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OMAN POSSIBLE BACK-UP VENUE FOR T20 WORLD CUP

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GOING BACK TO NORMAL

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic issued new decisions on Wednesday effectively returning life to normal.

With Oman obtaining more than 200,000 doses of vaccine last Saturday, and 1.25mn more expected in June, there is optimism that widespread vaccination will prevent further spread of the virus.

The committee stated that the decisions related to commercial activities issued on Wednesday aim to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on the private sector and to stimulate business activities without disregarding procedures set to protect individuals and society against COVID-19.

It urged all businesses to enforce the approved precautionary measures announced by the departments concerned and to penalise anyone who disobey health protocols. The committee reiterated that it will continue to monitor the situation and review its decisions in accordance with epidemiological developments.

Supreme Committee's new decisions include:

- Permission to re-open mosques, with minimum capacity of 100 worshippers, only to perform five daily prayers but not Friday prayers. The re-opening will take place in accordance with guidelines announced earlier by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Health.
- Ending the decision prohibiting commercial activities in the country from 8pm to 4am, allowing businesses to run at 50 per cent capacity (commercial outlets, restaurants and cafeterias). Children below 12 years will now be permitted in these establishments.
- Permission to open exhibition and wedding halls and allow such commercial activities provided attendance does not exceed 30 per cent capacity and a maximum of 300 individuals in the case of large halls. Precautionary measures must be in place in all halls and gathering areas.
- Permission to Omanis and GCC residents of the sultanate to move across land borders within the council states on furnishing proof of work entrusted to them by their employers.
- Reopening of beaches and public parks. The decision bans gatherings of any kind and stresses commitment to precautionary measures.
- Resumption of team sport activities in open places.
- Reopening gyms allowing maximum 50 per cent capacity.
- Reopening swimming pools, gyms and other facilities in hotels only for guests and membership holders.

Three more countries added to travel ban list

The Supreme Committee has extended its decision prohibiting entry to travellers arriving from Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania and the United Kingdom.

The committee also added

Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam to the list. The ban is applicable to all passengers arriving from any other country if they travelled through any of the above-mentioned countries within a period of 14 days of applying to enter the sultanate. The decision comes into effect

from 2pm, June 5, 2021, till further notice.

The committee has advised Omani citizens not to visit the countries in the travel ban.

With the new list, the travel ban on Ghana, Guinea, Lebanon and South Africa has come to an end.



SAYYID ASAAD RECEIVES PALESTINIAN PM

Muscat - Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Sayyid Asaad bin Tariq al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office Dr Mohammad Ibrahim Shtayyeh, Prime Minister of the State of Palestine, and his accompanying delegation on Wednesday.

The meeting exchanged cordial conversations and reviewed bilateral relations between Oman and Palestine. It also touched on aspects of the existing

cooperation between the two sides to serve the common interests of the two countries and their brotherly peoples.

The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, Riyad Najeeb al Maliki, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the State of Palestine, the two advisers at Sayyid Asaad's Office, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, Dr Tayseer Ali Farhat, Palestinian Ambassador to Oman, and the delegation accompanying the Palestinian premier.

Phuket to welcome vaccinated tourists starting July 1

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has confirmed that Phuket will be the first destination in the country to reopen to vaccinated foreign tourists without quarantine requirements.

Oman Air, the national carrier, is planning to start direct flights to Phuket from Muscat from July 1, subject to government approvals.

Yuthasak Supasorn, governor of TAT, said, "All of us at Tourism Authority of Thailand share the excitement and anticipation of everyone in Phuket in the preparation to welcome back foreign tourists in the not-too-distant future. From July 1, 2021, vaccinated foreign tourists will be allowed to visit Phuket without quarantine, so the count-down starts now to the reopening of Phuket!"

The country has launched a pilot - 'Phuket Sandbox' - to reopen the popular resort island for tourism. On March 26, the Cen-

tre for Economic Situation Administration, chaired by Prime Minister Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha, approved the plan submitted by TAT to open Phuket province to international visitors who have been fully vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus and who have tested negative upon arriving in the province.

"The approved plan stipulates that there would be no quarantine for international visitors who must remain in Phuket for at least seven nights before travelling elsewhere. It is aimed at accelerating the revival of the country's tourism industry and paving the way for the reopening of other tourist destinations within Thailand," said Supasorn.

Under the Sandbox model, Phuket plans to safely achieve herd immunity against COVID-19 for 70 per cent of the island's population with the number of new cases being close to zero by June 30.

TAT's website - www.tatnews.org - will be updated regularly with all travel information.



TRA's postal licences to three firms to create 200 jobs

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a move to provide job opportunities, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has granted licences to three local companies in the field of postal services with the objective of generating more than 200 jobs.

A statement issued by TRA said, 'The authority has granted licences to three local companies - Mandoob, Al Nowras Transport and Azw Technology - after these met all regulatory requirements. The companies will provide postal and related services.'

The activity of providing postal services includes receiving, clearing, sorting and distributing all types of postal items such as documents, parcels and packets not weighing more than 25kg.

'The licences aim to boost investment and job opportunities in the sector, as companies will provide more than 200 job opportunities, in addition to improving service quality and providing additional options to customers in terms of price and quality.'

According to the TRA, the number of licensed postal service companies in the sultanate currently stands at 19.



Citizens and residents flocked to beaches following the Supreme Committee's decision to lift COVID-19 restrictions on Wednesday (Syed Fasiuddin/Muscat Daily)

2nd dose to be given from June 6; ROP starts vaccination drive

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of the national strategy for immunisation against COVID-19, Royal Oman Police, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, launched a field vaccination campaign for all its personnel at the Police Hospital in Qurm on Wednesday.

ROP has prepared designated vaccination centres across governorates of the sultanate to accommodate all its personnel and vaccinate them according to a specific timetable.

The initiative to vaccinate its personnel is one of the important steps towards achieving acquired societal immunity that will lead to return of normal life in the country.

Second dose starting June 6

The Ministry of Health has announced that it will resume administering the second dose of



the COVID-19 vaccines to those who received the first one (after completion of ten weeks or more) starting June 6, depending

on appointments.

Meanwhile, the ministry on Wednesday announced that 41,155 General Education

Diploma students, teachers and allied staff have been vaccinated, accounting for 54 per cent of individuals in the target group.

1,258 new cases

The ministry on Tuesday reported 1,258 new COVID-19 cases and 14 related deaths. This is the third day in a row for Oman to record over 1,000 cases.

With the new cases, the total number has reached 219,529 and deaths 2,370. With 201,113 patients recovering, the recovery rate is 91.6 per cent.

The total number of patients in health institutions on Wednesday was 824, including 265 in intensive care units.

Oman Hall opens at noted museum in Russia

Muscat - The National Museum inaugurated on Wednesday the 'Oman Hall' at the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia, with the participation of Prof Dr Mikhail Piotrovsky, director general of the State Hermitage Museum, and member of the Board of Trustees of the National Museum of Oman, H E Yousef bin Issa al Zadjali, Oman's Ambassador to Russia, and the virtual participation of Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, secretary general of the National Museum.

H E Zadjali said, "It gives me great pleasure to attend the inauguration of Oman Hall, which hosts the exhibition 'Oman: The Land of Frankincense', organised by the National Museum of Oman. The exhibition is being

I would like to commend the fruitful cooperation with our friends in Russia in various fields, including our latest collaboration in the field of culture, heritage and museums

H E YOUSEF AL ZADJALI

hosted in the corridors of one of the largest and leading museums of the world. It has a wide reputation and fame among museum-goers for its archaeological findings and masterpieces that



(Supplied photo)

reflect the cultural and historical human heritage, whether of Russia or other cultures globally."

Oman is widely known for its friendly and respect-based relations with the world, he added.

"Here, I would like to commend the fruitful cooperation with our friends in Russia in various fields, including our latest collaboration in the field of culture, heritage and museums.

"As we celebrate the inauguration of Oman Hall in the State Hermitage Museum building, I would like to express my thanks as an accredited ambassador of the sultanate to the Russian Fed-

eration, to the director of the museum Prof Mikhail Piotrovsky and his employees for their effective contribution to the development of Omani-Russian relations," H E Zadjali said.

"At the same time, I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to Jamal al Moosawi for his great efforts in developing the National Museum and strengthening its relations with leading museums in various countries around the world. I also express my sincere gratitude to the attendees, with my hope that this exhibition will turn into an archaeological and historical forum for all lovers of Oman, its culture, history and authenticity," he added.

The exhibition 'Oman: The Land of Frankincense' sheds light

on a group of carefully selected archaeological findings, bearing an archaeological dimension of Oman through the ages, as it was the beating heart of the frankincense trade.

It was a hub for traders from other lands between Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and Paranoioc Egypt. The trade that extended through time has played an active role in shaping archaeological findings recently discovered in Oman, which came here either by sea or by land.

The objects displayed in this hall embody that global communication since the Bronze Age, the period of the first emergence of the Majan civilisation, which was famous for its ingenuity in copper smelting and building sea-going ships.

Barka 5 Desalination project

The Oman Power and Water Procurement Company SAOC (OPWP) is a government owned company responsible for ensuring sufficient electricity and water is available at an affordable cost to meet the rising demands in the Sultanate of Oman.

Consequently, OPWP is proposing to add a new Independent Water Project (IWP) adjacent to the existing series of Independent Water and Power Projects (IWPPs) in Barka. OPWP awarded the Barka V IWP project to GS Inima Barka 5 Desalination Co SAOC, which will include the design of the Sea Water Reverse Osmosis (SWRO) Plant according to the general guidelines provided by OPWP and Project requirements.

The Barka V IWP projects falls under Category A projects as per MD 48/2017 (Regulations for Organising Environmental Permitting) and therefore, it is required to conduct a detailed of Environmental and Social Impact Assessment study (ESIA) as part of the permitting process in the Sultanate of Oman.

To address potential environmental impacts arising

from the project development and outline appropriate mitigation measures to reduce impacts to as low as reasonably applicable, GS Inima Environment has commissioned HMR Environmental Engineering Consultants (HMR) to conduct the ESIA study for the Barka V IWP.

The ESIA will identify and estimate the potential environmental impacts due to the Project construction and operation. The Environment and Social Management Plan (ESMP), prepared as a part of the ESIA, proposes appropriate measures to prevent and manage potential impacts, and ensure compliance with applicable regulations.

The site for the development of Barka V IWP is a coastal area located in the capital region of Barka (located 50km West of Muscat and 140km East of Sohar) in the Al Batinah South Region, on the Gulf of Oman. Barka V IWP is proposed to be located in between the existing Barka III Independent Power Project (IPP) and Barka II IWP. The area is shaped as an "L" and is proposed to be used as follows: the area between Barka II and III of about 3.8ha shall

be used for development of the IWP, the land along the shoreline can be used a temporary laydown area of approximately 4ha (for a total footprint of approximately 7ha). The new plant, Barka V IWP, involves the design, financing, construction, commissioning, testing, ownership, operation, and maintenance of a high efficiency desalination facility based on seawater reverse osmosis technology with a gross capacity of 100,000m³ per day (22 MIGD) of potable water output plus a capacity of 100m³ per day (0.02 MIGD) of permeate water.

The Barka V IWP project has a detailed ESIA study as part of the permitting process in the Sultanate of Oman, also the Project developed an ESIA Addendum requested by project lenders. ESIA study and an ESIA Addendum are available for the next 30 days in the following link: <https://inima.com/proyect/o/barka-v-iwp/>

GS Inima Barka 5 Desalination Company SAOC, Sultanate of Oman, Muscat P.O. Box:294, Postal Code:103 Tel:22420207, Email:adminbarka5@inima.com

H E Sa'eedi attends WHO's virtual Gavi COVAX meet



(Supplied photo)

Muscat - Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, took part in a virtual Gavi COVAX Advance Market Commitment Summit, organised by the World Health Organization (WHO) and its partners, on Wednesday.

The event aimed to accelerate the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines in low-income countries. Gavi ensures the equitable distribution of several vaccines including polio vaccines.

Dr Sa'eedi praised the tireless efforts of Gavi in making the world more liveable for millions of people, despite the innumerable challenges it faced and continues to face due to the pandemic. He added that COVAX has demonstrated its ability to spread solidarity and to start a movement towards a more equal global distribution of vaccines.

In addition, the minister stressed in his speech the necessity to support COVAX in order to address the shortage in funds. The event, hosted by the Gov-

ernment of Japan, aims to accelerate access to 1.8bn COVID-19 vaccine doses for low-income economies via the Gavi COVAX Advance Market Commitment by raising an additional US\$2bn from donors and the private sector, in addition to US\$6.3bn already raised before the campaign was launched at the 'One World Protected' event on April 15.

Also on Wednesday, Dr Sa'eedi presided over a meeting to review the National Strategy for Immunisation against COVID-19.

The meeting was attended by the Ministry of Health's undersecretaries and a number of senior officials from the governorates.

Dr Sa'eedi applauded the efforts of all health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, stressing that everyone played a significant role in providing the required healthcare for all patients in general and patients infected with coronavirus in particular.

He pointed out that His

Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik appreciated the efforts of all health workers.

Dr Sa'eedi reviewed the general features of the National Strategy for Immunisation against COVID-19 and noted that the coverage rate in governorates varies due to concerns of some elderly people and parents.

Bader bin Saif al Rawahi, director of Communicable Diseases Control, made a presentation on vaccination of target groups, as well as the number of received and expected vaccines.

"The Ministry of Health has developed the National Strategy for Immunisation against COVID-19 to cover all the target groups of the population for vaccination who are aged 12 years and older, which represents 70 per cent of the population. The strategy will be implemented in several phases according to the supply of vaccines. Based on the agreements of vaccine procurement, 1.25mn doses of vaccines are expected this June," Rawahi said.

MoUs signed to fund projects in Dhofar

Thumrait - The Office of the Minister of State and Governor of Dhofar signed three Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) to fund projects in Thumrait and Al Mazyunah on Tuesday.

The MoUs include building

two public majlises, each worth RO75,000, in the niyabats of Al Hashman and Al Mathafa in the wilayat of Thumrait, and a mortuary in Al Mazyunah Health Centre at a cost of RO20,000.

The agreements were signed by Sheikh Musallam Ahmed al Hadhri, wali of Thumrait, Sheikh

Bakhit Salim al Mashani, wali of Al Mazyunah, and Abdul Amir al Ajmi, external affairs and value creation director in PDO.

The signing ceremony was attended by Sheikh Muhana Saif al Lamki, deputy governor of Dhofar.

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Bangladesh lifts ban on arrivals from Oman

Muscat - Bangladeshi expatriates are happy but also sceptical about the lifting of the travel ban from Oman to back home.

Bangladesh Civil Aviation has lifted the ban on passengers arriving from a list of eight countries, including Oman, with effect from June 4.

Unlike passengers from six other countries, those arriving from Oman and Kuwait must undergo a three-day mandatory institutional quarantine in government-approved hotels at their own cost.

A negative PCR test after three days will release such passengers for 11 days of home quarantine, while an unsatisfactory report will extend their self-paid institutional quarantine to 14 days.

Arrivals from Belgium, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark and Greece must undergo 14



days mandatory institutional quarantine.

Following suspension of the travel ban, several airlines announced flight schedules.

US-Bangla announced four weekly flights, and Salam Air five. Salam Air and Air Arabia have also scheduled weekly operations.

According to an employee of Biman, Bangladesh's national carrier, the airline is "looking into the matter because it is not viable to fly one-way at half capacity to

maintain COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. Besides, the ban on arrivals from Bangladesh to Oman is still in place".

Inability to fly full capacity

Biman is looking into the matter because it is not viable to fly one-way at half capacity to maintain COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. Besides, the ban on arrivals from Bangladesh to Oman is still in place

EMPLOYEE

will add to ticket costs, he informed.

"The average cost of Muscat-Dhaka tickets is around RO80. But now some airlines are offer-

ing one-way tickets from RO250 to RO350 which is quite expensive for a common Bangladeshi," he said.

Muscat-based Bangladeshi expatriate Alamgeer was planning a visit home to celebrate Eid al Fitr and Eid al Adha with his family, which didn't materialise due to the ban imposed on May 1 for arrivals from Oman.

He is happy with the possibility of flying home but unsure if he can afford the ticket.

"I need to check the price of the ticket and additional cost of mandatory hotel quarantine. If it's too expensive, I will hold my travel plan till things go back to normal," Alamgeer said.

