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## US STATE SECRETARY CALLS HM

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a phone call from Michael Pompeo, US Secretary of State, on Wednesday. The conversation dealt with aspects of bilateral cooperation between the two countries, as well as consultation on developments in the region.



### NEWS BRIEFS

#### TRUMP TELLS SUPPORTERS HE WILL 'NEVER CONCEDE'

Washington, United States - President Donald Trump on Wednesday told a rally of his supporters outside the White House that he would never concede that he lost the election, as Congress readied to certify Joe Biden's victory.

"We will never give up. We will never concede," Trump told the cheering crowd. "We will stop the steal."

Trump also urged Vice President Mike Pence not to certify Biden's victory in Congress.

Wearing 'Make America Great Again' caps and sharing biscuits, hundreds of Trump supporters insisted they would never accept Biden as president as they travelled by bus from near Boston to Washington to protest Congress's expected certification of his White House victory.

"We're not going to roll over and let this go. There's no way," said Sue Ianni, an official with the pro-Trump organisation Super Fun Happy America.



## VAT from April 16

Shaddad al Musalmey  
Muscat

VAT TO GENERATE  
**RO300mn**  
IN FIRST 12 MONTHS OF  
IMPLEMENTATION

As Oman braces for new direct and indirect taxes to counter continued weakness in revenues, the date for the implementation of the Value Added Tax (VAT) has been set on April 16, 2021. Tax experts say the move in general will drive Oman's economy and it is estimated to generate over RO300mn in its first 12 months of implementation.

On Wednesday, the Tax Authority issued three executive decisions related to the implementation of VAT specifying the

mandatory registration for businesses as well as exempting basic food commodities from the list of the goods to be taxed.

According to the authority, 94 food items are exempted from VAT, including milk and dairy products, meat, fish, poultry, fresh eggs, vegetables and fruits, coffee, tea and cardamom, cereals and seeds, olive oil, sugar, nu-

tritional products for children, bread, bottled drinking water and salt.

According to the earlier report released by the Ministry of Finance as part of Oman's Medium-Term Fiscal Plan 2020-2024, the introduction of VAT, which was authorised via Royal Decree No 121/2020 on October 12, 2020, will serve as the foundation for the sultanate's revenue-raising framework by introducing a broad-based indirect tax. 'A socio-economic impact assessment has been carried out by an independent third party to as-

sess the fiscal, social and economic impact of VAT in Oman,' the report said.

With its implementation, Oman will join over 150 other countries globally that impose VAT and experts say the tax is expected to provide an additional source of support to Oman's treasury. The move is also in line with the sultanate's commitment to its Vision 2040 programme, which seeks to diversify the economy away from oil and towards non-oil sectors such as manufacturing, logistics and tourism.

Continued on Page 04

## MSM made joint stock company via Royal Decree

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued a Royal Decree on Wednesday reading as follows:

Royal Decree No 5/2021 on converting Muscat Securities Market (MSM) into a closed joint stock company under the name 'Muscat Bourse Company SAOG'.

**Article 1** states that, by virtue of provisions of this decree, an Omani closed joint stock company will be founded under the name 'Muscat Bourse Company SAOG' and that its ownership will be transferred to Oman Investment Authority.

**Article 2** states that all the allocations, origins, rights, obligations, assets and registers of MSM will be transferred to Muscat Bourse Company.

**Article 3** transfers the employees of MSM to Muscat Bourse Company, in line with provisions of the Privatisation Law promulgated under Royal Decree No 51/2019.

**Article 4** transfers all specialisations of MSM stated in the Capital Market Law (promulgated under Royal Decree No 80/98) to be transferred to Muscat

Bourse Company, without prejudice to this company's objectives stated in its Articles of Association.

**Article 5** stipulates that Muscat Bourse Company will practice all its activities within the framework of the Capital Market Law and thereby come under the monitoring and supervision of the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

It also states that Muscat Bourse Company may issue all regulations and decisions necessary for practising its specialisations, achieving its objectives and specifying fees against the services that it offers, after the approval of the CMA. Till such time, the regulations and laws in force will continue to be implemented without prejudice to the provisions of this decree.

**Article 6** states that the CMA will determine the general policy governing Muscat Bourse Company and issue regulations and laws regulating licences necessary to be granted to the company so that it can practise its activities, as well as fees that it needs to pay to the CMA.

Continued on Page 04

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Sultanate to mark Oman Environment Day on January 8

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The sultanate, represented by the Environment Authority (EA), will mark Omani Environment Day observed every year on January 8. The day has been celebrated since 1997 on the directives of the Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said to boost the efforts aimed at protecting the environment in Oman and conserving the ecosystem and natural resources which form a key pillar of sustainable development.

The EA has launched several initiatives to spread awareness on the importance of preserving the environment, including planting mangroves, a project to plant 10mn wild trees, cleaning up coral reefs in various parts of the sultanate, and banning the use of single-use plastic bags.

National drive to plant 10mn wild trees

To increase green cover and plant wild trees, the EA in co-operation with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) launched a national initiative to plant 10mn wild tree saplings in the next ten years. The authority has informed that the wild tree varieties will include ghaf, al samar and sidr and that nurseries are being set up to produce saplings for the purpose.

*The campaign was part of a project which started in 2001 and aims to plant 1mn seedlings of mangrove trees on the sultanate’s coasts. The authority has already planted about 680,000 saplings in 30 khors in various coastal areas*

EA OFFICIAL

The EA will form working groups to collect seeds in co-operation with local communities in order to facilitate planting 10mn saplings.

Mangrove campaign

In the last two decades, the EA has planted mangrove seedlings in different parts of the sultanate to sustain the natural world.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, an official at EA said, “The mangrove plantation campaign is being conducted in several areas of the sultanate. The authority conducts several awareness campaigns among members of the community on the importance of mangroves and their benefit to humans. It also discusses the main factors for the growth of this type of trees and the threats and dangers faced by them.”

He added, “The campaign was part of a project which started in 2001 and aims to plant 1mn seedlings of mangrove trees on the sultanate’s coasts. The authority has already planted about 680,000 saplings in 30 khors in various coastal areas.”

The official said the authority also opened four nurseries to produce mangrove seedlings. “Two of them are in Qurm Nature Reserve in Muscat, while the others are in Khor Batah in Sur in South Batinah, and Qurm Grand Reserve in Salalah in Dhofar governorate.”

Ban on single-use plastic bags

In order to preserve the environment from the harmful affects of plastic waste, the sultanate decided to ban the use of single-use plastic shopping bags from January 1, 2020.

According to the EA, the ban came after a thorough study involving the participation of all stakeholders. Most of the waste in Oman

comprises single-use plastic bags. Single-use plastic bags are being replaced by eco-friendly bags made of cloth, paper or other organic materials and can be re-used multiple times.

Environment Society of Oman

The Environment Society of Oman (ESO) carried out several conservation projects, awareness campaigns and educational programmes in 2020, besides producing educational materials, including booklets, infographics and videos. Additionally, it has distributed more than 700 frankincense tree seedlings among communities in Dhofar.

In cooperation with Oman Flour Mills, ESO has distributed 4,000 reusable shopping bags in shops across Muscat, Sur, Masirah, Sadah, Thamrait and Al Wusta.

Bolstered by the Summer Sea Turtle Sustainability Grant from the Turtle Island Restoration Network and SEE Turtles, which was awarded to ESO following an international public vote, the society also removed almost 200 tonnes of abandoned fishing nets from the sea around Masirah.

Founded in 2004, ESO is the only non-profit organisation in Oman that focuses on environmental conservation. Its mission is to help protect Oman’s natural heritage and influence environmentally sustainable behaviour through education, awareness and conservation.

The society continues its efforts with various bodies, societies and individuals to protect the Omani environment, in addition to promoting sustainable environmental behaviour, and raising awareness about the importance of protecting the local environment and preserving its resources for future generations.

See also [Page 20](#)

25 divers to conduct coral reefs clean-up in Suwaiq

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

To celebrate Omani Environment Day observed on January 8, more than 25 divers will undertake a coral reefs clean-up exercise in the wilayat of Suwaiq, North Batinah governorate, in co-operation with the Environment Authority.



Hamed al Amri

The divers have conducted similar activities on previous occasions of the Omani Environment Day, and the clean-up exercise on Monday will involve volunteers from three wilayats.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Hamed Mohammed al Amri, head of Al Salam Diving Team, said, “This group of Omani volunteer divers, including seven women, belong to three teams - Al Salam Diving Team, Khabourah Diving Team and Oman Divers. The clean-up drive will be conducted in the Al Ghalila area in the wilayat of Suwaiq on January 8.”

Starting at 8am and ending at 10am, the divers will clean up the marine environment at depths of 15m.

“The initiative aims to rid the sea of pollutants and preserve it for the ultimate help of fishermen. Through this effort, the team also aims to spread awareness on the importance of preserving the marine environment in the community,” Amri said.

“We hope fishermen abide by fishing laws. They shouldn’t discard unwanted nets into the sea,” he urged.



(Supplied photos)

GREEN  
CLEAN OMAN

# Confusion and losses over plastic ban

Muscat - With the ban on single-use plastic bags being implemented across Oman since January 1, businesses involved in the production of plastic bags have been left confused and shackled with losses.

The decision was first announced in March 2020 and the date for implementation set on January 1, 2021. However, plastic businesses claim they were promised a substantial grace period once the authorities issued specifications for the replacement bags to be produced and sold.

A week since enforcement of the ban, specifications for alternatives are still awaited, which has resulted in significant losses for plastic bag manufactures.

According to Hussain Moosa Ibrahim al Lawati, vice chairman of Polythene & Plastic Products Company, talks between plastic bag production companies, the

Environment Authority and Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion started in December 2019. "The plastic industry welcomed the initiative, and the authorities promised to find a win-win solution for both - companies and supermarkets."

While describing the ban as a 'good initiative; there is no doubt about that', Lawati claimed it was not implemented the way it was discussed and promised. "It is causing all this chaos for plastic producing companies, supermarkets and the end-users - shoppers."

Lawati noted that as a first step towards banning single-use plastic bags, the authorities had agreed to decide the new specifications for replacement re-usable bags. "The ban on single-use plastic shopping bags was to be announced following a decision on replacement specifications. Additionally, it was



*The ban on single-use plastic bags was to be announced following a decision on replacement specifications. It was promised that six months to a year's grace period would be given to clear the stocks*

HUSSAIN AL LAWATI

promised that after the specifications were finalised, six months to a year's grace period would be given to clear the stocks held by companies and in supermarkets. Even today, though the ministerial decision has been implemented, we haven't yet received the official guidelines and specifications for the alternative re-usable shopping bags."

In a desperate measure to reduce losses, Lawati informed many companies have started producing small quantities of 50 microns shopping bags which was discussed in a meeting with the authorities.

Rashid Khamis al Farraji, CEO of Horizon Plastic Company, echoed Lawati's concerns.

"What was agreed in our last meeting with the authorities was that once specifications and guidelines for alternative re-usable bags were issued, we would be given a one-year grace period.

"Surprisingly, within months and without any notification, the law was announced. Almost ten months after the announcement, we are yet to receive official guidelines regarding specifications of the alternative re-usable bags."

Farraji's company has made huge losses. "Due to lack of clarity, we lost almost RO150,000 in business. December alone cost us RO40,000 because our clients were not confident of what bags they'd need. We could not produce anything in December and our staff sat idle without work." Farraji added that plastic bag manufacturers had been given a verbal assurance to allow 50 microns bags. "So we started production on a reduced capacity, but as of today (Jan 6), we are yet to receive official written guidelines."

Accepts the fact that COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and lockdowns may have resulted in delays in issuing the guidelines, Farraji said, "But they could have given us new guidelines first and a grace period of at least six months, so that we could shift smoothly to production of re-usable shopping bags as per new specifications".

Reiterating that he's not opposed to the ban, Lawati said, "The way it was implemented and handled caused all the problems. We believe it could have been done in a better way without harming the plastic bags producing industry."

(Text and photo by Syed Fasiuddin)

## Passport Index: Oman ranked 65th

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Oman's passport is ranked 65<sup>th</sup> in the world, a fall of three places from 2020, according to the Henley Passport Index: Q1 2021 Global Ranking released on January 5. The sultanate however has improved its ranking on the index from 73<sup>rd</sup> in 2015 to the 65<sup>th</sup> currently.

In the GCC, UAE continues to dominate the rankings, 'which has continued its remarkable upward trajectory on the Henley Passport Index. The UAE now has a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 173 and holds 16<sup>th</sup> spot on the ranking. This is a stunning ascent when compared to the position it held at the index's inception in 2006, when the country ranked 62<sup>nd</sup>, with a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of just 35,' stated the Q1 2021 ranking report. UAE is followed by Kuwait (55<sup>th</sup> rank), Qatar (56<sup>th</sup>), Bahrain (64<sup>th</sup>), Oman (65<sup>th</sup>) and Saudi Arabia ranked 66<sup>th</sup>. Oman has a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 80.

As 2021 commences, the latest results from the Henley Passport Index - the ranking of all the world's passports according to the number of destinations their holders can access without a prior visa - provide insights into the future of travel freedom in a world that has been transformed by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Without taking temporary restrictions into account, Japan continues to hold the No 1 position on the index, with passport holders able to access 191 destinations around the world visa-free. This marks the third consecutive year that Japan has held the top spot, either alone or jointly with Singapore.

Asia Pacific (APAC) region countries' dominance of the index - which is based on exclu-



*UAE is followed by Kuwait (55<sup>th</sup> rank), Qatar (56<sup>th</sup>), Bahrain (64<sup>th</sup>), Oman (65<sup>th</sup>) and Saudi Arabia ranked 66<sup>th</sup>. Oman has a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 80*

sive data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA) - now seems firmly established, states the report. Singapore sits in 2<sup>nd</sup> position, with access to 190 destinations, and South Korea holds onto 3<sup>rd</sup> place alongside Germany, with both having a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 189.

Finland, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain are ranked 4<sup>th</sup>, Austria and Denmark on 5<sup>th</sup>, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden on 6<sup>th</sup>, Belgium, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States on 7<sup>th</sup>, Australia, Czech Republic, Greece and Malta on 8<sup>th</sup>, Canada on 9<sup>th</sup> and Hungary 10<sup>th</sup>.

The ascendance of APAC countries in the Henley Passport Index rankings is a relatively new phenomenon. Over the index's 16-year history, the top spots were traditionally held by EU countries, the UK, or the US.

## Tax Authority issues 3 VAT-related decisions

Muscat - Tax Authority on Wednesday issued three executive decisions pertaining to the implementation of the Value Added Tax (VAT), which will come into effect on April 16.

The first decision determines the minimum volume of supplies (sales), which would require a taxpayer to compulsorily register with the Tax Authority. The second one relates to deadlines for registration to the Tax Authority while the third one lists the foodstuff exempted from the VAT (zero VAT payment).

As per the first decision, registering with the Tax Authority becomes compulsory if a taxpayer's annual supplies stand at RO38,500 or more or are expected to reach this ceiling.

The decision sets the ceiling of 'voluntary' registration with the Tax Authority at RO19,250 and states that, accordingly, a taxpayer may apply for voluntary registration if the applicant's annual supplies stand at, cross or expected to go beyond the value of RO19,250.

Determining ceilings for compulsory and optional registration comes within the context of the provisions of the GCC Unified VAT Agreement, which the sultanate signed in November 2016. The second decision fixes

deadlines for taxpayers' registration to the VAT at the Tax Authority. The decision was made taking into account a certain level of progression in taxpayers registering with the Tax Authority, depending on the volume of their annual supplies. 'The aim is to grant small and medium enterprises sufficient time to prepare and adjust their systems and their mechanisms of filing and billing to meet the requirements of the Tax Law,' it said.

The decision sets the 'Deadline of Registration' - the date on which a taxpayer will be required to implement the provisions of the VAT Law - according to the volume of the taxpayer's supplies. If the value of annual supplies of a taxpayer crosses or is expected to cross RO1mn, one has to register with the Tax Authority between February 1 and March 15 this year. Accordingly, the VAT for this segment (RO1mn-worth supplies) becomes applicable from April 16.

As for taxpayers whose supplies cross or are expected to cross the RO500,000 mark, their registration will be done in April and must be complete by July 1. The deadlines for lower segments follow a similar slope (per volume of supplies) till the minimum level of RO38,500-worth of supplies. The decision grants taxpayers a right to register voluntarily with the Tax Authority with effect from February 1 in case the value of their supplies crosses or is expected to cross RO19,250.

The third decision specifies the type of foodstuff exempted from the VAT. The list consists of 94 items under the customs tariff system to be exempted. These include meat, fish, poultry, dairy products, fresh eggs, vegetables, fruits, coffee, tea, cardamom, cereals and grains, olive oil, sugar, children's foods, bread, bottled water and table salt.

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## 114 new COVID-19 cases reported on Wednesday; 12,751 vaccinated



Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Wednesday announced 114 new cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), taking the total to 129,888.

The number of deaths re-

ported during the same time was two.

As of Wednesday, as many as 12,751 people had been vaccinated against the virus.

The number of those who recovered also increased by 50.

'The number of recoveries has

| CASES FROM JAN 01 TO JAN 06 |     |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Jan 1 to 3                  | 537 |
| (Average of 179)            |     |
| Jan 4                       | 180 |
| Jan 5                       | 190 |
| Jan 6                       | 114 |

increased to 122,456, while the number of deaths has reached 1,504,' an MoH statement said, adding that the rate of recovery is now 94.3 per cent.

As of Wednesday, a total of 67 patients were admitted in health institutions, including 26 in ICUs.

| PRAYER TIMINGS |        |         |         |
|----------------|--------|---------|---------|
| Fajr           | 5.30am | Duhr    | 12.18pm |
| Sunrise        | 6.50am | Asr     | 3.20pm  |
|                |        | Maghrib | 5.41pm  |
|                |        | Isha    | 6.56pm  |



# RO6.5mn pact signed for smart agri project

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resource signed an agreement on Wednesday to implement a smart agriculture project in the wilayat of Al Kamil W'Al Wafi in South Sharqiyah.

Under the agreement, the ministry will lease 100 acres of land to Agricultural and Fisheries Development Company for RO6.5mn to produce 2,400 tonnes of vegetables.



(Supplied photo)

The agreement was signed by H E Dr Saud bin Hamoud bin Ahmed al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and Abdullah bin Muhammad al Siyabi, general manager of the company.

The project aims to increase yield of a variety of vegetable crops, extending production seasons, and raise the quality of local produce.

'This agreement comes within the framework of joint cooperation between the public and private sectors and the directions of Oman Vision 2040 to stimulate investment, especially in the fields of agriculture and veterinary, to achieve local food security and create job opportunities for citizens,' the ministry stated.

The project focuses on introducing advanced technologies in the agricultural sector and raising efficiency of agricultural resources. Additionally, it will benefit Omani youth of the wilayat of Al Kamil W'Al Wafi.

The project includes green-

houses, and the use of cultivation techniques without soil, open field farming techniques, mechanised production, sorting and processing facilities, wireless agricultural meteorological inputs, and modern irrigation networks.

A variety of vegetables will be cultivated, and an area of 150,000sqm will be allocated for winter crops, including cherry tomatoes and sweet peppers of different colours, which are in demand in the domestic market, to reduce import requirements.

## Grace period for change of expat workers' status extended



(File photo)

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour has extended the earlier announced grace period for companies to change the status of their expatriate employees until January 21. This will help its efforts to regulate the labour market.

The decision allows modifying the professions of the non-Omani workforce from the banned sectors to other professions or vice versa. The companies will also be permitted to amend occupations at different professional levels in accordance

with the requirements of the profession.

'The decision allows transfer of non-Omani manpower data from one activity to another in the same establishment according to the licensing requirements of the business. The decision allows amending the wages of the non-Omani workforce according to the approved work contract,' a ministry statement said.

The decision gives permission to transfer non-Omani manpower services from one employer to another according to the controls and prescribed conditions. Also, an employer may apply for a licence to recruit and engage in work a non-Omani from inside Oman in the suspended activities if conditions are met.

The decision also allows the employer to cancel the work permit after paying the necessary fees and fines resulting from the expiration of the worker's licence.

