

The weather analysis of the National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre indicate that a trough of low pressure (Al Ghadaq Trough) will affect the Sultanate from Wednesday till Friday. It is expected that rains, occasionally associated by thundershowers with fresh wind and hail are expected over Governorate of Musandam extending gradually to affect governorates of Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, North Al Batinah and Al Hajar Mountains and adjoining areas. The Public Authority for Civil Aviation advices all to take precaution during rain and wadis and follow the instructions of the Supreme Committee for dealing with COVID-19 to stay home and never leave unless it is absolutely necessary.

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TIPS TO PROTECT
MENTAL HEALTH
DURING
RESTRICTIONS



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ARTISTRY
AND CULTURE
OF QUALITY
GLASSMAKING



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CYCLING
FACES
ECONOMIC
'MELTDOWN'



Omani factories told to produce basic medical goods

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry clarified that it continues, in coordination with government and private agencies, providing medical and other needs, such as personal protection equipment. Sami bin Salim al Saheb, Director General of Industry Ministry said. “The ministry has put in place precautionary measures for industrial establishments to ensure the safety of workers in those establishments and maintain the continuity of work in those facilities in the light of banning by some countries to export their products”. He indicated that the Omani industries are raising and developing their production capabilities through the use of their research and development resources and the utilisation of existing ones.

Charitable efforts to help the needy amid virus lockdown

MUSCAT: Shaikh Mohammed bin Said al Kalbani, Minister of Social Development, on Tuesday met officials and representatives of charitable organisations at the Relief and Sheltering Sector Centre. The minister thanked the charitable organisations for their role in meeting community needs while the Sultanate grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic. The minister pointed to the huge efforts exerted by charitable and voluntary organisations in helping low-income families and small business owners meet daily needs, especially those whose businesses were affected by the coronavirus lockdown. He affirmed that the social development committees are playing their part studying and identifying the requirements of the society segments affected.

DETAILS ON P2

Virtual clinics to diagnose patients easily at home

MUSCAT: Online clinics have been setup in the Sultanate in line with the government’s commitment to reach to every single person having issues related to COVID-19. These virtual clinics have been introduced in a number of hospitals in the Sultanate to ensure easier diagnosis and safety of the patients and the society. These clinics are aimed at reducing pressure on medical staff and preventing large gatherings at the healthcare service outlets. Patients here are diagnosed remotely, where communication between the patient and the specialist is carried out through a phone call. The specialist evaluates the case, takes immediate action if it requires urgent medical intervention, otherwise he prescribes appropriate treatment through virtual mode.

DETAILS ON P3

TOTAL CASES CROSS 800-MARK

MEASURES FOR UPCOMING RAMADHAN REVIEWED AS GCC CALLS FOR CONCERTED EFFORTS TO FIGHT COVID-19



VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

As the Sultanate announced 86 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the total number to 813, senior officials from the GCC called for more co-ordinated efforts to tackle the virus.

The GCC under-secretaries also reviewed the precautionary measures to be applied during the holy month of Ramadhan, among other issues. It

may be recalled that on Monday for the first time, Oman reported more than 100 cases in a single day.

The number of recovered cases has risen to 130 even as the authorities expect more cases to be detected in the coming days due to the intensified testing process.

All four deaths have been reported from the capital.

The fourth COVID-19 death reported on Sunday (April 12), was of

Blood plasma transfusion therapy now in Oman

The Ministry of Health represented by the Central Blood Bank and the Royal Hospital performed successfully a procedure of convalescent plasma extraction and transfusion from people who have recovered from COVID-19.

a 37-year-old expatriate. Region-wise, Muscat has 658 cases (77 recovered), Al Dakhiliyah 42 cases (19 recovered); South Al Batinah 40 cases (12 recovered); Musandam – three cases; Al Dhahirah three cases (two recovered); South Al Sharqiyah 14 cases (one recovered), North Al Sharqiyah 11 cases; Buraimi – three cases; North Al Batinah 29 cases (17 recovered) and Dhofar 10 cases (2) recovered.

Cluster spread is posing a greater challenge in Muttrah

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

When the Sultanate is taking commendable steps in controlling the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, the medics from the Ministry of Health (MoH) say that the cluster spread is posing greater challenge.

The healthcare workers are continuously educating the people in and around Muttrah, both in their households and commercial establishments, to come to the six clinics dedicated for COVID-19 testing, as cluster spread is a major cause of concern for them. From a random sampling carried out among various strata of people

in Muttrah, it has been found that some of them were “unbelievably” diagnosed positive.

“These people don’t have any travel history nor are they in touch with affected people. They were contracted from some places beyond their knowledge, and tracing the spot too is a challenge”, said Doctor Nadiyaal Hajri, Head of Muttrah PHC, that is open around the clock for COVID-19 tests.

Cluster spread pose high risk of further spread of the virus and was last reported in Italy where scores of people around a music venue were found positive.

Worldwide, the cluster spread is a

great challenge and measures need to be taken against the same. Erection of barriers around the focus of infection as well as geographic quarantine shall be applicable to areas reporting large outbreak.

“The number of cases keeps varying everyday because of the cluster spread among Muttrah residents. Effective measures only can prove to be useful in tackling the issue”, added another doctor.

Such measures include effective implementation of geographic quarantine, enhanced active surveillance, social distancing measures, testing of all suspected cases, isolation and quarantine, communication of risk to create awareness among public

on preventive public health measures, can bring results against cluster spread. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health reiterated that the extension of medical services in Muttrah is to provide assistance and evaluation for testing persons who have flu like symptoms.

“It is advised that people without symptoms should not utilise this service which will help focus services for the needy and also prevent unnecessary exposure and flouting of social distancing norms.

The date and venue of the visit of medical field teams to other locations will be intimated in advance”, a statement from the MoH has said.



GCC officials mull precautionary measures ahead of Ramadhan

KEY ROLE: Health sector workers thanked for the significant efforts in tackling COVID-19



MUSCAT: The GCC Under-Secretaries of Health Ministries convened their fourth video-conference meeting to discuss the latest developments of Coronavirus (COVID-19). The meeting reviewed the minutes of the third meeting, which was held last week, and discussed the implementation of the various multi-language awareness campaign for the

expatriates residing in the GCC states, as well as the updates of evacuating students and patients travelling for treatment abroad. The fourth meeting also reviewed the precautionary measures that will be taken by the GCC states during the upcoming month of Ramadhan, highlighted the medical, legal and legislative procedures related to washing the dead along with

formulating a unified definition for the death cause from COVID-19. The GCC under-secretaries praised the significant efforts exerted by the staff working in the health sector and their contribution in tackling COVID-19, as well as the cooperation of the citizens along with the official and civil authorities in these exceptional circumstances. In addition, the under-secretaries

urged all GCC citizens and residents to adhere to the infection control standards, avoid attending the gatherings as possible and maintain the preventive safety measures followed in such cases. They also stressed the importance of taking the information from official sources and to not pay attention to rumours and unofficial social media channels. — **ONA**

CRITICALLY ILL CITIZENS FLOWN TO MUSCAT



A Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo) aircraft on Tuesday carried out medical evacuation for a number of citizens suffering from chronic diseases from Dhofar Governorate. The patients, in need for special medical treatment and advanced medical examination, were transported to the Royal Hospital and the Sultan Qaboos University Hospital in Muscat from the Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah. This comes within the context of the humanitarian services rendered by the Sultan's Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence to citizens and residents across the Sultanate.

IN BRIEF

Govt agencies ordered to cut spending

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Finance has issued two financial circulars (No 11 & 12), the first of which deals with rationalisation of spending in government companies through fiscal year 2020 and the second relates to the lifting of exceptional bonus granted to state officials. The Ministry said that, within the context of its work associated with steps to undertake further government measures to handle the financial and economic developments which affect the Sultanate in view of the slump in oil prices, it issued Circular No 11 which requires government companies to implement a 10 per cent cut in operational and investment spending, which is the base minimum percentage needed to adjust budget plans for this year. Circular (No 11) also urged the firms to exert maximum efforts targeting utmost squeezing of actual spending, instead of merely implementing the 10 per cent stated in the circular. Also, the companies are required to carry out full review of elements of spending, including salaries, privileges of employees, the situation of vacant grades and spending on studies (i.e. consultancy, engineering, field studies), irrespective of the nature of these elements of spending (whether they come under capital or operational spending allocations). The Ministry called upon all companies to cooperate and stick to the circular's instructions to serve public interest. The second circular (No 12/2020) deals with the cessation of exceptional bonus to all state employees in all government units in implementation of the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, particularly retired employees. The statement said that the instructions, which seek to put to practice the Royal directives, are binding upon all ministries, public authorities, institutions and establishments, including all of the State's civil, military and security apparatuses. — **ONA**

New regulations for private colleges

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education has issued two ministerial decisions the first one regulating study at the private higher education institutions during the suspension of classes while the second decision determining regulations for the teaching and evaluation of courses at the colleges of applied sciences (CAS) and Al Rustaq College of Education during the suspension period. Ministerial decisions No 25/2020 states that the second semester and the summer semester at the private higher education institutions should continue by means of e-learning. Ministerial decisions No 26/2020 has approved the completion of courses through the e-learning system at the Al Rustaq College of Education and the colleges of applied sciences (CAS) during the suspension period. The Ministry of Higher Education emphasised the importance of developing the e-learning technical infrastructure for all the courses to ensure achieving the targeted student educational standard. The ministry also directed the private colleges to readjust their internal regulations to ensure that the current period is considered as part of the academic calendar.

Action against spreading fake rumours

MUSCAT: The Public Prosecution said on Tuesday that investigations are being carried out in a number of cases related to violations of the decisions of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19. Some of the violations, which included banned services and users, have been held on remand imprisonment, pending investigation. The authorities have also arrested a number of rumour mongers and publishers of classified content and other contents prejudicial to the public order. The criminal prosecution included all those who republished and sent the said materials. The Public Prosecution has urged citizens and residents not to publish any news or information related to the epidemic, and take the information from official sources.

