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THURSDAY, 08 JULY 2021
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NEWS BRIEFS

HAITI PRESIDENT ASSASSINATED AT HOME, WIFE WOUNDED

Port-au-Prince, Haiti - Haiti President Jovenel Moise was assassinated and his wife wounded early Wednesday in a gun attack at their private residence, tipping the impoverished and crisis-hit Caribbean nation into a renewed state of political uncertainty.

Interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph declared a 'state of siege' and said he was now in charge of the country, urging the public to remain calm while insisting the police and army would ensure public order.

As international outrage and shock spread over the killing, the capital Port-au-Prince was quiet early Wednesday with no extra security forces on patrol, witnesses reported.

"The president was assassinated at his home by foreigners who spoke English and Spanish," Joseph said of the assault.

Moise had ruled Haiti, the poorest country in the Americas, by decree, after legislative elections due in 2018 were delayed in the wake of disputes, including on when his own term ends.



Royal Decrees ratify GCC pacts on VAT, excise tax

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued two Royal Decrees on Wednesday reading as follows:

Royal Decree No 50/2021 on the ratification of the GCC Unified Agreement on Value Added Tax (VAT), signed on November 27, 2016.

Article 1 ratifies the GCC Unified VAT Agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article 2 instructs the departments concerned to deposit the document of ratifying the aforesaid agreement in accordance with its provisions.

Article 3 states that this decree will be published in the official gazette and enforced on its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 51/2021 on the ratification of the GCC Unified Agreement on Excise Tax, signed on November 27, 2016.

Article 1 ratifies the GCC Unified Agreement on Excise Tax in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article 2 instructs the departments concerned to deposit the document of ratifying the aforesaid agreement in accordance with its provisions.

Article 3 states that this decree will be published in the official gazette and enforced on its date of issue.

ONA

New deals to further boost Omani-Saudi relationship

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The relationship between Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has always been politically, economically and socially strong, will get a further boost with agreements set to be signed between the countries soon.

A statement issued by the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, 'The Saudi Cabinet, headed by King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, held a virtual meeting on Tuesday. The meeting emphasised the signing of several agreements between Saudi Arabia and Oman in several areas, including youth, sports, culture, media, broadcasting, television, investment, communications, information technology, postal services and transportation.'

The agreements will further boost relations. This is in addition to bilateral meetings held in the

past few months. Additionally, dialogues have taken place between the leaders of the two countries which is proof of the growing ties.

In June, an Omani delegation, led by H E Aseela bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, visited Saudi Arabia when 150 investment opportunities worth RO1.5bn were proposed for Saudi Arabia. These are in the areas on real estate, industry, tourism, fisheries, renewable energy and petrochemicals.

Saudi Arabia has also shown interest in developing an industrial zone in Oman. Officials from the two countries met in Riyadh to discuss the industrial zone to be developed, operated and managed by Saudi Arabia to help build logistics infrastructure for transportation of goods between special economic zones in the two countries.

IMF praises Oman's decisive steps

2.5%

growth in GDP expected in 2021

Monetary and financial policy responses to strike a balance between supporting the economy and containing risks

Reforms for state owned enterprises to enhance competition and more efficient use of public resources

Moving towards greener economy with optimum use of abundant wind and solar energy resources

1.5%

growth in non-oil GDP expected in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Praising the sultanate's response to the COVID-19 crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said that Omani authorities acted 'rapidly and decisively' to address the health and economic effects of the pandemic.

'Oman moved rapidly and decisively to contain the COVID-19 crisis. Containment measures and health support to the population have limited the cases and fatalities. The authorities' cautious approach towards reopening has helped contain new cases since early 2021,' the IMF said in its statement of the 2021 Article IV Mission to Oman.

Recognising the positive impact of the sultanate's Economic Stimulus Plan, the IMF said fiscal, monetary and financial support



measures introduced by the government have been deployed to ease the burden on households, firms and banks.

'The authorities have acted decisively to address the health

and economic effects of the pandemic. While gradual recovery is expected in 2021 and beyond, combating the pandemic and mitigating its effects remain the key near-term priorities until re-

'Oman moved rapidly and decisively to contain the COVID-19 crisis. Containment measures and health support to the population have limited the cases and fatalities'

covery is firmly established,' it said.

The IMF estimates that Oman's real GDP - which contracted by 2.8 per cent in 2020 - will grow by around 2.5 per

cent in 2021, with about three per cent average growth over the medium-term. The sultanate's economy, as per the IMF, is expected to benefit from projected modest increase in hydrocarbon production in the medium-term.

The fund projects non-hydrocarbon GDP growth of 1.5 per cent for 2021, as vaccine rollout gradually restores domestic economic activity along with the recovery of external demand. 'Thereafter, it (non-hydrocarbon GDP) increases gradually over the medium-term as the impact of fiscal adjustment subsides, reaching four per cent in 2026.'

However, there are substantial uncertainties around the sultanate's economic outlook. The emergence of COVID-19 variants could prolong the impact of the pandemic on the global out-

look and financial conditions, and thus intensify the economic impact on Oman, the IMF warned.

'Volatility in oil prices would have a significant impact on the outlook. Fiscal consolidation could weigh on economic growth and social pressures could create headwinds for reforms. Upside risks to the outlook would come from a strong rollout of vaccination and a stronger rebound in global activity than anticipated,' the fund explained.

The IMF said that Oman's near-term priority continues to be combating the pandemic until the recovery is entrenched. Efforts, it added, have focused on addressing the health crisis (including vaccine rollout), supporting the recovery, minimising economic scarring, and mitigating risks to financial stability.

See also Page 05



12 Indian ministers resign in major cabinet reshuffle



16 Hurkacz stuns Federer in Wimbledon quarterfinal

Expatriates needed to boost economy as Omanisation gains pace

Shaddad al Musalmay
Muscat

While Oman is sparing no effort in its drive to provide employment opportunities for citizens, the country still needs expatriates to boost the economy. In January, the government of Oman announced that it will provide more than 32,000 jobs for Omanis in 2021.

However, according to those that Muscat Daily spoke with, replacing all expatriates is not a solution as the country needs more people for a sustainable economy. They said the solution is to get more projects into the

country, as quickly as possible for Omanis to prosper along with expatriates.

As per the latest figures (May report) of the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the expatriate population currently stands at 1,429,831, less by 11.9 per cent the same time last year.

Dr Abdullah Abbas al Bahrani, associate professor of economics at Northern Kentucky University and director of the Center for Economic Education in the university, said that Oman needs local spending and local demand but with the expat population leaving the sultanate, spending in the



local economy is dropping. "They are vacating residential apartments, and reducing demand for housing. I expect housing prices will fall as demand drops.

This will also impact the hospitality

The negative sentiment towards expats can result in reduced future foreign direct investment in Oman

DR ABDULLAH AL BAHRANI

and tourism industry," he said.

"The negative sentiment towards expats can result in reduced future foreign direct investment (FDI) in Oman. The long term consequences are severe for an economy that is ex-

periencing decreasing domestic investment."

Bahrani noted that more efforts are needed to diversify the economy and the labour market. "We need to increase local demand and spending in Oman. We can do that by making spending in Oman more favourable for all, including expats and tourists."

Others believed that losing expatriates may impact knowledge transfer. Said al Rashdi, CEO of Oman Manufacturers Association, said despite the government's eagerness to employ every eligible citizen, expatriates play a role in developing the economy.

"Expatriates play a big role and are indispensable when it comes to boosting the economy. Losing expatriates, some of who are experts in their field, suddenly may actually harm the knowledge transfer needed to smoothen the transition to localise many positions," Rashdi said.

"The economy is not completely in our control and expatriates won't stay here without jobs. The solution is to support open regulation to welcome FDIs which will improve the economy, provide more jobs and allow the country to retain its expatriates' expertise at the same time."

Continued on Page 03

COVID-19 cases, deaths drop

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Wednesday reported 1,675 new cases of COVID-19 and 17 related deaths, which is a good indication that infection and deaths are dropping.

With these figures, the total number of cases registered in Oman has now reached 280,235, including 3,356 deaths.

In another encouraging indication, recovery rate has been increasing and on Wednesday as many as 1,685 people were declared recovered, taking the total number of recoveries to 248,151, according to an Ministry of Health statement.

The number of hospital admissions is also dropping, with 1,491 patients in health institutions on Wednesday, including 493 in intensive care.

MoH advises all citizens and residents to continue washing hands with water and soap, avoid touching the face, nose, mouth and eyes, and follow healthy habits when coughing and sneezing.

Appointment of 2,364 teachers started: MoE

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Education (MoE) has started recruitment procedures to appoint 2,364 teachers in the new academic year - 2021-22 - in various governorates of the sultanate.

This follows the Ministry of Labour's announcement to this effect made in cooperation with MoE. Of these, 440 male and female teachers are from Dakhliyah, some of who may be appointed in other governorates, according to the Directorate General of Education in the governorate.

"The competent committee has completed procedures for appointments, including matching educational qualifications, conducting medical examinations and opening bank accounts," said Ahmed bin Hamad bin Saeed al Darei, head of the Appointments and Transfers Department in Dakhliyah governorate.

"The committee's tasks also included conducting interviews focusing on applicants' personal characteristics, and their technical and psychological readiness to join the field of education."

The Directorate General of



(Supplied photo)

Education in Muscat Governorate also confirmed that it started recruitment procedures last week for teachers who will be appointed in the 2021-2022 academic year.

"The government continues to

provide job opportunities through training and qualification programmes and replacement of expats in the public sector, in addition to employment in various fields in the private sector," the Government Communication

Centre said in a statement.

In January, the Ministry of Labour announced that 32,267 jobs will be made available for jobseekers this year, including 7,602 opportunities in government sector units.



Air France to operate direct flights to Muscat

Muscat - Oman Airports and the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism have announced a new service to be operated from Muscat International Airport. In October, Air France will commence regular direct flights from Paris.

The new route is scheduled to operate from October 31, with the service flying three times weekly - Sunday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Air France will operate its fleet of modern Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner aircraft on the Muscat route, which will provide 279 seats in three travel classes - Business, Premium Economy and Economy.

The new service will provide an important link between the two capital cities.

There are strong cultural and economic ties between the two countries that have been built up

over centuries, and the introduction of direct flights will further strengthen these by providing more choice and connectivity, helping increase the number of business and leisure passengers in both directions.

France is one of the key markets for tourists visiting Oman, and pre-COVID-19 there were 68,000 annual visitors in 2019.

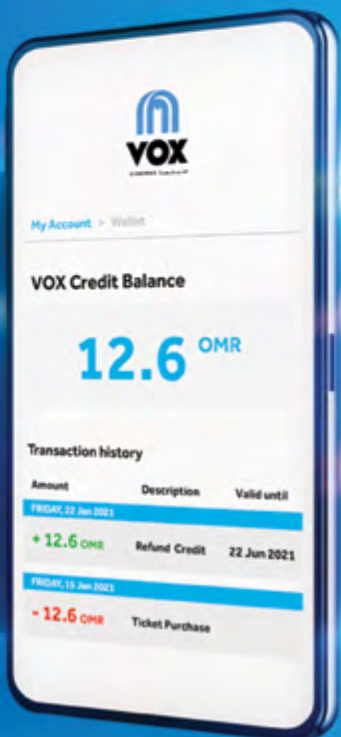
Considering Paris is one of the cultural and tourism capitals of the world, the route will open up access for Omanis looking to enjoy the sights of the city as well as others.

In addition, travellers from Oman will be able to access a broad route network across Europe and over the Atlantic to North and South America from Paris operated not only by Air France but its partner airlines in the SkyTeam Alliance.

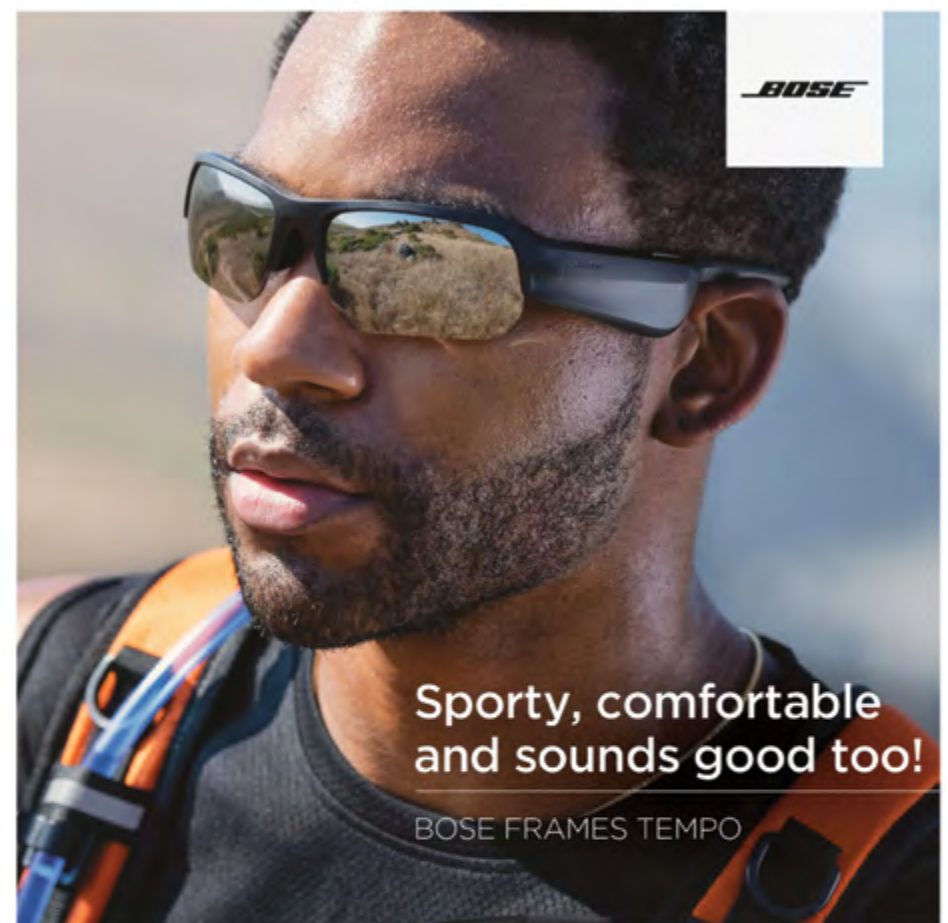
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Free marketing outlets to support SMEs

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a move to support the owners of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that have been affected by COVID-19, the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) is providing free marketing outlets in South Batinah.

The authority recently launched an initiative to open marketing outlets in commercial centres and malls, said an official at ASMED.

He explained, "The initiative aims to promote the products of SMEs by making them accessible to a larger customer base through commercial centres. The Authority for SME Development recently signed an agreement with Al Noman China Wholesale Market to provide 16 outlets inside the market to support SMEs in South Batinah."

ASMED has now provided seven free marketing outlets in Al Noman China Wholesale Market and calls on owners of



The initiative aims to promote the products of SMEs by making them accessible to a larger customer base through commercial centres

ASMED OFFICIAL

SMEs to benefit from these. It confirmed that the marketing outlets are ready and free for a period of two years, subject to

extension.

"The authority has set several conditions for people to take advantage of these outlets,

including the owners of the SME must be citizens from South Batinah, they must own commercial registers and be registered with the authority. Entrepreneurs must also provide high quality products," the official said.

Meanwhile, the authority confirmed that the pandemic has changed sales and shopping scenario for companies. It has accelerated the transformation processes towards online sales.

ASMED has launched a special initiative to provide consultations targeting small and medium enterprises most affected by the pandemic.

The total number of SMEs registered in ASMED till the end of May 2021 stood at 53,166, compared to 44,197 in May 2020, an increase of 20.3 per cent, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Among the governorates, Muscat tops the list, marking an increase of 20.3 per cent, followed by North Batinah with an increase of 20.4 per cent.

Oman LNG to fund labs at vocational college in Saham



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation signed an agreement with Oman LNG Development Foundation on Wednesday to fund the development of mechanical engineering laboratories for Saham Vocational College at a total cost of RO99,689.

The agreement was signed by H E Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim bin Said al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, and Dr Amer Nasser al Matani, CEO of Oman LNG Development Foundation.

The agreement states that Oman LNG will fund mechanical engineering laboratories, including fluid mechanics laboratory, applied mechanics laboratory, and materials science laboratory.

H E Dr Rahma said that the

agreement is part of the ministry's plan to develop and upgrade vocational colleges to contribute to the economy of the sultanate.

"This can be achieved by preparing skilled professionals and technicians for the job market," she said.

She added that the agreement is a manifestation of constructive cooperation between the ministry and the industrial sector. It also reflects one of the pillars of Oman Vision 2040 in promoting partnership and integration between different sectors, especially between the academic sector and job market.