## E-SYSTEM FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY INSTITUTES LAUNCHED



On the occasion of the Annual Day of Royal Oman Police (ROP), Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, launched the integrated electronic system of traffic safety institutes for various governorates of the sultanate at an event held at the Traffic Safety Institute in Ibri in Dhahirah governorate on Tuesday (ONA)

## VAT from April 16

Continued from Page 01

In comments to *Muscat Daily*, Joanne Clarke, tax director at Pinstent Masons Middle East, said, "Given current economic volatility as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the oil price dip, the government has insufficient funds to carry out legacy spending commitments that form part of Vision 2040. To drive these revenues, Oman has already announced it will be introducing a value added tax system aligned with the GCC VAT Framework at a standard rate of five per cent."

"It has undoubtedly been a difficult decision for the sultanate to press ahead with VAT implementation, however, there is no doubt that VAT has an important part to play in Oman's journey towards stabilising and diversifying state income, and it is estimated to generate over RO300mn in its first 12 months of implementation," she added.

Joanne said that it is likely that this will be the first of many significant tax changes to be implemented over the coming 24 months, as Oman has indicated it may also choose to introduce an income tax regime with effect from 2022 while taking particular care to ensure that low income families are protected.



*There is no doubt that VAT has an important part to play in Oman's journey towards stabilising state income, and it is estimated to generate over RO300mn in its first 12 months*

JOANNE CLARKE

"This would make Oman the first GCC country to implement a fully-fledged income tax system," she said.

The Ministry of Finance has stated the government is actively looking at all sources of revenue in order to plug the gap in deficit. This includes looking at income tax. 'The use of personal income tax is a widely used tool to diversify government revenue and is usually directed towards public services and social programmes. It is used as a tool to redistribute income within society,' the report said.

While the income slab that will come under the income tax is yet to be revealed, VAT will be imposed on most goods barring basic foodstuffs, healthcare services and public transport.

According to data released by the Ministry of Finance as part of the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan 2020-2024, the government is planning to increase its revenues through various sources to RO12.1bn and total spending to RO12.6bn by the end of 2024, with fiscal deficit reaching about RO537mn.

## MSM made joint stock company via Royal Decree

Continued from Page 01

**Article 7** states that the Board of Directors of Muscat Bourse Company will be formed in accordance with the company's Articles of Association and that the CMA may object to the decision of appointing a Board of Directors within a period of 15 days from the date the CMA is notified of such a decision.

**Article 8** states that Muscat Bourse Company must obtain the approval of the CMA prior to appointing a chief executive officer for the company and employees for the top management of the company.

**Article 9** instructs Oman Investment Authority to draft a contract of foundation of Muscat Bourse Company and its Articles of Association and to finalise its registration procedures in accordance with provisions of the Commercial Companies Law (promulgated under Royal Decree No 18/2019) before the date of enforcement of this law.

**Article 10** cancels MSM, as well as all that contradicts this decree or contravenes its provisions.

**Article 11** says that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced after 90 days from its date of publication.

ONA

ment Authority to draft a contract of foundation of Muscat Bourse Company and its Articles of Association and to finalise its registration procedures in accordance with provisions of the Commercial Companies Law (promulgated under Royal Decree No 18/2019) before the date of enforcement of this law.

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### REGIONAL WEATHER

|           | Max | Min | Kuwait City | 19 | 11 |
|-----------|-----|-----|-------------|----|----|
| Abu Dhabi | 24  | 12  | Manama      | 22 | 15 |
| Doha      | 23  | 15  | Riyadh      | 18 | 10 |

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# Mazoon Dairy signs pact to recycle plastic, solid waste

Muscat - Mazoon Dairy Company on Wednesday signed an agreement with Recycling Services Company to recycle plastic and solid waste, as it seeks through adoption of such solutions to recycle 90 per cent of its waste.

The agreement was signed by Ahmed bin Muhammad al Ghafri, chief support officer of Mazoon Dairy, and Mahmoud bin Abdullah al Ameri, CEO of Recycling Services Company.

The signing of the agreement coincided with the sultanate's celebration of Oman Environment Day which falls on January 8 every year. It is an expression of participation in the global and the national efforts of preservation and conservation of environmental resources, and an emphasis on Oman's rooted culture in coping with the environment.

"The agreement is the first of its kind in the sultanate, as the company has spaces dedicated to sorting all kinds of waste and recycling within its facilities," said the chief support officer of Mazoon Dairy.

"This agreement will expand



*The quantities that will be recycled and reused are estimated at 5 to 10 tonnes per day; as the organic waste is transferred to the biogas plant, the solid waste will be recycled*

MAZEN BIN HILAL AL SAADI

the company's waste recycling scope to include more types and quantities of waste that include plastic and solid waste. It is part of our social responsibility and

our commitment towards efficient waste management resulting from our operations."

Mazen bin Hilal al Saadi, director of Occupational Health,

Safety and Environment of Mazoon Dairy, added, "The quantities that will be recycled and reused are estimated at 5 to 10 tonnes per day; as the organic waste is transferred to the biogas plant, the solid waste will be recycled. The amount of plastic that will be recycled is estimated at 250 tonnes and will increase with the expansion of operations.

"This initiative will achieve a quantum leap in terms of sus-

tainability and preservation of the environment and within the environmental solutions that Mazoon Dairy has drawn up."

Mazoon Dairy worked on afforestation of its site in Sunaina in Al Sallahiyah with 7,000 different types of trees, where the step of afforestation came after the completion of all construction work on the site, ensuring the operation of the sewage plant, and equipping modern irrigation systems.

The cultivated trees include windbreaks, ornamental trees, and some fruit trees that are suitable for the desert environment.

Mazoon Dairy's eco-friendly programmes include sustainability plans, reducing emissions and environmentally friendly solutions.

The company has also banned the use of plastic on its site through the distribution of environmentally friendly bags starting from July of last year.

The initiative was completed by distributing environmentally friendly bags to the people of Sunaina as the first wilayat to ban the use of plastic bags.



## Follow COVID-19 measures at Mawaleh market: Municipality

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Muscat Municipality has called on visitors to the Central Market for Fruits and Vegetables in Mawaleh to follow COVID-19 preventive measures stating that only those over 12 years are allowed entry and a vehicle can carry up to two people.

'The market is open between 1pm and 6pm for retail shopping, while wholesale merchants can visit between 5am and 11am,' the municipality said.

Preventive measures to be followed on entering the market include wearing mask.

'Physical distancing is also required while shopping,' added the statement.

## Qatar Airways resumes daily flights to Muscat, weekly flights to Salalah

Doha, Qatar - Qatar Airways has announced the resumption of daily flights to Muscat starting from January 7, as well as weekly flights to Salalah, which resumed service on January 1.

The newly resumed flights to Salalah will leave Doha each Friday at 8.25am and arrive in Salalah at 1pm local time. Flights from Salalah are scheduled on Fridays at 4pm local time to arrive in Doha at 5.50pm. The flights to Muscat will fly daily from Doha at 12.45am, arriving in the Oman capital at 3.25am, and leave Muscat at 4.40am, landing in Doha at 5.30am. The schedule will be valid from January 1 to March 26.

Qatar Airways and Oman Air recently signed a code-share expansion that will significantly increase the number of destinations available to Oman Air passengers from three to 65 on the Qatar Airways' network across Africa, the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, India, and the Middle East.

Qatar Airways passengers will also benefit from additional connectivity, with the ability to book travel on an additional six



destinations across Africa and Asia in Oman Air's network. Both airlines will also explore a number of joint commercial and operational initiatives to further optimise their partnership.

Bennet Stephens, Qatar Airways' vice president, Sales for the Gulf, Middle East, Levant and Caucasus, region, said, "We are pleased to continue rebuilding our network and offering our passengers the opportunity to travel safely from Muscat and

Salalah. We are delighted with the response from the students' community of Oman to our Student Club programme, where they can enjoy great savings and bespoke benefits such as extra baggage allowances, the flexibility to change the dates of their flight and complimentary Super Wi-Fi onboard."

Qatar Airways is currently flying to over 110 destinations worldwide with more than 800 weekly flights, providing more

global connectivity than any other airline and connecting to US, GCC, Europe and Levant regions. Starting from January 29, Qatar Airways will restart flights to Seattle, almost two months ahead of the initial schedule. Passengers travelling to and from US will have an opportunity to enjoy the QSuite, the World's Best Business Class Seat, offered by Qatar Airways on all its US flights.

In November 2020, Qatar Airways signed another important code-share agreement with Air Canada, enhancing travel services between Doha and Toronto.

Passengers traveling to and from Canada will now be able to enjoy a seamless one-stop connection via, HIA, the Best Airport in the Middle East. Qatar Airways' enhanced connectivity with North America will benefit passengers from Oman, including Omani students, who massively enrolled to Qatar Airways' Global Student programme. Qatar Airways also expanded its connection with South America, increasing Sao Paulo services to ten weekly flights.

## Oman bans import of poultry from 7 countries

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has decided to ban the import of poultry from seven countries following reports of a highly contagious strain of avian flu spreading across Europe.

A statement issued by the ministry on Tuesday said, 'The import of poultry from Sweden, Netherlands, France, Ireland, Ukraine, Scotland and Tehran Province in the Islamic Republic of Iran has been prohibited. It is forbidden to import live birds and their products and derivatives until the cause of the ban is removed and a decision in this regard is issued.'

According to international media, a highly contagious form of avian influenza has been spreading rapidly in Europe for the last couple of months, putting the poultry industry on alert with previous outbreaks in mind that saw tens of millions of birds culled and significant economic losses.

Commonly called bird flu, the disease has been found in



France, the Netherlands, Germany, Britain, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, Croatia, Slovenia and Poland, after severely hitting Russia, Kazakhstan and Israel.

The vast majority of cases were found in migratory wild birds even though outbreaks have been reported on farms, leading to the death or culling of at least 1.6mn chickens and ducks so far around the region.

In the Netherlands - Europe's largest exporter of chicken meat and eggs - nearly 500,000 chickens died or were culled due to the virus this autumn, and

over 900,000 hens died in one single farm in Poland in November 2020.

"The risk of a transfer in poultry farms and more cases among wild birds is higher than in the past two years because of the massive appearance of various bird flu viruses in Europe," said a spokeswoman for the Friedrich-Loeffler Institute, Germany's federal animal disease research agency.

Although the risk to humans is low, the European Food Safety Agency said that the virus' evolution needed to be closely monitored.

## Jusoor Foundation gives falaj in Wadi al Jizi RO25,000 facelift

Sohar - Jusoor Foundation has completed the maintenance work of Al Dhuwaiqa Falaj in Wadi al Jizi area in the wilayat of Sohar, a project funded by OQ within a cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

Costing nearly RO25,000, the project is part of the commitment of OQ to social responsibility through Jusoor Foundation, the social investment arm of Sohar Aluminium, Vale Oman and OQ.

The falaj is expected to serve citizens residing in the area of Hail Dhuwaiqa in Wadi al Jizi by providing them with groundwater for their farms and animals. Maintenance of the falaj will enhance the added-value by preparing it to be a tourist at-

traction and through the preservation of Oman's attractions and heritage.

The Al Dhuwaiqa Falaj is categorised as a 'ghaili falaj', which refers to the type of falaj that is fed through ponds and running water. Measuring 880m long and located 5km away from the highway, the falaj is the water source on which people depend to irrigate their crops and for their other daily uses.

The maintenance work included the construction of an 800m open-air water distribution canal. The process required the removal of the old canal, deeper digging and expansion especially near mountainous surfaces.

This was followed by ce-



*This maintenance work will revive the falaj and enable the best utilisation of its water, besides preserving a part of Omani heritage and a beautiful tourist attraction*

SAIF AL SHIBLI

menting the bottom of the canal and constructing a 5m flyover.

Saif al Shibli, supervisor of Al Dhuwaiqa Falaj, said, "This project is of great importance to the people who rely heavily on this historic falaj for many aspects

of their life, in addition to their connection to it. This maintenance work will revive the falaj and enable the best utilisation of its water and will certainly preserve a part of Omani heritage and one of the beautiful tourist attractions in Wadi al Jizi area."

The investment by the founding companies of Jusoor for the maintenance projects for various aflaj in North Batinah governorate amounted to RO188,000, which included maintenance works for five 'ghaili' and 'dawoodi' aflaj.

These projects included the reconstruction of old water canals and the construction of new ones with flyovers in order to sustain a genuine heritage of the sultanate.

# Sohar Viewpoints to host renowned scientist

Continuing to bring global learning and perspective to locally relevant topics, Sohar International's thought-provoking Chairman's forum - Viewpoints, is back with yet another compelling session on Sunday, January 17, starting at 7.30pm.

The upcoming session of Viewpoints will host Dr Robbert Dijkgraaf, director and Leon Levy Professor at Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey in USA - one of the world's foremost centres for curiosity-driven basic research. Chaired by Mohammed Mahfoudh al Ardhi, chairman of the Board of Directors at Sohar International, the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of Viewpoints will tread into the many nuances of a digital, technology enabled world, underlined by age-old as well as modernised scientific infrastructure.

Announcing the latest edition, Ardhi said, "Viewpoints continues to share experiences, knowledge, and ideas from a global perspective through engagement with eminent international leaders. In the upcoming edition,



we look into the deeper meanings of the imminent use of science and technology, especially in a new digitised and virtual world. We are confident that our community comprising of mostly youth will definitely benefit from this session as the take-aways will have a positive impact on the society and the nation at large."

"In the upcoming session, we are proud to have Dr Robbert Dijkgraaf. He is not only an effective communicator, but also a leader in science policymaking, and a trained artist. Through this session, Dr Robbert will offer a



global perspective on science and policy, in context to its local adaptability, thereby maximising opportunities for Oman and its people to reflect on," added Ardhi.

Dr Dijkgraaf has served as president of the InterAcademy Partnership, a consortium of more than 130 of the world's national science academies, and co-chair of the InterAcademy Council, the global alliance of science academies advising the United Nations, the World Bank, and other international organisations.

He co-authored *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge*, which articulates how essential basic research and original thinking are essential for innovation and societal progress. As the director and Leon Levy Professor at Institute for Advanced Stud, Dr Dijkgraaf is an impassioned and eloquent advocate for pure scientific inquiry and the vital importance of encouraging creativity, imagination, and 'out of the box' thinking.

In the last few years, Viewpoints - Sohar International Chairman's forum, has gained audience eyeballs, for hosting the best of international experts as speakers. This, coupled with intriguing and engaging conversations, has put Viewpoints as a benchmark in events focused at building leadership equity.

Be a part of Oman's banking industry' most anticipated knowledge session! Subscribe to Sohar International's YouTube channel to watch the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of Viewpoints live, <https://www.youtube.com/c/SoharInternational>, on January 17, starting at 7.30pm.



## Ooredoo offers Shababiah users plan with bonus data

Enriching the digital lives of more and more customers, for the first time in the sultanate, Ooredoo is offering prepaid Shababiah users an enhanced plan that includes unlimited minutes to Ooredoo and free bonus data all rolled into one.

Until March 22, both new and existing users can sign up to get 4GB and 50 local minutes for RO5, or 6GB, unlimited on-net minutes and 100 local minutes for RO7.

Making it more exciting, customers can enjoy a whopping 15GB browsing data, unlimited on-net minutes and 150 local

minutes or, even better, 32GB, unlimited on-net minutes and 250 local minutes. Now, Shababiah prepaid users can get more out of their packages at a great range of prices, depending on their digital needs.

Raed Mohammed Dawood, director of Branding, Communications and Corporate Affairs at Ooredoo, said, "We all need to be connected, whether for work, school or even just to stay up to date on social media, and our new, first in the market, enhanced and exciting prepaid bundles can be adapted to suit all kinds of calls and data needs, for

whatever our customers' priorities may be."

A plan designed for all, the monthly prepaid Shababiah plans range fulfils customers' needs for the Internet and voice calls, and now, bonus data and unlimited minutes to the Ooredoo network.

Users can enjoy the Internet and stay connected with family and friends around the clock.

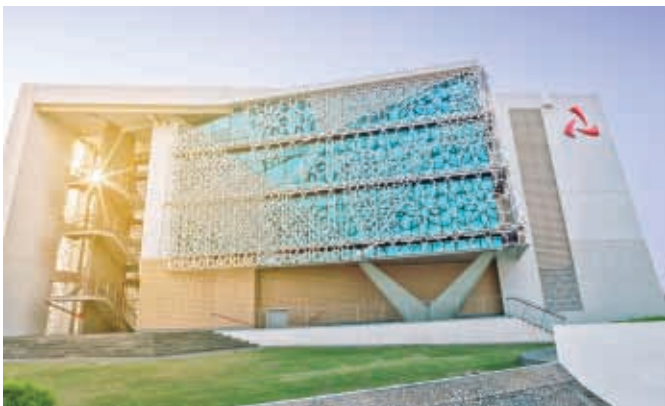
To subscribe to a desired plan, customers can simply log-in to the award winning Ooredoo Oman app, dial \*555\*55# or visit any of the 67 Ooredoo stores.

## BM Wallet, mBanking apps see strong response from customers

More and more customers have begun using the upgraded BM Wallet and mBanking apps for daily transactions. The upgraded apps which were launched in line with Bank Muscat's vision to 'To serve you better, everyday', has made it easy for customers to transfer money to or request funds from others using the Mobile Payments System of the Central Bank of Oman.

Funds can be transferred instantaneously using the following modes. For person to person transfers, money can be sent or collected from the recipient's default account or wallet. 'Send money' can be initiated by using mobile number, Alias or by QR code scanning and 'collect money' can be initiated using recipient alias/mobile number. Both the sender and recipient should be registered on the Mobile Payments System (MPS).

Bank Muscat customers have the facility to register on the MPS via both its BM Wallet and the mBanking app. Funds can be transferred instantly to both Bank Muscat and non-Bank



Muscat customers' bank accounts or wallets by using their MPS-registered mobile number/alias/QR code. Funds can be transferred instantly, 24/7 and at zero cost to any bank's registered MPS customer without the need to enter the beneficiary's long account number.

The new payment options will greatly help the retail sector in the country. A 'Scan & Pay' option can be used to initiate merchant payment requests. Merchant payments can be initiated from customer's mBanking app or wallet to the merchant by scanning a static or dynamic QR

code and the merchant can also request money from a customer using Mobile Payments System registered mobile number/alias/QR code.

The BM Wallet app is highly secure and does not store any sensitive information or transaction logs on the phone, which makes it totally secure. Bank Muscat has also built in other robust security features into the app. The BM Wallet app can be accessed on iOS and Android devices and is available at the App Store and Google Play in both Arabic and English versions.

## Badr Vaccine Protection Program launched

Badr al Samaa Group of Hospitals, the largest private healthcare provider and the most trusted healthcare brand of Oman, launched the one of its kind 'Badr Vaccine Protection Program'. This programme is aimed at creating awareness about all newborn, paediatrics and adult vaccinations recommended by the Ministry of Health, Oman and WHO.

Dr Anirudha Potey, senior manager, Serum Institute of India, Pune, India, was the eminent keynote speaker in the event.

Two health awareness talks about various newborn, paediatric and adult vaccinations were presented by Dr Parthasarthy Angappan, specialist paediatrician, Badr al Samaa Hospital, Ruwi, and Dr Atma S Raj, specialist, internist & group nodal officer for the programme, Badr al Samaa Hospital, Al Khoudh. Both the doctors explained the purpose of each vaccine, time schedule for when to be taken and age groups for which each vaccine is recommended.

Abdul Latheef and Dr P A Mohammed, managing directors of



Badr al Samaa Group, extended their full support for the vaccination programme.

Badr al Samaa is known for many innovations and introduced many initiatives in the past which were very beneficial to the society. Similarly Badr al Samaa has always been at the forefront of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and treated hundreds of COVID cases successfully and managed makeshift COVID hospitals established by the Ministry of

Health.

Badr al Samaa's comprehensive vaccination programme titled 'Badr Vaccine Protection' is an important initiative by Badr al Samaa aimed at raising awareness about all types of vaccinations, including newborn, child and adult vaccines.

On this occasion, Sameer P T, group CEO, said that Badr al Samaa will ensure the availability of all vaccinations across all centres of the group. Patients can conveniently check with the

nodal officers at group level and individual branch level and learn everything about the vaccines and seek appointment for vaccination. He said being the largest private healthcare provider, Badr al Samaa feels proud to take up the responsibility to spread awareness about the importance of vaccines.

