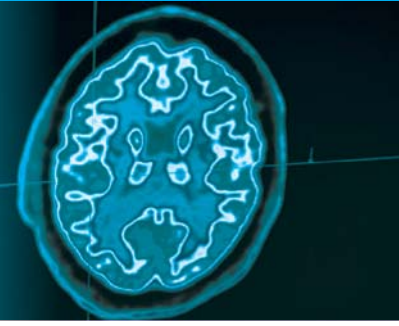


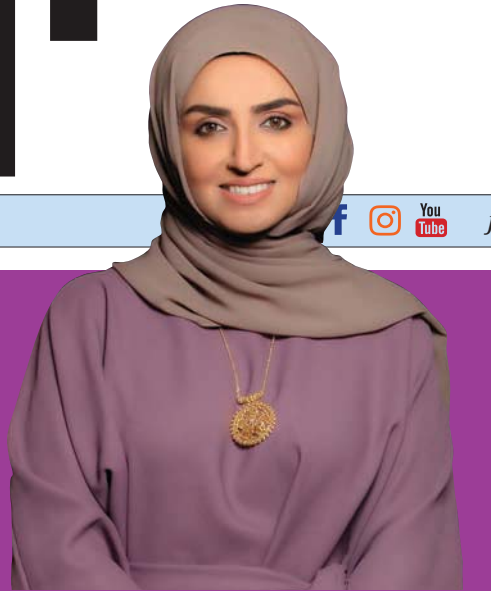
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HOW COVID-19 MAY AFFECT THE BRAIN



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A JEWELLERY DESIGNER REFLECTING MODERNITY



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OMAN EYE TOP HONOURS AT ASIAN BEACH GAMES



S U L T A N A T E E N T E R S C R U C I A L C O V I D - 1 9 W E E K

111 NEW CASES REPORTED

AS TOTAL STANDS AT 1,180, INCLUDING 176 RECOVERIES

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 18

Oman is expected to be entering the peak of COVID-19 infections this week, which may also coincide with the beginning of the holy month of Ramadhan.

At the peak, the country is expected to see a peak in cases, which could be limited if the current precautionary measures are strictly followed by all citizens and residents, according to the Minister of Health.

The Ministry of Health on Saturday announced 111 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the total number to 1,180, including 176 recoveries.

Saturday's cases included 33 citizens and 78 expatriates. With this, 441 Omanis and 739 expatriates are affected by COVID-19.

The ministry on Friday announced the death of a 76-year-old resident, which was the sixth COVID-19 related death in the Sultanate.

Also on Friday, the fifth death was reported – a 66-year-old resident.

The minister has urged the public that social distancing is the only way to contain the pandemic.

Region-wise, Muscat has 931 cases, followed by Al Dakhiliyah 54 cases, South Al Batinah 76 cases, Musandam three cases, Al Dhahirah three cases, South Al Sharqiyah 40 cases, North Al Sharqiyah 17 cases, Buraimi four cases, North Al Batinah cases, and Dhofar 10 cases.



A medical worker stretches outside Maimonides Medical Center in the Brooklyn borough of New York, on Saturday. – Reuters

SHIPMENTS
The Central Market in Mawelah has received over 329 shipments of 6,580 tonnes of vegetables and fruits over the last 10 days.

Most of the products are generally imported from Jordan, Lebanon Yemen,

India, Egypt and South Africa.

The Muscat Municipality said that one of the major shopping centres in Seeb was closed for failure to comply with the decisions of the Supreme Committee. It urged commercial establishments not to indulge in violations

that will affect the health safety of public.

Madayn has launched its annual Ramadhan charity campaign to distribute Omani products to families with limited income in the various governorates of the Sultanate.

HUGE GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO COPE WITH PANDEMIC

MUSCAT: Huge efforts are being exerted by the government to stem the spread of COVID-19 and alleviate its impact on citizens and residents since the onset of the outbreak.

Overseen by the Supreme Committee entrusted with undertaking measures to tackle developments stemming from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, these efforts clearly affirm the depth of attention accorded to Omanis and residents and providing them all means of welfare possible.

As many as 3,746 returned to the Sultanate from abroad during the past few weeks as part of a campaign overseen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in coordination with the Sultanate's missions overseas with assistance from Oman Air.

On top of that figure, 38 more Omanis were brought back to the Sultanate from Thailand on Friday by an Oman Air aircraft. The returnees were accompanying sick relatives seeking treatment in Thailand.

The following days will see arrival of more Omanis stranded abroad due to travel restrictions imposed by many countries in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. The flights are completely funded by the government of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik as part of its ongoing measures to stem the spread of COVID-19 and ease its impact on citizens and residents. — ONA



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Madayn launches
Ramadhan charity
campaign

MUSCAT: In line with its social responsibility initiatives, the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates — Madayn has launched

its annual Ramadhan charity campaign to distribute Omani products to families with limited income in the various governorates of the Sultanate. The campaign comes as part of Madayn’s Made in Oman initiative and in coordination with a number of Omani companies and factories. Madayn’s Social Responsibility Department was assigned to bring together all the donations from the factories as well as

purchase other necessary products and supplies, and finally arrange them in boxes for distribution. The Ramadhan donation boxes were packed by the department team in co-operation with Eshrakat Amal team, which works under Dar Al Atta’a Association. In view of coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, Madayn has supplied a number of the donation boxes to Oman Charitable Organisation for distribution among families affected

by this pandemic in Muscat Governorate. Distribution will continue to families in other governorates during this week. — ONA

Sultanate marks
Heritage Day

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Heritage and

Culture is marking the International Day for Monuments and Sites, also known as World Heritage Day, which falls on April 18 every year. Held under the theme Common Culture and Heritage, Shared Responsibility, this year’s celebration comes at a different and difficult time and expresses international unity in the fight against the of COVID-19 outbreak.

— ONA

MoCI ENCOURAGES
‘SHOP FROM YOUR HOME’ INITIATIVE

IN-DEMAND:
Online platforms
witness huge
demand for home
deliveries of all
goods and services

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 18

The demand for home delivery services has increased in the current situations, according to the officials of the home delivery companies and platforms.

They said that the ‘Shop from Your Home’ initiative launched by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, in cooperation with the Al Rafd Fund and the Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development “Riyada”, has supported making these services available as well as their promotion.

The ‘Shopping from Your Home’ initiative is aimed at making the use of electronic applications for shopping from stores, restaurants and cafes popular. It also came as an opportunity to introduce Omani companies of delivery of orders of various types and many of their other services which could be available at homes through their electronic applications. The ministry has urged citizens to use these applications and platforms.

Muhammad bin Mansour al Husaini, a founding partner in the “Bahhar” platform, said: The online platform “Bahhar” offers all kinds of fish for remote bidding locally and internationally and their selling. It provides services in the various governorates of the Sultanate. It serves the fisheries sector in the area of their electronic marketing. The platform is aimed at providing its services to all the segments which enter the field of fish marketing, starting from the fishermen and then the fish transport, whether to the markets, shops, companies or the individual consumers or the bulk consumer locally and internationally.

Al Husaini added: The demand for our services which we provide through the platform is huge. The number of visits to the platform reached more than 4,500. It is increasing on a daily basis. Similarly, the number of subscribers is also large.

The platform initially started marketing the products to the central wholesale market. Later its services were made available for the individual consumers for shop from home. This platform links wholesale markets with each other, such as the wholesale market in Barka and other markets on the beaches and 25 landing areas along the beaches of the Sultanate. Also, there is a chain linking fishermen, transport, companies and markets.

It helps the fishermen to exhibit his products on the platform. From him, a carrier takes and exhibits his products in the market, to companies or some of them internationally. The final consumers can learn about the original source of the fish. The facility to track the fish is available on the platform. This platform was launched



in partnership with the Oman Technology Fund and a strategic partnership with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Dr Matlooba bint Ayoub al Zadjali, Executive Director of the International Centre for Specialized Cardiovascular Diseases, said: The centre provides, in addition to other services, home visits service for cardiovascular patients, blood pressure patients, diabetics with varicose veins, and diabetics who have wounds. We have a well-prepared team consisting of a doctor and a nurse who arrive at the patient’s home and carry out all the procedures and do treatments needed by the patient.

