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GM DISPATCHES FIRST BATCH OF VENTILATORS



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UNIQUE WAY OF HONOURING FRONTLINE WARRIORS



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NEUER 'IRRITATED' AS BAYERN CONTRACT TALKS STALL



Be positive to make best out of lockdown



Practise physical distancing even during Ramadhan: WHO

NEW DELHI: As the holy month of Ramadhan this year falls between late April and late May amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has urged people to keep maintaining physical distancing.

"Practice physical distancing by strictly maintaining a distance of at least 1 metre (3 feet) between people at all times," the WHO said in its interim guidance titled "Safe Ramadhan

practices in the context of the COVID-19. Use culturally and religiously sanctioned greetings that avoid physical contact, such as waving, nodding, or placing the hand over the heart," said the document.

The transmission of COVID-19 is facilitated by close contact between people, as the virus is spread through respiratory droplets and contact with contaminated surfaces.

To mitigate the public health impact, several countries have implemented physical distancing measures aimed at interrupting transmission of the virus by reducing interaction between people.

"These measures are fundamental control mechanisms to control the spread of infectious diseases, particularly respiratory infections, associated with large gatherings of people," said WHO.

SEE PAGE 5

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

As COVID-19 wreaks havoc around the world, people are tapping art, entertainment and digital group events in social media to beat stress.

Artists, who were not getting much time to shape their creativity, now claim they have much to explore staying at home.

"Loneliness makes creative people more productive. During normal days we don't have much time for painting but the lockdown has given me much to do," says Salim Khamis Zahir al Salmi, Oman's budding artist. He said he could do a couple of paintings relating to 'stay at home' to create awareness among the general public.

"Not only that the painting helps people to be aware about the environment, but also will remind us of the situation that we were stuck in. Art is the best medium to express your ideas or feelings," Salim said.

Said al Ruwaidhi, another artist who also works in the health sector, said unlike the normal days, he is getting more time and space to tap new ideas.

"During the lockdown the passion within me is coming out to the extent that I explore my art as much as I can," he said, adding, "I am enjoying the lockdown boredom making best out of the worst".

With distancing no longer an obstacle thanks to technology, communication with family members, friends, professional contacts or colleagues can be done with the tip of a finger.

TURN TO P2

COVID-19 claims 7th victim

MUSCAT: The seventh COVID-19 death was reported in Oman on Sunday as the Ministry of Health announced 86 new cases, bringing the total number of patients to 1,266, including 233 recoveries.

The new cases include 15 citizens and 71 expatriates.

The number of recoveries has increased by 57 to 233 from 176 in the country.

Sunday's victim is a resident, aged 59, from the capital.

Muscat has 1,010 cases with 156 recovered, 7 deaths; Al Dakhiliyah 54 cases, 21 recovered; South

Batinah 78 cases, 16 recovered; Musandam 3 cases, Al Dhahirah 4 cases, 2 recovered, South Sharqiyah, 40 cases, 1 recovered, North Sharqiyah 17 cases, Buraimi five cases, North Batinah 44 cases, 24 recovered and Dhofar 10 cases, 4 recovered.

RO 500M CUT IN BUDGET SPENDING

SLUMP IN THE OIL PRICES SIGNIFICANTLY BATTERS THE REVENUE ESTIMATES AND WIDENS THE FISCAL DEFICIT

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

As part of the new measures to cut expenditure in the Sultanate, the Ministry of Finance has decided to reduce the 2020 budget spending by RO 500 million.

According to decisions taken by the ministry, a 10 per cent cut in allocations for civil ministries and government departments and a five per cent cut in allocations for the civil, security and military entities, have been effected in the revised budget.

Khalid bin Saif al Busaidi in the ministry's department of financial policies said that the slump in the oil prices, which plummeted below the even less than \$30 per barrel mark, has significantly battered the revenue estimates and widened the fiscal deficit.

"The measures have been necessary

to achieve financial sustainability and stability", said Al Busaidi.

According to him, the government departments must seek the finance ministry's approval before floating any new projects (tenders) or entry into any other financial obligations without prejudice to financial dues of firms or importers partnering with the government.

These measures, Al Busaidi said, can reduce RO 500 million worth of estimated spending.

He said that the government took gradual steps to ensure proper follow-up of the implementation of the decisions by various departments.

"The government is trying to balance desired financial and economic objective", he said.

The ministry had issued 13 circulars and several directives to state departments since the beginning of the year with the aim of reducing

spending in the state 2020 general budget.

Al Busaidi explained that the ministry issued instructions to rationalise spending in government firms in operation budgets and rescheduling of project execution by advancing government priorities during the current stage, Al Busaidi said.

He hoped that these measures may help Oman to bypassing the current crisis. But they may not hold for long if oil prices keep sliding as Budget 2020 estimates were based on \$58 oil price. The current price of less than \$30 will deepen budget deficit, said Al Busaidi.

The government may look at further financial and economic measures to face the crisis, Al Busaidi said, noting that State Budget 2020 estimated revenue at RO 10.7 billion and spending at RO 13.2 billion.



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RNO TRANSPORTS ESSENTIALS FOR MUSANDAM

MUSCAT: The Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), represented by the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO), has operated a number of navy ships to Musandam Governorate for shipping fuel tankers as well as essential commodities and staple foods for the citizens and residents of the governorate.

This is part of SAF's constant efforts to contribute to ongoing national campaign to combat the spread of the coronavirus and alleviate the impact of precautionary measures on citizens and residents.

SAF continues to do its part to ensure implementation of the decisions and measures taken by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and alleviating its repercussions on the Sultanate.



IN BRIEF

Fund to help low-income families pay electricity bills

MUSCAT: As part of Nama Group's vision to participate actively in developing and growing the national economy and society, 'For Lasting Prosperity' campaign was launched to support the Government's initiatives to mitigate the social and economic impacts of COVID-19.

As a result of the direct impact of COVID-19 pandemic on families of social security and SMEs, Nama Group established a fund with an initial contribution of RO 300,000 to cover electricity bill payments for those affected categories.

The initiative comes as a result of the Group's cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development, relevant NGOs, Riyada and Al Raffd Fund to facilitate the process, which will be finalised next month. — **ONA**

Omani inventions thrive in 'Corona' time

PROMISING: Youths are coming out with interesting ideas and translating them into useful solutions

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

If necessity is the mother of inventions, Omani youths seem to have understood the necessity and coming out with interesting ideas, and translating them into useful solutions to tackle the situation emerging out of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Efforts and initiatives made in this direction are testimony to the wise understanding of the Omani youths who are working with various institutions, bodies or even individuals. Their assurance gives strength to confront the virus, defeat it, and bring our lives back to normal again.

The Ministry of Technology and Communications had previously announced the formation of a major committee for technical innovations to counter the menace of COVID-19 in line with government's efforts to limit its spread by activating technical solutions that would provide modern technical alternatives in dealing with its effects.

The Oman Technology Fund also announced in the beginning of this dilemma, an allocation of one million Rials with the aim of investing and expanding technical projects in the Sultanate, contributing to the efforts of combating the situation emerging of Covid-19 as also to enhance the position of Omani innovations at the level of the region and the world.

According to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, these

The Ministry of Technology and Communications had previously announced the formation of a major committee for technical innovations to counter the menace of COVID-19 in line with government's efforts to limit its spread by activating technical solutions

innovations have varied, and are protected in various sectors of intellectual property. Some Omani youths have succeeded in creating a healthy clip that is small enough to be placed in the pocket and is a tool for pushing the doors without touching them by hand.

It is made of a solid non-porous material that is cleaned easily.

Moreover, a new smart bracelet that makes a whiz when the hand of the holder comes close to his face. There is also a design for spraying disinfectant bottle which is attached to the wrist, half-gloves to press buttons with a fingertip, and a tool to open the car doors without touching the handle for those who use taxis.

As a matter of social responsibility, some Omani youths who own small factories have emerged lately in producing some medical supplies and gift them to hospitals in the Sultanate, such as Eng Saleh al Abri, from "Tasnea" company who produced medical masks with 16 different designs and distributed them for free to health institutions that receive those infected

with coronavirus.

"They are working on a mass production line to cover the great demand for this product, as they aspire to produce 2,000 masks per day in their company," he said.

Whereas, Aitech, an Omani company specialised in artificial intelligence, manufactured 2,000 protective face shields for medical use within only 14 days, with aspiration to double production.

The company's engineers also have announced that they have the ability to produce plastic parts for ventilators. As for the Oman Makers Center, affiliated to the Innovation Complex, has designed a prototype for the ventilators as an immediate and quick alternative to coronavirus patients to avoid any deficiency.

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry encourages all Omani innovators to contribute to supporting the innovation sector in the Sultanate and to submit their applications with the ministry in order to protect these innovations and document their products with a patent certificate.

Tight vigil despite less COVID-19 cases in Salalah



KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, APRIL 19

Even though there has been comparatively far less cases in Salalah than Muscat, the Dhofar Governorate is maintaining all possible protocols to protect the citizens and residents from Covid-19.

So far Salalah has recorded 10 positive Covid-19 cases out of which four have recovered and six are undergoing treatment. The number here is far less than Muscat's 1010 confirmed cases – 156 recovered and 848 undergoing treatment.

The empty roads here are witness to people's response over the authorities' call to remain indoors and maintain social distancing as much as possible.

"We have been maintaining strict vigil by telling people to remain indoors as much as possible and not to step out if there is no urgency of buying medicines or groceries and we are happy that people are adhering to our call," said an official of the Royal Oman Police.

The police and other administrative bodies is maintaining strict vigil in congested areas like Sanaya where

factory workers live in large numbers and work in automobile workshops, and many other small workshops including those dealing in steel and carpentry ones.

While the civic bodies are inspecting the workers' accommodations and spraying insecticides in this area on regular basis, the Ministry of Health is conducting regular camps to examine Covid-19 cases. They call upon people across the nationalities to come for examination. They collect samples on the basis of an individual's health parameters and if the symptoms match with Covid-19.

"But yes the movement here is not as restricted as Muscat. Some people are not understanding the gravity of the situation and not only visiting shops for essential shopping without masks, they are not respecting the social distancing also," said a shopper at a hypermarket in central Salalah.

Such cases, however, are stray cases as most of the big supermarkets are maintaining social distancing by earmarking places for billing and even for shopping.

