

His Majesty congratulates
Burkina Faso President

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik sent congratulations to President Roch Marc Kabore of Burkina Faso on the occasion of him taking the oath of office as a president of his country for a new presidential term. His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere congratulations and best wishes of success to President Kabore, and the people of Burkina Faso further progress and prosperity. He also wished the friendship relations between the two countries further development and growth.



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BANKING CREDIT KEY TO
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DESPITE RISK OF LOAN
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A SMILE TO
MOSCOW'S COVID
PATIENTS



MUSCAT

HM THANKED BY QATAR EMIR

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a cable of thanks from Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of Qatar, in reply to His Majesty's congratulatory cable to him on the occasion of Qatar National Day. Shaikh Tamim expressed his utmost thanks and sincere appreciation for His Majesty's good feelings and best wishes. Shaikh Tamim wished His Majesty good health and wellbeing, and the Omani people permanent progress and prosperity under His Majesty's wise leadership. He also wished the strong fraternal relations between the two countries further development and growth.

CAIRO

HM THANKED BY KAZAKH LEADER

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received thanks from President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan in reply to His Majesty's congratulatory cable to him on the occasion of Kazakhstan National Day. President Tokayev expressed his sincere thanks and appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan's congratulations and sincere feelings. He expressed his confidence over the continuation of strong relations between the Sultanate and Kazakhstan for the interest of the two countries and their friendly peoples. President Tokayev also wished His Majesty the Sultan continuous health and happiness, and the Omani people permanent progress and prosperity.

Now get news
on the go



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BIDEN SAYS TRUMP PENTAGON
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HM GETS GCC SUMMIT INVITE FROM KING SALMAN



His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received Dr Nayef Falah al Hajraf, GCC Secretary-General, who handed over a written message for His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik from King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia to attend the 41st Summit of GCC Leaders. HH Sayyid Fahd and Al Hajraf reviewed the topics of the GCC summit's agenda, as well as ways to foster GCC cooperation and realise the aspirations of the region's peoples. The meeting also touched on current regional and international issues. It was attended by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister and the delegation accompanying the GCC Secretary-General.

Photo by Mohammed al Rashdi

COVID-19 jab safe,
say vaccine takers

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
[@zainabalnasseri](#)

Some people are afraid to take the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against coronavirus for fear of complications because this vaccine is new in Oman and it will take some time to raise public awareness about the vaccine, a health official said adding the vaccine is safe and the complications, if any, are rare and mainly low-grade fever or mild allergic reaction.

Dr Hanan bint Abdullah al Mahrouqiyah, head of Bausher Specialist Medical Centre, said on Tuesday in Muscat that those who took the vaccine at the centre have not felt any sort of



complications. Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Wahaibi said, "Being a medical worker with a chronic disease I have received the COVID-19 vaccine. The process was easy and did not take a long time starting from the administrative procedures until getting the vaccine."

Badriya bint Khamis al Zadjaliyah said: "I have chronic diseases like diabetes and kidney failure. I have been encouraged to take the vaccine to protect myself and my family members from coronavirus. It is really a chance that we have to seize and get vaccinated."

CREW OF SUNKEN SHIP RESCUED



A team led by the Maritime Security Centre (MSC) rescued crews of an Iranian ship that sank on December 25 in the Omani territorial waters near the Strait of Hormuz. The rescue operation was conducted in coordination with the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO), Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) and the Coast Guard Police at Royal Oman Police (ROP) as well as other military, security and civil units. The shipwreck was towed away to ensure smooth passage of ships across the Strait of Hormuz.

Quarantine
must for all
Oman visitors

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

All travellers coming into Oman must go for mandatory quarantine irrespective of the number of the days spent in the country, airlines sources clarified on Tuesday.

"Even if a visitor is coming to the country for only seven days or less, he or she will have to wear the bracelet and spend his time in self-isolation. The only option with them is to leave the country after 5 or 6 days spending time in isolation here," said an Oman Air official. "People have been taking advantage of the situation. With the outbreak of the new strain of COVID-19 virus, the only option with the concerned authorities is either to shut down the travel industry or impose stricter measures."

As per the new guidelines, travellers arriving in Oman for a period shorter than 7 days are no longer exempt from the isolation requirements.

Travellers arriving in Oman are required to undergo a PCR test at least 72 hours before their scheduled arrival and to present a certified negative COVID-19 test result.

Travellers arriving in Oman from any country will be required to undergo another COVID-19 PCR test on arrival, wear Tarassud+ bracelet, and isolate for 7 days.

At the end of 7 days, travellers are required to undergo a new PCR test on the eighth day and if the test result is negative, the isolation period will end.

Airlines are required to ensure

Even if a visitor is coming to the country for only seven days or less, he or she will have to wear the bracelet and spend his time in self-isolation

OMAN AIR
OFFICIAL

that all passengers are adhering to the health requirements of the Sultanate of Oman prior to departure.

GCC citizens, residents with valid residency permits, and travellers with a valid visa are allowed to enter the Sultanate without prior approval.

All travellers arriving in the Sultanate of Oman are required to have international health insurance covering the cost of COVID-19 treatment valid for one month, except for citizens, GCC nationals, and passengers with free treatment card. Children below 15 years old are exempt from the PCR test and Tarassud+ bracelet requirements.

Airlines have been told to take the necessary measures to ensure that the requirements to enter the Sultanate as per the circular issued by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) are in place. CAA said that legal action will be taken against the offending airlines.

Swan Late: Mourning bird holds
up 23 German trains

BERLIN: A swan mourning the death of its companion on a German railway track held up 23 trains for almost an hour and had to be removed by firefighters using special equipment, police said.

The two birds had strayed onto the track area of the high-speed line between Kassel and Gottingen in central Germany "during an excursion", according to Kassel police.

One of the birds died, likely



after getting caught in the overhead power cables, said the statement on the December 23 incident, which was made public

on Monday. Its companion then sat beside the body in mourning, resisting attempts by officials to lure it away and temporarily closing the line to traffic.

Firefighters with special equipment were later called in and managed to lift the dead swan and its surviving companion away from the area. Twenty-three trains were delayed for about 50 minutes while the rescue operation took place, the police statement said. — AFP

FROM PAGE 1

COVID-19 jab safe, say vaccine takers

Ahmed bin Gharib al Hilali, who took the vaccine, said: “We, old people, need the vaccine especially “We, old people, need the vaccine especially those who suffer from chronic diseases. I am here today to get vaccinated but I have been told to wait as I took the infectious disease injection 12 days ago.

I have been told at the centre that the vaccine should be administered within 14 days from the injection. Hence, I have to wait another two days to get the vaccine.”

A total of 1,717 people have been vaccinated in the first two days of phase 1 of the national campaign to fight the virus.

Among the governorates, North Al Batinah recorded the



highest number of people who were vaccinated (509) followed by Muscat (302), Buraimi (171), South al Batinah (166), South al Sharqiyah (131), Al Dhahirah (98), North al Sharqiyah (89), Al Dakhiliyah (84) Musandam (81), Dhofar (66) and Al Wusta(20).

The Ministry of Health (MOH) urged the target groups

for the COVID-19 vaccine to visit the nearest health institutions without adhering to the scheduled appointments for taking the vaccine depending upon the working hours in each institution.

The first phase of the national campaign for immunization against coronavirus targets the most vulnerable groups, including frontline workers, the chronically ill and the elderly.

The campaign was launched on Sunday after the first batch of 15,600 doses arrived at Muscat International Airport last week. Another 28,000 doses of the vaccine by American drugmaker Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech are expected to arrive next month.

MAFWR wins award for environment project

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) won the Arab Scientific Community Organization’s award for the best environment project of 2020. The project develops artificial reefs and their uses in enhancing fish stocks. The project was selected among 90 projects submitted by individuals and institutions from 13 Arab countries.

The Doha-based organisation

today announced names of the winners of the award, which is organised for the first time. The award aims at encouraging innovation in sustainable and successful projects.

The award also aims at demonstrating the existence of practical solutions to many environmental problems in the Arab region, with a focus on creative projects and ingenious technologies.

The artificial reef projects are among the important development projects that are being implemented by MAFWR to improve the fisheries sector. The reefs provide an ideal fishing environment for fishermen. They contribute to reducing the cost, effort, fishing time, and the use of selective fishing equipment (such as lines) to get high-quality fish that would increase the fishermen’s income. — ONA

Shura reviews standing panels’ work plans



NAWAL AL SAMSAMIYAH
MUSCAT, DEC 29

Majlis Ash’shura held its 5th regular meeting of the second annual sitting (2020-2021) under the chairmanship of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, on Tuesday.

Dr Mohammed bin Ibrahim al Zadjali, head of the Legislative and Legal Committees, said the committee gives priority to studying the draft laws referred by the government. The committee began reviewing the Advocacy Law following requests from relevant entities such as the Omani Lawyers Association and the Advocates Admission Committee.

The Legislative and Legal Committees presented a proposal to formulate a law on the appointments in leadership positions due to lack of clear-cut competitive standards and evaluation criteria for appointments in senior positions in the public sector. The committee head explained that the project is part of the strategic programme of



the fifth development plan, noting that the Council of Oman was given a time frame to formulate the said law.

The council discussed the work plans of its standing committees and approved the work plan of the Education and Scientific Research Committee. Nasser bin Rashid al Abri, committee vice-chairman noted that the committee’s work plan included a number of legislative and monitoring topics most importantly studying the draft school education law and draft higher education law which are expected to be transferred to the council in the coming period.

The council also approved the work plan of the Services and Social Development Committee. Dr Hamood bin Ahmed al Yahyae, head of the committee explained that the committee give priority to the studying of draft laws, legislations, amendments, conventions as well as the other topics referred from the government and entrusted to the committee. He said that the committee will organise a

discussion session entitled: ‘the future and frameworks of the Sultanate’s social protection systems’.

Yunus bin Ali al Manthri, head of the Youth and Human Resources Committee presented the committee’s work plan which includes a proposal for amendments of the existing Labour Law.

Al Manthri explained that existing Labour Law contains legal loopholes that need to be addressed in order for the law to keep up with the changes that emerged in the labour market. The amendments are required, he said, in order for the law to be able to cope with phenomena such as the dismissal of the national workforce in the private sector.

In addition, Majlis Ash’shura approved the work plan of the Food and Water Security Committee. Abdullah bin Ahmed al Malik, committee head explained that the committee will complement the review of the Pastures and Animal Resources Management Law.

Complete vaccines roll out will take more time: WHO

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

It will require more time and effort to roll out COVID-19 vaccines in 2021, and we cannot rest in the meantime, warned a top WHO official on Tuesday.

Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said, “We must continue to prevent and control COVID-19, by adhering to all the prevention measures needed — masks, hygiene, social distancing and avoidance of mass gatherings especially during the holidays — and we also need to maintain essential health services.

It has been an exceptionally challenging time for us all. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a dreadful toll. More than 117,000 people have lost lives in this region alone, including healthcare workers, he said.

The pandemic has devastated health systems, economies and communities. The severe disruption to essential health services such as immunisation will be felt for years to come.

There is now some light at the end of the tunnel. Thanks to

“
Our efforts to strengthen immunisation systems in countries will be critical when it comes to introducing COVID-19 vaccines
DR AHMED AL MANDHARI
WHO director

concerted efforts by scientists, funders and policy-makers across the world, vaccines are being developed with unprecedented speed.

And we need to go further. The pandemic has exposed serious flaws in our health systems and services. We need to invest in strengthening them so we are better prepared next time.

“Partnership for health and our vision of health for all by all are more important than ever. The pandemic has been time for solidarity and action, and despite the challenges, we have worked

tirelessly with our countries and partners throughout the year to progress our four strategic priorities.”

The pandemic compromised access to health care, but also spurred innovation which helped to maintain or restore essential health . “We also worked with countries on the ground to improve service delivery for communicable and noncommunicable diseases through new approaches such as home visits, community participation and integrated, multi-antigen immunisation campaigns. Our efforts to strengthen immunisation systems in countries will be critical when it comes to introducing COVID-19 vaccines,” he said.

Inevitably, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our ongoing health promotion work, but it also demonstrated the value of that work. Tackling the COVID-19 pandemic demands strong community engagement and a whole-of-government approach to health policy-making — exactly the sort of things WHO has been advocating for years to promote health.

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Al Dakhiliyah Governor reviews municipal projects

AMAL AL RIYAMI

@AMAL92ALRIYAMI

Shaikh Hilal bin Said bin Hamdan al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, visited Nizwa along with Shaikh Rashid bin Said bin Saif al Kalbani, the Wali of Nizwa, and the Director-General of Al Dakhiliyah Municipality.

The Governor thanked members of the municipality committee for the efforts they are making to support the municipality department in Nizwa. He asked them to respond to citizens' requests for municipal services and projects in line with the requirements of the next phase and according to specific priorities that take into account the needs of the villages.

A number of issues related to development and investment projects were discussed. The issue of local tourism was also

discussed, with a focus on projects that provide job opportunities for citizens.

He visited a number of projects in the state, including the expansion of the municipal slaughterhouse in Nizwa, which has been designed in accordance with safety and public health standards. It includes a slaughter hall, a waiting hall, a veterinarian's office, a room for destroying meat unfit for consumption, a refrigeration room and barns for selling livestock.

The Governor also visited Al Aqur village and the heritage inn project in Nizwa, where he met with a number of owners to address their concerns and requirements. He urged the officials to facilitate the procedures related to licenses.

He also visited Nizwa Central Market and the Eastern and Western Market and met with a



Shaikh Hilal bin Said bin Hamdan al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah listens to a trader in Nizwa market on Tuesday.

number of merchants. He listened to their views and suggestions to improve facilities in the market.

It should be noted that the Nizwa Central Market has recently witnessed addition of

various facilities to ensure the safety of visitors and traders. The market also upgraded

the fish sales hall. An iron fence was also added in the livestock market. The work also included installing lighting poles, setting up sidewalks in various parts of the market and constructing more public toilets.

The Governor also visited sewage water treatment complex. The possibility of using this treated water for irrigation was also discussed.

The Governor urged municipal officials to facilitate procedures and resolve citizens' requests without delay. The challenges and obstacles facing the workflow were reviewed, appropriate solutions were found, and employees' inquiries and questions were answered with full transparency.

He also met with a number of citizens to listen to their feedback on the quality of municipal services.

20th anniversary of Land of Frankincense inclusion in Unesco World Heritage List

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 29

The National Museum's Learning and Community Outreach Department along with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism organised a virtual on Monday to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the inclusion of the Land of Frankincense in the Unesco World Heritage List. In the Zoom session Ali bin Salim al Kathiri, Director of the Land of Frankincense Sites Department at the General Directorate of Heritage and Tourism in Dhofar Governorate, participated.

