

### Firms told to do online salary transfer by February 28

The Ministry of Labour has called on private sector establishments to use electronic or online banking services to transfer salaries and payments starting from February 28, based on the notice issued by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO). It also urged companies to stop using traditional means of money transfer thereafter. The ministry emphasised the need to cooperate with banks and adhere to the date set for implementing this initiative for public interest. **DETAILS ON P5**



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OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om

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#### MUSCAT

##### SQU CONFERENCE ON MASS COMMUNICATION

The Department of Mass Media at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) will organise on March 23 and 24 its Third International Scientific Conference themed “Mass Communication in the Digital Environment: Between Necessities of Media Literacy and Requirement of Media Education”. Organising the conference comes in response to the shifts emerging in the media literacy and education over the last years particularly the shift from traditional methods of media education to the new methods of media education. **DETAILS ON P3**

#### BRUSSELS

##### EU TO VACCINATE 70% OF ADULTS

The European Union is aiming to inoculate 70 per cent of its adult population against the coronavirus before the end of August, European Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas told a media conference on Tuesday. That aim, agreed in a meeting of all EU commissioners, comes as most member states are struggling to achieve lift-off with their vaccination programmes. The bloc started jabs three weeks ago and has so far approved two vaccines — from BioNTech/Pfizer and from Moderna — with others soon expected to follow. But its pace of vaccination trails behind countries such as the US, Britain, Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

#### INNOVATION BUILDING TO OPEN BY MID-YEAR



The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation will inaugurate the Innovation Building, the main facility of the Innovation Complex in Muscat, located near Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), in the middle of this year. The new facility is aimed at developing and encouraging innovation, activating links between the academic sector and the private sector and between various segments of the local and international community. **DETAILS ON P5**

## Biden set for presidential inauguration

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump spent his last full day on Tuesday in the White House mulling pardons and President-elect Joe Biden was set to arrive in Washington ahead of an inauguration that his predecessor, in a final break with tradition, will snub.

Trump has not appeared in



public for a week and, suspended from Twitter in the wake of his encouraging supporters to march on Congress, has been uncharacteristically silent. There have been no call-ins to his favourite Fox News hosts, interviews with the networks, or speeches celebrating his stormy one-term administration. **SEE ALSO P8**

# Visa-free stay for 14 days

STAFF REPORTER  
MUSCAT, JAN 19

As part of the efforts to support the tourism sector in the Sultanate, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) has decided to extend the entry visa exemption period for nationals of 103 countries to 14 days.

The ROP had earlier announced the plan, which eases travel requirements for tourists who spend up to 10 days in the Sultanate. Tourists are required to have a confirmed hotel reservation, health insurance and a return ticket.

#### NEW FACILITY

The new facility applies to citizens of countries throughout the world, including European nations such as Germany, France, United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and others. Citizens of Turkey, Japan, Brazil, Russia, China, Egypt, Jordan, and a number of other countries around the world are also eligible.

Residents of GCC countries

The Royal Oman Police has decided to extend the entry visa exemption period for nationals of 103 countries to 14 days

will be allowed provided they do not hold professional titles which are prohibited under the rule.

Travellers from countries like India, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Costa Rica, Kyrgyzstan, Nicaragua, Armenia, Panama, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkmenistan, Honduras, Guatemala, Kazakhstan, Laos, Albania, Bhutan, Peru, Salvador, Mexico, Vietnam, Cuba, and Maldives, also need one of the visas of the United States of America, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, the countries of the Schengen agreement, and Japan to get visa exemption.

# OMINVEST Net Profit rises to RO 33.7 million

Oman International Development and Investment Company SAOG (OMINVEST), one of the oldest and the largest investment company in the Sultanate, announced its initial unaudited financial results for the year ended 31 December 2020. The financial results are subject to statutory audit, review by the Audit and Control Committee, and approval of the Board of Directors of OMINVEST.

At the Group level, Net Profit attributable to the shareholders of OMINVEST rose by 5% to RO 33.7m, whereas Net Profit at the Parent company level rose by 6% to RO 38.1m, compared to the previous year.

Mr. Abdulaziz Al Balushi, Group CEO of OMINVEST, attributed the company's resilient performance to its major subsidiaries and associate companies and certain strategic transactions completed during an otherwise extremely challenging year. He added that OMINVEST's portfolio companies nimbly adjusted to new operating routines necessitated by the onset of COVID-19 and continued to serve their customers efficiently. Mr. Al Balushi stated that OMINVEST ended the year with a strong financial position.



Particularly, the company built a substantially large liquidity cushion enabling it to withstand difficult economic conditions and take advantage of emerging investment opportunities. Although OMINVEST has had the capacity to avail more long-term debt facilities at attractive terms, the company maintained a conservative debt profile with its net Debt/Equity ratio still well

below 1.0x. The company intends to prudently deploy its excess liquidity and unused debt capacity to undertake new investments to achieve its future growth and diversification objectives.

During the year, OMINVEST's banking subsidiary Oman Arab Bank (OAB) successfully merged with Alizz Islamic Bank (Alizz); completed its listing on the

Muscat Securities Market and became SAOG. Importantly, Alizz was seamlessly integrated into OAB as its Islamic Banking subsidiary, offering a wider array of products and services to its clients and realizing mutual synergies across the platforms. Preceding the merger transaction, OMINVEST also sold an 11.76% stake in OAB to Arab Bank plc, resulting in OMINVEST's

shareholding in OAB declining from 51% (before the merger) to 31.64% in the combined entity (after the merger). After the sale of the stake, OAB's classification in OMINVEST's financials was changed from a Subsidiary to an Associate with effect from 30 June 2020. Therefore, in line with IFRS requirements, from the date of the reclassification to an Associate, OMINVEST stopped consolidating OAB's financials and implemented the Equity Method of Accounting. In addition, sale of its partial equity stake in OAB will result in lower share of income with effect from the date of reclassification.

In another major transaction during the year, our subsidiary Jabreen Capital sold 6.74% of the Treasury Shares at attractive terms. In addition, International General Insurance (IGI), a portfolio company of Jabreen Capital, successfully listed on Nasdaq, resulting in partial liquidation of our stake, and generating decent cash proceeds. These transactions further boosted OMINVEST's cash position and the overall strength of its balance sheet.

Responding to questions related to the impact of COVID-19 and low oil prices on local and

regional businesses, Mr. Al Balushi explained that Omani and regional businesses across all key sectors continue to operate under challenging and uncertain economic conditions. He stated that while COVID-19 is coming well under control in Oman due to our Government's excellent response, the negative effects of COVID-19 continue to linger due to a severe second wave of the virus in the US, Europe, and most of Asia. While lauding Omani's government's new policy initiatives and reforms to restore the Sultanate's economic strength over the next few years, Mr. Al Balushi cautioned that 2021 will be another difficult year for the local and regional businesses as protracted weakness in oil price is leading to rising sovereign debt levels, budget deficits and tight liquidity conditions in the banking sector. Therefore, companies need to become much more creative and efficient to survive through these difficult times and emerge stronger. Mr. Al Balushi highlighted that being cognizant of such macro challenges, OMINVEST is prudently managing its assets and liabilities, aiming to further diversify and grow to maximize shareholder value while keeping potential risks well anchored.

#### WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 30°C Min 18°C SALALAH: Max 29°C Min 17°C NIZWA: Max 28°C Min 12°C

#### PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 06:51 FAJR: 05:32 DHUHR: 12:23 ASR: 15:29 MAGHRIB: 17:50 ISHA: 19:04

# Focus on raising standards of research, innovation to meet Vision 2040 goals

**MUSCAT:** The seventh edition of the Annual Research Forum organised by the Research and Innovation Sector of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI), took place at the Kempinski Hotel Muscat on Tuesday evening under the auspicious of His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tarik al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth. Present at the ceremony were Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim bin Said al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, ministers, researchers, academics and research winners.

The Annual Research Forum opened with a welcoming speech by Dr Rahma al Mahrouqiyah, who affirmed that the high interest of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik in the Research and Innovation Sector, and placing it on the top of the national concerns, to be the first priority in Oman 2040 Vision, made it a key focus for creating sustainable national development and creating a national knowledge-based economy.

Dr Saif Abdullah al Haddabi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Research and Innovation, also highlighted the main objectives and achievements of the sector. He stressed the importance of maintaining the harmony between the Research and Innovation Sector, the National Strategy for Research and Development 2040, the National Innovation Strategy and Oman Vision 2040 in terms of vision, goals and strategic directions.

There were also two major presentations during the forum; a presentation by Dr Jamila al Hinai, Project Director of NSRD 2040 at MoHERI, on the action plan of the National Strategy for Research and Development 2040,



and a virtual keynote speech by international expert Dr Jamil Salmi titled 'Learning from the Past, Coping with the Present, Ready for the Future' about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of research and innovation in facing this kind of challenge.

Moreover, as part of the forum's activities, the Oman Animal and Plant Genetic Resources Center (OAPGRC) launched its new identity and brand name 'Mawarid', illustrating Oman's precious genetic resources as both a natural element and a force of nature.

The Annual Research Forum most importantly announced 12 winners for the National Research Award (NRA) in the best-published research led by a PhD holder or equivalent (senior specialist or higher in the medical field) category and the best-published research led by a young researcher (a non-PhD holder) category.

## IN PHD CATEGORY

Under the PhD category, Prof Constantinos Chrysos from Muscat University won the Education and Human Resources field for his project titled 'University-industry interactions in the Sultanate of Oman: Challenges and opportunities'. Two teams won in the Information Systems and Communication Technologies field; Dr Hedi Haddad from Dhofar University for his project 'Transportation Service Redundancy from a Spatio-Temporal Perspective' and Dr Ashraf Saleem from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) for his project 'Cooperative Cruise Controller for Homogeneous and Heterogeneous Vehicle Platoon System'.

## ENVIRONMENTAL FIELD

In the Environmental and Biological Resources field, the award went to 'Enhanced power generation and desalination rate in a novel quadruple microbial

desalination cell with a single desalination chamber' by Dr Tahereh Jafari (SQU, International Maritime College Oman) while in the Health and Social Service field, the award went to 'Clonal copy-number mosaicism in autoreactive T lymphocytes in diabetic NOD mice' by Dr Maha al Riyami (SQU). As for the Energy and Industry field, Dr Chaham Alalouch from SQU took the award for his project 'Energy saving potential for residential buildings in hot climates: The case of Oman'.

## YOUNG RESEARCHER'S CATEGORY

Under the Young Researcher's category, Hanan al Burashdi from the Ministry of Education took the award for her project 'The effectiveness of using the Course Lab programme in improving the academic achievement and the attitudes toward science among 10th-grade students in Oman' in the Education and Human Resources field.

## ICT FIELD

In the Information Systems and Communication Technologies field, the award went to 'AMACoT: A Marketplace Architecture for Trading Cloud of Things Resources' by Ahmed al Rawahi from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Nizwa.

## BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Two teams won under in the Environmental and Biological Resources field; 'Fungal Diversity in Tomato Rhizosphere Soil under Conventional and Desert Farming Systems' by Elham Kazerooni from SQU and 'Detecting Dubas bug infestations using high-resolution multispectral satellite data in Oman' by Rashid al Shidi from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICE

For the Health and Social

Service field, the award went to 'MOVEdiabetes': A cluster randomized controlled trial to increase physical activity in adults with type 2 diabetes in primary health care in Oman' by Dr Thamra al Ghafri from the Ministry of Health.

## ENERGY AND INDUSTRY

'Investigating the technical feasibility of various energy carriers for alternative and sustainable overseas energy transport scenarios' by Mohammed al Breiki from Hamad Bin Khalifa University took the award in the Energy and Industry field.

The award for the Cultural, Basic, and Social Sciences field was withheld this year for both the PhD and Young Researcher's categories.

The National Research Award in 2020 has witnessed an increase of 34.6% over the previous edition in terms of the number of applicants, with the total number of research applications submitted reaching 218 research, more specifically 31 research in the Cultural, Social, and Basic Sciences field, 49 research in the Education and Human Resources field, 30 research in the Energy and Industry field, 31 research in the Environmental and Biological Resources field, 44 research in the Health and Social Services field, and lastly 33 research in the Information and Communication Technologies field.

The Annual Research Forum has demonstrated once again the importance of raising the standards of research, innovation and development in the Sultanate of Oman, as it aims to encourage researchers to conduct high quality and relevant research in areas of national interest and to reach the goals and meet the criteria of Oman Vision 2040. — OMA



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# Shura Office reviews key reports

**MUSCAT:** The Office of Majlis Ash'shura discussed a number of topics on its agenda including a message from the Council of Ministers regarding the Ministry of Education's annual report for 2019. The report containing the implementation phases of the ministry's projects was discussed by the Office and referred to the council's Education and Scientific Research Committee.

This was discussed at the seventh regular meeting of the Office of Majlis Ash'shura held on Tuesday under the Chairmanship of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali.

The meeting reviewed the messages of the council's standing committees. Those included the Services and Social Development Committee's message on the ministerial decision No 363/2020 issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning giving powers to director-generals in the governorates.

The Office also discussed a report prepared by the Media and Culture Committee on the utilisation of the Omani Islamic heritage landmarks to boost the tourism sector.

Also discussed at the meeting was a message presented to the Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs questioning about the management of Bayt Al Mal (house of money). The message included questions about the rental amounts paid by tenants of the properties held by Bayt Al Mal and the ministry's



method of collecting rents from the tenants as well as its plans to improve the institution management.

The Office also discussed a report prepared by the Food and Water Security Committee regarding the exploitation of rainwater stored at the protection dam in the Wilayat of Sur to develop the natural potentials of Al Saleel National Park in implementation of smart management of available water resources. The committee

recommended to generalise the idea in other wilayats.

The Office reviewed a briefing request presented to the Minister of Labour with regard to job-seekers number in medical and assistant medical specialties and the results of the agreement signed between Oman Global Logistics Group (Asyad) and the National Training Fund.

The Office also reviewed a briefing request presented to the Chairman of Oman

Investment Authority (OIA) regarding companies that are wholly or partly owned by OIA and the indebtedness of the government's companies.

Besides, the Office discussed a briefing request presented to the Minister of Finance regarding loans and the procedures taken by the ministry to collect instalments and interests on loans.

The meeting reviewed a briefing request presented to the Minister of Economy with

regard to its plan to provide 27,000 jobs in both the private and public sectors, and the details of the government's plan regarding the job opportunities due to be announced.

The Office also discussed a briefing request presented to the Chairman of the Tax Authority about the tax on corporate income as well as a question about the companies that have not disclosed their income tax and the procedures taken against them.

## Oman set to submit human rights report to UN body

**STAFF REPORTER**  
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Oman will submit its report on human rights to the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group.

The review of the report, being submitted for the third time, will be examined in a meeting that will be webcast live on Thursday, January 21.

"Oman is one of the 14 countries to be reviewed by the UPR Working Group during its upcoming session taking place from January 18 to 29", a statement from the UN Council said.

The three country representatives serving as rapporteurs for the review of Oman are: Malawi, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

The UPR 37th session was originally scheduled to be held in November 2020, although it was postponed due to COVID-19 measures. Oman's first and second UPR reviews took place in January 2011 and November 2015, respectively.

The documents on which the reviews are based are: National report — information provided by the State under review, information contained in the reports of independent human rights experts and groups, known as the Special Procedures, human rights treaty bodies, and other UN entities and information provided by other stakeholders including national human rights institutions, regional organisations and civil society groups.

