

HM RECIEVES PHONE CALL FROM
UK FOREIGN SECRETARY

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday received a phone call from Dominic Raab, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in the United Kingdom (UK). During the phone call, aspects of the existing cooperation between the two friendly countries were reviewed, within the framework of the strong relations binding the two countries. Efforts being exerted at all levels to curb COVID-19 pandemic and alleviate its impacts were also reviewed.

P4

NO LAST GOODBYE
FOR MIGRANT
WORKERS LOST TO
PANDEMIC



P10

OLD PLAYER
CHANGING
PREVAILING
BELIEF



P12

KLOPP SAYS
LIVERPOOL ARE
NOT FINISHED
ARTICLE



NEW TESTING CENTRE IN GHALA

SULTANATE REGISTERS 106 NEW CASES AS TOTAL STANDS AT 1,614

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

A new COVID-19 testing centre for expatriates was opened in Muscat even as the Ministry of Health (MoH) announced registration of 106 new cases.

With this, the total number of cases went up to 1,614, including eight deaths and 238 recoveries. Today's figures include 35 citizens and 71 expatriates and 238 recoveries.

Region-wise, Muscat has 1,238 cases, 156 recoveries and eight deaths; Al Dakhiliyah 64 cases, 30 recovered; South Al Batinah 121 cases, 19 recovered; Musandam five cases; Al Dhahirah 23 cases, 2 recovered; South Al Sharqiyah 60 cases, 1 recovered.



Hotel in Ghala area in Bausher.

VIRTUAL CLINIC
The Royal Hospital launched a virtual clinic service to enable the patients to communicate with the doctor remotely by a phone call so that to assess the patients' condition and develop his/her treatment plan.

This service is currently available for patients in several medical specialisations and according to the doctor's assessment.

The service is provided by sending an SMS message alerting the patient the time and date of the virtual clinic.

The Muscat Municipality, in cooperation with the public

prosecutor, raided a residential apartment in the northern area of Al Ghubra for violations of the measures imposed to combat COVID-19.

As per the details, the residential property was used to store large quantities of building materials and electrical materials for direct selling to customers.



HM exchanges Ramadhan greetings with leaders

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik exchanged phone greetings with King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain and President Dr Hassan Rouhani of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on the advent of the blessed month of Ramadhan.

His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings to the two leaders wishing them good health, long life and happiness and praying to Almighty Allah to return the blessed occasion, while their peoples enjoy further progress and prosperity and the Muslims more blessing and bounties.

On their turn, King Hamad and President Rouhani expressed their sincere greetings and best wishes of good health, long life and happiness to His Majesty the Sultan, wishing the Omani people further progress and prosperity and the Muslims glory and bounties. — ONA

Moon Sighting Committee to meet today

MUSCAT: The main committee for moon sighting of Ramadhan 1441 AH will meet on Thursday at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

The committee is chaired by Shaikh Abdullah bin Mohammed al Salmy, Minister of Endowments

and Religious Affairs.

The committee comprises His Eminence Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili, Grand Mufti of the Sultanate, Sayyid Harib bin Hamad bin Saud, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Khalid bin Hilal

al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, Shaikh Dr Saleh bin Hamad bin Salem al Rashedi, Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court, Shaikh Abdul Jalil bin Mohammed al Kamali, Judge at the Supreme Court and Shaikh Mohammed bin Salem al Nahdi,

Judge at the Court of Appeal.

The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs calls upon citizens and residents for Ramadhan moon sighting, with full adherence to the instructions issued by the COVID-19 Supreme Committee.

— ONA



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99841230

99639264

92998577

99429094

99429192

m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com

wadialmeeh@yahoo.com

bakhit.omandaily@gmail.com

nizwaofc@omandaily.net.om

sohardaily@outlook.com



Avoid extra-familial iftar gatherings

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs has urged both citizens and residents to refrain from any iftar gatherings, even at homes, with people coming from outside to take part in it.

The holy month of Ramadhan is marked by social and religious gatherings where families and friends unite to break their fast together, after sunset for iftar or before dawn for suhoor and that is considered auspicious during the holy month.

“Besides prohibiting mass gatherings in Ramadhan tents and other venues in view of the community spread of COVID-19, we would like to urge all believers to avoid iftar gatherings at homes where people from outside, be it a relative or a friend, are assembled”, a senior scholar at the MARA told the Observer.

In addition to the statement from the Supreme Committee tasked with combating COVID-19, which stopped all social, Ramadhan gatherings, Endowments representative said that prayers should be conducted individually or just within family members, as the case may be and not otherwise.

“Prayers during the holy month too



should be conducted individually and not otherwise. No others, from outside one's home, should be encouraged to pray together in view of the contagion”,

he said.

People who are feeling unwell or have any symptoms of COVUD-19 should avoid observing fast and

instead, they must follow the medical practioner's opinion. Similarly, older people and anyone with pre-existing medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease or cancer need not compel themselves to fast.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has also underlined the importance of continuing the social distancing practice through the holy month in view of warding off any potential risk.

“The transmission of COVID-19 is facilitated by close contact between people, as the virus is spread through respiratory droplets and contact with contaminated surfaces. To mitigate the public health impact, Oman has implemented physical distancing measures aimed at interrupting transmission by reducing interaction between people”, Dr Akjimal Magtimova, WHO Representative to the Sultanate, told the Observer.

“These measures are fundamental control mechanisms to control the spread of infectious diseases, particularly respiratory infections, associated with large gatherings of people. Hence, any iftar gathering that sees the presence of any outsider, be it an extended relative, need to be avoided”, she added.

IN BRIEF



Eastern Mediterranean health ministers meet

MUSCAT: The Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean of the World Health Organization (WHO) convened today a video conference meeting with the ministers of health in the region to discuss the latest COVID-19 developments.

Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, chaired the meeting. The Sultanate was represented by Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister

of Health, with the presence of Dr Akjimal Magtimova, WHO Representative to the Sultanate, and Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Hosni, Under-Secretary of Ministry of Health for Health Affairs.

The meeting reviewed the developments of COVID-19 pandemic globally and regionally and the latest statistics of the infected cases, as well as the experiences of the regional countries to tackle this pandemic. — ONA

Al Najd Farms in Dhofar – Boost to Sultanate’s food security



SALALAH: Al Najd region in the desert of the Governorate of Dhofar enjoys natural potentials. It is an environment with fertile lands that extend to more than 40 thousand square kilometres. It is one of the most promising agricultural regions in the Sultanate to cover the local demand of various agricultural crops.

Al Najd farms spread in large areas, such as Shasr, Hailat Al Rakka, Hanfai, Doka and Wadi Benkhotar. These areas are rich with date palms, watermelon, melon, lemon, guava, pomegranate, fig, mango and grapes, in addition to tomatoes, onions, garlic, peppers, potatoes, okra and eggplant, as well as cereal crops, such as wheat and corn.

Agricultural production began in Najd region since the early 80s. Agriculture developed in Najd with the introduction of electricity and road services to farms. The region is characterized by flat lands and fertile soil that can be reclaimed, in addition to the availability of groundwater suitable for agriculture.

Dr Ahmed bin Suhail al Hadhari, Head of Oman Agricultural Association's Branch in the Governorate of Dhofar, stresses in a statement to Oman News Agency



(ONA) the importance of Al Najd promising agricultural region that can achieve self-sufficiency and food security in many strategic agricultural crops.

He pointed out that the number of fruit trees in the region in 115 farms reached more than 143,000 trees. The annual vegetable production hit 27,000 tonnes and 80 tonnes of wheat in two farms in Hailat Al Rakka and Shasr, in addition to more than

one thousand tonne of dates and 10 million bundles annually as fodder for livestock.

Al Hadhari added, “It is required to grow crops that achieve self-sufficiency in agricultural products in the Sultanate. The Oman Agricultural Association seeks to encourage, guide and educate farmers in Al Najd region to increase and diversify agricultural production to fill any deficit of agricultural products in the

local market and focus in the coming seasons on basic crops, such as wheat, onions and garlic, to reduce import. Al Najd farms in the Governorate of Dhofar are among the most promising productive areas in the field of agricultural investment”.

He pointed out “Al Najd farms contribute significantly to covering the local market's need for various agricultural crops, such as vegetables and fruits, in addition to animal feed that are sold in the local markets inside and outside the governorate. High-quality Omani frankincense trees are also planted in some farms. The volume of investments in the region hit more than RO 25 million”.

The formation of the ministerial committee for the transfer and cultivation of fodder to Al Najd region comes with the aim of stopping their cultivation in the governorates of North and South Al Batinah and Salalah Plain in order to reduce the depletion of fresh groundwater and tackle the salinity of water, in addition to finding a suitable alternative, as well as providing appropriate quantities of fodder in the local market to contribute to stabilizing meat and dairy prices and supporting animal breeders. — ONA

Royal Hospital launches virtual clinic service



MUSCAT: Royal Hospital has launched a virtual clinic service enabling patients to communicate with the doctor remotely through a phone call to assess the situation and develop an appropriate treatment plan.

The service is currently available to patients who follow-up in some medical specialties, according to the evaluation

of the attending physician, especially those who have difficulty coming to the hospital because of the distance or other reasons.

The service is provided by sending an SMS message alerting the patient to the time and date of the virtual clinic through a secure application that guarantees the patient's privacy.

Regional authorities to ramp up inspections during Ramadhan

FOOD SAFETY: Shops urged to follow proper method while storing, transporting foodstuff



The Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources has directed the companies operating slaughterhouses to strictly follow the preventive measures ordered by the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 in terms of sterilization and health standards

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, represented by the Food Safety and Quality Centre, announced that it has laid down an intensified programme during the holy month of Ramadhan for inspection at markets, commercial centres, restaurants, coffee shops and other food establishments to ensure compliance

with the health requirements. This includes abidance by the provision of disinfectants and hand sanitizers at the entrances of supermarkets and sterilization of trolley handles in addition to conducting routine lab tests to ensure the safety of food products.

