

P9

OIL FALLS 4 PER CENT TOWARDS \$28 PER BARREL ON OVERSUPPLY CONCERNS



P10

FRANKINCENSE AN ENRICHING FACTOR OF OMAN'S HERITAGE



P11

SANE MOVE TO BAYERN STILL POSSIBLE, SAYS NEW AGENT



Ramadhan working hours 9 am to 2 pm

MUSCAT: The official working hours during the holy month of Ramadhan 1441 AH for the government sector will be from 9 am to 2 pm. This was announced by Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, and Chairman of the Civil Service Council, in a statement on Wednesday.

The Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court extended heartfelt greetings and best wishes to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on this blessed occasion; praying to Allah the Almighty to protect His Majesty and grant him good health, happiness and a long life, the Omani people and the Sultanate further progress and welfare under His Majesty's

wise leadership and blessings to all Muslims.

Shaikh Abdullah bin Nasser al Bakri, Minister of Manpower, in another announcement on Tuesday, reduced the working hours for Muslims in the private sector companies and establishments to six hours per day or 30 hours per week during the holy month.

All employees in the private sector extended their greetings and best wishes to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on this blessed occasion, praying to Allah the Almighty to protect His Majesty, grant him good health, happiness and a long life, the Omani people and all Muslims with blessings and well-being. — ONA

CHEERING FRONTLINE FIGHTERS



Dr Ahmed Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, visits the Royal Hospital on Wednesday. He praised the role of the hospital staff in Oman's battle against COVID-19. — ONA

SEE ALSO P2

NEW COVID-19 TESTING CENTRES OPEN

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

The Ministry of Health announced the opening of new COVID-19 testing centres in Darsait (medical visa facility) and Rusayl Al Sharadi as the country reported 97 fresh cases on Wednesday. Total number of coronavirus patients now stands at 910. Eighty-six of the new cases are from Muscat.

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) in Muscat said it will test people with COVID-19/flu symptoms in these centres from 9 am to 4 pm

The number of recovered cases has also increased to 131. Muscat has 744 cases (77 recovered), Al Dakhiliyah 44 cases (20 recovered), South Batinah 46 cases (12 recovered), Musandam 3 cases, Al Dhahirah 3 cases (2 recovered), South Sharqiyah 15 cases (1 recovered), North Sharqiyah 12 cases, Buraimi four cases, North Batinah 29 cases (17 recovered) and Dhofar 10 cases (2 recovered).

1 NO TERMINATION OF OMANI EMPLOYEES ALLOWED

2 PRIVATE COMPANIES CAN REDUCE SALARIES OF EMPLOYEES OR SACK THEM

3 REDUCTION IN THE RENEWAL FEES OF EXPATRIATE VISA TO RO 201 FROM RO 301 UNTIL JUNE 2020

4 BANKS TO DELAY THE REPAYMENT OF LOANS OF OMANIS WITHOUT INTEREST AND ADDITIONAL FEES

5 POSTPONE ELECTRICITY, WATER AND SEWAGE BILLS UNTIL THE END OF JUNE 2020

6 PRIVATE SECTOR WORKERS ENTITLED TO A FULL SALARY PAID LEAVE DURING THE QUARANTINE PERIOD

SOPS TO TIDE OVER VIRUS CRISIS

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

To tide over the economic crisis set off by the coronavirus, the Supreme Committee on COVID-19 announced milestone measures including major sops to the private sector on Wednesday.

According to the decisions, companies exposed to the impact of the pandemic can negotiate for a salary deduction of their employees for a period of three months in exchange for a reduction in working hours.

The private sector companies and institutions should not terminate Omani employees in private firms.

Another major concession, starting with effect from today, is

the reduction in the renewal fees of expatriate visa to RO 201 from RO 301 until June 2020.

While the private sector companies affected by the crisis can terminate their staff permanently, employers can renew the expired licence of their expatriate workers who are currently abroad.

At the same time, the Committee directed banks in the country to postpone the repayment of bank loans of Omani employees without interest and additional fees.

It also postponed the payment of electricity, water and sewage bills until the end of June 2020, and providing instalments and scheduling the amounts due later.

The package has been agreed

in consensus with relevant government departments and the private sector through representatives of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI).

The private companies are required to readjust their working system to adopt telework and avoid crowds at the workplace.

Private sector workers are entitled to, as per the approved package, a full salary paid leave during the quarantine period provided they submit a certificate issued by the relevant authority.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in the decisions announced on Wednesday gave exemption of fees to all private sector companies

and institutions for renewing the commercial registry until the end of June 2020.

Other concessions include exemptions obtained by the private sector institutions and companies from licensing renewal fees and fines for a period of three months for the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, the Ministry of Tourism and the General Authority for Consumer Protection.

At the same time, the ministry said that the private sector is not allowed to end the services of the Omani workforce, and the private sector companies are entitled to submit paid annual vacations to their workers in the sector that have been closed.

Shops insist on mask and gloves in premises

SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

Although not mandated by law, some hypermarkets in Muscat started insisting that customers wear masks and gloves while shopping.

While irate customers argue that the restriction comes at a time when "there is acute shortage of masks in the city", hypermarket authorities claim "it is an additional measure to safeguard customers' health".

James Mathew, a customer said that he was denied entry to a supermarket for not wearing mask and hand gloves.

"I did not know about the mask policy till I reached the store. Nor is there any signboard showing no entry to people without masks. I keep myself abreast of the rules and regulations, but they never say it is mandatory to wear mask while visiting a shop", he said.

He said if the stores insist on wearing masks, they should offer

them free as some hypermarket chains give gloves while shopping in their stores.

Sandeep Menon, a sales executive with a leading food supply group, also confirmed that some hypermarkets started insisting on the need to wear masks and gloves.

"Although this leaves many customers angry as these items are hard to come by since the lockdown. No doubt masks will prevent the spread of infection of the dreaded virus", he said.

However, the Royal Oman Police in the beginning of this month called on motorists to wear masks and gloves while driving for essential needs.

Sulfat Ali Bava, a housewife, said that along with facemasks, gloves and sanitation, temperature scanners should be made mandatory at all the supermarkets whether they are big or small.

Amid shortage, some shops in the city are insisting on masks and gloves for shoppers. People say it is unfair and all shops should give protective gear

TURN TO P2

Trump freezes WHO funds as world eyes easing lockdown

NEW YORK: Donald Trump ordered a freeze on funding for the World Health Organization for "mismanaging" the coronavirus crisis, as world leaders weighed easing lockdowns that threaten to tip the global economy into a second Great Depression.

The death toll from the pandemic has topped 125,000, with nearly two million people infected by the disease that has upended society and changed lives for billions confined to their homes around the globe.

World leaders are agonising over when to lift lockdown measures to jump-start devastated economies but still avoid a second wave of infections.

And with the world battling to get on top of the pandemic, the US President fired a broadside at the WHO and halted payments that amounted to \$400 million last year.

Beijing hit back, saying the move was bad for the global fight.

SEE ALSO P5



Efforts to ensure best treatment for the COVID-19 patients

ASSESSMENT: Health Minister visits Royal Hospital, commends services of staff

MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, visited the Royal Hospital on Wednesday to acknowledge the remarkable efforts of its medical and administrative teams amid this extraordinary time, ensuring the hospital's workflow.

The minister visited various departments including the intensive care unit, the paediatric post-surgery care unit, the critical care unit, the maternity ward, laboratory departments, pharmacy, gynaecology, the isolation department of patients with coronavirus (COVID-19), the departments of the National Oncology Centre and a number of other departments of the hospital.

The Minister of Health met the hospital's administration staff and health workers, and listened to their suggestions and opinions on improving the quality of health services provided for patients, urging everyone to do their best during this critical time.

Dr Al Saeedi also visited a number of COVID-19 patients who are undergoing treatment where



he checked on their health and the progress of the treatment process.

The minister appreciated the efforts of the medical staff who are playing a major role in limiting the fast spread of the virus, including physicians, nurses, medical assistant groups, engineers, administrators and others.

The minister pointed out the

fact that the Sultanate had started preparations for COVID-19 response since the announcement of the disease in China where steps were taken to slow down its spread with the joint cooperation of all health workers and public. Till this moment, the epidemiological curve is still controllable alongside the expected continuous increasing growth in the

number of cases.

Referring to the increase in the number of cases, Dr Al Saeedi attributed it primarily to some people's non-compliance with instructions regarding staying at home and social distancing and secondly due to the intensified medical tests; therefore the increase is expected in this situation. The health minister hence urged all to remain at home and never go out unless absolutely necessary.

Speaking of figures, Dr Al Saeedi stated that the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Sultanate till now has not exceeded 910 cases, the number of hospitals' admissions is no more than 35 cases and deaths stand at 4.

He noted that the Royal Hospital has a good capacity to accommodate more than 150 to 200 intensive care beds if necessary. However, there are basic health services such as obstetrics, gynaecological services, cancer services, heart services and emergency critical operations that should continue. — ONA

SAF bid to stem virus scare in Musandam continues



MUSCAT: The Sultan's Armed Forces, represented by the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO), has operated a number of navy ships to Khasab Port in Musandam Governorate from the Said Bin Sultan Naval Base for shipping fuel tankers as well as essential commodities and staple foods for the citizens and residents of the governorate.

The Chairman of the Board of Directors of Musandam branch of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), Raed bin Mohammed al Shuhi, commended the great role played by SAF and its contribution towards providing essential commodities to the governorate.

He added: "We are all aware of the precautionary measures being taken around the world including movement restrictions through the sea and land borders between countries. The Governorate of Musandam has been affected by these precautionary measures due to its

geographical location.

"However, preparations have been made since the onset of the precautionary measures to ensure the sustained essential commodities thanks to concerted efforts of the public and private sector. In this context, the Sultan's Armed Forces, represented by the Royal Navy of Oman, continues to provide support by shipping fuel and oil derivatives as well as other essentials to meet daily needs of citizens and residents in the Governorate of Musandam".

The SAF continues to work side by side with the other relevant departments to support national efforts within the framework of the plans and measures designed to combat the spread of the coronavirus. SAF continues to do its part to ensure implementation of the decisions and measures taken by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and alleviating its repercussions on the Sultanate.

