

Suez Canal traffic resumes

Shipping traffic through Egypt's Suez Canal resumed on Monday after a giant container ship which had been blocking the busy waterway for almost a week was refloated, the canal authority said. The 400-metre long Ever Given became jammed diagonally across a southern section of the canal in high winds early last Tuesday, halting traffic on the shortest shipping route between Europe and Asia.



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HAMILTON HOLDS OFF VERSTAPPEN TO WIN BAHRAIN GP



MUSCAT

HM CONDOLENCES TO EMIR OF KUWAIT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, on the death of Shaikha Nouria Al Ahmed Al Jaber Al Mubarak al Sabah. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to Allah the Almighty to rest the departed's soul in peace in paradise and grant her family patience. — ONA

HM THANKED BY TUNISIA PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from President Kais Saied of the Republic of Tunisia, in reply to His Majesty's greetings cable to him on the occasion of the 65th Independence Anniversary of his country. In his cable, President Saied expressed his utmost thanks and appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan's greetings and sincere feelings. He wished His Majesty good health and happiness and the Omani people further progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty. — ONA

Now get news on the go



OMAN OBSERVER

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H I S M A J E S T Y T H E S U L T A N I S S U E S O N E R O Y A L D E C R E E

Amendments to College of Sharia Sciences system

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday issued a Royal Decree No 31/2021, amending some provisions of Royal Decree No 35/2014 on the establishment of College of Sharia Sciences and promulgation of its System.

Article (1) replaces the text of the Article (1) of Royal Decree No 35/2014 with the following text: "A scholarly institution to be named "College of Sharia Sciences" shall be established, shall report to the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and shall be governed by the System (law) attached to this Decree."

Article (2) replaces the text of Article (4) of Royal Decree No 35/2014 with the following text: "The Chairman of Board of Trustees of College of Sharia Sciences shall issue the regulations and decisions necessary for the implementation of provisions of this Decree and its attached System. Till such time, the existing regulations and decisions shall continue to be enforced, but without prejudice to the provisions of this Decree and its attached System."

SHARIA SCIENCES

Article (3) stipulates that the attached amendments shall be applied to the System of College of Sharia Sciences promulgated under the aforementioned Royal Decree No 35/2014.

Article (4) cancels all that contradicts this Decree or its attached amendments or contravenes their provisions.

Article (5) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on the day following its date of publication. — ONA



HM confers Order of Felicitation on PDO Managing Director

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday conferred Order of Felicitation on Raoul Restucci, Managing Director of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), reflecting His Majesty the Sultan's appreciation for the efforts and contributions of Restucci in his field of work.

The order was handed over by HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, when he received Restucci at his office in Muscat on Monday.

The ceremony was attended by Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals, the Secretary General and the two advisers at HH Sayyid Asaad's Office. — ONA

Oman and China agree to boost investments

MUTUAL WAIVER OF VISAS FOR RESPECTIVE CITIZENS

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, on Monday received Wang Yi, State Councillor and Foreign Minister of China.

The Chinese official conveyed greetings of his country's leadership and best wishes of permanent success to His Majesty the Sultan and the government, and the Omani people further progress and growth.

Meanwhile, a session of political discussions was held at the Foreign Ministry by the governments of the Sultanate and the People's Republic of China. The Omani side was headed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister while Wang Yi led his country's delegation.

The two sides reaffirmed their support to measures of advancing investments and tourism exchange within the context of the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative' and with a view to realising mutual benefits for both countries.

The two sides welcomed the



HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, with Wang Yi. PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI

enforcement of a joint agreement for mutual waiving of entry visas for their respective citizens. They also welcomed a cooperation agreement in the fields of science and technology.

MEMORIAL FOR ZHENG HE

The session touched on bilateral cooperation in economic, scientific and cultural fields, as well as the exchange of views on various regional and international issues of common concern. They reiterated the significance of resolving conflicts by peaceful means and through dialogue among the disputing parties.

As part of his current tour, the Chinese official unveiled the plaque of a memorial monument of Chinese navigator Zheng He, commemorating his visit to Oman 600 years ago.

Earlier, the two sides agreed to set up the memorial of Zheng He in the city of Salalah. The session was attended by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Foreign Ministry's Under-Secretary for Diplomatic Affairs, Deng Li, Assistant Foreign Minister of China, Li Lingping, Chinese Ambassador to the Sultanate, and other high ranking officials from both countries. — ONA

GFW hopes for extension of Job Security Fund entitlement

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
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The period to benefit specified by the Job Security Fund for those registered in November 2020 is ending in April. The beneficiaries coming under the category are given six months time to avail of the job opportunities. According to the General Federation of Oman Workers

(GFW), till date, the number of beneficiaries from the fund stand at 5,000, which is likely to increase in the coming months.

However, some beneficiaries didn't get job offers during the specified period. The federation has requested the Ministry of Labour to extend the period of entitlement in such cases.

"We are expecting to hear some good news soon in this

regard", said Nabhan al Battashi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the GFW.

"The government has set six months as eligibility for the security amount, with three job opportunities to the registered applicants. We are now entering into the sixth and last month for the grant and some beneficiaries have not been offered a single job opportunity", he said. **TURN TO P2**

NIGHT LOCKDOWN TO CUT CASES



The Royal Oman Police (ROP) commended citizens' and resident's cooperation and commitment to the decisions issued by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the developments resulting from Covid-19 related to the night-time closure of commercial activities and ban on individual and vehicle movement between 8 pm and 5 am. **DETAILS ON P2**



PDO Management and staff would like to congratulate our Managing Director Raoul Restucci on receiving the **Honorarium Medal** from **His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik**.

The well-deserved accolade was conferred in recognition of his outstanding contribution to, and achievements in, the Energy industry.



شركة تنميه نفط عمان
Petroleum Development Oman

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SOHAR Port and Freezone invites Tenderers in the following Tender

NO	Tender Ref	Tender Title	Tender Fee OMR
1	SIPC 2021/030	Develop a Policy and Procedures for the Contracts Management	RO 25/-

Tenderers can request to receive the electronic tender documents from 9:00 am on Thursday, 30/03/2021 until 4:00 pm on Thursday 15/04/2021. Tenderers to follow the below procedures and steps to obtain the electronic tender documents:

Step 1: Interested Tenderers should remit the stated tender fees as per the below bank details:

Account Name	Sohar Industrial Port Co
Account Number	3101-007970-500
Bank Name	Oman Arab bank SAOC – Main Br
SWIT	OMABOMRXXX

Note: Bank transfers is the only mode of payment accepted

Step 2: Tenderers to send the following documents:

A request for the electronic tender documents
Scanned bank transfer
The firm's commercial registration documents
All shall be communicated to the following e-mail address:
sipc_procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

Step 3: Tenderers will receive the electronic tender documents
Due to the COVID-19 situation, the below procedure is still valid as of today for the submission of the bids. If the current situation remains until the date of submission, tenderers will receive a circular with clear steps and procedures on the submission protocol.

The Technical and Commercial proposals must be in separate, sealed envelopes marked "Technical and Commercial" addressed to:
SOHAR Port and Freezone
Secretary of Tender committee
Tender Reference No. **2021/030**
Tender Name: Develop a Policy and Procedures for the Contract Management
• SOHAR reserves the right to accept or reject any tender without assigning any reasons
• Tender Submission Date 22/4/2021
• All SMES are requested to provide their Green Card along with the required documents
• For any clarification regarding the tenders please send an e-mail to :
sipc_procurement@soharportandfreezone.com

soharportandfreezone.com

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ROP receives over 8,000 calls on first day of night lockdown



Lt Col Abdullah bin Said al Jaafari

MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) commended citizens' and resident's cooperation and commitment to the decisions issued by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the developments resulting from Covid-19 related to the nighttime closure of commercial activities and ban on individual and vehicle

movement between 8 pm and 5 am.

Lieutenant Colonel Abdullah bin Said al Jaafari, Director of Planning and Special Operations at the Directorate-General of Operations, affirmed that ROP continues to carry out its national roles in combating coronavirus. He added that the first day of lockdown and

movement ban witnessed compliance with lockdown orders by citizens and residents in all governorates of the Sultanate reflecting social awareness towards the measures aimed at containing the Covid-19 pandemic.

Al Jaafari called on the public to contact the number 1099 only for reports associated with violations of

the Supreme Committee's decisions, adding that the ROP accident centre received more than 8,000 calls on the first day of the lockdown mostly general inquiries about the lockdown and movement ban, urging individuals to call the nearest police station for urgent reports and emergency cases that require timely response.

The ROP official urged citizens and residents to finish their shopping prior to the start of the lockdown to ensure that they reach home before 8 o'clock. — ONA



China hails Sultanate's peace efforts in region

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, on Monday received Wang Yi, State Councillor and Foreign Minister of China.

The Chinese official conveyed greetings of his country's leadership and best wishes of permanent success to His Majesty the Sultan and the government, and the Omani people further progress and growth.

The two sides reviewed the growth and progress of their deep-rooted relations and ways to enhance bilateral cooperation in all fields. They also discussed current regional and international issues and developments.

Wang Yi underscored the

significance of his visit to the Sultanate in terms of exchange of views on matters of mutual interest. He voiced his country's appreciation for the efforts undertaken by the Sultanate, both in consolidating domestic development and fostering ties of friendship with all countries.

The Chinese official also expressed his country's willingness to back efforts to enhance dialogue and understanding between countries of the world to help find fair solutions to crises and ensure peaceful coexistence among all peoples so that they could focus on development in a climate of security and stability.

Wang Yi commended the exchange of views between Omani and Chinese officials,



noting that this exchange will reflect positively on Oman-China relations.

The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al

Busaidy, Foreign Minister, the delegation accompanying the Chinese Foreign Minister and Li Lingbing, Ambassador of China to the Sultanate.

MEETING WITH ROYAL OFFICE MINISTER

General Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received at his office on Monday Wang Yi and his delegation.

During the meeting, the two sides exchanged cordial conversations on the march of relations binding the Sultanate and China.

The meeting also reviewed fields of the joint cooperation and means of promoting them to serve the joint interests of the two friendly countries, as well as touching on several matters of common concern.

The meeting was attended by Li Lingbing, Chinese Ambassador to the Sultanate.

COOPERATION PROGRAMME

The Sultanate and the People's Republic of China signed an executive programme of cooperation in media, health and cultural fields for the years 2020-2024. The signing ceremony was held at the Foreign Ministry.

The programme was signed by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs and Li Lingbing, Chinese Ambassador to Oman.

Later in the day, Chinese guest and his delegation left the Sultanate. He was seen off by Dr Khalid bin Said al Jaradi, Head of the Protocols Department at the Foreign Ministry.

— ONA

CBO Board praises Economic Stimulus Plan, to boost growth

MUSCAT: The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) convened its first meeting of Board of Governors for 2021 on Monday.

The meeting was chaired by His Highness Sayyid Taimour bin Asaad al Said, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman.

At the outset of the meeting, the Board commended the Economic Stimulus Plan (ESP), endorsed by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik when His Majesty presided over the meeting of the Council of Ministers on March 9 2021.

The ESP aims to support the economic recovery efforts and enhance the performance of the national economy. The Board also appreciated the efforts and measures taken by CBO to minimise the impact and repercussions of the ongoing economic conditions on the performance of the national economy.

THE BOARD ALSO EMPHASISED THE CRITICAL ROLE PLAYED BY FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN PROVIDING APPROPRIATE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The Board, which took stock of the economic, financial and monetary developments in the Sultanate and across the world, underlined the importance of maintaining banking sector's core strength and its ability to bolster the national economy.

Likewise, the Board also emphasised the critical role played by financial institutions in providing appropriate financial support and guidance to their customers, enabling them to counter the negative effects of the pandemic.

The CBO Board also examined a set of reports submitted to it, for its perusal,

including the one on the prospects and challenges being faced by the Omani economy in view of the ongoing economic conditions.

Other reports, which came up for the Board's scrutiny included a report on the financial position of the CBO, a banking surveillance report indicating the financial safety data and performance indicators of the banking sector, and a report explaining the status of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) financing by banks.

The Board also reviewed the Quarterly report of the Oman Credit and Financial Information Center (Mala'a). It also approved the audited final accounts of the CBO and its subsidiary institutions and systems, including Mala'a, Banking Deposits Insurance Scheme (BDIS), and CBO employees' pension scheme until December 31, 2020. — ONA

■ FROM PAGE 1

Call to extend Job Security Fund entitlement

He confirmed that the ministry has stopped the direct dismissal of workers in its electronic system so that it is not used for unfair dismissal.

He explained this feature has been stopped after it was found that many workers lost their jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic. "With this, the employers cannot terminate the workers' services without communicating with the ministry first. After communication from the employer, the ministry contacts

the worker to inquire about the reasons. The dismissal, in this case, cannot be done arbitrarily and without justification," he said.

A worker must contact the ministry if his employer refuses to clear wages.

In August 2020, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Decree No 82/2020 approving the Job Security Fund, the long-awaited system to support the laid off workers and those who lost their jobs for different reasons.

Planned to be implemented in two phases, the first phase started in November 2020, in which the benefits are granted to Omanis whose services have been terminated.

The second phase will start after three years of the establishment of the fund when a subvention will be paid to the job-seekers. The system is financed by workers in both government and the private sectors as every employee contributes RO 1 out of every RO 100 of monthly salary.




TENDER NOTICE

Oman Development Bank is the leading player in financing projects that add value to national development and providing facilities for micro, SMEs and major ventures

Oman Development Bank seeks tenders for the following services from reputed vendors which specialized in providing a Digital Banking Platform for (Mobile Application & Internet Banking)

Tender No	Description of service	Tender Fee (RO)	Last Date for Purchasing Tender	Last Date of Submission of Tender
21/5	Provide a Digital Banking Platform and Develop / Implement the Mobile Application and Internet Banking as per the bank requirements	100 RO Non-Refundable	6/4/2021	15/4/2021

- ◆ Interested vendors may obtain tender documents from the Head Office of the bank (Ground Floor) located in MBD Area near the Ministry of Commerce & Industry and Investment Promotion on any working day (Sunday to Thursday) between 8 AM and 2 PM on payment of non-refundable tender fee. Vendors should enclose scan copy of bank guarantee submitted.
- ◆ The Tender enclosed in a sealed envelope addressed to **Mobile Application & Internet Banking team, Oman Development Bank SAOC**, should be submitted to the reception at Grand Floor by 2:00 PM on or before **15/04/2021**.
- ◆ Interested vendors should remit the stated tenders fees as per as the below bank details.
Bank Name: Oman Development Bank
Bank Account: 000-10121129300-45
Bank Name: Bank Muscat
Corporate Branch
Swift Code: BMUSOMRXXXX
- ◆ Oman Development Bank SAOC reserves the right to accept or reject any or all of the offers, extend the tender closing date, modify tender document(s) or cancel the tender without assigning any reason. Tender Committee's decision shall be final and binding.

OMAN DEVELOPMENT BANK SAOC
Post Box 3077, PC 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman. ☎ 24726992 ✉ anood@odb.om 🌐 www.odb.om

HOW SAFE ARE THE VACCINES?

KABEER YOUSUF
[@kabeeryousef](#)

JUST as talks are on and researches are progressing on the manufacturing of more vaccines, it's undoubtedly the fear factor playing the spoilsport against successful vaccination drive worldwide.

Many questions being raised before someone goes for vaccination. It ranges from 'safe to take vaccine to need of mask post vaccination, and quarantine needed or not after the jab.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has all possible answers to allay people's fears and doubts. It said the vaccine is nothing but a way forward, and everyone has the onus to take the doses as prescribed by the country.

