

OMAN

HM sends greetings to Tanzania

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr John Magufuli of Tanzania on the occasion of his country's National Day. His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health and long life to the president and the friendly Tanzanian people more progress and prosperity. — ONA

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT
MAX: 38°C
MIN: 28°C

SALALAH
MAX: 31°C
MIN: 28°C

NIZWA
MAX: 40°C
MIN: 25°C

SUNRISE 05.37 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:17

DHUHR: 12:10

ASR: 15:36

MAGHRIB: 18:38

ISHA: 19:52

115 fresh cases of COVID-19 in Sultanate

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

The Sultanate has registered 115 fresh cases of coronavirus on Saturday, bringing the total patients in the Sultanate to 1,905. On Friday, a 74-year-old Omani citizen became the tenth victim of COVID-19 in the Sultanate. Of the new cases, 69 are from Muscat. Among the new patients, 48 are citizens and 67 expatriates. Muscat stayed top on the list with 1,395 cases (218 recovered, 10

deaths) followed by South Batinah (174 cases, 47 recovered), North Batinah (79 cases, 25 recovered), Al Dakhiliyah (78 cases, 47 recovered), Al Dhahirah (33 cases, 8 recovered), North Sharqiyah (26 cases, 7 recovered), Dhofar (12 cases, 8 recovered), Musandam (five cases, three recovered) and Buraimi (four cases, three recovered). No cases have been reported from Al Wusta.)

PLAN FOR WHOLESALE FRUITS AND VEG MARKET IN KHAZAEN

MAWALEH MARKET TO RESUME ACTIVITIES FROM WEDNESDAY



WHO flags virus immunity as death toll nears 200,000

GENEVA: The World Health Organization warned on Saturday recovering from coronavirus may not protect people from reinfection as the death toll from the pandemic approached 200,000 around the globe. Governments across the world are struggling to limit the economic devastation unleashed by the virus, which has infected nearly 2.8 million people and left half of humanity under some form of lockdown. The United Nations has joined world leaders in a push to speed up development of a vaccine, but effective treatments for COVID-19, the disease caused by coronavirus, are still far off. But with signs the disease is peaking in the US and Europe, governments are starting to ease restrictions, weighing the need for economic recovery against cautions that lifting them too soon risks a second wave of infections.



The WHO warned on Saturday that there is still no evidence that people who test positive for the new coronavirus and recover are immunised and protected against

reinfection. The warning came as some governments study measures such as "immunity passports" or documents for those who have recovered as one way to get people back to work after weeks of economic shutdown. On Friday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres asked for international organisations, world leaders and the private sector to join the effort to speed up development and distribution of a vaccine. Any vaccine should be safe, affordable and available to all, Guterres said at a virtual meeting, which was attended by the leaders of Germany and France. Absent though were the leaders of China, where the virus first emerged late last year, and the United States, which has accused the WHO of not warning quickly enough about the original outbreak. SEE ALSO P5

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

Muscat Municipality is working on a proposal with the ASYAD Group to develop an integrated wholesale market in the Khazaen Economic City in South Al Batinah Governorate. According to a statement from the civic body, the move is part of the government plans to link the ports of the Sultanate directly with the wholesale market. "A study is currently under way to convert the market into an integrated area for traders. A tender in this regard will be floated by the year-end for the private sector participation", the statement said. The integrated market will have more area than the one in Mawaleh. Referring to the restrictions in place for the Central Market for Fruits and Vegetables in Mawaleh,

The move is part of the government plans to link the ports of the Sultanate directly with the wholesale market

the municipality said that retail activity in the Mawaleh market will resume from Wednesday. Vehicles of wholesalers (Category 3) and above are permitted to enter from Saturday (April 25) from 4 am until 11 am. "Work is under way to activate the platform (Athamar) to provide

opportunities for wholesalers, to get the benefit and to develop a marketing mechanism through it", the statement said. Around 6,580 tonnes of vegetables and fruits have arrived at Central Market for Ramadhan. Talking to Oman News Agency earlier, Othman bin Ali al Hattali, Director of Al Mawaleh Central Market for Vegetables and Fruits said, "More than 35 shipments are reaching the market per day and it will increase to more than 40 shipments during the peak period before Eid". The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries has ensured enough stock of vegetables and fruits at the market. The ministry is coordinating with the Public Authority for Consumer Protection (PACP) to ensure that vegetables and fruits are available across the Sultanate at fair prices.



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99841230
99639264
92998577
99429094
99429192

m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com
wadiameeh@yahoo.com
bakhit.omandaily@gmail.com
nizwaofc@omandaily.net.om
sohardaily@outlook.com



Take care when you discard used PPE

SAFE DISPOSAL: PACK THE USED EQUIPMENT IN SEALED BAGS AND PUT THEM IN PROPER TRASH BINS

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

Extra precaution needs to be taken while removing and dumping the personal protective equipment (PPE) after use as this can pose a great health risk during the current coronavirus pandemic, according to Muscat Municipality.

Earlier, the Ministry of Health (MoH) had urged all medical professionals to ensure safe disposal of used PPEs by packing them in sealed bags and putting them in proper trash bins.

“While discarding the single-use gowns, hand gloves, shoe covers, plastic caps etc, civilians as well as medics need to apply extra caution as these ‘wastes’ have chances of being



infected”, a MoH personnel told the *Observer*.

Similarly, used gloves and masks

are dominating at many places in the city and this is posing an environmental issue, according to

Muscat Municipality.

“Used plastic hand gloves and masks are seen randomly thrown here and there. People shouldn’t do that in view of the health and environmental issues by way of microplastic pollution”, a spokesperson at the Muscat Municipality said.

Both the MoH and Muscat Municipality urged people to be careful in disposal of such items in order to contain the spread of COVID-19. “Once these items are randomly dumped into the environment, they break into microplastics after getting into sewer systems or water bodies”.

“These plastic wastes also attract pesticides and other harmful

chemicals and when the marine animals eat them, they don’t just get the plastic, they get the chemicals too”.

Meanwhile, it is advisable to disinfect used clothes etc before putting them into the charity boxes otherwise these materials can be the carriers of virus.

“Used clothes, books and the like, once you discard make it a point to disinfect the whole bundle to avoid virus transmission to the recipient or the volunteer who collects them from the boxes”, representative of an NGO told the *Observer*.

There are hundreds of charity boxes that collect used clothes and other materials to generate funds for the needy.

Goods delivery at Sohar Port and Free Zone unaffected



SOHAR: The Sohar Port and Free Zone continues to operate in full swing despite the latest developments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The work team is endeavouring to ramp up the handling and shipping operations to ensure uninterrupted

delivery of goods to the local market while taking maximum precautions and complying with the directives issued by the relevant authorities regarding health and safety, said Sohar Port and Free Zone administration.

Batti bin Mohammed al Shibli,

Harbour Master at Sohar Port said: “The port has managed to overcome the challenges imposed by the health restrictions by following flexible mechanisms to ramp up the shipping and handling operations and ensure timely handling of goods arriving at the Sohar Port from international ports”.

Al Shibli commended the high sense of responsibility exhibited by the employees of the marine section expressing his confidence that with the cooperation of all the Sohar Port will get over the current crisis and emerge stronger more sustainable than ever before.

This experience has emphasised the importance of constant coordination between various public and private institutions, Al Shibli said commending the efforts made by all the port workers which helped the Sohar Port to successfully curb the implications of the coronavirus crisis.

— ONA



Livestock shipment from Sudan arrives

MUSCAT: Almost 10,000 heads of livestock arrived at Port Sultan Qaboos from Sudan, on Saturday. The livestock shipment will be subject to veterinary quarantine to ensure they are free of animal-borne diseases.

The move is in line with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries’ efforts to supply local markets with live animals in coordination with livestock importing companies.

— ONA

Global survey ranks Oman among low-risk countries

LONDON: The Sultanate has been classified among the countries with the lowest political and economic impact in the Middle East from the COVID-19 pandemic and the fall in oil prices.

Euromoney magazine published its risk survey for 1Q 2020 measuring 174 countries which coincides with the coronavirus crisis and the fall in international oil prices due to decreasing demand and a growing supply glut.

The report said that Oman has ranked 47th globally in the list of countries with lowest risk.

The GCC states appear to be prepared to cope with the crisis and shown an ability to instantly provide package of large-scale financial and social measures despite the suspension of commercial flights and tourist activities, the report said.

The survey showed that the average risk score in the Middle East region has fallen by 0.77 per cent lower than Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America.

The survey is conducted quarterly among several hundred economists and other experts, with the results compiled and aggregated, along with a measure of capital access and sovereign debt statistics, to provide total risk scores and rankings.

— ONA

Authorities studying possibility of resuming flight operations

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

The authorities are studying the possibility of opening the aviation sector in the country, it was revealed at the press conference of the Supreme Committee on Thursday.

“The possibility of resuming flight operations is being studied but no recommendations have been made”, said Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Hosni, Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Health, replying to a question. In line with the decisions issued by the Supreme Committee on COVID-19, all domestic and

international flights to and from Oman’s airports were suspended from March 29, except services to Musandam Governorate and cargo flights.

The authority, however, has been facilitating return trips for students and citizens even after this date, in coordination with the competent authorities.

Consequently, Oman Air suspended all passenger services to and from Muscat starting on March 29, until further notice.

“This is a temporary suspension of our passenger services. We regret

the difficulty and inconvenience this may cause, but it’s vital for us as the national carrier of the Sultanate of Oman to assist in the country’s efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19”, said Oman Air’s Chief Executive Officer Abdulaziz al Raisi.

“We will prioritise the needs of our guests and employees as we continue to assess the evolving situation”, Al Raisi added.

“This is an unprecedented time for our industry, but I am confident we will emerge stronger from this crisis as we have successfully done so in the past”.





