

US to reverse Trump's immigration policies

The United States plans to reverse the Trump administration's "draconian" immigration approach while working on policies addressing the causes of migration, President Joe Biden told his Mexican counterpart, the White House said on Saturday. In a Friday call with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Biden outlined his plan to create new legal pathways for immigration and improve the process for people requesting asylum, according to an account of the call released by the White House.



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OMAN OBSERVER

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NORTH ROAD'S PERKINS TOPS STAGE 6, MUNDHER CLAIMS THIRD

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AIR SERVICE TO LANKA RESUMES

Oman Air WY 371 carrying 50 passengers including tourists from the Sultanate as well as citizens of the island nation, touched Colombo last Thursday evening after the country reopened the aviation services that were suspended for more than 10 months. "As we open our doors to the world once again; we've pulled out all the stops, ensuring that every precautionary measure is in place to make your island getaway as safe, secure and serene as possible", said O L Ameer Ajwad, Sri Lankan Ambassador to the Sultanate. **DETAILS ON P2**

LOS ANGELES

ICONIC TALKS SHOW HOST LARRY KING DEAD

The iconic talk show host Larry King, one of the most recognizable figures on US television as he quizzed everyone who was anyone over a career spanning 60 years, died on Saturday at the age of 87. The company he co-founded, Ora Media, did not state a cause of death but media reports said King had been battling Covid-19 for weeks and had suffered several health problems in recent years. King, with his trademark suspenders, black rim glasses and deep voice, was best-known for a 25-year run as a talk show host on CNN's "Larry King Live." **DETAILS ON P8**

Sultanate supports Palestinian cause

RAMALLAH: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a written message to Mahmud Abbas, President of the State of Palestine, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

In his message, His Majesty affirmed the Sultanate's constant stance supporting the brotherly Palestinian people to gain freedom and establish sovereign and independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital, confirming the continued Omani efforts to serve the Palestinian cause.

The message was delivered by Salim bin Habib al Amiri, Chargé d'affaires of the Sultanate's Embassy in the State of Palestine, when he was received by Majdi Khaldi, Diplomatic Adviser to Palestinian president at the Palestinian presidential headquarters in Ramallah.

The president's adviser confirmed the Palestinian leadership's keenness to foster the brotherly relationships to serve the interests of both countries, expressing the appreciation of the Palestinian people and leadership to His Majesty's and the Omani people's brotherly attitude, commending the Sultanate's efforts and constant support to the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. — **ONA**

PHOTO ON P2



HM greetings to Emir of Qatar

DOHA: Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of Qatar, received Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, at the headquarters of the Police College in Al Sailiya, in the Qatari capital Doha, on Saturday.

The minister of interior conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik along with his best wishes of good health and happiness to the Emir of Qatar and the Qatari people more progress and prosperity.

On his part, the Emir of Qatar asked the minister of interior to convey his greetings to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik wishing him good health and happiness and the Omani people more progress and prosperity.

The two sides reviewed the strong brotherly relationship between the two countries and ways of fostering cooperation in various fields.

The meeting was attended by Shaikh Khalid bin Khalifa al Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of the State of Qatar and Najib bin Yahya al Balushi, Sultanate's Ambassador to Qatar. Sayyid Hamoud attended the graduation ceremony of the third batch of candidate students of the Police College at its headquarters in Al Sailiya, on Saturday.

Shaikh Tamim patronised the graduation ceremony which was held in the presence of officials of Arab states and heads of diplomatic missions. — **ONA (SEE ALSO P2)**

New labour initiatives, norms to be unveiled

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyvp

New regulations and measures aimed at increasing flexibility to cope with the current changes in the labour market are expected to be announced this week. Indications are that the Ministry of Labour will come out with new initiatives in accordance with the measures announced in the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan for the years 2020-2024.

According to Shaikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Under-Secretary, Ministry of Labour, the government will present its plan for 2021 following a review of its performance in the previous year, during a press conference to be held on Wednesday.

The media meet, first to be held after the renaming of the ministry, will announce ways and means to address the issue of striking a balance between the number of job-seekers and the opportunities available for employment in public and private sectors.

"The announcement will include a number of initiatives and procedures that the ministry is working on to correct the labour market conditions", the

In order to be able to compete globally, Oman has to increase flexibility in the labour market to adapt to changes in supply and demand as described in the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan

NASSER AL BALUSHI
Human resource specialist

under-secretary was quoted by Oman TV at the weekend.

Experts familiar with labour market conditions opine that the new policies and measures will be in line with professional standards that can stimulate the work environment and contribute to the national economy.

"In order to be able to compete globally, Oman has to increase flexibility in the labour market to adapt to changes in supply and demand as described in the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan", said Nasser al Balushi, a human resource specialist working with a finance company.

Rising dust, poor visibility to prevail

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Motorists and fishermen should take note of the sea level, rising dust and poor horizontal visibility, the authorities said on Saturday.

Hazy skies also are expected to prevail over most of the Sultanate, Oman Meteorology said.

Royal Oman Police also reported sand dunes on Haima-Adam

road. In the northern parts, the sea and mountains were covered by low-level dust clouds which led to poor visibility.

There is an advisory related to dust and sandstorms for places such as Sur, Saham, Qalhat, Adam, Ibra, Fahud, Bahla, Shinas, Mahdha, Duqm Port, Port Sultan Qaboos, Bidiya, Duqm Airport Masirah, Jabal Shams, Thamrait, Bausher, Muscat city, Suwaiq and

Buraimi among others. Maximum and minimum temperatures will be 24 and 15 degrees Celsius in Muscat, 15 and 5 in Jabal Shams, 23 and 14 in Al Amerat and 27 and 9 in Haima. "Good condensation of low clouds on the North and South Al Batinah governorates, and rising dust on the coasts of the Sea of Oman and the governorates of Musandam and South Al Sharqiyah", the Met office said.

PASSING THROUGH HISTORY!



Welcome to Harat al Siybani, Birkat al Mouz's historical settlement which was last rebuilt in the 17th Century. Comprising 50 abandoned houses, it has narrow passages, staircases and three entrances with the falaj irrigation channel amazingly passing through. People inhabited the Harat until the early years of the 21st Century. **DETAILS ON P20**

Sayyid Hamoud attends graduation ceremony in Doha

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Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy attended the graduation ceremony of the third batch of candidate students of the Police College at its headquarters in Al Sailiya.



Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani patronised the graduation ceremony, which was held in the presence of officials of Arab states and heads of diplomatic missions.

The minister of interior's participation in the graduation ceremony came in response to an official invitation extended to him by Shaikh Khalid bin Khalifa al Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of the State of Qatar. — ONA

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

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Bids Submission Date
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• Eligibility Criteria and Brief Scope of Work can be obtained from our website (www.omanbroadband.om) or by sending email to tenders@Omanbroadband.om

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Spotlight on Renewed Renaissance, Vision 2040

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

The roadmap for Vision 2040 and Renewed Renaissance are to be the highlights of the Oman Forum 2021, which is scheduled to be held on March 8 under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI).

The half-day event in Arabic will take place at the Sheraton Oman Hotel. Dr Saif bin Abdullah bin Sulaiman al Haddabi, Under-Secretary — Research and Innovation, Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation will be the guest of honour and keynote speaker.

Top government officials, decision-makers, C-suite executives, business owners, SMEs, young entrepreneurs, university graduates and change-makers are to be the part of the event that “offers

captivating content and a line-up of key personalities from the Sultanate. They will review Oman’s journey on the path of the Renewed Renaissance that aims to leverage its competitive advantage, foster private sector-driven competitive business environment, and create an efficient and friendly governance framework,” said a press release issued by the event organisers.

“The event will align the policymakers and thought leaders to offer perspectives for overcoming challenges posed by the pandemic, the economic and social implications and measures to make Oman a self-sustained nation. The engaging panel discussions and presentations made by industry stalwarts, budding entrepreneurs, ecosystem enablers and the thought-provoking address by the eminent profiles, will offer in-depth direction on Oman’s futuristic plans, government policies and

socio-economic environment,” the release said. The informative and interactive sessions will offer the audience more details on Vision 2040, which will create a nation built on innovation, sustainable development, a diversified economy and empowered knowledge-based society.

The two panel discussions, consisting of luminaries from various sectors, will inspire the audience on topics that include ‘Oman’s readiness to transition to an innovation, technology and knowledge-based society and economy’ and ‘Building a sustainable future through innovation.’

The dynamic entrepreneurs and scholars from various fields will present a series of case studies. The event will also witness the presentation of the Alam al Iktisaad Sustainability Awards for achievers in the areas of Human, Social, and Economy and Environment.

ZAKAT AL-SEEB COMMITTEE
UNDER SUPERVISION OF MINISTRY
OF ENDOWMENTS & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

THE FIRST ENDOWMENT FOR THE ZAKAT AL-SEEB COMMITTEE
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ABU HURAIRAH (MAY ALLAH BE PLEASED WITH HIM) REPORTED:
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HM SENDS WRITTEN MESSAGE TO ABBAS

RAMALLAH: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a written message to Mahmoud Abbas, President of the State of Palestine, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The message was delivered by Salim bin Habib al Amiri, Chargé d'affaires of the Sultanate's Embassy in the State of Palestine when he was received by Majdi Khaldi, Diplomatic Adviser to Palestinian president at the Palestinian presidential headquarters in Ramallah. — ONA

Air service to Sri Lanka resumes after 10 months

KABEER YOUSUF
[@kabeeryousef](https://twitter.com/kabeeryousef)

Oman Air WY 371 carrying 50 passengers including tourists from the Sultanate as well as the citizens of the island nation, touched Colombo on Thursday evening after the country reopened the aviation services that were suspended for more than 10 months.

“As we open our doors to the world once again; we’ve pulled out all the stops, ensuring that every precautionary measure is in place to make your island getaway as safe, secure and serene as possible,” said OL Ameer Ajwad, Sri Lankan Ambassador to the Sultanate.

He further said that all visas must be applied online through the Immigration ETA portal. Confirmed hotel booking, pre-purchased PCR tests and a mandatory COVID-19, insurance cover paid through the ‘Safe and Secure Level 1’ hotel when making the booking, are mandatory requirements for visa application.



The hotel will issue a reference number which the travellers need to include in their visa form under the section ‘contact details’.

“Also, all tourists are exempted from quarantine requirement and there is no minimum stay requirement, all aimed at attracting more tourists to the sector that has been in slumber since the pandemic outbreak.”

Even after vaccination against COVID-19, it is mandatory to follow the safety protocol, and PCR tests need to be taken on arrival.

He further said that there are several hotels and accommodation providers that comply with the COVID-19 health protocols and the tourism operational guidelines.

“These hotels are subjected to

a continuous audit process by an independent firm and tourists are allowed to visit up to 14 approved tourist sites under the safety of a bio-bubble.”

Each of the ‘Safe and Secure’ certified hotels including the ‘Level 1’ hotels will be having an appointed medical officer to provide medical care round the clock.

“In case any tourist is tested positive for COVID-19 with symptoms, the Level 1 ‘Safe & Secure’ certified hotel in consultation with the hotel doctor or local health authorities, will admit him to a private hospital approved by the Ministry of Health. The COVID-19 Insurance cover will reimburse all related expenses up to \$ 50,000 for a month.

Be watchful against online blackmailing of children

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

The Sultanate has embraced online training all the more with hybrid classes in most schools and kids being used to the virtual world for several months.

But the safety of children in the virtual world should precede any other matter of attention and experts advise that parents need to be aware as virtual world is a smooth area where identity can be often hidden and chances of kids being duped are high, according to the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

"A host of cyber hazards, ranging from cyberbullying, the threat from cyber predators, phishing, scams, accidental downloading of malware etc, that can often haunt the children throughout their lives, are potential dangers in the virtual world," a statement from the ROP cybercrime investigation department has stated.

The warning comes in the wake of three people being arrested by the Directorate-General of Criminal Inquiries and Investigations on charges of fraud, electronic extortion and money laundering online by intruding into the privacy of children while they were attending online classes.

These children were befriended by the culprits online and were asked to share obscene photos using which they were blackmailed and, according to the ROP statement, one of the children transferred huge amounts of money only to be blackmailed further.

"The cyber world is a place where culprits find it easy to hide

A host of cyber hazards, ranging from cyberbullying, the threat from cyber predators, phishing, scams, accidental downloading of malware etc, that can often haunt the children throughout their lives, are potential dangers in the virtual world

STATEMENT
ROP cybercrime
investigation department



their identity and both kids and adults are facing a lot of issues because of this," says Haitham bin Hilal al Hajri, cybersecurity researcher and expert.

He added that elders might be able to distinguish between a malicious mail and an original one, but children fail to recognise such attempts on their identity and innocence.

"We have to safeguard them against a variety of lucrative and malicious attempts inside the cyberspace. They need to be constantly educated on the safe

usage of the Internet and make sure they are not left unattended while being online," he added.

There are five important cybersecurity tips that can save children from being duped. It is important to protect kid's device by implementing anti-malware and parental control tools.

"Educate your kids to avoid sharing of sensitive information with strangers online, such as personal information, home address, schools or phone numbers."

Third is to teach children to

download apps only from official stores and avoid direct links via social media.

Fourth, follow and know what your kids' interests are on the cyber world, from games, social websites, or online blogs. Also, teach them to not search for illegal materials.

It is also important to educate children about cyber etiquette, and how to address and talk to people online. Besides, children should know about the impacts of cyberbullying and how to report them.

Sultanate participates in Berlin Agriculture Ministers' Conference

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, took part in the 13th Berlin Agriculture Ministers' Conference which was held in Germany via video conferencing.

The Sultanate was represented at the conference by Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

The conference was held within the framework of the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) under the theme 'How to Feed the World in Times of Pandemics and Climate Change'.

Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, noted that it is important that every country enhances its food system from a comprehensive integrated perspective that takes into account all fields of food that

can meet human needs. This food system, he said, should be less prone to natural calamities and pandemics that occur in the world.

Al Habsi said that it is important to reorganise the public spending in a manner that complies with the food and health objectives through adopting suitable policies for handling the public resources for instance by imposing taxes on certain commodities like sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB). He added that the government seeks to ramp up the social protection networks. The government's efforts also focus on electronic marketing through setting up several online platforms for the marketing of animal, agricultural and fisheries products in addition to direct import through land ports while focusing on staple commodities like fruits and vegetables. — ONA

SV Pittie Sohar Textile creates history - manufactures yarn made for the World by the first batch of 305 Omani women



SV Pittie Sohar Textiles, on the 11th January 2021 achieved another milestone. The first batch of 305 Omani women successfully completed their 14 month training program and started work in the plant as full time employees. The global pandemic lead to several exceptional challenges to be overcome. Despite it all the Company successfully maintained its operations whilst ensuring safety and precautionary measures. The Company has pledged employment to a total of 1000 Omani women who are undergoing their training program at the dedicated Training Centre, ITQAN. The remaining batches have resumed their training program and expected to graduate in the coming months. SV Pittie Group one of the prominent leaders in Compact

SV Pittie
Sohar Textiles

yarn manufacturing envisage to establish an Integrated Textile Cluster of USD 1.2 billion, positioning the Sultanate of Oman as a global textile hub creating enormous job opportunities, empowering local entrepreneurship and creating a new industry sector. The Sohar facility USD 428 million investment in addition to Yarn manufacturing has also set up downstream facility for Knitting, Weaving and Apparels thereby creating value addition particularly the non-oil sector and substantial employment opportunities. The integrated apparel unit will be producing abayas, dishdasha, uniforms in addition to garments

for international markets.