To mask or not

FROM PAGE 1

"I'm fully aware that wearing masks is something alien to us. But together we have to do everything so that we can quickly return to resist the spread of the pandemic", she said.

At the same time, law experts point out that private commercial establishments can, theoretically be allowed to deny people entry especially a situation that threatens the health and safety of other people.

"Property owners like shopping malls or hypermarkets have the right to turn away those who do not wear masks or gloves in order to protect the health and well-being of others on the premises", said Mohammed al Kiyumi, lawyer.

When contacted Muhsin Naduvil, sales manager with a hypermarket said, "We insist on masks and gloves to protect both customers and workers inside our stores. We started implementing after realising that voluntary measures don't go far enough".

Following instructions from Ministry of Commerce and Industry, all supermarkets have ramped up cleaning and sanitation in stores in the recent weeks.

The order from the ministry mandates stores to create physical barriers, where possible, to separate shoppers from billing counters. A statement from the ministry urged commercial centres and shops to avoid overcrowding.

The precautions that were mandated include entry of shoppers in groups, leaving a two-metre physical distancing between one consumer and another at the counter area, and disinfecting and sterilising shopping carts, hand rails and other common areas, as well as providing consumers with sanitizers.

Mobile medical teams conducting tests in Salalah

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, APRIL 15

Mobile medical teams have been setup in Salalah to support the country's relentless efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus.

These teams are apart from the examinations done at the public health centres and hospitals, said a source at the Directorate General of Health Services in Dhofar.

Currently there are two teams comprising six to seven members including medic, paramedic and administrative staff that visit different locations on everyday.

As of now it has done several rounds of examinations at easily accessible places like Auqad, Sanaya, Aqeel Mosque in central Salalah, Basameen mosque and Awjal Industries near the Rawasco Centre.

A paramedic involved in the testing teams said, initially not many people were coming out for tests due to their own fears, as what will happen if they were diagnosed and some of them were deliberately hiding their symptoms of cough, cold and fever.

"Some expatriate workers were apprehensive about some legal action as their visas had

expired. After being assured that we are here only to examine the disease, they became comfortable and everyday we are collecting some 30 to 35 samples", he said.

The samples collected are sent to Muscat and the result comes in three to four days. The teams keep the contact details of the people examined at the camps for follow-up purposes.

"Not everyone's sample is collect, as many who turn up have no sign of COVID-19. The samples of only suspected cases after examination are collected".

Several functionaries of the MoH are part of this team, including the Emergency and Crisis Department, Medical Response and Public Health; and Relief and Shelter Centre of the governorate.

The idea behind the mobile camps is to include more and more people under the test ambit to rule out every possibility of the virus and block the COVID-19 chain.

Anybody, who wants to be tested can visit the testing camps or get the appropriate levels of counselling and to the extent that they meet the requirements based on the protocols, the samples are collected.

Oman Air brings citizens and supplies to Sultanate

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

Oman Air has completed 27 flights to eight different countries to bring citizens home and supply the nation with food, commodities, medicine and medical equipment.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oman Air has returned citizens home from Jordan, Qatar, the United Kingdom, Tanzania, India and Saudi Arabia. The airline, which is grateful for support from all its partners in the public and private-sector, anticipates flying a rescue mission to Thailand on April 16.

Government officials have related that once the Thailand flight is concluded, all citizens who wish to

return home would have done so. Oman Air stands ready to provide any additional repatriation flights once it receives an official request for it.

Oman Air continues to provide regular round-trip service to Khasab; these flights transport citizens to and from the region and deliver a range of necessary supplies.

The airline has also flown several cargo-only flights to China to collect medical supplies, along with a number of flights to India to bring food and commodities to Oman.

Those flights will continue on an as-needed basis and Oman Air is prepared to conduct cargo-only flights to other destinations if the need arises.

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SQUH, OMSB undertake study of COVID-19's psychological impact

HARD TIMES: A research team will carry out the programme among Omanis and residents

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

Pandemics are not without any consequences on mental health and the experts are expecting the same with the COVID-19 outbreak during and after the disease subsides.

During such situations helping each other and being there for one another can work as morale booster and show them the rays of hope to sail through the difficult times.

With this in mind, a research team of Sultan Qaboos University Hospital (SQUH) in collaboration with the Oman Medical Specialty Board (OMSB) is carrying out a research on 'Psychological impact of COVID-19' pandemic among Omanis and residents.

A questionnaire has been prepared by the panel of pandemic experts in emerging societies seeking to draw policies around the COVID-19 pandemic, associated behaviour and psychological symptoms. This will help the country develop the appropriate psychological support.

"People may suffer from mental health issues such as cognitive ability deficits (Alzheimer's), anxiety, depression, panic attacks, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder besides suicide and psychosis owing to increasing stress hormones. The uncertainty of



Sultan Qaboos University Hospital



Dr Saleha al Jadidi

the situation can worsen any possible pre-existing mental health issues due to isolation/quarantine", says Dr Saleha al Jadidi, Head of Consultant Psychiatry and Geriatrics at Al Masarra Hospital.

In difficult situations, helping each other and being there for one another can work as morale booster and enable people to sail through the trying times

TAKING CARE OF ELDERS

The current pandemic situation puts pressure on the elders as authorities indicated that the people under this category are more likely to have severe

coronavirus infection than other age groups.

The Ministry of Health has accorded maximum attention to the old as it has established a department for older adults' psychological welfare at Al Masarra Hospital.

"The MoH is proceeding according to the programme and mechanisms to deal with the elderly in times of crisis and epidemics such as the COVID-19, as this group is about 20 per cent more likely to develop mental disorders than the rest as per the World Health Organization's data", said Dr Saleha.

Cases related to fear and anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic, are treated with behavioural and supportive (psychological support) therapies for the elderly.

The family and caregivers are educated about the contributing factors and the cause of the condition, and ways to prevent them. Some of the cases may require temporary drug treatments and psychological support from specialists.

She added that special programmes were developed to follow up with the patients and identify the problems that may be experienced through direct contact with him or his family. Doctors are available around the clock in the case of emergency just as the team is in the process of implementing Tele-Psychiatry Programme.

Two shopping centres booked for violations

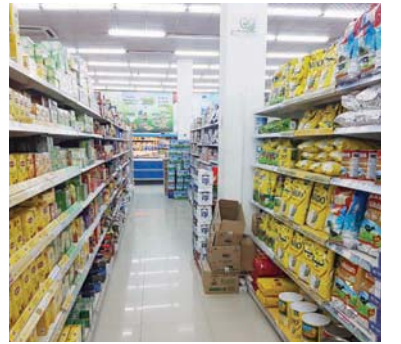
STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

Municipality of Muscat has closed two prominent shopping centres in Seeb due to their non-compliance with the decisions of the Supreme Committee on COVID-19.

The municipality, in a statement, confirmed its firm stand while dealing with violations that compromise on the safety of all by hampering the efforts to limit the spread of coronavirus.

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) urged commercial centres and shops to abide by the precautionary measures, which have been announced for them, in coordination with the Ministry of Health.

The ministry has made it clear that under these measures, consumers would enter these shopping centres in batches in a way that there is a safe distance of two metres between one consumer and the other at



payment corners. Shopping trolleys and surfaces should be sanitized and the consumers must be provided sanitizers.

The ministry said that the consumers should abide by these instructions without fail for their safety to prevent transmission of the pandemic. Only one person from a family should come to these places for shopping and they should avoid peak hours, which is normally between 7 pm and 10 pm.

The consumers were also urged to shop through electronic applications.

TRC extends date for submission of applications

MUSCAT: The Graduate Research Grant (GRG) Programme of The Research Council (TRC) has extended the date for submitting applications for self-funded Omani postgraduate and PhD students currently studying abroad, who have never received any government or private funded scholarship for the current academic degree, until May 31.

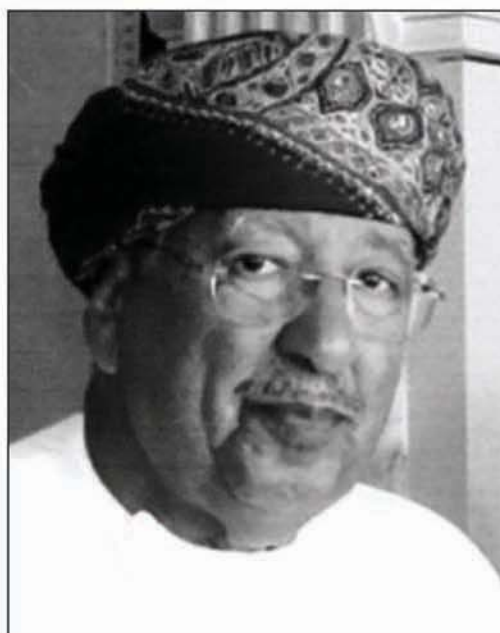
Interested applicants can apply through (int.student@trc.gov.om). Those wishing to obtain research support must send the research proposal, a pledge form that the student does not receive

any government or private scholarship from within the Sultanate, a copy of a valid passport, and the application form.

The Graduate Research Grant Programme aims to build a research culture in the Sultanate through supporting the initiatives of interested individuals or groups of researchers in areas relevant to their expertise, improve the quantity and quality of the pre-doctoral research, provide opportunities for hands-on research training, and establish a network of researchers. — ONA

CONDOLENCES

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IS E-LEARNING HERE TO STAY?

GUIDELINES: The Ministry of Higher Education has set specifications for technical colleges and private institutions

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

The online mode has been looked upon as the way forward to continue higher education without disrupting the academic year.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has set the specifications for technical colleges and private institutions in this regard. Many private institutions have already lined up their summer courses online in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak, as the transformation was very quick resulting in not just working from home but studying from home as well.

The trend may be here to stay because it may be slightly easy for the institutions and colleges, which already have a blended learning system in place: A combination of face-to-face and online learning depending on the time and materials to be covered in addition to the availability of resources.

Modern College is one institution that already had blended learning in its curriculum so the transition has been smooth. Dr Hesham Magd, Head of the Department of Business Faculty and Qualify Assurance, said. "The day the students

arrive in the college they are trained to use our technology. We have been using technology as a supplementary tool within our teaching. Soon after the current situation, we just managed to get our system up and running".