If he decided to go now, he would also have to take into consideration the fact that his return date to Oman is uncertain.

(Text by Syed Fasiuddin)

State Council and Majlis A'Shura chiefs receive Palestinian PM



Muscat - Dr Mohammad Ibrahim Shtayyeh, Prime Minister of the State of Palestine, and his accompanying delegation were received by H E Sheikh Abdulmalik Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of State Council, and H E Khalid Hilal al Ma'awali, Chairman of Majlis A'Shura, separately in their offices on Wednesday.

The meetings reviewed Omani-Palestinian relations and the sultanate's continued stance of support to the Palestinian cause, in addition to the developments in recent times on Palestinian lands.

H E Ma'awali stressed that the Omani people stand side by side with Palestinians in their claim of legitimacy of their rights. He also

called for unity to overcome all obstacles and to achieve the demands of the Palestinians.

On his turn, Prime Minister Shtayyeh hailed the sultanate's stand on the Palestinian cause, expressing his gratitude for all efforts exerted by Oman to support the Palestinian people in the current circumstances.

He further underscored the strong relations binding the two countries and their brotherly peoples. He said he valued Oman's noble endeavour towards the Palestinian cause, as well as its sincere efforts to maintain peace in the region.

The meeting was attended by a number of officials from both sides.

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MAFWR harvests 12 tonnes of seabream in Musandam

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a sign of successful and sustainable operation of aquaculture projects in Oman, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) in cooperation with Blue Water Company, has harvested around 12 tonnes of European seabream fish in Musandam so far.

The ministry launched the aquaculture project for breeding and reproduction of finfish in floating cages in Musandam governorate in June last year. The work at the project commenced with the assembling and installation of the floating cages and fishing nets in a bay in Musandam.

The ministry said that the project is located in Khor Ghab Ali in the wilayat of Khasab.

The average weight of a fish reached 350g in less than seven months - a weight achieved in 12 months in European countries. The ministry said this is an indication of obtaining a return on investment in a short period at a lower cost and less consumption of the feed.

The MAFWR has carried out surveys in khors in the Musandam governorate to study the possibility of starting fish farming projects in floating cages.

The surveys have proven that there are more than 30 suitable sites for investment in this field. The ministry is continuing to implement studies to ensure the establishment of such projects.

The MAFWR signed an agreement with Sultan Bin Saud Trading Corporation to purchase and market the European seabreams produced from the project.

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E-learning efficacy during pandemic focus of research

Muscat - An Omani research has examined the effectiveness of adopting e-learning in Oman during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research titled 'A Study of the E-Learning System Efficiency during the COVID-19 Pandemic in a Higher Education Context in Oman' by Dr Mohammed al Siyabi, dean of the Military Technological College, is among the projects funded by the COVID-19 Research Programme of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation that explore the e-learning format in Oman during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to a statement, the aim of the project was to determine the difficulties, complications, and potential solutions of the e-learning system implemented in the Omani higher education context during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Principal investigator Dr Siyabi and his team, which consisted of Hussain al Rashdi, Dr Abid Khan and Dr Tariq Hussain from the Military Technological College, used both quantitative and qualitative approaches that subsequently led to an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach in which a questionnaire, interviews and an experiment were used as data collection tools. The participants were comprised of academic faculty, students, administrative and technical support staff from four different higher education institutions - the Military Tech-



There is still a long way to go to adapt to the e-learning mode of study with higher confidence in Oman despite all the efforts

DR MOHAMMED AL SIYABI

nological College, Sultan Qaboos University, Dhofar University and the University of Buraimi.

According to Dr Siyabi, the main findings of the research project revealed that "e-learning is more prevalent to produce good quality results for mature learners and that the alertness and concentration level among young learners during online lesson delivery adversely impacts its outcomes".

He added that "there is still a long way to go to adapt to the e-learning mode of study with higher confidence in Oman despite all the efforts, new teaching techniques and advanced tools".

He further stated that the research showed that assessment,

which is an integral part of learning, is far behind to replace the conventional methods of supervised assessments and build a higher confidence level in the process.

Based on the results, Dr Siyabi suggested to continue online education even after the pandemic ends through hybrid mode of education and find alternative e-learning assessment tools which can make the online assessment system more reliable and effective. He also recommended providing more technical support to teachers and students, making available all the necessary e-learning materials, developing students' self-learning motivation, enhancing the ways of informing and communicating with students, and enhancing senior management's awareness in crisis management.

Dr Siyabi suggested to build up teachers' knowledge and professional experience in how to integrate pedagogy with technology in the learning and teaching process and to develop teachers' ability to share knowledge, collaborate, coordinate, and support each other within the organisation.

He recommended providing effective and user-friendly e-learning technology and infrastructure as well as making more investment on virtual reality and augmented reality technology to find innovative and effective e-learning tools for practical courses delivery in the sultanate.

Nakhla Fort restoration work in advanced stages: Ministry

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism is continuing restoration work of Nakhal Fort in earnest.

It said maintenance and restoration work is in advanced stages and added that it continues to restore and maintain forts and castles in the sultanate that are distinguished by architectural diversity.

The Nakhl Fort is an important tourist attraction in the wilayat of Nakhl in particular and the Governorate of South Batinah in general.

"We followed a systematic plan in the restoration process, which includes maintenance work on the entire exterior facades, removing the damaged outer layers, treating the interior ceilings, floors and walls of internal rooms, and preparing water drainage areas and general electrical connections in the castle," the ministry said.

"The process aims to preserve the character and identity of the fort by using traditional materials



(Supplied photo)

in restoration and preserving all architectural elements without changing them. The restoration process is carried out with prudence and caution by using manual equipment and not using heavy equipment that may affect the structure of the building."

The Nakhal Fort has derived its name from the wilayat itself. The fort lies amidst palm orchards. It is an entrenched building that rises above a rocky hill at

the base of Mount Nakhal in the northeast of Jebel Akhdar.

The fort, also called Husn al Heem, lies 120km from the capital Muscat and is located at the entrance of wilayat Nakhal in Wadi Ar Raqeeem.

The fort's architecture does not follow a particular pattern, as it was designed around an irregularly shaped rock. Visitors will find that some rock parts have become part of the building. This

can be observed in some towers, particularly on the fort's western side. The construction of the fort dates back to the pre-Islamic era.

According to the National Centre for Statics and Information, the number of visitors to Oman's 51 castles and forts increased by 71.2 per cent between 2015 and 2019 to 426,525 visitors, while the total number of employees at these sites grew to 110 workers.

Sultanate takes part in WHO meeting

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Health (MoH), took part on Wednesday in the virtual meeting of the 149th session of the Executive Board of World Health Organization (WHO) held from Geneva.

H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of

Health, and First Deputy Member of the WHO Executive Board, represented Oman in the meeting along with Ambassador Idris bin Abdul Rahman al Khanjari, sultanate's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva, H E Dr Fatma bint Mohammed al Ajmi, MoH Undersecretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs, and some senior officials from

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The meeting touched upon a number of topics including election of chairs, vice-chairs and rapporteur, outcome of the 74th World Health Assembly, the report of the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee of the Executive Board, the managerial, administrative and financial matters, as well as the report

on meetings of expert committees and study groups.

The meeting addressed the annual report of the hosted partnerships and the future sessions of the Executive Board and the Health Assembly in addition to promoting the WHO's efficiency and effectiveness in providing better support to the countries.

The WHO Executive Board meets at least twice a year.

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(Supplied photo)

Oman Air launches seasonal flights to Tbilisi in Georgia

Muscat - Oman Air has launched seasonal service between Muscat and Tbilisi, Georgia, with two weekly direct flights (Wednesdays and Sundays), operated with Boeing 737 aircraft. Flights will operate from June 16 to September 16, subject to government approvals, it said.

The Wednesday flight from Muscat will depart at 8.15pm and arrive in Tbilisi at 12.15am. The flight from Tbilisi will depart Thursday at 1.15am and arrive in Muscat at 5am. The Sunday flight from Muscat will depart at 3.30am and arrive in Tbilisi at 7.30am. The flight from Tbilisi

will depart at 8.55am and arrive in Muscat at 12.40pm.

Oman Air said it will maintain its comprehensive safety programme throughout all elements of the travel journey to ensure that guests fly confidently.

"Guests who are planning to travel to Muscat should visit the Civil Aviation Authority website, caa.gov.om, to ensure they are prepared to comply with requirements to enter the sultanate. Guests travelling to Tbilisi in Georgia should ensure they are aware of official requirements to enter or transit through the country," it added.

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Profits of Oman's listed firms reach pre-pandemic levels



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's listed companies witnessed a faster-than-expected recovery during the first quarter of 2021 and total profits of the firms listed on Muscat Stock Exchange reached pre-pandemic levels backed by healthy growth recorded in banking and insurance sectors.

Total net profits for listed companies in Oman grew by 20.9 per cent year-on-year to US\$465.6mn (approximately RO179mn) in the first quarter of 2021 as compared with US\$385.2mn (approximately RO148mn) in the first quarter of 2020, according to the GCC

Total net profits of the Muscat Stock Exchange-listed companies grew by 21% to RO179mn in January – March quarter of 2021 compared with RO148mn in the first quarter of 2020

Corporate Earnings report released by Kuwait-based Kamco Investment on Wednesday.

'Key sectors like banks, capital goods and diversified financial services mainly contributed to the growth in year-on-year profits that was partially offset by decline in profits mainly for the telecom and transportation sectors,' the report said.

Oman's banking Sector, the

biggest sector in the local stock exchange by market capitalisation, saw its first quarter net profits increase by 32.1 per cent to US\$217.2mn (approximately RO83.5mn) this year, up from US\$164.4mn (approximately RO63.2mn) in the first quarter of 2020, Kamco Investment said.

Bank Muscat posted the largest first quarter net profits among the banks which reached

RO47.1mn after recording a year-on-year increase of 41.8 per cent.

'The increase in bank's profit was mainly led by higher net-interest and non-interest income coupled with a steep decline in loan loss provisions during the quarter,' the report said.

In the telecom sector, Omantel saw its first quarter profits dropped by 10.4 per cent to reach RO56mn this year compared with net profit of RO62.5mn in the first quarter of 2020 led by a 7.4 per cent decline in revenues.

On the other hand, Ooredoo Oman reported a 26 per cent decline in first quarter 2021 net profit to RO4.6mn down from

RO6.2mn net profit recorded in the same period of last year.

GCC corporate earnings

At the GCC level, quarterly net profits of the region's listed companies jumped by 49.2 per cent to reach at US\$40bn in the first quarter of 2021 as compared to US\$26.8bn reported in the first quarter of 2020, Kamco Investment said.

The GCC corporate earnings during January – March quarter of 2021 also surpassed the first quarter of 2019 level by 4.4 per cent.

'Earnings reported by the GCC-listed companies witnessed a faster-than-expected recovery during the first quarter of 2021 backed by healthy growth seen in almost all sectors.

The recovery was led by a resumption in economic activity in the region despite controlled restrictions as COVID-19 cases re-emerged at the start of the year resulting in partial-lockdowns,' Kamco Investment said.

Business sentiments have remained upbeat as a result of one of the fastest vaccine administration in the world achieved by the GCC countries, the report added.

Profits were up across all seven exchanges in the GCC with Kuwait's listed companies reporting the biggest increase of almost two fold during the first quarter of 2021, whereas Dubai reported an year-on-year increase of 23.1 per cent. Bahrain and Abu Dhabi were next with reported quarterly profits up 102.5 per cent and 82.2 per cent, respectively.

Out of 21 sectors on the GCC exchanges, 17 sectors reported year-on-year as well as quarter-on-quarter growth in profits during the first quarter of 2021. Moreover, the top five sectors in the region reported an year-on-year profit growth of 42 per cent with the bulk of the growth coming from the materials sector.



CMA imposes RO10,000 fine on Takaful Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) on Wednesday said that it has imposed a RO10,000 fine on Takaful Oman Insurance Company for breaching the Standard Motor Insurance Policy Schedule.

'The executive president of CMA issued a disciplinary decision imposing RO10,000 fine on Takaful Oman Insurance Company for breaching Table (b) of the Standard Motor Insurance Policy Schedule which resulted in misleading some policyholders of the existence of insurance coverage for personal accidents in compulsory insurance cover,' the CMA said in a statement.

The CMA also obliged Takaful Oman Insurance Company to compensate policyholders who suffered damage due to the breaches of the company.

The Standard Motor Insurance Policy was issued by the CMA to regulate the relation-

ship between policyholders and insurers to maintain the rights and obligations of the parties and reduce disputes.

'The personal accident addendum is a crucial service in motor insurance package and is a basic benefit in the comprehensive insurance and optional benefit in the compulsory insurance.

A large portion of the motor vehicle owners are keen to add this benefit to hedge against the expected risks while driving,' the CMA said.

The CMA called upon all insurance companies and brokers to comply with the legal and professional provisions when rendering the insurance service to the customers.

The regulator also urged policyholders to contact the customer service departments in the insurance companies and the institutional services department of the CMA in case of queries and complaints relate to the insurance services.

Investcorp plans to delist from bourse

Manama, Bahrain – Investcorp, a leading global provider and manager of alternative investment products, announced that its extraordinary general meeting (EGM) on Wednesday approved the board's recommendation to delist from the Bahraini bourse and convert the company into a closed shareholding company.

This remains subject to receipt of regulatory approvals and completion of the required legal process and is expected to be completed during the third quarter of 2021, Investcorp said.

Mohammed Alardhi, executive chairman of Investcorp, said, "Delisting and becoming a private company is the most appropriate ownership structure at this stage in the continuing journey of Investcorp. It will allow us to be agile, focused on investing for our long-term strategy and enables our senior leadership team to be dedicated to driving growth. Bahrain is Investcorp's birthplace, our hub in the Gulf region and we highly value the deep talent pool, the regulatory environment and geographical central position it offers in the GCC."

Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation

Electronic Tenders

The Internal Tenders Committee of the Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation announced the following tenders:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Company that are entitled to participate	Tender Price	Last Date for purchasing Tender	The deadline for submission of tenders
04/2021	Rectification works at MOHERI Headquarters and carpark structure	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade: first	26 /200 RO	21/06/2021	11/07/2021
05/2021	Providing cleaning services for the buildings of Seeb vocational college	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade first – second- third	25 Ro	22/06/2021	12/07/2021
06/2021	Providing cleaning services for buildings of Sur vocational college	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade first	25 Ro	22/06/2021	12/07/2021
07/2021	Providing maintenance services for Al Buraimi Vocational college buildings	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade – second	25 Ro	22/06/2021	12/07/2021

please visit the following link in E-Tendering system for purchasing the tender documents:

<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om/>

All companies that are bidding must provide a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from a bank operating in the Sultanate for at least (1%) of the tender value on behalf of His Excellency Dr. / Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee.

Preference will be given to companies' or small and medium enterprises registered with the General Authority for the development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) that includes the largest proportion of its tender Omanization.

Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.

Chairman of tender committee

Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation

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Upward trend continues at MSX

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) on Wednesday further increased by 0.55 per cent to close at 3,915.47 points. The upward trend at the Omani bourse continued for the fourth consecutive day amid increased optimism about global economic recovery and oil prices.

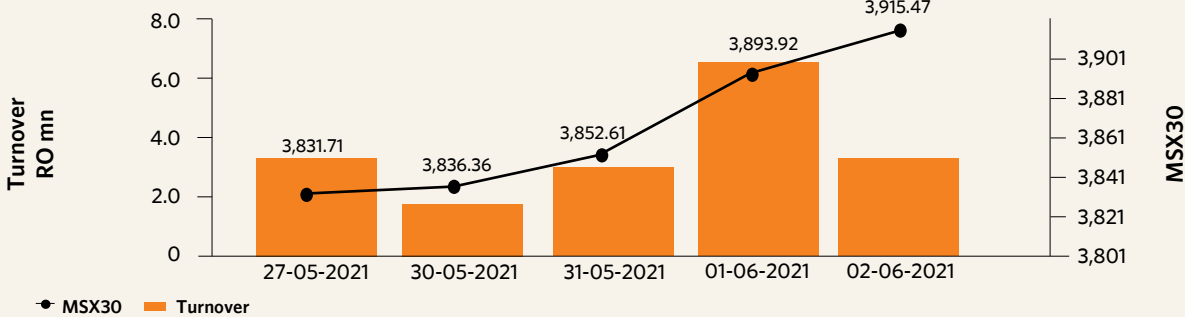
All sectoral indices closed in green territory led by Financial Index which gained 0.75 per cent. Industrial Index rose 0.17 per cent while Services Index increased 0.30 per cent. The MSX Sharia Index closed 0.19 per cent higher at 563.54 points.