Dr Poety, in his presentations, discussed the positive impact of vaccines in various pandemics which happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Anantara Jabal Akhdar welcomes new year with unique experience

Oman's leading resort, Anantara al Jabal al Akhdar Resort, welcomes the new year with the exciting launch of an all-new experience, Extreme Jabal Activity Wall and the big reveal of the much-anticipated dining platform, The Royal Edge in addition to a range of upgrades across the property.

This comes right in time with the amazing news of the sultanate reopening its land, air and sea borders after a temporary closure. The Supreme Committee has also made it compulsory for all travellers to take a PCR test 72 hrs within the scheduled time of arrival in Oman with a mandatory 7-day quarantine thereafter.

While the travel restrictions being updated, every other week, keeping in mind the health and safety of all citizens and travellers, Oman is still considered one of the safest countries to travel offering warm and friendly locals and a rich history, making

it a must-visit travel destination in 2021. To experience the country in splendour, Anantara al Jabal al Akhdar Resort welcomes guests to live life at 2000m with unparalleled views, great adventure, Omani hospitality and scrumptious food.

Rami Farhat, acting general manager at Anantara al Jabal al Akhdar, said, "With the borders just recently opened to international travellers, followed by visa exemptions, Oman is slowly bouncing back and taking actions to establish a new sense of normalcy. We are glad that we'll be able to welcome guests locally from Oman as well as from all around the world to enjoy our new activities, improved living and fully immerse themselves in true Omani hospitality. The entire team has put in a lot of work into forging an experience that breaches a new level of luxury which the GCC region is yet to see."

The Extreme Jabal Activity



Wall is the newest addition to the luxury property's range of experiences, designed for the bravest of adventurers. Widely known as one of the highest climbing routes in the Middle East, the favoured Jabal Activity Wall has been upgraded with an all-new extreme phase, offering the most daring travellers an un-

paralleled experience of Oman's Green Mountain and its expanse of craggy cliffs and limestone rock formations.

A climber's dream, the experience starts off on a high note with a zip line, taking explorers on a short flight through the air and across the canyon. Guests can then navigate their way

through multiple levels via ferata along the vertical rocks and end the hour-long activity by crossing the Middle East's highest steel bridge.

With the vast canyon plunging to 1,000m at its deepest point, courageous guests can enjoy a front row seat to the beautiful views beyond whilst

relishing in the peaceful silence. If you're up to task, head over to Anantara al Jabal al Akhdar to tackle the Al Hajar mountain range and cross this activity off your bucket list.

The secluded mountain getaway has also revealed its all-new exclusive dining platform, The Royal Edge, which is set to deliver an intimate and bespoke dining experience. Outfitted with a glass floor that extends all the way to the edge of the canyon, the new platform presents guests with an incomparable canyon stage and is only accessible through Anantara's signature 'Dining by Design' experience.

Available throughout the day, with prices starting from RO75 per person, Dining by Design offers the ultimate experience tailored to suite each guest. Take your pick of connoisseur menus or better yet, craft an entirely new one with your personal chef. Indulge in the dream location, with flawless butler service as

you savour the finest local and world flavours, either at sunset or under the stars. Guests booking to dine on The Royal Edge this month would be one of the first to experience the grandiose dining platform and its many intricacies.

In addition to the new experiences, the resort has also made strides to upgrade various parts of the property. Guests can now enjoy a new and improved main infinity pool which has been enlarged to offer an unmatched scenic view of the stunning mountains. The private pools located in the villas have also been completely revamped with a range of premium tiles, stone tiles in the Garden Pool Villas and sea fossils patterns in the Cliff Pool Villas, outfitted to reflect a piece of the fabled green mountain within the property.

For more information or to make a booking, call +968 2521 8000 or visit [jabal-akhdar.anantara.com](http://jabal-akhdar.anantara.com).

# Affordable EMIs on Mitsubishi models

General Automotive Company (GAC), the official distributor of Mitsubishi vehicles in Oman, has announced attractive EMI rates for the Pajero, Outlander, and L200 to welcome in the New Year.

Manoj Ranade, general manager of GAC, said, "These three models are some of our most popular on sale today. The Pajero and Outlander in particular, are a fan favourites, especially for those who like to go adventuring with their families. We wanted to provide these customers with an opportunity to get these three models at an affordable price, especially if they missed out on our year-end sale last month."

The promotion includes the Pajero, Outlander, and L200, with EMIs starting from RO129, RO99, and RO79 respectively.

Of these three, the Pajero is by far one of the most popular models, offering users a timeless yet modern look together with a great combination of safety, performance, comfort, and several advanced features that ensure a relaxing drive for all passengers. Powering the legendary SUV is a 3.5lt or 3.8lt, depending on trim, six-cylinder engine. When combined with its robust drivetrain and advanced four-wheel drive system, the Pajero offers proven



off-road and on-road capability, making it the perfect vehicle to take you wherever you want to go, whenever you want to go.

The second of the three, the Mitsubishi Outlander, offers a stylish exterior that sports the brands latest design language. Inside, the spacious cabin includes comfortable and supportive seats, high quality materials and large size boot.

Locally, it is available as either a five or seven seat variant, making it perfect for family trips.

The current generation L200 is the workhorse of the group and has been developed to embody the 'Engineered Beyond Tough' key phrase which underlined its creation.

As with the Outlander, it features the latest iteration of the Dynamic Shield front design concept and newly sculpted body curves with contrasting sharp lines that further embody the strength of a Mitsubishi Motors' and add a touch of modernity.

New looks aside, the L200 remains a tough, dependable and capable pickup truck, thanks in part to the 2.4lt power plant and robust drivetrain.

For more information on the promotion, visit GAC's Mitsubishi showrooms in Azaiba, Barka, Sohar, Nizwa and Salalah or follow 'MitsubishiMotorsOman' on Facebook or @mitsubishiomana on twitter to learn more.

# Manchester City Football Club visits A'soud Global School's virtual campus



A'soud Global School (AGS) recently welcomed English Premier League behemoths, Manchester City Football Club to its virtual campus. Students from Grade 4 to Grade 9 interacted and participated in virtual workshops led by the Manchester-based club, which imparted insights on Global 'City'zenship and healthy lifestyles.

AGS students were excited to meet the six-time English Premier League Champions, as coaches led engaging virtual sessions focusing on healthy living, sustainability and nutrition; providing students with a unique opportunity to learn from their football heroes.

Lee Davies, principal of A'soud Global School says, "At AGS we are continuously thinking of 'out of the box' ideas to enhance our students' learning outcomes, including unique and memorable experiences that excite and motivate them to work towards their own career goals."

Patrick Pritchard, community manager and goalkeeping coach at Manchester City Football Club

tines and patterns, understanding emotions, nutrition, where our food comes from and hydration for body and muscles. The interactive workshops provided students with a creative platform to discuss Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, part of the AGS curriculum.

AGS has entered into a partnership with Manchester City for the 2021-2022 academic year, which will enable AGS football teams to benefit from professional coaching sessions from the club's expert coaching staff.

"Our partnership with Manchester City Football Club highlights what can be achieved through technology, despite the challenges affecting the world at this time, and we are excited to learn from the club's wealth of knowledge. I would like to thank Manchester City for their support and all members of the AGS community, who have made this partnership possible. We are looking forward to a positive start to the New Year," added Davies.



# Sohar Cement Factory banks on digital transformation

Sohar Cement Factory celebrated the launch of SAP S4/HANA and SAP Success Factors development project. The system is considered as the new generation of the commercial SAP programme group.

The project is considered as part of RCC's strategic plan for digital transformation in all its factories using the latest technologies, and the experimental work has started on the SAP system on the first day of the New Year 2021.

Joey Ghose, chief executive officer, said "The digital transformation of companies and organisations has become a necessity in the current time; the digital transformation is concerned with developing the operations of institutions and companies by changing their method of working by using various digital technologies and following strategies in order to apply technology to increase productivity and reduce the costs."

Salim bin Ahmed al Ibrahim, acting deputy group CEO, stated, "It gives us immense pleasure that we have the most advanced ERP and Cloud Application in the region as well as a cement manufacturing network across GCC."

In addition, the digital transformation isn't an application of technology inside the institution only, but is a means to provide intensive programmes, which can have direct impact on the institution and its work methodology and the way to provide the required services to the customers and to the beneficiaries easily and quickly.

# Discovery partners with StarzPlay to launch discovery+ in MENA

Discovery Inc, the global leader in real life entertainment, announced a strategic partnership with StarzPlay, the MENA region's fastest-growing subscription video on demand service, to launch discovery+ - the definitive non-fiction, real life subscription streaming service - across the Middle East and North Africa. StarzPlay subscribers can now watch discovery+ content within a dedicated branded area across all existing StarzPlay platforms.

The partnership was announced at a virtual launch broadcast from Dubai.

Recently announced as part of a global roll-out, the service to be launched in Middle East and Africa, features a wide range of exclusive content to the platform, original series across popular passion verticals in which Discovery brands have a strong leadership position.

These include lifestyle and relationships; home and food; true



crime; paranormal; adventure and natural history; as well as science, tech and the environment, and a slate of high-quality documentaries.

Kasia Kieli, president & managing director EMEA at Discovery Inc, said, "The launch of discovery+ across MENA represents a major step toward adding 18 additional countries and territories to the global expansion of the platform, giving customers options to access the content that they love and have come to expect from Discovery."

Maaz Sheikh, CEO and co-founder, StarzPlay, said, "The unprecedented growth of online streaming has driven the need for compelling content that provides real value for subscribers. As the region's pioneering and homegrown SVOD platform, we

have been building in strategic partnerships to offer more online content and varied choices to our subscribers. We are confident that the discovery+ add on will be welcomed by the MENA audience and we look forward to growing this partnership further."

In the MENA region, discovery+ subscribers will enjoy new content added to the platform each month, featuring global franchises such as *Shark Week*, *MythBusters*, *Gold Rush*, *Expedition Unknown*, *House Hunters International*, *90 Day Fiancé*, *NASA's Unexplained Files* and *Say Yes to the Dress* available for anytime, anywhere viewing, as well as boxset bingeing.

StarzPlay subscribers will have access to a wide range of exclusive discovery+ originals across popular passion verticals for which Discovery brands are known. Coming first are the exclusive series, *The Impossible Row*, *Amy Schumer Learns to Cook (Uncensored)*, and *JonBenet Ramsey: What Really Happened?*

Additionally, discovery+ will offer the region's favourite programmes from the home of Arabic cooking, *Fatafeat*, along with the definitive collection of environmental programming with access to BBC's largest natural history library including *Planet Earth* and *Blue Planet*.

Francesco Perta, senior business development and distribution director, Middle East, Africa, Turkey and North East Europe at Discovery Inc, said, "Our vast content library gives us a running start to serve fans directly in markets across EMEA, and the world, in ways that are relevant, compelling and tailored to each market. Our partnership with StarzPlay is another example of how we are scaling our DTC businesses by leveraging our combination of competitive advantages - content ownership, brand strength and the biggest global footprint in media."

Now live everywhere MENA subscribers can access the StarzPlay app, including via Apple TV, and enjoy thousands of hours of Discovery-owned content in a dedicated branded area for a small additional subscription, anytime, anywhere and from any device.

Danny Bates, co-founder and CCO of StarzPlay, said, "As a leading regional video streaming service, our core strategic focus involves seeking out ways to drive customer satisfaction as we continue our growth trajectory across MENA. The decision to enter the content aggregation space adds to our proposition as a one-stop-shop for premium content, offering our subscribers quality, choice and convenience. Discovery offers the best-in-class real-life entertainment content portfolio and adding discovery+ to our offering continues to drive value to our platform."

StarzPlay is available to download online and via respective iOS and Android app stores.

DAILY CROSSWORD

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1 Tardy  
5 Assigned task  
10 Scottish feudal lord  
15 Cincinnati Rose?  
19 Very dry  
20 Starling's Asiatic cousin  
21 Diamond triumph  
22 Brainstorm  
23 Punjab princess  
24 Severe or sharp  
25 Irregularly notched or gnawed  
26 Predatory parrots  
27 Manila hemp source  
29 Toward the mouth  
30 One of the Simpsons  
31 Often blue  
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34 WWII org.  
36 Eng. composer Sir Edward  
38 Science degree, briefly  
41 Actor, author Lowe  
42 Strikebreakers  
44 Dawn goddess  
45 Sphere or globe  
48 Stan Musial, fondly  
50 Doctor's client  
52 Kettledrum  
54 Storms wildly  
55 Word with day or union  
56 Make a mistake  
58 Fragrant oleoresin  
59 Extinct wild ox  
60 Cut  
61 Norwegian

composer Edvard  
63 Anesthesia target  
64 MLB "Franchise" pitcher  
66 Newman ne'er do well movie  
67 Reduced drastically  
69 Very, in Versailles  
70 School of whales  
71 Motown music often  
72 Give up all hope  
76 First, second or third base  
77 DiMaggio's nickname  
82 Nobelist Wiesel  
83 Browns meat quickly  
85 Anglers use many  
86 Dispossess  
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91 Fold of skin  
92 Leo Durocher, fondly  
94 Makes up for  
96 Mechanic's need  
97 Crude cabin  
98 Totem pole  
100 Carnivores' canines  
101 Talk it out?  
102 Stat for 64 Across  
103 Rice dish  
105 Golfer's peg  
106 Uncanny  
108 Papal vestment  
111 Baker's product  
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115 Hoglike mamal  
119 Cougar  
120 Painter Matisse  
121 Ebert or Maris  
123 NM/AZ river  
124 Encourage  
125 Home of the llama  
126 Really senseless  
127 Certain lodge members  
128 Late-night TV host  
129 Hidden hoard  
130 Strong winds  
131 Bring in the crop

DOWN

1 Pasternak heroine  
2 Bedouin, e.g.  
3 Fey or Brown  
4 Official proclamation  
5 Little, in Glasgow  
6 Detroit Tigers batting legend  
7 Habituate  
8 Aztec Noah  
9 Gooden, to sportscasters  
10 George Herman Ruth, fondly  
11 Israeli dance  
12 Love, in Venice  
13 Settle down comfortably  
14 Before, to a poet  
15 Cheapskate  
16 River in Germany  
17 Laceration  
18 It's before chair or mark  
28 Tapestry wall hanging  
31 Moistened the turkey  
33 Charged atom  
35 Twosome

37 Region of W. India  
38 Swagger pompously  
39 Spanish entertainer/Cugat wife  
40 High Muslim woman  
42 Heavy cavalry sword  
45 Form of African witchcraft  
46 Flax-like fiber used in cloth  
47 Duck hunter's shelter  
49 Army meal  
50 Covers with asphalt  
51 Pod or ode starter  
53 Heidi's home  
55 Young hare  
57 Does a cobbler's job  
60 Garments worn by  
23 Across  
61 No no under the desk?  
62 Fills to excess  
65 RR depot listing  
66 Crone  
68 Once named Clay  
70 "Throwing \_\_\_\_", fast balls  
71 A Slavic people once: pl.  
72 Sudden \_\_\_\_; play ends  
73 One of Job's friends  
74 River to the Danube: var.  
75 Shed bark  
76 Law case summary

or abstract  
77 Long and high, in track  
78 "Oliver" nickname, once  
79 Morning drink  
80 "Sesame Street" grouch  
81 Legendary king of Kish  
84 Rhine feeder  
85 Baseball's Iron Horse  
88 Singing Chicks  
90 Ice cream holder  
91 American songbird  
93 Pen \_\_\_\_: friend  
95 Hunter who pitched a perfect game  
96 Sculler's tool  
99 Native skill  
101 Hydrocarbon from resins  
103 Greek philosopher  
104 Henry or Jane  
106 Potential energy  
107 Impatiently anxious  
108 October birthstone  
109 Cartoonist Goldberg  
110 It starred Sherman Hensley  
112 Greek war god  
114 New Rochelle college  
116 Bridge support  
117 Ms. Chase  
118 Coarse file  
120 "Spring \_\_\_\_ sprung"  
122 Legal matter

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES

MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Thursday's skies have a definite bite to them. The moon meanders into privacy-seeking Scorpio, intensifying the day's moodiness and turning your attention towards the psychologically stirring aspects of your current relationship story. Luna faces an array of difficult aspects, ultimately prompting tensions around finances, talents, and community efforts.



LEO

JULY 23-AUGUST 22

All you want is some rest! Yet, the universe seems to throw a wrench into that plan—thanks to the Scorpio moon quarrelling with planet after planet on her course. Little fires are likely to crop up around relationship matters and career concerns, but don't exhaust yourself trying to deal with all of them at once. Prioritise your peace, family connections, and the need to withdraw.



SAGITTARIUS

NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Have you ever woken up to a stormy day? One where you just don't even want to step foot outside? Now picture this energy, but in a cosmic sense, and you'll get a feel for today's landscape. The moon floats through Scorpio, signalling a strong need for time alone. The barrage of hard encounters she faces makes the need to withdraw ever more appealing today!



TAURUS

APRIL 20-MAY 20

You tend to submerge your stress without realising you're doing it. Be especially cautious of that method today, as Thursday's skies are laced with little land mines to dodge. The moon roams into your opposite sign of emotionally authentic Scorpio, facing a variety of hard aspects on her path. This can ultimately create tensions between relationships, identity, and career concerns.



VIRGO

AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Don't expect to sit still. Thursday's skies push you to express yourself, find movement, and reconnect with your talent for communication. The moon floats into sharp-minded Scorpio this morning, revving your engines for socialisation and activity. But her series of challenging aspects can set off little stresses to manage around your workflow or educational pursuits.



CAPRICORN

DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

The Beatles once said that we can "get by with a little help from our friends." This message rings ever true today, as the cosmic landscape is a treacherous one. The moon roams through Scorpio, turning your attention towards your trusted companions and chosen community. Luna faces a series of hard aspects, creating irritable circumstances around finances.



GEMINI

MAY 21-JUNE 21

You're ready to find a productive pursuit today. The moon launches into sharp-focused Scorpio this morning, helping you check things off your to-do list. Staying on task may be a whole different story though, as Luna encounters a barrage of difficult cosmic connections today, sparking stress on the mental plane. The key to staying sane is getting back into your body!



LIBRA

SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Thursday's cosmic landscape is cantankerous at best. The moon meanders into self-aware Scorpio, intensifying emotional responses and making you deeply aware of your current resources, financial or otherwise. Luna's daily trek is a tough one, as she encounters a variety of challenging aspects, potentially prompting issues to be handled on the relationship front.



AQUARIUS

JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You're primed and ready to make some moves that positively impact your career. Yet, the universe seems to throw a wrench or two into your plans. The moon roams into Scorpio, giving you that burst of energy to devote towards getting ahead. Luna's path is a tricky one, as she's in constant cross-fire all day. Thus, it might be best to wait a beat before launching ahead with big, public plans.



CANCER

JUNE 22-JULY 22

You're deeply connected to your ruling planet, the moon. Today's skies see Luna transition into Scorpio, helping you focus on the need for fun and romance. The moon faces a series of difficult aspects on her journey, creating stress around both intimate relationships and community. Keep your eye on the prize, and that prize is pursuing your joy, despite other people's issues.



SCORPIO

OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Today's skies are sure to give you some mixed messages. The moon floats into your sign, suggesting that you're deeply in need of some self-appointed TLC. Yet, Luna finds herself ensnared in difficult aspects throughout the course of the day, stirring up stresses to be handled on both the relationship and home front. Try to stay centred around your need to take care of yourself!



