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MUSCAT

HM THANKED BY ALGERIAN PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from President Abdelmadjid Tebboune of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, in reply to His Majesty's greetings cable on his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, President Tebboune expressed his utmost thanks and appreciation for His Majesty's greetings and best wishes, praying to the Almighty Allah to grant His Majesty good health and happiness. He also wished the Sultanate and the Omani people further progress and prosperity.

— ONA

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ICU PATIENTS DROP BELOW 200



31 per cent of target groups vaccinated

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

Covid-19 patients in the intensive care units (ICUs) of hospitals have gone below 200 along with a fall in the number of fresh coronavirus infections.

The Ministry of Health on Wednesday reported 293 new cases and 12 deaths. Currently, there are only 12,111 people in the hospitals, which is 4.07 per cent of the total infected people.

Thirty patients were admitted to hospitals across the country, taking the total number of inpatients to 434 including 194 in intensive care units.

The total number of cases registered in the Sultanate has now reached 297,724, including 3,889 deaths. The total number of recoveries is 281,724 while the recovery rate is 94.6 per cent.

Currently, 38 doses have been administered per 100 people in the country. The Sultanate has vaccinated 31 per cent of the target population with a single dose while 6.8 per cent

have been fully vaccinated in the country.

Meanwhile, the Directorate General of Health Services in Muscat urged those in target groups to get prior appointments for vaccination to avoid crowding at the centres.

The Directorate General of Health Services in Dhofar Governorate in coordination with the Directorate General of Education will start the national vaccination campaign soon for children aged 12 and above.

The centre in Salalah will be the Sultan Qaboos Youth Complex for Culture and Entertainment. A text message will be delivered about the time to the guardian of the child as per the phone number registered in the education. It should be shown at the vaccination centre. The student's birth certificate or passport should be presented to verify the data and while residents must carry the resident card.

Only one member of the family shall accompany the student to the venue of immunisation.

Oman contributes to securing international waters in region

MUSCAT: An official source with the Maritime Security Centre (MSC) in Oman said within the framework of joint maritime action and the existing coordination between the MSC of the Sultanate of Oman and other maritime security centres in the region, the MSC continues to follow up the incident of the ship *Asphalt Princess* which occurred in international waters.

The source told the Moral Guide that the Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo) is carrying out sorties close to


A handout image shows the Thalassa Desgagnes tanker, now called the Asphalt Princess. — Reuters

the incident scene.

For its part, the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) dispatched a number of its vessels to pitch in with securing the international waters.

The source affirmed the MSC's commitment to contribute to securing maritime navigation in the area.

The MSC previously received information that the Panama-flagged tanker *Asphalt Princess* experienced a hijacking incident in international waters in the Sea of Oman.

The boarding took place in an area in the Arabian Sea leading to the Strait of Hormuz, the conduit for about a fifth of the world's sea-borne oil exports.

HM greetings to Iran President

TEHRAN: President Dr Ebrahim Raisi of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on Wednesday received Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister.

During the meeting, Sayyid Badr conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the Iranian President, along with His Majesty's best wishes of health and wellbeing to him, the Iranian people permanent progress and prosperity, and the relations between the two countries further growth.

In his turn, the Iranian President asked Sayyid Badr to convey his greetings and best wishes of good health and well-being to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people. He wished the relations between the two countries further



progress and prosperity.

The meeting was attended by Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister of Iran, Ibrahim Ahmed al Ma'aini, Oman's Ambassador to Iran, the delegation accompanying Sayyid Badr and a number of Iranian officials. — ONA



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Oman, Qatar review military cooperation

MUSCAT: An official session of talks was held at SAF headquarters on Wednesday between Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raeesi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), and Lt Gen (Pilot) Ghanim Shaheen al Ghanim, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces in the State of Qatar, who is currently visiting the Sultanate.

The session reviewed fields of the existing military cooperation between the two countries' ministries of defence and means of enhancing these fields. The two

sides exchanged points of view and discussed several issues of joint interest that serve the two brotherly countries.

SAYYID SHIHAB RECEIVES AL GHANIM

His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Wednesday Lt Gen (Pilot) Ghanim Shaheen al Ghanim, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces in the State of Qatar.

During the meeting, Sayyid



Shihab welcomed the guest and his accompanying delegation. The meeting reviewed the fraternal relations between the two brotherly countries and exchanged views on several matters of mutual interest.

The meeting was attended by Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raeesi,, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF).

ROYAL OFFICE MINISTER RECEIVES AL GHANIM

Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, also received at his office

Lt Gen (Pilot) Ghanim Shaheen al Ghanim, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces in the State of Qatar.

The meeting reviewed the strong, fraternal relations between the two brotherly countries, and fields of joint cooperation. The two sides exchanged conversations on regional issues of mutual interest.

The Qatari guest commended the sturdy relations binding the Sultanate with Qatar.

— ONA



Muscat Municipality undertakes vital projects

MUSCAT: Muscat Municipality is currently implementing a number of vital and strategic projects in the wilayats of the governorate including the rainwater drainage channels project.

Eng Mohammed bin Salim al Yazeedi, road project engineer at the Department of Road Projects at Muscat Municipality, affirmed that the municipality has embarked on the first phase of the rainwater drainage channels project in Al Mahaj district in the Wilayat of Al Amerat.

The channel is 2-km long and 5-9-metre wide, Al Yazeedi said, adding that the project involves cutting hills, constructing 4-km protection for the channels and 4-cell viaducts on the service road crossing the path of the channel.

The project also involves relocation and protection of services on the path of the channels. It is expected to be

completed by the end of the year.

The first phase of the project is under way to construct viaducts on the entrance and the exit of Darsait district in the Wilayat of Muttrah. The project involves transfer and protection of several services on the path of the valley. The project is expected to be completed at the end of this month, Al Yazeedi said.

In addition, Muscat Municipality continues the construction of rainwater drainage channels in Wadi Al Ghadeer in the Wilayat of Bausher extending from the November 18 road to the sea. The project, expected to be completed by the end of this year, involves clean-up work on the wadi and construction of three viaducts and 3-km protections on Wadi Al Ghadeer as well as construction of two Irish bridges on roads crossing the path of the valley, the officials concluded.

— ONA

Date palm farmers must watch out for black scorch fungal disease

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
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Farmers must take adequate preventive measures to protect date palms from black scorch, a fungal disease, which is spreading across many governorates in the Sultanate, advised an agriculture ministry official.

Black scorch, also called Medjnoon or Fool's disease, has been observed on date palms in all date growing areas of the world. According to experts of the Food and Agriculture Organization, symptoms are usually expressed in four distinct forms: black scorch on the leaves, inflorescence blight, heart or trunk rot and bud rot on palms of all ages. Infections are all characterised by partial or complete damage of the tissues.

Decay is most serious when it attacks the terminal bud and heart leading to the death of the palm. Some palms recover, but these palms show a characteristic bend in the region of infection. This is why it is called Medjnoon. They set normal growth back by several years.

Amin bin Mayouf al Hinai, Head of the Plant Protection Department, at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, said: "We recommend



farmers to combat these pests by using fungicides, which are of several types. Each of them should be used in recommended doses. The top of the affected palm tree and its trunk must be

sprayed with the same solution," Al Hinai said.

According to al Hinai, these methods reduce the spread of the pest. The spraying of the fungicide should be repeated

Delay in eliminating black scorch may create hotspots of the pest and spread to other trees. Farmers should pay attention to irrigation, fertilisation, weed removal, and cleanliness of the palms

AMIN BIN MAYOUF AL HINAI
MoAFWR official

after two to three weeks.

Al Hinai explained that the delay in the methods of control leads to the death of the palm. "Delay in eliminating the black scorch may create hotspots of the pest and spread to other trees" he said, asking farmers to cooperate and in combating such diseases.

"Farmers should pay attention to irrigation, fertilisation, weed removal and cleanliness of the palms. They also have to monitor the palm trees on an ongoing basis," he said.

The affected fronds and leaves should be cut immediately and burned. After pruning, the surrounding tissues should be protected by spraying with Bordeaux mixture, lime-sulphur solution, or any copper-based fungicides. Under a severe attack, affected palms are to be removed and burnt.

Oman affirms support to Lebanese people

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Foreign Ministry, on Wednesday participated in the third international conference to support the brotherly people of Lebanon.

The virtual conference was headed by Emanuel Macron, French President. It was conducted in cooperation with the United Nations (UN) on the occasion of one year passing since the explosion in the Port of Beirut.

The Foreign Ministry

was represented by Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary for Diplomatic Affairs.

Sheikh Khalifa affirmed the Sultanate's stance supporting the brotherly Lebanese Republic in facing their current circumstances.

The conference aims to mobilise international solidarity and to boost the efforts exerted to provide aids for the brotherly people of Lebanon.

— ONA

■ SAYYID BADR MEETS IRAN'S FIRST VICE PRESIDENT



TEHRAN: Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister met in the Iranian capital, Tehran on Wednesday with Dr Mohammad Mokhber Dezfouli, First Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The meeting reviewed the cooperation and friendship relations between the two countries and touched on a number of topics of mutual interest. Sayyid Badr expressed his heartfelt sentiments to the Iranian First Vice President on being appointed in this position, wishing him success. He affirmed the Sultanate's keenness on developing the joint interests in different spheres that serve the two friendly countries and their peoples. — ONA

Interest in solar power spikes after high electricity bills



KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

The demand for solar power panels for industrial as well as domestic consumption is likely to increase in the wake of a spike in electricity tariffs according to company officials. Even mosques have started using this source of clean and green energy.

"We have been receiving many queries for solar panels. In Oman, there's a great scope for solar energy where ample sunlight is available round the year," says Manu S Nair, who handles many alternative energy projects.

He said that although initial investment on solar projects is slightly high, one can reap a return on investment in three years after the installation. Monthly maintenance costs negligible amount

"An average Chinese made panel has a life of 25 years and the initial cost would be equivalent to 2-3 years' electricity bills. Still, it's worth it in the long run."

On average, a normal household spends around RO

35 to RO 100 per month or even more on their electricity bills. The consumption and the charges shoot up for villas that are equipped with swimming pools and other amenities.

"Installing a solar system could immediately save up to 40 per cent of their monthly bills and the ROI payback period for such solar system investments is estimated to be less than 5 years with the increasing tariff rates," a company official said.

Reports suggest that many people have started registering for solar under Sahim scheme and some approached the private companies, other company officials confirmed.

"From the industrial sector too, we also have huge inquiries/ interests being shared from various C&I, warehousing, poultry and dairy farms where the peak load consumption is higher," said a representative of a company.

Places of worship are also tapping the Sun for power needs and setting an example for others.

The Hassan bin Thabit Mosque in the Wilayat of Al Seeb

“Lesser power consumption and cutting down power expenses by 17 per cent to 30 per cent are the primary benefits of solar energy. With replacing old air conditioners and lights the savings can be up to 30 per cent

YOUSUF AL HARTHY
CEO of Amana Waqf Funds Management Company

has been converted into a solar-powered mosque by the Amana Waqf Funds Management Company

The mosque uses 10-kilowatt solar panels installed in cooperation with a firm classed under the category of small and medium enterprises. The project cut down power consumption in

prayer areas by 40 per cent and generated a power surplus of 2 per cent.

"This initiative fits with Oman Vision 2040's focus on sustainable development. The overall aim is to tap power alternatives to enhance social welfare, diminish spending on conventional power solutions and realise Amana's objectives to create a new concept for the management of Waqf establishments in accordance with the most modern methods," said Yousuf al Harthy, CEO of Amana.

"Lesser power consumption and cutting down power expenses by 17 per cent to 30 per cent are the primary benefits of solar energy. With replacing old air conditioners and lights the savings can be up to 30 per cent. Producing less carbon emission and less usage of resources are the other major benefits."

Oman has clear rules governing solar power generation and consumption. Accordingly, anyone is free to use a solar panel and generate power, store it in batteries and use it for their own use.

Nizwa Fort most popular

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

MUSCAT: The Nizwa Fort in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate is one of the most popular forts in the country, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The Nizwa fort received 125,876 visitors in 2018, 143,767 visitors in 2019 and 44,047 in 2020, when the site was closed for a long time as part of the restrictive measures to limit the spread of Covid-19 in the country.

Among other forts and castles, Muttrah received 14,781 visitors in 2020, Taqah (4,457), Mirbat (691), Khasab (10,429), Bukha (6,367), Buraimi (1,068), Bahla (11,304) and Gebreen (19,977).

Among museums, the National Museum received 33,856 visitors in 2020, including 412 official delegates and 9,256 students.

The Frankincense Land Museum in Salalah has been popular with 11,871 visitors, while Bait al Zubair in the capital received 37,765 visitors.

The government has been working on various initiatives to privatise natural heritage sites such as forts, castles, and old villages located in Oman. Having achieved success with some projects, the initiative has been expanded to additional sites to develop – which are economically viable, and which offer further diversification potential for Oman's tourism sector.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) recently invited private companies and institutions that have the technical and financial capabilities to apply for a competition for the lease, operation, and employment of Muttrah Fort and Al Bait al Kabir in Muttrah.



Pact signed to Set up fish storage center

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources on Wednesday signed an investment agreement to set up fish storage centre in Sharbathat in the Wilayat of Shaleem and Al Halaniyat Islands.

The agreement aims to enhance fish products' quality by providing services like sorting, cleaning and packing fresh fish received from fishermen.

The project includes a fish trading hall, cold stores and ice production factories, in addition to other investment projects such as shops, rest shacks for fishermen and transporters and boat maintenance workshops in a 9,696 square metre area.

The project has economic and social value as it provides

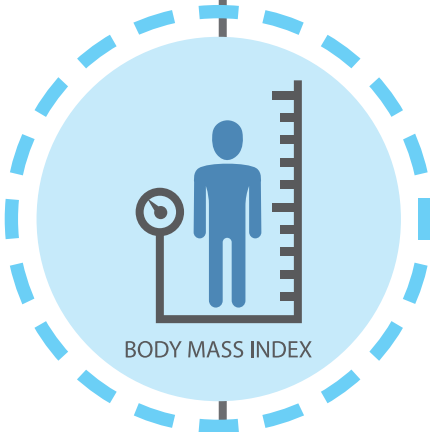
opportunities for everyone to obtain fish products from (transporters, companies, merchants, retailers, fish shop owners and restaurants). This will ensure transparency in product prices, control the fish products quality, and enforce the regulations and legislation of fish marketing and fish products distribution to meet the local market needs. It also provides job opportunities and support services to the fisheries sector through other investment projects linked with the project.

The agreement was signed by Eng Yaqoub bin Khalfan al Busaidy, the Ministry's Under-Secretary for Fisheries, and Salem bin Said Al Bat'hari, CEO of Al Izz Resources Trading Company.