While stressing that legal action will be taken against violators,

the ministry confirmed that its inspectors will ramp up inspection during Ramadhan to ensure full compliance with food safety requirements at restaurants and coffee shops as well as intensify monitoring on grocery stores and retail shops to make sure they are following proper methods in the storage and transport of foodstuff.

The ministry will also carry out inspections of slaughterhouses and butcheries to monitor the quality of meat. In this regard, the ministry directed the companies operating slaughterhouses to strictly follow the preventive measures ordered by the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 in terms of sterilization and health standards.



GCC ministers review support measures to tackle pandemic

MUSCAT: The GCC Financial and Economic Cooperation Committee held its 111th meeting via video conferencing, with the participation of the Ministers of Finance and Economy of the GCC countries.

The Sultanate's delegation in the meeting was led by Darwish bin Ismael al Balushi, Minister Responsible for Financial Affairs.

The Committee reviewed the precautionary and incentive measures, as well as the efforts undertaken by the GCC countries to confront the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and its financial requirements.

The GCC Finance Ministers stressed the need to continue to coordinate precautionary measures among the GCC states on all sectors to support the

economic recovery, as well as to facilitate the movement of goods among the GCC countries, especially goods and shipments related to consumer and basic materials related to economic growth in general.

The meeting discussed a number of recommendations submitted by the GCC Committee of Governors of Monetary Institutions and Central Banks, the GCC Customs Union and the recommendations of the Gulf Common Market Committee. It also discussed subsidy of the purchases of Gulf national products and other topics related to joint financial and economic cooperation, and the Gulf Common Market. The meeting took appropriate decisions regarding them. — ONA

850 types of fruits, vegetables on Athmar

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

The number of products registered with the Athmar platform has reached 850 products of vegetables and fruits, with more than 330 wholesale merchants and 147 farmers. Athmar caught the imagination of wholesale traders since its launch in the beginning of April.

"The efforts were exerted to promote this digital hub and make the best use of it, as work is under way for the website and will be operational for customers soon", said the officials associated with the project.



Athmar platform is an initiative launched earlier this month by Oman Technology Fund in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, and Muscat Municipality

to organise work between importers and wholesalers to ensure the flow of vegetables and fruits for all governorates of the Sultanate, in the light of the current exceptional circumstances of the outbreak of COVID-19.

The platform will work in two phases, the first through placing requests and wholesale, while the second phase will be for individuals' outreach.

Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Under-Secretary of the MoCI, said, "The platform has proven successful and it aims at maintaining the flow of fruits and vegetables and also reduce crowding of individuals and business owners in the market".

3.2m doses of animal vaccination in 2019

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

As part of the National Livestock Immunisation programme to protect animals from the risk of epidemic diseases, the total number of various immunization doses administered last year reached over 3.2 million in the Sultanate.

According to Dr Ahmed bin Saif al Amri, Director of the Animal Health Department at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, the animals covered in the immunization project are sheep, goats, camels and cows.

The diseases targeted by the vaccination in the project are foot and mouth disease, peste des petits ruminants (PPR), also known as goat plague, sheep and goat chickenpox, pasteurella disease, Brucella disease, streptococcal dermatitis etc.

Ramadan Iftar Program

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "He who provides a fasting person something with which to break his fast, will earn the same reward as the one who was observing the fast, without diminishing in any way the reward of the latter."

The Oman Charitable Organization is pleased to announce that it will receive donations for Ramadan Iftar Program in Sultanate of Oman for the year 1441 AH AD 2020 through the following accounts:

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TENDER

Oman Environmental Services Holding Company S.A.O.C "be'ah" was established in 2007. In 2009, Royal Decree No. (46/2009), granted "be'ah" the mandate and the legal status as the entity responsible for solid waste management in the Sultanate of Oman.

"be'ah" strives towards a vision to conserve the environment of beautiful Oman for future generations. "be'ah's" main objectives are to control environmental damage incurred during traditional waste dumping processes, structure the waste sector and its related services in a sustainable manner, develop the industry and support the national economy.

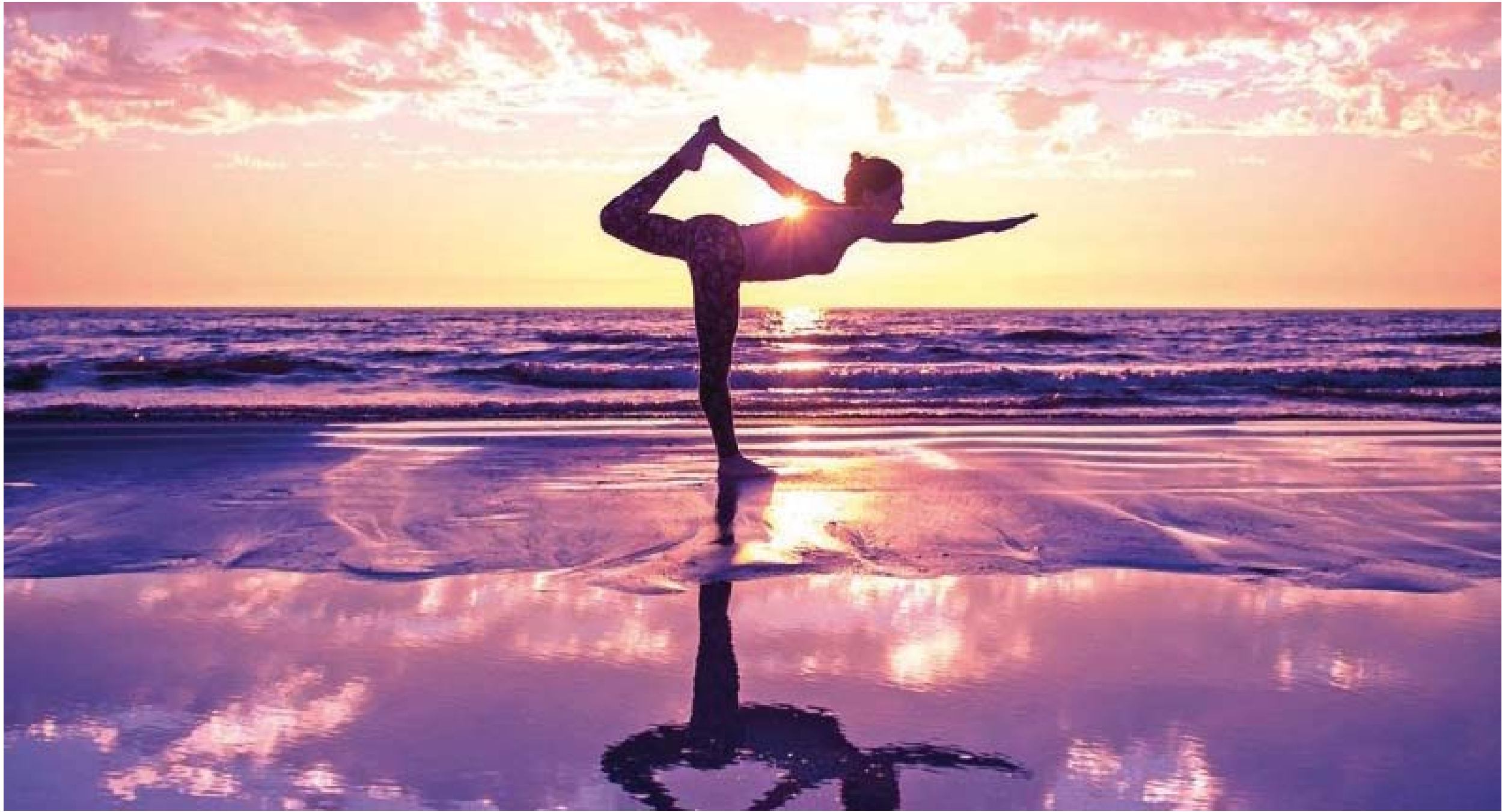
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STAYING IN SHAPE DURING COVID-19

EXPERTS HIGHLIGHT MANY MENTAL AND PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF YOGA



KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, APRIL 22

Fitness is everybody’s concern during the compulsions of staying at home in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. Some diet experts are suggesting immunity booster diets, while others are suggesting physical activity to keep fit even if people are confined in their houses.

Physical fitness equipment like treadmill and exercise cycles are effective tools for physical activity at home but everyone does not have this available at their homes.

Yoga, which has been widely accepted as healthy indoor physical activity, is gaining momentum among those who know the nuances of doing it and finding beneficial in maintaining their mental and physical health.

Yoga enthusiast Vandana J admits that she is able to maintain her physical activity requirements by doing Yoga daily for one-and-a-half hours. “During normal days I am doing my daily walk at the Salalah’s Old Airport walking stretch to control my weight and other physical fitness issues, but it has been totally stopped now. Thankfully I have been practising

Yoga for the last 20 years and I am finding it handy in managing physical fitness regime by doing certain yoga postures”.

“It has been so useful that despite being working from home and not doing any other physical activity apart from Yoga, I have neither gained weight nor I am feeling too stressed. By being at home continuously for so many days do have its impact on your mental well-being, but it is easy to manage if you are practising some yoga postures and some sets of meditation”, she said.

The question is there for those who

do not have exposure to Yoga as well. To cater to this segment of people, there are organisations like Art of Living and others which are offering online classes to keep them mentally and physically fit.

The Art of Living is quite active in Oman and offering online sessions for all segments of people. It conducted many online sessions during the restriction period and has lined up many more to keep people fit physically and mentally.

Ajay Khimji, Art of Living Chairman in Oman, called upon people to turn this crisis situation into

opportunity by learning new skills like learning new languages or doing Yoga and meditation to keep fit.