The Board of Directors expressed their appreciation to its partners Ministry of Labour / National Training Fund for their support and cooperation. Mr Chirag Pittie, Chairman in his note to the new employees congratulated and welcomed them into Team SV Pittie, Oman. It is a historical and proud moment as the Yarn manufactured in the plant for the first time will be "Made in Oman by Omani Women for the world". We are happy to have you onboard. Together we are creating history as the products you will be making will be exported to various countries worldwide. Your dedication, hard work and commitment is crucial for the company and country, said Chairman.

Career opportunity

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER Al Anwar Investments SAOG

Al Anwar Investments SAOG (formally Al Anwar Holdings SAOG) is seeking to appoint a CEO to lead the company. Al Anwar Investments, established in 1994, is one of Oman's leading investment company publicly listed on the Muscat Securities Market. Following the Private Equity business model, Al Anwar invests in sectors such as financial services, insurance and manufacturing in Oman and other emerging markets.

The CEO's responsibilities include creating an investment philosophy, adding value to existing portfolio and strategizing new investment opportunities.

The candidate should be an Omani national, possessing a minimum of 15 years' experience in a similar profile (Financial Services, Investment Banking, or Private Equity). The candidate shall have profound understanding of investment strategies & possess high capabilities in analytical, communication & negotiation skills.

The ideal candidate would have a bachelor degree in Accounting / Finance / Engineering from a reputed institution, and a MBA / ACA / ACCA / CPA.

If this opportunity interests you and you meet the above criteria, please send a detailed resume in English with clear details of your qualifications and work experiences (without certificates), to **CEO@ch-mea.com** within 7 days of publishing this advertisement.

الأنوار للاستثمارات ش.م.ع
Al Anwar Investments SAOG



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VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

The UK government’s warning that the new strain of the COVID-19 can be equally or more deadly is a reason for concern, with many countries in Europe struggling to come out of lockdowns. Mass vaccination seems to be the only way out.

While Oman has been reporting a relatively low level of new cases, the matter of concern is that some of the neighbouring countries are seeing a rise in the numbers.

UAE reported over 3,500 cases, Iran over 6,000, and Kuwait over 500 cases on Sunday. This could be the reason that the Oman government was forced to close the land borders last week while UAE had to suspend entertainment activities.

With the vaccination process gaining stream, there is hope that the new strain will be tamed faster than the original one.

According to a WHO director on immunisation, “Viruses change all the time, but there are no reasons to believe that the new variants will impact the efficiency of the vaccines. Until we get more information on vaccines, what is needed is the vaccination must be stepped up to cover all vulnerable segments of the population.”

Over 24,000 people have taken vaccines in Oman in the first phase, while over 4,000 has been vaccinated for the second dose, according to the Ministry of Health.

Oman has not made the vaccination mandatory but has been still encouraging people in targeted groups to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

The IATA and airlines have been working on a Travel Pass, which will be allowing travellers to store and manage certifications for COVID-19

tests or vaccines. “This will help the seamless flow of passengers from one country to the other and revive the travel and tourism sector.”

On the positive side, COVAX, the global initiative to ensure rapid and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, has signed an advance purchase agreement with Pfizer for up to 40 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine candidate, which has already received WHO emergency use listing. Rollout will commence with the successful negotiation and execution of supply agreements.

In further support of its mission to expedite early availability of vaccines to lower-income countries and help bring a rapid end to the acute stage of the pandemic, COVAX also confirmed that it will exercise an option with India’s Serum Institute to receive its first 100 million doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford University-developed vaccine. According to reports, the emergence of several, more infectious strains of the novel coronavirus have worried governments and scientists, who are investigating how and why the virus became more transmissible.

It was not unexpected for the new variants to appear after a year of COVID-19 as levels of global immunity increase through vaccinations and natural infection.

In South Africa and Brazil there was already quite a high level of antibody response from people who had been infected and recovered from the virus. Experts expressed doubt that immunity levels directly influenced the current mutations.

While the COVID-19 virus typically infects individuals for around 10 days before being neutralised by the body, some studies have shown that certain patients may carry it for several weeks or longer — maximising the window for mutations.



Base students' critical thinking on pure facts: Expert

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH

@patkaushal

Stress has always been there on inculcating a sense of critical thinking among students of all ages and grades. The problem, however, is deciding the basis for it, be it setting up of a right environment in the educational institutions, support from teachers, parents, or even the modes of education that need regular monitoring and changes therein.

Dr Fouad B Chedid, Vice-Chancellor of A'Sharqiyah University, called for a rational approach by asking the institutions to be subtle if they could all agree on a simple definition of critical thinking; maybe something like a form of objective thinking driven



Dr Fouad B Chedid

purely by facts.

"While everyone in the academic world agrees that critical thinking is one of the oldest and most agreed-upon purposes of undergraduate education, somehow universities don't seem to get it right when it comes to teaching students how to think critically," he said.

The conventional way of teaching, according to him, is something that not necessarily creates any opportunities at all for students to think critically.

"Many academics throughout the world continue to teach their courses the conventional way — to lecture to a passive audience — without dwelling much about the issue of whether their teaching creates any opportunities at all for students to think critically," he said.

For one thing, preparing an assignment that requires critical thinking takes time and effort. And for another, academics are expected to provide detailed feedback for students to truly benefit from such assignments. Given that kind of extra work, many academics, unfortunately,

Dr Fouad B Chedid, Vice-Chancellor of A'Sharqiyah University, called for a rational approach by asking the institutions to be subtle if they could all agree on a simple definition of critical thinking; maybe something like a form of objective thinking driven purely by facts

tend not to bother. Before we discuss this any further, let's take a step back and reexamine the notion of critical thinking itself.

First, we need to acknowledge that critical thinking is a complex subject that doesn't lend itself to one or a few definitions. For example, according to Cambridge Dictionary, critical thinking is "the process of thinking carefully

about a subject or idea, without allowing feelings or opinions to affect you." Another definition from Wikipedia states "critical thinking is the analysis of facts to form a judgment."

If the two above definitions were not enough, I could easily find a dozen other definitions on the Web categorised into the so-called traditional versus

non-traditional definitions, Dr Fouad said. He cited William of Ockham from the 13th century (also known as Occam's razor), "which invites us to express our thoughts in the simplest manner possible for the more assumptions one puts into their argument, the less comprehensible it becomes. And I am no longer surprised that professors and their critics do not agree on how much critical thinking takes place in undergraduate education."

I think it would have been much subtle if we could all agree on a simple definition of critical thinking; maybe something like a form of objective thinking driven purely by facts, said Dr Fouad while putting stress on inculcating critical thinking among the students.

413 samples of precious stones tested in 2020



STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 23

The number of gemstone samples tested and authenticated by the Valuable Stones Testing Laboratory at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) totalled 413 in 2020.

According to Nasser bin Ashraf al Balushi, Head of the Precious Stones Department and Testing Laboratory at the Ministry's Directorate-General of Standards and Metrology (DGSM), 314 of the samples

included diamonds, sapphires, blue sapphires, emeralds, black opals, alexandrite and chrysopril, in addition to the industrial gemstones manufactured by modern methods, single stones and stones fixed on jewellery.

A further 85 other samples included stones manufactured by traditional methods, single stones fixed on jewellery that are more or less than 10 stones, and the unpolished stones. The remaining 14 samples included plastic, glass, imitation and other shapes of artificial gemstones.

Outlet for products of small units, families opens

AMAL AL RIYAMI

@amal92alriyami

An incubator for marketing products of small enterprises and families has been opened at Hawa Commercial Centre in Nizwa.

It has been set up by the Al Dakhiliyah branch of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) in cooperation with the Bawareq Nizwa International Company, allowing beneficiaries to display and market their products.

It was inaugurated by Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, OCCI Chairman, in the presence of Eng Hamad bin Said al Rabkhi, Chairman of OCCI's Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. They, along with others, viewed the facilities of the incubator.

Ridha bin Juma al Saleh said: "This initiative by the Al Dakhiliyah branch of the OCCI



will help in the promotion and marketing of products from small enterprises and families."

The incubator has shelves for displaying the products of nearly 28 small and home establishments. The products include perfumes, incense, oud oil, aromatics, clothing embroidery, cosmetic creams, natural medicinal oils, soaps, cosmetics, foodstuffs, pickles,

saucers, accessories and henna inscriptions.

The participation of these families will be evaluated every six months. The participants then will have the opportunity to be independent in the project, to register products and get a commercial registration as a small enterprise, according to the success rate of the project and the public's demand for it.

The OCCI's branch in Al Dakhiliyah handles the promotion and marketing operations through a marketing trainer in charge of selling and promoting the incubator to visitors. Besides, Bawareq Nizwa International will provide the headquarters for free to support this incubator, as the company manages Hawa Centre project within its investment projects.

Focus on easing business procedures

AMAL AL RIYAMI

@amal92alriyami

Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, (OCCI), has met with businesspersons in Al Dakhiliyah at the Chamber's hall in Nizwa.

Eng Hamad bin Said al Rabkhi, head of the OCCI branch in the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah, gave a speech in which he said: "The meeting comes as a culmination of the visions and ideas of the Board of Directors of the OCCI — in developing the Sultanate's governorates economically and developing them in line with the developmental changes. During this, we seek to facilitate and simplify procedures to create a flexible economic and commercial environment for this sector, to play its role in assisting and revitalising the economic and commercial fields, while opening



communication channels with business owners and engaging them in all economic activities and benefiting from their diverse experiences.

"We are also in the process of monitoring the opinions and observations of business owners and exchanging views to come up with a unified and ambitious formula for economic work in line with the changes and developments in the work arena. And

coordination with the relevant authorities to reduce the different effects of these decisions."

Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of the Chamber, spoke about the challenges faced by the business owners in the economic and tourism fields and sought a mechanism for implementing projects easily and without complications.

He also dealt with the role the Chamber plays to review ministerial decisions, as well as studying the problems facing commercial activities, the challenges of the mining sector and crushers, and the Chamber's role in supporting private companies in case there are ideas for establishing private companies through a feasibility study. The meeting witnessed interventions by the attendees that dealt with proposals related to investment opportunities in various aspects.



TENDERS 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/2020/8	CALL FOR A CONTRACT AGREEMENT FOR THE SUPPLY OF CONTRACT RESOURCES FOR ORACLE UTILITIES & RELATED APPLICATIONS	26 Jan 2021	31 Jan 2021	100/-

- 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:
 - Commercial Proposal
 - Technical Proposal
 - Bid Bond
- Bids should be dropped in the tender box at NSS reception before 1.00 pm, time of the Sultanate, on Sunday, 31 Jan 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 12.00pm
- 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.

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

Nama Shared Services

Foreign forces ignore Libya exit deadline

TRIPOLI: Foreign forces ignored a deadline to pull out of Libya as scheduled on Saturday under a UN-backed ceasefire deal, highlighting the fragility of peace efforts after a decade of conflict.

Satellite images broadcast by CNN show a trench running tens of kilometres dug by “Russian mercenaries” near the frontline coastal city of Sirte, as main foreign protagonists Ankara and Moscow appear intent on defending their interests under any final settlement.

An unidentified US intelligence official, quoted by the American news network, said there was “no intent or movement by either Turkish or Russian forces to abide by the UN-brokered agreement”.

“This has the potential to derail an already fragile peace process and ceasefire. It will be a really difficult year ahead”, he said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Monday urged all “regional and international actors to respect the provisions” of the October 23 ceasefire accord that set out a withdrawal within three months of all foreign troops and mercenaries. That deadline passed on Saturday, with no movement announced or observed on the ground.



Libyan military graduates loyal to the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) take part in a parade marking their graduation. — AFP File Photo

The UN estimates there are still some 20,000 foreign troops and mercenaries in Libya helping the warring factions, the UN-recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli and military strongman Khalifa Haftar in the east.

The GNA has received military support from Turkey. Haftar has

the backing of the UAE and Egypt as well as Russia.

Guterres called on all parties to implement the terms of the ceasefire “without delay”, something he noted “includes ensuring the departure of all foreign fighters and mercenaries from Libya, and the full and unconditional respect of the

Security Council arms embargo”, which has been in place since the 2011 Nato-backed uprising that ousted and killed longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi.

Any withdrawal or end to foreign interference “does not depend on the Libyans but on the outside powers”, said Khaled al Montasser, professor of

international relations at Tripoli University.

Turkey on Friday welcomed a deal reached at UN-backed talks for Libya’s warring factions to set up an interim executive to rule the North African country until polls in December.

Turkey has backed the GNA with military advisers, materiel

and mercenaries, repelling an advance on Tripoli by Haftar’s forces, and it also has a military base in Al Watiya on the border with Tunisia under a 2019 military accord.

Last December, parliament in Ankara extended by 18 months its authorisation for Turkey’s troop deployment in Libya, in apparent disregard of the ceasefire deal.

“The mercenaries are unlikely to leave Libya so long as the countries which have engaged them have not guaranteed their interests in the new transitional phase”, said Montasser, referring to the multiple tracks of UN-sponsored talks currently under way.

“Their presence keeps alive the threat of military confrontation at any moment, while the current calm staying in place seems uncertain”, he said.

Most of the foreign forces are concentrated around Sirte, at Al Jufra air base held by Haftar’s forces 500 kilometres south of Tripoli and further west in Al Watiya.

“The context of the presence of mercenaries and foreign fighters is not the same in the east and the west”, said Jalal al Fitouri, another university professor in the capital.

— AFP

Acclaimed Sudanese filmmakers yet to enjoy recognition at home

CAIRO: Sudanese filmmakers who celebrated the end of stifling restrictions following the ouster of Omar al Bashir have won multiple international awards but are yet to enjoy the same recognition at home.

Cinema languished in the North African country through three decades of rule by Bashir.

But Sudanese took to the streets to demand freedom, peace and social justice, and Bashir’s rule came to an end in a palace coup by the army in April 2019.

“We started realising how much our society needs our dreams”, said Director Amjad Abou Alala.

His 2019 film “You Will Die at Twenty” was both Sudan’s first Oscar entry and the first Sudanese film broadcast on Netflix, winning prizes at international film festivals including Italy’s Venice and Egypt’s El Gouna.

The film tells the story of a young man a mystic predicts will die at age 20.

As Sudan undergoes a



Talal Afifi, founder and director of the ‘Sudan Film Factory’, in Khartoum. — AFP

precarious political transition, the country’s filmmakers have found more space to operate, Alala said.

Young filmmakers act “without the complexes, the lack of self-confidence or the frustration that we suffered in previous generations”, he added.

Talal Afifi, director of the Khartoum-based Sudan Film Factory programme, has trained hundreds of young people in

filmmaking.

Bashir’s government “aborted all cultural and artistic initiatives and fought... diversity and freedom of opinion, through policies”, he said.

Afifi began work long before the 2019 revolution, with advances in digital camera technology making filmmaking far more accessible.

The filmmaker attended a 2008 short film festival in Munich,

where the winning film — an Iraqi documentary shot on a handy-cam — inspired him to return home and set up a training centre and production house.

In the past decades, the Film Factory has organised some 30 screenwriting, directing and editing workshops — and produced more than 60 short films, honoured in international festivals from Brazil to Japan.

Afifi says the roots of Sudan’s innovative cinema was born from the “hard work dating from before” Bashir’s overthrow, when many cinemas were closed.

Today, cinemas are allowed — big budget Hollywood films, as well as Indian and Egyptian movies are popular — but moves to reopen them have been frustrated by restrictions to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The Sudanese National Museum organised screenings of films, including “You Will Die at Twenty”, but they were not screened in large theatres. — AFP

A FARMER’S FRUITS OF LABOUR



Palestinian farmer Atta Jaber carries giant turnips that he harvested from his land across from the Israeli settlement of Kiryat Arba, in the West Bank town of Hebron. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

RIYADH

Saudi intercepts ‘hostile target’ over capital

Saudi Arabia intercepted a “hostile target” over Riyadh on Saturday, said state media in the kingdom which has come under repeated attack from Yemen’s Ansar Allah fighters since 2015. An explosion was heard in the Saudi capital at around 11 am, AFP correspondents reported.

