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APPLE AND GOOGLE TO CREATE CONTACT TRACING TECHNOLOGY

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BEATING VIRUS WOULD BE 'REAL' VICTORY, SAYS PSG'S SARABIA

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THE FASCINATING STORY BEHIND POPULAR EASTER SYMBOLS

OMAN

Shops must stick to COVID-19 steps

MUSCAT: Supermarkets and shops must regulate the entry of customers and ensure 2 metre distance between shoppers at the billing counters to curb the spread of COVID-19. They must also sterilize trolleys, and provide sanitizers to customers, said the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in a statement on Saturday. The ministry also advised consumers to follow precautionary measures. Families should send only one person for shopping and avoid outlets during peak hours between 7 pm and 10 pm. **SEE PAGE 2**

Oncology patients can get medicines by WhatsApp

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Oncology at the Royal Hospital said patients in the Governorate of Muscat can get medicines by sending a WhatsApp message to the centre's pharmacy on 79323229. The centre will deliver medicines to the areas that are subject to quarantine in the Governorate of Muscat through some charitable institutions or through the hospital to the isolation areas. Doctors of the centre will study each case separately and reschedule doses according to the type of case so that it does not affect the patient's condition. **SEE PAGE 3**

WORLD

Some COVID-19 cured patients test positive again

GENEVA: The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Saturday that it was looking into reports of some COVID-19 patients testing positive again after initially testing negative for the disease while being considered for discharge. South Korean officials on Friday reported 91 patients thought cleared of the new coronavirus had tested positive again. Jeong Eun-kyeong, director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told a briefing that the virus may have been "reactivated" rather than the patients being re-infected. **SEE PAGE 5**

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WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT MAX: 31°C MIN: 26°C	SALALAH MAX: 30°C MIN: 26°C	NIZWA MAX: 34°C MIN: 21°C
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SUNRISE 05.49 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:31
DHUHR: 12:13
ASR: 15:40
MAGHRIB: 18:32
ISHA: 19:44

MAKE SURE YOU DON'T HAVE COVID-19

TESTING CENTRES OPEN AT MUTTRAH SABLA AND PRIMARY HEALTH CENTRE ON ALL DAYS FROM 9 AM TO 1 PM
TESTING IS ONLY FOR THOSE WITH COVID-19 SYMPTOMS SUCH AS FEVER, COUGH, SORE THROAT AND SHORTNESS OF BREATH



KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Citizens and expats of Muttrah turned up in large numbers on Saturday at virus testing centres set up the Ministry of Health as the Sultanate reported 62 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the total number to 546. The virus has so far claimed lives of two Omanis and an expat. Testing is only for those with COVID-19 symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat and shortness of breath.

In all four testing centres set up in the Wilayat of Muttrah, the hotspot of the pandemic in the country, people formed long queues from 7 am to be screened for COVID-19. These centres are open from 9 am to 1 pm every day.

The testing centres are at Muttrah Sabla and Primary Health Centre before the police station.

"We received expatriates in huge numbers for COVID-19 test and the response is overwhelming", a volunteer told the *Observer*.

Volunteers and multi-linguals living in and around Muttrah have been told to help the MoH as the two challenges faced by the medical team are lack of people who can speak both Arabic as well as foreign languages, and volunteers who can manage the huge crowds visiting the testing centres.

Muscat Municipality, in association with the private sector, on Saturday continued the sterilization operations in Muttrah. According to a statement from the civic body, all the designated places where the medical team began sampling and testing for the citizens and residents have fully been sterilized.

Muscat continues to top COVID-19 cases with 440 cases (69 recovered, 3 deaths) followed by Al Dakhiliyah (34 cases, 15 recovered), South Batinah (26 cases, 4 recovered) Musandam (3 cases), Al Dhahirah (three cases, 1 recovered), South Sharqiyah (3 cases, 1 recovered), Buraimi (2 cases, 1 recovered), North Batinah (22 cases, 17 recovered) and Dhofar (9 cases, 1 recovered).

A total of 22 institutional quarantine centres located in Muscat Governorate have received 3,000 people, of whom 196 were discharged on Friday and 387 discharged on Saturday today, according to Dr Mohammed al Saadi, supervisor of the relief and sheltering sector in Muscat Governorate.

The Ministry of Health has repeatedly advised all citizens and residents to wash hands with water and soap, as well as avoid touching the face, nose, mouth and eyes. One should cover the face while coughing and sneezing.

40,000 technology students log on to online learning

MUSCAT: The colleges of technology affiliated to the Ministry of Manpower have initiated technical measures that enable students to communicate with the academic staff to complete the remaining curricula through online learning. The initiative comes in response to the decision of the COVID-19 Supreme Committee on the suspension of studies in all educational institutions in the Sultanate.

This is part of the ministry's efforts, represented by the colleges of technology, since their establishment, to develop the infrastructure for information technology by providing all systems, applications, services and networks that support the education process.

The colleges of technology are also distinguished by being the main centre of the Cisco Academy in the Sultanate. The academy provides students with the practical skills necessary for networking, through obtaining professional certificates issued by the company.

To achieve the goals of online learning, these colleges use different applications, including Moodle (as a main window of interaction between students and e-learning



systems). The lecturers were provided with three systems, namely Microsoft Team, CISCO WEBEX and Big Blue Button.

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has made available other applications that can be used by lecturers to enable them to download or broadcast educational materials for students as well as to interact with them directly, including ZOOM, Skype and Hangout programs.

It is expected that these systems and programs will enhance the capabilities of young people, enable them to have future skills and transform the traditional educational process from dictation to interaction and creativity.

Nearly 40,000 male and female students in the seven colleges of technology have been instructed to start interacting with these platforms and applications.

The colleges transmit online live lectures in the fields of engineering, information technology, business studies, applied sciences, photography, fashion design and pharmacy. Some lectures are uploaded on the platforms so that students can have access to them.

— ONA

SMSM to raise production of coronavirus protective gears

SALALAH: The Salalah Medical Supplies Manufacturing Co (SMSM) has announced that it is planning to increase its production capacity to meet the surging demand for face masks, gloves and other medical supplies due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Ahmed bin Aqeel al Ibrahim, CEO, said that SMSM has a capacity to produce

2m gloves and 100k face masks per day to meet local demand for both the public and private health sector. We have managed to provide the

healthcare institutions with 2m face masks in March and are currently focusing on the essential medical supplies that are in high demand nowadays", he added.

Since the end of 2019, SMSM operated an additional production line for producing 10 types of medical gloves and two types of face masks, the official said adding that SMSM, when operating at a maximum capacity, will be able to cover the local demand for gloves as well as export the surplus of GCC countries.

— ONA

Oncology centre at Royal Hospital makes new arrangements for patients

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The National Centre for Oncology at the Royal Hospital has announced a number of measures to ensure that its outpatients are not affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

These measures include rescheduling of routine appointments in order not to affect the patients' health until after the pandemic has ended.

Patients in the Governorate of Muscat can get medicines by sending a WhatsApp message to the centre's pharmacy on 79323229

The centre will deliver medicines to the areas that are subject to quarantine in the Governorate of Muscat through some charitable institutions or through the hospital to the isolation areas.

Doctors of the centre will study each case separately and reschedule doses according to the type of case so that it does not negatively affect the patient's condition. The hospital said it follows the instructions of international agencies to deal with cancer patients during the pandemic stage.

In the event that treatment is required, the movement of patients to enter Muscat will be facilitated through coordination between the public relations department of the Royal Hospital and the competent authorities.



For radiation patients who want to return to their areas this week and their treatment is scheduled on a daily basis, the centre will facilitate their entry as mentioned above to complete their treatment plan.

Patients who receive oral treatment or simple skin injections, the centre's pharmacy will send the medicine with a detailed prescription to

reference hospitals in those areas where they reside so that they can get treatment without travelling to Muscat Governorate or visiting the Royal Hospital.

The centre stressed that it continues to provide its services for urgent cases, and these cases will be treated even if it is necessary to treat them in special rooms or isolation rooms.



Ministry of Finance

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MODIFICATION, FABRICATION, INTERIOR DESIGN, FITOUT (TAXATION AUTHORITY BUILDING)	R.O 50	Tuesday 16/4/2020	10:00 A.M Tuesday 30/4/2020
Site Visit Date	10:00 A.M Sunday - 19/4/2020		

All companies who wish to bid are kindly requested to register through E-tendering system of the Tender Board, and obtain a valid registration certificate. To obtain the tender document and specifications, companies must pay the fees online through safe E-payment gateway in the following link <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.

The bids must be submitted online via <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>, in addition to hard copies. E-tendering system will not accept any bid submitted after the deadline .

All companies must attach a copy of the bank guarantee or certified cheque issued by a recognized bank in Oman. The value of the cheque must not be less than (1%) of the bidding price, and must be valid for (90) days from the date of the bid submission. The original bank guarantee must be submitted along to Financial Affairs Department/ Taxation Authority.

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99639264
92998577
99429094
99429192

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



MUM, I’M BORED!

PARENTING DURING THE HARD TIME OF COVID-19

MALGORZATA PIECHOWICZ-PIETRUSZKA

Being a parent in the 21st century, in my humble opinion, may be the biggest challenge that we as parents have to rise to. Never in the history of the world were there so many expectations and this amount of criticism and pressure that parents put on themselves. Social media persistently undermine our already frail parental authority by promoting unattainable and in fact unreal pictures of ideal(ised) families. Even an experienced parent may feel at times inadequate, not to mention all fathers and mothers to be, whose self-confidence must be almost non-existent after scrolling through some of the Instagram accounts of ‘perfect’ mothers.

