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FIRMS ASKED TO PROTECT EMPLOYEES' WAGES



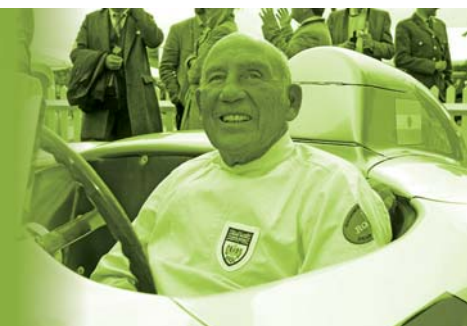
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DOING THINGS JUST THE RIGHT WAY



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MOTORSPORT GREAT MOSS DIES AGED 90





HM reviews pandemic situation with Abbas, Prince of Wales

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq has exchanged phone calls with President Mahmud Abbas of the State of Palestine, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and Prince Charles of Wales.

In the telephonic conversations, the Palestinian President and Prince of Wales wished His Majesty good health, happiness and long life and the Omani people further progress and prosperity.

His Majesty the Sultan reciprocated their cordial sentiments, wishing them good health, happiness and long life. He also wished the peoples of Palestine and the UK further progress and prosperity.

The telephonic conversations touched on existing ties of cooperation between the Sultanate and the respective countries. They also reviewed efforts being exerted at different levels to curb the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) and alleviate its impacts on humanity.

His Majesty the Sultan prayed to the Almighty Allah to spare mankind the evils of pandemics and diseases. — ONA

CASES RISE AS TESTING INTENSIFIES

FOURTH DEATH REPORTED AS MUSCAT TOPS WITH 490 CASES

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

The Sultanate continued to report a high number of confirmed COVID-19 cases as the authorities intensify the testing process, especially in parts of Muscat.

The fourth COVID-19 death was reported on Sunday, a 37-year-old expatriate. On Sunday, the Ministry of Health (MoH) announced 53 new cases, bringing the total cases to 599, while 109 cases have recovered.

Region-wise, Muscat with 490 cases and four deaths, accounted for the 50 cases that were reported on Sunday.

Among other governorates, Al Dakhiliyah has 34 cases, South Al Batinah 27, Musandam (3), Al Dhahirah (3), South Al Sharqiyah (3), North Al Sharqiyah (4), Buraimi (2), North Al Batinah (22), and Dhofar (8).

On Friday, the third death was reported in Oman – first from the expatriate community – is also from Muscat.

The MoH said on Saturday that the screening points in Muttrah are

only for those who have developed the symptoms such as fever, cough, flu, sore throat or shortness of breath. Others will not be accepted, it added, and the screening time is between 9 am until 1 pm.

The Royal Hospital, meanwhile, said it will continue to provide services to patients whose medical conditions require continued treatment. Patients can schedule an appointment through text messages.

NON-COMPLIANCE

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has reported that several shops in the Muscat Governorate have been booked for non-compliance with the health requirements and guidelines laid out by the ministry.

IMF PRAISE

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said that the policies and precautions taken by the Sultanate respond well to coronavirus developments and the current slump in global oil prices. In its report about reactions of 193 countries to



COVID-19 pandemic, the IMF pointed out that authorities in the Sultanate carried out a number of measures to curb the spread of the virus.

The IMF referred to the Omani government's announcement of a 5 per cent budget cut in view of the decline in oil prices that is conducive to a drop in government revenues. It highlighted Oman's announcement of measures to enhance the economy.

The IMF added that the Tax Institution, Oman, unfurled a set of procedures to ease pressure on the business community, including waiving fines and penalties linked to delayed disclosure of statements and permission to reschedule repayment of taxes and premiums (to be paid in instalments).

Last month, the Central Bank of Oman announced a raft of policies to spur the financial sector by pumping additional liquidity to the tune of RO 8 billion (\$20.8 billion). The procedures also included discounting interest on repurchase at a rate of 75 base points to 0.50 per cent and other incentives.

Winners for best application to monitor COVID-19 patients announced

MUSCAT: The Research Council (TRC)'s Smart City Platform, a collaborative initiative between TRC, the Supreme Council of Planning, Muscat Municipality and Information Technology Authority, has announced the competition's winners for the best application to monitor people infected with COVID-19.

The competition aimed to combat the pandemic at a national level by providing an electronic app that aids in the process of containing the spread of the

virus in the society with the help of institutions concerned in supporting the apps and determining its mechanisms to contain the virus.

More than 30 applicants submitted their proposals to participate in the competition. There was great competition among these different applications, especially with the prominent diversity in the ideas and modern techniques submitted to the competition. The advanced applications have suggested the participants' understanding

of the purpose of the competition and the need for innovative ideas to combat COVID-19. The evaluation was done virtually, with the committee consisting of more than 7 individuals from various institutions and ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Technology and Communications, and others.

The first place went to the application "Es-hal" by Mazoon al Habsi, Rahma al Habsi and Muzna al Habsi, with a cash prize of RO 1,300. This

app was made for faster epidemiological investigation, as a satellite tracking system for the user, and the data is only shared with the permission and approval of the user, to access a huge database that facilitates epidemiological investigation of the infection.

The second place went to the application "Oman faces Corona" by Muath Yousuf al Balushi, with RO 800 as the winning prize. The app includes an introductory platform on COVID-19 and ways to prevent it. It contains the

official bulletins issued by the official authorities concerned with the pandemic, and warns individuals in the society in a larger scale of rumours with regard to COVID-19.

Moreover, one of the prominent features of the app is its ability to search for available health services within 20 km from the current user's location as well as the ability to search for suppliers within 20 km of the location of the user.

The third place went to an application by Louay al Habsi and Sulaiman

al Rawahi, with RO 400 as the winning prize. The app aims to assist the authorities concerned in following up and monitoring COVID-19 patients and those in home and institutional quarantine.

The app also helps users to avoid those infected with the virus or even quarantined people. All residents of the Sultanate can also benefit from this app by taking caution and knowing new developments about COVID-19. — ONA



IN BRIEF

Two arrested for wildlife poaching in Sharqiyah

MUSCAT: Wildlife monitors of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs arrested two citizens for illegally hunting Arabian gazelles in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate.

The raid was carried out in coordination with wildlife rangers from the Office for Conservation of Environment (ECO) at the Diwan of Royal Court.

The ministry said that the two accused were referred to the judiciary for legal action.

Murder reported in Masirah, ROP probe under way

MUSCAT: A murder has taken place in Masirah, South Sharqiyah Governorate, and investigations are under way to find out the details of the incident, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) reported.

As per reports, the victim is a citizen who was killed by an Asian expatriate.

ROP has called upon everyone not to circulate false news as the investigations into the incident are being completed.

Action against retail outlets for flouting rules: MoCI

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) has reported that several shops in the Muscat Governorate have been booked for non-compliance with the health requirements and guidelines laid out by the ministry.

MoCI appealed to the commercial centres and shops to adhere to the precautionary measures issued by it in coordination with the Ministry of Health to limit the spread of COVID-19.

MoCI has urged commercial centres and shops to abide by the precautionary and preventive measures which have been announced for them, in coordination with the Ministry of Health.

These measures are meant for regulating and organising the process of shopping for consumers, to curb the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19).

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. Commercial centres or shops which ignore these guidelines would have to face legal actions.

COVID-19 testing draws huge response

FORBIDDEN: Screening only for those with disease’s symptoms such as fever, cough, flu or shortness of breath



KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

A campaign that was meant for conducting COVID-19 tests for households as well as commercial entities dealing in foodstuff in Muttrah got huge public response, resulting in a large turnout at the testing centres on Sunday.

The campaign, initiated by the Ministry of Health, began at 9 am and addressed all expatriates as well as citizens living in every nook and corner of the Wilayat of Muttrah, which is the focal point of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teams of the MoH officials visited houses located on the narrow roads, pathways and approach ways in and around the wilayat and spoke to people and instructed them to get themselves tested.

“Hundreds of houses situated inside Muttrah are parts of clusters and in cramped environment. Reaching out to them and educating them is a task but we are successful in getting to the people inside these areas”, Issam



Balushi and Moatasim al Balushi told the Observer.

Side by side, these teams of MoH officials visited the shopkeepers and educated them on the importance of the COVID-19 tests.

“One of the issues we found among the foodstuff sellers is that they were not fully aware of the severity of the issue and some don’t want to keep their shops closed and visit the Centre”, said Khalid Zadjali and Mohammed

Zadjali other team members.

As a result of increased campaigns and education among the residents, more and more people were seen at the centres by the afternoon on Sunday.

According to the four testing centres, hundreds of people, majority expatriates from Asian countries visited the centres.

“We are expecting increasing number of visitors on Monday as well as the campaigning is really seeing fruition”, one centre-in-charge told the Observer.

The MoH has strictly forbidden those who don’t feel sick from visiting the COVID-19 testing centres.

“Only those with symptoms such as fever, sore throat, headache, cough and /or difficulty breathing can approach these medical Centre for check-up”, a source at the Ministry of Health said.

Additionally, all citizens and residents were urged to follow the precautionary measures such as washing hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand rub regularly as it can help kill viruses that may be on your hands.

Also, it is suggested to maintain a distance at least of one metre between two individuals to prevent the community spread.



OUBOC Donates RO 200,000 To Ministry of Health towards Covid-19

In a recent development, the Board of Directors of the Omani Unified Bureau for the Orange Card (OUBOC), held an urgent meeting over video conferencing to discuss about the unprecedented situation across the Sultanate of Oman. Navigating the rapidly evolving to Covid-19 global pandemic, the Board delved deeper into the seriousness of the situation and best possible way forward in containing the deadly virus from spreading further. The meeting was convened with firm resolve on strategic steps and precautionary measures to be taken to assist the government in facing this impending national challenge.