The college's lectures, presentation discussions, tutoring, mentoring or case studies were taken to text app, video conferencing and virtual classroom. "We can share applications with our students and we also record our virtual classroom lectures on our learning management systems such as power point presentations, videos, discussion boards, chat forums, articles, so students can see it whichever time and wherever they are in the world. So it is accessible for everyone at any time", noted Dr Magd.

It is different from the traditional classroom where you are confined and only attend a class at a certain time, and in case the student missed the class he/

THE TREND MAY BE HERE TO STAY BECAUSE IT MAY BE SLIGHTLY EASY FOR THE INSTITUTIONS AND COLLEGES, WHICH ALREADY HAVE A BLENDED LEARNING SYSTEM IN PLACE

she has actually missed. The interaction with the instructor is also better now. The college did not miss out on any of the 273 courses in Spring Semester. "All of them are delivered online", he said.

Commenting on the challenges, he said, "Online learning is a new trend to be adapted into mainstream. Complete e-learning is being practised for the first time so we must expect a few hesitations from students. Sometimes they might lack self-motivation and might miss the social connectivity".

"Students like to interact face to face and talk. When they are online, maybe not all are comfortable to speak their mind. And some students might not very be comfortable using technology. We might have difficulty in building this community of learners because online learning is about sharing and creating the opportunity of learning and it is not about just sitting and listening to the faculty member on what he has to say".

Currently all the teachers are teaching from home. So, is the online teaching going to stay even after the COVID-19 crisis? In the western countries online teaching has

been gaining popularity since early 2000. Currently some of the top universities in the world are offering free courses for the public as the world goes through lockdown.

The Modern College envisions online learning is a trend that will stay because some students live far away and it might be difficult for them to physically come and attend lectures on campus.

"Others can look after their responsibilities like work from home and continue to study. Higher education would become affordable and accessible without having to move from one city to another. Education will be available for everyone irrespective of age, gender or economic status", suggested Dr Magd.

As a prerequisite for online study the student must have basic knowledge in technology. "The faculty member will observe and assess what each student requires from class room participation. What we have seen is that students prefer technology. We can do exams online now and get your grade within one hour through our application. You are doing exactly what has been done in the physical exams. They have already taken one exam so they are being trained for the final exams", Dr Magd explained.

This period is also a transformation in the role of faculty members as their hours could be longer than ever before compared to on-campus teaching.

"Initially there could be stress because it is a new experience as there is a lot of preparation. But once you prepare one course then it is easier because the materials are uploaded and the system is in place. Then it falls down into communication. By next term 80 per cent of the work is all done. This is only our beginning and the more we practise we become stronger. We are sure it is going to be a trend that will stay on", Dr Magd said.

Ramadan Iftar Program

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

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

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GFW monitoring reports about violations of workers' rights

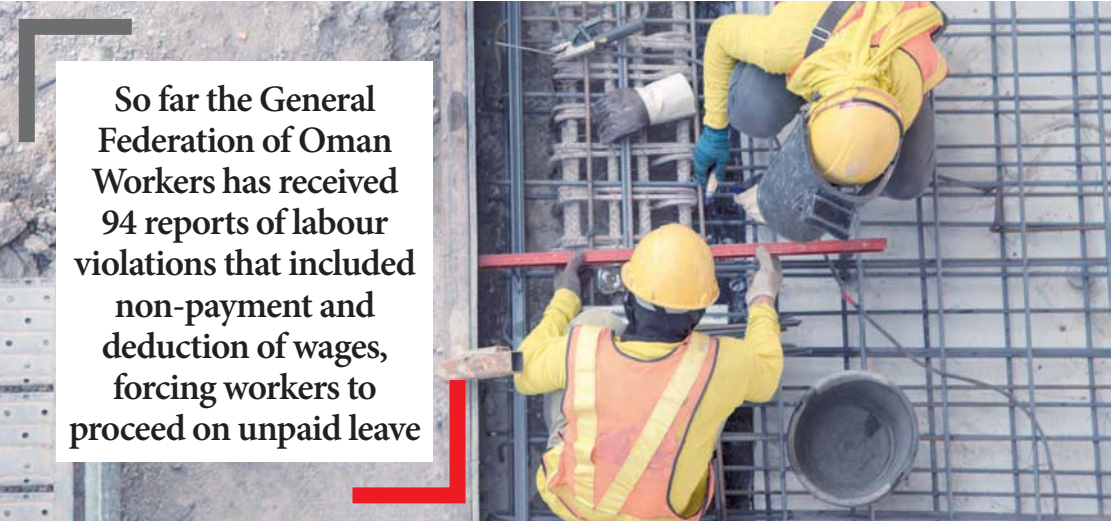
VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

The General Federation of Oman Workers (GFW) in the Sultanate has said it continues to receive reports about violations against the expatriate workers, which include deduction in their wages and threat to end the service.

The GFW added it has also been monitoring reports of violation of the rights of both, Omani and expatriate manpower.

So far the GFW has received 94 reports of labour violations that included non-payment and deduction of wages, forcing workers to proceed on unpaid leave, not committing to reduce the number of workers at work sites, notification of termination of service and deduction of the quarantine period from the annual leave.

On Sunday, the GFW said, a total of 80 violations were



So far the General Federation of Oman Workers has received 94 reports of labour violations that included non-payment and deduction of wages, forcing workers to proceed on unpaid leave

registered, and 30 of them were during the period between April 5 and 9. Muscat Governorate topped the list with 59 violations followed by eight in North Batinah.

The federation pointed out that the number of violations observed is constantly increasing and includes a number of

humanitarian aspects of the expatriate workforce, some of which are related to the minimum requirements for living, such as the availability of adequate housing, food and the payment of wages.

The federation called on the private sector institutions to exert

more efforts to protect the national and expatriate workforce and commitment to pay their wages and to ensure the availability of the necessary health standards in their workplaces and residences and the need to make them aware of the precautionary measures issued by the competent authorities.

Trump attack on WHO rocks global efforts to unite against virus

NEW YORK: Global efforts to join forces against the coronavirus faltered on Wednesday after Donald Trump halted funding for the World Health Organization, igniting criticism from leaders who are urging solidarity in the face of a crippling economic crisis.

The US president's shock move came as a patchwork of countries experiment with loosening lockdown measures, ushering the planet into a new and uncertain phase of a pandemic that has killed more than 125,000 people worldwide and infected at least two million.

In Europe, Denmark became the first country on the badly-hit continent to start reopening schools, while Finland lifted a travel blockade on the Helsinki region.

Italy and Spain have also allowed some businesses to restart after signs both are finally flattening the curve following weeks of punishing death tolls.

But as leaders launch into delicate debates of how to jump-start economies without triggering new waves of infection, Trump rattled efforts at global solidarity by ramping up his blame-game with the WHO, the UN's health agency.

The president ordered the US to freeze funding pending a review into the WHO's role in "severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus".

Trump charged that the outbreak could have been contained "with very little death" if the WHO had accurately assessed the situation in China, where the disease broke out late last year.

Leaders around the globe fired back at the US president, who had initially downplayed the dangers of a virus that has now killed more people



in the United States than any other country on the planet.

Beijing warned that the move would "undermine the international cooperation" at a "critical moment" in the pandemic.

Trump also earned a rebuke from UN chief Antonio Guterres as well as entrepreneur Bill Gates who tweeted that cutting funding was "as dangerous as it sounds". The European Union's foreign policy chief was similarly disapproving.

"There is no reason justifying this move at a moment when their efforts are needed more than ever to help contain and mitigate the coronavirus pandemic," Josep Borrell said in a tweet.

And African Union chief Moussa Faki Mahamat condemned Trump's decision as "deeply regrettable".

The president ordered the US to freeze funding pending a review into the WHO's role in "severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus".

Trump's controversial attack came when the world is facing down a looming economic catastrophe, which the International Monetary Fund has said could see \$9 trillion wiped from the global economy in the worst downturn since the 1930s Great

Depression.

Underlining the point, Europe's powerhouse Germany has been in recession since March, the government said on Wednesday.

The virus-hit Chinese economy, second only to the US, probably contracted for the first time in around three decades in the first quarter, according to an AFP poll of economists.

Meanwhile finance ministers from the G20 — the world's richest countries — held virtual talks on Wednesday about a possible debt moratorium for poor states struggling to weather the costs of the pandemic.

With tentative hope the pandemic could be past its peak in some European hotspots, countries are gradually lifting restrictions — to mixed reception. — AFP

Coronavirus holdout Palau opts for self-isolation

KOROR: The Pacific island nation of Palau is one of the world's last countries still free of the coronavirus, and it's doing all it can to stay that way.

As the contagion closes in and outbreaks grow in surrounding nations, President Tommy Remengesau has taken the bold step of shutting off his tourism-dependent nation, and is ready to keep it shut until the rest of the world is over the worst.

As he prepares his 20,000 people for economic losses going into next year, Remengesau says the remote country of 200 pristine islands and reefs knows pre-emptive measures are its only option. "It became a question of economics or people's lives," he said in a video interview on Wednesday.

THE GOVERNMENT HAS DELVED INTO RESERVES TO BEEF UP THE SERVICES, BUILDING IN LESS THAN A WEEK QUARANTINE FACILITIES, AN ISOLATION UNIT AND A VIRUS LABORATORY THAT COMPLETED ITS FIRST 31 LOCALLY-ADMINISTERED TESTS ON TUESDAY, IN A FIRST FOR ANY PACIFIC NATION

"Profits come and go. But you only have one life to live and that's the basic model we've been following ... That's why, as of today, no single virus (case) has been detected."

Tourism losses could cost the government 60 per cent of tax revenue, Remengesau added, but he vowed to keep the borders closed "as long as necessary".

Located about 1,000 km to 1,500 km (621 miles to 932 miles) from the nearest outbreaks in neighbours Indonesia, Philippines and the US territory of Guam, Palau declared a health emergency about a month ago to ensure a window of readiness.

Although both its suspected cases proved negative, they gave Remengesau sleepless nights, fearing an outbreak could overwhelm fragile health services.

