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OAA TO HOST 3 INTERNATIONAL EVENTS
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HM the Sultan affirms support to Palestinian people

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq sent a letter to President Mahmoud Abbas, President of the State of Palestine and chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, on Saturday.

In his message, His Majesty the Sultan affirmed the sultanate's firm and supportive stance for the brotherly Palestinian people to gain their freedom,

establish their independent sovereign state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and to continue Oman's efforts to serve the Palestinian cause.

The message was delivered by Salem bin Habib al Amiri, chargé d'affaires of the sultanate's embassy in the State of Palestine, during his meeting with Majdi al Khalidi, diplomatic advisor to the Palestinian President at the presidential head-

quarters in Ramallah.

Khalidi affirmed the Palestinian leadership's keenness to strengthen the brotherly relations in the interest of the two peoples and the two brotherly countries, expressing the Palestinian people's appreciation of Oman's brotherly position and its efforts and steadfast support for legitimate Palestinian rights.

Sayyid Hamoud delivers HM's message to Qatari Emir

Muscat - Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidi, Minister of Interior, met Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of Qatar, in Doha on Saturday. Sayyid Hamoud is visiting Doha to attend the Qatari Ministry of Interior's Police College graduation.

During the meeting, Sayyid Hamoud conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq to the emir and wished him good health and happiness and the Qatari people further progress and prosperity.

On his part, Sheikh Tamim conveyed his greetings and good wishes to His Majesty the Sultan and wished the Omani people further development and growth.

During the meeting, they reviewed the strong relations between the two countries and ways of developing and enhancing these in various fields. The



meeting was attended by Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa al Thani, Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of

Interior, and Najeeb al Balushi, Oman's ambassador to Qatar.

ONA

New British schools to open in Muscat in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Defence Pension Fund announced on Thursday that it will open two new British schools in Muscat this year, subject to final licensing from the Ministry of Education.

Both schools have a long and exceptional history of educational excellence in the UK. Cheltenham Muscat, for children aged three to 18, will represent a branch campus of the prestigious 180-year-old Cheltenham College UK. Downe House Mus-



cat will be a branch campus of one of the UK's leading high-achieving private schools, the 113-year-old Downe House.

Both schools are currently ac-

cepting applications for the session to commence in September 2021.

On behalf of the Ministry of Defence, H H Sayyid Shihab bin

Tariq bin Taimour al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, said, "In line with the sultanate's vision and the National Strategy for Education 2040, I am pleased to announce the opening of two international schools - Cheltenham Muscat and Downe House Muscat. Both schools will offer education with modern, inspirational teaching that cater to the needs of every child both in-school and through a virtual learning platform, blending the power of culture and heritage with innovation."

Continued on Page 04



NEW arrivals



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Reptile exhibition opens in Nizwa

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The University of Nizwa has opened a Reptiles and Insects Exhibition to the public. In the making for some time now, on display are 65 snakes representing 17 species, 11 lizards of six species and several poisonous scorpions in 48 cages.

The exhibition at the Natural & Medical Sciences Research Centre of University of Nizwa is open to the public, including students and tourists, offering them a close look at some species of reptiles and insects found in the sultanate.

Ahmed al Busaidi, the university's snake and wildlife specialist, said, "Snakes are an integral part of the ecology and help maintain the balance of nature. Almost everywhere around the world, snakes have a role to play in the culture and are regarded highly for medicinal purposes. At our centre, we take utmost care to not only understand and study the various species of snakes but also to protect them."

He informed that the exhibition was in the pipeline for a long time for want of appropriate space. "The exhibition area is spacious now and can accommodate more guests, besides space for cages and display enclosures. While it is open to the public for viewing, it is also a research centre. People can come and view the snakes and also learn about the various species," Busaidi said.

Among the snake exhibits are pythons, mole vipers, cobras and carpet vipers. The exhibits are representative of Oman's diverse landscape, including indigenous desert and mountain species.

The cages and display enclosures have heaters to help the



(Supplied photos)

Among the exhibits are pythons, mole vipers, cobras and carpet vipers. The exhibits are representative of Oman's diverse landscape, including indigenous desert and mountain species

reptiles regulate their temperature during winter. "From April until November, the reptiles are

active. They are a little lazy now," said Busaidi.

Similar to hibernation in mam-

mals, brumation is a dormant period for reptiles when their bodies shut down and conserve energy for the coming year. During brumation, a reptile may not eat, drink, defecate or move for several weeks.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visitors in a single batch has been restricted to five to ten people.

According to Busaidi, 101 reptilian species have been recorded in Oman so far. Of these, 22 are snakes. Most snake species indigenous to Oman are found in Dakhliyah, Salalah and the Batinah region. Of these, nine are venomous.

The most common species in Oman include the Arabian cobra, Saw-scaled viper, puff adder,

wadi racer, tree snakes, sand viper, sand boa and the cat snake.

For snakebites, Busaidi recommends going to a hospital immediately. Snakebite victims must avoid putting pressure on the bite wound.

"If you are bitten by a snake, do not be nervous. Stay calm and move away from the site quietly. If possible, see the snake to know

its pattern and colour. It'll help the doctor decide the treatment. Do not attempt to kill the snake as that might agitate the reptile further and prompt it to attack in self-defence," Busaidi said.

Busaidi is also part of a team at the university that studies characteristics of snake venom and using their properties to kill cancerous cells.

Campaign kick-starts in Sur to eradicate mesquite plants



(Supplied photo)

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In efforts to eradicate mesquite plants from the sultanate, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has kick-started a campaign in cooperation with Oman LNG to remove the invasive species from several villages in the wilayat of Sur in South Sharqiyah.

The campaign is part of a wider national campaign that the ministry is currently conducting in different parts of the country to eradicate the invasive species.

The ministry stated that the plant is a menace as it threatens local species, competing for water and soil nutrients. Its leaves contain toxic substances, and its thorns are known to cause serious injury to humans.

The plant's pollen has been identified as a major source of respiratory allergens, and consumption of its pods by animals lead to teeth decay and subsequently loss of life.

The plant also affects soil salinity and has a negative impact on groundwater. The ministry uses geographic information systems and remote

sensing to monitor its spread.

A high-level delegation comprising several ministers recently held a meeting to discuss harmful environmental and health phenomena in Dhofar governorate, notably the spread of mesquite plants.

The meeting was held by the Environment Authority with the participation of several bodies in the presence of the Minister of State and Governor of Dhofar, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Minister of Health, chairman of the Environment

Authority, and undersecretary for scientific research and innovation in the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

The meeting discussed phenomena such as the spread of the Parthenium plant, death of livestock, spread of mesquite plants and the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito.

The meeting also recommended activating the role of the private sector in finding innovative solutions and investment opportunities to benefit from mesquite trees in manufacturing industries.

CBFS researchers bag ICAI International Awards 2020

Muscat - College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS) researchers recently received global recognition for their scholarly contribution to the community.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) selected two research papers for the ICAI International Research Awards 2020.

A paper authored by Dr Ananda S, Sonal Devesh and Anis Moosa Al Lawati titled 'What factors drive the adoption of digital banking? An empirical study from the perspective of Omani retail banking' was adjudged second and awarded the Silver Shield in the Economics category of the awards.

Another paper authored by a CBFS researcher Dr Ahmed al Hadi titled 'Investment Committees and Corporate Cash Holdings' was awarded the Silver Shield in the Accounting category of the awards.

The awards were presented in the presence of Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Minister of Water Resources and River Development, Government of India.



(Supplied photo)

These papers have been published in reputed international journals, including Journal of Financial Services Marketing and North American Journal of Economics and Finance.

The awards received 95 papers from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Netherlands, Belgium, Bulgaria, South Africa, Nigeria, Turkey, UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Oman.

The ICAI is a statutory body that was established by an Act of the Parliament of India in 1949 to

regulate the profession of chartered accountancy in the country. The ICAI is the second largest professional body of chartered accountants in the world and functions under Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India.

These were the first papers from Oman considered for ICAI international research awards.

These international awards endorse the quality of CBFS research and also the efforts of the college to contribute to the society.

ROP NEWS

One arrested for setting vehicles on fire

Muscat - Royal Oman Police (ROP) arrested a person on Thursday for setting fire to two vehicles in Shinas. In a statement issued by ROP, it said, 'The North Batinah Police Command arrested one person for setting two vehicles on fire in Shinas. Legal action has been taken against the accused.'

Four women arrested for immoral activities

Muscat - The Buraimi Police Command of ROP arrested four women for engaging in immoral activities on Thursday.

According to an ROP statement, the arrested women are from Asian countries. 'Legal proceedings have been initiated against the four women,' the statement said.

Youth turns hobby into successful enterprise

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Abdullah Fareed al Lawati - a young entrepreneur of Oman - has scripted a beautiful success story in business recently when his unique hobby of watch collection guided him to launch a series of designer items for the safekeep of his valued jewels.

This energetic man started production of designer watch cases and holders combining marble and leather that can give many international brands a run for their money.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, the founder of Marble and Leather company said he has recently graduated from the Coventry University in Business Management. "So for me entering into a business was but a natural choice. What exactly would be my area of operations, was the main question.

"I'm passionate about watches, therefore the first idea that came to my mind was how to keep watches properly and prevent them from any scratches."

"In 2020, I was looking for a product in the market to keep my watches. Unfortunately my search was unsuccessful as I couldn't find anything in which I can keep my watches safely in an easy and suitable way," Lawati added. "My idea was to create a luxurious place to keep watches instead of keeping them on dressing tables or on regular desks," he said, while smilingly adding, "Innovation comes when a need arises, and my story started with a need."



(Supplied photos)



I'm passionate about watches, therefore the first idea that came to my mind was how to keep watches properly and prevent them from any scratches. My idea was to create a luxurious place to keep watches

ABDULLAH FAREED AL LAWATI

"I thought of different materials that can be used to keep watches properly and in the process found leather to be the most suitable," he said, while elaborating on how this business started from the scratch.

"After a few sketches, I found a perfect combination in having a leather cushion attached to a stainless steel rod with a marble base for hanging a watch. That was when 'Marble and Leather' - the company was born," he said. At first he has started with watch stands, then added leather trays, next came the watch rolls and finally the watch winder.

Even though instant success and a huge popularity of his

products got him accolades, Lawati doesn't believe his project and items, like any other, are 'final' or 'finished'.

"There is always room for improvement and we can advance further by incorporating new and modern ideas to our products."

Lawati found a bigger challenge in making people know about the presence of those items in the market.

"At first I was hesitant about advertising my products. I didn't know how to advertise for my new business. That is when I used my personal Instagram account to reach my family and friends letting them know about my first business.

"Thankfully everyone showed their interest and orders started coming right away," he added.

"I didn't know how much Oman needed this until I started and saw the acceptance through amount of orders that were being placed!" Not only in Oman, orders have started coming from around the Middle East due to the high quality products that Marble and Leather offers in reasonable prices, Lawati said.

"We are an environmental friendly brand that are against animal cruelty, therefore we do not use real animal leather. All our products are hand made. We have gained an impeccable reputation."

'Sultan Qaboos, Sheikh Sabah Summit signals new start'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

GCC secretary general Dr Nayef Falah al Hajraf has said that the 41st GCC summit - named Sultan Qaboos and Sheikh Sabah Summit held at Al-Ula city, Saudi Arabia, recently - formed a springboard that propelled the GCC march into further integration at a time the bloc is entering its fifth decade.

Dr Hajraf pointed out that the GCC has set landmark goals that call for the achievement of certain requirements, and that these goals include Joint Customs Action, Common GCC Market and GCC Economic Unity.

Dr Hajraf added that the GCC is now more determined and motivated by its leaders who have pledged to realise their peoples' aspirations for sustainable security, stability and prosperity.

Dr Hajraf made the statement during his visit to the GCC Statistical Centre, noting that the group is working towards the setting up and enhancement of statistical and institutional database to keep pace with global progress and to portray the GCC as a unified robust economic and social bloc. The GCC Statistical Work Plan (2021-2025) serves as a cornerstone of joint action, he added. He underscored the centre's significance in serving the GCC decision-makers.



The 41st summit marked the beginning of a new chapter for the GCC as it enters its fifth decade with economic integration and cooperation being a key objective since the council's formation in 1981, a media release from the GCC Secretariat General stated.

'Beginning in 1983, member states gradually began implementing unified GCC policies to facilitate intra-GCC businesses, such as tariff waivers for intra-GCC trade, and culminated in the creation of a GCC Customs Union in 2003 and the introduction of a unified customs tariff on inter-GCC imports. These two landmark policies set the foundation for the establishment of the GCC Common Market in January 2008, and for the introduction of policies that granted Gulf citizens equal treatment

across member states in business licensing and business activities,' the GCC Secretariat General stated.

The GCC is one of the biggest economic blocs with a GDP of US\$1.6tn and exports amounting to US\$609.5bn, making it the sixth-largest exporter in the world.

Entering the fifth decade, the GCC countries will focus on restoring economic growth in the region after the COVID-19 pandemic, overcoming its challenges, and resuming free trade negotiations and strategic partnerships with friendly countries.

The council will also seek to enhance its competitiveness at the global stage by adopting modern methods and harnessing them to form new horizons of desired cooperation.

With inputs from ONA



(Supplied photo)

Check-in 4 hours before departure: Oman Air

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Air has advised passengers travelling to international destinations to check-in four hours before the scheduled departure time.

Oman Air said this will make the travel smooth. 'When travel-

ling from Muscat International Airport to international destinations, you can check-in 4 hours before your scheduled departure time,' Oman Air said.

'Guests must also take into account to check-in at least 90 minutes before departure, regardless of whether or not they are checking baggage.'



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New luxury resort in Mirbat opens for reservation from May

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dhofar will soon witness the opening of a new luxury 5-star resort located 87km from Salalah International Airport in Mirbat. Alila Hinu Bay has started accepting reservations for rooms from May 1 and beyond.

Stretching over 45 hectares of ecologically attractive beachfront site in Mirbat, Alila Hinu Bay includes 112 hotel rooms and suites, including 16 pool villas.

'Designed by creative minds, Alila Hinu Bay project has succeeded to combine the quaint and the modern in a balanced fashion,' stated the hotel on its website.

'Alila Hinu Bay offers a contemporary fusion of local architectural traditions with modern aesthetic sensibility. The ultimate expression of contemporary style, the guestrooms and



The new luxury resort is spread over 45 hectares of beachfront site in Mirbat

villas are an exquisite composite of thoughtfully designed spaces, unparalleled quality in detail and comfort built for artisanal living,'

it further added.