Quarantine centre for each governorate

MUSCAT: The Medical Response and Public Health Sector and the Relief and Sheltering Sector clarified news circulating on social media sites regarding the transfer of a number of people infected with coronavirus from the Wilayat of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali to the Wilayat of Sur. A joint statement by both sectors said acting on the instructions of the Supreme Committee for dealing with COVID-19 outbreak, the Medical Response and Public Health Sector and the Relief and Sheltering Sector have set up a unified quarantine centre in each governorate to receive coronavirus cases from all the wilayats of the governorate. Meanwhile, 63 people were discharged from quarantine facilities in different governorates. This is the fourth group to be discharged after completing a mandatory 14-day isolation period. — **ONA**

Minister discusses ways to support low income people



MUSCAT: Shaikh Mohammed bin Said al Kalbani, Minister of Social Development, met on Tuesday at the Relief and Shelter Sector Operations Centre with several officials and representatives of charitable institutions and societies. The meeting was attended by Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maawali, Under-

Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development, Head of the Relief and Shelter Sector, and officials at the Ministry. During the meeting, the Minister pointed out that there are redoubled efforts with the sector to support institutional isolation centres and assist those with low incomes –

specially vendors and low-level professions - to meet their living needs because their livelihoods have been affected. He said, "The social development committees play an important role in monitoring the requirements and needs of the citizens, especially those affected by the current circumstances

and low income families. There is a different mechanism for providing that support to families and individuals in need, in addition to increasing the number of food baskets provided to some families, especially in the wilayats of Muscat and Muttrah". He emphasised that the Oman Charitable Organization is also

making great and continuous efforts in providing support, whether for the wilayats of Muscat and Muttrah or other wilayats of the Sultanate. On their turn, the representatives of charitable institutions and societies affirmed that they are continuing to provide support to the concerned authorities to overcome this stage

that requires more solidarity between all institutions. They showed their support for all proposals and mechanisms that must be followed in agreement and coordination with the Ministry of Social Development, as well as setting a platform for charitable work that contributes to regulating charitable work in the society. — **ONA**



Virtual clinics to diagnose patients in hospitals



ZAINAB AL NASSRI
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

Online clinics have been set up in the Sultanate in line with the government's commitment to reach to every single person having issues related to COVID-19. These virtual clinics have been introduced in a number of hospitals in the Sultanate in order to ensure easier diagnosis and safety of the patients and the society.

These clinics are aimed at reducing pressure on medical staff and preventing large gatherings at the healthcare service outlets. Patients here are diagnosed remotely, where communication between the patient and the specialist is carried out through a phone call. The specialist evaluates the case, takes immediate action if it requires urgent medical intervention otherwise he prescribes appropriate treatment through virtual mode. Now the facility is available through phone calls, while video meets will be next step, according to officials.

The Royal Hospital is receiving most of the critical COVID-19 cases with intensive care units, while health workers in the hospital are tirelessly providing the highest levels of care to all without exception. Through setting priorities they make sure that outpatients are also not neglected and they get health service as it used to be before the COVID-19 situation.

According to Dr Qasim al Salmi, Director General of the Royal Hospital, the health workers in the hospital have been

prepared to face emergencies through disaster preparedness plans, extensive knowledge and experience in dealing with crisis situations.

"Soon the Royal Hospital will activate the outpatient clinics in cooperation with Information Technology Directorate at the Ministry of Health. In the beginning it will function through phone calls and then move to the visual communication between the patients and the specialised medical staff".

Dr Al Salmi added, "We have reviewed the outpatients' lists in clinics and surgery units in order to reschedule routine appointments so that the patients can be attended without any delay. For urgent patients we have coordinated with the reference hospitals in respective governorates to provide them with the regular treatment".

Commenting on the readiness for the pandemic even before its outbreak in the Sultanate, he said, "In the beginning when COVID-19 appeared in China, we started training health personnel and staff on how to protect them and avoid virus transmission to them. We were keen to provide preventive equipment for health cadres, in addition to preparing special rooms for patients".

He confirmed that Oman is in good hands and praised the services of many retired cadres of nurses and doctors from the hospital who took the initiative to contact the Royal Hospital and expressed willingness to return to work in difficult times.

Thank you for ensuring our safety, expats express gratitude to govt

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

While the strategy and precautions devised by Oman to combat the spread of the dreaded COVID-19 received praise from global agencies, the expatriates here thanked the government for its gestures to ensure that every resident in the country is safe.

They expressed their love and gratitude to a country that has sprung into action to keep every citizen and expat safe with a string of measures including free test and treatment for COVID-19 and other welfare programmes to sustain health, safety and wellness.

"From information to assistance programmes, all the measures and steps are helping to deal with the coronavirus effectively. They ensure that all the people stay safe and healthy in the country", many senior expats said unequivocally in statements.

Following instructions from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Ministry of Health has made free test and treatment for COVID-19 for the expats residing in Oman.

"For residents, especially those struggling financially, the decision to get themselves tested or treated for coronavirus might be a hard one. The step that the Oman government has taken in assuring all residents with free testing and treatment will, no doubt, boosts community engagement and participation in the current fight against this pandemic", said Dr Baby Sam Samuel, Chairman of the Board of Indian Schools in Oman.

According to data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information, as of December last, the number of expatriates in Oman stood at 1,987,456, nearly 42.50 per cent of the total population.

WHOLEHEARTED SUPPORT

"As an expat myself, I highly appreciate and applaud this decision by the Sultanate to extend wholehearted support to all its residents during this time of crisis", he said.

Not only that test is being done free of cost, the government has also waived the requirement of resident card, for the purpose. According to the ministry, everyone will be tested free, even if they do not have any identity cards with them. They need to give only name and basic information about them with a credible mobile number to inform results and follow-up.

"Oman is managing the COVID-19 quite effectively, so far with the



Leave alone the free test and treatment, the government has taken all the necessary measures to ensure the welfare of both nationals and residents during the lockdown. At the worksites, measures are in place for the safety of the workers



lowest numbers of reported deaths and infected persons, as far as the Gulf region is concerned. There is no discrimination of any kind in the government hospitals. I sincerely appreciate this great gesture and generous hospitality of the government authorities", said Mohammad Osama Rawat, General Manager, Oriental Pharmacy.

AWARENESS IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

According to him, the controls imposed between regions and the sustained messaging in different languages help people stay at home.

"I am quite sure that with the blessings of Almighty, Oman will win the battle against COVID-

19 and life will be back to normal routine quite soon in the Sultanate", he said. According to Davis Kallukaran, Managing partner, Crowe, the government is doing an excellent

job in combating the spread of the coronavirus contagion.

"Leave alone the free test and treatment, the government has taken all the necessary measures to ensure the welfare of both nationals and residents during the lockdown. At the worksites, measures are in place for the safety of the workers", he said.

Kallukaran said that the decision to waive fines and penalties linked to delayed disclosure of statements by companies and permission to reschedule repayment of taxes and premiums set of procedures will ease pressure on the business community.

The ministry of health is proving that "saving life of all the people disregarding their nationality is the priority and also preventing the disease spread amongst the citizens and residents", said N Ramananda Prabhu, Chartered Accountant & Business Advisor, Middle East Chartered Accountants, Oman.

VARIOUS MEASURES

He said that the Oman government is working hard and has taken various precautionary measures.

In addition to this, the government is also coordinating with all embassies in Oman to ensure the safety of people of their respective countries, he said.

Siraj Mudassar Raza, Sales Manager with an electronic enterprise said that the leaflets in different languages on awareness campaign have helped all the residents immensely.

"There are thousands of expatriates who are living here only know the language of their mother country. This helped them what to do and where to go for the tests and related information", he said. As part of its ongoing awareness campaigns, the Ministry of Health has issued guidelines in different languages Arabic, English, Hindi, Filipino, Urdu, French, Swahili, Bengla and several other Indian languages.



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Tips to protect mental health during restrictions

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, APRIL 14



Dr Khalid Mahmood Rao

People are restrained in their houses to block the spread of coronavirus chain and those who are out as part of necessary works, are living under the fear of getting caught by the deadly virus. Generally people are undergoing some kind of mental pressure or the other.

There are people who are able to manage the situation through their own skills and understanding, but there are many others who are not able to take things in right stride.

Psychiatrists are of the view that it is natural to feel stress, anxiety, fear and loneliness at this time. It is important to be keep connected with family and friends, be kind to others and yourself, use skills to deal with stress, do some physical exercise even in home and maintain routine that gives sense of purpose to everyone.

Dr Khalid Mahmood Rao, HoD Psychiatry at Sultan Qaboos Hospital, gave some important tips to overcome this situation:

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL AND MANAGE

Since you cannot control virus or what's happening outside. It might be hard to control your thoughts and emotions when you hear the upsetting developments of outbreak, but you can control how to respond. Take bath, read positive books,



play with your children, do some gardening, tidy up your room, just focus on present moments.

SETUP SHARED GOALS FOR THE FAMILY

May be you and your family all share the anxiety, setup goals you can manage now and not after the outbreak.

KEEP YOURSELF ACTIVE PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY

Restrictions means you cannot swim or go to gym but you can do pushups, yoga, dance, tai chi, setup regular exercise routine suitable to your physical capabilities. Exercise your mind, reading books, watching intellectually stimulating movies, inspiring talks and relaxing music helps.

ORGANISE YOUR FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS

It is OK to feel sad, angry and anxious, try to summarise into short statement, I am anxious because of my job, I am sad because of the news, acknowledge your feelings and emotions helps you externalise your stress and anxiety into clearer thoughts rather than bottling up this emotional distress in your mind and storing it. Focus what you can control and manage.

IDENTIFY YOUR TRIGGERS AND SIGNS FOR POSSIBLE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

It is important noticing signs like tightness of chest, shortness of breath, being unable to sleep or sleeping too much, eating too little or eating too much, headaches, passing suicidal thoughts or impulses for hurting someone else.

EXPRESS YOUR EMOTIONS IN A HEALTHY WAY

Everyone has his own way of coping up with emotional distress. Some

ways are more damaging than being helpful like turning to alcohol, gambling games, arguing and violence also create more problems than solutions. So you can think about what you enjoy most and develop them into coping methods.

FEELINGS AND CONCERNS TO FRIEND AND FAMILY

Setting up support system for each other is beneficial to get through this time together. Talking to others might help you to understand your situation, talk to your friends and family if you feel emotional distress, sharing will help externalise your emotions and feelings. If you feel you have desperate thoughts or at risk of harming others please tell your family or friends, workout safety plan for yourself and family, talking to a professional will be of help.

SEEK HELP THROUGH HELPLINE AVAILABLE IN YOUR AREA

Many centres, psychiatrists, psychologists, healthcare workers (trained for the job) and hospitals offer this service.

