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VAT WILL NOT AFFECT COMMON MAN: EXPERTS
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1km zipline in Misfat al Abriyeen in pipeline

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In an effort to boost tourism in the country, Al Misfat al Ahlia will build the country's longest zipline in Misfat al Abriyeen in the wilayat of Hamra, Dakhliyah governorate.

Saeed al Abri, who is spearheading the project, informed *Muscat Daily* that the company recently signed an agreement with a private sector company to finance the zipline.

"The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism is the owner of the project site. Al Misfat al Ahlia is responsible to manage administration, operations and the technical aspects of the project which includes a 250m zipline for children and a 1,100m zipline for adults. It is expected to be implemented in 18 months," Abri said.

According to Abri, the project has already seen several hurdles. "It faced technical and administrative challenges which forced the company to change the location of the project resulting in delays. The company has convinced the people of the village about the viability of the project. We are coordinating with the



(Supplied photo)

Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning to prepare a technical survey of the site to acquire land for the project."

Abri informed that besides being an additional tourism attraction, the project will create job opportunities.

Al Misfat al Ahlia has also undertaken and completed a development plan for Misfat al Abriyeen to boost tourism in the area.

"Bank Muscat, in partnership with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and Al Misfat al Ahlia,

had launched a project to develop the area. The project included the development of the old Misfat village which was implemented by Al Misfat al Ahlia. It created a unique tourism experience focusing on the old village, highlighting Oman's tourism strategy based on a sustainable development model that benefits local communities and preservation of the country's environment and cultural heritage," Abri said.

He added that the main components of the development project included restoration of

the main gate of Misfat al Abriyeen and preserving its original features.

"The village's iconic mud houses were also restored, and a bakery and restaurant serving authentic Omani cuisine for tourists set up. The company completed the development of Misfat al Abriyeen in November 2020."

The village receives thousands of tourists every year. It currently has six hotels and heritage houses offering more than 70 rooms.

WHO warns of spike in cases in Ramadan

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The World Health Organization has expressed concern about the recent spike in COVID-19 cases in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. It has further warned that with Ramadan around the corner, 'there is a danger' of 'even more increases in cases and deaths' in the region.

Addressing a virtual press briefing on April 1, Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO's regional director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said, "It saddens me to report that we continue to see a worrying trend in the number cases across the Eastern Mediterranean Region."

There are several factors that could be associated with this increase of new cases. "Some of this increase can be accounted for by the increased circulation of the variants of concern, which we are monitoring closely. But more importantly, and despite countries' efforts to enforce various public health and social measures, we see people not adhering to those measures, which include physical distancing, wearing a face mask, hand hygiene, cleaning of hands, respiratory etiquette, avoiding crowded



There is a danger that we will continue to see even more increases in cases and deaths, as we did at the end of last year over the holiday period

DR AHMED AL MANDHARI

spaces, and opening windows," said Dr Mandhari.

He added that there is pandemic fatigue as people are exhausted and there is huge demand and pressure on everyone, including political leaders everywhere "to navigate our way out of this pandemic. But the reality is, the situation is not getting any better, and the trend we are seeing across many countries is worrying".

He warned of further rise in

new cases during Ramadan if precautions were not followed.

"There is a danger that we will continue to see even more increases in cases and deaths, as we did at the end of last year over the holiday period when people socialised more without respecting the public health advice. While we understand that these are important holidays worth celebrating, we urge you all to please continue to protect yourselves and others. And we urge all governments to provide the needed support that has shown its benefit over the last year."

Vaccine rollout

Dr Mandhari said that 20 countries are vaccinating their populations and more than 23mn doses have been administered so far in the region. "Twelve countries in the region have already received vaccines through the Covax facility, most recently Egypt and Yemen."

According to the WHO official, the global shortage of vaccines has led to delays in securing tens of millions of doses that Covax was counting on. "We are still concerned about vaccine inequity and uneven distribution across our region."

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MASERATI LEVANTE TROFEO 2020



(Syed Fasiuddin)

SPECS

ENGINE - 3.8-litre Twin Turbo V8

POWER - 590hp at 6,250 rpm

TORQUE - 730Nm at 2,500 - 5,000 rpm

ACCELERATION - 0-100kmph in 3.9 seconds

TOP SPEED - 304kmph



AN SUV THAT'S A FERRARI AT HEART

Tridwip K Das
Muscat

The Maserati Levante Trofeo 2020 has several firsts to its credit, the more significant among which are being the fastest and top-of-the-range Levante, and having the highest hp output per litre ever and the most powerful V8 in the history of the Trident.

Maserati vehicles are sold by Alfar-dan Motors in Oman. The Levante Trofeo made its world premiere at the 2018 New York International Auto Show and soon became the marque's best-selling car. This is, after all, a Trofeo - trophy in Italian. Trophy for being one of the fastest Maseratis, second only to the Quattroporte GTs.

Looks

Arguably the sleekest looking car in this segment, what makes it stand out is the fact that it's not muscled up like the other sloped-roof SUV 'coupes'. In side profile, its 22-inch wheels - the largest ever fitted in a Maserati - are unmistakable and a ready distinguisher in dual tone gunmetal gray with silver finishing, steel discs and coloured brake calipers.

Moving up, apparently this is the first Levante equipped with Full Matrix LED headlights, which are designed in straight slits.

Further up on the hood, there are two air vents leaving no room for any doubt what this car is built for or its capabilities. While the three vents on the side - signature trait of Maserati vehicles - are in place, a Trofeo logo has been mounted on the C-pillar to make doubly sure there is no mistaken identity.

Both rear and front doors are frameless - rather uncommon in an SUV - giving it another distinct feature. The rear windows have built-in sunshades for additional comfort.

It has several carbon fibre accents which are quite visible on the exterior, including front splitters and side skirts. There's a moderate size spoiler rolling off the roof with slits in it to channel air under it adding a sporty touch to its side profile.

At the back end, there's more carbon fibre in the rear diffuser and a chrome bar underlining the Maserati inscription. Exhausts with black mesh surrounds add to the uncluttered elegance in the rear.

Interiors

Inside, there are endless swathes of lush leather contrasted against uncoated - 3D - carbon fibre presenting a very textural feel throughout the cabin. The contrasting materials accentuate the black and red theme of the dashboard.

Encased in red Pieno Fiore leather with perforations and accented stitching, the seats are firm yet comfortable - the kind a chiropractor would probably approve. There are perforated leather grips on the steering wheel at 3 and 9 o'clock too.

An analogue clock mounted near the central speaker unit takes pride of place on the dash. Analogue speedometer and tachometer project out of a TFT centre display that presents all the drive information. The centre console with touch screen Maserati sat nav sits between two vertical air vents below which are controls for a two-zone climate system.

Further down, all encased in black leather or carbon fibre are the gear stick, drive mode selector, a storage space with USB, SD card and auxiliary port, two cup holders and cigarette

lighter, and a deep storage space under a very comfortable lower centre console arm rest. The glove box in black leather finish also has voluminous storage with additional charging and USB ports.

Adding more tactile texture to the cabin, there is black Alcantara in the headliner extending to the panoramic sunroof.

Probably owing to the marque's Fiat Chrysler Automobiles owners, the infotainment system and buttons feel like those in other FCA vehicles.

Fitted with adjustable latches, there's 20.5 cubic feet of cargo space behind the rear seats. The button to close the tailgate is on the bottom left in the cargo haul rather than on the gate itself.

Infotainment system

A Maserati Touch Control Plus infotainment system with 8.4-inch touchscreen and rotary knob sits in the centre console. Among others, it displays a 360° surround view camera system, very useful in such a luxury car so you won't scrap anything. The infotainment system can also be controlled

via a layered cake control - near the gear stick - the top knob of which adjusts volume and lower one to control settings.

The Levante Trofeo is equipped with a 17-speaker 1,280-watt Bowers & Wilkins premium surround sound audio system, but driving itself will be so engaging that it's unlikely that you'll ever need any other entertainment even on long drives.

How it feels to drive

Like any other petrol Maserati engine, the Levante Trofeo 2020's 3.8-litre V8 was developed in cooperation with Ferrari and produces 590hp at 6,250rpm and 730Nm peak torque at 2,500 - 5,000rpm. The car's performance is aided by an eight-speed automatic transmission that shifts quickly and smoothly with no perceptible surges or sags. The engine's eagerness will encourage you to drive hard.

Its Q4 Intelligent All-Wheel-Drive is designed to deliver 100 per cent of the torque to the rear wheels in normal driving conditions. However, on loss of traction at the rear, the Q4 can alter the front/rear torque ratio from 0:100 to

50:50 in milliseconds.

Adding to the Levante Trofeo's groundedness and agility are Limited-Slip Differential and torque-vectoring function. While executing highspeed cornering on the twisty Yiti-Humriya road, the system distributes more torque to the outer wheels by applying a slight braking force to the inner wheels so it never feels out of control.

Its engine sound is unique for a V8. It's a luxury car, so you can't hear the engine inside due to insulation. Turbo mutes all of the exhaust notes in cars in this segment, which isn't the case here. Stand outside and ask someone to rev the engine - it sounds like a highly tuned instrument even when fired in normal drive mode.

Its other drive modes are Speed, Corsa - 'race' in Italian - and ICE (Increased control and efficiency), which is comfort mode in any other car. Curiously, Speed and Corsa are activated by the same button on the central console cluster. Corsa mode, which significantly lowers the car, is activated by holding down the Sport/Corsa button a little longer.

Suspension is soft affording a plush ride even over the worst potholes in Darsait despite those 22-inch wheels. The suspension can also be independently controlled via a button located near the gear stick.

While being a grand tourer in ride quality, it's a great commuter vehicle and a Ferrari at heart. It's car in an identity crisis. All the same, the Maserati Levante Trofeo 2020 is a performance SUV built for the sole purpose of enjoyment.

@TridwipKumar

Fried Series

- Boil noodles in boiling water (400ml) for 3 minutes
- Mix the Seasonings into a serving bowl while noodles are being cooked
- Take out noodles from water and drain well
- Put the noodles into the serving bowl and mix it well

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VAT WILL NOT AFFECT THE COMMON MAN, SAY TAX EXPERTS



In an effort to address the concerns of people on Value Added Tax (VAT), tax experts have said that the new tax that is coming into force in Oman on April 16 will not affect the common man as most essentials and daily-need items are either zero-rated or exempted. Oman will apply VAT of five per cent on most goods and services, with the exception of essential food items, healthcare, education and financial services. The introduction of VAT is also in line with the sultanate's commitment to the Oman Vision 2040 programme, which aims to diversify the economy away from oil towards non-oil sectors such as logistics, manufacturing and tourism. Following the announcement on VAT, many members of the public reacted negatively saying it will affect common people. **Shaddad al Musalmy** spoke with tax experts who said that the rate in Oman is low compared to the rest of the world.



DAVIS KALLUKARAN
Managing partner, Crowe Oman

Oman has one of the lowest rates of taxation at just five per cent. The beauty of Oman's VAT regime is that it hardly affects the common man. Oman joins a group of 166 countries out of 193 United Nations full member countries in the introduction of VAT. However, most food items, medicines, healthcare, education, financial service charges, local passenger transport, renting and sale of residential properties and more are either zero-rated or exempted. It is estimated that VAT will contribute about RO400mn to the tax revenue of the government which will in the long run wipe off the deficit and move the country to the comfort zone.



PAUL CALLAGHAN
Partner, Moore Oman

As basic foodstuffs, vital services and other necessities are to be zero-rated or exempted, there will not be much effect. Additionally, the rate is low at five per cent (other countries such as UK have 20 per cent VAT). The other benefits, in addition to more revenue expected for the government, is that introduction of VAT is likely to be viewed positively by important organisations such as the IMF and World Bank, potentially facilitating them to provide more assistance to the sultanate. Clearly, where VAT impacts adversely on social welfare households of citizens, the Oman authorities will seek to mitigate the effects on them directly.



SALAH AL MUSALLAMI
Audit executive director, Talal Abu Ghazaleh Global

The good thing is that all the essential goods and services are either zero-rated or exempted. All essential food items - as per a list published by ministry, 94 items - are zero-rated. Medical services, education, public transport, etc are exempted fully. And to promote industry and export, there is zero rate on export. Overall, there is not much impact of VAT on the general public, yet the government will generate extra revenue which will be used for infrastructure and development work. I believe we all need to welcome this move for the future development of the country and public at large.



UBALDO TRIPOLI
Partner, Kearney Middle East

The impact of introducing VAT in Oman is aligned with realising the sultanate's strategy of achieving fiscal balance. The increased government revenues from VAT can be reinvested, creating opportunities for infrastructural development and employment. This will result in economic growth, increased foreign direct investments and betterment in the welfare of citizens and residents. Furthermore, the increased level of transparency it brings to the economy will boost competitiveness and strengthen growth strategies in corporate and government ventures. The benefits greatly outweigh the impact on purchasing power.



SHILPA PAWANI
Head of Transaction Advisory Services, HC Shah Chartered Accountants

Oman has largely been an oil-based economy. However, due to global changes in the oil sector and mushrooming of alternate energy sources, there is a need to support the economy. VAT is not new and uncommon. Many countries have implemented VAT to support their economies. Moreover, the rate of VAT in Oman is significantly lower or at par with other nations. Introduction of VAT has been carefully studied and implemented to ensure that necessities like healthcare, education and a wide range of everyday food requirements are either exempted or fall in zero per cent category.



RAJEEV R DUBEY
VAT expert, Talal Abu Ghazaleh Global

The rate of VAT in Oman is five per cent and some essential items are zero-rated. The government has announced 94 zero-rated items which is great relief for the general public. Almost all essential goods are zero-rated and other essential services like medical, education, public transport, etc are exempted fully. Additionally, to promote export and boost business, there is zero VAT for export of goods and services. Overall, there will not be much impact on the public while the government will generate some extra revenue which will be used for overall infrastructure development. We should all welcome this for the economic growth of the country.

8th Fak Kurbah launched to help release imprisoned debtors

Muscat - The Omani Lawyers Association on Thursday launched the eighth edition of Fak Kurbah under the theme 'For we believe that a person deserves a second chance'. The initiative helps raise funds to pay off debts of those imprisoned due to financial claims resulting from civil, commercial, legal or labour cases. This year the endeavour is to help release a greater number of prisoners than what was achieved during the previous editions by promoting the initiative on social media platforms. The launch of the latest edition of the initiative commenced with the presentation of a video in which H E Laila Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development, stressed the importance of such humanitarian initiatives that have a role in promoting the



Dr Mohammed Ibrahim al Zadjali

values of social solidarity, consolidating community cohesion, and deepening human and national values of cooperation for the best public interest.