“We have lined up four-day online ‘Happiness Programme’ from April 27 to April 30. It is a bundle of breathing exercises called (Sudarshan Kriya), meditation and light yoga”, he said and added that people are tuned to online platforms and there has been very good response for the course.

He admitted that some Omanis also have shown interest in joining the Yoga sessions.

Commenting on programme benefits, he said: “It reduces stress

and anxiety; you get to learn new techniques of mind management and meditation, as Yoga relaxes, refreshes and rejuvenates”.

He also put stress on adopting Ayurvedic diet to boost immunity, as much talk is going on boosting immunity during the Corona crisis around the world. “There will be special sessions by consultants from Sri Sri Tattva Clinic Oman that will give tips on how to boost your immunity”.

Many other online engagements have been lined up to cater to the fitness needs of the people, he said.

No last goodbye for migrant workers lost to pandemic

DUBAI/RIYADH: The body of the Indian migrant who died from coronavirus far from home was kept inside the ambulance in front of the crematorium in case a friend came by for a last goodbye.

But nearly an hour later no one had appeared, and the workers in protective suits had to carry out their grim task.

In silence, the four men carefully moved the body, wrapped in a white plastic bag, to a furnace where it was reduced to ashes that were placed in a silver box.

Millions of foreigners work in the United Arab Emirates and across other Gulf nations, providing the backbone of the workforce in hospitals and banks, as well as on construction sites and in factories.

Many have spent decades toiling to provide for their families, with the hope of returning one day to open a business or build a house.

But a death from coronavirus means that the body cannot be sent home, and that it has to be cremated or buried in the country where the person dies.

“The whole world is changing. Nobody comes anymore, nobody touches, nobody says goodbye”, said Ishwar Kumar, a manager of the Hindu Cremation Ground located in a desert area south of Dubai.

Before coronavirus “people would come here, around 200 to 250, to grieve and bring flowers. Now they die alone”, he said.

The majority of the 166 deaths and 26,600 registered cases in Gulf countries so far have been foreigners, according to health ministries, most of them from Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and the Philippines.

ONE THING IN COMMON

A few hours before the cremation of the Indian man -- aged in his 50s and a partner at a tourist company in Dubai -- the body of another victim, a 40-year-old Filipino beautician, was also cremated at the facility.

Both had one thing in common on their death certificates -- “covid pneumonia” as the cause of death.

The silver boxes, bought from a hypermarket, are handed over to the next of kin if they are in Dubai, or to the embassy.

“They work as labourers so most of them don’t have family members. Sometimes their work colleagues come”, said Suresh Galani, another manager at the facility.

Despite halting commercial flights to stop the spread of the pandemic, governments in the region have been



A mother and daughter, wearing protective gloves and face masks, walk together in Dubai. – AFP

trying to lay on repatriation flights for foreign workers.

But dealing with victims’ bodies is another challenge, as the presence of the contagious disease means that burial or cremation has to take place immediately.

At the Hindu cremation facility in Dubai, not all coronavirus-related

deaths have the name of the virus on their certificates.

Vijay, an Indian national, said his 45-year-old brother Ram died of a heart attack after he sank into a severe depression during a 14-day quarantine following a direct contact with someone who had the virus.

Standing near the body in the

cremation room, under a white ceiling fan, four of his colleagues spread flowers on the body before it was reduced to ashes.

“Ram tested negative after he stayed in a room for two weeks. He was mentally hurt and he got depressed because he stayed alone”, Vijay explained.

The laundry worker and father of three died in an ambulance while he was being taken to hospital after suffering severe chest pain.

“We are going back tomorrow to collect the ashes. We will send them home once the flights are back”, his brother said.

‘NO FAMILY, NO FRIENDS’

In Saudi Arabia, according to a source in the health ministry, “until now all the families are asking to bury the bodies inside Saudi because they prefer so”.

Among them was Wazir Moahmed Saleh, a 57-year-old Afghan who worked and lived in the holy city of Medina since the 1980s after he fled his country during the war with the former Soviet Union.

The stationery shop owner died of coronavirus last week.

He had family in the city but had to be buried with only four people in attendance — all his sons.

His nephew Amed Khan, a sales agent born in the kingdom, could only look at photos and videos of his uncle’s burial on a smartphone.

“His dream was to be buried in Medina, and his dream came true. There isn’t a person who dies in Medina and would want to be buried elsewhere”, he said. — AFP

Zoom-powered: British parliament makes an almost glitch-free debut

BACK ON JOB: 50 lawmakers allowed in; 120 permitted to join from home via Zoom video conference

LONDON: British lawmakers upended 700 years of history on Wednesday, grilling stand-in leader Dominic Raab by video link in an unprecedented but largely successful ‘hybrid parliament’ session forced by the coronavirus outbreak.

As Britain endures its fifth week of a national lockdown, with businesses shuttered and citizens ordered to stay at home, parliament has returned from an extended Easter break in a very unfamiliar form.

A maximum of 50 lawmakers are physically allowed in the debating chamber, with another 120 permitted to join in via Zoom video conference beamed onto television screens dotted around the walls of the ornate wood-panelled room.

Raab, deputising for Prime Minister Boris Johnson who is recovering from a spell in intensive care with COVID-19, faced questions from lawmakers - absent the usual jeering in the crowded chamber, replaced by an orderly and largely glitch-free interrogation.

Earlier, speaker Lindsay Hoyle said he had his “fingers crossed” that the new arrangement would work - and it mostly did.

A couple of early questions in the session just before Raab’s question time were partly inaudible, and one questioner was unable to connect, but the overall process was not derailed.

Lawmakers, dressed formally in line with the Commons’ usual dress code, quizzed Raab from their homes, showing off an array of artwork, wallpaper - and even a pair of signed



A video grab from footage broadcast by the UK Parliament’s Parliamentary Recording Unit (PRU) shows Members of Parliament sitting in the Chamber in the House of Commons, in London on Wednesday. — AFP

soccer balls.

Raab spoke from the debating chamber, where a handful of other lawmakers sat on the green benches, observing social-distancing markers taped on the carpet. The leader of the opposition Labour Party Keir Starmer also attended in person.

One lengthy question was inadvertently cut short, leaving lawmaker Peter Bone’s face animatedly reaching the climax of his interrogation on screen without audio.

Raab retorted: “I’m pretty sure I got

the gist!”

Prior to the session, lawmakers had expressed concerns that the choreographed question session would blunt their ability to skewer ministers with unexpected follow-up questions.

“The only thing that brings any fear to ministers is the unknown supplementary,” former cabinet minister Liam Fox said on Tuesday in a debate on the new measures.

After Raab finishes, health minister Matt Hancock will make a statement

on the government’s response to the coronavirus outbreak.

The new arrangement is so-far limited to questioning ministers, although officials are looking at ways that legislation can be discussed and even voted upon digitally.

“It’s symbolic, isn’t it? 700 years of working, and then suddenly we change to something new,” Hoyle told Sky News. “This is a starting point, this isn’t the end. What we want is a robust system that we build up from this point.” — Reuters

IN BRIEF

Iran successfully launches first military satellite

TEHRAN: Iran’s Revolutionary Guards announced they had successfully launched the country’s first military satellite on Wednesday. “The first satellite of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been successfully launched into orbit by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” said the Guards’ Sepahnews website.



It said the satellite — dubbed the Nour — had been launched from the Qassed two-stage launcher from the Markazi desert, a vast expanse in Iran’s central plateau. The satellite “orbited the earth at 425 kilometres,” said the website. “This action will be a great success and a new development in the field of space for Islamic Iran,” it added. The surprise operation comes more than two months after Iran launched but failed to put into orbit another satellite that it said had no military dimensions. — AFP

India suspends antibody tests due to concern over accuracy

NEW DELHI: India has ordered a pause in testing for antibodies to the coronavirus because of concern over the accuracy, health officials said on Wednesday, complicating the fight against the epidemic as its tally of cases nears 20,000.

India trails many countries in conducting the standard swab tests to determine the presence of the novel coronavirus because of limited testing equipment and protective gear for medical workers.

Early this month, health authorities approved blood tests for coronavirus antibodies as a faster way to bolster the screening effort and they ordered more than a half billion testing kits from China.

But the chief of epidemiology at the Indian Council of Medical Research, Dr R R Gangakhedkar, said he had asked health authorities to temporarily stop the tests for antibodies because of conflicting results.

“This is a first-generation test developed in just three-and-a-half months and needs refinement, the variations cannot be ignored,” he said.

Federal health experts have been sent to help authorities in states to validate the equipment.

“We have advised the states not to use them for the next two days until we come out with an advisory,” he said.

The antibody tests do not always pick up early-stage infections but show whether a person had the virus in the past, even if the person had no symptoms of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

In comparison, the swab test, known as the RT-PCR-technology swab test, determines whether a person has the virus at that moment by looking for it in nose or throat secretions. — Reuters

4,000 evacuated from Dutch village as wildfire rages

MAINZ: A large wildfire on the German-Dutch border has forced the evacuation of a village on the Dutch side which is home to around 4,000 people, local authorities said on Wednesday.

Emergency services evacuated Herkenbosch overnight, with the municipality saying that thick smog caused by a high concentration of carbon monoxide had prompted the operation.

The Red Cross has set up emergency accommodation in 16 gymnasiums, with the number of beds per hall limited to 50 due to the current coronavirus pandemic.

Only a small number of those affected are said to be taking up the offer. Municipal officials said it was unclear when people would be able to return to their homes.

The fire has been burning since Monday, engulfing moorland and forest, with the Dutch national park De Meinweg particularly hard-hit.

The blaze worsened on Tuesday afternoon to cover an area of around 170 hectares. A spokeswoman for Viersen district on the German side of the border said on Wednesday that the fire was under control there, adding that around 500 emergency response workers had been deployed overnight to the scene. — dpa



Coronavirus second wave may be even worse: US health chief

A second wave of the novel coronavirus in the US could be even more destructive because it will likely collide with the beginning of flu season, one of the country’s top health officials said.