المركز الوطني للطاقة
National Energy Center

Tender Announcement

National Energy Center invites bidders for the following Tender:

TENDER NO.	DESCRIPTION	LAST DATE OF BUYING	DATE OF SUBMISSION	TENDER PRICE
NEC/2020/05	PROVISION OF VEHICLES FOR NATIONAL ENERGY CENTER	29/04/2020	06/05/2020	R.O. 100/-

Interested Companies registered may obtain Tender documents from the Purchase, Tenders and Contracts Department at the head office of NEC, 3rd Floor, KOM-5 Building, Knowledge Oasis Muscat against a non-refundable payment as mentioned above for the tender documents. The Tender may be collected on any working days between 08:30am – 4:00pm hours.

Tenders should be submitted in a sealed envelope addressed to the Chairman of the Tender Committee and marked with Tender Number and the subject. No other marks or any reference thereto should be printed outside the envelopes.

The completed Tenders should be delivered to the Tender Section, 3rd Floor, KOM-5, Knowledge Oasis Muscat on or before 12 P.M. on the assigned date for submission of the Tender. Tenders submitted after the above-mentioned date and time shall not be considered.

Preference shall be given to the Companies or Institutions, which comprise the required percentage of Omanization and possible purchase of Omani National Products.

*Tenderer should provide Tender Board registration certificate & CR documents & Bank Payment Receipt.

For more information, please contact: +968 24155630

DRIVING CHANGE...

3.9m Internet, 1.6m Facebook users in the Sultanate



CAIRO: The seventh report for the Internet in the Arab world, published by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), said that the number of Internet users in the Sultanate is approximately 3.9 million.

The report added that the number of Facebook users in the Sultanate is about 1.6 million people and Twitter users account for about 200,000.

The report stated that more than half of the Arab world's population use the Internet and more than a third use Facebook. It furthered that among the approximately 420 million Arab citizens, the number of Internet users exceeds 220 million and about 159 million are Facebook users.

It pointed out that the number of Internet users in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries is about 51.1 million people, including 3.9 million in the Sultanate, 30 million in Saudi Arabia, 9.5 million in the UAE, 4.1 million in Kuwait and 2.1 million in Qatar.

The report explained that the number of Facebook users in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries is 35.9 million, and Twitter users is about 16.55 million.

It pointed out that the number of Internet users in Egypt is 55 million people, which is slightly more than half of the population, among them 46 million are using Facebook, and 7.5 million are using Twitter. — ONA

Strengthening faith online

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

As the holy month of Ramadhan started amid fears of COVID-19 spread, believers are now exploring alternatives to prevent any potential spiritual vacuum due to the closure of mosques and ban on gatherings including iftars.

Staying at home, they are becoming part of the technology to reflect and strengthen their faith by adding values online to the dynamics of the holy month.

According to experts, technology will play an enhanced role and the number of its users will increase manifold because of the pandemic putting a damper on the Ramadhan experience this year.

"Technology use, would in fact be, higher during the holy month of Ramadhan this year, especially with everyone being locked down at home", said Tariq Hilal al Barwani, Technologist and Knowledge Oman Founder.

Technology not only connects people with their loved ones real-time but also helps reflect and strengthen their faith by being part of online Islamic courses, live-streamed lectures and prayers.

"It is not just that people are working at home virtually using video conferencing technologies, but also they can now communicate with friends and family members to maintain the same closeness that they enjoyed during the Ramadhan period before", Al Barwani said.

From Quran apps to online lecture videos, there is a whole range of platforms available for us to still worship and communicate with each other.

Echoing it, Massarat Shaikh, Educational Psychologist, said despite the fact that people are unable to go to mosques, the faithful can stay positive by sharing fruitful knowledge using technology.

"Technology is truly a revolutionary advancement in our time. Being in this era, we are not only trying to restore the status quo but also to capitalize on the crisis to redesign a better system previously unknown to us", she said.

Last week, the Supreme Committee



dealing with measures to prevent the COVID-19 spread announced a number of precautionary measures that should be followed during Ramadhan.

Accordingly, the committee has called on all to avoid all sorts of gathering during the holy month and closure of mosques will continue during Ramadhan except for the call to prayer including for Taraweeh prayers.

"In addition to tracking timings for breaking fasting and prayers (with just smartphone using GPS and satellites to calculate the exact time), the advancements in technology helps us stay abreast with the happenings around us thanks to webinars that are conducted online for free and are Ramadhan specific too", said Al Barwani.

With lockdowns and social distancing prohibiting opportunities

Technology will play an enhanced role and the number of its users will increase manifold because of the pandemic is putting a damper on the Ramadhan experience this year, say experts

for communities to come together, some Muslims are using technologies to arrange online iftars.

Similar efforts are also being used to stream virtual sermons and special Ramadhan lectures, due to the closures of mosques and other community venues.

Massarat opined that due to physical distancing and the consequent behavioural changes, the entrainment industry will most probably see changes coming.

"Movie theatres will see reduced numbers due to Internet streaming services such as Netflix, YouTube, who have gained more popularity now and probably, will capitalize on it", she said.

A recent survey by National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) revealed that the average daily usage of social media by Omanis stood at six hours during normal days.

According to NCSI, 94 per cent Omanis have social media accounts and the most widely used social media apps is WhatsApp, which accounts for 93 per cent of the users of social media, followed by YouTube with 71 per cent and Instagram 50 per cent.

690,000 visitors until February



VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) has released the number of visitors to the Sultanate, hotel guests and other related figures until February 2020, a month before the COVID-19 measures came into effect, including travel restrictions.

The total number of visitors coming to the Sultanate until the end of February was 690,000 contributing RO 44 million to the economy.

The majority of these visitors were GCC nationals, followed by Indian, German and British nationals.

The total number of guests in three to five-star hotels was 311,000.

The total number of guests in Oman's three to five-star hotels was 163,000 in February 2020, a decrease of 0.4 per cent from the previous year.

The revenues for these hotels were RO 23.2 million in February 2020, compared to 24.1 million in 2019, a decrease of 3.7 per cent.

It may be noted that from January 11 until February 20, the country was in official 40-day mourning for late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos.

The total occupancy rates in hotels were 69.2 per cent in February 2020, a

decline of 5.5 per cent from the same period a year ago.

The country also saw 53,000 cruise ship visitors during the month of February 2020, with the majority of travellers being the Europeans (46,662) followed by Americans at 4,168.

Around 513,000 outbound travellers (a decline of 8.9 per cent) departed from the Sultanate during February 2020, with Omanis constituting 64.6 of them.

The number of inbound visitors declined by 3.9 per cent, to 339,000 during the same period.



Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

Tender Announcement

Sultan Qaboos University Hospital announces the following tender:

Tender No.	Subject	Non-Refundable Fee	Last Collection Date	Site Visit Date	Last Date of Submission
299/2020	Kitchen Renovation Works at Hospital	OMR. 25	06/05/2020	07/05/2020	25/05/2020

Tender Conditions:

- The companies who are registered in Tender Board shall collect the documents during office hours from 8.00 am to 1.00 pm from the Procurement Department/ Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.
- The site visit shall be at 09.00 am in the Technical Affairs Department building / Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.
- The Tenderers shall submit with the form of tender a certified cheque or tender bond from a locally registered bank in the sum of (1%) of the tender value and valid for 90 days from the date of tender submission and addressed to the chairman of tender committee, Sultan Qaboos University.
- The tender quotations shall be sealed and addressed to Procurement Director; Sultan Qaboos University Hospital. The tender number and the name of the tender shall be mentioned on the tender document. It is not accepted to indicate or mention the name of the company or its logo on the envelop.
- The quotations are subject to the Tender General Terms & Conditions for the Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.
- Sultan Qaboos University Hospital is not bound to accept the lowest bid or any other bid.

Procurement Directorate
Sultan Qaboos University Hospital
AL Khoudh / Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24144680/ 24144633
Fax: 24413156
E-mail: supplies@squ.edu.om
www.squ.edu.om





Beyond just a holy month this year

DR PRITI SWARUP

Two and a half years ago, I set my foot out of my own country for the first time and started my life in a completely new region of the world. What was new was the culture and the geography of the place, but what remained unchanged was the warmth and love we received everywhere. And as I look forward to witnessing one of the most pious sacrament, the holy month of Ramadhan, for the third time in my life, that too very closely and with one of the most beautiful people around, I have understood the beauty and the very importance of the month in an even better way.

Any festival is an expression to celebrate the culture, the tradition and the glorious heritage a place carries with itself. The true meaning of any festival is to rejoice special moments and emotions of our lives, with our loved ones, near and far alike. They help us preserve and add a character to our social lives. They help us immensely in connecting with our roots and origin once again, and by celebrating together, we forget enmity and embrace each other.

A natural bond of love is created, and environmental harmony ensues. A festival connects the whole culture and gives it an identity — identity of belongingness, the identity of oneness.

What is special about the holy month of Ramadhan? Ramadhan is the ninth and the most sacred month of the Islamic Hijri calendar (the Arabic term Hijri means migration, signifying the Prophet's movement from the holy city of Mecca to Medina). It is the month of fasting, spiritual reflection and prayer for Muslims. It is believed to be the month in which the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, revealed the Holy Quran.

It is essentially the time of the year when Muslims all over the world enter renunciation of food, water, carnal desires and practise self-control, willpower, self-discipline, sacrifice, empathy and compassion towards those who are less fortunate.

The blessed month of Ramadhan encourages acts of generosity and compulsory charity also called zakat in Islam. Muslims pray together to become closer and reconnect to God.

This year, Ramadhan shall be different. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, this year it will be marked more earnestly. Al Misaharaty (traditional Ramadhan drummer) who wakes up people to have their suhoor before the dawn shall be silenced this year. Because of the ongoing lockdowns almost everywhere, large public gatherings shall be a straight no and the community event of breaking the fast iftar shall be restricted to the close family members followed by performing taraweeh (special night-time prayer).

Owing to curfews at many places, the population, in general, has tended to hoard and stock essential items ahead of the festivities. This year schools shall be shut and millions shall be working from home. Due to closure of mosques, the sermons may be live-streamed, and worshippers can pray from their respective homes. Be it an individual house or an entire nation, the decorations and ornamentation of the houses and streets through the display of crescents, stars and Eid Mubarak lightings across the followers of the faith shall be in full fervour and will be a delight to watch, I am hope.

