

US plans to close Russia consulates

Donald Trump's outgoing administration is planning to close the two remaining US consulates in Russia, the State Department confirmed on Saturday, as President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office amid high tensions with Moscow. The US will close its consulate in the far eastern city of Vladivostok and suspend operations at its post in Yekaterinburg, a department spokesperson said. The decision followed consultation with Ambassador John Sullivan and was part of "efforts to ensure the safe and secure operation of the US diplomatic mission in the Russian Federation," the spokesperson said. — AFP



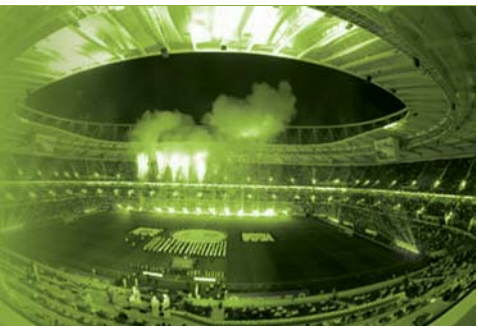
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QATAR 2022 STADIUM IN AL RAYYAN UNVEILED TO THE WORLD



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NEW INITIATIVE TO ENHANCE MONETARY POLICY IN OMAN



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QUEEN'S GAMBIT DEJA-VU FOR HUNGARY CHESS CHAMP POLGAR



MUSCAT

32 PER CENT FALL IN M-91 PRODUCTION

The Sultanate recorded a 32-per cent fall in the production of standard grade petrol (M-91) by refineries at the end of October, with the output falling to 7.98 billion barrels compared to 11.66 billion barrels produced in 2019. The total production of refineries by the end of October fell by 9.7 per cent compared to October. The output of super grade petrol (M-95) reached 10.50 billion barrels at the end of October, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Gas oil (diesel) output rose 22 per cent to 28.49 billion barrels, while aviation fuel production fell by 49 per cent to 6.24 billion barrels at the end of October over the same period of 2019. DETAILS ON P5

PARIS

MACRON STABLE AFTER TESTING POSITIVE

French President Emmanuel Macron is in stable condition after testing positive for the coronavirus, the Elysee Palace said on Saturday. The Elysee said in a statement that test results on the president's condition were reassuring, though he is still suffering from a cough, muscle pain and fatigue. The presidential office confirmed last Thursday that the 42-year-old Macron had tested positive for the coronavirus. He is isolating himself in the presidential residence, on edge of the Versailles palace gardens.



INSIDE



SUDANESE DEMAND 'JUSTICE' TWO YEARS AFTER PROTESTS

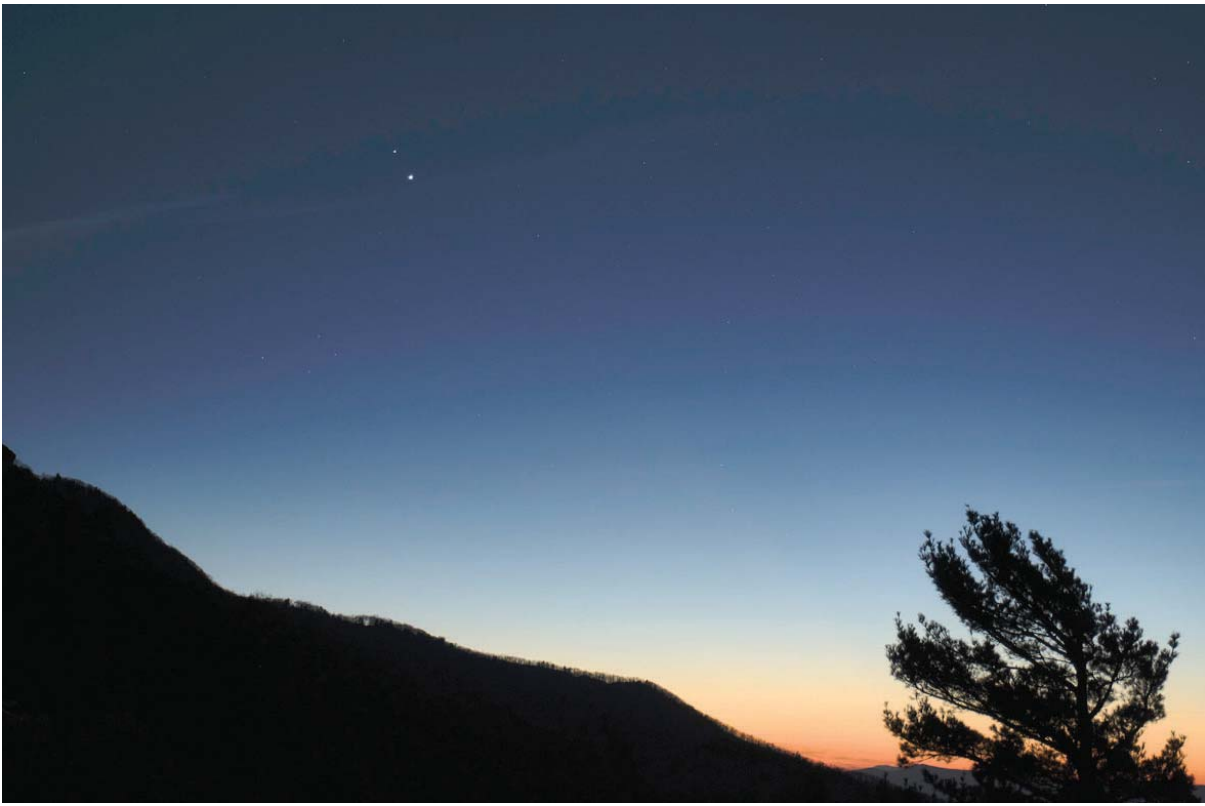
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COVID-19 VACCINES: WE'VE ONLY REACHED 'BASE CAMP'

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GREAT CONJUNCTION ON MONDAY



The Sultanate and many other countries will witness two phenomena on Monday – the Great Conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, and the winter solstice. Oman Astronomical Society (OAS) said the winter solstice this year will take place at 2:02 pm (Oman time) on Monday. On the same day, the Great Conjunction, an extremely rare astronomical event, will occur in the night sky of the Sultanate and most countries. DETAILS ON P3

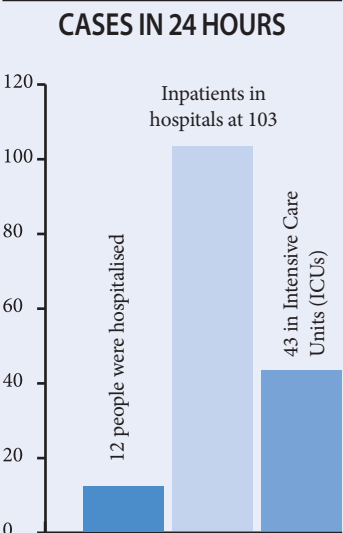
Coronavirus in-patients decline

VINOD NAIR @vinot_nair

The number of patients in Oman hospitals for COVID-19 treatment has come down to just over 100. Last Thursday, only 12 people were hospitalised in 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 103, including 43 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

The Ministry of Health reported 184 new cases of COVID-19 on Thursday, bringing the total number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 127,019.

The ministry reported three coronavirus related deaths, taking the total death toll to 1,483.



The total recovery cases reached 119,009, which is 93.7 per cent of the total cases reported so far.

Oman has joined the Global Alliance for Vaccination

and Immunisation (COVAX), which will provide 10 per cent of the required COVID-19 vaccine by year-end, said the Ministry of Health last week. The ministry, represented by the Directorate-General of Pharmaceutical Affairs and Drug Control, has issued a licence to import Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for emergency use. Meanwhile, COVAX, the global initiative to ensure rapid and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for all countries, regardless of income level, on Saturday announced that it had arrangements in place to access nearly two billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine candidates, on behalf of 190 participating countries.

45,715 expat workers apply for departure

MUSCAT: As many as 45,715 expatriate workers of various nationalities have applied for rectification of status between November 15 and December 14, benefiting from a grace period granted by the government which ends on December 31. Of those, 3,875 workers have left Oman so far. A great number of non-Omani workers seek to adjust their status and leave the Sultanate for good. The majority of them were working in the

construction sector with 15,879 followed by the industry sector with 6,891, and automotive sector (2,900). Salim bin Said al Badi, Director-General of Labour Welfare at the Ministry of Labour, said there is a large turnout by employers and expat workers who are willing to benefit from the grace period and leave the country, noting that all violating workers have the right to rectify their status during this period. — ONA SEE ALSO P3

Lab-grown meat makes historic debut in Singapore restaurant

SINGAPORE: Lab-grown chicken meat made a historic debut at a Singapore restaurant on Saturday in a culinary first that its makers said could help reduce the environmental damage involved in human food production. US start-up Eat Just said earlier this month that its product had been approved for sale in the city-state as an ingredient in chicken nuggets after Singapore became the first country to allow the sale of meat made without



slaughtering any animals. Consumption of animals is an environmental threat as cattle produce the potent greenhouse gas methane, while logging to create pastures destroys natural

This reflects the Authority's keenness to implement Oman Vision 2040 and, thereby, establish grounds for a true application of governance

SAUD BIN NASSIR AL SHUKAILI
Chairman, Tax Authority

tion, cooperation and confidence among them with the prime aim of attaining the goals of economic diversification and fiscal sustainability. He added that application of principles of governance and transparency come on top of the Tax Authority's priorities that contribute to the enhancement of confidence in the Authority. Sayyid Hamid bin Sultan al Busaidy, CEO of the Governance and Sustainability Centre, said that the Tax Authority, by seeking to draft a governance document, becomes the first government organisation to take such a step after the restructuring of the State's Administrative Apparatus. The Tax Authority will in turn impart awareness about the significance of governance in departments. — ONA

Fraudsters are eying year-end company transactions

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

With the country's financial year is to end in a couple of weeks, there is a word of caution for the big and small businesses as a new set of cyber fraudsters are active with an eye on the year-end transactions and final payments of the year.

The modus operandi this time is different. They are targeting the companies with a novel way of doing minor changes in the e-mail IDs, which may give the company employees a slip if they are not extra careful in reading between the letters.

A case of such nature has come to light in a Salalah Free Zone company in which the fraudsters have got access to some important documents, like details of due payments of the company clients and the company e-mail ID from which important correspondences are done for transactions.

Cleverly the fraudsters have done the changes in the e-mail ID. For security reasons the



company did not share the actual e-mail ID but cited an example. "Suppose the actual ID is xxjohn@xxxCOMPANY.com in the name of the company, the fraudsters have replaced the company's name with one of the e-mail service providers and

made it xxjohn@xxxgmail.com. "They somehow have accessed our pdf invoices, which they attached with the mail and asked for the final or year-end clearance payment from one of our clients," said a senior executive of the company.

"Luckily the client sensed something wrong in the mail and sounded us immediately. To our utter surprise we found our pdf invoices attached with the mail," he said. This happened three times in past four months. The company

They somehow have accessed our pdf invoices, which they attached with the mail and asked for the final or year-end clearance payment from one of our clients

OFFICIAL

has sounded the IT authorities and waiting for the action.

The cyber attack, according the executive, has put the company in a fix as sometimes large scale transactions are involved, reminders for which are exchanged only through mails.

The company is also looking to strengthen the internal IT security to ensure safety of the documents and reduce any chances of vulnerability in this regard.

Govt panel to oversee merger process of pension funds

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A governmental committee will oversee the merger process of the pension funds within a time period, the official sources said.

The committee will follow the necessary procedures for merging retirement funds, including studying the systems for restructuring through integrated policies and regulations.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik last week gave directives for the establishment of two retirement funds one for the public and private sectors and the other for the military and security units.

The directives included amending the minimum years of service required for early retirement to 30 years.

According to official sources, the system applies to all new employees in all government units and the current staff who have not completed a third of the minimum period required to be entitled to a retirement pension.

For employees whose services were transferred as per the recent restructuring of the government units, the old pension system will be applicable to them, provided they have completed 30 years in service.

The main motive of the merging of pension funds includes unifying investment regulations, merging and diversifying the investment portfolio of funds, developing the governance system, making investment decisions, developing proper control and auditing system, and reducing administrative costs.

The total number of Omanis registered in the public sector pension funds, including civil service, the Diwan of Royal Court, and the Central Bank Oman (CBO), until the end of September 2020 is 197,489.

The latest statistics by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) said the number of Omani males registered in the public sector pension funds amounted to 114,553, while the number of females reached 82,936.

COVID-19 spells debt overhang for households

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Although COVID-19 is posing severe challenges to people of all sections of the society, the most affected are the households with loans.

As a result, it spells a situation of debt overhang and likely onset of defaults, points out a report by the Central Bank of Oman.

"Notwithstanding the high credit quality of the households before the pandemic, the COVID-19 outbreak poses severe challenges to a cross-section of the households," states the apex bank in the Sustainability Report released last week.

The contraction of economic activity has

adversely affected the earnings and employment conditions of the households and has increased vulnerabilities in the household debt portfolio.

Moreover, points out the report, "Deferment of loan instalments to help affected borrowers fare through the pandemic has extended maturity profile of the household."

Since the onslaught of the pandemic, the Central Bank announced a slew of measures including loan deferment schemes to support the affected borrowers.

According to the apex bank's report, household indebtedness relative to non-oil GDP rose during the past few years as the household credit grew at a faster pace



than the non-oil GDP.

In Oman, the likely shocks from household loans, which are also known as personal loans, are limited through caps on interest rates and

limits debt burden by setting repayment patterns based on income.

Still, says the report, "There remains a risk that some households may experience

financial stress in the event of a large negative shock."

Lending to the households grew steadily over the last five years from RO 8.3 billion in 2015 to over RO 10.3 billion in 2019.

However, household debt-to-income ratio remained broadly unchanged. During 2019, the borrowing by households increased at a slower paced by 2.5 per cent than the total balance sheet of the banking sector at 3.6 per cent.

"This modest growth in lending to households reflects weaker demand, changing risk appetite for longer tenor loans in the interest rate expectations, and stringent non-price credit terms," adds the report.

Madayn hosts industrial safety training

MUSCAT: Madayn (The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates) concluded a five-day 'Public Safety in Industrial Units' programme under the auspices of Musallam bin Mohammed al Shehri, Head of Operations Sector at Madayn.