With this service the patient does not need to come to the centre, instead we reach out to the patient. We also offer a wound dressing service at homes of the wounded person. We also take samples from homes for lab tests of a patient, such as blood tests.

We analyse these samples at the centre and give the results. We also give the medical prescription to the patient through social media platforms such as WhatsApp.

Dr Al Zadjali added: There is a demand for our services of home visits, particularly in the current situation. This is because the patient prefers staying at his home and avail all services, including medical services. The centre takes safety measures in all its visits, as doctors and nurses also take health precautions when serving their patients at home.

Ayoub bin Saleh al Shuaili, a founding partner in the “Mandoob” company, said that the demand of consumers for home delivery services has increased significantly. The number of workers in the company has also increased under the part-time work system. It has led to nearly three thousand Omani youth working in a delivery network under

a participatory system.

Al Shuaili said: The company’s employees take all preventive measures to ensure the safety of both consumers and workers, as the company communicates with many institutions that provide and deliver basic commodities and services required by citizens at their doorsteps in various governorates of the Sultanate. He said that the “Shop from Your Home” initiative which was launched the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, in cooperation with Al Rafd Fund and the Public Authority for the Development of Small and Medium Enterprises “Riyada”, has supported them in providing their services and promoting them.

Maryam bint Yahya al Jilaniya, the owner of the “Fast Car Wash” company, said that her company specialized in washing and polishing cars upon request. The company currently has three vehicles equipped

with all tools required for cleaning and polishing services in any place as demanded by the customer. Keeping in view the current popularity of service and goods delivery companies her company was launching an electronic application through which we would provide our services on a large scale.

Al Jilaniya hopes to reach out to all the consumers who want to clean their cars at their homes. She thanked all the institutions which supported the project.

Zaher bin Hamad bin Saif al Busaidy, the owner of Prime Business Solutions, said: The Omani company is owner and developer of many administrative and cloud accounting systems. It provides the best opportunity for all business leaders in different fields to manage their business easily from anywhere in the world through any electronic smart device. The company provides cloud-based systems that run on the

Internet to manage organisations easily.

On the current demand for electronic services, Al Busaidy said that the desire of the people to subscribe cloud accounting systems has increased much fold recently, as everyone has become aware of the importance of the company having modern systems which enable it to work at any time without the need to be available at a workplace. We are seeing a daily increase in demand for electronic services and trying to provide them fast and at the best price.

On the company’s plans for expansion, Al Busaidy said: The company is expanding day by day. It has so far covered many areas. We will work towards completing them all. In addition to this, we are working in more than one country.

Tahnoun bin Bashir al Harthy, founder of Kunooz for Occupational Safety, lauded the initiative launched by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, in cooperation with the Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises-Riyada, Al Rafd Fund.

He said: Shop From Your Home initiative provided us lots of incentives to develop the company and expand it through its work in various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. We want to improve our work and provide all our services to various groups of society in the near future. He pointed out that the company specialized in distributing all occupational safety tools, including masks, gloves, hand sanitizers and surface sanitizers.

He added, “Before the Coronavirus crisis, we were providing our services only in government and private organisations. But after the crisis and to limit the spread of the Coronavirus, we have now been delivering our services to various segments of society. We are currently working on a strategy and would implement it after the crisis is over so that we continue to provide our services in an innovative and advanced way and create new job opportunities”.

Al Harthy said: “There is a huge demand. We receive calls continuously for home delivery. The company has five employees and soon it would have a larger number of national manpower”.

Tahnoun al Harthy said, “There are instructions given by the company to workers of home delivery. They must adhere to these requirements as wanted by government organisations to mitigate the impact of the outbreak of the Coronavirus. He said that the delivery activity has increased as number of hours to meet the demands has also gone up”.

Saad bin Nasir al Alawi, an employee in the electronic application of providing cooking gas, said: We, through the application, work in the field of delivering cooking gas to homes and restaurants. We take precautions to ensure the safety of all parties, whether delivery person or customers, using all necessary sanitization tools, and leave a safe distance between them.

After the authorities have taken steps to implement precautionary measures to get rid of the spread of the Coronavirus, the demand to use the service has increased. The website is providing its services currently in Muscat Governorate and expected to expand outside in the near future soon after the Corona crisis.



Avoid single-use plastic bags, prevent spread of virus

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 18

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs (MECA) has called for the need to replace plastic shopping bags with environmentally friendly ones. It also called for the continuous sterilization of all shopping bags.

MECA said that the COVID-19 virus can stay on plastic bags for three days.

Quoting a study by the New England Journal of Medicine, MECA said that people may acquire the coronavirus through the air and after touching contaminated objects. Scientists discovered the virus is detectable for up to three hours in aerosols, up to four hours on copper, up to 24 hours on cardboard and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel.

It can live on plastic surfaces from 48 to 72 hours, including plastic shopping bags before it loses its vitality and effectiveness.

As the single-used plastic bags are light and the wind catches them easily, they can be transported far and wide. For this reason, it's essential the amount of plastic bags in circulation is reduced and cut down on single-use plastic waste.

The multi-use reusable bags are made of several materials, such as cloth, paper and other organic materials. They can also be made of plastic provided that they are used several times (up to 100 times) because of thickness.

IT'S CHALLENGING TIME EVEN FOR PETS AND VETS

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
SALALAH, APRIL 18

Coronavirus has affected all walks of life and even animal are not unaffected. The challenge is more pronounced in front of pet lovers and veterinarians, as they find the situation so sudden that hardly anyone could get any choice but to remain restricted inside their houses as much as possible.

Dr Peter Nolosco, Senior Veterinarian, calls the situation awfully challenging in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak and says, "The restrictions to control this disease, has affected all sections of life including pets and their owners. The pet owners are facing the challenge of not being able to bring their pets to hospitals even to undergo regular health check-ups and treatments".

"Secondly, there is lack of food availability for them. Many pets have various medical conditions which require special food. Now because of these restrictions, what to talk about special foods, there has been delay in getting even regular pet foods".

Like humans the animals also need certain fitness exercises. They manage by running or stretching according to their requirements if they are not domesticated. Once domesticated, they need some training for their fitness.

"Exercise is of prime importance for the pets to stay healthy. Many dogs need to be taken outdoors for long walks and other kind of activities. This is completely stopped during this difficult time", said Dr Peter.

In this difficult situation, the veterinarian suggests the pet owners



to have good stock of pet food, treats and other essentials. The food and other essentials should be stored properly as per the manufacturer's instructions. "Pet owners should learn the regular care like brushing the hair coat, ear cleaning, eye cleaning, nail clipping, clipping excess hair on the face, removing hair knots, teeth

brushing, gland squeezing".

He also suggests going for reliable YouTube videos guiding care for pets. Many pet owners completely depend on grooming centres, now is the time for them to do things on their own.

"Pet owners also can buy regular preventive medications like deworming, flea and tick

treatments and they can do at home at regular intervals suggested by their veterinarians. Owners need to spend more time with their pets which will help to relax the pet as well as the owner.

Owners also need to open up the house windows to get fresh air and sunlight to their pets", he said.

Huge potential ahead for date industry as projects readies ground for growth

MUSCAT: The Date palm is the first crop in the Sultanate, in terms of number, the areas where it is grown, or the integrated agricultural and environmental system.

It is a national wealth that touches and affects directly and indirectly lives of citizens. Therefore, maximizing its economic, social and environmental returns is extremely important as it is the most important food-producing tree, and represents the basis for sustainable agriculture in all governorates of the Sultanate.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries prepared the national strategy for the development of date palms and its implementation plan, which sets out the limit of its plan to reach, represented in the maximization of the economic, water, social and environmental returns of date palm cultivation in the Sultanate at the individual and national level.

