

Libya's new unity government officially takes power

Libya's new unity government officially took power on Tuesday, a day after it was sworn in before the parliament in the eastern city of Tobruk. The new administration, led by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibeh, aims to lead Libya until long-delayed elections scheduled for December 24. **DETAILS ON P8**



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COMMODITIES RALLY POSITIVE FOR GCC ECONOMIES



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ATLETICO LOOK TO SUAREZ FOR INSPIRATION IN CHELSEA RESCUE MISSION



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RACCOONS TO SNAKES: SHANGHAI ANIMAL CAFES EXPAND TO EXOTICS



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO IRELAND PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Michael D Higgins of Ireland on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and well-being to President Higgins and the friendly Irish people further progress and growth.

NORTHERN OMAN

SEES DUST OVERCAST

The northern part of Oman has been experiencing an overcast of dust and is expected to be thicker on Wednesday. The weather seems to be cloudy and the weather forecaster at Oman Met Office, clarified that it is purely dusty. **DETAILS ON P3**

SQU GRADUATION

CEREMONY PUT OFF

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in coordination with the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the developments resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, decided to postpone the graduation ceremony for the 31st batch, until further notice. In a statement, the SQU administration said the decision stems from the university's keenness on public health as the epidemiological situation indicates a rise in daily Covid-19 cases. **DETAILS ON P5**



INSIDE



Business Research Award to enhance quality projects

MUSCAT: The Business Research Award, launched by Oman Economic Association, aims at contributing to the enrichment of development and motivation of sustainable economy. The award encourages research and studies analysing the current economic condition and charting out an

economic track which responds to the era of Renewed Renaissance across different sectors.

DOMESTIC ISSUES
The inaugural ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, who said that the prize

will significantly enhance quality research in economic fields, with emphasis on domestic economic issues, including economic stimulation and diversification of economic product baseline, among other issues.

The minister expressed the hope that this award will be held

on an annual basis and that the research papers will tackle a variety of economic issues and ways of facing challenges posed by coronavirus (Covid-19), besides pondering on developments associated with transformation into knowledge-based (cognitive) economy and energy sub-

stitutes, among other spheres. The award will help decision-makers find appropriate solutions to prevailing economic challenges and will furnish an interactive research platform through which researchers could focus on the pressing concerns of the national economy. **TURN TO P2**

RE-DISCOVERING THE DUNES OF BARKA



When one hears of Barka, it is easy to associate it with farms and industrial areas, but it hides much more beautiful secrets just waiting to be discovered. On weekends, especially before Covid-19, these farms particularly those equipped with pools and children's playground areas are the getaway of families. It still comes as a surprise to many, but Barka also has its own dunes. On some weekends, especially before Covid-19, since the area is close to Muscat, it is a weekend getaway for dune bashers. **DETAILS ON P19**

Travel ban to UK from March 19

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

Travellers from four countries, including Oman, will be subject to a travel ban to UK from March 19. From 4 am on March 19, visitors who have departed from or transited through Oman, Ethiopia, Somalia and Qatar in the previous 10 days will be refused entry into England. Only British and Irish citizens, or those with residence rights (including long-term visa holders), will be allowed to enter and

must stay in a government-approved facility for 10 days. British nationals currently in the countries on the red list should make use of the commercial options available if they wish to return to England. Commercial routes that will enable them to return to England continue to operate. Oman's Cultural Attache in London has issued a statement, "We regret to inform you that from March 19, Oman will be on the red list for travellers to and from the United Kingdom, and we hope the tickets

of everyone who booked to travel to the Sultanate during the spring break (Easter) will be arranged." Portugal and Mauritius have been removed from England's travel red list in the first major change to rules for international arrivals in months. It means people will be allowed to travel from the two countries and non-British residents and nationals who were previously allowed to do so will no longer have to quarantine in a hotel but can spend the time at home instead.

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
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It is normal to have concerns over any new product in the market, and especially when the product is related to human health directly.

This was stated by Dr Zaid bin al Khatab al Hinaï, Assistant Professor and a Consultant of Infectious Diseases for Children at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University.

"This is why there are rumours in the social media about the efficacy of AstraZeneca vaccine for which people, especially the elderly, hesitate to take."

He assured that scientists agreed on the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine.

"The biggest concern is to get infected with the Covid-19 virus, so it is better to get vaccinated as soon as it is available," he said during a TV interview.

He said that most of the European countries, which have

There are rumours in the social media about the efficacy of AstraZeneca vaccine for which people, especially the elderly, hesitate to take

DR ZAID BIN AL KHATAB AL HINAI
Assistant Professor, SQU

suspended vaccination with AstraZeneca, decided to move on with it because it is safe and there is no scientific evidence between serious symptoms or deaths that occurred in these countries and the vaccine.

"The temporary suspension of AstraZeneca is to analyse the details of deaths occurred in some European countries, and see if there is a link between them and the vaccine." **TURN TO P2**

Lightning may have sparked life on Earth, finds study

PARIS: Lightning strikes may have supplied primordial Earth with enough phosphorus to support the emergence of life, according to new research on Tuesday that offered an alternative explanation as to how living organisms were born.

Phosphorus is a vital building block of life as we know it, forming basic cell structures and the double helix shape of DNA and RNA. Billions of years ago on early Earth, most of the available phosphorus was locked away in insoluble minerals. However one



mineral, schreibersite, is highly reactive and produces phosphorus capable of forming organic molecules. Since most schreibersite on Earth comes from meteorites, the emergence of life has long been thought to be tied to the arrival of extraterrestrial rocks.

But schreibersite is also contained within the glass-like rock formed by lightning strikes in some types of clay-rich soils. Researchers used state of the art image techniques to analyse the amount of the phosphorus-giving mineral. — AFP

MoCIIP, CPA ink cooperation agreement

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) on Tuesday signed a programme of cooperation with the Consumer Protection Authority.

The programme comes within the context of integration among government establishments and units. It reflects the two sides' keenness to fully utilise their prerogatives and coordinate towards the accomplishment of their common goals.

The cooperation memo was signed by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and Salayum bin Ali al Hikmani, Chairman of the Consumer Protection Authority.

The programme aims to develop investment in the Sultanate in a manner that guarantees the abundance of commodities and staple products in local markets. It also seeks to ensure the quality of the goods and the stability of their prices.

The programme also provides for filing complaints, the registration of offences and the complementation of regulatory procedures, including the exchange of data and information related to the prices of goods and services in Oman and other GCC states.

The Ministry provides the Authority with lists of registered goods and services, as per the provisions of the programme, which also ensures electronic connectivity, an example of which is the Invest-Easy system, which deals with coordinating procedures like the issuance of discount-sale permits and promotional offers. — ONA

Detailed development plan for Muscat soon

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

With nearly 29 per cent of the population concentrated in the capital, a detailed plan will be prepared for Muscat under the National Urban Development Strategy, said the Minister of Housing and Urban Development on Tuesday.

He said the urban development strategy for Muscat will include the Ghala Industrial Zone.

The minister said as the global trend is planning modern smart cities in parallel to the transportation system, the Al Batinah Expressway opens new opportunities for urban development. "We call on the community to develop land

around the Al Batinah Expressway and Al Batinah Coastal Road.

The role of public transportation, including the light rail in the later stages, will increase from 4 at the moment to 18 per cent.

He said the Wilayat of Barka will remain within the Governorate of South Al Batinah.

"Simplifying procedures in investment is an important requirement so that the completion of licences and implementation periods are reduced."

He said that 911,000 housing units will be required over the next 10 years.

The government's National Urban Development Strategy (NUDS) will focus on integrated, balanced and sustainable development of towns and cities in

The strategy will give importance to the issues related to climate change, use of renewable energy, efficient water network and alternative means of transportation

DR KHALFAN BIN SAID AL SHUEILI

Minister of Housing and Urban Planning

line with Oman's Vision 2040.

"The strategy will give importance to the issues related to

climate change, use of renewable energy, efficient water network, waste management and alternative means of transportation, including the promotion of walking and bicycles", said Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning.

"The strategy will be based on developing cities suitable for living, preserving Omani identity, responding to climate change, promoting economic growth based on the components of each governorate, waste management, environment protection, and sustainable transport system."

Dr Khalfan said that the NUDS will contribute to channelling investment and development to appropriate destinations and will thus, help achieve harmony

among development activities, diminish the probability of clash of objectives and provide the necessary incentives to foster socioeconomic prosperity while at the same time safeguarding the environment for the coming generations.

The strategy expects the population of Oman to increase between 2.5 million and 3 million to around 7-7.5 million from current levels by 2040. The Omani workforce will increase by 32 per cent to reach 3.9 million, including skilled workers. There will be significant growth in the private sector by 83 per cent, with an increase in annual GDP growth of 5 per cent, foreign direct investment (FDI) contribution to GDP will increase by 10 per cent.



Al Suwaiq farms growing tropical jackfruit trees

SUWAIQ: Some farms in the Wilayat of Al Suwaiq, Governorate of North Al Batinah, have succeeded in growing the tropical jackfruit.

The seeds were brought from southeast Asian and African countries. The local farmers improvised different methods of increasing productivity.

South and southeast

Asia is the original home of the jackfruit, which grows in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the archipelago of Malay. It also grows in equatorial areas like Jamaica and Tobago, as well as Brazil and some Arab countries close to the Equator. The fruit can be grown in commercial quantities in humid areas.

— ONA

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Foreign Ministry, on Tuesday took part in the 2nd Tehran Dialogue Forum.

Held via video-conferencing, the forum was organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran.

The Sultanate was represented in the forum by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Diplomatic Affairs Under-Secretary.

During the forum, Shaikh Khalifa reiterated Oman's firm stance in supporting and promoting for dialogue and understanding as they represent the ideal means to solve disputes and conflicts in the region and the world.

The forum, held under the auspices of Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian Foreign Minister, saw participation of officials and experts. The forum discussed many international and regional issues and circumstances.

— ONA



■ FROM PAGE 1

Covid-19 vaccines are safe & effective

The number of those who got vaccinated in the Sultanate reached about 90,000, which constitutes 2 per cent of the total population. "We hope that more numbers will be covered quickly, with new batches of vaccines expected in the coming weeks", the doctor said.

Earlier, the Ministry of Health has that the temporary suspension of AstraZeneca vaccine by some countries was a precautionary measure taken by them to investigate some cases of blood clots observed in some of those who received the vaccine, calling on all target groups to quickly take the vaccine, and not to believe in rumours and get information from reliable official sources.

It said that no serious side effects have been recorded for vaccines used in Oman against Covid-19 disease till date.

NO DIRECT LINK

Experts who argue that the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University is safe —



and certainly safer than getting Covid-19 — circled their wagons on Tuesday, but not before more countries suspended the jab.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) — which approved the vaccine in January — remains convinced of the safety of AstraZeneca's product, the organisation's chief said on Tuesday.

Stressing on the safety of Covid-19 vaccines used in Oman,

the ministry said there is no preference among the vaccines currently used in Oman in terms of efficacy and safety.

Moreover, these vaccines were selected by a specialised technical team that studies vaccines from all aspects based on published studies in prestigious scientific journals as well as recommendations issued by international organisations.

"A situation like this is not unexpected", Executive Director

Emer Cooke said, referring to several cases of blood clots that had reportedly developed following an injection. "When you vaccinate millions of people, it's inevitable that you have rare or serious incidences of illnesses that occur after vaccination."

Fear has been spreading about the jab as more countries report incidences of blood clots in people after receiving a vaccination. The fears have grown to the point where several European countries have shelved the product, complicating already troubled vaccination drives.

The rate of reported blood clots amongst vaccinated people seemed to broadly mirror the rate in the general population, Cooke explained. The agency had also received similar numbers from other vaccines from across the world, she said.

However, EMA had launched a "very rigorous analysis" to determine whether the vaccines might have caused the events, she said.

Business Research Award to enhance quality research



The award will also encourage researchers to direct their activities towards fostering sciences and expertise of relevance to local and international economic developments, with emphasis on disseminating economic knowledge among segments of society.

The prize covers a broad range of business domains, including monetary policies, financial policies, the business environment, the legislations, foreign investment and current local economic challenges in the Sultanate and labour market

solutions. It targets research to be conducted by holders of Master's, PhD and Bachelor's degrees, as well as university and college students.

Now that research proposals are being received, the qualifying proposals will be announced from April 2021 till the end of May. Research studies will be conducted between June and November 2021. The final drafts of research papers will be received by the end of November and the successful ones will be sorted out in December. By January 2022, the final results will be announced. — ONA



Amendments to Insurance Companies Law discussed

MUSCAT: The State Council's Economic Committee discussed draft amendments of some provisions of the Insurance Companies Law and the Takaful Insurance Law, referred by Majlis Ash'shura.

The committee held its meeting under the chairmanship of Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdullah al Harthy in the presence of the committee members, on Tuesday.

During its eighth regular meeting of the second annual sitting, the Economic Committee discussed its report



on the Accelerators of the 'Omani Economic Growth Amid Covid-19' which aims to identify the impact of the

crisis on the national economy particularly the banking sector and the labour market with a view of supporting the

government's efforts towards economic recovery. The report is also aimed at identifying the accelerators of economic

growth and prioritising economic enablers for economic diversification. The meeting approved the minutes of the

previous meeting and took suitable decisions on certain issues. Meanwhile, the sub-committee of the State Council's Social Committee tasked with studying the draft psychiatric health law, discussed the introduction to the law under the chairmanship of Dr Mona bint Ahmed al Sadoon.

The committee reviewed similar laws of the Arab countries with the aim of proposing a draft psychiatric health law that responds to the local and international developments.

Dust cover over northern Oman

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The northern part of Oman has been experiencing an overcast of dust and is expected to be thicker on Wednesday.

Although the wind was only seven knots in Muscat during Tuesday afternoon, the weather seemed to be cloudy and the weather forecaster at Oman Met Office, Civil Aviation Authority, clarified that it is purely dusty.

The dust is spread over Muscat Governorate, some parts of the interior, Dhahirah and Musandam.

"We have the strong wind in the upper level and it is coming from the south west of Iran. And this means dust is prevailing across the Sea of Oman and Musandam Governorate", explained the weather forecaster.

Mainly clear skies over most of the Sultanate with advection of upper air dust over the northern



governorates of the Sultanate. Chance of cloud formation over al Hajar Mountain towards the afternoon.

Chances of late night and early morning low-level clouds or fog patches along the coastal areas of Oman Sea and over parts of South Al Sharqiyah, Al Wusta and Dhofar governorates.

Along the coastal areas of the Oman Sea winds will be northeasterly light to moderate during daytime becoming

variable light at night, while over the rest of the Sultanate it will be southerly to southeasterly light to moderate.

The Met Office alerted to be cautious as there could be poor visibility during fog formation.

The maximum temperature recorded was 35 degrees Celsius in Ibri, Fahud, Nizwa, Mahout and Haima and the lowest was recorded in Jabal Shams at 18 degrees with a low of 11 degrees Celsius.

Pact signed for info services, packages at Dubai Expo

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and the commission responsible for Oman Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai has signed an agreement to manage and operate the tourism services and information centre at the pavilion.

The agreement was signed by Maithaa bint Saif al Mahrouqiyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, with Raad bin Khalifa al Abri — CEO of the company, specialised in



providing such services. Al-Raqi Business and Services

Company will provide all information, services, offers and tour packages about the Sultanate to visitors to the pavilion and expo visitors in general, in addition to introducing the Sultanate and promoting its tourism components.

The mega event that will run from October 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022, was delayed to safely navigate the impact of Covid-19 and allow the World Expo to focus on a collective desire for new thinking to identify solutions to some of the greatest challenges.