GIVE OTHERS LOVE AND CARE

Be kind and caring as giving help to others makes us feel happier too. Do call your neighbours and friends who need more social connections, especially vulnerable elderly or someone who lives alone. Sometimes a warm greeting like “how are you doing” is very helpful for people who need more social support.

REMEMBER FIVE KEY WORDS: CONNECTED, CREATIVE, GIVING, LEARNING AND ACTIVE

These five factors contribute to well-being both physical and mental health, belief in ourselves, we can go through this great social trauma together by caring for ourselves and each other.

Smell, taste loss could be early signs of infection

NEW YORK: Several people lost their sense of smell or taste weeks ago globally and are still waiting for it to come back and now, researchers have identified an association between sensory loss and novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) infection, indicating that loss of smell and taste may be considered as early symptoms of the deadly disease.

Interestingly, the study also found that persons who reported experiencing a sore throat more often tested negative for COVID-19.

The team from University of California-San Diego found high prevalence and unique presentation of certain sensory impairments in patients positive with COVID-19.

Of those who reported a loss of smell and taste, the loss was typically profound, not mild.

“Based on our study, if you have smell and taste loss, you are more than 10 times more likely to have COVID-19 infection than other causes of infection.

The most common first sign of a COVID-19 infection remains fever, but fatigue and loss of smell and taste follow as other very common initial symptoms”, explained study researcher Carol Yan from UC San Diego.

“We know COVID-19 is an extremely contagious virus. This study supports the need to be aware of smell and taste loss as early signs of COVID-19”, Yan added.

For the findings, published in the journal International Forum of Allergy and Rhinology, the research team surveyed 1,480 patients with flu-like symptoms and concerns regarding potential COVID-19 infection who underwent testing at UC San Diego Health from March 3 through March 29, 2020.

Within that total, 102 patients tested positive for the virus and 1,378

Coronavirus symptoms

2019 Novel Coronavirus identified in Wuhan, China

Sources: WHO/CDC

Common signs of infection

- Fever
- Cough
- Diarrhea
- Shortness of breath
- Breathing difficulties
- Gastro-intestinal symptoms

Severe cases

- Pneumonia
- Severe acute respiratory syndrome
- Kidney failure
- DEATH

Treatment

- No vaccines or antiviral drugs available
- Symptoms can be treated

© AFP

tested negatives. The study included responses from 59 COVID-19-positive patients and 203 COVID-19-negative patients.

Encouragingly, the rate of recovery of smell and taste was high and occurred usually within two to

four weeks of infection.

“Our study not only showed that the high incidence of smell and taste is specific to COVID-19 infection but we fortunately also found that for the majority of people sensory recovery was generally rapid”, said Yan.

“Among the COVID-19 patients with smell loss, more than 70 per cent had reported improvement of smell at the time of the survey and of those who hadn’t reported improvement, many had only been diagnosed recently”, she added.

India extends world's biggest virus lockdown till May 3

COVID-19: South Asian nations have so far been relatively unscathed by the pandemic



A rickshaw driver carries passengers wearing facemasks past a mural in New Delhi. — AFP

NEW DELHI: India's nationwide coronavirus lockdown, the biggest in the world covering 1.3 billion people, will be extended until May 3, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Tuesday.

The move comes despite complaints from millions of poor, a vast underclass who have been left almost completely without support as jobs have vanished and incomes dried up.

"From the economic angle, we have paid a big price," Modi said. "But the lives of the people of India are far more valuable."

"From the experiences of the last few days it is clear that the path we have chosen is correct."

India's current three-week-old lockdown, in force since March 25, had been scheduled to end at midnight on Tuesday.

Modi said there would be "limited relaxations" from April 20 for districts with no cases, and new guidelines for industry and agriculture would be released on Wednesday.

The announcement comes as debate

rages around the world on how to lift restrictions so that the economic carnage of the pandemic can be eased without a new spike in infections.

Official figures suggest South Asian nations have so far been relatively unscathed by the epidemic, with around 10,000 cases and 339 deaths in India. Some experts say India has not conducted enough tests and that the true number of infections is much higher.

And with some of the most crowded cities on the planet, there are fears that numbers could take off and overwhelm the shaky healthcare system.

Several states including Maharashtra — home to Mumbai and with the highest number of cases — Tamil Nadu and Odisha have already announced lockdown extensions.

The World Health Organisation on Tuesday praised India's decision to extend the lockdown, saying "it would go a long way in arresting the virus spread".

"Despite huge and multiple challenges, India has been displaying



From the economic angle, we have paid a big price. But the lives of the people of India are far more valuable. From the experiences of the last few days it is clear that the path we have chosen is correct

NARENDRA MODI
Prime Minister of India

unwavering commitment in its fight against the pandemic," WHO regional director Poonam Khetrpal Singh said in a statement.

DEVASTATING FOR THE POOR

The shutdown, with strict limits on activity, has been devastating for the economy — and in particular for India's poor.

Millions of daily wage labourers suddenly lost their jobs, forcing hundreds of thousands to travel hundreds of kilometres back to their home villages, often on foot.

Some died on the way, while others were shunned by locals when they made it back. One clip that went viral on social media showed a group of migrants being hosed down with chemicals by local officials.

Others have been stranded in cities in cramped, unsanitary conditions where the virus could spread quickly. New Delhi alone is providing hundreds of thousands of free meals.

SNARL-UPS

Farmers have complained of a lack of workers to harvest crops while snarl-ups of thousands of trucks not allowed to move because of the lockdown have hampered food transport.

"We have tried to keep the interests of the poor and the daily wage workers in mind while making these new guidelines," Modi said in his 24-minute address. — **AFP**

IN BRIEF

North Korea fires multiple missiles into the sea

SEOUL: North Korea has fired multiple short-range projectiles into the East Sea on Tuesday, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported, citing the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) of Seoul's military.

The projectiles, which are believed to be surface-to-ship cruise missiles, flew around 150 kilometres.

They were fired from North Korea's eastern coastal town of Munchon in a north-westerly direction, the JCS said.

The launch comes on the eve of South Korea's parliamentary elections.

In March, North Korea test-fired a number of ballistic missiles over the course of the month after a three-month pause.

North Korea is banned from testing ballistic missiles by UN resolutions, and has been slapped with tough international sanctions to deter it from continuing to develop rockets that could be equipped with nuclear warheads. — **dpa**



Huge forest fire 'no threat' to Chernobyl nuclear zone

Hundreds of firefighters were battling a forest blaze in Ukraine's Chernobyl exclusion zone while officials insisted there was no risk to the ruined reactor and nearby storage facilities for nuclear waste. "There is no threat to the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and the storage facilities," Volodymyr Demchuk, a senior official from Ukraine's emergency service, said in a video statement.

The fire broke out 10 days ago at the scene of the world's worst nuclear accident in 1986. Kiev has mobilised helicopters and more than 400 firefighters, with planes dropping tonnes of water on the fire.

Demchuk said firefighters are now focused on stopping the spread. While forest fires are common in the exclusion zone, Greenpeace Russia said this is the worst since the 1986 nuclear explosion. The environmental campaign group said that analysis of satellite images showed the fire at its closest point was just 1.5 kilometres (less than a mile) from the protective dome over the ruined reactor. — **AFP**

Petition to make Duterte reveal health status

MANILA: A Philippine lawyer has filed a petition with the Supreme Court to compel the President Rodrigo Duterte to make his medical, physical and psychological reports public.

In his petition, which was accessed by Efe news on Tuesday, Dino De Leon questioned the state of Duterte's health and cited Section 12 of Article VII of the Constitution, which states that the public should be informed "in case of serious illness of the President".

While rumours about Duterte's health have been a matter of speculation since the 2016 presidential election, the lawyer referred to statements made by the President during recent press conferences as an argument to seek his medical reports.



20 years jail for spreading fake coronavirus news

HARARE: Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa on Tuesday threatened 20 years in jail to the author of a statement purporting to bear his signature that said the lockdown to contain the coronavirus outbreak had been extended.

Mnangagwa, who was speaking at his farm after touring Gweru city in central Zimbabwe, told state broadcaster ZBC the statement, which circulated on social media last week and was immediately denied by the government, was fake.

"That is absolutely nonsense, I have never made such a statement," Mnangagwa said. — **Reuters**

ASEAN leaders prioritise COVID-19 control

HANOI: At the special virtual summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) on Tuesday, leaders of the 10 member states affirmed that the bloc's current leading priority was controlling the COVID-19 pandemic and preventing it from spreading further.

The 10 Asean members, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, and the Asean Secretary-General agreed that the countries should join hands with one another and with other nations to prevent the global pandemic from spreading further, with focus on preventing cross-border infections.

The leaders also stated that the Asean should pay due attention to taking measures to minimise the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19.

The countries should forge closer coordination in protecting their citizens, providing social security services as well as economic stimulus and aid packages, and maintaining

supply chains to protect people and assist small- and medium-sized enterprises.

The Asean leaders also touched upon mapping out plans to recover the economy in the post-pandemic period, including stepping up intra-bloc trade, speeding up negotiations and then finalising economic cooperation deals, implementing economic stimulus packages, and enhancing the capability of coping with external shocks.

Another virtual Special Asean Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 took place on Tuesday with the participation of the state or government heads of the 10 Asean members, China, Japan and South Korea, the Asean Secretary-General and the World Health Organization Director-General.

The two summits are taking place at a time when COVID-19 continues to strike many countries around the world, including Asean nations, posing a grave threat to human health and safety, while fuelling worries about its huge impact on economy regionally and globally. — **IANIS**

Pacific clean-up after homes 'blown to smithereens' by superstorm

VANUATU: Tens of thousands of people remain homeless in Vanuatu a week after Tropical Cyclone Harold pummeled the Pacific nation, smashing houses and destroying crops, aid workers said on Tuesday.

The cyclone careened through the South Pacific last week, peaking as a Category Five superstorm that gouged a trail of destruction across the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga.

With aid efforts hampered by coronavirus-related travel restrictions, World Vision said up to 35 per cent of Vanuatu's 300,000 population were in temporary shelters after losing their homes.

"Shelter at this time remains absolutely the most pressing issue," World Vision's Vanuatu director Kendra Gates Derousseau said.

She said in some areas the destruction was worse than the last Category Five system to hit the country, Cyclone Pam in 2015, which flattened the capital Port Vila and wiped out almost two-thirds of the country's economic capacity.

