

Johnson & Johnson files for EU vaccine approval

Pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson has applied for authorisation for their coronavirus vaccine in the EU with a decision possible by the middle of March, Europe's drugs regulator said on Tuesday. The single-shot vaccine would be the fourth jab to be approved for use across the 27-nation European Union if it gets the green light from the Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency. Experts at the regulator "could issue an opinion by the middle of March 2021, provided the company's data on the vaccine's efficacy, safety and quality are sufficiently comprehensive and robust."



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OMAN OBSERVER

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NERVY DJOKOVIC SETS UP KARATSEV SEMIFINAL



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NEW HSE POSTS TO CREATE THOUSANDS OF JOBS FOR OMANIS



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OLD BUT GOLD: TOKYO'S RETRO CAR OWNERS REVEL IN MODERN CLASSICS

MUSCAT

HM CONDOLENCES TO SAUDI KING

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on the death of Princess Lamia bint Hathloul bin Abdulaziz al Saud. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to Allah the Almighty to rest the departed's soul in peace in paradise and grant her family patience. — ONA

FISH PLANT REOPENS IN AL ASHKHARAH

Oman Fisheries Company has reopened the fish factory in the Niyabat of Al Ashkharah after the completion of renovation. The fish processing plant was equipped with advanced freezing machines which increased its processing capacity to 60 tonnes per day. Besides, the capacity of cold storage has been raised to 220 metric tonnes. An ice factory with a capacity of 20 tonnes per day was added. The development of the fish plant in the Niyabat of Al Ashkharah came in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources. The factory buys fishermen's catch on a daily basis and targets to reach 60 tonnes per day. DETAILS ON P3

HM receives credentials of ambassadors



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik receives credentials of Ole Moesby, Ambassador of Denmark accredited to the Sultanate.

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received separately at Al Barakah Palace on Tuesday morning credentials of a number of ambassadors of the sisterly and friendly countries accredited to the Sultanate.

His Majesty received credentials of the following ambassadors: Ole Moesby, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, accredited to the Sultanate; Renatas Norkus, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Gitanas Nauseda of the Republic of Lithuania, accredited to the Sultanate; Dominique Mineur, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of King Philippe of Belgium, accredited to the Sultanate; Dr Juraj Koudelka, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Milos Zeman of the Czech Republic, accredited to the Sultanate; John Gerrard,...

TURN TO P2

Turnout for vaccine ‘not very impressive’

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

@zainabalnasseri

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Tuesday reported 337 new cases of Covid-19, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 137,929. It also reported one Covid-19-related death, taking the death toll to 1,544. With 28 patients hospitalised during the past 24 hours, the total number of inpatients in hospitals stood at 141, including 42 in intensive care units (ICUs).

Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, explained during a TV interview that there has been a worrying increase in the

Exemption from hotel ‘quarantine’

Children below the age of 16 years and senior citizens (above 60), are exempted from institutional quarantine, which has become mandatory for all inbound travellers from February 15. The Civil Aviation Authority announced that sick passengers who obtain an exemption based on their medical circumstances in writing from the health authorities can be exempted from institutional quarantine. All airlines operating to and from Oman have been informed of this. DETAILS ON P3

number of Covid-19 cases in the intensive care units. He stressed the Supreme Committee's determination to take strict measures against those who are not abiding by its decisions.

Dr Al Saeedi mentioned that the closure of Al Sharqiyah North Governorate was due to a 100 per cent increase in Covid-19 cases in the intensive care units in Ibra Hospital. He also said: "Data showed that arrivals from the Republic of Tanzania proved to be positive at a rate of 18 per cent," indicating that this number is "very high" and that the Supreme Committee is studying the possibility of stopping travels from countries having high rate of infections. TURN TO P2



People walk at the Camlica hill after a heavy snowfall in Istanbul. — AFP

Coast-to-coast winter storm brings freezing temperatures

NEW YORK: Winter weather advisories were in effect for almost half of the US as a wicked storm system triggered heavy snowfall, freezing rain and dangerous road conditions across the country, with temperatures plunging below zero in some states and millions of Americans spending the Presidents Day holiday without power.

The National Weather Service said the storm was expected to bring "frigid arctic air," record-setting snowfall and "dangerously cold wind chills" from coast to coast through at least till

Tuesday. The cold weather has led to emergency declarations in at least seven states from the Northwest to the South, including Oregon, Kentucky, Alabama and Mississippi, as well as tornado watches along the Gulf Coast.

In Texas, where most residents are not used to snow emergencies, a disaster declaration was issued over the weekend in anticipation of dangerously low temperatures and messy road conditions. The border city of El Paso registered a record low of 14 degrees Fahrenheit late on Sunday. SEE ALSO P8

INSIDE



1 PER CENT VACCINATED FOR CORONAVIRUS IN MIDEAST

P6



39 DEAD AS INDIAN BUS VEERS OFF ROAD INTO CANAL

P7

NOW ‘GROWN IN OMAN’ STRAWBERRIES!

A new breed of Omani agricultural entrepreneurs is testing the limits to which farmland, once left fallow for want of adequate supplies of irrigation water, can be put back into cultivation. Fahad al Hajri sparked incredulity on social media last week when he posted pictures of his latest harvest: Strawberries – piles of it, in all their luscious, bright red glory. DETAILS ON P20



WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 28°C Min 18°C SALALAH: Max 28°C Min 18°C NIZWA: Max 30°C Min 16°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 06:38 FAJR: 05:22 DHUHR: 12:26 ASR: 15:42 MAGHRIB: 18:08 ISHA: 19:19



HM receives ambassadors’ credentials

FROM PI
Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Michael Daniel Higgins of Ireland, accredited to the Sultanate; Shahin Shakur, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Dr Ilham Heydar Aliyev of the Republic of Azerbaijan, accredited to the Sultanate; and Antti Rytovuori, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of President Sauli Niinisto of the Republic of Finland, accredited to the Sultanate.

During the side meetings with His Majesty the Sultan, the ambassadors conveyed greetings of their countries’ leaders along with their best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people continuous progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty.

They also expressed their great honour and utmost delight to present their credentials before His Majesty the Sultan. They affirmed to exert their sincere efforts to promote relations of their respective countries with the Sultanate in various domains in a manner that serves the joint interests of the Omani people and their countries’ peoples.

His Majesty the Sultan welcomed the ambassadors, expressing his thanks for their leaders’ greetings and best wishes. His Majesty affirmed to them that they would receive all support from His Majesty, the Government and the Omani people to facilitate carrying out their duties.

The credentials’ presentation ceremony was attended by the Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, the Foreign Minister, the Head of the Royal Protocols, the Commander of the Royal Guard of Oman and the Military Aides to His Majesty the Sultan. — **ONA**



Renatas Norkus Ambassador of Lithuania



Dominique Mineur Ambassador of Belgium



Dr Juraj Koudelka Ambassador of Czech Republic



John Gerrard Ambassador of Ireland



Shahin Shakur Ambassador of Azerbaijan



Antti Rytovuori Ambassador of Finland



Children, Sr citizens exempted from institutional quarantine



KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

Children below the age of 16 years and senior citizens (above 60), are exempted from institutional quarantine, which has become a mandatory practice for all inbound travellers from February 15.

The announcement came on Tuesday following the decisions taken by the Supreme Committee on Covid-19.

The Civil Aviation Authority, in coordination with the Medical Response and Public Health Sector, the Relief and Shelter Sector, announced that sick passengers who obtain

an exemption based on their medical circumstances in writing from the health authorities can be exempted from institutional quarantine. All airlines operating to and from Oman have been informed of this.

The announcement came as a big relief for the families arriving from other countries, as they were worried about the procedures of the institutional quarantine.

Parvathy, an expatriate mother of two children welcomed the decision as a great relief.

"It is a great decision indeed. However, if both the parents are in quarantine then I won-

der where the children should go. Families travel together and it is difficult to send children to relatives or friends' houses", she added.

Riyaz Ambalath, an expatriate living in Muscat who is currently on vacation was a bit puzzled by the cost that his four-member family would have to pay in terms of institutional quarantine.

"My concern is that I have a six-year-old son and a daughter less than two years. This decision is great news as my family is arriving next week. However, if the mother too can be spared from the institutional quarantine, that would

have been a relief for these kids as their food and general care would have been taken care of."

Additionally, diplomats working at foreign diplomatic missions accredited to the Sultanate, diplomats visiting the Sultanate and their families, airline crew, subject to the precautionary measures issued by the Ministry of Health, have been exempted from presenting pre-confirmed hotel reservations before they check-in at the airport of departure.

"However, all other requirements as stipulated in previous circulars remain valid", the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) informed.

Turnout for vaccine 'not impressive'

FROM P1

The minister called on those who received the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to be assured that they will have the second dose available. "The delay was beyond the control of the Sultanate and the manufacturer, yet the effectiveness of the vaccine will

not be affected by this delay", he said.

DELAY IN DOSE

"There is no scientific evidence that delay in taking the vaccine reduces its effectiveness. The ministry has formed a team specialised in vaccinations last year and it is studying everything new in

this regard."

He added that there is a patient, among others admitted to ICU, who refused to take the vaccine. "There is no preference between vaccinations. We use what is proven and available", he said, expressing hope to cover 60 per cent of the population,

which is the percentage set by the technical team to reach herd immunity.

Dr Al Saedi urged all those who meet the conditions of vaccination, to go and take the available vaccine, indicating that "the turnout in some governorates "is still not impressive."

Fish plant reopens in Al Ashkharah



ZAKARIA FIKRI

MUSCAT, FEB 16

Oman Fisheries Company has reopened the fish factory in the Niyabat of Al Ashkharah after the completion of renovation.

The fishing processing plant is equipped with advanced freezing machines which increased its processing capacity to 60 tonnes per day. Besides, the capacity of cold storage has been raised to



220 metric tonnes. An ice factory with a capacity of 20 tonnes per day was added.

The development of the fish plant in the Niyabat of Al

Ashkharah came in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

By developing the fish factory, Oman Fisheries Company seeks to contribute to the development of the fisheries sector and achieve the desired goals.

The fish factory buys fishermen's catch on a daily basis and targets to reach 60 tonnes per day from Al Wusta and South Al Sharqiyah governorates.

Fear of Covid vaccine side-effects unjustified

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

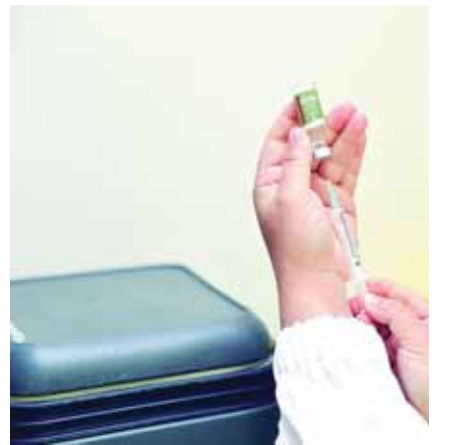
Fear of the side effects of the Covid-19 vaccine may be a reason for the lack of acceptance of vaccination by some and it is unjustified, said the Directorate General of Health in Muscat.

"More than 120 million people received the vaccine and no serious side effects were recorded for them, and this indicates the safety of the vaccine", it said.

According to WHO, Eastern Mediterranean Region, more than one year after the first case of Covid-19 was reported in the Region, almost 6 million people have been infected, and almost 140,000 people have died.

Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said, "There is an overall stabilisation in the number of cases across the region but several countries are reporting concerning increases."

Thirteen countries have reported cases of at least one of the three new variants reported globally, including those which may have higher transmission rates, while 14 countries in the region have genome sequencing capacity, but some countries are currently performing more sequencing of the virus than



others.

So far, more than 6.3 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been given to people in 12 countries of the region.

The remaining 20 countries in the region are expecting an estimated 46 to 56 million doses of vaccines during the first half of this year.

Meanwhile, the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate Police on Tuesday arrested an expatriate for violating the decisions of the Supreme Committee on Covid-19.

He violated the institutional quarantine that was imposed on him, and legal measures were initiated in the cases.

"To report violators of the decisions of the Supreme Committee on Covid-19, both citizens and residents can contact the toll-free number 1099."

MAJIS INDUSTRIAL SERVICES SAOC (Majis)
P.O. Box No. 553, Falaj Al Qabail, Postal Code 322, Sultanate of Oman
Tel No. 26852421 Email: Tender@miscoman.com
(Office Location: Administration Building, Opposite Sohar Aluminium and Sohar Power Co. at Sohar Industrial Port Area)

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT
Majis Industrial Services SAOC (Majis) is a closely held joint stock company fully owned by the Government of Oman. Majis is engaged in providing various water utility services at the Sohar Industrial Port Area and Sohar Free Zone.
Tenders are invited from the qualified local contracting firms for the following tender: A Brief Terms of Reference (TORs) is available at Majis' website (www.majisoman.com) for bidder's ready reference.

Sl. No.	Tender No.	Tender Description	Bids fees In R.O.	Last date for Obtaining Tender Documents	Last date for tender Submission	Contractor's grade with Tender Board
1	Majis/4/2021	UPGRADING OF SEAWATER INTAKE PUMPING STATION FOR COMMON COOLING WATER SYSTEM AT SOHAR INDUSTRIAL PORT	750/-	28 th February 2021	28 th March 2021	Excellent Grade/ First Grade

Bidders who have made electronic transfer of bid fee will be emailed soft copy of the tender document on the Sunday 28th February 2021. The companies participating must be registered with Majis' e-tendering system (<http://tendering.majis.com/VendorLogin.aspx>) during the tendering stage. The payment of bid fee should be made by direct transfer to the following bank account of Majis. (Account Name: Majis Industrial Services SAOC, Bank: Bank Muscat SAOG, Account Number: 0423010783830018).
While making payment by direct bank transfer name of the firm should be clearly mentioned and an email sent to tender@miscoman.com with a copy of the money transmittal advice. Tender documents will be emailed to such firms only.
The Tender should be delivered in sealed envelopes, addressed to the EXECUTIVE, NOMINATION & REMUNERATION COMMITTEE "ENRC", Majis Industrial Service SAOC, P.O. Box No. 553, Falaj Al Qabail, Postal Code 322, Sultanate of Oman (at Majis's reception).
Tenderers must not display their identities on envelopes. Majis is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.
Questions regarding this procurement process shall be directed to tender@miscoman.com.

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT
Construction of FTTH Network based on Public Private Partnership Model – Batch 1 - OBB-T-001-21

- Tender Fee (R.O) Non refundable 800 OMR
- Last Date for Collection 03/March/21
- Bids Submission Date 24/March/21 - (2:00 pm)

- The Tender documents can be obtained by email from the date of publication of this announcement. (Office Hours: 8:30 am to 3:30 pm, Sunday to Thursday).
- Eligibility Criteria and Brief Scope of Work can be obtained from our website (www.omanbroadband.om) or by sending email to tenders@Omanbroadband.om

@omanbroadband
omanbroadband.om

GHALA
GOLF
CLUB

COVID-19 MIGHT BE A HINDRANCE,
BUT THE OMAN GOLF ASSOCIATION
IS FOCUSED ON DEVELOPING GOLF
FURTHER AND ONE OF THE MAIN
OBJECTIVES IS TO EXPAND THE
GAME ACROSS OMAN



TEEING OFF INTO THE FUTURE

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

@lakshmioman

Golf in Oman has come a long way since gaining official status in 1971 with the Ghala Golf Club. In its 50th year, the club will have the Sultanate's first Golf Academy.

