

P15

US CONSUMER SPENDING RISES STRONGLY



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WORLD CUP WINNER RAPINOE OPTS OUT OF NWSL FALL SERIES



P18

'BLACK PANTHER' STAR BOSEMAN DIES AFTER PRIVATE BATTLE WITH CANCER



OMAN

40% rise in Omani pharmacists

MUSCAT: While the number of Omani health workers witnessed a rise of five per cent over a period between 2016 and 2019, pharmacists registered the largest increase as they exceeded the 40 per cent mark during the period. The number of physicians increased by approximately four per cent with dentists accounting for three per cent, data from the ministry of health reveal. The total number of workforce in the ministry, despite a marginal fall, stands now at 39,413 employees at the end of 2019 compared to 39,506 in 2016.

DETAILS ON P3

REGION

Libya sacks minister over protesters

TRIPOLI: Libya's UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) said the interior minister had been suspended after militia gunmen fired on peaceful protesters last week. "Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha has been temporarily suspended" and will face an inquiry "on his statements about the protests and incidents in Tripoli and other cities", the GNA said. He will be questioned on the authorisations and permits granted to the demonstrators, the security arrangements in place and the "violations committed", it said. Demonstrations began last Sunday in Tripoli, the seat of the GNA, against poor public services and living conditions, and gunmen fired on the crowd. Similar shootings occurred on Monday and Wednesday.

DETAILS ON P6

INSIDE



WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT

MAX: 37°C
MIN: 29°C

SALALAH

MAX: 26°C
MIN: 24°C

NIZWA

MAX: 42°C
MIN: 28°C

SUNRISE 05.48 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:31

DHUHR: 12:13

ASR: 15:40

MAGHRIB: 18:32

ISHA: 19:44



THEY COME IN THOUSANDS...



They come in their thousands, the migrants, winging their way from North Africa mostly, to the estuaries and mudflats of Oman, every year. Some here to stay, where the climate suits them, while others will linger a while before moving on to India and South East Asia, on that annual sojourn. The 2016 census identified over 500,000 birds, of some 80 different species, in Al Wusta wetlands alone, and mostly migratory.

DETAILS ON P19

Report hails Oman's diversification efforts

MUSCAT: The Market Watch for Economic Consultancies and American Media Services published a report hailing the Sultanate's efforts on diversification of national economy. The corporation expects that Oman 2040 Vision will help non-oil economy to grow during the period from 2020 to 2026. The report also envisages that countries of the Middle East will witness a wave of building and construction in the coming years, along with the development of infrastructure projects which match the standards of the current infrastructure of developed countries.

The report also expects these countries to set up widespread commercial entities including economic and medical cities, hotels and offices. "The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is striving to boost its non-oil sector such as housing and hospitality, a sector which is expected to record compound annual growth with 5.5 per cent during the next six years," the report added.

The corporation said that the infrastructure sector might boom in the MENA countries, while hospitality and housing sectors might grow temperately. — ONA

COVID-19 IS STILL AMONG US

BE CAREFUL

VIRUS HAS NOT WEAKENED AND IS STILL SPREADING

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
MUSCAT, AUG 29

In the last few days, some people seem to be complacent and reckless by not adhering to safety measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19. After the opening of a new set of commercial activities, almost everyone flocked to markets and stores with a minimum level of precautions, forgetting that the imminent danger is still looming.

This trend has been noticed in many public places, ignoring the fact of a possible another wave of COVID-19 that may find such a situation perfect to flourish.

Although the epidemiological curve in the Sultanate continues to gradually decrease, from over 1,000 cases per day during the period before Eid al Adha to a couple of hundreds in the past


We seek the cooperation of all, adherence to precautionary measures, and implementation of the decisions of the Supreme Committee

AN OFFICIAL MINISTRY OF HEALTH

two weeks, this doesn't mean that the virus is fading as the Ministry of Health changed its protocol of tests. "The ministry now restricts tests to the cases eligible for examination. It is now for those with

confirmed symptoms only, while previously included everyone suspected of being infected or has contact with a patient," according to a health official.

"We demand the cooperation of all, adherence to precautionary measures, and implementation of the decisions of the Supreme Committee. It is really sad to see, during the past days, groups of people who do not adhere to wearing a mask in public places. This could radically change all efforts made to contain the disease, and allow it to spread again," the source said.

As of Saturday, the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 reached 85,005, of whom 52,427 were Omanis, and 32,578 were non-Omanis. The deaths have reached 650. Moreover, the number of recoveries stood at 79,608.

TURN TO P9

Residents need sponsor letter to return to Sultanate after 180 days

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, AUG 29

Expatriate residents of the Sultanate who have stayed away from Oman for more than 180 days and now want to return, need to produce a letter from the sponsor supporting his residency data either through Sanad Centre or visa website. It has to be submitted along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approval, according to the Directorate-General of Passports and Residence.

Any expatriate who has been away from Oman for more than six months does not need a no-objection certificate (NoC) from the Royal Oman Police if he wants to return.

ELECTRONIC SYSTEM

"For foreigners residing abroad for more than 180 days and want to return, the employer must extract the worker's residency data via the electronic visa website or Sanad offices, using the employer's electronic authentication system,"

the DG of Passports and Residence told the *Observer*.

After this, the employer must apply to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to obtain approval for the staff to enter the Sultanate.

This would lay to rest the rumours that a letter from the ROP is also necessary.

However, the Sanad centre would need a copy of the ID card of the sponsor or the authorised person, to endorse his (the sponsor's) consent for the return of his staff.

TURN TO P2

World's largest wetland burns from above and below

POCONE: The world's largest wetland is ablaze, but the fire is often invisible.

In Brazil's Pantanal, the vegetation compacted under the marshy flood water during the wet season dries out as ponds and lagoons evaporate, leaving flammable deposits underground that can continue to smolder long after visible flames die down.

Firefighters across Brazil are battling raging towers of flames from the Amazon rainforest to the Cerrado savannah, but the fires beneath their feet are a particular challenge in the Pantanal. The only

way to combat an underground fires is to dig a trench around it, said state firefighter Lieutenant Isaac Wibhy.

"But how do you do that if you have a line of fire that's 20 km long? It's not viable," he said.

The fires here are the worst in 15 years. The flames threaten the region's biodiversity, rich with tapirs, pumas, capybaras and the world's most dense population of jaguars.

The Pantanal, whose name derives from the Portuguese word for "swamp," sprawls over more than 150,000 sq km in Brazil and also extends into Bolivia and Paraguay.



A fire is seen near Cuiaba River at Pantanal, in Pocone, Brazil. — Reuters

As fires approached emergency workers in the Pantanal this week, they used tractors to cut through desiccated trees and shrubs, leaving a gash of brown dirt meant to rob the flames of fuel and stop their spread. But strong winds can send the flames over the top, or underground fires can pass below.

"Sometimes it passes under a firebreak and takes the firefighters by surprise," said Lieutenant Jean Oliveira, who is leading the fire-fighting efforts.

"Sometimes you control a fire and it's not really dead, it's just sleeping," he said. — Reuters



Summer rains to continue today

NOT WINTER YET: Weather to experience transition period



Heavy rains, accompanied by thunderstorms and strong winds, have been reported from Al Dhahirah, Al Dakhiliyah, and North Al Sharqiyah governorates on Saturday. PHOTOS BY FAISAL AL BALUSHI AND MOHAMED AL HUDHRAMI

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, AUG 29

The wilayats of North Al Sharqiyah, Al Dakhiliyah and Al Dhahira received heavy rains along with thunderstorms and strong winds.

The weather pattern was due to the local cloud development seen across Al Hajr mountains in the summer.

The only two stations that recorded rainfall were Al Hamra (5 mm) and Izki (8.4 mm).

The weather forecaster at Oman Met Office said, “Thunders showers are expected tomorrow also but will not be as intensive as today. Rains will be scattered on Sunday.” There are chances of convective clouds development and occasional thunderstorms associated

with fresh wind over Al Hajar Mountains and adjoining areas during afternoon and evening.

In Dhofar Governorate, partly cloudy to cloudy skies along coastal areas and adjoining mountains with intermittent drizzle are expected. It is mainly clear skies over the rest of the Sultanate with a chance of late night to early morning low level clouds or fog patches over Arabian Sea and Oman Sea coastal areas.

ARE WE NEARING WINTER?

The weather expert explained “It is not winter yet until December. We refer to the stage between summer and winter as the transition period and that astronomically is considered to begin



on September 25th, but weather wise we expect it to begin on September 1st. The period from September to October is considered as the transition period.” According to Oman Met Office weather forecast, along the coastal areas of Oman Sea winds will be variable light at night becoming northeasterly during morning and along coastal areas of Arabian Sea winds will be southwesterly moderate to fresh, while over rest of the Sultanate winds will be southerly to southeasterly light to moderate.

Rough sea is expected along coastal areas of Arabian Sea with maximum wave height of 3.5 metres and in the rest of the coasts with maximum wave height is likely to be 1.25 metres.

OCCI CALLS FOR ECONOMIC AND LABOUR REFORMS

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, AUG 29

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) continues to conduct meetings with business owners to discuss the impact of COVID-19 in various sectors.

The chamber is expected to submit a recovery report to the Supreme Committee on COVID-19.

The Economic Affairs, Research, and Studies Committee of the chamber has suggested that no new taxes or fees should be imposed on the private sector in light of the current circumstances.

It added that the government should focus on evolving mechanisms to improve the tax collection from private sector establishments with the help of the chamber.

Apart from calling for coordination with the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) to address the problem of liquidity shortage and its impact on various economic activities, the meeting also discussed challenges in the labour market and recommended a balance on the size of expatriate workers and the Omanisation policy.

Earlier, Small and Medium Enterprises Committee said that economic incentives hold key to meet the challenges faced by landlords and tenants and all commercial activities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

The meeting reviewed the challenges facing business owners and ways to support them by reducing their burden in terms of rents.

THE CHAMBER HAS SUGGESTED THAT NO NEW TAXES OR FEES SHOULD BE IMPOSED ON THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN LIGHT OF THE COVID-19 SITUATION

It touched upon the need to distinguish the issues faced by the landlords from the difficulties among tenants, in addition to the incentives provided to both groups.

The various types of landlords include individuals, institutions, commercial centres and malls, government, or endowments, as well as those in residential, commercial, industrial, tourism, agricultural, and other sectors that the impacted by the precautionary measures of the Supreme Committee.

Meanwhile, the Majlis Ash’Shura members called for an amendment to the labour law to plug in loopholes that led to problems in the labour market, including the layoffs.

Residents need sponsor letter

FROM PAGE 1

“This is mandatory because the arrival of the person who lived for more than 180 days outside the country should be with the knowledge of the sponsor or authorised person, and this has already been implemented at the airports,” he added.

The ROP source further said that those who got their visa over during the COVID-19 lockdown period must renew the residency and then obtain approval from the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs to return in case he/she is allowed to do so. Also, return procedures require him to quarantine for two weeks.

The official further said that an employer no longer needs to apply for an exception certificate from the system of 180 days which is issued by the Directorate General of Passports and Residency while applying the foreigner’s return to the Sultanate. Earlier, it was mandatory to secure entry permission.

Experts call for installation of fire detectors at homes

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, AUG 29

Although installation of fire detectors has not been made mandatory at homes in Oman, experts and rescuers insist on their installation to avoid casualties.

Loss of lives and damage to property due to fire incidents have become quite often all across the Sultanate even as firefighters attend regularly panicky calls from citizens and residents.

Reports indicate that Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) attends around 10 fire incidents, including vehicle fires, on an average day, especially during summer.

Fire detectors are mandatory in commercial areas, industrial areas, business establishments, apartments and hotels and restaurants.

“Although not made mandatory by law, we regularly advise home owners that smoke detectors be installed as a precaution against

likely incidents of fires,” said an official at PACA.

Studies reveal that fire alarm systems have contributed a lot in saving lives in the past 30 years.

According to published statistics, globally, 70 per cent of home fire deaths occur in homes with no smoke detector alarm systems or faulty smoke alarms. It is also reported that the presence of operational smoke alarms in a home reduces the risk of death in a fire by 50 per cent.

According to Dr Bourdoucen Hadj, former Dean of the College of Engineering at Sultan Qaboos University, smoke detectors are properly designed and installed in different locations, ceilings and high walls, as part of a central or networked smoke detection systems to provide early warnings for the protection of lives and properties from smoke and fire. “Having smoke alarms installed in homes is one of the most important things to help keeping the family members safe

from smoke and fire dangers,” he said.

He added that, with the ongoing development of fourth industrial revolution technologies and Internet of Things systems, smoke detectors will become smarter and will provide better safety as the alarm notifications can be communicated to smartphones and Public Authorities for Civil Defence and Ambulance.

Working smoke alarms are a key factor in surviving a fire, but safe practices in the home are the first line of defence in preventing a fire from ever starting. Many residential fires and fire-related deaths are preventable. A fire can occur in anyone’s home.

Cooking equipment accounts for the largest percentage of residential fires. Because of oils used, these fires are most often flaming fires.

However, normal cooking can also produce steam, smoke, and fumes that set off alarms.



COVID-19
is still
among us,
be careful

FROM PAGE 1

Since the start of the pandemic, the number of examinations conducted by the health institutions to detect the virus numbered 309,212.

Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, had confirmed more than once that the virus has not diminished and is still spreading very quickly. He has recommended avoiding visits and family gatherings that increase the chance of the disease spreading. He also called upon everyone to maintain hand hygiene, avoid touching the face, nose, mouth and eyes, follow healthy habits when sneezing and coughing, and strictly adhere to social and physical distancing instructions issued by the Supreme Committee and the Ministry of Health, and not leave homes unless necessary.

The official authorities in the Sultanate had imposed several penalties on violators of the decisions of the Supreme Committee, aiming at limiting the spread of the virus. The penalty for attending gatherings including weddings, funerals, places of worship, and some other events is RO 1,500.

For participation in the gatherings, the penalty is RO 100 per person. Any gathering of five or more people in one area without family links will be considered a violation of the decisions of the Supreme Committee. A fine of RO 100 will be imposed on anyone who does not wear a mask in public places, including commercial centres.

Over 40 per cent rise in Omani pharmacists



SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, AUG 29

While the number of Omani health workers witnessed a rise of five per cent over a period between 2016 and 2019, pharmacists registered the largest increase as they exceeded the 40 per cent mark during the period.

The number of physicians increased by approximately four per cent with dentists accounting for three per cent, data from the Ministry of Health revealed.

The total number of workforce in the ministry, despite a marginal fall, stands now at 39,413 employees at the end of 2019 compared to 39,506 in 2016.

Commenting on the figures, Dr Omar Abdulaziz al Farsi, Director of Information and Statistics Department, said, "the development in the field of health services has been accompanied by a significant growth

The number of physicians increased by approximately four per cent with dentists accounting for three per cent, data from the Ministry of Health revealed

in the workforce in the ministry thanks to the Omanisation policy".

Dr Al Farsi said in a statement uploaded on the ministry website that the expansion of health services, in terms of quantity and quality, and the increase in the population have led to an increase in the number of outpatient visit for the year 2019 by about 100,000 visits compared to 2016.

"This shows an average 5.6 visits per Omani capita in 2019", he said.

According to statistics provided by him, the ministry performed about 118,000 operations with a 6 per cent increase, and about 29 million laboratory examinations with a 9.5 per cent increase, and more than 1.7 million radiology with a 7 per cent rise.

At the same time, the increase in the number of dialysis units all the governorates paved way for doing a total of 292,000 sessions of dialysis in 2019 compared to 204,000 in 2016 with an increase of 7.7 per cent.

On the other hand, the data showed that the number of admissions decreased from about 343,000 patients in 2016 to 331,000 in 2019.

Thus, said Dr Al Farsi, "the increase in the number of beds together with the decrease in the number of inpatients has resulted in a 4 per cent decrease in beds occupancy rate".

Nurses vital for universal health coverage goals

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, AUG 29

The Directorate of Health Services in Dhofar reiterated its commitment to raise healthcare standards while marking the 'Nursing Now' global campaign on Saturday. The participants discussed the role of nursing terming it vital to achieve the goals of 'universal health coverage for all'.

The participants from various healthcare units put stress on strengthening the capabilities of the nursing workforce to bring about a perceptible change in the healthcare system.

The participants who gave valuable suggestions during the campaign included directors of various departments in the health directorate, and representatives from the medical complex in the Diwan of Royal Court, the Armed Forces Hospital, and private health institutions.

