



HM SENDS MESSAGE TO KUWAIT EMIR

KUWAIT: Shaikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jabir al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, received a message from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The message was delivered by Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah, Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs when Kuwait's Prime Minister Shaikh Sabah Al Khalid al Sabah received him at Seif Palace on Friday, in the presence of Shaikh Dr Ahmed al Nassir, Foreign Minister.

The meeting reviewed the good bilateral relations between the two brotherly countries, in addition to discussing topics of mutual interest.

— ONA

TWO
SUCCUMB
TO COVID-19,
284
NEW CASES

MUSCAT: An Omani citizen and a resident died due to COVID-19 on Friday as Sultanate reported 284 new coronavirus cases out of which 204 are non-Omanis and the rest Omanis. This brings up the total number of coronavirus cases in the Sultanate to 4,625. The Ministry of Health said the number of COVID-19 recoveries rose to 1,350. Muscat Governorate reported 221 new cases of coronavirus, followed by Al Dakhiliyah Governorate with 18 new cases. More than 74 per cent of coronavirus cases have been recorded in Muscat Governorate with a total number of 3,467 cases.

TEST AND TREAT YOUR WORKERS, PRIVATE SECTOR TOLD

SAMUEL KUTTY

MUSCAT: Fearing a further spike in the number of COVID-19 cases in the Sultanate's labour camps, private sector companies have been advised to take responsibility of their employees.

In a fervent appeal, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, said, "My message to the private sector companies is please own responsibility of your workers. If you find them with symptoms, isolate them and ensure that they are sent for testing".

The minister made the request while addressing the seventh press conference at the weekend to give a briefing on the coronavirus in Oman.

"If you look at the cases in the last three days, it has gone up and most of it has come from labour camps and gatherings", he said.

The authorities have urged private businesses to send their employees showing symptoms of the new corona-



LEGAL ACTION MEASURES
WILL BE TAKEN AGAINST
VIOLATORS AS PART OF
COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS

IF THE RESIDENT HAS
A SPONSOR, THE SPONSOR
MUST BEAR THE COSTS
OF TREATMENT

FREE HEALTHCARE
TO MIGRANT WORKERS
WHO HAVE TESTED
POSITIVE FOR THE VIRUS

virus to health institutions and threatened legal action against cover-ups.

Last week, the Ministry of Manpower had asked private sector companies to subject suspected workers and infected persons to examination with a warning that "hiding them for public good to limit the spread of the disease".

The ministry said legal measures will be taken against violators as part of precautions taken to curb the spread of the potentially fatal ailment.

While the Sultanate has offered healthcare to migrant workers who have tested positive for the virus, the health minister made it clear that the sponsors or employers must now pay for the coronavirus treatment.

He clarified, "The testing is free, and the treatment is free for those expats who cannot afford to pay or do not have a sponsor. However, legally, sponsors must pay for the treatment of their expat employees".

TURN P2

OMAN

SEVEN WARRIORS IN THE BATTLE AGAINST VIRUS

KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT: The coronavirus pandemic has not only brought forward a tragedy but also heroism that our frontline warriors like doctors, nurses and other medical staff have shown. Wearing multilayered clothing, drenched in sweat, hustling endlessly to serve round the clock, the world is witnessing how they are risking their own health – and their families’ – for the greater good of their fellow beings. Even doctors and staff who are not on COVID-19 duty are at risk as they have to face regular patients who may not be knowing they are coronavirus carriers.

Observer caught up with a few doctors in the Sultanate who share their experiences with readers.

1 DR SULAIMAN AL ABRI
Senior Specialist
I'm alright. Doing clinical duties and assisting patients seeking consultation and treatment, sending them to reference hospitals, and the like. Life has become hectic after COVID-19 erupted. Taking it positively that we can fight the pandemic."



high risk of cross-infection. Medical or healthcare profession is one profession where balance has to be maintained between social distancing as well as healthcare of the patients. Hence, a doctor and medical staff have to be physically present to see the patients regularly but are advised to use proper healthcare measures.

3 DR SALEHA AL JADIDI
Psychiatrist
Health workers are in the frontline of COVID-19 response team and it exposes them to hazards



including exposure to pathogens, fatigue, burnout, psychological stress and the like. However, it can cause major effect on them as they may develop depression or anxiety along with other psychiatric problems and these may effect them and their families. Therefore managing psychosocial well-being is highly important as physical Health.

4 DR KP RAMAN
Cardiologist
Fear of death is universal. It is part and parcel of the survival instinct. Thought of death from corona brings, more fear, anxiety and in some even panic the reasons are manifold. Also there is great fear that if a person is



infected all his family members will get invariably infected. Post COVID-19 recovery may be associated with certain amount of stress and when combined with economic collapse and loss of revenue may lead to depression.

5 DR DILIP SINGHVI
Specialist Internal Medicine
Overall it is a challenging task on all fronts fighting against the virus, saving lives of people and at the same time avoid occupational hazard and also cope up with the mental stress. So, in my opinion all healthcare workers should use PPE all the time, facilities use techniques to de-stress themselves whenever they can and proper nutrition needs to be taken along with ensuring proper sleep. Health workers



should get support of family members and try to remain fit physically and mentally to save patients life.

6 DR MATHEW VARGHESE
Ophthalmologist
The usual friendly handshakes have stopped, instead, patients



are welcomed with just a warm smile and a greeting. Unnecessary visits of patients to hospitals are not advised, instead Telemedicine consultation is encouraged when necessary. Wearing appropriate masks while examining patients and strict hand hygiene measures are essential norms and are strictly followed. Medical professionals have a social responsibility and a commitment to the society but all care and safety norms should be practised during patient care.

7 DR NIGEL KURIAKOSE
Anesthesiologist
Walking into the hospital premises nowadays is like



entering a 'land mine' area. We need to watch out for potential exposures and be prepared for any eventuality. Wrapping mobile phones with 'cling-film' when leaving our homes and removing the wrap and cleaning the phones on entering back has all become part of the many new routines. Working in the wards, ICUs, operating rooms and the possibility of coming across asymptomatic carriers are a threat which we will have to face daily. Every patient coming in for an emergency surgery cannot be tested for COVID-19 and hence the risk for an anesthesiologist is potentially higher. Wearing PPE routinely for all patients is not a practical alternative yet for us.

TEST AND TREAT YOUR WORKERS, PRIVATE SECTOR TOLD

FROM PAGE 1

Later, the Ministry of Health also issued a statement clarifying the government stand on what is being circulated on social media platforms regarding the free treatment to workers residing in the Sultanate.

