

P12

HAMILTON RARING TO RETURN FOR ABU DHABI FINALE



P15

STOCK MARKET BULL RUN CONTINUES, STERLING FACES BREXIT TEST



P18

SHE WALKED 30 KM PER DAY FOR 33 DAYS TO PROMOTE A CAUSE



■ OMAN

HM THANKED BY EMIR OF KUWAIT

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jabir al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable to him on the death of Shaikh Khalifa Sabah Sabah Saud al Sabah. In his cable, the Emir of Kuwait expressed his utmost thanks for His Majesty the Sultan's sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to the Almighty Allah to protect His Majesty against all harms. — ONA

HM CUP FOR YOUTH RESULTS ON MONDAY

MUSCAT: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Taimour bin Asaad al Said, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), will preside over a ceremony on Monday for the announcement of results of His Majesty the Sultan's Cup Contest for Youth 2019 and the handing over of the Youth Excellence Prize 2020 to winners. The ceremony will be attended by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth. As many as 38 clubs participated in HM Cup Youth Contest this year. Last year, Ahli Sidab Club was the winner of the competition and Seeb Club stood second. — ONA



INSIDE



IRAN READY FOR SNAP RETURN TO N-DEAL COMPLIANCE | P6



LONDON PLOTS REBOOTAS COVID COMPOUNDS BREXIT | P9

Decree on water and wastewater sector



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday issued a Royal Decree No 131/2020 on water and wastewater sector.

Article (1) states that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources shall propose policies, strategies and plans on water and wastewater (sewerage) sector and submit the proposals to the Council of Ministers for approval.

Article (2) stipulates that the Public Service Regulatory Authority shall undertake the specialisations linked to the regulation of water and wastewater sector.

Article (3) states that Oman Wastewater Services Company shall run the activities of water and wastewater in all governorates

- Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources shall propose policies, strategies and plans
- Oman Wastewater Services Company shall run the activities of water and wastewater in all governorates except Dhofar

of the Sultanate, except for the Governorate of Dhofar, where Dhofar Power Company will run water and wastewater activities.

Article (4) states that all origins, assets, registers, rights and obligations of the Public Authority for Water shall come under the purview of Oman Wastewater Services Company, while Dhofar Power Company shall take over all origins, assets, registers, rights and obligations of the Directorate-General of Water at the Office of Minister of State and Governor of Dhofar.

Also, all origins, assets, registers, rights and obligations related to the water and wastewater sector in all units of the state...

TURN TO P2

Visa-free 10-day entry for 103 countries

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 9

In a decision which will give a much-needed boost to travel and tourism sector, nationals of 103 countries will be now allowed to enter Oman without visa.

In support of the tourist movement and to facilitate travellers wishing to visit the Sultanate, the Royal Oman Police announced that the nationals of 103 countries will be exempted from entry visas for a period of 10 days.

The entry will be allowed under specified controls and conditions, including the presence of a prior and confirmed hotel reservation, health insurance and a return ticket.

Currently, only citizens of five GCC countries can enter without a visa, while New Zealand nationals can spend up to three months in Oman and enter the country on a visa without paying any fee.

Nationals of 71 other countries and territories can apply for visas online provided they have a passport with six months validity.

The government recognises the need to strengthen the Sultanate's revenue-raising framework by reducing its reliance on hydrocarbon revenues.

The Middle-Term Fiscal Plan for the year 2020-24 said of the plans to encourage more tourists to visit Oman, enhance the tourism sector, and raise



“

The entry will be allowed under specified controls and conditions, including the presence of a prior and confirmed hotel reservation, health insurance and a return ticket

ROP

its contribution to the national economy.

Initiatives related to increasing non-oil revenues will have an impact of almost RO 1.4 billion, the Middle-Term Fiscal Plan for the year 2020-24 said.

Oman will focus on tapping tourists from new source markets, including the United States, said the Implementation Support and Follow-up Unit in its annual report.

LIST OF COUNTRIES ON P5

AN OFF-ROAD DRIVER'S PARADISE



The Sultanate is the only country in the whole of Arabia to have varied terrains, right from flowing wadis, verdant green oases, high jabal ranges, beaches as well as deserts. Rimal al Sharqiyah covers about 12,500 sq kms. Jabal Shams, the highest peak in the whole of Arabia, too is in Oman. These provide immense opportunities for off road driving in Oman.

DETAILS ON P20

93% rise in voluntary blood donation

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 9

While the Sultanate witnessed a drastic decline in the number of blood donors during the beginning of this year due to COVID-19 outbreak, the Central Blood Bank in Bausher witnessed an increase in the number of blood donors last year.

In 2019, the number of blood

units collected at the bank stood at 27,189, and the voluntary donation estimated at 93 per cent. Among the donors 79 per cent were Omanis and 50 per cent of those who donated were first time donors.

A total of 399 blood campaigns were organised by the central bank, while 99 blood drives were carried out by the mobile bank the same year. Following the outbreak

of the pandemic, the departments of blood banks services have been facing a sharp decrease in the number of donors.

Reluctance to donate, difficulty to carry out blood drives and high demand for blood from health institutions, are among key reasons behind the current decline, amounting to 69 per cent in comparison to the same period last year.

TURN TO P5

■ SAF DAY ON DECEMBER 11

■ FROM PAGE 1



The Sultanate will celebrate the anniversary of the Armed Forces Day on December 11. The event will be an opportunity to ponder on the achievements of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) in terms of training, armament and organisation. Over the past five decades, the SAF received the caring attention of the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the founder of Oman's modern renaissance. The SAF, which developed over the years into great fortress that guards the gains of the nation, are now being accorded special attention by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, so that it could continue to shoulder the tremendous responsibilities entrusted to them. The SAF take pride in honouring their national sacred role with full capability and confidence. — ONA

HM issues Royal Decree on water and wastewater sector

...administrative apparatus shall come under the purview of Oman Wastewater Services Company and Dhofar Power Company, as assigned to each, in line with provisions of the above-mentioned first clause and second clause.

The transfer of responsibilities, as stated here, shall not affect the legal commitments and contracts signed prior to the date of enforcement of this Decree — which also applies to all rights and obligations stated in the above-mentioned clauses in terms of taxes and fees.

Article (5) transfers employees of the Public Authority for Water to Oman Wastewater Services Company and transfers employees of the Directorate-General of Water at the Office of Minister of State and Governor of Dhofar to Dhofar Power Company, in accordance with the provisions of Privatisation Law promulgated under Royal Decree No 51/2019.

It also transfers employees of Salalah Wastewater Services Company to Dhofar Power Company in accordance with the System of Transfer stated in Article (6) of this Decree, but without prejudice to the privileges that might be applicable in their regard by virtue of another law.

Article (6) stipulates that the Ministry of Finance shall undertake, in coordination with Oman Investment Authority, the responsibility of drafting and implementing the System of Transfer within a period of not more than six months from the date of enforcement of this Decree.

Article (7) tasks Oman Investment Authority with taking measures to implement the provisions of this Royal Decree in accordance with provisions of Commercial Companies Law.

Article (8) states that, as of the date of issue of this Decree, the existing laws, Royal Decrees and bylaws (regulations) of relevance to the water and wastewater sector shall continue to be applied till such time that the "Law on Regulating the Water and Wastewater Sector" is issued.

Article (9) cancels the Public Authority for Water with effect from the date of completion of the implementation of the System of Transfer stated in Article (6) of this Decree. It also cancels all that contradicts this decree or contravenes its provisions.

Article (10) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — ONA

COVID-19 protocols missing in certain flights

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Even though some positive news on coronavirus vaccine is making the round, the risk of the virus' spread is very much there due to violation of COVID-19 protocols on certain flights.

Demand for flights for almost all the sectors in India is very high. The rush is also there on certain Indian sectors where no compulsory COVID-19 test for outbound passengers is required.

Some passengers travelling to the Indian state of Kerala experienced that it wasn't possible to practice the COVID-19 protocols onboard. "The only protocol being followed is mask by all the passengers, but social distancing is totally missing. The worst scenario onboard is while embarking and disembarking,"

The only protocol being followed is mask by all the passengers, but social distancing is totally missing. The worst scenario onboard is while embarking and disembarking

A PASSENGER TRAVELLING TO KERALA

said a passenger travelling to Kerala.

There is one good thing being noticed that the middle seat passengers are provided with PPE kits that include a coverall, face



shield, and sachets of sanitiser by the airlines.

Meanwhile, even though the flight tickets are very high, four to five times higher than pre-

COVID-19 days, there are people who are travelling due to urgent situations of their own.

With more movements, holiday season round the corner,

and schools getting ready for full-fledged mode, the rush is likely to be more.

No private airline is currently allowed to operate between Oman

and India due to the renewed air bubble agreement between the countries.

"I bought a two-way ticket for Muscat to Kochin and back on Indigo paying RO 90 for end of November. But due to the cancellation of their services, I had to pay RO 150 for the second week of December," said Gopika commenting on the current scenario a traveller from Kerala said.

"Airfares are astronomically high and a commoner who have not travelled home for years but wants to travel now has to pay very high fare now," another passenger said.

A representative of an airline said, "We have been severely hit by the cancellation of flights especially at a time when there is some movement after so many months."

UTAS, PDO sign cooperation agreement



MUSCAT: The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) and Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) signed education and scholarship cooperation agreement on Wednesday. The agreement stipulates the funding of 50 grants for holders of general education diploma in the academic year (2019/2020) at UTAS in Al Rustaq at a cost of RO 500,000.

These grants come within the joint cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the private sector to implement the Omanization programme. The programme aims to qualify the citizens in remote villages in various governorates of the Sultanate to study educational specialisations to Omanize teaching jobs in those villages.

— ONA

VINOD NAIR
@VINOT_NAIR

The Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) has launched a competitive process to select a solar PV system developer for the purpose of procurement, installation, ownership, and operation of rooftop solar PV systems on selected residential premises.

So far over 1,500 applications have been received over mobile Apps to join the project and 500 homes will be selected in the first phase, the authority said.

In 2017 the authority launched its Sahim initiative which established a regulatory framework allowing households and businesses to install grid-connected PV systems.

"Building on this initiative and in line with Oman's Vision 2040 and the government policy to achieve the wide-scale



deployment of renewable energy, APSR is pleased to announce the launch of the first phase of its Sahim II Residential initiative," the statement said.

The Sahim Residential Initiative is an initiative to drive the wide-scale deployment of grid-connected PV systems on residential premises throughout Oman. The authority believes that this initiative would deliver positive net benefits to residential

APSR launches process to select a PV system developer

customers, the electricity sector and the national economy as a whole.

The Sahim-II programme envisions the roll-out of small-scale solar PV systems on potentially up to 3,000 residential

buildings in Muscat Governorate in the first phase.

Their installation, as well as operation and maintenance over the long-term agreement with the local distribution and supply company (Muscat Electricity Distribution Company), will be undertaken by a successful bidder with the financial and technological wherewithal to deliver such wide-scale deployments.



Warning against burning waste

SAMUEL KUTTY

@samkuttyvp

With the winter already set in, Muscat Municipality warned against the tendency to burn solid waste in the open.

"Burning of waste is considered a quicker and easier way of disposing them but it can affect the environment adversely", the municipality said in a statement on Wednesday.

While warning that offenders will face a fine, the municipality reiterated that dumping of solid waste like tree trimmings, garden waste, old furniture, agricultural waste and large electrical and electronic appliances in the open and burning them is an offence under the civic law.

While pointing out that burning of agricultural and construction waste is a



phenomenon seen during the onset of the winter season, the statement said, "burning agricultural waste on farmland can reduce soil fertility and also affects the quality of crops. It is the responsibility of every individual

to ensure that the environment is not harmed in any way".

This can also cause increase in environmental pollution rates, and health damage, especially for people with diseases related to the respiratory system, in addition

to burning eyes and sinuses on smoke inhalers, it said.

Burning or cutting wild trees are violations of the Environmental Protection and Pollution Control Law for which perpetrators can be fined and imprisoned, according to the Environment Authority).

While highlighting different articles under the municipality's Administrative Decision 55/2017 based on Royal Decree No 114/2006, the statement said "it is prohibited for any person to throw, leave, put, liquefy, secrete or burn any waste in public places or dispose of it in other than disposal sites specified by the municipality."

Building contractors are obligated to dispose of construction and demolition waste in sites specialised for this, the statement added.

MoU to develop Al Saleel nature park



The Environment Authority signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Oman India Fertilizer Company (Omifco) to develop Al Saleel Nature Park in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate on Wednesday to benefit from the facility as a tourist attraction, as well as socially, economically and culturally. The MoU was signed by Environment Authority Chairman Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri and Omifco Board Chairman Said bin Talib al Maawali. They agreed to implement the first phase of the project within two years after the

development stage.

Al Saleel Park is one of the Middle East's largest nature reserves. It is home to 7 per cent of the world's stock of Arabian gazelle. Al Saleel lies in the Wilayat of Al Kamil W'al Wafi, South Al Sharqiyah, where it is bordered by a stretch of mountain series (Al Hajar Al Sharqi) extending till the Sea of Oman. Situated within a distance of 57 kilometres from Sur, Al Saleel Park has an area of 220 square kilometres.

It was declared as a nature reserve under Royal Decree No 50/97.

OHRC celebrates Human Rights Day

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 9

The Sultanate, represented by Oman Human Rights Commission, participated in the celebration of the International Human Rights Day, which falls on December 10 of every year.

The celebration focuses on the basic rights called for by the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and recalling them, which is considered among the most important UN documents, and was drafted by specialists in law and culture representing different groups of countries in the world, and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948, in Paris.

The United Nations considers national human rights institutions as active partners in promoting and following up the implementation of international human rights conventions at the national level. Hence the establishment of OHRC



came, to confirm the belief in the importance of these rights and the declared acceptance of the international conventions associated with them.

In the context of interacting with those universal principles and the Sultanate's commitments in this field, OHRC strengthened its activities at the external level, through its communication with human rights organisations,

its participation in meetings, conferences, workshops, and training courses, regionally and internationally, most of which were done via video calling techniques due to the current health conditions. The OHRC is an active member in many regional and international organisations, including the "Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions", the

"Asia Pacific Forum", the "Arab Network of National Human Rights Institutions" and the "Permanent Arab Committee for Human Rights".

Within the responsibilities of Commission in monitoring and following up on the observations raised by foreign governments, international organisations and external non-governmental organisations in the field of human rights in the Sultanate, it has responded during the current year to a number of international reports that dealt with some issues related to human rights in the Sultanate in coordination with the competent authorities to verify the information and observations contained therein.

The Commission also submitted its second "parallel report" to the United Nations Human Rights Council, where national institutions submit reports parallel to the national report submitted by state governments.

State Council's panel hosts EA Chairman

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 9

The Social Committee of the State Council hosted Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Omari, Environment Authority Chairman along with several Authority officials on Wednesday.

The meeting was presided over by Dr Ahmed bin Ali al Amri, Head of the Committee, in the presence of the committee members, the Secretary-General of the Council and several General Secretariat employees.

The hosting comes within the framework of the committee's study of the proposal to review the "Law on Conservation of Environment and Prevention of Pollution" issued by Royal

Decree No (114/2001).

The meeting discussed legislation, laws and internal regulations implemented by the authority in the field of environmental preservation and pollution control, duplication and the multiplicity of laws related to environmental pollution and the extent of this impact on environmental protection, in addition to identifying the types of pollution that the authority deals with and the efforts it makes to combat pollution and preserve the environment.

The committee also discussed the challenges facing the authority in the field of environmental protection and pollution control.