Salem al Mughaini, Director of Nursing Affairs Department in Dhofar, called upon awareness among the workforce involving the nursing and midwifery staff and put stress on continuous knowledge sharing with the latest happenings in the sector. He exhorted them to be prepared for all the levels of nursing care

to achieve the desired goals.

A video on nursing and its importance in the health sector was also shown during the launch of the campaign, while the Director-General's message was delivered by Dr Salem bin Saeed Habash al Kathiri, Director of the Department of Disease Control. He thanked the nursing staff for their humanitarian work and the sacrifices they make in all the situations.

In an interactive session, all the participants expressed views and reiterated the resolve to serve humanity with their work.

The Nursing Now is a three-year (2018-2020) global campaign, run in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Council of Nurses, which aims at improving health by raising the profile and status of nursing worldwide.

Five areas are under the focus of the campaign. The first is to ensure a more prominent voice of the nurses and midwives in health policy-making. Second is encouraging greater investment in the nursing workforce then recruiting more nurses into leadership positions; conducting research that helps determine where nurses can have the greatest impact; and the last is sharing of best nursing practices.

Environment Authority visits Daymaniyat Islands



MUSCAT: With an objective to ensure cleanliness of beaches, the Environment Authority conducted a field visit to Daymaniyat Islands Natural Reserve.

Al Daymaniyat Islands Nature Reserve was designated as a nature reserve in 1996 with the aim of conserving turtle nesting beaches, natural scenery, coral reefs and birds, as well as promoting ecotourism. It is an archipelago of nine islands along the coast of Wilayat of Seeb and Wilayat of Barka.

The islands are composed of prominent limestone rocks and

ancient coral reefs. To the north they slope steeply towards the sea to depths of more than 25 metres. To the south they are flanked by shallow sandy seas with extensive coral reefs.

Al Daymaniyat Islands Nature Reserve is an important conservation area, in which thousands of marine birds nest in summer, creating a wonderful panorama.

The reserve has 15 species of wild plants that densely cover parts of Al Kharaaba Island and Al Jibaa al Kibaar Island, making these islands the most important habitat for nesting birds. Island birds normally

seek nesting cover which is just beneath thick ground vegetation.

The Nature Reserve also boasts of biodiversity unique in an island ecosystem and located in an arid region. It provides a very vital breeding and nesting area for marine birds and endangered turtles.

Hence, the role of the authority relies on issuing regulations and rules that protect the natural components from any harm.

It issues permits required to practice some activities during the allowed periods.

— ONA



Oman Air touches down at Kannur International Airport

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, AUG 29

Oman Air, Oman's national carrier, received a water salute at Kannur International Airport, the newest airport in Kerala as it taxied along the apron on its maiden journey to this sector on Friday.

The airline's first service to Kannur was a charter service carrying 183 passengers including 4 infants and 19 children who flew for free, thanks to Makkah Hypermarket Group in Oman.

"We identified some 183 passengers who were stranded in the Sultanate of Oman after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the following lockdown. We are happy that we could offer a helping hand to these

people who were stuck for some reason or the other," Muhammed Kinhi (Mammooty), Managing Director of the Group, and Saif al Namani, Director, said.

They included visitors whose visas got expired, medical emergency cases, pregnant women, workers in distress, senior citizens and others who were stranded without work.

This is the first time that Oman Air is landing in Kannur International Airport, which was opened on December 9, 2018. Permission to carry passengers to and forth this 4th international gateway of Kerala was limited to Indian carriers while others were trying for the same.

With the Friday flight, more than 100,000 expatriates stranded in

With the Friday flight, more than 100,000 expatriates stranded in Oman for many reasons were able to get home since May 9 when the first charter service began to carry Indians home

Oman for many reasons were able to get home since May 9 when the first charter service began to carry Indians home.

Embassies and other diplomatic missions have been help their citizens in Oman get back to their respective countries along with various organisations, NGOs, travel agencies and other commercial establishments which have been busy sending their nationals back home.

These passengers included people stranded either due to visa expiry or lack of flight services to their home states back in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Philippines, among others.

Hilal Mohammed, Sinan Mohammed, Salim Sajith, General Manager and management and staff representatives were also present at the departure of the first flight that carried passengers for free.

Balqees appointed President of Knowledge Oman

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 29

Knowledge Oman, the largest award-winning knowledge sharing platform in the Sultanate, announced the appointment of Balqees Sulieman al Hassani as President of the platform effective from today. Balqees heads the Well-Being and Student Support Services of Al Sahwa School, one of the leading international private schools in Sultanate.

"Bridging the gap between the academia and the industry is one of important areas of Knowledge Oman where our focus is to bring valuable knowledge from the industry closer to the students and the society as a whole. Balqees appointment is a strategic fit and her rich experience, passion for education, and leadership abilities will no doubt strengthen Knowledge Oman's participation in developing a knowledge-based society," said Tariq al Barwani, Knowledge Oman Founder.

A graduate of science from the Sultan Qaboos University, Balqees has over 15 years of experience in education serving as a laboratory technician, teaching general sciences students, moving up the ladder to becoming the Pastoral coordinator for the upper secondary school, to being promoted as the Assistant Principal of Al Sahwa Schools. Balqees was the member of the senior leadership team of Al Sahwa Schools. She currently serves as Al Sahwa School's Head of Well-Being and Student Support Services.

Balqees was among the highest achievers in the public secondary school scoring a distinction mark of 95 per cent positioned among the top students of Dohat Al Adab School.

"I am honoured with the appointment and I look forward to collaborate with the industries to enrich the society with educational value that is cornerstone of Oman's wealth and development," said Balqees.



I am honoured with the appointment and I look forward to collaborate with the industries to enrich the society with educational value that is cornerstone of Oman's wealth and development

BALQEES SULIEMAN AL HASSANI
President of Knowledge Oman

Knowledge Oman has attracted more than 700 volunteers that initiated 74 projects that received more than 80,000 registrations and has partnered with 35 local and international organisations that impacted over 130,000 people. Knowledge Oman has received multiple regional and international awards for the projects contributed to society since 2008. The appointment follows Knowledge Oman's practice and commitment of empowering members with equal opportunities continuously to lead and support the community development.

THREE DEAD IN TWO MISHAPS



MUSCAT: The ROP helicopter airlifted the bodies of two persons of Arab nationality after their vehicle slid from the top of a mountain in the Qaran district of Tiwi. In another incident, two women citizens were rescued and a child drowned in one of the valleys in South Al Batinah Governorate. A statement issued online by the Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) said: "The civil defence and ambulance teams in the Governorate of South Al Batinah rushed to rescue two women while a 15-year-old girl drowned in Wadi Bani Hani in the Wilayat of Rustaq."



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Abe loyalist Suga emerges as strong PM contender

TOKYO: Yoshihide Suga, a longtime lieutenant of Japan's Shinzo Abe, has emerged as a strong contender to succeed him as prime minister, an outcome that would extend the fiscal and monetary stimulus that defined Abe's nearly eight years in office.

Abe, Japan's longest-serving premier, said on Friday he was stepping down due to a worsening of a chronic illness, setting the stage for a leadership election within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

While some other would-be successors have declared their intention to run, the 71-year-old Suga has said he doesn't want the job. But such comments have been called into question by an aggressive media push in recent days that put him squarely in the public eye.

"They are really going to try to get Suga to replace Abe and continue the Abe government without Abe," said Sophia University political science professor Koichi Nakano.

In an interview with Reuters this week, Suga stressed the need to spur economic growth over tightening

restrictions to contain the virus, pointing to the need to promote tourism.

"We need to consider what we can do to prevent the economy from falling off a cliff," Suga said at his parliamentary office, where a large photograph of him standing next to US President Donald Trump was on display.

The interview, in which Suga again denied he wanted the job, was part of the publicity blitz before Abe announced his resignation, in which he gave interviews to at least four major news organisations.

A self-made politician, Suga was chosen by Abe in 2012 for the pivotal role of chief cabinet secretary, acting as top government spokesman, coordinating policies and riding herd on bureaucrats.

The winner of the LDP vote, which domestic media said could be held around September 15, is virtually ensured the premiership because of the party's majority in parliament. The victor will serve out Abe's remaining term as LDP chief, which ends in



Police patrol on a road leading to the office of Japan's Prime Minister in Tokyo on Saturday. — AFP

September 2021.

Former defence minister Shigeru Ishiba, 63, a soft-spoken security hawk who aims to revive Japan's regional economies, is also expected to run. A long-time Abe critic, Ishiba is popular with the public but less so among party members of parliament.

Ex-foreign minister Fumio Kishida, 63, long seen as Abe's favoured heir, said on Friday he would run in the party poll, but the dovish lawmaker from Hiroshima has struggled to gain traction with voters.

Dark-horse potential candidates include Defence Minister Taro Kono, 56, who has an image as a maverick but has toed the line on key Abe policies,

The 71-year-old Suga has said he doesn't want the job. But such comments have been called into question by an aggressive media push in recent days that put him squarely in the public eye

and Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, 64, who has a reputation as a tough negotiator.

Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi is popular but at 39 seen by many as too young.

What format party executives pick to choose their next leader will have a big impact on the outcome. A decision is expected on Tuesday.

Usually, a leadership vote is held by LDP MPs along with grassroots party

members.

In case of a sudden resignation, however, an extraordinary vote can be called with participants narrowed to MPs and representatives of the party's local chapters.

"A regular election gives Ishiba a better chance," said Steven Reed, professor emeritus at Chuo University.

In 2012, Ishiba beat Abe in a first-round party poll that included rank-and-file members but he failed to win a majority and lost in a run-off, when only MPs voted.

Ishiba could also have an edge if LDP lawmakers put priority on a leader who would help the party keep its huge majority in a lower house election that must be held by late October 2021.

Talk of Suga as a contender bubbled up in April 2019 after he unveiled the new imperial era name, "Reiwa", for use on Japanese calendars after the enthronement of the new emperor.

Still, the veteran lawmaker has an image more as a behind-the-scenes operator than a frontline leader.

— Reuters

BELARUS REVOKES ACCREDITATIONS OF JOURNALISTS COVERING PROTESTS

MOSCOW: Belarus has revoked the accreditations of some journalists working for foreign media and covering anti-government protests that erupted after a disputed presidential election, news organisations and a journalist association said on Saturday.

The accreditations, issued by the Foreign Ministry, were revoked for 17 journalists including a video journalist and a photographer from Reuters, two from the BBC and four from Radio Liberty, the Belarusian Association of Journalists said.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Anatoly Glaz could not be reached for comment. A Reuters spokesperson said in a statement that Reuters journalists had been stripped of their accreditation, adding "We are not aware of any acts by our Belarus journalists that might warrant loss of accreditation."

"We hope the authorities will reinstate their credentials to ensure our journalists can continue to deliver independent, unbiased news in the public interest," the spokesperson said.

Radio Liberty in a report on its



Women walk during a demonstration against police brutality following recent protests to reject the presidential election results in Minsk, Belarus on Saturday. — Reuters

website cited the Foreign Ministry as saying the decision to revoke the accreditations was taken for security reasons. The ministry declined to say how many journalists had lost their accreditation, Radio Liberty said. In

comments at a government meeting on July 23, President Alexander Lukashenko threatened to expel foreign journalists, accusing them of inciting protests against him before the August 9 election.

Lukashenko denies opposition accusations that he rigged the election to prolong his 26-year rule. Thousands of people have taken to the streets to demand he step down.

— Reuters

Mali junta postpones first meeting over transfer of powers

BAMAKO: Mali military rulers said on Saturday they were postponing their first meeting over the transfer of powers due to "organisational reasons" nearly two weeks after ousting the president in a coup.

The junta had invited civic groups, political organisations and former rebels to consultations on Saturday, but said in a statement that the meeting was postponed to a later date.

A protest coalition that had campaigned against former president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the June 5 Movement, had not been invited to participate in the meeting.

The group has demanded that the military junta give it a role in the transition to civilian rule which the military has promised, though without a timetable.

After an escalating series of mass protests, young army officers mutinied on August 18, seizing

Keita and other leaders and declaring they now governed the country.

The coup shocked Mali's West African neighbours and ally France, heightening worries over instability in a country already struggling with an insurgency, ethnic violence and economic malaise.

Mali's influential imam Mahmoud Dicko, a key player in the mass opposition protests that led to Keita's ouster, said on Friday that the new military rulers did not have "carte blanche".

His comments came as a new document published on the Malian government's *Official Journal* said the junta's head had been effectively invested with the powers of head of state.

West African leaders, meanwhile, on Friday demanded an immediate civilian transition and elections within 12 months as they considered sanctions. — AFP

Attorney for accused Kenosha gunman says teen acted in self-defence

KENOSHA, US: A high-profile lawyer representing the 17-year-old boy charged with killing two protesters and wounding another during demonstrations on the streets of Kenosha, Wisconsin, said on Friday that his client had acted in self-defence.

Atlanta-based attorney Lin Wood said video footage of the altercation would vindicate Kyle Rittenhouse despite what he described as misinformation being spread by the media.

"Kyle Rittenhouse acted in self-defence. Murder charges are factually unsupportable. An egregious miscarriage of justice is occurring with respect to this 17-year old boy," Wood said on Twitter.

Rittenhouse, who prosecutors say travelled 50 km to Kenosha from his home in Antioch, Illinois, before the shooting at about 11:45 pm on Tuesday, is charged with six criminal counts, including first-degree homicide and attempted homicide.



Demonstrators hold up signs and flags during the "Commitment March: Get Your Knee Off Our Necks" protest against racism and police brutality on Friday, in Washington, DC. — AFP

Prosecutors accuse Rittenhouse of firing an assault-style rifle at three protesters who tried to subdue him, killing 36-year-old Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber, 26.

The criminal complaint cites as evidence several videos recorded by witnesses, including one in which Rittenhouse is seen calling a friend from the scene and telling them: "I just killed somebody."

An Illinois judge on Friday postponed his extradition to Wisconsin while the teenaged defendant arranged a private legal team. Rittenhouse, a former YMCA lifeguard who is being held without bond, did not appear at the livestreamed hearing.

SUMMER OF PROTESTS

The shooting of Jacob Blake, 29, in front of three of his children has

turned Kenosha, a predominantly white city of about 100,000 people on Lake Michigan, into the latest flashpoint in ongoing nationwide protests over police brutality and racism.

It also galvanised demonstrators who gathered in Washington on Friday to commemorate the 1963 march where Martin Luther King Jr made his historic "I Have a Dream" speech.

The summer of protests first ignited after video footage showed a Minneapolis police officer kneeling on the neck of a Black man, George Floyd. Floyd later died, and the since-fired officer has been charged with murder.

Blake, who was left paralysed by the shooting, had been handcuffed to a hospital bed because of an outstanding arrest warrant.

The handcuffs were removed on Friday and officers guarding Blake stood down after the warrant was vacated, his attorney, Pat Cafferty, said. — Reuters

Note

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Rural Areas Electricity Company (S.O.A.C) (TANWEER)
announces to modify the last date of collecting tender document for Tenders

No. (Tanweer- 24/20)

Rectification of 132 KV Transmission line between Khasab Grid Station and Dibba Grid Station in Musandam Governorate

To be 03/09/2020, and to extend the closing date till 15/09/2020

- Interested Companies with grade "A" which registered with Tender Board, Tanweer and Distribution Code Review Panel (DCRP) may obtain the Tender documents from Procurement & Contracts Department, against non-refundable amount of RO (155/-). The fees for the tenders shall be deposited on Tanweer account 0423010783090041 – Bank Muscat and for more information please contact via email address i.e. tender.purchase@tanweer.nama.om , or call us on phone number : 24250824.
- The Completed Tender should be deposited in the Tender Box at the Rural Areas Electricity Company (S.A.O.C) Main Office at Wilayat Al Seeb, before 12:00 P.M on the last date of submission.

For more information, please contact: 80077787

Turkey stages new military exercises in eastern Med

NEW TENSION:
EU threatens sanctions over drilling for gas

ISTANBUL: Turkey on Saturday launched new military manoeuvres in the eastern Mediterranean expected to last two weeks, in a sign that heightened tensions between Ankara and Athens were likely to continue.

A dispute over maritime borders and gas drilling rights has reignited the long-running rivalry between Greece and Turkey, with the two neighbours staging rival naval drills.

In a message on NAVTEX, the international maritime navigational telex system, Turkey said it would carry out “shooting exercises” from Saturday until September 11 in a zone off the southern Turkish town of Anamur, north of the island of Cyprus.

Ankara already announced on Thursday that military exercises would take place on Tuesday and Wednesday in a zone further east.