With a golf association, a strong national team, hundreds of registered players, golf in Oman is happening and now adding to the existing assets is the Golf Academy.

The objective now for golf enthusiasts in Oman is to promote the sport amongst the youngsters and build them up for the national team.

Faiz Mohammed is a national team player and is also a board member of the Ghala Golf Club. He has been playing golf for the last 11 years.

"The Academy has two parts to it. There is one part from where you can shoot outside, as we will have the foldable glass. Equipment are on the way to complete the facilities. Four cameras including — top, right and back — would be covering different angles of the player. The television screen would allow you to pause your swing to study it further", he explained.

The simulation at the academy allows the players to play golf at the various golf courses in the region so that they can practice at the home ground before heading for tournaments. "It is especially aimed at the national team", added Faiz.

900 GOLF PLAYERS

It has been over a year since the Oman Golf Committee has been upgraded to Oman Golf Association; for ten years it has been a committee. Covid-19 might be a hindrance, but the association is focused on developing it further and one of the main objectives is to expand the game across Oman.

There are 900 golf players registered at Oman Golf Association out of which 130 members are Omanis. Also, there is an Omani ladies team. One of the successful projects is the 'Go Ladies' — which overlooks the training and launching. We encourage ladies to come and learn the game for two weeks and then take them



to the next levels — intermediate level — followed by senior level. There is also a 'Go Juniors' team. These are two programmes the Oman Golf Association is proud of.

Mundir al Barwani, Chairman of Oman Golf Association, who has been playing golf for 15 years, said, "We want to get the youngsters to take up golf with training and with the right nurturing they can move towards the national team. We are very grateful for achieving the results we have had in recent years. Our under-18, under-15 and under-13 teams have been winning in the GCC region."

Ahmed al Wahaibi is a 10th grader and an under-15 champion. In 2018 he had won first place in GCC in 2019 he got second place. At the individual level, he got third place. "We have to keep practising and try our best. Discipline is the most important thing in this game", said Ahmed in his message to the young golfers.

To move forward with this objective Ghala Golf Club has also been providing initiatives.

Khalil al Wahaibi, General Manager at the GGC explained, "Facilities have been designated for juniors up to 17 years of age. This is free of charge. They can come and play for free here. The main purpose is to introduce them to the sport and if they take it up, they have the opportunity to reach up to the national team."

"The Academy supported by Mohammed Riyaz will bring in the professional training and hopefully will bring in a coach who will guide the youngsters. The youngsters are the future so they will grow with the game and then

have a strong national team", explained Mundir.

There is also tourism potential connected to golf although at present the globe is going through a pandemic.

"Many people together have been keeping up the sport active in Oman. Now our focus is also international events. Even when we were Oman Golf Committee, we were able to bring the European Tour — The Oman Open. It brought in a lot of professional players and gave it a tourism perspective as well.

In just one week there were 500 to 600 people in town keen to enjoy all the facilities and life in Oman. This year we had to postpone it at the last minute simply because of the current situation of the pandemic. We did not want to take the risk. Hopefully, we will go back to it at the end of this year or next year. Let us see how it goes", said the chairman of Oman Golf Association.

To promote family participation, the top floor of the Academy will have a Majlis area in which families can book and play golf from there to the netted area. "You can be with your whole family but from towards the front one can shoot the ball to the driving range, the golf course", explained Faiz.

According to him, lifestyle is the most important aspect of golf.

"Some of the best business deals happen at the golf course. The players are together for hours together and give immense opportunity to discuss and make decisions", Faiz Mohammed reflected from personal experience.



NQFs implementation, management reviewed

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 16

A meeting was held at the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation on the management and implementation of national qualifications framework (NQFs), under the auspices of Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and Chairperson of the Board of Directors of Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Education Quality Assurance.

The meeting was attended by HH Sayyid Dr Fahd bin al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU); Dr Muna bint Salim al Jardaniyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Vocational Training; Sayyid Salim bin Musallam bin Ali al Busaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources Development; Dr Bakhit bin Ahmed al Mahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Higher Education; Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Education for Education; Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Executive President of Oman Medical Specialty Board; Dr Salim bin Redha Radhwi, Acting Executive Chairman of Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Education Quality Assurance.

At the beginning of the meeting, Dr Salim bin Redha Radhwi, Acting Executive Chairman of Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Education Quality Assurance, presented a visual display about the development, implementation and management of the national qualifications framework (NQFs).

The visual display also included a summary about the development of a comprehensive national qualifications

framework in the Sultanate and the experimental inclusion of qualifications.

Dr Radhwi explained that the NQFs comprises three categories of educational levels, ten levels and four paths.

The NQFs encompasses all types and levels of qualifications provided by the educational sectors in the Sultanate including school education, technological education, vocational training and education, academic education and professional qualifications.

He added that the presence of a national qualifications framework helps learners plan their learning process, streamlines admission to programmes that lead up to qualifications in other educational sectors, facilitates students' transfer between the higher educational institutions through international recognition of the Omani qualifications.

The meeting discussed the required amendments to the document of national qualifications framework as well as the policies and procedures related to its implementation and management, capacities building at the education and training sectors in the field of including qualifications in the NQFs, the activation of the national qualifications registry and the establishment of a national registry of qualification evaluators.

Dr Al Mahrouqiyah underscored the importance of cooperation by the authorities concerned with education and training sectors to help the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Education Quality Assurance implement the national qualifications framework which, once implemented, will address the requirements of the education and training sectors in the Sultanate and improve education quality and boost the competitiveness and international ranking of the Omani educational institutions in line with the goals set by the Oman Vision 2040.

Role of higher education institutions in achieving SDGs discussed

MUSCAT: Represented by its International Cooperation Office and its library section, the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), on Tuesday organised a virtual international workshop on the role of higher education institutions (HEI) in sustainable development goals (SDG) in liaison with the Beirut-Doha-based Unesco's Arab region office.

HH Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for External Cooperation at the SQU, said in a statement on the occasion that "the workshop constitutes a practical start of programmes, plans and activities about partnering with the government to achieve sustainable development goals within the framework of Oman Vision 2040."

Dr Anna Paolini, Director of Unesco's regional office for GCC States and Yemen, laid emphasis on the role of higher education institutions in spearheading change in the region.

The workshop worked towards devising SDG plans in a number of higher education institutions in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040. It discussed the rise



and growth of higher education and sustainable development in the Sultanate, the first voluntary report of the Sultanate for the realisation of 2030 SDG and the activation of universities in this respect.

The workshop saw the participation of international speakers. Dr Anas Buhlal, Beirut Unesco's office, delivered a lecture titled "Higher education and SDG", while Dr Khalaf al Abri,

SQU, gave a presentation about the development of higher education and sustainable development in the Sultanate.

Dr Sharifa bint Hamoud al Harthiyah, member of the national team tasked with sustainable development and in-charge of the 9th sustainable development goal of 2030, spoke about the Sultanate's national voluntary report on SDG 2030 and the significance of motivating

higher education institutions.

The workshop also reviewed the experiences of different Omani universities, including the SQU, Dhofar University, Nizwa University, Sohar University and Muscat University.

The workshop's opening ceremony was held under the auspices of HH Dr Fahd bin al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of SQU, in the presence of about 200 participants. — ONA

SEVEN FISHERMEN RESCUED



The Coast Guard police rescued seven Omani fishermen after two fishing boats experienced engine failures at the sea. The Coast Guard police responded to the distress calls and towed the vessels to safety. In another development, the Directorate-General for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, arrested an expat in connection with smuggling drugs for the purpose of trafficking in association with an international drug trafficking cartel. The anti-drug unit seized 25 kgs of crystal meth from the accused. Meanwhile, the Muscat Governorate Police Command arrested a person on charges of fraud. The accused phoned up his victims promising them jobs at a company and asking for money to get them certificates required for recruitment at the company.

13,333 residential plots allotted



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning allotted 13,333 residential plots across the Sultanate until the end of December 2020, compared to 28,099 plots by the end of December 2019, comprising a decrease of 52.5pc, according to statistics released by the (NCSI).

The governorates of South and North Al Sharqiyah were allotted 4,238 residential plots until the end of December 2020, which is the highest among governorates.

This was followed by Al Dakhiliyah with 1,820 plots; Muscat with about 1,709 properties, Al Dhahirah with 1,528, North Al Batinah with 1,478 and Dhofar with 1,185 properties allotted until the end of December 2020.

The governorates of South Al Batinah, Al Wusta, Musandam were allotted 720, 289, 210 residential properties, respectively.

Al Buraimi was allotted 156 properties, which is the lowest among governorates.

— ONA



Recall/Special Service Campaign



Date of Campaign :17/02/2021
Campaign Type :Recall Campaign
Product Description :Hiace

Production Year	Brand	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle Range*	Nos. of Affected Vehicles
November 30, 2017 through November 11, 2020	TOYOTA	HIACE	JTGSS22PXJ0172436 to JTFHS02PXM0108758	597

* Not all vehicles in these VIN ranges affected.

Description:

The subject vehicles are equipped with a VSC (Vehicle Stability Control) system (Including TRC-Traction Control). Due to incorrect programming of the Engine ECU, there is a possibility that the VSC or TRC system will not work correctly. In this condition, these vehicles may not comply with the general requirements of GSO42.

Procedure:

Reprogram the Engine ECU.

For More Information:

Customers driving these vehicles may please contact M/s. Saud Bahwan Automotive LLC for further details / booking appointment etc. from 17/02/2021.

Contact Details:

Toll free No.80073000 on all working days between 08:30 to 17:30 hrs. from 17/02/2021.

Around 1% vaccinated for coronavirus in Mideast

CAIRO: The World Health Organization said on Monday that only around one per cent of the wider Middle East region's population had received a first coronavirus vaccine shot.

The UN body released its data for what it calls the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO) of nearly 600 million people, stretching from Morocco to Pakistan — but excluding Israel.

"So far, more than 6.3 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been given to people in 12 countries", Ahmed al Mandhari, the Cairo-based WHO's regional chief, told reporters.

WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO) comprises 21 member states and is home to some 583 million people.

But while it includes the Palestinian Territories, it does not include Israel, the country in

the region with the biggest mass vaccination campaign.

Israel reports that 3.8 million people have received a first dose, while 2.4 million have received a second shot. Mandhari did not name the 12 countries where people have been already vaccinated. But he said that vaccines distributed through the Covax programme are due to reach Tunisia and the Palestinian Territories in coming weeks.

Tunisia is expected to receive around 37,000 doses, while 94,000 doses will go to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, he said, without specifying the brands.

The remaining countries in WHO's region are due to receive "an estimated 46 million to 56 million doses of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine... during the first half of this year", Mandhari said.

Since the start of the pandemic,



A health worker takes a nasal swab sample from a Palestinian woman while testing for coronavirus disease in the village of Dura, southwest of Hebron in the occupied West Bank, on Tuesday. — AFP

there have been more than six million confirmed cases of the virus across the EMRO region, including 140,000 deaths, Mandhari said. Thirteen countries are affected by variants of the coronavirus, he added. Mandhari also warned of the "unequal distribution of the vaccine roll-out" globally, and said it was "difficult to predict" how many vaccines were available.

"A number of countries in the region have entered into bilateral agreements with manufacturers", he said, but predicting that "the pace of these agreements will accelerate". Lebanon was the latest country to launch its vaccination drive on Sunday.

Bed occupancy in Covid-19 intensive care units in Lebanon, which saw a spike in cases after the holidays, stood at more than 89 per cent on Friday. — AFP

Tobacco companies eye Africa to boost output, warns WHO

CAPE: Tobacco companies are increasingly targeting African countries to scale up tobacco leaf production as regulations tighten in middle and high-income countries, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Tuesday.

Increased cultivation in Africa combined with aggressive marketing also translated to growing tobacco use on the continent, from an estimated 64 million adult users in 2000 to 73 million in 2018, the WHO said in a new report.

At the same time, the number of tobacco users globally decreased from 1.397 billion to 1.337 billion.

Tobacco use is particularly prevalent in north-eastern Africa, with Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia accounting together for at least 19 million tobacco users, the WHO said. Tobacco cultivation has shifted to Africa for a number of reasons, including a more favourable regulatory environment, according to the report.

The acreage devoted to tobacco

leaf production in Africa increased by 3.4 per cent and production quantity increased by 10.6 per cent between 2012 and 2018, the WHO said.

This trend is counter to a 13.9-per cent decrease in global tobacco leaf production and a 15.6 per cent reduction in the area harvested under tobacco.

Tobacco use is one of the biggest public health challenges worldwide, killing more than 8 million people around the world every year, according to the WHO. — dpa

UN warns battle for Marib threatens millions of Yemenis

DUBAI: The UN's humanitarian chief said on Tuesday he was "very alarmed" by Ansar Allah's advance on the Yemeni government's last northern stronghold of Marib, saying the assault could endanger millions of civilians.

The rebel fighters have this month resumed an offensive to seize oil-rich Marib, some 120 kilometres (75 miles) east of Sanaa.

The city's loss would be a major blow for Yemen's government, which is backed by a Saudi-led coalition, but would also threaten catastrophe for civilians, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people sheltering in desolate camps in the region.

"I'm very alarmed about the military escalation in Marib and its impact on the humanitarian situation", Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, said in a tweet.

"An assault on the city would put two million civilians at risk, with hundreds of thousands potentially forced to flee — with unimaginable humanitarian consequences. Now is the time to de-escalate, not to add even more to the misery of the Yemeni people."

Pro-government military officials told AFP that the rebels had advanced towards the city on two fronts overnight after heavy fighting with government forces.

Dozens from both sides have



Ahmed Abdo Salem, a two-year-old Yemeni child displaced by conflict suffering from malnutrition (weighing only five kilograms) is measured at a health clinic in the war-ravaged western Hodeida province, on Monday. — AFP

been killed in the past 24 hours alone, they said. The total toll from the battle for Marib is unknown, but there are reports of hundreds dead.

"The rebels have advanced north and west of the city... and tightened their grip on hills overlooking supply lines for several fronts", one official said.

The Saudi-led coalition, which entered Yemen's conflict in 2015, has been pounding rebel positions, and the Ansar Allah-run Al Masirah television on Tuesday reported 13 airstrikes in several areas in Marib.

The fighting threatens sprawling camps for internally displaced people, many of whom had fled several times before ending up in Marib, the only part of Yemen's north not in Ansar

Allah hands.

Until early 2020, oil-rich Marib was spared the worst of Yemen's six-year-old conflict, partly due to its location near the Saudi border.

It became a sanctuary for many in the early years of the war.

But that relative stability evaporated as fighting flared last year, and despite a brief lull from October, fears are now mounting of another humanitarian catastrophe.

"If fighting moves towards populated areas or these displacement sites, we will see people flee again and towards locations to the east and south of Marib city with even less resources", International Organization for Migration spokeswoman Olivia Headon said. — AFP

10 YEARS ON, LIBYA CLUTCHES AT NEW HOPE



A man sells Libyan national flags in the Martyrs' Square in the centre of Libya's capital Tripoli on Tuesday, a day ahead of commemorations of the 10th anniversary of the uprising against former leader Muammar Gaddafi. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

KHARTOUM

Sudan inflation tops 300%

Sudan's inflation rate has soared above 300 per cent, officials said on Monday, posing a major challenge for a newly-appointed government tasked with tackling an economic crisis that has triggered recent protests.