The dire situation of the worldwide pandemic demands us to bring more compassion, more empathy towards fellow human beings, towards the ones who are less fortunate and come together to celebrate the true spirit of the festival irrespective of race and religion.

Let us pay our maids and workers in full, let us bring a smile on their faces by showing that we care; that we are there for one another. Let us resolve to provide food packets to the needy so that they too can celebrate the festivities. We also can encourage online donations for charitable trusts. Let's eliminate hatred from our hearts and let us all work towards the betterment of mankind and be kind to one another.

And as the great Prophet (PBUH) once said, "The greatest jihad is to battle your own soul, to fight the evil within yourself".

Let us purify our souls to the deepest and may the Eid this year be more reflective. Let us adopt the identity of oneness this year.

Ramadhan Kareem to all!

(Dr Priti is a Human Resource Management expert.
Email: drpritiswarup@gmail.com)

THE DIRE SITUATION OF THE WORLDWIDE COVID-19 PANDEMIC DEMANDS US TO BRING MORE COMPASSION, MORE EMPATHY TOWARDS FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS, TOWARDS THE ONES WHO ARE LESS FORTUNATE AND COME TOGETHER TO CELEBRATE THE TRUE SPIRIT OF THE HOLY MONTH IRRESPECTIVE OF RACE AND RELIGION

Virus toll nears 200,000 as UN pushes for global vaccine effort

NO SIGN OF END: COVID-19 deaths have climbed past 195,000



Sanitation workers disinfect the area around the Kaaba in Mecca’s Grand Mosque on the first day of Ramadhan on Saturday. — AFP

WASHINGTON: The global coronavirus death toll approached 200,000 on Saturday as the United Nations launched an international push for a vaccine to defeat the pandemic.

Governments around the world are struggling to limit the economic devastation unleashed by the virus, which has infected nearly 2.8 million people and left half of humanity under some form of lockdown.

The scale of the pandemic has forced medical research on the virus to move at unprecedented speed, but effective treatments are still far away and the United Nations chief said the effort will require cooperation on a global scale.

“We face a global public enemy like no other,” Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told a virtual briefing on Friday, asking for international organisations, world leaders and the private sector to join hands.

“A world free of COVID-19 requires the most massive public health effort in history.”

The vaccine should be safe, affordable and available to all, Guterres

stressed at the meeting, which was also attended by the leaders of Germany and France.

But notably absent from the meeting were the leaders of China, where the virus first emerged late last year, and the United States, which has accused the UN’s World Health Organization of not warning quickly enough about the original outbreak.

The UN chief’s vaccine appeal came a day after US President Donald Trump prompted outcry and ridicule with his suggestion that disinfectants be used to treat coronavirus patients.

“Is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?” Trump mused during a televised briefing. “It sounds interesting to me.”

As experts — and disinfectant manufacturers — rushed to caution against any such dangerous experiment, the president tried to walk back his comments, saying he had been speaking “sarcastically.”

The United States is the hardest-hit country by far in the pandemic,

recording more than 51,000 deaths and over 890,000 infections.

The world’s biggest economy has been hammered by the pandemic, with 26 million jobs lost since the crisis began, and American leaders are under pressure to find ways to ease social distancing measures.

Despite criticism from Trump, the governor of Georgia allowed some businesses, including nail salons and bowling alleys, to reopen on Friday, sparking both criticism and relief.

The mayor of the state’s capital Atlanta condemned the “irresponsible” move, telling ABC News: “There is nothing essential about going to a bowling alley or giving a manicure in the middle of a pandemic.”

But some in the city cherished the opportunity to re-engage with society.

“I actually had a great time,” beamed Tili Banks, 41, as she and a friend left a bowling alley.

“I was just so happy to be out that I didn’t even realise that I had these people’s bowling shoes on when I walked outside.”

Global COVID-19 deaths have climbed past 195,000, according to an AFP tally, but new reported cases appear to have levelled off at about 80,000 a day.

The daily death toll in Western countries seems to be falling, a sign hopeful epidemiologists had been looking for, but the WHO has warned that other nations are still in the early stages of the fight.

The unprecedented situation has left the world staring at its worst downturn since the Great Depression, and world leaders are trying to balance public health concerns with economic needs.

Some countries have already started loosening restrictions.

Sri Lanka said it would lift a nationwide curfew on Monday after more than five weeks, as Belgium became the latest European nation to announce an easing from mid-May.

On the other side of the world in Australia and New Zealand, people held vigils from the isolation of their own driveways to pay tribute to their war veterans on Anzac Day. — AFP

WWII veteran tops UK music charts after record virus fundraiser

LONDON: A 99-year-old British World War II veteran who shot to fame raising millions for health workers fighting the coronavirus has become the oldest artist to reach No. 1 in the UK music singles charts.

Tom Moore’s rendition of “You’ll Never Walk Alone” — a much-loved and widely covered song from a 1945 musical — sold 82,000 units, the Press Association (PA) news agency said on Friday, beating Canadian artist The Weeknd’s “Blinding Lights” in second place.

“It’s out of this world, truly amazing!” Moore, a captain who served in India, said on his official Twitter account. The single, which features Moore singing alongside actor and singer Michael Ball and a choir from the state-run health service is also the fastest-selling single of 2020 so far, according to PA.

The race to the No.1 spot had been tight, Martin Talbot, chief executive of the Official Charts Company told PA, until The Weeknd tweeted his support on Thursday for the “incredible 99 yr old war veteran”, and his hope that Moore “can have a No. 1 for his 100th birthday.”

“My grandchildren can’t believe I am a chart topper!” Moore, who turns 100 at the end

GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS ALSO ANNOUNCED MOORE HAD BROKEN THE RECORD FOR RAISING THE MOST MONEY IN AN INDIVIDUAL CHARITY WALK — MORE THAN £27 MILLION (\$33 MILLION)

of this month, told PA.

Guinness World Records also announced Moore had broken the record for raising the most money in an individual charity walk — more than £27 million (\$33 million).

He initially set out to raise just £1,000 for Britain’s National Health Service (NHS) by walking 100 laps of his 25-metre (82-foot) garden, with the help of his walking frame.

But his journey resonated with a public inundated with grim pandemic coverage and he became a global phenomenon praised by British Olympic great Mo Farrah and Prince William.

The final lap of his garden in Bedfordshire, south England, was met with a guard of honour from the Yorkshire Regiment and broadcast live on British TV on Thursday. — AFP



Captain Tom Moore with his No 1 trophy

China sends medical team to advise on Kim

BEIJING/SEOUL: China has dispatched a team to North Korea including medical experts to advise on North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, according to three people familiar with the situation.

The trip by the Chinese doctors and officials comes amid conflicting reports about the health of the North Korean leader. Reuters was unable to immediately determine what the trip by the Chinese team signalled in terms of Kim’s health.

A delegation led by a senior member of the Chinese Communist Party’s International Liaison Department left Beijing for North Korea on Thursday, two of the people said. The department is the main Chinese body dealing with neighbouring North Korea.

The sources declined to be identified given the sensitivity of the matter.

The Liaison Department could not be reached by Reuters for comment late on Friday. China’s foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment late on Friday.

Daily NK, a Seoul-based website, reported earlier this week that Kim was recovering after undergoing a cardiovascular procedure on April 12. It cited one unnamed source in North Korea.



South Korean government officials and a Chinese official with the Liaison Department challenged subsequent reports suggesting that Kim was in grave danger after surgery. South Korean officials said they had detected no signs of unusual activity in North Korea.

On Thursday, US President Donald Trump also downplayed earlier reports that Kim was gravely ill. “I think the report was incorrect,” Trump told reporters, but he declined to say if he had been in touch with North Korean officials. On Friday, a South Korean source told Reuters their intelligence was that Kim was alive and would likely make an appearance soon. The person said he did not have any comment on Kim’s current condition or any Chinese involvement.

Does sunlight destroy the coronavirus?

WASHINGTON: Does sunlight rapidly destroy the coronavirus? A White House presentation on a mysterious government study says so — but some scientists have called for caution as we await for more evidence.

An official from the Department of Homeland Security made the eye-catching announcement during President Donald Trump’s daily pandemic briefing on Thursday, showing a dramatic reduction in the virus’ viability under the sun’s rays.

But the fact there are no further details about how the study was conducted has left some experts scratching their heads.

“It looks like someone did a test somewhere,” Benjamin Neuman, chair of biological sciences at Texas A&M University-Texarkana, said. “It would be good to know how the test was done.”

William Bryan, the official who summarised the findings, told reporters that an experiment was carried out at the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center in Maryland.

On a stainless steel surface in sunlight, the virus shrinks to half its amount in a matter of just two minutes in 70 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit (21 to 24 degrees Celsius) heat and 80 per cent humidity, compared to six hours in the dark.

When the virus was suspended

Beyond the headline results, there are so far few details, making it impossible for experts to independently validate the findings.

in the air, its half-life in sunlight was just a minute and a half when the temperature was 70 to 75 degrees with 20 per cent humidity, as opposed to one hour in the dark.

Beyond the headline results, there are so far few details, making it impossible for experts to independently validate the findings.

“As a scientist, I’d of course like to see an actual study and the actual numbers,” viral epidemiologist Chris von Csefalvay said.

We do know that the solar radiation contained in ultraviolet light — an invisible, energetic part of the electromagnetic spectrum — can be very effective at dealing with certain pathogens.

That is why, for example, the World Health Organization recommends that people in developing countries

can place tap water in plastic bottles and leave them under the sun for five hours in order to make it drinkable.

But not all microbes respond in the same way.

Sunlight in fact contains different types of ultraviolet radiation, which are classed by their wavelength.

Broadly speaking, these can be categorised into UVA, which causes the skin to tan and age; UVB, which is a bit more harmful in high doses and can cause burning and cancer, and UVC, which is the most dangerous.

Most of the sunlight that penetrates our atmosphere is UVA while UVC is completely filtered out.

That is good news for us: UVC has small, high energy waves that are particularly adept at warping genetic material, whether in animal cells or in viruses.

A 2004 study on SARS — a close genetic relative of the new coronavirus — found that UVA light “had no effect on viability, regardless of duration of exposure.”

