

MOTORISTS CAN DRIVE WITH
THE EXPIRED LICENCE

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has told that motorists could still drive their vehicles even if they have an expired driving licence. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, ROP earlier had suspended licence renewal services in the Sultanate. In an exclusive interview with the Observer, Major Mohammed al Hashmi of Royal Oman Police, said that for the moment, motorists can use the expired licence and drive their vehicle. At the same time, we need to take note there are some travel restrictions imposed across the country. **DETAILS ON P2**

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PREMIER
LEAGUE
CLUBS FACE
BACKLASH



MUSCAT IN FOCUS WITH 257 CASES

SULTANATE REPORTS HIGHEST NUMBER OF COVID-19 CASES A DAY



VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

As the Sultanate reported the highest number of COVID-19 cases for a single day on Monday, it was clear that Muscat is the focus area of the coronavirus pandemic. The Ministry of Health reported 33 new COVID-19 cases on Monday, with the number for infected crossing the 300-mark to reach 331.

The capital, which accounted for 31 of these 33 cases, continues to dominate the list with 257, followed by Al Dakhiliyah (23), South Al Batinah (15), Musandam (2), Al Dhahirah (3), South Al Sharqiyah (1), Al Buraimi (1), North Al Batinah (21) and Dhofar (8).

It may be added that 29 of the 61 recovered cases in Oman also are from Muscat.

Two COVID-19 related deaths reported in the Sultanate have been from Muscat – first death, a 72-year-old citizen, was recorded on March 31 and the second again a 72-year-old citizen who contracted the disease earlier, was reported on Saturday (April 4).

According to the ministry, 226 of the 257 cases reported in Muscat are currently sick.

Currently, the Wilayat of Muttrah is being placed in isolation due to the prevalence of societal transmission, according to the Minister of Health.

He added earlier, “Muttrah has been

put under quarantine because of the prevalence of societal transmission, which is the transmission of the virus to people without contacting infected persons and not related to travel”.

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has been stopping people at strategic points in Muttrah from leaving the wilayat for unjustified reasons.

“My office has not officially stopped me from coming to work due to the nature of my job. With police checkpoints at different locations, I have to give convincing reasons to pass through”, said a Muscat resident Mohan. Even people travelling to supermarkets are checked to make sure that it is not more than one person at a

time. The ROP has provided alternative access and exit to Muttrah, which has been under lockdown since April 1. The alternative route is the Qurum-Darsait-Muttrah-Muscat-Al Bustan (seaside) road.

Motorists have also been recommended to wear masks and gloves while driving for essential needs and carry their identification (ID) and work cards at all times.

SUPREME COMMITTEE VISITS

As part of following the developments of coronavirus in the Sultanate, a number of members of the Supreme Committee on Monday visited the Directorates of the Ministry of Health

(MoH) to view measures that have been taken to curb COVID-19.

The members of the committee, led by Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, visited the Directorate General of Diseases Surveillance and Control. They were briefed on the efforts exerted by the MoH’s Technical Committee concerned with tackling COVID-19 outbreak along with the procedures that have been taken in the Sultanate in this regard.

The members also visited the Emergency Management Centre to get acquainted with the role of the centre, the local and regional epidemiological situation of the virus, as well as the

sectoral response in dealing with various scenarios that may occur.

Further, the members visited the COVID-19 Operation Management Centre, located at the Higher College of Technology-Muscat, to closely view the process of reporting the disease and entering data in the “Tarassud” application. The members were briefed on all sections of the centre including Prevention and Infection Control, Health of Points of Entry (Airport & Ports), Data Management and Epidemiological Investigation, Primary Healthcare, Support and Promote Health of Isolated Persons and the Contacts, Private Establishments, and Studies and Researches.

Good Samaritans come forward amid COVID-19 crisis

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, APRIL 6

Things become easy when the community comes forward in times of crisis and gives helping hand to people in need. The COVID-19 crisis took everyone by surprise. By the time people could understand the gravity of

the situation, restrictions were in place to block the coronavirus chain.

Good Samaritans came forward in aid of some affected workers either by asking them not to pay house rent for a couple of months or by providing essential commodities or food packets arranged from restaurants at discounted rates.

At least two Omani house owners have assured some barber shop and laundry workers not to pay accommodation rent for a couple of months with a hope that the situation would become normal by that time.

“I feel for them because in such a situation they cannot work and I know they hardly have any savings. In

my own limited capacity I decided not to charge rent during this time”, said one of the house owners, and insisted not to put his name ‘for this small thing’.

Similarly, Dr Sandeep Ojha, faculty member at Salalah College of Applied Science, felt for the workers of the barber shops and laundries soon after

the restrictions imposed on them.

“Immediately I contacted a restaurant and convinced its owner of their situation. He agreed to give food packets on discounted rate and I started sponsoring four meals to four workers per day”. He made efficient use of WhatsApp groups and announced if anyone wanted to help

the workers out. Three more agreed to join and now this group is offering daily meals to 30 workers.

“Since the restaurant was ready to give only 13 food packets, we arranged groceries for rest of the people”, said Dr Ojha with a hope that the initiative will continue till the situation normalises.



COVID-19 RESPONSE



As part of following the developments of coronavirus (COVID-9) in the Sultanate, a number of members of the COVID-19 Supreme Committee on Monday visited the Directorates of the Ministry of Health to view all measures that have been taken to curb COVID-19. They also visited the MoH Emergency Management Centre, COVID-19 Operation Management Centre, located in the Higher College of Technology-Muscat, and the Department of Central Public Health Laboratories in Darsait. -- ONA

Blood bank calls for donations as shortage looms

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

Call for blood donation has been intensified these days in light of the outbreak of COVID-19. Department of Blood Bank Services (DBB) has renewed its call to the donors especially for urgent operations and patients with cancer and blood diseases, as they are facing the challenge of stock shortage.

The blood bank department is encouraging the residents, except those living in Muttrah to donate blood. The reason behind Muttrah is its quarantined status as also a precautionary measure to protect the donors.

The DBBS has launched urgent donation campaign in coordination



Dr Zainab al Araiimi, Director of DBBS

with some agencies and volunteers to avoid shortage of blood units. “The process is done by organising the donors to avoid many people coming at the same time. We have also activated appointment system via WhatsApp service (94555648)

The Central Blood Bank in Muscat weekly requires about 500 to 700 blood units from different categories to cover the needs in health institutions. However, the blood bank’s combined need is about 1,500 units

or through the phone lines of blood banks in the governorates. All such contacts have been published on social media platforms,” Dr Zainab al Araiimi, Director of DBBS, said.

“The quantity of blood units needed in each bank vary according

to the size of the hospital and the services it provides in the governorate. For example, the Central Blood Bank in Muscat weekly requires about 500 to 700 blood units from different categories to cover the needs in health institutions. However, the blood



bank’s combined need is about 1,500 units’.

Stressing people to continue donating blood, Al Araiimi stressed that blood banks needed the society’s support to provide the best services to patients so that there is no shortage of

blood for blood transfusion cases.

Among the precautionary measures followed in blood banks to prevent Coronavirus transmission are: Activating appointment service for those who want to donate blood and platelets, recommending the use of preventive methods to avoid infection such as washing hands before and after donating blood, adhering to social distancing in the blood room and receiving only blood donors without company.

The blood team also ensures sterilisation of all surfaces, floors and devices used after each donation process and takes care in the movement of blood donors during the campaign to avoid crowd.

Man held for harming Environment

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs (MECA) in cooperation with the Royal Oman Police (ROP) arrested a motorist for causing environmental damage.

The arrest was made after a video went viral on social media of a motorist driving his vehicle recklessly on a mountain and harming the wildlife. The ministry said it will take necessary actions against the accused.

The ministry affirmed that it will take legal actions against anyone who tries to destroy the environment or harm the wildlife and violate Environment Protection Law.

Motorists can continue using expired licenses

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) in an exclusive interview with Observer said that motorists could still drive their vehicles even if they have an expired driving license. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, ROP earlier had suspended licence renewal services in the Sultanate.

Major Mohammed al Hashmi of Royal Oman Police said for the moment, motorists can use the expired license and drive their vehicle. At the same time, we need to take note there are some travel restrictions imposed

across the country.

Earlier, the Capital Market Authority (CMA) has instructed the insurance companies to provide insurance coverage for owners of vehicles whose driving licenses expired after Royal Oman Police (ROP) suspended renewal services in line with the measures taken licence Supreme Committee tasked with dealing with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) to curb its spread.

In a letter, the Authority urged insurance companies to provide the coverage even if the driving license of the insured is expired until the end of

the epidemic and to provide indemnity in traffic accidents even if the license is expired.

Last week, the CMA announced a number of precautionary measures related to the insurance sectors to curb the spread of the coronavirus in line guidelines adopted by the Supreme Committee. The Authority issued a circular to all insurers to suspend manual transactions in insurance services including the closure of counters and provide the service electronically to render the service remotely to the customers.



Understanding the curve: Will summer heat help beat COVID-19?

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

A few weeks ago the COVID-19 situation was where no one knew what was to be expected; today the Sultanate is in the phase of witnessing the pandemic that has moved from people who were exposed to the virus while travelling or to the individuals who have come in contact with the virus.