Trading activity, however, decreased on Wednesday as volumes fell 20.4 per cent to 29.8mn shares compared with 37.4mn shares traded on Tuesday. Market turnover also dropped by more than 49 per cent to RO3.43mn compared with RO6.74mn in the previous trading session.



Market breadth at the MSX remained highly positive with 21 advancing stocks to just four decliners. As many as 17 traded stocks remained flat for the day. Top gainers were Sharqiah Desalinat-ion (9.6 per cent), Al Sharqia Investment Holding (4.35 per cent), Taageer Finance (4.29 per cent) and Muscat Finance (4.17 per cent). Four stocks that dropped on Wednesday were Al Suwadi Power (-3.45 per cent), Al Anwar Ceramics (-2.08 per cent), Al Batinah Power (-1.82 per cent) and National Aluminium Products (-1.44 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



Talks to begin on Britain joining trans-Pacific trade agreement

Tokyo, Japan – Members of the vast trans-Pacific trade deal agreed on Wednesday to start the process for Britain to join the pact as the country pursues its post-Brexit commerce strategy.

Britain applied in February to join the 11-nation deal, signed in 2018 by countries including Japan, Canada, Mexico, Vietnam and Australia.

The deal known as the TPP-11 had been slated to become the world's largest trade pact before Donald Trump withdrew the United States in 2017.

After an online meeting of the members hosted by Japan, they said in a joint statement that they had 'reached a decision to commence an accession process' for Britain. "The move would be significant from the viewpoint of establishing a free and fair economic order", Japan's Economy Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura told reporters.

He said it would strengthen the relationship between Japan and the United Kingdom, which in October signed their own



Britain's Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab walks in Downing street in London on May 27 (AFP)

post-Brexit trade deal, largely similar to the previous EU-Japan accord.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said he was "delighted" with the development.

"This is a significant step towards a stronger trading relationship with the Indo-Pacific region which will support jobs and create opportunities for British businesses," Raab

tweeted.

International Trade Secretary Liz Truss meanwhile described the announcement as a "huge opportunity".

"It will help shift our economic centre of gravity away from Europe towards faster-growing parts of the world, and deepen our access to massive consumer markets in the Asia-Pacific," Truss said in a statement.

"Membership would give Britain all the benefits of a free trade area but without having to cede control of our borders, money or laws", she added.

Britain formally left the European Union in January 2020 after nearly five decades of membership, and quit its single market and customs union at the start of this year.

It has replicated or rolled over existing trade agreements with the bloc and several countries, but is yet to strike an entirely new deal with any government.

London is currently in advanced trade deal discussions with Australia and has held early talks with India, New Zealand and the United States.

The initial iteration of the trans-Pacific deal was seen as part of former US president Barack Obama's pivot to Asia.

But Trump's withdrawal soon after becoming president left the remaining members to move ahead with a revised agreement in 2018.

AFP

Pandemic plunges 100mn more workers into poverty: UN

Geneva, Switzerland – The pandemic has pushed over 100mn more workers into poverty, the United Nations said Wednesday, after working hours plummeted and access to good quality jobs evaporated.

In a report, the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) cautioned that the labour market crisis created by the pandemic was far from over, with employment not expected to bounce back to pre-pandemic levels until 2023 at the earliest.

The ILO's annual World Employment and Social Outlook report indicated that the planet would be 75mn jobs short at the end of this year compared to if the pandemic had not occurred. And it would still count 23mn fewer jobs by the end of next year. "COVID-19 has not just been a public health crisis, it's also been an employment and human crisis," ILO chief Guy Ryder told reporters.

"Without a deliberate effort to accelerate the creation of decent jobs, and support the most vulnerable members of society and the recovery of the hardest-hit economic sectors, the lingering effects of the pandemic could be with us for years in the form of lost human and economic potential, and higher poverty and inequality."

Working hours slashed

The report showed that global unemployment was expected to stand at 205mn people in 2022 – far higher than the 187mn in 2019. But the situation is worse than official unemployment figures indicate.

Many people have held onto their jobs but have seen their



ILO Director-General Guy Ryder

working hours cut dramatically.

In 2020, 8.8 per cent of global working hours were lost compared to the fourth quarter of 2019 – the equivalent of 255mn full-time jobs. While the situation has improved, global working hours have far from bounced back, and the world will still be short the equivalent of 100mn full-time jobs by the end of this year, the report found.

'This shortfall in employment and working hours comes on top of persistently high pre-crisis levels of unemployment, labour under-utilisation and poor working conditions,' the ILO said.

And while global employment is expected to recover more quickly in the second half of 2021 – provided the overall pandemic situation does not worsen – the ILO warned that the recovery would be highly uneven.

This, it said, was due to inequitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. So far, more than 75 per cent of all the jobs have gone to just 10 countries.

The limited capacity of most developing and emerging economies to support strong fiscal stimulus measures will also take its toll, the ILO said, warning that the quality of newly created

jobs will likely deteriorate in those countries. Compared to 2019, 108mn more workers around the world were categorised as poor or extremely poor, meaning they and their families live on less than US\$3.20 per person per day, the study showed.

"The poverty figures are absolutely dramatic," Ryder said, warning that five years of progress towards eradicating working poverty had been undone.

The report highlighted how the COVID-19 crisis had worsened pre-existing inequalities by hitting vulnerable workers harder.

The crisis has also disproportionately hit women, who have fallen out of the labour market at a greater rate than men, even as they have taken on more of the additional burden of caring for out-of-school children and others.

This, the report warned, had created the risk of a 're-traditionalisation' of gender roles.

Youth employment meanwhile fell 8.7 per cent last year – more than double the 3.7 per cent for older workers.

AFP

Britain approves eBay-Adevinta merger

London, UK – Britain's antitrust authority on Wednesday approved Norwegian firm Adevinta's acquisition of US e-commerce giant eBay's classified advertising business after the two agreed to sell off UK units.

The Norwegian classified ads company announced in July last year that it would acquire the eBay division, paying US\$9.2bn in cash and shares, thereby creating the largest player in the field.

But Britain's Competition and Market Authority (CMA) had expressed concern that the merged company would be too dominant in the sector in the UK.

On Wednesday, the CMA formally approved the transaction, saying the two companies' solution to sell UK units would remedy, mitigate or prevent the substantial lessening of competition, or any adverse effect which may be expected to result from the merger.

Adevinta agreed to sell Sh-

pock while eBay will offload Gumtree to third parties.

The sale of Shpock to Austria's Russmedia Equity Partners will be completed on Wednesday, Adevinta said in a statement, while the Gumtree sale will be completed later.

The Norwegian group said it still hoped to complete the eBay acquisition by the end of the second quarter after it receives approval from Austria's anti-trust authority.

AFP

IMF, World Bank prioritise vaccine access to end pandemic

Washington, US – After kicking their massive lending powers into overdrive to help the nations hardest hit by COVID-19 last year, the IMF and the World Bank are now focusing on getting vaccines to poor countries to keep the pandemic from derailing the global economic recovery.

The International Monetary Fund's managing director Kristalina Georgieva is spearheading a US\$50bn joint effort with the World Health Organization to expand vaccine access, particularly for impoverished nations that have struggled to get the crucial jabs.

Georgieva will on Friday present the proposal, which was unveiled late last month and backed by the World Bank and World Trade Organization, to finance ministers from the G7 wealthiest nations during a meeting in London.

Early in the COVID-19 crisis,

the IMF and World Bank warned the pandemic would set back poor countries' progress, causing increased inequality and a resurgence of poverty.

Now the Washington-based lenders are sounding the alarm that unequal access to vaccines will prolong a pandemic that has already killed more than 3.5mn people worldwide.

Low-income countries have received less than one per cent of the doses administered to date, resulting in a 'dangerous divergence' in economic fortunes, Georgieva warned.

As a result, it will take years for some countries to claw their way back to pre-pandemic levels. Economies in Latin America and the Caribbean will not regain their previous per-capita income until 2024, the IMF projected.

'All the firepower'

"The IMF and the World Bank early on understood that the cri-



IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva (AFP)

sis and the economic recession... would be very broad and very deep," said Homi Kharas, an economist at the Brookings Institution.

They pushed the G20 and private creditors to suspend debt payments for dozens of low-income countries.

"That was the first major step

in ensuring that the pandemic didn't trigger a debt crisis that could have longer term consequences," Kharas said in an interview.

The IMF itself extended direct debt relief to 29 of its poorest and most vulnerable members, doubled its emergency funding limits and tripled its concessional

resources.

"The IMF stepped up as never before, lending some US\$110bn to 84 countries since the start of the pandemic," fund spokesman Gerry Rice told AFP.

"Lending to sub-Saharan Africa in the first year of the pandemic was 13 times the annual average."

Meanwhile, the World Bank has committed over US\$108bn during the pandemic in more than 100 countries to respond to "the fastest and largest crisis" in the institution's history, the bank's chief of operations Axel van Trotsenburg said.

"We are using all the firepower we have," he said in an email.

However, critics note that help for middle-income countries has lagged.

"These countries, including many in Latin America, had really been almost left to themselves, to their own devices, since they

are not eligible for the debt service suspension initiative nor the low-cost loans available to the poorest countries," Kharas said.

On the table

Georgieva herself recently recognized the need to review lending criteria to reach these economies, but the priority now has moved to the effort to immunize at least 40 per cent of the world's population by the end of the year and at least 60 percent by the end of 2022.

In the bid to ramp up vaccination programs, "The World Bank has made US\$12bn available... and expects to have projects for around US\$4bn in 50 countries by mid-year," van Trotsenburg said.

But observers are pressing the institutions to do more, faster.

"The issue with the World Bank is their rate of execution," said Adnan Mazarei of the Pe-

tersen Institute for International Economic, who added the financing to date is "still a small amount."

"Since the start of the pandemic, the IMF did a very, very good job of quickly putting out some money with few conditions," he said. But now the fund needs "greater strategic clarity" on the vaccination goal.

Still, the US\$50bn plan is a good sign, and the IMF and other organizations should push to "make sure it is on the table" at the two-day G7 meeting concluding Saturday, Mazarei said.

He notes US President Joe Biden's administration already has shown more support for the multilateral initiatives than his predecessor, including one to boost the IMF's allocation of its reserve currency – Special Drawing Rights – by US\$650bn.

That proposal is expected to be approved in coming weeks.

AFP

Powering Bank Muscat's services, products

Information Technology (IT) has been an important enabler of the banking and financial services sector for decades. The digitalisation trend has been gathering pace globally over the last few years and the post-COVID-19 world has only further hastened this rapid change with banks receiving more and more customers globally through digital touchpoints. As the leading financial services provider in Oman, Bank Muscat is proud to spearhead this change in the country wherein customers' expectations of a 'superior experience' and increased digitalisation have led to considerable investments in technology.

Leading technology implementation

In continuation of Bank Muscat's endeavour to embrace the latest technology to serve our customers better, the bank has been undergoing a transformational journey over the past years by using state-of-the-art and best in class technologies to offer cutting edge products and services. The bank has invested millions of rials in upgrading to the best in class technology, and widening its banking network across the country as part of the financial inclusion strategy. The bank is channelising investments in technology to deliver meaningful impact and return on investment (ROI) in alignment with the bank's overall strategy. From having ATMs and CDMs across Oman to a feature-rich Mobile and Internet Banking platform, Bank Muscat has the best e-channels in the country, which are powered by cutting-edge technology. It must be noted that the bank's achievements in IT are



well recognised on the international stage with the bank winning two awards for IT implementation in 2020. Speaking about the implementation of the latest technologies, Ahmed Omar al Ojaili, group deputy general manager - Technology, Bank Muscat, said, "As the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman and in line with our customer-centric vision, it is of prime importance to provide our customers with an excellent banking experience. Our large investments in technology form the basis of this vital customer-centric experience that is currently driven by digital banking. "The bank continues to successfully leverage its ongoing partnership with global leaders in next-generation digital services and consulting to ensure that we are able to implement the 'best in class' technological solutions for the benefit of our customers

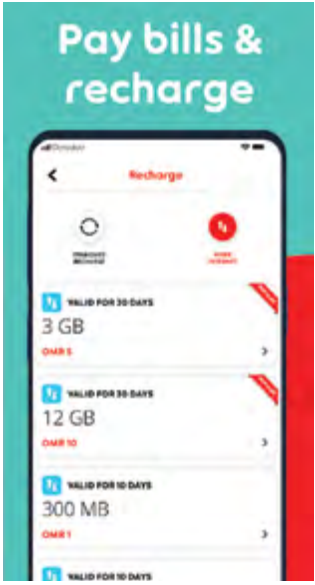
and other stakeholders." Ojaili added, "It is important to note that Bank Muscat has been consistently focusing on nurturing and supporting Omani youth in line with the long-term strategic plans of the country and also supporting the long-term growth strategy of the bank. We are proud of the fact that Omani youth have taken up the challenge and are now excelling in the IT arena. At present over 85 per cent of the IT team at the bank are Omani nationals. Digitalisation of banking services and solutions is in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040 and will ensure continued economic growth in the next phase of Oman's Renaissance." The year 2020 saw an increase in the number of delivered projects by as much as 30 per cent from 2017. This was despite the challenges brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic including working at 50 per cent

capacity to ensure social distancing. Though working in shifts made critical decision-making a longer process, the team successfully overcame the challenges and obstacles through perseverance and hard work even though it was running over 50 projects simultaneously. The projects delivered in 2020 included those which improved Access Management, Robotic Process Automation and the delivery of internal IT services to ensure greater convenience for end users. The adoption of smart and innovative payment technology has been a key area of the bank's focus in recent years. This provided timely help since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bank Muscat scaled up contactless credit and debit card production and distribution, which helped customers to conduct a safe electronic payment method for day-to-day transactions adher-

ing to COVID-19 guidelines. The introduction of contactless wearables for retail payments has also been playing a role in ensuring public health and safety during the pandemic. The bank has upgraded its Omni-channel Mobile and Internet banking with several new features to add further convenience and ease of banking for its retail customers. The online platforms meet the requirements of the bank's tech-savvy customers and further eases the delivery of services. Various features available such as bill payments, mobile top ups, payments within Bank Muscat, within Oman and international payments and transfers are being used by large numbers of bank customers on a daily basis and has resulted in a significant increase of active users on these platforms, especially in the post pandemic phase. The bank's 'B2B Connect' so-

lution, which is digitising the corporate and government payment workflow was another game changer during the past year. There is no doubt that scaling up the solution to address the needs of major corporate and government organisations helped the country to maintain economic activities. The B2B solution provides secure and seamless integration with the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems of large institutions and corporates to provide an automated, two-way data transfer service for high volume online payments. This facilitated the corporates to implement an automated robust and efficient end-to-end digitized payment workflow processing system. Smaller corporate customers are, meanwhile, well served by the online Corporate Banking platform, which averts the need for multiple branch visits and ensures secure payments and

transactions through the online platform. A number of digital options such as these have been helping to avoid face-to-face interaction with bank employees and ensuring social distancing. **Developing Omani IT skills** Bank Muscat has been privileged to lead private sector institutions in creating job opportunities across its different departments. The IT department of the bank has been witnessing a steady rise in the number of Omani cadre, who are also continuously offered new opportunities to further develop their expertise and skillsets. It is a matter of great pride to the bank that Omani employees across all levels have been keenly putting in great efforts to develop national human resources in line with the goals envisaged by Oman Vision 2040. The rate of Omanisation within the bank's IT department increased to over 85 per cent in 2020 and more and more opportunities continue to be created for young Omani IT professionals within the bank. Bank Muscat follows up on creation of job opportunities with a number of other initiatives. The bank hosts an annual IT and Project Management Achievements event to award both individuals as well as project teams for their excellent performance across different aspects. These include categories for individual awards like Rising Star which are given to new employees to encourage initiative and hard work. Awards for project teams include categories such as Most Complex Project, Smoothest Implementation and Best Governance Award.



