

UNSC to discuss global warming impact on world peace

The UN Security Council will hold a summit of world leaders on Tuesday to debate climate change's implications for world peace, an issue on which its 15 members have divergent opinions. The session, called by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and conducted by video-conference, comes just days after the United States under President Joe Biden formally rejoined the Paris climate change accord.



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MUSCAT AIRPORT WINS SKYTRAX 4-STAR RATING FOR COVID-19 MEASURES



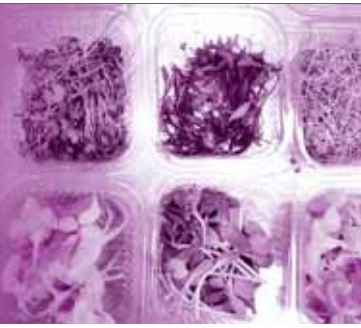
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9 IS DJOKOVIC'S MELBOURNE NUMBER!



P20

MARKET FOR EDIBLE FLOWERS BLOSSOMS IN TUNISIA



MUSCAT

HIS MAJESTY GREET'S SAINT LUCIA

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik sent greetings to Emmanuel Neville Cenac, Governor General of Saint Lucia on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. In the cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to the Governor General of Saint Lucia and his country's friendly people.

TEAM TO STUDY UNITS MOST HIT BY CRT

A workshop recommended for forming a work team to identify and register the factories most affected by the newly introduced Cost-Reflective Tariffs (CRT) of electricity. Eng Sami bin Salim al Sahib, Director-General of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Industry, said that the recommendations will be discussed by a joint work team representing all the stakeholders. The team will identify the factories that consume the most electricity and gauge the loss they have incurred, and devise a mechanism to resolve the issue to enable these factories to boost their production capacity. The Authority for Public Services Regulation will look into reducing the consumption ceiling for factories undergoing CRT from 150 megawatts to 100 megawatts.

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INSIDE



IN VIRUS-HIT LEBANON, SEAMSTRESSES STITCH BODY BAGS

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NIGER VOTES IN PRESIDENTIAL RUN-OFF

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Don't travel unless urgent, says MoH as cases rise

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
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The surging number of Covid-19 cases in the Sultanate is a cause of concern amid fears of lockdowns and more restrictions. The latest numbers raise alarm as the Sultanate on Sunday reported 868 new cases, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 139,362. Three Covid-19 related deaths were also reported, taking the death toll to 1,552. Au-

thorities in the Sultanate advised citizens and residents not to travel unless there is an absolute necessity, especially to countries and regions where new variations of the virus are widespread. Dr Amal al Maani, Director-General of Diseases Control and Surveillance, previously said that the first new cases of the new Covid strain reported in the country was related to travel. The WHO's Regional Director, Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, said dur-



A staff puts tracking bracelet on a passenger at the Muscat International Airport on Sunday.

ing a press conference last week in Cairo that the WHO is concerned about the emergence of the mutated strain of the virus that causes Covid-19 disease in the region, as some countries have reported the emergence of cases of the most contagious mutated virus. He added, "13 countries have reported cases of at least one of the three new mutations reported globally, including mutations with potentially higher transmis-

sion rates. Some new changes are associated with an increase in infections and could lead to an increase in cases and a rise in hospitalisations." The Ministry of Health said the total recovery from Covid-19 reached 130,653, which is 94 per cent of the total recovery rate. Twenty new patients were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 163, including 56 in intensive care units (ICUs).

THINKING OF NEXT DESTINATION



Beaches and mountains are awash in multiple colours of migrant birds as the season is nearing an end. For bird watchers and shutterbugs the annual spectacle is a reminder of mother nature's infinite surprises. PHOTO BY YAHYA AL SALMANI

SEE ALSO P2

'Oman key to regional security'

MUSCAT: General Kenneth McKenzie, Commander of the United States Central Command, lauded efforts of the Sultanate's government under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to upgrade the military sector. In an interview with Oman News Agency (ONA), the US military official affirmed that Sultanate is a strategically important partner for his country to maintain regional security. He explained that the Omani-US relationship is one of the oldest as it goes back hundreds of years, reaffirming his country's keenness to promote this relationship in various areas. — ONA

Feeling angry? 'Rage Room' opens in Brazil

SAO PAULO: Feeling frustrated and stressed out? Brazilians now have a place to vent their anger and fury in the newly opened "Rage Room." Inside a warehouse on the outskirts of Sao Paulo, people are able to swing giant hammers at old televisions, computers and printers, demolishing the machines, and shattering the glass into tiny pieces. Vanderlei Rodrigues, who opened the business a month ago in Cidade Tiradentes, said he has received a fair number of customers wanting to vent, especially during the pandemic. The "Rage Room" experience costs \$4.64. Wearing protective suits and helmets, participants write issues that bother them

on the walls - "ex-girlfriends", "ex-husbands", "corruption" and "work." These words become the targets of their anger. Alexandre de Carvalho, 40, who works in advertising and drives two hours back and forth to work, said with worries about health due to the pandemic, "it's great to come here and release some adrenaline and pent-up feelings." For Luciana Holanda, 35, who is an unemployed mother of two daughters, she said she prefers to vent her frustration inside the "Rage Room." "With all this accumulated stress, being a mother, having children and not being able to work ... it is very good to be able to release some stress and vent." — Reuters

Kids prone to Covid-19 strain

KABEER YOUSUF
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Unlike the first wave of Covid-19 which affected mostly adults, the new variant is affecting the children as well. They are more prone to the new variant and the same precautions, which were being followed strictly, need to be continued for everyone, according to experts. There are four strains as of now. They are K or British variant (B117), South Africa variant (501Y.V2 or B.1.351), Brazil variant (P.1) and California variant (CAL.20C). "The new variant of the virus which is fast spreading in the region is more transmissible among the communities. Unlike the first wave of Cov-



id-19, kids are more vulnerable to this variant", said Dr Mizun Tufail al Rahman, Senior Consultant and Family Physician at the Ministry of Health. CHILDREN DIAGNOSED Doctors further opined that in the first wave of Covid-19, adults were more likely to get in-

fectd than children. But on the contrary, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of children diagnosed with Covid-19 in many countries over the past two to three months. "This variant of Covid-19 is 70 per cent more rapidly transmitting and is 30 per cent deadlier than the older variant. TURN TO P5

Oman, US military cooperation discussed



Gen Al Numani receives Gen Kenneth McKenzie.



Al Za'abi receives Gen McKenzie.



Vice Admiral Al Ra'eesi receives Gen McKenzie.

MUSCAT: General Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received in his office on Sunday Gen Kenneth McKenzie, Commander of the United States Central Command and his accompanying delegation.

The guest expressed his thanks and appreciation to the Sultanate for promoting the existing cooperation with the friendly United States of America (USA). The two sides reviewed the

strong historic relations binding the two friendly countries in various spheres to achieve the joint interests. They also reviewed a range of current regional and international issues. The two

sides also touched on matters of common concern. Meanwhile, Dr Mohammed bin Nasser bin Ali al Za'abi, Secretary-General at the Ministry of Defence, and Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis

bin Abdullah al Ra'eesi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), also received separately Gen Kenneth McKenzie and his delegation, currently visiting the Sultanate. The two sides exchanged

views and discussed matters of common concern. The meetings were attended by the US Ambassador to the Sultanate and the Military Attaché of the US Embassy in Muscat. — ONA

RNO holds naval drill Sharp Dagger

MUSCAT: The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) on Sunday began implementing a naval drill 'Sharp Dagger' at Al Batinah Naval site with participation of friendly countries' navies and assistance of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) jets. The drill lasts till February 25. The drill, conducted as per precautionary measures of Covid-19, comes within the framework of the RNO's

annual training plans, besides exchanging experience with friendly countries to sustain the readiness levels of the RNO fleet and personnel in various marine disciplines in line with their national tasks. The naval drill began with the participating ships set off from Said Bin Sultan's Naval Base to the site designated for the drill according to the outlined plans. — ONA



THE BIRDS OF MUSCAT

TEXT & PHOTOS BY
YAHYA AL SALMANI

Although the season for the migration and breeding of birds is approaching the end in Muscat, visitors can still notice hundreds of resident and migratory birds gathering at mountains, green oasis and beaches. Among the most important bird species that can be seen closely are: grey francolin, moorhen, little stint, common snip, dove, ring-necked parakeet, green bee-eater, european roller, bulbul, pale rock sparrow, greater flamingo and night heron.

Environmental sources mention that there are more than 500 resident and migratory bird species in various parts of the Sultanate. Bird sightings attract dozens of bird watching and photography enthusiasts. "These are golden times for documenting birds, as they seem closer than ever", A photographer told *Observer*. Some bird photographers complain about the behaviours of some beach-goers who disturb, or chase away the birds from their natural habitats. Many seabirds lie on the beaches for a warm bath, while the rest of the birds prefer the shade of trees. All of these scenes contribute greatly to adding an aesthetic colour to Oman's natural environment.



Be on guard against coronavirus, commercial centres told

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The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion called on commercial centres and shops to adhere to the precautionary measures issued in coordination with the Ministry of Health. The shopping process suggested for consumers is aimed at limiting the spread of the coronavirus.

The ministry stated that these procedures include organising safe entry for consumers, wearing masks, adhering to social distancing norms (two metres) between one consumer and another at the payment counter, sterilising shopping carts and



roofs, and providing sterilisers to consumers.

It emphasised on healthy and safe practices for consumers, as they have been asked to adhere to safety measures and shop in an orderly manner. They have been

advised to avoid shopping during the peak hours, which is usually between 7pm and 10pm.

The ministry also directed consumers to take advantage of online shopping operations being offered by many operators that sell

groceries, food items etc, stressing that in light of the spread of the virus, many outlets have resorted to using home delivery services.

This is to avoid people's mixing at crowded places and protect the shoppers from getting infected. It also called on the owners of the commercial centres and restaurants to follow necessary preventive measures for workers in the field of home delivery services, affirming that all workers must, while providing the services, maintain the cleanliness of the general appearance and fully adhere to the health rules of personal hygiene and handwashing, not to mention wearing masks and gloves.

Safety guidelines must to avoid fire incidents

HIGH-LEVEL DELEGATION VISITS WADI KABIR FIRE SITE



VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

A high-level delegation including the Wali of Muttrah, the chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), members of Majlis Ash'shura, and the Municipal Affairs Committee visited the site in Wadi Kabir industrial area where the fire broke out on Thursday.

After the inspection visit, the delegates stressed the importance of following the safety guidelines and added that establishments must insure their properties, which will help them recover some losses incurred from such incidents.

“The insurance will help them recover from these emergency situations and return to operations at the earliest.”

The delegates praised the great efforts exerted by Royal Oman Police, Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) to control the fire, which lasted for over eight hours and helped to minimise the extent. All businesses must regularly conduct inspections and must ensure that safety instructions are followed at such sites. OCCI

will prepare a detailed study on the current situation at industrial zones that will include how to avoid future such situations apart from the commitment to have all properties insured.

The study will address the regulations that must be followed in the future in the industrial zones, which will contribute to protecting the facilities from risks and disasters, with the participation of competent authorities.

A comprehensive report on what led to the causes of this fire and the problems faced by owners of industrial facilities will be submitted to the Governor of Muscat.

Speaking to the *Observer*, some residents said such incidents are waiting to happen, and it is time to relocate the industrial area from the residential neighbourhood.

A mechanic employed at one of the garages, said, "Even if the park cannot be relocated keeping the interests in the businesses in trying circumstances, some planning has to be made. For example, activities that involve the use and storage of hazardous materials should be given special care and attention."

Drive against unsafe disposal of masks

MUSCAT: The Oman Environmental Services Holding Company, be'ah has launched an awareness campaign with the aim to highlight the health risks of random throwing of used masks in public places that negatively affect human as well as wild and marine life.

The drive has been launched in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and The World Health Organization office in the Sultanate.

Dr Jan Jabbour, the Representative of the World Health Organization in the Sultanate, explained the importance of adhering to the preventive measures and procedures and following the instructions and guidelines established for protection from Covid-19. In this context, the organisation has developed a global and comprehensive guidance document on the use



of masks and the best practices to dispose them in a safe manner.

Jassim al Wahaibi, Head of the Healthcare Waste Department at be'ah, said "There is an increasing concern about polluted single-use masks, which pose a threat to public health and negatively

affect wild and marine life when disposed in the wrong way, and we are happy with this cooperation to tackle this global phenomenon, which could lead to the transmission of infection among the community.

The Supreme Committee

in charge of examining the mechanism for dealing with developments resulting from the spread of Coronavirus (Covid-19) had previously issued decisions, obligating everyone to wear masks in public places and considers not wearing a mask a violation. This has greatly increased the daily consumption of masks.

Single-use contaminated masks contain many viruses, and cleaning workers are among the first victims who face the risk of infection, in addition to their environmental effects.

“Most single-use masks are made of plastic materials such as polypropylene, polyethylene and vinyl — a material that takes up to 450 years to degrade — which makes it all the time a source of micro plastics and negatively affects wild and marine life and ecosystems, according to a report released by OceansAsia.

Oman-Saudi Arabia TIR system launched

MUSCAT: The Directorate General of Customs on Sunday launched the first shipment using the international road transport system (TIR) from Sultanate to Saudi Arabia, via the land ports of the United Arab Emirates.

The implementation of the TIR system is expected to contribute to enhancing and facilitating the movement of trade and the transit of goods at border crossings, while also simplifying the customs procedures in a manner that promotes imports and exports.

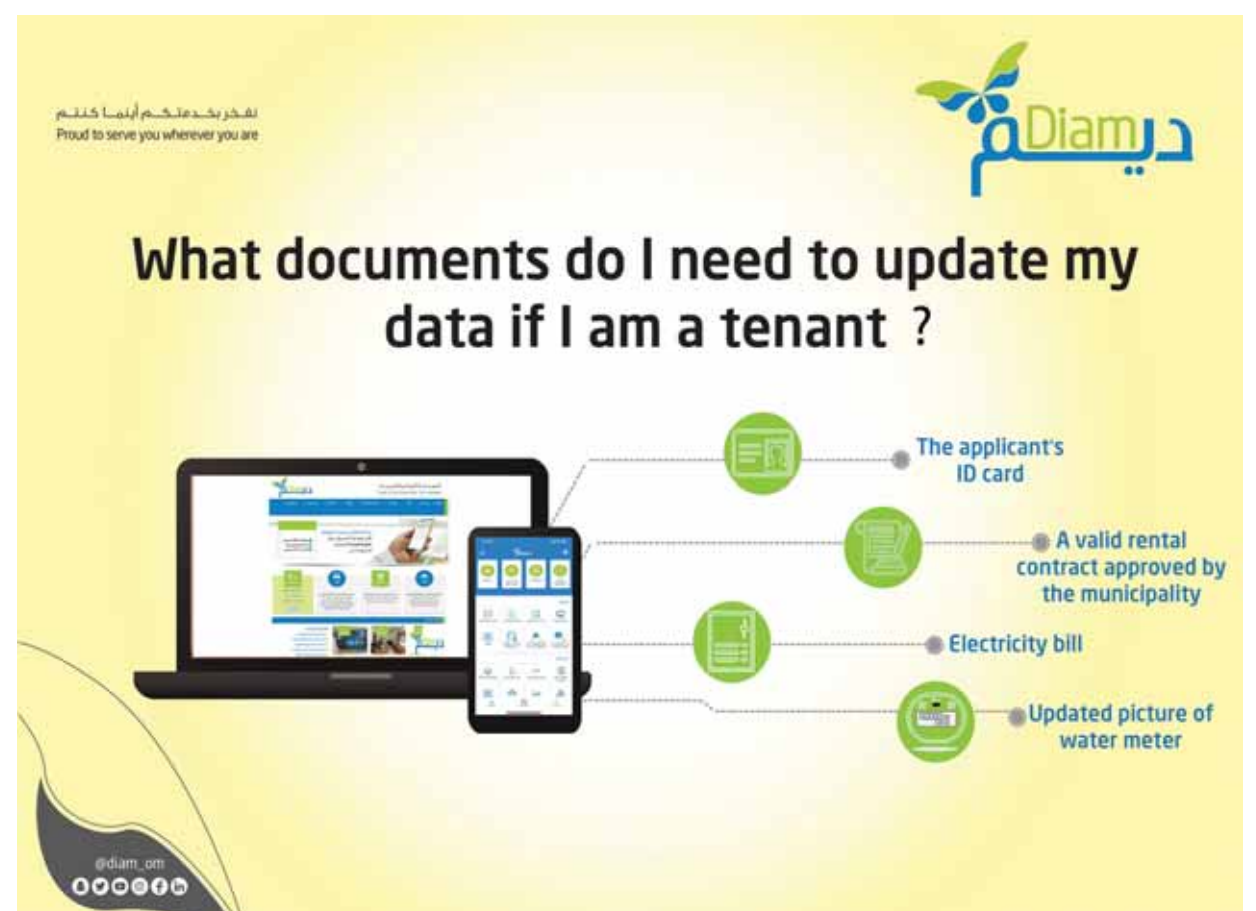
The system secures customs duties and taxes and provides a robust guarantee mechanism, reducing trade transaction costs and minimising time spent waiting at borders, smoothly and seamlessly, without border checks.

