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BENZEMA VOLLEY PEGS BACK CHELSEA



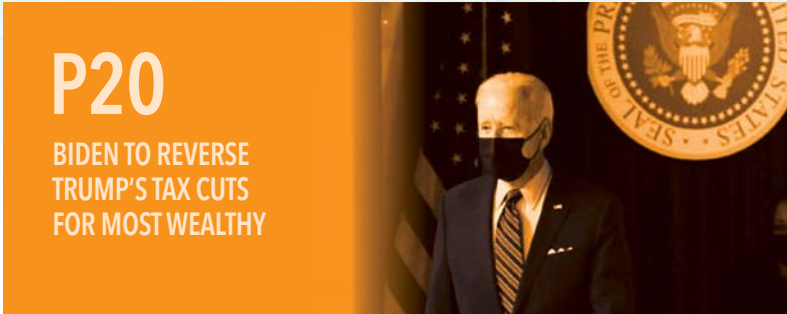
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WEEKEND HIKE AT THE AL KHOUDH TRAIL



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BIDEN TO REVERSE TRUMP'S TAX CUTS FOR MOST WEALTHY



MUSCAT

CRUDE PRICES AT \$63.71 A BARREL

Oman oil price for June delivery reached \$63.71, comprising a rise by 34 cents from the price of Tuesday, which was \$63.37. The average price of Oman oil for April delivery has stabilised at \$60.85, thus \$6.60 per barrel higher than March delivery. Brent crude futures fell a touch to \$66.40 a barrel, while US West Texas Intermediate crude lost 0.03 per cent to \$62.92 per barrel due to worries about energy demand. Benchmark copper edged back from a decade high of \$9,965 a tonne hit on Tuesday due to some concerns about a possible softening of demand in China, the world's top consumer of the metal.

LOW PRESSURE TO BRING RAINS

Muscat experienced a cloudy day with likely rains, while some areas like Al Ansab and Al Amerat reported hail on Wednesday. Many other governorates had thunderstorms, as there are chances of the influence of the low-pressure system to begin. Cumulative clouds continue to form around the Al Hajar Mountains and the adjacent areas and the coastal areas of the Sea of Oman and Musandam Governorate. Rains of varying intensity and thunderstorms are expected. The effect of a low-pressure system influencing Oman coming from the Mediterranean Sea is expected to begin on Thursday.

DETAILS ON P2

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NEW WAVE SENDS INDIA COVID DEATH TOLL PAST 200,000

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JOHNSON FACES FORMAL PROBE OVER APARTMENT RENOVATION

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HIS MAJESTY ISSUES ROYAL DECREE

Non-resident ambassadors appointed

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday issued a Royal Decree No 41/ 2021 appointing non-resident ambassadors.

Article (1) appoints Dr Ahmed Salim Mohammed Ba'omar, the Sultanate's Ambassador to the Italian Republic as extraordinary and plenipotentiary non-resident Ambassador to the Republic of San Marino.

Article (2) appoints Saleh bin Sulaiman bin Ahmed al Harthy, the Sultanate's Ambassador to the Republic of Kenya as an extraordinary and plenipotentiary non-resident Ambassador to the Republic of Malawi.

Article (3) appoints Dr Mohammed bin Said bin Khalifa al Busaidy, the Sultanate's Ambassador to Japan as extraordinary and plenipotentiary non-resident Ambassador to New Zealand.

Article (4) appoints Saleh bin Mohammed bin Ahmed al Saqri, the Sultanate's Ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as extraordinary and plenipotentiary non-resident Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Article (5) appoints Shaikh Dr Abdullah bin Salim bin Hamad al Harthy, the Sultanate's Ambassador to the Kingdom of the Netherlands as extraordinary and plenipotentiary non-resident Ambassador to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

Article (6) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — **ONA**

Sultanate and Iran agree to promote cooperation

THE COUNTRIES CALL FOR RESPECT OF UN CHARTER

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received on Wednesday Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister of Iran.

The guest conveyed the greetings of President Dr Hassan Rouhani of Iran, along with best wishes of permanent success to His Majesty the Sultan and the government, and the Omani people further progress and growth.

The meeting reviewed the existing bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and means of supporting them in several fields. The meeting also touched on issues of common concern.

The two sides exchanged views on regional and international developments, as well as the efforts exerted in prevailing security and stability in the region to serve peoples' interests and enhance international cooperation.

Meanwhile, a session of talks was held between the governments of the Sultanate and Iran.

The Omani side was headed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, while the Iranian side was led by Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif.

The talks touched on the relations of bilateral cooperation between the two friendly countries.

The talks reaffirmed the joint keenness to promote cooperation in various spheres.

The two sides exchanged views on a range of regional and international issues of common concern.

The two sides also asserted respecting the principal of non-interference in internal affairs of countries, the UN Charter and the international system based on law, equality and justice, as well as backing endeavours of achieving security and stability.

TURN TO P2



HH Sayyid Fahd receives Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif in Muscat on Wednesday. PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI

OMAN SEES BELOW 1,000 CASES

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

While the Sultanate reported below 1,000 daily new cases for the first time in weeks, it also crossed the 2,000-mark death toll on Wednesday.

The Ministry of Health reported 928 new cases, bringing the total number of cases to 192,326, while nine new deaths brought the death toll to 2,001.

Ninety-nine people were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, bringing the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 833, including 275 in intensive care units (ICUs).

The number of ICU patients at Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah went up to 44 on Tuesday, while four of nine deaths reported on Wednesday are from Salalah.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health has decided to temporarily stop all unnecessary surgeries, suspend the leaves of health workers, prevent visits at Sultan Qaboos Hospital and reduce work in specialised clinics up to 30 per cent.

The workforce from the medical and allied medical categories were redistributed, and the hospital's shift schedule was resumed to deal with the growing pressure on medical services.

UK signals self-driving cars could hit road this year

LONDON: Self-driving vehicles could hit the road this year on motorways in Britain, the government said on Wednesday, under plans to permit motorists to temporarily take their hands off the wheel.

The Department for Transport (DfT) said in a statement that it will allow hands-free driving in cars equipped with lane-keeping technology, for use during slow motorway traffic.

Automated Lane-Keeping System (ALKS) technology, which has been internationally adopted for the development of autonomous cars, limits speed to 60 km per hour.

The "first type of self-driving vehicles could be on UK roads by the end of this year", the DfT said Wednesday, adding this could "ease congestion, cut emissions and reduce human error".

Drivers will hand control over to the car, which then automatically monitors speed and keeps a safe distance from other vehicles, but can swiftly resume control when required.

The technology could improve road safety by reducing human error that contributes to more than 85 per cent of accidents, according to the DfT.

"This is a major step for the safe use of self-driving vehicles in the UK, making future journeys greener, easier and more reliable," said Transport Minister Rachel Maclean.

"But we must ensure that this exciting new tech is deployed safely, which is why we are consulting on what the rules to enable this should look like.

"In doing so, we can improve transport for all, securing the UK's place as a global science superpower," she added. — **AFP**



FROM PAGE 1



A session of talks was held on Wednesday between the governments of the Sultanate and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Omani side was headed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, and the Iranian side by Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister of Iran. — ONA

OMAN AND IRAN AGREE TO PROMOTE COOPERATION

The two sides also underscored the importance of resolving issues and disputes by peaceful means and through dialogue between different parties to realise international peace and harmony. Further, the two sides also stressed the importance of continuing consultations and exchanging views between them on different regional and international issues and developments, the foremost of which the Covid-19 pandemic worldwide. The two countries' ministers also underlined the importance of the bilateral and multilateral cooperation, exchanging relevant expertise and information, in addition to enhancing efforts to stem the pandemic. The talks' session was attended by officials from both countries. — ONA

‘Al Khair’ low pressure expected from today

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Muscat experienced a cloudy day with rains, while some areas, like Al Ansab and Al Amerat reported hail on Wednesday. Many other governorates had thunderstorms, as there are chances of the influence of the low-pressure system to begin.

Cumulative clouds continue to form around the Al Hajar Mountains and the adjacent areas and the coastal areas of the Sea of Oman and Musandam Governorate. Rains of varying intensity and thunderstorms are expected.

Cumulus cloud activity has been observed over South Al Batinah, parts of Dakhiliyah, North Al Batinah and Musandam, with possibilities for the rain of varying intensity. According to the Met Office, the flow of clouds may flow over to the Dhofar Governorate bringing in sporadic rains.

“The effect of a low pressure system influencing Oman coming from the Mediterranean Sea is expected to begin on Thursday”, said the weather expert, Mansoor al Shabibi, at the National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre.

He said, “On Wednesday, we have had clear to partly cloudy skies in most of the Sultanate and some places experienced thundershowers and hail storms associated with fresh winds and rain over some areas in the northern part of Oman. The effect of the trough system is expected to begin on Monday.”

The given name for the low-pressure system is Al Khair, Al Shabibi explained, “This name Al Khair has been issued before, and we can combine it with the holy month of Ramadhan which is also a month of ‘Khair’, and that is why this term has been used for the current system.”



Usually, the system formed over the Mediterranean Sea moves towards the Gulf countries and to Oman, bringing in rain associated with fresh wind and hail.

“We also expect the seas to be moderate to rough. When the clouds arrive over the mountains, heavy rains are expected and, at times, thunderstorms. We also expect the wadis to overflow, so one has to be cautious. There can be a reduction in visibility.

Over most of the Sultanate, the wind is expected to be southerly to southeasterly light to moderate.

The sea condition is expected to be slight across Musandam coast and the Oman Sea. At the same time, the Arabian Sea is reported to be slight to moderate with a wave height of 2.0 m.

Horizontal visibility is expected to be poor during thunderstorms, warned the Met Office.

According to weather experts, storms are developing rapidly across the Middle East. Storms are being experienced in Iran, the Horn of Africa, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Oman is to receive their share as well expected to begin on April 29.

Omanisation in large establishments feasible, well-received: Minister

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@vinot_nair

The new labour law has been discussed in detail and will be sent to the Council of Ministers for consideration after it has been reviewed by various authorities, it was revealed on Wednesday.

Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali al Baowain, Minister of Labour, said in an interview that the law was carefully reviewed by a ministerial committee that included members from the ministries of Economy, Finance, Commerce and Industry and Investment Promotion, Justice and Legal Affairs and the Ministry of Labour, in addition to the participation of workers' union and the Oman Chamber of Commerce. It also took into the account the situation of the pandemic, which led to a reduction in the number of workers due to the precautionary measures.

Regarding Omanisation in large commercial establishments, the minister said they are feasible

and well-received. “Some other countries have also completely nationalised these sectors and after a study, we found that it is easy to apply in Oman. Even if there is a need for training, there are solutions and we have opened part-time work students in universities and also for housewives.”

The minister said the Ministry of Labour is not responsible only for employment generation, but it is a regulatory body for the sector, development of human resources, and the improvement of the performance of institutions and individuals.

He said some jobs occupied by expatriates are possible to replace, but for the rest of the jobs it cannot be pressured to replace them at the present time but can be done gradually.

He said the ministry's quarterly report will be issued on Sunday and the previous target was to provide 32,000 job opportunities through replacement and work-related training.

Within three months, “We

have managed 10,000 jobs, including 4,000 jobs in the government sector, 3,000 jobs via appointment procedures. Around 2,000 among them is training associated with employment. He said it is a positive sign despite the challenges.”

The Minister of Labour said that it is not possible to lay off without notifying the ministry, whether it is to end services or reduce wages.

The companies have to invite the workers' union and the Ministry of Labour for a tripartite discussion to present and understand the real reasons behind these procedures.

The ministry was able to stop the layoffs of over 70,000 employees in companies, and that those who were released went protected under the Job Safety Fund.

“Due to the economic situation, there are companies that may go bankrupt and therefore we take the dismissals from them and distribute them in other companies.”

Tender Notice

The Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI), announces following E-Tenders for 2021

Tender Number	Tender Name	Deadline for Specifications Request	Deadline for tender bids	Tender Price
10/2021	Email Security Gateway	11 May 2021	25 May 2021	30 OMR
11/2021	Cisco Phones Management System (IMAGICAL)	11 May 2021	25 May 2021	25 OMR
12/2021	Supply and Installation of Pre-paid Electricity Meters - TAMNI-AT COMPLEX	11 May 2021	25 May 2021	50 OMR

Interested companies registered with Tender Board may obtain Tender document from the E.Tendering website: <http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. Tenders should be submitted online on given website. The Tenderer should enclose scanned copy of bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of (2%) of the Tender value validity for (120) days from the deadline for the tender bids and addressed to the Public Authority for Social Insurance. And original document of the same should be submitted later directly to the Administration Department - Purchase and General Services Section / Third Floor, PASI Head Office in Bawshar.

CORRESPONDANCE:

- Tender inquiry : All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at E-Tendering system (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
- E-Tendering system inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering system technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: Tel : +968 24166670 , E-mail : etenderhd@ita.gov.om

PASI is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other tender that may be received

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■ **OMAN, UK REVIEW TIES**



MUSCAT: Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidi, Minister of Interior, Chairman of the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, received on Wednesday Hamish Cowell, Ambassador of the United Kingdom (UK) to the Sultanate. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed the bilateral relations between the Sultanate and the United Kingdom and discussed several matters of common concern that would enhance the march of relations between the two friendly countries. – **ONA**

Lax in mask use, gatherings drove Covid cases high

KABEER YOUSUF
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A lax approach in the use of face masks, and increased gatherings during and before Ramadhan, has resulted in the surge in Corona cases, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Coming together of people for religious events that involved social gatherings, like Iftar and events like Easter, increased people's chances of being infected through close contacts.

Speaking on the sidelines of the World Immunisation Week press briefing online, Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said that given the possible

gathering on Eid days, sufficient measures should be initiated to dissuade gatherings.

"Adherence to mask use is concerning low, which has resulted in the surge in the number of cases. Utmost care needs to be taken in view of the special Ramadhan days, such as the last ten days and the Eid holidays, to keep people away to reduce infection," Al Mandhari said.

He opined that this year, the development and roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines shed new light on World Immunisation Week.

"It shows us all in real-time just how critical immunisation is to control deadly diseases and save lives."

According to him, there is not

one person in this region who has not been affected by Covid-19, either directly or indirectly. Nor is there any person who has not personally lost a loved one or has heard of others who have lost family members.

"The bleak reality of disease and death is all around us and in our daily lives. I call for a strong reawakening of our collective governmental, social, and individual responsibilities to protect ourselves and others."

Listing the global statistics on the Covid-19 situation, he said the number of cases had jumped manifold in the region. WHO reports indicate that in 2020, Eastern Mediterranean Region reported 5 million cases in total.

DON'T TAKE IT EASY, BUT DON'T PANIC

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

Since the pandemic situation continues to be critical, people need to draw a line between urgency and panic. The three stages of the infection need to be understood and act accordingly.

Those who are in the medical profession are asking people not to take the pandemic easy, at the same time not to panic as it worsens the situation of the patient and the attendant and confuses the treatment procedure.