According to the company, the hotel's design features a heavy influence of the Omani vernacular.

'Marble on the facade, falaj water features, and Omani archway corridor create an exclusive experience of traditional luxury,' it said.

The lobby is set around a central water feature, comple-

mented with a traditional majlis, limestones and artworks, created to visualise the best approach of local life.

The guest units are located along the natural contours of the resort, then descend towards the sea framing unparalleled views of the Arabian Sea.

Guests can explore the many locations in Mirbat, immersing in the local culture, traditions, and

lifestyle.

Apart from 112 hotel rooms and suites, the resort offers restaurants, swimming pools, children's areas and leisure centres.

'Guests are welcome to rest within the accommodation, prior to an exclusive tour where they will be able to enjoy nature reserves, incredible marine life and untouched coastline.'

Bayan system clears over 5,000 import transactions: Ministry

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The number of transactions of clearance for the imports of industrial plants done through Bayan system reached 5,171 during the 2020 calendar year.

The transactions were done via the Form B to obtain exemption of import duties.

According to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion 5,586 such transactions were done in the same period of 2019.

Eng Mohammad al Mahrouqi, the head of the customs exemptions department in the Directorate General of Industry at the ministry, stated that the number of customs exemption application during 2020 reached 662 applications for equipment, spare parts and raw materials imports, compared to 560 exemptions obtained in 2019, while 17 applications of income

tax exemption for industrial establishments were studied in 2020.

He emphasised that the investors' interest in utilising electronic services provided by the ministry's online portal 'Invest Easy' and the Bayan system of Royal Oman Police has contributed to speeding up the completion of transactions, facilitating and easing the movement of outgoing and incoming goods to and from the sultanate and reducing the cost of import and export operations.

He pointed out that industrial establishments which are interested in custom exemption should apply for this facility in advance through the Bayan system of the Directorate General of Customs at ROP before importing, while the application and its attachments will be studied in the ministry.

The application will be referred to the Tax Authority.

Sohar International announces RO2.25mn prize scheme for the year 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sohar International has announced its new Sohar I Prize Scheme for the year 2021, with total prize money running over RO2.25mn to be rewarded to more than 1,400 customers.

The new scheme announced at a press conference, at the bank's head office at Waterfront, Muscat, which began with the welcome speech from Khalil al Hedaifi, the chief retail banking officer at Sohar International.

"At Sohar International, we believe that as a responsible bank we must advocate the benefits of prudent saving habits among the people of Oman, which will help them to fulfil their dreams and aspirations," Hedaifi said. "By maximising the number of winners and prize values, the new prize scheme for the year 2021, brings winning closer to our account-holders more than ever."

The new scheme offers customers more draws, more chances, and more winners with the introduction of the newly



added Salary Account Draws and beefing up the previous categories with more overall value

in cash prizes.

The weekly draws under the scheme provide ten customers

bank-wide chances to win RO500 each and ten minor accounts to win RO100 each. Eligibility to these weekly draws requires a minimum monthly average balance of RO100.

Under the monthly draws, two winners from the general segment bank wide, maintaining a minimum monthly average balance of RO100, will receive RO25,000 each; and two winners from the wealth management segment, maintaining an average monthly balance of RO40,000, will also receive

RO25,000 each.

Sohar I Prize Scheme 2021 will consist of a Monthly Salary Draw for the general segment, giving one lucky winner bank wide a chance to win a prize worth RO12,000. The requirement to enter this draw will be a minimum average balance of RO100 and a salary equal to RO500.

For the Sohar I First customer base, a total of RO5,000 will be distributed equally among two customers, who have maintained an average monthly balance of RO10,000 each.

Under the Half-Yearly Draws, the bank will be giving away RO200,000 distributed equally among two customers in the General segment and two customers from the Wealth Management segment; each will be getting the chance to win RO50,000.

The grand prize of the year-end draw rewards a whopping RO400,000 that will be distributed equally between four lucky winners, two from the General segment and two from the wealth management category.

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Two new British schools to open in Muscat in 2021

Continued from Page 01

Sayyid Shihab informed that the schools will offer an environment conducive to encouraging all children to be understanding and tolerant of others, whilst developing self-confidence to express ideas and opinions, thus enabling them to become global leaders of the future. "I wish both schools success in their mission, and the students and their parents a beneficial tenure and successful careers."

According to H E Hamish Cowell, British Ambassador in Oman, the British Independent Schools Inspectorate rates both Cheltenham and Downe House as 'outstanding' in their formal appraisals and they feature within the top ten and three respectively of A-Level achievements.

"It is testament to the strong relationship between the UK and Oman that the schools have chosen to locate in the sultanate, and demonstrates their keen commitment to enhancing the tradi-

tionally strong bilateral relationship," H E Cowell said.

Unlike many other schools in the region, children will be taught by specialist staff rather than general class teachers. Starting as early as KG1, specialists will teach across individual subject areas and from Grade 4 across all subjects, enabling scientists to teach science, artists to teach art and mathematicians to teach maths.

This exceptional teaching is delivered via an extended all-inclusive school day giving the space for learning, growth and extra-curricular activities.

Designed by award winning architects, the two distinct campuses offer state-of-the-art facilities. The schools are at the heart of the Ministry of Defence Pension Fund's Al Bandar Master Plan, located between Muscat and Seeb, ten minutes from Muscat International Airport and Al Mouj. Construction is ahead of schedule and on track for completion by August 2021.

The schools will provide

teaching hubs including high-tech science labs, design-technology workshops, art, music and performing arts studios, media centres and theatres.

Alongside the high quality teaching and learning environments, there will be first-class sports facilities, including multiple indoor sports halls, two semi-Olympic size swimming pools and learner pools, extensive outdoor sports areas with full size soccer, hockey, rugby, cricket and junior soccer pitches as well as numerous basketball, netball and tennis courts.

Michelle Scott is the founding principal of Downe House Muscat, having previously been the deputy head at Downe House UK. Her highly-experienced staff will deliver an outstanding British curriculum as well as exceptional Arabic and Islamic studies to the pupils.

Cheltenham Muscat is led by founding head, Crispin Dawson who has moved to Muscat from his post as senior deputy head at Cheltenham College UK.

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EDO to play central role in Oman's energy transition

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Energy Development Oman (EDO), the newly established state-owned energy firm to fund the expansion of the PDO operated Block 6 concession area and the sultanate's energy offerings (including renewables), will play a central role in Oman's energy transition as well as economic diversification, according to the company's newly appointed CEO.

EDO was officially formed through Royal Decree 128/2020, marking a key milestone in PDO's journey towards becoming a fully-fledged energy company. The new entity also provides important financing benefits, which will enhance the sultanate's fiscal position.

Petroleum Development Oman's (PDO) finance director Haifa bint Juma al Khaifi has been appointed as the chief executive officer of EDO.

In a press statement issued by PDO, Haifa said, "The establishment of EDO is an extremely significant milestone for the Sultanate of Oman. Having led the establishment of EDO over the past year, and being a member of its founder's committee, I am deeply honoured by my appointment as the transitional CEO during this critical and exciting



EDO's establishment is part of the era of a renewed Renaissance for Oman, and contributes to the positive sentiment of international investors towards the country's economy

HAIFA AL KHAIFI

stage. I look forward to continue delivering extensive value to Oman with EDO, in addition to my role as the finance director of PDO."

She added, "EDO will play a central role in the sultanate's energy transition as well as eco-

nomics diversification. EDO's establishment is part of the era of a renewed Renaissance for Oman, and contributes to the positive sentiment of international investors towards the country's economy, as yet another example of the major reforms

launched by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. I take this opportunity to renew my pledge to serve Oman under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, and the renewed Renaissance."

PDO's managing director Raoul Restucci said, "I am truly delighted and proud of the senior PDO professionals appointed to lead EDO, and they will no doubt steer the new company into fulfilling its mandate while at the same time supporting PDO.

"We look forward to the multiple growth opportunities that the creation of EDO will bring about, including the opportunity to broaden PDO's remit beyond its current mandate and exploit new areas of value creation for Oman and especially in terms of accelerated delivery of renewable energies."

EDO is a closed joint stock company, wholly owned by the government of Oman. EDO will be an independent, stand-alone entity, able to rely on internally generated cash flows and market financing to meet its capital requirements, and will not be dependent on state backing.

This independence will enable Oman to further progress energy (oil, gas and renewables) investments including to generate future economic growth with reduced constraints.

COVID-19, low oil prices take toll on Oman's GDP

Our Correspondent
Muscat

2020 was a tough year for Oman's economy as the country faced the dual-shock of the coronavirus pandemic and sudden decline in oil prices which badly affected economic activities and government's fiscal position.

Oman's nominal GDP decreased by 16.5 per cent to RO18.190bn in the first nine months of 2020 compared to RO21.776bn in the same period of the previous year, according to the official figures released on Thursday.

The sultanate's Ministry of Economy estimates the nominal GDP to stand at around RO24.7bn for the full year 2020.

The sharp contraction in the sultanate's GDP at market prices was driven by a 24.4 per cent decline in hydrocarbon sector amid low oil prices and a 12.4 per cent drop in non-oil GDP as the pandemic took a major toll on economic activities during the January-September period of last year. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered tremendous challenges for the national economy, which prompted the government to undertake a set of precautionary measures, including partial lockdowns, to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

With lower oil prices and reduced production, total value of petroleum activities dropped to



RO5.790bn in the first nine months of 2020 compared to RO7.662bn in same period of 2019, while non-petroleum activities fell to RO13.152bn last year from RO15.016bn in the same period of the previous year, the data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information showed.

Among the non-oil sectors, industrial sector output dropped by nearly 20 per cent to RO3.296bn during the January-September period of 2020 from RO4.110bn recorded in the same period a year ago. Manufacturing activities fell 24.6 per cent to RO1.589bn and constructions sector recorded a 21 per cent decline at RO1.126bn.

Services sector, the biggest contributor to Oman's GDP,

witnessed a 10.6 per cent plunge during the January-September period of 2020 at RO9.285bn compared to RO10.385bn in the corresponding period of 2019.

Within services sector, wholesale and retail trade took the biggest hit of 31.4 per cent during the first nine months of 2020 at RO1.066bn compared with RO1.554bn recorded in the same period a year ago. Value of activities in the transport, storage and communication segment fell 17.5 per cent to RO1.043bn, while financial sector witnessed a 10 per cent decline at RO1.361bn against RO1.514bn recorded in the previous year. Value of real estate services fell by 14.2 per cent to RO882.3mn.

Authority of SME Development holds meet, reviews 5-year plan

Muscat - The board of directors of the Authority of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) Development on Thursday held its first meeting under the chairmanship of H E Qais Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and chairman of the board of the Authority.

The board discussed several topics that included defining the map of completing the support for SME sector during this stage of the renewed renaissance and Oman Vision 2040 under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The board also discussed enhancing the SMEs prospective role in di-



versifying the national economy.

Further, the board also discussed the organisational structure of the Authority of SME Development and approving its action plan during 2021, as well as the mechanisms to organise

policies of finance to entrepreneurs for the upcoming stage.

The board also viewed the Authority's five-year plan associated with priorities of Oman Vision 2040. ONA

Omran appoints Mahrouqi as new CEO

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omran Group, the executive arm of the sultanate for tourism development, has appointed Hashil bin Obaid al Mahrouqi as new CEO, replacing the group's former CEO Peter Walichnowski.

The appointment reflects the belief in empowering national competencies to lead the next stage of Omran's journey. Mahrouqi was selected after he passed the professional tests and job interviews conducted for various candidates for the position, Omran said in a press statement.

Mahrouqi's experience spans 20 years in managing real estate project investments and commercial contracts, and he held a



Hashil bin Obaid al Mahrouqi

number of positions, the last of which was senior manager of investment real estate at the Oman Investment Authority (OIA), chairman and CEO of Yiti Tourism Development Company, chairman of the executive committee and a member of the board of directors at ASAAS

Company.

In addition, he has also been a member in a number of boards of directors and associated committees in OIA's real estate investments in both the United Kingdom and Germany. This also coincided with other roles that he assumed, including managing local and international real estate investment portfolios amounting to RO1bn in the sectors of hospitality, entertainment, logistics, retail and multi-purpose projects, as well as leading projects to attract foreign direct investment worth tens of millions.

Eng Mohammed bin Salim al Busaidi, Omran's chairman said, "We are delighted to welcome the new CEO of Omran Group. His appointment reflects our

belief in the young Omani competencies to lead the group towards achieving more accomplishments."

"In the next stage, we are looking forward to expanding the capabilities of Omran, its subsidiaries and the wide portfolio of diversified tourism assets and investments throughout the sultanate, in line with the directions of OIA, while focusing on maximizing investment returns and achieving in-country value. These efforts will contribute to achieving the goals of Oman 2040 Vision, in addition to attracting tourism investments, developing pioneering projects and generating social and economic returns for the sultanate," he added.

HSBC launches sustainable and transition finance team in Mideast

Muscat - HSBC has announced the formation of a dedicated Sustainable and Transition Finance Team in the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey (MENAT). The team will help institutions, corporates and individuals transition to a more sustainable economy.

Speaking at Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week, Noel Quinn, HSBC's group chief executive, said, "Our best chance to achieve a successful global transition to net-zero is in partnership, where the public and private sectors are working together to create the optimal conditions for sustainable growth and are aligned on a common goal."

The new team has deep technical knowledge of the environmental, social and governance (ESG) opportunities and challenges facing HSBC's customers, as well as the evolving regulatory space and its impacts. With a presence in all of HSBC's markets across MENAT, the team will work with all of HSBC's



Noel Quinn

bankers to provide advice, expertise and financing solutions to customers across all sectors and segments - no matter what stage of the sustainability journey they are on, according to a press release.

The MENAT Sustainable and Transition Finance Team will work closely with HSBC's recently launched global ESG Solutions Team to bring the bank's extensive global experience and expertise in ESG finance to customers in MENAT.



Gareth Thomas

The newly formed team will be co-led by Gareth Thomas, HSBC's head of global banking in MENAT; and Daniel Howlett, HSBC's head of commercial banking in MENAT.

To support customers in their transition to lower carbon emissions, HSBC is aiming to provide up to US\$1tn of financing and investment globally by 2030, an unprecedented commitment that will help to build a thriving, resilient future for society and the economy.

In 2020, HSBC saw a six-fold increase in its sustainable and transition finance activity in MENAT over 2019, with the bank bringing a number of innovative deals to market.

