

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) has directed the owners of commercial centres and real estate owners to take into account the current conditions of tenants and affected stores by COVID-19 precautionary measures. It urged them to include measures such as reducing or postponing rents for the tenants during the current stage. OCCI has called on private sector institutions to reduce the number of employees at workplaces and instead encourage work through virtual channels, in line with the decisions of the Supreme Committee. **DETAILS ON P7**

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HM PARDONS 599 PRISONERS



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, the Supreme Commander, has issued a Royal pardon to a number of prisoners convicted of different cases. They included 599 prisoners, 336 of them are foreign prisoners. – ONA

MUSCAT LOCKDOWN FROM FRIDAY

GROWING
NUMBERS: 48 new
COVID-19 cases, total
crosses 400 mark

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

The entire capital area will be locked down from Friday as per the decision of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19.

“Due to the increase in the number of cases of infection in different places of the Sultanate, most notably in Muttrah (which has been locked down since April 1), the Supreme Committee on Wednesday decided to lock down the Governorate of Muscat through the activation of control checkpoints with effect from 10 am on Friday (April 10) to 10 am on Wednesday (April 22), along with the continued operation of control checkpoints,”



The Royal Air Force of Oman, the Royal Navy of Oman and Engineering Services at the Ministry of Defence provided and transported various sets of support equipment and necessary requirements on Wednesday.

said the Supreme Committee meeting chaired by Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior.

The Supreme Committee also decided to maintain the suspension of studies in all educational institutions in the Sultanate until further notice, while at the same time underscoring

the significance of efforts to activate online education through educational portals and platforms. The committee expressed thanks and appreciation for the efforts exerted by Omani diplomatic missions and cultural attache offices abroad to facilitate the repatriation of Omani citizens -

particularly students to return home.

NUMBER OF CASES

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health announced 48 new cases, bringing the total number of registered cases in the Sultanate to 419, including 72 recoveries and two deaths.

The capital continues to top the list with 334 cases and 34 recovered, followed by Al Dhakilyah (26 cases), South Al Batinah (19), Musandam (3), Al Dhahirah (3), South Al Sharqiyah (1), Buraimi (1), North Al Batinah (22), Dhofar (8) and North Al Sharqiyah (1).

The government has warned that the number of cases infected will see a jump in the coming days.

A top official at the ministry told the media, that the ministry is monitoring the spread within the community and there have been examples that one person transmitted the infection to five members of his family.

MEDICAL SUPPLIES

He added, “We are facing a shortage of some medical supplies for dealing with COVID-19 and we are seeking to secure what is needed.”

Sponsors or employers of expatriate workers have been urged to follow up, educate, and provide appropriate environment as infection among these workers pose a serious challenge.

He added that most of the cases are between 15-50 years old, and they constitute about 78 per cent of the total cases.

He said the decisions taken with the aim of preventive measures from COVID-19 will not help reduce its impact on the economy and the lives of citizens and residents.

Amid warnings, rumour mongers find space

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

Despite immense warnings, appeals and legal actions, rumours and fake information continue to find their space on different social media platforms. While the government agencies are quick to act to counter the claims, the fact is, they spread like the current dreaded virus.

On Wednesday, the Government Communications Centre had to come out with denial statements on two fake claims circulating on the social media relating to coronavirus cases and attendance of employees in the private sector. Denying that 15 members of a single family have been infected with COVID-19 virus, the centre said, “there is no truth in what is being circulated on the social media.”

The posting on a section of the social media said that a scholarship student who returned from the US infected other members of the family with the virus by not adhering to quarantine procedures. The Public Prosecution last week said nine people were arrested, interrogated and held in pre-trial detention after they were found to have posted fake news relating to the spread of coronavirus cases. Another

case, said the centre, related to the news about private sector employees being asked to attend duties.

“There is no truth in the news. On the contrary, the private sector has been advised to take necessary measures to slash the number of workers and call “only those who are indispensable for the smooth functioning of the company”, the centre clarified.

As per the directives of the Supreme

Committee tasked with monitoring the COVID-19 situation and taking appropriate measures all the private sector companies should reduce the number of employees to a minimum to keep essential work running unaffectedly. Reiterating that people should seek information from official sources, the centre said that sharing fake information on social media is punishable by law. “Sending or re-

sending a false news or rumours that would affect public order through various technical means is an offence punishable by imprisonment for a period of three years”, the centre said.

The punishment is by imprisonment for a period of no less than a month and not exceeding three years and a fine of no less than RO 1,000 and not more than RO 3,000 or one of these two penalties



IN BRIEF

Action to control COVID-19's economic impacts hailed

TORONTO: Canada-based KPMG international economic consultations and accountancy institution hailed the precautionary measures undertaken by the Sultanate of Oman to limit the negative impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on Omani economy.

It said that Central Bank of Oman (CBO) introduced a package of comprehensive incentives to help pump additional liquidity in excess of RO 8 billion into mainstream economy.

In a report published in its website, KPMG pointed out that the Sultanate endorsed a set of preventive procedures to alleviate the pandemic's toll on the business sector, namely by introducing a number of initiatives to facilitate business firms' ability to meet their commitment to legal and organisational systems.

The international agency said it expects that such steps will help manage financial and operational burdens generated by Covid-19.

— ONA

OHRC commends Royal Decrees on joining intl rights conventions

MUSCAT: The Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) highly valued the Royal Decrees issued by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, which approved the Sultanate's joining to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT), to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), all of which affirm the Sultanate's keenness to promote and protect human rights, and its permanent interest to respond to international bodies and organisations concerned with human rights, particularly the United Nations, which exerts its efforts and harnesses its capabilities to serve those humanitarian goals, in a way that achieves safety, peace and a decent life for all mankind.

OHRC expresses thanks and appreciation to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, and it affirms its continuity in carrying out its responsibilities in accordance with the goals and terms of reference assigned to it for everything that serves human rights in the Sultanate.

— ONA

GCC interior ministers review joint efforts to curb spread of pandemic



MUSCAT: The GCC Ministers of Interior on Wednesday held an emergency meeting via video conference.

The meeting was chaired by Lt Gen Shaikh Saif bin Zayid al Nahyan, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior in the UAE, Chairman of the current

session, with participation of Dr Nayif Falah al Hajraf, GCC Secretary General. Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, took part

in the meeting. The ministers discussed a number of major security topics pertaining to the COVID-19 outbreak and means to



curb it and limiting its spread.

The ministers agreed on a number of procedures aimed to combat the virus, including the formation of a high-level joint team of representatives from interior ministries of member states who would meet via videoconferencing to follow up developments, coordinate efforts and exchange information about security and precautionary measures to curb the pandemic.

The ministers also agreed to benefit from the experiences of countries that battled the pandemic successfully and follow their suit.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the ministers addressed a message of thanks and gratitude to doctors, nurses and paramedical teams who formed the frontline against the pandemic, exerting tremendous efforts in limiting its progress and saving lives.

Maj Gen Hamad bin Sulaiman al Hatmi, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Operations, also took part in the meeting. — ONA

MEDICAL SUPPLIES



A total of 7 aircrafts with medical supplies have arrived so far as the medical response and public health sector ramps up efforts to combat the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak.

MoH announces closure of health centres, time change

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

The Ministry of Health on Wednesday announced the closure of a number of health centres in the Sultanate after 9 pm throughout the week, health and treatment services will be provided in the morning and evening only and official holidays from Sunday, to limit the spread of COVID-19.

The centres are as follows: Wadi Al Sahtan Health Centre will be closed and patients can go to Wadi Bani Ghafir Hospital until further notice.

Al Awabi Health Centre will be closed – patients can go to Al Rustaq Health Complex or Wadi Bani Kharrouz Hospital until further notice.

Al Naseem Health Centre will be closed during the evening period throughout the week due to the current conditions, health and treatment services will be provided in the morning period only. Patients can go to the Barka Health Complex



during the closing period of the centre until further notice.

Al Rustaq Health Centre will be closed in the evening period on weekdays and treatment will be provided only in the morning period and official holidays from Sunday. Patients can go to Al Rustaq Health Complex during the closing period until further notice.

Wudam Sahil Health Centre will be closed during the evening period throughout the week treatment will be provided only in the morning period and official holidays from Thursday. Patients can go to the Al Musanaa Health Complex during the period until further notice.

Wadi Bani Daouf Health Centre will be closed after 9 pm throughout the week due to the Corona pandemic, health and treatment services will be provided in the morning and evening only and official holidays from Sunday. Patients can go to the Al Rustaq complex until further notice.