PISCES

FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Thursday's skies are a mess to be made. The moon meanders through Scorpio, stirring up your need to break routine and change up your environment. It's an ideal day to get lost in a new way of thinking or looking at the world. The moon has a hard day ahead of her, facing a series of emotionally pressing issues. So, honour your need for privacy, peace, and space.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The largest city of India is

a. New Delhi  
b. Mumbai  
c. Kolkata  
d. Chennai

2. The literacy rate of Andaman & Nicobar Islands is

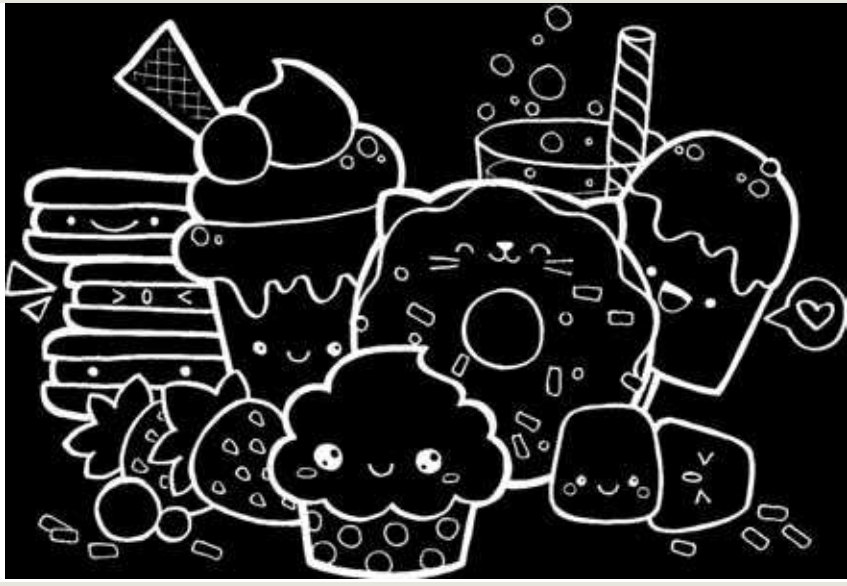
a. 81.18 per cent  
b. 80.76 per cent  
c. 79.23 per cent  
d. 78.11 per cent

3. The longest rail line of the world, Trans-Siberian line, is in

a. Russia  
b. China  
c. USA  
d. Saudi Arabia

Answers: 1: b 2: a 3: a

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

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9 |   | 7 | 4 |   |   | 1 |
|   | 3 | 8 | 9 |   |   | 4 |
|   |   | 1 |   | 3 | 8 | 9 |
|   |   | 2 |   |   |   | 1 |
| 3 |   |   |   | 5 |   | 9 |
| 7 | 5 |   |   |   | 3 |   |
|   | 9 | 3 | 6 |   | 1 |   |
|   | 2 |   |   | 5 | 6 | 8 |
| 8 |   |   | 3 | 7 |   | 2 |

BOGGLER

 BOGGLE - #F1875

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| S | Z | C | N |
| T | T | I | L |
| A | S | T | R |
| A | P | I | F |

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

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 1 | 9 | 4 | 8 |
| 8 | 9 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 5 |
| 4 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 9 | 6 | 5 |
| 8 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 5 |
| 6 | 2 | 7 | 9 | 5 | 8 | 4 | 1 |
| 5 | 1 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 2 | 9 |
| 9 | 6 | 8 | 2 | 9 | 1 | 7 | 4 |
| 7 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 9 | 6 | 8 | 2 |
| 1 | 8 | 2 | 8 | 4 | 7 | 9 | 6 |

|           |          |        |        |
|-----------|----------|--------|--------|
| PARIS     | PHON     | OSMO   | HAWAII |
| ROUTINE   | TINGO    | PICTAL | ABASE  |
| REAR      | INDROW   | POSTER | PAGH   |
| EARNE     | SCOUT    | DEAR   | SHED   |
| SET       | ELLIE    | ODAR   | SWAR   |
| ORLE      | OVING    | BOOR   | OSE    |
| TIGERS    | DELAGERS | ARETIS | ES     |
| AWASH     | DOED     | VOIE   | ANALPE |
| BASH      | BEHAVE   | SOODE  | FINTE  |
| JUMP      | SEELER   | STAG   | COACH  |
| RAINA     |          |        |        |
| ROCK      | RAY      | SACRED | HUE    |
| ROCK      | ARETIS   | RTIPER | BIND   |
| ADORN     | DAIDA    | ADAN   | BLIND  |
| DOOR      | ELITE    | PANOR  |        |
| DOOR      | SELOS    | PAND   |        |
| HOM       | MON      | WH     | BEND   |
| PARA      | CONE     | BOOTES | JOAH   |
| GARALANCA | THELO    | QUAIG  |        |
| LEON      | PIRE     | STAIN  | ALISNE |
| MANEN     | FLUTE    | BLITE  | PARNE  |

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

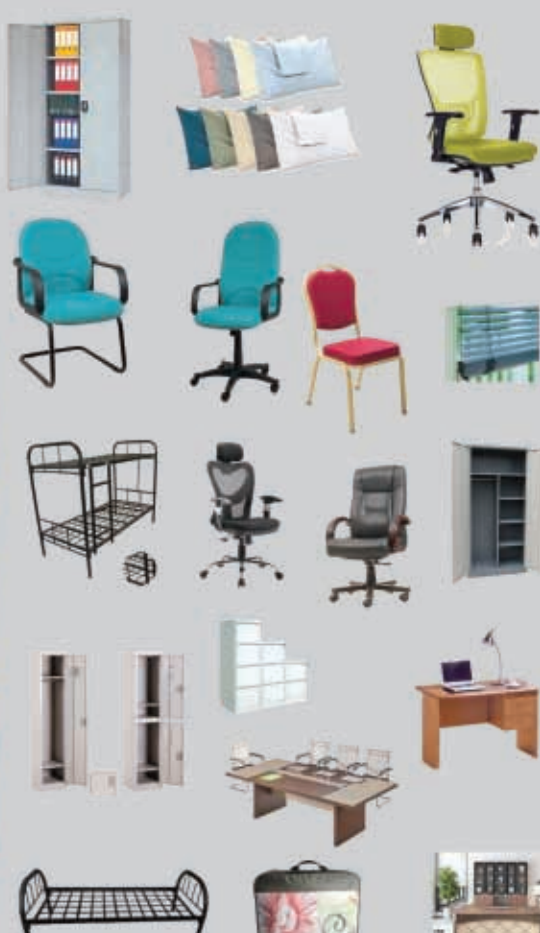


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FOOTBALL ROUND-UP



Ibiza players celebrate their win over Celta Vigo on Tuesday

# Ibiza stun Celta Vigo, Sevilla ease through

## COPA DEL REY

Madrid, Spain - Third-tier outfit Ibiza claimed a dramatic 5-2 win over Celta Vigo on Tuesday to reach the last-32 of the Copa del Rey for the second straight year, while Sevilla saw off Linares.

Ibiza were only formed in 2015 and lost 2-1 in the third round of Spain's domestic Cup competition last season to Barcelona, having led with less than 20 minutes to play.

They made no mistake in dumping out top-flight opposition this time around, racing into a 3-0 half-time lead over Celta, helped by two goals from Sergio Castel.

The island club moved further in front just after the hour through Manu Molina's penalty, but the visitors showed their La Liga class as they launched a comeback.

Santi Mina and Scottish mid-

fielder Jordan Holsgrove scored in the final 12 minutes.

But Mina missed the chance to make it 4-3 from the penalty spot in the first minute of injury time and Ibiza netted again through Angel Rodado shortly afterwards.

Europa League holders Sevilla had little trouble in beating third-division Linares 2-0.

Villarreal, sitting fourth in La Liga, also cruised past third-tier Zamora, winning 4-1 with Colombian striker Carlos Bacca scoring his first domestic goal of the season.

Top-flight Getafe also bowed out to a third-tier side, losing 1-0 at Cordoba, who were in La Liga as recently as 2015.

Real Valladolid escaped a similar fate, as Oscar Plano scored an extra-time winner in a 3-2 success at Marbella.

AFP



Sevilla players celebrate after a goal against Linares on Tuesday



Tottenham Hotspur's Moussa Sissoko (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Brentford in London, UK, on Tuesday

# Spurs storm into League Cup final

London, UK - Jose Mourinho urged Tottenham to kick on after Son Heung-min fired them into the League Cup final with the decisive goal in a 2-0 win against Brentford on Tuesday.

Moussa Sissoko put Mourinho's team ahead in the semifinal at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

But Tottenham were still searching for the knockout blow against spirited second-tier Brentford until Son netted with 20 minutes remaining.

Tottenham will face Manchester United or holders Manchester City, who meet in the second semifinal, at Wembley on April 25. It will be the club's first domestic final since losing the 2015 League Cup showpiece against Chelsea, and their first final in any competition since the 2019 Champions League defeat against Liverpool in Madrid.

"The final is now in a pocket for three months, we have to wait for the final so we have to focus on what we have coming up," Mourinho said.

"We have the FA Cup, the

Premier League, the Europa league, so let's forget the final for now. But when April arrives we have to be ready and to fight for the trophy."

Mourinho, appointed in November 2019, is hoping to lead Tottenham to their first major trophy since the 2008 League Cup. He has already won the competition four times, landing his first silverware in English football in 2005 with Chelsea, where he won it twice more before a further success at Manchester United in 2017.

Mourinho is the third manager to reach a League Cup final with three different clubs, following Ron Atkinson and Ron Saunders.

"This is a game that takes us to a final. Of course we are very, very happy with this," Mourinho said.

"We didn't play brilliantly, sometimes wrong decisions, sometimes one more touch, not with that soft control that allows you to play fast but the game is always under control against a team that will probably be in the Premier League next year."

The Tottenham boss had labelled Brentford's visit to north London as the biggest game of his reign, so it was no surprise he picked Son and Harry Kane in a team featuring five changes from Saturday's Premier League win over Leeds.

## Crucial moment

Brentford, fourth in the Championship, had already beaten four Premier League clubs in Southampton, Newcastle, Fulham and West Bromwich Albion to reach their first domestic cup semifinal.

But Tottenham needed just 12 minutes to take the lead as Sergio Reguilon's pin-point cross from the left evaded Brentford defender Ethan Pinnock and found Sissoko, who finished his burst into the six-yard box with a powerful header into the top corner.

It was the French midfielder's first goal since December 2019, ending a barren run that had stretched to 36 matches.

Tottenham pressed hard for a second goal and Son's long-

range drive forced a good save from David Raya, who had to stretch to tip away Lucas Moura's deflected header just before half-time.

Son flashed a volley just wide from Sissoko's cross, but Tottenham escaped in the 63<sup>rd</sup> minute when Ivan Toney's equaliser was disallowed by VAR.

When Pinnock's header was clawed away by Hugo Lloris, Toney stabbed in the rebound from close-range, only for the Brentford striker's celebrations to be curtailed when his knee was seen to be in an offside position.

That tight decision proved the crucial moment as Son struck in the 70th minute.

Kane fed Tanguy Ndombele and the midfielder's defence-splitting pass teed up Son, who fired high into the roof of the net for his 16th goal of the season.

Brentford's Josh Dasilva was sent off in the 84<sup>th</sup> minute for a studs-up foul on Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg that left the furious Tottenham midfielder with blood running down his shin.

AFP

## QUICK RUN

### Arsenal's Mesut Ozil nears deal with Fenerbahce: Reports

Arsenal's out-of-favour German midfielder Mesut Ozil is in advanced talks to join Istanbul club Fenerbahce, Turkish media reported on Wednesday. Ozil is expected to sign a three and a half year deal with the 19-time Turkish champions, the privately-owned DHA news agency reported. The reports came after the 32 year old, a World Cup winner with Germany in 2014, fanned speculation by tweeting a photograph of himself in Istanbul with the words: "This city ... #throwback #Istanbul." Sports daily *Fanatik* reported that Fenerbahce chairman Ali Koc and team director Emre Belozoglu flew to London to persuade the player, who is of Turkish origin, to make the move.

### Man City confirm three more coronavirus cases



Scott Carson

Manchester City confirmed three more cases of coronavirus on Wednesday, with goalkeeper Scott Carson, teenage midfielder Cole Palmer and a member of staff testing positive. City were without six other players for their English Premier League victory at Chelsea on Sunday following positive tests. "Manchester City FC can confirm that Scott Carson, Cole Palmer and one member of staff have tested positive for COVID-19," the club said in a statement.

### Bilic named Beijing Guoan boss after West Brom sacking



Slaven Bilic

Slaven Bilic was named coach of Chinese Super League Beijing Guoan on Wednesday, three weeks after he was sacked by Chinese-owned West Bromwich Albion. The 52 year old from Croatia has signed a contract until the end of 2022 and replaces Frenchman Bruno Genesio, Beijing said. Bilic, who was an imperious central defender as a player, will be expected to have the club from the Chinese capital competing for the CSL title.

### Barca youngster Alena joins Getafe on loan

Barcelona midfielder Carles Alena has joined Getafe on loan until the end of the season, the clubs announced on Wednesday. Getafe, who have dropped to 16th in La Liga, will pay all of Alena's wages as the 23 year old looks to kickstart his career away from Camp Nou. "Alena is a player for the future that has to play," said Koeman on Tuesday.

AFP

# Man City legend Bell dies aged 74

London, UK - Former Manchester City and England midfielder Colin Bell has died aged 74 following a short illness, the club announced Tuesday.

Bell scored 152 goals in 492 appearances for City during a 13-year career with the club after joining from Bury.

"Colin passed away peacefully this (Tuesday) afternoon after a short, non-Covid related illness, aged 74," said a club statement. "He leaves behind wife Marie, children Jon and Dawn and grandchildren, Luke, Mark, Isla and Jack."

Bell was a member of the City side that won the old First Division title in 1967-68

and the FA Cup in 1969.

He also helped City win two trophies in the 1969/70 season - the English League Cup and the European Cup Winners' Cup.

In addition to his City honours, Bell won 48 England caps and was in the squad for the 1970 World Cup in Mexico during a career cut short by a knee injury.

City said 'few players have left such an indelible mark' on the club as Bell, nicknamed 'The King of the Kippax' after one of the terraces at their former Maine Road home. Such was the respect in which Bell was held at the club that City fans voted to name a stand at the Etihad Stadium after him in 2004.

City chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak told the club's website:

"Colin Bell will always be remembered as one of Manchester City's greatest players and the very sad news today of his passing will affect everybody connected to our club. "I am fortunate to be able to speak regularly to his former manager and team-mates, and it's clear to me that Colin was a player held in the highest regard by all those who had the privilege of playing alongside him or seeing him play.

"The passage of time does little to erase the memories of his genius."

Meanwhile, his former City

teammate Mike Summerbee paid tribute to "a lovely, humble man".

"He was quiet, unassuming and I always believe he never knew how good he actually was," Summerbee told the club's website. "He was just the greatest footballer we have ever had.

"Kevin De Bruyne reminds me a lot of Colin in the way he plays and the way he is as a person."

Former England international Summerbee added: "He was adored by the City fans and for our supporters to say he is the best they have ever seen, you don't get a better compliment than that, do you?"

AFP



A file photo of Colin Bell in action during a match in December 1969

## LOCAL CRICKET

# Al Jadidi Engineering and Safara International record easy wins

Al Jadidi Engineering and Contracting and Safara International registered lopsided victories over Pitspot and Al Rehwan teams respectively in the Oman Cricket D Division T20 matches on Friday.

Also on Friday, Danmark CC and Aflag Group CT emerged winners in E Division games,

while KCA Deutag and Israr Ghala won their respective matches in F Division.

## BRIEF SCORES

**D Division:** Pitspot 103-8 (Bilal Suleiman 38; Ahmed Shahzad 2-15, Mohammed Rizwan 2-20, Gokul Gopinath 2-21) **lost to Al Jadidi Engineering and**

**Contracting** 106-1 in 12.1 overs (Rizwan 85).

**D Division:** Al Rehwan 147-8 (Puthan Marachailil 37; Sandesh Pusalkar 3-11, Ali Akbar Husain 2-22) **lost to Safara International** 150-3 in 16.3 overs (Syed Uzair Saman 50, Ahmed Mohammed 39, Sandesh Pusalkar 38).

**E Division (T20):** OCT Al Nahdha 128-6 (Rafeeq Mohammed 66; Mustafa Subhan 2-24) **lost to Danmark** CC 129-2 in 13.4 overs (Doresh Devender 50, Syamlal Sasidharan 36).

**E Division:** Aflag Group CT 195-5 (Haris Alam 80, Junaid Iqbal 30; Asim Abdul Qadeer

2-24) **beat** OCT Al Hail-B 142-4 (Khalid Rahim Bakhsh 50, Abdul Jalil al Balushi 49).

**F Division (T20):** KCA Deutag 176-5 (Sultan Ali 69, Munthir al Balushi 36) **beat Team Coorg** Muscat 131 all out in 15.5 overs (Dinal Napanda Devaiah 23; Sultan Ali 2-19,

Irfan Ur Rahman 2-24).

**F Division:** Israr Ghala 132 all out in 17 overs (Ihshan Ullah 38; Prashant Rana 4-33, Sanjay Makwana 3-5, Ashwinkumar Dave 2-22) **beat Y Horizon** 73 all out in 15.1 overs (Mohammed Islam 3-16, Mohammed Saqib 3-10, Amir Munir 2-11).



New Zealand players celebrate after winning the second Test against Pakistan at Hagley Oval in Christchurch, New Zealand on Wednesday. Photo right: Kyle Jamieson in action on Wednesday



## No new positive tests for England

### ENGLAND'S TOUR OF SRI LANKA

Galle, Sri Lanka - England's tour of Sri Lanka will continue - for now, at least - after the latest round of COVID-19 tests showed no new positive results. The squad will hold their first training session of the tour in Hambantota later on Wednesday, where Moeen Ali has now returned to stay in separate accommodation, after an aborted plan to relocate him to Galle following his positive COVID-19 test.

There had been anxiety over the future of the tour after Moeen's test result upon arrival in Sri Lanka. Chris Woakes, who travelled from Birmingham to Heathrow airport in the same car as Moeen, was also put in quarantine as he was considered a close contact and there were concerns that the virus may have spread through more of the tour party.

News that the rest of the squad - including Woakes - tested negative after a new round of testing on Tuesday will be a significant relief both to the England camp and Sri Lankan authorities.

While it would be wrong to think the threat to the tour has passed completely - the entire tour party will be tested again on Thursday in the understanding that the virus sometimes takes several days to manifest itself - the news revives the prospect of the series getting underway as scheduled in Galle on January 14.

Moeen is now isolating in a separate wing of the team hotel and Woakes, too, remains in isolation but should be able to join the team next week if he tests negative.

Cricinfo

# NZ ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Jamieson fires Black Caps to innings win over Pakistan in the second Test to complete series sweep

### NEW ZEALAND VS PAKISTAN SECOND TEST: DAY FOUR

Christchurch, New Zealand - Ambushed by pace and hostility, Pakistan's forgettable tour of New Zealand is over.

A 2-0 series sweep for New Zealand makes them the No 1 side in Test cricket, and gives them a chance of making the final of the World Test Championship (WTC) at Lord's in June.

Kyle Jamieson, just six Tests old, was the shining star, finishing with match figures of 11 for 117 as New Zealand wrapped up victory inside four days on Wednesday. Pakistan's 186 all out was not even a shade of their first-innings effort on a green day-one surface, where Azhar Ali and Mohammad Rizwan showed admirable fight.

Only debutant Zafar Gohar, who made 34 in the first innings, made some sort of an impression

with the bat in the second to score 37. Picked as a bowling allrounder, he ended with none for 159 with his left-arm spin, but could be left wondering if he did enough with the bat to keep his place when Pakistan next play Tests, at home against South Africa.

It told you how much the rest of the batting line-up applied themselves - or didn't - on a surface that was far from menacing. Azhar Ali's 37 was joint-best in an innings in which Pakistan collapsed in a heap to Jamieson, who seems to operate with a simple formula: pitch it on a length, get the ball to rear off the deck and have the batsmen second-guessing their own technique.

This tactic consumed Abid Ali, who went for an expansive drive at the first sight of width, driving to backward point where

substitute Will Young threw himself to his left to pull off a one-handed stunner.

Haris Sohail fell soon after lunch, pushing with an angled bat to one that nipped away. Then came the set-up of the day. Having figured Azhar wasn't com-

down the leg side to BJ Watling.

Because the short ball was on their mind so much, the batsmen were eager to push at full deliveries, Mohammad Rizwan's dismissal being a case in point. A sucker ball - full - did him in, swinging back in to sneak

*So assured were New Zealand of imminent win that Kane Williamson, a reluctant bowler, brought himself on for the first time as captain. Having missed an lbw with a slider, he had Shaheen Afridi caught at slip going for a slog*

fortable playing back, Jamieson decided to go the Neil Wagner way and attack his rib-cage from around the wicket.

One over is all it took for the plan to work as Azhar, looking to hop away to fend gloved one

through the gap between bat and pad to crash into the stumps.

