

P12

HAMILTON SEIZE HIS 99TH POLE



P15

LISTEN TO THE MUSIC OF A SPIDER'S WEB



P17

DEVELOPING A FUTURE WORKFORCE



**MUSCAT**

**HM GREETINGS TO ZIMBABWE PRESIDENT**

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to the president and the friendly people of Zimbabwe. — ONA

**NO VAT ON SPICES, PULSES, CEREALS**

An exhaustive list of fish and seafood species, spices and condiments, cereals and pastas, and dairy and cheese products are among 488 foodstuff items that have been zero-rated for VAT, which came into force in the Sultanate over the weekend. The 488 food commodities were part of a package of social protection measures unveiled by the government. **P17**

**DUST-RAISING WINDS LIKELY TO CONTINUE**

Dust-Raising winds experienced on Saturday are likely to continue on Sunday. The weather bulletin from Oman Met Office cautioned the chances of dust-rising winds over the desert and open areas. However, the weather forecaster at Oman Met Office pointed out that rains are not expected, "They are high clouds. These are just clouds passing through and are not being developed." **P3**

Now get news on the go



INSIDE



UNSC APPROVES CEASEFIRE MONITORS FOR LIBYA

P6



COVID LOCKDOWN EMPTIES DELHI'S STREETS

P7

# Extended lockdown begins in Dhofar

- HOSPITAL CAPACITY INCREASED AS CASES SURGE
- MWASALAT SUSPENDS MUSCAT-SALALAH SERVICE

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH  
@patkaushal

Dhofar Governorate went under lockdown with new Covid-19 protocols on Saturday. The start of the lockdown has been advanced by three hours, and closure of it has been extended by one hour.

Thus the governorate would have daily 11 hours of lockdown, unlike seven hours in the rest of the Sultanate. From Saturday, Dhofar went under lockdown from 6 pm to 5 am, whereas lockdown timing in the rest of the country is from 9 pm to 4 am.

The extension of the lockdown period in Dhofar will be effective till further notice as a mark of streamlining measure in the wake of the rise in Covid-19 cases in the governorate.

The move is part of the implementation of the decision



of the Supreme Committee on Covid-19, which on Friday called for an extension of the ban on commercial activities and movement of individuals and vehicles at night in the governorate. A source at the Directorate-

General of Specialised Medical Care in the Ministry of Health said that out of the latest 111 new cases in the governorate, 54 admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU), while 57 to the ward. The increased number of ICU cases is a worrying

trend for the governorate.

Keeping in mind the ongoing Ramadhan, the Supreme Committee has asked for strict adherence to the social distancing guidelines. It has also asked people to avoid gatherings during

funerals, weddings and iftar.

**RUMOURS DISMISSED**

Meanwhile, the MoH brushed aside the social media reports regarding the lack of ventilators at Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah. The ministry confirmed its readiness to deal with the pandemic in the region and added that the capacity in all hospitals had been increased. It praised the role of health workers and called upon everyone to rely only on correct information.

**BUS SERVICES SUSPENDED**

Starting today, Mwasalat, the public transport operator of the Sultanate, suspended Salalah bus service till further notice. Private bus operators, however, are continuing with their services as usual.

## Oman marks World Heritage Day today

**MUSCAT:** The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, will join the rest of the world today to mark the World Heritage Day celebrated each year on April 18.

The World Heritage Day was originally suggested by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) in 1982 and Unesco accepted the proposal in the following year 1983 during the 22nd General Conference.

The theme for this year's celebration is 'Complex Pasts: Diverse Future', which comes in response to international calls to conserve the cultural heritage. The aim of this day is to promote awareness about the diversity of cultural heritage of humanity, their vulnerability and the efforts required for their protection and conservation.



The Sultanate has a lot of monuments and historical sites which earned wide international commendation and some of them were included in the Unesco's Tangible and Intangible Heritage

List. The Sultanate presents a significant model in conserving its cultural heritage being aware of the importance of protecting its history and cultural identity in an ever-changing world. — ONA

## Britain bids farewell to Prince Philip

**WINDSOR:** Queen Elizabeth and her family paid their last respects to Prince Philip at a funeral on Saturday that celebrated his naval past, his international heritage and seven decades of service in which he helped guide the queen through repeated crises.

Elizabeth, dressed in black and in a white trimmed black mask, stood alone as her husband of 73 years was lowered into the Royal Vault in a service attended by senior royals including heir Prince Charles and his sons Princes



The hearse carries the coffin as members of the Royal Family follow behind during the ceremonial Funeral procession of Prince Philip. — AFP

William and Harry.

The queen was placed alone in the ceremony at St George's

Chapel with her children, grandchildren and a select group of royal mourners.

"We remember before thee this day Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, rendering thanks unto thee-for his resolute faith and loyalty, for his high sense of duty and integrity", Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said in a prayer.

Philip died aged 99 on April 9. The queen in 1997 described Philip as her "strength and stay" over their decades of marriage.

**SEE P5**



## ROP CONTINUES EFFORTS IN DHOFAR

**SALALAH:** The Royal Oman Police (ROP) is making constant efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19 across the Sultanate.

Major Tariq bin Awadh al Shanfari from the Department of Public Relations at ROP said in an interview with Oman News Agency (ONA), that the ROP, within the framework of enforcing the decisions issued by

the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the developments resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, regarding the closure of commercial activities and night-time movement ban in Dhofar Governorate between 6 pm and 5 am which came into effect from Saturday, ROP will continue its procedures aimed at contributing to containing the prevalence of Covid-19. He added

that ROP seeks to find a cooperative environment and commitment from all society segments in order to contribute to containing the pandemic in accordance to the plan laid down by the Supreme Committee.

The ROP official said that the basic service vehicles, emergency vehicles (electricity, water and telecommunications), cleaning and

waste water vehicles, ambulances and all types of trucks weighing more than 3 tonnes, will be allowed to pass during the lockdown hours.

Besides, airport and land port staff, health workers, arriving and departing passengers, media personnel, relief and sheltering sector teams, will be allowed to pass during the lockdown hours, he said. — ONA

## Covid situation enters critical phase as recovery rate drops

VINOD NAIR  
@vinot\_nair

The Covid situation in Oman, as elsewhere, continues to be critical, with the Supreme Committee warning of more stringent decisions, including full closure if the epidemiological situation warrants.

The SC has urged everyone to avoid practices that could lead to a surge such as failing to practise social distancing, wearing facemasks in mosques or other public settings, and holding social gatherings, funerals, Iftars, or weddings, and visiting commercial establishments at crowded times.

According to official sources, hospitals are operating to full capacity. The third wave cases are almost more than last year's double.

Health experts have warned that the current Covid-19 situation is more severe than last year. The new variant is spreading faster by about 70 per cent, and hospitals are overwhelmed with patients and in critical cases because of the rapid spread of the third wave.

Over 130 deaths have been reported since the start of the pandemic at a rate of 10 deaths per



day.

The number of new cases also averaged around 1,000-1,200 during this period.

The number of inpatients in hospitals was 786 on Thursday, including 267 cases in Intensive Care Units (ICUs) an increase of over 50 per cent. The recovery rate also dropped to below 90 per cent.

Meanwhile, the director of Covid-19 field hospital in Muscat has expressed concern about the third wave and added that the facility is ready to deal with any emergency.

Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, said that the Sultanate has focused on companies that have had a long history of producing vaccines, and

has booked doses sufficient for 60 per cent of the Sultanate population.

The minister said 4,750,000 doses from Pfizer will be supplied to the Sultanate before the end of September, of which 1,350,000 will be supplied before the end of June, and negotiations are still underway to obtain 250,000 this month.

## Syria shares historical ties with Oman: Envoy

**MUSCAT:** Dr Bassam al Khatib, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Sultanate, has affirmed that the Oman-Syria relations are based on deep-rooted historical foundations and have maintained their basic principles of respect, love, sincerity and non-intervention in the internal affairs of both countries.



In an interview with Oman News Agency, the Syrian ambassador said that the Sultanate is focused on the future through the Oman Vision 2040, consequently it is looking for partners who can contribute to the various aspects of this vision, noting that there are many Syrian medium term investors and many others are mulling investing in the Sultanate.

The ambassador said that during his visit to the Sultanate it was agreed to boost investments and trade exchange between the two brotherly countries, voicing his hope to see a qualitative development in investments noting that there are many well-versed Syrian academics and employees working for universities, colleges, establishments and projects in the Sultanate.

Regarding the Ramadhan atmosphere, the Syrian ambassador said that Syria is still preserving its ancient traditions and customs.

He added that the preparations for Ramadhan begins by preparing beverages from tamarind and rose water.

Readiness for the Eid begins in the middle of Ramadhan by preparing clothes and various types of Shami and Damascene sweets and foods.

The Ramadhan traditions in the Sultanate vary from one place to another and there are many cultures, the ambassador said adding that the more you come closer to the Omani society, the more you discover the Omani traditions in Ramadhan, some of which are similar to the Syrian culture.

— ONA

## Tourism meets tradition at Afi in Wilayat Wadi al Maawil



Afi town in the Wilayat of Wadi al Maawil is a place where tourism meets tradition. Its ancient history is evidence of a rich tradition of the place that stored knowledge along with an impregnable fortress that repelled invaders of all sorts.

Afi has many elements of tourist attractions. It is also famous for its moderate climate and rich agriculture crops.

Saud bin Said al Maawali, a resident of Afi town, spoke about the uniqueness of this town and said, "Located in the centre of Wilayat Wadi al Maawil, the heritage site has many historical monuments. Most notable is Harat Hujarat al Shaikh with its castle and high towers that protected the people living inside, from the raids of enemies."

Another important location is Al Safalah Castle, which is the signature site of Wilayat Wadi al Maawil. Other exciting sites here are Museum of Bait al Ghasham, Natalah House, Bin Salima Fort, and Al Mutlaa Castle.

The traditional irrigation system here is a distinctive feature of the town that reflects upon the



lifestyle of the inhabitants.

"Allah gave this town with the wealth of the aflaj and water springs. Prominent aflaj here are Al Washhi and Al Maliki," said a local resident.

Among the water springs, the most prominent is Al Munzif Spring. Afi is also known for a rare tree called Al Fanas.

A visitor can never forget Afi for its mesmerising environment and idyllic landscape.

Additionally, Afi has been known for its silver industries since ancient times. The skill reveals the legacy of its ancestors, who were experts in making Khanjar and converting it into the industry and traditional handicraft.





# Suqam: A perennial tree rooted in heritage

TEXT & PHOTOS BY:  
YAHYA ALSALMANI

It is well-known that Omanis have great interest in agriculture, especially in planting trees and plants as a natural means of combating desertification, aridity and shortage of water resources. Traditionally, they have taken care of trees as they believe that trees and plants are a bounty, from which they derive a lot of benefits.

The Wilayat of Al Rustaq is home to one of the perennial Omani trees — ‘Ficus Sycomorus’ which is locally called ‘Suqam’. Villagers told the *Observer* that “the tree is more than 300 years old”. It grows near wet areas and hence can be seen near the wadis and aflaj (the traditional irrigation system).

Environmental studies mention that the tree belongs to the Moraceae family. It is very huge and its height can reach up to 12 metres. The tourists who enjoy hiking and bashing in wadis spend some time under its shade to enjoy nature and its delicious fruit.

After a certain age, the leaves of this perennial tree wilt and their stems become brittle. People of the village still spend their spare time under the tree enjoying the shade and fresh air. “The tree, with its shade and fruits, gives us nice ambience for our gatherings. Usually



we meet here during the daytime, chatting and discussing all matters related to our daily life”, locals said.

The tree, mostly found in the northern and southern governorates of the Sultanate, is respected

by the local people as they consider it as one of the unique natural resources of the environment. They called for measures to preserve such natural resources.

Studies indicate that the tree has



been widely cultivated in the Arab countries and it is a sustainable green tree. One of the oldest trees was found in North Cairo (Egypt), and it is about 2,000 years old. It is well-known since the ancient

times. Sources indicate that it was called the “Sacred Tree” because “Virgin Mary took shelter under the shade of this tree with Prophet Jesus during their travel in Egypt”. Furthermore, as it has reference in

The Wilayat of Al Rustaq is home to one of the perennial Omani trees — ‘Ficus Sycomorus’ which is locally called ‘Suqam’

the Bible then, it became a symbol of protection and hope for the Americans as well.

Environmentally, it works to purify the air as it releases a large amount of oxygen. Its branches spread horizontally and the leaves resemble those of a fig. The tree has several health benefits. Scientific studies have proved that its fruit is a natural disinfectant for the gut, and helps treat many diseases of the digestive system. Sources say that it is also a natural remedy for constipation and intestinal flu, and its fruits help stimulate the nervous system. It has great importance in treating gum infections and dental problems, in addition to reducing mood swings, anxiety, tension, nervousness and depression. The fruit contains nutrients that treat anemia and give relief from scorpion stings and snake bites.

Making use of its health and environmental benefits, Omanis of various wilayats consider the tree as a natural heritage.

## Dust-raising winds experienced



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH  
@lakshmioman

Dust-raising winds experienced on Saturday are likely to continue on Sunday. The weather bulletin from Oman Met Office cautioned the chances of dust-raising winds over the desert and open areas.

Meanwhile, the Oman Met Office shared the aerial image showing cloud condensation in parts of the governorates of Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah, North and South Al Sharqiyah, and the flow of clouds in different parts of the Dhofar and Al Wusta governorates.

However, the weather forecaster at Oman Met Office pointed out that rains are not expected, “They are high clouds. These are just clouds passing through and are not being developed.”

Otherwise, it is mainly clear skies over most of the Sultanate with clouds advection and the chance of clouds development



**The dust-raising clouds will continue on Sunday and then diminish. And this is the case with the high clouds too. There are convective clouds around Al Hajar Mountains. Still, rain is not expected in the upcoming three days at least**

MET OFFICE

over Al Hajar Mountains towards the afternoon.

“The dust-raising clouds will continue on Sunday and then diminish. And this is the case

with the high clouds too. There are convective clouds around Al Hajar Mountains. Still, rain is not expected in the upcoming three days at least”, said the weather expert.

There are also chances of late night to early morning low-level clouds or fog patches along the coastal areas of Dhofar and Al Wusta governorates.

Along the coastal areas of Oman Sea, winds will be northwesterly moderate during the day, becoming variable light at night. Over the rest of the Sultanate, winds will be northeasterly light to moderate, occasionally fresh over the desert and open areas. And will be southwesterly mild to fresh along Arabian Sea coasts.

The wave height is expected to be moderate along most coasts with maximum wave height of 2.0 metres, becoming slight along the Oman Sea and Musandam coasts with a maximum wave height of 1.25 metres.



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# Ramadhan

M U B A R A K



# FAST

## BUT DON'T

# FEAST

**KABEER YOUSUF**  
@kabeeryousef

Fasting teaches modesty, minimalism and empathy. Contrary to it, many take iftar and post-iftar time as an opportunity to compensate for the lost food and tend to overeat, resulting in various lifestyle diseases.

A virtual survey conducted among the doctors by the *Observer*, suggests that many patients who visited them during or after Ramadhan, followed a wrong eating regime and consumed oily foods as well as carbonated drinks in empty stomach. These experts say, “Break the fast sensibly and reap the full health benefits of

Ramadhan.”

“The benefits of fasting will be nullified by drinking very sugary carbonated soft drinks and rich heavy fatty meals immediately after iftar,” says Dr Benny Panakkal, Medical Director at Badr Al Samaa Hospitals.

Such an eating pattern can spike blood sugar and triglycerides after the meal triggering a cascade of metabolic events leading to atherosclerosis or the process of developing clogged arteries leading to heart attacks and strokes.

Mini Padikkal, Clinical Dietician at the NMC Ghubra, suggests a balanced diet as the key to good health. She suggests moderate consumption of fried foods because they are high

in calories and fat, increasing cholesterol level in the blood.

