

1.2 million vehicles recalled in seven years

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) carried out 670 recall campaigns in which about 1.2 million vehicles between 2013 and 2020. The vehicles with some technical faults were recalled in cooperation with a number of vehicle dealers, while the number of withdrawn goods reached 136,532. The reasons for the recall of vehicles varied between defects and technical repairs that were detected later by the manufacturer in the country of origin. **SEE P5**



P12

AHMAD PUMPED UP FOR ASIAN LE MANS



P13

MOST OPEC+ COUNTRIES PREFER TO HOLD OUTPUT STEADY



P19

PHILIPPINE CINEMA OFFERS VENICE-THEMED PANDEMIC ESCAPE



MUSCAT

HM CONDOLES SAUDI KING

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia (on the death of Prince Khalid bin Faisal bin Saad I bin Abdulrahman al Saud. His Majesty expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to Allah the Almighty to rest the deceased's soul in peace in paradise and grant his family patience.

LONDON

'ASSANGE SHOULD NOT BE EXTRADITED'

A British judge has ruled that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange should not be extradited to the US to face espionage charges.

Judge Vanessa Baraitser gave a verdict at London's Old Bailey court on Monday stating she was concerned about the 49-year-old's health while he is incarcerated at a prison in south east London, HMP Belmarsh.

"Faced with the conditions of near total isolation without the protective factors which limited his risk at HMP Belmarsh, I am satisfied the procedures described by the US will not prevent Assange from finding a way to commit suicide. **SEE P8**



On behalf of HM, Sayyid Fahd to attend GCC Summit in Saudi

MUSCAT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers will leave on Tuesday for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to lead the Sultanate's delegation in the 41st Summit of GCC Leaders. The summit is scheduled to be held on Tuesday. The Sultanate spares no efforts to support the GCC march, as well as all endeavours aiming at serving Arab and Islamic issues and enhancing ties of cooperation and understanding with friendly countries. HH Sayyid Fahd will be accompanied by an official delegation comprising Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Abdullah Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Justice and Legal Affairs and government officials.



HM greeted by ROP chief on police day

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday received greetings from Lt Gen Hasan Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector-General of Police and Customs, on the occasion of Royal Oman Police Day, which falls on January 5.

"Your Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, peace be upon you. I am honoured, and so are personnel of the Royal Oman Police, to express our most heartfelt greetings to Your Majesty on the occasion of January 5, Royal Oman Police Day, wishing Your Majesty good health and happiness, and the Omani people further progress and prosperity. Your Majesty, Royal Oman Police (ROP) celebrates its annual day this year at a time the decade-old comprehensive plan of

“They have thus earned the constant appreciation of the people and their commendation of the lofty standards of professionalism

LT GEN HASAN AL SHRAIQI
Inspector-General of Police and Customs

development of different sectors of ROP approaches its final phase. The stage is set for full upgrading and empowerment of the police force with state-of-the-art technologies, modern systems...

Many goods to cost more from April

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkutttyp

Come April, citizens and residents will have to shell out more on many of the commodities they purchase or the services they avail.

According to the announcement in Oman Budget 2021, Value Added Tax (VAT) will be imposed on many of the goods and services in Oman starting from April 2021.

2ND WEEK OF APRIL

If calculated on the basis of the announcement made in October last, this indirect tax on consumption is expected to go live from the second week of April as it would be effective after 180 days from the date of its publica-

tion in the official gazette.

The government has earlier announced the approval of VAT through Royal Decree No 121/2020 dated October 12, 2020. With the VAT implementation, Oman will join 160 other countries on a global level and is expected to generate RO 300 million in revenue through value-added tax at the rate of 5 per cent this year.

LOWEST RATES

"The value added tax rate to be applied in Oman is among the lowest rates at the international level. Therefore, it is expected that the impact of VAT on the cost of living in Oman will be minimal", said a statement issued by the ministry of finance.

The tax will be imposed on

VAT EXPECTED TO GENERATE

RO 300 MILLION

The financial resources obtained from this tax will contribute to building a sustainable economy

The list of goods and services exempted from the soon-to-be-imposed VAT includes healthcare, education, financial services, food items and supplies for persons with special needs

most goods and services, with the exemption of a specific set of goods and services, rendered to consumers. It will also be imposed on imports of goods to the Sultanate, except the ones exempted by law.

EXEMPTIONS

The list of goods and services exempted from the soon-to-be-imposed VAT includes healthcare, education, financial services, basic food items and supplies for persons with special needs, among other items and services.

"The VAT will have a positive impact on the economic and social development and the international competitiveness of Oman", said the statement.

According to the ministry, the financial resources obtained

from this tax will contribute to building a sustainable economy for future generations, and it will also contribute to improving public services and continuing the development of infrastructure in future.

"The tax is expected to provide an additional source of support to the Oman's general finance. It is also expected to ensure the quality of public services and facilitate the Sultanate's diminishing dependence on oil and other hydrocarbon sectors as main sources of revenues", the statement from the ministry said.

Oman's business sector will serve as collector of tax in the sultanate and it will bear the cost of imposing the VAT, collecting it, claiming it and adhering to it as per the law and bylaw.

SNOW MAN RETURNS

Al Jabal Al Akhdhar has seen a significant drop in temperatures and ice formation in some areas.

Source @weatherOmanya

Oman gets nod to host Test cricket

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Oman's wonderful cricket facilities have met International Cricket Council's (ICC) highest approval and the country is now an accredited Test, One-day International (ODI) and T20 International venue. Afghanistan has chosen to play its home Test, ODI and T20I series at Oman Cricket Academy (OCA) Ground 1, the newest addition

to the elite club of Test cricket grounds.

Afghanistan is set to play a three-match ODI series against Ireland this month with the first game scheduled for January 26 followed by the next two matches on January 29 and 31 in Amerat.

This will be followed by Afghanistan's Test and T20I series against Zimbabwe, now scheduled to be held in Oman in February in which they will

play two Test matches and three Twenty20 Internationals.

"This is a big news and a wonderful achievement for Oman Cricket. The New Year has started on such a promising note for the Sultanate. Apart from UAE, Oman is the only other Associate nation to enjoy Test, ODI and T20I status.

This is a very proud moment for us all", said an elated Madhu Jesrani, Secretary, Oman Cricket.

FOREIGN MINISTER RECEIVES EXIM BANK PRESIDENT



Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, today received Kimberly Reed, President and Chairman of Export-Import (EXIM) Bank of the United States of America (USA) in Muscat on Monday. The meeting reviewed friendship and cooperation relations between the Sultanate and the USA. The meeting also explored means of promoting financial and banking cooperation and enhancing trade and investment partnership between the two friendly countries, within the framework of the Sultanate-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA), as well as the existing strategic relations. They reiterated keenness to support areas of science and technology transfer and entrepreneurship as per the agreement signed on this regard. They also explored means of polishing youth skills to achieve the prospective goals sought by the two countries. — ONA

Oman gets nod to host Test cricket

From Page 1
“Oman Cricket is delighted to know that the Sultanate has become an accredited venue for Test matches, ODI and T20 Internationals. The credit must go to our chairman Kanak Khimji and the Board of Directors for guiding us through thick and thin all these years. This honour and achievement is a realisation of our chairman’s dream. Oman hosting Test matches and all forms of international cricket is a dream come true. This was his vision and we should all thank him for guiding us to the path,” said Duleep Mendis, Chief Development Officer at Oman Cricket and coach of the national team.
ICC accreditation did not come easy. The procedure was quite tough and Oman Cricket had to work hard to meet all the requirements.
“When it comes to hosting Test matches and white ball international cricket, they (ICC) go into certain details. Fortunately, we fulfilled almost everything. Oman Cricket Academy is such a fantastic centre that has everything. All



Kanak G Khimji

Oman Cricket is delighted to know that the Sultanate has become an accredited venue for Test matches, ODI and T20 Internationals. The credit must go to our chairman Kanak Khimji

DULEEP MENDIS
Coach of the national team

the necessary facilities are there in one location. Most of the ICC officials have been here and seen the facility and they are very happy to grant this accreditation to Oman Cricket Ground. I must acknowledge that Pankaj Khimji played a key role in getting ICC’s attention to our facility in Amerat and we thank him for being so effective and helpful,” explained Mendis.
Oman also plans to boost the seating capacity of the ground before the first Test match takes place here.
“This will be a long tour and we need to plan and prepare well to give a good account of the facilities that we have. We are determined to make this a successful event. There will be many more international series taking place in Oman, bringing in top broadcasting companies here telecasting the games which will be viewed live around the world. This kind of international exposure is sure to benefit Oman,” said Mendis.
Afghanistan’s series against Ireland and Zimbabwe were originally scheduled to be held in UAE and India respectively but will now be held in Oman.



FROM PAGE 1

His Majesty greeted by ROP chief

... and mechanisms of work devised in accordance with public service requirements that meet the expectations of society.
The ROP thereby keeps abreast of the steady progress made by our country’s renewed renaissance under Your Majesty’s wise leadership. Your Majesty, The new generations, personnel of the ROP, value the well-studied development witnessed by Your Majesty’s police. They respond



to this accomplishment in high spirits and they utilise it to serve

Oman and its noble people. They have thus earned the constant appreciation of the people and their commendation of the lofty standards of professionalism through which different police tasks are implemented in light of Your Majesty’s noble directives and prudent visions. May the Almighty Allah protect Your Majesty and bestow His divine bounties on you. Happy Police Day, Your Majesty! — ONA

Oman to receive first cruise ship post COVID-19 travel restrictions

VINOD NAIR
@VINOT_NAIR

The Sultanate will receive its first cruise at the month-end, according to various sources following the cruise Itineraries.
As per the reports, AIDA Cruises have voyages planned around the GCC region, with its Aida Prima to sail on seven-day voyages starting January 29.
Aida Prima will be sailing on a voyage that will depart from Dubai and sail to Muscat, where the vessel will remain for two days – January 30 and 31.
The ship will be visiting Oman again in February and March besides Salalah in April. Aida Prima is the current flagship for AIDA Cruises.
The 3,300 passenger vessel was delivered in 2015. With a length of 300 metres, she weighs 125,572GT. The cruise line is part of Carnival Corporation.
Meanwhile, MSC cruises also listed Salalah as its port of call for MSC Fantasia on April 15.
Oman received 110,000 cruise



ship visitors until the end of February 2020, of which 30,374 were Germans, followed by 15,480 Italians, 10,673 Spaniards, 8,365 British, and 7,7117 Russians.
According to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the country posted 43.6 per cent growth in cruise ship tourists in 2019 to reach 283,488 passengers, with the highest arrivals between October and April.
Before the worldwide travel ban due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry was expecting 300,000 cruise ship

tourists in 2020.
The ministry has been collaborating with relevant government and private sector entities and ship owners and operators to enhance cruise tourism in Oman, as well as help, develop the capability and the efficiency of local ports to handle giant cruise ships.
The government had also started the sea/air exchange program to promote the cruise sector by making different ports of the Sultanate the destination of origin for many operators.

CNN Arabic features Omani photographer

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Omani photographer Ali Harbi has captured the harmony between the mountain and the sea that surrounds the coastal village Musandam Governorate.
The highlight of his photography is Khor Najd - a natural creek close to Khasab. On a 4WD it takes 10 minutes to visit the place by road. It takes around 10 minutes by road drive to reach the base of the mountain, behind which this Khor is situated.
Khor Najd is considered one of the most famous tourist places in Musandam Governorate, and also a popular destination for tourists, especially photographers, who can capture various corners of the road leading to the beach and the end of the winding road, according to Harbi who was featured by CNN Arabic.
Harbi said that the name given to the creek, Najd, is attributed to the help it offers to fishermen and travellers in the event of bad weather and sea turbulence.



The creek becomes a refuge and refuge, the photographer said.
The site of Khor Najd is distinguished by its picturesque nature and the mountains incubating the sea from all sides.

Harbi said that the lagoons of the Musandam Governorate are an essential destination for diving enthusiasts and deep-sea exploration, due to the beautiful marine creatures it contains.



ROP marks annual day today

MUSCAT: Royal Oman Police (ROP) is marking its annual day which falls on January 5 each year. This year's celebration comes as ROP has made various achievements with the blessed Renaissance being renewed under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Supreme Commander.

ROP affiliates have proven high efficiency and competence in the handling of changes and developments most notably COVID-19, utilising modern technology to provide quality services as well as the achievements that took place in criminology, traffic and customs. ROP has become the focus of everyone's attention due to a series of achievements and successes it has made in various levels.

The Sultanate has recorded zero in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) for the eighth consecutive year. The score maintained by the Sultanate since the publication of the first GTI report in 2012 represents the highest security level from terrorism threat.

Among the many achievements made by ROP, the 2020 Criminal Index shows that crimes against society such as theft, cyber extortion, money laundering and premeditated arson have declined.

The Directorate-General for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances carried out qualitative operations and crackdowns on several drug smuggling and trafficking networks.

The Sultanate has expanded cooperation with regional and world countries and international organisations in multiple fields including dealing with cross border



crimes with the spread of COVID-19. This also includes the exchange of expertise, international cooperation in arresting criminals and exchange of information regarding international crimes.

The ROP Coast Guard vessels cruise Oman's regional waters performing their security and humanitarian duties in cooperation with the other military and security bodies. ROP Coast Guard undertakes the tasks of combating smuggling and piracy operations as well as keeping safety and security at seaports

and maritime facilities.

The Directorate-General of Police Aviation provides support and assistance to the other units. It carries out patrols to monitor the Sultanate's coastline and track suspicious boats on the Omani regional waters besides transporting police personnel to remote locations and conducting search and rescue operations and medical evacuation as well as delivery of food supplies and necessities to residents of mountainous areas.

Royal Oman Police has made a great

success in providing electronic services to citizens and residents utilising the latest and most advanced technologies through the ROP website and smartphone application.

As part of its annual day celebrations, ROP is set to launch a number of E-Systems with a view of streamlining and improving the services provided to the public.

The Directorate-General of Customs at Royal Oman Police has contributed to facilitating trade and boosting the logistics

sector positioning the Sultanate on top of the cross-border trade index, 2020 at the GCC level. The report pointed to the infrastructure modernisation at Sohar Port and the introduction of inspection operations based on risk management e-system.

Bayan Customs System provides all customs-related services electronically. The system has an electronic single-window system connected with 48 government departments. The Bayan system won the best-integrated government project award in 2018 as part of the Sultan Qaboos Award for Excellence in eGovernment.