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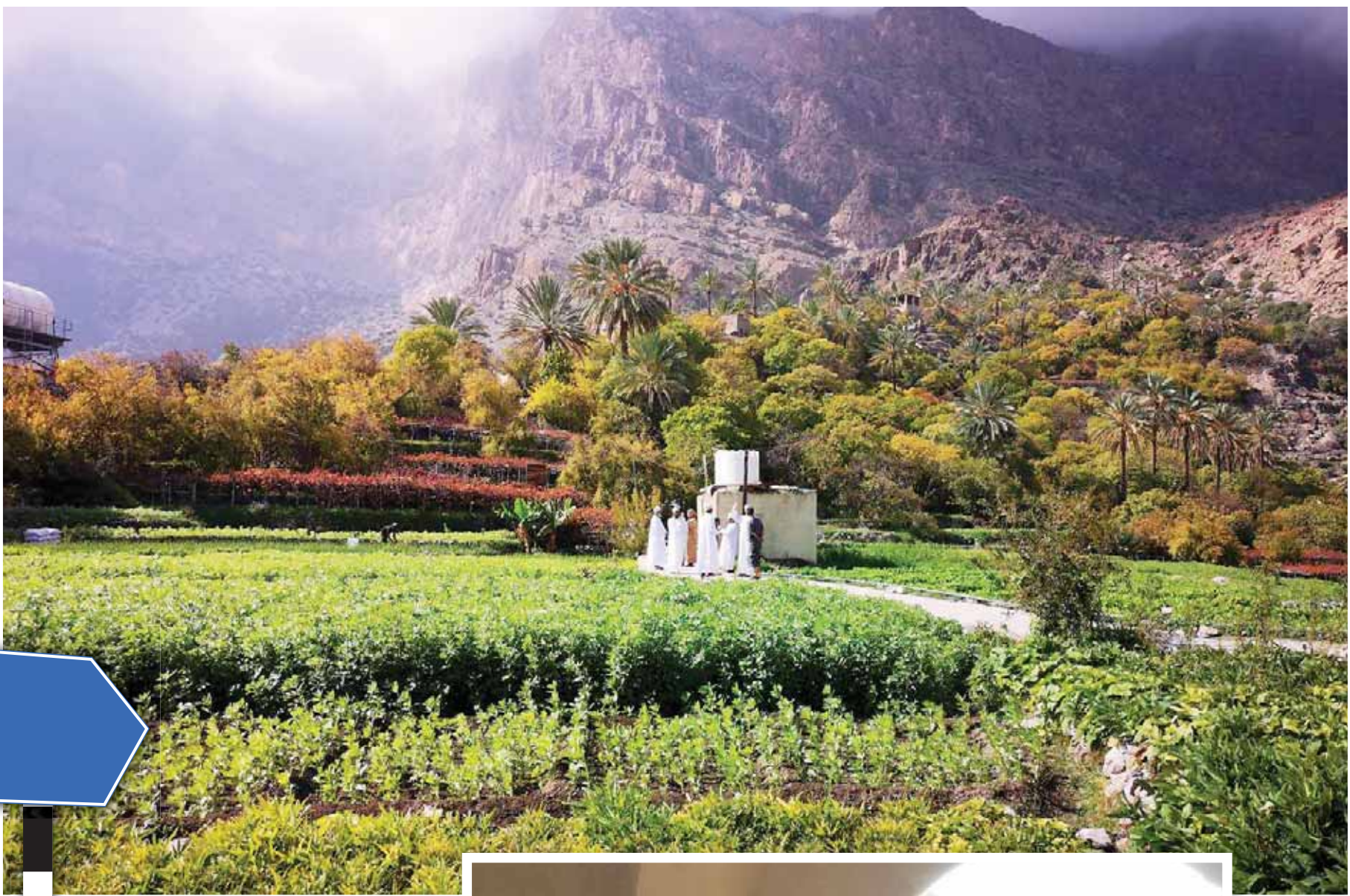
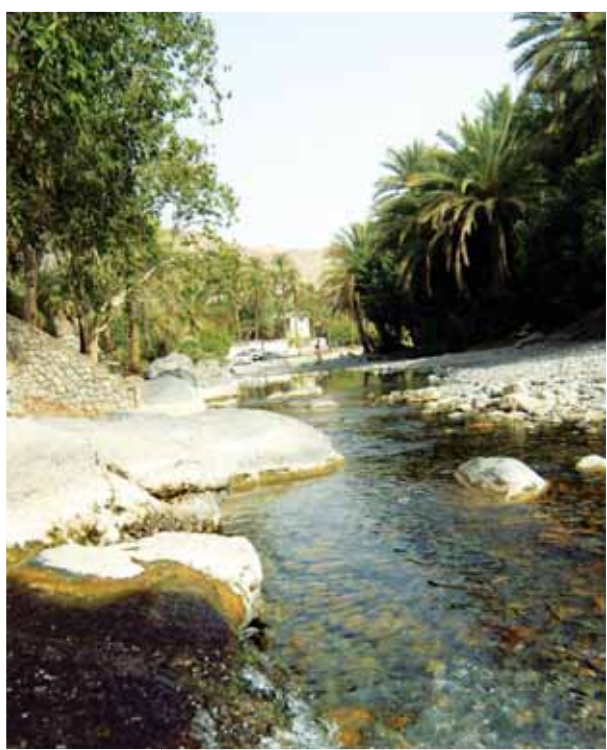
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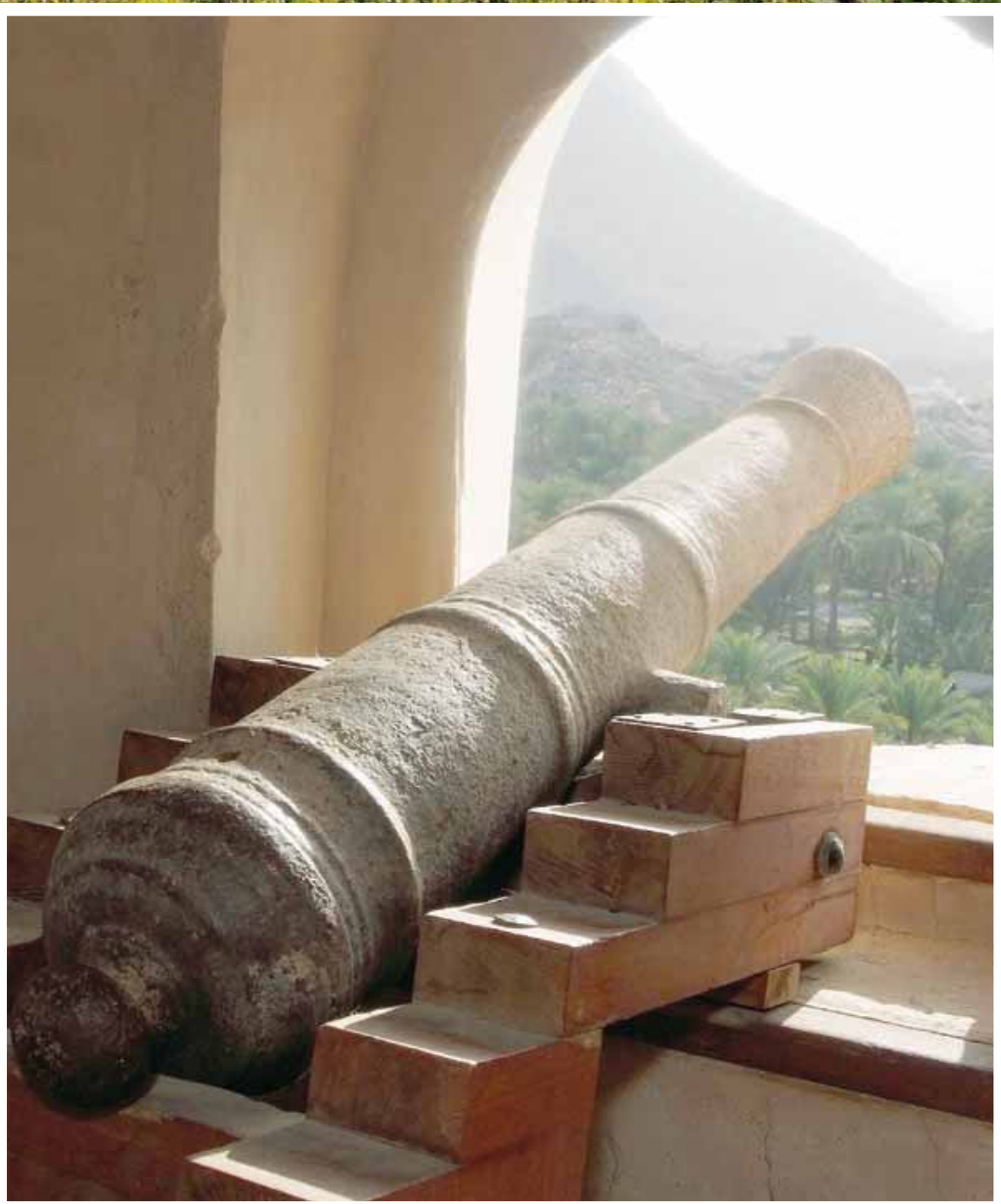
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Nakhl



HOME TO
HOT SPRINGS

The Wilayat of Nakhl in Al Batinah South Governorate is located among Al Hajar Al Gharbi mountain chain. The centre of the wilayat is 132 km away from the Governorate of Muscat. The wilayat, known for numerous tourist destinations, attracts a large number of visitors who wish to watch the splendid scenes of wide plains, mountains and wadis that spread across different villages.

Nakhl means palm trees. The fort of Nakhl is considered as the biggest and oldest fort in the governorate.

The fort offers magnificent views across the valley and up to the mountains. It is easy to understand why this protective structure was built here to guard the surrounding area Nakhl embraces several towers such as Al Abiadh, Jabal Aqoom, Al Sareer, Wadi Mistal and two towers of Al Kanood and Bani Hadrham in Al Aqaibah.

There are many archaeological villages in the Wilayat of Nakhl — one of them is Al Ghareedh that was built of mud. There are many other similar

villages like Al Gamimi, Al Yaarbah, Al Gabageb and Al Abiadh. The wilayat is distinguished by lowlands of Al Abiadh village, which are surrounded by a variety of flora and fauna.

The wilayat is home to Al Thowarah hot springs situated near the Nakhl Fort. The name ‘Thowarah’ derives from the Arabic word ‘to boil’. But it doesn’t mean the water is warm.

A twisty road leads from the fort where you will enjoy the lush greenery and date palm orchards. The natural spring water is channelled into the

falaj system to irrigate the surrounding orchards. This popular destination for locals and tourists offers another surprise — natural pedicure. Just sit on one of the many rocks at the side of the wadi and dip your feet in. Small fish will start to nibble on your feet.

It is ticklish at first and has a strange sensation but after a few seconds, you get used to it and it’s actually quite pleasant. My feet were so smooth afterwards.

Tourists prefer to visit Wadi Mistal as its terrain and ways of cultivation

look like Jabal Al Akhdhar. The place is overcrowded by visitors during the rainy season.

Wakan, situated 33 km away from the wilayat, is a well-known village in Nakhl. The area enjoys pleasant weather and its mountains are covered by greenery.

Several aflaj exist in the wilayat. Falaj Al Khatem in Al Abiadh irrigates several farms in the wilayat.

Farmers cultivate various kinds of date palms that are noted for taste, besides other seasonal crops.





Workshop on cloud services

MUSCAT:

As part of the private accreditation programme at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT), and in collaboration with Data2Cloud for cloud services, a workshop was held on Wednesday to introduce government agencies to the importance and ways of transferring to easy-to-use cloud services. The CEO of Data2Cloud, Munthir al Maamari, gave a brief on these services and a free experience to them in order to ensure the quality of the cloud services. The company is fully ready to host all government entities since they are part of the OGN (one government network).



■ FROM PAGE 1

Nationals of 103 countries exempted from entry visa

South American countries:

Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, Uruguay, Paraguay, Suriname, Argentina, Brazil, Chile.

Other countries and regions:

Japan, Thailand, South Africa, Lebanon, Hong Kong, Federal Republic of Russia, People's Republic of China, Seychelles, America, Brunei Darussalam, Turkey, South Korea, New Zealand, Iran, French Ghana, Australia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Canada, and Malaysia, Macau Island, Singapore, Azerbaijan – Uzbekistan – Belarus – Tajikistan – Kyrgyzstan, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Morocco, India, Armenia, Panama, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkmenistan, Honduras, Guatemala, Kazakhstan, Laos, Albania, Bhutan, Peru, Maldives, Salvador, Vietnam, Cuba and Mexico.

List of Arab countries added: Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Mauritania.

93% rise in voluntary blood donation

With the growing demand for convalescent plasma, the number of plasma units collected at the bank reached 1,533 and blood platelets to 1,940 units.

In order to avoid any further decrease in blood unit stock, the department coordinated with a number of military and voluntary teams to conduct urgent campaigns with committed donors. The blood banks are distributed across the governorates in respective referral hospitals, along with the Central Blood Bank in Bousher, which receives blood donors throughout the week.

A blood donation centre was opened at Seeb Stadium hall throughout the holy month of Ramadhan. The donors were received on appointment basis through WhatsApp messages as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

EU agency assessing COVID-19 vaccines suffers cyberattack

THE HAGUE: The EU's medicines regulator said on Wednesday it had been the victim of a cyberattack, just weeks before it is due to decide on special approval for two coronavirus vaccines.

The Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency (EMA) said the incident was being investigated but did not say exactly when it took place or give details about what was targeted.

"EMA has been the subject of a cyberattack. The agency has swiftly launched a full investigation, in close cooperation with law enforcement and other relevant entities," the EMA said in a brief statement.

"EMA cannot provide additional details whilst the investigation is ongoing. Further information will be made available in due course."

A spokeswoman for the agency referred back to the statement when asked for more details by AFP.

The EMA has said it will give a decision on conditional approval for Pfizer/BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine at a meeting that will be held by December 29 at the latest.

A ruling on Moderna's version should follow by January 12.

The regulator is also carrying



out reviews of vaccines developed by Oxford University-AstraZeneca vaccine and Johnson & Johnson.

The EMA moved to Amsterdam from London after Britain left the European Union in January 2019. It oversees all medicines for the 27-nation EU.

SERIES OF WARNINGS

The cyberattack on the EMA comes after a series of warnings about hacking related to the coronavirus pandemic.

Britain accused Russian-based, Kremlin-linked hackers in July of targeting labs conducting coronavirus vaccine research.

Cybercriminals have tried to attack several pharmaceutical companies developing vaccines including Johnson & Johnson, Novavax, AstraZeneca and South Korean laboratories, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Spanish laboratories also reportedly have been attacked by Chinese cybercriminals, the *El Pais* newspaper reported in September.

Microsoft urged a crackdown in November on cyberattacks perpetrated by states and "malign actors" after a spate of hacks disrupted healthcare organisations fighting the virus. — AFP

■ WHEN IT RAINED...



People walk past the Colosseum monument in Rome reflected in a pool of water on Tuesday following heavy rains. — AFP

Poor miss out as rich nations hoard vaccines

LONDON: Nine out of 10 people in dozens of poor nations could miss out on getting vaccinated against COVID-19 next year because rich countries have hoarded far more doses than they need, campaigners said on Wednesday.

Rich nations home to 14 per cent of the global population had bought 53 per cent of the total stock of the most-promising vaccines as of last month, said the People's Vaccine Alliance, a coalition including Oxfam, Amnesty International and Global Justice Now.

They said pharmaceutical companies working on COVID-19 vaccines should openly share their technology and intellectual property through the World Health Organisation (WHO) so more doses can be manufactured.

"This shouldn't be a battle between countries to secure enough doses," Mohga Kamal-Yanni, an advisor for People's Vaccine Alliance, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"During these unprecedented times of a global pandemic, people's lives and livelihoods should be put before pharmaceutical company profit," she added. While high-risk groups in Britain received on Tuesday the first shot of the

vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech, most people in 67 low- and lower-middle-income countries including Bhutan, Ethiopia and Haiti, risk being left behind, they said.

Among the three COVID-19 vaccines for which efficacy results have been announced, almost all the available doses of two of them - Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech - have been acquired by rich countries, the Alliance report said.

While AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford have pledged to provide 64% of their doses to people in developing nations, that would only reach 18% of the world's population by next year "at most", it added.