The programme focused on several topics related to food inspection, methods of food and water sampling, fire safety, and occupational safety and health inspection in industrial units.

The practical programme by Madayn Industrial Academy included field visits and training sessions to exchange expertise in health inspection and promote health fundamentals; highlight procedures of food and water sampling, and tools and methods used in the laboratory; learn

about fire prevention and emergency measures in industrial units and experience several fire scenarios; and measures related to occupational safety and health in industrial units that are under construction.

The training sessions were held in cooperation with Muscat Municipality, Barka Municipality, International College of Engineering and Management and Al Tasnim Company. Towards the end of the programme, the participants were given a written examination and recommendations were highlighted.

It is worthwhile to mention that Madayn Industrial Academy was established in 2019 to offer training opportunities for the national cadres to enhance

administrative, financial and technical skills, raise their productivity, provide value adding services to the investors in the industrial cities, and provide new job opportunities for the national cadres. Madayn Industrial Academy organises a series of training programmes and events that address trending topics and challenges locally and globally.

The academy also organises training-for-employment in cooperation with the concerned bodies in this field. Madayn aims through the academy to develop the skills of the national cadres through providing scientific and practical training opportunities to the cadres with the objective of meeting the requirements of the industrial sector.



Expats make beeline to get exit permit

15,879 construction workers among 45,715 apply to avail the scheme

SAMUEL KUTTY

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With only a few days left for the exit facility deadline, 45,715 applications from expatriates of different nationalities have so far been received at the Ministry of Labour. Of those, 3,875 workers have departed so far.

"The response has been overwhelming since the announcement of the decision to allow a fine-free return of the undocumented workers in the Sultanate," said a senior official at the ministry, adding that the total number of the request may exceed the 50,000 mark.

According to data from the ministry, the majority of the workers who applied to avail the facility are from the construction sector with 15,879 applications.

This is followed by 6,891 applicants from the industry sector and 2,900 from the automobile sector.

"The decision to facilitate the exit of the expatriate workers follows the government's keenness to regularise the labour market aimed at bringing comprehensive development and the national priorities in accordance with Oman Vision 2040," said the official.

The exit scheme, announced by the Ministry of Labour in November last, helps expatriate workers who are residing in the country without proper documentation including work permits to leave Oman for good without paying fees and fines.

The registration can be done at the Ministry of Labour's website till December 31. The largest number of people who applied to exit the country



under the scheme are from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, whose expats form the largest overseas communities in the Sultanate.

Social workers from the respective countries are helping the embassies to help expedite the return of the workers.

Speaking to the *Observer*, an official at the Indian Embassy said that the number of Indians this time, unlike in the previous occasion, is less as a number of them have already left the country in the recent months.

"Many of them left the country during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic after paying the fines and utilising the flight facilities offered by the Indian government and social organisations," said the official.

Mansoor Ahmed, an Indian national, while thanking the Oman Labour Ministry for the initiative, said, he did not expect he could go back to his country without paying the fines.

"I have been staying in the country without proper documents for the last three years. Papers are ready and I will fly back next week," he said.

The Pakistan Embassy

has even sent its officials to townships in Oman's interiors to help its nationals avail the facility.

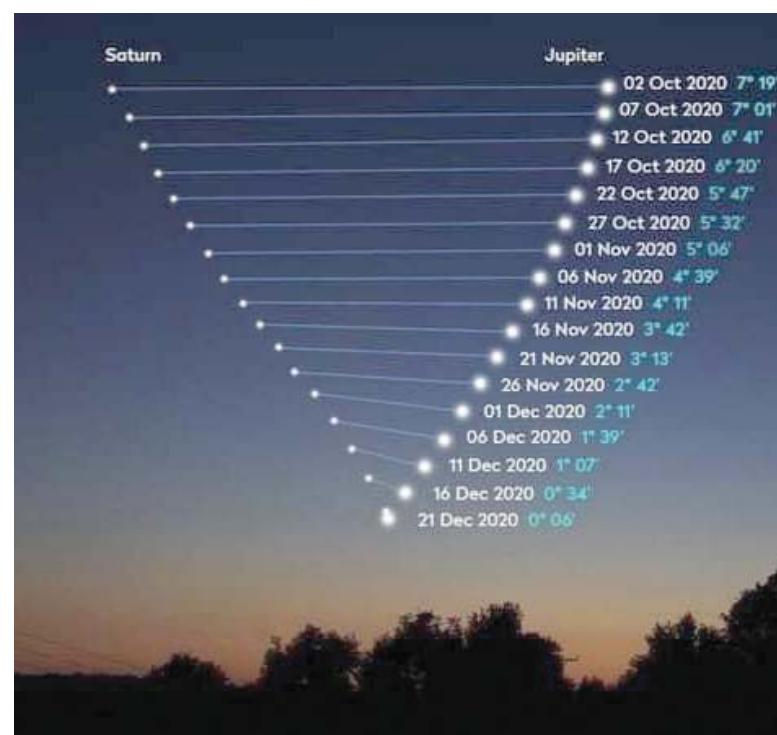
"The embassy is open to help our nationals by extending all possible assistance for the return to their hometowns. The Pakistani social workers are helping them fill the forms and other necessary work," said an official.

Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi Embassy was buzzing with a large number of people unlike other embassies. Many of them arrive at the embassy even at the wee hours.

"When I came at 4 am, I found many people already taking their positions to form the queue. We have to ready all the papers before the expiry of the scheme," said Sainuddin, a construction worker who has been without a work permit for the last six years.

Sainuddin is one among hundreds of workers who were found to have been living in the country illegally following non-renewal of their work permits either due to their absconding from the employers or the dereliction of the sponsors.

SEE JUPITER AND SATURN TOGETHER TOMORROW



Jupiter and Saturn will align in the night sky on December 21 in an event astronomers call the "great conjunction" marking the planets' closest encounter in nearly 400 years. The two planets have slowly been moving closer to each other over the past few weeks. The Sultanate and many other countries will witness this rare event and the winter solstice. Oman Astronomical Society (OAS) said the winter solstice this year will take place at 2:02 pm (Oman local time) on Monday. The Great Conjunction is a rare celestial event and it happens when Saturn and Jupiter align together and appear as a bright point of light, said Faisal bin Mohammed al Qartooobi, Vice-Chairman of OAS. The next one will occur in 2080. Sky gazers using telescopes will be able to see Saturn and Jupiter in the eyepiece, Al Qartooobi said.

— ONA

Credit to private sector up by 0.4 %

MUSCAT: The combined activities of conventional and Islamic banks provide a comprehensive picture of financial intermediation through the banking sector in Oman.

The total outstanding credit extended by other depository corporations (ODCs) grew by 2.2 per cent to RO 26.4 billion at the end of October 2020.

Credit to the private sector rose by 0.4 per cent Y-o-Y to RO

22.8 billion. Of the total credit to the private sector, the non-financial corporate sector and the household sector (mainly under personal loans) received a share of 46.5 per cent and 45 per cent, respectively, while financial corporations received 5.1 per cent and other sectors 3.4 per cent.

Total deposits held with ODCs reached RO 24.0 billion at the end of October 2020, increasing by

3.4 per cent from October 2019. Total private sector deposits increased by 9 per cent to RO 16.4 billion.

When looking at sector-wise analysis of private sector deposits; the share of households was the largest at 51.6 per cent, followed by non-financial corporations at 31.8 per cent, financial corporations at 14.2 per cent and the other sectors at 2.4 per cent. — ONA

AUCTION ANNOUNCEMENT

- Auction site:**
Nizwa Company Location
- Description of the auction:**
Selling used cars and trucks
1- Selling 5 used Toyota Yaris cars.
2- Sales 4 vans Isuzu with refrigerated Box & cooling unit.
- Date of the auction started:**
21/12/2020
- End date of the auction:**
24/12/2020
- Last date for submitting the form:**
24/12/2020
- Connect Number:**
99810701



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Following good running condition, Company executive manager used and well maintained vehicles are for sale on as-is where-is condition:

- Mercedes Benz-E 300 – Model 2012
- Renault-Safrane – Model 2012

Vehicles can be seen at company premises during working hours. Scan and send the quotations to email id:

salvage@muscatinsurance.com

Before 12:00 Noon on 23rd Dec 2020.

For more details contact:

Mr. Rakesh 99335205

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TRAVEL WITHOUT BARRIERS

LIJU CHERIAN
@cherianmathiker

The Sultanate is reputed for its warm hospitality and welcoming tourists from all over the world. The citizens are reputed to welcome tourists from wherever they are and whatever challenges they might have.

If you are a guest in a wheelchair, or with any other chronic illness, this should not stop you from discovering Oman.

Few hotels in Oman are equipped with barrier free rooms, as well as many sights within Muscat and other tourist areas are made as barrier free as possible. The Sultanate also has many organisations and individuals supporting Omanis and residents within the community with their projects as well as assisting tourists on request.

Rebecca Boos, General Manager,

Hashtag Oman Tourism and Partners, says Omani citizens are willing to go the extra mile to contribute and fulfil the dreams of any visitor, be it disabled or not. "We are here to meet your needs, creating bespoke itineraries, personalising trips and providing insights on the local way of life, so every visitor feels at home. Anyone who has a dream to explore Oman, within all its different offerings, is welcome. Arranging a roundtrip for guests with disabilities is beyond rewarding for all participants including the agency and the local guides," she says.

Boos further mentions that it is the desire of their boutique tourism company to see the guests experience first-hand Omani hospitality and provide tailor-made experiences for passionate travellers and groups and the constant need to be 'kind and caring.'

Tariq Jawad Jaffar al Khabori, cofounder of Oman Disabled Divers (ODD), says,

We need to move beyond charity, and provide real time opportunities for the disabled to experience life, and this is what we do

**TARIQ
JAWAD JAFFAR
AL KHABORI**

*Cofounder of Oman Disabled
Divers (ODD)*

"We need to move beyond charity, and provide real time opportunities for the disabled to experience life, and this is what we do at ODD."

Al Khabori was responsible for organising the first dive challenge in 2009 in which 15 visually challenged Omani men experienced scuba diving for the first time at Marina Bandar al Rowdha. "It was quite an achievement for the Sultanate," he recalls. Roopa Jog, who promotes inbound tourism, says all hotels in the Sultanate have two or three rooms with facilities such as wheelchair access to showers and washrooms.

The travel agent company where she works for also provides a wheelchair accessible vehicle which comes with extra charges. Christin Reinhold, Operations Manager at Hashtag Oman, says she loves to arrange barrier free tours and recollects an incident in particular which was very special to her.

Once visitors from the UK had booked a tour in which two of them were blind and their spouses visually impaired.

Quite a bit of planning was involved in their visit and Reinhold decided to go and meet them personally while on their tour to Muscat.

While they walked through, one of the ladies who had no eyesight stopped right under the large chandelier of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, and enquired with her if this was the centre of the room.

The visitor felt a very special aura and warmth while standing exactly at this spot. "Till today this moment is one of the reasons I love to arrange barrier free tours. Being inclusive opens so many new experiences to ourselves and others. We can share and experience together and Oman has welcomed guests from many different walks of life and arranged tours with local Omani guides for many visitors," she explained.

■ SAPLINGS PLANTED IN BIDIYA



The Department of Environment in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate carried out a planting campaign in the Wilayat of Bidiya with the participation of Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah) and the Omani Women Association. Some 700 wild trees were planted during the campaign which aims to control desertification and sand encroachment. — ONA

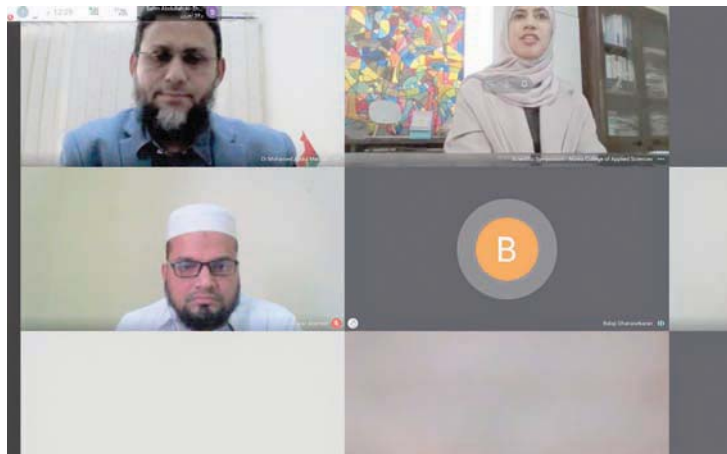
Dynamic interaction sought between HEIs and industries

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 19

The participants at the scientific virtual symposium on 'Higher education and industrial institutions: Strengthening links towards Oman 2040' recommended more dynamic interaction between the industries and the HEIs.

The symposium was held at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Nizwa that focused on the recognition of the integral role of higher education in promoting sustainable economic and social development towards the Oman 2040 vision — a role that has been recently amplified in response to the ever-changing dynamic needs of the labour market.

Among 28 research papers presented during the symposium had five main themes: The alignment of



the curriculum with the labour market needs; Quality standards in preparing higher education graduates for the labour market; The skills required for the global market; Promoting the culture of entrepreneurship in higher education institutions; and Internship and on-job-training programmes and community participants.

Reflecting on the symposium, Dr Amna al Abri, one of the chairpersons in the symposium sessions and

Assistant Programme Director of the Mass Communication programme, stated it had surpassed expectations amid the COVID-19 pandemic and has been fruitful in leveraging the relationship between the industry and entrepreneurial experts on one hand and HEIs' leaders and researchers on the other and creating deeper engagement.

The symposium focused on recognition of the integral role of higher education in promoting

sustainable economic and social development towards the Oman 2040 vision — a role that has been recently amplified in response to the ever-changing dynamic needs of the labour market.

Dr Salim al Shaikh, Assistant Dean for the Academic Affairs and Scientific Research, said, "The most prominent indicators of Oman Vision 2040 is to increase the Omani workforce in the private sector to 40 per cent. This percentage, he stressed, cannot be easily reached unless the gap between the higher education and labour market is bridged."