Matani affirmed the keenness of Oman LNG in serving the society and supporting it through national projects and its Development Foundation. He said the company is interested in contributing to develop methods of teaching.



MHT discovers necropolis in Ibri

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A team from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) has discovered an ancient necropolis in the village of Bilad al Shahoum in the wilayat of Ibri.

According to the ministry, the necropolis has tombs of various shapes, varying from pyramidal, beehive to oval.

Mohammed al Kalbani, head of the survey department in the ministry, informed that the burial structures in Bilad al Shahoum date back to 300BC, built deep in the ground, some 2m below surface level.

The tombs include human bones, pots made of soapstone

from mountains of Oman, and women's ornaments like earrings made of bronze and beads of various colours and size.

Kalbani said the site is important due to its location near an ancient trade route connecting the coast with the interior of the sultanate. The tombs are near the archeological sites of Bat, Al Khutm and Al Ayn, a necropolis from the 3rd Millennium BC, located near a palm grove that was declared a World Heritage by Unesco in 1988.

According to Kalbani, the large number of pottery items indicates the existence of ancient commercial relations between the sultanate, Sindh and Iran.



Expatriates needed to boost economy

Continued from Page 01

According to Khalfan al Tauqi, business and media consultant, the country "cannot prosper without expatriates because it needs knowledge, experience and diversification and this can be achieved with a mix of locals and foreigners".

He opined that expatriates can't affect the Omanisation pro-

gramme. "If we are attacking them directly or indirectly, this will affect the country. I disagree with letting expatriates leave the country due to unfavourable laws and conditions," he added.

Tauqi said the government should engage expatriates and look for ways to benefit from their expertise. "On one hand, we want foreigners to come to Oman for investments and on the other

hand, we are making decisions which are against them.

"If we want to widen our economy, we have to welcome everyone. Investors will not come to a very small economy. Instead, we have to create more business opportunities and make sure that Oman creates a good environment for expatriates with appropriate laws. It should be a give and take strategy."

PRAYER TIMINGS	
Fajr	3.57am
Sunrise	5.26am
Duhr	12.11pm
Asr	3.31pm
Maghrib	6.57pm
Isha	8.27pm

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

China Petroleum Pipeline Engineering Company Limited Oman Branch (CPP), as an EPC Contractor, invites companies to participate in the following tender:

Estimated Scope Description	Tender Documents Fee
Landscape works: Supply and installation of necessary irrigation system for plantation, execution, pipe laying, gravel laying with geotextile wrapped, sweet soil filling, root barrier, anchoring system for plants, grass, plants & trees, gravel laying above whatsoever mentioned in the drawing.	Free

Legal entities, domestic Omani and foreign companies who meet the following minimum qualification criteria are eligible to quote in Tender:

- Priority to Oman local companies, or local agent appointed by foreign companies,
- Capability to submit a performance bond of ten percent of total value.
- Complying with the CPP's project execution schedule.
- ISO 14001 and OHSAS18001 in valid period are mandatory.
- Having direct experience of similar jobs in the last five years.
- Agree to complete the further prequalification undertaken by CPP.

All interested bidders shall submit a written application letter printed on Bidder's letter head signed by the Bidder's authorized Person to cppomaned@cppmde.com, contractcppoman@cppe.ae over a period before **14th July, 2021** stating the following details: Full name of Bidder, phone number, e-mail address, contact person, tender name and tender title. Any application received after **14th July, 2021** shall not be entertained.

The ITB documents will be issued via email by CPP later. The bidders shall bear all cost arising from or incidental to the preparation, clarification, finalization and delivery of their bid proposal.

CPP is not obliged to accept the bid with least prices or any other bids. CPP reserves the right to accept or reject any bid, and to annul the bidding process and reject all bids, at any time prior to award of contract, without thereby incurring any liability to the affected bidder or bidders or; any obligations to inform the affected bidder or bidders of the ground for the CPP's action.

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

China Petroleum Pipeline Engineering Company Limited Oman Branch (CPP), as an EPC Contractor, invites companies to participate in the following tender:

Estimated Scope Description	Tender Documents Fee
SLOPE PROTECTION WORK, estimated quantity: It mainly includes the geo-membrane laying, PVC pipe installation, and rock soiling of all slope protection areas (Area A/C/F) as required by the approved of the main site, except cliff road slope protection. The qty. of rock soiling with Cement mortar is about 6720 cub meter.	Free

Legal entities, domestic Omani and foreign companies who meet the following minimum qualification criteria are eligible to quote in Tender:

- Priority to Oman local companies, or local agent appointed by foreign companies,
- Capability to submit a performance bond of ten percent of total value.
- Complying with the CPP's project execution schedule.
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(Supplied photo)

OCCL hosts Omani-Sri Lanka business forum

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCL), headed by Eng Reda bin Juma al Saleh, chairman of the chamber's Board of Directors, organised a virtual meeting of Omani and Sri Lankan business tycoons with an aim to enhance the economic and commercial cooperation with the island nation.

The meeting of the Omani-Sri Lanka Business Forum held in co-operation with the Sri Lankan Embassy in the sultanate and the Sri Lankan National Chamber of Commerce also aims to develop commercial relations between the two countries, said the OCCL.

Nandika Podipala, president of the National Chamber of Commerce in Sri Lanka, headed the Sri Lankan team, while H E Sheikh Juma bin Hamdan al Malik al Shehhi, Oman's Ambas-

The agreement will strengthen trade relations between the two countries in various economic fields

ENG REDA BIN JUMA
AL SALEH

sador to Sri Lanka, H E Omar Libi Amir Ajwad, Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the sultanate, Ali bin Hamdan al Ajmi, a member of the Board of Directors Amman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dr Al Fadl bin Abbas al Hinai, CEO of the Amman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and a number of other business owners attended the meeting as delegates.

In his welcome speech, Saleh asserted that "this meeting will

produce positive results that will serve the private sector in the Sultanate of Oman and Sri Lanka, especially since they have been linked to vital commercial relations for hundreds of years".

"The agreement will strengthen trade relations between the two countries in various economic fields," he said.

Saleh explained that the exchange of experiences between the sultanate and Sri Lanka has witnessed a remarkable fluctuation in recent years, as the volume of trade exchange between the two countries in 2019 amounted to about US\$75mn, of which the Omani exports represented about US\$14.8mn, which is a significant decrease compared to 2018, when it amounted to US\$34mn. The volume of Omani imports from Sri Lanka in 2019 amounted to US\$60.2mn, while imports from Sri Lanka in 2018 did not exceed US\$18mn.

Housing minister visits luxury resort Muscat Bay

Muscat - H E Dr Khalfan bin Said bin Mubarak al Shu'ailli, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, visited Muscat Bay, Oman's bespoke luxury resort living destination.

The visit by the minister along with senior officials is part of partnership between the public and the private sectors on the development of various urban and tourism related projects that form the pillars of Oman Vision 2040.

H E Dr Shu'ailli was received by Sheikh Hamood bin Sultan al Hosni, CEO - Muscat Bay, and the senior management team at the 'Experience Centre' of Muscat Bay. The minister and the accompanying delegation were given an update on the completed phases of the project and the progress on their handover process, besides having the delegates know about the ongoing efforts to capture the interest of both Omani and regional customers and investors, who have expressed interest to be part of Muscat Bay.

Talking about the project, H E Dr Shu'ailli said, "The Muscat Bay project is a bespoke development nestled in unique natural surroundings and we were pleased with what we saw. As a project, Muscat Bay embodies the essence of our future strategy, to develop tourism and enhance its contribution to the economic diversification plan towards Oman Vision 2040."

Sheikh Hosni said, "We are grateful to H E Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shu'ailli and the senior delegation for their visit, and for witnessing the delivery of our vision of creating an exotic living destination in one of the most serene



(Supplied photo)

Muscat Bay embodies the essence of our future strategy, to develop tourism and enhance its contribution to the economic diversification plan towards Oman Vision 2040

H E DR KHALFAN BIN SAID BIN MUBARAK AL SHU'AILLI

surroundings anywhere in the world. Oman is a land of breathtaking beauty, and Muscat Bay epitomises this reality with a landmark that is attracting attention both within Oman and in the region. In spite of the challenging economic situation, work has continued with caution and compliance to regulations, and we are glad to report the success of our efforts."

The integrated tourism complex will soon see the opening of the Jumeirah Muscat Bay Resort

Hotel, the first Jumeirah hotel in Oman that underlines the luxury identity of Muscat Bay whilst significantly raising the bar in terms of what Oman's tourism industry will have to offer.

The delivery of the residential units, the commercial village square: Parkland along with the hotel completes yet another successful phase of development of the envisioned project.

"With the new realities of living, our residents and potential clients appreciate the space and

privacy that come with their homes at Muscat Bay. Each residence is a tranquil space for peaceful and harmonious living amongst natural beauty that comes with resort-like calm and pace, whilst proximity and approach bring convenience to everyday life," Sheikh Hosni added.

The delegation was presented with a tour of the completed and ready properties within the project, which included the Zaha zone, comprising villas, apartments, parkland and swimming pools and sports amenities; Nameer zone comprising 33 exquisite villas; Wajid zone with its 22 prestigious hilltop villas overlooking Oman sea; and Village Square, a commercial area with restaurants, cafes, supermarket, gym and other facilities.

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Offer valid from 16th May 2021 to 15th August 2021. Total of 3 raffle draws will be held at Oasis Water Company, Aziba. Draw Dates: 16th June 2021, 18th July 2021 and 15th August 2021. Winners will be intimated directly. Oasis Water Company employees are not eligible to participate in this promotion. Gifts shown are for illustrative purpose only. Actual may vary.

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MUSCAT DAILY

Majan Electricity urges customers to pay bills via e-payment channels

Muscat - Majan Electricity Company, a leading electricity provider in Oman, has advised customers to use its e-payments platforms to pay bills for the ease and convenience it offers.

'Majan Electricity offers several smart, hassle-free and interactive options to pay the bills. Customers can pay their bills online from anywhere by accessing their account through the Majan Electricity's e-channels. The customers can use various banking channels linked to the system such as Nama Group portal www.electricity.com.om, mobile applications, online banking and corporate banking,' read a statement.

For corporate customers and government Majan offers a direct transfer of key subscribers to the company's designated local bank accounts.

'Majan customers can pay their electricity bills through mobile applications of companies such as Nama app (<https://oss.nama.om/ar->

[om/login.aspx](https://oss.nama.om/ar-om/login.aspx)), Bill & Pay Mobile Application (ONEIC), Khedmah Service mobile application (OIFC), Tasdeed portal (<https://www.tasdeed.om/EF-portal/WhereToPay>) for safe and easy payment.'

In addition, they can also pay through Omantel's electronic payment machines available in the Omantel's Customer Service outlets, commercial centres and some fuel filling stations or through direct debiting from the subscriber's bank account to the company's account in accordance with a tripartite agreement. On the other hands, customers can pay electricity bills by visiting the branches of the collection agents: Oman National Engineering and Investment Company (ONEIC) and Oman Investment and Finance Company (OIFC), which have branches all over the sultanate.

By encouraging to switch to a virtual payment methods, Majan Electricity says it will keep users safe.

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IMF sees sharp drop in Oman's budget deficit

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects Oman's fiscal deficit to sharply decline to 2.4 per cent of GDP in 2021 from around 19.3 per cent of GDP in 2020.

'Fiscal and external balances are projected to improve considerably over the medium term. After deteriorating sharply in 2020 to a deficit of about 19.3 per cent of GDP, reflecting lower oil revenue and a slump in economic activity, the fiscal balance is projected to improve to -2.4 per cent of GDP in 2021,' the IMF said in its statement of Article IV Mission to Oman.

The statement noted that the sultanate's fiscal balance is expected to move to a surplus over the medium term, with a substantial decline in the government debt.

This substantial improvement in fiscal balance will be contributed mainly by higher oil prices and fiscal adjustment measures taken by the government.

The impact of fiscal consoli-



(Muscat Daily)

ation, the IMF said, is mitigated by various policy support measures including social spending

needed without jeopardizing medium-term consolidation objectives,' the fund said.

The authorities have requested IMF technical assistance to help strengthen the medium-term fiscal framework and develop a medium-term debt strategy

and temporary reductions and waivers of taxes and fees.

'With oil prices currently higher than budgeted, there is scope for additional temporary targeted support for affected households and businesses if

According to the IMF, steady implementation of the sultanate's Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (MTFP) is essential to reinforce fiscal sustainability.

The sultanate's MTFP targets the elimination of the fiscal

deficit over the medium term by boosting non-hydrocarbon revenue while keeping nominal fiscal expenditure broadly constant and improving its efficiency and targeting.

'Strengthening Oman's medium-term fiscal framework, with a clear fiscal anchor, would help in achieving the fiscal consolidation.

The government has taken important steps in developing the fiscal framework with a balanced budget objective,' the IMF said. The statement said that Omani authorities have requested IMF's technical assistance to help strengthen the medium-term fiscal framework.

The IMF further said that the establishment of the Debt Management Committee to coordinate debt issuance of Oman and manage financial exposures is a welcome step.

'The authorities have requested IMF technical assistance to help develop a medium-term debt strategy to guide the government's borrowing program and provide more predictability to the financial system,' the IMF added.

Economic recovery gains momentum in Middle East

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With the pandemic continuing to challenge different economic sectors across the Middle East region, the latest edition of the PwC's Middle East Economy Watch report points to signs of building momentum in the recovery despite a third COVID-19 wave this spring.

After 2020's rapid recession, the region is recovering relatively well, the report released on Wednesday said.

'The region witnessed another wave of COVID-19 this spring. Nevertheless, there were signs of solid economic recoveries underway during this period. Saudi Arabia is the first economy to release data showing a very strong rebound in non-oil GDP. Also, other indicators have shown a recovery in consumption across the region,' the report said.

PwC forecasts for the region expect a return to pre-COVID levels of economic output around the middle of 2022 and some Gulf countries, such as Iraq and UAE, will not get there until 2023.

Some vulnerable sectors such as tourism and aviation suffered severely in the region due to the



lockdown measures. Aside from tourism, GCC countries, particularly the UAE and Qatar, were significantly affected by the collapse in global aviation.

Richard Boxshall, partner and chief economist at PwC Middle East, said, "It's been over a year since the start of the pandemic, and the 'return to normal' always seems to be just a few months away, but keeps receding. However, leading economic indicators now provide a good reason to think that the destination will soon be reached."

He said, "Saudi Arabian residents are now shopping more frequently than in February 2020. Also, real estate prices in Dubai are seeing the most sus-

tained increases since 2014 which is considered one of the benchmarks of regional confidence. And the purchasing managers indices, reflecting private sector activity, in the GCC have all signalled expansion this year."

The PwC report said that the potential reforms to global corporate tax policy may present new challenges for the GCC.

'While the GCC is still recovering from the pandemic contractions, the region might face other challenges in the future due reform in global corporate tax policy. This could have implications on the GCC countries, which have among the lowest corporate tax rates globally,' PwC said.

Omantel launches Innovation Labs for Omani tech startups

Muscat - Omantel on Wednesday announced the launch of the Omantel Innovation Labs, which will contribute to Oman's Vision 2040 by promoting innovation and entrepreneurship in new and emerging technologies.

Under this new initiative, Omantel will leverage its expertise, partnerships, reach, and access to technology to build a tech-based startup ecosystem, the company said in a press release. The key focus of Omantel Innovation Labs is to cultivate entrepreneurial skills among the youth and accelerate the growth of relevant Oman-based technology startups across five technological verticals: 5G, Internet of Things, cybersecurity, customer experience technology, and Big Data.

Located in a 1,100sqm facility

at Omantel headquarters in Muscat, the Innovation Labs will organize, participate in, and host multiple activities to support the company's internal innovation agenda by providing systematic spaces, approaches, events and activities that can accelerate product conceptualisation, prototyping, testing and deployment of solutions to Oman and Omantel-centric challenges.

"We want to support and tap into new ideas and technologies, stay ahead of the curve and drive local innovation. For this, we need to optimally deploy our resources and create an environment wherein caliber and opportunities match national digital transformation goals. Omantel Innovations Labs have been conceptualised and designed to fit perfectly into this



ecosystem and aim to put the company at the heart of Oman's emerging culture of entrepreneurial growth, knowledge sharing, collaboration and economic development through digitisation," Talal Said al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, said.

Omantel has been showcasing innovation possibilities with frontier technologies through numerous recent projects that add

efficiency to operations and excitement to everyday activities. The company has piloted two major 5G projects in Oman's transport and logistics sector that offer showcase the use of 5G infrastructure beyond network speed and efficiency but also bring more accountability and streamlining to port operations.