Robert Redfield, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), called on Americans to use the coming months to prepare — and get their flu shots.

“There’s a possibility that the assault of the virus on our nation next winter will actually be even more difficult than the one we just went through,” he was quoted as saying in an interview with the Washington Post published late on Tuesday. “We’re going to have the flu epidemic and the coronavirus epidemic at the same time,” he said.

The US has recorded more



A nurse listens to the relative of patient hospitalised at the Tacuba General Hospital in Mexico City. — AFP

than 800,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, according to a tally from Johns Hopkins University, with 44,845 deaths — the most reported of any country.

Billions of people around the world have been ordered to stay at home in recent months as governments try to prevent the highly contagious coronavirus from overwhelming healthcare systems.

The US, like other countries, has scrambled to secure enough ventilators and personal protection equipment for medical staff while the death toll mounts.

Redfield said the virus arrived in the US just as regular flu season — which itself can strain healthcare systems — was waning. — AFP

First virus case in Lebanon Palestinian refugee camp

BEIRUT: A Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon was on lockdown on Wednesday after the UN announced the first confirmed case of coronavirus in one of the country’s numerous and crowded camps. The patient, a Palestinian refugee from Syria, has been taken to the state-run Rafic Hariri hospital in Beirut, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, said.

Medical experts visited the Wavel camp in the eastern Bekaa Valley on Wednesday to carry out tests, Lebanon’s official National News Agency said.

The testing was to focus on the woman’s relatives and people she has interacted with, as well as 50 others chosen arbitrarily “inside the camp and its surroundings”, it said.

Inside a clinic, a nurse in blue and white personal protection gear took a nasal swab from a man who winced as he lay in a consultation chair.

Workers in blue hazmat suits sprayed disinfectant at an entrance to the camp, also called Al Jalil.

In coordination with Lebanese security forces, Palestinian factions in charge of security have imposed a lockdown on the camp, preventing anyone from entering or leaving, the NNA report said.

It said cars drove around the camp’s densely-populated neighbourhood as messages blared from loudspeakers urged residents to stay indoors.

A member of a popular committee living inside the camp said all shops had closed. Lebanon has officially announced 682 infections including 22 deaths across the country.

The United Nations and aid groups have repeatedly warned that refugees and migrants in crowded camps worldwide are at special risk of the new coronavirus.

More than 70 million people globally have been forced by conflict, persecution, violence and abuses to flee their homes, including more than 20 million living as refugees, according to UN data.

More than 2,000 people live in



Aid groups have warned that hundreds of thousands of Palestinian and Syrian refugees living in Lebanon’s overcrowded camps are the most vulnerable amid the COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

Wavel, according to statistics released by Lebanon’s government after a 2017 census, but the UN agency says the population of those registered in the camp are much higher.

Aid groups have warned that hundreds of thousands of Palestinian and Syrian refugees living in Lebanon’s overcrowded camps are the most vulnerable and that self-isolating patients in the camps where sanitation is weak would be one of the top challenges.

“The main concern remains... the spread of coronavirus in the overcrowded Palestine refugee camps where there are very limited possibilities for home isolation,” an UNRWA spokeswoman said earlier this month. More than 174,000 Palestinians live in Lebanon, according to official figures, with most residing in camps ruled by Palestinian factions beyond the reach of Lebanese security forces. They face work restrictions and many live hand to mouth from daily wages. — AFP

To our heroes in Oman, our thanks and appreciation

During this challenging time, so many essential workers are at the front line for our safety: the health care workers, the drivers, the rubbish collectors, the food deliverymen, the soldier, and so on. Many of them are low-level salary individuals.

While people are rushing to stock up with food and water, these heroes are working tirelessly so we can have some sort of normality. They survive on adrenaline, and when they have some rest, they feel like most of us: fear, anxiety, depression, and sadness. They worry about their children, spouses, and parents just like us.

We all know this pandemic will pass, but there will be a trail of consequences. Many say life will never be the way we knew it. We are learning to live in isolation; hardly going shopping and when we go, it is for the essentials; wearing masks and gloves have become a necessity; bank cards instead of cash;

and then, the abrupt change to online education — metaphorically, teachers and students are thrown in the water and told to swim. The list of changes is endless.

In this pandemic, the focus of attention is to save lives. However, there is a general understanding that the situation puts heavy pressure on mental health — not only on the senior; young people are showing signs of depression. Insurances do not cover mental health problems, and we will have individuals with serious after effects.

The other day, I heard the voice of a young man singing his heart out. It was painful to the ears, then; I looked up and saw him standing by the window of a room in a hotel. Probably, he was one of those put in quarantine. Loneliness is heartbreaking.

With the lockdown, it seems that the perception of time is one of the

They survive on adrenaline, and when they have some rest, they feel like most of us: fear, anxiety, depression, and sadness. They worry about their children, spouses, and parents just like us

first victims. Weekdays and weekends look the same. There is this feeling of senselessness for those stuck at home. Viewing old photographs, reconnecting with lost friends are some of the pastimes. While most of us are in this period of futility, health care workers and

security forces are spending long hours in hospitals filled with coronavirus patients or patrolling the streets — for our own good. The truth is, the era of narcissism and individualism suffered a halt.

It feels as we are part of a bizarre movie. In the beginning, the perception was 'this cannot be happening' — now, everything seems to be settling down. Positive messages of encouragement pop continuously on our radio stations, in our WhatsApp and, what a blessing to video call our families - to see our daughters and sons, our parents, and grandchildren. Even though there is a certain sadness in telling the family how much we love them just in case we turn to be another number in the death tally — it is a mind-boggling experience.

I am not an expert to consider either we are facing a biological weapon testing, or if animals are responsible for this pandemic, or if it fits within a particular

conspiracy theory. Hard to even speculate how these all started. However, a few points are valid: transparency in communication is vital, particularly during emergencies; it is important to consider the social fabric of society to address everyone; tensions and dilemmas happen during real-time communication — just keep focused; health and disaster crises should not be politicised — none will benefit!

Something good spring out from challenging events. The donations to contribute to medical research, staff reinforcement along with medical supplies are just some of the kindness we see. It is also inspiring volunteers coming up to help in whatever way they can. Solidarity has returned to our lips and attitudes. The heroes of this pandemic situation deserve the deepest of our gratitude and love — and thanks to their families.



SONIAAMBROSIO

soniambrosio@gmail.com



A surgeon working at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, has returned to work after recovering from a coronavirus infection. — Reuters

Citizens are the prime concern in crisis...

The Supreme Committee, in charge of dealing with the implications of the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, has recently taken many crucial decisions. These decisions were meant for mitigating the effects on institutions and companies in a proper and a fair manner by giving each of them their rights. These decisions and guidelines were important to reduce the implications of the pandemic.

This is the national responsibility of the government to do while dealing with the crisis. These responsibilities are also shouldered by all who are in the manufacturing sector. All of them have equal load, but the role each of them must play is larger than that of others. This is particularly in these difficult times which are being faced by the entire world, not the Sultanate alone as we all know.

The companies as well as their employees have equally suffered. Therefore, the cooperation between them is the common responsibility to face the implications. This is the need of the hour. Everyone must bear the implications and bridge the gap between them to avoid the side effects. All of us need to stand together as a wall to not to allow even a small loss. This is possible only with the mutual support and solidarity from all sides.

The Ministry of Manpower has also brought certain guidelines to deal with the implications of the crisis in a more balanced way so as nobody's rights are ignored. The ministry plays crucial role in bringing stability in the process of production. This is extremely a

These responsibilities are also shouldered by all who are in the manufacturing sector. All of them have equal load, but the role each of them must play is larger than that of others

complicated work. However, it is equally important amidst the ongoing crisis. It deals with all the sides with conflicting interests. Therefore, it is very difficult to deal with it. The balanced approach to this situation which came in the form of the second phase of the guidelines of the Supreme Committee had positive effect as it was fair and transparent.

In such exceptional circumstances, private sector usually stops using the services of the citizens. Therefore, it was required that no company misuses the situation to lay off its employees, end contracts with the citizens and reduce the number of its manpower.

The Supreme Committee also strengthened the approach of the Ministry of Manpower while dealing with the situation and bringing stability among the national manpower. It is with the belief that that the citizens have more rights on jobs than others. Therefore, they should be trained, and their skills should be developed to the

quality of work which is required for better output.

In the same framework, the decisions are taken to give more space to all to deal with the situation. Some of the employees were given paid leaves. Similarly, the wages, salaries and other dues were reduced according to the reduced working hours with mutual agreements.

The committee has also given certain facilities to those employees who might get affected due to any decisions taken by the companies. These facilities include relaxation or postponement of payment of bank loans, electricity and water bills etc., and placing those affected by the situation in the fuel subsidy programme.

These are the extraordinary efforts being made by the government, as part of its endeavour to strike the required balance between the parties of production, so that there is no prejudice in the rights of workers. At the same time, certain measures are also taken to compensate companies for the damages incurred on them due to the crisis caused by the outbreak of coronavirus. These measures included the reduction of the fee of the permits or 'mathooniyah' by more than RO 100 to bring it down to RO 201 for the next three months.

We expect that there would be cooperation to overcome the implications and repercussions of this ongoing crisis. Everybody would join hands and come together to promote the spirit of national responsibility.

Fear of coronavirus haunts Egypt's cramped jails

HUMEYRA PAMUK

Last April, medical student Mohamed Amashah stood on Cairo's Tahrir Square and held up a sign saying "Freedom for prisoners". He was detained.

Now awaiting trial for more than a year on charges of misusing social media and helping a terrorist group, the Egyptian-American fears the spread of the coronavirus in Egypt's crowded jails.