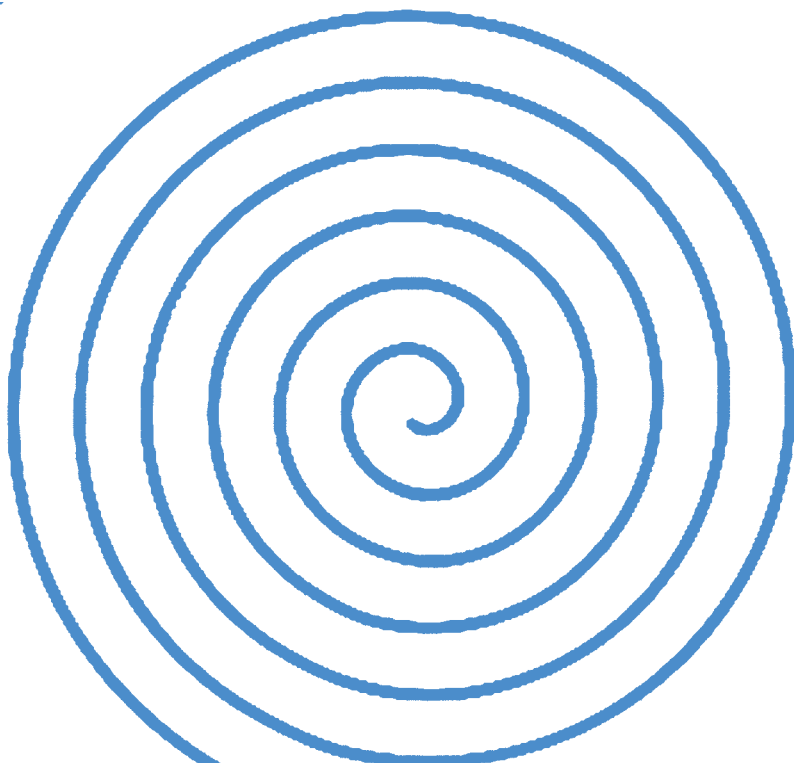


TIR has been facilitating and securing trade and international road transport for over 60 years and is set to align Oman's transport and transit procedures with the measures applied in more than 100 countries around the world.

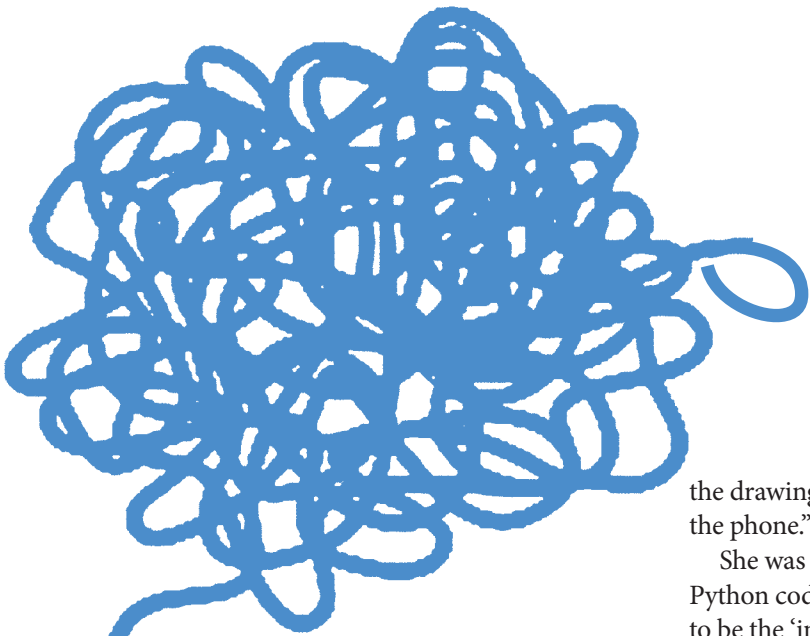
Bader al Nadabi, the acting CEO of Sinyar, said that the

company will act as guaranteeing association for both local and international companies; train TIR cardholders, manage the implementation of precautionary measures and monitor the movement of cards. Companies operating in Oman may apply for TIR cards by visiting the www.sinyar.om.





DECODING TALENT



LIJU CHERIAN
@cherianmathiker

Samiya Syed, a 7th-grade student at Indian School Darsait, finished her first phase of ‘Python coding’ under Arcomm’s Brainobrain in the Sultanate. Coding is a way to communicate with computers just like there is a way for humans to communicate with each other.

Coders write the instructions using a programming language. Every line of code tells the computer to do something.

In today’s digitalised world, Samiya has learnt a lot about Character User Interface (CUI) and how computer language works.

As a parent, Nabeela Farshori is happy that her two daughters are getting familiarised with emerging technologies practically. Her kids love the concept of coding, especially the mode of teaching on Zoom during the lockdown and being very interactive. They wait excitedly for the second phase where it will be more advanced learning.

“This digital magic makes children excited and creates curiosity to learn further. By the end of the course, my 11-year-old daughter created a paint App in which she gave strings to erase

the drawing with a simple shake of the phone.”

She was also taught Turtle and Python coding. Now coding seems to be the ‘in thing’ among school students. Recently, the Ministry of Education and Omantel signed an agreement to develop IT and coding courses for primary school students. The agreement aims to develop an educational curriculum providing students with future skills and the 4IR in line with ‘Oman Vision 2040,’ aiming to create a knowledge-based economy.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Arun Raaza, Founder and CEO at Arcomm Child Skills Development Training, says children should learn to code at the same time apply them in real time hardware and work or test the same. This will foster creativity and make them bright innovators.

Aside from aiding to interact with the computer, they help you perform the complex tasks in relatively few steps, he mentions. “It is very easy to programme once you know the syntax of the programming language which helps us solve problems and improves our Math skills,” he says adding that there are several languages like Java, Python. Java, for example, is the core foundation for developing Android apps.

Arun explains they offer a hybrid approach of online training with ‘Do It Yourself’ (DIY) kit in Oman which seems to work wonders.

“This hybrid model makes children strong in concepts as well as practical. We have already trained over 300 children from Oman in this model and getting rave reviews from parents and children. In the long run, this programme will make the children as innovators and prepare them for future industry requirements,” he says.

Ambika Padmanabhan, a primary

school teacher at Indian School Al Wadi Al Kabir (ISWK), says the ability to code transforms students from passive consumers into active innovators.

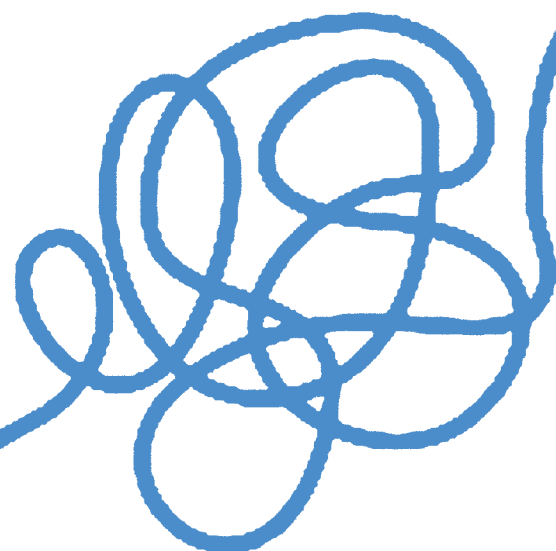
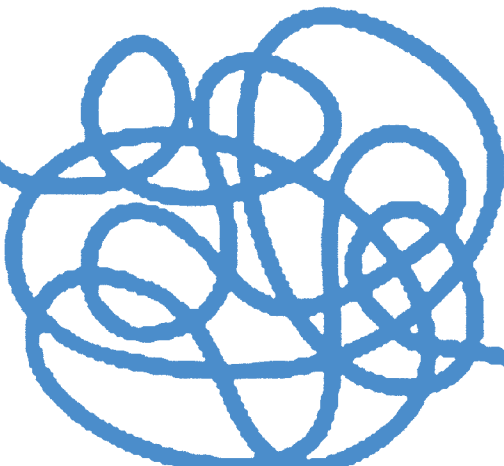
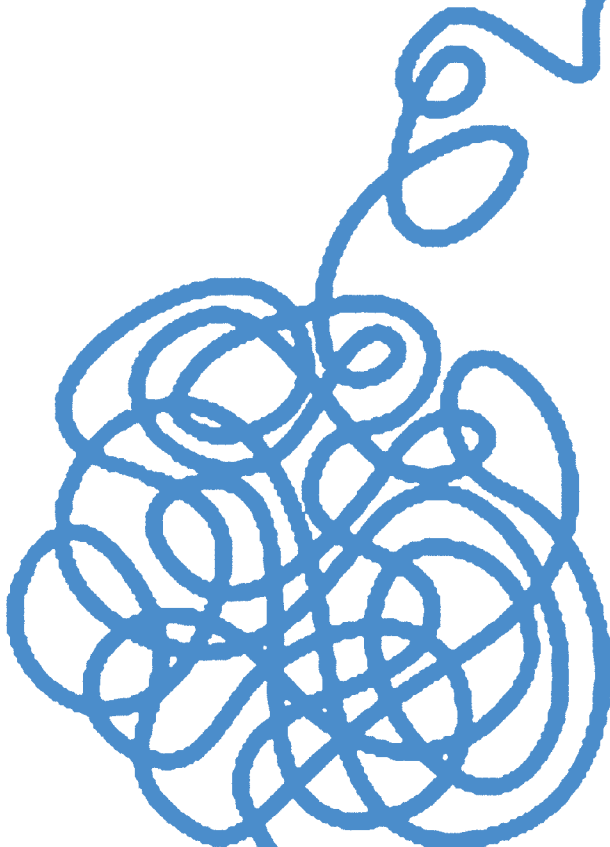
This, she says, helps to see every piece of the technology puzzle, not just as a toy but as a way to problems solving and an opportunity to create.

“Children need to be able to think critically and resolve complex problems to truly thrive in the environment where they are expected to live and work in the future. An approach to teaching these skills is to teach them coding. The focus must be on the ‘essence’ of the subject rather than the “mechanics of the moment,” she mentions.

Python Coding is the best coding language suitable for children and will play a vital role in the future world of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Arun concludes by saying that regardless of a child choosing professional courses, AI will have its influence in the near future and Python is currently the best-suited language for children to code AI programmes.

“It is less complex, easy to learn or use and is an open source,” he concludes.





NU holds virtual White Coat ceremony for College of Pharmacy students

MUSCAT: The College of Pharmacy, National University organised virtual White Coat ceremony at Bausher Campus on February 18, under the auspices of Vice Chancellor Dr Ali al Bemani. The Dignitaries included Dr Salim al Araiimi, Deputy Vice Chancellor and Provost, Prof M P Nair, Chief Finance Officer and Executive Adviser, Nizamuddin, AVC, Dr Saleh al Khusaiby, NU Health Adviser.

College of Pharmacy was established as Oman Medical College in 2003 in academic partnership with West Virginia University, USA. It is the first private Pharmacy College licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Health in the Sultanate of Oman to provide Bachelor of Pharmacy (B. Pharm) programme. More than 600 pharmacists have graduated from College of Pharmacy till date.

The "White Coat" emphasises professionalism and integrity among pharmacists and physicians as these students begin their clinical rotations. The White Coat Ceremony carries the symbolism of past accomplishments and entry into the professional programme.

Dr Ali al Bemani mentioned that this celebration is a take-off signal for pharmacy students to start their clinical training courses which will promote a

sense of professional responsibility among the new pharmacists. Dr Ali wished success for the students.

Dr Salim al Araiimi, DVC and Provost, congratulated students for arriving at this milestone in their career. He advised students to believe in themselves, to embrace the possibilities, reflect on the profound responsibility and work tirelessly to assure that patients receive maximum benefit from their medications with minimal risk.

Dr Khalid al Balushi, Dean of the College of Pharmacy, in his speech, sent a message to the students that wearing the white coat and undertaking the pharmacy oath is the start of their professional career that should be bound with the ethical and professional practice. He congratulated the students for arriving at this stage and gave a word of thanks to the College members, the academic and training partners, and to all College stakeholders.

Due to pandemic Covid-19 restrictions, Dr Khalid al Balushi, Dean College of Pharmacy, presented white coat virtually to a total of 54 students including Omani nationals and from other nationalities and administered The Pharmacist's Oath of integrity. This was followed by awards to Dean's List of Students and to the Students Council.

Manufacturing sector grows by \$5.3 million 2018-2019

RAHMA AL KALBANIYAH
MUSCAT, FEB 21

The added value of the manufacturing sector has grown to \$40 million in 2019 from \$36.9 million in 2015 while the sector's contribution to GDP was nearly \$10.5 million in 2019, an average increase of \$5.3 million in the 2018-2019 period, according to a recent study published by the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF).

The study which covered 14 countries concluded that the Sultanate is among three Arab countries that have seen an increase in the added value of the manufacturing sector at fixed prices of over 4 per cent in 2019 alongside Egypt and Mauritania.

According to the study titled 'the effect of the manufacturing sector on economic growth in the Arab countries', the manufacturing sector in the Sultanate employs 5 per cent of the overall workforce as of 2018



compared to 5.6 per cent in 2010.

In order to develop the manufacturing sector and boost its contribution to GDP, the study recommended that the Sultanate adopts a national strategy and action programmes that focus on

developing the manufacturing sector with the aim of enhancing its added value and boosting economic diversification. Other recommendations included issuing legislations that would boost the manufacturing

sector, bolstering human capital through improving educational and training output, boosting investments and credit facilitations and adopting incentive packages to draw foreign direct investments.

Children prone to Covid-19 strain

FROM PAGE 1

It has more propensity to infect children under the age of 15 years as compared to the older variant which infected mainly adults", says Dr Dilip Singhvi, Specialist Internal Medicine, Apollo Hospital.

Common symptoms

The most commonly seen symptoms of the new variant are cough, fatigue, muscle pain, and sore throat while the loss of taste and smell is less common as compared with the previous variant.

Accordingly, all the precautions, wearing the face



Loss of taste and smell is less common as compared with the previous variant

mask, maintaining social distancing especially while playing outdoors or in schools, keep sanitising hands and avoiding contact with strangers need to be strictly exhorted.

"Parents and teachers in schools have this added responsibility now to ensure that kids maintain the social distancing norms and our children remain safe and healthy", adds Dr Singhvi.