"After Pam, people were able to pick up the pieces pretty quickly, put a tarp on the roof and replant the garden," she said.



Tropical Cyclone Harold caused widespread damage in Vanuatu. — **AFP**

"What we're seeing from Harold is that houses have been blown to smithereens, there's nothing to pick up."

She said there was extensive damage on the islands of Pentecost, Ambae and Santo, where Vanuatu's second-largest town, Luganville, took a direct hit.

The death toll in Vanuatu stands at three, although Gates Derousseau said that could rise as information filtered in from hard-hit remote areas.

"The government and first responders in Vanuatu did an excellent job of making people safe ahead of the storm hitting and meeting immediate needs after it hit," he said in a statement.

"As the extent of the destruction becomes clear, this UN funding will ensure aid supplies are maintained and reach the people who need it."

The coronavirus pandemic has complicated disaster relief efforts, with Vanuatu reluctant to open its international borders as it seeks to remain one of the few countries without any confirmed cases of the virus.

Gates Derousseau said this meant aid distribution to some areas of Vanuatu had been slow, but the government could not afford to risk importing the disease.

"From the outside, it looks frustrating," she said.

"There's no choice though, a COVID-19 outbreak on top of the cyclone would be unfathomable."

Australia and New Zealand have airlifted disaster relief supplies to Vanuatu, and Gates Derousseau said China had also sent a plane loaded with COVID-19-related medical supplies. — **AFP**

Lockdown stalls Notre-Dame's make a year after fire

Perched over the gaping roof of Notre-Dame, a crane stands idle above the silent Paris cathedral, where repair work has ground to a halt one year after the monstrous blaze that nearly destroyed one of the world's most revered monuments.

Millions around the world watched in horror last April 15 as firefighters battled through the night to save the 13th-century masterpiece from the fire, which ravaged its roof and toppled the steeple.

French President Emmanuel Macron promised a herculean effort to have the Unesco heritage site restored within five years, in time for the Paris Olympics of 2024.

But France's lockdown to combat the coronavirus — which has forced a full suspension of work at the site — is making that goal even more unlikely than before.

Work had already been delayed for months by decontamination efforts after more than 300 tonnes of lead from the

roof melted in the blaze, covering the site in toxic particles that have proven hard to remove.

And the fragile structure remains at risk despite the massive wooden beams propping up the arches and gables. Authorities had to halt work several times over the winter when winds surpassed 40 km per hour.

The 60 to 70 workers normally on site have not even removed the tangled web of metal scaffolding tubes that fused together in the inferno, which erupted during renovation work on the roof.

Until they do, they cannot install a more durable temporary roof to protect the church's priceless artworks from rain.

Although investigators have still not determined the cause of the fire, prosecutors suspect faulty electrical wiring or a poorly extinguished cigarette.

Jean-Louis Georgelin, the five-star general and fervent Catholic in charge of

France's lockdown to combat the coronavirus — which has forced a full suspension of work at the site — is making that goal even more unlikely than before

the renovation, is hoping to resume work soon, perhaps by his "squirrels," who hang by ropes to reach areas where it is too dangerous to walk.

"For these technicians, these tightrope walkers, social distancing is part of the job," Georgelin said.

Much of the debris has been removed from the nave, which allowed Paris

Archbishop Michel Aupetit to hold a small Good Friday ceremony in the church last week.

But mounds of debris still have to be cleared above the massive vaulted roof, a more delicate operation that was supposed to be finished this summer.

Notre-Dame's renowned organ must also be removed to have its nearly 8,000 pipes painstakingly cleaned from the layer of lead dust deposited by the melting of the roof and spire.

Countless other cleaning and restoration operations await, and the project's chief architect Philippe Villeneuve has warned that new challenges could arise as the work progresses.

Even the esplanade in front of Notre-Dame remains off limits, surrounded by a tall fence to keep tourists far from the worksite.

Yet Georgelin said he remains confident the five-year goal will be met

despite the coronavirus delay, promising that worshippers will hear a "Te Deum" sung in the cathedral in April 2024.

"Lots of people said we'd cut corners to finish in five years. These are malicious comments — It's a question of carrying out the work assiduously, without any hesitation," he said.

Yet officials still have to decide a crucial question: Rebuild the cathedral exactly as it was, using traditional techniques and materials, or incorporate modern equipment and expertise?

Macron has said he is in favour of adding a "contemporary" touch to the spire, which was itself a relatively modern touch, installed by the architect Eugene Viollet-le-Duc in the mid-19th century.

Villeneuve has refused to countenance any glass spire, rooftop garden or any other proposals that have emerged. Opinion polls suggest most French share his more conservative view. — AFP



Beijing's coronavirus security measures are particularly strict. — AFP

Beijing now turns into virtual fortress

Beijing has virtually walled itself off to outsiders with drastic measures to protect China's seat of power against the threat of a second wave of coronavirus infections from other regions.

After largely getting the outbreak under control, China has banned foreigners from entering the country as authorities fret over an increase in cases imported from abroad — though most have been Chinese citizens.

But Beijing has gone a step further, imposing a strict 14-day quarantine on people arriving from other parts of China, regardless of whether they test negative for COVID-19 — a measure not required in other cities.

Beijing, of course, is not like any other Chinese city.

The ruling Communist Party postponed its once-a-year congress, known as the "two sessions," in March and experts said it likely wants to make sure the thousands of delegates who participate are not at risk before a new date is set.

"Strengthening management of people returning to Beijing has become the most critical priority, otherwise it is impossible to create the right conditions for the two sessions to start," said Ma Liang, a professor at Renmin University's School of Public Administration and Policy.

The measures are ultimately meant to shield the Communist Party elite from the virus, said Alfred Wu, associate professor at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy.

"In this moment, the central government and core leadership are highly protected, so ordinary people will have to pay the price," he said.

Strengthening management of people returning to Beijing has become the most critical priority, otherwise it is impossible to create the right conditions for the two sessions to start

Beijing has imposed a mandatory 14-day quarantine on all returning students, who must test negative to attend school. All hotel guests must test negative within seven days prior to their stay.

The measures have already deterred some from going back.

Chen Na, a carer from Anhui province, cannot return to her former employer in Beijing because her area was labelled "high-risk".

"When they see where I'm from, the conversation stops. I can't even get an interview. I've been out of work since February," she said.

But the toughest conditions are reserved for people travelling to Beijing from Wuhan, the central city where the virus first emerged late last year.

Those leaving the city, whose months-long lockdown was lifted on April 8, must test negative within seven days before their return date, undergo a 14-day quarantine once they arrive, and test negative again in order to be released.

Other cities only require those from

Wuhan and Hubei province to produce a green health code on a special app and a negative nucleic acid test result.

They must first request to return to Beijing through an app when they receive their negative diagnosis.

If approved, they have to submit another request to purchase train tickets to the capital, which are limited to 1,000 seats per day on two services.

"I originally bought tickets for the 12th, but I was told on the evening of the 7th that I needed a negative test result in order to return," said Wuhan resident Liu Shiyi, who arrived in Beijing by train on Sunday.

One day before her train was due to leave, her residential compound said she needed to obtain a paper copy of her negative certificate from the hospital.

"The whole time, my compound received orders from above in a very delayed fashion, making me waste time going back and forth," she said.

At two major Wuhan train stations, AFP saw that special lanes for Beijing-bound travellers had been set up and were crewed by several volunteers.

There are an estimated 11,000 Beijing residents stranded in Wuhan, officials said last week, but the city has lately seen a surge in asymptomatic cases which are notoriously difficult to detect.

During a recent visit to the Beijing West Railway Station, AFP saw that arrivals from Hubei were handled in a separate area and boarded designated buses bound for each district.

Between April 8 and April 13, some 1,037 people returned to Beijing from Wuhan. None tested positive for COVID-19. — AFP

In bid for unity, Sanders backs Biden to challenge Trump

TREVOR HUNNICUTT & JAMES OLIPHANT

Senator Bernie Sanders on Monday endorsed his longtime rival former Vice President Joe Biden, a move aimed at unifying a Democratic Party long fractured along moderate and liberal lines ahead of the election match-up against President Donald Trump.

Sanders cited the novel coronavirus outbreak as a reason for the party to come together behind Biden, the likely Democratic presidential nominee after the progressive firebrand Sanders suspended his White House campaign.

Sanders' endorsement during an online campaign event came as Biden's team had already begun reaching out to advocacy groups on the left to enlist their support for the November 3 general election battle against the Republican Trump.

Before the pandemic brought the Democratic primary contest to a virtual halt, Biden had built up a commanding delegate edge over Sanders, leading the US senator from Vermont to declare last week he saw no viable path to the nomination.

Even so, it remained unclear how soon Sanders, who is especially popular with liberal young voters, would rally behind Biden, whose support comes chiefly from the party's older moderates.

Sanders' quick move to back Biden made for a stark contrast to 2016, when Sanders waited until the eve of the summer Democratic National Convention to support the then-nominee, Hillary Clinton.

In the online event, Sanders called on Democrats, independents and Republicans "to come together in this campaign to support (Biden's) candidacy, which I endorse, to make certain that we defeat somebody who I believe ... is the most dangerous president in the modern history of this country."

Biden responded by terming Sanders "the most powerful voice for a fair and more just America."

With social distancing in widespread effect, Biden has been forced to move the bulk of his campaign to online events and has watched as the global pandemic had relegated the US presidential race to the back burner.

The Sanders endorsement gives him a much-needed jolt of energy and attention.

As the last two standing in a bruising Democratic primary, Biden and Sanders represented the conflict raging within the party between its moderate and liberal wings, with moderates claiming expansive progressive policies would alienate centrist voters needed to beat Trump. But Biden and Sanders, contemporaries who both have served in the Senate, largely treated each other with civility, even when some on the left wanted Sanders to be more critical of Biden's moderate approach. — Reuters

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Oman lenders report RO 15.8 million in combined exposure to NMC Group



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

Public listed banks and financial institutions in the Sultanate have so far reported direct and indirect exposure to the tune of around RO 15.8 million to the UAE-based healthcare services group, NMC Health, which is currently being restructured following the discovery of huge debts on its balance sheet.

On Tuesday, Bank Muscat, the Sultanate's biggest lender, affirmed that it has no direct exposure to the troubled Abu Dhabi headquartered group. The Bank however noted that it has extended a guarantee limit of RO 250K to Unimoni Exchange LLC, a related company in Oman. The guarantee is secured against 100 per cent cash margin, it stressed.