“Fasting, especially during the holy month of Ramadhan, carries a high risk of dehydration as food and drink are limited before sunrise and after sunset. Let’s not forget with the current Covid-19 situation it is now more important than ever to keep yourself healthy, active, hydrated and nourished. Hence, a balanced main dish at ‘iftar’ should contain complex carbs like whole grains, millets etc with some healthy protein and cooked vegetables or salads,” adds Mini Padikkal.

Mostly at iftar, people tend to take heavy meals, which usually are fatty foods. This leads to pain in the stomach called

acidity or gastritis in medical terms, nausea or vomiting, and indigestion.

“These symptoms get exacerbated if the person has a history of acidity. We advise everyone to have light meals at iftar, non-fatty or oily food, avoid junk foods, more fruits, salads, dates, plenty of water and take dinner after the special night prayers to avoid the above-mentioned health problems,” says Dr Dilip Singhvi, Specialist — Internal Medicine, Apollo Hospital.

“The month of Ramadhan is a great opportunity to focus on bringing back a balanced and healthy lifestyle in our life. Ramadhan fasting has spiritual, physical, psychological, and

social benefits. Fasting during Ramadhan can be good for one’s health and personal development,” says Jishy Seby, Diet Consultant, KIMS Oman.

Good hydration, fruits, vegetables, whole grains, protein foods like fish, lean meat, nuts and low-fat foods should be the primary energy source for those who are fasting.

### SIMPLE IFTAR & SUHOOR

#### At Iftar

Overeating or feasting should be avoided during all the meals during Ramadhan, especially during Iftar. The body’s immediate need at the time of Iftar is to get a readily available energy source in the

form of glucose, particularly for the brain and nerves. So it is always good to break the fast traditionally with dates and fruits. Dates provide energy in the form of sugar. Fruits help to maintain water and mineral balance in the body. Soups and cereals can follow it. Make sure your soup includes generous amounts of vegetables such as broccoli, spinach, peas, green beans, squash, and carrots.

#### At Suhoor

One should take a simple diet and should not differ too much from one’s normal diet. It should contain foods from all the major food groups such as cereals, pulses, meat and fish, dairy and fats.

# Britain falls silent in tribute to Prince Philip

**WINDSOR:** Queen Elizabeth and her family paid their last respects to Prince Philip at a funeral on Saturday that celebrated his naval past, his international heritage and seven decades of service in which he helped guide the queen through repeated crises.

Elizabeth, dressed in black and in a white trimmed black mask, stood alone as her husband of 73 years was lowered into the Royal Vault in a service attended by senior royals including heir Prince Charles and his sons Princes William and Harry.

The queen was placed alone in the ceremony at St George's Chapel with her children, grandchildren and a select group of royal mourners, separated due to Covid-19 rules.

"We remember before thee this day Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, rendering thanks unto thee for his resolute faith and loyalty, for his high sense of duty and integrity", Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said in a prayer.

Philip, officially known as the Duke of Edinburgh, died aged 99 on April 9. The queen in 1997 described Philip as her "strength and stay" over their decades of marriage.

The archbishop praised Philip's "life of service to the nation and Commonwealth, and for the courage and inspiration of his leadership."

After the nation observed a minute's silence in brilliant sunshine, Harry and William took up their places on opposite sides of the chapel in Windsor Castle, with the final resting place of Tudor monarch Henry VIII dividing them.

Philip's naval cap and sword lay on top of the coffin, which was covered with the Duke of Edinburgh's personal standard featuring the Danish coat of arms, the



Pallbearers carry the coffin up the west steps of St George's Chapel during the funeral of Britain's Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh in Windsor Castle in Windsor, west of London. — AFP



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II attends the funeral service of Britain's Prince Philip, inside St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle in Windsor, west of London. — AFP

was advised by her doctor not to travel while pregnant, a source familiar with the situation said. US networks showed the funeral live as did British TV stations.

Mourners eschewed the tradition of wearing military uniforms, a step newspapers said was to prevent embarrassing to Harry, who despite serving two tours in Afghanistan during his army career, is not be entitled to wear a uniform because he was stripped of his honorary military titles.

Prince Andrew, who stepped down from public duties in 2019 over controversy surrounding his what he termed his "ill-judged" association with late US financier Jeffrey Epstein, had wanted to wear an admiral's uniform at the funeral, media reported.

The palace emphasised beforehand that while the occasion would have the due pageantry that marks the passing of a senior royal, it remained an occasion for a mourning family to mark the passing of a husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather. — AFP

Greek cross, Edinburgh Castle and the stripes of the Mountbatten family.

A wreath of white roses, lilies and jasmine from the 94-year-old queen also adorned the coffin.

The four-person choir sang a sailors' hymn, "Eternal Father, Strong to Save", and shortly before he was lowered into the Royal Vault, the Russian "Kontakion of the Departed", a hymn of the Orthodox and Eastern churches, echoed around the ancient church. There were no eulogies.

Philip's coffin was borne to the chapel on a bespoke Defender TD

130 in military green as a minute gun fired eight times.

Before the procession, military bands spaced out across the quadrangle of Windsor Castle to play the prince's chosen music, including "I Vow To Thee My Country", "Jerusalem" and "Nimrod".

Philip, who married Elizabeth in 1947, helped the young queen adapt the monarchy to the changing world of the post-World War Two era as the loss of empire and the decline of deference challenged the world's most prominent royal family.

She has now been widowed

just as she grapples with one of the gravest crises to hit the royal family in decades — allegations of racism and neglect by it from her grandson Harry and his American-born wife Meghan.

Much media attention will focus on the royals' behaviour towards Harry, who was making his first public appearance with the family since the couple gave an explosive interview to Oprah Winfrey last month.

In the interview they accused one unnamed royal of making a racist comment, and said Meghan's pleas for help when she felt

suicidal were ignored.

The couple, who moved to Los Angeles and quit royal duties last year, laid bare their perceptions of the family's attitudes in what amounted to a critique of the old-fashioned customs of an ancient institution.

Meghan said she had been silenced by "the Firm" while Harry said his father, Charles, had refused to take his calls. Harry said both Charles and his brother William were trapped in the royal family.

Meghan watched the funeral at her home in California after she

# Cuba changes leadership, seeks 'respectful' talks with US

**HAVANA:** The all-powerful Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) opened a historic congress Friday to rubber-stamp the transfer of power to a new generation as outgoing leader Raul Castro committed it to "respectful" talks with the United States.

In an address to a few hundred party delegates, Castro emphasized that Cuba would not renounce "the principles of the revolution and socialism."

But he affirmed a "willingness to conduct a respectful dialogue and build a new kind of relationship with the United States", which has had sanctions against Cuba since 1962. Castro, 89, is stepping down as PCC first secretary — the most powerful position in Cuba — ending a near six-decade family hold on power that started in 1959 under his revolutionary brother, Fidel, who died in 2016.

The reins will now pass to 60-year-old Miguel Diaz-Canel, who has already served as Cuba's president since 2018, when Castro relinquished that part of his executive portfolio.

Ties with the United States, after a historic but temporary easing of tensions under president Barack Obama between 2014 and 2016, worsened under Donald Trump, who reinforced sanctions.

White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday the United States was not planning any immediate change in its policy toward Cuba.



Cuba's President Raul Castro

**Diaz-Canel will become Cuba's first civilian leader since the Castro-led revolution of the 1950s**

"Support for democracy and human rights will be at the core of our efforts", she said.

Diaz-Canel will become Cuba's first civilian leader since the Castro-led revolution of the 1950s, which happened before he was even born.

The official handover of power to the first non-Castro PCC first secretary is expected on the fourth and final day of the congress next Monday.

In a tweet Friday, Diaz-Canel said the congress would be a forum where "ideas are entrenched, history recognized and the future discussed" while underlining there would be "continuity."

Diaz-Canel, who will remain Cuban president, takes over as the country battles its worst economic crisis in 30 years, sky-high inflation, biting food shortages, long lines for basic necessities and growing discontentment over limited freedoms.

Cuba's economic crisis has been caused in part by its own management failures, worsened by ramped-up US sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic, which dried up tourists — a key income source for the island.

The economy plummeted by 11 per cent in 2020, the worst decline since 1993 in the country of 11.2 million.

Economic reforms to phase out the US dollar-pinned "convertible" peso — leaving only the less valuable official peso in place — saw salaries increased by the state, but not enough to make up for the resulting price inflation. Many stores now accept only US dollars — these are better stocked than others — but few people can afford them.

Castro, wearing a military uniform, on Friday denounced Washington's "economic war" against his country, in comments broadcast on state television from inside the closed-doors congress. — AFP



**ROYAL OMAN POLICE**  
DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF MEDICAL SERVICES

**TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT**

| Tender Number                                                  | Tender Name       | Tender Fee (R.O) | Last Date For Collection | Last Date For Submission |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>ROP/DGMS/PR/8/2021</b><br>Dated 15 <sup>th</sup> April 2021 | <b>Face Masks</b> | <b>50/-</b>      | <b>22-04-2021</b>        | <b>29-04-2021</b>        |

- ◆ Only Registered Manufacturer/Approved Suppliers can participate in the Tender.
- ◆ The Tender documents may be obtained from the office of Director General of Medical Services, Royal Oman Police, Qurum, upon receipt of non-refundable payment of respective amount.
- ◆ Bid bond certificate of 1% of the total bid amount valid for a total period of 90 calendar days must be attached.
- ◆ **Delivery Period:** Less than 30 days. (Least delivery period will also be considered in selection).
- ◆ **Delivery Schedule:** The confirmed order quantity can be imported in one lot and supplied in 3-4 lots.
- ◆ The response received from bidders must be submitted in 2 hard copies and 1 electronic soft copy on a CD or memory stick (flash drive), all in a sealed envelope showing the Tender Name and Number. No company names or hints of any sort should be shown on the envelope.
- ◆ Submissions received after the designated closing time (12:00pm) on the due date may not be considered regardless of the circumstances.
- ◆ The DGMS reserves the right to reject any or any part of, or all tenders and also reserves the right to award to a bidder other than the bidder submitting the lowest total acquisition cost.

# UN Security Council approves ceasefire monitors for Libya

**NEW YORK:** The United Nations Security Council gave the green light on Friday for the deployment of 60 UN ceasefire monitors to Libya and called on the country's new unity government to prepare for free, fair and inclusive elections on December 24.

A ceasefire in Libya has held since the autumn, but the main road across the front lines from Sirte to Misrata remains closed. The Security Council unanimously approved Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' proposal for the deployment of the monitors.

"The monitors would be deployed to Sirte once all the requirements for a permanent United Nations presence have been met, including security, logistical, medical and operational aspects," Guterres wrote to the council on April 7.

"In the meantime, forward presence would be established in Tripoli, as soon as conditions permit," he said.

Libya's unity government was sworn in on March 15 from two warring administrations that had ruled eastern and western regions, completing a smooth transition of power after a decade of violent chaos.

In the resolution adopted on Friday, the Security Council stressed the "full, equal and meaningful participation of women and the inclusion of youth" in the elections.

Libya descended into chaos after the Nato-backed overthrow of leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The country was then divided in 2014 between the



Labourers work on an infrastructure rehabilitation project near the Roman Marcus Aurelius arch in the Libyan capital Tripoli's old city. — AFP

internationally recognised government in the west and commander Khalifa Haftar's eastern-based forces.

Haftar is supported by the UAE, Egypt and Russia, while the government is backed by Turkey.

The Security Council also strongly urged countries to respect and support the ceasefire, including through the withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya "without delay," and demanded full compliance with its arms embargo on Libya.

Russia's Wagner mercenaries, sent to Libya to support Haftar and accused of lacing civilian areas with deadly booby traps when pulling out of Tripoli last year, remain entrenched around



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov welcomes Libya's Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah during their meeting in Moscow. — AFP

Sirte and other parts of the country.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said last year that if there are Russians in Libya, they are

not representing or paid by his government.

Meanwhile, Russia on Friday welcomed the prospect of renewed military cooperation with war-shattered Libya as Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu hosted Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah.

In February, Libya embarked on a new phase of its post-Gaddafi transition after interim leaders were selected to lead the country until December elections.

"I consider your Moscow visit to be the first step towards resuming full-scale cooperation between the defence ministries of the two countries," Shoigu told the Libyan prime minister in remarks released by his ministry.

— AFP/Reuters

# Heavy fighting near Marib leaves 96 dead

**DUBAI:** Heavy fighting near the Yemeni city of Marib has killed 96 combatants over the past two days as Ansar Allah fighters press their offensive on the government's last northern toehold, loyalist commanders said on Friday.

"Clashes between the two sides on several fronts in the Marib area on Wednesday and Thursday killed 36 loyalists troops and 60 fighters," one government military source said. The fighters rarely disclose their own losses.

Aircraft of a military coalition provided air support to government ground forces.

The Ansar Allah fighters are "keeping up their slow advance on Marib and now constitute a very real threat on the Kassara and Mashjah fronts, northwest of the city," another loyalist military official said.

The loss of Marib would be a heavy blow for the Yemeni government, currently based in the southern city of Aden, and

for its backers.

The city of Marib and its surrounding oil fields make up the last significant pocket of government-held territory in the north, the rest of which is under fighter control, including the capital Sanaa.

The city's fall could also lead to humanitarian disaster, as vast numbers of civilians displaced from fighting elsewhere have sought refuge in the area.

Around 140 camps have sprung up in the surrounding desert to provide basic shelter for up to two million displaced, according to the Yemeni government.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has warned that the suffering will only end when a political solution is found between the Ansar Allah fighters and the government.

The fighters see Marib as a strategic prize that will give them more bargaining power in peace talks that Washington says must begin soon. — AFP



Fighters with forces loyal to Yemen's government hold a position against Ansar Allah fighters in Yemen's northeastern province of Marib. — AFP

# Green and cheap? Doubts dog Lebanon's first electric car

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon is launching its first electric car — billed as cheap and green — but sceptics say subsidised power will count for little in a flat economy reliant on fossil fuels and struggling to attract investment into renewable energy. Designed by Lebanon's EV Electra, the coupe-style 'Rise' is the country's first foray into the electric car market, a fast-growing sector that promises to lower planet-warming emissions.

Costing \$30,000, the Rise reaches 180km an hour and goes on sale in Lebanon and Europe in late 2021, pending certification.

But for all the hype around the sector's rising popularity, from

Norway to China, the Rise faces a bumpy journey at home.

The economy is in crisis, with just 62 new cars sold in the first two months of 2021, against 1,876 in the same period last year, according to local consultancy Information International.

The car's green impact is also set to be diluted in a country reliant on fossil fuels for electricity, while frequent power outages do not bode well for reliability.

Its maker is undaunted, saying state-subsidised power lends allure to a car with a pricetag out of most locals' reach.

"Lebanon's electricity is one of the cheapest in the world. Few



people could dream of driving an electric car at these costs," CEO Jihad Mohammad said. "It's very competitive. You're

driving at the expense of the state," former energy minister Cesar Abi Khalil said. Outgoing Energy Minister

Lebanon's electricity is one of the cheapest in the world. Few people could dream of driving an electric car at these costs

JIHAD MOHAMMAD,  
CEO, EV Electra Ltd

Raymond Ghajar said that subsidies on electricity would only be lifted when a new government introduces a financial recovery

plan and wildly fluctuating exchange rates stabilise.

Prices would then be "in line with what the consumers are willing to pay and able to afford", he said in written comments.

Sales of electric cars have soared in many rich economies, promising eco-minded consumers low running costs coupled with a lower footprint.

But Lebanon presents its own challenges. The country's power supply has been spotty since a 1975-1990 civil war and has only worsened in an 18-month economic crisis, with rolling blackouts a regular feature of life. — Thomson Reuters Foundation

## SHORT TAKES

### BEIRUT

#### Lebanese minister blames fuel shortages

Lebanon's energy minister has blamed the country's chronic fuel shortages on smugglers exporting subsidised supplies into war-torn Syria. Recent weeks have seen fuel prices steadily rising and petrol stations shutting shop across Lebanon, adding to the misery of a grinding economic and currency crisis.