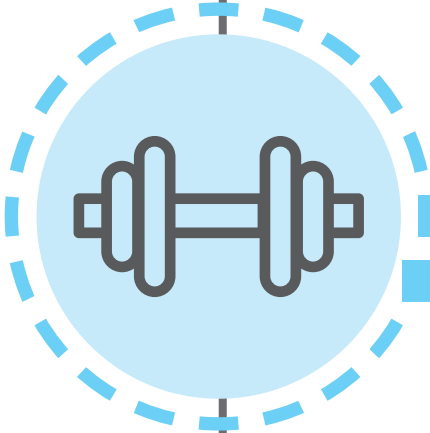
— ONA

INGREDIENTS OF A HEALTHY LIFE

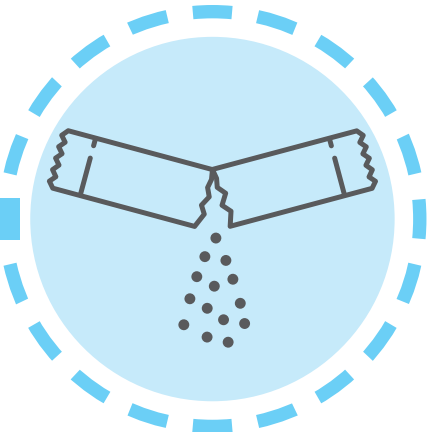
KEEP BLOOD
PRESSURE
UNDER
CONTROL



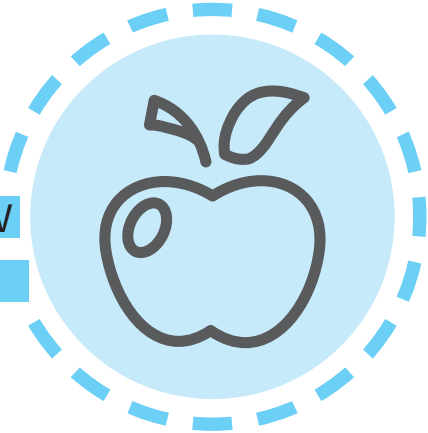
MAINTAIN HEALTHY BODY WEIGHT - BMI <25



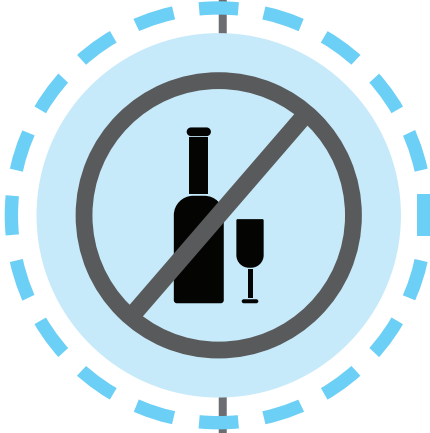
REGULAR EXERCISE OF AT LEAST 5 DAYS A WEEK
AMOUNTING TO NOT LESS THAN 150 MINUTES/ WEEK



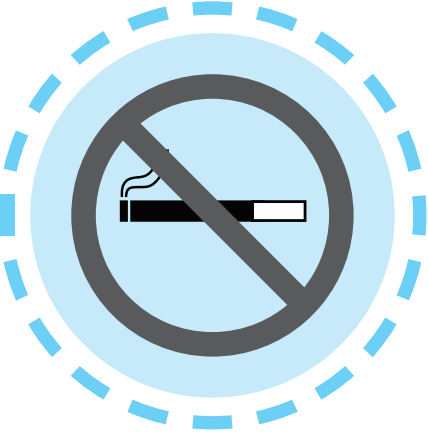
MINIMISE SALT AND SUGAR IN FOOD



INCLUDE FRUITS, VEGETABLES, NUTS, LOW
FAT DAIRY PRODUCTS AND LEAN MEAT



AVOID ALCOHOL



STOP SMOKING



Pandemic is also a time people neglect their existing medical issues and focus totally on the virus. This is due to the over-attention towards one, neglecting the other

DR MAHMOUD AL RAHBI,
Senior Consultant, Al Nahdha Hospital

REDUCE STRESS



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Covid-19 has brought focus on the importance of a healthy lifestyle and many deaths were due to bad management of chronic illness, especially high blood pressure, according to doctors.

People suffering from lifestyle diseases should undertake periodic health check-ups and ensure that they follow healthy protocols.

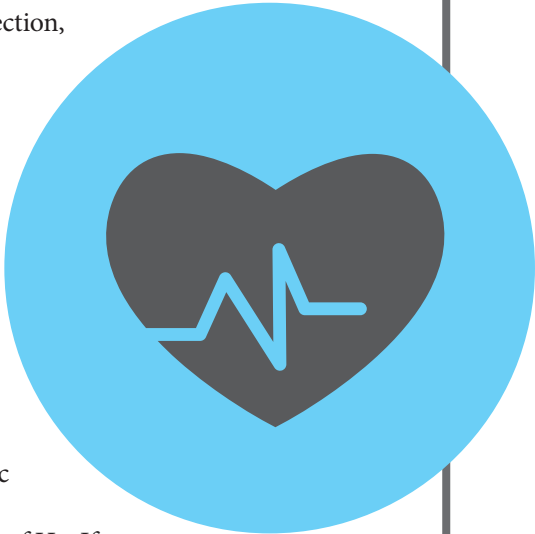
“Pandemic is also a time people neglect their existing medical issues and focus totally on the virus. This is due to the over-attention towards one, neglecting the other,” says Dr Mahmoud al Rahbi, Senior Consultant at the Emergency Medicine Section, Al Nahdha Hospital.

The pressure exerted by the blood on the arterial wall during its circulation is the blood pressure. The pressure exerted during the heart muscle contraction is the systolic blood pressure and the same during heart muscle relaxation is the diastolic blood pressure. Normal pressure is <120/80 mm of Hg. If the pressure is more than 130/80 ie >130 mm of Hg during systole (heart muscle contraction) and >80 mm of Hg during diastole (heart muscle relaxation), it is called systemic hypertension.

High blood pressure is an important risk factor for stroke, heart attack, abnormal heartbeat, heart failure, kidney failure and visual impairment. The commonest cause is primary hypertension which usually affects adults between the age of 35 and 55 years of age.

“High blood pressure is predominantly due to peripheral arteriolar constriction secondary to hormonal effects. The other causes are stiffness of arteries in the elderly population,” says Dr Anoop Soman, a cardiologist. “In some other patients it is due to sedentary lifestyle, excess salt intake, being overweight, smoking, drinking and the like.”

Once the doctor rules out the secondary causes of hypertension and even after lifestyle modifications, BP is consistently more than 130/80 mm of Hg one can consider starting medicines.





Health Endowment Foundation meets

MUSCAT: The Governing Board of the Health Endowment Foundation held its first meeting at the headquarters of the Ministry of Health (MOH).

During the meeting, Dr Ahmed Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, was elected as the Chairman of the Health Endowment Foundation, Dr Fatma Mohammed al Ajmi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs, as the Deputy Chairman, and Dr Halima Qalam al Hinai, Acting Director-General of Planning and Studies, as the Secretary.

The meeting reviewed the Foundation's Statute, and approved an executive committee to regulate the work of the Foundation. It also identified the required assets, and developed investment plans along with marketing plans to achieve the desired goals of the Foundation.

The idea of establishing this Foundation came due to challenges facing the health system in the Sultanate, such as high costs of health services, teaching, training and hiring workforce in the health field, as well as the high costs of medical equipment and devices, medications and

biomedical technology. In order to address these challenges, efforts have been exerted for sustaining the financing of the health system. Health endowment is one of the funding alternatives for the health system, which is adopted by a number of countries.

The most important tasks of the Governing Board are to formulate policies and general goals of the Foundation, providing the support to achieve and implement these policies and goals. In addition, the Governing Board has the full authority to issue the necessary decisions and procedures. — ONA



Initiative to facilitate and enrich research environment in Oman

Oman Research Portal provides services to researchers wishing to submit their proposals

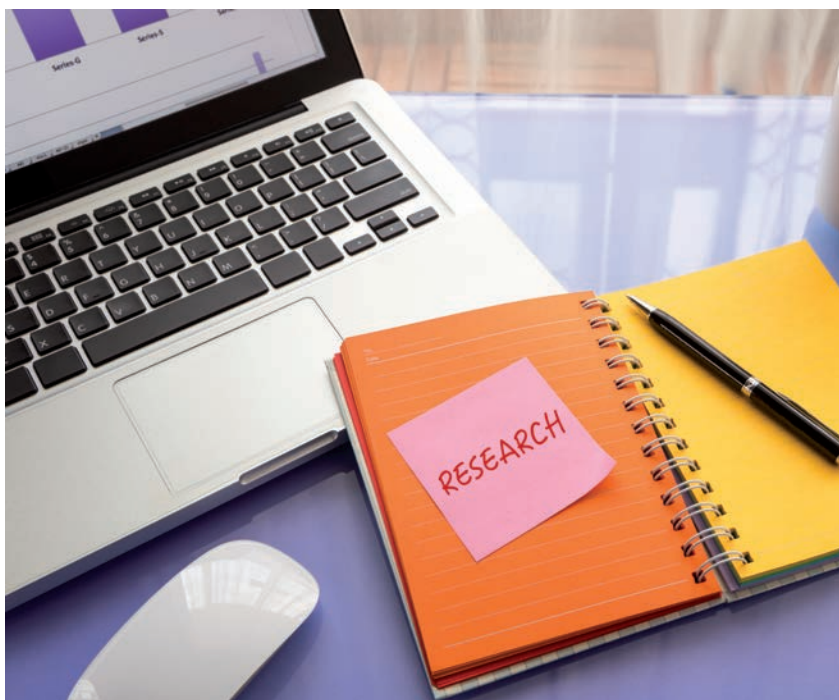
MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation has developed the Oman Research Portal, which is one of the national initiatives that aims to establish an integrated system to provide many electronic platforms and complementary tools to facilitate and enrich the research environment in the Sultanate of Oman.

The Oman Research Portal provides research services to researchers wishing to submit their research proposals within the programmes of the Ministry.

Through the portal, the researcher can submit their research proposal from anywhere with internet access. The results of the evaluation of the submitted proposal and evaluation reports can also be followed up through the portal. The researcher can access the portal if their institution is affiliated with the Ministry or if they are registered as independent researchers.

The portal also provides statistics on the number of researchers registered in the Research Information Management System (RIMS) and the number of submitted and approved research proposals. The portal displays statistical information on the number of scientific publications, practical journals, industrial challenges and current research projects available as well.

Regarding the facilities provided by the Oman Research Portal, Nasser bin Ali al Mandhari,



Director of the Oman Research Portal Project at the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, maintained that the portal facilitates the process of communication between users and research centres and institutions in the Sultanate. It also provides quick

THE PORTAL PROVIDES QUICK ACCESS TO NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH SYSTEMS AND EASY ACCESS TO RESEARCH TOPICS, PUBLICATIONS AND PROJECT OUTPUTS, IN ADDITION TO PRESENTING RESEARCH-RELATED NEWS, RESEARCH STATISTICS, RESEARCH PROJECTS AND SUBMISSIONS, AND MORE

access to national and international research systems and easy access to research topics, publications and project outputs, in addition to presenting research-related news, research statistics, research projects and submissions, and more.

In regard to the platforms and programmes available, Al Mandhari said that the portal contains many digital platforms and electronic systems that support scientific research, such as the Oman Research Repository (Shuaa), Oman Research and Education Network (OMREN), EJAAD, the National Equipment and Facilities Database (iLab), and Masader (Oman Virtual Science Library).

Al Mandhari added that the portal includes many research services, such as the Taawun platform, which is an interactive platform that facilitates communication between researchers and those interested in research and innovation.

The Research Information Management System (RIMS) is another service provided by the Oman Research Portal, and it is an electronic system for the integrated management of research support projects and programmes and institutional and individual funding opportunities in association with the Ministry. Through RIMS, new and existing research projects are managed, as well as funding requests, scientific publications, research reports and other related services are available for use by researchers from institutions affiliated with the Ministry electronically. — ONA

Desire modification phase of university admission from August 7

MUSCAT: The Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) announced that the desire modification phase for students of the general education diploma and its equivalents for the academic year 2020-2021, will be from August 7 to 17.

The HEAC said that the results of the first sort-out will be announced on September 5.

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA) Dr Hamad bin Khalfan al Numani, Director-General of HEAC, said that the number of seats at the higher education institutions for the academic year 2021-2022 has reached 33,320 seats, an increase of 17.4 per cent over the last year. This figure includes 20,040 seats at the public higher education institutions,

414 seats for overseas scholarships and 12,866 seats for local scholarships at the private universities and colleges.

The HEAC has previously announced updates of the study programmes of the desire modification phase on its website and social media platforms as some private companies and higher education institutions contributed free-of-charge scholarships in addition to 1,200 partly free scholarships. Besides, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for the first time rolled out partly free domestic scholarships beside the full-fee scholarships with a view to increasing the seats allocated to domestic scholarships, Al Numani said. — ONA

Musandam allocated RO 26.3m for power

KHASAB: Eng Muhammad Yousef al Shehhi, Director of Tanweer Electricity Company (Tanweer) in Musandam Governorate, stated that the total budget allocated to the electricity sector in the governorate for this year stood at RO 26.3 million.

In a statement to the Oman News Agency (ONA), Al Shehhi said that Tanweer is currently studying alternatives for reserve power feedbacks in Musandam Governorate. Options unrolled so far include a proposal to set up a backup station in the Wilaya of Daba. The proposal will be submitted to the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) before the end of this year because Musandam's electricity network is not linked to the Sultanate's power grid. Another anomaly is that power transmission lines are extended on rugged mountainous terrain, making it difficult to rectify breakdowns



when they occur there.

Al Shehhi affirmed that Tanweer exerted relentless efforts in developing electrical networks in Musandam. These include a 132kV power transmission system, completed in 2018, and its subsidiary network. Another example is the new Khasab Power Plant project, which is the company's most important project, set up at a cost of RO 62 million.

Al Shehhi pointed out that these projects keep pace with the rising demand for electricity in Musandam Governorate. They raise the capacity of power transmission and power distribution.

— ONA

ROP recruitment under way

MUSCAT: In response to the Royal directives issued by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, to speed up the implementation of the employment initiatives, the Ministry of Labour in coordination with Royal Oman Police (ROP) announced the opening of recruitment for holders of the general education diploma (GED) from August 5 to 12.

According to an advertisement published by ROP on Twitter, the applicant should be an Omani male holder of GED passing certificate.

The applicant should not be older than 27 years and should have taken a job at any unit state's administrative apparatus.

Oman Air to resume Jeddah flights

MUSCAT: Oman Air will resume flights to Jeddah on August 11. The twice-weekly flights will operate on Wednesday and Saturday as WY 1675 from Muscat (MCT) and WY 1676 from Jeddah (JED). Flights from Muscat will depart at 3:25 pm and arrive in Jeddah at 5:40 pm.

Flights from Jeddah will depart at 7:40 pm and arrive in Muscat at 11:45 pm.

Oman Air will maintain its comprehensive safety programme throughout all elements of the travel journey to ensure that guests fly confidently. Masks are required when



guests are onboard the aircraft and in Oman's airports. Distancing is maintained while guests board and exit the aircraft,

which are carefully cleaned after each flight and at the end of everyday.

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

Guests who are planning to travel to Muscat should visit the Civil Aviation Authority website, caa.gov.om, to ensure they are prepared to comply with requirements to enter the Sultanate.



Demonstrators gather near the damaged grain silos outside the port of Lebanon’s capital Beirut on Wednesday, on the first anniversary of the blast that ravaged the port and the city. (Right) A demonstrator marches with a sign showing the face of one of the young victims of the blast. — AFP

LEBANON MARKS YEAR SINCE DEADLY BLAST

BEIRUT: Lebanon on Wednesday marked a year since a cataclysmic explosion ravaged Beirut, with a mix of grief over lost lives and rage at the impunity for its worst peacetime disaster at a time when its economy was already in tatters.