The years 2015-2019 have seen great development in terms of the rise in traffic safety indicators and the increase in road lengths and vehicle numbers.

The data provided by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) showed the number of road accidents declined by 66.2 per cent from 6,279 in 2015 down to 2,812 in 2019.

The decline in road accident numbers and related deaths is the outcome of the efforts made by ROP which mainly focused on raising traffic awareness among the general public.

Out of belief in the role of women and the importance of integrating them in police work, female police affiliates are performing their roles with high efficiency in different units of ROP including training, general security, inquiries and criminal investigation and traffic. Besides, female police have proven high skills and competence in other fields such as special operations aviation, among others.

— ONA



STANDARDISATION

VITAL FOR ONLINE TESTS

DR ADIL AL KHAFAJI



Standardisation of education is an issue that calls for a level playing field for all the educational institutions be it private or government. Two standpoints are often discussed in education, one that calls for unifying instructions and procedures and the other that encourages diversity of modes of actions.

The first provides better control over relevant operations and eliminates biased results, the second allows for opinions coming from different backgrounds and diverse schools of thinking. For academics and students, the first standpoint holds importance.

The general requirements of a 'good test' can be adapted to provide a framework for unifying testing and measurement procedures. It is believed that a degree of standardisation of test preparation and administration is an important necessity in the case of formal academic online testing.

PRELIMINARIES

A test is a tool that is used to measure skills and knowledge learned in a given level usually through planned instructions,

such as classroom instruction, and/or through self-study. This is of course not to deny other types of tests like those designed to measure talent and inborn potentials.

We usually give tests to assess the students' level of learning. It is aimed at assessing whether the students have learned what we intended to teach. It is to gather information for adapting or improving instruction and to increase the level of learning and motivation. The last point, however, should not be taken to mean we teach through tests. 'When you are an examiner you are no more a teacher.'

STANDARDISED AND NON-STANDARDISED TESTING

There are four major elements in a test – questions, administering the test, scoring the answers, and interpreting the results. These four elements are consistent in a standardised test. Test design, administration, and scoring, as well as interpretation of results, are performed in a predetermined standard fashion. In non-standardised testing, the students are not necessarily tested in the same manner. Different questions may be given to different groups of the same level. On another count, the same test may be used but the time allotted may not be the same. Non-standardised testing can also be noticed in employing different methods of evaluation of answers and interpretation of results.

Standardisation can be performed at different levels – at the group level, at the level of one institution, a network of institutions, or even the entire country as in pan-country government examinations.

Decisions to provide a degree of standardisation can be relevant to any of the above four elements and may vary in nature, but better be directed at controversial issues like the use of cameras to invigilate online testing.

In certain contexts, test-takers, particularly females, may object to this but would show less resistance if the decision comes from high levels of the hierarchy. Other contentious issues that can be standardised in online testing are consideration of technical failures and the provision of grace time.

ACHIEVEMENT TESTS AND PROFICIENCY TESTS

Tests can be written with specific content material in mind. This material would have been the subject of instruction during a course of study at a certain level. The test can be based on this kind of material. Test writers are interested in knowing how much knowledge or skill the test-takers have been able to achieve or obtain during the study. Such tests are called achievement tests. They are usually used in formal teaching to decide whether a learner may proceed to an upper level of study or not. Such tests may not necessarily measure abilities like reasoning, problem-solving, evaluation, and the use of existing knowledge to acquire new knowledge. The label 'proficiency tests' is sometimes, but not always, reserved to measure the ability to perform processes of the latter type.

Standardisation would work on a different count when achievement and proficiency are in the spotlight. It would

set up common minimum requirements for progression to upper levels in the case of achievement tests and delineate the required target performance in proficiency tests. Such delineations can be crucial in disaggregating test-takers' results to consider fitness for certain tasks.

Validity, reliability, practicality, coverage, and relevance are characteristics of a good test. Other elements include balance, objectivity, clarity, and marks distribution.

For examiners, it is important to maintain a unified philosophy in test design, test administration, scoring, and result interpretation. He should be able to test the learners' abilities to make initiatives and use taught material to acquire new knowledge.

There should be a test for one thing at a time. Items should test what they are supposed to test. Better use one consistent criterion of scoring, and consider available resources when preparing your test. Neither neglect available resource potentials nor over-estimate them. A good examiner should try to cover all taught material and test all relevant skills and test items should be relevant to the field and type of knowledge at hand.

Ideally, test items should reflect different degrees of challenge to human minds. They should have discriminative power. Tests should have model answers either conceptualised or written down to ensure the objectivity of scoring.

(The writer is an Associate professor of Linguistics and Translation at Al Zahra College for Women, Muscat)



Ideally, test items should reflect different degrees of challenge to human minds. They should have discriminative power. Tests should have model answers either conceptualised or written down to ensure the objectivity of scoring

Officials take stock of health facilities in Al Wusta

The MoH does a regular review of the progress of work at the primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare units to identify their needs and requirements.

in the vehicles, error in the control unit programming in the passenger restraint system, use of insufficient insulation for the set of the rear signals, presence of a defect in the seat belt and a defect in the seat belt reminder switch in the driver's seat, fuel pump failure, electrical short in the electronic control unit, defective airbag inflator, defective ignition switch, defect in the rear brake pads and steering wheel, in addition to the possibility of rupture of the air inflator due to excessive internal pressure. When opening the driver's airbag, etc.”

Majan College
University College

كلية مجان
كلية جامعية

MAJAN COLLEGE

(UNIVERSITY COLLEGE) SAOG

BOARD REPORT FOR THE FIRST QUARTER ENDED 30 NOVEMBER, 2020

Respected Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of Majan College (University College) SAOG, I am pleased to present this report on Majan's financial performance and the accompanying un-audited interim condensed financial statements for the three month period ended 30 November 2020.

Financial Performance

Majan financial performance was affected in the core business due to the impact of change in entry criteria of postgraduate students. However, that was counter balanced through controlling the expenses. In comparison to the same period in previous financial year, total income has decreased by 27% to be OMR 1.22 Million mainly from decrease in new and returning postgraduate students. Total expenses have decreased by 17% to be OMR 0.93 Million mainly from the decline in postgraduate fees income and corresponding reduction in affiliation fees and control of salaries and related cost offset against the impact of depreciation of the new facilities. Taxation has decreased by 236% to make an income of OMR 0.11 Million mainly because of deferred tax income on provisions on the impairment of fee receivables & fair value adjustment of investments FVPTL. Consequently, overall net profit after tax has decreased by 13% to be OMR 0.41 Million. Earning per share is maintained at 5 Baiza per share.

Appreciation

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to his Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq for his unlimited support and guidance to higher education. Our sincere thanks to the Ministry of Higher Education for its support to the private higher education sector. This resulted in tremendous growth in the sector. It is our intention that Majan College (University College) continues to support

to achieve the vision of his Majesty by continuously improving and enriching the standards of its academic programmes and its resources.

Naser Al Marri
Chairman

UNAUDITED CONDENSED INTERIM STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

	30TH NOVEMBER 2020 OMR	30TH NOVEMBER 2019 OMR	31ST AUGUST 2020 OMR
	2019 RO	2019 RO	2018 RO
Assets			
Non-current assets			
Property and equipment	3,985,583	4,176,348	4,084,898
Deferred tax asset	254,857	89,509	84,940
Investments at fair value through other comprehensive income			
Total non-current asset	4,240,440	4,265,857	4,169,838
Current assets			
Receivables & prepayments	3,302,638	2,917,706	2,262,179
Cash & bank balance	3,158,656	4,254,723	4,267,508
Investments at fair value through profit and loss	922,413		
Investments at amortised cost	4,249,044	4,249,044	4,249,044
Total current assets	11,632,751	11,421,473	10,778,731
Total assets	15,873,191	15,687,330	14,948,569
Equity			
Share capital	9,000,000	9,000,000	9,000,000
Legal reserve	1,376,074	1,220,264	1,335,492
Retained earning	892,336	795,044	527,102
Proposed Dividend	1,305,000		1,305,000
Fair value reserve			
Total Equity	12,573,410	11,015,308	12,167,594
Liabilities			
Non-current liabilities			
Deferred government grant			
Employees end of service benefit	656,539	637,809	657,966
Students security deposits	378,455	406,805	401,305
Deferred tax liability			
Total non-current liabilities	1,034,994	1,044,614	1,059,271
Current Liabilities			
Payables & accruals	1,920,345	3,540,571	1,404,000
Dividends Payable			
Tax payable	787	233	30,399
Provision for tax	343,656	86,604	287,305
Total current liabilities	2,264,788	3,627,408	1,721,704
Total liabilities	3,299,782	4,672,022	2,780,975
Total Equity & Liabilities	15,873,191	15,687,330	14,948,569
Net assets value per share	0.14	0.122	0.135

UNAUDITED CONDENSED INTERIM STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME

	(1) SEP 20 - NOV 20 OMR	(2) SEP 19 - NOV 19 OMR
Income		
Fee Income	1,189,583	1,518,104
Other Income	10,413	45,828
Investment Income	23,690	103,358
Total Income	1,223,686	1,667,290
Expenses		
Salaries & related cost	-569,463	-641,389
Administrative & general expenses	-276,064	-406,312
Expected credit losses	-3,744	-9,691
Depreciation	-99,466	-60,410
Foreign Exchange	17,301	
Total expenses	-931,436	-1,117,802
Net profit before tax	292,250	549,488
Taxation	113,565	-83,738
Total comprehensive income	405,815	465,750
Basic earning per share	0.005	0.005

Note: The complete accounts are available on Muscat Securities Market (www.msm.gov.om)

Oil tanker seized for breaking environmental laws



The South Korean-flagged tanker being escorted by Iran's navy. — AFP

TEHRAN: Iran's Revolutionary Guards said on Monday it had seized a South Korean-flagged tanker for breaking "maritime environmental laws".

"A ship owned by South Korea was seized by our force's (navy) this morning", the Guards said on its website Sepahnews.

"This tanker was headed from Saudi Arabia's Al Jubail port and was seized due to the repeated infringement of maritime environmental laws", it added.

It identified the ship as the South Korean-flagged *Hankuk Chemi*, which it said was carrying 7,200 tonnes of "oil chemical

products."

The seizure of the tanker came at the request of Hormozgan Province's maritime organisation and upon the order of the provincial prosecutor, Sepahnews said.

The arrested crew were from South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar, the Guards said.

A photo released by the website appeared to show three speedboats and a patrol boat approaching the tanker.

The Guards' statement did not specify where was the tanker was seized or transferred to.

— AFP

Iran says enriching uranium to 20per cent at Fordow facility

TEHRAN: Iran has started the process to enrich uranium to 20 per cent purity at its underground Fordow facility, state media reported on Monday, going well beyond the threshold set by the 2015 nuclear deal.

It is the latest and most important suspension of nuclear commitments by Iran under the landmark deal, starting in 2019, and in response to President Donald Trump's dramatic withdrawal from the accord in May 2018, with the US imposing crippling economic sanctions on Tehran.

"The process for producing 20 per cent enriched uranium has started at Shahid Alimohammadi enrichment complex (Fordow)", government spokesman Ali Rabiei said, quoted on the website of the state broadcaster.

According to the official, President Hassan Rouhani ordered the enrichment "in recent days", and "the gas injection process started as of hours ago."

'CONSIDERABLE DEPARTURE'

The European Union on Monday said that Iran's enrichment programme would be



The interior of the Fordow facility in Qom. — AFP

a "considerable departure" from deal.

EU spokesman Peter Stano said Brussels would wait until a briefing from the director of the UN's IAEA nuclear watchdog before deciding what action to take.

On December 31, Iran informed the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),

that it would begin producing uranium enriched to up to 20 per cent purity, the level it had before the nuclear deal was reached.

According to the latest IAEA report available, published in November, Tehran was previously enriching uranium to levels greater than the limit provided for in the 2015 Vienna agreement (3.67 per cent) but not exceeding the 4.5 per cent threshold, and

still complied with the agency's strict inspection regime.

But there has been turmoil since the assassination in late November of Iranian nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.

NEW NUCLEAR LAW

In the aftermath of the attack, blamed on Israel, Tehran pledged a response and the parliament passed a bill "for the lifting of sanctions and protection of the Iranian people's interests".

The bill also called for the production and storage of "at least 120 kilogrammes per year of 20 per cent enriched uranium", and also mandates the administration to end UN inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities, if the remaining parties to the deal — Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia — do not facilitate Iran's oil sales and guarantee the return of the proceeds.

Before the bill became law, Rouhani slammed it as "detrimental to the course of diplomatic activities."

But the Guardian council, which arbitrates disputes between the parliament and the government, approved the bill into law last month. — AFP

Nile dam dispute: Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt agree to hold more talks

CAIRO/ADDIS ABABA: Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia have agreed to hold further talks this month, hoping to resolve their long-running dispute over the latter's huge dam on the Blue Nile, Sudan's water ministry said.

Previous three-way talks have failed to produce an agreement on the filling and operation of the vast reservoir behind the 145-metre tall Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a hydropower project which broke ground in 2011.

On Sunday, the three countries held a new round of talks by video conference in the virtual presence of South African officials, as well as other international observers. South Africa currently holds the African Union's rotating chair.

"The meeting concluded... that this week will be devoted to bilateral talks between the three countries, the experts, and the



Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam on the river Nile in Guba Woreda. — Reuters

observers", Sudan's water ministry said in a statement.

This week's talks will pave the way "for the resumption of tripartite negotiations on Sunday January 10 in the hope of concluding by the end of January", it noted.

Ethiopia's water ministry expressed a "positive outlook" toward a draft document circulated among the three countries for negotiation, and that Sudan also supported the approach being taken.

Egypt "categorically rejected

the document", the ministry said in a statement posted on Facebook.

Ethiopia said it had put forward alternative approaches for consideration by the other parties ahead of the next meeting.

— AFP

Arrested Palestinian DJ freed on bail

RAMALLAH: A prominent Palestinian disc jockey arrested after a dance event at a religious and cultural site last week has been freed on bail, her father said on Monday.

Palestinian Authority police arrested Sama Abdulhadi, 30, on December 27, the day after she performed at Nebi Mussa, near the city of Jericho.

Initially denied bail, according to her parents, Palestinian rights groups demanded her freedom along with 100,000 signatories to an online petition.