Ooredoo app offers fast service

No matter where users are and whenever they need it, Ooredoo's award-winning app continues to offer simple, fast service in the palm of their hands. With over 1mn downloads to date, the app provides an ever-growing range of useful features, including an ID renewal function, SIM card ordering for home delivery, data transfer, local and international credit transfers, and the ability to save credit card details, making payments and recharges easier than ever. Customers can also quickly and easily make bill payments, customise plans, track account details, check device health, subscribe to the latest promotions, and so much more! Putting customers' digital needs and satisfaction first, the Ooredoo app offers access to the company's loyalty programme, Nojoom that include many discounts from popular outlets. Users are also treated to a wide range of entertainment subscriptions, including OSN, providing them with an awesome digital experience.

Samsung launches 2021 Neo QLED TVs

Samsung Gulf Electronics has announced that Neo QLED TVs are now available for purchase across Oman. As Samsung heads into its 15th year as the leading global TV brand, the Neo QLED line underscores Samsung's commitment to accessibility, sustainability, and innovation with new advancements that help redefine the role of television in consumer homes. Neo QLED goes above and beyond traditional QLED models, emulating its predecessors and raising visual standards thanks to the very latest technological features and advancements. Samsung's new introduction is available in 4K and 8K models that cater to every preference. "For Samsung, fulfilling our commitments to our consumers and exceeding their expectations are two priorities that guide us



during the design and development phase of every product," said Mustafa Sadick, regional director, head of Visual Display Group, Samsung Gulf Electronics. "As we celebrate the launch of the 2021 Neo QLED, we are excited that the benefits of this enduring approach will be em-

phasised to all through the power and performance of this remarkable innovation. Neo QLED TVs promise to provide consumers with the truly immersive experience they deserve, and we are eager to witness the widespread reaction over the coming weeks." As people turn to TVs as an

outlet for their passions, Samsung developed Neo QLED to enhance the viewing experience, no matter what you are watching. The Samsung Neo QLED viewing experience is defined by our Neo Quantum Processor, and new Quantum Mini LEDs. At just 1/40th the size of conventional LEDs, Quantum Mini LEDs allow for ultra-fine light control. With deep blacks, bright lights, and upscaling technology smarter than any Samsung TV has ever offered, Samsung Neo QLED delivers an ultra-realistic picture—whether you are watching a football game, or playing one on your gaming console. Neo QLED TVs can be purchased from Samsung brand shops, e-store and authorised retailers. For more information, please visit www.samsung.com.

Payment app Khedmah takes part in COMEX

Oman Investment and Finance Company's innovative national asset 'Khedmah' is participating in the Communications and Information Technology Exhibition 'COMEX 2021'. Launched recently under the slogan 'Digital Transformation and Accelerated Utilisation of the Future', the virtual 3D event, COMEX will last for 10 days until June 8. OIFC aspires to exhibit its constant efforts toward adopting digital transformation in its methods of work and services provided to clients. To further reinforce its leading position in the market, the company seeks to keep pace with modern developments in the industry and therefore enrich customers' experience by providing easy and high-end services to them.



Mohammed bin Saif al Toqi, senior manager, Telecom Recovery at OIFC, said, "It has become imperative for companies and other institutions to keep pace with modern trends and capitalise on digital advancements. This will contribute in delivering top notch services by enhancing operational efficiency and the quality of products, ultimately stimulating productivity."

All-new Mazda 3: A thoughtful and luxurious design

The all-new Mazda 3 Sports Wagon is all the rage in Oman. This comes as no surprise that it is one of the most beautifully designed, stylish vehicles to have ever come out of the Mazda lineup. Something stylish as expensive but this is not the case with Mazda. Its drop dead looks along with its class leading features and an understated, minimalist design language is what attracts one towards it. The Mazda 3 is a favourite amongst the youth. Zainab Said al Wahaibi is one such excited, youthful customer. She is a first year chemical engineering student at Muscat University. Having bought the Mazda 3 Sports Wagon Luxury almost a month back from the Wattayah show-



room, she had all the positive things to say. When asked what she liked about the car she said that it had a reasonable price, it was comfortable, had a modest design especially the interior and she wanted the Mazda 3 'design for

a change'. The New Mazda 3 is a breath of fresh air in terms of the design and its minimalistic approach to the exterior and interior lines and curves. The specific model which Zainab purchased is the 2.0lt Sports Wagon. The design is

stunning in the truest sense. The CX-30 and Mazda 3 are the 7th Generation Mazda cars. Starting from the key to the interior design and extending to the exterior, everything has been rethought and redesigned which refines the distinct drive of previous generations. The New Mazda 3 is available in Sedan and Sports Wagon styles and comes in a 1.5lt and a 2.0L Skyactiv engine versions. The design of it is to inspire excitement and adventure, keeping the driver's comfort and driving posture in mind. It is to ensure that all the senses while driving are fully invoked, no matter how long and what the destination is. It is a suave vehicle designed to charm you with its ultra-modern, sporty looks. But more than its

charming looks, is its driving pleasure. With rain-sensing intermittent wipers, signal indicators, LED headlights, alloy wheels and the list goes on that will make you fall in love with the Mazda 3 as soon as you start driving. Available in gorgeous hues of greys, whites, metallics and red, it is sure to win your heart. Coming on to the interior, the Mazda 3 Sports Wagon is a 5 seater with stylish, sporty seats for increased support and a low-slung dash. Added to this the interior includes an 8.8 touch-screen and a menu intensive system i.e Apple car play and android auto which makes for a highly interactive driving experience. Apart from that, the Mazda 3 has a navigation system with map data, Bose acoustics

for a groovy drive and an auto dimming rear view mirror for increased safety. More than the design, the 2.0lt engine delivers power when needed and acceleration which is responsive. Powered by Skyactiv Technology and a 16 valve, 4-Cylinder engine it achieves a high compression ratio of up to 13:0:1. This high compression leads to significantly improved engine efficiency and torque. Every drive is improved thanks to increased torque of 150@4000 rpm and a horsepower of 155@6000 rpm. The Mazda 3 Sports Wagon is also extremely fuel-efficient by ensuring optimal distribution of torque and minimising drivetrain energy loss, fuel is only used to power the engine when necessary.

Infiniti Oman announces special offer on SUV range

Infiniti Oman has announced special offers across its SUV range of Infiniti QX50, Infiniti QX60, and Infiniti QX80 as part of its promotion.

Customers who purchase Infiniti QX50, Infiniti QX60, and Infiniti QX80 during the promotion are eligible for assured cash gift, free registration, free window film and ceramic paint protection coat, free periodic vehicle service package and free AAA Assistance Card.

The special offer on the QX50, QX60 and QX80 is valid till June 6.

A senior spokesperson at Infiniti Oman said, “Infiniti SUVs - QX50, QX60 and QX80 are fitted with smart technologies that adapt to the needs of customers. These SUVs have multiple advanced features to please even the most demanding of lifestyles, such as versatile interior with adaptable seating, cargo space, and the individualised entertainment system. This is the ideal time to book one of the versatile Infiniti SUVs. Infiniti SUVs continue to be amongst the best-selling vehicles in Oman for obvious reasons. They are an excellent choice for anyone looking for powerful performance, safe drive, and comfortable interiors.”

Assured cash gift

Assured cash gift of RO3,000 is being offered on Infiniti QX50. Customers buying Infiniti QX60 will get an assured cash gift of RO3,000. Infiniti QX80 customers will get an assured cash gift of RO4,000. The cash gift can be adjusted in the down payment of the car if customer opts for it.

Free registration

All customers purchasing Infiniti QX50, QX60 and QX80 during this scheme period will be eligible for free first year vehicle registration. Applicable to the extent of private registration only.

For commercial registrations, additional amount including passing needs to be borne by customer.

All customers purchasing Infiniti QX50, QX60 and QX80 during this scheme will be eligible for free window film (side and rear glass) and ceramic paint protection coat.



Free vehicle service

All customers purchasing Infiniti QX50, QX60 and QX80 during this scheme period will be eligible for free periodic maintenance service package for three years/60,000 kms (whichever is earlier).

Free AAA assistance card

All customers purchasing Infiniti QX50, QX60 and QX80 during scheme period will receive Free AAA assistance card for first year only.

5% VAT on SBA for QX60

The 5 per cent VAT charge applicable at the time of purchase for QX60 will be borne by SBA's Infiniti Oman.

Infiniti QX50: Convincing performance

Infiniti QX50 provides the highest level of versatility, efficiency, and performance in luxury mid-size crossovers. The VC-Turbo engine delivers the strong and convincing performance of a V6 and the fuel economy of a 4-cylinder engine, which allows users to harness the exhilarating

performance of 268 hp and 380 nm at 4,400 rpm of torque. The appearance of the Infiniti QX50 highlights the influence of human artistry in the design process to emphasize the car's premium quality with intelligent packaging and deep character lines with Infiniti signature design cues.

The VC-Turbo engine is the world's first production-ready variable compression ratio engine, transforming on demand. A breakthrough in combustion engine design, the 2.0lt VC-Turbo engine adjusts its compression ratio to optimise power and efficiency.

A multi-link system continuously raises or lowers the pistons' reach to transform the compression ratio. High compression ratios aid efficiency, while low ratios enable greater power and torque. The VC-Turbo offers any compression ratio between 8:1 (for performance) and 14:1 (for efficiency), maximizing driver control.

The engine delivers 268 hp (200 kW) and (380 Nm) and fuel economy of 14.1 km/lt combined, front-wheel drive; 13.6 km/lt combined, all-wheel drive). Front-wheel drive models offer a 35 per cent improvement in fuel

efficiency over the previous V6 gasoline QX50; all-wheel drive models offer a 30 per cent improvement. The engine is paired with a continuously-variable transmission (CVT), for seamless power delivery. Its infinite number of gears perfectly matches the engine's ability to transform.

Infiniti QX60

Featuring superior interior and exterior design with a collection of assistive and in-built technologies, the Infiniti QX60 which is a fantastic three-row luxury SUV stays ahead of the curve by bringing a unique offering to the segment. While it impresses auto enthusiasts with its array of features, Infiniti QX60's intelligent technology, advanced performance, and leading-edge craftsmanship has brought it new fans too.

Infiniti QX60's innovative design gives it both luxurious versatility and visual appeal, besides its improved interior design with a suite of assistive and intuitive technologies provide versatility precisely tailored to the needs of every guest. Furthermore, the state-of-the-art Infiniti QX60 is completely redesigned from the

exterior and also boasts a host of new features and technologies that enhance comfort, convenience and safety. Inside Infiniti QX60 rich leather appointments are naturally soft yet durable enough for beach days. A dual-screen rear entertainment system keeps kids happy, while drivers can enjoy music or conversation up front. When a premium crossover is as practical as it is elegant the owners get the best.

Infiniti QX80

The 2021 Infiniti QX80 full-size luxury SUV, features added equipment, innovative new technologies and stylish features befitting its luxury status, in addition to a new 'Black Edition' grade.

Key additions to the flagship model include the new generation Infiniti InTouch infotainment, Premium In-Vehicle -Infotainment (P-IVI) System featuring two HD display screens, 3D maps, Apple Car Play and Android Auto capabilities. A further notable addition to the model is the BOSE Performance Series with 17 speakers for high fidelity audio experience with surround sound technology.

Family businesses in the GCC region to be honoured

The Family Business Council Gulf (FBCG) has unveiled the first 'Family Business Awards' in the GCC region to honour organisations for their continued success across generations. The awards highlight the contribution of family-owned businesses that add to about 60 per cent of the gross domestic product of the GCC and employ about 80 per cent of the labour force.

Open for all entities in the GCC that are part of a family-owned business and at least in the second generation, the awards are presented in four categories - SME Family Business, Non-Family Executive, NexGen Venture and NexGen Innovation.

The winners will receive their award at the FBCG Awards Ceremony and can attend FBCG's member-only Annual Summit and gala dinner. They will also have exclusive access to select FBCG events, activities, and education programs for one year.

Businesses can nominate or self-nominate for the categories by June 30 through www.fbc-



gawards.com and learn more about the specific eligibility criteria. While the SME Family Business and Non-Family Executive categories will be evaluated by a special jury headed by Hind Bahwan, chairperson of Bahwan CyberTek Group, the NexGen Venture and NexGen Innovation will be chosen by the FBCG Board chaired by Omar K Alghanim.

Hind said, “The goal of the Family Business Awards programme is to recognise family business champions that have navigated challenging times to continue to build their business and add value to the economy.”

Fitbit debuts Ace 3 Special Edition: Minions

Fitbit announced Ace 3 Special Edition: Minions, making it fun and easy for kids ages 6+ to get active and build healthy habits with the whole family alongside some of the most beloved and recognizable characters of all time: Illumination's Minions.

The newest addition to Fitbit's Ace kids activity and sleep-tracker line, Ace 3 Special Edition: Minions includes motivating features like hourly reminders to move and daily activity goals in a swimproof design - all powered by eight days of battery life. Introducing a new interactive Minion clock face, Minions-inspired accessory bands and coming soon, Minions-themed activity badges at the same accessible price as Fitbit Ace 3, Ace 3 Special Edition: Minions is available for RO36.600.

“Parents and kids love our Ace activity and sleep trackers for their engaging and motivating features that inspire kids to stay active and build healthy habits,” said Alison Ross Powers, head of Global Strategic Partnerships for



Fitbit at Google. “Introducing Illumination's Minions to the Ace family brings fun, new Minions-inspired features that weave in even more personality and surprises into the Fitbit experience for families and kids, keeping them moving and happy alongside their favorite on-screen characters.”

Minions brings the loveable characters directly to kids' wrists with a themed design built into every aspect of the Fitbit device experience. With an exclusive, engraved accessory band in Minions Yellow with an embossed Minions design, the device is built to withstand tumbles and spills. Additional Minions engraved silicone accessory bands compatible with all Ace 3 devices are available for RO15.600 in Despicable Blue and Mischief Black.

The Hotel Show Dubai 2021: Last chance to catch all action

The Hotel Show Dubai 2021, the largest event of its kind in the region, is preparing for the final day of what has already been deemed an incredibly successful live and in-person event at The Dubai World Trade Centre.

The last day of the region's leading show dedicated to the hospitality industry will feature an illustrious agenda of speakers across hospitality engineering, housekeeping, and leaders from international delegations discussing the future of hospitality and in particular the upcoming impact of EXPO 2020.

The 21st edition of The Hotel Show Dubai will see a flourish of prominent leaders of industry, businesses and recognised brands continue to share knowledge, leverage countless networking opportunities and secure further support to safeguard the region's recovering hospitality sector. Prepared to draw thousands of eager visitors through the doors for one last time this year into an energetic, safe and highly influential and engaging setting, The Hotel



Show Dubai will share closing remarks as well as thought provoking, insightful and informative ideas across a range of topics, all while having the opportunity to meet and explore ideas with exhibitors from over 20 countries.

Ozair Rasool, sales and operations manager for Kimbo states, “It's been the first time we've exhibited at The Hotel Show Dubai and we're very pleased with how our brand and our products have been received by the many visitors who've come over the past few days. We always feel it's better to meet face to face with people to offer them a chance to

know and understand our product and as a result increase our brand visibility. The Hotel Show Dubai has been an excellent event so far to meet new people and understand market trends and we look forward to meeting even more new people.”

Hospitality Leadership Forum

The Hospitality Leadership Forum will provide an unparalleled opportunity to share face time with the industry's most effective leaders, including Diriyah Gate Development Authority CEO Jerry Inzerillo.

BMW iX is due to arrive in November

The BMW iX is ready for series production and is due to arrive on the world's roads from November 2021. The BMW Group's new technology flagship combines locally emission-free driving pleasure, sporting agility and a compelling operating range with a character profile dedicated squarely to sustainability.

With its trailblazing design and an interior devoted to luxurious spaciousness, the BMW iX embodies a fresh new take on the Sports Activity Vehicle (SAV) concept. Conceived from the outset for purely electric mobility, this model is based on a new toolkit for the future, whose vast potential for innovations in the areas of automated driving, operation, connectivity and digital services translates into a premium mobility experience unparalleled in this segment.

The BMW iX will be launched with a choice of two model variants. Both are equipped with an electric all-wheel-drive system, with combined output of 385 kW/523 hp in the BMW iX xDrive50 (electric power consumption combined in the WLTP cycle: 23.0 - 19.8 kWh/100 km [62 miles]; CO₂ emissions: 0 g/km).



g/km) and 240 kW/326 hp in the BMW iX xDrive40 (electric power consumption combined in the WLTP cycle: 22.5 - 19.4 kWh/100 km [62 miles]; CO₂ emissions: 0 g/km).