It was unanimously agreed and came forward with the noble initiative that the OUBOC will stand by the Nation at this hour of global pandemic and in extending all help and support by contributing OMR 200,000 (Omani Riyals Two Hundred Thousand only) for the cause to the Ministry of Health towards Covid-19.

Mwasalat ferries students, citizens from abroad

MUSCAT: The public transport company, Mwasalat, said that its buses and ferries services have been playing an active role in the national efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Mwasalat buses were used to transfer over 2,500 scholarship students and citizens from Muscat International Airport to the institutional isolation facilities in the capital.

Buses also transported citizens who have ended the period of institutional isolation to their homes in various governorates of the Sultanate based on the procedures followed by the Relief and Shelter sector in Muscat Governorate.

A number of ferry services were also conducted from Shinas to Khasab and Dibba in Musandam Governorate through the ferry Halaniyat.

The operations included transporting oil derivatives, a number of supplies and consumables, and various sets of basic and necessary requirements, living needs and other basic materials.

On the other hand, the company continues to provide ferry passenger services to Musandam and South Sharqiyah governorates to a time schedule established in coordination with the competent authorities to serve the people.



CONDOLENCES

The Chairman and Board members of
HSBC Bank Oman SAOG
together with the management and
staff extend their sincerest condolences to

**Brigadier (Retd) Waleed bin
Omar Al Zawawi,**

Deputy Chairman of HSBC Bank Oman

And to members of his family

on the sad demise of his father,

**Dr. Omar bin Abdul
Muniem Al Zawawi**

Dr Omar's vision in forming and growing
OIB and then merging OIB with HSBC
evidenced the leadership he brought to
so many aspects of life in Oman.

May the Almighty give his family the
strength to bear this loss, and
may his soul rest in peace.

Companies asked to protect employees' wages



SAMUEL KUTTY
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

Despite appeals by authorities and unions to be fair with employees, complaints of non-payment of wages and other violations in the private sector are on the rise.

According to the General Federation of Oman Workers (GFW), the number of complaints from both nationals and expat workers has been constantly increasing.

“Most complaints related to salaries, living conditions including housing and non-availability of sufficient food”, GFW said in a statement on Sunday.

The Federation said that it had received a total of 80 complaints last week from both Omanis and expatriate workers. Of these, Muscat region accounted 59 complaints.

Following complaints, the Majlis Ash’shura had earlier asked the private sector companies in the country not to deduct the salaries of employees.

The Shura also appealed to the private sector establishments to coordinate with the government in dealing with the crisis emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

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Also at the end of last month, the Ministry of Manpower said in a statement that heads of different companies were ready to withdraw their decision to deduct or reduce the salaries of their employees.

While expressing its concern over the increasing cases of non-compliance by the private sector, the Federation said that it was closely monitoring the conditions of the national and expatriate workforce.

In this regard, the statement from the Federation said, “the private sector should be more responsible as far as the salaries and ensure availability of necessary living standards at their residences and the need to make them aware of the precautionary measures issued by the competent authorities.

MoSD offers psychological support to isolated people

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) said it provided psychosocial support service at the relief and shelter centres during the current situation emerging out of Coronavirus (COVID- 19) outbreak.

“The service is provided to individuals in institutional and domestic isolation centres who may face psychological pressures that may be caused by tension, anxiety, fear and other negative feelings and may subsequently affect their behaviour or psychological and social stability”, Wadha al Alawi, Head of Family Guidance Department, at the MoSD, told the Observer.

She added, “The MoSD has allocated nine telephone lines to provide the service to be attended by social and psychological specialists from the department and some other specialised departments”.

The service is available

on weekdays, from Sunday to Thursday, from 10 am to 1 pm; and from 4 pm to 7 pm, with confirmation that all communications are kept confidential and privacy of the caller is ensured.

Al Alawi noted that this initiative aimed at promoting individual and family practices to help achieve a degree of psychological and social stability for individuals. We have contacted those in institutional isolation centres to introduce them to the service. We also have promoted it via social media platforms and it is there for everybody’s reference.

“The ministry also cooperates with private family centres licensed by the Ministry of Social Development to implement a number of counselling programmes and community initiatives that enhance mental health among individuals and the solidarity between the ministry and the centres to achieve family and community support and cohesion”, she said.

You can catch COVID-19, no matter how sunny or hot the weather is. Countries with hot weather have reported cases of COVID-19. To protect yourself, make sure you clean your hands frequently and thoroughly and avoid touching your eyes, mouth, and nose.



#Coronavirus #COVID19

FACT:

Exposing yourself to the sun or to temperatures higher than 25C degrees DOES NOT prevent the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)



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IN BRIEF

Taliban set to release 20 Afghan govt prisoners



Washington signed a key deal with the Taliban in February that promised the withdrawal of US and foreign troops from Afghanistan by next summer, provided the militants start talks with Kabul and adhere to other guarantees, including a prisoner exchange. -- AFP

KABUL: The Taliban on Sunday said it was set to release 20 prisoners in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, in a potential breakthrough after the insurgents walked out of talks with the government last week.

"Today, 20 prisoners of the Kabul administration will be released", Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said on Twitter, adding that the group would be handed over to representatives of the Red Cross. The announcement follows a string of releases of Taliban prisoners by the Afghan government and came after the head of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan met with insurgent leaders to discuss a reduction in violence in the war-weary country.

Washington signed a key deal with the Taliban in February that promised the withdrawal of US and foreign troops from Afghanistan by next summer, provided the militants start talks with Kabul and adhere to other guarantees.

The deal requires the Afghan government -- which was not a signatory to the accord -- to free up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners, and for the militants to release 1,000 pro-

government captives in return.

A small Taliban team met with the government to discuss a comprehensive prisoner swap last week, but walked out of the talks soon after officials offered a piecemeal release of the prisoners.

The exchange has been beset with problems, with Kabul claiming the Taliban want 15 of their "top commanders" to be released, while the insurgents have accused Afghan authorities of needlessly wasting time.

The Taliban cautioned that their decision to release a group of prisoners did not mean that the talks with Kabul were being restarted.

"No the process is not back on, but this is a good will step by the [the Taliban] to accelerate the prisoners exchange process", insurgent spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said.

Javid Faisal, the spokesman for the Afghan National Security Council, chided the insurgents for not starting the process earlier, saying a reduction in violence and subsequent ceasefire between the two sides was needed.

— AFP

Assange fathered 2 kids with lawyer in embassy

LONDON: WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange fathered two children with one of his lawyers while holed up in Ecuador's Embassy in London for much of the past decade, a report on Sunday said.

The 48-year-old Australian is allegedly the dad of two boys -- aged two and one -- born to South African-born lawyer Stella Morris, the Mail on Sunday reported.

The newspaper published the report alongside photographs of Assange with the toddlers and an interview with Morris who said they "fell in love" and were planning to marry.

The couple have been engaged since 2017, according to the paper, which said it learned about the revelations in court papers seen last week.

Assange is being held in London's high security Belmarsh prison as he fights an extradition request by the United States to stand trial there on espionage charges.

The Mail on Sunday said Morris chose to reveal their relationship and

the existence of their sons because "she fears Assange's life is at serious risk if he remains in Belmarsh", due to the spread of coronavirus.

Morris wants the one-time hacker released under British government plans to allow some prisoners temporary release, amid fears COVID-19 could sweep through jails.

But Assange last month failed in a bail bid based on his risk of catching the virus, with a British judge saying there were "no grounds" for his release.

Assange's lawyers could not immediately be reached for comment.

WikiLeaks responded to the report on Twitter.

"Julian Assange's newly revealed partner, mother of their 2 young children, urges UK government to bail him and other vulnerable prisoners as #coronavirus sweeps prisons", it said.

The whistleblowing organisation posted its own video interview with Morris soon after, in which she detailed her purported five-year relationship with Assange. — AFP

Bangladesh hangs killer of founding president

DHAKA: A former army officer was hanged in Bangladesh on Sunday for his involvement in the killing of the country's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, nearly 45 years after the latter's assassination in a military coup.

Deputy Inspector General of Prisons Mohammad Towhidul Islam told Efe news that the sacked army captain, Abdul Majed, was hanged to death in Dhaka Central Jail shortly after midnight.

Police arrested Majed in Dhaka on April 7 some 24 years after trial began against him and his fellow army officers for the killing of the "father of the nation".

He filed a mercy petition to President Abdul Hamid after his arrest. However, the President rejected the clemency plea.

The authorities executed five of the 12 military personnel sentenced to death for the murder of Mujib. Their execution took place on January 27, 2010, a year after Mujib's daughter, incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh

Hasina came to power for her second term.

One of the accused died in Zimbabwe in 2001, while six others declared fugitives faced conviction in absentia.

The execution of the five assassins - including the alleged chief conspirator Lieutenant Colonel Syed Faruque Rahman - took place nearly 35 years after the August 15, 1975 coup that led to the assassination and toppled Bangladesh's first post-independence government.

The assassins also killed several members of Mujib's family. The military-backed junta and subsequent governments provided immunity to those responsible for plotting and carrying out the assassination.

Hasina, who was abroad when the bloody coup took place, won the parliamentary election in 1996 as the leader of the Awami League. She opened a judicial process against the accused as soon as she took over as Prime Minister. — IANS

Virus mutes Easter across world

GRIM SITUATION: US overtakes Italy recording more than 20,000 coronavirus deaths

NEW YORK/ROME: Christians celebrated Easter Sunday under coronavirus lockdown in many countries with church pews empty and the pope on live stream, as the US death toll from the disease passed 20,000.

At the climax of Holy Week for the planet's two billion-plus Christians, congregations were shuttered at home to avoid spreading the pathogen that has infected at least 1.7 million worldwide.

Pope Francis broke the centuries of tradition by taking his Easter mass online, with Saint Peter's Square -- packed every year with worshippers -- left deserted.

The United States, with around a fifth of the more than 100,000 total COVID-19 deaths, topped the list for both fatalities and numbers of declared cases, according to a tally maintained by Baltimore-based Johns Hopkins University.