Last month Amashah, who suffers from an autoimmune disease and asthma, started a hunger strike to draw attention to his plight, his parents said.

He is one of 114,000 prisoners in Egypt, according to a recent UN estimate. Egypt, which has a population of 100 million, has reported 3,490 cases of the new coronavirus, including 264 deaths.

Top officials have expressed confidence they can contain the outbreak through measures including quarantine, a night curfew in place since March 25, and public information campaigns. But since the country's first case on February 14, relatives and rights groups have called for the release of detainees, including political prisoners.

Some rights groups, lawyers, and current and former prisoners say inmates are often kept in cramped, dirty cells and lack running water, adequate ventilation and health care: conditions ripe for the rapid transmission of disease.

While countries including Iran, Germany and Canada have freed prisoners in an effort to contain the coronavirus epidemic, Egypt has given no public sign it will do so.

The government press centre forwarded to Reuters an Interior Ministry statement on Thursday saying that it was taking all necessary preventative and protective measures for prison staff, ensuring cleaning, health care and testing inside places of detention.

The government also suspended family visits to prisons on March 10 to limit risk of infection, though some families say the measure makes it harder for them to deliver supplies including soap and medicine. The Ministry of Interior said it allowed for prisoners' belongings to be brought in, and the exchange of messages.

In November, authorities organised tightly supervised tours of Cairo's sprawling Tora prison complex, where former president Mohamed Mursi collapsed and died in a prison courtroom last year, and where Amashah is held. The tours followed a report by UN experts that said that poor prison conditions may have led directly to Mursi's death and was putting thousands more at severe risk.

A hunger strike started on several wards at Tora in late February in protest at poor conditions, a lack of information about the new coronavirus and a failure to disinfect cells, said a human rights lawyer in contact with inmates. — Reuters

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

HEAD OFFICE

Tel: 24649444, 24649450,
24649451, 24604563, 24699437
Fax: 24699643

SALALAH OFFICE

Tel: 23292633
Fax: 23293909

NIZWA OFFICE

Tel: 25411099
P.O. Box 955, P.C. 611

ADVERTISING

AL OMANEYA ADVERTISING & PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 3303,
P.C. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: SWITCHBOARD: 24649444
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DISTRIBUTION AGENT

AL OMANEYA for Distribution & Marketing, P.O. Box 974,
P.C. 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24649351/24649360
Fax: 24649379

Website: omanobserver.om

e-mail: editor@omanobserver.om

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subscribe@oeppa.om

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ALI AL MATANI

ali.matani2@gmail.com

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OMANI INNOVATIONS

Makers Oman begins mass production of COVID-19 safety aids and devices

AT LEAST SEVEN COVID-19 RELATED SAFETY AIDS AND EQUIPMENT CURRENTLY IN VARIOUS STAGES OF DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT AT MAKERS OMAN

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

Makers Oman – the Sultanate’s newest hub for Omani-driven science and technology innovations – has commenced production of a range of locally engineered items designed to strengthen the capabilities of Oman’s frontline healthcare workers in dealing with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

According to a representative of the Rusayl-based lab, mass production has begun of two key products: a face shield and a uniquely designed hands-free door opening. A range of other products are currently in various stages of prototyping and testing before they receive the all-important green-light for large-scale production.

“We have started mass production of face-shields for use by healthcare workers in the Sultanate,” said Issam al Toki, Education Coordinator at Makers Oman. “These are being done here at our facilities at Innovation Park Muscat (IPM), as well as in collaboration with our partners in Suhar.”

Speaking to the *Observer*, Al Toki said the face shields designed and produced by Makers Oman are cost-competitive alternatives to 3D-printed versions introduced in recent weeks by tech start-ups here in Oman and elsewhere around the world.

“At Makers Oman, we have successfully employed laser-cutting technology in the production of our face shields, which takes about 12 minutes to produce one unit – as opposed to about two hours per unit with 3D printing. Thus, in addition to the speed of production, laser-cutting involves the use of cheaper raw materials – which is a big advantage



over 3D printed face shields. We have already received a lot of orders from the health authorities for our product.”

Also in production is a ‘hands-free door-opener’ – a device that can be used, in addition to the opening of doors, in the operation of elevators, the handling of shopping trolleys, and so on. “With the aid of this device, the user avoids contact with surfaces (potentially contaminated with the virus). There is strong interest for this product not only from organisations,

but individuals as well,” said Al Toki.

Makers Oman is at the forefront of Oman’s efforts to innovate personal protective equipment (PPE) and other devices to help offset supply shortfalls in the country amid a surge in global demand for these goods. The outfit – sponsored by the Public Authority for Privatisation and Partnership (PAPP) – is described as a full-fledged manufacturing workshop featuring a dedicated metal workshop, woodworking area, Rapid Prototyping

Area, 3D printing workshop, laser-cutting area, textile workshop, and design lab. A raft of other COVID-19 related products are also currently under development at Makers Oman. The list includes a ‘Ventilator Splitter’ – a device that helps connect one ventilator with multiple patients; a portable ventilator for use in hospitals and home settings; an indigenously designed bed for Intensive Care Units (ICU), and assorted medical aids for COVID-19 care.



Face shields (left) and hands-free door-opens (above) currently under mass production at Makers Oman.

“The face shields designed and produced by Makers Oman are cost-competitive alternatives to 3D-printed versions introduced in recent weeks by tech start-ups here in Oman and elsewhere around the world.

ISSAM AL TOKI
Education Coordinator

Notable is a ‘Respiratory Helmet’, which is currently under design, according to Issam.

“This is an advanced version of a face mask. It has a filter unit strapped to the healthcare worker’s back, offering 99 per cent protection from viruses in the air. It also comes with a hood, which is presently being prototyped at Makers Oman.

In Phase 1 of the project, we will just focus on the hood, with a view to ensuring that every healthcare staff has one hood per person rather than having to share it with colleagues because of a paucity of these devices.”

Defer loan repayments of Omanis hit by wage cuts: CBO

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

The Central Bank of Oman of has directed commercial banks, specialized lenders, Islamic banks and windows and finance and leasing companies operating in the Sultanate defer collections of monthly instalments from Omani private sector employees who have had their wages cut during the period of the lockdown.

A circular issued by the regulator on Wednesday urged all providers of personal and housing loans – whether dispensed by conventional, Islamic or leasing institutions – to apply a three-month moratorium on such monthly repayments.

Consequently, salaries for three months effective from May 2020 shall not be subject to instalment deductions until further notice, the apex bank said.

Lenders have been barred from also applying any interest on the instalments for the period of the deferral or levying any additional fees. Instead, banks are required to work on rescheduling or refinances the loans, if necessary, it said.

The latest measures stem from decisions adopted by the Supreme Committee overseeing Oman’s pandemic response on April 15, 2020.

Insurance premiums in Oman grow 5 per cent in 2019

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

Gross direct premiums of insurance companies in the Sultanate increased by 5 per cent to RO 486.5 per cent in 2019, compared to RO 463.5 in 2018, the Capital Market Authority (CMA) – the regulator of the insurance industry – said in a report.

The growth in insurance premiums average 4 per cent in the past five years. Direct gross premiums of general insurance increased by 5 per cent to RO 425.8 million in 2019 compared to RO 403.9 million in 2018. General insurance’s share was 87.5 per cent of the total insurance portfolio accompanied by an increase in gross direct premiums of life insurance by 2 per cent to RO 60.7 million in 2019 compared to RO 59.6 million in 2018.

Life insurance’s share was 12.5 per cent of the total insurance portfolio.

Takaful products recorded 20 per cent growth in direct premiums during 2019 compared to the previous year. Takaful’s share was 13.2 per cent of the total insurance portfolio at about RO 64 million.

Despite the unfavourable environment, characterized by slow growth and recession in the past years, insurance premiums witnessed remarkable growth due to increased awareness of the economic and social importance of insurance to hedge risk and safeguard wealth.

Most insurance products witnessed increase in the volume of insurance premiums except motor insurance which decreased by 10 per cent and liability insurance which decreased by 5 per cent. This type of insurance provides cover for legal liability for claims by third parties to compensate for the loss resulting from accidents to properties and



STRONG GROWTH: Takaful’s share rises to 13 per cent of total portfolio

bodily injuries or death related to third party.

On the other hand health insurance products recorded good levels of growth to reach 24 per cent during the period 2011-2019. Health insurance represents the biggest share in the total market share for the

second consecutive year, accounting for a 34.3 per cent share (RO 167 million) and surpassing motor insurance, which was the market leader.

The sector is expected to witness greater growth in response to the government’s policy during the

coming period to make health insurance compulsory for the employees of the private sector, residents and visitors. The number of insured Omanis and expatriates during the past year totaled around 490,000, with this number projected to exceed 1 million when the Dhamani scheme is implemented.

Property insurance grew 31 per cent in 2019, generating RO 63.8 million in premiums last year compared to RO 48.6 million in 2018. Average growth during the five years was 6 per cent.

It is noteworthy that properties insurance covers properties against loss and damage and is different from the marine, aviation, transport and motor insurance.

The increase was due to increased turnout on properties insurance such as homes, buildings, roads, and so on, which could be affected by

adverse weather events. Insurance companies paid RO 324.5 million in claims in 2019 in addition to the claims paid by reinsurers. Compared to the claims paid in 2018 the audited financials show the claims paid in 2019 decreased by 16 per cent.

Insurance companies enjoy strong financial position to play a greater role in accommodating the volume of the economic activity in the Sultanate and to provide adequate protection from the expected risk to individuals and institutions specially after increasing the minimum limit of the capital of national insurance companies to RO 10 million in the amendments to the Insurance Companies Law under Royal Decree No. 39/2014 which aimed at enhancing the financial ability of insurance companies with their capital reaching about RO 254 million at the end of 2019.