Most recently, HSBC played a key role in the issuance of the world's first 'transition' sukuk, which was issued by Etihad Airways. The US\$600mn raised by the airline will be used for energy-efficient aircraft and research and development into sustainable aviation fuel. The sukuk also included a commitment from the airline to pay a penalty in the form of carbon offsets if it fails to meet its short-term target to reduce the carbon intensity of its passenger fleet.

Meanwhile, in September 2020, HSBC helped Saudi Electricity Company raise US\$1.3bn in the first public US dollar-denominated green issuance from the kingdom, and then a few weeks later Egypt, which issued the region's first sovereign green bond.

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A'Namaa Poultry, is an integrated poultry project, using state of the art technologies in the market for all the project components, to produce a high- quality poultry meat. A'Namaa Poultry currently seek to recruit for the following positions by national candidates to joint A'Namaa Poultry team. For more details and apply, Kindly logging to <https://foodjobs.om>. Last date receiving application will be on 01 Feb 2021.

NO.	Job Tittle	Number Of Position
1	IT Manager	1
2	Manager - Quality Assurance & Control	1
3	Sales Manager	1
4	Procurement Manager	1
5	Logistic Manager	1
6	Finance Manager	1

MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSM surges as firms announce results

Most of the listed companies at the Muscat Securities Market (MSM) have announced their initial financial results for 2020 which supported the market last week.

The benchmark MSM30 Index ended the week up by 2.99 per cent. All the sub-indices ended positively for the week. The Industrial index was the best performer with a weekly gain of 4.75 per cent, followed by Services index gains at 1.68 per cent and Financial index at 1.46 per cent. The MSM Shariah index increased by 2.5 per cent.

Local news

►Oman Cement announced an update on the lawsuit regarding the projects of installation of a new cement mill which was commissioned in the year 2016 and the upgradation of the pollution control facility for one of the kilns which was commissioned in the year 2017. Both projects were executed under EPDC contracts by the same contractor FLSmith Company. Due to the delay in completion of both projects, company had raised a claim for imposing liquidated damages on the contractor. Parallely, the contractor has also raised claim for additional cost incurred by them towards the cement mill project. Now the issue has been amicably settled and contractor has agreed to pay US\$1.757mn against liquidated damages to Oman Cement against the two

projects mentioned above and had withdrawn their claim for additional cost.

►Duqm Refinery, the sultanate's biggest industrial investment which is a US\$7bn venture under implementation at the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, has been rebranded as OQ8. The announcement came in a tweet posted over the weekend by Duqm Refinery and Petrochemical Industries Company (DRPIC), a joint venture of OQ, the wholly Omani government owned integrated energy group, and Kuwait Petroleum International (Q8).

►The 66th issue of government development bonds received applications worth RO149.6mn, subscribed 1.5 times. Total allotment was RO100mn. The average yield was 4.86 per cent, while the highest yield was 5.03 per cent and the lowest was at 4.55 per cent. The three-year bond carries a coupon rate of 4.75 per cent per annum and were issued on January 20, 2021 with maturity on January 20, 2024. This was the first three-year development bonds issue by Oman.

►Our analysis of Omani banks' initial unaudited financial results for 2020 revealed that the combined net profits of the banks fell by about 33 per cent year-on-year during 2020. Combined operating income of all banks fell 4.25 per cent year-on-year, largely on account of a significant drop seen in other



(Muscat Daily)

operating income of most banks. Operating expense growth was well-contained, with combined operating expenses having fallen by 0.76 per cent. However, as the fall in operating income outpaced the fall in operating income, combined operating profit of all banks fell by 7.4 per cent for 2020 on year-on-year basis.

GCC markets

Saudi Arabia's Projects Support Fund Initiative has signed an agreement with Tadawul, the Saudi Stock Exchange, to provide economic stimulus for listed companies. The initiative targets private sector companies in the healthcare, educa-

tion and large real estate development sectors, in a bid to help GDP growth, create employment and support local companies. The agreement targets companies listed in the Saudi stock exchange, indicating that the stimulus is to be provided through long-term loans to the companies. Listed companies will see their financing limits increased and Tadawul said it was confident the move would encourage more companies to list on the exchange. The Projects Support Fund Initiative was established as part of the government's stimulus initiatives with an initial capital of SAR10bn. It was reported earlier this month that Saudi Arabia

is set to lead the regional initial public offering (IPO) market this year, with authorities believed to be viewing over 15 potential listing applications.

Abu Dhabi is introducing a AED6bn supply chain financing initiative to back a variety of sectors as part of its efforts to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The first phase of the Abu Dhabi Department of Finance (DoF) initiative, which aims to provide liquidity to SMEs in the healthcare sector, will be delivered by National Health Insurance Company (Daman) and First Abu Dhabi Bank (FAB). While the new funding initiative will initially support healthcare SMEs, it will

be extended to include other sectors and banks, the DoF said.

Bahrain has hired a group of banks to arrange a multi-tranche US dollar-denominated bond sale, as Gulf borrowers line up to tap the market following a dull 2020. An issuance comprising benchmark tranches of seven years, 12 years and/or 30 years will follow, subject to market conditions, the document said. Benchmark generally means at least US\$500mn.

According to secondary sources, OPEC's total crude oil production averaged 25.36mn barrels per day (bpd) in December 2020, up by 0.28mn bpd on monthly basis. Crude oil output increased mainly in Libya, Iraq and the UAE, while production decreased primarily in Nigeria, Congo and Angola. Libya's crude oil output in December rose to 1.22mn bpd, according to secondary sources.

The share of OPEC's crude oil in total global production was up by 0.1 per cent in December to 27.3 per cent compared with the previous month.

Global news

China's gross domestic product in 2020 grew on the tail wind of investment and consumption, backed by a relatively rapid recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that also fueled exports. Full-year growth came in at 2.3 per cent year-on-year in real terms excluding price fluctua-

tions, the National Bureau of Statistics said, higher than the median 2.1 per cent projected by economists. The growth, the lowest in the 44 years, was lower than the 6 per cent achieved in 2019. However, the growth in the final quarter improved to 6.5 per cent, riding the momentum of the 4.9 per cent expansion achieved in the third quarter and the 3.2 per cent growth seen in the second quarter.

Recommendation

Global markets firmed up during the week as the new US President Joe Biden, was sworn in to the Office.

Further, the markets took heat from comments by the Treasury Nominee, Janet Yellen, on pushing through the new President's coronavirus stimulus package.

Investors set aside concerns over the COVID-19 crisis - although the disease continues to cast a shadow as governments keep lockdowns in place.

Regionally, all the markets were positive, supported by a general improvement in sentiment, increase in oil prices and better earnings for the full year 2020.

We expect this momentum to continue in the coming week.

Locally, most of the listed companies disclosed initial financial results for 2020 during the last week, which supported the market.

By special arrangement with U Capital



Alphabet closes down high-profile Internet balloon project 'Loon'

San Francisco, US - Google parent company Alphabet announced it was shutting down 'Loon', a high-profile project aiming to deliver wireless Internet via flying balloons in the stratosphere, because it is not commercially viable.

The idea behind Loon was to build a network of balloons to expand Internet connectivity to underserved areas and disaster zones and was initially part of an Alphabet 'moonshot factory' known as X, which aims to create projects to disrupt new sectors.

In a blog, X's Astro Teller announced the decision, adding: 'Sadly, despite the team's groundbreaking technical achievements over the last 9

years... the road to commercial viability has proven much longer and riskier than hoped.'

Loon was deployed to provide Internet in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017, as well as after a major earthquake in Peru.

But Loon CEO Alastair Westgarth said the company had failed 'to get the costs low enough to build a long-term, sustainable business'. Operations will be wound down in 'the coming months', with the hope that Loon employees will be redeployed at Alphabet, the firm said.

Loon's giant, transparent plastic balloons are powered by solar panels and navigated using artificial intelligence systems.

AFP

Double-dip recession 'inevitable' for Europe as COVID-19 batters economy

Brussels, Belgium - A slowdown in eurozone business activity accelerated in January, making a new recession almost certain as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to batter the economy, a key survey showed.

The closely watched PMI index compiled by IHS Markit is considered the earliest indicator of the state of the economy and the latest reading confirmed fears that the year-old virus crisis is still going strong.

"A double-dip recession for the eurozone economy is looking increasingly inevitable as tighter COVID-19 restrictions took a further toll on businesses in January," Chris Williamson, chief business economist at IHS Markit, said.

This meant that the economies of the 19 countries



A pedestrian walks past an advertisement indicating discounts in a shop in Rennes, France on Friday (AFP)

that use the single currency, dominated by Germany and France, would sink back into recession after only a very short recovery over the European summer.

The firm's closely watched PMI index fell from 49.1 points in December to 47.5 points this month, further away from the 50-point level which indicates growth.

Williamson noted however that the bad start to 2021 would be less damaging than the economic collapse seen in the first wave of the pandemic last year.

This was due to the 'ongoing relative resilience of manufacturing, rising demand for exported goods and the lockdown measures having been less stringent on average than last year', he said.

The difference between France and Germany was notable.

German exports managed to keep the country narrowly on a growth trajectory, while French business activity sank.

The situation for the rest of the eurozone, accounting for a little more than half of the bloc's economy, was even worse.

Worryingly, employment across the eurozone fell for an eleventh consecutive month, albeit with modest increases in France and Germany, IHS Markit said.

Much hope has been put in the distribution of vaccinations to reopen the economy but the campaign in the EU is going at a slower pace than hoped.

The rollout of vaccines had instilled 'a strong degree of confidence' but 'the recent rise in virus case numbers has caused some pull-back in optimism', Williamson said.

IHS Markit on Friday also posted an alarming survey result for Britain, where activity collapsed from a modest expansion in December to a low 40.6 points in January.

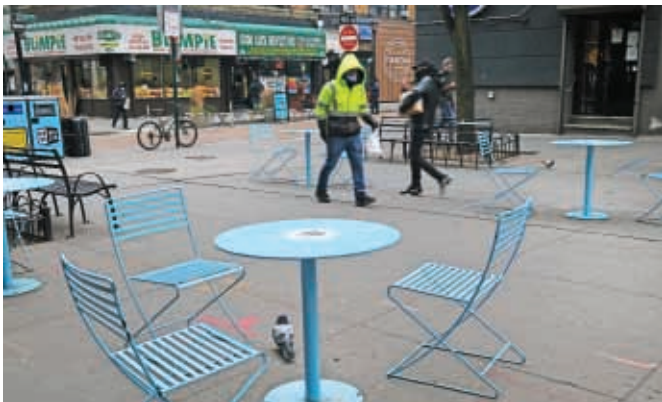
AFP

US jobless claim data underscores crisis awaiting Biden

Washington, US - US government data released the day after Joe Biden entered the White House made clear the scale of the employment crisis facing the new president as the country struggles to make it through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The US saw 900,000 new filings for unemployment benefits last week, the Labor Department said, a huge number that remains well above the single worst week of the 2008-2010 global financial crisis, during which Biden served as vice president under Barack Obama.

Economists had been expecting a significant reduction in seasonally adjusted claims in the week ended January 16, but in-



Empty tables sit outside of restaurants in downtown Brooklyn in New York City on January 08 (AFP)

stead they fell just 26,000 from the prior week's downwardly revised total, underscoring the damage done by the pandemic's renewed onslaught in the coun-

try.

The government also reported 423,734 new filings made under the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance programme for

self-employed people not normally eligible for benefits.

That was nearly twice the week prior, after that programme lapsed briefly amid a standoff in Washington over extending it and other aid.

All told, nearly 16mn people were receiving some form of assistance from the government as of January 2 - a figure that's expected to rise.

Citing the report, National Economic Council Director Brian Deese called on Congress to quickly enact Biden's US\$1.9tn recovery plan.

"We must act now to get this virus under control, stabilise the economy and reduce the long-term scarring that will only

worsen if bold action isn't taken," he said in a statement.

Biden's spending proposal is aimed at both improving the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines that are seen as the economy's best hope for a sustained recovery, and aiding small businesses and the unemployed.

With his Democrats only narrowly controlling both houses of Congress, it's unclear what degree of support Biden's package will get from Republicans.

Michael Feroli of JP Morgan predicted Congress could pare the President's plan down to the US\$900bn range, matching a separate measure approved last month.

AFP

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Meethaq launches its mega RO1.5mn Hibati prize draw

Meethaq, the pioneer of Islamic banking in Oman from Bank Muscat, has launched the 2021 edition of its Hibati Savings scheme based on Sharia'a rules and principles. In line with its vision 'To serve you better, everyday' and commitment to partnership in promoting a healthy savings habit in Oman, the bank's 2021 Hibati savings scheme will give away over RO1.5mn in cash prizes throughout the year. Since its launch in 2018, the Hibati Savings Scheme has grown rapidly to become one of the top Islamic savings schemes in Oman.

Amor Said al Amri, Meethaq head of Retail Branches, said, "We are delighted to launch the Hibati Savings programme for 2021. The bank has been constantly updating the prize scheme taking into account customer feedback from across the sultanate. The total cash prize amount has been increased substantially this year and the scheme will now give more chances for customers to win valuable prizes."

He thanked all customers for their confidence in the scheme and in the various products and services of Meethaq.

Based on the unrestricted



Mudarabah contract, the cash prizes offered under Hibati's 2021 prize draw scheme are 'Hiba' (gift) from Meethaq to its customers and are paid out of Mudarib's (shareholders') own sources. The cash prizes are in addition to the profit share of In-

vestment Account Holders (IAHs) in the General Mudarabah Pool as per the declared profit sharing weightages.

The 2021 Hibati scheme includes 100 weekly prizes of RO100 each. All customers maintaining a minimum weekly

average balance of RO100 will be entered into the draws. This year's scheme will also feature 2 quarterly draws with each draw having two sub draws offering 10 prizes of RO5,000 and RO10,000 each. Customers maintaining a quarterly minimum average balance of RO1,000 will be entered into the draw for 10 prizes of RO5,000 each, while customers maintaining a minimum quarterly average balance of RO5,000 will be automatically entered into the draw for 10 prizes of RO10,000 each.

These draws will take place in April and October for the first and third quarters of 2021 respectively.