Shortly after 6:00 pm on August 4, 2020, a stock of ammonium nitrate fertiliser haphazardly stored at the city’s port exploded and left swathes of the Lebanese capital looking like a war zone.

What went down as one of the largest non-nuclear blasts in history killed at least 214 people, levelled entire neighbourhoods, irreparably scarred the nation’s psyche and deepened the country’s economic abyss.

With more than half the country living under the poverty line, former colonial power France aims to raise humanitarian aid at another international conference co-hosted by the UN on the

anniversary.

President Emmanuel Macron, at the start of the event, pledged 100 million euros (\$118 million) from France alone.

But as the probe into the disaster stalls, he warned Lebanese leaders “owe their people the truth and transparency” over what happened.

The country’s already reviled political class has hidden behind its proclaimed immunity to avoid prosecution, delaying the lead investigating judge’s work at every turn.

In Beirut, security forces fanned out near the port ahead of families of the dead and survivors gathering to honour those who perished in a blast whose shockwave was felt as far away as Cyprus.

Port workers were buried under gutted grain silos, firefighters battling the fire that preceded the

Leaders ‘owe their people the truth’ about blast: Macron

PARIS: Lebanon’s leaders “owe their people the truth” about the massive blast that claimed hundreds of lives in Beirut last year, French President Emmanuel Macron said on the anniversary of the disaster on Wednesday.

“I think that Lebanese leaders... owe their people the truth and transparency,” Macron said at the start of a UN-backed donor conference for Lebanon, which he is chairing over a video link-up with several world leaders.

Macron aims to raise at least \$350 million in emergency aid for the battered Lebanese population.

US President Joe Biden, Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al Sissi and Lebanon’s own President Michel Aoun are among the participants from around 40 countries and organisations, including the International Monetary Fund, at the conference. — AFP



Tunisia unions urge speedy new government

TUNIS: Tunisia’s powerful UGTT trade union body has urged President Kais Saied to form a new government, nearly two weeks after he assumed executive power and sacked the prime minister.

Saied also suspended parliament for 30 days on July 25, and has since dismissed four ministers and other top officials.

The president has dismissed accusations by the largest party in parliament that he staged a “coup”.

He insists that he acted under the constitution, which allows the head of state to take unspecified exceptional measures in the event of an “imminent threat”.

“We call for speeding up the appointment of a head of government” and as “a smaller and harmonious rescue government”, said



Tunisian army barricade the parliament building in the capital Tunis, after the president dismissed the prime minister and ordered parliament to close for 30 days. — AFP file photo

a UGTT statement released late on Tuesday. It said any delay in forming a new government risked

worsening the political vacuum in the North African country. It would also “make it difficult

to emerge from the current social and economic crisis”, said the UGTT, which backed the president’s move last month.

Tunisia is currently suffering one of the world’s worst outbreaks of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of the death toll.

It has seen more than 20,000 deaths from a population of around 12 million.

On July 25, Saied announced measures that included freezing parliamentary activity for 30 days, lifting parliamentary immunity and sacking Hichem Mechichi as both premier and interior minister.

He later fired the defence, justice, economy and communications technology ministers, as well as top officials. — AFP

US extends Iraq’s sanction waiver for four months

BAGHDAD: The US has granted Iraq a four-month extension to a sanctions waiver allowing it to import Iranian gas, an Iraqi official said on Wednesday.

Iraq buys gas and electricity from neighbouring Iran to supply about a third of its power sector, which has been worn down by years of conflict and poor maintenance, and is unable to meet the needs of the country’s 40 million population.

The US blacklisted Iran’s energy industry in late 2018 as it ramped up sanctions, but granted Baghdad a series of temporary waivers, hoping that Iraq would wean itself off Iranian energy.

The last exemption period ended last month, and the new

waiver took effect last week, the official told AFP on condition of anonymity. It runs until the start of December.

The extensions follow a visit to Washington by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhemi to meet US President Joe Biden.

Iraq, where legislative elections are scheduled for October 10, must balance its relations with both Washington and Tehran, the arch-rival of the US.

Iraq produces 16,000 megawatts of power, far below the 24,000 megawatts needed, and even further from the expected future needs of a country whose population is set to double by 2050, according to the UN. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TELAVIV

Israel fires into Lebanon following rocket fire

Israeli gunners fired three rounds of artillery into south Lebanon on Wednesday in retaliation for rocket attacks, the army said.

“For the third time within two hours, the IDF (army) struck along the Lebanese border,” the military said in a statement, adding that artillery forces “struck in Lebanese territory in response to the rockets fired at Israeli territory earlier today.” There were no immediate reports of casualties on the Lebanese side.

The army said three rockets



were fired from Lebanon into Israeli territory, though one fell short of the border. The others struck near the northern town of Kiryat Shmona, where air raid sirens sent residents into bomb shelters..

BERLIN

Syrian man held over Damascus war crime

German police on Wednesday arrested a Syrian man for war crimes, accusing him of having fired a grenade into a crowd of civilians waiting for food and water from UN relief workers in Damascus in 2014.

At least seven people were killed in the attack allegedly carried out by Mouafak Al D on March 23, 2014, German prosecutors said in a statement.

“The accused is strongly suspected of having committed war crimes. In connection with this,



he is also charged with seven counts of murder and three counts of grievous bodily harm,” said prosecutors. At the time of the assault, the suspect is believed to have been a member of the “Free Palestine Movement.”

JUBA

South Sudan’s VP Machar deposed by party

South Sudan’s vice president Riek Machar has been ousted as head of his party and its armed forces, say rival leaders who accused the rebel-turned-politician of no longer representing their interests.

Machar, a pivotal figure in South Sudan’s bloody road to independence and subsequent civil war, was deposed following a three-day gathering of senior SPLM/A-IO leaders in the country’s far north, the party’s military wing said.



Its chief of staff, First Lieutenant General Simon Gatwech Dual, was declared interim leader of the opposition movement that governs the troubled country in a shaky alliance with former enemies.

In brief

■ BEIJING

**CHINA RESTRICTS OVERSEAS TRAVEL TO CURB COVID OUTBREAK**

China on Wednesday tightened overseas travel restrictions for its citizens as part of efforts to contain rising coronavirus cases, after reporting its highest number of infections in months.

The movement of people is coming under more restriction inside China — with localised transport closures and stay-at-home orders in places in some cities - and beyond China's borders. China had previously boasted of its success in crushing Covid-19, with hard lockdowns in the early stages mixed with tight controls of its borders, but mass testing campaigns have uncovered Delta variant infections across the country. The latest outbreak is threatening to undo the country's economic rebound and return to normal life with nearly 500 domestic cases reported since mid-July.

■ NEW DELHI

**JUDICIAL PROBE INTO ABUSE AND MURDER OF 9-YEAR-OLD GIRL**

The chief minister of India's capital ordered a judge-led enquiry on Wednesday after a nine-year-old girl was allegedly raped and murdered, sparking days of protests and renewed scrutiny of the country's problem with sexual violence. Police have alleged that the girl was killed after she had gone to fetch water from a crematorium near her house in the city's Cantonment area on Sunday. Her family told media the perpetrators cremated her body against their wishes.

Four men have been arrested in connection with the girl's murder, Ingit Pratap Singh, the top police officer in the south west of the capital where the alleged crime took place, said.

■ JAKARTA

**ASEAN APPOINTS BRUNEI DIPLOMAT AS ENVOY TO MYANMAR**

Foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have appointed Brunei's second minister for foreign affairs, Erywan Yusof, as special envoy to Myanmar, the group said on Wednesday.

Erywan has been tasked with ending violence in Myanmar, opening dialogue between the military rulers and their opponents in the crisis-torn country, according to a communique released after meetings on Monday and Wednesday by the bloc's foreign ministers.

Taliban claim Kabul bombing as Afghan forces defend cities

KABUL: The Taliban on Wednesday claimed responsibility for a huge bomb attack in Kabul targeting the defence minister, as the insurgents fought for control of a string of besieged cities across the country.

The bomb-and-gun attack on Defence Minister Bismillah Mohammadi on Tuesday was one of the biggest in Kabul for months, bringing violence to the capital after intense fighting in the south and west of the country.

The Afghan and US militaries have carried out air strikes against the insurgents to push them back, and the Taliban said the Kabul attack was a response to that.

"The attack is the beginning of the retaliatory operations against the circles and leaders of the Kabul administration who are ordering attacks and the bombing of different parts of the country," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement on social media.

It represents a major escalation by the Taliban, who have largely refrained from large-scale attacks in the capital in recent years after starting talks with the United States on troop withdrawal.

The first bomb exploded in the centre of Kabul, sending a thick plume of smoke into the sky, AFP correspondents reported.



Afghan security personnel inspect the site a day after a car bomb explosion near the wreckage in Kabul on Wednesday. — AFP

Less than two hours later, there was another loud blast followed by smaller explosions and rapid gunfire, also near the high-security Green Zone that houses several embassies, including the US mission.

The minister was safe and Afghan forces repelled the attackers, but at least eight people were killed, according to interior ministry spokesman Mirwais Stanikzai.

The bomb-and-gun attack on Defence Minister Bismillah Mohammadi on Tuesday was one of the biggest in Kabul for months, bringing violence to the capital

Mohammadi later said it was a suicide car bomb attack targeting his house.

A security source said several attackers stormed a lawmaker's house after setting off the car bomb and shot at the residence of the minister from there.

Security forces had cordoned off the scene of the attack on Wednesday as troops inspected the buildings and cars damaged by the blasts. — AFP



Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin

Malaysia PM defies calls to quit, wants trust vote

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin defied on Wednesday mounting pressure to quit, saying he retained majority support among lawmakers and would prove it when the southeast Asian nation's parliament reconvened next month.

The biggest bloc in Muhyiddin's ruling alliance, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), is split on its support for the prime minister, who has governed with a razor-thin majority in an unstable coalition since coming to power in March 2020.

In a televised speech, Muhyiddin said King Al-Sultan Abdullah agreed that he should stay in power until the confidence vote, even though some members of his coalition had withdrawn support.

In defiant remarks on national television, Muhyiddin said there was no question of his resigning as he held a majority. — Reuters

Japan warns of unprecedented Covid spread, Tokyo cases rise

TOKYO: Japan warned on Wednesday that coronavirus infections were surging at an unprecedented pace as new cases hit a record high in Tokyo, overshadowing the Olympics and adding to doubts over the government's handling of the pandemic.

The Delta variant was leading to a spread of infections "unseen in the past", Health Minister Norihisa Tamura said as he defended a new policy of asking patients with milder symptoms to isolate at home rather than going to hospital.

"The pandemic has entered a new phase ... Unless we have enough beds, we can't bring people to hospital. We're acting preemptively on this front," Tamura told parliament.

But he signalled the chance of rolling back the policy, as the decision to ask some sick people to stay at home has drawn criticism from medical experts as putting lives at risk.

"If things don't turn out as we expect, we can roll back the policy," Tamura said, adding the policy shift was a move to deal with the unexpectedly fast spread of the new variant.

Japan has seen a sharp increase in coronavirus cases. Tokyo reported a record 4,166 new cases on Wednesday.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said on Monday only Covid-19 patients who were seriously ill and those at risk of becoming so would be hospitalised, while others isolate at home, a shift in policy some fear may lead to an increase in deaths.



A man wearing a protective face mask, amid the Covid pandemic, makes his way at a local shopping street in Tokyo. — Reuters

Officials of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party have agreed to seek a withdraw of the policy, the Jiji news agency reported on Wednesday, joining similar calls made by opposition lawmakers.

The outcry is another setback for Suga, who has seen support plunge over his handling of the pandemic ahead of general elections to be held this year.

Polls have shown many Japanese people opposed to holding the Olympics while the country lagged in efforts to contain the pandemic and vaccinate the population.

Suga and Olympics organisers have said there is no link between

the July 23-August 8 Games and the spike in cases.

But top medical adviser Shigeru Omi told parliament hosting the Games may have affected public sentiment and eroded the impact of government requests for people to stay home.

Imposing a nationwide state of emergency could be an option to deal with the pandemic, he said. States of emergency are already in place in several prefectures, as well as Tokyo.

"Political leaders are sending out messages to the public in earnest but probably not as strongly and consistently as hoped," Omi said. — Reuters

WHO calls for moratorium on Covid-19 vaccine booster doses

GENEVA: The World Health Organization is calling for a moratorium on Covid-19 vaccine boosters until at least the end of September, its head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Wednesday.

The move was to enable that at least 10 per cent of the population of every country was vaccinated, WHO Director-General Tedros said.

The call to stop Covid-19 vaccine boosters is the strongest yet from the UN agency as the gap between inoculation rates in wealthy and poor countries widens.

“I understand the concern of all governments to protect their people from the Delta variant. But we cannot accept countries that have already used most of the global supply of vaccines using even more of it,” Tedros added.

High-income countries administered around 50 doses for every 100 people in May, and that number had since doubled, according to WHO. Low-income countries have only been able to administer 1.5 doses for every 100 people, due to lack of supply.

“We need an urgent reversal, from the majority of vaccines going to high-income countries, to the majority going to low-income countries,” said Tedros.

Some countries have begun to use or started weighing on the



WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus attends a news conference in Geneva, Switzerland. — Reuters file photo

The move was to enable that at least 10 per cent of the population of every country was vaccinated

need for booster doses.

Germany said on Monday it will in September start to offer a booster shot to vulnerable people. The United Arab Emirates will also start providing a booster shot to all fully vaccinated people considered at high risk, three months after their second vaccine

dose, and six months for others.

Last week, Israeli President Isaac Herzog received a third shot of coronavirus vaccine, kicking off a campaign to give booster doses to people aged over 60 in the country.

The United States in July signed a deal with Pfizer Inc and German partner BioNTech to buy 200 million additional doses of their Covid-19 vaccines to help with pediatric vaccination as well as possible booster shots.

US health regulators are still assessing the need for a booster dose. — Reuters

Project faces cash crunch

BRUSSELS: The World Health Organization (WHO) is seeking \$11.5 billion in urgent funding to fight the more infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus, a draft report seen by Reuters shows, amid worries wealthy nations are partly bypassing its Covid-19 programmes.

A large portion of the cash being requested from the WHO's partners is needed to buy tests, oxygen and face masks in poorer nations, says the document which is expected to be released this week. And a quarter of it would be to buy hundreds of millions of vaccines for them that would otherwise go elsewhere.

The paper, still subject to changes, outlines the results and financial needs of the Access to Covid-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A), the programme co-led by the WHO to distribute fairly Covid-19 vaccines, drugs and tests across the world.

The programme, set up at the start of the pandemic, remains vastly underfunded, and its coordinators are now acknowledging it will remain so as many governments look to address global Covid needs “differently”, an ACT-A official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. As a result, it has cut by nearly \$5 billion its total request for funds, the document shows. But it still needs \$16.8 billion, almost as much as what has been raised so far, and \$7.7 billion is required urgently. — Reuters



A person walks past a sign informing about a vaccination centre in Greenwich park, amid the Covid outbreak, in London. — Reuters

Britain to offer all 16 and 17 year-olds Covid shots

LONDON: Britain will offer all 16 and 17 year olds their first dose of Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine, Britain's vaccine advisers said on Wednesday, extending eligibility of the shots to children beyond the clinically vulnerable.

Britain's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) said it was updating initial advice given last month in light changes in the spread of the disease in younger groups, and the latest safety data that was available.