TURN TO PAGE 8



Support
MoH through
BankDhofar
mobile App

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its keenness to be at the forefront in supporting the national efforts exerted to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, BankDhofar updated its Mobile Banking App with the Ministry of Health (COVID-19) account which is dedicated to support the health services. This step enables BankDhofar's customers to easily donate and contribute to fighting the spread of the disease.

BankDhofar customers may donate at their convenience and easily through BankDhofar Mobile Banking. This step highlights BankDhofar's leading role in lending a hand to various social and economic causes, and engaging the community to take part in such charitable initiatives. Earlier, BankDhofar had contributed with RO 1 million to support the efforts of the Ministry of Health. The Bank continues to deliver on its commitment by launching various strategic sustainable CSR initiatives, ensuring sustainable benefit and on-going development, while simultaneously strengthening its ties with local community.

SV Pittie Group pledges jobs for dependents of frontline Omani health workers

STRONG GESTURE: LEADING GLOBAL TEXTILE GROUP SUPPORTS EFFORTS TO COUNTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

SV Pittie Group, one of the leading global textile manufacturers of compact and carded yarn, has announced a value creation initiative in its response and as support to the Omani government and community in its continuing fight against COVID-19.

The company is offering priority in employment opportunities for the immediate relatives of all Omani health workers who are on the frontlines fighting the pandemic selflessly in an effort to curb the spread of the virus, and thereby keeping citizens and residents safe.

Announcing the initiative, Vinod Pittie, Chairman, said: "SVP Pittie Group expresses its sincere thanks and appreciation to the Supreme Committee dealing with COVID-19 under the guidance of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. We are grateful for the actions taken by the Committee and the efforts taken by all Omani medical personnel in this continuing effort. As an expression of solidarity and gratitude, we are announcing this initiative that we believe will create long term value for the families of all those working tirelessly on the frontlines helping to securing the health and well-being of the wider public."

"We will offer priority employment



THE COMPANY IS OFFERING PRIORITY IN EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE IMMEDIATE RELATIVES OF ALL OMANI HEALTH WORKERS WHO ARE ON THE FRONTLINES FIGHTING THE PANDEMIC SELFLESSLY IN AN EFFORT TO CURB THE SPREAD OF THE VIRUS, AND THEREBY KEEPING CITIZENS AND RESIDENTS SAFE.

opportunities for the immediate support personnel who are engaged relatives of Omani medical and in the frontlines. Dependents of these remarkable individuals who are currently unemployed can apply for

a position at SV Pittie Sohar Textiles company website or contact its officials to be considered on priority."

SV Pittie Group is working together with the Government of Sultanate of Oman in setting up world-class textile facilities in Sohar and Salalah and thereby contributing to Oman Vision 2040, an ambitious plan of economic diversification in non-oil sectors. SV Pittie Sohar Textiles will see the establishment of an Integrated Textile Cluster, positioning the Sultanate of Oman as a global textile hub creating enormous job opportunities, empowering local entrepreneurship and creating a new industry sector. The company has already pledged employment to more than 1,000 Omani women with plans to employ more.

"We stand together with the Supreme Committee, the government and the people of Oman in this unprecedented and difficult time. While we pray for the situation to return to normal soon, we are inspired to do everything we can for those who put other lives ahead of theirs and are being role models for the community", Pittie added.

Frontline Omani health workers are requested to contact the under-mentioned SVP personnel to benefit from this initiative: Neelima Vyas (email: neelima@pittie.com) and Yaqoub al Mamari (email: yaqoub@pittie.com)

New Facility Building at Al Mazunah Free Zone

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) has signed an agreement with Shumookh Investment and Services to establish a Facilities Building at Al Mazunah Free Zone on Oman's border with Yemen. The project will be built on a 11,000 sqm plot at a total cost of around RO 3.5 million.

The agreement was signed by Said bin Abdullah al Balushi, Director General of Al Mazunah Free Zone, with Eng Musallam bin Juma'a al Hudaifi, Chief Executive Officer of Shumookh Investment and Services.



The project will be located at a strategic and easy-to-reach site, and will include a mixed-use space, the one Masar one-stop service centre,



restaurants, and office space for import and export services. The project is expected to be completed during the first quarter of 2021.

Insurance premiums in Oman grow 5 per cent in 2019

FROM PAGE 7

As to the level of investment performance of insurance companies they witnessed considerable increase at the end of 2019 with investments at more than RO 754 million compared to RO 621 million in 2018 increasing by 21 per cent which is good indicator compared to the investment performance of the other economic sectors. The proceeds of investments of insurance companies in 2019 increased by 29 per cent to about RO 23.9 million compared to

RO 18.5 million in 2018. Retention ratio of insurance companies in 2019 was about 60.5 per cent increasing compared to 2018 in which the retention ration was about 58.7 per cent.

The number of insurance companies licensed to carry out insurance business is 20 companies plus Oman Reinsurance Company. There were 35 licensed brokers at the end of 2019 and more than 145 insurance agents in the Wilayats and Governorates of the Sultanate.

Veolia Oman mobilises to maintain water, waste services

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 22

Since the beginning of the crisis, global water solutions specialist Veolia has put in place business continuity plans specific to each country that focus primarily on producing and supplying drinking water and treating wastewater, preserving waste collection operation, safeguarding energy management activities in cooling networks, performing industrial on-site services to ensure industrial continue to operate and upholding its activities processing hazardous waste, which is vital to maintaining key industrial operations.

In Oman, the men and women of Veolia who are highly experienced in managing crisis, draw on the Group's solid organisation and tried and tested methods to carry out duties, even in the most difficult and critical conditions.

In order to maintain the quality and availability of its services, Veolia Oman has activated a business continuity plan to protect the operations of the Sharqiyah Desalination Company in Sur that it is supplying drinking water for the 400,000 inhabitants of Sharqiyah South governorate and in the gas field of BP in Khazzan, where Veolia is producing drinking water for all the employees of the block. Veolia Oman teams continue to guarantee the supply of perfect quality drinking water in sufficient quantities, in all circumstances, the company said in a statement.

Tap water is perfectly suitable for drinking. The water supplied has systematically undergone various stages of treatment,



COVID-19 MEASURES: VEOLIA OMAN HAS ACTIVATED A BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN TO PROTECT THE OPERATIONS OF THE SHARQIYAH DESALINATION COMPANY IN SUR

including disinfection, which is designed to eliminate all viruses, as well as the coronavirus. The World Health Organization (WHO) has confirmed that the virus has not displayed any

resistance to the standard treatment applied to drinking water.

With the support of public authorities, Veolia and its partner Al Ramooz are fully

mobilised in Al Dhahirah and Al Buraimi regions in order to secure capability to handle waste. Veolia is doing everything it can to protect the safety of its employees, especially

those in the field who are currently the most at risk. Veolia is focusing even more actively on safety during these unprecedented times.

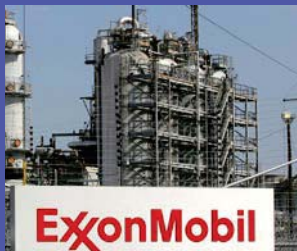
Veolia employees who can carry out duties remotely using digital technology are currently working from home. Employees who need to be present on the ground, specifically for certain tasks that are essential in maintaining service continuity, Veolia has put in place team rotations in order to reduce risk exposure and guarantee continuity of supply. Interventions have been prioritised and the teams are concentrating on priority duties.

All operations carried out or supported by Veolia Oman on the ground are coordinated by a crisis unit working at national and regional level, in liaison with the Veolia Group global crisis unit.

Veolia and its local partners, through the Sharqiyah Desalination Company, support the efforts of the Ministry of Health (MoH) to counter the threat of Covid-19. The Sharqiyah Desalination Company has made a donation of RO 10 000 in order to provide medical supplies to the population of Sur region.

"Veolia's mission is to provide services that are essential in day-to-day life, like supplying drinking water or processing waste. During this challenging time, our responsibility is even greater as needs are more pressing. Our operatives are fully mobilised to continue serving the Sultanate. Day in, day out, these everyday heroes are on the ground so others can stay at home", said Erwan Rouxel, Veolia Oman country manager.

US energy firms' quarterly reports to show depths of slump



A view of the Exxon Mobil refinery is pictured in Baytown, Texas. — Reuters

NEW YORK: Investors are in for more bad news on the energy front in the coming weeks as a host of the sector's biggest companies report quarterly results following the historic collapse in oil prices.

Forecasts for US energy sector earnings this year have dropped along with oil prices, weighing on shares along with worries over debt, layoffs and possible bankruptcies.

Analysts see a 58.9 per cent year-over-year decline in energy earnings for the first quarter, steeper even than the 37.7 per cent decline they projected at the start of the month, according to IBES data from Refinitiv. For the year, energy earnings are estimated to drop more than 95 per cent.

Down a whopping 46 per cent since Dec. 31, energy is by far the S&P 500's worst-performing sector this year. For many Wall Street strategists, it has become a sector that is hard to recommend.

