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25°C/16°C

FAIZ RIAZ TEES OFF TO A FRESH START
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Nadhira does it again

Claims distinction of being the first Arab woman atop Ama Dablam

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Nadhira al Harthy, the first Omani woman to climb Mt Everest, has accomplished another milestone by scaling Ama Dablam (6,812m) in Nepal, on January 15.

By climbing one of the highest Himalayan peaks, Nadhira claimed the title of being the first Omani and Arab woman atop Ama Dablam.

"The night was very difficult due to the cold and wind. This is a new Omani and Arab achievement," she told an Omani website.

The Ministry of Education, where Nadhira works, congratulated her. "By reaching the Mount Ama Dablam summit, Nadhira has become the first Omani and Arab woman to achieve the feat. We wish her success in her next journey."



Nadhira set off for Nepal on December 24, 2020. Before embarking on the journey, she tweeted that she had tried summiting Ama Dablam in 2018 as part of her training to climb Mt Everest. "I had to go through a strong experience before Everest, so I chose to climb Ama Dablam, as it is one of the most difficult mountains to climb."

Although she failed in that attempt, the experience taught Nadhira a lot about the Himalayas and the nature of the terrain.

"Today, I start the journey in a new attempt to climb this magnificent mountain again. I have returned with a new dream to a more challenging experience since the climb will be in the winter season," she tweeted before embarking on the climb.

Ama Dablam is sometimes referred as the 'Matterhorn of the Himalayas'.



Epidemiological investigation teams to monitor schools upon reopening

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Education has formed epidemiological investigation teams for schools to support the efforts of the Ministry of Health to detect any COVID-19 cases in schools, according to H E Dr Abdullah bin Khamis bin Ali Ambusaidi, Undersecretary in the Ministry of Education.

He informed that the decision to gradually reopen schools by applying blended learning will be assessed in accordance with the epidemiological situation in the country.

"We assure all that not all students will go back to school on Sunday. There will be a gradual return to schools this week with focus on making this transition in a safe and easy way. Returning back to school is subject to the epidemiological evaluation of the situation in the sultanate. Parents have the right not to send their children to school but must also ensure their children's right to education," H E Ambusaidi said.

He noted that the epidemiological situation is under continuous evaluation. "There are also other possible considerations upon which decisions will be taken on either returning to school or continuing blended learning in the second semester. If the pandemic continues to exist, the conceived scenario is sticking to blended learning. Face-to-face instructions will be held differently during the second semester of this academic year, in line with the epidemiological situation. The decision on gradual return of students to schools was

based on positive results, while implementing health protocols in the first phase."

According to Dr Ali bin Humaid al Jahwari, director general of the General Directorate of Education in Governorate of Muscat, school buses are available and the ministry has been ready for the step being taken today since a long time. Bus contracts were signed at the beginning of November 2020.

Under the school operation plans, the number of buses re-

Returning back to school is subject to epidemiological evaluation of the situation. Parents have the right not to send their children to school but must also ensure their children's right to education

H E DR ABDULLAH ALI AMBUSAIIDI

quired has been taken into consideration. "The ministry has requested that the capacity of each bus should not exceed 50 per cent of total capacity, among other precautionary measures in buses. Temperature measuring devices and sterilisers will be provided for each bus. It's important that school administrations meet the bus drivers to inform them of the health and preventive measures," Jahwari said.

Wedding halls, shisha cafes and more activities allowed to resume

Our Correspondent
Muscat

After months of suspension, shisha cafes have been allowed to resume services starting Sunday, Muscat Municipality said on Thursday.

The announcement is based on the decisions of the Supreme Committee to allow more activities to reopen after temporarily suspending these services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The municipality also allowed wedding halls to host up to 50 per cent of their guest capacity but not more than 250 people insides halls, it said.

According to the municipality, all establishments should follow health requirements as instructed by the Supreme Committee.

The municipality also al-



lowed prayer rooms in shopping malls to reopen. Meanwhile, discussions continue on allowing other small mosques to reopen and also allowing worshippers to gather for Friday

prayers as many have been calling for the authorities to allow Friday prayers since all other activities have reopened.

"As most activities have been allowed to resume, con-

gregating for Friday prayers needs to be given a consideration too. Only big mosques used to host Friday prayers earlier. We are hopeful things will go back to normal soon and we can gather again for Friday prayers," Nasser al Jahdhami, a resident of Azaiba, said.

On Thursday, H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, said, there is constant coordination with the Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs regarding the issue. "But gatherings in the absence of social distancing are still prohibited at this moment," he said.

The reopening of mosques had been sanctioned by the Supreme Committee to deal with COVID-19, which has stipulated that only mosques that can accommodate 400 worshippers can reopen.

Second dose of COVID-19 jab rolls out today

Muscat - The Ministry of Health will roll out the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine from Sunday.

In line with the schedule of the national campaign for immunisation against COVID-19, the second dose is for those in the target group who received the first dose in the few past weeks.

As of January 15, 24,204 people have received the first dose of the vaccine. The ministry stated that the second dose needs to be taken on time for the desired effect.

Individuals need to produce his/her immunisation card for the second dose. They will also be reminded of the second dose by a text message.

Sultanate, India hold strategic bilateral meeting in New Delhi

New Delhi, India - A meeting of the India-Oman Strategic Consultative Group (IOSCG) was held physically in New Delhi on January 14. This was the first high-level official visit from Oman to India since the outbreak of COVID-19.

The Omani delegation was led by Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs, Foreign Ministry, while the Indian delegation was led by Sanjay Bhat-tacharya, Secretary - Consular Passport and Visa & Overseas In-

dian Affairs.

Both sides expressed satisfaction that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, they have kept in close touch and sustained momentum in further consolidation of their strategic relationship. Bhat-tacharya thanked the Omani side for taking excellent care of the large Indian community in Oman during the pandemic. Both sides also expressed happiness that the Air Bubble arrangement between the two countries is functioning well. The Omani side expressed appreciation that India

had facilitated food and medical supplies to Oman during the pandemic. India assured assistance to Oman in its requirement of COVID-19 vaccines.

During the IOSCG meeting, the sides reviewed the entire spectrum of India-Oman relationships, including in political, energy, trade, investment, defence, security, space, mining, culture and consular fields. It was agreed that the two sides will pursue various agreements and MoUs in these areas for a future-oriented relationship.



Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy with Sanjay Bhattacharya in New Delhi (Supplied photo)

They looked forward to trade and investment linkages regaining momentum once normalcy returns after COVID-19. They also discussed intensifying cooperation in the areas of health and food security. Views on recent regional developments and global issues of mutual interest were exchanged.

Dr S Jaishankar, Indian External Affairs Minister, also received the Omani undersecretary on Thursday. Jaishankar congratulated the Omani side on the first anniversary of the reign of

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. He reiterated an invitation from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to His Majesty the Sultan to visit India. He said he also looked forward to the continuous strengthening of India-Oman strategic partnership in various fields.

On Friday, Harthy visited the Sushma Swaraj Institute for Foreign Service, where he addressed and interacted with the Indian Foreign Service Officer Trainees of the 2020 Batch & two Bhutanese diplomats.



02 **Farmer's colourful Omani peppers find market abroad**



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HOT SALE

Farmer's colourful Omani peppers find market abroad



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Farmer Khamis Saleh al Salhi from the wilayat of Suwaiq, North Batinah, has cultivated peppers on 21 acres of land. If the size of his farm isn't a first for an Omani farmer, the quality of his produce and its wide market probably is.

The idea of planting Omani peppers emerged following Salhi's interactions with the Omani Agricultural Association and specialists who recommended diversification of crops with the aim of increasing food security in keeping with most country's efforts to achieve self-sufficiency in food production.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Salhi said, "I've been farming for 30 years, but started growing peppers more recently for additional income. I grew peppers on three acres in the first year just to

know about the crop. I had to understand all the agricultural and market requirements of the crop, starting with planting of seeds right through to harvesting and delivery to markets. Now we cultivate four types of peppers - red, orange, green and yellow - on 21 acres for eight months a year. Our daily produce is around ten tonnes."

Peppers from Salhi's farms are currently sold in local markets, besides being exported to neighbouring countries as well as afar as Germany and Japan.

"I have visited some European countries to learn about their farming methods with different types of vegetables. The sultanate grows a wide variety of vegetables from November to June and has achieved self-sufficiency," Salhi said.

Talking about the challenges he faced in 2020, he said, the outbreak of the

I have visited some European countries to learn about their farming methods with different types of vegetables

KHAMIS SALEH AL SALHI

COVID-19 pandemic affected his business, more so in selling produce.

"We grow other vegetable crops as well, including lettuce. We have stopped lettuce cultivation now as some insects have acquired immunity to pesticides. We are currently working on greenhouses in our farm. We rely on modern agriculture methods, such as

drip irrigation. These reduce effort, time and labour."

Salhi informed that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has played an important role in his business. "The ministry offers us integrated programmes, helping us till the land and equipping us with a modern irrigation systems and organic fertilisers."

He is also grateful to the Omani Agricultural Association for its supports and for conducting meetings among farmers to exchange experiences to find solutions for the issues they face.

"I call on jobseekers to work in agriculture. It is profitable work. We should not leave this work to expatriate labourers. Our land is a treasure for future generations. Many countries depend on agriculture as the main source of income," Salhi said.

"We sell our produce in the veg-

etable and fruit market in Mawaleh, but also promote it in various commercial centres.

"I urge citizens and residents to purchase Omani products, especially vegetables and fruits."

The agricultural sector's contribution to the GDP increased from RO416mn in 2018 to RO433mn in 2019, recording a growth rate of about four per cent, according to Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources figures. The total production in 2019 was 3,018 tonnes, compared to 2,951 tonnes in 2018, recording a growth of 2.3 per cent.

"This increase in productivity is a result of the use of modern technologies by agricultural companies and individual farmers. It has contributed significantly to increasing the volume of agricultural production," an agricultural sector official said.



Oman books 370,000 doses of Pfizer vaccine

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Despite the drop in COVID-19 infections in Oman and most activities returning to normal, the preventive measures issued by the Supreme Committee, including staying away from gatherings and wearing masks in public places, are still in place.

Addressing a Supreme Committee press conference on Thursday, H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, urged the public to adhere to the precautionary measures. "We have noticed that some people are not following the measures. The vaccine has arrived but that is not the end of the pandemic. The precautionary decisions, including stopping all gatherings and compulsory rule on wearing masks, are still in place. There is no change to that," he added.

"We hope that we do not see the casualty figures rise again. We must commit to the precautionary measures against the



The vaccine has arrived but that is not the end of the pandemic. The precautionary decisions, including stopping all gatherings and compulsory rule on wearing masks, are still in place

H E DR SA'EEDI

coronavirus. Wearing a mask protects you and others from the risk of exposure to coronavirus



(Supplied photo)

and reflects your concern for public safety," he added. H E Dr Sa'eedi said that when

the infection rate peaked in Oman, the number of cases in intensive care units reached 219.

"The decrease in cases is a result of everyone's efforts and commitment to precautionary

measures. I call on everyone not to be complacent and to continue adhering to these meas-

ures," he said. On the ongoing vaccination drive, H E Dr Sa'eedi said the total number of people in the sultanate who received the jab is 22,749. As of Thursday, 82 per cent of the target groups had been vaccinated. However, he noted that there is no scientific proof to confirm that a person who has been vaccinated is not a carrier of the virus. "The sultanate has received 27,000 doses of the vaccine. In total, Oman has booked 370,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine," he informed, adding that the obligation to take the vaccine for travel is still under study by the World Health Organization. "When the vaccine is available for the private sector, the ministry will supervise the import, distribution and pricing. Currently, the categories covered in the vaccination drive include expatriates and Omanis, free of charge. In the first phase of the drive, 30 per cent of the target groups were expatriates," H E Dr Sa'eedi said.

RO65.48mn Oman REIT Fund launched

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Jasser al Aulaqi, CEO of Shumookh Fund Management, launched a RO65.48mn worth Oman REIT Fund (under formation), one of the largest real estate investment funds in the sultanate, on Thursday.

The fund's RO26.1mn IPO, representing 40 per cent of the total fund, of which the issuer can accept up to RO39.2mn - representing 60 per cent of the total fund - will be available for subscription from January 17, 2021, until January 31, 2021.

Shumookh Fund Management is the sponsor and investment manager of the fund while United Securities is the issue manager, handling the public offer.

Making the announcement at a press conference held in Sheraton Oman Hotel, Aulaqi said, "Oman REIT Fund offers an investment opportunity to investors to participate in Oman's high potential real estate market



by allowing them access to a diversified portfolio of real estate assets located at strategic locations across the sultanate. Oman REIT Fund could be a game changer in Oman's real estate sector. The fund presents investors with multiple benefits, including stable and high income, hedge against inflation and high liquidity along with professional management of their wealth by a team of investment experts."

The fund aims to pay an annual dividend of 7.5 per cent in the first year, which can grow up to 8.2 per cent in the fifth year.

The close-ended Oman REIT Fund will be listed on Muscat Securities Market (MSM) for secondary market trading upon closure of the IPO. The Capital Market Authority (CMA), sultanate's regulator has already given the necessary approval for the fund to open to the public, Aulaqi informed.

The fund has its assets distributed across sectors to ensure higher and steady returns, he noted, adding that residential cum commercial properties represent half of the fund's allocation, followed by office and retail

assets - 30 and 14 per cent respectively. Logistics and industry properties make up the rest.

Hopeful of growth in Oman's real estate sector, Aulaqi said,

"Supported by the government's continued focus on economic diversification, the sultanate's real estate sector is poised for vibrant growth, and this makes Oman REIT Fund an unmatched investment tool. The fund has in place an active asset management strategy and the availability of asset pipeline at an attractive valuation significantly enhances its appeal. Oman REIT Fund is ar-

guably the largest real estate investment trust in the sultanate with the total appraised value of properties pegged at RO65.48mn. It has a diverse portfolio of as many as 20 high-worth individual property assets spread across the capital area including Ruwi, Madinat Qaboos, Qurm, Al Khuwayr, Ghala, Rusayl and Misfah, with a strategic mix of residential and commercial, retail, office and industrial as well as logistics properties. The ranking of the fund is expected to be on top upon listing on the MSM, in terms of market cap," he continued.

According to Tariq Abdelrazaq, deputy general manager of United Securities, the current offering consists of 261,903,576 units with the right to accept up to 60 per cent of the offer, each unit priced 102bz (unit price 100bz, 2bz issue expenses).

The fund is open for subscription to both Omani and non-Omani individuals and juristic persons.

Tools simulating sounds of birds, animals banned: EA

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to preserve the environment and protect wildlife, the Environment Authority (EA) issued decision No 13/2021 banning the use of hunting tools such as those which simulate sounds of birds and wild animals for tracking.

The decision stipulated the prohibition of possessing and using hunting and tracking tools and devices simulating sounds of

birds and wild animals in the sultanate. The authority said the authorised tools and devices used for organisational, scientific and research purposes are exempt from the decision.

The authority confirmed that it will grant a permit to own devices and tools for one year for individuals for RO5 and RO20 for commercial establishments and companies. The authority said the unauthorised use of such devices will entail a fine of RO200 for each device.



ROHM open for public from today

Muscat - The Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) will re-open its doors to the public starting from Sunday.

Visitors can once again enjoy the magnificent opera house

building and experience the inspiration of this splendid institution through special guided tours. ROHM has prioritised the health and well-being of visitors and staff, with a strategic ap-

proach to safeguarding these in every part of the building following the guidance of the Supreme Committee dealing with COVID-19 developments. ONA

Eco-friendly 200,000sqm farm to be set up in Rustaq

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An area of over 200,000sqm has been earmarked to develop an eco-friendly farm in Rustaq that will produce up to 3,000 tonnes of vegetables that are most popular in Oman.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources signed a cooperation agreement with Amanah Waqf Funds Management Company to this end on Thursday.

The agreement aims at sharing knowledge and information, as well as providing agricultural, technical and logistical support

to build greenhouses in the Jamma Waqf Farm in Rustaq.

The project includes 300 greenhouses on an area of 205,000sqm and an eco-friendly solar energy farm, which will also be a tourist attraction in the region. The project seeks to convert waqf agricultural land into productive farms and provide 100 direct and indirect job opportunities for Omani youth.

The project will also offer contracts for support services, including harvesting, storage, packing and transport operations. Amanah will cultivate waqf land by introducing modern technologies.





Cold spell to continue for a few more days

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The prevailing cold spell will continue for a few more days in the sultanate, the Directorate General of Meteorology has stated.

Low clouds and fog spread over parts of the governorates of Buraimi, Dhahirah and Dakhliyah on Saturday, while the same was predicted for Dhahira and South Sharqiyah and parts of the coastal areas of the Oman Sea

on Sunday.

Northerly to northwesterly light to moderate winds over most of the sultanate will keep the temperature moderately low, with a maximum of 27°C and a minimum of 12°C on average.

Sea waves will be around 2m in Dhofar, while in other parts of the sultanate it will be 1.5m.

According to the Met office, Jebel Shams was expected to be the coldest place in Oman on Saturday night with the mercury

falling to 3°C. Saiq (6°C), Haima (8°C) and Yanqul (9°C) are other places expected to experience less than 10°C.

Speaking about the cold spell, an official from the Met department said, “This time of the year it gets cold and it is quite natural. However, this year the cold has been little more than the last few years, mainly in the interiors.”

He added that over the last few days, Jebel Akhdar and Jebel Shams recorded temperatures of

0°C, the lowest temperature in the sultanate.

Nagesh Vaid, an Indian working as a sales executive in Ghala, said, “I have been in Oman for the last few years and I can say confidently that this is the coldest season for some time. Indeed I went to the market twice to buy warm clothes unlike last years. Though I enjoy the winters, but at times it gets difficult mainly when I have to leave for office in early mornings.”

Tax Authority issues list of 90 food items exempted from VAT

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As Oman braces for the implementation of the Value Added Tax (VAT) from April 16, 2021, the Tax Authority has issued a list of over 90 food items that are exempted. Food items that are not specifically zero rated would attract VAT at the standard rate of five per cent.

According to the earlier report released by the Ministry of Finance as part of Oman’s Medium-Term Fiscal Plan 2020-2024, the introduction of VAT, which was introduced via Royal Decree No 121/2020 on October 12, 2020, will serve as the foundation for the sultanate’s revenue-raising framework by introducing a broad-based indirect tax.



‘A socio-economic impact assessment has been carried out by an independent third-party to assess the fiscal, social and economic impact of VAT in Oman,’ the report said.

With the implementation, Oman will join over 150 other countries globally that impose VAT and experts say the tax is

expected to provide an additional source of support to the Oman’s treasury. The move is also in line with the sultanate’s commitment to its Vision 2040 programme, which seeks to diversify the economy away from oil and towards non-oil sectors such as manufacturing, logistics and tourism.

