



Wear a mask... always!

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GCC DEFICITS TO FALL SHARPLY IN 2021

GO TO **PAGE 05 BUSINESS**

Application process for jobseekers starts today



A screen grab from Oman TV News of a Sohar gathering this week

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To implement directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to appoint 32,000 jobseekers, the Ministry of Defence (MoD), in coordination with the Ministry of Labour (MoL), will begin receiving requests of candidates who meet terms of recruitment starting May 27.

MoD will announce appointment of jobseekers in Royal Army of Oman, Royal Air Force of Oman, Royal Navy of Oman and other departments of the ministry.

Training for 3,000

The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) has called on owners of SMEs to benefit from an on-the-job training initiative

signed with MoL by registering their enterprise's data to benefit from training programmes.

The initiative includes opportunities to train 3,000 national cadres. With support provided by MoL, trainee graduates will receive RO500 per month, diploma holders RO400 per month and General Education Diploma holders RO300 per month.

Gatherings condemned

Citizens condemned and expressed dismay over the actions of a few individuals who joined gatherings in Sohar this week.

The gatherings and sit-ins were organised with the objective of tackling the issue of unemployment, but some of those who participated assaulted policemen, passers-by and road users, according to ONA.

"They blocked roads and vandalised public and private property in a flagrant violation of the Basic Law of the State, which states that 'Safe life is a guaranteed right for every human being and that the State has a duty to establish law and order and provide tranquility for all.'"

The citizens affirmed that the actions of the saboteurs contradict the values of Omani society and constitute a departure from the state of calm and commitment that prevails in the country.

Similar views and pleas for calm and respect for the law echoed on social media platforms, requesting the youth not to engage in activities that target those tasked with maintaining law and order, that damage property or violate civil liberties of citizens and residents.

Peace comes through dialogue, not killing and destruction: Oman at UN

New York, US - The sultanate has said that the road towards peace does not follow a course of killing and destruction, but rather comes through dialogue and negotiations that seek to preserve the supreme interests of the parties concerned.

This was stated in Oman's speech before the UN General Assembly's emergency session on Palestine, following the recent developments in the region. The speech was delivered by Ahmed Dawood al Zedjali, Deputy Permanent Representative of the sultanate at the United Nations.

Zedjali pointed out that Palestinian lands held by Israel since 1967 in the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza are, from the point of view of international law, "occupied lands" and that the escalation, which has been taking place until recently, occurs on occupied lands.

The sultanate said that the incidents on the Palestinian lands



Ahmed Dawood al Zedjali

are typical forms of occupation, a fact affirmed by more than 700 UN General Assembly resolutions and more than 80 decisions issued by the Security Council. "None of the resolutions have been implemented by the Israeli occupation authorities. To maintain the credibility of the Security Council - this major institution in the international relations system - it is time the resolutions were put to action," Zedjali said. ONA

3.4 magnitude earthquake reported in S Sharqiyah

Muscat - An earthquake was recorded in South Sharqiyah governorate on Wednesday, according to the Earthquake Monitoring Centre (EMC) at Sultan Qaboos University.

A statement issued by EMC said, 'An earthquake of 3.4 magnitude struck the fault area of Jalan Bani Bu Ali at 11.23am at a depth of 10km. The earthquake was recorded 125km away in Sur.'

"The epicentre was 250km from Muscat, 260km from Duqm and about 125km from Sur. Such tremors are small in magnitude and have no effect on houses and people," said Dr Issa al Hussain, director of Seismological Centre at Sultan Qaboos University.



WhatsApp moves court against India



EU, AstraZeneca in court over vaccine delays



Tokyo Olympics sponsor joins cancellation chorus

Students overjoyed at being vaccinated

Muscat - A two-week campaign to immunise 75,725 students, teachers and allied staff with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine kick-started on Wednesday.

Students, parents and school staff welcomed the decision to add 12th graders to the priority target group of the national COVID-19 immunisation plan.

Abdul Aziz Hamad al Daghari, headmaster of Al Imam al Muhanna bin Sultan School in Bausher, told Muscat Daily, "The school prepared to immunise students by setting up a special hall. We have obtained approval from the students' parents to immunise their children. A few students were hesitant at first, but our team explained the need and the importance of immunisation. All our students and their parents agreed to be vaccinated."

He expected more than 400 students to be vaccinated during the two-week drive, including ten who were unable to take the shot on the first day due to minor illnesses. "They will be administered the vaccine in a week's time. The booster dose will be



given after ten weeks."

Mohammed Nasser Mahdouri, a Grade 12 student of the school, was happy that he was getting vaccinated. "It will help me in the future."

Mohammed's schoolmate Muath al Hassani informed that while he was happy to hear about

the vaccination drive targeting students, his parents were initially hesitant. "They consented only after discussing the matter with other family members."

He said he felt privileged to be vaccinated at a time when only individuals aged 60 and older were getting the vaccine in the

country.

Mansoor al Siyabi, a parent who himself is not yet in the eligible category, was delighted that his son was getting the jab before he did. "It is good for him; it will help in the future."

Siyabi was initially "afraid" about his son being inoculated

STEPS TO FOLLOW AFTER COVID-19 JAB

A person is susceptible to the infection for till 14 days after the second dose. Full effectiveness of the vaccine begins from the 14th day.

To reduce side effects

- Apply cold compress on the injection site to reduce pain, redness and swelling.
- If any of these symptoms persist or if you experience severe side effects, visit the nearest health institution.
- Use fever-reducing medication such as paracetamol to reduce fever, headache and joint pain every six to eight hours if needed.

Be cautious

- Continue to adhere to preventive measures, such as washing hands frequently, wearing a mask and physical distancing after taking the vaccine. Being vaccinated doesn't end the need to be cautious.
- Pay no heed to rumors and source all information about vaccines from reliable official channels.

SAYYID SHIHAB RECEIVES AMBASSADOR OF SPAIN



H H Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received H E Maria Luisa, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Spain to the sultanate, in his office at Al Murtafaa Camp on Wednesday. Their meeting reviewed bilateral relations between the two countries and exchanged views on matters of common concern (ONA)

CAA amends PCR test validity for long-haul international flights

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has amended guidelines of COVID-19 PCR test for arriving passengers. Flyers on long-haul flights can take the PCR test up to 96 hours prior to arrival in Oman.

In a statement, CAA said that the decision was taken in coordination with health authorities in Oman.

The period of pre-travel negative COVID-19 PCR test has been amended for long international flights (not less than eight hours including transit) to be conducted within 96 hours of the scheduled arrival time in Oman. The requirement for negative COVID-19 PCR test for shorter flights continues to be 72 hours.



The authority added that Omani citizens who have recovered from COVID-19 are allowed to travel to the sultanate if they provide proof that they have completed the prescribed quarantine period before taking the COVID-19 PCR test prior to departure to Oman. 'The other entry requirements as stipulated in previous circulars will remain valid,' the CAA stated.



(Supplied photo)

866 new cases of COVID-19 reported

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Eight hundred and sixty-six new cases of COVID-19 and nine related deaths were reported on Wednesday, according to the Ministry of Health (MoH).

With these latest figures, the total number of cases in the sultanate now stands at 212,904 and the death toll 2,293. With a total of 196,355 COVID-19 patients recovering, the recovery rate is 92.2 per cent.

Ninety-one people were admitted to hospitals across the country during the 24 hour pe-

riod, accounting for a total of 731 patients in health institutions, including 248 in intensive care units.

The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to the virus. 'Everyday preventive actions like washing hands frequently with soap and avoiding close contact with people who are sick are recommended to help arrest the spread of the virus. Those who are suspected of having the virus should visit the nearest health centre and avoid crowds, and if confirmed sick, should isolate at home for 14 days,' the MoH said.

Pact signed to recycle fishing nets

be'ah signed the deal with Wakud as part of efforts to preserve the environment

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah) on Wednesday entered into an agreement with Wakud to collect, store, and treat fishing net waste.

Kumayl bin Ahmed al Lawati, department head of Business Development at be'ah, and Talal Hasan, chairman of Wakud's Board of Directors signed the agreement as part of their efforts to preserve the environment and sustain marine life.

Wakud was set up to catalyse the biofuel market in Oman.



(Supplied photo)

"We are pleased with this co-operation with Wakud which is a continuation of the efforts made for the proper and safe disposal of hazardous and non-hazardous waste items in order to preserve the Omani environment," Lawati said. "We aim to work jointly in reducing the impact of waste on the environment and the sustainability of its resources," he added.

"Recycling fishing net waste will contribute to the sustainability of resources, and the extraction of materials of economic value to benefit from them by adopting the circular economy model. In addition to that, it will be diverted to the engineered landfills where be'ah will provide an area of 1,000sqm in the Duqm engineered landfill, in

which Wakud will be storing the waste of fishing nets in partnership with various parties."

Wakud's Hasan said that the partnership with be'ah comes from "our firm belief in the importance of social responsibility and the constructive role it plays in preserving our environment, and the beautiful and picturesque beaches of the sultanate."

"Wakud will collect fishing net waste from the coasts of Masirah and Duqm, then transfer it to the engineered landfill in Duqm in Al Wusta governorate, to collect and store sufficient quantities in the area allocated by be'ah and subsequently, it will be transported to North Batinah for cleaning and sorting prior to being shipped abroad for recycling and utilisation of their value.

"This comes within the framework of social responsibility for non-profit companies and in collaboration and partnership with the Environment Society of Oman and the Port of Sohar. The initiative will also provide additional income for collectors and Omani fishermen to motivate them to collect the fishing net waste from the coasts and contribute to the cleanliness and sustainability of Omani beaches."

The Environment Society of Oman have removed an estimated 615 tonnes of abandoned fishing gear from Masirah Island in a series of dedicated net removal campaigns since 2017.

I wear a mask for your safety...

“

Wearing a mask to protect others and myself is my contribution to the well-being of the people. We must wear masks and together fight this pandemic for the love of humanity. I wear a mask every time I step out of my house because I remind myself that I have a duty to protect my people, both at home and at work.

Ali Al Mani

GM Business, National Finance

Do you?

The battle against COVID-19 is getting tough. Let's beat it by our responsible behaviour.

Wear a mask...always!

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Oman participates in UNWTO meet in Riyadh

Muscat - The sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, is taking part in the 47th session of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Regional Commission for the Middle East and the inaugural ceremony of the organisation's Middle East Bureau, as well as a conference on tourism recovery in the region, being held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The sultanate's delegation is headed by H E Salim Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism.

The two-day event sees the participation of the UNWTO Secretary-General, tourism ministers from the Middle East - including Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates - and other invited friendly countries.

The agenda includes the



UNWTO Secretary-General's report, the Middle East's coordination protocol standards, nominations and elections for the primary apparatuses and the affiliated organisations, besides review of UNWTO projects.

During the conference - themed 'Tourism Recovery in the Region - the experiences of sis-

terly and friendly countries in the tourism field, and the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and their solutions will be reviewed.

On the sidelines, several meetings will be held by H E Mahrouqi on fields of joint cooperation. **ONA**

ROP NEWS

Expats arrested for picking elderly citizen's pocket

Muscat - A group of expats has been arrested for pickpocketing an elderly citizen's wallet, according to the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

In a statement, it said, 'The Directorate General of Inquiries and Investigations arrested a number of Asian expatriates on charges of pick-

pocketing and stealing the contents of an elderly citizen's wallet while he was shopping in a market. The expats were caught after a video clip showing their act was circulated. The accused were arrested and legal action has been initiated against them.'

330 boxes of tobacco seized in South Batinah

The ROP has seized 330 boxes of tobacco from a truck in South Batinah governorate on Wednesday.

A statement issued by Oman Customs said, 'The Investigation and Risk Assessment Department seized boxes of tobacco and tobacco derivatives weighing about 9,900kg from a truck coming from the Port of Salalah.'



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1KG
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R.O **6.895**



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Lemon 3 ltr + All Purpose
Cleaner Lemon
R.O **3.290**



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PASI achieved 80% digital transformation in 2020

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Digital transformation rate for internal and external services reached 80 per cent in 2020, according to the Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI).

PASI said it seeks to have a fundamental and effective role in achieving the Digital Oman Strategy and Oman Vision 2040.

'The government aims to achieve digital transformation to raise the standard of living of the insured, their families and community members.'

In order to support this strategic direction and achieve national priorities, it has become important to focus on the services provided to customers and beneficiaries, especially electronic and digital transformation, in line with the rapid development witnessed by the world in the use of modern technologies, and to facilitate the community members to access services at any time and place, it added.

Talking about PASI's efforts in the digital drive, Hashim bin



Muhammad al Hashimi, director of Insurance Service at PASI, said, "PASI is interested in upgrading the services it provides to beneficiaries and this interest is clearly reflected in PASI's strategic direction to improve the services and achieve its vision to be one of the top 20 social insurance institutions in the world. In pursuit of this approach, PASI uses all its capabilities in the digital and electronic transformation of the services it provides."

Quality services
"PASI provides its insurance

PASI is interested in upgrading the services it provides to beneficiaries and this interest is clearly reflected in PASI's strategic direction

HASHIM AL HASHIMI

services through nine branches, including the main branch, in addition to the electronic portal and the application of smart phones (Taminatoman)," he said.

"It is important to mention that PASI launched its outlet in Muscat Mall at the beginning of this year, which operates in the morning and evening, so that customers can benefit from the outlet at different times, in addition to obtaining insurance advice or any inquiries. So in the context of providing services through PASI branches, and in the interest of PASI to regulate

the process of receiving customers, and confirmation of commitment to the precautionary measures, it launched the appointment reservation system in February. Customers can book an appointment through an easy link to the website, and smart phones, with the assurance that the appointments related to providing services do not exceed two working days."

As for the exceptional circumstances due to the coronavirus pandemic, Hashimi said, "PASI was able to keep up with the situation in the country. PASI has improved and expanded the channels of providing insurance services through the electronic portal, and opened a communication channel through WhatsApp last year to provide some services, in addition to a toll-free number (800777600).

"PASI has also used social media channels to respond to customer inquiries and to provide insurance advices. In addition, PASI has implemented online work for its staff," Hashimi added.

Shrimp caught off season seized in Muscat

Muscat - Over 70kg of fresh shrimp were seized by the fish control team in Muscat governorate.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources said, 'In cooperation with the Royal Oman Police, the fish control team in the Governorate of Muscat seized more than 70kg of fresh shrimp that was circulated outside the fishing season.'

Necessary legal measures are being taken against the violators, it added.

The three-month shrimp catching season in Oman is from September to November every year.

There are 12 shrimp species in Oman, but only four species are caught using traditional nets, including white Indian shrimps, white shrimps, tiger prawns and



dotted shrimps. Shrimp fisheries are found in Masirah Island, Mahout, the coastal areas of Al Wusta and along the coastal strip in South Sharqiyah governorate.

The ministry affirmed that the law prohibits catching, trading and dealing in Omani shrimp during the period from the beginning of December to the end of August.

RACHEL CHEW EXPLORES

I'M **RACHEL CHEW**; LOUD MOUTH, FOODIE AND A GENERAL EMBARRASSMENT WHO YOU CAN FIND ON HI FM WEEKDAYS 4-7PM.