The drive technology's efficiency paired to the very latest battery cell technology results in WLTP-calculated ranges of up to 630 kilometres (391 miles) in the BMW iX xDrive50 and up to 425 kilometres (264 miles) in the BMW iX xDrive40. Also set to join the model line-up at a later date is the BMW iX M60 (electric power consumption combined in the WLTP cycle: 21.6 kWh/100 km [62 miles]; CO₂ emissions: 0 g/km) with a maximum output in excess of 440

kW/600 hp that promises an exceptionally sporty all-electric driving experience. (The figures relating to motor output and energy consumption for the BMW iX M60 are predicted values based on the car's current stage of development.)

Well-balanced driving characteristics

The body structure, design principle and chassis tuning of the BMW iX are perfectly geared to blending superb ride comfort with sporty handling characteristics. The aluminium space-frame construction and the Carbon Cage's use of carbon fibre-reinforced plastic (CFRP) in

the roof and at the sides and rear result in an intelligent material mix that increases rigidity at the same time as minimising weight. The optimised aerodynamic properties that contribute to the car's drag coefficient of just 0.25 also have a positive impact on efficiency and range.

The high-voltage battery located low down in the car's underbody lowers the centre of gravity, combining with the even weight distribution to make handling more nimble. Thanks to its well-balanced driving characteristics, the BMW iX feels solid and comfortable out on the road, yet also exudes fleet-footed agility.

The standard chassis technology for the BMW iX comprises a double-wishbone front axle, five-link rear axle, lift-related dampers and an electric steering system with Servotronic function and a variable ratio. Two-axle air suspension with electronically controlled dampers, Integral Active Steering and Sport brakes can all be found on the options list. As an alternative to the standard 20-inch light-alloy wheels, there is a choice of 21-inch and 22-inch Air Performance Wheels.

Iran navy vessel sinks following fire

Tehran, Iran - One of Iran's largest naval ships sank on Wednesday after catching fire while on a 'training mission' off a strategic port near the head of the Gulf, the navy said.

The British-built fleet replenishment vessel Kharg, which measured more than 200m long, caught fire on Tuesday off the port of Jask on the Sea of Oman, the navy said.

Footage aired by state television showed a massive column of smoke rising from what it said was the burning vessel.

The fire broke out in 'one of the systems' of the ship, a navy statement said without elaborating. Firefighting efforts continued 'for 20 hours' before the ship went down.

"Considering the spread of the fire, the mission to save the Kharg failed and it sank in waters off Jask," the navy said.

The ship caught fire at 11am on Tuesday as it was in 'domestic waters' during 'a training mission', Iran's Tasnim news agency quoted the navy's head of public relations Behzad Jahanian as saying.

It sank at around 8:30am on Wednesday. All 400 cadets and crew disembarked safely, with 20 sustaining light injuries or burns.

Jahanian said the cause of the fire was 'still not clear'.



This file photo shows the Iranian Kharg 431 supply navy ship docked in the Red Sea Sudanese town of Port Sudan on October 31, 2012. The vessel caught fire and sank off the port of Jask in Sea of Oman on Wednesday, with no casualties reported (AFP)

The vessel was ordered from Britain in 1976 when the pro-Western shah was still in power. It was not delivered until 1984 after years of wrangling between Britain and the government that took power after the Islamic revolution of 1979.

Jeremy Binnie of open-source defence intelligence provider

Janes said the Kharg was important to Iran as its only dedicated vessel able to resupply warships at sea.

"The Iranians often describe it as a 'helicopter carrier' but it is actually a replenishment ship - a useful asset nonetheless as it was the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy's only dedicated ship serving this role," Binnie said.

"It is not the IRIN's largest vessel any more after they commissioned Makran, a converted oil tanker, in January," he added.

Iran's ISNA news agency said the vessel had left for a mission focused on 'training, intelligence and combat' alongside the destroyer Alborz on May 19.

Strategic waters

The port city of Jask, near which the Kharg went down, lies close to the Strait of Hormuz, the strategic chokepoint at the head of the Gulf through which a fifth of world oil output passes. Jask is strategically important to Iran as the government plans to make it the site of the country's second-

largest oil export terminal.

An approximately 1,000km pipeline from Bushehr province on the Gulf to Jask was put into service a few days ago, the government said. It provides a new bypass route for Iranian oil exports that avoids the Strait of Hormuz.

Last year, an Iranian warship was hit by friendly fire during a naval exercise off Jask, killing the 19 sailors onboard.

Logistical support vessel *Konarak* was hit after 'moving a practice target to its destination and not creating enough distance between itself and the target', state television said at the time.

In recent months, there have also been reported attacks on Iran's shipping fleet that have been linked to its arch foe Israel.

In April, Tehran said its freighter *Saviz* was hit by an 'explosion' in the Red Sea, after media reports said Israel had struck the ship.

The *New York Times* reported at the time that the *Saviz* had been targeted in an Israeli 'retaliatory' attack after 'Iran's earlier strikes on Israeli ships'.

It came at a time of heightened tensions between the foes, with reports of a series of tit-for-tat attacks on shipping since early March.

AFP

QUICK RUNS

23 missing, 2 dead off Tunisia coast

At least 23 migrants were missing and two bodies recovered from the sea off Tunisia, the Red Crescent reported on Wednesday, after the military said more than 100 migrants were intercepted. The Tunisian navy said a boat headed for Europe from Zuwara in Libya was intercepted on Tuesday near Miskar oil platform, some 67km off the coast. The migrants - 37 Eritreans, 32 Sudanese and an Egyptian, aged between 15 and 40 - were handed over to the Red Crescent and International Organization for Migration in the southern port Of Zarzis. Apart from 23 people missing, two bodies were recovered from the water, according to the Red Crescent. The Tunisian army said 39 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa were intercepted at sea off the eastern port city of Sfax on Monday night.

Belarus activist back to jail after surgery

A Belarusian activist who was hospitalised after stabbing himself in the neck in court has been returned to prison following surgery, the Viasna rights group said on Wednesday. Stepan Latypov (41) on Tuesday rammed a pen into his neck on the first day of his trial on several protest-related charges during a hearing seen by government critics as part of a sweeping crackdown on political opposition. Viasna, citing Latypov's relatives, said on Wednesday the activist was returned to prison and that family had been able to deliver him a parcel there. Latypov was detained last September and went on trial in the capital Minsk on several charges including creating protest symbols and resisting law enforcement. Viasna said he appeared in court with bruises and that after his father was questioned Latypov climbed on a bench and stabbed himself in the neck with what appeared to be a pen.

AFP

Kurdish forces shoot dead four during riots in Syria's Manbij

Beirut, Lebanon - Kurdish forces have shot dead four Arab protesters during riots in the northern Syrian region of Manbij, a war monitor said on Wednesday.

The violence broke out at a demonstration against military conscription against a backdrop of growing anger over a deepening economic crisis which the area's Kurdish leadership is struggling to contain.

The unrest comes weeks after similar riots gripped other parts of the autonomous zone Kurdish forces have carved out in northeastern Syria since civil war broke out in 2011.

In the Arab-majority region of Manbij, which was captured by Kurdish forces five years ago, 'four protesters have been killed in the past 48 hours from live rounds fired by internal security



This file photo shows a convoy of US armoured vehicles near Yalanli, on the outskirts of Manbij (AFP)

forces', known as the Asayish, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Syria's state SANA news agency also reported four

deaths. The demonstrators initially took to the street to demand an end to forced military conscription by the region's main fighting force, the Syrian Democratic Forces. But the protests swelled after one of their number was shot dead on Monday.

Protesters blocked roads and attacked an Asayish checkpoint

outside Manbij on Tuesday, the Observatory said.

The Asayish responded by shooting dead three more protesters, further fuelling public anger, the monitor added.

The Manbij Military Council, a governing body linked to the Kurdish administration, acknowledged there had been casualties but did not specify how many.

In a statement on Tuesday, it blamed the violence on 'criminal cells receiving their orders from external and domestic forces', a likely reference to the Syrian government and Turkey.

It accused instigators of using the issue of military conscription - which has been in place for seven years - as a pretext to spark strife.

Observatory head Rami Abdul Rahman said that after reaching

18, all young men were required to perform around one year of military service.

Representatives of the Asayish security forces and the Kurdish administration are currently in talks with Arab tribal leaders in an attempt to restore calm, the monitor said.

No major incidents were reported on Wednesday.

Since the end of 2019, Syrian troops and allied Russian forces have taken up positions in Manbij as part of an agreement struck with Kurdish forces, who fear a cross-border offensive by neighbouring Turkey.

Last month, two people died in clashes that broke out in parts of northeastern Syria over a decision by the Kurdish administration to raise fuel prices.

AFP

Netanyahu's opponents scrambling to form new Israeli government

Jerusalem - Israeli politicians scrambling to unseat veteran rightwing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu were locked in last-ditch talks on Wednesday to hammer out their 'change' coalition composed of bitter ideological rivals.

Netanyahu's opponents have until the end of the day - 11:59pm (2059 GMT) - to cobble together an administration that would end 12 straight years of rule by the hawkish political heavyweight, Israel's longest-ruling premier.

The high-stakes push for a new government is led by former television presenter Yair Lapid, a secular centrist who three days earlier won the crucial support of hardline religious nationalist Naftali Bennett.

Lapid has reportedly agreed to allow Bennett, a 49 year old tech multi-millionaire, to serve first as prime minister in a power-sharing agreement, before swapping with him after two years, halfway through their term.

"Everybody has been working hard to try to finalise a deal as soon as possible," a source close to the talks told AFP overnight.

To reach a majority in the 120-seat Knesset, the unlikely alliance would also have to include several other left and right-wing



Israel's 'Shinui' (Change) supporters take part in a rally in support of Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett for the formation of a government, in Tel Aviv (AFP)

parties - and would need the support of Arab-Israeli politicians.

That would result in a government riven from day one by deep ideological differences on flash-point issues such as Jewish settlements in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and the role of religion in politics.

'Fraud of century'

Lapid (57), the leader of the Yesh Atid party, was tasked with forming a government by President Reuven Rivlin after Netanyahu again failed to put together his own coalition following March elections, the fourth vote in less than two years.

In a separate political development, the Knesset voted Wednesday on Rivlin's successor and elected Isaac Herzog, a former leader of the Labor party, as the country's 11th president, due to take office next month.

Netanyahu wished Herzog 'good luck' and Herzog, the prime minister's one-time oppo-

nent, replied, "I'll be happy to work with every government, no matter the leader."

"Let's not get into it now," the premier known as Bibi replied wryly.

Israel's latest political turmoil adds to the woes of Netanyahu (71), who is on trial for criminal charges of fraud, bribery and

breach of trust while in office - accusations he denies.

If he were to lose power, he would not be able to push through changes to basic laws that could give him immunity, and would lose control over certain Justice Ministry nominations.

The Prime Minister and leader of the conservative Likud party, who served an earlier three-year term in the 1990s, has long been the dominant figure of Israeli politics and was close to former US president Donald Trump.

Netanyahu clinched historic normalisation agreements with four Arab states and unrolled a world-beating COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

But he has not engaged in substantive peace talks with the Palestinians, who have been angered by a boom in expansion of Israel's West Bank settlements under Netanyahu's watch.

Israel's latest political turmoil follows weeks of escalating tensions between Israel and the Palestinians, which spiralled into an 11-day exchange of rocket fire from Gaza and devastating Israeli airstrikes.

Netanyahu on Sunday defiantly condemned the alliance against him as opportunistic and 'the fraud of the century', warn-

ing it would result in 'a leftwing government dangerous to the state of Israel'.

Arab-Israeli kingmakers

In order to build the anti-Netanyahu bloc, Lapid must sign individual agreements with seven parties.

They include the hawkish New Hope party of Netanyahu's former ally Gideon Saar and rightwing secular nationalist Avigdor Lieberman's pro-settlement Yisrael Beiteinu party.

Also part of the alliance would be the centrist Blue and White party of Defence Minister Benny Gantz, the historically powerful Labour party and the dovish Meretz party.

If all those parties indeed sign on, the emerging alliance still needs the backing of four more lawmakers.

For that, Lapid is counting on parties representing Arab Israelis, the country's 20 per cent minority of Palestinian descent.

Mansour Abbas, head of the Islamic conservative Raam party, which has four seats, has generally voiced openness to any arrangement that improves living conditions for Arab Israelis.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As virus cases rose, so did hospital hacks in France

Dax, France - At 2.00am on a day in early February, the deputy director of the main hospital in the southwestern French town of Dax took an urgent call from a normally unflappable colleague in the IT department.

"He's usually very calm, but I could tell in his voice that there was something very unusual," Aline Gilet-Caubere told AFP from her office.

The technician reported how personnel working overnight were suddenly unable to use their computers, which were flashing up a ransom note saying the hospital's systems had been hacked and encrypted.

The attackers made a classic demand: They would provide a key to reverse the damage upon payment in Bitcoin, and they supplied email addresses to arrange the transfer.

"We imagined we were a sanctuary as a hospital, with our role, that no-one would dare (target us)," Gilet-Caubere said. "But not at all, in fact. That's part of the psychological shock."

Unwilling and unable to pay, hospital managers had no choice but to order a return to the pre-Internet, pre-computer era.

In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, paper records reappeared. Doctors took up pencils again and scribbled notes.

A manual system using stickers and flowcharts kept track of patients as they moved around.

There was no telephone system or email.

Payroll and supplier data were lost. All of the roughly 110-120 different software platforms run in the hospital were out-of-order.

And more than three months



Separate ransomware attacks have knocked out computer systems in more than half a dozen French hospitals, forcing them to return to using pen and paper (AFP)

later, after weeks of chaos and frustration for medics, as well as months of work by specialised cybercrime technicians, the hospital is still not back to normal.

"We can't say when everything will be finished. We keep discovering problems," Gilet-Caubere said.

Crisis in a crisis

But the 2,200 staff at the Dax hospital were not the only ones to find themselves battling a public health emergency over the last 18 months and the worst technology outages of their careers.

Elsewhere in France, at least half a dozen other public hospitals have had their operations severely disrupted after being targeted by ransomware hackers since the start of the COVID outbreak in Europe in early 2020.

Cyrille Politi, chief technology

advisor at the Hospital Federation of France, has no doubt that hackers have stepped up attacks - and have stepped over a moral line that made public hospitals mostly off-limits.

"It's a real paradigm shift," he told AFP.

According to French Digital Affairs Minister Cedric O, 27 hospitals experienced some form of cyberattack last year, including ransomware, while there was one per week on average in the first two months of the year.

In February, as alarm grew about the vulnerability of the health system, President Emmanuel Macron asked to be briefed personally by staff from Dax and Villefranche-sur-Saone.

He announced an extra billion euros for cybersecurity in the health sector, calling the spate of attacks at the height of the pandemic a 'crisis within a crisis'.

Impunity

Though uncommon in France, attacks on hospitals have been a regular feature of global cybercrime for years, particularly in the United States.

"What these actors (hackers) are looking for across the board are targets that have an operational imperative," says Adam Meyers from US-based cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike.

"They target things like healthcare because healthcare is one of the unfortunate sectors where it's not a money decision, it's a life-or-death decision."

And in the US too, the pandemic was seen as a business opportunity by some hackers.

After dozens of attacks in late 2020, the FBI and US authorities warned about 'credible information of an increased and imminent cybercrime threat' to hospitals and healthcare

providers. The bad news for hospitals, and other potential targets, is that ransomware attacks are becoming more sophisticated and more numerous.

Everything from information about the IT vulnerabilities of individual organisations to hacking and encryption technology is for sale online in closed criminal forums. Gangs with names such as Evil Corp or DarkSide operate beyond the reach of Western law enforcement in Russia, or former Soviet republics, cybersecurity firms say.

The attack on the Dax hospital used a well-known malware called Ryak, and IT director Gilbert Martin said the hackers left 'Russian traces'.

But with the risks low, profits high, and the potential targets almost limitless, ransomware hacking is growing exponentially globally.

Victims made an estimated US\$350mn in payments in cryptocurrencies in 2020, an increase of 311 percent from 2019, according to specialised analysis company Chainalysis.