Fawad Alam, Pakistan's only centurion on tour, then held one end up, somehow ducking and weaving his way out of a short-ball barrage against the old ball

before poking at a delivery he should've left to be out of 16, caught by Ross Taylor at slip. From there on, it was only a question of when Pakistan would fold.

So assured were New Zealand of imminent win that Kane Williamson, a reluctant bowler, brought himself on for the first time as captain. Having missed an lbw with a slider, he had Shaheen Afridi caught at slip going for a slog.

Victory was achieved an hour after tea when Gohar swung one to Matt Henry at long leg. This ended a golden Test summer for New Zealand, in which they won each of their four Tests - two apiece against West Indies and Pakistan.

Having done their bit, they'll now sit back and watch how things pan out for Australia and India. Their results - and against

### SCOREBOARD

|                                                                                                                                       |                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Pakistan 1 <sup>st</sup> Innings 297                                                                                                  |                               |
| New Zealand 1 <sup>st</sup> Innings 659 for six decl                                                                                  |                               |
| PAKISTAN 2 <sup>nd</sup> INNINGS                                                                                                      |                               |
| S Masood                                                                                                                              | c Southee b Jamieson 0        |
| Abid Ali                                                                                                                              | c sub (W Young) b Jamieson 26 |
| M Abbas                                                                                                                               | c Watling b Boult 3           |
| Azhar Ali                                                                                                                             | c Watling b Jamieson 37       |
| H Sohail                                                                                                                              | c Watling b Jamieson 15       |
| F Alam                                                                                                                                | c Taylor b Boult 16           |
| M Rizwan                                                                                                                              | b Jamieson 10                 |
| F Ashraf                                                                                                                              | c Watling b Jamieson 28       |
| Z Gohar                                                                                                                               | c Henry b Boult 37            |
| S Afridi                                                                                                                              | c Taylor b Williamson 7       |
| N Shah                                                                                                                                | not out 0                     |
| Extras                                                                                                                                | (b 1, nb 2, w 4) 7            |
| TOTAL: 186 in 81.4 overs                                                                                                              |                               |
| Fall of wickets: 1-3, 2-17, 3-46, 4-79, 5-88, 6-98, 7-126, 8-145, 9-171, 10-186                                                       |                               |
| Bowling: T Southee 20-8-45-0, T Boult 18.4-6-43-3, K Jamieson 20-6-48-6, M Henry 15-5-25-0, D Mitchell 5-1-8-0, K Williamson 3-0-16-1 |                               |

## All set for top-class bowling battle

### AUSTRALIA VS INDIA THIRD TEST

Sydney, Australia - They lost key players before the series, they've lost a few more since its start, and they've been rolled over for their lowest-ever total. It's a wonder that India are still holding themselves together, never mind level in the series and looking, by some measures, a better side than Australia in their own conditions.

They've done this not by becoming more Australian in their approach but by trusting methods that work for them at home: bowling at the stumps, and giving themselves insurance by setting strong leg-side fields. Oh, and spin has played as important a role as pace.

But for how long can they keep this run going while losing fast bowlers, one after another, to injury? They played the first Test without Ishant Sharma, played the second without Ishant or Mohammed Shami, and now, at the SCG, will be without Ishant, Shami and Umesh Yadav.

In Test cricket, a team is as good as the weakest link in its bowling attack. At the MCG, Mohammed Siraj showed more control and skill than any fast-bowling debutant could reasonably have been expected to, ensuring India didn't have a weak link that stretched the other bowlers and gave their rival a pressure-release valve. They will hope Navdeep Saini can pull off something similar at the SCG,



Ajinkya Rahane (left) and Tim Paine on the final day of second Test

even if Jasprit Bumrah and R Ashwin continue to perform at absurdly high standards.

India will need all their parts to work smoothly together, because Australia, for all their flaws, remain a formidable side at home. Thirty-six all out may have been one of the game's mysterious outliers, a result of the conditions and the planets aligning to turn every error into a dismissal, but it happened primarily because Australia turned in a fast-bowling display of the highest quality. Their quicks, Cummins in particular, were perhaps just as good with the new ball at the MCG.

Both teams will have rejigged top orders, with David Warner and Rohit Sharma set to return from injury and Will Pucovski making a highly anticipated debut.

Both attacks will have new problems to solve, and if either opening combination can survive the first hour-and-a-half, the tone of the series could be transformed.

### In the spotlight

**David Warner:** Australia have endured their slowest-scoring home series of the century, and couldn't be happier to see him back in their side. Warner has a formidable record in home Tests, averaging nearly 66, but Australia are taking a risk by playing him because he hasn't fully recovered yet from the groin injury.

**Rohit Sharma:** India have an opening batsman to welcome back as well. Rohit has batted at the top of the order in only five Tests so far, but averages 92.66

there. He hasn't played Test cricket since November 2019, though, and he's never opened overseas. If he can see off the first spells of Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood, though, he could make a huge difference to a side that has only managed opening partnerships of 7, 0, 16 and 0 through the series so far.

### The buzz

**Australia:** The hosts have not announced their XI yet, but the indications are that David Warner and Will Pucovski will open the batting, with Joe Burns and Travis Head dropping out of the side.

**India:** The two main questions facing India were where Rohit Sharma bats, and who comes in for Umesh Yadav. The answers are: at the top of the order, in place of Mayank Agarwal; and Navdeep Saini.

### Teams (likely)

**Australia:** David Warner, Will Pucovski, Marnus Labuschagne, Steven Smith, Matthew Wade, Cameron Green, Tim Paine (capt & wk), Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc, Nathan Lyon, Josh Hazlewood.

**India:** Rohit Sharma, Shubman Gill, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane (capt), Hanuma Vihari, Rishabh Pant (wk), Ravindra Jadeja, R Ashwin, Navdeep Saini, Mohammed Siraj, Jasprit Bumrah.

Cricinfo

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# A CRACKER IN THE OFFING

Five-time champions Al Nasr drawn against Omantel League winners Seeb in the last-16 knockout round

Ashok Purohit  
Muscat

## 2020-21 HIS MAJESTY'S CUP FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

A mouth-watering clash is on the cards as the defending Omantel League champions Seeb were drawn to take on five-time winners Al Nasr in the round-of-16 of the 2020-21 His Majesty's Cup Football Championship on Wednesday.

Three-time HM's Cup winners, Seeb, have been in imperious form since winning their maiden Omantel League title in October 2020 as they trounced Al Talee'a 5-0 in the first round of the HM's Cup on Sunday and have been unbeaten in the 2020-21 Omantel League season, so far, with two wins and one draw.

Al Nasr, too, have also been in good form, having recorded an emphatic 2-0 win over Bausher in the round-of-32 HM's Cup game in Salalah last week and winning one and drawing two of their Omantel League matches in the new season.

With the two clubs sharing a total of eight titles between them and being unbeaten since the start of the new season, a cracker of a contest is in the offing with the winner making it into the double-leg quarterfinals. The last-16 single-round format will be held on January 21-22.

The draw of the last-16 stage was held at the Oman Football Association (OFA) headquarters in Seeb on Wednesday in the presence of Said Othman al Balushi, OFA general secretary and CEO, Faisal Ali al Tamimi, general manager of Qatar National Bank (Oman), the main sponsors, and Dawood al

Mahrizi, vice-chairman of OFA legal committee.

Defending champions Dhofar, who had earned a bye into the last-16, have been drawn against Rustaq while another last-16 knockout round match that is expected to be widely followed will be the all-Batinah clash between three-time champions Al Suwaiq and Sohar. Sohar hired former Oman international star Badar al Maimani as their new coach on Wednesday.

With nine-time champions Fanja pulling out of the 2020-21 domestic season, Dhofar has an opportunity to break the record of maximum HM's Cup titles.

Both Dhofar and Fanja share the record of nine titles each in the sultanate's coveted tournament, which began in 1972.

Dhofar also holds the honour of maximum top-flight domestic titles (11), two more than their arch-rivals, Fanja.

Two other clubs that share a glorious history in the HM's Cup are Sharqiyah region's giants - Sur and Al Arouba. Both the clubs have won the title four times each. However, both of them do not feature in the 2020-21 Omantel League season and are determined to make up for their disappointments with a strong showing in ongoing HM's Cup edition.

Sur have a relative easier opponent in Ibri in the last-16 after coming through a big scare against Bahla [Sur won on penalties 4-3].

On the other hand, Al Arouba, who have approached the Lausanne-based Court of Arbitration for Sport against sanctions imposed by the OFA, take on Salalah-based Al Ittihad club for a spot in the quarter-



Action from the His Majesty's Cup first-round match between Al Nasr and Bausher at the Saada Sports Complex in Salalah on Sunday. Al Nasr won 2-0

nals. Arouba had recorded an easy 2-0 win against Salalah in the opening round.

Two-time winners Saham face a tricky opponent in Samail after the latter knocked out former champions Muscat in the first round. Al Nahda, who defeated Ahl-Sidab in the round-of-32, have been drawn against Majees and two-time winners Oman take on Al Mussanah.

Both Oman and Mussanah have recorded hard-fought victories against Jalan and Al Shabab respectively in the first round.

Following the conclusion of



Action from the round-of-32 His Majesty's Cup match between Seeb and Al Talee'a at the Seeb Sports Stadium on Sunday. Seeb won 5-0 to advance

the last-16 stage, the double-leg quarterfinals will be held in February. While the first-leg will be played on February 5-6, the

return-leg will be held on February 15-16. The two-leg semifinals will be played on February 26-27 and March 8-9.

**ROUND-OF-16 DRAW:**  
Dhofar vs Rustaq, Sur vs Ibri, Seeb vs Al Nasr, Saham vs Samail, Sohar vs Al Suwaiq,

Al Arouba vs Al Ittihad, Al Nahda vs Majees, Al Mussanah vs Oman.

@ashokmuscat



Said al Balushi (centre) with Faisal al Tamimi (right) and Dawood al Mahrizi at the draw ceremony on Wednesday

## Peterhansel leads as Attiyah completes Dakar stage hat-trick

### DAKAR RALLY

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - France's Stephane Peterhansel remained atop the overall standings despite Qatari Nasser al Attiyah claiming his third stage win in a row at the Dakar Rally on Wednesday.

Attiyah completed the 337km special fourth stage, as the caravanserai travelled a total of 813km from Wadi Ad-Dawasir to Riyadh, in 2hr 35min 59sec, just 11sec ahead of Peterhansel, a 13-time champion nicknamed 'Mr Dakar'.

It left the Toyota-driving Qatari four minutes 58 seconds off Peterhansel in the overall standings. "It wasn't an easy stage. We lost a minute to an error, but we were hardly the only ones to make a mistake and we quickly got back on track," said Attiyah, an Olympic skeet bronze medallist at the 2012 London Games.

Peterhansel said the stage had been marked by 'one relentless attack after another, and in the end we finished in the same time.' "Apart from a small navigation error near the finish, I don't think I can attack much more," said the Frenchman, whose previous Dakar victories came both in a car (seven) and on a motorbike (six).

"To stay in contention, we need to go all out. So far, so good, as we aren't making too many mistakes."

Defending champion Carlos Sainz went some way in making up for a costly navigation error on Tuesday by surging through the field to eventually finish fifth, a result that took him into third in the general classification, 36:19 off his Mini teammate's leading time.

**Barreda at the double**  
Spain's Joan Barreda Bort, on a



Mini's driver Stephane Peterhansel and his co-driver Edouard Boulanger during the Dakar Rally on Wednesday

Honda, won the motorbike category, his second stage win of this Dakar.

The Spaniard timed 2hr 46min 50sec to finish the stage 5:57 ahead of Botswana's Ross

Branch (Yamaha), with Australian Daniel Sanders (KTM) taking third, at 6:09.

"It was another good stage. I started very far back because of my result yesterday, but that's the way it is in this Dakar, you're either at the front or far back. We need to keep it up," Barreda said.

Barreda has been alternating victories with Toby Price since the first stage, but the Australian lost almost a quarter of an hour after opening the road for the stage and now sits 7:47 behind new overall leader Xavier de Soultrait.

Frenchman De Soultrait's fifth-placed finish on his Husquvarna was enough to see him take a narrow 15sec lead over Barreda, with Argentinian Kevin Benavides in third (+3:34).

Overnight leader Skyler Howes (KTM) dropped down to fifth after only managing 20<sup>th</sup> place on the stage.

Howes' American compatriot Ricky Brabec finished 18<sup>th</sup> at 12:53

and currently lies 15<sup>th</sup> in the general classification (+16:21), the defending champion perhaps riding more conservatively in a bid to make the most out of his tyres - motorcyclists are allowed only six rear tyres for the duration of the rally.

Barreda admitted that he had already used three tyres.

"The one I used today is quite worn, but I was supposed to use it for three days, so it's not great news," he said. "But we'll see what we can do in the coming days."

Thursday's fifth stage sees competitors racing a 485km special between Riyadh and Al Qaisumah, to the north of Saudi Arabia.

Organisers said the stage featured a tough dunes section and tracks littered with stones. "Haste makes waste - or, in this case, a flat tyre," they warned.

AFP



**COOK'S PAY JUMPS IN 2020**  
Apple Inc said it exceeded its internal financial targets in the past fiscal year and the cash bonus for chief executive Tim Cook rose 40 per cent for 2020 to US\$10.7mn

# BUSINESS

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## MARKET WATCH

|            |           |
|------------|-----------|
| MSM30      | 3,711.50  |
| BSE Sensex | 48,174.06 |

## FOREX RATES

| (RO1 equals)     |        |
|------------------|--------|
| Indian Rs        | 190.42 |
| Pakistani Rs     | 417.59 |
| Bangladeshi Taka | 220.54 |
| Philippine Peso  | 124.99 |
| Sri Lankan Rs    | 490.50 |

\*Rates as on January 06  
Source: xe.com

## BRIEFS

### Pompeo calls EU-China investment deal 'weak'

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticized an EU investment deal with China as 'weak' in an interview, warning that it does not protect against risks from Beijing.

"As we stared at it, it was a weak agreement. It didn't protect the European workers from the predation of the Chinese Communist Party," Pompeo told the Bloomberg television show of investor David Rubenstein.

Pompeo, a staunch critic of China, stopped short of urging the EU to dump the agreement but made clear the United States had no interest in anything similar.

"We care too much about our workers, about our people, about our manufacturing, about our intellectual property to sign a weak deal that would continue to allow China to engage in activities that weren't fair and even, balanced and reciprocal," Pompeo said.

# 'GCC economy may take 3 years to return to pre-pandemic levels'

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The economy of the GCC countries may take up to three years to return to pre-pandemic levels as subdued oil revenues are likely to slow the recovery process in the region, Moody's Investors Service said on Wednesday.

Moody's said its negative 2021 outlook for sovereign creditworthiness in the GCC reflects the coronavirus-related fall in oil revenue which is driving this year's deterioration in fiscal strength, while constraining government spending and slowing the economic recovery.

"We expect that it will take 2-3 years for real GDP in GCC sovereigns to return to pre-pandemic levels, with the recovery most protracted in the more economically diversified sovereigns, where key sectors such as transportation and tourism will be slow to return to health," the ratings agency said in a new report published on Wednesday.

Thaddeus Best, a Moody's analyst and the report's co-author, said, "Our negative outlook for GCC sovereigns reflects the coronavirus pandemic's impact on oil revenue and our expectations for the erosion of fiscal strength experienced last



*Moody's forecasts that GCC government debt burdens will rise on average by around 21 percentage points of gross domestic product over 2019-2021*

year to extend throughout 2021. The still elevated cost of funding for lower-rated sovereigns in the region will amplify these strains."

The lingering economic effects of the pandemic, Moody's said, also mean that citizen em-

ployment rates are unlikely to recover soon given high targets for citizen employment in private sector industries which have been hard hit by the shock.

Moody's forecasts that GCC government debt burdens will rise on average by around 21 per-

centage points of GDP over 2019-2021, compared with 14 percentage points on average for advanced economies. However, sovereign wealth fund buffers will mitigate the impact of higher gross debt burdens for most GCC sovereigns.

Despite a significant easing in market conditions compared with the first half of 2020, Moody's expects that borrowing costs will remain above pre-coronavirus levels for less creditworthy GCC sovereigns. For the region's stronger governments,

## World Bank tips fragile recovery for Middle East in 2021

Dubai, UAE - The World Bank has predicted a moderate economic recovery for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2021, while highlighting the many challenges still posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The institution said the pandemic had seen the region's economies shrink by about 5 per cent in 2020, inflicting heavy job losses and a sharp increase in the number of people living below the poverty line of less than US\$5.50 a day.

'Among oil exporters, growth is expected to recover to 1.8 per cent this year, supported by normalising oil demand, the scheduled easing of the OPEC+ oil production cuts, policy support, and the gradual phasing out of domestic pandemic-related restrictions,' it said in a report.

Saudi Arabia, the largest

economy in the Arab world, will benefit from the resumption of public projects, which had been postponed at the beginning of the crisis, and the recovery of demand after a sharp rise in value-added tax (VAT), it said, tipping a 2 per cent expansion.

Growth in other countries in the region is expected to reach 3.2 per cent in 2021 due to the easing of travel restrictions and a slow recovery of domestic demand.

The World Bank warned that regional economies faced a variety of hurdles as they try to get back on their feet.

'The recovery is contingent on containment of the pandemic, stabilising oil prices, no further escalation of geopolitical tensions, and the assumption of a vaccine rollout in the second half of the year,' the World Bank said.

AFP

flight to quality has lowered yields to levels that will continue

to allow opportunistic and long-dated borrowing.

## Oil prices surge following Saudi Arabia's pledge to cut output

New York, US - Oil prices shot higher on Tuesday and Wednesday following Saudi Arabia's surprise announcement that it would trim production.

The price of the main US oil contract, WTI, jumped more than 5 per cent on Tuesday to hit US\$50 a barrel for the first time since February. Brent crude, after recording a sharp increase on Tuesday, rose again nearly 1 per cent to US\$54.1 per barrel in London on Wednesday morning.

Members of the oil cartel OPEC and their partners agreed on Tuesday to raise output slightly in February and March, but only in Russia and Kazakhstan, while Saudi Arabian Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman announced that the country would cut its own production by 1mn barrels per-day in both months.

In February-March, Russia will increase oil production under the



Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman

OPEC+ deal by a total of 130,000 barrels per day (bpd) compared to January's figures of 65,000 bpd, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said in an interview with Rossiya 24 TV channel.

Overall the amount of crude oil that OPEC+ group has voluntarily withdrawn from global markets is to decline from 7.2mn barrels per day (bpd) to 7.125mn bpd in February, and 7.05mn bpd in March, the OPEC+ group said

in a statement issued at the end of its first ministerial meeting of the year. It called at the same time for caution on the part of those active in the sector owing to the coronavirus pandemic.

Saudi Arabia's decision to cut its own output represents a compromise between two of the biggest oil producers, because Russia had wanted to raise overall crude output by 500,000 bpd starting in February.

"Saudi Arabia put the cherry on the cake and if there is one way to describe what its voluntary cut means for the market, 'happy hour' is a pretty fitting term," Rystad Energy's Bjornar Tonhaugen said of the surprise Saudi announcement.

"They say there is no such thing as a free meal, but it's difficult to see how a beast of a 1mn bpd cut is justified behind closed Saudi strategist doors."

Agencies

## Ministry of Energy and Minerals signs agreement with be'ah

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals on Wednesday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah) which aims to regulate the waste management sector, and promote the proper and safe disposal of waste.

The MoU was signed by H E Dr Mohammed bin Hamed al Rumhi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and Eng Tariq bin Ali al Amri, CEO of be'ah.

In a press statement, H E Dr Rumhi said that the signing of the MoU between the two sides is a step within the framework of the continuous efforts by the ministry to enable operators working in the sultanate to follow the best practices in all areas related to the energy and minerals sectors.

H E Dr Rumhi affirmed his great confidence that the imple-



H E Dr Mohammed al Rumhi

Ministry to unify efforts and regulate the waste management sector to ensure that the companies operating in the oil sector are guided and approved by be'ah for the safe and secure disposal of hazardous waste such as lead acid batteries (LABs), electronic and electrical waste (WEEE), scrap metals and other types of recyclable waste."

mentation of this agreement will contribute to the disposal of the waste in a safe and secure manner, in line with international standards. He also stressed the importance of this type of cooperation between various state institutions and join efforts in the interest of the nation.