Sadly, I must admit it is usually women who tend to feature these photos of always-smily-children in always-tidy-kitchens. You ask yourself a question: How do they do it? Am I a failure? And now add to that yet another challenge of living in COVID-19 reality.

Parenthood is chaotic, messy and full of unpredictabilities. It consists of daily compromises, negotiations, exhaustion and quite a heavy load of worrying. Truth be told, ‘worry’ becomes your second name, a shadow that you need to learn how to accept and live with.

From the trivial daily things when kids are small: Did she burp? poo? ate enough? to more complex ones, like: Which university will be the best for their career? All these questions, plus a million more, constantly occupy the tired mind of a parent.

However, on top of that you also have to make sure that your children will be properly equipped for their future adult life. You obviously want them to have a better ‘start’ than what was offered to you. You wish them more fulfilling, more affluent and basically sweeter life that the one you currently (try to) enjoy. So you read to them endless stories from day one, preferably in a foreign language, because you know how crucial the first three years of life are in terms of phonology.

You enrol them in countless extra- curriculum activities because everyone does it and you read tonnes of research how brain stimulation is important for their future development. You chauffeur them around from French and piano classes to ballet and Ju Jitsu trainings because you do not want them to miss out on something.

You buy organic food, cotton and non-plastic lunch boxes. You cater for every need that your children have or at least you think they have. All that, so they can be fulfilled adults someday in the future.

And suddenly you realise that unintentionally you deprived your children of one of a kind, precious, innocent and carefree childhood. You think of your own parents and your own youth when it was totally OK to wander around the neighbourhood with a bunch of other kids having absolutely nothing to do but making experiments on a poor caterpillar or idly gazing at the sky trying to make sense of that whole thing called universe.

To be a parent thirty, forty or fifty years ago did not mean to inundate children with endless brain-stimulating tasks. Apart from providing safe home, healthy (enough) food, reasonable comfort and most of all love, parents were not expected to do much more. Why we have somehow come to believe that our kids need constant entertainment and stimulation - I do not know. Life as it is offers endless learning opportunities. Participating in daily family routines is very often enough for our children to grow as compassionate, kind and wise human beings. So, do not panic or worry when you children are bored. Especially now, during the COVID-19 epidemic, when we are confined to our homes and spend together 24/7. Juggling homeschooling, your own work, laundry, shopping, cooking and all the corona-inflicted worries is already quite a lot to deal with.

You will not simply be able to constantly entertain your children unless you are a cyborg. Let your children embrace boredom. It is not so bad in the end. When children are given a chance for undisturbed free play, it may become their favourite, most memorable part of the day.

Of course at first, espacially if they are not used to the idea of ‘go and play’, be prepared for some moaning and groaning. However, I can promise that after ten to fifteen minutes of being left alone and screen-free, they will discover something of their interest. They will improvise, experiment, build or simply daydream. Free play is children’s natural state and it can boost creativity and self-sufficiency better than any marathon of strenuous extra-curriculum activities or otherwise packed schedules.

When I was a child, whenever I wailed the infamous ‘I’m bored’ complaint, my father would tell me: ‘Intelligent people do not get bored’. Each time I felt a little bit offended but at the same time his words motivated me enough to prove to him and to myself that I can always find something to do.

Those moments of carefree, spontaneous and independent play are one of the most beautiful and cherished memories of my childhood. So do not fret Dear Parent. Be kind to yourself in this difficult time and let your children discover the bottomless possibilities of boredom.



US reports highest daily virus toll as Easter opens in lockdown

NEW EPICENTRE: 2,108 new deaths and more than half a million reported infections

NEW YORK: The United States became the first country to report more than 2,000 coronavirus deaths in a single day, marking a grim milestone as billions around the world celebrated the Easter holiday weekend under lockdown from home.

The global death toll from the virus surged past 103,000 on Friday, with the United States quickly becoming the epicentre of the pandemic that first emerged in China late last year.

Europe has so far shouldered the majority of all deaths and infections — though there were signs of hope the curve could be starting to flatten in some of the hardest-hit countries.

Numbers out of Madrid offered a glimmer of hope on Saturday: 510 new deaths, a dip in fatalities for the third day in a row.

In France, nearly 1,000 new deaths were confirmed on Friday but the country reported a drop in the number of intensive care patients for a second day running.

Italy meanwhile said the number of daily deaths was starting to level off -- though the government resisted pressure to lift its lockdown, extending confinement measures until May 3.

With 18,849 dead, Italy has the highest global death toll, but it is likely soon to be surpassed by the United States where fatalities continued to mount this week.

On Friday, the United States reported 2,108 new deaths, the highest daily toll out of any country since the outbreak was first reported in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in December.

Spain reported a drop in new deaths for a third consecutive day, offering a glimmer of hope the peak may have passed.

With more than half a million reported infections, the United States already has more coronavirus cases than anywhere else in the world.

The global infection rate now stands at more than 1.7 million, though with many countries only testing the most serious cases the numbers are likely far higher.

But President Donald Trump said that with the US infection trajectory “near the peak” and social distancing working well, he was considering ways to re-open the world’s biggest economy as soon as possible.

He acknowledged the risk of higher death tolls if businesses restart too soon — after the World Health

Organization on Friday cautioned countries against lifting lockdown measures too quickly.

“But you know what? Staying at home leads to death also,” Trump added, pointing to the massive economic suffering for millions of Americans.

It is unclear when that will be possible, with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo saying millions in the state — the hardest hit in the US — will have to be tested before it can reopen. Easter weekend kicked off in near-empty churches around the world as parishioners remained locked in their homes.

More than four billion people — over half the world’s population — are confined to their homes from New York to Naples to New Delhi as governments scramble to contain the pandemic’s deadly march across the globe.

Pope Francis was due to livestream his Easter Vigil from an empty St Peter’s Basilica later on Saturday, after he presided over an empty Good Friday Service to kick off the holiday weekend.

The pontiff was praised by Italy’s prime minister for his “gesture of responsibility” to observe Easter in private.

“We will remember this spring as the one in which, for the first time in history, the pope presided over the general audiences and conducted

the Angelus (prayer) by livestream,” Giuseppe Conte wrote in Italy’s Catholic daily Avvenire.

“His words, although spoken far from Saint Peter’s Square, which was wrapped in an unreal silence, have reached everyone.”

Worshippers in Rome stocked up on traditional Easter cakes ahead of the weekend, some piling them onto scooters outside of grocery stores, eager to maintain parts of the holiday tradition even from home.

Across Europe, government urged citizens to stay home for the weekend, fearing people would flock outdoors to enjoy warm weather or flee to holiday homes.

France deployed some 160,000 gendarmes to patrol busy roads, while Lithuania set up road blocks to prevent travellers from leaving cities.

Turkey announced with little warning on Friday that a 48-hour lockdown order would be in place in dozens of cities, including Ankara and Istanbul, as its virus death toll crept past 1,000.

Shoppers crowded supermarkets in Istanbul late on Friday in a rush to stock up on supplies before the curfew started at midnight.

The World Health Organization has warned that prematurely easing lockdown measures — as has started in central China where the virus first emerged — could spark a dangerous return of the disease. — AFP

WHO says looking into reports of some COVID-19 cured patients testing positive again

GENEVA: The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Saturday that it was looking into reports of some COVID-19 patients testing positive again after initially testing negative for the disease while being considered for discharge.

South Korean officials on Friday reported 91 patients thought cleared of the new coronavirus had tested positive again. Jeong Eun-kyeong, director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told a briefing that the virus may have been “reactivated” rather than the patients being re-infected.

The Geneva-based WHO, asked about the report from Seoul, said in a brief statement: “We are aware of these reports of individuals who have tested negative for COVID-19 using PCR (polymerase chain reaction) testing and then after some days testing positive again.

“We are closely liaising with our clinical experts and working hard to get more information on those individual cases. It is important to make sure that when samples are collected for testing on suspected patients, procedures are followed properly,” it said.

According to the WHO’s guidelines on clinical management, a patient can be discharged from hospital after two consecutive negative results in a clinically recovered patient at least 24 hours apart, it added.

Based on current studies, there is a period of about two weeks between the onset of symptoms and clinical recovery of patients with mild COVID-19 disease, the

South Korean officials on Friday reported 91 patients thought cleared of the new coronavirus had tested positive again. Jeong Eun-kyeong, director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told a briefing that the virus may have been “reactivated” rather than the patients being re-infected

agency said.

“We are aware that some patients are PCR positive after they clinically recover, but we need systematic collection of samples from recovered patients to better understand how long they shed live virus,” it said.

South Korean health officials said on Friday that it remains unclear what is behind the trend, with epidemiological investigations still under way.

“As COVID-19 is a new disease, we need more epidemiological data to draw any conclusions of virus shedding profile,” the WHO said.

The number of deaths linked to the novel coronavirus reached 100,000 on Friday, as reported cases passed 1.6 million, according to a Reuters tally. — Reuters



WORLD-RENOVED PRIMATOLOGIST PLEADS FOR HUMANITY TO LEARN FROM PAST MISTAKES

Jane Goodall says ‘disrespect for animals’ caused pandemic

LONDON: World-renowned British primatologist Jane Goodall says the coronavirus pandemic was caused by humanity’s disregard for nature and disrespect for animals.