Success and conditions
The Fak Kurbah initiative, in its seventh edition, has managed to help release 797 prisoners, including 84 women, from different governorates of the sultanate. More than

RO641,000 was paid for their release. The initiative stipulates that whoever it benefits should be imprisoned or against whom a detention order has been issued, who has not benefited before from the initiative during its previous editions, and that the amount required to be paid for release is related to a civil, commercial, legal or labour case, as the initiative does not cover criminal cases. It also stipulates that it does not exceed an amount of RO2,000. The cases that meet the conditions are selected from the General Administration of Execution Affairs at the Administrative Affairs Council of the Judiciary, and requests from the case owners themselves are not accepted. Dr Mohammed Ibrahim al Zadjali, supervisor of the Fak

Kurbah initiative, said, "We feel extremely happy of what has been achieved by the initiative during its previous editions, and we aspire this year that this initiative will contribute to the return of many detainees in cases with financial claims to their families before Eid al Fitr. We believe that a person always deserves another opportunity to start over and try to overcome the frustrations of the past." He added, "In the future, the Omani Lawyers Association aspires to transform this humanitarian initiative into a sustainable project that works throughout the year through its own administrative staff." In its eighth edition, Fak Kurbah will continue until May 31 and take advantage of social media platforms to create awareness about it.

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MUSCAT DAILY

Commuters urge early morning start of Mwasalat bus service

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Mwasalat bus passengers say they have been adversely affected by the reduced service hours of the national transport company.

With the night lockdown, bus services have been cancelled until morning. Unlike last time when airport buses were running throughout, currently all routes, including airport services, do not function between 7.30pm and 5am.

Though stringent measures have been taken in accordance with the decisions of the Supreme Committee to curb the spread of the virus, some people say stopping bus services altogether and alongside a late start is tough on them as they usually rely on Mwasalat buses.

Vikhas Raghu, a PR consultant, said, "The buses from Ruwi used to start services from 6am on various routes including Ma'a-



bela, Amerat, Muttrah, Wadi Kabir and Airport. But now they start only at 7.30am. Many people are dependent on morning buses, mainly those who travel long distance to work in areas like Mawaleh and Sohar. Others who have been affected are the ones looking to travel to the airport."

For many, availing cabs is expensive, while a bus ride to the airport costs only RO1.

Many suggest that bus serv-

ices should start early.

Mohammad Robi Alam, a Bangladeshi expatriate, said, "The lockdown ends at 5am and the bus services resume at 7.30am. This is somewhat astonishing; the services should start at least by 6am. There are people whose work starts by 8am and they need to start from Ruwi early. This delay affects our work."

His friend Babu added that

stopping bus services is a setback. "If we are talking about precautions, over the last few months, the bus company had taken ample measures including regular sanitisation and social distancing. Two people are not allowed to sit together and masks are mandatory."

An official of Mwasalat said the services are on hold during early hours till April 8 as part of precautionary measures.

Oman uses its diplomatic power to push for FDI

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry, organised a virtual meeting with Oman's ambassadors in Europe, the Americas and Central Asia to promote investment in the sultanate. It was the third high-profile meeting aimed at pushing for new foreign direct investment (FDI) into the sultanate.

Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthi, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, stressed the importance of such meetings in introducing economic developments, investment laws and facilities provided by the sultanate to investors.

"This will contribute to bring-



Asila bint Salim al Samsami

ing more investors in various sectors to the sultanate," he said, praising the role played by Oman's embassies in promoting the investment sector in the country and strengthening ties of cooperation between Oman and the countries of the world.

Asila bint Salim al Samsami, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in MoCIIP, referred to the blessing of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for the approval of the economic stimulus

plan, which will contribute to stimulating the investment environment in the sultanate.

She said the plan includes many improved business environment incentives to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the national economy.

She added that these meetings come in line with Oman Vision 2040, and in the belief of the MoCIIP in the importance of integrated work between various government agencies to promote the investment sector in the sultanate and to attract and encourage businesses to invest and promote Omani products in global markets. The previous meeting was held on March 10 with 21 Omani ambassadors in the GCC, Arab and African countries, while the first one took place on February 9 with 15 ambassadors in Asian countries.



Muttrah Souq's handcarts enliven old-world charm

Muscat - One of Muscat's most iconic tourist locations, Muttrah Souq also provides livelihood to many. Spice merchants, antiques sellers, knick-knack shops and street vendors are an integral part of the souq's old-world charm and attraction.

A five-month closure in 2020 owing to COVID-19 restrictions did little to diminish its draw not just as a tourist hub but shopping destination, too.

The bustling traditional market also affords opportunities to daily-wage earners to offer services not seen in modern malls.

Nizar ul Islam lost his livelihood when his coffee shop closed down; he lived without work for months. When the souq re-opened in August, he started plying a different trade - transporting items on a handcart, known as *arbana*, for shoppers in the souq.

Pointing at his cart loaded with a mandoo box, a carton and plastic bags, Islam said, "Imagine a shopper having to carry all these from a shop in the souq to their car parked at least

Imagine a shopper having to carry all these from a shop in the souq to their car parked at least a kilometre, may be even 2km, away. Parking is never easily available near the souq

NIZAR UL ISLAM

a kilometre, may be even 2km, away. Parking is never easily available near the souq."

The narrow lanes in the vicinity, which are not accessible by car, make the handcarts a lifeline for shop owners and a much-needed service for shoppers.

Islam sourced funds from Bangladesh to pay his sponsor the visa renewal fee. "It is not feasible for me to go back home and start afresh. That is why I have taken a loan and hope things will settle down soon."

Al Ameen started plying a handcart in the souq some years ago when his employer didn't clear his salary for over a year. He decided to quit and start operating a handcart service for shoppers in the souq.

"The first thing some shoppers do when they come to the souq is hire a handcart, asking us to follow them while they shop. We carry the items they purchase, load these on our carts and take their shopping to their vehicle," Ameen said.

Like most other businesses, the pandemic has affected Ameen's earnings too. Since the souq reopened, his daily earnings have dropped to half as fewer people are visiting the souq.

"Some are hesitant to hire us for fear of the virus," he said.

"When shoppers approach us, we never demand a fixed price or bargain or ask how long they'll take to shop. We just follow the shopper patiently and after loading their shopping in their car, we happily accept whatever they pay," Islam said. (Photo and text Syed Fasiuddin)

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OCE suspends issuing permits to visit nature reserves

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a move to curb the spread of COVID-19, the Office for Conservation of the Environment (OCE) at the Diwan of Royal Court has announced that it will suspend issuing electronic permits to visit nature reserves in the sultanate.

A statement issued by OCE read, 'The office will stop issuing electronic permits to visit nature reserves until further notice as part of the measures to confront the outbreak of coronavirus.'

The office confirmed that it will stop issuing permits for some reserves such as the Wildlife Reserve in Al Wusta, Wadi Sireen Reserve, Ras al Shajar Nature Reserve, Al Khuwayr Nature Reserve and Khor Salalah Reserve.

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S&P affirms Oman's sovereign ratings, keeps outlook stable

Economic and fiscal pressures on Oman to ease from 2021: S&P

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Standard and Poor's (S&P) Global Ratings has affirmed its 'B+/B' long and short-term foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings on Oman and maintained its stable outlook on the sultanate's ratings.

'We affirmed our ratings on Oman because we consider that the authorities have outlined a more solid path to reduce the historically-high fiscal deficits, backed by stronger political will to implement the related reform measures. The Omani government has embarked on a 2021-2025 fiscal plan to improve public finances and has implemented several reforms since last year,' S&P noted in a statement issued on Friday.

The world's biggest credit rating agency said it expects economic and fiscal pressure on Oman to ease from this year, as the effects of the sharp drop in oil prices in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic abate.

'The stable outlook balances the still-considerable fiscal and external pressures on Oman over the next 12 months, against the government's reasonably high fiscal buffers. We expect the increase in government net debt to remain elevated through 2024, but it should decelerate relative to 2020, on the back of higher oil prices and the govern-



ment's fiscal reform plan,' S&P said.

However, S&P projects that Oman government's balance sheet will continue to weaken, and that net government debt will rise to 35 per cent of GDP by 2024, from about 14 per cent in 2020.

'Even though fiscal imbalances will decline compared with 2020, Oman faces large external debt maturities of US\$10.9bn over 2021-2022. Given its small domestic capital markets, we expect Oman to rely on external debt to fund its government deficits and maturing debt,' the ratings agency said.

S&P noted that the reform momentum has picked up in Oman and changes to governance, economic, and fiscal policies have been announced. 'In our view, the government is responding more robustly to fiscal challenges than it had previously.'

Economic outlook

According to S&P, the economic activity in Oman will start to pick up in 2021, following an estimated contraction of nearly 6 per cent last year. Despite ongoing oil production limits under the OPEC+ agreement, the ratings agency expects some

growth in volumes to occur in condensates that are not covered under the OPEC+ quotas and through higher gas production in Oman.

S&P expects Oman's real GDP to recover slowly by 1.3 per cent this year and then accelerate to 5.2 per cent in 2022 as oil production ramps up after OPEC+ production limits are lifted. 'The rebound in non-oil sector growth will be supported by higher oil prices, to some extent, and by the recovery in global demand. That said, we see downside risks to our forecasts from pandemic-related restrictions and a slower-than-ex-

pected global economic recovery.'

S&P said it could raise ratings on Oman if the country's planned fiscal reforms reduce the accumulation and stock of net government debt over the medium term, or if growth prospects improve significantly more than it expects. It added, 'We could consider lowering the rating if we saw significant risks to fiscal reform implementation, which could signal reduced government capability and willingness to maintain sustainable public finances, and result in external financing needs increasing beyond our current expectations.'

Oman's medium-term fiscal plan, released late in 2020, aims to achieve a significant narrowing of deficits over the next four years and a small surplus by 2025.

Commenting on the sultanate's medium-term fiscal plan, S&P said, 'We expect fiscal deficits will average about 4 per cent of GDP over 2021-2022 and increase to slightly above 5 per cent over 2023-2024, based on our assumption that oil prices will decrease by US\$5 per barrel over this period. That said, deficits are substantially lower than in the past six years, reflecting a combination of higher oil prices over 2021-2022, accounting changes, and the fiscal reforms.'



OQ signs deal to sell entire BORL stake to BPCL

Our Correspondent
Muscat

OQ, Oman's integrated energy company, has signed a share purchase agreement with India's state-run Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) to sell its entire 36.62 per cent stake in Bharat Oman Refineries Limited (BORL) for ₹24bn (approximately RO126mn).

'A share purchase agreement has been signed on March 31, 2021 between BPCL and OQ for BPCL's acquisition of 36.62 per cent of equity shares in BORL from OQ for a consideration of ₹23.99bn,' BPCL said in a disclosure filed to the Bombay Stock Exchange.

BORL owns and operates Bina Refinery, located at Bina in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India. Built as a joint venture between India's BPCL and the sultanate's Oman Oil Company (now OQ), the 6mn tonnes per year Bina Refinery was commissioned in May 2011. The capacity of the refin-

ery was further increased to 7.8mn tonnes per year in 2018.

Earlier in December 2020, OQ had said that it was in discussions with BPCL to divest its stake in BORL.

Confirming the signing of the share purchase agreement with BPCL, OQ on its official Twitter handle said, 'To help drive our businesses towards creating better value from local and international investment portfolio, we signed a share purchase agreement with BPCL to sell our 36.62 per cent share in Bharat Oman Refineries Limited.'

OQ said this divestment is part of a portfolio rationalisation exercise aiming to create better value from its local and international investments.

BPCL was holding a majority 63.38 per cent of equity shares in BORL while OQ owned remaining 36.62 per cent equity shares in BORL. Upon completion of the transaction with OQ, BPCL will hold 100 per cent of equity share capital in BORL.

OPEC+ approves only modest oil output increases from May

London, UK - Oil producing countries grouped together under the OPEC+ alliance led by Saudi Arabia and Russia agreed on Thursday to only limited output increases as of next month.

In a statement issued after the meeting, the ministers noted 'improvements in the market supported by global vaccination programmes and stimulus packages in key economies'.

However, they also noted 'the



volatility observed in recent weeks warrants a continued cautious and vigilant approach in

monitoring market developments'.

Kazakhstan's Energy Ministry said that a decision was taken to collectively increase output by OPEC+ countries by 350,000 barrels per day (bpd) in May, 350,000 bpd in June and 450,000 bpd in July.

Under its current agreement, the OPEC+ group - made up of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies

including Russia - is enforcing drastic cuts in production, meaning 7mn barrels that could be shipped to markets every day are being left in the ground.

Addressing reporters after the meeting, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman stressed that the decision could still be 'tweaked' in the alliance's monthly meetings.

Before the meeting Prince Abdulaziz said that 'the reality re-

mains that the global picture is far from even, and the recovery is far from complete'.

'And until the evidence of the recovery is undeniable, we should maintain this cautious stance.'

Prince Abdulaziz praised the OPEC+ alliance nations for more than fulfilling their current commitments to restrain output.

The cuts were aimed at avoiding limited storage capacity

being saturated and supporting prices.

While Saudi officials urged caution about opening up the taps too much too fast, their Russian counterparts expressed optimism, both before and after the meeting.

'Today, there are figures that are much more positive concerning the market, including the level of stocks which have considerably fallen as demand in-

creases,' Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Rossiya 24 television following the meeting.

'Vaccination is already yielding positive results so that demand is recovering,' he added.

While acknowledging uncertainty remains, Novak said 'We're optimistic about the future.' AFP

Canal Authority says Suez backlog cleared

Cairo, Egypt - Egypt's Suez Canal Authority (SCA) said on Saturday that a shipping traffic jam caused by a giant container vessel getting stuck on the crucial waterway for almost a week has been cleared.

Traffic on the canal, a conduit for over 10 per cent of world trade, had begun moving again on Monday evening after the 200,000-tonne MV Ever Given was refloated with the help of international salvage experts.

'All the ships waiting in the waterway since the grounding of the... (MV) Ever Given have completed passage,' SCA chief Osama Rabie said in a statement by the canal authority.

The wedging of the Japanese-owned, Taiwanese-operated ship had created tailbacks to the north and south totalling over 420 ships, with billions of dollars-worth of cargo.

Rabie has acknowledged that the blockage, which began when the ship veered off course in a sandstorm, left Egypt's international shipping and wider reputation on the line.

Egyptian authorities have presented the freeing of the megaship as a vindication of the country's engineering and salvage capabilities.



A container ship navigates Egypt's Suez Canal on Tuesday, a day after the MV Ever Given cargo vessel was dislodged from its banks (AFP)

'Ninety-nine per cent' of personnel who worked to refloat the giant vessel were Egyptian, according to Rabie.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi has pledged investment to ensure no repeat of the episode, and the SCA has called for new tugboats and dredgers are needed.

Maritime data company Lloyd's List said the blockage had held up an estimated US\$9.6bn worth of cargo each day between Asia and Europe.

The canal is economically vital to Egypt, which lost between US\$12 and US\$15mn in revenues

for each day the waterway was closed, according to the canal authority. Nearly 19,000 ships navigated the canal in 2020, working out an average of just over 50 per day, it says.

But the President and port authority have ruled out any further widening of the southern stretch of the canal where the boat became diagonally stuck.

Sisi oversaw an expansion of a northern section, which included widening an existing stretch and introducing a 35km parallel waterway, to much fanfare in 2014-15.

But that was achieved at a

cost of over US\$8bn, without significantly increasing revenues from the canal.

The Suez Canal earned Egypt just over US\$5.7bn in 2019/20, little changed from the year before, and similar to the US\$5.3bn in revenues earned back in 2014.

'Economically... [further expansion] would not be useful,' Sisi declared this week.