The WHO Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety (GACVS) unequivocally said that the AstraZeneca vaccine remains as a critical tool to help prevent further illness and death and to control the pandemic as the world reported more than 120 million cases of Covid-19 infections, with more than two million deaths, till last week.

Dr Benny Panakkal, Specialist in Cardiology, underlined that the vaccines are safe and that the target groups do not hesitate to take it.

"The vulnerable are people with co-existing conditions like heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, diabetes, and older people. If they get infected with Covid-19, the chances of complications are high. That is why they are the priority group for vaccines," Dr Benny, Medical Director at Badr al Sa-

maa Hospitals, said.

Widely seen side effects of the vaccines are mild fever, muscle pain, pain at the injection site. These symptoms remain primarily for 36 hours. The rumours of blood clots following the vaccination is not even linked to the vaccine conclusively and reported in a very few isolated cases. So the benefits of vaccination far outweigh its potential risks.

"Covid-19 vaccines are safe. Research indicates that these vaccines have a very safe profile. Taking paracetamol against the mild side effects, such as fever, chill, fatigue and body ache, that usually lasts for 1-2 days, is effective," says Dr Viresh Chopra of Oman Dental College.

"Among the elderly group, above 65 years of age, where most have multiple medical issues like diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and cholesterol usually have no side effects other than mild ones," says Dr Dilip Singhvi, Specialist-Internal medicine at Apollo Hospitals.

Anyone with such medical conditions should first control it before going for vaccination.

"But the important point to note here is that this elderly group is the most vulnerable to complications in case the Covid-19 infection occurs and so are the most important group who should be vaccinated first as this will protect them from severe disease and hospitalisation."



Marriage, divorce issues discussed

MUSCAT: The National Committee for Family Affairs on Monday discussed the National Cooperation Programme between Oman and the Unicef.

The meeting presided over by Laila bint Ahmed bin

Awadh al Najar, Minister of Social Development and Head of the Committee also reviewed proposals on "Protecting Children from Crime" and "Supporting Family Studies," as well as touching on the reality of marriage and divorce in the

Sultanate.

The meeting also approved minutes of the 3rd meeting of the committee for 2020. It also reviewed the implemented recommendations of the 3rd meeting for 2020.

— ONA

Good response to CMYF blood camp



Chiru Mega Youth Force (CMYF), a voluntary organisation, conducted a blood donation camp recently. The camp held at Bausher Blood Bank, opposite to the

Royal Hospital, received good response as many volunteers turned out to donate blood. CMYF founder-president Ramdas Chandaka thanked all those who came forward for this

humanitarian cause. The CMYF has been honoured by the Ministry of Health on several occasions in recognition of its continuing support for blood collection services in Oman.

Do not crowd in front of retail outlets

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

People have been asked to finish shopping well in time to avoid crowding in front of retail outlets and restaurants.

According to the ROP, gathering in front of the outlets and crowding near shops are violations of the Supreme Committee's preventive measures against Covid-19. One should mind doing the shopping etc during the day time, instead of

waiting till the night lockdown to begin.

"It's a clear case of violation of the Supreme Committee regulations against the spread of the pandemic and one needn't wait till the last minute to buy their provisions or to order their foods from restaurants," said a top official from the ROP, adding stringent measures are in place to deal with such lawbreakers.

Meanwhile, the MoH reported 796 new cases of Covid-19 on Monday, bringing the total

number of cases registered in the Sultanate to 156,883. With one Covid-19 related death, the total death toll has gone to 1,662.

On the other hand, 142,944 people recovered from the virus infection ever since the first case was reported a year ago. This is 91 per cent of the total cases reported in the country.

In the past 24 hours, 84 patients were hospitalised, making the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 505, including 161 in intensive care units.

Acclaimed Omani writer honoured

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

Mohamed al Harthi, an acclaimed traveller and writer who authored several books in his lifetime, has been conferred with a posthumous honour by the Embassy of Nepal.

A memento, plaque and citation were handed over to his daughter, Ibtihaj al Harthi, on the sidelines of an online felicitation conference attended by litterateurs from Oman and Nepal. Apart from authoring a number of literary works Al Harthi had written a travelogue in Arabic portraying the various tourist attractions in and around the Kathmandu Valley.

"The Eternal Traveller" was organised in order to pay tribute



to Late Mohamed al Harthi and to provide a common platform to Nepali and Omani literati and nature lovers.

The webinar on the theme 'Nepal- Oman Literature and Nature: Posthumous Recognition for Mohammed al Harthi' was organised by the embassy in association with other related institutions.

In her opening remarks, Sarmila Parajuli Dhakal, Ambassador of Nepal to Oman,

highlighted the importance of literature and also explained the inter-relationship between nature and literature.

Dhakal presented a 'Letter of Honour' as a posthumous recognition to Ibtihaj al Harthi. She also launched the website dedicated to the ace writer.

Azhar al Harthi, Director of Oman Cultural Club, who was the guest of honour at the programme gave a brief note on Mohammed al Harthi.

Speaking at the programme, Mansi Agrawal highlighted the advantages of visiting Nepal with the help of her popular video. Similarly, Nawaraj Parajuli shared his experience of literary translation works and also tried to reflect upon the immortal contribution of late Al Harthi.

TENDERS ANNOUNCEMENT

MAZOOON ELECTRICITY COMPANY (MZEC) WOULD LIKE TO MENTION THE EXTENSION TIME OF PURCHASING AND AMENDMENT THE TENDER TO BE AS FOLLOWING:

Tender No	Description	Last Date of Purchasing	Last Date for Submission	Tender Board Grade	Type of Participation	Tender Price R.O
21/MZEC/2021	CONSTRUCTION OF MZEC HEAD OFFICE BUILDING PHASE-2 AT BIDBID IN AL DAKHLIYAH GOVERNORATE The site visit will be on 07/04/2021 at 10:00 am in MZEC H.O	05/04/2021	27/04/2021	Excellent	Local	500
22/MZEC/2021	Supply, Installation and Testing of OVERHEAD LINE FAULT PASSAGE INDICATORS (FPI's) for MZEC electrical network- 4th Phase	05/04/2021	27/04/2021	Specialist	Local	120

- Interested companies registered with DCRP and Tender Board and having a valid Registrations may obtain tenders documents through scm.tenders@mzec.co.om.
- Value of each tender document copy is non-refundable.
- Due to covid-19 all offers shall be submitted via the following email mzec-offerssubmission@MZEC.co.om.
- The tenderer should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of tender price valid (90) days as a bid bond and addressed to the chairperson of the (Internal Tender Committee) of Mazoon Electricity Company S.A.O.C and **any offer is not including the bond will be rejected immediately.**
- The completed tenders should be send the offers before 10:00 am on the assigned closing date for submission of the tender.
- The priority of the awarding will be given to those bidders who assure recruiting of the maximum numbers of Omani staff and utilizing Omani products.
- The related parties only are invited to attend the tender opining meeting based on the assigned date.
- All Clarifications are to be sent to the email address: MZEC-Clarification@mzec.co.om and the Last date for receiving vendor's clarifications for tenders on 20/04/2021.**
- Mazoon Electricity Company S.A.O.C. is not bound to accept the lowest tender.

(WE LIGHT...WE CARE)

TENDERS & CONTRACTS SECTION: (+968) 25371366 / 25371067 / 25371070



SULTANATE OF OMAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders:

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/ Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
MOH/ HQ-166/2020 Re-call	Upgrading of Building Management System at Ibri Hospital in Al Dhahirah Governorate	01/April /2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 14/April/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25.000 Per set
MOH/ HQ-37/2021	Supply & Installation of Immuno Hematology Analyzers with Consumables at Royal Hospital	01/April /2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 28/April/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25.000 Per set
MOH/ HQ-38/2021	Replacement of Air Conditioning Unit at Sumail Hospital in Al Dakhliya Governorate	01/April /2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 14/April/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25.000 Per set
MOH/ HQ-40/2021	Supply of Linen and of Patient Uniforms for Various Health Establishment	15/April /2021	Before 08 am on Wednesday 05/May/2021	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25.000 Per set

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Tender Board on the above mentioned Grade may obtain Tender documents from the E. Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Tenders should be submitted on line on the given website signed and sealed. The Tenderer should enclose scan copy of Bank Guarantee or a certified Cheque issued by a Local bank for not less than One percent (1%) for the Tender value validity for (90) days from the Tender Submission date, addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee before one day of date submission.
- The Original Bank Guarantee should be submitted to the office of Director of Purchase and Tenders one day before the submission date for all Tenders.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.

(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

Any Clarification, you may contact via

Telephone: 24166670

Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om



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Sudan and rebel faction sign deal on peace talks

JUBA: Sudan’s government signed an agreement with a rebel faction on Sunday to guide future peace negotiations as the country’s transitional leaders move to put an end to myriad internal conflicts.

The “declaration of principles” signed with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) faction lays out priorities including the unification of armed forces and the establishment of a democratic, secular state with freedom of religion.

It was signed by Sudanese head of state General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Abdelaziz al Hilu, head of the SPLM-N wing.

The group is based in the states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile in the country’s south. The signing took place in South Sudanese capital Juba.

“The next thing is the two parties will resume talks three weeks from now,” mediation team official Ramadan Goch said.

“They are now going to organise their teams and prepare to resume the peace talks.”

The transitional government in Khartoum, which includes soldiers and civilians installed after the 2019 overthrow of Omar al-Bashir’s 30-year dictatorship, have made peace with the country’s rebel groups a priority.

A historic agreement was signed in October with the Sudan Revolutionary Front, an alliance of rebel groups from the Darfur,



Sudan’s Sovereign Council Chief General Abdel Fattah al Burhan and South Sudan’s President Salva Kiir sign a declaration of principles in Juba. — Reuters

Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan regions.

A branch of the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Abdelwahid Nour in Darfur refused to sign.

Al Hilu’s SPLM-North signed a separate ceasefire, allowing its fighters to keep their weapons for “self-protection” until the Sudanese constitution is amended to guarantee separation of state and religion.

South Kordofan and to a lesser extent Blue Nile state have significant Christian populations who have fought for decades to end the imposition of Islamic law by Khartoum.

The deal lays out priorities including unification of armed forces and establishment of a democratic, secular state

Meanwhile, the declaration stated that both sides agreed to “the establishment of a civil, democratic federal state in Sudan, wherein, the freedom of religion, the freedom of belief and religious practices and worship shall be guaranteed to all Sudanese people by separating the identities of

culture, religion, ethnicity and religion from the state.”

“No religion shall be imposed on anyone and the state shall not adopt official religion,” it said, without specifying that Sudan would become a secular state, a controversial issue in the country’s transition.

Aman Amum, the Secretary-General of SPLM-N said that reaching a consensus on the role of religion in Sudan’s politics was a breakthrough that would now accelerate talks towards a final peace settlement.

Sudan had now “accepted the separation of religion from the state,” Amum said.

UAE launches vaccine production with Sinopharm

DUBAI: A new factory in Abu Dhabi will start manufacturing a Covid-19 vaccine from Chinese pharmaceutical giant Sinopharm later this year under a joint venture between Sinopharm and Abu Dhabi-based technology company Group 42 (G42).

While the new plant scales up, interim production of the vaccine has already begun in the emirate of Ras al Khaimah by Gulf Pharmaceutical Industries PSC (Julphar).

The venture is an expansion of Chinese diplomacy in the Gulf region and helps the United Arab Emirates’ quest to diversify its economy away from hydrocarbon production.

The new plant, which is being built in the Khalifa Industrial Zone of Abu Dhabi (KIZAD), will have a production capacity of 200 million doses a year with three filling lines and five automated packaging lines, a statement from the joint venture said on Monday.

The vaccine will be called Hayat-Vax when manufactured in the UAE, but is the same inactivated vaccine from the Beijing Institute of Biological Product (BiBP), a unit of Sinopharm’s China National Biotech Group (CNBG),

New plant in Abu Dhabi capacity to reach 200 million doses a year

that the UAE approved for general use in December.

“Hayat-Vax is the first COVID-19 vaccine to be produced in the Arab world,” the JV said.

As part of the joint venture, interim production of Hayat-Vax has begun in Ras al Khaimah, one of the UAE’s seven emirates, under a deal between G42 and Julphar, the statement said. That interim production line has an initial capacity of 2 million doses per month and no details were given about how long production will continue there.

Julphar’s share price surged 14.4 per cent to 1.4 dirhams (\$0.3812), its biggest single-day gain since June.

The UAE, through G42, hosted Phase III clinical trials of the Sinopharm vaccine from July, which later expanded to other countries in the region including Bahrain. The UAE approved the vaccine for frontline workers in September before making it available to the general public in December.

— Reuters

Shunned as a whistleblower, Iraqi family plans to emigrate

KARBALA: Hassanein Mohsen spent months protesting against corruption in Iraq. He also lodged complaints against officials. But now he is shunned as a whistleblower and sees only one way out: emigration.

“You can’t live here without paying bribes,” the unemployed father-of-four said. “I’ve given everything I can, and this country is still sinking lower.”

The stout 36-year-old engineer from the shrine city of Karbala said he had been driven to despair by the endemic graft in his homeland, ranked the 21st most corrupt country by Transparency International.

In January, the advocacy group said public corruption had deprived Iraqis of basic rights and services, including water, health care, electricity and jobs.

It said systemic graft was eating away at Iraqis’ hopes for the future, pushing growing numbers to try to emigrate.

But Mohsen hasn’t always felt this way. In 2019, hundreds of thousands of protesters flooded Iraqi cities, first railing against poor public services, then explicitly accusing politicians of plundering resources meant for the people.

Mohsen was one of them. He left behind his wife Nour — then



The family of Iraqi engineer Hassanein Mohsen time go about household chores at home in the central holy shrine city of Karbala. — AFP

pregnant with their youngest son, Karam — to protest in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square for weeks on end.

“I felt I had to go out. I either live in dignity or I die in dignity,” he said. One day, Nour called him with good news: they had come into some cash by selling a piece of land.

With that money, she insisted, they could start a new life abroad. From Tahrir Square, surrounded by hopeful youth, Mohsen refused. “I can’t leave now. Things are finally going to change,” he told his wife.

Corruption had infiltrated every part of Mohsen’s life.

He has forked out more than \$1,000 in cash bribes for simple bureaucratic processes, he said. These include updating his tax filings, getting a new passport or correcting spelling mistakes in his government records. Then, there were in-kind bribes.

During a brief stint as a furniture salesman, one of his cargo trucks got pulled aside by an Iraqi soldier while bringing in goods from Jordan. Even after confirming the import licences were in order, the soldier wouldn’t let the goods through — until Mohsen offered to leave an entire bedroom set for him at the checkpoint.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

KUWAIT CITY

Kuwait receives national archives from Iraq

Kuwait received eight tonnes of documents and other items taken during the 1990 Iraq invasion led by Saddam Hussein, officials said.

It is the third shipment that Kuwait has received since 2019, according to officials from both countries.

Kuwait’s assistant foreign minister Nasser al Hain welcomed the move, saying the shipment contained archives from Kuwait University, the information ministry and other



institutions. “We look forward to more cooperation and, God willing, there will soon be additional steps to complete the handover,” he said during a ceremony marking the occasion in Kuwait City. — AFP

DUBAI

Saudi Arabia launches major tree-planting drive

Saudi Arabia aims to plant 10 billion trees in the coming decades as part of an ambitious campaign unveiled by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to reduce carbon emissions and combat pollution and land degradation.

The de facto ruler of the world’s top oil exporter said that Saudi Arabia aims to reduce its carbon emissions by generating 50 per cent of the country’s energy from renewables by 2030. Riyadh would also work with



other Arab states on a Middle East Green Initiative to plant an additional 40 billion trees, which the prince said would be the world’s largest reforestation programme.