Team to register factories most hit by CRT

MUSCAT: A workshop recommended for forming a work team to identify and register the factories most affected by the newly introduced Cost-Reflective Tariffs (CRT) of electricity.

Eng Sami bin Salim al Sahib, Director-General of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Industry, said that the recommendations will be discussed by a joint work team representing all the stakeholders. The team will identify the factories that consume the most electricity and gauge the loss they have incurred, and devise a mechanism to resolve the issue to enable these factories to boost their production capacity.

The Authority for Public Services Regulation will look into reducing the consumption ceiling for factories undergoing CRT from 150 megawatts to 100 megawatts so as to reduce the number of these factories, the official said.



The workshop debated the challenges facing the industrial sector including the impact of CRT on local industries and new investments and finding suitable solutions for them with a special focus on improving energy efficiency for domestic industries so that they can compete in the regional and international markets.

A number of working

papers that touched on the challenges faced by industrialists were presented at the workshop which also came up with several proposals to overcome these challenges. It discussed the effect of CRT on factories and industrial plants and the method for calculating the electricity tariff for large electricity consumers.

The workshop witnessed an open debate between

the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Authority for Public Services Regulation, the Omani Industrialists Association.

The workshop was attended by representatives from the Authority for Public Services Regulation, the Omani Industrialists Association and owners of high-consumption industries.



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Ethiopian refugees gather to celebrate the 46th anniversary of the Tigray People's Liberation Front at Um Raquba refugee camp in Gedaref, eastern Sudan. — AFP

Sudan, Ethiopia trade accusations in border conflict

KHARTOUM: Sudan on Saturday accused Ethiopia of an “unforgivable insult” in its sharpest statement since a decades-old border dispute flared late last year.

Clashes erupted between Sudanese and Ethiopian forces over Al Fashqa, an area of fertile land settled by Ethiopian farmers that Sudan says lies on its side of a border demarcated at the start of the 20th century, which Ethiopia rejects.

In a statement on Thursday, Ethiopia's foreign ministry said it believes “the conflict being trumpeted by the Sudanese government's military wing could only serve the interests of a third party at the expense of the Sudanese people”.

Sudan's foreign ministry responded on Saturday by saying “slander towards Sudan and accusation of being an agent for other parties is a grave and

unforgivable insult”.

It added: “What the Ethiopian foreign ministry cannot deny is the third party whose troops entered with Ethiopian troops trespassing on Sudanese land.”

Neither country specified the third parties to whom they were referring in their statements, although the veiled references underscored the potential for any conflict to embroil neighbouring countries. Ethiopia may have been referring to Egypt, which has been angered by Ethiopia's construction of a massive hydropower dam on the Blue Nile. Sudan has also expressed concerns over the dam.

Sudan may have been referring to Eritrea, whose troops entered Ethiopia to support beleaguered federal forces in Tigray after a regional force attacked military bases in November, according to the United States and European Union. — Reuters

Iran says talks with IAEA chief ‘fruitful’ as deadline looms

TEHRAN: Iran said on Sunday it had held “fruitful discussions” with UN nuclear watchdog chief Rafael Grossi in Tehran, ahead of a deadline when it is set to restrict the agency's inspections unless the United States lifts painful sanctions.

Grossi's visit comes amid stepped-up efforts between US President Joe Biden's administration, European powers and Iran to salvage the 2015 nuclear deal that has been on the brink of collapse since Donald Trump withdrew from it.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who was to later meet Grossi, signalled that the Islamic republic wants to avoid an “impasse” but also warned that it could step further away from its commitments if Washington does not lift the sanctions.

Grossi, head of the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), arrived in Tehran late on Saturday and met with the head of the Iran Atomic Energy Organisation, Ali Akbar Salehi, early on Sunday.

“Iran and the IAEA held fruitful discussions based on mutual respect, the result of which will be released this evening,” Tehran's Ambassador to the UN agency Kazem Gharibabadi wrote on Twitter.

Grossi was due to hold a press conference when he returns to Vienna in the evening.

Iran's parliament months ago demanded that, if the US does not lift sanctions by this Sunday, Iran will suspend some IAEA inspections from Tuesday. But



Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif meets with IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi in Tehran. — Reuters

Iran has stressed it will not cease working with the IAEA or expel its inspectors.

Zarif told Iran's Press TV on Sunday that he would talk to Grossi about implementing Iran's law while making sure “not to create an impasse, so that he carries out the obligations to show that Iran's nuclear programme remains peaceful”.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said late on Saturday that the “IAEA's inspection capability will be reduced by about 20-30 per cent after the implementation of the parliament's law”.

Iran has notified the UN body it will suspend “voluntary transparency measures” —



IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi.

notably inspection visits to non-nuclear sites, including military sites suspected of nuclear-related activity — if the US fails to lift the sanctions Trump reimposed in 2018.

Zarif said the law mandates the government “not to provide the tapes” of cameras at sites to

the IAEA, adding that technical details would be discussed in Tehran.

“We are not violating the JCPOA, we are implementing remedial measures foreseen in the JCPOA itself,” Zarif insisted, referring to the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

“Once everybody implements their part and their obligations, then there will be talks, and those talks will not be about changing or adding to the agreement”.

Biden has committed to rejoin talks on Tehran's nuclear programme, in a shift away from Trump's policy of “maximum pressure” towards the Islamic republic. — AFP

In virus-hit Lebanon, seamstresses stitch body bags

SIDON, Lebanon: In a Lebanon textile workshop, Umm Omar recalled making school uniforms and holiday garments — before surging coronavirus cases forced her into the grim business of body bags.

“We used to sew festive clothes, outfits for pilgrims, and school uniforms. We brought people joy,” said the 53-year-old workshop supervisor in the southern city of Sidon.

“But now, even if we don't want to, we've been obliged... to shift from joy to sadness”.

Around her, seamstresses in face masks were busy at work sewing black body bags as demand rises due to a spike in Covid-19-

Lebanon's virus outbreak has also forced her team to produce face masks and medical gowns in recent months

related deaths.

Leaning over their machines, they placed spools of thread on holders.

A young man measured fabric and used a stub of chalk to mark out patterns, under a wan neon light.

Others folded the finished bags, resembling those used to store tuxedos or gowns, before



A seamstress sews a body bag for Covid-19 victims at Al Oum institution sewing factory in Saida south of Beirut. — AFP

packaging them in plastic covers.

“Doing this kind of work is upsetting, but we're forced to do it” because of the high demand, said Umm Omar, her face framed by a floral veil.

Lebanon, a country of more than six million, has recorded 343,584 coronavirus cases including 4,092 deaths since the pandemic reached it last year.

In January, it recorded one of the steepest virus upticks in the world after authorities loosened restrictions over the holiday season.

That has left the country's fragile healthcare system struggling to cope.

For the Al Umm textile

workshop, this has meant brisk business. “The deaths have led to a rise in demand,” said Umm Omar, who has worked at the factory for 27 years.

Lebanon's virus outbreak has also forced her team to produce face masks and medical gowns in recent months.

“Of course, we wish from the bottom of our hearts that we could change all this and go back to normal,” Umm Omar said.

After receiving its first doses of the Pfizer vaccine, Lebanon launched a nationwide campaign on Sunday with the goal of vaccinating more than half of the population before the end of the year. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

ANKARA

Turkey probes pro-Kurdish MP over ‘Iraq visit’

Turkish prosecutors launched a probe into a pro-Kurdish MP suspected of having travelled to a Kurdish-controlled region of Iraq where 13 Turkish hostages were killed in a failed rescue.

Lawmaker Dirayet Dilan Tasdemir “is under investigation for belonging to a terrorist organisation,” Ankara prosecutors said, hours after the interior minister accused her in a TV interview. Interior Minister Suleyman Soyulu said that Tasdemir, who belongs



to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), had been in Gara in northern Iraq, where Turkish troops launched the rescue operation against the PKK group designated as “terrorists” by Ankara and its Western allies. — AFP

ALGIERS

35 Algerian pro-democracy activists released

Algerian authorities released at least 35 pro-democracy activists from jail in the past 24 hours under presidential pardons issued ahead of the second anniversary of a popular uprising, rights groups said. The Hirak protest movement, which swept strongman Abdelaziz Bouteflika from power in 2019, marks its second anniversary on Monday, with calls on social media for demonstrations to mark the day.

On Saturday, rights group



the National Committee for the Liberation of Prisoners (CNLD) said at least 35 people had been released from jail in the past 24 hours. — AFP

TELAVIV

Israel re-opens with ‘green pass’ for vaccinated

Israel took a step towards normalcy on Sunday, re-opening a raft of businesses and services following its third national lockdown, with some sites only available to those who have been vaccinated. Nearly three million people, almost a third of Israel's population, have received the two recommended doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, the world's quickest inoculation pace per capita.

With a steady flow of data proving the Pfizer vaccine's



efficacy in stopping serious illness from Covid-19, Israel's government has begun gradually easing restrictions.

Shopping malls and stores with street access re-opened on Sunday, with certain limitations on crowd size. — AFP

In brief

■ MANILA



THOUSANDS EVACUATE AHEAD OF PHILIPPINES TROPICAL STORM

Thousands of people in the southern Philippines fled their homes ahead of a tropical storm expected to bring heavy rains and trigger landslides, officials said.

More than 12,700 residents from 12 towns in the province of Surigaodel Sur province, 835 kilometres south of Manila, were ordered to evacuate homes in low-lying areas and near the coast.

Provincial Governor Ayec Pimentel said more people were expected to be evacuated ahead of tropical storm Dujan's projected landfall on Sunday afternoon along the coast of Surigao. — **dpa**

■ SYDNEY



AUSTRALIAN PM MORRISON GETS COVID-19 VACCINE

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison received the first dose of a Covid-19 vaccine calling the start of the nation's vaccination programme a "massive step" that will enable it to return to normal. Up to 4 million Australians are expected to be inoculated by March, with Morrison among a small group receiving the first round of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

"This is the beginning of a big game change," Morrison told reporters moments after getting injected at a medical centre in Sydney. "Every day that goes past from here gets more normal. And that is what is exciting about today." — **AFP**

■ SKARDU



MISSING K2 CLIMBERS ARE DEAD: PAKISTAN OFFICIAL

Three climbers lost on Pakistan's K2 are believed to have died on the mountain, a Pakistan official said more than a week after the group went missing while trying to summit the world's second highest peak. Climbers John Snorri from Iceland, Juan Pablo Mohr from Chile and Muhammad Ali Sadpara of Pakistan lost contact with base camp on February 5.

"All the weather experts, climbers, and experts from the Pakistan army have reached the conclusion that a human being cannot live for that long in such harsh weather. That's why we are announcing that they are no more," said Raja Nasir Ali Khan, a provincial minister for tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan, where K2 is located. — **AFP**

UN condemns Myanmar after 3 killed in unrest



Daw Myint Kyi (R), mother of Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, prays for her daughter during her funeral service in Naypyidaw. — **AFP**

YANGON: A lethal attack on anti-coup protesters in Myanmar sparked fresh UN condemnation of the country's new military regime on Sunday, as mourners held a funeral for a young woman who became a national symbol of resistance to the junta.

Authorities have gradually ratcheted up their tactics against a massive and largely peaceful civil disobedience campaign demanding the return of ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Saturday marked the deadliest day so far in more than two weeks of nationwide street demonstrations after two people were killed when security forces fired upon a rally, while a third man was shot dead in Yangon overnight.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the use of "deadly

violence" against the crowd in Mandalay.

"The use of lethal force, intimidation & harassment against peaceful demonstrators is unacceptable," Guterres wrote.

Security forces in the country's second-largest city had attempted to raid a shipyard and detain port staff on strike to protest against the army takeover.

Medical rescue workers said troops used live rounds and rubber bullets against a crowd of people who had started flinging rocks in an effort to stop the arrests.

"Two people were killed," said Hlaing Min Oo, the chief of a Mandalay-based volunteer emergency rescue team.

Another 30 were wounded, with half of the injuries from live rounds, he added.

A graphic video circulated on

“The use of lethal force, intimidation & harassment against peaceful demonstrators is unacceptable

ANTONIO GUTERRES,
UN Secretary-General

Facebook showing a teenaged victim, played on the ground and bleeding from his head as a bystander placed a hand on his chest to feel for a heartbeat.

State media made no mention of the deaths but blamed demonstrators for the affray and said protest leaders had been detained.

"Some" protesters had been injured by security forces, the *Global New Light of Myanmar* reported, along with three soldiers and eight police officers.

In a separate incident on Saturday, a 30-year-old man was killed in Yangon while patrolling the neighbourhood as part of an initiative to guard against night-time arrests of activists. Tin Htut Hein's sister-in-law said he had been shot dead by police. "His wife is now heartbroken," she said. "They have a four-year-old son."

— **AFP**



This aerial photo shows a housing complex one day after flooding in Pondok Gede, Bekasi, West Java. — **AFP**

Severe floods kill five in Indonesia's capital

JAKARTA: Five people were killed in the severe floods that submerged entire neighbourhoods in Indonesia's capital Jakarta, authorities said on Sunday, as residents returned to clean their homes and salvage belongings.

The city was struck by torrential rains over the weekend, which flooded dozens of major roads and forced hundreds of people to rush to emergency shelters.

A 67-year-old man was found dead after he became trapped in his waterlogged house in the badly hit southern part of the capital on Saturday, Jakarta disaster mitigation agency head Sabdo Kurnianto said.

He added that three boys died

after being swept away by the floods, and one girl drowned.

Indonesia's meteorological agency warned that Greater Jakarta — a region of around 30 million people that is regularly hit by floods in the rainy season — can expect more heavy downpours next week.

"The river overflowed and brought a lot of mud... I have suffered great financial loss," said Ali Fatullah, a fruit seller in the town of Bekasi on the outskirts of Jakarta. He said furniture and electronic devices were damaged by the water.

Kurnianto said some 1,700 people remained in shelters, though many residents had started returning to their homes.

— **AFP/dpa**

India's Covid-19 infections rise again

NEW DELHI: Six Indian states have seen a fresh surge of Covid-19 cases and have been asked to regularly monitor mutant strains through testing and genome sequencing and refocus on surveillance and containment measures, a federal Health Ministry bulletin said on Sunday.

The latest spike in cases has raised concern that new mutant variations of the virus may lead to a fresh wave of

the pandemic in the country which has seen a substantial slowdown of the spread of the virus between September and January.

The largest spike in cases have been reported in Kerala and Maharashtra over the past four weeks, followed by Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh — both of which share borders with Maharashtra — as well as Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. — **dpa**

Pakistan zoo begins mammoth makeover

ISLAMABAD: A rundown Pakistan zoo once home to what was dubbed the "world's loneliest elephant" and notorious for housing animals in cramped concrete enclosures has launched an ambitious \$7.5 million makeover plan.

Animal rights activists had campaigned against the plight of Islamabad Zoo's biggest attraction — a 35-year-old bull named Kaavan, the last remaining Asian elephant in the country — who had lived alone since the death of his mate eight years earlier.

Kaavan was transferred to Cambodia late last year in a blaze of publicity after his plight caught the attention of US superstar Cher, who helped raise funds for the jumbo relocation.

