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OMAN U-16 FOOTBALL TEAM RESUMES TRAINING SESSIONS

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SOHAR ALUMINIUM HOT METAL PRODUCTION SOARS TO NEW RECORD IN 2019

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TURTLE LADY RECALLS MASIRAH DAYS

OMAN

HM greets Uzbek, Slovak presidents

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of the Republic of Uzbekistan on his country’s Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health and well-being to President Mirziyoyev and the friendly Uzbek people further progress and prosperity. His Majesty has also sent a cable of greetings to President Zuzana Čaputová of the Slovak Republic on her country’s National Day. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to President Čaputová and her country’s friendly people. — **ONA**

Crude price at \$45.74 a barrel

MUSCAT: Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME) said that Oman oil price for October delivery on Monday reached \$45.74. The price of Oman oil rose \$1.28 from the price of last Friday, which was \$44.46. The average price of Oman oil for September delivery has stabilised at \$43.62, thus \$2.03 per barrel higher than August delivery. Meanwhile, Brent crude futures rose 27 cents to \$46.08 a barrel, while US crude gained 14 cents to \$43.11.

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:32

DHUHR: 12:12

ASR: 15:39

MAGHRIB: 18:30

ISHA: 19:42

EX-MINISTERS’ CONTRIBUTION APPRECIATED



His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received at his office on Monday former members of the Council of Ministers. HH Sayyid Fahd underscored His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s commendation of the former Cabinet members’ contribution towards the missions entrusted to them. **SEE ALSO PAGE 2**
PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI

Longer wait likely for scheduled flights

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, AUG 31

Even as the authorities confirmed the preparedness of the airports to resume normal flight operations, the lifting of ban on scheduled flights from Oman is expected to take slightly longer.

It may be noted that the Civil Aviation Authority’s (CAA) guidelines for airlines operating special flights from Oman, which ended on Monday, has been extended until further notice. The unscheduled and special flights to facilitate the travel of citizens and

foreigners between the Sultanate and various countries will continue during this period.

Oman Air on Monday confirmed that its planes and staff are ready to fly anytime.

“Our planes and staff are ready and Oman’s airports are ready, too. When we fly, we will provide safe, careful service to our guests, along with all travel-related information and requirements,” Oman Air said in a statement.

Flights which pass the Omani airspace, domestic services to Khasab airport and oil concession

areas will continue to operate as per the guidelines laid out by the government, CAA said.

Meanwhile, volunteers will help the authorities in implementing the COVID-19 precautionary measures as and when Muscat International Airport reopens for normal traffic.

The participation of the volunteers was sought by a group called TaawonNetwork, which works under the supervision of the Omani Society for Human Resources Management.

WHERE IS YOUR MASK?

COVID-19 CURVE GOING UP AS MANY FLOUT REGULATIONS

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, AUG 31

Business as usual is what everyone wants, but there is an element of fear that commercial activities are back to normal. Coffee shops have always been a favourite among youngsters as well as senior citizens, but the latter has been able to control the urge to explore the outdoors to great extent in the wake of COVID-19.

As Barka al Bakry stood out looking from her balcony overlooking the Al Hail beach she said she was astounded to see families going in groups with children and joining the crowds.

“COVID-19 curve is going up again. I see so many people walking without a mask – grownups, elderly and youngsters. We must wear a mask. Why are we going backward now?” she questioned.

She added, “Instead of vigorously following instructions and the guidelines by wearing a mask we have now given it up. This is dangerous. We need to go back to wearing our mask. In



addition there are places on the beach where people are throwing their masks and even on the roads. This has to stop. Please try your best to wear the mask. It is very important”.

There is a desperation many feel as others have been enjoying the outdoors. They are surprised at the sudden relaxation in people’s behaviour. Mohammed al Farsi enjoys cycling everyday in Shatti Al Qurum, and he noted that ever since the cafes and restaurants opened there is a change in the mindset of people.

Lebanon’s new PM visits blast-hit Beirut

BEIRUT: When Lebanon’s new premier-designate Mustapha Adib went for a surprise stroll through Beirut’s disaster zone on Monday, he shook hands, chatted with baffled passers-by, then earned hostile shouts of “revolution”.

In a country traumatised by the massive August 4 explosion and worn down by political turmoil and economic pain, the brief encounter between the new leader and the people signalled the difficulties ahead for Adib.

In the capital’s blast-ravaged Gemmayzeh neighbourhood, most residents did not immediately recognise the man in a pressed white shirt and dark tie who had come down to greet and comfort them.

But they soon realised their clean-cut visitor, a former diplomat sporting neatly trimmed grey hair and surrounded by a small entourage, was none other than their brand new prime minister.

“Who’s that? A Canadian minister?” one security guard asked as Lebanon’s 48-year-old former ambassador to Germany walked past, before it dawned on him: “Is it Adib?”

Strolling along a road flanked by gutted and half-collapsed buildings, Adib was the first top Lebanese politician to visit the devastated district since the massive blast at the nearby port. His surprise walk came over three weeks after French President Emmanuel Macron had been cheered by crowds there. — **AFP**



Alizz Islamic Bank presents many exciting offers celebrating the 50th National Day!

Alizz Islamic Bank has announced a suite of special offers, discounts and cash prizes to usher in Oman’s 50th National Day, which is celebrated annually on the 18th of November. The landmark golden anniversary will be marked by the Bank in its customary style with a campaign aimed at building up the excitement for the Day.

This campaign is scheduled to run from September 1st 2020 to the end of December 2020, and will provide a platform for Alizz customers to avail a host of offers and prizes. The National Day campaign will include offers such as 50% discount on the monthly credit card fees, limited edition debit and credit cards that feature that majestic 50th National Day logo, 5% cash back on purchases of groceries, pharmaceutical items, clothing and fuel. As well as bill payments conducted via the Alizz Islamic Bank mobile banking application, cash prizes for the first 500 customers that deposit OMR 5,000 or transfer their salary to Alizz Islamic Bank, and whopping cash prizes of OMR 50,000 for customers of Bushra Prize Savings Account.

This campaign will open up the opportunity for Alizz Islamic Bank customers to win cash prizes totaling OMR 50,000. The prize money, available for Bushra Prize Savings account holders whose average balance exceeds OMR 100, will be distributed among 50 lucky winners, each of who will receive OMR 1,000. In addition, Alizz Islamic Bank will also conduct its monthly draw to pick one lucky winner who will walk away with OMR 50,000, and a second winner, who will get OMR 25,000. A special monthly draw will also be held for female customers, where 10 winners will receive OMR 1,000 each. In addition to 10 winners from each of the Bank’s branches, that will receive OMR 1,000 each.

بنك العز الإسلامي
alizz islamic bank

Alizz Islamic Bank has also announced the launch of its limited edition debit and credit cards, which will be imprinted with the glorious National Day logo to create a memorable insignia. Further, the Bank will gift OMR 50 each to the first 500 people who transfer their salaries to Alizz Islamic Bank; another OMR 50 each will go to the first 500 customers who deposit OMR 5,000 or more into their accounts in Alizz Islamic Bank.

The National Day campaign will also see the launch of a 5% cash-back offer for customers using the Alizz Islamic Bank’s mobile banking application to pay bills. Corresponding to this offer is a 5% cash back when using the Alizz Islamic Bank credit card to purchase groceries, pharmaceutical items, clothing and fuel. The customers can also look forward to a %50 discount on the monthly credit card fee.

Providing services, products and offers that help realize our customers’ ambitions is what drives Alizz Islamic Bank and the bank focuses its efforts in ensuring that their goals are achieved. This campaign comes as part of the ongoing offers that Alizz provides to various segments of society. Detailed attention is given to ensure that the offers chosen are shaped according to the needs and wants of customers. Alizz Islamic Bank’s prime objective is to ensure that the bank customers get the maximum benefit. The bank continues to spare no effort to be one of the leading banks as far as customer satisfaction is concerned and is proud to celebrate this golden jubilee with the nation.

Cash prizes are “14iba” (qR) from the shareholders’ funds.
*Campaign Valid from September 1st 2020 to December 31st 2020

*Terms and conditions apply.

800 7 2265

www.alizzislamic.com

mobile banking





Terms & conditions apply

For more information: www.maisarah-oman.com/Default/MaisarahPrizeAccount.aspx

Grand Prizes

5,000 OMR For 1 winner per month	2,000 OMR For 1 winner per month	25,000 OMR For 1 winner	50,000 OMR For 1 winner	100,000 OMR For 1 winner
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#WinningIsEasier
with Maisarah Prize Account!

MAISARAH
البنك الإسلامي
Islamic Banking Services

Fahd hails contribution of ex-ministers



MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Council of Ministers, received former members of the Council of Ministers at his office on Sunday.

After a welcoming note, HH Sayyid Fahd underscored His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's commendation of the former Cabinet members' contribution towards the missions entrusted to them.

HH Sayyid Fahd expressed his thanks and appreciation for the constructive efforts exerted by the former Cabinet members, saying, "Your constructive efforts contributed to the steps and procedures undertaken during the past period," said HH Sayyid Fahd, adding that the former Cabinet members' expertise will reflect positively on the national action.

The ex-cabinet members valued the formidable support they received which, they reaffirmed, enabled them to perform their missions.

They expressed their willingness to offer their expertise in the service of this dear homeland and its wise leadership.

The meeting was attended by the Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers. — ONA



FROM **P1**

WHERE IS YOUR MASK?

"I think it is good that everything is opening up, but we need to be a very careful as people have gone from being stuck at home to being able to go out. And I think some are going a bit overboard. People have started playing football on the beaches and the social distancing is gone. I worry about cycling now because there is so much traffic and

cannot even go over the pavement. It has gone from one extreme to the other that I wonder if things are not set right we might have to go back to the lockdown days.

So right now it is almost like how it was before lockdown. I see no difference. We need to be careful and practice caution", observed Al Farsi.

Longer wait likely for scheduled flights

"In preparation for the return of operations at Muscat airport, as soon as the CAA directives are issued, the TaawonNetwork in cooperation with Oman Airports invited the volunteers."

According to TaawonNetwork, 1,179 people have registered as volunteers, and the interview process, currently held in batches, will be completed soon.

Volunteers are required to ensure

precautionary measures to deal with developments of the COVID-19 pandemic at the airport.

Speaking to the *Observer*, a member of TaawonNetwork said both citizens and residents are invited to be part of this volunteer group. "The selected volunteers will be trained until the formal reopening of the airport".

As per the details, volunteers should be able to speak fluently in Arabic and English, while

dealing with travellers, priority will be given for those who speak more languages. Alongside having good appearance and behaviour, the dress code will be Omani dishdasha for males and modest dress for females.

Only male volunteers will be on the evening shift.

Oman Airports has been working on the installation, and operation of PCR testing solutions.

Royal Decrees ensure better governance

DEVOLVING POWERS: 'Provincial and Municipal Affairs System' to fast track development, decentralise decision-making



KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, AUG 31

Better governance of governorates, faster implementation of projects, and decentralisation of powers among the governorates and wilayats are some of the aims of the Royal Decree 101/2020, 'Provincial and Municipal Affairs System' issued on August 18.

The Decree embodies the continuation of the development march in the wilayats and strengthening of the role of the governors. With this, each governorate enjoys individual entity, financial and administrative independence, fund allocation and maintenance of the budget reserves for future needs.

There are 11 governorates in the Sultanate. Each governorate comprises wilayats, which look after local development issues.

The Royal Decree ensures that each governorate can specialise in developing and investing resources to achieve sustainable development and to create job opportunities for the citizens.

The local and municipal tourism assets can be used for the progress of the respective governorates. They should work towards meeting the governorate's needs and availability of other government services and implement public projects in



The governors have more authority towards fund allocation, project implementation, and follow up and their authority will be more effective. The Municipality being a part of their authority will enhance quick development in these areas

DR ABOOD AL SAWAFI
University of Buraimi

coordination with the authorities concerned.

PROVINCIAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL
The Decree indicated the formation of a Council for Provincial Affairs is under the Minister of Interior, and with the participation of Ministers of State and Governor of Muscat, Dhofar, and Musandam.

As per the arrangement the Sultanate is represented by the Chairman of the Provincial Affairs Council or anyone delegated by

him in regional and international conferences, events and meetings related to municipal affairs. The council can sign agreements and memoranda of understanding taking into account the provisions of the basic law of the state and the decisions of the Council of Ministers in this regard.

Dr Abood al Sawafi, Vice Chancellor, University of Buraimi, said the Royal Decree is a great move to give more authority to the governorates and decentralise decision taking which will, over a period of time, contribute towards rapid development.

"The governors have more authority towards fund allocation, project implementation, and follow up and their authority will be more effective. The Municipality being a part of their authority will enhance quick development in these areas," he said.

He further said that unlike in the past when the delegation was centralised and often the implementation was delayed, the new delegation of powers will enable the governors to better understand and communicate with the stakeholders in a better way.

"The wilayats will see better development in the days to come."

Health Minister visits Nizwa and Ibra hospitals



MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health on Monday visited Nizwa Hospital in the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah and Ibra Hospital in the Governorate of North Al Sharqiyah to follow up the measures to fight the coronavirus. He was briefed on the role and efforts of medical and allied staff in addition to the therapeutic and preventive services provided for the patients and visitors.

Dr Al Saeedi reviewed the two hospitals' workflow and met a number of the their administrations and health workers in addition to the Governorates Health Services' officials where he commended their efforts in fighting COVID-19 and briefed them on the pandemic local and global updates.

The minister listened to the opinions of healthcare workers on how to improve the quality of the services and urged all staff to provide the best of their services.

— ONA



More glory for Omantel at CCGA Awards 2020

Oman's premier telecom service provider named Best Data/Capacity Provider of the Year and the Middle East Regional Operator of the Year



like submarine cables, data centers, network operations centre, telecom alliance and more are recognized to have given us a unique competitive advantage to reach further and accelerate digital transformation across the Middle East."

Omantel Wholesale capitalizes on ultra-low latency networks to enable innovation and digital transformation globally, utilizing Oman's geographic advantage at the absolute nexus of Asia, Africa and Europe, and the entrance to the Middle East.