Goodall, who is best known for trail-blazing research in Africa that revealed the true nature of chimpanzees, pleaded for the world to learn from past mistakes to prevent future disasters. During a conference call ahead of the release of the new National Geographic documentary “Jane Goodall: The Hope”, the 86-year-old also said everyone can make a difference.

How do you view this pandemic?

Goodall: It is our disrespect for nature and our disrespect of the animals we should share the planet with that has caused this pandemic that was predicted long ago.

Because as we destroy, let’s say the forest, the different species of animals in the forest are forced into

a proximity and therefore diseases are being passed from one animal to another, and that second animal is then most likely to infect humans as it is forced into closer contact with humans.

It’s also the animals who are hunted for food, sold in markets in Africa or in the meat market for wild animals in Asia, especially China, and our intensive farms where we cruelly crowd together billions of animals around the world. These are the conditions that create an opportunity for the viruses to jump from animals across the species barrier to humans.

What can we do about these animal markets?

It’s really good that China closed down the live wild animal markets, in a temporary ban which we hope will be made permanent, and other Asian countries will follow suit. But in Africa it will be very difficult to stop the selling of bush meat because



so many people rely on that for their livelihoods.

It will need a lot of careful thought on how it should be done, you can’t just stop somebody doing something when they have absolutely no money to support themselves or their families,

but at least this pandemic should have taught us the kind of things to do to prevent another one.

What can we hope for?

We have to realise we are part of the natural world, we depend on it, and as



We have to realise we are part of the natural world, we depend on it, and as we destroy it we are actually stealing the future from our children

JANE GOODALL
Primatologist

we destroy it we are actually stealing the future from our children.

Hopefully, because of this unprecedented response, the lockdowns that are going on around the world, more people will wake up and eventually they can start thinking about ways they can live their lives differently. Everyone can make an

impact every single day. If you think about the consequences of the little choices you make: what you eat, where it came from, did it cause cruelty to animals, is it made from intensive farming — which mostly it is — is it cheap because of child slave labour, did it harm the environment in its production, where did it come from, how many miles did it travel, did you think that perhaps you could walk and not take your car.

(Also consider) ways that you could perhaps help alleviate poverty because when people are poor they can’t make these ethical choices. They just have to do whatever they can to survive -- they can’t question what they buy, they must buy the cheapest, and they are going to cut down the last tree because they are desperate to find land on which they can grow more food.

So what we can do in our individual lives does depend a little bit on who we are, but we all can make a difference, everybody can. — AFP



Better informed, better prepared, but not all wiser!

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here is no doubt that rather than just talking about COVID-19, people all around the world are sharing their experiences, thoughts and opinions in regard to their management of the respiratory pathogen, and we are all becoming just a little more informed, day to day, a little more aware, and a little more pragmatic.

One thing that is becoming increasingly more clear is that the human race, for all its scientific knowledge and prior research, is currently stuck somewhere between a rock and a hard place in terms of implementing a long-term solution to this third, after SARS and MERS, virulent member of the Corona virus family, yet we still have no absolute certainty as to its definitive origins, or how to manage, control or fight it most effectively.

Those governments who's medical, health, intelligence, and even defense agencies warned of the consequences of a global pandemic should have had their warnings heeded, and the elected officials who ignored their warnings should pay

The Sultanate has taken a very structured, low key, very much no-nonsense approach to the social requirements for disease control, without too much in the way of impositions, preferring a softly, softly approach where possible. The actions of the Supreme Committee have appeared to be reasoned, swift, and effective.

the price, but that is history, and won't fix the problem we all have now.

At the moment the major concern for us all is that there appear only two options in terms of future management of the pandemic, either the herd immunity method, where we wait for the human race to build an immunity through survival, which as a timeline of 12-18 months, and is based only, at this stage on statistical modelling which may not have legitimate statistics due to a lack of transparency by some health authorities, notably, it would appear, in China.

Plan B relies on us being patient and waiting for the researchers and scientists to come up with a vaccine, however even

the most ebullient among the scientific community appear to be saying that it could be 12-15 months in coming. That's a long time!

Just to digress briefly, this does beg the genuine question as to how, when we have so many virologists, and viral experts, you can see them standing to the left and right of world leaders when they appear in the media, we don't have a vaccine yet, as the first member of the corona family, SARS, appeared twenty years ago? What have they been doing instead? Were they fiddling as Rome burned?

How each nation's cultural and philosophical approaches are driving

their national response to the pandemic is also of interest as the Sultanate has taken a very structured, low key, very much no-nonsense approach to the social requirements for disease control, without too much in the way of impositions, preferring a softly, softly approach where possible. The actions of the Supreme Committee have appeared to be reasoned, swift, and effective.

Much of the world is not saying what it is doing, as its hierarchies prefer to do their own thing. As a rule, the Middle East, South East Asia and much of Africa don't do transparency, so we don't know much of their responses. We do know America's situation, as President Trump appears determined that he will lead his country through its very first 'home soil' threat. We cannot doubt his determination, but his practicality quotient does vary greatly.

The UK, led by Prime Minister Johnson, appears to have committed to the social support of its population in a significant manner, implementing subsidies for workers sent home,

and insisting that the financial sector exercise compassion, well aware that earlier financial assistance for banks and institutions did not play out well. Unfortunately, the UK government's first reaction was to go with a 'herd immunity' philosophy, but then they lost their nerve, and have now switched to a controlled scenario. Only time will tell which was correct! Johnson himself has been affected by COVID-19, which must limit the effectiveness of his leadership, but he does appear to still be in control.

Again, New Zealand, through its Prime Minister Ardern have shown the way, creating an apolitical working party which has made bold decisions, going into lockdown early, subsidising essential industries entire sectors, employers, and ensuring that nobody is alone and vulnerable, or without money. They put 6-month mortgage holidays in place, ensured nobody would suffer from rented house evictions, so that all of society is equally supported. Best of all, the main political parties are united, with political points-scoring a non-event.



RAY PETERSEN

petersen_ray@hotmail.com



Africans targeted in China virus crackdown

FRED DUFOUR

A

fricans in southern China's largest city say they have become targets of suspicion and subjected to forced evictions, arbitrary quarantines and mass coronavirus testing as the country steps up its fight against imported infections.

China says it has largely curbed its COVID-19 outbreak but a recent cluster of cases linked to the Nigerian community in Guangzhou sparked the alleged discrimination by locals and virus prevention officials.

Local authorities in the industrial centre of 15 million said at least eight people diagnosed with the illness had spent time in the city's Yuexiu district, known as "Little Africa".

Five were Nigerian nationals who faced widespread anger after reports surfaced that they had broken a mandatory quarantine and been to eight restaurants and other public places instead of staying home.

As a result, nearly 2,000 people they came into contact with had to be tested for COVID-19 or undergo quarantine, state media said.

Guangzhou had confirmed 114 imported coronavirus cases as of Thursday — 16 of which were Africans. The rest were returning Chinese nationals. It has led to Africans becoming targets of suspicion, distrust and racism in China.

Several Africans said they had been forcibly evicted from their homes and turned away by hotels.

"I've been sleeping under the bridge for four days with no food to eat... I cannot buy food anywhere, no shops or restaurants will serve me," said Tony Mathias, an exchange student

Community subjected to mass COVID-19 testing even though many had not left China recently, and placed under arbitrary quarantine at home or in hotels.

from Uganda who was forced from his apartment on Monday.

"We're like beggars on the street," the 24-year-old said. Mathias added that police had given him no information about testing or quarantine but instead told him "to go to another city".

Police in Guangzhou declined to comment when contacted by AFP.

A Nigerian businessman said he was evicted from his apartment earlier this week. "Everywhere the police see us, they will come and pursue us and tell us to go home. But where can we go?" he said.

Other Africans said the community had been subject to mass COVID-19 testing even though many had not left China recently, and placed under arbitrary quarantine at home or in hotels.

China has banned foreign nationals from entering the country and many travellers are being sent into 14-day quarantines either in their own accommodation or at centralised facilities.

Thiam, an exchange student from Guinea, said police ordered him to stay home on Tuesday even after he tested negative for COVID-19 and told officers he had not left China in almost four years.

He believes the measures are specifically and unfairly targeting Africans. "All the people I've seen tested are Africans. Chinese are walking around freely but if you're black you can't go out," he said.

Denny, a Nigerian trader evicted from his flat on Tuesday, said police moved him to a hotel for quarantine after he spent several days sleeping on the streets.

"Even if we have a negative test result, police don't let us stay (in our accommodation) and they don't give a reason why," he said.

The infections in Guangzhou have sparked a torrent of abuse online, with many Chinese internet users posting racist comments and calling for all Africans to be deported.

Last week a controversial cartoon depicting foreigners as different types of trash to be sorted through went viral on social media.

"There's just this crazy fear that anybody who's African might have been in contact with somebody who was sick," said David, a Canadian living in Guangzhou who did not want to give his full name.

China's foreign ministry acknowledged this week that there had been some "misunderstandings" with the African community.

"I want to emphasise that the Chinese government treats all foreigners in China equally," said spokesman Zhao Lijian on Thursday, urging local officials to "improve their working mechanisms".