"We've found that the underlying reason for the current lack of fuels is smuggling" of subsidised Lebanese products into Syria, caretaker energy



minister Raymond Ghajar told reporters.

"The need for petrol on the Syrian market is pushing Lebanese smugglers to smuggle it into Syria for massive profits," he said. — AFP

### TEL AVIV

#### Israel strikes Gaza after rocket attack

The Israeli military said it had conducted airstrikes against targets in the Gaza Strip following a rocket attack from the Palestinian enclave, in the second such exchange in as many days. The strikes hit what the military described as "targets" operated by Gaza's ruling party Hamas.

They included a "training facility, an anti-aircraft missile launcher post, a concrete production plant and terror tunnel infrastructure".



Witnesses and security sources said the strikes hit two fighter "training sites" in southern Gaza and another target in central Gaza. — AFP

### ISTANBUL

#### Turkey logs highest daily Covid cases

Turkey recorded 63,082 new coronavirus cases in the last 24 hours, the highest daily number since the beginning of the pandemic, data from the Health Ministry showed on Friday, bringing the total number of cases to 4,150,039.

The data also showed 289 people died due to Covid-19 in the same period, bringing the total number of deaths since the beginning of the pandemic to 35,320. Turkey currently ranks fourth globally in the number



of daily cases based on a seven-day average. President Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday announced several new restrictions and a "partial closure" for the first two weeks of the holy month of Ramadan to curb the surge in cases. — Reuters

## In brief

■ MANILA



### GIANT CLAM SHELLS WORTH \$24.8 M SEIZED IN PHILIPPINE RAID

Philippine authorities said on Saturday they have seized some 200 tonnes of illegally harvested giant clam shells worth nearly \$25 million in one of the biggest known operations of its kind in the country. Conservationists have expressed alarm over the surging illicit trade in the endangered creatures, which are used as a substitute for ivory following a global crackdown in the trade of elephant tusks.

The Philippines is home to most of the world's giant tropical clam species, and the raid took place in the western province of Palawan, considered a poaching hotbed. The coastguard said four suspects were arrested on the remote Green Island. — AFP

■ SURABAYA



### INDONESIAN HACKERS ARRESTED OVER US COVID SCAM

Two Indonesian hackers have been arrested over an international scam in which \$60 million was stolen from a Covid-19 aid programme helping Americans left jobless by the pandemic, authorities said. Text messages were sent to 20 million Americans directing them to more than a dozen fake US government websites, police in the Southeast Asian nation said late on Thursday.

Thousands of victims supplied personal information, including social security numbers, to the fake sites in the hopes of securing \$2,000 offered under a real assistance programme for the unemployed, authorities said. — AFP

■ BANGKOK



### THAILAND REPORTS 1,547 NEW CORONAVIRUS CASES

Thailand reported 1,547 new coronavirus cases and two additional deaths on Saturday, amid a third wave of infections in the Southeast Asian country. The new cases took the total number of confirmed infections to 40,585, with 99 fatalities.

Meanwhile, hundreds waited in grim silence at a Bangkok stadium to get free Covid-19 tests on Saturday as a spiralling infection rate gripped Thailand, on a fourth consecutive day of more than 1,000 new cases. The capital appears to be the epicentre of the kingdom's third wave, after infections were traced back to a nightlife district earlier this month. — Reuters

# US and Japan show united front



US President Joe Biden and Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga take part in a joint press conference in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Friday sought to present a united front with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to counter an assertive China as the US leader held his first face-to-face White House summit since taking office. The talks offered the Democratic president, inaugurated in January, a chance to work further on his pledge to revitalise US alliances that frayed under his Republican predecessor Donald Trump.

China topped the agenda, underscoring Japan's central role in US efforts to face down Beijing. The two leaders addressed an array of geopolitical issues in a joint statement, including "the importance of peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait."

"Today Prime Minister Suga and I affirmed our ironclad support for the US-Japanese alliance and for our shared security," Biden told a joint news conference in the White House Rose Garden, calling the

## US and Japan will invest together in areas such as 5G, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, genomics and semiconductor supply chains

discussions "productive."

"We committed to working together to take on the challenges from China and on issues like the East China Sea, the South China Sea, as well as North Korea, to ensure a future of a free and open Indo Pacific."

Other pressing concerns at the talks included China's increased military movements near Taiwan, its tightening grip on Hong Kong and its crackdown on Uighurs in Xinjiang. Suga said he and Biden agreed on the necessity of frank discussions with China in the context of Beijing's activities in the Indo-Pacific region.

In a strongly worded statement on Saturday, China's embassy in Washington said Beijing was "resolutely opposed" to the joint statement, and that Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang were China's internal affairs.

The remarks have "completely gone beyond the scope of the normal development of bilateral relations", harming the interests of third parties as well as peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific, the embassy said.

The move was an attempt to split the region that "will inevitably proceed with the purpose of harming others and end in harming themselves", it added.

The summit — Biden's first in-person meeting with a foreign leader as president — came just days after China sent 25 aircraft, including fighters and nuclear-capable bombers, near Taiwan, which Beijing considers a wayward province.

— Reuters

# Myanmar junta chief to attend Asean summit

YANGON: Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing will attend an Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in Indonesia on April 24, a Thai foreign ministry spokesman said on Saturday, for his first known foreign trip since he staged a February 1 coup.

Myanmar has been in upheaval since Min Aung Hlaing ousted an elected government led by democracy champion Aung San Suu Kyi, with security forces killing 728 people, according to an activist group tally, in an attempt to stamp out protests.

In the latest violence, security forces shot and killed two people in the ruby-mining town of Mogoke, one of several towns in which crowds came out to protest on Saturday, a resident said and media reported.

Myanmar's neighbours have been trying to encourage talks between the rival sides to resolve the crisis but the military has shown little willingness to engage with them or talk to the ousted government.

Several leaders of the 10-member Asean, of which Myanmar is a member, had confirmed their attendance at the meeting in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, including Min Aung Hlaing, the Thai spokesman, Tanee Sangrat, said.

A spokesman for the Myanmar junta did not answer calls seeking comment. Myanmar's ousted government is likely to decry the junta chief's participation in the meeting.

Pro-democracy politicians, including ousted members of parliament, announced the formation of a National Unity Government (NUG) on Friday, including Suu Kyi and leaders of the anti-coup protests and ethnic minorities.

The NUG says it is the legitimate political authority. It has called for international recognition and for Asean to reject Min Aung Hlaing's participation in the meeting and to invite it instead.

A representative of the NUG was not immediately available for comment.

— Reuters



Relatives and friends gather around a bus carrying prisoners outside the Insein Prison, as Myanmar's junta released 23,184 prisoners across the country under a New Year amnesty in Yangon. — Reuters

# Covid lockdown empties Delhi streets amid surge

NEW DELHI: New Delhi led major cities across India into a weekend lockdown on Saturday as the country confronts a fierce new coronavirus wave, with more than 230,000 fresh daily cases and families clamouring for drugs and hospital beds.

Hopes that South Asia might have beaten the pandemic have been dashed with India seeing over two million new cases this month alone and Bangladesh and Pakistan also imposing shutdowns.

India added another record 234,000 cases Saturday to pass 14.5 million overall and 1,341 deaths took its pandemic total to 175,649 deaths.

The per-capita rates remain low by international comparison, but the speed at which cases are rising led the international Red Cross to call the South Asian surge "truly frightening."

India now has three times the daily cases of the United States, the world's worst-hit country.

After a national lockdown a year ago led to an economic slump, the Indian government is desperate to avoid a second stoppage. But Delhi joined Mumbai in ordering all but essential services to close.

Landmarks such as the historic



Police stop vehicles to check commuters as a weekend lockdown is in effect wherein only people catering to essential services were allowed to commute in New Delhi. — AFP

Red Fort where tens of thousands of people would normally gather were deserted. "Not one person has turned up," said security guard Anil Dayan. Police checked many of the cars that strayed onto the streets.

The city of more than 20 million people now has the most daily cases in India and restaurants, malls and gyms were

## Delhi joined Mumbai in ordering all but essential services to close

all closed. Weddings can go ahead with guests limited to 50 people, while only 20 can attend funerals.

"Don't panic. All essential services will be available through

the weekend," Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said.

Maharashtra, which includes Mumbai, Gujarat and IT hub Bangalore's home state Karnataka have also imposed restrictions on movement.

Uttar Pradesh state, home to some 240 million people, has ordered a one-day lockdown on Sunday.

Similarly, the northern state of Uttarakhand has restricted gatherings to 200 people — but exempted the huge Hindu Kumbh Mela festival.

The gathering in Haridwar has attracted up to 25 million people since January, including some 4.6 million this week alone, with most people ignoring Covid-19 guidelines.

More than 1,600 people tested positive for coronavirus in Haridwar in barely three days this week and experts fear that many devotees will take the virus back to their home towns and villages.

The latest round of voting also went ahead in the West Bengal state election with long queues forming outside polling stations. Rival parties have been holding huge rallies in recent weeks again fuelling super-spreader fears.

In the state capital Kolkata, railway employee Samaresh Tapna fell sick after attending one such gathering and was hospitalised. "I felt angry with myself... I cursed my fate," the 42-year-old said.

Hospitals are running short of oxygen and widely prescribed medicines such as Remdesivir and Fabiflu, prompting desperate people to pay exorbitant black market rates. — AFP

# Russia to expel Ukrainian diplomat as tensions simmer

**MOSCOW:** Russia accused a Ukrainian diplomat on Saturday of trying to obtain classified information and ordered him to leave the country by April 22, in the latest flare-up of tensions between the two neighbours.

Russia's FSB security service earlier said Oleksandr Sosoniuk was taken into custody when he tried to access the information from Russian law enforcement databases during a meeting with a Russian citizen.

"This activity is incompatible with the status of a diplomatic employee and is hostile to the Russian Federation. The foreign diplomat will be dealt with in accordance with international law," the FSB said in



New recruits of the separatist Donetsk People's Republic's armed forces march during a training in Donetsk, Ukraine. — Reuters

a statement.

Ukraine's foreign ministry, describing the arrest as a provocation, said Sosoniuk was held for several hours, before returning to the country's consulate in St Petersburg.

Tensions between Moscow and Kyiv have been rising amid a build-up of Russian troops along the border and clashes in eastern Ukraine between the army and pro-Moscow separatists.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy on Friday pressed for peace negotiations.

Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement that Sosoniuk had been advised to leave Russian territory within 72 hours, starting from April 19.

— Reuters

## European countries vie to host US-Russia summit

**VIENNA / GENEVA:** At least three European countries have offered to host the summit with Vladimir Putin proposed by Joe Biden amid rising tensions between the United States and Russia.

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz offered his country's support as host for a possible meeting between the countries' leaders in the capital Vienna.

"We are already in contact with the Russian and the US side, if there really should be such a meeting," Kurz said in an interview for the "Morning Briefing" podcast hosted by German journalist Gabor Steingart.

In a telephone call this week, US President Biden had suggested to his Russian counterpart Putin that they meet for a summit in a third country, preferably in Europe during summer.

Kurz said his role in a possible meeting should not be overestimated as he is not playing a mediator.

"We have always traditionally had good contact to the East. We are neutral, and thus perhaps also a welcome interlocutor for Russia," Kurz said.

Switzerland is also vying to host the planned summit, according to at least one report.

The embassies in Washington and Moscow had made corresponding advances, the *Tages-*

*Anzeiger* newspaper reported on Saturday, citing diplomatic sources.

The Foreign Ministry in Bern said it will not comment on the matter "for reasons of confidentiality," but said that Switzerland is generally always happy to provide its good services when it is useful.

A legendary meeting took place in Geneva in 1985 between former US president Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, then newly appointed general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It was considered a turning point in the Cold War.

Earlier, Finland had already declared its willingness to organise a possible meeting. A summit between Putin and former US president Donald Trump already took place in Helsinki in 2018.

Whether Putin will accept the invitation remains open. Shortly after it was issued, Washington imposed new sanctions on Russia, and Moscow reacted with a travel ban on high-ranking US government officials.

Kurz also warned against an escalation in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Kurz said he did not accept the Russian side's statement that troop movements along the Ukrainian border were a normal exercise. — dpa

## Salvini sent to trial on migrant kidnapping charge

**PALERMO, Italy:** Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing League party, must stand trial on charges of kidnapping over his decision to prevent more than 100 migrants from landing in the country in 2019, an Italian judge ordered on Saturday.

Salvini, who was interior minister at that time, left the migrants stranded at sea until prosecutors ordered the seizure of the ship and the evacuation of the people on board. The trial will begin in the Sicilian capital of Palermo on September 15.

Salvini, who has built much of his political fortune on an anti-immigration campaign, could face up to 15 years in prison if found guilty at the end of a tortuous, three-stage judicial process. A definitive conviction could



Matteo Salvini

bar him from government office. "I am going to trial with my head held high, in your name as well as mine. Italy first, always," Salvini tweeted immediately after the

ruling. "Defending our country is a citizen's sacred duty... that is what I am being tried for." During his 14 months as interior minister, Salvini stopped several boats from docking in Italy in an effort to halt migrant flows, and regularly accused the charities that operated them of effectively encouraging people smuggling. He withdrew the League from the coalition government in the summer of 2019 in a failed bid to trigger an election when his party was riding high in the polls. The League, now part of Mario Draghi's two-month-old national unity government, has lost more than 10 points of voter support but remains the most popular party in Italy on about 23 per cent, according to most opinion polls. — Reuters

# Iran sees 'new understanding' at Vienna nuclear talks

**DUBAI:** Iran's chief negotiator at nuclear talks in Vienna said on Saturday an understanding was emerging at the negotiations but that "serious disagreements" remained, according to Iranian state media.

"A new understanding appears to be emerging and there is a common ground between the parties on the ultimate goal," Abbas Araqchi told state media. "But the path ahead is not an easy one and there are some serious disagreements."

Earlier in the day, China's envoy to the negotiations said they will continue and all remaining parts to the accord had agreed

**Negotiators are working on steps both sides must take, on sanctions and N-activities, to return to full compliance**

to accelerate work on issues including which sanctions the United States would lift.

Meanwhile, talks aimed at salvaging the Iran nuclear deal will continue and all remaining parties to the accord have agreed to accelerate work on issues including which sanctions the United States would lift, China's



European External Action Service Deputy Secretary-General Enrique Mora and Iranian Deputy at Ministry of Foreign Affairs Abbas Araqchi at meeting of the JCPOA Joint Commission in Vienna. — Reuters

envoy to the negotiations said on Saturday.

The second round of talks began on Thursday in the basement of a luxury hotel in Vienna. The United States is not present as Iran has declined face-to-face negotiation, but European Union officials chairing the talks are carrying out shuttle diplomacy with a US delegation based at another hotel across the road.

Iran has breached many of the deal's restrictions on its nuclear activities in response to the US withdrawal and reimposition of sanctions against Tehran under president Donald Trump. Negotiators are working on steps

both sides must take, on sanctions and nuclear activities, to return to full compliance.

"All parties have agreed to further pick up their pace in subsequent days by engaging (in) more extensive, substantive work on sanctions-lifting as well as other relevant issues," China's ambassador to the UN nuclear watchdog, Wang Qun, told reporters after a meeting of the remaining parties to the 2015 deal.

Iran has responded by saying it is enriching uranium to 60 per cent fissile purity, a big step towards weapons-grade from the 20 per cent it had previously achieved. — Reuters

### SHORT TAKES

#### MOSCOW

##### Celebrities demand medical help for Navalny

More than 70 celebrities from around the world have written an open letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin demanding medical treatment for dissident Alexei Navalny, who is being held in a prison camp.

