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P4

AN OPPORTUNITY TO DO DIFFERENTLY, AND NOT TO REGRET

P10

GADGET USE CAN HARM YOUR POSTURE

P12

SERIE A TEAMS HOPE TO COMPLETE SEASON

HM GREETINGS TO POLISH PRESIDENT

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Andrzej Duda of Poland on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health and happiness to the President and the friendly Polish people further progress and prosperity.

Oman sees record single-day COVID-19 recovery cases

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, MAY 2

The Sultanate reported the highest number of recoveries from COVID-19 on Saturday. For a single-day record, the total number of recoveries increased by 255 to 750 on Saturday from 495 the previous day.

The Ministry of Health announced only 36 new cases on Saturday, taking the total to 2,483, including 12 deaths, which included that of a 60-year-old resident of Seeb in Muscat.

TURN TO P2

9

Ramadhan Sunday 3/5/2020

Prayer times

	Muscat	Nizwa	Salalah
FAJR:	04:11	04:16	04:41
DHUHR:	12:09	12:13	12:26
ASR:	03:34	03:37	03:36
MAGHRIB:	06:41	06:44	06:49
ISHA:	07:57	07:59	08:00

Ramadhan Mubarak 2020/1441 AH

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MORE BUSINESSES MAY OPEN IN PHASES

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, MAY 2

The authorities are mulling the possibilities of allowing more businesses in Muscat to resume their activities in a phased manner.

An indication to this regard was given at the weekend media briefing held by the Supreme Committee dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The permission will depend on the commitment of the business owners, citizens and residents in adhering to the measures taken by the Supreme Committee tasked to deal with the situation,” said Issam al Zadjali, Chairman of Muscat Municipality. Discussions are held



PHOTO BY SAMI AL HINAI

regularly to review the situation by the technical committee in association with the Ministry of Health, and find out activities and establishments that can reopen while keeping the pandemic in check. Over 38 commer-

cial establishments have so far been given permission to reopen their businesses in the Muscat Governorate. Most shops that have reopened are in the automobile sector to facilitate the movement of vehicles whether

they are for government, private or corporate purpose. Mawaleh Market, which was closed for several days in order to reorganise the movement inside, was opened last Wednesday.

“The places designated for walking are open, but it is difficult to monitor them as they extend to several kilometres. We rely on the citizens and residents to follow the health procedures announced by the authorities”, he said. During the meeting, Ali bin Mohammed al Abri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources revealed that 100 commercial institutions were closed for violating the Supreme Committee decisions.

Omanis account 58.3 per cent of total population

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) said that expatriates accounted for 41.7 per cent of the total population of the Sultanate by the end of the first quarter of 2020. Their number reached

1,936,830, compared to 42.5 per cent at the end of 2019, with 2,030,000 expatriates. The centre stated that the population of the Sultanate reached 4,645,249 at the end of March 2020, including 2,708,419 Omanis, rep-

resenting 58.3 per cent of the total population. NCSI's monthly (April) bulletin indicated that 85.8 per cent of the total number of expatriates in the Sultanate work in the government, private and

domestic sectors. Their number at the end of the first quarter of 2020 stood at 1,662,113, including 53,332 in the government sector, 1,321,753 in the private sector, and 287,028 in the domestic sector.

TURN TO P2

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Please Contact with our Team

Mohd Al Rashdi : Head Office	99841230	m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com
Ali Al Maashari : Head Office	99639264	wadialmeeh@yahoo.com
Bakhit Al Shihri : Salalah Office	92998577	bakhit.omandaily@gmail.com
Abdullah Al Abri : Nizwa Office	99429094	nizwaofc@omandaily.net.om
Musalam Al Saidi : Suhar Office	99429192	sohardaily@outlook.com



SQU ANNOUNCES THE WINNERS OF HM GRANT

الفائزون بالمنحة السامية للبحوث الاستراتيجية ٢٠٢٠
Winners of HM Grant for Strategic Research 2020



						
ياسين المulla مركز الاستشعار عن بعد ونظم المعلومات الجغرافية Yaseen A. Al-Mulla Remote Sensing and GIS Center Research	عثمان الققيسي كلية العلوم الزراعية والبحرية Othman Alqaisi College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences	محمود الكندي كلية الهندسة Mahmoud A. Al-Kindi College of Engineering	رشيد سبيع كلية العلوم Rachid Sbiaa College of Science	حيدر اللواتي كلية العلوم Haider Al Lawati College of Science	أشرف مشرف مركز البحوث الإنسانية Ashraf Mishrif Humanities Research Center	علي الوهبي كلية العلوم الزراعية والبحرية Ali Al Wahaibi College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences

MUSCAT: Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has announced the winners of His Majesty's Grants for Strategic Research, 2020. The winning projects were announced at the SQU's marking of its 20th annual anniversary which falls on May 2 every year. The winners are: Ali al Wahaibi from the College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences, Ashraf Mishrif from the Humanities Research Centre, Haidar al Lawati from the College of Science, Rachid Sbiaa from the College of Science, Mahmoud al Kindi from the College of Engineering, Othman Alqaisi from the Agricultural and Marine Sciences and Yaseen al Mulla from the Remote Sensing and GIS Centre Research. A total of 21 research proposals were in contention for His Majesty's Grants for Strategic Research, 2020 of which 7 from the College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences, 5 from the College of Science, 2 from the College of Economics and Political Science, 2 from the College of Education, 1 from the College of Engineering, 1 from the College of Nursing and 3 from the university's research centres. — ONA

Oman sees record COVID-19 recovery cases

FROM PAGE 1

All 12 deaths have been reported from Muscat – eight from the Wilayat of Muttrah and four from the Wilayat of Seeb.

The government has that cases are high in South al Batinah due to contact with patients, and added that the governorate will be closed if cases continue to increase.

Region-wise outside Muscat Governorate, South al Batinah – 261 cases with Barka accounting for 121 of them. South al Sharqiyah has 123 cases with Jaalan Bani Bu Ali accounting for 111 cases. North Al Batinah has 106 cases, Al Dhakilyah 111, Al Dhahirah 49, North Al Sharqiyah 35, and Dhofar (17).

The Directorate-General of Health Services in Muscat Governorate announced the

opening of Outreach Clinic in Mabela Industrial Area in the Wilayat of Seeb for the testing of residents who have COVID-19 symptoms.

Dr Asim bin Mohammed al Munji, a physician at the Directorate for Disease Surveillance and Control, said the new centre will receive expatriates showing coronavirus-like symptoms by collecting samples and recording personal information of those tested including their house address, profession, and names of persons with whom they have been in contact. Samples are sent to the Central Lab.

In the case of a negative result, residents will receive an SMS telling them they are free of the virus, but those who test positive will be contacted by the epidemiological investigation teams for further medical procedures.

1 MORE TESTING CENTRE IN SEEB

SEEB: The Directorate-General of Health Services in Muscat Governorate announced the opening of Outreach Clinic in Maabela Industrial Area in the Wilayat of Seeb for the testing of residents who develop symptoms of COVID-19.

Dr Asim bin Mohammed al Munji, physician at the Directorate for Disease Surveillance and Control, said the new centre will receive expats showing coronavirus-like symptoms by collecting samples and recording personal information of those tested including their house address, profession and names of persons with whom they have been in contact.

Samples are sent to the Central Lab. In the case of negative result, residents will receive a SMS telling them they are free of the virus but those who test positive will be contacted by the epidemiological investigation teams for further medical procedures. — ONA

UAE, Oman have historic ties and blood bonds

MUSCAT: The Omani-UAE relations are historic and based on blood bonds and joint history. Those relations are eternal and constantly developing under the support of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan, said Mohammed Sultan al Suwaidi, Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the Sultanate.

In comments to Oman News Agency (ONA), the UAE ambassador said the Sultanate boasts huge economic and investment potentials helped by a prime geographical location, diverse climate and distinctive nature. He added that the Omani people's high moral, noble attributes and good conduct have translated positively into the development of the tourism industry in the Sultanate.

There is a joint coordination between the Sultanate and the UAE in various fields specially in agriculture and fisheries as the Sul-



tanate boasts huge natural wealth.

Besides, there is constant coordination to combat the utilisation of chemical substances in agriculture in both countries and several joint committees have been formed in this regard, the ambassador said.

Regarding the Omani-UAE joint committee, the ambassador said that this committee comprises a number of ministers in various fields. The committee held its last meeting in 2016 and several sub-committees have emerged from the joint Omani-UAE joint committee including the technical and military sub-committees which follow up the decisions that come out from the main committee, the ambassador said.

— ONA

WORKER STUCK IN WELL RESCUED



A rescue team from the Public Authority for Civil Defence and Ambulance (PACDA) managed to pull out a worker who was stuck in a 4-metre well at a house in Al Khoudh district in Muscat Governorate. The worker was taken to hospital to receive medical attention.