The complaints in Guangzhou contrast with a welcome reception to Chinese efforts in battling the coronavirus across the African continent, where Beijing this week donated medical supplies to 18 countries.

— AFP

Americans won't attend sports events without vaccine

D

odger Stadium in Los Angeles remains empty with Major League Baseball shut down for the coronavirus, and most Americans in a new poll say they would be reluctant to attend future sports events until a vaccine is developed.

A large majority of Americans would be reluctant to attend future sporting events unless a vaccine for the coronavirus is developed, a survey by Seton Hall University has found.

With every major sport across North America in shutdown for the past month since the COVID-19 crisis erupted, professional leagues are already exploring the practicalities of how and when competition may resume. But the results of the Seton Hall Sports Poll revealed deep unease among Americans about returning to stadiums before a vaccine had been developed.

The survey of 762 people carried out between April 6 and 8 found that 72 per cent would not feel safe attending a sports event without a vaccine. Among identified sports fans, 61 per cent said they would not feel safe. Twelve per cent of Americans polled said they would feel safe only if social distancing measures were in force while only 13 per cent said they would feel safe.

"This virus has the attention and respect of the nation," said Rick Gentile, director of the Seton Hall Sports Poll, which is sponsored by the Sharkey Institute within the Stillman School of Business.

"Those who identify as sports fans, at all levels of interest, line up closely with the general population in regard to their own safety and that of the players."

While 40 per cent of those surveyed believed no sports should be played through the remainder of 2020, some 76 per cent said they would have the same level of interest if competitions resumed and were broadcast with no spectators present.

Meanwhile, the survey revealed support for the decisions of professional sports leagues in the timing of their shutdown.

Some 76 per cent said the shutdown came at the right time. Eighty-four per cent also backed the International Olympic Committee's decision to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Olympics by one year.

The United States has more COVID-19 cases than any other country, with more than 473,000 infections and over 17,800 fatalities.

The National Basketball Association, National Hockey League and Major League Soccer all suspended their respective seasons in mid-March while Major League Baseball also postponed the start of the 2020 season. — AFP

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

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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P.O. Box 974, Postal Code 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
subscribe@oeppa.om

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ECONOMIC **HARDSHIP**

Pandemic imperils Omani SMEs unless they innovate

GIVEN THE MAGNITUDE OF THE CRISIS, OMANI SMES FACE A DIFFICULT PERIOD AHEAD AS THEY ATTEMPT TO WEATHER THE LOCKDOWN AND DOWNTURN, SAYS CEO OF SME FUND

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Thousands of Omani owned and operated small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are contemplating a bleak future amid the lockdown ordered by Oman's authorities to help contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), and by the intensifying downturn sparked by the recent collapse in international oil prices.

With the government already hamstrung by its own deepening fiscal constraints, aggravated by plummeting oil revenues, many of these micro-businesses will need to innovate in order to stay afloat, according to one of Oman's leading authorities on SMEs.

Shaikh Salah Hilal al Maawali (pictured), CEO – SME Development Fund, said: "I urge the owners of SMEs not to wait for things to improve, but to do whatever it takes to remain in business. This may require them to be a bit creative and innovative, perhaps



harness technology, ecommerce or other tools, consult with those with experience in business continuity, and so on. By taking these steps, entrepreneurs can hope to recover quickly when the situation improves."

Speaking to the *Observer*, Al Maawali however acknowledged that, given the magnitude of the crisis, Omani SMEs face a difficult period ahead as they attempt to weather the lockdown and downturn.

I urge the owners of SMEs not to wait for things to improve, but to do whatever it takes to remain in business. This may require them to be a bit creative and innovative, perhaps harness technology, ecommerce or other tools, consult with those with experience in business continuity, and so on.

SHAIKH SALAH HILAL AL MAAWALI
CEO, SME Development Fund

"I think the impact will be more severe from April onwards as the owners, with their establishments shuttered by the lockdown, will still have expenses to shoulder, in the form of salaries for their staff, rent, electricity, loan instalments and so on. Even if they take advantage of deferrals in the payment of loan instalments, they are still liable to pay the interest on the loan, and so on."

Significantly, SMEs represent

an important segment of Oman's economy. With an estimated 200,000 registered businesses, they account for a sizable 23 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Earlier, Al Maawali welcomed measures announced by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) aimed at alleviating the financial impact of the pandemic and downturn on small businesses.

The apex bank had directed

banks, finance and finance leasing companies to favourably consider requests for deferment of loan instalments from affected borrowers, particularly SMEs, with immediate effect for the next six months without adverse impacting the risk classification of such loans.

However, these measures will not go very far in easing the "huge" financial challenges that SMEs will be saddled with as a result of the crisis, he said. Furthermore, with banks and financial agencies facing their own difficulties posed by the crisis, they are unlikely to incur any losses themselves by, for example, waiving the interest incurred on loans payable by small businesses, he noted.

"Let's be logical here: This crisis is impacting even big companies, whether in Oman and globally. Everyone, including banks and financial institutions, are suffering a degree of hardship," he lamented.

The official also cautioned against expectations of a bailout from the

government which is itself grappling with slumping oil revenues, mounting deficit, and a steep interest burden on accumulating debt.

In the circumstances, entrepreneurs and small businesses need to suitably gird themselves for rough times ahead, said Al Maawali.

In the interest of business continuity in the face of upheavals of the COVID-19 kind, SMEs should consider putting aside savings for use in such contingencies.

They should also put in place strategies for implementation in response to all kinds of future scenarios, he said.

But he recognized that most SMEs, as single or family owned businesses, did not have the luxury of such resources and capabilities to invest in disaster planning strategies. This, he remarked, was part of the early lessons for entrepreneurs and SMEs from the COVID-19 crisis.

[Tomorrow: 'Incentives necessary for Omani SMEs to help fight 'hidden trade']

G20 nations agree to cut oil production



Workers are seen at Saudi Aramco's oil facility in Khurais, Saudi Arabia. – Reuters

WASHINGTON: Crude oil prices are at their lowest in 18 years, prompting the G20 to cut production. The Opec+ group of nations had already agreed on large production cuts, but sought US and Canadian support.

The G20 group of nations made the decision on Friday to cut crude oil production in May and June, in an effort to stabilize the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on markets. This would be the largest supply deal of its kind.

Earlier, the Opec+ alliance led by Saudi Arabia and Russia had also agreed to cut oil production to 10 million barrels per day. However, confirmation on this deal was delayed due to Mexico's defiance to cut its production.

The alliance was seeking cutdowns from oil producing G20 nations such as US and Canada to supplement the deal. "We think that in addition to the 10 million b/d that Opec+ will cut there will be another 5 million b/d cut by countries that are not included in Opec+, so in total the cut in May and June will be 15 million b/d," said Russian energy minister Alexander Novak.

"We commit to ensure that the energy sector continues to make a full, effective contribution to overcoming COVID-19 and powering the subsequent global recovery. We commit to take all the necessary and immediate measures to ensure energy market stability," said a statement by the G20 nations.

Saudi Arabia would be seeing a decrease in production by 3.5 million b/d and, Russia would reduce 2 million b/d from their current levels. Mexico refused the prescribed 400,000 b/d cut, but offered a reduction of 100,000 b/d instead. The cuts would gradually be reduced, till April 2022.

US President Donald Trump offered to help Mexico to "pick up some of the slack," in order to make the deal easier.

Shutdowns across the world have brought down the demand for oil by nearly a third. Crude oil prices are at their lowest in 18 years.

A price war earlier this month between Saudi Arabia and Russia, and the Mexican stand off have proved to be barriers in the bid to stabilise global oil markets. — Agencies

NEW MILESTONE

PDO's transition to Energy Development Oman gets nod

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Social media was abuzz with news over the weekend of an impending announcement by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) – the biggest player in the Sultanate's hydrocarbon sector by far – of its keenly awaited transition into a broad-based energy development holding company with an enlarged mandate to cover investments in, among other areas, renewable and alternative energy resources.

Energy Development Oman (EDO), the concept behind which was first unveiled by Managing Director Raoul Restucci (pictured) nearly three years ago, centres on a vision to reposition PDO from an essentially fossil fuels-based producer to a "fully fledged energy company".

The strategy envisions PDO's diversification into, among other areas, solar and alternative energy development, energy management, low-carbon technologies, oil and gas consultancy services, and water management.

The Omani government is a 60 per cent shareholder in PDO, which accounts for a predominant share of the country's oil and gas output.

In an online address to company employees last week, Restucci

EDO WILL BE A HOLDING COMPANY OF PETROLEUM DEVELOPMENT OMAN AND OTHER INVESTMENTS: **RAOUL RESTUCCI**

outlined, among other things, the company's strategy to weather the crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the collapse in international oil prices. A notable part of the strategy, he said, is the establishment of Energy Development Oman designed to diversify the company's activities and thereby reduce its vulnerability to upheavals of the kind that the global Oil & Gas industry is currently undergoing.

Plans for the creation of EDO now have the "full endorsement" of the Omani government, said the Managing Director.

"What that means is twofold: One, EDO will be a holding company of PDO and a number of investments.

For PDO, it will enable us to



deconsolidate that debt and secure it at substantially more attractive terms; Second, EDO is also about to transition as well. We have a number of businesses, a number of investments that are very keen to partner with us."