Referring to his illness, it says: "As a Russian citizen, he has the lawful right to be examined and treated by a doctor of his choice." The appeal was printed in several European publications, including *The Economist* in English. Navalny was in a critical



condition, the letter to Putin said. "We call on you, Mr President, to ensure that Alexei Navalny is immediately given the medical treatment and care he urgently requires- and is entitled to under Russian law. — dpa

#### KAZAKHSTAN

##### 3 space station crew members land safely

After months on the International Space Station (ISS), three crew members have returned safely to Earth. The Soyuz capsule carrying cosmonauts Sergey Kud-Sverchkov and Sergey Ryzhikov and Nasa astronaut Kate Rubins landed in the steppes of Kazakhstan on Saturday, live images from the Russian space agency Roscosmos showed.

"The crew is feeling good. Welcome to Earth!" wrote Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin on Twitter.



The capsule could be seen first appearing as a tiny dot in the sky. For the last few kilometres, it descended with a huge parachute before hitting the ground. Once on the ground, helicopters circled with rescue teams on board.

#### TRIPOLI

##### Libya launches public vaccination drive

Libya launched its coronavirus vaccination campaign for the general population in Tripoli, with the elderly and healthcare workers given priority in the conflict-hit North African nation. Those over 70 would get the AstraZeneca jab while the Russian Sputnik V vaccine would be administered to medical personnel and those aged 50-60, the National Centre for Disease Control said.

NCDC head Badreddine al



Najjar said the vaccines would be distributed across Libya "in the coming days", adding that China's Sinovac jab would also be available. Libya has so far received 400,000 doses, including 200,000 Sputnik V shots, . — AFP

# No problem... a trivial throwaway line, or something else?

An African proverb reads, “If you’re not part of the solution, you are part of the problem”, Linus Torvalds wrote, “No problem is so big it can’t be run away from”, and French philosopher Frances-Marie Arouet, more popularly known as Voltaire, wrote, “No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking.”

Thus, from such global diversity, we freely acknowledge that we, the world, all of us, have problems! Of course, it is mannerly, and often gentlemanly, to make light of problems, and the French idiom, “pas de probleme”, has been a typically French enlightenment of a required task, as one wit put it, “It is a dance, suggesting that while your imposition was important, maybe challenging, and maybe difficult, I have happily done it for you, understanding that one day, I will require the same from you.” So, while it had throwaway connotations, it was anything but!

Beatles peacenik John Lennon was to utter, and achieve immortality, if not already through his music, through his oft used quotation, “There are no problems, only solutions”, a quotable quote, glib and almost dismissive of the issues that face us all, from a personal level to global. Just think about it, you have rent to pay, but you have not been paid by your employer for three months, your landlord’s goodwill can only stretch so far before his bank



Ray Petersen  
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“NO PROBLEM” HAS NOW, APPARENTLY, MANIFESTED ITSELF WITHIN THE POPULAR VERNACULAR OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE NOT ONLY AS AN ACCEPTABLE RESPONSE TO SAYING, “THANK YOU”, BUT AS A RESPONSE TO A REQUEST

requires his money. Problem! Globally, conflict between two countries, a war can rarely be stopped by asking them both to stop! Problem!

The Spanish too have a similar phrase in “De Nada”, interpreted as, “it’s nothing”, yet it has an inherent lightness about it, and manifests itself simply as a well-mannered response to “Gracia”, in the same way as the appropriate response to “Shukran”, is “Afwan”, meant, sincere, yet with no undertone of responsibility.

This “No problem.” This simplest of responses, this dismissal of sometimes inconvenient circumstances, challenging events, and absolute disasters, this watershed of irresponsibility, has now, apparently, manifested itself within the popular vernacular of the English language not only as an acceptable response to saying, “Thank you”, but as a response to a request.

I like the thoughts of a diner who ordered a bottle of Californian Red with his steak, to which his server replied, “No problem.”

The diner immediately responded, “Why would it be a problem?” To which the abashed waiter had no response. From another perspective, go to any coffee shop, and order an Americano, and when the waiter brings it you say, “Thank you”, and the waiter replies, “No problem.” Of course, there is no

problem... if you pay. But try leaving without paying...

As Merriam’s Dictionary explains, “Think nothing of it”, “It’s nothing”, “Forget it”, “No sweat”, “No worries”, have been superseded by the millennial’s use of “No problem”, an innocuous yet irritating idiom. Maybe it is the lack of gravity, purpose, or sincerity, or maybe I am just getting old, and realistically, with the pandemic, ironically ‘a problem’, getting grumpy due to my continued isolation. No! It is that, if something in our lives has become a problem, and is beyond our ability to resolve it, like Covid-19 for instance... the question must be asked... Who are you that has the arrogance and temerity to trivialize it?

Media commentator Judith Humphrey listed the phrase as one that can diminish your credibility. “At a level just beneath consciousness awareness, it telegraphs an underhanded resentment”, she writes.

“It implies the possibility that somebody has created an issue that they’re willing to let slide.” Are you willing to let all you have worked for, all that you have... slide?

We did not create the pandemic, but through our arrogance, our conceit, our ignorance, and our hubris, we are perpetuating this life-affecting pandemic. Don’t just... let it slide!

## WRITE FOR US

*Oman Daily Observer* welcomes original contributions for publication in its opinion page. The newspaper reserves the right to publish or edit the article accordingly. The article’s length must not exceed 550 words. Please send the articles to [opinion@omanobserver.om](mailto:opinion@omanobserver.om)

## EASY TO CHEAT

# The reality of remote learning

VASSILIS KYRIAKOULIS

Shuttered for over a year because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Greek universities are now grappling with a surge in online exam cheating giving rise to a new reality: the “corona degree”.

Both professors and students candidly admit that examination safeguards are practically impossible to enforce in a remote-learning environment with hundreds of participants simultaneously online.

“In jest, we call the degrees to be awarded this season ‘corona degrees’”, says John Mylopoulos, a professor of environmental engineering and

former rector of Thessaloniki’s Aristotelio University.

“Remote learning is supposed to be a supplementary education tool. When it completely subsumes teaching, problems begin”, he said.

Sofia, a 20-year-old psychology

student at Aristotelio, says that “last summer, I took two exams on behalf of two of my friends and nobody realised.”

“I logged in using their computers and personal registration codes. There was no requirement for an open camera during the exam. My two friends received a nearly perfect score without opening a book,” she said.

Many professors have been surprised to see even long-term students who haven’t set foot in a university campus for years scoring high results.

“Result averages are up, and people we haven’t seen in years are showing up for exams because the system makes it easy to cheat”, says Kostas Kosmatos, an assistant professor of criminology at Thrace’s Democritus University.

Kosmatos notes that only an open-camera examination can help restore transparency to the procedure.

Angela Kastrinaki, dean of the University of Crete’s literature department, says it is easy for students to Google exam answers even under the eye of supervisors on camera.

“We get paraphrased Wikipedia answers,” she notes. Some of her students even enlisted a respected specialist in linguistic history to help crack an exam question that was not available online.

“But even he got a verse wrong, so I got 50 papers with the same mistake. It was funny,” says Kastrinaki. Overall, she found 100 students had employed some form of cheating that day.

Natassa, a 20-year-old student at the University of Ioannina, recalls that one of her friends gave 100 euros (\$120) to a teacher to sit her mathematics exam for her.

“In the end, she did not get a particularly good grade,” she laughs. — AFP

## GERMAN ELECTIONS

# Scrum for Merkel job opens wounds

KIT HOLDEN

A bruising internal struggle to succeed Chancellor Angela Merkel has left Germany’s once stable ruling conservatives in disarray and on the brink of implosion less than six months ahead of elections in September.

The fight between long-time Merkel-ally Armin Laschet and his more popular Bavarian rival Markus Soeder threatens to further destabilise the once dominant CDU/CSU alliance, whose poll ratings have plummeted in recent months.

Elected head of Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union in January, Laschet would usually be the first choice to lead both the CDU and its Bavarian sister party CSU into September’s general election.

Yet his claim to be chancellor candidate has been bitterly contested by CSU leader Soeder, who currently commands more support from both the public and conservative lawmakers.

The scrap for Merkel’s throne has opened up historic wounds between the two parties and could even loosen their 16-year grip on the chancellery.

With the clock ticking down to September 26 elections, the bitter divisions poisoning the conservatives spell a rocky campaign ahead for a post-Merkel era.

It also leaves them exposed, with the internal squabbles sapping attention at a time when Europe’s biggest economy is struggling to end a raging pandemic that has killed 80,000



German Chancellor Angela Merkel leaves the plenary hall during a session of the Bundestag on Saturday in Berlin. — AFP

THE SCRAP FOR MERKEL’S THRONE HAS OPENED UP HISTORIC WOUNDS BETWEEN THE TWO PARTIES AND COULD EVEN LOOSEN THEIR 16-YEAR GRIP ON THE CHANCELLERY

and ravaged thousands of businesses and livelihoods.

## HISTORIC SQUABBLES

“The CDU/CSU has not seen a showdown like this for more than 40 years!” wrote *Bild* newspaper after Soeder and Laschet exchanged verbal blows in a meeting with conservative MPs.

Yet it is by no means the first time that the CDU and CSU have been at odds over who should take the top job.

In 1980, CSU leader Franz-Josef Strauss was nominated ahead of CDU

candidate Ernst Albrecht and his then unpopular party leader Helmut Kohl.

In 2002, meanwhile, the newly appointed CDU chair Angela Merkel stepped back to allow Bavarian rival Edmund Stoiber to run.

In both cases, the CSU candidate was widely seen as a more charismatic and voter-friendly option, before being ultimately beaten in the polls by the incumbent social-democrats.

Both Kohl and Merkel then defied their critics at the next elections, going on to become Germany’s longest-serving chancellors. — AFP

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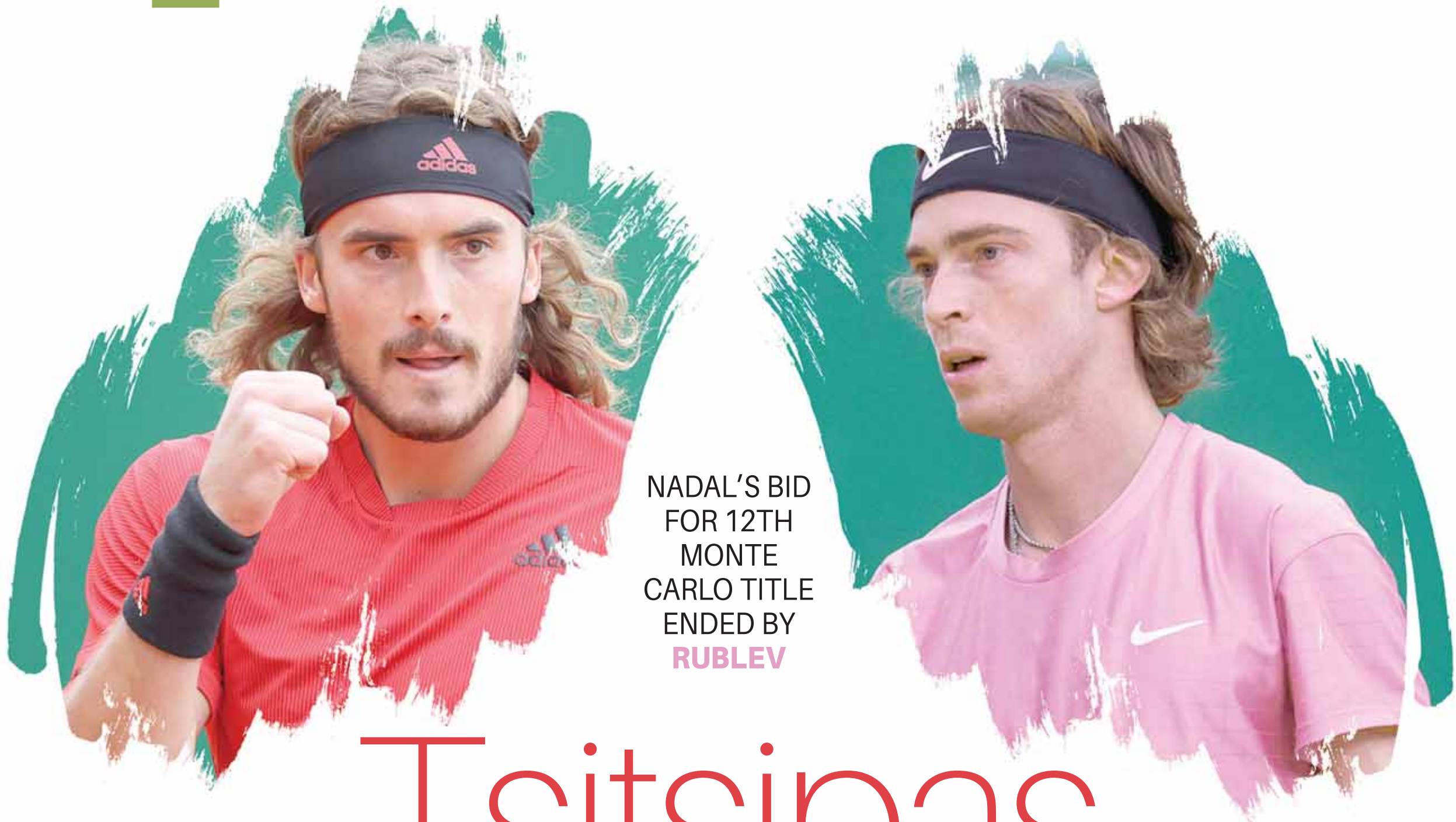
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# sport



NADAL'S BID  
FOR 12TH  
MONTE  
CARLO TITLE  
ENDED BY  
RUBLEV

# Tsitsipas crushes Evans to reach final

**MONACO:** Stefanos Tsitsipas defeated Dan Evans 6-2, 6-1 in the semifinals of the Monte Carlo Masters on Saturday and will face Andrey Rublev or Casper Ruud for the title.

Fourth seed Tsitsipas needed just over an hour to dispatch Britain's Evans, who knocked out world number one Novak Djokovic in the last 16.

Tsitsipas has yet to drop a set in Monte Carlo this week and is through to his third Masters 1000 final. He finished runner-up in Canada in 2018 and Madrid the following year.

Rublev and Ruud meet in the second semifinal later on Saturday. Rublev ended Rafael Nadal's bid for a 12th Monte Carlo title in the quarterfinals, while the unseeded Ruud eliminated 2019 champion Fabio Fognini.

Rublev swept to a 6-2, 4-6, 6-2 quarterfinal win on Friday with the great Spaniard admitting his serve was "a disaster".

Nadal, bidding to reach the semifinals of a Masters for the 75th time, followed world number one Novak Djokovic, who was beaten in the third round, out of the tournament.

"Today was one of those days that my serve was a disaster," said world number three Nadal.

"It's always sad to lose here. I missed an opportunity to start the clay court season in the right way. But that's it. It's not the moment to complain.

"The only thing that I can do is go to Barcelona (where he plays next week) and keep practicing, try to fix the things that didn't work well."

Despite Friday's setback, 34-year-old Nadal will still be favourite to capture a 13th Roland Garros title in June and record-setting 21st major.

"For Rafa, it must be incredibly difficult to play with this pressure of always having to win," said Rublev who also made the Miami Masters semifinals at the start of April.

"I'm shocked to see the level which he can reach despite this pressure. It's much easier to play when you have nothing to lose."

It was only the second time in 16 appearances in Monte

“It’s always sad to lose here. I missed an opportunity to start the clay court season in the right way. But that’s it. It’s not the moment to complain

RAFAEL NADAL  
World No 3

Carlo that Nadal had failed to make the semifinals.

Rublev is no stranger to taking out the big names — back in 2019, he stunned Roger Federer at Cincinnati in just 62 minutes. On Friday, the 23-year-old won the first set in 38 minutes but Nadal then pocketed the last four games of the 73-minute second set to level the contest.