A visit to Wadi Hoqain



You are greeted by a huge pool which resembles a bit of a lake, with rocky terrain lining its outside. After a little scramble over some rocks you are greeted by another large pool

Anybody who has encountered me recently will no doubt have heard me bang on about "my new favourite place". I plastered photos all over Instagram, Facebook and Tik Tok because this place is truly magical.

We got up nice and early to try and beat the midday sun, pulled up and straight away jumped in the water, because yes you guessed it, it was already hot. You are greeted by a huge pool which resembles a bit of a lake, with rocky terrain lining its outside. After a little scramble over some rocks you are greeted by another large pool. I casually found myself floating on a palm tree trunk.

This is where my commentary started. "Oh wowee, this is stunning, wow." The light bounces off the bright blue water and dances on the stone walls, which we all said looked like lion faces... Long story short, this truly beautiful place gets your imagination going.

Once you are out of the second pool you come to a white pebbled area which you walk through before you are met with sulphur blue water which you wade through before reaching the third pool which is waist deep. This pool has a mini waterfall and a lot of white sulphur, which if you wish to put on your face like a face mask you can... I warn you; you will be left smelling of

gone off eggs.

After a scramble up the waterfall [it's not even a metre high, but allow me] you go through what I can only describe as like a mini-rapids at a theme park, where the path is soft, white stone, half a metre wide winding along before being greeted by an open river bed surrounded by trees.

After turning round and returning through the water pools and climbing back up to the car, we dried off and set off on the five-minute journey to the water fall... Or so they said... According to Google there's a massive waterfall, there's even a huge car park for it. This was the most anti-climactic sight I have seen, all we found was a drain pipe. I think if you want to see the waterfall you should go after some rain, or at a different time of year.

Things you need to know before you go: don't wear your favourite shoes, I recommend water shoes or old trainers. Definitely, don't go bare foot as you will need to climb back to the carpark on uneven terrain. Take a water proof bag, most importantly to keep your car keys dry, but also so you can take your phone and take lots of lovely photos and of course sun cream. Most of the time the rocks provide shade for you, but the water pools are open and despite arriving at 9am it was already really hot.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of *Muscat Daily* or Apex Press & Publishing

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Offer valid from 15th May 2021 to 15th August 2021. Total of 3 raffle draws will be held at Oasis Water Company, Aziba, Draw Dates: 10th June 2021, 10th July 2021 and 10th August 2021. Winners will be informed directly. Oasis Water Company employees are not eligible to participate in this promotion. Gifts shown are for illustrative purposes only. Actual may vary.

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Hotel guests declined by 7.3% in April: NCSI



Muscat - The total number of guests in the three- to five-star hotels in the sultanate fell by 7.3 per cent till the end of April to stand at 373,035 guests compared to 402,581 guests for the same period of 2020, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The total revenues of these hotels also fell to RO27.409mn by April, compared to RO55.174mn during the same period of the previous year, comprising a decline of 50.3 per cent.

Meanwhile, the occupancy rate went down by 16.4 per cent as it reached 35.9 per cent.

Among nationalities, Omani guests constituted the highest number of visitors with an increase of 109.2 per cent to stand at 254,466 guests compared to 121,648 guests last year.

They were followed by Asian guests who reached 60,646 compared to 40,911 guests in 2020. The number of Europeans stood at 16,590, Arab guests (excluding GCC countries) at 15,802, American guests at 6,605, GCC guests at 4,749, Oceanian guests at 2,346, African guests at 1,446, and 10,384 guests from other nationalities.

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MARKET WATCH

MSX30	3,836.28
BSE Sensex	51,017.52

FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)	
Indian Rs	189.31
Pakistani Rs	403.31
Bangladeshi Taka	220.54
Philippine Peso	125.21
Sri Lankan Rs	516.27

*Rates as on May 26
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Adnoc awards \$744mn contract

Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc) announced the award of a US\$744mn (AED2.73bn) contract for the full field development of the Belbazem offshore block.

The contract underscores Adnoc's drive to unlock and maximise value from all of Abu Dhabi's oil fields as it plans to expand production capacity to 5mn barrels per day by 2030.

Located 120 kilometres northwest of Abu Dhabi city, the Belbazem block consists of three so-called marginal offshore fields; Belbazem, Umm Al Salsal, and Umm Al Dholou.

IMF reach agreement with Egypt on final loan disbursal

The IMF staff on Tuesday announced they had reached an agreement with Egypt over an economic program that would release the final tranche of a US\$5.2bn loan approved last year.

Once approved by the board of the International Monetary Fund, the second performance review would release the last US\$1.6bn from the one-year aid plan approved in June 2020. Celine Allard, who led the IMF team, praised Cairo, saying the "strong performance and commitment helped achieve the program's objectives of maintaining macroeconomic stability during the pandemic while protecting necessary social and health spending and implementing key structural reforms." She said the Egyptian economy has 'shown resilience'. The IMF projects economic growth of 2.5 per cent this year and 5.7 per cent in 2022.

GCC deficits to fall sharply in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The GCC governments' aggregate fiscal deficits will fall sharply this year which will result in lower funding needs compared with the previous year, according to the global credit ratings agency Standard & Poor's (S&P).

S&P Global Ratings expects the aggregate GCC central government deficit to fall sharply to about US\$80bn in 2021 (5 per cent of GDP) from US\$143bn recorded in 2020 (10 per cent of GDP), according to a new report released on Wednesday.

Lower deficits from 2021 will be supported by higher oil prices, fiscal consolidation measures, and a higher level of economic activity as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, S&P said.

Nevertheless, S&P believes the still-high GCC central government deficits will result in continued balance sheet deterioration in most cases. 'That said, GCC sovereigns have demonstrated ready access to international capital markets and many have substantial pools of external liquid assets available to fund their fiscal deficits and support their economies in the face of external shocks,' the report said.

S&P estimates that the GCC governments' deficits will reach



about US\$355bn cumulatively between 2021 and 2024. About 60 per cent of this relates to Saudi Arabia, the GCC's largest economy, followed by Kuwait with 25 per cent, the UAE with 7 per cent, and Oman with 4 per cent.

'Many GCC states have shown spending restraint in response to the double external shocks of 2020, given their already-large fiscal deficits going into the year. Some have also made inroads to diversifying their government revenue

streams away from hydrocarbons. Value added tax was introduced in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2018, in Bahrain in 2019, and in Oman in April 2021,' the ratings agency said.

It expects that Kuwait will register the highest central government deficit-to-GDP ratio of 20 per cent in 2021, followed by Bahrain and the UAE at 6 per cent, Saudi Arabia at 5 per cent, Oman at 4 per cent, and Qatar at 1 per cent.

'We expect fiscal deficits will reduce over 2021-2022 and

widen again in 2023-2024 given our oil price assumptions, as well as the gradual tapering of oil production cuts in line with the May 2021 OPEC+ agreement,' S&P said.

In its forecasts, S&P assumes an average Brent oil price of US\$60 per barrel for the remainder of 2021, US\$60 in 2022, and US\$55 in 2023 and beyond.

Lower funding needs

Since the structural decline in oil prices, many GCC sovereigns have posted sizeable central

S&P Global Ratings expects the aggregate GCC central government deficit to fall sharply to about US\$80bn in 2021 (5 per cent of GDP) from US\$143bn recorded in 2020 (10 per cent of GDP)

government deficits. These increased funding needs, S&P said, prompted total GCC government debt issuance in local and foreign currency of US\$90bn in 2016 and close to US\$100bn in 2017.

'The GCC government debt increased by much less in 2020 at US\$70bn, due to fiscal constraints and more diversified government revenue sources. Looking ahead, we expect total annual debt issuance to average about US\$50bn over 2021-2024, with higher borrowing in the outer years, when we assume lower oil prices,' the ratings agency said.

The GCC governments in recent years have borrowed, for the most part, rather than liqui-

dated their assets to fund their deficits.

S&P expects that the US\$355bn of financing required over 2021-2024 will be roughly split 50:50 between debt issuance and asset drawdowns.

'We base this projection on the financing trends of the past few years, governments' explicitly stated policy decisions, and our view of the availability of assets. We expect that Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia will finance most of their deficits through debt, while Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, and Qatar will draw more on their assets,' S&P added.

The ratings agency expects most GCC government balance sheets will continue to deteriorate until 2024, since some fiscal deficits remain quite large. It said the path to significantly narrowing fiscal deficits remains contingent upon the direction of government policy responses as much as it does on oil prices.

Given the significant balance sheet deterioration since oil prices sharply fell, beginning second-half of 2014, even if oil prices return to much higher levels S&P does not see ratings on hydrocarbon-exporting sovereigns to return to pre-2015 levels, absent changes in other rating factors.

Spanish firm wins contract to design new water desalination plant in Barka

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Spanish engineering consultancy company Savener announced that it has been awarded a contract in Oman for the design of Barka V water desalination plant.

The engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) consortium formed by Spanish firm GS Inima and Italian firm Fisia Italmianti has been responsible for selecting Savener to carry out the design of practically all the engineering of installation for the seawater reverse osmosis (RO) Barka V project, Savener said in a statement on its website.

The company said it has



Photograph for illustrative purpose only

signed a contract that will involve more than 50,000 hours of work.

'This alliance will allow Savener team and specialists and

GS Inima and Fisia Italmianti technicians to work in a coordinated manner in all disciplines associated with the project, such as civil engineering, electricity,

pipework, process, mechanics or 3D modeling, guaranteeing the usual levels of demand and quality of Savener projects,' Savener said.

The Barka V water desalination plant will be located in Barka and will complete the desalination complex that currently supplies residents near the capital Muscat.

'With this project Savener consolidates its knowledge and experience in the water sector, specifically in desalination systems. The award of this contract reinforces our presence as a strategic and technological partner of large engineering projects in the international arena,' Savener added.

Amazon to buy MGM studios for \$8.5bn

Washington, US - Amazon has agreed to buy the storied MGM studios for US\$8.45bn, the companies said Wednesday, giving the US tech giant a vast library to further its ambitions in streaming.

The deal bolsters Amazon Prime Video, which competes with Netflix and others in the fast-evolving market, with some 4,000 films - including the James Bond franchise - and 17,000 television shows.

'The real financial value behind this deal is the treasure trove of IP in the deep catalog that we plan to reimagine and develop together with MGM's talented team,' said Mike Hop-

kins, senior vice president of Prime Video and Amazon Studios.

The deal comes with Amazon experiencing surging growth in online retail and cloud computing, making a push into entertainment as consumers turn to streaming media. It gives Amazon the fabled Metro Goldwyn Mayer studios, an iconic name in Hollywood which has been through a series of ownership changes and bankruptcy in recent years.

MGM has nearly a century of filmmaking history and complements the work of Amazon Studios, Amazon said.

AFP

IMF praises US global tax proposal

Washington, US - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Tuesday praised Washington's proposal for a minimum global tax rate of 15 per cent on corporations and said it would unlock more resources for governments to invest in areas like education, health or infrastructure.

'While there have been proposals for setting the rate at as much as 21 per cent, anything that is above what today in many places is 10 (per cent) or even lower is a benefit,' said Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the International Monetary Fund.

The Washington-based crisis lender has long advocated an agreement on a common global tax, she said in a conversation with The Washington Post.

'Why? Because when we have it, there is no race to the bottom and less tax avoidance,' Kristalina said.

That means 'more money in the public purse to invest in education and healthcare, and infrastructure, digitalisation - all the good things we recognize we have to invest more into.'

However, she acknowledged the challenge in finding 'the sweet spot' for the global economy between that idea and the best rate for national govern-



IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva

ments, given some countries have relied on low tax rates to compete.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries agreed in principle in 2015 to work on a plan to prevent corporations from evading taxes by moving headquarters to low-tax countries, a process known as base erosion and profit shifting.

Years of negotiations made little progress, but the discussions were revived with the arrival of President Joe Biden in the White House.

Last week, his administration proposed to OECD partners a tax

rate on multinationals of at least 15 per cent, the first time the United States has formally suggested a global minimum rate.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen will attend next week's meeting of finance ministers from the Group of Seven (G7) advanced nations in London, who are expected to endorse the 15 per cent proposal.

Her deputy, Wally Adeyemo, told Reuters on Monday that he expects to see 'a lot of unified support' for the plan from the G7 nations.

The eurozone's largest economies, Germany and France, have expressed support for the US plan.

The other issue dominating debate is how to handle taxation of major tech companies like Amazon, Apple, Google and Facebook.

The challenge is how to ensure 'fair distribution' of taxes where the profits are made and where the companies are located, Kristalina said.

However, President Biden's push to get major economies to agree on a 15 per cent minimum tax rate for multinational corporations has hit turbulence after Ireland's finance minister expressed 'significant reservations' about the plan.

The objection from Dublin's Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe on Tuesday carries weight because Ireland hosts an out-sized number of technology and pharmaceutical firms that were attracted to the country for its lower tax rate.

'We do have really significant reservations regarding a global minimum effective tax rate status at such a level that it means only certain countries, and certain size economies can benefit from that base - we have a really significant concern about that,' Donohoe told Sky News in an interview.

AFP

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MSX closes flat at 3,836 points

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) closed almost flat at 3,836.28 points on Wednesday. The MSX30 Index had closed at 3,837.91 points on Tuesday.

While Service Index recorded a gain of 0.16 per cent, Financial Index and Industrial Index decreased by 0.17 per cent and 0.58 per cent, respectively.

The MSX Sharia Index inched down by 0.01 per cent to close at 552.91 points.

Trading activity on Wednesday improved as volumes rose by more than 23 per cent to 10.7mn shares against 8.7mn shares traded on Tuesday. Market turnover also increased by 41.4 per cent at RO2.45mn compared with RO1.73mn in the previous trading session.

Market breadth at the MSX remained negative with eights advancing stocks to 11 decliners.

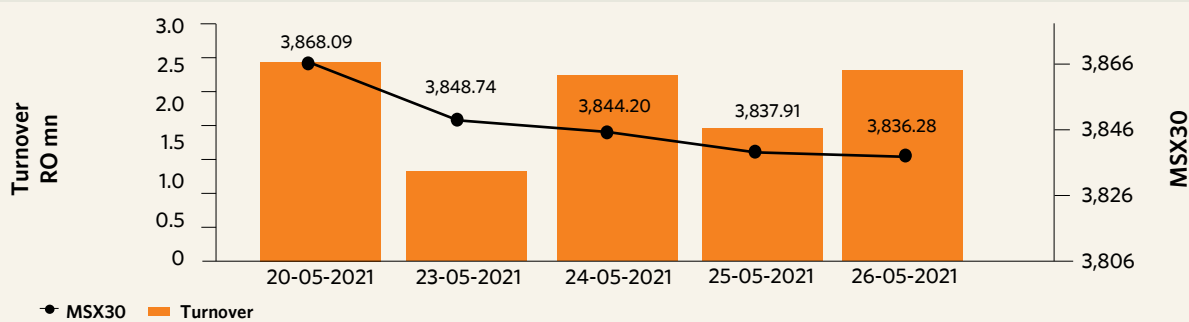
As many as 25 traded stocks remained



flat for the day. Top gainers for the day were Renaissance Services (2.5 per cent), Oman and Emirates Investment Holding (2.13 per cent), Al Batinah Power (1.82 per cent) and Ominvest (1.31 per cent).