In a statement to the *Observer*, PDO noted: "We are progressing plans aimed at corporatising PDO and developing renewable energy opportunities in close coordination with the Government and enabled by the establishment of Energy Development Oman (EDO)."

In recent years, PDO has embarked on a number of

corporate the entity and thus enable us to secure the funding and resources which the government at the moment is securing for us at very high cost. We will be able to

initiatives that champion energy efficiency in oilfield operations, use of renewables and low-carbon emission technologies, and environmental sustainability.

PDO is a global pioneer in the use of solar energy to generate steam necessary for its Enhanced Oil Recovery (EOR) operations. To this end, PDO is collaborating with GlassPoint Solar in the implementation of a 1-gigawatt Miraah project that harnesses solar energy to produce heavy oil from the Amal oilfield instead of natural gas for steam generation.

Last year, the company brought into operation its maiden utility-scale solar PV project — a 100-MW installation at Amin in the southern part of its concession — under a long-term Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) reached with investors in the Independent Power Project (IPP).

Furthermore, PDO is exploring avenues for investment in solar and wind resources for power generation and water desalination, power to 'X', solar to hydrogen, and other opportunities.

The company has also expressed an interest in bidding for large-scale solar power schemes procured by state-run Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP).



Oman’s first antimony, gold project to operate at 100 per cent capacity by year-end



JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Strategic & Precious Metals Processing (SPMP) Oman, the first antimony and gold dore exporter and the only gold processing facility in Oman, announced that its ramp up of antimony production is continuing at a steady pace moving towards operating at 50 per cent capacity in the near future, which it expects to move to full capacity by the end of the year, subject to any impact caused by COVID-19 pandemic.

SPMP was established in Oman in 2014 as a joint venture between the Government of Oman, through Oman Investment Fund (OIF), holding 40 per cent equity interest, UK’s Tri-Star Resources PLC (40 per cent equity holder) and UAE’s Dutco Natural Resources (DNR) (20 per cent equity holder). SPMP started producing and selling gold in November 2019.

SPMP has signed a term sheet with local banks to provide a \$60 million term loan facility. In addition, the banks have expressed an interest in providing a working capital facility of up to \$ 45 million (out of a total required of \$ 60 million as announced

early this year) subject to meeting certain criteria.

A total of \$40 million has been injected by OIF and DNR into SPMP on terms which have yet to be agreed between the shareholders.

The company said that to date the COVID-19 pandemic has had little impact upon the operations of SPMP. The situation is changing rapidly, however, with access to the Sohar Free Zone due to be restricted. SPMP is working with the authorities to agree a plan that allows critical employees to continue working, on a safe basis, to ensure that production can be maintained.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact upon the antimony market and prices, in particular France and Belgium (the two biggest consumers of antimony metal outside of China), are in lock down. Nevertheless, this is not expected to have a significant impact upon the long-term viability of the plant as prices are expected to recover in the medium term. The COVID-19 pandemic may have an impact upon supply of feedstock whilst there are restrictions in movement and mining activities.

Secure COVID-19 innovations against intellectual property theft

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) has urged Omani innovators, researchers, and small and medium enterprises, which are involved in scientific innovations to fight the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), to take the necessary measures to safeguard their inventions from theft and plagiarism. Such innovations may relate to disease testing and diagnosis, preventive gear, and other electronic applications.

Ali bin Hamad al Mamari, Director of the Intellectual Property Department at the Ministry, said: “The spread of the pandemic has prompted many individuals and institutions of various sectors to invent and bring out hundreds of new innovations, whether in the form of medicines or tools to deal with the threat of the virus and prevent it. These innovations are of different types which can be used for protection in various sectors. For example, there is a unique smart buckle which can be kept in the pocket and used to push open doors without touching them.

Also, there is a smart bracelet which buzzes when the person wears it on his wrist and takes his hand closer to his face. There is also a sanitizer which can be attached to the wrist with gloves and a tool to open car doors without touching the handle, which is very useful for those commuting in taxis.”

He said that experts in the ministry were coordinating with the innovators and relevant authorities for registration of their innovations that are related to deal with coronavirus and its prevention. These experts guide them about the format of their applications, how to file them and



The spread of the pandemic has prompted many individuals and institutions of various sectors to invent and bring out hundreds of new innovations, whether in the form of medicines or tools to deal with the threat of the virus and prevent it.

register so that their rights are protected. The ministry has already received a number of applications in this regard and in the initial stage of the process of registration, they are evaluated by the experts in the intellectual property department.

“The Ministry of Commerce and Industry believes that it was important for all concerned authorities and the private sector companies to support inventors in

the process of manufacturing, development and transformation of their ideas into commercial projects or products to benefit from them.

He pointed out that one of these innovations which could be protected under copyright law was a fast automated process of recording the results of tests of the virus to replace the common time-consuming data recording process.”

In the field of Artificial Intelligence, many innovations have been developed to use its artificial intelligence analytical software in order to measure the temperature of individuals and provide an alert if high temperature is detected. It can be used in public place buildings, such as hospitals, airports and corporate offices, said the official.

Those who are interested in innovations and need to protect them should take advantage of Ministerial Decision 206/2018, said Al Mamari, noting that the Ministry has reduced fees of intellectual property services by 90 per cent for industrial property rights of students of schools, colleges, universities, and researchers in research centres and by 50 per cent for small enterprises.

ACWA Power Barka allocates 75 per cent of CSR budget for COVID-19 campaign



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

ACWA Power Barka SAOG has earmarked the bulk of its current Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) budget for national efforts to combat the spread of the coronavirus in the Sultanate.

The Board of Directors

approved the allocation of 75 per cent of the social responsibility budget for the year to the Endowment Fund to support health services.

“The company’s decision comes in light of the exceptional circumstances resulting from the effects of the Coronavirus

(COVID19).

It reflects the company’s belief in the vital role played by corporates in supporting the efforts led by the Supreme Committee to deal with the developments of COVID19 in the Sultanate,” said ACWA Power Barka in a statement.

MSM up 2.63pc buoyed by attractive prices, Opec+ deal

The MSM30 Index closed the week up by 2.63 per cent, while MSM total return index was also up by similar percentage points during the week. Low share prices and the battering of companies in previous weeks along with prospects of an increase in oil prices following the Opec+ talks, have been the major factors behind the uptick.

All sub-indices closed up. The Financial Index closed up by 2.29 per cent w-o-w, Services and Industrial index also closed up by 1.96 per cent and 0.29 per cent w-o-w. The MSM Shariah Index closed up as well by 0.72 per cent w-o-w.

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) extended the deadline for publicly listed companies to disclose their first quarter (Q1) Financial Statements to June 30, 2020. Consequently, the preliminary financial results for Q1 2020 that are due to be disclosed by April 15, 2020, may now be disclosed latest by June 30, 2020. Likewise, the deadline for filing of detailed financial results for Q1 2020 has been extended from April 30, 2020 to June 30, 2020.

Muscat Securities Market issued an administrative circular extending the trading hours at MSM to three hours from two hours, effective this week. The pre-trading session shall

start at 9 am, the continued trading session shall be from 10 am (for three hours) and the closing session shall be at 1 pm.

Bank Nizwa announced that it has RO 5m direct financing to the subsidiary Elegant Medical Centre (34.3 per cent indirectly owned by NMC Healthcare through its other subsidiaries), for sole operations in Oman only.

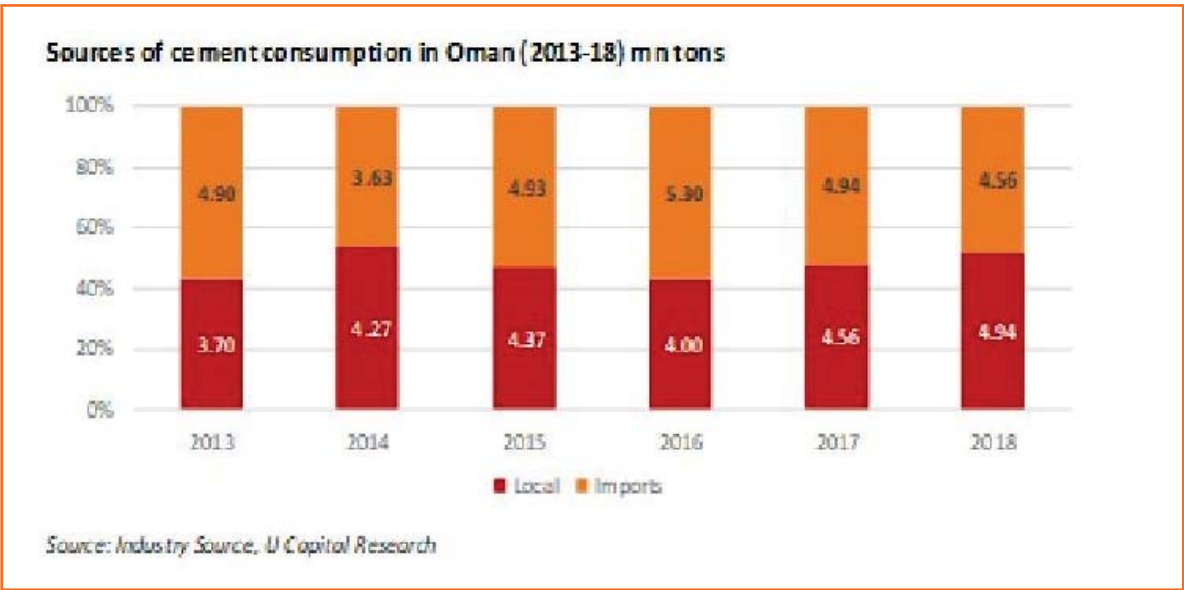
Galfar Engineering received letter of award for Fahud Runway Rehabilitation Project of RO 9.45m. Completion period is 11.5 months.