“After carefully considering the latest data, we advise that healthy 16 to 17-year-olds are offered a first dose of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Advice on when to offer the second vaccine dose will come later” said Wei Shen Lim, the JCVI's Covid-19 Chair.

“While Covid-19 is typically mild or asymptomatic in most young people, it can be very un-

pleasant for some and for this particular age group, we expect one dose of the vaccine to provide good protection against severe illness and hospitalisation.”

JCVI said that the benefits to children of keeping them healthy and in school were paramount, though there would also be positive impacts on society more broadly.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said he accepted the advice.

Britain has taken a much more cautious approach to vaccinating children than in the United States and Israel, which have pushed on with a broad roll-out for under 18s.

England's Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty has stressed the need for a full picture on safety data of the shots, given extremely low rates of severe outcomes for the disease in that age group. — Reuters

Belarus Olympic athlete stops over in Vienna before Poland refuge

VIENNA: Barusian Olympic athlete Krystsina Tsimanouskaya arrived in Austria on Wednesday en route to Poland, where she is expected to take refuge after saying she feared for her life if forced to return home.

The 24-year-old sprinter has been at the centre of a diplomatic drama in the middle of the Games since seeking protection from Tokyo 2020 staff on Sunday, saying her team was trying to bundle her onto a plane after she publicly criticised her coaches.

In an unexpected twist on Wednesday the athlete made a last-minute switch and decided not to board her flight to Warsaw, which has offered her a humanitarian visa, instead taking a plane to the Austrian capital.

The Austrian Airlines flight arrived at Vienna airport shortly after 3:00 pm (13:00 GMT) on Wednesday.

A VIP van followed by two po-



Magnus Brunner, Austrian State Secretary in the Federal Ministry for Climate Protection, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology, addresses the press at the VIP-Terminal after the arrival of Belarusian sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya at Vienna Airport, on Wednesday. — Reuters

lice vehicles were waiting to escort Tsimanouskaya from the plane.

“According to our information, she is scheduled to head to Warsaw this evening,” an Austrian foreign

ministry spokesman said, although the ministry added that should she “want to make an asylum application in Austria, she can of course count on our support”.

Tsimanouskaya had entered the airport in Tokyo surrounded by a phalanx of security, wearing a yellow facemask and with the pink ends of her hair visible in a bun.

She declined to speak to media gathered at her gate, but waved as she rounded the corner towards her plane.

Before travelling she had been sheltering in the Polish embassy in Tokyo for the past two nights after calling for international help, and activists have said she will go to Warsaw.

Belarus has been wracked by political upheaval and a crack-down on dissent after disputed elections that returned strongman Alexander Lukashenko to power last year.

Tsimanouskaya was one of more than 2,000 Belarusian sports figures who signed an open letter calling for new elections and for political prisoners to be freed.

But her trouble in Tokyo came after she posted on her Instagram, criticising her coaches for entering her into a race without informing her first.

Her husband has fled to Ukraine

and on Wednesday the Polish government said he had also been given a humanitarian visa.

The pair are expected to meet up in Poland, a staunch critic of Lukashenko's regime and home to a growing number of dissidents.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Tuesday he had spoken to the “courageous” Tsimanouskaya, who is “currently well taken care of and safe”.

“I assured her that she can count on the support and solidarity of Poland,” he wrote on Facebook.

The International Olympic Committee has said it will investigate Belarus's Olympic team, but activists have called for the country's Olympic committee to be suspended and its athletes to compete as neutrals.

Spokesman Mark Adams said on Wednesday that the IOC had received a report from Belarus's Olympic committee, which was “being evaluated”. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

MILAVCE

3 killed, dozens hurt in Czech train crash

Three people died and dozens more were injured on Wednesday when two trains collided at a village in the west of the Czech Republic, according to railway officials. The Munich-to-Prague express, number Ex 351 belonging to the German firm Die Laenderbahn, collided with a regional train coming from the opposite direction, between the Czech towns of Plzen and Domazlice.

Rescuers said two of the dead were Czech engine drivers, one of whom was operating the Ger-



man train. The third victim was a female passenger on the regional train.

Several foreigners were travelling on the German train and some of them were among the injured, local media reported.

WASHINGTON

Trump pick wins US House Republican primary

Mike Carey, a coal lobbyist endorsed by former President Donald Trump, won a crowded primary contest on Tuesday for the Republican nomination to a seat in the US House of Representatives from Ohio's 15th district.

With 65 per cent of precincts reporting, Carey was ahead of his closest contender, state senator Bob Peterson, by 37.5 per cent to 13.8 per cent, results from the Ohio secretary of state's office showed. The outcome in Ohio's traditionally Republican 15th



District south of Columbus was being closely watched as a measure of Trump's clout in the Republican Party, coming just a week after a Trump-backed candidate for the US Congress suffered a surprise loss to a fellow Republican.

ATHENS

Heatwave fuels big blaze on Evia island

A wildfire which set homes and cars on fire on the outskirts of Athens and forced residents to flee was receding on Wednesday, authorities said, but extreme temperatures fuelled another blaze on an island near the capital. With Greece facing its most severe heatwave in 30 years, Athens residents were told to stay indoors as a thick cloud of smoke covered the sky from Tuesday's fire.

“There is no active front right now,” fire brigade spokesman Va-



silis Vathrakogiannis told ANT1 TV. “There are so many forces present so rekindling will be tackled effectively.”

More than 500 firefighters were dispatched on the lower slopes of Mount Parnitha.

Afghan forces face intense Taliban test

MUSHTAQ MOJADDIDI & QASIM NAUMAN

Taliban territorial gains have raised doubts about the Afghan military’s strength with foreign troops all but gone — a showdown between two very different forces in which experts say morale could be as decisive as equipment and personnel.

It is not a conventional military engagement, but one that pits a large army — raised and equipped by a superpower — against a smaller but well-supplied group.

The United States has poured tens of billions of dollars into Afghanistan’s defence forces, providing modern weapons and high-tech equipment, including night-vision goggles, attack helicopters, armoured vehicles and surveillance drones.

With more than 300,000 personnel — police included — it is bigger and more advanced than the Taliban, who are mainly a guerrilla infantry with no air force.

UN monitors estimated last year the insurgents had between 55,000 and 85,000 fighters. But numbers alone do not tell the whole story.

The Taliban mainly use weapons found easily in war-torn Afghanistan or procured from the black market, such as variants of the AK-47 assault rifle and other Soviet-designed arms. They have also captured Western-made weapons and equipment from the Afghan military, and have allegedly received material and advisory support from regional powers such as Iran and Pakistan.

“The style of fighting they employ is a lot less logistically intensive,” said Jonathan Schroden, a counterterrorism expert at the military think tank CNA.

The insurgents also appear to have greater financial self-sufficiency. UN monitors said last year that the Taliban have annual revenues anywhere between \$300 million and \$1.5 billion, sourced from Afghanistan’s huge narcotics industry, criminal activities, and taxation in areas they control.

The Afghan military, on the other hand, requires \$5-6 billion annually. That comes almost entirely from external sources, mainly the United States.

Its air force gives it an unmatched weapon against the Taliban, but Afghanistan does not have enough personnel for maintenance — a task mainly performed by US contractors who are also leaving. — Reuters

The Taliban have annual revenues anywhere between \$300 million and \$1.5 billion, sourced from Afghanistan’s huge narcotics industry, criminal activities, and taxation in areas they control
UN MONITORS



UP IN THE AIR!

A hot air balloon is seen flying at the Bristol International Balloon Fiesta in Bristol, Britain, on Wednesday. — Reuters

The wisdom behind social media



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WE SHOULD KEEP A CLOSE EYE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND USE IT FOR DISCUSSING DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Social media is always abuzz with local issues. People use this platform to showcase divergent views about them. They come forward in all hues and colours. These means are used by them to express opinions and views without any limitations and restrictions. The only thing which regulates them is their conscious and the issues put forward for discussion. This is the place where people display their culture. The discussion on this platform is positive for some and negative for others.

We consider this social media activism as a healthy trend. We should not be afraid of it, nor should we be apprehensive of its growth. Everybody has the right to express his or her opinion on the issues in the country. There is no control over views. There are no restrictions on their expression, except on issues which have already been decided by the law and there is no ambiguity about that. There are certain traditions, social practices and values which should also be taken care everywhere. However, the activity on social media always helps the public interests in the country.

On social media, we interact with various types of thinking, faith, schools of thoughts and divergent views. They are all different from each other in their approach on issues. Therefore, we need to

be balanced when expressing our opinion and respect each other. If we offend or troll anybody, we harm the issue we discuss. We should always keep in mind the interests of the whole society while dealing with any issue on these platforms. This is because public interest is supreme.

Any deliberations on social media on local issues have its positive and negative aspects. This is a healthy practice which they are allowed to come forward and display. It shows the strength of the society, its cohesion and awareness level of people. This is the quality which should be utilised for their betterment and setting the future course of the country. Divergence of views shows the way which may lead to the satisfaction of the aspirations of people.

A constructive criticism is always required in a society. It is a lamppost which guides the ship. This is the reason social discussions are always encouraged. Some came up in the Sultanate as indigenous platform for open discussion, much before the social media, which we know today, was introduced. This is the way which guided the discussions and set the goals.

However, there are always doubts and apprehensions about the people who use fake identity to participate in discussions. It creates suspicions about their motives. They bring confusion in the society for

the objectives best known to them. We should not allow such elements to enter into such space and interfere in our local affairs under any circumstances. In the past, officials were prohibited from participating in social discussions. This was a mistake. By doing this, we actually did not utilise the national expertise and experiences which could deal with the issues discussed on social media.

We should re-visit our approach on dealing with social media. This is the platform which wages war against nations and works as militias which disrupt societies from within by interfering in internal matters. This platform is used to weaken the confidence and trust of the youth in their countries.

It is important that we keep a close eye on the social media and use it for discussing developmental issues which has positive impact on the society. We should utilise our rationale and logic while pushing forward any idea to make it a reality.

Of course, there is pressure and there are difficult circumstances ahead of us. Despite all this, we are confident that the social media discussion will be encouraged and utilised to serve the people of the country. Any virtual discussion, we agree with the views or not, always helps in setting the course of the caravan.

Growing threat to bank customers from cheats...



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BANKS CALL ON THE CUSTOMERS NOT TO RESPOND TO E-MAILS OR SMS MESSAGES

Sometimes a person receives several fake messages from strangers under banking addresses as if they were sent from the real banks to their customers. From this point of view, banks in the Gulf region and abroad are keen to educate and urge their customers not to respond to these messages, especially if they demand to provide account or secret numbers of their credit cards or other information which fraudsters can benefit from by accessing customer accounts through the use of modern technologies, and transfer money from their accounts.

Warning messages sent by banks emphasise the need to protect customers from fraud and

risks which the region sometimes witnesses, especially since it has recently seen an increase in their numbers. Hence, we see that a number of phrases accompany these messages to customers, including: be vigilant, and be on the lookout for any suspicious activity to protect yourself from fraudsters who may target your information in one way or another.

It also calls on customers to be aware of unwanted requests such as giving personal information to fake individuals, because some fraudsters claim to be representatives of banks, government authorities, official departments, and others. Sometimes these questions continue to be asked by

fraudsters, mixed with some pressure on customers, such as a bank blocking the official account or cancelling the card in the event of not sending the information.

They also sometimes use favourable methods, such as telling the customer that he has won a lottery to lure him to share the information. In this regard, the circulars call on banks in the region and the world not to respond to e-mails or SMS messages, and the need for the customer to contact the branch in case the customer finds anything suspicious.

Everyone is required not to disclose to any stranger about the identity card, passport or credit card, its issuance and expiry

dates. Security departments in banks today play a major role in following up on these issues and responding to customers’ inquiries, with the need to warn them not to open links or attachments that reach them via unknown e-mails, or download malware and spyware that can affect and reveal information to fraudsters.

Some requests come in the form of helping the poor and the institutions in need of donations and aid, which requires the need to know these institutions before answering them, with the need to review the account statements every time to ensure that there are no electronic thefts from accounts, or any suspicious activity, and contact immediately

with banking institutions in any embezzlement of funds, or receiving any fake calls or e-mails. Banks today used to send messages to their clients explaining that they will not be asked for any other confidential information, as they have had it since the first time the client opens the account, unless some data in the personal card or other information is changed.

Today, many institutions, including banking and financial ones, use dozens of products that deal with cyber security and information technology in order to address security objectives and protect their resources from any intrusions that come from fraudsters in order to preserve others’ money.



McLaughlin lights up track

DE GRASSE ROMPS HOME IN 200M; JAPANESE TEEN WINS SKATEBOARD GOLD

TOKYO: Sydney McLaughlin obliterated her own world record to win Olympic gold in the women's 400m hurdles on Wednesday as Japanese teenager Sakura Yosozumi maintained the hosts' stranglehold on the skateboarding competition.

Canadian sprinter Andre de Grasse powered to gold in the men's 200m final, completing a long journey back from injury and illness after taking silver behind Usain Bolt in 2016.

And in cycling, Italy won the men's team pursuit for the first time in 61 years, breaking their own world record to beat Denmark in a thrilling final at the Izu Velodrome.

At the Olympic Stadium, McLaughlin powered home in 51.46 seconds, with defending champion Dalilah Muhammad claiming silver in 51.58 after another classic duel between the two dominant American hurdlers.

It repeated the feat of Karsten Warholm, who took a huge slice off the world record in the men's race just 24 hours earlier.

The 21-year-old McLaughlin's blistering time bettered her world record set at the US trials in Oregon in June, when she ran 51.90sec.

"I saw Dalilah ahead of me with one to go," said McLaughlin. "I just thought 'run your race'. The race doesn't really start till hurdle seven. I just wanted to go out there and give it everything I had."

De Grasse claimed his first major championship gold medal, racing home in 19.62sec with Kenny Bednarek of the United States second in 19.68 and reigning world champion Noah Lyles taking bronze (19.74).

"I've been waiting for this moment, I've been training hard for this moment," said De Grasse, finally delivering on his promise after suffering hamstring problems and a bout of mononucleosis following his breakthrough in Rio.

Canada's Damian Warner ended the first day of the decathlon in top spot, with fancied French rival Kevin Mayer in fifth after complaining of back problems.

Defending champion Nafi Thiam of Belgium tops the heptathlon standings with four events gone. British world champion Katarina Johnson-Thompson's medal hopes are over after she pulled up with a calf injury in the 200m.

Dutch star Sifan Hassan took the next step in her bid for an unprecedented treble, easing into the 1500m final two days after winning the 5,000 title.

Emmanuel Korir led home compatriot Ferguson Rotich for a Kenyan one-two in the men's 800m final, ahead of Poland's Patryk Dobek.

Rotich said: "In Kenya we are progressing despite the challenges of the pandemic.

"In the last year, most of us, we didn't train well. There was the coronavirus and now we're coming back"

Poland's Wojciech Nowicki



USA's Sydney McLaughlin (C) wins the women's 400m hurdles final setting a new world record. – AFP



Canada's Andre De Grasse celebrates after winning the men's 200m final. – AFP

I've been waiting for this moment, I've been training hard for this moment

ANDRE DE GRASSE
Canadian sprinter

Medals				
By delegation				
Short version				
As of August 4				
Ranking				TOTAL
1 China	32	22	16	70
2 United States	25	31	23	79
3 Japan	21	7	12	40
4 Britain	15	18	15	48
5 Australia	15	4	17	36
6 ROC*	14	21	18	53
7 Germany	8	8	16	32
8 France	6	10	9	25
9 Italy	6	9	15	30
10 Netherlands	6	8	9	23
11 South Korea	6	4	9	19
12 New Zealand	6	4	5	15
13 Cuba	5	3	4	12
14 Hungary	4	5	3	12
15 Canada	4	4	7	15
16 Brazil	4	3	8	15
17 Czech Rep.	4	3	1	8

*Russian athletes

bagged gold in the men's hammer. Norway's Eivind Henriksen claimed silver, with four-time world champion Pawel Fajdek, another Pole, taking bronze.