The campaigners used data from science information and analytics company Airfinity to analyse the deals done between countries and eight leading vaccine candidates, including China's Sinovac and Russia's Sputnik V. The EU, United States, Britain, Canada, Japan, Switzerland, Australia, Hong Kong, Macau, New Zealand, Israel and Kuwait have acquired 53 per cent of these potential doses - with Canada buying enough to vaccinate its population five times over, Oxfam said.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

'Men with COVID-19 may need intensive care'

PARIS: Men infected with COVID-19 are three times more likely to require intensive care than women and are at significantly higher risk of dying from the virus, scientists said on Wednesday.

Researchers analysed over three million confirmed coronavirus cases from 46 countries and 44 states in the US between January 1 and June 1, 2020.

They found that the risk of Sars-Cov-2 infection was the same for women and men, as "exactly half" of the confirmed cases were male patients.

But men are almost three times more likely than women to be hospitalised in an intensive care unit and are 39 per cent more likely to die from the virus, the study said.

"These data may help doctors to recognise that sex is a risk factor for severe disease when



managing patients," co-author Kate Webb said.

"Sex is an under-reported variable in many studies and this is a reminder that it is an important factor to consider in research," the Cape Town University researcher said.

The trend is global — aside from a few exceptions — and can mostly be put down to biological differences, researchers said.

— AFP

7 of top 10 killers non-communicable diseases

GENEVA: Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) accounted for seven of the top 10 causes of death before the coronavirus pandemic, the World Health Organization said on Wednesday, with heart disease killing more people than ever before.

The WHO's new Global Health Estimates, adding 2019 data to statistics going back to 2000, found that people were living longer lives — but those extra years were not necessarily lived in good health.

The study, which exposes trends over the last two decades in mortality and morbidity caused by diseases and injuries, showed

that NCDs made up just four of the top 10 causes of death back in 2000, rising to seven last year.

COVID-19 is likely to figure in the 2020 top 10, WHO officials said, with the death toll having passed the 1.5 million mark on December 3.

In 2019, some 55.4 million deaths were recorded worldwide.

The top 10 causes of death accounted for 55 per cent of those fatalities. They fall into three broad categories: cardiovascular, respiratory and neonatal.

The top five causes of death, in order, were heart disease; strokes; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; lower respiratory

The WHO's new Global Health Estimates found that people were living longer lives — but those extra years were not necessarily lived in good health

infections; and neonatal conditions.

They were followed by trachea, bronchus and lung cancers; Alzheimer's disease and other dementias; diarrhoea; diabetes; and kidney diseases.

DIABETES SURGE

The figures "clearly highlight

the need for an intensified global focus on preventing and treating cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases, as well as tackling injuries," the WHO said in a statement.

Heart disease has been the world's leading cause of death for the last 20 years.

"However, it is now killing more people than ever before," the WHO said, with nine million fatalities in 2019 — up by two million since 2000.

Heart disease represents 16 per cent of total deaths from all causes, with strokes claiming 11 per cent and chronic obstructive

pulmonary disease six per cent.

Diabetes has entered the top 10 causes of death following a 70 per cent increase in the number of deaths since 2000.

Bente Mikkelsen, the WHO's NCDs chief, said that although insulin was discovered nearly 100 years ago, fewer than half of the people who need it have access to it.

"There is an urgency to act," she told reporters.

Mikkelsen said the most efficient way to protect people against NCD risk factors was "to increase the tax on tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages" and other unhealthy products. — AFP

Iran says ready for snap return to nuclear deal compliance

TEHRAN: Iran is ready to return to full compliance with a 2015 nuclear deal with major powers as soon as the other parties honour their commitments, President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday.

The agreement between Iran and major powers has teetered on the brink of collapse since outgoing US President Donald Trump pulled out of it in 2018 and reimposed crippling unilateral sanctions.

US President-elect Joe Biden has expressed readiness to return to the agreement but over the past 18 months Iran has suspended the implementation of some of its own obligations, including key limits to its uranium enrichment programme.

“Just as soon as the 5+1 or 4+1 resume all of their commitments, we will resume all of ours,” Rouhani said.

He was referring to the five veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany with whom Iran reached the nuclear deal.

“I’ve said it before — it doesn’t take time, it’s just a question of willing,” he said in comments to his cabinet aired by state television.

Defying criticism from ultra-conservatives, Rouhani reiterated his determination to seize the “opportunity” presented by the change of US president in January.

Parliament, which has been controlled by conservatives since a February election, passed a bill last week that threatens the prospects for a thaw in relations with Washington.

The bill, which still has to be signed into law by Rouhani, would relaunch Iran’s enrichment of uranium to 20 per cent purity and threaten other future measures that would likely sound the death knell of the nuclear deal.

In a blow to the president, the Guardian Council, which arbitrates disputes between parliament and



Just as soon as the 5+1 or 4+1 resume all of their commitments, we will resume all of ours

HASSAN ROUHANI
President

the government, approved the bill last week.

But in his comments on Wednesday, Rouhani appeared to suggest that he would withhold his signature from the bill.

“It is vital that we speak with a single voice,” the president told ministers.

“People voted for a platform... and they want four years of action,” said Rouhani, who won re-election in 2017 with more than 57 per cent of the vote.

Rouhani said Iran remained unable to purchase COVID-19 vaccines because banks were unwilling to process the transaction for fear of falling foul of US sanctions.

Iran has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic with more than 51,000 deaths from nearly 1.1 million cases, according to official figures.

Vaccines and other humanitarian goods are supposed to be exempt from the US sanctions but in practice few if any banks are willing to take the chance.

“We want to buy the vaccine... the money is... ready but no bank will handle the transaction,” Rouhani told ministers. —AFP

Syria war deaths reach 387,000 in slowest annual increase

BEIRUT: The overall death toll for Syria’s civil war has crept up to 387,000 following the least deadly of 10 years of conflict, a monitor said on Wednesday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which relies on a wide network of sources inside Syria, said the new figure included almost 117,000 civilians, among them more than 22,000 children.

The Observatory’s previous tally was issued in January and stood at more than 380,000.

The fighting, which erupted in 2011 after the brutal repression of anti-government protests, has largely abated this year as a ceasefire held in northwestern Syria and attention turned to containing the coronavirus pandemic.

The latest toll included more than 130,500 pro-government fighters, among them foreigners.

More than half of those were Syrian soldiers, while 1,703 were from Hezbollah whose members have been fighting in Syria since 2013.

The conflict has claimed the lives of more than 57,000 non-militant rebel fighters.



A woman visits the graves of slain Kurdish fighters at a cemetery in Qamishli in northeastern Syria. — AFP photo

It has also killed more than 67,500 militants, mainly from the IS group and Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), a group dominated by ex-members of Syria’s former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

More than 12,500 Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces fighters have been killed in battles against IS and Turkish forces.

The Observatory’s toll does not include some 88,000 people it says

died of torture in government-run prisons, nor thousands who were abducted during the conflict and are still missing.

After turning the tide of the war since 2015, the Syrian government now controls around two-thirds of the country.

Among the regions still beyond its reach are the last rebel enclave of Idlib in the northwest, Turkish-held areas along the northern

border, and northeastern parts of the country held by US-backed Kurdish forces.

The war has forced more than half the country’s pre-war population to flee their homes.

Some 6.7 million Syrians remained displaced inside the country, while 5.5 million are registered as refugees abroad, according to the United Nations. — AFP

IS steps up Sinai fight with bombs in civilian homes

CAIRO: Residents of Egypt’s restive North Sinai region ran for their lives when an IS group affiliate occupied their villages. Now, they are returning to find their homes booby-trapped.

“I lost my sister-in-law and her nine-month-old baby when an explosive device planted in their home went off,” said a young resident of Aqtiya village, who asked not to be named for fear of repercussions.

Around 15 people have been killed by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) since mid-October in villages around Bir al Abd, in the northwest of the troubled province, say Egyptian security sources.

The IED attacks that have multiplied in the vast, remote and sparsely populated region which authorities have declared off-limits to journalists recall those the IS launched to sow terror in Iraq and Syria.

The recent deaths have badly

A picture taken on July 26, 2018 shows Egyptian policemen driving on a road leading to the North Sinai provincial capital of El-Arish. — AFP



shaken the 1,000 or so residents who returned in October after seeking refuge elsewhere in Egypt for three months as the army continued its grinding battle to crush IS.

Another resident said over phone that locals found IS had taken over their homes, used them as hideouts and then booby-trapped them. “They even stole our livestock,” he added.

Egyptian security forces have been battling a long-running insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula,

spearheaded by a local IS affiliate.

The fighting intensified after the military’s 2013 ouster of president Mohamed Morsi. In February 2018, security forces launched a nationwide operation against militants, focused on the sparsely populated North Sinai.

The Egyptian army said on Tuesday that since September it had killed 40 suspected militants in air and ground operations in the Sinai region, and that seven of its own personnel had been either wounded or killed. — AFP

UAE registers Sinopharm vaccine, says 86pc effective

DUBAI: The United Arab Emirates on Wednesday officially registered the coronavirus vaccine produced by Chinese drug giant Sinopharm, saying it was 86 per cent effective according to analysis of third-phase trials.

The health ministry “has announced the official registration” of the vaccine, state news agency WAM said.

The vaccine has been undergoing third-phase trials in the Emirates since July, and it was approved for emergency use for healthcare workers in September.

“The announcement is a significant vote of confidence by the UAE’s health authorities in the safety and efficacy of this vaccine,” WAM said.

UAE health officials have reviewed Sinopharm’s interim analysis of the third-phase trials which shows it is 86 per cent effective against coronavirus, the report said. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

KIRKUK

Two small oil wells set ablaze in ‘terrorist attack’

Two wells in a small oilfield in northern Iraq were set ablaze by explosives in a “terrorist attack” on Wednesday but overall production from the field was not affected, the Oil Ministry and officials said on Wednesday. The Oil Ministry gave no further details about the assailants behind the explosive devices that targeted the wells in Khabbaz oilfield, 20 km southwest of Kirkuk.

Technical teams isolated the two burning oil wells and there



was no impact on output, two sources from the state-run North Oil Company (NOC), who spoke on condition of anonymity, said. The field produces about 25,000 barrels per day, oil officials said.

— Reuters

BEIRUT

Lebanese govt to keep bread subsidy

Lebanon’s caretaker government agreed on Tuesday that subsidies on bread and essential medicine should be kept, as the country’s financial meltdown sends poverty and inflation soaring.

At a meeting on subsidy rationing with the central bank governor and an advisor to the president, ministers pledged to draft a plan within a week that would help cut spending while keeping support for some basic goods.

With foreign reserves



dwindling fast and an end to subsidies looming, Lebanon’s leaders have yet to make any substantive moves towards a plan to back imports or help the country’s most vulnerable.

— Reuters

TEL AVIV

Israel plans unmanned lunar landing in 2024

Israel will try another unmanned lunar landing in early 2024 after its first attempt ended last year with the spacecraft crashing on the moon’s surface, officials said on Wednesday. The new project, named “Beresheet 2”, will involve launching two landing craft and an orbiter that would circle the moon for years, conducting experiments and collecting data on behalf of school students, Israel’s Science Ministry said in statement.

Hoping to become the fourth



country to carry out a controlled lunar landing, Israel in early 2019 launched “Beresheet” — Hebrew for “Genesis” and the opening words, “In the beginning”, of the biblical book — from Cape Canaveral. — Reuters

In brief

NEW DELHI



INDIA DENIES IT REJECTED EMERGENCY SHOT APPROVAL

India's health ministry rejected reports on Wednesday that the country's drugs regulator had declined emergency authorisation for the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine candidate and one developed locally by Bharat Biotech and the government. Broadcasters NDTV and CNBC-TV18 reported that India's Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) had sought more data from the drugmakers after deliberating on applications made this week.

A source with direct knowledge of the matter said that a decision on the vaccines would be taken "in toto".

— Reuters

TOKYO



LIBRARIES HOPE UV MACHINE GIVES VISITORS PEACE

Libraries in Japan are hoping a machine that sterilises books using ultraviolet light is giving visitors reassurance to take-out publications during the coronavirus pandemic. Libraries across the country are installing the machine, which takes 30 seconds to sterilise a book using UV light and flutter it pages to clear out dust. The Narimasu Library in Itabashi, north of Tokyo, has had a machine installed since 2018 but the facility's manager said that it is now being used three times as much. Patrons can use the machine, which sits next to the front desk, once they have out a book and then again upon its return. — Reuters

SEOUL



KIM'S SISTER SLAMS SOUTH KOREAN MINISTER OVER VIRUS

The sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has slammed the South's foreign minister as "impudent" for casting doubt over Pyongyang's claim that the country has no coronavirus cases, state media reported on Wednesday. Nuclear-armed Pyongyang closed its borders in January, sealing itself off from the outside world in an effort to avoid contamination, and has long insisted that it has had no cases. Kim himself reiterated the claim at a huge military parade in October. Experts suggest it is unlikely, given that the virus first emerged in neighbouring China, its main provider of trade and aid. — AFP

Singapore cruise passengers stuck in rooms after COVID-19 case

SINGAPORE: Nearly 1,700 passengers on a Royal Caribbean 'cruise-to-nowhere' from Singapore remained confined in their cabins for more than 14 hours on Wednesday after a COVID-19 case was detected on board, forcing the ship back to port. All passengers aboard the *Quantum of the Seas* vessel had cleared a mandatory polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test for the virus up to three days before the four-day cruise started on Monday.

Authorities said close contacts of the patient among the 1,680 guests and 1,148 crew members on board have so far tested negative and that all passengers must isolate in their rooms as contact tracing continued on Wednesday afternoon.

The patient, an 83-year-old male, had reported to the ship's medical centre with diarrhoea and a subsequent on board test revealed the infection.

He was taken to hospital on Wednesday after the ship returned to port. Other guests, who authorities say may be able to leave the ship on Wednesday evening, were awoken with the news of the infection in the early hours.



Royal Caribbean's *Quantum of the Seas* cruise ship is moored at Marina Bay Cruise Centre after a passenger tested positive for COVID-19 during a cruise-to-nowhere, in Singapore, on Wednesday. — Reuters

"I was like: 'there it goes, the worst fear has happened,'" said passenger Melvin Chew, a 31-year-old business development manager, who said he learned about the infected guest via an announcement on the ship's tannoy around 3 am (1900 GMT Tuesday).

The *Quantum of the Seas* returned to Singapore at 8 am local time (0000 GMT), and as of

5 pm passengers were still being asked to isolate in their cabins.

All passengers will undergo mandatory COVID-19 testing before leaving the terminal. The patient, wearing a full-length white protective suit, was escorted down the ship's gangway to a waiting ambulance just after 2 pm. Shortly after, the ship's captain told passengers over the tannoy that the ship was being deep-

cleaned and that a further update would come around 7 pm. "We do understand that this is not how you planned to spend your cruise and again ladies and gentlemen, I am terribly sorry," the captain said in a recording heard by Reuters.

The 'cruise-to-nowhere' by Royal Caribbean is one of its first sailings since the company halted global operations in March due to the coronavirus. — Reuters

Japan weighs ships for Aegis missile defence system

TOKYO: Japan will build two ships equipped with Aegis missile interceptors after public opposition forced the government to scrap deployment of a costly land-based system, the country's defence minister said on Wednesday.

Earlier this year, Japan decided to suspend unpopular plans to deploy the US-developed Aegis Ashore defence system in northeastern Akita and western Yamaguchi prefectures amid technical problems and swelling costs.

As an alternative, Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi told a ruling party meeting, the government hopes "to build two vessels equipped with the Aegis system."

Officials aim to win cabinet approval as early as next week, public broadcaster NHK reported. — AFP

Call for mass testing in S Korea amid rising third wave

SEOUL: The governor of South Korea's most populous province called for mass testing for coronavirus on Wednesday, as daily new cases centred in the densely populated Seoul area held at levels unseen since the outbreaks began earlier this year.