Laying the foundation for Omantel's strong contention at this year's awards were several measures from 2018 where Omantel, under its Global Wholesale Transformation Project, took great strides in expanding its presence internationally in the Subsea Cable market and in restructuring its offerings to facilitate the growth of cloud, content, and next-generation communication globally, some of these achievements are:

- Being the European, and Omani, landing party of one of the world's largest subsea cable system, the AAE-1, connecting Singapore and Marseille, with Oman in the middle;
- Landing of the Gulf 2 Africa subsea system in Somalia as Omantel's first step towards expansion into Africa;
- Launch of its international wholesale company, Omantel International (OTI), which currently manages international voice business of the group;
- The imminent opening in Q3 2020 of the first world-class, carrier-neutral hub in Oman where carriers, content providers and cloud providers can co-locate critical IT infrastructure under the complete management of Equinix; and
- Launch of a new state-of-the-art 24/7 International Network Operations Centre (INOC), specifically tailored to the needs of the cloud and content-centric market, monitoring and supporting Omantel's international terrestrial or submarine cable systems.

Omantel's global infrastructure consists of over 20 international submarine cable systems connecting all the way from Oman to the West and East coasts of the USA serving a potential subscriber base of more than 2 billion people through direct access to more than 50 countries and 120 cities in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and North America. Omantel generated in 2019 a revenue of US\$ 6.733 billion.

Muscat, August 30, 2020 - Omantel, Oman's pioneering and only integrated telecommunications services provider, has been going from strength to strength and has now won even more international recognition for its innovative strategy.

Omantel Wholesale emerged winner at the 4th Carrier Community Global Awards (CCGA) 2020- Berlin, Germany, walking away with top honors in the Best Data/Capacity Provider of the Year and the Middle East Regional Operator of the Year categories, which is a prestigious achievement and a global recognition of its achievements in the wholesale business as a regional leader.

Omantel Wholesale, the company's international arm providing services and solutions to carriers and content providers outside of Oman, was selected among global telecom companies being recognized for innovations and achievements in the telecom wholesale industry by a panel of 13 international and independent telecoms analysts and industry experts.

Sohail Qadir, Vice Preside Omantel Wholesale, addressed the community and the audience by saying: "We are really honored to receive these Carrier Community Global Awards 2020, and we would like to thank the Carrier Community for selecting Omantel as a winner in the prestigious awards that truly reflects our commitment to boost the global wholesale industry. It is with great pride that our milestone achievements in various areas

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A CRAFT FIGHTS EXTINCTION



AL DA'AUN, A DATE PALM FROND CRAFT IS FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL SO ARE THOSE PROFICIENT IN THIS LINE OF WORK



AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, AUG 31

Al Da'aun, a date palm frond craft is fighting for survival so are those proficient in this line of work. The craft involves collecting date palm fronds and tying it with ropes to form a plank of length up to a meter and a half or more, depending on the purpose for which it is used.

They are used in making summer houses in the past, manufacture of roofs and the floors of local councils and some household items including those for storing and drying dates. The palm fronds are collected when the dates are about to turn ripe. Before harvesting, dry fronds are removed. These sticks are then assembled in groups. Each group consists of from 170 to 200 sticks that are tied with ropes. They are immersed in water for about three weeks and then taken out to dry them in the sun.

The craftsman then reshapes each bundle of sticks by placing them on the surface so that the tip of each stick is opposite to the next

in the direction. Then he begins the weaving process, using a large needle, with a rope made of palm fibre tied at the end. This starts from the side of the first stick until it reaches the end of the last stick, and then back again in the opposite direction. The weaving is done back and forth five or ten times in close distance from each side according to the size of the da'an. The process almost takes four hours.

After the sewing process is over, the da'an is again dried out for two weeks, after which it is suitable for use.

Masoud al Kindi from Nizwa, one of the craftsmen, who learned it from his ancestors, said: "Al da'an is mostly practised in the summer when the fronds are pruned annually to facilitate the farmer to climb the date palms to pollinate it and obtain its fruits. It is also done in the early days of the winter season, when some farmers clean their palms after the harvest season.

He explained that the work begins after pruning out the dry leaves and sorting them according to their sizes. After the sorting process, the fronds are divided according to the size and purpose.

— PHOTOS BY SAMI
AL HINAI



Ministry to streamline rules to attract investment



MUSCAT: Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, said that the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik stressed on streamlining procedures of government services for investors and customers through the prompt finalisation of their transactions in the shortest possible time, particularly electronic services.

Speaking about the merging of Ministry of Commerce and Industry,

the Public Authority for Investment Promotion (Ithraa) and the Centre for Competition Protection and Monopoly Prevention under Royal Decree No 97/2020, the minister said that the merger will expedite investment-related transactions and cut down the duplication of licence providers. This, he affirmed, will establish an investment-friendly climate in the Sultanate at a time all world countries are competing to attract investments.

Al Yousuf made the statement during a weekly meeting with the ministry's under-secretaries and directors-general aimed at rapprochement of officials' views so that all could work as one team. The aim is also to have a close look at work progress in different sections and sectors of the ministry while at the same time streamlining procedures, improving and developing services rendered to the sectors of enterprises and investments.

Al Yousuf pointed out that the ministry accords attention to all directorates and administrations across the Sultanate's governorates and to help them

shoulder their responsibilities in activating the economy, business and investment.

The minister called for concerted efforts to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040 as envisioned

by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. — ONA

COVID-19 recovery rate crosses 94% in Oman

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, AUG 31

Even as the coronavirus recovery rate crossed 94 per cent on Monday, caution is the word that comes from the authorities.

According to the latest statistics issued by the Ministry of Health, out of a total of 85,722 cases, 80,810 infected cases have recovered till Monday taking the rate to 94.2 per cent.

While reminding both citizens and residents to follow precautionary measures, the ministry reiterated, "it is the national responsibility of all to wear masks, and follow social and physical distancing guidelines to ensure the mitigation of the virus and the safety of the community".

The figures from the ministry

show that 50 infected people were hospitalised during the last 24 hours, taking the total number of admitted persons to different health institutions to 404.

The ministry urged everyone to adhere to social distancing measures and stay at home and do not go out unless it is necessary.

Although Oman's latest infection figures reflect a downward trend seen among GCC states in the recent weeks, the casualty graph has been showing an uptrend with the total number of deaths reaching 685 on Monday.

The World Health Organization last week insisted that wearing masks alone is not enough to prevent the spread of coronavirus, but people

need to maintain a safe distance from others.

"We are seeing that people aren't really adhering to the physical distancing anymore", said Maria Van Kerkhove, the technical lead of the global body's emergency programme, at a press conference.

"Even if you're wearing masks, you still need to try to do the physical distancing of at least 1 metre (3 feet) and even further if you can", the official said.

As of August 31, there were almost 25.4 million global cases of COVID-19. Over 17.7 million people had recovered from the disease, while there had been around 850,600 deaths.

In Saudi Arabia, the rate of

recovery has reached 92 per cent, out of a total of 314,821 cases. The number of deaths in the country reached 3,870, as of Sunday.

While in Kuwait, the Ministry of Health announced the total number of infected persons reached 84,636 cases, while two more persons succumbed, bringing the number of dead to 530.

In the UAE, 362 new cases were registered during the past 24 hours with the total number of cases reaching 69,690. The number of deaths in the country stood at 382.

On Qatar's latest statistics, there have been 168 new injuries, bringing the total active cases to 2,948 cases, while the recovery of 179 cases was recorded, bringing the total number of recoveries to 115,430 cases.

Start-up launches online supermarket to ease shopping

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, AUG 31

An Omani start-up has launched an online supermarket to make shopping easier. It has started its trial in Salalah and based on response, it has plans to launch in Muscat as well.

This is an easy solution for those who want to cut down outside visits to rule out the possibility of getting COVID-19.

Omani Vegetable Oils and Derivatives (OVOD) has identified this challenge and developed online supermarket for called 'Asbhar'. The company started its services on Monday.

"Our mission with this service is to help customers stay safe by providing a convenient online shop with competitive prices and free fast delivery", said Salim bin Thaman al Maashani, Managing Director of OVOD.

"We are operating from our existing warehouses in Salalah which gives us lower cost of operation compared to supermarkets situated at prime locations. We have passed on this benefit to the customers by keeping the prices low and absorbing the cost of delivery to motivate the customers in taking advantage of this service. We are happy with the recent directives on Omanisation for last mile delivery, and accordingly this service is also generating employment for our Omani youth", he added.

Abshar has a selection of essential products to cover full supermarket range including fruits and vegetables, meat and poultry, breads, dairy, food ingredients, drinks, snacks, along with non-food products such as soaps, shampoos, toothpaste, detergents, tissue papers and more. It also boasts a decent selection collection for baby milk, diapers and pet food. More products are being added everyday based on customer



Our mission with this service is to help customers stay safe by providing a convenient online shop with competitive prices and free fast delivery

SALIM BINTHAMAN AL MAASHANI
MD of OVOD

demand.

P S Kumar of OVOD said, "We are on a digital transformation journey and being headquartered in Salalah, we want to offer a digital solution as a service to this region. We are excited to be able to help the customers stay safer and provide grocery shopping without any hassle of driving, parking, pushing trolleys and carrying heavy shopping bags. Customers can rest assured on quality of the products, as we have expert staff who pay utmost attention to quality while sourcing products and packing customer orders".

Commenting on mode of payment, he said, "We encourage customers to pay online or pay using their cards at the time of delivery which makes it probably the safest way to buy groceries in Salalah. In case a customer is not happy with any delivery, we will be happily to take it back and refund full amount".

Al Dakhiliyah governor meets walis



AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, AUG 31

Shaikh Hilal bin Said bin Hamdan al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, met in his office the walis of the governorates of Al Dakhiliyah on Monday. The meeting hailed the Royal speech of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik in the last cabinet meeting where His Majesty the Sultan said that the state is continuing to give the governors the necessary powers to enable them to assume responsibility for revitalizing the economy, investment and trade.

The attendees affirmed that these

directives are an incentive for them to exert more effort to serve the local community in the governorate. They intend to put these directives into practice by setting priorities for future work.

The Governor also reviewed the Royal Decree No- (101/2020) on Governorates and Municipal Affairs System and the detailed articles that regulate work in the governorate during the coming period. It will contribute to the advancement of work and facilitate procedures to achieve the citizens' demands. The governor urged the walis to redouble efforts and take into account citizens'

views of their states and study them, and to coordinate and integrate with the various government agencies in each state in order to achieve the public interest.

The meeting discussed the progress of work in the governor's offices. Some periodic meetings will be held to evaluate the various stages of work and to overcome the difficulties facing the implementation of government plans and suggest appropriate solutions to them. They agreed to work on preparing periodic reports on the progress of work in the governorate and to start creating a comprehensive database when making future plans.




Recall Campaign for KIA Sorento (BL) & Carnival (VQ) for ABS PCB Relay Block Kit Installation



Date of Campaign : 1/09/2020

Recall Segment : Safety

Product Description : ABS PCB Relay Block Kit

Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle production range	VIN Range	No. of affected Vehicles
KIA	SORENTO (BL)	From 14th Dec. 2005 to 17th Dec. 2008	KNAJC526075658499 KNAJC525295899765	1319
	CARNIVAL (VQ)	From 10th June 2005 to 14th Dec. 2009	KNAMB763066020953 KNAMG813XA6327344	698

Description of defect:

Some vehicles might experience the electrical short on the ABS/ESC power module which may cause the moisture entering the Hydraulic Electronic Control Unit (HECU), which may result in an electrical short circuit. This campaign aims to install the ABS PCB Relay Block Kit on all the affected vehicles.

Procedure:

Verify affected vehicles as per VIN and install the ABS PCB Relay Block Kit.

For More Information:

Customers, who own Sorento (BL) & Carnival (VQ) models, may please contact M/s. Reliable International Automotive LLC for details / booking appointment etc from 1/09/2020 onwards for installations.

Contact Details:

Toll free No. 80073222 on all working days (Sunday to Thursday) between 08.30 to 17.30hrs.



Angry residents begin clean up in Karachi

MONSOON MAYHEM: Heavy rains continue to lash communities across South Asia

KARACHI: Karachi residents began cleaning ruined homes and businesses on Monday after catastrophic flooding sent rivers of filthy water cascading through Pakistan's largest city, while deadly monsoon weather continued to lash communities across South Asia.

Successive days of storms have exposed the longstanding failures of Karachi's neglected and overwhelmed drainage system, and residents used a welcome break in the rain to vent their fury at what they see as gross mismanagement of municipal resources.

"Everything got ruined in my basement, with about three metres of water inside. The water is a mix of rain and sewage water. It is the fifth day and we are suffering horribly," housewife Lubna Salman, who lives in an upscale Karachi neighbourhood managed by the military, said.

Salman and other angry residents gathered outside local authority buildings to blast officials for failing to fix drainage problems in the city of 20 million people.

Municipal and military managers were "grossly incompetent" for neglecting the



People stand in front of closed shops along a flooded street after heavy monsoon rains in Pakistan's port city of Karachi on Monday. — AFP

city's sewerage system, Salman said.

Authorities did not immediately comment.

Karachi last week saw a record 230mm (nine inches) of rain, compared to the average of 130mm for the time of year, according to

the city's meteorological service.

Videos and images on social media regularly show builders dumping rubble into drainage canals, while shoddy new buildings are erected with scant regard for their effect on maxed-out sewer

lines.

With a population of only 500,000 in 1947, Karachi has seen its population mushroom "without investing in invisible infrastructure (pipes and sewerage) for more than 30 years," Karachi-based

urban planning professor Nauman Ahmed said.

During a single day last week, 18 Karachi residents died from flood-related incidents. The water was so deep in places that children were seen swimming in the streets.

More than 100 Pakistanis died in August because of the monsoon, which has also destroyed more than 1,000 homes.

Rains and flooding have also swept India in recent days, killing scores of people.

In the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, at least 10 people died in rain-related incidents over the weekend, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

The Indian air force helped evacuate stranded villagers Sunday, with images showing families being winched up in the badly affected Chindwara district.

Rescue workers and the army have evacuated more than 10,000 people in the state so far.

The monsoon, which usually lasts from June to September, is essential for irrigating crops and replenishing water supplies across the Indian subcontinent, home to one-fifth of the world's population.

— AFP

Powerful typhoon approaches Japan

TOKYO: A powerful typhoon was barreling towards southern Japanese islands with dangerous winds on Monday as weather authorities warned of a "major disaster" in the region.