In a sign of the volatility of the situation, Turkey’s defence ministry said on Friday that fighter jets had on Thursday intercepted six Greek aircraft which were approaching a



Greek and French vessels sail in formation during a joint military exercise in Mediterranean sea. — Reuters

zone where a Turkish research ship was deployed, forcing them to turn around.

It was the deployment of the Turkish research vessel *Oruc Reis* into Greek waters on August 10 that caused the current spike in tensions.

The EU on Friday warned Turkey it could face fresh sanctions

— including tough economic measures — unless progress is made in reducing soaring tensions. Turkey responded angrily to the warning.

“The fact that the EU is appealing for dialogue on the one hand and at the same time making other plans reflects a lack of sincerity,” Vice-President Fuat Oktay said on Saturday. “Turkey will not hesitate

to defend its interests,” he said.

Meanwhile, the European Union is considering new sanctions against Turkey because of its search for gas in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell said.

Speaking after a two-day meeting of EU foreign ministers in Berlin, Borrell said that “in the absence of progress” in the matter, “we could develop a list of further restrictive measures.”

This would then be discussed during the next summit on September 24.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said widening the scope of sanctions against Turkey would have to be discussed at the summit, adding sanctions would not be issued until then.

“We want to give diplomacy a chance,” Maas said.

Tensions between Greece and Turkey have flared up over the past months, with Turkey continuing its hunt for gas in what Greece considers illegal drilling.

Concern is mounting that a military conflict could break out between Nato allies Greece and Turkey, as both have been carrying out manoeuvres in the region. Turkish and Greek vessels have recently confronted each other in the region. Turkey claims it is working in its own exclusive economic zone.

— Reuters



Lebanese soldiers walk past a destroyed building near Beirut port. — AFP

Seven still missing after Beirut blast

BEIRUT: The Lebanese army said on Saturday that seven people, including at least three Lebanese nationals, remained missing after an August 4 blast at Beirut port that left at least 188 dead.

“Search and rescue operations will not stop until the missing are found,” said army spokesman Elias Aad during a press conference.

There are still “seven missing people: three Lebanese nationals whose relatives have submitted DNA samples, three Syrian nationals and one Egyptian national,” he told reporters.

The army spokesman said the

figure was compiled from data submitted by the country’s Internal Security Forces, in coordination with the Red Cross.

The ISF last week said it had identified the remains of 33 people who had gone missing following the explosion.

The health ministry said on Saturday the death toll from the blast had climbed to 188.

The explosion of a huge stockpile of ammonium nitrate fertiliser in the port of Beirut also injured at least 6,500 people and left tens of thousands more homeless, piling new misery on the city after

months of economic crisis and the coronavirus pandemic.

An estimated 300,000 people including around 100,000 children, whose homes were damaged or destroyed in the blast, face a lack of access to critical safe water and sanitation services, UNICEF warned on Friday.

“As COVID-19 cases continue to surge, it is more critical than ever to ensure that children and families whose lives were turned upside down by the explosion have access to safe water and sanitation,” said UNICEF Lebanon Representative Yukie Mokuo. — AFP

Efforts to reach Nile dam joint accord ‘at standstill’: Sudan

KHARTOUM: Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia have failed to agree on a unified text on the management of Addis Ababa’s controversial Nile dam, Khartoum’s water and irrigation minister said.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has been a source of tension in the Nile River basin ever since Ethiopia broke ground on the project in 2011.

Egypt and Sudan view the dam as a threat to their vital water supplies, while upstream Ethiopia considers it crucial for its economic development and electrification.

For the past 10 days, experts from the three countries had sought to merge draft agreements proposed by their respective capitals, and on Friday presented a report on their work, without having reached a unified agreement.



SUDAN, EGYPT AND ETHIOPIA HAVE FAILED TO AGREE ON A UNIFIED TEXT ON THE MANAGEMENT OF ADDIS ABABA’S CONTROVERSIAL NILE DAM

After “an examination of the work of the expert groups over the past days, it has become clear that the process of merging the three projects is at a standstill,” Sudanese Water and Irrigation Minister Yasser Abbas said after a video conference with his Egyptian and Ethiopian counterparts.

South Africa-led negotiations on the mega-dam were temporarily suspended earlier this month after Addis Ababa insisted on linking them to renegotiating a deal on sharing the waters of the Blue Nile. Sudan and Egypt say that a mechanism to resolve any future disputes should be part of any accord.

“Reaching an agreement requires political will,” Abbas said, adding that “pursuing negotiations in their current form will not lead to practical results”.

— AFP

Libyan minister suspended after gunmen fire on protesters

TRIPOLI: Libya’s UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) on Friday said the interior minister had been suspended after militia gunmen fired on peaceful protesters last week.

“Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha has been temporarily suspended” and will face an inquiry “on his statements about the protests and incidents in Tripoli and other cities”, the GNA said.

He will be questioned on the authorisations and permits granted to the demonstrators, the security arrangements in place and the “violations committed”, it said.

Demonstrations began last Sunday in Tripoli, the seat of the GNA, against poor public services and living conditions, and gunmen fired

Government of National Accord suspends powerful Fathi Bashagha from his duties, will probe his handling of street protests, violent crackdown against them

on the crowd. Similar shootings occurred on Monday and Wednesday.

Gunmen on Wednesday attacked a peaceful demonstration by “firing live ammunition indiscriminately,” Bashagha had said.

The gunmen also kidnapped dem-

onstrators, “sowing panic among the population and threatening security and public order”, he said, promising to “protect unarmed civilians from the brutality of a gang of thugs”.

At least six people were kidnapped from a Tripoli district by a militia overseen by the GNA, and many others were wounded, according to Human Rights Watch.

Bashagha said in a statement posted on the interior ministry’s Facebook page early on Saturday that he was ready to submit to an investigation.

But he demanded any hearing be broadcast live for the sake of transparency.

Libya has endured almost a decade of violent chaos since the 2011 uprising. — AFP



Libyans protest over the announcement of suspension of Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha during a protest in Misrata. — Reuters

IN BRIEF

Afghan flash flood death toll hits 160

KABUL: Rescuers in Afghanistan continued to search amidst mud and rubble for missing people on Saturday after flash flooding this week killed around 160 people and washed away homes across the country, officials said.

Thirteen provinces, mostly in the country's north, had been affected by floods, according to the Ministry for Disaster Management.

In Parwan, just north of Kabul, 116 people had been killed and more than 120 injured, with 15 people still missing, national and local officials said.

Flash flooding hit Parwan early on Wednesday, washing away homes and buildings. Local police spokesman Salim Noori said that the community in the worst-affected areas were mostly farmers and informal workers who were already struggling financially and that police were appealing for donations of blood for the many injured. — Reuters

MARCH AGAINST VIOLENCE



A woman is seen through the window of a police van after being detained during a protest against gender-based violence outside the parliament in Cape Town on Saturday. — Reuters

13 dead as restaurant collapses

BEIJING: At least 13 people died on Saturday when a restaurant in northern China collapsed, state media said, with rescuers pulling dozens of survivors from the rubble and searching for others believed to be trapped.

The two-storey building used for banquets came down in the morning in Xiangfen county, in Shanxi province, according to broadcaster CGTN.

"So far, 43 people have been brought out, including the dead and four seriously injured," the report said.

Images on the CGTN website showed rescuers in orange overalls and hard hats combing the crumbled ruin of the building, with a decorative painting seen on one of the few walls still intact.

CGTN said 700 people were involved in the rescue operation. While the cause of the disaster was not immediately clear, China is no stranger to building collapses and construction accidents. — AFP

Bangladesh extends shutdown

DHAKA: Bangladesh has extended the shutdown of schools and other educational institutions until October 3 due to a continued surge in the number of coronavirus cases across the country.

The government had previously announced that the shutdown would be extended to September 30 but later issued a revised statement on the matter, bdnews24 reported on Friday.

"The ongoing holiday for all educational institutions, except Qawmi madrasas, has been extended to October 3 because of the global coronavirus pandemic," the Education Ministry said.

The government announced the closure of all schools and other educational institutions in the country on March 17 following the outbreak of coronavirus. It later ordered the shutdown of offices, workplaces and public transport services under a nationwide lockdown which came into effect on March 26. — IANS

ECOLOGICAL DISASTER



A general view shows the bulk carrier ship M V Wakashio, that ran aground on a reef at Riviere des Creoles in Mauritius. — Reuters

Mauritians protest after catastrophic oil spill

CAPE TOWN: Thousands of Mauritians turned out on Saturday in peaceful protest after a catastrophic oil spill a few weeks ago caused by a Japanese vessel that ran aground near the Indian Ocean island.

The capital Port Louis was a sea of colourful Mauritian flags, photos and video showed, as demonstrators in masks to protect against COVID-19 held signs with slogans like "Your incompetence is destroying our island."

The Wakashio ran aground on July 25, and leaked about 1,000 tonnes of the 4,000 tonnes of fuel oil it was carrying into the popular tourist resort's pristine coastal waters earlier this month. The ship then broke in half, the larger part of which was sunk

last week. The Japanese company and the Mauritian government have been under increasing pressure to explain why the vessel had sailed so dangerously close to the reef and why it took authorities days to arrive at the scene. They blame bad weather for the delays.

The ship's captain, an Indian national, and officer, a Sri Lankan, were arrested last week in Port Louis and have been charged with endangering safe navigation.

In the past few days, at least 39 dolphins have washed up dead on the island's shores, prompting concern from environmental groups that the mass deaths could be due to the oil spill. The government however, denies there is a link. — dpa

Japan, US oppose bid to alter status of Asian waters

TOKYO: Japan's Defence Minister Taro Kono said on Saturday he had agreed with his US counterpart Mark Esper that both countries opposed any unilateral attempt to change the status quo in the key waterways of the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

Kono shared his view with the US defence secretary at a time when the United States and China are at loggerheads over issues ranging from technology and human rights to Chinese military activities in the disputed South China Sea.

A thorny issue in China's ties with Japan is Beijing's claim to a group of tiny East China Sea islets controlled by Tokyo.

"We agreed that the international community will respond firmly to any unilateral change to the status quo in the South China Sea as well as the East China Sea," Kono said.

He was speaking online from Guam to reporters in the Japanese capital following his meeting with Esper.

Kono said Esper had confirmed that the US-Japan security treaty covered the East China Sea islets, known as the Senkaku islands in Japan and the Diaoyu islands in China.

Turning to Japan's domestic politics, Kono said he would think



The US Navy aircraft carrier USS Nimitz receives fuel from the Henry J Kaiser-class fleet replenishment oiler USNS Tippecanoe in the South China Sea. — Reuters

hard about running in a ruling party election to choose a successor to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who abruptly announced his resignation for health reasons on Friday.

The United States has long opposed China's expansive

territorial claims in the South China Sea and has sent warships regularly through the strategic waterway.

China claims 90 per cent of the potentially energy-rich waters but Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also lay claim

to parts of it.

About \$3 trillion worth of trade passes through the waterway each year. China has built bases atop atolls in the region but says its intentions are peaceful. — Reuters

Modi's 'settler' masterplan for Kashmir

SRINAGAR: Prime Minister Narendra Modi is changing Indian Kashmir's residency laws for the first time since 1947, in a bid to snuff out any challenge to the disputed territory belonging to India.

On August 5, 2019, Modi's government revoked articles in the Indian constitution that guaranteed Kashmir's partial autonomy and other rights including its own flag and constitution.

A huge accompanying security operation saw tens of thousands of extra troops — adding to 500,000 already there — enforce a siege-like curfew. Thousands were arrested and telecommunications were cut for months.

Jammu and Kashmir state was demoted to a union territory governed directly from New Delhi, while the Ladakh region was carved out into a separate administrative area.

Modi's government tore up Kashmir's special residence rules dating back to 1927 which had ensured only permanent residents could own land and property, secure government jobs and university places and vote in local elections.

Now a raft of different categories of people from anywhere in India can apply for domicile certificates, giving them access to all the above.

These include those living in Kashmir for 15 years, who include around 28,000 refugees who fled Pakistan and as many as 1.75 million migrant labourers.

In addition, civil servants who have worked in Kashmir for seven years and their children, or students who have taken certain exams, also qualify for domicile status.

The changes are "the most drastic imposed since 1947," Siddiq Wahid, a historian and political analyst, said.



A Kashmiri man is detained by police as he defies restrictions in Srinagar. — AFP

Jammu and Kashmir state was demoted to a union territory governed directly from New Delhi, while the Ladakh region was carved out into a separate administrative area

"It was done with the intent to open the gates to demographic flooding."

Locals too now have to apply for the new "domicile certificates" in order to qualify for permanent resident rights.

To get this, they have to produce their Permanent Resident Certificates (PRC), cherished documents valid since 1927, which then become

worthless.

"They say, you want a job, OK, get the domicile document first," an engineering graduate said.

One of the first people to receive the new domicile certificate was Navin Kumar Choudhary, a top bureaucrat from the Indian state of Bihar who worked in Kashmir for many years.

Photos on social media of Choudhary proudly holding the certificate sparked huge anger among Kashmiris but delight among Modi's supporters.

Some 430,000 new domicile certificates have been issued — despite the coronavirus pandemic. It is unclear how many of them are to people from outside and how many to locals.

Many locals are refusing to swap their old documents, even though this makes life harder. Some do it in secret for fear of censure from their neighbours. — AFP



Berlin police stop mass ‘anti-corona’ protest

NO OTHER OPTION: Demonstrators did not adhere to virus safety rules despite repeated requests

BERLIN: German police on Saturday halted a march by some 18,000 coronavirus sceptics in Berlin because many were not respecting social distancing measures.

The mass protest against pandemic restrictions had been allowed to go ahead after a bitter legal battle.

But it had barely begun at the city’s iconic Brandenburg Gate, when it was forced to stop due to a police injunction.

“The minimum distancing is not being respected by most (of the demonstrators) despite repeated requests,” the police said. “There is no other option than to break up the gathering.” After the announcement, the demonstrators shouted “Resistance” and “We are the people,” a slogan often used by the far-right, and sang the German national anthem.

Police had vowed to turn out in force and strictly monitor compliance with mask-wearing and social distancing at the protest.

Berlin police chief Barbara Slowik had warned that if the demonstrators did not adhere to virus safety rules, police would clear the area “very quickly”.

“We will not be able or willing to watch tens of thousands assemble and create infection risks,” she added.

Berlin city authorities had previously decided not to allow the Sat-



Demonstrators attend a rally against Germany’s coronavirus regulations. — Reuters

urday demonstration to go ahead, fearing that the estimated 22,000 protesters would not keep a distance of 1.5 metres (five feet) apart or comply with face mask requirements.

The ban sparked outrage from organisers and their supporters who flooded social media with angry mes-

sages vowing to protest anyway, with some even calling for violence.

But on the eve of the demo, Berlin’s administrative court sided with the demonstrators, saying there was no indication that organisers would “deliberately ignore” social distancing rules and endanger public health.

‘WE MUST DEFEND FREEDOMS’

A crowd, including people of all ages and families with children, gathered at the Brandenburg Gate, the starting point for the march.

The protesters waved German flags and shouted “Merkel must go!”, a chant often used by the far-right

Alternative for Germany (AfD) party against Chancellor Angela Merkel.

“I’m not an extreme right-wing sympathiser, I’m here to defend our fundamental freedoms,” said Stefan, a 43-year-old Berlin resident with a shaved head and a T-shirt with the words “Thinking helps” written in large print.

“We’re here to say: we have to be careful! Coronavirus crisis or not, we must defend our freedoms,” Christina Holz, a 22-year-old student, said.

Around 3,000 police officers, including 1,000 federal police, were deployed at the site, alongside specialist equipment including water cannon, Slowik said. The rally came as coronavirus cases continue to rise in Germany, with daily new infection numbers reaching highs not seen since April.

At a press conference on Friday, Merkel said confronting the virus will become more challenging in the coming autumn and winter months.

Merkel and the leaders of Germany’s 16 federal states on Thursday introduced tougher coronavirus restrictions to curb the pandemic, including a minimum 50 euro (\$59) fine for people caught not wearing face masks where one is compulsory.

“We will have to live with this virus for a long time to come. It is still serious. Please continue to take it seriously,” Merkel warned. — AFP

Trump’s audience smaller than Biden’s

LOS ANGELES: Some 23.8 million Americans watched President Donald Trump’s keynote speech on the final night of the Republican National Convention, slightly less than the TV audience for his Democratic rival Joe Biden last week, Nielsen ratings data showed on Friday.