As part of the process to promote the date palm industry in the Sultanate, a company named Nakheel Oman Development Company was established in 2018, as a closed Omani joint stock holding company owned by the Diwan of Royal Court, represented by the Directorate General of One Million Date Palm Trees Project, and the Oman National Investments Development Company (Tanmia). The holding company will purchase the dates and the by-products from the Directorate General of One Million Date Palm Trees Project. It also provides material resources such as land, energy, water, and environmental permits, as well as expertise needed. The City of Nizwa was chosen to be the location for



the company's main manufacturing complex for date palm products.

The volume of investments includes the central unit for processing dates and date-based industries, as well as industries based on by-products are estimated at about RO 92 million.

The company announced last January that it had issued four tenders for the construction of the manufacturing complex. Tenders for the first phase of the project include civil works for the construction of the manufacturing complex and the work supplying and installing the steel structures of the complex, as well as the work of supplying and installing the cooling station for the cold stores and electrical and mechanical works manufactured for the complex.

In 2018 also, Oman Dates Production and Packing Company was also established. It is one of the companies affiliated to Oman Foods Investment Holding Company, by investing in a project to establish an integrated factory in the Wilayat of Barka and six collection centres in the governorates. The company will purchase dates products from farmers, then process, package and sell them in local markets and export them. The cost of the project is RO 28 million in the first stage and will reach RO 75 million in the last stage.

Adnan bin Mohammed al Alawi, CEO of Oman Dates Production and Packing Company, said to Oman News Agency, "The project comes within the framework of developing the dates sector in the

Sultanate, creating an incubating and marketing environment for Omani dates as part of the food security and import substitution system, in addition to developing governorates and providing high-quality products in line with international quality standards, providing job opportunities for citizens and localization of the food security industry. The project will benefit from this abundant production of Omani dates in the Sultanate, and support farmers to purchase their products through collection centres".

On distribution centres, Adnan al Alawi explained that "its construction will be completed within a year and a half and before the completion of the factory, so that the company can receive and store the dates crop. The

plan includes building 6 collection centres in 6 governorates, in the wilayats of Saham, Rustaq, Nizwa, Ibri, Ibra and Jaalan Bani Bu Hassan".

Al Alawi stressed that the factory's initial production in the first stage will reach 30,000 tonnes annually and will reach 80,000 tonnes annually in the final stages.

The factory will distribute 20 per cent of its production in the local market and 80 per cent for export. It is expected that the factory will start production within two years according to set plans.

He pointed out that "the factory was designed for the production and packaging of dates at the highest international standards on an area of one hundred thousand square metres in the Al Rumais area in the Wilayat

of Barka, and will follow the best methods taken in terms of cooling, drying, cleaning, fumigation and the technical aspects that the dates need".

The number of palm trees in the Sultanate, according to the latest statistic published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, reached 7.6 million palm trees in agricultural areas, in addition to 800,000 palm trees in home gardens, about 200,000 in streets and public parks and 600,000 palm trees within the project of one million palm trees.

The Sultanate's production of dates reached 369,000 tonnes in 2018. The human consumption in 2017 of dates reached 53 per cent of local production, as 6 per cent of the produced dates were processed and exported. — ONA



CONFUSION, SEIZURE, STROKES

A pattern is emerging among COVID-19 patients arriving at hospitals in New York: Beyond fever, cough and shortness of breath, some are deeply disoriented to the point of not knowing where they are or what year it is.

At times this is linked to low oxygen levels in their blood, but in certain patients the confusion appears disproportionate to how their lungs are faring.

Jennifer Frontera, a neurologist at NYU Langone Brooklyn hospital seeing these patients, said the findings were raising concerns about the impact of the coronavirus on the brain and nervous system.

By now, most people are familiar with the respiratory hallmarks of the COVID-19 disease that has infected more than 2.2 million people around the world.

But more unusual signs are surfacing in new reports from the frontlines.

A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association last week found 36.4 per cent of 214 Chinese patients had neurological symptoms ranging from loss of smell and nerve pain, to seizures and strokes.

A paper in the New England Journal of Medicine this week examining 58 patients in Strasbourg, France found that more than half were confused or agitated, with brain imaging suggesting inflammation.

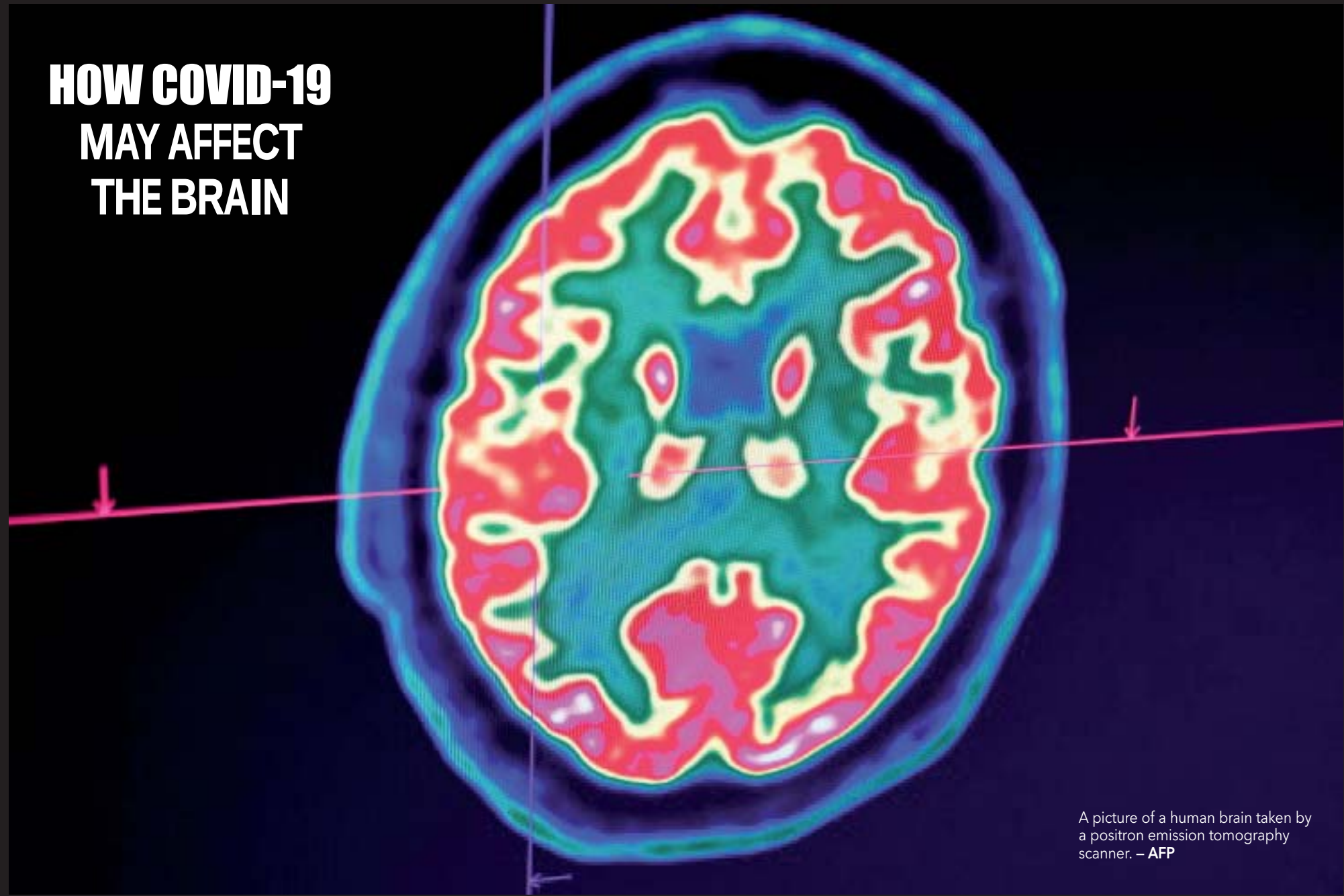
"You've been hearing that this is a breathing problem, but it also affects what we most care about, the brain", S Andrew Josephson, chair of the neurology department at the University of California, San Francisco said. "If you become confused, if you're having problems thinking, those are reasons to seek medical attention", he added.

