said

Cissy Gore-Birch, head of the Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation, in a statement from the University of Western Australia.

600 GENERATIONS AGO

She said partnerships could weave together traditional knowledge with western science, adding that the dating of the oldest known rock shelter painting "holds a great deal of significance for Aboriginal people and Australians and is an important part of Australia's history."

In total, the team dated 27 mud wasp nests around 16 different paintings from eight rock shelters, and found that the artworks in this same naturalistic style were produced between around 17,000 and 13,000 years ago.

The images were mostly depictions of animals, including a snake, a lizard-like figure, and three macropods — marsupials including kangaroos, wallabies and quokkas.

"This is a significant find as through these initial estimates, we can understand something of the world these ancient artists lived in," said Finch in a statement, adding that the environment would have been cooler and drier than today.

"We can never know what was in the mind of the artist when he/she painted this piece of work more than 600 generations ago, but we do know that the Naturalistic period extended back into the Last Ice Age."

The research, part of Australia's largest rock art dating project, was published in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*. — **AFP**



German band turn van into club so fans can rock out one at a time

German two-piece rock band Milliarden have turned a van into a club where they stage gigs for one fan at a time as a way of reaching music-lovers during the pandemic.

Separated by a plastic sheet, Milliarden www.milliardenmusik.de, which translates as Billions, treat fans to acoustic versions of their songs, recreating a club atmosphere with lighting effects, posters and plastic roses.

Large cultural events, including concerts, have become virtually impossible in Germany due to the pandemic.

"The fact that we have the club with us, that we are the club owners, so to speak, is something we use to get to the people who are not so close to this, to this cultural landscape, who are not in the big cities," band member Ben Hartmann said.

"We actually went to the villages and stopped in front of people's houses and played for them. A crisis like this one brings so many opportunities that you only recognise once you do stuff. You just have to do it."

Milliarden this month released their third studio album, "Schuldig" ("Guilty"). Fans can win tickets for the exclusive shows via social media.

"I think it's so nice that it works like this and that people respect it and accept it like that and get so emotionally connected to us here on this van. I think that is a gift," said Johannes Aue, in charge of keyboards and clapping.

"And that's why it is awesome that we were able to pull it off without thinking how we could earn money with it. Because we are in an immense debt with our fans."

"I'm just happy. Just happy. It was so nice... It was so great, it was really great," said fan Nadine Spichal, exiting the van parked outside a Berlin nightclub.

— **Reuters**

Born in Africa, made in Italy:

Five designers in Milan

Born in different parts of Africa but all operating under the Made in Italy brand, here are the five designers who opened Milan Fashion Week as part of a collective last Wednesday:



FABIOLA MANIRAKIZA, 50, was born in Burundi but it was in Zaire, which became the Democratic Republic of Congo, that she learned how to sew, in a school run by Italian nuns. A doctor by training, she used this skill when she founded her label Frida Kiza in Italy in 2016, the name a tribute to Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. She describes her work as a “mix between Africa and Italy”, like her silk scarves with Masai prints inspired by Botticelli’s painting, “Primavera” (Spring).



CLAUDIA GISELE NTSAMA, 29, born in Cameroon, has since childhood wanted to be a designer and particularly in Italy, as “fashion is Italy”. She spent eight years learning Italian before moving to Italy in 2012, where she worked in odd jobs — in cleaning and at football stadium entrances among others — before getting a diploma in design from Bologna. She “fell in love” with hemp, “one of the most ecological fibres”, and built her own label.



MOKODU FALL, 45, originally from Senegal, has worked as a cartoonist, actor and then painter. He came to Italy at the age of 22 “to experience the art and culture”. “My collection reflects my African origins,” explained the diplomat’s son who splits his time between Rome and Dunkirk in the north of France. “They are works of art that I transpose onto clothes.”



JOY MERIBE, 43, left Nigeria where she was born because there, “designers have no status”. She obtained a masters in international business before entering fashion, adding: “I’m not an ethnic designer, I live in Italy, I studied in Italy and I produce in Italy.” Her inspiration? “Strong, intelligent African women, like my grandmothers.”



KARIM DAOUDI, born in Morocco 27 years ago, arrived in San Mauro Pascoli in northern Italy at the age of 13 with his family, “looking for a better future”. “At 17, I started working in a workshop making shoes for major brands”, before winning a competition on shoe design in Rome. His collection, entitled “Journey into the forest”, brings together shoes in bright colours that remind him of Morocco. To finance his passion, he works as a postman