— Reuters

BEIRUT

Lebanon’s power plant shuts down

Lebanon’s Zahrani power plant has shut down operations after running out of gas oil, the state news agency NNA said quoting a statement by the country’s electricity company. The company said there had been a delay offloading a spot cargo that arrived in Lebanon after complications arose as to the method through which the gas oil should be tested.

The plant, in the south of Lebanon, is one of the four main power generation plants in the



country. Another cargo that was due to arrive from Kuwait was stuck in the Suez Canal after the waterway was blocked for nearly a week by a cargo ship.

— AFP

In brief

■ SEOUL



S KOREA'S MOON SACKS TOP ECONOMIC AIDE

South Korean President Moon Jae-in fired his top economic policy adviser for raising the rent on an apartment he owns in Seoul's affluent Gangnam district amid a public furore over skyrocketing home prices.

Kim Sang-jo raised the rent by about 14 per cent in July, two days before a 5 per cent cap on rent increases took effect as part of government efforts to protect tenants from unreasonable hikes. "I am very sorry that I've disappointed the people at this grave time when we should be making all-out efforts to root out real estate speculation," Kim told a briefing. — **Reuters**

■ BANGKOK



ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTERS DEFY POLICE THREAT

Hundreds of anti-government protesters gathered on Monday in defiance of a threat by police to make more arrests, a day after nearly 100 demonstrators were detained for breaching public health measures against the coronavirus. Demonstrators demanded the release of jailed activists, raising prospects for another confrontation between police and protesters, who are calling for an end to military dominance of politics and reform of the powerful monarchy.

"Free our friends," they shouted. Police had earlier on Monday warned they would arrest more people participating in anti-government protests. — **Reuters**

■ TAIPEI



TAIWAN SAYS NO PROGRESS IN BIONTECH VACCINE TALKS

There has been no progress on talks to seal a deal with Germany's BioNTech SE for its Covid-19 vaccine though talks are continuing, Taiwanese Health Minister Chen Shih-chung said. Taiwan complained last month that the firm had pulled out of a deal to sell it 5 million doses at the last minute, possibly due to Chinese pressure. BioNTech responded by saying it did plan on providing the vaccine.

Speaking at parliament, Chen was downbeat on the chances for finalising the agreement.

"At present, there has been no further progress, and the opportunity for both to complete the contract is getting less and less," he added. — **Reuters**

Japan's inoculation pace to speed up in May

TOKYO: Japan's vaccine minister, Taro Kono, said on Monday that the pace of coronavirus inoculation in the country would accelerate in May, but that the Tokyo Olympics, set to start in July, were not factoring into the schedule.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga has pledged to have enough doses for the country's 126 million people by June, before the July 23 start of the Tokyo Olympics. Supplies have been trickling in from Pfizer Inc factories in Europe, but are expected to accelerate in the coming months.

"Starting in May, there will be no bottleneck in supply," Kono



A staff member displaying Covid-19 measures encourages spectators to keep social distancing, along the route of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic torch relay in Fukushima. — **Reuters File Photo**

Starting in May, there will be no bottleneck in supply

TARO KONO,
Japan's vaccine minister

said in an interview. Officially the minister in charge of administrative reform, Kono was tapped in January to lead Japan's Covid-19 vaccination push.

He added that he expected to be able to get 10 million doses of vaccines each week in May

but that the Olympics, which a majority of Japanese have said in polls should be postponed or cancelled, were not a factor in his scheduling.

Japan started its vaccination campaign last month, later than most major economies and dependent on imported doses of Pfizer's vaccine.

Shots developed by AstraZeneca PLC and Moderna Inc now await local regulatory approval.

Kono said the AstraZeneca vaccine would be approved "hopefully sometime soon", adding that the decision was up to the health ministry.

— **Reuters**

■ FESTIVAL OF COLOURS CELEBRATED



Revellers smeared in colour powder celebrate Holi, the spring festival of colours, in Siliguri, India. — **AFP**

India suffers highest daily virus infections in five months

NEW DELHI: India reported the highest daily increase in coronavirus cases in five months on Monday, with the second wave of the disease driven by surging infections in the country's richest state Maharashtra.

A total of 68,020 new coronavirus cases were reported in the last 24 hours, the health ministry said. It was the highest daily rise since October 11, according to a Reuters tally.

India has been reporting a

spike in cases — above the 60,000 mark — for three consecutive days, though Monday's rise was still below September's peak of more than 90,000 cases a day.

The total number of cases since the epidemic began a year ago crossed the 12 million mark, making India the hardest-hit country outside the United States and Brazil. Some experts believe the truer figure would be more than 300 million due to insufficient testing, though that has improved.

Daily deaths rose by 291 on Monday and the virus has so far killed 161,843 people in India.

Maharashtra, the western state where country's financial capital Mumbai is located, recorded its highest ever daily case rise with 40,414. The state is considering imposing a strict lockdown this week. It has already tightened travel restrictions and imposed a night curfew in a bid to put a lid on rising cases of infections.

— **Reuters**

Drought, fire and flood devastate Australians

HOLLISDALE, Australia: Robert Costigan thought the worst was behind him when he saved two family properties from bushfires a summer ago. This year, they floated away.

The homes of the Australian cattle farmer and his father-in-law Brian Watt, who lives next door, were swept off their foundations this month when heavy rains caused rivers to reach their highest levels in half a century, submerging bridges and buildings. Watt's house slammed into a telegraph pole.

"If it wasn't for bad luck I'd probably have none at all," Costigan said at his 100-acre property at Hollisdale, 400km north of Sydney. Days after the floods, the property was strewn with upended farm equipment, trees and debris.

"I don't know whether it's just someone testing me or what, but it is what it is I guess. You get through



A local resident works to salvage and dry belongings in the aftermath of the area getting inundated with floodwaters following prolonged rains and a severe weather event in the suburb of Windsor in Sydney. — **Reuters**

Costigan's ordeal is familiar to thousands living outside cities on Australia's densely populated east coast

it," he added, fighting back tears.

Costigan's ordeal is familiar to thousands living outside cities on Australia's densely populated east coast.

After years of drought devastated crops and livestock, they battled the country's worst wildfires in a generation in the Southern hemisphere summer of 2019-20, only to face flooding amid a La Nina wet weather event this year.

The same river system Costigan pumped water from to save his house from the bushfires has

returned to destroy it with the flood.

Water levels have subsided but insurers have written off the building, with structural timber torn loose, tin roofs crushed and everyday objects — a mattress, a fluffy child's toy — reduced to a sodden mess.

When the fires hit, the family kept safe in town as Costigan remained at the property in an effort to protect it. Now they are all staying with neighbours, homeless and heartbroken.

Two days before the house was swept away, Costigan's daughter Eva had to cancel her 11th birthday party due to the flood.

"She was upset about that and then we had to tell her that she lost her house Saturday morning. All the presents that she got Thursday are gone," Costigan said.

— **Reuters**

Lockdown eases in England

LONDON: People in England rushed outside on Monday to enjoy sports, picnics and other previously prohibited activities, as the nation entered the second phase of its coronavirus lockdown easing thanks in large part to a successful vaccination drive.

England's months-old rules have been relaxed to enable outdoor gatherings of up to six people, or two households, in what newspapers have dubbed "Happy Monday".

"We haven't swum since the fifth of January so we were beyond excited to come back and get back into the water," swimmer Jessica Walker said from the Hillingdon Lido in northwest London.

"It's very exhilarating, it's absolutely fantastic for managing both mental and physical health," she added, basking in unusually sunny late March weather.

Under the UK government's staggered lockdown lifting plan for England, schools reopened on March 8 and an official stay-at-home order ended on Monday, allowing team and individual amateur sports to restart.

Non-essential retailers and services such as hairdressers



Swimmers exit the water after a swim at Hillingdon Lido in west London as England's third Covid-19 lockdown restrictions ease, allowing outdoor sports facilities to open. — AFP

will reopen from April 12, when outdoor drinking in pub gardens can also resume. Limited indoor mixing in hospitality premises will then be allowed from mid-May, while many other remaining restrictions will be eased on June 21, if the outlook remains positive. The devolved governments

of the UK's other nations — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — are moving at their own pace.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he hoped on Monday "will kick-start a great British summer of sport — with people of all ages reunited with team-mates, and

able to resume the activities they love".

But his government is urging vigilance as another wave of coronavirus sweeps Europe, and in a video message posted on Twitter he urged people to enjoy their new freedoms cautiously.

— AFP

German state premiers defend lockdown easing

BERLIN: A number of German state premiers on Monday defended their plans to ease coronavirus lockdown restrictions, after Chancellor Angela Merkel criticised their decisions and said the federal government may have to override them.

Participants in a conference call said that Armin Laschet, the head of the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and the leader of North Rhine Westphalia; Schleswig-Holstein premier Daniel

Guenther; and Saarland premier Tobias Hans were among those to defend regional easing.

Laschet and Hans, who have both said that a massive ramping up of rapid antigen tests would go hand-in-hand with the easing of certain restrictions in their states, said that their strategies would help to trace coronavirus cases and therefore curb a third wave of infections.

Hans said that allowing people to enter social situations if they

were able to show a negative test result would stop people from breaking the rules behind closed doors, according to the participants in the call.

Germany is waiting to see if Merkel will follow through after she rejected some state leaders' efforts to ease a lockdown designed to contain a severe third wave of infections driven mainly by the British variant.

Speaking on political talk show "Anne Will" late on Sun-

day, Merkel urged the country's 16 state premiers to implement a previously agreed upon "emergency brake" meant to see areas return to a hard lockdown when they reach a certain threshold of new infections.

"We must now implement the appropriate measures with great seriousness," Merkel said, adding that if this did not happen, she would have to think about overriding state regulations "in the very foreseeable future." — dpa

Pakistan, Afghanistan start 5-day anti-polio campaign

ISLAMABAD/KABUL: Pakistan and Afghanistan on Monday launched a new door-to-door campaign to vaccinate millions of children against polio despite the risks posed by the coronavirus, officials said.

In Pakistan, the five-day campaign will target over 40 million children under the age of 5. Around 285,000 frontline workers will span out across Pakistan's 156 districts to administer the oral drops while following Covid-19 safety protocols.

"Covid-19 continues to challenge us but we are committed to ensuring continuity of the essential public health services during these difficult times," the special assistant to the prime minister on health, Faisal Sultan, said in a statement.

In Afghanistan, the campaign intends to target around 9.6 million children in 30 out of the country's 34 provinces, a health official said.

In the second anti-polio

vaccination campaign this year, over 55,000 workers would implement the vaccination for five days, according to Afghan Health Ministry's Polio coordinator Mir Jan Rasikh.

However, there remains a major stumbling block in the Afghan polio drive. The insurgent Taliban, like in previous years, would not allow the home-to-home campaign in areas under their control.

According to Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid, the insurgents are still in talks with the WHO to reach an agreement about the home-to-home campaign. In areas under their control, the process is delayed for security reasons, according to Mujahid.

About 3 million children were deprived of the polio vaccine in the past three years, according to the Health Ministry. So far this year there have been about two dozen polio cases in the country, the ministry said. — dpa



A health worker administers polio vaccine drops to a child during a polio vaccination door-to-door campaign in Lahore. — AFP

Czech billionaire Kellner killed in Alaska helicopter crash

PRAGUE: Petr Kellner, the Czech Republic's richest man, was one of five people killed when their helicopter crashed on a skiing trip in Alaska. Kellner, 56, was among the passengers and pilot killed on Saturday in the crash near Knik Glacier northeast of Anchorage, Alaska State Troopers said.

One survivor was taken to hospital, they said, adding the group had been on a heli-ski tour.

Kellner avoided public attention but was known to be a keen skier. A picture of him snowboarding was published in one of

annual reports of his investment group, PPF.

The company in a statement expressed "deepest grief" at the death of its founder. He is survived by his wife Renata and four children.

Kellner was a towering figure in the Czech Republic's post-communist era, amassing wealth estimated at \$17.5 billion according to *Forbes*. He started out selling copy machines as the country opened up following the 1989 Velvet Revolution.

He set up PPF with partners to



Kellner was a towering business figure of the Czech post-communist era, with his wealth estimated at \$17.5 billion according to *Forbes*. — AFP

take part in the country's privatisation of hundreds of state-owned companies.

The group expanded into finance, telecommunications, manufacturing, media and biotech amassing assets of 44 billion euros (\$51.8 billion) by mid-2020.

PPF is the main owner a group of telecoms firms in central and eastern Europe including O2 Czech Republic.

It also owns Home Credit, an early entrant into the Chinese consumer lending market, starting lending there as the first fully

foreign-owned firm in 2010.

Czech President Milos Zeman has sough warm relations with China, and Kellner took part in Zeman's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in China 2014.

"The president held Petr Kellner in high esteem for his business success and is immensely sorry for his tragic death," Zeman's spokesman said. PPF is currently acquiring a stake in MONETA Money Bank and has proposed merging it with its Air Bank and parts of Home Credit. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

ABIDJAN

3 soldiers killed as dozens attack I Coast camps

Dozens of militants from Burkina Faso attacked two military posts in northern Ivory Coast early on Monday, killing three soldiers and wounding seven, the West African nation's army said. Three militants were also killed and four detained when approximately 60 ambushed the camps during more than an hour of combat, the army said in a statement.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attacks but one of the posts was attacked



last year which the defence ministry blamed on fighters. Two soldiers were killed during an initial raid on a military camp in Kafolo, near the border with Burkina Faso. — Reuters

TEHRAN

Iran pardons or cuts sentences of prisoners

Iran pardoned or cut the sentences of over 1,800 prisoners to mark a religious festival celebrated on Monday, including the rare release of 100 detainees held in connection to state security. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had "agreed to grant a pardon or reduce the sentences of 1,849 convicts", the judiciary's Mizan Online website said.

Those released included prisoners convicted following protests held in November



2019, when a surprise hike in fuel prices sparked a wave of demonstrations across Iran. "One hundred (of the prisoners) convicted for reasons related to state security are also on this pardon list." — AFP

BEIJING

Beijing launches air pollution crackdown

China's capital Beijing has launched a month-long campaign to stamp out air pollution violations, the official Xinhua news agency reported on Monday, after the city was choked by two sandstorms in as many weeks.

Beijing's air quality index (AQI) reached the maximum 500 on Sunday, as dust carrying extremely high levels of hazardous particles blew in from Mongolia and northwest China. In mid-March, the city was hit



by what China's weather bureau called the biggest sandstorm in a decade.

The Beijing authorities will carry out inspections on all local construction sites until the end of April. — AFP

Knowingly and unknowingly...

We know it but we still do it. We know why we should not speed yet if no one is looking we have an urge to do so. We know exercise is needed but we want to procrastinate. We know gathering is not good for us, yet we happen to be in the midst and think Covid-19 happens to others. We know we have been told to wear the mask. But there are moments when we want to get away with inhaling fresh air.

Now that the numbers are increasing we have begun to wonder when this has been happening and how and why the Covid-19 cases are increasing. The trend seems to be global. We want the normalcy but the numbers have become a hindrance.

So the nights have frozen once again from 8 pm in Oman. Would there be tougher measures to bring the numbers down? During the first round the media was accused of creating fear and anxiety in the world. When media and cautions eased out the numbers turned around and the new trait of Covid-19 is also being blamed for the quick spread of infection. However currently at the Royal Hospital's ICU there is no one admitted who has taken the vaccine.