South Korea is suffering a third wave of coronavirus outbreaks, and over the past week new cases have been consistently around 600. The daily tally on Wednesday, at 686 new infections, matched the level posted on March 2, and was the second highest recorded, though well below the 909 confirmed on February 29, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA).

The majority of the new cases have been reported

in the capital city of Seoul, the neighbouring port city of Incheon, and Gyeonggi Province, which is home to 13.5 million people and surrounds both cities. Gyeonggi Governor Lee Jae-myung called for mass testing in parts of his province and the greater Seoul area including Incheon in order to isolate potential spreaders.

"Since the confirmed cases of unknown origin are too widely hidden, it is difficult to trace the source of infection only from those who come forth to get tested," Lee said in a statement issued after an emergency meeting that was also attended by President Moon Jae-in. "We plan to adopt a method of preemptive and intensive testing by selecting a specific area or a region." — Reuters

Indian farmers to step up protests, reject govt proposals

NEW DELHI: India's farmers on Wednesday rejected the government's proposal to amend three controversial laws and said they would step up protests seeking withdrawal of these laws which they said would harm their economic interests while helping big food retailers. Farmers have been demonstrating since late last month over reforms enacted in September that loosened rules around the sale, pricing and storage of farm produce, that had protected farmers from an unfettered free market for decades.

"The farmers have rejected the government's proposals," Darshan Pal, president of Krantikari Kisan Union, told reporters after the meeting of over 30 farmers' unions. Farmers leaders said they would intensify nationwide protests from Saturday that would include boycott of the leaders of



Opposition party leaders Rahul Gandhi, D Raja, Sitaram Yechury and Sharad Pawar address the media after their meeting with President Ram Nath Kovind seeking repeal of recent agricultural reforms in front of the presidential palace Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on Wednesday. — AFP

Modi's ruling party, blocking of national highways and picketing at toll plazas.

Expressing their anger towards some large domestic corporations and retailers, including Reliance Industries and Adani Enterprises, farmer leaders said they would

boycott the products and services of these companies. There was no immediate comment from both the companies. The farmers believe the new laws could pave the way for some of leading corporations to enter the Indian agriculture trade, leaders said. — Reuters

Indonesia holds regional polls under virus fears

JAKARTA/DEPOK: Indonesian President Joko Widodo's son and son-in-law were among candidates on track to win posts in regional elections on Wednesday after polls that health experts have warned could spark new coronavirus clusters across the archipelago. More than 100 million people were registered to vote in the polls, a mammoth logistical task even without a pandemic, with nearly 300,000 polling stations in 24 districts and 37 cities.

The vote in the world's third-biggest democracy comes as Indonesia struggles to contain Southeast Asia's worst COVID-19

outbreak, with more than 592,000 infections and 18,000 deaths. On Wednesday, it recorded its highest daily COVID-19 death toll of 171, but voter enthusiasm did not seem to have been significantly dampened in many areas.

"Of course, we are all worried during this pandemic but as a good citizen of this country I want to participate in this election," said Rusdiana Jarkasih, who voted in Depok in West Java as volunteers handed out gloves and checked temperatures.

The regional polls had been pushed back once but the government ignored calls from health experts and Islamic groups



An election worker dressed as a superhero assists voters at a polling station in Surabaya on Wednesday. — AFP

for a second postponement.

Epidemiologist Pandu Riono warned that with about 100 million Indonesians active at the

same time "it's very likely that new clusters will emerge". But the chief security minister, Mahfud MD, disputed such assessments.

"There is no real link between the amount of COVID infections and the regional elections as shown in the data we've seen," he said.

While some countries in the region including South Korea and Singapore appear to have held elections successfully during the pandemic, Malaysia attributed a spike in cases to an election in its second-largest state of Sabah.

Among the most closely watched contest was in the city of Surakarta on Java island, where the president's eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, looked set to become mayor — a position once held by his father.

— Reuters

UK warns people with serious allergies to avoid Pfizer vaccine

LONDON: Britain’s medicine regulator has advised that people with a history of significant allergies do not get Pfizer-BioNTech’s COVID-19 vaccine after two people reported adverse reactions on the first day of rollout. Starting with the elderly and frontline workers, Britain began mass vaccinating its population on Tuesday, part of a global drive that poses one of the biggest logistical challenges in peacetime history.

National Health Service medical director Stephen Powis said the advice had been changed after two NHS workers reported anaphylactoid reactions associated with receiving the vaccine. They were among the thousands who received the shot on Tuesday. “As is common with new vaccines the MHRA (regulator) have advised on a precautionary basis that people with a significant history of allergic reactions do not receive this vaccination, after two people with a history of significant allergic reactions responded adversely yesterday,” Powis said. “Both are recovering well.”

The MHRA said it would



seek further information and was investigating as a matter of priority, and Pfizer and BioNTech said they were supporting the MHRA’s investigation. Last week Britain’s Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) became the first in the world to approve the vaccine, developed by Germany’s BioNTech and Pfizer, while the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and European Medicines Agency (EMA) continue to assess the data.

“Last evening, we were looking at two case reports of allergic reactions. We know from the

very extensive clinical trials that this wasn’t a feature,” MHRA Chief Executive June Raine told lawmakers.

ALLERGIC REACTION

Pfizer has said people with a history of severe adverse allergic reactions to vaccines or the candidate’s ingredients were excluded from their late-stage trials, which is reflected in the MHRA’s emergency approval protocol. The new MHRA guidance, sent out to health professionals, said a much broader segment should not take the vaccine.

“Any person with a history of

a significant allergic reaction to a vaccine, medicine or food (such as previous history of anaphylactoid reaction or those who have been advised to carry an adrenaline autoinjector) should not receive the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine,” it said. It also said resuscitation facilities should be available for all vaccinations. Britain is first rolling out the vaccine to the over-80s, those in care homes, carers and health staff. Food allergies are less common in older people, and both reactions happened in health workers rather than the elderly.

“Severe allergic reactions to vaccines are unusual but staff administering vaccines are always trained and equipped to deal with them in the event they occur,” Adam Finn, professor of paediatrics at the University of Bristol, said, adding the advice was a “sensible” precaution until more experience with the vaccine was gathered. In the United States, the FDA released documents on Tuesday in preparation for an advisory committee meeting on Thursday, saying the Pfizer vaccine’s efficacy and safety data met its expectations for authorisation. — **Reuters**

Court rejects bid to overturn Biden win

WASHINGTON: The US Supreme Court dealt the latest blow on Tuesday to Donald Trump’s effort to overturn his election loss when it denied his allies’ attempt to block the certification of votes in key state Pennsylvania.

The nation’s highest court, which includes three Trump-appointed justices out of nine, did not explain its decision, and none of the members expressed dissent.

More than a month since the November 3 election, Trump still refuses to concede to Democrat Joe Biden — who has a seven million-vote lead — and continues to make baseless claims of fraud.

Trump and his allies have filed dozens of lawsuits in several key states, almost all of which have been thrown out by the courts.

One of them, brought by Republican congressman Mike Kelly, challenged the legality of mail-in ballots in Pennsylvania, a crucial battleground state.

Biden carried Pennsylvania in November’s vote, four years after Trump won the state.

After the case was rejected



The US Supreme Court is seen in Washington, DC. — **AFP**

by the state supreme court, the plaintiffs turned to the national Supreme Court, asking it to freeze all electoral operations while they developed their arguments.

In dismissing the case, the Court put an end to the procedure and signaled that it was not inclined to get involved in post-election litigation.

Trump had hoped that the high court, whose bench he has tipped solidly to the right, would intervene in his favour.

In 2000, the Supreme Court halted a recount in Florida, where George W Bush was only 537 votes ahead of Democrat Al Gore, allowing the Republican to win the election. — **AFP**

Conservationists try to save Kenyan giraffes stranded on flooding island



NAIROBI: Conservationists are working to rescue giraffes stranded on an island in Lake Baringo in western Kenya after heavy rains led to the flooding of their rangeland habitat, threatening the animals with drowning. Relentless rains have increased lake levels which began to swallow up the peninsula where the giraffes have been

living. The Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) in collaboration with the United States-based Save Giraffes Now and Kenya’s Northern Rangelands Trust rescued two of the giraffes with a custom-made steel barge and is working to rescue the remaining six from the island.

“There is great urgency to execute this rescue,” said David

O’Connor, president of Save Giraffes Now, in a statement. “With giraffes undergoing a silent extinction, every one we can protect matters.”

The conservationists used the barge to transport one of the giraffes the four miles to its new home, a 4,400-acre fenced sanctuary within the 44,000-acre Ruko Conservancy. — **Reuters**

Kremlin sounds alarm over ‘doomsday plane’ robbery

MOSCOW: The Kremlin on Wednesday sounded the alarm over the theft of sensitive equipment from a secretive “doomsday plane” designed for the country’s top command in event of a nuclear attack.

The interior ministry said police in the southern city of Taganrog had been alerted that 1 million rubles (\$13,600) worth of equipment was stolen from an Ilyushin Il-80 plane at an airfield.

President Vladimir Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the breach as an “emergency situation” and vowed that “measures will be taken to prevent this from happening in the future.”

The interior ministry did not specify what was stolen but said that investigators had been dispatched to the scene.

The port city of Taganrog, more than 1,100 kilometres south of Moscow, is home to Beriev Aircraft Company, a struggling



In this file photo taken on May 04, 2010 a Russian Il-80 plane and fighter jets fly near Red Square during a Victory Day parade rehearsal in Moscow. — **AFP**

state-controlled enterprise.

Both the interior ministry and Beriev declined to comment when reached by AFP.

But the Kremlin-friendly REN-TV television channel reported earlier this week that radio equipment was taken from an Il-80 plane that was undergoing maintenance at Taganrog.

Thieves opened the aircraft’s

cargo hatch and shoe and fingerprints were found inside the aircraft, the channel said, adding that Beriev reported the theft to police last week.

The channel said that 12 people had been questioned as part of the probe that was made public on Wednesday. Citing a source, it said officials with access to the airfield could be behind the high-profile theft. — **AFP**

SHORT TAKES

GENEVA

‘Sabre-toothed tiger’ skeleton sells for \$70,000

A nearly 40-million-year-old skeleton belonging to what is popularly called a sabre-toothed tiger has sold for almost \$70,000, a year after its discovery on a US ranch. The skeleton, about 120 centimetres long, was snapped up by a private collector in just one minute at an auction in Geneva on Tuesday.

The original bones are those of a Hoplophoneus — not technically cats, they are an extinct genus of the Nimravidae family and once stalked the plains



of North America. Such extinct predatory mammals are commonly known as sabre-toothed tigers.

Also on sale was a Tyrannosaurus Rex tooth which fetched just over \$6,000. — **AFP**

GENEVA

Over 80 million people displaced: UN

Despite calls for ceasefires and compassion amid the COVID-19 pandemic, violence and persecution have continued to force people from their homes, with record numbers now displaced, the UN said on Wednesday. By the end of 2019, 79.5 million people were living uprooted and displaced, including nearly 30 million refugees — more than one per cent of the world’s population. And the UN refugee agency said preliminary figures showed more people had



been forced to flee in 2020, pushing the number past 80 million. “We are now surpassing another bleak milestone that will continue to grow unless world leaders stop wars,” UNHCR chief Filippono Grandi said. — **AFP**

LYON

Over 20,000 held worldwide for online fraud

Authorities “on every continent” have arrested a total of over 20,000 people in the past year in an Interpol-coordinated blow against online and telephone fraudsters, the international organisation said Wednesday.

Since September 2019, 35 countries have participated in the operation dubbed “First Light” that led to 21,549 arrests in more than 10,000 raids, as well as the seizure of almost \$154 million of “illicit funds”.



It was “the first time law enforcement has cooperated with Interpol on a global scale to combat telecoms fraud, with operations taking place on every continent,” the organisation said in a statement. — **AFP**

Need to regulate scrap trade...

Many services such as distribution of gas cylinders and supply of drinking water in bottles or by tankers are usually requested from the suppliers concerned, whether they are located at pre-defined sites, shops or companies with known commercial headquarters and addresses. Consumers visit or communicate to inquire these services directly or over phone or through other modern means of communication, except scrap trade.

Unfortunately, scrap dealers roam the residential areas and lanes day and night, constantly blowing annoying truck horns, where the residents of the affected lanes can recognise the sound of their horns. This is because of their frequent roaming in these areas, where they used to annoy the residents, while there is no any solution for this phenomenon, in spite of complaints about this strange phenomenon.

Therefore, it is necessary to regulate the scrap trade by restricting these services to pre-order system and to be submitted to those who need it by licensed dealers, who will have a particular place or a store, which has to be designated for them to deal with



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SCRAP
DEALERS ROAM
RESIDENTIAL
AREAS
AND LANES
CONSTANTLY
BLOWING
ANNOYING
TRUCK HORNS

this type of business. Accordingly the roaming of scrap dealers in residential areas has to be prohibited due to its repercussions.

Hence the issue requires prompt actions by authorities such as the municipalities and the police to regulate this business by issuing decisions which will allow scrap dealers to handle their businesses in licensed shops and locations in accordance with the demand of the customers and not by going around in lanes.

The scrap trade is a great wealth that the operating companies make huge sums of money by collecting scrap and exporting it abroad. Meanwhile, it has been noted that, expatriate dealers are manipulating this type of trade, through hidden trade like other commercial activities.

It is necessary to regulate scrap trade by preventing the dealers of this trade from roaming in the lanes, not to knock the doors of homes, not to blow horns of their trucks, and obliging them to handle their business in a proper manner.

It is not reasonable that several vehicles per day roam around

residential neighbourhoods seeking for scrap as if it is a lost treasure, as this form of practice causes lot of inconvenience and noise.

All governorates across the Sultanate are being affected by this phenomenon, particularly the Governorate of Muscat, where the scrap dealers are roaming in the governorate to buy “scrap” at low prices, while selling it for higher prices with zero benefit for the citizens and the country as well.

The authorities concerned are requested to cooperate with the municipal councils to follow up on such phenomena and to develop solutions for it with the aim of protecting individuals and society from its negative repercussions.

So we hope that the authorities will intervene to find solution for this phenomenon by organising scrap trade and limiting this activity to specialised shops and places which are dealt with in modern and scientific ways without these vehicles roaming in residential neighbourhoods causing harm to the residents. If this business becomes an organised activity like others it will help the economy.

AT WHAT COST?

Carbon capture a tool in climate fight

JULIEN MIVIELLE

Technology for capturing carbon from industrial emissions and storing it may still be in its early stages, but proponents believe it can become a major tool in the fight against climate change.

For its methods to rollout on a scale large enough to make a difference, though, experts and critics say carbon capture and storage (CCS) still has to overcome a host of logistical and financial hurdles.

CCS techniques are designed to capture and store carbon dioxide generated by power stations using fossil fuels as well as industrial plants from steelmakers to refineries and petrochemical plants.

Supporters see the technology has great potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from power production, industry in general and fossil fuel refining.

The captured CO2 is transported and reinjected into hermetically sealed geological reservoirs — for example, in former oilfields — for permanent storage.

A portion can be reused meanwhile, a process known as carbon capture, utilisation, and storage (CCUS).

The procedure is not new, with the first site set up in Texas in the early 1970s.

Despite growing interest in the technology, however, to date only about 20 sites exist worldwide, according to the Global CSS Institute, as it fights popular suspicion that CCS distracts

from the goal of moving away from fossil fuels.

The International Energy Agency says the technology has enormous potential and that it may play a “critical” role in helping to smooth the path to achieving net zero emissions.

“After years of slow progress, new investment incentives and strengthened climate goals are building new momentum behind CCUS,” the IEA said in a September report, pointing to 30 projects that have come on stream in the last three years.

The IEA maintains that CCUS has a positive role to play in sectors whose carbon footprint is hard to reduce significantly, such as cement production.

Hydrocarbons producers see the technology as a means of justifying their use of natural gas to produce electricity or hydrogen.

The Oil and Gas Climate Initiative (OGCI), which groups major sector players, has made CCS a priority.