The Japan Meteorological Agency warned that Typhoon Maysak could bring with it storm surge, heavy rains, high waves and violent winds, potentially causing a "major disaster" in the Okinawa region. The agency also called on residents to "evacuate to sturdy buildings before winds get stronger".

Maysak is expected to gain further strength with maximum winds of 252 kilometres per hour (kph) when closing in on the island from late at night, Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki said.

A total of 180 flights from and to the Okinawa region had already been cancelled and many schools and public offices were closed from Monday afternoon, the *Okinawa Times* newspaper reported. As of 5 pm (0800 GMT), the eye of the storm was about 190 kilometres south of Naha, Okinawa's capital, travelling north-north-west at 35 kph with maximum sustained winds of 144 kph and gusts of 216 kph, the agency said.

Forecasters were warning of flooding, mudslides and swollen rivers, as the storm is expected to unleash up to 80 millimetres of rainfall per hour on some parts of the island of Okinawa. — **dpa**

Ishiba people's choice for next Japan PM

TOKYO: Former Japanese Defence Minister Shigeru Ishiba is the most popular choice among the public to be the next prime minister, media opinion polls showed, as the race kicks off to succeed Shinzo Abe after his abrupt resignation last week.

But Ishiba, a vocal Abe critic, could face an uphill battle if he does declare his candidacy, with local media reporting Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga was set to receive the backing of several major factions within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

Japan does not elect its leader by direct popular vote. Under the country's parliamentary political system, lawmakers elect a prime minister who is usually the leader of the ruling party.

Ishiba has about 34 per cent of the public's support, more than double the 14 per cent for Suga, the second-most popular choice, a weekend Kyodo News survey showed.

A Nikkei/TV Tokyo poll showed Ishiba with 28 per cent support, followed by current Defence Minister Taro Kono with 15 per cent. Suga came in fourth place with 11 per cent, the poll showed.



Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Shigeru Ishiba. — Reuters

The surveys highlight a split between public opinion and internal LDP politics.

Suga - a longtime lieutenant of Abe's in a key supporting role - will join the race to replace his boss with support expected from the faction led by LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai and other major factions, putting him in a favourable position.

Suga declined to comment on Monday when asked about the LDP leadership race at his regular news conference as the government's top spokesman.

Ishiba - who unsuccessfully

challenged the out-going premier in the last LDP leadership race in 2018 and is considered less popular within the party - has yet to declare whether he will run.

LDP policy chief Fumio Kishida, who has announced his intention to stand, came in last place in both of the public opinion surveys.

Kishida voiced caution on Monday over the idea of cutting the sales tax rate to help the economy weather the hit from the coronavirus pandemic.

Abe's resignation announcement on Friday, citing the worsening of a chronic illness, set the stage for the party leadership election, which public broadcaster NHK said was likely to place around September 13 to 15.

The LDP president is virtually assured of being prime minister because of the party's majority in the lower house of parliament.

Brad Glosserman, deputy director of the Center for Rule-Making Strategies at Tama University, said Suga was the safe bet in terms of internal LDP dynamics, but might not be ideal come election time. A general election must be held by late October 2021. — **Reuters**

Former Indian president Mukherjee passes away

NEW DELHI: Former Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, who had tested positive for COVID-19 this month, died on Monday after weeks in hospital.

He was 84. New Delhi's Army Hospital (Research And Referral) said earlier in the day that Mukherjee had gone into a septic shock after coming down with a lung infection. His medical condition had declined since Sunday, it added.

A veteran politician who served as foreign and finance minister in previous administrations led by the now-opposition Congress party, Mukherjee had friends on both sides of the political divide.

"He has left an indelible mark on the development trajectory of our nation," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Twitter, posting a picture of him touching Mukherjee's feet in



reverence.

"A scholar par excellence, a towering statesman, he was admired across the political spectrum and by all sections of society."

— Reuters

Off the air: Top Philippines broadcaster shuts stations

BAGUIO: Anchor Dhobie de Guzman has been the face of a popular news show in the northern Philippines for more than a decade. Now the closure of his regional station — and dozens of others countrywide — has left him out of work.

He is among hundreds of journalists to lose their jobs at ABS-CBN as the broadcasting giant — a critic of President Rodrigo Duterte — slashes its operations after advertising revenues were ravaged by the loss of its free-to-air licence in May.

The closure of 53 regional television and radio stations that broadcast in six languages will deprive millions of Filipinos of their main source of local news and entertainment.

"It's painful," de Guzman, 43, told last Friday after presenting the final "TV Patrol North Luzon" in a studio

240 kilometres from the capital Manila.

"You do your job responsibly, you do your share to change the life of ordinary people, then at the end of the day you lose your platform to do that." Congress last month rejected ABS-CBN's application for a new 25-year franchise and a Supreme Court petition over the issue was dismissed.

ABS-CBN, which is owned by the wealthy Lopez family, has broadcast continuously since 1953 except between 1972 and 1986 when it was seized by dictator Ferdinand Marcos — who Duterte admires.

Duterte has a history of clashing with media outlets critical of his policies, including his controversial drug war that has killed thousands of people.

While he has denied any involvement in Congress's decision to reject ABS-CBN's application, he



ABS-CBN employees watch a pre-taped newscast during their last day of work at the regional studio in Baguio. — AFP

had previously pledged to block its licence renewal.

In the months since losing its free-to-air permit, ABS-CBN has kept showing many of its popular news and drama programmes on

cable TV and online.

But much of the advertising revenue it used to rake in has been wiped out, forcing the broadcaster to dramatically cut costs.

"Unfortunately, (digital

advertising revenue) is not at the same level as broadcast, so that's where the challenge is nowadays," said ABS-CBN news and current affairs boss Regina Reyes.

After the closure of the regional stations on Friday, more parts of the network will be shuttered on Monday and many of its stars are expected to move on.

Thousands of jobs — including staff and contractors — could be lost, ABS-CBN warned previously.

'BLACK DAY'

For decades, ABS-CBN's regional network has played a vital role in broadcasting information on natural disasters, such as typhoons, and health crises — including the coronavirus pandemic — to isolated communities that have little or no internet access.

For many, it is their only source of news.

Fishermen in some regions have

long relied on their local broadcaster to know if it was safe to go out to sea, said Reyes.

"Not everyone has access to the internet, to radio or newspapers," said Micaella Ilao, a TV reporter in Baguio.

"Removing (TV broadcasters) deprives the people of the privilege to receive proper information." The Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines has described the closure of ABS-CBN's regional stations as a "black day for independent media" in the country.

"It's an avoidable national tragedy, inflicted by the very people who should protect Filipinos from all adversity," it said.

ABS-CBN is allowed to file a fresh petition, but its success would require members of Congress, dominated by Duterte allies and whose terms expire in 2022, to change their minds. — **AFP**

FLOODS HIT KHARTOUM



Sudanese residents walk on sandbags to reach their houses along a flooded street in the capital Khartoum's southern neighbourhood of Al Kalakla on Monday. — AFP

Macron to hold talks in Baghdad

BAGHDAD: French President Emmanuel Macron will make his first official trip to Iraq on Wednesday, government sources in Baghdad said, to signal solidarity with the crisis-hit country.

The one-day visit following his trip to Lebanon will make Macron the most senior foreign official to travel to Iraq since Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhemi ascended to power in May.

“He will meet the Iraqi prime minister and president and is hoping to hold talks with a range of political actors,” an Iraqi government source said.

Two other Iraqi officials confirmed the visit. Macron's office has yet to publically confirm the trip.

The focus, the Iraqi

sources said, would be on “sovereignty” — insisting Baghdad carve out an independent path away from the tug-of-war between its two main allies, Washington and Tehran.

The message will echo that of France's top diplomat Jean-Yves Le Drian during a trip to Iraq in July, when he insisted Baghdad “should dissociate itself from regional tensions”.

On August 27, French Defence Minister Florence Parly held talks in Baghdad and Arbil, the capital of Iraq's Kurdish region.

Unlike most foreign officials visiting Iraq, Macron will not stop over in Arbil, and is instead hoping Kurdish leaders will come to Baghdad to meet him. — AFP

Sudan signs historic deal with 5 rebel groups

FIRST STEP: Peace agreement is a crucial step towards ending 17 years of conflict

JUBA: Sudanese leaders and rebel commanders agreed on Monday on a historic peace deal, a crucial step towards ending 17 years of conflict in which hundreds of thousands of people were killed.

Leaders of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), an umbrella organisation of rebel groups from the western region of Darfur and the southern states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, raised their fists in celebration after inking the agreement.

Fighting in Darfur alone left around 300,000 people dead after rebels took up arms there in 2003, according to the United Nations, with former government leaders accused of carrying out genocide and of crimes against humanity.

Conflict in South Kordofan and Blue Nile erupted in 2011, in the wake of South Sudan's independence, resuming two decades of war.

“I congratulate all in Sudan on reaching a historic comprehensive peace that addressed the roots of the problem and ended the war, God willing,” said Gibril Ibrahim,

commander of one of rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

He paid tribute to all those killed or affected by the long years of war.

Sudanese paramilitary commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo — best known by his nickname “Hemeti”, and who commanded fighters in the war — signed the deal on behalf of Khartoum.

Daglo and the leaders of the rebel movements grouped together and shook hands — and briefly danced together.

“We have started the real transformation of Sudan from dictatorship to democracy,” Faisal Mohammed Salih, Sudan's information minister, said, at the ceremony in Juba, the capital of neighbouring South Sudan. But while celebrating the deal, he said there was also still a long way to go.

“We know that we are going to face some problems when we start to move this (deal) from paper to the ground... but we have that political will,” Salih said.



Sudan's Sovereign Council Chief General Abdel Fattah al Burhan shows a copy of a signed peace agreement with the country's five key rebel groups. — Reuters

Forging peace with rebels has been a cornerstone of Sudan's transitional government, which came to power in the months after

the overthrow of Bashir in April 2019.

Both General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, head of a sovereign

council, and Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, were also at the ceremony in Juba.

Sudan's rebels are largely drawn

from minority groups that long railed against domination of the government in Khartoum.

The agreement covers key issues around security, land ownership, transitional justice, power sharing, and the return of people who fled their homes because of fighting.

It also provides for the dismantling of rebel forces and the integration of their fighters into the national army.

Rebel members of the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) had provisionally initialled the agreement with the government late on Saturday. However, an SLM faction led by Abdelwahid Nour and a wing of the SPLM-N headed by Abdelaziz al Hilu refused to take part.

Malik Agar, rebel chief of the SPLM-N faction that agreed to the deal, called on his comrades still fighting to lay down their arms.

“I announce from this platform the end of the war,” Agar said in a speech, calling on Nour and Hilu to “not miss this historic opportunity”. — AFP

WFP warns 2.2m more Syrians risk hunger

BEIRUT: Around 2.2 million Syrians risk joining the fast swelling ranks of the hungry and poor in war-torn Syria, the World Food Programme warned on Monday.

“Without urgent help 2.2 million more could slip further into hunger and poverty,” WFP said in a statement on Twitter.

The UN agency said in May that a record 9.3 million people in Syria were food insecure, as spiralling prices and the novel coronavirus pandemic compound the damage of the country's nine-year war.

That figure had leapt from 7.9 million six months earlier.

Most of Syria's population lives in poverty, according to the United Nations, and food prices have doubled over the past year.

In that same period, Syrians in government-held areas have faced a fuel crisis, a plummeting Syrian pound on the black market and steep price hikes.



Syrian refugee woman puts a face mask on a boy. — Reuters

Damascus has blamed Western sanctions for its struggling economy.

But analysts have pointed to other factors, including a financial crisis in neighbouring Lebanon, long a conduit for dollars to Damascus-

held areas under sanctions.

The conflict has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced millions more from their homes since it started in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests. — AFP

Lebanon designates diplomat as new PM

BEIRUT: Lebanon's leaders on Monday designated a new prime minister, the diplomat Mustapha Adib, to tackle the country's deep political and economic crisis, hours before French President Emmanuel Macron was due to visit.

Mustapha Adib, 48, Lebanon's former envoy to Germany, acknowledged in a televised speech that there is “a need to form a government in record time and to begin implementing reforms immediately”.

He vowed to resume talks with the International Monetary Fund for assistance to the country, which was traumatised by Beirut's deadly August 4 explosion.

“I want your trust,” he told a resident of Beirut's badly-hit Gemmayzeh neighbourhood during a tour of the area devastated by the blast that rocked the city and further shook confidence in the political class.

Macron, who had toured the area two days after the disaster, was due to return on Tuesday and was expected to renew his calls for a radical overhaul of the country's complex, sectarian political system.

Macron had demanded “deep



Lebanon's newly-appointed Prime Minister Mustapha Adib (R) speaks with the owners of a damaged shop during a tour in Beirut's badly-hit Gemmayzeh neighbourhood on Monday. — AFP

change” and warned then he would check on progress when he returned for the September 1 centenary of Greater Lebanon.

NEW PREMIER

President Michel Aoun expressed willingness in speeches on Sunday to change the way Lebanon is governed.

Adib emerged as a consensus option on Sunday and was named

premier the next day in a statement by the presidency.

The close aide to former prime minister Najib Mikati received backing from the country's top political parties.

Lebanon's last government, headed by Hassan Diab, resigned after the massive explosion, which revived calls at home and abroad for radical revamp of the state. — AFP



TRUMP CAMPAIGNS ON LAW AND ORDER MESSAGE

PRE-ELECTION BARBS: US president, Portland mayor blame each other after deadly shooting

PORTLAND: President Donald Trump and his Democratic challenger Joe Biden traded pre-election barbs as violent clashes continued to roil the US city of Portland following the fatal shooting of a protestor.

While the US leader tried to characterise Biden as weak on crime, his opponent accused Trump of fanning the flames of violence in a polarised and tense nation.

Saturday's shooting during a pro-Trump rally in the Oregon city followed a week of country-wide protests — including the cancellation of numerous sporting events — over the police shooting in Kenosha, Wisconsin of African American Jacob Blake.

The violence in Portland erupted during a rally involving hundreds of vehicles “caravanning throughout downtown Portland,” police said.

OregonLive reported “clashes” and “tense moments” between demonstrators and counter-protestors.

Photographs from the scene showed the victim wearing a hat with a logo for “Patriot Prayer,” described by local media as a far-right group at the centre of multiple Portland demonstrations that have ended in violence.