Top losers were Al Ahlia Insurance (-5.88 per cent), National Life and General Insurance (-5.0 per cent), Al Jazeera Steel Products (-3.83 per cent) and Oman Fisheries (-3.61 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



Shell ordered to cut emissions in Dutch climate case

The Hague, Netherlands – A Dutch court ordered oil giant Shell on Wednesday to slash its greenhouse gas emissions targets in a landmark victory for climate activists.

Dubbed 'the People versus Shell', the case was launched in 2019 by the Netherlands branch of Friends of the Earth, and is backed by six other groups and more than 17,000 Dutch citizens.

"The court orders Royal Dutch Shell... to reduce its CO2 output and those of its suppliers and buyers by the end of 2030 by a net of 45 per cent based on 2019 levels," the court said. "Royal Dutch Shell has to implement this decision at once."

The climate groups had asked the court to impose the target, saying that Anglo-Dutch multinational Shell should meet emissions targets in the 2015 Paris climate accords.

Shell said in February it had set new targets to reduce its net carbon footprint compared to a 2016 baseline by 20 per cent by 2030, 45 per cent by 2035 and 100 per cent by 2050.

Its previous targets were 30 per cent by 2035 and 65 per cent by 2050.

Shell had argued that it is making serious efforts to cut gas emissions, but that there is no legal basis for the case and that governments are responsible for meeting Paris targets.

Friends of the Earth Netherlands, one of the groups leading the case, said in a statement ahead of the verdict that it was 'unique because it is the first time in history that judges have been asked to order a company to



emit less CO2.'

The case is one of a series around the world in which citizens and campaigners frustrated with inaction on climate change have hauled governments and big polluters before the courts.

The 2015 Paris accords committed all nations to cut carbon emissions to limit warming to two degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels and encouraged them to go down to 1.5 degrees.

ActionAid Netherlands executive director Marit Maji said that "big polluters like Shell have an outsized responsibility to help tackle climate change."

Maji said the case was a "historic opportunity to hold Shell accountable for its actions and ensure it cuts its emissions in line with the Paris Agreement".

The group said Shell's strategy is to keep polluting while offsetting their emissions with vast tree plantations.

"This will require land the equivalent of three times the size of the Netherlands, which risks

driving conflicts over food and land in the Global South", she added.

Dozens of climate marchers handed in the lawsuit to Shell's headquarters in the Netherlands in The Hague in April 2019 in what organisers said was the first case of its kind.

Shell's lawyers told the court in December that the company was already taking 'serious steps' to support the global transition away from the fossil fuels, and that the ultimate decision rested with governments.

Campaigners have repeated the success of a case brought by the green group Urgenda in which the Dutch Supreme Court in 2019 ordered the state to slash emissions by at least 25 percent of 1990 levels by the end of 2020.

The Netherlands, particularly vulnerable to climate change as a third of the country is below sea level, has pledged to reduce emissions by 49 per cent by 2030.

AFP

US to open California coast to offshore wind farm projects

Washington, US – The US government is set to open California's Pacific coast to offshore wind farms, officials announced Tuesday, adding to the approval of the nation's biggest wind project to date off Massachusetts.

The opening up of California waters came after a resolution to long-standing opposition from the Pentagon, which uses the ocean waters for military exercises and had put swaths of coast off limits to the industry, officials said.

This now gives the green light to the 'first commercial scale offshore clean energy projects' on the West Coast, the White House said in a statement.

Two areas have already been identified off the central part of California near Morro Bay and the northern coast off Humboldt County.

"These identified areas will enable the build out of a significant new domestic clean energy resource for years to come," the White House said.

Between them, officials said, the two areas could support enough clean energy production to power about 1.6mn homes.

National climate adviser Gina McCarthy told reporters the



Biden government was 'thinking big and thinking bold' in its bid to leapfrog the nascent offshore wind turbine industry to a new level.

Earlier this month, Washington granted final approval for its biggest wind power project yet, which will be located off the coast of the north-eastern state of Massachusetts.

The 'Vineyard Wind' project

calls for up to 84 wind turbines to be built 12 nautical miles off Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, two upscale islands off the Massachusetts coast.

Biden has set a goal of generating 30 gigawatts of energy from offshore wind by 2030.

The 800-megawatt Vineyard Wind project would provide enough power for 400,000 homes and businesses, the Interior Department said.

Currently the only ocean wind

farms are small installations off the coasts of Virginia and Rhode Island.

Vineyard Wind, a joint venture between Avangrid Renewables and Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, said the Atlantic project will be operational in 2023.

AFP

Ford to increase investments in EVs to \$30bn by 2025

New York, US – Ford once again is ramping up investment in zero-emission cars and by 2030 expects 40 per cent of its vehicle volume to be comprised of fully electric vehicles (EVs), the company announced Wednesday.

The US automaker said it will increase investment in electric vehicles, components and infrastructure to more than US\$30bn by 2025, boosting the amount from the US\$22bn target set in February.

The company last week unveiled an all-electric version of its bestselling F-150 truck in an eco-friendly reinvention of a flagship American car brand, and said it

has received 70,000 reservations from customers in just one week.

"This is our biggest opportunity for growth and value creation since Henry Ford started to scale the Model T, and we're grabbing it with both hands," Ford CEO Jim Farley said in a statement.

Farley and other executives presented the plans in a virtual meeting with financial analysts and other stakeholders.

Besides the battery-powered F-150, called the Lightning, Ford has begun selling the electric Mustang Mach-E sport utility vehicle and will soon bring the E-

Transit cargo van to showrooms.

The company also is investing in producing its own batteries, and recently announced a joint venture with South Korea's SK Innovation.

Manufacturers have joined the growing move towards zero-emission vehicles to help address global warming.

Ford's main rival General Motors pledged in January to stop making diesel- or gasoline-powered cars by 2035.

German automaker Volkswagen also intends to offer 70 electric models by 2030 and sell 26mn units in 10 years.

AFP

Washington DC sues Amazon over market domination

Washington, US – Amazon was hit Tuesday with an antitrust suit from the US capital city Washington, claiming the tech giant abuses its dominant position in online retail sales, harming consumers.

The suit filed by the office of Attorney General Karl Racine alleges that Amazon's control of 50 to 70 per cent of US e-commerce sales results in higher consumer prices.

"Amazon's online retail sales platform benefits from, and is protected by, Amazon's anti-competitive business practices," said the suit filed in District of Columbia superior court.

"Far from enabling con-

sumers to obtain the best products at the lowest prices, Amazon instead causes prices across the entire online retail sales market to be artificially inflated, both for products sold on Amazon's online retail sales platform and on its competitors' online retail sales platforms."

Amazon has long claimed it delivers lower prices for consumers, and speeds up delivery in the process.

"The DC Attorney General has it exactly backwards – sellers set their own prices for the products they offer in our store," Amazon said in response to an AFP inquiry.

"Amazon takes pride in the fact that we offer low prices



across the broadest selection, and like any store we reserve the right not to highlight offers to customers that are not priced competitively."

The lawsuit could force

Amazon to feature higher prices on its e-commerce platform in an outcome that would be at odds with antitrust law, according to the Seattle-based company.

Big Tech scrutiny

The lawsuit comes amid heightened scrutiny of large tech platforms which have increased their dominance during the pandemic.

US state and federal antitrust enforcers last year filed suits targeting Facebook and Google alleging illegal dominance of their respective markets.

Racine's lawsuit seeks to stop Amazon from 'anticompetitive' practices and calls for damages and other penalties.

According to the research firm eMarketer, Amazon's share of US e-commerce was 39.8 per cent in 2020 and was expected to increase to 44.1 per

cent this year, representing US\$367.19bn, with growth larger than that of any other company.

According to the lawsuit, Amazon uses practices that prevent third-party sellers on its platform from offering their products at lower prices on rival websites.

Until 2019, Amazon required sellers to sign a 'price parity' agreement that prevented them from selling at lower prices, which 'artificially raised the price of goods to consumers across the online retail sales market.'

The complaint said Amazon ended this practice in 2019 under pressure from Congress

and regulations but implemented 'an effectively-identical substitute,' which allows Amazon to impose sanctions on sellers which offer lower prices elsewhere.

Amazon in the first three months of the year reported a profit of US\$8.1bn, triple the amount from a year earlier, amid soaring sales during the pandemic.

The company founded by Jeff Bezos, one of the world's richest people, has grown from modest beginnings as an online bookseller to a behemoth in e-commerce, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, streaming media, groceries and more.

AFP

Bank Muscat's draws showcase services in Musandam, Buraimi

In line with its vision 'To serve you better, everyday' and commitment to partnership in promoting a strong savings culture in Oman, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, recently conducted a number of draws under its Al Mazyona scheme 2021 for the month of April at the head office.

The draws were livestreamed on the bank's social media channels on Twitter, YouTube and Instagram keeping in mind the great public interest in the various prize draws conducted by Al Mazyona. As many as 451 winners won more than RO600,000 in the draws, which included the monthly mega draw as well as the Asalah, Al Jawhar and governorate draws.

The event, which also showcased the bank's services across different governorates, saw Al Mazyona monthly draws being held for customers from Buraimi, Musandam and other governorates in Oman. As many as 420 lucky winners won RO500 each in the draw for governorates while the mega draw saw a lucky winner walk away with the top prize of RO50,000. Also, 10 Asalah customers won RO25,000 each and 20 Al Jawhar customers won RO5,000 each in the other draws. It must be noted that all



Asalah customers who maintained a minimum balance of RO30,000 and Al Jawhar customers maintaining a minimum balance of RO10,000 were automatically entered into these monthly draws.

Speaking on the occasion, Abdullah Tamman al Mashani, DGM - Institutional Sales and Product Development, Bank Muscat, said, "We are pleased with the excellent response and follow up from our customers for

the Al Mazyona savings scheme, which is the most popular and offers the highest prizes in Oman. I take this opportunity to congratulate all the lucky winners for their good savings habit, which has resulted in them winning these excellent prizes."

He added, "Al Mazyona provides numerous opportunities to all our customers across the sultanate to win excellent prizes for their savings habit.

"We promise to continue our

focus on customers from governorates across the country in the coming months. I call upon everyone to take maximum advantage of the scheme by saving more and getting more chances to win."

Al Mazyona is the longest-running savings scheme, offering the largest prizes in the country. In 2021, the scheme will offer RO11mn to 7,470 winners, with the number of winners going up by 12 percent compared to last

year. Recently Bank Muscat held its special Eid al Fitr draw, where 25 lucky winners were rewarded with RO2,000 each.

The bank has also announced a number of special draws to be held during the year including the Mid-Year draw, the National Day draw and the End of the Year draw. Bank Muscat has called on its customers to increase their savings to get more chances to win exciting prizes in the Al Mazyona savings scheme.

Mustafa Sultan Science & Industry division receives 'Best Dealer' award

Mustafa Sultan Science & Industry Co LLC (MSSI) was recently recognised by Karl Storz GMBH for 'Best Dealer Award 2020' for Middle East. The award was given during annual dealer meeting event which was attended by dealers across Middle East and Africa.

The event was conducted virtually due to ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. MSSI was honoured with award in recognition for exemplary sales growth in 2020. The awards were given by Ara Sarkissian, managing director Middle East and Africa, Karl Storz.

The award was received by Dr Mohan Nadkarni, general manager and Mohammed Sajid, assistant general manager, on behalf of Mustafa Sultan Science & Industry Co LLC in Muscat. MSSI has been the distributor of Karl Storz for more than eight years.

Karl Storz company name is named after his founder Karl Storz, which started with production of ENT instruments, headlamps and binocular loupes in 1945. Karl Storz has played a crucial role in the development of modern endoscopy. The Karl Storz family company has grown into a global manufacturer and distributor of endoscopes, medical instruments, and devices.



The range of endoscopic instruments for human medicine, veterinary medicine, and industrial endoscopy now includes more than 15,000 products. The most recent Karl Storz developments are in digital documentation systems and comprehensive operating room concepts. As a system supplier, the company combines its expertise in endoscopy with software solutions to achieve integration in the operating room and to support clinical process and resource management.

Mustafa Sultan Science & Industry is part of Mustafa Sultan Enterprises, which was founded more than 30 years ago to promote and provide services relating to high technology and medical care in Oman.

OPPO Ramadan campaign a huge success

Global technology brand OPPO's #CaptureTheSpirit Ramadan campaign, held in collaboration with the brand's MEA Ambassador Egyptian football legend Mohamed Salah, has seen millions of fans from Oman and beyond flood its social media platforms. Posting creative, nostalgic photos and videos, OPPO aficionados reminisced about their favourite moments from the most special of all occasions for consumers in the Middle East region.

Running from April 12 until May 15, OPPO's #CaptureTheSpirit campaign featured the Arab football superstar in a TV commercial as he shared his most-missed Ramadan memories from back home - and invited viewers to do the same!

OPPO users across Oman flaunted the brand's latest smartphone, Reno5 Pro 5G, which boasts fifth generation technology ultra-connectivity and super-fast flash charging. Participants submitted short



videos which captured what the "spirit of Ramadan" meant to them.

"The goal of this campaign was to promote the incredible spirit of Ramadan, bring families closer together and strengthen bonds through the use of the advanced technology that is available to us nowadays," said Fadi Abu Shamat, director of Strategy and Development, OPPO Middle East and Africa.

"Not only did participants engage with the brand on our social

media platforms, but they also gained a lot of fame; as for the competition winners, they got to take home some of our latest devices."

"Our videos generated over 45 million impressions on Facebook alone. We were truly pleased to see users interact on OPPO's social media platforms for the region. User feedback has been largely positive, with OPPO smartphone owners posting on how their devices have beautified their lives," added Shamat.

"Our #CaptureTheSpirit campaign was a reflection of this incredible month, its values of kindness and generosity. Along with our brand MEA ambassador Mo Salah, we reminded people that - despite the pandemic - they would still get to experience Ramadan as they have always known it."

OPPO's latest range, the Reno5 Series of smartphones, has secured its place in the market as the top, universal photography device. With superior photography and videography, the Reno5 Series appeals to young content creators who are looking to capture moments in crisp quality with optimum brightness and tack-sharp focus - even in tough environments.

The OPPO Reno5 Series of smartphones are now available at major retailers and e-commerce platforms in Oman, at a retail price of RO299.9 for the Reno5 Pro 5G, RO209.9 for the Reno5 5G and RO159.9 for the Reno5 Z 5G.

Wipro Yardley appoints BPG Dubai for its brand campaigns

Wipro Yardley FZE, the Middle East arm of the consumer products business, a significant player in personal care and home care consumer product segments in the region, has appointed BPG Dubai to lead media planning and buying for its Middle East brand campaigns.

Wipro products have a large consumer base across Arab and Asian communities in the region and navigating this complex space has always been a challenge and an opportunity for growth.

The company also has ambitious expansion plans that required an agile, innovative and disruptive partner such as BPG.

Addressing the appointment, Arun Giridhar, vice president, MENA Wipro Yardley FZE, said, "We have a very steep growth agenda in the region with our uniquely positioned brands in categories across body care, home and hygiene segments.



With rapidly changing consumer trends in a prolonged disruptive phase, we felt the strong need to bring in a fresh and disruptive perspective.

"We clearly felt that we had to revisit various aspects of how we communicate with consumers and sharpen the way we reach them in an optimum and impactful manner. We saw this appetite to challenge the status quo in the BPG team.