The costly blockage is likely to result in litigation, according to analysts, with the ship's Japanese owners, Taiwanese operators and Egypt itself all under the microscope.

AFP

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MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

Ex-dividend stocks continue to weigh on MSM

The MSM30 index, the benchmark index of the Muscat Securities Market, ended last week down by 0.31 per cent as ex-dividend stocks continued to weigh on the market performance during the week.

The Financial index receded 0.12 per cent, Services index was up 0.07 per cent and Industrial index was higher by 0.46 per cent. The MSM Shariah index lost 0.87 per cent during the week.

Local news

►Oman Cables Industry Company announced that a court verdict has been issued in its favour by the first-degree court in Qatar, obligating a company (Imperial Trading & Contracting Co) to pay an amount of QR14.274mn (approximately RO1.5mn) as outstanding amounts, in addition to QR1mn (RO105,000) as compensation for damages. The court verdict is subject to appeal by any parties within a period of thirty days.

►ACWA Power announced an update regarding its RO (Reverse Osmosis) plants beyond 2021. Subsequent to the disclosure made on November 24, 2020, the company has been appearing before the Appeals Court for subsequent hearings of the case through its legal counsel and appeared for the final hearing on March 28, 2021. The company understands that the Appeals Court has issued an unfavourable decision and

have dismissed the appeal of the company. ACWA Power is working with its legal counsel to obtain the full text of the judgment to understand the basis of the unfavourable judgment and to plan next course of action.

►United Power Company announced that it has received the CMA's preliminary approval for conversion of the legal form of the company from SAOG to SAOC. The company on completion of the remaining procedures will call an extraordinary general meeting to approve the conversion.

►Oman Fisheries Company announced the final outcome of the appeal filed in the Administrative Court regarding the fish dumped in 2017. The court ruled in the session to pay the sum amounting to RO141,200 to the company as compensation and the expense for the lawsuit.

►Oman Arab Bank's annual general meeting (AGM) approved the issuance of Basel III compliant additional tier-1 capital securities of up to RO97mn, in one or more tranches and to be listed on international exchange.

►Fitch Ratings has affirmed Oman Electricity Transmission Company's (OETC) long-term foreign and local currency issuer default rating (IDR) at 'BB-'. The outlook is negative. The senior unsecured rating of the bonds issued by its subsidiaries has also been affirmed at 'BB-'. The rating affirmation is



(Muscat Daily)

supported by OETC's stable earnings profile and its dominant share of Ebitda from regulated electricity transmission over price-control period five (2019-2022), ending December 2022. This is despite its expected negative free cash flow over the next three years, due to higher capital expenditure and dividends. The ratings and outlook remain constrained by that of Oman (BB-/Negative).

►The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) announced the new issue of government development bonds issue number 67. The size of the new issue is at RO100mn (with an option to increase the size) with a maturity period of seven years and will carry a coupon rate of 5.50 per cent per annum. The issue will be open for subscription from

April 4 to 19 while the auction will be held on April 20. The issue settlement date will be on April 22. Interest on the new bonds will be paid semi-annually on October 22 and April 22 every year until the maturity date on April 22, 2028.

►Oman's daily average oil production decreased to 949,600 barrels per day (bpd) in February this year compared to 958,500 bpd recorded in the previous month. The sultanate's daily average output for full year 2020 stood at 950,700 bpd. The sultanate's total oil output during the first two months (January-February) of this year declined by 1.9 per cent to 56.301mn barrels against 57.415mn barrels in the same period of 2020, according to statistics released by the Na-

tional Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). While crude oil production plunged by 11.7 per cent to 43.07mn barrels during the January-February period of 2021 from 48.769mn barrels in the corresponding period of last year, the production of condensates jumped by 53 per cent to 13.23mn barrels during the same period.

GCC markets

Saudi Arabia's biggest listed companies have agreed to reduce their dividends and redirect the money into the local economy as the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman looks to get his economic overhaul plan back on track. Twenty-four firms including oil giant Saudi Aramco, Saudi Basic Industries Corp, Almarai Co, Saudi Tele-

com Co and National Shipping Co have agreed to join the plan, contributing SAR5tn (US\$1.33tn) of domestic capital spending over the next ten years. The SAR5tn from private firms is part of a SAR27tn plan Prince Mohammed announced on Tuesday, outlining a slew of planned investments over the next ten years.

The Saudi central government spending will account for around SAR10tn over the same period, while the sovereign wealth fund previously announced that it plans to invest SAR3tn on top of that, he said. Another SAR4tn from the ten-year plan will come from private investments in a not-yet-announced national investment strategy, while the final SAR5tn investment will come from ordinary consumer spending. Overall, 90 per cent of the SAR27tn investment plan will come from within Saudi Arabia: The government, the private sector, and the people. Around SAR2tn is expected to come from foreign investment, including regional investors as well as Western and Asian investors. That would translate to more than US\$50bn of foreign investment per year, compared to US\$4.6bn in 2019.

Saudi Arabia's stock exchange, has widened access to short-selling and stock-lending, while tightening other rules related to the activities. As of March 25, all eligible investors in the Saudi market are permit-

ted to sell any stock short, Tadawul said in a statement on the bourse website. However, new rules stipulate that the short ratio to average daily traded volume of any security should not exceed ten days and total net short positions must not exceed 10 per cent of the free float. Refinements have also been made to collateral rules for those lending and borrowing securities. The changes were made to develop a regulatory environment consistent with the international best practices and to provide a 'motivating and competitive atmosphere with high reliability', Tadawul said in the statement.

Recommendation

In the US markets, investors were focused on the economic impact of President Joe Biden's more than US\$2tn plan to build up America's infrastructure and what that would mean for equities.

Within the GCC, markets were more focused on Saudi trillion dollar plan. Following the announcement, Saudi stock market was up 2.8 per cent next day. We believe that the Saudi market has moved towards growth driven by trillion dollar investment plan of the government over the next ten years.

Locally in Oman, the mood will shift from dividend season to the first quarter earnings. Until that time the trading values and volumes will be subdued.

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President Biden hails US COVID recovery as employment surges

Washington, US – US President Joe Biden celebrated a massive rebound in US jobs on Friday as a sign of hope 'at long last' that the end of the pandemic is within sight, with businesses reopening nationwide and vaccine access quickly opening up.

New Labor Department data showing the economy regained 916,000 jobs in March come as a boon to millions of Americans facing financial ruin - but also lay bare the deep scars left by more than a year of shutdowns and restrictions due to COVID-19.

"We still have a long way to go to get our economy back on track after the worst economic and job crisis in nearly a century," the President said in a televised address.

"But my message to the American people is this: Help is here. Opportunity is coming. And at long last, there's hope for so many families."

The increase in jobs was the biggest since August, with nearly a third of the gains in the hard-hit leisure and hospitality sector, the Labor Department reported.

The rise in hiring pushed the unemployment rate down to 6 per cent from 6.2 per cent in February.

However, even as the economy begins to recover from the COVID-19 shutdowns, employment is still 8.4mn jobs lower than the pre-pandemic peak, the report said.

The gain in nonfarm payrolls, which far exceeded the consensus estimate among economists, reflects the accelerating recovery as vaccinations become more widely available, as well as the injection of more government stimulus which sent cash to most households and expanded sup-



US President Joe Biden speaks about the March jobs report in the White House in Washington, DC on Friday (AFP)

My message to the American people is this: Help is here. Opportunity is coming. And at long last, there's hope for so many families

JOE BIDEN

port to businesses.

And with upward revisions to hiring in the first two months of 2021, employment in January and February combined was 156,000 higher than previously reported, the report said.

Speaking from the White House, Biden said the gains in February and March mean the United States 'has seen more new jobs created in the first two months in any administration in history'.

While acknowledging the work still to be done, he credited a massive US\$2tn infrastructure plan he unveiled earlier last

week, which he said would create 19mn jobs over eight years while restoring US roads, bridges, ports and broadband Internet.

The Labor Department report showed hiring was widespread in manufacturing, construction and education, but leisure and hospitality which bore the brunt of the shutdowns topped the list, regaining 280,000 - 176,000 of those in restaurants and bars.

Labor Secretary Marty Walsh credited 'good economic policy but also a competent vaccination plan'.

And, "A lot more people are getting more confident in coming back into the workforce," Walsh said on Fox Business.

Labor economist Diane Swonk of Grant Thornton one of the few who accurately predicted the blockbuster report, pointed to 'the lifting of restrictions on indoor venues and a surge in spring break travel'.

But the figures showed the white women were the biggest winners last month, with nearly half a million returning to work.

"Young mothers who have little to no access to child care returned en masse to the labour force as schools reopened," Swonk said.

Remaining scars

But the data show lasting damage from the pandemic: Black unemployment remains little changed at 9.6 per cent, and average hourly earnings fell by four cents to US\$29.96, reflecting rehiring of lower wage workers who bring down the average.

In addition, there are nearly 6mn more workers now than before the pandemic who either are working part time because they cannot find a full time position, or are on the sidelines because they have not been able to find work, the report said.

With all of those workers included the unemployment rate is 10.7 per cent, compared to 7 per cent in February 2020.

Robert Frick of Navy Federal Credit Union said the data offered 'clues of problems we'll face in the future... Foreshadowing that moving millions of Americans back into the labor force will be an issue in the drive to return to pre-pandemic employment levels'.

But Nancy Vanden Houten of Oxford Economics predicted good times ahead, saying the economy 'is poised for an impressive run in the coming months as the combination of expanding vaccine distribution and generous fiscal stimulus leads to a hiring spurt'.

Oxford is predicting a gain of 7.5mn jobs in 2021 with the unemployment rate falling to 4.3 per cent.

AFP

Taiwan's TSMC plans \$100bn investment to meet chips demand

Taipei, Taiwan - Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) said it was planning to invest US\$100bn over the next three years to meet soaring demand as a global shortage of chips hits the auto and other industries.

The announcement came after US chip titan Intel unveiled plans to spend US\$20bn building two new plants in Arizona as part of a plan to boost production at home and in Europe.

Intel's move comes as countries and companies in those regions look to reduce reliance on plants in Asia for semiconductors, which are used in a growing array of products such as cars.

Taiwanese high-tech chip foundries are some of the world's biggest and most ad-



pected to fuel strong demand for our semiconductor technologies in the next several years,' it said in a statement.

'In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic also accelerates digitalisation in every aspect.'

The company has said the auto industry was a top priority but warned its factories were already operating at full capacity.

Semiconductor shortages, caused by supply chain priorities changing because of the coronavirus pandemic, have forced some major auto manufacturers to suspend production lines.

Shortages also appear to be spreading to a wide range of electronic items, including smartphones, games consoles, tablets and laptops.

AFP

'Dubai consumer confidence up'

Dubai, UAE - The first quarter of 2021 saw consumer confidence in Dubai rising to its highest level since the second quarter of 2015, according to the Consumer Confidence Index released by Dubai Economy. The index recorded 145 points in the first quarter of 2021, compared to 139 points during the same period of the previous year, and 142 points in the fourth quarter of 2020.

Mohammed Ali Rashed Lootah, CEO of the commercial compliance and consumer protection (CCCCP) sector in Dubai Economy, stated that the Consumer Confidence Index has risen mainly driven by improvements in personal finance conditions of consumers.

Lootah said, "Consumers expressing optimism on their personal finance conditions during the first three months of this year



have increased to 77 per cent, compared to 70 per cent during the last quarter of 2020. Optimism on personal finance conditions during the next 12 months is also evident among 84 per cent of consumers compared to 73 per cent during the same period last year.

"The index also shows that optimism on current personal finance conditions is particularly high among Emiratis at 89 per cent, while 87 per cent Arab ex-

patriates are the most optimistic about an improvement in personal finance during the next 12 months."

The Index shows 84 per cent of consumers as optimistic about the overall economy during the next 12 months. Among Emiratis, 89 per cent were optimistic on the economic situation, while the positive sentiment was also shared by 87 per cent of Western expatriates.

WAM

Bank Muscat launches auto finance with Ramadan options



In line with its customer-centric vision 'To serve you better, everyday', Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, has launched an attractive Sayyarati vehicle finance offer with the best rates in the market on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan.

The offer features some of the lowest rates for auto finance in the country and will prove to be of great advantage to customers looking forward to buying a new or pre-owned vehicle during the holy month. Highly competitive short term rates starting at an amazing 3.5 per cent for 12 months are available for customers who need only short term loans.

Sayyarti has some of the best interest rates in the country including 3.75 per cent for up to 2



years, 4 per cent for up to 3 years, 4.25 per cent for up to 4 years and 5 per cent for a loan term of up to 8 years.

Abdullah Tamman al Mashaani, deputy general manager - Institutional Sales and Product Development, Bank Muscat, said, "Sayyarati is a preferred vehicle financing option for people in Oman and we are happy to launch this special Ramadan offer with the best possible terms in Oman after listening to feedback from our customers. This campaign will be particu-

larly helpful for a large number of Omani youth who are entering the job market and require financing facilities. Bank Muscat reiterates its commitment to making vehicle purchases easy and affordable through its excellent financing facilities. What is more we have a finance package available for every customer according to their individual needs and situation."

Coinciding with the Ramadan auto sales season, the latest Sayyarati offer offers a highly competitive starting interest rate and

absolutely no need for post-dated cheques. With its fast turnaround time, the feature-rich Sayyarati finance can be obtained within the shortest possible time. Options available include a loan tenure up to 8 years for new and used vehicles, the lowest monthly payment options in the country and on-the-spot approvals.

The hassle-free Sayyarati finance can be obtained from Bank Muscat branches spread across Oman. Loans up to RO60,000 will be offered for new vehicles

and used vehicles. It is important to note that customers availing the Sayyarti offer can enjoy fast processing without any unnecessary paperwork and signing of cheques. Only the following documents are needed to process the loan facility: buyer's ID card, salary assignment letter, quotation / car valuation from the approved valuator, driving licence, Mulkiya (for pre-owned cars only) and seller ID card (for pre-owned cars only).

The monthly loan installments are automatically deducted from the customer's account once the mandate to do so is provided to the bank. With some of the world's best and safest vehicles available for purchase in the sultanate, the bank aims to do its part to improve road safety and the security of all road users. It is noteworthy that loans are disbursed within 24 hours subject to applicants meeting the concerned requirements.

For more details regarding Sayyarati loans, please go to <https://www.bankmuscat.com/en/loans/Pages/details.aspx#sayyarti>. Customers can also visit any branch, or Sayyarti Centres at Wattayah and Salalah as well as request Saed sales agents for more information and to apply for a loan.

Maximise your savings with pre-VAT offers at Malabar Gold

Malabar Gold & Diamonds, one among the largest jewellery retailers globally with a strong retail network of over 250 outlets spread across ten countries, has announced attractive instore offers for customers to ensure savings before the implementation of VAT in the country.

This campaign gives customers the opportunity to get free gold coins on Diamond Jewellery purchase worth RO300 and above. As part of the Royal Decree, VAT is expected to be implemented in the country from April 16.

Customers can get a free 1gm gold coin on Diamond and Precious Gem Jewellery purchase worth RO500 and free 1/2gm gold coin on Diamond and Precious Gem Jewellery purchase worth RO300.