"The old mantra of 'Don't come in unless you're short of breath' probably doesn't apply anymore".

VIRUSES AND THE BRAIN

It isn't completely surprising to scientists that SARS-CoV-2 might impact the brain and nervous system, since this has been documented in other viruses,

HOW COVID-19 MAY AFFECT THE BRAIN



A picture of a human brain taken by a positron emission tomography scanner. – AFP

including HIV, which can cause cognitive decline if untreated.

Viruses affect the brain in one of two main ways, explained Michel Toledano, a neurologist at Mayo Clinic in Minnesota.

One is by triggering an abnormal immune response known as a cytokine storm that causes inflammation of the brain — called autoimmune encephalitis.

The second is direct infection of the brain, called viral encephalitis.

HOW MIGHT THIS HAPPEN?

The brain is protected by something called the blood-brain-barrier, which blocks foreign substances but could be breached if compromised.

However, since loss of smell is a common symptom of the coronavirus, some have hypothesized the nose might be the pathway to the brain.

This remains unproven — and the theory is somewhat undermined by the fact that many patients experiencing anosmia don't go on to have severe neurological symptoms.

In the case of the novel coronavirus, doctors believe based on the current evidence the neurological impacts are more likely the result of overactive immune response rather than brain invasion.

To prove the latter even happens, the virus must be detected in cerebrospinal fluid.

This has been documented once,

in a 24-year-old Japanese man whose case was published in the International Journal of Infectious Disease.

The man developed confusion and seizures, and imaging showed his brain was inflamed. But since this is the only known case so far, and the virus test hasn't yet been validated for spinal fluid, scientists remain cautious.

MORE RESEARCH NEEDED

All of this emphasises the need for more research.

Frontera, who is also a professor at NYU School of Medicine, is part of an international collaborative research project to standardize data collection.

Her team is documenting striking cases including seizures in COVID-19 patients with no prior history of the episodes, and "unique" new patterns of tiny brain haemorrhages.

One startling finding concerns the case of a man in his fifties whose white matter — the parts of the brain that connect brain cells to each other — was so severely damaged it "would basically render him in a state of profound brain damage," she said. The doctors are stumped and want to tap his spinal fluid for a sample.

Brain imaging and spinal taps are difficult to perform on patients on ventilators, and since most die, the full extent of neurologic injury isn't

yet known.

But neurologists are being called out for the minority of patients who survive being on a ventilator.

"We're seeing a lot of consults of patients presenting in confusional states", Rohan Arora, a neurologist at the Long Island Jewish Forest Hills hospital said, saying that describes more than 40 per cent of recovered virus patients.

It's not yet known whether the impairment is long term, and being in the ICU itself can be a disorienting experience as a result of factors including strong medications.

But returning to normal appears to be taking longer than for people who suffer heart failure or stroke, added Arora. — AFP

Ramadan Iftar Program

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

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

Omantel users cost 1 RO
Send **Donate** to **90022**

Ooredoo users cost 1 RO
Send **Donate** to **90909**

Or donate via devices automated payment of a company "ONEIC"

National Bank of Oman
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Bank Dhofar
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Donations Portal for Charitable Organization
www.donate.om

O C O Headquarters : Muscat Governorate , Al Khuwair 33 , Street No. 47, next to Sultan Said bin Taimur Mosque, or one of its branches :

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Sur / Al-muradiah

North Al-Batinah Governorate
26664241
Sohar / Hamra

Musandam Governorate
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E-learning widens rich-poor divide

LOS ANGELES: As a member of the 2020 "class of coronavirus", Kenia Molina needed to find a laptop in order to graduate high school — a technology gap that has caused thousands of poorer students to miss out on weeks of education.

With many US schools and universities shut for the academic year, the Los Angeles student will be completing her final year via virtual learning on a home computer donated by her district.

"This is really important... for students that don't have any access to the Internet or even have any devices, they can't even afford any devices", said Molina, wearing a protective mask and gloves as she collected her laptop.

The free computers handed out by Los Angeles school district — second largest in the nation — "help us to be there and connected to one another", she added.

But California's Department of Education estimates nearly 240,000 more computers are needed.

Some 7,400 of Los Angeles' 120,000 high school students have

Rafael Balderas, a high-school principal in the Los Angeles suburb of Bell, is pictured with stacks of laptops for distribution to students in need — he says online learning has become the new normal. – AFP

not logged in since quarantine began.

That number is down from 15,000 absentees in the first two weeks of lockdown, when at least 40,000 students had no daily contact with their teachers.

"This is something we should have been ready and prepared for years ago", said Rafael Balderas, Principal of the school in Los Angeles suburb Bell where Molina studies.

"You can't take away from face-

to-face learning — it is the best form of instruction for kids", he said.

"But this now has become our new normal", he added, with the pandemic and advances in technology spurring the school system to "move our kids to the 21st century".

SIX MONTHS' EDUCATION

The closures have caused particular challenges in poor or rural areas where families often lack computers or Internet access.

Molina was one of 400 students at

her school who received computers for viewing classes, turning in assignments and taking tests.

For families lacking Internet, the school district is also working with technology providers to get them online.

In the school zone overseen by Andres Chait, one-in-five Telfair Primary pupils do not even have a home of their own.

Many of them live in motels or at the homes of other families, with no "desk in a quiet space" free from distractions, said Chait. Teachers have also been forced to rapidly adapt, learning to use YouTube channels and video call applications like Zoom.

"They're keeping (students) within that educational space so that we don't have a whole generation that loses six months of instruction", said Chait. — AFP



Global virus deaths hit 150,000

THE PANDEMIC: Virtually no corner of the world has been left untouched



People wait in line to be tested for coronavirus at a makeshift centre in Kuala Lumpur. — Reuters

WASHINGTON/BEIJING: Coronavirus deaths have surged past 150,000 worldwide with nearly a quarter of them in the United States, where President Donald Trump lent his support to protestors rallying against lockdown orders.

Evidence is mounting that social distancing successfully slowed the pandemic after more than half of humanity — 4.5 billion people — were confined to their homes.

Governments around the world are now grappling with when and how to ease lockdowns that have crippled the global economy, even as the COVID-19 death toll climbs further in hard-hit countries.

Demonstrators in three US states assembled in public this week to call for an end to the restrictions, with the largest protest in Michigan attracting 3,000 people — some of whom were armed.

Trump has largely left decisions on easing lockdowns to state officials even as he outlined guidelines for a staged reopening of the national economy. But his call to “liberate” Michigan,

Minnesota and Virginia in a series of tweets were quickly rebuked by the Democratic leaders of the three states.

“I do not have time to involve myself in Twitter wars,” said Virginia governor Ralph Northam.

The US accounts for nearly a third of the 2.2 million coronavirus infections reported globally.

It has also recorded around 37,000 deaths, more than any other nation, followed by Italy, Spain and France which have all been ravaged by their own outbreaks.

However these figures likely reflect only a fraction of the actual number of infections, because many countries are testing only the most serious cases.

Virtually no corner of the world has been left untouched, with deaths in Africa passing 1,000 overnight.

Nigeria announced the death of President Muhammadu Buhari’s top aide on Saturday, the highest-profile person to succumb to the virus in Africa’s most populous nation.

COVER UP CLAIMS

China sharply raised its own death toll

to 4,636 after adding another 1,290 fatalities for the city of Wuhan, where the respiratory disease first emerged late last year.

Trump, who has angrily shot back at claims he reacted too slowly to the virus threat, has accused Beijing of downplaying the impact of the virus within its borders.