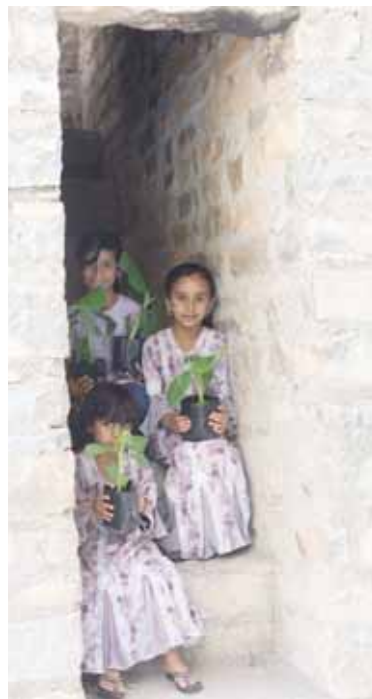
Schoolkids plant banana trees in Birkat Al Mouz



RAY PETERSEN
NIZWA, MARCH 16

In an initiative aimed at restoring local culture and heritage, Birkat al Mouz schoolkids undertook a banana palm planting programme at the Al Jazeera plantation on the edge of the township.

Under the name 'Awaser', perpetuating bonds with the local community, a student group at Umm Al Fadel Girls Primary School, participated in a regional competition with the idea of restoring the town's heritage of banana trees plantations, which has immense significance



for the local community. "The town's heritage and culture are inextricably linked to the naming of the township, Birkat al Mouz", said Hajar al Balushi, "as it can be literally translated as a 'sea of banana palms', indicative of the view from the heights above the town at the foot of the mighty Jabal Al Akhdhar."

"Recently", added Al Balushi, "the tradition has been somewhat neglected as public endowment farms are leased to new farmers every few years and those farmers have been reluctant to invest in new plants on an economic basis, with greater financial return possible



in growing cattle and stock feeds in recent years." Consequently, the town once known across the region for its banana plantations, now has scarcity of the beautiful, productive trees.

A local business, Kawa Kava, and the local Al Ittihad Football Club joined forces to support the students, by sourcing the 120 trees from fertile farms in Al Batinah and providing logistical assistance support. The initiative was welcomed by local farmers, the community, and even a tourist group who expressed their interest in the initiative, and no doubt will provide a lasting memento of their journey.



Invitation to attend the Extraordinary General Meeting & the Annual General Meeting of Oman Arab Bank S.A.O.G. (the Bank)

Oman Arab Bank "SAOG" takes pleasure in inviting all its shareholders to an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) and an annual general meeting (AGM) to be held on Sunday at 3pm on 28/03/2021 on Muscat Clearing and Depository (MCD) online platform, www.mcd.gov.om to consider and decide on the below agenda:

In case the quorum is not complete for the meeting of this EGM & AGM, the second meeting will be held at 3pm on Thursday, April 1, 2021, on Muscat Clearing and Depository (MCD) online platform.

Frist: The agenda of the Extraordinary General Meeting:

1. To approve the issuance of the Basel III compliant additional tier 1 capital securities ("Bonds") to be commenced at any time over the next five years (subject to prevailing market conditions) in the aggregate principal amount of up to OMR 97 million (or USD equivalent) in one or more tranches to be listed on an international exchange such as the International Stock Market of the London Stock Exchange (the Transaction); and
2. To authorise and approve the Board of Directors of the Bank to undertake any and all required or desirable steps to implement the above Transaction (including, but not limited to authorising the execution of documents) and do all that is required to give effect to the Transaction, including allocation, listing and pricing and to agree any amendments to the structure or the Transaction documents, however fundamental, on behalf of the Bank and to authorize, as it deems fit, the management of the Bank with the whole or any part of its so conferred authorities.

Second: The agenda of the annual general meeting:

1. To consider and approve the report of the Board of Directors for the financial year ended on 31/12/2020.
2. To consider and approve the report on Corporate Governance for the financial year ended 31/12/2020.
3. To consider the external auditor's report and approval of the balance sheet and profit and loss account for the financial year ended 31/12/2020.
4. To consider and ratify the sitting fees for the Board of Directors and its committees meetings for the financial year 2020 and approving sitting fees for year ending on 31/12/2021.
5. To consider and approve the Board of Directors remuneration of (RO 140,000) (One Hundred Forty Thousand Omani Rials) for the financial year ended 31/12/2020.
6. To consider the report on Related Party transactions for transactions conducted during the financial year ended 31/12/2020.
7. To consider the Related Party transactions that the bank will conduct with the Related Parties during the financial year ending on 31/12/2021.
8. To consider the donations made during the year ending 31/12/2020 for community services.
9. To consider and approve a proposal to allocate an amount of RO 100, 000 (One Hundred Thousand Omani Rials) as a donation for community services for the year ending 31/12/2021.
10. To elect three members for the board of directors from the shareholders or others to fill the vacant seats.

Those who wish to run for the membership of the Board of Directors must fill out the nomination form and submit it to the Secretary of the Board at least five days before the date of the AGM meeting, no later than 2:30 pm on Sunday 21/3/2021. The nomination forms are available at the CMA website.

11. To appoint the External Auditors for the financial year ending on 31/12/2021.

12. Approval of the additional fees of the external auditors for the additional work related to audit for the financial year ended on 31/12/2020.

As per the regulations for convening general meetings through the electronic platforms issued by the Capital Market Authority (CMA), we would like to draw your kind attention to the following:

1. The juristic persons should authorise a natural person to attend the EGM & AGM and vote on their behalf through the electronic systems, provided that the authorised natural person has an investor number at Muscat Clearing and Depository Company.
2. Voting on the subject items offered for voting in the agenda starts before a period of not more than three (3) days and until the end of the voting process on the day of the EGM and AGM. If your balance of shares increased or decreased during the period of voting, your submitted votes will be cancelled and you would have to submit your votes again on the EGM's and AGM's date.

Please attend at least 30 minutes prior to the meeting. For more information, please contact Mr. Mansoor Alraisi, Tel No 24754427.

Rashad bin Mohammad Al Zubair
Chairman

K.P.M.G
Auditor

Abdulla bin Mohammad Al Hooti
Legal Advisor

CONTENT MATTERS

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
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THE ONGOING

pandemic has affected all the sectors across the globe. The situation has forced everyone to let the ball rolling for basic survival yet be safe from the deadly virus by avoiding crowds and maximum possible direct contacts. Lockdowns and restrictions of several kinds are results of the situation, which has no sign of any early departure. People have to live with it by limiting activities, yet keep moving for survival of the economy. Content management, which is in vogue for quite some time, has gained momentum to cope up with the vacuum created by the pandemic, and came out with wonderful solutions for every sector. You name the issue, and there is a solution ready with those who have ability create an interface for the enterprises. Among the sectors most affected and talked about due to the pandemic is education. Everyone had questions about the quality of the virtual mode of education. But surprisingly it came out well and successfully managed the void created by the pandemic. “It all happened due to the solutions which were ready in the form of content management. Some value additions as per demand of the respective sectors, and the solutions offered by the content developers were perfectly functional,” said Omar, an information technology expert associated with a private sector firm.

GREAT DEMAND

Online training platforms for content writing, management and marketing were great in demand from the very beginning of the pandemic last year. According to Vaibhav Kakkar, CEO and Founder of IIM SKILLS, a leading online training platform for content writing, digital marketing, and other competitive exams, content management today is more significant than ever before. Of course the solutions were prevalent pre

pandemic, but its relevance multiplied manifold during the pandemic. People started looking for solutions to work from home, and those having content management skills proved very handy to people’s needs of running day-to-day businesses.

“The whole concept of content management revolves around the one fact of providing the utmost value to the consumer. For someone like me who is an online training provider, my team and I aim to educate and inform, be it in the form of courses, blogs, e-books, or white papers,” Vaibhav Kakkar said.

CONTENT MANAGEMENT

Since most of the information today is accessed on the Internet it is important to have a proper content management structure in place. “It requires us, professionals, to understand the importance of factors like business analytics, consumer personas to build better rapport with leads.”

According to Kakkar, there has to be proper synergy too among the different departments. Content management has to be a collaborative effort. It is not an individual’s responsibility, rather it’s teamwork. Sales, marketing, information technology, customer service, everyone should play a part in it. That will enable understanding of the consumer choices and preferences better.

“It will also benefit the organisations greatly if we put proper effort to bring on board content managers who would have insight into content creation for different platforms and provide solutions accordingly. Content management basically encompasses all the steps to develop a flexible content strategy and improved content quality. This also includes taking customer feedback very seriously and working upon it to provide more efficient, consumer-oriented content,” He said.

Content management has successfully managed the void that pandemic has created by
COMING OUT WITH WONDERFUL SOLUTIONS



SQU graduation ceremony postponed due to Covid

MUSCAT: Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in coordination with the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the developments resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, decided to postpone the graduation ceremony for the 31st batch, until further notice.

In a statement, the SQU administration said the decision stems from the university's keenness on public health as the epidemiological situation indicates an increase in daily Covid-19 cases. The statement said that the SQU administration will study all the options available

and the suitable timing for the graduation ceremony, appreciating the graduates and their families for their sense of responsibility.

The graduation ceremony of the 31st batch of graduates was originally scheduled to be held on March 22, 24, 29, 31 at the university's auditorium.



Proposal to support media

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

Representatives from the Media and Culture Committee of the Majlis Ash'shura met with specialists at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and proposed a set of plans and suggestions for the media that can contribute positively to the media scenario in the country.

The meeting held under the chairmanship of Ali bin Ahmed al Mashani, Chairman of the Committee, in the presence of members.

A set of proposals aimed at contributing to the revitalisation and development of media institutions and enhancing job security of the people associated with media houses are expected to catapult the quality of the media content, according to Ali bin Salem al Jabri, Vice-Chairman of the Committee.

"The Committee's role is to find effective and rapid ways to ensure the sustainability of media institutions in the private sector that previously relied on government support. We also need to explore ways to achieving financial sustainability and reaching levels of safety and stability for the institution and its workers," he said.

During the meeting, the specialists explained that the investment environment in the media sector in the Sultanate needs to be more attractive and ways to face financial, technical and marketing challenges need to be in place.

Cooperation pact signed on innovation, 4IR technologies



MUSCAT: Oman Makers Centre (OMC) has signed an agreement in the fields of innovation and 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies with Impact Integrated Company.

The agreement was signed by Hilal bin Nasser al Shibli, OMC Director General and Khalid bin al Safi al Huraibi,

CEO of Impact Integrated.

The agreement provides for the supply of multiple services to clients seeking innovative products that respond promptly to ongoing consumer requirements.

As per the agreement, cooperation covers courses in 4IR and entrepreneurship, which are considered rich

domains for innovation.

Hands-on application workshops will be organised in real projects for three-month duration. The overall aim is to achieve more positive competition and to enhance the quality of services through emphasis on distinguished new ventures to reach the desired goals. — ONA

الدقم الأهلية للتنمية ش م ع م
Duqm Ahlia Development SAOC

الدعوة لحضور اجتماع الجمعية العامة العادية السنوية للسنة المالية المنتهية في ٢٠٢٠/١٢/٣١

يسر مجلس إدارة شركة الدقم الأهلية (ش.م.ع.م) دعوة المساهمين الكرام لحضور اجتماع الجمعية العامة العادية السنوية للسنة المالية المنتهية في ٢٠٢٠/١٢/٣١م لشركة، والمقرر عقدها في تمام الساعة العاشرة من صباح يوم الاربعاء الموافق ٢٠٢١/٣/٣١م وفي كراون بلازا والكائن بولاية الدقم، وفي حال عدم إكمال النصاب القانوني لأي جمعية سيتم عقد الجمعية الثانية في تمام الساعة العاشرة من بعد صباح يوم الخميس الموافق ٢٠٢١/٤/١م في ذات المكان. لدراسة واعتماد القرارات المناسبة لبنود جدول الأعمال التالي:-

الجمعية العامة العادية السنوية:

١. دراسة تقرير مجلس الإدارة عن السنة المالية المنتهية في ٢٠٢٠/١٢/٣١م، والموافقة عليه.
٢. دراسة تقرير تنظيم وإدارة الشركة عن السنة المالية المنتهية في ٢٠٢٠/١٢/٣١م، والموافقة عليه.
٣. دراسة تقرير مراقب الحسابات والموافقة على الميزانية العمومية وحساب الأرباح والخسائر عن السنة المالية المنتهية في ٢٠٢٠/١٢/٣١م.
٤. احاطة الجمعية بالتعاملات التي أجرتها الشركة مع الاطراف ذات العلاقة خلال السنة المالية المنتهية في ٢٠١٩/١٢/٣١م.
٥. تعيين مراقب الحسابات للسنة المالية التي ستنتهي في ٢٠٢١/١٢/٣١م وتحديد أتعابه.

وفقا للنظام الأساسي للشركة يحق لأي مساهم أن يفوض خطيا أي شخص آخر لحضور الاجتماع والتصويت على القرارات المتخذة نيابة عنه حسب ما ينص عليه قانون الشركات التجارية الجديد، كما يرجى الحضور إلى مقر الاجتماع قبل الموعد المحدد بنصف ساعة على الأقل، وفي حالة وجود أي استفسار نرجو الاتصال بالفاضل / سالم العريمي على هاتف رقم ٧١٥٧١٩١٠.

المستشار
مراقب الحسابات
طاهر بن ميخوت الجنيبي
رئيس مجلس الادارة
المستشار القانوني

أمان
AMAN

Invitation to attend the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of AMAN Real Estate Investment Fund ("Fund")

The Fund Management Body of the Fund are pleased to invite the unitholders to attend the Annual General Meeting ("AGM"), which takes place on 31/03/2021, 3 PM to be held via the electronic platform to convene The General Meetings which is accessible through Muscat Clearing and Depository website (www.mcd.gov.om). If the quorum is not quorate, the meeting shall be re-scheduled to 7/04/2021 at 3:00 PM. To discuss the following Agenda:

1. To consider and Approve the Chairman's Report for the financial year ended 31 December 2020.
2. To consider the Audit's Report and to approve the financial statement Balance Sheet and Profit & Loss Account, for the financial year ended on 31 December.
3. To consider and approve the distribution of cash dividend to the unit holders as per the AGM date with a percentage of 3.56% (an amount of 3.56 baiza per unit), for the financial year ended on 31 December 2020.
4. To approve sitting fees to the meeting of the Fund Management Body for the year ended and determine the fees for the forthcoming financial year (Annex 1).
5. To brief the General Meeting of the related party transaction entered into by the Fund during the financial year ended 31 December 2020 (Annex 2).
6. To appoint an auditor for the fiscal year that will end on 31 December 2021 and determine their fees.

In accordance with the Fund's articles of association and the regulations for holding General Meetings, using modern technology issued by the authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- I. A Juristic person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person, to attend the assembly meeting and vote on his behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in the MCDC.
- II. Voting on any of the items on the agenda begins no more than three days before the date of the Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the meeting, and if the shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be cancelled, and he must re-vote again on the day of the meeting.

In case of any inquiries about the above agenda items, please contact

Shaima Al Balushi at phone number 24625819
or send an email to s.albalushi@tharaglobal.com

Legal Advisor

Financial Auditor

Chairman of the Fund

587 new cases, 5 deaths reported

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Health (MoH) reported 587 new coronavirus cases of Covid-19 on Tuesday, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 148, 010.

MoH also reported five Covid-19-related deaths, taking the total death toll to 1,614.

The total recovery

cases reached 137,128, including 358 on Tuesday, or 93 per cent of the total cases reported.

Fifty-one people were hospitalized during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 270, including 85 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

ISC Salalah election on March 26

SALALAH: Indian Social Club, Salalah will hold annual general body meeting (AGM) on March 26 which will be followed by an election to the management committee of the club. Due to the Covid-19 situation the election will be held online.