In addition, the 2021 Hibati scheme offers two Grand draws; a Mid-year and an End of Year draw. For every RO30,000 in quarterly average balance maintained in the preceding quarter, the customer shall be entitled to one entry to the Grand draws. Four grand prizes of RO50,000 each and one grand prize of RO100,000 will be given away during the Mid-year draw as well as the End of Year draw. Other special prizes to be given away during the year include 51 National Day prizes of RO1,000 each and 30 Omani Women's

Day prizes of RO1,000 each. Prizes totaling over RO1.5mn will be given away to a record number of 5,331 winners in 2021.

The Hibati savings scheme is the first-of-its-kind aimed at helping customers realise their aspirations and thereby boost the savings culture in Oman. The Hibati Savings Scheme, which is a broad savings scheme with multiple cash prizes shared by the largest number of winners at a regular frequencies, stems from Meethaq's commitment to reciprocate in giving back to the community.

Customers with Hibati Savings Accounts enjoy one of the largest number of benefits in Oman which includes attractive Mudarabah profit rates, cash prizes through draws, Visa Debit Card, no minimum balance charges and e-banking facilities.

Very importantly, every Meethaq product goes through the process of Sharia'a compliance certification by the Sharia'a Supervisory Board and is created in line with the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman.

For more details, please visit <https://www.meethaq.om/en/depositproducts/Pages/details.aspx#hibati> or call on 24656666.

ISTF 2020 - The mega virtual carnival begins

Indian School Talent Fest - ISTF 2020, the second edition of the magnificent mega event, organised by Indian School Ma'abala, under the aegis of the Board of Directors, Indian Schools, Sultanate of Oman, was inaugurated virtually on January 22. ISTF 2020 is a breakthrough in the realm of education as the events were aesthetically planned to entertain, enlighten and empower the young talents through virtual platforms.

The opening ceremony was graced by the presence of the chief guest, Dr Sudha Murty, chairperson of Infosys Foundation, Indian author and social worker; guest of honour, Lakshmi Gopalaswamy, Indian film actress and classical dancer; Dr Baby Sam Saamuel, chairman-Board of Directors of Indian Schools in the Sultanate of Oman; Gajesh Kumar Dhariwal-DIC, ISAM, Board of Directors, directors on the Board of Indian Schools, Jolly Mathews, president of Indian School Ma'abala School Management Committee, presidents and members of the School Management Committees of all Indian Schools and Care and Special Education in Oman, principals, dignitaries, teachers, parents and students of Indian schools.

The inaugural function commenced with the lighting of the lamp followed by a prayer song. The digital flag hoisting, followed by the theme song, marked the inauguration of ISTF 2020. In his introductory note, Dr Saamuel highlighted the significance of finding oneself, and self expression which is the beginning of the journey towards finding the identity and purpose of life.

The chairman added that ISTF 2020 emphasises on participation and collaboration rather than competition, thus enabling the children to be lifelong learners; happy and resilient under all circumstances.

Dr Sudha appreciated the organisers for making the talent fest non competitive. She further said that every child is a like a hidden diamond that should be polished and brought out to the world. The chief guest advised the children to have an extremely steady and strong mind, to be in the company of people who uphold good value system and to remain confident.

Lakshmi motivated everyone to follow their passion and to face life with confidence.

More than 10,000 students from 21 Indian Schools across the sultanate are participating in 37 events of ISTF 2020.

Unimoni opens branch in Al Khuwayr Square

Unimoni, a leading remittance, foreign exchange and payment solutions brand in the Sultanate of Oman, has opened its branch inside new integrated community mall Al Khuwayr Square, near Al Khuwayr Park.

The branch was formally inaugurated by Mohamed bin Salim al Busaidi, chairman of Omran and former member of Majlis A'Shura (Shura Council) in the presence of Sheikh Fahad bin Mohammed al Khalili, founder and CEO of Bayan Investment House, Tonny George Alexander, director of Unimoni Oman, Boban MP, CEO of Unimoni Oman and other senior officials.

The new branch offers a broad range of financial services like instant money transfer, real-time account credit facility for Individual and corporate customers, foreign currency ex-



change, and utility payment. The branch will remain open from 9.30am to 9.30pm on all days.

"The opening of the branch is in line with our retail expansion plans and reaffirms our commitment to provide customers with seamless money transfer and

foreign exchange solutions. In addition to the services available at the branch, on-the-move customers can use our online money transfer service to conveniently transfer money through Unimoni Oman app or web portal. The new branch also will have the

self-service kiosk facility," said Boban MP, CEO, Unimoni Oman.

Unimoni Oman commenced its operation in the sultanate in 1995. In a very short span of time, it has grown and expanded its branch network to 58 outlets, which is the largest in Oman.

Oman Forum 2021 to focus on Renewed Renaissance

Under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, the 10th edition of Oman Forum 2021 imparting insights on the roadmap for Vision 2040 and Renewed Renaissance to facilitate a constructive dialogue amongst stakeholders, is set to enlighten the audience on March 8.

The half-day event delivered in Arabic will take place at the Sheraton Oman Hotel. H E Dr Saif bin Abdullah bin Sulaiman al Haddabi, Undersecretary - Research and Innovation, Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, will be the guest of honour and the keynote speaker.

Graced by top government officials, decision makers, C-suite



executives, business owners, SMEs, young entrepreneurs, university graduates and change makers, the event offers captivating content and a line-up of key personalities from the sultanate. They will review Oman's journey on the path of the Renewed Renaissance that aims to leverage its competitive advantage, foster private sector driven

competitive business environment, and create an efficient and friendly governance framework.

The event will align the policy makers and thought leaders to offer perspectives for overcoming challenges posed by the pandemic, the economic and social implications and measures to make Oman a self-sustained nation. The engaging panel discussions and presentations made by industry stalwarts, budding entrepreneurs, ecosystem enablers and the thought provoking address by the eminent profiles, will offer in-depth direction on Oman's futuristic plans, government policies and socio-economic environment.

For more information, contact Shaikh Ahmed on 98049369.

Mazda ranks first for reliability in Consumer Reports' survey

Mazda's strong, stylish and popular line-up comprising the MX-5, CX-3, CX-5 and CX-30, has recently bagged the top spots in the Consumer Reports' annual survey of vehicle reliability.

Mazda has ascended to the number one spot for the first time with their strong and stylish line-up. Mazda nabbed the top spot with powertrains that used durable six-speed automatic transmissions instead of CVTs. Mazda also didn't rely on overly fancy infotainment systems, instead going against industry trends with interiors that discourage screen use during driving and encourage buttons and dials that can be handled without taking one's eyes off the road.

The Consumer Reports' brand-level rankings are based on the average predicted reliability score for vehicles in the brand's model line-up. The predicted reliability score is calculated on a 0 to 100 point scale, with the average rating falling between 41 and 60 points.

The most reliable Mazda was the MX-5 with a score of 98 out of 100, followed by the CX-30, CX-3, and CX-5, all scoring 85



and higher.

The top awards highlight the excellence and superiority of Mazda's vehicles in their respective class.

Among the factors that set Mazda vehicles apart from their competition are superior performance and excellence in interior quality. Mazda with its

high-end interiors, elegant designs and overall great performances, provides drivers with unforgettable experiences behind the wheel compared to other mainstream car brands.

Mazda's stylish and reliable range, brought to Oman by Towell Auto Centre (TAC), comprises Mazda CX-3, Mazda CX-5

and Mazda CX-30 and the MX-5.

According to Towell Auto Centre (TAC), the sole distributor of Mazda vehicles in the Sultanate of Oman, 'Mazda has a wide range of most sought after vehicles with advanced technology and global appeal. The new range of luxury vehicles include

features like Mazda's Skyactiv technology, which assures fuel efficiency without compromising on safety and performance. The Mazda CX-5, CX-3 and CX-30 are all big on performance and at the same time give drivers a premium feel, thanks to their plush interiors combined with a sporty feel behind the wheel,

while the all-new MX-5 Miata roadster truly represents Mazda's ethos for desirable and well built vehicles that represent great value for money. With stellar attributes like these, it's no wonder that Mazda has bagged top spot for reliability in the Consumer Reports' annual survey of vehicle reliability."

In Oman, TAC is recognised as a trusted name in customer service and a pioneer in the automobile business since 1972. A group company of the W J Towell Group, TAC takes off from the principle of its parent company and ensures the easy availability of high quality motor products coupled with the highest standard of service to its esteemed customers.

Mazda has brought quality to the roads of Oman, and TAC has made owning a Mazda an absolute joy, thanks to their excellent after-sales service, availability of genuine parts for all Mazda models, their efficient staff, amazing promotions and innovative solutions for a better customer experience.

To find out more about Towell Auto Centre's showrooms and servicing centres, you can log on to www.mazdaoman.com, or just walk into any one of Towell Auto Centre's 9 Mazda showrooms situated across the Sultanate of Oman. Now you can also download the revamped Mazda Oman mobile app to get easy access to everything related to Mazda in Oman.

Renault Oman organises exclusive preview of Megane RS Trophy-R, holds rally

Renault Oman organised an exclusive preview of the limited-edition Renault Megane RS Trophy-R for a host of auto aficionados at its showroom recently. The most high-performance production car Renault has ever put on the market, is rooted in the brand's immense history in motorsport.

The Renault Megane RS Trophy-R, which has the exceptionally efficient 1.8lt 300 bhp engine, brings to the roads the technologies and know-how Renault Sport has developed on the racetrack. The Renault Megane RS Trophy-R was launched in the form of limited series numbering few 100 across the world.

The car set a new officially approved record and reference time for the compact car segment of production cars on the Nordschleife of the Nürburgring, now a world-renowned race track and proving ground for cars and sports performance. The Renault Megane RS Trophy-R covered the 20.600km in 07'40"100, and the official whole lap length of the Nordschleife 20.832km in 07'45"389. Renault Megane RS Trophy-R owes its increased speed to the weight reduction, the work on aerodynamics and the more radical development of



its ground links. It has been designed with aerodynamic and technical efficiency in mind, underpinned by a total focus on improving performance.

The foundation was a design tested by both computerised fluid dynamics and a wind tunnel to ensure the front-rear balance was optimal and that aerodynamic drag was minimised from

the very beginning.

A spokesperson for Renault Oman said, "Auto aficionados who attended the preview were thoroughly impressed with the incredible Renault Megane RS Trophy-R. It was designed as a racing car by a team of engineers who focussed on maximum weight reduction, reworked aerodynamics, and a more radical de-

velopment of its drive axles."

Renault Megane RS rally

In another event organised by Renault Oman, seven Renault Megane RS owners joined in for a meet and greet and participated in a rally around Muscat.

The rally which started from Renault Qurm showroom, took

the road to Bait al Alam and moved through Riyam Park, Muttrah Corniche and Barik al Shatti. After a small coffee break, the rally which passed through the Sultan Qaboos Highway ended at Al Mouj Muscat.

Renault Megane RS has been impressing car aficionados with its unparalleled driving performance and motorsport cutting-

edge technology. Suitable for all enthusiasts and driven by its powerful design and focused on performance, Renault Megane RS makes no attempt to hide its motorsport pedigree, offering outstanding driving pleasure on the road and on the track.

The Megane RS features a new generation of 1.8lt turbo engine, delivering 280hp and

390Nm, thanks to the development work jointly carried out by engineers from Renault Sport Cars and Renault Sport Racing. The car comes with 6AT Electronic Dual Clutch transmission.

Salem al Rawahy, a participant in the rally said, "I drive an orange Megane RS and had a great experience with Renault. It was good to see how different people experienced the same car. The Trophy-R has been recognised as the fastest car in some race ring in Germany. What differentiates it is that it's lightweight, performance, manual gear and the fact that it doesn't have any back seats which makes it special."

Merging competence, dexterity and constancy, new Megane RS chassis is jam-packed with motorsports cutting-edge technology: 4Control System, independent pivot front-axle and suspension with hydraulic compression stops. With its finely-tuned chassis and 4Control technology, complete with four-wheel steering, the car has become a benchmark in the C-segment hot hatch market.

For more information, visit <https://www.renault.com.om/> or call Toll Free number on 80050011.

OES, PBS sign pact to develop student information system

Leveraging local capabilities in addressing high-end requirements, Oman Educational Services (OES) and Prime Business Solutions (PBS) have signed a collaborative agreement to cooperate for the development of an advanced Student Information System (SIS) and the implementation of GEARS ERP, a cutting-edge comprehensive enterprise resource planning solution.

GEARS ERP, fully developed by PBS, is designed to help increase productivity, lower costs and improve operations' monitoring and collaborations. By rolling out GEARS ERP to one of OES entities, the German University of Technology in Oman (GUtech), OES will not only be able to embrace current best practices, but it will also enable the university to integrate emerging technology to support changing organisational demands.

OES and PBS collaboration goes beyond implementing GEARS ERP, but to work together



on developing a new advanced higher education grade student information system (SIS). The SIS will extend the ERP features to respond to the needs of the higher education sector and align the organisation and business insights of private universities and colleges. The ERP and SIS solutions will provide GUtech's students as well as administrative and faculty members with the latest technology tools enabling real time access to information and processes. Dr Hussain al Salmi, CEO of OES and GUtech acting rector said, "The collabora-

tion with PBS, a strong and forward-looking Omani company, allows us to consolidate different solutions for a streamlined management of academic and administrative operations."

Eng Hilal al Busaidi, chairman of PBS, stated, "This agreement aims to localise technology and cement the collaborative effort towards a digital Oman as set out in the national strategy of Oman Vision 2040. We are actively involved in the development of Omani technology solutions that we look forward to exporting internationally."

NBO promises RO3.251mn in cash prizes

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has launched its 2021 Al Kanz Savings Scheme, pledging RO3.251mn in prize money over the course of the year.

Under the theme 'Saving for a better tomorrow', the yearly scheme aims to help the bank's customers save for the future with a variety of monthly, quarterly and half yearly draws, offering big rewards. The announcement was made during a special event with guest of honour Dr Said bin Hamad al Rubei', vice chancellor of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, in attendance.

The bank also conducted the final 2020 Mega Draw, which gave two lucky account-holders RO250,000 each, as well as RO65,000 as part of its monthly draws. As it embarks on Al Kanz Savings Scheme's 26th year, NBO continues to reward its customers, while supporting them to lead financially secure lives.

Wessam al Asfoor, head of Premier Banking at NBO, said, "We are looking forward to this



year's Al Kanz Savings Scheme, which continues to be a way to engage with our customers and instill in them a culture of saving. Last year, taught us how important financial security is. With the draw, along with our Al Kanz Savings account, which offers unique savings opportunities and the utmost in customer convenience, we aim to help people prepare themselves for the uncertainty of the future."