SAF PITCHES IN TO HELP IN ANTI-VIRUS CAMPAIGN

MUSCAT: The Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo) alongside the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) and the Ministry of Defence Engineering Services on Wednesday provided and transported a large quantity of support equipment and essential requirements for the preparedness of shelter centres for the relief and sheltering sector in Muscat Governorate.

The move comes in support of the national health services' NHS ongoing efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19.

In addition, the Ministry of Defence's engineering services have activated emergency and precautionary plans as part of the ministry's contribution to tackling the COVID-19 outbreak.



PACP launches food basket for the needy

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

The Public Authority for Consumer Protection (PACP) in coordination with major FMCG players in the country has launched a food basket for needy families at a reasonable price.

The 'Basket of Goodness' package with 19 essential commodities is priced between RO 9.400 to RO 9.900. It aims at ensuring a fast and safe shopping for both locals and residents and considerably reduces people's shopping time.

Announcing the initiative, Omar bin Faisal al Jahdhami, Vice-Chairman of the Consumer Services and Market Watch at the PACP said that the basket also aims at countering the economic effects of COVID -9 on the consumers.

"This 'Basket of Goodness' will significantly contribute to the idea of providing consumer goods at reasonable and competitive prices during the current crisis and help the authorities to keep people at home," Al Jahdhami said.

He further said that the Authority had

been studying the impacts of the present crisis that the "world and the Sultanate are going through in the wake of the outbreak of COVID-19".

"The effects of the present predicament are felt across the economy of many sectors of the society and the PACP felt the necessity to liaise with shopping centres across various governorates in the Sultanate", he added, saying that it is expected to mitigate the economic burden on consumers by providing the weekly needs of the necessary goods for the whole family in one integrated food basket. This basket also contributes to shortening the effort and time spent on shopping for essential goods and protects consumers from infections that may affect people while shopping for longer periods.

Regarding the timing of the introduction of the 'basket', he opined that it is to be launched just before the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan in order for all consumers, affected families, people with low income and charitable societies to benefit from it.



DON'T LET VANITY BE THE DEATH OF YOU, OR ANOTHER

RAY PETERSEN
NIZWA, APRIL 8

Although the World Health Organization (WHO) has discouraged individuals from wearing face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), continues to advocate their use, my research took me to an environment that I felt closely matches that of the capital in the coming 30-60 days, when COVID-19 will certainly challenge us all aggressively, and therefore looked closely at South East Asian based community and society protocols.

COVID-19 protection strategies have been gradually, and actively, phased in by the Supreme Committee in Oman throughout the month of March, and now into April. They

have been bold, and authoritative, yet respectful of individual rights during that time. Now however, with a lockdown of Muscat imminent, the message must get through, and the population, especially in the capital, must embrace fully the restrictive, unfashionable, lifesaving elements of the Supreme Committee's actions.

Masks and gloves may not look great, they are not fashionable at all, and specially for the young, "aren't cool," but the reality is uncomfortable. Do you want to be alive, fit and well, or 'cool'? And do you want your family, friends and others alive, fit and well, or not? Choose wisely, don't be vain, don't be selfish, and do the right thing.

Associate Professor Piotr Chlebicki, Senior Consultant from the Department of Infectious Diseases at Singapore General Hospital explained: "Frequently and properly washing your hands remains the most effective protection against infection," he

continued saying that if soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to quickly reduce the number of germs on your hands.

Of course, you should pay close attention to changes in your health, especially if you've recently been traveling, and if you experience flu-like symptoms, such as a fever, cough or sore throat, within 14 days of your return you should: Wear a mask and seek medical attention, informing the health professionals of your recent travel history.

Wear a mask if you have respiratory issues, or symptoms such as a cough or runny nose. Face masks provide a physical barrier to prevent contaminants and pathogens from entering your nose and mouth. Conversely, they protect others from your own nose and mouth secretions. The two common types of face masks are a surgical mask helps block out large particle droplets, splashes or sprays that may contain germs. It is

however unable to filter very small particles and its loose shape offers less protection than a properly fitted N95 mask, which, properly fitted should have no air gaps.

Besides blocking splashes, sprays and droplets, the N95 mask is also capable of filtering very small particles such as viruses and tuberculosis. The 'N95' designation means that the respirator can block out at least 95 per cent of small test particles, making it ideal for infection control purposes, though those with severe lung or heart problems, or who have difficulty breathing at rest or on exertion should first check with a doctor before wearing a N95 mask.

It would appear that the WHO has its own axe to grind in regard to the mask issue, and have not been totally transparent with the public, as their reluctance to recommend the use of masks is believed to be related to the health sector's fears of short supplies of N95 and surgical quality masks

could put health professionals at even greater risk from COVID-19. Though completely understandable from this perspective, the lack of transparency is a sad miscalculation of their responsibilities, coming hard on the heels of their impotent report on the role of China in the whole COVID-19 fiasco.

Professor David Heymann, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, chaired the WHO's scientific and technical advisory group for infectious hazards. He said on Tuesday that, "Unless people are working in healthcare settings, masks are only for the protection of others, not oneself." His group's updated advice was, "As the virus must spread via droplets or contaminated surfaces, physical distancing (social distancing) and handwashing are the initial responses to the threat."

However, there is emerging evidence suggests that infected people may be able to spread the

virus to others for up to three days before becoming ill themselves, says Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang from Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health in the National University of Singapore. "By wearing, even a cloth mask, these pre-symptomatic, or asymptomatic people may be a little less likely to spread the virus to others, though physical distancing remains the most effective measure against the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19" says Hsu, the school's program leader for infectious diseases.

Their stance is therefore like the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in that the mask is also meant to protect others. COVID-19 is a killer and must not be allowed to gain more traction in Oman than it already has. Stay at home, and if you must go out, please wear a mask and gloves. They may save a life... and maybe that life will be yours.

Face masks

Popular types of face masks

Surgical mask	N95 or similar type
One-way protection: captures particles or droplets from wearer	Two-way protection: filters air entering/exiting the wearer
Typically used to prevent spread of common colds, flu	Filters at least 95% of airborne particles
Loose-fitting	Sits tightly on the face
For general population	Mostly used by health workers

Experts warn that masks are not foolproof because a virus can still enter through the sides or enter body through the eyes

Source: CDC/WHO/OHS Canada

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Please Contact with our Team

Mohd Al Rashdi : Head Office	99841230	m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com
Ali Al Maashari : Head Office	99639264	wadialmeeh@yahoo.com
Bakhit Al Shihri : Salalah Office	92998577	bakhit.omandaily@gmail.com
Abdullah Al Abri : Nizwa Office	99429094	nizwaofc@omandaily.net.om
Musalam Al Saidi : Suhar Office	99429192	sohardaily@outlook.com

China lifts 77- day lockdown

WUHAN OPENS, SPARKING HOPE DESPITE RISING GLOBAL DEATHS AND ECONOMIC PAIN



Travellers are seen inside Hankou Railway Station after travel restrictions to leave Wuhan were lifted. – Reuters

WUHAN: Thousands streamed out of the Chinese city of Wuhan on Wednesday after a lockdown was lifted, offering a ray of hope even as Europe and the United States faced rising deaths and crippling economic pain.

As Wuhan reawakens, Western countries remain in the throes of a crisis that has claimed the lives of more than 80,000 people worldwide and forced around half of humanity into some form of lockdown.

The hardest-hit countries, among them Italy, Spain, France and the US, are grappling with how to balance public safety with the devastating impact of shutdowns that have erased millions of jobs, sent financial markets plunging and pummeled major industries from travel to construction.

In an alarming calculation of the economic costs, the French economy recorded its worst performance since 1945 during the first quarter, shrinking some six per cent.

Germany's economy, the biggest in Europe, is also expected to fall into a "serious recession" and shrink by nearly 10 per cent in the second quarter, leading researchers warned.

Yet health experts stressed it is too early to loosen restrictions that could accelerate the spread of a disease that has infiltrated every layer of society, from refugees to royals to Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who entered his third day in intensive care.

"Now is not the time to relax measures. It is the time to once again double and triple our collective efforts to drive towards suppression with the whole support of society," said the World Health Organization's regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge.