Internal Medicine practitioner, Dr Harish calls for understanding the three stages of the infection.

"Stage one is when the patient notices the first symptoms of the disease. Instead of denying it the infected person should self-quarantine for seven to 14 days. The infected person should consult his doctor either over phone or meet personally and start taking the prescribed medicines. He has to take nutritious food, be alert and do some physical activity even within the four walls of his room," he said.

He termed the first stage crucial in infection management due to the fact that this is the time one can avoid the situation going from bad to worse. "The infected person should do some breathing exercises to keep oxygen level intact and as soon as there is any deterioration in oxygen level, he should consult hospital."

According to Dr Harish, here comes stage two when saturation



Those who are in the medical profession are asking people not to take the pandemic easy, at the same time not to panic as it worsens the situation of the patient and the attendant and confuses the treatment procedure.

level of oxygen becomes low. "At this stage also don't panic. Follow the doctor's advice and be alert. With proper care and medication the saturation improves and after some time the patient becomes normal. Of course there are issues after becoming Covid-19 negative like, fatigue, weakness, loss of appetite etc. These issues also go in some weeks."

The third stage is mainly among elderly people and people with some chronic morbidity. People with this stage really need hospitalisation and proper medical care under regular supervision.

Dr Harish advises people to understand their level and act

accordingly. "First stage can easily be managed at home with self-quarantine. With this you are not only reducing pressure on the hospitals, you are protecting yourself and family members from any possible infection."

In the current situation everyone needs to follow the pandemic norms. This is in the best interest of the community and humanity that people come out voluntarily for isolation and self-quarantine if they have any doubts of having symptoms of flu, cough, cold and fever. Rushing to the hospital in this situation is not a right call as crowding of any kind even in the hospitals can cause the spread of the virus.

Explained, why the new Covid variant is spreading fast

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The current wave of Covid-19 has changed all the dynamics that were experienced last year. The number of patients is more, and people are getting infected rapidly.

Dr Dilip Singhvi, Specialist in Internal Medicine at Apollo Hospital Muscat, noted that the steep rise in numbers is accompanied by complications increasing in cases ending in mortality.

One of the reasons for this, according to Dr Singhvi, "is the virus' spread, that is 30 per cent faster than last time, and it is 70 per cent deadlier, which explains the rise in death. The world has experienced double mutants, and now we have noticed triple mutants reported in India."

HAVE THE SYMPTOMS CHANGED?

The doctor explained that the main symptoms that were observed with the coronavirus at the beginning are still prevalent. "Fever, headache and body ache, muscle pain, cough, feeling of tiredness, fatigue, and the feeling of drained out, all continue to be present. The new symptoms we are noticing are the cases of loose motions, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, and rash, and out-of-proportion muscle cramps. These are the new symptoms that have come with the new variant," he explained.

Another important factor is the change in age group. "This variant

is now involving more with the adolescent and younger age group than the older virus that was infecting the elderly population more."

And this is why there is a massive increase in infection because the younger population is more mobile. The working population is also younger who are on the move for work, entertainment, etc. Children are also being infected more now.

It is not just symptoms that have increased; the complications due to the Covid-19 infection are taking a new turn.

"As you know Covid-19 is a spectrum. It is a dynamic disease. We have a spectrum of asymptomatic to mild, mild to moderate, moderate to severe, and very severe diseases. So there are five categories of patients."

Usually asymptomatic patients do not need treatment, only isolation at home; even the mild symptoms can be treated at home or as an outpatient or through telemedicine.

They do not require hospital admissions at the most all they need is a visit to the clinic. With other categories such as mild to moderate and severe, these patients will require admission for hospital stay treatment," he noted.

Covid-19 treatment can be expensive. The treatment cost can vary due to the complications which were not widely seen last year.

"There is an increase in patients



in the category of severe cases. That is why hospital admissions have increased. In the last four to five weeks, the numbers have steeply gone up, and the number of hospital admissions has crossed last year's high, as is the case with ICU occupation. Deaths are more. The end result is the cost of treatment going high," he said.

This time doctors came across more cases of clot formations in the brain, heart, lungs, legs, lack of circulations, involvement of kidney, and liver as the urine output decreases.

The liver enzymes tend to go high, which are some of the reasons patients stay longer in hospitals.

The cost goes higher with the severity of the case, and the care one might need. A mild to moderate case might cost a few

hundred Omani Rials, but once the patient becomes moderate to severe, the oxygen requirement might go up.

The major costs are oxygen, ventilator and the injections, and other required services the team that is assigned to the treatment.

"The patient would have to be investigated more extensively and would have to be repeated depending on the severity. If mild cases require two to six litres of oxygen in the second category patients might require 8 to 10 to 12 litres per minute. The severe cases would require the next stage, which is ventilation that could be invasive or noninvasive, this would also increase the ICU stay," he pointed out.

The length of stay depends on the severity and how quickly the patient recovers.

"During this period, we have noticed that people come with severe situations that need a ventilator immediately or within 48 hours," he added.

One crucial factor Dr Singhvi says everyone should be aware of is the current variant is that it brings out the same symptoms of seasonal flu.

"I request all people not to be in denial and not to take the symptoms lightly. Take consultation with your own doctor because it could be Covid, and be aware that you could have transmitted it to others. What I would suggest is that if one develops any of the symptoms, fever, headache, body pain, weakness, tiredness etc please isolate yourself so that you do not pass it on to other family members and do not go to work so that you do not give it to your colleagues. Try to get to a medical facility and get yourself tested."

The test will give us either peace of mind if the test proves you are negative or give you the correct diagnosis for treatment.

This way, we can control the spread of the disease. Many patients are in the mode of denial and are not ready to do the test. This attitude needs to be changed because this would help control the spread of the disease, especially amongst the blue collared workers or employees who work in clusters. If the infected person does not get investigated on time he could give it to others in the camp same in

an office environment," said Dr Singhvi adding that it is important for people to know the symptoms because it is best to control it while it is still at a mild stage as it controls the spread of the disease as well as the spread of the infection.

POST-COVID COMPLICATIONS

Many patients are also undergoing post-Covid complications such as what medical practitioners call as long Covid syndrome. They continue to have shortness of breath, chest discomfort, body ache, and tiredness.

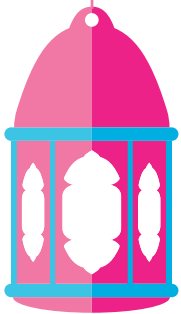
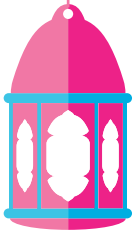
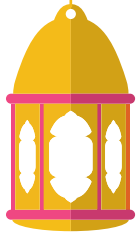
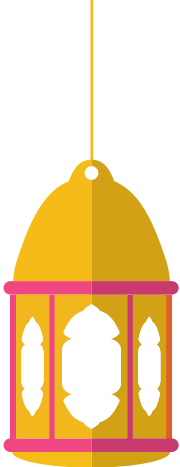
"Many people are going through prolonged weakness post isolation and post-Covid period with some carrying low-grade fever. All of this at times, continues for two to three months. So we counsel the patients. I would advise any patients going through post-Covid syndromes to seek advice from their doctor. People tend to have problems in concentration and remembering things correctly as part of the post-Covid syndrome. The best thing is to talk to your doctor, practice relaxation and meditation techniques to bring back the focus. Usually, the focus will come back, but it takes time, sometimes up to three months. So do not ignore these symptoms as many patients are also experiencing palpitations, anxiety, and disturbed sleep. All of these symptoms are mild and can be brought under control," advised the doctor.



Ramadhan

M U B A R A K

Mass iftars, longer night prayers, special supplications, social gatherings and familial get-togethers have disappeared leaving trails of nostalgia in a state of being lost



Iftar

at home



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The month of Ramadhan is, undoubtedly the month of caring, loving and radiate bonhomie and camaraderie. This year too, the holy month hasn't changed a bit but there's been changes in which we observed the holy month owing to the present pandemic situation. Mass iftars, longer night prayers, special supplications, social gatherings and familial get-togethers which had been the crème de la crème of the season that used to re-enforce the human bonds, bridged the gap between the rich and the poor and cemented human relations have disappeared

leaving trails of nostalgia in a state of being lost. But all that's for a cause, to beat the killer virus from spreading and to save humanity from perils just as the message of the holy Ramadhan is. To ward off dark and bring in light into the lives of people. It was quite a common site while passing by a mosque or any public place in the evenings that people in large numbers assemble and make elaborate preparations for the meal of the day.

Men and women of various ethnic backgrounds, diverse cultural origins, wearing different attires, prepare to share their first meal of the day from a single platter while helping each other with potable water, dates and other delicacies of breaking fast. They stood in perfect unison for prayers in rows reiterating the vow to stay

away from food and drinks and all material pleasures in life during the day and enhanced humanity at the iftar venues. They were unanimous in committing oneself to Allah Almighty and is quite a common scene those days of the holy month of Ramadhan. These places in the Sultanate were home for huge gatherings that emanated a sense of

bonhomie among the believers from, besides the hosting Omanis, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and you name it. They all sat on the mat with dates just a few minutes before the prayer to breakfast, and used to be busy saying prayers for the bounty and generosity of Allah Almighty. While these places, all Masjids, Grand Masjid, Saud Bahwan mosque in Al Wadi Al Kabir, the vast parking lot inside Muttrah Souq, the Clock tower area, and

many other places hosted the public for iftar, hotels welcomed corporate guests to their iftar gatherings enhancing their bonds. "The holy religion of Islam attributes paramount importance to unity, sharing, and give and take so that human race will live in peace and flourish setting models for the generations to come", said Hatim Abdussalam, an Islamic scholar. Truly, these self-controls, the power that believers have on their desires, on the urge to gather being social creatures, too are striking examples of unity, love and compassion for each other which will pave way for speedy recovery of the world from the pandemic.

France detains ex-members of Red Brigades sought by Italy

PARIS: France on Wednesday detained seven former members of left-wing Italian extremist group the Red Brigades, in a gesture ordered by President Emmanuel Macron designed to resolve a long-standing source of tension with Rome.

France has long served as a haven for Red Brigades figures from the 1970s and 80s under a policy set by former Socialist leader Francois Mitterrand, which has caused tensions with Italy.

The so-called "Mitterrand Doctrine", adopted in 1985, offered asylum to the extremists providing they renounced violence and were not wanted in Italy for murder or other "crimes of blood."

A statement from the French presidency said Macron had authorised the detention of seven former Red Brigades figures, while another three were being actively sought.

Without naming them, the statement said they were wanted for the "most serious crimes" but it made clear that Macron had not renounced the Mitterrand Doctrine.

"France, also affected by terrorism, understands the absolute necessity of providing justice for victims," the



This file photograph taken on March 16, 1978, shows crowds gathering near the site where five-time Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was kidnapped, near his home in Rome. — AFP

statement said.

"With this transfer, it is also part of the urgent need to build a Europe of justice in which mutual confidence must be at the centre."

Ultra-leftist groups like the Red Brigades sowed chaos during the period in Italy known as the "Years of Lead" — named after the number of bullets fired — from the late 1960s to mid-1980s.

The Red Brigades were the most notorious and were

responsible for kidnappings and murders, including of former prime minister Aldo Moro in 1978.

DIPLOMATIC TENSIONS

The presence of hundreds of figures in France who are wanted by Italy for violent crimes has caused tensions between the two neighbours for decades.

In 2019, far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini said he would write to Macron "to ask

him to stop allowing terrorists who have massacred Italians to be free to drink champagne."

Relations between France and Italy were at a historic low at the time over a range of issues, but Macron sees new Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi as a close pro-EU ally.

Draghi expressed his "satisfaction" in a statement, adding that the "perpetrators of very serious acts of terrorism have left wounds that are still open. — AFP

Iran audio leak sought to sow 'discord' amid N-talks: Rouhani

TEHRAN: An audiotape of Iran's top diplomat bemoaning the military's influence was leaked to sow "discord" during talks focused on reviving an international nuclear deal, President Hassan Rouhani said on Wednesday after the recording stirred domestic controversy.

The recording of Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was published by media outside Iran, triggering a heated debate inside the country ahead of presidential elections.

The talks in Vienna are aimed at getting the United States to return to the agreement it abandoned under former president Donald Trump, lift sanctions, and Iran to resume full compliance with nuclear obligations it retreated from in response.

Rouhani said the audio was leaked just as the Vienna talks were "at the height of their success so that it creates discord inside" the Islamic republic.

"We can only lift sanctions through unity," the president said.

Zarif has been under fire since the audiotape emerged on Sunday, with comments he made about



Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' foreign operations arm who was killed in a US airstrike last year, hitting a nerve.

"In the Islamic republic the military field rules," Zarif said in the recording, quoted by the *New York Times*. "I have sacrificed diplomacy for the military field rather than the field servicing diplomacy."

Zarif, seen as the architect of the 2015 nuclear accord, has been mentioned as a possible contender in the June 18 presidential election, although he has said he does not plan to run.

Another potential candidate, parliament speaker Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, weighed in on the issue on Wednesday, saying "We are sensitive on Haj Qasem". — AFP



Electronic Tender(s)

Majan Electricity Co. (SAOC) Announces the Following E-Tenders

Tender No.	Description	Grade	Last Date for Buying	Submission Date	Tender Price R.O.
59/2021	INTERLINK 11KV FEEDER FOR ASWAD PSS AT SHINAS IN NORTH ALBATINAH	C	3/5/2021	11/5/2021	25 /=
60/2021	UPGRADING FIZAH PSS FROM 3X6MVA TO 2X20MVA WITH 33KV FEEDERS INTERLINKS FROM SHINAS GRID (NORTH BATINAH GOVERNORATE)	A	10/5/2021	25/5/2021	735 /=
61/2021	UPGRADING AND RECONSTRUCTION OF SIET-2 PSS FROM 2X20 MVA TO 3X20 MVA WITH ONE NEW 33KV FEEDER FROM LIWA-2 GRID STATION (NORTH BATINAH GOVERNORATE)	A	10/5/2021	25/5/2021	752 /=
62/2021	REPLACE OF EXISTING 2X3MVAR TO NEW 2X3MVAR CAPACITOR BANKS AT WADI AHIN PRIMARY SUBSTATION (NORTH AL-BATINAH GOVERNORATE)	B	9/5/2021	18/5/2021	26 /=
63/2021	SUPPLY AND INSTALLATION OF A FULLY AUTOMATIC SYSTEM NON-MOBILE STATION METER TESTING SYSTEM TEST BENCH OF 15 POSITIONS	Specialized	6/5/2021	18/5/2021	60 /=
64/2021	PROVISION OF CLEANING SERVICE FOR MJEC OFFICES IN AL BATINAH NORTH GOVERNORATE & MUSCAT FOR TWO YEARS	Specialized	11/5/2021	25/5/2021	40 /=

Interested Firm having relevant experience in the similar nature of services and registered with Tender Board and Distribution Code Review Panel (DCRP) for electrical work, may register and obtain the tender documents from **E-Tendering Site** <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against online payment of non-refundable fees mentioned above for each tender.