“Back then we did not know what was needed but now we are in a stable phase where schools are closed, shops are closed and we are seeing almost a constant number of cases everyday so it is not exploding so it

is a very good sign. When we can get out of it – whether it is 10 or two weeks remains to be seen; anyway when we do come out of it we would have to do it gradually with a few steps at a time”, explained Dr Eskild Petersen, Directorate for Diseases Surveillance and Control, Ministry of Health.

When asked whether summer will help in the fight against the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), the expert on infectious diseases said, “Well nobody knows. We will have to wait and see as this is something we have not seen before. Some people believe that the virus may not be able to survive the

summer heat therefore the number of cases will go down. But it is not something we have seen so far and other countries have not reported anything on it. It is something we can hope but there is no data saying so”.

Dr Petersen said the important factor is that people are following the guidelines from the government and are staying at home.

The objective is to flatten the curve, but how do we know where we are at the curve?

“It is a good question but I do not think we can answer it. We have not seen a peak in Oman. Not every country sees a peak as

in the case of Singapore and Hong Kong for instance, as they were able to take care of it from the beginning, yet in other countries who really did not manage to stop it went on to have an outbreak in places like Italy, Spain, UK and of course China in the beginning.

We hope we do not see a peak. There is a spread in the community, so I hope in the next 10 to 15 days we can keep the numbers stable and not see a huge surge in the number of cases and then we can discuss on how to wane out of it and that would have to be planned as well,” he noted.



INSIDE THE WAR ROOM!

CENTRE OF OPERATION MANAGEMENT FOR COVID-19 WORKING AROUND-THE-CLOCK TO DEAL WITH PANDEMIC

MUSCAT: The Centre of Operation Management for COVID-19, operated by the Directorate General for Health Services at the Governorate of Muscat, located temporarily in the Higher College of Technology-Muscat, is working around-the-clock.

Dr Fatima Mohammad al Ajami, Director General of Health Services, Muscat, pointed out that the centre is an integrated venue for receiving, notification, and following-up data entry regarding the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

"It also aims to facilitate coordination among the teams concerned with the pandemic. The centre is being provided with all technical requirements to carry out the mission and follow-up on suspected and infected cases, in addition to undertaking surveillance", she added.

The centre consists of several departments and working teams, among which is the data management department for suspected and confirmed cases of Coronavirus

(epidemiological surveillance). It is assigned with receiving and following forms of suspected cases notification, in addition to reviewing reports and ensuring their validity and completeness. The department further receives laboratory results from the central public health laboratory and carries out the investigations, enumerates close contacts and distributes cases to health centres for daily follow-up for 4 days. Additionally, the department communicate with heads of health centres and focal points for daily follow-up.

Meanwhile, the department of public relations, media and health education follows up the calls received by the Ministry's Contact Centre and interacts with all contents being published on the directorate's social media and responds to followers' inquiries.

The pharmaceutical care and medical warehouses supplies health institutions, airports and hotels



with sterile, curative and preventive materials, in addition to dispensing the monthly medications via WhatsApp through (for your health) initiative and answering the patients' inquiries.

The department of supporting

and promoting health of isolated persons communicates with persons in institutional and home isolation. It responds to calls and inquiries received from the contact centre, follows up contacts cases in isolation,

provides them with the necessary advice and information, as well as medical advice and transportation in coordination with the specialists.

It also communicates with the medical staff in health institutions to

admit cases on the basis of determined medical indications, as well as dealing with complaints and notifications.

The department of primary healthcare institutions undertakes technical, clinical, administrative and organisational work at the level of the Governorate of Muscat and its health institutions.

It develops plans for workflow and triage in health centres in accordance with the epidemiological situation and provides phone health consultations, whether in health institutions or various isolation sites.

The department of crisis and emergency management coordinates with the various departments, and operates the video conferencing. It is tasked with counting the numbers of arrivals from the airport for quarantine, passes them to the Ministry's Emergency Management Centre and coordinates between the Directorate and the relief sector's representative assigned to the quarantine. — ONA



OMAN DAILY

Observer

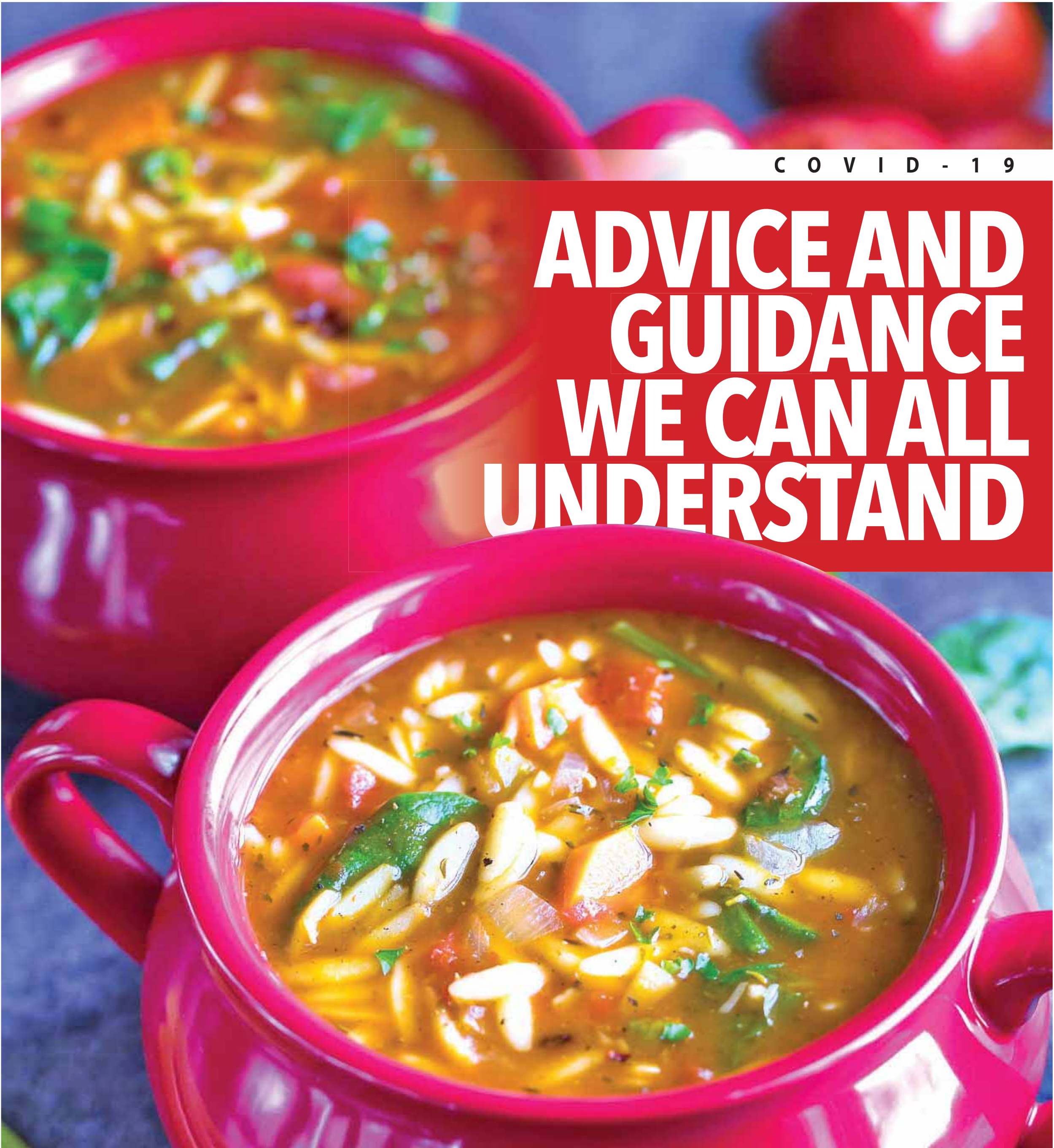
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C O V I D - 1 9

ADVICE AND GUIDANCE WE CAN ALL UNDERSTAND

Chicken-based soups have always been good for soothing both cold and flu symptoms.

RAY PETERSEN
NIZWA, APRIL 6

I'm not a doctor, nurse, health or care professional, but I do recognize good advice when I see it. We are all looking for advice and reassurance, and it's not easy to find, partly because of social distancing, but also because we like medical advice and guidance to come from someone, we can see face-to-face, rather than a nameless bureaucrat. It's human nature.

A General Practice Nurse in the United Kingdom has posted this advice, online, and for the ordinary 'man in the street,' who is no longer in the street but in lockdown. This is the sort of 'stuff' we all wanted, and probably needed, to know.

She explains that she had seen a lot of recommendations for how to try to avoid getting coronavirus in the first place, including good hand washing, a high level of personal hygiene, and the implementation of social distancing, but what she had not seen is advice for what

happens if you actually get it, which many will, and she has offered a number of suggestions.

She suggests buying these items ahead of time, preparing as if you are going to get a 'nasty respiratory bug,' like either bronchitis or pneumonia and have plenty of tissues, Paracetamol, and Vicks Vaporub, the latter is good for all chesty ailments. Buy whichever of the mucus thinning generic cough medicines you prefer, or as an alternative honey and lemon in hot water will do the same job. If you have Asthma, and have a prescribed inhaler, make sure it hasn't expired, and get a spare just to be safe.