'STUCK FOR 77 DAYS'

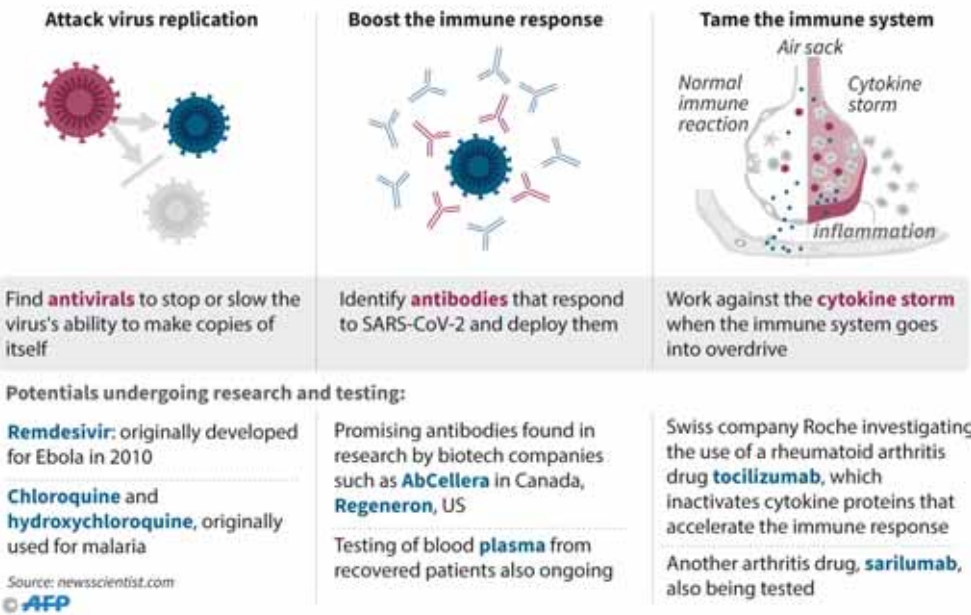
In the ground-zero city of Wuhan, who led the world with its unprecedented lockdown, strict measures appeared to have paid off.

After a nearly 11-week travel ban was finally lifted, tens of thousands of people fled the city in joyous scenes that contrasted with the macabre mood around much of the world – even if some passengers were travelling in hazmat suits.

"I've been stuck for 77 days! I've been stuck

The quest for COVID-19 drugs

The main strategies under investigation in the battle against infection by SARS-CoV-2



for 77 days!" shouted one man, who arrived at the railway station for a train back to his home province of Hunan. Yet not all is back to normal, with schools still closed and travel discouraged.

At the train station a robot whirled through crowds to spray their feet with disinfectant as it played a recorded message reminding them to wear face masks.

Passengers also had to pass temperatures checks and show green "health codes" on their phone, which are calculated in part by whether their neighbourhoods have been declared virus-free.

"Wuhan has lost a lot in this epidemic, and Wuhan people have paid a big price," a 21-year-old man surnamed Yao said.

"Now that the lockdown has been lifted, I think we're all pretty happy".

STAGES OF GRIEF

The mood was far bleaker in the United States, where the country mourned another 1,939 deaths over a period of 24 hours, according

to a tally by Johns Hopkins University, bringing the nation's death toll to nearly 13,000.

President Donald Trump lashed out at the WHO, accusing it of a pro-Beijing bias as he threatened to cut funding.

The US president has criticised China's handling of the pandemic and questioned the accuracy of official statistics that show its deaths have slowed to a trickle.

Yet Trump himself has also come under fire for initially downplaying the virus by likening it to the flu and failing to adequately prepare the country's hospitals.

Medical staff around the world are working tirelessly in brimming intensive care units and makeshift hospitals erected in sports stadiums, on ships and even in a New York cathedral.

In Spain, home to the world's second deadliest outbreak, another 757 deaths were reported Wednesday, bringing the toll up for a second day after several days of decline.

Antonio Alvarez, a 33-year-old nurse at Barcelona hospital, described his experience of



Irish Police conduct a traffic checkpoint on the outskirts of Dublin, as police exercised new powers to restrict people's movements in order to combat the novel coronavirus COVID-19. – AFP

the crisis as akin to bereavement.

"I've had my phases of anger, of denial, you go through all of them".

"Now we are still a little overwhelmed but it is better. Fewer patients are dying", he said.

Hundreds are still dying daily in devastated Italy although the peak of the crisis appears to have passed, with the rise of infections hitting a new low.

Britain, meanwhile, is bracing for its most agonising days after another record 786 more deaths on Tuesday, while the prime minister's hospitalisation underscored the seriousness of the disease for many in a country that was slow to react.

BAILOUT EFFORTS

A staggering 81 per cent of the world's 3.3 billion-strong workforce has been affected by "the worst global crisis since the Second World War", according to the UN's International Labour Organization.

Governments around the globe are rolling

out unprecedented stimulus measures, including a \$1 trillion package in Japan.

Yet the eurozone is mired in bickering over a bailout plan for its hard-hit members, with finance ministers unable to bridge the divide after 16 hours of talks that will now resume on Thursday. Meanwhile, markets continued their rollercoaster ride, with European stocks retreating on Wednesday after the Dow Jones index soared around 1,000 points on Tuesday before ending slightly lower.

The economic fallout is biting hardest among the world's poor.

Mohamed Said, a carpenter and father-of-three queueing for food packages in Cairo, spoke for millions as he said of his desperation.

"Since this crisis started we've been sitting at home and there's no money coming in," said the 36-year-old.

"We don't know how to feed our kids... and if, God forbid, something happens to any of them, I won't be able to foot a hospital bill," he said. — AFP



Obligations to abide during the current crisis...



ALI AL MATANI
ali.matani2@gmail.com

The government is working hard and using all its energies and resources to deal with the situation arising out of the crisis caused by the corona pandemic and its implications everywhere. It is also specially taking care of the small and medium enterprises in the country by giving them certain facilities, flexibility in abiding by its obligations and settlement of dues.

But the society has also its duty to deal with these enterprises with positive mind and support them by continuing its commitments with regard to them and do not deduct their dues just because of suspension of some of their services. People can do this by respecting the decisions made by the Supreme Committee.

When we talk about such enterprises, we mean institutions like

private schools, kindergarten and creches etc which have commitments and dues to pay such as rents, salaries of teachers and non-teaching staff. If they would not get their dues by the end of the year, it would harm a larger segment of the society which have their own commitments and obligations to lead normal life and which they cannot avoid.

This requires intervention of the ministries of education and social development to bring the matter to the notice of the parents and guardians that they should fulfill their annual obligations and fees which are paid in installments and all other commitments as the crisis continues.

Everybody is aware of the situation and no further explanation is required. There is no doubt that the

strengthening of small and medium enterprises in the country is not only the responsibility of the government, but it is also for the society to do. Entire society is required to stand together and show solidarity to overcome the crisis with minimum cost. This requires taking an objective and comprehensive look at the overall situation.

It is our ethics and part of our common conscience that we fulfill the commitments and entitlements towards these institutions. We should ask ourselves, if these institutions and enterprises would not get what was committed to them by us, then what would they do.

We need them for education and upbringing of our children. If they would not get what was committed to them, they would not be able to serve

us and would be forced to lay off its employees and eventually our children will suffer. We should see this clearly. These institutions do not have any other resources to continue their work and survive without the obligations they have on us.

We should realise that the economy, in its broadest sense, is interlinked.

We understand that schools and other such institutions and enterprises can sue parents and guardians, if they are not paid. But the fairness in the relationship between the parents and guardians on the one hand and these institutions on the other do not allow them to resort to take such measures as the solution. This is also good for either sides.

We should not forget that schools may decide to deprive their students

of the certificates of completing certain levels of schooling, if parents do not pay the dues they owe. Some kindergartens and nurseries hold not such practices are not fair. We do not want to see such things in our society. Everybody is facing the same problems.

We hope that parents and guardians would understand the current exceptional situation.

They would look at the issue from this angle also. It is a testing time for our love to this country. There is no doubt that there are always some who hate their country and do not like what is good for it.

But we always claim that we would sacrifice ourselves for this great nation and beloved country. Now this is the time of a small test of our commitment to the nation.



A man wearing a face mask walks next to barriers set up to block buildings from a street in Wuhan. – Reuters

How a military-style lockdown unfolded in Wuhan

CATE CADELL AND YAWEN CHEN

As the world grapples with the escalating coronavirus pandemic, China reopened the city of Wuhan on Wednesday, allowing its 11 million residents to leave for the first time in over two months, a milestone in its effort to combat the outbreak.

But while the operation to contain Wuhan's coronavirus outbreak has been hailed as a success by China and many international health experts, it didn't come easy.

Using virus case data, official reports and over a dozen interviews with officials, residents and scientists in Wuhan.

Wuhan health authorities reported the first case of what turned out to be the new coronavirus in December, and the first known death linked to the virus in early January.

City officials insisted the situation was under control for the first two weeks of January, downplaying the possibility of human-to-human transmission as they focused on a seafood and wildlife market where the outbreak was believed to have started.

But troubling signs were emerging. Hospital respiratory wards began reaching capacity by around Januar 12, and some people were being turned away, a half dozen Wuhan residents said.