"The club has called upon all the bona fide members to attend the meeting

and participate in the election. The election is happening under unprecedented situation of Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure safety of the participants and Supreme Committee guidelines, the club has decided to conduct the election online," said Hridhya Menon, acting president of ISC Salalah.

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Shared Services Company (NSS), would like to inform specialized companies that the tender sale has been extended for the tender below;

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last Date for Collection of Tender Documents	Time & Last Date for Proposal Submission	Tender Fee (OMR)
NSS/2021/1	Development of IR4.0 SMART ROADMAP	23 March 2021	07 April 2021	25/-

Terms and conditions:

- Bids shall be submitted in a single envelope and sealed with red wax, addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee", and must write on the envelope the tender name & number.
- 3 separate envelopes shall be included inside the single sealed envelope, and each of these 3 envelopes must be marked with a tenderer name & tender no. as per the below:
 1. Commercial Proposal
 2. Technical Proposal
 3. Bid Bond
- Bids should be dropped in the tender box at NSS reception before 1.00 pm, time of the Sultanate, on Wednesday, 07 April 2021.
- Each bid should be accompanied with a temporary insurance, in the form of a bank guarantee or a cheque certified from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, covering (1%) of the total bid value and valid for a period of (90) days from the last date for submission of offers, addressed to the "Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee". Tenders that do not include the required temporary insurance will not be considered.
- NSS is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid.
- Registration of the bidders to be done through the company Tender website (www.nama.om).
- Interested party to deposit Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) on: Account Name: Nama Shared Services, Bank Muscat: 0423-048027270-017 Corporate Branch (Bidder name and Tender Number to be clearly mentioned). Tender Documents will be received by email.
- The deposit at the last day of purchasing should be before 1.00pm
- In the event of receipt of the tender document on behalf of another company, the interested purchasers in the above tender document should provide details of the person's name and the company details.

للماء للخدمات المشتركة
Nama Shared Services

Al Muzn Mall

R - Floor - Al Mawaleh North, Al Seeb
P.O Box C9740, Post Code 900, Sultanate of Oman.
Phone Number: +968 24559200 / 246
E-Mail: Ibrahim.AlHina@Holding.nama.om

12 Syrian soldiers killed in militant ambush

BEIRUT: Armed men killed 12 Syrian soldiers in an ambush in the southern province of Daraa on Tuesday, a war monitor said.

“At least 12 members of the Fourth Armoured Division and the government’s intelligence units were killed in an ambush by militants,” the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The soldiers were en route to the Al Mzairib district in the rural west of the province to arrest a former opposition commander when they came under fire by militants loyal to him who sought to thwart his capture, Observatory head Rami Abdul Rahman said.

“The militants attacked two military trucks and two small buses carrying regime forces,” he added.

That sparked a gunfight which forced Damascus to deploy reinforcements to the area, Abdul Rahman said.

— AFP

Protesters storm Aden presidential palace

ADEN: Hundreds of angry Yemenis stormed the presidential palace in Aden on Tuesday protesting poor living conditions in the war-torn country but were eventually pushed back peacefully, an AFP correspondent said.

Protesters, including retired military and security officers, marched in the southern port city, the de facto capital where the internationally-recognised government is based.

“Revolution, revolution in the south,” they shouted.

Palace guards shot into the air but protesters continued to march in. The crowd remained in the building for over an hour before dispersing. A government official said that Yemeni and Saudi forces escorted to safety members of the cabinet, including Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, to the military intelligence building on the palace grounds.

Protesters said that they were angry over a lack of services and a delay in the payment of salaries.

Some carried flags of the southern separatist movement.

Yemen’s government was formed in December under a



Protesters gather to demonstrate outside the internationally-recognised Yemeni government’s headquarters at Al Maashiq Palace in the Crater district of Aden on Tuesday. – AFP

Riyadh-sponsored power-sharing agreement between ministers loyal to President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi and supporters of the secessionist Southern Transitional

Council.

Both are technically fighting the Ansar Allah, which controls the capital Sanaa in the north.

But the STC has sought to re-

store South Yemen’s independence from the north. The two sides unified in 1990.

Aden residents claim the new government has not done any-

Yemeni and Saudi forces escorted to safety members of the cabinet, including Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, to the military intelligence building on the palace grounds. The crowd remained in the building for over an hour before dispersing

thing to remedy price inflation or repeated power cuts.

MISSILES FIRED AT SAUDI

Two ballistic missiles fired by Ansar Allah fighters landed in uninhabited border areas of southern Saudi Arabia on Monday, the Saudi-led coalition said in a statement carried by state media.

The coalition later said it had destroyed a bunker for ballistic missiles and launch pads in the northern Yemeni province of Saada, from which it says the missiles had been launched, Ekhbariya TV reported. — AFP/Reuters

National Finance

Co. SAOG

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E-mail: info@nationalfinance.co.om Website: www.nationalfinance.co.om

Audited Financial Statements 2020*

Directors’ Report

During the year 2020, the company adopted conservative underwriting measures with focus on writing good quality business with improved margins. Our operating profit (profit before provision and tax) was at RO 15.3 million (RO 17.7 million in 2019) while total earning assets was at RO 402.3 million (RO 426.7 million in 2019). Profit after tax was RO 8.0 million as compared to RO 10.0 million in 2019. The decline from 2019 Profit of RO 10.0 million was primarily due to higher borrowing costs, lower business originations and continued pragmatic provisioning.

The company is in full compliance with the provisioning norms prescribed by the Central Bank of Oman and the International Financial Reporting Standards and holds an additional overlay over the IFRS9 requirement as a buffer given incremental risk in the portfolio due to COVID-19. The digital platform continues to play a pivotal role in our core business, we are constantly aiming to meet our customer’s growing demand and expectations. As a result, we have launched our e-Channels which enhance our customer’s experience. We will continue to strive to improve our technological platform to be aligned with the digital transformation happening across the world and provide solutions that deliver best in class customer experience.

The projected lower levels of credit offtake combined with increased interest costs will make it challenging to sustain current profitability levels. However, our Company is well positioned to deal with the challenging business environment as a result of its strong financial position, well established processes, well trained personnel and long experience in this business. We will continue to focus on strengthening our efficiencies, customer experience, product offerings and quality of service delivery.

The Company’s dividend distribution aims at providing shareholders a reasonable return and to build reserves to achieve a strong capital base. Based on this, the Board recommends distribution of 6% dividend in cash. This dividend will be paid on the shares outstanding on the record date.

Our Company has been complying with all the requirements of the code of corporate governance, as specified by the Capital Market Authority (CMA). A detailed report on corporate governance is set out along with a certificate from the Statutory Auditors in compliance with CMA regulations.

National Finance has been supporting numerous CSR initiatives to reinforce and maximize its contribution to society. During the year 2020, the company has contributed RO 175,000 to the Endowment Fund to support the health services towards the fight of COVID-19 in Oman as a part of the CSR initiatives.

The company remains committed to Omanisation and as of December 31, 2020, the number of Omani employees was 271 out of the total workforce of 312. The Omanisation percentage works out to 86.86%, which is higher than the given target of 80%. Your Company continues to remain committed to providing career growth and development of Omani nationals through ongoing training in line with their job requirement. We will continue to maintain momentum on employee engagement initiatives, development of future skills, managerial and leadership capabilities for professional development.

We also extend our sincere gratitude to the Central Bank of Oman, Capital Market Authority, Muscat Securities Market, our bankers, depositors, vehicle and equipment dealers, customers and shareholders for the support extended for the growth of the Company. On behalf of the Board of Directors, we also thank the management and staff for their dedication and hard work.

Statement of Profit or Loss and other Comprehensive Income for the Year Ended 31 December 2020

	2020 RO ‘000	2019 RO ‘000
Income		
Income from financing activities	40,970	41,806
Finance costs	(17,861)	(16,302)
Net finance income	23,109	25,504
Other operating income	2,952	2,826
	26,061	28,330
Expenses		
Operating expenses	(9,959)	(9,537)
Depreciation	(518)	(550)
Amortization	(340)	(338)
Impairment of goodwill	-	(256)
Net impairment loss on lease receivables	(6,255)	(6,480)
Bad debts written back	142	54
Total expenses	(16,930)	(17,107)
Profit before tax	9,131	11,223
Income tax expense	(1,112)	(1,206)
Profit after tax	8,019	10,017
Other comprehensive income		
Items that will be classified to profit or loss		
Movement in revaluation reserve – net of tax	26	31
Total comprehensive income	8,045	10,048
Basic and diluted earnings per share (RO)	0.012	0.016

Statement of Financial Position
As at 31 December 2020

	2020 RO ‘000	2019 RO ‘000
ASSETS		
Cash and cash equivalents	5,407	7,947
Net investment in finance leases	348,954	389,384
Working capital and factoring receivables	53,390	37,262
Advances, prepayments and other receivables	2,452	3,403
Assets held for sale	1,500	1,500
Goodwill	5,950	5,950
Intangible assets	1,134	1,405
Property and equipment	7,095	6,203
Statutory deposit	250	250
Total assets	426,132	453,304
LIABILITIES AND EQUITY		
LIABILITIES		
Creditors and accruals	8,303	5,138
Tax liabilities	1,687	2,007
Bank borrowings	281,793	320,023
Fixed deposits	24,834	17,009
Deferred tax liabilities	190	304
End of service benefits	666	711
Total liabilities	317,473	345,192
EQUITY		
Capital and reserves		
Share capital	54,123	54,123
Share premium	5,786	5,786
Revaluation reserve	1,040	783
Foreign currency reserve	4,321	4,321
Voluntary reserve	3,000	3,000
Cash flow hedge reserve	(298)	-
Legal reserve	8,501	7,699
Retained earnings	14,117	14,331
Total shareholders’ equity attributable to the equity holders of the company	90,590	90,043
Perpetual bonds	18,069	18,069
Total equity	108,659	108,112
Total liabilities and equity	426,132	453,304
Net assets per share (RO)	0.167	0.166

Note: The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests the company in either Arabic or English within 7 days of receipt of the request. The full set of financials are available in the website of Muscat Securities Market.

Israel unearths fragments of 2000-year-old biblical scroll

Recently-discovered 2000-year-old biblical scroll fragments from the Bar Kochba period, are displayed at the Israel Antiquities Authority’s Dead Sea conservation lab in Jerusalem, on Tuesday. – AFP

TEL AVIV: Israel on Tuesday unveiled fragments of a biblical scroll dating back some 2,000 years, in what experts described as the most significant such find since the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The artefacts were unearthed during excavations by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) in the Judean desert, which spans parts of southern Israel and the occupied West Bank.

In a site known as the “Cave of Horrors,” archaeologists found fragments of a scroll with a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the first such find since the early 1960s.

“For the first time in approximately 60 years, archaeological excavations have uncovered fragments of a biblical scroll,” the IAA said.

Oren Ableman, an IAA curator, said parts of the same scroll from the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets were first discovered in the Cave of Horrors by Bedouins in the 1950s.

The Cave of Horrors took its name from the numerous skeletons found inside it and the treacherous terrain nearby.

Most of the text is in ancient Greek, a widely used language at the time, but the word Lord appears in ancient Hebrew script.

Oren said that among the most striking features of the new fragments is a deviation from all other known versions of the Old Testament: in one passage, the word “gates” is replaced

by the word “streets.”

The significance of that deviation is “what we are trying to discover now,” he said.

Yosef Garfinkel, head of the Institute of Archaeology at Jerusalem’s Hebrew University, described the find as “exciting,” saying it could enrich the “study of the history of the Greek translation of the bible.”

The items were discovered in a cave believed to have been used by Jews rebelling against the Romans during the failed second-century Bar Kochba revolt.

The IAA compared the find to the extraordinary discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some 900 manuscripts found between 1947 and 1956 in the Qumran caves above the Dead Sea in the West Bank. They are some of the earliest biblical texts ever found.

The Judea desert excavation also unearthed a cache of rare coins, a six-millennia-old skeleton of a child and a basket described by the IAA as “likely the oldest in the world,” which been carbon-dated to 10,500 years old.

“I shook for days,” after the basket was found, IAA archaeologist Chaim Cohen said.

The woven basket was found remarkably intact, with a rock resting on its top -- an indication that its users wanted to keep the contents safe and intended to come back for them, Cohen said. — AFP

Myanmar families hold funerals as activists defy security crackdown

YANGON: The families of dozens of people killed in demonstrations against military rule in Myanmar held funerals for their loved ones on Tuesday as more protesters defied the security forces and at least one man was shot dead.

The political and economic crisis over the February 1 ouster of the elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi could also soon mean hunger for the poor who are facing rising food and fuel prices across the country, the UN food agency warned.

Security forces shot dead at least 20 people on Monday after 74 were killed a day earlier, including many in a suburb of Yangon where Chinese-financed factories were torched, according to advocacy group the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

On Tuesday, a crematorium in Yangon reported 31 funerals, a mourner at one of the ceremonies said.

Hundreds of young mourners spilt out on to the street at the funeral of medical student Khant Nyar Hein who was killed in Yangon on Sunday, the bloodiest day of the protests.

"Let them kill me right now, let them kill me instead of my son because I can't take it any more," the student's mother was seen saying in a video clip posted on Facebook.

Mourners chanted: "Our revolution must prevail."

Some families told media the security forces had seized the bodies of loved ones but they would still hold a funeral.

At least 184 people have been killed by the security forces in the weeks of protests, the AAPP said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was appalled by the escalating violence and called on the international community to help end the repression, his spokesman said, while the United States also denounced the bloodshed. — **Reuters**

Refrain from causing a stink, Kim's sister tells US



SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's influential sister warned the United States against "causing a stink," state media reported on Tuesday.

The statement by Kim Yo Jong, a key adviser to her brother, was Pyongyang's first explicit reference to the new leadership in Washington, more than four months after Joe Biden was elected to replace Donald Trump — although it still did not mention the Democrat by name.

The United States and South Korea began joint military exercises last week and Pyongyang's official news agency carried a statement from her warning the new US administration: "If it wants to sleep in peace for coming four years, it had better refrain from causing a stink at its first step."

— **AFP**

Blinken warns China on first Asia trip

TOKYO: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned China on Tuesday against using "coercion and aggression" as he sought to use his first trip abroad to shore up Asian alliances. "We will push back, if necessary, when China uses coercion and aggression to get its way," Blinken said.

His visit to Tokyo with Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin is the first overseas visit by top members of President Joe Biden's cabinet. It follows last week's summit of the leaders of the Quad grouping of the United States, Japan, Australia and India.

Blinken's comments come ahead of meetings in Alaska on Thursday that will bring together for the first time senior Biden administration officials and their Chinese counterparts to discuss frayed ties between the world's top two economies.

China has denounced what it called US efforts to foment unrest in the region and interfere in what it calls its internal affairs.

In Beijing, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told a regular news briefing that US-Japan ties "shouldn't target or undermine the interests of any third party," and should boost "peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific".

In the statement issued with their Japanese counterparts, Blinken and Austin said, "China's behaviour, where



US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin (L) arm bumps with Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi (2nd L) as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (2nd R) and Japan's Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi (R) look on, at the end of their joint press conference in Tokyo on Tuesday. — **AFP**

Beijing denounces what it called US efforts to foment unrest in the region and interfere in what it calls its internal affairs

inconsistent with the existing international order, presents political, economic, military and technological challenges to the alliance and to the international community."

The two countries committed themselves to oppose coercion and destabilising behaviour towards others in the region that undermines the rules-based international system, they added.

The meeting was held in the "2+2" format with Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi as hosts.

North Korea was in sharp focus after the White House said Pyongyang had rebuffed efforts at dialogue.

Blinken underscored the importance of working closely with Japan and South Korea on the denuclearization of North Korea.

"We have no greater strategic advantage when it comes to North Korea than this alliance," he said. "We approach that challenge as an alliance and we've got to do that if we are going to be effective."