We are yet to understand the virus yet. Why did it appear now? Have we harmed nature and is that why we are going through the situation



Lakshmi Kothaneth
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EXPERTS SAY IT TAKES ABOUT 21 DAYS TO FORM A HABIT. NOW WE HAVE BEEN PRACTISING THE COVID-19 PREVENTION PROTOCOL FOR A YEAR. SO WHERE ARE WE GOING WRONG?

we are today? No matter how much information is released, these questions keep popping up. Maybe we thought we knew more than what we knew last time this year.

We know the protocol for precautions yet knowingly or unknowingly we have been breaking them. Was it the urge to go back to normalcy? What we must understand is that after one year of battling it out with Covid-19, health workers might be tired. So our secured steps can make a difference. Maybe it was in a different context but in a way the quote of baseball legend Yogi Berra is relevant here too, "It ain't over 'till it's over." The recovery rate from Covid-19 has come down to 91 per cent and we need to bounce back and that can only be done through a collective conscience.

On Monday @OmanVsCovid19 reminded us, "Your negligence to apply the precautionary measures contributes injury to you and those around you."

Experts say it takes about 21 days to form a habit. Now we have been practising the Covid-19 prevention protocol for a year.

So where are we going wrong? Even in institutional quarantine we found ways to break the rules but at what cost? When we eased up did we practice leniency? So here we are with tougher

measures such as night lockdown and might even get tougher.

Nevertheless life must go on with positivity and there have been quite a few people who have been working undeterred.

The farmers are focused more and in Oman it is time to enjoy custard apple-cream fruit in Barka. Maybe it is time to focus around our surroundings as well and support the local producers and farmers.

With all the digitalisation we have been going through, maybe it is time the farmers and fishermen got onto the platform and who best to explore other than the youth. With them knowing the latest trends and happenings it would be interesting what they would come up with.

So it is a time to be concerned about but it is also a period when we need innovation at almost all levels from working remotely to finding ways to work smarter. If food delivery is working out from restaurants why not produce from farmers?

Virtual souqs and live online auction markets might be the order of the day.

After all more ways than one our reality is turning out to be virtual and the current experts happen to be school students, the ones with the key to the future.

WRITE FOR US

Oman Daily Observer welcomes original contributions for publication in its opinion page. The newspaper reserves the right to publish or edit the article accordingly. The article's length must not exceed 550 words. Please send the articles to opinion@omanobserver.om

FAILING GRADES

Another danger for kids in the age of Covid

GABRIELLA BORTER & BRENDAN O'BRIEN

Like millions of American children, Brody Cotton has not seen the inside of a classroom in more than a year.

As the Covid-19 pandemic left him navigating 7th grade from his couch in Carlsbad, California, Brody's grades dropped from As and Bs to a D and two Fs last semester. One of the Fs was in a "design and modelling" elective that would have entailed hands-on 3D printing projects in the classroom but became popsicle stick models at home.

"I never had to deal with any kind of educational issue with him before", said his mother Christine Cullinan, 42, a single parent juggling her son's schooling with a full-time job at an



I never had to deal with any kind of educational issue with him before

CHRISTINE CULLINAN
A mother

RUNNING LOW

Gaps emerge in US anti-hunger push for children

ANDY SULLIVAN

When the coronavirus pandemic forced the closure of US schools a year ago, Congress took action to ensure that low-income families whose children received free meals at school would have money to buy food on their own.

But nobody told AmberLee McCann.

The single mother, who cares for foster children along with her two sons, quickly ran through her savings after she quit her jobs at a veterinary practice and a real estate firm because she has underlying health issues and feared catching Covid-19, and money was running low. Trips to the grocery store became an exercise in triage: Yes to oatmeal, no to fresh fruit and eggs. One gallon of milk every two weeks, rather than every four days.

"I felt like a complete failure", said McCann, who lives in the Tennessee city of Clarksville, near the border with Kentucky. "I definitely had a lot of depression last year."

McCann, 39, found out about the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program in October, after it had expired. She ultimately was able to secure about \$750 in benefits, roughly half of what she calculated she was eligible to receive.

Congress over the past year approved nearly \$6 trillion in spending to battle a pandemic that has killed roughly 550,000 Americans and thrown millions of people out of work. It included hundreds of billions of dollars in unemployment aid, welfare spending and direct payments to help



AmberLee McCann, struggling to secure food assistance, stands outside her home in Clarksville, Tennessee, last Thursday. — Reuters

CONGRESS OVER THE PAST YEAR APPROVED NEARLY \$6 TRILLION IN SPENDING TO BATTLE A PANDEMIC THAT HAS KILLED ROUGHLY 550,000 AMERICANS AND THROWN MILLIONS OF PEOPLE OUT OF WORK

people weather the crisis.

Lawmakers loosened guidelines to make it easier for people to qualify for assistance, allowing states to screen applicants over the phone or internet, rather than in person.

Still, the ranks of the hungry in the United States have grown. Roughly 12 per cent of households with children reported not having enough to eat in February, according to the US Census Bureau, up from 8 per cent before Covid-19 emerged.

Advocates said the pandemic made clear that welfare programs too often set up barriers for those who need

help the most. "It was frustrating, it was burdensome, and it made an already difficult situation even more difficult for many people", said Pamela Herd, a professor of public policy at Georgetown University.

Much federal aid is filtered through state governments, and caseloads have varied considerably from state to state. Kentucky boosted the number of participants in the Women, Infants and Children food assistance programme by 21 per cent between February and November, while participation dropped by 17 per cent in Arkansas, government figures show. — Reuters

electronics company.

Brody's peers also are struggling. The number of Fs received by students in Carlsbad, a small, affluent, mostly white city 30 miles north of San Diego, increased by more than three times during the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year compared to the same period in 2019-2020, according to school district data.

Grades and test performance appear to have declined markedly around the country after school buildings closed — especially among students of color, according to Reuters' review of an assortment of early data from multi-state assessments, local media reports, state education departments and 12 individual districts.

Under the guidance of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, many districts plan to bring students back to campus full-time next fall, if not sooner. But huge hurdles remain for educators and parents in getting students up to speed.

Escalating numbers of students are failing classes, according to data from some of the nation's largest school districts, including Clark County School District in Nevada, which includes Las Vegas, Chicago Public Schools and Broward County Public Schools in Florida, which includes Fort Lauderdale. Clark County started bringing students back to classrooms this month, while Chicago started in January and Broward has offered in-person learning since October.

In Clark County, the nation's fifth largest district, 13 per cent of all grades were Fs in the first semester of the 2020-21 school year compared to 6 per cent the year before. In Broward County, with 260,000 students, 12 per cent of grades in the second marking period this fall were Fs, up from 6 per cent last school year. — Reuters

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PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY:

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

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AHLI SIDAB 'A' CYCLIST WINS OPEN AND UNDER-23 TITLES IN OCA CHAMPIONSHIP

Mundher storms to double crown

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

Mundher al Hasani of Ahli Sidab 'A' stormed to the overall title in the Oman Cycling Association (OCA) Championship that concluded recently at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

The under-23 rider finished second in the eighth and final round to complete a double title by clinch the leader's Omantel red jersey in the open category and Bank Nizwa white jersey for under-23 champion.

Mundher dominated the Open category overall points table with 590 points and topped the Under-23 section with 385 points.

North Road Oman's Paul Willcox from the United Kingdom, who did not compete in the final race, finished second in Open category with 462 points.

Mundher's team-mate Mohammed al Wahaibi finished third with 458 points. Royal Army's Hatim al Booshari claimed fourth with 415 points



and Gulf Cycle's Mazin al Riyami finished fifth with 408 points.

The 44 km-eighth race, which was staged around the SQSC for 14 laps on last Friday, saw Waleed al Fahdi of Arsen Endurance claiming the top honours with a timing of 1:05:22.08.

Mundher finished second in 1:05:22.56 and Said al Rawahi of Capital ended third in 1:05:22.80 timing.

Waleed al Fahdi took the second spot in the Under-23 section with 365 points and Mohammed al Wahaibi finished third with 355 points.

Royal Army's Said al Rahbi (265 points) was fourth and Talal al Maskari of Ahli Sidab 'A' finished fifth with 232 points.

WILLCOX TAKES 40 PLUS TITLE

Willcox's consistent performance got him the championship's Sohar International green jersey for overall winner in the 40 plus category.

The 44-year-old claimed the jersey with 400 points.

Second-placed Ayman al Wahaibi of Ahli Sidab 'B' has 305 points. Simeon Gelacio of North Road Oman is third with 278 points.

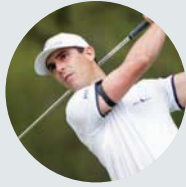
AHLI SIDAB 'A' CHAMPIONS

In the team section, Ahli Sidab 'A' emerged champions with 250 points. Royal Army claimed second spot with 210 points and Gulf Cycles finished third with 210 points.

Capital with 130 points were fourth in the overall team standings and Arsen Endurance finished fifth with 126 points.

OCA Chairman Saif al Rashdi and Ahli Sidab club chairman Dr Marwan al Juma were the chief guests for the concluding ceremony.





Horschel outlasts Scheffler to win WGC Match Play title

Billy Horschel defeated fellow American Scottie Scheffler 2&1 on Sunday to win the WGC Match Play Championship and capture his sixth career US PGA title. Horschel, the 2014 Tour Championship and FedEx Cup play-off winner, said: “There’s so much emotion, so many turns of tides,” said Horschel.



Olympic hopes driving me on, says Park after Kia win

Park In-bee said the prospect of defending her Olympic title at this year’s Tokyo Games is driving her on this season after the South Korean started her 2021 LPGA Tour campaign with victory at the Kia Classic on Sunday. The world number four collected her 21st LPGA Tour title with a five-shot win.

India edge England to clinch series

UNBEATEN 95 FROM CURRAN PUTS VISITORS NEAR TARGET

PUNE, India: India beat England by seven runs on Sunday to clinch the one-day international series 2-1 despite a courageous unbeaten 95 from Sam Curran.

England, who had already lost the Test and Twenty20 series, bowled out India for 329 with 10 balls to spare in Pune.

England looked on the ropes at 200 for seven, but Curran equalled the highest ODI score by a batsman coming in at number eight or lower.

England sent out the order that Curran was to be given the strike as much as possible for the closing overs as they hoped for an unlikely win.

But, needing 14 to win off the final six balls, Curran came up against a disciplined effort from T Natarajan who gave away just one boundary.

Stand-in skipper Jos Buttler said England, who were without injured captain Eoin Morgan, were indebted to Curran’s “unbelievable” innings.

Indian seamers Shardul Thakur and Bhuvneshwar Kumar shared seven wickets between them as England finished on 322 for nine.

England’s top order failed to build partnerships. Kumar sent back openers Jason Roy, for 14, and Jonny Bairstow, for one, in the first three overs.

Ben Stokes, who survived a dropped catch by Hardik Pandya on 15, fell to Natarajan for 35 and Thakur trapped Buttler lbw for 15.

Dawid Malan and Liam Livingstone put on 50 for the fifth wicket but Thakur had Livingstone caught and bowled for 36.



India celebrate winning the series with the trophy. – Reuters

“We’re disappointed, we came here and we wanted to win, but there have been great learnings throughout the whole process,” said Buttler, who praised Curran as one of the new generation making their mark in the England side.

“Sam keeps showing what a match-winner he is. He is still only 22 and the scope of where he can take his game to is massive so we are all very excited for him.”

Curran put on 57 for the eighth wicket with Adil Rashid, who was superbly caught by Virat Kohli in the covers, and then 60 for the

SCOREBOARD

INDIA

R Sharma b Rashid 37
S Dhawan c and b Rashid 67
V Kohli b Ali 7
R Pant c Buttler b Curran 78
KL Rahul c Moeen b Livingstone 7
H Pandya b Stokes 64
K Pandya c Roy b Wood 25
S Thakur c Buttler b Wood 30
B Kumar c Curran b Topley 3
P Krishna b Wood 0
T Natarajan not out 0
Extras (lb1, w10) 11
Total (48.2 overs, all out) 329
Fall of wickets: 1-103, 2-117, 3-121, 4-157, 5-256, 6-276, 7-321, 8-328, 9-329
Bowling: Curran 5-0-43-1, Topley 9-2-0-66-1, Wood 7-1-34-3, Stokes 7-0-45-1, Rashid 10-0-81-2, Moeen 7-0-39-1, Livingstone 3-0-20-1

ENGLAND (Target 330)

J Roy b Kumar 14
J Bairstow lbw Kumar 1
B Stokes c Dhawan b Natarajan 35
D Malan c Sharma b Thakur 50
J Buttler lbw Thakur 15
L Livingstone c and b Thakur 36
M Ali c H Pandya b Kumar 29
S Curran not out 95
A Rashid c Kohli b Thakur 19
M Wood run out 14
R Topley not out 1
Extras (lb1, w12) 13
Total (50 overs, 9 wickets) 322
Fall of wickets: 1-14, 2-28, 3-68, 4-94, 5-155, 6-168, 7-200, 8-257, 9-317
Bowling: Kumar 10-0-42-3, Natarajan 10-0-73-1, Krishna 7-0-62-0, Thakur 10-0-67-4, H Pandya 9-0-48-0, K Pandya 4-0-29-0

ninth wicket with Mark Wood, who made 14 before being run out in the final over. The left-hander, who was dropped on 22 and 87, hit nine fours and three sixes in his 83-ball knock.

POSITIVE APPROACH

India started strongly with a 103-run opening stand between Rohit Sharma, who scored 37, and Shikhar Dhawan, who hit 67, before Rashid’s leg-spin removed both.

Moeen Ali rattled the stumps of Kohli, playing his 200th international as captain, but who

We’re disappointed, we came here and we wanted to win, but there have been great learnings throughout the whole process

JOS BUTTLER,
England captain

has struggled against spin at times during England’s tour of India.

The home side were then indebted to Rishabh Pant (78) and Hardik Pandya (64) who put on 99 for the fifth wicket.

Left-hander Pant swatted a six off Rashid to bring up his second successive half-century. Thakur hit 30 off 21 balls but India lost their final four wickets for eight runs as Wood claimed three wickets, including two in one over.

Kohli said he was “surprised” that Thakur was not named man-of-the-match instead of Curran after his four wickets and 30 runs.

“And Bhuvi (Kumar) another contender for man-of-the-series. These guys were the difference in the middle overs and powerplay.”

England’s Jonny Bairstow was named man-of-the-series for his 219 runs in three matches including a match-winning 124 in England’s chase of 337 in the second ODI.

Kohli’s India outplayed England in the four Tests 3-1 and then edged out the tourists 3-2 in the Twenty20 series. — AFP

Hamilton holds off Verstappen to win Bahrain GP

SAKHIR, Bahrain: Lewis Hamilton produced another stunning demonstration of his supreme racing talent on Sunday to resist a charging Max Verstappen and win a thrilling ‘cliff-hanger’ season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix.

The defending seven-time champion defended with great skill over the closing laps in his Mercedes to hold off the Red Bull driver and claim a record-increasing 96th Formula One victory. Hamilton came home seven-tenths of a second ahead of the Dutchman, who was forced to hand back the race lead in the closing laps after passing him with a move that had taken him off the track.

As expected, the champion and his heir apparent delivered an exhilarating exhibition of racing as they raced to the flag — the pair leaving third-placed Valtteri Bottas, in the second Mercedes, to finish adrift by 37 seconds.

It was Hamilton’s first season-opening triumph since 2015 and surprised many observers after Red Bull had dominated pre-season testing and two days of practice and qualifying ahead of the race.

“Firstly, can I just say it’s the



Mercedes’ British driver Lewis Hamilton raises his first-place trophy on the podium after winning the Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix in Sakhir. – AFP

first time I’ve seen fans in a long time!” said a delighted Hamilton.