Omanis account for 58.3% of total population

FROM PAGE 1

According to the bulletin, the total number of expatriate workers in the Sultanate fell by 6.4 per cent at the end of the first quarter of 2020 compared to the same period of 2019. The number of workers in the government sector declined during that period by 7.6 per cent, workers in the private sector by 7.1 per cent, and workers in the domestic sector by 3.3 per cent. The bulletin indicated that the expatriates are concentrated in the Governorate of Muscat.

They accounted for 44.9 per cent of the total number of expatriates in the Sultanate, with 870,544 expatriates, compared to 571,192 Omanis residing in the six wilayats of the governorate (Muscat, Muttrah, Bowsher, Al Seeb, Al Amerat and Qurayt) representing 39.6 per cent of the total population

of the Governorate of Muscat. The bulletin indicated that about 82 per cent of the total number of expatriates in the Governorate of Muscat employed in the government, private and domestic sectors, with 714,111 expats, representing 43 per cent of the total expatriate workforce in the governorates of the Sultanate. Their number decreased by 7.8 per cent at the end of last March, compared to February 2020.

The Governorate of North al Batinah came second in terms of the total number of expatriates in the Sultanate.

They accounted for 13.2 per cent, with 255,617 expats. They formed 32.5 per cent of the total population of the governorate. The Governorate of Dhofar stands third with 222,650 expats, constituting 11.5 per cent of the total number

of expatriates in the Sultanate. They also constitute 49.4 per cent of the total population of the governorate, which stands at 450,723. In the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah, the percentage of expats reached 6.11 per cent of the total number of expats in the Sultanate. Their number reached 118,397 expats, representing 24.2 per cent of the total population of the governorate. Expatriates made up 26.6 per cent of the total population of the Governorate of South al Batinah, and 6 per cent of the total number of expats in the Sultanate.

Their number reached 117,151 expats, out of 440,003 living in the governorate. As many as 102,399 expatriates live in the Governorate of South al Sharqiyah, constituting 32 per cent of the total population of the governorate (320,483) people. — ONA

Ramadan Iftar Program

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

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

Omantel users cost 1 RO Send Donate to 90022	National Bank of Oman 1 0 4 9 3 3 7 7 9 8 0 0 1
Ooredoo users cost 1 RO Send Donate to 90909	Bank Dhofar 0 1 0 4 0 6 0 9 0 9 0 0 1

Or donate via devices automated payment of a company * ONEIC *

Donations Portal for Charitable Organization
www.donate.om

OCO Headquarters : Muscat Governorate , Al Khuwair 33 , Street No. 47, next to Sultan Said bin Taimur Mosque, or one of its branches :

South Al-Sharqiyah Governorate 25541087 Sur / Al-Muradiah	North Al-Batinah Governorate 26864241 Sohar / Al-Humbar	Musandam Governorate 26731588 Rhasab / Al-Sheebah	Dhofar Governorate 23234735 Salalah / Al-saada
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www.oco.org.om
charity@oco.org.om
24297961 / 24297960
OCOOMAN

AL BRAKAT TROUGH BRINGS RAINS TO PARTS OF OMAN

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, MAY 2

The western part of Al Hajar Mountains has begun to experience the impact of Al Brakat Trough. Parts of Al Buraimi and Al Dhahirah have begun to receive rains and is expected to gradually extend to the governorates of North and South Al Batinah, Al Dakhiliyah as well as North and South Al Sharqiyah in addition to certain parts of the Muscat Governorate in the coming hours today.

“By tomorrow the Muscat Governorate has the chance of receiving rain. Over the mountains the rains will be mostly moderate to heavy rains because the convective clouds are associated with heavy rains. The impact of the trough is likely to last till Monday,” said a weather forecaster from the National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre.

Sea conditions will be moderate to rough along Musandam and Oman Sea Coast and along the coast of the Arabian Sea it will be moderate at around 1.5 metres.



“Wadis are to be avoided during Al Brakat Trough,” cautioned the weather expert. “There could also be poor visibility during thundershowers and fog patches and fresh downdraft wind is expected during the thunderstorms. Horizontal visibility could become poor during fog and thundershowers,” he added.

The origin of the low pressure is in the eastern part of the Mediteranian Sea. “It has been moving along the Arabian Peninsula.

The general weather forecast will be mainly clear skies over most of the Sultanate with medium and high clouds advection over northern governorates and chances of isolated rain

along the coastal areas of Dhofar Governorate.

Along the coastal areas of Oman Sea winds will be variable light during night becoming northeasterly light to moderate during the day and along the coastal areas of Arabian Sea winds will be southwesterly light to moderate, occasionally fresh and over the rest of the Sultanate winds will be southerly to southeasterly light to moderate. Fahud, Buraimi and Sur tops the temperature chart with 42 degrees Celsius while the coolest places in the Sultanate are Jabal Shams with 23 degrees Celsius, Jabal Samhan with 26 degrees Celsius and Saiq with 27 degrees Celsius.

NOTICE

Referring to the current situation of Coronavirus (Convid-19), Nama Group would like to ensure all financial transfer payments to its contractors are secured with no error or delay. Our contractors are kindly requested to update their company profile and attach all supported documents as per the following guidelines:

Local companies:-

- Commercial Registration License
- Official Letter of the bank details (bank name, branch name and number, swift code, account name, and account number)
- Municipality License
- Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry License.

International companies:-

- Commercial Registration License
- Official Letter of the bank details (bank name, branch name and number, swift and IBAN code, account name, and account number).

Freelancers:-

- ID card
- Official Letter of the bank details (bank name, branch name and number, swift code, account name, and account number).

The above mentioned details should be updated no more than 7 May 2020.

For more information, please contact:

Mr. Mahmood Al Busaidi

Email: Mahmood.AlBousaidi@Holding.nama.om

Thank you



Board of Directors’ Report for the three months ended 31 March 2020

Dear Shareholders,
On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to present your Bank’s first Quarter financial results for 2020.

Performance Summary

Our first Quarter performance has been disappointing and shows a net loss of RO4.5 M compared with a net profit of RO8.1 M for the same period in 2019. This has primarily been driven by the increase in the Expected Credit Losses (ECL) and other credit impairment charges which reflect the significant deterioration in the macro-economic environment as a result of the impact of Covid-19 and the drop in the oil price. It is unclear how this will evolve through 2020 and how extensive the impact of these twin economic headwinds on the economy could become.

Net interest income was down 8.4% to RO14.1 M for the period ended 31 March 2020 compared with RO15.4 M for the same period in 2019. Tight liquidity in the market is pushing up the cost of deposits while the fall in USD LIBOR results in falling floating rate interest income. This was partly offset by higher interest income from our growth in customer loans. Net fee income stood at RO2.6 M for the period ended 31 March 2020 compared with RO2.8 M for the same period in 2019.

Net Trading income was down 35.0% to RO2.6 M compared with RO4.0 M for the same period last year, owing to lower income from FX swap transactions.

A net charge of RO11.3 M has been reported for the change in the Bank’s ECL and other credit impairment charges compared with a net release of RO0.1 M for the same period last year. Wholesale’s ECL was up RO9.7 M while Retail’s ECL was up RO1.7 M. As explained above, the incremental ECL largely reflected the judgemental overlay provisions recorded to account for the economic impact of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Operating expenses fell 2.4% to RO12.2 M compared with RO12.5 M for the same period in 2019.

Loans and advances to customers continued to grow with Quarter end balances up 17.9% to RO1,521.6 M compared with RO1,291.1 M as at 31 March 2019.

Customer deposits increased by 8.5% to RO2,073.7 M compared to the same period last year. Our liquidity remains strong in the market, as evidenced by an Advances to Deposit ratio (ADR) of 73.4% at the end of March 2020.

HBON’s Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) stood at 17.6% as at 31 March 2020 compared with 19.9% as at 31 March 2019.

Delivering the best customer experience

Retail Banking and Wealth Management (RBWM) business had a solid start to the year from the sales momentum perspective. A combination of a marketing campaign rewarding new Premier & Advance customers along with roadshows to energise the frontline has resulted in significantly higher new-to-bank customers compared to the same time last year. The launch of the first cash-back credit card late last year has also contributed to higher credit card acquisition during the Quarter. In addition to this, RBWM also launched a fresh Mandooos scheme which projects over 6,500 winners through 2020.

This was supplemented by the launch of “Step-up” savings account campaign where customers receive higher interest rates for incremental balances in their interest bearing savings accounts during the period. On the digital front, a new mobile App was launched in the Quarter and this was downloaded more than 10k times in the first three weeks following the launch.

In continuation of our customer experience promise, we also rolled out a fresh customer experience improvement program covering the Bank’s entire staff population which will help improve the customer centrality of the frontline staff all the way to the back-end processing staff.

In the wholesale businesses, many of our remaining high volume manually transacting Trade Finance clients have been on-boarded to HSBC’s Internet Trade Services platform in Q1. This has boosted our digital penetration for Trade transactions from 43% to 60%. Further increases in this penetration rate are expected.