— **Reuters**



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Co. SAOG

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Invitation to attend the Annual Ordinary General Meeting

The Board of Directors of NATIONAL FINANCE {the "Company"} has the pleasure to invite the shareholders to attend the Annual General Meeting, which will be held at 4.00 PM on 30-03-2021, via the electronic platform to hold general meetings which can be assessed through the website of Muscat Clearing & Depository Company (www.mcdc.gov.om). If the quorum requirement for holding the Annual General Meeting is not fulfilled, a second Annual General Meeting shall be held at 3.00 PM on 05-04-2021, to discuss the following agenda:

Ordinary Agendas Annual:

- To consider and approve the report of the Board of Directors' on Company's activity and its financial position for the financial year ended 31st December 2020.
- To consider and approve the report of the Board of Directors' on corporate governance for the financial year ended 31st December 2020.
- To consider the statutory auditors' report and to approve the financial statements and the profit and loss account for the financial year ended 31st December 2020.
- To consider and approve the proposed cash dividend to the shareholders, as on the date of the meeting, amounting to 6 baiza for each share for the financial year ended 31 December 2020.
- To approve the sitting fees paid to Directors' for attending meetings of the Board and sub committees for the previous financial year and to determine the Directors' sitting fees for the upcoming financial year, as per (Annexure '1').
- To consider and approve the proposed Directors Remuneration of RO 150,000 for the financial year ended on 31st December 2020.
- To consider the transactions carried out with related parties during the financial year ended 31st December 2020 (Annexure '2').
- To consider the allocation of an amount of RO 150,000 for Corporate Social Responsibility for the financial year ending 31st December 2021.
- To appoint statutory auditors for the financial year ending 31st December 2021 and determine their fees.
- To elect one (1) Director to fill the vacant seat in the Board of Directors (from the shareholders and/or non-shareholders). Any person wishes to nominate himself/herself to the Board of Director may fill out the nomination form that can be obtained from the Company's head office. The completed form should be delivered to the Company's head office at least 5 working days prior to the Annual Ordinary General Meeting, not later than Monday, 22nd March 2021.

According Company's Articles of Association and General Meeting regulations, through modern technology means issued by the Capital Market Authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

(a) Legal person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person to attend General Meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MCDL.

(b) Voting on any of the items on the agenda begins no more than three days before the date set for the Meeting until the end of the voting process on the day of the Meeting, and in the event that the shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be invalid, and he must re-vote again on the day of the Meeting.

Any questions relating to this Notice should be addressed to Mr. R. Panneerselvam (Telephone No. +968 24470000/24470102 or email: r.panneerselvam@nationalfinance.co.om)

Chairman

Auditors

Legal Advisors

OCTAL

AGENDA OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF OCTAL Holding S.A.O.C

The Board of Directors of **OCTAL Holding S.A.O.C** invites all Shareholders to attend the Annual General Meeting (**AGM**), which will be held on **Wednesday, 31st of March 2021 at 4.30 pm**, through the electronic platform for holding General Meetings, which can be accessed through Muscat Clearing and Depository Company ("**MCDL**") website (**www.mcd.gov.om**). In the event that the quorum for the first AGM is not met, **Tuesday, 6th April 2021 at 4:30 pm**, will be the date of the second meeting, through the aforesaid electronic platform to consider the following agenda:

- To consider and approve the report of the Board of Directors for the financial year ended 31st December 2020. (as per the Annexure 1).
- To consider the Auditor's report and to approve the financial statements (Balance Sheet, Profit and Loss Account) in respect of the Company for the financial year ended 31st December 2020. (as per the Annexure 2).
- To consider and approve the distribution of cash dividend to the shareholders on the date of meeting at 7 % on the paid-up share capital equivalent to 40 baiza for each share, provided the dividend to be paid in instalments and at such times so as to ensure ongoing compliance with the Banking covenants in existence at the time of distribution.
- To consider the transactions entered into by the Company with related parties during the financial year ended 31st December 2020. (as per the Annexure 3).
- To consider and approve transactions that the Company will enter into with related parties during the financial year ending 31st December 2021. (as per Annexure 4).
- To consider and approve the sitting fees of the directors and sub-committees of the Company during the year ended 31 December 2020 and determine the sitting fees for the next financial year. (As per Annexure 5).
- To appoint External Auditors for the financial year ended 31 December 2021 and fix their remuneration.
- To elect the Board of Directors for a new term of office. Any person wishing to be elected to the Board of Directors may fill out the nomination form that can be obtained from the company's head office. The completed form should be delivered to the Company at least 5 days prior to the Annual Ordinary General Meeting, not later than 25th March 2021. The nomination form will not be accepted after this date.

Pursuant to the Company's articles of association and General Meeting regulations, through modern technology means issued by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

A juristic person, exclusively, has the right to authorize a natural person to attend the General Meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MCDL.

Voting on any of the items on the agenda begins no more than three days before the date set for the Meeting until the end of the voting process on the day of the Meeting, and in the event that the shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be invalid, and he must re-vote again on the day of the Meeting.

For further information, please contact
Ms. Zareen Austin on Telephone: +968 22030722

Chairman

Note: The date of the annual general meeting published yesterday, March, 16, 2021, is corrected to the date of the annual general meeting specified in today's publication.

■ LOCKED-DOWN ITALY



A man skates near the Colosseum on the second day of lockdown, as Italy struggles to reduce the Covid-19 infections, in Rome, on Tuesday. — Reuters

2 charged with assaulting officers in Capitol attack



Light catches the security fence around the US Capitol, erected in the wake of the January 6th attack but now scheduled to start being removed, in Washington, on Monday. — Reuters

WASHINGTON: The US Justice Department on Monday charged two men with pepper-spraying three Capitol Police officers, one of whom later died, during the January 6 assault on Congress by Donald Trump supporters trying to overturn his election defeat.

Julian Elie Khater and George Pierre Tanios are facing multiple counts, including assaulting police with a deadly weapon, after investigators said they sprayed at least three officers with an unidentified, but powerful, chemical agent.

One of those officers, Brian Sicknick, was later rushed to a hospital and died the next day.

Khater and Tanios are not charged with killing Sicknick, whose cause of death remains unclear. A law enforcement source familiar with the matter

said it is still too early in the probe to know if Tanios or Khater directly bear any responsibility for Sicknick's death.

According to the complaint, the FBI said the two men "appeared to time the deployment of chemical substances to coincide with other rioters' efforts to forcibly remove the bike rack barriers that were preventing the rioters from moving closer to the Capitol building."

Khater, 32, of State College, Pennsylvania, was arrested as he disembarked from an airplane at Newark Airport in New Jersey. Tanios, 39, of Morgantown, West Virginia, was arrested at his residence in West Virginia.

The two men grew up together in New Jersey, according to the criminal complaint.

— Reuters

Libya's western government hands power to unity team

TRIPOLI: Libya's Fayez al Sarraj, outgoing head of the western-based Government of National Accord, formally handed over power on Tuesday to a new interim executive hoped to unify the divided and war-torn nation.

Sarraj, who has led the UN-recognised GNA since it was set up in 2016, stepped down from the role in a ceremony in Tripoli, one day after the new interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah and a three-member presidency council took the oath of office in parliament.

The new Government of National Unity (GNU), selected through a UN-supported process, is the latest internationally backed bid to end a decade of chaos in the North African nation and unite rival administrations.

Libya descended into conflict after ruler Muammar Gaddafi was toppled and killed in a Nato-backed uprising in 2011, with an array of forces battling to fill the void.

The new administration is hoped to replace both the GNA in Tripoli and a parallel cabinet headquartered in the east, under the de facto control of forces



Libya's Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh, Libya's internationally recognised former Prime Minister Fayez al Sarraj, and Mohammed al Menfi, Head of the Presidency Council, pose for a photo after the handover ceremony in Tripoli, on Tuesday. — Reuters

backing military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

Sarraj gave a brief speech in which he recalled the "endless difficulties" his government had faced.

Those included "the war on terrorism", the failed 2019 offensive by Haftar's forces to seize Tripoli, as well as "foreign interference".

Sarraj and the GNA had never won support of the eastern-based parliament.

A decade after Gaddafi was toppled, oil-rich Libya is divided between rival forces, with an estimated 20,000 mercenaries and foreign fighters still in the country.

In recent years, Turkey propped

up the GNA, while Haftar's administration has drawn on support from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia.

"We are determined to continue the path of reform and everything you started," Dbeibah told Sarraj, before posing for photographs, while an orchestra played the national anthem.

Mohamed al Manfi, who heads the presidency council, thanked the Sarraj government for "all that it was able to accomplish under difficult circumstances."

Dbeibah, a 61-year-old engineer and businessman, was selected on last month by a forum of 75 Libyan delegates at UN-led talks in Switzerland.

Last week parliament approved his choice of cabinet, a government he has said he hopes "will be the government of all Libyans".

Haftar last month offered "the support of the armed forces for the peace process".

Tunisia's president will travel to Libya on Wednesday for the first such visit between the neighbouring countries since 2012, his office announced, in a boost for Libya's new UN-backed administration. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

MANILA

Manila orders minors to stay indoors

The Philippine capital Manila will widen a ban on minors leaving their residences to include youths of up to 18 years old for two weeks starting on Wednesday, tightening coronavirus restrictions in a bid to tackle a new surge of infections. Only those aged 18-65 years old will be allowed out of their homes, the Metro Manila Development Authority said in a statement, citing an agreement among mayors.

The Philippines late last year



started easing one of the world's longest and strictest lockdowns though a rule that anyone under 15 must stay indoors in Manila remained in place. — Reuters

BEIRUT

Lebanon protesters back on streets

Angry protesters used burning tyres to block roads in parts of Beirut on Tuesday as the Lebanese pound crashed past a new milestone in its plunge against the dollar, losing most of its value as the country's financial meltdown worsens. The pound traded at around 15,000 to the dollar and above for the first time on Tuesday, according to market dealers, and has now lost nearly 90 per cent of its value since the crisis started in late 2019.

"We are absolutely fed up, we



are hungry we are finished," one protester yelled.

Lebanon's economic crisis is posing the biggest threat to its stability since the 1975-1990 civil war. — Reuters

GENEVA

Covid origins report postponed: WHO

An international expert team that visited China to investigate the origins of Covid-19 has postponed publishing their report, which will now likely appear next week, the WHO said on Tuesday. "The report is simply not ready," World Health Organization spokesman Christian Lindmeier told reporters.

"What we hear from the technical experts, from the mission members, is that the report most likely will come out now next week," he added.



The highly-anticipated report is expected to examine a range of theories about how the virus first jumped from animals to humans. — AFP

Post-Brexit UK looks to Asia...

CALLUM PATON & JOE JACKSON

Britain unveiled plans on Tuesday to pivot its strategic focus towards Asia, counter Russia and controversially bolster its nuclear stockpile, in one of the biggest overhauls of security, defence and foreign policy since the Cold War era.

The conclusions of the government's so-called Integrated Review, crafted over the past year as London recalibrates its post-Brexit foreign policy, including labelling China a "systemic competitor" that also requires engagement.

The 120-page document — entitled "Global Britain in a Competitive Age" — identifies Russia as the "most acute direct threat to the UK" which poses "the full spectrum" of dangers.

It also notably announces an increase to Britain's nuclear arsenal, reversing a previous commitment to reduce the stockpile to 180 warheads by pledging to increase it to 260 by the end of the decade, "in recognition of the evolving security environment".

"History has shown that democratic

THE 120-PAGE DOCUMENT IDENTIFIES RUSSIA AS THE "MOST ACUTE DIRECT THREAT TO THE UK" WHICH POSES "THE FULL SPECTRUM" OF DANGERS

societies are the strongest supporters of an open and resilient international order," Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote in a foreword to the review.

"To be open, we must also be secure. Protecting our people, our homeland and our democracy is the first duty of any government," he added.

Johnson said that boosting Britain's nuclear deterrent, which is maintained via four nuclear-armed submarines, was part of the UK's biggest programme of investment in defence since the end of the Cold War.

"This will demonstrate to our allies, in Europe and beyond, that they can always count on the UK when it really matters."

The Integrated Review comes as Britain's relations with both Moscow and Beijing have become increasingly strained, on issues ranging from espionage and cyber-attacks to human rights.

The report identifies the Indo-Pacific region — including major Asian powers such as India, Japan and South Korea, as well as emerging economies like Indonesia and Vietnam — as

"critical" to Britain's economy, security and "global ambition to support open societies".

The UK has already applied for partner status at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), while Johnson is due to make his first post-EU visit to India in April.

Despite describing Beijing as a "systemic competitor", the integrated review noted its growing power and international assertiveness were likely to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the decade.

The report concluded that cooperation with China would be vital in tackling various transnational challenges, in particular climate change and biodiversity loss.

"Open, trading economies like the UK will need to engage with China and remain open to Chinese trade and investment," it said, while flagging the need to protect against "practices that have an adverse effect on prosperity and security".

Meanwhile, the review paints a more pessimistic outlook for future relations with Russia. — **AFP**

WRITE FOR US

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

MAKE OR BREAK

Turkey-EU migrant pact at a crossroads

ERGIN HAVA

In September 2015, the image of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi's lifeless body washed ashore in Turkey sent shock waves across the world. Six months later, Turkish and EU leaders inked a migration pact under which Ankara was to receive political and financial benefits in return for tackling migration.

The deal reduced the number of migrants reaching Europe, while Turkey received most of the 6 billion euros (\$7.15 billion) in EU support. However, Brussels did not keep its promises to ease visa regulations and upgrade the customs union.

Five years on, the pact is failing as Turkey struggles with the increased number of migrants while the EU is more divided than ever over asylum policy.

Turkey is hosting 6 million migrants, with nearly 4 million from Syria, its migration authority says. That's 2 million more than in 2016, a heavy burden on a country that only had 60,000 asylum-seekers in 2011, before Syria's civil war broke out.

The pact nearly collapsed last year when thousands of migrants, mostly Afghans, Pakistanis and Iraqis, amassed at the Turkish border with Greece, after Ankara opened its borders for those heading to Europe, fearing more refugees from Syria's Idlib. The border crisis was interrupted by the outbreak of the pandemic.

Now, the pact needs more funding and to be extended to other migrant groups in Turkey, according to Sinem Adar, an associate at the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies in the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).

Future programmes should also support integration as most Syrians are likely to stay in Turkey, she says.

Meanwhile, 2 million irregular migrants in Turkey are a larger concern as most have settled here, says M Murat Erdogan, who directs the Centre for Migration Research (TAGU) at the Turkish-German University in Istanbul.

Some are likely to try to reach Europe rather than face deportation, he says.

The pact will fail if it can not be updated or replaced, says Gerald Knaus of the European Stability Initiative (ESI).

The EU must increase assistance for refugees in Turkey and start taking in more people, Knaus told a webinar of the Istanbul-based Association for Migration Research (GAR).

Otherwise, Ankara could be tempted to allow refugees to cross its European borders as a bargaining chip, says TAGU's Erdogan. The EU, meanwhile, expects Turkey to clamp down on human smugglers and readmit migrants from the Greek islands, an official said last week. — **dpa**

“Two million irregular migrants in Turkey are a larger concern as most have settled here”

M MURAT ERDOGAN
Centre for Migration Research

SEASONAL SPIKES

Biden's immigration policy takes heat as migrant levels soar

PAUL HANDLEY

President Joe Biden faced mounting pressure from Republicans over his handling of a surge in migrants — including thousands of unaccompanied children — arriving at the US-Mexican border.

While successive administrations have dealt with seasonal spikes in migration, Biden's critics claim he has driven the latest uptick by taking a softer stance on the flashpoint issue than his predecessor Donald Trump.