“I heard a loud sound and thought that something had fallen from the sky”, said one resident, who lives in the Al Sulaimaniyah district of Riyadh. “The whole house was shaking.”



The coalition said it had “intercepted and destroyed a hostile air target going towards Riyadh”, without elaborating, according to state-run Al Ekhhbariya television station.

— AFP

BRUSSELS

Turkey warns EU against ‘language of sanctions’

Turkey’s foreign minister warned the EU off using sanctions as Brussels demanded “tangible outcomes” from a push to mend ties battered by tensions in the eastern Mediterranean. Ankara’s top diplomat Mevlut Cavusoglu wrapped up two days of talks with EU chiefs aimed at soothing relations after conciliatory moves from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Tensions between Brussels and Ankara reached new levels last year after Turkey repeatedly



sent a ship to search for gas in disputed waters, infuriating the bloc and member states Greece and Cyprus. EU leaders in December agreed to add more names to a sanctions black list over Turkish drilling in Cypriot waters and draw up options for tougher punishments if Ankara did not change course. — AFP

GAZA CITY

Gaza home blast injures over 20

More than 20 people were injured and several homes destroyed by a large explosion on Saturday in a residential area of the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, Palestinian officials said. The source of the accidental explosion was apparently the home of a member of one of Gaza’s groups.

“An explosion occurred in a house in Beit Hanoun this morning, resulting in a number of injuries”, the interior ministry said, adding that an investigation had been launched into the cause



of the blast.

Medical sources said more than 20 people were injured, two of them seriously.

Witnesses said several homes were damaged as a result of the explosion in the home of an “activist”. Police cordoned off the area. — AFP

In brief

■ BANGKOK



SIAMESE CROCODILE IN RARE SIGHTING AT THAI NATIONAL PARK

The critically endangered Siamese crocodile has been spotted for only the second time in a decade at Thailand's largest national park, according to photos released. The freshwater reptile — snapped by camera traps sunning itself at Kaeng Krachan National Park near the Thai border with Myanmar — was once ubiquitous across Southeast Asia, but its numbers have plummeted in the region.

It is currently listed as critically endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list.

National park officials estimate only about 20 remain in the wild because of hunting and habitat loss. — AFP

■ YANGON



MYANMAR RECEIVES FIRST BATCH OF COVID-19 VACCINES

Myanmar received 1.5 million doses of a COVID-19 vaccine supplied by India to inoculate 750,000 people, the first vaccine batch delivered to the Southeast Asian country as it fights one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the region.

India is donating millions of doses of vaccines to a string of countries in Asia, drawing praise from neighbours and pushing back against China's dominating presence in the region.

Shipments of AstraZeneca's vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, the world's biggest producer of vaccines, have already gone to the Maldives, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. — Reuters

■ KATHMANDU



NEPAL EX-REBELS CALL TO PROTEST GOVT DISSOLUTION

A demonstration called by ex-Maoist rebels drew tens of thousands to the streets of Nepal's capital on Friday to demand the reinstatement of parliament in the biggest show of force since it was dissolved.

Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli dismissed the legislature in December, accusing members of his own party — including the former rebels — of noncooperation, and called for new elections in April.

The move plunged Nepal into fresh political uncertainty after years of instability, short-lived governments and earthquakes that devastated the country in 2015. — AFP

■ REHEARSAL FOR REPUBLIC DAY PARADE



Soldiers on the camel back march along the Rajpath during the full dress rehearsal for the upcoming Republic Day Parade in New Delhi. — AFP

North Korea sees talks as way to advance N-programme: US

WASHINGTON: The top US intelligence officer for North Korea warned on Friday the country sees diplomacy only as a means to advance its nuclear weapons development, even as the new Biden administration says it will look for ways to bring Pyongyang back to talks.

President Joe Biden's nominee for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said on Tuesday the new administration planned a full review of the US approach to North Korea to look at ways to increase pressure on it to return to the negotiating table.

White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki reiterated this on Friday, saying North Korea's nuclear weapons were a serious threat to peace and Washington had a vital interest in deterring Pyongyang.

Sydney Seiler, the US national intelligence officer for North Korea, told the Center for Strategic and International Studies think-tank earlier that Pyongyang's weapons development had been a consistent policy for 30 years.

"Every engagement in diplomacy has been designed to



Bystanders holding North Korea and US flags wait for the motorcade of US President Donald Trump in Hanoi. — Reuters File Photo

further the nuclear programme, not to find a way out... I just urge people not to let the tactical ambiguity obstruct the strategic clarity about North Korea that we have", he said. "So we should not be overly encouraged if suddenly (North Korea leader Kim Jong Un) proposes dialogue tomorrow, nor should we be overly surprised, or discouraged, if there's an ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) launch by Sunday."

Seiler also said humanitarian

aid — which Blinken said the United States should look at providing to North Korea if needed — was not something of interest to Pyongyang.

The force North Korea seeks to develop, while part aspirational and part years away, was far more than that needed by a country that simply wanted to be left alone, Seiler said, adding: "That is where the real risk of inaction comes in."

On Tuesday, Blinken had spoken of the review plan

North Korea's nuclear weapons were a serious threat to peace and Washington had a vital interest in deterring Pyongyang

JEN PSAKI,

White House spokeswoman

in response to a question by Democratic Senator Ed Markey, who asked whether Blinken would, with the ultimate aim of North Korea denuclearizing, support a "phased agreement" that offered tailored sanctions relief to Pyongyang in return for a freeze in its weapons programs.

Biden's top Asia official, Kurt Campbell, has said the administration must decide its approach quickly and not repeat an Obama-era delay that led to "provocative" steps by Pyongyang that prevented engagement.

— Reuters

Jail terms given to men involved in Vietnamese truck deaths

LONDON: Four men were given long jail sentences on Friday for the manslaughter of 39 Vietnamese men, women and children who suffocated to death in a stifling, airtight shipping container in October 2019 as they were being smuggled into Britain.

The discovery of so many dead people — two as young as 15 — in the back of the truck on an industrial estate to the east of London shocked Britain and Vietnam. It also shone a spotlight on the illicit global trade that sends the poor of Asia, Africa on perilous journeys to the West.

As oxygen levels fell, some tried desperately to escape, but in vain.

Others used mobile phones to say their last farewells to devastated relatives on the other side of the world.

Judge Nigel Sweeney said they had suffered an "excruciating slow death" as he jailed seven men involved in the people smuggling gang for a total of 92 years at London's Old Bailey criminal court.

He said it was a sophisticated, long-running, and profitable scheme which would have netted the gang hundreds of thousands of pounds.

The four who admitted or were found guilty of manslaughter and immigration offences, were 41-year-old haulier Ronan Hughes from Northern Ireland, the leader of the plot who was jailed for 20 years, and Romanian Gheorghe Nica, 44, another major figure, who was sentenced to 27 years behind bars.

Maurice Robinson, 26, the Northern Irish driver of the truck in which the bodies were found, was jailed for 13 years, while Eamonn Harrison, 24, also from the British province, who drove the container to the Belgian port of Zeebrugge from where the victims were taken to Britain, was given an 18-year sentence.

— Reuters

Wuhan marks a year since lockdown began in late 2019

SHANGHAI: China on Saturday reported more new cases of COVID-19 and the financial hub of Shanghai imposed new restrictions, as the country marked the anniversary of the world's first coronavirus lockdown in Wuhan city, where the disease emerged in late 2019.

The National Health Commission said 107 new COVID-19 cases had been identified in the mainland on Saturday, up from 103 cases the day before.

The commission said in a statement that 90 of the new cases were local infections.

The northeastern province of Heilongjiang recorded 56 new cases and neighbouring Jilin province had 13. Beijing and Shanghai recorded three new cases each, and the province of Hebei, which surrounds Beijing, recorded 15 new cases.



Huang Genben, who spent 67 days in hospital fighting the COVID-19 coronavirus in 2020, during an interview in Wuhan. — AFP

Shanghai's health commission designated a new medium-risk area in the city's northern Baoshan district, locking down

a neighbourhood in response to two new cases. The city had earlier named a hotel and a neighbourhood near its historic

riverfront Bund as medium-risk areas. The number of new asymptomatic cases, which China does not classify as confirmed cases, fell to 99 from 119 cases a day earlier.

Beijing launched mass COVID-19 testing in some areas on Friday and Shanghai was testing all hospital staff as China faced its worst novel coronavirus outbreak since March, with families fretting over Lunar New Year reunion plans.

Also on Friday, China reported its first cluster of cases among workers in a meat processing plant in Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang, raising consumer concerns.

The total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in mainland China stands at 88,911, while the death toll remained unchanged at 4,635. Wuhan shut down transport networks and suspended outgoing

flights on January 23, 2020, in an attempt to cut off transmission of the virus.

China on Friday premiered a documentary film to mark the anniversary of the lockdown, part of a broader effort to cast China's early response to COVID-19 in a positive light after some suggestions, which authorities reject, of an initial delay.

Zhong Guo, a Wuhan retiree dancing to traditional music near the banks of the Yangtze River said that life in the city was "definitely better" a year after the lockdown began.

"But you still have to be on your guard. You need to protect yourself, wear a mask and base your methods of protection on science", he said.

More than 2 million people around the world have died from the novel coronavirus, according to a tally. — Reuters

Russia arrests over 1,000 at Navalny protests

MOSCOW: More than 1,000 people were detained on Saturday as demonstrators took to the streets across Russia to demand the release of jailed dissident Alexei Navalny, civil rights activists said.

Of those, at least 300 people were detained in the capital Moscow and a further 162 in St Petersburg, according to volunteer platform OVD-Info.

Reporters at the scene witnessed uniformed officers in Moscow’s central Pushkin Square carrying people to prison transport vehicles or leading them away.

Navlany’s wife Yulia Navalnaya was among those detained. She posted a picture of herself in a dark space on Instagram with the caption: “Sorry for the poor quality. The light in the police van is very poor.”

A previous picture on her feed showed her attending the Moscow protest. Navalny’s team had also posted a picture of his mother at the unauthorised event.

Close Navalny ally Lyubov Sobol, a lawyer, was also detained.

Among the thousands of protesters in Moscow were many young people and members of the middle class.

Activists and journalists said the Internet had been shut down as videos of security forces attacking demonstrators with batons circulated on social networks.

Earlier, detentions were reported in cities across the country’s far east, where demonstrations began hours



A woman wears a face mask reading ‘Free Navalny’ during a protest demanding the release of detained Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Barcelona. — AFP

earlier due to the time difference.

Navalny’s team said thousands of demonstrators turned out in the cities of Khabarovsk, Irkutsk and Novosibirsk, braving freezing-cold temperatures.

Crowds shouted slogans including: “We have the power” and “Putin is a thief.”

Earlier this week, Navalny’s team released a video titled “A Palace for Putin,” claiming to show that the long-standing leader has built a “tsarist empire” on the Black Sea funded by bribes. The Kremlin has dismissed the accusations as a “lie.”

In Khabarovsk, protests also focused on the arrest of the

city’s popular former governor, Sergei Furgal. Activists shared footage of police officers beating demonstrators and bundling them into a van.

In the Siberian city of Tomsk, where Navalny was poisoned with the Novichok nerve agent in August, his supporters were expected to stage the largest unauthorised protest in decades.

Navalny has blamed the chemical attack on President Vladimir Putin and the FSB intelligence service — charges which the Kremlin denies.

Navalny’s supporters earlier this week took to social media to call for protests in more than 90

cities throughout Russia.

The rallies were not sanctioned by authorities, with Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov warning people not to take part. Russia has banned all protests during the pandemic.

Navalny, who returned from receiving treatment in Germany last weekend, was sentenced to 30 days of pre-trial detention on Monday. The Russian judiciary says he violated his parole from an earlier sentence by travelling to Germany for his recovery.

Navalny and his team have dismissed the allegations as a politically motivated attempt to silence him. — dpa

Iconic TV, radio interviewer Larry King dead at 87

LOS ANGELES: The iconic talk show host Larry King, one of the most recognisable figures on US television as he quizzed everyone who was anyone over a career spanning 60 years, died on Saturday at the age of 87.

The company he co-founded, Ora Media, did not state a cause of death but media reports said King had been battling COVID-19 for weeks and had suffered several health problems in recent years.

King, with his trademark suspenders, black rim glasses and deep voice, was best known for a 25-year run as a talk show host on CNN’s “Larry King Live.”

“For 63 years and across the platforms of radio, television and digital media, Larry’s many thousands of interviews, awards, and global acclaim stand as a testament to his unique and lasting talent as a broadcaster,” Ora Media said in a statement posted on Twitter.

King’s long list of interviewees ranged from every US president since 1974, world leaders Yasser Arafat and Vladimir Putin, and celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Marlon Brando and Barbra Streisand.

In an emotional last “Larry King Live” show in 2010, tributes included one from president Barack Obama, who in a video message called King “one of the giants of broadcasting.”

Tributes from the media, politicians and Hollywood stars poured in, led by Putin, who hailed the interviewer’s “great professionalism and unquestioned journalistic



TV Personality Larry King

authority,” according to the Kremlin.

Veteran CNN foreign correspondent Christiane Amanpour remembered King as “a giant of broadcasting and a master of the TV celebrity/statesman-woman interview.”

She added: “His name is synonymous with CNN and he was vital to the network’s ascent. Everyone wanted to be on Larry King Live. May he Rest in Peace.” Star Trek icon and social media personality George Takei noted how King understood “human triumph and frailty equally well,” while Kirstie Alley, of “Cheers” fame, described him as “one of the only talk show hosts who let you talk.”

Born Lawrence Harvey Zeiger on November 19, 1933, to poor Russian Jewish immigrants in working-class Brooklyn, New York, King says he never wanted to be anything but a radio broadcaster. — AFP

Farmers ‘need more climate aid to ward off famines’: UN

PARIS: Climate aid to millions of small farmers around the world must “substantially increase” to ward off hunger and instability, a United Nations body warned on Saturday.

Small farmers “do little to cause climate change, but suffer the most from its impacts,” Gilbert F Houngbo, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) said in a statement.

“If investments... do not substantially increase, we risk widespread hunger and global instability,” IFAD added.

Houngbo said small farmers’ “increasingly common crop

failures and livestock deaths put our entire food system at risk”, warning that “hunger, poverty and migration will become even more widespread” without increased aid.

The UN body’s warning comes ahead of a climate adaptation summit on January 25 and 26 in the Netherlands.

At the gathering, IFAD plans to launch a new \$500-million fund dubbed ASAP+ “to reduce climate change threats to food security, lower greenhouse gases and help more than 10 million people adapt to weather changes”.

Austria, Germany, Ireland and Qatar have already said they will



Farmers separate husk after threshing their harvest of maize at a farm on the outskirts of Bangalore. — AFP

The UN body’s warning comes ahead of a climate adaptation summit on January 25, 26 in the Netherlands

contribute.

British actor Idris Elba and his wife Sandrine, both IFAD “Goodwill Ambassadors”, will take part in a debate at the summit with Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo.

IFAD-funded research forecasts a potential fall in production of staples like beans,

maize and cassava of between 50 and 90 per cent by 2050 across much of sub-Saharan Africa due to climate change, “which would result in substantial increases in hunger and poverty”.

“Climate change could push more than 140 million people to migrate” over the same period, the studies found.

IFAD’s earlier ASAP programme has already distributed \$300 million to more than five million farmers in 41 countries.