But at least up to January 16, Wuhan's government said that no new cases of the disease had occurred for about two weeks, and the city continued as normal. Diners packed restaurants, shoppers flocked to commercial districts, and travellers headed to train stations and airports for their Lunar New Year holidays.

Minimal measures were put in place to take the temperatures of residents

in public places, or encourage them to wear protective masks, residents said.

"We ordinary people did not know that we needed to take protective measures," said Wang Wenjun, whose uncle died of the coronavirus on January 31. But that changed after Januar 18, when a team of scientists sent by the central government in Beijing arrived in Wuhan.

Leading the group was 83-year-old Zhong Nanshan, an epidemiologist credited with raising the alarm in China about the spread of another coronavirus, Sars, in 2003. Over two days, the team investigated the source and scale of Wuhan's outbreak, inspecting the seafood and wildlife market and other sites.

As the scientists toured Wuhan, their mood darkened as the scale of the crisis became clear, said a source familiar with the trip. A day before the scientists arrived, four new cases were confirmed in Wuhan, none of which had apparent links to the market.

That cast doubt over local authorities' previous assertions that there was no substantial evidence of human-to-human transmission, which would have required them to impose drastic containment measures on the city.

The scientists' visit was the third by an expert group since the end of December as suspicion in Beijing grew that the virus was transmissible and local officials had concealed the challenges they faced containing the disease, according to an academic on the January 18 trip and a scientist who visited on January 2. Another trip took place on January 8.

During the January 18 visit, the team made several discoveries that had been previously undisclosed to the public by local officials.

Over a dozen health care workers had been infected, efforts to track close contacts with other confirmed cases had dwindled, and hospitals had not conducted a single test before January 16, Zhong and other experts on the team announced a few days after their trip to Wuhan.

On January 19, the group of about a half dozen scientists returned to Beijing, where they reported their findings to the National Health Commission, which formulates China's health policy.

The experts recommended that Wuhan be put under quarantine and that hospital capacity be rapidly expanded, according to two sources who were briefed on the discussions. Zhong himself had suggested the lockdown measures, they said.

One of the sources said the proposal was initially rejected by Wuhan government officials because they feared the economic impact, but they were overruled by the central authorities.

On the evening of January 20, the central government set up a taskforce in Wuhan to spearhead the fight against the epidemic.

The lockdown of Wuhan had been put in motion.

Ye Qing, deputy chief of the statistics bureau in Hubei province, where Wuhan is located, said it was only when Zhong announced his findings that he began to realise the seriousness of this epidemic.

Wuhan officials, he said, reacted far too late. "If the government had sent out a notice, if they had asked everyone to wear masks, to do temperature checks, maybe a lot fewer people would have died."

He added: "It's a painful lesson with blood and tears."

— Reuters

Long lines and frustration as Wisconsinites vote

DANIEL ACKER & JOSEPH AX

Despite a last-minute court battle and a stay-at-home order, thousands of Wisconsin voters braved the coronavirus outbreak to wait 6 feet apart in lines for hours and cast ballots in the state's presidential primary and local elections.

Some Wisconsinites who had requested absentee ballots said they never received them, forcing them to choose between risking their health to cast a ballot in person or forgoing their right to vote.

The confusion and frustration among the Midwestern state's residents — as well as the 11th-hour legal wrangling over whether to hold the election during a public health emergency - served as a sobering preview of what may await other states, or the country as a whole, if the pandemic persists.

The general election that will determine the next president — Republican President Donald Trump or a Democratic challenger — is scheduled for November 3. In Wisconsin, more than half of municipalities reported shortages of poll workers, prompting the state to call up 2,400 National Guard troops to assist.

Outside Riverside High School in Milwaukee — where officials closed all but five of the city's 180 voting sites for a lack of poll workers - masked voters stood in a line that stretched for several blocks.

In Green Bay, poll workers sat behind Plexiglas barriers. In Madison, election officials urged voters to bring their own pens — black or blue ballpoint, if possible, because other colors or types of ink could flummox ballot-counting machines.

More than a dozen states have postponed nominating elections in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has transformed Americans' daily lives.

On Monday, Wisconsin's Democratic Governor, Tony Evers, ordered the election postponed until June despite having previously said he lacked the authority to do so. But the state Supreme Court reversed his order in a ruling late on Monday after Republican legislative leaders challenged Evers' decision.

Separately, in another Republican challenge, the US Supreme Court on Monday overturned a federal judge's decision extending absentee voting for six days, instead ruling all ballots had to be postmarked by Tuesday. That decision forced Jennifer Archer, 35, to don a mask and gloves and head to the polls in Milwaukee after her absentee ballot did not show up.

"I know several people who also never got their ballots," she said. "They had the option of coming out and hoping for the best, or sit this election out, but I didn't see that as an option."

Others were not able to vote at all. Green Bay Mayor Eric Genrich said in a phone interview that his wife, who is immunocompromised, never got her absentee ballot and could not risk voting in person.

— Reuters

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Observer

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

HEAD OFFICE

Tel: 24649444, 24649450, 24649451, 24604563, 24699437

Fax: 24699643

SALALAH OFFICE

Tel: 23292633

Fax: 23293909

NIZWA OFFICE

Tel: 25411099

P.O. Box 955, P.C. 611

ADVERTISING

AL OMANEYA ADVERTISING & PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 3303, P.C. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: SWITCHBOARD: 24649444

DIRECT: 24649430/24649437/24649401

Fax: 24649434

DISTRIBUTION AGENT

AL OMANEYA For Distribution & Marketing, P.O. Box 974, P.C. 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: 24649351/24649360

Fax: 24649379

Website: omanobserver.om

e-mail: editor@omanobserver.om

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P.O. Box 974, Postal Code 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
subscribe@oeppa.om

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COVID-19

IMPACTS

OCCI urges landlords to waive, reduce or defer rents

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) - the voice of the private sector in the country- has expressed full confidence in the efforts of the Omani government to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, and has affirmed the Omani private sector support for this national endeavour.

“The coordination between the public and private sectors is based on the highest level of control over the effects and consequences of this crisis. OCCI expresses its deep gratitude to the governmental authorities for ensuring consultation and cooperation by having private sector representatives in the joint task forces to follow events, developments, ongoing consultation about the proper procedure and precautions against the impact of the spread of various viruses,” the Chamber said in a statement.

Under the guidance of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Oman is considered one of the best countries for efforts in ensuring safety, health, and welfare of its citizens and residents, especially that its strategic stocks of medicines, food, and goods are sufficient for the coming period, stressing to exercise extreme care and caution in procedures and measures to achieve national security through productive industrial facilities to provide the countries current and future requirements and needs, and discussing the constraints facing business owners and ways to overcome them. In addition, all efforts have been made to ensure that these products are available at all sales centres.

OCCI is working towards this with various governmental and private authorities to address the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the decline of international oil prices and their impact on private sector institutions in the Sultanate. The Chamber presented a number of plans and proposals to deal with the economic situation that the Sultanate is currently going through, which aim to serve the community, especially the business sector and consumers.

CATEGORY 1: SOCIETY
The idea of establishing a Social Responsibility Fund with an initial contribution of RO 1 million aims to support the government in mitigating the effects of the pandemic, uniting the private sector efforts in community service, and organising and directing community projects. It is also worth noting that the private sector contributions to the fund are not limited to monetary contributions but



UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK, OMAN IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE BEST COUNTRIES FOR EFFORTS IN ENSURING SAFETY, HEALTH, AND WELFARE OF ITS CITIZENS AND RESIDENTS, ESPECIALLY THAT ITS STRATEGIC STOCKS OF MEDICINES, FOOD, AND GOODS ARE SUFFICIENT FOR THE COMING PERIOD.

rather contributions in kind or social services, in the form of exemptions from rental fees and the allocation of hotels to institutional quarantine to combat the pandemic.

CATEGORY 2: CONSUMERS
The Chamber, in cooperation with the competent authorities, is making sure that all basic commodities are adequately available while food reserves are at safe levels. It is also urging food centres to maintain general hygiene, sterilise shopping carts, stimulate remote shopping services through electronic services, an encouraging delivery companies to cooperate with the (Shop from home) initiative. It is also supporting efforts to facilitate import procedures and provide integrated logistics services.

In order to ensure the consumer's access to all basic services, the Chamber has submitted a number of recommendations to the concerned authorities regarding the exclusion of shops of some activities from the lockdown and partially making them available to the consumer and for limited times due to their importance in providing basic needs for their daily

life, compliance with the health and preventive procedures.

These activities include the sale of construction materials, sale of spare parts, maintenance and repair of cars, selling and repairing mobile phones, selling and repairing electronic and electrical devices, sale and repair of tires, aluminum and carpentry workshops in industrial areas, contracting companies and engineering consulting offices, car rental offices, and equipment rental offices, which is what has been achieved over the past few days.