“What a difficult race that was — stopping early we knew it was going to be tough, but we had to cover Max and it was always going to take something pretty special to do it.”

A disappointed Verstappen said: “Of course, it’s a shame, but you also have to see the positives. We’re putting the fight on to them

so it’s great to start the year like that.”

Lando Norris was fourth for McLaren ahead of Sergio Perez, who had started from the pit lane in the second Red Bull, Charles Leclerc of Ferrari and Daniel Ricciardo, of McLaren.

Carlos Sainz was eighth for Ferrari ahead of Japanese rookie Yuki Tsunoda of AlphaTauri and Aston Martin’s Lance Stroll.

Bahrain Grand Prix

Sakhir circuit

1	Lewis Hamilton (GBR)	1h11m11.111	Mercedes
2	Max Verstappen (NED)	at 11m11.111 sec	Red Bull
3	Valtteri Bottas (FIN)	at 11m11.111	Mercedes
4	Lando Norris (GBR)	at 11m11.111	McLaren
5	Sergio Perez (MEX)	at 11m11.111	Red Bull

Starting from his fourth pole position, Verstappen advanced smoothly and held the lead ahead of Hamilton as the lights went out, but the opening lap was soon halted when Russian rookie Nikita Mazepin of Haas speared into the barriers at Turn Three.

‘LEAVE ME TO IT’

The crash revived memories of a similar first lap accident at the

March 28	F1
Driver standings	
Lewis Hamilton (GBR)	25
Verstappen (NED)	18
Bottas (FIN)	16
Norris (GBR)	12
Perez (MEX)	10
Team standings	
Mercedes	41
Red Bull	28
McLaren	18
Ferrari	12

same corner last season when his predecessor Frenchman Romain Grosjean escaped from his blazing car after going into the barriers.

Mazepin escaped unhurt, but the race was paused for a Safety Car intervention for two laps.

On the re-start, AlphaTauri’s Pierre Gasly lost his front wing after a clash with McLaren new boy Daniel Ricciardo while rookie Mick Schumacher spun off in his

Haas at Turn Four — and a Virtual Safety Car (VSC) was deployed briefly.

Hamilton stayed within two seconds of Verstappen until lap 14 when he pitted as Mercedes went for an ‘undercut’ to switch him from mediums to a new set of hards.

Verstappen, complaining about differential problems, came in and took mediums as Hamilton swept into the lead for the first time.

By lap 23, Hamilton’s lead was 3.8 seconds on the Red Bull man, but it was soon reduced to one.

Sensing Verstappen closing in, Hamilton pitted again for more hards on lap 29, rejoining 20 seconds adrift of the Dutchman.

Verstappen pitted again on lap 40. He rejoined second, eight seconds behind the champion to set up a chase for a grandstand finish. An immediate fastest lap trimmed the gap to six seconds.

“Make sure you’ve got enough tyres to challenge him at the end,” warned his engineer Gianpiero Lambiase.

By lap 49, the lead was two seconds. “Leave me to it, Bono,” snapped Hamilton when his engineer advised him Verstappen was on his tail. The tension was palpable. — AFP



OMAN SAIL COUNTS DOWN FOR ASIA-AFRICA OLYMPIC QUALIFIER

MUSCAT: The eyes of the global sailing community will be on Musannah this week as 102 competitors from 16 countries across Asia and Africa look to seal their spot at this summer's long-awaited Tokyo 2021 Olympic Games. Kicking off on April 1 at the Millennium Resort, the week-long tournament offers a final opportunity for male and female sailors to qualify for the Olympics in Laser, Laser Radial, 49er, 49erFX and RS:X sailing and windsurfing classes.

Oman Olympic hopefuls in sailing, 49er sailors Musab al Hadi, Waleed al Kindi, Abdul Rahman al Mashari and Ahmed al Hasni, are aiming to impress and book their place in Japan with a strong performance on home waters.

Each day of action will be divided into a coach briefing in the morning with racing in the



Oman Olympic hopefuls in sailing, 49er sailors Musab al Hadi, Waleed al Kindi, Abdul Rahman al Mashari and Ahmed al Hasni, are aiming to impress and book their place in Japan



Oman national team competing in the qualifier in Musannah.

afternoon, giving all competitors the opportunity to familiarise themselves with their equipment as well as the judging criteria and regulations. Racing at the Musannah Open Championship will begin on April 3 and the prize giving and closing ceremonies will

take place on April 8.

Rashid al Kindi, Oman Sail's Director of Sailing, said: "This is an incredibly important event in the sailing calendar and we're looking forward to a week of intensely competitive sailing. Oman's own national team is competing and, in

what has been a disrupted season, we need to perform at our very best to reach the Olympic Games. For nearly five years we have been building towards this moment and having the opportunity to compete for a medal in sailing. The Musannah Open Championship is a chance to realise our dreams on the water and polish our performances against a high calibre of international sailors before travelling to Japan."

He added, "Musannah has proven to be an excellent host in the past and due to Covid delays around the world we are honoured that World Sailing and ASAF selected Oman to host the event. We have created a Covid-safe environment for all athletes and delegates with strict measures in place to ensure the safety of everyone involved. We are grateful to the Ministry of

Culture, Sports and Youth and the Oman Olympic Committee for their continued support, and to Millennium Resort Musannah, Salsabeel Water from the National Mineral Water Company and the International Maritime College Oman (IMCO) for their support of this event."

As events were cancelled and rescheduled due to ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, the Oman national team's preparations for Olympic qualification took them to training camps in Vilamoura, Portugal, in late 2020 as preparations resumed. This represented a return to the normal training routine after a long hiatus. All sailors, coaches and delegates are currently on site and currently making final preparations for the event which will serve to bolster Oman as one of the world's most exciting event hosts.

Top seed Medvedev toils into Miami fourth round

MIAMI: Top-seeded Daniil Medvedev hobbled into the fourth round of the Miami Open on Sunday, defying crippling leg cramps to beat Australian Alexei Popyrin 7-6 (7/3), 6-7 (7/9), 6-4.

World number two Medvedev, increasingly hampered as the third set wore on in the heat and humidity of South Florida, nevertheless mustered the only service break of the third set on the way to a dramatic victory over 86th-ranked Popyrin in the ATP Masters and WTA hardcourt tournament.

"It's probably one of the sweetest victories in my career, because I was cramping like hell in the third set," Medvedev said.

"It was really painful," Medvedev said. "A few moments during rallies, I felt like my legs were not following me any more. The only thing I was thinking about was not to fall down because if I fell down, I don't think



Daniil Medvedev of Russia hits a forehand at the Miami Open. — USA Today Sports

I'd be able to get up. There were moments where I just wanted to lie down and say, 'OK, it's over,' but I couldn't accept that."

Medvedev had appeared to be cruising to the finish line when he

seized a 5-2 lead in the second set. Popyrin held serve for 5-3, but since Medvedev hadn't faced a break point in the match another hold seemed a mere formality.

Instead, Medvedev was broken

to love in a game that featured a double fault and three superb forehand winners from Popyrin — including a stinging cross-court return on break point.

Popyrin promptly fell to 0-40 in the next game but an ace, a service winner and a forehand long from Medvedev erased three match points.

Medvedev saved two set points in the tie-break before Popyrin, who won his first ATP title at Singapore in February, levelled the match with a forehand winner on his third set point. The Russian, runner-up to Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open in February, will next face unseeded American Frances Tiafoe, who beat 16th-seeded Dusan Lajovic of Serbia 1-6, 7-5, 6-3.

John Isner, the 2018 champion and 2019 runner-up, booked a fourth-round spot with a 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5) victory over 11th-seeded Canadian Felix Auger-Aliassime.

The match was a near-carbon copy of Isner's two-tiebreak win over Auger-Aliassime in the 2019 semifinals. The US veteran, 35, next faces another familiar foe in Roberto Bautista Agut. The Spaniard beat Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff 4-6, 6-3, 6-2 to book a chance to avenge his 2019 quarterfinal Miami loss to Isner.

OSAKA GETS WALKOVER

In the women's draw, second-seeded Naomi Osaka reached the fourth round for the first time, without lifting a racquet, when scheduled opponent Nina Stojanovic withdrew with a right thigh injury. The US and Australian Open champion, who could overtake number one Ashleigh Barty in the rankings with a title victory if the Australian fails to reach the final, next faces 16th-seeded Belgian Elise Mertens, who defeated Anett Kontaveit of Estonia 6-2, 0-6, 6-2. — AFP

ATP/WTA MIAMI OPEN RESULTS

Men (third round)

Daniil Medvedev (RUS x1) bt Alexei Popyrin (AUS) 7-6 (7/3), 6-7 (7/9), 6-4; Frances Tiafoe (USA) bt Dusan Lajovic (SRB) 1-6, 7-5, 6-3; John Isner (USA) bt Felix Auger-Aliassime (CAN x11) 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5); Roberto Bautista (ESP x7) bt Jan-Lennard Struff (GER) 4-6, 6-3, 6-2; Emil Ruusuvuori (FIN) bt Mikael Ymer (SWE) 4-6, 6-1, 7-5; Jannik Sinner (ITA x21) bt Karen Khachanov (RUS x14) 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4; Taylor Fritz (USA) bt Cameron Norrie (GBR) 6-4, 3-6, 6-1; Alexander Bublik (KAZ) bt James Duckworth (AUS) 6-4, 6-4

Women (third round)

Bianca Andreescu (CAN x8) bt Amanda Anisimova (USA x28) 7-6 (7/4), 6-7 (2/7), 6-4; Garbine Muguruza (ESP x12) bt Anna Kalinskaya (RUS) 4-6, 6-3, 6-4; Sara Sorribes (ESP) bt Elena Rybakina (KAZ) 6-1, 3-6, 6-2; Ons Jabeur (TUN x27) bt Sofia Kenin (USA x4) 6-4, 4-6, 6-4; Jessica Pegula (USA x29) bt Karolina Pliskova (CZE x6) 6-1, 4-6, 6-4; Maria Sakkari (GRE x23) bt Liudmila Samsonova (RUS) 6-0, 6-1; Elise Mertens (BEL) bt Anett Kontaveit (EST) 6-2, 0-6, 6-2; Naomi Osaka (JPN x2) bt Nina Stojanovic (SRB) walkover

features

OMAN OBSERVER f t i y l w w w . o m a n o b s e r v e r . o m e d i t o r @ o m a n o b s e r v e r . o m



The magic of Omani red sugar production: A family's tradition in Bahla

Every year, for two months, around 200 tonnes of sugarcane travel from all over the country to a sugar cane processing plant in Bahla. Owned by Nasser al Yahyai and his family, they operate both as a family business and community service and obligation. Here's how they are doing it and why they are proud of the status it offers them within the Omani society... **P14**

INSIDE STORIES

TRAVEL TALES



HAVE YOU VISITED THE STUNNING HUFNAT BEACH IN MAHOUT?

Hufnat is one of the most famous beaches of Barr Al Hikman in the Wilayat of Mahout, which is located in the middle of the eastern coast of Oman 500 kilometres south of the Governorate of Muscat... **Story on P16**

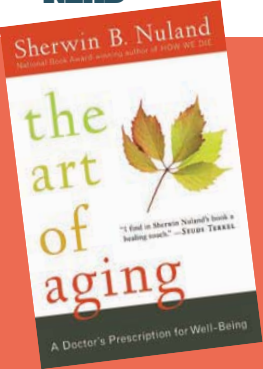
LOCAL SCENE



DIBBA AL SEBA FORT: BRAVELY GUARDING MUSANDAM AGAINST THE TIDES OF THE SEA OF OMAN

Dibba Al Seba Fort is one of the defensive and archaeological forts in the Wilayat of Dibba, which is the southern front of Musandam Governorate on the Sea of Oman... **Story on P15**

READ



THE ART OF AGING

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This book explores the impact of aging on our minds and bodies, strivings and relationships. Melding a scientist's passion for truth with a humanist's understanding of the heart and soul, Nuland has created a wise, frank, and inspiring book about the ultimate stage of life's journey.

ART



LONG-LOST FRAGONARD PAINTING RESURFACES IN FRANCE

A painting by the Rococo master Jean-Honore Fragonard not seen in over two centuries has been discovered in eastern France and will be put up for sale in June, the auction house managing the sale said on Thursday... **Story on P15**

CHANGING WORLD



SENEGALESE ARTIST OMAR BA TACKLES POLITICS AND THE PANDEMIC WITH PAINT

When Senegal erupted in violent protests this month over perceived injustice and inequality, artist Omar Ba was tackling the issues in his own way, with paint on canvas... **Story on P15**



The magic of Omani red sugar production: A family's tradition in Bahla

STORY BY RAY PETERSEN
PHOTOS BY LENA PETERSEN

It may not be magic, but the Al Yahyai family in Bahla has a history that is inextricably linked with the production of the Omani Red Sugar that makes Omani Halwa taste better and is just so deliciously different to all others.

Nasser al Yahyai is a farmer on the outskirts of Bahla, who grows Omani garlic, chillies, onions, melons, and oilseed, on a farm that has probably been "in the family" for centuries. He also has herds of camels, cattle, and goats, which are surely enough to keep the cheerful farmer, on the cusp of his fiftieth year and looking much younger, busy. But... for two months every year, the family business turns to sweeter pursuits, and the production of the highest quality, organic, Omani Red Sugar, recognised the world over for its characteristic

sweetness and rich red colour.

The cane arrives during the two-month harvest season from the furthest corners of the Sultanate, as far afield as Sohar to the West, Sharqiyah to the East, Muscat in the North, and many parts of the interior, around 200 tonnes in all, each season. The truckloads of incredibly green-tinged cane stalks are unloaded and tagged, as much of the factory's work, said Al Yahyai, "is on consignment. Meaning we process the sugar for the grower."

In earlier days, an oxen-driven crusher extracted the sugar juice, but for the last twenty years, two shredding machines separate the cane juice from the fibrous material which is known as 'bagasse' dried and recycled as stock feed. The extracted juice, or guarapa, then goes into a sump, from where it is pumped into giant vats every 30 minutes, is heated, and removed to settling trays. At the Izki factory, the process works 24/7 during the harvest season, and the process-

ing is continuous.

The furnaces under the two processing vats at the Al Yahyai factory maintain a regular temperature of around 1000 degrees to heat the sugar cane extract until it has reached the 'tipping point,' assessed through knowledge and experience, beyond which each 80 kg vat is considered as purified and ready to be 'ladled' out by foremen Malik and Ibrahim. Incredibly, though the vats reach the extremely high temperatures required for the process to occur, they are cool to the touch!

The extract is then carried away and 'settled' in huge trays to coagulate and into large blocks, which from this stage of the process are identified as 'jaggery.' From here it is cut into whichever size the consignor wishes, bagged in traditional palm frond bags made in Bahla, or bucketed, and held for the client to collect, each having a dedicated production number. Al Yahyai explained that there is an element of 'leakage' at this time,

but that the result is a pure Omani Red Sugar.

The product is noticeably large-grained, darker, since the molasses content has not been processed out, and vastly different from the white sugar most of us are familiar with, being a 'raw' processed but untreated product. This is an age-old process, traditional and organic, but more importantly, if you ask Nasser al Yahyai, "It is both a family business, and a community service and obligation, and we are proud of the status it offers us within our society."

Omani halwa, for sure, would not be the same using a proprietary product, and Omani red sugar would not be the same within an intensely automated process. You can "taste the difference." And that, my friends, is just a little more of the renowned Bahla magic at work. Well, sweet magic... Al Yahyai style.