Several topics were discussed in the session including the outstanding universal value of the Land of Frankincense in the World Heritage List, which are Al Baleed, Khor Rori (Sumhuram), Shasar (Ubar) and Wadi Dawka. Other topics included dealing with the stages of rehabilitation



and development of the site, as well as its sustainable development and lastly the information about the frankincense tree, its types and uses.

It's worth mentioning that the Land of Frankincense gallery, which is one of the Prehistory and Ancient History galleries in the museum, showcases the

history of long-distance trade in frankincense during the 3rd millennium BCE, types of frankincense and ancient incense burners.

Diam launches campaign to brief consumers on new water tariff

VINOD NAIR

@VINOT_NAIR

The Public Authority for Water (DIAM) launched a campaign to make citizens aware of the new tariff structure that will be launched from the new year.

A significant upward revision was recently announced in the tariff structure for potable water consumption.

Replying to a query from a group of brothers and sisters living in the same property, Diam said, "The water accounts should be registered under one civil ID to benefit

from the Citizen Account Tariff. If the two accounts of water are registered under two different names, the eligibility criteria shall not apply. In such a case, the members of the household can agree to have both accounts registered under one person's name (with no legal effect on the ownership of the property itself)."

The same person shall then update his or her data through any channel available to benefit from the Citizen Account Tariff which shall apply to two accounts registered under the name of that person.



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A SOOTHING DIP

DR PRITI SWARUP

Natural beauty, mountains, water streams, beautiful sunrise and sunset, that's Oman for you. And if you add pastel colours to this, you will get what is called the Ain Sahban sulphur spring in Al Batinah Governorate. The pool here is one of its kind owing to high sulfur concentration in the water that gives a calming blue colour to it. A recent visit to this place has been etched as a life-time memoir for us in Oman.

HOW TO REACH

A 4WD car is required to reach this area which is a less than 3-hour drive from Muscat towards the highway connecting Suhar to Buraimi. This includes off-roading of approximately 7 km before reaching the main spot, traversing through the adjacent village and aflaj system. For walk-lovers, it may be a good idea to park the vehicle at the local village and walk up to the springs. Care may be exercised though to avoid getting injured by the dry and at times thorny plants around. A little before approaching the main area, we could hear crystal clear water flowing by, inviting us towards it, even more.

WHAT TO DO

As per available information, the entire length of the spring is approximately 2 km. Water is basically shallow in the spring and deep enough for swimming at a few spots. It gets deep particularly between the spring walls, but within 4 feet at maximum depths, though precaution must be always taken. Though the place is generally heavily crowded on weekends, the spring can be an ideal channel for lazing around, during the afternoons. The surfaces are clay-like with a light blue cotton type appearance. Funny boomerangs videos are good with the children around who generally have a knack for creative ideas on the same. After enjoying in the water in the afternoon to early evening hours, it is highly recommended



to stay at the location for an hour or so to enjoy the picturesque sunset while you let yourself dry off naturally, munch on healthy evening snack and garb a cup of steaming tea or coffee.

The overlooking mountains display different shades of greens and browns and the sight becomes altogether mesmerising as the time for sunset approaches. That is the ideal time to obtain some good shots with the camera as the sun dips down fairly quickly and we got a range of captures and silhouette

pictures. Trying the jump-in-the-air shots against the setting sun turned out to be memories for a lifetime! If time permits and enough light is there, a quick hike up to the nearby mountain can be managed in before leaving the place and heading back home. It is also an opportunity to get some spectacular aerial views of the entire area.

WHAT TO CARRY

It is ideal to carry drinking water, good hiking boots to explore

the nearby area, swimwear to take a dip, snacks to cover up the exhausted calories after lazing around in the water and for the way back, sunscreen and sunglasses — be careful not to drop it in the water though, good camera for the shutterbugs as the place provides occasions for some highly creative shots in, around and above the water.

THINGS TO TAKE CARE

Although there are mixed opinions on its therapeutic

effects for skin diseases and detoxification, it is definitely not safe to consume the water and accidental ingestion must be immediately attended to.

While climbing down to the water body, there are chances of inadvertent slipping as the adjacent mud is loose and stones or other gritty material may slide off easily. Inside the main spring, the big stones and rocky surfaces have smoothened out and are covered with a thick layer of Sulphur, making the

surface clayey. This requires that the visitors be extra cautious, especially if carrying small children into it. Since the adjacent place is inhabited by the locals, respecting their customs, and dressing conservatively must be taken care of while traversing the nearby village.

An ideal attraction for spending 3-4 hours at the location with families and groups. An absolute delight for outdoor and photography lovers. A must for a thorough relaxation experience!

Sultanate to see rationalised spending in 2021

SAMUEL KUTTY

[@samkutttyp](#)

With emphasis on increasing efficiencies, the year 2021 is set to usher in with rationalised spending in Oman even as priority will be for providing basic services to citizens.

While the government is all set to unveil the general budget 2021 and the 10th Five-Year Plan, the focus will be on rationalised spending, reducing deficits and providing basic services such as health, education and social security services to citizens being among the top priorities.

During 2020, the government adopted a policy to reduce the operational and development expenditures of government agencies by 10 per cent from the 2020 State General Budget.

In a recent circular for budget estimates for 2021, the Ministry of Finance said that budget allocations should be in accordance with the financial framework of the tenth five-year plan (2021-2025).

"Priority will be on implementing projects that serve the economic and social goals, while giving weight to operationalise the completed projects," the circular stated.

The budget is also expected to seek alternative sources of income to finance some government projects and services.

According to the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan for the years 2020-2024, the government is committed to further recognising efficiencies in 2021 by reducing recurring spending compared to the levels achieved in 2020.

Our financial situation saw more challenges because of the economic conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic

NASSER BIN KHAMIS AL JASHMI
Secretary-General,
Ministry of Finance

The plan seeks to achieve sustainable levels of fiscal balance and establish suitable conditions to support the Oman Vision 2040.

"Cost optimisation and reductions are not across-the-board cuts, but rather rationalised in order to ensure the least disruption to government operations," states the plan.

Speaking to Oman TV, Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Finance said that Oman's economy will further improve after the fiscal balance plan is implemented.

"Our financial situation saw more challenges because of the economic conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic," he said.

He said that some of the areas of spending that occupy key segments of the current budget are salaries, which account for

60 per cent, and development spending – money used to serve the community in general.

Budgets for government agencies have been cut by up to 30 per cent, and next year, they will be reduced by an additional five per cent, he said.

The government restructuring undertaken in August 2020 is just one of the many efforts under way to increase operational efficiency, unlock synergies and realise real savings on a structural basis.

The National Programme for Fiscal Balance is currently overseeing a systematic review of government fees for services. The initiative aims to build an initial database of government services and create a unified regulatory framework for their pricing. Work is currently under way to build a guide for pricing government

services.

The government is also actively looking at all sources of revenue, including personal income tax, in order to plug the gap in the deficit. Currently, the government is evaluating the tax and how it can best be implemented.

Oman will introduce a value added tax (VAT) system with effect from April 2021 at a standard rate of 5 per cent, with limited zero-ratings but the highest number of exemptions. It is estimated to generate over RO 300 million in its first 12 months of implementation, subject to economic conditions.

Oman has undertaken several reforms over the past five years to contain the growth of the public wage bill — including hiring freeze except for critical public services such as health and education.



Muscat Municipality

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Omran organises workshop on corporate governance

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 29

OMRAN Group, the executive arm of the Sultanate for tourism development, conducted a workshop, titled, "Governance — Moral Compass, Concepts, Premises and Applications", in collaboration with Oman Center for Governance and Sustainability (OCGS). The workshop was organised as part of OMRAN's objectives to introduce tools, mechanisms and the necessary legal framework to implement principles of corporate governance.

OMRAN's Chairman of Board of Directors, Mohammed bin Salim al Busaidy, together with the Chief Executive Officer of OCGS, Sayyid Hamed bin Sultan al Busaidy, attended the workshop. Other attendees included the Board Members, CEOs of the Group's subsidiaries, senior executives from OMRAN's management and other representatives.

"The Board of Directors of OMRAN recognises the importance of governance as a modern concept of management, which aligns with the requirement of the current phase. Hence, this workshop was organised to discuss the best



practices in applying principles of corporate governance, improving performance and governance mechanisms. The workshop further examined the administrative readiness and identified practices, which serve the Group's goals and directions," commented Eng. Mohammed. "OMRAN's interest in hosting such a workshop reflects the Group's optimistic approach towards good corporate governance. Applying the concept of governance positively influences competitiveness and therefore, OMRAN is using best practices for implementing good governance," said Sayyid Hamed. "Promoting the culture of corporate governance is a

necessary tool for business development and motivation. This is what OCGS seeks to achieve by conducting such workshops," said he added.

The workshop's programme focused on a number of subjects that include, the main concepts of governance, general framework for accountability, premises for governance of state-owned companies and corporate social responsibility. To further enhance the skills of Board members, the workshop explored subjects related to the nature of their work, the capacity of its members and separating the executive management from the Board.

It also looked at the structure of the Board and types of

committees to ensure just use of authority, whilst avoiding conflicts of interests. Lastly, the workshop discussed the most important factors for successful corporate Board management.

OMRAN group operates in accordance with the governance frameworks, policies and guiding principles set by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), to ensure improved operational and investment performance that aligns with OIA's endeavours to streamline policies in line with Oman Vision 2040 by diversifying the economy, increasing non-oil revenues and attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) through the tourism sector.

Fish output grows by 41%

ZAKARIYA FIKRY

MUSCAT, DEC 29

The Sultanate has seen 41 per cent increase in fish production by the end of October 2020. The total fish production recorded an unexpected jump to 608,000 tonnes of fish from artisan and commercial fishing compared to 432,000 tonnes at the corresponding period of 2019, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

A recent data released by NCSI indicates that artisan fishing produced 580,000 tonnes of fish whilst commercial fishing and coastal fishing produced 25,000 tonnes and 3,000 tonnes, respectively.

The bulk of fish output was produced by means of surface fishing which accounted for 336,000 tonnes while big surface fishes accounted for 134,000 tonnes and deep sea fishes made up 85,000 tonnes. Output of large surface fish jumped by 60 per cent compared to the previous year, deep sea fish production 31 per

cent and shellfish 16.5 per cent.

Shark fishing increased by 7 per cent to 5,477 tonnes compared to 5,132 at the same period of 2019.

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Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.)

P.O. Box 311, Muscat, Postal Code 100, Sultanate of Oman.

DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR ENDED ON NOVEMBER 30, 2020

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to submit the un-audited Financial Statements of the company for the financial year ended on November 30, 2020 along with related reports.

We would like to state that the revenue for the above period was RO 12,326,456 as against RO 13,039,985 in the corresponding period of last year. The net Profit after tax was RO 2,547,747 against RO 2,797,008 recorded last year.

The total shareholders fund increased from RO 23,080,606 at the end of November 2019 to RO 24,403,353 at the end of current financial year. As a result of this growth, the net asset per share has increased from RO 3.426 to RO 3.622.

On behalf of the Board of directors, I express our most sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq Bin Taimour for his wise leadership and generous support to the private sector. Furthermore, I would extend our gratitude to his government for their co-operation and assistance with special mention of Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Muscat Securities Market and Capital Market Authority.

I conclude this report by expressing our appreciation to our shareholders, Petroleum Development Oman, our bankers and customers for their valued support and cooperation.

For and on behalf of Board of Directors,

TALAL BIN QAIS AL ZAWAWI
CHAIRMAN

	2020 RO. '000	2019 RO. '000
Fixed assets	16,790	17,739
	16,790	17,739
Current assets		
Inventories	31	24
Trade Receivables	4,816	4,812
Receivables from related parties	53	96
Bank and Cash	5,924	5,511
	10,824	10,443
Total assets	27,614	28,182
Current liabilities		
Trade and other Payables	536	876
Payables to related parties	1,022	1,486
Bank loans and over drafts	983	1,179
Lease liability	18	--
Tax liability	432	463
	2,991	4,004
Long term liabilities		
Bank loan	--	983
Lease liability	87	--
Deferred Tax liability	133	114
	220	1,097
Total liabilities	3,211	5,101
Net Assets	24,403	23,081
Shareholders' funds		
Share capital	6,737	6,125
Legal reserve	2,246	2,042
Retained earnings	15,420	14,914
Total shareholders' equity	24,403	23,081

	2020 RO. '000	2019 RO. '000
Turnover/Revenue	12,326	13,040
Gross Profit	4,443	4,641
Depreciation	(1,088)	(1,026)
Administration & general expenses	(442)	(374)
Operating profit	2,913	3,241
Finance charges	(93)	(135)
Other income	178	155
Profit before taxation and minority interest	2,998	3,261
Taxation	(451)	(464)
Net profit attributable to ordinary Shareholders	2,547	2,797
Net profit margin	21%	21%

The complete accounts in either Arabic or English will be delivered to any shareholder within 7 days of receipt of the request. Such requests may be sent to the Board Secretary, Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.), PO Box 311, Postal Code 100, Muscat.

Tender Notice

The Internal Tender Committee at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology In Al Khuwair invites for the Following Projects:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Date of Publishing	Last date to purchase tender document	Submission Date	Companies who should participate in this Tender	Document Price
MOTs/HQ-22/23/2020	MAINTENANCE OF TRACK ROADS PROJECT AT AL BURAIMI GOVERNORAT FOR 5 YEARS	30/12/2020	11/1/2021	1/2/2021	EXPERIENCED COMPANIES AND REGISTERED WITH THE TENDER BOARD IN (FIRST CLASS)	(200/-) TWO HUNDRED OMANI RIAL NON-REFUNDABLE
(MOTs/HQ-23/24/2020)	MAINTENANCE OF TRACK ROADS PROJECT AT SOUTH AL BATINA GOVERNORAT FOR 5 YEARS	30/12/2020	11/1/2021	1/2/2021	EXPERIENCED COMPANIES AND REGISTERED WITH THE TENDER BOARD IN (FIRST CLASS)	(250/-) TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY OMANI RIAL NON-REFUNDABLE
(MOTs/HQ-24/25/2020)	MAINTENANCE OF TRACK ROADS PROJECT AT AL WUSTA GOVERNORAT FOR 5 YEARS	30/12/2020	11/1/2021	1/2/2021	EXPERIENCED COMPANIES AND REGISTERED WITH THE TENDER BOARD IN (FIRST CLASS)	(220/-) TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY OMANI RIAL NON-REFUNDABLE

Interested Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. Tenders should be submitted online on given website. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee issued by local bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of (1%) of the Tender value validity for (90) days, and addressed to (Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee). And hard copy of the same should be submitted manually to the Tenders Section, Tenders and Contracts Department (1st Floor), Ministry of Transport Building at Al Khuwair before 11:00 am on submission date.

CORRESPONDANCE:

- Tender Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at e-Tendering System. (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
- E-Tendering System Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the e-Tendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number:

Tel: +968 24166670 e-mail: etenderhd@mtc.gov.om

<http://www.motc.gov.om>

Iran launches trial of own COVID-19 vaccine

TEHRAN: Iran launched on Tuesday the first phase of a clinical trial of a vaccine developed in the Islamic Republic, the region's country hardest hit by the pandemic, state television reported.