## Meeting discusses challenges facing environmental audit

**MUSCAT:** The State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution (SAI), is taking part in the 20th meeting of the INTOSAI Working Group on Environmental Auditing (WGEA), which is taking place from January 19 to 21 through video conferencing with the participation of the working group members.

The meeting agenda covers several practical and interactive sessions in matters, such as discussing aspects related to Circular Economy and its effectiveness in reducing resources waste and reviewing international experiences and observations on recycling nutrients and regenerative agriculture.

The meeting will also discuss the action plan for managing



plastic waste, review an audit case on agricultural circular economy projects and highlight challenges related to audit of plastic waste management.

Further, the meeting will examine progress reports of regional WGEA through exchanging experience and capacity building sessions.

— ONA

## Blood donation call to help cover supply

**KABEER YOUSUF**  
@kabeeryousef

Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), local and expatriate associations as well as linguistic and regional organisations have been exhorted to take part in the National Blood Donation Campaign that started on Sunday.

The supply of blood in hospitals is much lower than the required amount of around 5,000 units of blood per month.

The blood donation drive themed 'Be the One', began under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Kamil bin Fahd al Said, Assistant Secretary-General of the Office of Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, at the Blood Banks Services Department. The campaign is aimed at fetching sufficient stock of blood units in the blood banks across the



country.

"We are aiming to bridge the gap between the demand and supply of blood units in the country and to provide adequate, uninterrupted supply of the same which has been affected since COVID-19 started last year", said Dr Zainab bint Salim al Fanna al Araiimi, Director of Blood Banks Services Department.

"We need all individuals who meet the prerequisites for blood donation, institutions and NGOs and other regional as well as linguistic organisations to continue donating blood as the need for the blood is constant for many medical conditions", she added.

Explaining the prerequisites, Al Araiimi said, "Any adult



Dr Zainab bint Salim al Fanna al Araiimi

between 18-60 years of age, who is not suffering from any communicable diseases or not chronically ill, can visit the Department of Blood Services between 8 am and 5 pm to donate blood.

Donors can WhatsApp on 94555648 or call 24591255 and reserve their slot for donating blood.

## SQU to hold intl conference on mass communication



**MUSCAT:** The Department of Mass Media at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) will organise its Third International Scientific Conference themed "Mass Communication in the Digital Environment: Between Necessities of Media Literacy and Requirement of Media Education" on March 23 and 24.

Organising the conference comes in response to the shifts

emerging in the media literacy and education over the last years particularly the shift from traditional methods of media education to the new methods of media education.

The conference aims to develop academic visions pertaining to understanding and analyzing the deep impact of diverse array of mass media technologies. It also addresses

issues and latest developments of media literacy and review the academic and professional aspects of media rehabilitation.

Specialists, experts and researchers of media and education will take part in the conference, which will be held via video-conferencing.

Sub-themes of the conference will also cover the philosophical, theoretical,

and practical aspects of the relationship between media production, consumption and media education, including policies.

The conference's organisers affirm those interested from within and outside the Sultanate, are invited to submit an abstract in both Arabic and English as the deadline will be the end of January. — ONA



# WHALES IN DISTRESS

Arabian Sea humpback whales are one of the smallest and potentially the most vulnerable whale populations in the world, numbering fewer than 100 individuals in Oman

**ZAINAB AL NASSRI**  
[@zainabalnasseri](#)

Arabian Sea hosts a non-migratory population of Arabian Humpback Whales adhering to a Northern Hemisphere breeding cycle.

The habitats of whales, dolphins and porpoises often overlap with human activities that can have harmful impacts on individual cetaceans and populations as a whole.

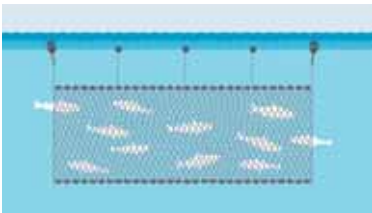
In the same context, Port of Duqm Company stated on Tuesday that the Oman Stranding Network was alerted about an entangled Arabian Sea Humpback Whale which got stranded at the port on Monday night. It said specialists and volunteers from the Environment Authority, Five Oceans Environmental Services LLC and Future Seas, supported by the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) and Port of Duqm

conducted a complicated rescue effort describing the incident that “sadly highlights the dangers of abandoned fishing gear near our marine environment.”

**POPULATION**

Arabian Sea humpback whales are one of the smallest and potentially the most vulnerable whale populations in the world, numbering fewer than 100 individuals in Oman.

Experts’ analysis of the injuries found on the stranded whales, in general, indicate that they were caused by entanglement in fishing gear. In 2019 alone, the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) coordinated the removal of over 390 tonnes of abandoned fishing gear from Masirah island and have embarked on behavioral change campaigns targeting fishermen to reduce the impact of net entanglements and move towards safe disposal of nets.



GILLNETS



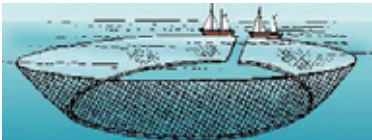
DRIFTNETS



TRAPS



WEIRS



PURSE-SEINE NETS



LONG-LINES

In 2019 alone, the ESO coordinated the removal of over 390 tonnes of abandoned fishing gear from Masirah island and have launched campaigns to save whales

Officials say threats to whales in this region are significant, with measurable consequences for the health of the population.

Various forms of fishing gear such as gillnets, driftnets, traps, weirs, purse-seine nets, long-lines, trawls and others were caught up causing entanglement that may lead to suffocation and death of whales, dolphins and porpoises. Globally, over 300,000 small cetaceans die each year due to entanglement in fishing gear.

**ENORMOUS CREATURES**

Humpback whales are enormous creatures, about the size of a school bus. They are known for their haunting and melodic songs and for breaching the water with amazing acrobatic abilities. Humpbacks don’t normally have a hump on their backs; the name comes from the large hump that forms when they arch their backs before making a deep dive into the ocean.

Arabian humpbacks, however, inhabiting the Arabian Sea, are a small sub-population of humpback whales, which are the most genetically distinct and are considered to be the most isolated whale population on Earth. A population estimation study suggests that they have remained separate from other humpback whale populations for perhaps 70,000 years, which is extremely unusual in a species famed for long-distance migrations.

Entanglement in commercial fishing and aquaculture gear (both active and derelict) can cause significant injuries to whales, affecting their ability to swim and feed. Worldwide, both entanglement and by-catch in fisheries operations pose a major risk for 86 per cent of the world’s toothed whales, according to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals.



# Pact to develop lime production

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism on Tuesday signed an agreement with the Industrial Innovation Centre (IIC) for an Omani Sarooj (lime) innovation project.

The agreement was signed by Eng Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Heritage and Dr Abdullah Mohammed al Mahrouqi, CEO of the IIC.

The "Project for Innovation in Sarooj" aims to develop the industry and upgrade its sustainability. This gypsum-like material consists of silicon and aluminium. It was used earlier in the Sultanate as a construction material in building aflaj (water channels) and military bulwarks like forts and castles. Currently, it is used in restoration or repair



works. The conventional method used in making sarooj takes a long time and its quality cannot be guaranteed. The new project seeks to improve the production of sarooj and enhance the tasks associated with it.

The project also aims to explore and develop sarooj production through the use of modern techniques and

comprehending the best practices used in this process. It will devise guidelines on "requirements of sarooj production" from the stage of raw material to the stage of finished product. In the meantime, the project will help preserve the traditional method of making sarooj.

The agreement lays emphasis on several goals to

be achieved, like fostering innovation in sarooj industry, upgrading the product's quality, implementing awareness and joint programmes between the ministry and innovation centres, exchanging expertise, adopting new proposals, providing licences for sarooj sites, selecting suitable locations for extracting sarooj and forming joint working teams to participate in the project.

According to the agreement, the Industrial Innovation Centre will explore the best practices in producing sarooj, with emphasis on global experiences, besides establishing a national strategic framework for the production of the Omani building material.

— ONA

# Drop in temperature expected on Friday

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

@lakshmioman

Northerly winds have been keeping the temperature in many parts of Oman at 30 degrees Celsius but the weekend is expected to be cooler. The wind continues to play a crucial part in the temperatures. Over most of the Sultanate wind will be northerly to northwesterly light to moderate.

"By Friday the temperature is expected to dip because of the expected northwesterly wind. Even though lately it has been slightly warmer," said the weather forecaster at Oman Met Office, Civil Aviation Authority, assuring that we are still in winter.

It has been mainly clear skies over

most of the Sultanate with chances of late night to early morning low-level clouds or fog patches over the coastal areas of South Al Sharqiyah and North Al Sharqiyah governorates. On Wednesday, Dhofar and Al Dhahirah governorates are also expected to experience low-level clouds and fog patches in the morning.

As the winter continues with no rain so far, the wave height is expected to be slight to moderate along Musandam Governorate coasts with a maximum wave height of 1.5m and slight along the rest of the coasts with a maximum wave height of 1 metre. Humidity in Muscat is ranging between 30 per cent to 55 per cent and in Salalah it is between 15 per cent to 75 per cent.

# Innovation building to be opened by mid-year



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation will inaugurate the Innovation Building, the main facility of the Innovation Complex in Muscat located near Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), in the middle of this year.

The new facility is aimed at developing and encouraging

innovation, activating links between the academic sector and the private sector and between various segments of the local and international community. It also seeks to provide a suitable and stimulating environment to researchers and entrepreneurs in addition to supporting the government's economic

diversification strategy.

In a statement to ONA, Dr Saif bin Abdullah al Haddabi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation said that the execution work at the Innovation Building is nearing completion with 95 per cent of the facility completed. — ONA

# Move to online salary transfer by Feb 28: MoL

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 19

The Ministry of Labour has called on private sector establishments to use electronic or online

banking services to transfer salaries and payments starting from February 28, based on the notice issued by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO). It also urged companies to stop using

traditional means of money transfer thereafter.

The Ministry of Labour apprised all private sector establishments of the necessity of adhering to the circular of CBO.



**Muscat Municipality**  
**Announcement No. 1/2021**

Specialized companies in the field of tender shown below and registered with **Tender Board**, may obtain tender documents from the website through the following link:  
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)  
against non-refundable fees until the end of deadline stipulated abelow.

| Tender No. | E- Tender No.              | Description of Tender                                                | Tender Fee | Last date to collect the tender | Tender return date | Grade |
|------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| PRE/20/111 | (2020/MM/ QS/52) (Re Call) | Construction of Fountain at Quriyat Lake Park (E- Tender ) (Re Call) | Rial 25    | 14/02/2021                      | 25/02/2021         | First |

**Tender Conditions:-**

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of a bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be ( 1% ) of the tender value valid for ninety ( 90 ) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Tender Bonds shall be placed in the Tender Bond Box for E-Tendering in the Ground floor at Muscat Municipality Building, Ruwi, before 10:00 am as per the date Mentioned in the above table. All envelopes are to be clearly marked with the name of the Tender being presented and no other marks.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to ([etenderhd@ita.gov.om](mailto:etenderhd@ita.gov.om)) or call (+96824166670).

## Six expats held for e-fraud

MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has arrested six expats in connection with electronic fraud.

In order to extract account information and withdraw cash amounts from victims' bank accounts, the fraudsters sent text messages on subscribers' phones alleging that their bank cards had been blocked and urging them to call and update their information so that their cards can be reactivated.

## 135 new Covid cases, 2 deaths

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Health on Tuesday announced 135 new confirmed cases with Coronavirus (COVID-19) and 2 deaths. The total cases in the country have now touched 132,146, including 124,398 recoveries and 1,516 deaths.

## TENDER NOTICE



Majis announce the following tender

| Sl. No. | Tender No.    | Tender Description                                                                        | Bids fees In R.O. | Last date for Obtaining Tender Documents | Last date for tender Submission |
|---------|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1.      | Majis-01-2021 | Supply and Installation of Sludge Drying at MAJIS' CETRP Plot, Sohar Industrial Port area | 200/-             | 1 <sup>st</sup> February 2021            | 1 <sup>st</sup> March 2021      |

- Interested companies may obtain the Tender documents from the e-tendering website: <http://tendering.majis.om/ VendorLogin.aspx> against non refundable payment as mentioned above. Tender documents will be published to such firms only.
- Tenders should be submitted online on the given website; no documents can be accepted as manual submission except original Tender Bond.
- The Tenderer shall register in E-tendering portal to enable purchase and collection of the tender documents.
- All correspondences pertaining to the Tender enquiry must be online at the e-tendering system and sent to email ID: [tender@miscoman.com](mailto:tender@miscoman.com).
- Any clarification pertaining to the e-tendering system technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email ID: [vendor@miscoman.com](mailto:vendor@miscoman.com) and phone No. 26852421.

Majis is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.

## TENDERS ANNOUNCEMENT

THE MAZOOON ELECTRICITY COMPANY (MZEC) INVITES THE FOLLOWING TENDERS:

| Tender No             | Description                                                                        | Last Date of Purchasing | Last Date for Submission | TENDER BOARD Grade | Type of Participation | Tender Price R.O |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| RETENDER 30/MZEC/2020 | SCADA INTERFACE WORK FOR NEW BAYS IN PRIMARY SUBSTATIONS IN MZEC REGIONS – PHASE 2 | 26/01/2021              | 02/03/2021               | SPECIALIST         | LOCAL                 | 117              |

| Tender No    | Description                                                        | Last Date of Purchasing | Last Date for Submission | DCRP Grade | Type of Participation | Tender Price R.O |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| 01/MZEC/2021 | PROTECTION UPGRADE FOR POWER SECURITY IN MZEC DISTRIBUTION NETWORK | 26/01/2021              | 02/03/2021               | A          | LOCAL                 | 70               |

- Interested companies registered with DCRP and Tender Board and having a valid Registrations may obtain tenders documents through [scm.tenders@mzec.co.om](mailto:scm.tenders@mzec.co.om).
- Value of each tender document copy is non-refundable.
- Due to covid-19 all offers shall be submitted via the following email [mzec-offerssubmission@mzec.co.om](mailto:mzec-offerssubmission@mzec.co.om).
- The tenderer should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of tender price valid (90) days as a bid bond and addressed to the chairperson of the (Internal Tender Committee) of Mazoon Electricity Company S.A.O.C and **any offer is not including the bond will be rejected immediately.**
- The completed tenders should be send the offers before 10:00 am on the assigned closing date for submission of the tender.
- The priority of the awarding will be given to those bidders who assure recruitment of the maximum numbers of Omani staff and utilizing Omani products.
- The related parties only are invited to attend the tender opening meeting based on the assigned date.
- All Clarifications are to be sent to the email address: [MZEC-Clarification@mzec.co.om](mailto:MZEC-Clarification@mzec.co.om), and the **Last date for receiving vendor's clarifications for tenders on 17/02/2021.**
- Mazoon Electricity Company S.A.O.C. is not bound to accept the lowest tender.

(WE LIGHT...WE CARE)

Tenders & Contracts Section : (+968) 25371366 / 25371067 / 25371070

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## Turkey slaps ad ban on Twitter under new social media law

ISTANBUL: Ankara has imposed advertising bans on Twitter, Periscope and Pinterest after they failed to appoint local representatives in Turkey under a new social media law, according to decisions published on Tuesday.

Under the law, which critics say stifles dissent, social media companies that do not appoint such representatives are liable for a series of penalties, including the latest move by the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK).

The law allows authorities to remove content from platforms, rather than blocking access as they did in the past. It has caused concern as people turn more to online platforms after Ankara tightened its grip on mainstream media.