Soup. Yes, I know there isn't a widespread 'soup culture' throughout the region, but soups, and especially chicken-based soups, have always been a 'grandma's remedy' for viruses. And the best thing is, they are quick and easy to make, and lend themselves to freezing really well!

Hydrate (drink!) hydrate, hydrate! Stock up on whatever your favorite clear fluids are to drink, though



ordinary bottled water is fine, you may appreciate some variety, and having some sparkling or tonic water also available is a good idea.

Even homeopathy has its role within COVID-19 protection, as the pH level of the virus is in the range of 5.5 to 8.5. It may be of value therefore, to eat more of the alkaline foods in a higher pH range, such as Dandelion (22.7), Avocado

(15.6), Garlic (13.2), Lemon, lime, Mango, Tangerine, and Pineapple, all of which have a higher pH rating.

How will you know/think you have COVID-19? The progressive symptoms are: An itchy throat, that becomes a dry throat, with a dry cough, then your temperature spikes, to above 38°C, and you become short of breath.

Don't panic! Take Panadol, not Ibuprofen which has different qualities, hydrate, take honey and lemon, and rationally discuss your way forward. If you feel better seeking medical assistance, then you should do so, particularly if you do have a pre-existing condition such as asthma, COPD, emphysema, lung cancer or are on immunosuppressants. Above all, don't panic, be calm and rational, and everything will be fine.

Unless you are having difficulty breathing, and your fever is elevated beyond 39°C, you will probably not be hospitalized, and you can be re-assured that 90% of healthy adult cases have so far have been managed at home with rest, plenty of liquids (hydration), and your home medicines.

In terms of managing yourself, not as a matter of social distancing (though that is good too), rest often. You should not be leaving your house! Even when you are feeling better, you may still be infectious for up to fourteen days and older people and

those with existing health conditions should be avoided, as they will still be susceptible to infection.

If you are ill, even within your home you should undergo a further form of self-isolation in your bedroom. Have your family supply you by leaving supplies, bedding, clothing at your door for you to access, and ensure that they are wearing gloves and masks whenever they are handling your plates, trays, clothing and bedding for washing and the like, and to sanitize frequently. Utilize a humidifier, or if you don't have one, sit in a steamy bathroom and inhale the steam.

The main thing is to distance, and isolate yourself if required, but to maintain good communication with those around you, though distantly so, to keep you safe, informed, and re-assured. None of what I have offered here is rocket science, and there is very little we can argue with, it's just good, simple, common-sense advice, from a nurse who saw a need for plain language and clear guidance.

Indian schools start virtual classes

ADMISSIONS: 3,744 seats allocated to children of various classes; No fee hike till July

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

A couple of Indian schools in Oman (CBSE boards) have started the new academic year 2020-21 with virtual classrooms or online classes.

While most schools already have started online classes for students of classes 10 and 12, some schools are in the process of training their teachers for a virtual classroom.

The Indian School Wadi Kabir (ISWK) and Indian School Al Ghubra (ISG) commenced virtual classes on Monday.

As per the guidelines issued by the schools, students should ensure that they have an Internet facility and facilities such as Google Classroom for updated daily/weekly schedules.

Some parents and teachers told Observer that the Zoom for cloud meetings is the popular app recommended by most Indian schools.

Even in India, several schools belonging to the CBSE boards have started the new academic year virtually.

The Board of Directors, Indian Schools in Oman has issued several notifications and directives in the wake of COVID-19 and the subsequent measures adopted across Oman and India, said a press release issued on Monday.



SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

The board has resumed online registration for admissions to the Indian Schools in the capital area for all classes except Class X and XII. Parents can log in into the admission portal of the Board website at www.indianschoolsoman.com and submit an online application for the admissions.

Considering the prevailing exigencies pertaining to COVID-19, the entire admission procedure will be completed online. The applicants will be contacted by the concerned school to complete the admission procedures; the school will guide the parents about the documents to be submitted, fees to be paid and other information regarding admission.

In the random draw held on March 10, the board was able to allot seats to all 3,744 children who had applied for admissions

to various classes in Indian Schools in the capital area. The schools will soon contact the parents to complete the rest of the admission formalities online.

ONLINE LESSONS

Although Indian Schools remain closed due to the onslaught of COVID-19, online classes are being organised by schools in order to cater to the educational needs of students. The schools have already started classes for the students of X and XII from the first week of March. Similarly, online tutoring for other classes will start from mid of April.

The Board is expanding the scope of its knowledge repository website www.isovle.net to all students of Indian Schools across the Sultanate by including additional resources in various subjects through webinars, question

banks and worksheets.

CBSE EXAMINATIONS

In a recent press release, CBSE has announced that for the schools outside India, it would not be possible to hold the remaining Class 10 and 12 examinations that were postponed due to COVID-19. In this regard, CBSE has clarified that it would devise some mechanism to declare the results of the students studying abroad, protecting the interests of the students at the highest level. The system of grading for the purpose of declaring results will be worked out by the CBSE and informed to schools shortly.

SCHOOL FEES

The Board has declared that parents can remit the applicable school fees in a monthly

manner, instead of the quarterly mode in all Indian schools. Additionally, in light of the financial constraints due to the pandemic, the fee hike proposed for the term 2020-21 shall be deferred until the end of July 2020.

“We are going through an unprecedented time in our history, with all of us – Board, schools, faculty, parents and students facing unique challenges. However, together we shall overcome these and ensure that our overall objective of imparting the best of 21st-century learning continues in every way we can. As Board, we would like to reiterate our support for our parent and student community and would also like to thank our teachers & faculty for overcoming many technological and personal hurdles in continuing to offer e-learning”, said Dr Baby Sam Samuel, Chairman, Board of Directors.

Mawaleh vendors launch mobile vegetable and fruit shops

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

Vendors at the Mawaleh market, the central market for fruits and vegetables, are visiting different areas of the city along with fresh fruits and vegetables in a bid to make up with the potential loss arising out of closure due to COVID-19. Some vendors are doing home delivery also.

Accordingly, several vegetable sellers are pulling up their stocks, loading into trucks and charting out different days of the week for different areas.

“This is aimed at catering to people from across the country who are not able to buy their daily food stocks regularly”, said Abdul Wahid of Suhel al Fayha, the largest local brand that imports and supplies fruits and vegetables across the country.

A wide range of offers makes these ‘fruits and vegetable suppliers’ different. They have special offers on special days and weekends, and a flat 10 per cent discount on all farm-fresh vegetables, besides free shipping and 24X7 customer support.

“No cash is collected in advance whereas we offer 100 per cent cash on delivery service which is a great support to people from all walks of life and to ensure the quality of the products. However, the rates of all vegetables and fruits will be varying according to the availability of the same”, Shebin, a marketing personnel told the Observer.

While focus of some of the leading suppliers is across the Sultanate, smaller players are focusing on Muscat Governorate and outskirts of the city.

The big players are delivering the orders at the doorstep, while smaller vendors set aside each day for each area as feeder day. For door delivery, the order should be of a minimum value of RO 5.

“Al Mawaleh Souq for vegetable and fruit has taken an initiative to visit customers on alternate days allowing them choose what they want but making sure that social distancing is maintained throughout the process”, another local supplier said.

Some of these trucks visit Ruwi, Wadi Kabir and Muttrah areas on Wednesday; Wadi Hattat, Al Amerat and Al Khuwair on Tuesday; Ghubra, Al Qurum, Bausher on Monday; and Ghala, Al Ansab and Misfah on Thursday. The truck schedule for Al Hail, Al Mawaleh, Maabela and Al Khoudh on Sunday.

“We literally can bring anything and everything a family needs from Al Mawaleh Souq for we know that everyone is taking part in a national stay home campaign against COVID-19. We too follow utmost care against the pandemic”, added Abdul Wahid.

World braces for hardest, saddest week in virus battle

WASHINGTON/LONDON/TOKYO: The coronavirus threatened Americans with their hardest week in living memory on Monday and put Britain's prime minister in hospital, despite early signs that some of Europe's hardest-hit countries may be turning a corner.

More than 70,000 people have now died worldwide in the epidemic — some 50,000 of them in Europe — and, as the human tragedy continues to escalate, the global economy is plunging into what leaders warn will be a historic recession.

Japan announced an imminent state of emergency and a trillion-dollar stimulus package, while the US surgeon general compared the likely impact of the epidemic in the week ahead to 9/11 or Pearl Harbor and France warned of the worst economic slump since World War II.

In London, Prime Minister Boris Johnson remained in hospital on Monday but was in “good spirits” after being admitted for tests for “persistent” coronavirus symptoms.

“The prime minister had a comfortable night in St Thomas’ Hospital in London and is in good spirits,” Johnson’s spokesman said, adding that the 55-year-old British premier remains “under observation”.

Johnson tested positive for the virus 10 days ago, and despite his hospitalisation his Housing Minister Robert Jenrick said the leader was still “in charge” of the government as the country grapples



A municipal worker cleans and disinfects walkways in a yard in Moscow, during the strict lockdown in Russia. — AFP

with the continuing crisis.

It was a mixed picture in Europe, where countries already ravaged by deadly COVID-19 outbreaks reported lower numbers of new infections and, in Austria and Italy, began thinking about easing lockdown restrictions.

‘CRITICAL SITUATION’

The new coronavirus has reached almost every corner of the planet, confining nearly half of humanity to their homes and turning life upside down for billions.