ZERO VAT FOR OVER 90 ITEMS

Poultry, Meat and Fish

- Layer chicken
- Broiler chicken
- Chicken weighing not more than 185g from *Gallus Domesticus* species
- Full and half carcasses of bovine animals, fresh or chilled
- Bovine meat cuts with bones, fresh or chilled
- Boneless bovine meat, fresh or chilled
- Full and half carcasses of lamb, fresh or chilled
- Full and half carcasses of sheep, fresh or chilled
- Sheep meat cuts with bones, fresh or chilled
- Boneless sheep meat, fresh or chilled
- Full and half carcasses of goat, fresh or chilled
- Goat meat with bones, fresh or chilled
- Boneless goat meat, fresh or chilled
- Offal and other parts of sheep or goat, fresh or chilled
- Meat, offal and other parts of camel and other camelids, fresh or chilled
- Frozen meat, offal and other parts of camel and other camelids
- Yellowfins tuna (*Thunnus albacares*)
- Bigeye tuna (*Thunnus obesus*)
- Atlantic and pacific bluefins tuna (*Thunnus, Thynnus, Thunnus orientalis*)
- Southern bluefin tuna (*Thunnus maccoyii*)
- Longtail tuna (*Thunnus tongale*)
- Kawakawa (*Thunnus albacares*)
- Mackerel (Kingfish, spotted seabass mackerel)
- Trevally
- Seabream (*Sparidae*)
- Groupers (Hamor, Bertam, Chenino, Cato, Nagel, Samman)
- She’ri fish (Sheoor)
- Hamra fish (Alesmaudi)
- Nagroor fish
- Bori fish (Meed and Biyah)
- Safi fish
- Barracuda

Dairy Products

- Long life milk in containers ex-

- ceeding 1lt
- Milk in powder, granular or solid form, of fat content by weight exceeding 1.5 per cent, not containing added sugar or sweetener
- Fresh yoghurt
- Fresh (unripe or uncured) cheese, including whey cheese and curd

Fresh Eggs

- Fresh eggs of fowls of the species *Gallus Domesticus* (Fresh chicken eggs)

Fruits and Vegetables

- Potatoes, fresh or chilled
- Tomatoes, fresh or chilled
- Onions for food (green or dry rind), fresh or chilled
- Garlic, fresh or chilled
- Cabbage lettuce (head lettuce), fresh or chilled
- Carrots and turnips, fresh or chilled
- Cucumbers and gherkins, fresh or chilled
- Peas (*pisum sativum*), fresh or chilled
- Beans (*Vigna spp, Phaseolus spp*), fresh or chilled
- Other beans, fresh or chilled
- Aubergines (egg-plants), fresh or chilled
- Fruits of the genus Capsicum or of the genus Pimenta
- Spinach, New Zealand spinach and orache spinach (garden spinach)
- Olives
- Pumpkins, squash and gourds (*Cucurbita spp*)
- Marrow
- Okra
- Parsley
- Coriander
- Fresh dates
- Pressed dates
- Pineapples
- Guavas
- Mangoes
- Oranges
- Mandarin (tangerines & satsumas), clementines, wilkings and citrus hybrids
- Fresh lemons
- Dried lemons
- Fresh grapes
- Watermelons
- Green melons

Yellow melons

- Apples
- Pears
- Apricots
- Sour cherries (*prunus cerasus*)
- Kiwifruit
- Pomegranates

Coffee beans, tea and cardamom

- Unroasted coffee beans (not decaffeinated)
- Roasted coffee beans (not decaffeinated)
- Green tea (not fermented), in packages not exceeding 3kg each
- Other green tea (not fermented)
- Tea bags not exceeding 3g each
- Other black tea (fermented) and other partly fermented tea
- Cardamom (neither crushed nor ground)
- Crushed or ground cardamom

Flour

- Normal wheat
- Thin wheat
- Semi-milled or wholly milled rice, whether or not polished or glazed
- Wheat flour

Olive oil and its fractions, whether or not refined, but not chemically modified

- Virgin olive oil

Sugar

- Refined sugar (fine crystals)

Baby food supplies

- Infant and baby food based on milk or malted milk prepared as substitute of mother’s milk, not containing cocoa

Breads

- Ordinary bread of any kind

Water

- Artificial mineral water
- Ordinary natural water

Salt

- Common salt (table salt)

Over 25,000 visited Muttrah Fort in 2019, an increase of 66%: NCSI

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 25,229 people visited Muttrah Fort in 2019, registering an increase of 66.2 per cent compared to 2018, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The visitors to the landmark site in Muscat included both locals and tourists from different countries according to the statistics of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The historic Muttrah Fort overlooks the Sultan Qaboos



Port, Muttrah Souq and neighbouring tourist spots.

Visitors to the fort can reach

the area by car via Muttrah Souq, moving towards the office of Wali of Muttrah, and then

taking a right turn towards the fort.

The fort seems as if it were the only passage connecting Muttrah and Muscat.

Currently, it consists of three circular towers - a huge one sitting on the summit, and the remaining smaller two are located in the west and the north of the large tower.

As per the NCSI figures, the number of visitors to the 51 castles and forts in the sultanate increased by 71.2 per cent between 2015 and 2019 to reach 426,525, while the total number of employees reached 110.

AL KHUWAYR DRAINAGE CANAL WORK PROGRESSING WELL



Work on the drainage canal in Al Khuwayr Street in the wilayat of Bausher is progressing well and Muscat Municipality expects it to be completed by mid-2021. In a statement, the municipality said, ‘Muscat Municipality is embarking on the implementation of a drainage canal along the Al Khuwayr Street, with a width ranging between 3-5m, at an average depth of 2m, and a length of 945m. The municipality assures completion of this stage in the middle of 2021.’

5.5km Yanqul internal road opens for traffic

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has opened the 5.5km Yanqul dual carriageway internal road, starting from Al Aqdah roundabout in Yanqul and ending at Yanqul Hospital intersection.

The project included the establishment of several services such as three locations for pedestrians crossing, 129 LED lighting poles, and service roads to serve the residential and shopping areas.

The road’s significance is seen in the benefits it offers to the wilayat of Yanqul’s centre, significantly reducing traffic congestion, easing commuting and revitalising commercial activities.

The ministry is continually expanding its main and secondary road network and raising road efficiency and dualisation while according traffic safety the highest of priorities during the design and implementation of roads.

The ministry is also involved in linking rural areas to urban centres by expanding the dirt road network.

The total length of paved roads falling under the ministry’s remit as of the end of December 2020 topped around 15,000km, while graded roads connecting small villages to urban centres was over 17,000km.



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PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	5.32am
Sunrise	6.51am
Duhr	12.22pm
Asr	3.27pm
Maghrib	5.48pm
Isha	7.02pm

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Huge turnout for beach clean-up on Masirah Island

Our Correspondent
Muscat

More than 100 volunteers came out to clean the beaches of Masirah Island on Friday responding to an invitation issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources. The ministry, represented by the Fisheries Development Centre in Masirah, organised the campaign in cooperation with its partners including Environment Authority, PDO and a number of government and private agencies, volunteer teams and community members. The clean-up was organised to mark Oman Environment Day which is observed every year on January 8. The Environment Authority has launched several initiatives to spread awareness on the importance of preserving the environment, including planting mangroves, a project to plant 10mn wild trees, cleaning up coral reefs in various parts of the sultanate, and banning the use of single-use plastic bags.



Oman Environment Day has been celebrated since 1997 on the directives of the Late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said to boost the efforts aimed at protecting the environment in Oman and conserving the ecosystem and natural resources which form a key pillar of sustainable development.

Ministers visit Musandam to support tourism projects

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A high-level delegation comprising several ministers visited Musandam governorate on Thursday and discussed numerous topics related to the heritage and tourism sectors in the governorate.

A statement from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism said, 'H E Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, H E Dr Khalfan bin Said bin Mubarak al Shu'a'ili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, and H E Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Musandam, made field visits in the presence of their excellencies the members of the State Council and Majlis A'Shura.'

The meeting discussed several topics related to the heritage and tourism sectors in the governorate. The team visited a number of sites in the four wilayats of the governorate and followed up



on their progress.

In December 2020, H E Eng Said bin Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, H E Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, and H E Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Musandam, also made field visits to Musandam.

The development projects and the needs of the people in the various wilayats of Musandam governorate were reviewed by the ministers, the Ministry

of Transport, Communication and Information Technology had said.

'The ministers toured a number of development projects and facilities in Musandam, including Khasab Port, where the general development plan for the port was viewed. The plan includes building a tourist berth, building three floating berths, building a commercial berth to receive commercial ships, and extending the current seaport,' said the ministry. In 2019, 332,489 tourists and 72 cruise ships visited the governorate.

Oman, Iraq discuss social development

Muscat - H E Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development, received on Thursday Ivan Faeq Jabro, Minister of Migration and Displaced of Iraq.

The two sides reviewed means of promoting the joint co-operation, particularly in the fields of research and studies that would serve social programmes and services for the two sides. The Iraqi guest praised the modern renaissance, prosperity, progress and security enjoyed by the sultanate.

ONA



PREVENT COVID-19

H E Dr Ahmed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health



IT IS
NOT
OVER YET

I AM WORRIED WE MIGHT
GO BACK TO WHERE WE WERE A FEW
MONTHS AGO

I URGE ALL OF YOU
TO CONTINUE TO DO THE
RIGHT THING

ISSUED IN PUBLIC INTEREST

BankDhofar conducts year-end prize draw

Demonstrating its keenness to stay connected with customers, BankDhofar recently organised Al Riadah Priority Banking Services gathering. The event was graced and attended by Al Riadah customers, whereas representing the bank and welcoming prestige customers were BankDhofar Al Riadah team and executive team members.

On the gathering, Dr Tariq Taha, chief retail banking officer at BankDhofar said, "This gathering is an opportunity for us to interact with our customers directly and hear from them. At BankDhofar, we have always been committed to design tailor-made products, services and financial solutions for our customers. We are always open for their feedback and suggestions, which help us elevate the level of our services and products."

BankDhofar applied the preventive measures to avoid the widespread of COVID-19. As part of the event, BankDhofar conducted the Year-End Grand Prize draw of the Savings Account Scheme 2020. The draw saw two Al Riadah Priority Bank-



ing winners of valuable cash prize worth RO250,000 each. Congratulating the winners, Dr Taha added, "I would like to congratulate the two lucky winners of the grand prize draw, and all the winners throughout the year. The scheme saw large popularity this year, as we introduced new draw categories, in which we provided the chance to win for all family members be it children, youth or ladies. Our main aim of the Savings Account Scheme is to encourage our customer to save, and we reward them for that."

Al Riadah Priority Banking provides a unique range of bank-



ing products and services that are tailored to suit the unique lifestyle of priority customers, ranging from personalised cheque book, exclusive Al Riadah card, including Visa Infinite Debit Card, Visa Signature Debit Card, Visa Infinite Credit Card, and MasterCard Platinum Credit

Card. Customers can enjoy exceptional times at restaurants, shops, as well as procurement protection, extended warranty, access to airport lounges around the world, travel insurance for cardholders and their families, in addition to other exclusive services.

BankDhofar has tailor-made financing solutions to meet the needs of its priority banking customers with low insurance fees and simple and fast procedures. The bank also provides deposit accounts at competitive interest rates and low insurance fees. Al Riadah customers may

benefit from the distinct monthly interest rate of the Savings Account, and get the chance to win in the special draws for Al Riadah segment. BankDhofar has dedicated Al Riadah counters in most BankDhofar branches and established specialised Al Riadah centres that provide a private and

unique experience in Muscat (Muscat Grand Mall, Mall of Muscat, and Royal Opera House), North Batinah (Sohar), and Dhofar (Salalah). Al Riadah Priority Banking customers may also reach the bank 24/7 at 24775775 or visit www.bankdhofar.com.



Madayn academy launches 3-month programme on English language skills

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates - Madayn, represented by Madayn Industrial Academy, has launched an intensive three-month programme on English language skills in business environment.

The programme, which focuses on three different levels, aims at equipping the participants with effective communication skills in English language to contribute to attracting and localising more foreign investments in the various industrial

cities. This programme comes in line with the academy's plan to train the human cadres in Madayn's various industrial cities.

It is worthwhile to mention that Madayn Industrial Academy was established in 2019 to offer training opportunities for the national cadres to enhance administrative, financial and technical skills, raise their productivity, provide value adding services to the investors in the industrial cities, and provide new job opportunities for the national

cadres. Madayn Industrial Academy organises a series of training programmes and events that address trending topics and challenges locally and globally.

The academy also organises training-for-employment in co-operation with the concerned bodies in this field. Madayn aims through the academy to develop the skills of the national cadres through providing training opportunities for the cadres with the objective of meeting the requirements of the industrial sector.

Be first to own Samsung Galaxy S21 Series 5G in the sultanate

Samsung Gulf Electronics has announced that pre-orders for devices part of the next-generation Galaxy S21 Series 5G are now available for brand enthusiasts across Oman.

Comprising the brand new Galaxy S21 5G, Galaxy S21+ 5G, and Galaxy S21 Ultra 5G, the ultimate flagships empower users to share their world, connect with the things and people that matter most, and express themselves like never before in the modern, digital world. With new, bold, and iconic design, pro-grade camera and video capabilities, and premium viewing and powerful connectivity experiences, the Galaxy S21 Series 5G promises to change everything and make everyday epic.

"The pre-order phase of the Galaxy S21 Series 5G is our first milestone of 2021 and we are looking forward to delivering amazing technologies and capabilities to our customers," said Osman Albora, head of Mobile Division, Samsung Gulf Electronics.

"As we all know, the past 12 months have witnessed unprecedented change - and technology kept us connected during this period. As such, with more of



us working remotely and staying entertained at home, we accelerated our transition to a mobile-first world. Innovative next-generation devices are a necessity - and we are delighted that the official launch of our latest flagships is almost upon us."

Galaxy S21 5G and S21+ 5G

Designed to effortlessly complement your lifestyle and future needs, the Galaxy S21 5G and Galaxy S21+ 5G provide the latest flagship experiences. Both

models are equipped with a triple-lens, pro-grade camera system to capture amazing shots and content. No matter the approach, you can capture, edit, and share stunning videos and photos from every perspective and in any lighting conditions with unbelievable ease.

From touching moments to fast-paced action, the things that matter most can be recorded from any distance and angle in stunning 8K video, captured in 33MP high resolution, and each device features an intelli-

gent, edge-to-edge, Dynamic AMOLED 2X adaptive 120Hz display. Additionally, the most advanced processor ever in a Galaxy device enables you to download, game, and stream seamlessly, while the elevated, super-expansive screen and large battery ensures uninterrupted viewing.

Galaxy S21 Ultra 5G

Equipped with powerful AI and Samsung's most advanced pro-grade camera system, brightest screen, and an adaptive display that supports a refresh rate from 10Hz to 120Hz at Quad HD+ quality, the Galaxy S21 Ultra 5G raises the bar of what premium smartphones can do. With one click, you can capture stunning, studio-quality photos in 33MP high resolution thanks to the device's enhanced 108MP sensor, and shoot and edit 8K videos like a pro with a quad camera

The Galaxy S21 5G is priced at RO339 (128GB) and RO359 (256GB), respectively. The Galaxy S21+ 5G is available at RO399 (128GB) and RO419 (256GB), while the Galaxy S21 Ultra 5G can be pre-ordered for RO519 (256GB) and RO569 (512GB).

Tissot launches women's timepieces

For Tissot, 2021 will be an eminently feminine year. The Le Locle-based brand, traditionally unisex by nature, is launching some new, high-quality timepieces for women.

The Tissot T-My Lady range provides the vision of the Tissot woman. She is confident of her life choices, committed to an exciting, mindful life and wants to make the most of everything. Aspirational and strong, sophisticated yet tough, she cruises between her home, the office, nights out and an active daily life, just like the Tissot T-My Lady. The new collection, consisting of several quartz models at launch, is dedicated to this complete woman. These watches, with the endurance of steel and, in some versions, the radiance of rose gold, have the simple grace of timeless lines.

Every woman

The Tissot T-My Lady is not just



a feminine watch. Its concept, design and underlying purpose make it the ideal watch for those women - elegant, sophisticated business women - who believe a watch should stand the test of time.

Ladies will like its dimensions - 29 mm in diameter - which make it ideal for everyday wear.



Elegant women will admire the diamonds on the dial of the automatic version, which give depth, character and warmth to the T-My Lady collection. Sophisticated women will love its mechanical self-winding movement, regulated by a Nivachron spiral with exceptional non-magnetic properties. Businesswomen

will be tempted by the dials: blue sunburst, silvered, opaline or anthracite sunburst.

Every life

The feminine counterpart of the Tissot Gentleman, the Tissot T-My Lady bears all the hallmarks of quality watchmaking inherent in Tissot's timepieces.

The watch's basic structure of steel case and bracelet, the choice of self-winding or quartz movements, and above all the finishing details, all testify to the experience and care that have gone into creating this new range.

The timepiece comes fitted with a steel bracelet for active women, and can be given a different look with the interchangeable leather strap to be found in the pouch for the all-steel automatic and quartz versions. On the solid gold models, the hour indicators are bevelled, faceted, three-dimensional appliques.

Bain & Company promotes partner

Bain & Company, a top global management consulting firm, strengthens its team with the announcement of a new partner promotion in the Middle East.

The promotion of Cyril Gourp is among 48 partner and 6 expert partner appointments across 25 global offices.

Cyril Gourp is a core member of the Financial Services and Private Equity practices at Bain & Company with deep industry knowledge and expertise.

With over 18 years of professional experience in management consulting and banking, including 9 years in the Middle East, he has extensive knowledge in driving full potential strategies and transformation programmes in Financial Services.

Prior to joining Bain & Company, Cyril worked for a global management consulting firm and Exane BNP Paribas.



He holds an MBA from HEC Paris and a master's degree in computer engineering from the Engineering School of Information and Digital Technologies in France.

The newly promoted partner, Cyril Gourp assumed his new role effective January 1, 2021.

Bain & Company is a global consultancy that helps the world's most ambitious change makers define the future.

Across 59 offices in 37 coun-

tries, it works alongside its clients as one team with a shared ambition to achieve extraordinary results, outperform the competition and redefine industries.

"We complement our tailored, integrated expertise with a vibrant ecosystem of digital innovators to deliver better, faster and more enduring outcomes," the company stated.

"Our 10-year commitment to invest over US\$1bn in pro bono services brings our talent, expertise and insight to organisations tackling today's urgent challenges in education, racial equity and social justice, economic development and the environment."