But the body notes that only 1.7 per cent of global climate finance goes to small-scale farmers in developing countries. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

PARIS

Ocean Viking aid ship rescues 374 migrants

The *Ocean Viking* aid ship has rescued 374 migrants from distress in the Mediterranean Sea off Libya within the past 48 hours, the ship’s French operating organisation SOS Mediterranee tweeted.

The crew had approached Malta and Italy, among others, with their request to be taken in, it said.

“With 374 survivors on board and an increasingly bad weather situation, we need to disembark the rescued people as soon as



possible at the nearest safe port, as required by maritime law,” said Verena Papke, Executive director of SOS Mediterranee Germany.

“Such a safe port can only be a European one.” — dpa

AMSTERDAM

Netherlands enters strictest lockdown yet

The Netherlands is set to enter its toughest phase of anti-coronavirus restrictions to date, imposing a nationwide night-time curfew in a bid to control the infection rate. From Saturday evening, residents must observe a curfew from 9 pm until 4:30 am the following morning, during which time they will be banned from leaving their homes.

The aim is to sharply reduce infections as concerns grow over mutations of the virus. The country has also banned flights



from Britain, South Africa and South America, where more transmissible coronavirus variants have been identified.

Violations of the curfew will be met with a \$116-fine.

— dpa

JOHANNESBURG

Cyclone hits Mozambique port city

The coastal city of Beira in Mozambique, which houses one of the country’s most important ports, has seen mild damage to property and flooding after tropical cyclone Eloise made landfall early on Saturday, an official said in a TV report.

The cyclone has since lost its strength and has been downgraded to a tropical storm, according to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO). “Beira had mild damage, but is too early to quantify the



extent and scale of destruction,” Luisa Meque, President of Mozambique’s National Institute for Disaster Risk Management and Reduction (INGD), said in a television interview with national broadcaster TVM.

— Reuters

Let’s think ‘Outside the Box...’

I am not sure if I would have been a happy or frustrated student, as this unsettled educational year takes yet another turn with the phased reopening of schools and classrooms, but if I think back on the many ways of filling in my childhood and my youth, I probably would have seen the whole COVID-19 ‘thing’ as another kind of opportunity, and become even better as a sailor, fisherman, tramp and woodsman, given the many opportunities of my New Zealand environment and society.

However, I can certainly sympathise with the thousands of young Omanis who did not have such a temperate environment in which to practice their outdoor pursuits, at any time, let alone during the pandemic, especially as the most severe restrictions were imposed as the summer temperatures rose.

Teachers have been challenged, not in terms of their classroom expertise, or ability to teach, but in coming to terms with a teaching scenario that has been totally and completely foreign to most. They have had to learn to present lessons from the privacy of their homes, shared offices, or alternative environments where intrusions are commonplace, to supervise and teach classes of individuals in individual response scenarios who have their own interruptions, trying to identify



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and respond to questions with the distractions of screen and microphone failures. It must have felt sometimes like a never-ending nightmare!

I have so much sympathy for their plight and circumstances simply in teaching, and that does not consider the number of difficulties involved in the teaching itself, or the assessment of the student’s learning. Teaching itself, I have found to be a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding vocation, and implementing educational theory, whether through the psychologies or the practicalities of teaching and learning can be a remarkably social event, with learning classrooms ‘buzzing’ with questions, answers, discussions, even arguments, as there is a ‘cross-pollination’ of knowledge and understanding among the students.

It is just so difficult to get that same level of engagement in online learning, and I have found myself continually frustrated in teaching online, and it must be said, mainly because of the factors I have little or no control over. Internet service has been a massive issue, and I have no doubt that service providers are doing their best to provide a level of service for all learning platforms, whether Zoom, Teams, Meet, or any other, but it is just not happening, and especially away from the capital.

It is human nature for students sharing screen to be distracted when another screen goes ‘mute,’ ‘off video,’ or an unplanned event occurs, such as another family member coming into the room. Even their apology and departure has distracted and caused a reaction like a pebble on a pond. No matter where every participant is, they must ‘rewind,’ and start again, and in terms of teaching and learning, it is a ‘killer.’

I do understand that everyone has just tried to ‘get through this,’ with as little harm done to the overall learning experience as possible, however there is no way that the educational experiences of millions of students around the world have been affected, and there is no hiding from that. My opinion is that ‘blended learning’ is not something that should be pursued as a viable, first choice, educational mainstream alternative, but that there is a place for it as a means of further and higher education.

The 28 research studies that have taken place reviewing the Sultanate’s educational experiences, and their future recommendations should feature socially distanced classes and lectures, temporary satellite campuses, mobile faculty, and be more about responding to the student’s needs than the institutions.

GLOBAL DANGERS

World’s ageing big dams pose ‘emerging risk’

MARLOWE HOOD

By 2050, more than half the global population will live downstream from tens of thousands of large dams near or past their intended lifespan, according to a UN report released last Friday.

Most of the world’s nearly 59,000 big dams — constructed between 1930 and 1970 — were designed to last 50 to 100 years, according to research from the UN University’s Institute for Water, Environment and Health.

“This is an emerging global risk that we are not yet paying attention to,” co-author and Institute director Vladimir Smakhtin said. “In terms of dams at risk, the number is growing year by year, decade by decade.”

A well-designed, constructed and maintained dam can easily remain functional for a century.

But many of the world’s major dams fail on one or more of these criteria.

Dozens have suffered major damage or outright collapse over the last two decades in the United States, India, Brazil, Afghanistan and other countries, and the number of such failures could increase, the report warned.

Compounding the risk in ways that have yet to be fully measured is global warming.

“Because of climate change, extreme rainfall and flooding events are becoming more frequent,” lead author Duminda Perera, a researcher at the University of Ottawa and McMaster University, said in an interview. “This not only increases the risk of reservoirs overflowing but also accelerates the build up of sediment, which affects dam safety, reduces water storage capacity, and lowers energy production in hydroelectric dams.”

In February 2017, the spillways of California’s Oroville Dam — the tallest in the US — were damaged during heavy rainfall, prompting the emergency evacuation of more than 180,000 people downstream.

In 2019, record flooding sparked concern that Mosul Dam, Iraq’s largest, could fail.

Ageing dams not only pose a greater risk to downstream populations, but also become less efficient at generating electricity, and far more expensive to maintain.

Because the number of large dams under construction or planned has dropped sharply since the 1960s and 1970s, these problems will multiply in coming years, the report showed.

“There won’t be another dam-building revolution, so the average age of dams is getting older,” said Perera.

“Due to new energy sources coming online — solar, wind — a lot of planned hydroelectric dams will probably not ever be built”

A global fleet of nearly 60,000 ageing dams also highlights the challenge of dismantling — or “decommissioning” — those that are no longer safe or functional.

Several dozen have been torn down in the United States, but all of them small, Smakhtin said.

More than 90 per cent of large dams — at least 15 metres from foundation to crest, or holding back no less than three million cubic metres of water — are located in only two dozen countries. — AFP

HANGING BY A THREAD

Biden pledges Covid aid for US as poor countries win cheaper tests

New US President Joe Biden was to order more help for Americans struggling to cope with the pandemic in the world’s worst-hit country, as an international deal won cheaper access to rapid COVID-19 tests for millions in poorer nations.

As Biden moves rapidly to distance himself from the legacy of predecessor Donald Trump — who often undermined the advice of his own experts — a flurry of US measures will oblige officials to boost protection for workers and speed up access to federal money.

“The American people can’t afford to wait,” said Brian Deese of the White House’s National Economic Council, adding that many people were “hanging by a thread”.

Europe’s economy has also taken a battering, with indicators showing on Friday that strict anti-virus measures were helping to push the euro zone into a “double-dip” recession.

The continent’s biggest economy Germany is among the nations struggling to tamp down its outbreak, with the national death toll now past 50,000.

Germany also confirmed its first case of the newer Brazilian strain of COVID-19 on Friday — one of several potent new variants spreading worldwide.

There were further signs that European Union governments are tiring of the bloc’s strategy to buy vaccines in bulk on behalf of members, with Hungary announcing it had made a deal with Russia to buy two million doses of the Sputnik V vaccine.



US President Joe Biden speaks about his administration’s plans to respond to the economic crisis at the White House in Washington, on Friday. — Reuters

THE WORLD HEALTH
ORGANIZATION
HAS REPEATEDLY
WARNED THAT
RICHER COUNTRIES
ARE HOGGING THE
VACCINE

“If there is no vaccine from the Union, let it come from elsewhere,” said Prime Minister Viktor Orban, whose popularity comes partly from a long-running battle with Brussels on a range of topics.

Brazil, the second worst-hit country in terms of deaths, was also due to receive two million vaccine doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford jab that were made in India.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has repeatedly warned that

richer countries are hogging the vaccine. But there was some good news on Friday for poorer nations, as a deal was announced to supply them with tens of millions of rapid antigen tests at half the usual \$5 price.

The deal was brokered by international agencies working with the WHO, and will see an Indian firm manufacture up to 120 million tests.

Many parts of Europe are still in crisis mode, with hospitals pushed to the brink. — AFP

sport



NORTH ROAD'S PERKINS TOPS STAGE 6, MUNDHER CLAIMS THIRD

OCA CHAMPIONSHIP GENERAL STANDINGS AFTER STAGE 6				
Rank	Rider	Category	Team	Points
1	Paul Willcox	M40+	North Road Oman	372
2	Mundher al Hasani	U23	Ahli Sidab - A	370
3	Mohammed al Wahaibi	U23	Ahli Sidab - A	318
4	Mazin al Riyami	Elite	Gulf Cycles 293	293
5	Shihab al Qamshouai	Elite	Royal Army	290
6	Hatim al Booshari	Elite	Royal Army	265
7	Waleed al Fahdi	U23	Arsene Endurance	236
8	Abdullah al Yaqoobi	Elite	Gulf Cycles	232
9	Husam al Rawahi	Elite	Royal Army	224
10	Mashari al Khalili	Elite	Royal Army	204
11	Saud al Mandhari	Elite	Ahli Sidab - A	202
12	Shabib al Balushi	Elite	Gulf Cycles	198
13	Szczepan Pietruszka	M40+	North Road Oman	195
14	Said al Rahbi	U23	Royal Army	178
15	Bradley Perkins	U23		170
16	Abdullah al Hasani	Elite	Arsene Endurance	169
17	Daniel Baldwin	Elite	North Road Oman	161
18	Ahmed al Battashi	Elite	Ahli Sidab - A	152
19	Talal al Maskari	U23	Ahli Sidab - A	136
20	Mohammed al Lamki	Elite	Ahli Sidab - B	134



WILLCOX BACK IN THE RED

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 23

North Road Oman rider Paul Willcox returned to the Omantel red jersey with a close second-place finish in the 87 km sixth stage of the Oman Cycling Association (OCA) Championship in the coastal city of Qurayat on Friday.

Willcox, who had slipped to the second to Arsene Endurance rider Abdullah al Ghailani after the fifth stage in Nizwa, clawed his way back in style with a second-best time of 2 hours 6 minutes and 45.13 seconds. By matter of seconds, the United Kingdom cyclist missed the first spot to under-23 rider and team-mate Bradley Perkins (2:06:42.73).

With two more stages to go, Willcox is leading the general classifications with 372 points.

Ahli Sidab 'As Mundher al Hasani claimed the third spot (2:06:56.72) and closed in on Willcox for red jersey with 370 points.

Ahli Sidab 'As under-23 rider Mohammed al Wahaibi (2:07:19.71), who finished fifth on Friday, is third overall with 318 points. Mundher and Al Wahaibi are the joint leaders in the Bank Nizwa white jersey standings for the under-23 section with 265 points each. Arsene Endurance's Waleed al Fahdi is third with 250 points.

In Qurayat, Royal Army's Hatim al Booshari finished up fourth on 2:07:14.14.

Willcox also topped the 40 plus category for Sohar International green jersey.

Stage winner Perkins also topped the under-23 section.

Among the teams, Royal Army is leading with 235 points, followed by North Road Oman (200) and Ahli Sidab 'A' (191)

Stage 7, the penultimate race in the OCA Championship,

will take place in Al Amerat on February 5. The Individual time trial will be run for 45 km from Al Amerat to Al Salil and back.

HILLTOP FINISH

The 87 km circuit was mainly out and back along the new Muscat-Qurayat-Sur Expressway.

With the start and finish on the old road, it was set up for a hilltop finish with a 3 km, 200 metres switchback climb at an average of 8 per cent gradient. The same finish also features in one of the Tour of Oman stages.

"With the finish suited for the best climbers, a clear tactic was to keep fresh for the final ascent. With no neutralised start and a tricky fast descent to negotiate after the first 5 km, the race started frantically... and soon a large group of the strongest riders was away", the North Road Oman captain explained.

"The pace never let up from there, a small break away was attempted by a group of riders but as we crested the highway climb they were reeled back in. The main group then arrived at the bottom of the climb. I led the charge up the hill with my closest rival and GC leader hot on my wheel, closely followed by Bradley."

"The three of us separated and with 300m Brad came past to surge in for the overall win... I held off a late attack from Mundher coming in second. The placing gave me back the GC lead (red jersey) and taking first in the Masters category", the 44-year-old said.

Like in the Duqm cycling and OCA Stage 5, North Road Oman continued their dominance.

Daniel Baldwin, Greg Pollard, Simeon Gelacio all saw the team take 6 out of 9 podium spots with a full 40 Masters with Simeon and Algene, and Brad topping the U-23 section with his outright win.



Benitez leaves China's Dalian Pro, blames virus

Rafa Benitez abruptly left as coach of Chinese Super League side Dalian Pro on Saturday, saying it was for family reasons because of the coronavirus pandemic. The 60-year-old Spaniard, who took Liverpool to Champions League glory in 2005, had been in charge of Dalian since July 2019.



Guardiola calls for fewer teams in Premier League, EFL

Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola has called for a reduction in the number of clubs in the Premier League and English football League to improve the quality of competition amid talk of a breakaway European Super League. The concept of a European Super League has been floated for years.

Anderson six-for keeps Sri Lanka in check



James Anderson

GALLE, Sri Lanka: England paceman James Anderson returned his best figures of 6-40 in Asia to help bowl out Sri Lanka for 381 on day two of the second Test on Saturday.

The tourists were 98 for two at stumps after Lasith Embuldeniya struck early to remove the openers. Skipper Joe Root, on 67, and Jonny Bairstow, on 24, were batting as England trail by 283 runs in Galle.

Anderson, 38, denied wicketkeeper-batsman Niroshan Dickwella a century after sending him back on 92 to claim his 30th five-wicket haul and second in Sri Lanka — his previous best was 5-75 in Galle in 2012.

Anderson, who replaced Stuart Broad in the team for this Test, bowled 29 overs with 13 maidens before Sri Lanka were bowled out in an extended second session with Dilruwan Perera scoring a defiant 67.

The pace spearhead struck in his first over of the day to send Angelo Mathews caught behind for 110 after the former captain added just three runs in the morning.

But the dismissal was skipper Joe Root's mastermind after he reviewed the umpire's call, which was not out, and replays suggested the ball had grazed Mathews' bat.

Fast bowler Mark Wood sent debutant Ramesh Mendis trudging back to the pavilion for nought with wicketkeeper Jos Buttler taking a one-handed diving catch towards his left.

Dickwella made the team fight back with his 16th Test fifty as he put together a 89-run seventh-wicket stand with Perera.

Perera also dug in after

Dickwella's wicket and scored his seventh Test half-century to frustrate the England bowlers before falling to Sam Curran.

All the 10 wickets went to the pacemen with Wood taking three scalps.