There was a first ever Olympic gold for a Ugandan woman as Peruth Chemutai won the 3000m steeplechase, with American Courtney Frerichs collecting silver and Kenyan Hyvin Kiyeng bronze.

TEEN SKATEBOARD BATTLE

Away from the athletics, Yosozumi won the women's park skateboarding event to stop compatriot 12-year-old Kokona Hiraki and Britain's Sky Brown, 13, becoming the Games' youngest-ever gold medalists.

The 19-year-old Yosozumi carved up the Ariake Urban Sports Park with a flowing opening run in the final, and her 60.09 points proved enough for victory ahead of Hiraki and Brown.

"This medal feels unreal — it feels like a dream," said Yosozumi, as she celebrated at a sun-baked Ariake Urban Sports Park.

"I hope skateboarding is going to be very popular in Japan because of the strong performances of the Japanese team," she said, adding: "Now I want to go back home and eat some delicious food."

In a sport making its Olympic debut, Japan also snapped up the men's and women's street titles earlier in the Games and they have now bagged five of the nine medals so far.

In the first round of the women's golf tournament, world number one Nelly Korda carded a four-under-par 67 to sit just one shot behind leader Madelene Sagstrom of Sweden.

The searing temperatures forced US star Lexi Thompson's caddie to pull out with heatstroke and organisers said the tournament could be cut to 54 holes because of an approaching tropical storm due to hit this weekend.

Away from the action, all 12 members of the Greek artistic swimming team are in isolation after five tested positive for coronavirus in the first cluster detected at the Games. — AFP

India's Kumar wins by fall to reach final



Ravi Kumar of India in action against Nurislam Sanayev of Kazakhstan. — Reuters

CHIBA, Japan: Helen Maroulis' quest for a second Olympic gold medal was ended by Risako Kawai of Japan in the semifinals of the women's freestyle lightweight competition in a battle of reigning Olympic champions on Wednesday.

In the men's freestyle bantamweight semifinals, India's Ravi Kumar secured victory by fall after trailing 9-2 against Kazakhstan's Nurislam Sanayev.

Maroulis, the first female American wrestler to be crowned an Olympic champion when she won the bantamweight gold in Rio, has battled through multiple concussions and post-traumatic stress disorder in recent years before qualifying for the Tokyo Games.

Kawai won gold in Rio in the heavier middleweight category, and it was the Japanese wrestler who triumphed 2-1 in a tight contest after the American lost points for passivity.

"I never thought I was going to wrestle again. I definitely didn't think I would be able to wrestle on the Olympic stage," Maroulis said.

"Having that extra year (when the Tokyo Games were postponed) really helped me, I needed that time to keep healing."

Kawai said she gained confidence when she realised Maroulis was not as aggressive as her sparring partners.

"(She) puts a lot of pressure on her opponents but once I started the match, I realised that

my usual practice partners are much stronger and put on more pressure," Kawai said.

Kawai will battle for the gold medal with Belarusian Iryna Kurachkina, who dominated Bulgarian Evelina Nikolova to win 11-0 by technical superiority in the other semifinal, scoring nine points in the second period.

VICTORY BY FALL

India's Kumar found himself 9-2 down against Kazakhstan's Sanayev but turned things around late in the second period to secure victory by fall.

The Indian will take on twice world champion Zavur Uguev in the gold medal bout after the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) wrestler beat Iran's Reza Atri 8-3.

However, Kumar's compatriot Deepak Punia was no match for 2018 world champion David Taylor of the United States, who scored with a series of turns to win the freestyle middleweight semi-final 10-0 in the first period.

Taylor had impressed in the previous rounds, beating Belarusian Ali Shabanau 11-0 before following up with a commanding 12-2 victory over San Marino's Myles Amine.

The American will face Iran's 2016 welterweight gold medallist Hassan Yazdani, who beat ROC's Artur Naifonov, a three-time European champion, making a four-point score at the buzzer to win 7-1.

— Reuters



ROC's Svetlana Kolesnichenko and Svetlana Romashina during their performance. — Reuters

Romashina wins record sixth gold

TOKYO: With a spider-themed routine, fast moves and sharp coordination, Svetlana Romashina of the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) won a record sixth gold on Wednesday to become the most decorated Olympian in synchronised swimming.

Romashina, 31, and partner Svetlana Kolesnichenko won the duet competition on Wednesday, taking Romashina to the top of the podium for the event in a third straight Games.

The gold medal added further lustre to a storied career that Romashina has said will end with retirement after Tokyo.

Romashina, the veteran of three previous Olympics and holder of 21 world titles, has a chance to take still more gold with the final team performance on Saturday. Russia has taken gold in every Olympic synchronised swimming event since Sydney in 2000.

From their start at the edge of the pool, with sinuous, spider-like movements, the ROC duo outclassed the rest of the field with the height of their boosts, the closeness of their swimming and their speed even at the end, when performers tend to get tired. They earned a combined score of 195.9079.



"I don't think about that it's the sixth medal," Romashina told reporters after the event. "I just think about our work we have done. And of course, we are very happy. I think that we are proud of our work of our team."

Rio silver medallists Huang Xuechen and Sun Wenyan from China took silver again with a snake-themed routine in which their hands and eyes both suggested serpents as they spun through the water in green and silver suits.

The angle of their moves, high in difficulty level, and tightly synchronised spins helped earn them 192.4499 combined points, better than they did in a preliminary round earlier this week.

I don't think about that it's the sixth medal. I just think about our work we have done. And of course, we are very happy. I think that we are proud of our work of our team

SVETLANA ROMASHINA

Russian swimmer

"We are satisfied with our scores," Sun said. "We were more synchronised on some of our movements compared with the

first day. We are also confident about our team performance."

Ukrainians Marta Fiedina and Anastasiya Savchuk edged out hosts Japan with 189.4620 for bronze, their nation's first Olympic synchronised swimming medal.

"This is the first time Ukraine has won a medal. Of course, we're so happy, we don't have words," Fiedina said.

"We work so many years, so many hours spent in the water, and this was not a surprise. We've been working so hard and doing all that we can."

Synchronised swimming continues with team technical competition on Friday and team free on Saturday.

— Reuters

Argentina edge India to set up Netherlands final

TOKYO: Argentina's players hugged each other and cried after reaching the women's hockey final at the Tokyo Olympics with a 2-1 win over India on Wednesday.

Argentina will face the Netherlands in Friday's final, while India will battle Britain for bronze.

"We're very happy. We were looking for this with the team," Argentina veteran Delfina Merino said.

Argentina suffered an early setback, conceding a second-minute goal when India's Gurjit Kaur flicked the ball into the goal off a penalty corner.

Las Leonas equalised halfway through the first half when captain Maria Noel Barrionuevo

also scored off a penalty corner. The 37-year-old, Argentina's oldest player, settled the match six minutes into the second half.

India head coach Sjoerd Marijne conceded that Argentina had created the best opportunities in the match.

"I can't be angry at the girls (India's players) because we don't play these matches a lot. It's a whole new experience," Marijne said.

FIFTH FINAL

In the other semifinal, the Netherlands notched up a convincing 5-1 victory over 2016 Rio Olympic champions Britain to reach the Olympic finals for a fifth straight time.



Players of Argentina celebrate after defeating India. — AFP

The Netherlands took the lead in the first half when Laurien Leurink outsmarted her opponent and her pass reached 21-year-old forward Felice Albers who shot the ball through the legs of British goalie Madeleine Hinch.

The Netherlands, who won silver in Rio after taking home the top prize at the 2008 and 2012 Olympics, doubled the score less than a minute later through a powerful shot by Marloes Keetels.

"We trained for five years on being able to score many goals... I think that's paying off now," said Keetels, who also played a key role in the first goal by getting the ball to Leurink with a long pass.

The Netherlands had already scored 21 goals before starting

the semifinals while conceding only two.

After the half-time break, the Netherlands extended their lead to 4-0 with goals by Maria Verschoor and Albers.

Britain had beaten the Dutch in a penalty shootout in the Rio final but, here, the gap between the two sides was too large for the British to overcome, though they got a goal back when Giselle Ansley flicked in a penalty corner before Frederique Matla made it 5-1 for the Netherlands.

Friday's match will give Argentina a chance to take revenge against the Dutch for their defeat in the final of the 2012 Olympics, when the Netherlands won 2-0. — Reuters



Bangladesh's Nasum Ahmed (R) celebrates after the dismissal of Australia's Mitchell Marsh. — AFP

Bangladesh surprise Australia in first T20

DHAKA: Bangladesh stunned Australia with a spirited bowling performance to secure a 23-run win in the first Twenty20 international in Dhaka on Tuesday, claiming their maiden T20 victory over the visitors in the process.

Chasing a paltry 132, Australia were never able to recover after losing three wickets in the first 13 balls, eventually getting bowled out for 108 in 20 overs.

All-rounder Mitchell Marsh tried his best to rally his team with a run-a-ball 45 but was undone by left-arm spinner Nasum Ahmed, who finished with impressive figures of 4-19.

“The bowlers did a terrific job. 130 was chaseable. You lose 3-10, you need to rebuild which Mitch Marsh and I tried to do, but it didn't work out. You need to find a way to

score runs on these wickets,” said stand-in skipper Matthew Wade.

Earlier, Bangladesh never got going after being put into bat and stuttered their way to 131-7, with Shakib Al Hasan top-scoring with 36 off 33 balls and opener Mohammad Naim chipping in with 30 off 29.

Josh Hazlewood (3-24) and Mitchell Starc (2-33) were the standout performers with the ball for Australia, while Adam Zampa and Andrew Tye claimed a wicket apiece. Australia travelled to Bangladesh minus a number of first-team regulars, including captain Aaron Finch, Steve Smith, Pat Cummins and Glenn Maxwell.

The second game of the five-match T20 series will be played at the same venue on Wednesday. — Reuters

NOTTINGHAM, United Kingdom: England captain Joe Root became his country's leading run-scorer across all international formats before India's Mohammed Shami dismissed Jonny Bairstow with what became the last ball before tea on the opening day of the first Test at Trent Bridge on Wednesday.

England were 138-4 at the interval, with Root 52 not out after Bairstow had fallen lbw for 29 to end the Yorkshire duo's stand of 72.

Bairstow, in what remarkably was his first red-ball innings of the season had looked increasingly fluent until Shami's nip-backer struck him in front of the stumps, although it needed an India review to confirm his dismissal.

At tea, paceman Shami had fine figures of 2-18 in 13.2 overs after removing opener Dom Sibley for a laboured 18 earlier in the session.

Root, by reaching 23 when he punched Mohammed Siraj through the offside for his fifth four, surpassed retired former captain Alastair Cook's record of 15,737 runs in 257 matches across all formats for England.

A fortunate inside edge off Siraj that went for four took Root to 49 before a quick single saw him to fifty in 89 balls.

Earlier, Root decided to bat after winning the toss despite his side's longstanding top-order problems and a green-tinged pitch



India's Mohammed Shami celebrates taking the wicket of England's Dom Sibley with teammates. — Reuters

that offered the promise of movement for India's quicks in the first match of this five-Test series.

It took India just five balls to reduce England to none for one, with left-hander Rory Burns lbw to a Jasprit Bumrah delivery that cut back in.

Burns reviewed the decision but replays upheld the umpire's call, confirming that the ball had pitched in line and would have hit the top of the middle stump.

New batsman Zak Crawley came to the crease having made just 123 runs in 12 Test innings since a brilliant 267 against Pakistan at Southampton last year.

Crawley had been largely troubled until the 21st over. He survived a review for lbw and caught behind, with replays showing the ball had missed the inside edge by a distance.

But three balls later, having squandered one review, India captain Virat Kohli called for the replay again after an appeal for caught behind had been turned down by umpire Richard Kettleborough.

This time the Decision Review System revealed Crawley, whose 27 featured four boundaries, had got a thin inside edge with the ball also hitting his back leg on

its way through to wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant — much to Kohli's evident relief. At lunch, England were 61-2 with Sibley 18 not out and the fluent Root unbeaten on 12, including three fours.

Sibley, however, fell tamely when, having faced 70 balls, he chipped Shami straight to KL Rahul at short midwicket.

Root, however, square-drove Ravindra Jadeja's left-arm spin for four and struck a similar boundary off Shardul Thakur.

Apart from a mix-up with Bairstow that nearly led to a run-out, Root cut an assured figure at the crease. — AFP

Local teams praise Bank Muscat Green Sports programme

MUSCAT: On the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of Bank Muscat's landmark corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme, Green Sports, a number of sports teams from across the Sultanate have appreciated and praised the bank's prominent role in supporting the youth and local communities across the Sultanate.

The bank's long-running CSR programme continues to benefit many sports teams across the Sultanate even as the annual programme brings together different generations on a single platform on the evergreen theme of sports. The bank's efforts complement the government's efforts to develop modern sports infrastructure across the Sultanate in the spirit of the Public-Private Partnership model. The scope of Green Sports support for sports teams include greening of football fields with natural or synthetic turf, floodlights or water desalination equipment in areas facing problems of water salinity. The programme aims to develop a sustainable sports infrastructure across the Sultanate, thereby serving as a means to channelise the boundless energy and vast talents of Omani youth in a productive way, besides helping local communities develop stronger bonds and a greater spirit of partnership and cooperation all around. Having seen the great success of the programme over



Ahmed bin Salim al Alawi

the years and to celebrate the 10th Anniversary, in 2021, Bank Muscat increased the number of annual beneficiaries to 20 sports teams, up from 15 teams annually in previous years.

A UNIQUE PROGRAMME

Salim bin Ali al Riyami, Chairman of Al Mustaqbal Team from the Wilayat of Bahla, said the Green Sports programme is a truly unique programme helping young Omani talent in various fields. He pointed out how the facilities were used by the community for activities like special religious and social events before the Covid-19 pandemic. The club's Green Sports field can also be provided to other teams on rent, thereby providing the Al Mustaqbal team with a means of revenue generation. Salim al Riyami said that the team and the community were eagerly looking forward to a time when pandemic-related challenges



Salim bin Ali al Riyami

are a thing of the past and the sports team could work towards a brighter future.

A PIONEERING STEP

On his part, Ahmed bin Salim al Alawi, the Chairman of Al Shabab Sports Team from the Wilayat of Yanqul, said that the launch of the Green Sports programme was one of the most successful and pioneering CSR steps undertaken by the bank. He pointed out how youth teams constitute an important feeder line for national level clubs as well as the national team in different sports activities, especially football. He expressed his great happiness about Al Shabab Sports Team being a winner in 2021. He added that this achievement would have a positive effect on the team's future. Strengthening Community Service Yousuf bin Salim al Saadi, Chairman of the Al Waha Sports Team in Wadi Bani Khalid, congratulated all



Yousuf bin Salim al Saadi

the 20 beneficiaries of the Green Sports programme in 2021. He said the team was very happy and proud to be chose as a winner in 2021 and the programme would help in the implementation of greening of the Al Waha Sports Team's football pitch. He added this achievement would help in attracting more young talent to the team to practice various social and sports activities.