"Since our founding in 1973, we have measured our success by the success of our clients, and we proudly maintain the highest level of client advocacy in the industry," added the statement.

MHD opens MG Motor showroom in Sur

Mohsin Haider Darwish (MHD), the official distributor of MG Motor in the sultanate, recently celebrated the opening of its new showroom in Sur. The state-of-the-art showroom, blends convenience, ease of use and best-in-class facilities.

The showroom's VIP launch event took place on January 11 under the auspices of H E Dr Yahya bin Badr bin Malik al Ma'awali, Governor of South Sharqiyah, and was presided over by Areej Mohsin Haider Darwish, chairperson MHD ACERE, Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE Division. Also, in attendance, were a number of highnesses and excellencies, as well as senior management and executives from MHD.

Commenting on the opening of the new showroom in Sur, Mohsin al Bahrani, CEO MHD ACERE, said, "We are delighted to officially be opening our first showroom here in Sur - reflecting the continuing growth and expansion of our MG Motor business here in the sultanate. In recent months MG Motor has become an increasingly popular brand in Oman, as more and more members of the motoring public recognise its world-class



engineering, build quality, power and style that are offered across diverse models at affordable prices. We have in fact seen people from different walks of life getting attracted to the MG

brand; not just in the capital area of Muscat, but also in other regions of the sultanate."

"Looking ahead to 2021, our strategic focus will be centered on customer experience and pro-

viding a first-class aftersales experience. We also plan to introduce new MG models, maintaining our reputation for being at the forefront of the automotive industry when it comes to the

latest models with technologically advanced features."

The line-up that will be displayed at the Sur showroom, include all of MG Motor's best-selling cars including the

enormously successful ZST, that have already proven extremely popular following its launch in October last year.

For more information about the new showroom and its facil-

ities, the ongoing promotion, or to arrange a test drive, please visit the MG Motor showroom or call 71557334, wherein a team of fully qualified sales consultants will be able to assist you.

'Digital technologies can allow O&G industry to respond to changes'

CC Energy Development (CCED) managing director Walter Simpson participated in the 11th Gulf Intelligence Global UAE Energy Forum 2021, which brought together energy industry experts from across the world to discuss latest trends under the theme, 'Energy Outlook 2021: Moving Beyond the Pandemic?'. CCED's MD featured in the Middle East section of the event as one of four speakers on the Energy Industry Roundtable titled, 'Digitalisation: What are 3 top priorities for Oil and Gas companies to manage their climate impact in 2021?'.

"Digitalisation has been a key empowering influence for operational excellence long before COVID-19. The challenges of the pandemic, however, have brought to the surface how effective digital tools can be in allowing businesses to work remotely, yet be able to deliver and succeed in such uncertain times," said Simpson.

"To stay competitive, the oil and gas industry needs to



demonstrate agility and adaptability while using technology intelligently to meet the requirements of the next 'new normal'. But we also need to beware that intelligent automation isn't just the deployment of digital tools, but having a comprehensive blend of a talented workforce and the latest technologies to sustain and enable further business growth."

Simpson went on to highlight that hydrocarbons are, and will remain, a major part of the en-

ergy mix for the foreseeable future, hence, the industry should leverage the spike in digital awareness to drive a lasting change in working practices.

He identified three elements that are critical for the success of smaller independent hydrocarbon producers including, lowering costs, minimising environmental footprint, and adding value to their local communities.

One more key point the CCED MD highlighted was that organi-

sations must constantly develop their human capital and build their capacity by providing them with access to the best available resources, which will in turn bring a major shift in how they use the technology of the 4th Industrial Revolution.

He went on to explain that 2020 was a year of multi-pronged disruption in the oil and gas sector with global oversupply, then a sharp slump in demand caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, triggering increased efforts to pursue an energy agenda to combat global warming.

Simpson concluded, "All of these challenges have heralded massive change that has paved the way for the large scale adoption of digital technology in the oil and gas industry. And while we are still not sure about the duration of the pandemic's impact, drawing up a plan to digitise and adjust, and most importantly accelerate the digital transformation in oil and gas is key to optimise operations and unleash new methods."

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi commences operations with Athens flight

On the eve of its inaugural flight to Athens, Greece, the UAE's new national airline, Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, marked the occasion with a visit from the company's chairman, József Váradi. Váradi is one of the airline's founders who established the company in 2003.

The company's chairman, Váradi said, "The launch of Wizz Air Abu Dhabi recognises Abu Dhabi as a bold new frontier for ultra-low fare travel in the region. We most welcome the opportunity to contribute to Abu Dhabi's efforts to provide a new segment of travel in the UAE in line with its socio-economic vision.

"We are looking forward to working in strategic partnership with our stakeholders in Abu Dhabi for the benefits of the country by opening up new travel options for residents and tourists."

The airline recently confirmed Athens as its inaugural destination, with flights from Abu Dhabi International Airport commencing January 15, 2021 followed by



flights to Thessaloniki, starting on February 4, 2021.

Tickets are already on sale on wizzair.com and the airline's mobile app, now also available in Arabic language.

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, a joint venture established between ADQ and Wizz Air Holdings plc, initially announced a route network that includes Athens, Thessaloniki, Alexandria, Kutaisi, Larnaca, Odesa and Yerevan. Further destinations will be

launched over the coming months.

With a fleet composed of four brand new Airbus A321neo aircraft, the airline will have the lowest environmental footprint among its competitors in the region.

Wizz Air has also introduced a new era of sanitised travel across its network, with enhanced hygiene measures to ensure the health and safety of passengers and crew.

Salalah Cricket League winners, runners-up awarded

Oman Cricket Club-Salalah under Oman Cricket distributed the winners and runners-up trophies for Salalah Cricket League 2019-2020 which was delayed due to coronavirus pandemic.

Four winners and four runners up teams received their respective trophies and individual medals from A R Srinivasan, Level 2 Educator for Umpires, who was present in Salalah to conduct the Level 0 course for Salalah umpires.

Mayur Toprani, Treasurer Oman Cricket Club Salalah, Hiten Dave and Waseem, members and Ground Committee heads from Oman Cricket Club-Salalah, along with Anil Kumar, secretary, Oman Cricket Club, were present during the ceremony.

Winners of A Division Fonderie Bellie and runners up Mohammed Riaz & Partner both won 6 matches with 12 points but with higher run rate Fonderie Bellie was declared winners of A Division.



In B Division Civil Technology won all there matches with 12 points were winners and runners up Abu Saeed Restaurant won 4 matches with 8 points came ahead of Divine trading with same number of wins but with lower run rate.

In C Division team Al Wasta United & Development with 4 wins were winners and Saham Al Janoob also with 8 points runners up due to lower run rate.

In D Division also Al S'afwa

Dairy & Beverages were winners with 8 points and ONEIC runners up again with 8 points but lower run rate.

Along with winners and runners up trophies individual trophies were also given to the winners of each division.

A Division

Man of series -Abhishek Choudankar of Fonderie Bellie with 214 runs & 14 wickets from 6 matches

Batsman of series - Mo-

ammed Ilyas of Muhammed Riaz & Partner with 399 runs from 6 matches.

Bowler of series - Mohammed Irfan of Danube 15 wkts from 4 matches.

B Division

Man of series - Vijesh V G from Divine Trading 128 runs & 10 wkts from 4 matches

Batsman of series - Kumar 164 runs from 5 matches

Bowler of series - Shah Baz from Civil Technology & Devel-



opment with 11 wkts from 5 matches.

C Division

Man of series - Mohsin Abdul Rajjak Wadekar from Saham Al Janoob with 136 runs & 8 wkts from 6 matches,

Batsman of series - Sanil Kumar Kunhil Paramnath From Saham Al Janoob with 236 runs from 5 matches

Bowler of series - Noel Ananda From Gharbia Enterprises with 10 wkts from

5 matches.

D Division

Man of series -Hafiz Kumar Shahzad - with 209 runs & 9 wkts from 5 matches

Batsman of series - Shirish Jawalkar 190 runs from 5 matches

Bowler of series - Qasim Khan 9 wkts from 5 matches.

Function started with Anil Kumar, secretary Oman Cricket Club-Salalah, welcoming the teams and chief Guest A R Srinivasan (certified Level 2 trainer & Umpiring Head for Oman Cricket).

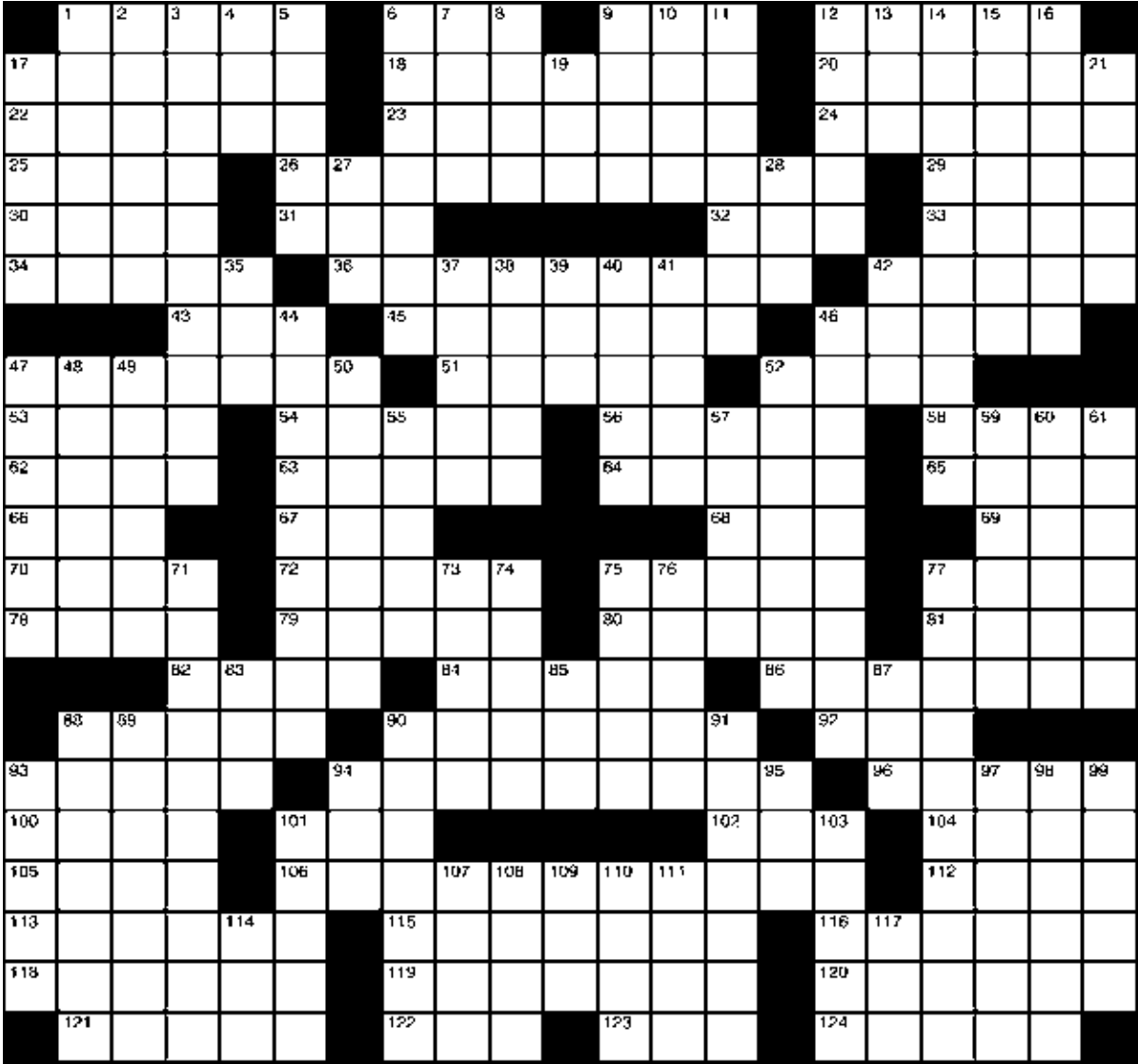
A small session on COVID-19 regulations in playing conditions included in 2020-2021 for all the captains/managers and umpires was conducted by Srinivasan and also briefed teams regarding strict adherence to the COVID-19 protocol and also discipline during the entire tournament.

Event concluded with Anil Kumar informing teams about possible start of Season 5 shortly.

Oman Cricket Club-Salalah expressed sincere thanks to Oman Cricket and Madhu, Duleep Mendis and Iqbal Ariwala for all the support and encouragement in conducting the event and the season.

"Our sincere thanks to our guest of the day and also Level 0 course conductor Mr A R Srinivasan for sparing his valuable time and energy in completing these items before commencement of new season."

DAILY CROSSWORD



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- ACROSS**

1 Leading lady Davis
6 Mas’ mates
9 Early TV alternate
12 “The Fabulous ___ Boys”
17 ___ in: liquidated
18 Site of Tallinn
20 Expressed a view
22 Former L.A. Dodger pitcher Claude
23 Nimoy, of “Star Trek”
24 Journal
25 Holy Roman emperor, 69 A.D.
26 Movie about an aging star for 1 Across (1950)
29 Storm or Gordon
30 Baltic canal
31 Observe
32 New World org.
33 Eternities
34 Outdoor enclosures
36 Movie about a star on the skids for 1 Across
42 Guinness, Baldwin et al.
43 Mire
45 Standing room only
46 Monster
47 Soft-shell clam
- 51 Angry with
52 Dry stream bed
53 Sun helmet
54 Nicolas and John
56 Doctrine
58 Footless creature: Gr.
62 Desertlike
63 Barbara and Anthony
64 Bad luck spells
65 Judy’s or Maggie’s title
66 Wayne or Kim
67 Flick
68 Amin
69 Neighbor of Cal.
70 Pretty soon
72 Filmings
75 Toms and bucks
77 “___ Hai”
78 Discotheque dancing once
79 Actress Massey
80 Vigilant
81 Harbinger
82 Courts
84 Duplicate
86 With irregular edges
88 Sofa
90 Emissaries
92 Sees ___: anger
93 Casa dweller
94 1 Across movie: re evil genius (1972)
96 Potter’s Rabbit
- 100 Lamarr (1930’s star)
101 Family member
102 Gibson or Torme
104 Jezebel, to 1 Across (1938)
105 Samoan port
106 1 Across movie: re twins (1946)
112 Painted ornamental wares
113 “Santa Fe Trail” actor
115 In the customary way
116 Played the ham
118 Group of nine
119 Saloon serving cerveza: Sp.
120 Cringes in fear
121 Poet Teasdale namesakes
122 Adjudicate
123 Roofer’s sealant
124 Fonda or Ford
- DOWN**

1 Corsica’s former capital
2 Persian queen
3 1 Across 1959 movie: unwed mom
4 Links elevator
5 Ferber et al.
6 Melisande’s true love
7 Offshore
- 8 Small stump: var.
9 Sloth: Fr.
10 Bourbon Street’s Al
11 Cinematic technique
12 Tree trunks
13 King Kong, for one
14 1 Across movie: boxer’s gal (1937)
15 Busies
16 Return to office
17 Ranch chef
19 Yoko
21 Outfit
27 Kind of bulb
28 Anatomical duct
35 Aggregate
37 YWCA sign?
38 Toaster’s handful
39 Professor deg.
40 Hollywood director Hal
41 Scandalous: Fr.
42 DDE opponent
44 1 Across movie: re a pianist (1946)
46 1 Across movie debut (1931)
47 “___ 17”
48 City SW of Milano
49 Closing section
50 Certain tires
52 Garden clearers
55 Kind of lizard
57 Banish
59 “___ Hattie”: 1942
- film
60 Brunch favorite
61 Andy, of Westerns
71 1 Across movie: spinster role
73 Concluded
74 Asian antelope
75 Dull surfaced
76 Succulent plants
77 1 Across movie: flirty wife
83 Crew member
85 Highland beret
87 Sen. counterpart
88 Enhances
89 One of the Joneses
90 Finale
91 Nearly alike
93 Portion
94 Prefix for lead or laid
95 Ship-shape clock
97 10 Down, in a way
98 Queen of whodunits
99 Walter and Willis
101 “Footprints in the ___ of time”
103 Hanger-on
107 Eskers
108 Moonstruck: var.
109 NYC winter time
110 Night, in Paris
111 A Turner
114 Motorists’ org.
117 A Stogge brother

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The stories that colour the year ahead are beginning to emerge. Jupiter locks into a confrontational square with Uranus, prompting a powerful impetus for change. Look for that desire to shake things up between the landscape of your goals and the potential of your skillset. The solitary Pisces moon stirs up unprocessed feelings behind the scenes, so try to stay low-key.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Big changes are underway and there’s no stopping them now! The cosmos are set on shaking up your approach to your career. That story gets a strong nudge forward today, as change-bringer Uranus butts heads with growth-demanding Jupiter, promising to add some shake-ups to the interpersonal part of your career story. Fortunately, the soft Pisces moon offers relief.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

The universe is stretching your potential for change. Your ruling planet, Jupiter, locks into an exciting connection with life-refreshing Uranus this afternoon. This pairing is a stimulating one—one in which you’re asked to shake off old routines and expectations tied to your work, mindsets, and identity. Open yourself up to new possibilities, however frightening they seem!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Sunday’s skies are anything but docile. Radical change-bringer Uranus, who’s inhabiting your sign, receives a visit from Jupiter. This rare and potentially unsettling alignment works to stretch you beyond your known boundaries, especially between your career goals and your individual identity. The gentle Pisces moon offers extra relief to be found by confiding in friends.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

The universe is providing you with new forms of education to immerse yourself in, Virgo. Change-bringer Uranus dukes it out with expansion-craving Jupiter in the sky today, prompting breakthroughs and pushing for leaps of faith in the work arena. This growth may feel a bit overstimulating at first, but the Pisces moon offers room for respite in your close relationships.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Your potential is being given a firm cosmic shake. Growth-giving Jupiter locks eyes with change-hungry Uranus, prompting a powerful need for change and freedom around your self-expression. Lean into any fresh opportunities to take centrestage in a new capacity. The Pisces moon urges you to use your voice in a soulful, vulnerable way. So, don’t hold back your truth!