"What excited us the most was their strategic approach backed by data and logic. We look forward to this partnership."

Avi Bhojani, CEO, BPG, added, "Wipro is a well-known brand with great products that deserves to reach every household in the region. It is an innovative company and we share a similar DNA with our ideas-driven approach.

"We believe in simple yet impactful solutions that work as a huge multiplier for our clients' efforts. Our strength lies in our people at BPG, as well as our experience within multiple product and consumer segments.

"We are looking forward to supporting Wipro through this exciting and rewarding journey."

FIVE Holdings and Atkins celebrate big wins at CTBUH Awards 2021

FIVE Holdings, a Dubai-based real estate group, and Atkins, a member of the SNC-Lavalin Group, celebrated big wins at The Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CTBUH) Awards 2021 with two prestigious accolades for the FIVE Jumeirah Village Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The award-winning hospitality and residential project was recognized as Best Tall Building Middle East & Africa, audience vote, and received CTBUH's Best Tall Building 200-299 meters Award of Excellence.

The CTBUH Awards programme honours projects and individuals that have made extraordinary contributions to the advancement of tall buildings and the urban environment, and that achieve sustainability at the highest and broadest level. Awards are given in over 20 categories for Best Tall Building,

Urban Habitat, Innovation, Renovation, Interior Design, Construction, and Engineering. The project was presented at the virtual awards ceremony by Nabil Akiki, CEO of FIVE Development, a subsidiary of FIVE Holdings, and Farida Farag, Senior Design Manager, Middle East, Atkins,

Nabil Akiki, CEO of FIVE Development, commented, "FIVE Development is extremely proud to have added a vanguard landmark to the Dubai landscape in inimitable FIVE style. FIVE Jumeirah Village by FIVE Hotels and Resorts is not just a 'Tall Building' - it sublimely combines the very best of nature-inspired landscaping that leans directly into and throughout the structure, with the thrill of viewing 360 degree sweeping Dubai vistas that can only be enjoyed from the vantage point of a high-rise structure. This unique amalgamation of the



best of both worlds - low rise, nature loving edifices and the aerial benefits of sky-high creations, is what powered FIVE's vision for

FIVE Jumeirah Village from the very beginning of its conception."

"These awards are especially close to FIVE's heart, as they are

the very first to be received upon the completion of the mammoth and pioneering FIVE Jumeirah Village project - a breakthrough

globally-patented concept design for hospitality," added Akiki.

FIVE Jumeirah Village uniquely supports environmental sustainability by creating and utilising 7X of the lush green spaces that would have been replaced by its construction - thus creating a unique natural haven for visitors to enjoy the vibe at FIVE. During the COVID-19 crisis, FIVE Jumeirah Village provided the ideally safe and sequestered space for guests to enjoy the organic soil and greenery surrounding the built-in waterbodies, such as the private pools and Jacuzzis.

"For over 50 years, Atkins has established a track record of delivering a multitude of iconic landmarks in the UAE. We are extremely proud to have supported Five Holdings with our world-class multi-disciplinary design expertise to bring this pres-

tigious project to life by combining industry innovation with the highest quality and sustainability standards. Congratulations to everyone involved in this great achievement," commented Johan Hesselsoe, managing director, UAE, Atkins, a member of the SNC-Lavalin Group.

What sets FIVE Jumeirah Village apart from other high-rise towers is its one-of-a-kind rotating design, conceptualized by Nabil Akiki, which features innovative architecture to maximize natural daylight and create welcoming spaces that conserve energy and incorporate both indoor and outdoor spaces. Atkins was appointed by FIVE Holdings in 2014 to provide multi-disciplinary design services for the project, including concept and schematic design, environmental impact assessment, design and construction documentation.

Z-Corp supported Injaz Oman's student contest reaches final

Fifteen student companies have qualified for the final stage of ninth edition of Injaz Oman Student Company Programme competition. The Zubair Corporation (Z-Corp) had recently signed a sponsorship agreement with Injaz Oman to support the ninth edition of the Student Company Programme.

The winners of the competition are expected to be announced in June.

The projects which have qualified for the final stage include Elligo, E-Med, Smart Socket, Palm Fuse, T2G, Repla, Resurrection, Paint Pulse, Inspirations, Bonn, DJ, Shan, Affluence, Cordyamotv and Laja.

Some 90 student companies participated in this edition of the programme. In all, the numbers of students who participated in the competition from different governorates stood at 950.

The jury reviewed and evaluated the projects at the Injaz Oman Foundation as well as via the Internet.

Khaula al Harthy, CEO of Injaz Oman, expressed her appreciation to the Zubair Corporation for the support it provided to Injaz Oman's Student Company Programme.

She said, "We would like to congratulate the students whose projects have qualified to the final stage. The programme has achieved many goals that are consistent with the sultanate's efforts to support entrepreneurship in the sultanate. The most important of which is enabling students to transform their ideas into innovative projects. The programme has helped them develop their leadership capabilities,



ties, trained them to manage cash flow, solve problems, make decisions, and provided them knowledge necessary to manage their own projects."

Said al Sahib, director of Zubair SEC, said, "As strategic partners Z-Corp and Injaz Oman organically complement the development process of young entrepreneurs moving from the academic stages into the real market scenario.

"As part of our social responsibility strategy, we are pleased to support national initiatives that support entrepreneurship like our social responsibility initiative Zubair Small Enterprises

Centre (Zubair SEC) does."

He pointed out that Student Company Programme matches Z-Corp's social responsibility strategy in advocating education, training, and encouraging entrepreneurs.

He added, "The Student Company Programme has identified many projects and pioneering ideas by students at colleges and universities in the sultanate. We hope that these projects will be transformed into real companies which will contribute to the development of this country."

Injaz Oman's Student Company Programme aims to enable students of higher education in-

stitutions to establish real projects after receiving training from a group of qualified experts in the field of entrepreneurship during the period of their participation in the programme. The programme aims to provide real opportunities to prepare young people and motivate them to enter the job market with confidence.

The sessions provided them the knowledge and abilities to refine and develop their talents with the various skills needed to establish and manage their own projects.

The company programme provides theoretical and practical experience to students par-

ticipating in the company's programme and builds their confidence and improves their skills. It also aims to educate young people about the importance of financial management and instills them the concept of trust.

Student Company Programme offers a unique learning experience for students, helping them to establish their own companies and engage in entrepreneurship.

The programme offers a learning experience that enables and enhances many skills, which complement and enrich the students' performance in their academics.



UAE calls on global community to join Dignified Storytelling

Dubai Cares, Expo 2020 Dubai and the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation have come together to launch Dignified Storytelling, an initiative with an aim of creating an ecosystem that fosters a shared understanding and practice of storytelling that maintains and upholds the dignity of all persons and contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Today, thousands of stories are being told regardless of who tells them and how they are told. Many of these stories lack authenticity, transparency, or are driven by ulterior motives which serve a predetermined narrative. These are just some of the few obstacles that get in the way of honest, wholesome and dignified storytelling within development and humanitarian contexts.

In order for a piece - be it visual, written or spoken - to reach an audience, it goes through a long process of filtration, revising and editing that sometimes alters the original content and makes it almost fictional. This in turn, ends up painting the wrong picture of the contributors who oftentimes are not aware of where their stories, visual or written, will be displayed and to what purpose will they be used.

Dignified Storytelling was born out of the need to unite the voices of content makers, editors, journalists, photographers, filmmakers, storytellers, and contributors and equip them with the awareness and hands-on knowledge that will enable them to capture moments and tell stories without compromising human dignity.

In order to fulfil this need, Dignified Storytelling kickstarted global consultations a year ago, to solicit cross-sectoral perspectives on storytelling within development and humanitarian contexts, as well as set and agree on the Dignified Storytelling Principles that today serve as guidance and an advocacy tool for bringing together various stakeholders from around the world to form a global movement that will be a game changer in maintaining and promoting human dignity through storytelling.

To truly embed Dignified Storytelling in the day-to-day policies and practices among international development agencies and various storytellers within the development and humanitarian sectors, Dubai Cares, Expo 2020 Dubai and UAE MoFAIC have established a Dignified Storytelling Alliance.



Ooredoo CFO named among GCC's best

Ooredoo is proudly celebrating its chief financial officer (CFO), Abdul Razzaq al Balushi, who, for the second year in a row, has been named on the *Khaleeji Times' New-Age Finance and Accounting (NAFA) CFO Powerlist*. The list, which identifies 30 of the GCC's top performing industry leaders, recognises CFOs' instrumental roles in the strategic operations of organisations, especially in today's complex economic environment.

Its the latest in a string of awards that have been received by members of the Ooredoo family, as it continues to transform the telecoms landscape and nurture a forward-thinking and future-ready workforce.

Razzaq joined Ooredoo in 2016, and is a veteran with nearly 30 years of experience in finance. With a strong track record in transformation both within the finance function and throughout the organisation, he has led a number of major projects in business process improvement and customer engagement that steer Ooredoo through its digital transformation journey.

Virtual forum for IT teachers in private schools begins

The Ministry of Education (MoE), represented by the Directorate-General of Private Schools, started the first virtual forum for teachers of information technology in private schools on Wednesday morning under the patronage of Dr Ali bin Salim al Shukaili, director general of the Directorate General of Private Schools with the presence of Dr Khadija bint Ali al Salamiyah, assistant director general for Educational Affairs at the Directorate General of Private Schools.

The forum continues for two consecutive days and targets in-

formation technology teachers in private schools in all the governorates, of which about 100 participants attended on the first day.

This virtual forum was organised with the aim of presenting scientific papers on e-learning, blended learning, and distance education, in addition to presenting the most important initiatives, programmes and applications employed by teachers of information technology for private schools. This is to contribute to raising the students' achievement level, to move forward in harmonising the current



educational work, exchanging technical expertise and skills, spreading the culture of self-

learning.

The forum also seeks to keep pace with the skills of the 21st

century and the fourth industrial revolution and raise the efficiency of information technology teachers in line with Oman Vision 2040.

The programme of the first day included a speech of Dr Ali al Shukaili, director general of the General Directorate of Private Schools, in which he said, "This forum comes in line with the current stage of education, which witnessed a qualitative shift in the use of many and varied technological and digital mechanisms and tools during the distance education process. This type of education has imposed itself as a

result of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic but contributed to developing the technical knowledge aspects of the student, the teacher and the parent alike in a large and remarkable manner."

The first day's sessions contained a number of papers, on 'Distance Education Strategy', 'Types of E-Learning', 'Technology Strategies for Classroom', 'Technology Applications in Active Learning', 'Explanation of the Socratic Program for Electronic Tests', 'Educational platforms', 'Class Point Tool' among others.

The forum will continue today.

Ferrari reports strong Q1 results, record order book

Commenting on the results and the outlook of Ferrari, chairman and acting CEO John Elkann said, "This strong start augurs well for the rest of 2021 and is testimony to the resilience of our business model as well as the extraordinary work of the women and men of Ferrari. Looking ahead, we expect the prudent steps we took in 2020 and are continuing in 2021 to adjust our expenditure in response to the COVID-19 emergency, will postpone by one year the achievement of our year-end 2022 guidance.

"However, the robustness of our order book and the wonderful new models we will launch in the coming years provide a strong base on which to build our ambitious future."

Shipments totalled 2,771 units in the first quarter of 2021, up 33 units or 1.2 per cent versus a strong prior year quarter despite the limited impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the core busi-

ness. Sales of 8 cylinder models (V8) were up 8.1 per cent, while 12 cylinder models (V12) were down 19.6 per cent. The deliveries of the quarter were driven by the F8 family and the 812 GT5. The SF90 Stradale and the Ferrari Roma remain in ramp up phase, while the 488 Pista family and the Ferrari Portofino have been phased out. The Ferrari Monza SP1 and SP2 continued to be delivered in line with production planning.

Total net revenues

Net revenues for the first quarter 2021 were €1,011mn, up 10.8 per cent at constant currency. The increase in revenues from cars and spare parts to €855mn (up 8.5 per cent or 11.0 per cent at constant currency) was generated mainly by the strong enrichment of the product mix.

Increased Sponsorship, commercial and brand revenues (€91mn, up 1.4 per cent or 2.6



per cent at constant currency) were attributable to an improved outlook for the Formula 1 calendar, partially offset by lower prior year ranking as well as reduced brand-related activities due to

the COVID-19 pandemic.

Q1 2021 highlights

Ferrari and Richard Mille signed a partnership contract on February 22, 2021; it was announced

that Ferrari and Richard Mille have signed a multi-year partnership agreement, which will see the Haute Horlogerie brand become sponsor and licensee for the Prancing Horse.

Share repurchase

On March 11, 2021 Ferrari communicated its intention to restart its multi-year share repurchase program announced on December 28, 2018 with a fourth tranche of up to €150mn starting on March 12, 2021 and to end no later than September 30, 2021, of which up to €120mn to be executed on the MTA market under a non-discretionary share repurchase agreement with a primary financial institution and up to €30mn to be executed on the NYSE under an additional mandate with a primary financial institution.

Subsequent events

On April 21, 2021 the first official images of Ferrari's latest limited-edition special series were published in the build-up to its world premiere, which was broadcast live on the Maranello marque's social media channels on May 5.

Rouhani urges greater ‘competition’ in poll

Iran President urged the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to intervene after many probables were barred

Tehran, Iran - Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani on Wednesday called for greater ‘competition’ in an election for his successor next month after several hopefuls were barred from running against ultraconservative candidates.

Rouhani said he had urged the Islamic republic’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to intervene and warned that ‘the heart of elections is competition. If you take that away it becomes a corpse’.

Iran’s ultraconservative judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi is now widely seen as the frontrunner to replace Rouhani, a moderate, after the powerful Guardian Council prevented several prominent figures from standing for election.

Seven candidates, five of them ultraconservatives, were approved for the June 18 poll, which comes at a time Iran is in talks with world powers to revive the tattered nuclear deal that former US president Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018.

The Guardian Council disqualified several well-known figures, including long-time parliament speaker Ali Larijani, a moderate-conservative ally of

Rouhani who had been seen as the main challenger to Raisi.

The president, speaking at a televised Cabinet meeting, also warned of the risk of low voter turnout and said the system’s ‘continued legitimacy’ was at stake.

Rouhani, an advocate of détente with the West and of ending Iran’s international isolation, won office through an alliance with reformist and moderate forces but must step down this year after serving two consecutive terms.

Iran was plunged into a deep recession after Trump torpedoed Rouhani’s signature achievement, the 2015 nuclear deal which offered sanctions relief in return for Iran’s pledge never to acquire an atomic weapon.

Negotiations are now underway in Vienna aiming to bring Washington back into the accord, lift punishing sanctions on Iran and get Tehran to reverse the nuclear steps it took in retaliation to the US withdrawal.

Goodbye reformism?

The election comes amid a climate of general discontent amid Iran’s deep economic and social crisis, and after the violent re-



Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani addresses a meeting of the council of ministers in Tehran on Wednesday (AFP)

pression of waves of protests in the winter of 2017-2018 and in November 2019.

For the reformers and moderates who have governed with Rouhani since 2013, the solution to the country’s problems lies in the discussions underway in Vi-

enna. Ultraconservatives and many conservatives meanwhile accuse Rouhani of shirking responsibility by blaming Iran’s woes solely on the United States, and on the Europeans for failing to help Tehran counter the devastating effects of US sanctions.