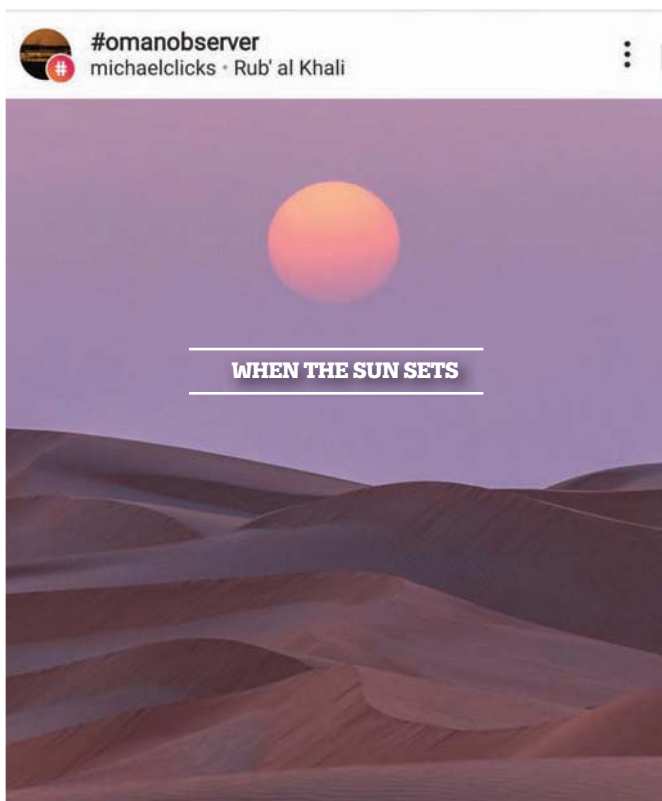
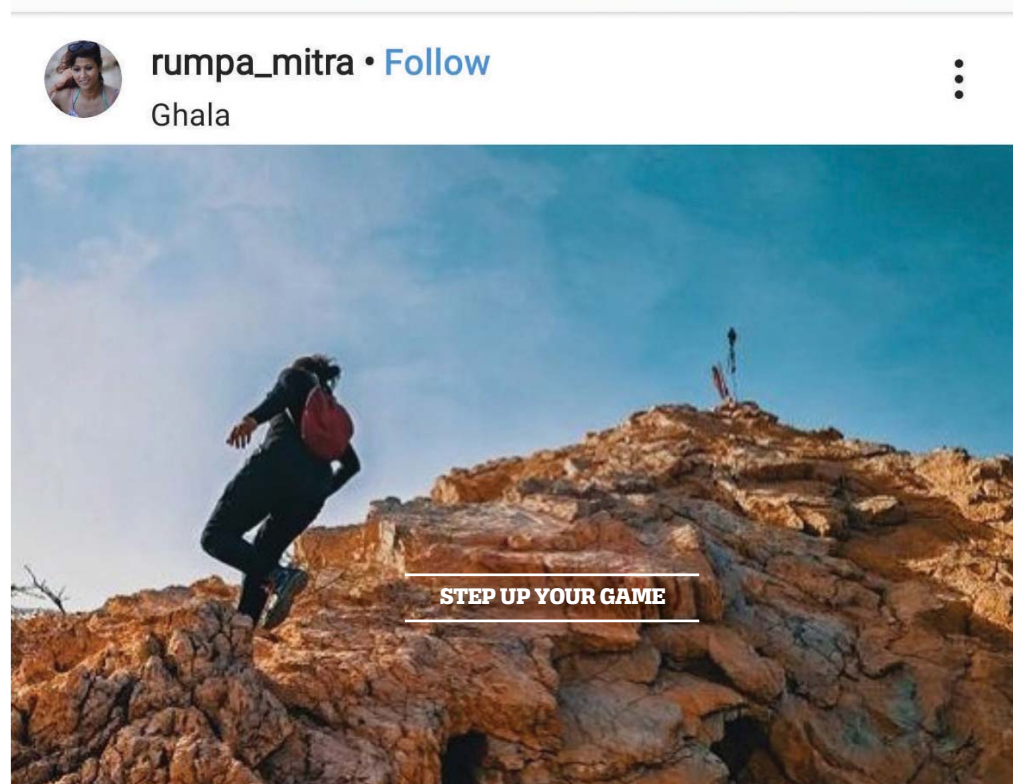


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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



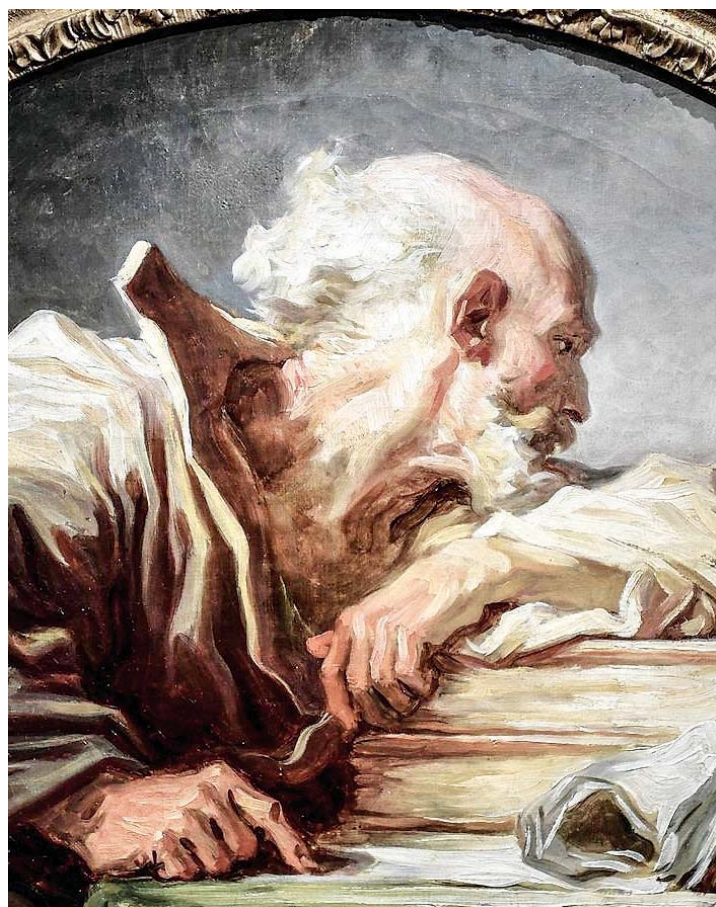
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Long-lost Fragonard painting resurfaces in France

A PAINTING by the Rococo master Jean-Honore Fragonard not seen in over two centuries has been discovered in eastern France and will be put up for sale in June, the auction house managing the sale said on Thursday.

The small oval portrait of a "Philosopher Reading" was discovered hanging high on a wall in a home by an expert at the Encheres-Champagne auctioneers in Epernay, who had been tasked with an estate inventory.

The family had not paid any attention to the painting in years, but the expert noticed a barely legible inscription of the artist's name on the back of its gilded frame.

"Despite the layers of dust and the yellowed varnish, the energy of his painting remains perfectly recognisable," said Stephane Pinta of the Turquin expertise firm in Paris that authenticated the work.

Unlike the sensual pastel scenes that secured Fragonard's place in the pantheon of 18th-century masters, the muted illustration of the philosopher poring over his texts was one of just a handful of aged men he depicted.

It dates from 1768-1770, when Fragonard was moving beyond his more whimsical scenes of stolen kisses in gardens to explore more contemplative subjects that nonetheless exalted the pleasure of painting.

It also appears to have been executed with the artist's trademark virtuosity and speed, Pinta said: "The paint seems to be moulded or sculpted, at times even applied directly with a finger."

"The artist has reached the summit of his talent. Freed from the extreme minutia of the Rococo style, his brush strokes are quick, precise and incredibly expressive," he said.

Its value has been estimated at 1.5 to two million euros (\$1.8 to \$2.4 million) for a sale set for June 26 in Epernay. — **AFP**

Dibba Al Seba Fort: Bravely guarding Musandam against the tides of the Sea of Oman



Dibba Al Seba Fort is one of the defensive and archaeological forts in the Wilayat of Dibba, which is the southern front of Musandam Governorate on the Sea of Oman.

The fort was built by the Portuguese as part of the Portuguese fortifications in the Arabian Gulf. Historical sources mention that Imam Nasir bin

includes five rooms in the form of a horseshoe, four of which have small windows with circular arches and the roof of the tower is made of sandalwood and contains lighting holes and upper ventilation. The thickness of its wall varies and the door leading to the roof is covered with a 135 cm high and 68 cm wide arch.

Near the main entrance, in addi-



Murshid al Yarubi wanted to take over the fort when he wanted to tighten his control over Sohar and its fortress in 1043 AH (1633 AD).

The fort is surrounded by a wall that is 64 metres long and 62 metres wide and is rectangular in shape built with stones and mud.

Its main entrance consist of a circular tower with a wooden door containing inscriptions, 170 cm wide and 320 cm high. It has a ratchet to throw incendiary liquids at attackers.

The entrance tower contains a staircase made of sandalwood. The height of the tower is 890 cm, and its diameter is 370 cm. Its first floor

tion to the circular tower, there are two towers of the northeastern tower, with a height of 605 cm, and a width of 50 cm, a diameter of 470 cm. The entrance leading to its roof has a boat arch with a height of 110 cm and a width of 80 cm, and it has a room on the ground floor.

There is also another entrance to the fortress that contains a covered corridor "Sabah" topped by three large boat arches. There are four towers of equal size and height linked by a corridor of 115 cm wide. There is also a small mosque designed with stucco inscriptions and geometric circles.



Senegalese artist Omar Ba tackles politics and the pandemic with paint

WHEN SENEGAL erupted in violent protests this month over perceived injustice and inequality, artist Omar Ba was tackling the issues in his own way, with paint on canvas. "What the youth are doing in the streets is the same thing I'm doing in my studio," said Ba, stepping in black paint and making footprints on a new canvas in his airy workspace outside the capital, Dakar.

Ba, one of Senegal's best-known contemporary artists, has often used his art to make political statements. A current exhibit at the Galerie Templon in Brussels, 'Anomalies', critiques power-hungry leaders through a series of portraits of imaginary heads of state. Ba said he was shocked to see such intense violence on the streets of his own country, widely viewed as a model of stability in West Africa.

"These are things I had seen on TV, but never here," he said in an interview.

"I think visual art is something I have to use to denounce what's not working, or to talk about what is positive, in society."

The protests were triggered by the arrest of a popular opposition leader, but gathered pace on a wave of anger over economic inequality that has widened during the coronavirus pandemic. Thousands took to the streets, hurling rocks at security forces, who opened fire on protesters.

Some worry Senegal's President Macky Sall will try to extend his rule beyond the allotted two terms, following a pattern of African leaders such as Ivory Coast's Alassane Ouattara and Guinea's Alpha Conde who used constitutional changes to reset their time in power.

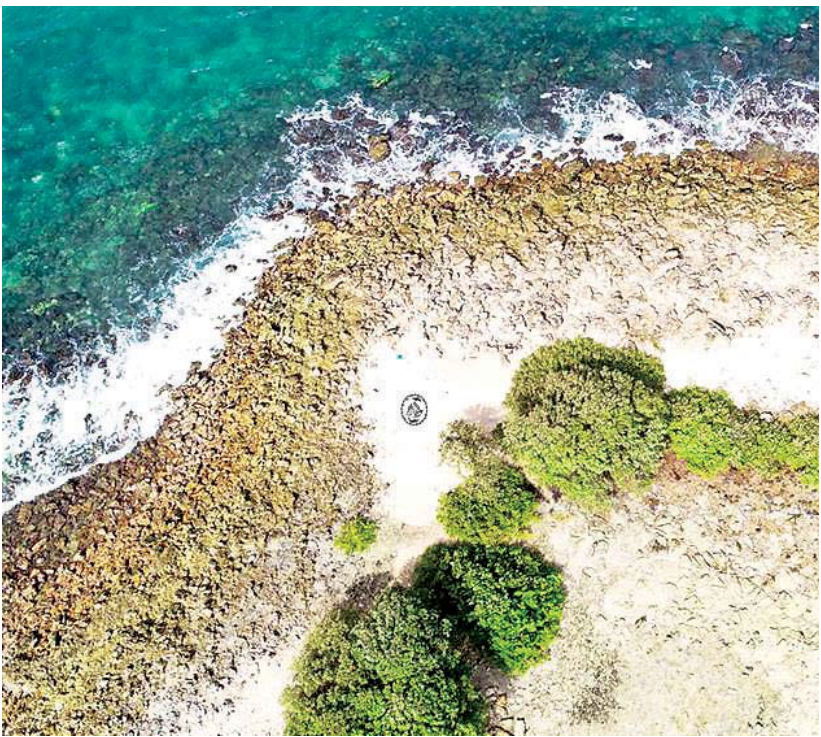
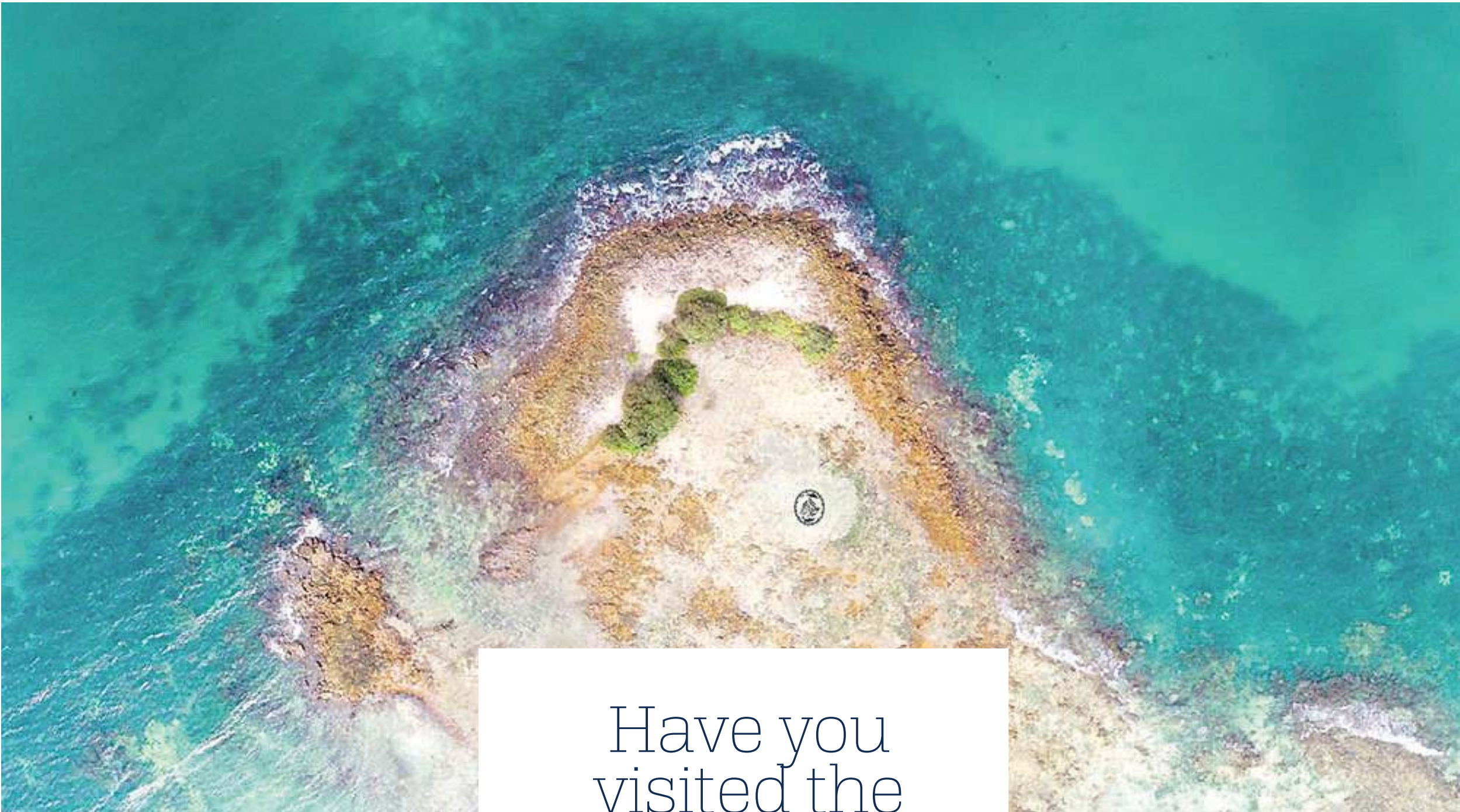
Sall has not commented on whether he will seek a third term. Ba normally keeps his subjects anonymous, so as to focus on themes rather than individuals, but for his next collection he said he might depict Sall.