"The first vaccine against the coronavirus, developed by Iranian researchers, has been unveiled by injecting three people," the public broadcaster said.

The novel coronavirus has killed nearly 55,000 out of more than 1.2 million people infected in Iran, according to health ministry data.

Iran has accused arch enemy the United States of hampering its access to vaccines through its tough sanctions regime. While food and medicine are technically exempt, international banks tend to refuse transactions involving Iran.

President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday said Washington had demanded that Tehran pay for the drugs through US banks and said he feared the United States would seize the money.

State television on Tuesday broadcast images at the trial launch showing two men and one woman receiving injections in the presence of the health minister and the Iranian vice-president in charge of science and technology.



A woman receives an injection during the first trial phase of a locally-made Iranian vaccine for COVID-19 coronavirus disease in Tehran on Tuesday. — AFP

It said the vaccine project was funded by the a state-run conglomerate whose president is

appointed by the Iranian supreme leader, called the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order or EIKO.

The state TV report said the three volunteers were the daughter of the president of EIKO

and two high-ranking officials of the conglomerate. The vaccine will be

The first vaccine against the coronavirus, developed by Iranian researchers, has been unveiled by injecting three people

STATE TELEVISION

administered to "56 volunteers" in two doses two weeks apart, according to Iribnews, the state television site, quoting a person in charge of developing the drug.

The result would be announced 28 days after the second injection, it said.

Another Iranian vaccine, developed at the country's Razi Institute, "will receive authorisation" for the start of human trials "in the very near future," said Health Minister Saeed Namaki.

Namaki early this month said Iran had "pre-purchased" about 16.8 million vaccine doses via Covax, the mechanism for the equitable distribution of vaccines established by the UN World Health Organization. — AFP

Gaza forces fire rockets to mark Israel conflict anniversary

GAZA CITY: Palestinian armed groups staged military exercises in Gaza on Tuesday, including firing rockets into the sea, to mark the anniversary of the start of the 2008 conflict with Israel.

The demonstrations were scheduled to last several hours and involve about 10 groups in the Israeli-blockaded Palestinian enclave, said a spokesman for the Al Quds Brigade forces.

The goal of the exercise, the first of its kind, is to "strengthen the skills of combatants" and demonstrate the "unity" of armed groups in Gaza, added the spokesman, whose face was almost entirely covered by a traditional headscarf.

Hamas, the group that has controlled Gaza since 2007, was also taking part. Hamas's Al Aqsa TV showed rockets being fired from the strip on Tuesday into the Mediterranean Sea.

Israel's army said a projectile



People watch as rockets are fired during a military drill by Hamas and other Palestinian armed factions in Gaza City on Tuesday. — AFP

device was launched from Gaza overnight Monday to Tuesday, but that it did not cross into Israeli territory.

Israel did not immediately retaliate to that launch with air strikes, as it typically does when

rockets fired from Gaza enter Israel.

The drills also come days after Hamas accused Israel of launching strikes that damaged a children's hospital.

Israel, which said it carried

out the weekend air strikes in response to rocket fire from Gaza, denied that its missiles hit the hospital.

In December 2008, Israel launched "Operation Cast Lead" to stop Palestinian rocket fire into Israel.

It ended with a ceasefire in January 2009, after 1,440 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed.

Hamas and Israel fought two further conflicts, in 2012 and 2014.

A fragile truce has broadly held in recent months, despite rocket fire from Gaza which is generally followed by retaliatory Israeli air strikes.

Poverty rates in Gaza, which hovered around 50 per cent before the coronavirus pandemic, are thought to have increased since Hamas imposed lockdown measures to limit transmission.

— AFP

Sudanese protest against activist's torture and killing



State news agency SUNA reported on Monday that the Rapid Support Forces had referred its intelligence chief and other personnel for questioning over Nouri's arrest and killing.

KHARTOUM: Hundreds of Sudanese protested on Tuesday against the torture and killing of a pro-democracy activist, allegedly by members of the powerful Rapid Support Forces paramilitary, an AFP journalist said.

Bahaa Eddine Nouri, 45, was snatched on December 16 from a cafe in the southern Khartoum district of Kalakla by men in plain clothes who were driving a vehicle without licence plates, according to local media.

His body was found days later bearing signs of torture at a hospital morgue in Omdurman,

the capital's twin city, triggering a public outcry. Dozens of protesters initially gathered outside the hospital on Tuesday, carrying pictures of Nouri and banners demanding the alleged perpetrators face the gallows.

His family collected his body from the morgue and the protesters moved on with Nouri's family to bury him, said an AFP journalist at the scene.

"Enough with disparaging the people's blood," read one banner, also referring to the protesters killed during months of unprecedented demonstrations in 2019. — AFP

DUBAI

70pc of inoculations with Pfizer vaccine

Dubai is planning to inoculate 70 per cent of its population with the COVID-19 vaccine produced by Pfizer and BioNTech by the end of 2021, in a campaign free of charge for citizens and residents, a health official said. The financial hub of the United Arab Emirates began the first phase of the vaccination campaign last week, targeting "priority groups", including those 60 and older, people with chronic medical conditions, those with disabilities and frontline workers.

In contrast with the UAE's



capital Abu Dhabi, which rolled out a vaccine made by China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm) to the general public, Dubai followed Saudi Arabia, which earlier this month became the first Arab country to use the Pfizer vaccine. — Reuters

ISTANBUL

Court rules jailing of rights defender lawful

A top Turkish court on Tuesday sanctioned rights defender Osman Kavala's three-year detention without a conviction in a case watched closely for signs of a political thawing under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. A respected figure in international circles, the 63-year-old patron of culture and the arts has remained in prison despite being acquitted in February in connection with 2013 anti-government protests.

Before he could walk free,



he was immediately re-arrested and jailed on fresh charges of espionage and involvement in a failed 2016 coup against Erdogan. The next hearing is scheduled for February 5 of next year. — AFP

CAIRO

Man sentenced to 3 years for harassment

An Egyptian court on Tuesday sentenced a former student to three years in prison for sexually harassing two young women, in a case that sparked outrage on social media under the #MeToo hashtag. The economic court, which tries cyber crimes, sentenced Ahmed Bassem Zaki "to three years in prison, finding him guilty of sexually harassing two girls over the phone, sending sexual photos to one of them and repeatedly contacting the other without her consent", a judicial



source said. Zaki, who is in his 20s, can appeal the verdict, the source added. Claims against Zaki emerged online in July in the form of testimonies. — AFP

In brief

■ CHENNAI

RAJINIKANTH ENDS
POLITICAL BID OVER
HEALTH FEARS

Indian movie superstar Rajinikanth on Tuesday cancelled his plans to enter politics, saying a health scare had been “a warning from God”. The announcement came a day after the 70-year-old Tamil action hero left hospital where he was treated for high blood pressure. Rajinikanth, one of Asia’s best paid actors, set off celebrations by his fans when he announced early in December that he would be launching a political party in a bid to bring “corruption free” government to his home state of Tamil Nadu. But the bus conductor-turned-actor said he could not go ahead in a long letter released on his Twitter account. — AFP

■ BANGKOK

THAILAND WARNS OF
STRICTER MEASURES TO
HALT WORST OUTBREAK

Thailand warned on Tuesday that more intensive measures might be necessary to halt its worst coronavirus outbreak yet and urged the public to cooperate to contain a spread that has seen cases in most regions of the country. Thailand has imposed tighter control measures in some areas, including on entertainment businesses, which will be reassessed in seven days.

Health authorities confirmed 155 new cases on Tuesday as new clusters emerged in the wake of a big outbreak discovered 12 days ago at a seafood market near Bangkok, among mainly migrant workers from Myanmar. — Reuters

■ KATHMANDU

THOUSANDS MARCH
AGAINST DISSOLUTION
OF PARLIAMENT

The Philippine Navy is hiring maritime militia forces to patrol and protect fishermen in the South China Sea from intruding Chinese forces.

Navy chief Vice Admiral Giovanni Carlo Bacordo told reporters on Tuesday that it is preparing to send over 200 militiamen to the disputed South China Sea.

One company is to watch the islands occupied by the Philippines in the Spratly archipelago — also known as Nansha islands in Chinese — and another company to secure Scarborough Shoal — Huangyan island in Chinese.

— dpa

MORE ROHINGYA SENT TO
BANGLADESH ISLAND

BHASAN CHAR: Bangladesh moved a second group of Rohingya Muslim refugees to a low-lying island in the Bay of Bengal on Tuesday, despite opposition from rights groups worried about the new site’s vulnerability to storms. The United Nations says it has not been involved in the relocation but urged the government to ensure no refugee is forced to move to Bhasan Char island, which only emerged from the sea 20 years ago.

The Bangladesh navy took the 1,804 Rohingya to the island in five ships, with the refugees sitting on wooden benches on deck, some clutching ducks, pigeons and chickens in bamboo baskets and wearing orange life vests and masks against the coronavirus.

A first group of 1,642 Rohingya, members of a minority group who have fled from violence in Myanmar, were relocated from their camps near the Myanmar border to the isolated island earlier in the month. The move has faced opposition, especially from aid groups worried about a disaster in a country that regularly faces severe weather, especially along its coast.

In 1991, nearly 143,000 people were killed when a cyclone whipped up a 4.5-metre tidal surge. The government has built a 2-metre high embankment for 12-km to protect the island along with housing for 100,000 people. It dismisses the risks. “The island is completely safe,” Foreign Minister Abdul Momen said in the capital, Dhaka.

Upon reaching the island, navy personnel on a jetty helped the refugees ashore, many of them with sacks of belongings slung over their shoulders. “Bhasan Char



Rohingya refugees sit on a Bangladesh Navy ship as they are relocated to the flood-prone island Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal, in Chittagong, on Tuesday. — AFP

is better,” said one middle-aged man who arrived with his wife and three children from a refugee camp of bamboo and plastic shelters packed across muddy hills near the Myanmar border, where some one million Rohingya live.

The man said the head of his old camp had convinced him that the island was a better option. Reuters is withholding the names of refugees going to the island because of the controversy surrounding the relocation with many refugees keen to stay on the mainland and opposed to the move.

‘SUFFERING AND
CONFLICT’

Tractor trailers and army trucks took the refugees to their

The Bangladesh navy took the 1,804 Rohingya to the island in five ships, with the refugees sitting on wooden benches on deck, some clutching ducks, pigeons and chickens in bamboo baskets and wearing orange life vests and masks against the coronavirus

new concrete homes and bunk beds. Navy officials took a Reuters photographer to a farm where sheep grazed on the greenish-gray grass overlooked by a watchtower. The government says the

relocation is voluntary but some refugees from the first group have spoken about being coerced to go.

The human rights group Amnesty International also expressed concern. “(A) lack of transparency in the consultation process with refugees, and allegations from within the community about cash incentives being offered to Rohingya families to relocate to Bhasan Char as well as use of intimidation tactics are making the relocation process questionable,” the group said.

Foreign Minister Momen rejected such doubts. “The Rohingya people who have shifted there are very happy with the arrangement. Some evil groups are spreading negative propaganda,” he said. — Reuters

■ STRANDED PAKISTANIS LEAVE INDIA



Pakistani nationals, who were previously stranded in India following the closure of borders due to the COVID-19 lockdown, wave as they sit inside a car before crossing through the India-Pakistan Attari-Wagah border post, some 35 kms from Amritsar, on Tuesday. — AFP

India finds 6 cases of virus
variant, all in isolation

MUMBAI: India has found six cases of a more infectious strain of the coronavirus, which has prompted border closures around the world, in people arriving from Britain and will likely extend a flight ban to guard against it, officials said on Tuesday.

All six of the infected people had been kept in isolation, the health ministry said in a statement, adding that their fellow travellers were being traced. “Their close contacts have also been put under quarantine,” the ministry said.

India had suspended all flights from Britain until the end of the month over worry about the

infectious variant of the virus but about 33,000 passengers had flown in from late November, before the ban was enforced, the ministry said.

Of those arrivals, 114 people were found positive for the coronavirus and their samples were being checked for the new variant, which has been detected across parts of Europe and Asia, it said.

Civil Aviation Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said the ban on flights from Britain would probably remain in force into the New Year. “I foresee a slight extension,” Puri told reporters.

— Reuters

Indonesia to ink Pfizer and
AstraZeneca vaccine deals

JAKARTA: Indonesia is poised to secure coronavirus vaccines from Pfizer and AstraZeneca, the health minister said on Tuesday, as it awaits authorisation to begin its inoculation programme with a third drug, by China’s Sinovac.

Budi Gunadi Sadikin said a 50-million-dose deal with AstraZeneca would be finalised before the end of the year, and one of the same size with Pfizer in the first week of January. The first shots for both those drugs, which have gained regulatory approval in many western countries, are not scheduled to arrive for months, the minister told his first news conference.

So Indonesia plans to start vaccinations with the Sinovac treatment, of which it secured 1.2 million doses this month and expects 1.8 million more in January, once it gains emergency use clearance. Interim results from its phase III trial are expected to be delivered to Indonesia’s Food and Drug Agency next month.

Budi said the country’s 1.3 million front-line health workers would get priority in the first wave of vaccinations between January and April. “They are the most important group of people in our battle against the pandemic,” he



A recovering COVID-19 patient hangs out along a corridor of the Bekasi Patriot Chandrabhaga stadium, used as a temporary hospital amid the pandemic, in Bekasi, on the outskirts of Jakarta, on Tuesday. — AFP

told a news conference. The world’s fourth most populous country has had over 727,000 confirmed COVID cases and 21,700 deaths, among Asia’s highest tallies.

Public servants will be next in line for shots, with those in infection “red-zones” aged between 18 and 59 prioritised in a second round of vaccinations. Indonesia is focusing its programme on that age range rather than the elderly in an effort to safeguard the working population. Bambang Heriyanto, corporate secretary of state-owned drugmaker Bio Farma, said that

strategy would allow Indonesia to reach herd immunity.

Including Tuesday’s announcement, Indonesia has secured 329 million vaccine doses, including about 125 million from Sinovac, 50 million from Novavax and 54 million from global vaccine programme COVAX. The AstraZeneca vaccines are expected to arrive in the second quarter of 2021 and Pfizer’s in the third quarter, according to a slide presentation by Budi. The companies were not immediately available for comment.

— Reuters

Philippines
bans arrivals
from 20
countries

MANILA: The Philippines will shut its borders to foreigners arriving from 20 countries and territories in a bid to prevent a new strain of coronavirus entering the nation, officials said on Tuesday.

The ban on travellers from places including Australia, France, Japan and Hong Kong comes as the archipelago braces for a post-Christmas surge in the virus that has infected nearly half a million people.

Dozens of countries closed their borders to Britain in recent weeks over rising cases of a variant that is believed to spread faster.