The worldwide number of

fatalities from the novel coronavirus rose to 70,009 on Monday.

More than 1.2 million declared cases have now been registered around the world since the epidemic first emerged in China in December.

About three quarters of all deaths have been clocked in Europe, and the US now has the most recorded cases of any country — along with a steadily rising death toll.

But there was hope in parts of Europe after a weekend that saw Italy reporting its lowest death toll in two weeks and France its fewest dead in a week.

“The curve has started its descent and the number of deaths has started to drop”, said top Italian health official Silvio Brusaferro, adding the next phase could be a gradual easing of a strict month-long lockdown.

In Spain, nurse Empar Loren said: “The situation is more stable. The number of patients in intensive care is not growing much anymore, and we are starting to discharge quite a few”.

Hard-hit Spain recorded deaths down for a fourth straight day on Monday — but still logged 637 fatalities.

MAKESHIFT MORGUES

At a field hospital set up at a Madrid conference centre, staff applauded whenever a patient was healthy enough to be sent home.

The effective mothballing of the global economy is beginning to hit hard with analysts warning millions of jobs will be lost despite unprecedented stimulus programmes.

Germany announced that the government would guarantee loans for small businesses but France was gloomy, with Finance Minister

Bruno le Maire estimating that the 2020 crunch would be “far beyond” the previous post-1945 worst case.

Iran, whose economy has suffered the double blow of the virus and punishing US sanctions, said it would allow “low-risk” economic activity to resume as daily infection rates fell for a fifth straight day.

But some in poorer countries are already chafing against curfews destroying their livelihoods.

“How can anyone stay home without anything to eat?” asked Garcia Landu, a motorcycle taxi driver in Angola’s bustling capital, Luanda.

“Better to die of this disease or gunshot than to starve to death”.

Despite the gloom, heartwarming examples of humanity around the globe have lifted spirits, with ordinary people doing what they can to help those on the medical frontline. In a Barcelona restaurant, chefs flipped burgers to deliver to nurses and doctors.

“When you deliver the food and you see they’re happy, that makes us happy and it makes us stronger”, said delivery man Daniel Valls.

And in the southern Italian city of Naples, a street artist lowered a “solidarity food basket” from his balcony, hollering: “If you can, put something in. If you can’t, take something out”.

“We started by putting a piece of bread, a bag of pasta, a box of peeled tomatoes,” said English-language tutor Teresa Cardo, who also lowered a basket.

“And two hours later, the basket was completely full”. — AFP



E-learning learning curve to replace face-to-face teaching

SUMIT SAXENA

The

he coronavirus pandemic has pushed the education system online, a challenge which could test the schools’ ability to provide quality learning for all. Digital technology replaces face-to-face teaching, paving the way for visual learning and to deliver lessons to children at home.

The COVID-19 crisis has already initiated the change in the conventional approach to education, and presents an opportunity for teachers to deploy innovations during the outbreak for a lasting change, where technologies will play a bigger role in schools in the future.

The schools are using existing platforms from the likes of Microsoft and Google as well as the conferencing apps like Zoom to conduct classroom

programmes for their pupils.

Speaking on the essence of design of the e-learning programme for children, Manju Sethi, Principal Bluebells School International, said: “The school has adopted e-learning to engage children meaningfully — both physically and emotionally. Lessons are made interesting for children and we encourage them to become independent learners. The school is already equipped with digital learning — teachers’ have been trained on Microsoft apps. We have adopted the universal backward design module. We have also trained teachers to explore digital platforms. Learning at home is an opportunity for the child.”

Digital learning also focuses on establishing connectivity between

Digital learning also focuses on establishing connectivity between children, while they participate in the e-learning programme. The programme also helps in developing communication among the children. Especially in completing digitally designed classroom assignments, for example story telling in

primary classes.

primary classes.

Monica Sagar, Principal, Shiv Nadar School, Gurugram, said the Shiv Nadar schools have been using online platforms since March 16 to hold scholastic classes and co-scholastic appreciation sessions; share annual academic results.

“Held orientations to the new sections; give an e-farewell to staff transferring out of school; have an SMC meeting and have confluences as well as training sessions for staff. We have ensured that teaching and learning and other school activities do not suffer owing to the lockdown” said Sagar.

Apeejay School International Principal Ritu Mehta said, “Through digital learning home becomes school and school goes beyond learning, as lessons are planned technologically,

We have developed a time table for the students to learn while they are home. Teachers at the school are already technology savvy. In the digital curriculum teachers develop powerpoint presentations to engage children. Visual learning will replace theoretical learning, in fact this is the future and we are already preparing for it. Since March 11, we have already rolled out digital classroom contact module for class 10 and 12 students.”

Juhi Tandon, whose children attend K R Mangalam World School, said she is extremely happy with the e-learning module of the school.

“It is a great effort by the school as the students of the secondary section are not missing on their academic curriculum”, added Tandon. — IANS



Soldiers patrol an empty Saint Mark's Square on Palm Sunday in Venice, Italy. – Reuters

Europe’s forces squeezed as infections balloon

TANGI SALAÜN

M

ilitary forces across Europe have scaled back operations and imposed stricter rules on personnel to try to stem the spread of the coronavirus among staff who often live and work in close quarters, making them more vulnerable to infection.

Preventing the virus’ proliferation among the military is important both for national security and because specialist army, navy and airforce units are being drafted in to help governments tackle the virus in many countries.

Germany mobilised 15,000 soldiers to help local authorities tackle the crisis, for example, while Poland activated thousands of troops to patrol streets under lockdown, disinfect hospitals and support border control, its defence ministry said.

Events aboard the US aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt have highlighted the risk of the disease spreading rapidly among personnel. The nuclear-powered vessel with 5,000 crew is now docked in Guam, a US territory, so everyone can be tested.

The US Navy has relieved the ship’s captain of his command after he wrote a letter flagging concerns about a lack of proper measures to contain the highly infectious disease.

In France, Italy and Spain, among the nations hardest hit by the outbreak, military operations have been curtailed or in some cases suspended.

Germany has changed rules, with no roll-calls or mustering of troops and the quarantining of some staff, while Turkish armed forces have imposed social distancing in mess rooms and

dormitories, among other measures.

On Sunday, Turkey said it was limiting troop movements in Syria as cases of the coronavirus jumped.

“We have had to cancel non-essential maritime missions and deployments, or modify their scope,” said French army command spokesman Colonel Frederic Barbry, adding that there had as yet been no impact on “operational capability”.

In eastern France, 600 military personnel have contracted the virus, the defence minister said last Friday, while four soldiers serving with the Barkhane operation against militants in West Africa are also infected.

“There will be an impact from this crisis, not only in the resources available for defence and security but in how those resources are distributed,” said Malcolm Chalmers, deputy-director of the Royal United Services Institute, a think-tank.

Testing of military personnel is critical, but it is unclear how widespread it is.

Britain, France and Turkey declined to say how many military personnel had been tested or had contracted COVID-19, the disease the coronavirus causes.

The Italian defence ministry would only give information on officers, saying Chief of Staff Salvatore Farina and a dozen others had tested positive. One lieutenant-colonel has died.

In Spain, which stands second behind the United States for the number of infections at more than 130,000, the defence ministry said 230 personnel had tested positive, while some 3,000 military staff are in self-isolation.

Spain’s chief of defence staff, Air Force General Miguel Angel Villarroya, said no naval operations had been affected by the virus, but the replacement of staff serving with the EU’s Atalanta operation off the Horn of Africa had been interrupted.

“We had to postpone and repatriate the staff who were to replace those on the mission because we found a person infected with the virus,” he said.

A spokesman for the German defence ministry said around 250 soldiers were infected, with fewer than 10 hospitalised.

Among them are a handful of soldiers serving with a Nato mission in Lithuania, where they act as a deterrent against Russian interference. A military spokesman said manoeuvres had been suspended because of the coronavirus, even if the main objective of the mission remained in place.

German troops going to Afghanistan are being put in 14 days of self-isolation first, while four Italian soldiers deployed to Kabul tested positive when they arrived. Some 200 of the 800 Italian soldiers deployed in Iraq are returning home.

But as infections may be starting to peak in Europe, a core concern is ensuring military personnel seconded to combat the virus are not themselves infected.

British authorities have been criticised for shortcomings in testing, with only around 65,000 tests conducted as of April 2 among a population of 66 million.

The health secretary has promised 100,000 tests a day by the end of the month.— Reuters

Death at home: the unseen toll of Italy’s coronavirus crisis

EMILIO PARODI

I

t took Silvia Bertuletti 11 days of frantic phone calls to persuade a doctor to visit her 78-year-old father Alessandro, who was gripped by fever and struggling for breath.

When an on-call physician did go to her house near Bergamo, at the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in northern Italy, on the evening of March 18, it was too late.

Alessandro Bertuletti was pronounced dead at 1:10 am on March 19, 10 minutes before an ambulance called hours earlier arrived. The only medication he had been prescribed, over the phone, was a mild painkiller and a broad-spectrum antibiotic.

“My father was left to die alone, at home, without help,” Bertuletti, 48, said. “We were simply abandoned. No one deserves an end like that.”

Interviews with families, doctors and nurses in Italy’s stricken Lombardy region indicate that Bertuletti’s experience is not uncommon, that scores are dying at home as symptoms go unchecked and that phone consultations are not always enough.