Iran’s candidate disqualifications caused dismay in the reformist press.

‘Goodbye reformism?’ read the front-page headline of an article published by *Shargh* daily that said ‘not even the most sceptical’ had imagined the latest

Ultraconservative judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi is now widely seen as the frontrunner to replace President Hassan Rouhani after the powerful Guardian Council prevented several prominent figures from standing

A record 57 per cent of Iranians stayed away from legislative elections in February last year after thousands of candidates, many of them moderates and reformists, were disqualified.

The Guardian Council, the unelected body responsible for overseeing elections, this time selected the seven candidates from a field of about 600 hopefuls.

Rouhani said that, in his request for a revision of the list, “I sent a letter to the supreme leader yesterday on what I had in mind and if he can help with this.”

According to Rouhani, the Supreme Leader has ‘seldom intervened’ during previous elections, but ‘there have been times when he added someone back in with an order’.

This happened in 2005, when he reversed the Guardian Council’s decision to bar two reformist figures - Mostafa Moein and Mohsen Mehralizadeh, the latter of whom is also an approved candidate this year.

Larijani, however, has already conceded his disqualification, writing on Twitter that ‘I am content with God’s will’.

AFP

Bashar Assad dismisses critics as Syria votes to extend his grip on power

Damascus, Syria - President Bashar Assad dismissed criticism of Syria’s presidential election on Wednesday as voters flocked to the polls in government-held areas despite Western accusations it was neither ‘free nor fair’.

“Your opinions have zero value,” Assad said, after voting with his British-born wife Asma in the Damascus suburb of Douma, a key rebel stronghold until its recapture by government forces three years ago.

The United States and the European Union said Tuesday the election was ‘neither free nor fair’, and Syria’s fragmented opposition has called it a ‘farce’.

But they will watch powerless as Assad prepares to renew his grip on power.

Few doubt Assad will trounce his two virtually unknown challengers to win a fourth term, in a war-battered country mired in economic crisis.

Huge election posters glorifying the president have mushroomed across the two-thirds of the country under his control.

The controversial vote is the second election since the start of a decade-long civil war that has killed more than 388,000 people and displaced half the pre-war population.

With opponents abroad



President Bashar Assad (right) greets supporters after casting his vote at a polling station near Damascus, as voting began across Syria on Wednesday for an election sure to return him for a fourth term in office (AFP)

barred from standing and no voting in the swathes of territory outside government control, Assad is expected to win by a landslide.

State television showed long queues forming outside polling stations after voting opened at 7.00am. Security was tight.

Hundreds of students clamoured to vote outside Damascus University.

“I came to vote for Bashar Assad because he is the only man who withstood ten years of war,” said 26 year old Kinan al Khatib. Around him, students chanted the slogan used to express support for strongmen

across the Arab world: “With our blood and with our souls, we sacrifice our lives for you, Bashar.”

Tolerated opposition

The result is not expected before Friday evening, 48 hours after polls close.

The election takes place amid the lowest levels of violence since 2011 - but with an economy in freefall.

More than 80 per cent of the population live below the poverty line, and the Syrian pound has plunged in value against the dollar, causing skyrocketing inflation.

Assad’s campaign slogan,

‘Hope through work’, evokes the colossal reconstruction needed to rebuild the country, requiring billions of dollars in funding.

Assad, a 55 year old ophthalmologist by training, was first elected by referendum in 2000 after the death of his father Hafez, who had ruled Syria for 30 years.

Standing against him are former state minister Abdallah Saloum Abdallah and Mahmud Merhi, a member of the so-called ‘tolerated opposition’, long dismissed by exiled opposition leaders as an extension of the regime.

AFP

Taliban warn Afghan neighbours against allowing US bases

Kabul, Afghanistan - The Taliban warned Afghanistan’s neighbours on Wednesday against allowing the United States to operate military bases on their soil, the insurgents insisting they would thwart such a ‘historic mistake’.

Washington is in the final stages of withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, and a flurry of diplomatic calls between the United States and Pakistan in recent days has fuelled speculation the Pentagon is scouting for new bases to use against the Taliban.

‘We urge neighbouring countries not to allow anyone to do so,’ the Taliban said in a statement. ‘If such a step is taken again, it will be a great and historic mistake and disgrace.’

They would ‘not remain silent in the face of such heinous and provocative acts’, the statement added.

Several of Afghanistan’s neighbours allowed the US military limited use of air bases in the early 2000s after the overthrow of the Taliban.

Such overt physical support has largely ended, however, although some countries do allow their airspace to be used for military flights.

Pakistan on Tuesday dismissed local media reports that it had struck a new deal with



Afghan security forces take their positions during a clash with Taliban members in Mihtarlam, the capital of Laghman Province, on Monday (AFP)

Washington. “This news is baseless and speculative,” Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi told the Senate.

“I want to make it clear on the floor of the house... that Pakistan, under the leadership of Imran Khan, will never allow any American base on its soil.”

The Taliban and Washington entered into a landmark deal last year that paved the way for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan.

In return, the Taliban said it would not allow Afghanistan to be a base for extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

US President Joe Biden an-

nounced last month that all remaining 2,500 American troops would leave Afghanistan by September 11, the 20th anniversary of Al Qaeda attacks in the United States that led to the invasion of the country.

But the withdrawal has raised concerns over whether Afghan government forces alone can fight the Taliban.

Violence has soared in recent weeks as government forces and the Taliban clash in near-daily battles, with the insurgents pressing on with their campaign to capture more territory as peace talks to end the war remain deadlocked.

AFP

Migrant workers hit by multiple crises in Lebanon, warns UN

Beirut, Lebanon - Migrant workers in Lebanon have been hit hard by its multiple crises and half of them left jobless, the UN warned on Wednesday, calling for voluntary returns to be scaled up.

The combined effects of Lebanon’s economic collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic and last year’s deadly Beirut port explosion have worsened already dire living conditions for migrant workers.

The International Organization for Migration found that ‘50 per cent of the respondent migrants reported being unemployed, with the majority losing

their jobs in the last quarter of 2020’.

The UN’s migration agency also said more than half of those surveyed in the study said they were unable to meet their food needs.

The plight of migrants workers in Lebanon - including many from the Philippines, Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone - has come under increased scrutiny in recent years over cases of mistreatment.

The IOM said many respondents said they were still being subjected to abuse, including beatings, sexual harassment and denial of wages.



Ethiopians gather at the country’s embassy in Lebanon after being dismissed as migrant workers, in Beirut (AFP)

“As the economic situation continues to deteriorate and employment opportunities remain limited, migrants’ vulnerability to exploitation and abuse is likely to increase,” said Mathieu Luciano, the agency’s Lebanon chief.

The Lebanese currency has lost more than 85 per cent of its value against the dollar, in an economic crisis that has sent poverty levels above 50 per cent of the population.

The UN survey found that around half of respondents wanted to go home but were stuck in Lebanon.

Many are unable to pay for

return flight and in some cases are not free to do so as a result of an infamous sponsorship system known as ‘Kafala’ whereby they relinquish their passports to the agencies that find them work.

“Clearly, and based on this worrying assessment, there is an urgent need to rapidly scale up voluntary return assistance services in Lebanon,” said Luciano.

The IOM said it was seeking funding to offer more voluntary returns to the thousands of migrant workers stranded in crisis-hit Lebanon.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

EU and AstraZeneca battle in court over vaccine delays

Brussels, Belgium - The European Union accused AstraZeneca of a 'flagrant violation' of its contract to rapidly build-up coronavirus production capacity in the bloc, as it began legal action against the drugs giant on Wednesday.

The EU member states and their executive, the European Commission, brought the case before a court in Brussels, the union having signed its supply agreement with the British and Swedish firm under Belgian law.

The EU is suing the group in a bid to force it to deliver 90mn more doses of its COVID-19 vaccine before July - arguing that it failed in its contractual duty by handing over only a quarter of the doses it promised for the first quarter of 2021.

The deadline for the contract was set for mid-June, according to the Commission, and the EU says the company will face financial penalties if it does not meet this deadline.

AstraZeneca delivered only 30mn doses in the first quarter out of the 120mn it was contracted to supply. For the current quarter which runs until June 30, it plans to deliver only 70mn of the 180mn initially promised.

A Commission official close to the case told AFP this month that AstraZeneca was currently delivering doses at a rate of only 10mn per month, well below the planned pace.

The company's defence - articulated ahead of the case in a



This file photo shows people gather to be inoculated with the AstraZeneca vaccine at the St Antonius Church in Castrop-Rauxel, in western Germany on May 19 (AFP)

series of media interviews by AstraZeneca's French-Australian boss Pascal Soriot - has been that the contract only stipulates that it make 'best reasonable efforts' and that production was hit by unavoidable delays.

But, opening the attack for the EU, lawyer Rafael Jeffareli argued that the firm had privileged supplies to Britain and beyond, while failing to make the best effort to step up production at its EU site in the Netherlands, operated by its sub-contractor Halix.

In court, Jeffareli alleged that for several weeks after the EU signed its contract with the firm

in September last year, the Dutch plant had continued to supply markets other than the EU.

"Best effort means flexibility! Why did the switchover of the Halix site (to EU supply) only start on October 13?" he demanded.

"AstraZeneca did not even use all the tools at its disposal," he said, claiming that the group could at the time mobilise 'six production sites to meet the set schedule'.

The Halix plant in Leiden, the Netherlands, had sent supplies to Japan at the end of last year,

he said. In total, '50mn doses were diverted to third countries in flagrant violation of the contract'. The group denies having failed in its obligations and at the end of April denounced the lawsuit as 'unfounded'.

One lawyer for AstraZeneca - which worked with Oxford University in the development of its vaccine - has claimed that the EU had been warned 'as early as February' of the delays and expressed surprise that the bloc had waited at least two months to take the matter to court.

But the European Commission says the contract proves

AstraZeneca is legally responsible, and EU diplomats and lawmakers have pointed out that the company has largely delivered promised doses to Britain, where it is headquartered.

'Not in the contract'

The commission, which has been responsible for procuring vaccines for all of the bloc, initially intended to use the AstraZeneca jab as the main workhorse to power the EU's inoculation drive.

It has now switched to the more expensive Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine as its mainstay.

Ahead of the hearing Hakim Boularbah, AstraZeneca's lawyer, said the contracts contained 'no obligation to use (production) sites'.

"This may be what the commission wants, but it is not provided for in the contract," he said.

The row has eroded public confidence in the AstraZeneca jab, which also took a blow over worries of links to very rare blood clots in people who had received it.

In the European Union, Denmark, as early as April, and later Norway and Austria, stopped using AstraZeneca in their vaccination campaigns.

Most other countries have restricted its administration to older adults. This is the case in France, where it is reserved for those aged 55 and over.

AFP



The WHO team investigating the origins of the COVID-19 virus, at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in Wuhan on February 3 (AFP)

US peddling conspiracies as lab-leak theory returns: China

Beijing, China - China on Wednesday accused the US of 'spreading conspiracy theories and disinformation' as the theory resurfaced that the coronavirus emerged from a Wuhan laboratory, while urging Washington to open its virology facilities to scrutiny.

Led by the US, pressure is mounting for a new probe into the origins of COVID-19 after a World Health Organization (WHO) mission to China, beset by delays and dogged by political baggage, returned inconclusive findings.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology has returned to the spotlight after a report in *The Wall Street Journal*, citing US intelligence, said three lab workers there were hospitalised in November 2019 with coronavirus-like symptoms, a month before the pandemic's first declared case.

The newspaper also said researchers had collected samples seven years earlier from a mine in southwestern China, where miners had contracted a mysterious illness from a new, bat-borne coronavirus.

Repeating an earlier denial of the report, Zhao Lijian, spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry, accused the US of 'spreading conspiracy theories and disinformation such as a laboratory leak'.

The theory that the killer virus leaked from a Chinese lab was originally fuelled by, among others, the adminis-

tration of former US president Donald Trump.

Zhao said it was 'disrespectful' to the WHO probe to revive the theory, and risked an 'undermining of global solidarity to fight the virus'.

Since infecting its first victims in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, the pathogen has struck almost every country in the world, killing more than 3.4mn people and eviscerating national economies.

"If the US really wants full transparency then it should, like China did, invite WHO experts to visit the US and investigate," Zhao added.

"Open up Fort Detrick military base as early as possible, and all the bio labs the US has around the world," he said, referring to a US research facility in Maryland.

The long-delayed report, by the team of international experts sent to Wuhan and their Chinese counterparts, drew no firm conclusions on the origins of the pandemic.

Instead, the WHO-led team said the virus most likely jumped from bats to humans via an intermediate animal.

Initially, the expert report said a theory involving the virus leaking from a lab was 'extremely unlikely'.

After the report was released, however, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus insisted all theories remained on the table.

AFP

Ex-aide says UK COVID policy failed the public

London, UK - The British government failed the public by not having adequate planning in place for the coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's former top adviser and Brexit architect Dominic Cummings told lawmakers on Wednesday.

Cummings, who stepped down in December, apologised for the inadequate response to the crisis when it emerged early last year. COVID-19 has claimed nearly 128,000 lives in Britain, the fifth-highest official death toll in the world.

"The truth is that senior min-

isters, senior officials, senior advisers like me fell disastrously short of the standards that the public has a right to expect of its government in a crisis like this," Cummings told a parliamentary committee.

"When the public needed us most the government failed," he added. "I would like to say to all the families of those who died unnecessarily how sorry I am for the mistakes that were made and for my own mistakes at that."

Cummings, however, said the British government was not alone in failing to recognise the



Dominic Cummings speaks in Portcullis house in London (AFP)

seriousness of the health crisis and 'many, many institutions failed around the world'.

"The government itself and Number 10 (Downing Street)

was not operating on a war footing in February in any way shape or form," he added. "Lots of people were literally skiing in the middle of February. It wasn't until the last week of February that there was any sense of urgency."

Cummings' appearance is being closely watched after he launched a series of explosive attacks in recent weeks against Johnson's coronavirus policies and financial dealings.

A divisive figure who carved out a uniquely powerful role during the first 18 months of Johnson's government, Cummings has accused the UK leader of

lacking competence and integrity and his government of 'appalling ethics'.

He previewed his testimony in dozens of social media posts, claiming Johnson had adopted a haphazard approach, initially favouring a so-called herd immunity strategy before belatedly abandoning it when the likely death toll became clear. If Britain had had 'the right preparations + competent people in charge', it could probably have avoided its first lockdown in March 2020 and 'definitely' escaped later ones, Cummings wrote.

AFP

WhatsApp moves court against India

New Delhi, India - WhatsApp has launched legal action to stop India enforcing new social media rules that would break its privacy guarantees, the messaging platform told AFP on Wednesday.

The regulations, which took effect the same day, come at a time of growing tensions between social media giants and the Indian government.

WhatsApp told AFP it had filed a case in the Delhi High Court. The Facebook subsidiary did not give details of the legal action but made clear its opposition to the new guidelines that would also affect Twitter, Instagram and other platforms.

The new rules demand 'traceability' of messages, which requires social media companies to give details of the 'first originator' of posts deemed to undermine India's sovereignty, state security or public order.