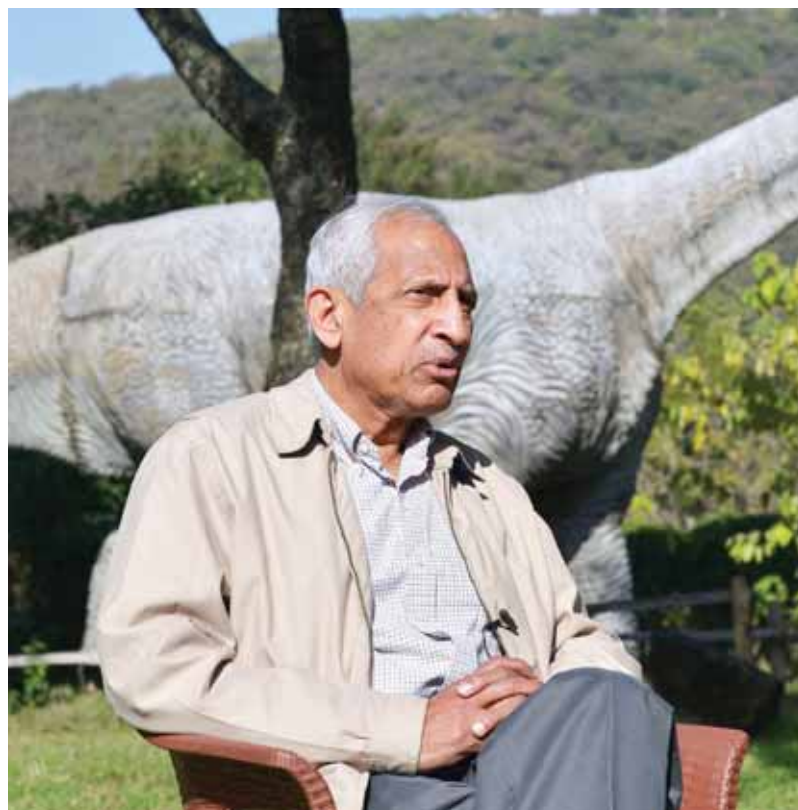
While the elephant now has hundreds of acres to roam alongside dozens of companions in northern Cambodia, his last

Mistreatment of animals is commonplace in Pakistan, but attitudes are changing

years in Pakistan were anything but tranquil.

Islamabad Zoo was bereft of any natural vegetation and many animals there developed classic caged behaviour, such as constant swaying or repetitive pacing.

Established in 1978 and eventually growing to 30 acres, keepers struggled to care for the zoo's residents. Conditions were so bad that a High Court judge last year ordered it closed, and every animal to be relocated — an exercise in itself that ended in tragedy. Two lions died during their relocation when zookeepers attempted to pry them from their



Vaqar Zakaria, member of the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board during an interview in Dino Park, located in the Margalla Hill National Park in Islamabad. — **AFP**

pen by setting ablaze piles of hay.

Pakistan's climate change ministry has now taken charge of the zoo's rehabilitation, with plans to establish a vastly improved conservation centre.

"We have temporarily shifted some 380 different animals — including monkeys, nilgai (antelope), zebras and bears — to different sanctuaries within and outside Pakistan," said Waqar Zakriya of the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board (IWMB).

"They will all be brought back — not to be kept in captivity but in a national park in a natural habitat."

The centre will also include facilities to treat and rehabilitate injured indigenous wildlife — the first of its kind in the country.

The initiative was "brilliant and extraordinary," said Rab Nawaz, the Director of World Wide Fund for Nature in Pakistan. — **AFP**

UK accelerates vaccine rollout as end of lockdown in sight

LONDON: The UK government on Sunday vowed to offer a first coronavirus vaccine dose to every adult by the end of July, as it readied to announce a gradual easing of its third lockdown in England.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who will outline the lockdown review in parliament on Monday, said the faster inoculation campaign would seek to offer a first dose to everyone aged over 50 by mid-April. The previous targets in the world-first campaign were to inoculate over 50s by May, and all adults by September.

“We will now aim to offer a jab to every adult by the end of July, helping us protect the most vulnerable sooner, and take further steps to ease some of the restrictions,” Johnson said, while stressing the exit would be “cautious and phased”.

Britain, one of the hardest-hit countries in the world by the Covid-19 pandemic with more than 120,000 deaths, was also the first nation to begin a mass vaccination campaign, in December. More than 17 million people have now received at least a first dose — one-third of the UK population.

But with infection rates and hospitalisations soaring after an easing of restrictions over Christmas, the government imposed a third lockdown at the start of January, closing schools, non-essential businesses and hospitality venues across England.

Case numbers are falling again and early evidence suggests the vaccinations are helping



A person waits to get the coronavirus vaccine as a health worker prepares an injection with a dose, at a vaccination centre in Westfield Stratford City shopping centre in London. — Reuters

to reduce serious illness, while political pressure is building on the government to return to normality.

Johnson was meeting with senior ministers on Sunday to finalise his House of Commons statement, which is expected to endorse the reopening of English schools on March 8 — although teaching unions say allowing all pupils to return on the same day is “reckless”.

Johnson is expected to lay out

More than 17 million people have now received at least a first dose, one-third of the UK population

a gradual easing more widely after March 8, including for outdoor activities. But the full reopening of retail and pubs, and attendance at sporting events, will be delayed until later.

“All of us understandably want to go back to normal, but it is right to be cautious,” Health Secretary Matt Hancock told Sky News on Sunday, noting that nearly 20,000 people remain in hospital with Covid.

Keir Starmer, leader of the main opposition Labour party, said he disagreed with the teaching unions’ opposition but urged the government to widen extra-hours access so that children can catch up ahead of exams. — AFP

Niger votes in presidential run-off

NIAMEY: Niger voted on Sunday in the second round of a presidential election that is expected to usher in the first democratic transition of power since independence from France in 1960.

Ruling party candidate Mohamed Bazoum is the favourite after leading in the first round on December 27 with 39.3 per cent of the vote. He is up against former President Mahamane Ousmane, who scored 17 per cent.

Bazoum, who had held several top positions in outgoing President Mahamadou Issoufou’s governments including the foreign and interior ministries, is backed by the candidates who came third and fourth in the first round.

In the capital Niamey, crowds of voters, some wearing masks against Covid-19, queued in dusty school courtyards.

“I hope that luck is on my side, but I have many reasons to believe it is indeed,” Bazoum said after voting.

Issoufou hailed the historic nature of the election in a country that has seen four coups since independence, congratulating Nigeriens on their “political maturity”.

Bazoum, 61, has vowed to continue Issoufou’s policies, making security a focal point as the West African country battles insurgencies, while attempting to revamp the economy.

Ousmane, 71, was Niger’s first democratically elected president and was ousted in a 1996 military coup. Endorsed by around a dozen smaller parties and first round candidates, he



Niger’s outgoing president Mahamadou Issoufou casts his vote during Niger’s presidential election run-off in Niamey. — AFP

has promised to bring change and tackle corruption.

“The vote is in every way between continuity and change,” said Mahamadou Harouna, a 30-year-old student who declined to say how he voted.

One of the world’s poorest nations, Niger has struggled with drought, floods, coronavirus and weak prices for its main export, uranium. The International Monetary Fund expects Niger’s economy to rebound to pre-pandemic levels, with growth of over 6 per cent this year after dipping by 1.2 per cent in 2020.

Niger is facing two of Africa’s deadliest insurgencies — one near its western border with Mali and Burkina Faso, where militants linked to al Qaeda and Islamic State have carried out attacks. Along its southeastern border with Nigeria attacks by Boko Haram have killed hundreds. — AFP

Fiery plane scatters massive debris over US city of Denver

DENVER: A United Airlines plane suffered a fiery engine failure on Saturday shortly after taking off from Denver for Hawaii, dropping massive debris on a residential area before a safe emergency landing, officials said.

A video shot from inside the aircraft — which had 231 passengers and 10 crew onboard — showed the right engine ablaze and wobbling on the wing of the Boeing 777-200, its cover entirely missing as the aircraft flew over a barren landscape.

There were no injuries to the plane or on the ground, authorities said.

“I can honestly say I thought we were going to die at one point

— because we started dropping altitude right after the explosion,” passenger David Delucia told *The Denver Post*. “I grabbed my wife’s hand and said, ‘We’re done.’”

Delucia said his stepdaughter tweeted the online video, which was shot by another passenger.

“Flight UA328 from Denver to Honolulu experienced an engine failure shortly after departure, returned safely to Denver and was met by emergency crews as a precaution,” United Airlines said in a statement.

“The majority of customers originally on UA328 are currently on their way to Honolulu on a new flight,” it added, saying those who did not wish to travel immediately



Residents inspect damage and take pictures after debris from a United Airlines airplane’s engine fell in the neighbourhood of Broomfield, outside Denver, Colorado. — AFP

had been provided with hotel accommodation.

In a recording of the distress call obtained from the website LiveATC, which broadcasts air traffic communications, the pilot requested emergency permission to turn back to Denver.

“Three-twenty-eight, uh, heavy. We’ve experienced engine failure, need to turn. Mayday, mayday,” he said, without obvious panic in his voice.

“Mayday, aircraft, uh, just experienced engine failure,” he said, after the tower asked him to repeat himself. “Need a turn immediately.”

Meanwhile, residents in the Denver suburb of Broomfield

found large pieces of the plane scattered around their community, including a giant circular piece of metal that landed in the yard of Kirby Klements.

“It was a little overwhelming,” he told CNN. “It landed square on top of my truck and fell off,” he said, reporting that a separate large piece of debris had put a five-foot hole in a neighbour’s roof.

The Federal Aviation Administration said it was “aware of reports of debris in the vicinity of the airplane’s flight path,” adding that the agency and the National Transportation Safety Board would be investigating the incident. — AFP

ABUJA

Nigerian air force passenger plane crash kills 7

A small Nigerian air force passenger plane crashed just outside Abuja airport due to engine failure on Sunday, killing all seven people on board, the air force said.

“First responders are at the scene. Sadly, all 7 personnel on board died in the crash,” said air force spokesman Ibikunle Daramole said in a statement.

The Beechcraft KingAir B350i aircraft crashed while returning to the Abuja airport after reporting engine failure en route



to Minna, he said. The city of Minna lies about 110 kilometres northwest of Abuja. In scrubland just outside the airport perimeter, dozens of military and airport officials picked through the charred remnants of the airplane.

KABUL

2 killed in powerful Kabul blast

At least two people were killed after a bomb struck a police vehicle in the Afghan capital Kabul, police said on Sunday.

Another five people, including two children, were wounded in the blast near a busy traffic roundabout, Kabul police spokesman Ferdows Faramarz said.

The blast was so powerful that it was heard across the city.

A video of the scene taken immediately after the explosion showed two kids crying over the



body of their mother.

Bombings and assassinations have occurred on a near-daily basis in Kabul in recent months, targeting Afghan security forces, civilian government employees, journalists, religious scholars and civil society activists. — dpa

LIBYA

Libya’s minister escapes assassination attempt

The powerful interior minister of Libya’s unity government survived an assassination attempt on Sunday on a highway near the capital Tripoli, an official from his inner circle said.

Fathi Bashagha’s convoy “was fired on from an armoured car while he was on the highway. His police escort returned fire. Two of the assailants were arrested and a third is in hospital,” the source said, adding that “the minister is fine”.

Bashagha, a heavyweight in



Libyan politics, was returning from a routine visit to a new security unit overseen by his department, the same source said. — AFP

Teachers add value to lives

Teachers are human beings like all of us! Similar to people of other professions, teachers make mistakes, lose interest and get demotivated. However, they are unfairly stereotyped by individuals, society and students alike. Teachers sometimes are even blamed for the shortcoming of students. Some critics even cast aspersions on the personal life of teachers.

Some have accused teachers of being spoiled by the daily stress-free work routine, number of holidays and a highly paid salary. None of these claims are true. Teachers are extremely overloaded with many tasks and administrative responsibilities. Number of leaves and off days are almost similar to all other government employees and they are similarly paid like others. Perhaps, their salaries are not even enough to compensate for their big responsibility at school and providing quality education to students.

What a pity to see this stereotype is passed through generations over the years! However, it is certainly



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SOME STUDENTS
MAY HAVE
FORGOTTEN
WHAT YOU SAID,
BUT MANY WILL
NEVER FORGET
HOW YOU MADE
THEIR DREAMS
COME TRUE

an unhealthy practice, which could cheapen the value of teachers, who were making all of us and paving our ways to the future! Oprah Winfrey, American talk show host and actor, was right to say, “For everyone of us that succeeds, it is because there is somebody there to show you the way out. The light doesn’t always necessarily have to be in your family; for me it was teachers and schools.”

Reflecting on seeing is believing, would anybody like to step into the shoes of a teacher even for a day? Teaching over 100 students with different individual learning challenges and undisciplined behaviours is not something that everyone can withstand?! Think of a teacher who handles 4-5 classes a day.

All those who are casting stones will realise how hard is teaching and how difficult it is to be a teacher. The list of accountabilities gets even longer every day, taking into account educational, social and disciplinary tasks in addition to the extra-curricular activities that teachers handle within and outside schools.

Teaching is the core of every other profession. Without teachers in all educational institutions, there will be no other professions. All those pilots, engineers, doctors and others were students one day and had been taught by teachers at schools, colleges and universities. Without teachers’ encouragement and support, students would never have realised their dreams.

As the teacher is the heart of the educational system, s/he is like a candle that burns out to show the way for students, and never give up on them, no matter how challenging it might be. All of us are here because, at some point, somebody did that for us. A teacher to some people may be just a teacher, but to many a teacher is a real hero.

Dear teachers, in teaching you cannot see the fruit of a day’s work. It is invisible and remains so, maybe for twenty years or more. Some students may have forgotten what you said, but many will never forget how you made their dreams come true. Never give up on your noble mission.

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

POST-COVID

Tech poses risks to privacy in workplace

ROB LEVER

People returning to work following the long pandemic will find an array of tech-infused gadgetry to improve workplace safety but which could pose risks for long-term personal and medical privacy.

Temperature checks, distance monitors, digital “passports”, wellness surveys and robotic cleaning and disinfection systems are being deployed in many workplaces seeking to reopen.

Tech giants and start-ups are offering solutions which include computer vision

detection of vital signs to wearables which can offer early indications of the onset of Covid-19 and apps that keep track of health metrics.

Salesforce and IBM have partnered on a “digital health pass” to let people share their vaccination and health status on their smartphone.

Clear, a tech start-up known for airport

screening, has created its own health pass which is being used by organisations such as the National Hockey League and MGM Resorts.

Fitbit, the wearable tech maker recently acquired by Google, has its own “Ready for Work” program that includes daily check-ins using data from its devices.

Microsoft and insurance giant United HealthCare have deployed a ProtectWell app which includes a daily symptom screener, and Amazon has deployed a “distance assistant” in its warehouses to help employees maintain safe distances.

And a large coalition of technology firms and health organisations are working on a digital vaccination certificate, which can be used on smartphones to show evidence of inoculation for Covid-19. With these systems, employees may face screenings even as they enter a building lobby, and monitoring in elevators, hallways and throughout the workplace.

The monitoring “blurs the line between people’s workplace and personal lives”, said Darrell West, a Brookings Institution Vice President with the think-tank’s Center for Technology Innovation.

A report last year by the consumer activist group Public Citizen identified at least 50 apps and technologies released during the pandemic “marketed as workplace surveillance tools to combat Covid-19.”

The report said some systems go so far as identifying people who may not spend enough time in front of a sink to note inadequate hand-washing. — AFP



For some companies their business model involves gathering data and using it for some monetisable purpose and that poses a risk to privacy

FORREST BRISCOE
Penn State University

NAVALNY EFFECT

European Union likely to approve sanctions over Russia crackdown

MAX DELANY

EU foreign ministers are expected to give the go-ahead on Monday to sanctions on Russia over the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny and a crackdown on protests.

The top diplomats from the 27-nation bloc meet in Brussels for talks that will also include a wide-ranging videoconference with new US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The move to target the Kremlin comes two weeks after EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell was caught in a diplomatic ambush in Moscow that enraged member states.

Capitals are eyeing using the EU’s new human rights sanctions regime for the first time to hit individuals responsible for the clampdown with asset freezes and visa bans, diplomats said.

“I expect a political agreement to be reached”, a senior European diplomat said.

“Then experts from the member states should work on the names.”