10 SUCCESSFUL YEARS

Bank Muscat's landmark Green Sports programme has supported 143 teams across various governorates in the Sultanate till date. Over 36,900 members from different communities have benefitted from the programme. Till date, 95 teams have received support for installation of artificial turf or natural grass on their fields, while 40 teams have received support for floodlighting and 8 teams for water desalination plants.

OQ becomes new partner of Ahmad

MUSCAT: Global integrated energy company OQ has on Wednesday announced its newest strategic partnership – support of Omani racing champion



Ahmad al Harthy, ahead of his welcome return to competitive action this coming weekend in the Intelligent Money British GT Championship.

Oman Racing's Al Harthy, who will join British GT at Snetterton on August 7 and 8, with Aston Martin works driver Charlie Eastwood, is proud to confirm the key partnership with homegrown company OQ which has operations across 17 countries.

Headquartered in the Sultanate's capital city Muscat, OQ – founded in 2019 – is wholly owned by the Omani Government. Already firmly established as a thriving business in the energy sector, in addition to its work with traditional fuels OQ also focuses on the expansion of alternative energies. Covering the entire value chain, from energy exploration and production through to marketing and distribution of end-user products, pioneering company OQ invests in power generation, energy transportation and infrastructure.

Maryam al Shaibani, Leader Corporate Identity and Culture in OQ, commented: “We are excited to provide our support to one of our talented Omani champions in motor sports, Ahmad al Harthy, and we are looking forward to supporting his endeavours in the upcoming racing events. “This support comes as part of our firm commitment to empower Omani youth in all fields, and to enable them to compete and raise the Oman flag in international sport competitions. OQ will continue to cheer for Ahmad and join-in his winning titles.”

Expressing his delight with the new partnership, Al Harthy said: “I'm obviously delighted to welcome OQ to our programme as a very important strategic partner, and looking forward to working together as Oman Racing returns to the track this weekend in British GT at Snetterton. We share the same synergies and philosophy with our approach and professionalism. OQ, like Oman Racing, is a homegrown success story, growing out of Oman and into Europe and beyond.

“I'm very proud to welcome the support of another Omani company into our racing programme as we compete in some of the globe's largest, and most competitive, championships. OQ is a natural partner for Oman Racing with our shared concepts of excellence, thinking big and aiming high. Our joint pursuit of success for Oman on the international stage is something we're all very proud of.”

business

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Pact signed for first business hotel in Khazaen

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 4

Khazaen Economic City has announced the signing of a new investment agreement with Ibtina Trading and Contracting Company to establish the first businessmen hotel in Khazaen Economic City on a total area of 4,500 square metres.

The hotel targets various segments of businessmen in the city and contains hotel rooms, a business centre, meeting and

workshop rooms, corporate administrative offices, as well as trade fairs and various restaurants.

The agreement was signed by Eng Salim bin Sulaiman al Thuhli, CEO of Khazaen Economic City, and Ibrahim bin Khalfan al Amri, CEO of Ibtina Trading and Contracting Company.

“This agreement is the first hotel project in the city, which will contribute significantly to attracting investors and



facilitating businesses by providing hotel rooms and a business centre for the city

investors and visitors, which will strengthen the principle of the integrated city. This signing

reflects the steady growth of the city, and the confidence and tendency of different categories

of investors,” said Al Thuhli.

Al Amri, CEO of Ibtina Contracting Company, added: “The idea of investing in the establishment of this businessmen hotel came from noticing the great demand of investors in the city for various field projects, which will serve the city visitors and the companies operating in the city, and we are looking forward to start implementing the project within the coming months.”

Sohar Aluminium achieves ‘positive bottom-line results’ in pandemic-hit 2020

KEY TRENDS: Capex budget cut by 35 per cent as part of urgent measures to maintain cash-flow; Hotel metal production hits new record

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Sohar Aluminium (SA), owned 40 per cent by OQ — the Sultanate’s integrated global energy group — said it closed pandemic-impacted 2020 with “positive bottom-line results” despite a collapse in global aluminium prices on the London Metal Exchange (LME) last year.

The joint venture, which owns and operates a world-scale smelter in Suhar, described 2020 as an “abnormal year” that sent aluminium prices on the LME tumbling to below \$1,500/tonne in the second quarter of the year.

“In spite of difficult market situations, SA concluded the year with positive financial results above Business Plan supported by lower cost of production coupled with an increase in production volume,” the company stated in its 2020 Sustainability Report released here on Wednesday.

It cited in this regard measures it had adopted to alleviate pressure on its cash-flow in the wake of the price collapse. “The company had urgently taken a number of measures to keep cash-flow positive. Capex budget was reduced by 35 per cent with a proper risk assessment and rescheduling.

“Controllable costs had been reviewed deeply and made significant budget cuts that touched all areas carefully without impacting safety and quality. The measures which had been taken



Through 2020, and despite the challenges posed by Covid-19 pandemic, both our operational and non-operational performances have witnessed steadily increasing improvements

ENG SAID AL MASOUDI
CEO, Sohar Aluminium

have proven their effectiveness on the financial performance. The company had positive bottom-line results and met all financial commitments,” the company noted.

Notwithstanding the challenges posed by the constrained global economic environment, Sohar Aluminium reported record aluminium production last year. Hot metal production rose to 396,929 tonnes, up 1.64 per cent from the previous year’s tally of 390,516 tonnes. Metal purity also reached the highest level in its

history at 593.08 ppm of Fe/ tonne of metal.

Commenting on the company’s overall performance last year, Eng Said bin Mohammed al Masoudi, CEO, said: “Through 2020, and despite the challenges posed by Covid-19 pandemic, both our operational and non-operational performances have witnessed steadily increasing improvements. For instance, in the health and safety pillars, we closed the year with the lowest rate of injury, and the lowest number of Significant Potential Incidents (SPIs) in our history. Also 37 per cent of our 396,929 tonnes of primary aluminium that were produced in 2020 were delivered to our local downstream customers.”

Sohar Aluminium, set up in 2004 as a greenfield smelter, is a partnership of OQ (40 per cent), Abu Dhabi National Energy Company – TAQA (40 per cent) and Rio Tinto (20 per cent). Electricity as the principal energy source for the 390,000 tonne-capacity smelter comes from a 1,000 MW captive power plant located at Sohar Port. The project also has its own dedicated waterfront berth at the port for the unloading of alumina and other raw materials.

Bonds, Sukuk to support green projects: CMA

GREEN-FINANCING: Draft regulation includes innovative financing instruments with their proceeds intended exclusively for financing investment projects related to protection of the environment and natural resources, encouraging alternative and renewable energy resources, and reducing the emission of greenhouse gases

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 4

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has affirmed that the Draft Bonds and Sukuk Regulation includes clauses advocating, for the first time, sustainable and responsible investments (SRI). Also known as innovative financing instruments, SRIs include, but are not limited to, the issuance of sustainable bonds and Sukuk for green, blue and social projects including Waqf Sukuk.

“CMA is mindful of developing the regulatory infrastructure of the financial sector to cope with the requirements of the current stage through diversification



of investment and financing instruments as the regulation of such financing products converges with the objects of Oman Vision 2040 in which CMA share with the financial sector institutions meeting their objectives. The key strategic objectives are the creation of flexible and easy financing arrangements in line with the global developments,” the Authority said in a press statement.

The draft regulation includes a chapter on SRIs which are innovative financing instruments with their proceeds intended exclusively for financing investment projects related to the maintenance and protection of the environment and natural resources, wise use of energy and encouraging alternative

and renewable energy resources or reducing the emission of greenhouse gases or addressing or mitigating social issues related to specific categories of the population.

Chapter 6 of the Regulation deals with the regulation of such type of bonds and Sukuk for specifically targeted population by the green, blue and social projects.

“The importance of such types of bonds and Sukuk is derived from the principles of the financial sector which is to channel the financial resources to human projects and activities especially the sustainable commercial activities that strikes a balance between the economic, environmental and social objectives and sustainable development,” the Authority added.

تنمية TANMIA

تثمين TATHMEER

TANMIA: Al Kawthar and Tathmeer the best in the Sultanate..

Mutual Funds under TANMIA’s management continued their outstanding performance for the first half of 2021. Tathmeer Fund achieved a return of 22.3% and Al Kawthar Shariah Compliant Fund recorded a return of 20.4% for the first six months of the year.

In light of the positive performance, the Boards of the Funds decided to distribute interim cash dividends of 5%. Investors of the two Funds as on 5 September 2021 shall be eligible for the declared dividend.

To subscribe to the funds, please visit www.tanmia.om

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www.tanmia.om

PO Box 3028, Ruwi PC 112, Sultanate of Oman



NBO, Alshaya team up to give cardholders major discounts

MUSCAT: Continuing to find exciting ways to rewards its customers, National Bank of Oman (NBO), in partnership with Alshaya Group, is offering cardholders exclusive discounts when shopping in-store at a selection of major brands.

Valid until August 19, 2021, customers can enjoy between 15 and 25 per cent off when shopping at Debenhams, Footlocker, Claire’s and Next, in addition to 25 per cent off at Mothercare until August 24, 2021. All they need to do is pay using their NBO credit, debit or prepaid card.

Maha al Raisi (pictured), Head of Products at NBO, said, “This campaign is part of a long-term partnership we have with Alshaya, which continues to open up exclusive rewards at some of the best-loved international brands in the Sultanate.

“With this and many other initiatives we are tapping into our customers’ spending preferences and lifestyles, and providing them with even more value when using their cards, while enhancing their overall banking experience.”

NBO’s suite of credit, debit and prepaid cards offer cashless convenience, tailor-made to meet the needs of its customers.

Providing excellent spending power and a smarter, safer alternative to cash, cardholders are able to access a host of exciting benefits including movie tickets, dining and hotel discounts, free travel insurance, airport lounge access and more.

More details about NBO’s range of products and services can be found on www.nbo.om or at any of the 60 branches located across the Sultanate, online at or by contacting the NBO Call Centre on (new call centre number).

Investcorp posts net profit of \$124m for fiscal year ended June

STRONG GROWTH:
Firm continues to show resilience to Covid-19 impact with 17 per cent growth in Assets Under Management (AUM) to a record high of \$37.6 billion



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 4

Bahrain-headquartered global investment manager Investcorp announced on Wednesday its fiscal year results for the twelve months ended on June 30, 2021 (FY21). Investcorp’s FY21 results were driven by good levels of activity across the core businesses of private equity, real estate, credit management and absolute return investments. This resulted in delivering a net profit attributable to the equity holders of the parent of \$124 million compared to a loss of \$165 million in FY20 and diluted earnings per share of \$1.34 compared to a loss of \$2.57 per share in FY20. Total comprehensive income attributable to the equity holders of the parent was \$132 million compared to a loss of \$210 million in FY20.

Total shareholders’ equity

(excluding non-controlling interest) as of June 30, 2021, increased 46 per cent to \$1,270 million (FY20: \$867 million) and total assets increased 13 per cent to \$2,391 million (FY20: \$2,123 million). The FY21 recommendation for distribution of preferred and ordinary dividends is \$44 million in aggregate, with the proposed ordinary dividend being \$0.30 per share versus \$0.10 per share for FY20.

Mohammed al Ardhi (pictured), Executive Chairman, said: “We are delighted to report strong financial and operational performance in what has been an incredibly challenging period for businesses globally. Whilst the coronavirus pandemic continues to present significant headwinds for many, we are making good progress on our growth journey and diversifying our investor, product and geographic base, which has

not only helped us weather the pandemic but emerge from it in a robust position, well placed for our future long-term plan.

“The business delivered 17 per cent growth in AUM to a record high of \$37.6 billion and strong performance across all business lines. This is a testament to the resilience of Investcorp’s business model and heightened demand for sophisticated and tailored solutions that meet the needs of our growing and global client base.”

Investcorp has a presence in 12 countries across the US, Europe, GCC and Asia, including India, China and Singapore. As of June 30, 2021, Investcorp Group had \$37.6 billion in total AUM, including assets managed by third party managers, and employed approximately 430 people from 45 nationalities globally across its offices.

Fee income increased by 24 per



cent to \$356 million during the fiscal year (FY20: \$288 million), whilst deal fees increased by 39 per cent to \$139 million (FY20: \$100 million in FY20), driven primarily by good levels of transactional and fundraising activity. Recurring AUM fees also increased by 15 per cent to \$217 million from \$188 million in FY20.

The continued recovery in asset values, driven by improved operating results of underlying portfolio companies as well as healthy financial markets, resulted in asset-based income of \$107 million compared to a loss of \$110 million in FY20.

The firm’s diversification strategy by geography, client and product type translated into broad-based growth in AUM to a record high of \$37.6 billion, representing an increase of 17 per cent from \$32.2 billion in June 2020.

CMA publishes draft info-security guidelines for joint stock companies

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUG 4

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has published draft Information Security Guidelines for Public Joint Stock Companies for consultation with the stakeholders.

The Authority urged public joint stock companies, audit firms, law firms, investors, academicians and interested persons to offer their feedback on the draft guidelines before they are enacted into law.

The Authority prepared the draft guidelines for information security in collaboration with the National Centre for Cyber Defence and the Ministry of Transport, Communication and Information Technology represented by the National Centre for Information Integrity.

The draft guidelines have been posted on the CMA’s website www.cma.gov.om. Any feedback may be e-mailed at: oeop@cma.gov.om.

CMA is preparing another set of information security guidelines for the licensed entities regulated by the CMA.

Experience your special banking world with BankDhofar

MUSCAT: Aiming to ensure the best banking experience and to provide banking services to all members of society, BankDhofar has repositioned its products, services and financial solutions to suit the lifestyle of each customer. This step will ensure that BankDhofar’s innovative services and products cover all segments of the society including children, youth, ladies, expats, and priority banking customers.

Elaborating on that, Abdul Hakeem al Ojaili, CEO of BankDhofar, said: “In line with our vision to achieve financial inclusion, we have extended our services and products to cover a wider segment of the society to include every individual.



The new bundles of offers and services are well designed to exceed the expectations of our customers, whether they are children, youth, women, expats, or priority banking customers.” In addition to the special prizes in the Savings Scheme draws, the Bank provides services and offers

that are designed to suit the needs of each customer based on their segment. The Bank also provides customers with chances to win in “Double Your Salary” scheme, for customers who are transfer their salary to BankDhofar.

“At BankDhofar we are always keen to cater to the needs of

all our customers, thus, we are providing each one of them with unique services and features that are tailored to suit their lifestyle. Because we understand that the financial needs of our customers differ based on their needs, our team has exerted its efforts to reposition our products and services and to provide unique offers and features to each customer. We are confident that our customers will see and feel the difference and they will enjoy banking with us” Dr Tariq Taha, Chief Retail Banking Officer at BankDhofar, added.

For AlRiadah Priority Banking Services customers, BankDhofar provides dedicated relationship managers, and a unique range of

banking products and services including; exclusive benefits with Al Riadah Visa Infinite Debit Card, Visa Signature Debit Card, Visa Infinite Credit Card, and MasterCard Platinum Credit Card.

Customers will also enjoy access to airport lounges across the world, concierge services, the finest hospitality and shopping experience in addition to zero-minimum balance charges, housing loan with zero processing fees, locker facility, higher daily withdrawal limits on ATM up to RO 1,500. Additionally, the Bank has a dedicated branch for Al Riadah Priority Banking customers at Royal Opera House.