"Once they're elected, (heads of state) completely change their discourse. I wanted to talk about that, and that's why I called this exhibition 'Anomalies,'" said Ba.

Four of the 12 paintings in the series deal with the coronavirus pandemic, conveying confusion and entrapment with the use of interlacing shapes and footprints.

COVID-19 exposed inequality and corruption in Africa, Ba said, and forced even the wealthy to rely on the ill-equipped public health services that they can normally afford to escape.

"Nobody could take planes to get treatment in Europe or the United States, and that was really great, because for once people realised that in their own hospitals there was nothing." — **Reuters**



Have you visited the stunning Hufnat Beach in Mahout?

Hufnat is one of the most famous beaches of Barr Al Hikman in the Wilayat of Mahout, which is located in the middle of the eastern coast of Oman 500 kilometres south of the Governorate of Muscat. It is one of the most important Omani beaches that is characterised by stunning natural beauty, clean golden and white sands, and a remote location frequented by many visitors from inside and outside the Sultanate.

The area is inhabited by a number of resident fishermen. Visitors to the place can practice many marine and outdoor activities such as diving, skiing in the sea and fishing. It is also a stop for migratory birds not only from the Sultanate but from Europe and Southeast Asia. Many birds congregate in Hufnat especially water birds coming from the shores of northern Siberia.

The beaches are mostly bordered by rocks creating the perfect atmosphere for the growth of shellfish and some fish that reproduce on the rocky bottoms. The presence of coral reefs in its water is what drives diving enthusiasts to this marine and avian sanctuary. Visitors can enjoy the scenes along the ten kilometres long beach that is covered by sea plants and a variety of desert plants.

Camping is another activity that has been growing rapidly in the area. Its bluish and emerald water commencing in some of the softest sand makes it an ideal landscape for relaxation and weekend getaways. The abundance of lakes, green samphire plants and other saline and acidic plants complete the scene of this splendid beach.

There are no permanent fixtures or facilities in Hafnut. While some fishermen barasti can be spotted, these are temporary shelters for fishermen who need a resting place or storage areas while doing their work. Toilets and garbage bins are hard to come. Since this is often hard to visit by Municipality cleaners, make sure to always bring your trash with you to help preserve its natural beauty.



business

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Maersk ship loads fish export cargo in maiden Duqm Port call



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

A container ship from Maersk Line, one of the world's largest container shipping lines, made its maiden main line call at the Port of Duqm last week to load a shipment of refrigerated fisheries cargo.

Port of Duqm said in a tweet on Monday that the call was part of the liner's "strategy to support fisheries exports out of Al Wusta Governorate".

In addition to Duqm's positioning as the venue of one of the Middle East's biggest Special Economic Zones (SEZ), Duqm is also set to host a world-scale fisheries port integrated with an industrial-scale fisheries and food processing cluster.

Last year, a consortium of predominantly Omani state-owned enterprises was awarded the government's mandate to develop the mega fisheries hub on the Duqm coast.

Heading the consortium is Fisheries Development Oman (FDO), the fisheries sector investment and development arm of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), with equity stakes also held by Oman Food Investment Holding Company (OFIC), Al Wusta Fisheries Company, Oman Fisheries Company and Port of Duqm.

Pacts inked to make Duqm a global hub for refined oils, petrochemicals

STRONG RELATIONS: OQ's OTTCO signs agreements with Port of Duqm

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

OQ, the Sultanate's wholly government-owned integrated energy group, has announced that its wholly owned subsidiary, Oman Tank Terminal Company (OTTCO), has signed two key agreements with Port of Duqm, which anchors the giant Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Duqm.

"We are proud to announce that Oman Tank Terminal Company, owned by OQ and Port of Duqm signed two agreements regarding Sub-Usufruct and Berth Operating Licence agreements. This partnership is another firm step to make Duqm a global hub for petroleum and petrochemicals", OQ stated in a post on Monday.

OTTCO is overseeing the development of a world-scale Crude Oil Storage Park at Ras Markaz, just 80 km south of the SEZ. Crude storage capacity envisaged at the Raz Markaz is presently estimated at five million barrels.

The terminal is connected to the SEZ and to its grassroots heavy oil refinery via a crude pipeline that will supply feedstock, when required to Duqm Refinery, currently in an advanced stage of construction within the industrial zone.

OQ also tweeted a picture of the Bulk Liquid Berth which is nearing completion within the Port of Duqm. Conceived initially as an export facility for the refined petroleum products of Duqm Refinery, it has since been scaled up to serve assorted international energy firms looking to



operate out of Duqm.

Leading global dredging and maritime infrastructure services provider Royal Boskalis Westminster NV was selected by the erstwhile SEZ Authority at Duqm in 2017 to construct the bulk liquid terminal at the Port of Duqm at a cost of RO 199.1

million (\$510 million).

The contract called for, among other things, the construction of a 980-metre quay wall, deepening of the port basin to — 18 metres and approach channel to — 19 metres, dredging and reclamation works, and the establishment of a new

OTTCO is overseeing the development of a world-scale Crude Oil Storage Park at Ras Markaz, just 80 km south of the SEZ. Crude storage capacity envisaged at the Raz Markaz is presently estimated at five million barrels

double berth jetty island.

In conjunction with the project, around 79 hectares of terminal capacity was developed adjacent to the 4.6 kilometre-long secondary breakwater.

However, following heightened international investment interest in Duqm, a further 55 hectares was reclaimed from the sea to create new terminal capacity for current and future companies looking to capitalise on the SEZ's strategic appeal.

Following the completion of the marine infrastructure, the consortium consisting of CB&I and Saipem commenced construction work on a crude tank farm, product export terminal and other facilities as part of its commitments under the EPC-3 package of the contract for the implementation of the Duqm Refinery project.

Storage capacity planned at the Bulk Liquid Terminal will cater for a variety of refined products emerging from the refinery. But a system of pipelines running from the refinery to the berth will also facilitate the direct loading of ships, particularly in the case of LPG and high sulphur fuel oil.

On the other hand, dry bulk products such as petroleum coke and elemental sulphur will be transported by truck to the terminal and stored in warehouses pending their export to overseas markets.

VAT-exempt free samples to be capped

CEILINGS: Newly published Executive Regulations place caveats on the value of freebies or promotional items given away by a taxable supplier during a tax year



CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](mailto:conradprabhu)

Free samples and promotional freebies given away by businesses will be exempt from Value Added Tax (VAT) provided their aggregate value does not exceed a certain limit stipulated in the Executive Regulations issued recently by the Tax Authority in

support of the VAT Law Value Added Tax (VAT) comes into effect across the Sultanate on April 16, 2021 as part of a slate of measures adopted by the Omani government to help beef up national revenues and reduce the annual fiscal deficit attributable to a sharp decline in oil export revenues.

A flat five per cent tax will be applied to goods and services supplied by businesses and organisations, although many types of goods and services are either zero-rated for VAT or tax-exempt altogether.

According to tax experts, businesses or organisations handing out free samples or giveaways will not be

A flat five per cent tax will be applied to goods and services supplied by businesses and organisations, although many types of goods and services are either zero-rated for VAT or tax-exempt altogether

required to levy VAT on these goods.

However, the Executive Regulations specify a number of caveats: Firstly, such freebies may be distributed only for the purpose of promoting the sale of that specific product;

Secondly, the value of such gifts or giveaways to a recipient shall not exceed RO 50 (including tax) during a

tax year; and

Thirdly, the total value of such samples provided by the business to all recipients in a tax year shall not exceed RO 1000 (including tax).

Likewise, Article 35 of the Executive Regulations allows businesses and organisations to levy VAT at the discounted price if a discount or reduction is granted by the taxable supplier.

This is however applicable on the proviso that (i) the value of the discount or reduction is recorded in the tax invoice, and (ii) the supplier has a clear policy with regard to discounts and reductions, say tax experts.

Businesses and organisations across the Sultanate are gearing up to get their enterprises ready for VAT, registration for which commenced in phases last month.

Indus Novateur drives digital transformation for Osool Poultry



Indus Novateur has been providing comprehensive IT solutions in Oman for over a decade. With presence across the Middle East, India and USA, Indus brings a unique perspective and skillset, developed through its large-scale customer base across multiple verticals. The diverse experience, know-how and successful deployments over the years enables Indus to apply industry best practices to any SAP implementation requirement. Indus also has had the honour of being awarded SAP Best Partner Award for three consecutive years.

Indus Novateur partnered with Osool Poultry for a greenfield implementation program that involved a fully integrated and comprehensive ERP solution. This relationship started with Osool Poultry way back in 2016 when they established the organization with the aim to produce 150 million hatching eggs per year to meet the needs of the project's shareholders and bridge the gap in the sultanate & Gulf market. This visionary thought process of Osool Poultry needed commendation in selecting Indus Novateur which required a lot of due diligence as they had the plan to start the Operation in Jan 2021. A long-lasting relationship was sought by Osool Poultry and their conscious choice of SAP Business one and Indus Novateur, an SAP Gold Partner with nativity of Oman shall supplement their growth had been right in all aspects.

The shareholding capacity of Osool Poultry comes from a varied set of investment companies pooling together 28.86 Million RO out of the total project investment of 61.5 Million RO.

Dr. Hadi Mohsin Al-Lawati, Chief Executive Officer of the company noted, "Osool

Poultry decided to implement SAP Business One ERP to build capabilities in finance, Poultry Farming, sales and distribution. We wanted our partner to align with our varying objectives- updates to the investors followed by betterment of operational efficiency and part of our continual growth. As the project contributes significantly to achieving the government's efforts and goals targeting economic diversification, development of governorates, and creating job opportunities for Omani citizens in various fields and specializations, we required the transparency, efficiency, and ease of reporting to the diversified stakeholders". He continued, "There were a lot of choices and we chose Indus Novateur for this project as they possessed the skill, expertise in conjunction with flexibility".

It was not about providing a software; it was all about a solution combined with Agility that builds the confidence. The Indus Novateur team can proudly say they had done their contribution in a strategic project like this aiming largely to achieve high self-sufficiency and enhance food security in the Sultanate.

Ms.Raji Sriram, General Manager of Indus Novateur noted "The experienced team at Indus understood the goals quickly and was able to contribute towards fulfilling the requirements. The team at Indus had to modify the deployment process. Collaborative working while providing technological advancement was an essential part of this project. The complete project was done in an agile method with quick turn-around on the activities and showing results".

Thanking the Osool Poultry Management for the faith imposed on Indus Novateur, she concluded "This success is once again a beginning and Indus would continue to be a technology partner in the future roadmap as well as ensuring the vision of Osool Poultry is converted into reality. Already a dedicated resource has been provided in supporting the regular production activities of Osool Poultry. The testament to our commitment and expertise does not stop here and would continue in the success story of Osool Poultry".

Al Mouj Muscat inks pact with Oman Towers

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

Al Mouj Muscat has entered into a partnership with Oman Towers Company (OTC) for new telecommunications towers to be installed at the leading leisure and lifestyle destination, improving Internet speeds as well as mobile phone services coverage.

The exclusive infrastructure agreement means people and businesses are set to benefit from reliable, high-speed Internet access as well as enhanced mobile phone connectivity.

OTC's new tower works on an open-access network basis



meaning it can accommodate all service operators with different technologies which will be a great boost to the telecommunications infrastructure within the

Sultanate.
Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat says: "Signing this important agreement allows us to add to the excellent

telecoms infrastructure already in place at Al Mouj Muscat to the benefit those who live, work and run businesses here in our community."

"We are constantly exploring ways to make our community experiences better and next-generation connectivity is another important feature of that improvement.

Open access networks encourage competition between service providers with different technologies, lowering both the costs for subscribers and making it possible for new service providers to enter the market.

Eng Majid al Kharoosi,

Managing Director of Oman Towers Company, says: "We are proud to be collaborating with Al Mouj Muscat in an initiative that will play an important role in the Sultanate's fast-paced telecommunications sector.

"As a company, we aim to contribute to the development of the sector by providing sustainable telecommunication towers and related equipment, and by working together with licensed operators to help put in place infrastructure which can be used by multiple customers, and which we know will have a positive impact by supporting Oman's knowledge society."

The best time to own a Lexus passenger car with exclusive benefits



MUSCAT: Lexus enthusiasts looking forward to owning their favourite luxury passenger car can take advantage of exclusive benefits. It includes free service 3 years /30,000 kms (whichever is earlier) and free registration (first year). (Conditions apply. For details visit your nearest Lexus showroom).

In Oman, the Lexus range includes the IS, ES and LS. For more info, please visit www.lexusoman.com or www.youtube.com/lexusoman or www.facebook.com/LexusOmanSBA or instagram.com/oman.lexus/.

NBC signs incubation pact with GreenBird 3D Company



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

The National Business Centre (NBC), which is part of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), has signed an incubation agreement with GreenBird 3D Company, which is a local company specialised in providing topographical

survey, drone services, virtual reality, and 3D and voice over services.

The company will benefit from a range of services offered by NBC that will contribute to its growth while having access to intensive training, coaching and mentoring sessions.

NBC is an initiative launched by Madayn at the Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) to offer promising Omani entrepreneurs a

platform to develop their business ideas and advance them into growing ventures. The centre offers a premier platform for Omani entrepreneurs by providing business development support and guidance, training and mentoring, access to markets and industry experts, and state-of-the-art and fully equipped office space, meeting rooms and presentation facilities.

Al Rawabi doubles down on Isuzu trucks powered by OTE's VLC

MUSCAT: Leading dairy products and fruit beverages manufacturer Al Rawabi is once again betting on the formidable reputation of the Isuzu brand of distribution trucks, suitably equipped with refrigeration units from Carrier Transicold, to get its immensely popular products safely to stores across the Sultanate.

To this end, the dairy company has turned to Vehicle Leasing Company (VLC) for a one-stop and cost-effective solution that fully addresses the brand's transportation requirements.

VLC is the vehicle leasing arm of OTE Group of Companies, a prominent Omani business house with diverse interests spanning automobiles, auto accessories, consumer electronics, vocational training services, and manufacturing.

Muscat-based VLC specialises in crafting customised leasing



and transport solutions that offer unmatched value to customers. Under the arrangement, Al Rawabi recently took delivery of a brand new fleet of Isuzu trucks on lease from VLC.

Fitted with refrigeration systems from Carrier Transicold, a global industry leader in land transportation refrigeration solutions, the trucks offer an optimal, yet competitive, transport solution to Al Rawabi.

"Isuzu, unquestionably the world's No 1 commercial truck, together with Carrier Transicold, the globally preferred refrigeration transportation brand, made for a winning combination in the price and quality-conscious perishables transportation business. Our cost-effective leasing solution, underpinned by these two impeccable brands, ticked all of the boxes for Al Rawabi," said Rajesh Nair, VLC.