The mood towards Moscow has hardened in the wake of Borrell’s disastrous trip to Russia, during which Moscow announced it was expelling three European diplomats and rebuffed talk of cooperation.

“They rejected out of hand any dialogue that was proposed”, a senior EU official said.

The EU has already hit Russia with waves of sanctions over the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Moscow’s fuelling of the war in Ukraine.

The bloc in October slapped six officials on a blacklist over the poisoning of Navalny with Novichok, a nerve agent.

President Vladimir Putin’s most prominent domestic critic was this month jailed for almost three years after returning to Russia following



Alexei Navalny stands inside a glass cell during a court hearing at the Babushkinsky district court in Moscow on Sunday. – AFP

CAPITALS ARE
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AND VISA BANS

treatment in Germany.

His sentencing sparked nationwide protests that saw baton-wielding security forces detain thousands.

Two of Navalny’s closest allies are set to meet with a dozen EU foreign ministers in Brussels on Sunday to push for sanctions targeting high-profile oligarchs they accuse of funding Putin’s regime.

But diplomats say any measures have to be tied directly to abuses and need to stand up to challenges in court.

While European countries appear to be readying a common front against the Kremlin they are also keen to allow for cooperation on efforts to revive the Iran nuclear deal after former US leader Donald Trump withdrew in 2018.

The EU is currently looking to broker a meeting between Washington, Tehran and other signatories — including Moscow — to try to work out how to salvage the 2015 accord.

The repression in Russia is not the only rights issue set to be addressed at the meeting.

A response to a military coup and increasingly lethal crackdown on protesters in Myanmar is to feature on the agenda, as are measures over disputed elections last year in Venezuela.

The senior EU official said that ministers were expected to move towards sanctioning Myanmar military officers and placing Venezuelan officials on a blacklist. — AFP

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AL HARTHY, TOM
CANNING AND JONNY ADAM
IMPRESS IN RD4

OMAN RACING 8TH IN
MAIDEN ALMS GT TEAM
STANDINGS WITH 24 POINTS

OMAN RACING WRAP-UP ALMS WITH SEASON-BEST FOURTH

ABU DHABI: Excellent pace, first class racecraft and an all-round great performance ensured Ahmad al Harthy and Oman Racing wrapped-up the 2021 Asian Le Mans Series with a season-best fourth place GT Class finish during an exciting final race of the campaign in Abu Dhabi on Saturday.

As during Friday's third round at Yas Marina Circuit, Al Harthy and team-mates Tom Canning and Jonny Adam were in contention for a dream podium result and ultimately just missed out, after four hours of incredible action, by a mere 3.5 seconds.

Even so, the top four result was a fantastic way for Oman Racing to conclude its maiden campaign in the ultra-competitive Asian Le Mans Series and gives Al Harthy a major boost at the beginning of the 2021 motor racing year.

"We really tried to capitalise on everything possible and we knew everyone was on different strategies, P4 was the maximum we could get out of the car and we're happy with

it", said Oman's number one racing driver, "It's great to end the series with our strongest drives, both in Friday's race and the finale on Saturday.

"My stint was very good again. I had a good amount of clean, uninterrupted racing which was great for me and we pushed as hard as we could. It's great for us to have been so very close to the podium in the final ALMS race and it's always an honour and pleasure for me to represent Oman in these big international championships. We look forward to continuing to do that!"

Starting the season finale from eighth on the GT class grid, Canning took the first stint of the race and maintained position early on before moving up into seventh place. Into the top six with around 10 minutes elapsed, the Safety Car then appeared moments later due to an incident.

Racing resumed after another 10 minutes or so, with Canning holding sixth, but at the half-hour mark the Safety Car was required again after a heavy accident involving two cars. Teams took the opportunity to serve

pit-stops during the lengthy second cautionary period and when all had shaken out, Canning was up into third in class and the outright top 10.

Just after the end of the opening hour the competitors were unleashed again and Canning climbed into second in GT ahead of a Full Course Yellow period 80 minutes into the race. The young Briton then pitted shortly after to hand over the No.97 Aston Martin Vantage GT3 to Al Harthy.

Running fifth in class when everything settled, the Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, National Bank of Oman, Omantel and Barr Al Jissah supported driver took fourth around 25 minutes into his stint and then moved into the podium placings a couple of laps later.

FAULTLESS DRIVE

Driving faultlessly as the race reached the halfway point and dusk began to set-in, Al Harthy was still third and running brilliantly. Soon climbing into second in GT, Al Harthy took the class lead with one

hour and 45 minutes to go when the McLaren 720S ahead pitted.

Circulating a couple of seconds clear of the No 99 Porsche 911, the Omani reeled off lap after lap without putting a wheel wrong and with just 90 minutes to run he was still inside the overall top 10 and well over 40 seconds clear of his closest class rival.

After an outstanding stint, Al Harthy pitted with roughly one hour and 25 minutes left on the clock to hand over to Adam from the lead. Threading into the race seventh in GT, the Aston Martin factory driver had risen to fourth with an hour remaining and was less than six seconds shy of the podium.

With a late 'splash and dash' fuel stop required, Adam entered the pits for the final time with 10 minutes to go and rejoined in fifth but less than two seconds away from the podium battle. Into the final five minutes Adam had caught the group, and on the ante-penultimate lap he took fourth from Renauer. At the flag after four hours, Adam was just 3.5 seconds shy of the rostrum and 16th overall.



**OMAN
CRICKET
CLUB (OCC)**

**Invitation to attend the General Body
Meeting of the Club for the years
2020 & 2021.**

The Board of Management of the Oman Cricket Club (OCC) wish to inform that Annual General Meeting of the Club for the years 2020 & 2021 scheduled on 28th February 2021 is postponed and now it will be held on Tuesday 30th March 2021 at Al Falaj Hotel, commencing at 7:00 pm. All Members wishing to attend this meeting and whose membership may have expired are requested to proceed with renewal of the membership with effect from the date of this announcement. The last date for renewal of membership is Wednesday 24th March 2021 before 5:00 pm.

As per Article No. 29 of the Statute of the Sports Clubs No.124/2008, the meeting will be considered valid in the presence of an absolute majority of members of the club who are entitled to attend (half + one). If the required number of members are unavailable at 7:30 pm the meeting could be postponed to another date within 15 days from the date of the first meeting, or be held on the same day at 8:00 pm.

The second meeting held on the same day will be considered valid in the presence of (quarter) of working members. Agenda will be available at OCC office before 7 days of scheduled meeting.

**Secretary of the Club
Chairman of the Board of Directors**



Luis Alberto lifts Lazio to fourth in Serie A

Luis Alberto scored the only goal as Lazio battled past Sampdoria 1-0 to move fourth in Serie A on Saturday before they take on holders Bayern Munich in the Champions League last 16 next week.



Ancelotti proves to be the Liverpool slayer again

While his assistant Duncan Ferguson ran onto the field, punching the air with delight, Everton Manager Carlo Ancelotti took Saturday's 2-0 derby triumph over Liverpool in his usual unflappable manner.



West Ham United's Jesse Lingard scores their second goal against Tottenham Hotspur at London Stadium. — Reuters

West Ham move to fourth as Spurs crash again

LONDON: West Ham moved into fourth in the Premier League with a 2-1 win against troubled Tottenham on Sunday that left their London rivals' top four bid in tatters.

Jose Mourinho's side slumped to a fifth defeat in their last six league games as they paid the price for a sloppy defensive display at the London Stadium.

Michail Antonio put West Ham in front early in the first half and Jesse Lingard doubled the hosts' advantage after the break.

Lucas Moura reduced the deficit with his first league goal since September, but spluttering Spurs were unable to salvage a point.

West Ham climbed two points above Chelsea into the

EPL RESULTS & POINTS TABLE											
ON SUNDAY											
West Ham 2 (Antonio 5, Lingard 47) Tottenham 1 (Moura 64)											
ON SATURDAY											
Burnley 0 West Brom 0											
Liverpool 0 Everton 2 (Richarlison 3, Sigurdsson 83-pen)											
Southampton 1 (Minamino 33) Chelsea 1 (Mount 54-pen)											
Fulham 1 (Lookman 61) Sheffield United 0											
English Premier League table after Sunday's first match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):											
Man City	24	17	5	2	49	15	56				
Man Utd	24	13	7	4	50	31	46				
Leicester	24	14	4	6	42	26	46				
West Ham	25	13	6	6	39	29	45				
Chelsea	25	12	7	6	41	25	43				
Liverpool	25	11	7	7	45	34	40				
Everton	24	12	4	8	35	35	40				
Aston Villa	22	11	3	8	36	24	36				
Tottenham	24	10	6	8	37	27	36				
Arsenal	24	10	4	10	31	25	34				
Wolves	25	9	6	10	26	32	33				
Leeds	24	10	2	12	40	43	32				
Southampton	24	8	6	10	31	40	30				
Crystal Palace	24	8	5	11	27	42	29				
Burnley	25	7	7	11	18	30	28				
Brighton	24	5	11	8	25	30	26				
Newcastle	24	7	4	13	25	40	25				
Fulham	25	4	10	11	21	32	22				
West Brom	25	2	8	15	19	55	14				
Sheffield Utd	25	3	2	20	15	41	11				

Champions League spots as their unexpected European challenge gathered pace with a seventh win in their last nine league matches.

It was a first triumph for West Ham boss David Moyes in 16 meetings with Mourinho.

And while Moyes has sparked a remarkable revival at West Ham, who were in a relegation battle when he arrived last season, Mourinho's Tottenham are in the middle of a woeful campaign.

They are languishing in ninth

and trail West Ham by nine points, albeit with a game in hand.

Tottenham have already lost eight league games this season — the second-worst return of Mourinho's career after losing nine with Chelsea in 2015-16.

Mourinho will have to turn the tide quickly to save his job after Tottenham's latest flop.

Tottenham had conceded nine goals in their last three games in all competitions, underlining the defensive flaws that have plagued them since they squandered a three-goal lead in the closing minutes of their 3-3 draw with West Ham in October.

Antonio exploited more dismal defending to open the scoring in the fifth minute. — AFP

World Cup options on show in NZ-Australia T20 series

CHRISTCHURCH: New Zealand and Australia go into a five-match Twenty20 series in Christchurch on Monday with one eye on winning the series and one on the World Cup in India later this year.

Rival captains Kane Williamson and Aaron Finch said on Sunday the series offered a chance to look at the potential balance of their squads ahead of the championship eight months away.

"The first aim is to win the series but there's also a bit of information grabbing throughout the series with guys in some different roles, potentially", Australia captain Finch said.

Neither captain was prepared to name their line-up for game one although Finch indicated he would join Matthew Wade and the uncapped Josh Philippe at the top of the order with Glenn Maxwell and Marcus Stoinis rounding out the top five.

The Black Caps confirmed hard-hitting opener Martin Guptill, who had been under an injury cloud, had passed a fitness test and would open — leaving no room for the uncapped Finn Allen who was the form player in New Zealand's domestic T20 series.

Guptill had averaged a low 11.5 before being injured in the home series while the 21-year-old Allen blazed away with 512 runs at an impressive 56.88.

"Every series you play is an opportunity to grow as a side and we have the World Twenty20s which are in the back of your mind",



Every series you play is an opportunity to grow as a side and we have the World Twenty20s which are in the back of your mind

KANE WILLIAMSON
New Zealand captain

Williamson said. "There's a lot of players around who are playing really, really well"

Preparation has not been ideal for Australia, who were scheduled to end their 14 days in managed isolation as part of New Zealand's strict Covid-19 regulations on Sunday — 24 hours ahead of the first match.

But Williamson did not expect Australia to be rusty.

"Whatever Australian team is put out is strong. They do have the majority of their consistent Twenty20 side there, with also the opportunity of bringing in a lot of talented youngsters they do have", he said.

Game one takes place on the 10th anniversary of a destructive 6.3-magnitude earthquake that claimed 185 lives in Christchurch. Williamson and Finch will lay a wreath at the anniversary memorial service hours before the cricket starts.

— AFP

India to be wary of tricky twilight conditions at Motera

AHMEDABAD, India: Indian players will have to focus more on their batting during challenging twilight conditions in a pink ball day-night Test against England later this week, opener Rohit Sharma said on Sunday.

Sharma's comments came on the heels of India's disastrous show in their last pink ball match against Australia in December.

The vaunted Indian side was skittled out for 36 — their lowest-ever score in Test cricket — as Australia romped home to an eight-wicket victory.

India and England are tied 1-1 in the current series and the third match beginning on Wednesday will see the home team contesting in a day-night game once again.

The match will go ahead at Ahmedabad's revamped Sardar Patel Stadium, the largest cricket venue in the world with a seating capacity of 110,000.



Sharma, who missed December's Adelaide game with an injury, said the conditions become tougher for batsmen

when the sun is just about to set.

"It's a little challenging because the weather and light suddenly changes. You have to focus slightly

more", he said.

"All our batters are aware that they have to be mindful of this session."

The match will go ahead at Ahmedabad's revamped Sardar Patel Stadium, the largest cricket venue in the world with a seating capacity of

110,000

Stakes are high in the game for both India and England, who are vying with Australia to make it to the final of the inaugural World Test Championship at Lord's in June.

New Zealand have already qualified for the final.

But Sharma said India would try not to think too much about making it to the final and instead focus on the matches at hand.

"We are happy to qualify and play the final (at Lord's) but there are little steps to take before that. We have to focus on the two Test

matches and see what happens after that", he said.

"It is important not to focus too far ahead as it adds too much pressure. We must stay in the present and focus on the job at hand."

The swashbuckling batsman also defended the turning pitch that India dished out for the second Test in Chennai.

"Pitch is same for both the teams, I don't know why it is discussed so much. Everyone takes advantage of home conditions." — AFP

MELBOURNE:

A tournament that had to contend

with many uncertainties

due to the Covid-19

pandemic, climaxed

with Novak Djokovic

remaining an

unbreakable force as he

thrashed Daniil Medvedev

to claim a record-extending

ninth Australian Open

title on Sunday. The world

number one's 7-5, 6-2, 6-2

triumph under the lights at Rod

Laver Arena secured his 18th

Grand Slam title, bringing him

within tantalising reach of Roger

Federer and Rafael Nadal's all-time

men's record of 20. Much like

Dominic Thiem in last year's

final, Djokovic faced an

opponent desperate

for success and his

own seat at the Grand

Slam table.

Unlike Thiem, who

pushed Djokovic to five

sets, Medvedev never really

threatened in his second Grand

Slam final.

Djokovic made a mockery of the

Russian's 20-match winning streak and his

pre-match barb that all the pressure to win was

on the champion.

He broke him seven times for the match and

closed out the one-sided contest with a net-rush

and a brilliant leaping volley.

Having extended his unbeaten record in nine

finals at Melbourne Park, the Serb roared in

triumph and wrapped up his team in a group hug.

After acknowledging Medvedev's congratulations,

Djokovic thanked the blue centre court during

the trophy ceremony.

"I would like to thank Rod Laver Arena. I

love you each year more and more. It's been

a love affair that keeps growing. Thank you so

much," he said.

"On the court, he's (Medvedev) definitely one of the

toughest players that I ever faced in my life.

"It's a matter of time when you hold a Grand Slam that's

for sure. If you don't mind waiting a few more years."

Djokovic now has won six Grand Slam titles after the age of

30, equalling Nadal's record.

SLAMMED DOWN

He had said pre-match that Medvedev was the man to

beat in Melbourne Park and seemed determined

to do it quickly as he slammed down an ace first

point and broke Medvedev immediately.

With an acrobatic, leaping smash,

he shot out to a 3-0 lead.

It was deflating start for Medvedev but he rallied to 3-3.

Running the Serb ragged in an epic rally,

Medvedev clinched two break points

when Djokovic netted a drop-shot

from the baseline and the Serb

dropped serve with a smash into

the net. With Medvedev matching

him on the baseline, Djokovic tried

pulling him to the net, the Russian's

least favourite part of the court.