The latest decisions in the country's Official Gazette said the advertising bans went into effect from Tuesday. Twitter, its live-streaming app Periscope, and image sharing app Pinterest were not immediately available to comment.

Deputy Transport Minister Omer Fatih Sayan said Twitter and Pinterest's bandwidth would be cut by 50 per cent in April and by 90 per cent in May. Twitter said last month it would shut down Periscope by March due to declining usage.

"We are determined to do whatever is necessary to protect



the data, privacy and rights of our nation", Sayan said on Twitter. "We will never allow digital fascism and disregard of rules to prevail in Turkey", he said, echoing tough comments by President Tayyip Erdogan.

On Monday, Facebook Inc joined other companies in saying it would appoint a local representative, but added it would withdraw the person if it faced pressure regarding what is allowed on its platform.

YouTube, owned by Alphabet Inc's Google, said a month ago it would abide the new law, which Ankara says enhances local oversight of foreign companies.

The decisions by Facebook, Google and YouTube leaves them "in serious danger of becoming an instrument of state censorship", Milena Buyum, Amnesty International's Turkey Campaigner, wrote on Twitter. She called on them to say exactly how they would avoid this.

— Reuters

## Iraq delays general election to Oct 10

BAGHDAD: Iraq's cabinet decided on Tuesday to postpone the general election to October 10 from June, the state news agency INA said.

The elections been brought forward to June 6, roughly a year early, following a proposal by Iraq's Independent High Election Commission (IHEC), which wanted more time to organise the polls.

Early elections were a key demand of anti-government protesters who staged mass demonstrations that started in October 2019. Hundreds were killed by security forces and gunmen suspected of links to fighter groups.

Meanwhile, Iraq is tightening security along its 600 km border with Syria to curb the movement of IS fighters, drug smuggling and other illegal activities.

Iraqi commanders on Monday toured the remote desert frontier controlled by various different forces, including the Iraqi military, militias, the Syrian army, anti-Damascus rebels and US-backed Kurdish forces.

The border is a flashpoint for tension between groups and the United States, and is also tense because of IS incursions and Turkish pressure on Kurdish fighter groups.

At an outpost facing into Syria, Lieutenant-General Abdul Amir al Shammari said the Iraqi side was under the control of state forces and was being more tightly secured, but that the main challenges came from inside Syria.

"One of the biggest challenges is there's no one single or unified security partner on the Syrian



Military vehicles of Iraqi army tour at Al Waleed air base near Al Tanf, Iraq. — Reuters



Deputy Commander of Iraq's Joint Operations Command, Lieutenant-General Abdul Amir al Shammari meets Iraqi troops at Al Qaim, Iraq. — Reuters

side", he said.

"In this area, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are across the border — whom we coordinate with via the (US) coalition", he said, referring to US-backed, Kurdish-dominated paramilitaries battling IS remnants and also opposed to Turkey.

"Further south, there's the Syrian army, and in some areas beyond that, control by Syrian

opposition groups", Shammari said.

Iraq was stepping up use of high-tech thermal cameras and observation balloons, he said.

Reuters reporters touring the border by air with the military saw diggers making deeper trenches along large sections of the Iraqi side of the frontier, which is sparsely peppered with border guard towers, earth berms and

Iraq is stepping up use of high-tech thermal cameras and observation balloons

metal fences. Shammari said some families of IS fighters had recently been detained after crossing from Al Hol, a displacement camp on the Syrian side housing tens of thousands of people who fled IS's final enclaves.

Officials worry Al Hol is a breeding ground for extremism and fear the return of thousands of Iraqis with ties to IS.

The border has recently also seen Israeli air strikes against targets including Revolutionary Guards commanders as Israel increases pressure on allies and of Syrian President Bashar al Assad.

The Iraqi military is in the difficult position of coordinating with state paramilitaries that include the groups which are facing off with Israel and the United States and transfer weapons and personnel across the frontier.

— Reuters

## Beyond the oil wells, Syrians rummage in trash to survive

AL MALIKIYAH, Syria: Plastic bottles, aluminium cans, clothes, sometimes spaghetti. When a tractor tows in fresh rubbish at a dump in northeast Syria, men, women and children rush to find the best pickings.

On the dry plains outside the city of Al Malikiyah, a dozen people wrapped up against the cold rip open the black plastic bags, in a desperate search for something to sell, repurpose or even eat.

Across the road, an oil pump swings back and forth in this resource-rich region controlled by US-backed Kurdish forces.

An armoured vehicle flying the American stars and stripes drives by on the asphalt.

At the dump, a woman in a scarf and light blue woolly hat hacks away at a pile of fuming



A Syrian child sifts through a garbage dump near an oil field in the countryside of Malikiya in northeast Syria. — AFP

burnt rubbish.

Another stuffs some flat bread into a bag hanging around her

waist. A gloved hand reaches for the remainder of a packet of spaghetti.

Someone finds a pair of small black boots, while a child smiles, holding out a pair of jeans.

A girl sifts through the refuse with a metal pick, finding some soft drink cans she carries away in a bag slung over her shoulder.

Umm Mustafa, a mother in her forties, says she often comes to the site in search of something to help sustain her family.

"Sometimes we find oranges that are still edible or apples people have thrown away", she said, her hands coarse and blackened by the hard work.

"We take them to eat, because everything is expensive." Almost 10 years of war in Syria have ravaged the economy and sent the value of the Syrian pound plummeting.

Food prices have tripled across the country since November 2019, the UN food assistance agency says. In the Kurdish-held northeast, already in 2019 more

than 60 per cent of people suffered from food insecurity, according to the World Food Programme.

Umm Mustafa said her five girls, the eldest 17, often worked with her while her husband, a shepherd, looked after their small herd.

"Because of the crisis and the price hikes, we're struggling to get by", said the mother, whose family was displaced from their village three years ago by fighting between Kurdish fighters and the IS group.

The best days are when the truck brings in food from restaurants, she said.

"Some of it is clean", she said. Other times, "we rummage through hospital waste despite the danger", Umm Mustafa added. "But we have to, because there is no other option." — AFP

### SHORT TAKES

#### DUBAI

##### Trump decorates Bahrain king on last full day in office

US President Donald Trump bestowed a rare award on King Hamad of Bahrain, acknowledging the Gulf state's normalisation of ties with Israel on his last full day in office. Trump already conferred the same award on King Mohammed VI of Morocco last week for his move to restore ties. Announcing his bestowal of the Legion of Merit, Degree Chief Commander, on King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, Trump also paid tribute to Bahrain's hosting of a June 2019 conference on



the economic dimensions of his controversial Middle East peace plan, which broke with decades of international consensus and was boycotted by the Palestinians. — AFP

#### BEIRUT

##### Lebanon doctors urge lockdown extension

The head of Lebanon's main coronavirus hospital backed the extension of a total lockdown to curb soaring infection figures and save a fragile healthcare system from collapse. "Easing the lockdown cannot occur if the virus is spreading unchecked in the community", Firas Abiad said on social media. "The infection is not under control." The country of more than six million has recorded 255,956 coronavirus cases and 1,959 deaths since its outbreak started



in February. It entered a strict 11-day lockdown last Thursday after recording a 70 per cent uptick in infections in one of the steepest increases in transmission worldwide. — AFP

#### TUNIS

##### Tunisia rocked by fourth night of street riots

Tunisia was rocked by a fourth night of street clashes between riot police and youths in mostly working class neighbourhoods, and there were calls on social media for more rallies on Tuesday. More than 600 people had been arrested by Monday over the disturbances in which teenagers and adolescents have hurled rocks and Molotov cocktails at police who have fired volleys of teargas at them. The social unrest comes at a time of economic crisis, worsened by



the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism-reliant North African country, that has deepened poverty and driven up inflation and unemployment. — AFP

In brief

JARKATA



INDONESIAN PRESIDENT VISITS QUAKE-HIT TOWN OF SULAWESI

Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited the province where at least 84 people were killed in a 6.2-magnitude earthquake last week. Joko flew to the West Sulawesi provincial capital of Mamuju, the area worst-hit by Friday's earthquake, after inspecting flood-hit areas in Kalimantan province, where 15 people have been killed. "I've seen for myself collapsed government buildings and homes in Mamuju," Joko said. "I've come here to ensure that rescue work and assistance given to people are managed well," he said. He said the government would give up to \$3,563 to those whose homes were damaged. — dpa

MANILA



PHILIPPINE PROTEST OVER PERMISSION TO ENTER UNIVERSITY

Philippine students and activists protested against a government decision to allow security forces to patrol the campuses of the country's biggest university after authorities accused it of being a breeding ground for communist rebels. President Rodrigo Duterte's government has stepped up efforts to end a Maoist-led rebellion, one of the world's longest insurgencies that has killed more than 40,000 people. But the United Nations had warned in a report that 'red-tagging', or labelling people and groups as communists or terrorists, and incitement to violence have been rife in the Southeast Asian nation. — Reuters

ISLAMABAD



BODY OF AMERICAN MOUNTAINEER FOUND NEAR KARAKORAM

Pakistan's military located the body of American mountaineer Alex Goldfarb-Rumyantsev in the Karakoram mountains in northern Pakistan, the second death of a foreign climber in the area in less than a week. A helicopter team spotted Goldfarb's remains during a search and rescue operation that began on Sunday. He appeared to have fallen off the mountain, Hungarian expedition company Magyar Expedicios, which was supporting the climbers, said in a statement. Goldfarb and Hungarian Zoltan Szlanko were planning to climb the 8,047 metre high Broad Peak. — Reuters

Japan eyes use of robots to boost COVID-19 testing

TOKYO: Japan's health minister watched a demonstration on Tuesday of a prototype automated COVID-19 testing machine that uses a robotic arm to take a sample from a person's nose and can deliver the results in about 80 minutes.

The robot system, built by Kawasaki Heavy Industries Inc, fits in a standard shipping container that can be transported by truck and set up at stadiums, theme parks and other mass gatherings, the company said.

"Looking at the global trend, we need to increase the number of people receiving tests, and the demand for preventive testing is rising," Health Minister Norihisa Tamura told reporters at the demonstration.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's administration has attracted criticism for Japan's paucity of testing. His government is under pressure to show it has the pandemic under control with fewer than 200 days until the start



Japan's Health Minister Norihisa Tamura visits the Kawasaki Heavy Industries' Tokyo Robot Centre amid the coronavirus disease pandemic in Tokyo. — Reuters

of the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo - already delayed by a year - and vaccinations yet to start.

The use of robot testing systems may help to preserve medical manpower and improve overall accuracy, Tamura said, without committing to using the Kawasaki Heavy set-up. The prototype facility demonstrated on Tuesday

uses human-driven robotic arms to collect samples from individuals and perform polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests. The system is housed in mobile, 40-foot shipping containers that would be able to process up to 2,000 samples every 16 hours.

Its developers say it offers greater efficiencies of scale and

The use of robot testing systems may help to preserve medical manpower and improve overall accuracy

better protection for medical workers, who can even operate testing remotely.

From the start of the pandemic, Japan has done fewer tests than other major economies, focusing on infection clusters and virus tracing. Japan conducts about 55,000 PCR tests daily, less than half of its capacity, according to government data.

With 337,000 cases and 4,598 fatalities, Japan has weathered the pandemic better than most major economies. Even so, the country is gripped by a third wave of infections that has proved more widespread and deadly than previous ones and prompted the government to announce a new state of emergency this month. — Reuters

ARTIST'S IMPRESSION OF BIDEN, HARRIS



Painter Jagjit Singh Rubal gives the final touches to a painting depicting US President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris in Amritsar. — AFP

China rescuers drill new 'lifelines' to trapped gold miners

BEIJING: Chinese rescuers drilled several fresh holes on Tuesday to reach at least 12 gold miners trapped underground for nine days, as dwindling food supplies and rising waters threatened their survival.

Twenty-two workers have been stuck 540 metres underground at the Hushan mine near Yantai in east China's Shandong province after an explosion damaged the entrance.

After days without any signs of life, some of the trapped miners managed to send up a note attached to a metal wire which rescuers had dropped into the mine on Sunday.

Pleading for help, the handwritten message said a dozen of them were alive but surrounded by water and in need of urgent medical supplies.



Members of a rescue team work at the site of a gold mine explosion where 22 miners are trapped underground in Qixia, in eastern China's Shandong province. — AFP

Several of the miners were injured, the note said. A subsequent phone call with the miners revealed 11 were in one location 540 metres below the surface with another — apparently alone — trapped a further 100 metres down.

The whereabouts and condition of the other 10 miners is still unknown. Rescuers have already dug three channels and sent food, medicine, paper and pencils down thin shafts — lifelines to the miners cut into the earth.

But progress was slow, according to Chen Fei, a top city official.

"The surrounding rock near the ore body is mostly granite... that is very hard, resulting in slow progress of rescue," Chen told reporters on Monday evening.

— AFP

15 sleeping workers crushed under truck in India



NEW DELHI: At least 15 labourers were crushed to death by a truck in India early on Tuesday while they were sleeping by a road, police said.

The accident took place near a village in the Surat district in India's western state of Gujarat, area police chief Varadhbhai Patel said by phone. The dumper truck ran over the sleeping workers, killing 12 of them at the scene, Patel said. Eight wounded were taken to hospital, where three more succumbed to their injuries, he added.

The workers were from the neighbouring state of Rajasthan.

The truck driver lost control of his vehicle after it hit some sugarcane hanging out of a tractor trolley coming from the opposite direction, Patel said. The driver was among those receiving treatment at the hospital.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed condolences and announced compensation for the families of the victims and for those injured.

Tens of thousands of people are killed in road crashes in India every year. The accidents are mostly blamed on poorly maintained roads and vehicles or negligent driving. — dpa



Rene Galy-Dejean (2ndR), former treasurer of French former Prime Minister Edouard Balladur arrives for his trial over alleged campaign graft at the Court of Justice of the Republic in Paris. – AFP

## French trial opens for ex-PM over kickbacks

PARIS: Former French prime minister Edouard Balladur appeared in court on Tuesday on charges he used kickbacks from 1990s arms deals to help finance a presidential bid, in a case that has already seen six people sentenced to prison terms.

Balladur, 91, made no statement to a throng of journalists at the Court of Justice of the Republic, which hears cases involving ministerial misconduct.

The conservative ex-premier joins a long list of senior French politicians pursued for alleged financial wrongdoing, including former president Nicolas Sarkozy and his predecessor, Jacques Chirac. Also on trial is Balladur's former defence minister Francois Leotard, 78.

The two men were charged in 2017 with "complicity in the misuse of corporate assets" over the sale of submarines to Pakistan and frigates to Saudi Arabia between 1993 and 1995. Investigators discovered an estimated 13 million francs in kickbacks from the deals, now worth some 2.8 million euros (\$3.3 million), after accounting

for inflation.

A large chunk of the money is suspected to have been funnelled to Balladur's 1995 presidential bid, while he was serving as prime minister in the final years of Francois Mitterrand's presidency, in a case known as the "Karachi affair".

In particular, the inquiry found a cash injection of 10.25 million francs — mostly in 500-franc bills — just as Balladur's team was scrambling after his defeat in the first round of voting.

Balladur, who also has to answer to a charge that he concealed the crimes, has denied any wrongdoing, saying the 10 million francs came from the sale of T-shirts and other items at campaign rallies.

The claims came to light during an investigation into a 2002 bombing in Karachi, Pakistan, which targeted a bus transporting French engineers.