"The annual inflation rate reached 304.3 per cent in January, compared to 269.3 per cent in December", the Central Bureau of Statistics said in a statement, attributing the rise to price hikes including on food. Protests have flared in recent weeks in several



parts of Sudan over skyrocketing costs of living. Sudanese authorities have blamed the sometimes violent demonstrations on supporters of ousted president Omar al Bashir.

GENEVA

Guinea and Congo to get Ebola vaccines, pills

Authorities in Guinea and Congo are working at full speed to contain two separate Ebola outbreaks, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Tuesday.

Vaccines and medical treatments are being shipped to the two countries to boost their current stocks, a spokesperson told a press conference in Geneva.

Guinea in West Africa has reported seven cases and three deaths. Four cases and two deaths have been detected in



eastern Congo in central Africa, according to the UN health agency. The highly contagious Ebola virus causes a fever and often leads to massive internal bleeding and death.

TEHRAN

Iran, Russia start drill in Indian Ocean

Iran's armed forces on Tuesday launched a joint naval drill with Russia in the north of the Indian Ocean designed to "enhance security" of maritime trade, state television reported.

The "Maritime Security Belt Exercise" is to cover an area of 17,000 square kilometres (6,500 square miles) and include units from the Iranian army and the elite Revolutionary Guards as well as Russia's navy, the broadcaster quoted drill spokesman Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani



as saying. "The purposes of this drill are to enhance security of international maritime trade, confront maritime piracy and terrorism and exchange information." — Agencies

In brief

■ MUMBAI



AMAZON TO MAKE DEVICES IN INDIA

Amazon will begin making Fire TV sticks in India, the US tech giant said on Tuesday, its first device manufacturing line in the country as it fights for a share of its booming e-commerce market.

Amazon is locked in a battle for dominance with Walmart-backed Flipkart and Reliance as well as thousands of local traders who have accused the US firm of driving them out of business.

Its latest announcement comes as Prime Minister Narendra Modi ramps up his flagship “Make in India” drive, aimed at urging foreign companies to manufacture goods in the South Asian nation and reduce imports.

■ DHAKA



FIVE GET DEATH FOR WRITER'S MURDER

Five extremists were sentenced to death on Tuesday over the brutal murder of a Bangladeshi-American writer and rights activist six years ago. Avijit Roy, a prolific blogger and the author of 10 books, was hacked to death outside Bangladesh's largest book fair by machete-wielding extremists in February 2015. The murder, part of a reign of terror by extremists at the time, enraged the Muslim-majority nation's secular activists, who staged days of protests.

The judge at Dhaka's Special Anti-Terrorism Tribunal found six people guilty, sentencing five to death and one to life in prison, prosecutor Golam Sarwar Zakir said.

■ KABUL



TALIBAN CALL ON US TO HONOUR DOHA DEAL

The Taliban on Tuesday urged the US to honour a landmark withdrawal deal under which all foreign troops would exit Afghanistan in the coming months, even as violence continues to rage in the war-ravaged nation. In an 11-point statement, the insurgent group called for the Americans to stick to the agreement ironed out in Qatar last year that paved the way for ongoing peace talks between the Taliban and the Kabul government. “We urge the American side to remain committed to the full implementation of this accord,” wrote the group's co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

‘North Korea tried to hack Pfizer for vaccine info’

SEOUL: North Korean hackers tried to break into the computer systems of pharmaceutical giant Pfizer in a search for information on a coronavirus vaccine and treatment technology, South Korea's spy agency said on Tuesday, according to reports.

The impoverished, nuclear-armed North has been under self-imposed isolation since closing its borders in January last year to try to protect itself from the virus that first emerged in neighbouring China and has gone on to sweep the world, killing more than two million people.

Leader Kim Jong Un has repeatedly insisted that the country has had no coronavirus cases, although outside experts doubt those assertions.

And the closure has added to the pressure on its tottering economy from international sanctions imposed over its banned weapons systems, increasing the urgency for Pyongyang to find a way to deal with the disease.

Seoul's National Intelligence Service “briefed us that North Korea tried to obtain technology involving the Covid vaccine and treatment by using cyberwarfare to hack into Pfizer”, MP Ha Tae-keung told reporters after a parliamentary hearing behind closed doors.

North Korea is known to operate an army of thousands of well-trained hackers who have attacked firms, institutions and researchers in the South and elsewhere.

Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine, developed jointly with Germany's



People visit the statues of late North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il on the occasion of the 79th birth anniversary of Kim Jong Il, known as the ‘Day of the Shining Star’, at Mansu Hill in Pyongyang on Tuesday. — AFP

North Korea is known to operate an army of thousands of well-trained hackers who have attacked firms, institutions and researchers in the South and elsewhere

BioNTech, began winning approval from authorities late last year.

It is based on technology that uses the synthetic version of a molecule called “messenger RNA” to hack into human cells and effectively turn them into vaccine-making factories.

Pfizer says it expects to potentially deliver up to 2 billion doses in 2021.

The company's South Korean office did not immediately respond to a request for comment by AFP.

Both it and BioNTech said in December that documents relating to their vaccine were “unlawfully accessed” during a cyber attack on a server at the European Medicines Agency, the EU's medicine regulator.

The comments came after the Amsterdam-based EMA said it had been the victim of a hacking attack, without specifying when it took place or whether its work on Covid-19 was targeted.

The allegations come only a week after a confidential UN report seen by AFP said North Korea had stolen more than \$300 million worth of cryptocurrencies through cyber attacks in recent months to support its weapons programmes. — AFP



A protester holds up a sign calling for the release of detained Myanmar civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a demonstration against the military coup in Naypyidaw on Tuesday. — AFP

Suu Kyi hit with second charge as Myanmar junta tightens grip

YANGON: Myanmar's deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi was hit with another charge on Tuesday, after the military imposed a second straight overnight Internet shutdown in an attempt to grind down an anti-coup uprising.

In the two weeks since the generals ousted Suu Kyi and put the civilian leader under house arrest in the administrative capital Naypyidaw, big cities and isolated village communities alike have been in open revolt.

The military justified its power seizure by alleging widespread voter fraud in November elections that Suu Kyi's party won.

After her detention in a dawn raid on February 1 — the day of the coup — she was charged under an obscure import and export law, over walkie talkies that were found in her home during a search.

The Nobel laureate's lawyer

said on Tuesday she had been hit with a second charge, of violating the country's disaster management law.

“She was charged under section 8 of the Export and Import Law and section 25 of the Natural Disaster Management Law as well,” Khin Maung Zaw said.

While it was unclear how the disaster law applied in Suu Kyi's case, it has been used against deposed president Win Myint — also arrested on February 1 — relating to a campaign event that the junta alleges broke coronavirus-related restrictions.

Khin Maung Zaw added that Suu Kyi and Win Myint, both of whom he has yet to have any contact with, were expected to appear via video conference during a March 1 trial. Both defendants were in a “safer place” and “in good health”, according to military spokesman Zaw Min Tun.

— AFP

39 dead as Indian bus veers off road into canal

NEW DELHI: Thirty-nine people were killed on Tuesday when a bus plunged into a deep canal in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, officials said, with seven others managing to swim to safety.

The accident happened when the bus, which was carrying more than 50 passengers, veered off a bridge and crashed into the 30-foot (9.1-metre) deep canal in Sidhi district early on Tuesday morning.

It was unclear what caused the bus to swerve, but India's vast network of roads is poorly maintained and notoriously dangerous.

Local media reported the bus was completely submerged, and images showed officials in orange life jackets using rescue boats to look for survivors.

Officials said the driver and six others swam to safety. Several other people remain missing.

“The death toll in the bus accident has risen to 39,” district magistrate Ravindra Kumar Choudhary told reporters.

Sixteen women and a child, whose age was not released, were among the dead. Some of the men who died were on their way to an employment exam for a job at Indian Railways.

The state government has ordered an inquiry.

An initial investigation suggested the driver lost control of the privately owned bus,



Onlookers stand along a canal as rescue teams search for survivors after a bus plunged into a canal killing at least 39 passengers, in Sidhi district of Madhya Pradesh on Tuesday. — AFP

reports said. The vehicle then hit the boundary of the bridge before crashing into the water.

Local officials stopped the release of water into the canal, which sped up rescue operations by divers and allowed cranes to pull the blue bus out.

The *Times of India* newspaper quoted sources saying it took three hours to lift the vehicle out.

Images showed bodies lined

up on the banks of the canal as distraught relatives hugged each other and cried.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's office tweeted that the families of those killed in the “horrific” accident would receive 200,000 rupees (\$2,750) in compensation.

“The entire state is standing with those affected,” Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj

Singh Chouhan said in a video message.

High-speed vehicles jostling with motorbikes, pedestrians and cyclists combine with poor infrastructure and poorly maintained vehicles to make India's roads treacherous.

In 2019, more than 150,000 people died — 410 every day or 17 an hour — in almost half a million accidents, according to

the government.

The United States sees nearly five times more accidents than India every year but the number of deaths in India is four times higher, according to the *Times of India*.

The main causes are excessive speed, not wearing helmets — sales of two-wheelers far outstrip those of cars — and not using seatbelts. — AFP

Millions struggle without power as cold snap grips US

WASHINGTON: Millions were left without power as a deadly winter storm gripped the southern and central United States on Tuesday, as weather chaos elsewhere saw at least three people killed when a tornado smashed into their community.

Arctic conditions have brought record low temperatures to several states unaccustomed to — and ill prepared for — such extreme cold.

Hardest hit was Texas, where freezing conditions prompted utility companies to implement rotating blackouts to stop the power grid being overloaded by the surge in demand.

The winter storm spawned at least four tornadoes, according to Atlanta-based weather.com, including one in coastal North Carolina late on Monday that killed at least three people and injured 10 more.

The twister tore into the southern part of the state late on Monday, particularly impacting two coastal communities in Brunswick County. “It is estimated that at least 50 homes were affected in the incident and several power lines were damaged, causing power outages”, Brunswick County Emergency Services said in a statement.

Photos and video broadcast by



A man sleds down a snow covered hill in Houston, Texas on Tuesday. – AFP

US media showed downed trees, flattened homes and smashed cars. According to the Poweroutage.us tracking site, more than four million residential, commercial and industrial customers were without electricity in Texas as of Tuesday morning. In the state capital Austin, the temperature was 10 degrees Fahrenheit (-12 degrees Celsius) — well below February’s average low of 45°F. By contrast, thermometers in

Anchorage, Alaska read 20°F.

Uncommon scenes played out in Houston, where locals built snowmen and sledged.

“It’s lovely to see the white but very dangerous at the same time because people here don’t know how to drive in it”, Houston resident Michael, who only gave his first name, said.

“You know they’re driving too fast.” In Mississippi, residents woke up to discover much of the

Deep South state transformed into a snow-and-ice-covered landscape. Authorities were struggling to clear roads, as they do not have snow plows because the state so rarely needs them, *The New York Times* reported.

At least 10 deaths have been linked to the recent bad weather, and authorities across the US urged residents to exercise caution in navigating the perilous conditions. — AFP

In EU first, Chinese doses arrive in Hungary

BUDAPEST: Hungary on Tuesday became the first EU country to receive China’s Sinopharm coronavirus vaccine as an initial batch of 550,000 doses arrived in Budapest, the government announced.

The vaccines — enough to protect 275,000 people against Covid-19 — were flown in aboard a Hungarian government plane which had left for Beijing on Monday and returned home at midday on Tuesday.

“This is an important day for Hungary”, Tamas Menczer, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s office, said at the airport. “We are trying to save lives and maintain the economy.”

Orban’s government announced late last month that it had ordered a total of five million Sinopharm doses.

Hungary’s pharmaceutical authority has approved the vaccine, but it cannot be



Workers unload the cargo of a Hungarian Airbus 330 plane, having transported the first doses of the Sinopharm vaccine at Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport on Tuesday. – AFP

administered until it receives the green light from the National Centre for Public Health (NNK), which has said it still needs to conduct tests.

In another first for the European Union, Hungary has already been administering the

Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine — named after the Soviet-era satellite — which has been found to be 91.6 per cent effective against symptomatic Covid-19 cases.

Orban said last Friday that if Hungary can also start using the Sinopharm vaccine “in the near

future, more than 2.5 million people can be inoculated by Easter.”

The prime minister has repeatedly criticised Brussels’ authorisation and procurement of vaccines as too slow — a criticism he reiterated on Friday.

“Each day we spend waiting around for Brussels, we would lose 100 Hungarian lives”, Orban said.

“Why should we think that European experts are smarter than us?” he asked, adding that he trusts Hungarian specialists more than those in Brussels.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) is under pressure to approve new coronavirus vaccines as quickly as possible, as the EU’s 27 member states grapple with delivery delays and shortages in supplies for the top three vaccines authorised in the EU — Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca-Oxford. — AFP

Covid-19

World toll Tuesday February 16, 1100 GMT

Deaths	New	Cases	New
2,408,243	6,743	109,074,737	278,225

New: 24-hour increase on Monday February 15

Hardest-hit countries

	Deaths	New (latest report)	Cases
UNITED STATES	486,332	1,009	27,694,647
BRAZIL	239,773	528	9,866,710
MEXICO	174,657	450	1,995,892
INDIA	155,813	81	10,925,710
UNITED KINGDOM	117,396	230	4,047,843
ITALY	93,835	258	2,729,223
FRANCE	82,226	412	3,469,539
RUSSIA	80,979	459	4,099,323
GERMANY	65,604	528	2,342,843
SPAIN	65,449	702	3,086,286
IRAN	59,117	89	1,534,034
COLOMBIA	57,786	181	2,198,549

Increases over 24 hours may not tally exactly with previous day’s total due to inavailability or late publication of data or corrections made by authorities

Sources: AFP count based on official tolls



Macron: No reduction of France’s Sahel force

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron said on Tuesday there would be no “immediate” reduction in the 5,100 French troops supporting Sahel nations fighting an militant insurgency.

“Changes that are likely to be significant will be made to our military deployment in the Sahel when the time comes, but they will not be made immediately”, Macron told reporters after a video-linked summit with leaders of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

“They will result first of all from a collective discussion with our Sahel partners and with the partners who have accepted to help us, and they will be based on the results obtained and the degree of engagement from our partners”, he said.

Calls have risen in France for a review of the Barkhane force deployed in western Africa, which aims to curtail the terrorism threat while training local security forces, following a series of deadly attacks on French troops.

“A French withdrawal, a massive withdrawal of men, which is a possibility I have considered, would be a mistake”, Macron said.

“It would be paradoxical to weaken our deployment at a time when we have a political and military alignment that enables us to reach our goals”, he said. “In the coming months we will not change our presence. We hope that we will have concrete results



French President Emmanuel Macron speaks during video-conference with leaders of the G5 Sahel on Tuesday in Paris. – AFP

“A French withdrawal, a massive withdrawal of men, which is a possibility I have considered, would be a mistake

EMMANUEL MACRON
French President

in terms of security in the very next months, for me this means between now and the summer”, Macron added.