But it was spin in the final session with left-arm orthodox Embuldeniya sending back Dom Sibley, for nought, and Zak Crawley, for five, in quick succession.

Root and Bairstow got together to thwart the Sri Lankan attack as they put on an unbroken 93-run stand till close of play.

Root, who hit 228 in his team's opening win last week, recorded his 50th half-century in his 99th match.

The series, which is being played behind closed doors, resumed after being cancelled in March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

Sri Lanka (0/n: 229/4):

L Thirimanne c Buttler b Anderson	43
K Perera c Root b Anderson	6
O Fernando b Anderson	0
A Mathews c Buttler B Anderson	110
D Chandimal lbw Wood	52
N Dickwella c Leach b Anderson	92
R Mendis c Buttler b Wood	0
D Perera c Leach b Curran	67
S Lakmal c Crawley b Anderson	0
L Embuldeniya c Root b Wood	7
A Fernando (not out)	0
Extras (LB-2, NB-1, W-1)	4
Total (139.3 overs, all out)	381
Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-7, 3-76, 4-193, 5-232, 6-243, 7-332, 8-332, 9-364.	
Bowling: Anderson 29-13-40-6, Curran 18-3-3-60-1, Leach 38-5-119-0, Wood 28-4-84-3, Bess 26-2-76-0.	
England	
Z Crawley c Thirimanne b Embuldeniya .	5
D Sibley lbw Embuldeniya	0
J Bairstow (not out)	24
J Root (not out)	67
Extras (B-2)	2
Total (8-2 wkts, 30 overs)	98
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-5.	
Bowling: Lakmal 5-2-10-0, Embuldeniya 11-4-33-2, Fernando 5-2-12-0, Perera 7-1-22-0, Mendis 2-0-19-0.	

Siraj says Australia abuse made him 'mentally strong'

HYDERABAD, India: India bowler Mohammed Siraj has given his first public account of the crowd abuse he suffered during the Australia Test series, saying it made him "mentally strong". Siraj said India, who stunned Australia to win the series 2-1, declined an offer from the umpires to walk off the field as players were abused in the third Test in Sydney. According to Indian media, shouts of "monkey" and other insults rang out when Siraj and fellow fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah were fielding near the boundary.

"The crowd in Australia began to abuse me but it made me mentally strong. I did not let it affect my game and that was important," said Siraj. "I told my captain Ajju bhai (Ajinkya Rahane) about the abuse and he spoke to the umpires who said you can leave the field. But Rahane said: 'We will play on.'"

He said Rahane told the umpires to take action over the abuse. Six fans were ejected and an investigation into the incident is underway.

— AFP

MUSCAT: Oman's international rally star Hamed al Wahaibi is back behind the rally car coming out of his long retirement.

Hamed announced his return that has come about to support the Oman Automobile Association to successfully host the second round of MERC this season.

Oman Sohar International rally, which will be held in Muscat from 18-20 February, will witness the return of Al Wahaibi on Skoda Fabia R5 for the first time on this car, after more than 10 years ago when he was behind the steering of rally car in Oman rally championship in 2012.

Al Wahaibi said "I am delighted to be back again to the rally world as an exceptional season to support in having good rally in Muscat, and as OAA is organising this event I was always supporting them and will do so even this time."

The Omani rally driver added that he is in a physical fitness programme to be fully fit for the rally and the championship and working hard on that programme, and he will start the training on the rally car Skoda Fabia this



week.

Al Wahaibi has mentioned that it will not be easy to compete with the Qatari rally champion Nasser al Attiya as he is racing continuously for the last 20 years in different championships like MERC and Dakar rally, and he is the champion of this championship for almost 15

Hamed announced his return that has come about to support the Oman Automobile Association to successfully host the second round of MERC this season

times, so it is very difficult to win the race, but said they will do their best. The Skoda Fabia R5 is been prepared by motor tune under the supervision of the Lebanese superstar rally driver Rojer Faghali and Al Wahaibi is aiming that the Omani young driver will showcase their talent and perform good skills in this rally.

Hammad helps Renaissance to victory

COMFORTABLE WINS FOR SARCO, PDO, OHI TOO

MUSCAT: Hammad Ifraq's dashing 88 not out saw Renaissance to an exciting 6-wicket victory against AER in a Premier Division 50-over League match at OC Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Friday.

AER failed to capitalise on the opportunity to bat first and set a big total on the board, getting bowled out for 174 in the 43rd over. Asim Kamal (65) and Shoaib Muhammad (56) were its main scorers batting at number nine and ten. Azam Khan and Yash Mehta claimed three wickets each.

Renaissance surpassed the total in the 45th over, scoring 176 for 4 thanks to brilliant batting by Hammad who stayed on to steer his side to a solid win.

Brief Scores (Premier Division): AER 174 all out in 44.2 overs (Asim Kamal 65 – 74, 3x6, Shoaib Muhammad 56 – 3x4, 4x6, Azam Khan 3-31, Yash Mehta 3-33, Asif Khan 2-24, Syed Muzamil 2-11) lost to Renaissance 176 for 4 in 44.4 overs (Hammad Ifraq 88 not out – 13x4, 1x6, Rubella Abdus 2-36) by 6 wickets.

Patil bowls Sarco to victory

Sandip Patel's magnificent 6 for 40 was the highlight of Sarco's superb win over Arabian Region Travel and Tourism (ARTT) in an A Division 50-over League encounter at OC Turf 2 on Friday.

ARTT did well to dismiss Sarco for only 160 in the 39th over with Zeeshan Siddiqui, Nazir Ahmed and Aqil Khan taking two wickets each. Dileepa Srilal (40) and Murad Khan (31) were Sarco's main scorers.

ARTT found Sandip and Hafiz Zahid unplayable and was bundled out for a dismal 132 in the 35th over with only Zeeshan Siddiqui making a notable score (60 off 67). Hafiz bagged 3 for 29.

Brief Scores (A Division): Sarco 160 all out in 38.5 overs (Dileepa Srilal 40 – 5x4, Murad Khan 31 1x4, 3x6, Zeeshan Siddiqui 2-34, Nazir Ahmed 2-34, Aqil Khan 2-33) beat ARTT 132 all out in 34.3 overs (Zeeshan Siddiqui 60 – 7x4, 1x6, Sandip Patel 6-40, Hafiz Zahid 3-29) by 28 runs.

Naveed ton helps PDO to easy win

PDO RC's run machine Abdul Naveed regained his touch, striking a beautiful 102 as his side thrashed Bank Muscat by 84 runs in a B Division 30-over league match at Muscat Municipality ground 1 in Al Amerat.

Apart from Naveed's splendid knock, Nadeem Khan (45) was the other leading scorer as PDO posted 236 for 8 on the board. Mohammed Umar and Zeeshan Tufail bagged two wickets each.

Bank Muscat found the going

tough and folded up for 152 in 28.1 overs. Opener Mohsin Nazir and Abbas al Balushi topscored with 17 each. Pisharody Uday claimed 3 for 27.

Brief Scores (B Division): PDO RC 236 for 8 in 30 overs (Abdul Naveed 102 – 15x4, 1x6, Nadeem Ahmed 45 – 6x4, 1x6, Mohammed Umar 2-47, Zeeshan Tufail 2-37) beat Bank Muscat 152 all out in 28.1 overs (Mohsin Nazir 17 – 2x4, Abbas al Balushi 17 – 2x4, Pisharody Uday 3-27, Abdul Naveed 2-20, Saud Baig 2-23, Zakir Khan 2-35) by 84 runs.

Ismail bats OHI to big win

An outstanding 178-run opening partnership between Ismail al Balushi (100 off 57) and Santosh Vishwakar (88 not out off 45) powered Douglas OHI to a big 145-run victory in a C Division T20 League game at Muscat Municipality ground 2.

Jumbo Electronics did not show the willingness to match OHI's effort, managing only 98 for 8 in 20 overs. Saeed Mohammed topscored with 34. Abdul Rehman was the pick of OHI bowlers, taking 3 for 22.

Brief Scores (C Division): Douglas OHI 243 for 1 in 20 overs (Ismail al Balushi 100 – 13x4, 2x6, Santosh Vishwakar 88 – 12x4, 1x6) beat Jumbo Electronics Co. Ltd 98 for 8 in 20 overs (Saeed Mohammed 34 – 5x4, Abdul Rehman 3-22, Mohsin Alimamad 2-20) by 145 runs.

POGBA'S RENAISSANCE COMES AT PERFECT TIME FOR UNITED

LONDON: Paul Pogba is back in form for Manchester United at just the right time as the Premier League leaders prepare for Sunday's FA Cup showdown with bitter rivals Liverpool.

Pogba has been a constant source of friction during his second spell with United and recent suggestions that he was keen to engineer a close-season transfer came as little surprise.

Mino Raiola, the France midfielder's agent, infuriated United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer in December by giving an interview in which he suggested Pogba wanted to leave because he was "unhappy" with the lack of freedom granted to him at Old Trafford.

At the time, Pogba's form was so erratic and his team's results so concerning, that some United fans would gladly have helped him to the exit door.

Perceived in some quarters to be a bad influence on some of his younger United team-mates, Pogba's stock could not have been any lower when Solskjaer's side crashed out of the Champions League in the same week Raiola made his inflammatory claims.

At that point, a move to his former club Juventus or a possible switch to Paris Saint Germain or Real Madrid seemed inevitable.

But from the ashes of what looked like a season-defining calamity, both Pogba and United have unexpectedly returned to prominence.

Finally showing signs of knuckling down and putting his focus on football rather than his image and commercial interests, Pogba has played a key role in United's surge to the top of the Premier League.

Solskjaer reportedly made his displeasure known to Pogba about Raiola's intervention, but did not lose his cool with the 27-year-old.

Pogba has repaid that show of faith with match-winning goals in United's league victories at Burnley and then Fulham on Wednesday.

The World Cup winner's superb curler against Fulham was only his fourth goal of the season but, with Pogba back in the groove, United are a far more formidable force.

'IN GOOD SHAPE'

Sitting two points clear at the top of the Premier League, United are in contention for a first English title since Alex Ferguson retired in 2013.

After the dour goalless draw between the old foes in the league at Anfield on January 17, United have a chance to inflict a psychological blow on Liverpool when the champions visit Old Trafford in the FA Cup fourth round this weekend.

The question on the lips of everyone at United is whether Pogba can sustain his sudden hot streak.

Some believe Pogba is motivated by a desire to keep his place in the France team ahead of this year's delayed European Championships.

Whatever the reason behind Pogba's renaissance, Solskjaer would clearly benefit from keeping his temperamental playmaker in a positive frame of mind.

"He's enjoying his football, he's happy. Mentally he's very happy and physically he's in a very good shape and we know all about his talents," Solskjaer said.

"We decided to play him in midfield (against Fulham) and it was worth it."

United are catching Liverpool at the perfect time after Burnley ended the champions' 68-game unbeaten home league record with a shock 1-0 win at Anfield on Thursday.

Jurgen Klopp's side have gone five league games without a win and lie six points behind United.

It is seven hours and 18 minutes since they last found the net in the league — Liverpool's worst goal drought for almost 21 years.

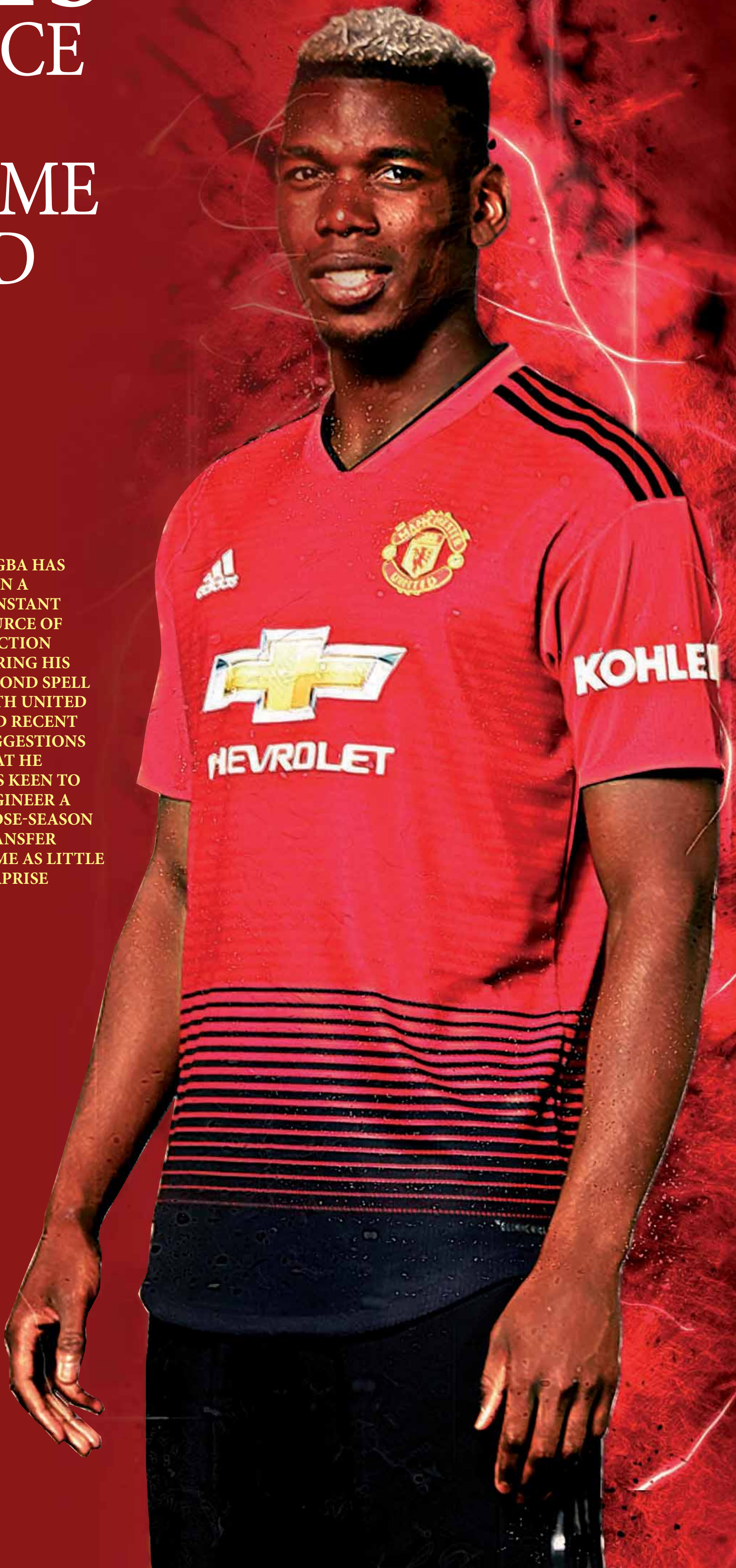
A victory over United would be just the tonic the ailing Reds need.

"When things don't work out on the pitch as we want them to, then there is an issue," Klopp said.

"The issue is that the things I tell the boys, I didn't tell them clear enough so I have to change the way I tell the boys and then we have to change the way we play.

"We have to keep going with the things that were good enough and improve the others." — AFP

POGBA HAS BEEN A CONSTANT SOURCE OF FRICTION DURING HIS SECOND SPELL WITH UNITED AND RECENT SUGGESTIONS THAT HE WAS KEEN TO ENGINEER A CLOSE-SEASON TRANSFER CAME AS LITTLE SURPRISE





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Port of Salalah concludes 2020 with record container volumes

POSITIVE TRENDS: Container throughput hits new record of 4.34m TEUs despite COVID-19 challenges

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

Despite the challenging situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Port of Salalah finished 2020 with a record-breaking container volume of 4.34 million TEUs (twenty-foot-equivalent units) and thereby laying a solid foundation for uninterrupted operations also in 2021.