UVC light — which is commonly used to sterilise labs, hospitals and now even buses in China — completely inactivated the virus within 15 minutes. It is entirely possible that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is more vulnerable to regular sunlight than its older cousin, and not just UVC.

The problem is the DHS has bypassed scientific norms by not

making its data available — even in its preliminary, non peer-reviewed form, which is how most major research during this pandemic has first made its way into the public domain.

“It would be really important for understanding this study to know how it was conducted, and I am quite hopeful that the actual paper, or at least a pre-print, will be shared soon,” said von Csefalvay.

“I know for a fact that the scientific community is eager to review their findings.”

But even if all the findings are airtight, solar disinfection is probably going to have a limited impact.

After all, people are less likely to be infected outdoors than indoors, unless they are directly coughed or sneezed upon — in which case UV rays won’t have time to inactivate the viral droplets before they hit their target.

On the other hand, UVB can help boost the immune system by causing the body to produce more Vitamin D.

All of this points to the need for more research. But one thing is clear: President Trump’s suggestion that UV could be used to treat patients already infected with the virus isn’t grounded in fact.

“There is no way currently that UV could be used to irradiate inside the body that would do any good,” Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at the University of East Anglia said. — AFP



e-learning a massive challenge that must be embraced

One can sometimes hear the wailing from my window, and although it is, in Arabic I just know, a student crying out, “Mum, the Internet’s not working!”

Oman’s Internet service providers face a challenge of innumerable proportion has as tens of thousands of student households, and hundreds, maybe thousands of teachers and lecturers seek to get Internet packages which will allow them to participate in e-learning, all across the country. Maybe students could do sufficient research for homework assignments on their mobile phones, but the learning landscape has now altered so much.

The greatest challenge of course, is that this was never going to happen. Students may be kept at home due to a flooded wadi, or a storm, but by what’s essentially a sophisticated form of ‘flu,’ nah, never gonna happen, but it has! And because it was never going to happen, the support structures, resources, knowledge, and skills development in the area of e-learning were never put in place. One could offer

the analogy that when you go on a flight somewhere you always get a flight safety briefing, and there are instruction cards, so that even though you may never need it, you can evacuate your plane in an emergency, in a flash! Here there was nothing!

Again, it’s not anyone’s particular fault, although the wise among us had looked at what the West is doing in terms of both classroom and e-learning and thought, “That’s good,” or “Wow, what I couldn’t do with that.” And especially in e-learning, new formats and systems are trotted out at every educational conference. We were certainly told we could not afford it, and deep down there was probably too a recognition that our students are still coming to grips with collaborative learning, academic language, and the generic demands of higher education. Certainly, we have made strides in enquiry and discovery learning, but we aren’t ‘there’ yet.

Universities and colleges have been rushing around, trying to redesign courses

The handwringing and angst must stop now, and each sector/ stakeholder must work with what we’ve got. Institutions should really stop trying to improve and develop courses now, and work with what they have. If they think this situation has been traumatic for them, they should consider the teachers, parents and students

and assessment that will be appropriate to the learning objectives of their courses.

This, all with varying degrees of need, capability, and success, because they were all in ‘different places.’ When this started. However, the handwringing and angst must stop now, and each sector/ stakeholder must work with what we’ve got.

Institutions should really stop trying to improve and develop courses now, and work with what they have. If they think this situation has been traumatic for them, they should consider the teachers, parents and students. There is a level of pragmatism throughout the academics here that while what they have isn’t what they want, they will make it work. Just now, trust them, and leave them to get on with it.

Teachers and lecturers are in a cleft stick somewhat, as few will have experience of e-learning, while those who do understanding the altered dynamics and methodologies are probably worn out from trying to ‘upskill’ a hundred colleagues. You can only do what you can do guys and girls! It would be a poor

employer who could not support and encourage you throughout this time. Trust them to ‘do the right thing.’

As for you students, rather than being traumatised and ‘caught in the headlights,’ by all that has occurred socially and educationally, look upon the eLearning and assessment as an opportunity to show how good you are, how strong, how resilient, how effective, and how grown-up and mature, in an academic sense, you can be about all that is ‘going on.’ You could cry like a baby, think the world is against you, go “oh woe is me,” from daylight till dusk, and plead that Ramadan could not have come at a worse time.

Or you can embrace the many challenges you face. You can grow up and ‘play with the big kids,’ so to speak, and ‘walk the walk’ instead of ‘talking the talk.’ Assert yourself as a mature, articulate, resilient young adult. Ask questions, research answers, and give thoughtful responses. See yourself through your teacher’s eyes and ask yourself, am I that person? I’m sure you are.



RAY PETERSEN
petersen_ray@hotmail.com



A healthcare worker performs a coronavirus antibody test at a walk-in testing site in New York on Friday. – Reuters

Hopes grow for COVID-19 antibody tests

FEMKE COLBORNE

The sun is only just rising in Berlin but Lothar Kopp, 65, is already standing in line outside a clinic in the district of Reinickendorf. Along with a handful of mask-clad people standing two metres apart, he is here to give a blood sample — for antibody tests in the hope of finding out if he has previously contracted the coronavirus and since developed immunity.

“If I’ve already had corona then I’m not infectious,” said Kopp, hoping to test positive for antibodies as it could allow him to visit his elderly mother without the risk of spreading the disease.

As nations around the world look to ease curbs on public life, some experts have mooted the possibility of so-called “immunity passports” to allow those who have antibodies to return to work first.

In Germany, tens of thousands of tests have been performed and large studies are ongoing. Elsewhere in the world, efforts are also under way to determine the so-called level of immunity in the population.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said last week that the state will be launching tests “in the most aggressive way in the nation” to find out how many have already had the disease. In a rush to catch up with testing, the US regulator had even taken the extraordinary decision to allow commercial manufacturers to market their tests without formal authorisation.

But experts including from the World Health Organization have urged caution over the accuracy of the nascent tests. Among the unknowns of

But experts including from the World Health Organization have urged caution over the accuracy of the nascent tests. Among the unknowns of the virus is how long immunity could last — meaning that even positive antibody tests may not be meaningful for long

the virus is how long immunity could last — meaning that even positive antibody tests may not be meaningful for long.

Urging prudence, a WHO spokeswoman noted that there is “much discussion” over the antibody tests. But “once we have validated tests, we may still not know how well a positive result correlates with protection against disease or for how long the protection will last,” she said.

Matthias Orth, a board member of the Professional Association of German Laboratory Doctors (BDL), said inaccuracies are a big problem.

People can test negative even if they have had COVID-19, he said. “There are also quite banal coronaviruses that do not cause serious illness, and they can give a positive result.”

As for so-called rapid antibody tests — home kits that extract blood from your finger and promise a result within 15 minutes — Orth’s verdict: “They’re nonsense.”

More accurate tests will come within weeks, he said, but he stressed that “it’s a little too early to give patients a clear statement that they are definitely immune”.

Experts also note that while large-scale studies underway across Europe’s biggest economy can serve to determine what proportion of the population has been infected, they cannot say for sure how many people are actually immune given the limitations on current antibodies tests.

Nevertheless, the studies, including one that started in Munich over the weekend with scientists picking 3,000 households at random to test for antibodies, are being closely watched.

A separate study is ongoing in Gangel, in the Heinsberg district — where Germany’s first major cluster of infections was uncovered. So far, researchers have determined that 14 per cent of the population had previously been infected.

Beyond studies, several pharmaceutical companies in Germany have also begun marketing such antibody tests — which must be analysed in a laboratory.

And around 70,000 tests have so far been processed by 54 laboratories, according to the ALM association of accredited medical laboratories.

Doctor Ulrike Leimer-Lipke of the Reinickendorf clinic, which has been offering antibody tests since mid-March, said: “I think it makes a lot of sense, because this way we can find out if people have immunity.

“It is very important for people if they have a grandmother or a mother or father who they care for, to know if they are already immune.” — AFP

Tunisia hopes novel methods will aid virus fight

CAROLINE NELLY PERROT

The feared impact of coronavirus on Tunisia’s fragile public health system has provoked a flurry of innovation from robotics to digitalisation efforts to bolster the North African country’s pandemic response.

The government has even turned to students for help, asking the engineering school in Sousse, south of the capital Tunis, to task its students with designing a locally made ventilator as their end-of-year project.

Ventilators are crucial for treating critically ill COVID-19 patients, but as in many countries, Tunisia’s poorly equipped hospitals lack sufficient numbers of the devices. Costs and delivery times for ventilators have increased dramatically.

Other Tunisian researchers have developed plans for a simplified respirator made with 3D-printed parts.

It will soon be made freely available, allowing undeveloped countries without access to sophisticated equipment to make their own. “We are using everything that we can find open source and the help of a Tunisian engineer specialised in respirators,” said Khalil Allouch, an engineering student on the local respirator project based in Tunis.

Tunisia graduates thousands of doctors and engineers with internationally recognised qualifications annually. But with low salaries and few local opportunities, many emigrate.

While Tunisian laboratories are struggling to keep up with COVID-19 testing, Tunisia was one of the first countries in the region to decode the local strain of the virus, a necessary step towards developing a vaccine. The Pasteur Institute in Tunis is one of few African institutions leading research into a vaccine.

On the diagnostic side, Tunis engineering school Insat is working on an artificial intelligence programme to evaluate the probability of infection based on an X-ray of the lungs. Tunisia has reported 38 deaths and fewer than 1,000 cases of coronavirus, but the impact of the lockdown in effect since March 22 has decimated the economy.

The government is eager to highlight the Tunisian response to the virus, creating a website to showcase the country’s many innovations both by government and non-government bodies.

The interior ministry has even started issuing some documents — waivers for movement during lockdown — online.