MAZOOON ELECTRICITY OBSERVES EARTH HOUR 2021

Mazoon Electricity Company, the leading electricity provider in Oman, observed Earth Hour between 8:30-9:30pm on March 27 as part of its Campaign. Earth Hour is an initiative launched by the international wildlife and environmental body WWF where citizens and organisations around the globe show their support for action on climate change by turning off lights and appliances for one hour from 8:30 pm.

The 2021 Earth Hour theme focused on "Climate Change to Save Earth". In the build up to the day, Mazoon Electricity had encouraged its employees, customers, community and their families to take part in Earth Hour and commit to ongoing low-carbon habits in the workplace and at home. Shabiba FM, Be'ah, Diam, Sandan, GuTECH and Environment Society of Oman had joined Mazoon Electricity's Earth Hour 2021 Campaign as partners. More than 45 entities including Omani Women Associations, sports clubs, and many others from the local community participated in the campaign.



AHLIBANK HOLDS AGM, APPROVES DISTRIBUTION OF CASH DIVIDEND

Ahlibank held its Annual Ordinary General Meeting on Thursday, March 25, 2021 via the electronic platform for general meetings on Muscat Clearing and Depository Company's website. The AGM was presided by Hamdan Ali Nasser al Hinai, Chairman of the Board of Directors, ahlibank.

The AGM approved the Board of Director's Report for the financial year ending December 31, 2020, the Bank's Corporate Governance Report, the Auditor's Report on the Bank's Audited Financial Statements, the Balance Sheet and Profit and Loss Account for the same fiscal year. The AGM took note of ahli Islamic's Sharia Supervisory Board's Report for the year ending December 31, 2020. The shareholders also approved the distribution of cash dividend of 5 baizas per share.

The AGM concluded with a set of decisions to be implemented in the fiscal year ending December 31, 2021, in which an independent third party has been appointed to appraise the performance of the Board of Directors, as well as appointing auditors and external Sharia auditors.



No 'return to normal' until 2022, if ever: CEO survey

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

Almost half of the CEOs do not believe there will be a return to pre-Covid business operations until 2022 – while a quarter does not ever see a 'return to normal' post-pandemic, a KPMG survey of 500 global CEOs shows. The survey of CEOs with companies over \$500m turnover also finds that the easing of government restrictions would be a more important trigger to return to normal than a successful roll-out of the Covid vaccine.

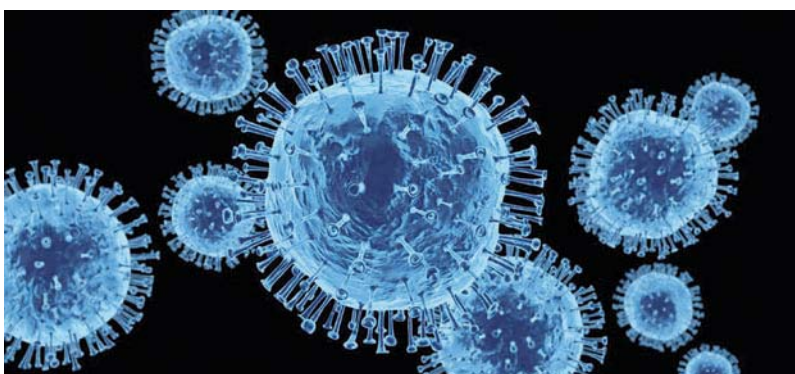
The two major concerns expressed by the leaders about the vaccine distribution were employees in different

countries not having access to vaccines at the same time, and staff being put off being vaccinated by misinformation. Yet despite the 'delayed/if ever' uncertainty about a return to normal, the CEOs are overwhelmingly confident about their company and country's prospects over the next three years.

Almost 80 per cent are expecting growth of between 2.5-10 per cent but fewer than half were optimistic about the prospects for the global economy in that timescale.

KEY FINDINGS:

- 45 per cent believe they will 'return to their normal course of business' sometime in 2022; 31 per cent say in 2021.
- 76 per cent said



government encouragement in key markets – by lifting Covid restrictions – would be the key trigger in a return to normal working.

• 61 per cent said a successful vaccine roll-out in their key markets would be the key factor – with at least half of

the population in those countries being vaccinated.

- 55 per cent said geopolitical issues were the biggest concern, with the potential for staff in different countries being vaccinated at different timescales.
- 34 per cent said their main concern was that staff won't take

the vaccine given misinformation stories.

- While 90 per cent of CEOs would expect their staff to tell the company if they've been vaccinated, only 21 per cent would expect that of clients/visitors to their premises.

• 89 per cent globally were confident or very confident of growth prospects over the next 3 years.

• M&A appetite was almost universally low to moderate.

• The top three risks were assessed as cyber, regulatory and supply chain.

• In terms of business effects of Covid, 61 per cent intend to increase spending on digital; 50 per cent will spend more in

HR resourcing to look after staff and improve mental health while 42 per cent plan more virtual interviews with candidates.

• On digital/IT expenditure, 52 per cent expected to invest more on data security; 50 per cent on customer-centric technologies like chatbots; and slightly under half on digital communications and artificial intelligence.

• Three-quarters (74 per cent) said that in terms of the digitisation of their operations, progress had accelerated by a matter of months during the lockdowns of 2020 – 15 per cent said it had progressed sharply in that time, putting them years ahead of where they would have expected to be.



France, EU close on Air France deal
France and the EU are close to a deal on a bailout for Air France, which like other carriers has been hammered by the pandemic, Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said. — **Reuters**



Euro set for biggest monthly drop
The euro is headed for its biggest monthly drop since mid-2019 as it languished below \$1.18 on Monday as coronavirus curbs weighed on the outlook for the European economy. — **Reuters**



Czech billionaire dies in copter crash
Petr Kellner, the Czech Republic's wealthiest person with a fortune topping \$13 billion, died aged 56 in a helicopter crash in Alaska, his spokeswoman said on Monday. — **AFP**

Massive fire engulfs Indonesian oil refinery



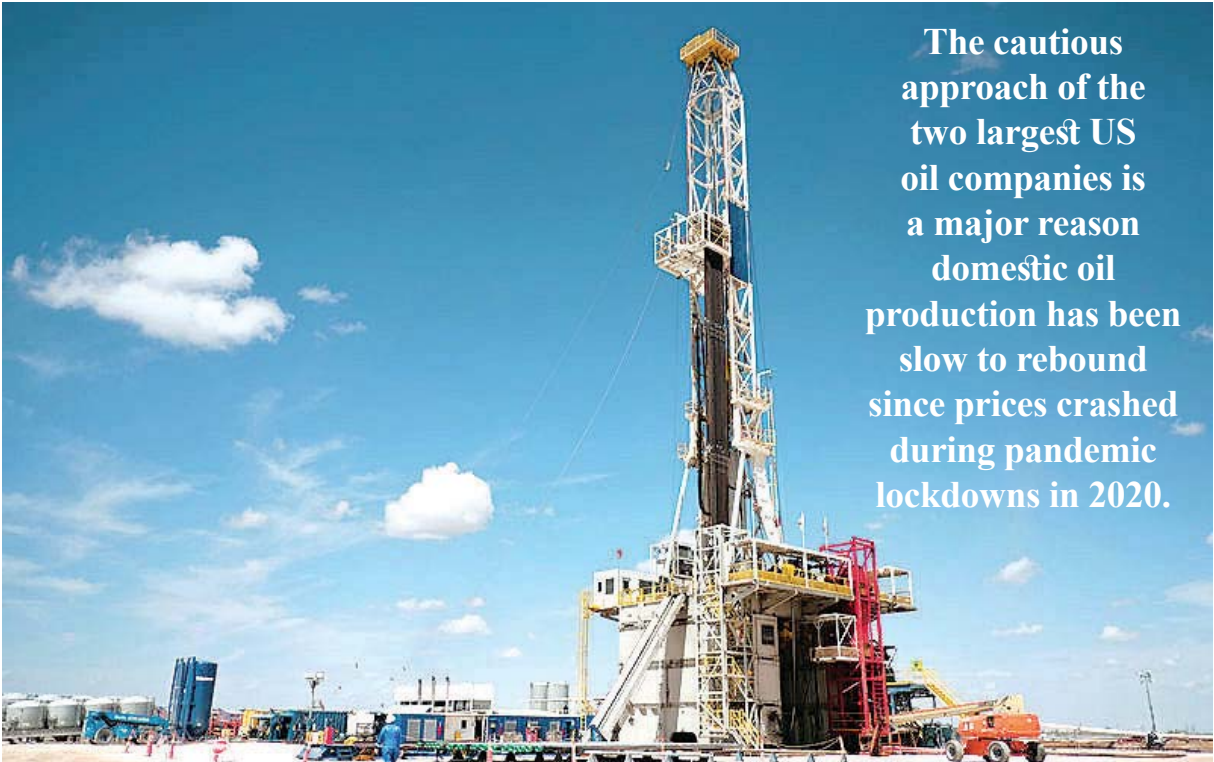
A massive fire rages at the Balongan refinery, operated by state oil company Pertamina, in Indramayu, West Java. — **AFP**

JAKARTA: A massive blaze broke out on Monday at one of Indonesia's biggest oil refineries after a huge explosion turned the sprawling complex into a raging inferno.
Firefighters battled to contain the fire at the Balongan refinery in West Java, operated by state oil company Pertamina, as towering plumes of black smoke rose into the sky.
At least five people were seriously injured and about 1,000 local residents were evacuated from the scene after the fire broke out early on Monday morning. The local disaster agency said one person had died from a heart attack after the explosion. About 15 people were slightly

injured and authorities said they were checking on the whereabouts of three others. "To prevent the fire from spreading we've shut down operations... and are putting our efforts into handling the blaze," Pertamina's president director Nicke Widyawati said in a statement.
The cause of the fire was not clear, but the company said the blaze broke out during a lightning storm. Pertamina said it did not expect the fire to cause fuel supply disruptions due to the high volume of stock it has on hand. The sprawling refinery is about 200 kilometres (120 miles) east of the capital Jakarta. — **AFP**

Exxon, Chevron take a slow walk on the path to US shale recovery

WASHINGTON: Exxon Mobil and Chevron Corp have scaled back activity dramatically in the top US shale oil field, where just a year ago the two companies were dominating in the high-desert landscape.
The cautious approach of the two largest US oil companies is a major reason domestic oil production has been slow to rebound since prices crashed during pandemic lockdowns in 2020. Production now is about 11 million barrels per day (bpd), down sharply from the record of nearly 13 million bpd hit in late 2019.
The share of drilling activity by Exxon and Chevron in the Permian Basin oil field in Texas and New Mexico dropped to less than 5 per cent this month from 28 per cent last spring, according to data from Rystad Energy.
"We essentially hit a pause button," said Chevron Chief Financial Officer Pierre Breber.
"When the world was oversupplied we didn't see the virtue in putting more capital to add barrels."
Neither company is likely to boost spending until next year, according to the companies and analysts. Chevron expects to produce around 1 million barrels



A Chevron oil exploration drilling site is pictured near Midland, Texas. — **Reuters**

daily by 2025 and Exxon 700,000 bpd by 2025, the companies said at investor days this month.
Chevron will increase Permian spending from \$2 billion now to pre-Covid levels of \$4 billion annually "over the course of the next several years," Breber said, but the company will not increase drilling in the Permian this year.
It is currently running about five rigs in the Permian with two

completion crews, down from just under 20 a year ago.
"Although prices are up and underlying fundamentals are strengthening and recovering, we're not out of the woods yet," Breber said. "So this year we're going to stick with our budget."
Exxon Chief Executive Darren Woods recently said the company would use additional profits to reduce debt instead of funding

The cautious approach of the two largest US oil companies is a major reason domestic oil production has been slow to rebound since prices crashed during pandemic lockdowns in 2020.

more drilling.
Exxon had seven Permian rigs drilling at the start of March and said it expects to keep seven to 10 at work this year, down sharply from 60 at this time last year. Both companies are likely to increase Permian spending next year, said Stewart Glickman, energy equity analyst at CFRA Research. — **Reuters**

Italy to cut 2021 GDP forecast to 4.1%, raise 2022 to 4.3%

ROME: Mario Draghi's government expects Italy's virus-hit economy to grow by 4.1 per cent this year and 4.3 per cent in 2022, three sources close to the matter said ahead of official publication of the new forecasts next month.
The 2021 forecast is a steep downward revision from the 6 per cent growth that had been pencilled in by the previous government of Giuseppe Conte, which collapsed in January, while the 2022 projection is above Conte's target of 3.8 per cent.
Both forecasts remain above those of the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the Bank



Visitors in face masks pose today outside Milan's Duomo. — **Reuters**

of Italy, which all currently see Italian growth below 4 per cent this year and next.
Italy's economy, which shrank by a post-war record of 8.9 per cent in 2020, is still struggling under the weight of the coronavirus pandemic. Much of the country remains in lockdown to try to tame a third wave, with around 20,000 new infections a day.
Italy has reported around 108,000 COVID-19 deaths, the seventh highest tally in the world. The new growth forecasts, along with updated public finance targets, will be contained in the Treasury's Economic and Financial Document (DEF) to be published by mid-April.

This forms the preliminary framework for the 2022 budget and must be sent to the European Commission for approval.
The forecasts are subject to ongoing government discussions and could still change marginally before their publication.
Moreover, they are based on an unchanged policy scenario and so do not include the impact of a new stimulus package which the government intends to present next month.
The growth targets will therefore be more ambitious also helped by plans to strengthen Italy's Recovery Plan in order to obtain more than 200 billion euros of EU funds. — **Reuters**

Malaysia's AirAsia posts record quarterly loss

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's budget airline AirAsia Group Bhd reported a record quarterly loss on Monday, as depreciation and impairments deepened the impact of lockdowns, but said it was confident of a full recovery in two years' time.

Net loss in the October-December period widened to 2.44 billion ringgit (\$590.72 million) versus 384.4 million ringgit a year earlier, overtaking the 1.33 billion ringgit loss estimated in a Refinitiv poll.
Revenue fell 92 per cent to 267.4 million ringgit as capacity shrank by 88 per cent compared to a year ago, it said in stock exchange filing.

"A major portion of the loss for the period relates to depreciation of (right-of-use assets) and interest on lease liabilities amounting to 654.2 million ringgit," the airline said. — **Reuters**

US not yet ready to lift import tariffs on China

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's new trade negotiator has said the United States is not yet ready to lift tariffs on Chinese imports, but could be open to talks with Beijing. US Trade Representative Katherine Tai (pictured) told *The Wall Street Journal* she understood the levies were hitting some American companies and consumers, but they can also protect businesses.
In January 2020, then-president Donald Trump signed an accord between Beijing and Washington after a bruising trade battle that saw tariffs imposed by both sides.

"I have heard people say, 'Please just take these tariffs off,'" the 47-year-old Tai told the *WSJ* in an interview published on Sunday.
But the former trade lawyer — whose parents were born in China — warned that suddenly axing the levies could harm the US economy unless a policy reversal is "communicated in a way so that the actors in the economy can make adjustments." She said it was essential for "companies, traders, manufacturers or their workers" to be able to plan for the future.
Tai told the *Journal* that



while she recognized the tariffs were taking a toll on some US businesses, they had been imposed "to remedy an unbalanced and unfair trade situation."
She also cited tactical reasons for holding firm. "No negotiator walks away from leverage, right?" she said. "Every good negotiator is going to keep all of their options open." Tai has already discussed Beijing's trade practices in calls with Japanese ministers, and in her confirmation hearings said she supported a "holistic review on China." — **AFP**