“What the minister of health stated at the press conference has been misunderstood”, said the statement, adding “for the resident who has a sponsor, the sponsor will bear the costs of treatment”. According to it, the resident who has health insurance, insurance will bear the costs of treatment and this issue is now being discussed with the insurance companies. If a resident cannot pay for treatment for any reason, the Sultanate’s government will ensure that he gets treatment. “We call on everyone not to share rumours and take the information from reliable official sources”, the statement said

HOW TO MAKE THE ULTIMATE LOCKDOWN BANANA BREAD

HOME BAKING IS HELPING COUNTLESS PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD STAY SANE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS LOCKDOWN. IF YOUR BANANA BREAD ISN'T NEARING PERFECTION BY NOW, THEN PROFESSIONAL BAKER CYNTHIA BARCOMI HAS SOME TIPS FOR YOU

If social media mentions is anything to go by, banana bread is the biggest winner from the coronavirus lockdown. The reasons are obvious - the list of ingredients is as simple as the baking process. The Internet is full of banana bread recipes, but which is the best? Cynthia Barcomi runs two delis in Berlin and has written several cookery and baking books. For her, the secret lies in not using too many bananas: "Otherwise the whole thing will be too heavy and too moist. In the end it's like a brick," she says.



PICK YOUR BANANAS

It's also really important that the bananas are really ripe, preferably with the skin already turning brown. This is when the fruit is sweet enough, and easy to mash down into a nice creamy paste. If you still have yellow-green bananas at home, you either have to be a bit patient and let them ripen naturally, or put them in a paper bag - the gasses produced will accelerate the ripening process. For a standard 11 cm by 25 cm loaf, Barcomi uses 125 g of butter, four or five crushed bananas (400 ml by volume), about 150 g of sugar and two eggs.

GO SWEET OR GO HOME

Sadly, there aren't really any good recipes which use less fat and sugar. "That won't work," says Cynthia Barcomi. "Not only does sugar provide the sweetness, it also determines the texture and supports the other flavours in the cake. It also turns the loaf to brown." She recommends reducing the sugar to no lower than between 100 and 125 g, roughly corresponding to the amount of butter. In addition, you'll need 300 g of flour, 1/4 teaspoon of salt, a little vanilla and 1 tsp of baking soda. Under no circumstances should you stir the dough until it is completely smooth. Otherwise the banana bread won't be fluffy in the end, and will be much too firm. If you want to be extra creative, you can add other ingredients to the banana bread before baking. Chopped walnut or macadamia pieces, chocolate chips, grated coconut, raisins or candied ginger all work well. Barcomi recommends combining a maximum of two or three of these ingredients to avoid getting too wild - but nobody's judging during the lockdown.

THE EASE TO FREEZE

Then the bread is placed in the oven at 185 degrees Celsius for 55 to 60 minutes. To test whether it's done, prick the loaf with a toothpick - if no dough sticks to it, your banana bread is ready. The temptation to eat it straight away will be strong, but banana bread also does great in the freezer as an emergency dessert. You'll need plenty of self-control, however, as you can't put it straight in the freezer. "You have to let it cool completely. Otherwise ice crystals will form when it freezes," says Barcomi. The best thing is to wrap the bread in cling film before freezing it. If you want to enjoy the bread straight away, you can do it as it comes, or toasted, buttered or with jam. Cynthia Barcomi prefers the unadorned version. "But it has to be a very thick slice." — dpa

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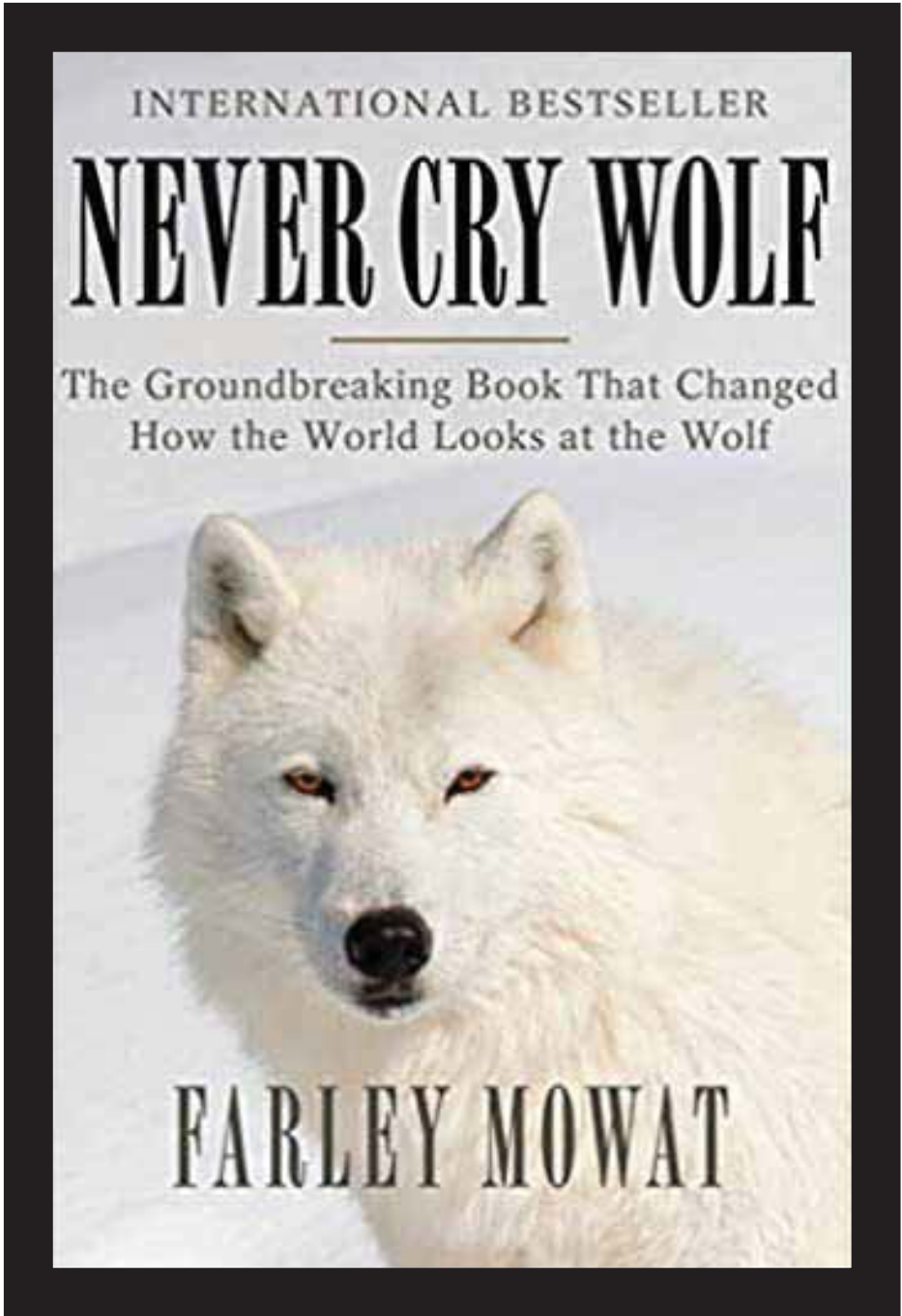
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A PEEP INTO THE WORLD OF WOLVES