The Tenderers should enclose a copy of Bank Guarantee issued by any registered bank in the Sultanate of Oman for a value of (1%) of the submitted bid value valid for a period of (90) days from the date of Submission, and addressed to The Chairman of the Tender Committee. The original Bid Bond to be delivered in sealed envelope, and the tender number and title of project only are to be mentioned on the envelopes. The place of submission the original bond would be at **MJEC Contracts & tenders office at MJEC building in Al Sawari Center in Sohar or at MJEC Contracts & tenders office at Muscat in Al Mubailah- opposite to the industrial Area beside to Bank Suhar, before 10 A.M.** according to the assigned date of submission of the tender. Any Submission of original tender bond after the time and date mentioned in the advertisement will not be accepted and tenderer offer will be rejected.

The Completed signed and sealed commercial and technical offer with all tender documents should be submitted and uploaded online into the above mentioned E-Tendering website. The Hard copies of the tender document are not accepted.

For any technical assistance please contact
Helpdesk: +968-24166670
E-mail: etenderhd@ita.gov.om

Preference of awarding the tender will be given to those bidders who achieved a high percentage of purchasing from local products & and have a high level percentage of Omanization.

**The Company is not bound to consent the lowest Bid or any other Tenders.
"WITH ELECTRICITY WE PROGRESS PLEASE AVOID EXTRAVAGANCE IN CONSUMPTION"**



شركة كهرباء مجان (ش.م.ع.)
Majan Electricity Company (SAOC)
إحدى شركات مجموعة ناما
Member of Nama Group

Majan Electricity Company S.A.O.C

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PC 311, Sultanate of Oman
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Saudi crown prince for centralising policy making

DUBAI: Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in a televised interview that he will further centralise policy making, to ensure the success of his drive to diversify the economy.

In the interview, aired on Saudi TV late on Tuesday, he said the kingdom had set up a Budget Bureau to take over setting the state budget from the finance ministry, and would by the end of this year launch a new Policies Office.

The moves continue a shift of policy decisions away from traditional bodies such as the finance ministry and central bank, which began with the formation of a Council of Economic and Development Affairs, headed by the prince, after his father King Salman took the throne in 2015.

"Policies today are being translated by committees but in the future the dedicated office ... will issue orders to ministries to implement the prepared strategy with clear roles and objectives," he said.

—Reuters

National Real Estate Development and Investments Co. (SAOG)

P.O. Box 84, Muscat-100, Sultanate of Oman - Phone: 24702133/24701454, Fax: 24703826, C.R.No. 1/02478/7

DIRECTOR'S REPORT FOR THE THREE-MONTH ENDED 31st MARCH 2021

Respected shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I present herewith the result of National Real Estate Development and Investments Co. (SAOG) for the first three-month period ended 31st March 2021.

Operational Result

The Company recorded an un-audited net loss of RO. 7,528 up to the 1st quarter ended March 2021 versus (2020: RO. 7,711 loss). There was no revenue and no volume up to 31st March 2021.

Finally, on behalf of the shareholders and the Board I wish to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tareq Bin Taimour for his wise leadership and guidance.

For the Board of Directors
Chairman

NOTE: The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder on request either in Arabic or English within 7 days of receipt of the request.

UNAUDITED & PROVISIONAL BALANCE SHEET AS AT 31st MARCH 2021

	2021 RO	2020 RO
EMPLOYMENT OF FUNDS:		
Non Current Asset	7,200,000	9,383,054
Current Assets	193,217	218,489
Current Liabilities	956	1,652
Net Current Assets	192,261	216,837
	7,392,261	9,599,891

FUNDS EMPLOYED:

Share Capital	1,762,500	1,762,500
Legal reserve	507,275	507,275
Revaluation reserve	5,937,254	7,637,254
Retained earnings	(1,894,203)	(1,686,573)
	6,312,826	8,220,456
Non-current liabilities	1,079,435	1,379,435
	7,392,261	9,599,891

UNAUDITED & PROVISIONAL PROFIT & LOSS ACCOUNT FOR THE PERIOD 1st JANUARY TO 31st MARCH 2021

	2021 RO	2020 RO
Sales	-	-
Cost of Sales	-	-
Gross Profit	-	-
Other Operating Income	1,117	1,277
Expenses before Depreciation	(8,646)	(8,988)
Profit before Depreciation	(7,528)	(7,711)
Depreciation	-	-
Net profit/(loss) after Depreciation	(7,528)	(7,711)



Ministry of
Higher Education,
Research &
Innovation

ELECTRONIC TENDER

The Internal Tenders Committee of Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation (MOHERI) announces the tendering of the tender shown in the following table:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Company that are Entitled to Participate	Tender Price	Last Date for Purchasing Tender	The Deadline for Submission of Tenders
02/2/2021	Providing Cleaning and Gardening Services to Al Khabourah Vocational College of Marine Science	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade Excellent First: Second, Third, Fourth	25/= RO	15/05/2021	04/06/2021
03/2021	Providing cleaning services to Saham Vocational College	Specialized in providing Same service and registered with the Tender Board with Grade: Second, Third, Fourth	25/= RO	15/05/2021	04/06/2021

The purchasing of the tender documents by E-Tendering system will start on **Monday 26/04/2021** at 09:00 am. To purchasing, please visit the following link:

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

All companies that are bidding must provide a bank guarantee or a certified cheque from a bank operating in the Sultanate for at least (1%) of the tender value on behalf of His Excellency Dr. / Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee.

Preference will be given to companies' or small and medium enterprises registered with the General Authority for the development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) that includes the largest proportion of its tender Omanization.

Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.

Chairman of tender committee

Ministry of Higher Education Research & Innovation



CONDOLENCES

The Partners, Management and Staff of
Bin Hayl Group

express their heartfelt condolences to the
Family Members

On the sad demise of
SAEED SALEEM KHAWAR

Chairman, Bin Hayl Group



May God Almighty bless the
departed soul with eternal peace and
grant enough strength to all family
members to bear this irreparable loss.



In brief

■ JAKARTA



INDONESIA SAYS 10 KILLED IN GUN BATTLE WITH PAPUA REBELS

At least 10 people were killed in a gun battle between police and rebels in Indonesia's restive Papua region, authorities said, in an apparent retaliation for the execution of a top intelligence chief. The shootout on Tuesday in remote Puncak district ended with nine guerrillas and a police officer dead, police said.

"We ambushed the area after confirming their whereabouts," Papua police spokesman Ahmad Musthofa Kamal said on Wednesday. Police said they believed the dozens-strong rebel faction was responsible for the Sunday slaying of General I Gusti Putu Danny Karya Nugraha, who headed Papua's intelligence agency. — **AFP**

■ NEW DELHI



MAGNITUDE-6.0 QUAKE HITS INDIA'S ASSAM, DAMAGES BUILDINGS

A magnitude-6.0 earthquake struck India's north-eastern state of Assam on Wednesday damaging buildings and infrastructure but no immediate casualties were reported. The quake was recorded 10.9 kilometres north-north-west of the town of Dhekiajuli at a depth of 34 km around 0221 GMT, the US Geological Survey said.

The European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre earlier said the quake measured 6.1 on the Richter scale. The temblor was followed by four aftershocks ranging between 4.9 and 3.6 magnitudes.

Local media reported that a few people had been injured in the quake. — **dpa**

■ BEIJING



CHINA TO REPORT FIRST POPULATION DROP IN FIVE DECADES

China is poised to report its first population decline in five decades following a once-in-a-decade census, the Financial Times newspaper said, citing sources familiar with the matter.

A population drop will add pressure on Beijing to roll out measures to encourage couples to have more children and avert an irreversible decline.

The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), which is due to release the results of the census conducted late last year in early April, did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment. — **Reuters**

Relentless new wave sends India Covid death toll past 200,000

NEW DELHI: India's coronavirus death toll crossed 200,000 on Wednesday as a relentless wave of new cases swamped hospitals and sent desperate families out into the streets of the capital in search of oxygen supplies and medicine.

Infection and death rates are soaring in the vast country of 1.3 billion, in contrast with the United States and some European nations taking tentative steps back towards a normal life.

The virus has now killed more than 3.1 million people worldwide, with India driving the latest surge, recording 360,000 new infections — a global record — and over 3,000 deaths on Wednesday.

In the capital New Delhi, car parks have been converted to crematoriums and the soaring body count has sparked a shortage of wood for funeral pyres.

Desperate relatives of the sick are crowding outside hospitals and pharmacies in search of treatment and medicines, often in vain.

Arriving in cars, rickshaws and ambulances, patients and their families desperate for oxygen flocked to a tent outside a Sikh place of worship on the outskirts of the capital this week.



Workers are seen sorting oxygen cylinders that are being used for Covid-19 coronavirus patients before dispatching them to hospitals at a facility on the outskirts of Amritsar on Wednesday. — **AFP**

Priyanka Mandal, 30, had been searching for oxygen for her mother since she became sick a week ago.

"Medicines are also not available... I've visited five, six big medical stores," she said.

"No matter how much time it takes, I have to wait here... I only have my mum."

Despite the rising cases, on Tuesday around 25,000 people took part in the final bathing day at the Kumbh Mela religious

gathering in the northern town of Haridwar, drawn to the banks of the Ganges by an "auspicious" full moon, festival official Harbeer Singh said.

The gathering has attracted millions of pilgrims, mostly without masks, sparking criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government for allowing it to go ahead.

NEW VARIANT

A variant of the virus feared to be contributing to the

A variant of the virus feared to be contributing to the catastrophic wave in India has now been found in more than a dozen countries, the World Health Organization said

catastrophic wave in India has now been found in more than a dozen countries, the World Health Organization said Tuesday.

Many nations have rushed to help, sending desperately needed oxygen and aid.

As part of the global effort, Singapore said Wednesday it had sent two plane-loads of oxygen supplies.

India also appears to be a leading contender for some of the millions of AstraZeneca vaccine doses the United States has said it will export.

Despite the crisis worsening in India and other parts of Asia, the Asian Development Bank on Wednesday raised its growth forecast for developing countries in the region. — **AFP**

Pakistan witnesses deadliest day since start of pandemic

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan on Wednesday reported its highest number of daily coronavirus-related deaths amid fears that the country may face a situation similar to neighbouring India.

The South Asian country recorded 201 deaths within the last 24 hours, making it the deadliest day since the pandemic began.

The death toll now stands at 17,530, according to the Health Ministry. The total number of cases reached 810,231 with the addition of 5,292 new infections.

A steady surge in new infections - with a more than 10-per-cent positivity rate of



A man receives a dose of Covid-19 vaccine, as others wait for their turn, at a vaccination centre in Karachi, on Wednesday. — **Reuters**

those tested for the coronavirus - pushed the authorities to put megacities under lockdown.

Provincial governments have

been asked to make arrangements for the imposition of a complete lockdown, from next week, in 20 major cities, a Health Ministry

spokesperson said.

Meanwhile, the authorities announced a blanket ban on tourism and inter-provincial transport during the upcoming Eid holidays. The government has already called in the military to enforce restrictions.

The new surge is overwhelming hospitals across the country, whereas oxygen suppliers have warned of extreme shortages.

The Pakistan Medical Association has asked the government for the imposition of more restrictions to contain the spread and to avoid a situation similar to India. — **dpa**

Myanmar junta launches fresh air raids in rebel territory

BANGKOK: Myanmar's military launched air assaults for the second day in a row into the rebel-held territory after gunfire was heard from neighbouring Thailand, a Thai official said on Wednesday, as fighting escalates along the border.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the junta ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a February 1 coup, its power grab angering much of its population.

The anti-junta movement has also garnered some support from some ethnic rebel groups, which controls territory along Myanmar's border regions.

The Karen National Union (KNU), one of the most prominent, has been among the junta's most vocal opponents — blasting the junta for violence against anti-coup protesters.

Clashes with the military in KNU's territory along the eastern border have increased since February 1, with the junta deploying air assaults last month — the first instance in Karen



Ethnic minority Karen troops are seen after setting fire to a building inside a Myanmar army outpost near the Thai border, which is seen from the Thai side on the Thanlwin, also known as Salween, riverbank in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand, on Wednesday. — **Reuters**

state in over 20 years.

The KNU's Fifth Brigade on

Tuesday attacked and razed an army base on the banks of

the Salween River — which demarcates a border between

HK passes immigration bill with 'exit ban' powers

HONG KONG: Hong Kong passed a new immigration law on Wednesday that includes powers to stop people entering or leaving the city, raising fears Chinese mainland-style "exit bans" could be deployed in the international business hub. The legislation sailed through a legislature now devoid of opposition.

Activists, lawyers and some business figures have sounded the alarm over various provisions within the bill, including one that allows the city's immigration chief to bar people from boarding planes to and from the city.

No court order is required and there is no recourse to appeal.

The city's influential Bar Association (HKBA) warned the bill's wording gave "apparently unfettered power" to the immigration director.

Speaking after the bill was passed on Wednesday, labour activists and legal critics said the legislature had ignored concerns about the law's broad wording and said they feared exit bans could now be employed in Hong Kong.

"When they have this power, absolute power, you don't know who they will use it on," barrister Chow Hang-tung, from the pro-democracy Hong Kong Alliance, told reporters after the bill was passed.

Hong Kong's government said the immigration bill was needed to address a backlog of non-refoulement claims and to screen illegal immigrants before they depart for the city.

"It will only apply to flights heading to Hong Kong," the Security Bureau said.

However, the wording of the bill does not limit the power to arriving flights or immigrants and legal experts say it could also be deployed against anyone leaving or arriving in Hong Kong. — **AFP**

European Parliament closes Brexit saga with vote

BRUSSELS: The European Parliament on Wednesday overwhelmingly ratified the EU's post-Brexit trade deal with Britain, but promised to keep a close eye on London with cross-channel hostility still high.

A big majority of MEPs approved the bare bones trade deal with the bloc's third-biggest trading partner that was sealed on Christmas Eve after nine months of tough negotiations.

The agreement provides the framework for London's new relationship with the 27-member union, five years after British voters shocked the world by voting to end its 47-year membership.

In the final tally, 660 MEPs voted in favour of the trade deal, five against with 32 abstentions, results released on Wednesday showed.

"The European Parliament voted on the most far reaching agreement the EU has ever reached with a third country," said the president of the assembly,

A big majority of MEPs approved the bare bones trade deal with the bloc's third-biggest trading partner that was sealed on Christmas Eve after nine months of tough negotiations

David Sassoli.

"This can form the foundation on which we build a new forward-looking EU-UK relationship," he said, warning that MEPs would monitor the implementation of the deal and "not accept any backsliding from the UK government."

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson hailed the "final step in a long journey" that brought "stability to our new relationship



Flags of the Union Jack and the EU ahead of the Britain's Prime Minister's meeting on a post Brexit trade deal with the European Commission President, in Brussels. — AFP file photo

with the EU as vital trading partners, close allies and sovereign equals."