Keeping such developments

in mind, the aim of the Innovation Labs is to build a platform that can generate use cases for prioritized technologies and facilitate an ecosystem that complements Omantel's differentiating activities.

An off-shoot of this initiative is the Omantel Accelerator program, designed in collaboration with the UK Oman Digital Hub. It will be delivered in partnership with Oman-based regional accelerator Oman Technology Fund (OTF) and the global venture accelerator and ecosystem developer Brinc.

The six-month program intends to de-risk innovative startups across multiple stages of their lifecycle. Startups will be guided through the myriad challenges in the highly competitive tech industry through mentor-

ship, networking, and fundraising support.

Mohammed al Rasbi, the managing director at OTF Accelerator, expressed his enthusiasm for the project. He said, "We are very excited about this partnership with Omantel. After accelerating over 100 companies in Oman, the Middle East, and North Africa, we have found that corporate partnerships are vital in increasing the growth rate of our portfolio companies."

Rasbi stressed the importance of having a carefully curated cohort of companies for the Omantel acceleration program.

"OTF Accelerator will be assisting Omantel in selecting Oman's next top startups. We believe that having great founders is at the core of having a successful start-up. With our

wide regional selection expertise, we are now eager to see that Oman's best entrepreneurial minds will be part of Omantel Innovation Labs, and Omantel Accelerator specifically."

Yasin Aboudaoud, managing partner at Brinc, said, "The global pandemic has underscored the value of innovation, technology and connectivity to business continuity and economic growth, making collaboration a core requirement to accelerating their pace."

The program is tailored to meet the needs of each participating startup to ensure that they commercialize, multiply, and scale effectively while providing the technical feasibility, market desirability, and financial viability of their products and operations.

Oman crude price declines 3.5%

Our Correspondent
Muscat

After crossing US\$76 per barrel level on Tuesday, Oman crude price at the Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME) dropped 3.5 per cent to close at US\$73.42 per barrel on Wednesday.

The price of Oman crude struck a 2018 pinnacle on Tuesday after OPEC+ oil producing countries failed to agree on lifting crude output despite improving demand due to global economic recovery.

According to a DME statement, the average price of Oman crude (for July delivery) has stabilized at US\$66.40 per barrel, which is US\$3.30 per barrel higher than the average price for June delivery.

US oil futures approached a seven-year peak after the talks between the 23 members of the petroleum producers group were called off, an OPEC statement said, ending negotiations on a proposal to boost crude supply.

But investors quickly shifted course, selling off both Brent and West Texas Intermediate (WTI) futures contracts, as investors fixated on a possible disintegration of any effort to rein



in supply.

WTI oil was down by 2.4 per cent at US\$73.37 in New York, while Brent North Sea crude fell 3.4 per cent at US\$74.53 in London.

"There is capacity to produce more oil, much more in fact, and the market expects that logic will soon prevail," Rystad Energy analyst Louise Dickson told AFP.

The group had been weighing a proposal that would see the world's leading oil producers

raise output by 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) each month from August to December.

That would add two million bpd to markets by the end of the year, helping to fuel a global economic recovery as the coronavirus pandemic eases.

But an agreement was scuttled following objections from the United Arab Emirates.

"Unregulated output could mean freedom for all to produce as much as each country sees fit

and would be an extremely bearish development for a market that got used to rules and supply quota, in a world still affected by COVID-19," Dickson said.

"It looks like the market is more worried about a potential crisis at the cartel than it likes the lack of fresh supply coming on in the second half of the year," Markets.com analyst Neil Wilson remarked. (With inputs from AFP)

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MSX declines on weak activity

Our Correspondent
Muscat

After continues improvement during past two weeks, the benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange on Wednesday decreased 0.28 per cent to close at 4,109.90 points.

The drop in main index came on the back of decline in financial and industrial stocks. Financial Index and Industrial Index decreased by 0.1 per cent and 0.05 per cent, respectively. Services Index rose 0.16 per cent for the day.

MSX Sharia Index remained flat at 597.08 points.

Trading activity remained weak on Wednesday as volumes further decreased 28 per cent at 18.9mn shares compared with 26.23mn shares traded on Tuesday. Market turnover decreased 5.6 per cent to RO3.55mn compared with RO3.36mn in the previous trading session.



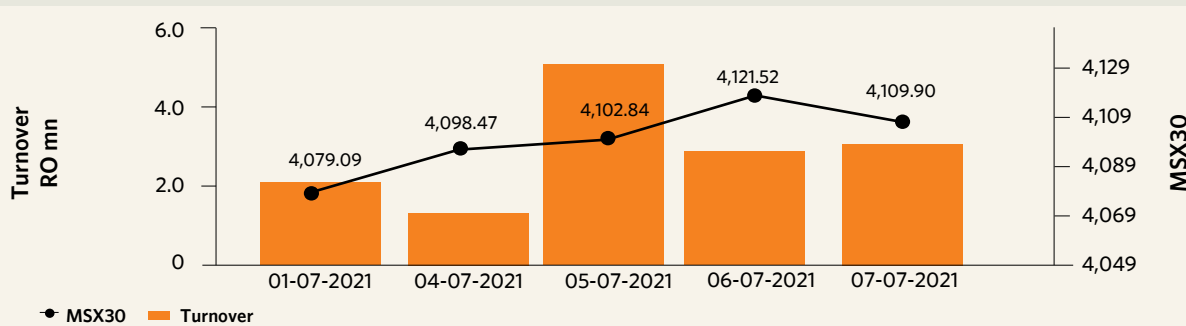
Market breadth at the MSX remained negative with 13 advancing stocks to 22 decliners. As many as 21 traded stocks remained flat for the day.

Top gainers were Al Hassan Engineering (93.33 per cent), Oman Oil Marketing (3.52 per cent), Oman Arab Bank (3.23 per cent), Al Maha Petroleum (3.18 per

cent) and Oman Qatar Insurance (2.67 per cent).

Top losers were Oman Fisheries (-3.53 per cent), Al Anwar Investment (-3.42 per cent), United Finance (-3.28 per cent), Oman and Emirates Investment Holding (-2.63 per cent) and BankDhofar (-2.33 per cent).

MSX INDEX AND TURNOVER OF FIVE TRADING DAYS



IMF urges G20 to prevent 'devastating' blow of pandemic to poorest nations

Washington, US - The world's richest nations must do more to help the poorest countries withstand the 'devastating double-blow' of the pandemic and the resulting economic damage, IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said Wednesday.

Warning of a "deepening divergence" between rich and poor, she called on the G20 to take urgent steps to keep developing nations from falling further behind in vaccine access and funding to repair their fortunes.

In a blog post ahead of this week's meeting of G20 finance ministers and central bankers, the head of the International Monetary Fund said "speed is of the essence" but the price tag is relatively small.

"Poorer nations are facing a devastating double-blow" losing the race against the virus and missing out on key investments that will help lay the groundwork for economic growth, Georgieva said.

"It is a critical moment that calls for urgent action by the G20 and policymakers across the



IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva

globe," she said.

While the United States is poised to grow by its fastest pace since 1984 and countries like China and the euro area are gaining momentum, the developing world is being left behind by a "worsening two-track recovery, driven by dramatic differences in vaccine availability, infection rates, and the ability to provide policy support."

She again pressed the G20 to do more to help get vaccines to the poor countries, including sharing doses, accelerating debt forgiveness, and endorsing the goal of vaccinating at least 40

per cent of the population in every country by the end of 2021, and at least 60 per cent by the first half of 2022.

With less than one adult in 100 fully vaccinated in Sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 30 per cent in advanced economies, those countries are at higher risk for emerging COVID-19 variants.

The IMF estimated that low-income countries will need to deploy about US\$200bn over five years just to fight the pandemic, and another US\$250bn for economic reforms to allow them to catch up to the richer nations.

But Georgieva said they cannot

do that on their own and wealthy nations must "redouble their efforts, especially on concessional financing and dealing with debt."

The Washington-based crisis lender has proposed a US\$50bn joint effort with the World Health Organization, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization to expand vaccine access, "a global game-changer" she said would save hundreds of thousands of lives and accelerate the recovery.

In areas where infections continue to rise, she said it is "critical" that businesses and families continue to receive financial support, but once the virus is under control funds can shift to things like worker training programs to "help heal the scars of the crisis," which hit women especially hard.

Georgieva also said the IMF is keeping an eye on rising prices, particularly in the United States, but as the recovery gains traction "it will be essential to avoid over-reacting to transitory increases in inflation."

AFP

Global tax reform plan goes to G20

Milan, Italy - G20 finance ministers meeting in Venice on Friday and Saturday could rally the world's top economies behind a global plan to tax multinationals more fairly that has already been hashed out among 131 countries representing 90 per cent of world output.

On the face of it, the Group of 20 - the world's 19 biggest economies plus the European Union - have already backed the framework for global tax reform, agreed on July 1 among members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) alongside China and India.

But negotiations continue behind the scenes to convince low-tax EU countries such as Hungary, Ireland and Estonia, who declined to sign up to the OECD deal to tax global companies at a rate of at least 15 per cent.

Italian Finance Minister Daniele Franco, whose country holds the G20 presidency, said he is confident of reaching a political agreement among finance ministers in Venice that would radically change the current international tax architecture.

The hold-out European countries have relied on low tax rates to attract multinationals and build their economies.

Ireland, the EU home to tech giants Facebook, Google and Apple, has a corporate tax rate of just 12.5 per cent, while Hungary has one of 9.0 per cent and Estonia almost only taxes dividend payments.

However, the support of these three countries is crucial for the EU, as the adoption of a minimum tax rate would require unanimous backing from mem-



ber states. The minimum rate is one of two pillars of global tax reform.

The other is less controversial - a plan to tax companies where they make their profits rather than simply where they are headquartered.

It has in its sights digital giants such as Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple, which have profited enormously during the pandemic but pay tax rates that are derisory when compared to their income.

When the new tax regime is in place - the OECD is aiming for 2023 - then national digital taxes imposed by countries such as France, Italy and Spain will disappear. However, the EU plans to announce its own digital tax later this month to help finance its 750bn-euro post-virus recovery plan - in the face of opposition from Washington, which sees it as discriminating against US technology giants.

It has warned the European proposal could 'completely derail' the global tax negotiations.

Countries have for years been debating how to stop multinational companies taking advantage of different countries'

systems to limit the amount of tax they pay.

Negotiations became bogged down during the US presidency of Donald Trump, but were revived with Joe Biden's arrival at the White House, and the G7 richest nations made a historic commitment at a meeting in London last month.

The reforms must be implemented by parliaments in different countries - and Republicans in the US Congress, for one, are strongly opposed. For a number of emerging economies, meanwhile, the reform does not go far enough.

Argentina, a member of the G24 intergovernmental group that also includes Brazil and India, has called for a global minimum corporation tax rate of 21 per cent or even 25 per cent before agreeing to the OECD plan.

"This is already a very important result," Giuliano Noci, professor of strategy at Politecnico di Milano, told AFP, saying it will be harder to go further. "The devil is in the detail. We have to wait for the implementation to assess the real scope of the agreement."

AFP

Eurozone's 2021 growth seen at 4.8%

Brussels, Belgium - The European Commission issued a sharply increased growth forecast on Wednesday, predicting that the eurozone economies will expand by 4.8 per cent this year.

Brussels had been expecting a 4.3 per cent growth rate as the single-currency area recovers from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdowns.

The new growth forecast for the eurozone now matches that for the 27-nation European Union as a whole, and both are now expected to grow at 4.5 per cent in 2022.

Last year's 6.5 per cent drop in eurozone output, -6.0 per cent in the EU as a whole, was a record fall, and now the recovery looks on course for a record climb. 'Growth is expected to strengthen due to several factors,' the European Commission statement said. First, activity in the first quarter of the year exceeded expectations.

'Second, an effective virus containment strategy and progress with vaccinations led to falling numbers of new infections and hospitalisations, which in turn allowed EU member states to reopen their economies.'

The commission also revised its inflation forecast upwards.

It now expects a rate of 1.9 per cent in 2021 and 1.4 per cent in 2022 in the euro area.

In the EU, consumer prices are expected to rise slightly faster, by 2.2 per cent this year - up 0.3 percentage points compared with the spring estimate - and by 1.6 per cent next year.

But the commission did not express concern, adding: "In 2022, these pressures should moderate gradually as production constraints are resolved and supply and demand converge."

AFP

Egypt releases megaship impounded over Suez blockage

Ismailia, Egypt - The megaship MV Ever Given which blocked the Suez Canal for six days in March headed out of the waterway on Wednesday as Egypt and the vessel's Japanese owners signed a final compensation deal that lifted its arrest.

The ship weighed anchor and started to move north from the central canal city of Ismailia towards the Mediterranean Sea, shortly after 11:30am local time.

The nearly 200,000-tonne container vessel became wedged across the canal during a sandstorm on March 23, blocking a vital artery from Asia to Europe that carries 10 per cent of global maritime trade and pumps vital revenues into Egyptian state coffers. After a round-the-clock salvage operation to dislodge it, Egypt seized the ship and demanded compensation from Japanese owners Shoei Kisen Kaisha for lost canal revenues, salvage costs and damage to the

canal.

In a ceremony attended by ambassadors and international media, Suez Canal Authority chief (SCA) Osama Rabie inked a final deal with representatives of the ship's owners.

"I announce to the world that we have reached a deal," Rabie said, flanked by Egyptian and Japanese flags in the ceremony carried live on Egypt's state television. He described the six-day salvage operations in March as a "race against time" to restore global shipping flows. "We were facing a tough test with the world watching," he added.

The SCA announced last month that it had signed a non-disclosure agreement with the Japanese firm ahead of reaching a final deal.

Khaled Abou Bakr, a prominent lawyer who headed the negotiation team of the SCA, reiterated Wednesday the "secrecy" of the final compensation



This picture on Wednesday shows a view of the Panama-flagged MV 'Ever Given' container ship sailing along Egypt's Suez Canal (AFP)

package shortly before the signing. "I can unequivocally state that we preserved the full rights of the Authority," he said.

Cairo had initially demanded

US\$916mn in compensation before slashing that to around US\$550mn, but the final amount has been the subject of tough negotiations.

Millions in revenues

Egypt, which earns over US\$5bn a year from the Suez, lost between US\$12mn and US\$15mn in revenues for each day the wa-

terway was closed, according to the SCA. The MV Ever Given's grounding and the intensive salvage efforts needed to refloat it also resulted in significant damage to the canal.

In April, maritime data company Lloyd's List said the blockage by the vessel, longer than four football fields, held up some US\$9.6bn-worth of cargo each day it was stuck.

The Taiwanese-operated and Panama-flagged vessel was refloated on March 29, and tailbacks totalling 420 vessels at the northern and southern entrances to the canal were cleared in early April.

On Tuesday, the Ismailia Economic Court ruled the seized ship with its crew on board was being released following a request from the SCA.

According to tracking service MarineTraffic, the ship had been moored in the northern part of Great Bitter Lake.

It departed with its complete cargo of 18,300 containers intact, SCA sources told AFP.

In a Sunday interview with a private television channel, Rabie said the Ever Given had suffered "no leakage".

He said Egypt would also receive a 75-tonne tugboat from Shoei Kisen Kaisha as part of the compensation package, and noted that the family of one rescue worker who died during the salvage operation would also be compensated.

"The Suez canal has always been a site of sacrifices since it was built," he said. Rabie waved off the megaship as it headed to the Mediterranean surrounded by captains clad in white waving Egyptian flags.

In a show of appreciation, the SCA also presented a silver plaque to the Ever Given's captain and crew, who had been stranded for months.

AFP

H E Dr Sa'eedi takes part in event on accelerating progress towards health SDGs

As part of the high-level Political Forum 2021 on Sustainable Development, H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health took part on Tuesday in a virtual side event 'Accelerating progress towards the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a time of crisis: solutions for an equitable and resilient recovery'.

The sultanate was selected to participate in this event for its international and health stature among the states of the region.

The event highlighted the centrality of health for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the need for multilateral collaboration to address the challenges the world is facing.

The event emphasised the relevance of health across the SDGs and why multilateral collaboration is key to overcome the pandemic, improve health security and accelerate progress to deliver on our vision to achieve healthy lives and well-being for all by 2030.

The Minister of Health stressed that the SDGs represent a roadmap for a better future that inspires action and cooperation among diverse actors and agents of change, while simultaneously offering flexibility in adjusting pathways based on country contexts.

Health is central to this roadmap because it is an important tool for building sustainable and equitable systems. Health



can play a role in promoting peace, and encouraging dialogue across divergent parties as it is a birthright for all.