RASHA AL RAISI

Continuing the theme of reviewing international classics, this time I chose a Canadian book called *Never Cry Wolf* by Farley Mowat (1921-2014). The book talks about the writer's experience as a biological researcher sent to the North of Canada between 1948 and 1949 to investigate if the Arctic wolves are behind the declining numbers of the caribou population. Mowat spends almost a year studying wolves' behaviour — something that was rarely done before — by following a particular pack that consists of two male wolves, a female and their four pups. Using the first-person narrative, Mowat takes the

reader in an eye-opening journey that helps in understanding one of the most misperceived beings in the animal's kingdom. Wolves are not blood-lusting rabid creatures that enjoy attacking other creatures. Surprisingly, their diet mainly consist small mammals such as rodents and hares. An adult wolf can devour more than thirty rats at a one go. Even when it comes to heavy kills such as caribous, wolves would collaborate with other packs and focus on does and fawns. Before hunting any of the two, the wolves would 'test' the prey by trotting after it for a few seconds to check its suitability for the hunt. Healthy ones are left aside and only the sick and injured are pursued. The meat of the game is consumed for days and some-



times weeks, with wolves hiding the good bits in their caves away from the foxes. Wolves are social animals where family ties matters. They get visits from their relatives (aunts, grandparents... etc) who'd also help in raising the pups. Wolves mate for life and if a female wolf gets killed, her pups are adopted by other families and raised like their own. Howling is a medium of communication through which different messages are exchanged such as caribou and human group movements across the wild, also expected visits from other relatives.

One of the fascinating information that Mowat represents is the Eskimo's ability to understand and

interpret different wolves' messages. Mowat's study concludes that the main reason for the decline of the caribous' numbers is human activity, especially leisure hunting that was considered a tourism attraction and approved by the Canadian government at the time. The culling of wolves and foxes was also advocated and hunters were paid an amount of money for each head. Published in 1963, the book was criticised by many such as the Canadian Wildlife Service — that funded Mowat's expedition — calling it "semi-fictional".

Mowat's claims of being sent to justify the extermination of wolves and foxes was met with anger by the organisation,

who recognizes wolves as an integral part of the ecosystem. He was also accused of plagiarising the observations of other biologists and claiming it as his own, an allegation he totally denied. However, Mowat's book was received well by the public, who'd sent thousands of letters to the Canadian Wildlife Service opposing the culling of wolves. It helped in changing people's perception of the wolf to a more positive one. The book was translated into Russian and published in the Soviet Union. It soon became influential and caused a public reaction against wolf-culling efforts. The book was made into a movie in 1983 by the same name starring Charles Martin Smith who played Mowat's part. The book is enlightening, thought provoking and funny with many laugh-out-loud moments (especially his first encounter with the wolves in person). Mowat's concludes that the image that we created for the wolf merely reflects the real image of ourselves: Savage and ruthless killers. We simply made the animal a scape goat for our sins. A recommended read for everyone. *The author is a certified skills trainer and the author of The World According to Bahja. rashabooks@yahoo.com*

Ramadan Iftar Program

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

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

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FORSAKING TRADITION FOR A SAFE COMMUNITY

SAMUEL KUTTY

Muslims have never before, at least in this century, experienced

Ramadhan the way it is being observed this year. Although it is disheartening that they are forsaking the traditions, the believers are exulted that the sacrifice is for the safety of the community.

“Unlike before, Ramadhan this time has the potential to be the best. It all depends on how you wish to embrace it. The stay-at-home restriction provides you more time to read the holy Quran and maintain intimacy with the Almighty”, said Yakoob bin Mohammed al Ismaili, who has performed the Haj last year.

The tradition urges the faithful to pray together at the mosque during the holy month. The essence of Ramadhan lies in social and religious life, which are both affected by these measures.

A big part of the holy month consists of special night prayers called ‘taraweeh,’ which are held daily at the mosque and performed by the mosque’s prayer leader.

Islamic endowment ministries and the clergy have issued fatwas making it clear that Muslims are obligated to pray at home amid spiking numbers of coronavirus cases.

“Our mosques used to be crowded with people all the time during Ramadhan. Although I feel pain deep inside, I feel elated that now our living rooms have become the place for prayers”, Yakoob

said. Ramadhan’s rituals of prayer and breaking fast together are usually opportunities for the community.

Nasser al Wahaibi said, “We must not be discouraged but keep our faith and the spirit of brotherhood strong. We have a common cause in our prayers this time, save our community from the pandemic”.

He said that when people are staying at home to avoid spreading the coronavirus, the faithful should focus on individual prayer habits and turn isolation into inner peace.

“When you tell people, it’s actually good for you to learn individual prayer habits right now, people have a hard time making the connection because they’re so used to praying at the mosque”, the 70-year-old said.

Echoing the same tone, Mohammed el Yousef, a teacher from Egypt, said Ramadhan is a gift from Allah to His servants.

He considers the holy month as a good time for self-reflection, despite Ramadhan being a solely communal experience.

“Therefore, we should not feel dejected even in this adverse situation. Instead, we should rejoice for the fact that the pandemic has given us more time to engage in prayers”, he said.

This is the month of prayer, mercy, forgiveness and a special time to have intimate conversation with God, he said, adding, “fasting should point the way to the spiritual treasure of Ramadhan”.

FATWA

Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili
His eminence grand mufti of Oman

Question

If someone is unable to fast due to old age or sickness, is it permissible to hire some body to fast on behalf?

Answer

If his inability is lasting, then he has to feed a poor person for each day. Allah knows best.





Ramadhan Mubarak
2020 / 1441 AH

CULTURE



Activists form a human chain during a demonstration in a last-ditch effort to try to save Y block. — AFP

LAST-DITCH BID TO SAVE OSLO BUILDING WITH PICASSO MURALS

PIERRE-HENRY DESHAYES

Face masks are rare and social distances vary but the human chain spreads out, braving the risk of infection, as activists in Oslo make a last-ditch bid to save a building adorned by Spanish master painter Pablo Picasso.