Our COVID-19 relief measures

We are monitoring the Covid-19 situation very closely and liaising with government and public health officials. Our priority at this time is the wellbeing of our customers and staff.

From a business perspective, we are working hard to maintain the support and services provided to our customers. The size and structure of HSBC allows us to support our clients from multiple sites.

We have well practiced contingency measures that ensure critical processes continue to be maintained. These include split-site operations, work transfer and extensive homeworking capabilities. We have also raised awareness among our employees on the need for good personal hygiene.

We have encouraged our customers to use our digital channels first and visit our branches only where necessary. Through our digital channels, our customers can continue to manage their accounts and perform banking transactions at home using Online Banking, the HSBC Mobile Banking App, or Phone Banking.

For our corporate clients, the implementation of Message Center, a self-service tool within HSBCnet, has helped our corporate clients activate additional value-added services on HSBCnet, including Internet Trade Services (ITS) and Payment entitlements, without the need to send physical documents to the Bank.

We have demonstrated the resilience of our Trade and Payments processing capabilities during this period, with no recorded impact to Customer SLAs for our Trade transactions across Wholesale Banking.

Digital Webinars were conducted by HSBC for wholesale clients across the region, with a total of 45 clients from Oman attending the 2 digital webinars.

Fulfilling our social commitment towards the society during this time. And in coordination with charitable organizations like Dar Al Atta and Oman Charitable Organization, we are making contributions to a range of projects in the Sultanate to help underprivileged families who have been impacted by COVID-19. The disbursements will help in providing relief and recovery to individuals and families impacted by COVID-19, as well as hospital workers helping combat the virus. We have also supported the Directorate General of Health in Muscat in conducting deep cleaning and disinfection of Al Amirat and Boushar Health Centers.

This follows HSBC Group’s recent announcement of a USD25m COVID-19 charitable fund to support the international medical response, protect vulnerable people and ensure food security.

Conclusion

We would like to express our thanks and appreciation to all the government authorities who are working relentlessly, steered by the Supreme Committee of COVID-19, to ensure that we overcome this crisis. We would like to thank the Central Bank of Oman for their continuous support to the banking sector.

It is with regret that we said farewell in April to His Excellency Dr. Omar bin Abdul Muniem Al Zawawi who was so involved in the Banking sector for many years with Oman International Bank and then latterly HSBC Bank Oman.

Finally we must acknowledge the succession of His Majesty Haitham bin Tariq following the death of His Majesty, the Late Sultan Qaboos Bin Said for whom we had the privilege of serving over the length of His Late Majesty’s reign. We look forward to continuing to support the Sultanate under His Majesty Sultan Haitham’s wise leadership.

We at HSBC Bank Oman are as committed as we have always been to contribute to the development of the banking sector in Oman and to support the government in its efforts to revive the Omani economy.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles
Chairman

Unaudited interim condensed statement of comprehensive income for the three month period ended 31 March 2020

	Three month period ended 31 March 2020	Three month period ended 31 March 2019
	RO’000	RO’000
Interest income	19,151	18,321
Interest expense	(5,084)	(2,877)
Net interest income	14,067	15,444
Fee income	3,408	3,910
Fee expense	(837)	(1,087)
Net fee income	2,571	2,823
Net trading income	2,615	3,986
Changes in fair value of financial investments measured at fair value through profit and loss	(214)	(106)
Other operating income – net	(9)	26
Net operating income before loan impairment charges and other credit risk provisions	19,030	22,173
Change in expected credit losses and other credit impairment Charges	(11,330)	85
Net operating income	7,700	22,258
Employee compensation and benefits	(5,752)	(5,799)
General and administrative expenses	(5,558)	(5,490)
Depreciation of property and equipment	(613)	(589)
Amortisation of intangible assets	(252)	(600)
Total operating expenses	(12,175)	(12,478)
(Loss) / profit before tax	(4,475)	9,780
Tax expense	-	(1,652)
(Loss) / profit for the period	(4,475)	8,128
Other comprehensive income / (loss)		
Items that will be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss when specific conditions are met		
Debt instruments at fair value though other comprehensive income		
- Fair value gain / (loss)	639	(53)
- Expected credit losses recognised in income statement	8	26
- Income tax	(96)	8
Other comprehensive income / (loss) for the period - net of tax	551	(19)
Total comprehensive (loss) / income for the period	(3,924)	8,109
Earnings per share – basic and diluted		
-for the period (RO)	(0.002)	0.004
-annualised (RO)	(0.009)	0.016

Unaudited interim condensed statement of financial position as at 31 March 2020

	At 31 March 2020	At 31 March 2019	Audited At 31 December 2019
	RO’000	RO’000	RO’000
Assets			
Cash and balances with central banks	210,151	181,963	281,186
Due from banks	221,498	189,363	205,595
Loans and advances to customers - net	1,521,640	1,291,143	1,502,734
Financial investments	496,553	623,466	488,085
Other assets	65,779	41,250	45,099
Intangible assets	1,471	830	1,572
Property and equipment	23,982	25,114	23,648
Deferred tax assets	1,982	1,891	2,078
Total assets	2,543,056	2,355,020	2,549,997
Liabilities and equity			
Liabilities			
Due to banks	67,175	36,910	54,754
Deposits from customers	2,073,748	1,912,041	2,071,457
Other liabilities	69,322	72,829	64,407
Current tax liabilities	2,146	3,293	7,387
Total liabilities	2,212,391	2,025,073	2,198,005
Equity			
Share capital	200,031	200,031	200,031
Legal reserve	45,944	43,016	45,944
Fair value through other comprehensive income (FVOCI) reserve	1,168	(209)	617
Retained earnings	83,522	87,109	105,400
Net equity	330,665	329,947	351,992
Total liabilities and equity	2,543,056	2,355,020	2,549,997
Net assets per share - RO	0.165	0.165	0.176
Off-balance sheet items:			
Contingent liabilities and commitments			
- Documentary credits	77,700	65,822	97,014
- Guarantees and performance bonds	536,347	533,611	535,007
- Others	1,282,469	1,372,478	1,093,526
	1,896,516	1,971,911	1,725,547



Ramadhan

AN OPPORTUNITY TO DO DIFFERENTLY, AND NOT TO REGRET



VINOD NAIR

The Holy Month of Ramadhan is that time of the year when businesses attempt to make up for the lost numbers.

In the Gulf, including Oman, one of the common business trends have been that of the commercial centers conducting raffle draws during that one month, enticing customers to purchase more.

People used to wait for the Ramadhan to buy a new vehicle or replace the old one to avail of these offers.

“That has been the trend for many years, but it changed recently due to economic slowdown, which got aggravated this year because of economic shutdown and restrictions to limit the spread of Covid-19,” said sources in the automobile and luxury goods market.

“This is the duller Ramadhan of my life. We cannot imagine people staying home and having Iftar only with family members. We stick to cooking at home and sharing food with some expatriate workers from a project in the neighborhood,” he added.

According to the Supreme Committee on Covid-19, Mosques will be closed, except for the call to prayer, and there will be no type of prayers - including Taraweeh.

Ramadan gatherings such as iftar meals and barbecues, at mosques or other public places such as tents, are also banned.

“Many restaurants are offering special Ramadhan menus and combo packages, but the business has been limited as people are reluctant to order due to movement restrictions in many parts of the capital,” said Arvind, an employee of a restaurant chain in the capital.

“Our customers are not sure whether the food can be delivered on time apart from healthy safety concerns. They want to ensure that our staff is healthy,” he added.

Mariyam al Balushi, a bank employee, said Ramadhan this year offers a few lessons for all us. “There are so many people in the

world without jobs and stuck in homes due to lockdown. It is the best opportunity for sharing food and essentials as more people are desperate and in need than before.”

Mohammed Rizwan, an expatriate from Pakistan, said that every year there has been a large quantity of food wasted and this we have a situation where a large people are actually suffering

due to Covid-19 related situation. What we should do is buy some food online and give to them.”

He added that is not the time to regret not able to have major celebrations or new purchases, but a chance to offer a helping hand.

Given that, with online platforms for donations and purchases coming of age in Oman, there are no excuses to not follow the instructions of the Ministry of Health for the holy month of Ramadhan.



FATWA

Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili
His eminence grand mufti of Oman

Question

**Does nosebleeding
invalidate the fast?**

Answer

No, it does not.



India makes Govt tracing app mandatory for all workers

NO MORE VOLUNTARY: Aarogya Setu app must for private sector workers

NEW DELHI: India has mandated that all public and private sector employees use a government-backed Bluetooth tracing app and maintain social distancing in offices as New Delhi begins easing some of its lockdown measures in lower-risk areas.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government on Friday said India — the country with the largest number of people in lockdown — would extend its nationwide control measures for another two weeks from Monday to battle the spread of the coronavirus that causes the COVID-19 illness, but allow “considerable relaxations” in lower-risk districts.