The Philippines — which has not yet detected the new strain — was among them, and in Tuesday’s announcement it extended the ban to January 15.

The measure takes effect on Wednesday, presidential spokesman Harry Roque said.

Foreigners have been largely banned from entering the country during the pandemic, but authorities recently started to allow entry to holders of certain types of visas.

Filipinos returning home from countries on the list will be allowed to enter, but will have to undergo 14-days quarantine even if they test negative for COVID-19, he added. — AFP

Biden says Trump Pentagon stalling transition, posing risks

WILMINGTON: President-elect Joe Biden said on Monday that Donald Trump's appointees at the Pentagon were stalling on the transition and warned that the United States faces security risks as a result.

After he and Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris were briefed by their transition teams on national security, Biden said that political appointees at the Pentagon as well as the Office of Management and Budget had put up "roadblocks."

"Right now, we just aren't getting all the information that we need from the outgoing administration in key national security area(s)," Biden said after the briefing.

"It is nothing short, in my view, of irresponsibility."

Biden said he was seeking a "clear picture" from the outgoing administration on the force posture of US troops around the world. "We need full visibility into the budget planning underway at the Defense Department and



President-elect Joe Biden delivers a speech alongside Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris after a conference video call focused on foreign policy at his transition headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, on Monday. — Reuters

other agencies in order to avoid any window of confusion or catch-up that our adversaries may

try to exploit," Biden said.

Trump has refused to concede the November 3 election, which

Biden won by some seven million votes and by 306-232 in the state-by-state Electoral

College. The president has made unsubstantiated claims of widespread fraud.

The Trump administration has drawn concern by shaking up the leadership of the Pentagon since the election including firing defence secretary Mark Esper, who had distanced himself from the president's use of force against unarmed anti-racism demonstrators earlier this year.

Trump's new acting defence secretary, Chris Miller, has said that the outgoing administration had agreed with Biden's people to pause briefings for the holiday season, an assertion that the incoming team called untrue.

Miller released a statement on Monday saying the Pentagon's coordination efforts with the transition team "already surpass those of recent administrations with over three weeks to go."

He added that Department of Defense officials would continue working in a "transparent and collegial manner" to support the transition. — AFP



Pedestrians, some wearing face masks, walk in front of Christmas decorations at a shopping mall in Moscow on Tuesday, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

Moscow sees sharp rise in COVID-19 deaths in November

MOSCOW: Moscow health officials on Tuesday reported a 27 per cent increase in deaths from the coronavirus in November compared to October, while still holding out against reimposing a full lockdown.

Figures published by Moscow's health department showed 4,542 fatalities from the virus in November compared to 3,573 in October and 1,569 in September.

Moscow health officials also said the capital saw 14,456 total deaths in November, meaning deaths from COVID-19 represented about a third of the total that month.

Russia has been battered by a second wave of infections since the fall, with epicentres in its capital Moscow and second-largest city Saint Petersburg.

But unlike most major European cities, the Russian capital has not reintroduced the kind of strict lockdown it imposed this spring at the start of the pandemic in the hopes of buttressing a struggling economy.

Officials have reduced in-office workers by a third, enforced mask-wearing in public places and obliged bars and restaurants to close by 11:00 pm.

On Tuesday Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanyin called the city's surging outbreak "alarming".

He said that around 130,000 people were in hospital with COVID-19 in the city of some 12 million. And he announced that the winter holiday period for schools had been extended by a week until January 17 to limit the spread of the virus.

Moscow's authorities, like the rest of the country, are betting on mass vaccination programme using Russia's homemade jab Sputnik V to get the outbreak under control. — AFP



Croatian soldiers walk on wreckage next to damaged buildings in Petrinja, some 50 km from Zagreb, after the town was hit by an earthquake on Tuesday. — AFP

One girl dead as strong quake strikes Croatia

PETRINJA: A powerful earthquake killed a young girl as it ripped down buildings in central Croatia on Tuesday, sending rescue teams to scour rubble for survivors as residents sought safe shelter.

The damage was concentrated in the town of Petrinja, 50 kilometres south of the capital Zagreb and home to some 20,000 people. The force of the quake caved in rooftops, sending bricks and other debris tumbling into the streets.

Josip Horvat, a 44-year-old artist, said he was fixing a friend's chimney in the town's centre when the tremor struck at

midday.

"I grabbed the gutter and I was just praying to God that it ends as soon as possible," he said, lamenting the "disaster" downtown.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, who took stock of the wreckage in Petrinja, said at least one girl was reported killed in the destruction.

Local media reported she was 12 years old.

"It is not safe to be here," Plenkovic said, adding that authorities would bring in containers for residents to stay in as long as their homes remained a risk. — AFP

UK virus strain has been in Germany since November

BERLIN/LONDON: The new coronavirus strain sweeping Britain has been in Germany since November, health officials said on Tuesday, after detecting the variant in a patient who died in the north of the country.

Researchers were "able to sequence the variant of the B.1.1.7 virus in a person infected in November this year", the health ministry of Lower Saxony said in a statement referring to the new strain.

This is the same strain "responsible for a large proportion of the infections detected in the south of England," it said.

The variant was found in an elderly patient with underlying health conditions who has since died. His wife was also infected but survived.

The couple caught the virus after their daughter returned from a trip to Britain in mid-November, where she "in all likelihood" became infected with the new strain, the statement said.

Teams from the Hannover Medical School (MHH) were able



Pedestrians walk past a bus stop with a government message about the coronavirus tier 4 restrictions urging people to stay home in London on Tuesday. — AFP

to identify the new strain after sequencing the genome.

The results were then confirmed by a team at Berlin's Charite hospital, which included top German virologist Christian Drosten. Germany had previously reported only one case of the new strain, in a woman who flew in from London on Thursday.

Britain sounded the alarm earlier this month over the

variant, which authorities say is significantly more contagious.

Concerns over the strain have prompted many countries to suspend travel to and from Britain. It has since been detected in several other nations, including Portugal, France, Jordan and South Korea.

Germany has banned arrivals from the UK by road, sea and air until January 6. — AFP/Reuters

SHORT TAKES

PARIS

50 journalists killed in 2020, says watchdog

Fifty journalists and media workers were killed in connection with their work in 2020, the majority in countries that are not at war, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said on Tuesday. The figure shows an increase in the targeting of reporters investigating organised crime, corruption or environmental issues, it said.

Eighty-four per cent of those killed this year were "deliberately targeted" for their work, RSF said in its annual report, compared to 63 per cent in 2019. "For several



years now, Reporters Without Borders has noted that investigative journalists are really in the crosshairs of states, or cartels," said Pauline Ades-Mével, RSF editor-in-chief. — AFP

MOSCOW

Russia and Turkey to develop military ties

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Tuesday that Moscow and Ankara's military cooperation would not be deterred by US sanctions on Turkey for acquiring a Russian missile defence system. Washington this month punished Turkey for buying Russia's S-400 air defence system, imposing rare sanctions against a Nato ally. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the time told Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu that the American sanctions



were intended to prevent Russia from receiving substantial revenues from the sale. On Tuesday, Cavusoglu visited Moscow for talks with his Russia's top diplomat Lavrov. — AFP

JOHANNESBURG

South Africa imposes new coronavirus measures

South Africa banned alcohol sales and made masks mandatory in public from Tuesday, tightening restrictions after a surge in coronavirus cases as more countries joined in mass vaccination campaigns to beat the pandemic. Nations around the world are struggling with winter spikes in infections that have pushed the global caseload close to 81 million and killed more than 1.77 million, even as the rollout of vaccines gathers pace in North America and Europe.



South African President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a ban on selling alcohol and said face masks will be compulsory from Tuesday. — AFP

Living through a tumultuous year!

A year before, at this time, we were all euphoric to welcome 2020, and never expected the year would be as tumultuous and wearisome as it has been.

For all its eventfulness — from record-setting wildfires in California and Australia to the current COVID-19 pandemic — 2020 has, for many, been a tough year, if not a lost year. The coronavirus has made the last 10 months a whirlwind for us all!

Unlike previous year-ends, when people take New Year resolutions about health or behavioural alterations in their personal lives, this time all of us will be looking back at the year which witnessed unprecedented challenges and changes.

And after two days, the year will be part of history as the worst year ever. While for researchers and scholars, of course, the year leaves behind a wealth of material for their accounts of this turbulent period, but for billions of people who lived through this time, the year is full of unforgettable memories of pain and isolation.

The coronavirus outbreak is one of the many events that have made 2020 a harrowing year like no other with



SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyp

UNLIKE PREVIOUS YEAR-ENDS, THIS TIME ALL OF US WILL BE LOOKING BACK AT THE YEAR WHICH WITNESSED UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

a flurry of changes. No doubt, it set the course of life to an extraordinary degree! The pandemic has taken a tremendous toll on so many lives, impacting our health, our traditions, our economy, and our psyches. We stayed home and continue to maintain social distancing in order to help save lives.

We've put our daily routines and rituals on hold for the good of everyone. Governments across the globe had to enforce stringent lockdowns in order to stop the pandemic from spreading. And with no concrete date for when the pandemic will end, we need to be in this for the long haul. Now, the increased use of the word 'lockdown' has led Collins Dictionary to choose it as its Word of the Year.

While 2020 will go down in history for an unseen virus that knew no geographic boundaries, no religion, no caste or creed!

The year also could be remembered for what got cancelled, what did not happen! With schedules disrupted, no one found it easy to keep track of which day of the week it was. Travels cancelled, marriages and births of the newborns were not celebrated and educational and places of worship

closed.

The toll of the pandemic has been so much to bear with the loss of millions of lives and many more are falling preys everyday to the lethal microbe! Yet we will get through it, because that's what humanity does. We endure. We keep waking up and putting one foot in front of another until we're walking again, just as we did before, just as we've always done.

Also what we should not forget is the fact that even as the year was marred by the pandemic, new approaches through innovations have emerged out of the turmoil and are presenting real opportunities to transform our lives.

With several vaccines on the horizon, we are hopeful of a new beginning in 2021, with stability in health and economy. People have become more cautious about their health by following proper hygiene.

While this is my last column of the year, I appeal to my readers, when we enter the New Year, if it is possible, try to be more empathetic to those outside of our immediate circle. Think of the sick, the hungry and the weak. Be ambitious of the future, but maintain a medium path so that we let others also grow!

HAMSTRUNG BY STRIFE

Central Africa elections face credibility question

CAMILLE LAFFONT
& ADRIEN MAROTTE

Central African Republic has staged presidential and legislative elections, defying many who predicted a disaster in a country hamstrung by strife and weak governance.

Sunday's vote is a key step for Africa's most troubled state — a byword for grinding poverty and militia brutality, still wracked by a civil war that erupted in 2013.

In the week before the election, the government accused a coalition of armed groups of working with an ex-president to topple President Faustin Archange Touadera, and three UN peacekeepers were killed.

While Touadera, 63, is strongly favoured to win a second term, experts point to several factors that will shape his legitimacy:

BALLOT SECURITY

In a country where armed groups hold sway over two-thirds of the territory, votes have to be transported to Bangui to be counted.

Provisional results are expected from January 4, but no final results are expected before January 18. A runoff will be held on February 14 if there

“These are part-elections, they are not credible and do not meet international standards

THIERRY VIRCOULON
Researcher

is no outright winner in the first round.

Those three long weeks provide plenty of opportunity for votes to disappear — a scenario that notably happened in Touadera's own surprise election in 2015-16.

VOTER TURNOUT

Polling was high in the capital Bangui, where it went ahead without incident, but it was badly affected by violence in the provinces.

The Strategic Committee for Secure Elections (CSSE), a governmental body, said it had documented at least 12 large districts, called sub-prefectures, where voting was unable to start.

The UN says there were also numerous polling stations which did open but then swiftly closed or remained empty because of voter intimidation.

“These are part-elections, they are not credible and do not meet international standards,” said Thierry Vircoulon, a researcher with the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI).

Nathalia Dukhan, a CAR specialist with a US NGO called The Sentry, said electoral fraud in the 2015-16 vote “was tolerated and thus legitimised” — it was deemed the price for consolidating peace after the civil war.

“But today, it's the entire political opposition which is condemning massive rigging,” she said. “In a post-electoral situation, (the opposition) may well provide more direct support for the coalition of armed groups in order to channel its dissatisfaction.”

MILITIA PRESSURE

A coalition of militia groups opposed to Touadera have so far been blocked from advancing on Bangui by UN forces and reinforcements flown in from Rwanda and Russia.

But by controlling swathes of the country, they retain a “nuisance power that will not go away with rigged, non-credible elections that have been legitimised by the international community,” said Dukhan. “We are going to enter a post-electoral phase with a military escalation in both camps,” she predicted. — AFP

VULNERABLE SECTIONS

Pandemic killing virus-free people with diabetes and Alzheimer's

MARIE MCCULLOUGH,
STACEY BURLING AND
CHRIS A WILLIAMS

The coronavirus has so far killed about 325,000 people in the United States, but that staggering toll does not include the multitudes who have died because of disruptions, isolation and destitution related to the pandemic. People with diabetes or Alzheimer's disease are particularly vulnerable.

An Inquirer analysis of federal data found that from mid-March through November, the US state of Pennsylvania had 753 more deaths attributed to Alzheimer's and diabetes than would be expected based on the last four years, a 14-per cent increase for each cause. In New Jersey, there were 634 more deaths than expected for the two causes, an increase of 11 per cent for Alzheimer's and 33 per cent for diabetes.

The same trends occurred across the country, according to the Inquirer analysis, which aligns with other studies this year of “excess deaths” — the gap between actual and expected deaths. The biggest deviation from the norm for Alzheimer's and diabetes was in April, but every month had excess deaths attributed to these causes. Even in the best of times, diabetes can be a costly, complex, frustrating condition to manage. Sugar builds up in the blood, either because the body can't properly use or doesn't make enough insulin, the hormone that regulates sugar. If not controlled with diet, exercise, and often, medication, diabetes can cause devastating complications including



Diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death in the United States. Because Type 2 diabetes, the most common type, is closely linked to obesity, incidence has been soaring over the last decade.

FROM MID-MARCH THROUGH NOVEMBER, PENNSYLVANIA HAD 753 MORE DEATHS ATTRIBUTED TO ALZHEIMER'S AND DIABETES THAN WOULD BE EXPECTED

heart disease, blindness, kidney failure and lower-extremity amputations.

Diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death in the United States. Because Type 2 diabetes, the most common type, is closely linked to obesity, incidence has been soaring over the last decade. About 34 million American adults and children — just over one in 10 — have diabetes, and 88 million more adults — about one in three — have higher than normal blood sugar, called pre-diabetes.

Barbara Simon, an endocrinologist at Thomas Jefferson University

Hospital, sees “multiple layers and multiple factors” related to the pandemic eroding the health and welfare of her diabetes patients. “From my experience, the number one issue is economic stress,” she said.