Italy, the hardest-hit country in Europe, has recorded more than 19,000 confirmed virus deaths -- second only to the US, which has a population five times its size.

But hopes began to rise in Western Europe and heavily infected parts of America that the pandemic was peaking.

Many were looking to China's Wuhan, where the disease first emerged late last year, as life began to return to normal while officials lifted stay-inside restrictions.

However for much of the world, from India to France, strict lockdowns were still in force.

A handful of US priests and pastors risked arrest by announcing they would hold public services in their churches on Sunday, snubbing rules and medical advice.



A man stands on his bicycle on the Las Vegas strip. – Reuters

But most were putting services online, and some were innovating with "drive-in" blessings.

President Donald Trump too followed Easter services online.

'WE MUST HOPE'

On Saturday, Pope Francis live-streamed his Easter Vigil to the world's 1.3 billion Catholics from an almost empty St Peter's Basilica.

"Darkness and death do not have the last word", he said.

"As the days go by and fears grow, even the boldest hope can dissipate. Let us not give in to resignation... We can and must hope", said the pontiff.

Francis was praised by Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte for his "gesture of responsibility" to observe Easter in private.

In Jerusalem, Christians were prevented from gathering for the Easter service and all cultural sites were shuttered, regardless of their religious affiliation.

And at one church in the Philippines, photos of parishioners were taped onto the empty pews.

LEVELLING

The hardest-hit countries of Europe, and the centres of infection in the United States -- New York and New Orleans -- were seeing signs of infection rates levelling off.

Numbers from Spain offered a shred of hope on Saturday: 510 new deaths, a dip in fatalities for the third day in a row.

Newly reported coronavirus deaths in France also fell by one-third from Friday to 635.

"A very high plateau for the epidemic appears to have been reached, but the epidemic remains very active", said French health official Jerome Salomon, urging people to remain vigilant.

Italy meanwhile said the number of daily deaths there was starting to level off -- though the government resisted

pressure to lift its lockdown, extending confinement measures until May 3.

New York and New Orleans saw a slowdown in the number of new infections, deaths and hospitalisations.

RESURGENCE WARNING

Although global infections stand at 1.75 million, the real number is thought to be much higher, with many countries only testing the most serious cases.

Many experts and the World Health Organization are cautioning countries against lifting lockdown measures too quickly.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned on Friday that jumping the gun could lead to a "deadly resurgence" of the novel coronavirus, known as SARS-CoV-2.

From the crowded slums of Mexico City, Nairobi and Mumbai to conflict hotspots in the Middle East, there are fears that the worst is yet to come for the world's poorest. — AFP

Saudi Arabia extends curfew indefinitely

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's King Salman extended a nationwide curfew until further notice due to the spread of the new coronavirus, the interior ministry said on Sunday, after the kingdom reported more than 300 new infections on each of the last four days.

Last week Saudi Arabia placed its capital Riyadh and other big cities under a 24-hour curfew, locking down much of the population to stem the spread of the virus.

Elsewhere, the curfew which began on March 23 runs from 3 pm to 6 am.

The country of some 30 million has recorded 4,033 infections with 52 deaths, the highest among the six Gulf Arab states where the total count has surpassed 13,200 with 88 deaths despite strict measures to curb transmissions.

The kingdom has halted international flights, suspended the year-round umrah pilgrimage, and closed most public places. Other Gulf states have taken similar precautions.



A general view shows almost empty streets, during the 24-hour lockdown to counter the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in Riyadh. – Reuters

The interior ministry said all precautionary measures across Saudi Arabia's 13 regions remain in place.

The eastern Qatif region, where its first coronavirus cases were reported, has been sealed off since March 8.

The United Arab Emirates, the region's tourism and business hub, has the second highest tally at 3,736 cases with 20 deaths.

OTHER GULF STATES

Several Gulf Arab states have seen the virus spread among foreign workers, many of whom live in overcrowded accommodations.

Qatar has locked down a large section of an industrial area, Dubai has sealed off two commercial districts with a large population of migrant workers.

Millions of migrant workers, mainly from Asian countries, including Nepal, India and the Philippines, are among the region's large expatriate population.

India's ambassador to the UAE told local English-language daily Gulf News on Saturday that the Indian government cannot repatriate a large number of its nationals while trying to break the chain of infection at home.

"At this stage, we feel that it is best for them (Indians wishing to return home) to stay where they are," Pavan Kapoor was quoted as saying. — AFP

British prime minister thanks hospital staff

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has thanked staff at a London hospital for taking care of him while he recovers from COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

"I can't thank them enough. I owe them my life", Johnson said in a brief statement.

The 55-year-old conservative politician, who was hospitalized last Sunday running a high fever, spent three days in the intensive care unit at St Thomas' Hospital after his health deteriorated.

He was moved back to a normal ward on Thursday. When the prime minister will be able to return to work



Johnson came out of intensive care on Thursday after three nights and is recovering in a hospital ward.

remains unclear.

According to Britain's Press Association, Johnson has a tablet computer to watch films such as "Lord of the Rings" and likes to play sudoku

while recovering from COVID-19.

He has received thousands of get-well cards from well-wishers and daily letters from his fiancée Carrie Symonds while in hospital. — dpa

North Korea calls for stronger measures

PYONGYANG: North Korea called for stronger measures against the rapidly spreading coronavirus pandemic at a meeting presided by leader Kim Jong Un, state media reported on Sunday, without acknowledging whether the country had reported any infections.

The already isolated, nuclear-armed North quickly shutdown its borders after the virus was first detected in neighbouring China in January, and imposed strict containment measures.

Officials in Pyongyang and its state media have repeatedly insisted that the North remains totally free of the virus, but Sunday's report did not make that assertion.

The coronavirus epidemic -- which has infected more than 1.7 million worldwide -- had become "a great disaster threatening the whole mankind, regardless of borders and continents", the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported.

"Such environment can become a condition creating some obstacles to our struggle and progress", it said, adding Pyongyang maintained "very stable anti-epidemic situation".

The meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea discussed changing policy tasks in the wake of the epidemic, KCNA reported, as officials called for strict and thorough check of the infiltration of the virus.

A joint resolution was adopted "on more thoroughly taking national measures for protecting the life and safety of our people to cope with the worldwide epidemic disease", it added. — AFP



Trilemma and the ecodemic...

K YATISH RAJAWAT

The war against the most severe health emergency in more than a 100 years involves three parallel battles — the ones against the COVID-19 pandemic, the infodemic and what I call “ecodemic”. The third term represents the impact the first two have on the economy. The scenario and the actions of the government, business and society are being dictated by epidemiologists. In the war of attrition between lives and livelihood, the former seems to be winning, though the verdict may not come in a public proclamation.

The war is being waged in the echo chambers of social media and the noise is rising to a crescendo. The verdict will not only affect policy making but also the way in which the policies are communicated. The problem with the

lives vs livelihood debate is that its noise creates panic among the general public and roils the markets, resulting in huge losses in notional and economic value. This results in a triple whammy — it slows down the policymaker, frightens the businessmen and shakes up the society.

It is impossible to solve the trilemma in tranches as all three are interdependent. All three need to be resolved together, using adequate resources, time and effort. The process should begin with the delegation of central control to step up the speed and quality of response. The pandemic is a phenomenon that can't be addressed centrally. The government is cognizant of this and is acting on it. As a matter of fact, the delegation shows in the recent sealing of designated hotspots in several Indian districts in Uttar

Pradesh, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh. This decision has to be made by the frontline administration in each district. There is an administrative glitch here — we recognise the district as a unit of governance and not the city. The virus is most virulent in dense urban areas and the government needs to delegate both financial, police, health and administrative control at the city level. If it was important earlier, it has become urgent now with the risk of contagion rising steadily.

The pandemic is about control, and hence the sealing and quarantine. The word quarantine derives from the Latin word for forty, and the method was first employed in Venice during the Great Bubonic Plague of 1377. The recent sealing of hotspots means that the government is moving to the next round

of containment. Parallel to this, freedom should be given to the domestic supply chain to operate in an efficient manner. It is important to set the protocol for opening the factories, move workers through safe transit routes and use railways for rerouting the logistics chain. Give back the freedom to the businesses to rebuild themselves. Otherwise, bankruptcies will mount — it will start with small businesses and snowball into a crisis that will hit the largest. This ecodemic is happening because of the lockdown and its contagion needs to be stopped before it destroys the economy.

It is not possible for the government to decide which sector is essential and which is not. It is best to be left to the market to decide. The government can set the protocol and start giving freedom in a phased geographical manner, taking

into account the hotspots.

After 9/11, a new industry of security came into being. It created a protocol for metal detectors, sniffer dogs and guards. A similar industry will rise post COVID-19 to take on future virus outbreaks. Factories, workplaces and offices will have temperature checks, make each person enter and exit through a sanitation unit. This will not happen through notification or orders as businesses need funds and liquidity. The market will create solutions if we allow them to operate.

The new cost of operation will be higher, but businesses will accept and adapt. The government needs to recognise that they do not address this problem at any stage — it's not a 40-day challenge, but an 18-month marathon. — IANS



As unemployment rises due to virus-related closings, more people are turning to crowdfunding efforts to make ends meet. – AFP

Crowdfunding fills gaps for displaced workers

The coronavirus pandemic threatened game over for Endgame restaurant near Seattle.

It shared its plight online at crowd support platform GoFundMe, where donations eclipsed the restaurant's \$5,500 goal to stay in business.

“All donations will go to expenses until we are able to resume normal operations,” Michael Lamere and Austin Sines said in an online plea for help.

Musicians, podcasters, writers and others denied income by the coronavirus pandemic are turning to the power of online community spirit to make ends meet.

The health crisis and its massive economic impact have stirred increased interest in crowdfunding sites like GoFundMe and membership platforms such as Patreon.