The scheme's biggest payout will be RO3.251mn in prize money. The half-yearly Mega Draw, which will give a total of RO1mn to four winners in June and December. The quarterly regional draw will also give 24 customers RO25,000 each, totalling RO600,000 by the end of the year. Exclusive draws will also be conducted for Sadara account-holders, giving away RO25,000 each to 30 winners over ten

months; Mazaya Exclusive, with RO10,000 each going to four winners every month; as well as a Youth draw, giving away RO100 to 115 winners four times during the year.

On top of that, 50 winners will be given RO500 every single month in the Salary Transfer draws. Last year the bank also introduced several brand-new segments, including a National Day draw, giving RO1,000 to 51 winners in October, and a quarterly Women's draw, which will give out RO1,000 to 24 winners over the course of the year.

Customers are eligible to win in the Al Kanz Savings Scheme by maintaining an average minimum balance of RO100 in their Al Kanz Savings account. Every RO100 provides an extra chance in the draw, so the more money kept in the account, the more the chance of winning.

Meanwhile, customers simply have to transfer their salary to NBO to be in for the chance of winning in the Salary Transfer draw.

Umpires' course held in Salalah

Oman Cricket Club-Salalah successfully completed second Level-0 course for umpires in Salalah. The first one was held in 2016. The course was conducted by A R Srinivasan, Level 2 accredited educator in Oman, who has been involved with Oman Cricket for more than 30 years in various roles. Anil Kumar, secretary Oman Cricket Club Salalah, welcomed Srinivasan and the participants and gave a brief introduction of Srinivasan to the participants.

Kumar also mentioned special thanks to Srinivasan for doing online video call sessions during the lockdown and covering the course in details which helped umpires in Salalah to learn the basics in detail with final completion over the period of two and half days in class room

The course commenced with Srinivasan giving his introduction to the participants and informing



general requirements to the participants to follow during the course in view of COVID-19 regulations. Temperatures were scanned and recorded for all the members present at venue on all three days to ensure safety of all participants. All participants were instructed to use mask during the entire period except during tea and lunch breaks and requested to abstain from venue if having fever/cold, etc.

Some 22 umpires successfully completed this course out of

which 7 were already certified in 2016. Four other umpires could not attend as they had to leave Salalah due to personal emergencies, work related transfer and annual vacation, etc. The course was conducted at Olympic Trading hall from Thursday, January 7 evening until Saturday, January 9 evening with exams conducted on January 9.

All the participants were given Certificate of Participation at the end of the course. All umpires were informed that the Certifi-

cate of Completion will be issued only after successfully passing the exams and officiating for one complete season.

On the final day Mayur Toprani, treasurer, Oman Cricket Club Salalah, Hiten Dave and Mohammed Wasim, members Oman Cricket Club-Salalah, were present.

Sudhakar and the team from Olympic Trading deserve thanks for providing an excellent venue with complete set up required to conduct such an event.

Landmark International opens showroom in Sur, 6th in Oman

Landmark International, one of the leading auto body parts distributors in GCC region with customer network in Africa, CIS regions and Middle East, has opened its door to customers in Sur, their sixth branch in Oman. The latest branch was inaugurated on January 17 under strict COVID-19 preventive measures.

Landmark International - Oman, under the leadership of vice chairman Tariq Mohammed al Balushi, started its operation with its first retail outlet in Ma'a-bela with four employees in 2018. In less than three years, they have expanded over Oman with four more branches, one each in Sohar, Wadi Kabir, Nizwa and Salalah bringing total branches to five. With a storage facility of 15,000sq ft, over 30 employees and more than 30 well-known auto body part



brands, Landmark is trying hard to reach out to end-users and consumers with best possible prices and service.

Landmark International Oman is the sister company of Landmark International UAE. As of date Landmark International UAE has 12 branches spread out in UAE with over 200 employees, over 200,000 sq ft of storage facility, over 60 delivery vehicles and over 3,000 cus-

tomers within UAE.

Apart from UAE and Oman Landmark has presence in India as well with an exclusive dealership of one of the world's most renowned auto lamp brand DEPO.

Balushi expressed hope of serving the people of Sur in the best possible way and also announced the opening of their seventh branch in Ma'a-bela shortly.

BIDEN ERA BEGINS

Biden administration to review US-Taliban withdrawal deal

Washington, US - The Biden administration said it will review a landmark US deal with the Taliban, focusing on whether the insurgent group has reduced attacks in Afghanistan, in keeping with its side of the agreement.

Washington struck a deal with the Taliban in Qatar last year, to begin withdrawing its troops in return for security guarantees from the militants and a commitment to kickstart peace talks with the Afghan government.

But violence across Afghanistan has surged despite the two sides engaging in those talks since September.

President Joe Biden's newly appointed national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, spoke with his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib and 'made clear the United States' intention to review' the deal, said National Security Council spokeswoman Emily Horne late on Friday.

Specifically, Washington wants to check that the Taliban is 'living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders', her statement continued.

It added that Sullivan 'underscored that the US will support the peace process with a robust and regional diplomatic effort, which will aim to help the two sides achieve a durable and just political settlement and permanent ceasefire'.



US President Joe Biden signs some executive orders in the State Dining Room of the White House, in Washington, DC, on Friday (AFP)

Sullivan also discussed the United States' support for protecting recent progress made on women and minority groups' rights as part of the peace process.

When contacted, the Taliban said they remained 'committed to the agreement and honour our commitments'. "We expect the other side to remain committed to the agreement too," Mohamad Naeem, the group's spokesman in Qatar, told AFP.

Washington's move was met

with a sigh of relief from officials in Kabul after months of speculation over how the new administration would potentially recalibrate the Afghan policy.

Mohib, the Afghan national security advisor, tweeted that during the call the two sides 'agreed to work toward a permanent ceasefire and a just and durable peace' in the country.

Another top Afghan government official lambasted the Taliban's failure to live up to the February 2020 deal, saying the

agreement had failed to achieve its stated goals.

'The agreement so far, did not deliver a desired goal of ending Taliban's violence and bringing a ceasefire desired by the Afghans,' Sediq Sediqqi, Deputy Interior Minister and former spokesman to President Ashraf Ghani said on Twitter.

'The Taliban did not live up to its commitments.'

Deadly attacks and high-profile assassinations have increased in recent months,

particularly in Kabul where several journalists, activists, judges and politicians have been murdered in brazen daylight attacks.

The Taliban have denied responsibility for these killings, but Afghan and US officials have blamed the group.

On Tuesday, Biden's nominee for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, told his Senate confirmation hearing that 'we want to end this so-called forever war'.

AFP

Trump mulled replacing attorney general: US media

Washington, US - Donald Trump considered replacing then-acting US attorney general Jeffrey A. Rosen with a Justice Department lawyer who would help him force Georgia officials to overturn the state's election result, US media reported late on Friday.

The *New York Times* said Trump only decided against the move when told that all remaining top officials at the Justice Department would resign en masse if the plan went ahead.

The news, also reported in the *Washington Post*, comes as Trump is set to face a Senate trial for 'incitement of insurrection' over his role in whipping up supporters with unfounded claims of election fraud before they stormed the US Capitol in early January.

Trump narrowly lost Georgia to Joe Biden in the November presidential election, in a vote he baselessly claimed was rigged.

The reports describe Trump's increasing frustration with Rosen's refusal to wield the power of the Justice

Department to interfere in the count.

He and Jeffrey Clark, a Justice Department lawyer who supported Trump's assertions that the election was stolen, allegedly came up with a plan to replace Rosen with Clark.

But at a three-hour showdown involving the three men, which officials cited in *The New York Times* compared to an episode of Trump's reality show *The Apprentice*, the then-president backed down after being told the move would prompt mass resignations.

Clark categorically denied that he devised any plan to oust Rosen and said there were inaccuracies in the reporting.

Trump, Rosen and the US Justice Department have not publicly responded to the allegations.

In early January, a leaked audio tape in which Trump pressured Georgia's secretary of state to 'find' enough votes to overturn the defeat sent shockwaves across Washington.

AFP

Foreign forces ignore Libya exit deadline under fragile truce

Tripoli, Libya - Foreign forces ignored a deadline to pull out of Libya as scheduled on Saturday under a UN-backed ceasefire deal, highlighting the fragility of peace efforts after a decade of conflict.

Satellite images broadcast by CNN show a trench running tens of kilometres dug by 'Russian mercenaries' near the frontline coastal city of Sirte, as main foreign protagonists Ankara and Moscow appear intent on defending their interests under any final settlement.

An unidentified US intelligence official, quoted by the American news network, said there was 'no intent or movement by either Turkish or Russian forces to abide by the UN-brokered agreement'.

"This has the potential to derail an already fragile peace process and ceasefire. It will be a really difficult year ahead," he said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Monday urged all 'regional and international actors to respect the provisions' of the October 23 ceasefire accord that set out a withdrawal within three months of all foreign troops and mercenaries. That deadline passed on Saturday, with no movement announced or observed on the ground.

The UN estimates there are still some 20,000 foreign troops and mercenaries in Libya helping the warring factions, the UN-recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli and military strongman Khalifa Haftar in the east.



Libyans mourn for the victims, whose bodies were found in mass graves in a once militia-controlled town, during a prayer ceremony before their burial, in Martyrs' Square of Tripoli on Friday (AFP)

The GNA has received military support from Turkey. Haftar has the backing of the United Arab Emirates and Egypt as well as Russia.

Guterres called on all parties to implement the terms of the ceasefire 'without delay', something he noted 'includes ensuring the departure of all foreign fighters and mercenaries from Libya, and the full and unconditional respect of the Security Council arms embargo', which has been in place since the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that ousted and killed longtime ruler Moammar Gadhafi.

Any withdrawal or end to foreign interference 'does not depend on the Libyans but on the outside powers', said Khaled al Montasser, professor of interna-

The mercenaries are unlikely to leave Libya so long as the countries which have engaged them have not guaranteed their interests in the new transitional phase

KHALED AL MONTASSER

tional relations at Tripoli University.

Turkey on Friday welcomed a deal reached at UN-backed talks for Libya's warring factions to set up an interim executive to rule

the North African country until polls in December.

Turkey has backed the GNA with military advisors, materiel and mercenaries, repelling an advance on Tripoli by Haftar's forces, and it also has a military base in Al-Watiya on the border with Tunisia under a 2019 military accord.

Last December, parliament in Ankara extended by 18 months its authorisation for Turkey's troop deployment in Libya, in apparent disregard of the ceasefire deal.

"The mercenaries are unlikely to leave Libya so long as the countries which have engaged them have not guaranteed their interests in the new transitional phase," said Montasser.

AFP

Saudi 'destroyed hostile air target going towards Riyadh'

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Saudi Arabia intercepted a 'hostile target' over Riyadh on Saturday, said state media in the kingdom which has come under repeated attack from Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels since 2015.

An explosion was heard in the Saudi capital at around 11.00am, AFP correspondents reported.

"I heard a loud sound and thought that something had fallen from the sky," said one resident, who lives in the Al-Sulaimaniyah district of Riyadh.

"The whole house was shaking."

The Saudi-led coalition, which

backs Yemen's internationally recognised government against the Huthis, said it had 'intercepted and destroyed a hostile air target going towards Riyadh', without elaborating, according to state-run Al Ekhbariya television station.

Riyadh's King Khaled International Airport said there were a number of flight delays, but it was not immediately clear if they were linked to Saturday's incident.

Saudi Arabia has been repeatedly targeted by the Huthis since its intervention in the Yemen war

in 2015. It is rare, however, for drones and missiles launched by the Huthis to reach the kingdom's capital - about 700km from the Yemeni border.

The Shiite rebels have yet to comment on the incident, which comes only days after Joe Biden was sworn-in as US president, replacing Donald Trump.

According to the new US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, the Biden administration will quickly revisit the designation of Yemen's Huthi rebels as terrorists.

AFP

Over 20 injured by blast in Gaza home

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - More than 20 people were injured and several homes destroyed by a large explosion on Saturday in a residential area of the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, Palestinian officials said.

The source of the accidental explosion was apparently the home of a member of one of Gaza's armed groups.

"An explosion occurred in a house in Beit Hanoun this morning, resulting in a number of injuries," the Interior Ministry said, adding that an investigation had been launched into the cause of the blast.

Medical sources said more than 20 people were injured, two of them seriously.

Witnesses said several homes were damaged as a result of the explosion in the home of an 'activist'.

Police cordoned off the area.



Palestinians protest against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for food aid cuts, in the Khan Yunis refugee camp last Wednesday (AFP)

There was no immediate official explanation of the explosion, but the Israeli military said it was the result of militants "storing weapons in residential homes".

Houses 'have been turned into warehouses for weapons... and missiles for terrorist organisations, and those who pay the

price in the end are innocent civilians', the military's Arabic-language spokesman, Avichay Adraee, said on Twitter.

Islamist group Hamas seized control of Gaza from rival Palestinian movement Fatah in a near civil war in 2007.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Inside world's biggest vaccine factory



Employees prepare themselves before getting inside a lab where Covishield vaccine is being produced, at India's Serum Institute in Pune on Friday (AFP)

Pune, India - The tiny clinking vials supervised by silent PPE-wearing technicians belie the excitement inside the world's largest vaccine manufacturing unit, the Serum Institute of India, a major player in the fight against coronavirus.

The firm, founded in 1966 in the western city of Pune, is producing millions of doses of the Covishield vaccine, developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University, for India and much of the developing world.

Unlike the rival Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, Covishield can be stored and transported using standard refrigeration.

It is also significantly cheaper than the vaccines developed by Pfizer or the US firm Moderna, making it better suited for countries with poorer populations and rusty infrastructure.

Even before the pandemic, the Indian firm was a world leader in vaccines, producing 1.5bn doses a year and inoculating two out of three children in 170 countries against diseases

such as polio, mumps, meningitis and measles.

Its journey kicked off on a stud farm, where the firm's owners, the Poonawalla family, began breeding horses in 1946, before a conversation with a vet sparked the realisation that anti-toxin serum extracted from the animals could be used to make vaccines.

The Serum Institute soon became a market leader thanks to its cheap and effective drugs, which were eagerly sought after by price-conscious governments and consumers, prompting the company to expand at a dizzying rate.

Adar Poonawalla, its 40 year old CEO, has spent nearly a billion dollars in recent years enlarging and improving the sprawling Pune campus.

As a result, when the coronavirus pandemic began to sweep across the world, the company, which recorded annual revenues of over US\$800mn in 2019-20 and is debt-free, was in pole position to reap the rewards.