Amri said, "We are pleased with this cooperation with the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to organise and sustain resources utilising an environmentally conscious and sustainable approach. We will work with the

This initiative and the associated business with oil and gas firms is an effort to achieve the objectives of the Oman Vision 2040 for building a sustainable environment and competitive economy by applying the principles of a circular economy.

Oman Vision 2040 focuses on activating components of circular economy so that the sultanate will shift from relying on the principles of linear economy to preserve resources and create economic benefits and secondary industries that result in job opportunities.

## Bank Nizwa CEO shares insights on future of Islamic finance

Muscat - Representing Oman's leading Islamic bank, Khaled al Kayed, CEO of Bank Nizwa, joined international experts and fellow industry leaders at the 15th annual AAOIFI-IsDB conference which was conducted virtually under the patronage of the Central Bank of Bahrain and sponsored by Bank Nizwa.

The conference, organised by the Accounting and Auditing Organization for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), was themed around 'Adaptability of Islamic finance post-



Khaled al Kayed

COVID-19: Navigating through the unprecedented times.'

With active participation of

several industry leaders along with regulators and standard-setting organisations, particularly in the region, the conference shed light on the resilience of Islamic finance principles during the pandemic and provided the necessary guidance on the sector's future. The conference also covered topics that revolved around the measures taken by Islamic Financial Institutions (IFIs) that contribute to social and economic development, and key opportunities and challenges for the Islamic finance industry during and post the COVID-19

pandemic.

Kayed participated as a panelist discussing the 'Future of Islamic finance in post-COVID-19 world: Change of business model in consideration of social and economic developments.'

The panel highlighted the core principles that define IFIs, its distinct characteristics of transactions, and a successful track record of overcoming financial obstacles.

Sharing his valuable inputs, Kayed said, "It is important to have unified standards in Islamic

finance across the world, especially in Islamic countries. This is essential for better growth, stability, resilience, risk management, and consistency. Standardisation has emerged as a key factor, both as an opportunity and a challenge, which is critical to take the Islamic finance industry into globalisation, where the multi-national Islamic banks will play a key role in driving growth of the industry."

"Also, the role of regulators in any country will be important to keep the banking system, both conventional and Islamic,

abreast and resilient, to reach its ultimate goal. Regulators should use national discretion to control matters which will have a direct impact on operational models, products and services. This way, we can witness good growth and developments in all Islamic banks," he said.

The 15th annual AAOIFI-IsDB conference was an influential gathering of international leaders and experts from across the Islamic finance industry and was attended by over 2,000 global stakeholders. These included prominent scholars

and senior officials from the central banks, regulatory authorities, Islamic financial institutions, and other international and multilateral organisations. In addition, there were accounting, auditing and legal firms, universities and higher education institutes, as well as media representatives from across the globe.

In just eight years, Oman has become the world's 15th largest Islamic banking industry and commands 13.4 per cent share in the sultanate's total banking assets.

## MSM index falls on weak activity

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Securities Market (MSM) fell 0.09 per cent to close at 3,711.5 points on Wednesday.

Trading activity deteriorated from the previous session as turnover declined 22.5 per cent to RO947,037 and volumes fell 50.7 per cent to 4.15mn shares.

All the sectoral indices closed in red territory. Financial index fell 0.03 per cent, Industrial index declined 0.29 per cent and Services index fell 0.38 per cent. The MSM Shariah index closed down by 0.06 per cent at 525.81 points.

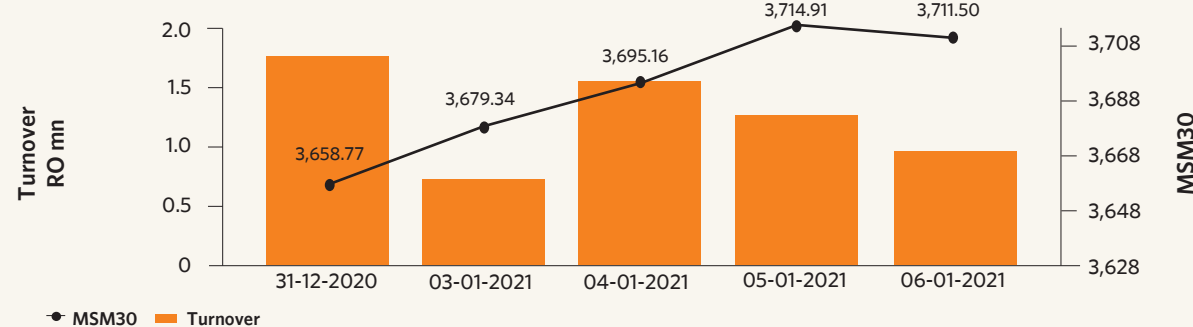
Market breadth remained negative as three companies closed up, while 11 companies closed down. The rest 22 traded stocks closed flat for the day.

The three gainers were Gulf International Chemicals (2.86 per cent), National Life & General Insurance (1.16 per cent) and Sohar International Bank (1.09



per cent). Top losers were Galfar Engineering & Contracting (-6.38 per cent), Al Anwar Holding (-2.99 per cent), Oman Investment & Finance (-2.17 per cent) and Sembcorp Salalah (-2.0 per cent).

### MSM INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



## Russia expects global oil demand to recover by 3-5mn bpd in 2021

Moscow, Russia - Volatility in the oil market in 2021 will decrease and oil demand will grow by 3-5mn barrels per day (bpd). Nevertheless, it will not reach the pre-crisis level, which was higher by 6-7mn bpd against the level of 2020, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said in an interview with Rossiya 24 TV.

"We expect that demand will recover during 2021. As you know, it is still below the pre-crisis level by about 6-7mn barrels per day. During 2021, there will be 3-5mn barrels of demand growth," he said.

"In terms of the current situation, we see that volatility has decreased significantly in recent months, especially after new vaccines have been registered in many countries," Novak added. He noted that the OPEC+ countries also agreed to prepare a report on production in countries that are not part of the agreement.

At the same time, the emergence of new strains of coronavirus is a factor of uncertainty for the oil market, since it is not yet fully clear how the situation will develop. Market volatility has slowed down, but production recovery will take some time, Novak added.

"Today the price is slightly



Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak (TASS)

*In terms of the current situation, we see that volatility has decreased significantly in recent months, especially after new vaccines have been registered in many countries*

ALEXANDER NOVAK

higher than we predicted. We see that the market is quite optimistic. This is due to the stimulating measures that many countries are introducing, due to vaccinations, so we believe that today there is enough positive: Both regarding prices and the balance of demand and supply," he said.

"Of course, there are still many uncertainties, we talked about them at the meeting. We need to be very attentive to the emergence of various coronavirus strains. It is not completely clear how they will develop, this needs to be monitored."

TASS

## UAE's Agthia Group completes merger of dates processing giant Al Foah

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Agthia Group, a leading Abu Dhabi-based food and beverages company, on Wednesday announced the successful completion of its strategic combination with Al Foah, the world's largest date processing and packaging company based in Abu Dhabi.

With the integration of Al Foah into Agthia as a strategic business unit, Agthia has instantly become the UAE market leader in four essential food and beverage (F&B) categories: Water, dates, flour, and animal feed, in addition to having a diversified international exposure within the date category. As a more robust, diversified, and consumer-centric food and beverage player, Agthia will have an



Khalifa Sultan al Suwaidi

even stronger platform to compete across the MENA region and beyond.

The transaction - which was first proposed by General Holding Corporation (Senaat) to the Agthia board of directors in October 2020 and received approval from Agthia's sharehold-

ers in November 2020 - saw Senaat transfer Al Foah's business, excluding its organic date farm in Al Ain, to Agthia in exchange for 120mn new shares through the issuance of a convertible instrument.

As a result, Senaat now owns 59.17 per cent of the entire issued share capital of Agthia, up from the 51 per cent it owned before the deal. Senaat is part of ADQ, one of the region's largest holding companies with a broad portfolio of major enterprises spanning key sectors of Abu Dhabi's economy.

In a press release, Khalifa Sultan al Suwaidi, chairman of Agthia Group and chief investment officer at ADQ, said, "The successful consolidation of Al

Foah's business has created a true F&B regional powerhouse and an immediate UAE champion in the exciting date market. Agthia has a winning formula which enables us to take advantage of opportunities such as the Al Foah transaction. We have a clear roadmap for growth and diversification of geographies and products, underpinned by a robust balance sheet." "Moreover, we are proud of our impeccable reputation for quality products and service, which is revered by peers and endorsed by our customers. We will continue to seek organic and inorganic growth opportunities to support our ambitions and to further strengthen the UAE's food and beverage sector," Suwaidi added.

## UK new car sales crash in 2020

London, UK - British new car sales crashed to the lowest level for almost three decades in 2020, with demand ravaged by chronic coronavirus fallout and Brexit uncertainty, industry data showed on Wednesday.

Sales tanked by 29.4 per cent compared with 2019 to 1.63mn new vehicles, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) revealed in a statement.

That was the lowest level since 1992.

The sector suffered a revenue loss of £20.4bn meanwhile.

"2020 will be seen as a lost year for automotive, with the

sector under pandemic-enforced shutdown for much of the year and uncertainty over future (EU) trading conditions taking their toll," SMMT chief executive Mike Hawes was quoted as saying.

"However, with the rollout of vaccines and clarity over our new relationship with the EU, we must make 2021 a year of recovery," he added.

Hawes was also positive around 'manufacturers bringing record numbers of electrified vehicles to market over the coming months'.

He warned however that Britain's latest coronavirus lock-

down, implemented this week to combat a spike in infections, would lead to 'rocky' trade over the coming months.

Official data show that one in 50 people in England were infected last week, rising to one in 30 in London, and many hospitals say they are swamped with COVID-19 patients.

Sales took a hit late last year also after the British government said it planned to ban diesel and petrol car sales from 2030 as part of a plan to achieve carbon neutrality by the middle of the century.

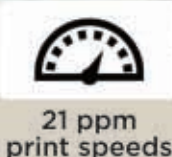
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## ACWA Power signs \$125mn deal with Apicorp to support growth

Dammam, Saudi Arabia - The leading regional multilateral development financial institution Apicorp and ACWA Power, a leading Saudi-based developer, investor and operator of power generation and desalinated water plants worldwide, announced the signing of a US\$125mn five-year Sharia'a-compliant corporate facility to support ACWA Power's future growth pipeline.

The agreement is aligned with Apicorp and ACWA Power's shared mission of accelerating the energy transition in the MENA region and globally through green technologies, which currently comprise over 15 per cent of Apicorp's financing portfolio.

The loan facility has been earmarked for funding ACWA Power's investments in renewable projects in the countries it operates in, as well as future high-growth markets, Apicorp said in a press release.

The five-year tenor is well suited for financing a typical renewable project's initial life-cycle, enabling greater financial strength during the early devel-



opment phase. Moreover, the Apicorp facility can also be utilised as a revolver loan during the initial three-year period, whereby it could be settled and redrawn as per ACWA Power's liquidity needs, enabling the company to recycle capital and increase financial capacity for further portfolio development and growth.

Nicolas Thévenot, managing director of corporate banking at Apicorp, said, "Backing the sustainable development of the Arab energy sector through in-

novative financing solutions continues to be a strategic priority for Apicorp. Worldwide and across the MENA region, we are witnessing a concerted drive to accelerate the share of renewables in the energy mix through the adoption of innovative, low-carbon technologies and solutions. This agreement further cements our longstanding and fruitful partnership with ACWA Power to build a renewable, more sustainable energy future."

Kashif Rana, Chief financial officer at ACWA Power, said,

"Apicorp's US\$125mn facility will serve as an important funding source to support the agile and robust expansion of ACWA Power's 'green' portfolio across markets. The revolving feature of this facility offers ACWA Power the flexibility to reallocate and thus optimise its utilisation. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with Apicorp as we actively seek to unlock renewable energy potential and deliver long-term, sustainable value to nations, backed by our strong ESG framework."

In October 2020, Apicorp provided a US\$70.5mn commitment to support ACWA Power and other co-sponsors to develop Phase V of the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park in Dubai.

A rapidly emerging sector within the regional energy mix, Apicorp forecasts that renewables will comprise just under one-third (32 per cent) of the total value of planned and committed power projects in the MENA region for the period 2020-2024, the largest such share of any power generation source.

# World Bank warns recovery could erode if virus worsens, downgrades outlook

Washington, US - The World Bank on Tuesday downgraded its outlook for the global economy, and warned the situation could deteriorate if COVID-19 infections accelerate or the vaccine rollout is delayed.

The coronavirus pandemic also has worsened the risks surrounding the rising debt load in developing nations, and it will take a global effort to avoid a new crisis in those economies, the bank cautioned.

After shrinking 4.3 per cent in 2020, the world economy is projected to grow by 4 per cent this year, two-tenths lower than previously forecast, as more than half of countries were downgraded in the semi-annual Global Economic Prospects report.

China was a bright spot with a surprisingly fast recovery in 2020, but advanced countries which did better last year will fare worse in 2021, the bank said.

The report warns the outlook remains 'highly uncertain', and GDP growth could be as low as 1.6 per cent this year if the downside risks materialise.

With millions driven into poverty by the coronavirus recession, countries will need to

find a way to move beyond direct aid and reignite investment to stimulate growth, the Washington-based development lender urged.

Policymakers face 'formidable challenges... as they try to ensure that this still fragile global recovery gains traction and sets a foundation for robust growth', World Bank president David Malpass said.

The expectation for a subdued recovery 'assumes that vaccine rollout becomes widespread' and the economic reopening continues, Malpass told reporters.

But even if the pace of growth holds steady, global GDP in 2022 will be 4.4 per cent below pre-pandemic levels, the bank said.

And, further out, the 'lasting damage to health, education and balance sheets' may lower the global economy's potential output, the report said.

### Poor hurt the most

Focus on policies to boost investment will be needed to counter 'the pandemic's lasting scars', including through investment in green infrastructure which can



World Bank president David Malpass

boost growth while at the same time addressing climate change, the report said.

Malpass said that would in-

clude phasing out fossil fuel subsidies and providing incentives for green technologies.

The Chinese economy is ex-

pected to expand by nearly 8 per cent this year, after 2 per cent growth in 2020, while US GDP is projected to gain 3.5 per cent - a

half point lower than the June forecast.

Excluding China, developing nations as a group will see growth of just 3.4 per cent, the report said.

The inequality of the downturn and the recovery was 'dramatic', and drove a 'devastating rise in extreme poverty', Malpass

make sure the recent debt accumulation does not end with a string of debt crises," said Ayhan Kose, acting World bank vice president for Equitable Growth and Financial Institutions.

"The developing world cannot afford another lost decade."

Malpass said that the situation is a 'red alert' with some

*After shrinking 4.3 per cent in 2020, the world economy is projected to grow by 4 per cent this year, two-tenths lower than previously forecast*

said.

'People at the bottom of the income scale were hardest hit' by the recession, and 'unfortunately will likely be the slowest to regain jobs, get health care, vaccinations and adjust to the post-Covid economy', he said.

### 'Red alert'

The pandemic also exacerbated the debt risks of developing nations.

"The global community needs to act rapidly and forcefully to

low-income countries facing deep debt distress, and the more they are forced to pay to service pre-pandemic debt, the less they have for health care and investment.

China, which holds 65 per cent of the debt of the lowest-income countries, has a key role to play in addressing the challenge, and Malpass again called on the country to provide transparency on the terms of the loans, including collateral and interest rates.

AFP

## Beijing slams 'bullying' US over Trump order on Chinese apps

Beijing, China - Beijing accused the US on Wednesday of 'bullying' after President Donald Trump ordered a ban on a series of Chinese apps in his last weeks in office, branding them a threat to national security.

Under the Trump administration Beijing and Washington have clashed repeatedly over trade, technology, human rights and the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the latest move to raise tensions, Trump ordered a ban on transactions involving Alipay, WeChat Pay and other apps linked to Chinese companies, saying they could route user information to the government in Beijing.

China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said on Wednesday the move was an example of 'bullying' by the US, and accused Washington of 'stretching the concept of national security'.

"This harms both itself and others."



A pedestrian walks past an Alipay logo at the Shanghai office building of Ant Group in Shanghai, China (AFP)

Trump's executive order is to take effect in 45 days - just weeks after he is replaced in the White House by President-elect Joe Biden on January 20.

But a senior administration official said the order and its implementation have not been discussed with the 'poten-

tial incoming Biden administration'.

The apps targeted by the new ban were chosen because of the extremely high number of downloads, which meant tens of millions of users could be at risk of having their data harvested, according to the administration of-

ficial.

Trump's order specifically named apps including Alipay, QQ Wallet, Tencent QQ, WeChat Pay and WPS Office. Alipay and Tencent did not respond to queries.

Previous executive orders aimed at banning TikTok - which is owned by China-based ByteDance - were derailed by court rulings indicating Trump had overstepped his legal authority.

Hua said the new order would 'of course have some impact on related Chinese companies, but more important might be that it damages the interests of American consumers and the US'.

"The US talks about a free market economy and fair competition, but how does it behave?" she said.

The executive order leaves it to the Secretary of Commerce to recommend which kinds or transactions with apps to prevent and how.

AFP

## Where next for bitcoin after record-breaking year?

London, UK - Bitcoin's record-breaking and volatile 2020, aided by increased popularity among individual investors, could be set for calmer times according to specialists, despite the new year starting with more sizeable swings.

Having quadrupled in price last year also on strong institutional interest, the leading virtual currency soared by 20 per cent in just 72 hours to reach an all-time high US\$34,792 on Sunday.

On Tuesday around 1630 GMT it stood at US\$32,570.

Since mid-December, 'you finally saw[(individual)]... investors come in', noted Antoni Trenchev, co-founder of specialist cryptocurrency platform Nexo.

Bitcoin purchases have opened up to the wider public thanks to the ability to buy fractions of one whole unit, while Paypal account holders can now use the virtual currency for online transactions.

But even buying fractions of



one bitcoin can leave small investors with big losses.

"If you want to get caught up in day-to-day movements, you need to be a pro with the stomach for stormy waters," Trenchev told AFP.

"There's no certainty in any asset class, bitcoin least of all," he cautioned.

The cryptocurrency's recent highs were achieved at weekends and during the festive period when many brokers were away from work.

Fawad Razaqada, analyst for

ThinkMarkets, believes like several analysts that a longer-lasting price correction awaits.

"The extended run means a lot of investors and speculators will be happy to book profit on the first sign of weakness, especially in the current economic climate," he forecast.

As the price approached US\$25,000 towards the end of last year, the boss of financial consultants deVere, Nigel Green, announced he had sold half his bitcoins.

"It should now be treated as any other investment - that's to say, where possible, it's better to sell high and re-buy in the dips," Green said.

In its 12-year history, bitcoin has suffered several wild price swings with rebounds not always immediate.

Despite the volatility, many investment funds continue to buy bitcoin, while banking giants have compared it to haven investment gold.

AFP

## Difficult 2020 ends on an improving note for US carmakers

New York, US - General Motors (GM) and Toyota reported strong US sales at the end of 2020 on Tuesday, reflecting surprisingly robust consumer demand that mitigated the sales drop for the full year in the wake of COVID-19.

The pair are the top two automakers by US market share, and both scored higher sales in the fourth quarter despite notching double-digit sales declines for all of 2020.

US auto sales for 2020 are projected to drop 15.3 per cent to 14.4mn - which would make it the worst year since at least 2012 - according to a December forecast from Cox Automotive.

Still, those numbers are much better than analysts feared after the US car market almost completely froze during spring lockdowns as the country contended with a spiraling coronavirus crisis.

"Everybody is excited the market has done as well as it has," said Charles Chesbrough, senior economist at Cox Automotive. "We're getting back to normal much more quickly than expected."

While the pandemic has caused elevated unemployment and long lines at food pantries, other consumers have more cash for cars and other big-ticket items due to less spending on travel and other discretionary goods, and many have benefited from federal stimulus funds.

"If you haven't lost your job, the government has been giving away money," said Chesbrough, who thinks the industry could benefit in the second half of 2021 from a recovering US economy bolstered by vaccinations and additional federal spending.

Chesbrough said auto compa-



Line workers work on the chassis of GM pickup trucks at the Flint Assembly plant in Flint, Michigan, US (AFP)

nies have been able to keep selling incentives in check due to limited inventories. However, sales could sag in the first quarter if the worsening pandemic

crimps demand.