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Prepare for some potential mental unrest. Your mind is being stretched by the cosmic landscape, as make-it-bigger Jupiter faces a tough, but necessary, encounter with excitement-craving Uranus. This pairing helps to illuminate some of the dark and dusty corners of your mind that have gone unattended to. The empathic Pisces moon promises relief by sharing your story in a public setting.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Stay flexible. Change is heavily weaved into the cosmic landscape of Sunday’s skies, as Jupiter squares off to Uranus. This aspect kicks off one of the most important narratives of the year, as your creative drive and romantic life is pushed to break through any old, outgrown boundaries. The soft Pisces moon offers to help keep you sane through exercise and restorative mindfulness.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

One of the most important narratives of 2021 begins with the arrival of today’s skies. Jupiter locks into an uncomfortable arrangement with change-craving Uranus, prompting a powerful need for a breakthrough on the home, family, and identity front. Lean into the changes at play, as daunting as they may seem, for their only goal is to keep you as true to yourself as possible.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

The universe is intent on bringing major updates to the ambitions you hold. Thus, one of the most important storylines of the year gets underway today to advance that story forward—as growth-giving Jupiter squares off with change-bringer Uranus. This pairing works to stretch your intimate relationships, friendships, and goals. Try to notice where the cracks are beginning to show.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

One of the major stories of 2021 is beginning to get underway. Your approach to relationships has been under some pressure to stay as authentic as possible, as Uranus has been moving through your opposite sign of Taurus. Jupiter locks into an electric connection with Uranus, pushing for you to break new boundaries between your home, family, and partnership arena.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Your mental world is getting a cosmic shake-up. Your ruling planet, Jupiter, spends the day in a hard aspect with change-craving Uranus, potentially prompting some major insights and breakthroughs on the communication front. This aspect also speaks to you at your core, as you’re being encouraged to break through old, outworn patterns that keep you thinking small.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The Law of Natural Selection is associated with

a. Dalton
b. Darwin
c. Kepler
d. Mendel

2. The Indian space programme began in

a. 1961
b. 1962
c. 1965
d. 1969

3. The member states of European Union are

a. Belgium, Denmark, France and Greece
b. The Federal Republic of Germany, Republic of Ireland, Italy
c. Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain
d. All of the above

Answers: 1: b 2: b 3: d

KIDS COLOURING

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

2			7		6	3
1			3	4		5
		4	6		5	1
3	9				8	2
			1			
	8	7				3
	4		5		2	1
6	2		8	4		5
8	1		9			2

BOGGLER

L	L	O	E
E	C	A	S
R	L	T	A
A	R	E	C

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

2	4	9	8	6	7	1	3
5	7	1	3	4	8	6	2
6	8	1	2	9	5	4	7
1	5	9	2	6	7	8	4
4	6	7	8	1	5	2	9
9	2	8	7	5	4	1	6
7	1	2	5	8	9	4	6
8	5	6	4	3	2	9	1
5	9	4	6	7	1	8	3

5	1	3	4	2	9	8	6
4	2	9	8	6	3	1	5
3	6	7	1	5	4	8	2
2	8	5	3	1	9	7	4
1	7	4	9	2	6	3	5
9	3	8	7	5	1	4	2
8	5	2	4	3	7	6	1
6	1	9	5	8	2	3	4
7	4	3	6	9	1	5	8

WORD BUILDER

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don’t count

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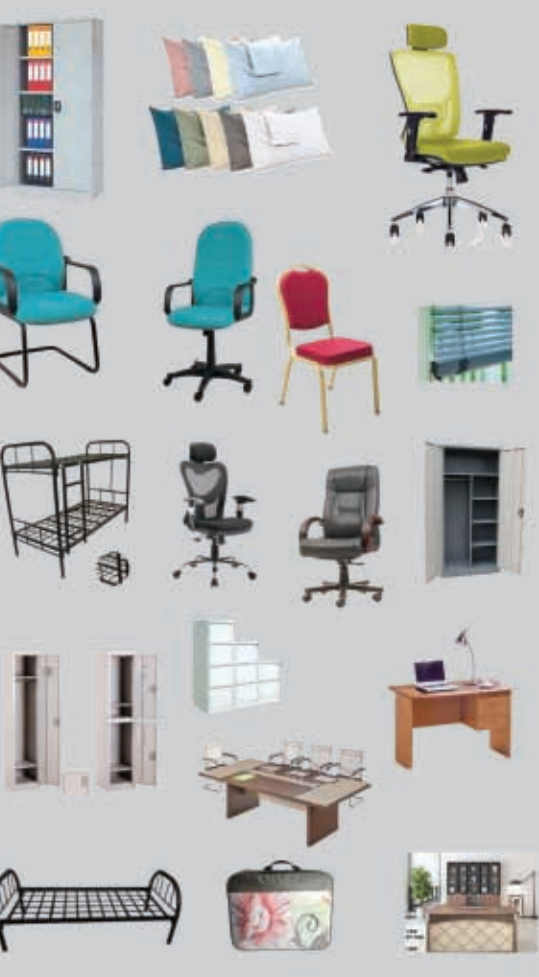


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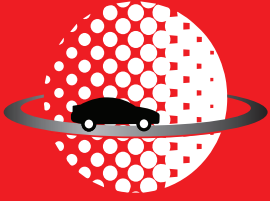


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BIRTHDAY WISHES



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January 15

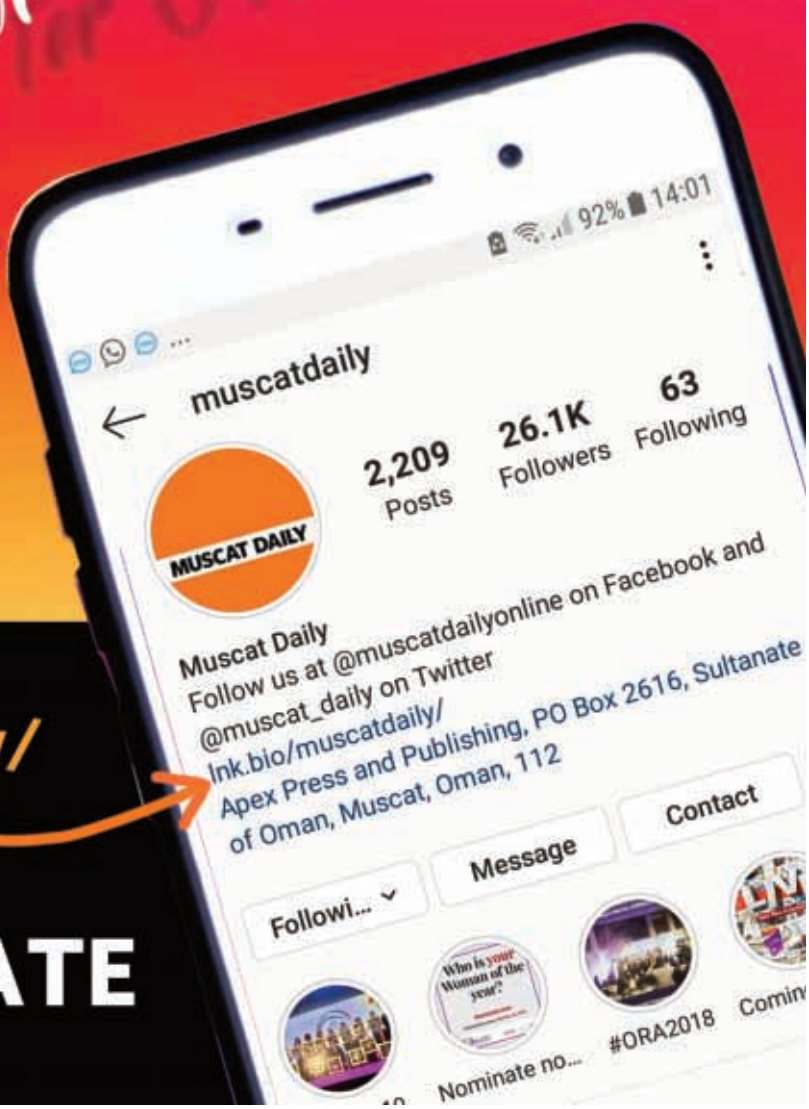
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ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

But the former England manager was finally able to celebrate after a pulsating Black

AFP

French driver Stephane Peterhansel is lifted by Nasser al Attiyah and Carlos Sainz (right) following his victory in the Dakar Rally on Friday (AFP)

Peterhansel's victory came shortly after news that French motorcyclist Pierre Cherpin had

"Experience and being able

"We need to change the rule against the buggies because now the buggies have been winning

AFP



Along with Jitenkumar Ramanandi (65 off 51), the duo added 86 for the eighth wicket.



Mohit Patel and Jay Odedara bagged two wickets each to support Mehran as AER was shot out for 81.

BRIEF SCORES:

Al Turki NMC 227-9 (Kumar 89, Ramanandi 65; Rubella Abdus 3-48, Shoaib Mohammed 2-20) **beat AER 81 all out in 38.3 overs** (Muzahir Raza 23; Khan 4-13, Patel 2-21, Odedara 2-15).

A Division (50-overs-a-side):

Basta CT 252-7 (Usman Haider 79, Shahid Mehmood 41; Shrey Wilson 3-31) **beat** Ernst & Young 231-9 (Issa al Balushi 72, Wilson 44, Sultan Ahmed 42; Shamsudheen Shareef 3-30, Mohammed Abbas Naqvi 2-36)

B Division (30-overs-a-side):

Zubair CT 197 in 29.1 overs (Mustansar Hussain 70; Abdul Rauf 3-42, Jaleel Mahmood 2-26, Shahil Mohammed 2-26, Rajesh Shetty 2-49) **beat LC Tech 188-8** (Mifas Mohamed 55, Rahul Rajeev 32; Hussain 2-35, Mubashar Iqbal 2-53).

B Division: PDORC 152 in 26
overs (Nadeem Ahmed 34, Tahar
Naqi 33 n.o.; Mohammad Ali
Akbar 3-22, Imran al Balushi
2-30, Zubair Ali Akbar 2-30,
Shuaib Ismail 2-38) lost to OCT
Ruwi 154-3 in 22.4 overs
(Mohammed Ali Akbar 50,
Shuaib Ismail 46, Zubair Ali 36).

1000



Australia's captain Tim Paine (right) and the umpires examine the pitch area after rain on day two of the fourth Test against India at The Gabba in Brisbane on Saturday (AFP)

India trail by 307 runs after rain wipes out final session

AUSTRALIA VS INDIA FOURTH TEST: DAY TWO

Brisbane, Australia - Rain washed out the final session of day two with the fourth Test poised intriguingly. Having bowled Australia out for 369 by lunch, India made a solid start to their reply before Rohit Sharma fell against the run of play to put the hosts on top. India will resume at 62 for two, with Cheteshwar Pujara, who has already batted for more than an hour, and Ajinkya Rahane at the crease. Rohit and Shubman Gill saw out the first six overs, bowled by Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood, without too much discomfort - other than a Starc delivery that jagged away off a crack to beat Rohit's outside edge - before a bowling change brought Australia their breakthrough. Through this series, Pat

Cummins has forced the right-hand batsmen to play at his deliveries in the corridor with his pronounced inward angle, and then got the ball to straighten off the seam to find their outside edges. He did just that with his second ball, and Gill, felt for the ball and edged to second slip. Rohit, meanwhile, was looking entirely at ease with the bowling and the conditions, getting right behind the line to defend, and driving handsomely down the ground when the bowlers erred on the full side. Having moved to 40 with one such drive off Green, he picked up another boundary in the next over, punching Nathan Lyon through the covers when he dropped short. Just when he seemed on course for a match-defining contribution, however, he stepped out to Lyon and holed

out attempting a lofted hit. It was a familiar moment for those who have followed his career - he's been out in similar fashion to Moeen Ali in Southampton in 2014, Dane Piedt in Delhi in 2015 and Lyon in Adelaide during India's 2018-19 tour of Australia - and one whose repercussions could yet be felt through the rest of this match. Australia lost their five remaining wickets during the morning session while adding 95 to their overnight total, in 28.1 overs. Much like the entirety of day one, it was a session to please or displease neither team. The overnight pair of Cameron Green and Tim Paine extended their sixth-wicket stand from 61 to 98 without too much trouble. But soon after Paine had brought up his half-century, a loose shot pried the

door open for India. He drove away from his body at a Shardul Thakur outswinger, with no movement of the feet, and edged to second slip. Within the space of the next two overs, India seemed to have burst through the opening, as Washington Sundar bowled Green, and Thakur had Cummins lbw playing all around a low full-toss. Having reduced Australia to 315 for eight, however, India's bowlers showed their inexperience, bowling too short or too full in an effort to blast out the tail. Lyon and Starc took full toll in a ninth-wicket stand of 39 off just 40 balls. Even Josh Hazlewood, the No 11, played a couple of spanking off-side drives before T Natarajan came back into the attack and knocked back his off stump with a near-yorker. Cricinfo

SCOREBOARD		
AUSTRALIA 1 st INNINGS		
D Warner	c Rohit b Siraj	1
M Harris	c Sundar b Thakur	5
M Labuschagne	c Pant b Natarajan	108
S Smith	c Rohit b Sundar	36
M Wade	c Thakur b Natarajan	45
C Green	b Sundar	47
T Paine	c Rohit b Thakur	50
P Cummins	lbw b Thakur	2
M Starc	not out	20
N Lyon	b Sundar	24
J Hazlewood	b Natarajan	11
Extras:	(b 4, lb 5, nb 6, w 5)	20
TOTAL:	369 in 115.2 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-17, 3-87, 4-200, 5-213, 6-311, 7-313, 8-315, 9-354, 10-369		
Bowling: M Siraj 28-10-77-1, T Natarajan 24.2-3-78-3, S Thakur 24-6-94-3, N Saini 7.5-2-21-0, W Sundar 31-6-89-3, Rohit Sharma 0.1-0-1-0		
INDIA 1 st INNINGS		
Rohit Sharma	c Starc b Lyon	44
S Gill	c Smith b Cummins	7
C Pujara	not out	8
A Rahane	not out	2
Extras:	(nb 1)	1
TOTAL:	62 for two in 26 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-11, 2-60		
Bowling: M Starc 3-1-8-0, J Hazlewood 8-4-11-0, P Cummins 6-1-22-1, C Green 3-0-11-0, N Lyon 6-2-10-1		

South Africa arrive for first Pakistan tour in 14 years

Karachi, Pakistan - The South African cricket team arrived in Karachi on Saturday to play two Tests and three Twenty20 internationals on their first tour of Pakistan in 14 years.

The team, led by wicketkeeper-batsman Quinton de Kock, was whisked from the airport under state-head level security accorded by the hosts, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB). The 21-member squad had two COVID-19 tests before their departure from Johannesburg which all came back negative, and they will be further tested on their arrival. Officials say the squad will stay in individual isolation until the results of the first round of testing are released before they start training in a ground adjacent to their hotel. Pakistan and South Africa will play the first Test in Karachi from January 26.

The second Test starts in Rawalpindi from February 4 while Lahore will host all three Twenty20 internationals on February 11, 13 and 14.

van der Dussen, Anrich Nortje, Wiaan Mulder, Lutho Sipamla, Beuran Hendricks, Kyle Verreyne, Sarel Erwee, Keegan Petersen, Tabraiz Shamsi, George Linde, Daryn Dupavillon, Marco Jansen

Masood, Abbas, Sohail dropped

Karachi, Pakistan - Shan Masood, Haris Sohail and Mohammad Abbas have all been dropped for Pakistan's two-match Test series against South Africa in a dramatically overhauled squad. The home series also sees several newcomers in the 20-man squad, with Haris Rauf, Imran Butt, Kamran Ghulam and Salman Ali Agha among a slew of players brought into the fold. The 20-man squad will be whittled down to 16 in the coming days.

Pakistan Test squad:

Abid Ali, Abdullah Shafique, Imran Butt, Azhar Ali, Babar Azam (captain), Fawad Alam, Kamran Ghulam, Salman Ali Agha, Saud Shakeel, Faheem Ashraf, Mohammad Nawaz, Mohammad Rizwan, Sarfaraz Ahmed, Nauman Ali, Sajid Khan, Yasir Shah, Haris Rauf, Hasan Ali, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Tabish Khan.

AFP



SA cricketers on their arrival in Karachi, Pakistan on Saturday. The team will play two Tests and three T20Is against the hosts

Root hits majestic 228 but Thirimanne stands firm



England skipper Joe Root raises the bat after reaching 200

SRI LANKA VS ENGLAND FIRST TEST: DAY THREE

Galle, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's batsmen have earned themselves a chance of saving the first Test after a much improved performance on the third day in Galle on Saturday. Having endured a miserable first two days, Sri Lanka started their second innings with a deficit of 286. Going into the fourth day, they have cut that deficit to 130 with eight second-innings wickets in hand. Lahiru Thirimanne accumulated an unbeaten 76, he not only recorded his highest Test score since March 2013, but exposed some vulnerability in an England attack who were flattered by the speed with which they accounted for Sri Lanka in the first innings. The opening stand, 101, was not only the first century opening

stand England had conceded since the MCG Ashes Test at the end of 2017, but the first time Sri Lanka's openers - Kusal Perera and Thirimanne - had survived more than ten overs together in their most recent six innings. Perera was dismissed by Sam Curran. Kusal Mendis was next to go, caught behind as the ball spun to take the edge, it gave England - and Jack Leach, in particular - an end of day boost. Earlier, Root's double-century - the fourth of his Test career and his second as captain - helped England take a commanding first-innings lead by the time they were bowled out on the brink of lunch. Only Wally Hammond (with seven) and Sir Alastair Cook (with five) now have more double-centuries for England. Root's score here represents the second-highest score by an Eng-

SCOREBOARD		
Sri Lanka 1st Innings 135		
ENGLAND 1 st INNINGS		
Z Crawley	c de Silva b Embuldeniya	9
D Sibley	c Thirimanne	
	b Embuldeniya	4
J Birstow	c Mendis b Embuldeniya	47
J Root	c Embuldeniya	
	b D Perera	228
D Lawrence	c Mendis b D Perera	73
J Buttler	c Dickwell b Fernando	30
S Curran	b Fernando	0
D Bess	run out	0
J Leach	lbw b D Perera	4
M Wood	c Dickwell b D Perera	2
S Broad	not out	11
Extras:	(b 7, nb 6)	13
TOTAL:	421 in 117.1 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-10, 2-17, 3-131, 4-304, 5-372, 6-372, 7-382, 8-398, 9-406, 10-421		
Bowling: L Embuldeniya 45-4-176-3, A Fernando 14-1-44-2, W Hasaranga 15-1-63-0, D Perera 36.1-2-109-4, D Shanaka 7-1-22-0		
SRI LANKA 2 nd INNINGS		
K Perera	c Leach b Curran	62
L Thirimanne	not out	76
K Mendis	c Buttler b Leach	15
L Embuldeniya	not out	
Extras:	(b 1, nb 2)	3
TOTAL:	156 for two in 61 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-101, 2-155		
Bowling: S Broad 8-6-3-0, S Curran 7-0-25-1, D Bess 13-2-30-0, M Wood 7-1-20-0, J Leach 20-2-67-1, J Root 6-0-10-0		

land player in Asia after Cook's 263* in Abu Dhabi in 2015. Root also surpassed 8,000 Test runs during the course of the innings. He is the seventh England player to reach the landmark and, in terms of innings (this is his 178th) the second quickest after Kevin Pietersen, who reached the milestone in 176 innings. Cricinfo



Shakib al Hasan

Shakib named in Bangladesh squad for ODIs against Windies

Dhaka, Bangladesh: Shakib al Hasan is back in the Bangladesh squad, which includes newcomers Shoriful Islam and Hasan Mahmud, as well as Mahedi Hasan, for the three-ODI series at home against West Indies starting next week in Dhaka.