“The generosity we are seeing is rather incredible and unprecedented,” said GoFundMe chief executive Tim Cadogan.

The crowdfunding platform, which allows anyone to launch a campaign, has seen more than two million individual donations to coronavirus-related efforts, amounting to about \$120 million, according to Cadogan.

COVID-19 related GoFundMe campaigns reflect evolving needs, from raising money to get supplies for health care professionals to supporting local restaurants barred from seating diners to helping the jobless pay rent.

A Coronavirus Rent Relief Fund launched about two weeks ago is raising money to help those left jobless avoid eviction.

“Coronavirus (COVID19) has

created one of the most difficult moments in world history, a moment we will surely look back on,” wrote the New York fund organiser, who raised some \$220,000.

A journalists' furlough fund raised some \$46,000 and a Miami campaign has collected \$11,000 for struggling restaurant workers.

The platform has some more modest campaigns including a \$1,000 effort for dancers -- the Burlesque Community COVID-19 Response Fund in Los Angeles.

“I felt it imperative to help my community of dancers who are already underpaid and have effectively lost any way to make income,” said organiser Veronica Voss, who boasts being Miss Hollywood Burlesque 2019.

Many campaigns however fall short, with demands rising and an estimated 17 million newly unemployed in the United States.

In one example, a campaign for the Just Oxtails Soul Food Restaurant in Texas raised just \$1,700 towards a goal of \$150,000.

Large operations are also turning to GoFundMe, which relies on “tips” from donors to sustain its business and collects fees that go for credit card processing.

Frontline Responders Fund started by logistics giant Flexport and other companies is among top fundraisers at GoFundMe, having collected more than \$6 million to get masks, gowns, gloves and other critical supplies to health care workers fighting the pandemic.

An Americas Food Fund at GoFundMe launched by Leonardo

DiCaprio, Laurene Powell Jobs and Apple, along with the Ford Foundation, has raised more than \$13 million.

Meanwhile, some 50,000 new artists launched on Patreon last month.

The appeal to patrons goes beyond performers showing off their crafts to paying for inside glimpses their lives, particularly at this stressful time, said Patreon chief financial officer Carlos Cabrera, himself a musician.

“Orchestras are getting hit so hard; for them it is a double-whammy,” he said.

“They depend on in-person events, and the majority of their demographic are older folks who are at high risk”

Cabrera said that he feared financial hardships caused by the pandemic would cause Patreon pledges to plummet but the opposite has happened.

“Way more patrons are creating pledges and raising pledges,” Cabrera said. More than 150,000 artists use Patreon to generate income by offering exclusive content to four million patrons in over 180 countries, according to the San Francisco-based platform established seven years ago.

The biggest category at Patreon is YouTube video creators, with podcasts in fast-growing second place ahead of illustrators such as artists who draw web comics and authors who release novels by the chapter.

Cabrera is seeing top music talent from around the world who, unable to tour, are recording at home and building Patreon pages to make money.

“I've seen artists go out for a walk in nature and hang out virtually with their fans,” Cabrera said. — AFP

Chaotic Wisconsin election signals virus-related voting battles ahead

SIMON LEWIS & JULIA HARTE

Savonda Sisson said she requested a mail ballot to vote in Tuesday's Democratic primary election in Wisconsin well ahead of the election.

When it failed to arrive, the Milwaukee resident decided not to risk voting in person. Sisson, a 39-year-old African American, feared her asthma would make her vulnerable to the deadly coronavirus now sweeping the country. And she expressed anger that other voters, especially in the hard-hit black community, had to make the same tough choice.

“Having to make that decision between their life and their vote, it's heartbreaking,” Sisson said.

Sisson is among potentially thousands of Wisconsin's nearly 3.4 million registered voters who could not vote by mail or in person in Tuesday's elections that went forward despite the coronavirus pandemic, according to data from state election officials, voting rights advocates who heard from people who never received a ballot, and interviews with more than a dozen Wisconsin residents who were unable to vote.

Conservative-leaning courts overturned a decree by Wisconsin's Democratic Governor Tony Evers to postpone the election and extend absentee voting. Evers issued a statewide stay-at-home order on March 25 to combat the virus, which has killed more than 14,000 people nationwide, at least 95 of them in Wisconsin.

The drama in Wisconsin foreshadows legal battles and political showdowns looming in upcoming primaries across the country, and heading into the all-important November presidential election, as the worst public health crisis in a century upends voting, Democratic officials, non-partisan voter advocates and election watchdogs say.

They are particularly concerned about the potential impact in closely fought battlegrounds such as Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, whose contests were decided in Republican President Donald Trump's favor by razor-thin margins in 2016.

Nearly 1.3 million Wisconsin voters applied for absentee ballots for Tuesday's elections in the midst of the pandemic, more than the total number of votes cast in the 2016 Democratic primary, according to the Wisconsin Election Commission.

More than 1 million of those ballots have already been returned, the commission said. Others will keep trickling in. Votes from Tuesday's election will not be tallied until after April 13, the deadline for mail-in ballots to arrive at local election offices.

Some local officials tasked with handling absentee-ballot applications acknowledged to Reuters and on social media that they were overwhelmed by the surge. More than 1,900 voters reported they never received their requested ballots, according to A Better Wisconsin Together, a progressive nonprofit group that asked voters to report missing ballots. Reuters could not independently verify these numbers.

— Reuters

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Net users in Oman hit by cyber extortion scam

EMAIL RECIPIENTS BLACKMAILED INTO PAYING \$1,900 IN BITCOIN TO AVOID ‘COMPROMISING’ MATERIAL BEING SHARED WITH CONTACTS

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

Scores of email users in the Sultanate have been the target of cyber blackmail conducted by suspected international online criminals using extortion as a tactic to shake down their victims.

In each of the targeted cases, the recipients were asked to cough up the equivalent of \$1,900 in bitcoin, or risk ‘compromising material’, purported to have been surreptitiously videotaped by the fraudsters, being sent out to family members, co-workers and friends.

A well-known Omani specialist in cybercrimes and disaster management confirmed to the Observer that the targeted victims were not few and far-between. Hassan Ali al Ajmi (pictured), who spent the past 18 years

studying and combatting cybercrime, said he was contacted by a number of followers seeking his counsel.

“I received a lot of queries from people reaching out via email, Instagram, Snapchat and through my DMs, asking about the email,” the Muscat-based expert said.

“It appears that the fraudsters had employed one of three distinct tactics to make the threat look credible to their victims. One: they included a set of private phone numbers in the mail that may not have been made widely public by the user; Second: they included a rarely used email address that the user may have created, say, for exclusively sending out job applications or to register on a specific website; and Third: they included one or more passwords used previously by



the victim.”

Aside from these ‘personalised’ references, the mail was essentially a cut-and-paste of a format long used

“Aside from these ‘personalised’ references, the mail was essentially a cut-and-paste of a format long used by scammers to target their victims.”

HASSAN ALI AL AJMI
Cybercrimes specialist

by scammers to target their victims. The fraudster typically claimed to have placed malware on the user’s computer that activated the latter’s webcam

and also collected all of the contacts from their Messenger, Facebook, and email accounts. In each of the mails, recipients were given 24 hours to make the payment, demanded by the cyber extortionist, into a designated alphanumeric bitcoin account.

Al Ajmi said he strongly cautioned the recipients of the extortion email against giving in to the cyber crooks. As for the bits personalised data used in their mail, he said the scammers were likely to have gotten their hands on that info via a range of possibilities: data breaches reported by major data hosting companies in the past, private information collected by various online marketing agencies via cookies and apps and sold onward to other parties, and so on.

Ajmi, citing his long experience in

the field, conceded that some users in Oman have fallen prey to cybercrime in past years, but he warned that the fraudsters, having succeeded once in extorting money from their victims, were unlikely to move on.

“At the end of the day, cyber security is one’s own personal responsibility. We should be aware of the risks of, for example, downloading apps and material from suspect sites, accessing dubious websites, and so on.

The government, represented by the Ministry of Technology and Communications (MTC) and its cyber security agencies, is doing its part in safeguarding our cyber space from all kinds of criminals and hackers. For our part, we need to constantly update ourselves of the risks and take the necessary precautions,” he added.

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HSBC reveals \$16 million exposure to troubled NMC Healthcare Group



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

HSBC Bank Oman SAOG (HBON), a publicly listed bank, announced on Sunday that it has exposure to NMC Healthcare LLC – part of the scandal-ridden UAE-based NMC Group – to the tune of \$16 million.

Andrew Long, CEO of HSBC Bank Oman, stated in a filing to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) that its exposure to the NMC Healthcare LLC, a company based in the UAE, amounts to 0.2 per cent of HBON's total assets.

HSBC Bank Oman is the second publicly traded Muscat-based lender to have disclosed a degree of exposure to the Abu Dhabi headquartered NMC Group, which is the largest private healthcare services provider in the UAE.

Bank Nizwa, the first sharia-compliant Islamic bank in the Sultanate, revealed last week that it had extended RO 5 million in direct financing to Elegant Medical Centre LLC, which is 34.3 per cent indirectly owned by NMC Healthcare UAE through its subsidiaries, for sole operation in the Sultanate.

The announcements come as a High Court judge in the UK placed HMC Health, which is listed on the London Stock Exchange (LSE), into administration, citing serious financial and management irregularities in the running of the group. The action follows a application by UAE creditors led by Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank (ADCB), which are owed huge loans by the troubled health care group.

COVID-19 reveals the fragility of our global economy

STEEN JAKOBSEN

The virus outbreak has set three major macro impulses in motion: a global demand shock, a global supply shock and an oil war that has forced prices to multi-year lows. This final development will result in an enormous destruction of capital and, soon, structural unemployment.

In over 30 years of doing this job I have never seen three simultaneous blows to the economy. I am again reminded of 2008, where small events like BNP Paribas closing their high-yield fund, Bear Stearns closing redemptions on its hedge funds in 2007 and ultimately the failure of Lehman Brothers catapulted markets into a fitful, systemic meltdown that quickly disrupted the economic backdrop as well.