MEDVEDEV FURY

The ploy paid off as Djokovic ripped

a backhand passing shot for three set

points and took it when a flustered

Medvedev thumped a forehand into the

net. The momentum swung to Medvedev

as Djokovic's backhand wavered when

serving first in the second set.

Yet the Russian could not consolidate,

handing the break back with an error-

strewn game.

Play was suspended briefly mid-point at

2-1 after a protester yelled "free the refugees"

repeatedly during play before being ejected

to cheers from the crowd.

Medvedev seemed unperturbed when

he fired an ace on the next point but then

dropped serve in a hurry with a pair of

unforced errors.

Djokovic marched on to a 5-2 lead and

Medvedev smashed his racket in fury.

The Russian sunk deeper into a funk,

slapping a forehand long to concede two set

points before being almost knocked off his feet

by a sizzling Djokovic return.

Worse was to come as Medvedev started

the third by being broken twice in succession,

a weak volley into the net handing Djokovic a

3-0 lead.

It had all gone downhill so quickly but

Medvedev battled to break back.

Yet there was no way to breach Djokovic's

stonewall defence. Holding to 5-2 after an epic

rally, Djokovic went to his chair with a pointed

tap at his temple and an icy gaze at the Russian.

In a thrilling match point, Djokovic raced

around the court before ending up at the net

where he leapt high to smash a lob past the

Russian and claim his second hat-trick of titles

at Melbourne Park after his 2011-13 treble.

"Never easy to speak when you just lost a

final of a Grand Slam," said Medvedev.

"But I'll try to do my best, better than on

court I hope.

"First of all congrats to Novak and your

team. Nine Grand Slams in Australia. 18

in total is amazing and probably not

your last one. I have no words to

say." — Reuters

9 - AUSTRALIAN OPEN



2008



2015



2011



2016



2012



2019



2013



2020

2021

IS
DJOKOVIC
MELBOURNE

1 - FRENCH OPEN: 2016
5 - WIMBLEDON: 2011, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019
3 - US OPEN: 2011, 2015, 2018

business

Petronas sees lower oil prices over long-term

Malaysia's national oil company Petrolim Nasional Bhd (Petronas) expects oil prices to be lower in the long term, state news agency Bernama reported on Saturday, citing the energy major's chief executive.

DETAILS ON P15



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PPI inflation falls 22.9 per cent in Q4 2020



MUSCAT: The Sultanate's producer price index (PPI) based inflation fell by 22.9 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2020, compared to the same period of the previous year due to a fall in oil and gas prices, according to the latest statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The price index of oil and gas products dropped by 28.3 per cent whereas those of non-oil products rose by 4.3 per cent in the 4th quarter of 2020, compared to the same period of 2019.

Within the oil and gas group, the price index of crude oil and natural gas declined by 29.9 per cent, refined oil products fell by 18.7 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2020, compared to the same period of 2019. In the non-oil group, the price index of the manufacturing group rose by 4.3 per cent.

Among different sub-groups in the manufacturing sector, the price index of most of the product groups fell at varying degrees. The PPI of metal products, machinery and equipment declined by 0.9 per cent whereas those of transportable goods rose by 10.2 per cent and food, beverages and textiles products group rose by 4.6 per cent as well.

In the food, beverages and textiles products group, the price index of fish, fruits, vegetables and oils increased by 9.0 per cent,

Within the oil and gas group, the price index of crude oil and natural gas declined by 29.9 per cent, refined oil products fell by 18.7 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2020, compared to the same period of 2019. In the non-oil group, the price index of the manufacturing group rose by 4.3 per cent.

beverages by 13.4 per cent and clothing, textiles and footwear by 4.4 per cent, the NCSI report added.

The price index of paints and pharmaceutical products fell by 2.5 per cent, wood and paper by 0.6 per cent, furniture products, jewellery and unmelted metal waste by 0.1 per cent.

Meanwhile, the prices of chemical products rose by 28.5 per cent, glass, cement and marble products by 0.7 per cent. The price index of metal products, machinery and equipment in the fourth quarter of 2020 declined by 0.9 per cent, compared to the same period of 2019. — ONA

Private partner sought in delivery of Oman's first PPP-based broadband project

PILOT VENTURE: Oman Broadband is seeking a qualified partner to finance and build the FTTH network in certain defined areas within a specific delivery timeline

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Wholly government-owned Oman Broadband Company has invited private investors to participate in the construction of a fibre-to-the-home (FTTH) network on a build, finance, operate and transfer (BOOT) basis — the first such project of its kind to be procured under the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model.

Oman Broadband, set up in 2014 as a joint stock company, is playing a key role in the implementation of the nation's e-government, digitalisation and national broadband strategies — aimed ultimately at stimulating the growth of a knowledge economy in the Sultanate.

For the first time, the state-owned entity is turning to the private sector to help with the implementation of key optic fibre-based broadband infrastructure in select parts of the country on a PPP basis.

Significantly, the PPP model



is expected to be an increasingly important route for government and public sector organisations in the Sultanate to procure and deliver public infrastructure and services amid the ongoing constrained fiscal and economic environment.

"Oman Broadband aims to apply a Public Private Partnership (PPP) Model for some of the FTTH projects, where Oman Broadband is seeking a qualified partner to finance and build the FTTH network in the defined areas, within a specific delivery timeline," the company said in an 'Invitation to Bid' floated late last week.

"The selected partner will be mainly responsible about financing, design verification and construction

of the FTTH network," it noted. Deployment of the fibre optic network is planned in parts of the wilayats of Barka and Rustaq.

The network will serve thousands of homes in the areas of Barka al Kwairat, Barka al Sahil, Rustaq al Weshail and Rustaq City Centre. Oman Broadband has proposed a revenue sharing model for the PPP-based project.

"The asset which is constructed by the partner will be owned by a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) that shall be established by Oman Broadband and the partner for an agreed period and shall be transferred to Oman Broadband after the agreed period," it stated.

Based on the success of this

initiative, Oman Broadband plans to offer other areas for network development on a PPP basis.

March 3 is the final date for the collection of tender documents, with March 23 stipulated as the deadline for submission of technical and commercial bids.

Oman Broadband, part of Oman ICT — a subsidiary of Oman Investment Authority — is currently focused on the roll-out of a passive fiber network infrastructure that seeks to provide equal and open access to telecommunication service providers, on a wholesale basis, and owners and operators of private networks, on a retail basis, thereby enabling end users to efficiently leverage high speed fibre in Oman.

Muscat Airport wins Skytrax 4-Star rating for Covid-19 measures

MUSCAT: Muscat International Airport has received 4-star rating by Skytrax in implementing health and safety measures to curb the spread of coronavirus (Covid-19) in the airport environment.

It ranked high among Middle East and Asia airports. The accomplishments caps concerted efforts exerted by Muscat International Airport since the outbreak of the pandemic.

The announcement sums up a rigorous review through which Skytrax assessed the effectiveness and firmness of safety and sterilisation measures applied by world airports, right from the point where a passenger is registered



upon arrival to the moment of departure.

The accomplishment reflects the efforts undertaken by Oman Airports Company to provide the best safety services to passengers, thanks to the company's long standing

history of applying top standards of health and safety in airports in line with national efforts to stem the spread of Covid-19.

Saud Nassir al Hubeishi, Deputy CEO of Muscat International Airport,

expressed his delight at the airport's realising such a high rating. He pointed out that, besides commitment to professional procedures in implementing Covid-19 control policies, the achievement also reflects the level of cooperation with the departments concerned amid circumstances posed by the pandemic.

Skytrax evaluation is based on testing the standards of personal protection equipment among department staff and their commitment to the procedures.

This is in addition to applying temperature measurement, wearing of face masks, general hygiene and sanitation in all airport lounges. — ONA

INVITATION TO TENDER

SOHAR ALUMINIUM

Sohar Aluminium LLC (SA), PO Box 80, PC- 327, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman hereby invites qualified Suppliers/Contractors for the following tender:

Tender No. : RFP 21/005
Tender Title : Provision of Skilled Manpower.
Scope : Sohar Aluminium has a requirement for various types skilled experienced manpower to work in Reduction area. The detail category of manpower required will be shared in the RFQ. Vendors who have readily available manpower in Oman under their direct sponsorship and who can mobilize them in short notice will be given preference.

Tender No. : RFP 21/006
Tender Title : SPL segregation preparation and crushing
Scope : Sohar Aluminium Co. LLC (SA), as part of its industrial process, generates Spent Pot Lining (SPL) materials. The hazardous recyclable SPL materials are no longer required by SA and hence, they have to be disposed of appropriately. As part of environmental improvement and recycling plan, SA has identified potential users who can recycle these materials safely. SA has to deliver these materials in a defined composition as agreed with the customer and this requires to be done within SA. SA invites suppliers who have the ability to supply equipment, manpower and services to manage this activity.

Kindly send your email and company profile to: tender@sohar-aluminium.com
For list of active tenders visit: <https://www.sohar-aluminium.com/en/content/tender-listing>

Winners and losers from the Covid-19 pandemic



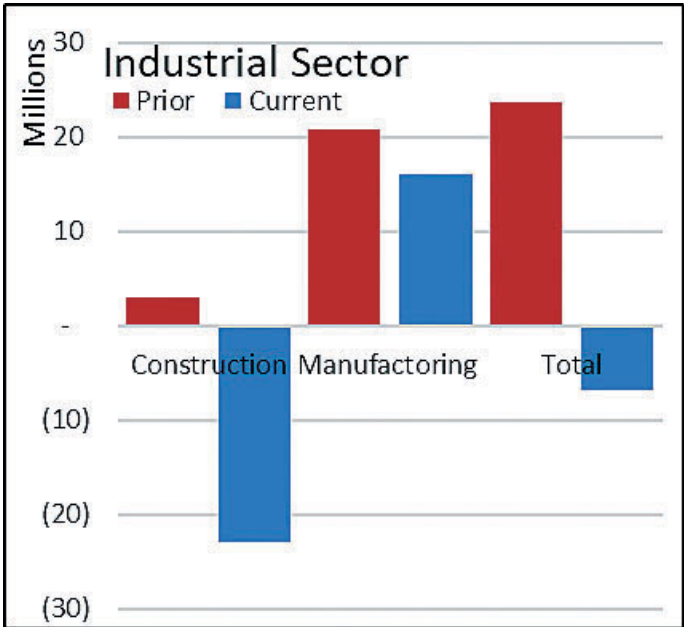
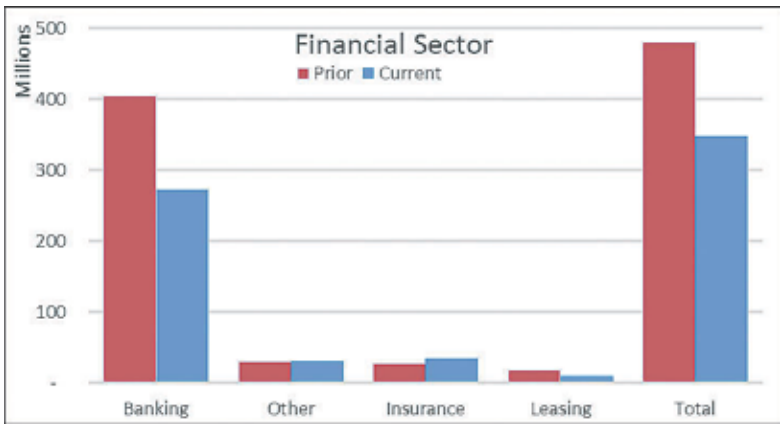
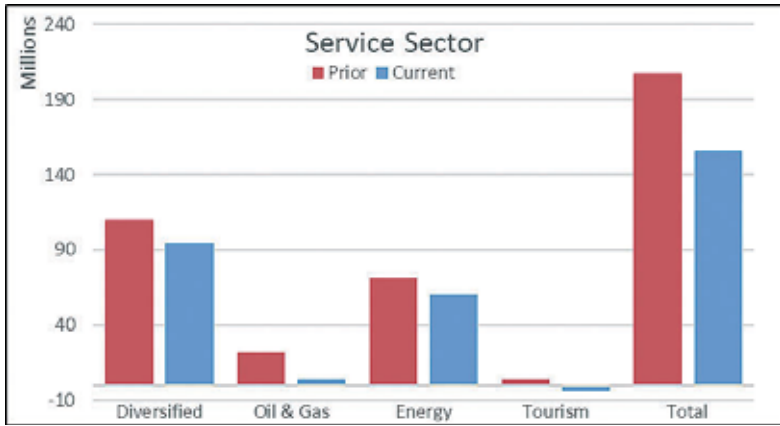
KARL JACKSON

As the MSM-listed SAOG companies have all now reported their preliminary unaudited full year 2020 results, we are able to gauge the financial impact the Covid-19 pandemic is having on the Oman economy.

Overall, the picture is much as expected, as we see almost all the sectors down when compared to the prior year. However, five sectors that are interestingly worthy of special mention are Banking, Construction, Oil and Gas, Telecoms (included within Diversified Services) and Insurance.

In all economies, the Banking sector has exposure to all other sectors, so is the best universal barometer, as they book provisions in advance of expected credit losses (IFRS 9 ECL). This sector alone is down 33 per cent.

Another sector that is



central to the Oman economy is Construction, which has not only shown a reduction, it has gone from a profitable RO 3m to a RO 23m loss position. The large construction firms, as we

all know, are just the tip of the iceberg, as their activities are felt throughout the economic chain and particularly deep into the private family groups as well as the SME sectors.

In all economies, the Banking sector has exposure to all other sectors, so is the best universal barometer, as they book provisions in advance of expected credit losses (IFRS 9 ECL)

Another sector that has been hit hard is Oil and Gas. With lower economic activity, less cars on the roads and the lack of air traffic requiring aviation fuel, this sector, which includes the Shell, Oman Oil and Al Maha petrol stations, saw an 80 per cent reduction in their combined profits.

Telecoms (Omantel and Ooredoo) have surprisingly also suffered with a drop in profitability of 22 per cent. With the increase in working from home and general social usage of the Internet, it would be intuitive to expect this sector to have benefiting from the pandemic.

However, unfortunately their revenue base is largely fixed as they charge per month but their cost base is variable, as they must pay based on usage, which has skyrocketed.

The final sector worthy of special mention is Insurance, which has surprisingly bucked the trend and reported a 37 per cent increase in profitability. If we look at all four quarters, we see a consistent year-on-year 1st quarter before the pandemic effect took hold and annual premiums were collected.

Then in the 2nd quarter, the performance improved considerably as the lockdowns

reduced activity, so there were significantly lower claims to be paid.

However, in the 3rd and 4th quarters, a slowdown ensued as new business dried up, with lower economic activity, cost cutting and an exodus of expats impacting adversely on the renewal of motor insurance policies.

We have not mentioned the Tourism sector including Airlines and Hotels, which have seen their revenues evaporate completely, only because few of these are listed on the MSM in Oman.

With the Covid-19 vaccination programme picking up pace, 2021 promises to be a year of growth as the economy and companies within it make up for the lost year of 2020.

Where survival was the word on everyone's lips in Oman, where GDP is projected to record a contraction of close to -10 per cent. The Government and the wider business community should already be positioning themselves to rise to the challenge and potential that lies ahead.

[Karl Jackson is an Assurance and Advisory Partner at Crowe Oman with close to 30 years of audit, accounting, banking and risk management experience; email: karl.jackson@crowe.om]

ACCA students, supported by Bank Muscat, continue excellent performance

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat has announced that the Omani youth supported by the bank in completing the Chartered Certified Accountant course by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) are continuing to make good progress in their course.

Earlier the bank had joined hands with Petroleum Development Oman to provide scholarships for a number of Bachelor's degree holders to complete this internationally-recognised accountancy course.