"Considering the current favourability of gold, both in terms of the reducing rate and as a value-appreciating lifestyle article, it is the best time now for consumers to invest in the metal and ensure savings, before the introduction of 5 per cent VAT. We are doing everything possible to ensure our customers benefit during this pre-VAT hike period, with several collections



displayed in our stores across gold, diamond and gemstone jewellery," said Najeeb K, regional director - Oman, Malabar Gold & Diamonds.

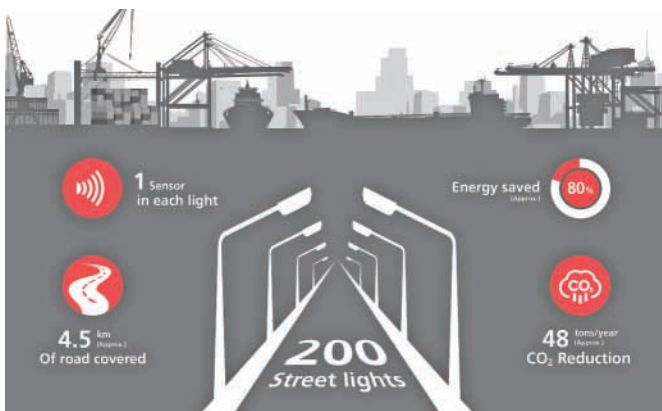
This offer will be valid across all stores of Malabar Gold & Diamonds in Oman, until April 15. Customers also have the unique opportunity to buy now and pay later through interest free installment scheme with selected banks including Bank Muscat, Sohar International and NBO. The pre-VAT savings offer is available across all stores of Malabar Gold & Diamonds in Oman.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds is the flagship company of Malabar Group, a leading diversified Indian business conglomerate. Established in 1993 in the Indian state of Kerala, Malabar Gold & Diamonds today has a strong retail network of over 250 outlets spread across ten countries.

Sohar Port and Freezone adopts 'Light on-Demand' technology

Aligned with its vision to support sustainable and innovative initiatives, Sohar Port and Freezone is one of the first ports in the region and in the world to have installed a 'Light on-Demand' system. The implementation of this project, positions Sohar as pioneers in the sector. Apart from promoting a low carbon footprint, the LED luminaires have successfully reduced energy consumption by 80 per cent.

Highlighting the importance of the project, Mark Geilenkirchen, CEO of Sohar Port, said, "At Sohar, we envision ourselves to be green front runners, by enabling and supporting sustainable development through energy efficiency projects and transitioning to cleaner fuels. Our overall objective is the need to develop a world-class complex and high-level of operations with state-of-the-art infrastructure that is safe, environmentally sustainable and legally compliant to attract investment and enhance industry diversification."



Khalid al Alawi, manager of Assets Management at Sohar, stated, "The Assets Management Department has explored the recent development in the field of innovative technologies. The roads within the Port and Freezone area are not frequently used during the night, resulting in energy loss from the illuminated lights overnight. This is why we have identified a solution for real-time control of street lights within the respective areas."

Light on Demand is a revolutionary integrated wireless motion sensor for presence-based

monitoring and control of outdoor lighting. It ensures the reduction of energy consumption without compromising on public safety and driving comfort. The technology consists of precise sensors for about 200 street lights and hosts a cloud-based control and energy monitoring system dashboard, commissioned by experts from the Netherlands.

"We continue to proactively seek and invest in alternative energy sources as part of our strategy to diversify energy sources," Geilenkirchen added.

Oman Air extends its complimentary COVID-19 coverage until December 31

Oman Air, the national carrier of the sultanate, has extended its complimentary COVID-19 coverage until December 31, 2021. The complimentary coverage is for expenses incurred by medical treatment or quarantine related to the COVID-19 virus, and applies to tickets issued for travel after October 1, 2020 until December 31, 2021.

The coverage is provided to guests who purchase tickets on omanair.com, through the airline's Call Centre, at Oman Air's offices or through travel agents after October 1, 2020, and is part of the airline's expansive efforts to ensure that guests are safe at all times so they can fly confidently. Details are available at omanair.com.

The coverage now includes Oman resident cardholders (expats) who are required to present medical coverage for their destination and return to Oman, if travel is completed within 31 days. Omani and GCC nationals do not require COVID-19 insurance, as per the directive issued



by Oman's Supreme Committee for COVID-19 safety.

Oman Air will maintain its comprehensive safety programme throughout all elements of the travel journey.

Masks are required when guests are on board the aircraft and in Oman's airports.

Distancing is maintained while guests board and exit the aircraft, which are carefully

cleaned after each flight and at the end of every day.

Cabin crew all wear a full set of personal protective equipment, meal service has been modified to further ensure safety and a number of other steps have been taken to ensure that the airline's guests and crew are safe at all times.

Guests who are planning to travel to Muscat should visit the

Civil Aviation Authority website, caa.gov.om, to ensure they are prepared to comply with requirements to enter the sultanate.

Guests departing from Oman should also ensure that they are aware of all pre-departure requirements and requirements during their flights, which are provided at omanair.com, along with any requirements at their destinations.

MoE signs MoU with KR Eshraqa to support StemaZone initiative

Sultanate's Ministry of Education (MoE) has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Eshraqa, corporate social responsibility arm of Khimji Ramdas to support the StemaZone initiative.

Dr Abdullah Ambusaidi, Undersecretary of Ministry of Education, and Nailesh Khimji, director, Khimji Ramdas (KR) Group, signed the MoU at a ceremony held in the Ministry of Education on March 23. The signing comes under the guidance and vision of the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik in building more scientific capabilities for Omani youth.

The agreement signifies an innovative strategy aimed towards inspiring young Omanis to enter STEAM fields and set them on

the pathway from an early age.

Putting a renewed focus on StemaZone, the MoU highlights the country's commitment to guiding students gain the skills they need to prepare for the demands of the global economy and jobs of the future.

The signing is significant given that the country is working toward achieving Oman Vision 2040 which will need a pipeline of talented young Omanis who are equipped with STEAM skills and knowledge.

StemaZone is a STEAM learning initiative (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics) meant for Omani children between 6 to 16 years of age. As part of the programme, an online learning platform (e-StemaZone) will be launched soon.



Commenting on the signing of MoU, Dr Abdullah Ambusaidi said, "We are happy to sign this agreement today with Eshraqa in order to provide support for the

StemaZone, which means directing students towards awareness of the importance of integration between Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and

Arts, which is in line with the current global trend in various educational institutions.

"This agreement comes among the initiatives that are

carried out by the local community and the private sector in support of the educational process, which the Ministry of Education strives to contribute to in order to raise the level of students in directing them to study and raising the level of their motivation towards science and technology.

"We hope that everyone will benefit from this initiative by joining the virtual workshops run by the team or through the workshops held in the Children's Museum, and we hope that they will be a source of benefit and enjoyment for our students. I wish all the best for all and that initiatives like this be a source of awareness-raising for our students. Thank you all very much and to the KR Group for their continuous support to the education

sector in the sultanate."

Elucidating on the signing of the MoU, Khimji said, "The agreement between the two parties indicates a futuristic blueprint aimed towards inspiring young Omanis to enter STEAM fields and set them on the pathway from an early age.

"Putting a renewed focus on learning, the MoU highlights the country's commitment to helping students gain the skills they need to prepare for the demands of the global economy and jobs of the future. In the coming weeks, we are also set to launch online learning through LMS, a cloud-based EdTech tool that assists educators to teach. The physical centre for StemaZone will help in expanding educational prospects for our students in various topics."

Land Rover extends global partnership with 'spaceline' Virgin Galactic to 2024

Land Rover has announced a three-year extension to its global partnership with Virgin Galactic, the world's first commercial 'spaceline'.

Virgin Galactic's latest space-ship was unveiled, supported by a Range Rover Astronaut Edition. Land Rover will remain an integrated part of Virgin Galactic's day-to-day operations as the company completes test flights with 'SpaceShipTwo' and begins a regular commercial service.

Land Rover vehicles are part of daily life for the Virgin Galactic team, with roles which include towing the space vehicles, carrying equipment and clearing runways before take-off.

They played key roles during the company's first two space-flights which saw Virgin Galactic become the first private company to fly humans to space on a spaceship designed for commercial service.

A fleet of Land Rovers also supported Virgin Galactic's relocation from its manufacturing and test facilities in Mojave, California, to Spaceport America in New Mexico - the world's first purpose-built commercial spaceport.

Virgin Galactic has already signed-up around 600 Future Astronaut customers, who will be transported to their flights from Spaceport America, in Land Rover vehicles.

In 2019, Virgin Galactic founder Sir Richard Branson and



Jaguar Land Rover Chief Creative Officer Prof Gerry McGovern OBE unveiled the Range Rover Astronaut Edition.

Created by Land Rover SV Bespoke and offered exclusively to Virgin Galactic Future Astronauts, these luxury SUVs celebrate the partnership's shared values and the Future Astronaut

community's historic contribution to the democratization of space.

Virgin Galactic has a team of eight highly experienced pilots and is preparing for its next rocket-powered flight in New Mexico. Founder Sir Richard Branson is planning to fly to space later in 2021.

Joe Eberhardt, president and CEO, Jaguar Land Rover North America, said:

"Accessible space travel for explorers worldwide is the next great big adventure., Land Rover is proud to work alongside the Virgin Galactic team to support all future astronauts as they push the boundaries of personal

adventure even further."

Michael Colglazier, chief executive officer, Virgin Galactic, said, "Land Rover vehicles provide invaluable support on the ground in Mojave and at Spaceport America in New Mexico. It is also fabulous to see our Future Astronauts around the world enjoying the unique Range Rover

Astronaut Edition.

"We are delighted to be able to extend this strong partnership. With a shared pioneering spirit, pursuit of adventure and vision to push the boundaries of travel, this is a natural collaboration between our two companies and one that will take exploration to new heights."



RLC London holds UAE leadership conference

Royal Leadership Consults (RLC), London and Ladies in Business, UAE jointly organised the first annual Change Leaders Conference on March 20.

The theme of the conference was Sharpening your Leadership Edge through multiple leadership models. The enterprise brought together field authorities, industry experts and change catalysts to share their knowledge on key topics such as the relationship between EQ, IQ and Transformational Leadership along with Leadership Philosophy and Personal Productivity.

Dr James Okpanachi, founder and chief architect, RLC London, graced the inaugural function as the keynote speaker and trainer. The leadership and entrepreneurship twin model and the link between the two was presented by Dr Evelyn Okpanachi, CEO RLC London.

Dr James talked about the importance of the Transformation Equation, leaderships misconceptions and selection of the right components of transformation for success. In his address to the leaders, Dr James said, "Transformation is a key driver of leadership. Transformation begins when your vision is a solution to a situation. Along with that vision, investing in the right people, skills and technology is critical for continued success. Leaders coming together and collaborating makes for a successful and happy society."

The panel included Laila Rahhal Elatfani, William Stenhouse of UAE/African Network and Adeshola Helen besides Dr James and Dr Evelyn. The conference was attended by over 30 participants including industry experts, directors, entrepreneurs and management professionals from across the region.

The interactive sessions enabled the participants to network and share their views with the panel benefitting both the participants and the panel. A series of tech, leadership and other events in the UAE are expected.



Sun salutations benefits highlighted

Zamzam who has mastered the benefits of sun salutations from yoga expert Dr Kavitha Ramakrishna has enunciated the benefits of the yoga repertoire surya namaskars (sun salutations).

Dr Kavitha, who is an expert practitioner of surya namaskar, taught Zamzam the intricacies of sun salutations which is a series of 12 yoga poses done in a continuous flow while synchronising breathing with body movement. Dr Kavitha, who holds the record of performing 648 surya namaskars at a stretch, has inspired Zamzam to practice the yoga technique every day.

Zamzam said, "COVID-19 has brought attention around the world to many yoga practices that promote and sustain good exercise for mental and physical health. Practices such as surya namaskar or sun salutations have become especially relevant as COVID-19 is a respiratory infection that attacks lungs. Hence, along with meticulously practicing preventive measures like washing our hands, wearing a mask, and social distancing, we also need to work on practices that can keep the lungs healthy and strong. Sun salutations a dynamic combination of breathing and exercises gives us mental and physical benefits.

"Since we alternate forward and backward bending move-

ments along with breathing while doing sun salutations, we enhance our oxygenation levels and boost our respiratory muscles. Practice of sun salutations also benefits muscles, ligaments and joints and increases suppleness of vertebral joints."

She added, "I am thankful to Dr Kavitha for inspiring me to take up the practice of sun salutations. I have benefited immensely from her style of teaching. Since she is an expert I was able to master the technique quickly. This yoga practices have boosted my immunity and improved my metabolism too. I urge everyone to take up the practice of sun salutations. It is a great way to energise your body first thing in the morning. It is easy to do. Not only your lungs, digestive system, muscles and joints will benefit from practicing sun salutations, your cardiovascular health will benefit too."

Dr Kavitha also presented Zamzam with her comprehensively researched book *Tamoghna* which articulately explicates the science behind surya namaskar. The book traces the history of yogic philosophy, crux of yoga practice and deals specifically with vast benefits of surya namaskar.

The book inspires yoga practice with a deeper understanding of the elaborate connection of mind, body and spirit.

Harvard researchers use AI learning to study health impacts of walnuts

Researchers from the Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health used machine learning, a subset of artificial intelligence (AI), to identify more precisely the components in walnuts that may be responsible for potentially reducing the risk of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases - two of the leading death causes in the US.

This study, supported by the California Walnut Commission and published in *The Journal of Nutrition*, used a novel approach, agnostic machine-learning, to identify 19 metabolites that were associated with walnut consumption.

The body forms specific metabolites based on the consumed food. The walnut



metabolite profile was associated with a 17 per cent lower risk of type 2 diabetes and 29 per cent lower risk of cardiovascular disease.

This is the first study to examine the association between walnut metabolites and the risk of cardiometabolic diseases, contributing to the three decades of existing research on walnuts and heart health.

"With data-driven technologies, we are able to enhance our understanding of the relationship between diet and disease and take a personalised approach to nutrition which will lead to better prevention and management of various health conditions," says Dr Marta Guasch-Ferré a research scientist at the Department of Nutrition at Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, instructor in Medicine at Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, and lead investigator of this research.

"In this study, we revealed the unique metabolomic signature of walnuts, which brings us one step closer to understanding "how" walnuts are good for our health. These cutting-edge tech-

nologies are shaping the future of nutrition recommendations," says Guasch-Ferré.

Researchers examined data from 1,833 participants of the PREvención con Dieta MEDiterránea (PREDIMED) study, a large-scale, multi-year study that took place in Spain and looked at the effects of a Mediterranean diet in the prevention of cardiovascular disease among people at high risk for heart disease.

Participants were aged 55-80 and followed one of three diets: 1) Mediterranean diet supplemented with mixed nuts (50 per cent walnuts, 25 per cent almonds, and 25 per cent hazelnuts); 2) Mediterranean diet supplemented with extra-virgin olive oil; or 3) low-fat diet.

Porsche Sprint Challenge Middle East ends season



The official support race of the Formula 1 Gulf Air Bahrain Grand Prix 2021, the Porsche Sprint Challenge Middle East, returned this weekend to see Jean-Baptiste Simmenauer crowned the overall season champion during a memorial race weekend for its founder, Walter Lechner.