The government has delved into reserves to beef up the services, building in less than a week quarantine facilities, an isolation unit and a virus laboratory that completed its first 31 locally-administered tests on Tuesday, in a first for any Pacific nation. Palau has received technical help from Taiwan, a key diplomatic ally Remengesau praised for the handling of its own virus outbreak. It also bought test kits, ventilators and modern lab equipment from Taiwan using funds from the United States, which administered Palau for five decades until 1994.

The government had to arrange for that equipment to

be brought in on a tuna fishing trawler, after commercial charter planes said it was too big to carry.

"It took seven days to get here," said Remengesau, 64, who has won awards for his radical environmental and marine conservation policies. "Slow is better than nothing at all."

But the testing capability meant the public was more confident Palau could tackle an outbreak, he said.

Key to that readiness was being able to convince people to follow strict hygiene and social distancing measures, while accepting that school closures and business and economic losses were sacrifices for the greater good, Remengesau said.

"The job gets easier if people respect what needs to be done, if people respect the value of life," he said, adding that it was unfortunate developed nations had lost lives because virus containment measures were not taken seriously.

"If you don't respect yourself, you don't respect your neighbours, and that's when chaos can ensue."

Palau was now better prepared and considered itself blessed not to be among the 213 countries and territories gripped by the virus, Remengesau said.

He added: "We are remote, we are small, and therefore, we can handle the problem situation. However, it's when that one virus gets in. It makes it doubly challenging, doubly chaotic, and we want to continue to avoid that."

— Reuters

South Koreans back Moon in pandemic poll

SEOUL: South Korean voters turned out in force on Wednesday to back President Moon Jae-in's handling of the coronavirus epidemic, putting on compulsory face masks and gloves to give his Democratic party a parliamentary majority according to exit polls.

South Korea was among the first countries with a major virus outbreak to hold a national election since the global pandemic began, and a raft of safety measures were in place around the vote.

Turnout was the highest for a generation, and an exit poll by national broadcaster KBS projected the ruling Democratic party and a sister organisation would take between 155 and 178 places in the



A South Korean in traditional dress casts his ballot in Seoul on Wednesday. — AFP

300-seat National Assembly.

It predicted the main opposition United Front Party (UFP) and its sister grouping would take between 107 and 130 seats.

Voters in obligatory masks lined up at least one metre (three feet) apart outside polling stations and had their temperatures checked before being allowed in.

All had to clean their hands with sanitiser and don plastic gloves, while those with fevers cast their ballots in separate booths that were disinfected after each use.

"It is done very well," said 80-year-old voter Kim Gwang-woo. "Because of the coronavirus, people are keeping their distance and everyone is wearing gloves." — AFP

Lockdowns should be lifted in two-week stages to stem virus

GENEVA: Countries that ease restrictions imposed to fight the spread of the coronavirus should wait at least two weeks to evaluate the impact of such changes before easing again, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Wednesday.

In its latest Strategy Update, the UN agency said that the world stands at a "pivotal juncture" in the pandemic and that "speed, scale, and equity must be our guiding principles" when deciding what measures are necessary.

Every country should implement comprehensive public health measures to maintain a sustainable steady state of low-level or no transmission and prepare its surge capacity to react rapidly to control any spread, the WHO said.

Some of the countries hardest-hit by the virus are now considering lifting lockdowns and beginning the transition towards a resumption of normal life. The WHO update said any such steps should be taken gradually, with time to evaluate their impact

IN ITS LATEST STRATEGY UPDATE, THE UN AGENCY SAID THAT THE WORLD STANDS AT A "PIVOTAL JUNCTURE" IN THE PANDEMIC AND THAT "SPEED, SCALE, AND EQUITY MUST BE OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES" WHEN DECIDING WHAT MEASURES ARE NECESSARY

before new steps are taken.

"To reduce the risk of new outbreaks, measures should be lifted in a phased, step-wise manner based on an assessment of the epidemiological risks and socioeconomic benefits of lifting restrictions on different workplaces, educational institutions, and social activities..." the WHO said.

"Ideally there would be a minimum



A soldier and a police officer stand guard at an entrance of the red zone under enhanced lockdown, during the movement control order due to the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday. — Reuters

of 2 weeks (corresponding to the incubation period of COVID-19) between each phase of the transition, to allow sufficient time to understand the risk of new outbreaks and to respond appropriately," it added.

It warned that the "risk of re-introduction and resurgence of the disease will continue". The Geneva-based global health organisation issued its advice at a time when it has come under criticism from the United States for its initial response to the pandemic. President Donald Trump said on Tuesday Washington, the WHO's biggest donor, would suspend funding.

China has begun lifting some of the toughest restrictions imposed on Hubei province where the disease first emerged at the end of last year. In the United States, which has the largest number of confirmed cases and deaths, Trump has jostled with some state governors over who has the authority to begin reopening US businesses. — Reuters

Work from home is not holiday!



ALI AL MATANI

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The world is reeling in the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, lifestyle and work must match with the requirements of the time. The Supreme Committee, set up for dealing with the spread of the coronavirus in the Sultanate, has given guidelines in this regard. Following its directives, the government has asked 70 per cent of its employees to work remotely or work from home as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the virus. But it is unfortunate, that many of them took it wrongly. They thought it as paid leave.

The fact is that they were supposed to work from home seriously and get their salaries as they did traditionally at their workplace earlier.

Work from home has become very popular in developed countries where an employee need not be directly supervised or monitored by his or her boss. In this system, the employee

himself or herself is in-charge of their work and has its responsibility. It is called self-monitoring which is based on what is called as conscience.

There are people who have developed this trust and did what they were supposed to do by their employer from the government or private sector. They did it by overcoming the lethargy and focused on work with full vigor. This has already happened many years before the beginning of this pandemic. This has reduced the cost of operations of the state and its organisations.

But not all of us did justice to the idea of work from home. They thought that if they are at home, there is no monitoring or accountability. This is how they did disservice to the interests of the people and did not show any sense of responsibility. This has damaged the idea of work from home.

Let us be very clear that this concept

Not all did justice to the idea of the work from home. They thought that if they are at home, there is no monitoring or accountability. This is how they did disservice to the interests of the people and did not show any sense of responsibility. This has damaged the idea of work from home

will never be successful if the employee himself would not elevate the ceiling of trust and show sense of responsibility as the only criterion for the success of this experiment. The coronavirus pandemic has brought us face to face with the reality of our preparedness to deal with the emergency. We entered the battlefield to have an experience of it. There was positive thinking and confidence in the employees that they would not ignore their responsibilities. There are some who have harmed this trust and confidence.

If those who did not work from home as they were supposed to, they don't deserve to get the money for the work.

Precisely, such wrong practices slow down the work against the wishes of the state or the employers of the public and private sector to match with the developments in the world. This compels them to stick to the old and

traditional work system. But, it means walking against the tide.

But there is no denying that also there are people who work with full commitment day and night. Their conscience did not die. They are honest to their work. They are doing exemplary job like the Royal Oman Police, Sultan's Armed Forces and other security agencies as well as those in the health and media. For them work is sacrosanct, not just salary. This is the concept of work they have in their minds.

The crisis we are facing should be used as an opportunity to assess and evaluate ourselves if we are really prepared to work and deliver in exceptional circumstances. The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) should be used in all directorates, departments and organisations to measure if we are moving in the right manner to match global standards.



Rethink teaching, learning beyond COVID-19

DR BABY SAM SAMUEL

COVID-19 offers an opportunity for innovation in education despite the stress it wrecked on students worldwide. UNICEF estimates that pandemic disrupted the classes of more than 1.57 billion students, accounting to 91 per cent of students worldwide. As families get affected physically, financially, and emotionally by the situation, more than ever, pupils, especially young children, need the sense of stability, purpose and social connections that they get from their schools.

At this juncture, it is therefore crucial that all stakeholders — parents, teachers and educators band together as a community; we have to adapt, innovate and bounce back, in order to be there for our students in their time of need. This month, UNICEF has launched their global agenda for action, imploring for increased investments in the welfare of children, with one of the six pillars of the agenda being "keep children learning".

As a proponent of the 'Right to Education', one of the fundamental Human Rights, UNICEF has been partnering with governments across the world to ensure continued learning at home, through government media & interventions such as television, radio & Internet.

Adapting to a change is difficult even under normal circumstances; under extraordinary measures, it becomes even more so. But in the context of COVID-19, the very first step is to accept that some of these changes are long-lasting, perhaps even permanent. Medical experts all around the world are warning us that social distancing might be around for a while longer. Life may never again be the same. By the time we get out of these crises, the world would have permanently changed its perceptions and the habits we hold on to. For example, in the case of education, including K12 schooling, lessons would no longer be just within classrooms. E-learning, at least as a blended curriculum along with in-person education, would be the norm rather than only an emergency measure.

So, as key drivers of our children's education, how do we innovate, make the

It offers a unique opportunity to hand the rein of learning back to the learner and show that the best learning is self-enabled, rather than teacher-led learning

best use of this time, and ensure continued learning for students?

First, start with yourself. Upskill yourself. This is applicable for all but is especially true for educators, who need to be one, if not several steps ahead of their students. We cannot teach 21st Century skills, if we ourselves are stuck in 19th Century schooling. You may join any of the thousands of courses available online that teach everything from "how to learn online" to "how to build a rocket", often for free.

Next is to establish a daily routine. Teachers and educators can share calendars and plans for both online & offline learning so that children may find the comfort of certainty and structure.

Parents too can chart out a few activities and chores for their children. The necessity for social distancing has meant an increased adoption of digital. Explore the various websites and apps that enable virtual calls, conferences and meet-ups, and e-lessons.

Equally vital is to plan ahead for a disruptive year. Expect further challenges for at least six more months. Anticipating these, schools, universities, and educators must explore and prepare new ways of engaging with students that ensure continued learning and sustained student-teacher connections. Make the lessons more experiential with virtual labs, 3D tours, activity sheets, interactive sites, projects, remote internships that can make a class more practical & fun.

Nevertheless, we have to understand that a digital-only approach may not be feasible for all; the solutions will have to also take into account the many barriers in the adoption of digital — age of the user, access to technologies, financial backgrounds, screen time and so on. Therefore, the ideal approach would be multi-pronged, utilising a variety of media — digital, mass media and print. Additionally, it needs to be customised to understand the requirements of a specific student, class, or school and involve all concerned stakeholders. But the important point is to just get started, and improvise on the go instead of waiting for perfection.