Fifteen people were killed, including 11 engineers working on the submarine contract, and the Al Qaeda terror network was initially suspected of the attack. — AFP

# US Senate to hold nomination hearings for Biden's cabinet

WASHINGTON: Hearings in the US Senate kicks off for President-elect Joe Biden's nominees for key posts in his cabinet, including for Treasury, Defense and State Departments.

Janet Yellen, the former chair of the Federal Reserve, will be among the first nominees, going before the Senate Finance Committee to get confirmed for the head of Treasury.

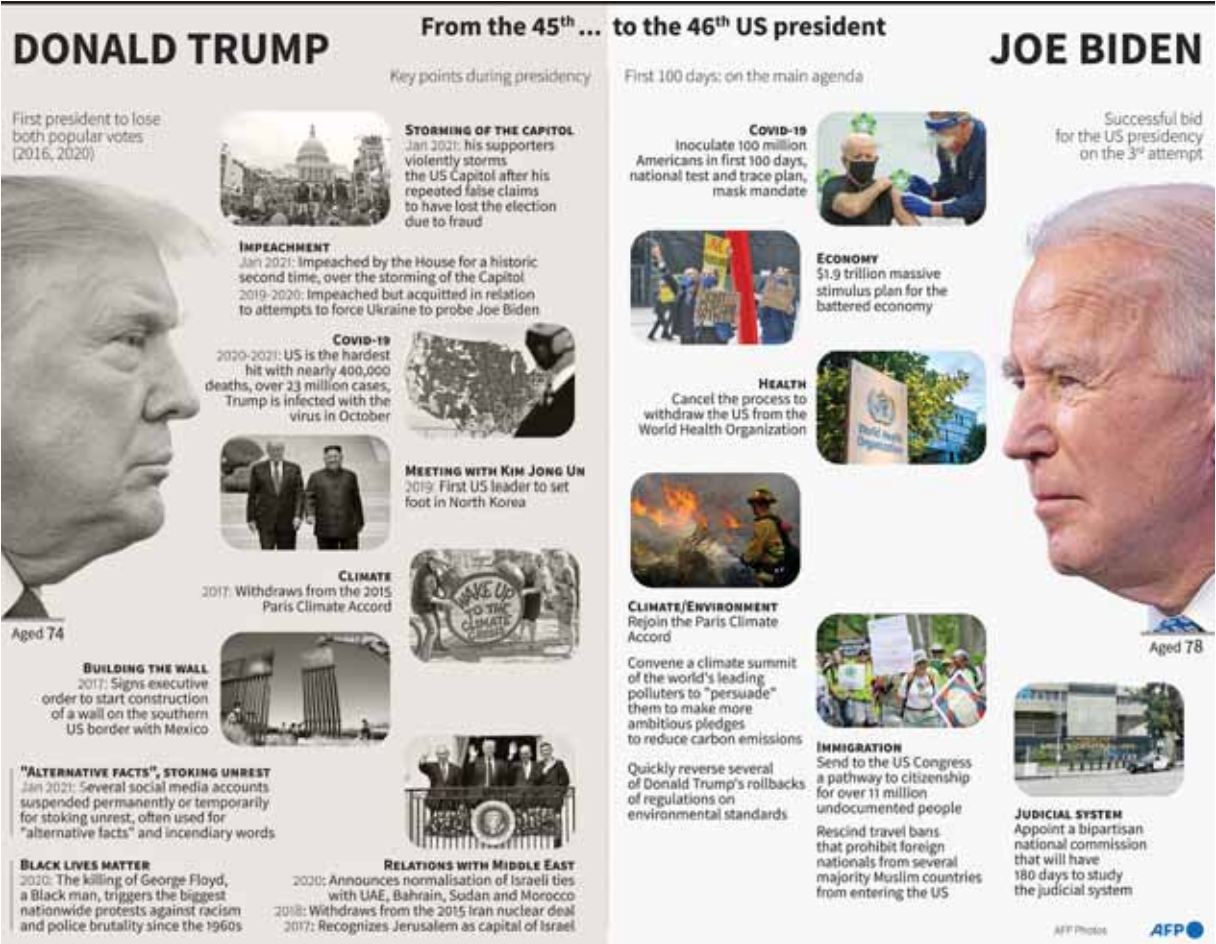
Antony Blinken, Biden's selection to be the incoming secretary of state, will appear at the foreign relations committee, and Lloyd Austin will go before the armed services committee for a hearing on his nomination to be defence secretary.

Austin will need a waiver for his job, as he only recently left the military. The issue will likely not get in the way of his confirmation, but there will be debate around the waiver, as there is concern about ensuring civilian oversight of the military.

The Senate Intelligence Committee will question Avril Haines to takeover as director of national intelligence and Alejandro Mayorkas will face a grilling over at the homeland security committee as he looks set to be confirmed as the new secretary of the department.

Committees hold interviews with cabinet nominees but the full Senate votes on confirmation, in line with the Constitution.

PARDONS: Meanwhile, President Donald Trump began his final full day in the White House on Tuesday with a long list of possible pardons to dish out before snubbing his successor Joe Biden's inauguration and leaving for Florida.



National Guard troops stand guard in Downtown Washington, DC ahead of the inauguration ceremonies for President-elect Joe Biden and Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris. – AFP

On Wednesday at noon, Biden will be sworn in and the Trump presidency will end, turning the page on some of the most disruptive, divisive years the

United States has seen since the 1960s.

Biden, a veteran Democratic senator who also served as vice president to Barack Obama,

was set to travel to Washington on Tuesday with his wife Dr Jill Biden from their hometown of Wilmington, Delaware. Together with incoming vice president Kamala Harris — the first woman ever to hold the job — Biden was due to deliver an evening address on the COVID-19 crisis, from the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool.

By contrast, Trump has remained uncharacteristically silent as the clock ticks down to his departure to a new life in his Mar-a-Lago golf club residence in Palm Beach.

Banned by Twitter for his stream of inflammatory messages and misinformation, he has largely stopped communicating with the nation. — dpa/AFP

# Italian PM pleads for Senate support ahead of trust vote

ROME: Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte pleaded for lawmakers' support on Tuesday as his teetering government faced a confidence vote while it struggles to battle the coronavirus pandemic.

The ruling coalition has been on the brink of collapse since former premier Matteo Renzi withdrew his Italia Viva party last week, depriving Conte of his majority in the upper chamber.

Conte, who since 2018 has headed two politically divergent governments, is desperately seeking the backing of opposition lawmakers to allow his coalition to stay in power.

"We are calling on all political forces, and also parliamentarians, who have Italy's destiny at heart to help us restart as quickly as possible," he told the upper chamber. The prime minister has repeatedly warned of the danger of leaving Italy rudderless in the middle of a pandemic that has claimed more than 82,000 lives and devastated the economy.

His government won a first confidence vote late on Monday in the lower house, but faces a tougher task persuading the Senate, where it lost its majority following Italia Viva's defection.

In a twist, Renzi's party said it



Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and Premier Giuseppe Conte during a debate at the Senate prior to a confidence vote in Rome. – Reuters

Conte is desperately seeking the backing of oppn lawmakers to allow his coalition to stay in power

would abstain, making it easier for the government to win the vote on Tuesday evening — but the crisis risks being merely delayed.

Conte was widely expected to take around 155 votes in the 321-seat chamber — saving the day, but with only enough support to keep going as a minority government. Minority governments are nothing new in Italy, which has had 29 prime

ministers and 66 governments since 1946. But the task facing this one is unprecedented, with parts of the country currently under partial lockdown and a \$267 billion European Union recovery package to push through parliament.

"Conte would end up commanding an extremely shaky majority that would risk collapsing at any divisive vote in the coming months," said Wolfango Piccoli of the Teneo consultancy.

Conte's coalition is made up of the former anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) and a smaller leftist party. — AFP

## MINSK Oppn leader wants help to return to Belarus

Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya wants to return to Belarus from exile abroad and called for the help of the international community, in comments to her followers on the Telegram messaging app. She said the case of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who was detained immediately on returning to Russia, showed that the support of the global community was necessary. Tikhanovskaya, who is wanted in Belarus, is currently living in exile in Lithuania,



following her country's disputed presidential elections and ensuing unrest. Tikhanovskaya ran in the August 9 elections in which long-time leader Alexander Lukashenko claimed victory, with 80.1 per cent of the vote. — dpa

## MADRID Disaster-zone status declared for Madrid

Spain's government classified Madrid and other regions struck by Storm Filomena last week as disaster zones, a move which will trigger emergency subsidies and other support measures. The storm brought the heaviest snowfall in decades and caused at least 1.4 billion euros (\$1.70 billion) in damage to the Spanish capital, according to a preliminary estimate from the mayor's office, though opposition parties have disputed that number.



Fallen trees and snowdrifts, which hardened into ice blocks during the ensuing cold snap, blocked roads and train lines, cutting off supplies to Madrid and leaving supermarket shelves empty. — Reuters

## MOSCOW Putin takes icy plunge to mark Epiphany

Russian President Vladimir Putin braved temperatures well below freezing to take a bare-chested dip into icy water in an Orthodox ritual marking the baptism of Jesus. The Russian leader shed a thick coat and boots, as temperatures hovered at -20 degrees Celsius and stepped into a pool surrounded by snow and facing a large cross made of ice outside Moscow. He immersed himself three times while crossing himself, in line with tradition. The Kremlin said that the tradi-



tion "celebrates one of the main Christian holidays — the baptism of the Lord." Every year on January 19, tens of thousands of Orthodox believers mark Epiphany by dunking themselves in ponds or rivers. — AFP

# Earth will continue to spin and life will flow again!

Everyone has different ways of coping with situations that are not familiar with, especially the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people have used this time to develop relaxation habits such as meditation, contemplation and listening to music, while many others tried cooking or indulged in indoor games.

But this period of uncertainty provided many of us an opportunity to embrace the world of words to beat COVID-19 induced stress.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, like many of my friends and colleagues, I too dug into a number of books and revisited many of my old favourites. But a tiny book with a little over 100 pages, narrating the story about rising up even after being destroyed, found to be more inspiring and relevant than it has ever been.

*The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, even after its publication 78 years ago, no doubt, continues to be a feast for the senses. It is a simple story on the surface, which has a message that man is not made for defeat. I reread the same pages — and then the same chapters — over and over again!

Although short, the novel reveals



SAMUEL KUTTY  
@samkuttyp

THIS PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY PROVIDED MANY OF US AN OPPORTUNITY TO EMBRACE THE WORLD OF WORDS TO BEAT COVID-19 INDUCED STRESS

the never failing truth that a man can be destroyed but not defeated. It tells the story of an old Cuban fisherman, Santiago, who goes too far into the sea and struggles with a giant fish Marlin.

It is one of my favourites along with *The Mother* by Maxim Gorky, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy that I read when I stepped into the world of English literature.

When I started reading the classic first time, to be honest, I had thought it to be a boring fiction. But I was proved wrong. I found out there are many hidden meanings, which made me enjoy the novel. That is the reason I read it again.

In spite of his age, Santiago is able to endure hunger, pain and isolation. He nobly blames himself, not the sharks, for the loss of Marlin. He acknowledges that he has gone too far out into the sea.

Whenever Santiago is threatened with despair, he summons up his internal resources. He calls up memories of his strength when he was young, and he sometimes prays. Santiago has unlimited potentialities in the presence of danger. Every bad

situation hurts. However, it sure does teach us a lesson.

Through the novel, the Nobel laureate advises the readers, “Live your life to your fullest potential, never give in, never surrender”. Our lives might end, but the impressions we have made will go on. Our legacy is what remains after we are destroyed.

Since March 2020, most people had their lives shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic in some way.

Even though there is no end in sight for the pandemic situation, no doubt, life will return to normal at some stage, but the world will look different because of the health and economic effects of this virus. Let’s all cope with these times as best as we can.

Santiago’s world is extremely tough. They survive day to day on what they can catch in the sea. He has little food and his friend Manolin sometimes brings him sustenance.

Most of us are much, much more fortunate than that. Everything can end tomorrow. Focus on what is important to us. When all this is over, Earth will continue to spin, and life will flow again! And be grateful for what you have in this day and age.

## SUDAN PEACE

# What does surge of Darfur violence mean?

ABDELMONEIM ABU IDRIS ALI AND MENNA ZAKI

Days of inter-ethnic fighting in Sudan’s Darfur region leaving almost 140 dead and 50,000 people displaced have cast shadows over hopes the war-ravaged region was heading towards peace.

While the ex-rebel forces who signed an October peace deal have condemned the violence — two separate clashes in South and West Darfur states — the fighting shows that signing an agreement is only the first step towards ending conflict.

What caused the recent surge of violence, and what does it mean for ending the conflict?

Fighting first erupted in Darfur in 2003, when ethnic minority rebels rose up against the Arab-dominated government in Khartoum, which responded by recruiting and arming notorious Arab-dominated militia known as the Janjaweed. A total of 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million displaced, according to the United Nations.

It left the region awash with weapons with the multiple ethnic groups divided by bitter rivalries.

Fighting has subsided over the years, but tribal and ethnic violence periodically occur between

Arab pastoralists against settled ethnic farmers over land ownership and access to water.

Former ruler Omar al Bashir — wanted by the International Criminal Court for genocide and other alleged crimes in Darfur — was deposed in April 2019, paving the way for the rebels and the new transitional civil-

ian-majority government to sign a peace deal in October.

A long-running peacekeeping force, the joint United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), ended 13-years of operations in December, with a phased withdrawal of its approximately 8,000 armed and civilian personnel over six months.

On Saturday, residents of the West Darfur state capital El Geneina, close to the border with Chad, woke to the sound of “intense gunfire”, one said.

“It started as a quarrel between two people, one from the non-Arab ethnic Massalit tribe and another from an Arab tribe on Friday”, Adam Hussein, a local farmer from El Geneina, said by phone.

“The dispute occurred in a restaurant, and ended with one stabbing the other.”

Police arrested the suspected killer, but “armed militias took advantage of the incident and attacked El Geneina”, said the Darfur Bar Association, a local civil society group.

“These militias spread panic... and carried out all forms of human rights violations, including pillage and plunder”, it said in a statement. Fighting persisted until Sunday afternoon, including in a camp hosting some of the thousands of Darfuris displaced by decades of conflict.

“We lived in horror for those two days”, said resident Om Kalthoum Mohamed.

Khartoum’s government said it was sending reinforcements to tackle the situation.

Then on Monday, a separate outbreak of fighting erupted in South Darfur state, with Arab Rizeigat men in pick-up trucks flanked by riders on motorcycles and camels sweeping to a village home to the Fallata tribe. — AFP

## PRESIDENTIAL LEGACY

# Trump leaves a more divided America

MATT SPETALNICK AND STEVE HOLLAND

When President Donald Trump delivered his inaugural speech on January 20, 2017, he promised an end to “American carnage”, a bleak and dysfunctional nation he had promised that he alone could fix.

Closing out his presidency exactly four years later, Trump leaves behind an even more polarised America, where thousands are dying daily from the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy is badly damaged and political violence has surged.

Trump didn’t create the bitter differences that have come to define American life. Still, he seized upon many of them as tools to build his power base, promising to uplift rural America and the broader working class he said had been neglected by the Washington establishment.

When thousands of his angry followers — the vast majority of them white — marched on Capitol Hill on January 6, they rallied behind Trump’s false claims of a stolen election. The rioting that ensued left a police officer and four other people dead, dozens wounded and a nation shaken.