“It is far higher than that and far higher than the US, not even close!” he tweeted.

Trump did not offer evidence, but pressure has mounted in recent days on Beijing to come clean over its handling of the original outbreak.

Leaders in France and Britain have also questioned China’s management of the crisis but Beijing hit back, saying it had not concealed information about the illness.

Signs that the outbreak could be easing in parts of Europe prompted Switzerland, Denmark and Finland to begin reopening shops schools this week.

Germany’s health minister said infection rates had “sunk significantly” after 3,400 deaths in his country, which

is now beginning the delicate task of lifting some restrictions without triggering a secondary outbreak.

Some small shops will be allowed to reopen on Monday, and some children would return to school within weeks.

Parts of Italy also began emerging from lockdown, with Venice residents strolling around quiet canals.

But Japan, Britain and Mexico all expanded their current movement restrictions.

VULNERABLE ECONOMIES

Signs of the economic damage of the pandemic are mounting, with China reporting its first contraction in GDP in several decades.

The Trump administration pledged another \$19 billion in relief for farmers reeling from a massive jolt to the agricultural markets with schools and restaurants shuttered across the country.

Part of the funds will be used to buy up surplus dairy products and produce that farmers have been destroying, unable to get it to consumers or food processors. — AFP

IN BRIEF

Refugees flown to Germany from Athens



A group of young refugees board flight at the Athens International Airport.

ATHENS: Dozens of refugee children from the Greek islands left for Germany on Saturday, a spokeswoman for Athens airport said.

The refugees are flying to the northern German city of Hanover, from where they are due to be brought to the Osnabrueck area for a 14-day coronavirus quarantine.

The majority of the 49 unaccompanied youths come from Afghanistan and Syria, according to sources in the Ministry of Migration in Athens.

“We are giving persecuted people the opportunity to restart,” Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said on state television.

After their coronavirus quarantine, they are to be distributed across Germany’s federal states. They are the second group of refugees to be taken from the notorious camps on the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos.

Already on Wednesday 12 young people were taken in by Luxembourg. The plan provides for around 1,600 young people to be brought to other EU countries. A good 90 per cent of the minors are boys. Some 39,000 people are currently staying in camps on the islands in the east of the Aegean. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), around 36 per cent are minors. — dpa

New Zealand PM sued over lockdown

WELLINGTON: New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is being sued over the country’s coronavirus lockdown, with two men arguing it has left them unlawfully detained.

The pair, who may not be named for legal reasons, made the claims at the Auckland High Court, local media platform Stuff reported. The hearing took place via a virtual meeting room, the court confirmed in an email.

The men have asked for a writ of habeas corpus, which seeks to rule an imprisonment unlawful and release the applicants.

Stuff reported one man told the court the United Nations Secretary-General should have been consulted before the lockdown restrictions were imposed.

A model predicting 80,000 deaths in New Zealand from Covid-19 if the lockdown was not enacted was, in his opinion, an inaccurate “well-woven yarn of complete decimation,” Stuff reported. — dpa



HK activists held over 2019 protests

HONG KONG: Police in Hong Kong carried out a sweeping operation against high-profile democracy campaigners on Saturday, arresting 14 activists on charges related to massive protests that rocked the Asian financial hub last year.

Among those targeted was media tycoon Jimmy Lai, founder of anti-establishment newspaper Apple Daily, who was arrested at his home.

The group also included former lawmakers Martin Lee, Margaret Ng, Albert Ho, Leung Kwok-hung and Au Nok-hin, who are accused of organising and taking part in unlawful assemblies in August and October, according to the police.

Five were arrested under suspicion of publicising unauthorised public meetings in September and October. — AFP

Chernobyl wildfire covers Kiev in smog



A forest fire burning in the Chernobyl exclusion zone in Ukraine, not far from the nuclear power plant last week. — AFP

KIEV: Smoke from a wildfire that has been raging for several days in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, has covered the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, making its air pollution among the worst in the world, it was reported.

According to Swiss monitoring group IQAir, the city’s air pollution was the worst in the world at one point of time due to the wildfire smoke, the BBC said.

Firefighters have been tackling the wildfire for more than a week, and there was a new flare-up fanned by strong winds.

But the country’s Health Ministry has said that the radiation level remains normal and the abandoned nuclear plant faces no immediate threat. — IANS

Man threatens shooting over lack of masks

FLORIDA: Police in Florida have arrested a man who threatened to go on a shooting rampage in his local supermarket because he thought too few shoppers were wearing protective masks against the coronavirus.

Robert Kovner, 62, was arrested after he posted on Facebook that he would “empty every clip I own” in his local Publix supermarket because not enough customers were wearing protective face coverings, police said.

“Will it take shooting a few of you selfish in the parking lot to get the message through?” Kovner was reported to have posted on social media.

“Trust me, the virus is not the only thing that may cause your demise!” Police in Sebring, some 135 kilometres south of Orlando, said that “these are stressful times, but there is no excuse for making threats like this.”

“It’s not a joke. It’s not just a bad day. It’s a crime. We will ALWAYS take them seriously, and you will go to jail,” they said. Florida has some of the laxest gun laws in the United States, a country rife with mass shootings and where the right to possess guns is guaranteed by the constitution. — AFP

How HK managed COVID-19 without complete lockdown

HONG KONG: With widespread testing, contact tracing and population behavioural changes Hong Kong appears to have managed to contain the first wave of COVID-19 without resorting to drastic measures like complete lockdown which now threaten to damage economies of several countries around the world, say scientists in a Lancet study.

A combination of border entry restrictions, quarantine and isolation of cases and contacts, together with some degree of social distancing helped the city with 7.5 million population avert a major COVID-19 outbreak up to March 31, said the study published in The Lancet Public Health journal.

“By quickly implementing public health measures, Hong Kong has demonstrated that COVID-19 transmission can be effectively contained without resorting to the highly disruptive complete lockdown adopted by China, the USA, and Western European countries,” said Professor Benjamin Cowling from the University of Hong Kong who led the research.

“Other governments can learn from the success of Hong Kong. If these measures and population responses can be sustained, while avoiding fatigue among the general



A woman runs past a banner of health advice at Tsim Sha Tsui’s tourist attraction in Hong Kong. — Reuters

population, they could substantially lessen the impact of a local COVID-19 epidemic.”

The study estimates that the rate at which the virus is transmitted — known as the effective reproductive number, or the average number of people each individual with the virus is likely to infect at a given moment — has remained at approximately 1 in the 8 weeks since early February, after public health measures were

implemented from late January onwards, indicating that the epidemic in Hong Kong is holding steady.

As of March 31, Hong Kong had 715 confirmed COVID-19 cases including 94 asymptomatic infections, and 4 deaths.

The public health measures implemented to suppress local transmission in Hong Kong are probably feasible in many locations worldwide, and could be rolled out

in other countries with sufficient resources, the researchers said.

The control measures implemented in Hong Kong in late January included intense surveillance for infections, not only for incoming travellers, but also in the local community, with around 400 outpatients and 600 inpatients tested every day in early March.

Extensive efforts were also made to track down and quarantine all close contacts an infected person had seen two days before becoming ill, and holiday camps and newly built housing estates were repurposed into quarantine facilities.

Additionally, anyone crossing the border from mainland China, as well as travellers from infected countries, were required to undergo 14 days of quarantine at home or in designated facilities. The government also deployed measures to encourage social distancing including flexible working arrangements and school closures, and many large-scale events were cancelled.

In the study, researchers analysed data on laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong between late January and March 31, 2020, to estimate the daily effective reproductive number (Rt) for COVID-19, and changes in transmissibility over time. — IANS

Trump's coronavirus reopening plan has big holes

ANN SAPHIR

The US economy has imploded in the past month amid aggressive measures to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, with 22 million people filing for unemployment benefits and most factories, stores and other businesses at a virtual standstill.