Her father, Saad Abdulhadi, said that she was released on Sunday evening after payment of a \$3,500 guarantee to attend a future court hearing, whose date has yet to be fixed.

She is banned from



travelling in the meantime, he added.

Sama Abdulhadi is considered by many to be the first Palestinian woman to have become a professional disc jockey and Israeli daily *Haaretz* has called her the "Palestinian Techno Queen".

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

BEIRUT

Famed musician Elias Rahbani dies

Elias Rahbani, who wrote songs for Lebanon's most revered singer Fairouz among many others, died on Monday at the age of 83, local media reported.

Elias was the youngest brother of celebrated musicians Mansour and Assi Rahbani, known together as the Rahbani brothers. Fairouz's songs, written by the Rahbanis, were listened to across religious and factional divides throughout Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war and they continue to transcend divisions in Lebanon



and beyond. "Another branch from the Rahbani tree falls after a journey full of refined music production", Prime Minister-designate Saad al Hariri wrote on Twitter. — Reuters

ISTANBUL

Hundreds protest against new university rector

Hundreds of people demonstrated in Istanbul on Monday against what they claim is the politically motivated appointment of a rector at a top Turkish university by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Anger erupted after a January 1 presidential decree in which Erdogan appointed Melih Bulu — a candidate in the 2015 general election for the president's ruling party — as the rector of Bogazici University.

The protesters outside the



public university's campus included students outraged by what they alleged to be political interference. — AFP

BEIRUT

15 killed in Syria road attack

Gunmen killed at least 15 people in Syria, mostly government soldiers travelling on a bus, in the second such road ambush in recent days, a war monitor said on Monday.

The attack late on Sunday resulted in the deaths of eight soldiers, four allied fighters and three civilians, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, updating an earlier toll.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but the monitor



said the IS militant group was to blame.

Another 15 people were wounded, with cars and fuel tankers also attacked, in the Wadi al Azib area of Hama province.

In brief

KUALA LUMPUR



FRENCH-IRISH TEEN'S DEATH RULED MISADVENTURE

A French-Irish teenager with learning difficulties died by misadventure after disappearing in the Malaysian jungle on a family holiday and no one else was involved, a coroner ruled on Monday.

The family of Nora Quoirin said they were "utterly disappointed" by the verdict, which also saw the coroner rule there was no sign the 15-year-old was murdered or assaulted.

The teen's body was discovered after a massive hunt through the rainforest following her disappearance from a resort outside Kuala Lumpur in 2019.

Police insisted there was no foul play and an autopsy conducted in Malaysia found that she probably starved and died of internal bleeding after days in the jungle. — AFP

KABUL



AFGHAN RIVALS PREPARE TO RESUME TALKS

Afghan government representatives and Taliban officials are due to resume peace talks in Qatar after a three-week break, officials said on Monday, although battlefield clashes and targeted killings risk undermining efforts to end the war. The negotiations, due to get going again on Tuesday, are expected to cover contentious issues such as power-sharing and a ceasefire after the two sides reached an initial agreement on procedural rules in December. The talks began in Qatar in September months after the Taliban reached an agreement with the United States allowing it to pull its troops out of Afghanistan and end its longest war in exchange for Taliban security guarantees. The Taliban have refused to recognise the government and that was an issue that would have to be tackled, said a member of the team representing the government. — Reuters

KOTA TINGGI



WORST FLOODS HIT PAHANG, EVACUATION ON

The onset of the winter monsoon at the start of 2021 has led to massive floods in Pahang state of Malaysia. Efforts to evacuate people stranded due to flooding in Kota Tinggi town centre were ongoing. A Bernama check found that most parts of the town centre were inundated with water up to two-metres-deep and impassable to all vehicles.

Most of the people trapped are those who live in shophouses or traders who operate shops in the town centre, while all commercial and daily activities have also stopped due to flooding.

The flooding and heavy downpour is part of a cold snap that has enveloped parts of West Malaysia, with temperatures across the Klang Valley dropping to as low as 23 degrees Celsius.



People walk through Shinjuku station during the morning rush hour in Tokyo. — AFP

Japan PM weighing coronavirus emergency for Tokyo area

TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said on Monday he was considering declaring a state of emergency in the greater Tokyo area over a "very severe" third wave of coronavirus infections.

Speaking at a regular New Year press conference, Suga also said he hoped vaccinations would begin in Japan in late February, adding that he would be among the first to receive one.

He urged people to avoid non-essential outings, and said the government would introduce legislation to penalise businesses that flout requests to shorten hours or close, as well as provide incentives to those who abide by such calls.

Suga also insisted the government was still committed to holding the virus-postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympics this summer, saying the Games would be "proof that mankind overcame the virus".

Suga, who took office in

September, has faced increasing pressure over his government's response to record numbers of new infections.

Tokyo on Monday recorded 884 new infections, and said the number of serious cases — those on a ventilator or ECMO machine — rose to a record 108.

On Saturday, Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike, joined by governors from three neighbouring regions, called on the central government to impose a state of emergency in their areas.

Koike on Monday warned that "we have already entered an unprecedented state of infections," and called on people to avoid non-essential trips after 8 pm.

She said she would not seek to close schools but urged businesses serving alcohol to close by 8 pm from Friday, and asked all restaurants to shut by that time from January 12.

Suga's government has been

reticent to take measures that could send the economy back into reverse, soon after it exited a recession, but the prime minister said on Monday he realised "a stronger message was necessary".

"The national government will consider issuing a state of emergency," he said, adding that it would prioritise measures to reduce infection risks from drinking and dining.

VACCINATION PLAN

Japan imposed a first state of emergency in spring, allowing local governors to call on businesses to close and to request people to stay at home.

The measure carries no penalties for non-compliance, but the requests were widely observed this spring.

The scope of any new emergency remains unclear, though Suga said "limited and focused measures" would be effective, without specifying further. — AFP

S Korea population falls for first time

SEOUL: South Korea's population fell for the first time in 2020, with more people dying than were born, the government said on Monday, warning that towns in poor regions faced a "crisis of extinction".

The world's 12th-largest economy has one of its longest life expectancies and one of its lowest birthrates, a combination that presents a looming demographic disaster.

As of December 31, South Korea had 51,829,023 people, down 20,838 from a year earlier, according to data released by the interior ministry.

Annual births have been falling for years and it added that they had been exceeded by deaths for the first time, 275,815 to 307,764.

"In regions with poor economic, medical and educational infrastructure, the crisis of the extinction of such towns is escalating," the ministry said.

It called for "fundamental changes" in government policies, including on welfare and education.

According to experts there are multiple causes for the phenomenon, including the expense of child-rearing and soaring property prices, coupled with a notoriously competitive

In regions with poor economic, medical and educational infrastructure, the crisis of the extinction of such towns is escalating

MINISTRY

society that makes well-paid jobs difficult to secure.

The double burden for working mothers of carrying out the brunt of household chores and childcare while also maintaining their careers is another key factor.

The South has spent more than 180 trillion won (\$166 billion) since 2006 to boost birth rates but the population is projected to fall to 39 million in 2067, when the median age will be 62. Reactions among South Koreans were mixed.

"The current situation will continue unless all dual-income households can afford to raise their children without any worries," one citizen posted on Twitter. — AFP

BEIJING EXTENDS QUARANTINE PERIOD



People waiting to receive COVID-19 vaccines at a temporary vaccination centre in Beijing on Monday. Beijing said it will extend its quarantine period from 14 to 21 days for new arrivals to prevent imported cases. — AFP

Tractors to Twitter: India's protesting farmers and their supporters battle on highway, online

SINGHU: In a standoff between farmers from India's northern breadbasket and the government that has convulsed the country, the farmers have a 21st-century ally: a handful of supporters scattered around the world running a Twitter handle.

The farmers have paralysed some traffic in and out of New Delhi, protesting recent agriculture laws that they fear could eventually eliminate government-guaranteed minimum prices for their crops.

But the demonstrators say they are also battling a social media campaign by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP brands some of the protesters as separatists from the gi-

ant multi-ethnic nation, a charge the demonstrators call disinformation.

Bhavjit Singh became energised for the battle in November from his bedroom in Ludhiana in the agricultural heartland state of Punjab, where he watched with dismay the online attacks on the farmers.

With a few friends, the information technology professional launched the @Tractor2twitr Twitter account in late November. The following month he journeyed to the focal protest site on a main highway connecting Haryana state and Delhi, the territory that includes the capital.

Thousands there have jammed the road for kilometres with tractors, trailers and tents,



Bhavjit Singh, a computer professional, poses on a tractor at the site of a protest against new farm laws at Singhu border near Delhi. — Reuters

sleeping in makeshift hovels and cooking in ramshackle kitchens.

Singh, 38, joined the protesters with two smartphones.

"We will intensify our cam-

paign because we are getting organised and getting more support now," Singh said, speaking near the noisy protest site where open kitchens dished out mid-

morning snacks. "Our war of perception, the war of messaging is going in the right direction."

The account, with more than 23,000 followers, promotes its message by pushing one hashtag a day. One day recently, #FarmersDyingModiEnjoying, pushed by @Tractor2twitr, was among the top hashtags on Indian Twitter - battling #ModiWithFarmers.

Thirteen thousand kilometres away in Houston, Texas, Baljinder Singh is part of the core group that helps run the account.

The BJP "were targeting us, so we felt we had to answer them back," the owner of a couple of 7-Eleven stores in the United States said. "We are all the sons and daughters of farmers." — Reuters

UK rolls out AstraZeneca shots, PM warns of ‘tough weeks’ ahead

LONDON: Britain on Monday began rolling out the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine, a possible game-changer in fighting the disease worldwide, while China raced to inoculate millions with a domestically made jab.

Even as the UK’s second vaccine rollout of 530,000 doses began, Scotland’s devolved government said the nation would impose a lockdown on its more than five million people for the rest of January.

Confronted with a severe wave of infections that has threatened to overwhelm the public health system, Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Downing Street office said he would announce new restrictions for England “to arrest this rise”.

“The vaccine means everything to me. To my mind it’s the only way of getting back to a bit of normal life”, said Brian Pinker, an 82-year-old retired maintenance manager who Britain’s NHS said was the first to receive the AstraZeneca jab at Oxford’s Churchill Hospital.

Across the English Channel, the European Medicines Agency said it could approve an inoculation from US firm Moderna as soon



Britain’s Prime Minister Boris Johnson watches as junior sister Susan Cole receives a dose of the AstraZeneca/Oxford COVID-19 vaccine during a visit to Chase Farm Hospital in north London on Monday. — AFP

as Monday, under pressure from EU member nations frustrated by slow progress in the bloc while other advanced countries race ahead.

Where Britain, the US and Israel have all given more than a

million people their first shot, the figure is just 200,000 in Germany and a few hundred in France.

But the regulator said the jab from the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca was unlikely to secure European approval in

January.

GREATER ACCESS

High hopes have been placed in the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which does not have to be stored at the ultra-low temperatures required by Pfizer-BioNTech and

Moderna alternatives.

That could mean greater access for less wealthy parts of the world in the fight against the coronavirus, which has infected nearly 85 million people with more than 1.8 million known deaths.

With 75,000 lives claimed by the virus in Britain so far, Johnson said in a BBC interview he hopes to get shots to tens of millions in the next three months.

In Beijing, thousands lined up for vaccination as Chinese authorities raced to inoculate millions ahead of the Lunar New Year mass travel season in February.

China has already administered around 4.5 million doses of largely unproven emergency vaccines this year — mostly to health workers and other state employees destined for overseas jobs, according to authorities.

Elsewhere, American officials on Sunday rejected claims by outgoing President Donald Trump that the country’s death toll of more than 350,000 was exaggerated, as they defended the stumbling rollout of vaccines in the world’s worst-hit nation.

— AFP

Parents worry as crowded Kenyan schools reopen

NAIROBI: Hundreds of children formed an orderly queue that snaked through Nairobi’s biggest slum Kibera on Monday, waiting to enter classrooms for the first time since March, when the government closed schools after Kenya reported its first COVID-19 case.

The country is the last in East Africa to fully reopen its schools.

Children in grades four, eight and 12 returned to class in October so they could prepare for exams postponed amid the pandemic. The World Health Organization and the UN children’s agency UNICEF say prolonged school closures due to COVID-19 present many risks for children in poor countries.

Higher rates of teenage pregnancy, poor nutrition, and permanent drop outs from school are among the dangers. Most boys and girls wore masks as they stood outside the Olympic Primary School’s gates, waiting their turn as school officials took temperatures and squirted hand sanitiser into their palms.

The real danger, however, lurked inside.

— Reuters

Nancy Pelosi narrowly re-elected speaker, faces difficult two years

WASHINGTON: Nancy Pelosi, the only woman to serve as US Speaker of the House, was narrowly re-elected to the position in a deeply divided new Congress that convened in the final weeks of Donald Trump’s presidency.

Pelosi, 80, faced a scare when five fellow Democrats defected and voted “present” or for someone else during the floor vote.

But the woman who is third in line to the presidency secured her fourth — and perhaps final — non-consecutive term as House speaker by earning 216 votes versus 209 for Republican leader Kevin McCarthy.

In a symbolic gesture beginning the 117th Congress, McCarthy formally handed the speaker’s gavel over to Pelosi, who raised it in triumph as Democrats cheered and applauded.

“We begin the new Congress during a time of extraordinary



First-term Republican members of Congress stand together for photographs on the steps of the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on Monday. — AFP

difficulty”, Pelosi told the chamber, noting the toll of 350,000 dead and 20 million infected by COVID-19.

“Our most urgent priority will continue to be defeating the coronavirus,” a masked Pelosi said. “And defeat it, we will.”

The vote took hours, as lawmakers were required to vote

in groups of several dozen due to social distancing rules imposed during the coronavirus pandemic.

Pelosi has been Trump’s chief nemesis in Congress, and the two clashed bitterly over the past two years, particularly as she levelled impeachment charges against the president.

Trump was impeached in December 2019, but the Senate acquitted him early in 2020. His successor, Joe Biden, takes office on January 20.

With Pelosi scrambling to keep her post, it was a handful of progressive lawmakers and members-elect who have been critical of her leadership but ultimately voted for her on Sunday.

Among them was Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, one of the most high-profile Democrats in Washington, and incoming lawmaker Cori Bush, who is the first African-American woman to represent Missouri in Congress.

There are normally 435 members of the House, but just 427 votes were cast Sunday as a few congressmen-elect are in quarantine due to COVID-19 and a tight House race in New York has yet to be formally decided.