A major part of his legacy when he departs the White House on Wednesday is likely to be Americans more politically and culturally estranged from each other than they were when he took office.

At the heart of that divide, Trump’s opponents say, is race. Early in his presidency, he initially resisted denouncing white nationalists after a deadly 2017 rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, fuelling perceptions that he sympathised with their cause. His



President Donald Trump speaks, with a flag behind him, during a campaign rally at Cecil Airport in Jacksonville, Florida. — Reuters

TRUMP LEAVES BEHIND AN EVEN MORE POLARISED AMERICA, WHERE THOUSANDS ARE DYING DAILY FROM THE PANDEMIC, THE ECONOMY IS BADLY DAMAGED AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE HAS SURGED

harsh rhetoric often worsened racial crises that flared over police killings of Black people on his watch.

“Sadly, he is the natural outcome of the history of divide and conquer”, in American race relations, said Reverend William Barber, a prominent civil rights activist and co-chair of the Poor People’s Campaign, an anti-poverty, anti-racism movement that Martin Luther King helped organise in the 1960s. “The thing is, he just pushed it all the way.”

Trump has repeatedly denied any racist animus. His staunch supporters

argue that he served as a corrective to prior administrations of both parties that let down the poor, the working class and rural regions that have struggled in recent decades. That base of support remains large — another likely legacy of the Trump era.

Alex Bruesewitz, an organiser for Stop the Steal, a pro-Trump group protesting the election results, said the president retains his appeal to working-class voters. “They felt like they were the forgotten men and women. And the president said, ‘You are forgotten no longer’”, Bruesewitz said. — Reuters



# Gallantry at Gabba

RECORD-BREAKING INDIA STUN AUSTRALIA TO CLINCH FOUR-TEST SERIES

**BRISBANE:** India pulled off a record run-chase in a thrilling final session to hand Australia their first defeat at Brisbane's Gabba ground since 1988 and clinch the four-Test series 2-1 on Tuesday.

Wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant starred with a swashbuckling 89 not out as the injury-depleted visitors overhauled the 328-run target with three overs to go, winning by three wickets.

Australia had not been beaten at the Gabba since falling to Viv Richards' all-conquering West Indies side by nine wickets in November 1988.

India's 329 for seven also smashed the 69-year-old record for the biggest run-chase at the ground, set by Australia who scored 236 for seven to beat the West Indies in 1951.

The Border-Gavaskar series win was a stunning turnaround after India were bowled out for their lowest Test score of 36 to lose the first Test in Adelaide, before bouncing back to win the second in Melbourne.

The visitors, ravaged by injuries and captain Virat Kohli's absence for paternity leave, then bravely batted throughout the final day to draw the third Test in Sydney.

Australian media called the win a "miracle", while former England captain Michael Vaughan said it was "one of the greatest if not the greatest Test victory of all time".

"It really means a lot to us. I don't know how to describe this victory but I'm really proud of all

| SCOREBOARD                  |                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Australia 1st innings       | 369                                                                                                          |
| India 1st innings           | 336                                                                                                          |
| Australia 2nd innings       | 294                                                                                                          |
| India 2nd innings           |                                                                                                              |
| R Sharma c Paine b Cummins  | 7                                                                                                            |
| S Gill c Smith b Lyon       | 91                                                                                                           |
| C Pujara lbw Cummins        | 56                                                                                                           |
| A Rahane c Paine b Cummins  | 24                                                                                                           |
| R Pant not out              | 89                                                                                                           |
| M Agarwal c Wade b Cummins  | 9                                                                                                            |
| W Sundar b Lyon             | 22                                                                                                           |
| S Thakur c Lyon b Hazlewood | 2                                                                                                            |
| N Saini not out             | 0                                                                                                            |
| Extras (b18, lb8, nb3)      | 29                                                                                                           |
| Total (7 wickets, 97 overs) | 329                                                                                                          |
| Fall of wickets:            | 1-18, 2-132, 3-167, 4-228, 5-265, 6-318, 7-325                                                               |
| Bowling:                    | Starc 16-0-75-0, Hazlewood 22-5-74-1, Cummins 24-10-55-4, Green 31-10-0, Lyon 31-7-85-2, Labuschagne 1-0-4-0 |

the boys," said India's interim skipper Ajinkya Rahane.

"They showed character, attitude, especially after the Adelaide Test match. We decided we're going to fight really hard... and we just wanted to give our best."

Man-of-the-match Pant, who played similarly explosive innings in the drawn Sydney Test, blasted his 89 from 138 balls with nine fours and a six. His innings followed an equally impressive knock from 21-year-old Shubman Gill, who made 91 at the top of the order earlier in the day.

**COMPLETELY OUTPLAYED**

Cheteshwar Pujara's 56 was also vital, the gritty number three hit 10 times by Australia's quicks, taking blows to the fingers, arm, ribs and head as he was subjected to a searching examination by Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood.



## MAN-OF-THE-MATCH PANT BLASTED HIS 89 FROM 138 BALLS WITH NINE FOURS AND A SIX

Cummins with 4-55 was easily the pick of the Australian attack, but the rest of the bowlers looked fatigued after bowling all day in Sydney just eight days ago.

"I'm absolutely disappointed, no doubt about that," said Australia captain Tim Paine.

"It's probably a little bit of a trend in the whole series — I think in the key moments we were found wanting and completely outplayed by a really disciplined, really tough Indian side who fully deserved the series win."

Despite Australia's fearsome

record at the Gabba, the Indian batsmen showed no fear and never looked interested in playing for a draw, even after losing the wickets of Pujara and Mayank Agarwal after tea.

Pant took advantage of any loose ball, but also played some

outrageous strokes, showing the influence of T20 cricket.

**HIGH INJURY TOLL**

India started the day on four for none after bowling Australia out for 294 late on the fourth day.

Australia raised hopes of a series-clinching Rohit Sharma edged Cummins to wicketkeeper Paine, who took a fine diving catch. But as India have shown since their capitulation in Adelaide, they are never out of the contest.

Their effort in the fourth Test is even more admirable considering the high injury toll on tour.

Their bowling attack was led by Mohammad Siraj, who debuted in Melbourne, supported by Navdeep Saini, Shardul Thakur, T Natarajan and Washington Sundar, who had two Tests between them.

After just one wicket in the first session, Australia could only manage two after lunch, with Gill falling for his superb 91 and skipper Rahane a quickfire 24.

Gill was magnificent on a fifth-day wicket, smashing the Australian bowlers to all corners.

He hit eight fours and two towering sixes in his 146-ball innings before he became Nathan Lyon's 398th Test victim, edging an arm ball to first slip where Steve Smith took a sharp catch.

India looked in control through the final session and despite losing three wickets in the last hour, they got home with three overs to spare when Pant hit the winning four off Hazlewood. — **AFP**



### Messi handed two-game ban for Sunday's red card

Barcelona's Lionel Messi has been handed a two-match ban for his sending off against Athletic Bilbao on Sunday. The punishment was confirmed by the Spanish Football Federation(RFEF) on Tuesday. Messi fouled Asier Villalibre late in the Spanish Super Cup final which Barcelona lost.



### Mandzukic joins AC Milan on short-term deal

Serie A leaders AC Milan announced on Tuesday the arrival of former Croatia striker Mario Mandzukic on a six-month contract. Free agent Mandzukic, 34, who retired from international football after losing the 2018 World Cup final, returns to the Italian top-flight after four years with Juventus.

# Mendis shines as OC Chairman's XI beat Dromedary

SHAHZAD RAZA  
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Oman Cricket Chairman's XI retained the Camel Trophy by beating Dromedary Club, a team of British expats in Oman, by 16 runs in a nail-biting finish to the annual exhibition game at Oman Cricket Academy's floodlit Turf 1 in Amerat on Monday.

The two teams play the match once every year to uphold the sportsman's spirit the gentleman's game so vividly espouses across the world.

OC Chairman's XI, led by Janab Sayyid Qais bin Khalid al Said, in the absence of team captain Pankaj Khimji, posted an imposing 216 for 4 on the board in 25 overs with the help of major contributions from Mendis (33 off 25), Qais (31 off 13), Hemal Mehta (28 off 17), Wilson Burboz (20 not out off 9) and Mazhar Qayyum (20 off 25). Craig and Williams claimed two wickets each.



OC Chairman's XI captain Janab Sayyid Qais bin Khalid al Said and Dromedary captain James Lansdell with the coveted Camel Trophy

The carpet-like picturesque ground that enjoys Test status from ICC was lit up by lovely strokes from former Sri Lankan great Duleep Mendis who topscored before retiring in line with the match rules that require a batsman to close his innings after he has faced 25 balls or

scored 30 runs, whichever comes first.

Despite his age, the 68 years old Mendis reproduced his customary cuts and flicks and lovely drives that made him one of the most elegant batsmen of his time. "Although I was playing after a gap of ten years it felt good

to be in the middle holding a bat. It was a pleasure to play for the OC Chairman's XI for the first time and I look forward to our next outing," said Mendis.

Determined to alter the course of history and take the Camel Trophy home for the first time since its inception in 2018,

Dromedary made a whirlwind start to its innings, racing to first hundred for two inside the first 10 overs before its opponent started to make amends.

OC Chairman's XI fought back in great style with a flurry of wickets to slow down the run rate for a close finish. Requiring 22

to win the final over, Dromedary could manage only six before getting dismissed 200 in 24.4 overs. Luke topscored with 49, batting twice, while captain James Lansdell hit up 36. David was the third main scorer with 21.

Mazhar Qayyum was the pick of OC bowlers, taking 2 for 16. Alkesh Joshi picked up 2 for 29 while Wilson took 2 for 37 with Qais claiming 1 for 25.

The teams were served a scrumptious dinner with the courtesy of Khimji Ramdas, which has been a regular sponsor of the annual event.

Dromedary captain thanks Oman Cricket for its hospitality and wonderful facilities at OCA.

"It was great game of cricket made more special by the spirit in which it was played. We wish to thank the ground staff too for providing an excellent track to play on as more than 400 runs were scored in 50 overs which is fantastic work," added the British team's captain.



AC Milan's Zlatan Ibrahimovic shoots to score a penalty and open the scoring during the Serie A match against Cagliari at the Sardegna Arena in Cagliari. – AFP

## Ibrahimovic double as Milan pull clear off Inter

MILAN: Zlatan Ibrahimovic scored twice on his first start in two months as AC Milan beat Cagliari 2-0 on Monday to pull ahead of city rivals Inter on top of the Serie A table.

Ibrahimovic, 39, got the first from the penalty spot after seven minutes, adding a second just after the break in Sardinia.

Milan, targeting their first league title since 2011 when Ibrahimovic last played in the team, pull three points ahead of Inter who beat champions Juventus 2-0 in the San Siro on Sunday.

"This victory is a sign above all to ourselves more than Inter," said coach Stefano Pioli.

"We all want to bring Milan back to the top. The team will do everything from here to the end.

"Now we have an important game against Atalanta (Saturday), we focus on that, then in March and April we will see where we are."

Ibrahimovic proved he has returned to his best after injury, with the club set to sign former Juventus and Bayern Munich forward Mario Mandzukic to help their title push.

"Ibra will take care of keeping him (Mandzukic) at bay," joked Pioli.

The Swede brought his tally

to 12 goals in eight games with five doubles, including a brace on November 22 against Napoli, when he picked up the thigh injury which sidelined him.

### 'ONE MORE WEAPON'

Milan shook of the absences of defender Theo Hernandez and midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu who tested positive for coronavirus.

The visitors quickly took control of the game after Cagliari defender Charalampos Lykogiannis fouled Ibrahimovic.

Ibrahimovic decided to take the penalty ahead of regular spot kicker Franck Kessie after the Swede had missed twice from the spot twice before his injury.

Cagliari goalkeeper Alessio Cragno cleared a long-range Davide Calabria effort after 24 minutes with the Italy defender hitting the post 10 minutes later.

Back after the break Ibrahimovic connected with Calabria's long-range effort finishing off with the goal confirmed after a VAR review.

Milan held their advantage despite playing the final quarter of an hour a man down after Alexis Saelemaekers was sent off for two bookings, ten minutes after coming off the bench.

— AFP

LONDON: Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang struck twice as Arsenal defeated Newcastle United 3-0 in the Premier League on Monday, condemning Steve Bruce's side to a ninth game without a win in all competitions.

After a dreadful start to the season, Mikel Arteta's side are now up to 10th place in the league and they never looked in danger against a Newcastle side that looks demoralised.

Aubameyang struck the post in the first half and Alexandre Lacazette forced a good save out of the Newcastle keeper just after the interval.

But Aubameyang finally fired the Gunners ahead in the 50th minute, finishing off a counter-attack, running at the Newcastle defence and then blasting home a powerful left-foot drive at the near post.

Ten minutes later Bukayo Saka made it 2-0 with a confident slot home after good work down the left flank from impressive youngster Emile Smith Rowe, who jinked his way around the back of the Newcastle defence before delivering a pinpoint pass.

Aubameyang completed the comfortable victory after Cedric Soares got to the byline and pulled the ball back into his path.

VAR examined whether the ball had crossed the line before Cedric's pass but allowed the goal to stand.

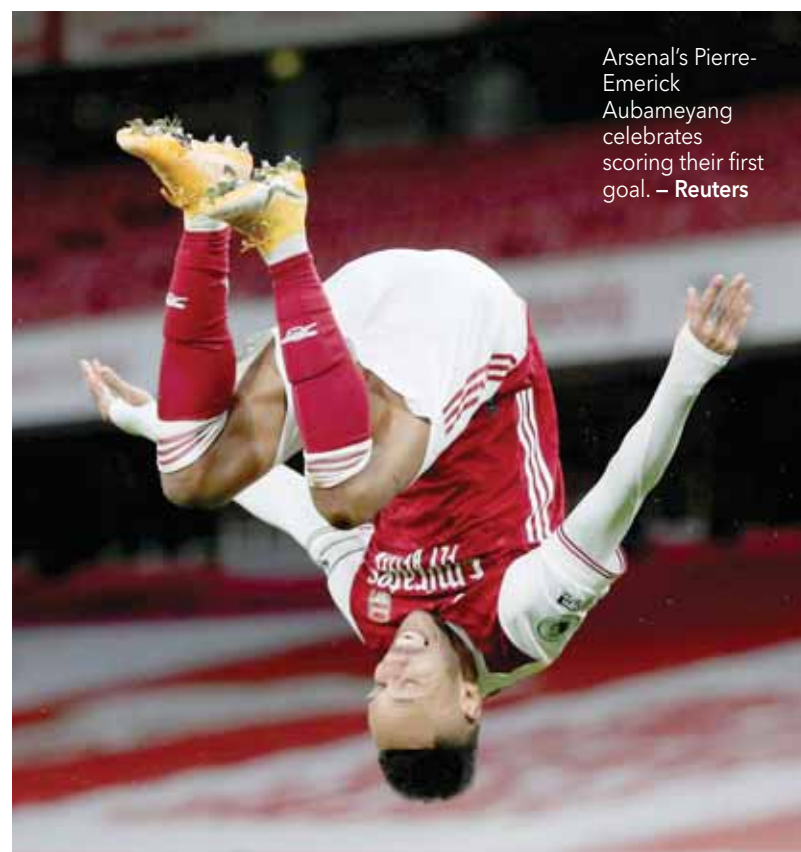
Arsenal have now kept a clean sheet in five straight games in all competitions.

"I'm really happy overall. Really positive performance, collective and individually we looked really solid and convincing from the first whistle," said Arteta.