Year 2020 had an unprecedented global impact on supply chain efficiencies with all players facing existential challenges which required fast, flexible, proactive and a very collaborative approach with all stakeholders for survival.

The spectacular results accomplished by the port, in a rather difficult environment, have been attributed to the commitment and dedication displayed by the staff at every level across the organisation and a strong commitment of its customers and business partners.

In a statement, Port of Salalah also highlighted the collaboration and remarkable efforts of various government agencies like ROP, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Transport, Communications and



Information Technology and ASYAD to name a few.

“Above all, the decisive and visionary leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the various ministries and councils have been instrumental in ensuring that the impact of COVID-19 is mitigated significantly in Oman which has also allowed our staff to function effectively through the crises,” it noted.

Mark Hardiman, CEO of Port of Salalah, stated: “While year 2020 has undoubtedly been one of the most challenging years the world has witnessed, it was a privilege to lead a team that went above and beyond to ensure that

The spectacular results have been attributed to the commitment and dedication displayed by the staff at every level across the organisation and a strong commitment of its customers and business partners.

our customers’ supply chain were functional and operational during these uncertain times and also mitigated any adverse impact to the local economy to the maximum extent possible.

“The team also ensured that vital supplies moved in and

out of the country swiftly and seamlessly.”

“This is an impressive accomplishment considering the team has also achieved a new record in productivity on top of the record volume,” added Scott Selman, Port of Salalah Chief Operating Officer.

According to Scott, these milestones were possible thanks to the Way of Working (WoW) standards adopted by the Port of Salalah together with other facilities operated by APM Terminals. The adoption and implementation of WoW and LEAN methodology has improved performance and increased efficiency.

Omani CEO to helm Omran Group

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

Omran Group, the executive arm of the Sultanate for tourism development, appointed Hashil bin Obaid al Mahrouqi (pictured) as new CEO, replacing the former CEO, Peter Walichnowski. The appointment reflects the belief in empowering national competencies to lead the next stage of the Group’s journey.

Al Mahrouqi was selected after he passed the professional tests and job interviews conducted for various candidates for the position.

Hashil al Mahrouqi’s experience spans 20 years in managing real estate projects investments and commercial contracts, and he held a number of positions, the last of which was Senior Manager of Investment Real Estate at the Oman Investment Authority (OIA), Chairman and CEO of Yiti Tourism Development Company, Chairman of the Executive Committee and a member of the Board of Directors at ASAAS Company.

In addition to his membership in a number of boards of directors and associated committees in the Oman Investment Authority’s real estate investments in both the United Kingdom and Germany.

This also coincided with other roles that he assumed, including managing local and international real estate investment portfolios amounting to RO 1 billion



in the sectors of hospitality, entertainment, logistics, retail and multi-purpose projects, as well as leading projects to attract foreign direct investment worth tens of millions.

Commenting on the new appointment, Eng Mohammed bin Salim al Busaidi, Omran’s Chairman, said: “We are delighted to welcome the new CEO of Omran Group. His appointment reflects our belief in the young Omani competencies to lead the group towards achieving more accomplishments.”

“In the next stage, we are looking forward to expanding the capabilities of Omran, its subsidiaries and the wide portfolio of diversified tourism assets and investments throughout the Sultanate, in line with the directions of the Oman Investment Authority, while focusing on maximising investment returns and achieving in-country value.

“These efforts will contribute to achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040, in addition to attracting tourism investments, developing pioneering projects and generating social and economic returns for the Sultanate,” he added.

Oman REIT Fund a game-changer for real estate investment

PROMISING POTENTIAL: New REIT Fund offers returns with a targeted annual dividend of 7.5 per cent that is expected to grow to 8.2 per cent over a five-year period.

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

With the launch of the RO 65.48 million Oman REIT Fund and its RO 26.1 million initial public offering (IPO) that can go up to RO 39.2 million, both Omani and non-Omani investors are presented with an unmatched opportunity to park their money safely in one of the most promising investment instruments in the Sultanate.

Allowing subscribers to the Fund to participate in the high potential Omani real estate sector in a hassle-free manner, Oman REIT Fund offers amazing returns with a targeted annual dividend of 7.5 per cent that is expected to grow to 8.2 per cent over a five-year period.



Investment analysts look at Oman REIT Fund as a game changer in the Sultanate’s real estate investment domain, given the multiple benefits offered to the Fund’s subscribers.

From stable and high income, hedge against inflation, long term capital appreciation and high liquidity to professional management of the fund by expert wealth managers and the diversified, balanced and high-occupancy asset portfolio that are spread across strategic localities and sectors in the Sultanate, Oman REIT Fund has positioned itself as a pioneer and leader in Oman’s REIT sector.



Oman REIT Fund’s core objective is to provide investors with a diversified, stable and sustainable income stream, while also allowing them to benefit from organic growth and value-added opportunities so that unit holder returns are maximised

JASSER AL AULAQI
CEO, Shumookh Fund Management LLC

According to Jasser al Aulaqi, Chief Executive Officer of the managing company, “Oman REIT Fund’s core objective is to provide

investors with a diversified, stable and sustainable income stream, while also allowing them to benefit from organic growth and value-added opportunities so that unit holder returns are maximised.”

Explaining how Oman REIT Fund qualifies as the best-in-class investment instrument available today, Tariq A Razeq, Deputy General Manager of the Issue Manager, highlighted some of the outstanding features of the Fund.

“The key investment features of the Fund include attractive yield driven by a large and scalable pan-Oman asset portfolio; distribution of stable and high dividend on a continuous basis; the large fund size; and the opportunity to gain exposure to potential recovery in Oman’s real estate sector.

“The Fund is also attractive as Oman’s economic diversification efforts are expected to bring in positive results and the real estate sector’s contribution to national GDP is set to rise considerably. The long tenure of the assets is another factor that enhances the value and appeal of Oman REIT Fund,” he said.

Distributed across premium

residential cum commercial, office and retail, logistics and industrial properties, the diverse range of assets owned by Oman REIT Fund is poised to take full advantage of the government’s focus on economic diversification that drives the growth and sustainability of Oman’s vibrant real estate sector, as well as the government’s Vision 2040 that stresses on high-paced infrastructure development.

The fund, which is operated by an active asset management strategy, has the added appeal of the availability of a remarkable asset pipeline at attractive valuation. Presently the Fund has as many as 20 high worth individual property assets in different governorates.

Additionally, what makes investment in Oman REIT Fund attractive is the prevailing low real estate prices in the Sultanate due to the COVID-19 crisis and the potential rise in prices once the situation reverts to normalcy. Oman REIT Fund is managed by Shumookh Fund Management LLC, and its issue manager is United Securities LLC.

How much is worth a preschool (Part 1)

US president John F Kennedy said that: “Children are the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future.”

We all know this by heart — especially when we are parents — and this is why we try to send our children to the best possible schools, starting from their first-daycare.

We certainly know that some schools are indeed expensive, but have you ever wondered how the people behind the scenes of such preschools run things on a daily basis, while educating your children and ensuring their safety?

Let us analyse, once again with the help of my friend Bharat Kanodia — who runs a Youtube channel entirely dedicated to business valuation — what a preschool could be worth.

Running a preschool or daycare is a tough job. As a business owner or manager you

will have Children who depend on you, staff that look up to you, parents that trust you with their most precious future, and regulators who watch your every move like hawks surround you.

According to Bharat, there are about 600,000 private and non-profit preschools in America, collecting annual revenue of over \$60 billion, with 1.6 million employees, majority of them with fewer than 25 employees.

As a Return of Investment rule of thumb, let us start from a property investment for comparison as well as thought retirement plan. A home purchase should cost less than an amount equal to two and a half years of your annual income. Save at least 10-15 per cent of your take-home income for retirement.

Have at least five times your gross salary in life insurance death benefit. Pay off your highest-interest credit cards first.



STEFANO VIRGILI
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A PRESCHOOL’S VALUE
DEPENDS MOSTLY
ON THREE FACTORS
– SIZE; REPUTATION
AND LOYALTY;
ENROLLMENT AND
EARNINGS; FACILITIES
AND COMPLIANCE;
AND REAL ESTATE.

These are examples of rules of thumb. They are not meant to be used as specifics, but as general guidelines.

A preschool’s value depends mostly on three factors — size; reputation and loyalty; enrollment and earnings; facilities and compliance; and real estate. We will use some rule of thumb here too.

The value varies from 1 to 4 times the Seller’s Discretionary Earnings (SDE). The SDE is computable through EBITDA + Owner’s Arbitrary Compensation. If real estate is included, depending on the location, and size of the facilities, the value can be two to three times the business’s value.

However, if the location is rented, it is important to carefully evaluate the pros of the location over the cons of high monthly overhead. When working on a preschool or school business model, it is

a good approach to keep things simple, but not too casual or banal.

Mark Twain once said that everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler. The key to running a successful school is to think of your school as a community of friends. Do the students come to school kicking and screaming, or they can’t wait to see their friends?

Are the parents involved in the school’s community? Are the teachers happy and go the extra mile? Preschool is a business made almost exclusively by people for people.

Loyal customers are built by pampering them and always go the extra mile. Especially by listening to everyone before making a decision — such as a new policy for example — that might affect any stakeholder in the day to day.

[The writer is a member of the International Press Association]

MEDRC Eco School Prize gains momentum



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

The judging panel of the MEDRC Eco School prize gathered today through an online platform to reach a decision on which of the 5 competing schools are to be declared winners.

The panel includes nominated representatives from the Ministry of Education, Haya Water, The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Oman, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman LNG, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, the Oman Film Society and MEDRC.

Sponsored by Oman LNG Development Foundation and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Oman, the inaugural inter-school competition was launched by MEDRC on World Water Day in March of 2019 and is designed to build greater water and energy awareness among school students in Oman by teaching them of the importance of both and why conservation of natural resources is vital for sustainable development.

The participating schools will be evaluated on the impact of the activities that have taken place throughout the competition, including the implementation of conservation practices in their homes, improvements in recorded water and energy consumption and awareness campaigns.

Under the best video category, students were tasked with creating engaging short videos for social media distribution where they were solely responsible for ideation, planning, storyboard, recording and editing of the projects.

MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

Rising sub-indices boost MSM30 Index

MSM30 Index ended the week up by 2.99 per cent. All sub-sectors ended positively. The Industrial Index was the best performer with a weekly gain of 4.75 per cent, followed by the Services sector at 1.68 per cent and the financial sector at 1.46 per cent.

The MSM Shariah Index increased by 2.5 per cent. Oman returned to the debt market for the third time in less than three months, taking advantage of investors’ appetite for yield to help plug the Gulf Arab region’s widest budget deficit.

The Sultanate sold \$3.25 billion in a three-part debt offering. Oman priced \$1.75 billion in 10-year notes at a yield of 6.25 per cent, compared with an initial price target of 6.625 per cent. It sold another \$1 billion in 30-year securities at 7.25 per cent, versus guidance of 7.5 per cent and initial price talk of between 7.625 per cent and 7.75 per cent.

It also tapped \$500m of its 2025 bond at 4.45 per cent; earlier guidance was for 4.625 per cent — 4.75 per cent, and the initial price talk was 4.875 per cent. The 66th GDB issue received applications worth RO 149.6 million, subscribed 1.50x. Total allotment was RO 100 million.

The average yield was 4.86 per cent while the highest yield was 5.03 per cent

(OMR mn)	FY19	FY20	YoY
Operating Income	1,126.65	1,078.74	-4.25%
Operating expenses	(527.84)	(523.85)	-0.76%
Operating Profit	598.91	554.89	-7.35%
Net Profit	407.08	273.10	-32.91%
Net Loans & Islamic Financing	23,600.90	24,797.08	5.07%
Customers’ Deposits	22,195.27	23,674.60	6.67%
Loan-to-deposit Ratio, %	106.3%	104.7%	

Source: Bank Disclosures on MSM, U Capital Research

and the lowest was at 4.55 per cent. The 3-year bond carries a coupon rate of 4.75 per cent per annum and was issued on January 20 with maturity on 20/01/2024. This was the first 3-year GDB issued by Oman.

Our analysis of Oman banks’ initial unaudited financial results for FY20 reveals that combined net profit of banks fell by about 33 per cent YoY during FY20. Combined operating income of all banks fell 4.25 per cent YoY, largely on account of a significant drop seen in other operating income of most banks.

Operating expense growth was well-contained, with combined operating expenses having fallen by 0.76 per cent YoY. However, as the fall in operating income outpaced the fall in operating income, combined operating profit of all banks fell by 7.4 per cent YoY.

Oman’s insurance sector (listed) reports net profit growth of 43 per cent YoY in 2020 to RO 35 million compared to RO 24.6 million in 2019. Growth in profit was a result of higher underwriting as well as higher investment income.

Underwriting income was supported by lower claims during the year mainly in the health and

auto segment because of COVID-19 led lockdown. Almost all companies reported better profit in 2020 with the exception of Vision Insurance whose profit declined marginally by 2.6 per cent. Major growth in income of the sector came from the profitability of the National Life & General Insurance whose net income was up 47 per cent to RO 15 million compared to RO 10.2 million in 2019.

The inflation rate in the Sultanate, measured by movement in the average Consumer Price Index (CPI), fell by 1.42 per cent in December 2020 compared to the same month of 2019, according to the latest data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) on consumer prices’ index.

The fall in the price index in December 2020 compared to the same month of 2019 is due to a decrease in the prices of the main groups such as the transportation group by 6.42 per cent, the housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels group by 0.42 per cent, the restaurants and hotels group by 0.22 per cent and the food and non-alcoholic beverages group by 0.07 per cent; as well as the communications group by 0.04 per cent.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]

Meethaq launches mega RO 1.5m Hibati prize scheme

MUSCAT: Meethaq, the pioneer of Islamic banking in Oman from Bank Muscat, has launched the 2021 edition of its Hibati Savings scheme based on Sharia rules and principles. In line with its vision ‘To serve you better, everyday’ and commitment to partnership in promoting a healthy savings habit in Oman, the bank’s 2021 Hibati savings scheme will give away over RO 1.5 million in cash prizes throughout the year.

Speaking on the occasion, Amor Said al Amri (pictured), Meethaq Head of Retail Branches, said: “We are delighted to launch the Hibati Savings programme for 2021. The bank has been constantly updating the prize scheme taking into account customer feedback from across the Sultanate. The total cash prize amount has been increased substantially this year and the scheme will now give more chances for customers to win valuable prizes.”

The 2021 Hibati scheme includes 100 weekly prizes of RO 100 each. All customers maintaining a minimum weekly average balance of RO 100 will



be entered into the draws. This year’s scheme will also feature 2 quarterly draws with each draw having two sub draws offering 10 prizes of RO 5,000 and RO 10,000 each. Customers maintaining a quarterly minimum average balance of RO 1,000 will be entered into the draw for 10 prizes of RO 5,000 each, while customers maintaining a minimum quarterly average balance of RO 5,000 will be automatically entered into the draw for 10 prizes of RO 10,000 each. These draws will take place in April and October for the first and third quarters of 2021 respectively.

In addition, the 2021 Hibati scheme offers two Grand draws; a Mid-year and an End of Year draw.

PRESS RELEASE

WINNING MADE CLOSER WITH SOHAR INTERNATIONAL’S PRIZE SCHEME 2021

Sustaining the momentum of creating more winning journeys for its customers, and adding more value to their lives, Sohar International has announced the new Sohar Prize Scheme for the year 2021, with total prizes worth over RO 2.25 Million, to be rewarded to more than 1,400 customers.

The launch of the new scheme was announced at a press conference, held at the bank’s head office located at Waterfront, Muscat, in the presence of senior officials from the bank.