As part of its efforts to fight the deadly virus, India last month launched the app Aarogya Setu — meaning Health Bridge



Employees wearing protective masks work inside a call centre run by Uttar Pradesh state police during an extended lockdown to slow the spreading of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Lucknow. — Reuters

— a Bluetooth and GPS-based system developed by the country's National Informatics Centre. The app alerts users who may have come in contact with people later found to be positive for

COVID-19 or deemed to be at high risk.

“Use of Aarogya Setu shall be made mandatory for all employees, both private and public,” India's Ministry of Home Affairs said in a

notification on Saturday.

It will be the responsibility of the heads of companies and organisations “to ensure 100 per cent coverage of this app among the employees,” the ministry said. — Reuters

Nasa, SpaceX target historic spaceflight despite pandemic

HOUSTON: Nasa and SpaceX have said they were pressing ahead with plans to launch astronauts to space from US soil for the first time in nearly a decade later on this month, despite the coronavirus pandemic.

Robert Behnken and Douglas Hurley, both veterans of the Space Shuttle programme that was shuttered in 2011, will blast off from the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida on May 27.



The mission will be the first time astronauts have launched into space from US soil in a decade. — AFP

Should the mission succeed, the US will have achieved its goal of no longer having to buy seats on Russian Soyuz rockets to give its astronauts rides to the International Space Station (ISS). It is also an important stage in Nasa's new economic model: the space agency has spent billions on contracts with both SpaceX and Boeing to develop spaceships that will each have to make six round trips to the ISS. — AFP

IN BRIEF

70,000 evacuated after dam burst

TASHKENT/ALMATY: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have evacuated tens of thousands of people from the Syr Darya river basin after a reservoir dam on the Uzbek side burst, flooding large areas on both sides of the border, the authorities said on Saturday.

Uzbekistan has evacuated about 70,000 people from 22 villages in the affected area following the May 1 burst, the Tashkent government said.

In Kazakhstan, the authorities have evacuated about 5,400 people from four villages in the southern Turkestan province, governor Umirzak Shukayev said, adding that some people had left the area overnight on their own.

The Uzbek government said it had managed to reduce the flow of water and divert it to a nearby lake. — Reuters

Half of Germans worried about catching virus at hair salon

BERLIN: For the first time in over six weeks, hairdressers in Germany are allowed to reopen from Monday — but many people aren't sure whether a trip to the salon is a good idea.

One in four people (25 per cent) polled in a YouGov survey said they had “mild concerns” but would still go for a trim, while 13 per cent said they had “major concerns” or “very major concerns.”

Eleven per cent won't be making any hair appointments due to the risk of coronavirus, the representative survey found.

The researchers also asked whether people had been trying their own hand at cutting hair while salons were shut during the pandemic. They found that one in seven people (14 per cent) had given it a go.

Another 11 per cent sought help from someone else to tame their locks — with largely positive results: 87 per cent of people who got a lockdown haircut said they were either “very satisfied” or “rather satisfied” with it. Only 3 per cent of amateur haircuts ended in disaster (“very unsatisfied”), YouGov said. — dpa



Wuhan clears all COVID-19 cases

GENEVA: The World Health Organization (WHO) has welcomed the news that there were no more hospitalised COVID-19 patients in Wuhan, the Chinese city where the novel coronavirus originated last December, praising its people's “tireless efforts” to combat the pandemic.

According to city authorities, Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, was cleared of all COVID-19 cases in hospitals by April 26, reports Xinhua news agency. — IANS

Kim makes public appearance amid health rumours

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has made his first public appearance in nearly three weeks, state media reported on Saturday, following intense speculation that the leader of the nuclear-armed nation was seriously ill or possibly dead.

The North reported that Kim had attended the opening of a fertiliser factory and released pictures it said showed the leader cutting a ribbon at the ceremony on Friday in Suncheon, north of Pyongyang, although the appearance could not be verified. Rumours

about Kim's health have been swirling since his conspicuous no-show at April 15 celebrations for the birthday of his grandfather, the North's founder — the most important day in the country's political calendar.

His absence triggered a series of fevered rumours and unconfirmed reports over his condition, while the United States and South Korea insisted they had no information to believe any of the conjecture was true.

Seoul's unification ministry reacted to Saturday's report by saying “groundless” speculation



Kim Jong Un visiting a fertiliser factory in Pyongan Province on Friday. — AFP

about Kim had caused “unnecessary confusion,” calling for more careful

consideration in future.

Kim's sudden death would have left Pyongyang facing

an unplanned succession for the first time in its history and raised unanswered

questions over who would succeed him and take over the North's nuclear arsenal.

China is keen to maintain stability in its neighbour and avoid the possibility of an influx of refugees. North Korea is “at the epicentre of an extremely tense security crisis,” involving “a nuclear standoff where tens of millions of lives are at stake,” Henri Feron, Senior Fellow at the US Center for International Policy, said.

“This raises legitimate concerns about the domestic and international instability that his death could cause.”

— AFP



Plenty of questions, but very few answers

I do not want to talk about COVID-19! I am sick of it. It dominates my life, my work, my family, my home, my diet, my freedom, my sleep patterns, my entire ability to function as effectively as I know I am capable of, has been significantly compromised.

I know... if you ask me how 'it' is all going? I'm going to put on a brave face, like everyone else, be laudably pragmatic and say something like, "Oh, as good as can be expected, safe and healthy thanks," and shrug, as you do, in that resigned gesture that says "what can I do about it?" And I have no doubt there are millions the same.

Underneath it all however, I... am... seething! I, and most of you, haven't fought

our way through life, through good times and bad, through some adversity, worked really hard to find your niche and your purpose in life to be caught up in a horrible parody of a Hollywood movies script, and have that dominate our present and future like an immense, suffocating black cloud, have we?

Yet... that is exactly what fate has dealt us... and we are better off than so many. And that, honestly, is all that keeps my 'rage' from surfacing. The fact that there must be so many people around the world who do not have the standard of living, and the life that we have, must be among the most vulnerable to the pandemic, and its consequences.

The raging concerns for the Sultanate must be the price of oil, which one would think must surely recover once the world comes out of lockdown, and that the foremost form of diversification away from oil and gas here, is tourism, which will face its own challenges as airlines increase fares to make up for what they have lost. Hmm... there is a moral question in there I'm sure?

Closer to home, it's clear that, in some way, there will need to be changes in the manner in which expatriate workers are accommodated throughout the Sultanate, as we cannot expect to maintain sufficiently high standards of health and hygiene with six or eight to a room and

shared facilities. It's not even a situation of how many to a room, but how much room, and space, they have.

I have experience of seasonal fruit-picking when I was a young lad at home, where there would be twenty of us sleeping in the same bunkhouse, but we all had our personal space. The same applied to shearer's accommodation on the farms, army barracks and boarding schools. It's one thing to have a large number of people sharing, but its another for it to be an 'all the time,' scenario, and another to be a temporary solution.

I can only imagine, as you all will, as to what will be our new future, as this pandemic will have one of two outcomes, either we will go back to being,

'the way we were,' or our world will change forever! Will we be able to ignore what has happened and go back to the way we were? Or what will our new 'world' be? Will it be that of few choices, like that Hollywood movie?

And how will we feel if we learn that COVID-19 was caused by poor isolation and security protocols at the Wuhan Institute of Virology? It's done isn't it? We cannot change history, can we? But if it is proven, our forgiveness will be well and truly tested, and the depth of our faith, as never before, challenged?

I'm not giving advice today, or answers. I don't have them, as much as I wish it were otherwise.



RAY PETERSEN
petersen_ray@hotmail.com



The Taliban's fall transformed women's lives, much more so in urban areas like Kabul. — AFP

Afghan women fear losing hard-won gains

HESAMUDDIN HESAM

Like many Afghans, when Nargis Azaryun thinks of peace talks with the Taliban she is sceptical, recalling the violence inflicted by the militant group over the past decades.

"I don't think that the Taliban have changed. I think they have a new generation that is even more brutal than the previous ones," says the 26-year-old peace activist, who as a child witnessed the Taliban's rule in the late 1990s.

The insurgents fought the US-backed government in Kabul for nearly two decades. But the group signed a peace deal with Washington in late February that paves the way for the withdrawal of all international forces.

Many see the deal as a major boost for the Taliban by potentially giving them

a role in a power-sharing arrangement — an uneasy prospect for those who fought for women's rights after the fall of the Taliban regime.

"It was a sad day to see that the Taliban get that much legitimacy," Azaryun said of the UN-designated terror group.

"Overnight, they are not terrorists any more but they are new partners of the international community," she says of the deal inked with Washington.

Likewise, Sima Samar, a high-profile women's rights advocate, says she was saddened when she didn't see a single word about human rights in the US-Taliban agreement and that the government in Kabul — sidelined from the talks — was mentioned as "the other side" in the document.

The intra-Afghan peace talks that were planned for March 10 have not started yet — and it is not clear when, or if, they will get off the ground.

The sides are at loggerheads over a prisoner exchange between the Afghan government and the Taliban that is mentioned in the US-Taliban agreement as a pre-condition for the talks.