“Many are out of work and not able to afford their already expensive medicines.” Even the price of insulin, a decades-old generic drug, has increased dramatically over the last decade. (For those with Medicare, some Part D plans will cap the monthly copay for insulin at \$35 beginning in January.) — dpa

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PSG confirm Tuchel sacking

POCHETTINO FAVOURITE TO TAKE OVER

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain on Tuesday confirmed the sacking of coach Thomas Tuchel, who had been at the club since July 2018, but did not name his successor.

“After an in-depth analysis of its sporting situation, Paris Saint-Germain decided to terminate Thomas Tuchel’s contract,” the French giants announced in a statement.

Argentinian Mauricio Pochettino, the ex-Tottenham coach and a former PSG player, is widely reported to be the favourite to take over.

Tuchel, whose axing was widely reported but unconfirmed last week, managed PSG 127 times in all competitions, with 95 wins, 12 draws and 20 defeats.

His trophy haul featured two Ligue 1 titles (2019, 2020) as well as the French Cup and French League Cup in 2020.

The 47-year-old German also led the Parisian club to their first ever Champions League final last August, which they lost 1-0 to Bayern Munich.

Despite appearing to be adept at man-managing PSG’s squad of superstar players such as Neymar and Kylian Mbappe, Tuchel reportedly upset the Qatari-backed club after complaining about an apparent lack

Tuchel, whose axing was widely reported but unconfirmed last week, managed PSG 127 times in all competitions, with 95 wins, 12 draws and 20 defeats

of recognition at leading PSG to the Champions League final.

“I would like to thank Thomas Tuchel and his staff for all they have contributed to the club,” said PSG chairman Nasser al Khelaifi.

“Thomas has put a lot of energy and passion into the job, and we will of course remember the good moments we shared together. I wish him all the best for the future.”

Less than three months on from the final defeat to Bayern Munich in Lisbon, Tuchel has become the first PSG coach to leave mid-season since Antoine Kombouare was replaced by Carlo Ancelotti in December 2011.

BARCA DATE LOOMS

Tuchel departs the Parc des Princes having secured a last 16 Champions League clash with Barcelona and PSG sitting third in Ligue 1 — a point shy of leaders Lyon — despite being plagued by injuries, suspensions and coronavirus infections.

Should Pochettino take over, his opening match in charge will be January 6’s trip to Saint-Etienne on Ligue 1’s resumption after the winter break.

Then, on February 16, the Argentinian could face his first massive test against his compatriot Lionel Messi’s Barcelona, with the return leg on March 6.

Pochettino was let go after five and a half years at Tottenham in the aftermath of leading the north London side to their first ever appearance in a Champions League final against Liverpool in 2019.

Although he has yet to win any silverware, the former PSG defender’s stock is high in managerial circles. The Parisians will be keen to complete his signing and avoid missing their man who has been linked to the likes of Real Madrid, Manchester United and Barca in recent months.

Importantly, Pochettino, like Tuchel, is at ease in man-managing a dressing room crammed with a galaxy of stars.

And looking further ahead, given their Argentine ties, Pochettino may be the catalyst for six-time Ballon d’Or winner Messi to start regarding PSG as potential new employers when he is free to move from the Camp Nou at the end of the season.

— AFP



Chelsea fail to lift pressure on Lampard after Villa draw

LONDON: Chelsea failed to ease the mounting pressure on manager Frank Lampard as Aston Villa came from behind to earn a 1-1 draw at Stamford Bridge on Monday, as a coronavirus outbreak at Manchester City caused their clash at Everton to be postponed.

Lampard’s men have now won just one of their last five league games to fall six points behind leaders Liverpool in sixth and having played a game more than the champions.

Chelsea also trail Villa on goal difference, despite Dean Smith’s men having two games in hand, and the visitors were well worthy of a point. “Now it’s a tough moment and you have to fight through it,” said Lampard. “Nobody let me down tonight, everyone worked, we just didn’t quite get the rub of the green.”

Lampard was able to make six changes from the side beaten at Arsenal 48 hours ago.

Olivier Giroud was one of those drafted into the side and the French international proved his worth with a precise near post header from Ben Chilwell’s cross to open the scoring with his ninth



Chelsea’s Olivier Giroud (not pictured) scores a goal against Aston Villa. – Reuters

of the season. By contrast, Smith made just one enforced change from the team that played for 45 minutes with 10 men in Saturday’s 3-0 win over Crystal Palace.

But Villa showed no signs of

fatigue in the second-half and levelled when Anwar El Ghazi turned home his fifth goal in as many games from Matty Cash’s cross five minutes into the second-half.

“I’m still yet to see a player carried off the pitch with exhaustion,” said Smith. “I’m a big believer in you if you want to play every game and if they are doing well keep playing them.”

COVID OUTBREAK AT CITY

For just the second time since the 2019/20 Premier League match season resumed in June, a match was postponed due to coronavirus infections after a spike at City.

The Manchester giants announced on Christmas Day there had been positive tests at the club for players Kyle Walker and Gabriel Jesus and two staff members.

A further round of tests revealed more positives on Monday, reportedly for three players, leading to the Premier League to agree to City’s request for the match to be called off.

“With the security of the bubble compromised, there posed a risk that the virus could spread further amongst the squad, the staff and potentially beyond,” City said.

The club’s training ground will now close for an “indeterminate period” with further testing on players and staff to take place before it can reopen.

City are due to face Chelsea away in the Premier League on Sunday and Manchester United in the League Cup semifinals on January 6. — AFP

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS ON MONDAY:
Crystal Palace 1 (Zaha 58) Leicester 1 (Barnes 83)
Chelsea (Giroud 34) Aston Villa 1 (El Ghazi 50)
Everton v Manchester City - match postponed due to coronavirus infections



Trippier sanction unfair on Atletico: Simeone

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone believes the 10-week ban imposed on defender Kieran Trippier for breaching betting rules unfairly harms his side and has asked for the punishment to be re-assessed. Tripper will miss at least 13 matches for Atletico, who are top of La Liga and challenging for their first Spanish title since 2014.



Neymar in new row over New Year party rumours

Brazil's star footballer Neymar is at the centre of a new controversy after several Brazilian media reported that he's organising a huge New Year's Eve party despite the coronavirus pandemic, a claim his lawyers denied. The *O Globo* newspaper said Neymar is hosting 500 people for a week-long party at his mansion near Rio de Janeiro.

Trail Blazers down Lakers

GRIZZLIES' MORANT HURT IN WIN OVER NETS

LOS ANGELES: The Memphis Grizzlies' first win of the NBA season was a costly one, as Rookie of the Year Ja Morant limped out with a sprained ankle in the first half of a 116-111 overtime triumph over the shorthanded Brooklyn Nets on Monday.

Morant rose to block a shot by Brooklyn's French forward Timothe Luwawu-Cabarrot with less than three minutes remaining in the first half, rolling his ankle as he came down and hopping to the baseline where he fell to the court.

He was taken to the locker room in a wheelchair, with the Grizzlies tweeting that the initial diagnosis was a sprained left ankle.

Morant watched from the sidelines as the Grizzlies rallied for the victory, standing through the final minutes — a protective boot on his injured ankle.

Kyle Anderson led the Grizzlies with 28 points — with a career-best four three-pointers — and Dillon Brooks added 24.

It was Anderson who drained three of four free-throws in the waning seconds of overtime, after he'd grabbed the rebound of when Brooklyn's Joe Harris couldn't get a potential game-winning three-pointer to drop with 5.6 seconds remaining.

"You always want to get that first one in the books to start rolling, so this was a big one," Anderson said. "We had to get this one."

But the loss of Morant was a potentially huge blow for the



Portland Trail Blazers' Damian Lillard (C) shoots under pressure from Houston Rockets' Christian Wood (behind) and David Nwaba (front) during the first half at Moda Center at Portland. — USA Today Sports

Grizzlies. The 21-year-old star had averaged 36 points in the first two games of the season.

Caris LeVert led the Nets with 28 points and 11 assists. Brooklyn rested stars Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving — both coming off long injury layoffs after the abbreviated off-season.

The Nets were also without Spencer Dinwiddie, who will have surgery to repair a partially torn right knee ligament suffered on Sunday.

The Los Angeles Lakers, heavy

NBA RESULTS

Atlanta bt Detroit	128-120
Memphis bt Brooklyn	116-111 (OT)
Portland bt LA Lakers	115-107
Denver bt Houston	124-111
Utah bt Oklahoma City	110-109

favourites to win a second straight title, suffered their second defeat in four games in the new season, falling 115-107 to the Portland Trail Blazers.

LeBron James led the Lakers with 29 points, nine rebounds and six assists and Anthony Davis

returned from a night off with 13 points and 10 rebounds.

Damian Lillard led the Blazers with 31 points and Gary Trent Jr added 28 off the bench as Portland's reserves out-scored the Lakers bench 45-23.

"I thought we came out with great energy," said Los Angeles coach Frank Vogel, whose Lakers seized a 13-point lead in the first quarter. "When they made their runs we weren't able to sustain the energy we began the game with."

— AFP



South Africa's Faf du Plessis (L) gestures as he holds a wicket after their victory over Sri Lanka during the fourth day of the first Test in Centurion. — AFP

South Africa hammer injury-hit Sri Lanka

CENTURION, South Africa:

South Africa wrapped up victory by an innings and 45 runs shortly after lunch on the fourth day of the first Test against Sri Lanka at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Tuesday.

Sri Lanka, needing 225 runs to avoid an innings defeat, were bowled out for 180.

Kusal Perera hit a spirited 64 off 87 balls for the tourists and debutant Wanindu Hasaranga slammed 59 off 53 balls, taking advantage as South Africa seemingly tried to lift their over-rate by rushing through six overs of slow bowling after lunch.

Sri Lanka resumed at 65 for two on Tuesday but never recovered after all-rounder Wiaan Mulder dismissed overnight batsman Dinesh Chandimal and Niroshan Dickwella in quick succession.

Batsman Dhananjaya de Silva, who retired hurt after making 79 in the first innings, did not bat for Sri Lanka. He was ruled out of the rest of the tour with a torn thigh muscle.

Sri Lanka suffered a spate of injuries during the match but bowlers Kasun Rajitha and Lahiru Kumara hobbled to the crease to delay the inevitable. Both suffered groin injuries while bowling.

Sri Lanka started the match well, making 396 after winning the toss but an injury-depleted bowling attack conceded 621 runs when South Africa

SCOREBOARD

Sri Lanka, first innings, 396	
South Africa, first innings, 621	
Sri Lanka, second innings	
D Karunaratne b Ngidi	6
K Perera c De Kock b Nortje	64
K Mendis c Van der Dussen b Ngidi	0
D Chandimal b Mulder	25
N Dickwella c De Kock b Mulder	10
D Shanaka c De Kock b Sipamla	6
W Hasaranga c Bavuma b Sipamla	59
V Fernando run out (Maharaj)	0
K Rajitha c Maharaj b Nortje	0
L Kumara not out	0
D de Silva absent hurt	
Extras (b4, lb2, nb3)	10
Total (46.1 overs)	180
Fall of wickets: 1-10, 2-22, 3-85, 4-99, 5-114, 6-142, 7-148, 8-179, 9-180	
Bowling: Ngidi 10-2-38-2, Nortje 10-1-47-2, Mulder 12-1-39-2, Sipamla 5-0-24-2, Maharaj 6-3-20-0, Markram 3-2-6-0	

batted, with former captain Faf du Plessis hitting 199. Du Plessis was named man of the match.

It was South Africa's second win in eight matches in the world Test championship. They have suffered six defeats. Sri Lanka have won one, lost three and drawn one of their five matches.

Chandimal, who appeared to suffer a groin injury towards the end of Monday's play, resumed his innings on Tuesday and survived for 40 minutes before being bowled for 25 by a ball from the medium-paced Mulder which cut back off the pitch.

Mulder, 22, followed up by having Niroshan Dickwella caught behind. He provided the control that was missing from much of South Africa's bowling in the first innings during a spell of two for 29 in nine overs. — AFP



South Africa's Faf du Plessis plays a shot that leads to his dismissal at 199 runs during the third day of the first Test at SuperSport Park in Centurion. — AFP

MCCC sides impress in Junior League

MUSCAT: Match-winning all-round show by hugely talented Adeel Abbas powered Muscat Cricket Coaching Centre (MCCC) to a 4-wicket win over Indian School Wadi Kabir (ISWK) in a Junior League 50-over Under-19 match at OC turf 1 in Al Amerat on Monday, making it a memorable week for MCCC sides.

ISWK failed to put a fighting total on the board, folding up for a disappointing 89 in 30 overs. MCCC captain Adeel picked up 3 for 13, while Nihaal Poojari and Jeel Tanna took two wickets each.

Leading from the front, Adeel excelled with the bat too, scoring a vital 39 off 25 as MCCC sealed victory in the 18th over, scoring 92 for 6. Siddh Mehta and Amanpreet Singh Siraj claimed two wickets each.

MCCC BLUE BEAT BSC

Earlier, in another Under-19 match on Saturday, MCCC Blue defeated Boshier Sports Centre (BSC) by 2 runs at OC turf 2.

MCCC Blue were dismissed for 154 in 40.2 overs, opener Habib top-scoring with a patient 52 off 98. Narayana Satish claimed 3 for 38 while Arafat Islam bagged 2 for 17. BSC fought well but fell short by two runs, getting bowled out for 152 in 44.3 overs. Mohsin Varya was their main scorer with 43 off 33.

Bilal and Uday bowled well, taking three wickets each.



MCCC stars Nihaal Poojari, captain Adeel Abbas, Jeel Tanna and Sameer Mohammed.



MCCC Blue stars Prathiesh Ramesh and Varshieth Dinesh.

GLENALEXEI BOWLS ISM TO VICTORY

In a Junior League 30-over Under-16 game on Saturday, Glenalexei Menezes' superb 5 for 32 helped Indian School Muscat (ISM) beat ISWK by 8 wickets at Muscat Municipality ground 2.

Thanks to Glen's brilliant bowling ISM dismissed ISWK



Rakshan Acharya took 5 wickets as BSI CT beat Mazoon Dairy by 113 runs in an F division match on December 25.

for 128 and chased the modest total down in 19.2 overs thanks to crucial knock by Gurumukhi Aditya (53) and Shanmugarajan Kuttiraja (38).

PRATHIESH, VARSHIETH SHINE FOR MCCC BLUE

In another Under-16 match at Muscat Municipality ground

1 on Saturday, MCCC Blue thrashed BSC by 8 wickets thanks to magnificent all-round performance by Prathiesh Ramesh and a splendid 97 by Varshieth Dinesh.

Prathiesh was the pick of Blue bowlers, taking 3 for 38 as BSC was dismissed for 183 in the 30th over. Sohan Khandekar and Siddarth top-scored with 40 and 35 respectively. MCCC Blue raced to the target in just 19.2 overs, scoring 185 for 2 thanks to brilliant batting by Varshieth (97 off 58) and Prathiesh (61 off 59).