Also in the 18-man party are Soumya Sarkar, Taskin Ahmed and Rubel Hossain. Former captain Mashrafe Mortaza, who was left out of the 24-man training group earlier this month, as well as Al-Amin Hossain, Shafiul Islam and Mohammad Naim are among the prominent names missing.

Bangladesh ODI squad: Tamim Iqbal (captain), Shakib Al Hasan, Najmul Hossain Shanto, Mushfiqur Rahim (wk), Mohammad Mithun, Liton Das, Mahmudullah, Afif Hossain, Soumya Sarkar, Taskin Ahmed, Rubel Hossain, Taijul Islam, Mustafizur Rahman, Mehidy Hasan, Mohammad Saifuddin, Mahedi Hasan, Hasan Mahmud, Shoriful Islam.

Cricinfo



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TEE-OFF TO A FRESH START



A file photo of Faiz Mohammed Riaz at a domestic golf tournament in Muscat

Faiz Mohammed Riaz is relishing his selection into the Oman golf team and he promises to give his best and bring laurels for the sultanate

Ashok Purohit
Muscat

A 19 year old watched his close friends decline an invitation to go out into the sea on a luxury yacht for a fun-filled trip. A confused Faiz Mohammed Riaz was keen to know why. And the reply he got - 'to play a round of golf'. He couldn't believe his eyes that four of his teenaged friends had decided against a sea trip with jet ski rides, also an added bonus.

As curiosity grew further, Faiz decided to check out why is the game so interesting. One day, he decided to go out along with his friends to a golf course. As his friends went out to play, he was told to hang out at the driving range and try out.

Hitting the balls on the range gave him a strange joy and soon he realised that he had fallen in love with the game.

Subsequently, he was spending hours and hours on the driving range, which soon turned into days and months, and then years.

From a rookie who shuddered to go onto the fairways and enjoy putting on the greens at one time, Faiz has come a long way over the past decade.

The journey from a rookie to finally being selected into the Oman national golf team recently has itself been like a session over 18 holes for him.

Be it hitting birdies and eagles to carding bogeys, or getting his first tee shot long to firing it into hazards, it has all been there over the past five years.

But now, it is time for him to climb a step up and raise his game further having been named into the national team.

For the 30 year old, the desire and determination has borne fruit since he picked up a club on the driving range in Dubai in 2009.

In his exclusive remarks to *Muscat Daily* after being selected into the national team, Faiz said, "It is a great honour to be selected into the national team. I am thankful to the Oman Golf Association (OGA) for giving me an opportunity to serve my country. I assure to give my best and bring more laurels for the team in future."

The inclusion of Faiz will bolster the squad, which has been spearheaded for long by experienced Oman's No 1 golfer Azaan al Rumhy.

The other members of the squad include Ahmed al Balushi, Badar al Amri and Mohammed al Busaidi.

Faiz's inclusion is expected to help Oman provide competition to their much superior rivals at the GCC and Arab events.

Faiz said his 'love for the game' grew as it is 'an individual sport and no one else can be blamed for the performance'.

"I like to own up responsibility and this game taught me to own up things - be it your own mess or glory. I got hooked up with the game as the idea of competing against myself appealed to me. It made me work harder as I went to the range daily to beat myself, and for hours I sweated it out trying to achieve my goal.

"My plan was to enter the tournaments only when I am good enough to compete and just not make up any numbers in the field. When I entered my maiden tournament in the UAE in 2013, I was very nervous. But once I took part and performed well, there was no looking back for me. I was soon a regular at the domestic competitions in Oman after that."

Born in Al Ain, UAE, Faiz

"Obviously, winning my maiden win in 2015 at the Xerox Corporate Challenge, which was followed by victory at the Dubai event of the same series, was a highlight. Over the years, I have won nearly 60 trophies but the biggest title I lifted was the Black Tee Challenge trophy at the Al Mouj Golf Course.

"The back-to-back titles at the Ghala Golf Championship in 2018-19 was another achievement and also the successive triumphs at the prestigious H H Sayyid Qais and H H Sayyid Abbas memorial tournaments."

Looking forward, Faiz, who has his family roots in Pakistan, said that 'to play along an experienced teammate like Azaan will be huge'.

He added, "We will try to compete against each other as it will bring the best out of each other and that will hopefully serve the interest of the national team in the future.

"The responsibility of playing for the national team is huge and I want to increase my training

Faiz brings in lot of experience and his presence will add more depth to the squad. He has shown his dedication and determination with good results over the past few years

AHMED AL JHDHAMY, OGA OFFICIAL



moved to Oman when he was 13 and studied in British School Muscat before completing his college education in Dubai. He joined his family business in 2014 and since then has been an active golfer on the domestic golf circuit.

Faiz has to his credit some of the biggest wins in domestic tournaments, which include Black Tee Challenge, considered to be one of the toughest, Xerox Corporate Challenge and Ghala Golf Club Championship.

Having received Omani citizenship few months back, Faiz was picked by the OGA for the national team based on his performances in the recent past.

Faiz, who is also a board member of the Ghala Golf Club, is determined not just to give his best on the course but is also keen to support the OGA through corporate backing. His company, Mohammed Riaz and Partners, has sponsored many golf tournaments in the past and is now involved with OGA on a project that is expected to give a boost to young Omani golfers.

Recalling some of his most satisfying victories, Faiz said,

sessions by 200 per cent. With a national team coach to guide us, I am sure of developing my game further."

Faiz thanked his family for their strong support and is now eyeing his first podium finish as an Omani golfer at the national tournament later this month.

Commenting on his inclusion into the national team, OGA general secretary Ahmed al Jhdhamy said, "Faiz brings in lot of experience and his presence will add more depth to the squad. He has shown his dedication and determination by achieving good results over the past few years and at OGA, we always look for golfers who play with passion. Faiz is passionate about his game and he prides himself to be a national team member."

As for Faiz himself, he said that 'his inclusion in the national squad is the biggest moment yet in his playing career'.

"Representing Oman is the highest honour and I am hopeful that I will be able to deliver good results and bring glory for the sultanate," said Faiz as he signed off.

[@ashokmuscat](#)

Positive cases on player flights leave buildup in disarray for 47 players

Melbourne, Australia - Forty-seven players were barred from practising for a fortnight on Saturday in a major setback to their Australian Open preparations after passengers on two charter flights that brought them to Melbourne tested positive to COVID-19.

While the three people who failed the tests were not players, everyone on board was considered a close contact and ordered to stay in their hotel rooms for the entire 14-day mandatory quarantine period.

It means none of them will now be allowed out to practise and train for the five hours each day agreed to as part of their build-up to the opening major of the year, Tennis Australia said.

That included 24 players on a plane from Los Angeles, where a crew member and one other passenger, reportedly a coach, tested positive.

According to local media, former Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka, 2017 US Open winner Sloane Stephens and Japan's Kei Nishikori were

among those on board. A positive case - not a player - also emerged from a flight from Abu Dhabi, with 23 players affected, reportedly including Grand Slam winners Bianca Andreescu, Angelique Kerber, and Svetlana Kuznetsova.

"We are communicating with everyone on this flight, and particularly the playing group whose conditions have now changed, to ensure their needs are being catered to as much as possible, and that they are fully appraised of the situation," tournament organiser Craig Tiley said of the Los Angeles service.



French player Alize Cornet, who is in Melbourne but was not

on either plane, called the situation 'insane'.

"Soon, half of the players from the AO will actually have

to isolate," she tweeted.

"Weeks and weeks of practice and hard work going to waste for one person positive to Covid in a 3-4 empty plane. Sorry but this is insane."

The world's top players began arriving in Australia on Thursday for the delayed Grand Slam, which is due to start on February 8. Most touched down in Melbourne, although the biggest names in the game, including Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Serena Williams, flew into Adelaide.

All must undergo a 14-day quarantine, but are allowed out for five hours daily to train in strict bio-secure bubbles ahead of a host of warm-up tournaments, all in Melbourne, in the week leading up to the Grand Slam.

According to the Melbourne's *Herald Sun*, the Los Angeles flight was the same one that sparked controversy on Thursday when American player Tennys Sandgren tweeted he had been allowed to board despite returning a positive test.

AFP



INTEL CEO TO STEP DOWN

Intel CEO Bob Swan will step down next month, the computer chip giant said, weeks after a hedge fund sent a letter demanding changes in its business

BUSINESS

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BRIEFS

Toyota to pay \$180mn to settle US emissions violations

Toyota will pay US\$180mn to settle charges it failed to comply with rules mandating that auto companies report problems with vehicle emissions to authorities, the US Department of Justice said.

"Toyota pays the price for its misconduct with a US\$180mn civil penalty and agreement to injunctive relief to ensure that its violations will not be repeated," Assistant Attorney General Jeffrey Bossert Clark said.

The Justice Department said that between 2005 and 2015, the Japanese automaker failed to file notices of emissions recalls or defects required by the US Clean Air Act.

Managers in Japan were aware of the non-compliance and the company only resumed filing in 2015, at which point some of the notices were eight years late, the Justice Department said.

Russian car industry 'survived' 2020 despite pandemic

Russia saw new car sales decrease by 9.1 per cent in 2020 on the previous year, as the industry was battered by the coronavirus pandemic, the Association of European Businesses (AEB) said.

The AEB, a Moscow-based representative body of foreign investors, said in an online press conference that Russians purchased around 1.6mn new vehicles last year compared to some 1.76mn in 2019.

"These are still good results considering the difficulties of the year. The industry has survived," said Thomas Staerzel, chairman of the group's automobile manufacturers committee.

The AEB said it expects a 2.1 per cent rebound in sales in 2021 provided that there are no new Western sanctions against Russia and government subsidies for the automobile industry remain in place.

Bank Muscat's 2020 profits decline 12% to RO163mn

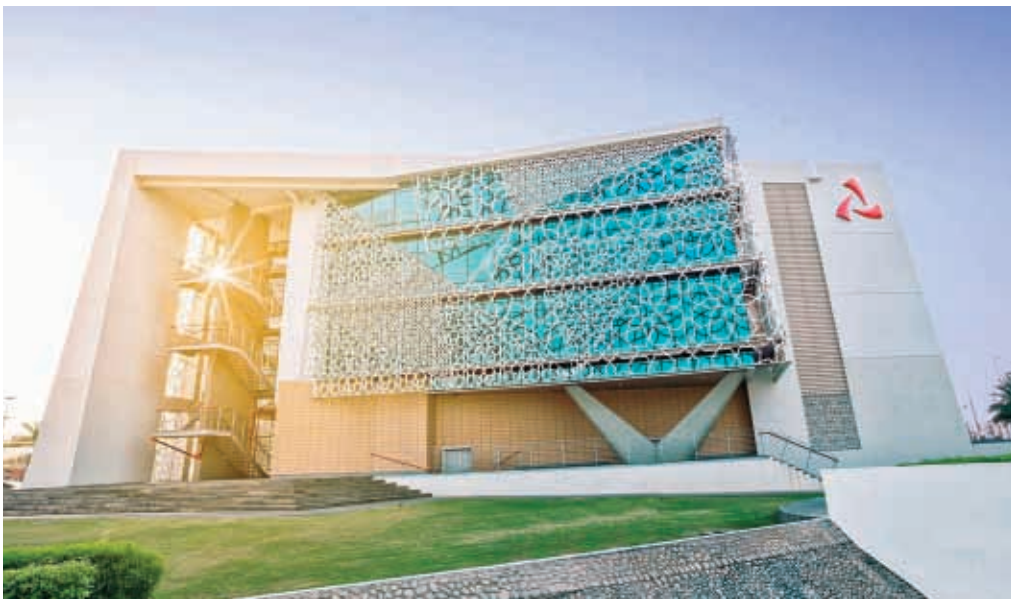
Our Correspondent
Muscat

Bank Muscat has reported a 12 per cent year-on-year decrease in its net profit for the full year 2020. The bank posted a net profit of RO163.36mn for the year ended December 31, 2020 compared to RO185.55mn reported during the same period in 2019.

Bank Muscat announced its full year preliminary unaudited financial results through a disclosure to the Muscat Securities Market on Thursday. It said the financial results are subject to the approval of external auditors, board of directors, the Central Bank of Oman and the shareholders of the bank.

The bank's net interest income from conventional banking and net income from Islamic financing marginally grew by 1.6 per cent to RO322.13mn in 2020 compared to RO316.97mn reported in the previous year.

Non-interest income, however, dropped by 13.4 per cent to



RO134.41mn for the year ended December 31, 2020 from RO155.20mn recorded in 2019. The sharp decrease in non-interest income was mainly due to subdued business conditions due to the COVID-19 related lockdowns in the second, third and fourth quarters of 2020 and waiver of certain fees due to regulatory measures, Bank Muscat

said.

Bank Muscat's loan-book witnessed a slow growth of just 0.5 per cent last year as net loans and advances (including Islamic financing receivables) increased marginally to RO8.918bn as of December 31, 2020 from RO8.878bn a year ago. While Bank Muscat's conventional loans and advances marginally

decreased by 0.3 per cent to RO7.688bn, its Islamic financing receivables grew by 5.5 per cent to RO1.230bn for the year ended December 31, 2020.

On the other hand, the bank's customer deposits (including Islamic customer deposits) increased by 4.2 per cent to RO8.377bn at the end of 2020 as against RO8.043bn as of De-

cember 31, 2019. Conventional customer deposits recorded a 5 per cent year-on-year growth at RO7.364bn, whereas Islamic customer deposits decreased by 1.8 per cent to RO1.013bn as of December 31, 2020 from RO1.032bn a year ago.

Operating expenses for the full year 2020 were reduced to RO179.85mn as compared to RO195.93mn in 2019, a decrease of 8.2 per cent due to cost management measures taken by the bank.

Bank Muscat's net impairment for credit and other losses for the year 2020 rose to RO81.04mn in 2020 as against RO56.13mn in the previous year. 'The increase was mainly on account of precautionary and collective provisions made in the first half of 2020, on a forward looking basis given the emerging stress in the economic and business conditions as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued pressure on oil prices,' Bank Muscat said.

HSBC Oman reports RO8.2mn net loss

Our Correspondent
Muscat

HSBC Bank Oman has reported a net loss of RO8.2mn for the year ended December 31, 2020 compared to a net profit of RO29.3mn in the previous year.

The bank's operating income dropped by 19.1 per cent to RO70.1mn for the full year 2020 from RO86.6mn in 2019, according to the preliminary unaudited results submitted to the MSM.

Operating expenses sharply rose to RO61mn for the year ended December 31, 2020 compared to RO48.5mn in the full year 2019. The bank said its 2020 operating expenses include an impairment charge on non-financial assets of RO12.7mn, representing the outcome of the impairment test carried out as per the International Accounting Standard (IAS) 36.

HSBC Bank Oman's net loans and advances to customers shrank by 9.3 per cent to RO1.363bn as of December 31, 2020 from RO1.502bn a year ago.

Global oil demand to increase 6.5% in 2021, says OPEC

Vienna, Austria - Global crude oil demand is expected to increase by 6.56 per cent or 5.9mn barrels per day (bpd) in 2021 to an average of 95.91mn bpd, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) said in its monthly report.

'The US economy is anticipated to recover relatively well this year, supported by the availability of viable vaccines in combination with well-targeted stimulus measures, which in turn will support oil demand going forward,' the report said.

Global oil demand in 2020, however, is estimated to have contracted by 9.75mn bpd, or 9.8 per cent, to reach 90mn bpd, according to the OPEC's

Monthly Oil Market Report.

In Europe, 2021 projections assume a healthy recovery in economic activities. 'Accordingly, oil demand is anticipated to rise steadily this year supported primarily by transportation and industrial fuels.'

In OECD Asia Pacific countries, it said oil demand is projected to grow for the first time in seven years but will remain below 2019 levels. 'A return of some of the consumption lost in 2020 in addition to recovering economic activities are projected to support a demand increase in 2021... Demand growth is projected to be driven by China, followed by India and Other Asia.'

Demand for OPEC crude in

2021 remained unchanged from the previous month's report to stand at 27.2mn bpd, which is 5mn bpd higher than in 2020.

Global oil production in December increased by 0.58mn bpd compared to the previous month to average 92.93mn bpd, showing a year-on-year fall of 8.23mn bpd.

In December, OPEC crude oil production rose by 0.71mn bpd month-over-month to average 25.11mn bpd, according to the report. As a result, the share of OPEC crude out of total global production rose to 27.3 per cent in December, marking a 0.1 per cent increase compared with the previous month.

Agencies

BankDhofar's net profit inches up to RO30.6mn

Our Correspondent
Muscat

BankDhofar's net profit inched up by 1.13 per cent to RO30.585mn for the year ended December 31, 2020 compared with RO30.244mn net profit reported for the previous year.

The bank's operating income for the full year 2020 remained stable at approximately RO130mn compared to the same period in 2019, according to BankDhofar's initial results submitted to the Muscat Securities Market.

Operating expenses decreased by 10.35 per cent to RO64.08mn for the year ended December 31, 2020 from



RO71.47mn in the full year 2019.

BankDhofar's loan-book grew by 6.6 per cent year-on-year as the bank's net loans and advances increased to RO3.265bn as of December 31, 2020 from RO3.063bn a year ago. The bank's deposits from customers

decreased by 2.78 per cent to RO2.861bn as of December 31, 2020 compared to RO2.943bn at the end of 2019.

BankDhofar said its net provisions for credit losses for the year ended December 31, 2020 was RO28.99mn compared to RO22.39mn for the year ended December 31, 2019, an increase of RO6.59mn.

It said 2019 net provisions included classification of certain large accounts reflecting the market conditions, while 2020 net provisions include management overlay of precautionary provisions considering the economic impact due to the COVID-19 pandemic and continued pressure on oil prices.

UN warns of another bad year for aviation due to depressed demand

Montreal, Canada - The UN aviation agency has predicted 'prolonged depressed demand' for air travel and more financial woes for airlines, following a year of fewer flights and big losses blamed on the pandemic.

Air travel plunged 60 per cent in 2020 as nations closed borders and restricted travel to slow the spread of COVID-19, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) said in a report.

The near-term outlook, it said, 'is for prolonged depressed demand, with downside risks to global air travel recovery predominating in the first quarter of 2021, and likely to be subject to further deterioration'.