**RUBLEV ‘DESERVED IT’**

In the decider, Rublev held his nerve, breaking the Spaniard three times on his way to a famous win, his first in

three meetings with Nadal.

"He played well, he deserved it more than me," added Nadal.

"But you can't expect win against a player like him losing my serve I don't know how many times — six, seven times? It's too much."

Tsitsipas advanced to the last-four when Alejandro Davidovich withdrew after losing the first set 7-5.

Evans battled past Belgian David Goffin 5-7, 6-3, 6-4.

Struggling with an injury to his left thigh, Spaniard Davidovich tried an underarm serve when facing set point.

Tsitsipas pounced to hit a winning backhand return with his opponent quitting after dropping the opener 7-5.

"I noticed he was hurt. His leg was hurting. But I didn't want to think about it, I tried to pretend he wasn't injured and keep playing as I was doing," said Tsitsipas. Evans edged Goffin after the Belgian made 47 unforced errors, including a final forehand on match point, to win. "I played good today. I felt a bit more pressure to not just win yesterday and give a bad performance today," said Evans, 30.

Unseeded Ruud won 6-4, 6-3 against 15th seeded Fognini, making the last four in Monte Carlo 24 years after his father Christian had reached the quarterfinals.

Rublev holds a 3-0 record against Ruud, which includes back-to-back clay-court wins at Hamburg in 2019 and 2020.

"I've gained good confidence from this week and I've beaten good players," Ruud said.

— AFP



### Rogers Cup to go ahead amid cancellations

Tennis Canada cancelled six Challenger events on Friday due to Covid-19 but said this year's Rogers Cup in Montreal and Toronto would go ahead as scheduled in August. Challenger events in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Granby, Vancouver, Calgary and Fredericton had all been scrapped due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



### Britain, Ukraine and Italy take 2-0 lead

Katie Boulter and Heather Watson won with near-identical scorelines to give Britain a 2-0 lead in their Billie Jean King Cup play-off against Mexico on Friday while Ukraine and Italy also chalked up victories. Boulter and Watson took control of the tie in Roehampton after injury to top-ranked Johanna Konta.

# Pakistan complete four-series sweep against SA

**CENTURION, South Africa:** Pakistan completed a clean sweep of four trophies in four series against South Africa but had anxious moments before scrambling to a three-wicket win with one ball to spare in the fourth and final Twenty20 international at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Friday.

"It is a big moment for Pakistan. It is not easy winning matches in South Africa", captain Babar Azam said through an interpreter at the post-match presentation.

Pakistan, who earlier in the season defeated South Africa in Tests and T20 internationals in Pakistan, followed up a 2-1 one-day series win with a 3-1 victory in the T20s to round off a successful tour. Medium-pace bowler Faheem Ashraf set up what seemed likely to be an easy win for Pakistan when he took three for 17 as South Africa were bowled out for 144 on what is usually a high-scoring ground.

Pakistan were cruising at 92 for one in the tenth over as Babar and Fakhar Zaman shared an impressive second-wicket partnership after Mohammad Rizwan was stumped in the first over. But Fakhar, who hit five fours and four sixes in a 34-ball 60, went for one big hit too many and sliced a high catch to backward point. Babar, who was named man of the series, was caught at wide third man for 24 three balls later and Pakistan found themselves in a collapse in which six wickets fell for 37 runs.

Two no-balls in the penultimate



Pakistan players and support staff celebrate their series victory after the fourth Twenty20 international match against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion. — AFP

over by Sisanda Magala proved disastrous for the hosts, with the second resultant free hit being slammed for six by Mohammad Nawaz.

However, it still went down to the fifth ball of the over before Nawaz clinched victory with another six, off Lizaad Williams.

South Africa, with five key players released to the Indian Premier League and without appointed captain Temba Bavuma because of injury, batted poorly but clawed their way back into the game despite bowling four no-balls and seven wides.

"I am disappointed but we have young cricketers with great

It is a big moment for Pakistan. It is not easy winning matches in South Africa

**BABAR AZAM**  
Pakistan captain

talent and I am proud of them", said stand-in captain Heinrich Klaasen. "We showed we can fight and compete as a young group but we need to get more consistency in our performances."

Faheem earlier started a South African collapse similar to that which later afflicted Pakistan.

South Africa had reached 73 for one after the early loss of Aiden Markram when Faheem had Janneman Malan caught at mid-off for 33 in the ninth over.

He followed up with the wickets of Klaasen and George Linde. He bowled his four overs in succession and did not concede a boundary.

"My brief was clear from the captain but the tone was set by the new ball bowlers", he said.

Fast bowlers Hasan Ali and Haris Rauf took three for 40 and two for 18 respectively. — AFP

## Abbas takes six with hat-trick in county match

**LONDON:** Pakistan paceman Mohammad Abbas took six wickets for just 11 runs, including a hat-trick, on Friday to leave Hampshire on course for victory over Middlesex in England's County Championship.

After Hampshire had made 319 in their first innings on the second day of four at Southampton, it was not long before new-ball bowler Abbas struck on his way to remarkable figures of 6-11 in 11 overs as Middlesex slumped to 79 all out.

"It's a great day for me", Abbas told BBC Radio Solent after stumps.

"I took two wickets and before I bowled for my third wicket I realised Ramadhan is going on and that is lucky for us and Friday is a day that is lucky for me."

Hampshire captain James Vince opted against enforcing the follow-on and at stumps the hosts were 204-2 in their second innings — a huge lead of 444 runs, with Ian Holland 90 not out and Sam Northeast unbeaten on 99.

Abbas, renowned for being especially accurate in the kind of early season conditions in England that often aid seam bowling, struck twice in two balls in his first over to dismiss Max Holden and Nick Gubbins.

The 31-year-old then completed his maiden first-class hat-trick with the first delivery of his second over when Middlesex captain Steve Eskinazi fell for a duck edging to wicketkeeper Lewis McManus.

Abbas then had both Robbie White and Martin Andersson lbw for nought apiece. — AFP



# Dhoni wins 200th game for Chennai Super Kings

**MUMBAI:** MS Dhoni marked his 200th game for Chennai Super Kings on Friday with a crushing six wicket Indian Premier League win over Punjab Kings.

Moeen Ali hit 46 off 31 balls as Chennai reached 107 for four to secure their first win of the season with 26 balls to spare.

Victory was crucial in relieving pressure on the 39-year-old Dhoni, whose side failed to reach the IPL play offs for the first time last year.

They lost their first game of the season against Delhi Capitals.

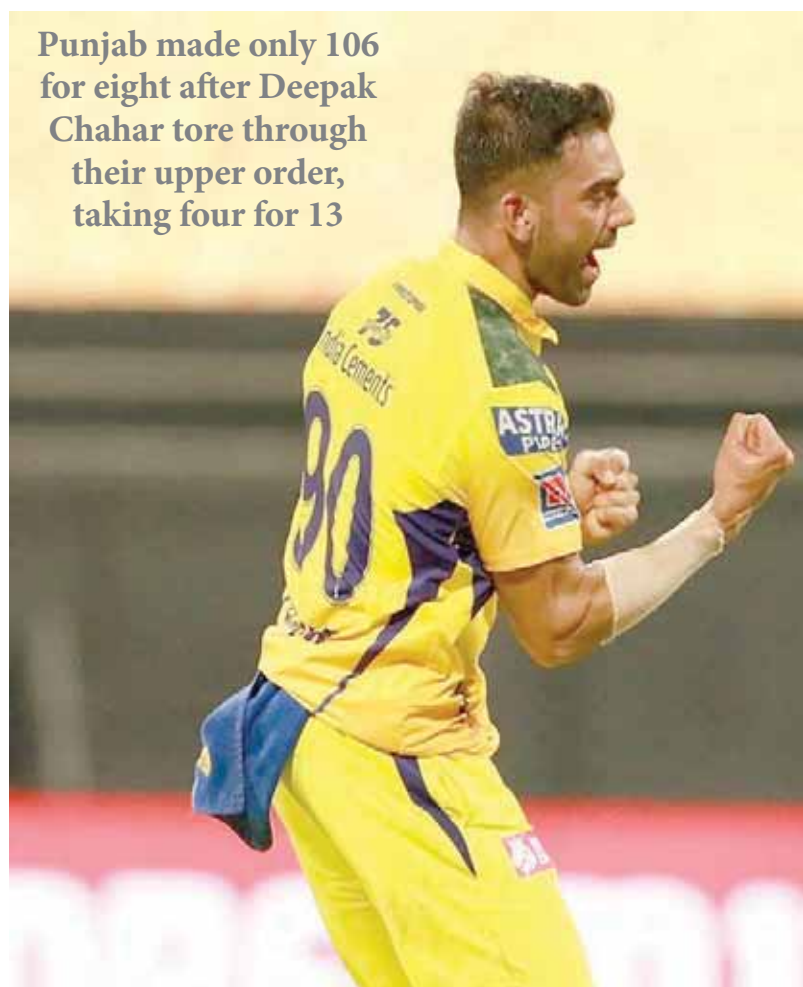
"It makes me feel very old", joked Dhoni of his landmark game. "It has been a very long journey, I started in 2008."

Chennai have won three titles under the former India captain but have seen the IPL dominated by arch-rivals Mumbai Indians in recent years and are seeking to rebuild.

This victory put them among six teams in the eight team Twenty20 league with one victory from two games and Dhoni knows they will need more consistency to add to their titles.

Punjab made only 106 for eight after Deepak Chahar tore through

Punjab made only 106 for eight after Deepak Chahar tore through their upper order, taking four for 13



their upper order, taking four for 13. Punjab were struggling at 26 for five at one stage after being put in to bat by Dhoni in Mumbai.

Chahar bowled Mayank

Agarwal with the fourth ball of the innings and quickly added Chris Gayle, caught by a diving Ravindra Jadeja, Nicholas Pooran, caught by Shardul Thakur, and

Deepak Hooda, snared by Faf du Plessis.

Punjab then relied on Shahrulkh Khan who hit two sixes and four fours in his 36 ball 47 before Jadeja caught him off Sam Curran.

Chennai's batsmen strolled to victory, the only blip coming when India fast bowler Mohammed Shami claimed Suresh Raina and Ambati Rayadu with successive balls in the 15th over.

By that time Moeen, batting at three, had already put Chennai well on course with seven fours and a six before Khan caught him going for another boundary off Murugan Ashwin.

"We were obviously disappointed with the result after the last game, but It was a great end for us tonight", said Moeen.

"I'm just really enjoying the environment and my role in the team. I really enjoy batting in the top three, it's a chance to make an impact", added the England all-rounder. — AFP

**Brief scores:** Chennai Super Kings 107/4 (Moeen Ali 46, Faf du Plessis 36 not out; Mohammad Shami 2/21) beat Punjab Kings 106/8 (Shahrulkh Khan 47, Jhye Richardson 15; Deepak Chahar 4/13) by 6 wickets.

## Chahar masterclass lights up Chennai win

**MUMBAI:** Chennai Super Kings skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni's 200th appearance for the franchise merited celebration and Deepak Chahar duly provided it with a bowling masterclass against Punjab Kings. Chahar claimed 4-13 to mow down Punjab's top order.

In what is considered a batting-friendly format, Chahar sent down 18 dot balls to strangle Punjab, who could never recover after being reduced to 26-5 in the seventh over. "Over the years, he has matured into a death bowler too but he's somebody who gets more purchase than other bowlers", Dhoni said, explaining his decision to bowl out Chahar's four overs in one go. "If you're looking to attack, why not finish his first four overs?"

Chahar drew first blood

with an excellent outswinger that angled past Punjab opener Mayank Agarwal's tentative bat to hit the top of the off stump.

"It was a dream ball for any fast bowler, pitching on the middle stump and hitting top of the off", Chahar said after collecting player-of-the-match award. "It was a coach's delight, every coach tells you to hit the top of the off stump."

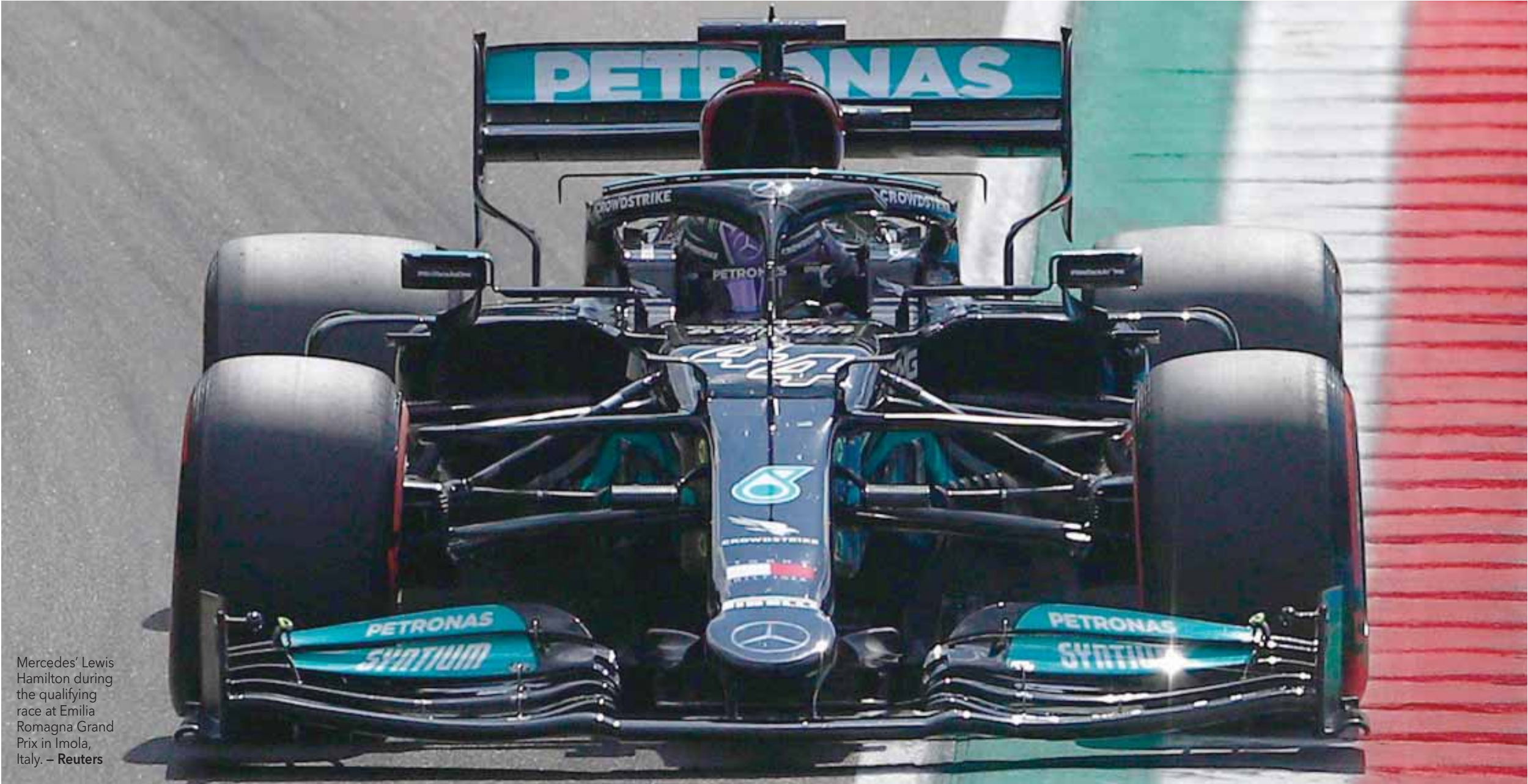
The 28-year-old thanked Dhoni for keeping faith in his ability and said he relished his new ball duty which allowed him to set the tone for the match.

Chahar was also happy how he strangled Punjab's batting with three overs' worth of dot balls, including the wickets.