There is also an ongoing leadership battle in Kabul following a disputed election last year, leaving the country in a state of political disarray.

The Taliban ruled the country for five years starting in 1996. They were then overthrown after the US-led invasion that followed the attacks of September 11, 2001. The Taliban then regrouped as an insurgency movement to fight the US-backed Afghan administration and the Nato-led troops. — dpa

Why North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's health matters

Nearly three weeks after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's no-show at a key event sparked rumours he was seriously ill or even dead, state media published photos on Saturday showing him in public.

Kim's conspicuous absence from the April 15 celebrations for the birthday of his grandfather, the North's founder, sparked feverish speculation over his health and who would replace him at the helm of the nuclear-armed country.

It is not the first time Kim has disappeared from public view. In 2014, he dropped out of sight for nearly six weeks before reappearing with a cane. Days later, South Korea's spy agency said he had undergone surgery to remove a cyst from his ankle.

Here is a look at why Kim's health has been the subject of so much conjecture. Kim has been in power for nearly a decade and his death would have left Pyongyang facing an unplanned succession for the first time in its history.

Leadership has always been a family affair in the isolated North, dominated by the members of the "Paektu bloodline" — a Northern term for the country's founder Kim Il Sung and his descendants.

Kim's three known children are still very young and there is no designated successor as far as the world is aware. — AFP

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HEAD OFFICE

Tel: 24649444, 24649450, 24649451, 24604563, 24699437

Fax: 24699643

SALALAH OFFICE

Tel: 23292633

Fax: 23293909

NIZWA OFFICE

Tel: 25411099

P.O. Box 955, P.C. 611

ADVERTISING

AL OMANEYA ADVERTISING & PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 3303, P.C. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: SWITCHBOARD: 24649444

DIRECT: 24649430/24649437/24649401

Fax: 24649434

DISTRIBUTION AGENT

AL OMANEYA for Distribution & Marketing, P.O. Box 974, P.C. 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: 24649351/24649360

Fax: 24649379

Website: omanobserver.om

e-mail: editor@omanobserver.om

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P.O. Box 974, Postal Code 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

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PPP model proposed for renal dialysis services in Oman

PRIVATISATION: ROLE FOR PRIVATE SECTOR SEEN IN DELIVERY OF DIALYSIS SERVICES IN THREE MAJOR REGIONS OF SULTANATE

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MAY 2

The Public Authority for Privatisation and Partnership (PAPP), set up by Royal Decree last July to spur, among other things, private investment in strategic projects under the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model, is preparing to commission a study of a potential role for the private sector in the delivery of public renal dialysis services in the Sultanate.

An estimated 2,000 people currently require regular dialysis treatment for kidney ailments in the Sultanate – a public health service which imposes a hefty cost burden on the Ministry of Health estimated in the tens of millions of Omani riyals every year.

With diabetes, hypertension and other non-communicable diseases on the rise – afflictions contributing to an uptick in dialysis treatment demand – the Ministry has been keenly exploring a role for the private sector in the operation and management of this increasingly critical



AN ESTIMATED 2,000 PEOPLE CURRENTLY REQUIRE REGULAR DIALYSIS TREATMENT FOR KIDNEY AILMENTS IN THE SULTANATE – A PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE WHICH IMPOSES A HEFTY COST BURDEN ON THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH ESTIMATED IN THE TENS OF MILLIONS OF OMANI RIYALS EVERY YEAR.

health service.

“The Ministry of Health in the Sultanate of Oman intends to commission the services of a qualified consultant to conduct a feasibility study of Renal Dialysis Services in

Sultanate of Oman,” the Public Authority announced in an invitation to interested parties to participate in a competitive tender for the contract.

“The tenderer shall be required to undertake

market, commercial, medical clinical, technical and financial analysis to assess private sector delivery of Renal Dialysis services,” it noted last month.

The selected consultant will be required to provide

advisory services and policy guidance to the Ministry on the operations, cost effectiveness, and social impact of various modes of operations of Renal Dialysis units with special emphasis on the Private Public

Partnership (PPP)” model, according to the Public Authority.

A key part of its remit is to establish a baseline for renal dialysis needs in the Sultanate in terms of forecasted beneficiaries, current delivery models and projected costs over the next 10 years.

Additionally, the consultant will be required to evaluate the current operational efficiency of the renal dialysis units and propose science-based suggestions for improvement.

Importantly, the procurement of a private player in the delivery of renal dialysis services is proposed to cover all three regional centres encompassing the governorates of Muscat, North & South Al Batinah and Dakhiliyah.

An award for a Transaction Advisory mandate is anticipated in the third quarter of this year, according to the PAPP, which has been tasked with overseeing all strategic partnership, privatisation and Tawazun (offset) projects in the Sultanate.

Oil price rebound, corporate results aid market recovery

The MSM30 Index closed the week up by 1.65 per cent. Recovery in oil prices along with some good result announcements pulled the market higher.

Financial and Industrial Index closed higher by 0.69 per cent and 2.26 per cent w-o-w while the Services index closed down by 0.79 per cent. Shariah Index was up by 2.51 per cent during the week.

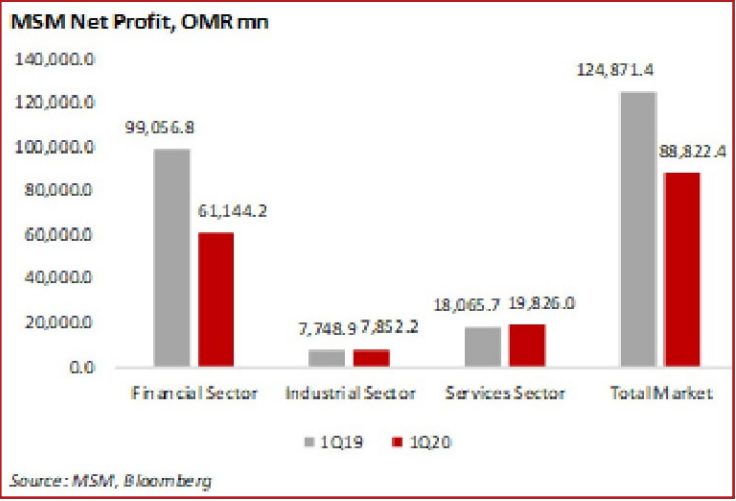
Bank Muscat announced that it has received in principle interest from SICO Bahrain to acquire a majority shareholding in Muscat Capital with a book value of SAR 80m (RO 8.2m). As consideration for proposed transaction, Bank Muscat would be offered SICO shares held currently as treasury shares.

Ooredoo Oman changed its revenue and net income figures for 1Q20. Revenue was raised to RO 67.4m from RO 67.1m, change of 0.4 per cent. Net Profit on the other hand was raised from RO 5.4m initially to RO 6.32m as per final numbers, growth of 17 per cent.

The Supreme Committee on Covid-19 announced new decisions last week including restarting of some commercial activities in the Sultanate.

The committee has decided to allow restarting of some commercial activities, including: Vehicle repair workshops, Fishing boat repair shops, Vehicle spare parts shops, Fishing equipment stores, Selling and repairing of electronic and electrical appliances, Computer sale and repair shops, Repair of household electrical appliances, Satellite transmitters sale, Vehicle rental offices, Equipment, and machinery rental offices, Stationery stores printers, Sanad offices, Quarries & Crushers and Money exchange offices.

Value of traded property in Oman went up by 24 per cent in 2M-2020 to RO 629.2m compared to RO 507.5m in 2M-2019. In the month of February alone, the traded value of property stood at RO 461.9m, second



highest since 2019. Traded value of mortgage contracts went up by 37.2 per cent to RO 458m compared to RO 333.8m last year.

Telecom data was recently released by NCSI. Big jump in active mobile broadband subscribers in Oman in March to 5.29 million compared to 4.60 million at the end of February 2020, growth of 15 per cent. Fixed internet subscription also went up 2 per cent in March to 0.483 million compared to 0.475 million in February 2020. Prepaid and postpaid mobile subscribers went up by 1.1 per cent and 1.6 per cent respectively on a m-o-m basis. Resellers are gaining market share against the telecom operators as their market share as of March stands at 17 per cent compared to 15 per cent at the end of 2019. We expect this growth trend in fixed and mobile broadband subscribers to continue as more and more people are working from home in the current environment. Local operators are expected to do well in view of current operating environment.

Courtesy: U-Capital



الشركة الوطنية العمانية للهندسة والاستثمار (ش.م.ع.)
Oman National Engineering & Investment Co. (S.A.O.G)

INVITATION FOR THE
EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING (EGM) OF
OMAN NATIONAL ENGINEERING & INVESTMENT CO. (SAOG)

The Board of Directors is pleased to invite all the shareholders to attend the Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) of the company intended to be held on Thursday 14th of May 2020 at 02:00 PM, via the Electronic Platform of convening the general meetings that you could access to through Muscat Depository & Clearance Company's website (www.mcd.gov.om), in case the quorum is not completed it has been decided to hold the second extraordinary general meeting on Wednesday 20th of May 2020 at 08:00 PM Through the aforementioned Electronic Platform to discuss and approve the following agenda:-

- 1- Study and approve the amendments to the company's articles of association in accordance with the requirement of the new commercial companies' law issued by Royal Decree No. (18/2019) according to the annex.