"Now is the time to look forward to the future and to building a more Global Britain," he added.

'REAL TEETH'

The vote comes amid

multiple feuds over the UK's implementation of Brexit agreements and angry finger-pointing about the supply of the Covid-19 vaccine from AstraZeneca.

Deepening tensions further, France has threatened to block UK financial firms doing business

in the EU if the London does not respect its commitments on fishing, a key part of the deal.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen "warmly welcomed" the approval, but in a final debate in parliament on Tuesday, assured MEPs that the agreement had "real teeth" and the legal means to keep the UK in check.

"Let me be very clear: We do not want to have to use these tools, but we will not hesitate to use them if necessary."

Britain's Brexit minister David Frost said he "hugely" welcomed the vote to approve the deal he helped negotiate during months of fraught talks with EU counterpart Michel Barnier.

"Hope we can now begin a new chapter together as Europeans, characterised by friendly cooperation between sovereign equals," Frost wrote on Twitter.

In a tweet, Barnier thanked MEPs for the "big greenlight" and said both sides now had a "joint responsibility" to respect

commitments.

ZERO TARIFFS

The vote ends five years of a Brexit saga in which Britain and Europe also sealed a divorce deal that bitterly divided the UK and saw the future of peace on the island of Ireland thrust into doubt.

A recent wave of rioting in the British province of Northern Ireland has been blamed on the fallout of Brexit arrangements with talks underway in Brussels and London to find a long-term solutions.

Britain left the EU on January 30 2020, but its new life with Europe only really began after a transition period ended on December 31, when London was no longer bound by the bloc's laws and rules.

Officially called a trade and cooperation agreement (TCA), the deal has been provisionally applied since January 1 and provides for zero tariffs and zero quotas on goods traded between the EU and UK. — AFP

US says vaccinated people can go mask-free outdoors



A woman not wearing a face mask speaks on the phone as she walks past the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on Tuesday. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Americans vaccinated against Covid-19 no longer need to mask up outdoors when there is no crowd, President Joe Biden said on Tuesday, before celebrating by taking his first short walk at the White House without the face covering.

Biden told the nation in televised remarks from the leafy North Lawn that "stunning progress" has been made in getting vaccines administered and that stringent mask recommendations can now be relaxed.

"For those who haven't gotten their vaccination yet, especially if you're younger, or thinking you don't need it, this is another great

reason to go get vaccinated. Now. Now," Biden said.

He was speaking shortly after the Centers for Disease Control notified fully vaccinated Americans that they can go mask-free most of the time outdoors.

"If you are fully vaccinated, you can start doing many things that you had stopped doing because of the pandemic," the CDC said in a statement.

Masks are still considered necessary for vaccinated people if they are at concerts, parades or large sporting events, even when outdoors, the CDC said.

Indoor activities also remain under a masks recommendation.

This includes movie theatres and even "uncrowded" indoor shopping centres and museums, the CDC said.

STUDENT CURBS EASED

The Biden administration on Tuesday said it was easing restrictions on Chinese and other students travelling to the United States this fall, potentially helping colleges whose enrolments declined during the coronavirus pandemic.

The US State Department said it was expanding its national interest exemptions to cover students and academics from around the world from August 1. — Agencies

Johnson faces formal probe into funding of apartment renovation

LONDON: Britain's Electoral Commission has opened an investigation into the financing of the refurbishment of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's apartment, saying there were grounds to suspect an offence may have been committed.

Eight days before local elections across England and for the election of the Welsh and Scottish regional assemblies, Johnson is facing a stream of allegations about everything from his muddled initial handling of the Covid-19 crisis to questions about who leaked what from his office.

"We are now satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to suspect that an offence or offences may have occurred," the Electoral Commission said of the financing of the apartment above Number 11 Downing Street where Johnson resides.

"We will therefore continue this work as a formal investigation to establish whether this is the case," the commission said.

The investigation will determine whether any transactions relating to the works fall within the regime regulated by the commission and whether such funding was reported as required.

If it finds that an offence has occurred, and that there is sufficient evidence, then the



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson waves as he leaves Downing Street in London, on Wednesday. — Reuters

commission can issue a fine or refer the matter to the police.

Asked who paid the initial invoices for the refurbishment, Johnson said he had covered the costs and he had conformed in full with the code of conduct and ministerial code.

"The answer is I have covered the costs," said Johnson under questioning in parliament from opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer, who cast Johnson as "Major Sleaze".

Though Johnson has over the years repeatedly weathered gaffes, crises over Brexit and disclosures about his adultery, he is now grappling with an array of accusations which opponents say show that he is unfit for office and

that his government is riddled by sleaze and cronyism.

His supporters deny he has done anything wrong and say he is focused on the Covid-19 crisis. Starmer said Johnson had been selecting wallpaper for 840 pounds (\$1,164) a roll in the middle of the crisis.

Asked last month about the refurbishment, Johnson's spokeswoman said all donations and gifts were properly declared, and that no Conservative Party funds were used to pay for it.

Johnson has a taxpayer-funded 30,000 pound (\$42,000) allowance each year for maintaining and furnishing his official residence, but anything above that must be met by the prime minister. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

NORTH CAROLINA

Black man hit with 'kill shot' to back of head

Lawyers for the family of a Black man gunned down by sheriff's deputies last week in North Carolina said a private autopsy showed he died from a "kill shot" to the back of his head, and the FBI on Tuesday opened a civil rights probe of the shooting.

Andrew Brown Jr, 42, was struck by four bullets to his right arm before the fatal shot penetrated the rear of his skull as he tried to drive away, attorneys for his relatives



told a news conference in Elizabeth City, a riverfront community near the Virginia border where last Wednesday's shooting took place. — Reuters

MOSCOW

Russia expels 7 EU envoys over 'solidarity'

Moscow on Wednesday expelled seven European diplomats after their countries ordered Russian diplomats to leave in solidarity with the Czech Republic, which is engulfed in a diplomatic row with Russia. The Czech government had accused Russian security services of being behind a deadly explosion at an arms depot in Czech Republic in 2014.

It expelled a number of Russian diplomats over the allegations, with Slovakia and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia



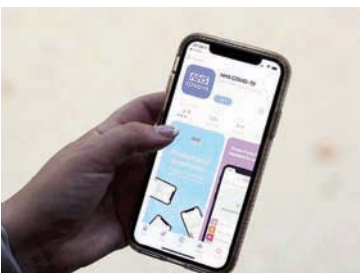
and Lithuania following suit in solidarity. Russia's foreign ministry said a total of four diplomats from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have been declared "persona non grata". — AFP

LONDON

Health service app as vaccine passport

Britain plans to use a National Health Service phone app as its Covid-19 'vaccine passport' certificate that will allow its population to travel internationally this summer.

Countries around the world are looking at a host of options that will serve as proof of Covid-19 vaccinations to allow travel, though airports, border agencies and airlines are worried there will be no clear global standard that will be accepted at all borders. So-called vaccine



passports could range from a digital certificate with a scannable QR code in the European Union, to a National Health Service (NHS) phone app in the United Kingdom. — Reuters

Accelerated physical, mental and virtual changes...

The sooner we recognise that changes are going to last, is better. Many times it is wiser to embrace than to fight against them. Or as some would say: Just go on with it!

Changes are constant — can take weeks, months, or even decades, but when these changes are fast and profound, individuals might challenge or repudiate. People's different perspectives, the listening, and learning have to be on the table. Changes go hand-in-hand with engagement, participation and understanding. The processes of consultations when not considered might have risky consequences.

But why should we care that many aspects of our lives, the way we knew it has already been modified? Simply because our interactions and relationships have been refashioned. Cultural and social institutions have been adapting to a new sphere, and as a consequence, so our lives.

We are chasing the sun — metaphorically speaking about social and cultural changes. It reminds me of Icarus, in Greek mythology, who thought he could escape the island of Crete by flying towards the sun; well, he ended up dead — drowned in the sea.

Let us put the sun apart for now, and look into more realistic and down-to-earth structural changes. For example, working from home



Sonia Ambrosio
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THE NEED FOR INDIVIDUALS TO OWN AND USE A SMARTPHONE. BESIDES, IF ONE DOES NOT HAVE A SMARTPHONE WITH AN INTERNET CONNECTION, HE/SHE CANNOT BUY OR PAY FOR SERVICES

has become a 24/7 routine. Virtual meetings are increasing substantially. The need for individuals to own and use a smartphone. Besides, if one does not have a smartphone with an Internet connection, he/s cannot buy or pay for services.

Banking, driving licence, medical appointment, booking hotels, groceries are just some of the changes we are having to cope with — we are pressed to learn and apply it quickly, otherwise, there are consequences for not being updated on payments, registers, and so on. We are being made dependents on smartphones! Fortunately, Chile has the largest lithium reserves in the world! Everything seems to be for yesterday.

The tomorrow — ah, that might be too late; things might have changed by then! With so much hurry to catch up with the latest telecommunications technology, surveillance technologies, software able to read deleted messages, high level of tracking social activities and health data, something is being overlooked and that is deliverance. How many times we have heard “we call you back” or “we will contact you” — and nothing happens! Every business initiative is running after profit: Making money, develop, grow and with this in mind, the rush to sell, to have contracts signed. Failures of service performance can be translated into losses. It is noticeable

that today's consumers are highly impatient. Perhaps, it is a consequence of the steamy changes happening around us.

An upside-down view of the world these days is greatly confusing. For a long time, physical activities have been linked to a better healthy life. Then, we are told the parks, gyms, beaches, are all closed to protect our health. How to make sense of the changes that many times do not fall within average rationality? Many will drink more, smoke like a chain, sleep all the time, sitting all day! Without mentioning domestic violence.

Now, should we blame the accelerated changes to the fact that the earth is spinning faster around its axis — and probably affecting the human's brain? For the first time, scientists talk about a possible negative leap second subtract. If it comes to that, in June 2021, data applications, telecommunications systems, time distribution services will be highly affected. So our smartphones! The moon and the sun can still be revered, but nature is setting the stage. It doesn't matter the size of the boat or how good a swimmer is, the increasingly complex social structures between the physical, mental and virtual world point to one direction: Changes are inevitable, but it would be helpful to adjust to them in a slower pace.

LIFE IS PRECIOUS

Indian migrants flee Covid-hit cities again

ROLI SRIVASTAVA

Amid India's Covid-19 crisis, migrant workers are abandoning cities and heading for their villages in droves in a repeat of last year's exodus when the lockdown shut industries and left them jobless — but this time they are worried about safety.

India's toll from the coronavirus surged past 200,000 on Wednesday with nearly 18 million people infected, according to government data, with the cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Surat and Bangalore under lockdown.

Healthcare facilities have been overwhelmed, with hospitals over-run and shortages of oxygen, medical supplies and hospital staff.

“I was reading about all the cases and the deaths and getting worried. I still had work but I didn't want to stay in the city”, said Sanjit Kumar, 30, who left Surat in western India last week on a train for his village in eastern Bihar.

“Last year I had gone back on a truck. But this time, I didn't want to wait for a complete lockdown. I was getting scared looking at messages of deaths on WhatsApp”, he said by phone from his village.

India's strict lockdown measures last year, such as severing transport links, took a toll

on the nation's estimated 100 million migrant workers, triggering an exodus from cities where they worked in garment factories, building sites and brick kilns. Hundreds died in road accidents while walking, cycling and travelling in trucks and vans in intense heat,

I was reading about all the cases and the deaths and getting worried. I still had work but I didn't want to stay in the city

SANJIT KUMAR

A worker from Bihar

charities said.

As the second wave of Covid-19 started sweeping through India last month, migrants who had returned to work after months of staying jobless again began a hasty retreat, fearing transport services could again get suspended.

At least three migrant workers died when an overcrowded bus from Delhi overturned in central India, local media reported.

But officials and campaigners said the impact of the lockdown this year was not as severe as in 2020 because industries had not been shut entirely and trains remained operational.

The government this month revived migrant worker helplines that were set up last April and announced financial assistance for employers who hire those who lost work in the pandemic.

“The volume of incoming calls on our helplines is not as much as last year. We have also told employers to hold on to workers”, said D P S Negi, India's Chief Labour Commissioner.

“There is not as much panic in the minds of people since transport services are not shut. The government is more prepared this time than last year.”

Until a few weeks ago, migrant rights non-profit Gram Vikas in eastern Odisha state had linked workers with jobs in Kerala and arranged transport for them but that has stopped.

Many of them have now booked tickets to return to their villages as infections at workplaces have spiked and many fear contracting the infection, the charity's officials said. “We are shifting gears to save lives now. We will use our resources to bring them back and quarantine. We are not motivating them to stay back in cities”, said Liby Johnson of Gram Vikas. — Thomson Reuters Foundation

SILENCE PAYS

Regulating driving schools in the Sultanate...

There are certain areas of work in Oman which need to be regulated. Driving schools are one among them. There are no specific rules and regulations for them so far. This vocation or area of work is riddled with chaos which is prominently reflected in its method of training and prices. This leads to exploitation of those who want to learn driving. They have no way out except to remain patient. Those who train them sometime even make fun of their hardships of learning.

They go through this ordeal hoping that someday they will learn to drive properly and their life will be easier. But everything is at the mercy of the trainer. The objective is to get a driving licence and this forces many of them to remain silent.

Also, the learner knows that any problem with the trainer will leave him nowhere, but in the middle of a thorny road. In that case, they would have to begin from zero. Therefore, their wisdom says that keep silence in the pursuit of the goal.

This situation makes it important that there should be some rules and regulations for driving schools, where the dealings should be civilised and



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THE LEARNER KNOWS THAT ANY PROBLEM WITH THE TRAINER WILL LEAVE HIM NOWHERE, BUT IN THE MIDDLE OF A THORNY ROAD

there should be a moral responsibility. There should be evaluation by any reputed and approved organisation which has full capacity to do evaluation and correct them if there are any faults. The authority should have the power to act if the required corrections are not made. This is the only way to protect trainees from exploitation. At the same time, this is how the trainer will get justified wages which commensurate with his efforts to bring quality in training process.

Once I was listening to a BBC radio programme. That particular episode was about driving schools. During the talk, it was told that there is a rule in Germany that those who learn driving are trained in first aid and how to help those injured during road accidents as some knowledge is required to get a driving licence. These things are in addition to traffic rules and regulations, awareness about safe driving and other related issues.

The crux of the matter is that we need to regulate the profession. Without any course in first aid or checking awareness level, the training of driving is not complete. But the situation today is adverse, you would not find any trainees who has no complaint about

the training school or the trainer. They would always complain about high rate or huge advance money.

As far as the places where driving is taught, they lack even the least requirements. It is just the efforts of the coach which they make to train people to learn driving successfully. But the task is so herculean that it is as if the person is being trained to fly F-16. Both the coach and the trainee have to go through an ordeal for this.