The audience reflects viewers across 13 networks between 11 pm ET and 11:45 pm ET on Thursday, when Trump accepted his party’s nomination in a speech delivered on the South Lawn of the White House. The figures do not include online viewers.

Former Vice President Biden’s nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention last week was watched on television by 24.6 million Americans, according to Nielsen data.

The viewership numbers for Trump’s speech were down some 25 per cent on the bumper 32.2 million people who watched his address in 2016 when he accepted the Republican nomination for president. The decline partly reflects an overall drop in TV viewership in recent years, and the fact that both political conventions this year were held largely in a virtual format because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Democratic event, however, was more widely watched than that of the Republicans on every night except the second convention night on Tuesday, when first lady Melania Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo were the headline speakers. — Reuters

Rescue ship in distress at sea

ROME: A rescue boat funded by British street artist Banksy has issued urgent calls for help, saying it is stranded in the Mediterranean and overloaded with migrants who it has been unable to bring ashore.

The Louise Michel, named after a French feminist anarchist, started operating last week. It is trying to find a safe port for the 219 migrants it has picked up off the coast of Libya since Thursday.

The boat, manned by a crew of 10, issued a series of tweets overnight and on Saturday saying its situation was worsening, and appealing in vain for help from authorities in Italy, Malta and Germany.

“We are reaching a state of emergency. We need immediate assistance,” said one tweet, adding that it was also carrying a body bag containing the corpse of one migrant who had died.

Another said the boat was unable to move and “no longer the master of her own destiny” due to her overcrowded deck and a life raft deployed at her side, “but above all due to Europe ignoring our emergency calls for immediate assistance.” An Italian charity ship, the Mare Jonio, said it was leaving the Sicilian port of Augusta to go to assist the Louise Michel. — Reuters

EU: School reopenings should not trigger new virus spike

ROME: The reopening of schools is not expected to trigger a major jump in novel coronavirus cases, EU Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides said in a Saturday interview.

“Studies in several EU countries have shown that child-to-child transmission in schools is rare and that school reopenings have not been associated with a significant increase in infections,” she told *Italy’s La Stampa* newspaper.

“Current evidence suggests that if adequate hygiene measures are implemented, with students distanced or divided into groups, it is unlikely that schools may be a bigger source of infections than other places. And this is what we hope,” she added.

Kyriakides also said the first vaccine against the virus could be available in late 2020 or early 2021. However, she stressed that making an exact prediction was “risky”.

Last week, Public Health England released a study indicating that out of more than 1 million children who attended pre-school and primary school in England in June, just 70 were affected by virus outbreaks.

“Where children did contract the infection, they were most likely to catch COVID-19 at home, usually from a parent. Half the outbreaks did not involve any students at all and transmission between students was very rare,” Public Health England said. — dpa

BACK ON TRACK



A steam train arrives into Summerseat Station along the East Lancashire Railway’s line in northern England on Saturday on one of the first weekends of operation since their extended closure due to the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. The East Lancashire Railway have introduced numerous measures to provide a COVID-safe experience for passengers including: the wearing of face coverings, temperature checks and a track and trace system. — AFP

Louisiana avoided Laura’s ‘wall of water’

LOUISIANA: The 20-foot high “unsurvivable” wall of water hurricane Laura was forecast to send onto the Louisiana coast showed up despite widespread reports of a lower peak, authorities said, rejecting criticism that they had raised too much alarm.

The highest surge hit about 15 miles east of where Laura was forecast to make landfall but it “wobbled” at the last moment. That slight change likely saved the city of Lake Charles, said Jamie Rhome, head of the storm surge team at the National Hurricane Center (NHC).

Most US media played up a nine-foot surge recorded by a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration observation station near Cameron, Louisiana, and the NHC was criticised for perhaps raising too much alarm.

There is just one problem, Rhome said.

“It’s wrong. That reporting is based

off a single observation station in Cameron Parish that didn’t come close to measuring the peak storm surge which occurred at 10 or 15 miles east of there,” he said.

Fresh data on Friday from an Army Corps of Engineer gauge 15 miles east indicates that the storm surge was right at the 15- to 20-foot forecast that was Rhome’s highest in his 20-year career, he said.

An exact reading would soon be released after the data and gauge are fully analysed, Rhome said.

“We’re finding out the storm surge was really 15 to 20 feet,” Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards confirmed to reporters after flying over the hardest-hit areas.

Rhome said it would be unfair to accuse NHC forecasters - who warned of an “unsurvivable storm surge” the day before Laura made landfall - or local and state leaders for raising alarm about storm surges. A decade ago, 50



People who have been evacuated from Lake Charles and the surrounding area in the path of hurricane Laura fill the lobby in the New Orleans Marriott. — Reuters

per cent of deaths from hurricanes were because of storm surges, he noted.

Today, that figure is closer to 4 per cent, Rhome said, largely because the NHC started including storm surge

warnings in its bulletins following the devastation brought by Hurricane Ike and its 15-foot storm surge in 2008.

The remnants of Hurricane Laura doused Arkansas on Friday before forecasters said it would head to the

East Coast, bringing heavy rains and possible flash floods.

The storm killed at least 14 people in Louisiana, including four who were killed when trees fell into homes, damaged buildings in Louisiana and Texas and knocked out power for hundreds of thousands of residents.

US President Donald Trump was expected to head to the Gulf Coast over the weekend to survey the damage.

The storm was forecast to drop heavy rain over Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Missouri and Kentucky as it headed out to the East Coast, the National Weather Service said. At its peak upon making landfall on Thursday morning, Laura had maximum sustained winds of 150 miles per hour (241 km per hour), faster than even Hurricane Katrina, which sparked deadly levee breaches in New Orleans in 2005 after arriving with wind speeds of 125 mph. — Reuters

"The human is a fickle baby..."



RAY PETERSEN

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Surely those of you who reside in the capital feel some pangs of conscience when you reflect upon the lot of those of us in other parts of the Sultanate, don't you? After all, Muscat, the nation's port capital city, with half of the Sultanate's population, monopolises the country despite being just 274 sq kms of the nation's 309,500 sq kms, less than 1 per cent of its area.

And before you go throwing your hands in the air, as you do, it is much the same the world over. In my home country New Zealand, for instance, we have a very similar situation in that the largest city is slightly larger, but indeed has half of the nation's population, and most of the squillionaires, but is not the capital city in spite of all that, with a geographical option preferred, and the capital being Wellington, in the

centre of the country.

Anyway, Muscat has an amazing climate, with fabulous seas, beaches, and mountains a stone's throw away. It has thousands of high-quality retail outlets and shopping malls, a delicate mix of high-rise and traditional architecture, classy coffee shops, and every service that can be found in any major city around the world. It oozes modernity, contemporaneity, and progress from every pore, and it has culture, global culture, stimulated by the embassies, consulates, and businesses from every corner of the globe. It has culture, most freely expressed in its wonderful Grand Mosque, Royal Opera House, its museums and libraries, and so many educational institutions where parents, pupils and students have, to some extent, choices, and so there are significant elements of prerogative because of that. In

many respects one must, as much as we are slaves to human nature, feel therefore some entitlement to the business, professional, cultural and leisure opportunities that exist at our fingertips, while those distanced from all of these bounteous offerings will be, not outrageously, but like a window-shopper, be entitled to a modicum of frustration at being unable to experience those same opportunities.

As such, it does grate somewhat to find that despite paying the same amount as the capital residents for monthly Internet plans, and prospering with the latest fibre technological advances, the 'provinces' still labour under antiquated cable Internet systems. Added to this, network providers continue to flood consumers outside the capital with the option to upgrade, then respond with a terse message confirming that

they are outside the coverage area. Responses too, to requests for service by those providers appear to gain no traction at all through their 'helpline,' despite our numerous 'speed tests,' and 'location' confirmations.

There is no doubt that the lockdowns contributed to the greater Internet usage, and online learning has certainly overloaded this aged system to the extent that very few are enjoying a positive experience, either in work, study, or entertainment. Really, talk of Netflix bingeing may be a 'thing,' in the capital, but here the Internet experience is abysmal.

Too often too, international freight forwarders and couriers are lax in their service to the interior's residents. Recent experiences in this sector have seen me engage a transport company to carry furniture from Dubai to Nizwa, with a tariff agreed for door-

to-door delivery. Upon its arrival in Muscat however, we were contacted by the freighter to say "You have to collect your furniture from Muscat. We don't deliver to Nizwa." It took another weeks before the freight, at an extra cost to us, was delivered by a passing truck.

These are just a couple of examples, from my experience of the regions being 'short-changed,' and I know neither was probably malicious or intentional, however they do reflect an unsettling culture of entitlement that may be emergent in the capital. Obviously, this is not an element of Omani culture, tradition, or personality, but more a subliminal seduction of that fickleness of human nature. Emma Goldman wrote, "The human is a fickle baby, that must have new toys every day," So, will you share your 'toys'?



US President Donald Trump delivers his acceptance speech during the final event of the Republican National Convention in Washington. — Reuters

Praise of Trump economy is a risky strategy!

HOWARD SCHNEIDER
AND CHRIS KAHN



Americans' support for President Donald Trump's management of the economy has slipped, a new Reuters/Ipsos poll shows, challenging a bedrock re-election argument laid out at the Republican National Convention this week. About 58 per cent of respondents said the US economy is on the wrong track in a survey taken August 19 through 25th.

And for the first time this year, Trump's net approval on economic issues dipped into negative territory, with 47 per cent saying they approved of his stewardship of the American economy and 48 per cent saying they disapproved. That is down from an approval margin of 14 percentage points in late March.

While the poll shows Trump still has an edge with voters over Democratic opponent Joe Biden on the economy, the results highlight the risks the Republican Party is taking by leaning on memories of last year's strong economy and arguing that Trump will easily be able to restore it.

"Our economic choice is very clear. Do you want economic health, prosperity, opportunity and optimism, or do you want to turn back to the dark days of stagnation, recession and pessimism?" White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow said at the convention last Tuesday night.

"Who do you trust to rebuild this economy?," Vice-President Mike Pence asked on Wednesday night. "A career politician who presided over

the slowest economic recovery since the Great Depression? Or a proven leader who created the greatest economy in the world?"

Looking to the fall, just as the US witnessed a historic drop in gross domestic product from April through June, Trump will be able to trumpet a record increase — equivalent to perhaps 25 per cent on an annualised basis — when statistics are released in October covering the July to September period.

Neither data point, products of a deliberate shutdown of the economy in March and the automatic impact of reopening from that sudden stop, say much about the economic fortunes of families and businesses during the first months of the pandemic, or in the weeks to come.

The coronavirus health crisis, with nearly 6 million infected and over 175,000 Americans dead, is still raging. The onset of the conventional flu season is on the horizon, and an experiment under way in reopening schools and colleges is already leading to new spikes in infections.

Consumer confidence, which can influence future economic activity, remains weak. The national unemployment rate at 10.2 per cent in July is the highest in 39 years, and improvement seems to be slowing. Nearly 15 million Americans are receiving unemployment benefits, the highest on record and double the number hit during the 2007 to 2009 Great Recession.

The blow has been received hardest among groups including blacks, Hispanics and women who

benefited most from last year's record low unemployment rate. Continued support among white women in particular will be critical to Trump's electoral chances.

The Reuters/Ipsos poll found most voters would not currently back Biden on the economy.

Trump's team has been hammering Biden's discussion of tax policies to pay for rising government debt due to the Trump administration's earlier tax cuts. Among registered voters, Trump still has a five-point edge over Biden in who would be better to manage the economy.

But the poll also found 30 per cent of Republicans felt the economy was on the wrong track, the highest since February 2018 when Reuters/Ipsos started tracking the question. The poll gathered responses from 4,428 American adults, including 1,929 Democrats, 1,750 Republicans and 430 independents. It has a credibility interval, a measure of precision, of between 2-5 percentage points.

If the economic impact of the pandemic has been in some ways less severe than feared, with household spending returning to pre-pandemic levels and Americans boosting their savings, it is only because of massive government spending and a larger federal footprint in the economy.

Both Republican and Democratic leaning economists feel much more federal help and a larger federal footprint will be needed to avoid a deeper slide this fall — steps that Trump would have to embrace even as he tries to brand Biden a "socialist." — Reuters

Now COVID-19 adds to blockaded Gaza's despair

NIDAL AL MUGHRABI



O n a deserted beachfront in a newly locked-down Gaza, fishermen look impotently at the Mediterranean waters they can no longer access under two separate bans — one by Israel and the other by Hamas police imposing COVID-19 restrictions.

In a narrow coastal enclave that is home to 2 million Palestinians, the 40 km coastline in normal times provides an important food source, and employment for 4,000 fishermen.

But old politics and new pandemic combined to leave the territory's fish markets virtually empty last Friday, when they would usually be packed on the busiest day of the week with Palestinians buying fresh sea bream and sardines.

The enforced fishing layoff began on August 16 when Israel tightened its long-standing blockade of Gaza, grounding boats after an increase in incendiary balloons flown from Gaza into Israel by supporters of groups in what Israel deemed a "continued violation of security stability".

Fisherman Sakher Miqdad says his industry now faces a "double lockdown".

"We were banned from the sea because of the occupation, and a week later because of the coronavirus. Now we are (jobless)," said Miqdad outside his home in Beach refugee camp.

Humanitarian organisations fear COVID-19 could be devastating on densely packed Gaza, whose isolation so far spared it from the worst of the pandemic.

According to the World Food Programme, even before the virus more than two thirds of Gazans were "food insecure", citing the blockade as a key factor.

But Israel says the restrictions on Gaza imposed by itself and Egypt are because of the security threat posed by Hamas.

Compounding the concerns, Gaza health authorities now fear the virus may have entered before last Monday's first reported case in the general population.

"The situation in Gaza is very worrying, especially since 70 per cent of the population are refugees and they live in overcrowded camps, with often inadequate living conditions," said Dr Ayadil Saparbekov, head of the WHO's Health Emergencies Team in the Palestinian Territories.

He said the Gaza health authorities thought the virus entered Gaza "maybe in early August," but said that was so far an assumption "which I don't want to confirm or to dismiss." — Reuters

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MCILROY, CANTLAY SHARE LEAD

OLYMPIA FIELDS COUNTRY CLUB CONTINUE TO TORMENT WORLD'S BEST GOLFERS



Patrick Cantlay



Rory McIlroy

NEW YORK: Rory McIlroy and Patrick Cantlay were tied for the lead at one-under par after the second round of the BMW Championship on Friday as the Olympia Fields Country Club continued to torment the world's best golfers.

McIlroy and Cantlay were the only two players under par at the halfway point of the second of three FedExCup

play-off events, where 69 players are battling it out for a place in next week's Tour Championship.

Starting on the back nine, McIlroy (69) was cruising early with three birdies and a bogey over his first nine holes but struggled coming in as conditions worsened at the course outside Chicago.

"As it got later in the day, the golf

course definitely became a little firmer, a little tougher," said the world number four. "The wind got up a little bit. A little disappointed to drop those shots on the way in, but I think if you shoot anything under par on this golf course, you've got to be pretty pleased."

Cantlay's eventful round included an eagle, four birdies, two bogeys and a double bogey as the American carded

a second round two-under 68 to sit at one-under 139 for the tournament.

He said not giving into frustration was key.

"You've got to realise that you're going to make mistakes," he said.

"You're going to make some bogeys just because of how hard the golf course is, and always having a forward mindset as opposed to thinking about

what's happened or what the mistakes you've made is really important."

Dustin Johnson, who is leading the season-long FedExCup standings, pumped his fist after he drained a tricky 32-foot birdie putt on his last hole to finish at even-par 140 going into the weekend.

The world number one is currently tied for third with overnight leader

Hideki Matsuyama.

Tiger Woods' poor putting led to a miserable round that included five bogeys, a double bogey and two birdies for a round of five-over 75.

The 15-time major champion is currently eight-over 148 for the tournament and would need a miraculous turnaround to make the Tour Championship. — Reuters

World Cup winner Rapinoe opts out of NWSL fall series



Megan Rapinoe

WASHINGTON: Two-time World Cup winner and OL Reign midfielder Megan Rapinoe is opting out of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) fall series starting next month, the Washington-based franchise said in a statement here on Friday.

US international Rapinoe is among 10 Reign players who are

not available for the tournament, which is scheduled to start on September 5.

No reason was given for her decision, but Rapinoe, 35, also skipped the NWSL Challenge Cup tournament in June, which was played in empty stadiums due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The fall series features nine

teams divided into three regional pods, West, Northeast and South, and playing four games each over seven weeks. Its format has yet to be announced.