The gross foreign assets of the State General Reserve Fund increased 5.2 per cent to RO 6.659 bn as of September 30, 2019, up from RO 6.328 bn as of December 31, 2018, according to the Central Bank of Oman.

CBO’s foreign assets as at the end of Feb 2020 stood at RO 6.11 bn, having contracted by 6 per cent YoY and 3 per cent MoM. CBO’s foreign assets are below the trailing 12-month simple average of RO 6.31 bn. These assets include bullion, IMF reserve assets, placements abroad and foreign securities.

Oman’s total credit reached RO 25.93 bn, +0.1 per cent MoM and 2.5 per cent YoY in Feb 2020.

Private sector credit comprised 88.2 per cent of the total, rising by 0.3 per cent MoM and 2.5 per cent YoY. Total deposits touched RO 23.59 bn,



rising by 0.1 per cent MoM and 4.0 per cent YoY. Private sector deposits formed 65 per cent of the total, rising by 0.7 per cent MoM and 7.2 per cent YoY. Loan-to-Deposit Ratio remained stretched at 109.9 per cent, unchanged from the previous month, and down from 111.48 per cent a year ago.

As per the CBO, Oman’s narrow money supply (M1) decreased during the month of Feb 2020 by 2.4 per cent MoM but rose by 4.2 per cent YoY. Broad money (M2) supply increased by 0.5 per cent MoM and 7.2 per cent YoY, indicating an increase of RO 1.22 bn in domestic liquidity on YoY basis in the month

of Feb 2020.

Regionally, Abu Dhabi was the best market with gain of 9.45 per cent while Kuwait market was the biggest loser down by 6.29 per cent.

Qatar received over \$41 bn in combined orders for a planned issue of dollar-denominated bonds in tranches of five, 10 and 30 years. Qatar tightened the price guidance for the bonds by 35 basis points (bps) across the three tranches, to around 300 bps over U.S. treasuries for the five-year tranche, around 305 bps over the same benchmark for the 10-year tranche and 4.4 per cent for the 30-year tranche.

Point-of-sale transactions in Saudi

Arabia saw a 35 per cent year-on-year (YoY) increase to SAR 25.9 bn in February 2020, as per Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA). Data showed that 183.3m transactions were processed through nearly 462,900 points-of-sales in shopping malls, retail stores, and pharmacies. Cash withdrawals rose 3 per cent YoY to SAR 56.39 bn through 166.5m transactions processed across 18,900 ATMs in February.

Euro zone economic growth slowed as expected in the last three months of 2019 as gross domestic product shrank in France and Italy against the previous quarter. European Union’s statistics

office Eurostat said GDP in the 19 countries sharing the euro expanded 0.1 per cent quarter-on-quarter in the October-December period. The quarterly growth rate slowed compared to the 0.3 per cent expansion in the third quarter because of a 0.1 per cent contraction in the second biggest economy France and a 0.3 per cent contraction in the third biggest Italy. Growth in Germany, the biggest euro zone economy, stagnated.

Opec and Non-Opec members met last week and agreed to adjust downwards their overall crude oil production by 10.0 mb/d, starting on May 1, 2020, for an initial period of two months that concludes on June 30, 2020. For the subsequent period of 6 months, from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2020, the total adjustment agreed will be 8.0 mb/d.

It will be followed by a 6.0 mb/d adjustment for a period of 16 months, from January 1, 2021 to April 30, 2022. The baseline for the calculation of the adjustments is the oil production of October 2018, except for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and

The Russian Federation, both with the same baseline level of 11.0 mb/d. The agreement will be valid until April 30, 2022, however, the extension of this agreement will be reviewed during December 2021.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

US consumer prices record largest drop in five years

WASHINGTON: US consumer prices fell by the most in more than five years in March and further decreases are likely as the novel coronavirus outbreak suppresses demand for some goods and services, offsetting price increases related to shortages resulting from disruptions to the supply chain.

With the country virtually at a stand-still and the economy rapidly contracting as state and local governments adopt stiff measures to control the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus, economists are predicting a period of disinflation or even outright deflation.

“The big concern right now is deflation,” said Gus Faucher, chief economist at PNC Financial in Pittsburgh. “Deflation is likely to take hold over the next few months as businesses slash prices in response to much lower demand from the coronavirus outbreak and associated restrictions on movement.”

The Labour Department said on Friday its consumer price index dropped 0.4 per cent last month amid a tumble in the costs of gasoline, hotel accommodation, apparel and airline tickets. That was the biggest drop since January 2015 and followed a 0.1 per cent gain in February. In the 12 months through March, the CPI rose 1.5 per cent after increasing 2.3 per cent in February.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the CPI dropping 0.3 per cent in March and climbing 1.6 per cent year-on-year.

The general price level decline is expected even as the Federal Reserve has adopted extraordinary measures to stop the economy’s free-fall. President Donald Trump last month signed a historic \$2.3 trillion package to aid businesses and workers.

“The disinflationary impulse, along with the great disruption in economic



Household provisions are depleted on nearly empty shelves at a department store in Washington, DC. – Reuters

and financial market activity, is a key reason why the Fed is unleashing vast new monetary policy stimulus,” said Gregory Daco, chief US economist at Oxford Economics in New York.

Restaurants, bars and other social venues have been shuttered. Clothing retailers have also closed shop as have some manufacturers, while transportation has been drastically scaled back, leaving millions of Americans unemployed.

Fears of a sharp global recession and an oil price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia have led to a collapse in crude prices. This is expected to offset price increases caused by bottlenecks

The general price level decline is expected even as the Federal Reserve has adopted extraordinary measures to stop the economy’s free-fall. President Donald Trump last month signed a historic \$2.3 trillion package to aid businesses and workers.

in the supply chain.

The widespread business closures impacted March’s CPI report, with data collection by personal visit suspended on March 16, the Labour Department said. It said data collection last month was also impacted “by the temporary

prices than usual, and a small number of indexes that are normally published were not published in March.

The dollar was little changed against a basket of currencies. Wall Street and the US Treasury market are closed for Good Friday.

Excluding the volatile food and energy components, the CPI dipped 0.1 per cent in March, the first drop since January 2010. The so-called core CPI had increased 0.2 per cent for two straight months. Underlying inflation fell in March also as prices for new motor vehicles declined. In the 12 months through March, the core CPI rose 2.1 per cent after increasing 2.4

per cent in February.

The Fed tracks the core personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index for its 2 per cent inflation target.

The core PCE price index increased 1.8 per cent on a year-on-year basis in February after rising 1.7 per cent in January. It undershot its target in 2019. With some components in the producer price index report that feed into the core PCE price index weakening in March, economists expect inflation pulled back last month.

March’s core PCE price index data will be released at the end of the month. The closure of businesses could, however, impact the collection of inflation data in the coming months, making the reports unreliable.

In March, gasoline prices plunged 10.5 per cent, the most since February 2016, after dropping 3.4 per cent in February. Food prices rose 0.3 per cent last month after surging 0.4 per cent in February. Prices for food consumed at home increased 0.5 per cent, matching February’s gain.

Owners’ equivalent rent of primary residence, which is what a homeowner would pay to rent or receive from renting a home, increased 0.3 per cent. That followed a 0.2 per cent gain in February. The cost of hotel and motel accommodation tumbled a record 7.7 per cent last month. Airline fares dropped 12.6 per cent last month, the biggest decline on record.

Healthcare costs rose 0.4 per cent after edging up 0.1 per cent in February.

Apparel prices dropped a record 2.0 per cent last month after increasing 0.4 per cent in February. New vehicle prices fell 0.4 per cent, the largest drop since April 2018. But prices for used motor vehicles and trucks rose 0.8 per cent after rebounding 0.4 per cent in February. — Reuters

Coronavirus-hit airlines in push for divisive route subsidies



Passengers board a Ryanair flight in Gdansk, Poland. – Reuters

PARIS: Major airlines are seeking operating subsidies for key routes once coronavirus restrictions are lifted, a leaked lobbying document shows, stoking tensions with some low-cost carriers that are less likely to benefit from the additional funds.

Route subsidies feature on a list of financial support requests circulated among airline members of the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and seen by Reuters.

“Airlines will need support to maintain their networks, which play a critical role in driving the world’s economy,” Geneva-based IATA states in the 12-page digest of “key messages” for airline public affairs executives to take to governments.

The support can be offered “either through a rebate on landing charges per flight or via a direct subsidy per available seat kilometre until markets have been stabilised”, it adds.

IATA spokesman Chris Goater confirmed the authenticity of the document, which was first reported by Unearthed, an environmental news service funded by campaign group Greenpeace. “It’s a private document for our members,” Goater said.

Operating subsidies would add to tax breaks, charge deferrals, loan guarantees and other forms of government support given to airlines crippled by an unprecedented near-total shutdown of air travel in the face of the global pandemic.

But they may also strain industry efforts to present a united front amid growing dissent over aid and its effects on competition. Ryanair’s Lauda unit publicly urged Vienna on Thursday to withhold financial support from Lufthansa-owned Austrian Airlines.