Oil giants such as BP, Equinor, Shell and Total are in the vanguard of its development.

Equinor, Shell and Total are partners in a large Norwegian project to stock CO2 beneath the North Sea.

“Oil companies have advantages compared with other industries when it comes to operating in these CCUS activities,” says Moez Ajmi of Ernst & Young France.

“CO2 capture activity is close, in size of projects and their complexity, to refining and petrochemical activities; CO2 transport is close to transport of gas and finally storage requires geological knowledge which the oil exploration and production industries already possess,” Ajmi says. — AFP

SAVING THE CITY

London’s finance district plots reboot as COVID compounds Brexit

SINEAD CRUISE AND
HUW JONES

For fintech entrepreneur Lewis Liu, no other city on earth could compare to London.

Chinese-born and New York-bred, the CEO and co-founder of Eigen Technologies had always dreamed of setting up business in the Square Mile, the historic heart of European finance and home to a global talent pool vital to companies like his.

But less than a year after opening his office within yards of the Bank of England, Liu’s happy-ever-after is under threat. The City, as London’s financial district is known, has survived the Great Fire, the Black Death and other upheavals down the centuries. This time though, it faces a double hit to its future.

COVID-19 is draining life and prosperity from almost every major global city, but London also faces a second, unique reckoning after Britain parts ways with the European Union on January 1.

“I came to London because it was truly global and Brexit certainly took a bite out of that rosy, futuristic vision I had,” said Liu, whose firm is backed by Goldman Sachs and Singaporean wealth fund Temasek.

“In the medium term, I have confidence in the City, in the long term I don’t know,” he said, citing fears of a brain drain that could scupper his young company’s growth. Before the pandemic struck, London was wargaming how it could remain one of the world’s leading financial centres, with Paris and Milan already offering sweeteners to poach talent.

While the jobs “Brexodus” has been lighter than predicted, that challenge



An EU flag and a Union flag held by a demonstrator is seen with Elizabeth Tower (Big Ben) as marchers taking part in an anti-Brexit rally in central London. — AFP File Photo

THE CITY HAS
SURVIVED THE
GREAT FIRE, THE
BLACK DEATH AND
OTHER UPHEAVALS
DOWN THE
CENTURIES

is now an existential battle as a new remote-working culture spawned by COVID-19 leaves London’s skyscrapers largely empty and a thriving office scene in tatters.

“We are more worried about the place, the damage caused by lack of footfall,” said Catherine McGuinness, leader of the City of London Corporation, which has presided over the finance district since 1191.

Public transport use in the City was still only 17 per cent of pre-COVID levels on December 4, just after the end of a second lockdown, with office visits down by 54 per cent, according to Google Mobility Report. Moreover,

almost half of UK workers intend to split their working weeks between office and home over the next six months, a September survey by the British Council for Offices found.

British and EU negotiators have been making last-ditch efforts to hammer out a post-Brexit trade deal.

But even if a deal is struck, the City won’t keep the same access to the EU, the bloc’s financial services chief has warned. And with the British economy taking its most damaging hit in 300 years due to the pandemic, there couldn’t be a worse time for turmoil in financial services, its biggest cash cow. — Reuters

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LEIPZIG OUST MAN UTD

PARIS: Manchester United were knocked out of the Champions League after a 3-2 defeat by RB Leipzig on Tuesday, while Paris Saint-Germain's qualification for the last 16 was overshadowed by a racism row involving a match official that caused their game against Istanbul Basaksehir to be suspended for 24 hours.

Cristiano Ronaldo scored two penalties as Juventus blew away Lionel Messi's struggling Barcelona 3-0 to wrest first place in Group G away from the Spanish giants.

Lazio also secured a spot in the knockout rounds for the first time in two decades following a tense 2-2 draw at home to Club Brugge in the pouring rain in Rome.

Requiring just a point to advance, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side fell behind to an Angelino goal inside two minutes in Germany. Amadou Haidara soon added a second and United were trailing 3-0 heading into the final quarter after a Justin Kluivert strike.

Bruno Fernandes's penalty and a deflected Paul Pogba header gave United a lifeline but Leipzig, who reached the semifinals last term, held on to move top of Group H on 12 points.

"We started too late. We showed great spirit to come back again, but you can't give a team a 3-0 lead and expect to come back," said Solskjaer.

Leipzig must wait until Wednesday to find out whether they finish first or second in the section, after the contest between last season's runners-up PSG and Turkish champions Basaksehir was interrupted with the score 0-0 in the 14th minute.

Players walked off in Paris amid allegations of racism by the fourth official, in an unprecedented incident in European football's elite club competition.

The row erupted after Basaksehir assistant coach Pierre Webo, the former Cameroon international, was shown a red card during a fierce row on the touchline with staff from the Turkish club appearing to accuse the official of using a racist term. Television microphones picked up a furious Webo repeatedly asking why a racist term had been used to describe him.

Uefa announced it would open a "thorough investigation".

In a statement, Uefa confirmed the game would, "on an exceptional basis", restart from where it was stopped on Wednesday at 1755 GMT, "with a new team of match officials". PSG, who advanced following United's loss, will claim top spot with victory.

Moukoko enters record books
Andrea Pirlo's Juventus avenged a 2-0 home loss to Barcelona in October when Ronaldo was sidelined with COVID-19, edging their opponents on head-to-head record and heaping more pressure on Ronald Koeman.

"We're very happy. We knew it was almost mission impossible (to come top)," Ronaldo told Movistar. "It was a difficult task but we played well. The key was to start the match well and from there we saw it was possible."

Weston McKennie scored in between Ronaldo's two spot-kicks at the Camp Nou as Barca, off to their worst La Liga start in 33 years, were denied a sixth win from six in Europe.

Borussia Dortmund striker Youssoufa Moukoko, aged 16 years and 18 days, became the youngest player in Champions League history as he came off the bench in a 2-1 victory away to Zenit Saint Petersburg. Jorginho spared Chelsea's blushes as his penalty rescued a 1-1 draw against Krasnodar in Group E following Remy Cabella's opener in London. — AFP



Uefa Champions League results on Tuesday:

GROUP E

At Rennes, France

Rennes (FRA) 1 (Rutter 86-pen)
Sevilla (ESP) 3 (Kounde 32, En-Nesyri 45+2, 81)

At London

Chelsea (ENG) 1 (Jorginho 28-pen)
Krasnodar (RUS) 1 (Cabella 24)

GROUP F

At Saint Petersburg, Russia

Zenit Saint Petersburg (RUS) 1
(Driussi 16) Borussia Dortmund
(GER) 2 (Piszczek 68, Witsel 78)

At Rome

Lazio (ITA) 2 (Correa 12, Immobile
27-pen) Club Brugge (BEL) 2
(Vormer 15, Vanaken 76)

GROUP G

At Kiev

Dynamo Kiev (UKR) 1 (Popov 60)
Ferencváros (HUN) 0

At Barcelona, Spain

Barcelona (ESP) 0 Juventus (ITA)
3 (Ronaldo 13-pen, 52-pen,
McKennie 20)

GROUP H

At Paris

Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) v
Istanbul Basaksehir (TUR)
-- Match suspended and to be
completed on Wednesday

At Leipzig, Germany

RB Leipzig (GER) 3 (Angelino 2,
Haidara 13, Kluivert 69) Manchester
United (ENG) 2 (Fernandes 80-pen,
Pogba 82)



- RACISM INCIDENT INTERRUPTS PSG GAME
- RONALDO'S JUVE GET BETTER OF MESSI'S BARCELONA



England confirm two-Test tour of Sri Lanka

England will play two Test matches behind closed doors in Sri Lanka next month, the England and Wales Cricket Board announced on Wednesday. The ECB said they had agreed biosecurity and travel plans with Sri Lanka Cricket for the tour, which was cut short in March during warm-up games due to the coronavirus pandemic. Both Tests will be in Galle, starting on January 14 and January 22 respectively. — AFP



Ben Stokes' father dies after cancer battle

England cricketer Ben Stokes' father Ged Stokes, a New Zealand rugby league international, has died after a battle with brain cancer, it was announced on Tuesday. Stokes, who played rugby league in England in the 1980s and returned as a coach, was diagnosed with the disease in January. The Rugby Football League said on Twitter: "We are saddened to learn that Ged Stokes has passed away." — AFP



KOHLI

ABSENCE CREATES 'VOID AND OPPORTUNITY': SACHIN

NEW DELHI: Cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar said captain Virat Kohli's departure will leave a "void" for India in their Test tour of Australia, but added that it will hand a golden opportunity to a younger player.

In an interview, the record-setting batsmen said India's bench strength would help as they bid to win a second straight Test series in Australia.

Kohli will only lead the side in the first of the four Tests — starting in Adelaide on December 17 — before returning home for the birth of his first child.

There have also been calls from some veterans for India's skipper in all three formats to hand over some of his captaincy duties permanently. Tendulkar would not, however, join that debate, saying instead: "Let's understand, this is not about individuals. It is about our team and the best part about Indian cricket right now is there is bench strength."

Still, he admitted Kohli would be missed. "When you lose an experienced player like this there is without any doubt a void," the former India captain said.

BATTING PROBLEMS

"Some youngster is going to get a chance to play in his spot and that's an opportunity for someone else."

India could have other batting problems as senior batsman Rohit Sharma is racing to recover from a hamstring injury in time to join the Test team. He is to undergo a fitness test on Friday, and Tendulkar said the presence of such an influential player is crucial.

"If he meets all the parameters; if he is fit then he should be there," said Tendulkar.

"Rohit is a special player and an experienced player. When a senior cricketer comes back in the team, it does have an impact."

India have made a mixed start to the tour, losing the one-day series 2-1, before reversing the result in the Twenty20 matches.

Kohli's men, who enjoyed a historic first Test series win in Australia in 2018-19, know this series will be a tough proposition.

Australia are just ahead of India in the world rankings and the Adelaide game will be the visitors' first day-night five-day game on foreign soil.

'COMPLETE ATTACK'

Tendulkar, 47, said the current Australian side is a lot "stronger" with leading batsmen David Warner and Steve Smith back from the two-year ball-tampering suspensions. "This is a far better squad compared to the earlier one. When a couple of your senior members are not there, suddenly that void is felt and that is what Australia felt."

But he insisted that India's bowling attack — led by the fiery Jasprit Bumrah and off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin — is also stronger, and can challenge Australia. "Every era should be kept separate, I don't like comparing," he said when asked if this was the strongest attack India has produced. "But I can say that it is a complete bowling attack. So it doesn't matter what kind of surface you are playing on, you have got all sides covered."

"You have got bowlers who can swing the ball. When it comes to variations and awkwardness, that is also there. Someone hitting the deck hard is also there. We have got a wrist spinner, we have got finger spinners." — AFP



I can say that it is a complete bowling attack. So it doesn't matter what kind of surface you are playing on, you have got all sides covered

SACHIN TENDULKAR
Indian cricket legend

Indian wicketkeeper Parthiv Patel retires from cricket

NEW DELHI: India's Parthiv Patel, who was the youngest Test wicketkeeper when he made his debut against England in 2002, on Wednesday retired from all cricket.

Overshadowed for much of his career by Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Patel, who was 17 years and 153 days on his international debut, played his 25th and last Test for India in 2018.

"Today, I announce retirement from all forms of cricket and as I bring down curtains on this 18-year-old cricketing journey, I feel heavier with gratitude for many," the 35-year-old said in a statement.

He added that India's management had "showed generous amount of confidence and faith in a 17-year-old boy to play for India".

Patel made his debut under Sourav Ganguly, current president of the Board of



Control for Cricket in India. He had a batting average of over 31, including six half-centuries, in his stop-start career.

The diminutive Patel also played 38 one-day internationals and two Twenty20 matches for the national team.

He had a prolific career in India's domestic championships, scoring more than 11,000 runs and appearing for Mumbai Indians, Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bangalore among six teams in the Indian Premier League. — AFP

South Africa to make first Pakistan tour in 14 years



JOHANNESBURG: South Africa will make their first tour of Pakistan in 14 years when they play two Test matches and three Twenty20 internationals in the Asian country in January and February 2021.

Cricket South Africa announced on Wednesday that the decision had been made following a visit to Pakistan by a security delegation recently.

The South Africans will arrive in Karachi on January 16 and undergo a period of quarantine before the first Test in the same city from January 26 to 30.

The second Test will be in Rawalpindi from February 4 to 8, followed by three T20 internationals in Lahore on February 11, 13 and 14.

The Test series will be part of the International Cricket Council's Test championship.

South Africa has not toured Pakistan since 2007 when they won a two-Test series 1-0.

The Proteas will be the fourth international team to visit Pakistan since an attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore in

2009 put a decade-long halt to tours of the country.

CSA Director of Cricket, Graeme Smith, said: "It's pleasing to see so many countries making a return to Pakistan — a proud, cricket-loving nation. Cricket South Africa is delighted to be counted among them."

"As someone who has toured the country on more than one occasion back in my playing days, I know how much passion the people of Pakistan have for the game as well as the love and support that the Proteas enjoy there as a team."

"I would like to thank the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) for the hospitality and transparency they showed our security contingent when they travelled over there a few weeks ago."

"The report on their findings and recommendations gives us confidence as an organisation that all of our team's security, playing and accommodation needs will be met, and that the wellbeing of the team will be the top priority. We look forward to embarking on this historical tour." — AFP

OMAN COLTS EDGE BAHRAIN

ABDULALEEM, ABDULMAJEED ON TARGET IN BAHRAIN FRIENDLY

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 9

The Oman national U-16 football team beat Bahrain 2-1 in Manama on Tuesday. The friendly match was part of the national junior team's overseas camp which is underway in Bahrain and will conclude on Sunday.

The Sultanate team's goals were netted by Abdulaaleem al Rawahi and Abdulmajeed al Balushi, while the hosts goal was scored by Abdullah al Subaei.

Oman coach Hilal al Aufi began the match with a starting list featuring Mohammed al Maqbali as the goalkeeper. The defence comprised Turki Bait Subeih, Abdulaziz al Ruzaiqi, Salim al Abdali and Al Mundher al Hasani.

Oman midfield was controlled by Mamoun al Araiimi, Al Motaism Ghanim, Abdulaaleem al Rawahi and Mohammed Bait Subeih while Loqman al Hadidi and Ammar al Saadi were the strikers.

Al Aufi's boys will have another



preparatory match against the hosts, Bahrain team, on Friday and it is expected to be with new faces who did not play in the first game.

The first external camp for U-16 football team is part of

the team's preparation for the AFC U-16 Championship. After series of domestic camps and local friendlies in Muscat, the coaching staff will evaluate the players' technical performance in the both matches to identify the

final eleven. Also, the coaching staff will give the equal chances for all the squad members and participate in the friendly game to test the technical capabilities.

Moreover, the friendlies against Bahrain will identify more the tactical scenarios and to address the weak points of the sides. Bahrain camp is a golden opportunity to adapt the players with Bahrain stadiums and training fields as Manama will host the AFC U-16 Championship in 2021 and the schedule will be announced later by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).

The Asian event is the top assignment for the national junior team to show their mettle at the Asian level.

Oman will play against Tajikistan, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates teams in Group B at the AFC U-16 Championship. The top two teams in the group will advance to the quarterfinals. The top four teams in the AFC U-16 finals will represent Asia at the Fifa U-17 World Cup in 2021 in Peru.



American Kenin named WTA Player of the Year



BENGALURU: American Sofia Kenin has been named WTA Player of the Year after winning her maiden Grand Slam singles title at the Australian Open.

Kenin defeated World No 1 Ashleigh Barty in the semifinals and twice Grand Slam champion Garbine Muguruza in the final to claim the title at Melbourne Park.

Kenin also reached the French Open final and finished the season ranked a career-high No 4.

The 22-year-old is the eighth American to win the WTA Player of the Year accolade, joining Serena Williams, Martina Navratilova, Lindsay Davenport, Tracy Austin, Chris Evert, Venus Williams and Jennifer Capriati.