In his keynote speech, Dr Faisal al Balushi, Head of the Office of Science, Knowledge and Technology Transfer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called for necessary familiarisation of the higher education institutions to understand the requirements of the labour market.

Production of refineries falls 9.7%



MUSCAT: The Sultanate recorded a 32 per cent fall in the production of standard grade petrol (M-91) by Omani refineries at the end of October 2020, with the output falling to 7.98 billion barrels compared to 11.66 billion barrels produced in 2019.

The total production of refineries by the end of October 2020 fell by 9.7 per cent compared to October 2019. The output of super grade petrol (M-95) reached 10.50 billion barrels at the end of October 2020, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Gas oil (diesel) output rose 22 per cent to 28.49 billion barrels, while aviation fuel production fell by 49 per cent to 6.24 billion barrels at the end of October 2020 over the same period of 2019. Production of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) fell 15 per cent to 5.17 billion barrels during the period under review.

Of the total production of M-91

grade petrol (which is the cheapest petrol available in the market), 6.47 billion barrels were sold in the domestic market.

Domestic sales of M-95 grade petrol reached 9.26 billion barrels, while sales of gas oil (diesel) within the country stood at 11.10 billion barrels during the first 10 months of 2020. Domestic sales of aviation fuel oil fell by 64 per cent, whereas that of LPG rose 3 per cent at the end of October 2020.

As far as petrochemicals are concerned, production of polypropylene by Orpic at the end of October 2020 was 195,000 tonnes, while output of paraxylene and benzene was 507,000 tonnes and 156,000 metric tonnes, respectively.

Further, Omani refineries exported 157,000 metric tonnes of benzene at the end of October 2020, while exports of paraxylene and polypropylene stood at 495,000 metric tonnes and 147,000 metric tonnes, respectively. — ONA

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6 punished for COVID-19 violations



MUSCAT: Primary courts in the governorates of Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah and South Al Sharqiyah issued verdicts — from December 9 to 17 December — convicting offenders who violated the decisions of the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The legal procedure began when the Public Prosecution Department interrogated six people who reportedly went out during the period of ban on nighttime movement or failed to wear face masks.

The courts awarded the convicts sentences of three-month imprisonment and imposed fines of RO 1,000 on each, while at the same time ordering the foreign ones deported. — ONA

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Shared Services Company (NSS), invites the specialized companies to participate and submit their best offers 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/2020/7	WEB DEVELOPMENT OUTSOURCE SERVICES	24-December-2020	10-January-2021	25/-

- 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, 10 January 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.

Nama Shared Services
نماء للخدمات المشتركة

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



إعلان هناقص
Tender Announcement

SINYAR is the new integrated commercial identity for Oman National Transport Company SAOC and National Ferries Company LLC leading land and Maritime public transport operator and the first mass transport operator in the Sultanate. SINYAR has more than 1,600 employees and operates more than 500 buses and 7 ferries across the country.

SINYAR announce the following tender, to companies specialized in the related services.

Tender Number T-21-2020	
Tender Name	اتفاقية توريد معقمات Call Off Agreement for the Supply of Sanitizers
Project Summary	Sinyar is looking for a qualified bidder for the Supply of two types of Sanitizers (Spray and Gel) of not less than 60% of Alcohol and as per the requirements in the tender documents.
Tender Fee	Grade & Specialty Specialized Companies in the Field
50/-	
Start date for tender document distribution Sunday, December 20, 2020	Last date for tender document distribution Thursday, December 24, 2020
	Last date for submission Wednesday, December 30, 2020

Oman National Transport Company S.A.O.C. "SINYAR"
Head Quarter, Ghala
P.O.Box: 620, PC: 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

National Ferries Company L.L.C. "SINYAR"
Head Quarter, Ghala
P.O. Box: 911, PC: 133, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

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Sudanese demand ‘justice’ two years after protests erupted

KHARTOUM: Thousands of demonstrators marched through Sudanese towns on Saturday calling for change, two years since the start of a protest movement that led to the toppling of dictator Omar al Bashir.

Black plumes of smoke billowed into the sky from burning tyres in the capital Khartoum’s southern Al Sahafa district, with protesters marching to the gates of the presidential palace chanting “justice.”

Demonstrators — many of them young and frustrated by what they see as a lack of change amid a dire economic crisis — waved the national flag as they marched, or carried photographs of “martyrs” killed during past protests.

“Today we have sent a very clear message to the civilian and military government,” said 21-year-old protester Nada Nasereldine.

“We have the power of the streets, it is our weapon and we will use it if our demands are not met.”

Protests were also reported in towns surrounding the capital, including Madani and Atbara, as well as in the east, in Port Sudan on the Red Sea, and Kassala.

Numbers taking part totalled several thousand people, according to estimates by AFP



Sudanese demonstrators take to the streets of Khartoum, to mark the second anniversary of the start of a revolt that toppled the previous government, on Saturday. — AFP

correspondents and other journalists.

Some shouted slogans of the revolution, including “the people want the fall of the regime” -- also a rallying cry during Arab Spring demonstrations in the region a decade ago.

Sudan’s youth-led movement started protesting on December 19, 2018, seeking greater freedoms and an end to Sudan’s international isolation.

Bashir was finally ousted by the army in April the following year, and the new authorities have since put him on trial over the hardline-backed coup that first brought him to power in 1989.

But those responsible for the repression during the revolution have still not been brought to justice.

Experts warn the country is now at a critical juncture, as tensions have flared between the

military and civilian leaders who share power in a fragile transitional government.

Earlier this month, the US removed Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, a designation dating from the times when Bashir hosted Osama bin Laden and other militants.

The delisting should help bring badly needed foreign aid, debt relief and investment to one of the world’s poorest countries. — AFP



Saudi soldiers pose for a picture during the withdrawal of fighters loyal to Yemen’s separatist Southern Transitional Council in Abyan province. — AFP

Exclusion of women from new Yemeni govt flayed

SANAA: Feminists in Yemen have condemned the exclusion of women from a new government formed under a power-sharing deal between the internationally-recognised government and separatists. The 24-strong government announced late on Friday includes members of the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) as part of a Saudi-brokered bid to end a power struggle between the sides.

The deal was signed in the Saudi capital Riyadh in November of last year. The new government is the first without female members in 20 years, the Yemeni Women Movement, a grouping of pro-women alliances in the country, said. “This is unfair discrimination against women’s right to political

participation,” the group said in a statement. “While we appreciate the formation of the government as a fruit of consensus among Yemeni political powers in the Riyadh agreement, we denounce women’s exclusion from the government,” it added.

The new government equally represents Yemen’s northern and southern areas. President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi has issued a decree for forming the government, reappointing Maen Abdulmalik as prime minister, Yemen’s state news agency Saba reported.

United Nations envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, hailed the formation of the new government as an “important step” towards resolving the country’s years-long conflict. — dpa

SELFIE AMID PANDEMIC



A Palestinian school teacher takes a ‘selfie’ photograph with her pupils, ahead of Christmas in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank, amid the novel coronavirus pandemic crisis, on Saturday. Christmas mass in Bethlehem, normally attended by Christian congregations in the West Bank town, will be closed to the public this year due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Palestinian president said earlier this week. — AFP

Conjoined Yemeni twins need treatment abroad: Hospital

SANAA: Conjoined twin boys in war-ravaged Yemen are in “critical condition” and in need of treatment abroad, a hospital in the capital Sanaa has said.

Born two days earlier, “the two babies are now in a critical condition”, Majda al Khatib, director of Al Sabeen hospital, said on Friday.

“An echocardiogram showed that each of the two children had their own heart, though the position of the heart of one of them is not normal,” she said.

The facility’s “low capacity” prevents doctors from accurately determining “which organs are connected”, she added.

The Yemeni capital has been controlled since 2014 by Ansar Allah fighters, who are fighting forces of the internationally



Newborn conjoined twins lie in an incubator at the child intensive care unit of Al Sabeen hospital in Sanaa on Friday. — AFP

recognised government supported by a Saudi-led military coalition.

The conflict has devastated health services already under-resourced in the Arab world’s poorest country.

Sanaa’s airport is closed to

commercial flights due to an air blockade imposed by the Saudi-led coalition.

But Khatib said, “there is certainly a chance for them (the twins) to leave Yemen in order to be separated if the relevant authorities cooperate”. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

BEIRUT

Syrian refugee families in extreme poverty: UN

Nine out of 10 Syrian refugee families in Lebanon are living in extreme poverty, according to a United Nations report released on Friday, citing “compounded crises” in the country. Lebanon is mired in its worst economic crisis in decades, with its currency plummeting, massive layoffs, soaring prices and rising poverty. It says it hosts some 1.5 million Syrians, including around one million registered as refugees with the United Nations.

On August 4, one of the world’s



biggest ever non-nuclear explosions destroyed much of Beirut’s port. “The economic downturn, steep inflation, COVID-19 and finally the Beirut blast have pushed vulnerable communities in Lebanon to the brink,” a UN statement said on Friday. — AFP

ISTANBUL

Fire at Turkey hospital kills 9 COVID-19 patients

Nine people were killed on Saturday after a fire broke out at an intensive care unit treating COVID-19 patients in southern Turkey, state news agency Anadolu reported. An oxygen cylinder exploded at the privately-run Sani Konuoglu Hospital in the city of Gaziantep, the report said.

Eleven patients at the unit were transferred to other hospitals for the duration of the investigation into the explosion, Gaziantep Governor Davut Gul



said on Twitter. Nearly 74 per cent of all intensive care beds across Turkey are occupied due to the coronavirus pandemic, according to government data. The daily virus death toll in Turkey reached a record high of 246 on Friday. — dpa

TEHRAN

Iran extends curbs ahead of Yalda festival

Shop closures and traffic restrictions in Iran began on Saturday in an effort to avert a resurgence of coronavirus infections and deaths as Iranians prepare for the Yalda Night winter festival, authorities reported. “Let’s not gather, so we don’t become fewer,” President Hassan Rouhani said in televised remarks on Saturday, urging Iranians not to hold extended family gatherings on Yalda Night, or Shab-e Yalda.

This year, the ancient



winter solstice celebration falls on Sunday night. Families traditionally celebrate until the early hours of the morning, reciting poems, singing and eating nuts, dried fruits, watermelon, pomegranates and persimmon. — Reuters

In brief

■ KUALA LUMPUR



MALAYSIA TO GET ASTRAZENECA COVID-19 VACCINE

Malaysia said on Saturday it has secured coronavirus vaccine from AstraZeneca PLC, on the heels of news it will receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in February as it grapples with a surge in infections.

The AstraZeneca deal, to be signed on Monday, will allow immunisation of about 20 per cent of Malaysia's population of 32 million, similar to that of the deal with US giant Pfizer Inc and its German partner BioNTech SE, said Health Minister Adham Baba. The Southeast Asian nation has seen a spike in cases since September, with nearly 92,000 cases of the new coronavirus and 433 COVID-19 deaths. — **Reuters**

■ DHAKA



12 KILLED AS TRAIN HITS PASSENGER BUS IN BANGLADESH

At least 12 people were killed and three others wounded after a train hit a passenger bus in northern Bangladesh, police said on Saturday. Ten people died on the spot when the Uttara Express train crashed into the bus and dragged it nearly half a kilometre along the rail track, officer Alamgir Jahan said, quoting witnesses.

Two people among a total of five initially wounded people died at a nearby hospital, he said. Railway communication in parts of northern Bangladesh was suspended for hours after the accident, which took place more than 200 kilometres north-west of the capital Dhaka. — **dpa**

■ SEOUL



SOUTH KOREA FEARS FOR PATIENTS AMID SICKBED SHORTAGE

South Korea ordered hospitals to secure beds for critical COVID-19 patients, Yonhap news agency said, as a third wave surge of infections raised concerns about a shortage of beds in a country that has kept fatalities low so far. The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) reported 1,053 infections of the new coronavirus, a record fourth consecutive day of more than 1,000 cases.

South Korea has recorded 659 COVID-19 deaths out of 48,570 infections, a comparatively low mortality rate attributed to aggressive tracing and testing, which minimised the strain on hospitals. — **Reuters**

India's coronavirus cases pass 10 million

NEW DELHI: India surged past 10 million coronavirus cases on Saturday, official data showed, the second-highest in the world although new infection rates appear to have fallen sharply in recent weeks.

The number of cases increased by just over 25,000 in 24 hours, according to the health ministry, while the total number of deaths from the virus in India now stands at 145,136.

In September, the vast nation of 1.3 billion people had been recording daily new cases of almost 100,000 and looked on track to surpass the United States as the worst-hit country.

But the outbreak has accelerated in the US and appears to have lost momentum in India, despite the country being home to some of the most crowded cities on the planet.

The United States, with a population a quarter the size of India's, has been reporting upwards of 200,000 new cases daily in recent weeks, 10 times as many as India.

India's fatality rate is also considerably lower — less than half that of the US.

Residents in the capital New Delhi said they were still worried



Tourists visit the Taj Mahal in Agra on Saturday, as India surged past 10 million COVID-19 cases. — **AFP**

but were more comfortable than before about leaving their homes.

"Obviously the fear levels have come down over time. Initially, it was scarier," said housewife Huma Zaidi, 46.

"But we are still taking precautions like wearing masks when going out and avoiding social gatherings."

India has lifted restrictions

The 10-million mark came as the world's second-most populous nation gears up for the colossal and challenging task of starting to vaccinate the population next year

on most activities to boost the struggling economy, although some states and territories have reimposed curbs.

"I plucked up my courage and went out for lunch for the first time in six or eight months," said Simpy Dhar, 44, a language instructor.

"However, my fear is not eliminated completely. I know

coronavirus is still out there."

VACCINE CHALLENGE

The 10-million mark came as the world's second-most populous nation gears up for the colossal and challenging task of starting to vaccinate the population next year.

The government aims to inoculate 300 million people initially, with health workers and other frontline staff expected first in line.

India has yet to approve any vaccines but several drugmakers have applied for authorisation, including AstraZeneca, which has partnered with India's Serum Institute, the world's largest vaccine maker.

Health ministry officials were expected to meet the Election Commission — which carries out vast state and national polls — as they map out how to distribute the shots, the Press Trust of India reported on Thursday.

Experts have cautioned that the country could struggle because of its weak cold-chain infrastructure — needed for keeping vaccines refrigerated — particularly in poor and densely populated urban areas and remote rural regions.