With just 1.8bn passengers taking to the air during the first year of the pandemic, compared to 4.5bn in 2019, airline losses reached US\$370bn, according to ICAO figures. Airports and air navigation services providers lost a further US\$115bn and US\$13bn, respectively.

And severe liquidity strains,



Passengers walk through the arrivals hall after landing at London Heathrow Airport in west London (AFP)

the ICAO said, are now 'placing the industry's financial viability in question and threatening millions of jobs around the world'.

The situation has also been devastating for tourism, given that half of international holiday-makers used air travel in the past.

A recovery, the ICAO said, will hinge on the successful rollout of vaccines, which have now started to be distributed.

Several governments have also provided or are in talks with carriers about bailouts.

The plunge in air travel began in January 2020, but was limited to a few countries. As the novel coronavirus spread, air transport 'came to a virtual standstill' by the end of March, the ICAO said.

A month later, with the introduction of wide-scale lockdowns, border closures and

travel restrictions around the world, passenger numbers dropped 92 per cent from 2019 levels.

Passenger traffic then saw a moderate rebound during the usually busy summer travel period, but again dropped off in the last four months of 2020, coinciding with a second wave of COVID-19 infections.

AFP

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MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

Financial stocks drag MSM down

The benchmark MSM30 index of the Muscat Securities Market last week recorded a 1.64 per cent drop led by sharp declines in financial sector stocks amid the announcement of financial results.

All other sectoral indices ended on positive note except Financial index which dropped 2.23 per cent for the week. Industrial index was higher by 1.56 per cent and Services index was up by 0.17 per cent. MSM Shariah index declined by 1.18 per cent.

The MSM recorded net foreign investment outflows of US\$105mn in 2020. Foreign investment outflows in the month of December stood at US\$0.6mn compared to US\$16mn in November 2020.

Local news

►Oman is looking to raise up to US\$2bn with a loan arranged mostly by local and regional lenders. Oman is now working with a group of banks to raise a US\$1.1bn facility which could go up to US\$2bn in size depending on market appetite. The loan, now being marketed to a wider group of lenders, has a 15-month maturity with the possibility to extend it by an additional 12 months at the borrower's discretion.

►The Central Bank of Oman, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Labour, has mandated the banks operating in the sultanate to provide a seamless mechanism for transferring salaries and recurring payments (bulk payments) of all government and private agencies/companies through electronic banking services. This corporate banking channel is safe and secure. It aims to stop using any methods that do not meet the safety and security standards. The move also aims to avoid expensive methods that consume a lot of time and effort.

►Muscat Gases Company signed an agreement with Al



(Muscat Daily)

Aman Industrial & House Company to acquire the 100 per cent share capital of Al Aman, including all LPG filling stations owned by them in Oman. Objective of the acquisition is to diversify the investments for enhancing the company's position and to create better growth opportunities in the future to create value for shareholder's equity.

►The Capital Market Authority approved the main prospectus of Mudharabah Sukuk of Takaful Oman Insurance for the offer of perpetual sukuk worth RO25mn. The Oman-based Sharia'a-compliant insurance provider Takaful Oman, has announced in the prospectus the first issuance of RO6mn in a private placement at an issue price of RO1.020 for each sukuk unit made up of RO1 nominal value in addition to 20bz for the issue costs. The minimum limit of the subscription in the first issuance is 100,000 sukuk. The subscription will commence from today.

►Al Kamil Power announced that given the uncertainty around the extension of its power purchase agreement, the company has reviewed the possible future scenarios and evaluated them by assigning appropriate weights and eliminating present value of future cash flows. Based on the assessment it will recognise impairments of RO6.965mn. This

non-cash charge represents estimated excess of the carrying value (net book value) over the net present value of future cash flows.

►Total registered vehicles in Oman rose to 1.555mn in November 2020 compared to 1.548mn at the end of 2019. New vehicles registered in the month of November 2020 were 3,416 compared to 3,137 in the month of October 2020. Private vehicles amounted for 78 per cent of the total registered vehicles in Oman followed by commercial, rental, taxis and government.

►The inflation rate in the sultanate, measured by movement in the average Consumer Price Index, fell by 1.42 per cent in December 2020 compared to the same month of 2019, according to the latest data released by NCSI. According to the NCSI report, the inflation rate in December fell by 0.18 per cent compared to November. However, the transport category prices fell by 0.59 per cent; miscellaneous goods and services by 0.13 per cent; food and non-alcoholic beverages by 0.09 per cent; and furnishings, household equipment, and routine household maintenance by 0.01 per cent in December 2020 compared to November 2020. In contrast, the prices of restaurants and hotels group increased by 0.05 per cent, and the prices of housing groups, water, electric-

ity and other fuels, health, communication, recreation and culture, and education remained stable.

GCC markets

The aggregate sales of 17 Saudi cement producers increased by 9 per cent to 5.2mn tonnes in December 2020, compared to 4.7mn tonnes in the same month last year, according to recent data issued by Yamama Cement Company. As many as 11 cement producers reported higher sales, led by Arabian Cement Company with a 43 per cent rise on year-on-year basis. It was followed by Qasim Cement and Najran Cement with 30 per cent year-on-year growth each. On the other hand, six other companies reported lower sales, led by Northern Region Cement that saw an 11 per cent fall in sales. Clinker production in Saudi Arabia fell by 3.4 per cent to 4.4mn tonnes in the same month, compared to 4.6mn tonnes in December 2019. Clinker inventories reached 37.1mn tonnes by the end of December, down 12.8 per cent from 42.5mn tonnes in December 2019.

The number of insurance subscribers in Saudi Arabia fell 10 per cent to 10.05mn by the end of 2020, from 11.15mn in 2019, according to a survey by Argaam, based on data issued by the Saudi Council of Cooperative Health Insurance

(CCHI). The number of insured Saudis decreased by 49,700, while the insured non-Saudis declined by about 1.05mn. The number of insured Saudis and their dependents reached about 3.44mn by the end of 2020 (representing 34 per cent of the total subscribers), while the number of non-Saudis reached about 6.61mn (representing 66 per cent of total subscribers).

Brent oil touched approximately US\$56 per barrel at the end of last week, a level last seen in February 2020. Oil is poised for the longest winning streak in almost two years after an industry report pointing to another decrease in US crude stockpiles added impetus to a new year rally driven by Saudi Arabian output cuts. The American Petroleum Institute reported crude inventories dropped by 5.82mn barrels last week, according to people familiar with the figures.

Recommendation

Global markets remained range bound as the impeachment of the US President Donald Trump and political pressures kept investors skeptical. On the positive side we saw investor churning their portfolio from tech stocks towards oil and gas and banking sectors.

Regionally, all the markets except Oman were positive last week led by the increase in oil prices and better earnings expectations for the full year. We expect this momentum to continue in the coming week.

Locally, the market was driven by financial results announcement. Financial companies results were mixed with some banks posting good results while some lower than our expectation. As expected, companies in ceramic and insurance sector were star performer.

We expect some good dividend announcements in insurance and ceramic sectors.

UAE's 9-month non-oil trade hit AED1tn in 2020



Abu Dhabi, UAE - Despite the global economic slowdown and COVID-triggered lockdowns, UAE's non-oil trade amounted to AED1.033tn during the first nine months of 2020, statistics by the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre showed.

The figures cover the exchanges of non-oil commodities, including direct trade and that of free zones and warehousing arrangements, highlighting the healthier trade and remarkable leap in exports and re-exports during September, at a value of AED76.35bn.

From January to September 2020, imports amounted to AED572.88bn, while the value of exports reached AED191.32bn and re-exports increased to

AED269.10bn, according to the FCSC's statistics.

China is the country's top trading partner with a total trade of AED124.45bn, followed by Saudi Arabia (AED90.8bn), India (AED70bn), US (AED60bn), and Switzerland (AED41bn).

Gold topped the list at around AED182bn, followed by phone and other cellular devices at AED105bn.

According to Ministry of Economy's statistics, the UAE ranks third globally, and leads Arab region in terms of re-exports, coming among top 20 import and export countries worldwide in 2019, during which non-oil trade grew 5 per cent, contributing significantly to the country's non-oil GDP.

WAM

US won't bar investments in Alibaba, Tencent, Baidu

New York, US - Washington will not bar Americans from investing in Chinese tech giants Alibaba, Baidu and Tencent as it has done for other firms over national security concerns, *The Wall Street Journal* reported.

US officials had weighed whether to include the three companies on a Defense Department trading blacklist due to alleged ties to China's military but decided against, according to the report.

Alibaba and Baidu trade on the Nasdaq, while Tencent is listed in Hong Kong where Al-

ibaba also has a secondary listing.

Top administration officials disagreed about whether to ban the three companies from US portfolios, with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin ultimately prevailing in a dispute with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the *Journal* reported.

The administration of President Donald Trump has continued to confront Beijing even as the clock winds down before President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

AFF

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WhatsApp delays data sharing change after backlash from users

San Francisco, US - WhatsApp on Friday postponed a data-sharing change as users concerned about privacy fled the Facebook-owned messaging service and flocked to rivals Telegram and Signal.

The smartphone app, a huge hit across the world, cancelled its February 8 deadline for accepting an update to its terms concerning sharing data with Facebook, saying it would use the pause to clear up misinformation around privacy and security.

'We've heard from so many people how much confusion there is around our recent update,' WhatsApp said in a blog post.

'This update does not expand our ability to share data with Facebook.'

It said it would instead 'go to people gradually to review the policy at their own pace before new business options are available on May 15'.

The update concerns how merchants using WhatsApp to chat with customers can share data with Facebook, which could use the information for targeted



Newspapers with front page advertisements of WhatsApp application are seen at a newspaper stall in Mumbai, India on Wednesday (AFP)

ads, according to the social network.

'We can't see your private messages or hear your calls, and neither can Facebook,' WhatsApp said in an earlier blog post.

'We don't keep logs of who everyone is messaging or calling. We can't see your shared location and neither can Facebook.'

Location data along with message contents is encrypted end-to-end, according to WhatsApp.

'We're giving businesses the

option to use secure hosting services from Facebook to manage WhatsApp chats with their customers, answer questions, and send helpful information like purchase receipts,' WhatsApp said in a post.

'Whether you communicate with a business by phone, email, or WhatsApp, it can see what you're saying and may use that information for its own marketing purposes, which may include advertising on Facebook.'

Technology experts note that WhatsApp's new requirement of its users makes legally binding a policy that has been widely in use since 2016.

Facebook aims to monetise WhatsApp by allowing businesses to contact clients via the platform, making it natural for the Internet giant to centralise some data on its servers.

The Turkish Competition Authority said it is opening an investigation and requiring WhatsApp to suspend the data sharing obligation on its users.

Several Turkish state organizations - including President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's media office - switched to Turkcell telecom's new messaging service BiP in response.

The terms of service tweak also put WhatsApp in the crosshairs in Italy and India, where a petition has been filed in a Delhi court.

WhatsApp's notice to users lacked clarity and its privacy implications need to be carefully evaluated, Italian data protection agency GPD said in a post at its website.

AFF

Biden unveils \$1.9tn economic plan as US recovery buckles

Wilmington, US - US President-elect Joe Biden will propose injecting US\$1.9tn into the US economy when he takes office this week, as evidence mounts that the recovery from the sharp downturn caused by COVID-19 is flagging.

With his fellow Democrats narrowly controlling both houses of Congress, Biden has a shot at passing what would be the United States' third massive pandemic aid package.

Dubbed the American Rescue Plan, the proposal released on Thursday includes a host of measures aimed at revitalising the world's largest economy.

Biden aims to raise the federal minimum wage to US\$15 an hour, help struggling state and local governments, safely reopen schools, roll out a massive COVID-19 vaccination campaign and raise the size of stimulus checks Congress approved last month.

"The return on these investment in jobs, racial equity will prevent long-term economic damage, and the benefits will far surpass the cost," Biden said during a speech in Wilmington, Delaware. "In this moment of crisis... we cannot afford inaction."

Top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi embraced Biden's



US President-elect Joe Biden speaks at The Queen theatre in Wilmington, Delaware on Friday (AFP)

plan, vowing to put it before lawmakers.

'We will get right to work to turn President-elect Biden's vision into legislation that will pass both chambers and be signed into law,' they said in a joint statement.

But this is just the first step, and the officials said Biden intends to present a second 'recovery' plan to lawmakers soon after his inauguration on Wednesday aimed at spurring hiring and

fighting climate change.

"We'll use taxpayers' dollars to rebuild America. We'll buy American products, supporting millions of American manufacturing jobs, enhancing our competitive strength in an increasingly competitive world," Biden said.

Uncertain path

The government on Thursday reported a spike in new jobless claim filings in the first week of

2021 to nearly 1mn, its highest level since August, while official data last week showed the economy shed jobs in December.

Biden (78) will take office after a tumultuous transition that saw a violent mob invade the US Capitol, egged on by outgoing President Donald Trump, as lawmakers were meeting to certify the Democrat's election victory.

His stimulus proposal builds on two massive relief packages Congress approved in 2020,

both increasing and extending through September unemployment benefits that have helped tens of millions of people pay their bills after losing their jobs during the pandemic.

It additionally calls for devising a way to maintain those programs if unemployment stays high, and also continues expanded government food assistance as the country struggles with some of its highest hunger levels in modern times.

But controversy could await the plan's provision of US\$350bn in funding to state and local governments, which Republican lawmakers blocked throughout last year.

Also potentially challenging is the president-elect's move to increase the size of stimulus checks Americans received in the December package to US\$2,000, which would fulfill a campaign promise.

But with only the slimmest of majorities in Congress - including an evenly split Senate where Vice President-elect Kamala Harris could have a tie-breaking vote - Democrats will have to woo some Republicans if anyone in their party breaks ranks.

One Democratic senator has already expressed hesitation over increasing the payments, but earlier last week Republican

Senator Marco Rubio told Biden he would back the additional aid.

The proposal also calls for US\$160bn to fight COVID-19, including through a national vaccination campaign, and US\$170bn for schools, with the goal of getting most institutions with students in kindergarten through eighth grade open in the first 100 days of his administration.

Prior to the release of the specifics, Michael Feroli of JP Morgan predicted Congress could pare Biden's plan down to the US\$900bn range, matching the measure approved last month.

Even the smaller amount would boost GDP growth this year to 5.3 per cent and in 2022 to 2.6 per cent, he said, a 'remarkable expected turnaround' aided also by negligible inflation and the Federal Reserve's maintenance of low borrowing rates.

Other aspects of Biden's plan include expanding tax credits aimed at fighting poverty and helping working parents afford childcare, plus extending a moratorium on evictions.

The plan offers flexible credits and grants for the small businesses that are major employers but have struggled to survive as states imposed restrictions to stop the virus.

AFP

Xi pens letter to Starbucks tycoon

Beijing, China - China's President Xi Jinping has asked former Starbucks chairman Howard Schultz to help promote trade between Washington and Beijing in a rare missive to a foreign business figure, state media reported.

Xi, responding to an earlier message from Schultz, urged the multi-billionaire to 'continue to play an active role in promoting China-US economic and trade cooperation', the official Xinhua news agency said.

China will 'provide a broader space for companies from all over the world, including Starbucks and other American companies, to develop in China', Xi wrote in his letter.

It was not immediately clear why the letter was published by state media, but it comes as relations between the superpowers have reached a nadir with bitter disputes over trade, tech, security and rights.

Starbucks, a ubiquitous sight in major Chinese cities, says it has opened over 4,700 coffee shops across the country since 1999.

Schultz, who stepped down as chairman of the chain in 2018 but retains an honorary title at the company, had previously congratulated Xi on China's transition into 'moderately prosperous society', Xinhua said.

AFP



China's trade surplus with US widens 7.1% to \$317bn

Beijing, China - China's trade surplus with the United States widened last year, underlining the failure of Donald Trump to narrow the gap during his tenure, while demand soared for electronics and medical equipment during the coronavirus pandemic.

The pick-up came on the back of a jump in exports through most of last year as China's factories kicked back into gear from the second quarter following a strict lockdown that managed to broadly contain COVID-19 and allow economic activity to return.

Trump had made addressing the gaping trade gap with China a priority when he took office four years ago, and signed a partial agreement with Beijing to boost the country's purchases of goods such as soybeans.

But Chinese customs data showed the surplus with the US climbed 7.1 per cent to US\$316.9bn in 2020.

The figure is a 14.9 per cent jump from 2017's surplus of US\$275.8bn - which was already a sensitive political issue due to Trump's claims that China held unfair practices and killed US jobs.

While the world's second-

largest economy suffered a record contraction in the first quarter of last year as the coronavirus essentially brought all activity to a halt, it soon recovered as lockdowns around the country were eased and people went back to work.

Total exports rose 3.6 per cent, though imports shrank 1.1 per cent.

In December, however, both exports and imports rose more than expected, at 18.1 per cent and 6.5 per cent respectively.

"With the pandemic under control in China, factories and export-oriented companies have resumed normal operations earlier than most other countries, allowing China to meet global demand better," said Axi strategist Stephen Innes.

The country posted a trade surplus for last month of US\$78bn, which analysts said was 'at or near record levels'.

Customs spokesman Li Kuwen told reporters that 'facing unprecedented difficulties and challenges, our country's imports and exports delivered a brilliant report card', adding that the outcome was 'significantly better than expected'.

Li said outbound shipments of electronics rose, with increases

seen in notebook computers and household appliances, as well as medical instruments and equipment.

China exported 224.2bn masks from March to December, Li added, nearly 40 masks for every person outside of China.

Iris Pang, ING chief economist for Greater China, told AFP that China's exports likely did well as 'other exporters for most of the year had been in difficult positions because of COVID-19', shifting more orders to China.

On the US-China surplus, she said coronavirus restrictions in the US would also have hit export capacity.

"The other thing is, during COVID-19, some commodity prices went down and affected the value of what China imported," she said, adding that Beijing will likely continue to fulfill its terms of the trade deal with the US, barring added demands from Washington.

Lu Ting, chief China economist for Nomura, noted that China's imports from the US jumped 45 per cent on-year in December, 'pointing to Beijing's continued effort to fulfill its commitments on the phase-one trade deal'.

AFP

Peugeot and Fiat complete merger

Paris, France - The merger of France's PSA and US-Italian rival Fiat Chrysler became official on Saturday, creating Stellantis, the world's fourth-biggest automaker by volume.

The long-awaited 50/50 tie-up, which was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, is seen as crucial for the two groups to undertake the investment necessary to transition to clean car technology.

The new company will bring together producers such as Peugeot, Citroen, Fiat, Chrysler, Jeep, Alfa Romeo and Maserati, each of which will continue under their own brand names.