By 10 pm on Sunday, about 100 to 150 anti-racism protestors had gathered outside a police building to the east of the city centre, waving signs and occasionally throwing projectiles.

Police declared the gathering an illegal assembly and in a tweet ordered people to leave the scene, warning of arrests and the use of tear gas.

Videos posted online showed about 20 officers rushing from the building to clear the area, and arresting a handful of protestors.



Supporters of US President Donald Trump stand with signs and flags as his motorcade leaves Sterling, Virginia. – AFP

The Portland clashes followed accused 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse of shooting dead two men and unrest in Kenosha, where prosecutors

wounding another who were protesting against Blake's shooting.

Trump is due to travel on Tuesday to the Midwestern city to meet law enforcement officials and view damage from unrest triggered by Blake's shooting last weekend.

Wisconsin's governor Tony Evers sent the president a letter asking him to reconsider the visit as it “will only hinder our healing,” according to US media reports.

‘LAW AND ORDER’

Violence connected to anti-racism protests has become a major issue in the campaign for November's presidential election, with Trump presenting himself as the “law and order” choice and arguing that a Biden presidency would allow left-wing mob rule.

Biden condemned the violence and argued that Trump had played a role in

spurring the clashes.

“He is recklessly encouraging violence,” the Democratic nominee said in a statement.

“He may believe tweeting about law and order makes him strong - but his failure to call on his supporters to stop seeking conflict shows just how weak he is.”

Biden's campaign said he will give a speech to address what it called a key question facing voters in November “Are you safe in Donald Trump's America?”

Trump spent Sunday morning tweeting and retweeting dozens of posts purporting to show violence in Democratic-run cities, and especially Portland. The president has repeatedly threatened to send federal government forces into the west coast city if Mayor Ted Wheeler does not crack down. — AFP

France slams UK’s Brexit approach

PARIS: Talks between Britain and the European Union on a final settlement for the UK's departure from the bloc are not progressing due to London's “intransigent and frankly unrealistic” approach, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian charged on Monday.

Both sides are pushing to have a deal in place by the end of a post-Brexit transition period which ends on December 31, but talks are failing to make headway.

“Negotiations are not advancing due to the intransigent and frankly unrealistic attitude of the United Kingdom,” Le Drian said in a speech to French ambassadors in Europe, alongside German counterpart Heiko Maas.

His downbeat assessment is the latest in a succession of negative comments by top figures within the EU about the progress of talks.

EU's chief negotiator Michel Barnier said on Friday at the close of the seventh round of trade talks that a deal was looking unlikely,

with discussions stuck on key issues including fishing rights and competition rules.

Hundreds of negotiators met over several days in the Belgian capital with both sides acknowledging a sliver of progress on technical issues — but not on the main obstacles.

“Those who were hoping for negotiations to move swiftly forward this week will have been disappointed,” Barnier told reporters after the talks ended on Friday.

His UK counterpart David Frost countered that Brussels' insistence that London meet EU demands on state aid and fisheries policy before work on other areas made it “unnecessarily difficult to make progress”.

Britain left the EU in January, nearly four years after a landmark referendum to end almost 50 years of European integration.

The Europeans are calling for a final post-transition agreement by October, leaving just two more months to find common ground.

LONDON CLIMATE PROTEST



Activists from the Climate protest group Extinction Rebellion carry 26 shoes, representing the people who die from air pollution in London each day, as they perform in General Gordon Square in Woolwich in South East London on Monday to highlight extra deaths caused by air pollution from traffic and to oppose the planned Silvertown Tunnel under the River Thames. – AFP

Australia parliament to probe foreign meddling at universities

SYDNEY: Australia's parliament is set to probe alleged foreign interference at public universities, a government minister said on Monday, as concerns grow about Chinese influence.

A proposed inquiry by the security and intelligence committee follows a series of controversies over China's clout on Australian campuses, ranging from hacks of university data to questionable financial donations and intimidation of Beijing's critics.

Concerns have also been raised about the nature of research links between academics and scientists in the two countries.

Alan Tudge, the minister for population and cities, told Sky News the mooted inquiry was the latest government attempt to tackle spiralling foreign interference now at “levels not seen since World War II”.

The move comes after Canberra announced last week that it was seeking new powers to scrap deals between local authorities and foreign countries that threaten the national interest — sweeping powers that would extend to universities.

It also comes less than a year after Australia announced new guidelines for universities for research collaboration, cybersecurity, and international partnerships.

Tudge said the inquiry would “go



Academics have been urged to be wary of sharing knowledge on sensitive topics. – Reuters

further” than previous probes into alleged foreign interference.

“We need to be assured and the public need to be assured that there isn't that foreign interference in our universities sector,” he said.

He did not say if the probe was aimed at China.

The Australian newspaper reported that Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton outlined the terms of reference for the inquiry in a letter on Sunday

to committee head Andrew Hastie, a government parliamentarian and outspoken China critic.

Advisers to Dutton did not respond to a request for comment.

The university guidelines announced in November push public institutions to enhance cybersecurity systems, undertake due diligence before signing partnerships with overseas organisations, and train staff to recognise foreign influence attempts.

Academics have been urged to be wary of sharing knowledge on sensitive topics and discern how joint research with international scholars could potentially be misused.

Schools and government officials also committed to more intensive consultation to protect Australia's national interests.

Beijing has repeatedly denied interfering in Australian campus life.

China-Australia relations have reached a new ebb in recent months, with the two governments at loggerheads over trade and competing for influence in the Pacific.

Tensions spiked in April when Australia infuriated China by calling for an independent probe into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, which emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year. — AFP

Merkel condemns ‘shameful’ protest

BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Monday condemned as “shameful” an attempt by protesters angry at coronavirus restrictions to storm parliament, saying they had abused the right to demonstrate peacefully.

Several hundred people tried to get into the Reichstag building during a rally against coronavirus rules in Berlin on Saturday.

“This right to demonstrate peacefully is of course a very valuable asset even during a pandemic,” Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said at a government press conference in Berlin.

However, he said their actions were “a clear abuse”.

“The result was disgraceful images at the Reichstag which are unacceptable, anti-democrats trying to make themselves heard on the steps of our democratic parliament,” he said.

Police estimated 38,000 people, double the number expected, gathered in Berlin on Saturday to protest at restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus, such as wearing masks and social distancing.

Several hundred broke through barriers and a police cordon to climb the steps leading to the

entrance to the Reichstag.

They were narrowly prevented from entering the building by police, who used pepper spray and arrested several people.

Merkel praised as “quick-witted and brave” three police officers who were seen pushing back crowds from the entrance to the Reichstag alone until reinforcements arrived.

President Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Monday invited the officers to Berlin's Bellevue Palace to thank them for their work.

Steinmeier described the protesters' actions as “despicable”, adding: “We will not tolerate any anti-democratic smear campaign or disparagement of the Federal Republic of Germany at the Bundestag.” About 300 people were arrested in scuffles with police, in front of the Reichstag but also outside the Russian embassy, where protesters pelted police with bottles. Resistance to coronavirus restrictions in Germany has gathered pace in recent weeks with demos attracting a diverse crowd of conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers and far-right or far-left activists.

Health Minister Jens Spahn was spat on at the weekend as he tried to talk to protesters in the northern city of Bergisch Gladbach. — AFP

Don't be the link; we are still breaking the chain



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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Oman is known for its hospitality, but what makes this country even more unique is the freedom to conduct cultural activities of various nationalities who are in Oman as residents.

In any other year before COVID-19 set in 2020, which probably could be termed as the pandemic year, the calendar would have been busy at hotels that have auditorium and banquet halls from August till January. The Indian community from Kerala used to begin celebration of Onam festival, a harvest festival with deep cultural roots, from August almost every weekend until New Year.

It was a natural trend because so many people wanted to celebrate it with music, traditional dances, theatre, art and concerts. This Monday saw Keralites celebrate Onam in a quiet way as it has

never been before, with respect to the guidelines set by the authorities – no gatherings. The feast of the festival is one of the highlights and there were restaurants and catering services who still managed to bring in the flavours of Onam festival with take away parcels, not to forget banana leaves that are used instead of the plates.

So Onam during COVID-19 has brought a new aspect – with no friends even to drop by, it has been a quiet day, which provided ample time to go back down the memory lane. But some shops still managed to stock up flowers required for floral decoration on the floor, which people present as another distinct feature of Onam.

It is interesting to note that almost all festivals have some relation to nature. Maybe it is the later generations

which have alienated themselves from the surroundings naturally because from agriculture, economies moved to industrial, and now to the Internet of Things. When we are focused on a range of technologies and 5G, and there is not much consideration that could go into landscape and nature in general.

We are so careful about our face and in case of one slight discomfort we run to a dermatologist. Life is not that easy for us, but it is not easy for nature either. It cannot run to an expert nor can it express itself unless it is too late resulting in a landslide for instance.

Tolerance is a quality that is needed to be practiced at all levels and when we succeed in practising it we enjoy a balance.

The balancing act is a crucial one we have a situation facing us right now. From

lockdown to easing of restriction on movements and commercial operations we have not been able to find the balance. With relaxation of restrictions we have had this urge for open air. It seems simultaneously we all thought of the beach – and we have been rushing there almost everyday.

Nature is probably saying, “come on”. But what do we do? In exchange of the good moments we leave behind the leftovers. It is not easy for us to learn. That is not all. They say it takes 21 days to form a habit. We had more days than that, but the minute when things are easing up, gone with the wind were all precautions – forgetting COVID-19 is still doing the rounds. For some reason we have conveniently forgotten about the masks, social distancing and sanitization while we are at the beach.

Still COVID-19 positive are being reported, and there are still people fighting to overcome difficulty in breathing. So how come we have lost focus on caution?

Is it just overconfidence or loss of fear creating a false sense of security?

The fact is we still need to build our physical and mental health along with immunity. While fresh air at the sea is what we need, we just cannot be safe if we forget the two metre distance between people.

We cannot forget what health experts have been talking about the symptoms of COVID-19 and its mode of transmission at the same time the measures to be taken to break the chain.

Maybe we are looking forward to getting back to the old routine, but we are still in the process of breaking the chain. So please, let us not be the link.



Majda Ibrahim and her family, who came to Sweden in 2013, the road to a new life has been arduous. – AFP

Syrians still finding their way in Sweden

NIOUCHA ZAKAVATI

They arrived in unprecedented numbers, pushing a strained Sweden to shut its borders as anti-immigration sentiment flared. Five years later, Syrians are still trying to integrate, some more successfully than others.

Abdallah Saleh, a 24-year-old Palestinian who fled Damascus in 2014, finally arrived in the southern Swedish town of Malmö in September the following year after a harrowing journey. Ten months later, he got his first job as a cashier.

Saleh spent three years learning Swedish and English, taking adult education classes and working on the side.

Now, he's just been accepted into a computer science programme at Halmstad University.

“It's been my dream since high school”, he says, beaming.

In 2015, the Scandinavian country took in the highest number of asylum seekers per capita in the European Union, at 163,000.

A third of them were Syrians. “Everyday the line of asylum seekers was never-ending. At the end of the day, they were knocking on the window, saying ‘please, help us’”, recalls a former case handler at the Migration Agency.

Experts say it's too early to tell how well Syrians as a group have integrated, citing a lack of data. But they say the early signs are pretty positive.

Pieter Bevelander, a professor of international migration at Malmö University, points to 2016 statistics: “Of the Syrians who received a residency permit in 2010, 70 per cent now have a job”.

“We can expect a similar result for

those who arrived in 2015”, he suggests.

This is especially the case since Syrians' education level is about the same as Swedes', noted Stockholm University professor Eleonora Mussino.

Sweden was however quickly overwhelmed with the huge influx of migrants knocking at its door.

It ended up adopting a temporary law in 2016 making permanent residency and family reunifications harder to get, offering three-year residency permits instead.

The law expires in 2021, but the hot-button issue is now up for debate again in parliament, which will likely replace it with a permanent law.

Sweden – a country of 10.3 million people, of whom 12 per cent were born outside the EU – has welcomed large numbers of immigrants since the 1990s, primarily from the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Iran and Iraq. But over the years, public opinion on immigration has hardened. The anti-immigration Sweden Democrats party has in two decades grown to become the third-biggest party, hovering around 20 per cent in opinion polls.

“It's an analytical mistake to think that the Swedish attitude to immigration was generous before 2015 and that it changed after the migrant wave”, Joakim Ruist, an immigration expert at Gothenburg University, says. “This tolerance has in reality always been fragile: Everybody knew that a large part of the population didn't want refugees in the country”, he adds.

Jonas Andersson, a Sweden Democrats MP, says “the temporary law was necessary but it was just a small step in the right direction”.

“Sweden needs to tighten its legislation”, he insists.

Since the temporary law came into force, the number of Syrian arrivals has plummeted, to just 5,500 in 2016 and even fewer in the following years.

The same trend can be seen in the number of asylum requests granted. Hala Alnahas knows that all too well.

With a dentistry degree from Damascus University, she now practises in the small Swedish town of Mariestad.

She has only been granted successive temporary residency permits, despite a shortage of dentists in Sweden.

Her request for permanent residency was recently denied because of a single document missing from her dossier.

“It was a shock, because I pay my taxes, I earn a decent living, I have my own apartment and I don't need anybody's help”, she says.

Other Syrians say they feel like they're living life on the sidelines. Unemployed since arriving in Sweden, Ali Haj Mohammad, 45, is struggling to get to know Swedes.

“I get the impression they don't want to talk to refugees. My Swedish isn't very good, but how can I improve it with no job and when I spend my free time with other Syrians or Iraqis?”, he complains.

According to Teodora Abda, the head of Sweden's Syrian Association, Syrians' integration “has failed” because of a lack of housing and their limited social contact with Swedes. “Those who arrived five years ago chose to live with members of their own families”, often in immigrant-heavy suburbs, “rather than find themselves alone in northern Sweden” where authorities might have placed them, she explains. — AFP

Next Japan PM faces daunting challenges

LINDA SIEG

His successor to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who is resigning because of poor health, faces a daunting list of economic, diplomatic and security issues. Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will choose its next party president on September 14. The winner will serve out Abe's term as party leader until September 2021 and is all but assured the premiership by virtue of the LDP's majority in parliament.