— **AFP**

China to vaccinate 'key groups' first

BEIJING: China will focus first on vaccinating high-risk groups over the winter and spring before widening the inoculation to the general public, a senior health official said on Saturday. Zeng Yixin, vice minister of China's National Health Commission (NHC) and director of the State Council's vaccine R&D working group, warned that China's COVID-19 prevention efforts were under increasing pressure as temperatures fall.

"During the winter and spring seasons, carrying out novel coronavirus vaccination work among some key population groups is of great significance to epidemic prevention," he told a briefing.

China aims to actively build group immunity, and the vaccina-



Zeng Yixin, vice minister of China's National Health Commission (NHC) and director of the State Council's vaccine R&D working group, addressing a press conference in Beijing on Saturday. — **AFP**

tion of high-risk groups — which include workers in the cold chain industry, customs, healthcare, markets and public transport — is

just the first part of a "step-by-step programme", he added.

China has included two candidate vaccines from Sinopharm

and one from Sinovac Biotech Ltd in an emergency-use programme launched in July, targeting specific high-infection risk groups such as medical workers and border inspectors. It has also approved a vaccine from CanSino Biologics Inc for military use but has not approved any vaccine for use among the general public.

China is planning to vaccinate as many as 50 million people before the start of the Lunar New Year holiday in February 2021, according to a report in the South China Morning Post.

It said that Beijing would distribute 100 million doses of vaccines made by Sinopharm and Sinovac Biotech.

— **Reuters**

Five rockets fired at US air base in Afghanistan

KABUL: A major US airbase north of Kabul was targeted in a dawn rocket attack on Saturday but there were no casualties or damage to the airfield, officials said.

Five rockets were fired at Bagram Airfield at 6:00 am, said Parwan province spokeswoman Waheeda Shahkar, adding that police had defused another seven rockets mounted on a vehicle used in the attack. A Nato official also confirmed the assault.

"Rockets were fired towards Bagram Airfield this morning. Initial reporting is there were no casualties and the airfield was not damaged," the official said.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, and the Taliban denied any involvement.

The IS group previously claimed responsibility for a similar rocket attack on the base in April.

In recent months, IS has claimed several assaults in Kabul, including two deadly rocket attacks that struck residential areas in the capital.

The group also claimed brutal attacks on two separate educational centres in Kabul that killed dozens of people, most of them are students. — **AFP**

Hundreds flee floods in Philippine storm

MANILA: At least two people were killed and hundreds forced to flee their inundated homes in the Philippines as torrential rain triggered flooding and landslides in the storm-battered archipelago, officials said on Saturday.

Huge waves smashed into a coastal village on Lapu-Lapu island in the central province of Cebu on Friday night, wiping out dozens of houses and leaving around 290 people homeless, Mayor Junard Chan said on Facebook.

Photos posted online by the mayor showed piles of wood and bamboo near the few houses still standing after the region was drenched by heavy rain.

Rescuers retrieved the bodies of two elderly women who were killed when a landslide hit an area of Mahaplag town before dawn in the nearby province of Leyte, police officer Racquel Hernandez said.

A boy was also pulled from the rubble of his home and treated for his injuries, Hernandez said.



A general view of destroyed houses after tropical depression Vicky hit Lapu-Lapu City in Cebu island on Saturday. — **AFP**

About 1,500 people were forced to leave their homes on the major southern island of Mindanao as floodwaters engulfed 13 villages, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council said.

The Philippines is hit by an average of 20 storms and typhoons every year, which typically wipe out harvests, homes and infrastructure in already impoverished areas.

The latest storm comes after a

succession of typhoons in recent months pummelled the country, taking the lives 148 people, destroying hundreds of thousands of houses, wrecking cash crops and leaving swathes of the country without power. — **AFP**

Post-Brexit talks grind on as fish spat threatens deal

BRUSSELS: EU and UK negotiators pressed on with talks on Saturday with no sign of them breaking an impasse over post-Brexit fishing rights in time to save a trade deal.

Fishing is now the main obstacle to any pact that could be in place on January 1 to prevent an economic jolt on both sides of the Channel as Britain leaves the single market.

“It remains very blocked,” one EU diplomat said.

Another said Brussels had made Britain its last offer on fishing access and it was down now to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to decide whether he wants a deal.

“If Britain doesn’t accept the latest EU offer of it will be a ‘no deal’ over fish,” he warned.

Barnier has proposed EU fishermen giving up nearly a quarter of the value of the fish they currently catch in UK waters. Britain is understood to be holding out for getting back much more than half.

The UK has suggested this compromise last for three years before it is renegotiated, whereas Europe is holding out for seven. “It’s all down to numbers now,” the second European diplomat said.

The EU’s pointman in the talks, Michel Barnier, has consulted member states that share fishing waters with Britain, but has been told to stand his ground.



EU chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier leaves the Hemicycle during a debate at the European Parliament in Brussels on Friday. — Reuters

The European Parliament has highlighted a deadline of mid-night (2300 GMT) on Sunday to receive a deal for review if MEPs are to ratify it before the end of the year. Their UK parliamentary counterparts are in recess, but can be recalled within 48 hours to do likewise.

But EU capitals are not binding themselves to the European Parliament’s deadline. The second diplomatic source said Britain effectively had until the end of the year to make its mind up. France’s European affairs minister, Clement Beaune, warned that time left to get a deal was “a matter of hours,” echoing words used by Barnier a day earlier. — AFP

Britain says new coronavirus strain spreads more quickly

Govt to consider urgent action to curb rise in cases

Urgent work to see if new strain affects mortality rate

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson discussed with his senior ministers on Saturday what urgent action to take after it was confirmed that a new strain of the COVID-19 virus could spread more quickly and lead to a surge in cases.

The BBC reported that London and southeast England would be placed in a new higher tier of restrictions and the government would cut back on a planned relaxation of the rules over Christmas, but gave no further details. Johnson will hold a news conference at about 1600 GMT during which he will discuss what his plans are in light of a rise in infections across London and southeast England linked to a new, more transmissible variant of the virus.

England’s Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty said that while there was no current evidence the variant of the novel coronavirus caused a higher mortality rate or



A protester holds up a placard as they gather at a ‘Memorial March’ in central Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in north-east England on Saturday, to unite against restrictions imposed to combat the spread of the coronavirus. — AFP

impacted vaccines, urgent work was underway to confirm this.

“We have alerted the World Health Organization and are continuing to analyse the available data to improve our understanding,” Whitty said in a statement.

Britain reported 28,507 new COVID-19 cases on Friday and 489 deaths, with the reproduction

“R” number estimated to be between 1.1 and 1.2, meaning the number of cases is rapidly increasing.

Johnson said on Friday he hoped England would not need a third lockdown after Christmas and has so far resisted calls to change plans to ease restrictions for five days over the festive period, allowing three separate

households to meet indoors. Much of the country, including London, is currently in the highest of a three-tier system of restrictions to curb the pandemic’s spread.

The Daily Telegraph newspaper said ministers could now announce curbs on travel between southeast England, including the capital, and the rest of the country. — Reuters

US authorises 2nd vaccine as countries tighten holiday curbs

WASHINGTON: The United States on Friday authorised Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use, paving the way for millions of doses of a second jab to be shipped across the hardest-hit country in the world.

The latest breakthrough came as many governments clamp down on socialising over Christmas and New Year, which is expected to fuel a jump in virus deaths in early 2021.

Italy on Friday announced harsh new restrictions over the holidays with many shops and all pubs and restaurants closed, travel between regions banned, and only one daily outside trip per household permitted.

And parts of Sydney were heading into a fresh lockdown on Saturday, with Australian officials saying they hoped the restrictions would be enough to control a growing outbreak in time for Christmas.

With the United States now registering over 2,500 deaths a day from COVID-19, senior US officials including Vice-President Mike Pence stepped up to receive early vaccinations on Friday.

Pence’s public inoculation was the most high-profile attempt yet at persuading vaccine-skeptic Americans to join a national effort to halt a pandemic that has killed at least 1.66 million people and infected more than 74 million worldwide.

President-elect Joe Biden, who will take office on January 20, announced he would take the vaccine, also in public, on Monday.

MACRON ‘SLOWED DOWN’

In hard-hit Europe, unease mounted after Slovakian Prime Minister Igor Matovic tested positive for COVID-19 a week after attending a European Union summit in Brussels.

The summit is believed to be



US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi receives the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine by Dr Brian Monahan, attending physician of the United States Congress, at the Capitol in Washington, on Friday. — Reuters

where French President Emmanuel Macron caught the virus. Macron’s diagnosis has led to a host of European leaders and French officials rushing into self-isolation.

The French leader acknowledged on Friday he had been “slowed down” by his infection, but insisted he was still actively involved in government business including Brexit trade talks.

US President Donald Trump, who may be currently immune after recovering from COVID-19, has also signalled he would be willing to take the vaccine.

The United States is the first nation to authorise the two-dose regimen from Moderna, now the second vaccine to be deployed in a Western country after the one developed by Pfizer and BioNTech.

Millions of doses will start shipping out as early as this weekend from cold-storage sites outside Memphis and Louisville.

TWO BILLION DOSES

The European Union, facing pressure to approve vaccines, intends to begin its inoculations with the Pfizer-BioNTech dose before the end of the year, with some countries naming December 27 as a start date.

Poorer countries meanwhile received a boost on Friday when the World Health Organization

and partners said vaccines would be distributed early next year to the 190 countries in its Covax initiative, a pooling effort formed to ensure equitable distribution.

“The light at the end of the tunnel has grown a little bit brighter,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual press conference.

Two billion doses have been secured from developers AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, Novovax and Sanofi/GSK, though none of their candidates have so far received authorisation for use.

With the vaccine rollout only just beginning however, infection rates continue to surge in many countries and a number are tightening restrictions.

In Australia a cluster of cases on Sydney’s northern beaches grew to 38, with residents ordered to stay home from late Saturday other than for essential reasons.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

KATSINA

Jubilation as freed Nigerian boys reunite with kin

Parents sobbed, mobbed their children in hugs and even kissed the ground in gratitude on Friday as they reunited with scores of schoolboys who had been kidnapped a week earlier in northwest Nigeria. Hundreds of adults jostled to find their offspring among the 344 dusty and dazed looking children who had arrived by bus in Katsina state on Friday morning.

Those who succeeded cheered and grabbed their children, but scores more were still waiting by early evening. “I feel like God has



granted me paradise because I am so happy,” said an ebullient Hamza Kankara after she found her son, Lawal, in the crowd. Another man knelt and kissed the ground, thanking God for the return of his young son, before clutching the boy and sobbing. — Reuters

MOGADISHU

Death toll rises to 16 in Somalia bombing

The death toll from a suicide bombing in Somalia has risen to 16, after a number of people hurt in the blast succumbed to their injuries overnight, security sources said on Saturday.

Initially, six people including three senior military officials were killed on Friday when a suicide bomber attacked a stadium in the Somali city of Galkayo, ahead of the planned arrival of the country’s prime minister.

But a local security official



said by telephone on Saturday: “The number of people who have died in the blast increased this morning, 16 people, most of them civilians, died, according to the information we have.” — AFP

WASHINGTON

US Congress passes stopgap funding bill

The US Congress on Friday passed and sent to President Donald Trump a two-day stopgap extension of existing federal funds to avoid a midnight government shutdown, as negotiators work on a \$900-billion coronavirus aid bill and a \$1.4-trillion government-wide spending bill through September 2021. The House of Representatives and Senate, with little debate and with only hours to go before government funding expired, gave congressional leaders more time



to try to craft a bipartisan coronavirus aid bill that would ride along with the massive spending legislation. — Reuters

Breakdancing at the Olympics? Legends will be turning in their graves!

I honestly thought someone was pulling a gigantic stunt last week when it was announced that breakdancing will debut as an Olympic sport in Paris, in 2024. The International Olympic Committee has announced that along with skateboarding, climbing, and surfing, it will be included to appeal to the younger generation, to urbanise, popularise, and diversify “The Games.”

Chris Hill, writing in ‘Olympic Politics,’ explained that Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who revived the ‘Games’ as we have known them for over a hundred years, “idealised the Olympic Games as the ultimate ancient athletic competition.”

Politically liberal, he also took the perspective that sport had the potential to cross-cultural barriers, and founded the International Olympic Committee in 1894, with the first games of the modern era being held in the ‘spiritual’ home of the games, Athens, Greece just two years later. Since then, the pantheon of athletic stars such as Paavo Nurmi, Michael Phelps, Nadia Comaneci, Kristin Otto, Usain Bolt, Carl Lewis, Mark Spitz, Cassius Clay, Emil Zatopek, are just a few who are immortalised in this cast of greats.

Others have achieved their fame in adversity, such as Eric Moussambani of Equatorial Guinea almost drowned during the 100m freestyle but finished the event. Johnny Weismuller won five Olympic swimming Golds and then



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CLIMBING AND SURFING WILL BE INCLUDED TO APPEAL TO THE YOUNGER GENERATION

won even greater fame in the movies, as Tarzan! Cathy Freeman became the first Aboriginal to win the 400m Gold in her home, Sydney, Olympics.

Fanny Blankers-Koen of the Netherlands was known as the ‘flying housewife,’ starring as she juggled her family and athletics, when it was unheard of. Lasse Viren fell during the 10,000m, and still won, and came out a few days later and won the 5,000m Gold for good measure. These were warriors, real men and real women, real athletes.

And the ideals of fair play were never better demonstrated than in the 5000m qualifying in Rio, 2016. Abbey D’Agostino (USA) and Nikki Hamblin (NZ) sacrificed any medal hopes to help each other following a mid-race fall. Though they were never going to make up the lost ground, the two’s compassion, and concern for each other reflected the Olympic spirit so emphatically, they were granted places in the Final later in the games. Both were unplaced but had created a ‘moment’ sports fans could celebrate forever.