"It took us a little bit longer than I expected to score the first goal but I really like the chemistry,



Arsenal's Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang scores their first goal. – Reuters



Arsenal's Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang celebrates scoring their first goal. – Reuters

cohesion and rhythm the team played with."

Aubameyang had only netted

three goals prior to Monday's game and his manager was delighted to see him score his first

double since last season's FA Cup final.

"He needed that for his confidence and the team needs that to be successful. We need him at his best. We were missing his goals, we all know that so to have them back is great for the team," he said.

Newcastle boss Steve Bruce had made eight changes to his team after the defeat to bottom club Sheffield United and was disappointed his team could not improve on a solid first half.

"We gave as good as we got and got into ourselves some decent opportunities but that little bit of confidence has ebbed away for sure. We were caught in the second half where we didn't see it coming from the first-half performance," he said.

Asked about his future, the experienced Bruce said: "I am trying to do the best I possibly can as always but you will have to ask others about that." — Reuters

# Rustaq camp to groom national swimmers

Team to continue with technical programme: Coach Filipovic



ADIL AL BALUSHI  
MUSCAT, JAN 19

The Oman swimming team will continue with their technical preparatory plan for the forthcoming assignments despite cancellation and postponement of many top sporting events including GCC Games in Kuwait and Asian Games in China.

Oman's talented swimmer, Issa al Adawi, will move on with special training in Japan as he will represent the Sultanate in Olympic Games in Tokyo.

Srdan Filipovic, Oman national swimming head coach, said the

team will move ahead with the set plan although the decisions on cancellation and postponement of many tournament and championships.

“We had managed to have many series of domestic camp sessions in Muscat and Al Rustaq after the decision o restart sporting activities in the Sultanate. I believe this should continue to ensure top development in the swimmers performance towards the forthcoming events”, the coach said.

Omani swimmer Al Adawi, who is based in Tokyo, will have an international assignment prior



Head coach Srdan Filipovic

to the top significant assignment  
in Olympic Games in Tokyo.

“Issa will take part at the Russia Open Championship which will be held in Moscow city in April.

OMAN'S TALENTED  
SWIMMER, ISSA AL  
ADAWI, WILL MOVE  
ON WITH SPECIAL  
TRAINING IN JAPAN AS  
HE WILL REPRESENT  
THE SULTANATE IN  
OLYMPIC GAMES IN  
TOKYO

It is a golden attempt for him to shape and raise the preparation level before the prestigious participation at Olympic Games in Tokyo. Furthermore, Issa had registered a new Omani record in MIE (Japan) in 100 free swimming with a time of 50.1seconds. The national swimmers will have another Asian challenge as they will take part in the Asian Swimming Championship in Bangkok city”, the Serbian pointed out.

The Sultanate swimming team will have an internal camp at Al Rustaq Sports Complex and that will take place in February. "In the

next internal gathering, the aim is to continue further with the set and planned programme to address our weaknesses and boost strong points”, the coach said.

Oman's national team swimmers had a domestic camp at the Al Rustaq Sports Complex in last September under supervision of the head coach Srdan Filipovic.

The national swimming team probables: Noaf al Qasmi, Aiman al Qasmi, Naif al Qasmi, Abdulrahman al Kulaibi, Shihab Aladyn, Mohammad Aulad Thani, Omar al Balushi, Nasser al Kindi, Hamis al Hassani, Bashar al Kulaibi and Adam al Raisi.



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## Oman Shell launches 25 MW solar plant in Sohar Freezone

**NEW AMBITIONS:** Sohar Solar Qabas is Shell's first industrial-scale solar project in the Middle East

**BUSINESS REPORTER**  
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Oman Shell launched the 25-MW Qabas solar plant at Sohar Port and Freezone, helping the hub become more sustainable and demonstrating the commercial benefits of solar power for industrial purposes. Owned by Shell, Sohar Solar Qabas is the company's first utility-scale, photovoltaic (PV) solar project in the Middle East and in Oman.

The plant is located on a 50-hectare site within Sohar Freezone and consists of over 88,000 solar modules. The renewable electricity output from Qabas is supplied to a large ferrochrome production facility, displacing the equivalent gas-fired power generation taken from the grid and avoiding more than 25,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions annually.



(L to R) Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidi, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones; Walid Hadi, Oman Shell's VP & Country Chairman; and Omar bin Mahmood al Mahrizi, CEO Sohar Freezone and Deputy CEO for Sohar Port at the launch of Sohar Solar Qabas

The project was completed to budget and on time while meeting Oman Shell's stringent Goal Zero safety standards. It was accomplished despite unprecedented challenges created by the global COVID-19

pandemic.

Oman Shell has future ambitions to facilitate solar energy development within the Sultanate. Walid Hadi, Oman Shell's VP & Country Chairman commented: "This is an incredible project and

the first of its kind for Shell in the Middle East and in Oman, while being in line with our ambition to become a net-zero emission energy business by 2050 or sooner.

I thank the Omani government,



The project was completed to budget and on time while meeting Oman Shell's stringent Goal Zero safety standards. It was accomplished despite unprecedented challenges created by the global COVID-19 pandemic

particularly the Sohar Port and Freezone, for their collaboration and support on a project with potential for long-lasting economic value for the Sultanate."

Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidi, Chairman of The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) commented, "I would like to congratulate Oman Shell and Sohar Free Zone for inaugurating this solar

project in Suhar. The facility is an important milestone and it aligns with Oman Vision 2040, the Sultanate's national economic ambition.

It is the first step for the Public Authority of Special Economic Zones and Free Zones' plan for solar projects equating to 1 gigawatt in Sohar. This will help free up natural gas for other industrial use."

## Oman's largest red meat project launches new brand

**BUSINESS REPORTER**  
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Al Bashayer Meat Company, the Sultanate's first integrated red meat project — and the biggest of its kind in the region — celebrated the launch of its retail brand of red meat products.

'Bushra', the red meat brand, was unveiled at a ceremony held at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC) on Monday. In attendance were officials from Oman Food Investment Holding Company (OFIC), the parent organisation of Al Bashayer, as well as Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the main sovereign wealth fund of the Sultanate of Oman.

Set up in Thamrait in Dhofar Governorate, the integrated project features an array of farms for the rearing and fattening of livestock, such as cattle, goats and sheep. The total capacity of the project is in excess of one million head of livestock annually.

Besides supporting the Omani government's food security objectives, Al Bashayer will also make available fresh red meat products for the domestic market, slaughtered and packaged in high-tech



Set up in Thamrait in Dhofar Governorate, the integrated project features an array of farms for the rearing and fattening of livestock, such as cattle, goats and sheep. The total capacity of the project is in excess of one million head of livestock annually

conditions. The plant's state-of-the-art abattoir features two sophisticated slaughtering lines — one dedicated to sheep and goats, and the other for cattle.

## Construction work begins on Oman's first inland port facility

**KEY FEATURE:** The inland port is one of several anchor projects that will underpin Khazaen's development into a leading destination for logistics, light-industrial, food processing and distribution activities in the Sultanate.

**CONRAD PRABHU**  
@conradprabhu

Construction work has commenced in earnest on the Sultanate's first inland port facility at Khazaen Economic City, the country's first integrated logistics hub, which is coming up at Barka midway between Muscat and Sohar Port.

The inland port — also known as a 'Dry Port' — is one of several anchor projects that will underpin Khazaen's development into a leading destination for logistics, light-industrial, food processing and distribution activities in the Sultanate.

Khazaen, the master developer of the Economic City, said in a post that the Dry Port will also make an important contribution to, among other things, achieving the objectives of the National Logistics Strategy 2040, which seeks to position the Sultanate as a leading logistics-friendly destination regionally and globally.



**Dry Port will also make an important contribution to, among other things, achieving the objectives of the National Logistics Strategy 2040, which seeks to position the Sultanate as a leading logistics-friendly destination regionally and globally**

The announcement comes just over a year since Khazaen Dry Port Company, a consortium headed by Marafi — the wholly Omani government-owned port operator — signed an agreement with Khazaen for the development and operation of the Dry Port

initiative. Marafi, with a 50 per cent equity stake in the dry port company, is joined by leading Omani corporate entities Khimji Ramdas Shipping (30 per cent) and Al Madina Logistics Services (20 per cent) in the delivery of the venture.

Under the deal, Khazaen Dry Port Company secured a lease covering around 250,000 sq metres of land within Khazaen for the establishment of the Dry Port in phases. In Phase 1, the joint venture is committed to developing around 100,000 sq metres of the site with an investment of RO 10 million.

When operational, the new

dry port will be more than just a half-way point for the storage of shipping containers bound for, or arriving from, Sohar Port. Besides enabling the speedy flow of cargo containers to and from the maritime port, the inland freight terminal will also pave the way for stuffing and destuffing of cargo containers, aggregation and redistribution of goods, maintenance and repair of shipping containers, and so on.

Additionally, the presence of Customs services on-site will enable the clearance of import and export containers at Barka, thereby alleviating potential congestion at the entry points into Sohar Port. **TURN TO PAGE 14**

# Price reduction in UK house sales to beat tax deadline

There has been encouraging news for house buyers in the UK with property prices falling on average by nearly £3,000 over the last fortnight. It is to tempt buyers to squeeze in a purchase before the end of the stamp duty holiday on March 31.

Prior to that, with 2020 ending on a record high, property prices in Britain, at one point, had been set to grow an average of four per cent this year, despite the looming end of the tax break and forecasts of rising unemployment.

But now, according to leading estate agents prices this year are likely to remain flat.

Online property firm, Rightmove said asking prices for the property advertised in November and December were 6.6 per cent higher than a year

earlier, after people “reprioritised housing needs high on their life agendas” during the pandemic.

Britain’s housing market had received an unexpected boom after the first raft of COVID restrictions were lifted in June, as people sought better houses and jumped on a temporary reduction in purchase taxes.

In July, the government had announced a stamp duty holiday for properties purchased for under £500,000, leading to a build-up of transactions over the last few months as buyers rushed to complete sales before the deadline.

Rightmove had said last month – prior to the latest price reduction – underlying demand and cheap borrowing costs were unlikely to dampen activity.

“There’s likely to be a lull in quarter two unless the stamp



ANDY JALIL  
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BRITAIN’S HOUSING MARKET HAD RECEIVED AN UNEXPECTED BOOM AFTER THE FIRST RAFT OF COVID RESTRICTIONS WERE LIFTED IN JUNE, AS PEOPLE SOUGHT BETTER HOUSES AND JUMPED ON A TEMPORARY REDUCTION IN PURCHASE TAXES

duty holiday is extended, but for many buyers, its removal will not be make or break, though may lead them to reduce their offers to a degree,” Rightmove’s director of property data, Tim Bannister, said. He added: “Our 2021 forecast of a 4 per cent (now revised down) price rise is more conservative than the unsustainable 6.6 per cent national average seen in 2020.”

The Bank of England in October reported that lenders approved the highest number of new mortgages since 2007, while mortgage lender Halifax said house prices had risen by the most since 2004 in the five months since the earlier lockdown ended.

Jeremy Leaf, London estate agent and a former RICS residential chairman, said: “At the coalface, we are experiencing

much the same but expecting a busy first quarter as buyers and sellers rush to take advantage of the stamp duty concession.”

He added: “However, we don’t anticipate a cliff-edge scenario at present. Nearly all sales agreed seem to be proceeding to exchange of contract, unless exceptional circumstances prevail and prices are not being widely renegotiated in anticipation of a market fall due to Brexit, the pandemic or potentially worsening economic news.”

The rise in house prices had been faster than expected, particularly in December, to record their biggest annual increase in six years, according to Nationwide data this month.

After a collapse in house purchases during the first months of lockdown, there had been a

surge in demand, driven in part by the temporary exemption of Stamp Duty. More UK mortgages were approved in November than for any month since before the 2008 global financial crash.

UK banks signed off on more than 100,000 new mortgages in November. The new home lending defied expectations of a slowdown in the housing market boom that started after the first COVID-19 lockdown.

Bank of England showed UK banks approved 104,969 mortgages in November, up from 98,338 the previous month.

Effective interest rates on new mortgage borrowing ticked up to 1.83 per cent. This was despite England being in a national lockdown for most of November and December.

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

## Construction work begins on Oman’s first Dry Port

FROM PAGE 13

Longer term, Khazaen Dry Port Company sees the potential for ‘road trains’ to be operated between Khazaen and Sohar Port.

Road trains are primarily heavy trucks hauling two or more semi-trailers laden with shipping containers – a feature that contributes to greater efficiency in the transportation of cargoes and ultimately increased cost savings.

Given Khazaen’s location adjoining the Batinah Expressway, road trains carrying multiple containers or other cargoes represent a cost-effective alternative to the present mode of transporting one 40-foot or two 20-foot containers per truck.

Furthermore, heavy cargo movement on the Batinah Highway will be predominantly diverted to the Expressway once the dry port is operational, it is hoped.

# Energy Oman celebrates formal launch

BUSINESS REPORTER  
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Energy Oman – the newest print and digital magazine of Oman’s expanding and diversifying energy sector – was formally launched at a ceremony held at the W Hotel last week, attended by leading personalities representing key stakeholder institutions in the industry.

Eng Salim bin Nasser al Auqi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, was joined by Ali bin Khalfan al Jabri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Information, in the unveiling of the inaugural edition.

The bimonthly publication, which was ‘soft’ launched last November on the occasion of Oman’s 50th National Day, is the product of a collaborative endeavour involving leading Omani energy professionals and *Oman Daily Observer*.

Speaking at the launch, Al Auqi congratulated the magazine’s Omani promoters on their success in bringing out a “quality” magazine focused primarily on the Sultanate’s vital energy sector, encompassing not only Oil & Gas,



but also electricity, renewables and minerals as well.

“When I saw the first edition and went through it, I said to myself: This is a very courageous move. For someone to put all of the effort and resources into producing a magazine like this on a (bimonthly) basis, it takes a lot of courage; It’s not the usual product that we deal with in the Oil and Gas sector – because you have to think about your audience, you have to think about your resources. You are constantly knocking on people’s doors asking for stories and for contributions – it takes a lot of time,” he remarked.

Al Auqi described Energy Oman as a welcome alternative to energy publications produced by international publishers for the Omani market. As a magazine “locally produced, locally designed and suited for the local market”, Energy Oman will go a long way in catering to the country’s energy industry, he noted.

The Under-Secretary also said he felt “proud” to have the magazine displayed in his office and to hand out copies to visitors.

“It provides excellent material to those who want to see what’s happening, what’s new, what is

being developed and so on,” he said, adding that the publication would also serve as an informative resource for universities and research institutions.

Earlier, in welcome remarks, Abdullah al Harthy, Chairman – Energy Oman, underlined the magazine’s signature feature as an ‘In-Country Value’ (ICV) initiative. Guiding the magazine’s editorial policy and content, he said, is an all-Omani Advisory Board comprising Eng Saif al Salmani, Technical Director – CCED; Dr Anwar al Kharusi, Vice-President – Upstream Business Development, Upstream Business Unit – OQ; Eng Fahmy al Musharafi, Oil & Gas Investor; and Dr Omar al Jaaidi, General Manager – ARA Petroleum LLC.

Also present at the launch event were Eng Abdulrahman al Yahyaei, CEO – Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL); Dr Abdullah al Abri, Executive Director – EJAAD; Eng Yaqoob al Kiyumi, CEO – Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP); Abdullah al Shueilli, Editor-in-Chief – *Oman Daily Observer*, and Dr Hussain al Salmi, Acting Rector – Gutech.