On January 20, his first day in office, Biden scrapped several of Trump's contentious immigration policies, including halting the new construction of a border wall and proposing legislation to create a citizenship pathway for the nearly 11 million people living illegally in the US.

At a bus terminal in the border town of Brownsville late on Sunday, a Guatemalan woman said she had crossed the border illegally after her husband, who already is in the US, told her things may be simpler under Biden.

"My husband told me to come at this time," said Rubia Tabora, a 25-year-old mother of one.

"At home there are no jobs, no money"

In February, the US Customs and Border Protection agency (CBP) arrested about 100,000 people at the southern border — including nearly 9,500 unaccompanied children — a 28-per cent jump over January.

Republican Congressman Kevin McCarthy of California, who leads his party in the House of Representatives, told reporters last week the "crisis at the border is spiralling out of control."

"It's entirely caused by the actions



A migrant child plays with his own shadow inside the office of the Center for Integral Attention to Migrants after being deported with his mother from the United States, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. — **Reuters**

ON JANUARY 20, HIS FIRST DAY IN OFFICE, BIDEN SCRAPPED SEVERAL OF TRUMP'S CONTENTIOUS IMMIGRATION POLICIES

of this administration," said McCarthy, who was planning a news conference later Monday in the Texas border town of El Paso.

Biden took office promising a more humane immigration policy, but some migrant advocacy groups say the new Democratic president's decisions are luring undocumented travellers.

In line with a pandemic-rooted policy adopted by Trump, who cracked down on immigration both legal and illegal as part of his "America First" doctrine, the Biden administration is deporting most of the undocumented people who arrive at the southern border.

But unlike Trump, Biden has opted

against expelling minors who show up unaccompanied and are filling shelters set up to hold them, with limited capacity because of the coronavirus crisis.

The Biden administration over the weekend ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to support an effort to temporarily house thousands of children who crossed the US-Mexico border alone.

While migrant adults and families continue to be sent back to Mexico when they are caught, unaccompanied children are being processed and get help resettling with US relatives. — **Reuters**

sport



Al Oruba lift second division league title

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

Al Oruba lifted the title of the 2020-2021 second division handball league championship after beating Al Suwaiq 27-21 in the concluding match of the league at indoor hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex on Monday night.

With the triumph, the Sur-based team confirmed their presence in the top-tier handball

league in the next season accompanied by Al Shabab who booked the second slot after finishing as runners-up. Al Ittihad were third and they will meet the last-placed team in the first division league to decide the last spot for the first division league.

Al Sharqiyah South Governorate team had played eleven matches and gained 31 points from 10 victories and suffered one loss. Al Shabab

came in second with 30 points while Al Ittihad finished third with 29 points.

Nizwa, Qurayat and Ibri were positioned in the fourth, fifth and sixth places respectively.

Twelve teams took part in the 2020-21 second division handball league championship including Al Khabourah, Saham, Al Nasr, Dhofar, Sohar, Al Suwaiq, Ibri, Qurayat, Nizwa, Al Ittihad, Al Shabab and Al Oruba.

After completion of the

concluding round match, Nasr bin Hamood al Wahaibi, Chairman of Muscat club and chief guest, awarded the medals and trophies to the top placed teams in presence of Dr Said al Shahri, Chairman of Oman Handball Association (OHA). Al Oruba team players received gold medals, the league shield and cash prize of RO 3,000.

Al Shabab players got the silver medals with a cash prize of RO 2,000, while Al Ittihad

players received bronze medals and cash prize of RO 1,000.

MUSCAT TOP FIRST DIVISION

On the other hand, the first division handball league championship is under way and Muscat are topping the league table with 12 points while the closest opponents are Ahli Sidab with nine points.

Muscat beat Seeb 37-27 on Sunday in the fourth round. On

Friday, Ahli Sidab defeated Seeb 29-23, while Muscat registered a tough win over Majees 25-24.

On Wednesday, Seeb will take on Oman club while Ahli Sidab will face Muscat in another match. Both matches will be held at the indoor hall at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

The first game will start at 5 pm while the second fixture will begin at 7 pm.

The league will conclude on April 11.

Fifa ‘should consider’ holding World Cup every two years

MANCHESTER, England: Arsene Wenger says Fifa should consider holding the World Cup and Euros every two years and that a review of the international match calendar will consider compressed qualifiers and enforced breaks for players.

The former Arsenal manager is Chief of Global Football Development at world soccer’s governing body and a close adviser to President Gianni Infantino.

Wenger said the current four year wait for a World Cup is unfair to players and the focus should be on “competitions of

meaning”, including the European Championships. “If you look at the teams in the World Cups usually the average age is 27/28. That’s why, because the World Cup, is every four years there are very few chances to win it again because when they go back to the next World Cup they are 32/33.

“That’s why maybe we should organise the World Cup every two years”, he told broadcasters beIN SPORTS in an interview.

“Kick all the rest out. Organise only competitions of meaning and kick all the parallel competitions out of the game. People must understand what is at stake and

“**Kick all the rest out. Organise only competitions of meaning and kick all the parallel competitions out of the game. People must understand what is at stake and only have games with meaning**”

ARSENE WENGER
Adviser to Fifa chief Infantino



only have games with meaning”, he added, having been critical in the past of Uefa’s new Nations League tournament.

The Frenchman said one idea on the agenda, for the review which is due to start this month, is to reduce the amount of international breaks taken from domestic football for qualifiers for major tournaments.

“I would say that’s one of the solutions we will discuss is to compact the qualifiers... instead of going away in October, November, September, March, June, we regroup the qualifiers all in one month or two quadruples

in October and in February but at least the players can dedicate that time to the club from March until June, and we would gain four dates”, he said.

Any changes to the international match calendar would have to be passed by Fifa’s ruling council and possibly also a full congress of all federations.

Wenger said whatever calendar was agreed had to include a clear break for players. “I believe it’s needed, with the physical resources that the players need today, it’s important that you have four weeks holiday”, he said. — Reuters



8-year ban for UAE cricketers found guilty of corruption

UAE's Mohammed Naveed and Shaiman Anwar were both handed eight-year bans from all cricket by the ICC on Tuesday after being found guilty of corruption by an independent anti-graft tribunal. The bans are backdated to October 16, 2019, for attempting to fix matches at the ICC T20 World Cup Qualifier 2019.



Zidane says Ronaldo return to Real Madrid 'possible'

Zinedine Zidane opened the door to Cristiano Ronaldo returning to Real Madrid on Monday, admitting a comeback is "possible" for the striker. Asked by Sky Italia if there is any truth to rumours that Ronaldo could rejoin Madrid, Zidane said: "It's possible, it's possible." "We know Cristiano", Zidane added.

Shapovalov makes winning debut in Dubai

DUBAI: Canadian world No 12 Denis Shapovalov plans on competing in fewer tournaments this season if the tennis tour continues to operate under strict coronavirus bubble conditions for the players.

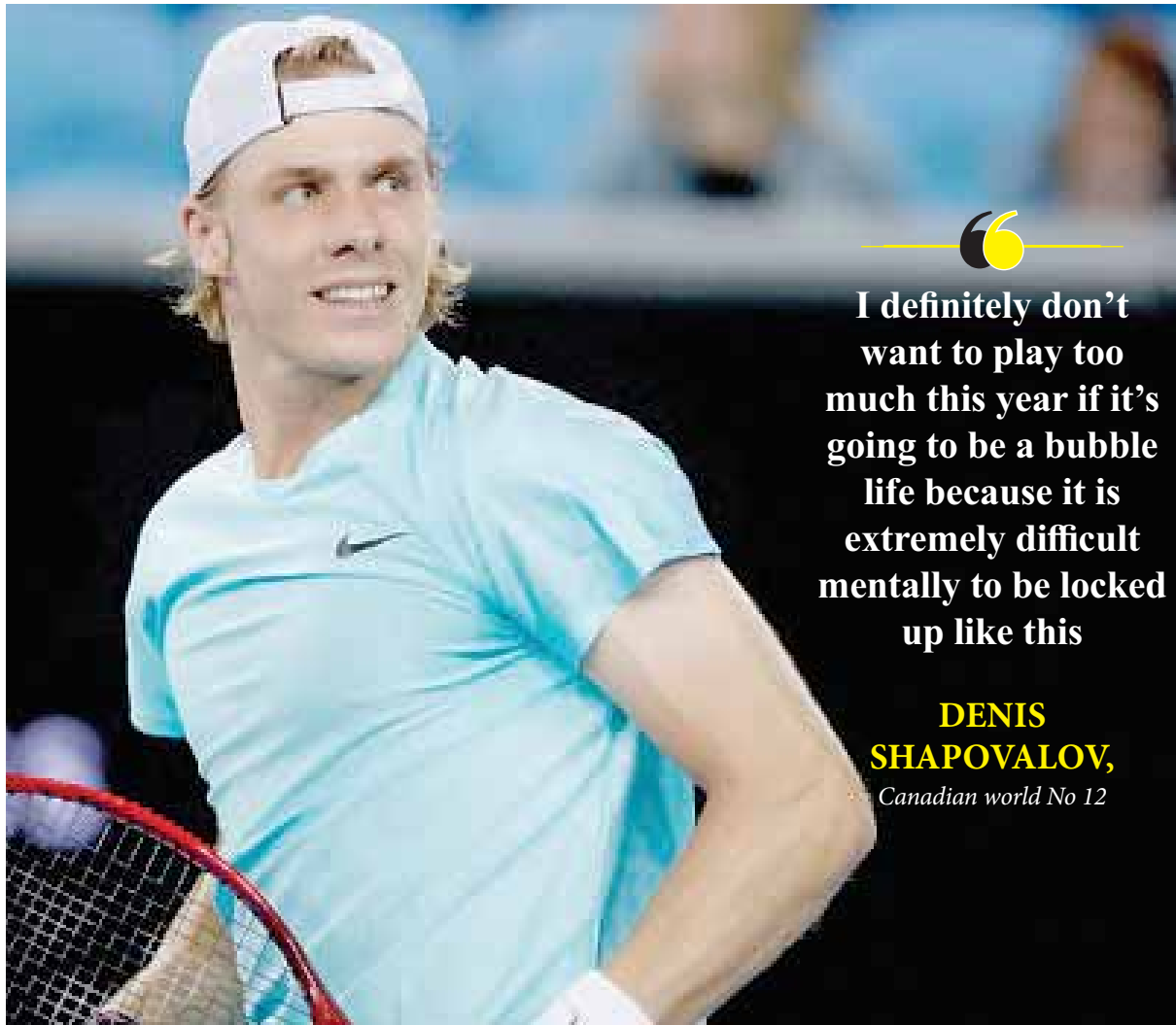
Shapovalov, who enjoyed a winning debut in Dubai thanks to a 6-1, 6-3 second-round success over German big-server Jan-Lennard Struff on Tuesday, says being confined to a hotel room at every tournament due to the Covid-19 restrictions in place can take a mental toll on the players.

"I definitely don't want to play too much this year if it's going to be a bubble life because it is extremely difficult mentally to be locked up like this", the 21-year-old told reporters in Dubai.

"Of course it's amazing to play, but as the weeks go on, you kind of lose that passion for tennis and a lot of players are struggling with that. So we're trying to take the approach of minimising that as much as possible and just enjoying every match that I do go out and play this year."

The third-seeded Shapovalov, who made the quarterfinals in Doha last week, fired 26 winners and just six unforced errors against Struff and next faces Polish No 13 seed Hubert Hurkacz.

Struff struggled on serve early on which helped Shapovalov



I definitely don't want to play too much this year if it's going to be a bubble life because it is extremely difficult mentally to be locked up like this

DENIS SHAPOVALOV,
Canadian world No 12

speed to a 5-0 lead inside 20 minutes. The young Canadian wrapped up a flawless opening set with an ace, dropping just one point behind his first serve along the way.

A break of serve in game five

gave Shapovalov the advantage in the second set and he secured the win — just his second in six meetings with Struff — on the 61-minute mark.

Over on Court 2, surprise Australian Open semifinalist

Aslan Karatsev, who received a wildcard into the Dubai main draw this week, upset No12 seed Dan Evans of Great Britain 6-4, 4-6, 6-4. The Russian will take on Italian Lorenzo Sonego in round three. — AFP



Ibra returns to Sweden squad after 5-year gap

STOCKHOLM: Zlatan Ibrahimovic will return to Sweden's squad after an almost five-year hiatus to play in World Cup qualifiers at the end of March, head coach Janne Andersson said on Tuesday.

The player, known for his not-so-humble ways, also announced his own return, posting a picture of himself on Instagram in the Swedish team kit with the caption "The return of the God".

The highly-anticipated announcement comes just three months before the European Championship in June-July.

The 39-year-old AC Milan striker retired from the Swedish squad after the 2016 European Championship, with 116 caps and 62 international goals.

Media had speculated about Ibrahimovic's possible return to the national team, but the Swedish Football Association had refused to comment until Tuesday, when he was announced among the players selected for the qualifiers

against Georgia on March 25 and Kosovo on March 28, as well as a friendly against Estonia on March 31. Ibrahimovic has been nursing a muscle injury lately but hopes to return to the pitch on Thursday when Milan face his former club, Manchester United, in the Europa League round of 16.

'NOT DONE YET'

After being awarded Sweden's Footballer of the Year award for an astonishing 12th time in late November, he said that he missed playing for the team. "The one who does not miss it, he has already finished his career. And I have not finished my career", he told Swedish daily *Aftonbladet*.

Ibrahimovic and coach Janne Andersson then met for talks.

Andersson told reporters Tuesday: "I think we'll be a better team with Zlatan, that's why he was selected."

Andersson said he would announce the squad for the Euro in May. — AFP

DG of Special Education win football tourney



MUSCAT: The Directorate-General of Special Education and Continuing Education team won the second friendly football championship cup 2021 organised for employees of the Ministry of Education.

The closing ceremony of the tournament was held under the auspices of Dr Ali al Shukaili, Director-General of the Directorate-General of Private Schools, with some of Director-Generals and employees at the Ministry of Education. The tournament took place at Al Saad International School in Muscat Governorate on Monday with the strict precautionary measures against the pandemic.

The tournament was organised

by the School Sports Committee of the Directorate-General of Private Schools from February 15 to March 15.

The six Directorate-Generals participating in this tournament were divided into two groups. The first group included the Directorate-General of Private Schools, the Directorate-General of Curricula and the Department of Customer Services, while the second group included the Directorate-General of Special Education, the Directorate-General of Scouting and Guidance and the Ministry's Security Office. The winning team of the Directorate-General of Special Education received the cup after winning the final with Musaab al

Maawali scoring the winner.

The auspices of the ceremony honoured the top three teams and the judges and sponsors of the championship, as well as the Sultan Qaboos school and Al Saad International School for hosting the tournament, the supporting individuals and members of the organising Committee.

Mohammed al Raeisi from the Directorate-General of Scouts and Guides received the best player award, Mahmoud al Waili from the Directorate-General of Private School received the best guard award and Saud al Rawahi from the Directorate-General of Special Education and Continuous Education received the best administrator award.

OWCA take on ISC in Women's League final

MUSCAT: Oman Women's Cricket Academy (OWCA) take on Indian Social Club (ISC) Women in Wednesday's final of Women's League after handing PSM Women a 125-run drubbing in the eliminator at OC Turf 1 in Amerat on Monday.

ISC topped the group standings with 8 points without losing any of the four games they played, winning a direct entry to the final, while TM Done-sponsored OWCA ended up second with 6 points, winning three before thrashing PSM in the eliminator to reach the final, which will be played at the same venue at 3 pm on Wednesday.

Led by Vaishali Jesrani, OWCA have made a big impression in their very first season, improving with each game as the tournament progressed. Opener Nayan Anil has been the batting star of the tournament, scoring 175 runs in five games, including an unbeaten 102 off 70 balls against PSM on Monday.