Iga Swiatek, who became the first Polish player to win a Grand Slam singles title when she beat Kenin in the French Open final, was named the WTA's Most Improved Player of the Year.

Former world number one Victoria Azarenka was named WTA Comeback Player of the Year after she claimed her first title in over four years at the Western & Southern Open and advanced to her fifth career Grand Slam final at the US Open.

The Belarusian also regained her spot in the WTA Top 20.

France's Kristina Mladenovic and Hungary's Timea Babos were voted the WTA's doubles duo of the year after capturing the Australian Open and Roland Garros titles. — Reuters

Hamilton raring to return for Abu Dhabi season finale after COVID-19 positive

SAKHIR, Bahrain: Formula One world champion Lewis Hamilton said he hopes to return for the season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix after one of the hardest weeks of his life following a positive test for COVID-19.

The Mercedes driver, who secured his record-equalling seventh title in Turkey last month, missed Sunday's Sakhir Grand Prix after testing positive in Bahrain.

"It has been one of the hardest weeks I've had for some time," the 35-year-old Briton said in a video on social media on Tuesday.

"I've just been focusing on recovering and trying to get back in shape so I can get back in the car and race in Abu Dhabi.

"I woke up today feeling great and got my first workout in so I just wanted to send you guys a message of positivity, let you know I'm OK. I hope that I can get back in the car soon."

Hamilton did not say whether he had tested negative yet, which will be a requirement for travel to Abu Dhabi for next Sunday's



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton celebrates winning the race on the podium of Portuguese Grand Prix at Algarve International Circuit, Portimao, Portugal, on October 25. — Reuters

race.

Formula One teams and associated personnel were allowed to enter Abu Dhabi on Monday on specific flights from Bahrain, with staff then confined to circuit hotels within

a protective bubble.

Hamilton would be able to fly to Abu Dhabi on a private jet but would still need the approval of the authorities.

In the champion's absence, stand-in George Russell sparked

I woke up today feeling great and got my first workout in so I just wanted to send you guys a message of positivity, let you know I'm OK. I hope that I can get back in the car soon

LEWIS HAMILTON
F1 world champion

in Bahrain but was denied an almost certain win due to a pitstop mix-up and late puncture.

Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff has said Russell, who normally drives for the Williams team, would race again if Hamilton is unavailable for Yas Marina. Practice starts on Friday and Hamilton will need to be cleared and in place by Saturday qualifying if he is to take part in the race. — Reuters



business

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OPAZ allocates 150 sq km for clean energy projects

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 9

The Board of Directors of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) held its first meeting on Wednesday, chaired by Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy. The Board discussed OPAZ's draft organisational structure, and statute and the legislations governing economic and free zones, and reviewed ways to enhance the capabilities of the One-Stop-Shop in the Special Economic Zones at Duqm (SEZAD) and the Free Zones of Salalah, Sohar and Al Mazunah.

The Board also decided to study to move forward with the procedures of converting the Fishing Port and the Fishery Industrial Complex into a multinational port and to turn the Fishery Industrial Complex into Food and Fishery Industrial Complex.

During the meeting, the Board of Directors approved incentives for attracting projects that produce clean energy for local use and green hydrogen production projects in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm and Sohar Free Zone.

It also increased the area designated for the project by 50 square kilometres to become 150 square kilometres.

Additionally, the Board approved the sale of Tatweer's stake in Duqm Quarries, a wholly-owned subsidiary of OPAZ, to Oman Investment Authority in coordination with the relevant parties.

Furthermore, the Board approved plans by the International Marine Products Incorporation, a subsidiary of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), to establish a fishing project on a 100,000-square metre plot starting from Q2 2021.

Strategy to ramp up exports of Omani marble and gypsum

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals is formulating a strategy to fuel exports of marble and gypsum — two industrial minerals that have exemplified the promising potential of the Sultanate's mining and mineral processing sector.

While marble production declined slightly in 2019 (versus figures for 2018) due to a slump in demand on account of the global economic downturn, gypsum output on the other hand maintained its robust growth trend. Oman is currently the world's largest exporter of gypsum — a mineral used primarily in cement production, as well as in the production of gypsum board.

According to figures published by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), marble production dipped 11.9 per cent to 1.183 million tonnes in 2019, down from 1.269 million tonnes a year earlier.

Gypsum production, on the other hand, climbed 10.3 per cent to 10.663 million tonnes last year, up from 9.666 million tonnes in 2018.

"The mining sector is one of the five promising industries in the country to lead economic diversification under the government's plan," the Central Bank said in its 2019 Annual Report published earlier this week.

"Endowed with geographical diversity, the initial estimates indicate that most of the Sultanate's mineral reserves — estimated at 97 per cent of the total estimated resources in the country in 2018 — have not yet been exploited."

PROMISING POTENTIAL: The mining sector's contribution to the GDP, in value terms, slid 10.6 per cent to RO 125.3 million in 2019, down from RO 140.3 million in 2018



According to the CBO report, Oman's mining sector was impacted by the decline in the global economy last year. The sector's contribution to the GDP, in value terms, slid 10.6 per cent to RO 125.3 million in 2019, down from RO 140.3 million in 2018.

With construction sector activities contracting significantly on account of the downturn, building materials output plummeted 26 per cent to 32.0 million tonnes last year, down from 44.9 million tonnes in 2018.

"Building materials constitute 58 per cent of total output with output coming from 172 operating quarries — remained the most significant category in the minerals production," said CBO in its annual report.

"Limestone, marble and gypsum together represented 90 per cent of

the remaining production.

"A total of 285 quarries are distributed in the Sultanate around the northern mountains and the southern mountains. The largest number of quarries are in Al Batinah North Governorate (56), followed by Al Dakhiliyah with 48 quarries and Dhofar with 40 quarries," it stated.

Production of limestone — a key ingredient in steel manufacturing and chemicals — plunged 31 per cent to 9.67 million tonnes in 2019, down from 14.02 million tonnes a year earlier.

Chromite ore output too fell 31 per cent to 885K tonnes, down from 607K tonnes in 2018.

Other minerals that posted a dip in their output included: laterite 508K tonnes (- 7.7 per cent), quartz 265K tonnes (- 14.3 per cent), magnesium 33K tonnes (-26 per

cent) and kaolinite 12K tonnes (- 88.7 per cent).

However, some minerals boosted output during the year.

Clay production soared 44 per cent to 460K tonnes in 2019, sand to 48K tonnes (51 per cent) and silica 21K tonnes (14 per cent).

Auguring well for the strong growth of the mineral sector are a number of initiatives designed to enhance the industry's investment appeal, the apex bank said.

The new Mineral Resources Law, which came into effect in March 2019, provides a framework for sustainable development and commercialisation of Oman's natural resources.

Currently under implementation are as many as 15 strategically important proposals and initiatives outlined for the growth of the sector under the landmark Tanfeedh programme.

They include the Mining Blocks initiative under which 15 mineral blocks have been pre-approved for auction.

"One of these blocks is Mawarid's Ghuzayn Underground Mine which is the largest copper discovery in Oman and the first unique advanced underground copper project," the report said. Further, in a move to maximise the economic value of the sector, the ministry is preparing an investor guide designed to help investors conduct mining activities in prospective areas. Additionally, the ministry is in the process of establishing an E-Mining Platform and an e-management system in support of its national mining strategy, dubbed Ada'a.

Climate change imperils fisheries, aquaculture

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 9

New research from HSBC and the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), in partnership with The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Oman, has identified the potential impact of climate change on Omani fisheries and aquaculture.

Fisheries are recognised as one of the five sectors of Oman's economy that can drive economic diversification, and ambitious investment plans amounting to RO 1 billion (\$2.5 billion) have been proposed to rapidly develop Oman's wild fisheries, aquaculture and processing sectors. This research aims to identify the components of the fishery and aquaculture sectors that are most at risk of climate change, and the factors generating this risk.

The outcomes of this research, which was conducted by CEFAS, are intended to



help facilitate the development of actions to ensure long-term environmental and economic sustainability in the fisheries sector in Oman.

According to the research, in general, the fisheries in Al Sharqiyah and Al Wusta show the greatest risk of climate impacts due to their low socio-economic resilience, dependence on limited species and high exposure to climate hazards.

Dhow fisheries, meanwhile, show greater risk than other fleet sectors due to due to socio-economic vulnerability, sensitivity of the target species,

KEY FINDING: Fisheries in Al Sharqiyah and Al Wusta show greater risk of climate impacts due to their low socio-economic resilience, dependence on limited species and high exposure to climate hazards

limited diversity in catches and high exposure to climate hazards. The industrial fisheries, the most capital-intensive components of the fishery, display relatively high level of resilience to climate impacts.

Elsewhere, shrimp aquaculture is identified as the sector of the developing aquaculture industry most at risk from climate change due to vulnerability of shrimp ponds to coastal flooding and disease risk.

Melika Betley, CEO of HSBC Oman, said: "At HSBC, we recognise the potential impact of climate change and have set out an ambitious plan

to unlock climate solutions through our partnership with a range of stakeholders including charities, governments, non-governmental institutions and policymakers.

"We commissioned this research to better understand the risks of climate change to this important sector of the Omani economy so that we can help build a more sustainable fishery and aquaculture sector in Oman, and protect the livelihoods, food security, revenues and investments associated with it."

Tim Green, CEO of CEFAS, said: "The effects of climate change can already be observed in our oceans, and these impacts will increase over the coming decades. CEFAS, and its International Centre for Marine Climate Change, are actively working with partners across the world to understand these impacts, which can help to develop targeted adaptation actions to build resilience and avoid the worst impacts of climate change on society."



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Championing disability inclusion in the workplace

CHALLENGES faced by people with special needs are a pertinent problem in the Arab world where their numbers are on the rise due to a number of congenital factors.

A combination of wars, conflicts and domestic violence are contributory factors as well. Today, there are more than 40 million people living with some form of disability in the Arab world, and half of them are children and adolescents. Globally, around one billion people suffer from disabilities out of a total population of 7.7 billion people.

Worsening economic conditions in many countries of the Arab world are compounding the

woes of those with disabilities. Many face discrimination and marginalisation in their societies and are often denied employment opportunities in government or private businesses. International organisations, such as the United Nations, have long called for the inclusion of people with special needs in public and private sector workforces.

Indeed the UN has dedicated December 3 as the International Day of People with Disability (ID-PWD) – espousing disability inclusion as a basic human right.

Some governments earmark a percentage of jobs for people with special needs as part of efforts to integrate them into the national workforce. But many have become dependent on their families



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THE
UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE AMONG THE
DISABLED IS MORE
THAN 60 PER CENT,
ACCORDING TO
SOME ARAB DATA

for support, while enduring economic and social challenges.

The unemployment rate among the disabled is more than 60 per cent, according to some Arab data.

Some Arab governments impose laws requiring the inclusion of 5 per cent of people with disabilities in the labour market, but on the ground, many of them wait years without obtaining work, forcing their families to care for them financially and emotionally. Furthermore, the disabled lack access to facilities of the kind that are often available in Western countries, such as free transportation, dedicated parking, and free access to some places.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, some people with special needs in the Arab world have

become successful in their own right, after obtaining their degrees despite their disabilities. Based on their academic and professional merit, they have secured for themselves distinctive positions in various fields.

Today, there are many conferences and seminars run by people with special needs around the world offering valuable advice on coping with the challenges associated with their disabilities. Some Arab institutions have entered the field as well with initiatives and programmes to help the disabled enhance their well-being and integrate them into the labour market.

Raising awareness and combating social stigma are part of these efforts.

Today, governments, interna-

tional organisations and civil society have taken on the responsibility of securing jobs for people with special needs in various professional streams, while also making sure they are not deprived of their wage-related entitlements.

But more needs to be done to ensure that disability inclusion is the norm and not the exception – whether in education, recruitment, career development, and so on. Workplaces should also be made disability-friendly to ensure those with special needs are not inconvenienced for want of basic facilities. After all, there is abundant talent among the disabled, while needs to be developed and nurtured in their own interest, and that of the wider community and the national economy.

Occidental Oman celebrates best practice win for Omanisation

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 9

Occidental of Oman recently celebrated its OPAL Best Practices Competition win in the category of Omanisation.

The company won for its submitted project, ‘Talent Management Strategies, Programmes and Results — Mukhaizna Project’.

The event, organised by the Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL), was held under the auspices of Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Occidental Oman’s project, led by Hilal al Yarubi, Talent Management Manager, centred on the company’s success in Omanisation, expressed key strategies the company has embraced over the years,



including hiring fresh graduates as a key pool of talent, and empowering Omani workforce for leadership and senior positions.

This was achieved through talent development strategies for blended learning, including classes and workshops, simulators, on-the-job training, E-learning, and virtual reality

programmes.

“We are excited to celebrate this accomplishment, as it highlights Occidental Oman’s long-term focus on Omanisation and empowering our Omani workforce, which has resulted in our achieving an over 93 per cent Omanisation rate for the company,” said Stephen Kelly, President and

General Manager of Occidental Oman.

“Our Talent Management Programme builds on the company’s existing commitment to national capacity development, as we continue to support job-seekers with internship programmes, on-the-job training, and other specialised programmes.”

Saif al Busaidy, VP of Admin, HR, and CSR, said, “This achievement underscores our commitment to investing in the development of our Omani employees, as well as our hiring strategies within our concession areas. We remain committed to the social and economic development of our communities, by enabling our employees through our established and long-term Talent Development Programme.”



CMA amends Clearance and Settlement Regulation

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 9

The Capital Market Authority has issued a decision amending certain provisions of the Clearance and Settlement Regulation by replacing Article 44 related to transfer of Repurchases Agreements (REPO).

The amendment limits the transfer of title to Government development bonds or Sukuk or treasury notes or any other products accepted by the CBO to and from the accounts of commercial banks and their Islamic windows or Islamic banks and the account of the CBO that pertain to REPO

transactions. A commission at RO 50 will be charged to the Applicant for each transaction.

The Article was changed in line with the global and regional regulations to decrease the fees to enhance trading processes among banks which would contribute to supporting the banking sector to achieve liquidity for various financial and banking entities.

Previously the commission charged by Muscat Clearing and Depository Company was 0.00005 of the market value of the transferred securities charged to the application at a maximum of RO 500 and a minimum of RO 5 for each transaction.

PRESS RELEASE

TWO BATCHES OF ENTREPRENEURS COMPLETE PROJECT MANAGEMENT CERTIFICATION



Abdullah Al Alawi

Bank Muscat in step with its vision ‘To serve you better, everyday’ and commitment to strengthening support to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), celebrated the graduation of 40 entrepreneurs from its Al Wathbah SME Academy.

Two batches of entrepreneurs from Musandam and Al Buraimi successfully completed the SME training programme to acquire internationally-accredited certification that will go a long way in helping them realise their entrepreneurial dreams.

The Al Wathbah Academy was launched by Bank Muscat as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative to equip Omani entrepreneurs with business skills.



Iman bint Saleh al Salatiya

Abdullah al Alawi, owner of Al Reem International, which specialises in selling cars and offering financial and insurance advisory services, said that participants have benefitted a lot from its workshops and activities.

Iman bint Saleh Al Salatiya, owner of the Zari Khasab Tourism Project, which specialises in hosting tourists coming to Khasab on cruise ships, by land and air, thanked Bank Muscat for organising the training as part of the bank’s CSR initiatives.

She along with other participants in Musandam had been following the progress of the training in the media.

Global Islamic finance assets to hit \$3.69 tn in 2024

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 9

Global Islamic Finance assets are forecast to reach \$3.69 trillion by 2024, according to the 2020 Islamic Finance Development Report released on Wednesday by Refinitiv and the Islamic Corporation for the Development of the Private Sector (ICD), the private sector development arm of the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB).

According to the report, global Islamic Finance assets increased by 14 per cent year-on-year totalling \$2.88 trillion in 2019. The Islamic Finance assets of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) reached \$1.2 trillion in 2019, followed by Middle East and North Africa (MENA) excluding the GCC at \$755 billion, and Southeast Asia at \$685 billion.