The governors of Michigan, Florida and other states outlined tentative steps on Friday to reopen their economies, a day after the White House issued guidelines to help states decide when to lift lockdown orders and allow firms to restart and workers to return to their jobs.

President Donald Trump, a Republican who is running for re-election in November, touted the guidelines as a blueprint for a reawakening of the economy, saying growth would soar like a "rocket ship" after the restart.

But the guidelines, and the ways in which experts say they fall short, suggest that revving activity back up to pre-pandemic levels will be anything but smooth or speedy.

States may be ready to end lockdowns

once infections have declined for 14 straight days, availability of tests to detect the virus is stable or rising, and if there is enough hospital capacity to treat everyone who gets sick, the guidelines say.

They also call on states to be ready to test all healthcare workers and anybody with symptoms, as well as to be able to trace contacts for people who test positive for the virus.

None of the states are ready, according to Harvard epidemiologist Bill Hanage, who was among the many experts who took to Twitter on Thursday to criticize the guidelines. Hanage says inadequate testing capacity is the main problem.

The United States has reported more coronavirus infections than any other country, with about 680,000 cases and more than 34,000 deaths.

US testing has been delayed and chaotic largely due to bureaucratic roadblocks and mistakes at the federal level. Trump, who initially downplayed the threat of the coronavirus outbreak to the country, has pledged to ramp up testing.

States are "far from being able to do enough tests to enable us to move to the next phase of responding to the pandemic," says Jen Kates of the Kaiser Family Foundation. She says there are no details in the guidelines on how much testing is needed.

State governments also need more people to track new infections through phone calls and visits. Alphabet's Google and Apple Inc are working together on software to make contact tracing easier. The software is expected to be available in mid-May.

"Not one of the 50 US states currently has surveillance capabilities sufficient to enable case-based interventions at the necessary scale," Duke University researchers wrote in an extensive look at testing needs. The White House guidelines don't provide any information on how to get there.

Charmaine Yoest of the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank said the White House was right to leave decisions on reopening economies to state leaders.

"It has to be done based on the data that applies to their communities and their workforce," she said.

But data on infections, and the means to deal with them, may be hard to come by.

"There is no — zero, zip, zilch — way to upscale testing, PPE (personal protective equipment) production, hospital readiness, the public health workforce ... without robust federal leadership," tweeted Jeremy Konyndyk, senior policy fellow at the Center for Global Development. "States don't have the capacity or resources to achieve these things on their own."

The White House guidelines call for a staged reopening, which is consistent with recommendations from many experts.

A study from McKinsey & Company, which is advising New York Governor Andrew Cuomo as he battles the nation's worst coronavirus outbreak, recommends opening a few sectors at a time, based on "both the risk of transmission and the relative importance" of each sector, as defined by number of jobs and contribution to the economy.

The guidelines also call for schools, factories, shops and restaurants to function differently than before the pandemic, again broadly consistent with a wide range of experts who say that maintaining social distancing, wearing masks, and frequent hand-washing and cleaning are critical to keeping the public safe. But those practices will slow commerce. As for reopening gyms and entertainment venues, which the White House plan suggests is possible in "Phase 1" of a restart, former US Food and Drug Administration chief Scott Gottlieb urged caution.

"Those may not be permitted until we have seen that work can safely return without a resurgence," tweeted Gottlieb, who was FDA commissioner from 2017 to 2019 and was otherwise generally supportive of the guidelines. Assuming the country weathers the first stage of a restart without a resurgence of coronavirus, it is not clear, based on the guidelines, how quickly states could move to the next phases — that is key to gauging how quickly the economy can rebound. — **Reuters**



Workers from the garment sector block as they protest lockdown in Dhaka. — AFP

Fast-fashion nightmare for Bangla clothes makers

One day Parvin was toiling to meet the fast-fashion demands of European capitals, the next she was among hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi clothes workers made instantly jobless as the coronavirus pandemic struck.

Big-name international brands have cancelled billions of dollars in orders because of the pandemic, decimating Bangladesh's most important export industry and hurting in particular rural woman who dominate the workforce.

Parvin, a 28-year-old seamstress, joined thousands of workers queueing to collect final wages from tables of banknotes set up at the Al Muslim factory, one of the biggest in the country that supplies some of the world's most famous labels.

The workers waited in long lines, each one metre apart in a bid to keep up social distancing, and the anxiety built as the towers of bank notes went down.

"We don't know when it will reopen," said Parvin, who collected her salary for March just before the giant complex closed its doors.

She has no other means to support her family going forward, and described her situation as a "catastrophe".

"Many factories have already closed. My husband is jobless."

Making the shirts, pullovers, bras and socks for stores in wealthier nations is the foundation of Bangladesh's impoverished economy.

It accounts for 80 per cent of the South Asian nation's \$40 billion of annual exports and has played a vital role in its growth of the past two decades.

More than four million people, mainly women from poor rural

villages, are employed in the sector.

But the industry has a reputation for running sweatshops, with workers toiling in unsafe factories without labour protections or a social safety net.

The 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, when the collapse of the garment complex claimed the lives of 1,130 lives, exposed appalling safety conditions in Bangladeshi factories.

Now, with international brands walking away and a government lockdown stopped people in Bangladesh travelling, laid-off workers are complaining of being dumped without any help.

Thousands of workers — some of whom earned just \$100 a month — have staged multiple demonstrations over the past week complaining that factories have not paid them.

"Many of us don't have food at home now. We can't even ask for handouts on the streets because those poorer than us would mock us as we have jobs," said sewing machine operator Didarul Islam.

"What do we do? Die of hunger?" added the 38-year-old father of two.

International brands have cancelled or held up orders worth \$3.11 billion, affecting more than two million workers, according to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. "The situation is apocalyptic," said Asif Ibrahim, a factory owner and a BGMEA director.

The Bangladesh group and counterparts in China, Vietnam, Pakistan, Cambodia and Myanmar, have pleaded with the high street majors not to cancel orders.

"It is time for global businesses to

uphold and honour their commitment to labour rights, social responsibility and sustainable supply chains," said a joint statement.

Some of the big firms, including H&M and Inditex, which runs the Zara chain, responded by vowing not to cancel existing orders. Others have sought discounts, according to the BGMEA.

There were no promises for the future though.

H&M chief executive Helena Helmersson said that purchasing was a key area where "forceful measures" have been taken because of the pandemic.

But the situation is already dire at Ashulia, home to 600 factories where workers live in rows of concrete slums near the plants.

Rubel Ahmed, the owner of a factory employing 250 people making apparel for Spanish retailers such as SDV, Ritchi and Vamutex, said he had lost more than 50 per cent of his business.

Ahmed, chain smoking as he watched the empty machines in his factory, said the pandemic was "one hundred times" worse than the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster.

"Those who have smaller factories like me will be destroyed," he said.

Activist groups say action must be taken to make sure wages hold up when work starts again.

"People will remember when this crisis is over which brands stepped up to protect their workers and employees and which did not," said Dominique Muller of Labour Behind the Label, a British group on workers' rights in the clothing industry. — **AFP**

Nasa steps in to help develop COVID-19 solutions

In a bid to find solutions that can address shortage of critical medical equipment like ventilators in tackling the COVID-19 crisis, the US space agency has joined forces with a task force in California to build medical devices to help patients infected with the disease.

The US space agency said its Armstrong Flight Research Center partnered with Antelope Valley Hospital, the City of Lancaster, Virgin Galactic, The Spaceship Company (TSC), and Antelope Valley College to come up with innovative ideas to meet shortage of medical equipment that could arise in future.

One of their first efforts was to build a prototype oxygen hood that has now proven to work for the doctors at the hospital, Nasa said, adding that the production of 500 will begin next week at TSC's Faith Facility in Mojave, California.

The device, developed by Nasa engineer Mike Buttigieg, is an oxygen hood for COVID-19 patients exhibiting minor symptoms and will minimise the need for these patients to use ventilators.