When I am writing this, I do not generalise. There are trainers who do justice with their task with full honesty. They are making their personal reputation better that their dealings are fair, and they do their job reliably. Therefore, they are not blamed for any unfair practices. We feel that they should be compensated in a better way.

In view of this situation, we feel that there is a dire need for giving any authority the responsibility to take care of this profession. There should be clear rules and regulations to run it. This is important to improve the quality of driving on roads, avoid road accidents, control the behaviour of people behind the wheels and make those who want to learn driving fully satisfied.

BENZEMA VOLLEY PEGS BACK CHELSEA

REAL KEEP HOPES WITH 1-1 DRAW IN SEMIFINAL FIRST LEG

MADRID: Karim Benzema came to Real Madrid's rescue again on Tuesday, his acrobatic volley earning them a 1-1 draw against an impressive Chelsea side in the first leg of the Champions League semifinal.

Christian Pulisic grabbed Chelsea a deserved away goal in a soaking wet contest at Valdebebas but they might regret not pulling away, with the struggling Timo Werner again missing a golden chance.

It means Madrid will be satisfied too, after recovering from a chastening opening half an hour before Benzema's brilliance left the tie in the balance.

Eden Hazard was given 24 minutes off the bench against his former club but despite some twinkling touches, he was unable to add a late twist. "It's always good to play against friends," Hazard told BT Sport afterwards.

By the time the Belgian entered the contest, it was drifting, the early adrenaline lost, with both teams seemingly content to defer to the return leg at Stamford Bridge next Wednesday.

Benzema's goal was his 71st in the Champions League, making him the joint-fourth top scorer in the competition's history with Raul, behind only Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Robert Lewandowski.

When Real Madrid were suffering, and in the absence of the injured Sergio Ramos, Benzema was the one dragging his team back into this match, at times through sheer force of will.

With Werner clearly short of confidence, the Frenchman's precision at the other end could yet prove the difference.

"We should have won the first half," said Chelsea coach Thomas Tuchel. "We should have scored at least one more."

"The result is fair," said Zinedine Zidane. "Our first half wasn't the best, their pressure caused us difficulties but we adapted and in the second half we were better."

These two teams were both among the Super League's 'Dirty Dozen', with Madrid president Florentino Perez, the face and voice of the breakaway project, watching on at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium.

Despite stirring scenes of protests outside Premier League stadiums last weekend, Real Madrid's — admittedly remote — training ground was untouched by any sign of discontent with the club.

And there was no Real Madrid revolt against Uefa either, with the Champions League anthem ringing out as normal and the stadium announcer loyally declaring: "The Uefa Champions League brings together the best teams in Europe."

Chelsea were electric in the first half an hour, their passing slicker and their movement quicker than Madrid, who were unable to keep up.

WERNER MISSES SITTING

Werner should have scored when Mason Mount's deflected, looping shot was headed across goal by Pulisic but he missed from six yards, his volley blocked by the right leg of Thibaut Courtois.

But Chelsea's dominance was such that another chance never felt far away, in the 14th minute Pulisic taking advantage.

Antonio Rudiger was given time to float a delightful ball over the top for the darting American, whose first touch took him left but he recovered his poise, nipping past Courtois and firing between Marcelo and Raphael Varane on the line. — AFP



Mumbai need momentum against confident Rajasthan

IPL STROKES
PRANAV MEHTA

We often talk about momentum being a big factor in cricket. But here is a team which has lost 3 games out of 5. In the last 2 games, first they lost to Delhi Capitals and then got thrashed by Punjab kings in a one-sided affair. Mumbai Indians are coming after a much needed six-day break.

On the other hand, Rajasthan Royals were thrashed by Royal Challengers Bangalore and then they won against Kolkata Knight Riders. Early in the tournament, captain Sanju Samson was accused by the masses of not doing justice to his talent consistently, on which he expressed that he wanted to play cricket with freedom. Although, that was not the case, when he won his team the last match.

What's wrong with MI?

Despite having almost zero momentum, MI will start as favourites against RR. Mumbai are known for starting their campaign poorly and then they find their rhythm, just when their backs are against the wall and there is no way out. After all, they have won 5 IPL titles out of 12, which is the best for any team.

So far in the tournament, MI have been trying to save their best resources for the crucial moments. Although, most teams realise this and they have been able to capitalise at other times.

The Pandya brothers and Keron Pollard have been their secret recipe for soo many years, but I guess that all teams have them figured out or they are terribly out of form.

What's wrong with RR?

Inconsistent top order is always an issue. It doesn't allow you to target a big score and that's almost a necessity, considering that RR have a very inexperienced bowling attack. Mustafizur Rahman, Jaydev Unadkat, Chetan Sakariya and Chris Morris are all very effective bowlers with their cutters, but low scores, dew and smaller grounds have broken their backs.

A lot of foreign players have left the team due to various reasons and now they are left with only 4 foreign players. Player loans are already open and RR management has expressed their want to loan a few players to various teams.

What to expect in the match?

Afternoon game would support RR a great deal and they would certainly fancy their chances against MI.

MI has a brilliant support staff and they would try and play the same brand of cricket, which has given them success of years, positive and attacking.

The match is in Delhi and it should favour the game play of MI and they should be able to start their campaign of domination from here.

KKR vs DC

KKR feels that they have found their lost touch with their win against Punjab Kings, but at the same time, they would not forget that they are playing against Delhi, who have been one of the dominating factors in this year's IPL. DC lost a nail-biting thriller with RCB and would want to win this game and stay in the top two. KKR might have had their problem this season, but on their day, they have the capability to make the best of teams look very ordinary.

What's wrong with KKR?

In their last match against Punjab Kings, KKR were consistently able to pick up wickets. This didn't allow Punjab to gather any momentum and they finished at a very low score of 123. While chasing, KKR were 17 for 3, from where Eoin Morgan played a very patient knock, that was accompanied by the gentle aggression of Rahul Tripathi, to make sure that they get these very crucial 2 points to keep them alive.

Andre Russell or Dre Russ, is considered to be one of the biggest match winners in T20 cricket around the world. A player of his caliber needs to bat slightly higher in the order, so that even if he clicks in 4 or 5 games out of 14, but those games would be one sided and easy wins. He should at least have 10 to 12 overs to make a considerable impact.

Another thing which goes against KKR is that the management is not very patient and wants instant results. This results in consistent changes and with players not being able to settle in their slots.

What wrong with DC?

DC has a very well balanced and composed side. Obviously, they miss Shreyas Iyer as a captain and player. The DC management on various occasions has shown disbelief in Rishabh Pant. Just last game, he didn't complete the overs of Amit Mishra, who is their biggest wicket taker.

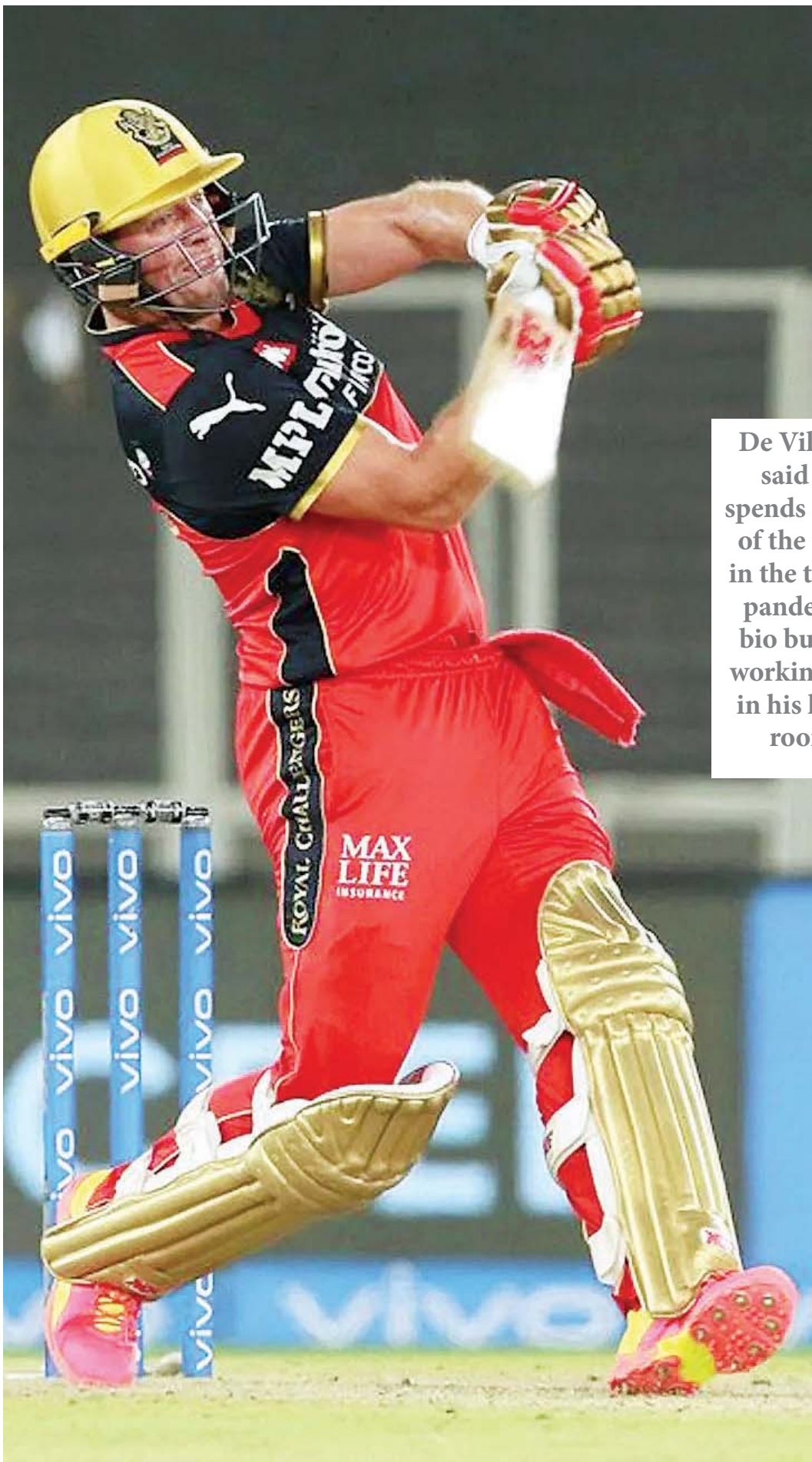
Pant might not be very good as a captain currently, but definitely he is a good investment for DC. His game play and maturity as a player will only help DC to further grow in coming years.

Ishant Sharma also did brilliantly on his return. His sharp line and length have created problems for the batsmen.

One area, where DC really needs to work is the fielding department. They have been consistently dropping catches and their direct hit ratio is the worst amongst all teams.

RCB EDGE DELHI TO GO BACK TOP

DE VILLIERS PASSES 5,000 IPL RUNS AS BANGALORE PULL OFF ONE-RUN WIN



De Villiers said he spends much of the time in the team's pandemic bio bubble working out in his hotel room

AHMEDABAD, India: AB de Villiers hit a landmark 75 as Royal Challengers Bangalore beat Delhi Capitals by just one run to go back top of the Indian Premier League on Tuesday.

The South African veteran's unbeaten 42-ball blitz made him only the sixth batsman to pass 5,000 runs in the tournament, and only the second foreigner.

Delhi needed 14 runs off the last over to beat Bangalore's 171 for five, but even boosted by Shimron Hetmyer's late 53 off 25 balls they just failed.

Victory sent Virat Kohli's Bangalore back top with five wins from six games. They are two points ahead of Chennai Super Kings, who play bottom of the table Sunrisers Hyderabad on Wednesday, and Delhi.

Put in to bat, Bangalore had seemed destined for a moderate score until De Villiers came in with the score on 60 for three.

Helped partly by Rajat Patidar, who made 31, De Villiers produced final over fireworks that changed the game. Kohli said that the South African went "berserk" with his man of the match performance.

De Villiers, who had not played competitive cricket in the five months before the IPL, hit 23 runs off the only over that Marcus Stoinis bowled, with three of his five sixes.

De Villiers said he spends much of the time in the team's pandemic bio bubble working out in his hotel room. "You have to stay fresh," said the 37-year-old.

"He keeps doing it again and again for us," said Kohli. Delhi put themselves under pressure with a slow start.

Captain Rishabh Pant made 58 off 48 balls but Delhi only seemed a threat when Hetmyer took over. The West Indies star hit three sixes in the 18th over but was the kept off strike in the final two overs. Fast bowler Mohammed Siraj brilliantly frustrated Pant with the final six balls, with Pant only managing two fours.

"I backed my yorker at the death as it was coming out really well and I was able to execute it really well," said Siraj.

BRIEF SCORES

Royal Challengers Bangalore 171/5 (AB de Villiers 75 not out, Rajat Patidar 31; Avesh Khan 1/24) beat Delhi Capitals 170-4 (Rishabh Pant 58 not out, Shimron Hetmyer 53 not out; Harshal Patel 2/37) by 1 run.

Former Sri Lanka Test player gets six-year ban for match-fixing

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's former Test cricketer and bowling coach Nuwan Zoysa was banned for six years on Wednesday by the International Cricket Council for match-fixing during a T10 tournament in the United Arab Emirates.

The ban on the 42-year-old is backdated to October 2018 when he was suspended pending an investigation into his conduct at the inaugural Sharjah tournament in 2017.

"Contriving to fix a game betrays the basis of sporting principles", the ICC's anti-corruption chief Alex Marshall said. "It will not be tolerated in our sport."

"In his role as a national coach,



he should have acted as a role model. Instead, he became involved with a corrupter and attempted to corrupt others."

There was no immediate comment from Zoysa, but he had

expressed shock when the ICC initially announced in November that he had been found guilty.

"It is a fallacious and cheap gimmick by the ICC to perform such an act (of announcing guilt) intentionally to tarnish my reputation and the reputation of my beloved country", Zoysa told reporters in Colombo at the time.

His sanctioning came eight days after another former Sri Lankan bowler Dilhara Lokuhe-tige was banned for eight years for corruption during the same T10 tournament.

Both were found guilty after a two-year investigation.

The duo join a growing list of Sri Lankan players to have been

punished by the ICC for breaching its anti-corruption rules.

Lokuhe-tige featured in an Al Jazeera documentary in 2018 when he spoke to an undercover reporter about fixing a game.

Zoysa was accused of agreeing to introduce players to an Indian national to arrange match-fixing and remains under investigation accused of further breaches of the anti-corruption code.

"Zoysa has also been charged by the ICC on behalf of the Emirates Cricket Board (ECB) with breaching three counts of the ECB Anti-Corruption Code for Participants for the T10 League and these proceedings are ongoing", added the ICC statement. — AFP

EXCITING DRAW FOR FIFA ARAB CUP

OMAN FACE SOMALIA IN QUALIFIER TO BOOK SPOT IN FINALS

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

Doha city hosted the draw of the first edition of Fifa Arab Cup Qatar 2021 at Katara Opera House late on Tuesday. Oman legend Ali al Habsi was one of the guests who attended the draw function.