BRIEF SCORES

Junior League U-19

ISWK 89 all out in 30 overs (Joshin Vincent 10, Yash Rajesh Toprani 10, Adeel Abbas 3-13, Nihaal Poojari 2-22, Jeel Tanna 2-23) lost to MCCC 92 for 6 in 17.5 overs (Adeel Abbas 39 - 4x1, 1x6, Siddh Hemal Mehta 2-18, Amanpreet Singh Siraj 2-30) by 4 wickets.

MCCC Blue 154 all out in 40.2 overs (Habib 52 - 3x4, 1x6, Zakariya 20 - 2x4, 1x6, Narayana Satish 3-38, Arafat Islam 2-17) beat Boshier Sports Centre B 152 all out in 44.3 overs (Mohsin Varya 43 - 6x4, Bilal 3-27, Uday 3-28, Mohammad Abubakar 2-33) by 2 runs.

Junior League U-16

ISWK 128 all out in 23.4 overs (Abhas Ajay Jaltare 38 - 4x4, Parikshit Gupta 30 - 3x4, Glenalexei Menezes 5-32) lost to ISM 129 for 2 in 19.2 overs (Gurumukhi Aditya 53 - 3x4, Shanmugarajan Kuttiraja 38 - 4x4) by 8 wickets. Boshier Sports Centre 183 all out in 29.5 overs (Sohan Khandekar 40 - 1x4, Siddarth Shankar 35 - 4x4, Prathiesh Ramesh 3-38) lost to MCCC Blue 185 for 2 in 19.2 overs (Varshieth Dinesh 97 - 14x4, Prathiesh Ramesh 61 - 5x4) by 8 wickets.

Resilient India thump Australia in second Test

MELBOURNE: Stand-in captain Ajinkya Rahane led India to a dominant eight-wicket win over Australia in the second Test Tuesday, levelling the series 1-1 and capping an extraordinary turnaround after their record collapse in the opening game.

Rahane, deputising during Virat Kohli's paternity leave, hit an unbeaten 27 in Melbourne — after a century in the first innings — as India reached the meagre target of 70 for the loss of two wickets.

It capped a remarkable comeback for an Indian side desperate to make amends after losing in Adelaide by eight wickets, when they posted their lowest ever score of 36 and were widely criticised at home. And they bounced back without superstar and batting maintstay Kohli, who has returned home for the birth of his first child.

"Really proud of all the players," said Rahane.

"I want to give credit to the debutants (Mohammed) Siraj and (Shubman) Gill, the character they showed after the Adelaide loss was great to see. Character was important for us."

Kohli, watching at home in India, tweeted his congratulations.

"What a win this is, absolutely amazing effort by the whole team," he said. "Couldn't be happier for the boys and specially Jinks (Rahane) who led the team to victory amazingly."

SLOPPY CRICKET

Under the mild-mannered Rahane, India battled hard to dismiss Australia for 195 in the first innings and then posted 326 in reply. Australia resumed their second innings on day four on 133 for six with a two-run lead, and their hopes resting on 21-year-old rookie all-rounder Cameron Green.

He made 45 as they battled to 200 before tail-ender Josh Hazlewood was the last man to fall before lunch. Siraj took 3-37 with Jasprit Bumrah, Ravindra Jadeja and Ravi Ashwin grabbing two



Really proud of all the players. I want to give credit to the debutants (Mohammed) Siraj and (Shubman) Gill, the character they showed after the Adelaide loss was great to see. Character was important for us

AJINKYA RAHANE
Indian captain

each. Rahane and Gill (35) then saw India home, but not before some nervous moments.

Mitchell Starc got a nick from the out-of-form Mayank Agarwal (5), which Tim Paine caught, then Pat Cummins snared Cheteshwar Pujara for three, edged to Green at gully. It left India on 19 for two



before they regained their composure to seal the win.

"Very disappointed, played poor cricket, sloppy cricket," said Australia captain Paine.

"Let's not take anything away from India, they forced us to make mistakes. They bowled beautifully, we haven't adapted as well as we would've liked.

"Disappointed as a batting group, but two Tests to go."

To make matters worse for Aus-

tralia, they were fined 40 per cent of their match fee and docked four World Test Championship points for a slow over-rate.

MATCH-WINNER RAHANE

Australia had collapsed to 99 for six in the run chase on Monday before Green and Cummins knuckled down to weather 18 overs and steer them to stumps.

Green showed glimpses of his magic, cutting Ashwin and driv-

SCOREBOARD	
Australia first innings: 195 India first innings: 326 Australia second innings (O/n: 133/6)	6-99, 7-156, 8-177, 9-185. Bowling: Bumrah 27-6-54-2, Yadav 33-0-5-1, Siraj 21-3-4-37-3, Ashwin 37.1-6-71-2, Jadeja 14-5-28-2.
J Burns c Pant b Yadav 4 M Wade b Jadeja 40 M Labuschagne c Rahane b Ashwin 28 S Smith b Bumrah 8 T Head c Agarwal b Siraj 17 C Green c Jadeja b Siraj 45 T Paine c Pant b Jadeja 1 P Cummins c Agarwal b Bumrah 22 M Starc (not out) 14 N Lyon c Pant b Siraj 3 J Hazlewood b Ashwin 10 Extras (LB-5, NB-3) 8 Total (all out, 103.1 overs) 200 Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-42, 3-71, 4-98, 5-98,	India second innings M Agarwal c Paine b Starc 5 S Gill (not out) 35 C Pujara c Green b Cummins 3 A Rahane (not out) 27 Extras: 0 Total (For 2 wks, 15.5 overs) 70 Fall of wickets: 1-16, 2-19. Bowling: Starc 4-0-20-1, Cummins 5-0-22-1, Hazlewood 3-1-14-0, Lyon 2-5-0-5-0, Labuschagne 1-0-9-0.

ing Bumrah beautifully for fours, while also exhibiting patience.

But in only his second Test, he was undone by Siraj, caught by Jadeja as he looked to find the boundary with a pull shot, ending a 146-ball stay.

Cummins survived chances on 15 and 19, but when Bumrah took the new ball he finally fell, gloving a rising delivery to Agarwal.

Starc was unbeaten on 14 with Nathan Lyon caught behind off

Siraj for three, and Hazlewood making 10. Australia's hopes rested with the tail-enders after their top order failed to fire, exposing the fragile nature of their batting in the absence of the injured David Warner. Opener Joe Burns again flopped, out for four, to put his place in the team for the third Test next week at risk, while Travis Head (17) also disappointed and Steve Smith's poor run continued, gone for eight. — AFP

Southee leads NZ charge to have Pakistan on the ropes

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, New Zealand: Swing king Tim Southee celebrated his milestone 300th wicket as New Zealand sensed victory over Pakistan at stumps on day four of the first Test in Mount Maunganui on Tuesday.

New Zealand declared their second innings at 180 for five and Pakistan, set an unlikely target of 373, will go into the final day at 71 for three. Azhar Ali will resume on 34 with Fawad Alam on 21.

The Black Caps need to sweep the two-Test series if they are to be in contention to make the World Test Championship final at Lords in June.

In New Zealand's second innings, the Pakistan quicks struggled to get any assistance from the fourth-day wicket, but Southee and Trent Boult immediately had the ball dancing to their tune.

Abid Ali fended a rising Boult delivery and was caught behind, while Shan Masood was caught at first slip off Southee and Pakistan were two down for no runs after 14 deliveries.

Azhar Ali and Haris Sohail provided some resistance for 15 overs and 37 runs before Sohail chipped Southee to Mitchell



New Zealand's Tim Southee (right) celebrates the wicket of Pakistan's Haris Sohail with team-mates on the fourth day of the first Test against Pakistan. — AFP

SCOREBOARD	
New Zealand first innings: 431 Pakistan first innings: 239 New Zealand second innings:	Shah 12.3-1-55-3, Ashraf 4-1-18-0, Y Shah 6-0-21-0, Masood 1-0-4-0.
T Latham c A Ali b N Shah 53 T Blundell b Abbas 64 K Williamson c Rizwan b N Shah 21 R Taylor (not out) 12 H Nicholls c Abbas b N Shah 11 B Watling (run out) 5 M Santner (not out) 6 Extras (LB-2, W-1, NB-5) 8 Total (For 5 wks dec; 45.3 overs) 180 Fall of wickets: 1-111, 2-139, 3-147, 4-165, 5-170. Bowling: Afridi 11-0-47-0, Abbas 11-2-33-1, N	Pakistan second innings: S Masood c Taylor b Southee 0 A Ali c Watling b Boult 0 A Ali (not out) 34 H Sohail c Santner b Southee 9 F Alam (not out) 21 Extras (B-4, LB-2, W-1) 7 Total (For 3 wks, 38 overs) 71 Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-0, 3-37. Bowling: Southee 9-5-15-2, Boult 10-4-24-1, Jamieson 7-6-3-0, Wagner 6-3-4-0, Santner 6-1-19-0.

Santner at short cover — making Southee only the third New Zealander, after Richard Hadlee and Daniel Vettori, to take 300 Test

wickets. But Southee said the landmark delivery was not the one he was looking for. "I would have loved one to pitch off and

nip away and get caught behind," he said.

"But the surface obviously dictates what you're trying to achieve and the wicket is obviously a bit slower so those catches in front of the wicket become important."

Southee said the target now was to extend New Zealand's 15-match unbeaten streak on home pitches.

"The boys will recover well tonight and turn up with that chance of achieving something special tomorrow."

For Pakistan, much hinges on Azhar Ali staying at the crease on a deteriorating wicket if they are to avoid defeat.

"Obviously losing three wickets doesn't help," said the batsman. "You've seen some balls keep low and it (the pitch) is getting slower so it's hard to time the ball.

"It will be challenging and all we can do is focus on playing the ball on merit as much as we can."

Southee has two for 15, and Boult one for 24.

Neil Wagner, who was thought to have broken one toe while batting on Sunday, but has now been diagnosed with a second broken toe, sent down six overs to have none for four. — AFP



business

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In brief

MUSCAT



GOVERNMENT ISSUES TREASURY BILLS WORTH RO 119 MILLION

A tender of government Treasury Bills, issue number 108, worth RO 119 million was announced this week.

Treasury Bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their surplus funds. The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) acts as the Issue Manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (Repo).

The results of the said issue are as follows:

The total value of the allotted Treasury bills amounted to RO 119 million, for a maturity period of 28 days, from December 30, 2020 until January 27, 2021. The average accepted price reached 99.950 for every RO 100, and the minimum accepted price arrived at 99.950 per RO 100.

The average discount rate and the average yield reached 0.65179 per cent and 0.65211 per cent, respectively.

It may be noted that the interest rate on the Repo operations with CBO is 0.5 per cent while the discount rate on the Treasury Bills Discounting Facility with CBO is 1 per cent. Furthermore, Treasury Bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates.

Additionally, the government may also resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary for financing its recurrent expenditures.

— ONA

Banking credit key to economic recovery despite risk of loan defaults: CBO

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](#)

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has cautioned commercial banks in the Sultanate that any reluctance to lend amid concerns of loan defaults linked to the ongoing pandemic would only slow the pace of Oman's economic recovery.

The caveat came in the 2020 Financial Stability Report issued by the regulator recently. It said: "The pandemic-led shock may push up the flow of new non-performing loans (NPLs). Nevertheless, continuity in risk-taking by the financial sector is imperative for bringing the economy back on track."

It comes as the stock of gross NPLs of the banking sector rose sharply to RO 890 million at the end of 2019, equating to 3.5 per cent of the combined lending portfolio of commercial banks.

The corresponding figure for 2018 was RO 683 million, representing 2.7 per cent of gross loan portfolio for the year.

Net NPLs however amounted to RO 345 million or 1.4 per cent of the net loans at the end of

RISK-TAKING:
The stock of gross non-performing loans (NPLs) of the banking sector rose sharply to RO 890 m at the end of 2019, equating to 3.5 per cent of the combined lending portfolio of commercial banks

2019, the apex bank said, noting that the existing loan portfolio of banks was "well-covered against expected credit losses through adequate provisions with a coverage ratio of over 61 per cent".

The report credited measures adopted earlier by the CBO for increasing the resilience of borrowers to any pandemic-related impacts.

These measures included deferrals of loan instalments and a moratorium on changes in risk classifications for borrowers availing such deferments. Such "regulatory measures were



imperative to support viable borrowers facing a temporary liquidity crunch", the report noted.

Nevertheless, the apex bank urged lenders to be vigilant for "problem loans" obscured from view by the measures.

"Considering that the pandemic may have a long-lasting impact on some borrowers affecting their viability, once these relaxations expire, the non-performing loan portfolio may grow from the current levels.

This underscores the need to carefully monitor the developments of the banks in the period ahead," it stressed

remain vigilant of their exposure to the sectors that are closely linked to economic downturns, particularly the construction sector. Going forward, the prevailing challenging operating conditions and reduced expenditure on infrastructure projects may further adversely affect the construction sector," the report stated.

Personal loans disbursed by commercial banks climbed to RO 10.242 billion in 2019, up from RO 10.006 billion a year earlier. A distant second came the construction sector, which received RO 2.803 billion in credit last year, representing 10.9 per cent of total banking credit of RO 25.830 billion.

Other economic sectors benefiting from banking credit last year were: Services RO 2.193 billion (8.5 per cent), manufacturing RO 2.173 billion (8.4 per cent), electricity – gas – water RO 1.302 billion, financial services RO 1.244 billion, transport and communications RO 1.240 billion, mining and quarrying RO 1.113 billion, and wholesale and retail trade RO 1.075 billion.

Dhofar Poultry eyes 20pc growth

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 29

Dhofar Poultry Company, one of Oman's fresh and frozen chicken brands, segment, plans to boost output from around 8,000 tonnes (as of 2019) to 10,000 tonnes in 2021 — a move that will lift annual revenues to around RO 12 million, up from RO 10 million in 2019.

According to statistics of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, the Sultanate's production of broiler chickens in 2018 was estimated at 129,000 tonnes, of which 54 per cent were locally consumed. Oman's home-grown chicken brands have successfully established their presence in the organised market in this sector with over 100 products across various segments including fresh products from whole and sliced chicken with different weights and types, in addition to products of additional value.

Commenting on the company's business



plans, Salim bin Taman al Maashani, CEO of Dhofar Poultry Company, said, "With evolving consumer palettes, and growing awareness on consuming fresh food, we believe it is our duty to educate the consumer and satisfy their need for superior quality, fresh chicken. Concerted efforts are being put in this direction and we believe that we have tasted success to a great extent. Our natural farms for bird raising have high restrictions of health conditions, and biosecurity standards, as we use feeds made from natural grains that are free from any animal additives, to ensure the provision of high-quality products".

CMA SUSPENDS 36 INSURANCE AGENTS

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 29

The Capital Market Authority (CMA), which also regulates the insurance sector in the Sultanate, has issued a decision suspending 36 insurance agents for contravening Omanisation guidelines.