Earlier this month, DarkSide created fuel shortages in the US and extracted more than four million dollars from Colonial Pipeline, a company carrying gasoline and diesel from the US Gulf coast to the northeast.

"Those who ply their trade in this multi-billion dollar sector are operating with almost complete impunity," Brett Callow from cybercrime firm Emsisoft said.

For radiologist Nicolas Pontier at the Dax hospital, the experience of being unable to treat his cancer patients was a wake-up call that he hopes will be heeded by others.

AFP



Tables and chairs are stacked up on the Lygon Street café and restaurant strip in Melbourne on Wednesday (AFP)

Curbs extended in Melbourne as 'Kappa' variant spreads

Melbourne, Australia - Melbourne was ordered on Wednesday to remain in lockdown for another week, as Australian authorities try to stamp out a quick-spreading coronavirus strain they described as an 'absolute beast'.

Five million city residents were hoping to exit a seven-day lockdown just before midnight on Thursday, but those plans have been thwarted by the spread of the 'Kappa' variant, which originated in India.

"We've got to run this thing to ground otherwise people will die," Victoria's acting state Premier James Merlino said, describing this strain of the virus as 'quicker and more contagious than we have ever seen before'.

Australia is battling to stop a cluster of 60 cases from growing in its second-biggest city, and to remain one of the few countries in the world without endemic transmission.

The border remains closed to most travellers - with the exception of New Zealand - and authorities are quick to impose restrictions when COVID-19 cases are detected.

But outbreaks in Taiwan and

Japan have underscored how initial success containing the virus can quickly be eroded without widespread vaccination, and only about two percent of Australians have been fully jabbed to date.

Merlino said stay-at-home orders would likely be lifted for Victorians living outside Melbourne on Thursday, though a swathe of restrictions would remain, including caps on wedding guests and mourners at funerals.

Melbourne residents would largely be stopped from travelling outside the city, but senior school students will return to classrooms and some outdoor workers can return to their jobs, he added.

Brett Sutton, Victoria's chief health officer, said the Kappa variant was an 'absolute beast' and said the extended lockdown would limit each person's contacts from about 100 others to just a handful.

It is believed to be the 17th time in six months that the virus has leaked out of Australia's makeshift hotel quarantine facilities, which are now facing tough scrutiny.

AFP



A man (right) holds a placard during a protest against French President Emmanuel, in Paris on Wednesday (AFP)



With eyes on election, President Macron starts a 'Tour de France'

Paris, France - French President Emmanuel Macron begins a nationwide tour on Wednesday ahead of next year's presidential election, in a risky repeat of previous meet-and-greet initiatives that saw him heckled by angry voters.

The 43 year old centrist, widely expected to seek a second term in polls next April and May, will begin what he calls the task of 'measuring the country's pulse' in picturesque villages in southwest France.

Around a dozen stops are planned over the next two months, in a sign that the former investment banker has an eye on regional elections on June 20 and 27, as well as his own personal political test next year.

Recent polls show him as the frontrunner in the presidential race, narrowly ahead of far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, while his personal ratings have im-

proved as France emerges from its third national coronavirus lockdown.

His Republic on the Move party, which has struggled to build a presence outside of cities, is expected to perform poorly in the regional vote, however.

Macron has undertaken several other tours since his 2017 electoral triumph over the traditional parties of government on the left and right.

A 2018 trip to mark the centenary of the end of World War I is best remembered for the scenes of furious citizens booing and heckling France's youngest post-war leader.

It took place just as 'yellow vest' protests were gathering momentum to denounce the government's policies and the head of state personally for his leadership style, which was criticised as aloof and arrogant.

Macron conducted another

tour billed as a listening exercise in 2019 in the aftermath of those protests, which shook the country and saw him promise to change his way of governing.

Macron has spoken frequently about his fondness for spontaneous meetings with citizens, but extremely tight security due to threats from 'yellow vests' and extremists have limited his opportunities in recent years.

An impromptu walkabout with his wife Brigitte through the Tuileries gardens in central Paris on Bastille Day last July ended with the head of state being verbally abused by a group of protesters.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has also restricted his travel and ability to focus on any political initiatives beyond short-term crisis management for the last 14 months.

AFP

Burnt-out ship sinking off Sri Lanka

Colombo, Sri Lanka - A burnt-out container ship that has already caused Sri Lanka's worst maritime environmental disaster was sinking fast on Wednesday with nearly 300 tonnes of oil still in its fuel tanks.

The MV X-Press Pearl, carrying hundreds of containers of chemicals and plastics, burned for 13 days just outside the Colombo harbour before rescue workers finally extinguished the blaze on Tuesday.

Dutch salvage firm SMIT attempted to pull the still-smoking wreckage of the 31,600-tonne vessel further into deeper waters on Wednesday but the effort stalled, navy spokesman Indika de Silva told AFP.

He said the stern had sunk to the bottom at a depth of 22m, six nautical miles (11km) from the coast of Pamunugama, just north of Colombo.

"The bow is still afloat, but the stern is submerged and resting on the sea bed," de Silva said. "As a result, the towing of the ship has been stopped."

A huge amount of plastic debris has already inundated beaches, and authorities now fear an even greater disaster should the 278 tonnes of bunker oil and 50 tonnes of gas in the Singapore-registered ship's fuel tanks leak into the Indian Ocean.

Some oil was already visible near the beaches of Negombo, about 40km from Colombo, an AFP photographer said, although it was not clear if it was from the stricken ship.



This handout photo shows MV X-Press Pearl, which is being towed away from the port of Colombo as ordered by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to prevent a bigger environmental disaster, off Colombo on Wednesday (AFP)

International shipping academic and lawyer Dan Gunasekera said there were no immediate signs of bunker oil leaking, but said divers may have to be used to pump it out safely.

Navy spokesman de Silva said an Indian coastguard vessel was in the area with specialised equipment to deal with any oil slick.

An official involved in the operation said some of the vast amount of water sprayed on the fire to put it out had made the vessel unstable.

"Much of that water has settled in the stern," the official said.

Oil disaster

Officials believe the blaze destroyed most of the nearly 1,500 containers onboard.

The inundation of microplastic granules from the cargo has

already forced a fishing ban and prompted concern for wildlife and the marine environment.

Marine Environment Protection Authority chief Dharshani Lahandapura said the ecological damage was still being assessed, but he believed it was the 'worst ever in my lifetime'.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa asked Australia on Monday to help evaluate the ecological damage to the island, one of the most bio-diverse countries in South Asia.

Call to sue

The head of Sri Lanka's Roman Catholic church, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, called for legal action against the authorities for allowing the ship into local waters.

He said that the livelihoods of thousands of fishermen, most of

whom were from the Catholic minority, was now under threat.

Sri Lanka has already launched a criminal investigation.

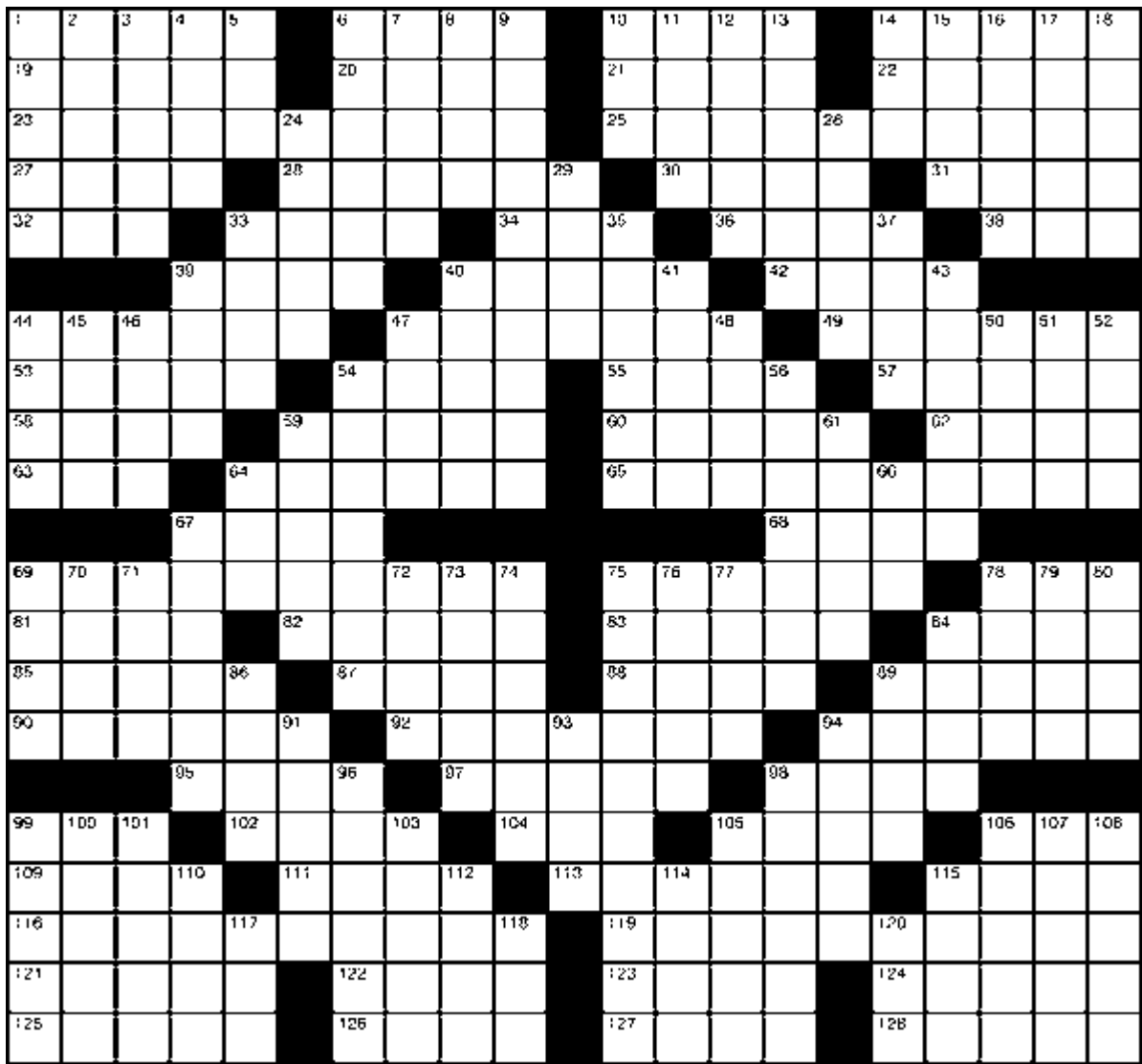
Authorities believe the fire was caused by a nitric acid leak which the crew apparently knew about from May 11, nine days before the blaze started.

The 25-strong crew was evacuated last week. One was admitted to hospital with minor injuries. Police said three officers from the ship, two Russians and an Indian, had been questioned and their passports had been impounded.

The ship was heading to Colombo from Gujarat in India when the blaze started, having previously visited Qatar and Dubai where the containers of 25 tonnes of nitric acid were loaded.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



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ACROSS

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- 3 Sea eagles
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- 5 Milkfish
- 6 Singer Swift
- 7 Nimble
- 8 Manufacture
- 9 Devotional tome
- 10 Prefix to Scotch names
- 11 Over
- 12 Italian city
- 13 Part of a shoe
- 14 Japanese sash
- 15 Yeast on brewing liquors
- 16 George ___
- 17 Dried cassia leaflets

- 18 ___ Allan Poe
- 24 Man of great wealth
- 26 To dress up
- 29 Pierce with a dagger
- 33 Television award
- 35 Producing vinegar
- 37 Conifers
- 39 First-class
- 40 Burger option
- 41 Babylonian hero
- 43 One of the Barrymores
- 44 Fencing sword
- 45 Roman emperor
- 46 Fling
- 47 Desert in Asia
- 48 To goad
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- 51 Greatest amount
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- 56 Certain weasels
- 59 Taut
- 61 Sea duck
- 64 Operated
- 66 To drowse
- 67 More acute
- 69 Issue forth
- 70 Strange: comb. form
- 71 Snare
- 72 Toward the mouth
- 73 ___ Wolpert in "Harry Potter"
- 74 Nets

- 75 Remonstrating
- 76 Carnival features
- 77 Pre-owned
- 78 Edible rootstock
- 79 "Once ___ a time..."
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- 84 Chums
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- 98 Stingy hoarders
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- 101 Stone pillar
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- 105 ___ pole
- 106 Skin disease
- 107 Wide awake
- 108 Flowers of love
- 110 The southwest wind
- 112 Tax
- 114 Arrow poison
- 115 Bosc or Anjou
- 117 Printer's measures
- 118 Compass direction: abbr.
- 120 Spot's doc

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Have you been losing perspective when it comes to the most important people in your life? Sure, your boss deserves a lot of your attention, but are you giving them too much? Your family deserves more of your energy, so put them first on your priority list. They're the ones who truly love you and have your best interests at heart. Try to take some time off even if it's just an hour or two.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your enthusiasm about one aspect of your life is going to start bubbling over to another part of your life. Things could get a little messy, but you'll love every minute of the fun chaos, and so will the people who are closest to you. You'll have a smile plastered to your face all day long, and a great attitude about even the most boring-sounding things.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Try to fill your day with as much music and art as you can. Both of these will soothe you and take you out of a crabby, blue mood in minutes. Plus, music and art can help you get back in touch with the more expressive parts of yourself. Listening to your favourite songs, visiting a museum or sculpture garden will help you stay content and happy.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

If you're put in a situation that involves a clash of delicate egos, focus on fairness, not politics. You have the strength of your ideals to rely on, so rely on them. Equality is too important to be sacrificed to get on someone's good side. If you smell a bad idea, say so. Playing favourites is not advised. Set a good example by being honest and objective. Impressionable people are watching.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Someone sweet from your past might pop back into your life again soon. Greet them with open arms or an enthusiastic reply. They were very important to you once, and they could be again. The two of you have a lot to catch up on, and their news might shock you in the most delightful way. This person isn't new, so integrate them back into the rotation.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You'll wake up with a lot of high energy coursing through your body this morning, which will go a long way toward fuelling some high productivity! This is a great day to tackle that project you've been putting off for so long: cleaning the garage, organising your clutter, finances, tidying the refrigerator. The things that you were dreading will suddenly be enjoyable.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Communication with your partner could be somewhat difficult right now, and it isn't going to be immediately clear why. This is nothing you should worry too much about, though. As long as you're up front about at least trying to talk things out, then they'll try to listen. That's about the best you can hope for. Sometimes when you work so hard to talk things through with someone else new ideas emerge.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Just as one bad apple can ruin the whole bunch, a bad person can ruin a whole team. So watch out for people who aren't on board with the group goals. Staying focused on the greater good isn't easy for some (selfish) people to do, so you'll have to help them along. If you don't, their negative energy could really bring everyone down. Don't let them force everybody's momentum downhill.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

If you don't feel extremely self-confident right now, ask yourself what you're doing to test yourself. By facing a difficult challenge, you can prove to yourself how special you are. Even if you don't succeed, the act of facing a fear or trying to surmount an especially tall obstacle alone will go a long way toward making you see that you're capable of doing just about anything.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

If you're not in the mood to whoop it up, you're not going to be much fun doing it, are you? This is the logic you should use when you tell your friends that they should count you out of the latest big social scheme. You're feeling more introspective right now, and the idea of going out and making small talk with strangers isn't striking you as the recipe for a good time.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Your willpower is still going strong, so there is absolutely no reason to worry about succumbing to any temptations. Be confident that you can continue to resist. All of the charm that this vice or that unhealthy person used to hold for you is fading fast, perhaps not quite as fast as you'd like, but it's definitely fading! Just keep abstaining and soon you'll lose your taste for it.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

The powerful people are cheering you on and singing your praises. These newfound friends can help you go a very long way. It's up to you to go the entire distance, though. So don't take your eye off the ball. You're so close to what you want right now that resting on your laurels or taking a break from the action would be a mistake. All that planning is finally starting to pay off.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The Nobel Prize was first awarded in