The 16-team tournament will be held from November 30 to December 8.

Oman will play in Group A if they win the qualifier match against Somalia. Group A will consist hosts Qatar, Iraq, winner of Bahrain and Kuwait match, winner of Oman and Somalia match in the qualifier.

The 16 participating teams are divided into four groups. Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Syria and winner of Mauritania and Yemen match are placed in Group B.

Morocco will play in Group C comprising Saudi Arabia, winner of Jordan and South Sudan match and winner of Palestine and Comoros fixture.

Meanwhile, Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon or Djibouti and Libya or Sudan are clubbed in Group D.

Seven teams from the qualifiers will join the top nine highest-ranked teams, including host country Qatar for the group matches which will begin from



December 1 in Doha and conclude on December 8.

The top two teams from each group, will qualify to the quarterfinals which will be played

by knockout stage moving to the semifinals, third/fourth place play-off match and final of the championship.

Shaikh Salim al Wahaibi,

Chairman of Oman Football Association (OFA), commented after the draw ceremony saying that participation of Oman national football team at Fifa Arab

Cup Qatar 2021 is considered a major event.

"We are looking forward to a positive outcome from our team in their participation at this high-

profile tournament. Also, we are fully confident that Oman national football team will compete strongly with other teams and we are assured of our technical staff and players to deliver high technical performance," he added.

The OFA chief pointed out that the Fifa Arab Cup Qatar 2021 championship is considered an important tournament to all the Arab countries especially after Fifa's approval of the event. "We are confident that Qatar will organise the event successfully and it is a significant rehearsal prior to top major event of Fifa 2022 World Cup," he ended

The Fifa Arab Cup event in Doha city will play a significant role ahead of Qatar 'hosting the Fifa 2022 World Cup. The top tournament will serve as a proper dress rehearsal for the organisers to examine readiness of the infrastructure, operations and logistics prior to a year from the kick-off for the 2022 World Cup.

THE DRAW:
Group A: Qatar, Iraq, Oman or Somalia & Bahrain or Kuwait
Group B: Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Syria & Mauritania or Yemen
Group C: Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan or South Sudan & Palestine or Comoros
Group D: Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon or Djibouti & Libya or Sudan

Uefa set to raise squad size to 26 players for Euro 2020

Europe's soccer governing body Uefa is set to increase the size of the national team squads at this year's European Championship from 23 to 26 players, British media reported on Tuesday.

The rule is being changed to lighten the burden on players after the start of the 2020-21 season was delayed last year due to the Covid-19 pandemic while the campaign was also compressed to finish by May, in time for the June 11-July 11 Euros.

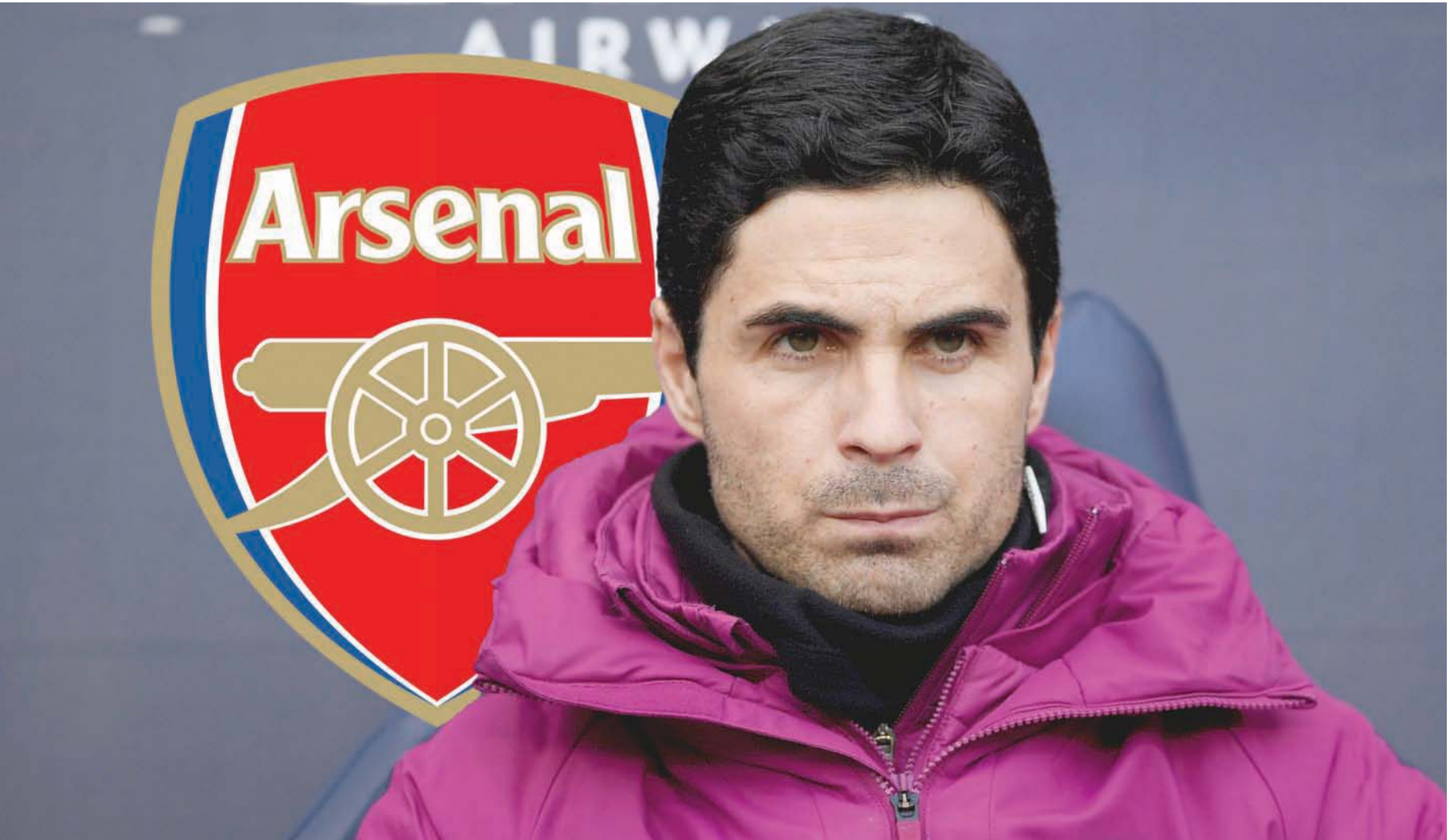
The decision was taken by UEFA's national teams committee on Monday and is expected to be ratified by its executive committee later this week, the BBC said.

Italy head coach Roberto Mancini said last month he would support the introduction of larger squads due to the risk of players contracting Covid-19 and the difficulty in replacing them during the Euro 2020 tournament.

"Someone could contract the virus during the tournament. It would then become difficult to find other players, because they would have all gone on holiday," Mancini said.

Uefa confirmed last month that teams will be allowed to make five substitutions per game at the Euros. — Reuters

Arsenal owners have shown commitment to club after takeover rumours, says Arteta



LONDON: Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta said on Wednesday he hopes a strong statement from the club's owners underlining their commitment to the club will end speculation over a potential takeover bid from Spotify founder Daniel Ek.

Swedish billionaire Ek last week sent a tweet saying he would be interested in buying the Premier League club, which is owned by American billionaire Stan Kroenke through his Kroenke Sports & Entertainment (KSE) business.

Thousands of Gunners fans protested outside the Emirates Stadium before Friday's 1-0 defeat to Everton following the collapse of the proposed European Super League.

Arsenal were one of 12 clubs to initially sign up to proposals for the breakaway competition but, along with five other English clubs, withdrew from the plans within 48 hours after a fierce backlash from fans, players, governing bodies and the British government.

On Friday, Ek said he was considering a takeover

bid and reports this week suggested former Arsenal players Thierry Henry, Patrick Vieira and Dennis Bergkamp would be part of an advisory group.

But any potential deal appears to have been scuppered following a staunch response from the Gunners' American ownership, which said it had not received any bids.

"In recent days we have noted media speculation regarding a potential takeover bid for Arsenal Football Club," read a KSE statement.

"We remain 100 per cent committed to Arsenal and are not selling any stake in the club."

Speaking ahead of Arsenal's Europa League semi-final first-leg tie against former Gunners manager Unai Emery's Villarreal on Thursday, Arteta said he was pleased with the response.

"It closes a lot of the speculation regarding what could happen because they moved straight away and made very clear lines of their understanding and what they want to do with the football club," he said.

"We spoke to them and I think it was very clear, they have shown their commitment and ambition to the football club because we all want a successful team on the pitch. It was very clear and took any doubt out of the situation."

Arsenal are 10th in the Premier League and on course for their worst league finish since 1995.

However, they could play themselves back into the lucrative Champions League for the first time in five years should they win the Europa League. — AFP





ramadhan

Weekend hike at the Al Khoudh Trail

With the summer heat on full onslaught, doing hikes can be a real challenge which is why a lot of avid hikers had shifted to doing morning or evening short hikes. Here's a morning short hike idea you can do for this weekend... **P14**



QURAN



VERSE OF THE DAY

Say, "O disbelievers. I do not worship what you worship. Nor do you worship what I worship. Nor do I serve what you serve. Nor do you serve what I serve. You have your way, and I have my way.

Al Kafirun

www.omanobserver.om







FATWA



QUESTION & ANSWER



HIS EMINENCE
**SHAIKH AHMED BIN
HAMAD AL KHALILI**
GRAND MUFTI OF OMAN

QUESTION

Is external usage of ointment considered breaking the fast?

ANSWER

External usage does not affect fasting. Just like bathing during days of Ramadhan is acceptable, in the same context, using external ointments is also permissible.

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HADITH



A GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Sahl b. Sa'd (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger as saying:

In Paradise there is a gate which is called Rayyan through which only the people who fast would enter on the Day on Resurrection. None else would enter along with them. It would be proclaimed: Where are the people who fast that they should be admitted into it? And when the last of them would enter, it would be closed and no one would enter it.

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Weekend hike at the Al Khoudh Trail

BY YERU EBUEN
Follow on Instagram: @yru_here

For the uninitiated, it's hard to imagine Al Khoudh as a hiking destination. Very close to the city, many have an impression that it's just an industrial area if not an exclusive village for locals.

But Wadi al Khoudh and its surrounding mountains are amazing short hike destination — one that you can accomplish in two or three hours (return trip). But if you're like us who take the time to know almost every corner of the destination, you too will end up hiking the trail and swimming in shallow wadi waters and might spend a longer time.

The Al Khoudh trail is about 3.7 miles long and begins right at the end of the old Khoudh village. Rated as one of the easy paths, it's an ideal hiking destination for beginners looking for a little bit of diversity in their weekend adventure.

While it is an easy hike, the trail also provides its own set of challenges. After a 20 minute steep hike towards the mountains, where one will also pass through a popular biking trail, the road descends on a cliff where a metal ladder was set up to make the hike down more doable. While one can creep on the corners of the cliff, the two-storey high ladder is easier to use and is also safer. Anyone who has fear of heights may find this 'climb down' challenging but this is pretty much the only "slightly difficult" ordeal one has to pass through.

The rest of the path is going in between canyons. The trail is marked and expert hikers usually finish the hike in barely an hour and a half.

Taking an off-road path, we found ourselves deeper into the mountains of Al Khoudh where the paths are uncharted. It's not really recommended to stray off the path as in some areas, the rocks are loose. Even during the summer, some fauna however survives and the stark landscape with the few wadi plants growing in the area makes up for a good photograph.

The return hike led us into

the flat but rocky trail along Wadi al Khoudh. Unlike other wadis, Wadi al Khoudh has shallower waters and on weekends, pre-corona, the place has been teeming with picnic weekenders and wadi bashers.

Even during our hike, we spotted nearly half a dozen cars wadi bashing and the splashing water did make up for quite a nice scene.

As previously stated, the pools in Wadi al Khoudh are usually shallower, with the deepest we find on our return just about knee-deep but that doesn't mean it's not enough for a quick dip.

After a hot hike, the water here is comfortably cooler and if you find the right dipping pool, makes it worth it for a quick swim.

It is highly recommended to do this hike in the morning as later in the afternoon will be torture because of the sun while evenings will pose a challenge as it is, after all, still a wadi and hiking in its rocky path in the dark is dangerous.

For those who have a longer time to spare, the pockets of water pools overgrown with vegetation are good places for a picnic. One can hide under the shade of this vegetation which gives comfort against the strong sun.

Overall, I concur with the ratings made by others that it is easy. But while it is easy, it doesn't mean it doesn't have its own charm.

HOW TO GET TO WADI AL KHOUDH:

Quoting our friend Ali of omantripper.com, "You can get to Wadi Al Khoudh by taking the Muscat Express Road and taking the exit to Al Khoudh Village. The drive is about 30 minutes from Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. After going through the village, the road ends into the wadi, in which you must go through a small stretch of really uncomfortable uneven wadi rocks to get into the wadi, see the google maps link below. You will definitely need a 4x4 car to drive in the wadi, and preferably a proper 4x4 as I have seen people in AWD (All Wheel Drive) cars get stuck there badly. Also, make sure you get out of there before it gets dark as the entrance/exit is quite hard to find in the dark."



LOOKING BACK

How The Duke of Edinburgh helped shape the lives of more than 16,000 young people in Oman



In the wake of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh's death on Friday, April 9th, the world has been reflecting on an extraordinary life of service, a life that helped inspire and shape the lives of more than 16,000 people in Oman.

Throughout his 99 years, The Duke was associated with 992 charities in one capacity or another, usually as president, patron or as an honorary member. The charity with which he was associated for the longest time was Outward Bound, joining as Patron in 1953, before stepping down some 66 years later in 2019. His active support helped inspire over 1.2 million people in the UK to participate in an Outward Bound programme, and his influence was instrumental in spreading the Outward Bound mission around the world, including to Oman, where Outward Bound Oman was launched in 2009, the first Outward Bound school in any Arabic speaking nation.

Initially founded by Dentons, Shell and Suhail Bahwan, and quickly supported by many of the leading corporates in Oman through their social investment programmes, Outward Bound grew rapidly in The Sultanate. Thousands of young people, as well as the emerging talent of many companies, were challenged through focused outdoor journeys as Outward Bound helped equip people with the skills and attitudes to succeed in life, and in the workplace.

In 2013 HRH Prince Charles visited Oman, and his father, The Duke of Edinburgh, saw the opportunity to write a letter to congratulate the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos for being the first Arab leader to have the vision to challenge and develop the national talent of his country through Outward Bound. The response of the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos was to establish Outward Bound Oman by Ministerial Decree in 2014 and grant land upon which international standard training centres were to be constructed to enable greater numbers of people to benefit in the future.

With the generous support of the then Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Social Investment Committee and The Ministry of Education, a third training centre is now just 5 months away from completion on Jabal Akhdhar, so giving Oman three high-quality purpose-built national training centres.