Simmenauer, a 20-year-old Frenchman, performed consistently throughout the season with a third place and five second places finishes over six races. His constant podiums gained him a season total of 137 points to secure the overall 2020/21 title. He was followed by Dutchmen Lucas Groenevelt with 112 points in second and Daan van Kuijk in third with 104 points.

The season finale had a more poignant meaning to the drivers and organisers this time around, as it was also the first race weekend without its founder Walter Lechner, who sadly passed away in December 2020. The man behind bringing a truly regional racing event to the Middle East, he

took Porsche GT3 Cup race cars to the tracks of Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Dubai, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Now in its twelfth year, the Porsche Sprint Challenge Middle East supported many regional drivers including former champions Al Faisal al Zubair of Oman, Zaid Ashkanani of Kuwait and HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal from Saudi Arabia. Twenty four drivers who have raced under Walter's guidance over the years assembled for 12 laps of the Sakhir circuit ahead of

the Bahrain Grand Prix. For the first time, a range of Porsche 718 Cayman GT4 Clubsport joined the fleet, including one piloted by Walter's close friend and major supporter of the Porsche Sprint Challenge Middle East, Shaikh Salman bin Isa al Khalifa, CEO of the Bahrain International Circuit.

"Thank you Walter" could be seen in Arabic on Shaikh Salman's red and white Porsche 718 Cayman GT4 Clubsport as his personal tribute to Walter and his work in Middle Eastern

motorsport.

Well-known drivers from previous seasons returned for the memorial race, including Saudi nationals Bandar Alesayi and father-son team Fawaz and Fahad Algosai. As in the first ever Porsche Sprint Challenge Middle East race, Fahad drove a 2009 Porsche 911 GT3 Cup car to highlight the 12 years of work by Walter here in the region.

The winners each received an honorary helmet in authentic Walter Lechner paint as an individual trophy. All 24 vehicles were adorned with Walter's former race lettering on the top of the windshield. Also, car number three, piloted by Bandar Alesayi, had a stylish illustration of Walter on the doors and the hood.

Speaking after the race, son of Walter Lechner and manager of the Porsche Sprint Challenge Middle East and Lechner Racing, Robert Lechner, said, "My father always said racing was his passion and his destiny, and the races we've held in Bahrain over

the past 12 years have always been very special to him. He made many friends here and felt it was the home of motorsport in the Middle East. It was only fitting to celebrate him the only way he would have wanted, more racing in Bahrain.

"Congratulations to Jean-Baptiste Simmenauer for clinching the season title in Bahrain. The weekend was also made special by returning faces of the championship from Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to honour my father and his work in the region. Thank you to all 24 drivers for joining us."

The Porsche Sprint Challenge Middle East is recognised as having a profound impact on the sport's development as it was the first regional championship backed by a manufacturer in the Middle East. It gives official drivers access to the latest Porsche 911 GT3 Cup race car, the same model used for international motorsport editions, such as the Porsche Carrera Cup and the Porsche Mobil 1 Supercup.

US, Iran to start indirect talks to salvage nuke deal

Brussels, Belgium - The United States and Iran will open indirect talks next week in Vienna as the European Union spearheads efforts to bring President Joe Biden's administration back into a nuclear accord.

Participants in the accord over Tehran's nuclear ambitions - including China, France, Germany, Russia, and Britain - will meet in-person on Tuesday in the Austrian capital, the European Union said after a video conference.

The United States will not take part directly but, for the first time since former leader Donald Trump pulled out of the agreement in 2018, a US delegation will be present.

The European Union said its mediator will hold 'separate contacts' with the United States in Vienna.

The painstakingly negotiated 2015 accord saw Iran granted relief from international sanctions in exchange for accepting limits on its nuclear programme aimed at easing fears it could acquire an atomic weapon.

Biden has promised to rejoin the agreement on condition Iran first returns to respecting commitments it abandoned in retaliation for Trump pulling out and reimposing swingeing sanctions.

Tehran says Washington has to end the sanctions before it will make any moves to get back in line, and is refusing to hold direct negotiations with the US.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif insisted the aim of the talks was to 'rapidly finalise sanction-lifting and nuclear measures for choreographed removal of all sanctions, followed by Iran ceasing remedial measures'.

'No Iran-US meeting. Unnec-



This photo provided by the Iranian Foreign Ministry on Friday shows Abbas Araghchi (centre), the political deputy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, attending a virtual meeting with the Joint Commission on Iran's nuclear programme (AFP)

essary,' he wrote on Twitter.

US State Department spokesman Ned Price called the Vienna talks a 'healthy step forward' and said Washington 'remains open' to a direct encounter with Tehran.

He cautioned that 'these remain early days, and we don't anticipate an immediate breakthrough as there will be difficult discussions ahead'.

The deputy State Department spokeswoman, Jalina Porter, said sanctions relief steps will be 'up for discussion' but declined to elaborate further.

'Substantial work ahead'

EU diplomat Enrique Mora described Friday's virtual meeting that he chaired as 'positive', but warned there was much left to do to revive the deal.

'Substantial work ahead for a key opportunity to bring JCPoA

back to life,' he tweeted, using the acronym for the nuclear deal's formal name.

A senior EU official said Brussels - which acts as coordinator - hoped to see a final agreement on a US return to the deal within the next two months.

The official said two groups of experts from the remaining participant countries would work simultaneously, with one focused on US sanctions and the other on rolling back Iran's breaches.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said it was 'good that all the relevant actors would meet in Vienna next week'.

"We have no time to waste." "A treaty that is fully respected once again would be a plus for security throughout the region," he said.

Russian diplomat Mikhail Ulyanov said 'the impression is that we are on the right track but the way ahead will not be easy

and will require intensive efforts. The stakeholders seem to be ready for that'.

'Possible US return to JCPOA apparently will require Washington's full compliance with the nuclear deal,' he wrote on Twitter.

Creative solution?

In 2018, Trump dramatically withdrew from the pact and reimposed crippling economic sanctions on Tehran. The following year, Tehran announced it would start breaking limits agreed on nuclear activity.

The remaining participants in the deal have scrambled in recent years to salvage it from total collapse as Tehran has made good on its threat, while insisting it is not seeking a nuclear weapon.

Some analysts have seen Biden's hesitation at immediately removing sanctions as a way to pressure Iran - or a way to pre-

serve political capital for other priorities as the nuclear deal remains fiercely opposed by Trump's Republican Party.

Republicans quickly pounced on news of the Vienna meeting. Senator Tom Cotton, who has called in the past for attacking Iran, tweeted that the Biden administration was 'so desperate to get back to a broken deal that they're giving up all their leverage and offering concession after humiliating concession'.

But some observers saw the Vienna meeting as a way to break the logjam and return to an accord with which UN inspectors say Iran was complying before Trump trashed it.

"Proximity talks are a creative solution to overcoming the current impasse," said Suzanne DiMaggio, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

AFP



Al Shabaab group attacks Somalia's 2 key army bases

Mogadishu, Somalia - Al Shabaab extremist fighters attacked two key military bases in Somalia on Saturday, detonating car bombs at both locations before engaging in an intense gun battle, an army official and witnesses said.

The attacks happened in the southern region of Lower Shabelle on bases in the towns of Awdheegle and Bariire - some 30km apart. Both are forward operating bases in the fight against the extremist group.

"The assailants tried to attack but thanks to our brave soldiers who knew about the tricks of the assailants, the militants were defeated and their wounded and dead bodies are strewn around, we will provide you the details later," army chief General Odowa Yusuf Rage told reporters.

"The forces are still pursuing the rest of the attackers and the Somali army is in control of the both contested locations."

Witnesses in Awdheegle - home to the larger of the two bases - said Somali troops had repelled the militants after around an hour of heavy fighting.

"Shabaab gunmen used a vehicle loaded with explosives to launch the attack, but they failed to enter the camp after nearly an hour of exchanging machine gun fire with the Somali troops," town resident Mohamed Ali said by phone.

"I saw several dead bodies of the Shabab gunmen near the camp where the fighting occurred, the Somali soldiers paraded these bodies after the fighting."

In Bariire, a car bomb was also detonated before heavily armed gunmen stormed the base.

"We heard a heavy explosion caused by a suicide bomber ramming a car at the entrance to the base and a heavy exchange of gunfire followed," said resident Abdirahim Malin.

"A few minutes later the militant fighters managed to enter the camp and torched some military supplies belonging to the Somali army."

Al-Shabaab, which has been waging a long insurgency to unseat the internationally backed government in Mogadishu, claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement on a pro-Shabaab website.

The group claimed it had killed dozens and captured military vehicles and supplies.

Casualties are often difficult to establish from Al Shabaab attacks in remote areas, especially when the military is targeted.

Al Shabaab were driven out of Mogadishu in 2011, but still control swathes of territory from where they plan and launch frequent, deadly strikes against government and civilian targets.

AFP

Nigerian air force dismisses Boko Haram claim on jet

Lagos, Nigeria - Nigeria's air force on Saturday dismissed a claim by the Boko Haram extremist group that it had shot down a fighter jet that went missing a few days earlier.

The Alpha jet lost radar contact on Wednesday while on a mission to support troops battling extremists in the northeastern Borno state. The air force said it believed the jet with two crew may have crashed.

Boko Haram on Friday released a video showing a militant standing on what the group claimed was the wrecked fuselage of the plane with the Nigeria Air Force number 475.

"It is obvious that the Boko Haram Sect, in its characteristic manner of employing false propaganda, is seeking to claim credit for what was obviously an air accident," the air force said in a statement.

It said investigations into how the aircraft crashed were still ongoing. On Friday it had said the whereabouts of the two crew was still unknown.

In 2014, Boko Haram said it shot down a Nigerian air force jet and showed a video claiming to have beheaded its pilot.

Since the extremist insurgency broke out in 2009, Nigeria's conflict has killed around 36,000 people in the region and displaced some two million from their homes.

AFP

Four UN troops die in major attack in northern Mali



A United Nations vehicle patrols at the Independence square in Timbuktu last Wednesday (AFP)

Bamako, Mali - Four United Nations peacekeepers were killed on Friday when suspected extremists staged a major attack on their camp in Aguelhok, northern Mali, the UN mission said.

The peacekeepers 'bravely pushed back a complex attack carried out by several heavily armed terrorists', MINUSMA said, adding the attackers had suffered heavy losses and had abandoned 'several of their dead'.

In a statement, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said he 'condemns in the strongest

terms' the assault, commending the bravery of those who repelled the attack.

The incident left 19 wounded, the statement said, in addition to the four troops who were killed.

A source in MINUSMA said the attack occurred around 200km from the Algerian border, targeting a contingent of peacekeepers from Chad.

A UN source described the dawn raid as of 'very large magnitude' by about 100 attackers on motorbikes and in vehicles.

"The fighting lasted three hours... mortar shells, shooting exchanges... attempted suicide

car bombing," the source said.

He added that about 20 assailants had been killed.

A Chadian military source said 'two of our forces' positions were attacked'.

"We lost four people, including our forces' detachment commander, and 16 were injured."

The UN force's statement called the attack another 'attempt against the peace process' that will 'in no way undermine its determination to continue the execution of its mandate'.

It thanked 'international forces for their aerial support'.

The attack took to ten - the

number of MINUSMA troops killed this year.

Second attack

Also on Friday morning, two Malian soldiers were killed and around ten wounded in an attack blamed on extremists in Diarabane in the country's centre, Mali's army said in a statement.

Local resident Youssouf Aya told AFP that he had seen a line of armed men on motorcycles headed toward a military post, then heard gunfire.

He said the assailants had 'briefly occupied' the military post before leaving along the

Niger River.

Mali has been struggling to contain a radical insurgency that first broke out in the north in 2012 before spreading to the centre and neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

Thousands have died and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes.

France, the former colonial power, intervened in Mali in 2013 to beat back the extremists and now has some 5,100 soldiers deployed across the semi-arid Sahel region, though the mission has not been without controversy.

The peacekeepers pushed back an attack carried out by several heavily armed terrorists on their camp in Aguelhok. The attackers suffered heavy losses and abandoned several of their dead

MINUSMA

A UN probe published on Tuesday concluded that a French air strike in central Mali killed 19 civilians on January 3.

The French Defence Ministry has denied the account, insisting it had identified and attacked an 'armed terrorist group'.

On Friday, France's military issued a statement on a separate incident, saying a woman died and a child was slightly wounded in a fire linked to an operation in Mali.

It said a suspected extremist was also killed and two others captured in the operation in the intervening night of Wednesday and Thursday in an area south-east of Tessalit in the country's north.

According to the statement, the soldiers were shot at by the suspected extremist in a tent and returned fire.

The tent caught fire with the woman and child inside, it said. The child was evacuated to a military hospital.

AFP

Myanmar's rebel groups voice support for protesters as junta continues crackdowns

Yangon, Myanmar - Ten of Myanmar's major rebel groups threw their support behind the country's anti-coup movement on Saturday, fanning fears that a broader conflict could erupt in a country plagued for decades by on-and-off fighting between the military and the ethnic armies.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from power on February 1, triggering an uprising that the junta has sought to quell with deadly crackdowns.

According to a local monitoring group, more than 550 people have been killed in the anti-coup unrest, bloodshed that has angered some of Myanmar's 20 or so ethnic groups and their militias, who control large areas of territory mostly in border regions.

On Saturday, ten of these rebel groups met virtually to discuss the situation, condemning the junta's use of live ammunition on protesters.

"The leaders of the military council must be held accountable," said General Yawd Serk, leader of rebel group the Restoration Council of Shan State.

Last week, the junta declared a month-long ceasefire with ethnic armed groups, though exceptions might be made if 'security and administrative machinery of the government... are encroached on'.

The announcement did not encompass stopping lethal force against anti-coup demonstra-



This handout photo released on Saturday shows protesters holding signs while taking part in a demonstration against the military coup, in Dawei (AFP)

The ten rebel groups that met online are signatories to a ceasefire agreement brokered by Suu Kyi's government, which attempted to negotiate an end to the armed struggle for greater autonomy

tions.

But Yawd Serk said the ceasefire means security forces should halt "all violent actions", including against protesters.

The ten rebel groups that met online are signatories to a nationwide ceasefire agreement that was brokered by Suu Kyi's government, which attempted to ne-

gotiate an end to the ethnic militias' decades-long armed struggle for greater autonomy.

But distrust runs deep for the ethnic minorities of Myanmar, and Yawd Serk said the ten signatories to the nationwide ceasefire would 'review' the deal during their meeting.

"I would like to state that the (ten groups) firmly stand with the people who are... demanding the end of dictatorship," he said.

Last week, a UN special envoy

on Myanmar warned the Security Council of the risk of civil war and an imminent 'bloodbath'.

'No reason for conflict'

The rebel groups' meeting also comes a week after one of them, the Karen National Union (KNU), seized a military base in eastern Karen state, killing ten army officers. The junta retaliated with airstrikes.

The KNU has been a vocal op-

ponent of the military junta and said it is sheltering hundreds of anti-coup activists.

On Saturday, it condemned the military's use of 'excessive force by engaging in non-stop bombing and air strikes' from March 27 - 30, which have 'caused the deaths of many people including children'.