Therefore, the sultanate is consolidating the Global Health for Peace Initiative (the GHPI), which was inspired by WHO's Health as a Bridge for Peace framework.

In addition, H E Dr Sa'eedi touched upon the importance of achieving the SDG 10 on reducing inequalities and disparities, as it will ensure equitable access to essential services, universal health coverage, and financial protection.

He also addressed the SDG 16 by promoting peace, justice

and stronger institutions will have positive impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals, leading to more prosperous and productive populations.

Moreover, the virtual event discussed the acceleration solutions, which include primary healthcare as an accelerator for recovery, boosting resilience to

future shocks and enhancing health security, equity-focused approaches and the importance of multisectoral action, data and accountability to reach the most vulnerable, as well as strengthened collaboration as indispensable to support countries in implementing their acceleration approaches.

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi to begin Baku flights

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, a national airline of the UAE, has announced its latest route to Baku, Azerbaijan starting on August 14. The launch of the new route will see the airline now fly to 29 destinations. Azerbaijan is currently on Abu Dhabi's green country list meaning that travellers will not be required to quarantine upon arrival or when returning back to the UAE's capital.

The flight to Baku will operate twice a week on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Tickets are on sale on wizzair.com and the airline's mobile app (also available in Arabic), with fares starting as low as AED179.

The new route to the capital city of Azerbaijan opens up yet another opportunity for travellers to explore amazing destinations from Abu Dhabi or reconnect with friends and family.

Baku is positioned on the coast of the beautiful Caspian Sea and is the most southern point of Azerbaijan. Located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East, the city's heritage, leisure and architecture is the perfect blend of multiple cultures making it a true sight to be seen, experience and enjoy.

Kees Van Schaick, managing director of Wizz Air Abu Dhabi said, "We are once again adding a new and exciting destination to our route network. Baku is a city like no other with a unique fusion of cultures offering a wide variety for everyone, from hospitality, history to F&B. As restrictions across the world start to ease, we continue to provide more travel options for those with a desire to travel - we look forward to seeing you on board soon!"

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi has the youngest fleet composed of four brand new state-of-the-art Airbus A321neo aircraft, offering the lowest fuel burn, emissions, and



noise footprint.

The airline has also introduced a new era of sanitised travel across its network, with enhanced hygiene measures to ensure the health and safety of passengers and crew.

Everyone on board of Wizz Air Abu Dhabi flights will have been tested prior to boarding and approved to travel in line with Abu Dhabi Airport guidelines.

For ultimate peace of mind during this uncertain time, passengers can book tickets with confidence, thanks to Wizz Flex. With Wizz Flex, passengers can cancel their flight up to three hours before departure without any fee and receive 100 per cent of the fare immediately reimbursed in airline credit.

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi is a joint venture by ADQ, one of the region's largest holding companies with a broad portfolio of major enterprises spanning key sectors of Abu Dhabi's diversified economy, and Wizz Air Holdings Plc, the fastest growing European airline which operates a fleet of 139 Airbus A320 and A321 aircraft. A team of dedicated aviation professionals delivers superior service and very low fares, making Wizz Air the preferred choice of 40mn passengers.



National Museum participates in vaccination campaign

In conjunction with the National Immunisation Campaign against the coronavirus, which is being implemented by the Ministry of Health, the National Museum hosted a vaccination campaign programme on Wednesday.

The campaign was organised by Badr al Sama Group of Hospitals and Polyclinics at the head-quarter of the National Museum.

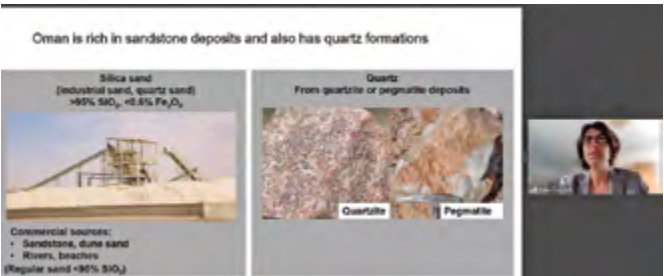
The National Museum's participation in this initiative fulfils some of the objectives of which it was established for, such as increasing public awareness and consolidating the noble Omani values that call for solidarity and cooperation. The museum will harness its advanced facilities and qualified front office staff to ease procedures and reach the

largest number of targets for the vaccination campaign in the Governorate of Muscat in a place incubating the components of Oman's long-standing cultural heritage. Furthermore, the participation supporting the national efforts in reducing the spread of the pandemic and preserving the health and safety of citizens and residents.

IIC emphasises importance of capitalising on silica, limestone, copper and chromium

The Industrial Innovation Center (IIC) held two online workshops on the capitalisation on the sultanate's natural resources, highlighting four natural minerals, namely silica, limestone, copper and chromium, aiming at enhancing opportunities for sustainable utilisation of these minerals, identifying investment challenges that facing them and how to expand their contribution to the sultanate's GDP.

The two workshops come within the framework of the IIC's efforts to develop the industrial sector, and to strengthening the economical revenues of the sultanate's natural mineral resources. The two workshops highlighted the potential investment opportunities in the mining sector, and the sector's importance in maximising the added



value of the natural resources.

The workshops focused on the IIC efforts in developing the mineral sector's production, in opening up prospects for small and medium-sized enterprises to utilize the self-employment opportunities, thus contributing to create new jobs opportunities for the jobseekers.

Experts and specialists in mineral economics from a number of local and international entities have participated in the two

workshops, in the presence of a number of participants from government and private sectors who concerned with the sultanate's mining sector, who followed-up the functions via Internet platforms. The two workshops reviewed a set of basic information about the mining sector in the sultanate, its importance, challenges, and the potential opportunities to benefit from these minerals, explaining who the opportunities are clustered, outlin-

ing the sector situation in Oman, and presenting different parts of the value chains that can be added by utilising these four minerals, as well as briefing overview of the global scouting of the minerals addressed in the two workshops.

Dr Abdullah al Mahrouqi, CEO of the Industrial Innovation Center, said, "As part of the sultanate's continuation to implement of Oman Vision 2040 and its objectives of diversifying the sultanate's economy sources of revenues, the scope of the center's interests is expanding to include providing whatever could enhance performance and the innovative innovation for various economic sectors, including the mining sector, which we hope will increase its contribution to the country's GDP."

Volkswagen corporate offers exclusive benefit to fleet customers

Volkswagen corporate and fleet range offers fleet packages across its leading products, including the region's most popular seven-seater SUV, the Volkswagen Teramont, Passat and the recently released stylish compact SUV, the T-Roc.

Volkswagen's corporate and fleet segment works towards ensuring that customers receive enhanced sales and service privileges. It extends preferential rates for corporate customers, trade-in and buy-back offers, special rates on service, parts and extended warranty, finance and insurance solutions, courtesy vehicle service, and replacement.

Christian Nehme, general manager of Premium Motors Oman, said, "At Premium Motors, we offer the right vehicles that meet professional requirements and can be perfectly customised to specific work requirements. Volkswagen cars are innovative, affordable, fun to drive, safe, fuel-efficient, and distinctly German-engineered. Our mission is to provide you with a unique and innovative automotive experience by offering a wide range of products and services that deliver superior value and satisfaction."

He added, "At Volkswagen corporate and fleet segment, our



mission is to make the buying and ownership experience as smooth, convenient and cost-effective as possible. We do this through our commitment to unparalleled service, customized solutions, and world-class vehicles that raise the standard in their respective classes."

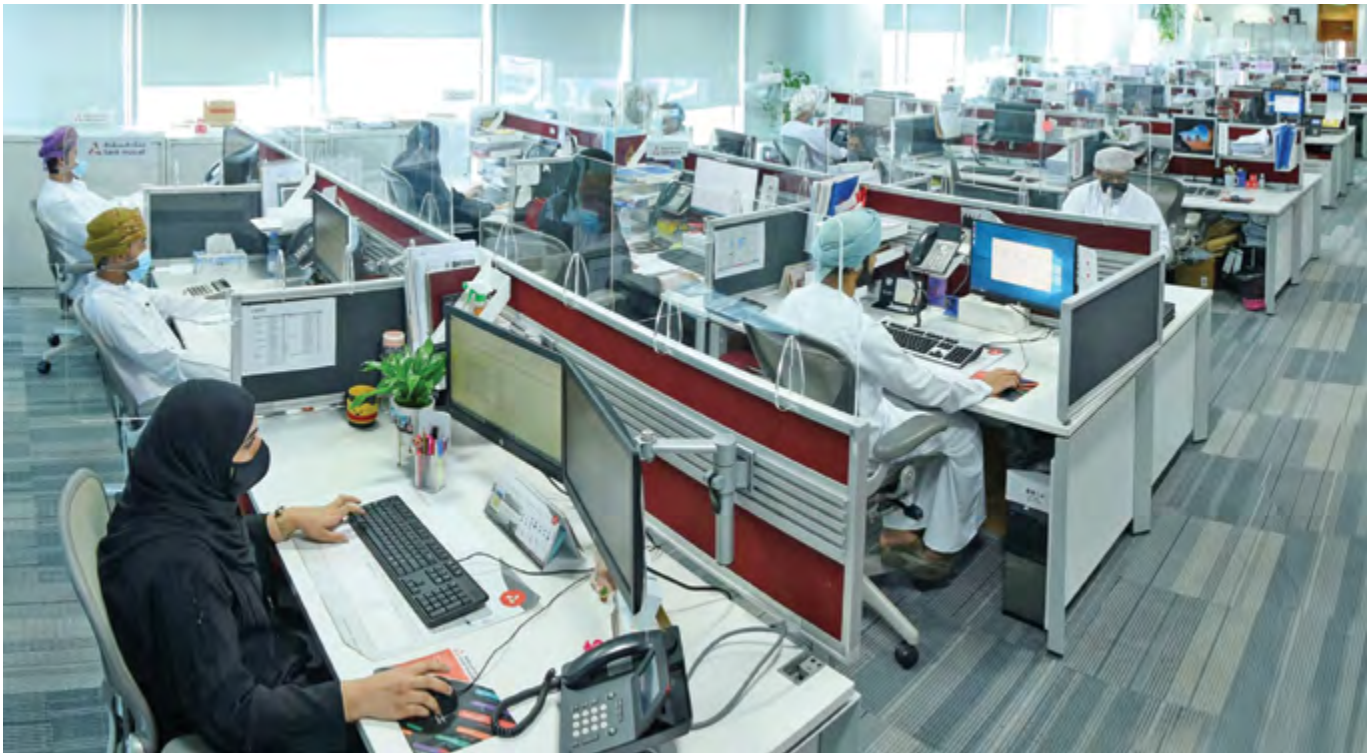
Volkswagen wants to exceed expectations and open up new possibilities. It reflects its goal to lead the corporate fleet industry through customer-focused services and solutions, creating lasting relationships with fleet decision-makers.

For more information, contact Francy George at 92982064.

Bank Muscat has excellent Omanisation ratio

In line with its pioneering role in the development of Omani human resources, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the sultanate, has appointed over 120 Omani nationals in its different departments at the Head Office and branches across the country, from the beginning of the year till date taking the total number of Omanis working in the bank to 3,584. The bank, which has an Omanisation ratio of over 95 per cent, will be continuing its recruitment drive and recruiting more talented Omani youth in the coming months. It must be mentioned in this regard that the bank recruited 184 Omani nationals in 2020.

With its positive work culture, common values, fostering of innovation, employee engagement activities, and sound HSE (Health, Safety and Environment) practices, Bank Muscat is a dream employer for many job seekers in the sultanate, particularly those who are interested in the banking and financial services sector. The bank recognises that employees are its core strength and the primary reason for its success and accomplishments. It constantly invests resources and time to further develop their skills and help them



reach their peak potential.

From the moment of joining the bank, suitable training and development opportunities are provided to make employees skilled with work-related processes and procedures such that they can deliver to the best of their abilities. It is responsive to employee feedback and strives to ensure a professional work environment that is based on fair and equal opportunities to

all employees, cutting-edge technology and global financial best practices. It is notable in this regard that Bank Muscat has excellent gender equality.

About 49 per cent of its employees are women, who work across different departments and at all levels including the bank's management. The bank recruits Omani talent through its strong relationships with leading higher educational institutions,

career fairs and through posts on its official social media accounts.

Speaking about the many successes and achievements by the bank over the last four decades, Said Salim al Afi, group deputy general manager - Human Resources, Bank Muscat, said, "The bank is moving forward in close alignment to its strategic plan of developing Omani human resources in the best manner possible. It takes into account the

need to develop Omani human resources across different specialties and disciplines for all round development. To ensure success in its mission to develop the sultanate's human resources, the bank works in close partnership with many government organisations and higher education institutions. This ensures that Bank Muscat is a much sought after employer and is able to attract and retain the best and



most talented Omani nationals."

Aufi added, "Bank Muscat is currently working on plans to provide more jobs to Omani youth in the future and will be making further announcements regarding this in the coming months. The bank is closely supporting efforts for further development of youth through specialised programmes and courses to realise national development goals. We also take this opportunity to appreciate the efforts of higher education institutions in the country and thank them for successfully implementing strategic education and skill development plans, which are helping our young people to develop the necessary skill-sets to take on important roles across different sectors and businesses."

As part of the crucial skills de-

velopment of its workforce, the bank's Jadara Academy, organised 211 training programmes with a total of 3,435 participants in the first five months of this year. Earlier in 2020, it conducted 380 programmes which offered a total of 19,868 training seats to bank employees. In the post-pandemic phase, training programmes are being offered online to maintain social distancing norms and the health and safety of all involved.

Bank Muscat has been greatly encouraged by the results of its continuous investments in human resources. As a result of its strong HR processes and abundant learning and development opportunities for employees, most of its senior and middle management today have been promoted from within the bank's ranks. It must also be noted in this regard that as part of its strategic plan, the bank continually creates a pipeline of leaders not just for the bank, but also to contribute to the overall growth and development of the nation. Driven by its vision of serving the people of Oman better every day, Bank Muscat continues to actively nurture and support Omani youth so as to play its part in the progressive march of the nation across all realms.



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beIN Sports commemorates 500 days to go for FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 countdown

beIN Media Group - the global sports and entertainment broadcaster and its flagship sports channel beIN Sports - the official broadcaster of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 for all 24 countries in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and France - marks the significant 500-days-to-go World Cup milestone as it continues to make preparations for broadcasting the world's biggest football event. The tournament is set to make history when it kicks off on November 21, 2022, for what will be the first FIFA World Cup to take place in the Middle East and Arab world.

Celebrating the milestone, Mohammad al Subaie, acting CEO of beIN MENA, said, "In just 500 days Qatar will proudly welcome football fans from all over the world to what's set to be an unforgettable FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. From beIN's MENA HQ in Qatar, we will also deliver an exceptional World Cup viewing experience for our millions of



viewers and subscribers in the region where we will bring the world to Qatar, and showcase Qatar to the world. The World Cup is a truly defining and unifying moment for the Arab world, and beIN Sports is tremendously proud to be the exclusive broadcaster across all 24 countries of MENA."

As the first Arab World Cup draws ever closer, on Friday, July 9, from 1pm Mecca through to

2am on Saturday morning, beIN's Arabic Sports News Service will have dedicated bulletins, covering the 500 day milestone. Included in the all day coverage will be a celebratory FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 special studio, plus an exclusive Hassad bulletin scheduled for 1am on Saturday.

The MENA English channel, beIN Sports EN 1, will present their dedicated 500 Day milestone studio immediately after

the Men's Semi-Final Wimbledon coverage at 11pm Mecca. The Arabic and English coverage will be complemented with FIFA World Cup And Qatar related programming on the Arabic and English sports channels, including episodes of Welcome to Qatar, Road to Qatar, and opportunities to relive previous World Cup tournaments.

beIN's exclusive celebratory coverage will also include contributions from various football legends plus global reactions to the milestone from beIN's network of reporters and channels. The MENA studios will be home to the official FIFA World Cup Winners Trophy for the day. beIN's international and Arab talent - including visiting EPL star and Egyptian National team full back Ahmed Elmohamady, Arsene Wenger, Bacary Sagna, and Peter Schmeichel, plus many other well known faces - will be out and about in Qatar, conducting interviews and experiencing

the local sights and culture.

To celebrate the milestone, beIN will launch a social media competition on July 9 for its followers on beIN Sports MENA's Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. Football fans will need to identify which FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 stadiums are being shown in a short celebratory video.