The ACCA course prepares entry and mid-level professionals to work in any aspect of finance or management.

The Omani youth in the programme have shown great enthusiasm and passion for their studies and in developing their skills, which will contribute to the better qualification and skills enhancement of human resources in the banking and financial sector in the Sultanate.

The participants supported by the bank have achieved remarkable results with many of them ranking among the highest globally and the GCC region. The group performance in all the examinations of ACCA subjects has surpassed global benchmarks.

Occidental Oman donates 300 tablets to low income students

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 21

As part of its social responsibility to local communities, Occidental Oman recently provided tablets for low income students in Hamra Al Doraa, Al Dhahirah Governorate, and students in Al Wusta Governorate, where company concession areas are also located.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the project aims to support students in response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

A total of 306 tablets were distributed to students from low-income families — 25 in Hamra Al Doraa, 281 in Al Wusta — in order for the students to successfully integrate in schools operating



through online distanced learning.

This initiative continues Occidental Oman's collaboration with the Ministry of Education

over the past years, as the company has sponsored yearly ceremonies to honour high achieving school students in Occidental Oman's

concession areas, as well as the 2019 project to install safety devices on school buses serving government schools across Muscat Governorate, and the company's English Training Programme in concession areas.

"Occidental Oman is keen to support the advancement of local communities within our concession areas, particularly in support of school students, as it highlights the company's long-term focus on education as a central pillar for investment and development in Oman", said Stephen Kelly, President and General Manager of Occidental Oman. "We are hopeful that the tablets provide vital e-learning channels for the students moving forward."

PRESS RELEASE

SAVE NOW: ZERO PER CENT INTEREST ON TOYOTA YARIS

Toyota Yaris enthusiasts looking for the perfect opportunity to own and enjoy the Yaris now have a fantastic opportunity to make the most of.



Those looking forward to owning a Yaris hatchback or a Yaris sedan can benefit with cash gift RO 1,550, insurance 1 year comprehensive or cash gift in lieu of insurance RO 125, service 2 years / 20,000 kms (whichever is earlier) and special interest rate up to 20YM models only — (0 per cent up to 2 years or 1.99 per cent up to 4 years or 2.99 per cent up to 5 years).

(Prospective buyers may be advised that the benefits vary between model variants, model year and manufacturing year. Terms & conditions apply. Visit the showroom for exact details, please).

LULU MARCHES AHEAD WITH EXPANSION PLANS, OPENS 200TH HYPERMARKET

The region's top retailer Lulu Group is going ahead



with their expansion plans, despite the current challenging times, a clear sign of economy bouncing back embracing the new norms. The 200th milestone hypermarket was inaugurated in Park Mall in Cairo, Egypt recently by Ali el-Moselhi, Egyptian Minister for Supply and Internal Trade in the presence of Dr Ibrahim Ashmawy, Deputy Minister of Internal Trade and other prominent officials and business leaders. This is the 3rd hypermarket in Egypt for Lulu Group, which is planning to expand further in the biggest market in the MENA region.

NISSAN OMAN'S '0 PER CENT INTEREST UP TO THREE YEARS ON SELECT MODELS' OFFER RECEIVES GREAT RESPONSE

The '0 per cent interest up to three years on select models' offer announced by Nissan Oman, from the house



of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), has garnered great response from customers. To deliver the best possible value with amazing offers and value propositions, Nissan Oman has launched a special offer on a range of its models as part of new promotion. Apart from the 0 per cent interest up to three years on select models, other interest slabs include 1.99 per cent for 4 years or 2.49 per cent for 5 years or 2.99 per cent for 6 years.

The offer is applicable on select stock of Kicks, X-Trail, Altima and Pathfinder.

Madayn takes part in Gulfood 2021



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 21

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) is participating in Gulfood 2021, one of the world's largest annual food and beverage trade shows, which opened at Dubai World Trade Centre on Sunday.

The five-day event features 2,500 companies representing the food and beverage industry from various countries worldwide.

Hamood bin Abdullah al Balushi, Director of Omani Products Department at Madayn, said Madayn is participating at Gulfood for the ninth consecutive year, reflecting its desire to promote Omani products and explore new markets globally.

"Gulfood presents an ideal opportunity for the Omani food industries to feature their high quality products to visitors from different countries. Madayn aims through the exhibition to disseminate awareness on the objectives of 'Made in Oman' campaign outside the Sultanate, identify new markets and business opportunities, and attract new consumers regionally and internationally", Al Balushi pointed out.

Through Gulfood 2021, the Omani companies aim at enhancing the presence of their products in various markets, and get familiarised with the latest products, trends and technologies in the food and beverage industry.



IKEA plans to open its first shopping centre in India



An IKEA sign is seen in Hyderabad, India. — Reuters

STOCKHOLM: IKEA plans to open its first shopping centre in India after the furniture giant's shopping centres business — one of the world's largest — said it had bought a 48,000-square-metre plot in the city of Noida on the outskirts of Delhi.

IKEA, which opened its first store in India in 2018 in Hyderabad followed by one in Mumbai in 2020, said it would develop the new site into a mall anchored by an IKEA store.

Ingka Centres, which has 45 IKEA store-anchored malls across Europe, Russia and China and plans to enter the United States in 2021, said it planned to invest nearly 55 billion rupees (\$759 million) in the Noida project. It will announce more detailed plans for the project in the near future, it said in an e-mailed statement.

Ingka Centres plans to enter around 45 large cities across its existing markets and the United States in coming years. It said in October visitors had returned quickly to its malls after the lifting of Covid-19 related restrictions that had forced stores and malls to close.

Ingka Centres is owned by Ingka Group which also owns most IKEA stores worldwide. — Reuters

Swiss fear over using debt to aid economy

After debt soared at the end of the 1990s owing to a crushing real-estate crisis, Switzerland became a champion of fiscal rectitude, introducing a debt brake into its constitution in 2003

ZURICH: Germany, which is known for strict budgets, has tapped debt markets to prop up its virus-hit economy, while neighbouring Switzerland has consistently curbed borrowing despite calls to change course.

With Swiss firms struggling through another lockdown, the federal government last week finally loosened its purse strings a bit, doubling emergency aid to 10 billion Swiss francs (\$11.2 billion) as part of a programme to boost the economy.

But when he presented the package for companies worst hit by the latest Covid restrictions, Finance Minister Ueli Maurer again lamented that Switzerland had to borrow to boost the economy.



A man wearing a mask walks past the Swiss House of Parliament in Bern. — AFP

Some 10 billion francs in debt will have to be paid off within six years according to a constitutional debt brake rule, Maurer warned.

He promised to present various options to do so as soon as the economic outlook cleared a bit. Despite mounting criticism

that the wealthy Alpine nation isn't doing enough to support companies, Maurer has repeated time and again that the Swiss government has "no money".

The government is already borrowing "150 million francs a day, or six million per hour, or

100,000 a minute", he notes.

In 2020, Switzerland's federal government spent 15 billion francs (\$16.7 billion) to support the economy, and preliminary data shows it ended the year with a deficit of 15.8 billion francs.

Some have called for

Switzerland to put balanced budget dogma aside during the crisis, to protect against potential long-term economic damage.

"Switzerland could be much more generous", said Michael Graff, an economics professor at ETH Zurich, a public research university. He believes the country could borrow what it needed to boost business activity without a problem.

A study published by Graff in January argued the nation's post-crisis finances would remain healthy even if borrowing rose, primarily because the country entered the pandemic with one of the world's lowest debt ratios.

National debt stood at 25.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) at the end of 2019.

That was less than half the European Union's widely breached target of 60 per cent. According to Graff, if the Swiss debt ratio rose by 10 percentage points, or even 20, and "if things take a turn much worse than expected" the country would still be at a level that is "extremely low, compared to other nations, once the crisis is overcome". — AFP

Sudan sharply devalues currency to overcome economic crisis

KHARTOUM: Sudan's central bank sharply devalued the country's currency on Sunday, announcing a new regime to "unify" official and black-market exchange rates.

The change aims to help Sudan overcome a crippling economic crisis during a fragile political transition, and access international debt relief following an International Monetary Fund monitoring programme.

The central bank set the indicative rate at 375 pounds to the dollar from a previous official rate of 55 pounds.

Recently, the dollar traded at between 350 and 400 Sudanese pounds on the black market.

The central bank will set a daily indicative rate in a "flexible managed float", a circular sent to



A man shows freshly-minted notes of the Sudanese pound in Khartoum. — AFP

banks said. Banks and exchange bureaus are required to trade within 5 per cent above or below that rate.

The circular also set a profit margin between buy and sell

prices of no more than 0.5 per cent. Sunday's move had been expected late last year under the IMF programme but was delayed by political instability.

— Reuters

Japan factory output to rise for first time in three months

TOKYO: Japan's industrial production likely grew for the first time in three months in January as manufacturing activity picked up globally, a Reuters poll found, offering a glimmer of hope for an economy battered by the coronavirus pandemic.

But retail sales, a key gauge of consumer spending, probably contracted for a second straight month, suggesting the pandemic continued to dampen consumption, the poll showed.

Analysts expect the economy in the current quarter to shrink as a local state of emergency in some areas, including Tokyo, to contain coronavirus cases hit



Employees work on the automobile assembly line at a factory of Mitsubishi Fuso Truck Corp in Kawasaki. — Reuters

businesses and consumers.

Japan's factory output was projected to have risen 4.0 per cent in January from the previous month, the poll of 18 economists showed, rebounding from a revised 1.0 per cent fall in December.

— Reuters

Petronas sees lower oil prices over long-term

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's national oil company Petroliaam Nasional Bhd (Petronas) expects oil prices to be lower in the long-term, state news agency Bernama reported on Saturday, citing the energy major's chief executive.

"We believe that the price is very fragile and artificial", Tengku Muhammad Taufik Tengku Aziz was quoted as saying in an interview. "We believe that oil prices will be lower than before in the long run."

Petronas is planning for projects to be viable at \$40 per barrel for the next few years, he said. Brent crude futures were priced at \$62.91 per barrel as of Friday.

Oil prices will be affected by the speed of the global coronavirus vaccine rollout, Tengku Muhammad Taufik said. The CEO said the Malaysian



A Petronas gas station sign is seen against the background of the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur. — Reuters

government, Petronas' sole shareholder, was in talks with Sabah over the eastern state's demand for more rights over its energy resources, including a sales tax on oil and gas revenue. Petronas has not yet been invited to the talks, he said.

Last year, Petronas agreed to similar demands from the Sarawak state — a move that some analysts have said could hurt its financials. — Reuters

Britain's Sunak to raise business tax to pay for Covid-19 support

LONDON: British Finance Minister Rishi Sunak (pictured) is set to increase a tax on business to pay for an extension to Covid-19 support schemes in the budget next month, *The Sunday Times* reported.

Sunak, in his speech on March 3, will announce he is increasing corporation tax from 19 pence in the pound and will outline a pathway where it rises to 23 pence in the pound by the time of the next general election, the report said.

The move will raise an expected £12 billion (\$16.8 billion) a year, the report added.

According to the report, at least 1 pence is set to be added to the bill for business from this autumn, at a cost



to business of £3 billion, with further rises in subsequent years. Allies of Sunak clarified he would not increase corporation tax higher than 23 per cent.

These measures will be helpful in paying for an extension to the

Sunak, in his speech on March 3, will announce he is increasing corporation tax from 19 pence in the pound and will outline a pathway where it rises to 23 pence in the pound by the time of the next general election

furlough scheme, VAT cuts and business support loans until at least August.

Unlike the 2010 Conservative-led government, which pursued spending cuts to rebalance the economy after the global financial

crisis, Sunak is expected to defer most of the toughest decisions about how to pay for that support in his budget speech.

"The corporation tax hike will be higher than expected and the extension of the support schemes will be longer than most people expect", the newspaper quoted a source as saying.

Insiders indicated the stamp duty holiday on property purchases would also be extended in line with the other coronavirus support measures, the report said.

Britain's economy had its biggest slump in 300 years in 2020, when it contracted by 10 per cent, and will shrink by 4 per cent in the first three months of 2021, the Bank of England predicts. — Reuters

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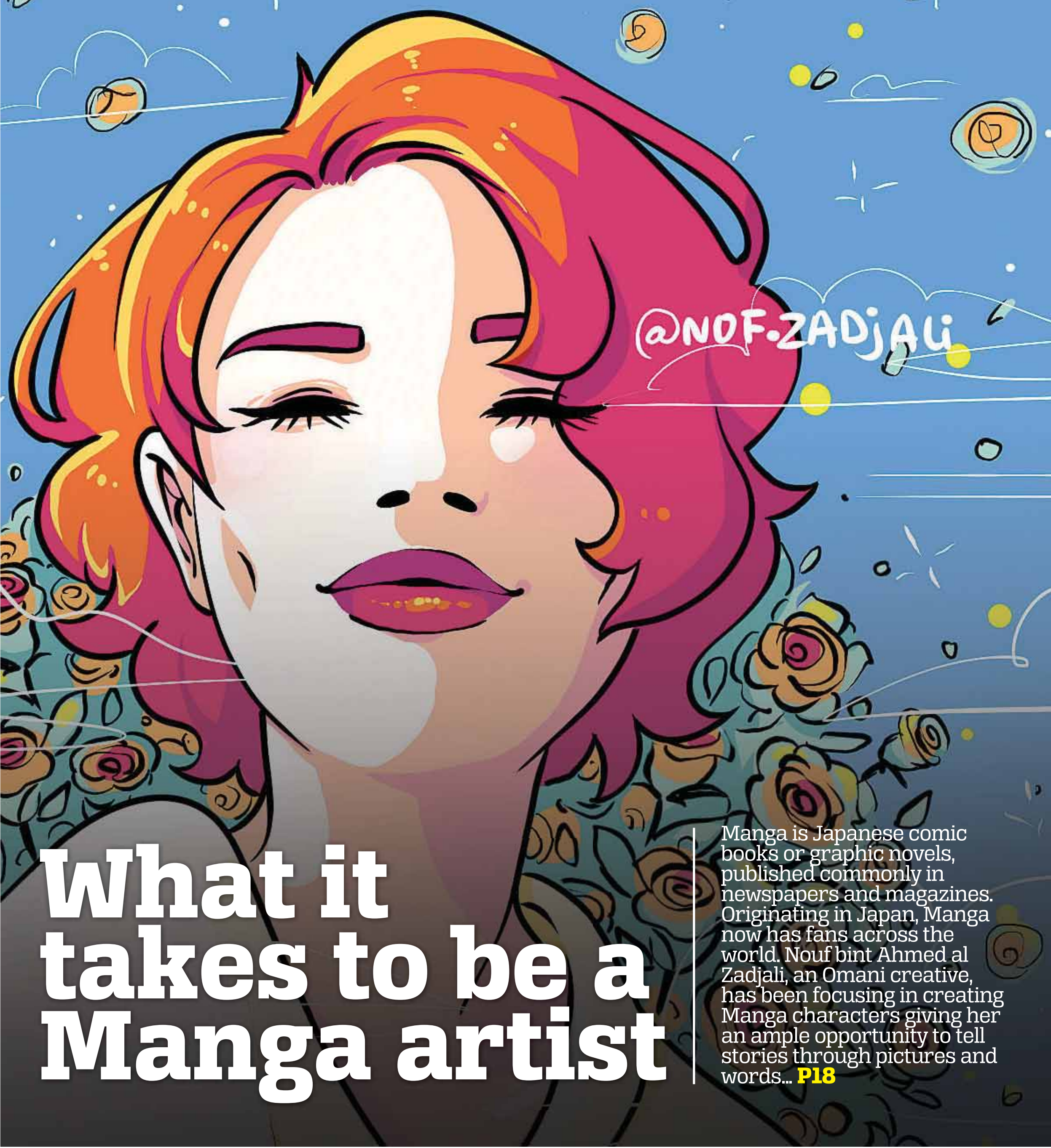
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What it takes to be a Manga artist

Manga is Japanese comic books or graphic novels, published commonly in newspapers and magazines. Originating in Japan, Manga now has fans across the world. Nouf bint Ahmed al Zadjali, an Omani creative, has been focusing in creating Manga characters giving her an ample opportunity to tell stories through pictures and words... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

GASTRONOMY



MARKET FOR EDIBLE FLOWERS BLOSSOMS IN TUNISIA

A Tunisian entrepreneur growing edible flowers says she is surprised by the appetite for her homegrown product in the North African country and hopes to see a "new culinary culture" bloom... **Story on Page 20**

CONSERVATION



DISNEY CONSERVATION FUND HELPS ESO SUPPORT ENDANGERED VULTURES

(ESO) has been awarded a grant by the Disney Conservation Fund (DCF) for its work to protect Oman's Vultures. During its 25th anniversary year, the Disney Conservation Fund is proud to continue providing critical support to community-led conservation efforts globally... **Story on Page 19**

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HERITAGE



IN IRAQ, GENEROUS MIDEAST TRADITION OF 'ISTIFTAH' LIVES ON

As the sun rises over Arbil's historic bazaar, shopkeepers sweep their stoops and eagerly await the "istiftah" — the first customer of the day, believed to be a good omen... **Story on Page 19**

FASHION



DIGITAL LONDON FASHION WEEK KICKS-OFF

A completely digital London Fashion Week kicked off on Friday, with designers hoping to entice trend-followers from the comfort of their homes with their latest creations... **Story on Page 19**



What it takes to be a Manga artist

BY ABDULAZIZ AL JAHDAMI

Most people do not want to be bored no matter how old they are! Children, in particular, always want to do something new and watch something fun. They, generally, indulge in different activities to have fun like playing, drawing, and even fighting with their siblings at home. Above all these activities, children love to watch television, especially cartoons. Sometimes, it becomes even difficult to move them from their seat while they are watching their favourite cartoon show.