'The airstrikes have also led to the further displacement of more than 12,000 people,' it said.

Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said the military has only been targeting KNU's 5th Brigade - which led the seizure of the military base.

"We had an airstrike on that day only," he told AFP.

"We have signed a nationwide ceasefire agreement... If they follow the NCA, there is no reason for conflict to happen," Zaw Min Tun said.

Ethnic Karen local media and rights groups have reported multiple bombings and airstrikes across the state over recent days.

city forces violently crack down before noon on Saturday.

In eastern Mon state, a man was shot in the stomach and died on his way to the hospital.

"He was trying to help our young protesters," a fellow protester told AFP.

Demonstrators in Yangon, Mandalay and the central city Monywa continued to come out Saturday, wearing helmets and using sandbags as barricades as they faced off against authorities.

But 'two were shot in the head', said a rescue worker in Monywa who had to pick up the bodies.

CNN - which was granted access by the junta - arrived this week with correspondent Clarissa Ward, who was ferried around Yangon in a military convoy.

On Friday, she spoke to two sisters - Shine Ya Da Na Pyo and Nay Zar Chi Shine - who were later detained along with another relative.

Local media reported they had flashed a three-finger salute, a symbol of resistance, while speaking to Ward.

"We don't know where they've been detained," said a relative of the sisters who did not want to be named.

"They seized their phones, and we lost connection with them... Our family is trying our best for their release."

CNN did not respond to request for comment on the incident.

AFP

This madness must stop: UN rapporteur

With the junta cutting WiFi services, mobile data and imposing a nightly internet blackout that has gone on for nearly 50 days, information flow in the country has been effectively throttled.

'This madness must stop,' UN rights rapporteur Tom Andrews in a tweet. 'Sanctions & an arms embargo must be imposed to cut their [the junta's] access to revenue and weapons.'

At least two cities saw secu-



Rescue workers at the wreckage of a collapsed building, in Thailand's capital Bangkok on Saturday (AFP)

At least four killed in Bangkok residence collapse

Bangkok, Thailand - A Bangkok residence building collapsed on Saturday, killing at least three rescue workers and a resident and trapping a handful of people under the debris, according to an emergency worker.

The three-story house, located in a luxury gated community in western Bangkok, was engulfed in flames around 6am and the fire raged for about an hour before it was put out.

At around 7am, as firefighters and rescue workers were moving through the razed structure in the Thai capital, it abruptly collapsed, killing at least four, including a resident.

"The cause of the collapse remains unknown. The fire could be the main reason for interiors of the residence building to collapse," Jiraththikorn Banjongkit, chief of

rescue at the Poh Teck Tung Foundation, told AFP.

He added there might be about five people still under the crumpled heap of concrete walls and wiring structure.

It remains unclear how the rescue workers will be able to safely retrieve those trapped, said Bangkok governor Aswin Kwanmuang.

"There's still no safe passage," he told reporters.

"We will have to gradually drill and use small-sized equipment as larger equipment could cause (the debris) to collapse further."

Aswin added that a forensic team was investigating the cause of the fire.

Building collapses are rare in metropolis Bangkok, which is replete with gleaming towering malls and residential sprawl.

AFP

Taiwan mourns after train disaster kills 50

Hualien, Taiwan - Grieving relatives of those who died in Taiwan's worst rail disaster in decades held prayers at the crash site on Saturday as salvage crews worked to remove the tangled mass of wrecked carriages.

Officials said Friday's devastating collision, which killed at least 50 people and injured more than 170, was caused when a parked railway maintenance vehicle slipped down an embankment and onto the tracks.

A train packed with as many as 500 people at the start of a long holiday weekend then hit the truck just as it entered a narrow tunnel near the eastern coastal city of Hualien.

The truck driver - who railway officials said may have failed to secure the parking brake prop-



Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen (second from right) visits an injured passenger at a hospital on Saturday (AFP)

erly - has been released on bail after being interrogated by prosecutors and is barred from leaving Taiwan pending further investigation.

Around one hundred relatives held an emotional Taoist prayer

ceremony near the crash site on Saturday afternoon, shaded under a canopy of black umbrellas.

Many wept openly as they surveyed the scene, some holding makeshift shrines inscribed

with the names of those who died. Some called out the names of their loved ones as other family members held them tight.

Rescuers described an appalling scene as they rushed into the tunnel and found the front of the train pulverised into a twisted mesh of metal.

"Car number eight had the most serious injuries and number of deaths," rescue worker Chang Zi-chen told reporters on Saturday, referring to the most forward passenger car.

"Basically more than half of the carriage was split open and bodies were all piled up together."

Specialist teams spent hours extracting victims and survivors on Friday.

On Saturday, focus shifted to

removing carriages now blocking one half of the sole train line down Taiwan's remote and mountainous eastern coastline.

Two giant cranes were being used to move the carriages and rescuers said further bodies might still be found inside the most damaged cars inside the tunnel.

The Interior Ministry ordered all flags to be lowered to half-mast for three days while President Tsai Ing-wen visited the wounded in Hualien's hospitals.

"Government agencies are making an all-out effort in the hope of minimising the impact of the disaster so the deceased can rest in peace and the injured can recover soon," she told reporters.

AFP

Millions face Easter under virus curbs; US logs 100mn jabs

Rome, Italy - Millions of Christians around the world on Saturday spent another Easter weekend under restrictions because of coronavirus surges, but there was good news from the hard-hit United States, which crossed the milestone of 100mn vaccinations.

There have been worrying spikes in infections in many parts of the world, even as vaccine roll-outs gather pace, forcing the reimposition of deeply unpopular restrictions including in European nations.

Italy began a strict Easter lockdown on Saturday, with the entire country considered a high-risk coronavirus 'red zone' during a time when families usually hold reunions. At the Vatican on Good Friday, a handful of onlookers caught a glimpse of Pope Francis presiding over the 'Way of the Cross' ceremony in an empty St Peter's Square, with



A deserted view of St Peter's Square as the Pope leads the celebration of the Way of the Cross, in the Vatican on Friday (AFP)

COVID-19 restrictions preventing large gatherings there for a second year in a row.

New restrictions also came into force on Saturday in France, where authorities are scrambling to deal with a dramatic rise in cases that has overwhelmed hospitals in the capital Paris.

Curbs had been already intensified in other European nations

such as Belgium, and Germany - where the government scrapped plans for a strict Easter lockdown - saw Chancellor Angela Merkel urge people to limit their social contacts ahead of the break.

"Doctors and nurses are doing everything they can," Merkel said on Thursday, warning that hospitals were filling up with younger people.

Argentine President tests positive for COVID-19

Buenos Aires, Argentina - Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez, who has been vaccinated against COVID-19, announced late on Friday that he had tested positive for the coronavirus.

'At the end of today, after presenting a fever of 37.3 and a slight headache, I performed an antigen test, which was positive,' he tweeted, adding he was waiting for the results of a PCR test to confirm the diagnosis.



A file photo of President Alberto Fernandez (AFP)

The president, who turned 62 on Friday, was in isolation as a precaution but said he was 'physically well'.

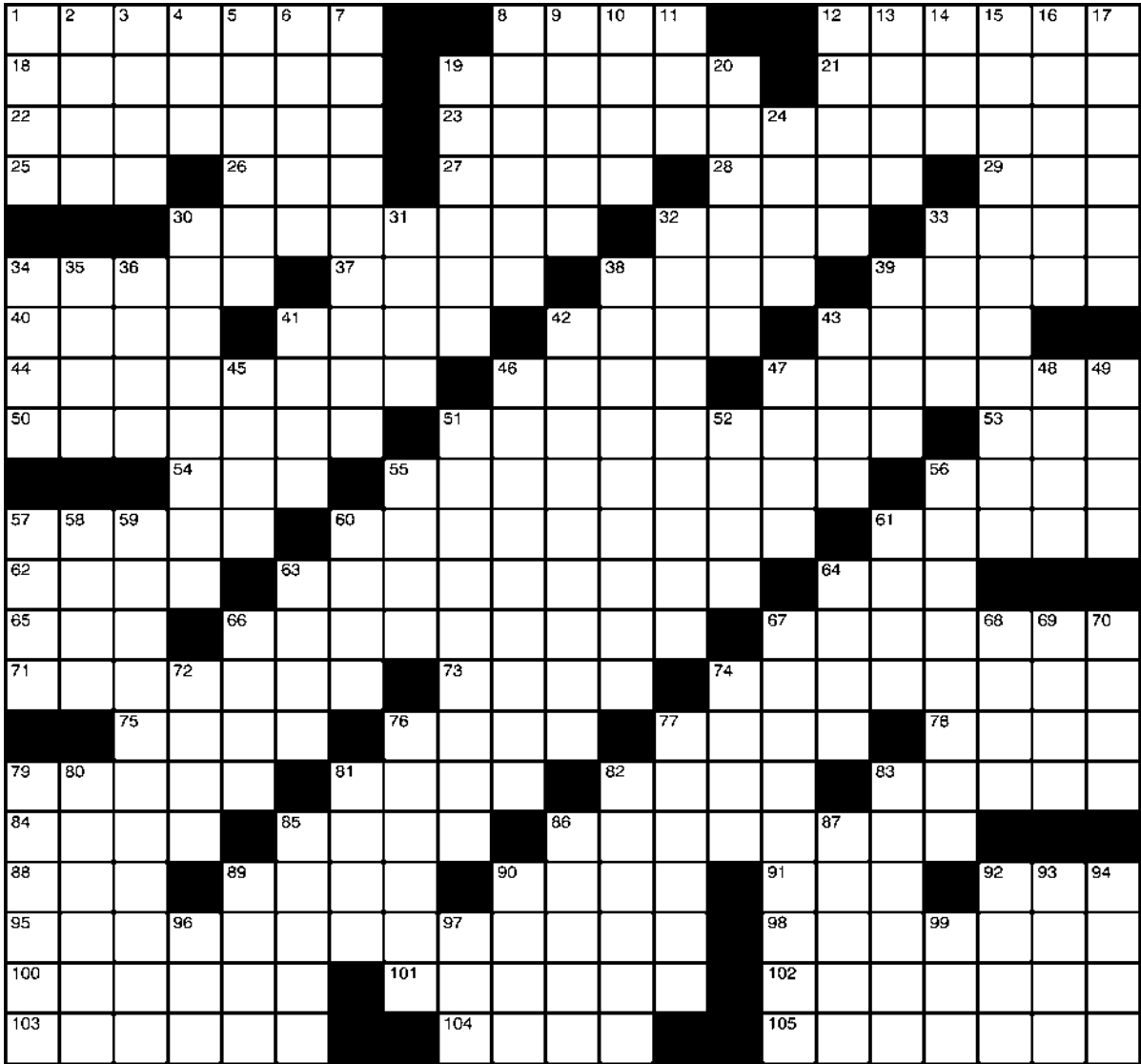
AFP

"We shouldn't leave them alone, but instead support them through our own actions... That means it should be a quiet Easter celebration, in a small circle, with strongly reduced contacts."

Across the Atlantic in Canada, similar restrictions were imposed ahead of Easter in Ontario and Quebec, the country's two most populous provinces.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



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ACROSS

- 1 Conceit
- 8 Cleo's suitor
- 12 Catherine of ____
- 18 King Hassan's country
- 19 Desert
- 21 " ____ Mr. Nice Guy"
- 22 Parisian expletive
- 23 Irwin Shaw novel
- 25 Thirst quencher
- 26 Nanny has three
- 27 Handout
- 28 Albatross' cousin
- 29 Posed
- 30 Actresses
- Parsons and Harris
- 32 Chronologist's concern
- 33 Place for a chapeau
- 34 Point of view
- 37 Arena area
- 38 Savory cake
- 39 Belt-mounted beeper
- 40 Don't let go!
- 41 HST or LBJ
- 42 " ____ I say, not ..."
- 43 Nero's M, today
- 44 Tallin native
- 46 Kukla's friend
- 47 Ukraine native

50 Accumulate

- 51 Turmoil
- 53 Fabricate
- 54 Maritime alert
- 55 Doublechambered
- 56 Money, in Modena
- 57 Weighed down
- 60 Controversial
- 61 Lost soul
- 62 Frankenstein's assistant
- 63 Camper abodes
- 64 Part of PGA
- 65 Actress Ryan
- 66 Cozy living room areas
- 67 Chelsea's mom
- Hillary
- 71 Sets on
- 73 See the sights
- 74 Upscale Philly 'burb
- 75 Airport near Paris
- 76 Brilliant play
- 77 Very small creature
- 78 Box for 27 Across
- 79 Fracas
- 81 ____ Christian Andersen
- 82 Slip, another way
- 83 Shotgun sport
- 84 Alan, Frances or Robert
- 85 Grave
- 86 Recording unit

88 Gendarme's law

- 89 African antelope
- 90 Show weariness
- 91 Regatta entrant
- 92 Barcelona bravo
- 95 Aldous Huxley novel
- 98 Configured in folds
- 100 ____ the Dinosaur
- 101 Dispossession
- 102 Banking activity
- 103 Valued possessions
- 104 Wet blanket
- 105 All together
- DOWN**
- 1 Madame Bovary
- 2 Tasty
- 3 River at Caen
- 4 Wool weight unit
- 5 Most lacking in warmth
- 6 Bouquet
- 7 Agatha Christie's "The ____"
- 8 Austrian composer/ conductor
- 9 Throat sounds
- 10 Hope
- components?
- 11 ____ -Magnon
- 12 Go fishing
- 13 Bialy or bagel
- 14 Mont Blanc buddy

15 Hall of Fame

- outfielder
- 16 Showy
- 17 Homesteader on the range
- 19 Grows tiresome
- 20 Italian journalist
- 24 Without feeling
- 30 Signer as owner
- 31 Legal claim
- 32 Cuts longitudinally
- 33 New Mexico resort
- 34 " ____ Funny That Way"
- 35 Confused
- 36 Choral voice
- 38 Underground man
- 39 Frost work
- 41 Popular name for popes
- 42 Imagined
- 43 "American ____"
- 45 Light gas
- 46 Jocose
- 47 Viva voce
- 48 Yorkshire river
- 49 Approach
- 51 Burden
- 52 Singers' syllables
- 55 Tree trunk
- 56 Doctorow novel
- 57 Andean capital
- 58 Bronze and Iron

59 Doughboys

- 60 Duffers' dreams
- 61 Happy reaction
- 63 Cunning
- 64 Ballet bend
- 66 Data repository
- 67 Val Lewton's first horror film
- 68 Run out of gas
- 69 Tale opener
- 70 Shipshape
- 72 District
- 74 ____ America
- 76 Lanza role
- 77 Senior, stateside
- 79 Port NE of Gibraltar
- 80 Weds hastily
- 81 Secrete
- 82 Armed horseman
- 83 Waterway
- 85 Cool guys
- 86 Poetic division
- 87 Claw
- 89 Weave
- 90 Coin for Pedro
- 92 Singer Redding
- 93 Focusing device
- 94 Sidle
- 96 Brunched
- 97 Hero, for short
- 99 Memorabilia

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

One of your more outgoing friends has been acting out of character, and their emotions could get really get in your way. If this happens, you need to value the relationship with them much more than whatever it was that they messed up for you. Keep things in their proper perspective and support them. It could be time for a talk. Get them alone and find out what's going on.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You have a heightened sense of intuition, and you should rely on it to help a friend who's about to start a project. If you're worried about them, let them know how you feel. You owe it to them to elaborate as much as you can. Maybe you had a dream or maybe it's just a gut feeling. Regardless, you won't be able to relax until you know you've said what has been on your mind.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Reaching out to others doesn't always have to feel like a risk. Sure, wearing your heart on your sleeve can leave you feeling vulnerable, but it's also a great way to show how much you care. Don't be shy about your feelings for someone, especially if they're positive! There is great energy around sharing your thoughts and hopes. When you feel the urge to confess do it.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. What is the measurement of the badminton court for singles?