“Not all airlines (are) in support of this initiative,” the IATA document states, noting a “high risk of discrimination if only applied in certain markets”. It did not identify carriers seeking or opposing route support.

British Airways parent IAG and Air France-KLM declined to comment on the proposal. Germany’s Lufthansa did not respond to requests for comment.

Subsidies have long existed on low-traffic routes offering economic lifelines to regions with few other transport links.

But IATA, which represents 290 airlines, wants support to help to restore services on some of the bigger international connections during what may be a slow and difficult recovery.

Even after restrictions end, airlines could face further losses, hit by weak demand, intense fare competition and limits to passenger numbers designed to keep the coronavirus at bay. — Reuters

FEDERAL STIMULUS

Millions file for US jobless benefits; many waiting for cash

NEW YORK: A shocking 16.8 million people filed for US unemployment benefits in the last three weeks as the country shut down to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, overwhelming state labour departments and creating a large backlog of pending applications.

A month after the virus was declared a pandemic, many newly jobless Americans are still waiting desperately for their unemployment checks.

After going weeks without a paycheck, they are falling behind on their bills and drastically ratcheting back spending. The delays come as other federal stimulus, including a small business lending programme, also experience hiccups.

Zaborah Roane, 48, a laid off daycare worker from Raleigh, North Carolina, said her application for unemployment benefits was still pending Thursday, about two weeks after she applied.

“Every day you just have to see what that day brings to help you

decide what your next move is going to be,” said Roane, who was able to buy groceries with help from the National Domestic Workers Alliance, a nonprofit group raising money for workers affected by the virus.

The North Carolina Department of Commerce says people typically receive payment within 14 days of filing their initial claim.

The \$2.3 trillion stimulus act signed March 27 includes a \$600 a week across-the-board unemployment payout. Some states have started issuing the benefits, but it could take until May in some states for this money to filter through creaky federal and state bureaucracies into the bank accounts of Americans.

The unemployment benefits programme is administered by states using guidelines set by federal law.

States facing a surge in applications are increasing staff, expanding call center hours and changing their application processes to make it easier for people to file for benefits.

Some states, including Illinois,

Apple and Google to create contact tracing technology



The Apple Inc. logo is seen hanging at the entrance to the Apple store on 5th Avenue in Manhattan, New York. – Reuters

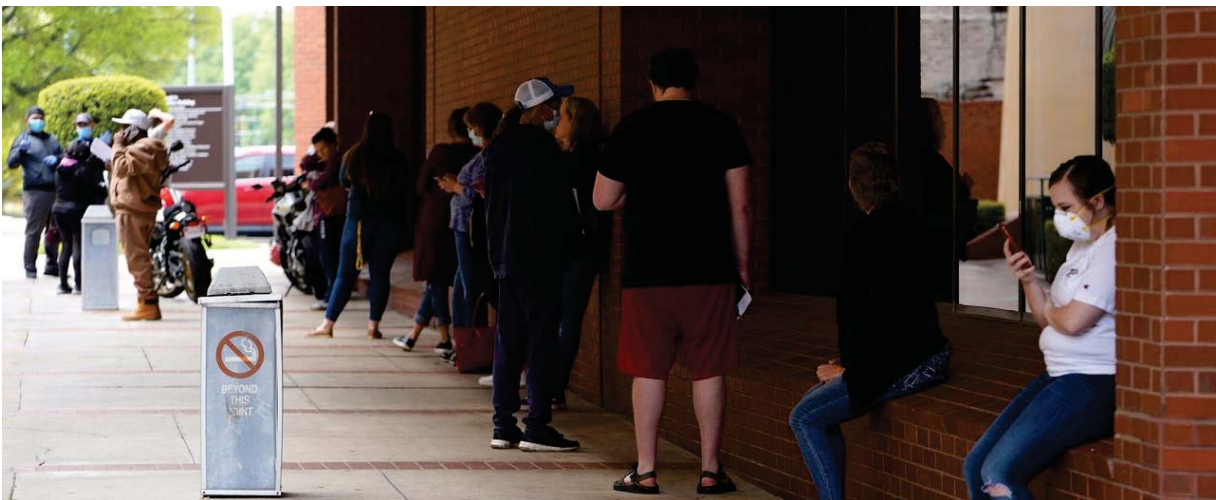
SAN FRANCISCO: Apple Inc and Google said that they will work together to create contact tracing technology that aims to slow the spread of the coronavirus by allowing users to opt into a system that catalogs other phones they have been near.

The two Silicon Valley companies make the world’s dominant smartphone operating systems for iPhones and Android devices.

They will work together on technology that will allow mobile devices to trade information via Bluetooth connections to alert people when they have been in close proximity with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19, the sometimes deadly disease associated with the novel coronavirus.

The technology will first be available in mid-May as software tools available to contact tracing apps endorsed by public health authorities. However, Apple and Google also plan to build the tracking technology directly into their underlying operating systems in the coming months so that users do not have to download any apps to begin logging nearby phones.

The companies said the technology will not track the location or identity of users, but instead will only capture data about when users’ phones have been near each other, with data being decrypted on the user’s phone rather than the companies’ servers. — Reuters



People who lost their jobs wait in line to file for unemployment at an Arkansas Workforce Centre in Arkansas. – Reuters



THE FASCINATING STORY
BEHIND POPULAR
EASTER
SYMBOLS

MARY OOMMEN

Easter is a reaffirmation of resurrection, which is the very foundation of Christian faith. The world over, Christians celebrate Christ's victory over sin, suffering and death.

For the faithful, this day brings up images of the cross and an empty tomb. For others, it brings to mind more popular symbols of Easter like the sprightly Easter Bunny, gaily decorated Easter eggs, beautiful white lilies and a basketful of delicious hot cross buns. How then, did these become prominent symbols of Christianity's most important celebration?

THE EASTER BUNNY

Interestingly, the exact origins of the Easter bunny are still shrouded in mystery. One popular folklore suggests that the rabbit was drawn from the symbol associated with the Babylonian and Assyrian goddess of love and fertility, Ishtar. Others believe that the Easter bunny can be traced to an ancient Anglo-Saxon myth, concerning the goddess of spring and rebirth - Ostara or Eostre, from whose name the festival of Easter is probably derived.

There is another reason why the rabbit was probably adopted as a symbol of Easter. Believers perhaps took the rabbit springing up from its underground home as symbolic for Jesus coming out of the tomb.

So, while the true origins of the Easter Bunny may remain undecided, it continues to be a much-loved part of



Easter celebrations.

PAINTED EASTER EGGS

Another big part of Easter celebrations is, of course, the beautifully decorated Easter eggs. Eggs have been an important aspect of festivities for thousands of years. The Hindus, Egyptians, Persians, and Phoenicians believed the world began with an enormous egg. The Greeks and Chinese gave eggs as gifts during the spring festivals in celebration of the new life blooming around them. Eggs were considered a delicacy in Roman times and only the very wealthy and powerful could afford to serve eggs at meals.

According to some legends, Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary carried a basket of eggs, perhaps to try and coax the soldiers not to hurt Jesus during the crucifixion. Others tell the story of how early Christians were the first

to adopt eggs as part of Easter meals, and the first to decorate them. They dyed the eggs bright red as a symbol of the blood that Jesus shed on the cross. In Eastern Orthodox churches, egg shells represent the stone walls of Jesus' tomb, while the egg itself symbolises the new life of the Resurrection.

MARZIPAN, CHOCOLATE EGGS AND JELLY BEANS

Easter is also a time when kids eat and share candy. Joseph Fry has been credited with creating the first chocolate Easter egg in 1873. These were considered an expensive indulgence because they were hand-crafted from the best chocolate.

It wasn't until the 1950s, that more affordable chocolate eggs for children were introduced. Marzipan and jelly beans were added to the stock of candy that children exchanged as part of

Easter celebrations the world over. Samantha Reynolds remembers how she would exchange candy with her friends during Easter:

"We would wake up early and find that mum had an Easter basket ready for us kids, filled with creamy buns and candy. After attending church in the morning, a group of us kids from the neighbourhood would meet and share our basket of goodies".

HOT CROSS BUNS AND SIMNEL CAKE

Hot cross buns and other sweet breads marked with an X to symbolise the cross are a tradition on many Easter tables even today. A special treat enjoyed during Easter breakfast, they mark the end of Lent and are a reminder of the day Jesus died on the cross. Hot cross buns are marked with a cross to help the bread rise and are a visible sign that the bread was "blessed". The blend of spices used to flavour the buns - nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon and allspice - represent those used to embalm Christ for his burial.

WHITE LILIES

The Easter lily is another symbol used during Easter celebrations. Through the years, painters and sculptors have used the lily to symbolise purity and innocence.

Legend has it that white lilies were found growing in the Garden of Gethsemane after Christ's night of agony and that they sprang up where drops of Christ's tears fell to the ground in his final hours of sorrow. According to some records, the significance of the lily goes back even further

to the lilies that sprouted from Eve's repentant tears after she and Adam were cast out from Eden. Today, Christians see the white lily as a symbol of life and joy.