CATEGORY 3: PRIVATE SECTOR COMPANIES AND INSTITUTIONS

In the interest of serving the private sector, the Chamber had a prominent role in alleviating the economic burden faced by various institutions of the sector by taking a package of actions, which we summarise as follows:

■ Exempting the members of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry from the arrears renewal fees for the previous years, knowing that one-year fees will be charged as well as the membership renewal for the year

2020, and note that these exemptions are estimated at RO7 million.

■ Providing most of the Chamber's services electronically, allocate numbers to communicate with the members who are facing challenges as a result of this crisis, while extending receiving calls hours through the Member line 80073737

■ Notifying the Chamber's members of the instructions issued by the Supreme Committee and the concerned authorities, by making them aware of the most important health and preventive requirements from Coronavirus.

■ Directing owners of commercial centres and real estate to take into account the current conditions of rented and affected stores by precautionary measures, whether by exempting, reducing or postponing rents during the current stage.

■ Promoting direct import through the Sultanate sea and airports outlets, and take advantage of the infrastructure that distinguishes the Sultanate.

Through its representation on the Public Establishment for Industrial

Estates – Madayn, food reserves, and discussion of the proposals, some decisions have been approved by these bodies that concern the private sector.

Some problems related to the certificate of origin have been resolved in cooperation with the Royal Oman Police customs, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

To propose a package of economic measures and incentives that would reduce the effects of this crisis.

CATEGORY 4: PRIVATE SECTOR WORKERS

The Chamber has worked in coordination with the Ministry of Manpower and with the competent authorities to provide many measures and incentives aimed at reducing the pressures it suffers from as a result of the current economic conditions, including:

The Chamber's contribution is RO1 million in the name of the Omani private sector to the Job Security Fund established by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

OTHER MEASURES:
■ Urging the private sector institutions to reduce the number of

employees in the work environment to work through virtual channels, in line with the decisions of the Supreme Committee in charge of dealing with the pandemic of the emerging Coronavirus COVID-19.

■ Urging private sector institutions to comply with hygiene and prevention requirements.

■ After studying the economic conditions and aspects affected by the private sector as a result of the precautionary measures for the outbreak of the emerging Coronavirus COVID -19, the Chamber presents a set of recommendations related to stimulating some economic aspects.

The Chamber held a number of important meetings with decision-makers at the various government bodies and participated in preparing a number of incentive recommendations for the current economic situation, which include:

The Chamber called on the Central Bank to urge the various financing institutions, banks and financing companies to take in to account the current conditions of private sector institutions by postponing the installments to companies and employees working in the private sector for a period of six months without accumulating interest, make the process of receiving deferral requests more smooth and flexible, grant companies emergency loans equivalent to at least 3 months of fixed monthly expenses without interest or symbolic interest and without additional guarantees until they exceed the liquidity crisis and are able to pay their obligations, especially the salaries of workers, re-scheduling of loans in general, loans of those affected by the current situation and small and medium-size enterprises of which owners hold Riyada cards, by give them a grace period without accumulating interest in order to alleviate the economic burden facing this group, and reducing fees and the percentage of using electronic payment machines (POS) to encourage companies to reduce cash transactions.

The Chamber recommended that food commodities, medical supplies, disinfectants and sterilisers be exempted from customs duties if any, exemption from payment of late fines of social security dues with the possibility of posting dues during the crisis period, exempting companies and factories from land rental fees and usufruct for a period of six months, extendable for another six months, consider reducing and postponing the payment of electricity and water bills during the period. **TURN TO P8**

Contract awarded for new two hotels at Oman theme park



CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

Notwithstanding the subdued economic environment sparked by the COVID19 pandemic and the sharp drop in international oil prices, Muscat National Development & Investment Company (ASAAS), one of the biggest investors in the Sultanate's travel, leisure and hospitality sectors, is pressing ahead with the implementation of its flagship venture – the Hayy Al Sharq integrated entertainment and leisure complex at Barka in South Al Batinah Governorate.

The Muscat-headquartered developer recently awarded contracts for the construction of two branded hotels as part of the signature project, which clusters a theme park with an array of leisure facilities in the first such destination of its kind in Oman. According to officials, the well-

NEW PROPERTIES:
The well-established Omani construction firm, Al Subhiah Trading and Contracting LLC, has been selected by ASAAS to build a pair of hotels at the Hayy Al Sharq integrated entertainment and leisure destination in Barka.

established Omani construction firm, Al Subhiah Trading and Contracting LLC, has been selected by ASAAS to build a pair of hotels: a 247-keys

3-star property under the 'Arjaan by Rotana' brand, and a 263-keys 4-star hotel under the 'Reyhaan by Rotana' brand. Both properties – part of Hay Al Sharq's Phase 1 offerings – are slated for completion by the first quarter of 2020.

First unveiled in December 2016, Hayy Al Sharq is envisioned to be a one-of-a-kind destination, anchored by an integrated theme park, wildlife and water park and edutainment centre, while also featuring a collection of 3, 4 and 5-star hotels, residential clusters, and a wide array of dining and leisure options. A well-known operator from Orlando, USA, is proposed to be tapped to operate and manage the theme park components.

Adding to the appeal of the project, ASAAS has also signed a lease agreement with the popular retail brand, Carrefour, represented

by Majid Al Futtaim Group, to have a presence at Hayy Al Sharq.

Together with F&B components, family entertainment facilities, ice-rink, and other entertainment offerings, the destination is expected to one of Oman's top draws when it is launched in the next several years. The sprawling facility has been master planned by Singapore-based Surbana Jurong, one of Asia's largest urban and infrastructure development consultants.

Established in 2014, ASAAS has investments totaling around RO 1 billion in various stages of conceptualization, design, development and operation encompassing the tourism, transportation, logistics and healthcare sectors. The company also played a key role in the launch of SalamAir, the Sultanate's first budget airline.



Dentons advises on Ibri II mega solar project

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

Global law firm Dentons has advised ACWA Power and the Sponsors in reaching financial close on the \$400 million 500-MW Ibri II photovoltaic (PV) solar independent power project (IPP), in Oman. The plant will become the largest utility-scale solar park in Oman.

ACWA Power led the consortium of sponsors, which includes Kuwait's Gulf Investment Corporation (GIC) and Alternative Energy Projects Co (AEP). The power project, financed on a 70/30 debt to equity ratio, has received \$275 million in senior debt funding from a group of six lenders. The lending consortium includes the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Bank Muscat, Riyad Bank, Siemens Bank, Standard Chartered Bank and Warba Bank.

Partner Udayan Mukherjee commented, "We are delighted to have been able to assist the Sponsors to close this transaction, particularly given the challenges in the current environment. This is a landmark project as it is the largest renewables project in Oman and will be the first renewables IPP for AIIB in the region, with a consortium of international and regional banks also participating."

The Dentons Finance team was led by partner Udayan Mukherjee, with assistance from counsel Michelle Teng, senior associate Carina Onzer, associate Annabel Vince and trainee Asila al Hinai. Dentons' Oman office also advised on the local law aspects, led by partners Sadaf Buchanan and Andrew Figgins, with assistance from counsel Justine Harding and paralegal Safa al Bulushi.

Business continuity plan in place at Salalah Port

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

Shipping and cargo operations are continuing round the clock at Port of Salalah in line with ramped up efforts by the transshipment and logistics hub to ensure the smooth flow of goods amid measures to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19).

According to Mohammed al Mashani (pictured), General Manager – Corporate Affairs, the General Cargo Terminal witnessed an increase in the volume of foodstuffs, vegetables and fruits imported during March as traders took advantage of enhanced shipping connectivity to source essential supplies.

In line with the guidelines of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 containment, Port of Salalah has also put in place a business continuity plan to ensure the smooth operation of the maritime hub notwithstanding 'work from home' measures and other pandemic prevention initiatives advocated by the authorities.

"The port also, in cooperation with the various authorities concerned, is implementing all precautionary measures, supported by a specialized team that includes the Health Ministry's representatives at the port.

It coordinates with all of the relevant agencies and follows up on all the circulars and guidelines issued by all



“The General Cargo Terminal witnessed an increase in the volume of foodstuffs, vegetables and fruits imported during March as traders took advantage of enhanced shipping connectivity to source essential supplies.

MOHAMMED AL MASHANI
GM, Corporate Affairs

the relevant government agencies in this regard.

We also wish to confirm that the port continues to provide all the requisite facilities to its customers."