In Bergamo province alone, according to a recent study of death records, the real death toll from the outbreak could be more than double the official tally of 2,060, which only tracks hospital fatalities.

As the global fight to save lives centres on boosting the supply of hospital ventilators, some doctors say a lack of primary health care is proving just as costly because medics cannot or will not make home visits, in line with a worldwide tactic of switching to remotely delivered medical advice.

“What led to this situation is that many family doctors didn’t visit their patients for weeks,” said Riccardo Munda, who is doing the work of two doctors in Selvino and Nembro, two towns near Bergamo, after a colleague caught the virus.

“And I can’t blame them, because that’s how they saved their own skin.” He said many deaths could be avoided if people at home received prompt medical help, but doctors were swamped, lacked enough masks and suits to protect themselves from infection and were discouraged from making visits unless absolutely necessary.

“Doctors give people at home a treatment. But if this treatment doesn’t work, if there is no doctor who checks and changes or adjusts the medicines, then the patient dies.”

While hospital workers were given priority access to masks, some family doctors say they went without and so felt unable to visit patients safely.

A spokeswoman for the state-run ATS health agency in Bergamo said authorities in the Lombardy region, rated among the world’s most efficient for health services, told family doctors to “deal with patients by phone as much as possible”, limiting home visits “to reduce contagion and waste of protective equipment”. — Reuters

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Oman trials drone use in parcel delivery and inventory counting

PROMISING RESULTS: PARCEL DELIVERIES TESTED FOR FAST AND MORE EFFICIENT OPERATION; INVENTORY COUNTING EXPERIMENT CONDUCTED WITH OVER 99.7 PER CENT ACCURACY



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

The technology team in Oman Logistics Centre (OLC) and Asyad have experimented parcel delivery and inventory stock counting using drones, demonstrating the advantages of adopting 4th Industrial Revolution (4th IR) technologies to improve the efficiency of logistics operations, reduce costs and increase productivity.

The first experiment saw packages delivered in Nizwa and Muscat. The Nizwa drone transported a parcel

weighing approximately 1.5kg nearly three kilometres in just over four minutes, matching best global drone delivery speeds.

The Muscat drone successfully transported a parcel weighing approximately 5kg in less than four and a half minutes before returning, a round trip of over 3km. Both deliveries demonstrated an impressive proof of concept and potentially opening the way to commercial parcel services in the near future.

OLC's inventory drone experiments

were also highly successful, producing the first robotic warehouse stock count in the Sultanate.

The experiment, which was observed in partnership with A'Saffa Logistics and attended by representatives from eight other prominent Omani logistics companies, used specialized indoor drones to track pallets of goods in real time.

Equipped with a long-range laser scanner, HD camera and onboard software that allowed for autonomous operations, the inventory drone took

just 2.6 seconds to scan each pallet and generate a report that it shared wirelessly with a base-station. The drone conducted its scans with over 99.7 per cent accuracy and could operate continuously for up to 30 minutes between battery changes.

The trials managed by the technology team at OLC and Asyad are the latest example of the importance of investing in powerful and emerging technologies which have the potential to enhance productivity, streamlining outcomes and improving service offerings across the Sultanate.

Foreign assets of Oman's SGRF rise 5.2 per cent to RO 6.6 billion



CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

The gross foreign assets of the State General Reserve Fund (SGRF) – the biggest sovereign wealth fund of the Sultanate of Oman – increased 5.2 per cent to RO 6.659 billion as of September 30, 2019, up from RO 6.328 billion as of December 31, 2018, according to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

In contrast, the gross foreign assets of the CBO declined 0.8 per cent to RO 6.632 billion as of September-end 2019, down from RO 6.686 billion in December 2018, the apex bank said.

The figures were among the highlights of a report on Oman's Foreign Trade and Balance of Payments for the first nine months of 2019 (January – September) published by the CBO earlier this week.

It looked at, among other things, the implications of falling expatriate manpower and the resulting decline in outward remittances, on the current account balance.

"The trade balance improved during Jan-Sept 2019, as merchandise imports dropped considerably and compensated more than the decline in merchandise exports," said the Central Bank in its report.

"As the expatriate workers declined by 2.6 per cent in September 2019 over their level a year ago, it is expected that workers' remittance would have also declined accordingly during Jan-Sept 2019. With improved trade balance and an expected decline in worker's remittances, the current account balance seems to have recorded improvement during Jan-Sept 2019.

The overall balance of payments, however, became negative as reflected by a decline in the country's net foreign exchange reserves during this period. Notwithstanding improvement, the elevated current account deficit remains a challenge for public policy. The fiscal deficit also causes the current account deficit (CAD) through a large dependence on imports for both consumption and investment. Hence, the fiscal consolidation being pursued would help in further reducing the CAD in the future," the report stated, noting that the fiscal deficit declined to RO 1.5 billion during Jan-Sept 2019, down from RO 1.9 billion during Jan-Sept 2018.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Petrofac announces manpower and salary reductions

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

International oilfield services giant Petrofac Limited has announced manpower reductions, staff furloughs and salary cutbacks across its global operations in response to the economic crisis sparked by the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).

The announcement will have significant implications for Oman, which is currently one of the largest markets for the oilfield services group with several billion dollars' worth of contracts currently in various stages of implementation.

"In this period of unprecedented disruption, we are taking decisive actions to improve our cost competitiveness and protect the long-term health of our business," said Petrofac in a statement.

"These include: Reducing and structurally rebasing salaries and allowances for our Board, senior management and most of our employees by between 10-15 per cent; Reducing personnel by c.20 per cent and furloughing staff in anticipation of a reduction in activity levels; and Reducing non-staff overhead costs by up to 25 per cent."

Just last week, the UK-headquartered oilfield and engineering



COST-COMPETITIVENESS: OMAN ACCOUNTED FOR A FOURTH OF PETROFAC'S GLOBAL REVENUES IN 2019

services contractor had revealed that Oman was the biggest revenue earner for the group, accounting for around a quarter of its total revenue of US\$5.5 billion in 2019.

The contractor is currently undertaking a sizable portfolio of prestigious upstream, midstream, refining and petrochemical projects totaling several billions of dollars

in government and public sector investments in the Sultanate.

The biggest of these is Duqm Refinery with Petrofac's contract share totalling around \$1.1 billion. Other key projects being executed by Petrofac include BP Oman's Khazzan Phase 2 project (contract value of \$800 million), the Salalah LPG project of OQ (formerly Oman Oil & Orpic

Group) with a contract value of \$600 million, and a number of projects awarded by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

The measures, it said, are in response to "the unprecedented market conditions affecting our industry, clients and business". It includes reductions in overhead and project support costs by at least \$100

million in 2020 and up to \$200 million in 2021. The group also announced plans to conserve cash and liquidity by reducing capex by 40 per cent and suspending the 2019 final dividend.

Significantly, Petrofac is the second major player in Oman's hydrocarbon sector to announce sweeping measures in response to the snowballing crisis sparked by the pandemic and the

collapse in international oil prices.

Late last month, majority state-owned Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) sent letters to its major contractors and service providers directing them to explore options for achieving savings of at least 30 per cent of their contract values. Other operators and players are expected to follow suit as well.

A spokesperson for Petrofac said: "As we have announced this morning, we are targeting a number of measures to reduce our costs across the Group. These prudent measures are consistent with the industry's efforts to align costs to the challenges of the current environment, although you should not expect these measures to apply evenly across each of our markets.

"Petrofac is confident that it will maintain first class service delivery in Oman. We are working on several major projects and plan to continue to invest in local content and Omanization over the long term. Oman remains a very important market for Petrofac – we have a long history of operating in Oman and are committed to playing a key role in the future development of Oman's energy industry, including through training of local people."



Madayn’s Shumookh Investment to manage Barkha Application



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

Shumookh Investment and Services, the investment arm of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates – Madayn, signed a partnership agreement with Ibn Al Muallem United Trading to manage and operate the Barkha app. The agreement was signed by Eng Musallam al Hudaifi, Chief Executive Officer of Shumookh Investment and Services, and Juma’a al Rawahi, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Ibn Al Muallem United Trading.

Founded by young Omani cadres, Barkha app is dedicated to road freight transportation services, which aims at providing job opportunities for the Omanis in the field of logistics. The application serves companies and individuals wishing to transport freight from

one place to another whether within or outside the Sultanate, as well as owners of trucks and Omani drivers working in 100% Omani transportation companies. The two sides have also confirmed their partnership in Shumookh’s Makhazen Logistics Company.

Madayn established Shumookh Investment and Services in 2010 to develop infrastructure projects and encourage investments in Madayn’s industrial cities. The vision of Shumookh is to develop globally competitive industrial infrastructure in the industrial cities of Madayn and create the best environment for the growth of industries in Oman through the attraction of strategic partnerships to invest and implementation of diverse infrastructure development projects in the industrial cities pertaining to Madayn

2.5pc growth in banking credit to private sector: CBO

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

The total outstanding credit extended by other depository corporations (ODCs) in the Sultanate – comprising conventional and Islamic banks -- grew by 2.5 per cent RO 25.9 billion at the end of February2020, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) announced in its newly public review of banking and monetary developments for February 2020.