Batting first, OWCA posted a robust 146 for 4 on the board thanks to Nayan's brilliant knock that included 17 boundaries.

None of PSM batswomen reached the double figures as the



Nayan Anil and Shreya Dhuri of OWCA

whole side was dismissed for a dismal 21 that included 10 extras. Shreya Dhuri bowled a splendid

spell taking 5 for 10 in four overs, taking her tally of wickets to 12 in 5 games, followed by Payal Kanojia of ISC who picked up 11 in 4 matches. Shreya's partner Saya Channa was quite impressive too, conceding only 6 runs in 4 overs while also taking a wicket.

Fizza Javed of PSM, second behind Nayan in runs aggregate, ended the tournament with 154 runs in 3 games. Priyanka Mendonca of ISC was third with 126 runs in 4 games. She also claimed 8 wickets in the group games.



ATLETICO LOOK TO SUAREZ FOR INSPIRATION IN CHELSEA RESCUE MISSION

16
GOALS FOR SUAREZ
IN 21 GAMES

Atletico Madrid's hopes of coming back against Chelsea in the Champions League on Wednesday may depend on Luis Suarez returning to form on his return to the country where he became one of the best in the world.

Atletico trail 1-0 after Olivier Giroud's bicycle kick lit up an uneventful first game at the Wanda Metropolitano last month and handed Chelsea a crucial advantage heading into this week's second leg.

And if they are to reach the quarterfinals with another upset like the one that knocked out Liverpool last year, Atletico are likely to need Suarez back to his best at Stamford Bridge. The Uruguayan's form has matched his team's, with a slight downturn in recent weeks perhaps inevitable after such an impressive first half of the season.

Suarez scored 16 goals in his first 21 games while Atletico lost only one of their first 20 in the league, when a first La Liga title since 2014 seemed firmly within their grasp.

Yet they have won only three of their last eight and Suarez has scored only twice in that time, even if those two goals have come in the last three, against Real Madrid and Athletic Bilbao.

'NATURAL-BORN STRIKER'
Certainly, there can be no room for complacency for Chelsea, who know only too well the damage Suarez can do after his hugely successful four seasons for Liverpool, when he scored 82 goals in 133 appearances.

"He is a natural-born striker," said Chelsea coach Thomas Tuchel before the first leg. "He has that certain mentality that only strikers have. This mentality to show his will, intensity and anger to score and score and score and is never satisfied. What a mentality, what a player."

Tuchel is such a fan he even tried to sign the 34-year-old for Paris Saint-Germain when it became clear he was on his way out of Barcelona last summer.

1
LOSS FOR ATLETICO
IN THEIR FIRST 20 MATCHES

"There was a possibility," Tuchel said. "We heard the rumours he was about to leave Barcelona and who cannot be interested to sign one of the best strikers in world football, in history and the present?"

"We tried our luck. We did not make it, he chose to stay in Spain with Atletico and again he proves his quality."

Suarez has history with Chelsea too, after one of his three biting incidents happened while playing against them for Liverpool in 2013, with Branislav Ivanovic that time the victim.

But without fans in the stadium and with a fresh crop of players, Chelsea will be focused completely on thwarting Suarez's threat to their goal while the striker will be hoping to end his own six-year wait for a Champions League goal away from home.

"For all the competitions, not just the Champions League, his presence gives us experience and leadership," said Atletico coach Diego Simeone last month.

"He brings confidence to our team and a lot of tension for our opponents because history shows this is a player who has a gift around the goal."

Suarez's 18 goals in 29 games this season means his switch to Atletico from Barcelona last summer has already been a triumph but there will be disappointment now if he does not end the season with a trophy. Despite their dip, Atletico remain four points ahead of Barca in La Liga and it might be that a defeat to Chelsea could help their La Liga ambitions, with the Catalans being knocked out of the Champions League last week by Paris Saint-Germain.

Suarez will not relent. "My way has always been to be competitive, always wanting to prove myself," he said earlier this month.

"To come to a team like Atletico that hasn't won titles for a long time, to be able to win something is definitely one of the wishes I have."

— AFP



business

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Pact signed to facilitate industrial investment



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion signed on Tuesday an agreement with the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) for establishing a framework for cooperation to facilitate investment-related procedures, licences and approvals for the investors and business owners through Madayn's Masar Service Centres in the various industrial cities.

The signing ceremony was attended by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, while the agreement was signed by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, and Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, Chief Executive Officer of Madayn.

Ibtisam bint Ahmed al Farooji, Director General of Investor Services at Madayn,

stated that this agreement comes along the lines of the efforts undertaken by the two bodies to attract and localise investments, simplify investment procedures, strengthen cooperation in common competencies, and consequently contribute to achieving comprehensive and sustainable economic and social development in coordination with the relevant bodies.

"In this regard, Madayn established Masar Service Centre to deliver a variety of services in a fast and effective manner to achieve an attractive investment environment for local and foreign investors. With this in mind, efforts are being made to offer comprehensive services within Madayn's industrial cities including road, electricity, water and sewage networks," Al Farooji said.

Under the agreement, all investment-related services offered by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion will be provided through Masar Service Centres in Madayn's various industrial cities.

Omantel foils over 120 million cyber-attacks in 2020

RESILIENT NETWORKS: Signalling attacks, distributed denial-of-service (DDOS), web application attacks, and user profiling, endpoint and behavioural incidents among a flood of threats tackled by operator last year

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The majority state-owned Omantel, the Sultanate's biggest integrated telecom services provider, says it thwarted tens of millions of different types of cyber-attacks across its nationwide network last year.

The biggest threat — in volumetric terms — was posed by web application attacks where hackers exploit known vulnerabilities in web apps primarily to steal data or engage in other types of cybercriminal activity.

In 2019, web application attacks accounted for nearly half of all successful data breaches globally, say experts.

According to Omantel, a staggering 123 million web application attacks were prevented across its entire network last year. "Omantel's resilient security infrastructure and policies have enabled us to achieve incident-free services and an incessant network uptime throughout the year.

Omantel is the key enabler



The biggest threat — in volumetric terms — was posed by web application attacks where hackers exploit known vulnerabilities in web apps primarily to steal data or engage in other types of cybercriminal activity.

in supporting the Sultanate to remain the third global best in diffusing cyber-attacks," the publicly listed mobile operator stated in the Management Discussion & Analysis report issued together with the 2020 financial report earlier this week.

In addition, the operator's corporate security infrastructure thwarted 435K signalling attacks — attempted hacks that take advantage of a weakness in the design of Signalling System 7 (SS7) networks to enable data theft, eavesdrop on communications, text interception and location tracking.

Furthermore, Omantel says it fended off over 7,925 high intensity distributed denial-of-

service (D-DOS) attacks.

D-DOS attacks are malicious attempts to disrupt the normal traffic of a targeted server, service or network by overwhelming the target or its surrounding infrastructure with a flood of Internet traffic.

Adding to the tidal wave of cyber-attacks mounted on the operator last year were in excess of 24k user profiling, endpoint and behavioural incidents — all of which were successfully tackled, it said.

Omantel credited its success to "proactive steps" it had taken to ensure that customer data, information and logical assets remain protected from the high vulnerability of cybercrimes.

"As new circumstances evolved from the pandemic, Omantel revisited its Business Continuity programme and incident response plans especially to protect critical elements, ramped up work-from-home and remote access capabilities, prioritize investments in our network security, ramped up our SOC (Security Operations Centre) infrastructure protection and implemented data leakage prevention practices across the organisation," it said.

The company also expanded its D-DOS threat detection and mitigation capacity to protect the operator and its customers against large scale volumetric threats (of up to 40 Gbps on premise and 14Tbps through cloud), it stated.

Commodities rally positive for GCC economies

KEY TRENDS: Rise in oil prices reflects not only demand normalisation but investor hedges against inflation, says expert

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

The commodity sector, including oil, has been rallying since early November on the back of a vaccine-led optimism about the demand outlook, but investors should also watch for short term risks that may halt the bull commodity market, according to Saxo Bank's Head of Commodity Strategy, Ole Hansen.

Speaking during an online briefing on the prospects for a new commodity supercycle hosted by Saxo Bank, Hansen said that the biggest risk of inflation in a decade



is creating a paper demand from investors looking to commodities as hedges against inflation.

Oil prices are also rallying on an expectation that people around the world will start travelling and consuming more going forward - as restrictions concerning the Covid-19 pandemic hopefully lift as vaccination programmes are rolled out - which will drive significant demand for oil.

"Tangible assets with a strong fundamental backdrop like oil copper and other commodities are in huge demand right now. Rising bond yields have triggered an emerging shift from momentum stocks, such as those from tech companies, back into value stocks which commodities producers are a part of." The rally in oil prices is generally seen as positive for GCC

economies which have been suffering from the impacts of the Covid-19 lockdowns such as lack of tourism.

"The increased oil-based revenues will help to give local economies some breathing space during a difficult economic time, but governments must not be complacent," said Hansen.

"It's important to remember that the green transformation

The increased oil-based revenues will help to give local economies some breathing space during a difficult economic time, but governments must not be complacent

OLE HANSEN
Saxo Bank's Head of Commodity Strategy

such as the move to electric cars, was initially kicked-off when oil prices reached in excess of \$100 a barrel. It was at this point that consumers realised the green alternatives were no longer excessively expensive."

"If we go through a period

for a number of years where oil prices rise to be higher than previously expected this may further incentivize the green transformation and the weaning off fossil fuels."

Hansen also highlighted the increasing risks of conflict within Opec+ nations saying that elevated prices depend on sticking together. Brewing discontent between the two nations put this at risk. Likewise, Chinese demand is potentially not going to continue the same trajectory as it has in recent months.

China has utilised low prices to stock up on oil and this could mean demand may not be as strong in the next period. "This oil rally is one that has multiple legs and some of these legs may be chopped off creating short term risks and short-term adversity. However, I am not yet going to jump off the bull wagon," said Hansen.

Increase in UK manufacturing amid Covid-19 restrictions

The UK manufacturing sector has fought its way through the latest lockdown which began in February and climbed back to its highest levels, new figures have shown. The IHS Markit/CIPS Purchasing Managers' Index rose to 55.1 last month, up from 54.1 in January. Any reading above 50 shows growth.

Looking back for a comparison, the manufacturing PMI rose to its highest level in over three years in December, mainly reflecting a boost from last-minute preparations before the end of the Brexit transition period.

The figure, a 37-month high, beat economists' forecasts with a reading of 57.3 for the final month of 2020. It marked a considerable improvement from the previous month, when the index stood at 55.6. It was an increase for the seventh straight month as factories recovered from the impact of the second national lockdown.

However, a combination of supply chain disruption as a result of the UK's departure from the EU and cost pressure due to material shortage kept

a lid on output growth. New orders expanded following a slight decrease in January, as domestic demand improved and new export business inched higher.

Rob Dobson, Director at IHS Markit, warned that

manufacturing constraints look set to remain for the months to come. "The UK manufacturing sector was again hit by supply chain issues, Covid-19 restrictions, stalling exports, input shortages and rising cost pressures in February.

"Look past the headline PMI and the survey reveals near stagnant production, widespread shipping and port delays and confusion following the end of the Brexit transition period", he said. Adding: "With current constraints likely to continue for the foreseeable future, pressure on prices and output volumes may remain a feature during the coming months".

In the Eurozone, manufacturing growth jumped to a three-year high of 57.9, up



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Head of manufacturing at accountants BDO, Richard Austin, said that the contrast between the UK and EU's performance was illustrative of the problems Brexit has caused for supply chains. "While the rise in the UK's manufacturing PMI is encouraging, sentiment is notably lower than in major Eurozone economies which have reported the fastest growth in manufacturing for three years", he said.

"While the vaccine roll-out is faster in the UK than in mainland Europe, this would suggest that Brexit frictions are proving challenging."

Austin added: "What manufacturers needed was a targeted tax policy which

from 54.1 in January.

A surge in demand helped the measure to one of the highest levels in its history, though also resulted in a shortage of raw materials and a spike in input costs.

supports a green economic recovery through the adoption of new technology and digital transformation. Without the right investment conditions, the UK manufacturing sector risks falling behind international competitors."

The export of British goods to the EU fell by more than two-fifths in January, prompting questions of Brexit plans.

Latest figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that the overall export of goods from the UK to the European Union plummeted by more than 40 per cent, or £5.6 bn. Imports from the EU also slumped by £6.6 bn.

The falls in imports and exports are the largest since records began in 1997, the ONS said, with the export of food and live animals to the EU hit particularly hard.

The export of livestock dropped 64 per cent in January alone. Shadow minister for the Cabinet Office, Rachel Reeves, said: "Businesses have been appealing to the Government to start listening to the problems they've been facing, but they've been left out in the cold."

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

Bank Muscat launches 'first of its kind' Floosi accounts

MUSCAT: In line with its commitment to financial inclusion and provision of banking facilities to different segments of society, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, has announced the launch of a new Floosi account for youth aged 15-17.

The new card, which is available for both Omanis and residents was launched after feedback from many bank customers indicated the need for this new product catering to this demographic segment.

The Floosi account aims to educate youth early on the importance of sound financial management. When they grow up, their acquired savings account will contribute to a secure future and encourage them to make it a regular habit in their lives.

Speaking about the new launch, Abdullah bin Tamman al Mashani (pictured), DGM — Institutional Sales and Product Development, Bank Muscat, said: "The new Floosi account comes with some great offers, special events, and some opportunities for our customers to win some great prizes.

Parents will be happy to know that the new account has been designed keeping in mind the safety of their children and will



help them learn the basics of sound financial management."

The Floosi debit card is subject to the parameters mandated by the Central Bank of Oman and comes with a daily limit of RO 50 per transaction and a monthly cumulative limit of RO 200 for Point of Sale (PoS), e-commerce transactions and ATM withdrawals.

To apply for a Floosi account, minors must visit their nearest branch along with their parent or legal guardian and submit their application and copies of important documents like their National ID card (for Omani citizens) or Resident Card and Passport (for expatriates).

The parent/guardian will be the authorised signatory and must sign the deal slip on behalf of the minor. Floosi accounts can be converted into Shababi accounts when they turn 18 years, following which they can operate the account independently.

Toyota launches all-new Corolla Cross SUV in Oman

At the first-ever, Toyota online launch event, Saud Bahwan Automotive, unveiled the much-awaited new member of the Toyota family. The all-new 2021 Corolla Cross.

The exciting online event gave visitors a fantastic opportunity to connect and view the proceeding through Toyota Oman's social media channels on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

According to a spokesperson from Toyota Oman, "We wanted our customers all across Oman to get a glimpse of Toyota's newest addition to the family — the all-new Corolla Cross. We knew the challenges associated with the unique situation that we all are in.

But even though we were apart, we wanted our customers to be present and a part of this event. The online event offered customers an opportunity to conveniently experience the benefits of digital technology while staying up-to-date with all the happenings at their favourite brand. All from the comfort of their home. Or wherever they are."

Raising the bar on the levels of excitement was the Chief Engineer, of the all-new Corolla Cross, Daizo Kameyama, who joined the event via a special video message.

He said, "The concept of the all-new Corolla Cross was 'Corolla Meets SUV'. The Corolla is a mass-market car that throughout its history has remained ahead of its times. The Corolla series has become a best-seller with cumulative sales of about 48 million cars in more than 150 countries worldwide.

It was inevitable and natural that Toyota would offer an SUV model that retains the line's affordability. The most remarkable characteristics of the Corolla Cross are premium feel and utility that go beyond expectations. We are confident in the appeal of this SUV's stylish, powerful appearance. Which was designed to



evoke 'Urban Toughness', particularly its wide stance."