“Beyond summer, I want to work with our partners for an evolution of our presence to consolidate our military victory in the region”, he added.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

BRUSSELS

Denmark tops annual waste output per person

Denmark generated 844 kilograms of waste per person in 2019, a number far above the EU average of 502 kilograms, the European Union’s statistical office Eurostat said on Tuesday.

Other countries that produced more than 600 kilograms of municipal waste — which consists of waste collected by or on behalf of municipal authorities, mainly from households — include Luxembourg, Malta, Cyprus and Germany. Romania produced the least amount of waste in



2019: 280 kilograms per person. Overall, the EU average shows a slight increase compared to 2018, where municipal authorities across the bloc collected 495 kilograms of waste per person.

PARIS

5G phones may interfere with aircraft gear

The latest generation of smartphones, 5G, can interfere with aircraft altitude instruments, the French Civil Aviation Authority warned on Tuesday as it recommended they should be turned off during flight.

“The utilisation of 5G devices on board aircraft could lead to risks of interference that could potentially result in errors in altitude readings”, a spokesman said. The potential phenomenon is due to “signal interference from a close frequency source of



a strength that is similar or even superior to that of altimeters.” This interference can cause errors “in instruments that are extremely critical during landing”, said the agency.

TELAVIV

Fauci wins prestigious Israeli prize for virus work

Anthony Fauci, the US top infectious disease specialist, was named a winner of a prestigious Israeli academic prize on Monday for his work during the coronavirus crisis, among other things.

The Dan David Prize was awarded to Fauci in the field of Public Health, the foundation announced in a press release. Other laureates of this year’s prize include: Health and medicine historians Alison Bashford, Katharine Park and Keith Wailoo



in the field of History of Health and Medicine; and the pioneers of an anti-cancer immunotherapy, Zelig Eshhar, Carl June and Steven Rosenberg in the field of Molecular Medicine.

Zero Covid in Europe: Possible or pipe dream?

PAUL RICARD

Hit the virus quick and hard, under-
going drastic short-term measures in
order to allow life to return to normal.
Several nations in Asia and Oceania
have pursued “Zero Covid” strategies.

Can European countries do likewise?
In Auckland, two million New Zea-
landers have been confined to their
homes since Monday because of three
confirmed Covid-19 cases.

Across Europe, tens of thousands of
cases are confirmed every day, yet very
few cities are in lockdown.

As vaccine schemes stutter across
the continent, more and more experts
are pleading for states to follow the ex-
ample of New Zealand and others and
move to stamp out the virus.

“There’s a three-fold advantage for
countries who have adopted” the Zero
Covid approach, said Antoine Flahault,
an epidemiologist from the University
of Geneva.

“On a disease level they are the un-
contested world champions in terms of
number of deaths per inhabitant. On
a social level they have resumed: bars,
restaurants, cultural and sporting activi-
ties, schools and universities are open

ACROSS EUROPE,
TENS OF
THOUSANDS
OF CASES ARE
CONFIRMED
EVERY DAY,
YET VERY FEW
CITIES ARE IN
LOCKDOWN

as normal. “Distancing measures are
virtually non-existent,” he said.

“And from an economic point of
view, places like Taiwan and China have
seen positive GDP growth in 2020.”

He said this approach was preferable
to the “mitigation strategy that most
Western nations had adopted”, that is
“organising between waves how to live
with the virus”.

For Martin McKee, professor of Eu-
ropean Public Health at the London
School of Health and Tropical Medi-
cine, “living with the virus” is not an
accurate term. “What does that actually
mean?” he said.

“We don’t think it’s acceptable to
have a situation (where) you’re trying to
keep it under control but not succeed-
ing, you’re continually having resur-
gences and more lockdown, because we
don’t see how anybody can plan ahead
for holidays, wedding, investing in a
new restaurant, for anything.”

What’s more, the more the virus is al-
lowed to circulate the greater the chanc-
es of a meaningful mutation emerging,
such as the British and South African
variants that are more transmissible.

“We don’t think we can keep going
on with a third, forth, fifth, fifteenth,
twentieth wave,” said McKee, who be-

lieves that Zero Covid is the “only alter-
native”.

So why have so many nations not
even attempted to stamp out Covid-19?

CONDITIONS MATTER

Archie Clements, Vice-Chancellor of
the Faculty of Health Sciences at Aus-
tralia’s Curtin University, said a variety
of factors made Zero Covid harder to
pursue in Europe.

These include the greater degree of
travel among European nations, higher
urban population density, and the fact
that Europe is a major global travel des-
tination.

“Our advantages in Australia (and
New Zealand) are natural advantages
that cant be replicated elsewhere,” he
said. “In particular, our isolation and
lack of land borders, the fact that we
aren’t major travel hubs or destinations,
and the fact that we can maintain our
economies without a lot of cross-border
travel are inherent to our success.”

For Flahault however, none of these
are reasons not to try.

“When Britain was registering high-
er mortality than Germany, Switzerland
or France, we didn’t say that it was Brit-
ain’s isolation that caused its poor per-
formance,” he said. — AFP

WRITE FOR US

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

MILK AND MUSIC

Indian villages support farmers

GLEND A KWEK

Blasting catchy pro-farmer songs from a speak-
er, an electric-blue tractor rattled down an In-
dian village road collecting pails of milk — just
some of the donations sustaining massive protest
camps outside New Delhi.

More than two months after the first farm-
ers set up camps on the capital’s borders, tens of
thousands more have joined them, calling for the
repeal of new agriculture laws.

The farmers, who have slept outdoors through
the winter cold, are being supported by an army
of small villages in the northern states neigh-
bouring Delhi.

“This campaign, this farmer movement, isn’t
theirs — those who are sitting there — alone,”
Sumit Arya, the 35-year-old head of Makrauli
Khurd, a village about two hours’ drive from the
main protest sites, said. “The movement belongs
to all of us, the rural villagers.”

Makrauli, home to 4,000 people, is a hive of
activity every morning with men and women
bringing vegetables and wood to collection
points. On Tuesdays, villagers carry small metal
buckets full of milk freshly squeezed from their
cows to the back of trailers, where men like Ajit
Singh gently pour them into larger cans.

“We can’t give
our time there
but we can take
care of their food
and water needs
and whatever they
need in winter,”
the 58-year-old
farmer said as he
sat on a bed of hay
in a trolley.
Around him,
villagers raised
their fists and
chanted “zinda-
bad” (“long live”),
in reply to some-
one yelling “kisan
ekta” (“farmers united”) — a rallying cry often
heard at the protests.

SUMIT ARYA
A villager

The government says the agriculture sector
needs to be modernised. But farmers fear the
deregulation will place them at the mercy of big
corporations. Farming has long been a political
minefield in India, with nearly 70 per cent of the
1.3-billion-strong population drawing their live-
lihood from agriculture.

The protests — which turned deadly in late
January when a tractor rally in Delhi turned into
a rampage — have become one of the biggest
challenges to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s
government since it came to power in 2014.

Since the start of the sit-in protests in late No-
vember, a support network has sprung up to care
for the sprawling camps. Tractors pulling trolleys
laden with wood, rice, flour, sugar and vegetables
leave villages like Makrauli on daily or weekly ro-
tations for the camps. They are joined by farmers
and their families eager to spend the day or sev-
eral nights at the sites.

“We strike up friendships... Two or three trac-
tors keep going from our village to keep their
spirits up,” Ajay Punia, 18, said on a trailer en
route to Delhi. — AFP

CRUISE FROM HELL

A year after *Diamond Princess*, cruise industry eyes return

SARA HUSSEIN

David Abel and his wife Sally might
have had the cruise from hell last
year on the coronavirus-hit *Diamond
Princess*, but they can’t wait to get back
to sea.

A year after the ill-fated ship went
into quarantine off Japan, the cruise
industry is hoping passengers like the
Abels will help steer them to calmer
waters. Analysts say smooth sailing
isn’t likely before the second half of
2021 at the earliest, but bookings are
already picking up.

The Abels both caught coronavirus
on the *Diamond Princess*, but they’ve
booked five cruises for late 2021 and
early 2022, and are eyeing a sixth.

“We can’t wait to get back to sea,”
David Abel told subscribers to his
YouTube page in an early February
video.

“There’s nothing better than waking
up in the morning in the world’s most
exciting and interesting cities. We love
the sound of the ocean.”

He acknowledged some people
“have concerns” but insisted he
believes “cruises will be one of the
safest types of vacations human beings
could ever take”.

When the *Diamond Princess*
arrived off the Japanese city of
Yokohama on February 3, 2020, the
global death toll from the mysterious
“new coronavirus” was around 400
and Japan had registered a handful of
infections.

Carrying 2,666 passengers and



US passengers wave to reporters as they leave the Daikaku Pier Cruise Terminal in Yokohama port, next to the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship. — AFP file photo

THINGS
CHANGED
QUICKLY FOR
THE *DIAMOND
PRINCESS* WHEN
A PASSENGER
TESTED POSITIVE
AFTER LEAVING
THE BOAT

1,045 crew, the *Diamond Princess* was
supposed to be meandering around
Asia, but things quickly changed when
a passenger tested positive after leaving
the boat.

By February 4, Japanese authorities
quarantined the ship and all on board.
Testing showed the virus had spread
widely. Over 700 people on board
would eventually test positive for the
virus and 13 people died.

Sarah Arana, an American social
worker, looks back on the experience
as “incredibly surreal”

“I don’t have any regrets about it,”

the 54-year-old said, saying she felt she
had a front-row seat to the pandemic’s
start and the science around handling
the virus.

NOT BRILLIANT

A year on, the lessons learned from the
pandemic mean tough restrictions for
the cruise industry.

Canada has barred cruise vessels
from its waters until February 2022.
And the US Centers for Disease
Control advises against cruises, though
authorities released rules last year for a
phased resumption. — AFP

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sport



Seeb, Dhofar seal spot in HM Cup semis



Action from the Dhofar vs Musannah game.

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

Unbeaten Dhofar and Seeb have sealed their slots in the semifinals round of the prestigious 2020-21 HM Cup Football Championship. The defending champions advanced to the last four after blanking Al Musannah 3-0 in the quarterfinal second leg at Al Rustaq Sports Complex on Monday night. Former national team player Khalid al Hajri scored a brace for Dhofar. Al Hajri found the target in the 13th and 35th minutes while the Omar Mohammed netted in the 21st minute. Al Musannah's Majid al Saadi received a red card in the last minute of the match. In the first leg, the Salalah giants had won 2-0 at Al Saada Sports Complex on February 6. Earlier on Monday, Seeb secured spot in the semifinals after they trashed Saham 3-0 in the return match. Seeb had edged Saham 1-0 in their home match at Seeb Stadium on February 5. In-form Seeb are moving to

the semifinals after missing last two seasons. At Sohar Sports Complex, Seeb managed to end the second leg match comfortably as Abdulaziz al Maqbali commenced the match with an early goal in the ninth minute. Six minutes later, Saham's defender Ahmd Atoor's misjudgement resulted in an own goal and the first half ended with Seeb leading 2-0. In the second half, the visitors controlled the game and after 15 minutes, Khalid al Buraiki struck the third goal which ended the game at 3-0. The Oman Football Association (OFA) announced on Tuesday that the draw for the semifinals will take place on Wednesday at Seeb Stadium. The draw ceremony will start at 1 pm in presence of all the four teams representatives. The first leg of the semifinal matches will be held on February 26 while the return matches on March 2. The final match of the coveted cup will be on March 7 under the auspices of Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Muscat.



Action from the Seeb vs Saham game.

‘Al Afia’ claims Round 7 honours at Al Bashayer

RAY PETERSEN
MUSCAT, FEB 16

The Annual Al Bashayer Camel Racing Festival's second day featured 13 rounds, each with big fields of three-year-old camels during the morning and afternoon rounds. There was drama early in the fourth round when the camels from the inside and outside crowded in shortly after the start and one runner fell, bringing down another only metres from the starting gates, then only 50 metres later two camels came together and appeared to crash heavily to the track. Fortunately, all four camels appeared unhurt and were passed fit to race later in the day.

POPULAR TRAINER
Popular Al Mudhaibi camel trainer Mahmood bin Ali al Jabri produced his modestly bred Al Afia, later in the morning to head



A saffron daubed Al Afia, and her proud trainer Mahmood bin Ali al Jabri, after winning Three-Year-Old Round 7. – Lena Petersen

off a large field of more highly favoured runners to score a convincing win in Round 7. By Ibn Sarab, out of the locally bred Khawr, Al Afia built

significantly on a recent winning run in the UAE to win with something in hand. The trainer, who has a promising stable of camels in his charge at present

AL BASHAYER CAMEL RACING FESTIVAL DAY TWO RESULTS	
THREE-YEAR-OLD MORNING ROUND	bin Ali al Jabri. Time: 7:51
Round 1: Jabarah, Owner: Hamed bin Mattar al Shamsi. Time: 7:42 min	Round 8: Al Mokhtabar. Owner: Saleh bin Hamad al Wahibi. Time: 7:53
Round 2: Mahdi, Owner: Said bin Safir al Malki. Time: 7:49 min	THREE-YEAR-OLD AFTERNOON ROUND
Round 3: Bashair, Owner: Emmad bin Gharib al Junaibi. Time: 7:51 min	Round 1: Saayb, Owner: Royal Camel Corps/Trainer Hamed bin Salim al Jidaily. Time: 7:37
Round 4: Shahinia, Owner: Hamid bin Mohammed al Junaibi. Time: 7:51	Round 2: Bashair, Owner: Salim al Gailani. Time: 7:38
Round 5: Jalmood, Owner Mohammed bin Ahmed al Amri. Time: 7:54	Round 3: Ma Yhab, Owner: Al Taylat Camels/Mohammed bin Salman al Khalifa (Bahrain). Time: 7:38
Round 6: Al Zajel, Owner: Hamood bin Said al Harthy. Time: 7:51	Round 4: Wahaga, Owner: Hamed bin Salim al Jidaily. Time: 7:51
Round 7: Al Afia, Owner Mahmood	

and has an excellent training record with “too many winners to count,” has been around camels since he was five years old, but is confident he has the bloodstock now to be competitive and earn good prizes in the trophy rounds

of major camel racing events. The standout time however, was returned by Jabarah, for Hamed bin Mattar al Shamsi in the opening event, of 7:42sec. Jabarah was always prominent, and at the top of the home

straight soon loped up outside the leader easily. Given some encouragement with 800 metres to run, he stretched out stylishly for a hollow victory in a time that indicated his favouritism for the later rounds, and his prospects later on in the circuit. **DOUBLE WIN** The afternoon round saw Hamed al Jidaily strike twice, with Saayb, for the Royal Camel Corps in Round 1, and his own camel Wahaga in Round 4, while in between Bahraini trainer Baraq al Mahalhal won Round 3 with Ma Yhab for prominent Bahrain identity Al Taylat Camels, and Mohammed bin Salman al Khalifa. The emergence of these high-profile owners is a stark indication of the international prestige, and profile of the event. The festival continues on Wednesday, with the Four-Year-Old rounds in the morning and afternoon.



Man United forward Greenwood extends contract to 2025

Manchester United forward Mason Greenwood signed an extension to his contract on Tuesday, tying him to the Premier League club until 2025. The 19-year-old who joined the club at the age of seven said United was “the perfect environment to play my football”.