The event commenced with a recap video of the 2020 prize scheme, followed by the welcome speech from Khalil al Hedaifi, Chief Retail Banking Officer at Sohar International. A new scheme animation led to a presentation on the bank’s Prize Scheme for year 2021. This was followed by a Q&A session with representatives of the press.

Emphasising on the bank’s vision to become a world-class Omani services company that helps customers, community and people to prosper and grow, Khalil al Hedaifi, said, “At Sohar International, we believe that as a responsible bank we must advocate the benefits of prudent saving habits among the people of Oman, which will help them to fulfil their



dreams and aspirations. By maximising the number of winners and prize values, the new prize scheme for the year 2021, brings winning closer to our account holders more than ever.

Furthermore, the scheme’s diverse eligibility criteria make regular saving an easy practice for individuals. Moving forward, we will continue to encourage our loyal and valued customers to commence their journey of savings by opening Sohar prize scheme account to dream big and win big.”

US factory activity near 14-year high; home sales rise

WASHINGTON: US manufacturing activity surged to its highest level in nearly 14 years in early January, but bottlenecks in the supply chain caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are driving up prices and signalling a rise in inflation in the months ahead. Other data showed an unexpected increase in sales of previously owned homes in December.

Manufacturing and the housing market are helping to anchor the economy, which is being battered by a wave of coronavirus infections.

But the pandemic is causing labour shortages at construction sites and factories, which could erode some of the strength in the manufacturing and housing sectors.

Data firm IHS Markit said its flash US manufacturing PMI accelerated to a reading of 59.1 in the first half of this month, the highest since May 2007, from 57.1 in December.

Economists had forecast the index would slip to 56.5 in early January. A reading above 50 indicates growth in manufacturing, which accounts for 11.9 per cent of the US economy. Manufacturing is being supported by businesses



Employees work at Toyota's engine plant in Huntsville, Alabama. — Reuters

rebuilding inventories and a shift in demand towards goods from services because of the pandemic.

The IHS Markit survey's measure of new orders received by factories raced to its highest level since September 2014. The surge in demand reflected both existing and new customers, "with some clients reportedly committing to orders previously placed on hold."

That led to manufacturers hiring more workers early this month. The survey's factory employment index increased to 54.8 from 52.2 in December.

But the pandemic is gumming up the supply chain, resulting in manufacturers paying more for materials, and they are passing on the higher production costs to consumers. The survey's gauge of prices received by factories vaulted to its highest level since

July 2008.

This mirrored other manufacturing surveys, suggesting inflation could pick up and remain elevated beyond the anticipated boost from the drop of weak readings in March and April from the calculation. The strength in manufacturing helped to lift business activity.

The survey's flash composite PMI Output Index, which tracks the manufacturing and services

Manufacturing and the housing market are helping to anchor the economy, which is being battered by a wave of coronavirus infections

sectors, rose to a reading of 58.0 early this month from 55.3 in December.

While its flash services sector PMI increased to 57.5 from 54.8 in December, the pace of new business growth softened at the start of 2021.

The services sector, which accounts for more than two-thirds of US economic activity, has borne the brunt of the pandemic, with severe disruptions to restaurants, bars and other businesses that attract crowds. COVID-19 has infected more than 24 million people in the United States, with the death toll exceeding 400,000.

The survey's measure of services industry employment fell to a six-month low in early January. US stocks were trading lower while the dollar was steady against a basket of currencies. US

Treasury prices rose.

In a separate report, the National Association of Realtors said existing home sales increased 0.7 per cent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 6.76 million units last month. Economists had forecast sales would decrease 2.0 per cent to a rate of 6.55 million units in December.

Home resales, which account for the bulk of US home sales, surged 22.2 per cent on a year-on-year basis. They totaled 5.64 million in 2020, the most since 2006. Sales in December increased in the Northeast and South. They were unchanged in the Midwest and declined in the West.

Cheaper mortgages and an exodus from city centres to suburbs and other low-density areas as companies allow employees to work from home and schools shift to online classes because of COVID-19 are underpinning demand for housing.

About 23.7 per cent of the labour force is working from home. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted lower-wage earners. But housing supply remains a challenge. — Reuters

Yellen nomination sails through Senate panel

WASHINGTON: The US Senate Finance Committee unanimously approved Janet Yellen's (pictured) nomination as the first woman Treasury secretary, indicating that she will easily win full Senate approval, but Republicans called for her to work with them in developing economic policies.

The full Senate will vote on Yellen's nomination on Monday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said, which would allow her to get to work promptly on President Joe Biden's economic agenda.

Her nomination was approved 26-0 in the evenly split committee, with concerns expressed by Republicans about Biden's ambitious plans for massive coronavirus relief spending, infrastructure investment and tax hikes failing to sway them against the former



Federal Reserve chair.

"I have very strong disagreements with Dr Yellen on a number of her positions, particularly in the tax policy arena, but she has committed to us that she will work with us," Republican Senator Mike Crapo said.

"And I think the strong vote on our side to support her today is an indication that we want to engage."

Biden has proposed a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan and has pledged to invest \$2 trillion in infrastructure, green energy projects, education and research to boost American competitiveness. — Reuters

GM warns Maharashtra's move to block its exit could hit investment

NEW DELHI: An Indian state's move to block General Motors (GM) from shutting a plant and exiting the country defies the state's business friendly image and sends a "concerning message" to potential future investors, the US automaker said.

GM's comments came after authorities in Maharashtra earlier this week rejected the automaker's application to cease operations at its plant in the western Indian state amid protests by workers who demanded GM continue production or keep them on the payroll indefinitely.

The decision runs counter to Maharashtra's business-friendly reputation, a GM spokesman said in a statement. "It sends a concerning message to any potential future investors who want to bring jobs and investment to the state," GM stopped selling cars in India, the world's second most populous nation, at the end



Employees work inside a plant of General Motors India at Halol, India, in this file photo. — Reuters

of 2017 after years of low sales.

It sold one of its two factories in the country to China's SAIC Motor Corp and continued to build vehicles for export at its second plant until December 24.

In January 2020, it agreed to

sell its second factory in the state's Talegaon district to Chinese automaker Great Wall Motor Co, but tensions between India and China have delayed completion of that deal. GM said it planned to seek a reversal of the state's order

as soon as possible.

"Effectively, the state's decision amounts to a requirement that GM either produce vehicles for which there are no customer orders, or pay workers indefinitely for doing no work. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

TUNIS

IMF urges deficit control in Tunisia

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that Tunisia's fiscal deficit could exceed 9 per cent of GDP and urged the country to control energy subsidies, transfers to state companies and wages, even as protesters have been demanding jobs and economic development.

Violent protests have hit Tunisia at a time of unprecedented economic hardship in the North Africa country that ran a fiscal deficit of 11.5 per cent of GDP in 2020, the



highest in four decades.

The 2021 budget aims to cut the fiscal deficit to 6.6 per cent but the IMF, following a mission in Tunisia, issued a statement calling for specific measures to back this objective. — Reuters

TOKYO

Japan factory output seen falling again

Japan's industrial production likely declined again in December and retail sales are also expected to have slipped reinforcing worries a recent sharp increase in COVID-19 cases could derail a fragile economic recovery.

The world's third-largest economy has rebounded from its biggest post-war slump last year, but a resurgence in local coronavirus infections is raising the prospect of a prolonged period of subpar growth. The nation's factory output is expected

to have declined 1.5 per cent in December from the previous month, the poll of 18 economists showed, deepening from a 0.5 per cent fall in November.

"Production recovery in transport machinery has come to a pause, which affected the overall factory output", said Yoshiaki Shinke, Chief Economist at Dai-ichi Life Research Institute.

"There is a chance that rapid recovery in the production on a monthly basis may have ended", he added. — Reuters

NEW YORK

TPG in lead for stake in AT&T's DirecTV

Private equity firm TPG has entered into exclusive talks to acquire a minority stake in AT&T Inc's satellite TV division, DirecTV, in a deal that would allow the US wireless carrier to trim its net debt of close to \$150 billion.

The exact price TPG is willing to pay could not be learned, but sources said the deal could value DirecTV at more than \$15 billion. Were the negotiations to conclude successfully, a deal could be announced in the



coming weeks.

AT&T shares rose close to 1 per cent on the news to an intraday high of \$29.05, giving the company a market capitalisation of nearly \$210 billion. — Reuters

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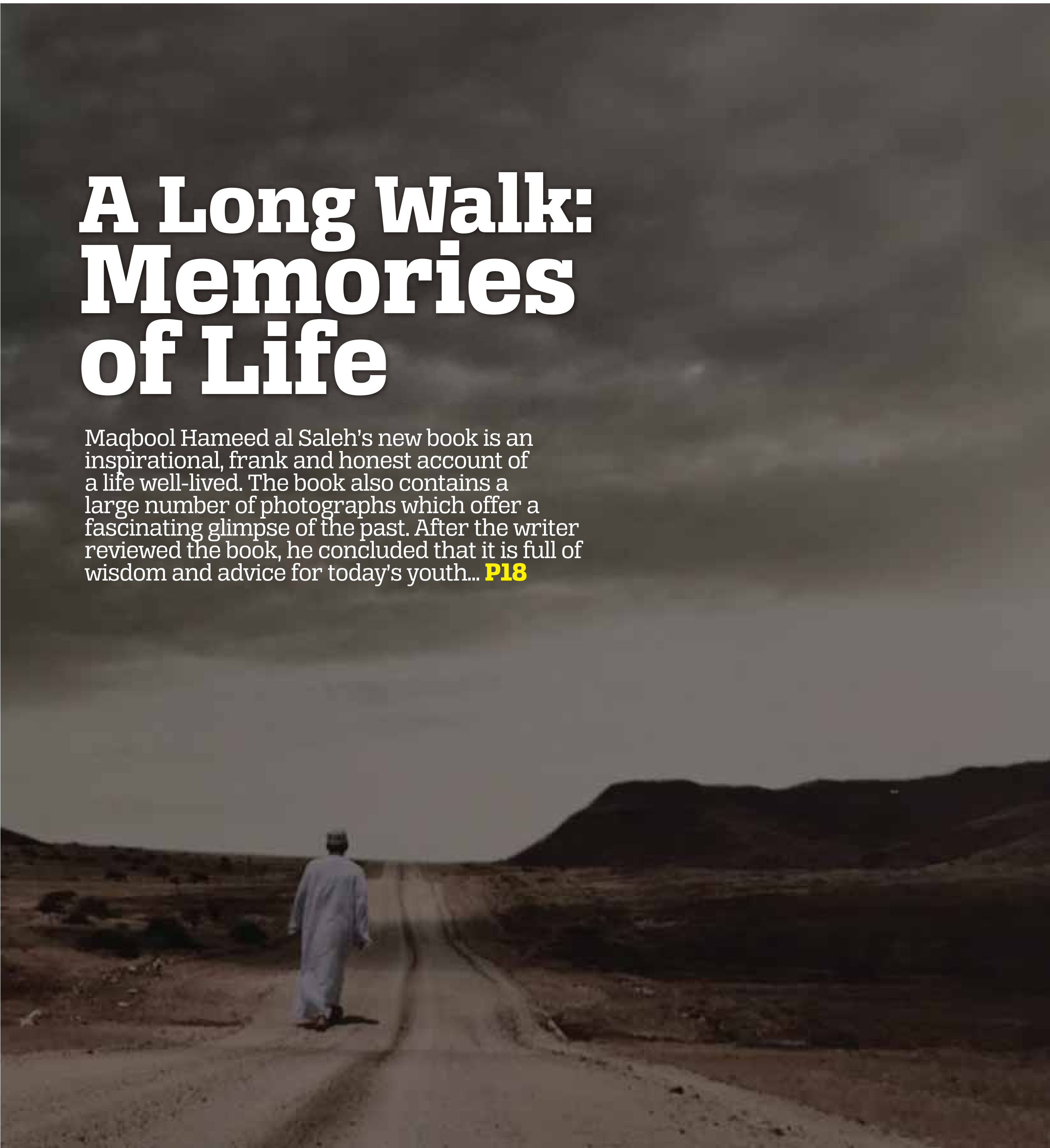
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features



A Long Walk: Memories of Life

Maqbool Hameed al Saleh's new book is an inspirational, frank and honest account of a life well-lived. The book also contains a large number of photographs which offer a fascinating glimpse of the past. After the writer reviewed the book, he concluded that it is full of wisdom and advice for today's youth... **P18**

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BY JULIA QUINN

The first book in the Bridgerton series. Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton."

TRAVEL TALES

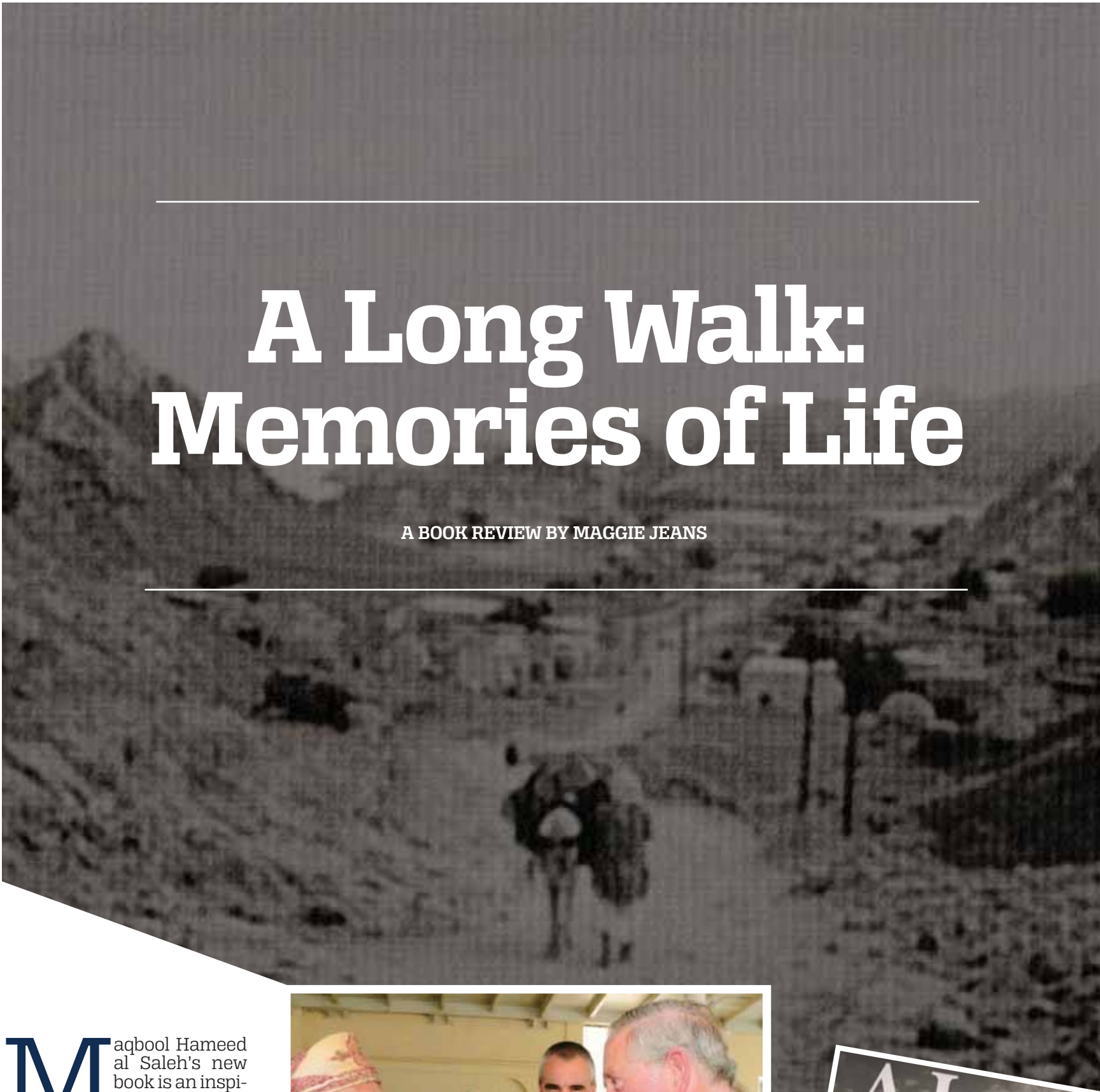
GROUNDLED BY COVID RESTRICTIONS, SKIERS EMBRACE THE HUMBLE SNOW SHOE

No one relishes the COVID-19 epidemic and the death it has brought, but Philippe Gallay, boss of one of the world's biggest snowshoe manufacturers, acknowledges it has been good for business. Sales of his company's product have exploded... **Story on Page 19**

ENTERTAINMENT

JEFF LOWE ORDERED TO SURRENDER CUBS IN ANIMAL WELFARE CASE

"Tiger King" star Jeff Lowe, the former business partner at the private wildcat zoo featured in the hit Netflix series, has been ordered to surrender his cubs and their mothers after the death of two young tigers in his care.