The health ministry has adopted an application developed by students to track hospital bed availability and facilitate transfers and the deployment of extra emergency bed space. — AFP

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HEAD OFFICE

Tel: 24649444, 24649450, 24649451, 24604563, 24699437

Fax: 24699643

SALALAH OFFICE

Tel: 23292633

Fax: 23293909

NIZWA OFFICE

Tel: 25411099

P.O. Box 955, P.C. 611

ADVERTISING

AL OMANEYA ADVERTISING & PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 3303, P.C. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: SWITCHBOARD: 24649444

DIRECT: 24649430/24649437/24649401

Fax: 24649434

DISTRIBUTION AGENT

AL OMANEYA for Distribution & Marketing, P.O. Box 974, P.C. 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: 24649351/24649360

Fax: 24649379

Website: omanobserver.om

e-mail: editor@omanobserver.om

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INVESTMENT DESTINATION

Salalah Free Zone to launch 10 new projects in 2020



STEEL COMPLEX, PHARMA PLANT, INTEGRATED WHOLESALE CITY, KNOWLEDGE ACADEMY AND BUS ASSEMBLY PLANT AMONG INVESTMENTS UNDER IMPLEMENTATION

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

Salalah Free Zone (SFZ) — the Sultanate’s first free zone development — plans to bring into operation 10 new factories and industrial ventures before the end of this year, further strengthening its reputation as a major draw for industrial and economic investment.

The free zone, adjoining Salalah’s transshipment and logistics hub overlooking the Indian Ocean, has announced a flurry of new investments since the start of this year, many of which have now entered the construction phase.

Announcing an uptick in activity at the nation’s oldest free zone, Ali Mohammed Tabouk, CEO, said: “Business in Salalah Free Zone is booming, with more than five factories currently under construction at a good pace. We are targeting the operation of 10 new factories before the end of 2020,” he tweeted on Saturday, adding

that the Free Zone is “sparing no effort in achieving its top priority of creating job opportunities for citizens”.

Gearing up to commence production is Magnificence Tech of Asia (FZ) LLC, which is setting up a bus assembly plant at the free zone with an investment of \$50 million. The company is targeting the production and roll-out of around 1,000 coaches per annum for distribution across markets in the Gulf, Middle East and Africa. It will be the second such investment in the Sultanate, after Oman’s maiden bus assembly plant by Karwa Motors, which is currently under construction at Duqm Special Economic Zone.

Also making headway is the Knowledge Academy – a training hub designed and equipped to develop the technical and vocational skills of up to 1,000 young Omanis at any given time. At full capacity, the Academy will be operated by a 160-strong faculty

of trainers and administrative staff. Total investment in the facility, promoted by Muscat-based Oman Technology Establishment, is around RO 10 million.

In the early stages of construction is Salalah International Exhibitions City – an integrated wholesale hub that will leverage, on the one hand, its proximity to Salalah City – a rapidly expanding urban destination – and a well-connected international maritime gateway.

At full build, the Exhibitions City will host as many as 2,000 commercial units that will be offered for wholesale trading in a variety of goods and activities, including building materials, electronics, vehicles, textiles, furniture, consumer goods, and luxury items. As many as 1,500 job opportunities will be created when it is fully operational.

Work on the Free Zone’s first large-scale metallurgical plant is gathering pace as well. National Steel Company, backed by a

Saudi corporation, is investing \$500 million in an integrated steel complex that will produce around 25,000 tonnes per year of steel structures, 60,000 tonnes per year of prefab metal structures, 2 million sq metres per year of sandwich paneling for industrial structures, and 10,000 tonnes per year of industrial floors. Roughly two-thirds of this output is destined for overseas markets.

Among the major ventures targeted for launch this year is Philex Pharmaceuticals, which is being developed in three phases with a total investment of \$365 million. The high-tech facility, backed by Qatari investors, will produce an array of drugs and vaccines as well.

Other initiatives that the Free Zone plans to launch this year is a mammoth, integrated residential city with a capacity to accommodate around 100,000 people, remotely operated ‘smart’ warehouses, and renewable energy projects.

Oil price volatility, underperforming blue chips pull down MSM

Oman Public Finance			
(OMR mn)	Jan-19	Jan-20	Change
Oil Revenue	270	413	53.0%
Gas Revenue	152	125	-18.2%
Custom Duties	-	-	-
Corporate Income Tax	6	13	109.7%
Capital Revenue	1	1	-25.0%
Other Revenue	592	24	-95.9%
Revenue	1,021	575	-43.6%
Current Expenditure	629	654	3.9%
Investment Expenditure	-	0	-
Actual expenditures under settlement	400	264	-34.1%
Participation & Support	23	2	-90.2%
Expenditure	1,053	920	-12.6%
Deficit	(32)	(344)	972.9%

Source: NCSI

The MSM30 closed the week down by 1.62 per cent. Volatility in oil prices along with unsatisfactory results of some blue-chip stocks took the market down during the week. Foreigners were net sellers at \$1.86m.

Financial and Services Index closed down by 0.33 per cent and 1.87 per cent w-o-w while the Industrial index closed up by 1.24 per cent. Shariah Index was up by 1.74 per cent during the week.

Oman Arab Bank (OAB) has announced that it has been given the green light by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) to acquire Alizz Islamic Bank SAOG (AIB) and to eventually become a publicly listed entity. The revelation came in a filing by OAB’s majority shareholder, Oman International Development & Investment Co SAOG (OMINVEST), to the Capital Market Authority (CMA). In the filing, OMINVEST referred to its disclosure dated January 16, 2020 pertaining to OAB’s “proposed transaction” with Alizz Islamic Bank.

It proposed: Alizz Islamic’s acquisition as a fully owned Islamic banking subsidiary of OAB and its conversion into an SAOC entity; The transfer of the assets and liabilities of Al Yusr Islamic Window to Alizz Islamic Bank SAOC; and the conversion of OAB SAOC into an SAOG entity.

BANK NIZWA AND ALIZZ ISLAMIC BANK ALLOWED ALL THEIR CUSTOMERS WHO EARN A NET SALARY OF RO 1,500 AND BELOW AND THAT HAVE HOME FINANCE IJARAH/DIMINISHING MUSHARAKAH OR COMMERCIAL FINANCE IJARAH DIMINISHING MUSHARAKAH FACILITIES TO DEFER THEIR FINANCE INSTALLMENTS UP TO THREE MONTHS (MAY, JUNE, JULY) FROM MAY 1, 2020.

Two Islamic banks in Oman will allow customers to defer the instalment of their home loans by three months – May, June and July due to the current COVID-19 situation prevailing in the country. Bank Nizwa and Alizz Islamic Bank allowed all their customers who earn a net salary of RO 1,500 and below and that have home finance Ijarah/diminishing Musharakah or commercial finance Ijarah diminishing Musharakah facilities to defer their finance installments up to three months (May, June, July) from May 1, 2020.

NCSI released the latest data of public finance for the month of January 2020. Revenue was down 43.6 per cent largely because of drop in other revenue segment. Oil revenue in the first month of 2020 was up by 53 per cent while the gas revenue was down 18 per cent. Government was able to lower the expenditure in the first month by 12.6 per cent to RO 0.92 bn compared to RO 1.05 bn in same month last year. Deficit was RO 344m in Jan 2020 compared to a deficit of RO 32m in Jan 2019.

Oman has reduced its state budget by RO 500m (\$1.3 bn) as a result of recent cuts and will take new measures to stabilize the economy. Oman’s finance ministry directed all ministries to reduce development budgets by 10 per cent and operating budgets by 10 per cent. Last month, the government cut the budget allocated to government agencies for 2020 by 5 per cent.

As per the latest data available with Muscat Clearing & Depository Company, only 4 companies in MSM30 witnessed increase in their foreign ownership during 1Q20 i.e. Gulf Investment Services, Galfar Engineering, Oman Investment & Finance and Al Suwaidi Power while ownership in three companies remained unchanged and declined in 23 companies.

Till the market close on April 23, 51 companies whose year ends in December announced 1Q20 results. Overall, the profitability of the 51 companies declined by 20.3 per cent to RO 78.4m compared to RO 98.2m in 1Q19. Earnings of the financial sector stood at RO 52.9m (-29.9 per cent), Industrial sector at RO 7.2m (+15.6 per cent) and Services sector at RO 18.2m (+9.2 per cent).

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

Factory workers encouraged to remain on premises

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

The owners of factories engaged in the production or basic commodities have been urged to convert part of their administrative blocks into temporary lodgings for their workers to ensure continuity of operations amid the lockdown over the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recommendation is among a number of measures adopted by a technical committee set up by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) to ensure that the lockdown does not hamper the supply of goods deemed essential to daily life in the Sultanate despite the lockdown.

The panel comprises officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Ministry of Transport, Directorate General of Customs of the Royal Oman Police, Public Authority of Stores and Food Reserves, Public Authority for Consumer Protection, Oman Global Logistics Group-ASYAD and Oman Aviation Group.



The team was formed to mitigate any impacts from the lockdown on the availability of basic commodities and ensure that cross-border movement of commodities was smooth, said Eng Mohammed bin Said al Mahrouqi (pictured), Head of the Exemptions Department at MoCI.

Part of the committee’s mission is to ensure that local factories have the raw materials and spare parts they require to function normally. Industries operating within free zones and under the auspices of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) are operating normally, he said.

Also as part of measures to support the smooth operation of factories, workers are encouraged to stay on the plant premises during the lockdown. Owners have been urged to convert part of the administrative offices into rooms for workers to sleep in.

Drivers are instructed to wear protective clothing, masks and gloves. When they enter the free zones, they are urged not to leave their trucks. The process of unloading and shipping of consignments of trucks in the facility is to be carried out by another team of dedicated employees who will also wear protective clothing, masks and gloves. The teams working on the production lines will wear different colour clothes or signs so they can be easily identified.



SPOT

LIGHT

SPOTLIGHTING OMANI ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND TECH INNOVATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Omani start-ups take part in global COVID-19 contest

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

Around 24 Omani tech start-ups are participating in a global competition that will see five of the world's top teams collecting attractive cash prizes, as well as accolades for formulating the most innovative start-up solutions in the fight against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The Sultanate is among more than 50 countries taking part in the latest edition of the Start-up Weekend – a series of international events organised by Techstars – a US based global platform for investment and innovation. Partnering with Techstars in organizing a country-level competition for Omani start-ups is Al Jabr, a Muscat-based firm specializing in start-up development and corporate innovation projects.