COVID-19 also offers a unique opportunity to hand the rein of learning back to the learner and show that the best learning is self-enabled, rather than teacher-led learning.

Even as WHO recommends social distancing, they have been highlighting the need for meaningful social connections. Many students may find it hard to be unexpectedly cooped up inside without their friends, teachers, the support system in schools & universities, and the stability they had so far. They seek someone to empathise and engage with them. Teachers and counsellors, if they can, must reach out to their students— over the phone, email, chat — to talk about their fears & concerns. Parents too have to be conscious of the emotional impact of the school closures and lockdowns & intervene accordingly.

Across Oman, most schools and universities, including Indian schools, have started to offer lessons online. In the initial stages, there might be a few glitches in the reach and scope of the solutions being adopted, as e-teaching is relatively new to the educators themselves. But over time, we can hope to reach a midway where all concerned — students, teachers, educational institutes and the community at large come together to facilitate learning.

As the world slows down, may we also make the moments count and make the best use of the blessing of time we have received, to prepare today for a newer future.

Lone bell chime to mark Notre-Dame fire anniversary

GEOFFROY VAN DER HASSELT

A lone bell will ring out from what remains of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on Wednesday, the sole event planned to mark a year since a massive blaze nearly destroyed one of the world's most revered monuments.

Reconstruction of the mediaeval cathedral has been halted, with France under lockdown over the deadly coronavirus outbreak.

President Emmanuel Macron vowed on Wednesday to do everything possible to ensure the 13th-century masterpiece is restored to its former glory within five years -- a timeframe already judged optimistic by many, and now further imperilled.

The ferocious blaze, watched in horror by millions of television viewers worldwide, has not been forgotten even if "our days, our thoughts, our lives are usurped" by the coronavirus outbreak, Macron said.

The bell dubbed "Emmanuel" in the cathedral's south tower is scheduled to ring out at 8:00 pm, the hour French people have become accustomed to gather at their windows and on balconies to applaud health workers on the frontlines of the battle against the virus that has killed over 15,000 people in France.

The 13-tonne bell is the cathedral's oldest, installed in 1686 at the behest of King Louis XIV, according to the Notre-Dame website.

Firefighters battled through the night on April 15, 2019 to save the cathedral from the blaze which ravaged its roof and dramatically toppled the steeple.

But even before the coronavirus pandemic struck, work had been delayed by decontamination efforts. More than 300 tonnes of lead from the roof melted in the blaze, covering the site in toxic particles.

The fragile structure remains at risk, and massive wooden beams are propping up the arches and gables. Workers have not even removed the tangled web of metal scaffolding that fused together in the inferno, which had erupted during renovation work on the roof.

This needs to happen before they can install a more durable temporary roof to protect the church's priceless artworks from rain.

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

Macron has said he is in favour of a "contemporary" touch for the spire. But the project's chief architect Philippe Villeneuve has refused to countenance any glass spire, rooftop garden or other modernistic proposals and opinion polls suggest most French people agree with him. More than 900 million euros (nearly \$1 billion) have been given or pledged by some 340,000 companies and individuals worldwide to restore the cathedral. — AFP

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LANDMARKTOWNSHIP

Oman’s maiden integrated residential project makes headway

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD WILL HOST MORE THAN 1,000 HOUSING UNITS OF DIFFERENT SIZES AND FEATURES

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

Construction work on the first residential neighborhood project in Hay Al Naseem is continuing apace in Barka Wilayat, according to a key official of the Supreme Council for Planning (SCP), which is overseeing the implementation of this housing initiative in the Sultanate.

Yaarub bin Mubarak al Hadhrami (pictured), Director of the Soroush Integrated Residential Neighborhood Project, a key milestone in the development of the venture will be achieved when the marketing centre formally opens shortly. It will pave the way for the marketing of housing sales and the commencement of sales.

“This project will enable citizens, who are eligible for land plots, to consider residing in an integrated neighbourhood equipped with all of the amenities of modern living,” said Al Hadhrami.

He told ONA that the project, which is being supervised by the Secretariat General of the Supreme



Council for Planning (SCP), in cooperation with the Ministry of Housing, is a PPP initiative with Al Adrak Development representing the private sector in the delivery of the first precinct (Hay Al Naseem).

Commenting on the progress made thus far, he said: “The preliminary studies of the project, such as traffic and environmental studies, have been completed, as well as all engineering designs



“This project will enable citizens, who are eligible for land plots, to consider residing in an integrated neighbourhood equipped with all of the amenities of modern living.

Y’ARUB AL HADHRAMI
Director

for the residential area and the infrastructure of the project, and the preparation of the marketing plan.”

Construction work of 22 independent housing units has started as models that are fully designed with all surrounding services, such as sidewalks, corridors and afforestation, to be used later as a marketing centre for the project.

He added, “The construction of one of the apartment housing buildings for the project has started. It will be fully furnished to be a living model for marketing the project.” He explained that the marketing campaign will be launched in mid-June and the sale stage will start in July, and construction work for the first stage of the project will kick off in August.

The integrated residential neighbourhood is coming up on a 355,000 sq metre plot and will accommodate more than 1,000 housing units of different sizes and features.



Oman GDP set to grow 3pc in 2021

MUSCAT: The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects the Sultanate’s GDP to grow 3 per cent next year compared to -2.8 per cent in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacts economies globally, a report said.

According to the IMF’s World Economic Outlook, oil exporting nations in the Middle East and Central Asia are expected to see a 3.9 per cent decline in GDP growth this year, rising however to 4.6 per cent in 2021, while growth in oil-importing countries is expected to decline to -0.8 per cent this year, rising to 2.9 per cent next year.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is inflicting high and rising human costs worldwide,” the multilateral global lender said in the Executive Summary of its report. “Protecting lives and allowing health care systems to cope have required isolation, lockdowns, and widespread closures to slow the spread of the virus. The health crisis is therefore having a severe impact on economic activity.”

As a result of the pandemic, the global economy is projected to contract sharply by -3 per cent in 2020, much worse than during the 2008-09 financial crisis, the Fund warned. In a baseline scenario, which assumes that the pandemic fades in the second half of 2020 and containment efforts can be gradually unwound, the global economy is projected to grow by 5.8 per cent in 2021 as economic activity normalizes, helped by policy support, it said.

BP to support 3D printing of 4,000 face shields for Oman’s COVID-19 fight

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

BP Oman, which operates the prolific Khazzan and Ghazeer gas fields in Block 61, says it is partnering with an Omani SME in the production of 4,000 face shields for distribution to healthcare personnel on the frontlines of the Sultanate’s fight against the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).

The gesture is one of several initiatives announced by the energy major in support of the Sultanate’s campaign against the health scourge.

“We’re working with our SME partner to protect medical teams against Covid-19,” said the company in a tweet, adding that the face shields – which are critical part of a first responder’s personal protective equipment (PPE) – will be 3D printed at the facilities of the Omani SME.

Innotech, the award-winning Omani specialist in prototyping and manufacturing services, has been roped in play a key part in the production of the 3D printed face shields.

The company, founded in 2013 by three young Omani engineers, is among a growing number of Omani startups that are innovating ways to support the Sultanate’s requirements of PPE and other technical gear that are critical in the fight against COVID-19.

Earlier this week, BP Oman



(Picture courtesy: Innotech Oman)

KEY GESTURES: Energy major announces initiatives to bolster Sultanate’s pandemic drive

announced that, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, it has supplied the Nizwa Hotel with a number of medical devices in support of the anti-virus campaign. “We also prepared the new intensive care department with the necessary medical supplies, as Nizwa Hospital is the nearest hospital to a large number of oil and gas concession areas,” it said.

This is in addition to supplies of smart TVs and tablet devices to help the Ministry of Health connect with its medical teams distributed across the Sultanate, it said.

Furthermore, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, BP Oman chartered a flight to bring back Omani students and also dependents of Omanis stranded in the UK, it added.



المنطقة الحرة بصلالة
SALALAH FREE ZONE

INVITATION TO TENDER No.: (SFZ-SUA-2020-003)

DEVELOPING, OPERATING, MAINTAINING & MANAGING OF INTEGRATED RESIDENTIAL CITY IN SALALAH FREEZONE

Salalah Free Zone Company (SFZCo.) invites reputed and specialized companies and offices qualified in the field of **Real Estate, Commercial Development** registered in Sultanate of Oman to participate in tender of **above** shall submit their sealed offer consisting of one sealed envelope for following works mentioned below:

- **Tender No.:** SFZ-SUA-2020-003
- **Tender Name:** DEVELOPING, OPERATING, MAINTAINING & MANAGING OF INTEGRATED RESIDENTIAL CITY IN SALALAH FREEZONE
- **Start Date of Document Purchase:** 16/ April /2020
- **Last Date of Document Purchase:** 30/April/2020
- **Last Date of Offer Submission:** 16/June/2020

Tender Document should be obtained from the offices of Salalah Free Zone Company’s Finance Directorate, Purchase & Contract Department, or SFZ Muscat office in Al Qurm Area during office hours, from 8:00 AM to 3:00PM (Sunday to Thursday) after payment of Tender Document price for a nonrefundable amount of Omani Rial 100, (Omani Rial Hundred only).

SFZCo is not bound to accept a higher or any other offer.

Submission should be on or before **16/June/2020** at **SFZCo Main Office in Salalah opposite Hilton Hotel, Finance Directorate-Supply Chain 3rd Floor or SFZ Muscat Office in Shatti Al Qurm.**

Completed Tender Documents (Original + additional copy+ CD) shall be submitted in sealed package without revealing the identity of the Tenderer on the exterior, addressed to SFZCo Chief Executive Officer, with all supporting documents.

PO Box 87, PC 217, Tel: 23132500, Fax: 23132400
Website: www.sfzco.com



HSBC Oman announces COVID-19 charity projects

MUSCAT: HSBC Bank Oman SAOG will immediately begin making contributions to a range of projects in the Sultanate to help underprivileged families impacted by COVID-19.

The disbursements, organised in close cooperation with partner charities in Oman, will help in providing relief and recovery to individuals and families impacted by COVID-19, as well as hospital workers helping combat the virus.