The Olympics has seen bravery triumph, persistence rewarded, and determination victorious. Which of those will apply to breakdancing? Stack those guts and glory athletic, sports and sporting efforts alongside the entertainment potential of breakdancing, and it doesn’t seem right

does it? Is it too great a stretch to expect to see Simon Cowell, Amanda Holden, Will.I.am, and Rihanna as the socially and culturally, gender-balanced judging panel? Even its originator, DJ Kool Herc identified ‘breaking,’ as slang for “getting excited, acting energetically, or causing a disturbance!” So Gold, Silver, and Bronze Medals will be awarded for excessive excitement? ADHD anyone?

Tragedy and controversy too have befallen the games, with drug scandals involving Russia drawing participation bans. In 1936 Adolf Hitler refused to congratulate America’s Jesse Owens after he beat the German sprinters. In Mexico, 1968, Tom Smith and John Carlos gave Black Power salutes on the victory dais. In Munich, 1972, eleven Israeli team members were killed by Black September fighters. Sixty-six countries boycotted the Moscow Olympics in 1980, while the Soviet bloc returned the favour at Los Angeles in ’84. The Beijing Games, in 2008, saw 50 athletes stripped of medals for doping violations. Rio, four years ago, saw four American swimmers vandalise a gas station, and were expelled

Yet for all this misbehaviour, murder, and mayhem, could it be that John Milton’s poetic lines from ‘Allegro,’ so long ago, urging us to “trip the light fantastic,” to dance, could well signal the imminent demise of the greatest sporting event the world has ever known, the Olympic Games?

2020 EMISSIONS

Setting a precedent or bucking the trend?

PATRICK GALEY

For a few moments in late April of 2020, oil — normally the lifeblood of the world economy — became more expensive to store than to pay someone to take it away.

Crude oil’s wildly fluctuating futures prices reflected the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, with record falls in greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel demand making 2020 an unexpectedly good year for the climate.

The United Nations and the Global Carbon Project both said this month that planet-warming carbon pollution was set to fall seven per cent this year, the largest single-year drop in history.

As pressure mounts on governments to match action to their promises to slash emissions, such a historic drop is welcome even if it only came about due to the pandemic.

It puts 2020 roughly in line with what the UN says is needed to keep the Paris climate deal goal of limiting warming to 1.5C within reach.

But with the distribution of several COVID-19 vaccines ramping up in 2021, enabling an anticipated global economic rebound, will 2020 be the start of an annual downward emissions trend, or just a momentary blip?

“I am afraid that if governments do not take major new policies we may well see that the decline we are experiencing in emissions this year will rebound,” Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency, said.

FATIH BIROL
International Energy Agency

“I f governments do not put clean energy policies in their economic recovery packages we will go back to where we were before the pandemic.”

Birol pointed to China, the world’s largest polluter, which he said was an “important test run” for how other nations power their COVID-19 recovery.

“We all know China was the first country to have the coronavirus, the first where there was a lockdown and where the economy declined,” he said.

“But China is also the first country where the economy rebounded and as of today Chinese emissions are higher than levels before the crisis.”

The UN in its annual Emissions Gap report said last week that 2020’s dip in emissions would have only a “negligible impact” on long-term warming without a profound shift towards green energy.

It said emissions hit a record high in 2019 of 59.1 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent — a whopping 2.6 per cent higher than the year before. Yet the countries that pollute the most have prioritised sectors heavily reliant on fossil fuels in their stimulus packages.

In October, a study by manufacturer Wartsila and Energy Policy Tracker found that G20 nations had earmarked \$145 billion for clean energy solutions as part of their recovery funding.

This compared with \$216 billion that had been pledged for fossil energy, the analysis showed.

The UN said this month that production of oil, gas and coal needed to fall 6 per cent annually through 2030 to stay on a 1.5-C course. Its Production Gap assessment showed however that countries plan to increase fossil fuel production 2 per cent per year this decade.

— AFP

COVID-19 VACCINES

We’ve only reached the ‘base camp’

RACHEL MORE AND ALBERT OTTI

Many families across the globe will spend the 2020 festive season hoping that next year will be different. Countries across Europe have returned to varying degrees of lockdown in response to a second wave of coronavirus infections.

Cases have surged in the United States in recent weeks. But a ray of hope is on the horizon: COVID-19 vaccines. The numbers are encouraging, with drugs developed by US biotechnology company Moderna and the BioNTech/Pfizer partnership promising protection of 90 per cent and upwards, while a vaccine developed by British-Swedish pharmaceuticals company AstraZeneca boasts at least 70-per-cent efficacy.

Even as regulators one by one give the go-ahead for vaccination, the logistical feat of administering the drugs is an uphill battle, as Kate O’Brien, the World Health Organization’s chief immunisation expert, explained at a recent briefing.

“Getting to vaccine efficacy is like building base camp at Everest, but the climb to the peak is really about delivering the vaccines,” she said. “I think we’re looking at at least the first half of next year as being a period of very, very limited doses. Supplies are going to be limited,” WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan said.

Orders were already coming in long before the first regulators gave the vaccines their stamp of approval. The European Commission alone has



A vial of the Pfizer vaccine used at The Reservoir nursing facility is shown in West Hartford, Connecticut, US. — Reuters

THE FIRST COUNTRIES HAVE BEGUN VACCINATING PEOPLE SPARKING HOPES OF AN END TO THE PANDEMIC

arranged for the purchase of hundreds of millions of doses from vaccine developers. But not everyone will get hold of the vaccine at once.

At a national level, the WHO is recommending that high-risk groups, such as front-line health workers, the elderly and people with pre-existing conditions, are prioritised.

And on a global scale, the WHO is working together with major health funds to promote a global distribution project called Covax that aims to share COVID-19 vaccines fairly, irrespective of a country’s wealth level. A September report from the WHO on vaccine

allocation said fair and equal access was in every country’s interest: “Infectious threats to health know no borders; as long as there is active Sars-CoV-2 transmission anywhere there will be a risk of transmission everywhere.”

Britain, the United States and Canada have already started giving people the jab. Germany is in the process of setting up hundreds of vaccination centres across the country, many of them in repurposed sports stadiums and conference halls, ahead of the EU regulatory body’s pending approval of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, expected on Monday. — dpa

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sport

Rustaq, Suhar and Al Suwaiq register crucial league wins

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 19

Al Rustaq, Suhar and Al Suwaiq registered crucial victories in the inaugural week of 2020-2021 Omantel League on Friday.

At Rustaq Sports Complex, the South Batinah-based team stunned Bahla 2-0. Rustaq demonstrated that they were the best side in the game. Scoring the goal came in the second half as Alvies and Mohammed al Ghafri netted winning goals in the 65th and 75th minutes.

In the same venue, Al Suwaiq secured an important victory against Muscat 1-0 to claim the first three points in the league. The only goal was struck in the 70th minute by Brazilian Rodrigo from a penalty.

Suhar came back from behind to beat Oman Club 2-1 to bag the winning points. The visitors scored the first goal by Ishad Obaid. The hosts benefited from the lapses at the back and pressurised the defence to bring the match into the beginning. Oman's defender Mohammed Faraj scored an own goal and

Mohammed al Siyabi netted the winning goal in the second half to capture the first three points in the league.

After the completion of the opening week matches, Seeb is leading the table order with goals preference than Al Rustaq, Suhar, Nizwa, Al Nasr and Al Suwaiq.

The next week's matches will take place on Tuesday and Wednesday. Nizwa will host Musannah at the former's home while Seeb will face Al Ettihad at Seeb Stadium.

Suhar will take on Dhofar at the latter's home and Al Nahdha will clash with Saham at Al Buraimi Sports Complex. Muscat will face Bahla at Seeb Stadium while Al Nasr will host Al Suwaiq at Al Saada Sports Complex.

Oman Club will meet Al Rustaq at Seeb Stadium.

The Disciplinary Committee at Oman Football Association (OFA) issued three decisions. The deduction of six points and financial fine of 14,000 OMR for Dhofar, Saham and Al Nahdha as these clubs did not complete the rules of obtaining the licensing permit.



Sakshi, ISM steal show at Oman Cricket Awards Night



Indian Social Club captain receiving the winner's trophy from OC Vice Chairman Sayyid Qais bin Khalid al Said



ISM Under-16 captain receiving the winner's trophy



ISM Under-13 captain receiving the winner's trophy



ISM Under-19 captain Azam Ali receiving the winner's trophy

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, DEC 19

Sakshi Shetty of Women's Cricket Sohar (WCS) swept the Oman Cricket Awards Night like nobody else, walking away with all the three individual prizes reserved for excellence on the field for the season 2019-20 while Indian Social Club (ISC) claimed the Winner's Trophy from chief guest Sayyid Qais bin Khalid al Said, OC Vice-Chairman at Oman Cricket Academy ground in Amerat on Thursday.

Indian School Muscat (ISM) completed a hat-trick of titles, winning all three competitions in the Junior League. The awards ceremony was also attended by Madhu Jesrani, Secretary, Oman Cricket, Duleep Mendis, Chief development Officer, Oman Cricket and senior OC officials.

Sakshi's outstanding season fetched her Best Batswoman, Best Bowler and Best All-rounder awards. Her team WCS was also happy to receive the Runner-up trophy on a cold Thursday evening.

ISM lifted the Junior League Under-19 Winner's Trophy while Indian School Wadi Kabir (ISWK) received the Runner-up prize. Amanpreet Singh Sirah of

The awards ceremony was also attended by Madhu Jesrani, Secretary, Oman Cricket, Duleep Mendis, Chief development Officer, Oman Cricket and senior OC officials

ISWK wore the broadest smile among schoolboys, claiming the most coveted Best Batsman and Best All-rounder awards his team-mate Sidhh Mehta bagged the Best Bowler prize.

ISM and ISWK claimed the top two trophies respectively in Under-16 league too. Arjun Suresh Dhiman of MCCC Yellow was presented the Best Batsman award while his team-mate Aum Nrupen Kanani received the Best Bowler prize. Sri Lankan School Muscat's Ravindra Jadeja was adjudged the Best All-rounder.

In the Junior League Under-13 category, ISM A lifted the Winner's Trophy whereas Indian School Seeb (ISB) claimed the Runner-up title. Devansh Loya of ISM B received the Best Batsman award while Best Bowler prize went to Mukul Mahesh of Indian School Ghubrah (ISG).



Gavaskar comforts Kohli & Co

Sunil Gavaskar knows what it feels like to be saddled with a dubious distinction and the batting great offered comforting words to India's team after they registered a record low total in the day-night test against Australia on Saturday. — Reuters



Wasim named Pakistan's chief selector until 2023 World Cup

Former Test batsman Mohammad Wasim has been appointed Pakistan's chief selector, succeeding Misbah-ul-Haq, until the 2023 World Cup in India, the country's cricket board said on Saturday. — Reuters

India suffer shocking defeat to Australia

ADELAIDE, Australia: A devastated India crashed to their lowest ever score of 36 on Saturday as Australia ran riot to win the opening Test in Adelaide by eight wickets after Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins produced a bowling masterclass.

India started the third day of the pink-ball Test on nine for one and with a 62-run lead, looking to build a competitive second innings total for the hosts to chase.

But their hopes were left in tatters by a wicket with bounce and deviation as Hazlewood took 5-8, including his 200th Test wicket, and Cummins 4-21. Wicketkeeper Tim Paine claimed five catches as the bowlers found the edge.

"I didn't expect it to come that quick, I was expecting a real dog-fight," said skipper Paine.

"To hang in, give our bowlers a chance, and then turn up and start the day the way we did, full credit to our bowling attack again.

"It's nice to get off to a good start. Chuffed with the way we bowled in this Test."

It was an incredible Indian collapse, with no batsman reaching double figures during a capitulation that lasted less than 22 overs, in contrast to their battling first innings' 244.

That included skipper Virat Kohli, who fell for four and now heads home for the birth of his first child, leaving his stunned team to face three more Tests, starting in Melbourne on Boxing Day, without him. Ajinkya Rahane will assume the captaincy.

"It's very hard to put those feelings into words," said a disconsolate Kohli.

"We had a lead of 60-odd when we arrived, and then just collapsed. We played two days of good cricket to get in a position and then just lost it in an hour. It really hurts."

India's previous Test low was



Australian bowler Josh Hazlewood shows the ball after taking his fifth wicket on day 3 of the first Test. — Reuters

SCOREBOARD	
INDIA FIRST INNINGS: 244	
AUSTRALIA FIRST INNINGS: 191	
INDIA SECOND INNINGS (O/N: 9-1):	
P Shaw b Cummins.....	4
M Agarwal c Paine b Hazlewood.....	9
J Bumrah c & b Cummins.....	2
C Pujara c Paine b Cummins.....	0
V Kohli c Green b Cummins.....	4
A Rahane c Paine b Hazlewood.....	0
H Vihari c Paine b Hazlewood.....	8
W Saha c Labuschagne b Hazlewood.....	4
R Ashwin c Paine b Hazlewood.....	0
U Yadav (not out).....	4
M Shami (ret hurt).....	1
Extras:	0
Total (For 9 wks, 21.1 overs)	36
Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-15, 3-15, 4-15, 5-15, 6-19, 7-26, 8-26, 9-31, 9-36 (Shami - retired hurt).	
Bowling: Starc 6-3-7-0, Cummins 10.2-4-21-4, Hazlewood 5-3-8-5.	
AUSTRALIA SECOND INNINGS	
J Burns (not out).....	51
M Wade (run out).....	33
M Labuschagne c Agarwal b Ashwin.....	6
S Smith (not out).....	2
Extras (LB-1, NB-1)	2
Total (For 2 wks, overs 21)	93
Fall of wicket: 1-70, 2-82.	
Bowling: Bumrah 7-1-27-0, Yadav 8-1-49-0, Ashwin 6-1-16-1.	

42 against England at Lord's in 1974. Their 36 was the joint fourth lowest of all time, with New Zealand's 26 facing England in 1955 at Auckland the worst ever.

The carnage left Australia, who scored 191 in the first innings, needing 90 to win, with out-of-form Joe Burns hitting a confidence-building 51 not out, including a six to win the match.

Matthew Wade made 33 and Marnus Labuschagne six with Steve Smith not out one.

IN TROUBLE

Cummins wasted no time removing nightwatchman Jasprit Bumrah for two in the second over of the day, temping him to push at a slower ball that popped back up to him.

That brought the stubborn Cheteshwar Pujara to the crease. He saw off an over from Cummins, but that was as good as it got for the veteran who fell without scoring.