## Omantel App garners 1 million users



MUSCAT: Omantel has entered the year 2021 buoyed on a great achievement that underscores the Company’s growing popularity as the preferred integrated telecom services provider among customers in the Sultanate.

The user-friendly Omantel App has clocked 1 million users and continues making it easier to avail the company’s array of services, for an increasing number of users.

The milestone has been achieved within one year from the revamped App launch on January 9, 2020. From around 368,000 registered users at the beginning of 2020, Omantel saw the number grow to 1 million users, with a monthly average acquisition of new customers by 200 per cent. The in-app monetisation for the company has increased by 90 per cent since December 19.

Dr Jihad al Ansari, Senior Manager, Digital Operations at Omantel said: “It gives me immense pride to highlight this achievement. The 1 million mark is not just a reason to celebrate, but also the time to set higher goals. I am confident that Omantel will achieve more milestones in customer service by channelling technology and moulding it into a user-friendly avatar for our subscribers as well as non-subscribers so that they derive maximum benefit from the telecom and digital revolutions.”

## REFER YOUR FRIENDS AND WIN UP TO RO 5,000 PRIZES WITH BANK MUSCAT’S AL JAWHAR REFERRAL SCHEME

In line with the bank’s vision “To serve you better, everyday”, and commitment to offering the best services in Oman to benefit its customers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, has called upon its Privilege Banking customers to make the best use of the ongoing Al Jawhar referral scheme.



The promotional scheme gives Al Jawhar customers a chance to earn up to RO 5,000 by referring their friends and family members to join the Privilege Banking services.

The scheme is at present seeing an excellent response. Abdulnasser al Raisi (pictured), Deputy General Manager - Premier Banking, said: “In line with its prolific role as an innovator, Bank Muscat is very happy to launch this new scheme with guaranteed rewards.

All existing Al Jawhar customers will earn an incentive of RO 50 for every successful referral, up to a maximum of 100 referrals. New referrals who successfully open an Al Jawhar account before the last date of the scheme will also win RO 50 each. This makes the scheme a win-win proposition for both existing customers as well as their family and friends when they join the largest banking family in the country.”

## ALIZZ ISLAMIC BANK APPOINTS NEW SHARI’A SUPERVISORY BOARD

Alizz Islamic Bank recently announced the appointment of a new Shari’a Supervisory Board. Shaikh Dr Essam Khalaf al Anzi was appointed Chairman of the Sharia Supervisory Board. Shaikh Dr Ahmed Subhi Ahmed Ayadi and Shaikh Nasser bin Youssef al Azri were appointed as members.



The Shari’a supervisory board of Alizz Islamic Bank reviews all Islamic banking agreements, documents, products and services launched by the Bank. The Board includes members who are knowledgeable about Shari’a law and transaction jurisprudence in particular.

They work in accordance with the Central Bank of Oman and with the higher Sharia Supervisory Authority to provide the bank customers with peace of mind by offering products and services that are approved by fatwas and resolutions. The Shari’a Supervisory Board also helps reassure shareholders and depositors whose trust is undoubtedly one of the most important factors for the bank’s success. It is also through the contribution of their knowledge and experience play a key role in the success of the Islamic banking in the Sultanate.

## THREE BANK NIZWA EMPLOYEES AMONG THE TOP 300 INFLUENTIAL WOMEN IN ISLAMIC FINANCE



Oman’s pioneering and most trusted Islamic bank, Bank Nizwa, has been a frontrunner in promoting gender diversity at workplace, giving equal opportunities to women employees to prove their mettle.

In recognition of these efforts, three of the bank’s employees have featured in the Women 2020 report’s list of 300 most influential women in Islamic business and finance globally, released by the prestigious Cambridge Institute of Islamic Finance. The three employees, holding senior positions in the bank, are Haifa Abdul Ali al Lawati, Head of HR, Sayyida Wisam Jaifer al Said, Head of Marketing and Corporate Communications and Amal Said al Juma, Chief Manager – Wealth Management.

Speaking about empowering Omani women as a key focus area for Bank Nizwa, Khalid al Kayed, CEO, Bank Nizwa, said, “Banking and finance are growing to be a preferred career choice among women. We have seen an increased interest from female candidates in Islamic finance jobs as well.”

# Canada scrambles to salvage Keystone XL pipeline

**OTTAWA:** US President-elect Joe Biden's expected move to cancel the Keystone XL pipeline prompted Canada's main oil-producing province of Alberta on Monday to threaten to seek damages as Ottawa made efforts to save the troubled project.

Scrapping the project would threaten Canadian jobs and the US-Canadian relationship as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tries to turn the page on the Donald Trump era, though the idea drew support from environmental groups and progressive US Senator Bernie Sanders.

A source said on Sunday that Biden will cancel a permit for the \$8 billion project over concerns about fossil fuels contributing to climate change, dealing a blow to the Canadian energy sector.

The news sent shares in Keystone XL owner TC Energy lower on Monday and prompted Alberta Premier Jason Kenney to urge Trudeau to reach out to the incoming Biden administration in the next 48 hours. Biden, a Democrat, is due to take the oath of office on Wednesday.

"This is the 11th hour and if this really is the top priority, as it should be, then we need the Government of Canada to stand up for Canadian workers, for Canadian jobs, for the Canadian-United States relationship, right now", Kenney told a news conference.

He said Alberta had retained legal counsel and believed there was a "very solid" legal basis to seek damages under international free trade agreements if the



Men work on the construction on the Keystone XL pipeline in Montana. — AFP

pipeline is effectively killed by presidential fiat.

Alberta's financial exposure is just over C\$1 billion (\$783 million), Kenney said, after the province last year invested in the pipeline, also known as KXL.

KXL is intended to carry 830,000 barrels per day of oil sands crude from Alberta to Nebraska but has run into fierce opposition from US landowners, Native American tribes and environmentalists.

Outgoing Republican President Donald Trump had supported the project.

Diplomats in Ottawa continue to engage with their American counterparts over Keystone XL, two sources close to the Keystone XL file said, and one of them said TC Energy is still lobbying.

"We don't have a decision from the Biden administration at this point. We should continue to work", one source said, adding Trudeau had consistently supported the pipeline and would continue to do so.

"It's not over until a decision is public." "While there have been reports suggesting a decision is imminent, our sense is very much that it remains possible this could drag out for several weeks", a second source said.

Trudeau's government has previously urged the president-elect not to halt construction. Canadian Natural Resources Minister Seamus O'Regan said in a statement on Monday that Canada would continue to push for KXL with the Biden administration.

— Reuters



A 3D-printed oil pump jack is placed on dollar banknotes in this illustration picture. — Reuters

## Oil prices climb on economic optimism

**SINGAPORE:** Oil prices climbed on Tuesday as optimism that government stimulus will buoy global economic growth and oil demand trumped concerns that renewed COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns globally could cool fuel consumption. Brent crude futures for March gained 55 cents, or 1 per cent, to \$55.30 a barrel by 0737 GMT after slipping 35 cents in the previous session.

US West Texas Intermediate crude was at \$52.52 a barrel, up 16 cents, or 0.3 per cent. There was no settlement on Monday as US markets were closed for a public holiday. Investors are upbeat about demand in China, the world's top crude oil importer, after data released on Monday showed its refinery output rose 3 per cent to a new record in 2020. China was also the only major economy in the world to avoid

a contraction last year as many nations struggled to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Yesterday's data out of China was a positive for oil prices", Michael McCarthy, Chief Market Strategist at CMC Markets in Sydney said. Investors are watching out for US President-elect Biden's inauguration speech on Wednesday for details on the country's \$1.9 trillion aid package. OANDA's Asia-Pacific senior analyst Jeffrey Halley said: "Like other asset classes, oil has received a gentle US stimulus tailwind in Asia."

Oil prices have also been supported by Saudi Arabia's additional supply cuts in the next two months which are expected to draw down global inventories by 1.1 million barrels per day in the first quarter, ANZ analysts said.

— Reuters

# Oil companies to press Biden to allow Venezuela fuel swaps

**CARACAS:** Representatives of fuel suppliers to Venezuela, importers of Venezuelan oil and advocacy groups said this month they plan to press the incoming administration of US President-elect Joe Biden to reverse a ban on crude-for-diesel swaps.

The Trump administration since the last quarter of 2020 has barred companies from sending Venezuela diesel in exchange for crude. Those deals were exempted for more than a year from sanctions on state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela SA, aimed at ousting President Nicolas Maduro, who has overseen an economic collapse.

That has prompted concerns about the humanitarian impact of a possible deficit of diesel, widely used in Venezuelan public transportation, agriculture, and as fuel for generators used as a backup for frequent blackouts.

Farmers are already warning that shortages are impeding sugar harvesting and rice planting.

A more acute scarcity of diesel would add to widespread gasoline shortages in Venezuela, as domestic refineries are working at a fraction of their installed capacity. Washington has not authorised PDVSA's customers to supply the crisis-stricken Opec nation with gasoline for over a year.

"Public transit uses a lot of diesel", said Feliciano Reyna,



Workers walk past PDVSA oil tank in Caracas, Venezuela. — Reuters

President of Caracas-based aid group Accion Solidaria focusing on HIV/Aids treatment and other medical relief activities.

"We hope that the incoming Biden administration can take a more strategic look at the purpose of the sanctions, and can lift those that don't change the position of the group in power and instead create problems for the population", Reyna said.

A spokesperson for Biden, who takes office on January 20, declined to comment. Biden has labelled Maduro a dictator, and advisers said he was likely to maintain some sanctions while seeking more consensus among

US allies about how to apply them.

Companies that frequently engaged in the swaps with US government authorisation include India's Reliance Industries Ltd, Spain's Repsol SA, and Italy's Eni SpA.

The permits allowed the firms to refine Venezuelan crude in exchange for diesel even amid sanctions.

A person close to Reliance said the company had sent Biden allies briefing materials on the potential humanitarian fallout of the ban on diesel swaps in the hopes the new administration would reinstate the exemption. "Our objective is, do it on Day 1",

said the person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The person added that the Trump administration in November turned down a request from the company to participate in a swap offered by PDVSA that would have let the firm import Venezuelan crude in exchange for diesel.

A Repsol spokesman said the company "is in constant dialogue with the authorities in Venezuela and the US to ensure that the company remains compliant", and said the company would "continue its engagement with the incoming Biden administration."

— Reuters

## SHORT TAKES

### PARIS

#### COVID-19, economic impact are top global threats

Business and government leaders currently see the loss of life from COVID-19 and related economic effects as the world's greatest short-term threats, the World Economic Forum said on Tuesday.

The group which organises an annual get together of leading industrial and political voices at the Swiss Alpine resort of Davos carries out a survey of its members beforehand to determine what they consider as the greatest global threats.



Unsurprisingly, this year the COVID-19 pandemic is at the top of the list for short-term threats, though climate change remains among the top long-term concerns. — Reuters

### BRUSSELS

#### Europe's new car registrations continue to decline

Europe's new car registrations continued to fall in December, data published by the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association, or ACEA, showed on Tuesday.

Car registrations were down 3.3 per cent on a yearly basis, but slower than the 12 per cent fall logged in November. Data showed that the four largest EU markets reported very different results.

Sales in Italy declined 14.9 per cent and that in France slid 11.8

per cent.

Meanwhile, Germany registered a robust growth of 9.9 per cent and Spain's sales remained stable.

In the whole year of 2020, the market recorded its biggest yearly drop in demand since records began. EU passenger car market contracted 23.7 per cent to 9.9 million units as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

All 27 EU markets recorded double-digit declines throughout 2020. — dpa

### BERLIN

#### Germany consumer prices fall as estimated

Germany's consumer prices declined in December, as initially estimated, final data from Destatis showed on Tuesday. The consumer price index decreased 0.3 per cent year-on-year in December, same as seen in November, as estimated.

Energy price inflation eased to 6.0 per cent in December. Excluding energy prices, inflation was 0.4 per cent.

Prices for clothing and footwear declined 5.4 per cent yearly in December and communication



cost fell 3.4 per cent. Transportation cost declined 2.7 per cent. Prices for furniture, household equipment, and health fell by 0.9 per cent and 0.5 per cent, respectively. — Reuters

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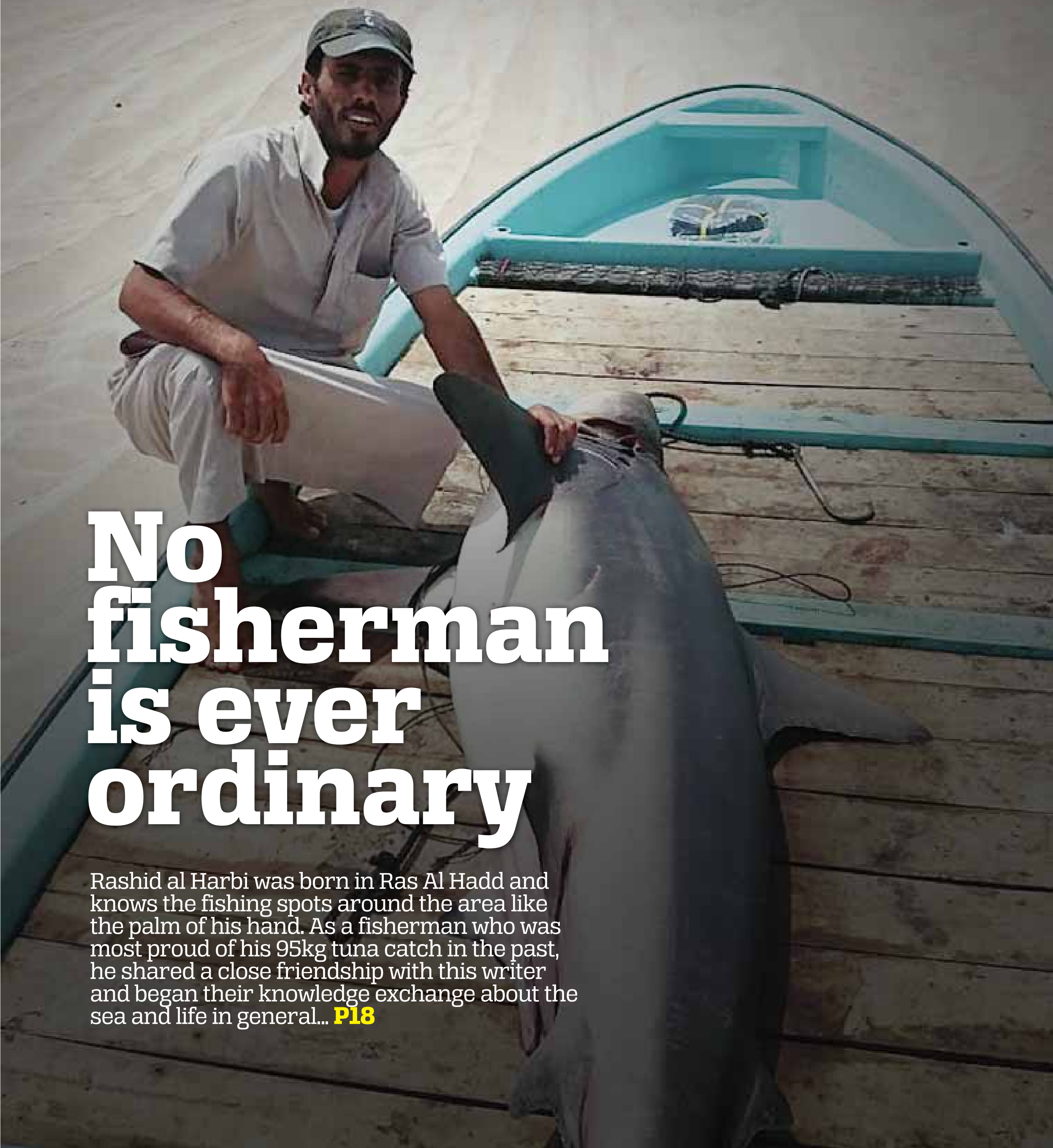
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# features

OMAN OBSERVER f t i y t u www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om



# No fisherman is ever ordinary

Rashid al Harbi was born in Ras Al Hadd and knows the fishing spots around the area like the palm of his hand. As a fisherman who was most proud of his 95kg tuna catch in the past, he shared a close friendship with this writer and began their knowledge exchange about the sea and life in general... **P18**

## INSIDE STORIES

### ENTERTAINMENT



#### US-BASED MUSICIAN DREAMS OF PERFORMING AT ROHM

He was born and brought up in Oman — and today is one of India's leading and talented musicians. At a young age, he has under his belt several accolades including the creation and production of music used in a commercial for one of the automobile giants in the world... **Story on Page P20**

### DISCOVERY



#### WORLD'S OLDEST KNOWN CAVE PAINTING FOUND IN INDONESIA

Archaeologists have discovered the world's oldest known cave painting: a life-sized picture of a wild pig that was made at least 45,500 years ago in Indonesia... **Story on Page 19**

### READ



#### SPYING ON WHALES

BY NICK PYENSON

This book is an enjoyable read about whales, both entertaining and enlightening with an excellent bibliography if you want more. It is not just about science but also about the pursuit of science.