Andrew Long, CEO of HSBC Oman said: "Through our partnership with the selected charitable organizations in Oman, we aim to complement the efforts of the different government and non-government entities as they combat the virus and its implications. We have always been committed to the local community and to giving back to society, and amid this national crisis we will ensure that we do all we can to help those most in need."

Sabrin Rahman, HSBC's Head of Sustainability in the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey (MENAT) said: "Our efforts in MENAT as part of the

Group's \$25 million donation fund will be vitally important to our local communities. We have acted quickly to the urgent call for support by putting our resources to work where they have the biggest impact and donating to specific projects so that we are able to ensure accountability and track the real impact our funding has had on people's lives.

"We carefully selected local charity partners that have track records of being able to identify and help vulnerable communities by getting them food, medicine and education resources," Rahman added.

HSBC's disbursements in MENAT will account for \$1.2 million of the \$25 million global fund and underpin the bank's existing long-term community programmes.

HSBC MENAT's student-focused future skills programme will pivot to be delivered remotely, using e-learning channels, while its entrepreneur-targeted programmes, such as the Maharat Min Google programme with Injaz Oman will utilise virtual and online sessions.

Madayn adopts measures to limit COVID-19 spread in industrial cities

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), in cooperation with related bodies, is continuing its intensive efforts to help prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the various industrial cities in the country. Madayn began implementing procedures to address this pandemic early on, said Eng Basim al Zadjali, senior health, safety and environmental health specialist at Madayn.

"When the Sultanate announced the registration of the first two cases of coronavirus in February this year, Madayn formed a team to discuss the implications of the novel coronavirus at various levels for the industrial cities in particular and the Sultanate's industrial sector in general," Al Zadjali said.

He added: "Madayn's Security and Occupational Safety and Health (OHS) team is making significant efforts to disseminate awareness on this subject through various methods. Moreover, Madayn has developed a precautionary plan and is following up its implementation through field visits to the industrial units in the various industrial cities in addition to Al Mazunah Free Zone and the Knowledge Oasis Muscat.

These field visits aim to monitor any violations and provide correction methods, obligate factories to provide personal protection tools for the workers such as sanitisers, gloves for continuous change, ensure adherence to personal hygiene, and necessary review of potential risk stages during manufacturing."

Al Zadjali added that Madayn's Security and OHS team is conducting daily practical training for the OHS officers in the industrial units to get them acquainted with the precautionary measures and how to deal with suspected cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) at the workplace.



“
Madayn has developed a precautionary plan and is following up its implementation through field visits to the industrial units in the various industrial cities in addition to Al Mazunah Free Zone and the Knowledge Oasis Muscat.

ENG BASIM AL ZADJALI
HSE Specialist, Madayn

The team also aims to ensure the adherence of the industrial units to the precautionary measures that were

circulated by Madayn to limit the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in various languages.

The circulated measures by Madayn include providing continuous sanitisation in all of the factory's facilities including the accommodation; minimising contact and ensuring distance between workers during work and break periods, and at dining rooms within the factory and the accommodation, and minimising the presence of a large group of workers in one place; assigning fixed working groups so that members are not allowed to move from one group to another; on-site workers are not allowed to be in close contact with anyone from outside the work environment; reducing the number of workers in the factory through applying rotational system, activating 'working from home' method, and calling out the worker whenever required.

Also, instructing workers to avoid contact with surfaces and wash hands frequently with soap and water; if someone has coronavirus symptoms at work, the person must be transferred immediately to the nearest health centre while taking the necessary precautions; controlling the entrance of trucks to the industrial cities and ensuring necessary sterilisation of these trucks is taking place; unauthorised access to the industrial cities and the factories is not permitted, except for the employees or those required.

It also includes wwdisseminating constant awareness within the industrial city and the factories on the precautionary measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19); providing temperature measurement devices at the entrances of the factory for mandatory examination; and ensuring that salaries and leave balance of all the workers are not being affected.

Opportunities for ICT as Oman fights COVID-19

Oman has responded incisively to the pandemic, according to a report by Oxford Business Group (OBG). On February 24, two citizens returning from Iran became the first recorded cases on Omani soil, prompting the immediate suspension of flights from that country.

Meanwhile, on March 15, when the total number of recorded cases stood at 22, officials introduced extensive measures limiting both entry to the country and the movement of citizens within the sultanate.

"Oman reacted swiftly to COVID-19 by completely halting the entry of cruise ships and imposing a ban on tourist visas, despite the immediate economic impact on its tourism sector," Lujaina Mohsin Darwish, joint deputy chairperson of Mohsin Haider Darwish LLC and member of the State Council, told OBG. "However, the response was intended to ensure the protection of the population from the pandemic."

On April 10 the government implemented a 12-day lockdown in the entire Muscat governorate, which has been the hardest hit by the virus. Travel in and out of the governorate has been stopped, while people may only leave their homes to buy groceries and in the case of emergencies. Educational institutions, initially closed for a one-month period on March 15, will remain shuttered until further notice.

DIGITAL TRANSITION

Some business leaders have identified opportunities emerging from the current hardships.

"As more and more businesses are adapting to virtual meetings, companies are seeing the benefits of remote work and reduced travel costs. It is likely that these efficiencies will continue even after the current situation has been resolved," Rishi Khimji, managing director of Ajit Khimji Group, told OBG.

The necessity of conducting most business online may accelerate digitalisation and attract



THE NECESSITY OF CONDUCTING MOST BUSINESS ONLINE MAY ACCELERATE DIGITALISATION AND ATTRACT INVESTMENT IN THE ICT SECTOR. SUCH A SHIFT WOULD ALIGN WITH EXISTING STRATEGIES TO BOLSTER ICT DEVELOPMENT, A KEY PILLAR OF VISION 2030, THE COUNTRY'S LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT PLAN.

investment in the ICT sector. Such a shift would align with existing strategies to bolster ICT development, a key pillar of Vision 2030, the country's long-term development plan.

On the back of investment from the Oman Technology Fund, last month saw the launch of local start-up Behar, an online auction platform for wholesale fish markets. 'Behar Plus', an online retail spin-off, will allow fish sellers and stores to sell products directly to individual customers, in line with 'stay at home' guidelines.

The lockdown should also help accelerate

a trend towards online purchases in the insurance sector.

Last year the number of insurance policies purchased online increased by 59 per cent, according to the Capital Markets Authority (CMA), which noted that a majority of insurance companies operating in the country now offer electronic distribution channels. The CMA has been promoting the drive to electronic transactions, which are anticipated to rise even more sharply in light of the pandemic.

These developments come amid significant

efforts in recent months to upgrade the country's IT infrastructure, with further improvements expected after COVID-19 subsidies.

"Given the wealth of in-country tech talent, a natural progression for us after the pandemic will be a sharper focus on Oman's growing hi-tech sector, an area that is already generating foreign interest and investment," Azzan al Busaidi, CEO of the Public Authority for Investment Promotion and Export Development (Ithraa), told OBG. "Given this, I believe we will see a marked increase in the

presence of Oman-made tech products and services in international markets."

BROADER ECONOMIC IMPACT

While there are opportunities for expansion in ICT, the broader economy is facing a series of challenges related to the virus. As a result of falling demand and a production dispute between Russia and Saudi Arabia, global oil prices fell from \$66 per barrel at the start of the year to as low as \$25 in early April, before rallying to around \$33 at the time of writing.

Despite significant diversification efforts in recent years, hydrocarbons still accounted for 35 per cent of Oman's GDP, 74 per cent of revenue and 66 per cent of exports in 2018, leaving the country particularly exposed to oil price downturns.

Relatively high levels of government debt have further constrained Oman's capacity to deploy significant financial resources to cushion the economy from all of the immediate consequences of the pandemic.

Nonetheless, the Central Bank of Oman unveiled a \$20bn economic stimulus package on March 18, providing much-needed liquidity at a time when small business owners, in particular, had started to feel the impact.

While the stimulus package will provide important relief, other resources will need to be deployed in the long term. On April 6 ratings agency Fitch projected that the sultanate's fiscal deficit would widen to \$10bn in 2020. Fiscal needs are expected to be met through a \$5bn drawdown of the State General Reserve Fund, \$4bn in new foreign debt and \$1.2bn in foreign maturities from the Petroleum Reserve Fund. In March 2020, the agency had downgraded Oman to BB from BB+, citing erosion of its fiscal and external positions.

Overall, however, Oman is keen to project an image of economic resilience. "With 200 ships calling every week, cargo continues to flow in and out of our three principal gateways in Sohar, Duqm and Salalah, directly linking Omani businesses to 86 ports in 40 countries. That is business as usual," Al Busaidi told OBG.

[Courtesy: Oxford Business Group]

Trump says close to plan to reopen economy



US President Donald Trump speaks during a press conference at the White House in Washington. — Reuters

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump said he is close to completing a plan to end the coronavirus shutdown and reopen the battered US economy with some parts of the country likely to be ready to go before May 1.

Standing in the White House Rose Garden, Trump said he would “authorize” governors — despite doubts from some experts that the presidency has such powers — to implement plans in their states at the appropriate time. He said he would speak to all 50 governors about the plan, probably on Thursday by video conference.

Trump’s coronavirus task force has recommended people across the country follow strict social distancing guidelines through the end of April. Opening some states before that would go against the guidelines in their current form.

Trump, facing re-election on Nov. 3 and under pressure to get the economy going again after millions have been made jobless by the shutdown, said some states should be able to reopen soon, based on a low rate of infections.

“We think that some of the governors will be in really good shape to open up even sooner” than the end of April, Trump said. “Others are going to have to take a longer period of time.”

Trump had initially said he hoped to reopen the economy by Easter in mid-April, but the mounting toll of infections and projected deaths forced him to extend federal guidelines for 30 days to the end of April. Some medical experts question whether the country will be ready by then.