According to the Company's Articles of Association and the rules of convening the general meetings via electronic means issued by CMA, we would like to bring your attention to the following:-

- (a) Only juristic person shall have the right to appoint a proxy to a natural person to attend the general meeting and vote on their behalf via electronic means. However, this natural person shall have an investor no. in Muscat Depository & Clearance Company.
- (b) The voting starts on the items tabled in the agenda three (3) days prior to the date of the general meeting until the end of voting process in the meeting day. Where the number of shares of the shareholder increased or reduced, the voting process will be canceled, and he/she has to re-vote in the day of the general meeting.

Shareholders are requested to attend to the EGM electronic platform at least half an hour prior to the fixed time.

For any inquiries, please call Mr. Mohamed Humaid Al Hinaï – Legal Advisor, on GSM No. 99580795 or Telephone No. 24396260

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Oil producers need to rebalance global market



DAN COLOVER

It is no secret that the coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc globally, but the industry in the most turmoil now is arguably the oil sector.

The global lockdowns have decimated oil demand, particularly for transportation fuels, and especially jet fuel and gasoline, and caused ripple effects across the global economy.

Prices of gasoline, or petrol, at the pump have fallen significantly in many countries but consumption is declining as well.

Given various lockdowns and movement restrictions across the world many consumers have changed their daily routines and habits, minimising driving, curtailing trips both for business and leisure. A

quick drive to the shops to buy essential items is often the only time their car is used.

As a result, the fall in pump prices for gasoline is not something that many consumers have been able to take advantage of in the immediate term.

S&P Global Platts Analytics estimates that as a result of weaker global GDP and increased lockdowns, global oil demand is forecast to decline by 8.7 million b/d for the year with a contraction of 18.9 million b/d in the second quarter. This is the worst case of demand destruction ever witnessed in modern times.

In response, oil refineries around the world have throttled back their processing volumes to mitigate this sudden loss in consumption and to preserve positive margins.

Global refining capacity is currently around 100 million barrels a day, and shut-ins along with idled capacity reached nearly 20 million b/d in late April, as refiners either lowered operating rates or halted operations altogether.

With the majority of the global population staying home, the resulting crash in oil demand has caused oil prices to fall nearly 80 per



cent since the start of the year.

Benchmark Platts Dubai crude, which represents the price of a barrel of medium heavy sour crude for loading in the Middle East – arguably the most consumed type of crude in Asia – has tumbled to a low of \$13.55 on April 22, as sellers have struggled to find buyers.

Platts Dubai price assessments have averaged \$20.76/b, month to date, in contrast to \$33.70/b in March and \$54.22/b in February.

Other crude oil grades have not been spared. In

the North Sea, Platts Dated Brent represents a more prompt loaded barrel of lower density and lower sulfur or light, sweet crude oil and this price has also declined. In the US, WTI NYMEX crude futures remarkably went negative and settled at a low of minus \$37.63/b on April 20.

This reflected limited storage availability in inland parts of the country forcing financial players without access to storage to close out their financial contracts to avoid taking physical delivery.

The pain has been felt most acutely by upstream

producers of crude oil, which must now make difficult business decisions as prices are now below break-even levels for many projects.

Crude production is not a uniform matter and there are thousands of oil companies around the world, all with different economics.

Oil producers of onshore crude oil in the Middle East typically have some of the lowest production costs, but these countries are also highly dependent on oil revenues to fund their national budgets.

Many of these countries have nationalised oil

companies and they are able to augment production as they see fit. However what we have seen in recent weeks is that despite the largest agreed production cuts in history between Opec and its coalition of partners, crude prices remain sharply lower than before the coronavirus outbreak.

In contrast, in the US, there is no national oil company and there are a myriad independent producers with their own economics, some of whom will have earlier hedged their oil production at specified oil price levels and therefore could be incentivised to continue production.

S&P Global Platts Analytics believes the Opec+ production cut of 9.7 million b/d isn't enough to plug the huge near-term imbalance in the marketplace.

The world is rapidly running out of storage for crude oil and the price should act as a signal to producers to cut output to rebalance the market, as without demand at the levels seen just a few months ago there are very few benefiting from the current situation.

(Dan Colover, Structured Market Engagement, Middle East, S&P Global Platts)

E-Commerce, direct imports to spur economy

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 2

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) is urging people to take make the most of the scores of e-commerce applications that have become available in recent weeks for their shopping, import/export and other online activities. E-commerce, it said, will help the Sultanate's economic development amid the preventative measures adopted by authorities to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A section for e-commerce has been set up in the Department of Commercial Affairs (Directorate General of Trade) to organise and develop the sector. The Ministry is also encouraging home business owners and small and medium enterprises to promote their products and use modern methods and technologies for marketing their goods and services domestically and overseas.

The Ministry, in cooperation with Al-



THE MINISTRY IS ALSO ENCOURAGING HOME BUSINESS OWNERS AND SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES TO PROMOTE THEIR PRODUCTS AND USE MODERN METHODS AND TECHNOLOGIES FOR MARKETING THEIR GOODS AND SERVICES DOMESTICALLY AND OVERSEAS.

Raffid Fund and the Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Riyada), has also launched "Shop from Your Home" initiative through Twittersocial media accounts. This is in the light of the measures taken by the Supreme Committee in charge of taking measures to deal with the spread of the Covid 19. The initiative is aimed at using electronic applications to shop from

stores, restaurants and cafes, and prevent transmission of the virus. There are also several Omani companies working in the area of order delivery. They deliver and provide various commodities and services at home through their electronic applications.

Mubarak bin Mohammad al Dohani, Director General of Trade, said the e-commerce section in MOCI provides all facilities

to facilitate the work of businesses and importers easy, particularly those related to permits, speedy completion of transactions, coordination with the concerned authorities to reduce custom duties and freight fees and provide them best possibilities for direct imports from the country of origin.

"Inlightofthecoronavirus pandemic and the closure of borders, the Sultanate has turned towards e-commerce and direct import, which helped in revitalisation of commercial activities at Omani ports and led to the strengthening of food stocks in the country. E-commerce has become popular as many government agencies, various institutions and educational, health and other sectors have opted it and launched electronic services platforms. It has helped in creation of jobs and marketing outlets to support businessmen, provided consumers' needs and encouraged them to go for electronic shopping online from the comfort and safety of home."

Airlines now requiring masks, promise more safety measures



Passengers wait to disembark the plane on their arrival at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta Airport in Atlanta. — AFP

NEW YORK: With the largest US airlines now set to mandate — and provide — facial coverings for all passengers over the next two weeks, many are turning their focus to other measures to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus during air travel.

United Airlines Holdings Inc, for example, told journalists on Friday that it has purchased hundreds of hospital-type electrostatic fogging machines that it will start using in June to decontaminate airplane cabin surfaces and crevices before every flight.

The measures are among the steps airlines are taking to help passengers feel more comfortable about flying in the midst of the pandemic, which has decimated travel demand.

The industry, through lobby Airlines for America, has also begun discussions with policymakers in Washington on measures such as virus testing and pre-boarding temperature checks, United Chief

Communications Officer Josh Earnest said.

Southwest Airlines Co and Alaska Airlines on Friday joined other major airlines in imposing facial coverings.

JetBlue Airways Corp was the first to mandate such a policy, and on Thursday United, Delta Air Lines Inc American Airlines Group Inc and low-cost carrier Frontier Airlines, which is owned by private equity firm Indigo Partners LLC, followed suit.

The largest airlines provide masks for passengers who do not have their own facial covering. United noted that recent supply issues with masks have now eased.

The requirements are being made by airlines on an individual basis and will be included in the contracts of carriage and explained on their websites. They are not mandated by the Federal Aviation Administration, which has said that it only has the authority to regulate matters that are directly tied to air safety. — Reuters

Dutch McDonald's trials virus-proof restaurant

AMSTERDAM: Big Macs delivered on meal trolleys, hand sanitisers at the entrance and designated waiting spots to separate customers could become a feature of McDonald's restaurants in the Netherlands when they are allowed to reopen.

In a trial at a restaurant in the city of Arnhem, McDonald's has been looking for ways to maintain social distancing when the coronavirus lockdown is relaxed.

"We have tried to figure out how to keep our customers and employees safe, while maintaining a restaurant

A customer maintains 1.5 metre social distancing measure at McDonald's in Arnhem, Netherlands. — Reuters



atmosphere," McDonald's Netherlands spokeswoman Eunice Koekkoek said. "These are drastic changes, but we hope to make them in a way that

customers don't notice them too much."