Be positive to make best out of lockdown

FROM PAGE 1

"As the pandemic continues and so does the lockdown, we must shift and embrace new mindset", advises Dr Hassan Mirza, Psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.

The mindset, according to him, "is that of a simpler life, which gives us an opportunity to do the things we always wished we could do, but couldn't due to the busy schedules and long times spent outside home".

Similarly, being hopeful that this pandemic will end, and it will end just like the others in the past, such optimism is always associated with better mental health and even physical health by boosting our immunity.

"People should remain productive during lockdown, set a routine, exercise, eat healthy, sleep well, stay connected, and do something pleasurable every day", Dr Mirza says.

Social media is abuzz with activities during lockdown. WhatsApp groups are engaging their members in entertainment and knowledge events. 'Vayanakootam', a group of literature lovers, hosts singing and quiz for members to reduce the stress.

"It allows all of us to be together in these crazy times even though we cannot see each other", said Shoukat Ali, the admin of the group.

With all the tragic things that are happening in the world as a result of the coronavirus, it might seem like an unusual time to talk about being positive. Yet staying positive is a core ingredient in the recipe of successful coping in a crisis. "If we organise our time and set a certain schedule with activities, we can take full advantage of this time like the way we do", says Shoukat who is also the Managing Director of Al Bhaj Books.

Fishermen village in Al Wusta locked down

MUSCAT: The Fisheries Department in the Ras Madarka area, Al Wusta Governorate, shut down a village in the area falling in the Wilayat of Duqm to prevent the gathering of fishermen as a measure to protect their safety in view of the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Hassan bin Hussein al Aghbari, Director of Fisheries Department in the Governorate of Al Wusta, said that the decision came in implementation of the instructions of the Supreme COVID-19 Control Committee.

Al Aghbari told Oman News Agency (ONA) that the Ras Madarka Fishermen's Village was set up in 2012 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries to provide accommodation for fishermen from outside the Governorate of Al Wusta.

The facility saves the time and effort of fishermen and ensures traffic safety in the coastal area, said Al Aghbari, adding that the fish loading



activity is proceeding as normal in the area and that this serves both the interests of the local community and the fishermen, whose livelihood is not affected. The Fisheries Department prohibited entry to the jetty by

people other than fishermen, halted the activity of leisure boats and took precautionary measures to implement social distancing among fishermen, Al Aghbari added.

He pointed out that Al Wusta

Governorate is one of the richest hubs of fisheries in the Sultanate and that his department is coordinating with fish marketing companies to market the daily catch in other governorates. — **ONA**

Fruits, vegetables imported for Ramadan

MUSCAT: The Central Fruits and Vegetables Market in Mawaleh received 329 shipments weighing 6,580 tonnes of vegetables and fruits over the past 11 days.

An official of the Mawaleh Central Market said these shipments of vegetables and fruits were made to meet the demand during Ramadan.

The imports are mostly from Jordan and Lebanon, Yemen, India, Egypt and South Africa.

He pointed out that the prices of vegetables and fruits in the central market are accessible to all and are subject to the law of supply and demand and the nature of the goods as they are perishable.

HOSPITALS MULL OFFERING TELEMEDICINE SERVICE

FACILITY: To provide health related services via electronic information and telecommunication technologies

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

Private hospitals in the Sultanate are weighing the pros and cons of offering telemedicine service in a bid to beat the COVID-19 impact.

Accordingly, many hospitals have requested the Department of Private Hospitals at the Ministry of Health (MoH) while others are busy studying the practical side of the same.

"We have made a request to the MoH to begin such a service on our premises especially for those suffering from various chronic diseases during this time. This is even more important at a time when our business has gone ten times lower in the past one month", head of a leading hospital in Muscat told the *Observer*.

The branch of medicine called 'telemedicine', also known as 'tele-health' or 'e-health', is the provision of health-related services and information via electronic information and telecommunication technologies.

The main advantage of this service is that it allows long-distance patients and doctors get in touch with each other face to face in the virtual world at a click of the mouse and talk to each other, to care, advise, monitor and if need be, for remote admissions.

Videoconference, digital photography, instant messaging and the like are used to assess patients remotely using or other



technology.

The MoH itself is in the process of implementing Tele-Psychiatry Programme for the benefit of the people who are quarantined, isolated or those who are feeling the pinch of COVID-19 psychological effects.

"We have developed special programmes to follow up the patient and identify the problems that may be experienced through direct contact with him or his family", said Doctor Dr Saleha al Jadidi, Head of Consultant Psychiatry and Geriatrics at Al Masarra Hospital.

"Doctors are available around the clock in case of emergency just as the team is in the process of implementing the 'Tele-Psychiatry Programme' to assist the people who are going through various psychic issues during the Coronavirus lockdown period", she said.

Studies suggest that specialists who practices telemedicine are

Many hospitals have requested the Department of Private Hospitals at the Ministry of Health while others are busy studying the practical side of the service

using telemedicine the least to interact with patients are emergency physicians (38.8 per cent), pathologist (30.4 per cent), radiologists (25.5), gastroenterologists (7.9), and allergists/immunologists (6.1 per cent).

"Telemedicine is a very useful technology in these testing times as it enables a real time interface between the doctor and patient with no physical presence. In at

least non-emergency cases, the patient queries and symptoms can be addressed and treatment prescribed," opines Dr Hemant Hardikar, Chief Medical Services, Aster Al Raffah Hospital.

He believes that it ensures delivery of healthcare to needy patients at their doorstep and continuity of care and business for the clinics or healthcare providers while achieving the objectives of social distancing and unnecessary exposure of non-emergency cases to hospital setting.

"One of the benefits of telemedicine is cost effectiveness, because information is less expensive to transport than the people. In the current situation of 'staying at home', telemedicine is the best practice and in case of any emergency for elderly population, it is the best way of telecommunication with the nearest health center," says representative of Al Salama Hospital.

Gulf measures in right direction, says WHO official

MUSCAT: A top WHO (World Health Organization) official for the East Mediterranean Region has stressed that the measures taken by the Gulf countries are in the right direction in terms of speed of response and the integration of their procedures.

Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Mandhari, Regional Director, WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region (WHO-EMRO), said in an interview to the *Oman Arabi* daily that WHO dispatched a team of experts to some Gulf countries to consult on the conditions of (COVID-19) and review responses applied in the countries. "They have been also meeting with the ministers of health", he said.

The experts have praised the level of readiness and response, availability of capabilities, whether laboratory or therapeutic, as well as the ability of epidemiological investigation teams to implement the recommendations of the World Health Organization, he said.

"Interactions are still ongoing between the ministries of health and WHO to provide technical support when needed".

Mandhari urged testing should be expanded and the cases should be detected early to stop transmission before the situation becomes worse.

He added, "All scenarios must be expected and we should prepare for the worst-case situation, which means expanding the well-equipped centres that are prepared to accommodate larger numbers of infected people when the prevention and control measures are applied".

Mandhari said, "We are dealing with one new virus that humanity has not known before and this virus is spreading in various parts of the world. The only difference is the degree and severity of the disease and the severity of the symptoms caused by it. The available evidences indicate that, within the limits of what we have done in studies and research, the degree and severity of the disease are mild and accompanied by simple symptoms in the 80 per cent of the cases".

He added that the distribution is not related to one region and the



different degrees of severity of the disease are seen in all regions and countries.

"They are related to the affected groups and not to the geographical location. The categories of the elderly, patients with chronic or latent illnesses are the most susceptible to infection and more deaths have been reported compared to young people and children.

Mandhari said, "It is premature to determine the period that takes to end the pandemic, the prevalence rates are still accelerating and the epidemiological curve of the number of cases is still escalating and has not yet reached the highest point in the curve.

The peak point after which the curve begins to decline is the beginning of the recession".

He said, "We believe that the current numbers are much less than the actual reality due to the difficulty of monitoring all cases, as we are witnessing the emergence of new central focus in different regions and the widening geographic scope of the pandemic as well as the emergence of societal and local spread patterns, which makes the issue of decline more difficult".

He expected the people to continue with healthy habits and practices — washing hands, following the etiquette of coughing and sneezing, covering the nose, mouth and avoiding unnecessary contact with patients and ensuring health- even the pandemic has ended.



TRA unveils plan to cover 500 remote villages

MUSCAT: The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has unveiled a plan to provide telecom services to 500 rural villages at a cost of RO 15 million.

Yusef bin Abdullah al Balushi, First Deputy Chairman of TRA, said in a statement to Oman News Agency that the project got the approval of the Ministry of Finance to set up telecom infrastructure in the selected villages.

He explained that the initiative is the second of its kind after an earlier move to set up 23 stations to cover 450 villages, most of which got telecom service in cooperation with licensed operators, Omantel and Ooredoo.

Oman Broadband Company will implement the new project, either through fibre optic or satellite as part of the National Broadband Strategy, said Al Balushi.

— ONA

SFAAI produces TV programme 'Nazaha' in its 4th edition

MUSCAT: The State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution (SFAAI) continues its efforts and activities to instil integrity values towards public funds and civil service. This approach comes through SFAAI media and awareness-raising plan adopted to realize an optimal level of awareness and impartial institutional and social behaviour.

The plan presents content in different media templates (visual, audio, printed and electronic) as well as seminars, lectures and local events. Besides, the plan focuses on partnership with State entities to execute specific activities. The "Nazaha" programme, which started in 2017 as one of the primary tools of the plan, comes to promote integrity towards public money and public service.

Dr Hemyar bin Nasser al Mahrouqi, Director of Awareness and Integrity Promotion Department at SFAAI, stated that the programme hosts a number of their eminencies and shaihs to talk about several subjects related to integrity towards public funds and public service.

He added that the programme would be aired on national television and radio of Oman during the holy month of Ramadhan of this year. The programme will be also disseminated in "Youtube" through SFAAI's official account.

As for the primary themes of the programme,



four main areas are highlighted. The first area is public funds and its inviolability and touches upon several relevant topics such as; public inviolability, bribery and legitimate earning. The second area is about matters relevant to roles and responsibilities of public service such as; misuse of authority, reliable performance assessment, employee's rights and duties as well as employment justice.

The third area touches upon general integrity values and its relevant topics, for instance, responsibility is a trust and self-monitoring. The last area highlighted in the programme is efficient use of resources that talks about professional capacity building, collaboration and effective use of financial resources.