### CHANGING WORLD



#### INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS ARE A VACCINE PRIORITY IN WARY INDONESIA

Among the first in the queue for coronavirus vaccines in Indonesia has been one conspicuous group — social media influencers... **Story on Page 19**

### WHAT'S TRENDING



#### TOM HANKS TO HOST BIDEN INAUGURATION TV SHOW

The universally beloved actor Tom Hanks, "Forrest Gump" star will host a special programme broadcast simultaneously on all major US networks on the night of Biden's inauguration, American media reported.



# No fisherman is ever ordinary

BY RAY PETERSEN

Myself, the son of a fisherman, I am intrigued by the why? The great American essayist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau pondered, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing it is not fish that they are after."

Maybe he is right, maybe it is not always what we want but the needs that drive us to do what we do, and we romanticise the justification. The commercial fisherman seeks a living for himself and his family, and catching fish is a way to do that. The sports fisherman seeks a contest, solitude, calm, serenity and catching fish is often a bonus. We rarely 'go fishing' simply to catch fish. That said, I think Captain Ahab wanted to catch Moby Dick, didn't he?

A sport fisherman, I met Rashid al Harbi on a Sharqiyah beach one afternoon, and we chatted, as is the fishermen's custom. We fishermen will share everything except our best fishing spots! We chatted about fish, fishing, fishermen and the English language that he speaks very well. He must have had a good teacher at his Ras Al Hadd school, and we swapped contact numbers. Rashid has since then been my 'go-to man,' for weather and sea conditions before leaving home on our more than the two-hour journey to the Sharqiyah coastline and he has proven incredibly obliging and helpful.

Rashid bin Sutta bin Juma al Harbi is 32-years-old, born in Ras Al Hadd, married, though as yet not blessed with children, and like his brothers, like his father, and like most of his wider family, Rashid is a fisherman.

He keeps his boat ashore in

Ras Al Hadd, and has respect for, although no fear of the sea. "I know most places in these waters", he said, "and most days I will motor around fifteen kilometres to the best fishing grounds for the Tuna which I love fishing for the thrill, because of that, it is fun, though difficult work and I must keep fit, strong and healthy."

Most of the time he fishes with the plastic 'Rapala' type lures which have revolutionised fishing for predator species at sea. They are plastic imitation fish that 'wobble' in the water like wounded and vulnerable baitfish. Most have two hooks and are towed along behind the boat at various depths, determined by the weight and design of the lure, and at speeds which are each fisherman's secret.

"We have to go fast enough to get the predators like Mahi Mahi and Tuna to attack the lure without looking too closely at it, or they will see it's not real, and yet slowly enough they can attack it. That is the skill."

"One day", he shared, "I caught a 95kg Tuna and hauled it aboard my boat alone. I was exhausted, elated, happy and sad all at once."

This relationship between fishermen and fish is a complex one, with respect and admiration in evidence as a worthy foe or a young, immature fish is often returned to the sea.

Yet men need victories, and sometimes despite that respect, we must do what we must do, and to paraphrase Turkish poet Mehmet Murat ildan, "the moment when the fisherman catches the fish, is one of agony and ecstasy, darkness and light, joy and sadness, life and death, all come face to face in a moment."

"The sea is amazing, and I see whales, dolphins and turtles all the time, but there are not many big sharks in the sea now, so there is nothing to fear. The fish are getting harder to catch,



maybe because we catch too many, or maybe they are just getting too clever for us?" he thought aloud. The remarkable Vincent van Gogh is more renowned for his art than his words, yet he philosophised that, "The fisherman knows that the sea is dangerous and the storms terrible, yet they have never found this sufficient reason to stay ashore." And here he may well be true.

Rashid al Harbi perpetuates a

family legacy, a cultural, hereditary and traditional link to the sea, and his enthusiasm is genuine, he wishes to be an ordinary man, "not special", and yet, no fisherman is ever ordinary. If ever he heard these immortal words of Ernest Hemingway, he would revel in their sincerity: "Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman, but that was the thing I was born for."

WILDLIFE

## ‘Game of Thrones’ dire wolves far apart from other canines: Study



**PREHISTORIC DIRE** wolves made famous by the TV series "Game of Thrones" prowled the Earth for thousands of years before being wiped out at the end of the Ice Age.

Known as *Canis dirus* — "fearsome dog" — they hunted down and feasted on large mammals, so when species such as giant bison went extinct dire wolves lacked prey, contributing to their decline.

But a study published last week in *Nature* points to another reason the top predators may have died out around 12,000 years ago after lording over the food chain for nearly a quarter of a millennium — their inability to breed with other wolf species.

Anatomical similarities had led scientists to suggest that grey wolves and dire wolves could be close enough genetically to produce offspring, as did modern humans and Neanderthals.

"Our genetic results show these two species of wolf are much more like distant cousins, like humans and chimpanzees", said co-lead author Kieren Mitchell from Australian Adelaide University.

Mitchell and his team sequenced the DNA from five fossil dire wolf bones ranging from 50,000 to 12,900 years old.

The authors found dire wolves last shared a common ancestor with other wolf-like canines around 5.7 million years ago, also the approximate date for the last common ancestor for chimps and humans.

**Biological barriers**

"When we first started this study we thought that dire wolves were just beefed up grey wolves", said senior author Laurent Frantz from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich.

"So we were surprised to learn how extremely genetically different they were."

Dire wolves probably originated in the Americas in geographical isolation from the Ice Age ancestors of grey wolves and coyotes, which evolved in Eurasia and North America, the researchers said.

But dire and grey wolves almost certainly roamed the same territory for the last 20,000 years before dire wolves went extinct, so the lack of interbreeding is a surprise, the researchers said.

"There must have been biological barriers — lack of interfertility — or behavioural impediments, such as the offspring not being able to integrate with the pack of a different species", Frantz told AFP by phone.

A lack of interbreeding may have hastened the dire wolf's demise, but the hypothesis remains untested, said co-lead author Alice Mouton, most recently a post-doctoral researcher at the University of California Los Angeles.

"Perhaps the dire wolf's inability to interbreed did not provide necessary new traits that might have allowed them to survive", she said.

Larger and heavier than the modern grey wolf, scientists say they were nonetheless smaller than the fictional dire wolves made famous by the "Game of Thrones" series.— **AFP**



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## INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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## DISCOVERY

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## CHANGING WORLD

## Instagram influencers are a vaccine priority in wary Indonesia



**AMONG THE** first in the queue for coronavirus vaccines in Indonesia has been one conspicuous group — social media influencers.

Alongside President Joko Widodo as the world's fourth most populous country kicked off its vaccination drive on Wednesday was Indonesian television personality, Raffi Ahmad, who boasts almost 50 million followers on Instagram.

"Alhamdulillah [Praise be to God] a vaccine... Don't be afraid of vaccines", the 33-year-old celebrity wrote under a video of him receiving the shot, next to a heart emoji and another of Indonesia's red and white flag.

Deciding who should be first in line for limited vaccine doses has been a challenge around the world, with many countries prioritising vulnerable medics and the elderly.

Senior health ministry official, Siti Nadia Tarmizi, said the decision to include influencers alongside almost 1.5 million healthcare workers in the first round of inoculations was a deliberate government communications strategy.

Although Indonesia faces the most severe coronavirus outbreak in Southeast Asia — with more than 869,000 cases and 25,000 deaths — there has been skepticism around the safety and efficacy of any vaccine, and in the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation, whether it is halal, or allowed under Islam.

Indonesians are among the top global users of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

The health ministry did not say how many influencers would be first in the

vaccine line, but others due to receive a shot on Thursday included musicians Ariel, of the band Noah and Risa Saraswati.

Ahyani Raksanagara, head of Bandung's health agency, told Reuters the artists would "hopefully convey positive influence and messages" about the vaccines and especially to young people.

A poll last month showed just 37 per cent of Indonesians were willing to be vaccinated while 40 per cent would consider it, and 17 per cent refused.

Some doctors have raised doubts over Indonesia's initial use of Chinese company Sinovac Biotech's CoronaVac vaccine — with studies from Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey showing efficacies ranging from 50-91 per cent.

But in another possible boost for chances of acceptance, the country's top Islamic council has deemed the vaccine halal.

However the decision to include social media influencers on the priority list backfired somewhat when photos of Raffi showed him partying hours after he was given the injection — which does not confer immediate immunity.

The images of him unmasked and flouting social distancing protocols with a group of friends drew criticism on social media, with calls for him to set a better example.

"It also shows the government is inconsistent in prioritising who gets the vaccine first", said Irma Hidayana, cofounder of pandemic data initiative LaporCOVID-19, "They should've done it with another health worker, maybe, not an influencer." — **Reuters**

# World's oldest known cave painting found in Indonesia

**A**rchaeologists have discovered the world's oldest known cave painting: A life-sized picture of a wild pig that was made at least 45,500 years ago in Indonesia.

The finding described in the journal *Science Advances* on Wednesday provides the earliest evidence of human settlement of the region.

Co-author Maxime Aubert of Australia's Griffith University said it was found on the island of Sulawesi in 2017 by doctoral student Basran Burhan, as part of surveys the team was carrying out with Indonesian authorities.

The Leang Tedongnge cave is located in a remote valley enclosed by sheer limestone cliffs, about an hour's walk from the nearest road.

It is only accessible during the dry season because of flooding during the wet season — and members of the isolated Bugis community told the team it had never before been seen by Westerners.



Measuring 136 by 54 centimeters (53 by 21 inches) the Sulawesi warty pig was painted using dark red ochre pigment and has a short crest of upright hair, as well as a pair of horn-like facial warts characteristic of adult males of the species.

There are two hand prints above the pig's hindquarters, and it appears to be facing two other pigs that are only partially preserved, as part of a narrative scene.

"The pig appears to be

observing a fight or social interaction between two other warty pigs", said co-author Adam Brumm.

Humans have hunted Sulawesi warty pigs for tens of thousands of years, and they are a key feature of the region's prehistoric artwork, particularly during the Ice Age.

### EARLY HUMAN MIGRATION

Aubert, a dating specialist, identified a calcite deposit that had formed on top of the

painting, then used Uranium-series isotope dating to confidently say the deposit was 45,500 years old.

This makes the painting at least that age, "but it could be much older because the dating that we're using only dates the calcite on top of it", he explained.

"The people who made it were fully modern, they were just like us, they had all of the capacity and the tools to do any painting that they liked", he added.

The previously oldest dated rock art painting was found by the same team in Sulawesi. It depicted a group of part-human, part-animal figures hunting mammals, and was found to be at least 43,900 years old.

Cave paintings such as these also help fill in gaps about our understanding of early human migrations.

It's known that people reached Australia 65,000 years ago, but they would probably have had to cross the islands of Indonesia, known as "Wallacea."

This site now represents the oldest evidence of humans in Wallacea, but it's hoped further research will help show people were in the region much earlier, which would resolve the Australia settlement puzzle.

The team believes the artwork was made by Homo sapiens, as opposed to now extinct human species like Denisovans, but cannot say this for certain.

To make handprints, the artists would have had to place their hands on a surface then spit pigment over it, and the team are hoping to try to extract DNA samples from residual saliva. — **AFP**



# US-based musician dreams of performing at ROHM

BY TITASH CHAKRABORTY

He was born and brought up in Oman — and today is one of India's leading and talented musicians. At a young age, he has under his belt several accolades including the creation and production of music used in a commercial for one of the automobile giants in the world.

In 2018, *Oman Daily Observer* was in conversation with Prateek Rajagopal, a rockstar of many slashes. A music composer, producer, guitarist, SFX designer & mix engineer for bands, TV commercials/ad films, shorts, one of his aspirations is to create his full-length feature in the future.

He was referred to as one of the most versatile songwriters amongst various sub-genres in Heavy Metal in India. Highly considering Oman as his second home, he has the dream to someday play at the country's prestigious Royal Opera House Muscat.

At the time, Prateek was in between doing courses and wrapping up commercial work and was about to go on vacation, he said, "I'll continue working on transcribing some of my orchestrated (midi) scores to staff, write a Gutslit song or two, and continue the back and forth work for acquiring and releasing assets for HOIA's album this year.

My next big goal is to score movies and films!"

Prateek is now a composer, producer and guitarist who has gracefully received accolades, recognition and awards as an artist, and has been featured on Red Bull Music, Rolling Stone, VICE, Prog Magazine, Rotosound, Metal Injection and a multitude of popular media for his accomplishments. Having collaborated with

**Highly considering Oman as his second home, Prateek has the dream to someday play at the country's prestigious Royal Opera House Muscat. As a composer in LA, he hopes to meet and share a long-term, viable and gratifying relationship with every director, collaborator and story-teller**

some of the brightest musical minds and having written and produced music across various genres. He has developed a unique understanding of the distinctive ways to communicate through music.

As a composer in LA, he hopes to meet and share a long-term, viable and gratifying relationship with every director, collaborator and story-teller.

As of 2020, Prateek wrote

and produced the climax song for an Indian-American feature starring Emraan Hashmi, worked with David Lynch's son on a 15-minute short film and worked on a Netflix gig (unfortunately can't reveal the name yet) where I did music producing, musical sound design and world-building for the main composer Michael Kramer, a two-time Emmy nominated composer and multi-instrumentalist for film, television, and video games.

A graduate of USC's prestigious film scoring program, he currently scores the hit Cartoon Network TV series LEGO Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitsu, for which he received a 2020 Emmy Award nomination.

At almost 10 years and counting, the show is the network's longest-running animated program and airs in more than 30 countries.

Additionally, he enjoys sculpting sounds from scratch using analogue tools, musical sound-design and experimental technology, giving each project its own sonic identity. From conducting Hollywood's most sought after orchestras to touring alongside the topmost metal bands, Prateek has developed a unique understanding of the distinctive ways to communicate through music.