Credit to the private sector rose by 2.5 per cent to RO 22.9 billion, it stated. Of the total credit to the private sector, the non-financial corporate sector and the household sector (mainly under personal loans) received shares of 45.5 per cent and 45.1 per cent, respectively, while the financial corporations received 5.4 per cent and other sectors the remaining 4.0 per cent.

Total deposits held with ODCs registered a growth of 4.0 per cent and stood at RO 23.6 billion at the end of February2020. Private sector deposits increased by 7.2 per cent to RO 15.4 billion.

Sector-wise, the share of households in the total private sector deposit was largest at 50.0 per cent, followed by non-financial corporations at 30.9 per cent, financial corporations at 16.8 per cent and the other sectors at 2.3 per cent, the apex bank said.

“The combined balance sheet of conventional banks denotes an annual growth of 1.4 per cent in total outstanding credit as on end-February2020. Conventional banks’ credit to the private sector increased



by 0.8 per cent to about RO 19 billion. Conventional banks’ overall investments in securities amounted to RO 3.8 billion,” the Central Bank noted.

Investment in Government Development Bonds and Government Sukuk increased by 21.9 per cent over the year to RO 1.7 billion. Banks also invested RO 278.3 million in Government Treasury Bills, while their investments in foreign securities stood at RO 1.2 billion at the end of February 2020.

Aggregate deposits held with conventional banks increased to RO 20.1 billion in February2019, registering a growth of 3.4 per cent

TOTAL DEPOSITS HELD WITH ODCS REGISTERED A GROWTH OF 4.0 PER CENT AND STOOD AT RO 23.6 BILLION AT THE END OF FEBRUARY2020. PRIVATE SECTOR DEPOSITS INCREASED BY 7.2 PER CENT TO RO 15.4 BILLION.

over the level a year ago. Government deposits with conventional banks decreased by 5.4 per cent to RO 5.2 billion, while deposits of public enterprises increased by 21.7 per

cent to RO 1.3 billion. Private sector deposits, which accounted for 65.6 per cent of total deposits with conventional banks, increased by 5.3 per cent to RO 13.2 billion.

Islamic banking entities provided financing to the extent of RO 4 billion at the end of February 2020, recording a growth of 9.5 per cent over that a year ago.

Total deposits held with Islamic banks and windows increased by 7.3 per cent to RO 3.5 billion.

The total assets of Islamic banks and Windows stood at RO 4.9 billion and constituted about 14 per cent of the banking system assets as on end-February2020.



PAUL DUCKLIN

POINT of VIEW

Five things you can do to make Zooming safer

Work still means meetings, and meetings still mean people.

But with the coronavirus pandemic having caused many countries to define a “group” as a maximum of two people, and prohibiting people from meeting up face-to-face anyway, even with friends and family, then meeting with people means an online meeting.

For very many of us, that means Zoom, not least because many of us were using Zoom already, and happily, and.....or so we thought, safely. But Zoom has had a bunch of security scares recently, as huge numbers of new users flock to it, and as crooks and miscreants try to take advantage of that.

Fortunately, a lot of the problems and risks people are having can be reduced enormously just by getting the basics right.

Unfortunately, a lot of the habits that existing Zoom users have fallen into need to change.

Insecure shortcuts – ways of using Zoom that the old-timers have inadvertently been teaching to the Zoom newcomers – didn’t seem to matter that much before, but they do now. So here are our top 5 “things to get right first” – they shouldn’t take you long, and they are easy to do.

1. Patch early, patch often

Zoom’s own CEO just wrote a blog post announcing a “feature freeze” in the product so that the company can focus on security issues instead. It’s much easier to do that if you aren’t adding new code at the same time.



Why not get into the habit of checking you’re up-to-date every day, before your first meeting? Even if Zoom itself told you about an update the very last time you used it, get in the habit of checking by hand anyway, just to be sure. It doesn’t take long.

By the way, we recommend you do this with all your software – even if you have been using your operating system’s or an app’s auto-updating for years and it’s always been on time, a manual cross-check is quick and easy.

2. Use the Waiting Room option

Set up meetings so that the participants can’t join in until you open it up.

And if you suddenly find yourself “on hold until the organiser starts the meeting” when in the past you would have spent the time chatting to your colleagues and getting the smalltalk over with, don’t complain – those

pre-meeting meetings are great for socialising but they do make it harder to control the meeting.

3. Take control over screen sharing

Until recently, most Zoom meetings (or at least the ones we attended in the not-too-distant era before coronavirus) took a liberal approach to screen sharing.

But the term ZoomBombing entered our vocabulary very forcefully about two weeks ago, when a public “Happy Hour” meeting that was supposed to buoy everyone’s morale turned into an HR nightmare when one of the participants, who had entered under a false name, started sharing pornographic filth. (Unhappily for the organiser of the meeting, he’d chosen that day to invite his parents along as guests of honour.)

Actually, it’s not just screen

sharing that can cause trouble. There are numerous controls you can apply to participants in meetings, including blocking file sharing and private chat, kicking out disruptive users, and stopping troublemakers coming back.

4. Use random meeting IDs and set meeting passwords

We know lots of Zoom users who memorised their own meeting ID long ago and had fallen into the habit of using it for every meeting they held – even back-to-back meetings with different groups – because they knew they’d never need to look it up.

But that convenience is handy for crooks, too, because they already have a list of known IDs that they can try automatically in the hope of wandering in where they aren’t supposed to be.

We recommend using a randomly generated meeting ID, and setting a

password on any meeting that is not explicitly open to all. You can send the web link by one means, e.g. in an email or invitation request, and the password by another means, e.g. in an instant message just before the meeting starts. (You can also lock meetings once they start to avoid gaining unwanted visitors after you’ve started concentrating on the meeting itself.)

5. Make some rules of etiquette and stick to them.

Etiquette may sound like a strange bedfellow for cybersecurity, and perhaps it is.

But respect for privacy, a sense of trust, and a feeling of social and business comfort are also important parts of a working life that’s now dominated by online meetings.

If you’re expected or you need to use video, pay attention to your appearance and the lighting. (In very blunt terms: try to avoid being a pain to watch.) Remember to use the mute button when you can.

And most importantly – especially if there are company outsiders in the meeting – be very clear up front if you will be recording the meeting, even if you are in a jurisdiction that does not require you to declare it. And make it clear if they are any restrictions, albeit informal ones, about what the participants are allowed to do with the information they learn in the meeting.

Etiquette isn’t about keeping the bad guys out. But respectful rules of engagement for remote meetings help to make it easy for everyone in the meeting to keep the good stuff in. (Paul Ducklin, principal research scientist, Sophos)

Zoom has had a bunch of security scares recently, as huge numbers of new users flock to it, and as crooks and miscreants try to take advantage of that.

Oil falls after Saudi Arabia and Russia delay meeting

LONDON: Oil prices fell on Monday, after Saudi Arabia and Russia delayed a meeting to discuss output cuts that could help reduce global oversupply as the coronavirus pandemic pummels demand.

Brent crude fell more than \$3 when Asian markets opened but recovered some ground with traders hopeful that a deal between the top producers was still within reach.

At 0814 GMT, Brent was down \$1.10, or 3.2 per cent, at \$33.01 a barrel. US crude were 84 cents, or 3 per cent, lower at \$27.50 a barrel, off a session low of \$25.28.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies, a group known as Opec+,



is expected to meet on Thursday, instead of Monday, to discuss cutting production.

“Perhaps it is best that the meeting was delayed for producers to cement a minimum of common ground before

the actual discussions take place on Thursday,” said BNP Paribas analyst Harry Tchilinguirian, although he said initial disappointment at the delay had driven down prices in Asian business.

Opec+ is working on a deal to cut oil production by about 10 per cent of world supply, or 10 million barrels per day (bpd), in what member states expect to be an unprecedented global effort.

The countries are “very, very close” to a deal on cuts, one of Russia’s top oil negotiators, Kirill Dmitriev, who heads the nation’s wealth fund, told CNBC.

But Rystad Energy’s head of oil markets Bjornar Tonhaugen said even if the group agree to cut up to 15 million bpd, “it will only be enough to scratch the surface of the more than 23 million bpd supply overhang predicted for April 2020.”

Still, sentiment was lifted by Saudi

Arabia’s decision to delay releasing its crude official selling prices to Friday to wait for the outcome of the Opec+ meeting.

US President Donald Trump has said he would impose tariffs on crude imports if he needed to protect US energy workers from the oil price crash that has been exacerbated by the war between Russia and Saudi Arabia over market share.

Rig counts in the United States fell by 62 last week, energy services firm Baker Hughes Co said, marking the biggest weekly drop in five years, as US energy companies slashed spending on new drilling due to a coronavirus-related slump in economic activity and fuel demand. —Reuters

Rolls-Royce scraps targets, dividend on pandemic hit



A Rolls-Royce logo is seen at the company’s aerospace engineering and development site in Bristol, Britain. – Reuters

LONDON: Rolls-Royce is scrapping its targets and final dividend to shore up its finances as the British aero-engine maker’s customers around the world ground planes due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Rolls, one of Britain’s most historic industrial names, which before the coronavirus crisis struck was trying to emerge from a multi-year turnaround plan, has suspended its dividend for the first time since 1987.

The company’s engines power Airbus and Boeing’s widebody jets but more than 60 per cent of that fleet is now grounded, according to aviation data provider Cirium.