They also require platforms to take down posts depicting nudity or manipulated photos within 24



This photo taken for illustration shows the WhatsApp icon (AFP)

hours of receiving a complaint.

'Requiring messaging apps to 'trace' chats is the equivalent of asking us to keep a fingerprint of every single message sent on WhatsApp, which would break end-to-end encryption and fundamentally undermines people's right to privacy,' WhatsApp said.

WhatsApp, which claims 500mn users in India, said it would keep cooperating with 'valid legal requests' for information from authorities.

Facebook and Google have said they are working towards complying with the guidelines.

AFP

Deadly cyclone batters India; 1.5mn evacuated

Digha, India - At least two people died on Wednesday as howling winds and huge waves slammed eastern India in the COVID-stricken country's second cyclone in as many weeks.

Cyclones happen regularly in the northern Indian Ocean but many scientists say they are becoming both more frequent and severe as climate change warms the sea.

Last week, Cyclone Tauktae claimed at least 155 lives including dozens of oil rig workers as it lashed western India, the fiercest to hit the area in several decades.

Now Cyclone Yaas has forced the evacuation of more than 1.5mn people in the eastern states of West Bengal and Odisha, killing so far two people.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said that the seaside town of Digha has been 'swamped' by waves the height of a double-decker bus.

She said that two people had been killed including one dragged into the sea by the waves in Digha and another crushed when



Local residents walk to a shelter as Cyclone Yaas barrels towards India's eastern coast, in Digha some 190km from the eastern Indian city of Kolkata on Wednesday (AFP)

his house collapsed.

Nearly 20,000 houses were damaged and more than a dozen river islands were flooded with a number of embankments breached, she said.

The storm packed lashing rain and winds gusting up to 155km an hour, the equivalent to a category-two hurricane.

'Terrible blow'

"I have never seen such a storm ever in my life," said Purnendu Jana, a Digha resident. "The water may cross the main road for the first time."

Local hotel owner Shiuli Das said, "Many of us are here, all of us are really scared."

Almost 5,000 disaster work-

ers were deployed with tree and wire cutters, emergency communications, inflatable boats and medical aid, the National Disaster Response Force said.

Officials fear the emergency will further complicate efforts to halt a surge in coronavirus cases that has now killed 310,000 people.

Masks were distributed in emergency shelters but West Bengal state minister Bankim Chandra Hazra told AFP that maintaining social distancing would be 'a big challenge'.

"This cyclone spells double trouble for millions of people in India as there is no respite from COVID-19," said Udaya Regmi from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

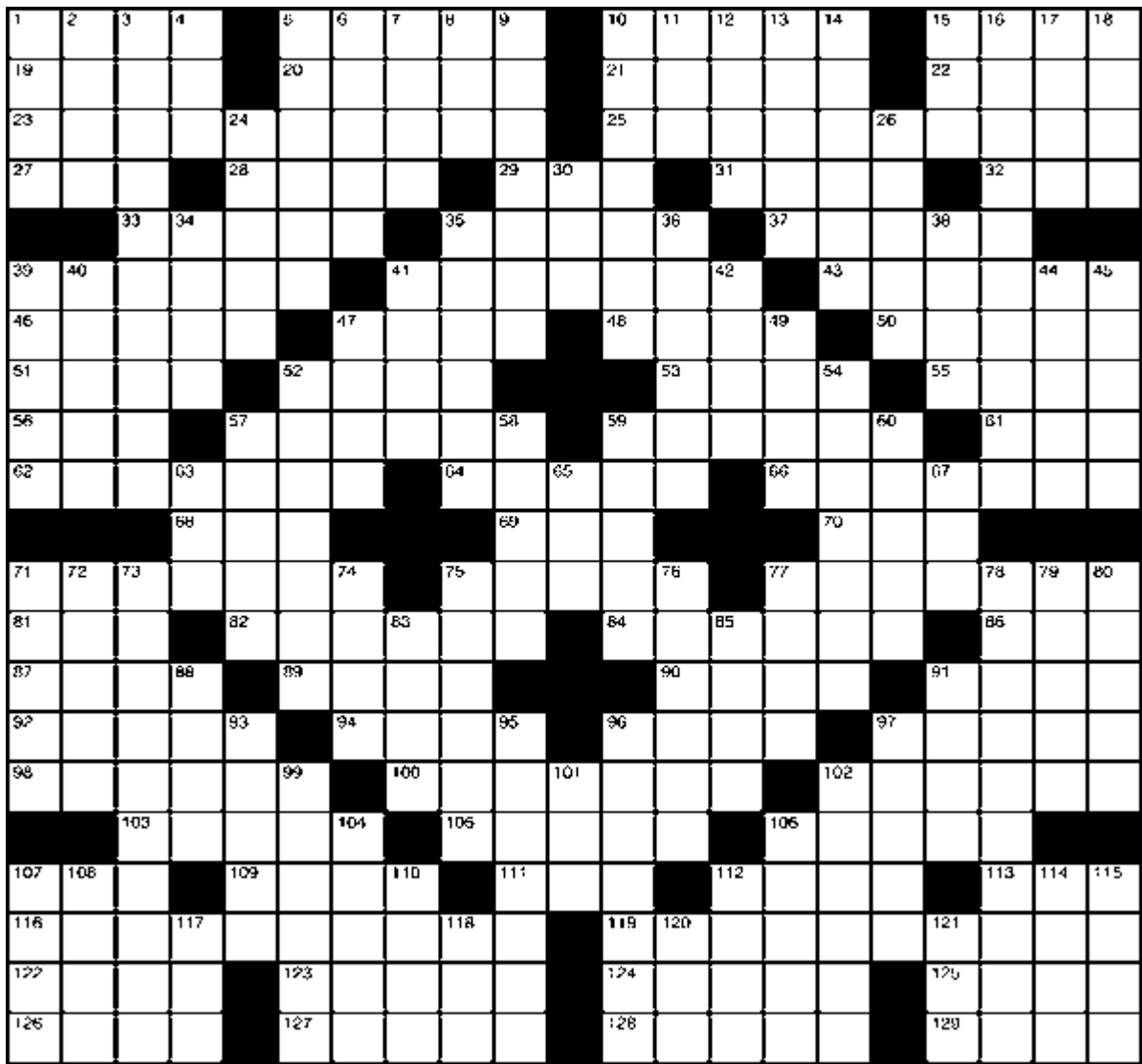
Some vaccination centres in threatened districts, as well as Kolkata, suspended operations and a special effort had been launched to ensure the supply of oxygen and medicines to hospitals, officials said.

Officials in neighbouring Bangladesh, a regular target of cyclones, said they expected the low-lying delta nation to be spared this time.

Some of the deadliest storms in history have formed in the Bay of Bengal, including one in 1970 that killed half a million people in what is modern-day Bangladesh.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



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ACROSS

- 1 One of a pair
5 Abode of the dead
10 Betrayer of Jesus
15 Blemish
19 Persia
20 Ward off
21 Singleness
22 Ecclesiastical office book
23 Large, branched candlesticks
25 Worship
27 Work unit
28 Long gash
29 An article
31 Charles Lamb
32 Native metal
33 Painter's aid
35 Petitioning
37 Rower
39 Four-wheeled carriage
41 Marsh plant
43 Observe
46 Pseudonym
47 After yard or garage
48 Den
50 Of birth
51 Optical glass
52 Its capital is Lima
53 A brad
55 Linen fuzz
56 Uncle: dial.

- 57 Wrenches forcibly
59 Undue pressure
61 WWII theater
62 Noted French chemist
64 Roof edges
66 American statesman
68 Unmatched
69 ATM code
70 Self
71 Hauled
75 Coppice
77 An assumed proposition
81 Norse goddess
82 Captivate
84 To value highly: obs.
86 Seize roughly
87 Delicate fabric
89 Very: Fr.
90 Transaction
91 Tree stump
92 Miss Merman
94 Et ____; and others
96 Flat-bottomed boat
97 Fragment
98 Mariner
100 Offers
102 Excluded
103 Novices
105 To hoard
106 Temples: arch.
107 Scottish explorer

- 109 Detail
111 Bitter vetch
112 Brief remark
113 Philippine peasant
116 Allegation
119 Overburdening
122 Crafts partner
123 Rams down
124 Whitney to Dionne
125 Genus of maples
126 Office equipment
127 Actress Kimberly
128 Jewish home festival
129 French head
- DOWN**
- 1 Rodents
2 Sandarac tree
3 Juicy fruits
4 Conclude
5 English astronomer
6 Benefit
7 An obligation
8 Blunder
9 Law
10 Roman poet
11 One: Fr.
12 Take dinner
13 Defect of structure: comb. form
14 Native of Damascus
15 Drunkard
16 Orders of preference

- ence
17 Scent
18 Vocal quality
24 S-shaped curves
26 Brother of Moses
30 Smite
34 Macaws
35 Military greeting
36 Fabled monsters
38 And others: abbr.
39 Dried orchid tubers
40 Body of Moslem scholars
41 A Disney animated comedy
42 Prevaricator
44 A book
45 Russian salt lake
47 A prophet
49 Narrow inlets
52 Frugal
54 Word for word
57 Iceberg salad often
58 Flavor
59 After book or common
60 African river
63 To dress
65 Eminent dignitary: abbr.
67 "Hi ____"
71 Deletes
72 Lariat
73 Building designers
74 Olympic swimmer

- Torres
75 Teapot covers
76 Withstand
77 Turf fuel
78 A crevice
79 Bechamel or Hollandaise
80 Receded
83 Dissolve
85 Lairs
88 Wriggling
91 Father
93 A lemur
95 Deep
96 Individuals
97 Himalayan mammal
99 Turn on axis
101 June bug
102 To trade
104 Of a bristle
106 To compel
107 Electric catfish
108 Land measure
110 A Puccini heroine
112 Noxious plant
114 The dill
115 Mythical monster
117 Welsh river
118 Goddess of harvests
120 Compete
121 Indian memorial post

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Long-term changes don't happen overnight, especially when they involve another person. So cool your jets! You've simply got to learn how to be a little more patient with things. Just regard the other person in this situation and everything will be fine. Follow their lead on this and do as they do. For once, they might have a better handle on the way things need to go than you do.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Adding more romance to your life doesn't always mean turning up the heat on a love relationship. Romance should be a part of everything in your life, in the truest sense of the word. Try to ensure that what you see is beautiful, what you hear is mellifluous, and what you eat is delicious. Give yourself the gift of pleasurable moments that you can look back on in the future.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Try to put some silliness at the top of your to-do list. Practical jokes and wacky faces are totally free and can be totally fun. Your sense of humour is one of your greatest strengths, and your ability to see humour in just about any situation is one of the biggest reasons you are so loved by your friends. Socialising is a wonderful idea, especially if the weather cooperates.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your creative side hasn't been getting any love. It's time to check out some art or music that makes you think and feel differently. All of this logical stuff has its place, but too much of it will turn your personality into something you won't even recognise. Getting back in touch with your creativity doesn't take much effort. Just check out an art museum or some different music.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Try to use more of your creativity today. Just let yourself go and try not to work so hard to come up with the expected answers. Express what you feel and communicate in the way that you feel most comfortable. If that means singing a song, then sing! If that means writing a poem, then get to rhyming. Your personality is conveyed whenever you open your mouth.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You could encounter a person from a different culture who sets your world on edge. But whether the change they make is a good one or bad one is completely up to you. If you can keep your mind open, you'll have a positive experience. Just because someone doesn't handle a difficult situation in the same way you do doesn't mean they are wrong.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

This is not such a great day for mulling things over. Now is the time for decisive action! Even if you're not totally sure about what you're doing, you need to fake it until you do. Your brain is excellent at coming up with new schemes, but maybe not so excellent at understanding how to pull them together. To make it happen, you need to ask a friend for help. So get out, grab a willing accomplice.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

It's a super day for you to live large! Be over the top and take your shameless flirting to a whole new level. Just have fun with whatever you do, and don't modify your behaviour based on who could be watching. Who really cares what other people think? It's a day for you to be careless and even a little bit crazy. Let loose with silly jokes, goofy slapstick, and groan-worthy puns.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You've always found learning to be an enjoyable activity, but today your brain is hungry for information. Go and seek out some new people and places to discover. Sidele up to a group you never talk to and introduce yourself. Each time you experience something new, you energise yourself and create a whole new connection that should come in handy soon.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Try to become more socially active. Getting involved in making the changes you want to see in the world is a wonderful way to get a deeper understanding of what motivates other people and, ultimately, what motivates you. You need to focus more on the process of living in order to get more out of your own life. Stop getting distracted by disposable culture trends.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You can't change the past, so if you're full of regrets, you just have to start getting comfortable with them because there's no going back. The pain of what you did or didn't do will fade with the passage of time, so look ahead. Make some plans with friends for a road trip and give yourself something to look forward to, something to take your mind off of the past.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

When it comes to your finances, you can't sacrifice your savings for your reputation. If you bow out of a pricey event due to budget constraints, the people who care about you won't judge you. If they do, who needs them? When you choose friends, put their ability to support you high up on your list. If they only like you when your wallet is open, they're not your friends.

1. The groundwater can become confined between two impermeable layers. This type of enclosed water is called

a. artesian
b. artesian well
c. unconfined groundwater
d. confined groundwater

2. The largest glaciers are

a. mountain glaciers
b. alpine glaciers
c. continental glaciers
d. piedmont glaciers

3. The ionosphere includes

a. mesosphere
b. thermosphere
c. thermosphere and exosphere
d. thermosphere, exosphere and mesosphere

Answers: 1.a 2.c 3.c

KIDS COLOURING

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

	9	7		6		8	
1				9	4		7
	5		7	1			6
7	2				5		
		1		2	8		
		9				4	2
8				6	7		9
9		4	8				5
	7		9			3	1

BOGGLER

H	F	A	O
G	R	U	C
A	I	H	S
D	E	F	A

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

8	1	4	5	6	2	7	9
5	9	1	2	8	4	1	6
4	6	2	7	9	1	5	8
2	4	9	1	7	8	6	5
6	7	8	5	2	9	1	4
1	5	8	6	4	7	2	9
9	2	6	8	1	7	8	4
7	5	4	6	8	2	8	9
8	1	9	4	5	7	2	6

DAILY CROSSWORD ANSWERS (MAY 26)

ALPACA SEAFARER RACKET
GOOGAR ARMORED EITOTTE
ADRIANO FOLKLORE
KENTINITE DEED ASSNER
FONTO RIVER PAPER
JOHNIE BELL BARB BEOO
ANDVODKAMANTSMINGKIV
MELP KUNG ATLAS BATTLE
GATAPLAN PUTTING SPINAK
RICKSHA BELTAPED
GAMES PESTICIDE STAGMAD
MARV GORER PARKACA
ASGOTIORONUMISSOHONUM
MELP KUNG ATLAS BATTLE
GYO RAME WAINER JOHNN
WEARE BELLER BEN
GATAPLAN PUTTING SPINAK
RICKSHA BELTAPED
ALPACA SEAFARER RACKET

WORD BUILDER

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

FIBROMYALGIA

ACHES ALL OVER?

Do body aches often take a toll on your enthusiasm at work or your general well-being at home? Do you often feel that every part of your body seems to be aching and a trip to your local clinic does not quite bring you any relief? You could be suffering from fibromyalgia, the exact cause of which cannot be pin-pointed even by physicians.