“We are delighted to be organising this competition in Oman,” said Noor al Haddabi, Financial and Administrative Coordinator – Al Jabr. “It’s an opportunity for us to support the local efforts of the Omani government in alleviating the problems caused by the pandemic here in the Sultanate.”

Speaking to the Observer, Noor



explained that the Online Weekend Start-up competition is the virtual version of a hugely popular event hosted by Colorado-USA based Techstars in various cities around the world.

“Considering the current

circumstances centring on COVID-19, Techstars decided to host country-level Start-up Weekends to help support the quest for solutions to the pandemic. The idea behind making them country-based is to support solutions that are unique to the needs



LOCAL STARTUP DEVELOPMENT FIRM **AL JABR**
PARTNERS WITH GLOBAL INNOVATION PLATFORM
TECHSTARS IN ORGANISING COUNTRY-LEVEL
ONLINE WEEKEND START-UP COMPETITION IN
SUPPORT OF COVID-19 SOLUTIONS

of a particular country, while also enabling the participants to work within the laws and regulations of the respective country.”

Over the weekend, 24 Omani start-ups – shortlisted from a total of 150 people who had registered to participate in the maiden edition of Online Start-up Weekend in the Sultanate – attended a series of workshops and mentorship sessions aimed at fine-tuning and validating their COVID-19 themed start-up ideas.

The selected start-up ideas, according to Noor, offer COVID-19 mitigation solutions applicable to a wide array of sectors, notably,

healthcare, education, logistics, environment, and project management.

“On Sunday, April 26, they will make video presentations of their ideas to an online jury. The top 10 of these contestants will be invited later on Sunday night to take part in a live demo of their themes. Of these finalists, three will be chosen as winners of the Oman country round.”

In the next stage of the competition, the winners of country-level start-up contests currently underway across the world will be invited to participate in Techstar’s Global Innovation Boot Camp – an exclusive three-day event planned next month. At this event, 20

of the world’s top start-up ideas will be offered the opportunity to add value to their projects before they submit their final proposals to an online jury.

Eventually making the cut will be five finalists, who will be absorbed into Techstars’ coveted programmes, as well as receive cash prizes of \$10,000 apiece, courtesy of Differential Ventures – a venture capital fund based in New York. As of 2019-end, American seed accelerator Techstars had accepted over 1,600 companies into its programmes with a combined market capitalisation of \$18.2billion.

For Oman, the opportunity to be part of this global contest is a testament to the country’s burgeoning start-up and entrepreneurship industry, whose success is critical to supporting self-employment and economic growth.

Partnering with Al Jabr in the delivery of the Oman Start-up Weekend are several well-established entrepreneurship support and SME development agencies, notably Al Rudha,

Phase Ventures, Phaze Ro, IDO Investments, OSH (Oman Start-up Hub), Riyadh, and National Youth Commission (NYC).

VW pushes back restart operations in Mexico



Volkswagen Tiguan cars are pictured in a production line at company's assembly plant in Puebla, Mexico. – Reuters

MEXICO CITY: German automaker Volkswagen will extend until at least May 18 a suspension on operations at its Puebla production plant in Mexico due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the company said in a statement.

The company’s Silao plant in Mexico is also temporarily down, and the company said it has not yet determined when it might resume

operations.

The eventual restart at both plants will be “gradual and under strict hygiene measures,” the statement added.

Volkswagen is among manufacturers worldwide who are responding to a steep fall in demand, as well as supply chain challenges following public health measures adopted by governments to rein in the pandemic. — Reuters

Venezuelan oil price falls below \$10 per barrel

CARACAS: The price of Venezuelan oil has fallen to below \$10 a barrel — its lowest level in more than two decades, the government said on Friday. The oil ministry said the price between Monday and Friday was 70.62 Chinese yuan — \$9.90 a barrel — a level that has not been seen since 1998 when it was \$9.28.

Since 2017, the government of President Nicolas Maduro has announced its oil prices in yuan rather than dollars in protest over US sanctions.

The weekly price — last year averaging \$56.70 and at \$61.41 in 2018 — has fallen through the floor since the coronavirus pandemic began.

Oil prices have been sliding since 2014 and exacerbating the country’s ongoing economic crisis that has pushed almost five million Venezuelans to leave the country, according to UN figures.

Venezuela is almost entirely dependent on its oil revenues, which account for around 96 percent of its income.

“It is an extremely extreme situation,” oil expert Francisco Monaldi said this week in a meeting with the country’s Foreign Press



A sculpture is seen outside a building of Venezuela's state oil company PDVSA in Caracas, Venezuela. – Reuters

Association. “Venezuela would normally need prices of more than \$30 to make it attractive to continue drilling and pay royalties,” he said.

“What we are experiencing is a kind of Armageddon.”

Venezuela’s oil production has fallen to around a quarter of its 2008 level.

Maduro’s government blames that on US sanctions, including against state oil company PDVSA, but many analysts say the regime has failed to invest in or maintain infrastructure.

Although the South American country has the largest oil reserves in the world, the sector is a victim of corruption and lack of investment, according to analysts and the Venezuelan opposition.

Between 2004 and 2015, the country earned \$750 billion from its oil exports, the price of which peaked in 2011 and 2012 with an annual barrel average of \$101.06 and \$103.42 respectively.

But now, the government is running the printing press to make up

“It is an extremely extreme situation. Venezuela would normally need prices of more than \$30 to make it attractive to continue drilling and pay royalties.

FRANCISCO MONALDI
Oil expert

for the budget deficit — and fueling runaway inflation.

Despite a national lockdown because of the coronavirus, protests have bubbled up across the country as people experience shortages of food and medical necessities.

Officials said several dozen people had demonstrated in Upata, a town of about 100,000 inhabitants, while seven people were injured Wednesday during protests — that turned to looting — in the eastern state of Sucre.

10 people have died from COVID-19 in Venezuela, with just over 300 infections, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. — AFP

Oman celebrates World Intellectual Property Day

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

The Sultanate of Oman is joining other countries of the world in celebrating World Intellectual Property Day (WIPO), which is celebrated on April 26 every year. This is the day when the WIPO Convention came into force in 1970. The day is observed every year to create an understanding among the people on the contribution of the intellectual property towards the advancement of technological innovations for world development. This year, the day is being observed under the slogan, ‘Let us innovate for a green future 2020’.

Ali bin Hamad al Maamari, Director of the Intellectual Property Department of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, said: “This celebration

is to make people understand the importance of intellectual property rights and encourage them to respect these rights. There are many dimensions of the intellectual property which are important for the development of societies.

These are related to patents, industrial designs, copyrights, trademarks, and geographical index. Many people still think that these issues are legal and commercial and are not related to their day-to-day life.”

He added: “The Sultanate celebrates this day every year to spread awareness among individuals and institutions regarding innovators. It is important that the real concept of ownership of Intellectual Property rights is conveyed to the society to explain its importance in the advancement of civilisation.



But it requires cooperation among institutions for the process of planning and strategy formulations to serve as a connecting point between the innovators and the institutions that support the intellectual property rights.

The adoption of the National



Innovation Strategy by the Council of Ministers led to institutional communication and cooperation to meet the requirements of social and economic development. This is in line with the directions of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, as

It is important that the real concept of ownership of Intellectual Property rights is conveyed to the society to explain its importance in the advancement of civilisation.

it supports the objectives of creating an environment where innovations are encouraged by harmonizing with the five-year plans as well as corporate programmes and initiatives.

He said that the National Innovation Strategy relies on the intellectual

property strategy to enable the Sultanate to be at par with top 20 countries in the global innovation index.

The institutional cooperation also strengthens the Sultanate to generate valuable economic assets in the field of intellectual property, especially as the country possesses wealth in the form of human capital; literary and artistic works; traditional knowledge; and genetic and biological assets.

The supporting institutions want to liberate these assets from restrictions by creating factors suitable for it to have a renewable and sustainable economy.

During the first quarter of the year 2020, there were 2,834 trademark applications filed. Of them, 152 applications were for patents, five for industrial designs and 55 for applications were for copyright.

US deficit could quadruple to \$3.7 tn in virus crisis

WASHINGTON: A nationwide business shutdown and surge in US government spending will nearly quadruple the federal deficit to a record \$3.7 trillion this fiscal year as the country combats the coronavirus pandemic, congressional forecasters said on Friday.

US gross domestic product will plunge by nearly 40 per cent on an annualized basis in the second quarter, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office. But the CBO forecast an economic resurgence in the second half of the year, and said unemployment would crest at 16 per cent but remain in double digits throughout 2021.

The CBO report illustrated the fiscal pressures lawmakers in Congress face as they prepare to craft new legislation to respond to the pandemic. Congress has already passed \$3 trillion in spending on health care, small businesses and other measures to combat the outbreak and its economic effects.

"If the laws currently in place governing spending and revenues generally remained unchanged and no significant additional emergency funding was provided, the federal deficit would be roughly \$3.7 trillion in fiscal year 2020 and \$2.1 trillion next year," the CBO said. In March, the CBO projected deficits of just over \$1 trillion in each of those years.

The federal debt would equal 101 per cent of GDP by September 30, when the 2020 federal fiscal year ends,



A bicyclist rides through Times Square during evening rush hour, during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease in New York City, New York. — Reuters

and would grow to 108 per cent by the end of fiscal 2021, CBO said.

The agency predicted real GDP will decline 5.6 per cent in 2020 and

then grow 2.8 per cent in 2021. But economic activity for 2021 would still be 6.7 per cent below a projection the CBO issued in late January.

The CBO's Jan. 28 forecast, before coronavirus roared through the United States, saw the economy remaining vibrant through this presidential

election year, partially due to strong consumer spending.

Now, some experts see an even more dire landscape than the CBO.

IF THE LAWS CURRENTLY IN PLACE GOVERNING SPENDING AND REVENUES GENERALLY REMAINED UNCHANGED AND NO SIGNIFICANT ADDITIONAL EMERGENCY FUNDING WAS PROVIDED, THE FEDERAL DEFICIT WOULD BE ROUGHLY \$3.7 TRILLION IN FISCAL YEAR 2020 AND \$2.1 TRILLION NEXT YEAR.