Damaged in rightwing extremist Anders Behring Breivik's July 2011 attacks, the "Y Block", a government building complex named for its shape and completed in 1969, is due to be demolished any day now.

On its grey cement walls are two Picasso drawings, sandblasted by Norwegian artist Carl Nesjar, who collaborated with the Spaniard.

On the facade facing the street, "The Fishermen" depicts three men hauling their oversized catch on board their boat. In the lobby, "The Seagull" shows the bird, its wings spread wide, devouring a fish.

Etched in the Spanish painter's childlike strokes, the two works will be cut out and relocated to

new government buildings due to be built in the central Oslo neighbourhood.

But not everyone is okay with that plan.

"We're going to be kicking ourselves for years," blasts Erik Lie, one of the 200 or so Norwegians who have come to protest against the demolition on this freezing May morning, one link in the human chain in front of the building.

"I hope it's not too late," he says, his orange woolly hat reading "Let Y Stand", before adding fatalistically: "But this will probably be a pile of rubble soon."

Because of the new coronavirus, protesters are linked by metre-long ribbons in a bid to keep them at a safe distance from one another.

Energised by their despair, they still harbour dreams of ripping the building from the bulldozers' claws.

But behind them, beyond the high fences, the sound of metal saws suggests the preparations are well underway. — AFP

Mythical monster goes viral as Japan prays for end of pandemic



Amabie's recent revival has come as something of a surprise to some yokai experts. — AFP

Move over Pokemon and Hello Kitty, in coronavirus-hit Japan, a new character has captured hearts and hopes: Amabie, a beak-nosed, long-locked mythical mermaid monster said to repel plagues.

In recent weeks, the mash-up monster has become the unlikely mascot of hopes for an end to the pandemic, emerging from relative obscurity to become a trending Twitter hashtag, as well as the inspiration for everything from cakes to nail art.

Her revival in fortunes was sparked in early March, when the Kyoto University Library tweeted an 1846 drawing of the creature floating above the sea, accompanied by a text explaining her apparent infection-fighting powers.

The scaly social media star is supposed to have appeared to a samurai in southern Kumamoto prefecture, warning of the spread of an infectious disease and instructing him to draw a picture of her and show it to people to protect them.

The post quickly went viral, and sparked the "Amabiechallenge", with everyone from amateurs to artists posting their renditions of the mythical monster.

The long-locked legend has also sparked on outpouring of creative content, including an udon dish featuring Amabie in the form of a fish sausage emerging from a bowl, with the traditional wheat noodles for her hair.

She has also found herself immortalised in bento form, her body and distinctive beak carved from a piece of luncheon meat and hair represented by thin strips of Japanese rolled omelette.

Amabie is part of a rich pantheon of Japanese mystical monsters called yokai. — AFP

HISTORY



The largest group of human footprints ever found in Africa - discovered at a site called Engare Sero, south of Tanzania's Lake Natron - offers a glimpse at what humans in the so-called Late Pleistocene period looked like. — AFP

Thousands of years ago, a group of people took a walk in what is now Tanzania. The footprints they left behind are now offering insights into ancient human life.

The group of more than 400 footprints was made sometime between 5,000 and 19,000 years ago at a site called Engare Sero, south of Tanzania's Lake Natron.

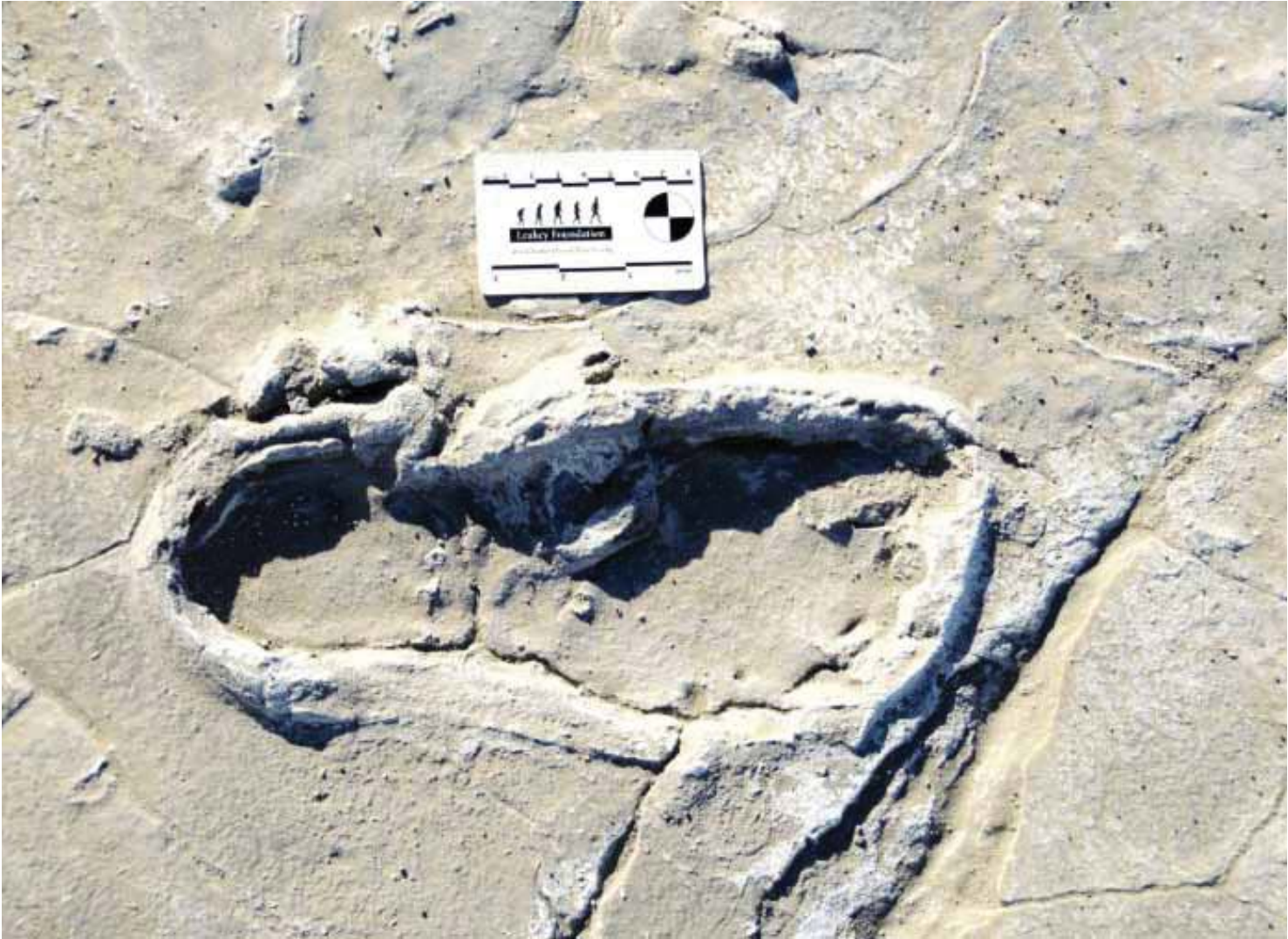
It's the largest group of human footprints ever found in Africa, and offers a glimpse at what humans in the so-called Late Pleistocene period looked like, as well as how they may have gathered food.