Rooney calls for Premier League to ban VAR

England and Manchester United’s all-time record goalscorer Wayne Rooney has urged the Premier League to get rid of the use of VAR as it is ruining the emotion of football for players and fans. Rooney is in his first managerial job with Derby in the Championship, which does not have VAR in place due to financial restrictions.

India wrap up big win in style



CHENNAI: India captain Virat Kohli said on Tuesday his side showed more “grit” and “determination” to thrash England in the second Test, playing down complaints about the difficult pitch.

With local hero Ravichandran Ashwin claiming eight wickets in the match and scoring 106 in the second innings, India completed a 317-run victory inside four days in Chennai.

Left-arm spinner Axar Patel claimed a five-wicket haul on his Test debut as England were out for 164 while chasing an unlikely 482 on day four.

Some said the Chennai pitch, which crumbled from nearly the first day, was not fit for a Test.

But England made no public complaint and Kohli rejected the criticism and said his side played a “perfect game”.

“I think our application with the bat was outstanding,” said the India captain.



“The conditions were challenging for both sides but we showed more application and grit and determination to battle it out.”

“We didn’t panic out there looking at the hard turn and bounce on that pitch.”

Kohli highlighted that India scored 600 runs over two innings despite the conditions, and winning the toss made no difference. “So if you put up that

kind of batting performance and you string in those important batting partnerships then we know that our bowlers are going to do the job.”

ENGLAND ‘OUTPLAYED’

England captain Joe Root conceded that his side were “outplayed in all three departments this week” and had to learn quickly before the third Test in Ahmedabad.

SCOREBOARD

India first innings:	329
England first innings:	134
India second innings:	286
England second innings (O/n: 53/3):	
R Burns c Kohli b Ashwin	25
D Sibley lbw Patel	3
D Lawrence st Pant b Ashwin	26
J Leach c R Sharma b Patel	0
J Root c Rahane b Patel	33
B Stokes c Kohli b Ashwin	8
O Pope c l Sharma b Patel	12
B Foakes c Patel b Yadav	2
M Ali st Pant b Yadav	43
O Stone lbw Patel	0
S Broad (not out)	5
Extras (B-6, LB-1)	7
Total (all out, 54.2 overs)	164
Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-49, 3-50, 4-66, 5-90, 6-110, 7-116, 8-116, 9-126	
Bowling: Sharma 6-3-13-0, Patel 21-5-60-5, Ashwin 18-5-53-3, Siraj 3-1-6-0, Yadav 6-2-1-2-2	

“The conditions were challenging for both sides but we showed more application and grit and determination to battle it out. We didn’t panic out there looking at the hard turn and bounce on that pitch

VIRAT KOHLI

Indian captain

But he added: “I would say it was a challenging wicket. I do think that it was an important toss to win.”

England, he said, now have to be “honest” and learn quickly to adapt to conditions in India.

England, struggling since the opening day, kept losing wickets after resuming on 53-3 on day four. Root departed for 33 soon after lunch, falling to Patel. — AFP

‘England outplayed by India but still have hope’

CHENNAI: England were “outplayed” by India in the second Test but can still win the crucial series, captain Joe Root said on Tuesday.

England’s run of six straight wins in foreign Tests came to a crashing halt in their 317-run defeat in Chennai that levelled the four-match series 1-1. “We have been, let’s be honest, outplayed in all three departments this week,” Root said after the game.

India scored more than 600 runs on a turning pitch on which two England innings could not even match India’s first innings of 329.

Root said he believed the toss was critical, but did not use the state of the pitch as an excuse for the defeat. “The fact is that India showed that you can score runs on it (the pitch) and found a way of managing on a very tricky surface so we have got to learn from that,” said Root.

“The thing that stands out is that India made the most of the opportunity and we didn’t perform well enough in the first innings, get close enough to them, or apply enough pressure.”

The result after their 227-run victory in the opening Test was a tough reality check.

England were bowled out for 134 in their first innings and, chasing an impossible 482, lasted 54.2 overs to make 164 in the second. India’s spinners led by Ravichandran Ashwin took all 10 second innings wickets.

Root will also have to make do without all-rounder Moeen Ali in the third Test, which begins in Ahmedabad on February 24, after he decided to return home.

England must not get “too far above our station” when they win, nor “see it as a doom and gloom



when we have tough weeks like we have this time round,” said Root.

“We’ve got to take bits from it, add it to our own games and come back better for it as well,” said Root. “So as long as we stay level, keep working hard, we’re very much alive and kicking in this series”.

The series will decide who will meet New Zealand in the inaugural World Test Championship final at Lord’s in June. England need to win the series 3-1 while a 2-1 win would be enough for India.

Australia, who have no games left, could also sneak through depending on the results.

Root said qualifying for the WTC final would be a tough ask as the process had been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. “It is a very tricky thing,” said Root.

“We will have played more Test cricket than any other side in the competition. Probably more games away from home as well. Is that a disadvantage or not?”

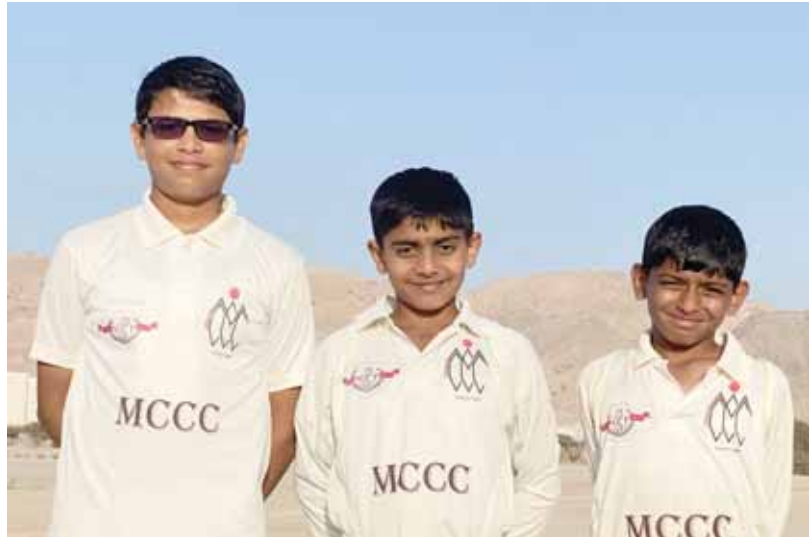
The England captain added: “All we can do as players and as an England team is try to win as many games as we can to give ourselves the best chance.”

— AFP

Azam ton takes ISM to win, MCCC Yellow top U-13 League



Narayana Satish of Boshers Sports Centre



MUSCAT: Prolific scorer Azam Ali struck another superb century to steer Indian School Muscat (ISM) to an exciting 6-wicket victory against Boshers Sports Centre (BSC) A in a Junior League Under-19 League game at OC Turf 2 in Amerat on Saturday.

BSC was bundled out for 186 in 50 overs, Vrishab Gladwin (43) and Muzahir Raza (41) being its topscorers. Tanuj Sivakumar was the pick of BSC bowlers, taking 3 for 18. Azam led ISM’s response with a solid 107 while Arjun Suresh contributed 33 their side raced to the target in the 38th over,

scoring 187 for four wickets.

LAKSHMI STARS AS BSC BEAT SLSM

Lakshmi Narayana’s splendid hundred powered Boshers Sports Centre (BSC) to a thumping 8-wicket win over Sri Lankan School Muscat (SLSM) in a Junior League 30-over Under-16 match at Muscat Municipality ground 1.

SLSM posted 191 for 8 on the board with Mustafa Mahabub topscoring with 41. Jeyapranesh Ayyappan bowled well, taking 4 for 31. BSC’s chase was led by Lakshmi Narayana’s brilliant 100 not out off 61 balls as it sealed victory in 20

OC LEAGUE BRIEF SCORES

JUNIOR LEAGUE U19

Boshers Sports Centre A 186 all out in 50 overs (Vrishab Gladwin 43 – 5x4, Muzahir Raza 41 – 4x4, Tanuj Sivakumar 3-18, Ikanchan Mithil 2-44) lost to ISM 187 for 4 in 37.3 overs (Azam Ali 107 – 14x4, 1x6, Arjun Suresh 33 – 2x4) by 6 wickets.

JUNIOR LEAGUE U16

SLSM 191 for 8 in 30 overs (Mustafa Mahabub 41 – 5x4, Jeyapranesh Ayyappan 4-31, Raghav Venkatesh 2-30, Lakshmi Narayana 2-36) lost to Boshers Sports Centre 194 for 2 in 20 overs (Lakshmi Narayana 100 – 15x4, Venkata Naga 47 – 4x4) by 8 wickets.

JUNIOR LEAGUE U13

MCCC Yellow 223 for 6 in 20 overs (Anirudh Para 53 – 7x4, Aneek Chakravarty 52 – 8x4, Kriv Rajesh 50 – 4x4) bt MCCC Blue 95 all

out in 20 overs (Mark Mathews 32 – 3x4, Haider Hussain 2-15) by 128 runs.

ISWK-B 107 for 7 in 20 overs (Vasudev Ram 29 – 1x4, Muhammad Arslan 2-14) lost to PSM 108 for 5 in 15.3 overs (Asad Kashif 25 – 2x4, 1x6, Kartikeya Gupta 2-28) by 5 wickets.

ISWK A 236 for 3 in 20 overs (Nilaksh Vats 103 – 13x4, Kavish Rajeshkumar 52 – 4x4) beat MCCC RED 88 for 8 in 20 overs (Sumit Suresh 17 – 1x4, Shanbhag Mitul 17) by 148 runs.

WOMEN’S LEAGUE T20

PSM Women 18 all out in 5.2 overs (Sameera Khan 9 – 2x4; Priyanka Mendonca 5-1, Mamta Thakur 2-5) lost to ISC 19 for 0 in 1.1 overs (Priyanka Mendonca 14 not out – 3x4) by 10 wickets.

overs, scoring 194 for 2. Venkata Naga scored an unbeaten 47.

MCCC YELLOW END U-13 LEAGUE ON TOP

MCCC Yellow ended their Junior League Under-13 campaign with a huge 128-run victory against MCCC Blue and a top-spot finish with 12 points from 8 games, three more than second-placed Indian School Wadi Kabir who have 13 from the same number of matches.

Yellow scored a huge 223 for 6 in 20 overs and then bowled Blue out for 95 in 20 overs to seal a comfortable win.

Anirudh Para (53), Aneek

Chakravarty (52) and Kriv Rajesh (50) were its top scorers.

PRIYANKA BOWLS ISC TO BIG WIN

Priyanka Mendonca was the star of Indian Social Club’s thumping 10-wicket victory against Pakistan School Muscat Women in a Women’s League game at OC Turf 1 in Amerat on Monday.

Priyanka bowled a magnificent over, taking five wickets for only one run as PSM was dismissed for a dismal 18 in 5.2 overs.

ISC raced to the target in just 7 balls, scoring 19 without loss with Priyanka unbeaten at 14 off 8.



I started moving better and playing better. I served extremely well and I think I had slightly more aces than him, which for me is a miracle. There were a lot of nerves out there and I feel emotionally a bit drained.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC
8-time Aus Open champion

Nervy Djokovic sets up Karatsev semifinal

MELBOURNE: Eight-time winner Novak Djokovic smashed his racquet en route to a tense, four-set win over Germany's Alexander Zverev to reach his 39th Grand Slam semifinal at the Australian Open on Tuesday.

It was a patchy performance from the world number one, who is nursing an abdominal injury and drew deeply on his mental fortitude to win 6-7 (6/8), 6-2, 6-4, 7-6 (8/6) in three hours and 30 minutes.

"With this condition (injury), I need time to warm up and actually feel like I can rotate well," said Djokovic, who started sluggishly but finished with 23 aces and 48 winners, along with 56 unforced

errors. "I started moving better and playing better. I served extremely well and I think I had slightly more aces than him, which for me is a miracle.

"There were a lot of nerves out there and I feel emotionally a bit drained.

"I kind of regained my focus after I broke that racquet and things started to shift to me in a positive direction."

Djokovic will be hot favourite to advance to Sunday's final when he plays Russian qualifier Aslan Karatsev, who continued his dream run with a 2-6, 6-4, 6-1, 6-2 win against injured Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov.

"I hadn't seen him play before

the Australian Open," he said of 114th ranked Karatsev.

"He's very physically strong and moves well. He has a lot of firepower from the back of the court. "He's motivated and has nothing to lose."

FRUSTRATION BOILS OVER

The Serb remains on track for a record-extending ninth Australian Open title and 18th Grand Slam trophy, nipping at the heels of rivals Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, who both have 20.

Djokovic and Zverev went the distance in a see-saw clash in the warm-up ATP Cup, foreshadowing what was ahead.

Having played three straight gruelling matches, a lethargic Djokovic dropped his opening service game and laboured through the first set, which Zverev claimed in a tense tiebreaker to take the early lead.

Djokovic's impenetrable game returned in a dominant second set marked by sliding retrievals and unrelenting punching from the baseline.

But Djokovic couldn't continue the momentum in the third set and his frustration boiled over when he was unable to crack Zverev's serve, as he smashed his racquet three times on the court.

Djokovic, however, regrouped and gained a stranglehold by

pulling off five straight games to edge ahead.

The twists continued in the fourth set with Zverev running out to a 3-0 lead until Djokovic once again hit back. He proved nerveless in the decisive tiebreaker, finishing it off with an ace to clinch his 19th straight win at the Australian Open.

Djokovic last tasted defeat in the fourth round in 2018, when he was upset by unseeded Hyeon Chung of South Korea.

Zverev, who served 21 aces, lost to Dominic Thiem in last year's Melbourne semis, and fell agonisingly short against the Austrian in his only Grand Slam final at last year's US Open. — AFP

AUSTRALIAN OPEN RESULTS

MEN'S SINGLES:
QUARTERFINALS (PREFIX DENOTES SEEDINGS):
1-Novak Djokovic bt 6-Alexander Zverev 6-7 (6-8), 6-2, 6-4, 7-6 (8-6);
Aslan Karatsev bt 18-Grigor Dimitrov 2-6, 6-4, 6-1, 6-2

WOMEN'S SINGLES:
QUARTERFINALS:
3-Naomi Osaka bt Hsieh Su-wei 6-2, 6-2; 10-Serena Williams bt 2-Simona Halep 6-3, 6-3

OFC signs deals with clubs to boost sport in Sultanate

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

Oman Fencing Committee (OFC) signed serial of agreements with many local clubs to promote and develop fencing across the Sultanate. The signing function took place on Monday night at Seeb Stadium under the auspices of Khalifa bin Saif al Issaei, General Director of Sports Activities at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in presence of Khalid bin Said al Shuaibi, Chairman of OFC, and the chairmen of the clubs.

The deals were signed between OFC and the six clubs including Ahli Sidab, Oman club, Qurayat, Al Bashayer, Al Nahda and Salalah. Khalid al Shuaibi signed on behalf the OFC while the chairman of each club represented the second party.

The agreements aimed to implement OFC objective of boosting the Olympic sport of fencing in the Sultanate through domestic clubs. Moreover, enrolling the fencing sport among



the clubs' activities besides spreading the game across Oman. The goal of the agreements also was to have better preparations of fencing team players through dedicated technical coaching staff led by coach Hisham Karshood.