Adar Poonawalla, the CEO of India's Serum Institute, has spent nearly a billion dollars in recent years for upgradation

'Used to pressure'

The palm-fringed Pune campus, whose grounds boast horse-shaped topiaries in a playful nod to the firm's origins, is home to several buildings where vaccines are manufactured and scrutinised for quality before being deposited into sterilised vials and stored for delivery.

From Brazil to South Africa, there is no shortage of customers, with governments clamouring to buy Covishield.

With Poonawalla vowing to reserve 50 per cent of Covishield stocks for the Indian market, New Delhi, which intends to immunise 300mn people by July, is engaging in a bout of vaccine diplomacy, planning to supply 20mn doses to its South Asian neighbours.

The Serum Institute also plans to supply 200mn doses to Covax, a World Health Organization-backed effort to procure and distribute inoculations to poor countries.

If all this sounds overwhelming, the firm's bosses are not worried.

"We are used to these kinds of pressures because even in the past there were situations when we were required to step up the production to meet individual countries' requirements," Suresh Jadhav, Serum Institute's executive director, said.

Even a deadly fire at an under-construction building this week failed to dent confidence, with Poonawalla promptly tweeting that 'there would be no loss of #COVISHIELD production due to multiple production buildings that I had kept in reserve to deal with such contingencies'.

The pandemic has transformed Poonawalla's public profile, from a jet-setting billionaire known for his expensive taste in cars and fine art to a pharma-tycoon applauded for his willingness to take risks and his commitment to affordable vaccines.

Unsurprisingly, the father-of-two has not held back from taking so-called anti-vaxxers to task, including US rapper Kanye West for spreading conspiracy theories. 'Though we enjoy your music very much @KanyeWest, your views on #vaccines come across as irresponsible and borderline dangerous, considering the influence you have today and may have in the future; vaccines save lives,' Poonawalla tweeted in July.

AFP

HK orders thousands to stay home for two days

Hong Kong, China - Thousands of Hong Kongers were ordered to stay in their homes on Saturday for the city's first coronavirus lockdown as authorities battle an outbreak in one of its poorest and most densely packed districts.

The order bans about 10,000 people living inside multiple housing blocks within the neighbourhood of Jordan from leaving their apartments until all those in the area had been tested.

Officials said they planned to screen everyone inside the designated zone within 48 hours 'in order to achieve the goal of zero cases in the district'.

"Residents will have to stay at their premises to avoid cross-infection until they get their test results," Health Minister Sophia Chan told reporters on Saturday.

The government had deployed over 3,000 staff to enforce the lockdown, which covers about 150 housing blocks.

Residents were seen lining up for testing at more than 50 mobile specimen collection vehicles parked in the area and for basic daily supplies provided by the government.

By lunchtime on Saturday, around 3,000 people in the area had been tested.

Hong Kong was one of the first places to be struck by the coronavirus after it spilled out of central China.

AFP

UAE seeks to allay Danish concerns over virus tests

Dubai, UAE - The United Arab Emirates said late on Friday it was in contact with Danish authorities to 'clarify the details' of the concerns over coronavirus testing that prompted them to suspend flights.

Danish Transport Minister Benny Engelbrecht announced earlier on Friday that all commercial air traffic from the UAE would be suspended for five days over concerns that its pre-flight COVID-19 tests were not rigorous enough.

"Communication is currently underway with the Danish authorities to clarify the details and cases behind the decision in order to guarantee the safety and security of all travellers," the UAE Foreign Ministry said.

All air passengers arriving in Denmark need to show a negative virus test from the previous 24 hours, but Engelbrecht said Danish authorities want to be sure there were no botched screenings or tests that had been bought in Dubai - one of the seven emirates that make up the UAE.

He said the five-day suspension would give officials time 'to ensure that the required negative test is a true screening that has been carried out correctly'.

The UAE Foreign Ministry insisted that all accredited testing centres were 'regularly subject to strict quality checks'.

'Severe penalties are imposed for non-compliance with international standards to ensure the highest level of quality in testing,' it said.

AFP

Iconic TV and radio interviewer Larry King dead at 87

Los Angeles, US - The iconic talk show host Larry King, one of the most recognisable figures on US television as he interviewed everyone who was anyone over a career spanning 60 years, died Saturday at the age of 87.

The company he co-founded, Ora Media, did not state a cause of death but media reports said King had been battling COVID-19 for weeks and had suffered several health problems in recent years.

King, with his trademark suspenders, black rim glasses and deep voice, was best known for a 25 year run as a talk show host on CNN's *Larry King Live*.

'For 63 years and across the platforms of radio, television and digital media, Larry's many thousands of interviews, awards, and global acclaim stand as a testament to his unique and lasting talent as a broadcaster,' Ora Media said in a statement.

King's long list of interviewees ranged from every US president since 1974, world leaders Yasser Arafat and Vladimir Putin, and celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Marlon Brando and Barbra Streisand.

In an emotional last *Larry King*

Live show in 2010, tributes included one from President Barack Obama, who in a video message called King 'one of the giants of broadcasting'.

Tributes from the media, politicians and Hollywood stars poured in, led by Putin, who hailed the interviewer's 'great professionalism and unquestioned journalistic authority', according to the Kremlin.

Veteran CNN foreign correspondent Christiane Amanpour remembered King as 'a giant of broadcasting and a master of the TV celebrity/statesman-woman interview'.

Star Trek icon and social media personality George Takei noted how King understood 'human triumph and frailty equally well', while Kirstie Alley, of 'Cheers' fame, described him as 'one of the only talk show hosts who let you talk'.

British TV hosts Piers Morgan and Craig Ferguson, both of whom have had shows in the US, paid tribute to King's interviewing skills.

"Larry King was a hero of mine until we fell out after I replaced him at CNN," said Morgan.

AFP

Russian police arrests over 1,000 Navalny supporters, his wife at anti-Putin rallies

Moscow, Russia - Russian police on Saturday detained over 1,000 protesters, including the wife of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, as several thousands took to the streets nationwide to denounce President Vladimir Putin's rule.

Thousands of people, including teenagers, packed Moscow's central Pushkin Square and nearby streets as riot police hauled off demonstrators and beat others with batons.

Among those detained were Navalny's wife Yulia Navalnaya and his prominent aide Lyubov Sobol. AFP journalists saw several protesters left badly injured after clashing with police in Moscow.

"What a joy that you are here!" Navalnaya wrote before being detained and posting a picture of herself from inside a police van.

The protests in Moscow were estimated to be the largest demonstrations since 2019 when Navalny supporters rallied to demand free local elections.

Navalny had called on Russians to protest this week after surviving a near-fatal poisoning with Novichok and returning to Moscow following months of treatment in Germany, only to be



Police officials detain a man during a rally in support of Alexei Navalny in Moscow on Saturday (AFP)

arrested on arrival.

Some protesters marched towards the Kremlin, while others blocked Tverskaya Street, the Russian capital's main thoroughfare.

Police clashed with the demonstrators in the city centre and hit them with truncheons, AFP journalists said. The protesters threw snowballs at the police.

Navalny's Anti-Corruption

Fund said on Twitter said that 'an incredible number' of people had gathered in the capital.

Moscow police, which are accused of downplaying turnout at rallies, said 4,000 turned up.

Earlier on Saturday thousands took to the streets in the Far East, Siberia and the Urals including Khabarovsk, Novosibirsk and Yekaterinburg.

Over 1,000 protesters were

arrested across the country, the OVD monitoring group said.

Demonstrators in Moscow reported mobile network disruptions and sporadic internet.

Navalny's supporters in Moscow held signs saying 'Free Navalny' and 'Don't be afraid' and chanted 'Putin is the enemy of people'.

The rallies are a test of the opposition's ability to mobilise

ahead of parliamentary elections this year, despite increasing Kremlin pressure on critics.

Protesters said they wanted new leadership and that authorities were persecuting Navalny for speaking the truth.

"Criminals dressed in uniforms are protecting criminals at the helm," Vera Spivakova, a 71 year old pensioner, told AFP in Moscow.

She and others said the Kremlin was angered by opposition claims that Putin had amassed vast wealth during his two-decade tenure.

Ahead of the demonstrations, Navalny's team released a video investigation into an opulent Black Sea property allegedly owned by Putin. The two-hour report has been viewed more than 66mn times.

"Putin and oligarchs are afraid of losing their trough. That's why they are dispersing people," Spivakova said.

In Russia's second city of Saint Petersburg where around 10,000 people took to the streets, 20 year old Alexei Skvortsov said he no longer wanted to live in a 'dictatorship'. "People are tired of Putin," he said.

AFP

ART BEATS INTERVIEW SERIES - EPISODE 1 / HASSAN MEER

Two sides to creative art

Hubert Vaz

An artist needs to be very sensitive to everything around - the people, the community, the culture - which enables him to create meaningful art, says Hassan Meer, Oman's well-known artist and founder of the 'Emerging Artists' programme at Stal Gallery.

In a free-wheeling chat with Ibrahim Gailani, renowned artist and curator in Oman (in the first episode of a new video series called Art Beats, shot by Studio.t to explore the powerful and stimulating world of art), Meer explains that there are primarily two sides to every artist's creativity - first, the physical task of creating a beautiful painting, and secondly, using one's vision and brain to create meaningful art by being sensitive to things around. "One can be a good artist only if one uses both sides of one's creativity," he observed.

Hosted by Gailani, Art Beats is dedicated to showcasing art across various media. Gailani, who is a self-taught contemporary artist of Iraqi and Pakistani descent living in Muscat, has exhibited in the Middle-East, Europe and North America and his recent works are known for its pop-up inspired portraits with street graffiti lettering.

Founder of Gailani Art Retreat, a creative gateway of self-expression using painting and music that has engaged more than 800 participants through 50 art retreats since its inception in 2013, Gailani has a unique way of propagating art as well as encouraging budding artists in Oman to explore new sides to their own talent and potential.

When Gailani asked Meer as to how does an artist nurture that thought process which leads to meaningful art, for which Meer is wellknown, Meer said, "You have to educate yourself and develop a vision. I started out by doing portraits, but I eventually moved towards photography and installation art. Sometimes, an artist cannot express himself in a two-dimensional format, that's when one needs to think and use your artistic freedom by exploring new forms of expression. Some art cannot be confined to a two-dimensional format, it is then that you have to let it take on



Ibrahim Gailani (left) interviews Hassan Meer at Stal Gallery

a new form. You have to challenge your boundaries, just as all established artists have done over the ages."

Gailani pointed out that art schools acquaint budding artists with certain structures and guiding principals of art and it might be a difficult task for them to break that structure and push those boundaries. So how can artist believe in himself/herself and not let the criticism of those who are more used to conventional stuff get in the way of his/her attempt to get out of the box?

Unfazed by this question, Meer replied that creativity and criticism go side by side and one cannot expect not to face criticism when taking on any new creative task. "You cannot go one step further without expecting someone to criticise you. If you don't accept criticism, you will never improve. But, while keeping the

basic structures in mind, one does have the freedom to pursue what interests oneself."

Acknowledging Meer's initiative of launching the Emerging Artists platform for your Omani artists, Gailani asked him how and why he conceived such a programme. Meer informed that the idea was conceived seven years ago to help young artists discover their own creative potential while the winner of each edition is sent abroad on a scholarship to study art in the developed countries. This was because Meer himself had noticed the absence of Omani artists, or their minuscule numbers, in art events held in the region as well as in the West, and wanted Omani artists to come to the forefront on the world map of art.

In his message to young artists in Oman, Meer said young artists in Oman need to work

hard, produce more, and participate more in art events as the government, too, has been investing in the art movement to promote Omani artists. "We have much talent in Oman. They need to come forward," he said.

Meanwhile, Gailani told Muscat Daily, that the Art Beats initiative stems from the fact that in 2020, with people being lockdown by and large, and there was need to showcase what good was being done in society at the individual level. The initiative came forth from Studio.t and Dr Sam Samuel from the Indian School Board and it was decided to take a closer look at art in Oman.

"We thought, what if we showcase art talent in Oman in a different way as people are not going out much and are stuck in their homes. So by having a web series, we can take the artists' point of view to everybody's

Art Beats

In the Art Beats series, Gailani will talk about different forms of art, including painting, sculpture, pottery, photography, installation, and more. Art Beats will also feature artists from Oman through interviews and their works.

At the core of Art Beats is a social initiative. Studio.t has collaborated with Oman Cancer Association for a noble cause. At the end of the first season of Art Beats, Studio.t will host a special art-themed event to support the altruistic work being done by Oman Cancer Association. As part of the initiative, an artwork each will be acquired from all artists featured on Art Beats. These art works will be collated into a digital portfolio and shared with prospective buyers. All proceeds from the sale of the artworks will be donated to Oman Cancer Association to support the work done towards cancer awareness.

To further promote the cause, the artworks of the artists that will be up for sale will be showcased at Oman Avenues Mall in the run up to the art event.

homes, since people are not visiting art galleries these days. And the purpose is to bring the younger generation to art, to become part of this community and to contribute as aspiring artists or as people who appreciate art by trying to understand the creative process of artists and the creative soul," Gailani said, adding, "By understanding that creativity, they can make a contribution to society in some way. And there is also a noble cause attached with this activity, of supporting Oman Cancer Association."

About the scope for interaction by viewers of this series, Gailani said, "As part of this series, we will be exploring what artists can do in their own area and how they can connect virtually, either through masterclasses or online programmes and online art residencies with an intention to mentor budding artists. That is the ultimate aim of doing this series."

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FROM CAVE PAINTINGS TO GRAFFITI

EVOLUTION OF STREET ART

For many of us, art can still feel out of reach. We think of paintings hanging in a museum, chosen by curators and viewed at a price, or private art collectors in possession of influential pieces never seen by the wider public.

In its most ancient form, however, the accessibility of art was essential as a way for civilisations to communicate. Cave paintings depicted the everyday, from hunting to belief systems, and was a way to document history. This remains true even today - art is a way to communicate culture and should exist to be observed, absorbed and appreciated by all.

While some art remains inaccessible - viewable to museum visitors or wealthy individuals only - the history of publicly viewable art has evolved immensely, meaning that the possibilities for everyone to experience it have increased.

The accessibility of art has, however, come under threat again with the mass closures of museums and exhibition spaces as the world was left reeling in the wake of a global pandemic. The importance of 'art for all' has never been more relevant.