Rolls-Royce is paid by airlines based on how many hours they fly. Over the last six weeks, the headwind from coronavirus was about 300 million pounds, Rolls-Royce said, on flying hours which were 50 per cent lower in March and expected to deteriorate further in April.

Chief executive Warren East said the company’s focus was on strengthening its financial resilience, and as such it would be looking at cutting its cash expenditure, including reducing salary costs across its global workforce by at least 10 per cent this year.

Rolls-Royce also said on Monday it had secured an additional 1.5 billion pound revolving credit facility, bringing its overall liquidity to 6.7 billion pounds, to give it headroom during a potential prolonged downturn.

Withdrawing its previously announced guidance for 2020, Rolls-Royce said its board was no longer recommending its final dividend in respect of 2019, saving 137 million pounds. — Reuters

Samsung’s first quarter profit likely to be flat

SEOUL: The coronavirus-driven global shift to working from home is set to have boosted demand for Samsung Electronics’ memory chips from laptop makers and data centres, but first-quarter profits are likely to remain flat as the outbreak weakened consumer electronics sales.

The South Korean tech giant is the world’s largest memory chip maker, and its Galaxy smartphones are a major rival of Apple Inc’s products.

Samsung releases guidance for the January-March quarter profit which is widely expected to be unchanged, and come under pressure in the next few quarters as the impact of coronavirus-related factory and retail stores shutdowns bites.

“The visibility for Samsung’s earnings is low for the second quarter,” said Lee Do-hoon, an analyst at CIMB Research.

For the quarter which just ended, Samsung is likely to estimate its operating profit at 6.2 trillion won (\$5.05 billion), unchanged from the same period a year ago, according to Refinitiv SmartEstimate, weighted towards more consistently accurate analysts.

However, the company already warned last month that the pandemic would hurt sales of smartphones and consumer electronics goods this year, and analysts said a prolonged virus outbreak could put higher demand for memory chips at risk.

“If COVID-19 continues into 2H20, the memory market outlook could change for the worse,” CW Chung, head of research at Nomura in Korea, said in a recent report.

When the outbreak first started in China last year, Samsung’s strategy of spreading out its production base to countries including Vietnam and India seemed to pay off: rivals such as Apple were hit by supply disruptions as China shut down factories and locked down cities to control the coronavirus.

—Reuters

Asian firms rush to meet \$69 billion in Q2 debt refinancing

HONG KONG: Companies in the Asia Pacific need to raise a near record \$69.3 billion to refinance their existing borrowings in the second quarter, Refinitiv figures show, as the region’s capital markets remain turbulent due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The level of US dollar corporate debt due to mature in the region, including Japan and China, is the second highest on record and only slightly behind the \$71.4 billion that was due during the same time last year.

Some of China’s largest state-owned enterprises are the leading contenders to refinance debt with oil giant SinOpec Group, which has a 5-year bond worth \$2.48 billion maturing in April while power utility State Grid has a three-year \$898.5 million bond expiring at the same time, according to Refinitiv.

The data shows a Soft Bank Group bond worth \$2.48 billion due to mature on April 18, and the conglomerate flagged it planned to carry out \$41 billion worth of asset sales to buy back shares and pay down debt.

Australia’s banks are likely to be active in the US dollar bond markets in the next few months with National Australia Bank and Westpac Banking Corp having a combined \$3.14 billion worth of bonds due to expire.

The rush of refinancing deals comes as Asia’s debt markets are performing well behind the rest of the world.

Bankers said well known corporates should be able to refinance but lower rated companies and those with ratings considered ‘on the edge’ by ratings agencies could face trouble.

“Massive stimulus has been



People wearing protective masks are pictured at The Bund in front of the Lujiazui financial district of Pudong in Shanghai, China. – Reuters

THE LEVEL OF US DOLLAR CORPORATE DEBT DUE TO MATURE IN THE REGION, INCLUDING JAPAN AND CHINA, IS THE SECOND HIGHEST ON RECORD AND ONLY SLIGHTLY BEHIND THE \$71.4 BILLION THAT WAS DUE DURING THE SAME TIME LAST YEAR

provided by governments worldwide as they seek to keep the wheels turning. It remains to be seen how this will

translate into support for the more challenged credits in the coming weeks,” said Raj Malhotra, head of Societe Generale’s Asia Pacific debt capital markets (DCM) unit.

JPMorgan’s head of Asian DCM origination, excluding Japan, Amy Tan said an increasing number of Asian businesses were looking to diversify their funding sources this year.

“Companies are looking at all forms of alternative financing, including bank loans and local currency markets, to manage financing,” she said.

A record \$220 billion has been raised in the US corporate credit market in the past fortnight, while just

\$2.57 billion has been raised in Asia during that same time, Refinitiv data shows.

The majority of the Asian volume was made up of Chinese search engine company Baidu Inc and insurer AIA raising \$1 billion each last week.

Nomura’s head of Asia, excluding Japan, DCM syndication Alister Moss said Asian markets were lagging the United States and Europe because of their respective central banks’ moves to allow increased credit purchases which gave bond markets confidence.

“We don’t have that in Asia, and so our market is recovering more slowly,” he added. — Reuters

Boeing extends Washington state production shutdown

WASHINGTON: Boeing Co said it would extend the suspension of production operations at its Washington state facilities until further notice amid the coronavirus outbreak.

The largest US planemaker said on March 23 it would halt production at its Washington state twin-aisle jetliner factory as a temporary measure to help fight the outbreak of the respiratory disease. Production had been expected to resume early this week.

Boeing declined to say when production could resume. It said the actions were “being taken in light of the company’s continuing focus on the health and safety of employees, current assessment of the spread of COVID-19 in Washington state, the reliability of the supply chain and additional recommendations from government health authorities.”

Boeing will stop paying about 30,000 production workers this week in Washington state after it previously doubled to 10 days



A worker leaves the Boeing Everett Factory, amid the coronavirus disease outbreak, in Everett, Washington, US. – Reuters

the amount of paid leave it gave to production workers after the suspension. Employees can use paid time off, vacation and sick leave in the interim and will continue to get medical benefits.

Boeing said on Sunday about 135 members of its 160,000-person global workforce had tested positive for the coronavirus.

The Seattle Times reported that as of Friday, Boeing had 95 employees who tested positive for the respiratory disease in Washington state, up from 54 a week earlier. The newspaper said 14 of those work at the Everett widebody jet plant.

During the suspension, Boeing will implement additional health and safety measures, including “new visual cues to encourage physical distancing,” more frequent cleaning of work and common areas and staggered shift times.

“We will take this time to continue to listen to our incredible team and assess applicable government direction, the spread of the

coronavirus in the community and the reliability of our suppliers,” said Boeing Commercial Airplanes Chief Executive Stan Deal.

Boeing’s airline customers have deferred taking new aircraft and making pre-delivery down payments, compounding a crisis over the year-old grounding of Boeing’s previously fast-selling 737 MAX jet after two fatal crashes. Boeing halted 737 production in January.

Boeing asked last month for at least \$60 billion in US government loan guarantees for itself and other American aerospace manufacturers to help the embattled industry withstand a coronavirus-related cash drain.

Boeing said last week it would suspend operations at its Ridley Township, Pennsylvania, facilities until April 20 because of the outbreak. The site includes manufacturing and production facilities for military rotorcraft, including the H-47 Chinook, V-22 Osprey and MH-139A Grey Wolf. — Reuters



BACK TO OLD VILLAGES



MAI AL ABRI

Many Omanis who abandoned their old houses years back wish to return to the old neighbourhoods as they recall the old memories of their childhood. For several reasons and purposes, they had to move to new blocks, they had to think modern but their hearts remained in their old alleys and clay-made houses. urban cultural tourism is a growing phenomenon in the world and in Oman in particular. With the renovation of the old neighbourhoods, it is predicted that the number of tourists will increase. "tourists come from all around the world to see the ancient houses and landmarks. However, they don't enjoy wandering around the wreckage of old houses," says Rashid al Abri, a teacher of History.

"since these houses are private properties to residents, many people in old neighbourhoods in Willayat of al Hamra, al Dakhiliyah Governorate, decided to renovate their old houses to partially live there in special occasions," he explains. With the urban expansion and the increase in the family members, many families before ten years or so made the choice to move from old houses in the old neighbourhoods to modern blocks. At that time, they made the perfect choice but yearning to their old places now motivated them to restore their old houses. In "Harat al Gharb", for example, in al Hamra, many families felt that their old houses that have been left for ages now, are the ideal place for gathering in the special occasion like Eids and the Holy month of Ramadhan. Many houses are being reconstructed or restored, depending on the condi-



tion of the house. While this change has been positive on many levels (flexibility and mobility in terms of children's education and gave more space to agriculture expansion in villages), it made some other changes to intimacy of the village. Only few families remained in the village and most of the families consist of members who are quite old (above 20 years old). The neighbourhood was left without children and became really quiet. "The laughs of children disappeared from the neighbourhood," said Shaikha al Khiyariya, a grandmother. "I used to live with my daughter who got married a year ago and she left with her husband. My children and grandchildren come to visit me in the weekends and sometimes in the night when they are free. They are all engaged with their lives and schools of children." From her side, Eida al Oufi says "my

daughters rented houses near my house and they regularly come in the weekends and occasions. It feels good that young people still favour living in the old neighbourhoods and I noticed that many old houses around us are being reconstructed." Emotions about all of this change are mixed," says Abdullah al Abri. "each neighbourhood has its unique style. Where we live now, all services are available and close to the house. However, we lost that intimacy that we used to feel in the old house. You don't feel bored there because when you go outside your doorstep, you will surely meet the next door neighbour sitting by his doorstep. But there you struggle to keep anything secret from them." "I am glad that we planned to renovate our old house. Even for one day, I would like to feel the old emotions and it will bring back lost memories of our childhood," he commented.