"Wickets in T20s are very rare, so my plan is to bowl dot balls in powerplays and create pressure", he said. — Reuters

# Hamilton sees off Red Bulls to seize 99th pole

■Red Bull second and third ■Perez qualifies ahead of Verstappen ■Tsunoda crashes in phase one



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton during the qualifying race at Emilia Romagna Grand Prix in Imola, Italy. – Reuters

**IMOLA, Italy:** Lewis Hamilton put Mercedes on pole position for the Emilia Romagna Grand Prix at Imola on Saturday with Red Bull's Sergio Perez joining the seven-time Formula One world champion on the front row.

Perez's Dutch team-mate Max Verstappen qualified third, ending his bid for three poles in a row, with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc a strong fourth on a home track for the Italian team.

The pole was a record-extending 99th of Hamilton's extraordinary career, and it was one the 36-year-old Briton had to work for against resurgent rivals, with Mexican Perez only 0.035 slower.

"I definitely didn't expect us to be ahead of two Red Bulls," said Hamilton, who won the season-opener in Bahrain last month

after Verstappen started on pole.

"I think they have been so quick this weekend, there were times when they were six-tenths ahead.

"I came around the last corner and heard I'd got the pole and I was super grateful."

Hamilton produced the pole time of one minute 14.411 seconds with his first flying lap of the final session.

Perez, who will be making his first front row start, was signed to put more pressure on Mercedes than Verstappen's previous team-mates had managed, and he delivered in only his second race for Red Bull.

He still felt he could have done better, however.

"I've been improving, P2, but I should've been on pole and I did a mistake on the final corner," said Perez, a first time winner



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton celebrates after qualifying in pole position at Emilia Romagna Grand Prix in Imola, Italy. – Reuters

with Racing Point (now Aston Martin) in Bahrain last year.

It was the first time Verstappen had been outqualified by a team-mate in regular conditions since Australian Daniel Ricciardo was alongside at Red Bull in 2018.

"You can't be good every time, so we'll see what went wrong," said the Dutch driver. "It's still P3, which is a good starting position."

AlphaTauri's Pierre Gasly qualified fifth with Ricciardo sixth for McLaren and team-mate Lando Norris seventh.

Norris would have been on the front row had his fastest lap not been deleted for exceeding track limits.

Spaniard Carlos Sainz, in his first race in Italy with Ferrari, failed to make it through to the final shootout and starts 11th.

Both Williams drivers

reached the second phase for the first time since last July, with George Russell still sounding disappointed with 12th despite being ahead of former champions Sebastian Vettel and Fernando Alonso.

Four-time champion Vettel will line up 13th for Aston Martin and Alonso, a winner at Imola with Renault in 2005 on his way to the first of two titles, 15th for Alpine.

Japanese rookie Yuki Tsunoda was the big casualty of the first session, losing control at the Variante Alta and smashing his AlphaTauri backwards into the tyre wall.

"For me that was a huge mistake and I feel really sorry for the team," he said, with the session red-flagged as the badly damaged car was removed from the track. — Reuters

# Willock late strike dents West Ham's top four hopes

**NEWCASTLE:** Newcastle moved closer to Premier League survival after Joe Willock's late goal capped a thrilling 3-2 win against 10-man West Ham that dented the visitors' bid for a top four finish in the Premier League.

Steve Bruce's side had squandered a two-goal lead in the closing stages at St James' Park, but Willock came off the bench to snatch a priceless winner.

Newcastle are nine points clear of the relegation zone with just six games remaining in a turbulent season on Tyneside.

The Magpies had taken control in the first half thanks to Issa Diop's own goal and a blunder from West Ham keeper Lukasz Fabianski for Joelinton's strike.

West Ham defender Craig Dawson was sent off for two bookings in between those goals.

But the Hammers set up a tense finale when Diop got one back before Jesse Lingard equalised with a penalty 10 minutes from full-time.

On-loan Arsenal midfielder Willock settled a pulsating encounter with his thunderous header, putting Newcastle in position to avoid relegation.

Staying up would be an impressive achievement for Bruce, who has battled with dressing room rifts and distracting takeover talk.

The defeat was a big blow for West Ham as they chase an unexpected place in next season's Champions League.

David Moyes' side remain fourth, but Chelsea are just one point behind with a game in hand, while fifth-placed Liverpool would go above the Hammers if



Newcastle United's Joe Willock celebrates scoring their third goal with team-mates. – Reuters

they beat Leeds on Monday.

Newcastle made a bright start as Jacob Murphy's 25-yard effort brought Fabianski into action.

Allan Saint-Maximin tested Fabianski after carving through the West Ham defence in typically flamboyant fashion.

Newcastle took the lead in the 36th minute when Dawson, in his attempts to recover from a heavy touch, felled Joelinton on halfway.

He could only look on as Saint-Maximin sped away, twisted his way past the retreating Mark Noble and then saw his weak shot bundled over the line by Diop as referee Kevin Friend allowed play to continue.

Dawson's misery was compounded when, having already been booked for a 12th-minute foul on the Brazilian, he

received a second yellow card.

Joelinton, who had previously scored only two Premier League goals this season, was gifted his third by Fabianski when he spilled Matt Ritchie's 41st-minute corner, leaving the Brazilian striker with a tap-in that he couldn't miss.

However, Diop headed the Hammers back into it with 17 minutes remaining.

West Ham draw level when, after a VAR check, Ciaran Clark was penalised for handball and on-loan Manchester United midfielder Lingard struck from the spot for his ninth goal in 10 games. But there was a sting in the tale as Willock, who had only been on the pitch for seconds, thumped his header past Fabianski from Ritchie's cross in the 83rd minute. — AFP



# ramadhan

## The hidden burial ground in a cove in Sidab

Have you heard of the Sheikh Jaber Cove in Sidab? It is now becoming a favourite amongst the country's hiking enthusiasts not only because it is right at the capital but also because of its challenging trail and panoramic landscape. But besides its beautiful exterior, the cove is also home to a burial ground with a very interesting story... **P16**



### QURAN

#### VERSE OF THE DAY

On that day, you will see the sinners bound together in chains, their garments made of tar, and the Fire covering their faces.

Ibrahim 49-50

### FATWA



HIS EMINENCE  
SHAIKH AHMED  
BIN HAMAD AL KHALILI  
GRAND MUFTI OF OMAN

#### QUESTION:

Someone overslept at some of Ramadhan's nights and missed Al Isha prayer. He woke up after the sun rise but found himself junub, what should he do?

#### ANSWER:

He should perform ghusul (washing) from janabah. Then, he should pray Al Isha and Al fajr prayers even after the sun rise. Probably, it is OK if he doesn't make up that day as it happened unintentionally.

### HADITH

#### A GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Abu Hurairah narrated that:

the Prophet said: "Whoever does not leave false speech, and acting according to it, then Allah is not in any need of him leaving his food and his drink."



# Italian piano maker sees craft threatened with extinction

At the age of 23, Luigi Borgato decided to build his first piano, for himself.

In the decades that ensued, the Italian craftsman grew his business into a prestigious brand capable of attracting buyers from all over the world – until the coronavirus pandemic abruptly put a halt to it all.

Now, the 58-year-old fears his ancient trade could disappear entirely in Italy, the country that invented the pianoforte at the end of the 17th century.

“Everything stopped, there are no more concerts, no more contacts with musicians. Without government assistance, our profession may not make it to the end of the pandemic,” Borgato said.

Inside his home in Borgo Veneto, near Padua in northern Italy, everything breathes classical music – a bust of Verdi and a portrait of Beethoven hold court along with concert posters from such storied opera houses as La Scala in Milan.

At the back of the room sits the Doppio Borgato, an imposing assembly of two grand pianos on top of each other, with 37 pedals.

Halfway between an organ and a piano, the concept was borrowed from Mozart who had a pedal piano built in 1785.

When Borgato starts to play a Chopin prelude, he modestly smiles, murmuring that he should “study a little more”.

Nearby sits the latest addition to Borgato’s collection, introduced in 2017 by its inventor as “the longest concert piano in the world”, at 3.33 metres (10.9 feet), about 50 centimetres longer than the standard.

Borgato and his wife Paola, who is in charge of each instrument’s mechanics, build a maximum of two pianos per year, aided by a single employee.

**- HANDCRAFTED -**

“There is no one else in Italy, or even in the world making concert pianos by hand like we do,” said Borgato.

“But with the pandemic, people are thinking twice about investing in a piano.”

The price of a Borgato ranges from 291,000-486,000 euros (\$346,114-\$578,083) excluding tax, depending on the model, each of which represents



more than 1,850 hours of work.

Buyers are mostly from abroad, from Switzerland, France, Germany, Austria but also China, and are generally piano players – although some invest in the instrument as a work of art.

Paola, 55, acknowledged the difficulty of saying goodbye to the handcrafted pianos.

“There is always a beautiful part of our life in each instrument that leaves,” she said.

Her husband lamented that Italy does not adequately recognise the craft of piano making, despite it being the country where Padua’s Bartolomeo Cristofori invented the piano’s ancestor, the pianoforte, in 1698.

Throughout Europe, small piano factories have gradually disappeared in favour of large companies, which in turn have been swallowed up by Asian giants.

Austrian manufacturer Boesendorfer, for example, has been owned by Japan’s Yamaha since 2008, while Germany’s Schimmel sold a majority stake to China’s Pearl River in 2016.

**‘A GREAT ACTOR WHISPERING’**

In his workshop, Borgato meticulously takes measurements, then cuts, moulds and glues each part, from the soundboard in red spruce to the hammer heads covered with merino wool felt – at least 15,000 for a grand piano.

After starting his career as a tuner in 1983, he and his wife travelled the world

to visit museums of musical instruments and study the history of the piano.

In 1985, driving an old Renault 4L, Borgato went to Berlin to visit his first piano factory, that of Bechstein.

It was also in Germany that he drew inspiration for his first piano, after visiting the house in Bonn where Ludwig van Beethoven was born in 1770.

Following the example of the German composer’s last instrument, he created a piano with four strings for the high notes instead of three, an idea he patented.

In 1991, the French virtuoso Jean Guillou, who died two years ago, inaugurated this piano in the Church of Saint-Eustache in Paris, referring to its “young genius piano maker”.

Since then, famous pianists such as Radu Lupu, Vladimir Ashkenazy or Jerome Rose have given recitals on Borgato pianos.

If the concerts have stopped due to coronavirus, the professional recordings continue.

During the lockdown last year, Italian pianist Francesco Libetta played all 35 sonatas of Beethoven on a Borgato, describing the sound of the 3.33-metre piano as “breathhtakingly beautiful.”

“This piano is gigantic, but the sound that emanates from it is very supple, very nuanced, and allows you to go easily from pianissimo to fortissimo,” Libetta said.

“It’s like a great actor whispering and the back row of the house can hear it perfectly.” — **AFP**

THIRD PART OF A SERIES

## Getting To Know Islam

An in-depth look into the faith of billions

Information sourced from  
The Islamic Information Centre

www.iiicoman.om

### Do you know Allah?

There is no God but Allah

If there is one truth then it can only be reached with the negation of false assumptions. The Muslim starts his or her spiritual journey by the negation of all gods and the affirmation of The Absolute, “there is no god but Allah”. This testimony is the bedrock of belief and therein lies the spiritual and intellectual emancipation of the Muslim heart and mind – A relief from dogmas and misbeliefs. In its essence, the testimony of oneness is liberation from the personal prison of a spiritual quagmire. Nothing is rightfully worshipped except the One and only One God, the Creator and the Sustainer of the entire universe whom Muslims call ALLAH. There is one Creator and everything else is God’s creation. We have a direct bond with the Creator and a common bond with all that he has created.

Timeline of Development in Muslim Civilisation

637 AD

Islam spreads to Persia, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and later to Egypt

### Do you know MUHAMMAD (PBUH) ?

Who was Muhammad?

Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) lived in the early 7th Century. He was born in Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula, a town known as a hub of trade and pilgrimage, visited by people from Yemen in the South and Syria in the North. The people of that time had some good qualities but were also characterised by some extremely unpleasant morals and values that had become norms within their society - in particular with regards to women, orphans, slaves, the poor and vulnerable, and in relation to their religion. Strangely enough, events that took place in the 7th Century Arabia have much to teach us about the events of our time. Muhammad called the prevailing spirit of his time as ‘Jahiliyyah’ or time of ignorance, that is the pre-Islamic Arabia. However, ‘Jahiliyyah’ does not refer to a historical era, rather a state of mind that breeds injustice, corruption, violence and terror: Until the age of forty, Muhammad lived an ordinary life, other than being widely admired for his integrity, honesty, manners and wisdom. He was actually known among his people as the “Truthful” and the “Trustworthy”. He would show an uncommon concern for others, not least towards his family, friends and relations. It was only when he was forty after receiving divine revelation from God that he began his mission to try to change the society around him.



### Do you know the QURAN?

What is Quran?

The word “Quran” came from the Arabic root that gives meanings: “to read” (Quran 17:93) or “to recite.” (Quran 75:18). The Quran also describes itself “a guide for mankind” and “a clear exposition of guidance”, “a distinguisher” (Quran 25:1), “a reminder” (Quran 20:3), “a healer” and “the admonition” (Quran 10:57), “the light” (Quran 71:57, 41:74), “the truth” (Quran 17:81), “an explanation of all things” (Quran 16:89, 17:12, 18:54), “eye-opening evidence” (Quran 45:20), “a convincing proof” (Quran 4:174), “good news” (Quran 27:2), “clear signs of wisdom” (Quran 10:1, 31:2-3), and “the rope of God” (Quran 3:103). Unlike the Jewish and Christian scriptures that were written by people who claimed to have been inspired by God and the scriptures were canonised centuries after they appeared, the Quran was not canonised, because no time elapsed from its revelation to becoming authoritative on the Muslim community. It is self-described as a revelation from God, and it took time only for the revelation (oral) to become scripture (codified). As such, every verse is divine revelation and it is in its original context as no human (not even Muhammad) has ever altered, omitted or added a single letter



### FAQs About Women in Islam

ARE WOMEN ALLOWED PRAYING IN CONGREGATION WITH MEN IN THE MOSQUE?

At the beginning of Islamic era, women participated in public gatherings and in all prayers conducted in the Mosque, as they have always fulfilled all the rites of hajj pilgrimage, then and now. Although women can and do attend congregational prayers in the Mosque, it is optional for them while it is mandatory for men. This is clearly a tender touch of the Islamic teachings to give a woman privilege and practicality when nursing or caring for her children and household. Thus, women are rewarded more for praying in the privacy of their homes, while men are rewarded more for praying with congregation in the Mosque. Muslim congregation prayer involves worshippers standing in rows shoulder-to-shoulder, foot-to-foot. Often, the persons standing next to you could be strangers. The prayer itself involves some compromising postures such as bowing and prostrating. Thus, to maintain focus and concentration, women are preferred to occupy back rows when men and women are fact, the front-most rows carry more reward for male worshippers and the back-most rows carries more reward for female. More recently, Mosques are built with separate section for women to give them more freedom and comfort, but they still follow the Imam from the main prayer hall through public address system.