In partnership with the government and private sectors, the vision and legacy of two great leaders in the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh will be realised in the development and training of many more thousands of people in Oman in the coming years to help support Oman's Vision 2040.

Outward Bound Oman Patron His Highness Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said stated that "The Duke of Edinburgh's 66 years at Patron of Outward Bound UK is an example of extraordinary public service. The Duke clearly believed, as do I, in the difference that Outward Bound makes to people's lives, be that in the UK, or here in Oman."

Outward Bound Oman Executive Director Mark Evans said that "Outward Bound has flourished in Oman thanks to the support of many, but principally due to the vision and support of two inspirational people in the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh. Our three national training centres will soon give us the capacity to train many thousands more people in the coming years, doing our part to help develop the next generation of leaders and so help shape the character of the nation in line with what both men would have wanted'.



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ramadhan
OMANDAILYOBSERVER | **15**
THURSDAY | APRIL 29 | 2021

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



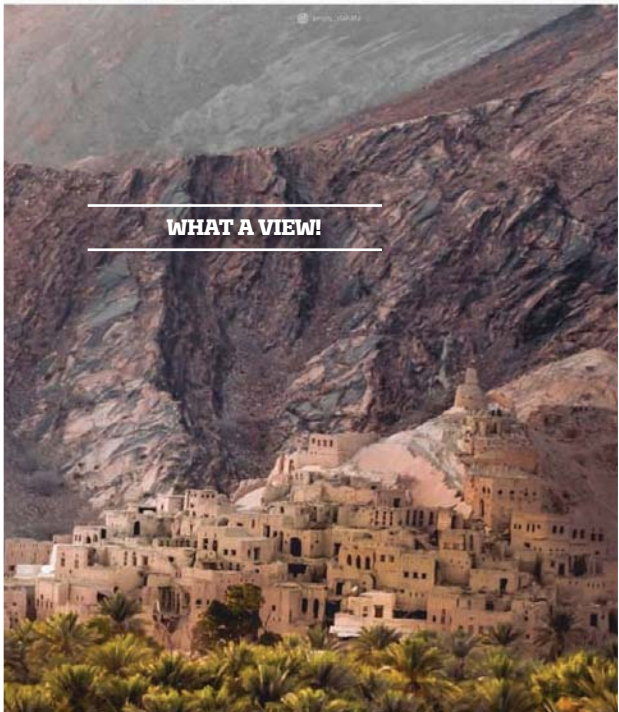
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COOK LIKE A CHEF RAMADHAN EDITION

Get full stories online at www.omanobserver.om

Lamb mansaf recipe your family will definitely love



Ifar in Ramadhan is also the best way to spoil your family with good food. After a long day of fasting, everyone craves for a delicious meal that would keep them nourish until the next meal. In today's Cook Like a Chef, we are presenting this dish you usually would just find in restaurants. While the process may seem long and tedious, we can assure you it's going to be worth your effort.

PREPARATION

TRIM MANSAF MEAT & BROTH

Start by filleting pieces of lamb meat from off the bone, but keep the bone for cooking. Pre-season the lamb with salt and pepper

Take a large pot over medium-high heat and add a dash of olive oil

Once hot, start with your onion and garlic. Sauté for several minutes for 1-2 minutes as they start to sweat and become fragrant

Next, add your lamb. Move your onions and garlic to the side to let your lamb directly hit the heat of the bottom of the pan. Sear your lamb for 4-5 minutes as it starts to brown

As the lamb browns, add your cumin, cloves, cardamom, bay leaves and cinnamon stick. Stir well for ~30 seconds to get the spices well integrated into the lamb, onions and garlic

Then, add enough water to the pot to cover all your ingredients. Bring the heat to high and bring the entire pot to a boil. As the water boils, a white froth will come to the top of your boiling liquid. Scoop this liquid out with a spoon as much as you can

After 2-3 minutes of boiling and fishing out the froth, reduce the heat to a simmer and cover your pot. Simmer everything together for at least 1 hour

RICE

Start by grinding the saffron with a pinch of salt in the mortar and pestle

Pour a bit of hot (slightly under boiling temperature) water over the saffron

As the flavours of the saffron come alive, take a small pot of water over high heat and bring to a boil

When the water is boiling, pour your rice into the pot along with the warm saffron water

Stir the rice and saffron water around in the boiling water until the entire pot has a nice orange hue to it, then

Reduce the heat to a low simmer, then add the salt and butter. Cover and let the rice simmer for ~20 minutes

While the rice cooks, take a pan over medium heat and add a tablespoon of butter. Once the butter is hot, lower your heat and add your pine nuts and skinned almonds

Continually toss the nuts around as they start to toast, which should take about 3-4 minutes. As you toss and toast, sprinkle your cinnamon over the nuts if you wish to add it

When the nuts have browned slightly and roasted, take off the heat and set them aside

After 20 minutes, uncover and fluff your rice. Re-cover and let the rice steam further until the rest of the Mansaf is ready

YOGHURT SAUCE

After at least an hour of simmering, pour your pot of what has now become a lamb broth through a colander into a large bowl

From the colander, fish the pieces of lamb pieces out and place back into the pot

Add ½ of the strained stock



back into the pot and bring the pot back to a simmered heat

Take a separate pot over low heat and add a mixture of your Greek yoghurt and remaining strained stock. Stir well so as to evenly heat the yoghurt and to mix it well with the stock to create a thickened liquid

Once heated, pour the yoghurt liquid into the larger pot with the lamb and mix well through. Simmer for 5 minutes

After 5 minutes, add your arrowroot powder and stir well through. Simmer for another 5 minutes as the sauce begins to thicken

Finally, take the pot off the heat and add in your mint and stir well

TO SERVE THE MANSAF

Start by laying the markook bread flat in a platter or dish

Next, layer your rice on top of the bread

On top of the rice, ladle pieces of lamb meat followed by spoonful of the yoghurt sauce.

And sprinkle the roasted nuts and fresh parsley over the Mansaf.

INGREDIENTS



1 Kg of lamb on the bone
1 large onion, finely chopped
3 cloves of garlic, crushed
1 tablespoon cardamom pods, crushed
1 teaspoon whole cloves
2 tablespoons ground cumin
2 bay leaves
2 small cinnamon sticks
1 tbsp black peppercorns
2 Ltr Water
2 cups of Greek yoghurt
3 teaspoons arrowroot powder
2 teaspoons sea salt
1 handful fresh mint, chopped
Roasted Nuts
½ cup almonds, skins removed
½ cup pine nuts
1 tablespoon butter or ghee
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

Rice
4 cups rice
½ teaspoon ground saffron
1 tablespoon ghee
1 teaspoon sea salt
6 cups water

For Serving
1 piece of markook bread
1 handful of fresh parsley, chopped
¼ cup dried currant
Salt and pepper to taste

ABOUT THE CHEF



Chef Abdul Farash
Oriental Chef
Sheraton Hotel Oman

Chef Abdul Farash grew up in Amman, Jordan where his mom and grandma set him on his path of loving food and cooking for others. Chef Abdul Farash grandma's home was really an outlet for the community. His grandma was always cooking and bringing people together which became an inspiration to Chef Abdul's approach to hospitality.

Chef Abdul loves to make food inspired by his childhood and for every recipe he makes, he gives it a Jordanian twist showing pride in his heritage.

Chef Abdul recently joined as an Oriental Chef at Sheraton Oman with great experiences in the past working in different Gulf countries. His innovative touches help transform the heritage experience of guest in Sheraton's Courtyard Kitchen.

Genetic study offers good news for endangered Sumatran rhinoceros



A GENOME study involving the last remaining populations of the Sumatran rhinoceros — a solitary rainforest dweller — is providing what scientists called good news about the prospects of saving this critically endangered species from extinction.

The researchers said on Monday that their study found that the two existing wild populations of this rhino on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra boast unexpectedly good genetic health and surprisingly low levels of inbreeding. Experts estimate that only about 80 of the rhinos remain after a separate population on the Malaysian Peninsula went extinct in recent years. The Sumatran rhinoceros — the closest living relative to the woolly rhinoceros that was among the notable species of the last Ice Age — is known for its two small horns and a thin coat of reddish-brown hair.

"With such small population sizes, we were expecting much higher inbreeding in extant populations of Sumatran rhinoceros. So these findings were good news to us," said Nicolas Dussex, a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Palaeogenetics in Sweden who helped lead the study published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

"Moreover, while the fate of the Malaysian population serves as a stark warning to what might happen to the two remaining populations on Sumatra and Borneo, our findings suggest that it may not be too late to find ways to preserve the genetic diversity of the species," Dussex said.

The researchers sequenced the genomes of

seven rhinos from Borneo, eight from Sumatra and six from the Malay Peninsula population that has been considered extinct since 2015.

The Sumatran rhinoceros is the smallest of the world's five rhinoceros species, at around 1,540 to 1,760 pounds (700 to 800 kg). The elusive rainforest inhabitant, the most vocal rhino species, remains solitary except for mating and rearing offspring. It once had a wide range in Southeast Asia, from the foothills of the Himalayas down to Borneo and Sumatra.

Poaching and habitation destruction by humans have devastated its population, with its numbers falling by about 70 per cent over the past two decades.

"When it comes to long-term survival of a species, genetic diversity is one of the key factors, as this enables adaptation to future environmental changes and diseases," said Centre for Palaeogenetics doctoral student and study lead author Johanna von Seth. "So, the fact that a lot of diversity remains is very promising if we can manage to maintain it, of course assuming we can also reduce the impact of non-genetic factors."

The researchers said steps such as translocating rhinos for mating — a costly and logistically challenging proposition — or using artificial insemination could enable a beneficial exchange of genes between the Borneo and Sumatra populations. This species has shown low reproductive success in captivity and faces a high risk of inbreeding — mating with close relatives — in the wild because of its small numbers. — **Reuters**



In Berlin, a coronavirus test before Ramadhan prayers

With his head tilted back and his face mask pulled down, Imam Abdallah Hajjir patiently undergoes a nasal swab outside a Berlin mosque to get tested for the coronavirus.

"Negative!" he smiles a few minutes later, and heads inside for Friday prayers.

The medical team manning a testing station outside the red-bricked "House of Wisdom" mosque is part of a push by authorities in the German capital to raise Covid awareness among Muslims during the holy fasting month of Ramadhan, and among migrant populations more generally.

Sitting at a table in the building's parking lot, the staff made up of Libyans, Syrians and Armenians carry out free rapid testing for a steady stream of worshippers lining up with prayer mats rolled up under their arms.

'PROTECTING SOCIETY'

Imam Abdallah Hajjir, wearing a gold-rimmed cap, says encouraging the congregation to get tested is a way "to contribute" in the fight against the pandemic.

"By protecting the members of our community, we are protecting those they come into contact with, so society as a whole", he told AFP.

Around 35 per cent of Berlin residents have a migrant background and neighbourhoods with the highest proportion of migrants have recorded the highest number of coronavirus cases since the pandemic began a year ago.

They are often also the areas where population density is above average.

Many immigrants live in close quarters in small apartments, or in asylum centres where up to five people sometimes share a single room.

Last October, the OECD sounded the alarm and said migrant workers were "on the frontline" of the pandemic in developed countries.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a club of some 40 mostly rich nations, estimated that the risk of a coronavirus infection was "at least twice as high" as among the rest of the population.

In Germany as elsewhere, people with foreign backgrounds also tend to be employed in work that can't be done remotely, such as cleaning or caring for the elderly, according to the Dezim institute for research on integration and migration.

As Germany's Covid vaccination drive picks up speed, city authorities are stepping up efforts to try to overcome "the large reservations" held by some migrants about getting jabbed, said Katarina Niewiedzial, Berlin's integration officer.

"There's false information circulating" about the vaccines, she said, ranging from "It's going to make me sterile" to 'they're going to implant a chip'".

She said people like the imam "with all the authority they carry" are best placed to "boost people's confidence" in the Covid jabs.

"The impact is completely different when he uses his sermon, like he did today, to stress the need to protect lives", she added.

Berlin has also launched coronavirus information podcasts in over a dozen languages, including Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish.

The vaccination of 18,500 refugees living in shared accommodation in Berlin has also got under way.

SIDEWALK PRAYERS

Outside the mosque in Berlin's diverse Moabit neighbourhood, a small group of worshippers have placed their prayer rugs on the asphalt and are listening to the imam's voice carried by loudspeakers from the prayer room.

Pandemic restrictions on the number of people allowed to gather inside the building have left them praying on the sidewalk.

The cleansing ritual, or ablution, has to be carried out before arriving at the mosque.

But Ali, 30, who comes every Friday, says he won't let the virus curbs ruin the holy month of Ramadhan for the second year in a row.

"It's a shame we can't have large family gatherings (to break the fast). But luckily we can have video chats with our relatives", he says, smiling. — **AFP**

As Germany's Covid vaccination drive picks up speed, city authorities are stepping up efforts to try to overcome "the large reservations" held by some migrants about getting jabbed, said Katarina Niewiedzial, Berlin's integration officer



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Omani appointed to head OMIFCO



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

Oman-India Fertilizer Company (OMIFCO) has appointed Ahmed bin Said al Marhoubi as the Acting CEO of the company with effect from May 1, 2021. He takes over from Sharanappa G Gedigeri, who has been associated from the OMIFCO project from its inception.

A message from the Board of Directors said: “The Board has expressed its appreciation to Mr S G Gedigeri for his hard work throughout his journey with the company & wishes him success in his future.”

OMIFCO, which has been in operation for over a decade, is owned 50 per cent by OQ of the Omani government, 25 per cent by Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO) and 25 per cent by Krishak Bharati Cooperative Limited (KRIBHCO).

Located within Sur Industrial City, the OMIFCO plant has the capacity to produce 3,500 metric tons per day of anhydrous ammonia 5,060 tonnes per day of granular urea.

Strong growth in cargo volumes handled by Al Mazunah Inland Port

ROBUST VOLUMES:
Between June 2020 and March 2021, the dry port handled 540,000 tonnes of cargo transported by over 35,000 trucks

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

An inland port (also known as ‘Dry Port’) currently in operation at Al Mazunah Free Zone straddling the Oman-Yemen border in Dhofar Governorate has so far handled over 540,000 tonnes of cargo transported by over 35,000 trucks crisscrossing the free zone.

These volumes, generated from June 2020, when the inland port first commenced operations, and end-March 2021, underscore the free zone’s growing importance as a hub for trade and commerce between the two countries.

Commenting on the role played by the inland port, Faiz Awaidan Qumsit, Operations Supervisor at Al Mazunah Land Port, said, “The Port witnesses daily active traffic. It receives an average of 100 trucks daily, while



at peak times the number reaches 170. The Directorate General of Customs makes great efforts along with other government bodies, handling good inspection operations prior the importing or exporting companies obtain customs release data.”

The official said in an interview published in *Duqm Economist*, the newsletter of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), said the land port ensure that the inspection of each truck, as well as customs

declaration processes, takes under 30 minutes.