- a. 13.41 m x 6.10 m
- b. 13.41 m x 5.18 m
- c. 12.30 m x 7.66 m
- d. 12.30 m x 6.23 m

2. When did India enter into space age by launching the satellite 'Aryabhata'?

- a. 1966
- b. 1932
- c. 1975
- d. 1990

3. What is Bhakti movement?

- a. It is a social and religious movement form about AD 500 to 1600
- b. It is the movement that influenced the developed of regional language because it emphasised people's everyday speech
- c. both (a) and (b)
- d. None of the above

Answers: 1: b 2: c 3: c



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Try to surround yourself with people who look at the world from a perspective that differs from yours. People like older relatives, younger siblings, and friends from different cultures can help you solve a problem that's been nagging you for a while. Sometimes all you need is for someone else to put in their two cents about a situation in order to understand the true value of it.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

If your feet aren't planted firmly on the ground today, you run the risk of missing out on something special. It's important to be grounded, so try not to let your emotions get the better of you. Sometimes it's your emotional nature that serves as your driving force in life, but right now you need to follow your brain, not your heart. Think things through and don't act too hastily.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

The universe is sending you a lot more introspective energy, which might cause you to shy away from the world, but that's perfectly fine. In fact, you should follow your instincts to stay at home even if friends are pressuring you to do something with them. Being your friends they'll totally understand if you feel like taking a pass. It's a good time to explore your own ideas.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Intelligence isn't always about what degree you've earned or what books you've read. People don't walk around with their resume tattooed on their face, so when you walk into a room, assume you're on equal footing with everyone else. Don't let other people intimidate you. What you have to say and contribute to a brainstorming session is valuable, and people will see that.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Your grasp of complicated financial information is getting stronger, so take advantage of it! Visit a few financial websites and start growing your education about what to do with your money. Ask a friend who knows their stuff how you can learn even more. When the concepts start to click, you'll be hooked. Don't get frustrated if you get confused. It's educational time for you.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

If you want more privacy in your life, you simply have to ask for it. People are so excited about the idea of spending more time with you that they aren't going to pick up on the subtle hints you've been laying down. If someone asks to hang out with you, don't hem and haw or tell them you're not sure. Go ahead and own your time. Tell them you're sorry, you can't.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

A friend has quite a few troubles on their mind, and they might feel the need to tell you all about them. It's kind of you to sit and listen to them go on and on about their drama, but you don't have to, especially when you find their troubles to be trivial. Tolerating their emotional intensity and upheaval could send them the message that you're always going to be willing to enable them..



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Creating a vision of what you want to accomplish is the very first step in accomplishing it. So pick your toughest goal, whether it's getting fit, landing a new job, or asking out that cutie, and create a clear picture of it happening in your mind. Give yourself a road map to follow and you'll make it easier to succeed. Don't let doubts creep in. Those just don't have a place in your storyline.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

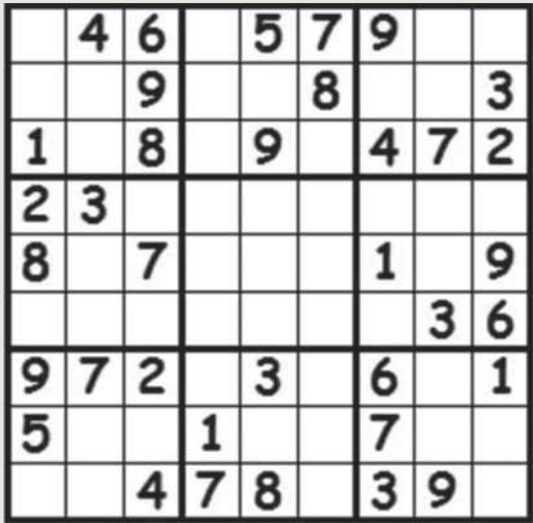
You're in a great mood, full of good humour and unlimited hope, so it's a great day to pick an obstacle and fly right over it! You're feeling confident and energised enough to go the distance, no matter how far it is. Pick your battle early in the day and by tonight you should have a very satisfying solution all worked out. This accomplishment will make you feel warm.

KIDS COLOURING



DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number



BOGGLER



Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER



DAILY CROSSWORD ANSWERS (APRIL 01)



WORD BUILDER

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count



THE PHARAOHS'

GOLDEN PARADE

Emmanuel Parisse
Cairo, Egypt

The mummified remains of 22 Egyptian pharaohs, including the most powerful ancient queen, have been paraded through the streets of Cairo on Saturday, in a procession to a new resting place.

Under the watchful eyes of security forces, the mummies were moved 7km across the capital from the iconic Egyptian Museum, where most have resided undisturbed for over a century, to the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation.

Dubbed the Pharaohs' Golden Parade, the 18 kings and four queens travelled in order, oldest first, each aboard a separate float decorated in ancient Egyptian style.

The Interior Ministry said both pedestrians and vehicles were barred from Tahrir Square, site of the current museum, and other sections of the parade route, ahead of the 6.00pm start.

"The whole world will be watching," said Egyptian archaeologist and former antiquities minister Zahi Hawass, who will commentate as the event unfolds live on state television.

"This is an important 40 minutes in the life of the city of Cairo," he said ahead of the event.

Sequenre Tao II, 'the Brave', who reigned over southern Egypt some 1,600 years before Christ, was on the first chariot, while Ramses IX, who reigned in the 12th century BC, was at the rear. Ramses II and Queen Hatshepsut, the most powerful female pharaoh, also made the journey.

Emblazoned with the name of their allotted sovereign, the gold-coloured carriages were fitted with shock absorbers for the trip, to ensure none of the precious cargos are accidentally disturbed.

'Raises emotions'

Discovered near Luxor from 1881 onwards,



This file photo shows Egyptians bidding farewell to the Ramses II colossal statue at Talat Harb Square, as it was being moved from the polluted capital city Cairo to a spot near the Pyramids in Giza, closer to its original site. The mummies of 18 ancient Egyptian kings and four queens were paraded through the streets of Cairo on Saturday evening, in a carnival dubbed the Pharaohs' Golden Parade (AFP)

most of the mummies have lain in the Egyptian Museum since the early 1900s.

Fascinating new details of the pharaohs' lives are still emerging.

A recent high-tech study of Sequenre Tao II, involving CT scans and 3D images of his hands and long-studied skull fractures, indicated that he was likely killed in a post-battle execution ceremony.

For their procession through Cairo's streets, the mummies will be in special containers filled with nitrogen, under conditions similar to their regular display cases.

The mummies will be showcased individ-



This is an important
40 minutes in the life
of the city of Cairo

ZAHY HAWASS

ually at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation, in an environment redolent of underground tombs.

They will be signposted by a brief biography and, in some cases, copies of CT scans.

Upon arrival, they will occupy 'slightly upgraded cases', said Salima Ikram, professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo.

"The temperature and humidity control will be even better than it was in the old museum," added Ikram, a mummification specialist.

The mummies' re-housing 'marks the end

of much work to improve their conservation and exhibition', said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay.

"This raises emotions that go much further than the mere relocation of a collection - we will see the history of Egyptian civilisation unfold before our eyes," she added.

'Curse of the Pharaoh'

The National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation was completed in 2010, and Hawass said he had planned to open it in 2012.

But the process was delayed by the Arab Spring revolution of 2011 and subsequent turmoil.

The new museum opened its doors to limited exhibits from 2017 and will open fully on Sunday, before the mummies go on display to the general public from April 18.

In the coming months, the country is due to inaugurate another new showcase, the Grand Egyptian Museum, near the Giza pyramids.

It too will house pharaonic collections, including the celebrated treasure of Tutankhamun.

Discovered in 1922, the tomb of the young ruler, who took the throne briefly in the 14th century BC, contained treasures including gold and ivory.

A so-called 'curse of the pharaoh' emerged in the wake of Tutankhamun's unearthing in 1922-23.

A key funder of the dig, Lord Carnarvon, died of blood poisoning months after the tomb was opened, while an early visitor likewise died abruptly in 1923.

With the planned parade coming only days after several disasters struck Egypt, some have inevitably speculated on social media about a new curse provoked by the latest move.

Recent days have seen a deadly rail collision and a building collapse in Cairo, while global headlines were dominated by the struggle to refloat the giant container ship *MV Ever Given* which blocked the Suez Canal for almost a week.

AFP

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BIRTHDAY WISHES

GARVIT
April 01

Happy Birthday Sweet Garvit, The day you were born was the most special and happiest day of our life. With lots of love Bhagwatiba, Sarlaba, Kaushalibali, Sanatdada, Vishalpappa, Yashumom, Tapanmasha, Bhumicamashi, Anandmama and Prahar.

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Indian Male, 24, B.E. Computer Science, Masters in GIS from U.K, seeking placement in GIS field.

Having Oman Driving Licence.
Contact 99738614

IT Manager with 15+ years of experience. Currently working with a reputed institution in Muscat for last 7 years. MCSA, CCNA, ITIL certified. Seeks suitable placement as IT Manager/System Admin. Contact 92514687
Email: hi.binu@gmail.com

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YOUNG EMERGING ARTIST'S PRIZE 2020



'Collectibles' by Majeda al Hinai

ART ACES

Hubert Vaz

Stal Gallery's Young Emerging Artist's Prize (YEAP), initiated and mentored by the internationally esteemed Omani artist Hassan al Meer, has become a unique platform for art since 2015. This programme has been the first of its kind in Oman, supporting a new generation of rising artists.

For its 5th Annual Young Emerging Artist's Prize, Stal Gallery is especially proud to continue to support and to be at the forefront of this initiative for Omani youth. Throughout this programme, they are mentored by artists with invaluable experiences and international recognition.

The three-month long programme provides access for professional skills development, online profiling, usage of multimedia technology and displaying a wider presentation of visual arts. The contest has grown to become the most anticipated art programme of Oman at a nonprofit art gallery - Stal, the

Alserkal Group's first cultural project in Oman.

The 5th Annual Young Emerging Artist's Prize has been awarded under the guidance of Meer who is Stal Gallery's art director and curator. The featured works represent conceptual art by Omani artists including Farah Mubarak, Said al Jahdhami, Arwa al Jahwari, Hadiya al Qasimi, Farah Asqul, Mahmood al Zadjali, Bashayer al Naaimi, Majeda al Hinai, and Mujahid al Malki.

"This year was not ordinary because of the pandemic and the social distancing norms. The 5th edition of YEAP actually started at the beginning of 2020 by selecting the most promising young artists and preparing them for the competition," said Meer, adding that it was an opportunity for both established and emerging artists to engage in the thought process and the conceptualisation of new ideas towards effectively communicating the concepts presented therein, aesthetically and philosophically.

"This programme holds very exciting promise for the future of contemporary art in Oman. The jurors were drawn from different institutions and back-



All nine artists show a willingness to experiment with different media and presentational styles, which is very impressive for emerging young artists.

I can't wait to see what they will do next

KAREN DRAKE

grounds and they had an opportunity to collaborate via Zoom conferences, to discuss the merits of each entry, ensuring a fair, thorough, and robust process," Meer said.

The judging panel comprised a diverse group of art professionals like David Drake, director of Foto-

gallery (UK), Marta Michalowska, director of The Wapping Project (UK), Riham Noor al Zadjali, artist and co-founder of Art with Refugees (Oman), Karen Drake, scientist, art director and creative producer (UK).

"All nine artists show a willingness to experiment with different media and presentational styles, which is very impressive for emerging young artists. I can't wait to see what they will do next. I'm sure they will go on to achieve wider international exposure," David said.

Karen added, "The artists demonstrated bold intentions and delivered high quality and innovative work. It was a privilege to work with Stal Gallery and partners on this year's art prize."

Riham elaborated, "Stal's YEAP is about innovation, trying to deliver artworks in ways that haven't been delivered before, whether it's in concept, materials or presentation. It is nice to see that many of this year's artists managed to use the challenge of working during this pandemic by looking inwards and delivering works that are more original to themselves."



'Dead Fish' by Farah Mubarak



'Moral Assortment' by Mahmood al Zadjali

THE WINNERS

The other winners are:

Best concept:

Farah Asqul

Best presentation:

Farah Mubarak al Balushi

Best use of materials:

Mahmood al Zadjali



GRAND PRIZE: MAJEDA AL HINAI

Majeda al Hinai is an artist, designer, educator and co-founder of Brash Collective (BC). Her background in architecture plays a key role in her fascination with form and sculpture. Majeda's collaborative practice BC deals with transposing familiar forms found in popular culture and playing on their exuberance. The research is driven by the desire to re-imagine recognisable objects and represent them in an estranged form. While taking part in social commentary, the work also deals with experimentation and advancement in multiple disciplines, combining art and technology in the physical and digital realms.



'Fragmented Nostalgia' by Farah Asqul



'Portrait' by Farah Asqul



Dimuth Karunaratne of Sri Lanka plays a shot as Joshua de Silva (L) of West Indies looks on during the final day of the second Test on Friday

Sri Lanka stand firm as second Test fizzles out

WEST INDIES VS SRI LANKA
SECOND TEST: DAY FIVE
North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda - Dimuth Karunaratne hit 75 and soaked up 176 deliveries in a century stand with Lahiru Thirimanne, and Oshada Fernando struck an unbeaten half-century (66) of his own later in the day, as Sri Lanka comfortably batted out a draw in Antigua on Friday.

Missing Shannon Gabriel for part of the day due to a hamstring complaint, West Indies were only able to take two Sri Lanka wickets on a pitch that had become slower and lower for the quicks and yet did not take substantial turn for the spinners. Only the occasional delivery misbehaved, and that was usually out of the rough.

Each of the four Sri Lanka batsmen who came to the crease in this innings appeared comfortable. At no stage was there the

dramatic, fast turn - often seen in South Asia on the fifth day - to envenom the slow bowlers.

It was the 101-run opening stand that laid the platform for Sri Lanka's successful resistance. Thirimanne was dropped on 17 in the third over of the day when wicketkeeper Joshua da Silva failed to grasp a straightforward leg-side chance off the bowling of Gabriel.

Karunaratne was especially adept at shuffling across the stumps, closing his bat, and hitting into leg-side gaps. In fact, 55 of his runs came on that side of the pitch, with all but one of his nine boundaries scored there. He completed a half-century shortly before lunch, having hit some memorable on-drives, to go with his leg-side flicks.

Thirimanne was more cautious, venturing only two boundaries in the morning, perhaps pushed to reticence by

the early chance he gave up. When he was dismissed for 39 off 114 nicking a full Alzarri Joseph delivery to first slip where Cornwall took a sharp, low catch, Karunaratne slowed down too. Sri Lanka had very clearly decided the target of 377 was going to be too much of a stretch (it always seemed extremely unlikely).