OCCL urges landlords to waive, reduce or defer rents

FROM PAGE 7

The Chamber recommended to the authorities responsible for storage places, industrial areas and cities to reduce field inspection of the goods in a manner that does not conflict with the security requirements, stop fines for storing in the port and shipping companies, keeping shipping media companies and commercial shipping companies open because they are related to ports and not lock them down so that the import and export movement is not affected, and excluding factories from closing or from reducing the number of workers, especially those related to the production of food, sterilisers, disinfectants, medicines and medical supplies. The government, with its various agencies, issued the first package of facilities, and it is expected that there will be another package due to the great impact on the private sector in particular and society in general.

Work is currently underway to study the Chamber's proposals in several aspects, the most prominent of which are the financial, banking and tax measures, fees, rents, services, electricity and water prices, regulating the labour market, in addition to supporting small and medium enterprises and enhancing local added value programmes and other aspects.



JESPER ANDERSEN

POINT of VIEW

Networking in the time of COVID-19

“The ability of companies to become “virtual offices” almost immediately is due in large part to the dramatic transformations that have taken place in the technology sector over the past decade.

I'm writing this from home. "So what," you may be thinking, "I'm reading this at home."

But as companies around the world have sent employees home to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are living through a global experiment to find out what happens when millions of people transition to working remotely overnight.

The ability of companies to become "virtual offices" almost immediately is due in large part to the dramatic transformations that have taken place in the technology sector over the past decade. Driven by the development of computing- and storage-as-a-service models, these innovations have shifted enterprise technology out of on-premise hardware and onto cloud-based platforms. In doing so, they have enabled workers to access data, run analytics, and collaborate with colleagues from anywhere in the world—including their homes.

The COVID-19 pandemic is showing us that this transformation remains incomplete. Recent questions about the resiliency of our networking infrastructure—including residential internet and corporate networks—demonstrate that networking is one of the few remaining bottlenecks in the true digital transformation of the modern workplace.

These limitations result in challenges to productivity and access for workers trying to log in from offsite locations and new devices, and open up networks to additional security risks. Inherent physical limits like latency and bandwidth hamper the speed and responsiveness of our networks. And the complexity of modern networking functions and our modern enterprise network ecosystem results in a patchwork of networking and security solutions provided by a multitude of vendors that are challenging to conduct in



RECENT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESILIENCY OF OUR NETWORKING INFRASTRUCTURE—including residential internet and corporate networks—DEMONSTRATE THAT NETWORKING IS ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING BOTTLENECKS IN THE TRUE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE MODERN WORKPLACE.

harmony.

Modern networks have become so complex that, even in normal times, the tasks of maintaining uninterrupted service, troubleshooting problems and protecting individual devices and overall network security have the potential to overwhelm IT professionals. Now, with work from home being the default across virtually the entire economy, the nearly complete decentralization of enterprise networks poses a real threat to business continuity and data security.

It doesn't have to be this way. The reality is that in today's cloud-based environment, these limitations don't need to exist. Like computing and storage has done in the past, networks can be managed as a service, allowing

managers to spin up and down critical functions automatically and as needed for individual users and branch offices.

When it comes to latency, there are a number of opportunities to put cloud-based applications near users as cloud providers or independent co-location vendors have provided points of presence (POPs) around the world.

And indeed, the world is increasingly becoming covered with high-bandwidth internet connections. This is one of the promises of 5G mobile technology—soon these connections won't even need to be hard-wired.

But the biggest challenge is no doubt the complexity of the current enterprise network. Networking represents a much broader set of

functions than a normal computing operating system or data storage facility.

Networking typically includes DNS and IP address management services to facilitate network connections, switching and routing to organize the flow of data, load balancing and proxy servers to maintain reliability, WiFi to provide access, firewalls to provide security and numerous other functions.

Traditionally, many of these functions have been performed by different networking vendors, and while some—like Cisco with networking hardware—have risen to dominate a particular niche or part of the networking ecosystem, no single company has become a market leader across those various networking

functions.

This evolution has resulted in a networking environment that is inefficient and resource intensive, and can have security gaps that leave remote users exposed to cyberthreats.

The networking systems of the future will have to be designed and developed to be intuitive, useable, reliable and secure—which means putting them on the cloud and building them with simplicity and ease-of-use in mind. Virtualizing old software and putting it on the cloud—as several members of the previous generation of networking companies are doing—won't solve the problem.

That approach simply dresses up cumbersome and costly software as state-of-the-art cloud networking—which it is not.

Actually tackling this challenge requires significant commitment and investment to build cloud-native, cloud-managed networking systems that use micro-services to leverage the power of open source software—just as was done in computing and storage—to connect and secure users whether they are accessing the network from the main office or their living room.

There is no shortcut to building a cloud-native platform, but the sea-change that networking-as-a-service will bring to the way networking and security services are provided will reward the first movers and make obsolete those who have not put in the research and resources to develop next-generation platforms.

The COVID-19 outbreak has exposed a weakness in the infrastructure that is driving the digital transformation. Focusing on networking and security wherever the user is—whether that's in a physical office or quarantined at home—will be the challenge and opportunity for networking companies of the future.

(Jesper Andersen is the President and CEO of Infoblox)

Tesla to furlough workers and cut salaries of employees



A view of Tesla Inc's US vehicle factory is pictured in Fremont, California. – Reuters

NEW YORK: Tesla Inc told employees it would furlough all non-essential workers and implement salary cuts during a shut down of its US production facilities because of the coronavirus outbreak.

Tesla said it planned to resume normal operations on May 4, barring any significant changes, according to an email sent to US employees by in-house counsel Valerie Capers Workman.

The company, which suspended production at its San Francisco Bay Area vehicle and New York solar roof tile factories on March 24, said in the email the decisions were part of a broader effort to manage costs and achieve long-term plans.

Tesla did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The coronavirus pandemic has slashed US demand for cars and forced several other automakers to furlough US workers.

Pay for salaried Tesla employees will be reduced beginning on April 13 and cuts will remain in place until the end of the second quarter, the email said.

In the United States, workers' pay will be cut by 10 per cent, directors' salaries by 20 per cent and vice presidents' salaries by 30 per cent. Comparable reductions will be implemented abroad.

Employees who cannot work from home and have not been assigned to critical work onsite factories will be furloughed, with workers maintaining their healthcare benefits until production resumes, the email said.

Tesla suspended production at both factories last month after it ended a standoff with authorities concerned about the spread of the coronavirus.

Tesla's sole US auto factory employs more than 10,000 workers, with annualized production of slightly more than 415,000 units by the end of December 2019. — Reuters

US job openings fall; shutdowns seen causing further declines

WASHINGTON: US job openings fell in February, suggesting the labour market was losing momentum even before stringent measures to control the novel coronavirus outbreak shuttered businesses, throwing millions out of work.

That was underscored by another report on Tuesday showing a sharp decline in the share of small businesses planning to increase employment in March. The reports came in the wake of data last week showing the economy shed 701,000 jobs in March. The unemployment rate shot up 0.9 percentage point, the most since January 1975, to 4.4 per cent in March.

With 10 million people filing for unemployment benefits in the last two weeks of March and millions more expected to have submitted claims last week, economists are expecting payrolls to sink by at least a record 20 million in April and the jobless rate to top 10 per cent.

“The economy would be lucky to just be in a recession right now instead of what is looking more and more like the twilight zone of depression if Washington policymakers aren't careful,” said Chris Rupkey, chief economist at MUFJ in New York.

Job openings, a measure of labour demand, decreased 130,000 to 6.9 million, the Labor Department said in its monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, or JOLTS. Vacancies peaked at 7.5 million in January 2019. The job openings rate slipped to 4.3 per cent in February from 4.4 per cent in January.

The decline in job openings was led by real estate and rental and leasing, and information industries.

But there were 927,000 vacancies in the leisure and hospitality industry, with 783,000 of them at hotels, bars and restaurants.

Retailers had 727,000 job openings in February. None of these vacancies



People who lost their jobs wait in line to file for unemployment following an outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), at an Arkansas Workforce Centre in Fayetteville, Arkansas. – Reuters

likely exist now, with entire industries virtually closed.

Hiring was little changed at 5.9 million in February, keeping the hiring rate at 3.9 per cent for a third straight month. JOLTS data in the coming months will be closely watched for clues on the impact of the coronavirus shutdowns on hiring.

Stocks on Wall Street were trading higher as early signs of a slowdown in coronavirus cases in the nation's hot spots raised hopes that sweeping lockdown measures to contain the outbreak were working. The dollar weakened against a basket of currencies.

Prices of US Treasuries fell. “What we do not know yet is how much hiring has frozen in industries that have continued to operate by having the option of at-home work,”

said Sophia KorOpeckyj, a senior economist at Moody's Analytics in West Chester, Pennsylvania. “A freeze on hiring due to the uncertainty about the duration and severity of the downturn as well as such tangible things as canceled or delayed contracts will create a secondary effect that will deepen the pain in the labour market.”