- a. 1976
- b. 1958
- c. 1901
- d. 1972

2. The 'Cannes Award' is given for excellence in which field?

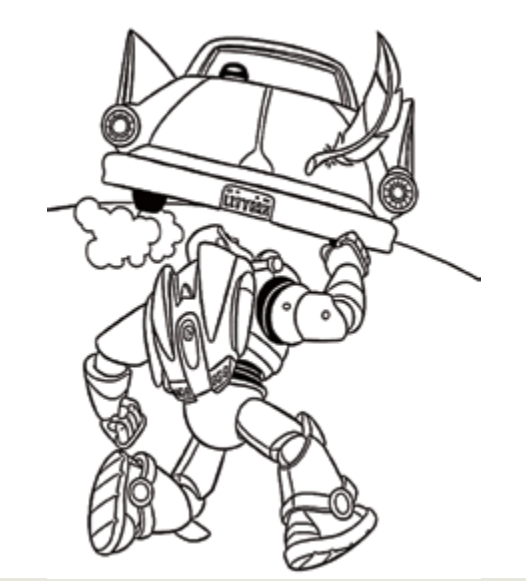
- a. Films
- b. Journalism
- c. Literature
- d. Economics

3. The journalist who refused to accept 'Padma Bhushan' was?

- a. Shekaran Nair
- b. Khushwant Singh
- c. Ratan Thiyam
- d. Arun Shourie

Answers: 1. c 2. a 3. b

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

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

BOGGLER

U	I	S	O
D	E	D	E
T	L	N	S
W	K	O	S

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

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

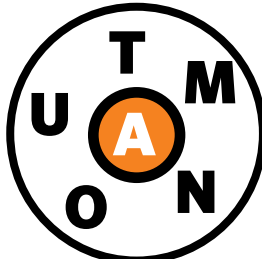
DAILY CROSSWORD ANSWERS (JUNE 02)

BARA	YAPIE	CLUMP	ANAT
AMES	ELENT	LUATIE	HITCO
ATTORNING	CEIGER	EPPOS	
ENA	HASH	CEASE	VARIOUS
GOVERN	CARVE	BUNNY	
AM	BEATING	BOATEND	
LAISE	WINDING	LUIS	STEE
GRAT	GIVE	TAP	CHUS
ONE	RAZOR	MONT	CHRETT
ATRLINE	GRANT	BREATH	
CAITEN	SHATE	GLIMS	
ATTEND	NOVOT	POSTPOD	
GEANE	BSVONDE	GOOL	
LEINE	ARITA	GOAD	STING
NO	ON	SHRUB	CHITON
SHAMMER	ARNER	SCIE	
ROUNO	TAIR	SHADOWS	
GOO	MA	HIS	CHIT
EDER	AGREE	KRAAT	OREN
NABA	NOSTE	SORRY	TASTE

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





TORN MENISCUS

WEIGHT BEARERS

Meniscus tear injuries often occur during athletic action, as in contact sports. But most patients older than 65 years also have a degenerative meniscus tear. While some may experience no pain at all, a few might need to fix these weight bearing tissues in knee joints

Do you experience immense pain in your knee joints while climbing stairs or suddenly feel you are about to lose balance in the midst of your shopping in a supermarket? It could be due to a meniscus tear in your knee joint, and the treatment options vary, depending on your symptoms and age.

Meniscus tear injuries often occur during athletic activities, especially in contact sports like football and hockey. Motions that require pivoting and sudden stops, in sports like tennis, basketball, and golf, can also cause meniscus damage.

The risk of developing a torn meniscus increases with age because cartilage begins to gradually wear out, losing its blood supply and its resilience. Increasing body weight also puts more stress on the meniscus. So, even routine daily activities, like walking and climbing stairs, increase the potential for wear and tear as well as degeneration.

It is estimated that six out of 10 patients older than 65 years have a degenerative meniscus tear. Many of these tears may never cause problems for most, but for some, it can seriously affect routine life and cause immense pain.

A torn meniscus is damage from a tear in the cartilage that is positioned on top of the tibia (the lower bone) to allows the femur (the upper bone) to glide when the knee joint moves. Tears are usually described by where they are located anatomically in the C shape and by their appearance.

While physical examination may predict whether it is the medial or lateral meniscus that is damaged, a diagnostic procedure, like an MRI or arthroscopic surgery, can locate the specific part of the cartilage anatomy that is torn and its appearance.

Because the blood supply is different to each part of the meniscus, knowing where the tear is located may help decide how easily an injury might heal (with or without surgery). The better the blood supply, the better the potential for recovery.



WHAT IS A TORN MENISCUS?

There are 3 bones in the knee. These are the femur, tibia, and patella. The ends of those bones are covered with cartilage - a smooth material that cushions the bone and allows the joint to move easily without pain, acting as a shock absorber. Between the bones of the knees are two crescent-shaped disks of connective tissue, called menisci. These also act as shock absorbers to cushion the lower part of the leg from the weight of the rest of the body.

Meniscus tears can happen during a rotating movement while bearing weight, such as when twisting the upper leg while the foot stays in one place during sports and other activities. Tears can be minor, with the meniscus staying connected to the knee. Or they can be major, with the meniscus barely attached to the knee by a cartilage thread.

Symptoms
Each person may have different symptoms. But the most common symptoms are:

- Pain, especially when holding the knee straight
- Swelling and stiffness
- Knee may catch, click, or lock
- Knee may feel weak or unstable

Diagnosis
Your healthcare provider will ask about your medical history and do a physical exam. You may also need:

- X-ray. This test uses invisible electromagnetic energy beams to make images of internal tissues, bones, and organs onto film.
- MRI. This test uses a combination of large magnets, radiofrequencies, and a computer to make detailed images of organs and structures within the

body. It can often find damage or disease in a surrounding ligament, tendon, bone, or muscle.

- Arthroscopy. This is a minimally-invasive procedure used for conditions of a joint. A small, lighted, optic tube (arthroscope) is inserted into the joint through a small incision in the joint. Images of the inside of the joint are projected onto a screen. They are used to evaluate any degenerative or arthritic changes in the joint.

Treatment options
Treatment will depend on the symptoms, age, and general health of the patient. It will also depend on how severe the condition is. These include:

- Icing
- Medications to relieve pain/reduce inflammation (such

as ibuprofen)

- Muscle-strengthening exercises
- Arthroscopic surgery

Possible complications
An untreated torn meniscus can result in instability of the knee and lasting pain. It can also increase the risk of osteoarthritis. Hence, immediate attention is necessary to stop the damage from increasing. If simple methods do not bear results, surgery might be necessary for some patients.

Surgical options
If the examination indicates that the meniscus tear is mild (Grade 1 or 2), surgery may not be necessary. However, if it's Grade 3, surgical intervention will be needed. The following options are being used:

- Arthroscopic repair - The doctor

will make small cuts on the knee and insert an arthroscope to get a good look at the tear. Then they'll place small devices that look like darts along the tear to stitch it up. Your body will absorb these over time.

Arthroscopic partial meniscectomy - Your doctor will remove a piece of the torn meniscus so that the knee can function normally. It usually takes about 4 to 8 weeks for patients to increase weight bearing and range of motion.

Arthroscopic total meniscectomy - During this procedure, the whole meniscus is surgically removed. Most patients are able to return to work within a few days or a week or two after arthroscopic total meniscectomy, provided work does not involve strenuous activity such as heavy lifting or climbing.

Oman Sail gears up for worlds

Week-long festival of sailing to feature world championships in three Olympic classes in Mussanah from November 16-21

Our Correspondent
Muscat

It is going to be a busy period later this year for Oman Sail as it hosts the Asian and world championships between October and November.

While the Asian Windsurfing Championship will be held in Musandam from October 11-6, a week-long festival of sailing awaits in Mussanah when the venue hosts the world championships in three Olympic classes - 49er, 49erFX and Nacra 17 - from November 16-21.

On Wednesday, Oman Sail announced that it had opened up registrations for the three classes of the worlds.

Oman Sail said that preparations are on for a hectic period ahead as it

welcomes hundreds of sailors to Oman, first to Musandam and then at Mussanah.

A 400-strong fleet of the world's best sailors in 49er, 49erFX and Nacra 17 classes will arrive for the worlds, which is being held in Asia for the first time.

The worlds will also be the first stop on the road to the Paris 2024 Olympic Games for sailors in the 49er, 49erFX, and Nacra 17 class and offers another chance for the international sailing community to experience Oman's famed hospitality.

Weather conditions in

November in Mussanah are likely to be ideal for sailing with a wind average between ten and 14 knots and an average temperature of 23°C.

Rashid al Kindi, Oman Sail's director of sailing, said, "This is a chance for Oman to make history as the first Asian hosts of the world championships in 49er, 49erFX and Nacra 17. We welcome the world's best sailors in all the three classes to our shores. The championships will mark the first global sailing event post-Olympics in Tokyo and launch the qualification campaign for the 2024 Games in Paris. With such a high calibre of talent set to compete, we anticipate an

exciting return to the water for the 49er, 49erFX, and Nacra 17 classes. Oman Sail is looking forward to welcoming the world's best sailors."

The race will be managed by Oman



The world championships will mark the first global sailing event post-Olympics in Tokyo

RASHID AL KINDI

Sail's professional race management team in collaboration with World Sailing and 49er class officials.

Kindi said, "Hopefully, the world will start to reopen by then

following the coronavirus pandemic and there will be opportunities for visitors to stay longer in the sultanate.

City tours, cultural visits and adventures into the mountains, the sea and the desert will be made available to guests through Oman Sail."

Oman has earned a well-deserved reputation in international sailing as an impressive host venue, complete with excellent sailing conditions and world-class

facilities. Past successes include the 2010 Asian Beach Games, for which Al Mussanah Sports City was purpose-built, the 2013 Laser World Championships, the 2015 RS:X World Championships, the 2019 Asian and Oceanian Optimist Championships, and most recently the 2021 Mussanah Open Championship, a Tokyo 2020 qualification event for African and Asian nations.

And there is a good possibility for Oman to host the Youth Sailing World Championships, probably in December 2021. It would be the 2020 edition of the worlds, which was due to be held in Salvador, Brazil from 12-19 December, 2020, but was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The move to rearrange the Youth Sailing World Championships comes following the global challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rearrangement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games to 2021.



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NOTICE



This is to inform that Mr. **Soji Abraham V**, Indian National (**Indian Passport No.K0083503**) holder of Oman Resident Card No.**110063461** whose photo is appearing herewith, has been working with us as 'Marketing Executive' based in Salalah, is no longer working with our firm with effect from 08 April 2021.

Therefore, we request all the concerned parties to stop dealing with him henceforth with respect to our firm 'Gulf Center Consultancy & Audit'. Anyone dealing with him will be doing so at their own risk and the company will not take any responsibility hereafter. If anybody has any claim, they should report to the company within the next 14 days of this advertisement to the contact details given here below.

Gulf Center Consultancy & Audit

Office Telephone: 24139350, GSM: 95850405
Email: audit@gccaoman.com

BIRTHDAY WISHES



JUNE 03

Wish you a very happy birthday my dear angel -
From your Mommy,
Harshi, Papa and family

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Muscat Daily now offers free classified listings for individuals in the following categories:
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FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

QUICK RUN

Van Bommel takes over as coach of Wolfsburg

Former Bayern Munich and Netherlands star Mark van Bommel will coach Wolfsburg after agreeing a two-year deal, the Bundesliga club said on Wednesday. He will replace Oliver Glasner who has taken over Bundesliga rivals Eintracht Frankfurt. Van Bommel, 44, coached PSV Eindhoven for a brief tenure in 2019 and was previously assistant for Saudi Arabia and Australia alongside his father-in-law Bert van Marwijk. "I'm looking forward to working for Wolfsburg and I'm excited about my new environment, the people and the job that awaits me," van Bommel said.

Saudi Al Hilal name Jardim as head coach

Saudi giants Al Hilal, the local league champions for the second consecutive season, have appointed Portuguese Leonardo Jardim as head coach. "The board of directors of the club headed by Mr Fahad bin Saad bin Nafel has signed the Portuguese manager Leonardo Jardim to be in charge of the first football team," Al Hilal said in a statement on Twitter late on Tuesday. "Jardim's contract will be lasting for one season; with the extension preference for another season." After winning local championships in Portugal and Greece, the 46 year old Jardim coached Monaco, the French champions in 2017.

AFP

Brazil races clock, chaos to pull off Copa America

Sao Paulo, Brazil - Brazil confirmed on Tuesday it has agreed to stand in as emergency host for the troubled Copa America, though the threats of a COVID-19 surge, political divisions and a court battle still loom over the tournament.

Organisers raised eyebrows on Monday when they named Brazil as replacement hosts for Argentina because of a COVID-19 surge in the latter - apparently overlooking the fact that Brazil has the second-highest death toll in the pandemic.

Further doubts about the fate of the 2021 edition of the world's oldest running international football tournament emerged when Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's chief of staff, Luiz Eduardo Ramos, said the decision was not yet final.

However, both Bolsonaro and Ramos said on Tuesday that the tournament was a go.

"Brazil will host the Copa America," the far-right president said, saying the governors of Rio de Janeiro, Mato Grosso do Sul and Goias had agreed for their states to play hosts, plus the capital, Brasilia, and a fifth yet to be named.

Ramos tweeted: "Confirmed: the Copa America will be held in Brazil."

Bolsonaro said matches would be held without fans.

Media reports had indicated the South American football confederation, CONMEBOL, was pushing to allow some fans, at least for the final.

There are still plenty of



A file photo of Copa America trophy. On Tuesday, Brazil confirmed that it would host the 2021 edition from June 13-July 10

potential pitfalls ahead as organisers race to pull together the June 13-July 10 championships.

At least six of Brazil's 27 states have said they will not host matches because of the pandemic.

Opposition politicians meanwhile petitioned the Supreme Court to block the tournament, saying it would not be safe.

They included the Workers' Party (PT) of leftist ex-president

Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who currently leads Bolsonaro in the polls for Brazil's October 2022 presidential elections.

'Insanity'

It has been an uphill battle to make the Copa America happen this year.

Already delayed by 12 months because of the pandemic, it was supposed to be co-hosted by Colombia and Argentina.

But CONMEBOL nixed the

former on May 20 because of violent anti-government protests, and the latter on Sunday because of a surge of COVID-19.

Brazil, which hosted in 2019, has some advantages: a large economy, experience organizing big events and stadiums left over from the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics.

But has also recorded more than 460,000 deaths from COVID-19, second only to the United States.

The coronavirus curve in Brazil has declined recently, from a weekly average of more than 3,000 deaths a day in April to about 1,800.

But experts say state and local officials lifted restrictions too soon, with just 10.5 per cent of Brazil's 212mn people fully vaccinated.

They warn rising infections and hospital occupancy rates indicate a new surge is coming, fueled by the spread of new vari-

ants. "It's impossible to describe the insanity of trying to hold an event of this magnitude here now," said infectious disease specialist Jose David Urbaz.

"The worst phases (of the pandemic in Brazil) in 2020 were three to four times smaller than what we're seeing today.

"We have this false sense that things have gotten better. The reality is, we're still in a terrible phase of very rapid spread," he said.

Calling on Neymar

The decision has been swept up in politics in a Brazil deeply polarised by Bolsonaro.

It came days after the president faced the first mass protests of the pandemic, as thousands of Brazilians outraged over his COVID-19 denialism took to the streets in cities across the country.

He also faces a Senate investigation into his government's controversial handling of the pandemic, including fighting lockdowns and refusing offers of vaccines.

The rapporteur of that commission, Senator Renan Calheiros, called on none other than football superstar Neymar to intervene.

"Neymar, I want to have a word with you: don't agree to this Copa America in Brazil," he told the Paris Saint-Germain striker. "It's not the championship we need to be playing. We need to be in the championship of vaccines."

AFP



Mancini names injured Verratti, Sensi in Italy's Euro 2020 squad



Stefano Sensi

Milan, Italy - Midfield pair Marco Verratti and Stefano Sensi were both included in Italy's squad for Euro 2020 named late Tuesday despite recent injuries.

Coach Roberto Mancini unveiled his 26-man squad at the midnight June 1 deadline set by UEFA ahead of the June 11-July 11 tournament. There was also a surprise inclusion of Sassuolo forward Giacomo Raspadori, 21,

who has not yet played for the senior national side. Raspadori became available after Italy were eliminated from the European U21 Championship.

The centre-forward could provide an attacking option alongside Ciro Immobile and Andrea Belotti.

Verratti suffered knee ligament damage last month with his club, Paris Saint-Germain



Marco Verratti (left) and Italy's manager Roberto Mancini

(PSG), estimating that six weeks' recovery could be needed, which would rule the 28 year old out of the group matches.

Sensi suffered a thigh muscle problem on the final day of the season playing for Serie A champions Inter Milan.