The markets were extremely difficult to trade in this period, just as it was difficult to comprehend all of the moving parts of the broader economic fallout. This current disruption has already eclipsed the 2008 chaos in some markets, as we suddenly find ourselves in a period in which some markets can move up and down more in one day than they did in an entire year. A bull and bear market can happen inside of a week.

The behaviour of markets this year is completely without precedent and reflects how illiquid markets are after having suffered this triple whammy of shocks.

The volatility is a symptom of the worst-nightmare for traders and market makers: when prices become 'discontinuous', or gap viciously from one price to the next like an airliner hitting air-pockets. The bid-ask spread goes from some orderly path of 5-10, 6-11, 4-9 to something like a jump from 5-10 to 25-35 to 45 bid- but where is the offer? 70? 90? This tests trading systems on the chaos of inputs. But even more importantly, it forces many financial investors to deleverage as P&L swings become too violent and counterparties send out a flurry of margin calls.

In an environment of panic deleveraging, the 'cash is king' mantra arises. Funds, banks, investors and even companies suddenly see not only a dramatic mark-down of asset prices, but wild swings in correlations across portfolios and swings in P&L.

Central banks, meanwhile, try to move in quickly with 'support' in the form of rate cuts and liquidity provision. For a company or fund



THE VOLATILITY IS A SYMPTOM OF THE WORST-NIGHTMARE FOR TRADERS AND MARKET MAKERS: WHEN PRICES BECOME 'DISCONTINUOUS', OR GAP VICIOUSLY FROM ONE PRICE TO THE NEXT LIKE AN AIRLINER HITTING AIR-POCKETS.

relying on credit for some portion of its operations, this may help in terms of the future cost of financing liabilities. But it does not help the price of the equity or credit on the asset side. Here, the 'crowded theatre with a small exit' metaphor applies, with everyone selling to deleverage across the board. And, often, that selling is of assets that are highly illiquid even in the best of times.

This cycle is even worse than past cycles because the current era of low and negative yields has seen a 'reach for yield' that forces market players further and further out on the risk curve and into super-illiquid financial assets such as private equity and high-risk corporate credit.

Markets always become most vulnerable when we are operating with discontinuous price structures. The shakeup we are seeing here in Q1 will change the landscape of investment and risk tolerance going into 2021.

But it will also change the long-term allocation model away from a 60/40 bond/equity allocation — or similarly heavy-fixed income-weighted risk parity principles — to proper hedging through commodity exposure (inflation protection) and long volatility (fat tail-discounted price action protection).

If this happens, then investors will be in a better place going forward. The popular idea that the spectrum of asset allocation only stretches from some mix of bonds/equities to the riskiest 100 per cent long equities has always been flawed, but the illusion of safety

was measured in returns, not in risk. Now risk has come back to bite.

ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

The triple whammy to the global economy almost guarantees that 2020 as an economic year is lost, with policymakers needing to pull out all of the stops to address a real, global recession.

Classically the policy response has been to lower the price of money. But with the Fed effectively zero bound before Q2 even gets under way, we already have all of the major world's major central banks at that level (and even beyond in some cases with NIRP). The ability of monetary policy is at best constrained and, at worst, directly detrimental to the ability of economies to respond — as a low velocity of money dictates lower inflation and in the process less net lending demand.

There is now a demand gap, supply gap and an energy sector scrambling to survive as their 2020 cash flows point to major losses for the strong and bankruptcies for the weakest producers.

The market is on the brink of spinning out of control as credit, which is everything in today's market, has dried up — such that US mortgage yields are rising even though 30-year US treasury yields have collapsed. In other words, the market is tightening terms on credit even as the Fed tries to ease by cutting rates.

With the central bank policy tool box empty, we think we are on the verge of full Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), as politicians take the

reins from obsolete central banks and expand spending without constraint from debt issuance (true money printing!).

The UK budget was an early indication of this and was drawn up even before the coronavirus impacts began to crystallise. And the concept of the government filling the gap left behind on demand is now even accepted in Germany, which issued its own form of Mr. Draghi's 2012 'whatever it takes' speech in vowing infinite support to German businesses large and small through the KfW or government development bank.

Think of the Marshall Plan after WWII, where the US issued infinite credit to war-torn Europe in order to create demand and help the destroyed continent rebuild. In economics, this is Say's law: the idea that supply creates its own demand.

And that will be the solution here because failure via debt-deflation and a credit implosion is not an option. Governments will create money far beyond any on- or off-balance sheet constraint. Note how Germany used a government entity, not its budget this week.

Is the system so broken, or unbalanced, that it needs to get worse before it gets better? We will leave that for others to speculate on. But we have full confidence that when we leave 2020 the policy measures taken will prompt strong inflationary forces that even point to the risk of stagflation.

(Steen Jakobsen, Chief Investment Officer at Saxo Bank)

Omanexpo to host free webinar on 'Steering Businesses through COVID-19'



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

Businesses are facing a challenge they would not have dreamed of over a year ago—that of coping and keeping up with the rapidly changing business landscape as a result of COVID-19.

Responding to the need to inform businesses and uphold its commitment to continue to provide useful, relevant, insightful, and practical information about developments, trends, innovations to the industries it serves, Omanexpo will host its first webinar "Steering a Business through COVID-19" from 11 am to 12.30 pm on April 20.

The interactive webinar will feature talks from Dr Fatma al Yaqoubi, Head of TB and Acute Respiratory Diseases Section, Directorate General for Disease Surveillance and Control, Oman Ministry of Health; Dr Marie-Louise Van Eck, Regional Medical Director, International SOS; Mohamed Nayaz, Partner, Africa, India & Middle East (AIM) Advisory Services, MENA leader for Resilience Services, Ernst & Young (EY); and Craig Ceppetelli, Executive Director (Interim), Office of International Collaboration, Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, and will culminate with Q&A sessions after each presentation.

The speakers will share insights on how to mitigate COVID-19 risks within workspaces; mental health and resilience during a pandemic; and strengthening business continuity and resilience to disruptive events in the MENA region, among others.

Ashley Roberts, Acting General Manager and Portfolio Director of Omanexpo, said: "As an exhibition and conferences organiser, we need to continue to innovate and adapt to the current restrictions on hosting mass gatherings by using virtual platforms to enable us to continue to play our role in delivering meaningful events for our customers and markets."

Interested attendees may register for the webinar at <https://events.streamgo.co.uk/omanexpo-webinars-steering-a-company-through-COVID-19>.

SEZAD sets standards for labour camps in Duqm SEZ

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

Yahya bin Said al Jabri, Chairman of the Special Economic Zone Authority at Duqm (SEZAD), issued a decision approving the standards and conditions for the construction of workers' accommodation in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZD).

The objective behind this decision is to unify and specify the minimum mandatory requirements for the provision of appropriate accommodation for workers in SEZD, covering planning, designing and operation requirements as well as health, safety and environment requirements, in compliance with the local and international requirements.

Moreover, other conditions that have been added to the list of requirements to take into account the precautionary measures concerning the infectious diseases, in accordance with the recent amendments implemented to the Law on Control of Infectious Diseases.

The newly set standards and



conditions are applicable to all permanent and temporary workers' accommodations designated to accommodate workers in the Zone, and are compulsory to all owners of these accommodations. The decision issued on April 9 requested that all existing workers' accommodations to be adjusted as per the new decision within six months from the date of its

issue.

Likewise, on February 10, SEZAD added a new article to the Urban Planning and Building Permits Regulations stipulating that it is not permissible to establish workers' accommodation in the Zone unless an approval is obtained from SEZAD to ensure the compliance of its standards and requirements. Otherwise, SEZAD

may impose an administrative fine not exceeding RO 5,000 for violations.

The conditions and standards stipulated all workers' accommodations shall have the features and facilities that ensure providing decent standards of living for workers; including privacy, comfort, security, health, safety and service, while taking into account the

NEW CRITERIA: Lodgings should offer decent living standards for workers, including privacy, comfort, security, health, safety and service, while taking into account the environmental and social aspects.

environmental and social aspects.

In view of that, all accommodations shall consider the size and type of facilities as to be appropriate to the number of residents, provide all necessary facilities to maintain health and safety of residents, ensure all facilities have appropriate natural or artificial lighting, good ventilation, equipped with tools and fire-fighting equipment according to

the requirements of civil defense and appropriate to the size of area while providing training for workers to use it.

Further, all accommodations shall include a first aid box with all the necessary medical tools and supplies. Besides, all facilities should be built from materials that comply with the approved technical and standard requirements.

The new conditions strictly prohibited the use of asbestos, any other product in which Asbestos is used or any other harmful substance. Also, the cooking stoves, washing machines, food storage, or any dangerous materials are not permitted inside bedrooms.

Overall, the standards and conditions are covering all facilities and services in the accommodations including bedrooms, toilets, washing rooms, kitchen and accessories, dining hall, prayer hall, activities hall, gym, clinic, laundry, drinking water tanks, sewage treatment station, sewage tanks, waste collection sites and many other facilities.

France builds \$21.7 billion fund to support big firms

PARIS : The French government has set aside 20 billion euros (\$21.7 bn) to help inject capital into big companies struggling to survive the coronavirus crisis, Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said.

Le Maire has repeatedly pledged to help France's corporate champions get through the coronavirus crisis by taking stakes in them or even going as far as nationalisation if necessary.

"We've decided to put credit on the fund, to put 20 billion euros on the special fund to support to the capital of companies that need it, whether public or private," Le Maire said on Europe 1 radio.

The funds are earmarked in a package of crisis measures that Le Maire more than doubled on Thursday to 100 billion euros and which is set to go to parliament next Wednesday for approval.

First on the list of companies that may need state funds is Air France KLM, which said on Thursday it expected the French and Dutch states to help meet its cash needs with air travel at a standstill.