— AFP

UK judge rules Assange should not be extradited to US



Supporters of Assange celebrate outside the court in London. — AFP

LONDON: A British judge has ruled that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange should not be extradited to the US to face espionage charges.

Judge Vanessa Baraitser gave a verdict at London’s Old Bailey court on Monday stating she was concerned about the 49-year-old’s health while he is incarcerated at a prison in south east London, HMP Belmarsh.

“Faced with the conditions of near total isolation without the protective factors which limited his risk at HMP Belmarsh, I

am satisfied the procedures described by the US will not prevent Assange from finding a way to commit suicide and for this reason I have decided extradition would be oppressive by reason of mental harm and I order his discharge”, she told the court.

In court, Assange wiped his forehead as the decision was announced while his fiancée Stella Moris burst into tears and was embraced by WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson. — dpa

BANGUI

Rebel fighters capture southern city

Rebel fighters have captured the southern city of Bangassou in the Central African Republic (CAR), aid organisation Medecins Sans Frontieres said on Monday. Thousands of local residents have fled across the border to Congo, according to the group, which added that it had provided medical treatment to around a dozen people wounded in the clashes.

Citizens in CAR voted in presidential and parliamentary elections last month despite



ongoing violence throughout the country. UN peacekeepers were stationed at polling stations in the capital Bangui to provide security. — dpa

BERLIN

2020 climate goal achieved, thanks to pandemic

Germany surpassed its goal for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in 2020, but as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and not policy changes, climate experts say. Europe’s largest economy pumped out 42.3 per cent fewer greenhouse gases last year compared to 1990 levels, according to the Berlin-based Agora Energiewende think-tank.

The original target, which in fact had been written off long ago, was a 40 per cent reduction.

According to Agora



Energiewende’s calculations, German emissions of greenhouse gases — which trap heat in the Earth’s atmosphere, causing global temperatures to rise — went down by over 80 million tonnes to around 722 million tonnes last year. — dpa

ATHENS

Migrant boat carrying 55 people intercepted

A boat carrying 55 migrants was intercepted off the Mediterranean island of Cyprus overnight, state broadcaster RIK reported on Monday.

The boat was discovered by a police patrol vessel. The migrants, among them 14 minors, are said to be in good health and were taken to the small port on the holiday resort of Agia Napa.

Where the migrants came from was initially unclear. Authorities believe they set out from Syria or Lebanon, state



television reported. The group will be taken to a reception centre provided they test negative for coronavirus. — dpa

Learning from the plastic bag

Plastic bags have become collector's items in Oman as shops have embraced paper or cloth bags for shopping while in Oman in 2021 and onwards.

It might be a blow to the plastic industry but great for the environment. Once again we have no one but us to be blamed as we went overboard with dependence on the plastic bags. Its durability became its problem. Not to forget its impact on the environment.

We never thought too much about the way we disposed of it and soon we found them waving from tree tops, floating in water, gathering at the shore, entangled with sea animals and rolling with the wind on the sand dunes.

And oh, we needed a plastic bag for everything from carrying a fruit juice to vegetables. Uses of plastic bags were many once they reached home from groceries. But the other villain is still around — the plastic straws. The straws go astray too and quite often find their way to the ocean. In Oman, some of the five star hotels have made the switch over from plastic straws to other types on their own.

So most probably, children born this year may never know that we were once so dependent on plastic bags. There were even charming flowers made out of plastic bags.



Lakshmi Kothaneth
lakshmiobserver@gmail.com

MOST PROBABLY,
CHILDREN
BORN THIS YEAR
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DEPENDENT ON
PLASTIC BAGS

When we are not willing to learn from mistakes the inevitable happens. For plastic bags it is a ban, but in life it is a natural shift of our life's path sometimes so swift that we are left with a shock and aftershock only to slowly gain the ability to get a grip on life.

A pandemic sent a panic button ringing throughout the world economies because of the uncertainties it created. For the first time the analysts could not give a clear forecast or predict. Come to think of it the farmers across the globe regularly go through the trauma of unpredictability when it comes to droughts and floods.

If you look at the situations closely the striking common factor is the balance. We went overboard with plastic bags, we were not quick enough to get into the defensive mode against COVID until fines were established and as for the farmers what they seek is an ideal weather and policies too.

From lessons learnt it would be nice if innovators also come up with solutions to be applied when their innovation becomes a problem.

We do have solutions in recycling but the strange factor is when it comes to recycling and solar energy the technology has not come into the level of affordability. Could it be that we have not been hungry for it?

Cutting down trees to make paper might have been a problem but there is a solution of planting trees simultaneously. Paper being a natural product and biodegradable has made it back now. Just like the popular saying goes — 'Never say never again.'

Interesting is it not to note how anything in nature has a way to go back to nature while any of the material that is manmade becomes eventually toxic waste? A toxic waste with no place to go sometimes stranded in oceans and no shores to anchor, and if it does then it is a ticking disaster.

The only solution is to find a way to dispose of the waste safely even before you make the product commercially available.

And the same goes for our thoughts — let them not be unnatural, let them not be toxic and let us try not to dump it on others. Let not the negative thoughts float around or hang on the tree. Maybe sometimes there might be people to help you with it, eventually they will return it back or for that matter even decide enough is enough saying our thoughts are too toxic to handle.

Maybe it is time to start the work from the other way around — consequences then to the origin.

When lost let us be inspired by nature.

US ELECTION FIGHT

Georgia election guardian faces heat as Trump contests defeat

BY NATHAN LAYNE

Georgia's Republican secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, cemented his status as an unlikely hero for US Democrats following a fresh clash in which he rejected President Donald Trump's claims that his election defeat was the result of widespread fraud.

Trump returned the 65-year-old former businessman to the limelight when he called Raffensperger on Saturday to badger him to "find" enough votes to reverse Democratic President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the state, according to audio of the hour-long call published by the *Washington Post* on Sunday.

As Georgia's top election official, Raffensperger oversaw multiple recounts of the November 3 ballots, each of which reached the same result — that the southern state had narrowly favoured a Democratic presidential candidate for the first time in a generation.

He has vowed to fight any future election fraud even as he echoed the findings of his counterparts across the United States that there

was no evidence of widespread fraud in November.

He has also repeatedly pushed back against Trump's unfounded claims of fraud, even after the president labelled him an "enemy of the people." He did so again on Saturday's call, telling Trump the vote showed Biden was the rightful winner.

"Well President, the challenge that you have is the data you have

is wrong," Raffensperger could be heard telling Trump on the recording of Saturday's call.

The White House declined to comment.

But he and his colleagues for weeks have been warning that Trump's rhetoric placed them and their colleagues in danger.

"Stop inspiring people to commit potential acts of violence. Someone's going to get hurt, someone's going to get shot, someone's going to get killed," Gabriel Sterling, the manager of the state's voting systems, said at an emotional December 1 press conference. Noting Raffensperger's wife had been getting threats, he added, "It has all gone too far. It has to stop."

It was unclear if the state had taken security measures around Raffensperger after the threats emerged. His office and that of Governor Brian Kemp did not respond to requests for comment.

After years as a civil engineer and successful businessman, Raffensperger served two years on a city council and four years in Georgia's House of Representatives before succeeding Kemp in 2018 as the top election official.

Acquaintances of Raffensperger in the state House described him as a "straight shooter" who backed traditional Republican priorities, supporting a bill to cut regulations on small businesses, for example, and voting against a tax on gasoline, according to a profile in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. A lifelong Republican, Raffensperger was an early supporter of Trump in 2016, and the president returned the favour by endorsing him for secretary of state. But whatever goodwill existed between the two men has since disappeared. — **Reuters**



I've been a little too critical of Brad, but where there is so much smoke I would want to verify," Ham said. "He's a good guy, but he won't survive re-election if he gets that far

BRAD
RAFFENSPERGER
Georgia secretary of state

VACCINE POLITICS

Macron under pressure over France's slow start to COVID-19 vaccinations

STUART WILLIAMS

President Emmanuel Macron on Monday faced growing pressure to accelerate France's COVID-19 vaccination drive which has seen just a few hundred people receive the jab, with the French leader himself reportedly livid over the sluggish pace.

Just over 500 people have received the vaccine so far in France, with critics pointing to the figure of 200,000 people who have been immunised in Germany in a similar timeframe after the EU-wide rollout began a week ago.

"What we have seen is a government scandal," Jean Rottner, the head of France's Grand Est eastern region, which has seen a particularly sharp rise in infections, told France 2 television.

"Things need to accelerate," said Rottner, a member of the right-wing Republicans (LR) opposition party. "The French need clarity and firm messages from a government that knows where it is going. It is not giving this impression."

With pressure growing on Macron to take personal responsibility for the situation, the Elysee said the president would host a meeting later on Monday with officials including Prime Minister Jean Castex to discuss the vaccine rollout.

The situation is worsened by a scepticism about vaccinations in France that is far higher than in other countries, despite being the country that produced Louis Pasteur, the 19th century scientist who



Only about 500 people have received the vaccine in France so far. — AFP

JUST 40 PER CENT
OF FRENCH WANT
TO TAKE THE
VACCINE COMPARED
WITH 77 PER
CENT IN BRITAIN,
ACCORDING TO
AN OPINION POLL
BY IPSOS GLOBAL
ADVISER

pioneered immunisation. According to an opinion poll by Ipsos Global Adviser in partnership with the World Economic Forum last week, just 40 per cent of French want to take the vaccine compared with 77 per cent in Britain.

NOT A 'FAMILY STROLL'

In his New Year address to the nation, Macron had pledged there would be no "unjustifiable delays" in the rollout of the vaccination, but the *Journal du Dimanche* newspaper reported on Sunday that he has been scathing in private about the speed of progress.

A pace at the level of "a family stroll" was not "worthy of the moment nor of the French," the newspaper, seen as close to the Elysee Palace, quoted Macron as saying.

"I am at war in the morning, noon, evening and night," Macron, who recently himself recovered from COVID-19, reportedly said.

"I expect the same commitment from all. This won't do. It must change quickly and firmly." The deputy president of the far-right National Rally (RN), Jordan Bardella, said France had become the "laughing stock of the world." — **Reuters**

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DISTRIBUTION AGENT

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Marketing, P.O. Box 974, P.C. 100,
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Game-changer for Oman Cricket

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Oman becoming a Test centre is a real gift of 2021 and certainly, an uplifting, mood-enhancing vaccine for cricket fraternity in the country, said Pankaj Khimji, a senior member of Oman Cricket’s Board of Directors.

“This is a phenomenal time for us. We had the lows of 2020 when there was little or no cricket and then we come to 2021 and we come out with a bang. We have received our first Test accreditation for Ground No 1 which is really a phenomenal, uplifting, mood-enhancing vaccine that we could have got for cricket in Oman,” he said reacting to the news that Oman has been accredited to host Test, ODI and T20I matches.

Pankaj, who is also considered Oman’s voice in the highest echelons of ICC and ACC, said becoming a Test centre is going to be a game-changer for cricket in Oman.

“To see Test cricket being played here in February between Afghanistan and Zimbabwe will probably be the finest moment for my father (Kanak Khimji) whose dream was to bring cricket to Oman. But did we actually dream of Test cricket coming to Oman? I think that was really a pipe dream. To realise a pipe dream is probably the greatest high and this is really a tribute to my father who is our inspiration and our leader in terms of cricket in Oman. To Kanak bhai this is



certainly a super spirit-lifting development,” he added.

Pankaj said this was the right time to thank all those who had supported Oman Cricket in achieving greater glories.

“I must thank His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said for supporting this wholeheartedly, His Excellency Rashad al Hinai for making sure that we have all the permissions in place and of course every other member of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Royal Oman Police, and city administration who have really gone the whole nine yards in making this happen,” he added.

He also thanked OC administration, Board of Directors and all the teams in Oman for all the years of hard work that has gone into making

this beautiful infrastructure.

“Of course, we pay our tributes to the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said for his contribution and magnanimity in making us realise our cricket dreams and put Oman on the real map of Test cricket now. We also thank His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik al Said, Patron of Oman Cricket. I have no words to explain the contribution that he has made over the past twenty-five years to making Oman one of the most renowned Associate cricket nations in the world.”

Pankaj said OC still had a little bit of ground to cover before the dream is fully realised.

“I am sure things will be put in place and the spade work done well in time to be able to host Test matches in Oman,” he concluded.



“

We have received our first Test accreditation for Ground No 1 which is really a phenomenal, uplifting, mood-enhancing vaccine that we could have got for cricket in Oman

PANKAJ KHI MJ I
OC board member



Duleep Mendis



In brief

■ JOHANNESBURG



SRI LANKA LOSE PERERA AFTER SOUTH AFRICA COLLAPSE

Vishwa Fernando took his first five-wicket haul in Tests as Sri Lanka fought back on the second day of the second and final Test against South Africa at the Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on Monday.

But the tourists were still in deep trouble, losing first-innings top-scorer Kusal Perera in the third over of their second innings.

Sri Lanka were 16 for one at tea, a deficit of 129 runs.

The left-armed Vishwa took five for 101 as South Africa were bowled out for 302, a first innings lead of 145 runs, despite reaching 218 for one. Namesake and debutant Asitha Fernando and medium-pacer Dasun Shanaka took two wickets each.

■ HAMBANTOTA



ENGLAND'S MOEEN TESTS POSITIVE FOR COVID-19 IN SRI LANKA

England all-rounder Moeen Ali tested positive for COVID-19 in Sri Lanka after the team's arrival on the island, the country's cricket board said on Monday.

The tourists, led by Joe Root, arrived in Sri Lanka on Sunday as airport officials in hazmat suits sprayed the team with disinfectant before being tested.

"Ali will now observe a period of 10 days self-isolation, in accordance with the Sri Lanka Government's protocol on quarantine," the England and Wales Cricket Board said in a statement. "Chris Woakes has been deemed as a possible close contact, and he will observe a period of self-isolation and further testing."

■ CHRISTCHURCH



CLASSIC WILLIAMSON TON SWINGS MOMENTUM NZ WAY

A classic century by Kane Williamson in a 215-run stand with Henry Nicholls hauled New Zealand into a strong position at 286 for three at stumps on day two of the second Test against Pakistan on Monday.

New Zealand, having recovered from 71 for three in Christchurch, ended the day trailing Pakistan's first innings 297 by just 11 runs with seven wickets in hand.