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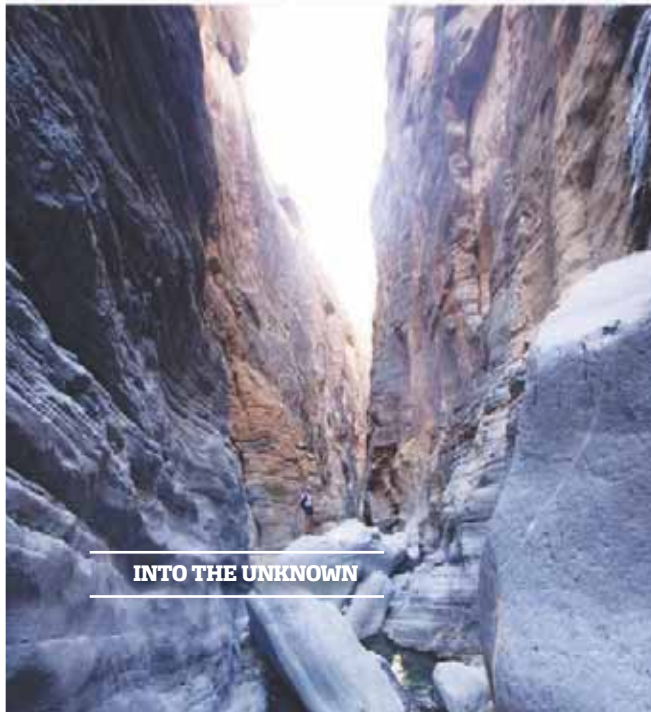
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## ART

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## DISCOVERY

# Listen to the music of a spider's web. Tell me what do you hear?



**IT IS AN** eerie, foreboding, reverberating tune, enough to send a tingle down your spine.

This is what a spider-web sounds like.

From communication to construction, spider-webs may offer an orchestra of information, says Markus Buehler, engineering professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has been using artificial intelligence to study them.

"Spiders utilise vibrations as a way to communicate with the environment, with other spiders," he said. "We have recorded these vibrations from spiders and used artificial intelligence to learn these vibrational patterns and associate them with certain actions, basically learning the spider's language."

Buehler and his team of researchers created 3D models of spiderwebs when the arachnids were doing different things - such as construction, repair, hunting and feeding. They then listened for patterns in the spider signals and recreated the sounds using computers and mathematical

algorithms.

"Spiders are a whole different animal," said Buehler. "What they see or sense isn't actually audible or visible to the human eye or the human ear. And so by transposing it, we begin to experience that."

Buehler hopes his team's work could enable humans to understand the language of a spider and one day communicate with them.

"The melodies are really the kind of relationships that the spider would also experience. And so we can begin to feel a little bit like a spider in that way," Buehler said.

There are more than 47,000 species of spiders, and all spin silk webs to provide housing and catch food. Scientists say the silk from a spiderweb is five times stronger than steel.

The living structure of a spiderweb could lead to innovations in construction, maintenance and repair, Buehler said.

"We can imagine creating a synthetic system that would mimic what the spider does in sensing the web, repairing the web," he said. — **Reuters**

# Digital art gets physical home, buyers in New York gallery

**D**igital art, whose prices can now rival those of Old Master paintings, is on display at a new physical gallery in New York that aims to show how such pieces can fit into the home or office.

Digital artist Beeple made headlines in March when his video artwork "Everydays: The First 5000 Days" sold for over \$69 million at Christie's. The video was an example of a digital asset called a non-fungible token (NFT), which exist

only online and have exploded in popularity recently.

So why do they need a physical space?

Ed Zipco, founder of the Superchief Gallery NFT, which he calls "the first physical permanent NFT gallery space in the world," said it can fulfil the artist's "ideal intent" to show a high resolution digital canvas on the wall.

"It shows you how you live with the work," he said.

The gallery, which sold \$150,000 of art in its first

week in March, accepts cryptocurrency payments. While digital images are easily copied and shared online, tokens provide proof of ownership for files that supporters say are the equivalent of the original signed painting.

At the gallery in Manhattan's Union Square neighbourhood, the work of five artists will be shown each day through the end of May, for a total of 300 artists, including Swoon, James Jirat Patradoon and Mashkow. Artists receive

85 per cent of the sales proceeds.

The NFT of Mashkow's "NFTesla" on display is a rotating digital image of an original physical version exhibited at Superchief's main SoHo Gallery.

Superchief Gallery NFT breaks new ground, said Cody Kennedy, 44, whose NFT work, "In the service of," is on display there.

"One of the best things about showing in this gallery in particular is... this is what's coming next," he said. — **Reuters**



# The hidden burial ground in a cove in Sidab

BY ANWAAR MOHAMMED AL AAMRI

Oman, over its long course of history, has many burial grounds located in different locations. The beehive tombs, spread in different parts of the country, although have no remnants in them, are technically considered as burial grounds. But of the many unique locations, the burial ground hidden between the mountains of Sidab towards one of its remote beach is perhaps one of the most intriguing. Did you ever imagine that a cemetery is lying hidden in a cove in Sidab? Who is buried in it? How does this cemetery look like? How do you reach it?

Oman is known for its many political relations with other countries due to its geographical location. In fact, if we trace Oman's history, we would come to understand its importance for different earlier civilisations. As of today, it is becoming an international economic centre not only because of its airport but also because of the strategic importance its ports play in the global exchange of goods. Therefore, different people from different cultures had visited Oman for various reasons. Oman is also a beckon of peace in the Middle East. Its peace and order including its safety index have been known globally. It also is one of the most tolerant countries amongst the Arab nations. Even today, Oman is amongst the best rated Arab country for acceptance of other religions.

The cemetery in Sidab is located in Sheikh Jaber Cove and as such, has adopted the name Sheikh Jaber Cove Cemetery. It is a fine example of Oman's tolerance as this cemetery is known to be a Christian burial ground which is why others call it the Cove Christian Cemetery.

The cemetery is said to be the burial ground of 13 dead soldiers. They were from Britain. They were soldiers of the Commonwealth armies that fought in World War I. The most prominent person buried in the cemetery is George Edward who died on 26 November 1958 at the age of 31. Ellen Swindells, Edward's son, was buried with his father. Wells Thoms was buried in 1971 at the age of 40. John Oummina was buried in 1914.

The full cemetery ground is shaped like a square and is elevated from the ground and can be reached by climbing 4 flight of stairs. Although there are no fences, the columns that indicate the outline of the cemetery is painted white.

Each of the tombs has its own unique shapes. The majority of them however are either square or oval in shape. On top of these tombs are carved rocks where the information of the dead person is written including the name, age, date of birth and date of death.

Some tombs have a cross on them — two lines intersecting perpendicularly. It is a symbol of Christianity's beliefs. It a symbol practised throughout Europe and Western Asia. Some additional words were also inscribed such as "dearly beloved son", "ever in our thoughts", "in loving memory of", and "well-done thou good and faithful servant".

The burial ground's location is quite challenging to reach. There are two ways to reach the cove's location and both are dangerous.

One of the paths is through a steep mountain. A parking lot in Sidab has a direct connection to an Omani cemetery. Passing through this cemetery, a rugged pathway would lead to a crack in between mountains. One has

The full cemetery ground is shaped like a square and is elevated from the ground and can be reached by climbing 4 flight of stairs. Although there are no fences, the columns that indicate the outline of the cemetery is painted white

to climb this mountain, hike a few metres and climb another set of the mountain passing through remote beaches before reaching the cove. There are marks along the path, so people will not lose the way. There are aids such as stairs and ropes to help the climber to climb easily and be safe. This hiking trail is more than 3 km long.

Since the hike can be challenging, it is important to wear comfortable sneakers and comfortable and light clothing.

The other way is through the sea. Hiring one of the local boats near a village in Al Bustan, the ride can be faster than the hike but the boats might off-load in a different cove depending on the tide.

As of late, the cemetery and Sidab are becoming popular as hiking destination. Because of its location, it offers enough challenges for both amateur and advanced hikers.

If you are planning for a visit, make sure to take all safety precautions. There is no doubt that you will enjoy the views of the mountains and the sea. You will be astonished when you see Sheikh Jaber Cove Cemetery.



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Bank Muscat posts Q1 net profit climbs to RO 47.15m



BUSINESS REPORTER  
MUSCAT, APRIL 17

Bank Muscat announced its preliminary unaudited results for the three months ended on March 31, 2021. The bank posted a net profit of RO 47.15 million for the period compared to RO 33.25 million reported during the same period in 2020, an increase of 41.8 per cent, mainly due to lower impairment charges.

Net Interest Income from Conventional Banking and Net Income from Islamic Financing stood at RO 83.74 million for the three months period ended March 31, 2021 compared to RO 81.23 million for the same period in 2020, an increase of 3.1 per cent. Non-interest income was RO 37.68 million as compared to RO 34.39 million for the same period in 2020, an increase of 9.6 per cent.

Operating expenses totalled RO 47.11 million as compared to RO 50.60 million for the same period in 2020, a decrease of 6.9 per cent.

Net Impairment for credit and other losses for the three months period in 2021 was RO 18.08 million as against RO 25.73 million for the same period in 2020.

The decrease is mainly attributed to the precautionary and collective provisions created by the bank during Q1-2020, at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the historic decline seen in global crude oil prices. The bank remains vigilant of the continuing stress in the macro-economic and business conditions and its potential impacts, the bank said in a statement.

Net Loans and advances including Islamic financing receivables increased by 2.2 per cent to RO 9,278 million as against RO 9,076 million as of March 31, 2020. Customer deposits including Islamic Customer deposits increased by 2.1 per cent to RO 8,446 million as against RO 8,269 million for the corresponding period of 2020.

Indian group completes divestment in Jindal Shadeed

MUSCAT: Indian-based conglomerate Jindal Steel and Power announced on Friday the completion of its divestment in the Oman subsidiary Jindal Shadeed Iron and Steel (JSIS) to Vulcan Steel, a subsidiary of Templar Investment.

The announcement came in a filing to the local stock exchange,

BSE.

“JSPML [Jindal Steel & Power (Mauritius) Limited] has sold the balance shareholding held by it, representing 51 per cent of the share capital of JSIS Oman, to Vulcan Steel in the second and final tranche, in accordance with the shareholder approval”, the company said in the statement.

Spices, pulses, cereals among 488 food items zero-rated for VAT

SOCIAL PROTECTION MEASURES: The food commodities – up from 93 items originally – were part of a package of social protection measures unveiled by the government

CONRAD PRABHU  
@conradprabhu

An exhaustive list of fish and seafood species, spices and condiments, cereals and pastas, and dairy and cheese products are among 488 foodstuff items that have been zero-rated for Value Added Tax (VAT), which came into force in the Sultanate over the weekend.

The 488 food commodities — up from 93 items originally — were part of a package of social protection measures unveiled by the government recently to help alleviate the impacts of VAT, as well as the pandemic-induced economic downturn on vulnerable sections of the Omani population.

An unofficial translation of the expanded list of food items zero-rated for VAT, shared by tax experts, sheds light on the comprehensive nature of the government’s gesture. A sample list of some of the products across different categories appears here below:

**Vegetables and fruits:** The list features a wide selection of vegetables — fresh and chilled — including edible greens, spinaches, pumpkins, gourds, green beans, green peas, legumes and pulses — fresh and dried — and all kinds of fruits, as well as a wide range of berries.



An unofficial translation of the expanded list of food items zero-rated for VAT, shared by tax experts, sheds light on the comprehensive nature of the government’s gesture

**Spices and condiments:** A full range of spices and condiments that go into food preparations has been placed outside the coverage of VAT. The list includes sweet and hot peppers, cinnamon, anise seeds, fennel, coriander, cumin and caraway, turmeric, bay leaves, nutmeg and cardamom, among others.

**Cooking oils:** Zero-rated for VAT are olive oils of all grades, palm oil, sunflower seed oils, safflower seeds, or cotton seeds, corn oil, sesame oil, castor oil and other types of vegetable oils.

**Fish and seafood items:** Accounting for the lion’s share of the zero-rated food-related commodities are numerous varieties of fish species ranging from sardine and anchovy fish, white and blue finned tuna, mackerel, tilapia, Nile River fish, mullet, shark, Haddock fish, to

codfish and shrimp. However, not included in the list are certain premium types of locally harvested and imported fish species.

**Livestock, poultry and red meat products:** The list includes fresh table and hatching eggs, domestic chickens, livestock such as cows, sheep and goats for breeding, roosters and turkeys; fresh, chilled and frozen poultry and turkey and their parts and innards; fresh, chilled and frozen carcasses and meat of lamb, goat, bovine species and camel.

**Milk, dairy and cheese products:** Included in this category is an extensive list of fresh and chilled milk, dairy and cream products based on their content of fat and lactose, as well as yoghurts in a variety of form (unsweetened with sugars or sweeteners), including

buttermilk, laban, cream, sour milk, butter, fresh cheeses, fresh fermented cream cheese and hard or medium hard cheese (such as cheddar, gouda, gruyere and so on) and parmesan.

**Grains, flours and cereals:** Keeping in mind the varied appetites and staple diets of consumers in the Sultanate, a wide range of grains, cereals and flours have been zero-rated for VAT by the authorities. The list includes single grain or mixed grain flours, oatmeal, semolina, buckwheat grain in various forms — flattened, oats, corn, rice across many varieties — wholegrain or polished, white or brown and so on.

**Breads and pastas:** The list includes regular breads, gluten-free breads for diabetics, spaghetti, noodles and all kinds of pastas.

**Teas and coffees:** Green and black teas, roasted and unroasted coffees and non decaf coffees.

**Baby and infant foods:** Includes milk-based or non-milk substitutes, special formulations.

How Covid-19 is helping Oman develop a future-ready workforce



SAMI AL ASMI

In recent years, how to be more inclusive of youth and their capabilities in the workforce has been one of Oman’s primary challenges. The National Centre for Statistics and Information’s census suggests that Omani youth between the ages of 18 to 29 represents 46.7 per cent of the Sultanate’s population. As such, every year there is an influx of fresh graduates met with an imbalance of available

opportunities.

Fortunately, a series of reforms issued by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has ensured steady rotation in the workforce, specifically in the government sector. These include a reduction in the retirement age and the introduction of a Job Security Fund with a starting budget of \$26 million.

To bridge the skills gap between national workforce supply and industry demand, the Omani government has also set up a nationwide training infrastructure and tasked the Ministry of Labour with developing Omani talent for the jobs of today and opportunities of tomorrow.



Omani companies keen to compete in the global marketplace will have to reinforce their training commitments as job requirements evolve

SAMI AL ASMI  
Curator, Muscat Hub

Omani companies keen to compete in the global marketplace will have to reinforce their training commitments as job requirements evolve, particularly

as working lives get longer, and workers of all ages will need to regularly update existing skills and learn new ones.

Constant reskilling to add to an individual’s pre-existing area of expertise and life-long learning are challenging the traditional reliance on solely school-based learning. The digital age has made continued learning easy with tools including e-learning platforms, such as Oman’s own Edlal, Coursera and Udemy. Acquiring and honing new skills that are relevant to the need of the hour is beneficial; predicting and meeting the skill needs of the future is critical to make our economies shatter-proof.

TURN TO PAGE 20

# Operating hair and beauty salons in Oman

Last week I shared the conversation that happened with Ms Hanna with regards to her enquiry about launching and operating an online store selling traditional Omani products.

Today I am responding to Mr Hilal, who reached out to me concerning his wife's idea about opening a hair salon. Mr Hilal is worried about the sustainability of the business.

Although I do not have direct experience on this specific segment, I had a call with my friend Amos — who runs countless salons in Malaysia — and had an exchange with him. I am aware that Oman and Malaysia are substantially different markets, but the similarities are strikingly interesting.

Amos describes hair and beauty salons as the best business model. Of course, he has bias in his statement, as he literally does

that for a living, but some of the points he brought forward are really compelling.

“First of all” he said “hair keeps growing throughout someone's life... so that tell you already that this is an endless business.” Good point on that Amos. So if clients are endlessly experiencing the “problem” of hair growth and we are always offering the “solution” of cutting hair, we have a good starting point there. The same could be said for gentlemen's beard by the way.

“Secondly, the products that you need to operate the business have virtually no expiry date.” In other words, shampoo, conditioners, serum and all other products for hair care and — for some beauty salons — skin care, can be stored for years.