Al Mahrouqi indicated that the selection of the topics was carried out after considering all the four main themes and prioritizing subject matters based on importance that represent the messages SAAI desires to communicate to community.

Regarding the objective and continuation of producing the programme in its 4th edition, Al Mahrouqi said that awareness-raising programmes come in line with SFAAI keenness to adopt best practices in promoting integrity and fighting corruption.

— ONA

Ramadan Iftar Program

RAMADAN MUBARAK

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "He who provides a fasting person something with which to break his fast, will earn the same reward as the one who was observing the fast, without diminishing in any way the reward of the latter."

The Oman Charitable Organization is pleased to announce that it will receive donations for Ramadan Iftar Program in Sultanate of Oman for the year 1441 AH AD 2020 through the following accounts :

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THE DIARY & THOUGHTS OF A COVID-AWARE EXPATRIATE

RAY PETERSEN

I have been in lockdown for three weeks today, since my wife and I waved our daughter goodbye at Muscat International Airport. We never knew then what tomorrow, next week, or next month, let alone next year, would bring us. I couldn't give her a hug and share with her all I wanted to say, because what could I say? Sasha and Christian, her partner, are both nurses, and now I understand how earlier generations felt when they sent their precious ones off to war.. I don't want to be emotional, but it doesn't let go..

Worse, we don't have a timetable for this, or its effects upon us, to finish, and in this era of science, understanding nature and technological advances, that's just not good enough! My brutal thoughts on the scientific sector are that "Unless what you are doing has relevance to mankind's living experience, you are contributing to its dying experience!" I may be wrong, but between scientists and politicians, who cannot agree which way is up.

In matters concerning COVID-19, I'm subservient, I guess, in our house, as Lena has embraced the role of a frontline adversary for the pandemic. Lena is the staunch protector. It is she who dons her gloves and mask once a week and does a pharmacy, flour and milk, fresh fruit and veg run, and woe betide anyone who intrudes upon her social distancing protocols or etiquette. She is an absolute star, and nothing purchased from outside gets inside the house without going through her 'Dettol' disinfection protocols at the door.

She is amazing! And why is Lena doing those tasks. Because she wants to protect me. She is significantly younger than I, and figures that she is therefore at a lesser risk of infection and has carried her awareness and

COVID-19 resistance through in everything, to keep us both safe, or at least as safe as we can in terms of protecting ourselves from others, and others from us. Nobody will be able to blame the Petersens, if they get it!

I have always thought I had high standards of personal hygiene, but I will probably now, for the remainder of my life, take 20 seconds to wash my hands. I will also probably also continue to disinfect my bath, continue to use germicidal hair shampoo and shave everyday. I just wish I could get a haircut!

I've been working from home since very early in the piece, as I must pay the bills, and I decided early on that I would be working everyday to ensure that I kept up with my responsibilities. I'm not sure that everyone has the same ethos! At the same time, I feel strongly for my colleagues and students having to make a rude transition to e-learning. It's a complex dynamic that doesn't just happen because someone says so as there is much more to it.

I watch very little TV but do keep an eye on Facebook as that's our primary means of communication, along with WhatsApp, with family and friends. We have discovered OSN streaming, OSN streaming Plus, and Netflix has been good as a diversion... and yes, I can understand how couch potato-ism can occur, but so far I'm resisting.

I have always thought I had high standards of personal hygiene, but I will probably now, for the remainder of my life, take 20 seconds to wash my hands. I will also probably also continue to disinfect my bath, continue to use germicidal hair shampoo and shave everyday

We've discovered video-calling so have been able to also touch base with distant family and friends, and I had a conference call with my mates, in our 'Lonesome Blues' chatroom the other night, and that was fun.

I was concerned that, being housebound, I/we may put on weight, but it's not been too bad for a couple of reasons. Lena provides a tasty, different breakfast each day, we have a little soup for lunch, and smaller boutique fare in the evenings with meals from all around the world. We eat very little junk food... Lena insists upon healthy options... and I do love my chocolate! The only 'naughty' thing is that we have rediscovered our bread-maker, and Lena's breads are superb.

Speaking of bills, the upside is that we are spending very little, as we are going nowhere. Also, we are missing our regular fishing

trips. Hopefully our favourite fishing spots are re-populating in our absence, and we will get some good catches upon the lifting of travel restrictions. Also, we have a walking path around the house, inside the fence. I turn on my music and do a 2-3-4 kms walk each day, keeping the weight wolf from the door.

We do consider ourselves fortunate to be living in Oman, where the authorities may not have been aware of the gravity of COVID-19 originally, as those who knew 'kept schtum,' but they have responded very decisively and it seems, effectively. If the populace embraces the precautions and practices the Supreme Committee communicate, Inshallah, we will get through this, relatively unscathed.

But for now, it's just Lena and I, and our new fostered cat Persy. Isolated, in our bubble, but healthy and well. Please, if you can, stay at home, stay healthy, stay COVID-free. And a big shout out for the healthcare professionals, police, forces and essential industry workers everywhere. Thank you so much!



Spain's coronavirus death toll slows, with lowest increase in about a month



Priest Andres Conde, 49, receives help from his twin sister Inma while donning personal protective equipment he received from a convent as they prepare food donations for distribution to needy families, during a lockdown amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Ronda, southern Spain, on Sunday.

MADRID: Spain's death toll from the new coronavirus outbreak rose by 410 on Sunday, down from 565 on Saturday, the Health Ministry said, the lowest daily increase in about a month in one of the world's hardest hit countries.

The total number of deaths reached 20,453. The daily increase was the lowest since March 22. It is far below the highest daily increase - 950 deaths reported on April 2 - in a sign of a slowdown of the spread of the virus after Spain imposed a strict lockdown in mid-March.

The overall number of coronavirus cases rose to 195,944 on Sunday

from 191,726 on Saturday, the Health Ministry added.

Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said on Saturday he would ask parliament for a 15-day extension of the lockdown until May 9, but said the restrictions would be more flexible, such as allowing children to leave their homes for short periods of time.

"We have left behind the most extreme moments," Sanchez said at a press briefing. But he added: "These achievements are still insufficient and above all fragile. We cannot put them at risk with hasty solutions."

— Reuters

Wuhan lab denies coronavirus link

US DOUBT: If they were knowingly responsible, there should be consequences, warns Trump

BEIJING: A laboratory in the Chinese city at ground zero of the global coronavirus outbreak has rejected as "impossible" US theories it is the cradle of the pandemic, as President Donald Trump warned Beijing of consequences if it was "knowingly responsible".

The denial came as the world's top musicians -- from the Rolling Stones to Taylor Swift, Stevie Wonder and teen superstar Billie Eilish -- joined forces for a virtual mega-concert, hoping to spread cheer to billions under lockdown.

The six-hour online event aimed to cultivate a sense of community during a pandemic that has ravaged the global economy and killed at least 157,000 people worldwide, with nearly 2.3 million confirmed infections.

"Was it a mistake that got out of control or was it done deliberately?" Trump said at a White House briefing on Saturday, questioning the origins of the disease, which first emerged in the city of Wuhan in December.

"If they were knowingly responsible, yeah, then there should be consequences," he said when asked if China should face repercussions for the pandemic. The highly contagious disease was likely first transmitted to humans at a market where exotic animals were slaughtered, according to Chinese scientists.

But conspiracy theories that the virus came from a maximum-security virology lab have been brought into the mainstream in recent days by US government officials.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said



A worker inside the P4 laboratory in Wuhan, capital of China's Hubei province. The P4 epidemiological laboratory was built in co-operation with French bio-industrial firm Institut Merieux and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The facility is among a handful of labs around the world cleared to handle Class 4 pathogens (P4) - dangerous viruses that pose a high risk of person-to-person transmission. — AFP

an investigation was under way into how the virus "got out into the world".

"There's no way this virus came from us," Yuan Zhiming, the head of the P4 laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which is equipped to handle dangerous viruses, said in an interview with state media.

The US has the highest caseload of any country, with more than 735,000 confirmed infections, and by Sunday had lost 39,000 people to the virus, according to a tally from Johns Hopkins University.

Progress was marked in some places and New York state reported the lowest

number of deaths in weeks, which Governor Andrew Cuomo attributed largely to social distancing.

But as Americans and others around the world chafe after weeks under stay-at-home orders, resentment is rising.

Anti-lockdown protests on Saturday drew hundreds of people at the capitols of states including Texas, Maryland, New Hampshire and Ohio. Many demonstrators waved American flags and some carried arms.

The small but spreading movement drew encouragement from Trump, who tweeted that three states should be "liberated" from the stay-home orders.

Pakistan starts repatriating stranded UAE-based citizens

DUBAI: Pakistan has started repatriating some of its citizens from the United Arab Emirates, which had threatened to review labour ties with countries refusing to take back their nationals during the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The first Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flight carrying 227 "stranded passengers" from Dubai and other emirates left for Islamabad on Saturday evening, Pakistan's consulate general in Dubai said in a Twitter post.

It was not clear when other flights would depart. More than 40,000 Pakistanis in the Gulf Arab state have registered with the consulate to return home, two UAE newspapers reported.

The UAE and other Gulf states have reported increased infections among low-income migrant workers who live in overcrowded quarters. Some have moved to re-house them in shuttered schools or dedicated centres, and are trying to arrange flights to repatriate them.

On Sunday the UAE announced 479 new cases and four more deaths, bringing its total to 6,781 cases and 41 deaths so far.



The UAE last week said it would review labour relations with states refusing to evacuate citizens, including those who have lost jobs or been put on leave, after the ambassadors of India and Pakistan said their countries were not yet ready to do so.

PIA said on its website that it would not be able to provide services for inbound flights beyond Islamabad International Airport due to suspension of domestic flights and

a lockdown in the country.

Millions of foreign workers, many from Asia, form the backbone of Gulf economies and work in sectors that have been disrupted by the coronavirus outbreak. The pandemic is also likely to disrupt the significant remittances those workers send back to their home countries.

The total infection count in the six Gulf states has risen steadily to more than 26,600, with 167 deaths,

despite containment measures such as halting passenger flights, curfews and in several cases locking down districts with large populations of low-income expatriate workers.

Saudi Arabia, which has the most infections and deaths among Gulf Cooperation Council states, at 9,362 and 97, recorded a record 1,088 new cases in 24 hours. It said 83 per cent of the new confirmed cases were in non-Saudi nationals.