The NWSL scheduled the Challenge Cup and fall series as a replacement for its regular league season, which was cancelled this year due to the epidemic. — Reuters

Nordqvist in 3-way tie for LPGA lead



Anna Nordqvist

LOS ANGELES: Two-time major champion Anna Nordqvist fired seven birdies in a seven-under 64 on Friday to share the first round lead in the LPGA NW Arkansas Championship with Jackie Stoelting and Esther Lee.

Stoelting, making her first LPGA start since the birth of her son last October, also nabbed seven birdies on the Pinnacle Course in Rogers, Arkansas, where Lee collected eight birdies and a bogey to join the leading trio.

"Today was really good," Nordqvist said. "I feel like I've done a lot of good things the last couple weeks. It just hasn't really paid off."

"It's been a little bit disappointing, a little bit frustrating," added the Swede, who finished tied for 32nd at the Women's British Open at Troon last week. "But had a pretty good talk with my caddie and fiance the beginning of the week, and I feel like they kept me in it."

Stoelting, 34, is making her first start in 14 months. Some of that time off was due to the birth of her son, now 10 months old, and some to the coronavirus pandemic.

"I feel great," she said. "I didn't really have many expectations. But I also have an extremely different perspective on life now that I'm a mom. So, I just was out here really

trying to have fun and take it one shot at a time."

Stoelting said she found it harder to play during her pregnancy than she expected, feeling more fatigue and struggling to find her game.

"So, I felt like (today) I picked it up from Q Series two years ago where I finished top 10. I just kind of tried to remember that event and put myself back there."

In her sixth career LPGA start, Lee broke 70 for the first time on tour after missing the cut in five prior events in a rookie season disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's been hard to find a rhythm for tournament golf," Lee said. "I've definitely struggled the first few back."

"It's nice that when everyone was in Scotland for two weeks, I was just at home and just kind of took a breather. Just kind of re-examined everything and seems to be working well so far."

England's Stephanie Meadow and South Korea's Kim Sei-young were in a group on 64 that included Australian Katherine Kirk, Puerto Rico's Maria Fernanda Torres and Americans

Austin Ernst and Mina Harigae.

It was a further shot back to Stacy Lewis, Angela Stanford, Dana Finkelstein, China's Yan Jing and Lizette Salas.

The 54-hole event featuring seven of the world's top 10 players is being played without spectators and is the last tuneup for the year's second major, the ANA Inspiration at Rancho Mirage, California, starting on September 10.

Defending champion Park Sung-hyun is not in the field, the world number three from South Korea remaining in self-quarantine in her homeland because of the COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

LPGA NW ARKANSAS CHAMPIONSHIP SCORES
First round (USA unless noted, par-71):
64 - Esther Lee, Anna Nordqvist (SWE), Jackie Stoelting
65 - Stephanie Meadow (ENG), Kim Sei-young (KOR), Austin Ernst, Mina Harigae, Katherine Kirk (AUS), Maria Fernanda Torres (PUR)
66 - Stacy Lewis, Angela Stanford, Dana Finkelstein, Yan Jing (CHN), Lizette Salas
67 - Chun In-gee (KOR), Maria Fassi (MEX), Jenny Shin (KOR), Moriya Jutanugarn (THA), Lee Mi-hyang (KOR), Park In-bee (KOR), Nelly Korda, Linnea Strom (SWE), Jodi Ewart Shadoff (ENG)

INJURED OSAKA PULLS OUT OF FINAL

A z a r e n k a t a k e s W e s t e r n & S o u t h e r n O p e n t i t l e b y w a l k o v e r

NEW YORK: Japan's Naomi Osaka withdrew from the Western & Southern Open WTA final due to a left hamstring injury on Saturday, just two days before the start of the US Open.

The world number 10's withdrawal means meaning Victoria Azarenka takes the title by walkover.

"I'm sorry to have to withdraw today with an injury," said Osaka, who is currently on the Monday night schedule at the US Open where she is due to play fellow Japanese player Misaki Doi in first round.

"I pulled my left hamstring yesterday in the second set tie-break and it has not recovered overnight as I had hoped."

Osaka, 22, had defeated Belgium's Elise Mertens in the semi-final to set up the championship match against two-time Australian Open winner Azarenka, from Belarus, in the same New York COVID-19 quarantine bubble where the US Open will be held.

Two-time Grand Slam champion Osaka, of Haitian and Japanese heritage, had threatened not to play in the semifinals to protest the police shooting of African-American Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Osaka said she was "sick to her stomach" and "exhausted" by repeated violence against blacks by US police, echoing a move by the NBA Milwaukee Bucks in boycotting a play-off game for the same reason, which brought the entire league to a standstill for three days.

Osaka's decision prompted the WTA and ATP to postpone all semifinal matches to Friday, which inspired Osaka to change her mind and play, although she was worried other delayed players would be upset.

"This has been an emotional week



Naomi Osaka (JPN) serves the ball against Elise Mertens (BEL) during the Western & Southern Open.
— USA Today Sports

and I want to thank everyone for the outpouring of support," said Osaka, who had said on Friday her gesture, and the backing she received from the tours and other players had made her "more aware of the impact my voice could have."

The injury, however, is a major blow as she prepared to the return of her first Grand Slam triumph, her 2018 victory over US star Serena Williams in a controversial US Open final at the National Tennis Center in Flushing Meadows.

She followed that up with a victory in the 2019 Australian Open before enduring a slump that saw her exit in the first round of Wimbledon and exit early in her defence of the US Open title.

With her father standing in as coach Osaka roared back to the form that had made her number one with back to back titles in Japan and China in 2019.

In May, she was reported by Forbes to be the highest paid female athlete in the world, the magazine calculating her earnings over the prior 12 months at \$37.4 million (34.3 million euros).

She edged Williams by \$1.4 million in prize money and endorsement income over the past year.

But Osaka endured disappointment again at the Australian Open in January, where she fell in straight sets to unseeded US teenager Coco Gauff in the round of 32.

She had lost in the semifinals at Brisbane in an Aussie Open tune-up event, and the Western & Southern Open was her first WTA appearance since the tour resumed in the wake of a coronavirus shutdown that started in March and caused Wimbledon to be cancelled and the French Open postponed to late September. — AFP

Leeds sign Rodrigo from Valencia for club-record fee

LONDON: Leeds announced on Saturday they had signed Spain international Rodrigo from Valencia for a club-record fee.

The forward has penned a four-year deal at Elland Road, reportedly costing the Premier League newcomers around £30 million (\$40 million).

The 29-year-old said he was excited to join the club and was looking forward to working with Marcelo Bielsa, whom he described as one of the best coaches in football.

"It's a new step in my career and I want to help the team to achieve the goals of the season," he told the club's Twitter account.

"Leeds have been working for two weeks on this deal with Valencia — we knew Valencia have some problems now as we didn't achieve the Champions League.

"Since the first time Victor (Orta, director of football) talked to me I knew I wanted this new challenge with Leeds."

Rodrigo, who can operate as a winger or striker, spent time at Celta Vigo and Real Madrid as a young player before moving to Benfica.

He joined Valencia in 2014, initially on loan, scoring 59 goals in 220 appearances.

He previously spent the 2010/11 season on loan at Bolton, then in the Premier League.

Rodrigo was born in Brazil but is a Spain international and has 22 caps and eight goals.

He scored 10 goals for club and country in 38 games last season, including the winner in Valencia's



1-0 Champions League win at Chelsea in September.

Valencia said on Tuesday they had reached preliminary agreement with Leeds for the transfer but the formalities had to

be completed.

Leeds finished 10 points at the top of the Championship last season, securing their return to the top flight for the first time since 2004. — AFP

Bautista Agut hits out at decision to close roof

NEW YORK: Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut has hit out at tournament officials for their decision to close the roof during the second set of his semifinal defeat to Novak Djokovic on Friday in the Western & Southern Open in New York.

Bautista Agut won the opening set and was about to serve at 4-5 in the second when organisers decided to close the roof of the Louis Armstrong stadium during the changeover, anticipating rain.

The world number 12 lost his serve immediately as Djokovic drew level in the match and then carved out a 4-6, 6-4, 7-6(0) victory to avoid a third straight loss against the Spaniard.

"Everybody knows that they could wait a little bit, no? It was an unfortunate decision," the 32-year-old Bautista Agut told reporters. "It's not the first time I disagree with Lars Graff (ATP supervisor). I think it was not great and it was 100 per cent wrong."

Bautista Agut said the break disturbed his rhythm and he also had problems with his ball toss while serving in the first game under the closed roof.

"I totally disagree with the decision he took, and for sure it was not great because he broke my rhythm," he said. "So the roof break could wait a little bit to finish the set because to close the roof, it's five minutes."

World number one Djokovic, who has struggled with a neck injury during the tournament, received assistance from the physiotherapist during the second set and later said his opponent was the better player on Friday.

While Bautista Agut rued the missed chance to stop Djokovic from



Roberto Bautista Agut (ESP) hits the ball against Novak Djokovic (SRB).
— USA Today Sports

winning his 22nd straight match this year, the fact that he was two points away from a win while serving at 6-5 in the decider should give him confidence ahead of next week's US

Open.

"I played really good matches this week, and I was serving for the match against the No 1," Bautista Agut said.

— Reuters

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HAMILTON EARNS BELGIAN POLE AHEAD OF BOTTAS

* RED BULL'S VERSTAPPEN IN THIRD * LECLERC AND VETTEL LINE UP 13TH AND 14TH FOR FERRARI



Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton drives during the second practice session at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit. – AFP



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton (R) talks with third-placed Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen after securing his 93rd pole position at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit. – AFP



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton competes during the qualifying session at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit. – AFP

SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS: Lewis Hamilton stormed to a dominant pole position in qualifying for the Belgian Grand Prix on Saturday ahead of team-mate Valtteri Bottas who completed a front-row lockout for Mercedes while rivals Ferrari endured a miserable day.

The Briton, who leads the overall standings by 37 points from Red Bull's Max Verstappen, lapped the

seven-km Spa-Francorchamps track in a record time of one minute 41.252 seconds, 0.511 seconds clear of Bottas.

Verstappen was once again best of the rest in third for Red Bull. The Dutchman was 0.526 seconds off Hamilton's pace.

Saturday's pole was a record-extending 93rd of Hamilton's career and he dedicated it to

'Black Panther' film star Chadwick Boseman who died of colon cancer on Friday.

It was the 35-year-old's fifth pole from seven races this season and a record-extending sixth at the Spa-Francorchamps track.

Hamilton, who had also topped Saturday morning's final practice session, never look like being challenged throughout the

qualifying hour. He was fastest in all three parts of qualifying, giving his Mercedes team's 'party mode' power unit setting, which will be banned from the next race in Monza, a fitting send-off.

Daniel Ricciardo took fourth for Renault, the French team carrying its strong practice form into qualifying.

Alexander Albon in the other

Red Bull was fifth ahead of Ricciardo's team-mate Esteban Ocon. Carlos Sainz was seventh for McLaren ahead of Racing Point duo Sergio Perez and Lance Stroll, while Lando Norris rounded out the top 10 for McLaren.

Ferrari, winners in Belgium for the last two years, had gone into qualifying facing the prospect of a knockout in the first part after a

dismal practice showing in which four-time champion Sebastian Vettel was last.

They survived the opening 18 minutes but failed to make it through to the pole-position shootout. Charles Leclerc, who took his maiden Formula One win in Belgium last year, was 13th with Vettel, who is leaving Ferrari at the end of the year, 14th. — Reuters



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IN BRIEF

Omantel launches Generation Z to empower young talents in Oman



MUSCAT: Omantel continues to make headway with the "Generation Z" initiative, a unique, intensive and interactive training programme which lasts for one year, despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic. The programme is designed to build the necessary skills for enabling new generations of young Omanis to participate in building the future of Oman by securing them a practical learning environment, monitoring challenges and providing them with solutions.

Ibtihal bint Mohammed al Riyami, General Manager of Organisation Planning at Omantel, said, "Omantel has been devoting its due attention to the future capacity-building as well as enhancing the skills of young Omani talents who will play a key role in building the future of the Sultanate. This will consequently help in supplying various sectors across the Sultanate with well-qualified young Omanis capable of leading the Sultanate towards the future. The launching of this programme comes as part of Omantel's corporate social responsibility and ongoing efforts to empower Omani youth and discover new talents through an intensive training programme."

"Through this programme, we seek to create a new generation of young talents and leaders and equip them with a wide range of skills that help them achieve success in their work environment. Most important of these skills are innovation, professional performance and keenness to achieve excellence," added Al Riyami.

Coinciding with COVID-19 pandemic, Generation "Z" programme kicked off last March. However, the programme continued with its training plan that witnessed the transition to distance training in order to ensure the safety of the young trainees who are receiving distance training and learning via latest digital technologies provided by Omantel.

Mega Omani petrochemicals project makes headway

MAMMOTH DEVELOPMENT: DUQM REFINERY AND PETROCHEMICALS INDUSTRIES COMPANY (DRPIC) SELECTS 12 TECHNOLOGY LICENCE PACKAGES FOR GIANT PETCHEM SCHEME AHEAD OF FINAL INVESTMENT DECISION IN 2021

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, AUG 29

The joint venture Duqm Refinery and Petrochemicals Industries Company LLC (DRPIC) has tapped a leading Dutch engineering firm to provide the technology for a pair of world-scale polyolefin plants planned as part of a mammoth petrochemicals complex envisaged for implementation downstream of the grassroots Duqm Refinery project currently under construction at the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Duqm on Oman's Al Wusta coast.

Rotterdam-based LyondellBasell, billed as the world's biggest licensor of polyolefin technologies, announced at the weekend that it has been selected by Muscat-headquartered DRPIC to provide its proprietary technologies for two plants dedicated to the production of polypropylene and polyethylene as part of the petrochemicals complex.

Total investment in the petrochemicals complex, featuring an array of units that seek to maximise value generation from crude and other feedstocks flowing downstream from Duqm Refinery as well as other sources, is estimated at over \$10 billion. DRPIC's principal shareholders are OQ, the wholly Omani government-owned integrated energy group, and Kuwait Petroleum International.

In a statement, LyondellBasell said it would provide its Spheripol PP process technology for a proposed 280,000 tonnes per annum (TPA) capacity polypropylene plant planned by DRPIC as part of the petrochemicals complex. Envisioned alongside this plant is a significantly larger high-density



polyethylene scheme sized at a world-leading 480,000 TPA. For the latter venture, LyondellBasell has earmarked its licensed Hostalen ACP process technology, it noted.

DRPIC's CEO Dr Salim al Huthaili (pictured) was quoted as stating that the technology selections were among a dozen technology licence packages awarded by the company to help advance the delivery of Oman's biggest petrochemicals project.

"The Spheripol and Hostalen technology licences forms part of 12 technology licence packages awarded by DRPIC to international technology providers, advancing the Front End Engineering and Design progress towards achieving shareholders' Final Investment Decision in 2021," said the CEO.



"Due to the increasing global demand for petrochemical products, the DRPIC Petrochemical Project will become a significant player in the region, benefiting from its strategic location on the Oman eastern seaboard with direct access to international markets. Working with long established technology licensors enables us to develop a

world class project empowering the future development of downstream petrochemical industries in the Special Economic Zone of Duqm," he further added.

FEED work for the giant petrochemicals complex is being undertaken by UK-based international energy services specialist Wood Group. The FEED package covers not only the Natural Gas Liquids (NGL) extraction facility, to be located in Central Oman, but also a 230-km pipeline connecting the facility with Duqm.

The centrepiece of the complex in Duqm is a mega mixed-feed 1.6 million TPA capacity Steam Cracker that will process select product streams from Duqm Refinery, as well as Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), Full Range Naphtha (FRN),

off gases and Natural Gas Liquids (NGL) extracted from natural gas available in central Oman.

Significantly, the complex plans to produce a string of new products for the first time in Oman, notably Ethylene Glycols, Oxo Chemicals and Butadiene, thereby adding to the portfolio of petrochemicals already produced in the Sultanate. New grades of polyethylene and polypropylene proposed to be produced at the Duqm complex will also complement the existing product portfolio. Additionally, these product streams will serve as feedstock for value-adding downstream investments, thus driving the growth of a vibrant chemicals and petrochemicals-based industry in Duqm and beyond.