Fibromyalgia is a condition that causes pain in muscles and soft tissues all over the body. It can affect your neck, shoulders, back, chest, hips, buttocks, arms, and legs. The pain may be worse in the morning and evening, and sometimes the pain may last all day long. It can also get worse with activity, cold weather, or if you have any anxiety or stress. Since a clear diagnosis is not always possible, management of symptoms, however, seems to be the only way forward.

According to Johns Hopkins Medicine, this condition affects around 1 in 50 to 1 in 25 people in the US and is most common in middle-aged women. The average age range at which fibromyalgia is diagnosed is 35 to 45 years old, but most people have had symptoms, including chronic pain, that started much earlier in life.

The cause of fibromyalgia is unknown but it can often be triggered by a stressful event, including physical stress or emotional (psychological) stress. Other possible triggers for the condition include injury or a viral infection.

Researchers think there may be a link between fibromyalgia and sleep problems or stress. It may also be linked to immune, endocrine, or biochemical problems. Pain may start in one part of your body, such as your neck and shoulders but any part of the body can be affected.

The pain ranges from mild to severe. It may feel like burning, soreness, stiffness, aching, or gnawing pain. You may have sore spots in certain parts of your muscles. Sometimes, it may feel like arthritis, but it's not a condition that gets worse and it doesn't damage muscles or bones.

Symptoms

Common symptoms of fibromyalgia include:

- Medium to severe tiredness (fatigue)
- Less exercise endurance
- Sleep problems at night
- Depressed mood
- Anxiety
- Headaches
- Irritable bowel symptoms (pain, bloating, diarrhoea, constipation)
- Restless legs
- Painful menstrual periods
- Trouble thinking clearly

Diagnosis and management

These symptoms can seem like other health conditions. Hence, one should see a healthcare provider for a diagnosis to rule out other conditions. There are no tests that can confirm a diagnosis of fibromyalgia. Instead, diagnosis is based on your symptoms, a physical exam, and possibly ruling out other conditions.

There is no cure for fibromyalgia, but symptoms can be managed. Mild cases may get better with stress reduction or lifestyle changes. More severe cases may need to be treated with a team including a rheumatologist, a physical therapist, and a pain management expert.

Treatment options

One may consider a host of treatment options to ease pain as well as reduce discomfort in many ways. These include:

- Anti-inflammatory medicines
- Other pain medicines
- Medicines approved for treating fibromyalgia
- Medicines to ease depression
- Exercise and physical therapy
- Relaxation methods
- Heat treatments/cold treatments

Symptoms in women

- Women with fibromyalgia may experience heightened or different symptoms compared with men. Because fibromyalgia peaks in women during the reproductive years, female hormones are also believed to play a role in the higher incidence and severity of the disorder in women.
- Women are more likely to experience fatigue in the morning, pain all over the body, and symptoms specific to irritable bowel syndrome. Other symptoms common to women may involve those connected with menstruation. Since fibromyalgia can affect the menstrual cycle, periods may be heavier, and women may experience painful menstruation.

Medication to help you sleep

- As fibromyalgia can affect sleeping patterns, one may want medicines to aid sleep. If you sleep well, you may find that other symptoms are not as severe.
- If you have muscle stiffness or spasms (when the muscles contract painfully) as a result of fibromyalgia, your GP may prescribe a short course of a muscle relaxants. These help you sleep better.

Other treatment options

- There are other treatment options that can be helpful to cope with the pain of fibromyalgia. These include:
- Swimming, sitting or exercising in a heated pool or warm water.
- An individually tailored exercise programme.
- Relaxation techniques - meditation, breathing exercises, yoga.
- Psychotherapy that helps you think/tackle problems more positively.



Swiatek aims for title defence

Questions linger over several of her main rivals at the French Open

2021 FRENCH OPEN WOMEN'S SINGLES

Paris, France - Iga Swiatek heads into the French Open trying to become the first player since Serena Williams at Wimbledon in 2016 to successfully defend a women's Grand Slam singles title, with injuries and poor clay form clouding the hopes of several of her chief rivals.

The 2021 tournament gets underway at Roland Garros in Paris on Sunday:

Following her victory in Rome, culminating in a ruthless 46-minute takedown of Karolina Pliskova, Poland's first Grand Slam singles champion returns to Roland Garros just seven months on with a far greater weight of expectation.

Swiatek, who turns 20 next week, was the lowest-ranked woman, then 54th in the world, to win the French Open, shifted from its traditional May-June slot last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like Jelena Ostapenko in 2017, it was her first title at tour level. Unlike the Latvian, who has struggled to reproduce her best tennis regularly, Swiatek appears better equipped to stay at the top.

She entered the top-ten for the first time last week, and has cited the consistency of Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer as a goal for which she can strive.

"I'm really proud of myself that I'm actually starting to be more consistent, because that was my goal from the beginning," said Swiatek.

"I feel right now that I am doing huge progress in that matter. But

it was actually a bit frustrating after the French Open, because sometimes you can't see the result of your work.

"Obviously winning a Grand Slam is great, but after that comes rankings, and this year it was different.

"I'm really proud that I'm gonna have in my resume that I'm top-ten, because I always wanted that. I also want to be consistent. So right now our goal is to keep me in that place and go further."

Ashleigh Barty vacated her Roland Garros title after skipping much of the 2020 season citing health and travel risks.

The world No 1 has won three titles this year and reached the Madrid final, but an arm injury at the Italian Open forced her out of the quarterfinals and cast doubt over her fitness in Paris.

"The pain was becoming too severe, so it was important that I listen to my body and of course try and do the right thing," Barty said after retiring against 17 year old Coco Gauff.

"It just pops up every now and again," she added, "but we're confident we know how to manage it."

Halep ruled out

While the Australian sounded optimistic, the same cannot be said for Simona Halep, the 2018 French Open winner and reigning Wimbledon champion who will miss the event with a torn calf muscle.

"The thought of not being in Paris fills me with sadness, but I will focus my energy on recovery," tweeted Halep, who was thumped by Swiatek in the last-16 of last year's tournament.

As for Serena, now 39, she has won just one of three matches on clay this month having returned after nearly three months away following the Australian Open.

The American remains on 23 Grand Slam titles, one behind Margaret Court's all-time record, and has not gone beyond the last-16 in Paris since losing the 2016 final to Garbine Muguruza.

Her coach Patrick Mouratoglou admitted it was unlikely Serena would win her first major since the 2017 Australian Open in Paris.

With few obvious viable candidates for the trophy, this edition could offer Naomi Osaka a chance to step up on clay.

However, all seven of her career titles, including her four majors, have come on hard surfaces.

The Japanese star was knocked out early in both Madrid and Rome. Her best performance at Roland Garros in four attempts is the third round.

Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus claimed her biggest title to date at the Madrid Open. She will look to build on her run to the last-16 in Melbourne knowing that nine of the past 15 women's majors have yielded first-time winners.

Bianca Andreescu, the 2019 US Open champion, could be one to watch if she hits form but she has struggled with injuries.

On Tuesday, she pulled out of the Strasbourg clay-court tournament after winning her round-of-16 match, saying, "I don't want to take any risks" ahead of Roland Garros.

AFP



RECENT WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS

2020:	Iga Swiatek (Poland)
2019:	Ashleigh Barty (Australia)
2018:	Simona Halep (Romania)
2017:	Jelena Ostapenko (Latvia)
2016:	Garbine Muguruza (Spain)
2015:	Serena Williams (US)
2014:	Maria Sharapova (Russia)
2013:	Serena Williams
2012:	Maria Sharapova
2011:	Li Na (China)

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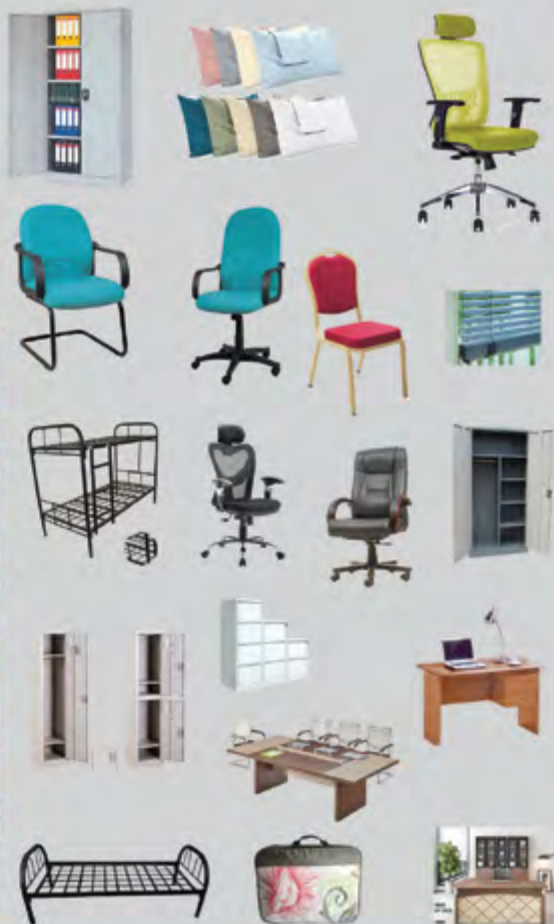


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FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Coach Galtier quits new French champions Lille



Christophe Galtier celebrates after Lille won the Ligue 1 title on Sunday

FRENCH LEAGUE

Paris, France - Coach Christophe Galtier told *L'Equipe* on Tuesday he was stepping down as coach of Lille two days after winning the French League (Ligue 1) title.

"I simply have the deep belief that my time is up here," he told the French sports daily.

Galtier, who was appointed in 2017, says he has received job offers from clubs including Nice and Lyon in France and Serie A's Napoli. The Marseille-born 54 year old said he was moving on to avoid 'falling into a routine'.

"I feel now is the moment," he said.

Galtier engineered a turnaround in Lille's fortunes after succeeding Marcelo Bielsa midway through the 2017-18 season.

Lille just avoided relegation. They then finished second to Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in his first full season.

Lille were fourth when last season was ended early because of the coronavirus pandemic, and on Sunday were crowned champions for the first time since 2011.

On the final day of the 2020/2021 season, they beat Angers 2-1 to ensure they finished one point ahead of PSG.

The former Saint-Etienne manager envisages signing up with his next club by the end of the week.

Lille's fourth Ligue 1 crown ended a three-year league winning streak for PSG, where Mauricio Pochettino took over during the season.

Despite boasting the world's two most expensive players in Neymar and Kylian Mbappe, PSG had to settle for second best to their more modest rivals from the north of France.

Lille took four points off PSG,

beating them in Paris, during the campaign.

Galtier had a year left on his contract, and is moving on with the club facing an uncertain future after turmoil off the pitch during the winter when owner Gerard Lopez was forced to sell due to financial pressure.

Lille also lost Luis Campos, the Portuguese super-scout who built the Monaco team that denied PSG the title in 2017.

Galtier had placed Lille's success at the door of these two men when he said in November: "The president found funds to invest in players spotted by a man of incredible competence."

Among the players Campos introduced were Canadian striker Jonathan David and veteran Turkish striker Burak Yilmaz, who both scored in Sunday's title-clinching win.

AFP

Gattuso named as Fiorentina boss

ITALIAN LEAGUE

Rome, Italy - Gennaro Gattuso was appointed Fiorentina coach on Tuesday, less than 48 hours after announcing he was leaving Napoli.

"Gennaro Gattuso will be the new coach of Fiorentina," president Rocco Commisso announced on the Tuscan club's website, which added that the new coach would take up his position on July 1. Gattuso succeeds Giuseppe Iachini, who left the club twice in six months.

Iachini started last season in charge, was fired and replaced by Cesare Prandelli in December but recalled when Prandelli quit in March. After ensuring the club would avoid relegation, Iachini resigned. Fiorentina finished 13th.

Italian media had reported earlier in the day that Lazio were going to fire coach Simone Inzaghi and would be Gattuso's preferred destination.

Gattuso, a 43 year old former AC Milan and Rangers midfielder and former Milan coach, succeeded Carlo Ancelotti at Napoli in December 2019 with



Gennaro Gattuso

the squad plagued by internal dissent.

Gattuso led Napoli to his first major trophy as a coach when they won the Italian Cup last June.

However, Napoli missed out on this season's main target, Champions League qualification, on Sunday. They started the final round of matches in fourth place, but drew at home with Verona to slip below Juventus, who won at Bologna.

Gattuso's exit was announced immediately by Napoli president Aurelio De Laurentiis.

AFP

16,500 fans to be allowed at Champions League final

Lausanne, Switzerland - Up to 16,500 spectators will be allowed to attend the Champions League final in Porto on Saturday, UEFA announced on Tuesday with the opening of ticket sales.

The figure permitted by the Portuguese authorities is one-third of the capacity of the Estadio do Dragao which took over hosting the final in mid-May after Istanbul was ruled out by COVID-19 problems.

UEFA had already allocated



Venue of the Champions League final: Estadio do Dragao in Porto

6,000 tickets each to finalists Chelsea and Manchester City.

To this will be added the

sold on a first-come, first-served basis'. Tickets will cost from US\$85-\$735.

Because of the pandemic, spectators 'will require proof of a negative COVID-19 test' to enter the stadium. Fans coming from abroad 'will have to comply with border entry restrictions and requirements that will be in force'.

As Portugal is on the British government 'green list' neither the players nor UK-based supporters will have to quaran-

tine on their return home.

The switch from Istanbul came after the UK authorities on May 7 put Turkey on their 'red list' of the most severe travel conditions.

While both finalists are two English, switching the final to the UK was ruled out because entry restrictions meant the media, officials and guests would need to quarantine before the match, which was not practicable.

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Glasner named Frankfurt coach

GERMAN LEAGUE

Berlin, Germany - Outgoing Wolfsburg coach Oliver Glasner will take over Bundesliga rivals Eintracht Frankfurt on a three-year contract from next season, the two clubs said on Wednesday.

"Oliver Glasner has shown in the last two years at Wolfsburg that he is able to work at the absolute top level and develop young players," said Frankfurt director Axel Hellmann in a statement.

Glasner, 46, led Wolfsburg to a top-four finish last season, but will now forego the chance to lead the club in the Champions League in order to join Eintracht, who finished fifth.

His move to Frankfurt, who will play in the Europa League next season, continues a trend of Bundesliga managers moving to clubs lower down the table.

He will take over from fellow Austrian Adi Huetter, who is leaving Frankfurt for Borussia Moenchengladbach, a club who missed out on European football entirely by finishing eighth.

Glasner, who had remained



Oliver Glasner signed a three-year deal with Eintracht Frankfurt

tight-lipped over his future in recent weeks, said the decision to leave Wolfsburg had 'not been easy'.

"Eintracht Frankfurt is an exciting club. The emotions in the city and the region are great," he added.

The Austrian will be charged with guiding Frankfurt through a period of upheaval, with many key figures in the club leadership set to leave this year.

As well as Huetter, the club is set to lose sporting directors Fredi Bobic and Bruno Huebner, who are widely seen as the architects behind Frankfurt's success in recent years.

The club won the German Cup in 2018, reached the Europa League semifinals the following year and only just missed out on a top-four spot this Bundesliga season.

AFP

Every day, all day!