The total infection count in the six Gulf states has risen steadily to more than 26,600, with 167 deaths, despite containment measures such as halting passenger flights and curfews

Kuwait's 90-year-old ruler, Emir Shaikh Sabah al Ahmad al Sabah, on Sunday addressed the nation to welcome back the first group of Kuwaitis returned home under a new repatriation programme.

He urged them to comply with all isolation and quarantine guidelines given by authorities in the Gulf state, which has recorded seven deaths, including one on Sunday, and almost 2,000 cases of the infection. — Reuters

Recovery from coronavirus must be just and equitable: Pope

ROME: Pope Francis called on Sunday for an all-embracing vision of the world after the COVID-19 crisis, saying moving on without global solidarity or excluding sectors of society from the recovery would result in "an even worse virus".

The pope left the Vatican for the first time in more than a month to say Mass in an almost empty church a few blocks away to mark Divine Mercy Sunday.

In his homily at the Mass, as well as in his traditional Sunday message afterwards, Francis said the recovery could not leave anyone behind and that now was the time to heal injustice around the world because it undermined the health of the entire human family.

"Now, while we are looking forward to a slow and arduous recovery from the pandemic, there is a danger that we will forget those who are left behind," Francis said in his homily in the church of Santo Spirito in Sassia, chosen because it is also known as the Sanctuary of Divine Mercy.

"The risk is that we may then be struck by an even worse virus, that of selfish indifference. A virus spread by the thought that life is better if it is better for me, and that everything will be fine if it is fine for me," he said.

Francis, who last ventured into a deserted Rome on March 15 to pray at two shrines for the end of the pandemic, said the recovery should not sacrifice "those left behind on the altar of progress", particularly the poor.

More than 23,000 people have died from the novel coronavirus in Italy and the Vatican has mirrored the nearly six-week-old lockdown in the country, forcing the pope to hold all his Masses and general audiences without the public.

In his homily, Francis said the pandemic "reminds us that there are no differences or borders between those who suffer".

In his noon message immediately after the Mass, he called for "just sharing among nations and their institutions in order to confront the current crisis in a manner marked by solidarity". — Reuters

Practise physical distancing even during Ramadhan: WHO

NEW DELHI: As the holy month of Ramadhan this year falls between late April and late May amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has urged people to keep maintaining physical distancing.

"Practise physical distancing by strictly maintaining a distance of at least 1 metre (3 feet) between people at all times," the WHO said in its interim guidance titled "Safe Ramadhan practices in the context of the COVID-19. Use culturally and religiously sanctioned greetings that avoid physical contact, such as waving, nodding, or placing the hand over the heart," said the document.

The transmission of COVID-19 is facilitated by close contact between people, as the virus is spread through respiratory droplets and contact with

contaminated surfaces.

To mitigate the public health impact, several countries have implemented physical distancing measures aimed at interrupting transmission of the virus by reducing interaction between people.

"These measures are fundamental control mechanisms to control the spread of infectious diseases, particularly respiratory infections, associated with large gatherings of people," said WHO.

"Physical distancing measures, including the closing of mosques, monitoring of public gatherings and other restrictions on movement, will have direct implications for the social and religious gatherings central to Ramadhan," said the document that highlights public health advice for social and religious practices and



Practise physical distancing by strictly maintaining a distance of at least 1 metre (3 feet) between people at all times. Use culturally and religiously sanctioned greetings that avoid physical contact, such as waving, nodding, or placing the hand over the heart

WHO

gatherings during Ramadhan that can be applied across different national contexts.

Saying that cancelling social and religious gatherings should be seriously considered, WHO recommended that any decision to restrict, modify, postpone, cancel, or proceed with holding a mass gathering should be based on a standardised risk assessment exercise. While cancelling social and religious gatherings, where possible, virtual alternatives using platforms such as television, radio, digital and social media can be used instead, the WHO said.

If Ramadhan gatherings are allowed to proceed, measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission should be implemented, it added.

"National health authorities should be considered the primary source of

information and advice regarding physical distancing and other measures related to COVID-19 in the context of Ramadhan. Compliance with these established measures should be assured," said the guidance document.

In India, Islamic scholars from all schools of thought on Thursday appealed to Muslims to offer prayers during the holy month of Ramadhan at their homes in view of the nationwide lockdown to check the spread of coronavirus.

Ulemas and Muftis, in their joint appeal, urged the community to offer 'Taraveeh' prayers at their homes.

They also advised members of the community to eat 'Sahr' (pre-dawn meals for fast) and 'Iftar' (breaking the fast) at their homes. They were urged not to go to the mosques for 'Iftar'. — IANS



America’s love affair with an elderly epidemiologist

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ove over, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. There is a new feisty super senior in Washington who is captivating American hearts. Anthony Fauci is everywhere these days — not just as the straight-talking coronavirus point man at President Donald Trump’s daily pandemic briefings but on T-shirts, coffee mugs and, yes, even donuts.

Indeed, for many, the diminutive 79-year-old epidemiologist with a heavy Brooklyn accent is the country’s new hero — a no-nonsense scientist speaking truth to a terrified nation led by a president who sometimes has a loose grasp of the facts.

Nick Semeraro, owner of Donuts Delite in Rochester, New York, is just one of the business owners paying tribute to the doctor — and simultaneously cashing in on Fauci-mania.

Semeraro is churning out donuts that

feature a picture of Fauci on edible paper where the hole should be — his way of honoring the government’s top infectious disease expert.

“I’ve never met a guy so admired by so many people. I have never heard one negative comment about him,” Semeraro said.

“In my opinion, he was like a cool calm voice in chaos,” he said of Fauci’s behavior at Trump’s daily coronavirus briefings, which can morph from a recounting of scientific facts into something more like a campaign rally.

Semeraro said demand for his treats is so high that he has had to open up extra telephone lines, and is now shipping the Fauci donuts across the country.

Fauci’s craggy, bespectacled face is showing up elsewhere, too: on T-shirts with the slogan “In Fauci We Trust” and on coffee mugs with the line “Keep calm and wash your hands.”

Anthony Fauci, the head of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has emerged as a new national hero during the coronavirus crisis for speaking sense and truth

Americans can even buy Fauci socks and candles. Online marketplace Etsy now offers more than 3,000 items dedicated to the doctor, who has been in the public eye for decades.

On Facebook, the “Dr Anthony

Fauci Fan Club” has more than 79,000 members. A video game called “Fauci’s Revenge” has lasers shooting out of his eyes to help defeat the virus.

And in the US capital, one restaurant is selling the “Fauci Pouchy” — cocktails in a pouch with a straw, for pickup and delivery, of course, in these days of the Great Lockdown.

“They’re selling out like crazy,” said Rohit Malhotra, beverage director at Capo Italian Deli in Washington, which has a backroom speakeasy.

Probably no one expected this soft-spoken man who first rose to prominence during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s to become a pop culture icon.

With his frequent White House appearances, Fauci has been “propelled into everyone’s consciousness,” said Robert Thompson, a expert on television and popular culture at Syracuse University in New York. Fauci is all over social

media, giving live interviews in his raspy voice on Snapchat, answering questions from basketball star Stephen Curry on Instagram and talking to late night funnyman Trevor Noah on YouTube.

Many Americans like Fauci because of his direct way of explaining a world that has been transformed by the pandemic.

He is often in the excruciating position of having to gently correct things Trump says as the president stands next to him, glowering.

“In a moment of crisis like this, Americans are desperate for heroes,” said Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University.

“Even in a difficult political environment, Fauci has insisted on speaking the truth — even with an angry president standing besides him,” said Zelizer.

For Thompson, “he seems to be talking sense and science.” — AFP



Volunteers pack boxes full of food at the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank in San Rafael, California. The Food Bank is offering drive thru pickup on Saturday mornings during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. — AFP

Jobless Americans tap food banks

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merican families slammed by the coronavirus pandemic are turning more and more to food banks to get by, waiting hours for donations in lines of cars stretching as far as the eye can see.

And with 22 million people out of work seemingly overnight as business after business closes under the Great Lockdown, these charities feeding hungry and scared people fear the day will come when they cannot cope with the tsunami of demand.

On Tuesday, for instance, some 1,000 cars lined up at a distribution center set up in Pennsylvania by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Demand for its bags of food soared nearly 40 per cent in March.

At eight centers like that one, some 227 tonnes of food were placed in the trunks of cars of families suddenly unable to put meals on the table, said the organization’s vice president Brian Gulish. “A lot of people are utilising our service for the first time. They’ve never turned to a food bank before,” said Gulish. So they do not know there is a network of 350 distribution points in southwest Pennsylvania.

“That’s why those lines are so long. Because they don’t know that network that we have,” Gulish added.

All over America, from New Orleans to Detroit, people abruptly stripped of a paycheck are flocking to food banks -- sad scenes of desperation among people waiting for their small share of stimulus money included in the \$2.2 trillion emergency relief package approved by Congress last month.

Perhaps the most dramatic picture of some Americans’ new food

With 22 million people out of work seemingly du to the Great Lockdown, charities feeding hungry and scared people fear the day will come when they cannot cope with the tsunami of demand

insecurity unfolded on April 9 in San Antonio, Texas, where a staggering 10,000 cars showed up at one food bank, with some families arriving the night before to just sit and wait.

“We have gone for months without work,” a woman who gave her name only as Alana said at a food distribution center in Chelsea in suburban Boston.

“I find a lady yesterday with a 15-day-old baby, a newborn. The husband is not working, she has two more kids. She was having no food in her house,” said Alana.

Everywhere, food bank officials say their needs in the pandemic era have skyrocketed all of a sudden -- by 30 per cent, for example, at a network in Akron, Ohio.

“We built a supply chain over the years that would serve a certain anticipated need for food. Ramping that up 30 per cent overnight is nearly impossible,” said Dan Flowers, CEO of the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank.

In part this is because the food banks are caught up in the maelstrom that has hit the US food industry.

With restaurants closed because of the lockdown, Americans are stocking up on everything in grocery stores, which no longer can make as many product donations as they usually do. Ditto for restaurants that often donate surplus food to homeless shelters.

Fortunately, the US food industry is in fact making donations. Food banks including 200 local branches of an organization called Feeding America are even getting special kinds of loads to hand out.