Abe's signature “Abenomics” growth strategy was facing headwinds because of an export slump and a sales tax increase even before the coronavirus outbreak, highlighting the problem of lifting the economy out of decades of stagnation.

Critics said Abe's “third arrow” of structural reforms – the first two were hyper-easy monetary policy and government spending – was not bold enough in the face of a fast-ageing population and a rigid labour market.

Japan has not seen an explosive coronavirus outbreak but cases have been rising and the government must balance containing it and restarting the economy. The pandemic brought Japan's biggest economic slump on record and a third quarter of declines knocked real gross domestic product growth to decade-low levels, wiping out the benefits of “Abenomics”.

Policy makers are short of ammunition with a big public debt limiting new government spending and the Bank of Japan running out of options to hit its elusive 2 per cent inflation target. Japan is also struggling with a rock-bottom birthrate, shrinking labour force and low global ranking on women's empowerment.

Japan's ties with China had improved ahead of a planned visit by President Xi Jinping, but the trip was postponed because of the coronavirus. Some LDP members want the visit cancelled over China's clampdown on Hong Kong and its push to assert claims in the East China Sea.

China is locked in a confrontation with the United States over rights, trade and security, and Washington may press Tokyo to take sides. But while Japan shares US concerns about China, the Asian neighbours' economies are deeply intertwined so the next leader must balance security and economic priorities. Abe had forged close ties with President Donald Trump so the next leader will be starting afresh no matter who wins the US election.

Pressure on Japan from its main security ally to take on a greater share of the burden of its defence and pay more to host US troops is unlikely to ease. Japan's ties with US ally South Korea are frigid due to disputes over Koreans forced to work for wartime Japanese firms and the feud has spilled over into security and trade.

— Reuters

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Masterful Morgan leads England to victory

MANCHESTER, England: Captain Eoin Morgan belted a blistering half-century as England chased down a record target at Old Trafford to beat Pakistan by five wickets in the second Twenty20 international on Sunday.

Pakistan posted 195 for four in their 20 overs on a flat wicket, but the home side completed their victory with five balls to spare and a take 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

Morgan blasted 66 from 33 balls to secure the win in what is the highest chase in any form of 20-over cricket at Old Trafford.

Jonny Bairstow (44 from 24 balls) and Tom Banton (20 from 16 balls) got their side off to a fast start with an opening stand of 66 in 38 deliveries, but when they fell in consecutive balls to spinner Shadab Khan (3-34), the home side appeared to wobble.

But Morgan and Dawid Malan (54 not out in 36 balls) led the counter-attack and accelerated as their third-wicket partnership grew, finishing with 112 in 62 balls before the skipper was caught in the deep with the side still needing 18 runs to win.

Pakistan also got their runs at the top of the order as opener Babar Azam smashed 56 from 44 balls in an opening stand of 72 with Fakhar Zaman (36 from 22 balls).

Number three Mohammad Hafeez carried on that momentum with a blistering assault on the home bowlers, who struggled to find the right length and too often dropped too short, exposing the square boundaries.

Hafeez struck four sixes in his 69 from 36 balls before offering a simple catch to Morgan at cover.

The pick of the England bowlers was leg-spinner Adil Rashid, who recorded figures of 2-32 as he picked up the wickets of both openers.

The third and final match in the series will be at the same venue on Tuesday. The first match was abandoned due to rain. — **Reuters**



England's Eoin Morgan in action. — Reuters

SCOREBOARD	
Pakistan	
B Azam c Billings b Rashid	56
F Zaman c Banton b Rashid	36
M Hafeez c Morgan b Curran	69
S Malik c Morgan b Jordan	14
I Ahmed (not out)	8
S Khan (not out)	0
Extras (LB-6, NB-2, W-4)	12
Total (for 4 wkts, 20 overs)	195
Fall of wickets: 1-72, 2-112, 3-162, 4-194.	
Bowling: Mahmood 4-0-38-0, Moeen 1-0-10-0, Jordan 4-0-41-1, Curran 4-0-46-1, Rashid 4-0-32-2, Gregory 3-0-22-0.	
England	
T Banton lbw Shadab	20
J Bairstow c Imad b Shadab	44
D Malan (not out)	54
E Morgan c sub (Khushdil) b Rauf	66
M Ali c Babar b Shadab	1
S Billings c Zaman b Rauf	10
L Gregory (not out)	0
Extras (LB-1, NB-1, W-2)	4
Total (For 5 wkts, 19.1 overs)	199
Fall of wickets: 1-66, 2-66, 3-178, 4-182, 5-195.	
Bowling: Imad 3-0-30-0, Afridi 3-1-0-44-0, Amir 2-0-25-0, Shadab 4-0-34-3, Iftikhar 3-0-31-0, Rauf 4-0-34-2.	

Clippers eliminate Mavericks, Celtics rout Raptors

MIAMI: Kawhi Leonard finished with 33 points and 14 rebounds as the Los Angeles Clippers advanced to the second round of the NBA playoffs with a 111-97 victory over the injury-hampered Dallas Mavericks on Sunday.

Leonard, last year's NBA Finals Most Valuable Player while with the Toronto Raptors, also had seven assists and five steals for the Clippers, who clinched the series four games to two.

"Just got to my spots and put up the shot with confidence and it went in," Leonard said after his fifth 30-point game in a row. "Just kept giving it to me and it went in with confidence."

The Clippers will face either Utah or the Jamal Murray-led Denver Nuggets, who forced a winner-take-all game seven on Tuesday night by beating the Jazz 119-107.

Luka Doncic scored 38 points in a losing cause in the spectator-free quarantine bubble at Disney World resort in Orlando, Florida.

The Clippers opened the second half with a 20-3 run for a 77-54 edge, and saw the lead trimmed to 88-82 early in the fourth in a Doncic-led fightback only to pull away again down the stretch.

Dallas was sorely missing starting centre Kristaps Porzingis, who was out with a knee injury.

"Momentum, it can switch real easily," Leonard said. "You have to keep fighting when you're up and when you're down stay focused."

Clippers forward Marcus Morris was ejected late in the first quarter after being whistled for a flagrant foul on the 21-year-old Doncic.

Morris grabbed then hit Doncic with a forearm slam on the head as the Slovenian star drove to the bucket with the ball. "It was a terrible play," said Doncic.

In the Eastern Conference, Jayson Tatum and Marcus Smart each scored 21 points to lead the Boston Celtics



LA Clippers guard Landry Shamet (20) passes the ball away from Dallas Mavericks forward Maxi Kleber (right) during the fourth quarter in game six of the first round of the 2020 NBA Playoffs at AdventHealth Arena.

"Marcus today was unbelievable on both ends," Celtics coach Brad Stevens said. "All our guys played with great purpose, great enthusiasm. We just have to clean some stuff up."

Game two of the best-of-seven series comes Tuesday.

Boston frustrated Toronto shooters, as the Raptors went 31-of-84 from the floor and 10-of-40 from 3-point range — the most 3-point misses ever by Toronto in a playoff contest.

"We just didn't play well enough to win," said guard Kyle Lowry, who led Toronto with 17 points despite a sore left ankle. "We've got to do our coverages harder, execute better."

The games were the first for each club since last Sunday after a walkout shut down the NBA playoffs for three days until team owners and players agreed on league measures to support voting, social justice and racial equality programs.

"We needed a chance to catch our breath as players and black men and get some things handled. It was a really emotional week. It was up and down. It was hard," Lowry said.

"Basketball always matters but in this situation, in this time, it's taking a back seat. We're going to perform at the highest level we can perform at, no excuses, but we have an obligation because we have this platform and can reach out to the world."

Said Canadian Murray of the Nuggets, "It is not just America, it happens everywhere."

The Celtics were without Gordon Hayward, who is out until late September with a right ankle injury.

In the late game, Murray posted his second 50-point game of the series to power the Nuggets to a win over Utah which tied the series at 3-3.

Donovan Mitchell finished with a team high 44 points for the Jazz. Denver is trying to become the 12th team to rally from a 3-1 deficit to win a series and the first in four years. — **AFP**

over defending champion Raptors second-round series. 10 assists for the Celtics, who also had points and 15 rebounds from Daniel 112-94 in the opening game of their Kemba Walker added 18 points and 17 points from Jaylen Brown plus 13 Theis.



NATIONAL SWIMMERS BACK IN SHAPE HITTING THE POOL



Srđan Filipović

ADILAL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 31

The national team swimmers got back to their training at the Olympic swimming pools at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex after an absence of six months due to the ongoing COVID-9 pandemic.

The Sultanate swimming team head coach, Srđan Filipovic, expressed his gladness for restarting the sporting action.

"The announcement of resumption of the national team swimmers to the training made the

swimmers happy as they are waiting for the decision since long time.

The swimming teams were among the first national football and tennis teams which was allowed by the Supreme Committee to resume their trainings as they have some external participations". Starting with the recovery sessions and raising the training sessions gradually is the preferred methodology by the Serbian coach.

"It is quite risky to register back with the normal training as before due to the stop of six months without

actual training. Accordingly, I instructed all the swimmers to have one training session daily and for one hour duration.

During this period, the swimmers will swim for three to four km only instead of seven to eight km in the normal condition. The announcement of resumption of the swimming activities of the national team will serve the swimmers a lot and will shape them properly for the forthcoming events and participations," the coach said. The national swimming team will

take part in many different future scheduled events including the GCC Games in next March and April and swimming Championship end of this year.

Moreover, the swimming team will participate at the Asian Beach Games in China next year. The upcoming year will be busy with many events as most of the current year is moved to the following year due to the spreading off the COVID. The 48-year-old affirmed that the national swimmers will go through a gradual training programme until

reaching to the optimum technical level.

"It is correct that the other GCC countries began their training ahead to the Sultanate by almost one or two months.

However, we will deliver our best to catch up with them. Moreover, our national team swimmer, Essa al Adawi, who is in Japan did not stop from the training and he is one of the potential swimmers. Beside to him, the swimmers Abdulrahman al Kulaibi and his colleagues will run through the training programme

and will eye for the top positions in the next participations," he added. During the stopping of sporting activities in the Sultanate, Oman's swimmers were undergoing intensive training programme through online "Zoom" platforms under direct supervision of the national coach Srđan Filipovic.

The swimmers were focusing on strength and fitness training as they are away from the swimming pools.

The purpose of the online warmup sessions was to keep the swimmers in right shape with proper fitness.



Thiem confident of turning things around for US Open

NEW YORK: Dominic Thiem had a nightmarish start to his US Open preparations when he was bundled out in his first match of the Western & Southern Open last week but the world number three is confident he can turn things around in time for the Grand Slam.

The Austrian is seeded second at Flushing Meadows in the absence of Rafael Nadal and is expected to pose the strongest challenge for top-ranked Novak Djokovic, who beat Thiem in a five-set thriller in this year's Australian Open final. Thiem, however, managed to win just three games in his second-round match against Serbia's

Filip Krajinovic at the Western & Southern Open after getting a first-round bye.

"Things like that, matches like that, are happening. I didn't have my best day. That's how that result came," the 26-year-old told reporters on Sunday.

"I know about my strength. I know things can change very quickly. Well, I hope that I do better at the Open."

Thiem, who was also a finalist at the last two French Opens, begins his US Open campaign on Tuesday against Spaniard Jaume Munar, whom he beat in Brazil in his last tournament before the circuit was

suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March.

Players rarely stick around host cities after an early defeat but with the Western & Southern Open taking place in New York this year due to the pandemic, Thiem had nowhere to go. "Normally if you lose... you hop on the plane and go to a different place.

It's easier to forget," he said. "Here you're stuck in the same place for a very long time. So it's not easy to forget the loss, to get your mind on different things.

The last days, of course, (I was) practising and preparing for the Open." — Reuters

sport

Oman U-16 football team resumes training sessions



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 31

The national U-16 football team will resume ground training on Friday at the Seeb Stadium. Resumption of the junior football team to the external training sessions were among the partial sporting activities which was allowed by the Supreme Committee before two weeks and that was dedicated for the national teams which are gearing up for participating in events abroad.

Oman national U-16 football team head coach Hilal al Afi, has announced the squad for an internal training camp that is scheduled to take place in Muscat from September 1 to 20. The preparatory camp will serve as a critical step for Oman U-16s gearing up for the AFC U-16 Championship that will be held in Bahrain from November 25 until December 12.

The warming up session which will begin today is expected to be under full precautionary measures to avoid spreading of the COVID-19 among the players. Oman Football Association (OFA) had prepared detailed proposal of precautionary

measures and medical protocols which was implemented recently by Dhofar team players and it will apply as well for the junior team and futsal team. The medical considerations guidance is in full compliance to the Fifa and Asian Football Federation (AFC) rules and regulations and in direct coordination with the local Ministry of Health instructions. All the players will be tested for the COVID-19 test and the training sessions will be conducted under full implementation of the social distancing specially during the earlier training sessions. According to the medical protocol, the training sessions will begin by individuals warm up sessions and then moving into groups technical training. OFA announced in their official pages at twitter that the training sessions will be at closed doors due to the tough situation of the pandemic.

Al Oufi stated previously to Oman Daily Observer that the recent decision issued by the Supreme Committee will support the team to prepare well technically for the Asian event. The technical staff of the team depended during the last period on the remotely training sessions. There were sessions every

week depended on giving the players a weekly schedule which included some physical training to ensure the fitness level of all the players. Technical strengthening, running exercises, withstand speed and other related training aspects.

Oman will play against Tajikistan, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates teams in Group B at the AFC U-16 Championship. The top two teams in the group will advance to the quarterfinal.

The squad: Mohammed al Muqbali (Sohar), Salim al Abdali, Jawad al ezzi, Hamza al Eisari, Abdulrahman al Jabri, Nibras al Busaidi (Seeb), Loqman al Jadidi, Murshid al Hamhami, Abdulaziz al Ruzaiqi, Mishari al Hasani, Muhannad al Saadi, Mukhlid al Hashemi (Al Nahda), Mamoon al Arimi, Fahad al Mukhaini, Almotasim al Sameen (Dhofar), Turki Beit Rabee, Ayham al Raqadi, Abdulalim al Rawahi (Fanja), Abdulmajeed al Balushi, Ali al Balushi, Khalid Yazeed (Al Ettihad) Ahmed al Hilali (Rustaq), Ammar al Saadi (Suwaiq), Al Mundhir al Hasani (Al Oruba), Khalid Subaee (Al Ettihad) and Mansour al Amri (Al Khaboura).

business

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GAZPROM POSTS MASSIVE SLUMP IN FIRST HALF P15



RELIANCE TIES GOLDEN BOW ONTO ITS SHOPPING DEAL P16

Sohar Aluminium hot metal production soars to new record in 2019

BENCHMARK SMELTER: THE PRODUCTION MILESTONE OF 390,516 TONNES COMES ON THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF OPERATIONS OF THE \$2.4 BILLION VENTURE

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, AUG 31

Sohar Aluminium, the Sultanate's biggest non-hydrocarbon based industrial investment when it was founded in 2004, achieved a record hot metal production of 390,516 tonnes in 2019, underscoring its ambitions to become the benchmark smelter in the Middle East.