The device functions like a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine to force oxygen into a patient's low-functioning lungs. "We looked across our centre's expertise in innovation, engineering, design, and fabrication of unique systems, to bring Nasa knowledge and people together to collaborate on solving the needs and challenges brought about by the COVID-19 situation," said Armstrong Chief Technologist David Voracek.

Nasa engineer Allen Parker and this team at Armstrong designed a canopy that protects health care workers by safely covering COVID-19 patients while still allowing health care providers access to the patients to provide care. "The patient will be located inside this canopy where aerosol viral contaminants will be vacuumed out through a viral filter located within the canopy. In doing so, the health provider can freely work around the patient outside the canopy with minimal risk," Parker said. — **IANIS**

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RISK MITIGATION

Should coverage against natural catastrophes be made mandatory in Oman?

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 18

With the COVID-19 pandemic threatening to unleash immense economic losses for the private individual and corporate sector – a costly tab that the government may be constrained to shoulder in part at least – the time has come for authorities in the Sultanate to consider making it mandatory for personal, businesses and establishments to insure themselves against all manner of catastrophes – natural and manmade, according to a key insurance industry official.

Murtadha M J Ibrahim al Jamalani, Chairman – OCCI's Finance & Insurance Sector Committee, referenced the soon-to-be-launched Unified Healthcare Insurance Scheme (Dhamani) as a model for the formulation of a legislative and regulatory framework making it obligatory for all kinds of establishments – public and private sector – to secure insurance coverage against a wide array of potential disasters.

"It is well-known that insurance penetration in the Sultanate is below the global average with awareness of the importance of insurance protection still very low outside of the motoring and healthcare segments. Further, with Oman witnessing a rising trend in adverse weather events, and now an economically destructive pandemic, the burden of compensating people and businesses for losses falls increasingly on the government. This can put a tremendous strain on Oman's already burdened national budget," Al Jamalani explained.

In comments to the *Observer*, the official mooted the idea of mandatory coverage against a range of natural and manmade calamities, including cyclones, flooding, climate change related impacts, seismic disasters, fire and explosions, and even pandemics.

"Insurance can play a critical role in mitigating the economic effects of a catastrophe and hasten the recovery process," said the expert. "Against the payment of a modest premium, which can be determined by law, individuals and businesses can get basic protection. The Dhamani model is a good paradigm to emulate in this regard. Risk is no longer placed solely on the shoulders of the government, but shared in some fashion between the private sector and the insurance industry."

Over the past decade, a succession of cyclones and other severe flood and fires events have caused significant damage to farms, factories and plants, transport and coastal infrastructure, leaving Omani entrepreneurs, farmers and even the government to pick up the tab for reconstruction and rehabilitation works. Individuals and communities that suffered losses in these disasters have also been received aid and other support through a variety of government agencies. But with government revenues and its spending ability being increasingly constrained by the downturn in oil prices,

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With a sound insurance scheme, it would be possible for businesses and organisations to bounce back as quickly as possible in the post-pandemic phase without having to wait for government funding support. This is the essence of the concept of insurance protection.

MURTADHA M J IBRAHIM AL JAMALANI
Chairman, OCCI Finance & Insurance Sector Committee



a new approach to risk-sharing associated with natural disasters is now imperative, says the OCCI official.

"A natural calamity like the coronavirus pandemic is causing severe economic disruption, job losses, public health impacts and wide-scale turmoil across a wide spectrum of sectors. With a sound insurance scheme, it would be possible for businesses and organisations to bounce back as quickly as possible in the post-pandemic phase without having to wait for government funding support. This is the essence of the concept of

light of its importance to the national economy, he said.

"Risk mitigation and management are imperatives both at the national and societal levels. To this end, the Insurance and Banking Laws should be suitably upgraded and modernized on a par with the landmark statutes that were enacted in recent times, notably the Public Private Partnership (PPP) Law, Privatisation Law, Monopoly Prevention Law, and so on. As we approach 50th anniversary of Oman's renaissance, we should give insurance and reinsurance their due as pillars of a

of the economic losses associated with a pandemic or any other natural calamity, it would make sound economic and strategic sense for the government to support the creation of an insurance pool or a fund based on insurance principles. Another option is for the government to participate in the equity of reinsurance companies, which in turn, will provide funding support for insurers. The Ministry of Finance should take the initiative to bring together pension funds to create its own reinsurance company or partner with existing players," he added.

MURTADHA M J IBRAHIM AL JAMALANI, CHAIRMAN – OCCI'S FINANCE & INSURANCE SECTOR COMMITTEE, HIGHLIGHTS THE INDISPENSABILITY OF A STRONG INSURANCE INDUSTRY FOR A COUNTRY INCREASINGLY BUFFETED BY NATURAL DISASTERS, CLIMATE CHANGE RELATED ADVERSITIES, AND NOW THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC. BESIDES MITIGATING POTENTIALLY LOSSES, A VIBRANT INSURANCE AND REINSURANCE SECTOR CAN ALSO FUEL THE GROWTH OF OMAN'S ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION, HE SAYS.

insurance protection."

For its part, the OCCI's Finance and Insurance Committee is weighing a number of insurance proposals to make its mandatory for some commercial activities to be covered for business disruptions as part of their license to operate in the Sultanate through the relevant, competent authorities. Notable sectors being actively looked at are private schools and agriculture, said Al Jamalani.

"A natural calamity has the potential to disrupt schooling and shutter schools for a long time, as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated. Who pays the salaries of the teachers and staff during the disruption? Our goal is to make it compulsory for the investors and promoters of private schools to be covered for liability arising from the schools activities, asset damage, business interruption or other consequential losses. We are soon proposing a unified insurance police duly approved by the Capital Market Authority (CMA). The proposal is currently being discussed among the specialised committees of the Chamber."

At the same time, more must be done to strengthen insurance sector regulation, as well as professionalise the industry in

strong and stable economy. With the appointment of professionals well-versed in the principles of risk management, we can aspire to grow into a vibrant sector of the economy."

Murtadha also sees ample potential for the Omani government, directly or through various state-owned pension funds, to invest or be consolidated within the insurance industry in the Sultanate, particularly in the reinsurance business. This is to enable reinsurers to support direct insurance companies in providing coverage particularly to critical infrastructure, such as power plants, energy installations, Oil & Gas facilities, and so on. After all, this infrastructure is a magnet for foreign investment and a source of revenue generation, he said.

"Given the magnitude

US oil prices hit 18-year low

An oil exploration drilling site is seen in Midland, Texas.
– Reuters

WASHINGTON: US crude oil prices slipped to a new 18-year low on Friday, ending the week on a decline.

At one point on Friday, West Texas International crude prices dropped to as low as \$17.31 per barrel before eventually settling at \$18.27. They had opened Friday at \$20 per barrel.

Prices have seen significant declines in recent weeks amid lower levels of demand linked to the coronavirus pandemic, as well as trade disputes between Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Since then, both the US and major foreign producers have agreed to cutting some oil production, a move they hoped would stabilize markets while demand falls worldwide.

A group of major oil producing countries, including Russia and Saudi Arabia, known as Opec+ has recently agreed to reduce their oil output by just shy of 10 million barrels a day for May and June.

The US, Brazil and Canada, which are not part of the group, will cut an additional 3.7 million barrels.

The US economy at large has also struggled amid the coronavirus pandemic, with skyrocketing unemployment claims, although stocks have posted some gains in recent days.