Five hundred randomly selected participants will then be in with the chance to win a weekly beIN pass, gaining access to 1-7 beIN Sports Premium, English, and French Channels, amongst others.

beIN's MENA channel alone broadcasts over 34 beIN channels and has 816 hours of content every day across the region and 600 hours live premium sport every week. To find out more details and enter the celebratory 500-day competition, visit us on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram - and to subscribe, visit www.bein.com/en/subscribe

Bank Nizwa appoints new member in its Sharia'a board

Strengthening its leadership in the Islamic banking industry, Oman's most trusted Islamic bank, Bank Nizwa announced during its recent Annual General Meeting, the appointment of Ali Suliman Mohammed al Ghahdami, as a non-voting member of the bank's Sharia'a Supervisory Board.

Ghahdami is well acquainted with the field of Islamic studies.

He acquired an extensive experience of the industry during his professional career. Since 2007, he worked as a Fatwa researcher in the Fatwa Department of the Office of the Grand Mufti of the sultanate. In addition, he is a visiting teacher at the College of Sharia'a Sciences for BA and MA students.

He is a PhD researcher in the Department of Jurispru-



dence and its Foundations in College of Knowledge of Revelation and Humanities at International Islamic University Malaysia.

Additionally, he acquired a Master in Economics and Islamic Banking from Yarmouk University in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a Bachelor degree of Jurisprudence and Dawah from the College of Sharia'a Sciences, Sultanate of

Oman, and many others accreditations in Islamic Banking Industry. Furthering his prolific career, Sheikh Ali authored several scientific researches and studies including Sharia'a Perspective on Banking cards, Sharia'a Perspective on generating money and an analytical study on the impact of Sharia'a policy on financing operations in Islamic Banking in the Sultanate of Oman.

Bank Nizwa will continue to march toward success with significant focus on hiring and developing a talent pool for its greater benefit.

Such assets will contribute to the bank's development, strengthen its leadership in the Islamic banking industry and enhance its growth, ultimately achieving the bank's desired objectives locally and internationally.

Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix showcases Jeddah Corniche Circuit

The Saudi Automobile & Motorcycle Federation (SAMF) - Promoter of the 2021 Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix - was delighted to welcome a selection of the region's key sports, news and lifestyle media to the site of the Jeddah Corniche Circuit, as the newest venue on the F1 calendar nears completion ahead of the inaugural F1 race weekend in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia later this year.

With just five months until the greatest drivers in the world land in Jeddah for the first ever 2021 Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, the lucky group of media were treated to an exclusive tour of the newest track in F1 - idyllically located on the banks of the stunning Red Sea - by Prince Khalid bin Sultan al Abdullah al Faisal, chairman of the Saudi Automobile & Motorcycle Federation (SAMF).

Featuring no less than 27 cor-



ners, the Jeddah Corniche Circuit stretches to 6.175km in length, making it the longest street circuit in the sport. Moreover, with average speeds expected to reach at least 250km/h, the newest addition to the pinnacle of motorsport is due to establish itself as the fastest street circuit on the planet and in the top 5 fastest F1 circuits altogether.

During the tour, media were given exclusive access to the various sectors of the Jeddah Corniche Circuit that already mark it out as the most hotly anticipated

new track on the F1 calendar, including the site of the futuristic 280m-long, four-storey, cutting-edge Pit Building - due to be finalised by October - that will become one of the most unique and innovative structures of its kind, guaranteeing spectacular views of the racing action as well as of the breathtaking Jeddah waterfront.

Furthermore, media were able to inspect the spectacular 12-degree bank at Turn 13 that is currently under construction, providing a tantalising glimpse of

the near-future when the likes of Lewis Hamilton and Max Verstappen will take on this remarkable section of the track in their battle for F1 supremacy.

They also got to examine progress at the rapid, DRS-enabled, sweeping stretch that follows the exit from T23, where cars are expected to hit speeds of 322km/h as they head into the crucial final turn of the lap (T27), as well as the beautiful, state-of-the-art Media Island, where the world's press will cover the race.

Taliban launch assault on Afghan provincial capital as US ramps up troops withdrawal

Herat, Afghanistan - The Taliban launched a major assault on a provincial capital in Afghanistan on Wednesday, the first since the US military began its final drawdown of troops from the country, as insurgents press on with a blistering offensive.

Fierce fighting erupted in the western city of Qala-e-Naw, the capital of Badghis, with the militants seizing police headquarters and offices of the country's spy agency. Afghanistan's Defence Minister Bismillah Mohammadi said government forces were in a 'very sensitive military situation', adding that 'the war is raging' with the Taliban.

The onslaught came just hours after Washington announced US forces on the ground had completed more than 90 per cent of their withdrawal from Afghanistan, and as the Kabul government held talks with Taliban representatives in neighbouring Iran.

The militants have waged a dizzying campaign across Afghanistan since US and NATO forces announced the final withdrawal from the country in early May, seizing dozens of rural districts and stirring fears that the government is in crisis.

'The enemy has entered the city, all the districts have fallen,' Badghis governor Hessamuddin Shams told reporters in a text message. Badghis provincial



Afghan militia forces stand guard at an outpost against the Taliban fighters in the Tange Farkhar area of Taloqan in Takhar province on Tuesday (AFP)

council chief Abdul Aziz Bek confirmed the assault, saying some security officials had surrendered to the Taliban.

"The provincial council officials have fled to an army camp in the city. Fighting continues in the city," added Badghis provincial council member Zia Gul Habibi.

She said the Taliban had entered the city's police headquar-

ters and the local office of the country's spy agency, the National Directorate of Security.

In a separate video message sent to reporters, Shams attempted to calm the residents of the city, even as he appeared armed with a rifle with gunfire rattling in the distance. "My message is please keep your calm. I assure you that we will, all of us, together defend the city," he said.

Fighters on bikes

As news of the attack spread, social media was flooded with videos of the fight for the city, with some videos showing armed Taliban fighters on motorbikes entering Qala-e-Naw as onlookers cheered.

Last week, all US and NATO forces left Bagram Air Base near Kabul - the command centre for anti-Taliban operations - effec-

tively wrapping up their exit after 20 years of military involvement that began in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

Vital US air support for the Afghan forces has been massively curtailed by the handover.

For months the Taliban have been effectively surrounding several provincial capitals across the country, with observers predicting that the militants were wait-

Afghan govt meets Taliban in Tehran: Iranian ministry

Tehran, Iran - An Afghan government delegation met with Taliban representatives in Tehran on Wednesday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said.

Opening the talks, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif welcomed the departure of its US foe from its eastern borders but warned, "Today the people and political leaders of Afghanistan must make difficult decisions for the future of their country."

Deputy chief negotiator Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai headed the Taliban delegation while former vice president Yunous Qanooni represented the government, the Iranian ministry said. Taliban spokesman Zabi-

hullah Mujahid confirmed Stanikzai's visit to Tehran to 'discuss issues of mutual interest'.

But he made no reference to any Afghan government delegation, saying only that Stanikzai was holding talks with 'some Afghan personalities'.

"They will discuss and exchange opinions on the current situation of the country and finding a solution through talks," Mujahid added.

Zarif hailed the 'defeat' of US troops after two decades of war that had caused 'extensive damage' but warned of the "unfavourable results of continuing the conflict".

AFP

ing for the complete withdrawal of foreign forces before ordering an onslaught on urban areas.

After they routed much of the north in recent weeks, the fall of Badghis would further tighten the Taliban's grip on western Afghanistan. Their forces have also inched closer to the nearby city of Herat, near the border with Iran. If the Taliban capture Qala-e-Naw it will be of 'strate-

gic value as it creates a psychological effect of Afghan forces rapidly losing territory like dominoes against an unstoppable force," said Afghanistan expert Nishank Motwani.

Afghan defence officials have said they intend to focus on securing major cities, roads and border towns in the face of numerous Taliban offensives.

AFP



Iran's President Hassan Rouhani addresses a Cabinet meeting in the capital Tehran on Wednesday (AFP)

Rouhani regrets blackouts after drought hits Iran

Tehran, Iran - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani apologised Wednesday for a wave of blackouts sweeping the country, blaming a searing drought he said had virtually halted hydroelectric power generation and prompted record consumption.

Since last week, Tehran and Iran's other major cities have experienced frequent power outages that authorities say may continue until late July.

"We regret the problems the people have had in the past few days," Rouhani said in televised remarks at a Cabinet meeting mostly dedicated to the power cuts, which have sparked a chorus of complaints.

Unconfirmed videos circulating on social media appear to show frustrated Iranians protesting the outages in several cities including Shiraz and Kazeroun in the south, and Amol and Kordkuy in the north, as well as Tehran.

"On the one hand, our output has dropped due to the condition of hydroelectric power plants, and on the other consumption has gone up," Rouhani said.

He attributed the surge in demand to 'industrial growth and extreme heat' as well as energy-intensive cryptocurrency mining operations.

In May, the government temporarily banned crypto mining for four months, but Iranian news

agencies still report frequent police raids on 'illegal farms' that authorities say use large amounts of subsidised electricity.

On Tuesday, Rouhani said Iran was facing an 'unprecedented drought' with average rainfall down 52 per cent compared to the previous year, bringing hydroelectric power generation to 'almost' zero.

He called on the energy ministry to prevent any cuts outside of the scheduled blackouts of at least two hours a day.

After the Cabinet meeting, Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian said he 'sincerely' apologised to Iranians. He said that until late August all government departments would remain closed for an extra day a week, on Thursdays, to save energy.

Ardakanian had offered a similar apology in May, when Iran introduced planned, rolling blackouts after Tehran and other cities were hit by unannounced power cuts.

Tehran's police chief said the blackouts were placing a huge burden on his officers as traffic lights failed across the capital.

Power cuts are not uncommon during Iran's hot summers, when air-conditioning use spikes.

But Rouhani said this year's searing drought was the worst in 11 years.

AFP

12 Indian ministers resign in major cabinet reshuffle

New Delhi, India - Twelve Indian ministers including the health chief resigned on Wednesday following a catastrophic surge in COVID-19 cases earlier this year.

The resignations form part of a major cabinet expansion by Prime Minister Narendra Modi ahead of seven state elections in 2022.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan, 66, came in for particular criticism during the spike in infections in April and May.

The health service was under severe pressure in many areas with hospitals running out of beds, medical oxygen and drugs.

The COVID-19 explosion was blamed on new virus variants and the government having allowed mass religious and political gatherings to take place from January.

Modi had declared victory over the virus in January and critics say his government failed to use the time to prepare the his-



An Indian national flag flutters on the Presidential Palace as new ministers take oath in New Delhi on Wednesday (AFP)

torically underfunded health system for another wave.

India's official death toll has exploded from around 160,000 at the end of March to more than 400,000 now, the third-highest in the world.

But many experts suspect the figures are an undercount and the real number of dead could be several times higher.

Elections

Three dozen new faces have been inducted into the new Modi cabinet, taking the number of ministers to 77, up from 52.

More than a dozen ministers are from poll-bound states such as Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, representing different castes and regional communities, a dominant factor in India's electoral

politics. Four members from southern Karnataka state were also added, including millionaire media mogul Rajeev Chandrasekhar, and Shobha Karandlaje, a sectarian rabble-rouser politician.

Karandlaje has several police cases filed against her over her anti-Muslim remarks.

Six other women ministers also found a place in the new cabinet.

But the expansion has witnessed the shock exit of two key members from the Modi cabinet, including Ravi Shankar Prasad -- minister for law and justice and information technology -- and Prakash Javadekar, minister for information and broadcasting, environment and climate change.

Both Prasad, 66, and Javadekar, 70, were seen as faces of the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party government, with some press reports suggesting

they would handle party work ahead of the key state elections.

Seven Indian states are due to hold elections next year, six of them currently ruled by the BJP. They include Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, Gujarat and Punjab.

Earlier this year the BJP suffered a major setback when it failed to wrest power in the important eastern state of West Bengal from a high-profile Modi critic.

Some commentators said this was a reflection of Modi's falling popularity because of his handling of the pandemic. The BJP did however retain Assam in the northeast.

Twitter spat

Prasad's exit from the cabinet has been particularly surprising as he was locked in a bitter dispute with foreign social media companies over a new law.

AFP

Thousands flock to see dwarf cow in Bangladesh

Charigram, Bangladesh - Thousands of people are defying a nationwide coronavirus lockdown in Bangladesh to see Rani, a 51cm tall cow whose owners claim it is the world's smallest.

The 23 month old dwarf cow has become a media star with scores of newspapers and television stations throwing the spotlight on the tiny bovine at a farm near Dhaka.

Photos of Rani on social media platforms have set off a tourist frenzy.

Despite a nationwide transport shutdown because of record coronavirus infections and deaths, people are flocking in rickshaws to the farm in Charigram, 30km southwest of Dhaka.

"I have never seen anything like this in my life. Never," said Rina Begum (30), who came from a neighbouring town.

Rani is 66cm long and weighs



People take photos of a dwarf cow named Rani, whose owners applied to the Guinness Book of Records claiming it to be the smallest cow in the world, at a cattle farm in Charigram in Bangladesh on Tuesday (AFP)

only 26kg but the owners say it is 10cm shorter than the smallest cow in Guinness World Records.

M A Hasan Howlader, manager of Shikor Agro farm, used a tape measure to show dozens of

onlookers how Rani dwarfs her closest rival Manikyam, a cow in the Indian state Kerala that cur-

rently holds the world record.

Guinness World Records had promised a decision in three months, he said.

Guinness World Records said Manikyam, from the Vechur breed, was 61cm high in June 2014.

Rani is a Bhutti, or Bhutanese, cow which is prized for its meat in Bangladesh. The other Bhutis on the farm are twice Rani's size.

"We did not expect such huge interest. We did not think people would leave their homes because of the worsening virus situation. But they have come here in droves," the manager said.

Sajedul Islam, the government's chief vet for the region, said Rani is a product of 'genetic inbreeding' and was unlikely to become any bigger.

Islam said he had told the farm to restrict the tourist influx.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Indonesia logs record virus deaths, expands restrictions

Jakarta, Indonesia - Indonesia expanded nationwide restrictions on Wednesday as it reported a record number of coronavirus deaths, while the World Health Organization (WHO) chief warned that the pandemic remains in a 'very dangerous phase'.

Many wealthy nations are lifting curbs because of successful vaccination drives, but the need for caution has been illustrated in recent weeks by outbreaks across the Asia-Pacific region.

A sudden surge in cases forced reimposition of punishing restrictions in several countries in the region, as governments try to contain the spread and find ways to accelerate their vaccination programmes.

Indonesia has become the region's hotspot, with hospitals having to turn away patients, authorities forced to import oxygen supplies and a record 1,040 deaths reported on Wednesday.

The government expanded restrictions across the archipelago following earlier clampdowns on the capital Jakarta and some other areas.

"Cases are also rising in other regions and we need to pay attention to the availability of hospitals," said senior minister Airlangga Hartarto.

"Facilities in those regions are limited and overwhelmed."



A woman receives a dose of Sinovac jab during a vaccination drive in Banda Aceh on Wednesday (AFP)

The new restrictions apply to dozens of cities and extend across the vast nation of nearly 270mn people, which has been hammered by the highly infectious Delta variant that was first detected in India.

Many of the country's hospitals are bucking under the pressure as a wave of sick patients floods the overwhelmed health-care system.

This week the government rolled out new virus curbs in the hard-hit capital Jakarta, across Java and on holiday island Bali as it reported Wednesday a record

34,379 new infections and 1,040 deaths - as much as ten times the daily mortality rate less than a month ago.

Southeast Asia's worst-hit nation could see cases soar to more than 50,000 a day, authorities warned on Tuesday.

Delta-fuelled outbreaks have also led to the imposition of restrictions in Australia, including in its biggest city Sydney where lockdown orders on more than five million residents were on Wednesday extended by at least another week.

"This Delta strain is a game

changer, it's extremely transmissible," said Gladys Berejiklian, premier of New South Wales state, of which Sydney is the capital.

Australia has largely kept its outbreaks in check since the pandemic began, but the government is under increasing pressure over the slow rollout of vaccines.

"It's still scary that the virus is out there," said Menno De Moel (44) at a vaccination centre in Sydney where he was getting his first shot.

"Hopefully this is going to be

the last lockdown, but on the other hand anything that is needed, needs to be done."

Britain is also facing a new surge in infections.

Mass vaccinations, however, have stopped a resultant surge in hospital admissions or deaths.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced the end of most virus restrictions, such as face masks and indoor social distancing, in England. Other UK nations - Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - are moving more slowly.

'Obnoxious' anti-maskers

Despite the progress in some parts of the world, the pandemic remains in a 'very dangerous phase', WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned on Tuesday.

"The countries that are now opening up their societies are those that have largely controlled the supply of life-saving personal protective equipment, tests, oxygen, and especially vaccines," he said.

"Meanwhile, countries without access to sufficient supplies are facing waves of hospitalisations and death."