The ancient origins of graffiti

We know that in its simplest form, graffiti and street art dates back to prehistoric times, with some of the oldest cave paintings created more than 64,000 years ago, painted by a Neanderthal in Caves, Spain. However, the term 'graffiti' can actually be traced to the inscriptions and drawings found on the walls of ancient Rome or Pompeii - used to denote any imagery added to surfaces after their original creation. The first example of what is commonly recognised as graffiti is still in existence today in the ancient Greek city of Ephesus - in modern-day Turkey - which local guides say was an advertisement for adult services.

The Sistine Chapel

During the Renaissance, painting on buildings became more sophisticated. Botticelli and Michelangelo are responsible for some of the most widely known examples of publicly viewable art in the world - that of the ceilings and walls of the Sistine Chapel.

While modern day street artists have access to ladders, cherry pickers, and scaffolding, Michelangelo didn't have the same

luxuries of modern technology in 1508. He painted over 5,000 square feet of frescoes over four years, all from a flat wooden platform built out from holes in the wall of the church. While it's famously reported he painted the ceilings on his back, he actually did so from a standing position - his poor neck!

From vandalism to art

The rise of graffiti - characterised as writings or drawings on walls or other public surfaces without permission - in the 21st century was at first dismissed by critics as an unsightly symbol of vandalism in neighbourhoods. However, the New York City graffiti boom between the 1960s and 1980s helped to establish the medium as a credible art form.

Many now iconic artists made their name in the later stages of the boom. Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat are now as respected as traditional artists, with museum exhibitions and fashion collaborations around the world. A particular focal point was that of the intersection at Houston Street and the Bowery, kicked off by Haring, which became a place of significant artistic interest with many different street artists featuring their work. Since 2008, the wall has been privately managed and is now available by commission or invitation only.

Banksy, Ben Eine and D*Face

The 90s and beyond gave rise to global names such as Banksy, further reforming street art's bad reputation and establishing it as a legitimate art form in its own right. Banksy's subversive work, which drew on the origins of protest and social message graffiti, gained mass appeal, receiving worldwide fanfare when a new piece appeared.

Today street artists are sought out by brands, politicians and musicians looking to harness their global 'cool factor'. London-based artist Ben Eine's signature typeface graffiti has been gifted by David Cameron to Barack Obama, and fellow artist D*Face has collaborated with the likes of Christina Aguilera and Blink-182 to create album cover art.

The art form has become so much of a cultural titan, that this year saw the inaugural London Mural Festival - which joins the likes of Miami's Art Basel in celebration of street art.

Unconventional canvases

The festival presents London as a canvas with over 40 large-scale murals and artistic events, celebrating street art in the capital. As one of the sponsors, iconic American lifestyle brand Zippo partnered with D*Face to create a mural located on the side of the Theatro Technis Theatre in London's King's Cross.

The large-scale artwork is a new take on one of D*Face's iconic 'stripe' motifs. A subversive self-portrait of sorts that combines pop-media and imagery, not only as a satirical comment on content consumption in the 21st century but as a nod to Zippo's iconic pop culture status and commitment to individual expression.

To highlight Zippo's role as an unconventional canvas - one that allows you to carry works of art in your pocket - the mural has been scaled down onto a limited edition windproof lighter. The windproof lighter is created using a new 540 Colour decoration process, the latest design innovation from the brand which enables lighters to feature any design, in full colour graphics, wrapped around all edges and surfaces.

The D*Face limited edition lighter will form part of a wider street art collection of Zippo windproof lighters featuring pre-existing artwork from street artists including Tristan Eaton, Marija Tiurina and Pref. (BPT)



Street art in Sur, Sharqiyah (Oman)

Street art in the Middle East

In the Middle East, graffiti and street art has, over the past years, become more prevalent. Street art allows people to view not only graffiti of images and artistic pieces of objects, but to analyse written graffiti and the messages that are meant to be shared within a particular piece.

Each work of street art has unique political, economic, and social factors, illustrating the messaging and content of each work. In Oman, too, over the past few years, street artists have been painting murals and messages in open spaces and walls, underpasses, as well as sections of rugged hills. Most prominent was a recent portrait of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik by Abdullah al Sayeagh, an Omani artist from Sur, on Sur port, in South Sharqiyah region.

Street art in a variety of cities, including main sources such as Lebanon, Tehran, and Palestine, has taken on a common attribute of frequent Arabic script and Arabic calligraphy as the main focus of street art pieces. Coined 'Calligraffiti', this art form remixes the traditional principles of the Arabic script from past years with the post-modern perspective of nostalgia and visibility of documented works within society.

Street artist El Seed, who has never learned traditional calligraphy, prefers to define it as a form of 'Calligraffiti' in which the approach is much more visceral than technical. He says, the Arabic script has this specific thing that gives you so much possibility in designing the letters and that he is in love with this ability to re-form and endlessly innovate. Furthermore, he sees this art form as one which is globalising at a rapid speed, eager to take meanings and display of culture from the city of origin and disseminate it throughout major factions of the world for a specific message or movement.



Street art in Houston, Texas (US)

Japan dismisses Olympics cancellation report

Tokyo, Japan - Japan dismissed a report claiming officials see cancelling the Tokyo Olympics as inevitable on Friday, as heavyweights the United States, Canada and Australia said they were still preparing for the Games.

Deputy government spokesman Manabu Sakai said there was 'no truth' to the report in

The Times, which quoted an unnamed ruling coalition source as saying 'the consensus is that it's too difficult' to hold the Olympics. It is the latest report to cast doubt on the troubled 2020 Games, which were postponed over the coronavirus last year but have been hit by a surge in cases and plunging public support.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on Friday insisted he was 'determined' to hold the event 'as proof that mankind will have overcome the virus'.

Tokyo 2020 organisers said they were 'fully focused on hosting the Games this summer'.

And the national Olympic committees of the United States, Canada and Australia all



said they were preparing to send teams to Japan.

The statements from Canada and Australia contrast with last

year, when they withdrew their athletes before officials took the unprecedented decision to postpone.

However, despite denying the British report, Sakai said a decision was looming for Japan.

"At some point in time, we will naturally make a decision as to whether to actually hold it," he said. "Until then the Japanese

government will do what it needs to do and make progress and prepare for it."

Concerns have risen as Japan battles a third wave of coronavirus infections, with polls showing around 80 per cent of Japanese oppose hosting the event this year. The Olympics have never been cancelled in peacetime.

International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach said there was 'no reason whatsoever' for them not to go ahead on July 23 as scheduled. "Everybody is really determined to make these Olympic Games," Bach said in a video message on Friday. "All the prospects are good and we are working hard." AFP

Holders Dhofar, three other former winners remain in fray

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

2020 21 HIS MAJESTY'S CUP FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

Exciting clashes are in store when the 2020-21 His Majesty's Cup Football Championship draw will be held at the Oman Football Association (OFA) headquarters on Sunday.

The double-leg quarterfinals will be held in February. While the first-leg will be played on February 5-6, the return-leg will be held on February 15-16.

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

Earlier, the round-of-16 clashes held over the weekend produced not only expected results but also upset victories leading to the path of the eight teams to the quarters.

Following the last-16 single-round knockout matches, four former winners including defending champions Dhofar, Seeb, Al Suwaiq and Saham were left in the fray.

And joining the Goliaths are the Davids like Ibri, Al Mussanah and Al Ittihad clubs.

Top-flight team Al Nahda, who are chasing their maiden



Action from the match between Dhofar and Al Rustaq on Friday

title, also made it to the quarterfinals.

The three major upsets were registered by Ibri, Mussanah and Ittihad as the trio knocked out former multiple champions and heavyweights. While Ibri dispatched four-time champions Sur 6-5 in a penalty shootout after teams were 1-1 at end of

extra-time on Thursday, Al Ittihad upset another four-time winners, Al Arouba 5-4 in a shootout, after teams ended the game 2-2 following extra-time on Friday. Al Mussanah shocked two-time champions Oman with a 2-1 win on Thursday.

However, normalcy was restored with wins for nine-time



Al Suwaiq and Sohar players in an aerial duel for the ball during their HM's Cup last-16 game

champions and holders Dhofar, who beat Al Rustaq 2-0 on Friday, Seeb, Saham and Al Suwaiq.

In the most-anticipated last-16 clash featuring former champions, Seeb and Al Nasr, at the Seeb Sports Stadium on Thursday, Omantel League holders Seeb prevailed 4-2 in a shootout after extra-time failed

to break the 1-1 stalemate. Salah giants Al Nasr have won the title five times while Seeb are chasing their fourth title, having won the last in 1998.

Also on Thursday, two-time champions Saham got past Samail 4-2 in another shootout with scores tied 1-1 and Al Nahda was an easy 3-0

victor against Majees.

Three-time champions Al Suwaiq recorded a hard-fought 2-1 win over Sohar to advance on Friday night to leave four former winners including defending champions Dhofar and four other clubs looking for their maiden glory.

@ashokmuscat

Holders Arsenal crash out of FA Cup

FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

London, UK - Southampton dumped holders Arsenal out of the FA Cup on Saturday as West Ham cruised into the fifth round with a 4-0 win against third-tier Doncaster.

The Gunners, who have won the competition a record 14 times, went down 0-1 on England's south coast courtesy of a Gabriel own goal. Brighton edged past Blackpool 2-1 and Sheffield United beat Plymouth 2-1 as the other English Premier League (EPL) teams in action avoided embarrassment against lower-league rivals.

Elsewhere, Swansea thumped fellow Championship

side Nottingham Forest 5-1, while Bristol City beat Millwall 3-0. Barnsley beat Championship leaders Norwich 1-0. Sixth-tier Chorley put up a brave fight against EPL side Wolves on Friday but lost 0-1.

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE Burnley stun Liverpool

Liverpool, UK - Jurgen Klopp took responsibility for the sudden collapse of Liverpool's EPL title defence after their 68-game unbeaten run in the EPL at Anfield came to a stunning end in a 1-0 defeat by Burnley on Thursday.

OTHER RESULTS

FRENCH LEAGUE: Saturday: Lens 0 Nice 1; Friday: PSG 4 Montpellier 0.

GERMAN LEAGUE: Saturday: Bayer Leverkusen 0 Wolfsburg 1, Freiburg 1 Stuttgart 1, Mainz 3 RB Leipzig 2, Augsburg 2 Union Berlin 1, Arminia Bielefeld 1 Eintracht Frankfurt 5; Friday: Borussia Moenchengladbach 4 Borussia Dortmund 2.

SPANISH LEAGUE: Saturday: Huesca 0 Villarreal 0, Sevilla 3 Cadiz 0; Friday: Levante 2 Real Sociedad 2.

AFP

Ifraq steers Renaissance to easy win

LOCAL CRICKET

Hammad Ifraq's unbeaten 88 led Renaissance CT to a six-wicket victory against AER in an Oman Cricket Premier Division (50-over-a-side) match at Al Amerat on Friday.

Batting first, AER was bowled out for 174 in the 43rd over. Asim Kamal (65) and Shoaib Mohammed (56) were the main scorers for AER. Azam Khan and Yash Mehta claimed three wickets each.

Renaissance surpassed the total in the 45th over, thanks to brilliant batting by Ifraq, whose knock was studded with 13 hits

to the ropes and one maximum.

Patel 6-40, Hafiz Zahid 3-29).

BRIEF SCORES

Premier Division: AER 174 in 44.2 overs (Kamal 65, Shoaib 56; Azam 3-31, Mehta 3-33, Asif Khan 2-24, Syed Muzamil 2-11) lost to Renaissance 176-4 in 44.4 overs (Ifraq 88 n.o.; Rubella Abdus 2-36).

A Division (50-over-a-side):

SARCO 160 in 38.5 overs (Dileepa Srilal 40, Murad Khan 31; Zeeshan Siddiqui 2-34, Nazir Ahmed 2-34, Aqil Khan 2-33) beat ARTT 132 in 34.3 overs (Zeeshan Siddiqui 60; Sandip

B Division (30-over-a-side): PDORC 236-8 (Abdul Naveed 102, Nadeem Ahmed 45; Mohammed Umar 2-47, Zeeshan Tufail 2-37) beat Bank Muscat 152 all out in 28.1 overs (Pisharody Uday 3-27, Abdul Naveed 2-20, Saud Baig 2-23, Zakir Khan 2-35).

C Division (T20): Douglas OHI 243-1 (Ismail al Balushi 100, Santosh Vishwakarma 88) beat Jumbo Electronics 98-8 (Saeed Mohammed 34; Abdul Rehman 3-22, Mohsin Alimamad 2-20).

Ferrari sign up first woman driver to academy

Ferrari on Friday signed up 16 year old Maya Weug, the first woman to join their academy which has nurtured the talent of Formula one drivers like Charles Leclerc. Weug, born and raised in Spain, will compete in Formula 4 this year backed by the academy which also counts Formula One rookie Mick Schumacher among its success stories.