"Sites like Engare Sero form over very short time intervals, and so they capture snapshots in time of ancient humans moving across their landscapes", said Kevin Hatala, assistant professor of biology at Chatham University, who led the research.

"Given the rarity and value of this variety of fossil evidence, part of what makes our discovery exciting is its magnitude, with over 400 footprints preserved on the same volcanic

MAKING TRACKS: ANCIENT FOOTPRINTS SHED LIGHT ON EARLY HUMANS

THE GROUP OF MORE THAN 400 FOOTPRINTS WAS MADE SOMETIME BETWEEN 5,000 AND 19,000 YEARS AGO AT A SITE CALLED ENGARE SERO, SOUTH OF TANZANIA'S LAKE NATRON



A human footprint believed to be made between 19,100 and 5,760 years ago at the Engare Sero site. — AFP

ash surface", he said. "However, we have also been able to learn some really interesting things from these direct windows to the behaviour of the group that walked across the footprint surface". Analysing the footprints was a complex process. In 2009, when the research team first visited the site — discovered by a local Maasai community — just 56 footprints were visible, exposed by natural erosion.

Three years of additional excavations revealed hundreds more prints, made by humans but also animals such as zebra and buffalo.

ANALYSING TRACKS

The prints were made in wet volcanic mudflow, which would have dried quickly into a hard surface, said Hatala. That, combined with other evidence including the lack of overlap on footprints, strongly suggests the impressions were made by a group travelling together at the same time, rather than by individuals moving across the same area at different times. — AFP

WORLD

Virus vaccine race heats up, but not without row

WASHINGTON: Global tensions simmered over the race for a coronavirus vaccine on Thursday, as the United States and China traded jabs, and France slammed pharmaceuticals giant Sanofi for suggesting the US would get any eventual vaccine first.

Scientists are working at breakneck speed to develop a vaccine for COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, which has killed more than 300,000 people worldwide and pummelled economies.

From the US to Europe to Asia, national and local governments are easing lockdown orders to get people back to work — while fretting over a possible second wave of infections.

Increased freedom of movement means an increased risk of contracting the virus, and so national labs and private firms are labouring to find the right formula for a vaccine.

The European Union's medicines agency offered some hope when it said one could be ready in a year,



Governments and private companies around the world are working to develop a vaccine for the novel coronavirus. — AFP

based on data from clinical trials already under way.

But Marco Cavaleri, the EMA's head of vaccines strategy, acknowledged that timeline was a "best-case scenario", and cautioned that "there may be delays".

The race for a vaccine has exposed a raw nerve in relations between the United

States and China, where the virus was first detected late last year in the central city of Wuhan.

Two US agencies warned on Wednesday that Chinese hackers were trying to steal COVID-19 vaccine research — a claim Beijing rejected as "smearing" its reputation.

US President Donald

Trump, who has ratcheted up the rhetoric against China, said he doesn't even want to engage with Chinese leader Xi Jinping — potentially imperiling a trade deal between the world's top two economies.

"I'm very disappointed in China. I will tell you that right now", he said in an interview with Fox Business.

"There are many things we could do. We could do things. We could cut off the whole relationship".

'DARKEST WINTER'

On Capitol Hill, an ousted US health official told Congress that the Trump government had no strategy in place to find and distribute a vaccine to millions of Americans, warning of the "darkest winter" ahead.

"We don't have a single point of leadership right now for this response, and we don't have a master plan", said Rick Bright, who was removed last month as head of the US agency charged with developing a coronavirus vaccine. — AFP

Typhoon displaces thousands in Philippines

MANILA: Tens of thousands of people were forced into cramped shelters by the powerful storm pounding the Philippines on Friday, making social distancing nearly impossible as the nation battles the coronavirus pandemic.

Typhoon Vongfong smashed homes, schools and virus quarantine sites when it hit central Samar island on Thursday, but then weakened into a severe tropical storm on its path north to the capital Manila.

The storm struck as tens of millions of Filipinos are hunkered down at home to protect themselves against COVID-19, but more than 140,000 had to flee in central Bicol region because of the powerful storm, disaster officials said.

Vongfong packed gusts up to 190 kilometres an hour and drenching rains when it roared into the Philippines. — AFP



Millions of people live along Typhoon Vongfong's path. — AFP

ANALYSIS



People queue up while waiting for their turn to be tested for COVID-19 by Kenya's Ministry of Health in the Kawangware slums of Nairobi. — AFP

Virus could infect over 200m in Africa

The new coronavirus could kill 150,000 people in Africa in a year unless urgent action is taken, according to a WHO modelling study that says nearly a quarter of a billion people will be infected.

Authors of the research, published on Friday in the journal BMJ Global Health, predicted a lower infection rate than in other parts of the world like Europe and the US, with fewer severe cases and deaths.

But while they said many African nations had been swift to adopt containment measures, they warned that health systems could still quickly become overwhelmed. "Our model points to the scale of the problem for health systems if containment measures fail," said the authors.

The study comes amid stark warnings that COVID-19 threatens a health emergency in developing nations where fragile health systems are already struggling with an array of other

chronic diseases.

Experts at the World Health Organization's Africa office modelled likely rates of exposure to the virus and infection in the 47 countries under its regional remit, which excludes Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia.

Some 231 million people, or 22 per cent (with a range of 16 to 26 per cent) of the one billion people in the region were expected to be infected in the 12 month period — most of them showing few or no symptoms.

But an estimated 4.6 million people would need to be admitted to hospital, while 140,000 would have severe COVID-19 infection and 89,000 would be critically ill.

That would lead to some 150,000 deaths (between 83,000 and 190,000) the study suggested.

The modelling estimates what would happen for each country over the period of a year from the beginning of widespread and sustained community transmission. — AFP

Delayed survey data blurs India's COVID-19 picture

DEVJYOT GHOSHAL

India has lost two weeks in its bid to get a picture of the spread of the coronavirus in its population because of poor Chinese testing kits, a member of a national task force said, complicating a decision on opening up from a lockdown.

The kits were for antibodies to the virus, meaning authorities could determine who had been exposed to it as part of a broad survey to assess its spread.