Top priority for digital transformation, eGovernment

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 29

Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary for Communications and Information Technology at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, said the ministry is committed to implementing the eGovernment strategy as a priority goal in line with the Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

Dr Al Shaithani said: "His Majesty's attention to the role of communications and information technology sector in supporting and promoting social and economic development has been evident since His first speech last February, as His Majesty's messages were focused on encouraging innovation,



DR ALI BIN AMER AL SHAITHANI, Under-Secretary for Communications and Information Technology



His Majesty also stressed that the government will follow up the progress of this aspect; therefore, we, at the ministry, will review and reevaluate all strategies, plans and projects, and will set clear and specific goals and action programmes

employing artificial intelligence and advanced technologies, and providing young people with the future skills to enable them to contribute to building the nation and progressing its prosperity.

"His Majesty also stressed that the government will follow up the progress of this aspect; therefore, we, at the ministry, will review and reevaluate all strategies, plans and projects, and will set clear and specific goals and action programmes to accelerate the digital transformation and complete the implementation of eGovernment."

The Under-Secretary added: "The directives of His Majesty to provide computers to higher education students from social security segment and those with low income, and the government's

rapid endeavour to deliver the communication and Internet services to 598 villages and rural areas in the Sultanate during this year, confirm His Majesty's interest to empower all citizens of the nation with technical services and knowledge."

Dr Al Shaithani indicated that the ministry's competencies in relation to the advanced technologies came as a translation of His Majesty's vision of moving forward to grasp the science and skills of future, and enhancing the use of advanced technologies and employing them to improve the competitive capabilities of the national economy.

This comes in line with Oman's 2040 vision, which considered this sector as a supporter and enabler of economic sectors;

thus, the ministry was entrusted with unprecedented and new competencies such as setting up the national space programme, supporting programmes for developing uses and applications of space science and technology, establishing infrastructure for the development and manufacturing of space systems and satellites, and transferring and adopting advanced technology in the information technology industry.

These competencies were translated through the ministry's structure as there are a centre for space, advanced technology and artificial intelligence, directorates for infrastructure and digital platforms, stimulating the sector, building future skills and empowering other sectors, he added.



World cybersecurity summit showcases women in technology from Oman

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 29

The MENA edition of the World Cybersecurity Summit was held virtually recently with the focus on ‘Cybersecurity for a Post-Pandemic Age’ featuring MENA’s leading government authorities and cybersecurity experts. In attendance, virtually, were over 500 participants including, government leaders, CISOs and cybersecurity experts from across the globe to discuss the latest strategies and trends in the post COVID-19 era.

Representing Oman were two well-known personalities Laila Abdullah al Hadhrami as panellist and Alena Dique as SDG partner and moderator. Laila al Hadhrami is a Digital Transformation & Change Management Expert in the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, who is also Director of the Oman Smart City Platform in the Sultanate. Alena Dique is the founding director and coordinator of the UNCTAD Youth Action Hub Oman.

“The more we are becoming



smarter in our data, the more we need cybersecurity to protect our data from being hacked,” emphasised Laila al Hadhrami. “Cyber-security is one of the main elements and components in Smart Cities and we have to keep educating the society

through the sustainable initiatives in awareness which is the most powerful weapon. We have also cybersecurity experts from Smart City Ambassadors which is one of the main successful initiatives managed by the Smart City Platform through



Laila al Hadhrami

the different ambassadors who keep delivering knowledge and awareness in different sectors of Smart Cities and emerging Technologies.

Recently, we have launched a professional community of practice for Smart City ambassadors where they can propose innovative ideas and take it to an advance level to be executed and implemented.”

“COVID-19 has created both a health and economic crisis. As we move from the response to recovery phase to the reimagine phase, we need to ensure that no one is left behind. Every job will now require digital skills. In the next five years, Microsoft has predicted the creation of 149 million new tech jobs in



Alena Dique

the field of software development, cybersecurity and Machine Learning. With this comes the increase in cyber threats, hacking and cyber-attacks for individuals and nations alike. We must act now in terms of creating awareness, implementing training and upgrading skills,” said Alena Dique, UNCTAD Youth coordinator, Youth Action Hub Oman.

Youth Action Hub Oman, the first UNCTAD Youth Hub in the GCC, was the Youth Partner for the Trescon World Cyber Security Summit and aligned the event with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This event was aligned with Goal number

9 on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure. The objective is to promote sustainable development in the MENA region, to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and to foster innovation in the field on cybersecurity.

The cohesive agenda of the summit covered topics such as ‘Cybersecurity for Smart Cities and citizens’ safety; ‘Disaster prevention and recovery planning for cyber attacks’; ‘Cybersecurity and data protection for Banking and Financial Institutions’; and ‘The MENA Government Cybersecurity Strategy’; to name a few.

The summit included unique interactive online environments featuring keynotes, technology use cases, panel discussions, product showcases and leading solution architects in the cybersecurity realm who presented latest innovations to tackle cyber threats. The attendees also had the opportunity to discuss their challenges in secure, private one-to-one consultation rooms and networking rooms.



MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

MSM30 Index buoyed by support from foreign investors

MUSCAT: This week, the MSM30 Index continued on its positive trajectory from last week and ended the week up by 2.99 per cent. Its main sub-indices were all up as well, led by the Financial Index which rose by 3.76 per cent. The Industrial index and Services Index were also higher by 0.54 per cent and 2.00 per cent, respectively. GCC, foreigners and Arab investors absorbed selling pressure from Omanis and were net buyers of \$17.8 million worth of securities.

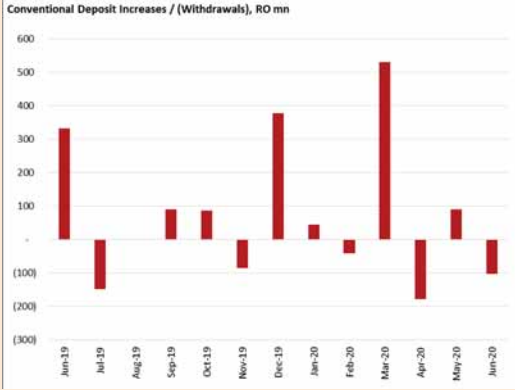
Locally, it was announced that Blue Waters (BW) – a group company of Fisheries Development Oman (FDO) wholly owned by Oman Investment Authority (OIA) – recently took delivery of the largest shipment of fish fingerlings for its maiden fish farming project currently under implementation off Qurayyat in Muscat Governorate. This is in line with Omani government’s ambitions to develop a thriving aquaculture industry in the Sultanate

During the week, further progress was seen on re-opening economic activities. As part of the fifth package of reopening, shops inside traditional souqs, and fish markets across Oman, were allowed to reopen to customers.

Oman & Emirates Investment Holding Co disclosed on MSM that its accountant had fraudulently embezzled an amount of RO 113,392. The company is pursuing recovery of these funds in coordination with the investigative authorities and the ROP. The company reported a net loss of RO 2.2 million for 1H20 vs a net profit of RO 0.37 million in 1H19. Latest CBO statistics reveal that Oman’s conventional credit growth has slowed to 1.5 per cent YoY in Jun 20 as compared to 2.4 per cent YoY in May 20. Total conventional credit reached RO 22.22 billion (-RO 242 million on MoM basis or -1.1 per cent MoM).

Conventional credit slowed largely on account of a 0.6 per cent MoM contraction in private sector credit (contracted by RO 124 million), which forms about 86 per cent of the total. Furthermore, credit to Public Enterprises and non-residents also declined by about 4 per cent (down RO 106.4 million) and 6 per cent (down by RO 17.2 million) respectively. Only credit to Government expanded during the month, increasing by 3 per cent or RO 5.2 million.

Conventional deposits growth also slowed to 3.4 per cent in Jun 20 vs 5.7 per cent YoY in May 20. Total conventional deposits stood at RO 20.41 billion (-RO 103.3 million on MoM basis or -0.5 per cent MoM). Sector Loan-to-deposit (LTD) ratio decreased to 108.9 per cent vs 109.5 per cent in May 20. Conventional deposits declined on MoM basis largely on account of a 4.6 per cent MoM



Locally, it was announced that Blue Waters (BW) recently took delivery of the largest shipment of fish fingerlings for its maiden fish farming project currently under implementation off Qurayyat in Muscat Governorate

(RO 284 million) decline in Government & public enterprises’ deposits (total at RO 5.95 billion or 29.1 per cent of total conventional deposits). Private sector deposits, which account for about 68 per cent of total conventional deposits, rose by 1.2 per cent MoM and 8.8 per cent YoY.

Islamic Banking financing (Banks & Islamic Windows) reached RO 4.1 billion (+0.6 per cent MoM and +9.7 per cent YoY). Islamic financing stands at 15.5 per cent of total Oman banking credit, and Islamic deposits form 14.7 per cent of total bank deposits. Islamic deposits reached RO 3.54 billion (-0.7 per cent MoM and +7.2 per cent YoY).

Islamic Financing-to-Deposit Ratio stood at 115.8 per cent in Jun 20 vs 114.3 per cent in May 20 on an MoM deposit contraction together with credit expansion. Oman banking sector’s total credit (includes Islamic Financing) stood at RO 26.32 billion (-0.8 per cent MoM and +2.4 per cent YoY).

Total deposits stood at RO 23.95 billion (-0.5 per cent MoM and +3.9 per cent YoY). Total private sector credit stood at RO 23.05 billion, (-0.4 per cent MoM and +2.2 per cent YoY).

Loan-to-deposit Ratio stood at 109.9 per cent in Jun 20 vs 110.2 per cent a month ago, declining due to credit decline outpacing deposit decline on MoM basis in Jun 20. MSM was the best performing market at the end of the week. All other markets closed higher w-o-w except Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange where the General Index lost 0.17 per cent.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

Suhar plant wins first-ever order for 220 kV class transformers

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 29

Voltamp Power SAOC, a subsidiary of Voltamp Energy SAOG, Oman, has signed an agreement with Oman National Engineering and Investment Company (ONEIC) to book their first order of a pair of 500 MVA 220/132/33 kV power transformers. The equipment will be manufactured at Voltamp’s modern plant in Suhar Industrial City.

The order stems from a contract secured by ONEIC to construct a new 400/132/33 grid station at Al Jifnain with associated OHLs as well as the installation of two 500 MVA 220 kV class power transformers at Misfah Grid Station.

Sayyid Aymen bin Hamad al Busaidy, Chairman, Voltamp Power, said: “We are proud as an Omani company to have joined the elite club of 220 kV class power transformer manufacturers.

We are grateful to Oman Electricity Transmission Company SAOC (OETC) and



Oman National Engineering and Investment Company (ONEIC) for putting their trust in us and we are confident to design, manufacture, test and supply them for their important projects. We continue to keep raising the bar in providing quality products and service to our valued customers.”

Eng Abdullah al Badri, CEO of Voltamp Energy SAOG said, “We are proud to have established our brand as a reliable manufacturer of 132 kV class transformers in last 10 years and are happy to

take the next step to 220 kV class transformers. At Voltamp, we are confident to reduce Oman’s and GCC dependence on global manufacturers and make GCC self-reliant in transformers of these capacities.”

Voltamp’s technology partner for 220 kV class as well as 400 kV class power transformers is Tatung of Taiwan, who are also equity partners in Voltamp Power with a seat on the company’s board. The Suhar factory was launched in October 2011 at a project cost of \$30 million.

BUSINESS ALERT

Al Mouj Golf achieves sustainability milestone

MUSCAT: Al Mouj Golf, regarded by many as one of the Middle East’s finest golf courses, is set to further its sustainability credentials by announcing that it has successfully retained its GEO Certified distinction – a marque dedicated to recognising credible leadership in sustainability and golf.

Commenting on this achievement was Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat: “Al Mouj Golf was first certified in 2017 and this continues to be an important partnership for Al Mouj Golf. I am incredibly proud of the team for successfully earning our recertification. Their efforts represent an important milestone in the facility’s ambition to operate in a highly sustainable way and will help us elevate the impact of our sustainability practice; creating new opportunities through education and responsible leadership, providing widespread benefits to a broad spectrum of stakeholders and championing innovation to set new benchmarks in such a crucial sector.”

In recent years, the course managers at Al Mouj Golf have undertaken significant work to enhance the natural character and biodiversity of the course, also reducing the consumption of water and other vital natural resources,



while also contributing to national goals on priority issues such as combating desertification; protecting groundwater supplies; converting to clean, renewable energy; stimulating the circular economy; and engaging youth and communities in healthy recreation.

GEO Foundation is the international not-for-profit dedicated to helping golf to deliver and be recognised for a positive impact for people and nature. Inspiring golf to fully embrace sustainability and promoting a shared understanding of issues and solutions, working with and through industry associations and businesses. Strengthening the reputation of golf clubs and developments and helping golf celebrate great golf environments on the basis of a new collection of real-world data and highlights.

US consumer spending rises strongly

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The expenditures needed to fuel the economy's recovery in August are a big question mark given the hit to personal income nationwide with the loss of those \$600 weekly unemployment benefit checks.

CHRIS RUPKEY,
MUFGECONOMIST

WASHINGTON: US consumer spending increased more than expected in July, boosting expectations for a sharp rebound in economic growth in the third quarter, though momentum is likely to ebb as the COVID-19 pandemic lingers and money from the government runs out.

The report from the Commerce Department on Friday also showed a rise in personal income after two straight monthly declines, but a chunk of the increase was from unemployment benefits, which were bolstered by a weekly \$600 supplement from the government that expired on July 31. Both consumer spending and income



A man is seen wearing mask while shopping at a supermarket in Bradford, Pennsylvania.

— Reuters

remain well below their pre-pandemic levels.

“The consumer is back spending at the shops and malls in July, but many of their purchases reflected pent-up demand following the pandemic lockdown,” said Chris Rupkey, chief economist at MUFGE in New York. “The expenditures needed to fuel the economy’s

recovery in August are a big question mark given the hit to personal income nationwide with the loss of those \$600 weekly unemployment benefit checks.”

Consumer spending, which accounts for more than two-thirds of US economic activity, rose 1.9 per cent last month, after jumping 6.2 per cent in June. Economists

had forecast consumer spending would gain 1.5 per cent in July. July’s increase left consumer spending about 4.6 per cent below its February level.

Consumers boosted purchases of goods like new motor vehicles. They also lifted spending on healthcare, dining out and hotel and motel accommodation. While spending

on goods has rebounded above its pre-pandemic level, outlays on services are about 9.7 per cent from recovery as consumers remain wary of exposure to the coronavirus.

That is a bad omen for the services-based economy, which fell into recession in February. Though new COVID-19 infections have subsided after a broad resurgence

through the summer, many hot spots remain, especially at college campuses that have reopened for in-person learning.

The economy suffered its deepest contraction in at least 73 years in the second quarter, with consumer spending at the forefront of the decline in gross domestic product. While economists are anticipating a sharp rebound in GDP in the third quarter, led by consumer spending, they are cutting estimates for the fourth quarter.

Stocks on Wall Street were trading higher while the dollar was down against a basket of currencies. Prices of US Treasuries rose.

Americans in low-wage jobs have borne the brunt of the economic downturn. Though President Donald Trump extended the jobless benefit supplement, the payout was cut to \$300 per week and funding for the programme is expected to be depleted by September.

A handful of states are offering the extra unemployment benefit. Economists estimate the loss of the \$600 could cut \$50 billion from retail sales in August. 27 million people are on unemployment benefits.

A survey on Friday from the University of Michigan showed a modest gain in consumer sentiment this month. According to the survey, half of all consumers expected the economy to improve in the year ahead, but many of them viewed the overall economic conditions as unfavourable.

In July, income rose 0.4 per cent, in part as the reopening of more businesses lifted wages. Income fell 1.0 per cent in June. It remains 5 per cent below February’s level. Wages gained 1.3 per cent. — Reuters

China’s factory activity grew at faster pace in August



A textile worker is seen on a fabric production line at a factory in Qingdao, Shandong province, China. — Reuters

BEIJING: China’s factory activity likely expanded at a slightly faster pace in August, fuelled by rising infrastructure spending and improving global demand, a

Reuters poll showed on Friday, as the Chinese economy continues to recover from the coronavirus crisis.

The official manufacturing Purchasing Manager’s Index (PMI)

is expected to pick up moderately to 51.2 in August from July’s four-month high of 51.1, according to the median forecast of 16 economists.

A reading above 50 indicates an

expansion in activity on a monthly basis.

China’s vast industrial sector is steadily returning to the levels seen before the pandemic paralysed huge swathes of the economy early this year. Pent-up demand, stimulus-driven infrastructure and surprisingly resilient exports have been the main drivers propelling the rebound, but private consumption is lagging as consumers remain cautious about spending.

Profits at China’s industrial firms last month grew at the fastest pace since June 2018, official data showed.