The production milestone comes on the 10th anniversary of operations of the \$2.4 billion venture, which is jointly owned by the Omani government (40 per cent) represented by OQ — Oman's integrated energy group; Abu Dhabi National Energy Company PJSC — TAQA (40 per cent), and leading global mining group Rio Tinto (20 per cent).

Commencing production in 2010 with an annual capacity of 390,000 tonnes of high quality aluminium, hot metal output was up about 2.8 per cent from the previous year's high of 379,775 tonnes. In contrast, output had slumped to 252,714 tonnes in 2017 when smelting operations were impacted by a technical glitch.

Eng Said bin Mohammed al Masoudi, CEO — Sohar Aluminium (SA), said the production record was one of several milestones achieved by the company. "In 2019 following the improvements in place from 2018, SA hit the record of 390,449



“

Moreover, the PFC (perfluorocarbon) emissions intensity decreased drastically by 72.7 per cent compared to 2018 due to significant Anode Effect rate improvement showing a renovated efficiency and productivity

ENG SAID AL MASOUDI
CEO, Sohar Aluminium



Purity levels of the finished product were also the highest in the company's history with the lowest level of iron (Fe) per tonne of metal produced, Sohar Aluminium stated in its newly published Sustainability Report 2019.

tonnes of finished goods production with an energy consumption intensity of 13.99 MWh per tonne of aluminium. Moreover, the

PFC (perfluorocarbon) emissions intensity decreased drastically by 72.7 per cent compared to 2018 due to significant Anode Effect rate

improvement showing a renovated efficiency and productivity following the shut-down in 2017 and as a result of the maintenance

and improvements carried in 2018 and 2019".

Purity levels of the finished product were also the highest in the company's history with the lowest level of iron (Fe) per tonne of metal produced, Sohar Aluminium stated in its newly published Sustainability Report 2019.

Operating a single 1.2km long potline at its complex adjoining Sohar Industrial City, Sohar Aluminium also supports a thriving downstream aluminium processing cluster. Around 158K tonnes of hot metal from the smelter, representing about 40 per cent of total production, were supplied to three local off-takers Oman Aluminium Processing Industries (OAPIL), Oman Aluminium Rolling Company (OARC) and Oman Aluminium Cast (OAC). Local uptake of hot metal is projected to rise to around 60 per cent of total production when a new customer comes into operation at Sohar Industrial City later this year.

Sohar Aluminium's operations are also supported by a 1000 MW gas-fired captive power plant located at Sohar Port. A dedicated berth at the port enables the handling of bulk carriers bringing alumina, which is ferried by conveyors to silos for the storage of alumina, as well as other feedstock notably petroleum coke and liquid pitch.

India economic growth hit by record slump

MUMBAI: India's economic growth suffered a historic 23.9 per cent decline between April and June, official figures showed on Monday, as manufacturing and productivity were battered by a strict coronavirus lockdown.

The contraction was the biggest since New Delhi started publishing quarterly statistics in 1996, and the latest figures came as the country's coronavirus cases surged past the 3.6 million mark.

The steep dip in Asia's third-largest economy reflected the impact of a months-long nationwide shutdown that saw most industrial and manufacturing activity grind to a halt.

The decline was worse than expected, with a survey of economists by Bloomberg earlier predicting a contraction of 18 per cent.

On Monday the government warned that the figures could be revised further since the pandemic had also affected the ability to collect accurate data on economic activity.

"The entire quarter was spent in lockdown and it was a complete washout for the Indian economy",



A labourer moves bricks through a brick factory on the outskirts of Kolkata. — AFP

Mumbai-based economist Ashutosh datar said.

He added that the clouds of gloom were unlikely to lift "for the next few quarters".

"We started publishing quarterly growth figures only

The decline was worse than expected, with a survey of economists earlier predicting a contraction of 18 per cent

from 1996 and this is the worst quarterly performance on record ever since", he said.

Even before Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a lockdown in late March, the economy was struggling to gain

traction with sluggish growth, record unemployment, and a flurry of bad loans making banks reluctant to lend.

The sudden shutdown prompted a huge exodus by millions of migrant workers who fled cities for their villages due to a lack of food and money.

Many have yet to return even as restrictions have eased, leaving factories struggling with labour shortages.

Modi had announced a \$266 billion package — 10 per cent of the country's GDP — to revive the battered economy, while India's central bank has slashed interest rates and transferred billions of rupees in annual dividends to the government.

But the measures have yet to yield any positive economic impact or spur a pick-up in demand.

Meanwhile, coronavirus infections have hit new records across the country, with the lockdown failing to contain the spread of the disease which has travelled from crowded cities to remote villages where access to healthcare remains a huge issue. — AFP

Italy plunges into recession as virus bites

ROME: Italy posted a record economic contraction on Monday as household spending and investment crashed during the country's coronavirus lockdown, driving the eurozone's third-largest economy deep into recession.

The country's gross domestic product fell by 12.8 per cent in the second quarter compared to the previous quarter and by 17.7 per cent versus the same period last year, national statistics agency Istat said.

"The full estimate of the quarterly economic figures confirm the exceptional extent of the drop in GDP in the second quarter, due to the economic effects of the health emergency and the containment measures adopted", Istat said.

The contraction was even worse than predicted in July, when Istat estimated a second quarter drop of 12.4 per cent.

A recession is commonly defined as two consecutive periods of a quarter-on-quarter drop in GDP. Italy's economy shrunk 5.4 per cent in the first quarter.

In the second quarter, household spending fell by 11.3 per cent compared to the first quarter, while exports plummeted 26.4 per cent, the agency said.

Italy, the first European country to be hit full force by the coronavirus outbreak, went into total lockdown in early March as COVID-19 tightened its grip on the country. — AFP



Mazoon Electricity cautions about dangers of illegal electricity connections

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 31

To ensure high safety standards, Mazoon Electricity Company, has reminded the public of the dangers of illegal electricity connections.

Mazoon Electricity urged the public to follow the simple yet right process to apply for electricity connection by just submitting a request through the company's website or through Sanad Centres and reminds public to abstain from using any illegal connections.

Cautioning against unauthorised connections, it alerted public that illegal power connections pose a danger of electrocution not just to the users, but the public at large. Unsafe and illegal connections are an easy solution to temporary electricity needs but they pose a danger to user's safety and those in their surroundings.

The company explained that customers who wish to obtain temporary electricity connection should visit the nearest Sanad centres with required documents and submit their request. Customers have to fill the temporary connection request form by including documents such as ID copy, mulkiya and krooki copy, construction permit from Ministry of Municipalities, description of the devices/appliances required to be connected and required load.

Once the document is processed, an inspector from the company will visit the site and approve the connection if all the required criteria is fulfilled.

Bolstering cybersecurity capabilities during COVID-19 and beyond

GREGORY GARNIER

While the COVID-19 pandemic hit its peak, businesses across the globe had to make drastic changes to survive. Owing to difficulties in arranging personal meetings and the inability to work with physical documents, most organizations adopted technological innovations and went digital.

Not only did the pandemic force most companies to embrace the new digital era, but approximately 70 per cent of the companies rolled out work-from-home (WFH) for their employees.

This included increasing network connectivity to allow more people to connect simultaneously, shifting select workloads to the cloud to make access easier and faster, adopting new collaboration and productivity solutions like Zoom and Slack, and deploying devices like laptops along with peripherals. Unfortunately, while companies scrambled to keep their workers productive, there was a significant rise in cybercrime.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, few organisations had mature cybersecurity capabilities that could meet the mounting challenges posed by attackers. Research by Bain & Company in the fourth quarter of 2019 found that executives at many companies overestimate the effectiveness of their cybersecurity and lack the strategic capabilities essential for a robust posture.

Instead of increasing cybersecurity, over 40 per cent of large enterprises made moderate to



The pandemic has created more remote workers and, as a result, more attackers who seek to take advantage of that.

significant reductions in IT budgets, and about 20 per cent cut their security spending. This made it easier for malicious entities to launch attacks with a greater frequency and intensity on remote employees and other corporate assets.

Security teams have seen more attempts at intellectual property theft, particularly since late January 2020.

APT41, a prominent cyberthreat group, reportedly targeted companies across industries in

the US, UK, Canada and parts of the European Union and Middle East using recently disclosed vulnerabilities in major vendor systems. This was one of the broadest campaigns in recent years, and its aim was long-term espionage and surveillance.

With the digital ecosystem expanding almost daily, it is essential to protect customer information, intellectual property, sensitive communications and other data generated online.

Organisations should take two sets of actions against cybercrime, the first to neutralise the threats to all companies that have adopted digital technology and the second to position themselves for the evolution of how work gets done after the pandemic.

A multidisciplinary task force is the most effective way to tackle WFH threats and improve resilience during the pandemic. The chief security officer should lead this effort, along with informed leaders

with decision-making authority from various parts of the business, IT and cybersecurity, as well as audit, risk, compliance functions, legal and HR.

The task force should begin by characterizing groups of remote workers and partners based on their business role and level of access. All groups should be covered by a common set of modern security technologies and processes.

However, high-risk groups, like the top leadership who perform mission-critical functions or employees that have the deepest system access such as DevOps teams, system administrators and application developers, need a robust complement of security.

Additionally, to avoid hacks, companies must also consider revising software and hardware technology standards, such as minimum specifications for employee-owned laptops, and lists of approved USB, HDMI and Bluetooth peripherals for remote workers. Strong cybersecurity involves much more than implementing technology.

Companies should perform ongoing activities like adjusting technology standards and offering security-awareness training that help maintain a security baseline for remote work. Finally, companies must also reevaluate the full complement of security capabilities as they permanently adjust operating models for the post-pandemic world.

(The author is a Partner at Bain & Company Middle East and Syed Ali, Expert Partner at Bain & Company Houston, United States)

COVID-19's devastating impact on global oil and gas sector



ROBERT MINTER

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the Oil and Gas sector across the globe and it is not going to get much better anytime soon.

The widespread mandated activity halt of work due to the pandemic has disrupted virtually every industry in such a violent manner that companies within the industries could not react in time. Oil and physical commodities were particularly hard hit due to the long supply chain delivery time and the rapid cessation of mobility. The rapid 20+ per cent plunge in oil demand was longer and of higher magnitude than most oil companies initially estimated.

The return of normalized oil demand is not in the foreseeable future. Current guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in the US, make it nearly impossible for workers to return to office buildings before there is a widespread vaccine.

If no one is in the office, there is no need for business travel, and business travel pays the majority of airline flight costs. Currently we



see less than 1 million bpd of jet fuel demand, down from 7 million normally. That 6 million bpd hole in demand may return in 2021 at some point but is predicated on medical breakthroughs. British Airways parent company, IAG's CEO, William Walsh, confirmed this recently stating that it is misguided to consider the travel crisis 'temporary'.

This does not even account for the reduction in daily travel to work. In the US, 77 per cent of workers drive to work, averaging 30 miles per day. Much of that demand has evaporated with work from home policies expected to last through year end.

US Presidency candidate Joe

Biden recently released his \$2 trillion energy plan, largely designed to inspire the democratic base to come out and vote in November, regardless of how realistic the plan turns out to be.

We are as excited about the future of renewables as everyone else, however we temper it with experience. There has been no industry that has, as consistently, underperformed vs guidance as renewables over the last 40 years. Volkswagen, Tesla and others have designed compelling if expensive electric vehicles. Regardless of pricing it will take time to replace the 1.2 billion internal combustion engines currently operating globally.

The implication of a Biden presidency may well be to increase barriers to entry in the US oil and gas exploration market, raising prices. Time will tell, but for now our oil price expectations are for \$33-\$43 through year end. A widespread increase in lockdowns could pierce the floor of the range.

Over the medium term the 10 million bpd of global producer cuts along with currently offline Libyan and Iran production amounts to 13 million bpd of potential supply increases as an overhead dampener on prices.

[The author is an Investment Strategist at Aberdeen Standard Investments (ASI)]

BUSINESS ALERT

OAB enhances local market presence with advanced digital service

MUSCAT: Oman Arab Bank continues to enhance its presence in the local banking industry as one of the best-certified e-payment solutions providers. The Bank has heavily invested in building an advanced digital infrastructure, capable of keeping pace with the rapid technological changes that influence the growth of businesses while enriching the digital business environment. Based on this concept, OAB's advanced e-payment gateway has emerged as one of the best e-channels for digital payments in the Omani market.

Commenting on the features of this innovative technology, Rashad al Shaikh (pictured), Acting Head of the Retail Banking Division at OAB said, "Our e-payment gateway is the only one in the market that provides direct connectivity for all types of local and international bank cards, in addition to competitive service fees and 24/7 advanced technical support. This single-integration point allows our customers to easily make transactions and accept payments from anywhere in the world. Moreover, our team supervising the gateway is always ready to facilitate the activation process for new customers, and support them in all their banking requirements."



GAC awarded for After-Sales Excellence by Mitsubishi Motors MEA

MUSCAT: General Automotive Company (GAC), the official distributors for Mitsubishi Vehicles in Oman, was recently awarded the '3 Star Silver Award' in the After-Sales Business Excellence Program for the year 2019 by Mitsubishi Motors Middle East and Africa. It received this award for its outstanding after-sales service and customer care, GAC was the only dealership to have received this accolade from the region.

On receiving the award, Manoj Ranade, General Manager of GAC, said, "For GAC to be selected for this award is indeed a great honour. For us to have received this prestigious award is a testament to our commitment to our customers and towards achieving after-sales excellence in Oman. It is also very encouraging for our team here at GAC, for it is their consistent hard work and dedication towards their job and their customers that has truly earned us this recognition."