A Long Walk: Memories of Life

A BOOK REVIEW BY MAGGIE JEANS

Maqbool Hameed al Saleh's new book is an inspirational, frank and honest account of a life well-lived. It begins by painting a fascinating picture of the harsh reality of life in Oman pre-1970 Muttrah. The author was born in 1945 at the American Mission Hospital which was, at that time, one of only three hospitals in the entire country. Infant mortality was very high and many born did not survive beyond the first year of life.

"At the time, the rule of Sultan Said bin Taimour, who reigned from 1932 to 1970 was characterised as feudal and isolationist (Muscat State Affairs: British Library files, 1948)".

Life was hard with no infrastructure and donkeys and camels as the main mode of transport and there were none of the modern conveniences which we now take for granted. Few people had electricity and housing was very basic, often lacking decent bathrooms, kitchens & toilets and without running water. Yet despite these hardships, the author describes a rich community life full of inspirational characters who influenced his future.

Survival was a perpetual struggle with barely enough to eat, malnutrition, illness and poor living conditions. There were no formal schools and reading and writing were taught in Madrassah run in an open warehouse or Godown. Children were required to provide their own chairs from home and notebooks if the family could afford them. These institutions were named after the teacher who owned them and because of them, the Sur Lawati community in Muttrah was relatively well educated. Punishments were harsh and children learnt from their mistakes.

Childhood amusements were limited.

"Swimming in the sea was one of our favourite activities. The energy of the water was overwhelming. The



absence of freshwater swimming pools and the need to clean ourselves of the dirt and the stink made us regularly engage in this activity." (p86)

There were beach games and later field hockey. There were also numerous religious celebrations throughout the year in which youngsters were obliged to participate.

"The nostalgia of childhood and it's bittersweetness moulds our personalities, characters and dispositions. I doubt if I ever dreamt about my plans, or what I wanted to become. I was completely engrossed with what I had and what I did with it: To live life day by day." (p89)

The author left school at 14 in 1959 and joined the army. As the eldest son, earning an income to support the family became a necessity. The job involved a 7 km walk daily over rough terrain in the heat although eventually a bicycle was procured – part of the long walk from which the title of the book is derived. This eight years of service in the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) was clearly a formative period for the author's future career.

Travelling also played an important role in the author's life. With a group of friends and on very limited means he managed to spend time in India, Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt, travelling by sea and raising funds by trading goods from Oman along the

way. Later he was to travel widely throughout the world with his own family.

By 1969, the author was working for what is now Ernst & Young in Abu Dhabi. He was now financially independent and accordingly entered into a very happy arranged marriage and subsequently raised a family of five children. The importance of family and community is a central theme which runs through the entire book.

His career also gathered momentum at this point and he worked in Dubai and Bahrain before beginning his own business in Oman until, in 1971, he joined the Diwan Affairs and eventually became deputy minister and later under-secretary in the Ministry of Social Affairs. The experience gained in these roles was invaluable.

His entrepreneurial instincts were very strong and he established several successful business ventures before finally setting up Oman Holdings Company – OHI. These initiatives are all detailed in the book, together with the many challenges they presented and the obstacles that had to be overcome to achieve success. The style of this work, written with the help and encourage-

ment of his sister, is refreshingly open, frank and honest. He has the ability to relate episodes that did not go exactly as planned with humour and insight.

There is a short chapter about his passion for boats and long relationship with the sea & fishing culminating in the acquisition of an 88 footer. This is followed by a very amusing chapter about driving a Rolls Royce across France entitled "Adventures & Misadventures". Finally, there is a thoughtful "Epilogue" and also a "Postscript" with a series of thought-provoking questions and answers. The book also contains a large number of photographs which offer a fascinating glimpse of the past.

The book is full of wisdom & advice for today's youth. "Formal education does not define our goals and paths. As individuals, we need determination, ambition and faith in our abilities to reach our desired goals." (p 268)

"A dear friend once told me that we are products of our past but we do not have to be prisoners of it! Change is inevitable and we must be willing to let go of the life we planned, to have the life that is waiting for us". (p 192)

The book is available locally in both English & Arabic from all good booksellers.



WILDLIFE

'Paddington' bears tour crowd-free Machu Picchu



TWO MEMBERS of South America's only bear species – a mother and her cub – have been spotted exploring the ruins of the Inca citadel of Machu Picchu, where tourist numbers have been restricted due to the pandemic.

The pair of Spectacled bears, also known as Andean bears, were captured on film clambering around the mountainous site's dry-stone walls before slinking off into the jungle, Peru's culture ministry said.



With the absence of tourists due to the coronavirus pandemic, the bears – said to be the inspiration for the children's book character Paddington Bear, who came from the jungles of Peru – have been able to explore where they would otherwise avoid.

Biologist Ernesto Escalante, who is in charge of the Machu Picchu sanctuary surrounding the archaeological site, said the mammals are naturally fearful of humans.

The Spectacled bear is classified as "vulnerable" on the red list of threatened species of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

It is the only surviving bear species in South America and the last of the short-faced bear subgroup.

It is a small omnivorous mammal, standing between 1.3 metres (4.2 feet) and 1.9 metres tall and weighing between 80 and 125 kilograms (176-275 pounds).

The dark-coloured bear, usually black, gets its name from light patches on its face that form spectacle-like rings around its eyes.

Humans are its main threat, encroaching on their natural habitat and killing bears that damage crops or capture livestock. Andean bear products are used for medicinal or ritual purposes, according to the IUCN, and in some areas the creatures' meat is highly prized.

Live bears are sometimes captured and sold. Machu Picchu was declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco in 1983. Visitor numbers are restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. — **AFP**



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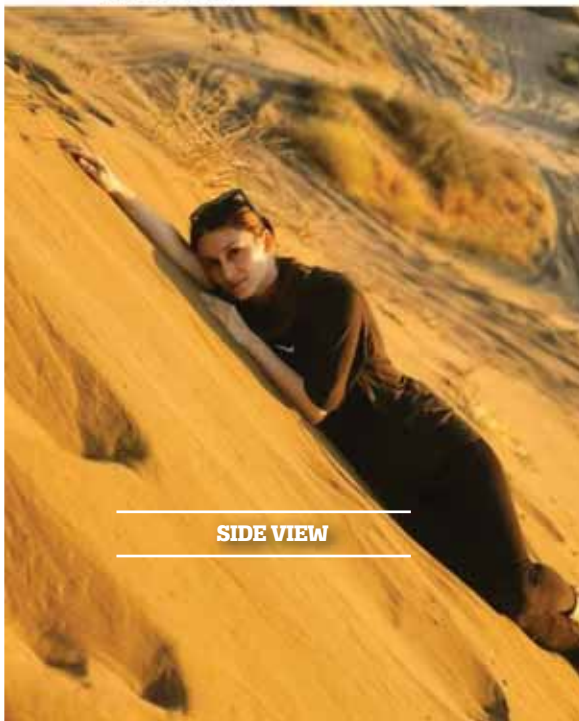
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ART

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Crops' chance to shine in 'Grow' project by artist Roosegaarde

Long after the sun sets on a quiet farm in the Dutch town Lelystad, one of its fields comes to life with a beautiful display of red, blue and ultraviolet LED light beaming across its crop of leeks.

The installation pairing the plants' natural beauty with the futuristic LED show is part of "Grow", artist Daan Roosegaarde's latest project intended as a homage to farmers and to inspire them to experiment with artificial light in outdoor farming.

"You know the 16th, 17th (century) painters, the master painters, they were obsessed with the Dutch sky, the clouds and the light," said Roosegaarde, who is known for his art/tech fusion projects, in an interview at his studio in Rotterdam.

"They made thousands of paintings, mastering the technology to paint it. I feel



and they painted on canvas and I have my 20,000 square metres of crop, of leek."

Using specialised LEDs to assist crops grown in greenhouses has become common, and "vertical" farms in

cities grown entirely with LEDs are a new trend.

But Roosegaarde says there is also potential for using LEDs outdoors in rural areas for the same reason: farmers and scientists are still discovering "light recipes" for individual crops and exploring how exposure to red and blue LED lights can influence a plant's growth and characteristics.

LED lights, powered by solar batteries, mostly aug-

ment the light the plants receive in the day. But Roosegaarde's project is also testing whether brief exposure to some wavelengths of ultraviolet light could reduce the need for pesticides.

"So we started to scan the plants with these wavelengths of light and then suddenly it started to dance, the light," he said.

"You had these huge fields of fireflies and we were testing it and the magic started kicking in so I think that's when the worlds of science and art and design collide and enhance each other."

Given the global COVID-19 pandemic, a film showing the exhibit will be launched on the studio's website here from Monday, rather than opening the Lelystad farm to public tours.

But Roosegaarde's goal is to take "Grow" on the road to 40 different countries, with each installation featuring a local or national crop with its own unique "light recipe". — Reuters

TRAVEL TALES

Grounded by COVID restrictions, skiers embrace the humble snow shoe



ANNECY, FRANCE: No one relishes the COVID-19 epidemic and the death it has brought, but Philippe Gally, boss of one of the world's biggest snowshoe manufacturers, acknowledges it has been good for business. Sales of his company's product have exploded.

In France, where Gally's TSL firm is based, and in other countries, officials stung by virus clusters in ski resorts have closed chair

lifts, button lifts and cable cars at ski resorts.

With no mechanical means to lift them up the slopes, skiers and snowboarders have resorted to an old-school solution: the humble snow shoe.

Last month, Gally's factory in Annecy in the French Alps took orders for 100,000 pairs of snowshoes — three times the amount that, before, the pandemic, it would produce over a whole year.

"We are crumbling under the orders," said Gally. "But it's a good stress... As far as COVID-19 is concerned, we are the lucky ones, we have to acknowledge that."



Gally has switched his factory to operating 24 hours a day, and has hired ski instructors and lift operators — out of work because

shoes is "the only thing to do this season," he said.

Under France's lockdown, schools and non-essential shops are open and professional top-flight sport allowed. There is a curfew from 1800 nightly, with theatres, cinemas, gyms, restaurants, cafes and bars shut.

But the ski slopes are open for those willing to climb them.

Above the resort, Lucie Godineau, who lives in a nearby village, was trudging through the powder in her snowshoes. Normally, she would be on skis, but with the ski lift out of action, that's off the agenda.

"I miss it," she said of downhill skiing. But she had reconciled herself to reality, for this season at least. "It's snowshoes, and nothing more." — Reuters



MICHAEL D'SOUZA



SHEHAN MCGRATH

The historic, beautiful old settlement of Harat al Siybani

TEXT BY MICHAEL D'SOUZA
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL D'SOUZA & SHEHAN MCGRATH



WE ENTERED the settlement through a huge arch door and were immediately welcomed by a signboard stating the history of the place.

It reads: "Welcome to Harat al Siybani, Birkat Al Mouz's historical settlement that was last rebuilt in the 17th Century. Comprising 50 abandoned houses, it has narrow passages, staircases and three entrances with the falaj irrigation channel amazingly passing through. People inhabited the Harat until the early years of the 21st Century."

This notice says nearly all one has to know about this quiet and beautiful place.

There were three of us who decided to explore and capture some memories of this historical settlement.

I along with my wife Betty and my photo-buddy Shehan McGrath, (from Friday-Shootout Muscat) started from Muscat at 5 am (well before sunrise).

Birkat Al Mouz is about 90-minute drive from Muscat. It is a small oasis town in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, very close to Nizwa city.

The key settlement controlling access to the Jabal Al Akhdhar mountains, anyone going to the Green Mountain must pass through this village.

We must have been to Jabal Al Akhdhar several times in the past but never thought of exploring this beautiful oasis town, which is abundantly blessed with date palm plantations.

The oasis of Birkat Al Mouz has three old settlements, namely Harat al Siybani, Harat al Wadi and Harat al Makasir.

I love visiting historical places, especially old villages and ruins, hence after I saw some pictures of this old settlement on social media, I could not stop myself from visiting Harat al Siybani.

Also as an added attraction to the place, a new cafe, 'Bait Al Sabah' adorns the entrance of the old settlement. This cafe is operating from renovated buildings of the old settlement.

Since the ruins of the old village are located on the hillside, one needs to cautiously climb the narrow pathways and steep steps for there are loose rocks and rubble along the way. Also, be careful entering the houses as you might be in for a nasty surprise, where the floor may give way under you.

But once you get past all these obstacles and reach the dilapidated tower at the top of the hill, you will just be in awe of the view that awaits you. After you have had your fill of the views, you could take a break at the restaurant and enjoy breakfast or just a hot brew. Then take a stroll through the winding falaj and date farms, enjoying the greenery and cool and pleasant weather.

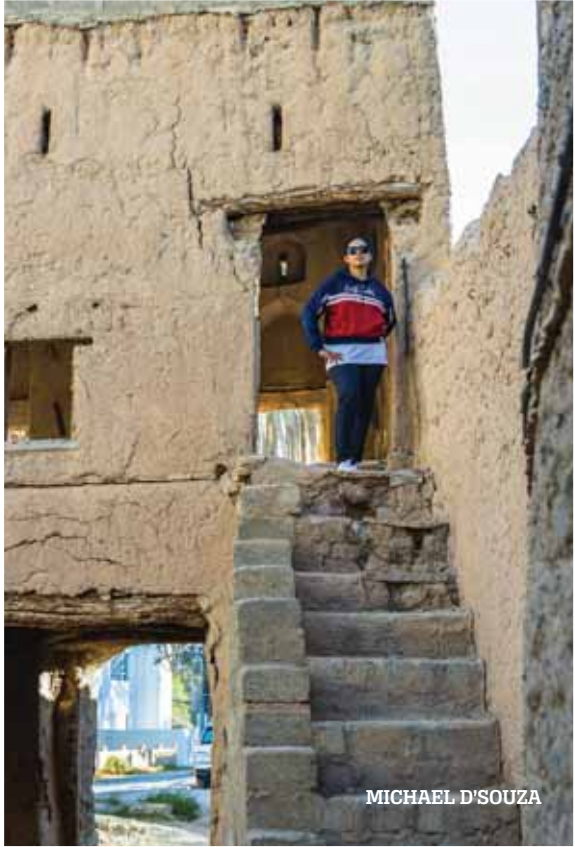
Birkat Al Mouz is worth a visit. Don't just pass this place whilst travelling to Jabal Al Akhdhar, do explore its beauty and history.

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