Baseball homer king Aaron dies

Long-time Major League Baseball home run king Hank Aaron died on Friday at age 86. Aaron shrugged off racism and death threats to pass the record 714 homers hit by Babe Ruth in 1974, finishing on 755 for his career and becoming a pioneer in front office opportunities for black players after their careers. Aaron played 23 MLB seasons from 1954 to 1976, starting with the Milwaukee Braves, moving with them to Atlanta in 1966, leaving for the Milwaukee Brewers in 1975 and retiring in 1976. He was inducted into Hall of Fame in 1982

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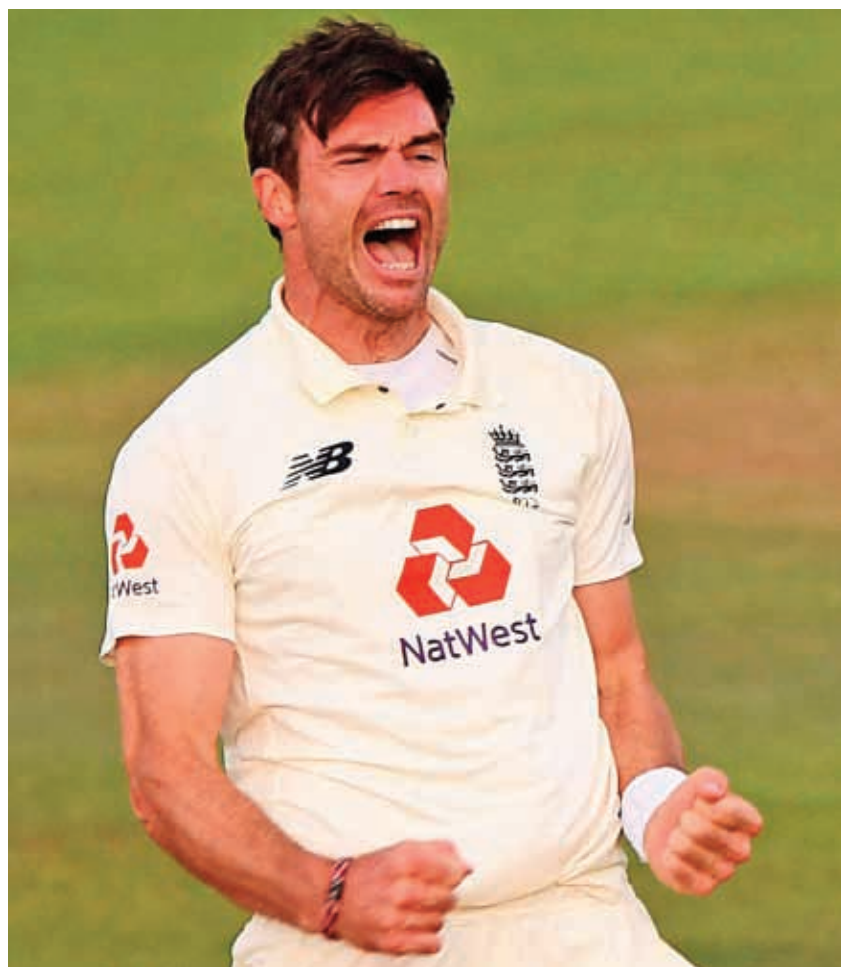
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ANDERSON'S SIX-FOR AS HOSTS SCORE 381

Root leads England response after openers fail again against Sri Lanka



England's James Anderson celebrates after dismissing Sri Lanka's Niroshan Dickwella (photo left) on the second day of the second Test at Galle on Saturday

SRI LANKA VS ENGLAND SECOND TEST: DAY TWO

Galle, Sri Lanka - It was a credit to the Sri Lanka batsmen - in particular their proficiency against spin - that James Anderson's six-wicket haul was as much an act of damage limitation as destruction on day two in Galle on Saturday.

When left-arm spinner Lasith Embuldeniya made early inroads, England looked to be in danger. It took an unbroken partnership worth 93 from Jonny Bairstow, homeward-bound to rest after this match instead of heading to India, and Joe Root to put them back on course, with Root particularly strong on the sweep to reach 67 not out off just 77 deliveries and push England to 98 for two by the close.

Where England's spinners had failed - all ten Sri Lankan wickets fell to the seamers - Embuldeniya accounted for both openers for the third time in as

many innings on this tour.

Dom Sibley fell to Embuldeniya yet again, this time without scoring. Zak Crawley, who is also yet to reach double figures this series, was out to a good ball from Embuldeniya, angling in and dipping then finding an edge that went straight to Lahiru Thirimanne at slip to put England at five for two. Root and Bairstow dug in to provide just that and ensure that the contest retained its intrigue.

The home side had earlier fought their way into a strong position through impressive innings from Niroshan Dickwella and Dilruwan Perera (67). Dickwella fell painfully short of a Test century when he gifted Anderson his fifth wicket, chipping to Jack Leach at mid-off for 92, his highest score in 41 Test appearances.

Dilruwan made an impressive fifty from No 8, taking to Leach in particular, dancing down the pitch three times to plunder

through mid-on and mid-off and a six down the ground. He helped add 89 in partnership with Dickwella and then another 49 for the last two wickets.

By shortly after lunch, Anderson, the 38 year old seamer playing his 157th Test, had doubled his tally from the previous day, adding three more wickets to help end Sri Lanka's innings on 381 and finish with figures of six for 40 off 29 overs.

It was Anderson's second straight five-wicket haul in Tests away from home, following his five for 40 in Cape Town a year ago, and the 30th of his career - only Richard Hadlee has more among pace bowlers with 36.

He removed centurion Angelo Mathews with his sixth ball on day two and drew Suranga Lakmal into a poke outside off-stump as Crawley took a sharp catch at gully either side of Dickwella's dismissal.

That prompted Dickwella to

shift gears into drive, quite literally at times, as he assumed the lead upon debutant Ramesh Mendis' arrival at the crease. Dickwella unfurled a series of well-timed boundaries, carving Sam Curran through backward point and punching Mark Wood through long-on.

A fantastic take behind the stumps had Mendis out for a duck, a faint edge off Mark Wood going down the leg side and finding Buttler's glove at full stretch to his left.

Sri Lanka had lost two wickets for 11 runs in the space of 19 balls but Dickwella remained in excellent touch, be it against pacers or spinners.

Wood's hard graft was further rewarded with the wicket of Embuldeniya and Curran finally accounted for last man out Dilruwan, who holed out to Leach at deep backward square leg.

Cricinfo

SCOREBOARD

SRI LANKA 1 ST INNINGS		
L Thirimanne	c Buttler b Anderson	43
K Perera	c Root b Anderson	6
O Fernando	b Anderson	0
A Mathews	c Buttler b Anderson	110
D Chandimal	lbw b Wood	52
N Dickwella	c Leach b Anderson	92
R Mendis	c Buttler b Wood	0
D Perera	c Leach b Curran	67
S Lakmal	c Crawley b Anderson	0
L Embuldeniya	c Root b Wood	7
A Fernando	not out	0
Extras:	(lb 2, nb 1, w 1)	4
TOTAL:	381 in 139.3 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-7, 3-76, 4-193, 5-232, 6-243, 7-332, 8-332, 9-364, 10-381		
Bowling: J Anderson 29-13-40-6, S Curran 18.3-3-60-1, J Leach 38.5-119-0, M Wood 28.4-84-3, D Bess 26.2-76-0		
ENGLAND 1 ST INNINGS		
Z Crawley	c Thirimanne b Embuldeniya	5
D Sibley	lbw b Embuldeniya	0
J Bairstow	not out	24
J Root	not out	67
Extras:	(b 2)	2
TOTAL:	98 for two in 30 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-5		
Bowling: S Lakmal 5-2-10-0, L Embuldeniya 11-4-33-2, A Fernando 5-2-12-0, D Perera 7-1-22-0, R Mendis 2-0-19-0		

India-England Tests in Chennai set to be played without fans

INDIA VS ENGLAND TEST SERIES

Mumbai, India - The prospect of the first two Tests of the India-England series being played behind closed doors has grown stronger after the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA) informed its members that no crowds would be allowed at the MA Chidambaram stadium. The TNCA took the decision despite the Indian government recently ruling that outdoor sport could be conducted with spectators at 50% capacity.

Chennai will host the first two matches of the four-Test series with the first Test scheduled to be held from February 5-9 and the second from February 13-17.

Both teams will then travel to Ahmedabad for the last two Tests, to be played at Motera stadium.

The third Test, to be played under lights, is scheduled from February 24-28 and final Test from March 4-8.

England's tour of India, which also includes five T20Is (to be played in Ahmedabad) and three ODIs (in Pune), is the first international cricket that India will host since the sport went on a global hiatus last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. India ranks second globally in terms of total COVID-19 infections reported, with its count inching towards the 11mn mark.

On January 20 the TNCA secretary R Ramaswamy sent a circular to the association's members saying the decision

to bar crowds was taken in unison with the BCCI as a 'preventive measure'.

"In view of the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, BCCI has decided not to take any kind of risk with the safety of the players during the forthcoming India-England Test series," Ramaswamy said. "As per BCCI directive, the first two Test matches will take place behind closed doors (No Spectators/Guests/Sub-Committee Members) as a preventive measure."

Incidentally the Indian government had said outdoor sports could have crowds of up to 50% capacity. "For outdoor events, spectators will be allowed upto a maximum of 50% of the total capacity of the stadium," the Indian Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports had said while putting out a note on December 26.

The note was part of the 'standard operating procedures and guidelines for conducting sporting competition in India in the COVID-19 environment'.

Despite the TNCA decision, a senior official at the Gujarat Cricket Association, which runs the Motera ground, remained optimistic of having some section of the ground open to crowds.

In 2020 the refurbished Motera was inaugurated by former US president Donald Trump. With a capacity of 110,000 Motera is the biggest-capacity ground in world cricket.

Cricinfo



A file photo of MA Chidambaram stadium

S Africa to use separate T20I, Test squads

Johannesburg, South Africa - Both the South African and Australian Test squads will quarantine ahead of their yet-to-be-confirmed three-Test series in March, in what will be the strictest biosecure bubble yet in South Africa. Unlike for the England and Sri Lanka series, where training could begin after the squads had taken their first COVID-19 tests - though social interaction was not allowed until after the third Test - for the Australia series, players on both sides will be confined to their rooms for a longer period of time.

For that reason, South Africa's Test squad will leave Pakistan on February 9 to begin their quarantine period at home. A separate squad will play the three T20Is in Pakistan on February 11, 13, and 14 in what CSA director of cricket Graeme Smith sees as an inevitable consequence of the times and something member boards will have to work together to ensure the cricket calendar is as unaffected as possible. "Unfortunately, we would have to play two different squads at the time of Australia series," he said.

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Motorsports fans in Oman are all set to be treated to a variety of top-class events, starting early next month. The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) has been in the forefront over the past couple of years to enhance the reputation of Oman as a world-class venue for various motorsports events.

And the OAA has met with considerable success in recent times with the return of the Oman International Rally as an important event in the FIA-Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) calendar in 2020.

It is just not the fans of rally, which has a glorious history in Oman, who are going to celebrate in the coming months but OAA has ensured that there are activities, competitions and championships in different fields.

The first of the three back-to-back international events that will set the ball rolling in Oman will be the opening round of the Oman International Drift Championship (OIDC), which will be held at the OAA Drift Arena on February 4-5.

The screeching noises, the air filled with adrenaline and the smell of tyres burning the tracks ablaze with 45 skilled drivers from 15 countries fighting it out will be a battle to watch and preparations are already on track to make it a huge success.

The second round of the championship will be held at the same venue on February 11-12 and the OAA has already confirmed entries from 17 nations, including drivers from US, UK, the Netherlands, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Pakistan, Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon, Ukraine, Russia, Qatar and popular names from Oman.

This is the fourth edition of the popular event and over the years, thousands have attended the event, that has a strong following in the sultanate.

Oman Sohar International Rally

There is no let-up for motorsports fans in Oman as February will also have rallying fans rejoice as the 2021 Oman



A file photo of drivers competing in the 2020 Oman International Drift Championship at the OAA Drift Arena

Sohar International Rally will be staged from February 18-20.

The new branding as Oman Sohar International Rally comes in the wake of the full support provided to the MERC round by Bank Sohar.

Defending champion Nasser al Attiyah, who recently finished runner-up at the gruelling Dakar Rally and is a 16-time MERC champion has confirmed his entry and will be defending his title.

Last year, Attiyah had begun his MERC campaign in Oman but this time, Oman will be the sec-

The three international events underline our capabilities to host world-class motorsports events. We are proud to host them

SULEIMAN AL RAWAHI

ond leg of the series with the opening round to be held in Doha, Qatar from January 29-31.

Oman's own talented rallying star Abdullah al Rawahi did the sultanate proud when he finished overall runner-up in the interrupted MERC season last

year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Rawahi will hope to keep up his strong presence in the circuit and will be competing in the opening round in Qatar where a strong field of 18 cars have been confirmed. Among

the other leading names competing in the opening round is WRC star Kris Meeke, who is a former winner of five WRC rallies between 2015-17.

Seven R5 cars have entered in Qatar along with Abdullah, who aims for a podium finish before returning to Oman for the next round.

Among the other leading names taking part in the Oman Sohar International Rally from Oman are Zakariya al Amri, Zakariya al Afi and Hamed al Wahaibi.

If February witnesses action for the big boys of drift and rally, March will have the best of go-karting sensations vying for the top honours at the Middle East and Africa (MENA) International Karting Nations Cup.

Second MENA Karting Cup

The MENA Karting Cup concept is an evolution of significant contributions from many MENA associations over the past few years. Oman will host the second edition of this exciting event with the support under the auspices of the FIA Sport Grant Programme from March 3-7.

Go-karting racers from 21 countries have already confirmed their entries in a sport that

Wahaibi all set for return to rallying

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

In his prime, Oman's rallying ace Hamed al Wahaibi was considered to be one of the fastest drivers in the region. And his reputation was backed by a strong showing in regional and international rallies in late nineties.

Wahaibi dominated the domestic rallies for long and was the first Omani driver to compete in the World Rally Championship (WRC).

From 1997 to 2005, Wahaibi was a regular face on the world circuit before he took a break. He came out of his semi-retirement in 2011 when he competed in the 2011 domestic season and the Dubai International Rally, a leg of the Middle East Rally Championship (MERC). He continued to compete in the Oman Rally Championship till 2012 before deciding to move away from competing though he kept himself involved with the sport by managing a rally team.

On Saturday, Wahaibi announced that he would be making yet another return to rallying after a gap of nine years as he has confirmed his entry for the 2021 Oman Sohar International Rally,



which will be held next month as the second leg of the MERC.

Wahaibi, who would be driving Skoda Fabia R5 car, said his return to competitive rallying is his 'own way of supporting the sport.'

In a statement, Wahaibi said, "I am delighted to return to rallying. I was tempted by the fact that OAA is hosting the second round of the MERC, where I have had some of my best results including several podium finishes."

As part of his preparations, Wahaibi is currently undergoing a strict fitness programme and has had few runs in the new R5 car.

Wahaibi promised to give his best in the MERC round in Oman though he said a podium finish will be 'a difficult task on return to tracks after nearly a decade'.

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A file photo of go-karting drivers in action during the MENA Cup at the Muscat Speedway last year

is popular in Oman. In the past, Oman have produced go-karting champions of the likes of Abdullah al Rawahi, Sanad al Rawahi and Shihab al Habsi.

Last year, Oman made history as it was the first time that an international go-karting event of such big magnitude was held at the Muscat Speedway.

Buoyed by the success, the OAA has once again decided to host the contest that features state-of-the-art Rotax powered karts

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Suleiman al Rawahi, the OAA managing director said, "The

three international events underline our capabilities to host world-class motorsports events. We are proud to host them, and hopefully, Oman's stature as a growing destination for motorsports will gain more popularity and respect in the region."

Last year, when the MENA Cup was held, Oman also had organised the FIA MENA Congress in Muscat, with FIA president Jean Todt among the dignitaries attending the gathering of international motorsports federation leaders.

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