The Mitsubishi brand enjoys one of the largest and most loyal customer bases in the sultanate, and for good reason. As its official distributor, GAC is committed to excellence and continues to invest heavily in its employees.



Currency plunges, IT giants eye exit in Belarus

MINSK: The Belarusian currency is tumbling in value and companies in its crucial IT sector are threatening to pull out after weeks of unprecedented protests against authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenko.

Belarusians are desperately trawling banks and bureaux de change for foreign currency to salvage at least some of the value of their savings.

“The banks don’t have any foreign currency. Staff tell you to wait, that a customer might bring some,” said one customer at the country’s largest lender, Belarusbank, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The national currency is falling at a record rate, losing more than 10 per cent of its value against the euro and the dollar in the last month due to uncertainty over the deepening political standoff and fears of an economic crisis.

Over the last year, it has fallen 27 per cent against the dollar and 33 per cent against the euro.

In recent days, numerous Telegram accounts widely followed by the opposition have urged people to buy foreign currency to destabilise the rouble and therefore Lukashenko’s regime.

They have also encouraged people to boycott the giant state enterprises that are the bulwarks of Lukashenko’s Soviet-style economy and buy from private companies.

The president, re-elected in disputed polls on August 9, on Thursday condemned “scoundrels” who are “calling for destabilising the financial market.”

“We will not allow the national



A woman walks past the empty shelves in an electronic shop in Minsk. – AFP

currency to collapse,” he vowed at a meeting on state enterprises, in comments reported by his press service.

Independent analyst Alexander Vasilyev acknowledged that some people were selling roubles “as a sign of protest” but said the amount involved was not enough “to significantly affect the exchange rate.”

The mood of dissatisfaction has also extended to the country’s

The national currency is falling at a record rate, losing more than 10 per cent of its value against the euro and the dollar in the last month due to uncertainty over the deepening political standoff and fears of an economic crisis.

strong IT sector, one of Belarus’s few success stories.

It is angry that the government has attempted to quell protests by

More than 2,000 people working in the IT sector have signed an open letter calling for new elections and an end to political violence and Internet shutdowns, even threatening to move out of the country.

Russian Internet giant Yandex had its Minsk offices searched by armed law enforcement officers in mid-August.

It responded by closing its work space in the capital and transferring all of its approximately 300 staff to

remote working.

Yandex has said that some employees have left Minsk but has not confirmed reports that it is beginning to move staff out of the country.

The Viber messaging app said on Twitter that it temporarily closed its office in Minsk earlier in the month due to “the safety concerns of our staff” and “Internet issues.”

The office reopened last week, it said.

The political crisis caused by Lukashenko’s re-election amid accusations of vote-rigging has also hit sectors of the economy with a high level of state intervention.

This comes as Russia has cut down on its largesse towards its smaller neighbour reliant on subsidised energy.

“Strikes in key sectors could further erode growth prospects, which were already weakened by oil supply disruptions and the pandemic,” Fitch analysts said in a note.

They estimated that GDP would contract by five per cent in 2020.

Workers at tractor, heavy machinery and potash plants — seen as Lukashenko’s political heartland — have downed tools and joined protests, shaking the authorities.

The walk-outs have died down in recent days as workers have been threatened with dismissal and strike leaders have been detained.

But Fitch said last week that strikes at the potash mines of Belaruskali, the world’s largest producer, could lead to a reduction in the country’s exports. — AFP

Russian energy giant Gazprom posts massive slump in first half

MOSCOW: Russian energy giant Gazprom announced on Monday that net profit fell 25-fold in the first half of 2020 due to the economic crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic and low oil and gas prices.

The state-controlled group posted a net profit of 32.9 billion roubles (\$447 million) in the six months to June, compared to 836.5 billion roubles in the same period last year.

Turnover fell almost a third to 2.9 trillion roubles.

Hydrocarbon producers globally have been hit hard by a sharp fall in prices and demand as a result of restrictions imposed to combat the coronavirus, especially limits on travel.

Russian producers have been additionally hit by a falling rouble. After a net loss of 116.2 billion roubles in the first quarter, Gazprom recovered slightly in the three months to June, posting a net profit of 149.2 billion roubles.

Monday’s figures are mainly the result of lower prices and a drop in sales to Europe which is a crucial market for



An employee checks a gas valve at the Atamanskaya compressor station, in Siberia. – Reuters

the gas giant, Gazprom said in a statement.

Year-on-year sales to Europe dropped 16 per cent by volume in the first half of 2020, while revenues fell by almost half. — AFP

Argentina debt deal set for high creditor support

BUENOS AIRES: Argentina’s debt restructuring deal is set to have received huge creditor support when the government unveils the results of the tender, though there are question marks over two individual bond series that may have fallen short.

The South American country’s government is scheduled to present the outcome of the deal after months of tense negotiations, pushed deadlines and modifications to its offer helped strike an agreement with most creditors.

A strong deal is key for Argentina, Latin America’s No

3 economy and a major grains producer, to drag itself out of default and revive an economy that is in its third year of recession and expected to contract around 12.5 per cent this year.

The possibility that collective action clauses (CACs) may not be reached on some bonds raises the possibility of holdouts, though those are not expected to account for a significant portion of the overall debt pile or affect the wider deal. The bonds being restructured have CACs that mean the government needs a certain level of support to restructure them. — Reuters

LESS SEVERE

Virus-hit Turkish economy shrinks by 9.9 per cent



A merchant counts Turkish lira banknotes at the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. – Reuters

ISTANBUL: Turkey’s economy shrank by 9.9 per cent between April and June compared to the same period last year, the first reading since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic showed on Monday.

The drop was smaller than the 10.7 per cent contraction forecast in a survey by Bloomberg and less severe than those experienced in other big emerging markets.

It was also largely in line with the economic slowdowns experienced across Europe once weeks-long national lockdowns were imposed in March.

The Turkish economy grew by 4.5 per cent in the first three months of the year as the country fought its way back from a deep economic crisis in 2018.

The pandemic forced the Turkish central bank to sharply cut interest rates and inject cash into the economy to help businesses and households survive.

But those measures are now taking a toll.

The Turkish lira has lost roughly fifth of its value against the dollar this year and annual inflation is hovering around 12 per cent.

The central bank has responded by tightening access to credit without raising the main interest rate — a political sore point for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The measures are aimed at slowing down inflation and improving the appeal of Turkish bonds and other financial instruments.

But foreign investors are still pulling out of the Turkish market and the central bank is burning through its hard currency reserves to support the lira. — AFP

Warren Buffett looks to Japan with \$6 bn bet



Berkshire Hathaway Chairman Warren Buffett smiles at Berkshire Hathaway Inc’s annual shareholder meeting in Omaha, in this file photo. – Reuters

NEW YORK: Berkshire Hathaway Inc has bought a 5 per cent stake in each of Japan’s five biggest trading houses, together worth over \$6 billion, marking a departure for Chairman Warren Buffett as he looks beyond the United States to diversify his conglomerate.

The long-term investment in Itochu Corp, Marubeni Corp, Mitsubishi Corp, Mitsui & Co Ltd and Sumitomo Corp could see the stakes rise to 9.9 per cent, Berkshire said on Sunday. “The five major trading companies have many joint ventures throughout the world and

The long-term investment in Itochu Corp, Marubeni Corp, Mitsubishi Corp, Mitsui & Co Ltd and Sumitomo Corp could see the stakes rise to 9.9 per cent.

are likely to have more,” Buffett said in a statement. “I hope that in the future there may be opportunities of mutual benefit.”

The investment will help reduce Berkshire’s dependence on the US economy, which in the last quarter contracted the most in at least 73 years as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. Many of its businesses have struggled, including aircraft parts maker Precision Castparts from which it bore a \$9.8 billion writedown.

Buffett’s choice in Japan, however,

surprised market players as trading houses have long been far from investor favourites. As well as significant exposure to the energy sector and resource price volatility, tangled business models involving commodities as varied as noodles and rockets have long been a turn-off.

“Their cheap valuation may have been an attraction,” said Norihiro Fujito, chief strategist at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley Securities in Tokyo. “But it is un-Buffett-like to buy into all five companies rather than selecting a few.”

Berkshire bought the little-over 5 per cent stakes in about a year through insurance business National Indemnity Co. Together, five 5 per cent stakes were worth 700 billion yen (\$6.63 billion), Reuters calculations showed based on Refinitiv data.

Firms’ shares often rise when Buffett discloses investment, reflecting what investors view as his imprimatur. On Monday, Marubeni

and Sumitomo ended up over 9 per cent, followed by Mitsubishi and Mitsui at over 7 per cent. Itochu rose 4.2 per cent to a record high.

Berkshire shares were flat in premarket trade.

Even so, Marubeni, Mitsubishi and Sumitomo are still 10 per cent down on the year, versus a 6 per cent fall in the Topix index. Itochu, which has shifted towards consumer-related businesses, is the only one whose share price is higher than last year.

Indeed, Itochu is the only one whose stock trades above its book value. That means, for the other four, their market capitalisation is less than the value of their assets, making them attractive to a value investor like Buffett.

Several have large amounts of cash on hand, raising their appeal. Mitsubishi, for instance, has seen steady growth in free cash flow per share for four years, Refinitiv data showed. — Reuters



BREATHING SPACE

Banks face fallout as forbearance expires

China's largest state-owned banks are readied for rising bad debt and increased margin pressure in the months ahead as forbearance policies designed to give borrowers breathing space during the coronavirus crisis expire.

All five banks, which have been raising provisions to counter expected losses due to rising soured loans, have reported their biggest profit falls in at least a decade. "The external challenges in the second half are unprecedented," Bank of China Ltd (BoC) President Wang Jiang said on Monday.

Their forecasts highlight the impact of the pandemic and the economic slowdown on China's banks, which have been asked by Beijing to step up and lend to flagging sectors, while sacrificing profits in a bid to revive the country's fortunes.

Borrowers are struggling to repay debt after months of lockdown and some sectors, such as those in the travel

ALL FIVE BANKS, WHICH HAVE BEEN RAISING PROVISIONS TO COUNTER EXPECTED LOSSES DUE TO RISING SOURED LOANS, HAVE REPORTED THEIR BIGGEST PROFIT FALLS IN AT LEAST A DECADE.

industry, are battling to survive under the shadow of coronavirus.

Second-quarter loan-loss provisions were up 61 per cent to 436 per cent compared to the same period last year at ICBC, CCB, AgBank and BoC, data from China International Capital Corp (CICC) showed.

The crater in first-half profit was mostly down to provisioning ordered by regulators, CICC said, noting that second-quarter profit growth would otherwise have been 1.5 per cent to 5.1 per cent for those four lenders.

"As forbearance policies that help companies to recover expire in the first half of next year, the impact of

non-performing loans will increase," Chief Risk Officer Jin Yanmin of China Construction Bank Corp(CCB) said during a news briefing.

Agricultural Bank of China (AgBank) President Zhang Qingsong said bad loan pressure was rising, as short-term policies aimed at keeping firms afloat expired, adding its profit growth faces pressure from a "declining loan prime rate, fee cuts and an increase in loan loss provisions".

Ji Zhihong, CCB vice president, predicted that net interest margins, a key profitability indicator, will narrow further. Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), the world's

largest commercial lender by assets, will face higher pressure on loan risk controls in the second half and will increase efforts on provisions to guard against "significant turbulence," its vice president Liao Lin said.

Overall, Chinese commercial banks recorded a 9.4 per cent drop in first-half net profit to 1 trillion yuan, data from the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission showed.

By the end of the June quarter, the average non-performing loan ratio for commercial banks was at 1.94 per cent, data from the commission showed, the highest since 2009. And banks are likely to keep boosting provisions in the third quarter, Everbright Securities analyst Wang Yifeng said.

However, CICC analysts said the first-half is likely to mark the start of the sector's bottoming-out and they expect the industry to post profit growth again in 2021 as economic activity gradually

recovers.

Non-performing loan (NPL) ratios rose at the big five banks during the reporting period, with ICBC's increasing to 1.5 per cent by the end of June from 1.43 per cent three months earlier, and that of CCB rising by 0.07 percentage points in second quarter to 1.49 per cent.

"Consumer behaviour changes and reshuffle of industries accelerated by the pandemic will have an uncertain impact on the economy," Moody's Investor Service analyst Nicholas Zhu said.

In the second half and early 2021, big banks are expected to step up the sale of capital bonds to help counter deteriorating asset quality, Zhu said.

China's biggest banks still have a estimated shortfall of \$500 billion by 2025 to meet global capital requirements, Moody's estimates. Net interest margin (NIM) fell at ICBC, BoCom, CCB and AgBank, although it improved slightly at BoC. — Reuters

SHALE BOOM



An oil tanker stands attached to a mooring station near a refinery in Bayonne, New Jersey.

— Reuters

ABSORBING BUSINESS

Reliance ties golden bow onto its shopping deal

Mukesh Ambani is wrapping up a deal to buy a brick-and-mortar shopping rival with a golden bow. A unit of his Reliance Industries conglomerate has agreed to buy the retail, wholesale and supply chain businesses from Kishore Biyani's Future Group. It's a fiddly but clever acquisition that girds for online battle with Amazon and Walmart-owned Flipkart.

As a first step in the transaction, Biyani will consolidate his sprawling assets, including Big Bazaar supermarkets and modern warehousing, into the Mumbai-listed Future Enterprises. That company is swapping shares to absorb five related listed companies.

It also will swallow up more than a dozen mostly smaller and unlisted firms. Once that's done, Future Enterprises plans to sell the retail assets to Reliance for an enterprise value of \$3.4 billion.

The terms of the Future share swaps are, in one way, generous for shareholders of the affiliates. Owners of Future Retail, the largest of them by market value, are receiving a 50 per cent premium, based on Friday's closing price.

That figure shrinks significantly to just 19 per cent, however, when adjusted to the closing price on June 17, the day before reports of a deal surfaced in local media.

Amazon and others that had backed Biyani's retail ambitions will end up owning something else entirely.

Future Enterprises will be left with a hodgepodge of assets, including an insurance joint venture with Generali, some fast-moving consumer goods units and manufacturing facilities.