Evolved from the popular Corolla that is loved by the world, the Corolla Cross is a compact yet comfortable SUV. It combines key elements like strength and functionality taking centre stage with its stunning looks, high ground clearance, roomy interiors and occupant focused detailing.

The all-new member of the Corolla family is built from the ground up with a TNGA platform, to encourage you to ascend to new heights. And to 'live elevated'. Sporting a bold profile, the Corolla Cross

is powered to amplify arrivals.

With a 1.8L engine paired to an electronically controlled CVT transmission. This hybrid electric vehicle produces dynamic acceleration and a world-class fuel efficiency. A wide and tough stance is emphasised by the front grille resulting in a mature front expression.

Together with the bumper, the double trapezoid form expresses a bold and stable design. Angular and wrap around design of the headlamps integrated with daytime running lights, flow outwards from the grille.

Highlighting its dynamic looks and

bolder stance. Sleek defined lines run along the side, culminating at the front of an aerodynamic cabin exuding a sophisticated impression. A muscular wheel arch adds to the sturdy looking lower body.

A comfortable driving experience is made possible by TNGA platform and is complemented by the large 17" alloy wheels. The solid forms of rear fenders are fused to the body, contrasting with the aerodynamically tapered cabin, which expresses an imposing stance.

The rear spoiler not only contributes to vehicle performance but also increases the appeal of exterior styling.

The Corolla Cross doesn't simply provide enough luggage space, but also achieves a lower luggage compartment opening making it easy to load and unload luggage.

A smart and push start system allows you the freedom of just getting into your car and driving away. Consistent with its attractive and sophisticated exterior, the Corolla Cross has a well-detailed and spacious interior. That brings families together on every journey.

Slim seatback gives adequate legroom for backseat passengers. The thin pillars and rear quarter window add to the roomier atmosphere of the Corolla Cross. The large rear door openings are a welcome feature. Ensuring passengers get in or out of the vehicle without any difficulty. 60-40 split rear seat offers for more luggage space in case the need arises.

Framed by the optitron meters, a 4.2" TFT Multi information display puts all the data you need at eye level. The upward protruding type 7" Display Audio System unit with T-Link connectivity matches a vibrant instrument panel. The Corolla Cross provides a safe and secure feeling to all occupants with a range of safety features.

Including airbags for driver and front passenger, anti-lock braking system, vehicle stability control for safer driving experiences. And rear view camera and rear parking sensors to allow the driver to easily reverse in to a parking spot.

The Corolla Cross with its bold design, powerful performance and advanced technology is built to maximise experience and to encourage customers to Live Elevated.

Those wishing to catch up on the most happening digital launch event, that they missed, can view the event on Toyota Oman social media channels.

The all-new Corolla Cross Compact SUV is now on display at the Toyota showrooms. For any further details and to ascertain availability of stocks, please visit your nearest Toyota showroom.

Investors value China's Ant Group at over \$200 billion after IPO halt

HONG KONG: Some of Ant Group's global investors have valued the Chinese fintech firm at over \$200 billion based on its 2020 performance, said people with knowledge of the matter, offering a more sober estimate after the shelving of its IPO and forced restructuring.

The number is about a third above Ant's valuation after its last fundraising in 2018 when it emerged as the world's most-valuable unlisted tech firm, yet is far below the \$315 billion it touted for what was set to be the world's largest IPO.

Investor hopes for a huge windfall crashed when regulatory scrutiny scuppered the \$37 billion initial public offering (IPO) days ahead of Ant's November listing.

Regulator-mandated restructuring as a financial rather than tech firm has since made some more conservative with their analysis as the former typically carry lower valuations, sources and analysts said.

Ant's business as of the October-December quarter was little affected by regulatory scrutiny, an investor said. Still, the Alibaba Group Holding Ltd affiliate's revised valuation and listing timeline must wait until it finalises a revamp plan.

Investors' revised estimates of Ant's valuation, which will determine their returns, are reported here for the first time. Warburg Pincus LLC valued Ant at about \$220 billion at year-end based on 2020 earnings and comparable company analysis,



A woman is seen working at the front desk reception of Ant Group's office in Beijing. — Reuters

The Hangzhou-based financial technology giant was regarded as a tech firm in 2018 when it raised \$14 billion at a valuation of about \$150 billion in the world's largest single fundraising

said two of the people.

Early last year, the US private equity firm sold part of its stake for \$90 million at a \$190 billion valuation in private trade, other sources said.

Another investor said its estimate, based on Ant's latest financial figures, was not very different from that of Warburg. Ant is changing its corporate structure to that of a financial holding firm following regulatory

pressure to subject it to rules similar to those for banks.

The Hangzhou-based financial technology giant was regarded as a tech firm in 2018 when it raised \$14 billion at a valuation of about \$150 billion in the world's largest single fundraising.

Investors included private equity firms Warburg, Carlyle Group Inc, General Atlantic and Silver Lake Partners LP, plus Singapore sovereign wealth

fund GIC Pte Ltd and existing shareholders Boyu Capital and Primavera Capital Group.

At its IPO pricing, Ant's valuation soared to about \$315 billion, or over 31 times its forecast 2021 net profit. With the earnings impact of the revamp unknown, one investor said it valued Ant at about the same as the 2018 fundraising. Another said it marked its Ant investment at cost, meaning it does not see any return for the time being.

It is unclear if and how global investors in particular will be able to monetise their investment.

— Reuters

PRESS RELEASE

NBO WINS THIRD CONSECUTIVE AWARD FOR MOBILE APP FROM INTL BUSINESS MAGAZINE

Continuing to pioneer modern banking in the Sultanate, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has been given the award for 'Best Mobile Banking App Oman 2021' from International Business Magazine.

It's the third consecutive year the bank has been awarded by the Dubai-based publication, which recognises companies who are class-leaders in their respective fields.

As the pinnacle of its digital

transformation, the bank's innovative mobile app continues to evolve, offering its customers a host of smart solutions that make their lives easier.

Abdul Karim al Hinai (pictured), Deputy General Manager – Chief Transformation Officer at NBO, said, "We're delighted to have been honoured once again with this prestigious award, which is a testament to our ability to keep up with the changing trends of the market and our customers' needs."



DATA2CLOUD EXPANDS CAPACITY WITH FACILITY AT NEW OOREDOO DATA CENTRE

Celebrating its latest milestone as a digital leader,

data2cloud, an Ooredoo subsidiary, has expanded its operations with a new state-of-the-art facility.

Monther bin Hamad al Maamari, CEO at data2cloud, said, "Adding to our existing Data Centre in Samayil, we are delighted to be expanding with a unique digital facility that will enable us to take our services to the next level. Conveniently located and backed by Ooredoo's reliable network, the new data centre is helping us stay aligned with our customers' needs while supporting the Sultanate on its digital transformation journey."



CHANGAN CS95: A SEVEN-SEAT 4WD SUV ENSURES SOPHISTICATED LUXURY AND SUPERIOR COMFORT



Changan's high-performance full-size SUV CS95 is catching the attention of auto enthusiasts in Oman. The seven-seater SUV 4WD which amplifies driving experience with sophisticated luxury and superior comfort has been designed to stir the driving emotions.

Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment LLC recently announced a partnership with leading international automotive group Changan Automobile Co Ltd to bring its range of passenger vehicles to Oman including Changan CS95.

News Corp inks Australia Facebook deal, signalling truce

SYDNEY: Rupert Murdoch's News Corp reached a content-supply deal with Facebook Inc in Australia, the companies said on Tuesday, a step toward settling a dispute that saw the social media giant briefly shut down thousands of pages in the country.

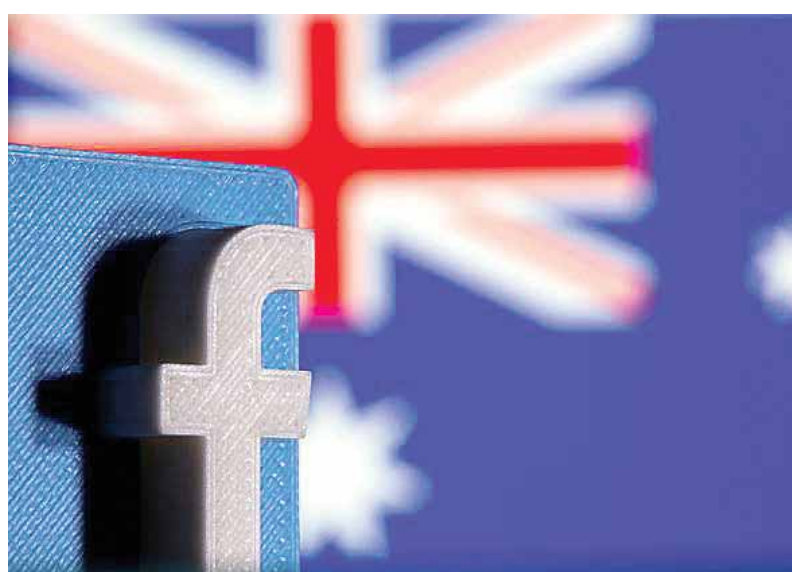
The agreement, terms of which were not disclosed, makes News Corp the first major media outlet to strike a Facebook deal under controversial new laws that let an Australian government-appointed arbitrator set fees if companies fail to do so.

Facebook's shutting out all media content in the country for a week last month angered

world leaders, as the blackout included emergency services and government health pages. It ended the shutdown when Australia agreed to soften some parts of the new regulations.

News Corp, which owns about two-thirds of Australian metropolitan newspapers, was among media companies calling for the government to make Facebook and Alphabet Inc's Google pay for the media links that drive viewers, and advertising dollars, to their platforms.

Google had also objected for months and threatened, like Facebook, to withdraw core services from the country, before



A 3D printed Facebook logo is seen in front of displayed Australia's flag in this illustration photo. — Reuters

signing deals with most media outlets — including News Corp — in the days before the rules became law.

"The agreement with Facebook is a landmark in transforming the terms of trade for journalism, and will have a material and meaningful impact on our Australian news businesses," News Corp CEO Robert Thomson said in a statement that thanked the Australian prime minister, treasurer and chief antitrust regulator by name.

Facebook's head of news partnerships in Australia, Andrew Hunter, said the deal meant Facebook's 17 million

users in the country "will gain access to premium news articles and breaking news video from News Corp's network of national, metropolitan, rural and suburban newsrooms".

As well as the country's top-selling tabloids The Daily Telegraph in Sydney and The Herald-Sun in Melbourne, News runs a subscription cable TV network called Sky News, which struck a separate Facebook deal, the terms of which were not disclosed, according to News Corp.

News Corp was first to say it struck a Facebook deal.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

SINGAPORE

Singapore reports biggest employment drop

Employment in Singapore contracted by the most "in over two decades" last year, the Manpower Ministry said, after hundreds of thousands of migrant workers were laid off.

Reflecting a record annual gross domestic product contraction of over 5 per cent, the number of employed in the wealthy city-state fell by over 166,000 last year, according to ministry statistics.

While "resident employment" increased slightly, with around



15,000 new recruits, job losses among "non-residents" reached almost 190,000. Most of Singapore's 60,000 cases of the novel coronavirus were recorded among migrant workers in construction sector. — dpa

LONDON

Oil prices drop amid rising stockpiles

Oil prices dropped on Tuesday, extending declines to three consecutive days, as rising stockpiles in the United States added to the risks to a demand recovery after countries including Germany and France halted Covid-19 vaccinations.

Brent crude was \$1.03 cents, or 1.5 per cent, lower at \$67.85 by 1002 GMT. US crude was down 96 cents, or 1.4 per cent, at \$64.43 a barrel.

Germany, France and Italy plan to suspend AstraZeneca



Covid-19 injections after reports of possible serious side effects. These moves are deepening concerns about a slow pace of vaccinations in the EU, which may delay any economic recovery from the pandemic in one of the hardest-hit areas. — Reuters

STOCKHOLM

Nokia to cut up to 10,000 jobs over next 2 years

Finnish telecoms group Nokia said on Tuesday it planned to cut up to 10,000 jobs within the next two years to trim costs and invest more in research capabilities, as part of its restructuring plan.

After taking over the top job last year, Chief Executive Pekka Lundmark has been making changes in a bid to transform the company to better compete with Nordic rival Ericsson.

He announced a new strategy in October, under which Nokia will have four business groups



and said the company would "do whatever it takes" to take the lead in 5G, as it banks on also capturing share from Huawei.

Lundmark is expected to present his long-term strategy on Thursday. — Reuters

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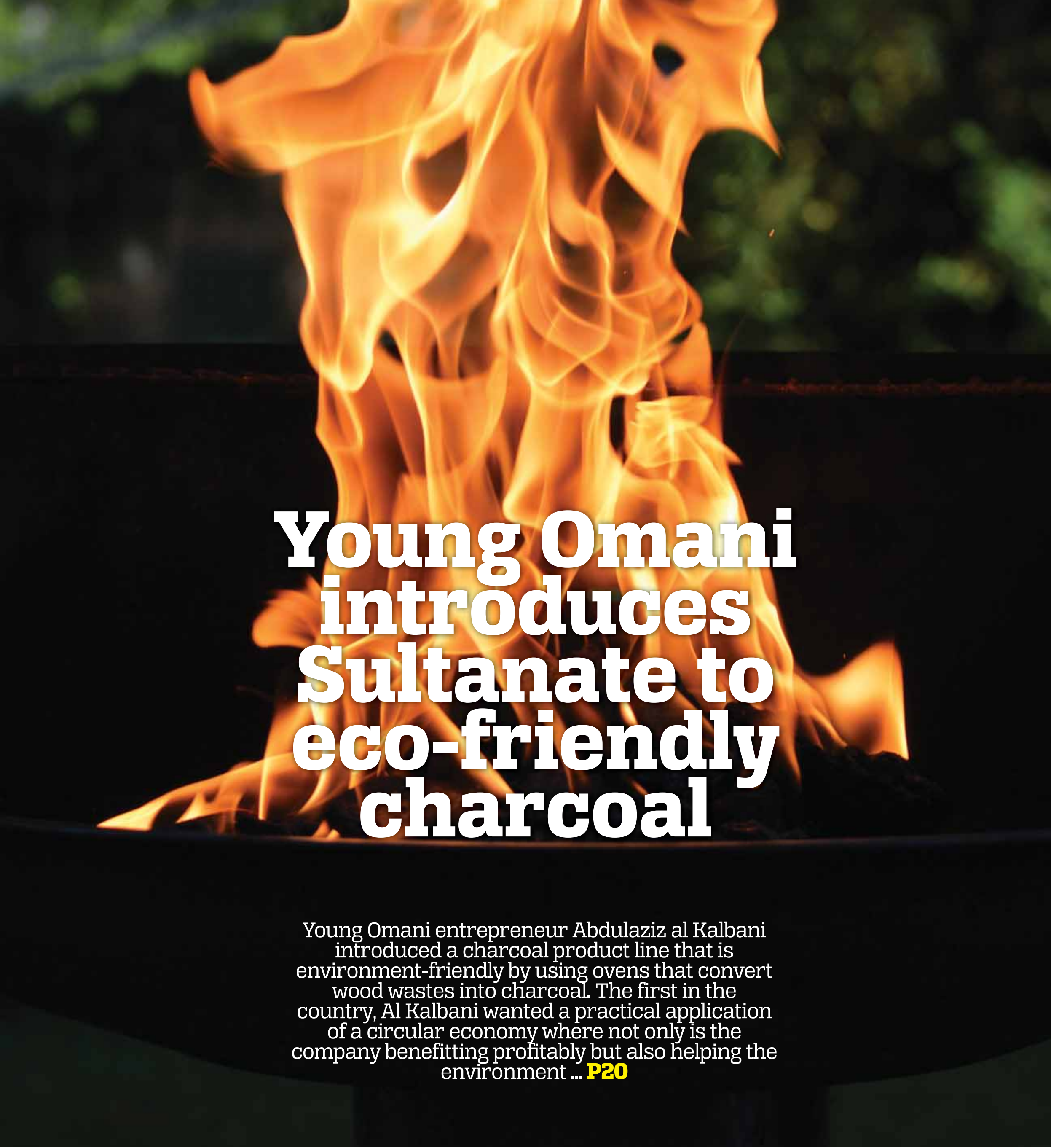
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Classifieds



features



Young Omani introduces Sultanate to eco-friendly charcoal

Young Omani entrepreneur Abdulaziz al Kalbani introduced a charcoal product line that is environment-friendly by using ovens that convert wood wastes into charcoal. The first in the country, Al Kalbani wanted a practical application of a circular economy where not only is the company benefitting profitably but also helping the environment ... **P20**