The 14 Stellantis brands will account for about 9 per cent of the global auto market. Together they produced 8mn vehicles in 2019.

Ranking behind global rivals such as Volkswagen, Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi and Toyota,

Stellantis will be the fourth-largest automaker by volume and the third-largest by revenue, with a workforce of over 400,000.

John Elkann, Fiat chairman and scion of Italy's storied Agnelli family, will retain his role at

Stellantis in what he has called 'a challenging era'.

"The coming decade will redefine mobility: we are intent on playing a leading role in building this new future," Elkann said earlier this month after the shareholders gave their blessing to what he called the 'historic merger'.

On Monday the new group Stellantis, the name derived from the Latin verb 'stello' meaning to brighten with stars, will launch on the Milan and Paris stock exchanges followed by its debut in the New York stock market the following day.

AFP

Smartphone giant Xiaomi reels as US ramps up China blacklist

Hong Kong, China - Shares in Xiaomi collapsed on Friday after the United States blacklisted the smartphone giant and a host of other Chinese firms as the Trump administration aims to cement its trade war legacy against Beijing.

Beijing hit back at the latest sanctions, accusing the US of 'abusing state power' to crack down on Chinese companies 'for no reason'.

The flurry of last-minute blacklistings is the coda to four years of aggressive diplomatic and trade policies towards rival China under Donald Trump.

With just six days to go before the president leaves office, US officials made a series of announcements targeting Chinese firms including state oil giant CNOOC, Xiaomi and embattled social media favourite TikTok.

Xiaomi is one of the biggest companies to be blacklisted so far and its shares plunged more than 10 per cent in Hong Kong by the close of trading Friday after the announcement. US chip giant Qualcomm is a major investor.



People walk past a Xiaomi store in Beijing on Friday (AFP)

Xiaomi - which overtook Apple last year to become the world's third-largest smartphone manufacturer - was one of nine firms classified by the Pentagon as 'Communist Chinese military companies'.

The Pentagon's move means US investors will be unable to purchase Xiaomi securities and will ultimately have to divest down the line unless the order is overturned by the incoming administration of Joe Biden.

Xiaomi said in a statement that 'it is not owned, controlled or affiliated with the Chinese military, and is not a Communist Chinese Military Company'.

But the US Department of Defense said it was 'determined to highlight and counter the People's Republic of China's military-civil fusion development strategy' that allowed it to access key technology and security data.

"The Trump administration

has broadened the concept of national security, abused state power and repeatedly cracked down on Chinese companies for no reason," said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian on Friday.

"China is firmly opposed to that," Zhao added.

Xiaomi said it 'will take appropriate course of actions to protect the interests of the company and its shareholders'.

AFP

Hunt for survivors after Indonesia quake

At least 46 people died after a 6.2-magnitude quake struck Sulawesi island in the early hours of Friday

Mamuju, Indonesia - Rescuers scrambled to find buried survivors on Saturday after a powerful earthquake on Indonesia's Sulawesi island killed dozens, injured hundreds and left more feared trapped in the rubble of collapsed buildings, as monsoon rains lashed the disaster-struck region.

At least 46 people died after the 6.2-magnitude quake struck in the early hours of Friday, triggering panic among residents of the island, which was hit by a 2018 quake-tsunami disaster that killed thousands.

Search-and-rescue team worked through the night as they pulled dozens of bodies from beneath crumpled buildings in Mamuju, a city of about 110,000 people in West Sulawesi province, where a hospital was flattened and a shopping mall lay in ruins.

Others were killed south of the city after the quake struck, as a strong aftershock jolted the area Saturday morning.

Grieving relatives began burying the dead at a local cemetery.

Planes and boats packed with food and other emergency supplies were arriving, with the navy reportedly sending a ship equipped with mobile medical services as Mamuju's still-standing hospitals were flooded with



Rescuers search for survivors at a collapsed building in Mamuju city on January 16, 2021, a day after a 6.2-magnitude earthquake rocked Indonesia's Sulawesi island (AFP)

hundreds of injured.

Rescuers said a shortage of heavy equipment was slowing the search effort, while thousands left homeless by the quake set up makeshift shelters on higher ground - many little more than tarpaulin-covered tents that were lashed by heavy down-

pours.

"We're running out of food. There hasn't been any aid from the government yet," 24-year-old survivor Desti told AFP from hard-hit Majene, adding that some survivors at the camp needed medical attention.

"Some people are using co-

conut leaves as mats," she added.

Many survivors are unable to return to their destroyed homes, or too scared to go back fearing more quakes or a tsunami, said Desti, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

Authorities have not given a figure for the number of resi-

dents who could still be trapped under buildings reduced to twisted metal and concrete chunks, including the hospital that collapsed with more than a dozen patients and staff inside.

On Saturday, authorities said they had pulled eight corpses from under the building, while

five members of a family of eight were found dead in the crumpled remains of their home.

Among the Mamuju survivors was a pair of young sisters plucked from under the mass of concrete and other debris. The pair are now being treated in hospital.

'Heartfelt solidarity'

The Pope said he was 'saddened' to learn of the quake.

'His Holiness Pope Francis expresses his heartfelt solidarity with all those affected by this natural disaster,' the Vatican said in a statement.

'He prays for the repose of the deceased, the healing of the in-

gional governor's office was also partly destroyed, authorities said.

Power remained out in parts of Mamuju after the quake damaged its electricity grid.

Save the Children warned that the young were among the most at risk. 'While the extent of the earthquake damage is still unclear, we know children are often the most vulnerable following disaster,' it said.

'It will be essential that children are prioritised in any response, as they may have witnessed the death of loved ones or become separated from their parents.'

The quake's epicentre was 36km south of Mamuju and it

Search-and-rescue worked through the night as they pulled dozens of bodies from beneath crumpled buildings in Mamuju, a city of about 110,000 people in West Sulawesi province

Iran test-fires ballistic missiles on targets at sea



This handout photo released on Saturday shows a launch of a missile during a military drill in an unknown location in central Iran (AFP)

Tehran, Iran - Iran's Revolutionary Guards test-fired ballistic missiles against targets in the Indian Ocean as they wrapped up a two-day exercise, their official website reported on Saturday.

The missiles of 'various classes' targeted 'the enemy's battleships and destroyed them from 1,800km away', according to the Sepahnews website.

The missiles were fired from central Iran with the targets located in the 'northern Indian Ocean', the Guards said.

A video released by state television showed two missiles being launched and targets being hit at sea.

Iran's armed forces chief of staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri was present on the second day of the drill, alongside Guards chief Major General Hossein Salami and aerospace commander Brigadier General Amirali Hajizadeh.

Using 'long-range missiles for maritime targets indicates that if the enemies ... show any ill will towards our national interests, maritime trade routes or territory, they will be targeted and de-

stroyed by our missiles', Sepahnews quoted Bagheri as saying.

"We do not intend to carry out any attack," he said, adding that the exercise showed Iran's readiness to defend itself 'with all its strength' against any aggressor.

Dubbed Great Prophet 15, the exercise also featured a drone attack on a missile defence system followed by the launch of a barrage of 'new generation' surface-to-surface ballistic missiles.

The war games come at a time of rising tensions with the United States in the final days of President Donald Trump's administration.

It was Iran's third military exercise in less than two weeks after a naval exercise in the Sea of Oman on Wednesday and Thursday, and an army drone drill on January 5-6.

The exercises started two days after Iran marked the anniversary of the assassination of revered Guards commander Qasem Soleimani, killed in a US drone strike in Iraq in January last year.

AFP

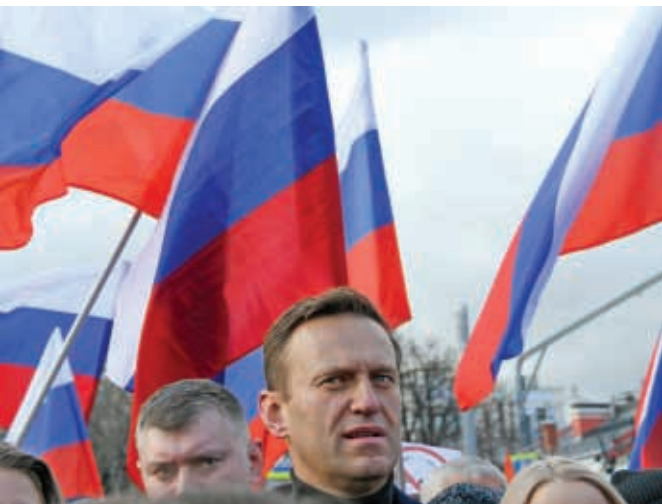
Germany says answered Russia call for aid in Navalny probe

Berlin, Germany - Germany has transmitted to Russia transcripts of interviews with Alexei Navalny as part of its response to Moscow's request for assistance in its investigation into the poisoning of the Kremlin critic, Berlin said on Saturday.

Navalny was evacuated to Berlin in late August for treatment after he fell violently ill on a flight from Siberia to Moscow.

Tests carried out by Western countries including Germany have concluded that he was poisoned by the Soviet-era nerve agent Novichok.

He has said he will return to



This file photo shows Alexei Navalny in a march in memory of murdered Kremlin critic Boris Nemtsov, in Moscow on February 29, 2020 (AFP)

Russia on Sunday, flying with Pobeda - Aeroflot's low-cost subsidiary whose name means 'Victory' in Russian.

Germany's Justice Ministry said it 'responded yesterday to the four requests for legal assistance from the prosecution office of Russia in connection to the murder attempt on Alexei Navalny in Russia'.

Police investigators had questioned Navalny, who 'provided extensive answers to questions sent through by the Russian prosecutor', said a spokesman for the German Justice Ministry.

The transcripts were transmitted to Moscow, he added.

"The government assumes that the Russian government will now take all necessary steps to clear up this crime against Mr Navalny," said the spokesman.

"All the information necessary in criminal investigations like blood and tissue samples, clothing pieces, are in, are available in Russia," he said.

Navalny has accused Russia's main security agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB), of poisoning him on the orders of President Vladimir Putin.

AFP

Trump to leave town before Biden inauguration

Washington, US - By the time Joe Biden is sworn in as the 46th US president on Wednesday, his scandal-tainted predecessor Donald Trump will already be far away, having helicoptered out of the White House a last time earlier that morning, an official said on Friday.

Trump will be the first president in a century and a half to snub the inauguration of his successor.

An official who asked not to be identified said Trump would go to his Mar-a-Lago golf club in Florida, which is his legal residence and will become home after the White House.

He is expected to be out of town well before Biden is sworn in on the steps of the Capitol building at exactly noon.

After spending more than two months trying to overturn the results of the November election, pushing false conspiracy theories about fraud, Trump's presence had not been expected at the inauguration.

The final straw came on January 6 when Trump gathered a huge crowd of supporters on the National Mall and once more claimed that they had to fight to stop a fraudulent election.

A mob then stormed Congress, halting proceedings underway to certify Biden's win.

For longer than anyone can



National Guard soldiers before their guard shifts at the US Capitol building, in Washington, DC, on Friday (AFP)

Donald Trump's extraordinary exit adds to the nervous atmosphere around an inauguration set to be like no other

remember, outgoing presidents have stood by their replacement on the Capitol steps, watching them take the oath - and in so doing showing visible support for

the peaceful transfer of power.

Trump, who was impeached for a record second time in the wake of the Congress storming, has also broken with more discreet protocol by refusing to invite Biden and his wife Jill Biden to the White House for a traditional cup of tea in the Oval Office.

On Friday, Vice President Mike Pence did make the gesture of telephoning his incoming counterpart Kamala Harris, a source said.

Although this came only five days before inauguration day - and more than two months after

the election - *The New York Times* said Pence offered his congratulations and belated assistance to Harris, describing the exchange as 'gracious and pleasant'.

Recriminations over the January 6 attack continued to reverberate on Friday, however, when Trump's health secretary criticised 'the actions and rhetoric following the election'.

In a letter confirming he would step down when Biden takes office on January 20, Alex Azar called the violence 'an assault on our democracy and on the tradition of peaceful transitions of power', urging Trump to con-

demn all violence and help ensure a smooth handover to Biden.

Trump's extraordinary exit adds to the nervous atmosphere around an inauguration that was already set to be like no other.

In the wake of the Congress attack, thousands of National Guard troops have taken up position around central Washington.

And even before the security nightmare, organisers had been forced by COVID-19 safety measures to nix the traditional big crowds and long guest lists.

For Biden, the subdued ceremonies will quickly be followed by a mammoth To Do list.

His administration faces multiple crises on day one, including the stumbling national COVID vaccination project, a precarious economic recovery and Trump's looming impeachment trial in the Senate.

At the same time, Biden will have to cajole the Senate into rapidly confirming his cabinet appointees, allowing him to form a government and bring stability back to the country.

Incoming White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday that the Senate is fully capable of juggling the impeachment trial along with the urgent confirmations.

AFP



The Taliban’s statement came just hours after the Pentagon announced it had cut troop levels in Afghanistan to 2,500, their lowest numbers during the nearly two decades of fighting

Taliban praise US troop reduction in Afghanistan

Kabul, Afghanistan - The Taliban welcomed the latest withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan with the insurgents’ spokesman Saturday calling the continued reduction of American forces a ‘good advancement’ even as fighting raged across the war-weary country.

The Taliban’s statement came just hours after the Pentagon announced it had cut troop levels in Afghanistan to 2,500, their lowest numbers during the nearly two decades of fighting.

Washington struck a deal with the Taliban in Qatar last year to begin withdrawing its troops in return for security guarantees from the militants and a commitment to peace talks with Kabul.

Those talks are ongoing, but have stalled amid violence and allegations of slow progress.

Meanwhile the Taliban has continued its lethal assaults on

Taliban kill 12 pro-govt militiamen in camp

Herat, Afghanistan - Two Taliban fighters who had infiltrated a base of pro-government Afghan militiamen killed 12 of them, officials and the insurgent group said on Saturday.

The night-time attack at a post manned by the militiamen occurred in the district of Ghorian in the western Herat province late on Friday, the governor for the district Farhad Khademi told AFP.

“Twelve pro-government

militiamen were killed in the Taliban attack in Ghorian district last night,” he said.

Herat provincial council member Mohammad Sardar Bahaduri confirmed the attack and said it was carried out by two Taliban fighters who had infiltrated the base. “The militiamen were dining when the attack happened,” he said.

The Taliban also said two of its fighters had carried out the attack and then returned.

In a separate incident, a vehicle carrying policemen was struck by a roadside bomb in the centre of the Afghan capital Kabul, police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz told reporters.

Two policemen were killed and one wounded in the attack, he said. Violence has surged across Afghanistan in recent months, especially in Kabul, which has been rocked by a new trend of targeted killings.

AFP

slashed in both countries to that level by January 15 - despite initial pushback from the Pentagon.

Both the Taliban and Afghan government however are anxiously eyeing the arrival of President-elect Joe Biden in Washington and any new policy directions that might be implemented by the incoming administration.

The US invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

The Taliban regime then in place had hosted Al Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden.

The regime was quickly toppled but launched an insurgency and in recent years have seen a resurgence, with violence soaring across the country since NATO withdrew its combat forces in 2014 and civilians paying a disproportionate price.

AFP

Five Hong Kong democracy protesters seek asylum in the US

Hong Kong, China - Five Hong Kong democracy protesters who reportedly fled to Taiwan have arrived in the United States intending to seek asylum, an activist group said on Saturday.

Their escape follows the mass arrest of democracy figures in Hong Kong under a new national security law that is part of a mounting crackdown by China on the financial hub.

The Hong Kong Democracy Council (HKDC), a US-based group, said it had welcomed a group of young activists to America this week and their journey had been ‘arduous and perilous’.

“The activists, all under the age of 30, took part in the ongoing pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, faced protest-related arrests and charges, and fled the city by boat last July,” Samuel Chu, founder of HKDC, told AFP.

“I am relieved and overjoyed to welcome them to the United States and to assist them as they seek asylum and a new life,” Chu added.

Through a statement issued by the HKDC, the five activists now in exile said their hearts have been ‘filled with anxiety and all kinds of emotions’ from the moment they left Hong Kong.

Taiwanese media in August reported that the five tried to flee to the self-ruled island in late July and were intercepted by its authorities. Officials in Taiwan have since kept a low profile regarding the case, declining to comment.

After massive democracy protests across Hong Kong in 2019 in which more than 11,000 people were arrested, Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law late last June to silence dissent.

In August, another group of 12 Hong Kong activists, including one arrested under the national security law, made an attempt to flee by speedboat to Taiwan but were arrested by Chinese coastguards. Last month a Chinese



The activists, all under the age of 30, took part in the ongoing pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, faced protest-related arrests and charges, and fled the city by boat last July

SAMUEL CHU

court jailed ten of these 12 fugitives for up to three years for ‘organising and participating in an illegal border crossing’.

Chu said that the five Hong Kongers could have easily perished at sea or met the same fate as the ‘Hong Kong 12’ without the help from ardent supporters who provided shelter and protection along the way.

“Their desperate effort exemplifies the rapidly deteriorating human rights condition and growing humanitarian crisis Hong Kong is in right now,” Chu said, adding that the options for safe passage are limited.

At least 50 former Hong Kong protesters applied for asylum in various jurisdictions before the coronavirus pandemic ended most international travel last year. Hundreds more have relocated to democratic Taiwan.

AFP

Out-of-control Australian bushfire threatens Perth

Sydney, Australia - Australian firefighters said they expect to battle an out-of-control bushfire well into the night on Saturday, as the blaze threatens lives and homes in the west coast city of Perth.

Residents were told ‘to act immediately to survive’ as the flames approached homes near Oakford, about 35km south of Perth’s city centre, in an emergency warning issued by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES).

Locals were told to evacuate if the way was clear or to take shelter, as the fire spewed thick smoke over the area.

Around 150 firefighters were expected to work overnight into Sunday to bring the 80-100 hectare blaze under control, DFES District Officer Russell Wells told media.

“There are certainly some challenging conditions ahead,” Wells said.

Although temperatures were expected to dip overnight from their high of

33 degrees Celsius, strong gusty winds were forecast.

And crews were expecting even hotter temperatures on Sunday amid concerns the windy conditions could cause the fire to double in size.

“What we’re really trying to do at the moment is bring this fire under control today and have a really strong presence tomorrow so it doesn’t flare up,” said Wells.

Aerial footage showed at least one structure ablaze in the area as water bombing aircraft repeatedly tried to douse the fire.

Several roads have been closed and evacuation centres set up.

There were also several other wildfires burning around the edges of the city.

Western Australia was spared the brunt of last summer’s devastating climate change-fuelled wildfires, which mostly ravaged the country’s two most populous states, New South Wales and Victoria.