Four other Oman-based lenders and financing houses — Bank Nizwa, HSBC Bank Oman, Tageer Finance and Sohar International Bank — have so far disclosed direct and indirect exposure to the embattled NMC Group.

Earlier on Monday, Reuters reported that the administrators of NMC Health have set up a new board for the London-listed company that brings in four new non-executive directors with international restructuring experience. Previous board members, including executive chairman Faisal Belhoul have been removed, the administrators said in a statement.

The move came after London's High Court on Thursday placed NMC Health into administration, on the application of one of its biggest lenders, Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank (ADCB).

Michael Brenden Davis remains as interim chief executive officer and chief operating officer, but does not sit on the company's board, the administrators from Alvarez & Marsal said.

Oman's new Tax Authority to foster efficient tax administration

INDEPENDENT INSTITUTION: NEW ENTITY TO REPORT DIRECTLY TO THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

The establishment of an independent Tax Authority with an integrated organisational structure bodes well for the growth of a robust, modern and efficient tax apparatus in the Sultanate, according to a well-known Muscat-based tax expert.

Ashok Hariharan (pictured), Partner and Head of Tax — KPMG Lower Gulf, said the revamped entity, established by Royal Decree 66/2019 last October, with its new organizational structured approved more recently by Royal Decree 42/2020, will also pave the way for a national tax administration modeled on the lines of modern tax entities in operation elsewhere around the world.

"The new Tax Authority has been granted autonomy and now reports directly to the Council of Ministers," said Hariharan. "At the helm is a new Head of the rank of Minister and with the authority to issue regulations, policies and administrative decisions related to tax administration."

Speaking to the Observer, he said the new entity effectively replaces the erstwhile Secretariat General



of Taxation, which was part of the Ministry of Finance. As an independent state institution in its own right, the Tax Authority will oversee the efficient administration and collection of tax revenues, which account for a significant share of the public purse.

Importantly, the new Tax Authority has been conceived to operate as a homogenous organization and not as a collection of departments each focused on specific taxes.

"One of the main features is that the Tax Authority will function seamlessly, instead of different departments for different taxes,

“
At the helm is a new Head of the rank of Minister and with the authority to issue regulations, policies and administrative decisions related to tax administration.

ASHOK HARIHARAN
Partner, KPMG

say corporate tax, withholding tax, excise tax (introduced last year), and VAT, which could come next year. Rather, they will have tax directors responsible for a certain set of tax payers.

That tax director will ensure compliance with the taxes – be it corporate tax, excise tax, or any other tax that may come in the future. So there is more coordinated information available to the assessing officers when they determine whether tax payers are in compliance. This enhances the

efficiency of tax administration, as well as the prompt collection of taxes that are due."

Furthermore, the establishment of the Tax Authority with a modern organizational structure also has beneficial implications for Oman's aspirations to attract foreign investment, according to the tax professional.

"The issuance of Royal Decree 42/2020 and the By-Law echoes the Tax Authority's autonomous status, established last year, and enables timely tax policy changes.

In fact, after announcing the new tax structure in October 2019, Oman has signed the Automatic Exchange of Information. In November 2019, the Multilateral Convention (MLI) was also signed which supports implementation of tax-treaty related measures to prevent Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS).

Both tax policy measures were ratified through issuance of respective RDs (34/2020 and 43/2020) on March 31, 2020. Given the pace of tax reforms, Oman may soon come out of the current EU blacklist, which is dampening foreign investments," he added.

China lifts 92 per cent of Omani crude exports in March

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

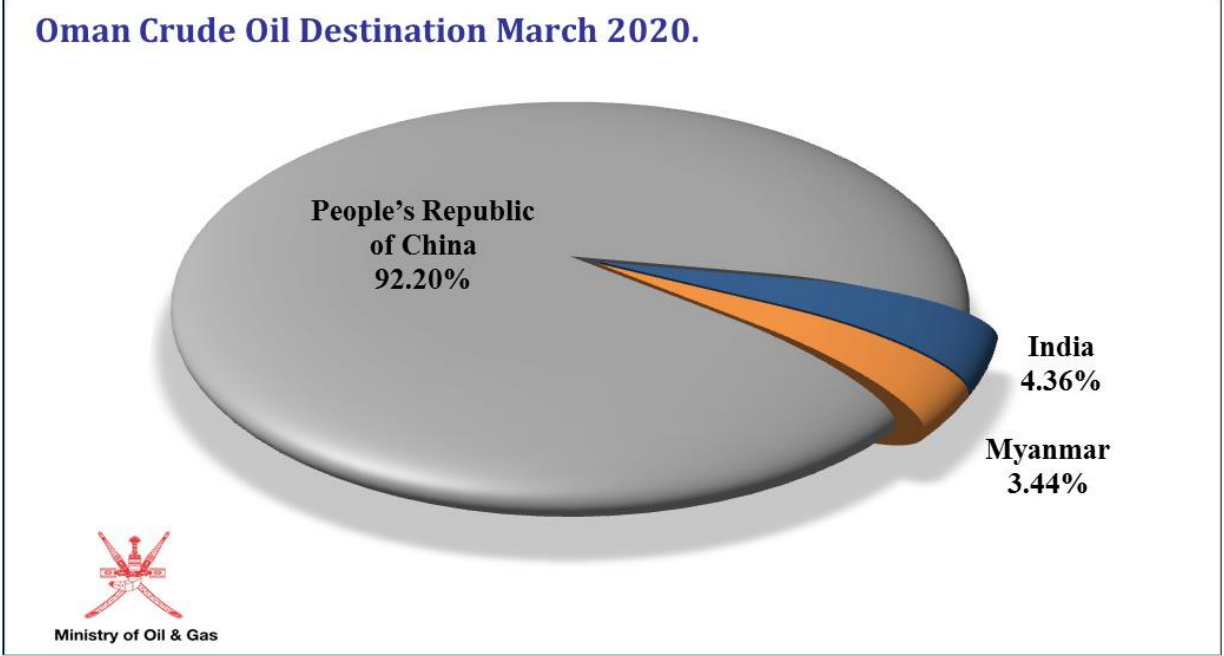
China remained the top destination for Omani crude exports in March 2020, lifting 92.2 per cent of exports averaging 738,348 barrels per day (bpd) during the month, the Ministry of Oil and Gas announced here yesterday. India came a distant second with 4.36 per cent of exports, followed by Myanmar with a 3.44 per cent share.

Oman's daily production of crude oil and condensate during March 2020 reached 1,078,475 barrels, which was up 12.83 per cent over figures for February 2020.

The prices of benchmark crudes around the world declined during March 2020 – for delivery in May 2020 - compared with trading month of February 2020.

The average price of West Texas Crude Oil at the New York Mercantile Exchange (NYMEX) settled at \$30.67 per barrel, declined by \$20.02 per barrel, whereas the average price of North Sea Oil (Brent) at the Intercontinental Exchange (ICE) in London reached \$33.73 per barrel, which was lower by \$21.7 per barrel in comparison with figures for February 2020.

The average price of Oman's Crude Oil future contracts at DME also dropped by 36.2 per cent compared



OMAN'S DAILY PRODUCTION OF CRUDE OIL AND CONDENSATE DURING MARCH 2020 REACHED 1,078,475 BARRELS, WHICH WAS UP 12.83 PER CENT OVER FIGURES FOR FEBRUARY 2020.

to the previous month. The monthly average price of Omani crude oil during trading in March 2020 – for delivery in May 2020 – declined to \$34.85 a barrel, which was lower by \$19.77 per barrel compared with April 2020 deliveries. The daily trading price ranged between \$23.95 per barrel and \$52.15 per barrel.

"Crude oil prices have experienced

a collective decline during the trading of March 2020 due to several factors, which had direct and negative impact on prices. The continued negative impact of the spread of the coronavirus on the global economy, has forced the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and the US Energy Information Agency to reduce their expectations for oil demand.

In addition, the decrease in global demand for oil, gasoline and aviation fuel due to restrictions of movement and gatherings and the closure of companies and schools.

Also, fears from a global recession due to the closures imposed by governments to contain the spread of the disease," said the Ministry in a statement.

Pact for new vehicle trade centre at Al Mazunah FZ

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) signed an agreement with Al Alia Investment and Industry Company to establish vehicle trade centre on a total area of 53,000 sq metres at Al Mazunah Free Zone.

The project, which is estimated at a total value of RO 400,000, will be specialised in trading, re-exporting and repairing vehicles, and providing a variety of automobile related services. The agreement was signed by Said bin Abdullah al Balushi, Director General of Al Mazunah Free Zone, and Abdulmalik bin Hilal al Bahri, Chief Executive Officer of Al Alia Investment and Industry Company.

Commenting on this agreement, Said al Balushi, Director General of Al Mazunah Free Zone, stressed that automobile and auto parts industry is one of the key sectors that the free zone is currently focusing on its development. "Significant efforts are being made by Al Mazunah Free Zone to attract companies specialised in trading new and used vehicles," Al Balushi said, adding: "The vehicle trade centre shall stimulate other automobile related businesses such as vehicle repair workshops, spare parts, vehicle wash businesses, and related SMEs to provide their services. Besides, the project aims at providing job opportunities, boosting other economic sectors as well as stimulating the transportation sector and the Omani ports through which these vehicles are imported."

The total number of incoming vehicles to Al Mazunah Free Zone touched 2,066 by the end of March 2020, marking a growth rate that exceeds 500 per cent and an increase of 1736 vehicles compared to the same period of 2019. Since the beginning of April this year, an increasing trade movement has been observed at the free zone. The second quarter of the current year is expected to witness major increase in the volume of goods and vehicles entering the free zone.

The strategic location of Al Mazunah Free Zone on the border of the Sultanate and Yemen makes it the Gulf gateway for transit trade to Yemen and Eastern Africa. General incentives are offered to the investors in the free zone, including customs' exemptions, 100 per cent foreign ownership, no minimum capital requirements, and Omanisation rate stands at 10 per cent.



Oman's Phaze Ventures invests in French seismic monitoring start-up

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

Phaze Ventures, the Oman-based venture capital firm, is investing in SpotLight, the French geoscience start-up that provides dynamic detection of subsurface movements. The deal marks Phaze Ventures' seventh investment since 2018, building on its mission to transform traditional industries with disruptive technology.