A separate report from the National Federation of Independent Business on Tuesday offered some early indications on hiring in the months ahead. According to the NFIB, the share of small businesses planning to increase hiring plummeted to 9 per cent in March, the smallest since August 2016, from 21 per cent in February.

Overall, confidence among small business tumbled by the most on record to its lowest level since October

2016.

Economists say the labour market's fate will be determined by how quickly small businesses can access funding that has been put together by the government as part of a historic \$2.3 trillion fiscal stimulus package. The Federal Reserve has also taken extraordinary measures to provide liquidity to businesses.

“The extraordinary stimulus efforts from the US government and the Federal Reserve should support small businesses in coming months and help to keep workers on payrolls,” said Ben Ayers, senior economist at Nationwide in Columbus, Ohio.

“Still, the rollout and timing of the lending programmes for small enterprises will be key to limiting the negative effects from the economic downturn.” — Reuters

US grants GE licence to sell engines for China's new airplane

NEW YORK: The Trump administration granted a licence to General Electric Co to supply engines for China's new COMAC C919 passenger jet, a spokeswoman for the company said.

Early this year, the United States was weighing whether to deny GE's latest licence request to provide the CFM LEAP-1C engine for the narrow-body COMAC jet, which is expected to go into service next year.

The US Department of Commerce, which issues such licences, declined to comment, saying it cannot discuss individual licence applications. The White House also declined to comment.

But in February, President Donald Trump intervened, blasting US proposals that would prevent companies from supplying jet engines and other components to China's budding aviation industry.

“I want China to buy our jet engines, the best in the World,” Trump tweeted on February 18. “I want to make it EASY to do business with the United States, not difficult. Everyone in my Administration is being so instructed, with no excuses...”

Trump's downplayed any national security concerns.

“We're not going to be sacrificing our companies...by using a fake term of national security. It's got to be real national security. And I think people were getting carried away with it,” he told reporters.

GE had received licences for the LEAP engines since 2014 and was last granted one in March 2019, as the C919 plane was developed and began to engage in test flights.

Such licences are typically valid for four years with a defined quantity and value, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The engine is a joint venture between GE and France's Safran Aircraft Engines.

“We received notification that GE Aviation has licence approval for engines for the C919,” a GE spokeswoman said on Tuesday.

Safran confirmed GE received the licence approval. COMAC was not immediately available for comment.

— Reuters

Oil rises as markets eye Opec, Russia meeting on output cuts



A man works on an oil drilling pump site in McKenzie County outside of Williston, North Dakota. – Reuters

SEOUL: Oil rebounded on Wednesday after a two-day fall, lifted by hopes that a meeting between Opec members and allied producers on Thursday will trigger output cuts to shore up prices that have crumbled amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Brent crude was up by 21 cents, or 0.8 per cent, at \$32.08 per barrel by 0639 GMT after falling 3.6 per cent on US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude rose 82 cents, or 3.8 per cent, to \$24.45 a barrel after dropping 9.4 per cent in the previous session.

Thursday's videoconference meeting between members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and its allies, including Russia, is widely expected to be more successful than

their gathering in early March. That ended in failure to extend cuts, and a price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia amid slumping demand.

But doubts remain over the role of the United States in any production curbs.

“Whether the United States will join output cuts is closely watched as the market's focus remained on Opec meeting,” said Kim Kwang-rae, commodity analyst at Samsung Futures in Seoul. “Oil prices have been volatile as the market is in wait-and-see mode.”

Saudi Arabia, other Opec member countries and Russia, a grouping known as Opec+, are likely to agree to cut output, but that accord could be dependent on whether the United

States would go along with cuts. The US Department of Energy said that US output is already declining without government action.

Iran's Oil Minister, Bijan Zanganeh, said Iran does not agree with holding any Opec+ meeting without a clear-cut proposal and expected outcome from such talks, according to a letter sent to Opec.

“Saudi Arabia and Russia continue to hammer out a deal ... What is clear is that the United States must be involved,” ANZ Research said.

US crude production is expected to slump by 470,000 bpd and demand is set to drop by about 1.3 million bpd in 2020, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said. — Reuters

Pandemic to wipe out 6.7pc of working hours worldwide



People who lost their jobs wait in line to file for unemployment at an Arkansas Workforce Centre in Fayetteville, Arkansas. – Reuters

GENEVA: The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to wipe out 6.7 per cent of working hours globally in the second quarter of this year, equivalent to the labour of 195 million full-time workers, the International Labour Organization (ILO) said on Tuesday.

More than four out of five people in the global workforce live in places hit by full or partial workplace closures, it said in a report on the “worsening crisis with devastating effects” on the world of work.

It urged countries to take steps to keep people connected to jobs they are no longer able to do, so that fewer of them will end up unemployed.

“We clearly need and we are seeing it around world on an individualised national basis, efforts to stimulate

The Asia-Pacific region accounts for 125 million of the overall decline of 195 million in full-time job equivalents in the second quarter, although Chinese companies are getting back to work after a long lockdown to halt the virus spread.

economic activity through expansive fiscal and accommodating monetary policies — this is absolute essential,” ILO director-general Guy Ryder told a news conference.

He listed initiatives such as partial unemployment, technical unemployment and short working time measures that keep workers tied to their jobs.

“I think we have seen in a number of countries very appropriate reactions which enable companies to benefit from public support but at the same time take their responsibilities in retaining their employees and keeping them connected to the company involved and to the labour market,” Ryder said.

The Asia-Pacific region accounts

for 125 million of the overall decline of 195 million in full-time job equivalents in the second quarter, although Chinese companies are getting back to work after a long lockdown to halt the virus spread, the report said.

The UN agency gave no precise projection for the number of people to be made jobless by the crisis, though it said it would be “significantly higher” than the 25 million it forecast just last month. At the start of this year, 190 million workers were unemployed around the world.

The four sectors hardest-hit worldwide are accommodation and food services, manufacturing, retail, and business services and administrative activities, the report said. — Reuters



P A S S I O N F O R COOKING T U R N S I N T O BUSINESS



RUQAYA AL KINDI

What can be the better use of time than cooking and spending time with family amid the coronavirus pandemic which has restricted people inside their homes?

Afrah al Ghatrifi, 23, is making the best use of time as she has been enjoying cooking, which is her favourite pastime as well.

"I love to cook and bake. Cooking is one of my favorite pastimes and I find it one of the best stress busters. Since I am mostly at home these days, I am either cooking or baking and my love for baking surpasses everything else. I love to bake because I love sweet food, and also cooking because it is not something for which you have to travel or you have to depend on someone."

And she loves to be alone while cooking which makes her focus and try more cooking tricks and experiment-

ing new dishes.

"I make all kinds of sweets. I enjoy every moment and I never get bored. On the contrary when I get bored I make sweets to get rid of this feeling," she says.

It is her mother's cooking treasure that made Afrah passionately associated with cooking. Her passion for cooking started some 8 years when she was a school student.

"I had a great passion for cooking. No one taught me but I was watching when my mother was in the kitchen and learnt many things automatically just by watching her," she said.

"I learned how to cook Maho sweet, which is one of the desserts that is usually available in festivals and other occasions. In the beginning it was my main dish that I use to cook for family and friends. I was giving it to my relatives and teachers as gift."

She did not limit her passion only as a hobby and launched her project in 2017 as 'Mahoti Sweet'. "The idea began



when my sister convinced me to change my routine and enhance my cooking by adding new flavours," she said.

"I agreed with my sister and started to experiment flavours like snickers, oreo, lotus, kinder and others. Then I began distributing it to neighbors, family and friends, and it gained their admiration and praise."

Her Instagram account helps her a lot in promoting her products and to reach out to more and more customers. She has more than 3,000 followers on Instagram. Afrah used her learning which she earned while studying marketing at Sultan Qaboos University. It helped her in experimenting with new ways of marketing for her products and helped in managing her project in a better way.

You can find different flavours in Afrah's Maho. It has range of flavours like lotus flavor, Oreo, Kinder, Galaxy, Pistachios, Maltese's and others. She also provides cheesecake, cake and biscuit, and pastries such as donuts,

pancakes. Beside that she cooks cookies, Cinnabon with different flavors, saffron cake, and soon she is going to add new sweets in her list.

Afrah was able to build and develop her business while she was a student at the university for two consecutive years and she continued after graduation. Running a business seems a difficult task, but Afrah thinks it just needs more planning and overcoming obstacles in smart ways to achieve success.