US food giant JM Smucker, maker of many well-known products such as Folgers coffee, is a regular donor and has sent extra pallets of food to banks in Ohio. And a distillery called Ugly Dog in Michigan dispatched a truckload of hand sanitizing gel made from residual alcohol and packed in pint bottles that normally hold booze, said Flowers.

Cash donations are also coming in, ranging from anonymous people to the likes of Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest person, who donated \$100 million to Feeding America.

“If it wasn’t for that, these food banks would not be able to meet this demand,” said Flowers.

The Food Bank For New York City, a major one in the Big Apple, is ordering higher volume than it normally does, said Zanita Tisdale, its director of member engagement.

As supply chains get more complex and the legions of desperate families grow, there is the issue of those manning the food banks, who are simply exhausted after weeks of toil. — AFP

Australia seeks independent global virus probe

SAEED KHAN

A

ustralia on Sunday called for an independent investigation into the global response to the coronavirus pandemic, including the World Health Organization’s handling of the crisis. Foreign Minister Marise Payne said the country would “insist” on a review that would probe, in part, China’s early response to the outbreak in Wuhan, the city where COVID-19 emerged late last year.

Payne said Australia shared similar concerns to the United States, whose President Donald Trump has accused the WHO of “mismanaging” the crisis and covering up the seriousness of China’s outbreak before it spread.

Trump has also announced that Washington will halt payments to the UN body that amounted to \$400 million last year.

“I’m not sure that you can have the health organisation which has been responsible for disseminating much of the international communications material, and doing much of the early engagement and investigative work, also as the review mechanism,” Payne said.

“That strikes me as a bit poacher-and-gamekeeper,” Payne added she believed the fallout from the pandemic was set to change the relationship between Australia and China “in some ways,” with her concern around Beijing’s transparency now “at a very high point.”

Health Minister Greg Hunt backed the call for an independent review, saying Australia had achieved success in limiting the spread of the virus in part by going against WHO advice.

Australia — which has recorded 6,600 coronavirus cases and 70 deaths linked to COVID-19 — was one of the first countries to impose a ban on travel from China.

“Australia has been able to have, by global standards, just a profoundly important and successful human outcome, but we have done that by following the course that our medical experts here in Australia set out,” Hunt said.

“We do know there was very considerable criticism when we imposed on the 1 February the China ban from some of the officials and the WHO in Geneva.”

Hunt said although the WHO had “done well” in fighting diseases like polio, measles and malaria, its coronavirus response “didn’t help the world.”

“We have done well because we made our own decisions as a country,” he added. In recent weeks, Australia has seen the rate of new cases slow dramatically, leading health authorities to declare the country has “flattened the curve.”

Tough restrictions on movement and gatherings are set to remain in place for at least the next month as officials attempt to keep the virus spread under control. — AFP

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12,000 ‘Made in Oman’ face visors for COVID-19 control

WITH SUPPORT FROM OQ, INTAJ-SUHAR KICKS OFF INDUSTRIAL-SCALE PRODUCTION OF LOCALLY DESIGNED FACE SHIELDS

CONRAB PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

Intaj-Suhar, the first of its kind ‘dies and moulds’ project operating under the auspices of Sohar University, is preparing to ramp up production of face visors for distribution to first responders on the frontlines of Oman’s battle to control the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

With support from OQ (formerly Oman Oil and Orpic Group), the industrial innovation hub plans to produce around 12,000 face visors to help meet the Sultanate’s requirements of this critical piece of personal protective equipment (PPE).

But unlike an array of locally manufactured face shields produced by a number of Omani tech start-ups, Intaj-Suhar’s face visor is cost-competitive, takes a fraction of the time associated with 3D-printed versions, and is fully Omani in its design, development and material use, according to a key scientist associated with the initiative.

Prof Ghassan al Kindi (pictured), Pro Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation at Sohar University and Director of Intaj-Suhar, said: “Our face visors exemplify the capabilities of Inta-Suhar, which was set up in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry as an initiative of The National Programme for Enhancing Economic Diversification (Tanfeedh). From the design of the mould and the product, and the development of the manufacturing process, coupled with the use of locally produced raw materials, this initiative is ‘Made in Oman’ in its entirety.”

On Thursday, Intaj-Suhar delivered a batch of around 300 face visors for use by healthcare staff of Sohar Hospital – representing the first output from its operations. The plant is now gearing up to produce around 400 – 500 visors per day which, in a couple of weeks, should generate enough



THE INDUSTRIAL INNOVATION HUB IS NOW OFFERING ITS FACE VISORS TO FIRST RESPONDERS, INCLUDING THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH. **TO SUPPORT THE MASS PRODUCTION OF THE GEAR, INTAJ-SUHAR HAS ROPED IN LOCAL SMES TO HELP WITH THE ASSEMBLY OF THE VISORS, WHILE IT CAN FOCUS ITS ENERGIES ON THE PRODUCTION OF HIGHER TECH PRODUCTS.**

volumes to meet Oman’s immediate requirements, Prof Al Kindi noted.

Speaking to the *Observer*, the technologist outlined a number of features that gives Intaj-Suhar’s face visors a significant edge over locally produced, 3D-printed alternatives. “Firstly, it takes less than two minutes

to produce the main part of Intaj-Suhar’s face visor, versus 60 – 90 minutes for a 3D printed version; secondly, our product is cheaper by a factor of eight; and thirdly, we use locally produced polypropylene as the main ingredient, while 3D-printed visors depend on imported materials.”

Wholly government-owned OQ – the Sultanate’s refining and petrochemicals powerhouse – has extended key support to Intaj-Suhar in its endeavour, according to Prof Al Kindi. The company donated some machinery along with technical staff to help with its installation

and commissioning at Intaj Suhar. Additionally, it contributed 500 kilos of polypropylene as raw material for the face visors.

Despite the odds, the Intaj-Suhar team was able to kick off trial production in less than a week — which was a record of sorts for a



“The plant is now gearing up to produce around 400 – 500 visors per day which, in a couple of weeks, should generate enough volumes to meet Oman’s immediate requirements.

GHASSAN AL KINDI
Director, Intaj-Suhar

dies-and-moulds project anywhere in the world, said Prof Al Kindi. “This is indeed a success story for Oman’s efforts to create indigenous capabilities in product design and prototyping,” he noted.

The industrial innovation hub is now offering its face visors to first responders, including the Ministry of Health. To support the mass production of the gear, Intaj-Suhar has roped in local SMEs to help with the assembly of the visors, while it can focus its energies on the production of higher tech products, he added.

Sohar Port is first ME port to join SEA-LNG coalition

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

Sohar Port and Freezone (SOHAR) has announced its membership of SEA-LNG to promote its investment in LNG bunkering facilities and the use of liquefied natural gas (LNG) as a marine fuel. SEA-LNG is the leading multi-sector industry coalition, created to accelerate the widespread adoption of LNG. Marsa LNG, a venture comprised of Total SA and OQ, is developing a state of the art LNG liquefaction plant and bunkering facility in SOHAR Port.

Highlighting the importance of the upcoming project, Mark Geilenkirchen, CEO of Sohar Port said: “This major LNG Bunkering project will generate in-country value and job opportunities, and will support industry diversification efforts by promoting shipping activities in Oman. The establishment of this facility will make SOHAR one of the key LNG bunkering facilities



on the main shipping trade routes, alongside other strategic ports, many of whom are already SEA-LNG members, such as the Port of

STRATEGIC LOCATION: Marsa LNG, a venture comprised of Total SA and OQ, is developing a state of the art LNG liquefaction plant and bunkering facility in SOHAR Port

Singapore. Marsa LNG will supply LNG sourced locally in the Sultanate.”

The project will see the provision of LNG to the shipping lines calling at SOHAR Port. The switch from traditional marine fuel oils to LNG has accelerated following the implementation of new sulphur emission limits by the International

Maritime Organization (IMO) in January 2020 and the IMO greenhouse gas emission targets set for 2030 and 2050.

Peter Keller, Chairman of SEA-LNG said: “We are excited to welcome SOHAR to the SEA-LNG coalition. SOHAR is our first member from the Sultanate of Oman and will provide an attractive global offering once the marine bunkering project is completed. From our perspective, this is an opportune time to develop LNG capabilities in Oman given the expansive growth of marine activity within the region. We welcome SOHAR to our cause of furthering the use of LNG as an important, environmentally superior maritime fuel.”

Due to its unique location outside the Strait of Hormuz and mid-way between Europe and Asia, SOHAR is ideally positioned to become a major LNG bunkering hub in the Middle East. In addition, SOHAR Port and

Freezone feature deep-water drafts capable of handling the largest vessels in the world. The liquefaction plant and bunkering project will be able to offer attractive business conditions, further enhanced by access to a dedicated logistics chain as well as large domestic gas reserves.

Peter Keller continues: “As well as providing a means to comply with recently enforced sulphur limitations, LNG provides a clear pathway for the shipping industry to decarbonise through the introduction of biomethane and synthetic methane.

Now is the time to move forward with LNG as an important maritime fuel.

Inaction is not a plan and we cannot afford to wait decades for solutions that may never be realised. Investing in LNG capable vessels now provides the shipping industry with a pathway to a low carbon future as well as significant and immediate environmental and health benefits.”



Financial markets perspective of a pandemic

EDRIS ALRAFI

Financial markets are attempting to price in a rapid and unprecedented series of shocks to the world economy. The net result has been the fastest bear market in the history of equities. Should investors buy or sell even at these depressed levels for the FTSE100?

To answer such a question, we need to know several facts. Firstly, will public health measures, especially the creation of effective vaccines, bring this pandemic under control within a few months? Unfortunately, most experts emphasise the impossibility of knowing an answer at this stage.

Secondly how effective will the monetary and fiscal responses be from governments around the world. Clearly, many economies will experience a short, sharp recession.

The shut-down of so much travel and entertainment, so many shops and borders, will ensure that is the case. The key issue is how long will the recession last.

Unlike the 2008-09 banking crisis, this is a widespread demand and supply side shock. Central banks have responded aggressively, with sizeable interest rate cuts plus a series of measures to ensure banks continue to supply credit to their borrowers.



CENTRAL BANKS HAVE RESPONDED AGGRESSIVELY, WITH SIZEABLE INTEREST RATE CUTS PLUS A SERIES OF MEASURES TO ENSURE BANKS CONTINUE TO SUPPLY CREDIT TO THEIR BORROWERS.