“High frequency data such as blast furnace operating rates and crude steel daily output continued to climb in August, likely driven by rising infrastructure demand,” said Jiang Dongying, Shanghai-based analyst at CIB Research.

“On foreign demand, the continued re-opening of overseas economies could help boost new export orders.”

UK-based industry consultancy Off-Highway Research said on Wednesday it now expects a 14 per cent jump in China’s construction

machinery sales due to government stimulus, having previously said it would dip 8 per cent before COVID-19.

With infrastructure and property investment set to drive growth for the rest of the year, investment Bank HSBC this week raised its forecast for China’s 2020 GDP growth to 2.4 per cent from 1.7 per cent.

“With an uneven recovery and uncertain global growth, Beijing is focusing on refuting the domestic economy,” Qu Hongbin, chief China economist at HBSC, said in an article.

“We thus expect policy to remain supportive with further interest-rate reductions this year — a 25 basis-point cut in the average reserve-requirement ratio to 9.15 per cent and the one-year loan prime rate trimmed by another 20 points to 3.65 per cent.” The official PMI and its sister survey on the services sector will be released on Monday.

The Caixin manufacturing PMI will be published on September 1, and analysts expect a reading of 52.7, easing from 52.8 in July. The Caixin services PMI survey will be out on September 3. — Reuters

Triller says
made \$20
bn bid with
Centricus for
TikTok assets



NEW YORK: Triller Inc executive chairman Bobby Sarnevesht said on Friday that the short-video app had made a \$20 billion offer with investment firm Centricus Asset Management Ltd for the assets of rival TikTok that China’s ByteDance is seeking to a divest.

ByteDance and TikTok denied knowledge of the offer, raising questions over whether the proposed deal between two of the most popular social media apps in the US represented a serious bid or was a publicity stunt.

ByteDance has been ordered by President Donald Trump to divest TikTok in the United States, amid security concerns over the personal data it handles.

Microsoft Corp and Oracle Corp are among the US companies vying to acquire the assets of TikTok, which claims about 100 million monthly active users in the US. The Chinese firm is expected to pick a bidder to enter into exclusive talks soon.

“We submitted an offer directly to the chairman of ByteDance through Centricus, and have confirmation it was received and is under consideration by him,” Sarnevesht said. — Reuters

BUSINESS BRIEF

Apple terminates ‘Fortnite’ creator’s App Store account

NEW YORK: Apple Inc said on Friday it had terminated “Fortnite” creator Epic Games’ account on its App Store amid a legal battle over the iPhone maker’s in-app payment guidelines and accusations they constitute a monopoly.

Apple said its move will not affect Epic Games’ Unreal Engine, a software tool relied on by hundreds of other app makers. But the move means iPhone users will not be able to download “Fortnite” or other Epic titles through the Apple App Store. Players who have already downloaded Epic’s games will still be able to play but will no longer be able to make in-app purchases with Apple’s payment system.

On Monday, a federal court ruled that Apple could block Epic’s titles from its store but could not take action that would harm Unreal Engine while Epic’s antitrust lawsuit against the iPhone maker plays out. — Reuters

Facebook’s failure to remove militia page an ‘operational mistake’

NEW YORK: Facebook Inc made an “operational mistake” in not acting sooner to remove a page for a militia group that posted a call to arms in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the company’s Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg said on Friday.

The social media company said it had removed the page for the Kenosha Guard, and an event listing there for Armed Citizens to Protect Our Lives and Property as it violated the company’s policy against “militia organisations”.

Facebook’s action came after two people were shot and killed during protests in the town on Tuesday night, part of three nights of civil unrest that followed the shooting by a white police officer that left a Black man, Jacob Blake Jr, paralysed.

Zuckerberg, speaking in a video message, acknowledged the company had received complaints from “a bunch of people” about the Kenosha Guard posting. — Reuters

MGM Resorts to lay off 18,000 furloughed US employees

NEVADA: Casino operator MGM Resorts International informed its staff on Friday it would lay off 18,000 furloughed employees in the United States as the coronavirus-induced travel curbs hurt its operations.

The company will start the process on Monday, according to a letter from Chief Executive Officer Bill Hornbuckle to employees. MGM employed nearly 52,000 full-time and 18,000 part-time people in the United States as of December 31.

“Federal law requires companies to provide a date of separation for furloughed employees who are not recalled within six months. Regrettably, August 31, marks (that) date,” Hornbuckle said.

Many companies have decided to cut jobs as the US economy recorded its sharpest contraction in at least 73 years in the second quarter due to pandemic-led disruptions, with corporate profits sinking deeper. — Reuters



GLOBAL TREND

How COVID-19 has accelerated digitalisation

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he virus that took the world by storm came with plenty of terrible news in 2020, but as the clouds of the disease and the recession begin to fade, we can see some ray of sunlight at the horizon of 2021.

One of the most interesting aspects of the global lockdown was the necessity to keep essential services going despite the movement restraint. As always, logistics must continue.

Even during wars, the logistic mechanism is always working. Perhaps it is one of the very few sectors that actually gains traction as the crisis deepens.

However, logistics alone is unable to carry the weight of the economy if the financial sector is not matching its speed.



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ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING ASPECTS OF THE GLOBAL LOCKDOWN WAS THE NECESSITY TO KEEP ESSENTIAL SERVICES GOING DESPITE THE MOVEMENT RESTRAIN. AS ALWAYS, LOGISTICS MUST CONTINUE

And this is the second great piece of news: finance has somehow benefited from COVID-19. As mobility was forbidden over the past few months, financial regulators and financial institutions around the world had to quickly find ways to simplify access to credit, removing obstacles and barriers that are usually in place during “normality”.

But with an ongoing pandemic lockdown, nobody could afford to go to the bank to sign documents, and

those banks that still required manual processes were strongly urged to embrace paperless procedure.

Digitalisation has also pushed financial institutions for a broader adoption of APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) to connect their systems to the facilities offered by third party providers.

A classic example is the ability to automatically read transaction data. When a person wants to transfer money to a third-party digital wallet

for instance, often the easiest solution is to simply perform a bank transfer for the desired amount from the person's account to the bank account of the company managing the wallet.

However, when APIs are not in place, the company receiving the transfer would not be able to tell when the payment is in.

Hence, delays could occur between the time when the transfer is done and the moment when the balance is reflected on the person's digital wallet.

However, APIs are able to recognise the transaction and automatically credit the balance without human intervention.

On a larger scale, automation and digitalisation has proven to be

essential during the lockdown at every level of the economy and finance: from business-to-government transactions, to business-to-business transfers. So when innovative logistics meets digitised finance, the results can be extremely encouraging.

Now keeping the notion of APIs in mind, an example is when not only monetary transfers are automatically tracked and recorded, but also the movement of goods and the relevant services.

The result is semi-automated trade finance. If there is one thing that COVID-19 has forced us to use is to become more efficient and ingenious, minimising our efforts and maximising both results and speed of execution.

RESTORING EFFICIENCY



A sign is pictured in front of the chair of the Director-General before the start of the General Council of the World Trade Organization in Geneva. – Reuters

Crisis demands reformer at WTO helm

C

ompared to the fireworks of the US election, the contest to lead the World Trade Organization is a low-key affair. There are no viral ads, big reveals, or blockbuster endorsements.

Few outside top-level business and politics could name one, let alone all, of the front runners. Yet to overlook this election would be a mistake. Though the impulse toward multilateralism has waned in recent years, the need for it, particularly in the wake of the pandemic, is greater than ever. As the world looks to rebuild, the WTO can guide the global economy in a fairer, greener direction — but only if it has a credible reformer at its helm.

The need for reform could not be more urgent. Restoring the efficacy of the WTO means restoring its moral authority, and that means shaking things up. Too many benefits have been accrued by the winners of globalisation and too many have lost out. Inequality has spiralled.

As a result, the good name of international trade has been sullied. On the left it is blamed for the destruction of once-prosperous industrial communities. On the right it is seen as standing in opposition to nationhood and patriotism.

Facing a world after COVID-19, the new director-general has an opportunity to reverse the world's inward turn. The virus has exposed the dangers of connectedness without cooperation: We have been unable to stop a global crisis because we have been unable to rally a global response to it.

This is true of the pandemic, of course. But it is true also of climate change, global inequality and the destruction of the environment. By placing these problems at the heart of the WTO's mission, the next director-general can redefine the WTO as a force for good.

Such a progressive programme

requires a director-general with the gravitas to make their presence felt on the world stage.

“Gravitas” may sound vague, but it is important: The WTO director-general wields limited executive power, so their effectiveness derives largely from their status and influence. When they talk, the business world — and, crucially, China and the United States — must listen. Reforming zeal, unmatched by experience, will therefore be of little use.

Global leadership experience is particularly important given the daunting trade implications of COVID-19. Over \$12 trillion in economic stimulus packages have distorted global markets to the detriment of poorer nations.

‘VACCINE NATIONALISM’ IS ALSO AN ECONOMIC RISK OF THE HIGHEST ORDER. IN AN INTERDEPENDENT ECONOMY, NO GOVERNMENT CAN BE SURE OF REVERSING ITS DOMESTIC ECONOMIC FORTUNES IF THE PANDEMIC CONTINUES TO SPREAD BEYOND ITS BORDERS

Excessive risk-aversion — what economists call “precautionism” — is increasing red tape and pushing up prices. Antagonism between nations continues to undermine the case for openness.

Most pressingly, the new director-general will need to build a muscular strategy for coordinating fair distribution of a vaccine.

This means ensuring that there is no repeat of the “sicken-thy-neighbour” measures seen during the early months

of the COVID-19 crisis.

“Vaccine nationalism”, though often described in humanitarian terms, is also an economic risk of the highest order. In an interdependent economy, no government can be sure of reversing its domestic economic fortunes if the pandemic continues to spread beyond its borders.

With the G20 having failed to forge a coordinated global response, hopes of avoiding a damaging escalation of vaccine-related trade barriers rest on the appointment of a director-general with real political clout. And, ideally, a good understanding of pharmaceutical supply and distribution chains.

Without these, the WTO will struggle to rise to the challenge of this moment. In recent years, the organisation has been hampered by squabbling and overcaution.

To get a sense of its limitations, look no further than the process for choosing a director-general: all 164 members must agree on a winner, a system that risks favouring less-radical candidates.

The new director-general cannot afford to be inoffensive. Beyond the pandemic, the new head of the WTO will have a vital role to play in remodelling capitalism to meet the environmental and economic challenges of a world in crisis. This should begin with re-establishing the body as the central forum for global trade rule-making.

While the WTO has made welcome progress in many important fields over the last few years, there is an urgent need to expand negotiations to cover a wide range of 21st century trade frictions — including the connection between trade and the environment.

This will be a big departure for an organisation prone to talking lots and achieving little. It's why the WTO would benefit from someone from outside its ranks to take it forward. — Reuters

CUTTING COSTS

Banks eye layoffs as short-term crisis ends

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t the height of the coronavirus pandemic last spring, the heads of US banks including Morgan Stanley, Bank of America Corp and others pledged not to cut any jobs in 2020 because it was the wrong thing to do.

However, as executives prepare for an extended recession and loan losses that come with it, layoffs are back on the table, said consultants, industry insiders and compensation analysts.

Compared with April projections, bank economists and executives expect the US economy to take longer to recover, with high unemployment into 2021 and interest rates staying near zero for the foreseeable future.

On top of that, working from home has shown some managers that they need fewer employees to do the same amount of work.

“No question, layoffs (will) come across the board for all the banks,” said Barry Schwartz, chief investment officer at Toronto-based Baskin Wealth Management, which invests in JPMorgan Chase and other large Canadian banks.

Banks have to cut costs because of expected credit issues, as well as low interest rates and regulatory pressure to trim dividends, he said.

Bank staff could shrink by an average of 5-10 per cent, mainly at mid- and lower levels in technology, human resources and finance departments, according to Alan Johnson, head of the compensation consultancy Johnson Associates, Inc.

JPMorgan Chase & Co already cut around 100 jobs in mid-July, according to comments on social media. People who said they worked in three divisions — the community and consumer bank, the commercial bank and the corporate and investment bank — said they were let go. JPMorgan representatives declined to comment.

Wells Fargo & Co resumed cutting jobs in August after putting layoffs on hold in March. The affected staff have so far been in technology and retail banking, and management is planning thousands more layoffs this year and next, sources said.

“We didn't see a lot of restructuring or layoffs with the banks (earlier in the pandemic). We're starting to see it now,” said Dennis Baden, partner-in-charge at executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles.

“Things will get a little bit worse... and we might see an increase in restructuring.”

Among global banks, Standard Chartered PLC and HSBC Holdings PLC have let go of several hundred employees this year. Standard Chartered plans to lay off a few hundred more this year and early next year, according to bank sources. — Reuters



A man withdraws cash from a Bank of America automated teller machine (ATM) in Hollywood, California. – AFP



Coronavirus crisis threatens to unravel Japanese artist's kimono ambitions

TOKYO: Japanese artist Hiroko Takahashi fought through sexism and suspicion from traditional kimono artisans to establish a globally known brand that sold hundreds of her original garments every month – until the coronavirus devastation hit.

Takahashi has tried to regroup by selling handmade masks sewn from kimono fabric.

"My designs are kind of strong, so there are people who resist the idea of wearing them in something full body," the 42-year-old said. "But they'd love to wear it as a mask."

But the masks are a long fall from her original business. Noted for her bold, unisex prints for both kimono and yukata, a lighter kimono, and her refusal to accept conventional limits on wearing them, Takahashi this year was part of an exhibit at London's Victoria and Albert Museum. She also has a contract to provide yukata for a new, luxury hotel as Japan gears up to host the Olympics.

Success took time. When she began, traditional dyers hated her designs and refused to work with her. When she called to check on progress, they'd hang up.

"Being a woman and young can make it hard to work in Japan," she said.

She persisted until she was selling 100 to 200 made-to-order yukata a month – remarkable success in an industry so steadily declining that sales now hover around 16 per cent of what they were in 1981,



according to government data.

The coronavirus changed everything. Department stores shut for weeks, the Olympics were postponed until 2021 and the hotel opening was put off. Summer festivals and fireworks displays, usually prime yukata-wearing occasions, were cancelled nationwide.

"We have absolutely nothing,"

she said. "I've done nothing new this year. No new designs, no new colours."

Though Takahashi is teaching and eking out income making kimono fabric masks, her income has taken a major hit. Her yukatas started at 60,000 yen (\$566) and kimono at 3 million yen, but the masks go for just 1,400 yen each.

The coronavirus could devastate the kimono industry, where aging artisans, each specialising in one stage of the process, are finding it impossible to envision future work.

"There are a lot of people who expected to hang in there, but with the virus, and not enough work coming in, they're deciding to call it quits," said Kazumi Furuoya, 44, a third-generation kimono tailor who works with his wife and parents in the Den-en-chofu area of Tokyo.

A generation ago, the Furuoya workshop was so busy it scrambled to keep up with orders.

A recent survey by Aeru, a company promoting traditional crafts, found that unless demand improves, about 40 per cent of artisans may be forced to quit by the end of the year.

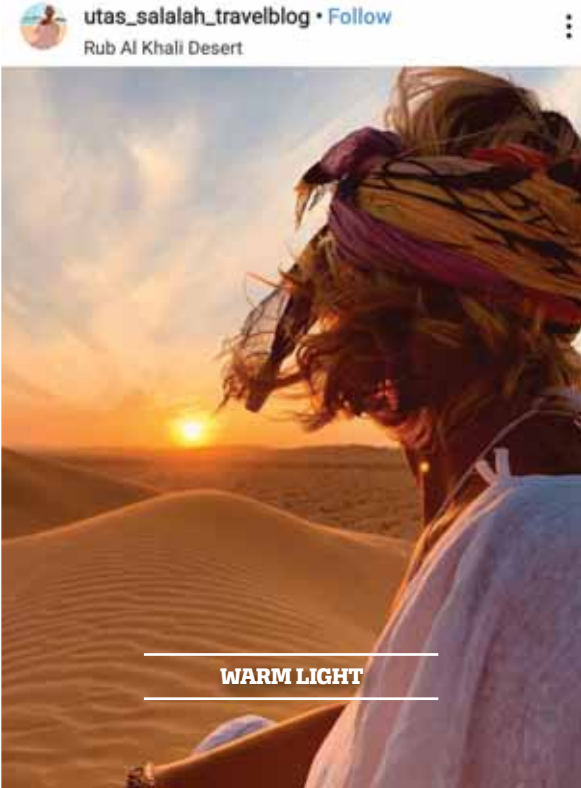
"If a fabric-maker goes under there's nothing to dye, and if the dyers quit we can't make kimonos," Takahashi said. "If one goes down, we all do."