Speaking during the function, the OFC chief affirmed that this step is a historic moment for the committee which was formed two years ago.

RIGHT MOMENT

"I believe this is the right moment to begin the campaign with our stakeholders, the clubs, towards better development of fencing in the Sultanate. Despite all the challenges faced during the last period, the Oman fencing team had managed to register many accomplishments during this short period. The OFC had received the international



membership from FIE and our team heroes had registered top results in many GCC and Arab meets. We are looking for more in forthcoming years," he said.

Khalid al Shuaibi thanked the board members of OFC, coaching staff and players' parents for their efforts during the last two years.

Sayyid Said al Busaidy, Chairman of Oman club, said fencing is a new sport to Oman.

"It is a favourite sport for many interested in it. After the activation of the agreement with OFC, the clubs have to strengthen and develop this sport along with OFC and create the right competition environment for the players. Diversification of the sports and activities in the clubs are required and this will assist to create new generation equipped in different sports. This is one of

the philosophies which we are implementing at Oman club and it is adherent to the Ministry's directions to diversify the sports and activities in the club," he said.

Khalifa bin Saif al Issaei said the initiative of OFC to sign deals with the clubs is an important step towards development of fencing in the Sultanate. "The clubs are the best organisations to boost and strengthen different sports and the OFC took the right decision through this cooperation with local clubs. We are looking forward for high level activation between OFC and the six signed clubs," he said.

Al Issaei ended his statements by ensuring that the Ministry had provided and will continue to support OFC to deliver their objectives. "There is an equipped venue with all facilities for fencing players at Seeb Stadium. The Ministry have a set plan to provide another facility for the fencing players and that will depend on the future development of this sport in the Sultanate," he concluded.



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New HSE posts to create thousands of jobs for Omanis

EMPLOYMENT GENERATION:
The initiative mandates all businesses, organisations and institutions operating in the Sultanate, with at least 50 employees on their rolls, to appoint Omani HSE Advisors in their respective organisations.

CONRAD PRABHU
@CONRADPRABHU

A novel initiative aimed at establishing an exclusive cadre of Omani Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) professionals in the Sultanate has the potential to create in excess of 8,000 jobs for nationals when the programme is fully rolled out.

The initiative is the brainchild of the Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL), the umbrella grouping of energy industry businesses and stakeholder organisations in the Sultanate. It is one of several programmes supported by OPAL and backed by the Ministry of Labour, among others, to help create meaningful and rewarding career opportunities for Omanis in various economic sectors.

According to OPAL CEO Abdulrahman al Yahyai, the broad outlines of the initiative were unveiled by the Ministry of Labour at a recent media briefing. It mandates all businesses,



The programme will come into force from January 1, 2022. This is to allow for Omani candidates to acquire the requisite competencies and qualifications to offer their services as HSE Advisors

ABDULRAHMAN AL YAHYAEI
CEO, OPAL

organisations and institutions operating in the Sultanate, with at least 50 employees on their rolls, to appoint Omani HSE Advisors in their respective organisations.

“We approached the Ministry with this proposal which, if suitably implemented, will not only enhance HSE compliance at the workplace, but importantly, it will pave the way for the creation



of thousands of positions for qualified Omanis,” said Al Yahyai.

“Given that only a handful of organisations currently have full-time HSE Advisors, we envision that the programme has the potential to employ as many as 8,000 Omanis over the next couple of years.”

Speaking to the *Observer*, Al Yahyai said a high-level committee with representatives from a number of stakeholder bodies will oversee the delivery of this initiative. Represented on the committee are officials from the Ministry of Labour, Petroleum

Development Oman (PDO) and the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), besides OPAL.

While preparations for the roll-out of the programme have already commenced, it will come into force only from January 1, 2022, said the official. This is to allow for Omani candidates to acquire the requisite competencies and qualifications to offer their services as HSE Advisors, he explained.

As part of their remit, HSE Advisors will be responsible for implementing and maintaining a

regimen encompassing all aspects of employee health, workplace safety and environmental integrity.

This includes the formulation of policies and measures to prevent accidents and injuries, identify and control hazards, organise fire and safety drills, promote workplace hygiene, oversee sound waste management, and ensure full compliance with environmental regulations.

In a pandemic of the Covid-19 kind, their role will also include enforcement of social distancing protocols and infection prevention.

As the Sultanate’s reference point for HSE-related National Occupational Standards (NOS), OPAL will play a key role in preparing competency programmes to qualify interested Omani candidates for careers as HSE Advisors.

Given the critical nature of the tasks that HSE Advisors will be called upon to perform, only suitably qualified candidates, duly certified by OPAL’s Sector Skills Unit, will be able to apply for these positions, Al Yahyai stated.

The Sector Skills Unit has developed a special HSE apprenticeship programme extracted from an approved National Occupational Standard that’s suitable for all sectors.

The use of any other programme for the entry-level is just a waste of time, effort and money, Al Yahyai noted. Thus, with effect from January 1, 2022, expatriates holding positions as HSE Advisors will have to make way for Omanis when their visas come up for renewal.

Furthermore, businesses and organisations with 50 or more employees that presently lack a dedicated HSE Adviser will be required to create these positions regardless of the nature of their operations. Longer term, the initiative will not only support the creation of fulfilling jobs for Omanis, but will also contribute to higher standards of workplace safety and employee well-being in the Sultanate, he added.

TRA kicks-off public consultation on regulatory sandbox

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 16

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) of the Sultanate has announced the launch of a public consultation on its regulatory sandbox – a framework in which telecom service providers and researchers can pilot or test their innovations or ideas.

Announcing the launch of the public consultation, the Authority said: “The TRA intends to allow telecommunications technology, applications or services to be tested in a coordinated, coherent, secure and safe manner.”

The framework, it stated, will be applicable to all entities or individuals (seeking) to test services related to telecommunications technology, applications or services directly. It defined the sandbox as a ‘safe house’ where pilots of specified types of innovative products and services can take place.

“Sandboxes allow businesses to test innovative products, services, business models and



delivery mechanisms in a live environment, without having to immediately comply with all regulatory requirements,” the Authority explained.

According to the regulator, the regulatory sandbox will be open to any company, technology firm or individual who aspires to “introduce innovation in the telecommunications market” in the Sultanate. Besides enabling interested parties to test their products and services in a controlled manner, the framework also reduces time-to-market at potentially lower cost.

Additionally, it aids in identifying appropriate consumer protection safeguards to build into new products and services, it said.

SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS:
Agreement covers oil and gas, water management and technologies, renewable energies, energy efficiencies, hydrogen, emissions intensity, data and statistics, and training

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 16

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) signed a Statement of Co-operation (SoC) with the International Energy Agency (IEA) to strengthen collaboration between the two parties in the areas of energy transitions and policy dialogues.

This agreement, which covers oil and gas, water management and technologies, renewable energies, energy efficiencies, hydrogen, emissions intensity, data and statistics, and training, will usher in intensified joint efforts across the energy sector to help Oman meet its clean and



sustainable ambitions.

The agreement was signed virtually by Abdulmir al Ajmi, PDO External Affairs and Value Creation Director, and David Turk, IEA Deputy Executive Director.

Through this agreement, PDO strives to leverage Oman’s competitive advantage today in oil and gas exploration and production, established production and export facilities, abundance of renewable

resources, and centrality in the global trade map into continued advantage for the future.

PDO’s Al Ajmi said: “We are delighted to partner with the world’s powerhouse — a major step that supports PDO’s dedicated efforts in energy transition and sustainability. Such partnership shall emphasise PDO’s and Oman’s aspirations to be at the forefront of the future energy sector.”

IEA Deputy Executive

Director David Turk said: “The International Energy Agency is working hard to put clean energy transitions at the heart of everything we do.

Oman is a key country in the world, with great opportunities to leverage its existing energy advantages to advance clean energy transitions. The IEA looks forward to supporting a growing global consensus on the need for ambitious action to meet our energy and climate goals.”

Dr Abdullah al Abri, Hydrogen Economy Project Manager, said “I am particularly pleased today for this will reinforce collaboration on joint projects, expertise sharing, technical foresights, applied research and development across the ‘new’ energies and technologies, and other areas of mutual interest — including those related to hydrogen as an emerging new and environmental-friendly economic engine for Oman. We architecture Oman’s clean and sustainable future in partnership with this global think-tank (IEA).”

UK unemployment rate jumps to highest since 2015

Spurred on by a record rise in redundancies, the UK unemployment rate has risen to 5.0 per cent of the economically active population in the last quarter.

For September to November 2020, an estimated 1.72 million people were unemployed, according to new figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). That's up 418,000 on the same period the previous year and up 202,000 on the quarter. Unemployment reached its highest level since July to September 2015, the ONS said.

The new rate of unemployment is now 1.2 per cent higher than it was at the same time last year. This surge was driven by the redundancy rate, which reached a record high of 14.2 per thousand in the same period.

But economists said that the government's business support measures, such as the furlough scheme, were keeping a lid on the full extent of the damage to the job market.

The unemployment rate measures people without a job who have been actively seeking work within the last four weeks and are available to start work within the next two weeks.

There was also a slowdown in the number of job vacancies available over the last quarter.

According to the ONS, an estimated quarterly increase of 81,000 means there are now 578,000 vacancies, but that increase is half what it was in July to September 2020.

Economists said that it was likely that the unemployment rate would rise when the government ended its support schemes.



ANDY JALIL
andyjalil@aol.com

ANALYSTS EXPECT THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE TO SURGE FURTHER WHEN THE UK GOVERNMENT'S FURLOUGH SCHEME PAYING THE BULK OF WAGES FOR MILLIONS OF PRIVATE SECTOR WORKERS STOPS AT THE END OF APRIL

Equals Group chief economist Jeremy Thomson-Cook said that people in the retail, hospitality and construction sectors would be especially exposed.

He added: "The current expiry of the furlough scheme at the end of April looks premature and we would both urge and expect the Chancellor to allow for a gradual cessation of support through the summer."

Tej Parikh, Chief Economist at the Institute of Directors, agreed that it was "crucial" that the furlough scheme be extended. "The latest lockdown will have only added further pressure on firms with troubled balance sheets, which means more jobs are likely to be lost in the coming months," he said.

The Chairman of Recruitment Firm Reed, James Reed, said the figures supported Chancellor

Rishi Sunak's statement in November that the economic emergency had "only just begun".

Despite this, he said he was optimistic for the future. "With the vaccination programme gathering pace, the economy will begin to reopen and a return to normality could be sooner than expected", he said.

"Job-seekers are urged to get ready for an easing in lockdown restrictions, and those currently unemployed or furloughed can do so by upskilling or reskilling for the emerging post-pandemic and post-Brexit economy."

Looking back, Britain's unemployment rate hit 5.0 per cent at the end of last year as coronavirus lockdowns destroyed jobs, official data showed.

The rate for the three months to the end of November

compares with 4.9 per cent in the quarter to October, the ONS said in a statement.

At 5.0 per cent, the figure is 1.2 percentage points higher than a year earlier, the ONS added.

"This crisis has gone on far longer than any of us hoped — and every job lost as a result is a tragedy", Rishi Sunak said.

Analysts expect the unemployment rate to surge further when the UK government's furlough scheme paying the bulk of wages for millions of private sector workers stops at the end of April.

Between February last year, ahead of Britain's first lockdown, and December, the number of payroll employees dived by 828,000.

(The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK)

Annual travel fair to focus on recovery of Middle East tourism

KEY THEME: 'A new dawn for travel and tourism'

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 16



The annual Arabian Travel Market (ATM), organised by Reed Events, will be held in Dubai during May 16-26, 2021. "This week-long festival of events is dedicated to travel professionals from all over world, to collaborate and shape the recovery of the Middle East travel industry, through exhibitions, conferences, breakfast briefings, awards, product launches and networking events", Danielle Curtis, Exhibition Director ME, Arabian Travel Market.

"Essentially, Arabian Travel Week will provide a pivotal platform for the region's travel and tourism industry, whether participating in-person at the events or virtually, over the course of 10 days — it will put a spotlight on Dubai, the UAE, GCC and of course the wider MENA region's tourism sector", she added.

"There will be a whole host of in-person seminars on ATM's show floor specifically designed to

support, inspire and innovate all travel and tourism professionals, looking at the latest trends in technology, sustainability and profiling the next generation of global travellers", said Curtis.

There will also be an array of high-profile keynote speakers and world-class technology experts lined up for the Travel Forward Theatre, providing industry-leading insights and discussing the latest technologies and trends that will shape the future of travel.

"This year's theme of 'A New Dawn for Travel and Tourism' has never been more relevant nor important — this message of recovery will be integrated into all

of the show verticals and planned activities", added Curtis.

To complement the four-day in-person show, for the first time, a new hybrid format will mean a virtual ATM running a week after to reach a wider audience than ever before. ATM Virtual, which made its debut last year, proved to be a resounding success attracting 12,000 online attendees from 140 countries.

"It is imperative that we include a virtual element to Arabian Travel Week because many industry professionals from around the world, may not be able to attend the in-person event for 2021", said Curtis.

PRESS RELEASES

OOMCO OPENS COUNTRY'S FIRST STEERS BURGER



With customer-centricity in mind, Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) welcomed the first branch of internationally renowned burger chain, Steers to its SQU service station. This step goes in line with OOMCO's efforts to provide quality services and products across all its service locations and transform its service stations into versatile hubs for shopping, dining and services.

"We are excited to include Steers under our umbrella of internationally recognised brands, and to bring the Middle East's first Steers into the Sultanate. We are always working to energise our customers' journey throughout all our service stations, with a host of services that provide a holistic experience for all customers. We are working to completely transform our service stations to serve as one-stop-shops for all customer needs", said Ramzi bin Ali al Mejri, SFS Marketing Manager.

Steers is praised for its 100 per cent beef flame-grilled burgers, and operates more than 580 branches in South Africa and 54 international branches. The restaurant's menu ranges from their 100 per cent real flame-grilled burgers, handmade chips, and many other items to satisfy every craving. It is worth noting that Steers is only one great example of the many international brands OOMCO is partnering with to bring the best services to its customers; starting with Café Amazon, Debonairs Pizza and now Steers.

OOREDOO CONTINUES TO EMPOWER FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS



Continuing to place the community at its centre, Ooredoo recently held its fourth virtual women's incubator training session, helping entrepreneurs to sharpen their skills and grow their businesses.

An initiative the telecoms company started six years ago, the latest edition of the women's incubator shed light on a number of important topics like how to grow in a competitive market, the importance of customer service and how to use smartphones for product photography. As part of its CSR programme, Goodwill, Ooredoo continues to empower Omani women and help them achieve their personal and professional goals.

Raed Mohammed Dawood, Director of Branding, Communications and Corporate Affairs at Ooredoo, said, "At Ooredoo, we are always looking for innovative ways to help businesswomen in Oman reach their full potential for themselves, their families and the wider community. During the recent session, we shared a number of new and important topics with the aim of keeping trainees up-to-date with the ever-evolving digital world, and showed them how they can utilise the latest technologies to promote their products and enhance the overall success of their projects."