Nissan genuine parts ensure optimum performance, durability and safety

MUSCAT: Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA), offers a broad range of Nissan genuine parts which are designed, tested and manufactured to the same exacting standards to fit perfectly for optimum performance, durability and safety. By fitting Nissan Genuine Accessories, customers can rest easy knowing its high quality standards ensure the perfect fit, increased safety and reliability, allowing them to future-proof their car.

A senior official from Nissan Oman said, “Your Nissan vehicle is an important investment so do not compromise on safety or reliability — beware of non-genuine parts and always insist on Nissan Genuine. Nissan genuine parts are tested for best accuracy of fit, and are available at a competitive price and covered for warranty.”

He added, “SBA, the exclusive distributor of Nissan genuine parts in Oman, over the years has become a trusted name in Oman automotive



market and is renowned for its customer service excellence, fostering enduring customer relationships. The company leads the way across the region as a value adding partner and has been recognised globally by Nissan. Living by the corporate core values and commitment to their customers, SBA continuously conducts awareness campaigns to educate their customers on the importance of using genuine parts.”

Khedmah unveils new mascot

MUSCAT: Oman Investment and Finance Co (Khedmah) has unveiled its new mascot, named “Wafi”. Representing the company’s ethos of digital transformation as well as its simple and swift services, Wafi will cater to Khedmah’s clients’ needs and answer their daily queries. The new mascot reflects Khedmah’s long-standing commitment of providing high-end, anytime, anywhere services to its clients and meeting their day to day requirements.

During the past period, the demand on the company’s services, growing customer base and offered solutions witnessed an increase. This is attributed to the high quality of the services and the variety of products that Khedmah seeks to deliver to its clients. Such factors prompt the company to further innovate on ways to meet customers’ aspirations



and keep up with the competition in the market.

Aspiring to serve and connect with the community, the company launched Wafi which denotes in its design, OIFC’s technological prowess as well as futuristic vision, and in its identity, fulfilling client’s requirements with perfection.

Said Ahmed Safrar, Chief Executive Officer of OIFC, said: “We are delighted to reveal Wafi to be Khedmah’s ambassador and a representative for our brand for all segments of community. We strongly believe that the mascot can contribute to the delivery of the company’s messages on services and communicate with beneficiaries in a friendly and unique manner that suits the target people. The name Wafi is an Arabic name which is deeply-rooted in Arab culture and being used since ancient times. It demonstrates loyalty, honesty, and wide knowledge, additionally fulfilling the needs of people with perfection. Hence, we decided to give this name to the mascot, as the characteristics are in line with what the mascot represents to the community.”

China may need policy easing to halt economic slowdown



Labourers work at a construction site in Shanghai, China. — Reuters

SHANGHAI: China may need more monetary and fiscal easing to halt an economic slowdown in the wake of torrential rains and flooding, and authorities' tough response to outbreaks of the highly-transmissible coronavirus Delta variant, economists say.

Nomura lowered its China GDP growth forecast on Wednesday to 5.1 per cent in the third quarter and 4.4 per cent in the fourth quarter, from 6.4 per cent and 5.3 per cent, respectively.

It also cut its full-year growth projection to 8.2 per cent from 8.9 per cent, citing the impact of Beijing's tough stance on Covid control due to the emergence of the coronavirus Delta variant in many major cities.

While calling China's zero-tolerance approach to containing the virus "increasingly costly", Lu Ting, chief economist at Nomura, said he expects Beijing to keep policy rates steady this year in favour of a mix of "targeted tightening" and universal easing.

"However, we believe these policy easing measures might be insufficient at reversing the growth downturn," he said.

Policy insiders and analysts said that China is poised to boost infrastructure spending, while the central bank may take modest easing steps.

In a note, Goldman Sachs economists said they expect easing to focus on fiscal stimulus and government

bond issuance, as well as a reserve requirement ratio (RRR) cut in the fourth quarter.

Standard Chartered, ING, OCBC Bank and Pinpoint Asset Management have also recently suggested possible further RRR reductions after the central bank surprised markets in July with a broad cut.

"Two RRR cuts in 2021 would not contradict the prudent monetary policy stance, but would help to reduce corporate borrowing costs, prevent M2 and TSF (total social financing) growth from slowing further, and pre-empt GDP growth from slipping below 5 per cent year-on-year in Q4," said Li Wei, senior China economist at Standard Chartered.

The results of a Reuters poll of 82 financial institutions this week echoed that view, with nearly a quarter of participants expecting an RRR cut in the next three months, and some forecasting cuts to the one-year loan prime rate (LPR) and medium-term lending facility (MLF) rate.

Those expectations pushed China's benchmark 10-year yield to a more than one-year low of 2.7975 per cent this week, after the latest Politburo meeting revealed no change in stance, and as virus concerns and weak manufacturing data open the door to more easing.

But with local governments expected to issue more bonds to underpin economic growth, the dip could be short-lived. — Reuters

Euro zone private sector sees fastest growth rate since 2006

BRUSSELS: The euro area private sector grew the most in more than 15 years in July, underpinned by steep manufacturing output growth and an accelerated expansion of services activity, data from IHS Markit showed.

The composite output index rose to 60.2 in July, from 59.5 in the previous month. But the reading was below the flash score of 60.6. A score above the neutral 50.0 indicates expansion in the sector.

This was the longest uninterrupted sequence of expansion since the pandemic began early last year. Services activity grew at its fastest pace since mid-2006. Although manufacturing production rose at its softest rate in five months, the expansion outstripped that seen in the services sector.

Easing virus restrictions and further vaccination progress are boosting demand for a wide variety of activities in the service sector. The final services purchasing managers' index (PMI) advanced to 59.8, from 58.3 in June. However, this was below the flash 60.4.

"Alongside the sustained elevated growth recorded in the manufacturing sector, the impressive strength of the service



Employees assemble a car at Porsche AG plant in Stuttgart, southern Germany. — AFP

sector's expansion in July means the euro zone should see GDP [gross domestic product] growth accelerate in the third quarter," Chris Williamson, chief business economist at IHS Markit, said.

Among the four largest euro zone economies, the fastest growth was seen in Germany, where again the rate of expansion accelerated to a record high.

In Italy, private sector activity growth jumped to a three-and-a-half year high, while Spain and

France registered softer increases in output.

Germany's private sector growth surpassed the previous record set in June 2006. The composite output index advanced to 62.4 in July, from 60.1 in June. The flash score was 62.5.

Strong increases in activity were seen across both the manufacturing and service sectors. The services PMI came in at 61.8, compared to 57.5 in June and the flash 62.2.

France's private sector growth slowed from June's 41-month high in July. The composite PMI slid to 56.6, from 57.4. The flash reading was 56.8. But the score was consistent with sharp expansion when compared with those seen over the past three-and-a-half years.

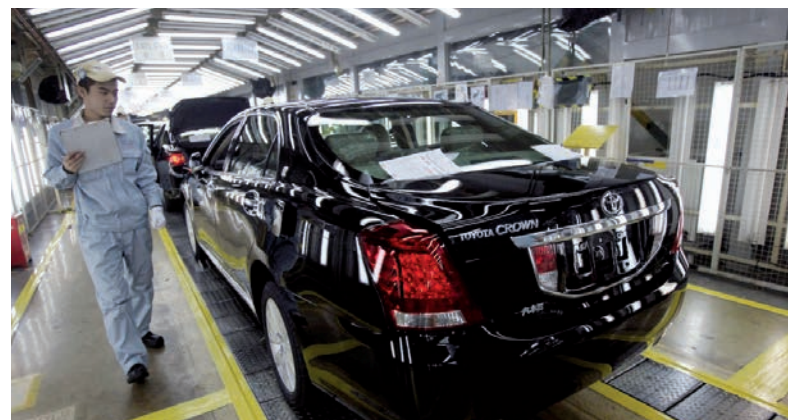
At 56.8, the services PMI was down from 57.8 in June and the flash 57.0. Nonetheless, the sector expanded for the fourth straight month. — Reuters

Toyota net profit hits first quarter record but forecast unchanged

TOKYO: Toyota's net profit soared more than fivefold in the first quarter as strong sales were fuelled by the recovery from the coronavirus crisis, but the firm left its annual forecast unchanged citing "uncertainties" ahead.

The world's top-selling automaker has bounced back quicker than its competitors from the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns, reclaiming the top spot for sales last year.

The Japanese giant has also so far weathered a global chip shortage that has forced rivals to slash production targets, although it is now facing some disruption.



An employee inspects a new Toyota Crown at the Japanese carmaker's plant in Tianjin, China. — Reuters

For the three months to June, Toyota logged an 897.8 billion yen (\$8.2 billion) net profit — a record for the first quarter, and up

from 158.8 billion yen in the same period last year.

Sales surged 72.5 per cent to 7.9 trillion yen. — Reuters

Italy reports rise in retail sales for June

ROME: Italian retail sales rose in June after falling in the previous month, data from the statistical office Istat showed on Wednesday.

The value of retail sales increased 0.7 per cent month-on-month in June, after a 0.1-per cent fall in May. In April, sales rose 0.1 per cent.

On a yearly basis, retail sales value rose 7.7 per cent in June, after 13.3 per cent growth in the previous month.

Food sales gained 1.1 per cent monthly in June and non-food product sales grew 0.3 per cent. — dpa

SE Asia's factory powerhouses hit by vaccination woes

BANGKOK: Fresh outbreaks of the Delta coronavirus variant in Southeast Asia have crippled its factory sector, disrupting global supplies of goods such as rubber gloves, semiconductors and SUVs and threatening the \$3 trillion region's recovery.

A series of factory surveys this week showed business activity across most Southeast Asian economies fell sharply in July, a contrast to more resilient manufacturing economies in Northeast Asia and the West, where business growth has slowed but remained in expansion.

The economic disruptions in Southeast Asia caused by the virus have been made worse by slow progress in vaccinations in the region of 600 million people. Governments have struggled to secure doses and have imposed costly lockdowns that have left

many factories without workers.

The setbacks threaten the growth of one of the world's more resilient emerging market blocs, which has withstood various global crises in recent decades thanks to broad robust economic reforms and its proximity to China.

HSBC economists warn the low inoculation rates in Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand, as well as the uncertain efficacy of their vaccines, put their economies at risk.

"This means that populations in these countries could remain vulnerable not only to the current outbreak, but any future mutations that may develop," HSBC said. "Touch-and-go restrictions are likely to continue, weighing on the near-term growth outlook."

For Southeast Asia's manufacturers, which are



A woman works at a garment factory in Bangkok, Thailand. — Reuters

competitive largely because of low-cost labour and access to raw materials, the impact of new outbreaks on labour supply has been a major production

bottleneck.

In Thailand, Asia's fourth-largest auto exporter and a production base for major global car brands, Toyota Motor Corp

Business activity across most Southeast Asian economies fell sharply in July, a contrast to more resilient manufacturing economies in Northeast Asia and the West, where business growth has slowed but remained in expansion

suspended production at three of its plants in July due to parts shortages caused by the pandemic.

Siam Agro-Food Industry, a Thai processed fruit exporter, is heavily reliant on migrant labour and has only been able to fill 400 of the 550 roles as workers return to their countries and are unable to return due to closed borders.

"There are 350 tonnes of fruit per day but now we can take only 250 tonnes because of not enough workers to process," said Ghanyapad Tantipatpong, president of Siam Agro-Food Industry.

"There is strong demand from export markets, such as the United States, our main market. The problem now is with the production."

In Vietnam, which hosts facilities belonging to global companies such as Samsung, Foxconn and Nike, companies in the country's south have been forced to keep workers isolated at their production sites at night.

Industrial output in several southern cities and provinces where strict movement curbs were imposed from July, has fallen sharply, the government's statistics office said. — Reuters

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features



Inspiring women athletes pursue their passion and shedding light on their achievements

Noorulhuda Almanthari is a multi-hyphenate, multi-talented athlete who has conquered some of the world's tallest mountains. While she's getting recognition for her achievements, she is of the belief that other women are accomplishing more which is why she's dedicated an initiative in making sure that they also get their due recognition and support which goes a lot way into the fight for proper women representation in the society ... **P18**

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KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL
BY ANTHONY BOURDAIN

A memoir-exposé of the restaurant world. Originally published in 2000.

Venezuelan couple nurses injured sloths back to health at home shelter

JUAN CARLOS RODRIGUEZ and his wife Haydee were taking one of their dogs to the veterinarian in Venezuela last year when they found a sloth on the road that had fallen from a power line after apparently suffering an electric shock. They took the Brown-throated sloth - which are common in parts of South and Central America - to the vet and were able to save him, though the animal lost two hind limbs and the claws of its left arm. They dubbed him Chuwie after the furry Star Wars character Chewbacca and decided to

open a shelter for the vulnerable animals in their home in the lush suburbs of the Venezuelan capital, Caracas. The famously slow-moving animals obtain their nourishment and protection from predators by spending their time in tropical forests. But they are prone to attack or injury when they are outside that environment. The Chuwie the Gentleman Rescue Center has so far rehabilitated more than 40 sloths and returned them to the wild. "We want to be the NASA of sloths," said Haydee Rodriguez,

referring to the US space agency, describing plans to conduct research on sloths due to limited knowledge of the animals in Venezuela. Neither is a veterinarian, but they have learned to provide treatment with the help of online training from experts in Chile and Costa Rica. They hope to set aside 400 square metres (4,306 square feet) of their 1,100-metre (11,840 square feet) property by the middle of next year to be able to treat 50 sloths at a time. Funding needs are limited because sloths generally eat leaves. Veterinarian friends in Chile send them donations of medicine. Chuwie's injuries meant he could not survive in the wild, so he has stayed on as a pet in the Rodriguez's two-story home in San Antonio de Los Altos - a Caracas suburb surrounded by



verdant forest that is a natural habitat for sloths. Other sloths that will return to the wild receive numbers instead of names because the Rodriguezes do not want them to habituate to people. Six species of sloths live in Central and South America, according to the United Nations

Environment Programme, which says that their natural habitats have been disrupted by deforestation and degradation of tropical forests. Only the Pygmy three-toed sloth, the *bradypus pygmaeus* species that lives in Panama, is critically endangered, according to the UN agency. — **Reuters**



Inspiring women athletes pursue their passion and shedding light on their achievements

By Sara al Harthy



The lack of media representation of women athletes especially in Oman has encouraged local women to step up and help put into the spotlight this cause.

Noorulhuda al Manthari, an engineer and an athlete has also a passion for different adventures. This passion would drive her to climb the highest point in Africa Mount Kilimanjaro which is 5895 meters above sea level. This was followed by her treks to the highest point in Europe at 5642 meters above sea level, Mount Elbrus in 2019, and Everest base camp 5357 meters above sea level.

"The passion continued as I attempted to climb two peaks in Nepal at 6000 meters above sea level, Island Peak in 2019 and Lobuche Peak in 2021," she said.

As an Omani athlete, Noorulhuda noticed the lack of media coverage when it comes to the achievements of her fellow athletes and adventurers. She said that there are women that have achieved as much as her and more, yet very few know about them. And that is why she decided to start to tell their stories and showcase the Omani women achievements, and for people to also know them on a personal level.

"I believe that sharing such stories will inspire and encourage many women in the world of sports and adventure, and can relate to each other through the stories, as we are all in the same boat yet have different journeys," she said.

The ultimate goal for Noorulhuda is for the world to know about women athletes and adventurers in Oman and their international achievements. So she started an Instagram page for that.