"As regards Air France, we are ready for when the time comes, without a doubt soon, to support Air France and make sure that this French industrial champion ... recovers quickly," Le Maire said.

— Reuters



Air France Airlines planes are seen on the tarmac at Paris Charles de Gaulle airport in Roissy-en-France.

— Reuters

World Bank forecasts worst economic slump in South Asia in 40 years

NEW DELHI: India and other South Asian countries are likely to record their worst growth performance in four decades this year due to the coronavirus outbreak, the World Bank said on Sunday.

The South Asian region, comprising eight countries, is likely to show economic growth of 1.8 per cent to 2.8 per cent this year, the World Bank said in its South Asia Economic Focus report, well down from the 6.3 per cent it projected six months ago.

India's economy, the region's biggest, is expected to grow 1.5 per cent to 2.8 per cent in the fiscal year that started on April 1. The World Bank has estimated it will grow 4.8 per cent to 5 per cent in the fiscal year that ended on March 31.

"The green shoots of a rebound that were observable at the end of 2019 have been overtaken by the negative impacts of the global crisis," the World Bank report said.

Other than India, the World Bank forecast that Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh will also see sharp falls in economic growth.

Three other countries — Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Maldives — are expected to fall into recession, the World Bank said in the report, which was based on country-level data available as of April 7.

Measures taken to counter the coronavirus have disrupted supply chains



An atrium is seen at the World Bank headquarters building.

— Reuters

across South Asia, which has recorded more than 13,000 cases so far — still lower than many parts of the world.

India's lockdown of 1.3 billion people has also left millions out of work, disrupted big and small businesses and forced an exodus of migrant workers from the cities to their

homes in villages.

In the event of prolonged and broad national lockdowns, the report warned of a worst-case scenario in which the entire region would experience an economic contraction this year.

To minimise short-term economic pain,

TO MINIMISE SHORT-TERM ECONOMIC PAIN, THE BANK CALLED FOR COUNTRIES IN THE REGION TO ANNOUNCE MORE FISCAL AND MONETARY STEPS TO SUPPORT UNEMPLOYED MIGRANT WORKERS, AS WELL AS DEBT RELIEF FOR BUSINESSES AND INDIVIDUALS.

the Bank called for countries in the region to announce more fiscal and monetary steps to support unemployed migrant workers, as well as debt relief for businesses and individuals.

India has so far unveiled a \$23 billion economic plan to offer direct cash transfers to millions of poor people hit by its lockdown. In neighbouring Pakistan, the government has announced a \$6 billion plan to support the economy.

"The priority for all South Asian governments is to contain the virus spread and protect their people, especially the poorest who face considerable worse health and economic outcomes," said senior World Bank official Hartwig Schafer.

— Reuters

Lender JPMorgan Chase to raise borrowing standards

NEW YORK: JPMorgan Chase & Co, the country's largest lender by assets, is raising borrowing standards this week for most new home loans as the bank moves to mitigate lending risk stemming from the novel coronavirus disruption.

From Tuesday, customers applying for a new mortgage will need a credit score of at least 700, and will be required to make a down payment equal to 20 per cent of the home's value.

The change highlights how banks are quickly shifting gears to respond to the darkening US economic outlook and stress in the housing market, after measures to contain the virus put 16 million people out of work and plunged the country into recession.

"Due to the economic uncertainty, we are making temporary changes that will allow us to more closely focus on serving our existing customers," Amy Bonitatibus, chief marketing officer for JPMorgan Chase's home lending business, said.

The bank was the fourth largest US mortgage lender in 2019, according to industry publication Inside Mortgage Finance.

The changes should help JPMorgan reduce its exposure to borrowers who unexpectedly lose their job, suffer a decline in wages, or whose homes lose value.



A view of the exterior of the JP Morgan Chase & Co corporate headquarters in New York City.

— Reuters

The bank said the change will also free up staff to handle a surge in mortgage refinancing requests, which are taking longer to process due to staff working from home and non-essential businesses being closed.

Refinancing requests jumped to their highest level in more than a decade last month as average rates on 30-year fixed-rate mortgages, the most popular home loan, fell to near record lows, according to data from the Mortgage Bankers Association (MBA).

JPMorgan would not disclose the current minimum requirements for its various mortgage products, but the average down payment across the housing market is around 10 per cent, according to the MBA.

— Reuters

Macy's taps Lazard to bolster finances

NEW YORK: Macy's Inc has hired investment bank Lazard Ltd to explore options for bolstering its finances after the department store operator lost most of its revenue as it shut down all its stores as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, people familiar with the matter said.

The move by Macy's, the largest US department store operator by sales, is a sign of the severity of the crisis facing brick-and-mortar retailers, which were already struggling with the shift to online shopping.

The pandemic has forced store closures and widespread furloughs of employees as state after state issued shelter-in-place orders in efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus, which causes the COVID-19 respiratory illness.

Macy's has called in Lazard bankers who specialise in finding ways to recapitalise financially troubled companies and rework debts, the sources said. Macy's has also enlisted debt restructuring lawyers at Kirkland & Ellis LLP, two of the sources said.

Macy's has asked its advisers to help manage its liabilities and explore options that could include new financing, the sources said, adding that no debt restructuring is imminent.

The sources asked not to be identified because the deliberations are confidential.

A spokeswoman for Macy's said in a statement that the company is "exploring numerous options to strengthen our capital structure," adding that it maintains relationships with a range of advisers.



People wait to enter Macy's Herald Square in Manhattan, New York City.

— Reuters

The company, which operates the Macy's and Bloomingdale's department stores, declined to comment further beyond pointing to previous steps it has taken in response to the pandemic, which include suspending its quarterly dividend, drawing down its credit line, deferring spending, reducing pay at most management levels and furloughing the majority of its roughly 123,000 employees.

The company, which also operates the bluemercy beauty products and spa chain, has \$3.6 billion in long-term debt and roughly \$7 billion in store lease obligations.

It had \$685 million in cash as of the end of its most recent fiscal year, and recently drew down another \$1.5 billion from a credit line

while its stores remained closed.

Macy's decision to explore new financing, among other options, makes it the latest US retailer to do so.

Rival Nordstrom Inc raised \$600 million by placing real estate assets that included five stores, six distribution centres and its Seattle headquarters in a separate company and borrowing against it by issuing bonds.

Macy's was already in the midst of slashing costs before the coronavirus outbreak, with plans to permanently close 125 stores over the next three years and cut more than 2,000 jobs.

Those were in addition to the more than 100 store closures and thousands of job cuts it has rolled out since 2015.

— Reuters

Moroccan companies begin ventilator production

RABAT: Morocco has started manufacturing its own ventilators with oxygen masks, with 500 expected to be ready by mid-April to help meet demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Industry Ministry said.

The North African kingdom has confirmed 1,431 cases of the novel coronavirus, including 105 deaths, and is seeking to raise the number of its intensive care beds to 3,000 from 1,640.

The pandemic has led to a global shortage of ventilators and other medical equipment.

Morocco's Industry Ministry has asked aeronautics and electronics suppliers in the country to develop and manufacture both non-invasive ventilators, where an oxygen mask is secured over the patient's face, and invasive models where a tube feeds oxygen straight to a sedated patient's lungs.

The first 500 non-invasive



Employees work on a Moroccan ventilator at a factory in Casablanca, Morocco.

— Reuters

ventilators will be ready in about a week, the ministry said.

"We use locally supplied material available here and we will continue to produce ventilators depending on Morocco's needs," said Badre Jaafar, director of SERMP, a Casablanca-based company that supplies parts to French aircraft engine maker Safran.

It worked with a group of other companies, coordinated by the Industry Ministry and with help from the Health Ministry and other public bodies.

The government, which has imposed a lockdown to slow the spread of the disease, said last month it had allocated \$200 million to buy equipment and medicine to prepare for the crisis.

Doctors and engineers from public institutions helped design the non-invasive ventilator that is already under production, capable of 3,000 hours of

use, and the Health Ministry approved the design.

They are now working to develop an invasive ventilator.

Morocco has around 140 aeronautics suppliers that employ more than 10,000 people and last year exported \$1.58 billion of parts to companies including Boeing and Airbus.

Neither the ministry nor the companies have said how much investment has been required or on what commercial terms the ventilators are being manufactured. The ministry said it had instigated the project but the private sector is now leading it.

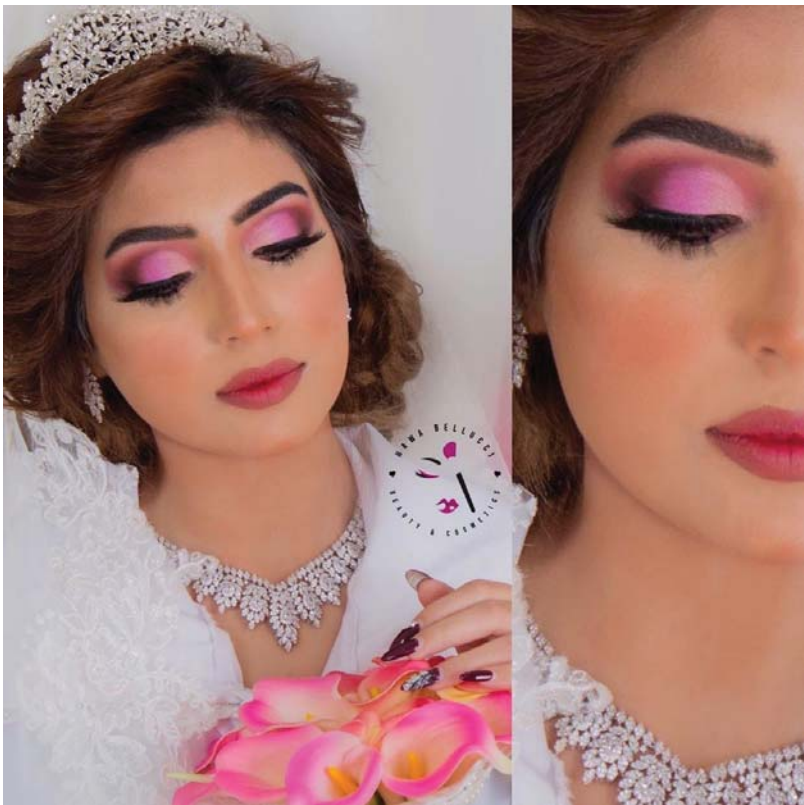
"I hope this will be a launch pad for the medical industry in the country," Jaafar said. Morocco has offered financial support for small businesses producing anti-coronavirus equipment and made wearing masks compulsory earlier last week.