GFH reports net profit of \$45.1 million for 2020

STRONG GROWTH: Bahrain Group enters 2021 with a strong pipeline of opportunities and plans for further expansion of its global portfolio

BUSINESS REPORTER
MANAMA, FEB 16

GFH Financial Group BSC (GFH) (Bahrain Bourse: GFH) announced its financial results for the fourth quarter and twelve months ended December 31, 2020. The Group reported net profit attributable to shareholders of \$21.93 million for the fourth quarter of 2020 compared with

\$1.5 million in the fourth quarter of 2019, an increase of 1,362 per cent.

Previous year fourth quarter results included a significant impairment provision in the commercial banking subsidiary of the Group. Earnings per share for fourth quarter of 2020 was US cents 0.65 compared to US cents 0.04 for the comparative quarter of 2019.

Consolidated net profit for the fourth quarter was \$19.04 million compared with losses of \$8.1 million in the fourth quarter of 2019. Net profit attributable to shareholders was \$45.1 million for the full year compared with \$66.03 million in 2019, a decrease of 31.7 per cent. The decline is predominantly attributable to



slower contribution from business lines as a result of the pandemic situation during the year. Earnings per share for the year was US cents 1.35 compared to US cents 1.96 for the full year 2019.

Consolidated net profit for the year was \$49.34 million compared \$53.12 million in 2019. Total equity attributable to shareholders was \$0.913 billion from \$1.00 billion at year-end 2019, a decrease of 8.7 per cent. The drop was primarily due to the 2019 dividends payout, mark to market changes on treasury portfolio, and additional capital



contribution to the Group's commercial banking subsidiary.

Total assets of the Group were \$6.59 billion at year-end 2020 compared with \$5.95 billion at December 31, 2019, an increase of 10.8 per cent.

The Group's Total Assets and Fund Under Management (AUM) increased from \$10 billion in 2019 to over \$12 billion in 2020, marking a year-on-year increase of 20 per cent, primarily from the growth in the treasury portfolio

of the Group along with inorganic growth through acquisition.

In line with results, the Board of Directors has recommended total dividend of \$42m at 4.60 per cent on par value, divided into 1.86 per cent cash dividends amounting to \$17 million and 2.74 per cent stock dividends of \$25 million for the shareholders, subject to approval by the General Assembly and regulators.

Commenting on the results, Jassim Alseddiqi, Chairman of GFH, said, "2020, despite its exceptional challenges and the unprecedented global turmoil caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, has helped GFH to test and confirm the strength and resilience of the Group, our strategy and business model.

We remain pleased with our overall performance and ongoing diversification, which has enabled the Group not simply to weather this storm but to continue to make strides across the business and deliver another solid dividend for our shareholders even in the toughest of years."

Hisham Alrayes, CEO of GFH, added, "As we look back on what was no doubt the most challenging year faced by governments, businesses and citizens around the world, we're very proud of how we've performed. We worked quickly to secure the safety of our colleagues, their families and our community, activated our continuity plans and provided support to investments as and where required."



WTO new chief: 'Vaccine nationalism' could slow economic recovery



WASHINGTON: The World Trade Organization's incoming chief on Monday warned against "vaccine nationalism" that would slow progress in ending the Covid-19 pandemic and could erode economic growth for all countries — rich and poor.

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said her top priority was to ensure the WTO does more to address the pandemic, saying members should accelerate efforts to lift export restrictions slowing trade in needed medicines and supplies.

The former Nigerian finance minister and senior World Bank executive was appointed on Monday in a consensus process and starts her new job on March 1.

"The WTO can contribute so much more to helping stop the pandemic", Okonjo-Iweala said in an interview at her home in a suburb of Washington. "No one is safe until everyone is safe. Vaccine nationalism at this time just will not pay, because the variants are coming. If other countries are not immunised, it will just be a blow back", she said.

"It's unconscionable that people will be dying elsewhere, waiting in a queue, when we have the technology."

Okonjo-Iweala said studies showed that the global economy would lose \$9 trillion in potential output if poor countries were unable to get their populations vaccinated quickly, and about half of the impact would be borne by rich countries.

"Both on a human health basis, as well as an economic basis, being nationalistic at this time is very costly to the international community", she said. "A very top priority for me would be to make sure that prior to the very important ministerial conference that we come to solutions as to how the WTO can make vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics accessible in an equitable and affordable fashion to all countries, particularly to poor countries", Okonjo-Iweala added. — **Reuters**

US oil wells, refineries shut as winter storm hits energy sector

TEXAS: A deep freeze across the United States is taking a toll on the energy industry in the largest US crude-producing state, halting Texas oil wells and refineries on Monday and forcing restrictions from natural gas and crude pipeline operators.

The rare deep freeze prompted the state's electric power suppliers to impose rotating blackouts, leaving nearly 3 million homes and businesses without power. US President Joe Biden issued an emergency declaration, unlocking federal assistance to Texas.

Texas produces roughly 4.6 million barrels of oil per day and is home to some of the nation's top gasoline and diesel producing refineries.

In Midland, heart of the West Texas shale region, a record snowfall and temperatures that hit a 32-year low closed offices and businesses.

"Some producers, especially in the Permian Basin and Panhandle, are experiencing unprecedented freezing conditions which caused concerns for employee safety and affected production", the state's energy regulator said on Monday.

Oil refiner Motiva Enterprises said it was shutting its 607,000 barrel-per-day Port Arthur, Texas, refinery, the largest in the United States. Valero Energy Corp and Total SE separately moved to shut their 335,000 and 225,000 bpd plants in Port Arthur, Texas, due



Workers are seen near pump jacks at a snow-covered oil field in Permian Basin, Texas. — **Reuters**

to severe cold, sources said.

Exxon Mobil also began shutting its 369,024 bpd Beaumont refinery and 560,500 bpd Baytown refinery and chemical plant in Texas, sources familiar with plant operations said. Its Baton Rouge, Louisiana, plant also suffered operational issues.

Citgo Petroleum Corp said some units at its 167,500 bpd Corpus Christi, Texas, oil refinery were shutting due to weather-related power disruptions.

The plant's crude distillation unit, a reformer and a hydrotreater were shut by cold weather, sources familiar with plant operations said, with all other units also being powered down.

The cold snap forced LyondellBasell's 263,776 bpd Houston refinery to operate at minimum production and shut most units at Marathon Petroleum's 585,000 bpd Galveston Bay plant.

Reports of power outages across the Permian may result in

a moderate impact on Permian oil production for the month, Rystad Energy's head of oil markets, Bjornar Tonhaugen, said in a note.

Distribution of energy was stalled across large parts of the US. Kinder Morgan reported gas-pipeline capacity constraints at locations in Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, New Mexico and Texas, while Enable Gas Transmission said it was taking measures to ensure adequate supply for customers.

— **Reuters**



A man walks on top of an oil pipe in Midland, Texas. — **Reuters**

Oil prices climb as deep freeze shuts US oil wells

SINGAPORE: Oil prices rose on Tuesday as a cold front shut wells and refineries in Texas, the biggest crude producing state in the United States, the world's biggest oil producer.

Brent crude was up 35 cents, or 0.6 per cent, at \$63.65 a barrel at 0434 GMT, after rising to its highest since January 2020 in the previous session.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures gained 82 cents, or 1.4 per cent, to \$60.29 a barrel.

"The unexpected US supply disruption provides another short term price recovery bridge that has likely taken oil prices to a level where markets were eventually heading but just a little bit quicker than expected", Stephen Innes, Axi chief markets strategist said. — **Reuters**

Indonesia lifts economic recovery budget again

JAKARTA: Indonesia has again raised the budget for its National Economic Recovery (PEN) programme, which includes its mass vaccination campaign, to now reach 688.33 trillion rupiah (\$49.48 billion) its finance minister said.

Initially earmarked at 372.3 trillion rupiah, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati has gradually lifted the programme's budget several times. Earlier this month, she put the value at 619 trillion rupiah.

The new increase came after Southeast Asia's largest economy last year recorded a full-year gross domestic product contraction of 2.1 per cent, its first since 1998, which the central bank said was softer than expected.

"Our PEN budget for 2021



A woman counts Indonesian rupiah banknotes in Jakarta. — **Reuters**

will reach 688.3 trillion rupiah, which if you compare with 2020's 579 trillion rupiah, shows a significant increase, especially in healthcare spending", the Finance

Minister said in a presentation to security forces.

Healthcare's share would reach 173.3 trillion rupiah for 2021, up from 63.5 trillion rupiah last year,

Our PEN budget for 2021 will reach 688.3 trillion rupiah, which if you compare with 2020's 579 trillion rupiah, shows a significant increase, especially in healthcare spending

**SRI MULYANI
INDRAWATI**

Indonesia Finance Minister

including for the vaccination campaign, Sri Mulyani said. The budget for social assistance

would be 150.21 trillion rupiah, below last year's 220.4 trillion.

Indonesia launched its vaccination drive last month and aims to inoculate more than 180 million people. It has among Asia's highest number of coronavirus cases.

Sri Mulyani did not mention the impact of the increase on the government's budget deficit plan. Her presentation showed that under the assumption the PEN programme had a total budget of 627.9 trillion rupiah, the budget deficit estimate would remain at 5.7 per cent of GDP, below last year's 6.1 per cent.

A finance ministry official separately said the PEN budget could change as the government was still working on more detailed spending plans. — **Reuters**

SHORT TAKES

PARIS

French fourth quarter unemployment rate fell

France's unemployment rate improved slightly in the fourth quarter compared to the previous quarter, with the rate coming in at 8 per cent compared to a two-year high of 9.1 per cent in the third quarter, the INSEE statistics office said on Tuesday.

INSEE said there had been an increase in hiring, but added that the data had also been skewed by France's second national lockdown from October 30 to November 15 to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus.



INSEE said this lockdown reduced the number of those normally classified as being unemployed, by making it impossible for them to look for work as businesses were closed. — **AFP**

ZURICH

Glencore losses deepen on massive write-offs

Anglo-Swiss mining giant Glencore said on Tuesday it plunged deeper into the red last year, hit by the "extraordinary" challenge of Covid-19 and massive write-offs, especially on a mine closure in Zambia.

The company said it had a 2020 net loss of \$1.9 billion after writing off assets worth \$5.9 billion, compared with a 2019 net loss of \$404 million following writedowns costing \$2.4 billion.

The coronavirus pandemic and the impact on the global

economy amounted to an "extraordinary" challenge for the company which mines and trades basic raw materials globally.

Glencore boss Ivan Glasenberg said in a statement the global economy was in recession in the first half of 2020, followed by a strong rebound in the second half. The trading arm of the company saw operating profit soar 41 per cent to \$3.3 billion, reflecting the huge volatility of metal and oil prices. — **AFP**

TOKYO

SoftBank shares hit historic high

SoftBank Group Corp shares closed at a record high on Tuesday, surpassing a peak reached at the height of the dot-com bubble, as online backers celebrated the recovery in the value of the firm's tech portfolio.

Shares in SoftBank, a heavily weighted component of the Nikkei 225 index which is trading at 30-year highs, closed up 4 per cent at 10,420 yen, above the record 10,111 yen reached in February 2000. Underpinned by buybacks



and with retail investors buying its shares and baseball-themed junk bonds, SoftBank's shares have been supported by a growing number of portfolio companies listing in ebullient markets. — **Reuters**

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■ ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcement of Capital Reduction

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MECHANICAL engineer, 21, Indian male currently in Oman looking to work at any engineering field. Contact 96511338. Email: rkdhanush11@gmail.com

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Now ‘Grown in Oman’ strawberries!

Can strawberries grow in windswept Bidiya in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate? Fahad al Hajri, exemplifying an emerging cadre of agripreneurs, sparked incredulity on social media last week when he posted pictures of his latest harvest: strawberries — piles of it, in all their luscious, bright red glory... **P20**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



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CARS



OLD BUT GOLD: TOKYO'S RETRO CAR OWNERS REVEL IN MODERN CLASSICS

Fast and furious they aren't, but for a group of Japanese retro car enthusiasts the sleek lines and high shine of their old-school models hold a much more special charm... **Story on Page 18**

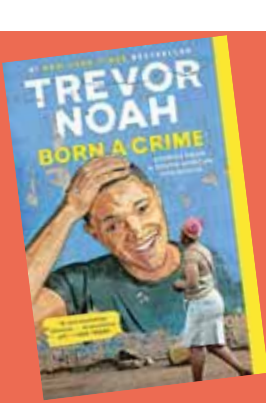
FASHION



GROCERIES, GOWNS AND COCA-COLA: JASON WU SETS UP SHOP AT NEW YORK FASHION WEEK

Lockdown cooking and casual clothing inspired designer Jason Wu's Autumn-Winter 2021 collection, which his models paraded live at New York Fashion Week on Sunday evening... **Story on Page 19**

READ



BORN A CRIME BY TREVOR NOAH

Born a Crime is the story of a mischievous young boy who grows into a restless young man as he struggles to find himself in a world where he was never supposed to exist.



Old but gold: Tokyo's retro car owners revel in modern classics

Fast and furious they aren't, but for a group of Japanese retro car enthusiasts the sleek lines and high shine of their old-school models hold a much more special charm.

A loose club of fans rolls up most weekends in central Tokyo to show off their Cadillacs, Chevrolets and other modern classic vehicles from the mid to late 20th century.

"Each time I drive it, I still get a thrill. There aren't many vehicles that give you that feeling," Masamune Isogai said of his Knight Rider replica — a Pontiac Trans Am, the car made

famous by the hit 80s TV drama.

Sliding into the driver's seat — which he calls the cockpit — he is surrounded by futuristic displays, illuminated buttons and a wheel that looks like an oversized gaming controller.

These sci-fi touches were installed to give the ride the look and feel of the show's AI-powered talking car called Knight Industries Two Thousand, or KITT.

"I speak to the car when I drive," laughed the 46-year-old, who has owned the streamlined black vehicle — complete with sound effects and a "KITT scanner" light on the front — for around a decade.

These days Japan is known for its practical cars that economise on fuel and space, and rarely break down — a world away from the group's painstakingly maintained wheels.

The casual society has around 10 members and the oldest cars they own are a 1941 Cadillac and a restored 1929 Ford Model-A.

People cheer and take snaps as the cars go by, from the 1956 Ford F100 Pumpkin to the 1961 Volkswagen Karmann Ghia.

"The shape of old cars is very charming, impossible with today's mass production," said Hiroyuki Wada, 49, next to his red 1959 Cadillac Coupe de Ville.

"When you get older, you are more likely to appreciate a car that requires lots of care," Wada said.

"Old engines often need 10 minutes or so to warm up before you can drive them. That's what's really charming about them."

Wada, who runs a car valet business near Tokyo, will spend three to four days on each old-fashioned ride to give it a shiny new look.

He says his heart belongs to American vehicles including old police cars, which he rents out for film and photography shoots.

"Someday I want to valet old fire engines in the United States. That is my dream," he said. — **AFP**

CHANGING WORLD

Singapore swap shops offer alternative to fast fashion



SINGAPOREAN Sue-Anne Chng used to wear a different outfit on all 15 days of the Lunar New Year, when it is customary to don new clothes to symbolise a fresh start.

But this year she will wear second-hand items exchanged for her old clothes at a store catering to people concerned about the impact of fast fashion on the environment.

Several swapping initiatives, from permanent shops to pop-up events, have appeared in the affluent city-state in a bid to encourage consumers to make the most of what is already in their closets.