Williamson, newly installed as the world's number one Test batsman, was unbeaten on 112, his 24th century, with Nicholls on 89.

It is Williamson's third century in as many Tests in the past month, although fortune was on his side.

HM Cup last 16 draw to be held tomorrow



ADIL AL BALUSHI

MUSCAT, JAN 4

The draw of last 16th stage of the His Majesty's Football Cup Championship will take place on Wednesday at the Oman Football Association (OFA) premises.

The draw will be held at 1:30 pm in presence of all the qualified teams representatives.

The 2019/2020 defending champion Dhofar will lead the qualified teams as they advanced directly to this round. Teams from the first division league registered top attendance in this round as five teams sealed spots in the stage including: Samayil, Al Orouba, Ibri, Majees and Sur.

Eleven teams will represent Omantel league clubs including Oman club, Saham, Al Rustaq, Al Musannah, Al Suwaiq, Al Ittihad, Sohar, Al Nahda, Al Nasr, Seeb and Dhofar.

Similar to the previous round, one single round will be implemented in the last 16 round and the first selected team in the draw will host the match.

Muscat based team, Seeb, was the last qualified team as they trashed Al Taliea 5-0 in the concluding match of the last 32nd round late on Sunday.

At Seeb Stadium, the hosts did not face difficulty to ends the match on winning note as they complete the first half leading

with 4-0. Coach Brono Migiel battalion demonstrated their best display in the match and Amjad al Harthi began the scoring as he netted the opening goal in the 14th minute.

Ten minutes later, the same player added the second goal. Oman's national football team player, Abdulaziz al Maqbali, increased the margin as he netted the third goal.

Al Maqbali continued his impressive show in the match and added the fourth goal in the 35th minute from a penalty. Essam al Makhzoomi end the host's goal as he struck the last goal six minutes later from the commencement of second half.

City in total control over jaded Chelsea

ANDY JALIL

LONDON, JAN4

For a club that has spent £220 million in signing top players at the start of the season, their inconsistent performances have become a major concern.

Chelsea failed to recover after being overwhelmed 3-1 at home by a ruthless Manchester City and the defeat has increased the pressure on manager Frank Lampard who has now seen his team lose four and draw one in the last six matches.

Lampard claims worrying about being sacked will only derail him in his attempt to turn Chelsea around, but he said: "I will always feel the heat. I felt the heat when we were on our good run because I know that around the corner can be negative and we are not a team that has been churning out results. It is my job to focus on working on the players, not what the people above (club directors) are thinking – that would just distract me and I can't do it."

Chelsea were outplayed and outwitted throughout the match by a superbly disciplined City team. Although they began sprightly, they faded away under relentless pressure and City went into the lead after 18 minutes

He added: "We went 16 games unbeaten and a month ago everyone was asking me about where we can go, where I am going to go, where is the new contract? Now people will be saying the opposite – I can't control that. The pressure remains constant in this job and you know in tough moments that will be there. I have belief in this group (players). Any rebuild takes pain, pain behind the scenes and on the pitch. This is a difficult period."

Chelsea were outplayed and



Manchester City's Bernardo Silva in action with Chelsea's Billy Gilmour. – Reuters

outwitted throughout the match by a superbly disciplined City team. Although they began sprightly, they faded away under relentless pressure and City went into the lead after 18 minutes.

Oleksandr Zinchenko began the move, Phil Foden's clever layoff found Ilkay Gundogan and he turned on the edge of the box to put his shot into the bottom corner. Within the next three minutes

came the second goal. Zinchenko and De Bruyne combined on the left to pass to Foden who was tackled by Thiago Silva but the ball went to De Bruyne whose low cross was smartly flicked inside the near post by Foden.

Chelsea were not allowed to settle with City enjoying much of the possession. They put the game beyond the home side with the third goal after 34 minutes.

The Blues, in a rare attacking mode, were caught from their own free-kick when the ball was headed out by De Bruyne and it sent Raheem Sterling racing clear with only N'golo Kante in the chase. Sterling rounded the Chelsea goalkeeper and curled a firm shot which hit the far post and rebounded to De Bruyne who reacted quickly to side-foot into the net.

Curry delivers throwback performance

LOS ANGELES: Two-time MVP Stephen Curry got his swagger back on Sunday night, scoring a career-high 62 points as the Golden State Warriors outgunned the Portland Trail Blazers 137-122.

It was just like old times for Curry, arguably the greatest shooter in the history of the NBA.

Curry, who played just five games in the coronavirus-shortened 2019-20 season due to a broken hand, drained eight of 16 from beyond the arc to score the most points by a Warrior since Rick Barry scored 64 in the 1970s.

The Warriors went wire-to-wire for the win at the Chase Center in San Francisco and Curry got into the zone early, delivering 21 points in the first quarter and capping his night with 17 points and several late threes in the fourth.

Curry topped his previous high of 54 with two free throws with 2:23 to play and capped his



Golden State Warriors' Stephen Curry (30) makes a layup against the Portland Trail Blazers. – USA Today Sports

night with a nothing-but-net three-pointer with 42 seconds remaining. It was his seventh

career 50-point game.

"I just try to stay humble and stay in the moment. As long as I

keep being aggressive and decisive then good things will happen," he said.

"I want to make the right decisions. A lot of it is just not rushing things. I got to make sure I see everything right."

The 50-point night was the NBA's first of the season, while the 60-pointer was the first for a Warrior since Klay Thompson had 60 in 2016.

The only blemish for Curry was that his streak of free throws was snapped at a franchise-record 80 in the first quarter. The run dated to March 2019.

Elsewhere, Thomas Bryant stuffed the go-ahead dunk with 14.9 seconds left and the Washington Wizards held on for a 123-122 victory over the Brooklyn Nets.

Bradley Beal led the Wizards with 27 points and 10 rebounds and assisted on Bryant's decisive basket, which stood up as Nets stars Kyrie Irving and Kevin Durant both missed on the final possession of the contest. — AFP

AHMAD PUMPED UP FOR ASIAN LE MANS

ALL FOUR ENDURANCE RACES TO BE RUN
AT YAS MARINA IN ABU DHABI

MUSCAT: Oman Racing’s Ahmad al Harthy is little more than four weeks away from beginning his long-awaited first season in the prestigious and hotly-contested Asian Le Mans Series, with the added bonus of all four rounds taking place on Middle Eastern soil in the United Arab Emirates.

As a result of the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Automobile Club de l’Ouest — the organising body behind the ALMS — made the decision during the latter part of 2020 to put in place a new calendar and location for the entire championship due to travel restrictions in South East Asia.

Having been scheduled to start in January in Thailand before moving on to Malaysia, the revised four-race series will now begin on February 4 at Yas Marina Circuit with the whole championship packed in to a busy 17-day period at the Abu Dhabi venue.

Following round one on February 5, the second four-hour race will be contested on February 6, with round three on February 19, and round four ending the season on February 20.

To provide as much variety as possible for drivers and teams, the races — all four hours long — will be run on two different track

“Obviously it’s the closest track we have to Oman, so this going to be fantastic for all of us at Oman Racing. I have great memories from there with some great results so, for sure, we can’t wait to be there and get started

AHMAD
AL HARTHY
Oman racer

configurations at Yas Marina and the quartet of encounters will combine day, twilight and night racing. Al Harthy, who is supported by long-term partners Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, National Bank of Oman, Omantel and Barr Al Jissah, will be partnered for his maiden ALMS campaign by Aston Martin factory driver Jonny Adam and AMR Driver Academy racer Tom Canning.

Delighted the Asian Le Mans Series will be contested in the Middle East, and especially at a track he knows well, Al Harthy has a glowing record at Yas Marina with many successes stretching



2021 ASIAN LE MANS SERIES CALENDAR

Rd1 - Yas Marina Circuit, Abu Dhabi (4hr race) - Feb 5

Rd2 - Yas Marina Circuit, Abu Dhabi (4hr race) - Feb 6

Rd3 - Yas Marina Circuit, Abu Dhabi (4hr race) - Feb 19

Rd4 - Yas Marina Circuit, Abu Dhabi (4hr race) - Feb 20



back over the last 10 years.

Taking a lights-to-flag victory in the Porsche GT3 Cup Challenge Middle East F1 support race in 2011, the Omani, partnering Adam and Darren Turner, took pole position and a podium finish in the Gulf 12

Hours in 2015. Another podium was achieved in the same race in 2017 with Tom Jackson and Euan McKay while, in 2018, Al Harthy finished in fourth place.

“I can’t wait for the championship to begin, especially now it’s being held at Yas

Marina Circuit”, said the double Blancpain Endurance Cup Pro-Am Champion, “Obviously it’s the closest track we have to Oman, so this going to be fantastic for all of us at Oman Racing. I have great memories from there with some great results so, for sure, we can’t

wait to be there and get started.”

“We have a very strong line-up with Jonny (Adam) and Tom (Canning) and with the TF Sport guys always preparing an amazing car for us, our confidence is very high. The competition is going to be incredibly strong, but we are determined to have a very successful championship.”

Having been on the racing sidelines for the bulk of 2020 due to the travel restrictions imposed because of COVID-19, Al Harthy and Canning only made their first competitive appearance together at Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium in October.

Unsurprisingly, the duo starred in the No 97 Aston Martin Vantage GT3 by winning the Pro-Am class on their debut in the International GT Open.

‘Flat-out’ Nasser al Attiyah claims Dakar second stage

WADI AD-DAWASIR, SAUDI ARABIA: Qatari driver Nasser al Attiyah won the second stage of the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia on Monday ahead of rivals Stephane Peterhansel and Carlos Sainz.

The three-time winner of the Dakar sped through the 457-kilometre stage from Bisha to Wadi ad-Dawasir in 4hr 03min 14sec to take the victory after reigning champion Sainz won Sunday’s opening stage.

“It was a good day,” said Al Attiyah, who is aiming for a seventh Olympic skeet appearance in Tokyo later this year.

“Yesterday we lost a lot of time because we opened the way and it was not really good for us and we didn’t take risks.

“But today we went flat out and everything is working very, very well. The tyres were amazing and the car too, the pace from start to finish, no mistakes at all... there’s still a long way, but it’s a good start.”

Peterhansel, a 13-time winner of the race, leads the overall standings with Spaniard Sainz 6min 37sec behind and Al Attiyah just over nine minutes back.

The Frenchman said he had been stressing about how to avoid getting bogged down in the first

sand dunes of this year’s Dakar.

“It was the first dunes, but also the car was full of diesel which meant it was really heavy,” said Peterhansel, whose 13 Dakar victories came seven times in a car and six on a motorbike.

“So, the priority was not to get stuck. After that, I have to say that we navigated well.”

KEEP RIDING

Spain’s Joan Barreda took the second stage in the motorbike category, finishing ahead of American rider and title holder Ricky Brabec, who is also on a Honda.

Brabec has a lot of time to claw back after trailing in almost 20 minutes behind Australian Toby Price in Sunday’s first stage after losing his way in the desert terrain.

Barreda, whose victory was his 25th on a Dakar special, said he had had no option but “to push with everything — I put it all in today.”

“I enjoyed this type of stage a lot. It’s faster and better for me, better than enduro like it was yesterday,” the Spaniard said.

“Right now, everything is perfect. Sure, tomorrow will be a long day and really hard again, but the race is like this. We need

DAKAR RALLY RESULTS

SECOND STAGE, FEATURING A 457KM SPECIAL
BETWEEN BISHA AND WADI AD-DAWASIR

AUTO

1. Nasser al Attiyah/Matthieu Baumel (QAT/FRA/Toyota) 4h 03min 14sec, 2. Stephane Peterhansel/Edouard Boulanger (FRA/FRA/Mini) at 2:35, 3. Carlos Sainz/Lucas Cruz (ESP/ESP/Mini) 9:17, 4. Yazeed al Rajhi/Dirk Von Zitzewitz (KSA/GER/Toyota) 10:24, 5. Mathieu Serradori/Fabian Lurquin (FRA/BEL/Century) 10:27, 6. Sebastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (FRA/MON/Brx) 16:53, 7. Brian Baragwanath/Taye Perry (RSA/RSA/Century) 17:21, 8. Jakub Przygonski/Timo Gottschalk (POL/GER/Toyota) 17:49, 9. Vladimir Vasilyev/Dmitro Tsyro (RUS/UKR/Mini) 20:38, 10. Bernhard Ten Brinke/Tom Colsoul (NED/BEL/Toyota) 21:38

OVERALL STANDINGS

1. Stephane Peterhansel/Edouard Boulanger (FRA/FRA/Mini) 7hr 17min 18sec, 2. Carlos Sainz/Lucas Cruz (ESP/ESP/Mini) at 6:37, 3. Nasser al Attiyah/Matthieu Baumel (QAT/FRA/Toyota) 9:14, 4. Mathieu Serradori/Fabian Lurquin (FRA/BEL/Century) 14:21, 5. Jakub Przygonski/Timo Gottschalk (POL/GER/Toyota) 24:27, 6. Yazeed al Rajhi/Dirk Von Zitzewitz (KSA/GER/Toyota) 27:32, 7. Sebastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (FRA/MON/Brx) 36:40, 8. Brian Baragwanath/Taye Perry (RSA/RSA/Century) 37:51, 9. Bernhard Ten Brinke/Tom Colsoul (NED/BEL/Toyota) 41:49, 10. Nani Roma/Alexandre Winocq (ESP/FRA/Brx) 41:55

MOTO

1. Joan Barreda Bort (ESP/Honda) 4hr 17min 56sec, 2. Ricky Brabec (USA/Honda) at 3:55, 3. Pablo Quintanilla (CHI/Husqvarna) 6:02, 4. Ross Branch (BOT/Yamaha) 7:16, 5. Jose Ignacio Cornejo Florimo (CHI/Honda) 12:06, 6. Adrien Van Beveren (FRA/Yamaha) 8:34, 7. Luciano Benavides (ARG/Husqvarna) 9:07 (penalty: 1:00), 8. Skyler Howes (USA/Ktm) 9:31, 9. Stefan Svitko (SVK/Ktm) 10:23, 10. Lorenzo Santolingo (ESP/Sherco Factory) 10:51

OVERALL STANDINGS

1. Joan Barreda Bort (ESP/Honda) 8hr 15min 38sec, 2. Ricky Brabec (USA/Honda) at 6:23, 3. Ross Branch (BOT/Yamaha) 6:37, 4. Pablo Quintanilla (CHI/Husqvarna) 7:16, 5. Xavier De Soultrait (FRA/Husqvarna) 8:25, 6. Adrien Van Beveren (FRA/Yamaha) 8:34, 7. Luciano Benavides (ARG/Husqvarna) 9:07 (penalty: 1:00), 8. Skyler Howes (USA/Ktm) 9:31, 9. Stefan Svitko (SVK/Ktm) 10:23, 10. Lorenzo Santolingo (ESP/Sherco Factory) 10:51



Toyota’s driver Nasser al Attiyah of Qatar and his co-driver Matthieu Baumel of France compete during Stage 2 of the Dakar Rally 2021 between Bisha and Wadi Ad-Dawasir in Saudi Arabia. — AFP

to keep calm and stay in front. For sure, there are still a lot of kilometres to come and we will try to keep riding, that’s all.”