Oshada hit out only against the truly wayward balls, picking up frequent singles in between the big shots. He scored more quickly than the openers, reaching his half-century off the 86th ball he faced, but then buckled down soon after. He was 66 not out off 119 when Kraigg Brathwaite decided no result was possible and the match was called off. With Karunaratne having been dismissed by Kyle Mayers late in the second session, Oshada had Dinesh Chandimal for company for the 20 overs

that were played in the third session. Chandimal made 10 off 66 deliveries.

The 0-0 result means Sri Lanka failed to win any of their series in the Caribbean, having lost the T20Is 2-1 and the ODIs 3-0. They do maintain their No 7 ranking in Tests, however, keeping West Indies at eight.

Cricinfo

SCOREBOARD	
West Indies 1st Innings 354	
Sri Lanka 1st Innings 258	
West Indies 2nd Innings 280-4 decl	
SRI LANKA 2 ND INNINGS	
L Thirimanne c Cornwall b Joseph	39
D Karunaratne lbw b Mayers	75
O Fernando not out	66
D Chandimal not out	10
Extras: (lb 1, nb 1, w 1)	3
TOTAL: 193 for two in 79 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-101, 2-146	
Bowling: K Roach 12-2-33-0, J Holder 10-3-24-0, R Cornwall 26.4-8-53-0, S Gabriel 5.2-2-20-0, A Joseph 10-2-33-1, J Blackwood 6-1-17-0, K Brathwaite 3-0-7-0, K Mayers 6-4-5-1	

Azam century helps Pakistan beat SA off last ball in first ODI

SOUTH AFRICA VS PAKISTAN FIRST ODI

Centurion, South Africa - A century by Babar Azam set up a three-wicket, last-ball win for Pakistan in the first one-day international (ODI) against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Friday.

The Pakistan captain hit a stroke-filled 103 off 104 balls and shared a second-wicket partnership of 177 with Imam-ul-Haq, who made 70.

But Azam's dismissal started a collapse in which fast bowler Anrich Nortje took four wickets in four overs. From 186 for one, with more than 18 overs in hand to reach a target of 274, Pakistan slumped to 203 for five before Mohammad Rizwan and Shadab Khan steadied the innings again in a sixth-wicket stand of 53.

But both were dismissed before Faheem Ashraf hit the winning run off Andile Phehlukwayo off the last ball.

"There was a little bit of pressure but we will learn from that," Azam said through an interpreter at the after-match presentation.

Azam, who was named man of the match, praised his bowlers, who came within three runs of achieving his objective of restricting South Africa to a total of around 270 after he won the toss and sent them in.

"I told them to bowl hard lengths and there was some swing as well," he said.

"They took wickets in the power play and that helped us."

Rassie van der Dussen had to perform a rescue act for South Africa after the hosts struggled to 55 for four inside 15 overs.

He hit 123 not out, his maiden international century, to enable South Africa to score 273 for six.

South African captain Temba Bavuma admitted the loss of early wickets disrupted South Africa's aggressive intent.

"We didn't help ourselves



Pakistan captain Babar Azam celebrated after scoring a century against South Africa during the first ODI in Centurion on Friday

with our batting effort in the first ten overs," he said.

The win gave Pakistan an important advantage in the three-match series, with South Africa set to lose five key players to the Indian Premier League after Sunday's second match in Johannesburg.

Nortje, one of those who will depart for India, conceded 31 runs in his first spell of five overs but came back strongly, dismissing Babar and Iman in successive overs before having new cap Danish Aziz caught behind off a vicious, lifting delivery.

When Asif Ali was caught off a top-edged pull, South Africa were right back in the game. Nortje finished with four for 51.

Van der Dussen and David Miller (50) revived South Africa's innings earlier with a fourth-wicket stand of 116.

Van der Dussen and Phehlukwayo (29) then added 64 for the sixth wicket.

AFP

SCOREBOARD	
SOUTH AFRICA	
A Markram c Ashraf b Afridi	19
Q de Kock c Azam b Afridi	20
T Bavuma c Afridi b Hasnain	1
R van der Dussen not out	123
H Klaasen c Rizwan b Ashraf	1
D Miller c Rizwan b Rauf	50
A Phehlukwayo c Khan b Rauf	29
K Rabada not out	13
Extras: (lb 2, nb 1, w 14)	17
TOTAL: 273 for six in 50 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-34, 2-41, 3-43, 4-55, 5-171, 6-235	
Bowling: S Afridi 10-1-61-2, M Hasnain 10-2-52-1, F Ashraf 9-0-25-1, H Rauf 10-0-72-2, S Khan 8-0-45-0, D Aziz 3-0-16-0	
PAKISTAN	
Imam-ul-Haq c Rabada b Nortje	70
F Zaman b Rabada	8
B Azam c de Kock b Nortje	103
M Rizwan c Rabada b Phehlukwayo	40
D Aziz c de Kock b Nortje	3
A Ali c Phehlukwayo b Nortje	2
S Khan b Phehlukwayo	33
F Ashraf not out	5
S Afridi not out	0
Extras: (nb 1, w 9)	10
TOTAL: 274 for seven in 50 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-9, 2-186, 3-193, 4-198, 5-203, 6-256, 7-271	
Bowling: K Rabada 10-1-51-1, L Ngidi 10-1-65-0, A Nortje 10-0-51-4, A Phehlukwayo 10-0-56-2, T Shamsi 10-0-51-0	

Delhi Capitals' Axar Patel tests positive

IPL 2021

Mumbai, India - Axar Patel, the Delhi Capitals allrounder, has tested positive for COVID-19. Patel had checked into the team hotel in Mumbai on March 28 after arriving with a negative COVID-19 report, but has returned a positive test since.

He is 'currently in isolation at a designated medical care facility'. The franchise's medical team 'is in constant touch with Axar and ensuring his safety and well-being'. The Capitals are currently training at the Cricket Club of India premises (Brabourne Stadium), and the



Axar Patel

club has barred its members from accessing the areas being used by the franchise.

Patel was with the India team - Tests and T20Is against England - till recently, and made

a remarkable start to his Test career in the absence of Ravindra Jadeja.

He played three of the four Tests of the series, and picked up 27 wickets - joint-most with Dilip Doshi (against Australia in 1979) for most wickets by an Indian in his maiden Test series. He also played the first T20I of the five-match series, on March 12, the last time he was in action.

He is the second cricketer, after the Kolkata Knight Riders' Nitish Rana, to test positive since the teams started checking into their hotels in Mumbai and Chennai. There was positive

news for Rana, however, with the Knight Riders putting out a video that showed him attending a team training session after an extended 12-day quarantine.

As such, the situation in Mumbai, as well as other parts of the country, is rather grim, with a fresh spike in COVID-19 cases, which the chief minister of Maharashtra (of which Mumbai is a part) Uddhav Thackeray has called a 'second wave'.

Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru, Delhi, Kolkata and Ahmedabad are the six host centres for 2021 IPL, which will start on April 9.

Cricinfo

BCCI keeps Hyderabad in contingency plans

IPL 2021

Mumbai, India - The BCCI is keeping a close eye on the growing number of COVID-19 cases in India, especially in Mumbai, but remains confident that it will be able to conduct the IPL as scheduled, starting in less than a week's time.

At the same time, Hyderabad has emerged as a back-up venue option, should one or more of the six designated host cities not be able to hold their matches.

However, the BCCI has the state's assurance that the development shouldn't affect the IPL bubbles. The matches are meant to be held in a bubble without any crowds. All of the

four teams who will start their IPL 2021 campaigns in Mumbai - Chennai Super Kings, Delhi Capitals, Punjab Kings and Rajasthan Royals - are staying at exclusive accommodations, and don't come in contact with anyone outside the bubble.

Franchises who contacted said they haven't yet been spoken to about a move to Hyderabad, and remained confident that the matches would go on as scheduled. Despite the assurances, though, there is a sense of uncertainty after reports came in that few members of the ground-staff at Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai have tested positive.

Cricinfo

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Oman's Abdul Majeed al Hadrami in action during the opening day's action in RS:X class at the Mussanah Open Championship on Saturday

MODEST START FOR OMAN SAILORS

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

It was not the best of starts for the Omani sailors as the Mussanah Open Championship, which is serving as an Asia and Africa Olympic Qualifier, began at the Mussanah Sports City on Saturday.

Two Oman teams - Musab al Hadi-Waleed al Kindi and Ahmed al Hasani-Abdul Rahman al Mashari - competing in the 49er class had a day to forget as they ended day one at tenth and 13th spots respectively among 14 competitors after the conclusion of three races. China's duo of Chao Xiang and Hong Wei led the standings with a total score of seven points and closely following the pair was another Chinese team of Wang Xin and Zhou Zhibo with 11.

South Africa's Alex Burger and Benjamin Talbot Daniel were third with 16 while India's Ganapathy Kelapanda Chengappa and Varun Ashok Thakkar were fourth with 18.

Hadi and Kindi recorded 11th place in the opening race and then improved to sixth in the next and finished eighth in the third and final race to total 25 points. Hasani and Mashari had disappointing starts in the first two races as they were 13th and 12th respectively before making a comeback with a sixth to finish with a score of 31.

The sultanate is fielding sailors in 49er and RS:X classes and a lot of hopes are pinned on the 49er teams.

The three Omani sailors in RS:X men class are Abdul Majeed al Hadrami, Faisal al Qutaiti and al Mukhtar al Mujaini.

On Saturday, two RS:X races took place and Qutaiti was the best Omani performer with a tenth place finish (20 points) while Hadrami was 12th with 22 and Mujaini 13th at the bottom with 26. Thailand's Natthapong Phonoppharat led with four points and was followed by countrymate Navin Singsart. The Philippines' Yancy Kaibigan was third with seven.

The RS:X class trio and the two Omani 49er teams have a chance to make history as a title win after six days of racing will secure a spot at the Tokyo Olympics, a first for Oman.

The Mussanah Open Championship is also serving as an Olympic qualifier for Laser, Laser Radial, 49erFX and RS:X classes for men and women.

A total of 102 sailors from 17 countries are participating in dif-

ferent classes in a bid to secure their place at Tokyo Games as the championship in Mussanah is the final qualification event.

International race management officials selected by the Asian Sailing Federation (ASAF) joined their counterparts from Oman Sail, organisers of the event, on Saturday.

Ahead of the start of racing, Rashid al Kindi, Oman Sail director of sailing said, "We welcome a strong fleet to sail in Oman and we are confident of a high level of competition. Conditions in Mussanah are great and with such high stakes, we know the sailors will be able to perform at their peak. The competitors in each class are evenly matched, so it will be all about small gains on each day and fine margins that will decide who qualifies for Tokyo 2020."



Sailors at the start line for the opening race of the 49er class on Saturday

The Mussanah Open Championship was allocated Olympic qualification status by World Sailing to substitute for postponed events throughout 2020 and allow sailors the opportunity to confirm their spot in a safe and competitive

environment. Everyone involved has been tested upon arrival in Oman and regularly throughout to create a secure bubble and allow the event to go ahead.

Ajay Narang, Chair of the ASAF Events Committee, said, "It has been very challenging for

everybody to organise an event during this period but the organisation has put systems in place to make sure that sailors are safe and able to compete to qualify for the Olympics.

"Despite the challenges everybody has gone through, there has been thorough testing at every stage to ensure the safety of the sailors, coaches and officials so that the event can happen. We are very grateful to Oman Sail for organising this event in such a short timeframe and making sure the event is successful."

All sailors, coaches and onsite management staff have passed rigorous COVID-19 safety procedures in order to enter Oman and will remain within Millennium Resort Mussanah for the duration of the event.

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OFA cancels domestic football leagues

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

The decision of the Oman Football Association (OFA) - to cancel all the domestic leagues of the current season (2020-21) on Thursday - has sparked a debate on the social media on whether the leagues should have been rescheduled or cancelled.

On Thursday, the OFA board met under the chairmanship of the OFA president Sheikh Salim al Wahaibi and announced the decision to cancel all the ongoing leagues of the current season.

While the Omantel League, which features the top-14 clubs in the sultanate, had finished ten rounds; the OFA First Division was in the second round stage with nine teams in action after the completion of the first round with participation of 19 teams. Also the OFA Women's Futsal League, which had begun last month with 23 teams entering the competition, had two rounds completed.

The OFA released a statement on Twitter that the 'decision to cancel all the ongoing leagues have been taken to ensure the safety and

health of players and officials in view of the alarming coronavirus pandemic situation'.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily* on Saturday, Fahd al Raisi, the OFA general secretary and the CEO, said, "Following the instructions of the Supreme Committee incharge of dealing with COVID-19 to stop all sports activities from April 1 until further notice, it was decided that in the interest of all, we cancel the ongoing leagues.

"With the rise in COVID-19 cases and the instructions from the government, we have been closely monitoring the situation. We discussed with the representatives of the 14 Omantel League clubs and they were unanimous in their support to cancel the league this season as they had a bitter experience last year following the suspension of the top-flight league for more than six months.

"That uncertainty of resumption had cost most of the clubs a lot and, this time, the top 14 clubs agreed that it was sensible to cancel the league at this stage."

Raisi, a veteran sports administrator, added, "We all love to see players on the field.



A file photo of Dhofar and Seeb club players in action during the 2020-21 Omantel League earlier this year

But this is a difficult situation and we have to follow the advise of the government. With the Holy Month of Ramadan approaching and the night curfew on, it is going to be very difficult to rearrange the remaining fixtures of the OFA First Division. A lot of first division clubs were adamant to postpone and not cancel, but given the situation, the OFA board took the call to cancel all the three leagues.

"One of the reasons of the first division clubs being upset was our refusal to accept their demand that all nine clubs, which are now in the second round, should be promoted to the Omantel League and that the top-flight league next season should feature 23 clubs. There was no way we could accept such a proposal," said Raisi.

Raisi said that the OFA will distribute financial aids to all the Omantel League clubs and the

first division clubs and prepare for next season's league in a much better way following the cancellation.

National team's World Cup campaign

Raisi said that with the forthcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup and 2023 Asian Cup joint qualification matches of Oman to be held in June in Qatar, 'lot of focus is on our national team's preparations'.



All 14 Omantel League clubs agreed to the cancellation of league

FAHD AL RAISI
OFA GENERAL SECRETARY

of the qualifiers are scheduled in September and OFA will have that in mind when it chalks out plan to begin the 2021-22 season in August.

Raisi said the criticism of cancellation of the leagues was unfair as OFA looked into the interests of the clubs and the safety of players. Lot of football analysts took to Twitter and other social media handles to express their displeasure after the leagues were cancelled.

Raisi said that they had decided to set up a bio-bubble for the nine first division teams to organise the league in Muscat from April 3-11 but the Supreme Committee's decision forced them to suspend all sporting activities on Wednesday.

Last year, the leagues and sporting activities were suspended in mid-March but OFA resumed the Omantel League and First Division League in October before concluding it in November. At that time, the number of rounds left in top-flight were only three.

Raisi said that the cancellation was the 'best option' in the current situation and hoped that the clubs would be better prepared for the next season.

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