Cummins, the world's number one Test bowler, sent down a delivery that had to be played and Pujara caught an edge that carried to wicketkeeper Paine.

It left India on 15 for three, and it only got worse with opener Mayank Agarwal back in the pavilion five balls later for nine, again caught by Paine on Hazlewood's opening delivery.

Hazlewood and Paine again combined to get rid of Rahane for nought, after which Cummins picked up the massive wicket of Kohli. — AFP



Australian bowler Josh Hazlewood reacts after taking his 5th wicket on day 3 of the first Test at Adelaide Oval. — Reuters

Indian press, ex-players rue 'massacre' in Australia

NEW DELHI: The Indian press and former players savaged the national cricket team on Saturday after they slumped to their lowest-ever score in a "humiliating" and "jaw-dropping" Test defeat in Australia.

India were bundled out for 36 in the second innings of the first Test in Adelaide as Australian pacemen Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins put the visitors to the sword.

In cricket-crazy India, *The Times of India* dubbed the performance and the defeat — the hosts cruised to an eight-wicket victory on just the third day — the "massacre in Adelaide".

"India did almost everything right on Day 2," the paper said in a lengthy post-mortem. "Day 3 however saw the Aussie fast bowlers especially Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins come out with

a vengeance."

The Indian batting performance — no player got into double figures — was a "jaw-dropping act of meek surrender," the paper said, calling Hazlewood with his stellar figures of five for eight the "wrecker-in-chief".

The Indian Express wondered if the "summer of 36" is "Indian cricket's lowest point", adding tongue-in-cheek that the players had at least "buried the ghost" of 1974, when the previous record low of 42 was set.

Forty-six years ago when India were thrashed by England at Lord's, that innings at least saw one player — Eknath Solkar making 18 not out — reach double figures, the paper recalled.

The Republic TV channel on its website called the batting performance "humiliating", with



Sachin Tendulkar. — Reuters

the middle order of Cheteshwar Pujara, Virat Kohli and Ajinkya Rahane "badly exposed".

Virat Kohli said he was confident that the team would bounce back, but the talismanic

Indian skipper is returning home now to be with his Bollywood star wife for the birth of their first child.

With Kohli absent, and a "question mark" over the fitness

In cricket-crazy India, *The Times of India* dubbed the performance and the defeat — the hosts cruised to an eight-wicket victory on just the third day — the "massacre in Adelaide"

of key batsman Rohit Sharma, "Team India have a lot to think about," the Times of India said.

GRACIOUS TENDULKAR

Former India great Sachin Tendulkar meanwhile was gracious about the defeat, congratulating the Australians.

"With the way India batted & bowled in the 1st innings, they

were in the driver's seat, but the Aussies came back really hard this morning," he tweeted.

"That is the beauty of Test cricket. It's NEVER over till it's over. India was outclassed in the 2nd half. Congratulations to Australia!"

Former India pacer Irfan Pathan said though: "Very disappointed with the result. We all expect the Indian team to play better cricket".

Kris Srikkanth, a former India opener, captain and selector, was similarly unforgiving.

"All the hard work done by india in the 1st innings lost by pretty pathetic batting in a span of 20 overs! Congrats @CricketAus," Srikkanth tweeted.

"Time for our boys to dig deep and put a decent total on the board for our bowlers!" — AFP

Qatar 2022 stadium in Al Rayyan unveiled to the world



DOHA: In the presence of His Highness the Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Ahmad bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan hosted the 48th Amir Cup final on Qatar National Day to become the fourth fully operational FIFA World Cup 2022 tournament venue to be inaugurated.

The stadium – which will become the new home of Al Rayyan Sports Club – follows Khalifa International, Al Janoub and Education City in being declared ready to host the first FIFA World Cup in the Middle East and Arab world. The 40,000-capacity venue will host seven matches during Qatar 2022 up to the round of 16 stages.

Following a spectacular pre-match ceremony featuring music, cultural performances and stunning visual effects, along with a riddle recited by presenters Hamad bin Mohsen al Naimi and Ali bin Rhema al Marri, the final between Al Sadd and Al Arabi kicked off. Al Sadd won the match 2-1 to claim the Amir Cup for the 17th time in front of a socially distanced crowd of 50% the stadium's capacity.

Among the dignitaries in attendance was FIFA President, Gianni Infantino, who praised the SC for the successful completion of another Qatar 2022 tournament venue.

"Ahmad bin Ali Stadium is a wonderful venue for football," said Infantino. "The atmosphere is incredible, with the seats



extremely close to the pitch. Even with a socially-distanced crowd, I could feel the passion for the game. I am sure this will be a perfect football arena in 2022 when it hosts matches during the World Cup."

Infantino continued: "I would like to congratulate Qatar on the completion of this latest World Cup project. The country is very well prepared for the next World Cup and on track to host a memorable version of the tournament – the first in the

Middle East and Arab world, and the second in Asia."

Built on the site of a deconstructed stadium, the new venue is adjacent to the Mall of Qatar and within walking distance of Al Riffa Station – on Doha Metro's Green Line. The stadium's most striking feature is a glowing façade, comprised of patterns that characterise different aspects of Qatar: the importance of family, the beauty of the desert, native flora and fauna, and local and international

trade. A fifth shape – a shield – brings together all the others, representing the strength and unity that is particularly relevant to the desert city of Al Rayyan.

HE Hassan al Thawadi, Secretary-General of the SC, said: "The inauguration of Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium on Qatar National Day is another important milestone on the road to 2022 and a triumph of the efforts of everyone involved to put on such a successful event during a global pandemic. The stadium and

surrounding precinct are sure to be a source of pride for Al Rayyan Sports Club and everyone who lives in this historic city.

"As we look ahead to 2021, we look forward to unveiling more stadiums in the new year, as we ensure that all tournament venues are delivered well in advance of the big kick-off in 2022."

Nasser al Khater, Chief Executive Officer, FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 LLC, said: "Tonight was an immensely proud occasion for Qatar and the

The stadium – which will become the new home of Al Rayyan Sports Club – follows Khalifa International, Al Janoub and Education City in being declared ready to host the first FIFA World Cup in the Middle East and Arab world. The 40,000-capacity venue will host seven matches during Qatar 2022 up to the round of 16 stage

people of Al Rayyan. It was also another opportunity to test our readiness for Qatar 2022, with thousands of fans enjoying the spectacle, despite the challenges caused by the ongoing pandemic. We look forward to developing the Qatar 2022 fan experience further next year when we host more major tournaments, including the FIFA Club World Cup and FIFA Arab Cup – events which are sure to excite football lovers in Qatar, across the region and around the world."



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New initiative to enhance monetary policy in Oman

ALL-ROUND BENEFITS: CBO’s Monetary Policy Enhancement Project will further strength Sultanate’s economic and financial stability

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) says its new Monetary Policy Enhancement Project, launched at the start of this year, will help unleash an array of benefits that will contribute to further strengthening the economic and financial stability of the Sultanate.

The overarching objective behind the initiative is to enhance the effectiveness and the transmission mechanism of CBO’s monetary policy within the boundaries of the fixed exchange rate regime, thereby reinforcing the country’s economic and financial stability, the sector regulator said.

Earlier, an action plan approved by CBO’s Board of Governors last December was fine-tuned by CBO experts with technical assistance provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), it pointed out.

“Successful implementation of MPEP would have enormous positives impacts on the effectiveness of CBO’s operations in particular and on the Omani economy at large,” said the apex bank in its newly published 2020 Financial Stability Report.

“First, it would smoothen the transmission mechanism of monetary policy in Oman within the boundaries of the fixed exchange rate regime, through improving domestic liquidity management, better alignment of domestic interbank rates with CBO’s policy rate, and boosting the efficacy of domestic interbank markets.

Second, it would raise CBO’s capabilities in performing two of its critical functions — the lender of last resort and guardian of financial stability — and would expedite the completion of the regulatory framework within which CBO performs these functions. Finally, it would expand CBO’s



capacity as the monetary policy-maker and as a consultant to the government on various economic affairs,” it stated.

Among measures initiated to this end is the scrapping of the use of USD LIBOR as the reference rate for CBO policy and standing facilities rates. Accordingly, the

interest rates on CBO’s lending facility (repo transactions) and discount/rediscout facilities are calculated, with effect from March 2020, as the upper bound of the Fed’s target federate funds rate plus a spread.

Additionally, the Steering Committee is conducting an Interbank

Market Survey on all traditional and international money markets and the challenges posed in meeting their short-term financing and investing needs.

Significantly, a key objective of the Monetary Policy Enhancement Project is to support the development of a Domestic Money

Market and Foreign Exchange (FX) market, according to the Central Bank.

“The goal is to strengthen the role of the interbank market as the primary source for meeting banks’ short-term financing and investment needs.

This dimension also considers increasing the availability of sharia-compliant money market instruments to Islamic Banking Entities (IBEs),” it said.

The monetary policy enhancement initiative will also help the Central Bank advance its macroeconomic forecasting capabilities. To this end, it is working with other government institutions to improve the quality of Oman’s macroeconomic data and enhance the reliability of existing macroeconomic forecasting models.

It is also working on the establishment of a centralised data hub to facilitate liquidity and macroeconomic forecasting.

“Over the medium term, CBO is planning to set up an advanced framework for its macroeconomic forecasting, including building its own macroeconomic forecasting model,” it added.

PetroTel selects offshore bank to support Musandam project

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 19

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has been selected as the onshore bank for PetroTel Oman LLC, which has just secured a \$300 million financing from the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) for its oil and gas projects in Oman’s Musandam peninsula.

PetroTel Energy is an exploration and production company headquartered in Texas, USA, PetroTel’s local subsidiaries PetroTel Oman LLC (PTO) and PetroTel Oman Offshore LLC (PTOO) operate Block 17 and Block 40 respectively in Musandam.

Both licences are 100 per cent owned by PetroTel Energy.

With funding support from DFC, PetroTel plans to build facilities, as well as a three-kilometre offshore pipeline that will carry hydrocarbons to the existing Musandam Gas Processing Plant at Tibat.

While oil will be sold to international markets via an offshore loading terminal located off Tibat, the gas will be supplied to the Musandam Independent Power Project, a 120 MW power plant majority-owned by OQ and brought into operation in 2017.

Dr Anil Chopra, Chairman and CEO of PetroTel Oman LLC, added, “We are happy to have chosen NBO as our onshore banking partner with DFC. This project is a significant

NEW FINANCING: PetroTel’s local subsidiaries PetroTel Oman LLC and PetroTel Oman Offshore LLC operate Block 17 and Block 40 respectively in Musandam



investment in Musandam and our partnership with NBO will help us solidify our contribution to the socio-economic growth and development of the Sultanate of Oman under the guidance of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.”

Asif Redha, Head of Global Transaction Banking at NBO, said, “NBO is always ahead in the market by providing innovative technological solutions to

international and local businesses. Our Corporate Internet Banking and B2B channels are at the forefront of helping institutions to leverage their cash flows and optimise their resources and have made us the bank of choice for many reputed organisations.

We are glad to offer our tailor-made solution to PetroTel Oman LLC to meet its requirements, throughout the whole of their project lifecycle.”

Return on investments hits 9.5 per cent in 2019: OIA

MUSCAT: Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the Sultanate’s integrated sovereign wealth fund, has described 2019 as the most successful year in its history with a return on investments averaging an attractive 9.5 per cent.

In addition to the healthy performance of its investments, wholly government-owned OIA has also ventured into fields of space, food technology and infrastructure and enhanced its investment position in different markets in China, Japan and South Korea. In all, OIA has investments in more than 25 countries, it said in a statement.

“The OIA also enhanced the State’s general budget without affecting its own financial position and without being compelled to compromise any of its assets. The Authority has been able to take safe investment decisions, either by clearing some of its assets concurrently upon the shutting down of global firms associated to those assets and by safely exiting the investments that have vague, unorganised data or cancelling partnerships that constitute no positive results to minimise risk proportions and spare the OIA possible losses. The OIA localised some techniques in the Sultanate and re-



channeled some investments into different sectors and new markets,” it stated.

As for loans of state-owned companies, the Authority noted that borrowing is among normal business practices and that it is the least costly instrument of funding, notably at a time when companies are taking up new projects and expanding in operations without consuming their capital or available liquidity and without ledgering the burden of financing in disfavor of the state’s general finance.

In this context, it said that a company may opt for investing its available liquidity to gain higher returns compared to the value it pays as cost of low-interest debt it receives. Also, financing parties offer their loans based on feasibility of projects to be funded to

ensure the borrower’s ability to refund the loan and its associated expenses, it said, noting that firms’ borrowing does not necessarily mean their susceptibility to loss.

The OIA reaffirmed its attention to the issue of loans of state-owned firms that became affiliated to the OIA since June 2020 as per Royal Decree 61/2020 establishing Oman Investment Authority, said the statement.

“OIA is laying down a comprehensive structure of governance for state-owned companies that covers all the firms’ operations (including loans) through the devising of policies that require companies to regulate borrowing and financing instruments for the purpose of cutting down the total of those loans,” it added. — ONA

Checklist for beginners in art investment

Recently, I have been contacted by a friend who asked me what I thought about a painting that he bought from a not so famous artist.

He told me that he was confident that in a decade it would have been worth at least double his investment. Given my accounting background and the ability to quickly crunch numbers, I told him that any investment that renders a 7 per cent annually, doubles the principal capital over a decade, which is considered a decent amount for an average investor.

I also told him that if he put the same amount on Bitcoin in June he would have doubled the money by now.

It always boils down to risk versus profit.

That got me thinking about art as an investment overall and I decided to write this column.

First of all, the due disclaimer, I am not a financial adviser nor an expert in art investment, but I have put together a quick checklist that anyone could use should they consider investing in art.

Let us call it "Art investment for beginners". Here is what I would do if I decided to invest in art: I would bring my knowledge of art up to date.

Too much dust has settled on my art textbooks from school. So I would probably visit the biggest bookshop in town and stock up the best books that I can find about new emerging artists.

I definitely cannot afford to step into art investments with a Picasso as my first purchase, so I would explore the scene from the root, looking at trends over the past decade.