William Hoagland, senior vice president at the Bipartisan Policy Center, a Washington think-tank focused on fiscal policy and other issues, said he thought the economy will recover slower in the second half of 2020 than the CBO's outlook.

Hoagland added that the 2020 budget deficit could exceed \$4 trillion when taking into consideration possible additional economic stimulus legislation. Indeed, House of Representatives Democrats already are crafting a new coronavirus aid bill. Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Friday warned it will be "expensive."

Further ahead, Hoagland said in an email the next fiscal challenge facing policymakers will be how they "unwind the level of debt and deficits post-crisis without significant inflationary pressures." — Reuters

Philippine economy to suffer first annual contraction in over two decades



A worker assembles a pole at a construction site of the Metro Rail Transit (MRT) on Commonwealth Avenue in Quezon City, Philippines. — Reuters

MANILA: The coronavirus outbreak will likely send the Philippine economy into its first annual contraction in more than two decades this year, before it pulls back up for a U-shaped recovery in 2021, the central bank governor said on Saturday.

Key cities in the Philippines, among the fastest growing economies in Asia during the pre-pandemic period, are under strict quarantine measures since mid-March.

Philippine gross domestic product would likely shrink by 0.2 per cent in 2020 before bouncing back to about 7.7 per cent as policy support measures gain traction, central bank Governor Benjamin Diokno said in a statement.

That would mark a sharp reversal from the government's initial annual growth target of between 6.5 per cent and 7.5 per cent for 2020 to 2022.

The economic recovery would follow a U-shaped path in 2021, following a slowdown in the first

quarter and contractions in the next two quarters of this year, Diokno said. "The strong recovery is based on the assumption that the pandemic is contained in the second half of 2020."

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte on Friday extended a strict lockdown in the capital Manila and key cities until May 15 to try to contain the spread of the coronavirus, which has so far killed 477 people and infected

7,192 in the country.

Given the collapse of world crude prices, and the coronavirus' impact on global and domestic growth prospects, inflation would average 2.0 per cent this year, down from the previous 2.2 per cent forecast, the central bank said.

Inflation is then expected to accelerate to an average of 2.45 per cent for 2021, slightly up from the previous forecast of 2.4 per cent, as domestic activity picks up and more cash flows through the economy, it added. — Reuters

UNEXPECTED

GROWTH

US core capital goods orders eke out surprise gain

WASHINGTON: New orders for key US-made capital goods unexpectedly rose in March, but the gains are unlikely to be sustainable amid the novel coronavirus outbreak, which has virtually shut down the country and contributed to a collapse in crude oil prices.

Despite the slight pickup in demand reported by the Commerce Department on Friday, shipments of these goods dropped further last month, suggesting that a downturn in business investment persisted into the first quarter and would contribute to what economists expect will be the sharpest economic contraction since the Great Recession.

"That's not going to last with company after company saying they are slashing capex in this month's earnings calls," said Chris Rupkey, chief economist at MUFG in New York. "If growth isn't happening there's no need to buy the equipment to produce more goods if the demand has simply evaporated."

Orders for non-defence capital goods excluding aircraft, a closely

watched proxy for business spending plans, edged up 0.1 per cent last month. Data for February was revised up to show these so-called core capital goods orders falling 0.8 per cent instead of dropping 0.9 per cent as previously reported.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast core capital goods orders plunging 6.0 per cent in March. Core capital goods orders increased 1.0 per cent on a year-on-year basis in March.

The economic picture is deteriorating rapidly amid nationwide lockdowns to control the spread of COVID-19, the potentially lethal respiratory illness caused by the virus. A record 26.5 million Americans have filed for unemployment benefits since mid-March. Retail sales, homebuilding, business activity and consumer confidence have weakened sharply.

Much of the slump in economic activity occurred in the second half of March when states and local governments ordered nonessential businesses to close and enforced "stay-at-home" orders that have affected

more than 90 per cent of Americans.

The deepening economic slump has seen a handful of states, including Georgia, prematurely rushing to reopen their economies this weekend against the advice of health experts. Economists also warn that such steps could unnecessarily prolong the economic downturn, especially if this triggers a new wave of infections as predicted by health experts.

There is also no guarantee that consumers will feel safe to start visiting restaurants and other social venues.

A separate report from the University of Michigan on Friday showed its measure of consumer sentiment dived a record 17.3 points to 71.8 in April, the lowest since December 2011. But sentiment improved slightly from the middle of the month.

"As long as the virus is running wild, a significant segment of the population will either be unwilling to get back into the world or will do so in a limited way," said Joel Naroff, chief economist at Naroff Economics in Holland, Pennsylvania. — Reuters



A worker monitors a 1 medical mask making machine at the former GM transmission facility in Warren, Michigan. — Reuters

New North American trade agreement to take effect on July 1



US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer speaks during a meeting at the Presidential Palace, in Mexico City. — Reuters

WASHINGTON: US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer said he has notified Congress that the new US-Mexico-Canada trade agreement will take effect on July 1, a month later than initially proposed.

In a statement, Lighthizer said both Mexico and Canada had taken measures necessary to comply with their commitments under the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which replaces the 26-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta).

Some industries, including automakers, had been arguing for a delayed implementation because of the difficulties they are facing from the coronavirus pandemic.

Mexico had asked the United States and Canada for a longer transition period for the auto industry to certify that it was meeting new, more stringent North American content rules.

Lighthizer said his office would work to ensure a smooth implementation of the new trade rules.

"The crisis and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that now, more than ever, the United States should strive to increase manufacturing capacity and investment in North America," Lighthizer said in a statement. "The USMCA's entry into force is a landmark achievement in that effort."

The accord includes tougher rules on labor and automotive content but leaves \$1.2 trillion in annual US-Mexico-Canada trade flows largely unchanged. US President Donald Trump had been a critic of Nafta. — Reuters

Ramadhan



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Finding words in silence: A young Omani's tale of compassion

RAY PETERSEN

“To everything, there is a season, and a time for every purpose”, according to Ecclesiastes, an Old Testament book of the Bible, which ironically focuses on retribution, but one young Omani woman may treasure those 12 words for a long time, after an experience that has changed her life.

Let me share with you how Manar al Nairi, a serious young female student at the University of Nizwa, with whom I had crossed paths during writing and literature classes in recent times. Manar, 23, is from Ibri, part of a family in which she is the eldest, with three brothers and two sisters, and a father who is an Educational IT specialist. I will let Manar take up the story herself.

“I was in the Anjiz Center at the university, where students sometimes go to get extra learning support, it's optional, like a drop-in centre. It was Cultural Week, and most of the students who were not in classes would probably be at Hazim Hall, checking out all the cultural events. I go to Anjiz sometimes; I help students, or student groups in discussions, because my level of English speaking is good.” She was being modest, as her English is particularly good. She is also active on campus in several other clubs, societies, and activity groups, in the manner of most like her, at the university.

“My phone was in my bag, and because it was noticeably quiet, I heard it vibrate, so I reached for it and checked it. We are not allowed to use our phones there, but there was nobody else around. It was just one of my friends, Ashjan, who was down in Hazim Hall looking after a booth for our Book Club. ‘Manar,’ she had texted, ‘I have a big favour to ask. I forgot I have an In-Class test today, can you come and look after the booth at ten for an hour, please?’ What could I say?” So, texting Ashjan that she would be in Hazim Hall soon, Manar packed her books away, and in her distinctive hurried gait, always in a hurry style, set off for the booth.

Cultural Week at Unizwa sees all countries, activity groups, sports clubs, academic clubs, and societies have booths, stalls or stands to represent their extra-curricular specialty. The students really enjoy it as an opportunity to mingle with others, check out the cultural diversity that surrounds them each day, and even try some foods from different countries. It is both fun and informative. Manar continues the story...

“I got there, and high-fived Ashjan as she left, taking my place in our booth, which displayed book covers from hundreds of classic and short stories, and passed out handouts, each one featuring an exciting passage from one of the books. I was just finishing explaining about ‘The Black Cat,’ by Edgar Allan Poe, when a group of young women, very animated, with a lot of gestures came to check out the stall. I think I must have frozen on the spot, as I realised they were deaf, or hearing-impaired, and I had no idea what to do! I was blushing and talking gibberish. I did not have a clue what to do. To my shame I even thought I should try to make sign language myself, and the hole I was in just got deeper and deeper!”

Fortunately for Manar, a translator/signer for the young women arrived and rescued her from her growing predicament, and everybody was able to share the funny side of what had occurred. Manar asked the women's 'hero,' how she could learn more about their language, as she had never met a group of people who had so much certainty and positivity about them, despite their impediment.

He handed her a signing alphabet, saying,

“I have continued to work with, and for, this amazing group of hearing-impaired young people... I feel I have a significant purpose in my life now that is not self-centred. I feel more complete,” says **Manar al Nairi**

“Most people actually want to engage with our group because of that attitude, but then they see how much work there is in learning sign language, and we don't see them again.” But again, Manar noticed there was no animosity or malice in his words, and he was just 'telling it like it is.' “We have a workshop next month, the details are on the sheet, maybe we'll see you there?”

“I was still there when Ashjan came back, and though we are good friends we barely spoke, as I was still in a daze. All my short life I have worked hard, studied hard, and tried so hard to be a good person, without realising how selfish my objectives had been. I think I have never done anything awfully bad, but everything I have done was for me. Now I could see a way in which I could genuinely help others, to improve their lives. It was strange, but I felt from that moment, driven by a greater purpose.”

At that first workshop, Manar felt uncomfortable, as she is a progressive student doing well in her courses, and although knowing what she wanted to do, felt that she made a lot of mistakes in her signing. However, at one part of the workshop, one of the young women she had met earlier, smiled at her, and signed that she was doing a great job. Manar was heartened and felt extremely positive about the experience, and as she left was aware of the same message she had heard from her English teachers, that only practice and using a language will make it truly a 'second-language.'