Veteran Juventus defenders Giorgio Chiellini and Leonardo Bonucci are also included, with Atalanta's Rafael Toloi preferred

to Roma's Gianluca Mancini.

Atalanta midfielder Matteo Pessina and Napoli winger Matteo Politano were both left out.

After failing to qualify for the 2018 World Cup, the Azzurri are looking for redemption in a tournament they won in 1968.

They kick off on June 11 against Turkey in Group A in Rome's Stadio Olimpico.

AFP

Not reaching semis at Euros will be a failure, says Southgate

London, UK - England manager Gareth Southgate said on Tuesday that failing to reach the semifinals at Euro 2020 will be classed as a failure. The Three Lions reached the last-four of the 2018 World Cup and a run to the final would see them play all but one of their games at Wembley.

Asked if anything less than reaching the semifinals would be deemed a failure, Southgate replied, "Yeah, it probably will.

"I think we're realistic about that, we have to live with that expectation."

And he added: "Are we ready to win? Well, we've been to two semifinals so the next step is to try to go further."

Southgate named his 26-man squad on Tuesday.

Former Middlesbrough manager Southgate was appointed in September 2016 and oversaw the side's best finish at a major tournament since 1990 as they reached the semifinals in Russia in 2018.

Agencies





Serbia's world No 1 Novak Djokovic after his first-round win on Tuesday

Djokovic salutes 'brave and bold' Osaka on pullout

Paris, France - World No 1 Novak Djokovic hailed Naomi Osaka as 'brave and bold' for withdrawing from the French Open and revealing her struggles with anxiety and depression but admitted he wasn't surprised she had been threatened with a Grand Slam ban.

"I support her. I think she was very brave to do that. I'm really sorry that she is going through painful times and suffering mentally," said Djokovic on Tuesday after his first round win over American Tennys Sandgren 6-2 6-4 6-2. "This was, I must say, a very bold decision from her side. If she needs to take time and reflect and just recharge that's what she needed to do, and I respect it fully. I hope that she'll come back stronger."

Serbia's Djokovic said he was not surprised that the Grand Slams had threatened to extend sanctions against Osaka even for future majors.

"The Grand Slams are protecting themselves and their own business," said Djokovic.

"Of course they are going to follow the rules and they are going to make sure that you are complying. Otherwise you'll be paying fines and getting sanctioned. It's not surprising to me that was their reaction."

Djokovic also hinted at the generational shift in the sport where traditional mainstream media is often eclipsed by an athlete's own social media platforms.

Osaka has 2.3mn followers on Instagram. On Twitter, she only follows 18 people.

"It used to be the (traditional media) was the only way we can reach out to our fans, right, in the last five years or maybe ten years, it's not the case anymore," said Djokovic.

"We have our own platforms, our own social media accounts through which we are able to communicate directly with fans.

"Naomi, she's very young and she grew up with obviously with social media and ability to speak out through her channels."

AFP

TSITSIPAS, SERENA ENTER THIRD ROUND

Paris, France - Fifth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas marched into the French Open third round on Wednesday with a 6-3, 6-4, 6-3 victory over Spaniard Pedro Martinez while Serena Williams edged a little closer to a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam title with a battling three-set win over 174th-ranked Mihaela Buzarnescu of Romania on Wednesday.

The 39 year old Serena, a three-time champion in Paris, won 6-3, 5-7, 6-1 and will face fellow American Danielle Collins for a place in the last-16.

Tsitsipas, who lost an epic semifinal at Roland Garros to Novak Djokovic last year, next faces big-serving American John Isner for a spot in the second week.



"I'm really happy that my tennis is there, my performance is there and that I'm able to create a really good atmosphere on this court," said Tsitsipas.

The 22 year old will be hoping to take advantage of being on the opposite side of the draw to Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer. He has never reached a Grand Slam final, but has reached the last-four in his last two major tournaments.

"I don't see my performances as extra outstanding, but I've been consistent. We're here at a Grand Slam and it's a big opportunity... But of course it's going to be a challenge."

Tsitsipas holds a 3-2 winning record over Isner, but has prevailed in each of their last three meetings. He served eight aces and struck 44 winners in a strong display against a stubborn rival in world No 103 Martinez.

Earlier, sixth seed Alexander Zverev was in scratchy form but did enough to see off Russian qualifier Roman Safiullin in straight sets. The German, last year's US Open runner-up, will take on Serbia's Laslo Djere in the third round after a 7-6 (7/4), 6-3, 7-6 (7/1) victory.

"I'm happy to be through in three sets," Zverev said. "I'm happy not to have played another five-setter. I think it's going to be important for me during the course of this tournament."

Norwegian youngster Casper Ruud continued his excellent year by easing past Poland's Kamil Majchrzak 6-3, 6-2, 6-4.

Three-time quarterfinalist Kei Nishikori of Japan edged out Russian 23rd seed Karen Khachanov 4-6, 6-2, 2-6, 6-4, 6-4 after three hours and 59 minutes on Chatrier, setting up a last-32 encounter with Swiss qualifier Henri Laaksonen.

In the women's draw, Swiss tenth seed Belinda Bencic failed to improve her poor French Open record as she lost 2-6, 2-6 to Russia's Daria Kasatkina.

AFP



Stefanos Tsitsipas returns the ball to Pedro Martinez during their second round match on Wednesday (AFP)

SEEDED PLAYER RESULTS

(x denotes seeding):

MEN SECOND ROUND:

Henri Laaksonen beat Roberto Bautista Agut (x11) 6-3, 2-6, 6-3, 6-2; Casper Ruud (x15) beat Kamil Majchrzak 6-3, 6-2, 6-4; Fabio Fognini (x27) beat Marton Fucsovics 7-6 (8/6),

6-1, 6-2; John Isner (x31) beat Filip Krajnovic 7-6 (8/6), 6-1, 7-6 (7/5); Reilly Opelka (x32) beat Jaume Munar 6-3, 6-2, 3-6, 7-5.

Tuesday:

Matteo Berrettini (x9) beat Taro Daniel 6-0, 6-4, 4-6, 6-4.

WOMEN SECOND ROUND:

Victoria Azarenka (x15) beat Clara Tauson 7-5, 6-4; Madison Keys (x23) beat Leylah Fernandez 6-1, 7-5; Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova (x31) beat Ajla Tomljanovic 6-2, 6-3; Elena Vesnina beat Petra Kvitova (x11) - walkover;

Katerina Siniakova beat Veronika Kudermetova (x29) 7-6 (9/7), 5-7, 7-5; Marketa Vondrousova (x20) beat Harmony Tan 6-1, 6-3; Paula Badosa (x33) beat Danka Kovinic 6-2, 6-0; Ana Bogdan beat Naomi Osaka (x2) - walkover.

Tuesday:

Coco Gauff (x24) beat Aleksandra Krunic 7-6 (13/11), 6-4; Karolina Pliskova (x9) beat Donna Vekic 7-5, 6-4; Karolina Muchova (x18) beat Andrea Petkovic 1-6, 6-3, 6-4.

Suarez Navarro 'proud' despite early exit

Paris, France - A 'proud' Carla Suarez Navarro came close to winning her first match back after recovering from cancer at the French Open on Tuesday, but bowed out in the first round with defeat by Sloane Stephens.

The Spaniard, a former world No 6 and two-time quarterfinalist in Paris, was told in September 2020 that she was suffering with Hodgkin's lymphoma.

But almost nine months later, Suarez Navarro is back after recovering following eight chemotherapy and 15 radiotherapy sessions.

Roland Garros was the first step of a farewell tour before retirement which will also take in Wimbledon, the US Open and possibly the Olympics in Tokyo.

The 32 year old served for the match against 2018 runner-up Stephens on Tuesday, but eventually lost 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 after two hours and 24 minutes on Court Simonne Mathieu.

"Of course I feel tired at the end. I know that if I don't close the match in two sets, it will be so difficult for me," said Suarez Navarro.

"But I'm really proud, too, of myself and really happy to have the chance to play here one last time."

Stephens, a former US Open champion, will face ninth seed Karolina Pliskova in the second round.

AFP

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OMAN A ‘POSSIBLE BACK-UP VENUE’ FOR T20 WORLD CUP

In case of India unable to host T20 World Cup, BCCI will retain the hosting rights and the event could be played in the UAE with Oman as a co-host

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

With uncertainty growing whether India could host the men's T20 World Cup in October-November, the ICC board, which met virtually on Tuesday, gave enough hints that the 2021 edition could be moved to the UAE with a possibility of Oman as a co-host.

A final decision on whether the marquee T20 tournament will be held in India or not will be made later this month.

In case of India unable to host, the BCCI will retain the hosting rights and the tournament would be played in the UAE (three venues - Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah) with Muscat possibly hosting the preliminary round of matches.

All the members of the ICC board agreed to give the Indian board (BCCI) time until June 28



A file photo of Oman Cricket Academy ground at Al Amerat

to decide whether or not they can host the event, after receiving a request from the Indian board president Sourav Ganguly.

With a 16-team World Cup, three venues in the UAE may not be enough and Oman could be added as a fourth-venue to host few of the qualification round matches in Muscat.

The Oman Cricket Academy ground in Amerat has previously hosted ICC WCL Division ODI and T20I matches. The venue had recently also received accreditation from the ICC to host a Test match.

Besides the UAE, Oman is the only country in the region to have top-class cricket ground facilities and its proximity to the UAE will be an added advantage during the T20 World Cup.

It is understood that in a bid to mitigate the risk of the pitches at the main venues - Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah - getting weary, the ICC has earmarked Oman - to be the co-host. However, it would be the BCCI that would make a final call as they have the hosting rights.

In his comments to *Muscat Daily* on Wednesday, Oman

We are ready to host T20 World Cup matches if we are offered

PANKAJ KHMJI
OMAN CRICKET CHAIRMAN

Cricket (OC) chairman Pankaj Khimji said, "We are ready to host T20 World Cup matches if we are offered."

OC chief development officer and national team chief coach Duleep Mendis said, "Let's wait and see. It is too early to say. But we will be ready if given an opportunity."

Several media reports on Wednesday hinted that the ICC board believes that the T20 World Cup would be safer to host the tournament in the UAE.

In a press statement on Tuesday night, the ICC said that 'the ICC board has requested management focus its planning efforts for the ICC Men's

T20 World Cup 2021 on the event being staged in the UAE with the possibility of including another venue in the Middle East'.

The ICC statement comes days after BCCI announced that the lucrative 2021 IPL, suspended after a new COVID-19 wave hit India, would be finished in the UAE in September-October.

The IPL, the world's richest cricket tournament, was halted on May 4 after a number of players and team officials caught the coronavirus despite being based

in bio-secure bubbles, prompting an exodus of foreign stars.

The biggest concern for the BCCI with regard to hosting of the T20 World Cup is the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, which is currently battling a second wave.

Health experts are predicting a third wave during the winter - the event is scheduled to be played between mid-October and November 14. India also is on the red list of several countries which have barred all travel to and from the country.

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India coach Ravi Shastri (left) and skipper Virat Kohli

‘India ready for their biggest ever Test’

WTC FINAL

INDIA VS NEW ZEALAND

New Delhi, India - India's upcoming World Test Championship (WTC) final against New Zealand will be their biggest ever game, coach Ravi Shastri said on Wednesday as the team set off for an extended England tour.

Team India will take on New Zealand in Southampton from June 18-22 for the WTC honours. India will then play a bilateral Test series against the hosts England.

"It is the first time you have a World Test Championship final," Shastri told journalists alongside Indian captain Virat Kohli.

"When you look at that and the magnitude of the game that is going to be played, I think this is the biggest, if not the biggest ever."

Kohli's India and Kane Williamson's New Zealand, the two top ranked Test teams, will be declared joint winners of the WTC if the final ends in a draw or a tie. "It is the toughest form of the game. It is a format that tests

you," Shastri said, adding that all players involved had "played around the world and earned their stripes."

Captain Kohli, also one of the top rated batsmen in world cricket, said that the WTC final held a lot of value.

"This being first of its kind, and in the toughest format. All of us take a lot of pride in playing Test cricket," he said.

The Indian skipper said that his team's presence at the WTC final showed how much 'progress' had been made over the last few years.

India, unlike New Zealand, won't play any international matches in UK before the WTC final, though Kohli said he felt that wouldn't be an issue.

"In the past too we have landed at places three days prior (to the match) and have had a very good series," he said.

"It is not like we are playing for the first time."

January saw Shastri guide a young Indian team - with Kohli absent - to a historic Test series

victory against Australia. They then followed it up with a 3-1 series win against England in March to seal their WTC final spot as the top-ranked Test nation.

But their coach said on Wednesday he felt that the WTC final could change formats and not just be a single match between the two top teams. "In the long run... a best of three would be ideal," Shastri said.

And given the global pandemic and tough quarantine rules, both the coach and captain said they saw having two Indian squads competing separately in the near future as more practical.

"It is very difficult for the players to stay motivated and find the right kind of mental space just confined in one area," Kohli told journalists.

"Just doing the stuff day in and day out, and dealing with high pressure situations."

"(Two squads) will definitely become the norm of the future," he said.

AFP

Conway’s debut century puts Kiwis in command

ENGLAND VS NEW ZEALAND FIRST TEST: DAY ONE

London, UK - Devon Conway became just the sixth batsman to score a hundred on Test debut at Lord's to leave New Zealand well-placed at stumps on the first day of their series opener against England.

The South Africa-born opener batted for the whole of Wednesday's play, with his 136 not out the cornerstone of New Zealand's 246 for three in a match that marks the return of spectators to international cricket in England after a 2020 season played behind closed doors because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Together with fellow left-hander Henry Nicholls (46 not out), Conway shared an unbroken stand of 132 after the tourists were in trouble at 114 for three on the first day of this two-match series.

On a day for debutants, Ollie Robinson marked his entry into Test cricket by leading England's attack with two for 50 in 16 overs. But the 27 year old Sussex fast bowler found himself under scrutiny when a number of racist and sexist historic Twitter messages he had posted as a teenager resurfaced.

The tweets, dating back to 2012, left Robinson and the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) in an especially embarrassing position given both teams had lined up before play for a 'Moment of Unity' meant to show their opposition to discrimination within cricket.

England, in the absence of the injured Ben Stokes and Jofra Archer, opted for an attack built on four right-arm quick bowlers and no specialist spinner after



NZ's Devon Conway celebrates his century against England on Wednesday

Jack Leach was omitted from their XI.

The only real variety came when England captain Joe Root bowled his occasional off-breaks.

Root, however, did come close to having Conway stumped by wicketkeeper James Bracey, one of two England debutants along

with Robinson, on 117. But re-plays confirmed Conway had dragged his foot back in time.

Conway was thrust into the action immediately after New Zealand captain Kane Williamson won the toss in what was the Black Caps' first match at Lord's since an agonising 'Super Over' loss to England in the 2019 World Cup final.

But while Williamson and fellow senior batsman Ross Taylor both fell cheaply, the 29 year old Conway pressed on to a

SCOREBOARD		
NEW ZEALAND 1 st INNINGS		
T Latham	b Robinson	23
D Conway	not out	136
K Williamson	b Anderson	13
R Taylor	lbw b Robinson	14
H Nicholls	not out	46
Extras:	(b 6, lb 7, nb 1)	14
TOTAL:	246 for three in 86 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-58, 2-86, 3-114		
Bowling: J Anderson 20-5-55-1, S Broad 20-5-42-0, O Robinson 16-4-50-2, M Wood 18-6-49-0, J Root 12-1-37-0		

163-ball century, reaching the landmark with a flamboyant whipped legside four, his 11th boundary, off Robinson.

Only five other batsmen had previously scored a Test debut hundred at Lord's, with Conway the first New Zealand international to achieve the feat.

New Zealand had the better of the morning session to be 85 for one at lunch after Robinson had Tom Latham playing on for 23.

But James Anderson, equalling retired former captain Alastair Cook's England record of 161 Test appearances, struck in the first over after the interval when Williamson played on for 13 as the runs dried up.

Williamson's exit gave Anderson, already England's most successful bowler in Test history, his 615th wicket at this level. Robinson then had Taylor, playing down the wrong line, lbw for 14.

The Black Caps, who face India in the inaugural World Test Championship (WTC) final at Southampton later this month, were without Trent Boult after the left-arm quick was granted family time in New Zealand following his stint in the Indian Premier League.

AFP