But hundreds of thousands of kits had to be returned to China after inconsistent results, and the government does not have all of the data it should have to decide on how and when to loosen the lockdown, first imposed on March 25.

"We would have known the extent of infections, how much is the spread, about two weeks back. The delay is about two weeks," Dr Manoj Murhekar, a task force member and director of the National Institute of Epidemiology, said on Thursday.

A survey of 24,000 people was now underway with indigenously developed test kits and data would be available

by the end of May, he said.

Two members of a research group advising the government said the delay caused by the inconsistent Chinese kits was longer than two weeks.

Two other members of the group said another factor that has hindered the collection of the data is that health authorities have been more focused on testing high-risk groups and containment, and slow in efforts to mount systematic surveillance.

"Without surveillance data, you are really flying blind," one of the members said.

All four experts declined to be identified, some citing a government rule not allowing public comment.

The health ministry said this week systematic surveillance was starting in selected districts.

It did not respond to queries from Reuters.

China criticised India's complaint about the kits as unfair and irresponsible, and said the tests needed to be carried out in a professional manner to produce accurate results.

— Reuters

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BUSINESS

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Should insurers bear treatment costs of COVID-19 patients?

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: Health insurance providers in the Sultanate are bracing for government guidelines potentially obliging them to pick up the tab for the treatment of their policyholders hospitalised for COVID-19.

From the outset of the pandemic in Oman in March, the cost of testing and treating COVID-19 patients has been shouldered almost exclusively by the Ministry of Health. But on Thursday, health authorities, for the first time, put private companies on the hook that they have a legally mandated responsibility to shoulder any costs incurred by the government in the treatment of their expatriate employees afflicted with the novel coronavirus.

The issue surfaced during the seventh televised press conference on Thursday during which Health Minister Dr Ahmed al Saeedi clarified that COVID-19 treatment, while essentially free for expatriate patients, should ultimately be borne by their sponsors. A role for insurance companies was mentioned as well.

Further clarity came in an official post on Friday asserting the following: “The resident (expatriate) who has a sponsor, the sponsor will bear the costs of treatment; The resident who has health insurance, the insurance will bear the costs of treatment, and this issue is now being discussed with the insurance companies; If a



resident cannot pay for treatment for any reason, the Sultanate's government will ensure he gets treatment.”

Insurance providers contacted by the Observer confirmed that they are already in discussion with the regulator (Capital Market Authority — CMA), among other authorities, about the scope of any COVID-19 related cost burden on them.

“Discussions have been ongoing between us and the regulator, but we have not yet received any directives with regard to this issue. We anticipate some announcement to this effect early next week,” an executive representing a leading insurer said. The deliberations, the executive noted, cover issues to do with, among other areas, patient cost-sharing, prior authorisation waivers, co-pay, exclusions, and so on.

According to experts, pan-

demics are typically excluded from health insurance coverage as a norm, although exception can be made by insurers against the payment of an additional premium. However, when a natural disaster amounts to a national calamity, it is common for authorities to reach out to insurers to help ease the burden on the state.

In the Sultanate, there are precedents to illustrate a possible role for insurance firms in alleviating the pandemic treatment cost burden on the government. For example, when Tropical Cyclone Gonu, among other equally disastrous extreme events, struck parts of Oman over the past decade, local insurers were urged to settle flood claims although such natural disasters are typically excluded from coverage. The same principle also holds good in the case of COVID-19 coverage, it is pointed out.



Oman crude rises to \$34.95

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT: DME Oman, the Sultanate's crude benchmark, gained \$1.03/b in trading on the Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME) to settle at \$34.95/b on Friday, sustaining a rally that has seen prices more than double over the past month.

It comes as oil prices touched a six-week high on Friday amid signs demand for crude was picking up, with China reporting increased refinery runs and rounding out a week of bullish news on the supply front.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI) oil was up 65 cents, or 2.36 per cent, at \$28.21 a barrel, after reaching \$28.75, its highest level since early April. WTI jumped 9 per cent in the previous session. Brent crude was up 81 cents, or 2.6 per cent at \$31.94 a barrel, after touching \$32.50 the highest level since April 13. Brent rose nearly 7 per cent on Thursday. Both contracts are on track for a third consecutive week of gains.

Reuters reported on Friday that Oman is considering cutting its oil output in June by another 10,000 to 15,000 barrels per day, after Saudi Arabia and other Gulf OPEC producers also made additional cuts to reduce a global glut.

Vale Oman produces WHO-standard sanitiser

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT: Vale Oman, the Omani-Brazilian joint venture that owns and operates a mega iron ore pelletising complex and distribution hub at Sohar Port, says it has produced its own in-house version of a hand sanitiser spray that has a qualitative edge over commercial available brands.

The JV joins a growing list of major corporations, as well as local SMEs and start-ups, that have come up with their own innovations in support of Oman's collective campaign against the novel coronavirus which causes the deadly COVID-19 disease. Providing impetus for the majority of these local innovations has been a severe dearth of protective gear and sanitising liquids at the outset of the pandemic.

In a statement, Vale Oman said the hand sanitiser was



formulated at the company lab based on guidelines provided by the World Health Organization (WHO). The formulation, it noted, was far more potent in destroying viruses and bacteria than many commercially

distributed versions. Younis al Mamari, Supervisor of the Vale Oman Laboratory, said the locally developed sanitiser was carefully tested at the company clinic before an application was made to the

authorities for its wider use. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has since given its consent for the sanitiser to be mass produced internally for use by Vale staff and contractors, he added.

Bank Muscat offers loan deferment option

MUSCAT: In line with the directives of the Supreme Committee for Dealing with COVID-19 and the Central Bank of Oman to address the current situation, Bank Muscat is offering loan deferment options for Personal, Auto and Housing loans for three months. The bank has said that the deferment option will be available for loan instalments that are due from May to July 2020. It is one of the many steps undertaken by the bank to support its customers during these difficult times.

Affected customers who are eligible to apply include those whose salaries have been reduced, those who have been placed on leave



without pay, those whose additional income has been negatively affected and pensioners with a debt burden ratio over 40 per cent Bank Muscat has reaffirmed its commitment to the affected that the interest will be handled in line with the instructions issued by the regulator and the competent authorities.

All customers who meet the criteria for loan deferments can apply for the same through Mobile Banking, Internet Banking or by visiting their nearest branch. For more details, please go to <https://www.bankmuscat.com/en/awareness/Pages/update.aspx>.

BUSINESS

China crude oil runs rebound in April

BEIJING/SINGAPORE: China's daily crude oil throughput rebounded in April from a 15-month low in March as refiners cranked up operations to meet renewed fuel demand after lockdowns imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus outbreak were eased.