The Islamic banking sector contributes the bulk of the global Islamic Finance assets. The sector grew 14 per cent in 2019 to \$1.99 trillion in global assets. This compares with just 1 per cent



growth in 2018 and an average annual growth of 5 per cent over the years 2015 to 2018.

According to the report, the top five developed countries in Islamic Finance are Malaysia, Indonesia, Bahrain, UAE and Saudi Arabia. This year, Indonesia showed one of the most notable improvements in the Islamic Finance Development Indicator (IFDI) moving into second spot for the first time due to its high knowledge and awareness ranking.

David Craig, CEO of Refinitiv,

said: “A lack of relevant, actionable data has held back the Islamic finance industry for too long. That’s why the Islamic Finance Development Indicator is now such an important tool for policy makers and market participants. This market is worth nearly \$3 trillion already and I’m excited about its future, particularly when it comes to Sukuks and because Islamic finance has so much in common with sustainable finance — one of the most significant trends in global business today.

Ayman Sejiny, the CEO of ICD,

said: “We believe that the analyses and information provided in this year’s report will serve as a vital reference point for the state of the Islamic finance industry during these difficult times and we remain convinced that Islamic finance can play a major role in alleviating the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The report covers 135 countries and is based on five key metrics including Quantitative Development, Knowledge, Governance, Awareness, and Corporate and Social Responsibility (CSR).

According to the report, Green and Socially Responsible Investments (SRI) increased in the UAE and Southeast Asia in 2020. The pandemic was a game changer as several Islamic banks reported losses and reduced profits throughout this year. The pandemic has also led to growth in some areas of the industry as some regulators turned to Islamic finance to mitigate the economic impact.



China reports consumer deflation for the first time

BEIJING: China's economy reported consumer deflation in November for the first time in 11 years, as pork prices stabilised after an outbreak of swine fever last year, official data showed on Wednesday.

The consumer price index, a main gauge of inflation, dropped to minus 0.5 per cent year-on-year in November, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

It was the first time the index dipped below zero since October 2009, when it also reached minus 0.5 per cent. The fall came on the back of food prices dropping 2.2 per cent, including a 12.5 per cent fall in the price of pork and a 17.1 per cent drop in the price of eggs.

Prices soared last year as China suffered from an outbreak of African swine fever, which wiped out more than a third of the country's swine population.

Prices started stabilising in recent months and eventually dropped in October, for the first time since 2019. — **dpa**

Stock market bull run continues, sterling faces Brexit test

TOKYO: Asian shares rose to a record high and US stock futures gained on Wednesday as investors tracked positive news on COVID-19 vaccines and ongoing efforts to launch more fiscal stimulus.

MSCI's broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan rose 0.65 per cent. At one point the index reached 647.78, an all-time peak. MSCI's gauge of stocks across the globe also hit a record high. Australian shares gained 0.61 per cent. Japan's Nikkei rose 1.27 per cent to approach a 29 ½-year high.

Sentiment got an added boost after Japanese data pointed to a rebound in capital expenditure. South Korean stocks also jumped by 1.6 per cent to trade near a record high. Shares in China bucked the trend and fell 0.68 per cent on profit taking. Euro Stoxx 50 futures rose 0.45 per cent, German DAX futures were up 0.37 per cent, and FTSE futures in London added 0.48 per cent.

US S&P 500 e-mini stock



A pedestrian walks past an electronic quotation board displaying a share price of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo. — **AFP**

futures rose 0.23 per cent after shares on Wall Street notched new record highs on Tuesday, boosted by positive vaccine news and seeming progress on US stimulus talks.

The British pound was little changed before make-or-break talks on a trade deal between Britain and the European Union. "While hopes are still alive that a fresh stimulus package for the

United States will be agreed on soon, it is looking less likely a Brexit deal will be made with negotiators from both sides acknowledging a deal may not be achieved," analysts at ANZ Bank wrote in a research memo.

"The next 24 hours will be critical and is likely to cause market volatility depending on what is or isn't agreed."

The Dow Jones Industrial

Average rose 0.35 per cent on Tuesday, the S&P 500 gained 0.28 per cent and the Nasdaq Composite added 0.5 per cent. US policymakers continued to negotiate over additional stimulus to help offset the economic impact of the pandemic while pursuing a stopgap government funding bill.

Leaders in both parties remain adamant a deal must be struck but are still working through sticking points, including aid to state and local governments and business liability protections. The steady march of positive news on COVID-19 vaccines helped lift investor spirits.

Britain on Tuesday became the first Western nation to begin a wide vaccination campaign, and Johnson & Johnson reported it could obtain late-stage trial results for a single-dose vaccine in January, earlier than expected.

Meanwhile, Pfizer Inc cleared another hurdle when the US health regulator released documents flagging no new safety

or efficacy concerns.

But the looming prospect of a "no deal" Brexit weighed on sentiment for sterling, which last traded at \$1.3379 and at 90.68 pence per euro.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will meet Ursula von der Leyen, president of the EU's executive European Commission, for dinner in Brussels on Wednesday to try and close gaps their negotiators have struggled with for months.

Against a basket of currencies the dollar sat at 90.802, which is just above a two-and-a-half-year low it hit on Friday as optimism about vaccines lured short sellers.

Highlighting the dollar's weakness, the offshore Chinese yuan strengthened past 6.5000 to reach the strongest level in more than two years.

The onshore yuan also traded near its highest in more than two years. Benchmark US 10-year Treasury yields edged up to 0.9394 per cent on Wednesday.

— **Reuters**

Twitter, Tumblr, Vimeo push back against EU rules

BRUSSELS: Twitter and three other US tech companies have urged the EU to take a flexible approach towards harmful and illegal online content instead of blanket rules requiring takedown, saying this would preserve an open Internet.

US Internet media group IAC/InterActiveCorp-owned online video platform Vimeo, nonprofit browser maker Mozilla and Automattic, owner of online publishing tool WordPress.com, made the call a week before EU tech chief Margrethe Vestager is due to present her draft rules.

Known as the Digital Services Act, the rules aim to get bigger companies to take more responsibility for removing illegal and harmful content as soon as they have been notified.

In a joint open letter published on Wednesday, Twitter and the other companies said the solution should be broader than just removing



content.

Blunt content removal obligations could have a negative impact on freedom of expression, they said.

"...By limiting policy options to a solely stay up-come down binary, we forgo promising alternatives that could better address the spread and impact of problematic content while safeguarding rights and the potential for smaller companies to compete," they said.

The companies said a better tactic would be to limit the number of people who encounter harmful content.

The companies said new EU rules should also take into account the rise of decentralised hosting of content and data. — **Reuters**

Leaders in COVID fight praised in Forbes list of world's powerful women

NEW YORK: Female leaders who have stood out for their handling of the coronavirus earned honours on Tuesday in the annual *Forbes* list of the world's 100 most powerful women, which highlighted women's roles in battling the global pandemic.

Women from prime ministers to corporate executives earned spots in the list for their achievements helping mitigate and control the deadly contagious virus, which has infected more than 67 million people and caused 1.54 million deaths, *Forbes* said.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin, European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde and Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike were particularly effective, it said.

"Where they differ in age, nationality and job description, they are united in the ways they have been using their platforms to address the unique challenges of 2020," *Forbes* said on its website.



It quoted Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, also on the list, who said recently that "countries where human rights are respected and where women are able to reach top positions in society are also the countries that are the best-equipped to handle crises by COVID-19."

New Zealand eliminated coro-

navirus infections with a strict lockdown, reporting just over 2,000 cases of the virus and 25 deaths. Taiwan kept the pandemic under control after instituting strict restrictions and largely closing its borders in January, long before Western countries, limiting cases of the virus to just over 700 and seven deaths, it said.

Of the 17 newcomers to the *Forbes* list, Carol Tomé, chief executive of United Parcel Service, where delivery volumes skyrocketed during lockdowns, and Linda Rendle, chief executive of Clorox, which boosted production of cleaning goods, were noted for their work. — **Thomson Reuters Foundation**

SHORT TAKES

SAN FRANCISCO

Apple launches \$549 new AirPods Max

Apple Inc unveiled its new AirPods Max, a set of wireless over-ear headphones at \$549 apiece, pricier than some of its other popular phone and tablet products, in a measure likely to boost sales over the December holiday period. The new AirPods, which will have up to 20 hours battery life, will be shipped from next Tuesday, Apple said.

Because over-ear headphones create a seal around the ear, they are capable of delivering higher audio quality than in-ear devices



and remain the standard form factor in professional studios.

The AirPods Max model will compete with high-end headphones such as Bose's Noise Cancelling 700 units, which retail for \$340 with holiday discounts.

CALIFORNIA

Tesla launches second \$5 billion share sale

Tesla Inc unveiled a \$5 billion capital raise, its second such move in three months as the electric-car maker cashes in on a stellar rise in its shares this year.

The company's shares touched a record high on Monday, pushing Tesla's market value above \$600 billion and further cementing its position as the most valuable auto company in the world despite production that is a fraction of rivals such as Toyota Motor, Volkswagen and General



Motors.

Ten major banks, including Goldman Sachs, Citigroup Global Markets and Morgan Stanley, will conduct the sale, the car-maker said in a filing, giving no timeline for its completion.

BERLIN

German exports rise by less than expected in Oct

German exports rose by less than expected in October but foreign trade still gave Europe's largest economy a boost at the start of the fourth quarter as it struggles to avoid slipping into a double-dip contraction. Seasonally adjusted exports rose 0.8 per cent on the month after an increase of 2.3 per cent in September, the Federal Statistics Office said on Wednesday.

Imports rose 0.3 per cent after an upward revision in the prior month's figure to an increase of



0.2 per cent. The trade surplus expanded to 18.2 billion euros.

Economists polled by Reuters had expected exports to rise by 1.2 per cent and imports to increase by 1.0 per cent. The trade surplus was predicted to come in at 18.0 billion euros.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

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ANNOUNCEMENT

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She walked 30km per day for 33 days to promote an important cause

On the occasion of the Omani Women's Day and the 50th Omani National Day, Suhaila al Kindi, a wife and mother, walked for 33 days covering nearly 30km per day from Muscat to Salalah with an important message — to remind people that the beauty of Oman needs to be protected through proper disposal of one's waste... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

TRAVEL TALES



OMAN – OFF-ROAD DRIVER'S PARADISE

A day spent in the desert is enough to recharge you and forget the hard work put in during the week. Travel in the Omani desert and visiting a Bedouin settlement and experiencing their hospitality is a memory that you will cherish for your lifetime... **Story on Page P20**

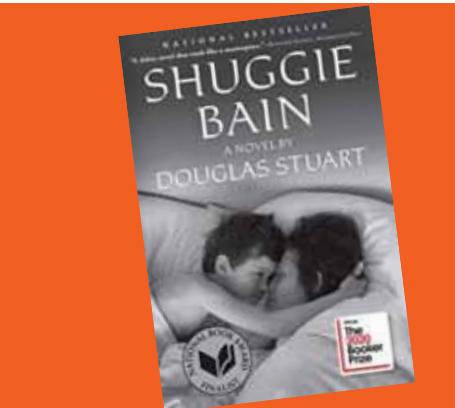
LOCAL SCENE



A GEOLOGICAL PARADISE ON EARTH

Travelling across Oman has always been enjoyable thanks to the surrounding mountains, consisting of rocks in different colours, textures, foliation (layers) and faults. What we observe on the sides while casually passing by is a story of 800 million years... **Story on Page 19**

READ



SHUGGIE BAIN
BY DOUGLAS STUART

The winner of the 2020 Booker Prize. A boy's working-class childhood in 1980s Glasgow is subsumed by his mother's alcoholism.

ENTERTAINMENT



WHAT PANDEMIC? HOLIDAY TV MOVIES STICK WITH ESCAPISM OVER COVID-19

"Grey's Anatomy"'s fictional surgeon Meredith Grey was stricken with COVID-19, while the "Superstore" staff hoarded toilet paper. But Christmas - complete with carol singers, family gatherings and romance - will be a largely coronavirus-free zone on television... **Story on Page 19**

OPERA



PANDEMIC FORCES LA SCALA TO REPLACE TRADITIONAL SEASON OPENER

Milan's La Scala opera house staged a three-hour televised medley of arias and ballet late on Monday after the coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of the traditional season opener for the first time since World War Two... **Story on Page 18**



She walked 30 km per day for 33 days to promote an important cause

BY AL ANOOD AL WAHAIBI

There are people on the planet who strive to find a deeper meaning for their lives and therefore dedicate a portion of it for a cause sacrificing not only their time but effort too, leaving behind their comfort zone to achieve something intangible within them. Some people walk to bring awareness to a health cause, or social cause, that they care deeply about.

Suhaila al Kindi is a wife and a mother, that is also a motivator and an inspiration to many out there. On the occasion of the Omani Women's Day and the 50th Omani National Day, Al Kindi participated in a challenge of a different kind. In collaboration with Be'ah Company, the challenge (walking from Muscat to Salalah) carrying out an important environmental message and awareness throughout the journey.

Intending to complete 30 km per day, the challenge took Al Kindi 33 Days arriving at her destination in Dhofar during the 50th Omani National Day. She not only carried the environmental awareness message of "preserving our beautiful Oman" but also carried it during the time of Omani Women's Day as an honour and celebration for her.

After an interview conducted with Suhaila al Kindi, she says that one of her hobbies is hiking

for long distances and paths, through which she discovers the picturesque nature of Oman and its beautiful terrains.

Intending to complete 30 km per day, the challenge took Al Kindi 33 Days arriving at her destination in Dhofar during the 50th Omani National Day

"During my journeys, I noticed that unfortunately these beautiful areas are polluted with waste and leftovers for a long time, and these wastes harm the environment and distort the view," Al Kindi says. From here, she got the idea to begin the initiative of the walk to spread environmental awareness and deliver her message by spreading them in many areas around Oman during her path.

Although the trip was exhausting and tiring to Al Kindi, yet she managed to learn many things throughout including patience and perseverance. The journey deepened her love of the challenge and further allowed her to notice that any Omani woman can achieve her goals as long as she finds the will to do it.

Al Kindi adds that the challenges she faced during the path were minor challenges which include the sun's heat in the day and the fluctuation of the weather in the areas she passed by, in addition to the rough roads in some places.

However, these minor challenges did not stop her from completing the path. With the support of her family and her husband, she managed to fulfil and achieve her goal.

"I advise everyone to protect the environment and to stop bad practices in the random dumping of waste. I also advise everyone to pursue their dreams and goals, no matter how difficult it seems, nothing is impossible as long as you find the will, persistence, and motivation," Al Kindi adds.



OPERA

Pandemic forces La Scala to replace traditional season opener



MILAN: MILAN'S La Scala opera house staged a three-hour televised medley of arias and ballet late on Monday after the coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of the traditional season opener for the first time since World War Two.

Masked members of the choir and orchestra performed the national anthem in an empty auditorium that in other years would be packed with Italy's political, business and showbusiness elite for one of the highlights of Milan's cultural calendar.

Organisers called the show "A riveder le stelle" ("to see the stars again") in reference to the final phrase in Dante Alighieri's "Inferno", signalling hope that the pandemic which has brought Europe's economy to its knees will soon be overcome.



"This was an extraordinary experience but I hope not to repeat it," conductor Riccardo Chailly said.

Italy shut its theatres and concert halls in October to contain a resurgence of the pandemic after the summer and the restrictions are due to stay in place until at least after the Christmas holiday season.

Some performances were live and others pre-recorded. They included star dancer Roberto Bolle, who performed a ballet solo surrounded only by light beams.

Organisers also took viewers to normally off-limits rehearsal and backstage areas of La Scala, the 242-year-old theatre at the heart of Milan's musical life.

With the Lombardy region around Milan among the worst affected areas in Europe and still recording thousands of new coronavirus infections every day, it is still unclear how La Scala will stage its planned new season.