Secondly, I would visit as many art galleries as I could, to check the price range of the



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AN INVESTMENT IN ART MIGHT BECOME THE BEST INVESTMENT IN ONE'S LIFETIME, BUT MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, A PAINTING OF A RELATIVELY UNKNOWN ARTIST IS MORE LIKELY TO REMAIN AT THE SAME PRICE POINT OR EVEN LOSE VALUE OVER TIME

painting and pieces on display. I would also check the crowd visiting the galleries, to see who is just window-shopping and who is actually purchasing pieces of art.

By observing their habits I would want to determine a pattern in purchasing habits of art collectors.

Then I would go back home to visit good old Google to find out what are the actual global trends, as opposed to the local scene. I would want to know the success stories of artists that have emerged from nothing into world recognised talents.

My best guess would be that in general a piece of art appreciates in value once the author passes away, so I might avoid purchasing pieces produced by young artists, unless they are rising stars and their creations are already featured in international media.

Lastly, I would want to set

a budget and a target for my investment. If the entry point is too low, then it might not be worth the investment, but on the other hand, investing too much on a single piece of art or an individual artist might not be very wise.

The target profit on any investment should be higher than 5 per cent a year in my mind, however in art, given the nature of its high risk, I would expect at least double.

In the end an investment in art might become the best investment in one's lifetime, but more often than not, a painting of a relatively unknown artist is more likely to remain at the same price point or even lose value over time.

Caution is recommended.

[Stefano Virgilli is a member of the International Press Association]

Raysut Cement Company scoops nation builder award



MUSCAT: Under the patronage of Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, and Shaikh Salim bin Mustahail al Mashani, Dossier Magazine invited leading companies of the construction, infrastructure, real estate, manufacturing, design and engineering consultancies who participated in the Dossier Construction's Infrastructure Awards and Summit 2020, on December 9.

Raysut Cement Company was the associate partner of Dossier Construction's Infrastructure Awards and Summit 2020 event, which included a panel discussion.



MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

Financial Index buoys MSM

Inflation - YoY



Sources: NCSC

The MSM30 Index ended the week up by 0.16 per cent. The Financial Index rose 0.30 per cent, while the Services and Industrial Indices ended the week lower by 1.45 per cent and 1.0 per cent respectively. The MSM Shariah Index rose by 0.45 per cent.

During the week, Gulf Investment Services & Oman Investment & Finance Co (OIFC) announced that their Boards of Directors, after reviewing commercial and legal due diligence reports, recommended to the shareholders to approve the proposed merger between the two entities. The Board recommendation is subject to shareholder and regulatory approvals.

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has issued a new organisational regulation to organise the investment of the insurance companies' assets and Takaful insurance. The executive director of the CMA directed all the companies to work on conciliating its conditions according to the regulation's requirements during one year.

This regulation provided the Takaful insurance companies with the investment in new investment instruments that comply with the legal provisions like deeds and Islamic investment funds according to the specified percentages and terms whether inside or outside the Sultanate. This regulation also provided the companies with the necessity to organise the investments professionally through investments policies and plans annually certified in addition to the existence of committees that follow these policies and plans conditions. This organisational step will contribute to directing the investments towards safety and limit the impact of investment risks.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik gave directives for the establishment of two retirement funds — one for the public and private sectors and the other for the military and security units.

His Majesty also gave directives for amending the minimum years of service required for early retirement to 30 years of service. His Majesty gave directives to merge the Supreme Committee tasked with handling the

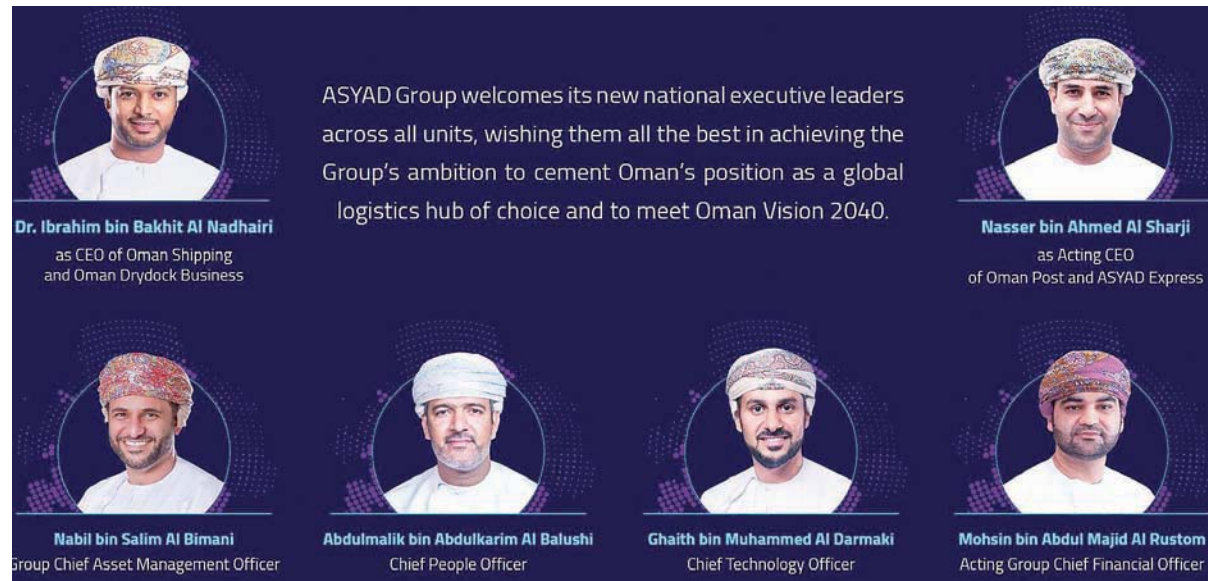
developments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the committee entrusted with addressing the economic impacts of the pandemic.

Our analysis indicates that the simple average of Oman banks' capital adequacy ratio (CAR) stood at 17.27 per cent as at the end of 9M20 vs. a regulatory minimum of 12.25 per cent. The lowest CAR amongst all banks is Bank Nizwa at 13.22 per cent as at the end of 9M20. Average Core Equity Tier 1 (CET1) Ratio stood at 13.49 per cent vs. a regulatory minimum of 8.25 per cent.

Amongst all listed banks, the lowest is Ahli Bank at 10.02 per cent as at the end of 9M20.

The average Tier 1 Capital Adequacy Ratio for all banks stood at 16.17 per cent vs. a regulatory minimum of 10.25 per cent. The lowest ratio was for Bank Nizwa at 12.49 per cent as at 9M20-end. It must be noted that, amongst other support measures for banks as well as borrowers due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, CBO has allowed a "Prudential filter" for considering stage 1&2 ECL as part of tier 2 capital.

Courtesy: U-Capital



New line-up at Asyad Group

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 19

Asyad Group, the integrated logistics services provider of the Sultanate, has announced a significant reshuffle in its top leadership, while elevating some Omani executives to high-level positions.

Dr Ibrahim bin Bakhit al Nadhairi has been formally named as CEO of Oman Shipping

Company and Oman Drydock Company, which were integrated as one entity earlier this year.

Heading Oman Post and Asyad Express as Acting CEO is Nasser bin Ahmed al Sharji.

Other key appointments include Nabil bin Salim al Bimani as Group Chief Asset Management Officer, Abdulmalik bin Abdulkarim al Balushi as Chief People Officer, Ghaith bin Mohammed al Darmaki as Chief Technology Officer, and Mohsin bin Abdulmajid al Rustom as Acting Group Chief Financial Officer.

Technology Officer, and Mohsin bin Abdulmajid al Rustom as Acting Group Chief Financial Officer.

"Asyad Group welcomes its new national executive leaders across all units, wishing them all the best in achieving the Group's ambition to cement Oman's position as a global logistics hub of choice and to meet Oman Vision 2040," said the Group in a statement on social media.

Report shows steady increase in malicious files in GCC

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 19

A report released by international cloud cybersecurity firm Mimecast says its researchers have observed a month on month increase in malicious files detected in the Arabian Peninsula over the course of 2020.

The report, titled 'Arabian Peninsula as a Cyber Innovator and Associated Cyber Risk to Resilience in the Region', highlights how between March and April — when COVID-19 first began spreading in the region and countries went into lockdown — there was a 93 per cent increase in malicious files detected. There has been a steady increase in malicious files every month since then.

The report provides a detailed overview of threats seen in



the region over the course of this year, highlighting some of the technologies and regional dynamics driving increased cyber threats. It draws on data from organisations in Oman, Bahrain, KSA, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE.

The report finds that spam remains the most prominent vector across all sectors throughout the region. Malware-centric campaigns have been observed to continue quarter-over-quarter.

And as observed in previous threat research by Mimecast, these campaigns are increasingly

sophisticated and continue to use a diverse range of malware during the different phases of an attack. In terms of most targeted verticals in the GCC, between February and August, Mimecast researchers found that the most targeted sectors were professional services; transport, storage and delivery; and retail and wholesale.

The report also highlights how threat actors are recycling tried and tested methodologies. Given the evolution of threats illustrated, the Mimecast Threat Intelligence Centre assesses that the range of threats encountered is likely (55 – 75 per cent) to continue to both increase in volume, and become more sophisticated the longer the pandemic remains a subject of significant concern to the global community and as organisations return their respective workforces from remote-working.



In brief

■ LONDON

**SOLARWINDS HACKERS BROKE INTO US CABLE FIRM, ARIZONA COUNTY**

Suspected Russian hackers accessed the systems of a US Internet provider and a county government in Arizona as part of a sprawling cyber-espionage campaign disclosed this week, according to an analysis of publicly-available web records.

The hack, which hijacked ubiquitous network management software made by SolarWinds Corp to compromise a raft of US government agencies and was first reported by Reuters, is one of the biggest ever uncovered and has sent security teams around the world scrambling to contain the damage.

■ TORONTO

**HUAWEI CFO'S ACTIONS HAD 'NO GENUINE CONNECTION' TO US**

Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou's alleged actions had "no genuine connection" to the United States, her lawyers have argued in their latest bid to end her extradition from Canada, according to court documents released. Meng, 48, was arrested two years ago at the Vancouver airport by Canadian police on an arrest warrant from the US, where she is charged with bank and wire fraud for allegedly misleading HSBC about Huawei Tech Co Ltd's business dealings in Iran.

She has claimed innocence and is fighting the extradition while under house arrest in Vancouver.

■ WASHINGTON

**GOOGLE TRIAL JUDGE SUGGESTS POTENTIAL TRIAL DATE**

The judge hearing the US Justice Department's antitrust case against Alphabet Inc's Google suggested a trial date of September 12, 2023.

US District Judge Amit Mehta suggested the date during a status conference, and counsel for the two sides did not object. Mehta noted that the two sides appeared to expect that discovery would be completed in March 2022, with other pretrial matters not addressed until early 2023. The state case is broader than the Justice Department's. The Justice Department's lawsuit focused on Google's search and search advertising while the state case filed this week included what it said was Google's efforts to extend its dominance to devices like speakers, televisions and even smart cars. Google has denied wrongdoing. — Reuters

Equities dip, oil jumps as investors wait on US stimulus package

NEW YORK: Global equity benchmarks slid while oil prices rallied to near nine-month highs on Friday as investors weighed hopes for a US coronavirus relief package against moves by the US government to add dozens of Chinese companies to a trade blacklist.

The Democratic-controlled US House of Representatives continued to negotiate with the Republican-led Senate on a \$900 billion piece of legislation to support the economy during a pandemic that has killed nearly 309,000 Americans.

"Markets in the US (are) going to be focused on the ongoing negotiations to see if we can get things over the line," said Ned Rumpeltin, European head of currency strategy at TD Securities.

Asian shares fell earlier in the day after Reuters reported the United States was set to add dozens of Chinese companies, including the country's top chipmaker,



CEO of Tesla Motors Elon Musk during a television interview after his company's initial public offering at the NASDAQ market in New York. — Reuters file photo

SMIC, to a trade blacklist later in the day.

MSCI's gauge of stocks across the globe shed 0.30 per cent following broad declines in Asia and Europe. On Wall Street, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 124.32 points, or 0.41 per

cent, to 30,179.05, the S&P 500 lost 13.07 points, or 0.35 per cent, to 3,709.41 and the Nasdaq Composite dropped 9.11 points, or 0.07 per cent, to 12,755.64. The US benchmarks hit record highs on Thursday and touched new highs Friday before retreating.

The Democratic-controlled US House of Representatives continued to negotiate with the Republican-led Senate on a \$900 billion piece of legislation

Electric-car maker Tesla Inc rose nearly 6 per cent, with massive trading volume, as it is set to become the most valuable company ever added to the S&P 500. In currency markets, the British pound slipped off the 2-1/2-year high it hit Thursday with only days remaining before the UK leaves the European Union single market on December 31.

Sterling was at \$1.3493, down 0.66 per cent on the day. The EU warned there were just hours left to strike a deal, undermining British domestically focused mid-caps as the prospect of trade tariffs

in the New Year loomed.

"The EU-UK talks could well go right up to the wire as neither side wants to be seen to be giving in too easily. It's all about the optics for both sides, so it could take a little bit longer than most people are comfortable with," said Michael Hewson, chief market analyst at CMC Markets. The dollar index rose 0.183 per cent, with the euro down 0.17 per cent to \$1.2245.

Benchmark 10-year notes last fell 5/32 in price to yield 0.9446 per cent, from 0.93 per cent late on Thursday. Markets were encouraged that the United States stood ready to ship 5.9 million doses of a new coronavirus vaccine developed by Moderna. Hopes for additional distribution of coronavirus vaccines helped push oil prices near nine-month highs. US crude recently rose 1.51 per cent to \$49.09 per barrel and Brent was at \$52.28, up 1.51% on the day. — Reuters

FDA authorises Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use



WASHINGTON: Moderna Inc's coronavirus vaccine on Friday became the second to receive emergency use authorisation (EUA) from the US Food and Drug Administration, welcome news to a nation with a staggering COVID-19 death toll of over 307,000 lives lost.

The FDA announced the authorisation the day after the agency's panel of outside experts endorsed its use. Moderna said it intended to apply for full US licence.