"As a community platform, our goal is to bring those women together through events to create an international connection for them to support, inspire and encourage each other in the world of sports and adventures,"



she said.

Wisal al Rashdi, tour guide, and Noorulhuda started an online community platform where they feature and showcase the achievements of women in sports and adventures.

Noorulhuda says that since the achievements of the women in sports and adventures in Oman is not showcased enough, the platform she and her partner created is established to focus on them, and get the Omani community, the gulf, the Arab to know them.

While both partners were deciding on a name for the platform, they wanted a word that represents women, unity and for it to be in Arabic, Wisal landed on

naming the page HUN'na, which is the feminist version of the word "them" in Arabic.

"A few women have inspired me to start HUN'na, particularly from women who supported and recognised my achievements," she said.

Noorulhuda believes that the Omani women athletes need two main things, one being resources to practice their sports in an appropriate environment and cultural support. Two, providing appropriate practice fields.

"Going across different regions in Oman, we have visited different football clubs during practice as part of the first Women's football tournament in Oman, as well as

Salalah Handball team in Dhofar, we have witnessed a desperate need for resources and freedom to access for women to the existing facilities, basic gear and cultural support and encouragement for them to go further towards their goals," she said.

From all the women Noorulhuda and her partner Wisal talked to, Anisa al Raisi was one of the most inspiring people they have met. Anisa gave them the opportunity to cover her story for 50 days where she crossed Oman in a straight line from Musandam to Dhofar. She crossed the sea, the mountains, the deserts and wadis to showcase the resilience and the impossible possible to the youth.

"We have witnessed strong, active, independent women, of all ages, that came together to encourage and lift each other towards specific sports and adventures such as walking and hikes," she said.

HUN'na is working on launching a YouTube channel this fall to interview women athletes and adventurers. Their goal for the long term is to transform HUN'na into a worldwide community organisation that will serve female athletes and adventurers across the gulf region. Which as Noorulhuda said will be achieved through online and field events by collaborating with local communities, organisations and the government.

A MESSAGE FROM HUN'NA TO ALL OMANI WOMEN ATHLETES:

Regardless of all the challenges, you are going through, from limitations in facilities to cultural support, don't give up on your goals. Use every alternative available and make the most out of it, it may be harder and requires taking the longer route, but it will definitely be worth it. Every step forward counts, and the slower it is, the better, as that's where most learnings take place.

Surround yourself with an encouraging crowd and we will be here to support you in any way we can.

South Africa's 'crazy' mountain farmers cash in on truffle bet



ONLY SHRUBS grew naturally in the sandy acid soil that farmer Volker Miros chose as a site to test the potential for truffle production in South Africa.

The determined mycophile saw no reason why the highly prized fungi could not grow on the plateaus of South Africa's rugged Cederberg mountains in the west of the country, where the climate is similar to that of Mediterranean Europe.

"We looked at where truffles are grown in the rest of the world and it's in the northern hemisphere, about 32 to 35 degrees north," said the white-bearded Miros, wearing a black beanie on a chilly winter day.

"The same thing needs to be looked at 35 degrees south" — where the family farm lies around 1,100 metres (3,600 feet) above sea level, he said.

Miros, 81, who picked mushrooms with his grandfather as a child in Germany, is a pioneer of South Africa's budding truffle cultivation industry.

In 2009, he imported spores of the French Perigord variety — touted as the "black diamond" of the culinary world —



and used them to inoculate the roots of oak seedlings that were then planted in the area.

After six years of trial and error, and tonnes of calcitic lime to counter the soil's acidity, the first truffles were finally unearthed.

Today the family is South Africa's number one Perigord grower and supplier, with almost 100 hectares (250 acres) of truffle orchards planted not only in the Cederberg region but also in other pockets of the country with similar climates.

The most prolific of the orchards yields close to 10 kilogrammes (22 pounds) of truffles per hectare each season, which spans South Africa's coldest months from June to August.

- 'WET FOREST FLOOR SMELL' -

"We were the crazy farmers on top of the mountain," Miros's son Paul chuckled, squinting in the winter sunlight as he looked over neat rows of inoculated oak trees and shrubs surrounded by snowy peaks.



A dog sat obediently by his side, having recently uncovered a tuber the size of a tennis ball.

The highest quality Miros truffle sells for 20,000 rand (around \$1,370) per kilo this year, almost at par with the European market rates.

Most buyers are local high-end restaurants that have only recently started to incorporate the delicacy into their dishes.

"People in South Africa don't know truffles that well," said Paul Miros, 56, likening their taste to "the smell of a wet forest floor".

"One of our biggest challenges was getting... people to buy truffles in their fresh state, because they only last about three weeks out of the ground," he noted.

"It needs a proper chef who understands how to cook with it," he added.

A small but growing number of restaurants have worked the pungent tuber into their menus, conquering delighted customers with fresh truffle pastas and buttery potato dishes.

Paul Miros, who relishes experimenting with truffles in the kitchen, swears by a more unusual pairing.

"I like making vanilla ice cream with a little bit of truffle in it," he said. "That creamy texture... really carries the truffle flavour excellently." — **AFP**



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LIFESTYLE



Barbie debuts doll in likeness of British Covid-19 vaccine developer

BRITISH CORONAVIRUS vaccine developer Sarah Gilbert has many science accolades to her credit but now shares an honour with Beyonce, Marilyn Monroe and Eleanor Roosevelt: a Barbie doll in her likeness.

Gilbert, a 59-year-old professor at Oxford University and co-developer of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, is one of six women in the Covid-19 fight who have new Barbies modeled after them.

Toy maker Mattel Inc (MATO) is recognising them with a line of Barbie "role model" dolls.

Gilbert's Barbie shares her long auburn hair and oversized black glasses, and she wears a sensible navy blue pantsuit and white blouse.

"It's a very strange concept having a Barbie doll created in my likeness," Gilbert said in an interview for Mattel.

"I hope it will be part of making it more normal for girls to think about careers in science."

Among the honorees are emergency room nurse Amy O'Sullivan who treated the first Covid-19 patient at the Wyckoff Hospital in Brooklyn, New York, and Audrey Cruz, frontline doctor in Las Vegas who fought discrimination, according to Mattel.

Other dolls include Chika Stacy Oriuwa, a Canadian psychiatry resident at the University of Toronto who battled systemic racism in healthcare, and Brazilian biomedical researcher Jaqueline Goes de Jesus, who led sequencing of the genome of a Covid-19 variant in Brazil, the company said.

Lastly a doll honours Kirby White, an Australian doctor who pioneered a surgical gown that can be washed and reused by frontline workers during the pandemic.

Gilbert chose nonprofit organisation WISE (Women in Science & Engineering), dedicated to inspiring girls to consider a career in STEM, to receive a financial donation from the toy maker. — **Reuters**

ENTERTAINMENT

'The Suicide Squad' seeks redemption for DC supervillains — and director



WHEN JAMES GUNN was asked to direct the next DC superhero film, he didn't pick an icon like Superman, Batman, or Wonder Woman. He chose the rag-tag group of Z-list villains known as "The Suicide Squad."

Gunn's R-rated romp brings back familiar faces like Margot Robbie's Harley Quinn in a sequel-of-sorts to the near-identically named 2016 "Suicide Squad" — which saw anti-heroes join deadly US government missions to shave time off their prison terms.

And then there are some more obscure newcomers... like Polka Dot Man.

"I literally put into Google, 'who is the dumbest super villain of all time?' And Polka Dot Man always came up near the top," said Gunn.

"Being able to take a character like that and then give him heart was fun for me," Gunn told a recent virtual press event for the film.

Gunn's approach to choosing his gallery of expendable rogues might at first seem unlikely to inspire confidence among money-counting Warner Bros executives.

Even David Dastmalchian, the actor playing him and a self-avowed comic book nerd, initially "had no freaking clue who Polka Dot Man was."

But the first film's success suggests that plumbing the

comic book world's depths for less-than-mainstream characters does not hurt in terms of movie popularity.

The original "Suicide Squad" shrugged off poor reviews to take almost \$750 million at the global box office.

Like the first film, "The Suicide Squad" has its share of big-name actors — Will Smith and Jared Leto have moved on, but are replaced by John Cena, Idris Elba and Sylvester Stallone, who appears as the voice of a half-man, half-shark.

According to Elba, playing Bloodsport — a "character that wasn't as well-defined as a personality" — allowed the actors more freedom.

"It was 'let's find a character who's obscure, who we can build as our own cinematic creation for Idris,'" agreed Gunn.

'TAKE RISKS'

The film's blend of risk-taking and redemption mirrors the path of its director.

Gunn, a cult director and writer who penned Zack Snyder's "Dawn of the Dead" 2004 re-make, hit the mainstream with Marvel's wildly popular "Guardians of the Galaxy" films.

But he was unceremoniously fired by parent company Disney in 2018 when old tweets emerged in which he made crude jokes about the

Holocaust, AIDS and rape.

Warner swooped in to poach Gunn for their rival DC superhero films.

After apologies and a groundswell of support from Hollywood collaborators including Chris Pratt, Gunn is back on board with Marvel too — he is set to direct 2023's "Guardians of the Galaxy 3."

"You don't expect people to have your back... that was an eye-opener for me," Gunn told the New York Times recently.

"When Warner Bros. comes to me on the Monday after it happens and says, we want you, James Gunn, you think, wow, that feels good to hear."

Describing "The Suicide Squad" as a "Dirty Dozen" style war film blended with dark comic book humour, Gunn told journalists that he had "felt the responsibility to take risks" and avoid using "the same boring three-act structure every time."

Indeed, the film features a 200-foot pink starfish as a primary villain.

"It does seem like big movies are the ones that people are going to see in theatres" as the pandemic eases, he added.

"If they don't continue to take risks and change and try new things, then people aren't going to want to be coming to the theatres." — **AFP**

MUSIC

'We'll scream our pain': Gaza's first rock band, Osprey V, takes wing



AN ACCOUNTANT, two lawyers, an agronomist and a Swiss humanitarian worker have formed Gaza's first rock band, giving voice in English to the pain of war in the Palestinian territory.

The unlikely group got together more than two years ago to create Osprey V, posting video clips online and projecting an aura of mystery by keeping their faces hidden.

Now, the band is ready to step into the limelight, with songs steeped in the emotions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In April, a month before an 11-day war between Gaza militants and Israel, they performed in "Live for Gaza", an online concert to raise funds for musicians in the Palestinian Territories. Pro-Palestinian activist Roger Waters of Pink Floyd fame also took part.

The band's songwriter, Moamin El-Jaru, said Osprey V wants to convey both a universal message and one unique to Gaza, run by the Islamist Hamas militant group since 2007.

"I try to address situations or problems that face everybody in the world, but because I came from a place that has been cursed with so many wars and conflicts, I try to say that from my perspective, from my place from Gaza," said El-Jaru, a lawyer by profession.

"We'll scream our pain — can you hear the call?" implores one of the band's songs, "Home".

Lead singer Raji El-Jaru, an accountant and Moamin El-Jaru's cousin, was the driving force behind the band's formation, calling it the realisation of a childhood dream.

At a rehearsal, he said that Osprey sang in English "so everyone will understand and everyone will be touched by the message", which he described as a "scream of anger against the injustice".

And for Moamin El-Jaru, the song's title "Home" has a poignant meaning for Palestinians displaced by war with Israel.

"When I sing about home, I am singing (about) home for Palestinians and everybody in a difficult situation that doesn't get to feel (at) home," he said.

Speaking from Switzerland, drummer Thomas Kocherhans said he joined the band three years ago while doing humanitarian work in Gaza.

"When I heard them for the first time, I was really shocked, but in the very good sense. I just never thought such quality music would exist in Gaza," said Kocherhans, who had to leave Gaza earlier this year after his mission ended.

Despite a lack of interest in Western music in conservative Gaza, the band, named after a bird of prey, has high hopes for success.

"I would love to become the Palestinian Metallica or Pink Floyd, Roger Waters," Raji El-Jaru said. — **Reuters**



ART WALK: Preserving the beauty of everyday scene

By Anan al Balushi

As an art student in the United Kingdom, Mays al Moosawi found joy in taking solo walks and sketching randomly what she saw on the streets. What she has come to understand is that the UK is rich in culture and natural diversity. Taking regular walks every day was both a learning and enjoyable experience for her as what is supposedly a very uneventful day would lead to her bumping into street art, graffiti, art galleries and museums. Whenever she finds something that inspired her, it goes into her sketchbook.

Mays al Moosawi eventually earned her bachelor of arts degree in Illustration and Animation. As a visual artist returning home, she was shocked that there is not much art exposure in Oman compared to when she was in the UK.

She shared that taking sketching trips alone was not amusing anymore, and it got a bit challenging.

With this bump on the road, she came up with an idea.

"I had this idea of gathering up people, to be more precise youngsters like myself who are out-going, self-motivated, eager to learn from others, and most importantly enjoy sketching, and I started arranging outdoor activities that involve views to sketch by the end of the day," she shared.

"Art Walk" then became an experiment for her. Simply put, it basically is walking and sketching.

By the beginning of 2019, Mays had been organising art walks via a vis workshop which led to her making short visits to different places such as Muttrah, The Grand Mosque and The Wave.

In every walk, she noticed that the number of artists joining is also improving.

"That's when we decided to grow our family and create a WhatsApp group to keep track of upcoming events, outdoor activities and share our ideas. We are about 60 members now, and we always welcome others to join, do not worry; you do not have to be a professional artist," she said.

Other than the artsy part of their goal, they also wanted to create great memories other than drawing. The experiment is one of a kind, and people were constantly looking for new fun activities.

"We met many curious people on the streets while sketching, which raises our sketching family's chances of increasing its participants. When people saw us sketching, these strangers usually share the same question: 'What are you guys doing?'," she noted.

Answering the question has given them the opportunity to engage and deliver the group's message to the society.

"We tell them that by doing what we are doing, we were able to pre-

serve different places by creating memories and sketching them," she said.

"I believe art is the journey of a free soul, creating experiences and stories to symbolise what I came across in life, defining my character within my work of art," Al Moosawi said.

While they were beginning to gain momentum, the coming of the pandemic posed significant issues for them.

"2020 was not an easy period when the coronavirus outbreak significantly impacted us as an artistic community. We had to pause for a while, taking a step backwards for the sake of our health and our loved ones since our concept is based on gathering people and having them exist in the same spot simultaneously," she said.

Despite the hurdles, they carried on. Al Moosawi shared that "Art walk" is not just about drawing. It defines someone's personality as an individual and provides them with an opportunity to express their individuality. Spreading awareness towards the young generation is crucial, especially in the visionary of the art, as it transcends one's perception and allows one to experience various art themes.

"Art Walk" resembles a mixture of every little thing I am passionate about; Art and exploring. I found beauty in the nature of Oman and I got lost wandering in the most magnificent places," she said.

She added, "I had to sketch to show the world a little piece of heaven on earth. I get my dose of inspiration from my surroundings and talking to nature."

Despite the temporary pause, Al Moosawi said that she looks forward to a better future adding that "I can see myself and my work of art all around the world and be recognised at international galleries one day."

"My family of artists and I plan to go back to work sometime around winter once the weather gets cooler and Covid restrictions get hopefully lifted. Further plans are being discussed with other creative artists to enhance the concept behind "Art Walk" in our community," she shared.

For additional information regarding upcoming events and supporting great artists, follow @artwalk.om on Instagram!