"The response I get and the positive reinforcement and acceptance of people to my sweets boosted my confidence and I hope I would reach a higher level of professionalism and expertise very soon," she added.

She advises entrepreneurs to develop their skills in time management, setting priorities and then accomplish them in the right order. "They have, also, to know learn from their mistakes and not to repeat them over and over and to lead their project towards success."

FRENCH FOOTBALLERS STRIKE DEAL TO REDUCE WAGES

PLAYERS
MAKING
LESS THAN
10,000
EUROS WILL
NOT BE
AFFECTED

Players like Kylian Mbappe and Neymar would face a 50 per cent pay cut.

PARIS: Footballers and clubs in France's top two leagues have reached a non-binding agreement over a "temporary" pay cut during the coronavirus crisis, the national players' union (UNFP) said on Tuesday.

"We approved the recommendation this morning," UNFP president Philippe Piat said. "The idea is that players defer a part

of their April wages to allow clubs to cope," during what he called a "dramatic health situation".

Club and player representatives agreed upon a joint "recommendation" that would see footballers accept a temporarily reduced wage, which they will receive once money from TV rights is paid.

Broadcasters Canal+ and beIN Sports

have for the time being suspended the payments, the clubs' main source of revenue, after the season was put on hold last month indefinitely.

The pay cuts will be calculated on a sliding scale starting at 20 per cent, with the highest earners -- those who pocket over 100,000 euros monthly -- facing a 50 per cent reduction.

Players making less than 10,000 euros will not be affected.

Under French labour law the arrangement cannot be legally enforced, although the UNFP president expects "a large majority will not go against" the agreement.

"We advise them to accept it because it is a question of saving jobs. Without this

temporary effort the profession would suffer," he said.

Several Ligue 1 clubs, including Lyon and Marseille, have already placed their squads on partial unemployment to save money, a move that means they only pay 70 per cent of salaries with the state paying the rest, albeit limited to 4,850 euros per employee. — AFP

Stokes crowned *Wisden's* leading cricketer in the world

LONDON: Ben Stokes has ended Virat Kohli's three-year reign as *Wisden's* leading cricketer in the world after playing a starring role in England's World Cup win last year.

The 2020 *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*, published on Thursday, crowns the swashbuckling all-rounder as the sport's pre-eminent player.

He is the first England player to receive the honour since Andrew Flintoff in 2005.

The 28-year-old won the man-of-the-match award in the World Cup final against New Zealand at Lord's and then produced a remarkable match-winning innings of

135 not out in the third Ashes Test against Australia.

"Ben Stokes pulled off the performance of a lifetime -- twice in the space of a few weeks," said *Wisden* editor Lawrence Booth.

"First, with a mixture of outrageous talent and good fortune, he rescued England's run-chase in the World Cup final, before helping to hit 15 off the super over.

"Then, in the third Ashes Test at Headingley, he produced one of the great innings, smashing an unbeaten 135 to pinch a one-wicket win.

"Against red ball or white, he was a force of nature."

Stokes in January won the International Cricket Council's player of the year award.

England pace bowler Jofra Archer, who bowled the super over in the World Cup final, is among *Wisden's* five cricketers of the year.

Australians Pat Cummins, Marnus Labuschagne and Ellyse Perry have been named alongside Archer, as well as South Africa-born Essex off-spinner Simon Harmer.

Perry also reclaimed the leading women's cricketer in the world title from India's Smriti Mandhana.

—AFP

Fencing players staying fit with home training sessions

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 8

Oman's fencing team medallist Israa al Siyabi was one of the fencing national team stars who took part in the Stay Home campaign run by the Oman Fencing Committee (OFC). She and her team-mates are undergoing training sessions at their homes under direct supervision of coach Hisham Karshood.

The OFC, established in 2019, is keen to protect the players during this exceptional period witnessing the spread of COVID-19 global pandemic. The recent campaign of doing the training at home through online applications is part of the committee's initiative to keep the players fit, adhering to the decisions by the Supreme Committee and the Ministry of Sports Affairs instructions to stop doing any outdoor and group sport activities.

Hisham Karshood, head coach of the national fencing team, said the team players are continuing their home warm-up sessions. He said this decision is part of the precautions to prevent spreading of coronavirus.

"I am monitoring the players training remotely by watching their videos through the modern communication system. This idea of the initiative came after the completion of our normal training sessions on March 14. On the following day, we stopped doing any sports activities in the training hall as part of the implementing the government instructions. I contacted the



players' families and sought their approval to do training sessions from home," the Tunisian coach added.

The training sessions ranged from basics to technical practices for 'epee' and 'foil' categories. The head coach aims to maintain the players' technical performance and keep them fit for the upcoming camps and events.

"I would like to thank the families of the players for their full support for the success of this campaign and we hope to continue it until situation returns to normal. It is necessary that the players are getting encouragement from their families to do training from home," the coach said.

The OFC, joined as a member of Fencing International Federation (FIE) in November, impressed during the last few months. Oman fencing team members registered top results in different regional events. Oman national fencing team had claimed the bronze medal at the Arab Fencing Championships which was held in Bahrain in January.

The Sultanate team comprised Omar al Harthy, Al Harith al Harthy, AbdulHakeem and Al Muqtada al Adawi. Oman's Ahmed Anwar won the first place at foil competition in Kuwait friendly tournament which was part of the team's camp in February, while his team-mate Asad al Maskari finished runner-up. At the epee competitions, Oman's AbdulHakeem al Shidani came in second position while Omar al Harthy earned third place.

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F1 FURLONGHS STAFF AS BOSSES TAKE PAY CUTS

LONDON: Formula One has put almost half its staff on furlough until the end of May due to the novel coronavirus with chairman Chase Carey and senior management also taking a pay cut, an F1 spokesman said on Tuesday.

Sources said those on furlough were mainly employees whose work was focused on race weekend activities and who could not carry out duties remotely. The Liberty Media-owned company employs in excess of 500 people.

The Formula One season has yet to start, with the March 15 season-opener in Australia cancelled along with the Monaco showcase in May.

Six other races have been postponed and Formula One hopes to start up some time in the European summer, conditions permitting, with a reduced schedule of 15-18 races.

The spokesman said the senior leadership team had voluntarily taken a 20 per cent pay cut but would remain at work while Carey, an American, had taken a bigger reduction.

Formula One gains most of its revenue from race promotion fees, broadcast deals and advertising and sponsorship which have all been



Formula One group CEO Chase Carey along with other officials.

stalled by the virus with most sport at a standstill globally.

Three of the seven British-based teams — McLaren, Williams and Racing Point — have also furloughed staff in the past week to cut costs.

Under the British government's

furlough scheme announced last month, employers can claim for 80 per cent of employees' usual monthly wage costs, up to £2,500 (\$3,068) per month.

The teams are currently on a factory shutdown, with the August

THE FORMULA ONE SEASON HAS YET TO START, WITH THE MARCH 15 SEASON-OPENER IN AUSTRALIA CANCELLED ALONG WITH THE MONACO RACE IN MAY

break brought forward to allow space for race rescheduling.

The shutdown for all competitors and power unit manufacturers was extended on Tuesday from 21 to 35 days, all to be taken in March, April and/or May, the governing FIA announced.

It said the move was approved by an e-vote of the FIA's World Motor Sport Council after unanimous agreement by the Formula One strategy group, F1 commission and all 10 teams.

Champions Mercedes, who supply engines to three teams, have repurposed their Brixworth technology centre to manufacture a new breathing aid for new coronavirus patients. — **Reuters**



World Athletics suspends Olympic qualification until December

PARIS: The governing body of athletics has suspended Olympic qualification until December due to the coronavirus outbreak, which has forced the Tokyo Games to be postponed until 2021, it said on Tuesday.

"During this period, results achieved at any competition will not be considered for Tokyo 2020 entry standards or world rankings," World Athletics said in a statement.

Qualification would restart on December 1, subject to the global situation returning to normal, and continue until the end of May for



World Athletics chief Sebastian Coe

the marathon and 50 kilometres race walk or June next year for all other events, it said.

The total qualification period, which started in 2019, will be four months longer than it was originally. Meanwhile, results continue to be recorded for statistical purposes, including for world records.

World Athletics president Sebastian Coe said the decision "gives more certainty for athlete planning and preparation and is the best way to address fairness in what is expected to be the uneven delivery of competition opportunities

across the globe."

World Athletics also said that half of the staff at its Monaco headquarters would be furloughed on full pay.

It said that the Monaco Government would contribute 70 per cent of the gross salaries of staff on furlough and World Athletics will fund the remainder.

"This decision, made possible by the Monaco Government, means we will focus only on business critical activities for the short term which will help us manage our cashflow effectively and protect jobs in the long term," said Coe. — **Reuters**