This is necessary, but not sufficient. Many households and businesses, small and large, will need cash flows to keep them afloat and prevent bankruptcy or default.

Measures to support local

restaurants or nationwide cinema chains will necessarily be different to car parts suppliers or national airlines. Politicians are slowly preparing the country for a really major expansion of government debt; we saw the early

indications in the UK Budget a few weeks ago. Examples could include faster benefit procedures, more sick pay, holidays for business rates, long-term company loans.

What do market valuations tell us?

Bond markets are pricing in close to zero interest rates and weak inflation for the foreseeable future.

This makes considerable sense; politicians should focus on debt servicing rather than overall debt

levels. Equity markets are pricing in a recession, but clearly could still fall further if the downturn lasts 9-12 rather than 3-6 months.

Amidst a blizzard of conflicting facts and figures, a few key issues are worth focusing on. The first is the rate of improvement in the COVID-19 statistics.

The second is the speed with which governments use their fiscal firepower to support households and businesses — as in war time borrow today and sort out the bill tomorrow. Economic data will be poor for some months but when will signs appear in the economies first affected by the virus, such as China and South Korea, that commercial activity has started to recover.

Some of the implications for investors are already clear. Profits will take a hit. For those building up a pension pot, it will take time to re-build wealth, as it did after 2000 or 2008.

For those relying on an income then suspensions to dividend payments are possible. So, the emphasis should be on searching for quality companies which can survive the pandemic, investment firms who can be dynamic in their decision making, and absolute return funds designed to withstand this sort of crisis.

(The author is Head of Middle East and Africa, Aberdeen Standard Investments)

Ford issues \$8 billion debt securities after \$2 billion loss



A worker of Ford Germany fixes the engine of a Streetscooter WORK XL electric van based on a Ford Transit at Ford's new manufacturing line in Cologne, Germany. — Reuters

DETROIT: Ford Motor Co on Friday raised \$8 billion from corporate debt investors to shore up its cash reserves as the coronavirus outbreak pummeled vehicle sales and production, resulting in an estimated loss of about \$2 billion for the first quarter.

The Dearborn, Michigan-based company, which lost its investment-grade status in March, raised new funds with a three-part debt offering, according to a regulatory filing.

Investors said Ford benefited from the US Federal Reserve's move last week to backstop

debt offerings by companies that lost investment-grade credit ratings after the COVID-19 crisis accelerated in the United States, International Financing Review reported on Friday.

"Today's deal is a good sign of the growing confidence around the improving market backdrop with respect to liquidity as well as more promising views around the economic outlook," said Dan Mead, head of investment grade syndicate at Bank of America Securities, which was one of the lead banks on the Ford deal.

In an environment where interest rates on cash savings are close to zero, Ford will pay investors interest of between 8.50 per cent and 9.625 per cent on the new debt securities.

There was around \$40 billion worth of demand from investors across the three debt packages, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Ford had earlier drawn down over \$15 billion from revolving credit lines to ride out the pandemic, which forced the shutdown of its North American and European factories during the past month.

Separately, General Motors Co disclosed in a regulatory filing that it had entered into a 364-day revolving credit agreement of \$1.95 billion. The automaker said it has allocated the credit line

for exclusive use by its financial services business.

Ford on Friday said it had to put up additional guarantees for earlier loans — not the notes sold Friday — because it has not maintained an investment-grade status. It has suspended its dividend for the quarter.

Stanching the cash drain and restarting profitable operations in Europe and North America will be critical for Ford in the months ahead. The company told investors ahead of Friday's bond deal that absent new funding and a restart of production, it had cash to last to the end of the third quarter.

Now, Ford has more breathing room financially, and federal and state officials this week said they expect coronavirus lockdowns to begin easing, possibly allowing auto plants to begin building vehicles again early next month.

Still, the company has taken a body blow from the pandemic at a time when it was already wrestling with a difficult restructuring effort begun more than two years ago. Ford's vehicle sales to dealers fell 21 per cent in the first quarter, compared with a year earlier.

Only Ford's joint ventures in China, where the pandemic has been receding, are currently producing vehicles, and dealers there have resumed work. — Reuters

Colombia's Rappi trials robots to deliver restaurant food to homes



A delivery robot from the Colombian company Rappi, travels down a street in Medellin, Colombia. — Reuters

BOGOTA: Colombian startup Rappi is piloting deliveries by robots as a safe way of getting food to people forced to stay at home due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The pilot started this week in Medellin, Colombia's second-largest city. The boxy robots, which travel on four wheels and are decked with orange flags on their antennae, carry deliveries of up to 35 square centimeters (5 square inches) and are used to transport restaurant orders paid for digitally.

The robots complete the last mile of the deliveries and are disinfected before and after each use, Rappi said in a statement on Thursday night.

The robots are operated jointly by Rappi and US-based KiwiBot.

"We believe that by partnering with technology we will be able to continue meeting our aim of safely making people's lives easier, especially in situations like the one we find ourselves in," Rappi's Colombia country manager Matias Laks said in the statement.

Rappi has completed close to 120 deliveries each day with 15 robots in the pilot area, it said.

It said it intended to run the pilot until July and, if successful, roll it out to other cities where it operates.

— Reuters

UK regulator clears Amazon stake in Deliveroo

LONDON: Amazon's purchase of a stake in Deliveroo has been provisionally cleared by Britain's competition regulator in view of a potentially fatal deterioration in the online food delivery group's finances because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Amazon.com Inc led a \$575 million fundraising in Deliveroo last May, making what the two parties called "a minority investment" and pitching it against Uber Eats and Takeaway.com in the global race to dominate the market for meal deliveries.

Britain's Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) launched a detailed investigation in December, saying the deal could damage competition by discouraging Amazon from re-entering the online restaurant food market and further developing its presence within the online convenience grocery delivery market.

However, the CMA said on Friday it had become clear that the health emergency was having a significant negative impact on Deliveroo's revenues, given the closure of a large number of the restaurants available through its platform during the lockdown.



A deliveroo rider cycles on Clapham Common, London, Britain. — Reuters

The regulator said Deliveroo informed it the impact of the pandemic on its business meant it would fail financially and exit the market without the Amazon investment.

"Without additional investment, which we currently think is only realistically available from Amazon, it's clear that Deliveroo would not be

able to meet its financial commitments and would have to exit the market," Stuart McIntosh, chair of the CMA's independent inquiry group, said.

He said Deliveroo's demise could leave some customers cut off from online food delivery and others facing higher prices or a reduction in service quality.

"Faced with that stark outcome, we feel the best course of action is to provisionally clear Amazon's investment in Deliveroo," he said.

Deliveroo said it was delighted with the CMA's decision.

"This investment will help us to overcome immediate and long-term challenges," a spokeswoman said.

Amazon.com Inc led a \$575 million fundraising in Deliveroo last May, making what the two parties called "a minority investment" and pitching it against Uber Eats and Takeaway.com in the global race to dominate the market for meal deliveries.

"We're committed to this investment," Amazon said in a statement. "Our investment will benefit both consumers of Deliveroo's service and its small-business restaurant partners."

The CMA is seeking views on its provisional findings by May 11. The deadline for its final report is June 11.

— Reuters

GM dispatches first batch of ventilators



A worker builds a production ventilator at the General Motors Kokomo manufacturing facility in response to the coronavirus disease outbreak in Kokomo, Indiana. — Reuters

DETROIT: General Motors said it had started delivering the first batch of 54 ventilators to US hospitals treating severely ill COVID-19 patients.

GM said the Franciscan Health Olympia Fields hospital in Olympia Fields, Illinois, and Chicago's Weiss Memorial Hospitals will receive shipments of 10 ventilators each via package delivery company UPS Inc.

A third shipment comprising 34 ventilators will be delivered by UPS to the US Federal Emergency Management Agency at the Gary/Chicago International Airport on Saturday to be distributed at other locations.

The deliveries are part of a contract awarded to GM by the US Department of Health and Human Services for 30,000 ventilators by the end of August. The contract is worth \$489.4 million.

GM is working with ventilator firm Ventec Life Systems to produce the equipment. — Reuters

India toughens rules on investments from neighbours, seen aimed at China

NEW DELHI: India has stepped up scrutiny of investments from companies based in neighbouring countries, in what is widely seen as a move to stave off takeovers by Chinese firms during the coronavirus outbreak. India's trade ministry said in a notification dated April 17 the changes to federal rules on investment were meant to curb "opportunistic takeovers/acquisitions". It did not mention China.

Investments from an entity in a country that shares a land border with India will require government approval, it said, meaning they cannot go through a so-called automatic route.

"These times should not be used by other countries to take over our companies," a senior government official said.

Similar restrictions are already in place for Bangladesh and Pakistan. But up to now, they have not applied to China and India's other neighbours including Bhutan, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Nepal.

"This will certainly impact sentiment among Chinese investors. However, greenfield investments will not be impacted," said Santosh Pai, a partner at Indian law firm Link Legal that advises several Chinese companies.

Australia has also said all foreign investment proposals will be assessed by a review board during the coronavirus crisis to prevent a fire sale of distressed corporate assets. Germany has taken similar measures.

A February report by research group Gateway House said Chinese foreign direct investment into India stood at \$6.2 billion.



Students wear masks of China's President Xi Jinping as other waves national flags of India and China, ahead of the informal summit with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, at a school in Chennai, India, in this file photo. — Reuters

China's Bytedance has plans to invest \$1 billion in Indian, while automakers including Great Wall Motor Co Ltd and MG Motor, a unit of China's SAIC, have said they intend to invest millions.

Delano Furtado, a partner with law firm Trilegal, said the notification may also impact Chinese companies with existing investments in the country.

"Any follow-on investments in those

entities may now require approvals," he said.

India's notification also said government approval would also be needed to change the ownership of an Indian entity that had existing foreign investment. — Reuters

Germany may rein in debt if economy improves

FRANKFURT: Germany may be able to manage the fiscal impact of the coronavirus crisis without exceeding approved debt levels if the economy recovers in the second half of the year, Finance Minister Olaf Scholz said in an interview published on Sunday.

Parliament suspended a debt brake to fight the crisis on March 25 with a supplementary budget of 156 billion euro (\$169.67 billion), 100 billion euros for an economic stability fund that can take direct equity stakes in companies, and 100 billion euros in credit to public-sector development bank KfW.