GM cited continued consumer hunger for pickup trucks, sport utility vehicles and other large cars that enabled the auto

giant to score record average transaction prices in the fourth quarter and for the full year.

The auto giant reported a 4.8 per cent increase in US auto

sales in the final three months of the year, to 771,323, topping analyst estimates.

But GM's overall sales for 2020 fell 11.8 per cent to 2.5mn compared with 2019, reflecting the hit from a nearly two-month disruption to auto manufacturing due to the initial US COVID-19 outbreak.

Since then, automakers have overhauled plants to respect social distancing protocols, enabling car output to return roughly to pre-pandemic levels.

GM said year-end inventories stood at about 33 per cent below 2019 levels, but offered an upbeat outlook for the year.

"We look forward to an inflection point for the US economy in the spring," GM chief economist Elaine Buckberg said.

"Widening vaccination rates and warmer weather should enable consumers and businesses to return to a more normal range

of activities, lifting the job market, consumer sentiment and auto demand."

At Toyota, fourth-quarter sales were up 9.4 per cent at 660,715. However, full-year sales came in at 2.1mn, 11.3 per cent below the 2019 level.

In contrast, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) reported a fourth-quarter sales decline of 8 per cent to 499,431 and a 17 per cent drop for the year to 1.8mn.

FCA attributed the drop to plunging fleet orders, particularly from car rental companies.

But Jeff Kommor, FCA's head of sales, said the fourth quarter provided 'strong springboard' into 2021.

"The economic indicators are pointing in the right direction," Kommor said, noting that 'petrol prices remain low... and consumers have access to credit'.

AFP

# Court denies bail to Julian Assange

London, UK - WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange will have to remain in custody in Britain, pending a US appeal of the decision to block his extradition to face charges for leaking secret documents, a judge in London ruled on Wednesday.

Judge Vanessa Baraitser told Westminster Magistrates Court there were 'substantial grounds for believing that if Mr Assange is released today he will fail to surrender' for the appeal hearings.

"Mr Assange still has an incentive to abscond from these as yet unresolved proceedings," she said. "As a matter of fairness the United States must be able to challenge my decision. If Mr Assange absconds during this process then they will have lost the opportunity to do so."

The US had earlier urged Baraitser not to release the 49 year old, while it prepares to challenge Baraitser's decision on mental health grounds to block his extradition to face charges for publishing secret documents.

Lawyer Clair Dobbin, representing the government in Washington, told the court there were 'no conditions that could guarantee his surrender' if he were freed from custody.

"The history of his attempts to evade extradition to the United States demonstrated that he is capable of going to any length to avoid that possibility," she added.

Assange was in court to hear the application and ruling, two



Stella Morris, partner of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, leaves Westminster Magistrates court in London after he was denied bail on Wednesday (AFP)

days after an unexpected decision on Monday to block his removal to the United States on the grounds he was a suicide risk.

Dobbin said the court 'should be under no doubt about his resources to abscond', pointing to his previous flouting of bail conditions, and an offer of political asylum, notably from Mexico.

But Assange's lawyer, Edward Fitzgerald, said he should be freed, after spending 15 months in custody awaiting the extradition proceedings. "We say after all this time, after the long proceedings over a year... the court has given a decision and the decision has been that he should be discharged," he added.

**Diplomatic refuge**  
Assange is wanted to face 18 charges relating to the 2010 release by WikiLeaks of 500,000 secret files detailing aspects of military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Washington claims he helped intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal the 2010 documents before exposing confidential sources around the world.

He faces a possible 175 year sentence if convicted but Assange and his lawyers have long argued the case against him is politically motivated. He has been held at the high-security Belmarsh prison in southeast London.

A previous request for bail in March on the grounds he was vulnerable to COVID-19 while behind bars was rejected because the judge assessed he was likely to abscond. Assange sought sanctuary in Ecuador's Embassy in 2012, after Sweden issued an arrest warrant in connection with sexual assault

allegations. He spent seven years at the South American country's London mission until the government in Quito revoked his citizenship. British police dragged him out and arrested him in 2019.

He was then sentenced to 50 weeks in jail for breaching his bail terms in connection with the Swedish case, which was later dropped due to lack of evidence.

The UN called the sentence 'disproportionate'.

Assange's long-running legal woes have become a cause celebre for media freedom, even though the judge hearing the case said he did have a case to answer. Baraitser on Monday said he would have been 'well aware' of the effects of his leaking of secret documents, and his actions went 'well beyond' the role of a journalist.

But she said extradition would be 'oppressive' as his mental health would probably deteriorate in the US penal system, 'causing him to commit suicide'.

She rejected US experts' testimony that Assange would be protected from self-harm, noting that others such as disgraced US financier Jeffrey Epstein had managed to kill themselves in custody despite supervision.

UN rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer applauded the decision to block his extradition, and said he should be freed and compensated for his ordeal, which amounted to arbitrary detention. AFP

## Bosnia must act to help hundreds of homeless migrants, says EU

Brussels, Belgium - The European Union's foreign policy chief on Tuesday called on Bosnia to assume responsibility for hundreds of migrants left sleeping out in the cold after their camp burned down.

In a damning summary of the crisis there, the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell argued that, as a country seeking to join the European Union, Bosnia needed to assume its responsibilities.

More than a thousand migrants have been homeless since fire destroyed the Lipa camp in northwest Bosnia on December 23. Officials in Bosnia have so far failed to find them anywhere else to stay.

In recent days, EU officials have stepped up their condemnation of Bosnia's failure to help the homeless migrants.

Police there believe the blaze was started by some of the migrants to protest the withdrawal of the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM), which had been running the



Migrants from Africa and Asia protest at 'Lipa' migrant camp near the Bosnian town of Bihac on January 3 (AFP)

camp. But even before the fire, wrote Borrell, conditions there were 'totally inappropriate and dangerous'.

The IOM had pulled out after Bosnian officials 'ignored repeated appeals to provide basic and secure living conditions and humane treatment', Borrell noted, writing in a blog at the EU

website. "The closure of the Lipa centre left around 3,000 refugees and migrants without access to basic shelter and services in winter conditions."

And yet a centre in the nearby city of Bihac, which had been refurbished with the help of €3.5mn of EU funding, 'stands empty, due to the opposition of

local authorities and population to open it', wrote Borrell.

"Some 900 persons have had to continue to sleep in Lipa in the open for a week now and some 800 people have gone off to sleep in abandoned buildings and the woods', the EU official added.

AFP

## Tanzanian rights activist free after year in jail

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania - Tanzanian human rights activist Tito Magoti has been freed from prison after more than a year under a plea bargain over alleged economic crimes, his lawyer announced on Tuesday.

Magoti, of the Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC), was arrested in December 2019 in Dar es Salaam. His case drew international attention after Amnesty slammed his ongoing detention as a bid to silence government critics.

He was charged with various economic crimes, including money laundering, possession of a computer programme designed for the purpose of committing an offence and leading organised crime. The prosecution dropped the first two charges and kept that of organised crime against Magoti and co-accused Theodory Giyani, a fellow member of the LHRC.

The two paid 17mn Tanzanian shillings (US\$7,300 approx) for their release after agreeing to plead guilty.



Tito Magoti of the Legal and Human Rights Centre was arrested in December 2019 in Dar es Salaam

'The two agreed to plead guilty in the plea bargaining,' Kambole posted on Twitter.

'It should be remembered that they have been in detention for more than a year pending investigations,' he said.

The case was postponed 26 times before it entered into plea bargaining on Tuesday, the LHRC said.

Amnesty International called the detention 'an affront to justice and a clear attempt to silence government critics by

keeping them behind bars'.

President John Magufuli, who won a disputed second term in October 2020 elections, has been accused of intimidating the opposition and suppressing democracy and human rights.

Last year, journalist Erick Kabendera was also released after seven months in detention. He pleaded guilty over money laundering and tax evasion charges in plea bargaining. AFP

## Australia vows to 'restore order' on immigration detention island

Sydney, Australia - Unrest broke out at an Australian island immigration detention centre, authorities and NGOs said on Wednesday following reports the Christmas Island facility had been set alight by frustrated detainees.

The Australian Border Force said an operation was underway "to restore order after a disturbance" at the North West Point Immigration Detention Centre on the Australian territory in the Indian Ocean.

"A small number of detainees caused some damage to the facility overnight and continue to be non-compliant," the government agency said in a statement, adding there were no reports of any injuries.

Advocacy group Refugee Action Coalition said reports from inside the centre suggested two compounds had been set ablaze overnight Tuesday into Wednesday as tensions boiled over.

"While the extent of the damage is not known, the glare from the fires and the extent of the smoke in the air indicates the fires are substantial," the group said.

Video footage apparently shot inside the facility and posted to Facebook shows a man climbing on a roof as a blaze glows orange-red behind him.

"This is how frustrated people are with this... detention. We are sick and tired to be treated as a dog," a man can be heard saying. "They are burning the roof..."



This file photo shows the education centre inside the North West Point Immigration Detention Centre

nobody care about us," he adds later.

National Justice Project principal solicitor George Newhouse said detainees were increasingly frustrated with conditions after being confined to their rooms for up to 22 hours a day and unable to contact their families due to a poor mobile phone signal.

"The federal government have a policy of keeping detainees in harsh and inhumane conditions to force them to leave Australia," Newhouse said.

"These harsh and solitary conditions are having an effect on the mental health and welfare of detainees."

The Australian Border Force said the centre was being used to house 'unlawful non-citizens' -

migrants who had their visas cancelled after being convicted of crimes - but would not confirm how many people were currently being detained.

The Refugee Council of Australia said the facility held 220 detainees as at October 2020.

Christmas Island, a tropical isle off Australia's northwest, gained notoriety as a venue where asylum seekers who attempted to reach the country by boat were detained.

The government controversially reopened the facility last August after a two-year hiatus, saying mainland detention centres were filling up as the coronavirus pandemic prevented the deportation of migrants.

AFP

# China arrests over 50 HK dissidents

Hong Kong, China - China's crackdown in Hong Kong escalated dramatically on Wednesday with police arresting more than 50 opposition figures in their largest operation since a draconian security law was imposed on the financial hub.

The sweep is the latest salvo in Beijing's battle to stamp out dissent in the semi-autonomous city after millions hit the streets in 2019 with huge and sometimes violent democracy protests.

Police confirmed 53 people - including a US citizen - were arrested for 'subversion' in an early morning operation that involved about 1,000 officers.

The charges were sparked by an attempt by opposition groups last year to win a majority in the city's partially-elected legislature.

Hong Kong's security chief John Lee described the arrests as 'necessary' and aimed at a group of people who tried to 'sink Hong Kong into an abyss' and 'overthrow the government'.

Beijing's Liaison Office in Hong Kong said those facing prosecution 'strategically organised or implemented a plan to paralyse the government'.

But the operation sparked a rebuke from Antony Blinken, US President-elect Joe Biden's pick for secretary of state, who said authorities were launching 'an assault on those bravely advocating for universal rights'. "The Biden-Harris administration will stand with the people of Hong Kong and against Beijing's crackdown on democracy," he added.

Those detained represented a broad cross-section of Hong Kong's opposition, from veteran former pro-democracy lawmakers such as James To, Andrew



Civic Party members hold a press conference at the party headquarters following the arrest of opposition figures, in Hong Kong on Wednesday (AFP)

Wan, Lam Cheuk-ting and Claudia Mo to a host of younger activists.

Among the youth campaigners were Gwyneth Ho, a former journalist turned social activist, district councillor Tiffany Yuen and Jeffrey Andrews, a campaigner known for working with ethnic minorities.

Colleagues of Joshua Wong, one of the city's most famous democracy activists, who is currently in jail, said via his official Facebook account that his home was searched.

## 'Night of the long knives'

National security police also searched a law firm known for taking on human rights cases.

John Clancey, an American lawyer working for the firm, was

*An assault on those bravely advocating for universal rights... The Biden-Harris administration will stand against Beijing's crackdown on democracy*

ANTONY BLINKEN

arrested on suspicion of subversion, two sources told AFP. It is the first time a US national has been detained under the new law.

A fluent Cantonese speaker and long-term Hong Kong resident, Clancey is a veteran legal activist. "Continue to work for democracy and human rights in Hong Kong," he told reporters as he was led away by officers.

The police operation also involved the media.

Three local news outlets - Stand News, Apple Daily and In-

mediakh - said national security police visited to request documents.

Some of the remaining members of Hong Kong's rapidly diminishing pro-democracy block gathered for a press conference on Wednesday afternoon, raising fists and shouting 'Free all political prisoners!'

Nathan Law, a prominent democracy leader who fled overseas last year, used social media to accuse authorities of trying to 'extinguish the flames of resist-

ance' in the city.

The foundations of Wednesday's mass arrests were laid last summer when pro-democracy parties organised an unofficial primary for local legislative elections which were ultimately scrapped altogether.

Only half the legislature's 70 seats are popularly elected.

The campaign's aim was to win all 35 elected seats and take a majority in the legislature for the first time and try to block government policies.

Over 600,000 Hong Kongers turned out to vote in the unofficial poll which infuriated Beijing.

Chinese officials at the time warned any attempt to win a majority and block government policies constituted 'subversion' under the new security law.

AFP

## Last HK governor urges EU to rethink on 'miserable' China pact

London, UK - Hong Kong's last British governor Chris Patten on Wednesday condemned the police action in Hong Kong demanding the EU cancel its 'miserable' investment pact with China.

The arrests in Hong Kong were the latest salvo in Beijing's battle to stamp out opposition in the semi-autonomous business hub, which was controlled by Britain up to 1997.

The arrests came after opposition groups tried last year to win a majority in the city's legislature, whose partial democracy is a legacy of reforms by Patten in the closing years of British rule.

'Taking advantage of the political and pandemic distractions around the world, the Chinese Communist Party has further turned the screw in Hong Kong. It is now clearly to be regarded as illegal to support democracy,' Patten said in a statement.

'Liberal democracies around the world must continue to speak out against this brutal destruction of a free society, as well as about the ethnic genocide in Xinjiang,' he added.

There was no immediate comment on the arrests from the UK, which is now fully out of the European Union.

At the end of last month,



Hong Kong's last British governor Chris Patten (AFP)

the EU and China approved in principle a major investment pact that Brussels hopes will open up lucrative opportunities, despite concerns about Beijing's rights record.

Patten, who is also a former EU commissioner, said the deal 'spits in the face of human rights and shows a delusional view of the Chinese Communist Party's trustworthiness'.

'It is surely inconceivable that the European Parliament can support the miserable draft deal that the European Commission wants to sign with Beijing,' he said.

Patten added the deal was 'a massive strategic blunder' and, in the ex-governor's view, confront China's 'bullying loutish behaviour' in harness with other democracies.

AFP



Residents ride an excavator to escape floods in Lanchang in Malaysia's Pahang state on Wednesday (AFP)

## Malaysian villagers escape floods on an excavator

Kampung Sementeh, Malaysia - Malaysian villagers were evacuated in an excavator while others swam through deep waters on Wednesday as the number forced from their homes by floods rose to more than 28,000 with at least four dead.

Flooding hits the country's east coast during the rainy season annually and regularly results in mass evacuations, but people in some areas say this year's are the worst in decades.

The worst-hit state is Pahang, where over 21,000 have been evacuated in recent days, with almost 4,000 forced from their homes in Johor and thousands more in other states, according to the social welfare department.

Four deaths have so far been reported in Pahang and Johor.

On Wednesday a group of villagers was evacuated from the small settlement of Kampung Sementeh in Pahang, which has

*It has been raining for three days, food is running low, some shops are closed. There are no government boats or heavy trucks to help.*

JUZAILI MAT ZAIN

been cut off by the floods, in an excavator, an AFP journalist at the scene said.

A pregnant woman and a sick elderly lady were among a handful of residents sitting in the raised shovel of the machine as it drove along a flooded road, while others hung off the cab.

Residents of another cut-off village swam through floodwaters about 1.8m deep as they

sought to obtain supplies of fresh water and food.

"It has been raining for three days, food is running low, some shops are closed," factory worker Juzaili Mat Zain (44), who helped organise the excavator evacuation from Kampung Sementeh, told AFP.

"There are no government boats or heavy trucks to help."

Electricity had been cut off in the village and some houses were inundated, he added.

Resident Ahmad Saad Mohamad (48) said it was the area's worst floods for four decades.

"We are disappointed and angry," he said. "It has been three days and there has been no government aid."

This year's floods come against the backdrop of a worsening coronavirus outbreak, with some fearful they could be exposed to COVID-19 in crowded relief centres.

AFP

## New Venezuela parliament sworn in, US-backed Guaido 'without job'

Caracas, Venezuela - A new Venezuelan parliament was sworn in on Tuesday with President Nicolas Maduro's party in firm control and opposition leader Juan Guaido officially without a job, but with foreign backing to keep up a parallel legislature.

The new assembly was denounced as 'a fraudulently elected body' by outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who said Washington recognised Guaido as 'the legitimate president of Venezuela'.

"We consider this group to be illegitimate and will not recognize it nor its pronouncements," he said of the new parliament which was also rejected by Colombia, Brazil and Uruguay.

A total 256 of the National Assembly's 277 seats are in the hands of Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela and its allies after December 6 elections boycotted by the opposition, who claimed fraud.

The chamber, which has a five-year mandate, previously



The official deputy of the National Assembly, Jorge Rodriguez, raises his fist after being sworn in as the new president of the National Assembly, in Caracas on Tuesday (AFP)

had an opposition majority with Guaido as its speaker since 2019.

Lawmakers sporting masks and bearing portraits of revolutionary hero Simon Bolivar and the Late socialist president Hugo Chavez - Maduro's predecessor - lay flowers on a public square before heading to the National Assembly to be sworn in.

The new speaker Jorge Rodriguez quipped with MPs that

the chamber required an 'exorcism' after the previous five years, and said holy water had been sprinkled 'in every corner' of the house.

Maduro and members of his party had campaigned with promises of punishing 'traitors', referring to Guaido and other outgoing opposition lawmakers who voted in December to continue functioning alongside the

newly-elected parliament.

Analysts have said the Guaido group's move has no foundation in law. Some have criticised the opposition leader's decision to boycott last year's elections, essentially giving up institutional power, limited as it was, and potentially placing governments that support his claim to the presidency in a difficult position.

AFP

## Indonesians linked to Philippine blast shot dead

Jakarta, Indonesia - Two Indonesian militants linked to a 2019 church blast in the Philippines have been shot dead by police, authorities said on Wednesday, as officers arrested scores of pro-Islamic State radicals.

The shootings came as Indonesia's counter-terrorism squad, Densus 88, raided a hide-out of extremist group Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) in Sulawesi island's Makassar city, they said.

Two suspects were gunned

down when they 'resisted arrest' and attacked officers, police said, adding that a third suspect suffered gunshot injuries and was being treated in hospital.

Another 17 militants were detained.

Later on Wednesday, police said the two dead suspects were involved in financing the Philippines' worst terror attack in years, which killed 21 and injured scores more in 2019.

"The two were involved in transferring money to the

bombers of the church in Jolo, Philippines," national police spokesman Ahmad Ramadhan told reporters.

In early 2019, two explosions ripped through a Catholic church on the Philippines' island of Jolo, killing worshippers at Sunday mass and security forces - raising fears about growing links between militants in Southeast Asia. IS claimed responsibility for the cathedral blast, saying two suicide bombers detonated explosive belts. The pair were later

identified as an Indonesian militant and his wife.

The Jolo attack was carried out days after voters approved expanding Muslim self-rule in the south aimed at ending a decades-old rebellion for independence or autonomy for the sizeable Islamic minority of the mainly Catholic Philippines.

On Wednesday, police in Indonesia said the two men shot by authorities were members of JAD, a local terror network.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

# China throws a spanner in WHO probe

Beijing, China - An expert mission to China to probe the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic was in disarray on Wednesday after Beijing denied entry to the World Health Organization (WHO) team at the last minute despite months of painstaking negotiations.

Ten experts were due to arrive in China this week for the delicate, highly politicised task of establishing how and where the virus jumped from animals to humans.

But with a number of the team already in transit, China denied them entry visas, prodding WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, to say he was 'very disappointed'.