The fashion industry is responsible for up to a tenth of global carbon emissions, according to the United Nations' environment programme.

Clothes cause emissions in a wide variety of ways — from their manufacture to transportation and washing by the consumer.

On a recent trip to her favourite store, The Fashion Pulpit, Chng took along several dresses and a matching blouse and skirt, which a staff member assessed before crediting points to her account.

She spent her points on 17 items, including a yellow and green dress to wear for the first day of the new year as it looked like "an auspicious pineapple".

The fruit, seen as a symbol of prosperity, is typically given as a gift or displayed during Lunar New Year in Singapore.

INSANE CONSUMPTION

"I've always been brought up by my parents to have a new set of clothes every Chinese New Year, and I fell into that behaviour of consumerism," the 35-year-old said.

"In the past I probably made sure I have 15 days of outfits even if I'm not visiting (relatives), which is too much."

But now, "as long as the item is new to me, I think it's good enough," added Chng, who works for a tech company and is married.

Chng first learnt about clothes swapping at a work event five years ago, and decided to change her ways after realising her wardrobe was filled with unworn items.

"Prior to switching over to swapping, my consumption habit was insane," she said.

"I realised I had more than 50 per cent of my wardrobe unworn, but I still felt like I didn't have anything to wear."

She pays Sg\$599 (\$450) for a yearly membership at The Fashion Pulpit,

which allows her unlimited swaps and visits — about 80 per cent of her wardrobe is now from the shop.

"Swapping allows me to be like a chameleon when it comes to fashion but allows me to be environmentally conscious as well," she said.

Tiny Singapore alone produced 168,000 tonnes of textile and leather waste in 2019, according to authorities — the weight of more than 400 Boeing 747 planes.

NOT DIRTY, NOT DUSTY

Filipino clothes designer Raye Padit founded The Fashion Pulpit nearly three years ago after learning about his industry's impact on the environment and poor treatment of garment workers.

"In Singapore, the problem is overconsumption and waste," he said.

"We want to provide a platform where you can still dress up, express yourself... through clothes. But at the same time, it's not damaging to the planet and to your wallet."

His company now has more than 1,500 members and has started turning a profit. It also holds workshops where customers can learn how to mend or upcycle used clothes.

People have swapped everything from casual clothes made by high-street brands to top-end items such as Prada bags and Louboutin shoes, Padit said.

One-time swap events are also popping up in the city-state while a group of volunteers host monthly swap gatherings.

"When I join a clothing swap it reminds me to consume consciously because when I give away clothes, I think about whether I'm still wearing them," said Nadia Kishlan, a 30-year-old participant at one clothing swap.

Challenges remain in persuading Singaporeans to swap rather than shop, however, and the city's industry is still in its infancy.

Second-hand shops are not as popular in Asia as in the West, in part because many believe used clothes from strangers could bring bad luck, or be unhygienic.

But Padit said attitudes in Singapore were changing, driven by rising environmental awareness and a wave of trendy new thrift shops marketing their goods on social media.

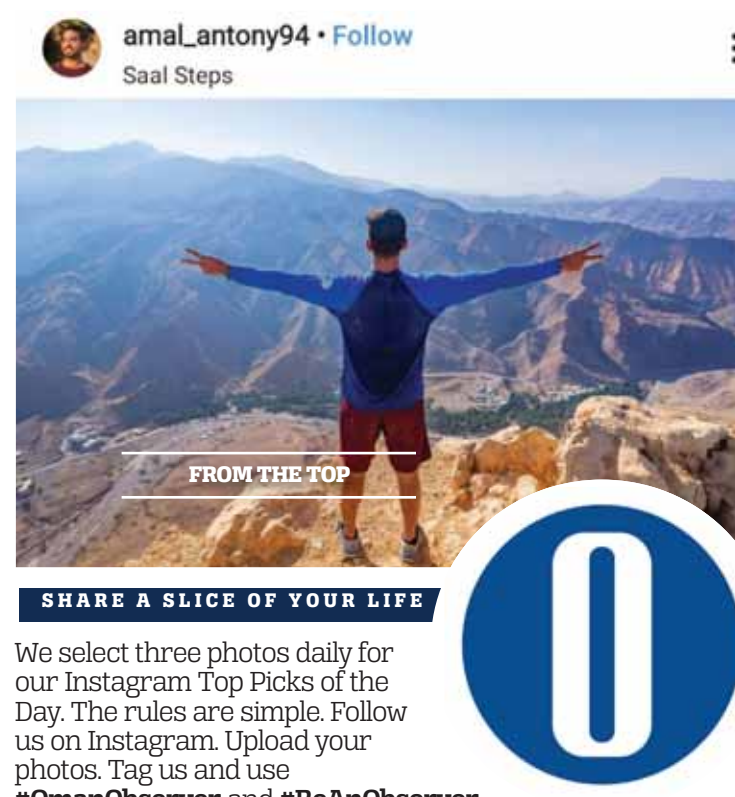
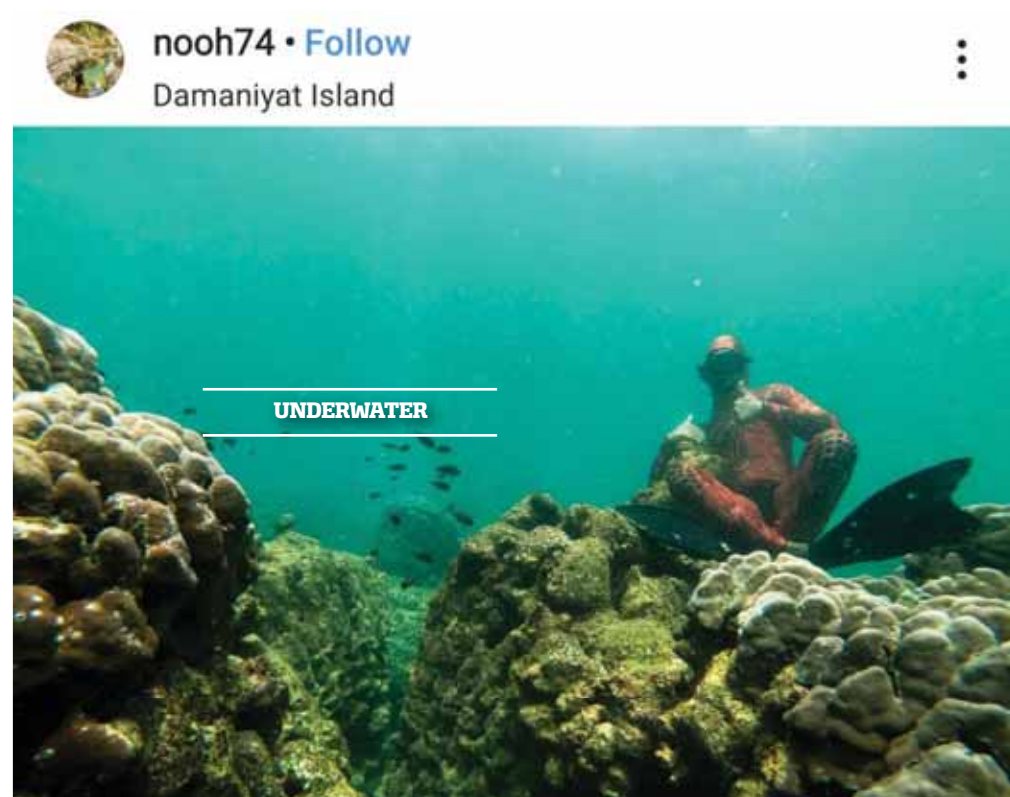
"It's slowly changing the perception of what second hand is all about," he said.

"It's no longer dirty, it's no longer dusty — it's a cool thing." — **AFP**



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Groceries, gowns and Coca-Cola: Jason Wu sets up shop at New York Fashion Week

LOCKDOWN cooking and casual clothing inspired designer Jason Wu's Autumn-Winter 2021 collection, which his models paraded live at New York Fashion Week on Sunday evening.

The edible ingredients were donated to City Harvest, a New York charity fighting food insecurity, after the show, one of the few live events in this year's Fashion Week.

"During this past year, cooking has proven to be an amazing outlet for me creatively", the Taiwanese-Canadian designer, 38, said in a statement.

"The joys that I experience from cooking and spending time with loved ones make me hopeful to celebrate the moments that really matter. This show represents who I am, not only as a designer but as a person."

The edible ingredients were donated to City Harvest, a New York charity fighting food insecurity, after the show, one of the few live events in this year's Fashion Week.

Wu, who founded his eponymous label in 2007 and rose to global fame as the designer of the gown worn by former first lady Michelle Obama to her husband's first inauguration ball in 2009, has been documenting his pandemic-time cooking in a diary on his Instagram account "MrWuEats".

In line with his 1950s Americana theme, Wu also partnered with Coca-Cola, diving into the US brand's archives to unearth prints, logos and styles.

"These logos bring that multicultural aspect to the collection and a nod to what America means to me — a melting pot of diverse cultures", Wu said.

The show featured loose-fitting long dresses and skirts, combined with knitted sweaters and long masculine coats. Red and blue popped out against whites, black and greys. Long fringes and boots in yellow snakeskin and pink patent leather lightened up more somber styles. — **Reuters**



Prince Harry and Meghan to break silence in Oprah interview

Prince Harry and his American wife Meghan will break their silence in their first interview since they quit Britain's royal family when they sit down with Oprah Winfrey next month.

Harry and Meghan, who announced they are expecting their second child on Sunday, shocked senior royals last year by announcing plans to step back from their royal roles.

CBS said the interview will be broadcast on March 7.

"Winfrey will speak with Meghan, The Duchess of Sussex, in a wide-ranging interview, covering everything from stepping into life as a Royal, marriage, motherhood, philanthropic work to how she is handling life under intense public pressure", CBS said in a statement.

"Later, the two are joined by Prince Harry as they speak about their move to the United States and their future hopes and dreams for their expanding family."

Harry and Meghan married in a glittering ceremony in 2018 that captured the world's attention but later gave up their official royal roles following disagreements with other family members and in the face of

huge media attention.

The couple moved to Southern California with their infant son Archie last year and have signed a multi-year production deal with Netflix Inc, a major step in their plan to make a living for themselves outside the royal family.

Their relationship with the British press swiftly soured and the couple have launched legal cases against several newspapers.

Last week, Meghan won a privacy claim against Associated Newspapers after its *Mail on Sunday* paper had printed extracts of a letter she wrote to her father in August 2018.

Winfrey, one of America's richest and most influential women, in 2011 ended her top-rated daily television talk show, where she interviewed presidents and celebrities.

Buckingham Palace declined to comment.

A royal source said that as Harry and Meghan are no longer working members of the royal family, any decisions they take with regard to media commitments are up to them. They are under no obligation to inform the royal household of such plans, the source said. — **Reuters**



The price of beauty: In City of Love, some say roses harm the planet

It is the classic romantic combination: St Valentine's Day in Paris, the city of love, and a gift of red roses. But some Parisian florists are trying to wean customers off the flowers because of their ecological cost.

Most roses sold in France in the run-up to St Valentine's Day, a peak sales period for the global flower industry, have to be imported by air freight from countries such as Kenya, resulting in carbon emissions that contribute to climate change.

Florists worried at the environmental damage from this trade say there are viable alternatives that can be grown locally and they are trying to encourage customers to try them.

They face an uphill struggle, because the tradition of gifting red roses on St Valentine's Day, which falls on February 14, is so engrained in many cultures.

Hortense Harang, founder of an online flower shop called "Fleurs d'Ici" — French for "Flowers from here" — has been spearheading the campaign to wean people off roses.

"Red roses is so 1950s", she said.

"Roses is something that is completely a no-go in this season because it doesn't make sense basically to buy roses. Roses do not grow under our latitudes in this season."

Her campaign has gathered support. "It's not logical to have flowers from the other side of the planet if we can get them locally", said Edith Besenfelder, a 46-year-old Paris florist who works with local and seasonal flowers.

But old habits die hard. Celine Argente, the 40-year-old owner of the Sylvine flower shop in Paris, said she had been encouraging clients to buy red tulips as a way of declaring their love. But despite that, her shop this week was packed to the rafters with red roses, to meet demand.

"It's a classic which people can't change from", she said. "The red rose remains the flower for Valentine's Day." — **Reuters**



Now ‘Grown in Oman’ strawberries!



BY CONRAD PRABHU

A new breed of Omani agricultural entrepreneurs is testing the limits to which farmland, once left fallow for want of adequate supplies of irrigation water, can be put back into cultivation, albeit with modern greenhouse farming techniques, some funding support, and an enterprising spirit.

Fahad al Hajri, exemplifying an emerging cadre of agripreneurs, sparked incredulity on social media last week when he posted pictures of his latest harvest: strawberries — piles of it, in all their luscious, bright red glory.

Adding to their disbelief was the revelation that the fruit was farmed not in the likes of Jabal Al Akhdhar, famed for its terraced fruit orchards, or in the fertile farms of the Batinah coast, but in windswept Bidiya in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate.

A private sector employee, Fahad has long been passionate about fruit and vegetable cultivation. His roughly three-acre farm in Bidiya features rows of greenhouses in which he farms a variety of fresh produce, including Omani beans, cucumber, capsicum, eggplant and cabbage.

Last year, the avid planter decided to try his hand at strawberry cultivation for the first time. Procuring grafted saplings from Pakistan, he began planting the sprigs in October, at the start of the winter season. Over the course of several weeks, he planted as many as 900 saplings in neat rows across the farm. Nourished by fertiliser and a simple irrigation system, they yielded a profusion of full-bodied fruit, initially green in colour, but which eventually gave way to a bright red shade.

Late last month, the first strawberry crop from the farm was ready to be harvested. With each plant yielding as much as 500 grammes of delicious fruit, Fahad realised he had to secure

a market for his home-grown produce. Procuring rigid plastic packs, he began to sell his produce in local stores under the ‘Bidiya Strawberry’ brand. The response from local consumers was heartening.

At RO 1 per pack of 300 grammes, the local brand performed well against imported strawberries shipped in from other parts of the Middle East.

Fahad explained: “Consumers see value-for-money in my product. Not only is the price competitive, but they are assured farm fresh strawberries grown locally in hygiene settings and without harmful pesticides. Imported produce, on the hand, typically spend several days in transit or in storage, and is not as fresh in comparison.”

Eager to optimise value generation from the strawberry crop, Fahad also prepared a selection of home-made jams from the fruit. Taking samples to the local hypermarket, he was elated when staffers in charge of the preserves section gave him a big thumbs-up.

To be sure, Fahad is not the first Omani grower to venture into strawberry farming. Others have tried their hand at strawberry cultivation, with varying degrees of success. But Fahad’s success in not only growing this much-coveted fruit, and to market it as well, is sure to inspire others to follow in his footsteps.

Buoyed by his maiden success, Fahad plans to expand his strawberry business at the start of the next season in October. Visitors to his farm will also have the opportunity to go about strawberry-tasting, he adds.

Of late, Omanis have taken to social media to flaunt some of their exploits in fruit and vegetable farming. Over the past week ago, a farmer in Dhank in Al Dhahirah Governorate posted images of freshly harvested carrots grown in a variety of colours. Just earlier, another farmer showed off home-grown tomatoes, not in their customary bright red shade, but bituminous black.