— Reuters



DOING THINGS JUST THE RIGHT WAY

A SELF-TAUGHT MAKE-UP ARTIST FINDS ETHICS OF HER ART



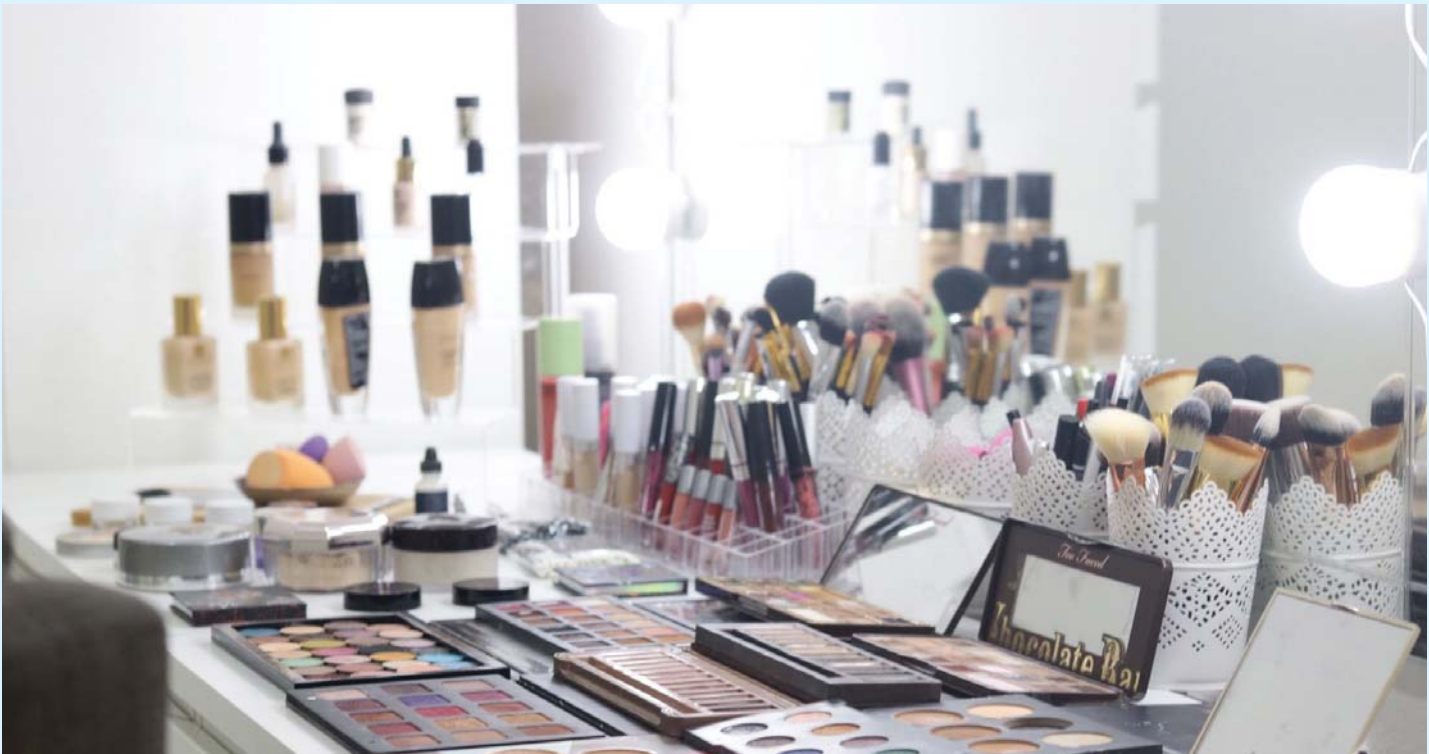
MAI AL ABRI

There are people who acquire knowledge by training and proper schooling and there are those who have natural instinct to do something. Hawa al Bellucci comes under the latter category that led her to learn by trial, through amateur attempts and ended up becoming a true make-up artist who is known for doing things "just the right way".

A graduate in geography it took time for Hawa to choose a career due to clash between her academic knowledge and her passion for becoming a make-up artist. Once decided she did not care for her educational background and listened to her intuition of setting up a beauty parlour.

"My major in college was actually geography. I did not study anything related to make-up. Make-up artistry was only a hobby for me and I never thought that it would be a profession for me", she said.

Hawa started applying her own acquired skill on friends and sisters before converting it into a career. "Your friends and sisters will always be there for a free makeover. Who wouldn't be? Make your friends aware that you are there for a free service before they go



out even before a big event".

Those free clients were doing free marketing for Hawa. When asked by others that who did the make-up for them, they sang all praises for her and she got a reputation of a good make-up artist.

This is how she started her career in make-up artistry. Later, before moving on to her next big plan of having an

independent salon, Hawa joined 'Mulhemat programme -- inspirers in English', organised by Riyada in cooperation with other companies.

This course was her starting point. Through the course she learned how to launch her small business, how to promote it, how to make deals, how to grow up, and how to recruit others in her project and lots more.

"To me make-up is something special. It taught me to have fun and more importantly, it taught me that even when you've had a bad day, you can take a look at the mirror, wipe it out and start afresh again tomorrow. It is not just a red lipstick; it is confidence in a tube. It's not just a concealer, it's the secret to giving that teenager the confidence to go to a party with her head

held high believing that beauty is all hers," Hawa explained.

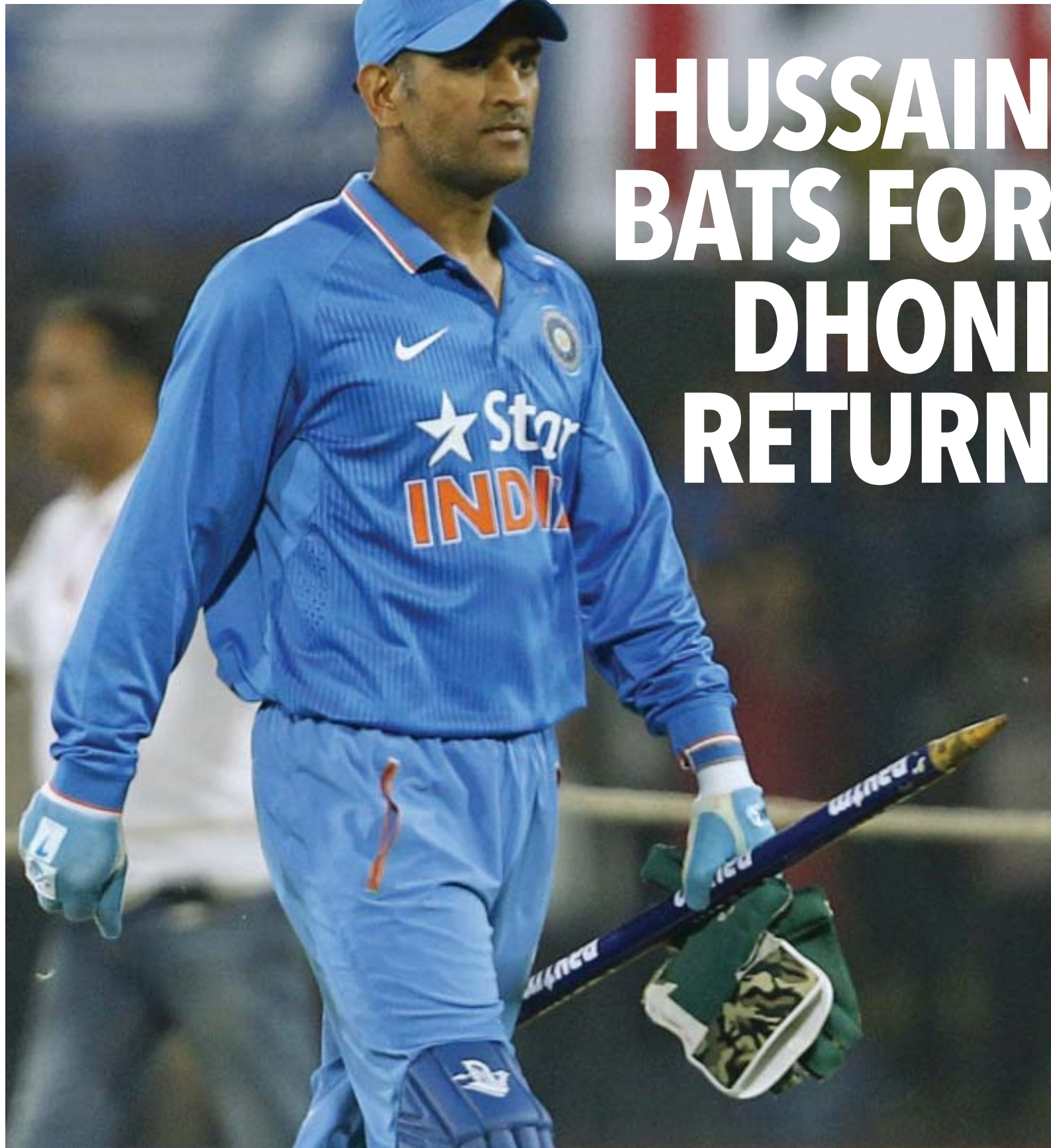
Hawa believes that make-up has the ability to give confidence to many girls to a certain extent, to change a life, to evoke a smile or even a tear. "Most of the women don't go out without wearing make-up. It is not because they are not beautiful enough. It gives them confidence to cover some of the facial skin problems.