The virus is known to have claimed close to four million lives worldwide.

AFP

Virus death toll rises to 4mn

Paris, France - The novel coronavirus has killed at least 3,996,519 people since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP at 1000 GMT on Wednesday.

At least 184,524,100 cases of coronavirus have been registered.

The vast majority have recovered, though some have continued to experience symptoms weeks or even months later.

The figures are based on daily reports provided by health authorities in each country. They exclude revisions made by other statistical organisations, which show that the number of deaths is much higher.

The World Health Organization estimates that the pandemic's overall toll could be two to three times higher than official records, due to the excess mortality that is directly and indirectly linked to COVID-19.

A large number of the less severe or asymptomatic cases also remain undetected, despite intensified testing in many countries.

On Tuesday, 8,254 new deaths and 446,454 new cases were recorded worldwide. Based on latest reports, the countries with the most new deaths were Brazil with 1,780, followed by Indonesia with 1,040 and India with 930.

The United States is the

worst-affected country with 605,905 deaths from 33,747,198 cases.

After the US, the hardest-hit countries are Brazil with 526,892 deaths from 18,855,015 cases, India with 404,211 deaths from 30,633,665 cases, Mexico with 233,958 deaths from 2,549,862 cases, and Peru with 193,588 deaths from 2,069,051 cases.

The country with the highest number of deaths compared to its population is Peru with 587 fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Hungary with 311, Bosnia-Herzegovina with 295, the Czech Republic with 283, and the Republic of North Macedonia with 263.

Latin America and the Caribbean overall has 1,296,118 deaths from 38,200,250 cases, Europe 1,175,509 deaths from 55,029,236 infections, and the United States and Canada 632,283 deaths from 35,165,224 cases.

Asia has reported 591,617 deaths from 40,854,733 cases, the Middle East 151,948 deaths from 9,484,223 cases, Africa 147,896 deaths from 5,732,921 cases, and Oceania 1,148 deaths from 57,514 cases.

As a result of corrections by national authorities or late publication of data, the figures updated over the past 24 hours may not correspond exactly to the previous day's tallies.

AFP

Inoculation must for all adults in Turkmenistan

Ashgabat, Turkmenistan - Turkmenistan announced on Wednesday it was introducing mandatory vaccinations for all adults even though the secretive Central Asian country claims to have registered no coronavirus cases.

The state mouthpiece, the Neutral Turkmenistan newspaper, said that all citizens aged over 18 'should be vaccinated'. Those with medical contraindications will be exempted from inoculations, the newspaper said, citing the health ministry.

"To make preventive vaccinations effective, each of us should actively participate in this process," the Health Ministry said.

Turkmenistan is one of the few countries, along with North Korea, yet to declare a single case of the coronavirus.

The isolated Central Asian country has approved two Russian and two Chinese vaccines.

Turkmenistan leader Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov said in an interview published in early June that 'thanks to work (we) have carried out', Turkmenistan has 'yet to discover a case of this disease'.

While Turkmenistan has no local independent media, foreign-based media have regularly cast doubt on the coronavirus-free claim.

AFP

As lockdown bites, Malaysians fly white flag for help

Petaling Jaya, Malaysia - Malaysians struggling to make ends meet during a worsening coronavirus outbreak have hoisted white flags outside their homes in a desperate plea for help that has swept the country.

Authorities imposed a second strict nationwide lockdown last month in response to a surge in COVID cases, and many low-income workers who live hand-to-mouth have lost their jobs again after a ban on non-essential businesses.

The flags - often little more than strips of cotton or T-shirts - have sprung up outside homes of the needy around the country in the past week, prompting an outpouring of sympathy and donations from the public.



Single mother Tilda Kalaivani wave a shirt to use as a white flag to call for help, in her rental apartment in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday (AFP)

"This month I have not paid the rent... I am afraid that I might not be able to find another place to stay in this critical situation," said Tilda Kalaivani, a single mother of four.

The 37 year old, who was forced to stop working as a florist after the closure of all non-essential businesses, said she at first felt 'too shy' to hang a flag outside her home on the out-

skirts of capital Kuala Lumpur.

"But facing such difficulty, if I don't say anything, people won't know - and I don't know what will happen."

The #benderaputih - 'white flag' in the Malay language - movement has expanded rapidly online, with social media groups set up to let people in need post appeals for help.

Members of the public are bringing food to households that have signalled their distress, while businesses are also donating, with a noodle-maker sending workers to deliver food in worst-hit Selangor state outside Kuala Lumpur.

Popular Malaysian rapper Altimet also pledged to donate food in a message to his nearly

400,000 Instagram followers.

Only essential businesses, such as supermarkets and medical clinics, have been allowed to operate since last month, and the government has come under fire from the public for not providing sufficient aid.

Growing desperation is reflected in rising suicides - police recorded more than 450 in the first five months of this year, compared to 631 for all of 2020.

Referring to the figures, Malaysia's top health official Noor Hisham Abdullah said the pandemic had had a 'huge impact' on people's mental health, especially those cut off from support networks of friends and family.

AFP

Tributes pour in as Bollywood veteran Dilip Kumar dies at 98

New Delhi, India - Tributes poured in on Wednesday from Indian and Pakistani actors, politicians, sports personalities and even an animal rights group after much-loved Bollywood veteran Dilip Kumar died aged 98.

Born Mohammed Yusuf Khan in 1922 in Peshawar - now part of Pakistan - Kumar became a major star in Indian cinema's golden age between the 1940s and 1960s, starring in nearly 60 films in a career spanning 50 years.

He died in a Mumbai hospital early on Wednesday.

"Dilip Kumar... will be remembered as a cinematic legend," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Twitter.

"He was blessed with unparalleled brilliance, due to which audiences across generations were enthralled. His passing away is a loss to our cultural world."

Indian President Ram Nath Kovind said, "Dilip Kumar summarised in himself a history of emerging India. The thespian's

charm transcended all boundaries, and he was loved across the subcontinent. With his demise, an era ends."

Kumar would 'live forever in the heart of India', Kovind added.

Kumar was spotted selling fruit at his father's stall in Bombay - now Mumbai - by actress Devika Rani, who convinced him to try acting.

Changing his name to hide his profession from his disapproving father, Kumar went on to become a beloved household name who transcended generations and India's social and religious divides.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said he was 'saddened' by the news.

"I can never forget his generosity in giving his time to help raise funds for SKMTH (Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital & Research)... his appearance in (Pakistan) & London helped raise huge amounts," Khan said on Twitter.

Amitabh Bachchan, Bolly-



Saira Banu (left), wife of Dilip Kumar, mourns near his body as Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray (second from right) and actor Dharmendra (right) visit at her residence in Mumbai on Wednesday (AFP)

wood's biggest star, called Kumar his 'idol' and said on Twitter: 'An epic era has drawn curtains... Never to happen again.'

'An institution has gone. Whenever the history of Indian cinema will be written, it shall always be 'before Dilip Kumar, and

after Dilip Kumar',' Bachchan added.

Akshay Kumar, another of modern Bollywood's biggest lu-

Whenever the history of Indian cinema will be written, it shall always be 'before Dilip Kumar, and after Dilip Kumar'

AMITABH BACHCHAN

minaries, said: "To us actors, he was The Hero. #DilipKumar Sir has taken an entire era of Indian cinema away with him. My thoughts and prayers are with his family."

The veteran actor enjoyed a following across the Indian subcontinent and among the global diaspora.

Former Pakistan cricket captain Shahid Afridi said his death was a 'huge loss' for his fans in Pakistan, Mumbai 'and across the globe'.

"He lives on in our hearts,"

Afridi added.

India cricket captain, Virat Kohli, who is in England to lead the national Test squad for a series against the hosts, said, 'today, an icon who was loved by generations passes away. Rest in peace Dilip ji. My condolences to the family'.

Sachin Tendulkar, the country's batting legend, also offered his 'heartfelt condolences' to Kumar's family: 'There will never be another like you.'

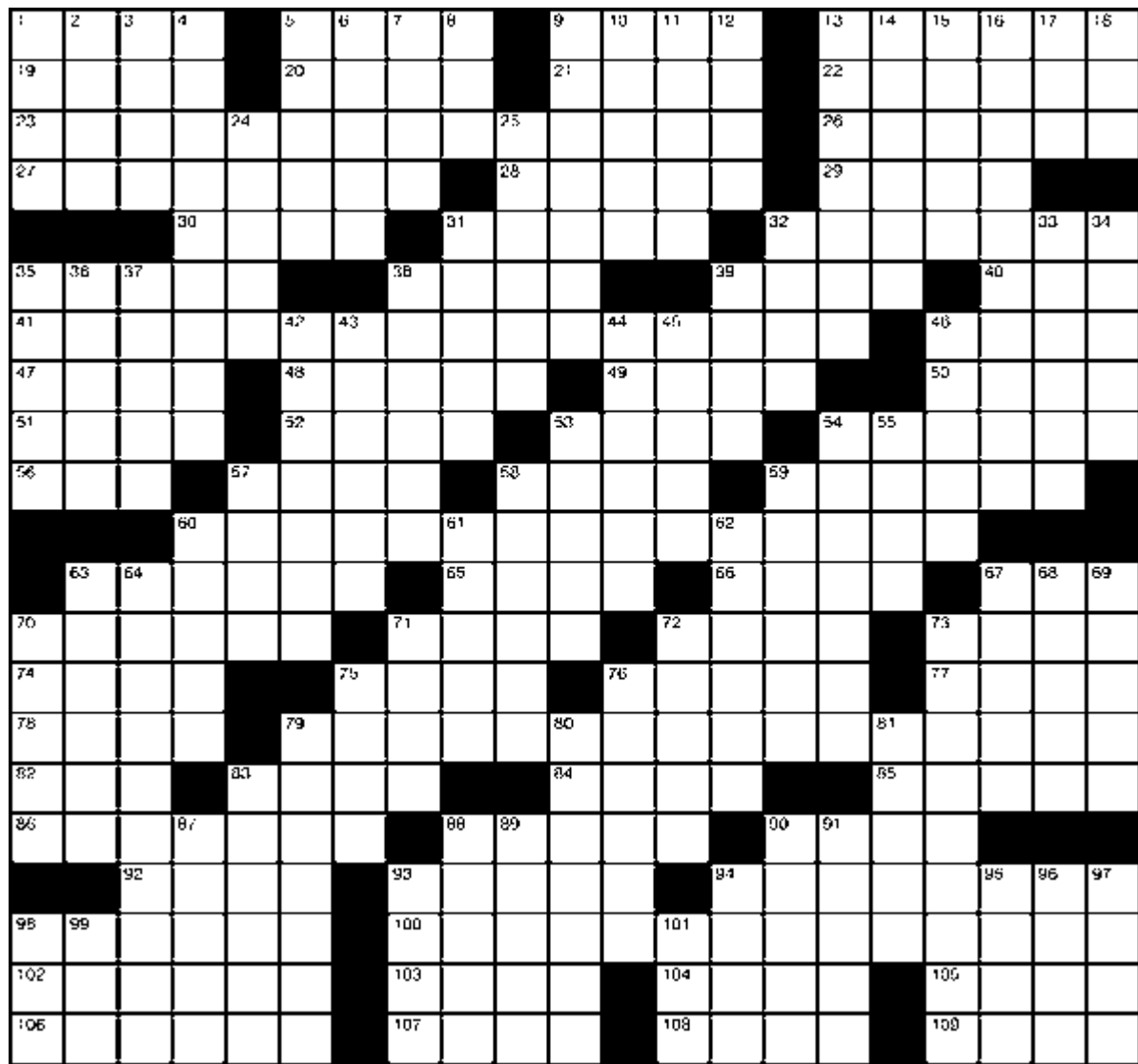
'Your contribution to Indian cinema is unparalleled and you'll be missed dearly,' he posted on Twitter.

Animal rights pressure group PETA India offered its condolences too, saying 'animals everywhere have lost a great friend'.

The organisation said Kumar had helped it enact a ban on the entry of elephants into Mumbai, 'sparing them violence and cruelty and ensuring the safety of Mumbai's human residents'.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



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ACROSS

1 MP quarry
5 Peter the Great
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22 One or the other
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63 Rye buys
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86 Sticks
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6 Blind pieces
7 Friend by treaty
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11 Peevish
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17 Dusk, to Donne
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44 Mystery
45 Nancy Drew creator
46 Brooke's ex
53 Silverdome squad
54 Kind of poll
55 Large green moth
57 By ___!
58 Carefully examined
59 Patient in quarantine, e.g.
60 Nile capital

61 Moon crater

62 Shorthand experts
63 Posthumous fame
64 Judy Garland classic, in a drought?
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71 W. Romania city
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73 Do-it-yourself restaurant
75 ___ and that
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79 Vindicator
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81 Walled city near Madrid
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87 See 97 Down
88 Chameleon
89 Uptight
90 Victim's lament
91 Lifelines
93 Pindar poems
94 97 Down was one
95 Springs or Beach
96 Do nothing
97 Capone nemesis
98 Meas., for Emeril
99 Shoshonean Indian
101 Sgt., e.g.

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You may have been planning on spending some time alone tonight -- but you need to expand that social calendar! The entire day turns out to be far livelier and more packed with various shenanigans than you'd have imagined possible. Don't worry too much about it -- your sweetheart has become quite used to dealing with last-minute situations, and has probably planned ahead.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your old friend the spotlight is back in your life. You're more than used to it, and it probably doesn't even excite you much anymore. It might get a bit awkward, though, since you're looking for a bit more privacy than the spotlight affords. You and a certain someone need to spend some much-needed quality time alone, so what can you do?



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

That intense 'zing' feeling you've had lately in the romance department may not have gone anywhere -- and it doesn't show signs of going anywhere soon, either. Don't panic! When the one you adore draws near, don't play hard to get, or hard of hearing, or anything else -- play it straight. Your feelings are more obvious than you'd like to think today, so just let them flow freely.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You can't handle anything superficial today. The deeper side of life is all that appeals to you, so toss out the light-hearted chit-chat and surface conversation. You can experience depth, intensity and meaningful exchanges pretty easily on a day like today, and it's not like you haven't earned them. You've been handling everyone else's issues, so take care of your own needs.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You wake up feeling quite brave this morning, and, to celebrate, you may decide to try something a bit out-there that you've always wanted to do. You've got a bigger safety net than most in place for the time being, so you don't have much to worry about. Why not take your sweetie or best bud along for the adventure? Think of what a great story this will make to tell the kids.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Taking part in the gossip factory and building to the buzz of the day has never really been your style -- and that's a good thing, of course! It keeps you honest and makes it easy for others to genuinely trust you. Today, though, there just might be a nugget of truth behind what you're hearing. Not that you should get involved in the machinations behind the gossip.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You've never had a real problem dealing with that fine line between platonic and romantic relationships, though others certainly do. It's because you've never had to think twice about which side anyone happens to fall on -- not until recently, at least. You're not supposed to feel jealous when the people we're 'just friends' with show interest in someone else, right?



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Some issues just never seem to go away, no matter how hard we try. You're facing something like that today -- for the hundredth time, most likely. The way things are looking, you've got your work cut out for you. The solution likely involves working closely with someone who isn't at all tough on the eyes. After it's over, you'll have something to legitimately gloat about to your friends.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You've never really been a stickler for doing what people say must be done when it should be done, and you feel the urge to relax right now. Whether or not it's authorised, you and your friends or sweetie need to chill on your own, so flee your responsibilities for the day. By tonight, you should be in the mood to really get going and move toward some extreme fun.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Remember that big secret that seemed so important just yesterday? It might be impossible to hide it again today -- if you even care any more! That doesn't mean you can't start the day trying, or that you can't make it clear that you need to be consulted the next time this situation comes up. You know perfectly well that nothing stays secret forever.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You've feeling kind of strange, and may have been trying to figure it out all day. You woke up on the crazy side of bed, and you just can't shake it. Don't be too surprised if you realise that it's quite familiar. Your passion, is back and it doesn't just apply to someone you find seriously attractive. There are all kinds of passion, some more convenient than others.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You've been seriously involved before in many different ways, and you know what it's like to care deeply for someone. At the moment, though, you're not really thinking about the past -- only about what it would be like to be with someone new. Of course, there's also an air of secrecy surrounding the situation, which makes it all the more appealing.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Which book was written by Graham Greene?