Tuesday’s third stage sees competitors racing a loop around Wadi ad-Dawasir, the gateway to the Empty Quarter, a vast sand

desert that covers much of the southern Arabian Peninsula and given prominence by explorers such as Wilfred Thesiger.

Organisers have promised a “hefty serving of dunes, albeit spread far and wide and in small chains” for the 403km special. — AFP



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Hospitality experts confident industry will rebound

LIJU CHERIAN
@cherianmathiker

COVID-19 presented one of the most challenging times for the hospitality industry in recent history. This caused paralysis of global economies with travel and tourism being the hardest hit.

Hospitality experts and managers in the Sultanate who spoke to the *Observer* shared their views of how they are working to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic and are looking forward with optimism in the New Year.

David Faull, General Manager, Novotel Muscat Airport, sees the new year as being a slow road to recovery in Oman.

“The Supreme Committee’s decision about encouraging relaxation measures for 103 countries will hopefully see the economy recover with the influx of business and leisure travellers alike. The coronavirus caused us all to think and react differently and the management has hit the reset button to minimise costs and maximise opportunity”, he says.

“In 2021 Novotel will still be ensuring the organisation is sized accordingly and scaled up appropriately to make sure they return to profitability. We envisage

‘The hospitality sector will grow steadily with confidence now that vaccines are already been rolled out’

that this will continue to be the new norm for the coming years into 2023”, he forewarns.

“Throughout 2020, Hilton found innovative and meaningful ways to adapt to the changing needs of its guests, team members and communities”, says Chris Nassetta, President & CEO, Hilton.

“Even in the face of incredible challenges, the team members and owners have proven that travel is an unstoppable force for good. Hilton has made a difference in the lives of so many and positively impacted communities at a time when hospitality is needed more than ever”, he explains.

Manuel Levonian, General Manager, Crowne Plaza Resort Salalah, is optimistic the hospitality sector will grow steadily with confidence now that vaccines are already been rolled out. He is positive that the industry will rebound in 2021.

The chain of events, he says, has

Manuel Levonian David Faull Antoun Kobercy Samer Gerages Chris Nassetta Gerald Chevasson

not dampened their valued guests who love travel and are glad to have come up with attractive staycation packages to help jumpstart the industry with a positive outlook and push domestic tourism.

Antoun Kobercy, Acting General Manager at Royal Tulip Muscat, says the Sultanate will recover from the present crisis by adopting and planning durable and effective tools for developing a new tourism scenario.

“The reestablishment of trade fairs and conferences will be one of the driving forces behind the recovery of the urban sector. The

targeted communication, up-to-date information provision and effective interaction with potential customers will help build a relationship and drive positive word-of-mouth referrals”, he adds.

“Businesses need to focus on driving footfall in the first instance and build back consumer confidence. Flexible cancellation policies are a must and could help manage expectations and help consumers adjust to the ‘new normal’”, he reasons.

Gerald Chevasson, General Manager, W Muscat, admits that 2020 certainly held challenges of

an unprecedented level for the industry but overall, they faced the situation with positivity and consideration. The newly opened star hotel is more than ready for 2021 and will continue to champion their passion points namely design, music, fashion and fuel.

“Our Whatever/Whenever philosophy offers customised and out-of-the-ordinary experiences for guests and an escape from daily life. We are as positive as ever and will never give-up on fulfilling our lust for life”, he adds.

2020 certainly tested their strength but it did not hinder

their vision, explains Samer Gerages, Director of Sales and Marketing, JW Marriott Muscat, as they continued to create truly memorable moments, while implementing new measures and practices to ensure that they maintained the safest environment possible for associates and guests.

As they complete first anniversary they look forward to the year with a host of new launches like modern poolside restaurant and lounge, and specialty coffee shop.

Praveen George, General Manager, Al Falaj Hotel Muscat, says they will look to sustain and improve business through various promotions and marketing in 2021.

“It is very important to make your presence felt in the market in the midst of any crisis. We are confident that this phase will end soon and the tourism industry will be at its best in the coming years.”

“Although they had to make some tough decisions to reduce expenditure, they managed to withstand difficult times and keep themselves afloat. Now that the international travel restrictions are being eased out the opportunities for business will definitely grow”, he adds.

Tethys Oil spuds exploration well on Block 49

OIL PLAYS: The well is planned to be drilled to a depth of about 4,000 metres below ground and drilling operations are expected to last about 45 days

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Swedish energy firm Tethys Oil has announced that drilling operations of exploration well Thameen-1 on Block 49 onshore Oman has commenced.

The well is planned to be drilled to a depth of about 4,000 metres below ground and drilling operations are expected to last about 45 days.

Primary target is the Late Ordovician Hasirah Sandstone layer at a depth of 3,500 metres (TVD).

A secondary target is the Mid-Ordovician Saih Nihayda Sandstone at a depth of 3,700 metres (TVD). In addition, the well will also investigate the shallower Gharif Sandstone.

“We are delighted to have started drilling operations on Block 49. The Thameen-1 well is designed to penetrate several potentially hydrocarbon bearing rock layers. We have three defined targets, but we will analyse all data from the well to increase our understanding

(Picture for illustration only)

of the potential oil plays in the block, conventional as well as unconventional”, says Tethys Managing Director Magnus Nordin. The drill site is located within the northern part of Block 49 at Marsudad village in the Wilayat of Maqshan.

Block 49 is an onshore block that covers 15,439 square kilometres in the South West of the Sultanate of Oman within the Governate of Dhofar.

Tethys Oil, through its wholly owned subsidiary Tethys Oil Montasar Ltd, has signed a contract with Abraj

Energy Services SAOC for the provision of the Abraj-204 drilling rig.

Tethys Oil entered into a farmout agreement with EOG Resources, Inc (EOG) in November 2020, whereby EOG acquired 50 per cent interest in the exploration and production sharing agreement covering Block 49.

The agreement is subject to government approval. Tethys Oil AB, through Tethys Oil Montasar Ltd, is the operator of the Block and holds 50 per cent of the licence interest.

Most Opec+ countries prefer to hold output steady

LONDON/DUBAI: Most Opec+ countries would like to postpone a planned increase in oil output from February due to weakening fuel demand amid new global lockdowns to stop the spread of the coronavirus, three Opec+ sources said on Monday.

Opec+, a group combining Opec and allies such as Russia, meets later on Monday after a meeting of Opec+ experts on Sunday, when Opec Secretary General Mohammad Barkindo said he saw downside risks for oil markets in the first half of 2021.

“Amid the hopeful signs, the outlook for the first half of 2021 is very mixed and there are still many downside risks to juggle”, said Barkindo. “Curbs on social and economic activity remain in place in a number of countries, and there is concern about the emergence of a pernicious new strain of the virus”, Barkindo said.

In December, Opec+ decided to increase production by 0.5 million bpd from January as part of a 2 million bpd gradual rise this year, but many members have questioned the need for a further boost due to spreading coronavirus infections.

Brent oil prices rose above \$53 per barrel on Monday, touching multi-month highs on expectations that Opec+ will hold output steady in February.

Opec’s leader Saudi Arabia has suggested a more cautious approach during previous

A 3D printed oil pump jack is seen in front of displayed Opec logo in this illustration picture. – Reuters File Photo

meetings, while Opec member the United Arab Emirates and non-Opec member Russia have said they prefer a speedier increase. Opec+ was forced to cut production by a record amount in 2020 as global lockdown measures hammered fuel demand.

Opec+ first cut output by 9.7 million bpd, then eased cuts to 7.7 million and ultimately to 7.2 million from January.

Opec members typically meet twice a year at the cartel’s headquarters in Vienna, but last year, summits were scheduled more frequently to maintain a strong influence on the oil market amidst the pandemic.

Despite demand remaining uncertain, analysts have said that Opec+ demonstrated that it can manage the market as the North Sea Brent Crude and West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude both

ended the week around the \$50 per barrel level.

Though far lower than the prices seen at the start of 2020, crude was well up on the lows seen last year, particularly in March, when Moscow and Riyadh embarked on a brief but intense oil price war that caused prices to plummet.

Russia and Saudi Arabia are respectively the second and third biggest oil producers in the world after the United States.

On April 20, WTI crude collapsed to minus \$40.32 per barrel — meaning producers paid buyers to take the oil off their hands.

Relations between the two oil giants have eased since then, with the Russian and Saudi energy ministers meeting in mid-December in a display of unity.

— Reuters

The reign of the e-commerce industry

MAURO ROMANO

The e-commerce industry had quite an impact on the shopping experience of individuals, as the global pandemic forced closure of retail stores worldwide, compelling consumers to shift their shopping preferences online. However, regions across the globe have responded differently to this change thus showcasing contrasting results in e-commerce spending.

A report by Statista.com stated that in 2020 alone, retail e-commerce sales globally were expected to hit \$3.9 trillion; Asia Pacific expected to be making \$2.45 trillion in online sales. North America was projected to be second in line, likely to generate online retail sales of \$749 billion.

Mauro Romano (pictured), CEO and Co-Founder of ArabClicks, said, "The global pandemic probably worked in



favour of online businesses. With several consumers not willing to compromise on their shopping preferences, this came across as an opportunity for businesses to upscale their ventures and revamp their products and services to closely match the needs of their consumers. We are presently seeing so many businesses thriving online and I believe this trend is here to stay."

In a report highlighting leading e-commerce retailers during the year, Statista.com listed WooCommerce as the



leading e-commerce platform accumulating market shares of 28.24 per cent.

This was followed by Squarespace online stores with shares of 17.69 per cent and Shopify making shares worth 10.98 per cent.

These online businesses have a strategic way of carrying out their activities that helps them conduct

their business effectively and efficiently.

These platforms make use of the 'E-commerce software,' that helps manage online activities including handling inventory, changing the visibility of products, calculating taxes and complying to various orders of customers.

In 2018 alone this software

application market encompassed a value around \$5.1 billion and is expected to reach approximately \$6.3 billion by 2023. With e-commerce industries doing exceptionally well e-commerce sales worldwide are expected to climb to a whopping \$6.5 trillion by 2023.

Overtime, it has been observed

that consumers find it increasingly convenient to make their online purchases using their mobile phones, with approximately 64 per cent of the traffic coming through these devices.

South Korea and China having experienced the highest online penetration with approximately 83 per cent of shoppers making purchases online. Some of the leading e-commerce industries today happen to be Chinese companies such as Taobao.com, Tmall and JD.com. American e-retailer giant Amazon has also attracted customers due to its diverse offerings.

The digital revolution leading all nations has had its impact on the e-commerce industry as well. With consumer behaviours rapidly changing, this platform can change to accommodate the needs of the consumers, thus continuing to be the preferred mode of making purchases.

The author is CEO and Co-Founder, ArabClicks

Pathus International opens new HQ building

MUSCAT: Pathus International Company for Technology and Trade, which specialises in firefighting and safety systems, inaugurated its new head office in Ghala Industrial Area, under the auspices of Malik bin Hilal al Yahmadi, Majlis Ashshura Representative from Wilayat of Bausher.

Also present was Ahmed bin Hamad al Shukaili, CEO of the company.

In a statement, Al Shukaili said the company's new headquarters building will help serve the expanding needs of the domestic market for security and safety systems and products.



"At Pathus, we strive to keep pace with technological advancements in the field of firefighting and fire alarm systems, installation and certification of LPG lines, and other fire and safety activities,"

he noted. The chief guest toured the premises and was briefed about the range of equipment and safety systems distributed by Pathus International to the local and overseas markets.



PRESS RELEASE

MAISARAH ISLAMIC BANKING SERVICES' TO HOLD GRAND PRIZE DRAW

Maisarah Islamic Banking Services is all set to conduct its Grand Prize draw of the Prize Account Scheme. As part of Grand Prize draw, Maisarah Islamic Banking Services is offering its customers a chance to win RO 25,000, RO 50,000 and RO 100,000 as prize amount for one winner each.

Nasser bin Said al Bahantah, Chief Retail Banking Officer at Maisarah said, "We are delighted to organise the Grand Prize draw of the Prize Account Scheme, which has garnered positive feedback from our customers. Our scheme has encouraged our customers to continue saving. The Prize Account Scheme, which makes winning easier, has not only been encouraging people to take charge of their finances but also rewarding them substantially for their saving habits."



MEDRC names finalists of 'Omani Young Water Researchers Award 2020'

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 4

MEDRC Water Research has announced the names of 12 young Omani researchers, short-listed as finalists for the 'Omani Young Water Researchers Award, 2020. The high-profile award celebrates the world class water research being conducted by young Omani students at undergraduate and postgraduate level in universities both in Oman and abroad.

The short-listed students for the Omani Young Water Researchers Award 2020 are: Postgraduate Category: Basim al Farsi, Ibtihal al Manthri, Rasheeda al Abri and Tahani bint Khamis Bait Suwailum; Undergraduate Category: Hawaa al Abri and Faiza al Hatmi, Kawther al Ismaili and Matar al Maqbali; Wastewater Research category: Manal al Hashmi, Aziza al Hinai & Halima al Himali, and Thuraya al Fahdi.

The 12 young students secured their place on the shortlist after being called upon to present their



project and defend their research findings to a judging panel consisting of the foremost water

experts in Oman. "None of this would be possible without the ongoing support of

the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Omar Zawawi Establishment LLC

and Haya Water. Year after year their commitment to supporting Oman's research talent has been truly impressive," said Ciarán Ó Cuinn, MEDRC Centre Director.

First launched by MEDRC Water Research in 2017, the Award aims to recognise the valuable contributions of young Omani researchers whose work has, or has the potential to make a positive impact on the water sector in Oman.