According to the Authority, the suspended agents were in breach of Article 4 (Clause 9/A) of regulations governing the licensing of insurance agents in the Sultanate.

They had failed to adjust their status in accordance with the provisions related to Omanisation of the insurance agents' business, which is now subject to 100 per

cent Omanisation. A grace period granted by the Authority, along with a further extension, had lapsed, it stated.

The move comes as part of the Tamkeen initiative adopted by the CMA to enhance the ability of the insurance sector to accommodate national cadres based on training and qualification to gradually achieve the targeted Omanisation ratios.

Regulations for licensing insurance agents issued by the CMA in April 2016 granted a three-year grace period for licensed entities to achieve stipulated Omanisation ratios within their organisations.

Turkey's lira jumps before free-trade deal with Britain

ANKARA: Turkey's lira rose for a fifth straight day before a free-trade deal with Britain is signed later in the day, while steps towards bigger US stimulus measures raised hopes for a quicker global recovery next year.

The lira jumped 0.5 per cent after reports that Britain and Turkey were set to sign a deal that replicates the existing trading terms. British trade minister Liz Truss said that she hoped a bespoke deal between the countries could be struck soon.

Most risk assets held ground on Tuesday on signs of expanded

US stimulus measures. The Democratic-led US House of Representatives voted on Monday to meet President Donald Trump's demand for \$2,000 COVID-19 relief checks.

"Most emerging-market risk assets are poised to gain as risks around Brexit and US stimulus measures have disappeared, and markets are pretty happy about it," said Stephen Innes, chief global market strategist at AXI.

"The factor that seems to hold back most EM currencies in the near term is the demand



for dollars as we approach the end of the year." MSCI's basket of emerging-market stocks gained 0.5 per cent currencies traded 0.2 per

cent higher. South Africa's rand slipped 0.3 per cent as the impact of a stricter lockdown in South Africa announced by President

Cyril Ramaphosa weighed on the currency and the stock market locally.

South Africa on Monday tightened COVID-19 restrictions, banning alcohol sales and extending a nationwide curfew, as infections passed a million. Currencies in central Europe made modest gains against the euro.

Hungary's forint, Poland's zloty and the Czech crown rose 0.2 per cent to 0.3 per cent. The forint gained after six sessions of declines after Hungary's central bank governor, Gyorgy

Matolcsy, said the bank continues to be ready to support economic recovery "with all its tools", in an interview published on Monday. Hungary's benchmark stock index gained the most among its central European peers, rising for a fourth consecutive session.

Turkish and Russian stocks gained nearly 0.4 per cent each. Russia's rouble traded almost flat against a slightly weaker dollar after the government decided to scale down its state support of the economy in 2021, Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said. — **Reuters**

New law to probe foreign takeover of UK businesses

IN order to enable ministers to scrutinise foreign takeovers of companies considered to be of national importance, a law has been introduced.

It is reported that the National Security and Investment Bill has listed 17 sectors of strategic significance that will need governmental approval for transactions.

Sources have said that these sectors include nuclear energy, defence, artificial intelligence, robotics and communications.

In addition, it said that foreign bidders for companies in these sectors would be guaranteed response to their offers within 30 days.

The mandatory notification element is an attempt to reassure overseas businesses that the UK is still an attractive destination for foreign investment despite leaving the European Union.

Total investments in the UK are set to near pre-pandemic levels this year despite a torrid year for global markets amid the coronavirus crisis.

Total assets under management (AUM) by members of the Investment Association (IA) reached a record high of £8.5 trillion at the end of 2019, a 10 per cent increase on the previous year.

Last month it was reported that the government would also launch an 'Office for Investment' to encourage foreign interest in infrastructure projects.

But these challenges are compounded by demands to increase scrutiny of companies taking over assets of strategic importance.

Over the summer, increased concerns about the role of China in the UK's telecoms networks culminated in state-owned Huawei being banned from the country's 5G networks.



ANDY JALIL
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THE UK IS STILL AN ATTRACTIVE DESTINATION FOR FOREIGN INVESTMENT DESPITE LEAVING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Business Minister Alok Sharma has been working on the proposals alongside the PMs offices at Downing Street for months.

According to the report, the new law will not identify individual countries that are of particular concern. However, a dedicated unit will be stood up in order to oversee potential deals for companies and assets both physical and intellectual.

The bill was first announced in last December's Queen's Speech, which said that it would allow the government to 'scrutinise investments and consider the risks that can arise from hostile parties acquiring ownership of, or control over, businesses or other entities and assets that have national security implications.'

The legislation had caused concerns among business and investor communities that the proposals will make the UK

significantly unfriendlier to foreign investment at a time when its economy is already struggling due to the pandemic.

Under the current regime of the 2002 Enterprise Act, the government is already able to intervene where mergers and acquisitions raise any one of a number of specified public interest concerns, including national security.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson reiterated his commitment to investment infrastructure as he unveiled new spending pledges back at the last Conservative Party Conference.

The new Downing Street-backed operation was orchestrated by the minister for investment and former Standard Life Aberdeen chairman Lord Grimstone.

The 'City' (the financial district of London) veteran was appointed by Johnson earlier this year to encourage investment into the

UK from overseas institutions and sovereign wealth funds.

He has held a number of government advisory roles, including in UK-China and UK-India relations. Johnson's closest aides at the time, prior to resigning last month, Dominic Cummings and Sir Edward Lister are said to have also been closely involved in the plan.

By basing the new unit in the Downing Street offices, Johnson hopes to send a signal to foreign investors that their interest in investing in the economy will be 'closely chaperoned', one insider said.

This came ahead of the publication of the National Security and Investment Bill, which gives the government new powers to scrutinise overseas acquisitions of British companies and assets.

(The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK)

MENA region holds strong potential for low carbon energy



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 29

The Arab Petroleum Investments Corporation (APICORP), a multilateral development financial institution, published its 'MENA Power Investment Outlook 2020-2024' on Tuesday, highlighting key regional developments and prevalent trends in the power sector over the short and medium terms.

Among the report's key findings is the emergence of the MENA region as a strong candidate for becoming a major blue and green hydrogen-exporting region due to the combination of low-cost gas resources and low-cost renewable energy.

Another key trend noted by the report is the expected uptick in planned investments directed to power transmission and distribution projects in several countries over the next five years, driven by the rise of renewables and focus on boosting regional interconnectivity.

The role of the private sector and financing in the power sector however is still largely dependent on sector reforms and government guarantees.

Typically, highly leveraged power projects in the region continue to be largely financed based on non-recourse or limited recourse structure with typical debt-equity (D/E) ratios in the

60:40 to 80:20 range, or even an 85:15 D/E ratio for lower-risk projects backed by strong government payment guarantees. However, regulatory reforms to support renewables and the impact of the 2020 crisis may change this balance.

The health, economic and financial fallout stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic has cost

STRONG CANDIDATE:
Committed investments in MENA power sector hold relatively steady while planned investments decline by \$114 b compared to last year's outlook due to commissioning of several projects in 2019

the global economy an estimated \$1 trillion, and its impact was felt disproportionately and differently across various sectors. In the power sector, the pandemic underscored the criticality of stable electricity supplies and digital services to the economy and had a tangible effect on power demand across its three major sectors — residential, commercial and industrial sectors.

As industries and businesses reduced their operations and people spent more time at home due to lockdowns, the share of the residential sector's electricity consumption increased at the expense of the industrial and commercial sectors.

In MENA markets, the residential sector accounts for 41 per cent of the total power demand, followed by industrial and commercial sectors at 21 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, with the remaining 18 per cent comprised of other sectors such as agriculture and transport, as well as network losses.

Shift in power supply mix
The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and oil price volatility led to a steady increase in the share of renewables and nuclear technologies in the power supply mix worldwide. The main accelerators for this increased penetration in the MENA region are twofold: the unprecedented cost declines in renewable energy, and governments' renewable energy targets — which range from 13 per cent to 52 per cent of installed capacity by 2030.

However, the intermittency of renewable power sources and lack of grid-scale storage solutions means that fossil fuels — namely natural gas — and nuclear, will remain indispensable in the power supply mix in the foreseeable future.



MOSD HONOURS BANK MUSCAT FOR ROLE IN SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

In recognition of its prominent role in supporting persons with disabilities, the Ministry of Social Development honoured Bank Muscat for its efforts in supporting the ministry's services and programmes in the field of supporting people with disability.

This was part of the celebration that was recently organised by the Ministry of Social Development on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities under the auspices of Dr Mahad bin Saeed Baowain, Minister of Labour, and in the presence of excellencies and invitees, where Said Salim al Aufi, Group Deputy General Manager - Human Resources, Bank Muscat, received the honours from His Excellency.

Bank Muscat has set up a special playground for children with special needs in line with the bank's commitment to CSR and Sustainability. The playground is being set up at the Al Aman Centre for Rehabilitation in Al Khoudh.

PRESS RELEASE

BANKDHOFAR CORPORATE CENTRE HAS BEST SERVICES FOR BUSINESSES

In line with its strategic vision and core values to deliver service excellence to its customers, BankDhofar provides comprehensive products, services and financial solutions, through its full-fledged Corporate Centre serving corporates, government entities, small and medium enterprises customers all under one umbrella.

Hussain Ali al Lawati, Acting Chief Corporate Banking Officer at BankDhofar (pictured), says: "The inauguration of Corporate Centre comes within our aim to expand our presence in the Sultanate through our one-stop-shop for our customers. At the Corporate Centre, we focus on a leaner approach by emerging digital technologies into our channels, thus, enhancing the services provided and ensuring the best customer experience."

"We at BankDhofar keep the latest technology and innovation at the core of our strategy to improve the experience of our corporate customers as they can monitor their accounts on a real-time basis and lots more.



OAB LAUNCHES 2021 CALENDAR WITH TALENTED OMANI PHOTOGRAPHERS

Oman Arab Bank (OAB) launched its first eco-friendly desk calendar for 2021. Developed with 12 talented Omani photographers, the new calendar features a stunning photograph for each month of the year and is made entirely from recycled paper and vegetable-based inks.

Commenting on this initiative, Feras al Farsi, Sustainability and CSR Specialist at OAB, said, "This calendar is aligned with our sustainability strategy to establish partnerships within our communities, as well as preserving the environment. With the help of these amazing local talents, we were able to produce one of our most beautiful calendars to date. I encourage all our customers and partners to show their support for these exceptionally talented photographers by following their accounts on social media, which are also featured in the new calendar."

Firm unveils pandemic safety awareness products

MUSCAT: Al Ariq, leading distributors of cleaning equipment, waste handling systems and agriculture equipment, held an event to mark the launch of its new awareness products in support of pandemic safety. The launch was witnessed by employees and environment experts.

Speaking on the occasion, Nikson Mathew, Divisional Manager, said the 2021 launch of these promotional materials is fully in keeping with the requirements of the current pandemic situation.

"We have put a strong focus on how to reflect the awareness of being safe during this crisis. One of our staff members, Afrah al



Musallami, came up with a theme on the proper wearing of masks. We are happy the design came out well," he said

Yahya al Badawi, lead member

— public relations mentioned, said T-shirts with the message, 'Be Smart, Stay Safe', graphically illustrate how face masks should be worn properly.



In brief

■ WASHINGTON

US EPA FINALISING
FIRST-EVER AEROPLANE
EMISSIONS RULES

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said it was finalising the first-ever proposed standards regulating greenhouse gas emissions from aeroplanes. The EPA said its new requirements for aeroplanes used in commercial aviation and for large business jets would align the US with international standards.

In 2016, the UN International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) agreed on global Aeroplane emissions standards aimed at makers of small and large planes, including Airbus SE and Boeing Co, which both have backed the standards. The final rule “is vital for protecting the environment and supporting the sustainable growth of aviation and the US economy,” Boeing said. — **Reuters**

■ NEW DELHI

TESLA TO START
OPERATIONS IN INDIA
NEXT YEAR

Tesla Inc will come to India early next year, country's transport minister Nitin Gadkari told the Indian Express.

The electric-car maker will start with sales and then might look at assembly and manufacturing based on the response, the minister told the newspaper.

Tesla and the minister's office could not be reached for comment.

India has been keen to reduce its oil dependence and cut down on pollution, but its efforts to promote electric vehicles have been stymied by a lack of investment in manufacturing and infrastructure such as charging stations. — **Reuters**

■ ZURICH

SWISS HAND OVER \$150
M TO US FROM
PONZI SCHEME

Switzerland will return \$150 million from blocked Swiss bank accounts by the end of the year to the US to be given to victims of convicted Ponzi scheme con artist Robert Allen Stanford, the Federal Ministry of Justice said.

Stanford, a former Texas financier known primarily by his middle name, was convicted of fraud by a Houston jury in 2012 in what prosecutors called a \$7.2 billion fraud that lasted two decades and which was eclipsed in size only by the Ponzi scheme run by Bernie Madoff.

About \$50 million had previously been returned, the justice ministry said. — **Reuters**

Most Asian markets advance after Wall St sets new records

HONG KONG: Asian markets mostly rose on Tuesday following a record-breaking lead from Wall Street, as investors cheered the passage of a huge US stimulus bill which has helped temper fears about surging coronavirus infections.

With President Donald Trump finally signing off on the \$900 billion rescue package and a post-Brexit trade deal now agreed, the mood on trading floors was a little lighter heading into the new year.

News that more vaccines could be rolled out soon also provided a lift, even as governments around the world were forced to impose lockdowns and other strict, economically painful measures to contain surging COVID-19 cases.

“Where we are right now in the equity market is somewhat of a sweet spot,” Michael Cuggino, at Permanent Portfolio Family of Funds, told Bloomberg TV. “We’ve got stimulus, likely more on the way.”

“You’ve got great comps on earnings going into next year with respect to equities, and you have a pent-up demand situation as



A pedestrian walks past an electronic quotation board displaying share prices of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo. — **AFP**

the economy both in the US and globally comes out of COVID.”

Trump had held off signing the stimulus package for almost a week, saying it did not provide enough cash to Americans and calling for handouts to be jacked up to \$2,000 from the \$600 offered in the initial bill.

Democrats agreed more was needed and on Monday the House of Representatives approved a motion to increase the payments — though it will likely meet resistance from Republicans in the Senate.

President-elect Joe Biden, asked by a reporter Monday if he

favoured raising the payouts to \$2,000, replied: “Yes.”

All three main indexes on Wall Street ended at record highs, as did Germany's DAX, and most of Asia followed suit.

Tokyo led the way, soaring 2.7 per cent to end at a 30-year high, while Wellington was up more

than one per cent.

There were also healthy gains in Hong Kong, Sydney, Seoul, Mumbai and Singapore.

Shanghai, however, was weighed by concerns about a possible crackdown on the tech sector after authorities set their sights on Alibaba and its fintech arm Ant Group. Taipei, Jakarta and Bangkok all fell.