England's Foakes out of New Zealand Test series

ENGLAND VS NEW ZEALAND
TEST SERIES

London, UK - Ben Foakes has torn his left hamstring in a dressing-room accident and will miss the two-Test series against New Zealand, starting at Lord's on June 2, with James Bracey set to debut in his place as wicketkeeper.

Foakes, who had been in line to play his maiden home Test series after finishing the recent tour of India as England's incumbent keeper, sustained the injury after slipping in his socks while walking through the Surrey dressing-room following their drawn County Championship fixture against Middlesex on Sunday.

Foakes' assessment and rehabilitation will be managed by the Surrey medical team. However, in a statement, the ECB said that he was expected to be out of action for at least three months, meaning he is unlikely to play any part in the five-Test series against India that starts at Trent Bridge on August 4.

In Foakes' absence, Bracey is in line to take over the keeper's role for his Test debut. Bracey has been a part of England's bio-secure bubble since the home series against West Indies last July, and was already widely tipped to make his debut as a batter at some stage in the series.

However, the other established wicketkeepers in England's ranks - Jos Buttler and Jonny Bairstow - are both missing from the current squad, having been rested following their involvement in the IPL, which was postponed earlier this month due to India's surge in COVID-19 cases.

As a consequence, Sam Billings has been drafted into the Test squad as cover. Though he was also at the IPL, as a non-playing squad member at



A file photo of England's Ben Foakes during a training session

- Wicketkeeper tears hamstring in a freak dressing-room accident
- James Bracey set to debut behind stumps, as England call up Sam Billings, Haseeb Hameed

Delhi Capitals, Billings' winter was interrupted by a shoulder injury, sustained during his solitary ODI appearance at Pune. He returned to action as Kent's captain last week, making 11 against Glamorgan in his first County Championship appearance of the season.

Given that Bracey was effectively covering for two roles in England's squad, the coach Chris Silverwood has also recalled the Nottinghamshire opener Haseeb Hameed, who played each of his three Tests against India in 2016-17, before breaking his hand and suffering a subsequent loss of form for his former club, Lancashire.

The timing of Foakes' injury would be cruel for any player, but it is particularly unfortunate given how long he has had to wait to be given an extended run in England's Test squad.

He was first selected for England's tour of Sri Lanka in 2018-19, and immediately impressed with a match-winning hundred on debut in Galle. However, he was squeezed out of the XI after an ill-balanced team slumped to two Test defeats on England's subsequent tour of West Indies.

Despite being widely considered the best gloveman in English cricket, Foakes was made to wait another two years for his next Test opportunity, when



James Bracey

Buttler flew home for the final three Tests of England's tour of India, as part of the management's rest and rotation policy.

His wicketkeeping immediately stood out in tough conditions, as he pulled off three stumpings in the second Test at Chennai, although he was unable to better the unbeaten 42 that he made in the first innings of that match.

Speaking to London's *Evening Standard* in the build-up to the

Lord's Test, Foakes admitted he was looking forward to his home England debut after eight overseas appearances (as well as a one-off ODI against Ireland in Malahide and a T20I in Cardiff in 2019), but said that he recognised that opportunities at the highest level could be few and far between.

"You can preoccupy with the external stuff that's not in your control," he said. AFP



Fans return for Edgbaston Test

ENGLAND VS NZ
TEST SERIES

London, UK - Up to 18,000 spectators will be able to attend every day of the Edgbaston Test between England and New Zealand after the match was deemed a pilot event by the UK government.

It was feared that the Test, which starts on June 10, would see spectator numbers limited to 25% of ground capacity because of COVID-19 restrictions. But, in what may feel like a major step towards a return to normal, Warwickshire announced on Wednesday that 70% capacity will be admitted.

Spectators will be contacted imminently and asked to sign a consent form and take a lateral flow test. It is understood that they only need to wear masks when moving around inside the ground.

The first three days of the match have effectively been sold out for many weeks. Tickets for day four will go back on sale. Around 10,000 have been sold at present.

ESPNcricinfo revealed in April that Warwickshire, with the backing of council leaders and the local mayor, had written to the government requesting that the game be utilised as a 'validation event'. At the time, though, the club hardly dared hope for more than 50% attendances.

Although there is relatively little financial upside to the news - Warwickshire were in-

sured for lost revenue and are going to need to spend heavily to ensure the correct protocols are followed - it will come as a significant morale boost for players and spectators, and for a region that has suffered financially in recent months.

With England having played their entire 2020 home summer behind closed doors, the game will be the first home match since 2019 that England have played in front of something approaching normal conditions.

"This is great news," Becky Fairlie-Clarke, of the Cricket Supporters' Association, told ESPNcricinfo.

"People have been through a lot over the last year and more. The chance to return to cricket with friends and family will feel like a giant step back towards normality. It really does give us a hope that we are getting through this. I think the entire game will feel like a celebration."

There will be no such boost for Lord's. The first Test of the series, which starts there on June 2, will be played in front of crowds of 25% capacity, or about 7,500 a day.

"We too have been communicating with the ECB and government with a view to staging a pilot for some time," an MCC statement said.

The decision to allow larger crowds at Edgbaston follows successful trials at a range of other events.

Cricinfo

Miraz rises up to No 2 in ODI bowler rankings

ICC RANKINGS

Dubai, UAE - Bangladesh off-spinner Mehidy Hasan Miraz has risen to second place in the ICC's rankings for bowlers in ODIs, becoming only the third bowler from his country to be ranked in the top two in the format. Miraz rose three spots, having returned figures of four for 30 and three for 28 in the first two ODIs against Sri Lanka.

Before Miraz, only allrounder Shakib al Hasan and left-arm spinner Abdur Razzak have been placed inside the top two from Bangladesh, with Hasan achieving the No 1 rank in 2009 and Razzak climbing up to No 2 the following year.

Left-arm seamer Mustafizur Rahman also had a steep rise, breaking into the top ten after going up eight spots to be ranked No 9. Rahman played a crucial hand in both ODIs against Sri Lanka, taking three for 34 in a 33-run victory in the first match and following up with three for 16 in the second, in a 103-run triumph via the DLS method. The wins have given Bangladesh an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

Among the batters, Mushfiqur Rahim's back-to-back player of the match displays with scores of 84 and 125 have seen him rise four places to be 14th. Mahmudullah, too, advanced by two steps to sit at No 38



Mehidy Hasan Miraz (R) celebrates after a dismissal vs Sri Lanka on Tuesday

following innings of 54 and 41.

Despite the series loss, the visitors too had their share of gains among the bowlers as Dushmantha Chameera's three for 44 in the second ODI helped lift him 11 spots to be joint-61st along with his teammate and leg-spinner Wanindu

Hasasranga, who also jumped eight places.

Meanwhile, allrounder Dhananjaya de Silva and left-arm wrist-spinner Lakshan Sandakan both gained nine spots to be placed 83rd and 94th, respectively.

Cricinfo



Jofra Archer

Archer faces fitness race for first India Test after surgery

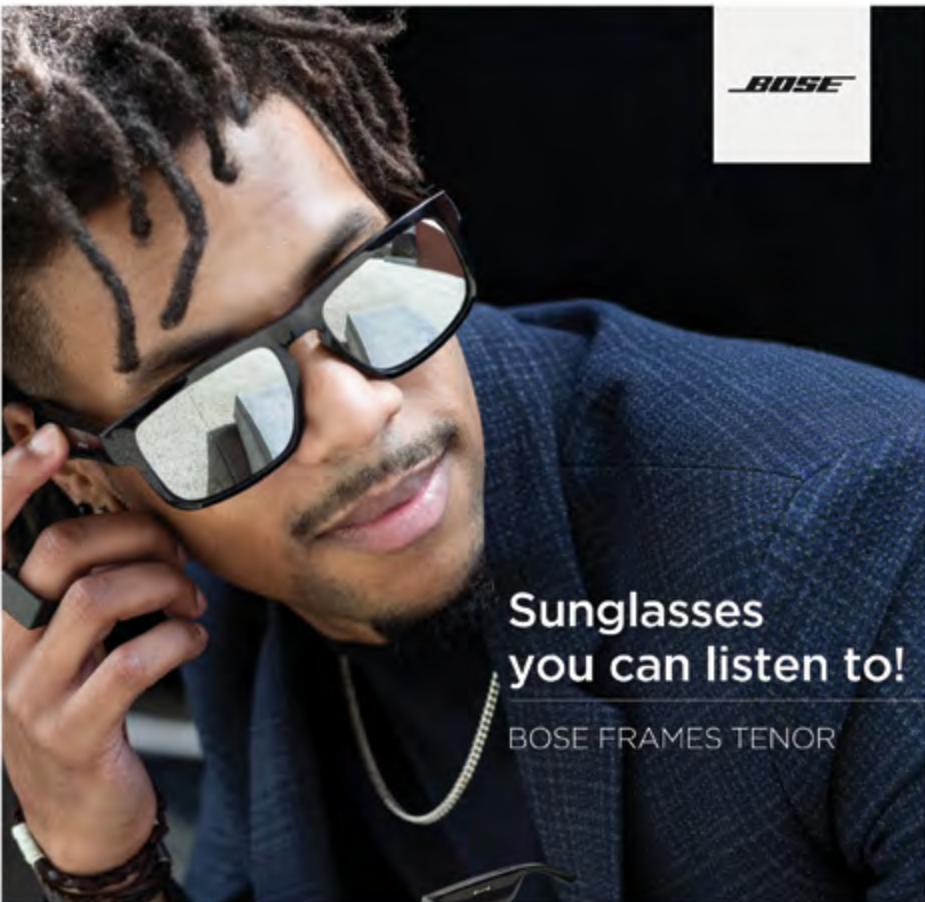
London, UK - Jofra Archer faces a race against time to be fit for the start of England's Test series against India in August, following surgery on his long-standing right elbow problem last week.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) confirmed on Wednesday morning that Archer had undergone surgery on Friday following the advice of a specialist, and said that he would now begin 'an intensive rehabilitation period working with the ECB and Sussex medical teams'.

"His progress will be reviewed by his consultant in approximately four weeks at which point further guidance will be provided as to when he can return to bowling," a spokesperson said.

The timeframe for the injury puts Archer's involvement in the first Test of the India series - which starts on August 4 at Trent Bridge - in doubt.

Cricinfo



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Tokyo Olympics sponsor joins cancellation chorus

Tokyo, Japan - Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, an official Tokyo Olympics sponsor, called for the Games to be cancelled on Wednesday, in the latest sign of opposition less than two months before the opening ceremony.

The call comes with public opinion in Japan firmly against holding the Games this summer, and after prominent business leaders voiced their concern in recent weeks.

Organisers insist however that the Games are on, saying an extensive rulebook will keep athletes and the Japanese public safe.

The *Asahi* daily's editorial urged Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to 'make a calm, objective assessment of the situation and make the decision to cancel this summer's Olympics'.

The paper said it 'cannot accept the gamble' of holding the event, despite organisers' assurances it will be safe.

It also accused International Olympic Committee (IOC) leaders, including vice-president John Coates, of being 'self-righteous' and 'clearly out of step' with the Japanese public.

When asked last week if the Games could be held even during a virus state of emergency, Coates said 'the answer is absolutely yes'.

Tokyo and other parts of Japan are currently under a state of emergency, which is expected to be extended this week until June 20.

"Saying 'yes' without demonstrating any clear grounds for it once again drove home the self-righteous image of the IOC," the *Asahi* editorial said.



Protesters call for the Tokyo Olympic Games to be cancelled, during a recent rally in Tokyo, Japan

Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto said it was 'natural' that 'different media organisations have different views', but acknowledged that people are 'anxious'.

"The national and local governments have put stringent measures in place to contain the spread of infections, and we believe the situation will improve as a result," he said.

Muto added that no executive board members had called for the Games to be cancelled or postponed.

Two prominent figures in Japanese business have also voiced opposition to the Games in recent weeks.

Masayoshi Son, head of tech investment behemoth SoftBank Group, tweeted on Sunday: "Do

the IOC have the right to decide if it's held or not?"

"If you think about what people have to put up with, we might have a lot more to lose if the Games go ahead," he added.

And earlier this month Hiroshi Mikitani, CEO of e-commerce giant Rakuten, called the Games 'a suicide mission'.

"The risk is too big and... I'm against having the Tokyo Olympics this year," he told CNN.

'No change' on Games: US

Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto acknowledged organisers face 'considerable' opposition.

"There are a considerable number of Japanese people who

If you think about what people have to put up with, we might have a lot more to lose if the Tokyo Olympic Games go ahead

MASAYOSHI SON,
HEAD OF SOFTBANK GROUP

are concerned," she told an executive board meeting.

She reiterated that the number of overseas participants would be capped and they would face tough restrictions while in Japan, and that the Games would not place extra stress on overstretched local medical system.

Muto said the number of medical staff required for the event would be reduced by around 30 per cent of the original

figure. Japan has seen a comparatively small outbreak of the virus, with fewer than 12,500 deaths, and has avoided the harsh lockdowns seen in some places.

The current virus emergency mostly limits the sale of alcohol in restaurants and bars, and forces them to close early.

But the government faces criticism for a comparatively slow vaccine roll-out, with no date yet set for expanding jabs beyond

medical workers and the elderly.

An exception will be made for Japan's Olympic athletes and some staff who will get early jabs courtesy of doses donated by Pfizer.

Those vaccinations will start from June 1, with doses going to around 600 athletes and 1,000 coaches, training partners and other members of staff, according to Japan's Olympic Committee.

IOC chief Thomas Bach said last week that most athletes and team members staying at the Olympic village would be vaccinated by the time the Games begin.

But earlier this week, with less than two months to go before the opening ceremony, the US State Department issued a travel warning for Japan over virus risks.

The White House said on Tuesday that it supported plans to hold the Games, with press secretary Jen Psaki saying 'our position has not changed on the Olympics'.

"There are very specific entry and movement rules and procedures which the organisers have laid out in order to ensure the protection of everyone involved," she added.

Cancelling the Games would cost Japan around 1.8 trillion yen (US\$16.6bn), a research institute said on Tuesday.

But the Nomura Research Institute warned that the country could suffer even greater economic damage as a result of holding the Games, if a spike in infections led to a new state of emergency.

AFP

UEFA opens proceedings against three clubs over ESL

Lausanne, Switzerland - UEFA on Tuesday opened formal disciplinary proceedings against Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus, the three clubs which are still refusing to give up the aborted European Super League (ESL) project.

"Following an investigation conducted by UEFA Ethics and Disciplinary Inspectors in connection with the so-called 'Super League' project, disciplinary proceedings have been opened against Real Madrid CF, FC Barcelona and Juventus FC for a potential violation of UEFA's legal framework," said the governing body of European football in a brief statement.

UEFA appointed 'ethics and disciplinary inspectors' on May 12 to conduct a preliminary investigation. The other nine promoters of the Super League escaped prosecution in exchange for light financial penalties.

UEFA, challenged in mid-April by the launch of the proposed private European tournament at the same time as it announced a major overhaul of its Champions League, has long preferred to negotiate the surrender of the rebels rather than crack down. But having failed to obtain a surrender from the three hold-outs, has opted for disciplinary measures without specifying what offences they have committed.

By announcing their own private ESL on the night of April 18-19, the 12 clubs turned European football on its head and threatened the very existence of UEFA.

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