SpotLight's proprietary single source, single receiver seismic monitoring technology is currently being piloted by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

The first and only solution to offer 4D seismic monitoring of subsurface movements from a single source and a single receiver, SpotLight's technology drastically reduces the cost of effective real-time monitoring. With 4D seismic monitoring having proven prohibitively expensive in most use cases, this unlocks the possibility of accurate monitoring for a much wider range of projects than ever before including, but not limited to, projects stretching across the oil and gas value chain and nuclear storage.

Habib al Khatib, Founder and CEO at SpotLight adds: "We are thrilled to be a part of the Phaze Ventures portfolio. Over the last six months we have been working very closely with the team and Petroleum Development Oman to further develop and deploy our technology in-country. The results so far have been very exciting and we look forward to continuing our rapid progress over the months and years to come."

"Phaze Ventures' deep industry partnerships and network will play a crucial role in that development, as



Source: Marine Techn

DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGY: SPOTLIGHT'S PROPRIETARY SINGLE SOURCE, SINGLE RECEIVER SEISMIC MONITORING TECHNOLOGY IS CURRENTLY BEING PILOTED BY PETROLEUM DEVELOPMENT OMAN (PDO).

Mazoon Electricity continues network expansions

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

As part of its development and service sustainability plans for customers, Mazoon Electricity Company, the leading electricity provider in Oman, continues with its electricity network expansion works aimed at augmenting network efficiency, improving power quality and reducing contingency service interruptions.

In this context, the company recently completed the energising of two electricity feeders with a voltage of 33 kV from Al-Aiga main substation.

Two additional electricity substations of Mazoon Electricity with a voltage of 11 kV were made operational earlier this month at the Ibra police station building in the governorate of Al Sharqiyah North.

A technical examination of the building's internal electrical connections was made to ensure the building was ready to be connected to the electrical network.

Two new lines, operating at 11 kV, were made operational at Samad Al-Shan substation in Wilayat Al Mudaibi, in the Al Sharqiyah North governorate.

OTF now a leading investor in start-ups

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

Eng Yousef bin Ali al Harthy, CEO of Oman Technology Fund (OTF), announced on Tuesday that the Fund is the leading venture capital investment fund in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with MAGNiTT – the region's leading data platform – ranking the Sultanate the fourth most important investor in start-ups.

The CEO said: "As part of the Sultanate's efforts to support a knowledge-based economic transformation, OTF was established in November 2016, at which time the Sultanate's ranking was 17th regionally in the MENA region. After the fund's inception, it invested in innovative projects based on technology."

OTF ended its first year with 17 investments, which made the Sultanate advance to the tenth



place, according to the report of Arab Net, which is specialized in monitoring bold investments.

By the end of 2018, the Sultanate ranked fifth in the Middle East and North Africa region, according to MAGNiTT, which publishes periodic reports on start-up investments. In 2019, the Oman Technology Fund invested in 51 innovative technology-based projects."

Oman, he said, is highly

placed in the innovation space, according to a report by the Global Innovation Index in 2019. The Sultanate ranked first globally in the ratio of Engineering and Science graduates, in comparison with the total number of general graduates, which constitutes one of the most important components of technological innovation.

OTF has recently supported 14 projects based on innovation and technology to support the

“
In 2019, the Oman Technology Fund invested in 51 innovative technology-based projects.

ENG YOUSEF BIN ALI AL HARTHY
CEO, OTF

national drive against the spread of COVID-19, he said. OTF launched an initiative to encourage innovation in areas that help society overcome the challenges it faces by allocating RO 1 million for youth-led projects. The Fund has so far invested in five projects submitted by more than 20 Omani young men and women.

BankDhofar launches instant money transfer through Western Union

MUSCAT: BankDhofar is pleased to announce the new feature of its Mobile Banking App, which enables the customers to send money instantly across the world through Western Union.

Commenting on the new service, Ahmed Said al Ibrahim, General Manager & Chief Corporate Services Officer at BankDhofar, noted: "This initiative is part of BankDhofar's continuous transformation plan, which is putting digital technology and innovation at the core of its strategy to improve the experience of its customers. This move will enable BankDhofar customers to benefit from Western Union transfer feature in our Mobile Banking App, and send money across the world. BankDhofar has always been in a leading position to offer a range of new products and instant payment services."

"BankDhofar is one of the leading banks in the Sultanate in deploying the latest technologies and in providing cutting-



edge financial solutions. The Western Union is a global leader in cross-border, cross-currency money movement. We have added the feature of sending money instantly across the world to our Mobile Banking App through Western Union, with a competitive transaction rate of only RO 1.500 to all countries. The first 5,000 transactions will be free of charge, subject to one free transaction per customer. This addition will enrich our customers experience," Dr Tariq Taha, DGM and Chief Digital Banking Digital & Information Officer, added.

BankDhofar's Mobile Banking App offers a wide range of exclusive services which are available only with through its award winning App. The services include; instant transfer to any Bank in the Sultanate, cardless cash, mobile top-up for all telecom providers in the Sultanate, increasing withdrawal limit to RO 5,000, among other services.

Investment banks face added risk in ME following pandemic

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

Leading management consultancy Oliver Wyman and investment bank Morgan Stanley have released its latest report highlighting that in the event of a rapid economic rebound following the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact on wholesale and investment banks' earnings are even more at risk in GCC countries.

Entitled 'Steering through the next cycle', the new report outlines three potential scenarios for the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impacts on investment banks, ranging from a rapid rebound

to a deep global recession, assessing the implications for wholesale banks over the medium-term.

Despite the banking industry having built extensive capital and liquidity buffers to endure a challenging downturn, their profitability heading into a crisis is at its lowest point, creating greater pressure on earnings that could reveal structural weaknesses in some banks' business models.

It is expected some banks will deliver returns of less than five per cent, far below the 10 per cent targeted by investors.

In the most optimistic 'rapid rebound' scenario following the



COVID-19 pandemic, which would take at least six months for normal operating conditions to be restored, Oliver Wyman and Morgan Stanley

It is expected some banks will deliver returns of less than five per cent, far below the 10 per cent targeted by investors.

project that wholesale and investment banks could witness a 100 per cent erosion in earnings.

In the most pessimistic 'deep global recession' scenario, lasting at least one year, the combination of lower

revenues and elevated credit losses for banks could drive earnings down by 277 per cent with credit losses of \$200-300 billion.

Mathieu Vasseux, Head of Financial Services MEA at Oliver Wyman, said: "Our report shows that wholesale and investment banks are not immune to the COVID-19 pandemic."

The impact of the pandemic on wholesale banking in the GCC is compounded by the 60 per cent collapse in the oil price, which could amplify GDP contraction by up to 40 per cent in the most challenging quarters, making the impact even

more acute for the Middle East region.

"Although GCC countries are resilient, in the event of our worst case scenario, corporate defaults would increase alongside cost of risk by up to 200 per cent."

Additionally, wholesale banking in the GCC is heavily geared towards wholesale lending, constituting 70 per cent of their total revenues, adding pressure to the top line which would also be affected by lower rates."

Oliver Wyman believes the global economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak depends on its duration, how far it spreads and the extent quarantine disrupts the labour market.

China's 2020 GDP growth set to sink to 44-year low

BEIJING: China's economic growth is set to stumble to its slowest annual pace in nearly half a century, as the coronavirus health crisis shutters businesses and brings the global economy to a standstill, a Reuters poll showed on Tuesday.

China's leaders have pledged to take more steps to combat the impact from the pandemic that looks likely to delay a recovery in the virus-ravaged economy, as mounting job losses pose a threat to social stability.

Growth in the world's second-biggest economy for 2020 was forecast at 2.5 per cent, according to the median of 62 analysts surveyed by Reuters, which would mark the weakest clip since 1976, the final year of the decade-long Cultural Revolution that wrecked the economy.

That is a sharp easing from a 6.1 per cent gain in 2019, and is below the 5.4 per cent growth forecast in the March poll.

The survey also predicted China's economy in the first quarter will contract by 6.5 per cent year-on-year, for the first time since at least 1992 when the country first started issuing quarterly gross domestic product (GDP) data.

It also marks a reversal from 3.5 per cent growth forecast in the last survey done in the previous month. China will release its first-quarter GDP data on April 17.

The projected 2020 growth would be weaker than the 3.9 per cent rate in 1990, when the economy was hit hard after the Tiananmen crackdown, but still outperform a 1.6 per cent contraction in 1976.

The forecasts highlighted the challenges faced by the Asia's engine of growth given an immediate recovery looked some way off as the global



Workers wearing face masks pull a rope a of a container ship at a port in Qingdao, China. — Reuters

Growth in the world's second-biggest economy for 2020 was forecast at 2.5 per cent which would mark the weakest clip since 1976, the final year of Cultural Revolution that wrecked the economy.

pandemic hits exports, despite a sharp slowdown in China's virus infections from its peak in February.

Early in the outbreak, Beijing imposed draconian travel restrictions and factory suspensions to curb the spread of the disease, but at a heavy price.

As the number of new domestic cases are now easing, the government is slowly relaxing emergency measures and exhorting industries to reopen. But analysts say the pace of recovery in the coming months will be heavily constrained by external headwinds.

The virus has spread rapidly around

the world, prompting unprecedented shutdowns in many countries, which has wreaked havoc along global supply chains and severely hurt overseas demand, raising the risk of a steep global recession this year.

"Despite its initial success in containing COVID-19, China is

still faced with two dire challenges: nosediving external demand due to the pandemic, and the rising threat of a second wave of the virus," said economists with Nomura, adding that the hope of a quick recovery is dimming.

The slump in China's exports and

imports eased in March, customs data showed on Tuesday, but analysts say the overall outlook remains grim as the pandemic has brought business activity in its major trading partners to a standstill.

The health crisis has dealt a particularly heavy blow to the country's private sector, which is the most productive part of the economy and a key source of employment.

The small and privately-owned firms are facing a severe cash crunch to tide over a prolonged downturn, with many laying off workers or shutting down businesses.

Analysts expect nearly 30 million job losses this year due to stuttering work resumptions and plunging global demand, outpacing the 20-plus million layoffs during the 2008-09 financial crisis.

"Lingering fear of the virus and uncertainty over job losses mean people are remaining cautious. We expect household consumption to be negatively affected for many months to come and see only a gradual sequential recovery from Q2 onwards," said Louis Kuijs, economist at Oxford Economics.