US futures were also in positive territory, while London rallied more than one per cent as dealers there returned from an extended weekend. Frankfurt rose to a fresh record and Paris was also up.

The cash handouts will “provide that immediate key consumption bridge through the first quarter until the vaccines become more widely distributed”, said Axi strategist Stephen Innes.

“The stipends will arrive quickly and are spent rapidly, providing the US economy with immediate retail sales spending bonanza boost.

This splurge could be multiplied by three if the Senate agrees to rubber-stamp support for increased COVID cheques.” — **AFP**

■ GERMAN STOCK INDEX ON RECORD HIGH



A general view shows the stock exchange operated by the Deutsche Boerse AG in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany, as the stock index DAX reached a record high. Germany's main stock index reached a record high on December 28, buoyed by a pandemic recovery package agreed in the US and Britain's Brexit deal with the EU. — **AFP**

Brexit deal puts fishermen in uncharted waters

RAMSGATE, United Kingdom: The fishermen of Ramsgate, a once-thriving seaside town in southern England, had high hopes that Brexit would bring back the pre-EU glory days of teeming catches and lively fish auctions.

Britain had insisted it wanted to take back control of its waters while EU coastal states sought guarantees that their fleets could keep fishing in UK waters.

“We’ve been sold out by Boris!” fumed John Nichols in his Ramsgate cottage overlooking the English Channel, referring to Prime Minister Johnson.

Nichols, president of the Thanet Fishermen's Association representing around 40 boats, said they were looking forward to a return to the days before frozen rectangles of cod could be imported from far away.

They fought for stricter quotas and stepped-up checks, especially against Dutch “electric pulse



Newhaven fishing boat skipper Neil Whitney sorts fish aboard the Newhaven fishing boat ‘About Time’ after the first trawl of the day, off the south-east coast of England. — **AFP File Photo**

fleets”, a method that Nichols said sterilises fish stocks.

Instead, last week London and Brussels reached a compromise that will see European boats gradually relinquish 25 per cent of their current quotas during a five-and-a-half-year transition period.

Nichols, 69, has been fighting

for a “hard” Brexit since 2016, the year Britain voted to leave the EU in a referendum, with his group staging “Leave” flotillas on the Thames, sailing under the Houses of Parliament in London.

Now, “foreign vessels will continue to come in and out and take more fish than they did before,” Nichols said.

“The old saying says ‘be careful what you wish for,’” said the doyen of the group, 85-year-old Tom Brown, his cap pulled down to his eyebrows.

Brown said that “when it all started to go wrong” after Britain joined the European Union — then the European Economic Community — in 1973, he and his brother joined every protest, from strikes to blockades, to fight for their rights against European competition.

Brown even created his own modest fuel company, with profits going to fellow fishermen to help offset the losses.

And then, with global warming, the cod population began migrating northwards, and the British began importing their cod for fish and chips — a national staple — from Iceland.

Brown said that people in England no longer eat fresh fish, “only fish and chips”. — **AFP**

Cambodia starts first crude oil production

PHNOM PENH: Cambodia has begun extracting its first crude oil from fields in the Gulf of Thailand, in a venture between Singapore's KrisEnergy Ltd and the government, both parties said on Tuesday, bringing an end to years of delays. Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the news on social media while KrisEnergy said the concession started production on Monday and would progress in phases once new wells were commissioned and completed.

“I ... am pleased to inform all Cambodians about the start of Cambodia's first oil production in the long-awaited Block A,” Hun Sen said on his Facebook page. Kelvin Tang, chief executive of KrisEnergy's Cambodian operations, called the event “an important strategic milestone” for the company.

“There has been a steep learning curve for all involved,” Tang added in a statement.

Cambodia and Singapore-listed KrisEnergy signed a pact in 2017 to develop 3,083 sq km of the Khmer Basin in the Gulf of Thailand known as Block A.

Cambodia has struggled to develop its oil fields as few companies were willing to invest in the area following a global oil price slump in 2014.

KrisEnergy, which has been a partner in the project for more than a decade, bought out Chevron Corp's operating interest in Block A in 2014 for \$65 million. Chevron had found oil in the block in 2004 but failed to strike a development agreement with Cambodia, which has a 5 per cent stake in the venture. — **Reuters**

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Glass Point Solar Muscat LLC announces the availability of used furniture, computers and printers for sale. Those wishing to buy should inspect the used furniture and devices must take into account the below matters:

1. The inspection will take a place at the company's office, at beach one building, unit 209, on 4th of January 2021 from 10 am to 2 pm.
2. The last day for submitting purchase offers is 10th January 2021.
3. Offers to purchase shall be submitted in sealed envelopes addressed to the liquidators of Glass Point Solar.
4. Company is not obligated to accept any offer.

For inquiries, please contact Mr. Faizan Mustafa on 95484644

■ ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcement of Capital Reduction

In accordance with the provisions of Article 150 of the Commercial Companies Law. The company **Health Medical (LLC)**, which is registered with the Commercial Registration No **1159166**, hereby announces that it is going to reduce its capital from Omani Rials **150,000.000** to **50,000.000**. Whoever has any objection to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within 30 days from the date hereof.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT : +968 91984614, +968 98083560

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features



Rahma al Hajri is a craftswoman who completed eleven years in the profession of sculpture on bones. Her love and passion for drawing inspired her to choose bones sculpture after she graduated from the Scientific College of Design in 2009... **P18**

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HUMAN INTEREST



PPE ART BRINGS A SMILE TO MOSCOW'S COVID PATIENTS

With medics and helpers covered in masks, medical glasses and protective suits, it is sometimes hard to convey festive cheer to the patients on Moscow's COVID-19 wards... **Story on Page P19**

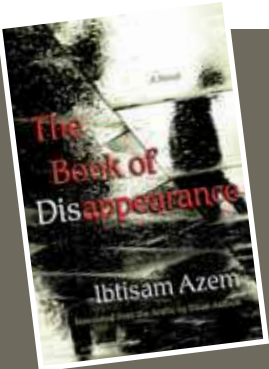
WILDLIFE



GCC WILDLIFE DAY CELEBRATED TODAY

The Sultanate represented by the Environment Authority, celebrates today GCC Wildlife Day under the slogan "Man and Wildlife, Partners in One Environment ". the day is celebrated on December 30 each year ... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE BOOK OF DISAPPEARANCE

BY IBTISAM AZEM

Azem's Book of Disappearance is built around a tremendous vanishing act. One night, at the stroke of midnight, all the Palestinians in Israel and Occupied Palestine are suddenly gone, and Israelis are left behind to struggle to understand what has happened.

TOURISM



BRITISH TOURISTS SNEAK OUT OF SWISS SKI RESORT

Hundreds of British tourists forced into quarantine in the Swiss ski resort of Verbier fled in the night rather than seeing their holidays go downhill, the local municipality said on Sunday... **Story on Page 20**

SPECIES



SECOND TAIWAN-BORN GIANT PANDA AT TAIPEI ZOO

Taipei Zoo debuted its second Taiwan-born giant panda cub to the public on Tuesday. The female giant panda named Yuan Bao was born on June 28 using assisted reproductive technology. Yuan Bao was put on display at the zoo's Panda House.



CONSIDER FINE DETAILS WHILE BONE CARVING

MAZOUN AL GHAILANI

After trying various materials for carving, Rahma al Hajri finally settled down with bone carving as a unique art in Oman. There she gained an understanding of the customer's high standards, especially the need to polish every mark to a satin-smooth finish.

Rahma al Hajri is a craftswoman who completed 11 years in the profession of sculpture on bones. Her love and passion for drawing inspired her to choose bones sculpture after she graduated from the Scientific College of Design in 2009. She started training at the Bidiyah Center for Carving on Bones. Trained by the virtuous sculptor Shander Kant, she later started working in the production of carved bone products.

Al Mandoos (ancient box) is the extraordinary artwork piece in her art career that took full three months of work. "I carved the bones in shape of this box, in order to

participate in the Sultan Qaboos Award for Craft Excellence Competition 2010/2011 and there she won the first place. "The same product won in the world craft council award of excellence 2018," Rahma said.

"This piece means a lot to me and I see it as a great achievement because of the time and effort I put on it. it gave me more confidence to accomplish more," Rahma added.

She derives the idea of the sculptures from her imagination or from one of her drawings then she makes a sketch and starts carving. I always tend to carve new models and advanced shapes, especially the one that has a nature of Islamic character and Omani inscriptions".

Mostly, Rahma makes traditional sculptures, but the options are limited by the size of the bones. Only the leg bones, the femur, and rib are suitable, as the walls of the bone are thick enough to carve; other bones are too thin-walled and brittle.

"That is why I choose the camel bones, due to their large size and hardness.



Obtaining and preparing the raw piece requires high effort and precision, unlike wood that comes as a ready-made and large tablet. I usually get them from camel's breeders and prefer to work with bones that have lain on the ground for a few years. They are drier and sometimes develop a grain that can add interest to the work," Rahma shared.

Rahma wishes to deliver a message to the community through her art focusing on the importance of preserving and protecting heritage.

She has a hobby of searching for ancient carved bones, but unfortunately, she could not get old sculptures, but she got new sculptures from the Republic of India.

Rahma is currently sculpturing a gift that she aspires to give to the honourable lady, the Spouse of HM Sultan Haitham. Rahma is generous in advice for anyone wishing to carve bone. While not everyone has access to dead camels, they can get bones from their butcher and have them cut to a manageable size.



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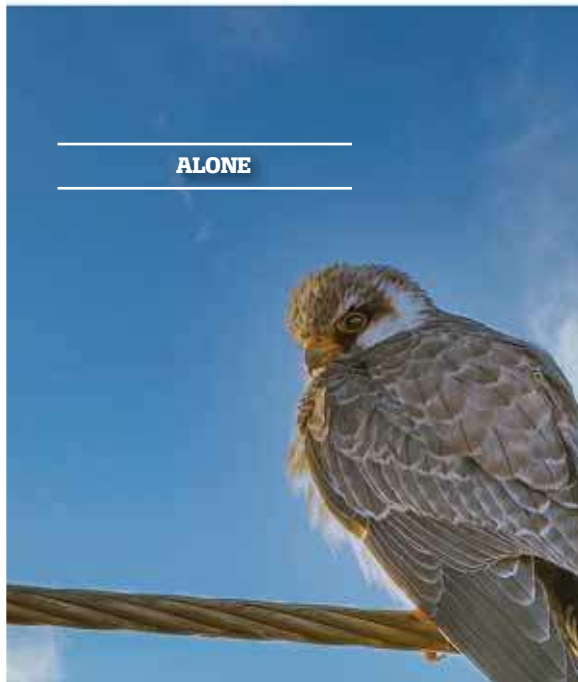
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WILDLIFE

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HUMAN INTEREST

PPE art brings a smile to Moscow's COVID patients



With medical glasses and helpers covered in masks, medical glasses and protective suits, it is sometimes hard to convey festive cheer to the patients on Moscow's COVID-19 wards.

But Leonid Krasner, who has been volunteering at a hospital since the first wave, has found a way with the colourful pictures he draws on the back of his overalls to help patients recognise him and bring a smile to those being treated.

Krasner, 59, decorates his single-use suits before entering the wards every time he is in the hospital. He once drew a cartoonish plane for a sick pilot and a congratulations card for a mother on Mother's Day.

"This is to boost your mood and your immune system," he told an old lady with an oxygen mask, charmed by the Christmas tree daubed on his back.

During the outbreak's second wave, Moscow has registered around 6,000-7,000 new infections every day,

about a quarter of Russia's nationwide caseload, and it has had to open several temporary hospitals, including one on an ice rink.

Krasner and some of his fellow volunteers are tasked with looking after the weak patients discharged from intensive care units to regular wards. They help them with every day things like combing their hair, brushing their teeth and shaving.

A former businessman, Krasner was one of dozens of Muscovites with no prior medical experience who volunteered to help at coronavirus hospital number 52 in spring when the outbreak hit the Russian capital.

He ended up catching the virus himself shortly after his first shifts and it took him two weeks to recover at home before he could get back to his patients.

"Even if a person is in a bad way and is sick, they still need emotions ... This cheers people up," said Krasner outside a ward where he had been massaging the legs of a recovering patient.

— Reuters

GCC Wildlife Day celebrated today

The Sultanate represented by the Environment Authority, celebrates today GCC Wildlife Day under the slogan "Man and Wildlife, Partners in One Environment". the day is celebrated on December 30 each year.

The chosen slogan

this year demonstrates the values and ethics of human beings at preserving wildlife. It also emphasises the importance of the balance between the vocabulary of nature around humans, and protecting wildlife from the dangers posed by humans from pollution and destroying natural places.

Celebrating this day annually reinforces the united efforts exerted by citizens and countries to protect the wildlife and preserving the ecosystem and the endangered species. It also sheds light on the human model that is based on the coexistence of human beings and the wildlife and promotes

awareness on the importance of creating a peaceful environment with the wildlife around.

Every year on December 30, environmental authorities across the region observe the day through organising a variety of activities to raise awareness about wildlife conservation.



British tourists sneak out of Swiss ski resort



Hundreds of British tourists forced into quarantine in the Swiss ski resort of Verbier fled in the night rather than seeing their holidays go downhill, the local municipality said on Sunday.

Around 200 of the 420 or so affected British tourists in the luxury Alpine ski station quit under the cover of darkness, the *SonntagsZeitung* newspaper reported.

Switzerland's ski resorts were set to boom with snow-seeking British tourists — but a flight ban due to the new COVID-19 variant raging in England put those plans on ice.

The drastic ruling by the Swiss government also included a 10-day retroactive quarantine for anyone who arrived from Britain since December 14, following the discovery of a new variant of the coronavirus which experts fear spreads more quickly.

Some of the British tourists affected in Verbier left immediately, while others stuck it out for a bit before quitting.

"Many of them stayed in quarantine for a day before they set off unnoticed under the cover of darkness," Jean-Marc Sandoz, spokesman for the wider Bagnes municipality, told SZ.

He called the whole situation "the worst week our community has ever experienced".

British tourists normally make up 21 per cent of the Verbier clientele, and most start pouring in just after Christmas.

Voted Switzerland's best ski resort for the past two years, Verbier markets itself as offering "adrenaline-packed thrills, simple pleasures and a chic lifestyle".

The Verbier Tourist Office has been holding daily crisis cell meetings to try to deal with the ever-changing coronavirus picture.

Breakfast untouched
"It was when they saw the meal trays remained untouched that the hoteliers noticed that the customers had gone," Sandoz told ATS news agency.

He said that according to a Saturday survey of the ski resort's hotels, fewer than 10 people would still be in quarantine.

The rest would either have left or their quarantine time would have expired.

"We can't blame them. In most cases, quarantine was untenable. Imagine four people staying in a hotel room of 20 square metres," Sandoz said.

He said the tourists left feeling "a little angry with Switzerland" and with the sense of having been "trapped".

— AFP