The measures were predominantly aimed at funding healthcare and helping companies. Asked if 156 billion could remain the top level of new debt, Scholz told the *Welt am Sonntag* newspaper: "If we manage to move the economic curve upwards again in the second half of the year, then this could be the case."

He said that Germany would aim to recover the outlays over a long-term period without having to make substantial savings elsewhere.

He praised the country's social welfare system of capitalism that makes a high level of state support possible, but added this meant there could be higher taxation of top earners after the crisis.

A demand by his Social Democratic party in a coalition government



German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz attends an interview in his office in Berlin, Germany. — Reuters

led by Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives, he said such taxation needed to be "fair and just," supporting lower income groups as well.

The government package further includes a stability fund of 400 billion euros in loan guarantees to secure corporate debt at risk of defaulting, taking the overall sum to more than 750 billion euros.

Scholz said that he would aim to provide economic stimuli, if necessary, after the end of the current lockdown policy that keeps businesses shut and the population at home.

"When it is the right time, we will get measures on their way to stimulate business again. Those will have to be as economists would imagine them — targeted, fit for purpose and limited in time," he said. — Reuters

Main Street bailout rewards US restaurant chains and rural firms

WASHINGTON: Over two frantic weeks, the US government pledged \$350 billion to Main Street businesses across America desperate for cash after coronavirus lockdowns.

Now a picture is emerging of who got the money. More than 25 per cent of the total pot went to fewer than 2 per cent of the firms that got relief. They include a number of publicly traded companies with thousands of employees and hundreds of millions of dollars in annual sales.

The loans from the US Small Business Administration — totaling \$342.3 billion as of Thursday — went to companies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and five US territories, and were spread across all 20 of the main industry sectors.

Congress directed the SBA to award \$349 billion to struggling businesses with 500 or fewer workers as part of a \$2.3 trillion coronavirus aid package that President Donald Trump signed into law on March 27. The Payroll Protection Program (PPP) was crafted to keep Americans off unemployment benefits, by giving small and mid-sized companies forgivable loans for keeping employees on the books.

The SBA does not make the loans directly but instead backs loans made by participating financial firms. The three biggest state economies — California, Texas and New York — accounted for 23 per cent of the loans, more than \$82 billion. Meanwhile, businesses in a number of



A person in a mask walks on an empty street near the Treasury Department in Washington. — Reuters

small, rural states that have avoided the brunt of the outbreak took home a disproportionate share of the pie.

The business sector receiving the most money was construction, with 13 per cent of the total. The sector represents less than 9 per cent of overall employment among US firms with 500 or fewer employees, according to US Census Bureau data from 2017, the latest available.

Companies on the front line of the virus — in the accommodation and food services

sector — received about 9 per cent of the pot while representing nearly 14 per cent of workers among sub-500 person firms.

Loans of \$2 million or more made up nearly 28 per cent of the total, and those of at least \$5 million accounted for 9 per cent, with a number of those going to companies with access to public securities markets.

At least 60 publicly traded firms have claimed a share of the total, according to Securities and Exchange Commission filings. — Reuters

Banks seek term changes as Fed finalises lending programme

WASHINGTON: US banks are pushing the Federal Reserve to change the terms of a \$600 billion lending programme for small and medium-sized businesses, including reducing minimum loan sizes and allowing more flexibility on underlying reference rates, industry groups said.

Over the past few days, Washington-based bank groups have given the Fed feedback on the terms of the Main Street Lending Programme designed to help mitigate the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak. The programme was unveiled on April 9 and is due to launch in coming weeks.

As part of that programme, banks



The Federal Reserve Board building is pictured in Washington. — Reuters

will make loans to eligible small and medium-sized businesses and the Fed will then purchase 95 per cent of the loan via a special-purpose vehicle. The Fed asked for public input and has said it may change the terms if necessary.

Making the programme workable for lenders is critical to getting federal funds into the real economy quickly, but the terms of that and other assistance schemes are under growing scrutiny amid worries insufficient conditions are being placed on borrowers and that banks may dish out the funds unevenly.

Media reported that some funds from a separate programme to cover small businesses' payroll appeared to

have gone to some states and companies in less need of the cash.

Industry groups including the Independent Community Bankers of America (ICBA), the Consumer Bankers Association (CBA) and the American Bankers Association (ABA) told the Fed that the programme's \$1 million minimum loan size is too large and will exclude many small businesses that need to borrow a smaller amount.

"The minimum loan amount should be no higher than \$100,000. Otherwise, Main Street businesses and community banks will not participate," the ICBA wrote in a letter published. The ABA said in its letter published on Saturday

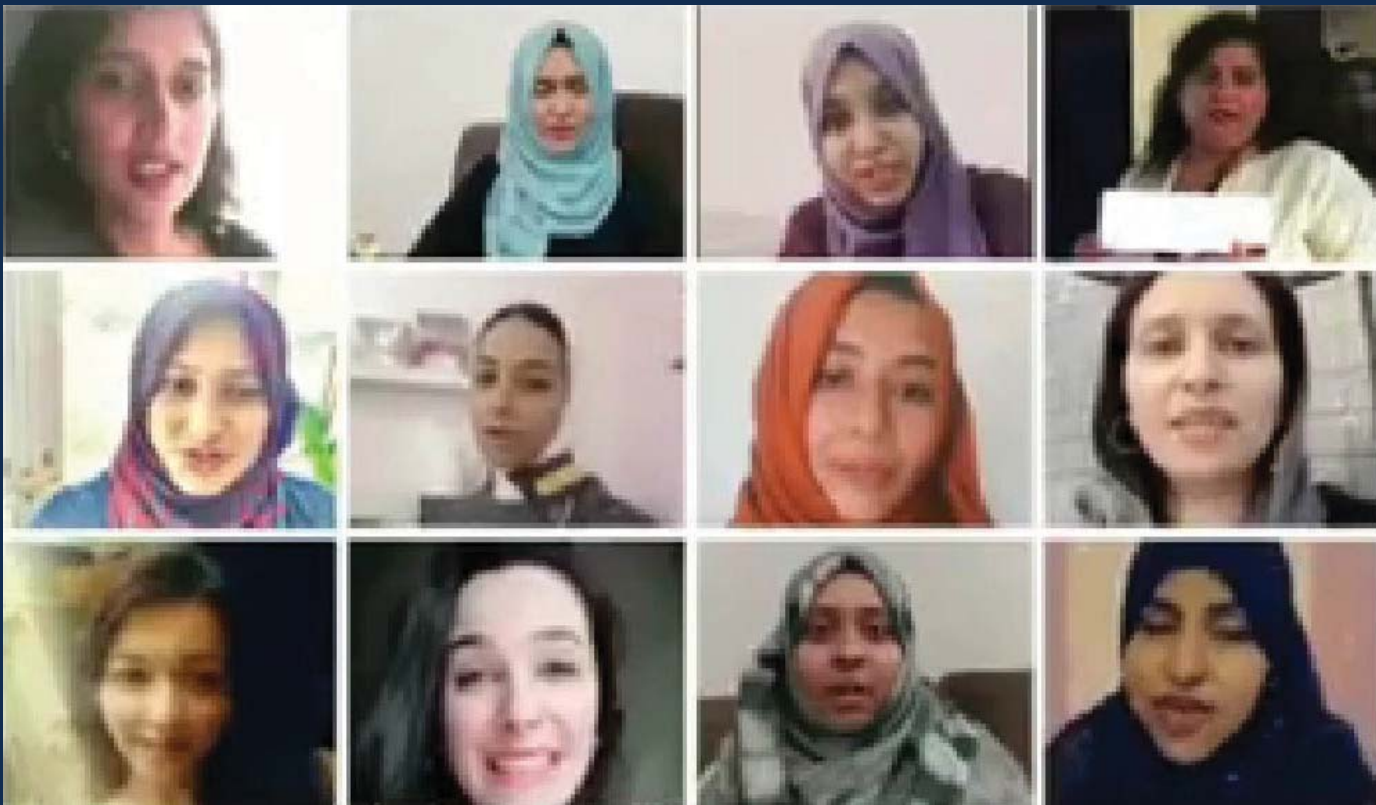
the floor should be \$50,000.

The Fed has said banks must price the loans using the Secured Overnight Financing Rate (SOFR), a newer benchmark that is due to replace the London Inter-Bank Offered Rate (Libor) next year. But some lenders want to use Libor or other benchmarks, since many have yet to adopt SOFR, the ABA said.

The ICBA also said the requirement for lenders to retain a 5 per cent interest in the loan is unlikely to make lenders any more prudent when underwriting the loan, but it will complicate the loan's sale and the accounting treatment of the transaction. — Reuters



UNIQUE WAY OF HONOURING FRONTLINE WARRIORS



#STAY HOME #STAY SAFE
CAKE TALKS MUSCAT

KABEER YOUSUF

At a time when the whole country is following the official instructions to "stay home and stay safe" with a view to flattening the curve of COVID-19, a group of women comprising both Omanis and expatriates have found a unique way of getting the message across.

With a short video shot within the four walls of their homes, these women are acknowledging the efforts of the frontline warriors in the battle against coronavirus and advising the rest to stay home as a national responsibility.

A group named 'Cake Talks', formed by those women who are passionate about cooking, has a video that has gone viral beyond the boundaries of the virtual world and is earning accolades from across the continents.

"We wanted to express our gratitude to the nation, the leaders, the medical staff and the defence personnel and reiterate our solidarity with those who stay in quarantine while supporting those people whose incomes have stopped at least for the time being", said Ruby, Cassie, Shaki and Reena, the four admins of the Cake Talks group.

"This video which speaks several languages is a unique way of honouring the frontline warriors".

**A GROUP OF WOMEN
COMPRISING BOTH OMANIS
AND EXPATRIATES HAVE
FOUND A UNIQUE WAY OF
SPREADING THE MESSAGE
'STAY HOME AND STAY SAFE'
TO FIGHT COVID-19**

Initiated in 2015 with the pure intention of sharing ideas and recipes in cake making and decorating, Cake Talks is a Muscat-based support group for bakers and an ideal platform for any hobby baker or professional baker to be a part with no formal restrictions.

Our motto, vision and mission are simple, they said. "The little I have, I share with you; the little you have, you share with me, and together we all have a full share of everything".