Restaurants, bars and other public places in the Netherlands have been closed since March 15. As of Friday, 39,791 coronavirus cases had been confirmed with 4,893 deaths.

But new infections have been dropping, prompting calls to loosen the lockdown after its current deadline of May 19. A decision on whether to reopen restaurants and bars is expected around May 12, but Prime Minister Mark Rutte has ruled out a return to normal. — Reuters

US manufacturing activity plunges to 11-year low

WASHINGTON: US manufacturing activity plunged to an 11-year low in April as the novel coronavirus wreaked havoc on supply chains, suggesting the economy was sinking deeper into recession.

The survey from the Institute for Supply Management (ISM) on Friday added to a raft of grim data this week, including a collapse in consumer spending in March and a surge to 30.3 million in the number of Americans who have filed claims for unemployment benefits in the last six weeks.

Strict measures to slow the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus, have almost paralysed the country, leading to the deepest economic contraction since the Great Recession in the first quarter.

"The backdrop for manufacturers is very bleak, with collapsing global demand, ongoing supply chain disruptions, and high levels of uncertainty all posing very significant challenges", said Oren Klachkin, lead US economist at Oxford Economics in New York. "We do not expect output losses to be recouped until 2021".

The ISM said its index of national factory activity dropped to a reading of 41.5 last month, the lowest level since April 2009, from 49.1 in March. The monthly decline in the ISM index was



An employee manufactures a component for new Amtrak Acela trains in Harvey, Illinois. — Reuters

the biggest since October 2008.

A reading below 50 indicates contraction in the manufacturing sector, which accounts for 11 per cent of the US economy.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the index would fall to 36.9 in April.

The smaller-than-expected drop in the ISM index was attributable to a surge in the survey's measure of supplier deliveries to a reading of 76.0 last month

from 65.0 in March.

A lengthening in suppliers' delivery times is normally associated with a strong economy and increased customer demand, which would be a positive contribution. But in this case slower supplier deliveries indicate supply shortages related to the coronavirus pandemic, and not stronger demand.

Even with some parts of the country starting to reopen, economists do not expect a rapid reversal in

the economic downturn, with some small businesses expected to go under. There is also a risk of a second wave of COVID-19 infections.

Stocks on Wall Street were trading lower amid the rising tide of weak economic reports and President Donald Trump's threats to slap new tariffs on China over the coronavirus crisis. The dollar was slightly lower against a basket of currencies, while US Treasury prices fell.

Last month's decrease

in the ISM index pulled it below the 42.8 threshold. A reading above this level over a long period of time is associated with economic expansion.

Economists believe the economy entered recession in mid-March when state and local government enforced "stay-at-home" orders for non-essential workers.

The rule of thumb in many countries is to define a recession as two consecutive quarters of decline in real

gross domestic product, but the National Bureau of Economic Research, the private research institute regarded as the arbiter of US recessions, does not use that definition.

Instead, it looks for a decline in economic activity, spread across the economy and lasting more than a few months.

"The ISM manufacturing survey has come late to the recession forecasting party this time, as this recession is the quickest deterioration in economic activity ever recorded", said Chris Rupkey, chief economist at MUFJ in New York.

The ISM said comments from manufacturers were "strongly negative regarding the near-term outlook, with sentiment clearly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and continuing energy market recession". COVID-19 lockdowns have weighed on demand for oil, sending crude prices crashing.

The ISM's forward-looking new orders sub-index tumbled to a reading of 27.1 in April, the lowest since December 2008, from 42.2 in March.

The monthly decline was the largest since April 1951. Out of the 18 industries, only manufacturers of paper and food, beverage and tobacco products reported increases in orders.

This is consistent with shortages of some foodstuffs and paper products like toilet paper. — Reuters

Exxon and Chevron slam brakes on shale as oil demand tumbles



A view of the Exxon Mobil refinery is pictured in Baytown, Texas. — Reuters

HOUSTON: Exxon Mobil Corp and Chevron Corp are slamming the brakes on oil output, as the top two US producers plan for combined global shut-ins of 800,000 barrels per day in response to plunging crude prices and fuel demand.

Both companies on Friday outlined deep cuts in investments in the Permian shale basin, the top US oilfield where growth in recent years made America the world's top oil producer and a net exporter for the first time in decades. They each announced global shut-ins of up to 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) this quarter due to lockdowns to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

Exxon and Chevron have been sidelining Permian drilling equipment since the market started crashing in March.

US crude prices have plunged nearly 70 per cent this year to under \$20 a barrel, and traded in negative territory on April 20 for the first time ever.

Oil and gas output at both US producers rose in the first quarter with the companies racing to produce 1 million barrels per day in the Permian. Then fuel demand sank nearly a third due to travel and business lockdowns, while a flood of Russian and Saudi oil hit the market when they abandoned production cuts. — Reuters

Fed officials worry about lasting economic scars from crisis

WASHINGTON: After rolling out trillions of dollars in support for the US economy during the coronavirus pandemic, Federal Reserve officials have begun warning of potentially lasting scars to the workforce and productivity if the recovery is not handled well.

In separate comments on Friday, the heads of three Fed regional banks said the aggressive efforts already taken to keep companies and firms afloat are only the start of what will be required to get the economy back to normal, with worker retraining, retooled social safety nets, and other steps needed once the health crisis eases.

"We need to be working on the economy's recovery rate" after the crisis, said Richmond Fed President Thomas Barkin, noting that companies may be operating less efficiently under social distancing rules, business investment may be hampered by eroded confidence, and workers may pull back from the labour market as they rethink how to care for children and ageing parents in an era when day care facilities and nursing homes pose higher risks.

Barkin spoke amid a patchwork end to the coronavirus-spurred lockdowns that has seen



A jogger runs past the Federal Reserve building in Washington, DC. — Reuters

some states throw open their economies already and others maintain restrictions, while companies and their employees struggle to find the right balance. Workers that remain on the job face risks — meat processing plants have been forced offline due to outbreaks among workers — while companies that do reopen likely face higher costs and fewer customers.

"We will return to somewhat normal operations - at a gradual pace," Barkin told the Maryland Chamber of Commerce in a webcast. But "I worry about the landing spot - how strong the economy will be at the end of this", St Louis Fed President James Bullard and Dallas Fed President Robert

Kaplan expressed similar concerns that the path out of the crisis may be both slow and complex.

Not only will the unemployment rate spike to catastrophic levels as high as 20 per cent in the coming months, for example, but it will likely remain high until the end of the year or longer, Kaplan said in an interview on Fox Business Network.

"We're going to end the year probably with an unemployment rate as high as 8 to 10 per cent", Kaplan said, a figure that would mean perhaps 10 million more unemployed over the next several months compared to the start of the year.

"We're going to need stimulus going into the rest of the year and into

next year so we grow faster, so we work down this unemployment rate".

That stands in contrast to initial hopes for an economic rebound as swift and historic as the decline of recent weeks.

The Fed this week restated a pledge to keep interest rates low and continue offering trillions of dollars in credit across the economy as long as is needed to keep it stable during the fight against a pandemic that has killed more than 62,000 people across the country.

But that may just be the beginning of a struggle that will require critical policy choices about how and what to reopen, what health protections are needed to keep the virus contained, and how to offset whatever financial or other wounds emerge.

Bullard, in a Wall Street Journal interview, said he worried about the prospect of an economic depression if both the shutdown goes on too long and the reopening is not handled well.

"I think we are taking depression risk here if we are not careful and if we don't execute this properly over the next couple of months", Bullard said, suggesting a "far more granular, far more risk-based" approach to the timing of states or industries coming back online. — Reuters

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GADGET use can harm your posture

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, many people are working from home. But it may be difficult for them to stay physically active and maintain good postures while working on gadgets. Incorrect postures can invite a plethora of health problems. “People sit on the bed, couch or chairs that are not comfortable, and may lead to back, shoulder or neck pain. Sitting in a hunched back position is also problematic. One may develop poor circulation problems due to sitting for long period of time. Bad posture can also cause impaired lung function as one’s poor posture tends to affect the amount of air one is taking into the lungs while breathing,” says Dr Ashwin Borkar, Consultant Neurosurgeon specialised in brain and spine surgery. Adding, “One may suffer from digestive problems as slouching can compress one’s abdominal organs (including the digestive tract), and even lead to fatigue,

spasm and a sluggish metabolism. One may have a headache due to leaning forward for a longer period of time.” The orthopedic problems that one sees due to bad posture include, lower back pain which leads to pelvic pain, which may lead to urinary retention or incontinence, constipation, or pain during intercourse as well; neck pain and upper back pain along with headaches, giddiness, pain radiating down to hand and fingers with tingling and numbness; and increase in stress levels, says Dr Chirag P Borana, Orthopedic Surgeon and Joint Replacement Surgeon, Mumbai. A “corporate illness”, bad postures can better prevented than cured. **How to say no to bad postures?** Avoid staying in one posture for a long time. It is vital to keep moving in order to stay active and fit, and also have postural changes throughout the day. Remaining in one position for a longer period of time is a strict no. Don’t be static. Try to move while working from home, watching a movie

The orthopedic problems that one sees due to bad posture include, lower back pain which leads to pelvic pain, which may lead to urinary retention or incontinence, constipation, or pain during intercourse as well; neck pain and upper back pain along with headaches, giddiness, pain radiating down to hand and fingers with tingling and numbness; and increase in stress levels on the couch, while using cell phone when you are on the bed or standing in the kitchen while cooking.