F1 in 'very fragile state', warns McLaren boss Brown

LONDON: McLaren boss Zak Brown said on Sunday that the coronavirus pandemic has plunged Formula One into "a very fragile state", warning that as many as four teams could even be driven out of business.

The 2020 world championship has been unable to start with eight races of a scheduled 22 already either scrapped or postponed.

"This is potentially devastating

to teams, and if (it is devastating) to enough teams then it's very threatening to F1 as a whole," Brown told the BBC on the eve of a meeting planned to discuss cost-cutting in the sport.

Brown insisted that all the teams have agreed to lower the 2021 budget cap to \$150m (138.7 million euros) down from \$175 million.

However, he said the ceiling needs

to be reduced further to counter the financial fall-out from the virus-hit season.

"Could I see — through what is going on right now in the world if we don't tackle this situation head on very aggressively — two teams disappearing? Yeah," said Brown.

"In fact, I could see four teams disappearing if this isn't handled the right way.

"And then, given how long it takes to ramp up an F1 team, and given the economic and health crisis we are in right now, to think there would be people lined up to take over those teams like there has historically been... I don't think the timing could be worse from that standpoint.

"So I think F1 is in a very fragile state at the moment."

— Reuters

China's twerking high jumper Guowei retires at 28

BEIJING: China's world silver-medallist high jumper Zhang Guowei, renowned for his flamboyant twerking celebrations, has stunned fans by announcing his retirement aged 28.

The colourful Zhang won silver at the Beijing 2015 World Championships and also competed at the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympics.

"I'm sorry, I really can't jump anymore, I've decided to retire," Zhang told his 3.4 million followers on the Twitter-like Weibo on Sunday.

However, his form and fitness tailed off after his 2015 triumph and his season's best performance of 2.28m, set in Italy's Siena in February, was some way short of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics qualifying standard of 2.33m.

The Tokyo Games were last week moved to the summer of 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Zhang was suspended in March last year for an undisclosed amount of time for breaking Chinese athletics' strict rules on commercial activities.

His return to the national team was blighted by more mediocre form and bursitis, an inflammation of the joints, the People's Daily said.

But Zhang still had many fans in China because of his quirky character, celebrating successful jumps in an exuberant fashion, twerking and striking poses, before sprinting towards spectators.

His surprise retirement was a trending topic on Weibo on Monday, with many expressing shock and disbelief.

The hashtag "Zhang Guowei retires" was read 260 million times as of Monday afternoon on Weibo.

"Big brother, April's Fool Day has passed," wrote one fan.

— AFP



Former OOC official advises sports bodies to revise strategic plans



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 6

Dr Suleiman al Balushi, former official of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC), said the sports associations, committees and the clubs are advised to utilise this period in revising the strategic plans including the short and long-term objectives.

Al Balushi stressed on minimising the losses from the unexpected period due to the impact of global pandemic COVID-19.

The national sports lecturer stressed to Oman Daily Observer on the importance of working on a full review by sports entities including clubs, associations and committees and revising the existing plans and programmes.

"All the sports organisations are required to work in restructuring their plans and goals based to the future events. Re-setting their strategic goals and objectives based on their experience is a major task. Activating the modern technologies to develop

the human resources including coaches, technical staff, players and referees at this moment through involving them in a dedicated online workshops and seminars are also important," he added.

Dr Suleiman is a licensed sports lecturer in the Sultanate and had attended a sports workshop for Qatar Olympic Committee staff through Qatar Olympic Academy, recently. "This is a real example which I would like to share with all. The Qatari sports entities used the facility of



training the staff remotely and used the advanced technology applications. I was in Muscat on last Wednesday and Thursday and I presented an online workshop to the staff of the Qatar Olympic Committee. There was participation of more than 20 persons. Meanwhile, we can use the same facility locally for different segments including: sports administration, financial/technical/marketing management or any other related topics," Dr Suleiman said.

The former official of OOC highlighted the role of coaches and technical staff during this tough situation.

"Due to the existing circumstance of the COVID-19, it is expected a lot from the coaches/technical staff to maintain the top levels of their players and teams. Using technology will ease performing this task as the outside



Dr Suleiman al Balushi

training is prohibited nowadays due to spread of the coronavirus. For example, many coaches around the world are using the 'Zoom' meeting application to monitor the players training. The continuous follow-up with players on specific training at home and following a good are essential at this period," he added.

He stressed on implementation of the tips for development of the local sports. "Studying the weak points by the associations/committee and seeking for the best solutions will direct them to achieve targets and goals. Our national associations, committees and clubs should revise their plan and programmes at this exceptional time.

I also hope they will focus more on development of the sports human resources through online courses and workshops," he ended.

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Liverpool announced they would use the British government's job-retention scheme. – AFP

LIVERPOOL BECOME FIFTH EPL CLUB TO TAP INTO PUBLIC FUNDS AFTER FURLOUGHING NON-PLAYING STAFF

PREMIER LEAGUE CLUBS FACE BACKLASH

LONDON: Premier League clubs are facing a fierce backlash after Liverpool became the latest club to tap into public funds during the coronavirus pandemic as players and bosses struggle to resolve a festering pay-cut row.

English top-flight clubs, among the wealthiest in the world, have come under intense scrutiny as the health crisis escalates, with government ministers warning bosses and players they should “think carefully” over their next moves.

The highest-paid Premier League players such as David de Gea and Kevin De Bruyne command eye-watering salaries, reportedly nearing £20 million (\$25 million, 23 million euros) a year.

Even the average salary for a Premier League footballer is more than £3 million a year, according to the 2019 Global Sports Salaries Survey.

European champions Liverpool, who recorded pre-tax profits of £42 million in February, announced their decision to furlough some non-playing staff on Saturday, becoming the fifth Premier League club to do so.

The controversial move comes with no sign of a deal between Premier League clubs and players’ representatives on a pay cut.

Olivier Dowden, a culture and sports minister, writing in The Daily Telegraph, said people had a right to expect leadership from football.

“Clubs, players and owners should be thinking very carefully about their next steps,” he said.



Kevin De Bruyne is one of the highest earners at Manchester City. – AFP

“Leaving the public purse to pick up the cost of furloughing low-paid workers, whilst players earn millions and billionaire owners go untouched is something I know the public will rightly take a very dim view of.”

Former Liverpool stars Jamie Carragher and Stan Collymore strongly criticised the move by the Premier League leaders.

Under the scheme, the British government pays 80 per cent of wages. Liverpool said they would top up the remaining 20 per cent.

“I don’t know of any Liverpool fan of any standing that won’t be anything other than disgusted at the club for furloughing staff,” tweeted Collymore.

Liverpool fan group Spirit of Shankly initially supported the move but later wrote to the club expressing concern at the negative reaction.

“We understand this is essentially an employee/employer issue, but as LFC’s recognised official supporter representatives we are concerned about the damage this is causing to our club’s reputation and values,” the



Derby County’s Wayne Rooney has spoken out over the treatment of players during the coronavirus crisis. – AFP

group said. Liverpool’s opponents in last year’s Champions League final, Tottenham, owned by billionaire Joe Lewis, have also opted for the furlough option, along with Newcastle, Norwich and Bournemouth.

Reigning champions Manchester City said they would not be using the government’s job retention scheme, with Manchester United reportedly set to follow their example.

PAY-CUT IMPASSE
The Premier League has been seen as lagging behind other European

leagues in its response to coronavirus — in Spain, Barcelona and Atletico Madrid players have agreed to pay cuts of 70 per cent. The league was last week accused by one British lawmaker of operating in a “moral vacuum” and many politicians have urged action.

The Premier League’s suggested strategy involving a combination of pay cuts and deferrals amounting to 30 per cent of wages, was discussed in a conference call with players’ and managers’ representatives on Saturday. But former England captain Wayne

EVEN THE AVERAGE SALARY FOR A PREMIER LEAGUE FOOTBALLER IS MORE THAN £3 MILLION A YEAR

Rooney has criticised the British government and the Premier League for placing footballers in a “no-win” situation.

Rooney questioned the wisdom of the Premier League in preempting behind-the-scenes talks involving players with its own proposals for sweeping reductions.

“In my opinion it is now a no-win situation,” he said in a newspaper column. “Whatever way you look at it, we’re easy targets.”

Former England striker Gary Lineker echoed Rooney’s sentiments, telling the BBC that footballers he had spoken to were “desperately keen” to offer help but were an easy target.

Burnley manager Sean Dyche said footballers deserved more credit for the work they do to help good causes behind the scenes.

“I have seen footballers do so many good things, so many things financially, so many things with time, care effort and attention,” he told Talksport radio.

The move to force Premier League players to take a pay cut has overwhelming public support.

In a poll conducted by YouGov last week, 92 per cent of respondents said they backed the idea. — AFP