Even if business was slow to pick up, there is no rush to sell our products. That would not apply of course to a restaurant, where food expires quite quickly. So if we can wait virtually forever



STEFANO VIRGILLI  
stefano@virgilli.com

RENT COULD BE A “KILLER” FOR ANY BUSINESS, BUT IN THIS CASE, SALONS CAN START WITH 60 TO 80 SQUARE METRES AND EXPAND AS BUSINESS GROWS. SO THE INITIAL RENT COULD BE UNDER CONTROL.

to grow the business with no repercussions on our stock, that makes the business a lot safer.

Where to focus then? According to Amos the key points are:

1. Low rent in a decent location
2. Flexible, yet experienced staff

Here is where things get a bit complicated. Decent locations generally come with high rent, but Amos reasoned that “in this specific business, women prefer privacy, so you don't need to be visible, but convenient. Look for shop lots with plenty of parking availability.”

Rent could be a “killer” for any business, but in this case, salons can start with 60 to 80 square metres and expand as business grows. So the initial rent could be under control.

When it comes to staff, experienced hair stylist tend to be quite demanding on their salary and benefits. In Amos'

mind this could be both bad and good.

Having an experienced full time staff with high salary might reduce profits when business is slow, but also could create loyalty among clients and provide a higher baseline. Ideal scenario could be to have experienced staff willing to work flexible hours as-and-when needed.

To conclude, I would encourage Mr Hilal not to be scared about the possibility of a total failure as long as his wife is able to attract experienced staff, willing to work flexibly, and setting up shop in a convenient location with accessible car parking.

Although competition might be tough, as a number of salons has sprung in the past years in Oman, this does not prevent new salons to make a living or prosper.

*[The columnist is a member of the International Press Association]*

## Ahli Islamic holds first Qitaf quarterly draw



**MUSCAT:** Encouraging individuals to chase their dreams by saving more to win more, ahli islamic has announced one lucky winner of its first quarterly draw under the bank's Sharia compliant 2021 Qitaf programme.

The ahli islamic accountholder walked away with a generous prize money of RO 100,000. The draw was held by Al Wisal FM live stream.

Yousuf bin Salim al Rawahi, Deputy General Manager and Head of ahli islamic said, “Qitaf reflects our efforts towards providing unique savings opportunities that suit the needs of our customers, and instill a culture of savings among them.

The Sharia compliant prize draw scheme rewards their commitment through quarterly, monthly, weekly and special event draws.

As a progressive step in this direction, the bank has added new categories in its new 2021 Qitaf programme, to provide maximised chances of winning for its customers.

Ahli islamic will continue to offer innovative and attractive programmes to reward its customers, while encouraging them to adopt positive financial practices to achieve their goals in the long-term.”

Qitaf prize scheme not only supports and encourages a culture of savings among the people of the Sultanate, but also helps them to invest their capital in profitable assets, in accordance to the bank's criteria that is based on the Islamic Mudaraba principles.

Al Rawahi further added, “ahli islamic is on a consistent path of growth, delivering an innovative portfolio of products and services, that meet the needs of its customers and benefits them in multiple ways — providing them a financially sound living, securing their future, and enabling their aspirations.

On behalf of ahli islamic, I would like to congratulate the lucky winner of the first quarterly Qitaf draw, Abdul Wahid al Murshidi. We hope this prize will help him achieve his dreams. We also invite our customers to continue saving to have greater opportunities to win.”

## Go beyond on every journey in the Toyota Land Cruiser

**MUSCAT:** The powerful, capable and tough Land Cruiser has been the favourite 4WD SUV for enthusiasts the world over. From routine drives, to off-road experiences, the



Land Cruiser has always stood tall to offer exceptional experiences. Even earning it the status of the ‘Pride of the Land.’

Hailed as a timeless icon, the Toyota Land Cruiser has a loyalty unmatched by any other SUV. The product of over 60 years of global adventure, it is a sophisticated blend of off-road prowess, on-road comfort and unparalleled refinement. And it remains totally unchallenged.

Proudly carrying forward its undisputed legacy of phenomenal all-terrain performance and reliability, the Land Cruiser indeed, is one of the most technically advanced four-wheel drive vehicles ever produced and is equipped with a series of advanced dynamic and handling features.

The Land Cruiser's driving control features extends to the Active Traction Control (ATRC), which ensures excellent vehicle handling functionality. Further enhancing its versatility is the Hill Assist Control (HAC), which prevents vehicle rollback when stopping and then starting again on a steep incline or slippery surface. The Crawl Control System helps maintain a low uniform vehicle speed by automatically controlling the engine output and brake hydraulic pressure for the purpose of reducing driver burden when in off-road conditions.

At the heart of the indomitable 4WD Land Cruiser's capability is a 4.6-litre engine. A smooth and quiet drive results from the Land Cruiser's advanced 6-speed Transmission.

Elevating the Land Cruiser's In-vehicle Entertainment to a completely new level is the 10-inch Navigation System with Multi Bluetooth connection & SIM card slot for Wi-Fi Hotspot, 6 Speakers and Rear Seat Entertainment System, Power backdoor (upper door only), New design front bumper spoiler with chrome garnish, Leather seats, Remote engine starter and Front sequential indicator.

The Land Cruiser VX is equipped with 5.7L, V8 engine, New design front bumper spoiler with chrome garnish, 20" Alloy Wheels, Chrome + Gloss black Radiator Grille, Premium Leather Seats, 9" Navigation System with 14 JBL Speakers, Qi Enabled Wireless Charger, Multi terrain monitor with 4 cameras and active height control.

## CHANGAN EADO OFFERS UNCOMPROMISING SAFETY, SMART TECHNOLOGY, AND GREAT FUEL ECONOMY

**MUSCAT:** The C-segment refined family sedan Changan Eado continues to impress auto enthusiasts in Oman with its composed performance, tasteful interiors, uncompromising safety, smart technology, and great fuel economy. The charismatic Changan Eado's inherent design language integrates style with function and practicality.

The Premium Automotive Brand Changan recently launched by Bahwan International Group in



Oman has received overwhelming response among the customers. Changan Automobile boasts of a comprehensive portfolio of range of products including Sedan, Crossovers and SUVs like

Eado- Family Sedan, CS35 Plus Crossover, CS75 4WD Crossover, CS85 Coupe & CS95 7Seater 4WD.

Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment LLC (AGAE), which is part of Bahwan International Group, recently announced a partnership with leading international automotive group Changan Automobile Co Ltd to bring its range of passenger vehicles to Oman including Changan Eado.

### MSX WEEKLY REVIEW

## MSX ends marginally lower

The MSX30 Index ended the week down by 0.03 per cent. The Industrial and services sectors ended in green up by 2.9 per cent and 1.1 per cent respectively, while the financial sector closed in the red i.e. down by 0.34 per cent. The MSX Shariah Index was higher by 0.61 per cent.

Oman implemented Value Added Tax (VAT) last week on April 16, 2021. The VAT is expected to raise about 400 million Omani riyals annually and to generate approximately 1.5 per cent of the value of GDP.

The 5 per cent tax will be imposed on most goods and services, with the exemption of a specific set of goods and services, rendered to consumers at outlets throughout the Sultanate. It will also be imposed on imports of goods to the Sultanate, except the ones exempted by law.

The list of goods and services exempted from the VAT includes healthcare, education, financial services, and basic food items and supplies for persons with special needs, among other items and services.

Al Hassan Engineering has announced an award of new project with Strategic and Precious Metals Processing FZC LLC valued at approximately RO 1.04 million.

The execution period will be 6 months starting from April 2021. The company expects reasonable profit from this project.

A new food processing cluster, anchored by a flour mill, is being established in Salalah Free Zone — the

latest in a series of food hubs in various stages of planning and implementation across the Sultanate.

The food sector is one of the fastest growing industries in the Sultanate — its growth powered partly by the government's aggressive quest to secure the country's basic food requirements, and partly by the development of a wider ecosystem that, along with Agro, fish and livestock processing, is fuelling new investments into this rapidly expanding segment of the Omani economy.

Corporates in MSX announced their results for 1Q21. At the time of preparation of this report only 63 companies with year-end in December announced the results. As of 1Q21, total market profitability stood at RO 92 million compared to RO 26 million in 4Q20 and RO 55.2 million in 1Q20.

Financial sector net income stood at RO 74.3 million, followed by Industrial at RO 15 million and Services at RO 2.6 million. We have seen good recovery in industrial and service sector profitability compared to fourth quarter of 2020.

The total number of guests in hotel properties of the

Sultanate fell 47.2 per cent to 169,465 in February 2021, compared to 320,816 guests for the same period of 2020. Meanwhile, the occupancy rate slumped to 49.7 per cent, according to the latest monthly statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Total revenues of these hotels also fell to RO 6.515 million in February 2021, compared to RO 23.350 million during the same period of the previous year.

The inflation rate in the Sultanate, measured by movement in the average Consumer Price Index (CPI), fell by 0.37 per cent in March 2021 compared to the same month of 2020, according to the latest data released by the (NCSI) on consumer prices' index. According to the report, the inflation rate in March increased by 0.50 per cent compared to February 2021.

However, the transport increased by 3.22 per cent; restaurants and hotels group by 0.01 per cent, miscellaneous goods and services by 0.11 per cent, clothing & footwear by 0.05 per cent, while the prices of the rest of the main groups were stable.

*[Courtesy: U-Capital]*

**MSX Net Profit, OMR mn**

| Quarter | Financial Sector | Industrial Sector | Services Sector |
|---------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1Q20    | ~45,000          | ~10,000           | ~10,000         |
| 2Q20    | ~55,000          | ~15,000           | ~10,000         |
| 3Q20    | ~65,000          | ~15,000           | ~10,000         |
| 4Q20    | ~55,000          | ~10,000           | ~10,000         |
| 1Q21    | ~70,000          | ~15,000           | ~10,000         |

Source: MSX, Bloomberg



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Fed's Waller: US economy 'ready to rip' but inflation will level off



WASHINGTON: The US economy is set to take off this year as more Americans get Covid-19 vaccinations and become comfortable engaging in a wider range of activities, but any accompanying spike in inflation is likely to be temporary, the Federal Reserve's newest board member said on Friday, echoing the view of most US central bankers.

To that end, a measure of inflation expectations released on Friday, bolstered the take on price pressures from Governor Christopher Waller (pictured).

It showed an uptick in inflation expectations in the first quarter but offered no indication of them becoming untethered from the Fed's targeted level.

"I think the economy is ready to rip", Waller said during an interview with CNBC. "Everyone is getting a lot more comfortable with having the virus under control and we're starting to see it in the form of economic activity." — Reuters

# US housing starts near 15-year high; consumer sentiment rises

WASHINGTON: US homebuilding surged to nearly a 15-year high in March, but soaring lumber prices amid supply constraints could limit builders' capacity to boost production and ease a shortage of homes that is threatening to slow housing market momentum.

The sharp rebound reported by the Commerce Department on Friday added to robust retail sales in March in suggesting that the economy was roaring after a brief weather-related setback in February. Increasing Covid-19 vaccinations, warmer weather and massive fiscal stimulus are driving the economy, with growth this year expected to be the strongest in nearly four decades.

But caution is starting to creep in among consumers as the course of the pandemic remains uncertain and inflation is showing signs of heating up. Other data on Friday showed consumer sentiment rose moderately in early April.

"We're in a unique situation with the economy beginning to rebound from the worst of the pandemic", said Robert Frick, Corporate Economist at Navy Federal Credit Union in Vienna,



A new apartment building housing construction site is seen in Los Angeles, California. — Reuters

Virginia. "Uncertainties remain, with many businesses yet to reopen, unemployment still high, and Covid-19 levels lower but persistent."

Housing starts surged 19.4 per cent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.739 million units last month, the highest level since June 2006. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast starts would rise to a rate of 1.613 million units in March.

Starts soared 37.0 per cent on a year-on-year basis in March. Homebuilding slumped in February as large parts of the country reeled from unseasonably cold weather, including winter storms in Texas and other parts of the densely-populated South region.

Groundbreaking activity increased in the Northeast, Midwest and South, but fell in the West. Permits for future

home building rose 2.7 per cent to a rate of 1.766 million units last month, recouping only a fraction of February's 8.8 per cent plunge. They jumped 30.2 per cent compared to March 2020.

"While housing demand is expected to remain strong, we expect it to diminish somewhat as the year progresses", said Doug Duncan, Economist at Fannie Mae in Washington. — Reuters

## Credit Suisse sued over risk exposure to Greensill, Archegos

WASHINGTON: A pension fund filed a lawsuit against Credit Suisse Group AG in a US court, accusing the Swiss bank of misleading investors and mismanaging risk exposure to high-risk clients, including Greensill Capital and Archegos Capital Management.

The pension fund filed the class action lawsuit in federal court in Manhattan, alleging violations of federal securities laws.

"The defendants concealed material defects in the risk policies and procedures and compliance oversight functions and efforts to allow high-risk clients to take on excessive leverage, including Greensill Capital and Archegos Capital, exposing the company to billions of dollars in losses", the lawsuit said. — Reuters

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# How Covid-19 is helping Oman develop a future-ready workforce

FROM PAGE 17

**Oman and the 'Human Cloud'**

Omani companies and youth alike are already logging on to sites like Fiverr or Upwork and using the 'Human Cloud' to get jobs done or to offer their services. Instead of being a threat to Omani jobs, the Human Cloud offers a wealth of opportunities to local talent willing to go online and meet the needs of global companies.

However, it is fundamental to ensure that our young employment seekers, wherever they are in Oman, are trained with in-demand skills, have access to the equipment they need, have places and spaces to work and, most importantly, are equipped with the knowledge and information necessary to present and promote themselves on these sites.

**Adapting business models to Covid-19 situations**

The pandemic has brought some industries to a devastating halt, while others are still in the process of adapting to this new reality.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we witnessed companies in Oman letting go of their traditional business models and adopting the latest possible modes of operating. This move has been particularly noticeable in companies that had not moved assets to the cloud and were now doing so at full throttle. In a matter of weeks, Oman became a society where remote working was no longer a consideration for the future but a present-day

reality.

The country also relaxed the regulations for setting up small-to-medium enterprises, which brought a rapid and unprecedented surge in new independent businesses.

In a way, it can be said that the Omani youth has been swift to pursue entrepreneurship without a second thought — an encouraging feat and a vision for the future.

The pandemic has also set in motion the wide acceptance of part-time work, as temporary work, "gig" or freelance work become part of the "new normal". Many people may now juggle a number of projects rather than jobs in their work portfolio at any one time.

This is advantageous to the Omani economy where new industries are yet to open. Young Omanis are free to offer their skills and services to multiple companies simultaneously. This variety of projects will allow them to gain a range of experience that a traditional job position may no longer offer. The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry has recognized this benefit and is currently in the process of setting up an effective plan that enables part-time work for one and all.

## Pandemic proofing

As the pandemic resets work trends, Oman's HR leaders will need to rethink the workforce, employee training and approaches to measuring performance. Criteria for employment will perhaps be more inclusive of a diverse skill set rather than focused on region-based experience, while potential

candidates will be bold enough to question an employer's integrity.

In the long run, the benefits of automation, AI and digitisation are going to be enormous. Like the industrial revolutions that came before, the effects will be positive.

The advantages to greater diversification will be huge in crucial pillars of Oman's economy like manufacturing and logistics. Asyad has already predicted the use of drones to enhance global trade, for example. What we need to fear is not massive unemployment caused by technological change but growing inequalities in different segments of the workforce.

As we look to the future, to reset and rebalance, we must ensure Oman's workforce has access to the information on emerging opportunities at home, online and abroad and to the training required to make the most of them.

This applies especially to gig and cloud workers who will not have access to the safety nets and guidance provided by HR professionals and other necessary resources. These workers will need support systems that keep them updated, encouraged and motivated; help them obtain the tools they need and guide them in organising their time and planning for a financially secure future.

With the right systems of support and guidance, we can redress imbalances and allow our workforce to enjoy a secure future in which they can provide for themselves and their families and contribute to the socio-economic goals of Oman's Vision 2040.