Many children like watching cartoons for they are fun to see, so they could watch them all day. As Walt Disney said, "Animation offers a medium of storytelling and visual entertainment, which can bring pleasure and information to people of all ages everywhere in the world".

Children's love of cartoons is growing up; their passion is not just limited to what they watch, but they tend to narrate the incidents and stories to their friends and parents too. They also force their parents to accompany them when watching cartoons.

Children get emotionally and mentally connected to cartoons because it creates a world to which they can relate to. The extraordinary energy and powers of cartoon characters make them a favourite among children. Similarly, the victory of good over bad attracts them to a great extent! The special sound and animation effects and storyline fascinate children too. Children love funny things and cartoons provide them with all of that through different ways and shows.

As they have been obsessed since childhood, many young people get addicted to watching cartoons. The younger the children are, the more they become attracted and spell-bound by cartoon characters and shows. If we refer back to the days of childhood, we could recall the old cartoons which children were fond of. Those days were full of passion, imagination and dreams as well as associated with fun that never ends! This could influence their interests and provoke their spirit and creativity.

Among those who got addicted to cartoons is Nouf bint Ahmed al Zadjali, an Omani creative Manga artist. Manga is a diverse and popular art form in which artists tell stories through pictures and words. Manga is Japanese comic books or graphic novels, published commonly in newspapers and magazines. Originating in Japan, Manga now has fans across the world. Manga

can tell any kind of story, for any age group of any gender. Both inside and outside Japan, Manga is enjoyed by women and men, and some of the greatest Manga artworks have been created by immensely talented women.

"There is something about Manga that speaks to me more than other arts. Possibly, my fascination with cartoon is the key link of communication to that. Although Manga is a very interesting art, it is very difficult and challenging. Storytelling is the hardest part of being a Manga artist, so an artist has to understand the flow of the story and what makes readers connect with a character." Nouf al Zadjali expressed.

Nouf was first inspired by cartoons dubbed into Germany, which she was overpoweringly watching since her childhood days. At the age of 15, Nouf could master speaking German. Her fascination with the cartoon was behind her learning the art of Manga. As a graphic design graduate from the Scientific College of Design, her study was too influenced by Manga. Likewise, Nouf helped to organise Oman's first of its kind Manga exhibition in 2010 at the college.

The journey of drawing Manga started at the age of 10 and fruitfully continued through attending courses and partaking in various events, starting the first one in Japan in 2013. Nouf participated in different art exhibitions in Japan including Oman-Japan Student Forum as a cultural exchange event in 2015 and another solo art gallery, organised by Oman-Nara Friendship Association in Japan, in 2017. Moreover, Nouf participated in the Comic-Con 2017 Exhibition in Dubai.

As a token of appreciation to her creative talent, Nouf received several accolades, acknowledging her creativity in Manga. Receiving Omani Women Excellence Award (2014), named First Place and Second Place in Behance Oman (2014 & 2015) art competitions respectively are just to name a few of her awards. Nouf's journey with Manga is so rewarding as out of the 20 years of practising this art, she was able to produce her first Manga storybook "Living Dreams", which was published in 2017.

Out of her passion for Manga and art overall, Nouf is currently working on her own project to bring a one of a kind art studio-café to the Sultanate. The place will promote creativity and mark a perfect destination where one can relax, enjoy a cup of coffee while showing his talent at the same time.





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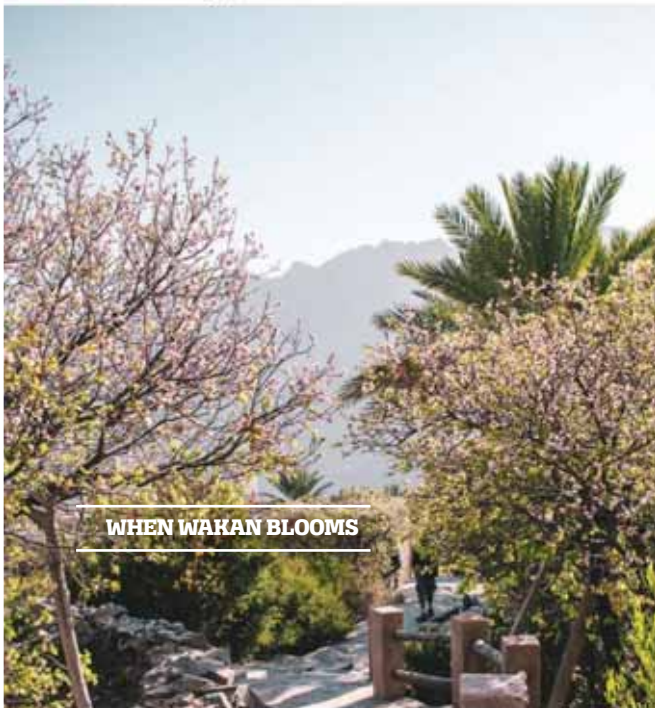


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Disney Conservation Fund helps ESO support endangered vultures

THE ENVIRONMENT Society of Oman (ESO) has been awarded a grant by the Disney Conservation Fund (DCF) for its work to protect Oman's Vultures. During its 25th anniversary year, the Disney Conservation Fund is proud to continue providing critical support to community-led conservation efforts globally. The fund has been supporting local efforts around the world aimed at saving wildlife, inspiring action and protecting the planet with more than \$100 million distributed to non-profit organisations since 1995.

The Sultanate is a stronghold for a number of raptor species whose declining populations are a cause for concern, including the Egyptian Vulture, the Steppe Eagle and the Lappet-faced Vulture. The fund will support field efforts to survey and monitor the breeding of both Egyptian and Lappet-face vultures, but also include assessing their numbers at dumpsites, electrocution risk assessment and tracking via satellite. In addition, the project will also undertake advocacy, education, and outreach campaigns about raptors, specifically vultures, in Oman. Initial field work will commence in February 2021 in Muscat and surrounding areas, as well as the Island of Masirah.

Maia Sarrouf Willson, Research & Conservation Manager at the Environment Society of Oman, said, "Vultures often suffer from negative perceptions yet they play an extremely valuable role in our ecosystem as nature's waste managers. With support from the Disney Conservation Fund we will be able to understand these endangered species better, share our findings with the conservation community and the wider public, and help us raise awareness of the true value of these species, not just to Oman, but all over the world."

DCF grant recipients are selected based on their efforts to implement comprehensive community wildlife conservation programmes, stabilise and increase populations of at-risk animals and engage communities in conservation in critical ecosystems around the world.

For information on Disney's commitment to conserve nature and a complete list of grant recipients, visit www.disney.com/conservation.

In Iraq, generous Mideast tradition of 'istiftah' lives on



AS THE SUN rises over Arbil's historic bazaar, shopkeepers sweep their stoops and eagerly await the "istiftah" — the first customer of the day, believed to be a good omen.

For a country as famously hospitable as Iraq, where lunch tables are often overflowing with platters of meat as big as truck tyres, the custom of "istiftah", which means "opener", is subtle but sweet.

The first customer of the day gets to name his or her price for the goods or service being purchased, without the usual process of haggling and compromise that is quintessential to street markets.

"The first customer is exceptional," said Hidayet Sheikhani, 39. "He's carrying wealth and well-being straight from God to the businessperson in the early morning."

Sheikhani sells traditional black-and-white embroidered scarves and hats in the bazaar in the bustling centre of Arbil, the Kurdistan region's capital.

Shopkeepers arrive in the bazaar's brick alleyways around dawn, roll up the metal shutters of their shops and pour an obligatory glass of sweet tea to start their day.

It's a tradition as old as time — not only in Iraq, but all across the Middle East.

Sheikhani inherited it from his grandfather, who had a shop in the same marketplace a century ago.

At the time, he said, the "istiftah" tradition set the tone for the rest of the day.

Shopkeepers who had not yet sold anything would put a chair outside their shop, as a signal to their colleagues.

Those who had made their first sale would direct any incoming shoppers to the other shops,

until everyone had their "istiftah".

Only then would they accept a second customer.

That went for both Muslim and Jewish shopkeepers, said Sheikhani, as Arbil was home to a thriving Jewish community until the mid-20th century.

GOD WILL MAKE IT UP TO ME

The origin of the "istiftah" tradition remains disputed.

Some say it hails from the Hadith, a record of the words and actions attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, in which he pleads to God, "Oh Allah, bless my people in their early mornings".

But Abbas Ali, a lecturer at the College of Islamic Studies in Iraq's Salahaddin University, said the custom's prevalence among other faiths indicates it may not be related to Islam at all.

"It's possible it was merely an ancient custom that was practised for a long time — and good traditions often become religious rituals," Ali said.

Either way, it lives on, even among young businessmen.

Jamaluddin Abdelhamid, a 24-year-old with a wispy goatee, sells roasted nuts, sweets and spices in the bazaar.

"Often, a customer requests honey because they're sick. It usually costs 14,000 Iraqi dinars (less than \$10) per jar, but they ask for it at 10,000 and I agree because it's the 'istiftah'," he said.

"I know God will make it up to me somewhere else in my day," said Abdelhamid.

Rejecting a first customer's request — no matter how steep the discount is — leaves him guilt-ridden.

"I spend the whole day feeling sad, asking myself how I could have rejected God's blessing," Abdelhamid said. —AFP



Digital London Fashion Week kicks off

LONDON: A completely digital London Fashion Week kicked off on Friday, with designers hoping to entice trend-followers from the comfort of their homes with their latest creations.

With Britain under a national lockdown, streamed videos have replaced the usual bustling catwalk presentations.

Nearly 100 womenswear and menswear brands will share their collections over the next few days, having to adapt how they present their clothes in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"It is really difficult ... for everybody at the moment but particularly in the fashion industry," Caroline Rush, chief executive of the British Fashion Council, said.

"Fashion Week (offers) this glimmer of inspiration, uplifting, connecting with creativity and really thinking about the impact of fashion has on society and culture. And we need it."

Turkish designer Bora Aksu said he was inspired by 19th century French mathematician Sophie Germain, who he said felt her own isolation when she was discriminated against because of her gender but thrived.

Models walked down an empty Tate Britain museum in tailored suits, boxed cashmere coats and lace tiered dresses.

Aksu layered voluminous tulle shirts and skirts and put lace capes on coats, using a colour palette of pink, black, navy, teal, red and yellow.

"I was trying to find something that (can) bring hope in this time," he said.

Designer Mark Fast looked to the ocean for his autumn/winter 2021-2022 line, presenting colourful puffer jackets, cardigans and knit skirts. A polar bear and star fish adorned tops while fringed or sequined dresses were mermaid-like.

"I think we are realising now that it is not about quantity but quality and that in so many aspects of our lives things can be done differently and in new ways, fashion being one of them," Fast said in e-mailed comments.

With the pandemic shutting stores, studios and factories as well as curbing travel, the fashion sector has been hit hard in the past year.

In Britain, high street giants Debenhams and Arcadia collapsed with online fashion retailers Boohoo and ASOS last month setting their sights on their brands.

Brexit has also affected business.

Earlier this month, some 450 British fashion industry figures signed an open letter to the government warning the sector, which contributes 35 billion pounds (\$49 billion) to the economy, was "at risk of decimation by the Brexit trade deal" due to new travel rules and paperwork. — Reuters



Market for edible flowers blossoms in Tunisia

A Tunisian entrepreneur growing edible flowers says she is surprised by the appetite for her homegrown product in the North African country and hopes to see a "new culinary culture" bloom.

Sonia Ibidhi, a 42-year-old journalist, turned to organic farming of the niche but in-demand product "out of love" for working on the land.

Among the flowers she grows are borage, a blue star-shaped flower that tastes like cucumber, chive flowers — purple blossoms with a flavour similar to onion — and nasturtiums, bright yellow to orange flowers with a radish-like taste.

"I thought the flowers would be for export and of no immediate interest to the local market, but I've been surprised by the growing demand, in particular from some top-end hotels," she said.

After bringing back 42 seed varieties from France, Ibidhi began planting around a dozen types of flowers.

She said she chose the mountainous Tabarka region in the country's northwest for its humid climate and abundant fresh water, and now uses her own seeds.

"I do something that I love, that is beautiful and colourful," she said proudly.

She said she hoped her flowers would spark "a new culinary culture in the country".

Tunisians already use certain flowers in their traditional cuisine — some sweets feature dried rose petals, while lavender is an ingredient in a spice mix used in couscous recipes.

But fresh flowers, which can be used for dishes from soups to salads as well as teas, are a novelty.

CULINARY JOURNEY

In a luxury hotel in Gammarth, an upscale northern suburb of the capital Tunis, chef Bassem Bizid uses nasturtiums for his fish tartar and accompanies other dishes with a flower-leaf salad or a sorbet garnished with fresh violets.

Clients are "very satisfied to discover something new", he said.

The hotel's master chef, Italian Alessandro Fontanesi, said that during the novel coronavirus pandemic, the flowers went beyond introducing a new look and flavour.

"Not only are we using a rare Tunisian product, which makes the plate more attractive and adds a special taste, but it can take our clients on a culinary journey," he said.

Ibidhi launched her business in 2019, after four years of planning.

As well as needing to do an "enormous" amount of paperwork, she said she had to repeatedly explain to the forestry department "what edible flowers were for".

She sold her car to help finance the business, and later received a grant from the African

Development Bank, she said.

She now pays the state 1,400 dinars (around \$520) annually to lease five hectares (12 acres) of land.

But Ibidhi now fears seeing her business wither.

As well as edible flowers, she has planted a large quantity of strawberries, selling both the fruit and the leaves, which can be used for herbal teas.

But the authorities say growing strawberries is in breach of her lease agreement.

Ibidhi said she risked a large financial loss were she to uproot them.

"My flowers have become my world," she said. "I will fight tooth and nail for my project."—

AFP

Sonia Ibidhi, a 42-year-old journalist, turned to organic farming of the niche but in-demand product "out of love" for working on the land