- a. O' Jerusalem
- b. The Power and Glory
- c. Crisis in India
- d. Of Human Bondage

2. George Bernard Shaw, the great dramatist, was

- a. a Welsh
- b. an Irishman
- c. a Scotsman
- d. an Englishman

3. Who directed the film '1942: A love story'?

- a. Mahesh Bhatt
- b. Vidhu Vinod Chopra
- c. Yash Chopra
- d. Ketan Mehta

Answers: 1.b 2.c 3.d

VOX WHAT'S ON



BLACK WIDOW

Natasha Romanoff, aka Black Widow, confronts the darker parts of her ledger when a dangerous conspiracy with ties to her past arises. Pursued by a force that will stop at nothing to bring her down, Natasha must deal with her history as a spy, and the broken relationships.



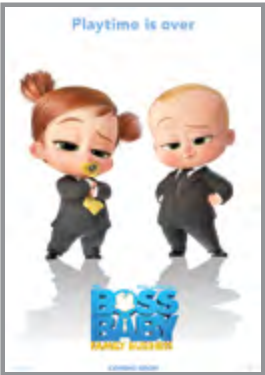
AL BAA'D LA YAZHAB L AL MA'ZOUN MARATAYEN:

The film raises questions about the experience of marriage and the struggles the couple is going through, and presents a media personality who works to reveal the facts in a disguise of different characters.



ICE ROAD

After a remote diamond mine collapses in far northern Canada, a 'big-rig' ice road driver must lead an impossible rescue mission over a frozen ocean to save the trapped miners. They discover the real threat is one they never saw coming.



BOSS BABY 2

The Templeton brothers have become adults and drifted away from each other, but a new boss baby is about to bring them together again - and inspire a new family business.

KIDS COLOURING



WORD BUILDER

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

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



DAILY CROSSWORD ANSWERS (JULY 07)



CERVICAL CAUTION

PAIN

IN THE NECK?

Neck pain can range from mild discomfort to disabling, chronic pain. Many different things can cause neck pain including injury, age-related disorders, and inflammatory disease. But the good news is, easing your own discomfort is a task literally in your own hands.

There are times when you just have to be tied down to your desk for hours on end...or you have to stay put by the kitchen platform until all tasks are complete. And you think, the world will come to an end if you don't do so. The result: your 'world of comfort' does come to an end, and you invite excruciating pain in your neck that simply won't go away even if you marinate it with balm for days.

Neck pain is a common complaint among people of all ages. The neck muscles get strained from poor posture - whether it's due to leaning over your computer, hunching over your workbench or performing routine chores at home, from cleaning to cooking, which needs you to hold your head in awkward positions for a long time. Neck pain is rarely a symptom of a really serious problem, but if it is accompanied by numbness or loss of strength in your arms, then it could be a pointer to long-standing neglect of many conditions that call for corrective action.

The cervical spine begins at the base of the skull and consists of a series of seven vertebral segments (named C1 though C7) which connect to the thoracic (chest) region of the spine (C7 to T1). Ligaments, muscles, and tendons help stabilise and move the cervical spine.

The most common cause of neck pain occurs when one of these soft tissues becomes strained or sprained from overuse or overextension. This type of injury typically heals within a week or two. However, various problems in the cervical spine can irritate a nerve root or the spinal cord, causing longer-lasting neck pain and/or neurological deficits.

Some signs and symptoms associated with neck pain could indicate the health of a nerve root or that the spinal cord is at risk, or perhaps, there is an underlying disease or infection. These 'red flag' signs and symptoms may include fever or chills, pain or tingling that radiates into the arms or legs, problems with balance or coordination, or other troublesome signs. Hence, immediate medical attention is needed if your neck pain gets serious.

PREVENTION TECHNIQUES

Most neck pain is associated with poor posture combined with age-related wear and tear. To help prevent neck pain, keep your head centered over your spine. Some simple changes in your daily routine may help in getting rid of neck pain in the early stages. Consider trying to:

- Use good posture
- When standing and sitting, be sure your shoulders are in a straight line over your hips and your ears are directly over your shoulders.
- Take frequent breaks
- If you travel long distances or work long hours at your computer, get up, move around and stretch your neck and shoulders. Adjust your desk, chair and computer so that the monitor is at eye level. Knees should be slightly lower than hips. Use your chair's arm-rests.
- Avoid inappropriate actions
- Avoid tucking the phone between your ear and shoulder when you talk. Use a headset or speakerphone instead.
 - Quit smoking, it can put you at higher risk.
 - Avoid carrying heavy bags with straps over your shoulder - the weight can strain your neck.
 - Sleep in a good position - your head and neck should be aligned with your body.

CAUSES OF NECK PAIN

Your neck is flexible and supports the weight of your head, so it can be vulnerable to injuries and conditions that cause pain and restrict motion. Neck pain causes include:

- Muscle strains
- Overuse, such as too many hours hunched over your computer or smartphone, often triggers muscle strains. Even minor things, such as reading in bed or gritting your teeth, can strain neck muscles.
- Worn joints
- Just like the other joints in your body, your neck joints tend to wear down with age. Osteoarthritis causes the cushions (cartilage) between your bones (vertebrae) to deteriorate. Your body then forms bone spurs that affect joint motion and cause pain.
- Nerve compression
- Herniated disks or bone spurs in the vertebrae of your neck can press on the nerves branching out from the spinal cord.
- Injuries
- Rear-end auto collisions often result in whiplash injury, which occurs when the head is jerked backward and then forward, straining the soft tissues of the neck.
- Diseases
- Certain diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, meningitis or cancer, can cause neck pain.



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Pain that often get worse by holding your head in one place for long periods, such as when driving or working at a computer is one of the most common symptom. Other symptoms include muscle tightness and spasms, decreased ability to move your head, headaches, etc.

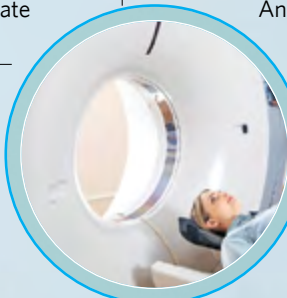


DIAGNOSIS

Along with a complete medical history and physical exam, diagnostic procedures for neck pain may include:

- Blood tests
- These tests can help in diagnosing any underlying inflammatory disease.
- Electromyogram (EMG)
- A test used to evaluate nerve function.
- X-ray
- A test that uses electromagnetic energy beams to make images of bones onto film.

- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)
- A procedure that uses large magnets and a computer to make detailed images of organs and structures within the body. MRI can often identify damage or disease of internal structures within our joints, or in a surrounding ligament or muscle.
- Computed tomography scan (also called a CT or CAT scan)
- An imaging procedure that uses X-rays and computer technology to make images of the body. A CT scan shows detailed images of any part of the body, including the bones, muscles, fat, and organs.



Martinez the penalty hero as Argentina reach final

Brasilia, Brazil - Goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez was the hero as Argentina defeated Colombia on penalties on Tuesday to set up a dream Copa America final against Brazil. Argentina stopper Martinez saved three penalties in the shoot-out after a bruising 1-1 draw in Brasilia.

Hosts Brazil beat Peru 1-0 in Monday's first semifinal meaning their star forward Neymar will line up against Lionel Messi's Argentina on Saturday at Rio de Janeiro's iconic Maracana stadium.

Two years ago a Brazil team missing the injured Neymar knocked out Argentina in the semifinals before winning their ninth Copa title on home soil. For Messi, 34, time is running out to win a first major international title with his national team, having previously lost in three Copa finals and the 2014 World Cup final.

For once he wasn't his country's main hero, although he did create the opening goal for Lautaro Martinez on seven minutes, before Luis Diaz equalised just after the hour mark.

In the shoot-out, goalkeeper Martinez three times dived to his left to save penalties from center-backs Davinson Sanchez and Yerry Mina, as well as midfielder Edwin Cardona.

And although Rodrigo De Paul skied his penalty for Argentina,



Argentina's goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez makes a save during the penalty shootout against Colombia in the semifinal of Copa America in Brasilia, Brazil, on Tuesday (AFP)

Messi - who finished with blood seeping visibly from his left ankle - was amongst the scorers to give them a 3-2 victory on spot-kicks. "Saving penalties is a question of luck and today it was my turn to be the glorious one," said Martinez.

"We said it the first day, we want to play the final and what better than playing Brazil on their pitch."

Despite the defeat, Colombia coach Reinaldo Rueda was feeling positive, saying their performance 'invites us to dream, to

think we're on the right path'.

"We should lift our heads, look each other in the eyes and know we have nothing to reproach ourselves about," he added.

Messi produced some early magic to beat three players and cross for Martinez to head wide. Colombia didn't heed the warning and on seven minutes, Giovanni Lo Celso found Messi in the box, the diminutive star held off the giant Mina and picked out Martinez to fire into the far corner.

Colombia remained the better side after the break with Duvan Zapata having a shot blocked and substitute Miguel Borja firing wide. But they deservedly equalised on 61 minutes when Cardona took a quick free-kick from inside his own half and sent Diaz scampering away to hold off German Pezzella and dink a clever finish over Martinez.

Argentina brought on Angel Di Maria for Gonzalez and the tricky winger immediately brought more urgency to his side's attack. But Di Maria and

Martinez contrived to butcher a glorious chance to give Argentina the lead again.

Jesus to miss final

Elsewhere, Brazil forward Gabriel Jesus will miss the Copa America final after he was handed a two-game on Tuesday by South American football's governing body CONMEBOL. Manchester City's Jesus was dismissed for a foul on Egenio Mena in Brazil's 1-0 quarterfinal win over Chile on Friday.

AFP

India's Olympic hockey legend Keshav Datt dies

New Delhi, India - India's double Olympic hockey champion Keshav Chandra Datt has died at the age of 95, the sport's national body said on Wednesday.

The centre halfback, born in Lahore, in what is now Pakistan, was part of India's gold medal-winning team at the 1948 and 1952 Olympic Games in London and Helsinki. "He was the lone surviving member of the 1948 and 1952 Olympic Games and today truly feels like the end of an era," said Hockey India President Gyanendro Ningombam in a statement.

"He was a formidable halfback and was part of independent India's historic feat at the 1948 Games where they beat home team Great Britain 4-0 in the final at the Wembley Stadium." The



Games were a showcase as they were the first after India's independence in 1947, as well as the first after World War II. Datt, who moved to the eastern Indian city of Kolkata in West Bengal state in 1950, died from natural causes.

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee called Datt one of hockey's 'true legends'.

India once dominated men's field hockey, winning eight Olympic gold medals between 1928 and 1980.

AFP

Last-gasp penalty helps Australia defeat France

RUGBY UNION

Brisbane, Australia - Noah Lole-sio nailed a last-gasp penalty as Australia clawed back a 15-point deficit to edge France 23-21 on Wednesday and win the opening Test of the three-match series. Winger Gabin Villiere scored two tries for France with Brandon Paenga-Amosa and Michael

Hooper crossing for Australia.

Meanwhile, world champions South Africa have called off a Test against Georgia scheduled for Friday in Johannesburg. South Africa, after a coronavirus outbreak saw five players testing positive in the camp, SA Rugby said on Wednesday.

AFP

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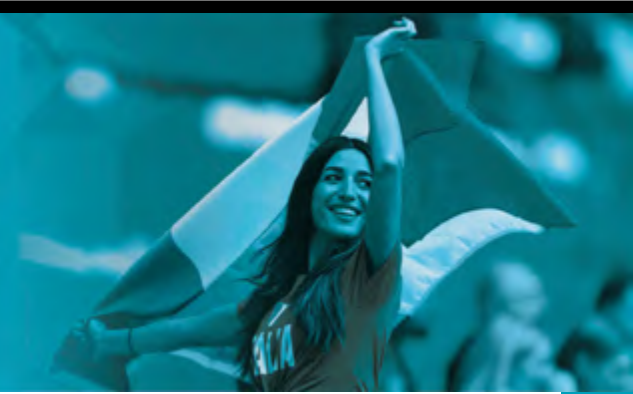
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EURO2020



AZZURRI HOLD NERVE TO REACH EURO FINAL



Italy's players celebrate their win in the Euro 2020 semifinal against Spain at Wembley in London, UK, on Tuesday (AFP)

Mancini's men edge out Spain in a shootout to win an epic semifinal

London, UK - Italy beat Spain 4-2 on penalties after a 1-1 draw in a magnificent Euro 2020 semifinal at Wembley on Tuesday, as Jorginho converted the decisive kick to take the Azzurri through to the final of a tournament in which they have been the outstanding side.

They were not always on top in this game though, with Spain the better team for long spells of an epic contest before Federico Chiesa, the Juventus forward, gave Italy the lead with a fabulous finish an hour into a match watched by a crowd of almost 58,000.

The much-maligned Alvaro Morata, who was dropped from the starting line-up, came off the bench to equalise with ten minutes of normal time left.

No further scoring in extra-time meant penalties again for Spain, who had beaten Switzerland in a shootout in the quarterfinals.

They had also beaten Italy on penalties at Euro 2008, but this time misses from Dani Olmo and then Morata saw Spain give up the advantage they had been handed when Manuel Locatelli failed with the first kick in the shoot-out.

The Italians celebrated at the end with a large contingent of their UK-based supporters, and a team that has been rejuvenated under Roberto Mancini continues to dream of winning a first European Championship since 1968.

Now unbeaten in 33 games, they go through to Sunday's final to face either England or Denmark, who meet in the second last-four tie.



Italy's goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma makes a save during the shootout

"I have to thank the players because they believed right from day one that we could do something incredible," said Mancini.

It is nine years since Spain mauled Italy 4-0 in the Euro 2012 final in Kiev to win a third consecutive major tournament, and this was the fourth consecutive Euro in which these power-houses had met.

Spain won the first two of those meetings, but the last two have now gone to Italy.

Wembley comes to life

This meeting took place in the chill of a damp July evening in London, but the atmosphere at Wembley was no damp squib.

There were no travelling supporters, given the obligatory quarantine for all visitors to the United Kingdom. However, the large Spanish and

Italian communities already in Britain meant a combined 20,000 fans of the two teams were in the 57,811-crowd allowed inside Wembley.

They added a noise and colour so sadly lacking at major sporting events since the pandemic began, and that provided the perfect stage.

The football itself was absorbing and of the highest quality, particularly in midfield where Italy's outstanding trio of Jorginho, Marco Verratti and Spain's Sergio Busquets, Koke and the brilliant Pedri, a frightening talent at just 18.

Morata: Hero to villain

What the game lacked in the first half was drama in front of goal, although Italy's Gianluigi Donnarumma made

one crucial save to deny Olmo in the 25th minute.

Italy missed Leonardo Spinazzola, their outstanding left-back who suffered a torn Achilles tendon against Belgium in the quarterfinals.

Meanwhile Luis Enrique dropped Morata and selected Mikel Oyarzabal to start on their right flank.

Spain had enjoyed the better of the game before Italy went ahead thanks to a goal of the highest quality.

A move that started with Donnarumma's throw out saw Lorenzo Insigne play Ciro Immobile in behind.

Immobile was thwarted by Aymeric Laporte's tackle but the ball fell to Chiesa and he picked his spot in the far corner of Unai Simon's goal on his right foot.

The Italian fans, gathered en masse at that end of Wembley, erupted in celebration.

Spain reacted by sending on Morata and Gerard Moreno, and just as Italy looked to be seeing out the victory, Morata was the man who got the leveller.

After collecting the ball midway inside the opposition half, Morata played a one-two with Olmo as he cut through the defence and slotted in.

It was a deserved equaliser, and Spain had a spring in their step going into extra-time, but they could not take that into the decisive shootout.

"Penalties are a lottery," said Mancini.

"It was a very hard game. Spain are a great team, they play very well. We had a good match, not quite like usual but we knew we would have to suffer.

"They put us in difficulty at the beginning, then we found the right way and we didn't risk too much. It was a very tough match.

"We deserved to be here... It wasn't easy, hardly anyone believed it and we got to the final."

AFP



Italy's coach Roberto Mancini celebrates after his team beat Spain at Wembley on Tuesday

Mancini delights in defying expectations

London, UK - Having taken over Italy at their lowest ebb, Roberto Mancini revelled in defying expectations after the Azzurri made it through to the final on Tuesday. Italy's transformation under Mancini in the last three years has been extraordinary, from a team that failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup to one that has gone now on a record of 33 games unbeaten.

"When you play in a World Cup or a European Championship it is intense, and there always comes a game where you have to dig in and suffer to win," said Mancini. "It can't all be smooth as our progress had been up to now.

"We knew this was the one that was going to be really tough and that is why I think the players and everyone who has worked with us over the last three years deserves a lot of credit because it has not been easy by any means."

"Almost nobody believed we could do it and yet we are in the final, so we are pleased for Italians everywhere. There is still one step to go and now we have to rest up because this really was very challenging," added Mancini.