Even if demand picks up, the impact may be lasting. A lack of orders means new tailors can't practice enough.

"Kimonos are part of Japanese culture and as long as even one artisan remains, I want to work with them to keep things going – because once something vanishes, bringing it back is really hard," Takahashi said. "I don't know how much strength I have, but if I can contribute even a little to this, it'll be good." — Reuters



INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



COOK LIKE A CHEF

Get full stories online at www.omanobserver.om

Black Angus Tenderloin with chili garlic broccoli and mashed potato



SOCIAL DISH-TANCING

Most of the restaurants and hotels in the country are now open but they are operating under strict guidelines enforced by the relevant ministries. There is a 'new normal' to the dining experience and this includes temperature check as well as proper social distancing by limiting restaurant capacities to 50 per cent and with restriction of only four people per table.

For those who are still uncomfortable dining out and exposing their families to possible infections, we are bringing back 'Cook Like A Chef' where we ask reputable and unique chefs to share easy-to-do recipes at home.

The food at home doesn't have to be stale and repetitive. Curated twice a week from our numerous contributors coming from luxury hotels to international chains and local food champions, we hope you will enjoy these selections and let us know on Instagram and Twitter via our handle @OmanObserver of what you'd like to see next featured in our series.

ABOUT THE DISH

Everyone loves a good steak especially a well-prepared and well-seasoned one. For those who just started in the kitchen, cooking it can be a bit intimidating but this easy-to-do recipe might just be right at your alley and make you enjoy preparing it.

Angus beef is one of the most popular meats in the market today and preferred by many because when cooked, they marble really well. Contrary to popular belief, Angus has very little to do with the meat quality but rather is the name of the breed of cattle and come either in red or black. It is a good source of protein, vitamin B12, zinc, phosphorous and Vitamin B6 among others.

ABOUT THE CHEF

CHEF AJAY DHOUNDIYAL

Executive Chef
In-Charge of F&B & Kitchen
Park Inn by Radisson Muscat

Executive Chef Ajay Dhoundiyal leads the culinary team of Park Inn by Radisson Muscat Hotel since September of 2012 and currently in-charge of F&B department. With over 2-decade experience in the culinary industry, Chef Ajay operates seamlessly to winch the dining experience of the hotel guests.

He has over 20 years of experience in the culinary industry. His career has taken him across various hotel brands like Hyatt, Kempinski, Starwood, and Radisson hotel groups. As the Executive Chef of the hotel, he leads the culinary team, preparing and managing the operations of the hotel's dining outlets and banquets. He specialises in international cuisine and strives to create interesting banquet menus.



INGREDIENTS:



Black Angus Tenderloin 200 gm
Salt and black pepper

SIDE DISH:
Mashed Potato, chili garlic broccoli, char grilled cherry tomato

CHILI GARLIC BROCCOLI
INGREDIENTS
75 gm Broccoli florets
2 large Garlic, thinly sliced
Chili flakes
Salt
Olive oil

MASHED POTATO
INGREDIENTS
1 large potato boiled and mashed
15gm Butter
50ml Milk
Parmesan cheese grated

Grilled Cherry tomato 3-4 pcs
Whole roasted garlic

PEPPERCORN SAUCE
100ml beef stock or Demi Glaze sauce
Powder (Follow packaging recipe for base sauce)
1 garlic clove, crushed
1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
1 tbsp Dijon mustard
75 ml double cream
½ tsp crushed black peppercorns
2 tbsp chopped fresh parsley

PREPARATION AND COOKING INSTRUCTIONS

For the sauce, add the stock to a saucepan, bring to the boil until reduced by half. Add the garlic, Worcestershire sauce, mustard, mixed well cream, and peppercorns. Stir and bring to the boil over a high heat. Season with salt and cook until it reaches the consistency of pouring sauce, add chopped parsley.

Prepare mashed potato by warming butter and milk together, add boiled mashed potato, mixed/fold it gently add salt pepper, finish with parmesan cheese, keep ready.

Heat the pan, add olive oil, toss garlic slices, add blanched broccoli florets, season with salt and chili flakes. Grill tenderloin steak as per your choice of cooking doneness, give rest before plating the steak, sprinkle with salt and pepper.

ENTERTAINMENT

'Black Panther' star Boseman dies after private battle with cancer



CHADWICK BOSEMAN, star of the ground-breaking superhero movie "Black Panther," has died after a private four-year battle with colon cancer, his publicist said on Friday.

Boseman, 43, never publicly discussed his condition and continued to work on major Hollywood films during and between "countless" operations and chemotherapy, his family said in a statement.

"It was the honour of his career to bring King T'Challa to life in 'Black Panther,'" they said.

"A true fighter, Chadwick persevered through it all," the statement added.

Boseman became the first black superhero to get his own standalone film in the record-breaking Marvel franchise with 2018's "Black Panther."

The movie, set in the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda, was adored by critics and audiences, becoming the first comic book film to be nominated for best picture at the Oscars and grossing over \$1 billion worldwide. Earlier in his career, Boseman played black icons Jackie Robinson in "42" — today, ironically, was Jackie Robinson Day in the US — and James Brown in "Get on Up."

The news of Boseman's death sent shockwaves through Hollywood and around the world.

"The true power of @chadwickboseman was bigger than anything we saw on screen," wrote Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden.

"From the Black Panther to Jackie Robinson, he inspired generations and showed them they can be anything they want — even super heroes."

Boseman's Marvel co-star Mark Ruffalo tweeted: "Brother, you were one of the all time greats and your

greatness was only beginning. Lord love ya. Rest in power, King."

Leading US civil rights organisation the NAACP praised Boseman for "showing us how to conquer adversity with grace" and "to walk as a King, without losing the common touch."

"#RestInPower #BlackPantherForever," its tweet concluded.

'HEARTS ARE BROKEN'

Boseman had recently appeared in Spike Lee's Vietnam War-set "Da 5 Bloods," and was set to appear in a sequel to "Black Panther" due in 2022.

"Our hearts are broken and our thoughts are with Chadwick Boseman's family. Your legacy will live on forever. Rest In Peace," wrote the official Marvel Twitter account.

His character T'Challa, king and protector of technologically advanced Wakanda, was the first black superhero in mainstream American comics, having been featured in "The Fantastic Four" in 1966.

The Marvel film was celebrated as an important cultural moment for its mainly black cast, and for subverting stereotypes by depicting a prosperous African country that takes in refugees and extends its culture and technology to poorer nations.

Born in South Carolina, the son of a nurse and an upholstery entrepreneur, Boseman has roots in the west African state of Sierra Leone.

Before Marvel, he was best known for acclaimed portrayal of the legendary Robinson in Brian Helgeland's "42" (2013), which had the highest-grossing debut for a baseball movie in Hollywood history.

Boseman died in his home "with his wife and family by his side," the statement said. — **AFP**



The Sultanate's migratory mudflat habitats and inhabitants

TEXT BY RAY PETERSEN
PHOTOS BY LENA PETERSEN

They come in their thousands, the migrants, winging their way from North Africa mostly, to the estuaries and mudflats of Oman, every year. Some here to stay, where the climate suits them, while others will linger a while before moving on to India and South East Asia, on that annual sojourn.

According to a 2016 study, involving the government, Shell Oil, and a Netherlands based conservation and monitoring group, Wetlands International, completed a census which identified over 500,000 birds, of some eighty different species, in the Al Wusta wetlands alone, and mostly migratory. The International Waterbird Census team headed by Ward Hagemeijer, Wetlands International's Head of Business and Ecosystems, and Associate Expert Szabolcs Nagy, with volun-

teers Kees Camphuijsen, Lenze Hofstee, Leon Kelder and Steven de Bie.

Wetlands are where water meets land, and the terrain lends itself to estuary sustained marshes, river deltas, mangroves, peat marshes and exist on every continent. These wetlands, have long been a primary target for predatory real estate developers, due to their location, relatively low cost of regeneration, and flat terrains, and during the last century more than 60 per cent of global wetlands have been drained for such urban development. Wetlands International is adamant that the abundant and unique nature of wetlands biodiversity requires urgent action to reverse this deeply concerning global trend.

In the MENA region particularly, being more arid, the wetlands have a meaningful role to play, in that they retain water from rainfall, for longer. They provide grazing for farmers and pastoral cultures, and a breeding haven for fish and waterbirds, especially the wading birds. Wetlands International has made a signifi-

cant impact within the region through the restoration of the internationally important Ndiael Avifauna Special Reserve in Senegal, the redesign of the proposed Fomi Dam in the Upper Niger River in Guinea to minimise the downstream impacts on people and nature, and restored nearly 500 hectares of valuable flood forests in Mali's Inner Niger Delta through community participation while improving livelihoods and reducing bird hunting.

Here in Oman, from Bar Al Hikman in Al Wusta, to a hundred locations in Sharqiyah, and even in Qurum, Muscat, the mudflats and mangrove wetlands host wildlife galore, but almost certainly the standouts are the long-legged, usually elegant, almost arrogant waders, the stilts, flamingoes, and herons. They are so amusing to watch as they gently tiptoe through the water, never dragging their legs or feet, but very deliberately taking that one step after another, in their search for food.

Flamingos, the national bird of the Bahamas, get their names

from the Spanish origin 'flamengo,' meaning flame coloured, and describes the bill and legs particularly. They are proportionately, the longest legged of all birds. They feed on shellfish and algae, using their oddly shaped, specially adapted, beaks to filter and separate mud and silt from the food they consume, usually brine shrimps and algae. Uniquely, they can both raise their top jaw, or lower their bottom jaw. Most either dwelling or migrating through Oman will be of the Greater Flamingo standing 1 to 1.5m tall, or the Lesser Flamingo at approximately 60-80cm tall. They can most often be found standing on one leg, though scientists are to date, inconclusive why that occurs.

The heron has a long rapier-like beak, or bill, though unlike the flamingo it is more rapier, or harpoon shaped, and are usually black, brown, or yellow. They feed mainly on fish, crabs, and shrimps, and use their sharper bill to spear their prey. They are interesting to watch as they stalk, as they appear to calculate distance,

refraction of the water and hunch over close to the surface before striking swiftly, and perhaps that is why the rapier analogy comes to mind so easily? The heron is also renowned as a cultural predator, adept at using bait to attract their prey, so must retain high intelligence.

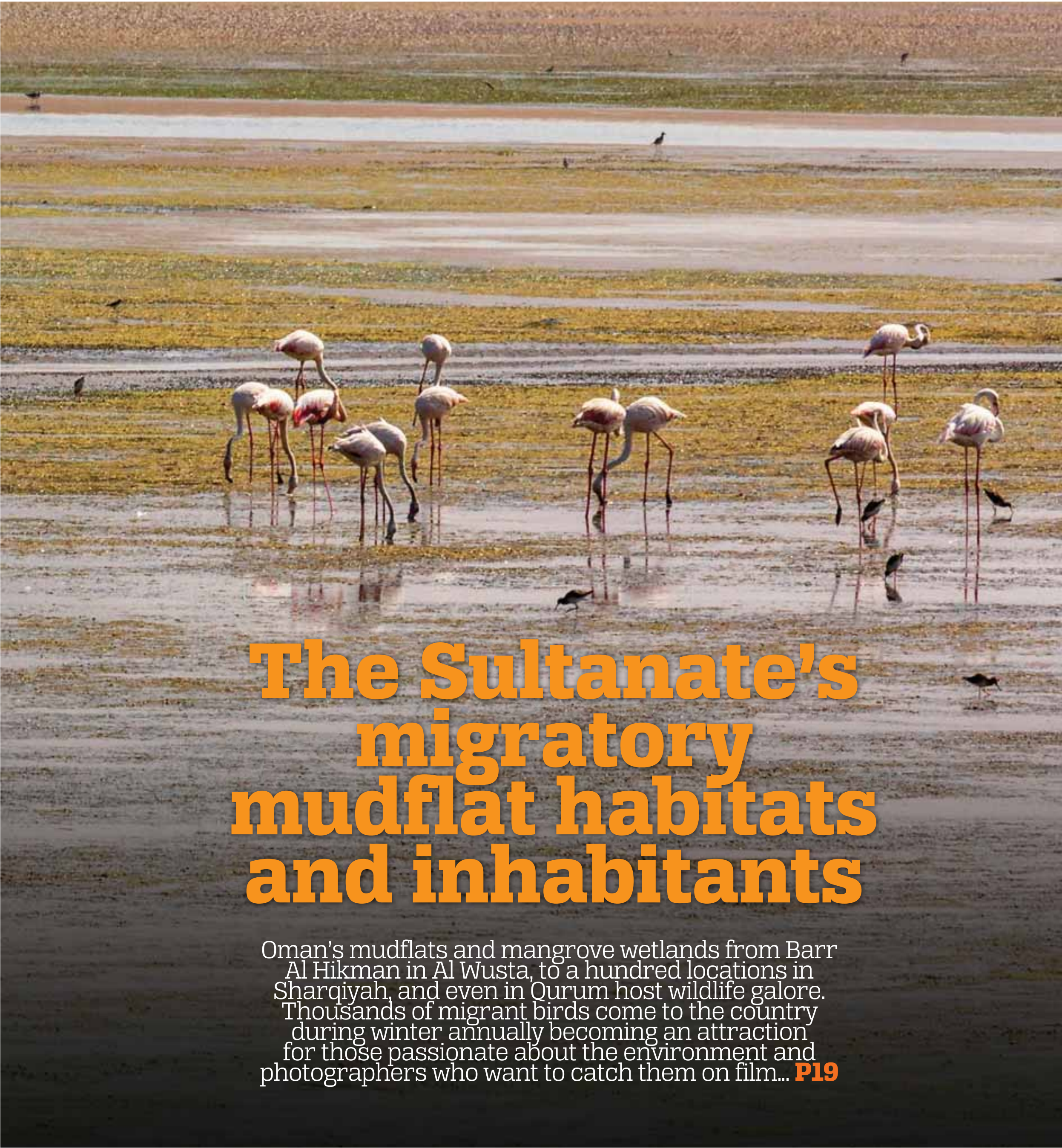
The stilts, though the smaller of the three, at only 30-35cm long, have extremely long pink legs and long, thin, straight bills, with distinctive black and white plumage and markings. They get their name from the Ancient Greek 'stilt,' meaning strap leg. They feed on aquatic insects and organic small creatures.

The stilt is quite aggressive, and if you have ever camped out near the wetlands you would recognise their loud, strident, barking type of call. Their long pink legs are comparatively, only shorter than the flamingo.

These birds are gracious, quite elegant movers, fun to watch, and sustaining their habitats here in the Sultanate would appear to have significant upside in a post-COVID-19 tourism environment.

features

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The Sultanate's migratory mudflat habitats and inhabitants

Oman's mudflats and mangrove wetlands from Barr Al Hikman in Al Wusta, to a hundred locations in Sharqiyah, and even in Qurum host wildlife galore. Thousands of migrant birds come to the country during winter annually becoming an attraction for those passionate about the environment and photographers who want to catch them on film... **P19**

DAILY PICKS

TRAVEL



EXTRAORDINARY POOLS

Counting the days until we can travel again. But more important than that, I am anxious for better days... This is one of the striking swimming pools we were able to enjoy @sixsenseszinghybay! We stayed for a week and to be honest, I just couldn't get used to this amazing view — the mountains, the arid scenario, the hotel's fantastic structure... really #outoftheordinary," shared Instagram user @marineira.

EAT



BLACK ANGUS TENDERLOIN WITH CHILI GARLIC BROCCOLI AND MASHED POTATO

Impress your loved ones with this easy to prepare Angus steak with healthy sides — one of the dishes prepared at Park Inn Muscat. Recipe and details on **page 18**

READ



THE VANISHING HALF

BY BRIT BENNETT

The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.

WATCH



TENET

Armed with only one word - Tenet - and fighting for the survival of the entire world, the Protagonist journeys through a twilight world of international espionage on a mission that will unfold in something beyond real time.

Director: Christopher Nolan
Starring: John David Washington, Robert Pattinson, Elizabeth Debicki

CELEBRATE



INTERNATIONAL WHALE SHARK DAY

International Whale Shark Day started in 2012 to raise awareness of how these animals had been hunted for their meat and to celebrate these gentle giants of the ocean. Oman is one of the countries constantly visited by whale sharks so celebrate today by creating awareness on social media why it's important to stop eating them.