MORE STIMULUS STEPS IN PIPELINE

The negative growth shock has already prompted a raft of monetary policy response from the central bank, but so far its easing has been more measured than during the global financial crisis.

Sources said the People's Bank of China (PBOC) will ramp up its policy easing to support the economy but will not follow the US Federal Reserve's steep rate cuts or quantitative easing moves, mindful of debt and property market risks.

Analysts expect the PBOC to deliver another 100 basis points (bps) in banks' reserve retirement ratios (RRR), and lower the one-year LPR by 35 bps to 3.70 per cent by the end of 2020.

The poll also predicted the benchmark deposit rate to be cut to 1.25 per cent from its current level of 1.50 per cent. The PBOC has kept the benchmark deposit rate unchanged at 1.5 per cent since October 2015.

China's consumer price index (CPI) in 2020 will likely rise 3.3 per cent from the previous year, quickening from a 2.9 per cent rise in 2019, according to the poll. — Reuters

Oil prices slip as producer cuts fail to banish demand fears

LONDON: Oil prices edged lower on Tuesday, with investors apparently unconvinced that record supply cuts could soon balance markets pummeled by the coronavirus pandemic, though a predicted plunge in US shale output provided some support.

Brent futures fell 25 cents, or 0.8 per cent, to \$31.49 a barrel by 0825 GMT after settling 0.8 per cent higher on Monday. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude was down 22 cents, or 1 per cent, at \$22.19, having dropped 1.5 per cent in the previous session.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec), along with Russia and other producing countries — a grouping known as Opec+ — agreed over Easter to cut output by 9.7 million



A man stands at the Hammar Mushrif degassing facility site inside Basra's Zubair oil field in Iraq. — AFP

barrels per day (bpd) in May and June, equating to about 10 per cent of global supply before the coronavirus outbreak.

Additional output cuts by the United States, the world's biggest

producer, and other nations outside the Opec+ group will take the estimated total reduction to about 19.5 million bpd. Yet oil prices remain down by more than 50 per cent this year. — Reuters

French economy to contract 8pc this year

PARIS: The French government scrapped its days-old economic outlook after President Emmanuel Macron extended a national lockdown, shutting down swathes of the euro zone's second-biggest economy.

Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire (pictured) said the economy was now expected to contract 8 per cent this year instead of the 6 per cent flagged as recently as Thursday, revising the number to take the longer lockdown into account.

Since March 17, France's 67 million people have been ordered to stay at home except to buy food, go to work, seek medical care or get some exercise on their own. The lockdown was originally scheduled to end on Tuesday.

The extension would put additional strain on public finances, blowing the public sector budget deficit out to a post-war record of 9



French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire attends a press conference after the weekly cabinet meeting, in Paris, France. — Reuters

per cent of GDP, up from 7.6 per cent last week, budget minister Gerald Darmanin told France Info.

The government more than doubled last week a package of measures to pull the economy back from the precipice to at least 100 billion euros (\$109.32 billion) — over 4 per cent of economic output.

"If we need to do more, then we will do more. We will be there," Le Maire told BFM TV. — Reuters

Renault SA withdraws from Dongfeng venture, its main China business

PARIS/BEIJING: Renault SA said on Tuesday it is pulling out of a loss-making business with Dongfeng Motor Group due to poor sales, becoming only the second global automaker to exit a major venture in China in recent years.

Although Renault will retain a presence in China with other ventures, the partnership with Dongfeng was its main passenger car business in the world's biggest vehicle market.

That said, the venture sold only sold only 18,607 cars in 2019, far below its annual capacity of 110,000 and reported an operating loss of more than 1.5 billion yuan (\$212 million).

Dongfeng, which will gain Renault's 50 per cent stake in their venture, plans to revamp and upgrade the venture's existing car plants which will no longer make Renault-branded cars, a spokeswoman for the Chinese automaker said.

Dongfeng will arrange positions for the staff at the venture within its wider group operations, she added.

A slowdown in China's automotive sales, which is expected to worsen this year due to the coronavirus, has heaped pressure on carmakers that have not managed to establish a big presence in the Chinese market. In 2018, Japanese automaker Suzuki Motor Corp sold its stake in a venture with Changan Automobile. — Reuters

Exxon raises \$9.5 billion to load up on cash

NEW YORK: Exxon Mobil Corp raised \$9.5 billion in new debt, with the largest US oil producer seeking to bolster its finances while debt markets remain open to new deals.

Exxon paid a lower price to borrow than it did in a similar debt deal almost four weeks ago, a sign of how investor confidence is gradually returning after a rout in energy prices and a stock market collapse fueled by the coronavirus outbreak.

Nevertheless, borrowing costs for Exxon were still higher than prior to the coronavirus outbreak.

Exxon raised \$9.5 billion by selling five different bonds with a variety of durations ranging from five years to 31 years, up from \$9 billion which it had originally planned to raise, indicating

robust investor demand.

In an example of how the company's borrowing costs have come down in recent weeks, it priced a 10.5-year bond worth \$2 billion at a 185 basis-point premium to US Treasuries with a 2.61 per cent yield. On March 17, Exxon sold \$2 billion in debt with a 10-year duration where the premium to US Treasuries was 240 basis points and the yield was 3.482 per cent.

In August last year, Exxon raised \$1.25 billion through a 10-year bond with a premium to US Treasuries of just 75 basis points and a yield of 2.44 per cent.

The new issue by Exxon comes as highly rated US companies have been tapping debt markets for cash at a record clip, stocking up on cash due



An airplane comes in for a landing above an Exxon sign at a gas station in the Chicago suburb of Norridge, Illinois. — Reuters

to the uncertainty surrounding the economic impact from coronavirus.

The logic behind Exxon's deal was to stock up further on cash while the market is still open to issuers of new debt, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Exxon's stock has been hammered this year by the collapse in oil prices, with its share price down 38.7 per cent so far in 2020, a steeper fall than the 14.5 per cent drop in the benchmark S&P 500 Index. Exxon said it planned to use the proceeds for "general corporate purposes."

Oil prices were mixed on Monday, as the historic production-cut deal signed by major global oil producers was not enough to assuage existing worries about the demand destruction brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. — Reuters

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Artistry and Culture of Quality Glassmaking

RAY PETERSEN

Historians still disagree whether moving the glassmaking industry from the magnificent city of Venezia, or Venice as we know it today, was to protect the city, or to protect the glassmaking craft and maintain its commercial rarity. It was in 1292 that the Grand Doge, and the Grand Council of Venezia announced that all glassmaking activity was to be moved to the small collection of islands, one mile further offshore, in order to protect the city, uniquely built on a series of canals, from the risk of fire.

Another, less romantic version, is that the glassmakers were evading taxation by selling their wares on the mainland, not in the city, so the council isolated them from their market in a protectionist and commercial move. There was also believed to be, at that time, a recognition of the value of glassmaking, and glassmakers, so throughout Italy many such craftsmen were actually murdered, or their homes and businesses were destroyed if they did not move to Venice, and ultimately to Murano. The Grand Doge and his council were obviously very powerful.

Whatever the motivation, the Grand Council of that day could not have foreseen the global reputation of Murano glassware becoming as prominent as it has today. Alongside such identifiable global craft brands and labels as Swarovski crystal, Omani silver, South Sea pearls and French Champagne, Murano glass stands ahead of its peers in terms of both

quality, and artistic wonder.

With a population of only 5,000, and almost all involved in the glassmaking industry, Murano is by no means a cultural backwater. The Church of Santa Maria et Donata is architecturally famous due to its hexagon inspired design and construction, which is enhanced by beautiful Byzantine mosaic paving and decoration. A second church, the San Pietro Martire, built in 1506, boasts artwork by Giovanni Bellini, Tintoretto and Veronese, and the Gothic façade of the Palazzo de Mulais immortalised in Monet's tiny "two men in a boat."

However, it is the glasswork that was the most prized here, and even though the industry was something of a hostage, Murano's craftsmen were permitted to wear swords in public, a privilege which identified them as part of high society, and their fame, or in some cases notoriety, took advantage of their social standing to marry into long established and wealthy families. The downside of this was, of course, that they were forced to live under the yolk of Venice all their lives, and there are very few examples of Murano tradesmen successfully 'escaping' to Europe to produce and market their skills.

Given their monopoly on glassmaking, and the skills they bought with them, glassmakers jealously guarded their own techniques, however living so closely meant that what one craftsman practiced uniquely, would soon be copied by others, as human nature and the consequences of their isolation proved too difficult to fight. Eventually, a guild was formed, and the craftsmen decided that only their sons could ever take their places and be taught the



skills of glassmaking and crafting. That rule still applies today.

Of the main techniques practiced on Murano throughout time, the most common is the *Millefiori*, literally interpreted as "thousand flowers" and is the process of creating a single long, thin, multi-coloured rod, known as a murrine which is drawn longer and thinner while maintaining the cross-sectional art design. It is then cut into beadlike shapes for necklaces, bracelets and the like.

Aventurine glass was produced initially by the Miotti family, in the 17th century, its origins perhaps dictated by the name they gave it, which means 'lucky' or "by chance" and was discovered when workers accidentally contaminated a batch of glass with copper filings. Upon starting work with the glass Miotti noticed the sparkle throughout the glass, and so it was born. It remained a family secret until the widow of one unwittingly revealed the secret almost 200 years later. Also known as Stellaria, or goldstone, this stunning technique is created by adding copper, or copper sulphate, to produce a rich brown colour. Other colour variations are possible with the addition of other elements.

Cristallo, is a totally clear rock crystal glass which takes away the normal greenish tinge caused by impurities by the addition of manganese oxides. Pioneered by the Barovier family during the 1400's the process of initially heating the original quartz to the highest possible temperature and stirring continuously to remove the impurities. The subsequent smaller (called frit) blocks are continually reheating, and each time water filtering the impurities, and they are left with a clear, very

cool looking material to work with.

Watching a glassmaker at work, my favourite is *Flamework*, the technique of forming glass into a myriad of shapes using a handheld heat source, formerly lamps, but in modern times more often a bench-mounted propane torch, to shape the glass with the use of tongs, forceps, knives and other small tools. This is sculpture under pressure, as the glass must be shaped while it is still hot and pliable. The deft movements and actions of the artist made this look almost casual, but you just know it's not that easy.