AFP

Thousands of US-bound Honduran migrants cross border into Guatemala

El Florido, Guatemala - At least 4,500 Honduran migrants pushed past police and crossed into Guatemala on Friday night, passing the first hurdle of a journey north they hope will take them to a better life in the United States.

Seeking to escape poverty, unemployment, gang and drug violence and the aftermath of two devastating hurricanes, the migrants plan to walk thousands of kilometres through Central America to Mexico and then on to the US.

The crowd of men, women and children - many wearing masks due to the COVID-19 pandemic - pushed their way past police and border gates diving the two countries at the town of El Florido, an AFP correspondent said.

A Guatemalan police official said the force had let the migrants cross as there were many families with children in the crowd and that using tear gas at night could have resulted in casualties.

“We won’t leave from here until they let us through,” said domestic worker Dania Hinestroza (23) shortly before attempting to cross the border



Migrants heading to the United States display an Honduran national flag as they hitchhike on the back of a truck near El Florido, in the Honduran department of Copan near the border with Guatemala, on Friday (AFP)

The migrants are seeking a better life in America under Joe Biden after years of tough anti-immigrant policy under Donald Trump

with one of her young daughters. “We have no work or food, so I decided to go to the United States.”

The migrants are seeking a better life in America under Joe Biden after years of tough anti-

immigrant policy under Donald Trump, but the quest is likely to end in heartbreak for many, with US authorities already having warned off the group.

Guatemala, Mexico and Honduras also have an agreement

with the US to stop north-bound migratory flows from the south of the continent.

Biden has promised ‘a fair and humane immigration system’ and pledged aid to tackle the root causes of poverty and violence that drive Central Americans to the United States.

But Mark Morgan, acting commissioner of US Customs and Border Protection, warned the group last week not to ‘waste

your time and money’. The US commitment to the ‘rule of law and public health’ is not affected by the change in administration, he said in a statement.

More than a dozen caravans, some with thousands of migrants, have set off from Honduras since October 2018.

But all have run up against thousands of US border guards and soldiers under Trump, who has characterised immigrants from Mexico as ‘rapists’ who were ‘bringing drugs’ and other criminal activity to the United States.

Mexican authorities said late on Thursday that 500 immigration officers were being deployed to its border with Guatemala in anticipation of the caravan’s arrival.

Trump said on Friday he was extending a national emergency on the border with Mexico that was first imposed in February 2019 to unlock funding to build his signature wall.

“Further action is needed to address the humanitarian crisis and to control unlawful migration and the flow of narcotics and criminals,” a statement from the White House said.

AFP

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

World's largest vaccine drive starts in India as global deaths cross 2mn



A doctor inoculates her colleague with a COVID-19 vaccine at a hospital in Srinagar in the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir on Saturday (AFP)

New Delhi, India - India kicked off one of the world's largest coronavirus vaccination drives on Saturday as the pandemic spread at a record pace and global COVID-19 deaths surged past two million.

The World Health Organization has called for accelerating vaccine rollouts worldwide as well as ramping up efforts to study the sequencing of the virus, which has infected more than 93 million people globally since it was first detected in China in late 2019.

India, home to 1.3bn people, has the world's second-largest caseload.

The government has given approvals to two vaccines - though one is yet to complete clinical trials - aiming to inoculate around 300mn people by July.

One of the first to receive a jab in the eastern city of Kolkata was 35 year old health worker Santa Roy, who told AFP that he now saw a 'ray of hope' after witnessing people die of the coronavirus.

Authorities say they are drawing on their experience

with elections and child immunisation programmes for the drive, which is a daunting task in an enormous, impoverished nation with often shoddy transport infrastructure and one of the world's worst-funded health-care systems.

Regular child inoculations are a 'much smaller game' and vaccinating against COVID-19 will be 'deeply challenging', said Satyajit Rath from India's Na-

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on Friday said he wanted 'to see vaccination under way in every country in the next 100 days so that health workers and those at high risk are protected first'.

His call came as infections snowballed, with 724,000 new cases recorded on average per day globally over the past week - a record ten per cent increase on a week earlier.

In hard-hit Europe, there are concerns that the Pfizer delays could further slow a vaccine rollout that has already faced heavy criticism.

Pfizer, which jointly developed its vaccine with German company BioNTech, said EU countries could expect delayed deliveries in the coming weeks due to work being done at its plant in Belgium.

It promised that there would be 'a significant increase' in shipments in March, and the European Commission said all vaccines ordered by the bloc for the first quarter would be delivered on time.

But ministers from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden said in a joint letter that the situation was 'unacceptable' and 'decreases the credibility of the vaccination process'.

As cases mount, nations have doubled down on restrictions.

Portugal entered a fresh lockdown on Friday, and new curbs on populations were announced from Italy to Brazil.

Beijing extended its isolation period for overseas arrivals, re-

quiring travellers to spend an extra week at home after the 21 days in hotel quarantine already in place, state media reported on Saturday.

Fears are also growing that a new strain of the virus found in Brazil could be more contagious, just like the variants recently found in Britain and South Africa.

Chinese pharmaceutical giant Sinopharm has claimed that ongoing tests showed its vaccine to be effective against the variant first detected in Britain, according to state media.

'Out of control'

In the United States - the hardest-hit nation in the world - President-elect Joe Biden vowed on Friday to harness the full strength of the government in a vaccine blitz: Creating thousands of immunisation sites, deploying mobile clinics and expanding the public health workforce.

Known US infections have surpassed 23mn with more than 390,000 deaths since the first case was reported.

AFP



A medical worker prepares to inoculate a colleague with a vaccine at a hospital in India's capital New Delhi on Saturday (AFP)

India's jumbo-sized rollout in numbers

300mn people

Over the coming months, India aims to inoculate around a quarter of the population, or 300mn people. They include healthcare workers, people aged over 50 and those at high risk.

The government aims to manage the entire process digitally with its own app, CoWIN, which will link every vaccine dose to its recipient.

is intact," Preeti Kumar, a public health specialist, said.

₹200 per dose

India has ordered an initial 11mn doses of Covishield, AstraZeneca's vaccine made by India's Serum Institute, at ₹200 (US\$2.74) each, and 5.5mn doses of Covaxin at ₹206 each.

The government approved 'emergency use' of Covaxin, made by India's Bharat Biotech, that is yet to complete the phase 3 human trials for which, Indians who were given this shot on Saturday were given a consent form to sign that made clear that its 'clinical efficacy... is yet to be established'.

69% in no hurry

A recent survey of 18,000 people across India found that 69 per cent were in no rush to get a COVID-19 shot, in part due to public scepticism fuelled by online disinformation.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan took to social media to dispel some of the doubts.

1 plane from Brazil

Other developing countries are banking on India for getting vaccines, and Brazil wanted to send a plane to India this weekend to collect 2mn doses from Serum.

But President Jair Bolsonaro said that 'political pressure' by India had postponed the flight.

Serum chief Adar Poonawalla said it would supply Brazil in two weeks.

AFP

Pompeo pushes new claim of China covering up origin

Washington, US - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo alleged on Friday there were COVID-like illnesses among staff at a Chinese virology institute in autumn 2019, casting further blame on Beijing as health experts arrived in the country to probe the pandemic's origins.

The top US diplomat in a statement urged the World Health Organization team that landed on Thursday in Wuhan, where COVID-19 was first detected, to 'press the government of China' on the 'new information'.

"The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the (Wuhan Institute of Virology) became sick in autumn 2019,



A man visits an exhibition on China's fight against the virus, in Wuhan on Friday (AFP)

before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses," Pompeo said.

He said this contradicted reports that none of the staff at

the institute had contracted COVID-19 or related viruses.

"Beijing continues today to withhold vital information that scientists need to protect the world from this deadly virus, and the next one," Pompeo said.

COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan in late 2019 and has since billowed out across the world killing more than two million people so far, infecting tens of millions and eviscerating the global economy.

The outgoing administration of Donald Trump has consistently blamed China for COVID-19, which has killed 390,000 people in the United States, with the President routinely calling it the 'China virus'.

AFP

Belgian café owner holds 'sleep-in protest'

Pepinster, Belgium - A fed-up café owner in Belgium is sleeping in her premises with little food, in protest at the months-long shutdown of her sector to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

"To remain like this, without working, losing everything - every day to see you're losing a little bit more - it's hard," Christelle Carion said sitting on her bed, set up beside the bar.

The 48 year old has been holed up in the closed Amon Nos Autes café in the eastern village of Pepinster since Tuesday, to draw attention to the ordeal that she and other owners in Belgium's bar and restaurant sector are going through.

They have been ordered shut since October 19 to counter the second coronavirus wave



Christelle Carion relaxes in the bed in her café on Friday (AFP)

sweeping Europe, after having been closed for three months for the first wave in early 2020.

From the start of the pandemic until now, Belgium has gone from being one of the worst-hit countries in the world - with one of the highest per capita COVID-19 mortality rates - to being among the few EU countries to get a grip on

curbing infections.

But Carion - known in her village by her nickname 'Betchette', which adorns the café she took over 12 years ago - said she was seeing possible dates for reopening repeatedly being pushed back, fuelling her desperation.

"Already at the beginning of the second lockdown I had it in

mind to show the rage that it's the restaurants and cafés that are always first to get it," she said. "A time comes that this just has to stop."

She was refusing solid food, getting by on soup, coffee and cigarettes. She hopes that the protest from her army cot, donated by a friend on her second day, will be heard by politicians.

Although the government is providing financial aid to bars, cafés and hotels - €2,700 a month in the case of Carion, before tax - that is not enough for many to survive.

Around 40 per cent of hospitality establishments were already on the brink of bankruptcy following the first lockdown, according to a survey last year by the Foodservice Alliance.

AFP



Living with Art

ART IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Hubert Vaz

Saleem Sakhi, an artist who finds himself lost in artistic inspiration all around everyday, recently held a solo exhibition at the Art & Soul art gallery at the Water Front mall, in Shatti Qurm, wherein he portrayed the multiple influences of the environment on his paint-brush.

The exhibition, held a fortnight ago, portrays various scenes of nature through the Kumma. His artworks of the kumma displayed the flora and fauna of Oman imprinted as designs on the Omani cap in many interesting hues. They were other installations that showcased wellknown cultural symbols of Oman.

The artist asserts that when everything around him become a source of inspiration, it turns the overall shape of his thoughts and becomes the main theme of his works. He has always sought to bring out that co-existence of him and the environment, the heritage and culture of Oman on his canvases which have always strayed off the beaten track.

Sakhi has participated in many art exhibitions in the sultanate and other countries where the scenes from Oman's culture are formatted into art of the rich environment overlapping the sensory and emotional constitution with a new vision and unique outcome.

His artworks are collected by some government and private institutions such as Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Regional Municipalities , Minister of Culture, Sport and Youth National Museum, Oman Museum Across Ages, Oman Petroleum Company, Bait Al Zubair, Omantel, UNESCO and

other individual buyers.

The Art & Soul gallery is a platform where artists of all denominations can express their creativity and showcase it to the community. It offers enhanced exhibition settings, appropriate lighting and state of the art equipment to display artworks attractively.

This platform is a perfect venue for art talks, workshops and creative performances and artists can look forward to regular exhibitions, events and competitions, while the gallery hopes to bring other unique concepts of art to Muscat.

Sakhi, shares his thoughts on the exhibition which was well received:

What was the theme of the exhibition?

The exhibition was about the Omani environment in all its forms. That coexistence between me and, on the other hand, the environment, heritage and traditional costumes has always been a source of creativity and inspiration to me.

I was deeply influenced by the resettlement project of the Arabian Oryx in the sultanate to safeguard and to protect them from extinction. That project has become, for me personally, an obsessive issue prompting and inspiring me to create forms of Arabian Oryx paintings and sculptures as an attempt to remove them their barren environment to a world full of life and vitality

Why did you portray the kumma through this exhibition?

This has always been a subject brought to light by me.



“That coexistence of me and the environment has always been a source of creativity and inspiration

SALEEM SAKHI

I have been inspired by it to a great extent as we have a daily relationship with the kumma. This formed an artistic vision for my artworks on the kumma which

are rich in various motifs that indicate our culture and traditions. I have always been fascinated by the kumma and so gave it a new identity on the canvas.

What features of the kumma appeal to you the most?

The kumma is an element that characterises men's costume in Oman. It is an inspiration source for me because of what it carries - the various patterns and shapes. And I add a self-dimension to this repeated rhythm for the kumma with a variety in design that breaks away from the familiar ones.

What is your opinion on the evolving art scene and scope of artists in Oman?

The art scene and artists in Oman are constantly evolving and it works to stimulate the artistic offering to further progress. I myself have evolved as an artist over the years. As we go forward, cultural influences do affect our work as well as our approach to paintings. I have seen it in myself as well as other artists over the years.

Do you think different aspects of Oman's culture deserve to be seen in exhibitions around the world?

What is around us - nature, heritage, or scenes of our daily life - are sources of inspiration for all artists, with a uniqueness that is peculiar to Oman alone. Therefore, the Omani artist must show this distinction in his/her artwork to rediscover these legacies with a modern vision.





Nikos Zarras (left) at the opening of the exhibition on January 12

COLOURS OF OMAN

Hubert Vaz

Greek artist Nikos Zarras is currently showcasing his solo exhibition titled 'Colours of Oman' at the Art & Soul Gallery at Water Front mall, in Shatti Qurm. The exhibition displays photography and charcoal paintings while Nikos also demonstrates a live charcoal painting of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik at the gallery.

Colours of Oman comprises 15 pieces of exclusive photography, 10 pieces of charcoal drawings, and two sand paintings, all of which seem to tell varied stories of Oman's cultural past and present as seen through the eyes of the artist. It is on till January 23.

"As a Greek artist, I have explored Oman's history, culture and nature and I always like to document my work by creating paintings and photography," Zarras told Muscat Daily, explaining how he has been enraptured by the cultural hallmarks of the sultanate which includes not just the people but also the ancient as well as modern edifices which stand out in stark contrast from those in the rest of the world.

"The aim of this exhibition is to bring awareness to the beauty of the traditional Omani culture. Times are changing and traditions and cultures are fading over time and it is important to remind the youth through forms of art," Zarras asserts, adding, "I have been in Oman for around ten years and in those years, I have been blessed enough to see the country bloom and advance while still being connected to its traditions in forms of architecture and landmarks."

Architectural splendour in Oman

Zarras has taken note of many changes in the landscapes and admits that the changes have had good as well as not-so-good implications as there is a tendency to sacrifice some elements of the existing culture in the pursuit of modern living. "That's my reason for capturing and documenting Oman," he says, adding, "Every piece I have ever created for this exhibition was inspired by the beauty of Oman, from the way of life of the people here to the natural landscapes of this land."

Fond of the varied architectural splendour in Mus-



The aim of this exhibition is to bring awareness to the beauty of the traditional Omani culture

NIKOS ZARRAS

cat, especially Al Alam Palace, Royal Opera House Muscat as well as the Old Muttrah Souq and the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Zarras notes that outside the capital most of the villages are mesmerising in their own way, being juxtaposed with mountains, wadis as well as seascapes in different regions. He has captured most of these sights in his photography and charcoal drawings.

Zarras has also been featured in many articles in Greece about his artworks which include those inspired by Oman. He has always received very positive feedback as people have taken much interest in viewing as well as learning about the culture of Oman, he pointed out.



Artist, animator, set and puppet designer

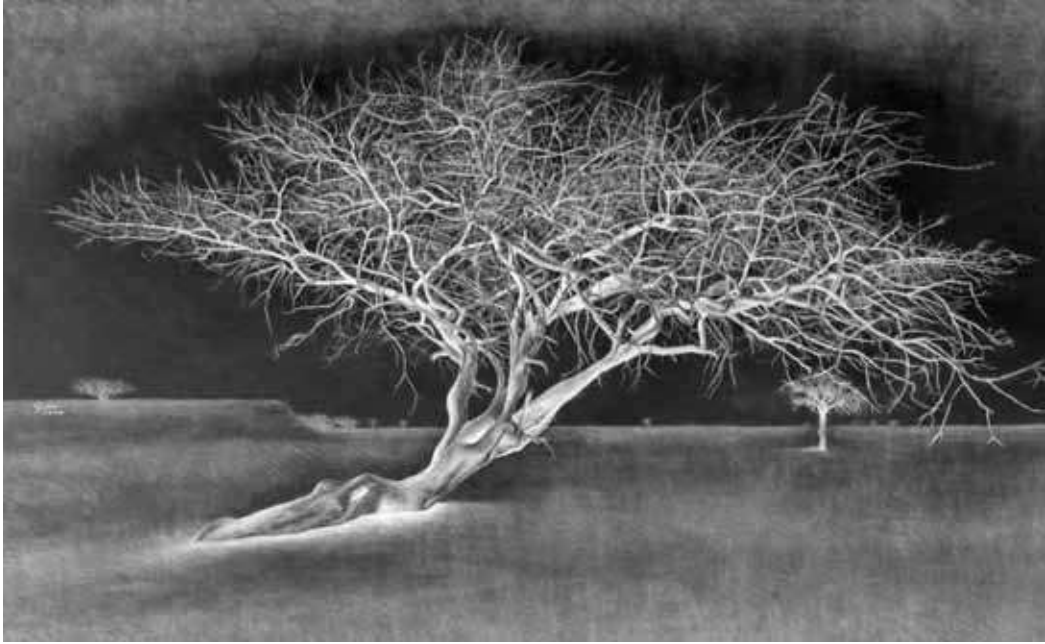
Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, Nikos had a passion for drawing from a very young age. When he moved back to Greece, painting continued to be passion even as a teenager and he chose to study Design, History of Art, Sculpture, Traditional Crafts, and Puppet Making at the Fine Art Department in the Polytechnic School of Trikala.

He later majored in Conservation of Ancient Monuments and Works of Art at the Athens Technical and Arts Institution, where he learnt not just design and restoration but also the crafting and nature of all materials used in art through the ages.

Zarras worked in Athens as a puppet designer, theatre set designer, creator of children festival sets, interior designer, and as a theatre and television animator for puppet shows. He has also worked with Greece's most famous puppet maker, Lakis Apostolidis, for more than a decade as a puppet maker and set designer.

Over the years, he broadened his skills and expertise which now include oil paintings, iconography and wall paintings. His portfolio contains an abundance of baby rooms, churches, restaurants, interior decorating and cartoon characters that he created both, in Greece and in the UK.

Moving to the Middle East, Zarras devised a unique technique by only using pure sand without any colour for my paintings. During the short time that he has been in Oman, he already participated in Al Duqm Exhibition in Bait Muzna Gallery and later in a group exhibition at The One & Only Royal Mirage represented by the Galatea Gallery in Dubai. A few of Zarras' sand paintings are exhibited in the Abu Dhabi Art Hub.



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