The annual event focuses on water research conducted in the following specified areas: Water management, Wastewater treatment and reuse, Water Treatment Technologies, Desalination and/or related environment research, and Non-revenue water.

The winners will be presented with a winner's medal, certificate of achievement, and a prize. The winners will be announced at an official ceremony which will be attended by dignitaries and officials from the public and private sector.

GREEN SPORTS REGISTRATION FOR 2021 ENDS ON JANUARY 6

Bank Muscat continues to inaugurate more new fields as part of the Green Sports programme to teams across various governorates. The deadline for receiving new registration applications for 2021 is January 6 as the opportunity is still available to all. Eligible teams to submit their requests no later than January 6. Applications are being accepted online at <https://www.bankmuscat.com/greensports>.

The new registration process is user-friendly and can be easily done using a computer, a tablet or even a mobile phone. It is noteworthy that 15 Sports Teams will benefit from the support in 2021, thus the Green Sports programme will continue to achieve successes and achievements in the field of social responsibility and sustainability.



In brief

■ LOS ANGELES



CARL ICAHN SELLS MORE THAN HALF OF HIS HERBALIFE STAKE

Carl Icahn sold over half his stake in Herbalife Nutrition Ltd and is relinquishing his seats on the nutritional-supplements company's board, taking a step back from a long-time investment he fiercely defended against an onslaught from rival activist investor William Ackman.

Icahn sold about \$600 million of his 16 per cent Herbalife stake back to the company in recent days, according to people familiar with the matter. That leaves him with a roughly 6 per cent stake, worth \$400 million. Given that his holdings will go below the level stipulated in an agreement Icahn has with the company, he also plans to give up the five board seats currently held by his representatives, the people said.

■ PALO ALTO



TESLA 2020 DELIVERIES BEAT ESTIMATES, BUT FALL JUST SHORT OF TARGET

Tesla Inc reported better-than-expected 2020 vehicle deliveries, driven by a steady rise in electric vehicle adoption, but narrowly missed its ambitious full-year goal during a punishing year for the global auto industry.

The company delivered 499,550 vehicles during 2020, above Wall Street estimates of 481,261 vehicles, according to Refinitiv data - but 450 units shy of CEO Elon Musk's target.

Musk tweeted here he was "proud of the Tesla team for achieving this major milestone."

"At the start of Tesla, I thought we had (optimistically) a 10 per cent chance of surviving at all," he said. — Reuters

■ TOKYO



BITCOIN TRADES RECORD OF \$34,800 FOLLOWING 800PC SURGE

Bitcoin traded at \$33,176 in Asia on Monday, after soaring to a record high of \$34,800 on Sunday as investors continue to bet the digital currency is on its way to becoming a mainstream payment method.

The latest milestone for the world's most popular cryptocurrency came less than three weeks after it crossed \$20,000 for the first time, on December 16, and bitcoin has now surged some 800 per cent since mid-March.

Investors have said limited supply of bitcoin has helped power upward moves over recent days, with some also seeing it as a safe-haven play during the COVID-19 pandemic, akin to gold.

Asia shares given pause by Tokyo lockdown talk



Pedestrians wearing face masks walk past a stock indicator displaying numbers of Nikkei 225 of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo on the first trading day of the year. — AFP

SYDNEY: Asian share markets hit pause on Monday as reports of a possible tightening in coronavirus emergency rules for Tokyo pulled Japanese stocks off 30-year highs, while also lifting the safe-haven yen.

Investors are still counting on central banks to keep money super cheap while the rollout of coronavirus vaccines helps revive the global economy over time, but much of that optimism is already priced in and the virus is not cooperating. Japan's Nikkei shed its early gains to fall 1.1 per cent when Fuji TV reported the government was considering a state of emergency for capital Tokyo and three surrounding prefectures.

MSCI's broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan edged up 0.1 per cent, a whisker from a record high. E-Mini futures for the S&P 500 dipped 0.2 per cent after touching a new all-time top in early trade.

Investors are cautiously watching runoff elections in Georgia for two US Senate seats on Tuesday that will determine which

party controls the Senate. If the Republicans win one or both, they will retain a slim majority in the chamber and can block President-elect Joe Biden's legislative goals and judicial nominees. "If Democrats win both races, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris would be the tie-breaking vote, giving the party unified control of the White House and Congress," noted analysts at CBA.

"This would raise the likelihood a material US infrastructure spending package gets fast tracked through Congress."

Minutes of the Federal Reserve's December meeting due on Wednesday should offer more detail on discussions about

making their forward policy guidance more explicit and the chance of a further increase in asset buying this year.

The data calendar includes a raft of manufacturing surveys across the globe, which will show how industry is coping with the spread of the coronavirus, and the closely watched ISM surveys of US factories and services. A survey showed Japan's factory activity stabilised for the first time in two years in December, while activity in Taiwan picked up.

Friday sees the US December payroll report where median forecasts are for only a modest increase of 100,000. Analysts as Barclays are tipping a fall of 50,000 in jobs, which would be a shock to market hopes of a speedy recovery.

"A number of incoming indicators on activity point to slower momentum as the economy closes out the year, including data on labour markets where initial claims rose during the December survey period," said economist Michael Gapen in a note. — Reuters

Analysts as Barclays are tipping a fall of

50,000
in jobs, which would be a shock to market hopes

Singapore's virus-hit economy suffers worst decline in 2020

SINGAPORE: Singapore's economy suffered its worst ever annual contraction in 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic hammered the city-state's vital trade and tourism sectors, official data showed on Monday.

But the 5.8 per cent decline was not as bad as feared — official forecasts had predicted a fall of up to 6.5 per cent — as economic activity picked up with the easing of curbs.

The financial hub plunged into its first recession since the 2008 global financial crisis in the second quarter when the government closed most workplaces as part of drastic measures to contain infections.

One of the world's most open economies, Singapore is seen as a bellwether for the health of global trade, and its economy's dramatic deterioration rang alarm bells.

But curbs were eased in the second half of the year and key sectors of the economy, such as manufacturing, have begun to



recover.

In the fourth quarter, the economy shrank 3.8 per cent year-on-year, less than expected, according to preliminary growth data released by the trade ministry.

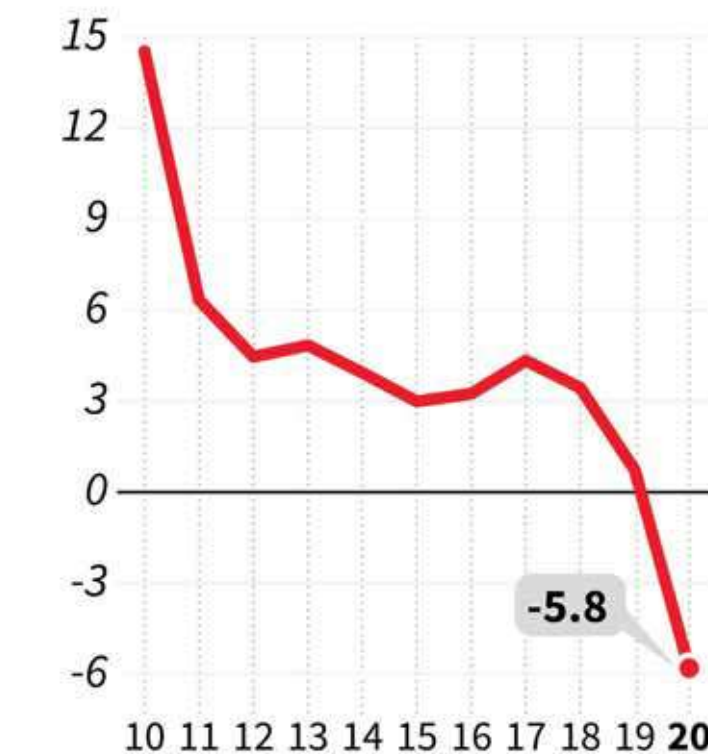
Song Seng Wun, a regional economist with CIMB Private Banking, said the contraction was not as bad as feared due to strong exports of some goods.

Song said he expects a "rebound of around six per cent" this year.

"We are seeing businesses continuing to benefit from the further easing of restrictions and stronger global demand for (microchips) and medicines," he said. — AFP

Singapore GDP

%, annual GDP growth



Source: MTI, World Bank

AFP

Peugeot, Fiat merger to be sealed by shareholders

PARIS: The shareholders of France's PSA and US-Italian rival Fiat Chrysler are expected to approve their merger on Monday, creating the world's fourth-biggest automaker by volume, Stellantis.

The outcome of the vote by PSA and Fiat shareholders is seen as a foregone conclusion, coming two weeks after the European Commission gave conditional approval to the mega-merger announced in late 2019.

The 50/50 tie-up, which was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, is seen as crucial for the two groups to undertake the investment needed to transition to clean car technology.

"This merger is a matter of survival for both Fiat and PSA," Giuliano Noci, professor of strategy at Milan Business School said, citing the "enormous technological and strategic challenges" faced by both as well as the damage wrought by the pandemic.

The merger allows Fiat-Chrysler to strengthen its presence in Europe and the French group to regain a foothold in the US.

Ranking behind global rivals



Carlos Tavares (L), chairman of the managing board of French carmaker PSA Peugeot Citroen, and Fiat Chairman John Elkann in Auburn Hills, Michigan. — AFP

such as Volkswagen, Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi and Toyota, Stellantis will be the fourth-largest automaker by volume and the third-largest by revenue, with a workforce of over 400,000.

The new company will group producers such as Peugeot, Citroen, Fiat, Chrysler, Jeep, Alfa Romeo and Maserati, each of which will continue under their own brand names.

PSA and Fiat expect the merger to allow them to achieve billions of euros in synergies each year.

"Only the most agile, with a Darwinian spirit, will survive," PSA chief Carlos Tavares, who will take the helm of the merged group, said in November.

The European Commission had been worried the merger could affect competition in Europe's lucrative van market, with PSA

and FCA together accounting for 34 per cent of market share.

To assuage those concerns, the commission said PSA would continue an agreement with Toyota to manufacture vans to be sold under the Japanese brand in Europe.

The disruptions wrought by COVID-19, which ground manufacturing to a halt for several weeks in the first half of 2020, forced PSA and Fiat to change the terms of their tie-up to ensure it remained a merger of equals.

FCA agreed to lower the exceptional dividend to be distributed to its shareholders while PSA agreed to share out its 46 per cent stake in French automotive equipment maker Faurecia among all shareholders of the new company, rather than its shareholders alone as agreed to previously.

The two companies have so far shown relative resilience in the face of the pandemic.

Fiat-Chrysler posted net profits of 1.2-billion-euros (\$1.47 billion) in the third quarter, compared with losses of 1.04 billion euros (\$1.27 billion) in the second

The 50/50 tie-up is seen as crucial for the two groups to undertake the investment needed to transition to clean car technology

quarter when much of the world was in lockdown.

PSA sold 589,000 fewer vehicles in the third quarter but sold them for more money as part of a strategy to maximise profitability and cash flow which boosted turnover by 1.2 per cent.

At the time when the merger was announced Tavares assured no plant would be closed, but unions in France remain sceptical.

"On the whole it's a good insurance policy for the future of our group. Those who don't make the shift risk being left by the wayside," a representative for the CFTC union at PSA, Franck Don, said.

But he wondered: "What synergies will they find and what consequences will that have for sites in France?" — AFP

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Mohammed al Rashdi: 99841230
m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com

Ali al Maashari: 99639264
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ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcement of Capital Reduction

In accordance with the provisions of Article 150 of the Commercial Companies Law. The company BCT Digital (LLC), which is registered with the Commercial Registration No 1315365, hereby announces that it is going to reduce its capital from Omani Rials 250,000.000 to 25,000.000. Whoever has any objection to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within 30 days from the date hereof.

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Research study on 2,000 year-old stone monuments

'The Trilith Stone Monuments of Oman or the TSMO research project is the dedicated research on trilith monuments of Oman and discoveries in Duqm shows potential for heritage tourism in the area.'... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

NEW YEAR JOY



ICELANDERS TAKE NEW YEAR'S FIREWORKS TO DIZZIFYING HEIGHTS

While New Year's Eve fireworks are hardly rare, Icelanders take the tradition to breathtaking heights, firing the dazzling incendiary devices from back gardens, streets, hilltops or city parks across their Nordic island... **Story on Page P20**

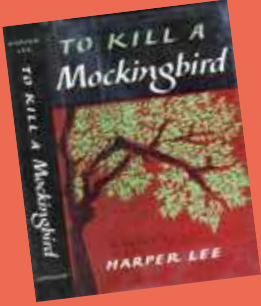
LIFESTYLE



SOUTH KOREANS SCRAMBLE TO ARRANGE COSMETIC SURGERY

When Ryu Han-na, a 20-year-old university student, got cosmetic surgery on her nose in mid-December, she had a simple reason: it might be the last chance to do so covertly before people start taking off masks this year as vaccines are distributed... **Story on Page 19**

READ



TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

BY HARPER LEE

The novel centres on Atticus Finch's attempts to prove the innocence of Tom Robinson, a black man who has been wrongly accused of raping a white woman in 1930s Alabama.

CINEMA



PHILIPPINE CINEMA OFFERS VENICE-THEMED PANDEMIC ESCAPE

Some moviegoers in the Philippine capital, tired of lengthy COVID-19 restrictions, are opting for a taste of Venice, bobbing in front of the big screen in socially distanced gondolas... **Story on Page 19**

AROUND THE WORLD



AUSTRALIA CHANGES ONE WORD IN NATIONAL ANTHEM

A single word has been changed in the Australia's national anthem to make the song more inclusive and reflect the 60,000-year history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As of Friday the lyrics have been changed from "we are young and free" to "we are one and free."



RESEARCH STUDY ON 2,000 YEAR-OLD STONE MONUMENTS



LIJU CHERIAN
@Cherianmathiker

OMAN'S long history follows a rich archaeological record. Now, the archaeologists are trying to reveal the mystery of 2,000 year-old ritual stone monuments in the Sultanate.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism together with a team of archaeologists from the Czech Republic, Italy, Austria and Jordan is conducting research on the study of "Triliths", the Iron Age ritual stone monuments.

Trilith monuments are distributed in the landscape throughout the south-eastern Arabia from Hadramawt in Yemen up to Ras al Hadd.

They consist of three upright flat stones, angled inward to form a pyramid,

and are often arranged in rows alongside dry watercourses.

Research which began in late 2018 is still undergoing but was postponed towards the end of 2020 till next year due to COVID-19.