Speaking to the sales and marketing staff in the showroom later, they assured me that there is only one way to practice the skills and methods of all their glasswork, and that is by working with the molten glass. One slip, one mistake, and the glass must go back into the batch to be re-processed. It's not like you can practice on any other material before you graduate to the 'real thing.' Photography is not permitted in the showroom, in order to help retain their intellectual and artistic property, however, my photographer can be very persuasive, and you can see some of the results of the Murano craftsmen's artistry.

Prancing and rearing horses, birds, turtles, fish, almost all the animal kingdom is represented in the stunning showroom. Bowls, glasses, charms and jewellery are just some of the amazing sights on show, and for sale. Expensive for sure, but well worth it considering the artistry involved. Seeing and knowing a little of Murano and seeing the craftsmen at work has been an unforgettable pleasure.

Photos by Yelena Glukhovtseva

Premier League transfer embargo could follow wage cuts: Neville

LONDON: Former Manchester United captain Gary Neville believes the Premier League may force clubs who are looking to cut player wages during the coronavirus crisis to accept transfer embargoes.

Clubs in England's top-flight have requested players take up to a 30 per cent pay hit in cuts and deferrals to help soften the estimated £1 billion (\$1.2 billion) blow of potentially failing to complete the season. A number of Premier League clubs, including Tottenham, have also been fiercely criticised for using public money to shore up the wages of non-playing staff before cutting the salaries of players.

Liverpool quickly reversed their decision to use the UK government's furlough scheme, which guarantees 80 per cent of wages up to a maximum of £2,500 a month, after a backlash from supporters and the media last week.

Neville said Tottenham striker Harry Kane would be the "perfect" signing for his old club Manchester United, but dismissed speculation over the England captain's future in the current climate.

"The Premier League spent £1.4 billion last summer on transfers and the previous three summers they also spent over £1 billion. If you're trying to get 30 per cent pay cuts from existing players, you may have to put a transfer embargo in place," Neville told Sky Sports.

"Transfers are things the fans love, and we love players moving around, but it does seem to me to be awry when we've got such a behind-the-scenes war going on with respect to players taking cuts, the clubs needing support, and then in the next breath you've got a £200 million transfer speculation going on."

Kane, who has been sidelined by a hamstring injury since New Year's Day, opened the door to leaving Spurs last month. "If I don't feel we're progressing as a team or going in the right direction, then I'm not someone to just stay there for the sake of it," said Kane in an Instagram chat with former Spurs midfielder Jamie Redknapp.

Neville and Redknapp believe that Tottenham's conduct during the crisis will not have sat well with Kane.

"He's a clever lad and he's not somebody who would get caught out if he didn't want to say something. The little opening of the door that he left in that Instagram piece with Jamie was probably something that had something in it," added Neville.

"In my mind, I think he would have



The future of Tottenham striker Harry Kane could be affected by a transfer embargo on Premier League clubs.



been warning them and saying 'just be careful because I'm watching you and it's not something that we do'.

Redknapp said the action taken by Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy to furlough staff on the same day it was revealed he was paid £7 million last season did not surprise him.

"Kane would have been extremely disappointed with how Tottenham have acted but I have to be honest, having been around Tottenham and played for them, it didn't surprise me how Levy acted in this," said Redknapp.

"You learn a lot about someone in difficult times and he was one of the first to furlough staff. 'There's no doubt at all that Kane would have been disappointed with that, but I certainly wasn't surprised.' — AFP



Jamaica's Usain Bolt won the Beijing Olympics 100m in a world-record time

Bolt goes viral with 'social distancing' Olympic photo

PARIS: Retired track star Usain Bolt showed he's still a few steps ahead when he posted an AFP picture of him outstripping his rivals at the Beijing Olympics with the cheeky caption: "social distancing".

Bolt's post, featuring a picture by AFP photographer Nicolas Asfour of the 2008 Olympics 100m final, blew up on social media, drawing more than half a million likes and 90,000 retweets.

It showed the Jamaican crossing the finish line at the Bird's Nest stadium in a then-world record time of 9.69sec, glancing round from lane four as his despairing competitors trail two paces behind.

"Savage", commented one Twitter user, while New York Times journalist Christopher Clarey posted another picture

of Bolt out in front on his own, captioned "self-isolation".

Bolt's chest-thumping celebration in Beijing added to a legend that grew further when he won the 200m in another world-record time. He retired in 2017 with eight Olympic gold medals and the current 100m mark of 9.58sec, set in 2009.

Bolt, 33, has been encouraging Jamaicans to self-isolate during the coronavirus pandemic, posting videos of himself exercising at home and juggling footballs with a friend. He also helped promote a major fundraiser, Telethon Jamaica.

After retiring from athletics, Bolt, a Manchester United fan, attempted to launch a career in football, and had a trial with Australia's Central Coast Mariners before contract talks failed. — AFP

Oman Olympic Academy to launch training courses remotely soon

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 14

The Oman Olympic Academy (OOA) will soon launch training courses remotely as part of the current situation's requirement which did not allow any gathering of people in lecture rooms and meeting rooms due to coronavirus crisis. Ishaq al Balushi, Director of OOA, told Oman Daily Observer that the OOA is ready to begin the online courses.

"We are working closely with the information technology team to finalise the online methodology to have these programmes in a safe and secured platform. The online programmes will be through Microsoft teams application. After getting the approvals and completing the administration process, we will announce the registration mechanism through our official channels in the social media," he added.

The OOA was launched in December 2018 at the premises of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) under the patronage of Shaikh Saad bin Mohammed al Saadi, Minister of Sports Affairs. The first year of the Academy registered organisation of courses and workshops on various academic and sports disciplines. More than 150 participants took part



in the courses which provided 225 training hours.

On a query on which kind of the online training programmes will be provided, Ishaq responded: "We had many courses for this academic year to be done. We will begin remote courses on sports media programme which is supposed to be presented by a lecturer from Jordan University. She is not able to attend it due to the travel restrictions over COVID-19 pandemic."

"However, we have almost finalised with a local lecturer to present this programme and all the details of the lecture will be shared with everyone through the e-newspaper and social media accounts," he concluded.

The existing 2020 academic

calendar of OOA began with a course on the 'Modern management techniques in sports institutions' in February. The course was conducted by Dr Ali bin Abdul Rahman al Bakri, Head of Sports Development Department at Qatar Olympic Academy. The rest of the courses for 2020 plan include the following topics: The modern sports training, modern sports marketing strategies, sports media, rehabilitation of the disabled in sports administration, sports injuries and recovery and financial

management at the sports bodies.

The vision of OOA focused on developing human resources in sports in the Sultanate, upholding the Olympic values and philosophy. In addition, the academy is committed to provide the best and modern methods in various sports sciences to develop and qualify the top candidates in the sports institutions.

The OOA is keen to deliver top quality programmes by attracting good lecturers from the approved academies and universities.



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Groupama-FDJ team manager Marc Madiot says the Tour de France is essential for the sport of cycling.



EXPERTS FEAR HEAVY CONSEQUENCES IF CORONAVIRUS CRISIS FORCES CANCELLATION OF TOUR DE FRANCE

CYCLING FACES ECONOMIC ‘MELTDOWN’

PARIS: The Tour de France is not only a French monument, but also the economic heartbeat of professional cycling itself and analysts fear heavy consequences if the coronavirus crisis forces its cancellation.

An announcement is expected this week on either a postponement or an outright cancellation of the 21-day extravaganza that is currently scheduled to start in Nice on June 27.

The ‘Grande Boucle’, as the Tour is known in France, is the central economic pillar which supports the 22 professional teams on the roster for 2020.

“Cancellation opens the door to a possible economic meltdown in the cycling sector,” says Jean-Francois Mignot of the French National Centre

for Scientific Research, who has written the book ‘A History of the Tour de France’.

Maintaining the original dates looks almost impossible following French President Emmanuel Macron’s announcement on Monday that public events with large crowds were banned until at least mid-July.

France has been under lockdown since March 17, and nearly 15,000 people have died from coronavirus in the country.

Usually, up to 12 million fans line the roads as the Tour makes its way through the French countryside and towns and cities for three weeks every summer.

“It’s as simple as this. If the Tour does not take place, teams could

disappear, riders and staff alike would find themselves unemployed,” said Marc Madiot, the chief of top French outfit Groupama-FDJ.

His team budget is estimated at 20 million euros (\$21.8 million) per year and is bankrolled by the state lottery and an insurance company.

TOUR ROLLS ON ADVERTISING REVENUE

Tour de France organisers Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO) paid 2.3 million euros in total prize money on the 2019 edition, won by Ineos’ Colombian rider Egan Bernal who picked up a cheque for 500,000 euros.

The Tour rakes in revenue but the giant cost of staging the event, featuring logistics that are as spectacular as any

mountainside showdown on two wheels, eat into the margins of all road races.

Sponsors are paying hard cash for the daily hours-long television coverage and even the smallest teams can get involved in a breakaway and hence command screen time.

There are ceremonies every day on the Tour de France for all kinds of prizes — sprinting, climbing, attacking, young riders — where sponsors’ names are prominent.

“Most sponsors are in cycling for this reason alone, the whole thing is centred around the Tour de France,” Mignot claimed.

“If these sponsors invest money it is because television viewers recognise the team jerseys, it is the only cycling

race watched by such a vast audience.”

The Champs-Elysees, seen here deserted during the lockdown, marks the finish point of the Tour de France.

“There are very few other sports with so much riding on one event,” explains Bruno Bianzina, the general manager of the agency Sport Market.

Mignot estimated that ASO’s Tour revenue has climbed from five million euros in the mid-80s to 50 million today.

Another group, Sporsora, put the turnover for the 2019 Tour de France at 130 million euros.

Some 40-50 per cent comes from sponsors, television rights make up around half, and host regions of the race also contribute around five per cent.

This would make up more than half the turnover ASO declared in 2018, which according to Infogreffe.fr was 233.5 million euros. ASO did not reply to questions from AFP.

‘PROPS UP CYCLING’

“The Tour de France props up the whole of cycling, but the Tour needs the rest of the cycling calendar too,” says Madiot, a two-time winner of the Paris-Roubaix one-day race.

Even the smallest sponsor pays 250,000 euros to ASO while it is estimated that the yellow jersey sponsor, the LCL bank, pay 10 million euros. “But it goes much deeper than that because the Tour de France is also a huge advert for France and French tourism,” Bianzina says. — AFP