Certainly, these students make an impact. They demonstrate no bitterness at what has befallen them, in fact it is almost as if they have a secret we do not know. Again, Ecclesiastes rears its head: *“...a time to weep, a time to laugh, a time to mourn, a time to dance.”* There is this certainty, positivity, call it what you will, but it is there.

“It's not as easy as it looks,” Manar told me later, *“They use their hands, arms, bodies, and facial expressions for emphasis, and maybe they get a lot of people who come once and never come again. I have continued to work with, and for, this amazing group of hearing-impaired young people. I have presented on-campus workshops to staff, faculty, and students, and all in all, I feel I have a significant purpose in my life now that is not self-centred. I feel more complete.”*

I am glad Manar has found a purpose to her life and believe that may offer her the balance she needs to turn her sometimes 'manic' study, into something more mature. We all know that faith can move mountains, yet sometimes a little leap of faith can take you through an ocean of uncertainty to... Well, we do not know what, but we do know that the greatest beauty lies beneath.



Premier League 'eyes' June restart



LONDON: The English Premier League are eyeing a resumption of the season on June 8, behind closed doors due to the coronavirus pandemic, and reaching a climax on July 27, according to The Times.

The paper claims football chiefs, along with other sports governing bodies, have been holding talks with the British government about when they can resume and at only "approved grounds".

The Premier League has 92 games remaining since it suspended the season on March 13 with Liverpool agonisingly close to their first ever EPL title.

The Times says Premier League bosses shared their idea 'Project Restart' with the shareholders last week.

The matches would be played behind

The matches would be played behind closed doors — a maximum of 400 people would be permitted to attend including media

closed doors — a maximum of 400 people would be permitted to attend including media though only if they tested negative for the virus — and at selected stadia to limit stretching the limited resources of the medical services.

Extra changing facilities would be introduced to ensure social distancing measures were in place whilst players

would be required to turn up for training individually and already in their kit.

They have also suggested August 22 as the date for the start of the 2020/21 campaign.

The main sticking point, though, remains the lack of tests available.

Should the season be unable to resume — the Dutch championship was abandoned without promotion or

relegation on Friday — it would be a financial nightmare for the clubs.

Measures being taken to alleviate some of that has seen the EPL link up with DLA Piper — a law firm that has advised on TV rights deals for the league in the past — on an emergency loan fund, with a maximum of £10 million (\$12.4 million) per club.

Some clubs have taken measures agreed with their players to ease the financial burden.

Southampton, West Ham United, Sheffield United and Watford have agreed deferrals with their first-team squads while the majority of Arsenal's players have agreed a 12.5 per cent wage reduction. — AFP

UNDER STRAIN

Transfer talk ignores virus 'reality': Man Utd's Woodward

LONDON: Manchester United executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward has said talk of mega-money football transfer moves "ignore the realities that face the sport" because of the coronavirus outbreak.

United have been linked with a £200 million (\$247 million, 228 million euros) bid to lure England captain Harry Kane away from Tottenham Hotspur.

But Woodward's comments suggest any such deal is unlikely in the current climate.

It is six weeks since the Premier League suspended all matches and, with no certainty as to when or if the season can resume, club finances are under strain at all levels.

United, one of world football's commercial powerhouses, are better off than most, however, with Woodward telling a fans' forum late on Friday the club were determined to play their part in aiding those affected by the virus.

"We have always believed that our commercial model gives us greater resilience than most clubs and we are grateful for the enduring support of our commercial partners in helping us achieve that," he said.

"However, nobody should be under any illusions about the scale of challenge facing everyone in football and it may not be 'business as usual' for any clubs, including ourselves, in the transfer market this summer."

Woodward added: "On this basis, I cannot help feeling that speculation around transfers of individual players for hundreds of millions of pounds

this summer seems to ignore the realities that face the sport."

Looking ahead, Woodward said he hoped "a season which still held so much promise for us in the Premier League, the Europa League and the FA Cup when it was suspended" could resume.

"And while it may be that games need to be played behind closed doors in the shorter term, we all recognise that football will not be fully back to normal until supporters are once again in attendance."

United have not taken advantage of the British government's coronavirus job reduction scheme, which sees taxpayers' money used to contribute to a portion of employees' wages, with Woodward stressing club staff were still being paid "in full".

Nevertheless he warned even United could not escape the economic impact of the virus.

"Of course, everyone is grappling with the economic realities of the pandemic and we are no different, so the longer the crisis continues the greater the impact will be for every club, including ourselves." — AFP



No champions as Dutch league ends season

THE HAGUE: The Dutch football federation (KNVB) called an end to the 2019-20 season on Friday, as the Eredivisie became the first top European league called off due to the coronavirus pandemic.

No team will be declared champions after Ajax and AZ Alkmaar were left level on points at the top of the table with nine games still to play.

"Unfortunately, given the measures (banning large-scale gatherings) taken by the government, it became impossible to finish the 2019-2020 season," the KNVB said in a statement.

"Public health always comes first. It's not just a football problem here given what the coronavirus is doing to society. Nonetheless, the professional football committee is aware that today's decisions are going to cause great disappointment for some," it added.

Leaders Ajax, above AZ on goal difference, will qualify for next season's Champions League, according to the KNVB, which will await a definitive verdict from Uefa on May 25.

AZ will likely enter the competition's preliminary rounds,

AJAX AND AZ ALKMAAR WERE LEFT LEVEL ON POINTS AT THE TOP OF THE TABLE WITH NINE GAMES STILL TO PLAY

with Feyenoord, PSV Eindhoven and Willem II set to compete in the Europa League based on the final standings.

It marks the first time since 1945 the Dutch season has finished without a league champion.

"As a player and as a club you naturally want to become champion," Ajax chief executive Edwin van der Sar told the club's website.

"You want to show it on the field and we have been at the top all year round.

"It is a pity that you are not declared champion, but in this situation that may be understandable. There are more important things at the moment than football."

No relegation or promotion

The KNVB announced its intention



to scrap the season on Tuesday following the Dutch government's decision to extend a ban on mass gatherings until September 1.

Matches behind closed doors were said not to be an option as they are considered events which require a permit and police presence.

The final decision was made following a meeting with the clubs on Friday. Next season will begin with the same 18 teams that started the

aborted Eredivisie campaign.

"There will be no relegation, nor promotion," said the KNVB, which is expected to face legal action from SC Cambuur and De Graafschap -- the top two clubs in the second division.

"This feels like the biggest disgrace in the history of Dutch sports," Cambuur manager Henk De Jong told Dutch broadcaster NOS. His side was 11 points clear of the play-off places when the league was halted.

The Belgian Pro League is expected to take a similar decision to that of their neighbours next week, with Club Brugge to be awarded the title.

Football in Europe ground to a standstill in mid-March following the spread of the virus across the continent. However, Germany is preparing to resume the Bundesliga on May 9 behind closed doors, if the government gives the green light.

Players in France could begin to return to training starting May 11, if lockdown restrictions are eased, while La Liga is also planning for clubs to resume training early next month.

No potential restart dates have yet been announced for leagues in Italy or England. — AFP

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ELIUD KIPCHOGE

STAR RUNNERS KIPCHOGE AND BEKELE FIGHT TO STAY FIT FOR RESCHEDULED RACE ON OCTOBER 4



London Marathon remains in limbo

LONDON: Eliud Kipchoge and Kenenisa Bekele should have spent this week finalising their preparations for the London Marathon but the two best distance runners in history are instead out alone on the trails of East Africa not knowing when they will race again.

Sunday's planned showdown between the only two men to have gone under two hours, two minutes for the classic distance was an early victim of the coronavirus pandemic.

Although the race has been rescheduled for October 4, it is far from certain if it will take place, in what form and whether the two superstars will be on the start line if it does.

"It would have been our 40th race and we think it would have been an incredible day," London Marathon race director Hugh Brasher told a teleconference on Friday.

"We hope we can welcome them back in October but at this stage we just don't know what is going to happen.

"We have to look at it in totality, with three quarters of a million spectators, the medical side, the charities — we are looking at probably 10 scenarios, and they are changing all the time," said Brasher.

He added that staging an "elite-only" race, as run in Tokyo last month, was one of those options.

September's Berlin Marathon has been cancelled and Brasher said, without revealing details, that he was in regular discussions with other major race directors where some "radical ideas" were being evaluated.

Brasher said last year's London Marathon raised over £66 million (\$81.34 million) for charity.

In an attempt to help plug an



KENENISA BEKELE

estimated four billion pounds hole in charity fundraising across all events this year, it has helped set up the 2.6 Challenge where athletes, celebrities and the public are doing

their own fundraising activities.

BEST RACE

For athletics fans, however, it is the absence of what Kipchoge said

"could have been the best race ever" that will be leaving them feeling particularly hollow this Sunday morning.

Kenya's Kipchoge, the first man

to run a sub-two hour marathon, in an unofficial race, is the defending champion and would have been chasing a record fifth London title.

Bekele, from Ethiopia, still holds

the world records over 5,000 and 10,000 metres and last year got within two seconds of Kipchoge's 2:01:39 official marathon best.

Now, instead of being the focus of the world's sporting attention when "something special might have happened" according to Bekele, they, like millions of others, are doing their best to stay fit and keep their spirits up during lockdown.

"Training alone affects my physical and mental state," Kipchoge told the teleconference from his home in Eldoret. "Physically I'm training to make sure I'm fit but with a team you train to be in your best-ever shape.

"Mentally, running alone, thinking alone, for an hour you can start feeling tired. I have been with a team for the last 15 years and this is really crazy for me and not comfortable at all."

Bekele agreed. "It's not nice to run alone and it's not possible to run together here in Ethiopia so it's really difficult to prepare well," he said. "I'm praying this will be all over soon."

In the wake of another Kenyan doping case last week, when 2017 London Marathon winner Daniel Wanjiru was provisionally suspended, there has been concern that the coronavirus lockdown, would present a "window of opportunity" for potential dopers in a country with a wretched recent record.

Kipchoge, however, said he had confidence in the agencies involved. "Two weeks ago I was tested at home — following social distancing rules," he said.

"The testers have passes to allow them to move around so I don't think it will be a problem."

— AFP