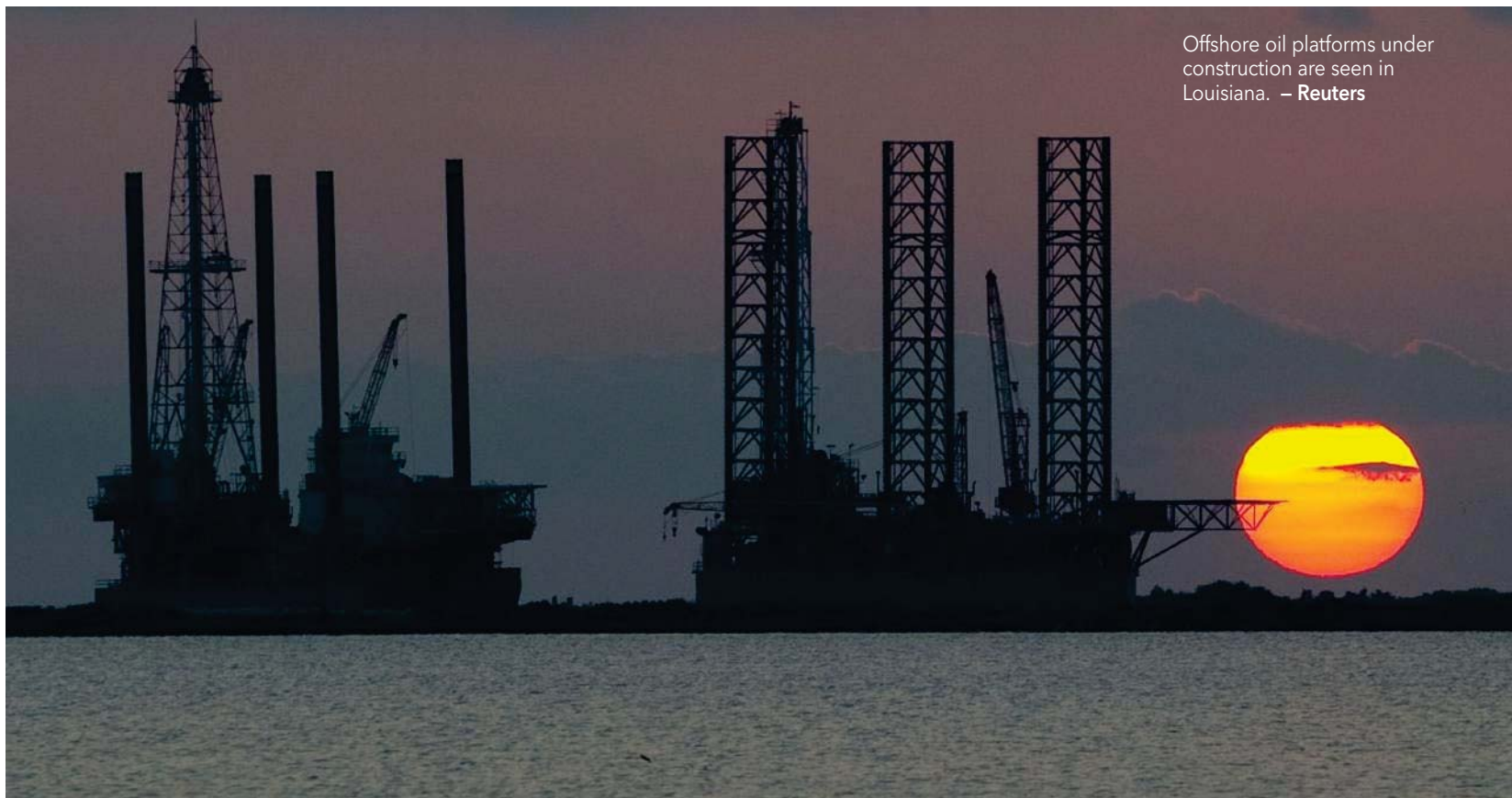
"It's all messy, and it suggests there's no easy way out of this. We have too much supply and too little demand," said Sameer Samana, senior global market strategist at Wells Fargo Investment Institute in St. Louis, which downgraded energy shares to its "most unfavorable" rating from "neutral" in early February.

The supply-demand situation needs to improve for the outlook to get better, he said. "What it needs, in a market with investors that have very little patience, is probably for some time to pass."

Results so far bear out that the season will be grim for energy. US oilfield services giant Halliburton reported a \$1 billion first-quarter loss on charges and outlined the largest budget cut yet among top energy companies.

— Reuters

Oil hits lowest this century as COVID-19 crisis hammers demand



Offshore oil platforms under construction are seen in Louisiana. — Reuters

LONDON: Oil slumped to less than \$16 a barrel on Wednesday, hitting its lowest since 1999, with the market awash with excess supply as the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic continues to hammer demand for fuels.

A glut has been building since Opec+, led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, failed to renew output cuts last month. Opec+ agreed new curbs this month, but government lockdowns to contain the pandemic have cut fuel demand more steeply.

Brent crude, which fell 24 per cent in the previous session, touched \$15.98 a barrel, its lowest since June 1999. It was trading down \$1.83, or 9.5 per cent, at \$17.50 by 0840 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate was down 15 cents, or 1.3 per cent, at \$11.42.

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"Be prepared for more surprises in this broken oil market," said Rystad Energy's head of oil markets, Bjornar Tonhaugen, adding that prices could sink to unprecedented levels because there will simply not be enough storage capacity unless there are further outputs cuts.

The falls follow two of the wildest days in the history of oil trading, with supply looking likely to outstrip demand for months to come.

The nearby US contract fell into

negative territory for the first time ever on Monday and Brent's low on Wednesday takes the price back to a time when Opec was also tackling a supply glut and business and consumers were concerned about the Millenium Bug affecting computers after the turn of the century.

In the latest sign of excess supply, the American Petroleum Institute on Tuesday reported that US crude inventories rose by 13.2 million barrels, against analyst expectations

for an increase of 13.1 million barrels.

The US government's official supply report is due later on Wednesday.

In an effort to shore up the market, Opec+ this month agreed to reduce output by 9.7 million bpd. Other nations, including the United States, have also said they will pump less.

Producers are considering further steps. Saudi Arabia on Tuesday said that it was ready to take extra measures with other producers, though the next formal Opec+ meeting is not until June.

In a development that raises doubt over a formal US supply cut, two of three Texas regulators on Tuesday delayed a vote to force producers to curtail output, predicting the move would land the state in a legal minefield. — Reuters



A 3D printed Facebook logo is placed between small toy people figures in front of a keyboard in this illustration photo. — Reuters

Facebook invests \$5.7 billion in India's Reliance Jio

BENGALURU: Facebook Inc announced a \$5.7 billion investment in Reliance Industries Ltd's (telecom unit on Wednesday, making it the largest minority shareholder in Jio Platforms Limited.

The social media giant said it would focus on collaborating its messaging platform WhatsApp with Reliance's e-commerce venture JioMart to enable people to connect with small businesses.

Facebook's investment will translate to a 9.99 per cent equity stake in Jio Platforms on a fully diluted basis, Jio said in a statement.

The deal comes at a time when Facebook-owned WhatsApp has secured approval to roll out its digital payment service in India, according to media reports to compete with the likes of Google Pay and Paytm.

WhatsApp has 400 million users in India, its biggest market, reaching nearly 80 per cent of smartphone users in the country.

Reliance Jio, the fast-growing telecom carrier controlled by billionaire Mukesh Ambani, began operations in late 2016.

Last month, Financial Times reported that social media giant was in talks for a 10 per cent stake in Jio but the talks were halted due to global travel bans amid the coronavirus outbreak. — Reuters

Mexico unveils \$31 billion stimulus, cuts interest rates



People walk past the building of Mexico's Central Bank (Banco de Mexico) in downtown Mexico City. — Reuters

MEXICO CITY: Mexico's central bank unveiled around \$31 billion in support for the financial system and cut borrowing costs on Tuesday in the country's most decisive move yet to help the economy weather the coronavirus pandemic.

Banxico, as the Bank of Mexico is known, said it implemented the measures to "foster an orderly behaviour of financial markets, strengthen the credit channels and provide liquidity for the sound development of the financial system."

The moves, which included cutting the bank's benchmark interest rate by 50 basis points, were approved in a unanimous vote by the

bank's five-member governing board. The new overnight interbank interest rate stands at 6 per cent.

Goldman Sachs economist Alberto Ramos said Banxico still has significant room to ease in coming meetings and still offer one of the highest carry trades across the emerging market landscape, as its spread versus rates in the United States remains attractive.

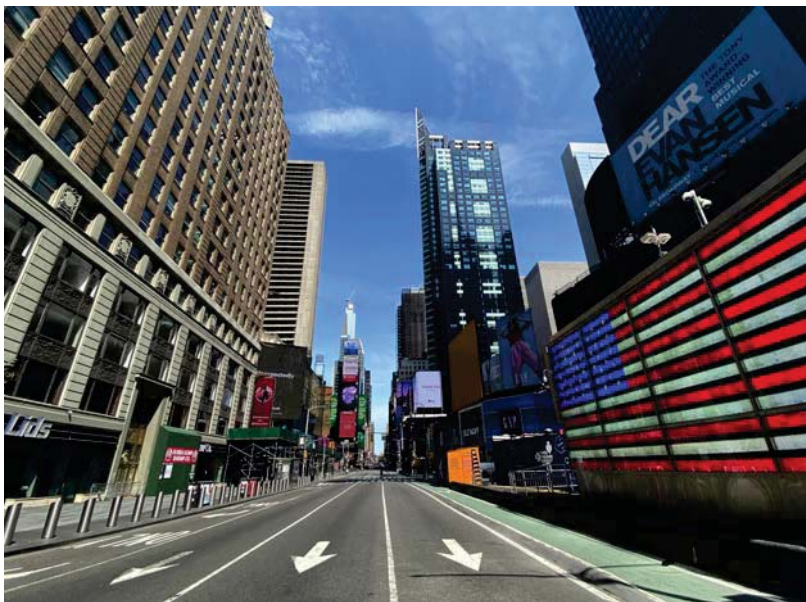
In a carry trade strategy, an investor borrows money in the currency of a country with low interest rates, such as the United States and some European countries, to buy bonds of a high-yield nation like Mexico.

Ramos forecast Banxico will cut the benchmark rate to 4.50 per cent by end-2020.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is facing growing criticism for his reluctance to support businesses and jobs hurt by the coronavirus crisis with more aggressive relief measures.