The trilith's stone compositions with hearths marks a space of special meaning which the archeologists still are unable to comprehend. They were probably ritual monuments of ancient nomads.

The archaeological team members consist of Roman Garba and Maria Pia Maiorano from the University L'Orientale Naples, Italy, Denis Stefanisko and Dominik Chlachula from the Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic, Alzbeta Danielisova and David

Danecek from the Archaeological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Jakub Trubac from the Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic and Omani Waleed al Ghafri from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The team is complemented by the geochronologists Stephanie Neuhuber from BOKU University Vienna, Austria, and Jordanian Mahmoud Abbas from the China University of Geosciences.

Triliths are also associated with large round fireplaces. Archaeologists have recorded more than 441 locations in Oman where such enigmatic stone compositions exist.

Although they appear to mark places of special meaning for ancient rituals, further interpretation is still a mystery as no human

remains or other artefacts have been found near or beneath the trilith monuments.

"One of the main task of our archaeological expedition was excavation of trilith fireplaces across Oman for collection of pieces of charcoal suitable for radiocarbon dating to be able to tell when trilith rituals were performed," says Roman Garba, Director of TSMO (Trilith Stone Monuments of Oman) archaeological expedition.

The first results from the excavated fireplaces shows that trilith monuments appeared 2,400 years ago and were used until 1,800 years ago.

This is 200 years earlier than previously archaeologists assumed. Expedition also discovered locations with two generations of trilith monuments where radiocarbon dates show 400 years between these generations.

Research on triliths is mainly conducted in Duqm where TSMO expedition has its base.

"The area surrounding modern port of Duqm is a unique cultural landscape providing evidence for human occupation from the Palaeolithic period until the Late Iron Age and there is one of the highest concen-

tration of trilith monuments in Oman as well," adds Waleed al Ghafri, an Omani archaeologist.

The TSMO expedition also made two additional discoveries in Duqm.

The first was the ancient coastal settlement beside lagoon in the area with high concentration of trilith monuments.

The collected bronze artefacts and charcoal samples provided evidence of human occupation starting from the Early Iron Age period (2,800 to 2,300 years ago).

"Any chronological convergence could have, indeed, a major contribution to the understanding of triliths' function, particularly in the Duqm area," says Maria Pia Maiorano.

The second discovery was the stone tools made 70,000 to 100,000 years ago, indicating one of the routes of modern humans spread Out of Africa to the rest of the world.

"A preliminary typological analysis of a recorded artefacts allowed us to date provisionally these surface finds to the Middle Palaeolithic period with indication of Levallois technique," explains Denis Stefanisko.

The important outcome of the first excavation season was also relocation of endangered trilith monuments from Duqm to Muscat for the

permanent exhibit at The National Museum.

The trilith group from Wadi Sayy in Duqm was documented in 3D, excavated and all stones carefully labelled and wrapped. The dismantled monument, weighing nearly 900 kilograms, was transported 600 km to The National Museum of Oman in Muscat and reconstructed for the permanent exhibit.

"I am glad that we are contributing to the education of the wider public and preserve part of Omani heritage for future generations," says Sultan al Bakri Director-General for Archaeology at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

"The TSMO research project is the first dedicated research on trilith monuments of Oman and discoveries in Duqm shows potential for heritage tourism in the area," concludes Khamis al Asmi, Director of the Department of Excavations and Archaeological Studies.

As soon as COVID-19 pandemic situation dies down, the archaeologists will continue working on unlocking the mystery of trilith monuments in Oman.

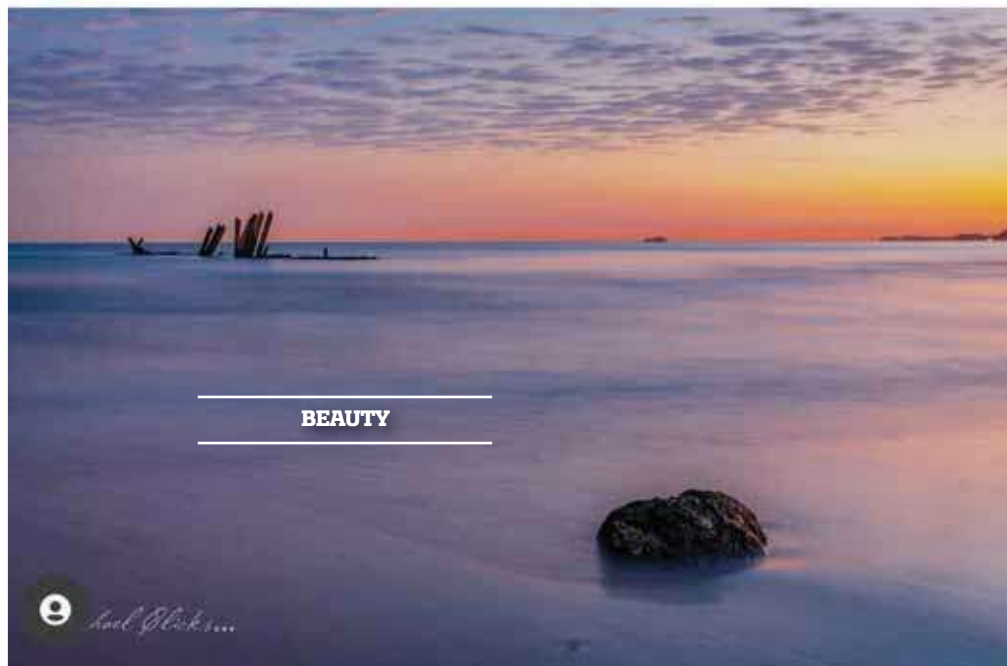


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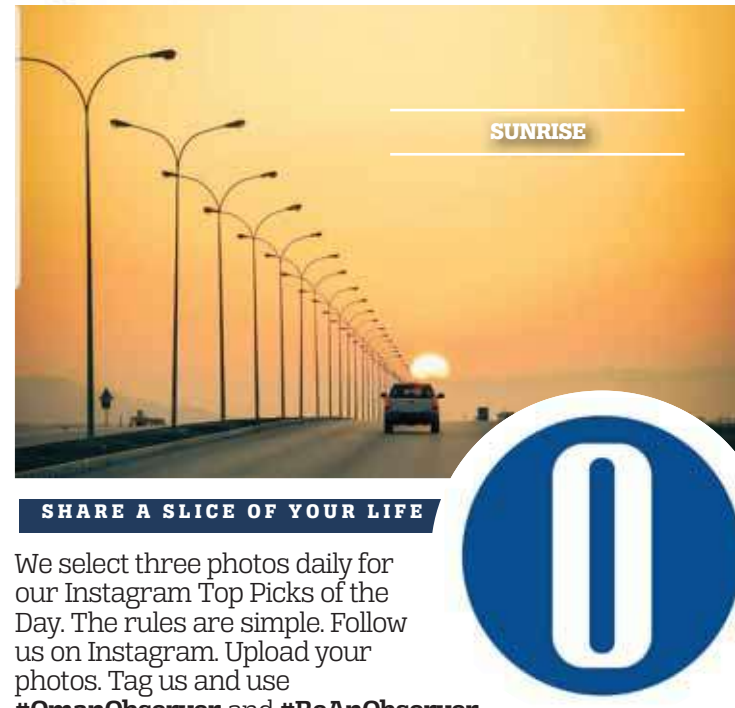
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LIFESTYLE

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SOUTH KOREANS SCRAMBLE TO ARRANGE COSMETIC SURGERY

When Ryu Han-na, a 20-year-old university student, got cosmetic surgery on her nose in mid-December, she had a simple reason: it might be the last chance to do so covertly before people start taking off masks this year as vaccines are distributed. Ryu, who has been attending her courses online throughout 2020, said the ability to recuperate at home and wear a mask in public without drawing attention were deciding factors.

"I always wanted to get a nose job... I thought it would be the best to get it now before people start taking off masks when vaccines become available in 2021," she said as she prepared for the 4.4 million won (\$4,013) procedure. "There will be bruises and swelling from the surgery but since

we all be wearing masks I think that should help," she added. That attitude is fueling demand for such operations in South Korea, which had already experienced a pick-up in cosmetic surgery in 2020. The country has been a world capital of cosmetic surgery even during non-pandemic times. The industry is estimated to be worth about \$10.7 billion in 2020, up 9.2 per cent year-on-year, and is expected to hover around \$11.8 billion this year, according to Gangnam Unni, the country's largest online cosmetic surgery platform. Cosmetic surgeons say patients are interested in all parts of the face: those that can be easily hidden under masks, such as the nose and lips, as well as those that face coverings don't conceal, which some consider the criteria of beauty in the coronavirus era. "Both surgical and non-surgical inquiries about

eyes, eyebrows, nose bridge and foreheads — the only visible parts — certainly increased," said Park Cheol-woo, a surgeon at WooAhIn Plastic Surgery Clinic, who was in charge of Ryu's operation.

Surgeon Shin Sang-ho, who operates Krismas Plastic Surgery Clinic in the centre of Gangnam district, said many people have spent their emergency stimulus payment from the government at hospitals and clinics, boosting revenue in the third and fourth quarter of 2020. "I felt like it's sort of a revenge spending. I've sensed that customers were expressing their pent-up emotions (from the coronavirus) by getting cosmetic procedures," Shin said. Government data showed that of 14.2 trillion won (\$12.95 billion) government cash handouts, 10.6 per cent was used in hospitals and pharmacies, the

third-largest segment by classification behind supermarkets and restaurants, though the details of hospital types were not disclosed. Gangnam Unni data showed its users surged 63 per cent from a year earlier to about 2.6 million last year. They requested 1 million counselling sessions, double the amount from a year earlier. The pandemic made it harder to promote services to foreign clients, so in the last year it embraced a more local and regional focus. But a third wave of coronavirus at home remains a concern as the country reports record-breaking daily cases.

"We've seen growing numbers of cancellations in consultation appointments recently as people refrain more from going outside... especially customers from the suburbs mostly postponed their surgeries to 2021," Park said. — **Reuters**

CINEMA

Philippine cinema offers Venice-themed pandemic escape



SOME MOVIEGOERS IN the Philippine capital, tired of lengthy COVID-19 restrictions, are opting for a taste of Venice, bobbing in front of the big screen in socially distanced gondolas.

Gondoliers in striped uniforms steer and position each boat in an outdoor canal to watch full-length films, a rare chance to visit the cinema after nine months of lockdowns.

"Riding a boat made it a unique experience," patron Violet Gatchalian said at the Venice Grand Canal-themed shopping mall in Manila. "It's also one of the first cinemas to reopen so we wanted to try it."

Philippine cinemas have been closed since mid-March, when President Rodrigo Duterte imposed one of the world's toughest and longest lockdowns. With more than 456,000 coronavirus infections and 8,875 COVID-19 deaths, the Philippines is Southeast Asia's hardest-hit country after

Indonesia.

The government started gradually reopening the economy in June, but most non-essential businesses remain shut — in Manila, the gondola cinema and a drive-through theatre are the only movie venues.

Gondola moviegoers may sit two to a boat, with up to 10 guests per screening and boats kept metres apart. Admission is 500 pesos (\$10), roughly the minimum daily wage in the capital.

The float-in cinema aims to lift the spirits of guests and help film industry workers, said Graham Coates, head of Megaworld Lifestyle Malls.

Guests bring their own earphones and listen to audio broadcast at a radio frequency available only to those aboard the gondolas.

Open-air cinemas are seeing a revival in many parts of the world as the leisure industry figures out how to deal with the constraints of the pandemic. — **Reuters**





Icelanders take New Year's fireworks to dizzying heights



While New Year's Eve fireworks are hardly rare, Icelanders take the tradition to breathtaking heights, firing the dazzling incendiary devices from back gardens, streets, hilltops or city parks across their Nordic island.

Iceland's law provides a brief window, from December 28 to January 6, when buying and shooting off fireworks is allowed, and citizens buy more pyrotechnics in a week than most Europeans do all year — all in the name of charity.

Each year the nation's 365,000 inhabitants buy around 600 tonnes of fireworks, more than a kilo and a half (three and a half pounds) per person, according to Statistics Iceland.

That's more than six times the EU average in a full year, according to Eurostat, and only the Dutch come close to competing with Icelanders' love for noisy bursts of colour in the wintry night sky.

The bulk of the devices go up on New Year's Eve, turning the sky above the subarctic island into a glittering canopy from the capital Reykjavik to the smallest village.

"We sort of burn away the past year and make way for the new one, which I think we'll be very happy to do this year", said Dagrun Osk Jonsdottir, a doctoral student and expert on Icelandic folklore.

Bonfires cancelled

The tradition, dating to the early 20th century, is rooted in the Nordic bonfire, a much older custom that is banned this year anyway because of the pandemic.

Once too expensive for most Icelanders, fireworks became more accessible to the general public thanks to a fundraising campaign launched in 1968 by the volunteer Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue (ICE-SAR).

The group, which controls most of the fireworks trade, has relied on the annual sales to finance its activities for the rest

of the year ever since.

"It's a bit strange to think that we are so dependent on this sale", ICE-SAR president Thor Thorsteinsson said.

"But we want to continue because we haven't been able to find other ways of raising funds."

The organisation's 93 volunteer rescue teams spread throughout the country respond to emergencies that public services cannot because of long distances and difficulty of access in many parts of the sparsely populated country.

While many of the fireworks are fired from private gardens, the New Year's Eve displays follow a common timetable.

A first round, lasting around an hour and a half, begins around 8 pm after the prime minister's year-end speech.

The sky goes dark and quiet for the next hour as three quarters of the population turns on the TV for "Aramotaskaup" — It hit a record in 2019 when 99.7 per cent of Icelanders in front of their TV watched it.

The must-watch annual comedy show, whose title loosely translates as "Jollies of the Year", is a recap of the year's events with a hefty dose of satire.

Warmed and amused by the show, Icelanders venture back out into the cold to set off their fireworks extravaganza in earnest.

Pollution

As with many traditions elsewhere, Icelanders' fireworks excesses have recently come under scrutiny.

In 2018, unfavourable weather combined with the fireworks to pollute Reykjavik's usually pure air with microparticles, reaching levels associated with megacities like Beijing or New Delhi.

The highest hourly value, 3,000 microgrammes per cubic meter, was detected in Kopavogur on the outskirts of the capital, setting a European record according to a study by the University of Iceland.

The government is considering cutting the fireworks purchasing window to three days from the current 10. — AFP