Several factors will help Ambani get through checkout. Plenty of investors probably would prefer to avoid any standoff. Private equity firm L Catterton, for example, picked up 10 per cent of Future Lifestyle Fashions in 2018 and this year bought a \$260 million stake in Reliance's digital business, Jio Platforms. Meanwhile, Future Group's debt problems mean stock prices may have kept falling without a sale.

Ambani has added a flourish, too. Reliance is staking a claim to the Future Enterprises rump by immediately buying equity and warrants that amount to a 13 per cent stake and impute a \$2.7 billion valuation based on the equity portion.

Reliance's backing of the company at the centre of the share swaps could signal further interest down the line, which should further lift the premiums. It's too early to determine the financial logic of the entire deal but the strategic rationale is solid. Reliance has meticulously planned its shopping list. — Reuters



A worker cleans the floor in front of a hoarding of Reliance Industries Ltd at a shopping mall on the outskirts of Kolkata, India. — Reuters

US legacy: Overpriced deals, unwanted assets

Oil and gas companies plunged over \$156 billion into corporate takeovers and land deals during the second US shale boom, in a massive bet that good times would continue and crude prices would rise. Many of those deals have become financial albatrosses.

The prospect for relief is limited: the industry is still working through the shock of a historic collapse in fuel demand in such a short period of time, prompted by the sudden impact of the coronavirus on global mobility. Oil companies are cutting their budgets to preserve cash and survive — not to spend it on buying more companies.

That leaves few companies with the money or the appetite to buy distressed assets. Another 150 North American oil and gas producers could face bankruptcy by the end of 2022, according to Rystad Energy, if crude prices remain near current levels.

The shale revolution turned the United States into the world's largest crude producer, pumping out more than 12 million barrels per day (bpd) at its peak. The industry beat forecasts again and again for production growth, but rarely for financial returns.

Still, the promise of future returns lured investors, including a wave of acquisitions that happened after the first boom when prices pulled back sharply from 2014 to 2016.

Now, many of the 2016 to 2019 shale deals are financially unworkable due to low oil prices, according to six people familiar with the transactions.

Of the 50 largest acreage purchases or M&A transactions between 2016 and 2019, at least 31 add value only if global benchmark Brent crude is above \$50 a barrel, or \$5 higher than current levels,

according to energy research firm Wood MacKenzie.

Production has fallen by more than 1 million bpd, and there is little to encourage a sustained rise in prices. Fuel storage is brimming worldwide, and fuel demand has been slow to recover even as global lockdowns ease.

Investors are wary of energy shares, as the S&P 500 Energy sector is down 40 per cent this year even as the US stock market touched new highs this month.

THE INDUSTRY IS STILL WORKING THROUGH THE SHOCK OF A HISTORIC COLLAPSE IN FUEL DEMAND IN SUCH A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME, PROMPTED BY THE SUDDEN IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS ON GLOBAL MOBILITY.

Oil companies such as BP Plc, Occidental Petroleum and Exxon Mobil Corp made highly publicised purchases that have lost substantial value. BP, Royal Dutch Shell and others have cut the assumed value of those assets, conceding big wagers on shale will not pay off.

In May 2019, Occidental bought Anadarko Petroleum for \$38 billion, taking on debt to outbid oil major Chevron Corp in a big bet on bigger growth in the largest US oil patch in Permian Basin. The combined company was worth about \$80 billion when the deal was announced, but is now worth just \$12.1 billion.

Occidental cut expected capital expenditure for this year by more than

half after oil prices plummeted, and dropped its quarterly dividend to a penny per share.

"You took a company (Occidental) that was healthy, and potentially an acquisition target itself, and it looks like you created a much larger unhealthy company," said one energy M&A lawyer.

There are few exit strategies for companies holding unwanted assets and acreage. Some, like Occidental, are seeking to sell assets to pay down debt even though buyers are scarce. Others will likely be forced to unload stakes at a loss.

There have been a few deals. Chevron executed the largest — a \$13 billion purchase of Noble Energy. But more big acquisitions are unlikely, said Sven del Pozzo, analyst at IHSMarkit.

"I don't think they're going to go snapping up shale players anytime soon. A lot of these companies haven't even been able to prove that they can make money with what they have," he said.

Occidental recently said it would sell assets in Colorado and Utah as it struggles to whittle down its \$36 billion debt load.

"People were too focused on growth as opposed to really drilling things that make sense," said Brock Hudson, managing director at investment bank Carl Marks Advisors. "It's hard not to appear that you overpaid when we end up in a situation like we are right now."

Overall, Permian basin purchases accounted for nearly a third of the 2016-2019 deals, Ernst and Young said. In the Permian, over 80 deals were done in which exploration and production companies (E&Ps) paid over \$10,000 an acre, according to industry information provider Enverus. — Reuters



Japan's Toshimaen amusement park closes after 94 years, to make way for Harry Potter

A popular Tokyo amusement park on Monday closed its doors for the last time after being in business for more than nine decades, with part of the site set to make way for a "Harry Potter" theme park.

Toshimaen amusement park, which opened in 1926 in northern Tokyo, caught the imagination of locals such as Junko and

gone", she said.

Other visitors remembered family visitors, school outings, and traditional "coming-of-age" celebrations they had at Toshimaen, which limited the number of people who were allowed to enter over the coronavirus crisis.

"It's regrettable and sad, I can't stop wishing for a delayed closure of the park or for it to survive", said Akiyoshi Tomizawa, 54.

Toshimaen amusement park, which opened in 1926 in northern Tokyo, caught the imagination of locals such as Junko and Hikari Abe, a mother and daughter who work at the park and met their partners there

Hikari Abe, a mother and daughter who work at the park and met their partners there.

Junko, a 62-year-old park keeper who has worked intermittently at Toshimaen since the 1970s, said she had assumed it would be there till the end of her life. "I wanted to enjoy that place together with my daughter".

Daughter Hikari, 30, started working at the park in 2015. She had hoped to take family photos there after getting married with her fiancée, who she also met there.

"It was a spot I had taken for granted because it had been there from the time I was born, so I can't believe that it will be

Tomizawa, who visited the park from the age of four, said he used to go swimming in the park with friends and take dates there as a teenager.

Part of the park's charm lay in its variety of attractions, which included swimming pools, eateries and roller coaster rides.

Yasuko Tagata, 56, recounted watching fireworks, which are a nighttime summer tradition in Japan, with friends from the park's swimming pools.

"Toshimaen is a place where people grew up together", she said.

The new "Harry Potter" theme park is expected to open in 2023, and will be Japan's first. — Reuters





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MOVIES

Box Office: 'New Mutants' Lands \$7 Million Debut



LOS ANGELES, (Variety.com): Superhero thriller "The New Mutants," one of the first major movies to open since coronavirus caused theaters to close in March, launched to \$7 million over the weekend. Though ticket sales were on the lower end of expectations, the Disney and 20th Century Studios release marks the biggest debut yet for a new release during the pandemic. Around 60-70% of theaters have reopened across the U.S. and Canada, according to Disney. However, some of the biggest moviegoing markets, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington DC, New Jersey and New York, still remain closed. In parts of the country where theaters have resumed business, venues are capping capacity and keeping space between seats to comply with social distancing measures. Even before the pandemic hit, "The New Mutants" was facing headwinds. The "X-Men" spinoff, about young mutants discovering their powers, had a particularly arduous journey to the big screen since it was initially scheduled to release in 2018. It reportedly went through extensive reshoots and has been delayed numerous times. Analyst David A. Gross, who runs movie consultancy FranchiseRe, estimates "The New Mutants" would have generated roughly \$14 million if all 6,000 movie theaters in the country were open. "The figure is below superhero and horror spinoff averages," Gross said. "Still, it's a positive step for the business following last weekend." "The New Mutants"

bowed this weekend alongside a number of fresh offerings, including Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter's "Bill and Ted Face the Music" and "The Personal History of David Copperfield" starring Dev Patel. "Bill and Ted Face the Music," the third installment in the sci-fi comedy franchise, simultaneously debuted on digital rental services. Theatrically, the film picked up \$1.06 million from 1,007 screens — with drive-in theaters in Salt Lake City, Dallas and Houston accounting for a bulk of receipts. Though it's unclear how much money "Bill and Ted" made on premium video-on-demand platforms, Orion Films reported that it was the No. 1 title on iTunes, while the series bundle had the No. 2 slot. "Bill and Ted 3," directed by Dean Parisot, received mostly positive reviews. "The Personal History of David Copperfield" made \$520,000 from 1,360 theaters, a slow start for the PG-rated comedy. Based on the Charles Dickens novel, the movie was directed by "Veep" creator Armando Iannucci. Searchlight, the specialty studio distributing the film, plans to expand "David Copperfield" to nearly 100 additional theaters in time for Labor Day weekend. "The results, while modest, signals a return to the cinema for moviegoers who are yearning for the majesty of the big screen," said Searchlight's head of distribution Frank Rodriguez. Among holdovers, Russell Crowe's road-rage thriller "Unhinged" pulled in \$2.6 million during its second weekend of release, bringing its total bounty to \$8.8 million. — Reuters

A digital dance-off spreads from Argentina to the world

BUENOS AIRES: With theaters closed around the world, three South American dancers have created a digital dance-off for aspiring twirlers, with Instagram the new stage where competitors from Argentina and Brazil to Israel and Italy post clips of their moves. The competition, open to all, has attracted hundreds of applicants — some professionals, others youngsters dancing from lockdown in their homes. A panel of renowned expert judges assess each dance, and viewers can also vote with "likes." "We were struck by the desire of participants to be seen, to express themselves and their dance, what is happening to them at the moment," said Argentine Facundo Luqui, who organized the '@stayhomedance-competition' event with two other dancers. "What we thought when we started this project was that anyone can participate," added Luqui, 23, who is a member of the ballet company at Buenos Aires' iconic Teatro Colón. The competition, which wraps up

on Sunday, challenged dancers to raise awareness about the pandemic, reference the coronavirus and honor an artist. In one video, a mother wearing a doctor's coat and a mask guards her daughter while she dances. Giovana Soria, 18, a Paraguayan who has studied Latin rhythms for two years, said her dance was to encourage people to take steps to prevent infections spreading. "I started to watch the news and saw that many people respected the quarantine, but when going out they did not take measures like putting on a mask, they touched everything and didn't wash their hands," said Soria. Paz Schattenhofer, an 11-year-old who studies classical dance and who took part from Buenos Aires, said her performance was a homage to Russian photographer Yulia Artemyeva, who made a series of works comparing ballerinas to flowers. "I would love to win it but in reality it's to have fun. It is great when peo-

ple 'like' you and that people see me, it is like a stage," she said. Performance art globally has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, closing theaters and leaving dance troupes unable to perform or rehearse at close quarters. "I think dance at the moment is undergoing a great crisis," said Manuela Lavalle, 24, another of the organizers, who dances in a company in the United States but is passing the quarantine in her native Buenos Aires. "It's complicated because many companies do not have the money they need to get by. I believe the world of dance is going to change a lot and we still do not know how, but it is a matter of waiting and continuing to create in the meantime." — Reuters



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LIJU CHERIAN

A Greek lady specialised in sea turtles and working on them for many years in her home country has high impressions about the turtle conservation project and environment research in the Sultanate.

The fact that Oman hosts the most important Loggerhead Turtle rookery in the world always fascinated her to work in Masirah which later led to the creation of the first-ever Environmental Information Centre.

As a legal professional specially trained in Environmental Law and Management, Nancy Papathanasopoulou organised and carried out many successful sea turtle conservation projects on Masirah Island for five years.

The project was carried out in cooperation with the Environment Authority and sponsored by Total Group through its Foundation for Biodiversity and the Sea, as well as Total SA-Oman branch from June 2004 to 2009.

Nancy was the field coordinator and adviser to the Masirah Turtle Conservation Project (MTCP) that conducted a beach and endangered turtle survey launching the first satellite tracking operation in the island.

The five-year project studied the four nesting species of sea turtles on the island and proposed a general management plan to the authorities based on their conservation.

Their initial fieldwork came up with mainly three deliverables. These relate to the population assessment of four species of nesting turtles, a package of environmental information and education, and lastly a general management plan of the island based on sustainable development.

As in Athens, she was working in several capacities as a volunteer, legal professional, researcher, nature conservation consultant, and had significant experience on the actual conservation methods, needs

and politics.

But the Middle East proved for her to be an excellent experience to adapt to different cultures and relative lack of legal and institutional background on the conservation of endangered species and ecosystems.

Recalls Nancy about her Masirah experiences.

"It is impossible not to notice that the island is blessed with unique environmental features of extreme interest: Apart from the 60 kilometres of turtle nesting/mating/feeding beaches and beachfront areas, there are immense wetlands

Nancy was the field coordinator and adviser to the Masirah Turtle Conservation Project (MTCP) that conducted a beach and endangered turtle survey launching the first satellite tracking operation in the island.

with hundreds of thousands of birds all year round. Some beaches are strewn with hundreds of thousands of seashells and upon a simple snorkel one meets an amazing multitude of reef life, as well as significant marine megafauna such as dolphins, whales, sharks, rays and of course sea turtles."

As a result, Nancy and her colleagues, all nationals from foreign countries, decided to extend work to that multitude of important species and their ecosystems as well. They worked day and night fascinated by this incredible island and its environmental treasures.

At the end of their duty, they created a general management plan on sustainable development based on the conservation not only of turtle species but also the unique monotypic reef of Masirah.

They included highly protected core areas and those of less strict protection, suitable for ecotourism development and stated all the species and their status according to their degree of danger based on international indicators.

Their plan was later used as an example when the Oman government formulated the Master Plan for all Governorates in the Sultanate.

"It was one of the most gratifying moments in my 15 years of work in the Middle East," she mentions.

Later, Nancy proceeded to Kuwait where she did a similar project at its southern islands for eight years. The turtles are much fewer in Kuwait, and much more endangered as she and her team stayed at coast guard stations on three tiny islands close to the border with Saudi Arabia.

As project manager, she brought out coffee table books on Birds of Kuwait and Coral Reefs of Kuwait, with scientifically solid information published in 2012 and 2015.

Nancy is now a certified drone pilot and project leader, currently part of a drone research project on the Greek side of an EU project called 'Life Euroturtles.' This project, under the auspices of the Environment Commission in Brussels, subsidises countries hosting turtles to help them in assessment, conservation and scientific research.

She leads teams on select beaches in Greece and flies all year round to see if the marine areas contain sea turtles and other types of species.



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