Wearing make-up on a daily basis is the call of the girl herself".

"I always tell girls that make-up is not the first solution to the skin problems. We do not hide them, we fix problems first. Skin care is extremely important. All women should apply the right creams and facial wash. If the problems are too hard to handle, they should go see a skin specialist", she advises.

"For me, I prefer wearing make-up on special occasions to give a new and different look and to hide some problems. It gives a girl the feeling that she is unique and charming. Ninety per cent of my outings are without make-up and I still feel confident".

Hawa uses echo-friendly products only. "I don't use any cosmetic that is tested on animals. I make sure that my products are verified by BETA organisation that certifies the products are cruelty free", she stressed.



HUSSAIN BATS FOR DHONI RETURN

NEW DELHI: Former England captain Nasser Hussain has backed veteran Mahendra Singh Dhoni to make an international comeback despite growing uncertainty over the start of the Indian Premier League.

The 38-year-old Dhoni has not appeared for club or country since playing for India in last year's 50-over World Cup and the nationwide coronavirus lockdown is limiting his chances of getting back in the side with the IPL likely to be truncated or cancelled. There has been speculation that Dhoni might retire from international cricket.

"What I have seen of Dhoni, I still think he has a huge amount to offer to Indian cricket," Hussain told Indian broadcaster Star Sports on Saturday.

"Yes, there have been one or two occasions where he has got it wrong in run chases, like that World Cup game against England. But in general, Dhoni is still a really good talent."

Hussain warned that Dhoni was a once-in-a-generation cricketer that India would struggle to replace.

"Don't push Dhoni into retirement too early. In the end only Dhoni knows his mental state, in the end selectors select and players turn up when asked to," he added.

"I do believe that certain individuals should not just retire into the sunset without some kind of farewell."

Dhoni, who gave up Test cricket in 2014, has been busy gardening

at home during the lockdown, according to an Instagram post by his wife.

The opening match of the Twenty20 tournament between the Dhoni-led Chennai Super Kings and holders Mumbai Indians was pushed back to April 15 as sporting events around the world were delayed or postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

'PROSPECTS BLEAK'
Former India captain

Krishnamachari Srikkanth said Dhoni's comeback prospects looked "very, very bleak" if the IPL was cancelled.

"Because straightaway, in my opinion, KL Rahul will be the wicketkeeper-batsman,"

Srikkanth, former chairman of the national selection committee, said.

"Rishabh Pant, I still think he might be a bit of a doubt, but I believe that Rishabh Pant is highly talented.

"He is absolutely fit, he is a legend, he is brilliant. I am a great fan of Dhoni myself. But the question is for the (T20) World Cup team. So you'll have to put the Indian team first and then the individuals."

Dhoni led India to win the inaugural Twenty20 World Cup in 2007. He hit a six to seal the 2011 World Cup final victory and his status as a national hero.

He has amassed 10,773 runs from 350 ODIs, but his form dipped noticeably at last year's 50-over showpiece. — AFP

**THE FORMER
ENGLAND CAPTAIN
WARNED THAT
DHONI WAS A ONCE-
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INDIA WOULD
STRUGGLE TO
REPLACE**

Montreal WTA tournament put off until 2021



Simona Halep of Romania poses after winning the Montreal Cup in 2016.

MONTREAL: The Montreal WTA tournament, one of the key build-up events ahead of the US Open, was axed on Saturday and will not be played until 2021, officials said.

The event, scheduled for August 7-16, had been in jeopardy after Quebec Province requested that all sporting and cultural events be cancelled through August 31 as a means of slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

"As a result of the measures imposed by the Quebec government prohibiting holding events until August 31, the Rogers Cup in Montreal will postpone their event to 2021," said a WTA statement.

"The WTA reiterates that health and safety will always be the top priority. We understand this was a difficult decision and we look forward to being back in Montreal in 2021."

Tournament director Eugene Lapierre said the decision was made for them.

"At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis we were hoping that the situation would be resolved in time to be able to host our tournament as initially planned on the calendar.

"It is thus with a heavy heart that we received this news, but we understand that this decision was necessary," Lapierre said.

"We will be working tirelessly in the coming months in order to make next year's tournament a great celebration during which we will be able to celebrate the sport and enjoy each other's company."

This is the latest blow to the tennis season which has been on ice for the last month.

The French Open was postponed from its traditional May-June slot and rescheduled for September-October, just a week after the conclusion of the US Open.

Wimbledon was cancelled for the first time since World War II, meaning that the earliest tennis can resume this year is July 13.

"As it currently stands, the WTA Tour is suspended through July 12," added Saturday's statement.

"We will continue to work with our tournament partners in evaluating when we will be able to get back on the court.

"We do not foresee any further decisions until next month." — AFP

Mirbat chairman lists out reasons for team relegation from top league

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

Continuous changing of the club board, bad decisions made by some referees and improper structure of developing the junior teams were among the main reasons behind Mirbat relegation to the first division league according to Shaikh Salim al Amri, Chairman of Mirbat club. The Dhofar Governorate's club was the only confirmed team which will drop to the first division league. The other two teams are still to be decided after Oman's top domestic football league was suspended due to COVID-19 pandemic until next September with remaining of three rounds only.

The chairman of Mirbat club explained the main reasons behind the slumping form of the team. "The club saw five different chairmen within nine years which seriously affected team's progress as there was lack of clear vision," Al Amri told Oman Daily Observer.



Shaikh Salim al Amri, Chairman of Mirbat club

"Absence of local players from Mirbat and lack of organisation at the junior level affected the team's performance during the league. There was no strong second squad to depend on during the tough situation. The team lost many points due to the wrong decisions made by the referees. Also, absence of the local

investors and lack of sponsors were other reasons which influenced on the financial resource of the club," the club chief added.

Since the season of 2017-2018, Mirbat did not relegate from the top division league. The Dhofar team was at 10th position with 32 points in 2017-18 season. In the 2018-19 edition, they retained the same position with 30 points. In the HM Cup for this season, Mirbat suffered a 4-3 defeat against Nizwa in the round of 32. The team had reached to the quarterfinal in the previous edition of the coveted cup.

Prior to the second phase of the Omantel League, the board decided to equip the team with some professional players. After completion of the procedures for the professional players, we have been informed by the Oman Football Association (OFA) that the team is blocked by Fifa after a complaint made by one of the foreign players. Our concern is why the OFA did not inform us earlier so that we

could avoid the situation," the Mirbat chief pointed out.

Shaikh Salim al Amri expressed concern on the referees' performance this season. "Unfortunately, the team lost 18 points due to the bad management of matches by the national umpires. I have sent an official letter to the referees committee chairman. The committee agreed and stopped the umpires for two weeks while the team did not benefit from this decision," he said.

On a query on the team's future plan to return back quickly to Omantel league, the chairman of Mirbat club responded: "We have extended our deal with national coach Hussain al Hadhari for two seasons as well as for assistant coach Carlos from Brazil. Also, our focus will be on the players from the Dhofar Governorate and from Mirbat. We will add some professional players if the negotiation goes smoothly and agreed between both parties," he concluded.



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Stirling Moss with his wife Susie in 2001. – AFP



FORMULA ONE HAILED A ‘LEGEND’ AND ‘ONE OF THE TRUE GREATS’ AS TRIBUTES POURED IN

MOTORSPORT GREAT MOSS DIES AGED 90

LONDON: Stirling Moss, the British racing driver who ranked as one of the all-time Formula One greats despite never winning the world championship, died on Sunday at the age of 90 after a long illness.

“He died as he lived, looking wonderful,” his wife Susie told the Daily Mail newspaper.

“He simply tired in the end and he just closed his beautiful eyes and that was that.”

A team-mate at Mercedes to Argentine five-time world champion

Juan Manuel Fangio, the Briton survived one of the deadliest eras of motorsport with 16 Grand Prix wins in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Four times a championship runner-up, and also third overall on three occasions, no other driver has won as many races without taking the title.

Moss was also the first Briton to win his home Grand Prix, beating Fangio at Liverpool’s Aintree circuit for Mercedes in 1955, with his name becoming a byword for speed for a generation of fans.

News of his passing was mourned across the world of motorsport, with Formula One hailing a ‘legend’ and ‘one of the true greats’.

“A prodigious competitor, supremely talented racer, and consummate gentleman, he leaves an indelible mark of greatness on the history of international motorsport,” said McLaren offering their condolences.

‘MIGHTY RACER’
Former racer and television

commentator Martin Brundle hailed “a mighty racer and gentleman”.

But for his sense of sportsmanship, Moss could have been Britain’s first ever world champion in 1958 instead of Mike Hawthorn.

He lost the title by a single point that year after asking stewards to reinstate his disqualified compatriot at the Portuguese Grand Prix.

“I felt that it was quite wrong and I went and gave evidence on Mike’s behalf and said no way should he be disqualified,” Moss, who won four

races that year to Hawthorn’s one, said in an interview at his home in 2009.

Moss ended his professional career after an accident at Goodwood in 1962 left him unconscious for a month and paralysed for six months.

Knighted Sir Stirling Craufurd Moss in 2000 for services to motor racing, the London-born dentist’s son retired from all forms of motor racing only in 2011 when he was 81.

He regarded the 1961 Monaco Grand Prix as his greatest Formula One race but the 1955 Mille Miglia, a

sportscar race on Italian public roads, was as memorable.

He covered the last stage, some 83 miles from Cremona to Brescia, at an average speed of 165.1 miles per hour from a standing start.

Moss was taken ill in Singapore in late 2016 and spent 134 days in hospital battling a chest infection.

He also survived a three-storey plunge down a lift shaft at his London home in March 2010, breaking both ankles and four bones in his feet.

— Reuters