The country processed a total of 53.85 million tonnes of crude oil last month, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed on Friday, equivalent to about 13.1 million barrels per day (bpd). That was some 11 per cent higher than 11.78 million bpd in March.

The agency said on Friday it had adjusted the database of industrial enterprises it uses to help compile a range of production numbers. On that basis, Friday April's crude oil throughput was 0.8 per cent above the year-ago level, it said; a Reuters calculation using NBS data from last year put the rise at 3.4 per cent.

"In terms of year-on-year percentage change, we only included the companies that existed in both years," a spokesperson from agency's media relations department said.

"For instance, if a company existed in 2019 but does not exist in 2020, then their figure in 2019 will not be included in 2020 year-on-year percentage calculation."

Analysts said it would not be not surprising for the agency to revise its year-ago numbers.

"We've noticed over the years that the bureau tweaks the refinery output figures often towards end of the year due to under-reporting or delays in data providing by some plants," said Seng Yick Tee, senior director at consultancy SIA Energy. — **Reuters**



OIL HITS ONE-MONTH HIGH AS SIGNS OF DEMAND EMERGE



TOKYO: Oil prices jumped more than 3 per cent on Friday, touching more than one-month highs amid signs that demand for crude was picking up with China reporting increased refinery runs, and rounding out a week of bullish news on the supply front.

Brent crude was up \$1.21 cents, or 3.9 per cent at \$32.34 a barrel by 0707 GMT, after touching \$32.44 the highest since April 14. Brent rose nearly 7 per cent on Thursday and is heading for a 3 per cent gain for the week after rising the previous two weeks.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI) oil was up 92 cents, or 3.3 per cent, at \$28.48 a barrel after reaching \$28.54, the highest since early April. WTI jumped 9 per cent in the previous session and is also heading for a third weekly increase, up about 15 per cent.

Amid supply cuts by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and other major producers, bright spots are also emerging on the demand side. Data released on Friday showed China's daily crude oil use rebounded in April as refineries ramped up operations.

The market mood remains less than euphoric, though, with the coronavirus pandemic far from over and new

clusters emerging in some countries where lockdowns have been eased.

"Market forces have aligned producers around the world to support fundamentals, and demand is increasingly showing signs of having troughed," Barclays analyst Amarpreet Singh said in a note.

"However, the sheer size and speed of the disruption and associated inventory overhang will take time to get fully absorbed, in our view," he said.

Barclays still raised its forecasts for Brent and WTI by \$5-\$6 a barrel for 2020 and by \$16 a barrel for 2021.

The International Energy Agency said it expects global crude inventories to fall by about 5.5 million barrels per day (bpd) in the second half of this year. Meanwhile US crude inventories fell after 15 weeks of declines, the Energy Information Administration said on Wednesday.

Output cuts will boost the trend towards lower inventories, but US crude is unlikely to see strong gains.

"WTI crude will struggle to break above the \$30 level until both the economic outlook improves for the US and some of the downside risks ease," said Edward Moya, senior market analyst at OANDA. — **Reuters**



A man wears a protective mask as he walks past the New York Stock Exchange on the corner of Wall and Broad streets during the coronavirus outbreak in New York City. — Reuters

Pandemic stirs Wall Street’s social conscience

LONDON : Worker welfare is having a moment on Wall Street. The need to restart production lines and reopen offices idled by the coronavirus pandemic mean issues such as sick pay and working conditions are suddenly a top priority for the C-suite and, for some investors, a golden opportunity to apply the principles of ethical investing. Buying into companies based on environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors was growing in popularity before the virus started spreading. But the

focus was largely on how companies were dealing with climate change and overly generous executive pay – the E and G – rather than social issues such as the well-being of staff. The virus is driving a reassessment. “Someone the other day said ‘has environment taken a back seat? And my reply was ‘no, it’s more the ‘S’ has climbed into the front seat,’” John Goldstein, head of the Sustainable Finance Group at Goldman Sachs, told a media conference call in April. Investors ini-

tially balked when Amazon founder Jeff Bezos said last month that he expected to spend \$4 billion on virus-related expenses including protecting staff. The online retailer needs to convince employees, unions and governments that it can keep workers safe or risk warehouse closures at a time of unprecedented demand from shoppers. Amazon shares plunged over 7 per cent when Bezos announced the outlay would wipe out its next quarterly profit but have since pared much of those losses and

are up 28 per cent since the start of this year. Portfolio manager Lewis Grant at Federated Hermes said the move would help Amazon improve “its ability to deliver in the long-term”. “For the cynics, it is also a smart PR move,” he added. Companies which have chosen to cut jobs rather than investor payouts have drawn criticism and, taking note of the mood and welter of government supports on offer, many have taken steps to ease the financial impact on staff from the crisis. — Reuters

Britain, EU dig in their heels in trade talks

BRUSSELS: Talks between Britain and the European Union on their new trade relationship made little progress this week, sources with the bloc said on Friday, with persistent differences on key areas weighing on chances for a deal by the end of the year. That is when Britain is due to leave its status-quo transition period after exiting the EU earlier this year and both sides are now locked in talks on new cooperation rules from 2021 from trade to fisheries to security.



“Both sides agreed to disagree,” said one diplomat following Brexit in

the EU hub Brussels as the penultimate round of scheduled negotiations wrapped up on Friday before a key deadline at the end of June. That is when both sides are to assess progress so far and agree on any extension of talks, which London has refused to do. Unless prolonged, the EU says any talks would need to wrap up around October to allow enough time for ratification of any new deal by the bloc’s parliament and the 27 national capitals. — Reuters

SPORTS

‘KOHLI COULD BE STRANDED WHEN INDIA RESUME TRAINING’



MUMBAI: Top Indian players Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma could be left stranded in pandemic-stricken Mumbai when senior players start training again, an official has warned.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) could allow outdoor training as early as next week when a further easing of the government's nationwide coronavirus lockdown is to start.

But Mumbai, where Indian captain Kohli and batsman Sharma are based, is at the forefront of India's battle against the pandemic, and tough restrictions are expected to be maintained there.

“For players like Kohli and Rohit, the restrictions are there in Mumbai and might stay”, BCCI treasurer Arun Dhumal told AFP.

Mumbai has recorded almost 1,000 coronavirus deaths and accounts for more than a third of India's fatalities so far. The number of new cases is still rising.

Dhumal said that following government talk of further easing its nearly two-month-old lockdown, “some skill-based training” outdoors could be possible in other parts of India.

While international cricket and the Indian Premier

League have been high-profile sporting victims of the coronavirus, Kohli and other players have been posting pictures of their indoor training and other activities on social media during the lockdown.