"During this current situation in the world with the lockdown, people are suffering from pandemic stress and anxiety and the only

thing which keeps everyone occupied is undoubtedly cooking or baking", they added.

Recent studies show that many people around the world have turned towards baking as a way to divert themselves from stress and anxiety.

"In light of this, our members in the group keep posting and sharing their favourite recipes on social media with everyone expecting nothing but love in return".

The bonus of these initiatives is that these recipes keep kids occupied and enjoy a fun kitchen time with their parents.

Bushra Siddique, Shemna Zameel, Alvita Diaz, Vanessa Mehri, Samina Urooj, Dana Numan, Shyma Shiyas, Jiya Safeer, Rubeena Ibrahim and Mufeeda Ubaidh are the other members of the group.

As admins of a group with nearly 3,000 members, the group admins decided to take up social responsibility of creating an awareness and reinforce the message which the authorities have been urging the people to do. Hence, they wanted everyone around them to know that they are not alone and that we are all in this together.

"We need to support our heroes of Oman to succeed in their mission of eradicating the virus and what better way to spread awareness than social media. The team chose Instagram as their medium to spread the message".

NEUER 'IRRITATED' AS BAYERN CONTRACT TALKS STALL

BERLIN: Bayern Munich captain and goalkeeper Manuel Neuer told German media on Sunday he has become "irritated" with negotiations to extend his contract, which have reportedly stalled in recent weeks.

"All talks I have had since I have been here have been confidential... nothing has ever leaked," the 34-year-old told Germany's most popular daily Bild.

"But now, details about the current talks are constantly appearing in the media, and are often untrue. That irritates me. It's not something I am used to at Bayern."

The veteran goalkeeper's unusually candid comments come amid widespread reports that his current contract negotiations have hit the rocks.

If the talks fail, club captain Neuer could be free to leave Bayern in June and attract the interest of the Premier League clubs.

According to Bild, Neuer and his agent Thomas Kroth are demanding a five-year deal, with a salary of 20 million euros (\$22 million) per season.

In Sunday's interview, Kroth denied such details and said he was not "confronting the club with demands which will hit it hard in the coronavirus crisis".

With Bundesliga matches currently suspended due to the coronavirus, Bayern have recently extended the contracts of forward Thomas Mueller and head

coach Hansi Flick, both until 2023.

Neuer hailed Flick as a "super coach" and said that the 55-year-old's extension had convinced him too to stay on at Bayern.

"I want to have a contract which is a win-win situation for me and Bayern. I want to perform, be there for the team... and give 100 per cent," he said.

"The conditions have to be right (for that)," he added. Neuer, who helped Germany win the 2014 World Cup title, has been named world

goalkeeper of the year four times.

He has kept 191 clean sheets in 373 appearances for Bayern since joining from Schalke in 2011 and made 92 appearances for Germany.

Undisputed number one for nearly a decade, Neuer's future at Bayern has been thrown into doubt by the impending arrival of young Schalke goalkeeper Alexander Nuebel.

Nuebel, 23, will join Bayern at the end of the current campaign, and has reportedly been promised at least 10 appearances per season.

Yet Neuer dismissed the idea that his number one jersey was under threat.

"As long as I am performing, I will play. That is my assumption," he told *Bild*. — AFP

Taylor, Gilchrist predict big pay cuts for Australia players



SYDNEY: Former Australia captain Mark Taylor and wicket-keeping great Adam Gilchrist believe pay cuts are inevitable for the country's cricketers as the sport gears up to deal with the expected financial crisis posed by the novel coronavirus.

Cricket Australia (CA), the governing body of the sport, on Thursday announced plans to lay off almost 80 per cent of its staff, putting them on 20 per cent pay until June 30.

Media reported on Saturday that CA Chief Executive Kevin Roberts has told staff a financial crisis was coming and the organisation would not have been able to pay its bills at the end of August without lay-offs.

Gilchrist, who retired in 2008 after a glittering career spanning almost 12 years, said the players were next.

"Without being aware of any numbers and the financial side of it, I wouldn't be surprised if we go back a decade or two to the level of payment that players get. Even maybe further for a while," Gilchrist told ABC Grandstand on Sunday.

"It's going to get stripped back, right back. Support staff numbers have to get dragged back.

"The revenue is going to go down significantly, 50 per cent they are banking on at the moment and that's an optimistic position, I believe. The players will take a whack."

The spread of the

coronavirus has forced countries to close their borders and impose lockdowns. It has halted professional cricket, leaving most boards bracing for significant revenue falls.

This year's lucrative Indian Premier League, which offers big pay cheques for the players, has also been postponed indefinitely.

"There will be haircuts, as we've seen from CA staff. Players will be next," Taylor, a former member of the CA board, said on the Nine Network.

"I also suspect that Cricket Australia and the ACA (Australian Cricketers' Association) have been working together on this. I hope they get their heads together and sort out a good solution for the near future."

Cricket Australia would hope to earn significant revenue later this year when the country hosts the men's Twenty20 World Cup in October and November before India's tour for a widely anticipated four-test series around the New Year.

"Six months is a long time. It may not be long enough in this pandemic, but it might be long enough to get some cricket in October which may save Cricket Australia and the players from taking too big a haircut," Taylor said.

"Cricket Australia are trying to be proactive and making a move early to hopefully save some pain later." — Reuters

Chess committee conducts online training for referees

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

After the successful home online training sessions, Oman Chess Committee (OCC) was the first sports committee in the Sultanate to conduct online umpiring course. The online course, which began on Thursday and will conclude on Monday, featured participation of more than 20 referees from the Sultanate, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and Morocco.

Mahdi Abdul Raheem from UAE is the lecturer of the online workshop for referees. The course is one of the approved online methods by the International Chess Federation using the technology and online communication platforms for development of chess.

The OCC recently conducted



three online tournaments to improve the players' timing. At the same time, the committee continued their online initiatives by conducting some courses for umpires to develop

their chess umpiring skills and raising their readiness level for the upcoming events. Daily four hours were dedicated for the course which started at 6:00 pm until 10:00 pm.



Dr Mahdi Abdul Raheem, trainer of the course, focused on some legal points for using the right and approved chess tools. Also, he recommended the participants to

learn from their mistakes and address the weak areas. The training was helpful for the referees in Oman and abroad to know the latest updates on chess rules and regulations

as approved by the international federation. The course also included comparative studies of different chess games, chess playing positions, time control, international chess designations for players and umpires, international ranking, cheating of players and ways of prevention and other related topics.

The five days online course is part of OCC training plan to improve the national referees level as the Sultanate was supposed to host the Asian Amateur Championship during April. It was postponed until further notice due to the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. The OCC is keen to implement the right development plans for the coaches and umpires in order to gain the required knowledge and experience.

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BIG

PLAN TO HELP LOW-RANKED PLAYERS

DJOKOVIC, FEDERER AND NADAL ORGANISING AID FOR STRUGGLING PLAYERS

PARIS: Novak Djokovic said on Saturday that he, Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal are organising aid for players struggling with the paralysis of the game due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“I spoke to Roger and Rafa a few days ago,” Djokovic, the world number one, said in an Instagram chat with friend and rival Stan Wawrinka on Saturday.

“We had a long conversation about the near future of tennis, what is going to happen, how we can contribute and how we can help especially lower-ranked players, who are obviously struggling the most.”

“The majority of the players who are ranked between 200, 250 in the world, and the 700th or 1,000th do not have federation support, do not have sponsors. They are completely independent and left alone,” he said

“Guys who are ranked between 200-250, especially to 700... are thinking of leaving tennis right now.”

He said players, the ATP and the four Grand Slams “would all get together and will contribute to a player relief fund that ATP

will distribute.”

“It looks, hopefully, that there will be something between \$3 million (2.75 million euros) and \$4.5 million that is going to be distributed,” he estimated.

Djokovic said the cash could come from the prize money for the season-ending World Tour Finals or the final bonus pools for top players.

‘FUTURE OF TENNIS’

“Maybe if we don’t have any tournaments this season, we can take a certain percentage from our prize money form Australian Open in January,” he said.

“These guys are the grass roots of tennis. The future of tennis. We need to show them they still can rely on support of the top guys.”

According to reports in tennis media, Djokovic, as president of the ATP Players’ Council, which also includes Federer and Nadal, proposed to members that players in the top 100 for singles and the top 20 in doubles contribute according to their rankings.

The proposed scale runs from \$30,000 for

a top-five player to \$5,000 for those between 51 and 100.

That would raise approximately \$1 million and the ATP would make a similar contribution.

On Friday, ATP chief Andrea Gaudenzi echoed the call for unity on the tour website.

“Our guys are at home, obviously unable to play, unable to earn money and financially struggling, so we will try to help,” he said, adding that the ATP faced the problem of not knowing how long the crisis would last and how much revenue it would lose.

“I’ve been quite touched by the top players who reached out, the big names expressing their desire of helping the lower-ranked players and putting those players first.”

“We are also talking with the Grand Slams about it. They may want to join in the effort. I think it would be a great message for the sport.”

World tennis has been at a standstill since the beginning of March and will not resume until mid-July at the earliest following the postponement of Roland Garros and the cancellation of Wimbledon. — **AFP**

GERMANY TO HOST EXHIBITION EVENT ‘WITHOUT FANS’ IN MAY

MUMBAI: The German state of Rhineland-Palatinate is set to host an exhibition event without the presence of fans from May 1 as the professional tennis season remains shut due to the novel coronavirus, according to The Telegraph newspaper.

Professional tennis came to a halt in March after countries started closing borders and imposed lockdown to contain the spread of the virus, and all events are currently suspended till at least mid-March.

The report said players at the Tennis Point Exhibition Series will have to wear masks when not in

action and there will only be three people on court - two competitors and a chair umpire - during a match.

The event will be an eight-man field contesting a total of 32 matches over four days on indoor clay at the Base Tennis Academy near the small town of Hoeher-Grenzhausen.

None of the players set to be involved are currently ranked in the top 100 and include singles world number 143 Yannick Hanfmann and Dustin Brown, ranked 239.

The content of the event will be broadcast by the Tennis Channel while scores will be streamed for betting through data company Sportradar.

Serena Williams’ coach Patrick Mouratoglou said on Saturday that his tennis academy in south of France will host a five-week tournament starting in May that will give players the chance to get back on court during the COVID-19 pandemic. — **Reuters**