The president drew fire from governors for saying on Monday at a contentious briefing that he has “total authority” to order them to reopen. Constitutional experts have doubted he has such authority but Trump has not backed down. — Reuters

Oil falls 4 per cent towards \$28 per barrel on oversupply concerns

LONDON: Oil fell 4 per cent towards \$28 a barrel on Wednesday, pressured by reports of persistent oversupply and collapsing demand due to global coronavirus-related lockdowns and a lack of coordinated oil purchases for strategic storage.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) on Wednesday forecast a 29 million barrel per day (bpd) dive in April oil demand to levels not seen in 25 years and said that no output cut could fully offset the near-term falls facing the market.

Brent crude fell \$1.19, or 4 per cent, to \$28.41 a barrel at 0940 GMT, giving up earlier gains. US West Texas Intermediate crude slid 45 cents, or 2.2 per cent, to \$19.66.

“There is no feasible agreement that could cut supply by enough to offset such near-term demand losses,” the IEA said in its monthly report. “However, the past week’s achievements are a solid start.”

Crude prices have tumbled this year, hitting an 18-year low of \$21.65 a barrel on March 30. The drop in prices and demand has pushed global producers to agree unprecedented supply cuts.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec), along with Russia and other producer — a grouping known as Opec+ — has partnered with other oil-pumping nations, such as the United States, in the record global supply pact.

Officials and sources from Opec+ states indicated that the IEA, the energy watchdog for the world’s most industrialised nations, could announce purchases of oil for storage of up to several million barrels to buoy the deal.

But as of Wednesday, no such purchases had materialised. Some analysts said they expect more downward pressure on the market without a demand recovery.

“The slow implementation of the



An offshore oil platform is seen in Huntington Beach, California. — Reuters

agreement, the risk of non-compliance and no firm commitment from others to follow suit could see the market remain under pressure until the pandemic loosens its grip to let fuel demand recover,” said Saxo Bank analyst Ole Hansen.

The IEA report added to downward pressure caused by rising inventories. The IEA forecast a 9.3 million bpd drop in demand for 2020 despite what it called a “solid start” by producers following a record deal to curb supply in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

“By lowering the peak of the supply overhang and flattening the curve of the build-up in stocks, they help a complex system absorb the worst of this crisis,” the Paris-based IEA said.

“There is no feasible agreement that could cut supply by enough to offset such near-term demand losses. However, the past week’s achievements are a solid start.”

Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and other producers including Russia on Sunday agreed a record cut in output from May of 9.7 million bpd, or almost 10 per cent of global supply, to help support prices and curb oversupply.

Ahead of that, however, April could prove the worst month ever for the industry as production is set to increase while demand tumbles amid economic lockdowns around the world, IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol said.

“When we look back on 2020 we may well see that it was the worst year ... April may well have been the worst month - it may go down as Black April,” Birol told reporters on a call.

Oil producers “lost two very important months”, Birol added, referring to events including the failure of producers in early March to agree on cutting output. Instead, Saudi Arabia, Russia and others pledged to increase

production as they looked to grab back market share.

Now, in addition to planned supply cuts, some nations are expected to boost buying for strategic reserves.

The IEA said it was “still waiting for more details on some planned production cuts and proposals to use strategic storage”, noting the United States, India, China and South Korea have either offered or are considering such purchases.

“If the transfers into strategic stocks, which might be as much as 200 million barrels, were to take place in the next three months or so, they could represent about 2 million bpd of supply withdrawn from the market,” the IEA said.

The IEA’s forecasts on such purchases were based on “our communications with the countries, what we see in the press and the countries’ public announcements”. — Reuters

Global airlines’ COVID-19 losses rise to \$314 bn

LONDON: Estimated global airline losses from the coronavirus pandemic have climbed to \$314 billion, 25 per cent more than previously forecast, owing to the severity of the economic downturn and a slower than previously expected reopening of international routes.

The latest forecast from the International Air Transport Association (IATA) is up from the \$252 billion figure given on March 24 and represents a 55 per cent drop in 2020 passenger revenue compared with last year.

Traffic measured in revenue passenger kilometres is forecast to be 48 per cent down this year, compared with the previously forecast 38 per cent decline, industry body IATA said at a weekly online news conference on Tuesday.

The pandemic has brought air travel to a standstill, with many airline fleets grounded and no visibility on when travel restrictions will be eased.

IATA has urged governments to provide airlines with liquidity urgently to help them to survive the crisis, warning that many will go bust within weeks unless they receive help.

The trade body, which represents airlines such as Lufthansa and British Airways owner IAG, said it expects domestic markets to be the first to reopen, as has happened in China, with international routes following gradually.

A phased return of international flights would still be problematic for airline finances because most carriers obtain the bulk of their revenue from international routes, IATA said. — Reuters

US import prices post biggest decline in over five years



Imported automobiles are parked in a lot at the port in New Jersey. — Reuters

WASHINGTON: United States’ import prices dropped by the most in more than five years in March amid declines in the costs of petroleum products and a range of other goods, pointing to import deflation that could deepen amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The report from the Labor Department on Tuesday followed data last week showing the biggest decline in the consumer price index in more than five years as state and local governments adopted stiff measures to control the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus, virtually

grounding the country and sending the economy into a tailspin and millions out of work. Producer prices also fell in March.

“Import prices remain firmly in deflation,” said James Watson, a senior US economist at Oxford Economics in New York.

“A strong dollar, low oil prices and a global recession will keep them that way.”

Import prices dropped 2.3 per cent last month, the largest decline since January 2015, after a downwardly revised 0.7 per cent drop in February. Import prices, which exclude tariffs, were previously reported to have

decreased 0.5 per cent in February.

Economists polled by Reuters had seen import prices tumbling 3.2 per cent in March. In the 12 months through March, import prices plunged 4.1 per cent. That was the biggest drop since June 2016 and followed a 1.3 per cent decline in February.

Imported price data is collected on the first day of the month.

The Labour Department said while not directly related to the coronavirus pandemic, response rates for March were approximately 6.5 percentage points lower than March 2019. — Reuters

‘Great Lockdown’ will shrink global economy by 3pc in 2020



Containers and trucks are seen on a snowy day at an automated container terminal in Qingdao port, Shandong province, China. — Reuters

WASHINGTON: The global economy is expected to shrink by 3.0 per cent

during 2020 in a stunning coronavirus-driven collapse of activity that will

mark the steepest downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the International Monetary Fund said.

The IMF, in its 2020 World Economic Outlook, predicted a partial rebound in 2021, with the world economy growing at a 5.8 per cent rate, but said its forecasts were marked by “extreme uncertainty” and that outcomes could be far worse, depending on the course of the pandemic.

“This recovery in 2021 is only partial as the level of economic activity is projected to remain below the level we had projected for 2021, before the virus hit,” Gita Gopinath, the IMF’s chief economist, said in a statement.

Under the Fund’s best-case scenario, the world is likely to lose a cumulative \$9 trillion in output over two years - greater than the combined gross domestic product of Germany

The IMF predicted a partial rebound in 2021, with the world economy growing at a 5.8 per cent rate, but said its forecasts were marked by “extreme uncertainty” and that outcomes could be far worse, depending on the course of the pandemic.

and Japan, she added.

The IMF’s forecasts assume that outbreaks of the novel coronavirus will peak in most countries during the

second quarter and fade in the second half of the year, with business closures and other containment measures gradually unwound.

A longer pandemic that lasts through the third quarter could cause a further 3 per cent contraction in 2020 and a slower recovery in 2021, due to the “scarring” effects of bankruptcies and prolonged unemployment. A second outbreak in 2021 that forces more shutdowns could cause a reduction of 5 to 8 percentage points in the global GDP baseline forecast for next year, keeping the world in recession for a second straight year.

“It is very likely that this year the global economy will experience its worst recession since the Great Depression, surpassing that seen during the global financial crisis a decade ago,” the IMF said in its report. “The Great Lockdown, as one might

call it, is projected to shrink global growth dramatically.”

The new forecasts provide a somber backdrop to the IMF and World Bank spring meetings, which are being held by videoconference this week to avoid contributing to the spread of the virus. The meetings normally draw 10,000 people to a crowded two-block area of downtown Washington.

The restrictions placed on travel around the world and the breakdown in supply chains have made the response to the pandemic a trying time for globalization, Gopinath said in a videoconference on Tuesday.

“But it is very important that this does not become a feature, where we reverse all the gains that we’ve gotten from globalization,” she said, calling specifically on countries to refrain from putting restrictions on exporting medical supplies. — Reuters

features



Frankincense

An enriching factor of Oman's heritage

RUQAYA AL KINDI

Frankincense, called 'luban' in Arabic, is obtained from one of the rare wild trees found in Oman with a history of thousands of years. Dhofar Governorate, known across the world for the production of frankincense, has been known as the 'Land of Luban'. The port of Samahram in Dhofar, an important commercial port then in southern Oman, had been exportting luban in the first century to Yemen, Egypt and Rome. Frankincense tree grows naturally on the mountainous areas, nurtured by seasonal rains in this governorate. It often grows on the lower slopes and at the bottom of the canyons and streams and in large numbers on the broad bottoms of the larger valleys. Frankincense, in ancient times, had a role in trade in southern Arabia, and an important source of income. Dhofar Governorate is famous for producing the finest luban in the world due to the availability of an appropriate climate for the growth of the trees in terms of temperature and humidity, in addition to the presence of calcareous soil suitable for tree's growth. It is known that the finest kind of frankincense in the Dhofar Governorate is called Al-Hojri. It is surprising that frankincense tree lives for about 100 years, multiplies naturally and does not need watering and human attention. It is about 3 to 5 metres high and produces the



Dhofar Governorate, known across the world for the production of frankincense, has been regarded as the 'Land of Luban'. Harvesting of luban begins in April and continues until June

resin after 8 or 10 years of it is growth. Experts who collect frankincense wait for April eagerly, because the harvesting of luban begins in this month and continues until June every year through using the traditional method that is used since ancient times. In early April of every year, as soon as the temperature rises, workers collect the fruits



by tapping on the tree in multiple places. the luban production process begins by tapping the branches of the tree with a sharp tool until a milky colour and viscous resins begins to come out from the holes made by scratching the tree. Within 14 days, the liquid solidifies or freezes, and then it is harvested. Tapping frankincense trees is not a random

process. It is a process that requires special technical skill and expert hands. Even the process of tapping on the tree varies from one tree to another according to their size. The harvest lasts for three months, and the average yield per tree is 7 to 10 kilograms. Omani frankincense, which is considered one of the best types of luban in the world, is

still on demand in many countries around the world, as it is included in the manufacture of medicines, oils, powders, perfumes, special candles and cosmetics, in addition to its use in many places of worship around the world. It is, also, used as an important material in the incense industry, which is one of the symbols of Omani culture and is used almost daily in every Omani house. It was mentioned and praised by Ibn Sina, a Muslim scientist, who said "it cures all diseases". Since ancient times, India, the African continent, and the Sultanate of Oman have been famous for using luban in traditional folk medicine to treat many diseases —the most important of which are mouth and skin ulcers, hair loss, diarrhea, colds, and arthritis, and was used against snake venom or poison. A team of researchers at the Research Center for Natural and Medical Sciences at Nizwa University, confirmed the possibility of increasing the production of the Acetyl keto-Beta-Bowsellic Acid (AKBA) from 5 per cent to 30 per cent from a natural source — that is, luban gum — and purity up to 99.9 per cent, as it is an effective compound against types of cancer cells. This method, actually, was first invented and registered as a patent in the name of the university. Efforts to protect luban include preserving it in its habitats, protecting it from grazing and the unfair use of its lands, and conducting surveys of the luban environment in a number of areas in order to identify the plant intensity of this species and the current state of these trees.