INSIDE STORIES

TRAVEL TALES



RACCOONS TO SNAKES: SHANGHAI ANIMAL CAFES EXPAND TO EXOTICS

A baby raccoon to stroke while you sip your skinny latte? Or a snake to coil around you after your cappuccino?... **Story on P18**

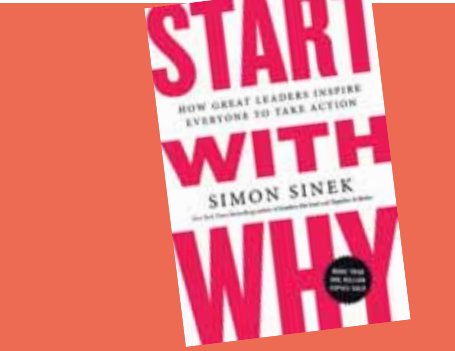
DESTINATION OMAN



WADI KHAMIS IN MAHDHA, A SPLENDID DESTINATION

Wadi Khamis in Mahdha in Al Buraimi is known for its rock formations, caves and abundant groundwater. The wadi is located 60 kilometres away from the centre of the wilayat... **Story on P18**

READ



START WITH WHY

BY SIMON SINEK

It helps others do work, which inspires them, and uses real-world examples of great leaders to show you how they communicate and how you can adapt their mindset to inspire others yourself

CHANGING WORLD



BLOOM BOOM: MALAYSIANS GET PASSIONATE ABOUT POT PLANTS

Learning to tell your elephant ears from your flamingo flowers has become the latest virus lockdown escape in Malaysia, where houseplants are very much in season... **Story on P19**

LOCAL SCENE



RE-DISCOVERING THE DUNES OF BARKA

A recent visit to these dunes in Barka resulted in the discovery of Dunes by Al Nahda — a hotel perched on one of the desert peaks with a stunning view of the surrounding Barka area... **Story on P19**



Observer

WHAT IS HYDROPONIC FARMING?

Hydroponics is a way to skip the soil, sub in a different material to support the roots of the plant, and grow crops directly in nutrient-rich water.

HYDROPONICS EXPLAINED

Plants grow through a process called photosynthesis, in which they use sunlight and a chemical inside their leaves called chlorophyll to convert carbon dioxide and water into glucose and oxygen. There's no mention of "soil" anywhere in there—and that's all the proof you need that plants can grow without it.

WHY GROW WITHOUT SOIL?

It allows growers to produce food anywhere in the world, at any time of the year, and to net higher yields with fewer resources.

- WATER SAVING
- NO SOIL
- FAST GROWTH

HOW DOES HYDROPONICS WORK?

Hydroponic systems work by allowing minute control over environmental conditions like temperature and pH balance and maximized exposure to nutrients and water. **Hydroponics operates under a very simple principle:** provide plants exactly what they need when they need it. Hydroponics administer nutrient solutions tailored to the needs of the particular plant being grown.



Wadi Khamis in Mahdha, a splendid destination

Wadi Khamis in Mahdha in Buraimi is known for its rock formations, caves and abundant groundwater. The wadi is located 60 kilometres away from the centre of the wilayat.

A huge turnout from visitors is spotted during the winter season. Hikers, adventurers and campers enjoy this location greatly to detach themselves from the past-paced often an anxiety-laden rush of the city.

Wildlife such as ibex, Arabian deer and other species abound in the wadi, along with other types of migratory birds. it is a beautiful natural place surrounded by trees like Al Ghaf and Sidr.

It is worth noting that Mahdha is an Omani territory north of the town of Al Buraimi which borders the emirates of Sharjah, Ajman and Dubai. It was previously necessary to pass through Mahdha to reach the Ajman exclave of Masfut, as well as the Dubai exclave of Hatta, a popular tourist spot for its hotel, government-run Heritage Village and the famous (although now a metalled road) Hatta track.

However, a road linking Hatta to the Mleiha road now means Mahdha can be bypassed. It contains the township of Rawdah and is governed from Buraimi. It was traditionally home to the Bani Kaab tribe.

It is claimed the first Arab Ambassador to America, Ahmed bin Naaman al Kaabi, came from Mahdha in 1840.



TRAVEL TALES

Raccoons to snakes: Shanghai animal cafes expand to exotics



A BABY RACCOON to stroke while you sip your skinny latte? Or a snake to coil around you after your cappuccino?

Forget dog or cat cafes, Shanghai's animal cafe scene has expanded to include a wider — and more exotic — kingdom.

The fad in dining alongside all manner of species — from raccoons to pigs and reptiles — comes despite pandemic-fuelled concerns about the dangers of deadly viruses jumping from wild animals to humans.

There are dozens of animal cafes in China's biggest city, with visitors helping to drive the craze by posing for photos with the creatures and sharing them on social media.

Tucked away in central Shanghai, Raccoon Cafe is home to eight of the mammals. The biggest of them, weighing about 10 kilos (22 pounds), jumps up and down by a window, seemingly agitated by customers.

"I think it's really cute," said Qin Siyu, a 27-year-old professional volleyball player who found out about the cafe from a friend's pictures.

Customers pay from 98 yuan (\$15) for entry but it is debatable how much of the venue actually functions as a cafe.

The raccoons' behaviour is too unpredictable for people to have hot drinks around them and the menu is limited.

The cafe's owner, Cheng Chen, admits she had no first-hand experience of raccoons before taking over the establishment at the end of last year.

They can be aggressive, she says, and has the scars on her wrists to prove it.

The 36-year-old understands why some people may question whether it is fair for the raccoons to be kept in a cafe, eating dog food.

Cheng, who seems to have a genuine affection for the rac-

coons, is an animal lover and has several dogs and cats at home.

She hopes the government will make it more difficult to own and breed such animals, to prevent them from falling into the hands of people who are less concerned about their welfare.

"Generally there's no special regulation. In fact, especially in China, the regulation for pets may be relatively weak," she said.

HUGE SUFFERING

In another Shanghai cafe, snakes, iguanas and geckos wait to delight customers.

Owner Wang Liqun has 30 snakes, among them Corn snakes and Kingsnakes — neither is venomous but they can bite. Wang is yet to have such an incident with a customer.

A visitor who gave only her surname Tang said the cafe helps people to get over their fears.

"After coming here they will feel that it's not what they thought and may find reptiles actually quite lovely," said the 27-year-old.

But Evan Sun, a scientist with World Animal Protection, said that he was "deeply concerned" about such cafes.

"Wild animals are having a miserable life in these cafes, enduring huge suffering and pressure," said Sun, the charity's wildlife campaign manager for China.

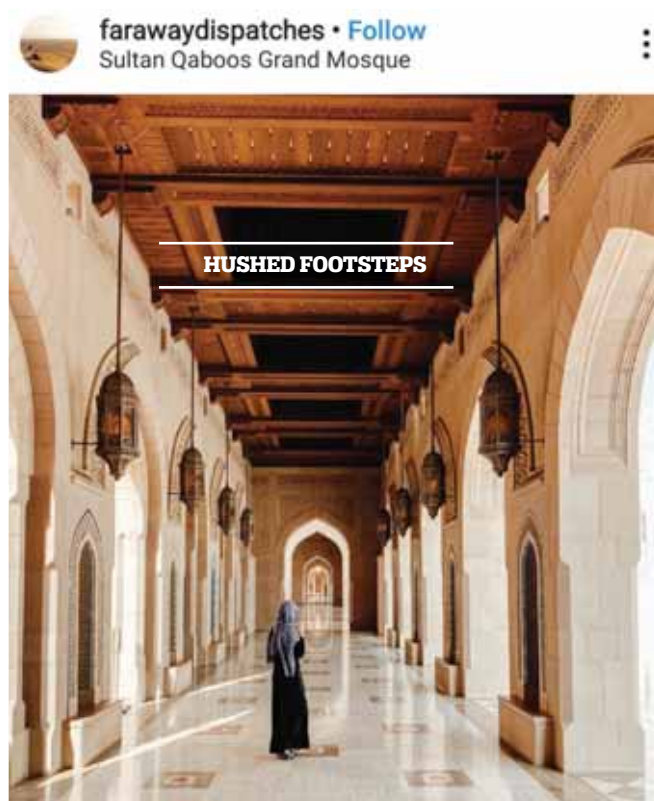
"The close interactions with wild animals not only fuel suffering and cruelty, but also creates a hotbed of diseases that could exacerbate the likelihood of zoonotic diseases' emergence and spread.

"Most customers who visit animal cafes are animal lovers, but they do not know that their consumption choices have such a negative impact on both wild animals and humans." —AFP



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Re-discovering the dunes of Barka

When one hears of Barka, it is easy to associate it with farms and industrial areas but it hides much more beautiful secrets just waiting to be discovered. On weekends, especially before Covid-19, these farms particularly those equipped with pools and children's playground areas are the getaway of families.

It still comes as a surprise to many but Barka also has its own dunes. On some weekends, especially before Covid-19, since the area is closest to Muscat, it is a weekend getaway for dune bashers.

With a steep desert wall as tall as a 15-floor building, it provides the kind of adventure bashers are looking for without driving far.

It's different desert peaks also served as great camping grounds especially during the winter months.

A recent visit to these dunes in Barka resulted in the discovery of Dunes by Al Nahda — a hotel perched on one of the desert peaks with a stunning view of the surrounding Barka area.

The hotel itself is an amazing anomaly in what would have been a monotonous landscape of brown and grey. What is most interesting about the location is that the luxury tents are



popping out from the sand — a real 1001 Arabian nights experience.

Dunes used to be filled with many adventures — from camel rides to ATV rides, from customised dinners under the stars to picnics on top of the dunes but because of restrictions, those were temporarily put on hold.

It however makes up for it with a nice setting, one that allows people looking for proper relaxation listening to the breeze and the gentle murmur of the moving sand.

Dunes also has one of the best infinity pools in the desert overlooking some of the best views Barka has to



offer. In the evening, the nearby expressway is a stunning view of dancing lights as the roads are filled with cars rushing to go towards Suhar or Buraimi.

While dunes bashing is temporarily not allowed in the Barka desert, its re-opening is one of the most anticipated by people not only from Muscat but the nearby areas. The thrill of going up and down the desert sand is an experience one must try when visiting Oman.

If you have extra money to spare, experiencing luxury tents is definitely a must-try too — an experience that makes Oman's desert truly unique.

CHANGING WORLD

Bloom boom: Malaysians get passionate about pot plants



LEARNING TO tell your elephant ears from your flamingo flowers has become the latest virus lockdown escape in Malaysia, where houseplants are very much in season.

Collectors are searching out specimens with intricate patterns in a dazzling array of reds, yellows and greens, and sharing their best on social media.

"It's like looking at a painting", collector Leiister Soon said, admiring the broad-leaf caladium — elephant ear plants — at his Kuala Lumpur home.

"Taking care of plants meant that I can divert my attention — (it is) better than watching the number of Covid cases going up."

The plants are known as

Soon says he spent more than 20,000 ringgit on plants in the past year alone.

"During the lockdown, people were at home thinking about how to beautify their homes", nursery owner Daud Kasim told AFP in Sungai Besar, 100 kilometres (60 miles) northwest of Kuala Lumpur.

"They could look at these plants — and their stress would go away."

An avid collector himself, Daud said he started selling keladi plants in late 2018 but demand exploded during the pandemic.

Nearly half of his nursery's inventory is now made up of such plants, with foreign varieties from countries such as Thailand,



"keladi" in the local Malay language, but the trend has grown to encompass other species, such as anthuriums — known as flamingo flower, or laceleaf — and alocasias, whose varieties include the silver dragon.

Once relatively cheap, prices surged last year when lockdowns confined Malaysians to their homes, and many collectors started posting images of their favourite plants on social media.

While some still cost as little as 20 ringgit (\$4.80), the rarest can now fetch up to 6,000 ringgit each.

China, the United States and The Netherlands.

Standing among thousands of potted specimens, Daud said the trend was here to stay, even as authorities gradually begin lifting restrictions.

Malaysia first imposed curbs last year shortly after the start of the pandemic and had to implement restrictions again in January when a new wave hit, but the outbreak is slowing.

Health authorities have reported more than 300,000 infections and over 1,000 deaths. — AFP



Young Omani introduces Sultanate to eco-friendly charcoal

By Ruqaya al Kindi

The discovery of coal as a source of energy drove humanity into an unprecedented era paving the way for many of the modern developments that shaped the Industrial Revolution. But that massive growth and expansion also posed a great threat to the world as eventually, we discovered that the use of coal causes enormous carbon emission that destroys the planet.

As of today, mankind has

ity to 1,152 tonnes of natural coal of various kinds.

The project obtained a patent for the technologies used in the factory, as well as obtained the intellectual property for the method of producing special charcoal and the materials used in it. It, also, won the award for the best small project owner in the GCC in 2019.

As of today, the factory produces four types of charcoals. One of them is "special barbecue charcoal" which comes in cylindrical bri-



been busy looking for alternative energy sources, ones that are sustainable and leave a lesser carbon footprint.

As with coal, humans also looked for substitutes. From coal mines, wood became an alternative thus our used of friendlier charcoal.

Locally, young Omani entrepreneur Abdulaziz al Kalbani introduced a charcoal product line that is environment-friendly by using ovens that convert wood wastes into charcoal.

"The factory's innovative ovens char all palm waste without burning them (in an environment-friendly way) in order to produce high-quality charcoal. By using these ovens, we were able to preserve a large amount of the materials with lesser emissions made during the manufacturing process", he said.

Abdulaziz said that their manufacturing system includes a purifier that lessens the smoke from the production processes — something which he is proud to share is a practical application of a circular economy benefitting the environment and financially profitable at the same time.

Such innovation is important for the environment because, according to the FAO, the annual greenhouse gas emissions from coal-making processes are estimated at 24.1 gigatonnes.

As the first CEO of a factory that specialises in recycling wood waste, Abdulaziz said that he has customised many of the machines used by the factory thereby increasing production capac-

quettes.

"It is characterised by its longevity, rapid flammability and provides high temperature compared to the traditional charcoal available in the market", he said.

The factory also produces regular charcoals, incense charcoals and scented charcoals.

"We had been in charcoal-production business for seven years. Charcoals produced in the factory are free of any chemicals that may harm the environment, and they also contain a natural substance that improves the soil after use", he shared.

"We have a great desire to dramatically double the production line, add new innovative machines that serve the production line significantly, and open other factories in different areas of the Sultanate. Soon we will open two new factories belonging to the same company, and we also have an idea to use solar energy to run these factories", Abdulaziz said.

Supported by different institutions and individuals in Oman like the Industrial Innovation Centre, Al Raffd Fund and Oman Environmental Service holding company, Abdulaziz said, "There is a very high demand for our products because of their high quality and reasonable price."

Purchases and requests can be made through phone numbers +968 92050466 and +968 97853579.

For updates and access to some of Abdulaziz's work, he can be followed on Twitter through his account @Abdulaziz_Oman1.