Dhumal said India's National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bangalore was working on a post-lockdown plan for players which would be adapted to the level of restrictions.

“As of now we are working, given the lockdown restrictions, through apps and online modes. The coaches and support staff are regularly in touch with the players”, said Dhumal.

“Everybody would be keen to hit the ground and the idea is whenever we are ready for cricket to resume, they (the players) are able to give their 100 per cent”.

India have a short tour of Sri Lanka scheduled for June but it is widely expected to be called off. — AFP At Asian level, Iran topped the list as they have 279 points while Japan, Korea and Qatar are placed in second, third and fourth positions respectively. At Arabian level, Tunisia came in the first spot with one point difference then Egypt was placed in second with 167 points. — **AFP**

Townsend hopes Scotland will soar on back of Red Arrows chat

LONDON: Gregor Townsend hopes words of wisdom from acrobatic display team the Red Arrows will help Scotland become high-flyers when international rugby union resumes following the coronavirus outbreak.

The Scotland head coach and his staff held a video conference call with the Royal Air Force team just days before they took part in celebrations marking the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe earlier this month.

Scotland's coaching team are trying to learn from other organisations during the lockdown and have spoken to staff from baseball's Toronto Blue Jays and Belgium football coach Roberto Martinez. But Townsend said his “most fascinating” get-together had been with the Red Arrows. “We got to speak to two of their team of nine, one of them being their leader”, he said during a conference call.

“It was three days before they flew over London and we just couldn't believe they gave up their time to discuss how they put together their performances, how they review it. There were a few things we took from that we could apply in our sport”.

But it will be a while yet before Townsend can see the on-field benefits after World Rugby announced on Friday that the entire July programme had been postponed due to COVID-19.

Scotland had been due to play world champions South Africa twice before facing the All Blacks in New Zealand for the first time in 20 years.

“As a team we were generating some positive momentum in the Six Nations”, said Townsend, whose side had won two of their four matches when their Championship finale against Wales in March was postponed just a day before kick-off in Cardiff.

— **AFP**



Dr Abdulrahim recalls origins of football in the Sultanate

ADIL AL BALUSHI

MUSCAT: Football is Oman's most loved sport for the longest time and has quite a history in the Sultanate.

It is practiced by majority of people in different places including: beaches, clubs, sports complexes and in the interior areas. Despite that establishment of Oman Football Association (OFA) was in 1978.

However, Oman's history in football goes back to 1920s and the formation of first club was in 1942 in Muscat Governorate.

In later stages, OFA joined as a member in Asian Football Federation in 1979 and in the following year, Oman was an official member at Fifa.



Dr Abdulrahim al Droushi, an assistant professor in sports management and policy at physical education department in Sultan Qaboos University, presented a comprehensive paper on socie-



ty's response in the Sultanate to introduction of football in Oman, at the Annual Interdisciplinary Gulf Studies International Conference at Qatar University in December 2017. The academic lecturer stated in his paper that football in Oman can be traced to

the 1920s even though different documents states that the first practice of the game was in the late 1930s. "The first issue to emerge was the fact that football was seen as different from the traditional sports that were practised at that time and

which did not require special clothing. Wearing shorts was considered as incompatible with traditional Omani values and Islamic teachings and as a consequence, being perceived negatively. Other reasons led to negative connotations for football in Oman in early 1970s and 1980s. First, it was considered a waste of time. Omani families were at that time, preventing their sons from playing football since they preferred them studying at school and going to a religious school in the evening.

Football also was seen as a means of entertainment and therefore widely accepted in some areas around Oman. Some interviewees expressed that the game gave the community a chance for enjoyment, and if you were not a player, you would watch a match.

Such different experiences from different regions in Oman illustrate regional differences, especially between interior and coastal areas," he added.

Liverpool boss Klopp pokes fun at Neville over lockdown rants

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp has joked that his biggest lesson from the coronavirus lockdown is just how outspoken former Manchester United defender Gary Neville can be.

In his role as a television pundit, Neville has vented on a range of issues related to the Premier League and the health crisis.

The former England international has criticised Premier League chiefs for being slow to give updates on their restart plans.

He also took issue with the government's call for players to take wage cuts during the pandemic and let rip on a host of other subjects. Klopp could not resist a good-natured jibe at Neville when asked what his lockdown experience had been like.

"I didn't learn a lot in lockdown, other than Gary Neville has an opin-



ion about absolutely everything. It is incredible," Klopp told the BBC's Football Focus programme. Liverpool were two wins away from winning the English title for the first time in 30 years when the Premier League was postponed on March 13. The league hopes to resume in mid-

June and players are already returning to training while observing strict social-distancing rules.

Klopp has been in touch with Liverpool's squad, but he admitted it had been hard to go so long without seeing them in person.

"I am quite proud how we as a society have dealt with it," he said. "We are not perfect. We will always make mistakes but I think we have learned how connected we are to each other."

"I miss the boys the most because we created a group where all the people at Melwood (training ground) have a really good relationship and we became friends over the last four-and-a-half years."

"We saw each other with Zoom and other calls but it is still not the same. Going back to Melwood and doing the things we usually do is something I really miss." — AFP

SPORTS

I DON'T THINK ANYONE KNOWS THE
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KANE WANTS ASSURANCES BEFORE PREMIER LEAGUE RETURNS



LONDON: England captain Harry Kane says players are waiting for safety guidance from the Premier League after the government said it was “opening the door” for the return of football next month. Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden said Thursday’s meeting with the Football Association, Premier League and English Football League had “progressed plans for the resumption of the professional game in England”. The Premier League hopes for a return to action on June 12, with matches played behind closed doors. Tottenham striker Kane is willing to take the next step, moving from individual training to small group ses-

sions, but suggested more information was needed. “I don’t think anyone knows the right answer at the moment,” he told ITV’s Good Morning Britain programme. “I think the majority of players are looking forward to playing again as soon as possible but we know we want it to be as safe as possible too. “From what I have heard — obviously I haven’t seen too much of my team-mates — at the moment everyone is OK. We want to see how the Premier League gives us a plan and what that looks like.” Kane confirmed that he, along with the rest of the Spurs squad, had taken initial tests for coronavi-

rus, with no positive results following their return to training. “About a week ago we started going to the training ground, we were allowed to have one-on-one training with one member of staff on one pitch, self-distancing from everyone,” he said. “We had tests on Monday, all the players and staff had tests, and everyone came back negative, which was great.” Kane said Liverpool’s 25-point lead would make them worthy champions however the 2019/20 campaign ends, with the absence of their fans from the conclusion to the season a necessary evil because of the pandemic. — **AFP**