In October dozens of La Scala singers and musicians tested positive for the virus, forcing all members of the chorus into quarantine along with members of the orchestra. — Reuters



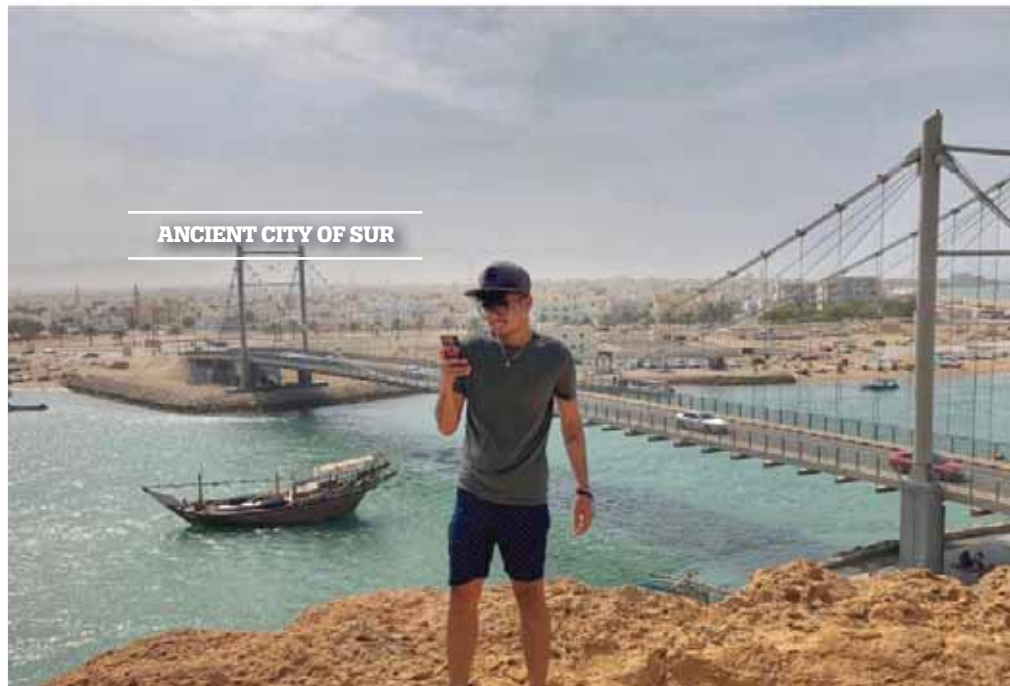
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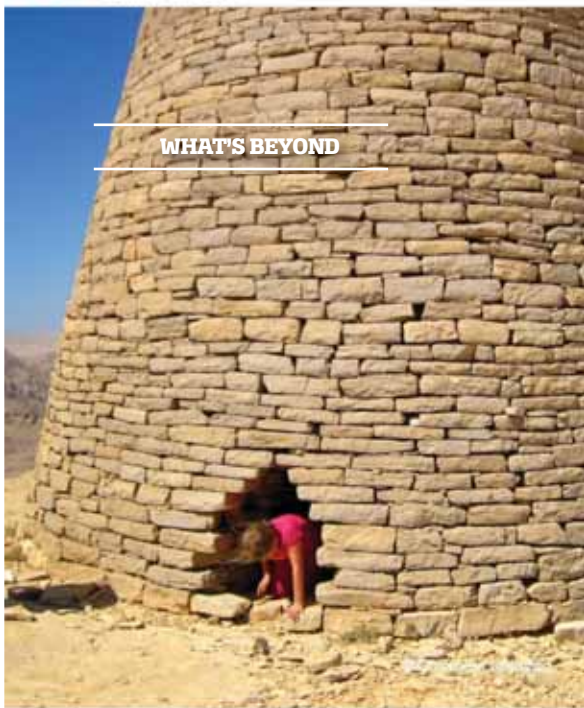
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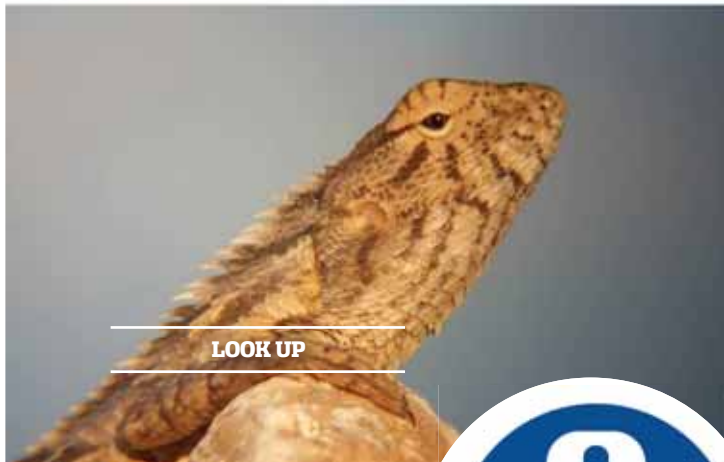


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A Geological Paradise on Earth

BY DR SIVA KUMAR
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Travelling across Oman has always been enjoyable thanks to the surrounding mountains, consisting of rocks in different colours, textures, foliation (layers) and faults. What we observe on the sides while casually passing by is a story of 800 million years. During this time there were at least three periods when the whole region was covered completely by ice, producing unique geological and cave structures.

Oman is referred to as a geologist's paradise across the world and remains one of the most sought-after places in international geo-tourism. As we already live here, it is important for us to know what is so special about Oman's geological features. We can understand and

appreciate this when we know some of the basics of geology.

Geology is one of the Earth science subjects and is concerned with the study of rock; its composition and the processes that change it over time. Geology explains the formation of rocks, fossils, structures, caves and meteorites. We can find examples of each of them in Oman and, therefore, it is no wonder geologists across the globe come to visit.

The mountains contain rocks that have formed due to physical changes such as deforming, compacting, eroding, melting and cooling. Sedimentary rock is a type of rock formed from existing pieces of rocks or other materials. Limestone and sandstone fit into this category. When the traces of plants or animals are preserved in sedimentary rocks, they are called as fossils.

When immense heat or pressure is applied, rocks

change their appearance and are described as metamorphic rocks. These rocks often contain foliation perpendicular to the direction of pressure. Slate and marble are examples of this type. Igneous rocks are those formed when hot material cools and solidifies. They can be formed both inside the Earth and on its surface. Basalt and Pumice are examples of igneous rocks.

Situated near the Sea of Oman on the edge of the Arabian plate, Oman's mountains contain several arrangements that illustrate the effect of continental collisions and oceanic movements. The 700 km-long Al Hajar Mountain range contains peaks and drowned valleys that tell us about the north-eastern tectonic movement of the Arabian plate at the rate of 2 cm per year.

Gigantic movements of the outer layer of the Earth, known as the Earth's crust,

cause mountain formation. There are several types of mountains such as folded, block, dome, volcanic and plateau mountains. When a section of oceanic crust is exposed, it is called an ophiolite. The world's best-exposed and largest ophiolite, the Semail Ophiolite, is found in the Hajar Mountains. The Wadi Mayh area, located in North-eastern Oman, also contains the world's largest and best-exposed mega-sheath fold ever discovered.

The Mountain of Sun (Jabal Shams), Mountain of Green (Jabal Al Akhdhar), Mountain of Water (Natif-Hasik) and Mountain of Moon (Jabal Al Qamar) are some of the popular destinations finding their way into the itineraries of international geo-tourists.

Jabal Shams is the highest mountain in the Al Hajar Mountain range and all of Oman, with a peak height of 3,004m. Jabal Al Akhdhar is 2,980m high, and Samhan Mountain measures 2,100m. These mountains contain stunning canyons, spectacular viewpoints, beautiful creeks and tremendous caves.

Next time a child shows you a stone and asks curiously about it, you can try explaining a bit more about geology. Or you can be even smarter and install a mobile app such as Rock Identifier or Fossil Recognition and surprise them by saying, "it is a Cenozoic gastropod fossil formed 65 million years ago", while smiling like a rock star.

What pandemic? Holiday TV movies stick with escapism over COVID-19



"GREY'S ANATOMY"'S fictional surgeon Meredith Grey was stricken with COVID-19, while the "Superstore" staff hoarded toilet paper. But Christmas — complete with carol singers, family gatherings and romance — will be a largely coronavirus-free zone on television. TV shows are adopting varying approaches to the pandemic in their regular-season storylines, with shows like "The Conners" embracing it, comedies like "Mom" ignoring it completely, and drama "This is Us" working it in, but not as a central theme. But, when it comes to Christmas, escapism still rules. The Hallmark Channel and sister network Hallmark Movies &

or issue-related movies, but what people come to us for is to feel happy and positive and warm and loved," she said. Robert Thompson, professor of pop culture at Syracuse University, said Christmas movies aren't meant to reflect reality.

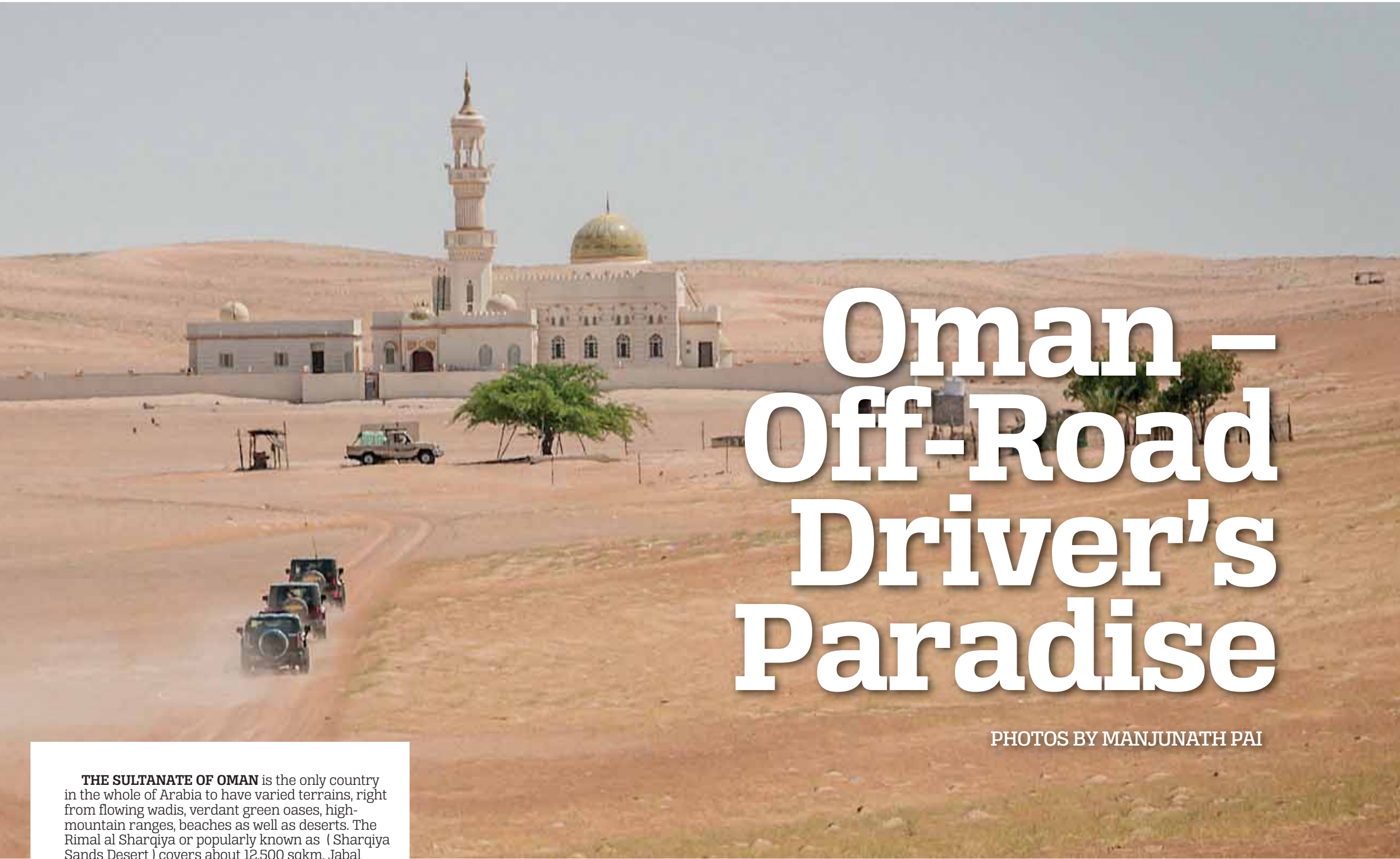
"That isn't to say there isn't waiting out there 'A Very Pandemic Christmas,' in which people at a small Vermont inn find they can't join each other for Christmas because one of them is quarantined," Thompson quipped. On the other extreme, "Grey's Anatomy," set in a busy Seattle hospital, returned in November set in the early weeks of the pandemic. It



Mysteries is putting out some 39 holiday TV movies this year — all of them made since the pandemic yet none of them mentioning the virus.

"The Hallmark brand is about connections and relationships and love and celebrations of the holiday season," said Michelle Vicary, executive vice-president of programming at Crown Media, which owns the Hallmark channels. In original Hallmark movies this year like "Heart of the Holidays" and "Christmas She Wrote," millions of viewers will see characters heading home for the holidays, falling in love, and gathering around festive tables. Despite strict filming protocols that meant more special effects and less kissing, Hallmark's holiday movies have all the comforting touches that viewers have come to expect, Vicary said. "There's a lot of places where you can get darker or edgier

quickly combined the shock of star Ellen Pompeo's Dr Grey contracting COVID-19 with the return of fan favourite "McDreamy," played by Patrick Dempsey, in dream sequences. "It was my job to find a way, once we determined that we were doing the pandemic, to also bring joy, and escape, and fan candy, and all the things that at 'Grey's Anatomy' we give people," Executive Producer Krista Vernoff told Hollywood website Deadline of the decision to bring back Dempsey's character. Thompson compared TV's differing takes on the pandemic to how writers handled the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York. "That was a one-off horrible event and this (the pandemic) is a long process," he said. "But even then, some shows, including those that took place in New York, chose to completely pretend it never happened." — Reuters



PHOTOS BY MANJUNATH PAI

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN is the only country in the whole of Arabia to have varied terrains, right from flowing wadis, verdant green oases, high-mountain ranges, beaches as well as deserts. The Rimal al Sharqiya or popularly known as (Sharqiya Sands Desert) covers about 12,500 sqkm. Jabal Shams, the highest peak in the whole of Arabia, with it's just over 10,000 ft above MSL, too is in Oman.



This provides immense opportunities for Off-Road Driving in Oman. The Royal Geographic Society conducted an expedition in 1986 to document the diversity of the terrain, flora and fauna. This desert was noted to be home to about 16,000 invertebrates as well as 200 species of other wildlife including birds. 150 species of native fauna were recorded. Hence once the temperature starts dipping, off-road enthusiasts start visiting the desert for crossings, camping and experiencing the nature and discovering themselves once again.

A day spent in the desert is enough to recharge you and forget the hard work put in during the week. The terrain experienced in the Upper Wahiba and Lower Wahiba is drastically different due to the south-west blowing monsoon and the northern shamal trade winds coming in from the east. To experience the beauty of the deserts, enthusiasts enter the desert from various locations to get a different experience each time. The desert crossing from Jaalan to Kuwaiymah on the coast gives a totally different experience from a North-South Crossing entering from Mintrib in the North and exiting at Ras Al Ruwais on the coast at the southern end. The desert though appears hostile, is home to the Bedouin Tribes of Al Wahiba, Al Amr, Al Bu Isa, Al Hikman and Janaba.

A stay in the desert if one cannot do a full crossing is a must-do item during your visit to Oman. Travel in the Omani desert and visiting a Bedouin settlement and experiencing their hospitality is a memory that you will cherish for your lifetime. While the majority go to the various desert camps to experience the desert, the Off-Roaders go on desert crossings experiencing the challenges of nature and terrain vs man & machine. These set of photos is a small display of some of the desert-scapes encountered during my crossings with Adventure Oman Off-Roaders, an active group of Off-Roaders enthusiasts.

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