Significantly, the inland port handles a variety of merchandise, including cars, fish, fruits and vegetables, and food and consumer goods. “Exporting fish through the port is of high interest to importers and exporters, as more

than 2,146 fish trucks carrying over 16,000 tonnes have been received, exporting fish outside Oman through the ports of Salalah, Sohar and other land

ports. More than 2,000 truckloads of agricultural products of fruits and vegetables with a load of about 50,000 tonnes were received in the port,” he said.

The inland port – the second of its kind in the Sultanate (the first having been set up at Khazaen Economic City in Barka – was established following an agreement signed in April 2020 between Al Mazunah Free Zone Management and Al Madina Logistics Company. That pact led to the establishment

of a specialised company, Al Mazunah Land Port Company, to manage and operate the inland port.

The facility contributes to the development and improvement of services related to customs inspection and handling of goods, thus increasing trade flows between Oman and Yemen. In the wake of its establishment, a qualitative improvement has been witnessed in the handling of logistics within the Free Zone, particularly with regard to the handling of containers.

Recently, Al Mazunah Land Port received the international code ‘OMMFZ’ as part of its accreditation to be an international land port for exports and imports by the International Organisation of Standardisation, an agency of the United Nations.

The code allows the inland port to be qualified as an international trading hub approved by the competent body of the United Nations to facilitate the movement of shipping containers from the source country to the inland port in Al Mazunah. Goods destined for the inland port are not subject to customs inspection in all transit areas until they reach the Port, and vice versa.

Digital banking key to enhancing financial inclusion

The Sultanate, represented by the Central Bank of Oman, observes Arab Day for Financial Inclusion, which falls on April 27

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

The issue of promoting access to financing and financial services in the Arab countries is receiving great attention from the Council of Arab Central Banks and Monetary Authorities’ Governors, in recognition of the potential and great opportunities that can be achieved through enhancing financial inclusion to support inclusive and sustainable economic development, address unemployment challenges, and achieve social justice.

There is no doubt that the current developments and the negative repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic have clearly highlighted the great importance of deploying Fintech for the purposes of financial inclusion, and the need to enhance digital financial services and familiarise users with them.

The pandemic has increased the demand for digital financial services and made the need to



accelerated digital transformation and improved digital financial services a critical issue in economic policies in the Arab region.

The available statistics highlight the great opportunities inherent in the development of digital services, as nearly 85 per cent of adults in the Arab region have a mobile phone, 48 per cent have a mobile phone and can access the Internet at the same time, 7 per cent own mobile money account, and 33 per cent made or received digital payments in the previous year, compared to nearly 44 per cent globally.

In this context, the Council

of Arab Central Banks and Monetary Authorities’ Governors, considering the growing need to intensify awareness of the importance of financial inclusion among all community categories in the Arab countries, endorsed in 2016 April 27 as the “Arab Day for Financial Inclusion”, celebrated this year under the theme of “Role of Digital Transformation in Increasing Financial Inclusion”.

It is important on this occasion to emphasise support for the efforts of the international community in enhancing financial inclusion, which was adopted by the G20 as one of the main aspects to support the sustainable development goals

and enhance financial stability.

The G20 pays special attention to supporting the access by young people, women and micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) to digital financial services using Fintech, in addition to paying attention to digital community awareness and education, which increases the chances of success of efforts and policies in this regard.

The Council is keen to give great importance to the issues of financial inclusion in the Arab countries, as it welcomed the launch of the “Financial Inclusion for the Arab Region Initiative” (FIARI) by the Arab Monetary

The pandemic has increased the demand for digital financial services and made the need to accelerated digital transformation and improved digital financial services a critical issue in economic policies in the Arab region

Fund in cooperation with several regional and international organisations, to empower capabilities that aim to overcome the challenges of enhancing the financial inclusion indicators in the Arab countries.

In this regard, the Council values the FIARI activities that focus on digital financial transformation.

The Council calls on the partner organisations to pay more attention to supporting the use of Fintech in enhancing the access of young people, women, and MSMEs to financial services and welcomes the “Digital Financial Transformation Framework” in the Arab region issued in the framework of FIARI initiative in September 2020, as a roadmap to help develop domestic policies and action plans to create inclusive and secure Fintech ecosystem.

The framework is based on a few

primary goals to enhance access and expand usage and quality and discusses Fintech sandboxes, consumer protection and financial literacy, financial and technical infrastructure, competition, data and cybersecurity, monitoring and cooperation.

In this regard, it is important to mention measures and actions taken by the Arab countries to enhance digital financial literacy. Arab countries can also work on developing country action plans that contribute to digitally transforming financial systems and supporting economic development to achieve sustainable growth and poverty alleviation.

The Council also reaffirms the need to integrate all community categories into the formal financial system, especially young people, women, entrepreneurs and MSMEs, to benefit from Fintech and follow-up efforts to raise the awareness of all these categories, protect their financial rights, and improve their knowledge of digital financial issues, so that they can make sound investment decisions.

In this context, the ministries of education, culture, and higher education in the Arab region can contribute to strengthening efforts to spread and deepen education and digital financial literacy.

TURN TO PAGE 20

Accelerating the growth of the industrial sector

It appears that the coronavirus pandemic will give impetus to investments in the production of vaccines, medications for treatment, modernisation of hospitals and upgrade of public health infrastructure. The Arab region suffers from a lack of adequate investment in pharmaceutical and healthcare related manufacturing and specialist services.

We are dependent on foreign countries for our requirement of vaccines and pharmaceuticals, while they shy away from giving use the requisite knowhow to support the growth of domestic manufacturing capabilities.

In the Sultanate, it is imperative that more attention is given to

local production of vaccines and pharmaceuticals. This new sector can also open up opportunities for employment generation while expanding the industrial and productive base of the economy.

Indeed, great efforts are being made by the government in attracting foreign investment with the Sultanate's embassies joining the campaign to promote Oman as a destination for investment.

With countries in the region competing for international investment, business leaders in the Sultanate stress the need for more incentives and facilities, coupled with the reduction of barriers to trade, and the dismantling of impediments, to help enhance Oman's



HAIDER AL LAWATI

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THIS NEW SECTOR CAN ALSO
OPEN UP OPPORTUNITIES FOR
EMPLOYMENT GENERATION
WHILE EXPANDING THE INDUS-
TRIAL AND PRODUCTIVE BASE
OF THE ECONOMY.

investment appeal. They insist that the industrial sector should be dealt with in a prudent, as it is one of the sectors that needs a lot of care and attention in terms of attracting the quality of the required investments, providing more industrial areas, preparing skilled labour, and so on.

Industry needs to obtain the necessary knowledge, provide the technical capabilities, work on exemptions, incentives and facilities, and ease tax systems, thereby improving the investment environment.

The sector needs to increase its capacity, competitiveness, productivity and export focus. These efforts should be backed by modern legislation that fuels the healthy growth of industry.

It is also the duty of government institutions to give more attention to local industrial products in their tendering and procurements.

This is in line with various decisions issued by the concerned authorities in the Sultanate over the past decades, but rarely put in practice, according to some industrialists. Without active support from the government, the industrial sector is likely to drive away young people, entrepreneurs and investors looking to be part of a thriving segment of the economy.

Everyone hopes to see the industrial map of the country redrawn with manufacturing being nurtured in every governorate of the Sultanate.

Incredible Ramadhan offers available on Dodge models from Dhofar Automotive

MUSCAT: Dhofar Automotive, the official distributor of Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep and RAM vehicles in the Sultanate, recently launched its Ramadhan offers on the Dodge Charger, Challenger and Durango.

As part of the offer, customers can receive free service for up to 2 years/30,000km on select models, warranty for 5 years/100,000 km, five years



roadside assistance, free registration and insurance and several other amazing benefits.

The offer includes the Dodge

Durango at a starting price of RO 13,490 with easy monthly instalments starting at RO 160 after the deduction of a cash gift.

The Dodge Charger is available at a starting price of RO 9,990 with monthly instalments of RO 120, while the Challenger comes at a starting price of RO 19,690 and easy monthly instalments of RO 230. The offer will last until May 31.

Celebrate Ramadhan with Nissan Kicks

MUSCAT: Nissan Oman from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) is offering a wide range of rewards for the patrons of youth centric and stylish Nissan Kicks.

Customers of Nissan Kicks will have a choice of benefits including 0 per cent interest for three years on specific models, cash gift, free service, insurance and more. The offer, which is available on all models purchased for personal use, will go on till June 3, 2021.



spacious interior that maximises room with a flat floor design, to the high degree of craftsmanship apparent in every design element, Nissan Kicks gives owners the perfect excuse to stay out and have fun.

A spokesperson for Nissan Oman, said, "Nissan Kicks has been impressing customers with its excellent mileage, unique styling, roominess, personal technology, smart functionality, and advanced safety features."



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Date of Recall: 29/04/2021

Campaign Type: Safety Recall

Recall Segment: Seat Belts

Product Description: Cadillac Escalade 2021 / Chevrolet Tahoe 2021/ Chevrolet Suburban 2021 / GMC Yukon 2021 / GMC Yukon XL 2021

Model Year	Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle Vin Range	No. of Affected Vehicles in Oman
2021	Cadillac	Escalade	1GYS47KL0MR208081 to 1GYS48KL7MR191026	6
2021	Chevrolet	Suburban	1GNSK9ED2MR210238 to 1GNSK9KD9MR207762	12
2021	Chevrolet	Tahoe	1GNSK8ED2MR210038 to 1GNSK8KDXMR196197	85
2021	GMC	Yukon	1GKS27KD0MR163233 to 1GKS27KLXMR202661	144
2021	GMC	Yukon XL	1GKS28KD0MR166669 to 1GKS28KL9MR168492	18

DESCRIPTION:

During installation of the third-row seat, one or both third-row outboard seat belts may have been inadvertently entrapped in or misrouted behind the outboard seat-folding mechanism. A seat belt in this condition may be damaged by the seat-folding mechanism.

PROCEDURE:

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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- Role & Responsibilities:** Single point responsible and accountable for the management and execution of all aspects of the services.

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- Location:** Site
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Digital banking key to enhancing financial inclusion

FROM PAGE 17

In the context of the increasing importance of using Fintech in the financial and banking sector and the great and rapid growth witnessed by Fintech and related services, the Council commended the role of the “Arab Regional Fintech Working Group” launched by the Arab Monetary Fund in sharing expertise and knowledge about Fintech issues and crystallising different visions on the best way to regulate and put technologies into effect in the Arab countries.

In this context, it is worth noting that the Fund issued in 2020 guiding principles to enhance the requirements of digital transformation, specifically the frameworks on digital identity and “e-KYC”, principles for building national strategies for Fintech, and Open banking operations. Arab countries can adopt these guiding principles within the framework of needs and procedures of each country.

On the other hand, the Council values the increasing interest in Fintech issues in the activities of the “Arab Financial Inclusion Task Force”, and its role through developing policies and procedures related to enhancing financial inclusion, ways to improve financial inclusion indicators, working to help Arab countries implement relevant international standards and principles, and strengthening cooperation between various national institutions concerned with financial inclusion issues and between them and the relevant international organisations.

Furthermore, the Council looks forward to pursuing the improvement of financial inclusion indicators, as recent



statistics reflect the efforts made by the Arab countries to enhance access to financial services.

These statistics reveal that the percentage of the adult population in the Arab countries who have access to formal financing and financial services has risen, on average, to 37 per cent, 26 per cent for women, and 28 per cent for low-income groups.

Although these statistics conceal disparities in this regard among Arab countries, they still highlight the great potential opportunities — especially for private financial and banking institutions — that can be exploited to enhance access to financial services in the Arab communities.

In this context, it is worth noting the efforts of the Arab countries that have implemented the statistical surveys, and to emphasise the importance of following up its implementation by the rest of the countries, in order to help improve the quality of financial inclusion indicators according to the circumstances of each country.

Before concluding, the Council values the efforts made by the Arab central banks and monetary authorities, the commercial banks and the official financial institutions in the past years to celebrate the “Arab Day for Financial Inclusion” and the

related activities and events that contributed to spreading financial literacy among people.

Accordingly, the Council calls on all member countries to celebrate the “Arab Day for Financial Inclusion” and encourage large community participation through the implementation of activities and events that enhance knowledge of financial inclusion.

On this occasion, the Director General Chairman of the Board of the Arab Monetary Fund, Dr Abdulrahman al Hamidy, stressed the importance and the role of financial inclusion in addressing the economic challenges that affect economic growth.

He added that this goal can be achieved by mobilising resources to increase investments and create new job opportunities.

Dr Al Hamidy also praised the increasing attention being paid to issues related to enhancing financial inclusion by policymakers in the Arab countries, which would help to address the challenges of poverty, unemployment and social justice.

He then referred to the efforts made by the Arab central banks and monetary authorities and the increasing attention paid to issues of improving financial inclusion and access to quality financial services at reasonable costs.

Dr Al Hamidy praised the “Buna” Arab payments platform, which was launched recently by the Arab Monetary Fund, and its role in providing innovative services in accordance with international standards and the best practices and technologies. He is looking forward to the platform’s role in encouraging the development of digital financial services in the Arab region and linking Arab countries with their main global trading partners.

Biden to reverse Trump’s tax cuts for most wealthy



US President Joe Biden arrives at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building at the White House in Washington. – Reuters

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden will call for reversing his predecessor Donald Trump’s tax cuts for the wealthy to pay for a huge middle class families spending programme, senior administration officials said on Wednesday.

Biden will use his speech to a joint session of Congress to unveil the \$1.8 trillion American Families Plan, funded by ending Trump’s tax cuts and closing loopholes used by the most wealthy to escape paying their share, officials said.

“The president will be proposing a set of measures to make sure the wealthiest Americans pay the taxes that they owe, while also ensuring that no one making less than \$400,000 a year will see their taxes go up”, one official, who asked not to be identified, told reporters.

The spending plan, which

The Biden plan would also end loopholes and capital income tax breaks, while raising ‘billions’

will need approval by a deeply divided Congress, would pour money into early education, childcare, higher education and other building blocks in what the Biden administration argues will be reconstruction of the country’s battered middle class.

Some \$800 billion would be sent out in tax cuts for lower income people and another \$1 trillion would be invested.

The strategy, an official said, is “to build back better and generate a strong and inclusive economy for the future.”

Tax credits will cut child poverty and halve the price of childcare, allowing mothers to remain longer in the labor force, the official said, predicting “a

larger, more productive and healthier workforce.”

The plan to pay for the huge government programme will likely be a lightning rod for Republican members of Congress.

But the White House is banking on voter support by targeting the tax increases firmly at the super rich.

They would pay a top income tax rate of 39.6 per cent, ending the reduction to 37 per cent enacted under Trump.

The Biden plan would also end loopholes and capital income tax breaks, while raising “billions”, according to the White House in tighter taxes on inherited wealth.

Officials said that the measures would be enough to pay for the nearly \$2 trillion spending program within 15 years — and make the country fairer. — AFP

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