NEW CLOTHES

New clothes have long been associated with the idea of fresh beginning. The familiar custom of getting clothes for Easter probably began with early Christians wearing new white robes for baptism during Easter services. Later, the custom expanded to everyone wearing new clothes in celebration of his or her new life in Christ. "We always got new clothes to wear to the Easter church service", shared Vincent Pinto. "Our clothes were typically white or light pastel colours to represent new beginnings and a new life".

THE CROSS

The cross is perhaps the most powerful and recognisable symbol of Christianity, especially during the Easter season for its significance with Jesus' crucifixion. For Christians, the cross symbolizes Christ's victory over sin and death and God's love.

On Easter Sunday, the cross is usually draped with a white cloth to symbolise the purity of a new life that is possible through Christ's resurrection. The Christian meaning of new life through Christ is not limited to the resurrection alone. It is the belief that love is stronger than hatred, that hope is stronger than despair, and that life is stronger than death. More simply, it reminds us that nothing is impossible with God.

Ibri TT coach aims top position in National TT meets



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Ibri club is one of the leading table tennis teams in the Sultanate and managed to claim podium in the last few years at junior teams.

Despite the tough competitions among the clubs, the Al Dhahirah team, which is coached by Adnan Fawakhirji, has made its presence felt strongly in the domestic table tennis events which was organised by Oman Table Tennis Committee (OTTC).

The head coach of Ibri club, Adnan Fawakhirji, said he began his stint with the team since the first quarter of

2017 as he was appointed to lead the technical staff of the table tennis team.

“My first assignment with the team was to work closely with the schools in Ibri to select the talented players. I set my initial plan to visit many schools in the wilayat. After completion of visiting the clubs, I had selected some top players who have some basic skills and good technical characteristics to develop,” he added.

The Syrian coach continued his first year with Ibri club and set up a junior team. “After the formation of our first hopes and cadet table tennis team in Ibri, we had started to participate

at Oman Table Tennis Committee (OTTC)’s domestic tournaments and championships,” the coach told *Oman Daily Observer*.

Despite the short period of formation of the team, Adnan Fawakhirji imprinted his fingerprint through reaching Ibri club to the podium for first time. “The team succeeded to manage and win the National Junior Table Tennis Championship for second consecutive year in 2018 and 2019. We had faced tough challenges from Saham club which is one of the top teams in the Sultanate. However, our junior stars

managed to overcome the challenge and win the title for cadet category. As our players had more confidence, the team had snatched the title of STAG league which is dedicated for school players. In addition, the first team won the first place award in the last edition of the National Table Tennis Championship for general category,” the 30-year-old added.

Commenting on their future plans, the head of the technical staff of Ibri club said we had drawn different plans for development of the teams and players. “Taking part at overseas camps and attending in the



overseas championships around GCC region are the top priority for future plans. Moreover, we are working on growing the table tennis sport in the team to have more players in the forthcoming seasons. I would like to thank the Educational Directorate at Al Dhahirah Governorate for their continuous support to us and a dedicated thanks to Mohammed al Jassasi, Board member of OTTC and staff of the Directorate for his follow up and help.

Coach Adnan Fawakhirji pointed out the current activities of the team during the global pandemic of

COVID-19.

“Due to the current situation of suspension the outdoor sports activities, we decided to shift some tables of the sport to the player’s home. We provided one table for a family in case if they have two players and more in the team. For the other players, we instructed them to do some training remotely and under direct supervision of the head coach. In addition to that, we are in close follow up with the national team head coach, Mohammed Atoum, who is also performing some weekly training session with players through online,” the coach ended.

Dalglish’s son thanks well-wishers after Liverpool legend gets virus



LIVERPOOL: Kenny Dalglish’s son admitted he was “truly humbled” by the messages of support that poured in from across the football world after the Liverpool legend tested positive for the coronavirus.

Dalglish found he had the virus after being admitted to hospital on Wednesday for treatment for a separate infection which required

intravenous antibiotics.

The 69-year-old Scot’s family said on Friday he is not showing symptoms of the disease, but Liverpool fans, current players and old stars were quick to send him their best wishes.

Dalglish’s son Paul responded on Twitter, writing: “It’s not my place to comment on my old man, he can do that for himself in due course.

“Truly humbling messages from supporters of all teams.

“I’m sure we can all agree this is more important than football and that we are all united as blues to support the NHS. Stay safe everyone.”

Dalglish’s daughter, Sky Sports presenter Kelly Cates, also shared a message of thanks to fans for their kind words and well wishes.

“Truly humbling messages from supporters of all teams. I’m sure we can all agree this is more important than football and that we are all united as blues to support the NHS. Stay safe everyone.”

PAUL DALGLISH
Kenny Dalglish’s son

“Thank you so much for your lovely messages and I’m really sorry I can’t reply to them all,” she tweeted.

Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker said on Twitter: “Love from Becker family to Sir Kenny Dalglish!!”

Former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher tweeted: “Hopeful Kenny will be rid of the virus ASAP”

Blackburn, who Dalglish led to the Premier League title in 1995, said: “Everyone at Rovers would like to send their love and best wishes to Sir Kenny Dalglish and his family.”

Dalglish won the Scottish league title with Celtic as a player on four occasions before signing for Liverpool in 1977.

At Anfield, he captured eight English league titles, three FA Cups and three European Cups as a player and in two managerial spells.

In his Liverpool playing career, he scored 172 goals in 515 games.

As well as his role in Liverpool’s golden era in the 1970s and 1980s, Dalglish received plaudits for supporting victims’ families after 96 fans died in the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster. — **AFP**



Swiss prosecutors to drop one of cases against ex-Fifa chief Blatter

ZURICH: Switzerland’s federal prosecutor is about to end its investigation into former Fifa President Sepp Blatter’s deals with the Caribbean Football Union (CFU) to sell World Cup broadcasting rights.

The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) said it has informed all the parties of its intention to close the case and was seeking ways to end it.

“We confirm the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland... considers the criminal investigation into the partial facts and allegations concerning the contractual relationship with the CFU to be complete and ready for conclusion,” it said in a statement.

The OAG “intends to discontinue the proceedings”, it added, giving no reason for the decision.

As a result, Blatter, who is currently serving a six-year ban from football-related activities over ethics violations, will not be prosecuted for the matter which relates to selling TV rights for World Cup tournaments too cheaply.

The 84-year-old Swiss, who led Fifa until 2015, was accused of selling TV rights to the CFU for the 2010 and 2014 World Cups for \$600,000, seen as far below the market value at the time.

A spokesman for Blatter said he had not heard anything officially but had no reason to doubt the media reports.

In a second criminal case, Blatter is accused of having arranged a payment of two million Swiss francs (\$2.06 million) to the then UEFA President Michel Platini in February 2011.

The investigation in this case is not affected by its intentions to end the first case, the OAG said.

Blatter and Platini, who could not immediately be reached for comment, have maintained they did nothing wrong amid what became part of the biggest corruption scandal to shake world soccer’s ruling body, resulting in numerous prosecutions and convictions in the United States.

— **Reuters**

sport

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain winger Pablo Sarabia says that beating the coronavirus would be the “real victory of the season”, with most professional football shut down due to the pandemic.

France’s Ligue 1 was suspended on March 13, with PSG sitting 12 points clear of Marseille at the top of the table, while having also reached the Champions League quarterfinals for the first time since 2016.

But Spanish international Sarabia says public health has to come first ahead of getting back onto the pitch.

“No, I’m not afraid about that (the season not restarting), it’s not the thing I am worrying about,” he said.

“I am thinking about my family first and foremost and then about getting this sorted. This is a critical situation.

“Who knows right now whether the league will restart or not -- it is hypothetical and we all need to focus on the pandemic. Coming through this would be the real victory of the season.”

Football players have come under pressure to take salary cuts, with Barcelona, Real Madrid, Juventus and Bayern Munich stars all among those to accept a reduction in pay.

And Sarabia says that the French clubs are also planning to take similar measures.

“All that is in our hands, if we can help, donate something, do what is in our hands, (we will),” he said.

“We are talking about it and our captains are in discussions and all we

BEATING VIRUS WOULD BE ‘REAL’ VICTORY, SAYS PSG’S SARABIA



can do to help PSG and the country in general, we will try to do that.”

EURO HOPES ON ICE

Sarabia, 27, joined the French champions from La Liga outfit Sevilla last year and has impressed in Paris, scoring 14 goals in all competitions so far this season.

He is hoping to use his unexpected free time to improve his French, having signed a five-year contract with PSG.

“I like to talk and if I don’t understand the language and can’t communicate that frustrates me a bit,” said Sarabia.

“I’m trying to make the most of these days to study and come out with a better level of French.”

PSG’s main aim since the takeover by a Qatari investment group in 2011 has been to lift the Champions League trophy, but the capital club have still not reached the semifinals since 1995.

A last-16 victory over Borussia Dortmund last month, though, having trailed after the first leg, raised hopes that PSG could finally make a serious tilt at European football’s greatest prize.

“It was a difficult time when we lost in Dortmund but everything that has happened has shown how united we all are as a team,” said Sarabia.

“I could see in the eyes of my team-mates that we were going to get through, you could feel it.

“(But) there is still a long way to go before the final, and as I said before I don’t think we should be thinking about that just now.” — AFP

“

I am thinking about my family first and foremost and then about getting this sorted. This is a critical situation. Who knows right now whether the league will restart or not — it is hypothetical and we all need to focus on the pandemic. Coming through this would be the real victory of the season.

PABLO SARABIA
PSG winger