Sane move to Bayern still possible, says new agent

MANCHESTER: Leroy Sane's new agent says the Manchester City winger is still in the running for a transfer to Bayern Munich, after a potential switch was put on hold due to a serious knee injury.

"FC Bayern is the only club in Germany that Leroy can see as the next step in his career," Sane's agent Damir Smoljan told magazine Sport Bild on Wednesday.

"He believes the conditions are right there for him to achieve his ultimate goal: winning the Champions League."

The 24-year-old Sane is viewed as one of Germany's brightest talents and has scored five goals in 21 appearances for his country. He won the Premier League title with City in 2017/18 and 2018/19.

He seemed to be on the verge of joining Bayern last August before he tore his cruciate knee ligament during the Community Shield match against Liverpool at Wembley, holding up a possible move.

Last month, Sane admitted the devastating injury was the

"longest and hardest" of his career, describing the road to recovery as both mentally and physically gruelling.

Sane returned to training and played a game for City's reserves in March before the Premier League fixtures were halted due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Before injury struck, Sane's rumoured switch to Munich had involved a reported transfer fee in excess of 100 million euros (\$109 million).

Bayern want Sane after wingers Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery both retired at the end of last season.

"The interest of FC Bayern is no secret, but other very big European teams have already contacted us about Leroy," Smoljan added, with Barcelona and Real Madrid also said to be interested.

In this season's Champions League last 16 ties, Bayern beat Chelsea 3-0 in London while City ran out 2-1 winners over Real Madrid in Spain before both second legs were postponed due to the coronavirus.

— AFP



“

FC Bayern is the only club in Germany that Leroy can see as the next step in his career.

DAMIR SMOLJAN
Sane's agent

Oman to submit bid for Asian Volleyball meet in 2022



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 15

Oman University Sports Committee (OUSC)'s board agreed to submit the Sultanate bid for hosting the Asian University Beach Volleyball Championship in 2022.

This decision was taken during the first meeting of the committee after the re-formation of board for the next period. The meeting was conducted through video online call and presided by Dr Salim al Oraiimi, the chairman of OUSC, in presence of all the board members.

The online meeting also featured many other decisions including participation of the National University football team at the Asian

Championship in South Korea in next September. The board approved also another event for the football team and to take part at the Arabian futsal championship in Abu Dhabi in December 2020. The OUSC's board discussed on defining the national teams to participate at the 2021 Summer World University Games in Sichuan city in China.

The chief of OUSC thanked all the positive contributions of the previous board members and he requested the new board members to continue working hard for the development of the University Sports in the Sultanate. The new formation of the OUSC board which issued by the Ministry of Sports Affairs recently featured

the following members: Dr Salim al Oraiimi, Chairman of the Committee, Dr Qassim Mardha Jaafar, Deputy Chairman of the Committee, Dr Zahir al Ghasseni, Sami al Yousifi, Salim al Hajri, Aisha al Jabriya and Ahmed al Darmaki Secretary of the Committee.

OUSC organised successfully in last February the fifth edition of the Arabian University Beach Volleyball Championship in direct coordination with Ministry of Sports Affairs. Sixteen teams representing 11 countries took part at the event. Oman national University Beach Volleyball team were crowned as champion of the tournament after beating Libya team 2-0 in the final game. In another

top achievement of the OUSC, the committee had announced in last December that Oman will host the FISU World University Cross Country Championships in 2024 after the Sultanate's bid was confirmed by the International University Sports Federation (FISU) during the meeting held in Switzerland in December 2019.

The University sport teams impressed last year as the futsal team bagged a runner-up finish in the summit clash of the Arabian University futsal championship against Egypt in Abu Dhabi in November 2019. The team had suffered a 5-2 loss against Egypt in the concluding game.

IPL indefinitely postponed due to coronavirus pandemic

MUMBAI: The Indian Premier League, the world's richest cricket tournament, has been indefinitely postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic, a team official said on Wednesday.

Though India's cricket board made no official announcement, the further delay of the Twenty20 tournament, which draws top players from around the world, was inevitable after the government extended a three-week lockdown until at least May 3.

In line with other sports events worldwide, the IPL had already been pushed back from its original start date of March 29 to April 15.

"Yes, they have informed us that the IPL stands suspended for the moment," a team official said on condition of anonymity.

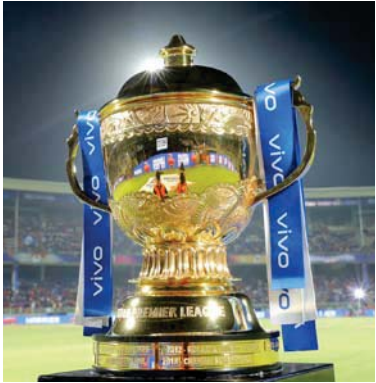
"However it is said that they will find a window in the later end of the year to do it."

Media reports said all eight IPL teams were told on Wednesday of the new postponement. The reports said the BCCI may aim for a tournament in September-October.

Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) president Sourav Ganguly earlier sought to dampen hopes of a quick resumption of sport.

"Practically speaking, when life has come to a standstill everywhere in the world, where does sport have a future in this?" he said at the weekend.

With the global shutdown preventing players from travelling and Indian restrictions ruling out new visas, the tournament cannot be held in coming weeks.



Former India star VVS Laxman said the IPL should be played before the Twenty20 World Cup, which is scheduled to be held in Australia in October and November.

"I think some of the cricket boards will be encouraging the fact that IPL is a big tournament, and everyone acknowledges that," Laxman, an adviser to the Sunrisers Hyderabad team, told Indian broadcaster Star Sports.

"And just before the World Cup it will set the tone for a hectic cricket season. But I just hope that everything is normal, and no one is in danger. And once that happens, I am sure the IPL should kick off the cricket calendar."

Cricketers turned pundits, including England's Kevin Pietersen, have suggested the glitzy tournament be shortened from its normal eight-week duration and played behind closed doors.

The league is a huge revenue-earner for the BCCI and is estimated to generate more than \$11 billion a year for the Indian economy.

— AFP

sport



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RESCHEDULED TOUR DE FRANCE TO START ON AUGUST 29



Following the president's address on Monday evening, where large-scale events were banned in France until mid-July as a part of the fight against the spread of COVID-19, the organisers of the Tour de France, in agreement with the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), have decided to postpone the Tour de France to Saturday 29th August to Sunday 20th September 2020.

**Tour de France
official statement**

PARIS: The Tour de France will be raced from August 29 to September 20, organisers announced on Wednesday, postponing cycling's flagship event originally slated to start on June 27 due to the coronavirus lockdown.

The new dates follow French President Emmanuel Macron's extension of a ban on large public gatherings until mid-July.

While the news comes as a relief to professional cycling teams and fans, it also moves the three-week race out of its traditional slot in the summer holidays where roadside crowds of around 12 million would be expected to gather in festive spirit.

"Following the president's address on Monday evening, where large-scale events were banned in France until mid-July as a part of the fight against the spread of COVID-19, the organisers of the Tour de France, in agreement with the Union

Cycliste Internationale (UCI), have decided to postpone the Tour de France to Saturday 29th August to Sunday 20th September 2020," a statement from the organisers said.

It said the race would follow the same route as the original itinerary, starting in Nice and ending in Paris.

The new date solves a series of problems after organisers faced up to the reality that the race could never take place on the original dates.

Top cycling teams will survive economically, social distancing will be easier without massive crowds, and the 4,500 strong Tour de France rolling caravan can be more easily put up in hotels outside August.

With the Tokyo Games and football's Euro 2020 both delayed by a year, the Tour is the last major event remaining on the summer sports calendar.

Elite cycling will breathe a huge sigh of

relief as the Tour accounts for most of its earnings.

"The Tour represents around 60 per cent of earnings in a season," French team AG2R boss Vincent Lavenu said last week.

The Tour will provide a daily fix for deprived sports addicts the world over, with millions of armchair fans able to tune in daily, including those still working from home.

Organisers Amaury Sports Organisation (ASO) had stubbornly refused to cancel the event, and while the new date is later than expected, it now gives them time to stage the warm-up Criterium du Dauphine — held annually ahead of the Tour but postponed this year as the spring cycling season was swept aside by the coronavirus.

Cycling's governing body the UCI announced the new dates, saying that May's postponed Giro d'Italia would be raced after

the Tour de France, and the Vuelta a Espana after that, with dates to be announced in May.

HEALTH COMES FIRST

That eight-day jaunt through the Alps will likely attract huge attention, as all the top cyclists in the world will want to compete.

With May's Giro d'Italia being cancelled and also the prestigious Tokyo Olympic road race in late July on Mount Fuji, the Tour de France will be more competitive than ever as the whole spectrum of elite cyclists focus on the one race.

"The Tour de France is 3,000km of smiles," race director Christian Prudhomme has repeated many times in the past in reference to the Tour and its fans. But he has also stressed that health comes first, ahead of the Tour de France, as the country battles the coronavirus crisis. — AFP