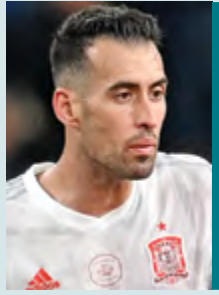
AFP

We'll be back, says Spain's Busquets

London, UK - Spain captain Sergio Busquets said the team will return stronger after gaining vital experience during their run to the Euro 2020 semifinals, despite losing on penalties to Italy on Tuesday.

"It's a shame, we would've have liked for our tournament not to end today but that's football," Busquets told *Radio Marca*. "The team was very good, we were the better team for almost the whole match. We can be proud, I feel pride for my teammates. Everyone was making Italy favourites, but we showed we're better."

"With lots of young players it will serve to give them confidence. This team will be back," said Busquets. "On the whole I believe we were better, but football is like that and we have to congratulate



The team was very good, we were the better team for almost the whole match

SERGIO BUSQUETS

them (Italy). There's still a year and a half to go until the World Cup, but we're on the right track."

Busquets, now 32, was the only current squad member to play in the 2010 World Cup title win.

The Barcelona midfielder refused to be drawn on his international future. "It's not the moment to think about me. It's the moment to be sad and proud at the same time. It's not the moment to think about me, but of the group."

'Not a sad night for me'

Despite the loss, Spain coach Luis Enrique said, "It is not a sad night for me by any means. This is elite sport and you have to know how to win and lose.

"I said before the tournament we were one of the eight favourites (to win the competition). I don't think I was wrong. We go home with the reassurance of knowing we competed and we were among the best."

AFP



Bangladesh's Liton Das celebrates upon reaching his half-century on the first day of the one-off Test against Zimbabwe in Harare on Wednesday

Das and Haque lead Bangladesh recovery

ZIMBABWE VS BANGLADESH ONE-OFF TEST: DAY ONE

Harare, Zimbabwe - Liton Das struck a Test career-best 95 on Wednesday to play a pivotal role in Bangladesh reaching 294 for eight by the close of play after the first day of a one-off Test against Zimbabwe.

With the Asian Tigers struggling at 132 for six, Das and Mahmudullah came together and put on 138 runs for the seventh wicket behind closed doors at Harare Sports Club.

Das bettered by one run his previous best of 94 in a 2018 draw with Sri Lanka before being caught by Victor Nyauchi off the bowling of Donald Tiripano.

"We have some highly skilled players in this team (and) Liton is one of those guys," said recently appointed Bangladesh batting coach Ashwell Prince from South Africa.

"We have had some conversations during the week. He shared that sometimes he gives his wicket away in the 30s and 40s, due to lack of concentration.

"I told him, if he can bat for more than three hours, forgetting about the score which is on 30 or 40, he would be close to a hundred.

"We were all quite disappointed for him that he did not get the hundred. I think this is a good learning (experience) for him."

Das was poised for his first Test century as he faced the first ball of the 79th over, but the 27 year old right-hand batsman pulled a shot straight to fine-leg where Nyauchi took a sharp catch.

On a day when no Bangladeshi managed to claim a six, Das struck 13 fours off 147

balls during a 200-minute stand at the crease.

Haque stabilises innings

Recalled Mahmudullah was unbeaten at the close on 54 - the third highest contribution after Das and captain Mominul Haque, whose 70 stabilised an innings that began disastrously.

Top-order pair Saif Hassan (0) and Najmul Hossain Shanto (2) were back in the change room with just eight runs on the scoreboard as Blessing Muzarabani struck twice.

When hesitant opener Shadman Islam was sent packing for 23, rattled Bangladesh were 68 for three and in dire need of a saviour.

Enter Haque, a skipper in desperate need of a Test victory having achieved the feat just once in eight previous attempts

as the helm. He matched Das by hitting 13 fours and put on 70 off 92 balls in 157 minutes before being caught in the 36th over as debutant Dion Myers grabbed a cut shot at gully off the bowling of Nyauchi.

Mahmudullah, whose last Test appearance was in February 2020 against Pakistan, notched five fours in a half century patiently constructed off 141 balls.

Muzarabani was the most successful Zimbabwe bowler, taking three wickets at the cost of 48 runs in 16 overs, which included three maidens.

Tiripano and Nyauchi took two wickets each and Richard Ngarava one for the hosts, who fielded without captain Sean Williams after he came into contact with several people who tested positive for COVID-19.

The Test is the first part of an all-format visit by Bangladesh to

Zimbabwe with three one-day internationals (ODIs) and three T20Is to come this month. Bangladesh hosted Zimbabwe last year and completed a six-match clean sweep, winning a Test, three ODIs and two T20Is.

AFP

SCOREBOARD		
BANGLADESH 1 ST INNINGS		
S Hassan	b Muzarabani	0
S Islam	c Taylor b Ngarava	23
N H Shanto	c Myers b Muzarabani	2
M Haque	c Myers b Nyauchi	70
M Rahim	lbw b Muzarabani	11
Shakib al Hasan	c Chakabva b Nyauchi	3
L Das	c Nyauchi b Tiripano	95
Mahmudullah	not out	54
M H Miraz	lbw b Tiripano	0
T Ahmed	not out	13
Extras:	(b 9, lb 3, nb 10, w 1)	23
TOTAL:	294 for eight in 83 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-8, 3-68, 4-106, 5-109, 6-132, 7-270, 8-270		
Bowling: B Muzarabani 16-3-48-3, R Ngarava 15-5-36-1, D Tiripano 13-4-36-2, V Nyauchi 12-1-69-2, D Myers 3-1-13-0, M Shumba 18-4-53-0, R Kaia 6-0-27-0		



A file photo of Sri Lankan players during an ODI match

Sri Lanka cricketers agree contracts for India series, Mathews declines offer

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's men's limited-overs cricketers have signed tour contracts that cover the forthcoming series against India. But Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) decision to withdraw its offer of annual contracts had caused substantial dismay among players.

Angelo Mathews, who was offered a tour contract for the India series, is the only member of a group of 30 who declined to sign. Although an SLC release said Mathews had asked to be relieved from national duties owing to 'personal reasons', Mathews' disillusionment with the contract offer and the general situation within Sri Lanka Cricket is understood to have informed his decision.

SLC CEO Ashley de Silva confirmed to ESPNcricinfo that the board would only offer a succession of tour contracts until the end of the year, because 'the players had enough time to sign the central (annual) contracts but they didn't'. Essentially, this is the board's way of penalising players for making demands over

their central contracts.

Unsurprisingly, this decision by SLC has caused significant distress among players. Firstly, those players who are not within the limited-overs frame have been left without contracts of any sort. Senior players such as Test captain Dimuth Karunaratne, Suranga Lakmal and Dinesh Chandimal may not see a contract from SLC until November, when they are next due to play Tests.

Secondly, players who were holding out for better central contracts are now unhappy with those who agreed to sign SLC's temporary tour contract - a move that essentially ended the contracts negotiation, because to sign the tour contracts was to concede to SLC.

Part-way through the England tour, the players had apparently decided to sign the annual contracts that SLC was offering. However, by the time the team returned from the UK on Monday, SLC had already made the decision to withdraw the central contracts it had offered.

Cricinfo



A file photo of Tokyo 2020 Olympic torch relay run in Japan last month

Olympic torch relay legs in Tokyo scrapped

Tokyo, Japan - The Olympic torch relay has been scrapped on Tokyo's public roads, officials announced on Wednesday, as virus concerns continue to plague the Games just over two weeks before they begin.

The latest setback comes only a day before IOC chief Thomas Bach is due to arrive in Japan for the postponed mega-event. And with coronavirus infections on the rise again in Japan, the government is expected to this week extend restrictions that are likely to affect fans.

The Olympic flame arrives in Tokyo on Friday, but private torch-lighting ceremonies will replace the relay across the capital to prevent crowds gathering to

watch, the city government said. Right up to the opening ceremony on July 23, the torch ceremonies will be streamed online, with authorities urging spectators to watch them 'in the comfort of your home'.

Only the relay leg in the Ogasawara islands - a remote archipelago some 1,000kms south of Tokyo - will go ahead in public as scheduled.

Virus emergency

The Japanese government plans to impose a virus state of emergency in Tokyo during the Olympics, reports said on Wednesday, meaning spectators could be barred from venues.

AFP



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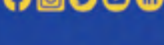
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Jumbo Visma's Wout van Aert of Belgium celebrates as he crosses the finish line at the end of the 11th stage of Tour de France on Wednesday

Wout van Aert clinches frantic 11th Tour stage

TOUR DE FRANCE

Malauïcène, France - Raucous crowds cheered Belgium's Wout van Aert to a frantic stage 11 win on the Tour de France on Wednesday after a double ascent of Mont Ventoux. UAE leader Tadej Pogacar retained the overall lead by more than five minutes over his pursuers.

Jumbo-Visma's Van Aert crossed the summit of 'the Giant of Provence' alone in his Belgian champion's shirt on a baking day.

"There's loads of Belgians here," said Van Aert, who played to the crowds bending his ear to their acclamation. "It's my best victory ever," said Van Aert, who finally reaped his reward, after his attacking riding helped light the Tour fuse in earlier stages.

On this iconic climb, where Tom Simpson died in 1967 and where Eddy Merckx, Marco Pantani and Chris Froome climbed to memorable wins, Van Aert's effort was magnificent.

Behind him his teammate Jonas Vingegaard climbed into the top three, crossing the line in a small group that included Pogacar, Rigoberto Uran and Richard Carapaz.

Pogacar leads Colombian Uran of EF Education by 5min 18sec, Dane Vingegaard is third 14 seconds further back and a second ahead of Ecuadorian Carapaz of Ineos. Vingegaard dropped Pogacar after a struggle over the final 3km of the last ascent, only for the Slovenian's group to catch up on the 25km descent.

"I couldn't follow him, the heat, Ineos, there was a lot going on," said a cool and relaxed looking Pogacar at the finish line.

With a vehicle ban on Ventoux, police searched the vast crowds ascending on foot for alcohol and handed out bin bags after 40 tonnes of rubbish were left behind last time the Tour climbed the mountain.

AFP

FEDERER BOWS OUT

Poland's Hubert Hurkacz shocks Swiss great in quarterfinal match
World No 1 Novak Djokovic reaches tenth Wimbledon semifinal



Hubert Hurkacz celebrates his win over Roger Federer in the quarterfinal of Wimbledon on Wednesday

London, UK - Roger Federer crashed out of Wimbledon in the quarterfinals at the hands of Poland's Hubert Hurkacz on Wednesday, potentially bringing down the curtain on the Swiss legend's All England Club career.

On a day when world No 1 and five-time champion Novak Djokovic reached his tenth Wimbledon semifinal and 41st at the Grand Slams, Federer, who turns 40 next month, was beaten by a player 15 years his junior in straight sets 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 6-0.

It was only the eight-time Wimbledon champion's 14th defeat at the tournament in 119 matches and his first straight-sets loss since an opening round exit against Mario Ancic in 2002. It was also the first time Federer, the 20-time Grand Slam title winner, had lost a set 6-0 at Wimbledon.

Earlier, defending champion Djokovic, chasing a record-equalling 20th major, defeated Hungary's Marton Fucsovics 6-3, 6-4, 6-4. He will face Canada's tenth seed Denis Shapovalov, who beat Russia's Karen Khachanov 6-4, 3-6, 5-7,

6-1, 6-4, for a place in Sunday's final.

'Dream come true'

"It's super special to have played Roger here, it's a dream come true," said Hurkacz. "He's done so many special things here."

World No 18 Hurkacz, 24, had never got beyond the third round of a Grand Slam before this Wimbledon. However, boosted by having defeated world No 2 Daniil Medvedev in five sets in the last-16, he was a break up on a sluggish-looking Federer in the sixth game of the opening set.

The Swiss star, who underwent two knee surgeries in 2020, carved out a break for 2-0 in the second set. He couldn't hang on and Hurkacz levelled in the seventh game from 1-4 down before dominating the tie-break.

Federer looked punch drunk and he was quickly down 0-2 in the third set before Hurkacz wrapped up the decider in just 29 minutes. He is only the second Polish man to reach the semifinals at Wimbledon - Jerzy Janowicz being the other in 2013.

Up next is a clash with either Matteo Berrettini of Italy or Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime for a place in Sunday's final.

"I noticed the mis-hits, awkward looking points from Roger and obviously the last set of course, 6-0," said former champion Boris Becker commentating on Federer's performance.

"He would never ever say if



Roger Federer leaves the court after his quarterfinal defeat on Wednesday

there was a nigggle, but I don't know if we will ever see the great man again here."

Djokovic on a roll

It was 34 year old Djokovic's 100th career grass court victory.

Djokovic became only the third man to capture all four majors more than once with his second French Open victory last month.

Now he is halfway to becoming the first man in the Open Era and only the third in history to complete a calendar Grand Slam of all four majors.

"I'm aware of certain stats, I love this sport with all my heart, body and soul and have been devoted to it since I was four," he said. "Sometimes things do look surreal for me but I try to live in the moment and take every opportunity I have on the court.

"Going for history is a huge inspiration for me, let's keep it going."

Djokovic raced into a 5-0 lead in the first set before 29 year old Fucsovics got on the board.

The world No 48, bidding to become the first Hungarian man since 1948 to make the semifinals at Wimbledon, saved five set points. However, the rearguard action was too late to prevent the champion prevail.

The top seed broke for the only time in the second set in the ninth game which was enough for a two sets lead. Djokovic had

spent three hours fewer than the muscular Fucsovics in getting to the last-eight and his freshness showed when he crucially broke in the first game of the third set and then fought off two break points in the sixth.

Shapovalov fired 17 aces and 59 winners past Khachanov to reach his first Grand Slam semifinal. The left-handed Canadian will be a huge underdog against Djokovic having lost all six matches against the world No 1.

"Obviously he's the best player in the world but I think anything is anything is possible. When you look at the scoreboard first thing it will be 0-0," said the 22 year old.

"Nothing else matters. Its a tennis match and it can go either way. I have full belief in myself and my team."

'Not a bad guy'

Despite his success, Djokovic later faced the first questioner at his post-match news conference who asked, "what has it been like to be something of the 'bad guy' chasing after Roger and Rafa all these years?"

"I don't consider myself a bad guy. I mean, that's your opinion," replied the Serb. "I'm not chasing anybody. I'm making my own path and my own journey, my own history. I'm privileged to be part of history of this sport that I love."

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Novak Djokovic celebrates his quarterfinal win over Marton Fucsovics in Wimbledon, UK, on Wednesday (AFP)

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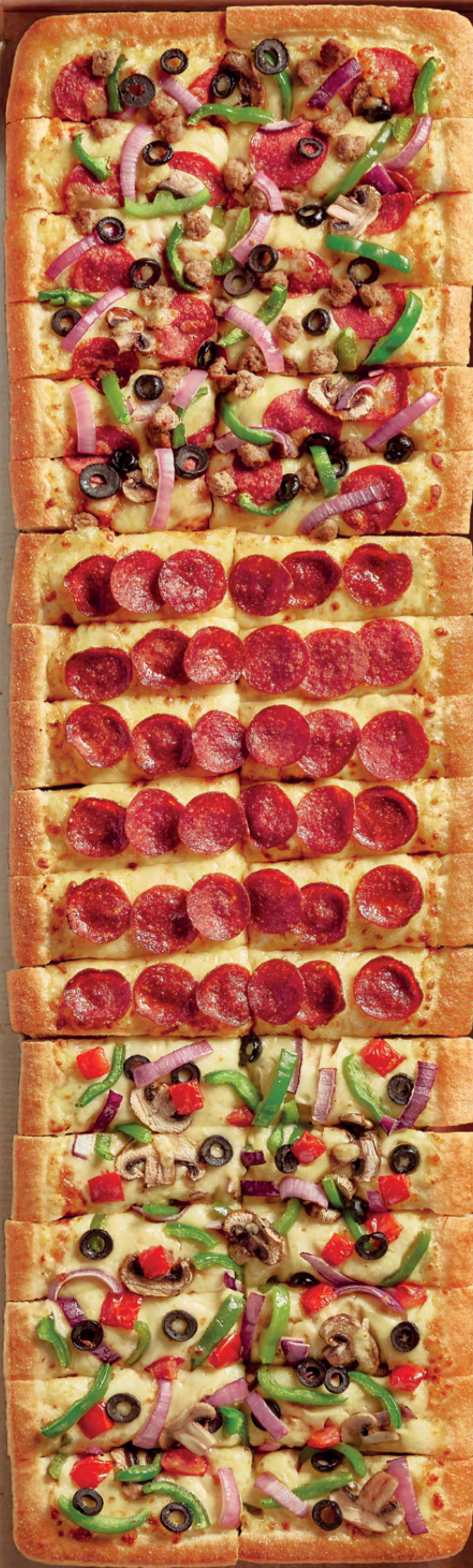
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