The decision marks the first regulatory authorisation in the world for Moderna's vaccine and validation of its messenger RNA technology. It came less than a year after the first COVID-19 case was identified in the United States. The biotech company has worked with the US government to prepare for the distribution of 5.9 million shots as early as this weekend. The FDA decision is based on results from a late-stage study of 30,000 volunteers that found the vaccine was nearly 95 per cent effective at preventing

illness from COVID-19 with no serious safety concerns.

The authorization follows an EUA granted for a similar vaccine from Pfizer Inc and German partner BioNTech SE that has been put into the arms of thousands of US healthcare workers this week in a massive nationwide roll-out.

"With the availability of two vaccines now for the prevention of COVID-19, the FDA has taken another crucial step in the fight against this global pandemic that is causing vast numbers of hospitalizations and deaths in the United States each day," FDA Commissioner Stephen M Hahn, MD, said in a statement.

Moderna's shot is expected to be used in harder-to-reach locations, such as rural hospitals. The vaccine needs to be stored and shipped frozen, but does not require the ultra-cold temperatures of the Pfizer/BioNTech shot. Once thawed, the Moderna vaccine can be kept at typical refrigerator temperatures.

— Reuters

Hackers' attack sets cyber experts scrambling to defend networks

LONDON: Suspected Russian hackers who broke into US government agencies also spied on less high-profile organisations, including groups in Britain, a US Internet provider and a county government in Arizona, according to web records and a security source.

More details were revealed on Friday of the cyber espionage campaign that has computer network security teams worldwide scrambling to limit the damage as a senior official in the outgoing administration of US President Donald Trump explicitly acknowledged Russia's role in the hack for the first time.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on the Mark Levin radio show "I think it's the case



that now we can say pretty clearly that it was the Russians that engaged in this activity."

Networking gear maker Cisco Systems Inc said a limited number of machines in some of its labs had been found with malicious software on them, without saying if anything had been taken.

A person familiar with the company's ongoing probe said

fewer than 50 were compromised. In Britain, a small number of organisations were compromised and not in the public sector, a security source said.

Shares in cyber security companies FireEye Inc, Palo Alto Networks and CrowdStrike Holdings rose on Friday as investors bet that the spate of disclosures from Microsoft Corp and others would boost demand for security technology. Reuters identified Cox Communications Inc and Pima County, Arizona government as victims of the intrusion by running a publicly available coding script from researchers at Moscow-based private cybersecurity firm Kaspersky.

— Reuters

■ DRAFT BUDGET AIMS FOR SURVIVAL SOLUTIONS



Iraqis shop at the fruits and vegetables market in Baghdad. A year of economic agony for pandemic-hit and oil-reliant Iraq is drawing to a close, but a draft 2021 budget involving a hefty currency devaluation could bring more pain for citizens. Officials who prepared the document aim for 'survival' solutions after an unprecedented fiscal crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic and the collapse in the price of oil. — AFP

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B Tech Mechanical Engineer, 2 yrs experience, looking for suitable job in Oman. Email: boovarasanboopathi@gmail.com GSM: 0091-9159352599, 97676177.

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features



Everyone Deserves to Dream

• The challenge and journey started after coming back to Oman in 2017 when she did not know how to pursue her hobby of playing football like how she used to abroad... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

CHESS CHAMP



QUEEN'S GAMBIT DEJA-VU FOR HUNGARY CHESS CHAMP POLGAR

Watching the hit Netflix show "The Queen's Gambit" sparked déjà-vu for Hungarian chess great Judit Polgar, regarded as the game's best-ever female player. Like the show's fictional heroine Beth... **Story on Page P20**

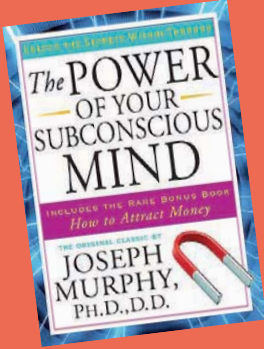
OPERA



PARIS OPERA SINGERS GO DIGITAL AFTER COVID KEEPS THEATRES CLOSED

Just five days before they were due to perform before a live audience for the first time in almost two months, the singers of the Paris Opera learned they could not re-open before January as France's coronavirus cases remained stubbornly high... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE POWER OF YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS MIND

A believer of the Religious Science movement, a spiritual, philosophical and metaphysical religious movement within the New Thought movement, Joseph Murphy was a doctor of psychology who wrote extensively about the power of the subconscious mind.

CHRISTMAS JOY



RESCUE CATS DON SANTA SUITS FOR PURRFECT KOREAN CHRISTMAS

What could be more endearing than a roomful of cats in red-and-white Santa costumes, each complete down to a hood with a white bobble and a belt? This holiday season, come home to the cat cafe in Seoul where you can cuddle up to around 130 out... **Story on Page 19**

CELEBRITIES



CELEBRITY DEATHS FROM CORONAVIRUS

Showbiz – Charley Pride, the first black superstar of country music, died in Dallas on December 12, aged 86. Controversial film director Kim Ki-duk, the enfant terrible of Korean cinema, died the previous day aged 59. Bronx rapper Fred the Godson died aged 35 in April. British rapper Ty, 47, died in May. Also in May, Roy Horn, of Las Vegas magic legends Siegfried and Roy, died aged 75. Dave Greenfield of British punk band The Stranglers died in May at 71.



BY AL ANOOD AL WAHAIBI

It all began with Oryx, a girls football team in Muscat, founded in 2018 that was created after the passion, commitment and determination of a 19 years old girl, Malak al Zadjali.

"I started playing when I was 7 years old, I grew up with my male cousins and so they had a huge impact on the start of my football journey",

Malak says. I lived in Thailand with my family for almost five years, playing football during my stay there".

The challenge and journey started after coming back to Oman in 2017 when she did not know how to pursue her hobby of playing football like how she used to abroad.

With the help of her sister, Mazoon al Zadjali, a youth advocate and a motivational speaker, the journey started. First, by creating a page on a social media platform, Instagram. Then coming up

with a name for the team, and she picked the name "Oryx", the name was a reflection to females. A Google form was created for girls to sign up, where almost 180 girls signed up to join the team.

Malak faced several challenges, yet the biggest was to convince these girls to be committed to football, as she lacks the support of sponsors. However, with the administration team created and by working collaboratively together, it went as they planned for.

The admin team included Mazoon al Zadjali, Shifa al Sharji, Azza al Sharji, Alya al Busaidy, Alhanoun al Barwani, Arwa al Hinai, Maram al Said, and Husan al Musawi. They worked together to get the sponsorship they needed by approaching several clubs.

The next step faced is finding a football pitch and that was quite a minor challenge for the team. After searching, they could contact the marvelous Faris al Ismaili, who is coaching the team out of passion and voluntarily, along

with the sponsor from Muscat Club. Today, Muscat Women's Football Club is coached voluntarily by a male coach, Faris Ismaili, and a female coach, Ahlam al Marjbi, who is also a verified Fifa level coach.

"I took care of advertising for the team abroad through the social media means and also by connection with different academies and football organisations outside of Oman", Mazoon says.

After recently winning a Soccer Squad Photo Competition held by the

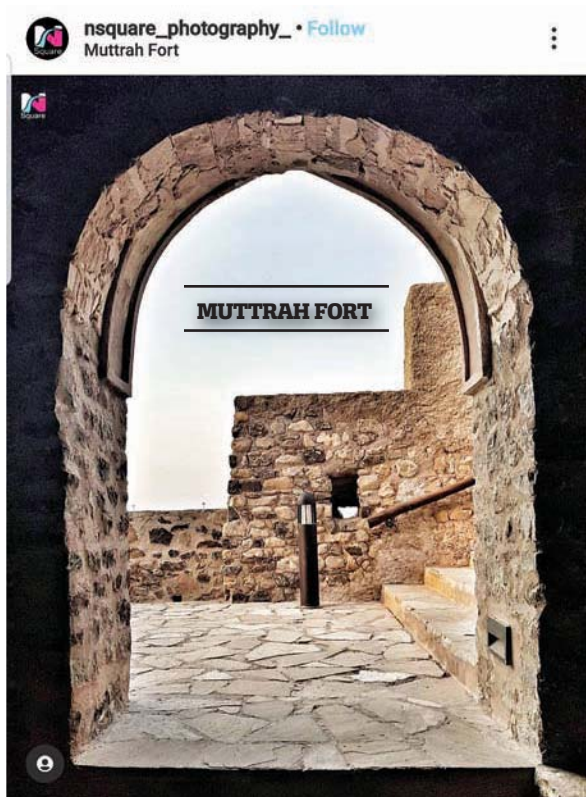
Women in Soccer organisation community, the team gained a good international reputation through profitable and non-profit football organisations outside of Oman.

Beside Malak's aim to be a professional football player, she also aims at being part of a positive change in women's football field here in Oman. "I want to build a future in football for the next generations. I want to be an inspirational entity for the next generations of footballers here in Oman.", Malak adds.



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OPERA

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Paris Opera singers go digital after COVID keeps theatres closed

Just five days before they were due to perform before a live audience for the first time in almost two months, the singers of the Paris Opera learned they could not re-open before January as France's coronavirus

cases remained stubbornly high. So they decided to film their performance of works by a young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and 18th century French composers Chevalier de Saint-Georges and Andre Gretry and offer it on a new video-on-demand portal



launched last week by the Opera de Paris, which runs the Garnier and the Bastille opera venues.

"Of course it is sad, but we're very lucky to be able to film this concert, especially because some pieces of music that will be played have never been recorded", said French soprano Pauline Texier.

France's government announced in November that a lockdown imposed at the end of October to tackle a second coronavirus wave would be partially lifted by December 15 and would include the re-opening of cultural venues.

But last Thursday Prime Minister Jean Castex said museums, cinemas and theatres would not re-open before at least the beginning of January as the target of keeping daily new infections below 5,000 had not been met.

"For me, it's really a shame that we currently cannot perform. Because we, as artists, are incomplete without the public", Fernando Escalona, a countertenor from Venezuela, said during the rehearsal.

People from the arts and entertainment world protested in Paris on Tuesday against the government's decision.

Castex said extra financial aid would be granted to artists and there would be a January 7 meeting to see if some reopening was possible.

Not being able to perform in front of an audience has "become the new normal", American bass Aaron Pendleton said.

"But we're still able to share our work and we're still able to work so we've been lucky to have that", he added. — Reuters

CHRISTMAS JOY

Rescue cats don Santa suits for purrfect Korean Christmas



WHAT COULD BE more endearing than a roomful of cats in red-and-white Santa costumes, each complete down to a hood with a white bobble and a belt?

This holiday season, come home to the cat cafe in Seoul where you can cuddle up to around 130 feline friends at tables decked out with tiny Christmas trees.

"Especially this year, it is hard to feel the festive atmosphere, but it was great to see cute cats wearing Santa suits and feel like Christmas is nearing," said 22-year-

staying at home, more people are adopting cats. But at the same time, more people abandon pets as the coronavirus situation worsens," said Park.

"Whenever I hear about such news, it really hurts me," Park added, urging those who adopt cats to take responsibility for them for their entire lives.

The Catgarden cafe itself has been hit this year by the coronavirus pandemic.

The cafe used to have about 100 visitors a day, but that has recently



old visitor Cha Seung-Ju. Park Seo-young opened the Catgarden cafe in 2016 to take in cats rescued off the streets or that were the subjects of failed adoptions, a situation that has worsened this year.

The number of abandoned pets increased by about 3.7 per cent in the first half of 2020 compared to the same period last year, according to South Korea's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

"With many people

dropped by about a third.

Visitors lucky enough to drop by during snack time get to interact with a long queue of cats feeding in the front yard, and some said that the furry animals helped them shake off the "corona blues".

A special feast is on the cards for the feline Santas over the festive period.

"On Christmas Day, I'm having a chicken breast party for my cats," Park said. — Reuters



QUEEN'S GAMBIT

DEJA-VU FOR HUNGARY CHESS CHAMP POLGAR

Watching the hit Netflix show "The Queen's Gambit" sparked déjà-vu for Hungarian chess great Judit Polgar, regarded as the game's best-ever female player.

Like the show's fictional heroine Beth, an orphaned chess prodigy, Polgar tackled not just opponents across the board but gender stereotypes in the male-dominated sport.

"I played all my life with male competitors, sometimes I was the only female player at a tournament," she said.

Now 44, Polgar became the youngest-ever international grandmaster aged 15, breaking US legend Bobby Fischer's record, and went on to beat a string of male world champions.

"The first grandmaster I beat

was hitting his head in the elevator after the game, another defeated opponent refused to shake hands and stormed away from the board," said Polgar.

Similar to "The Queen's Gambit" finale in which Beth overcomes Russian powerhouse Vasily Borgov, Polgar had her own tussle with Russia's Garry Kasparov, widely considered the finest player in history.

At the 1988 Chess Olympiad, Judit, then aged 12, and her older sisters Susan and Sofia helped Hungary win the women's gold, impressing the on looking Kasparov, who was world champion at the time.

But Kasparov, who had previously called Polgar a "circus puppet" and said women chess players should stick to having children, dismissed the idea of a woman ever beating the world's

number one.

"Women are not capable of handling that kind of pressure, so I'm almost sure it's impossible," he told Hungarian journalists then, according to Polgar.

Fourteen years later, however, the Hungarian got her revenge, beating Kasparov in Moscow in what she called a "historic moment".

"I had a déjà-vu feeling when watching Beth sitting opposite Borgov, tense and afraid, thinking that perhaps she could not handle it, this is what I felt against Kasparov," she said.

'NASTY LOOKS'

Long since reconciled with Kasparov — who was a technical adviser on "The Queen's Gambit" — Polgar said she particularly enjoyed the show's "attention to detail" although she considered some aspects of it "unrealistic".

Beth's struggles with addictions to pills and alcohol, "would make it near impossible to reach the top in modern chess," while sexism is more rife in chess than was depicted on screen, said Polgar.

"Girls for sure are going to be handling many more gender-based comments and nasty looks than Beth received," she said.

"Usually I didn't have very ugly situations, but there were times when they said: 'OK, she was just lucky,' so I had to prove myself more than if I were a boy," she added.

Polgar remembers her crowning achievement as finishing second in a prestigious tournament in the Netherlands in 2002, ahead of then world champion Vladimir Kramnik of Russia.

"That was the tournament of my life, to prove how good I can be," she said. — **AFP**