Avoid bending downwards while working on the computer, or even using the cell phone while tilting downward. It can lead to neck, upper back and shoulder pain. Hold handheld devices directly in front of you at eye-or-shoulder-height, rather than down around your waist. Raise your computer screen or stack books underneath it so that you can keep your neck and spine in that neutral position when looking at it. Do not lean instead of that consider the zoom-in action so that you can see properly. Avoid sitting on the couch while working. Stop doing that immediately. On a couch, you tend to sit anyhow without even thinking that it can be harmful to you. Avoid bending elbows and wrists for a longer time. Resting wrists on the desk while typing can leave your wrists over-flexed for too long. Keeping either the wrists or elbows bent for too long can strain the joints and the nerves across them. Slowly and gradually, it can lead to Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (a condition

that causes pain, numbness, and tingling in the hand and arm). Likewise, ones with a larger shoulder width, wider chest or a bigger frame must have a bigger keyboard as using a wrong-sized keyboard is not recommended. Opt for strength and flexibility exercises. Abdominal, back and leg muscles are all important for maintaining a good posture. Exercises and workouts that strengthen these muscles can be a good idea. Do yoga or stretching exercises at home that can also help strengthen your core. To improve circulation, try to take breaks while working from home and stand for some time after every 20 minutes. Do upper body exercises that will be helpful for your shoulder and neck. Practice correct breathing techniques. Stick up a picture of good postures to help you remind that you need to do so to stay in top shape. Use lumbar support pillows recommended by the doctor. Take the help of doctors, don’t sit on it, and wait till it gets worse. — IANS



INDIA TO STEP UP EFFORTS FOR 2032 OLYMPICS

NEW DELHI: India will step up its battle to win the 2032 Olympic Games and other international events when the global coronavirus pandemic eases, its top sports leader Narinder Batra said.

Ten years after hosting the Commonwealth Games, the Indian Olympic Association president said his country had lessons to learn but would not be deterred.

“We are serious and definitely pitching for the 2026 Youth Olympic Games and the 2032 Olympics”, he said on Friday.

India has already written expressions of interest to the International Olympic Committee but faces reported competition from Thailand, Russia and Colombia for the 2026 event.

Queensland in Australia, Shanghai and a potential joint bid between Seoul

and Pyongyang are also being touted for the 2032 Olympics.

However, the pandemic has halted all debate. Batra, also head of the International Hockey Federation, said “documentation” has started for 2032 but work is now frozen. A final decision may take until 2025.

“Now there is a team that visits the various venues and you keep talking to them and then they submit a report. It is a continuous process which I believe will see no activity until December”, India’s most influential sports leader said.

Delhi’s hosting of the 2010 Commonwealth Games was marked by construction delays, failing infrastructure and accusations of financial mismanagement.

“This is not the time to talk with business houses or government about pitch-



“We are serious and definitely pitching for the 2026 Youth Olympic Games and the 2032 Olympics

NARINDER BATRA
IOA chief

ing for the Olympics. The first thing should be how we sort out this problem which has come into the world”, Batra added, referring to the virus.

Delhi’s hosting of the Commonwealth Games was marked by construction delays, failing infrastructure and accusations of financial mismanagement.

More recently, Delhi was stripped of the 2021 World Boxing Championships, with the global body accusing organisers of failing to pay a hosting fee on time.

Batra said he knew nothing of the boxing dispute but insisted that the 2010 multi-sport event had made India think big and its growing economic clout means it has resources.

“I can say the biggest takeaway was that India is capable of hosting all big-ticket events whether it

is Olympics or any other Games”, said Batra.

But he added that New Delhi did not capitalise enough on the 2010 Games by encouraging more young athletes.

HOCKEY HOPES

“The Delhi event fell short on legacy values. The legacy that you produce more athletes and you develop them never happened here and that is why tournaments shifted out of Delhi”, he said.

“The fact that such a big event happened here was not properly exploited”.

India has a population of 1.3 billion people but while it excels at cricket, its team returned from the 2016 Rio Olympics with just two medals.

The coronavirus pandemic has only made it harder for athletes to train

for the postponed Tokyo Olympics, put back until at least 2021.

But Batra is sticking to his prediction that India will get more than 10 medals whenever the next Games are held.

“About 80 Indian athletes have already qualified for the Olympics and are being monitored by directors and chief coaches”, he said.

“So I maintain my earlier prediction of a double-figure medal tally and I don’t think this situation will change anything”.

Batra said he was counting on the men’s hockey team — which has won eight Olympic golds but not finished in the first four since 1980 — to return to success.

“In this Olympics I am certainly looking to the men’s team for a medal”, he said. — **AFP**

OMAN CHESS PLAYERS TAKE PART IN ARAB VIRTUAL CAMPS

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAY 2

The Oman Chess Committee (OCC) participated in the virtual friendly camps with other Arab associations and federations through the advanced technology systems. The OCC was one of the first sports body in Oman to activate the online events since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. The committee had organised many e-tournaments and online training sessions.

Oman chess team players began their e-camps on April 20 as part of OCC training schedule for the national team. The OCC agreed with different countries to hold this e-camps and the first country was Lebanon. The virtual camp featured participation of 12 players in junior and general categories.

The Sultanate chess players held a draw with Lebanon team in the initial two rounds.

The national team play-



ers will continue their preparatory e-matches this week with Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon teams on Monday and Tuesday in weekly basis.

The technical system of the e-matches at the virtu-

al camps through ‘Lichess’ application and each round is for 30 minutes + 10 seconds. As many as 12 players can join the application in general, women and junior sections. The allowed ranking of play-

ers should be below 1200 points. OCC will broadcast some matches live through the social media channels besides providing the technical analysis of some games.

Many top players were included in the Sultanate chess team at the virtual camps. The players from general category are Salim al Omari, Amin al Ansi, Mohammad al Omari, Salim Shammas and Mohammad al Omari. The ladies team comprise Al Anwood al Ghafri,

Anaa al Eisaei and Kamila al Ghafri and the junior team included Hamoud al Busaidy, Abdul Rahman al Zadjali, Anas al Darwoushi, and Suhil al Rubai.

Meanwhile, OCC launched its Youtube channel as an official tool for all the chess lovers to learn more strategies, moves in the game and provided analysis of the matches. In addition, OCC provided e-courses for the junior level players to learn more about chess.

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editor@omanobserver.om



SERIE A TEAMS HOPE TO COMPLETE SEASON

EMILIA-ROMAGNA REGION BECAME FIRST TO OPEN WAY TO TRAINING DESPITE GOVERNMENT CURBS

MILAN: Italy's 20 Serie A clubs on Friday reiterated their unanimous desire to complete the season as the northern Emilia-Romagna region became the first to open the way to training despite government restrictions.

An emergency Lega Serie A assembly via video of the top-flight clubs took place after Sports Minister Vincenzo Spadafora this week said the chances of restarting were "increasingly narrow".

League president Paolo Dal Pino stated after the meeting "his openness to a dialogue with the government from a constructive and collaborative perspective, obtaining on this position the full agreement of all the clubs."

Spadafora has warned that the government will call time on the season which has been suspended since March 9 if the Italian Football Federation (FIGC)

fails to convince them on its health and safety protocol.

An FIGC meeting slated for May 8 could be decisive.

Meanwhile, the Emilia-Romagna region on Friday gave permission for local clubs, including top-flight sides Bologna, Parma, SPAL and Sassuolo, to resume training in sports centres from May 4 if they wished to do so.

Emilia-Romagna regional president Stefano Bonaccini

has agreed to allow "professional sportspeople to train individually, in compliance with social distancing rules and without any gatherings in closed-door structures."

NAPOLI PLAN RETURN Southern giants Napoli are also planning to return to training as their safety proposals have received the backing of local authorities.

Friday's league meeting also addressed the issue of

TV rights, but no resolutions were adopted concerning broadcasters Sky, DAZN and IMG, with a final payment estimated at 340 million euros (\$370 million) for the current season, due to be paid in May.

FIGC president Gabriele Gravina has said that calling time would be "the death of Italian football", predicting losses of over 800 million euros in TV rights, sponsors, ticketing

and marketing.

If the government did decide to pull the plug on the season it would have the support of a country traumatised by over 28,000 coronavirus deaths.

According to a recent survey, two out of three Italians would support a stoppage, in particular in the northern epicentre, stronghold of heavyweights Juventus, Inter Milan and AC Milan and Atalanta. — AFP