Banxico said the liquidity and credit moves will support the functioning of the financial system with up to a total of 750 billion pesos (\$30.8 billion). Coupled with previously announced measures, the support amounts to 3.3 per cent of last year's gross domestic product (GDP). — Reuters

Global CEOs see U-shaped recession due to COVID-19



A nearly deserted 7th Avenue in Times Square is seen near midday in Manhattan during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease in New York City. — Reuters

SINGAPORE: Global business leaders are preparing for a drawn-out U-shaped recession due to the impact of coronavirus and many fear their companies won't survive the pandemic, a survey of thousands of chief executives showed on Wednesday.

The pandemic sweeping the world has killed nearly 180,000 people, routed financial markets and could trigger the worst economic meltdown since the 1930s Great Depression.

Around 60 per cent of chief executives are preparing for a U-shaped recovery — a long period between recession and an upturn — compared with 22 per cent who predict a double-dip recession, according to an April 15-19 poll of 3,534 chief executives from 109 countries conducted by

Around 60 per cent of chief executives are preparing for a U-shaped recovery — a long period between recession and an upturn — compared with 22 per cent who predict a double-dip recession, according to an April 15-19 poll of 3,534 chief executives from 109 countries.

YPO, a business leadership network. The survey found that 11 per cent

of chief executives see coronavirus as a risk to the survival of their firm, while a further 40 per cent say the pandemic poses a severe threat.

"We have not seen a crisis like this for over a hundred years, and some household names will not survive," said Glenn Keys, Executive Chairman of Aspen Medical, a Sydney-based health services firm and YPO member.

Business leaders in the hospitality and restaurant sectors were the most vulnerable with 41 per cent of executives saying their firms were at risk of not surviving, while 30 per cent in aviation and 19 per cent in wholesale and retail sales feared they may go under, the survey found.

There are some beneficiaries, with 10 per cent of sector-specific retail and wholesale leaders as well as heads

of production firms in agriculture, factories, mines and utilities reporting a positive impact to their revenue.

However, most chief executives expect things to get worse before they get better.

Almost two-thirds of business leaders forecast a negative impact on earnings to continue for more than a year, while a quarter expect their workforce to be down by more than 20 per cent a year from now.

"Across the globe, the mindset of the business leader is clearly that the world has changed in a very short space of time," said Scott Mordell, YPO's chief executive.

"We are in uncharted waters, filled with an unprecedented number of pitfalls, that are challenging some businesses' very existence." — Reuters

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OUD PLAYER

CHANGING PREVAILING BELIEF

MAZOUN AL GHAILANI

One of the most beautiful things about music and art is that it can transform the situation and the mood of the player and the listener at the same time. There are those artists who created brilliant, life-changing work. With some artists, the music they create, takes the listener into worlds of fantasy and imagination, even if the music is kind of classical by oud.

It was the strings' sound and melodies that fascinated her the first time when trying playing oud. She defied the prevailing belief that playing oud is for men only. Despite her hesitation at the beginning, she started to play oud in the first year at the university. Then she joined the Omani oud hobbyists association to improve the skills.

The talented Oud player Noura al Nadhiri, has a Bachelors Degree in Music and Musical sciences from Sultan Qaboos University, and she is musical skills teacher as she is also a singer.

"I chose oud instrument because it expresses my feeling and I love carrying it all the time when I am singing", Noura Said.

While playing the oud, Noura shows how it rests snugly against the body. So the vibration resonates with the body of the musician so "she can concentrate on the vibration of the oud." This connection with the instrument also means the oud player can easily correct the voice while singing.

"I am influenced by many players, including my professor at the University Lasad Abbas who was a big supporter to me and Fathi al Balushi, Director of Omani Oud



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Hobbyists Association.

Her passion in creating a new touch for Omani music has resulted in founding the "Jawaher Alafia" musical band that is certified by Oman Center for Traditional Music. The whole team members of the band are from the same talented family.

The beginning of the band was when



Oman Center for Traditional Music announced a competition to develop and encourage the talents of young people.

"We came to participate in the competition as a band consisting of eight members who are all my relatives. The aim of establishing the band is to develop stanzas in the Omani character," Noura Said.

"The idea was accepted and we presented musical performances that impressed the audience. Supported by Professor Muslim al Kathiri, I grew up as an Omani singer and oud player," Noura added.

Noura loves to play Omani, Syrian, Egyptian and Turkish types of music. She has many of participations and

musical achievements by her own diligence and from the support of colleagues artists. She participated in a national television music song called "YaWatan" for the 42nd National Day. The tenth edition of Omani song festival was one of Noura's unforgettable experiences.

"My international participation was in Morocco in the Arab Youth Festival and I was awarded the best voice as member of the Sultan Qaboos University Music group," Noura said.

The challenges that people face are the change point. Some people would surrender immediately and others chose to continue. "The first challenge to me was gender bias. The community could not accept a woman playing music in events and public celebrations. Knowing deep inside of me that this is something that should be changed in the community, I refused to easily surrender and let go of my dream. I continued to appear and gradually, people accepted the presence of women as musicians", she explained.

The first piece of music that she had written was when she participated in youth creation competition. She wrote and composed the musical theme and effects for "Al Heel Theatrical Group" and played it live on the stage. She won the best music prize in this competition.

Playing oud changed Noura's life in several aspects. It helped her to express her feelings, raised her self-confidence and enabled her to overcome challenges.

"I think there is an increase of the musical awareness in society. I hope, God willing, that my projects will help everyone who has a talent in this field," Noura concluded.



FEDERER SUGGESTS MERGER OF ATP AND WTA



LONDON: Roger Federer on Wednesday called for a merger between the men's ATP Tour and the WTA, which runs the women's circuit, as tennis wades through a lengthy coronavirus shutdown with lower-level professionals in deep financial crisis.

"Just wondering... am I the only one thinking that now is the time for men's and women's tennis to be united and come together as one?" the winner of 20 Grand Slam singles titles said on Twitter.

"I am not talking about merging competition on the court, but



merging the 2 governing bodies (ATP and WTA) that oversee the men's and women's professional tours..."

The tennis season was suspended in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown will continue at least until mid-July, depriving lower-level players, who depend solely on

tournament winnings, of the chance to earn a living.

The men's ATP Tour, the WTA, along with the International Tennis Federation and organisers of the four Grand Slams, are creating a fund to help the lower-level players affected by the shutdown. — **Reuters**



Italy's Fanchini sisters retire from skiing

MILAN: Italian sisters Nadia and Elena Fanchini, who both won world championships medals in alpine skiing, announced on Wednesday they were calling time on their careers.

Nadia Fanchini, 33, claimed two World Cup victories, in the super-G in 2009 at Lake Louise and downhill at La Thuile in 2016, and 13 other podium finishes during her career.

She also won bronze in the downhill at the world championships at Val d'Isere in 2009 and silver in the same event in 2013 at Schladming.

Older sister Elena Fanchini won silver at the world championships in Bormio in 2005 and claimed four World Cup podiums, all in downhill, including victories in Lake Louise, Canada in 2006 and Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, in 2015. The 34-year-old has not competed since recovering from a tumour operation in 2018 and subsequently breaking her

“

I started in competition with Elena and we are finishing together. It's difficult to leave competition, even if as athletes we know it has to happen sooner or later

NADIA FANCHINI
Alpine skier

leg and a finger in training.

"I started in competition with Elena and we are finishing together," said Nadia. "It's difficult to leave competition, even if as athletes we know it has to happen sooner or later."

— **AFP**

WEST HAM, PALACE CANCEL AUSTRALIA PRE-SEASON TRIP



LONDON: West Ham and Crystal Palace have announced they will not be travelling to Australia after the pre-season Queensland Champions Cup in July was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Premier League clubs had been set to travel to Australia as part of their preparations for the 2020/21 season, with A-League side Brisbane Roar also involved in the three-team tournament. But global sport is currently in turmoil, with no clear indication of when the English football season will end.

A statement from West Ham

said: "West Ham United regret to confirm that, due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the inaugural EVA Air Queensland Champions Cup has been postponed."

Manager David Moyes said: "It is a real shame that we will no longer be able to make it over to Queensland this summer. However, it is the right decision to postpone given the circumstances." Crystal Palace chairman Steve Parish described it as "bitterly disappointing" but said football was of secondary importance during the global crisis. — **AFP**

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KLOPP SAYS LIVERPOOL ARE NOT FINISHED ARTICLE

LIVERPOOL: Juergen Klopp believes there is still room for improvement from Liverpool despite their incredible Premier League campaign, which is on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Reds were 25 points clear of second-placed Manchester City and on the verge of their first top-flight title since 1990 when football was halted last month. But Klopp said Liverpool, who won the Champions League last year and have only lost one Premier League match all season, could get even better.

“We will not change, that’s the first thing, but whether we will be successful depends on what other clubs are doing as well because they have all the chance to improve things, do things better

JUERGEN KLOPP
Liverpool manager

be “forced back” after the COVID-19 shutdown but admitted it could have a positive impact on the mood of the country. There is no end in sight to the football lockdown in England but German football authorities are set to announce plans for Bundesliga matches to restart in empty stadiums on May 9.

“We are all at home, all isolated, we have no cases or stuff like this,” said Klopp.

“If we come together and train in groups of two or five or six or eight, I’m not sure when that will be possible, we have to wait for the government on that. We cannot force that and will not, because we can’t, there’s absolutely nothing for that.

“But if football can help in some departments with lifting the mood, giving something to think about and to deal with in a different way, then we have to start training at one point, but I don’t know when that will be.”
— AFP

“We will not change, that’s the first thing, but whether we will be successful depends on what other clubs are doing as well because they have all the chance to improve things, do things better,” he told Sky Sports.

“So I have no clue what the future will hold for us. But we will not change, this team is not the finished article, and we have a lot of space for improvement, and we work on that.

“We have fresh blood internally coming through. We can improve with this team, which is great.”

Klopp does not believe football should