China is determined to control the origin story of the virus, which has killed more than 1.8mn people around the world and laid waste to global economies.

The first cases of the coronavirus were recorded in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, prompting accusations of chaotic, secretive handling by Chinese authorities which led to its spread beyond China.

US President Donald Trump called the pandemic the 'China virus'.

Despite the hail of criticism,



WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at a press briefing via video link from the WHO headquarters in Geneva on Tuesday (AFP)

Beijing has so far resisted pressure for an independent probe and instead has seeded doubt as to whether the pandemic even started inside its borders.

Beijing Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying confirmed the WHO team had

not been admitted as planned, and admitted it was 'not just a visa issue'.

"The issue of origin-tracing is incredibly complicated," she told reporters at a regular news briefing. "To ensure the work of the international expert team in

China goes smoothly, we have to carry out necessary procedures and make relevant arrangements." Talks were continuing over 'the specific date and specific arrangement of the expert group's visit', Hua added, despite the months of negotia-

tions already spent on setting up the trip.

**Critical mission**

The origins of COVID-19 remain bitterly contested, lost in a fog of recriminations and conjecture from the international com-

*To ensure the work of the international expert team goes smoothly, we have to carry out necessary procedures and make relevant arrangements.*

HUA CHUNYING

munity - as well as obfuscation from Chinese authorities determined to control of the virus narrative.

The WHO trip was seen as an important way to cut through the rancour and seek clear answers on how it started.

"We were all operating on the on the understanding that the team would begin deployment today," WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan said on Tuesday.

He stressed the 'absolute critical nature' of the mission, acknowledging that the situation was 'frustrating and... disappointing'.

Scientists initially believed the virus jumped to humans at a market selling exotic animals for meat in the city of Wuhan.

But experts now think the

market may not have been the origin of the outbreak, but rather a place where it was amplified.

It is widely assumed the virus originally came from bats, but the intermediate animal host that transmitted it between bats and humans remains unknown.

Experts say geopolitics hollowed out the global cooperation needed to head off the virus in its early stages.

At the time of the outbreak the Trump administration was locked in a brutal trade war with China and the US president used it as a political bludgeon.

That soured Beijing's mood for compromise and communication.

Without the trade wars and other tensions raging in 2019, 'January 2020 would not have played out the way it did', said Ilona Kickbusch, the founding director and chair of the Global Health Centre in Geneva.

"Geopolitics... put the world in this situation," she said.

Inside China, the narrative of a devastating contagion has been recast as a story of Chinese resilience and strong leadership by Communist authorities.

China has broadly contained the pandemic and presided over an economic rebound.

AFP

## Over 600 journalists killed by virus, says NGO

Geneva, Switzerland - More than 600 journalists have died of COVID-19 last year since March 1, a press freedom organisation said, calling for media workers to have priority access to vaccines.

The Press Emblem Campaign (PEC), which tracks the deaths of journalists around the world, said that of the 602 media workers known to have died from the new coronavirus, more than half were from Latin America, with 303 fatalities.

Some 145 deaths were recorded in Asia, with 94 in Europe, 32 in North America and 28 in Africa.

The PEC said it was not possible to differentiate journalists who had become infected whilst working, and their list also includes retired journalists.

The Geneva-based group said it believes journalists 'should have priority access to immunisation upon request'.

'Because of their profession, journalists who go into the field to testify are particularly exposed to the virus. Some of them, specially freelancers and photographers, can't just work from home,' PEC secretary-general Blaise Lempen said in a statement.

The PEC tally is based on information from local media, national associations of journalists and regional correspondents.

It said the actual number would be higher than 602 as the cause of journalists' deaths is sometimes not specified.

AFP



A pedestrian walks past a sign calling for the safe upkeep of loved ones in York, north west England on Wednesday (AFP)

## UK vows 'massive' increase in jabs

London, UK - Britain's minister for vaccinations on Wednesday promised the drive would speed up dramatically to inoculate nearly 14mn people in the coming weeks, as lawmakers were set to back an England-wide lockdown.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has pledged that the most vulnerable - including those over 80 and in care homes - will get a first dose by mid-February.

"My absolute focus is to get to 13.9mn," vaccines deployment minister Nadhim Zahawi told BBC radio.

"I'm confident the NHS (National Health Service) has a plan and we will meet that target," he said. "You will see a massive increase in the numbers," he said, with the public able to get shots at national vaccination centres opening soon, as well as in hospitals, doctors' surgeries and community pharmacies.

The House of Commons has been recalled and will vote retroactively on the latest restrictions, which took legal effect overnight and could remain in force until March 31.

AFP

## Slow vaccine rollouts fuel worry as US logs record daily death toll

London, UK - England went back into full lockdown as Europe battled on Wednesday to stem a rising tide of coronavirus cases, and the United States logged its worst daily death toll of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown no signs of slowing, with known infections nearing 86mn worldwide and more than 1.8mn deaths, even as many nations ramp up their vaccination rollouts.

England began its third national lockdown on Tuesday as alarm grew in Britain over the latest surge in cases which is threatening to overwhelm its National Health Service, piling on the misery for people growing tired of social distancing and the economic cost.

Denmark and Germany also extended and increased coronavirus measures on Tuesday, as concerns grew about the surge on the continent and the European Union falling behind other advanced nations in its vaccination drive.



People walk through a busy shopping area amid the coronavirus pandemic, in New York City on Tuesday (AFP)

### Vaccine frustrations

Spurred on by new variants that are believed to be more contagious, the virus situation in some countries is as bad as it has ever been.

The United States broke its own record for the number of daily deaths from COVID-19 yet again Tuesday, recording 3,936

fatalities in 24 hours, according to a tally kept by Johns Hopkins University.

The world's worst-hit nation is ultimately counting on its vaccination campaign, which began mid-December, to end the crisis. But less than two percent of the population has so far been covered, with 4.8mn people

having received the first of two doses.

The spikes in caseloads around the world have disrupted including the Grammy music awards, a few entertainment and sports events that had managed to resume after shutdowns earlier in the pandemic.

AFP

## Amnesty calls on Israel to give Palestinians virus vaccine

Jerusalem - Amnesty International on Wednesday called on Israel to provide coronavirus vaccine doses to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, saying the Jewish state was obligated to do so under international law.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, which is home to some 2.8mn Palestinians, has not publicly asked for Israeli assistance in vaccine procurement.

Hamas Islamists, who control the Gaza strip, where about 2mn Palestinians live, are highly unlikely to publicly coordinate with Israel in any vaccination effort.

But UK-based rights group Amnesty said Israel needed to 'stop ignoring its international obligations as an occupying



A healthcare worker administers a vaccine at Clalit Health Services, in Bnei Brak on Wednesday (AFP)

power and immediately act to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are equally and fairly provided to Palestinians living under its occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip'.

The PA has said Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza will be vaccinated through the United Nations-backed COVAX programme.

The Palestinian Health ministry said Monday that it expected to receive its first vaccine doses next month through COVAX.

Israel began inoculating its citizens, including Israeli settlers in the West Bank, on December 19, starting with medical workers and the over 60s, and has so far injected more than a million people.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Saturday he hoped that within a month 2.25mn Israelis - a quarter of the population of nine million - would have received the two shots of the Pfizer-BioNTech jab needed for optimum effect.

As of Tuesday, Israel's Health Ministry had confirmed 451,000 cases of the virus since the outbreak of the pandemic, with over 3,400 deaths.

The Palestinian Health Ministry has confirmed more than 100,000 cases in the West Bank, including 1,100 deaths.

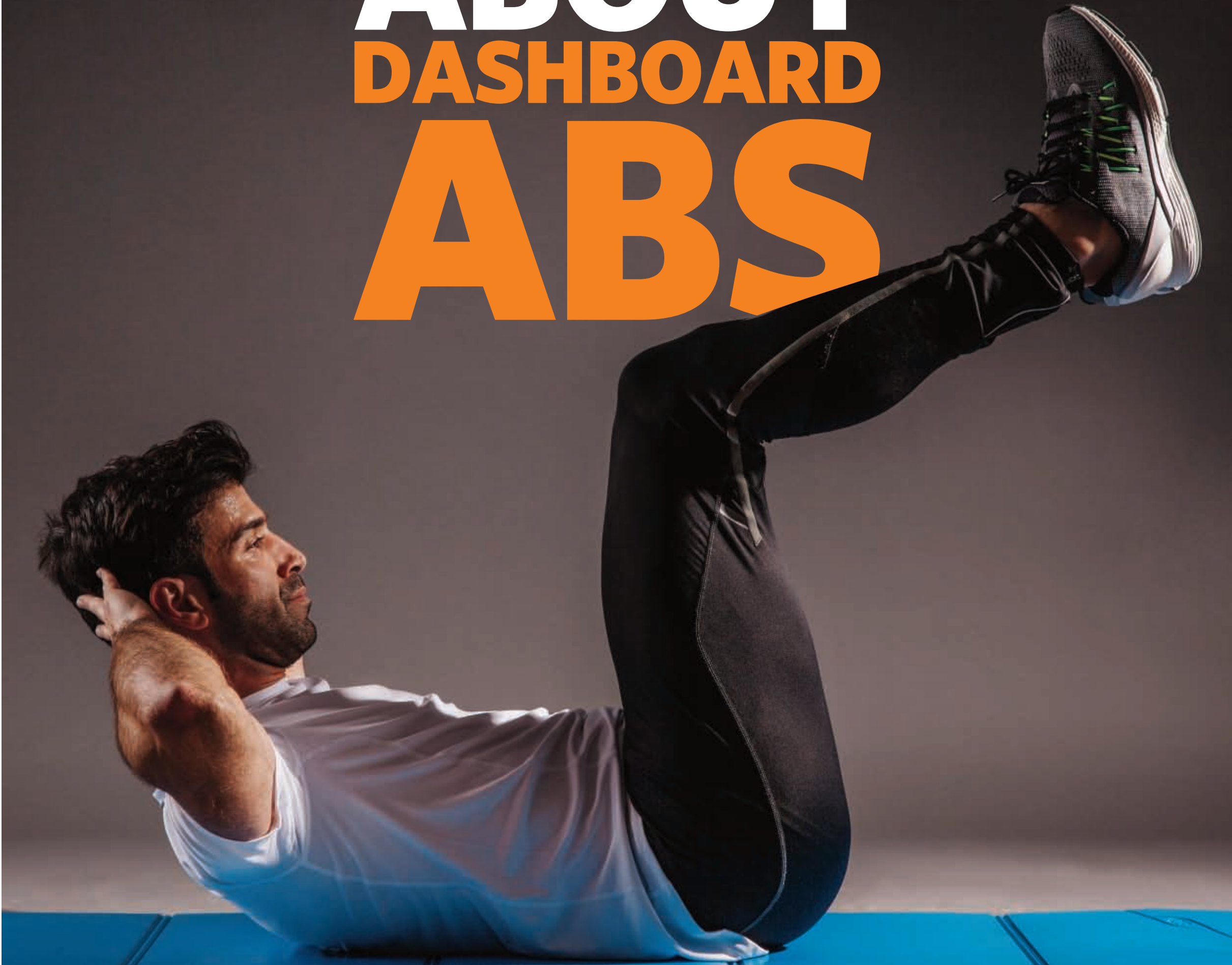
In Gaza, there were 43,134 cases, with 404 fatalities.

The PA has said it has made contact with potential vaccine suppliers.

AFP

GET RID OF BELLY FAT

# DREAM ABOUT DASHBOARD ABS



If you are used to daydreaming about having dashboard abs, you, probably, spend more time on the couch than on your feet. And your dream remains a dream. The truth is, acquiring a flat stomach is always within reach, if you have the will to do so.

Fitness experts say, successfully flattening your stomach is a matter of burning body fat and building muscle. And the best way to burn body fat is through cardio exercises such as running, walking, elliptical training, and bicycling. With these exercises, burning stomach fat, shedding love handles, and building a 'six pack' is completely do-able. So, give yourself an ultimatum to get rid of that belly fat - flat abs are in style, and it's time to get yours! Get started.

Running or walking

Most wonder how moving your legs (as in running/jogging) can shrink those love handles? The truth is, there are many ways to target belly fat. And Running/jogging/walking is one sure way to reducing inches around your waist, if you do it consistently.

As you run/walk, calories are burned and your body fat percentage decreases. So, exercising not only helps you lose belly fat, it also sheds fat from other areas. Running and walking are two of the best fat-burning exercises. Plus, the only equipment you need is a good pair of shoes. Between the two, running burns more calories, but walking really isn't too far behind.

Elliptical trainer

Some of us no longer have the strong joints we had as teenagers. So, jogging may be out of the question. The good news is elliptical trainers provide an intense, low impact cardio work-

out. In fact, a 60kg person can burn about 300 calories in 30 minutes on an elliptical trainer. That's about as many calories as running burns, but without the joint wear-and-tear.

**Bicycling**

Bicycling is another great low impact cardio exercise. Not to mention, it's also a great way to travel or see the countryside. Depending on the speed and intensity the average person can burn between 250 to 500 calories during a 30-minute bike ride.

Bicycle exercise

Burning body and belly fat with cardio exercises is half the battle. Next is strengthening abdominal muscles so you have something to show once the fat is shed. In a recent study, ab exercises were ranked from best to worst. And, bicycle exercise ranked as 'number 1' because it requires abdominal stabilisation, body rotation, and more abdominal muscle activity.

These are some bicycle exercises you can do before you hop on your bike:

- Lie on your back with hands behind your head

- Raise knees to your chest while lifting head and shoulders off the ground
- Bring the right elbow to your left knee and straighten the right leg.
- Switch sides - bring the left elbow to your right knee and straighten the left leg
- Continue switching sides to simulate a pedaling motion
- Breathing should be relaxed and even
- Do 1-3 sets with 12-16 repetitions

Captain's chair leg raise

For this exercise, you require a captain's chair which is found in most gyms. The chair has a padded back and armrests with grips. Your legs hang free.

- Stand on the chair and grab the hand bars
- Keep your back flat against the pad while raising knees to your chest
- Then lower legs back down
- For added intensity, keep legs straight when you raise them
- Do 1-3 sets with 12-16 repetitions

Exercise ball crunch

This exercise needs a lot of stabilisation which

engages more muscles. You'll need an exercise ball.

- Lie on the ball so your lower back is supported and feet are firmly planted on the ground
- Place hands across chest or behind the head
- Contract abs and lift your torso up and forward
- Lower back down
- Keep the ball stable during each crunch
- Exhale when you crunch; inhale when you lower back down
- Do 1-3 sets with 12-16 repetitions

Vertical leg crunch

The vertical leg crunch is similar to a regular crunch. But it requires you to keep your legs straight, which makes the abs work harder and increases the workout's intensity.

- Lie down with hands behind your head
- Put your legs straight up with knees crossed
- Flex abs to lift head and shoulders off the floor
- Lay back down
- Keep legs extended in the air the whole time
- Exhale when you flex; inhale when you lay back down
- Do 1-3 sets with 12-16 repetitions

Reverse crunch

The reverse crunch was also ranked above regular crunches as the 5th best exercise for strengthening core muscles.

- Lie flat on the floor with arms at your sides
- Cross your feet and lift them off the floor so your knees create a 90-degree angle
- Contract ab muscles and lift head and shoulders off the ground
- Exhale when you contract; inhale when you lower back down
  - Do 1-3 sets with 12-16 repetitions



OMAN ENVIRONMENT DAY

LOVE YOUR ENVIRONMENT

50 actions for Oman Environment Day – January 8

Hubert Vaz

Do you love your environment? If you do, you will protect, preserve, and be passionate about every aspect of it. It is just like a real 'love affair' – a life-long commitment!

The sultanate, represented by Environment Authority, celebrates Oman Environment Day on January 8 upon the directives of the Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, to embody the role played by the sultanate in preserving the environment and support efforts made to protect the country's natural resources.

January 8 is an annual environment event in which the sultanate celebrates the environmental developments at local and international levels in the field of environment protection, and emphasises the contribution of society and government and private institutions in the protection and conservation of natural resources.

The UN-established World Environment Day, however, is observed on June 5 every year to bring increased awareness to worldwide environmental concerns, like climate change, deforestation, pollution of the world's oceans, and unsustainable development that could harm plant and animal species. Since its inception, World Environment Day has spread to over 140 countries and has had its main celebratory event held on all the six inhabited continents. The day calls for attention to the need to protect the earth and its life forms, the vital importance of water, the need to protect the ozone layer, the ill effects of excessive deforestation, the plight of 'wildlife crimes', and leaving behind a beautiful planet for future generations.

Here are some things you can do to save Oman's environment. These tips have been adapted from 'Fifty Simple Things You Can Do To Save Oman's Environment' second edition, Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs:

Save water

- Use only as much water as you need – have short showers, don't turn the tap on full
- Fill the sink with water while washing dishes – no running taps while brushing teeth
- Fix leaking taps
- Water plants at night or early morning
- Use a bucket to wash cars instead of a hose
- Use brooms to sweep dry leaves, don't wash them off
- Use bowls to wash vegetables and recycle water for watering plants



It's time to make a difference

Last year has truly been a year of change for all of us here at ESO, and we are taking everything we've learned in 2020 into this new year. This pandemic has taught us so much on both, the individual level as well as an organisation, we've had to continue our work, no matter what, and were able to quickly adapt to achieve some great results in the last year. We've also been very lucky to have such incredible support from both, organisations and the general public, which helped us achieve our goals and continue our efforts in raising awareness in terms of a sustainable lifestyle and preserving Oman's rich natural heritage.

Kicking off the new year with Oman Environment Day, we need to come together and work towards creating a positive impact on the country's environment, as well as prepare ourselves for a more sustainable and eco-friendly future.

Tomorrow we celebrate Oman Environment Day. It is also a time of the year when we think about making New Year resolutions. Let's all think about individual actions we can take in our own lives to positively impact Oman's environment, because together we can make a difference – it's time!

HH TANIA AL SAID  
President, Environment Society of Oman

Keep water clean

- Use falaj water properly - Don't use it for washing
- Keep afalaj free from rubbish
- Boil water for safer consumption
- Prevent spread of malaria, fill puddles with soil
- Monitor septic tanks and sewage drains
- Dispose household chemicals and used oil properly, don't discharge these into the ground to pollute ground water supplies
- Contact civic authorities for advice

Save energy

- Turn on lights only when you need them
- Use natural daylight as far as possible

- Use energy saving bulbs and appliances
- Turn off the television/computer when you are not using them
- Use air-conditioners efficiently – don't leave doors open
- Switch off unnecessary appliances when you leave home
- Avoid unnecessary car trips – save petrol, drive within speed limits
- Minimise waste
- Avoid individually packed items – avoid using disposables
- Buy products in bulk, than in individual containers
- Re-use paper

- Avoid aerosol cans that are not friendly to the ozone-friendly
- Re-use plastic bags, don't dump them in garbage
- Use cloth/reusable shopping bags
- Pass on used clothes/toys to the less fortunate
- Say 'No' to plastic bags

Keep Oman clean

- Do not litter – discard rubbish in bins
- Avoid dumping hazardous waste and litter which can harm animals (broken glass, etc) on land and in the sea
- Keep a handy garbage bag/bin in your car
- Discard rubbish in rubbish bags to facilitate civic staff and curb spread of diseases
- Play an active role in cleanliness - join community clean-up drives
- Do not let children play near garbage bins/dumps
- Look after land
- Drive on graded roads when possible
- Don't crush plants/flowerbeds while driving off road
- Plant native trees in your locality
- Learn about plant life in Oman and their conservation

Protect wildlife

- Do not hunt or disturb wild species - Don't tamper with birds' eggs
- Make your own bird sanctuary – create watering holes, provide grain/nuts
- Learn about Oman's wildlife/marine life
- Avoid frightening turtles on beaches – do not use flashlights where they nest
- Avoid driving/littering on beaches to avoid harming marine life
- Visit reserves and strictly follow guidelines
- Avoid damaging corals – do not collect corals/live shells
- Do not anchor boats near coral reefs

Share your views on environment

- Join debates and competitions
- Write letters to the ministry, sharing useful information. Letters can be addressed to: Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs, Pollution Operations Monitoring Centre. Tel: 2469366/24691082, or to
- Ministry of Fisheries Wealth, General Directorate of Fisheries Resources Development. Tel: 24696369
- Join the Environment Society of Oman as a volunteer