— Reuters

المنطقة الحرة بصلاح
SALALAH FREE ZONE

INVITATION TO TENDER No.: (SFZ-SUA-2020-003)

DEVELOPING, OPERATING, MAINTAINING & MANAGING OF
INTEGRATED RESIDENTIAL CITY IN SALALAH FREEZONE

Salalah Free Zone Company (SFZCo.) invites reputed and specialized companies and offices qualified in the field of **Real Estate, Commercial Development** registered in Sultanate of Oman to participate in tender of **above** shall submit their sealed offer consisting of one sealed envelope for following works mentioned below:

- Tender No.: **SFZ-SUA-2020-003**
- Tender Name: **DEVELOPING, OPERATING, MAINTAINING & MANAGING OF INTEGRATED RESIDENTIAL CITY IN SALALAH FREEZONE**
- Start Date of Document Purchase: **16/ April /2020**
- Last Date of Document Purchase: **30/April/2020**
- Last Date of Offer Submission: **16/June/2020**

Tender Document should obtained from the offices of Salalah Free Zone Company's Finance Directorate, Purchase & Contract Department, or SFZ Muscat office in Al Qurm Area during office hours, from 8:00 AM to 3:00PM (Sunday to Thursday) after payment of Tender Document price for a nonrefundable amount of Omani Rial 100, (Omani Rial Hundred only).

SFZCo is not bound to accept a higher or any other offer.

Submission should be on or before **16/June/2020** at SFZCo Main Office in Salalah opposite Hilton Hotel, Finance Directorate-Supply Chain 3rd Floor or SFZ Muscat Office in Shatti Al Qurm.

Completed Tender Documents (Original + additional copy+ CD) shall be submitted in sealed package without revealing the identity of the Tenderer on the exterior, addressed to SFZCo Chief Executive Officer, with all supporting documents.

PO Box 87, PC 217, Tel: 23132500, Fax: 23132400
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SPOTLIGHTING OMANI ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND TECH INNOVATION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

OTF commits funding support to 3 new Omani online start-ups

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 18

The Oman Technology Fund (OTF), the Sultanate's leading venture capital investment fund, has announced funding support for three Omani new startups that will help strengthen the virtual marketplace at a time when many conventional shops and establishments remain shuttered amid the current lockdown over the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Tharwa, Drewel and Hadaya join a total of seven online platforms named by the government-backed Fund as beneficiaries of funding assistance from a special purse of RO 1 million earmarked for innovative IT initiatives that help mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

As with all of the beneficiary projects supported by OTF, the latest platforms are designed to enable Omani farmers, livestock breeders and manufacturers of consumer goods to connect with customers online and thereby fuel the growth of e-commerce in the Sultanate.

Tharwa, an online platform set up by three Omanis, will serve as a virtual marketplace for suppliers and distributors of all kinds of fresh and processed meat to offer their products to consumers. The platform will cater to local as well as internationally sourced produce.

Hadaya's launch coincides with the start of the Omani rose harvest and rosewater distillation season in Al Jabal Al Akdhar and is thus an apt platform for buyers of rose essence



or other related products to connect with suppliers.

Finally, Drewel specializes in the home delivery of a range of fresh of produce, including fruits and vegetables, meat, foodstuff and household goods. It caters primarily to Omani farmers, producers and traders.

Already, four previous startups have taken off in recent weeks since OTF announced funding support for their initiatives.

They include Behar, which was launched earlier this month in the wake of the shuttering of the

Wholesale Fish Market at Al Felajj in Barka wilayat – part of measures by the Omani government to curtail the spread of COVID-19. Fishermen and brokers can now use this integrated platform to offer their fresh merchandise to leading supermarket chains and other distributors operating across the Sultanate.

Helping connect wholesale buyers and sellers of fruits and vegetables is Athmar, an online platform that recently won the endorsement of Muscat Municipality, which operates and manages the wholesale market at Al Mawaleh in Muscat Governorate.

RECOGNISING INNOVATION: THARWA, DREWEL AND HADAYA JOIN A TOTAL OF SEVEN ONLINE PLATFORMS NAMED BY THE GOVERNMENT-BACKED OTF AS BENEFICIARIES OF FUNDING ASSISTANCE FROM A SPECIAL PURSE OF RO 1 MILLION EARMARKED FOR INNOVATIVE IT INITIATIVES THAT HELP MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC.

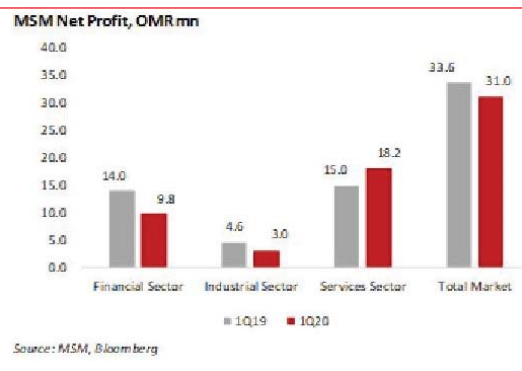
Ashal is an online teaching platform set up by Omanis for the benefit of students who are encouraged to study from home.

Rounding off the seven OTF-funded initiatives is Edlal, billed as the first Omani open e-learning platform which seeks to prepare young Omanis to join the workforce by equipping them with the required skills and knowledge for the market, in addition to enriching the Arabic online content.

OTF, which is also providing funding support for a number of startups engaged in COVID-19 innovations, has pledged to expand the list of Omani initiatives benefiting from its RO 1 million kitty.

Opec+ deal, stimulus measures lift MSM Index

MUSCAT: MSM30 closed the week up by 1.93 per cent. Government support measures for the private sector, the Opec+ deal and low share prices were the major reasons behind the rise during the week. Also supporting the market activity were the result announcements this week as almost a third of the companies have published their initial results.



All sub-indices closed up as well. Financial Index closed up by 1.19 per cent w-o-w, Services and Industrial index also closed up by 2.03 per cent and 1.02 per cent w-o-w, respectively. The Competition Protection and Monopoly Prevention Centre approved the acquisition of Gulf Baader Capital Markets by Ubhar Capital SAOC. The approval was issued in cooperation with Capital Market Authority which approved the acquisition earlier.

Oman's Finance Ministry has told all government agencies to cut their operating budgets by at least 10 per cent this year to counter a slide in oil prices, including by reviewing salaries and benefits. The move comes after the government cut the budget allocated to government agencies for 2020 by 5 per cent last month in response to the financial challenges the oil-exporting nation faces. All operational budgets would be reviewed and exceptional bonuses for state employees would be halted, according to the finance ministry. It said the decision applied to all ministries, agencies and public entities, as well as security and military bodies.

Oman has told its oil producing companies to cut 200,000 barrels per day starting from May 1 until the end of June in line with Opec+ crude supply reduction pact and will inform its customers of the same plan, its oil ministry said.

PDO's transition to Energy Development Oman was approved last week. Energy Development Oman centres on a vision to reposition PDO from an essentially fossil fuels-based producer to a "fully fledged energy company." The strategy envisions PDO's diversification into, among other areas, solar and alternative energy development, energy management, low-carbon technologies, oil and gas consultancy services, and water management.

The CEO of Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWPC) said that it has not so far been decided which electricity production companies will be decommissioned during the first phase of 2021. CEO said that gas stations whose contracts will expire by the end of 2021 still compete to produce the specified capacities. Setting the final required capacity will be closely associated with the growth or decline of demand, as per CEO, adding that capacities and bids are likely to be finalized during the second half of 2020.

Inflation in Oman dropped by 0.29 per cent YoY in March 2020 compared to the same month of 2019, according to the latest data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information. The prices of furnishings, household equipment, and routine household maintenance fell by 0.06 per cent; housing, water, electricity, gas, and other fuels fell by 0.64 per cent; communication by 0.25 per cent; miscellaneous goods and services by 1.45 per cent in March 2020 compared to the same month of 2019. Inflation on a m-o-m basis fell by 0.51 per cent in March 2020 compared to February 2020.

Till the market close as of April 16, 38 companies whose year ends in December announced 1Q20 results. Overall, the profitability of the 38 companies declined by 7.7 per cent to RO 30.98m compared to RO 33.5m in 1Q19. Earnings of the financial sector stood at RO 9.83m (-29.8 per cent), Industrial sector at RO 2.98m (-34.9 per cent) and Services sector at RO 18.16m (+21.3 per cent).

[Courtesy: U-Capital]



A V MANOHAR

POINT of VIEW

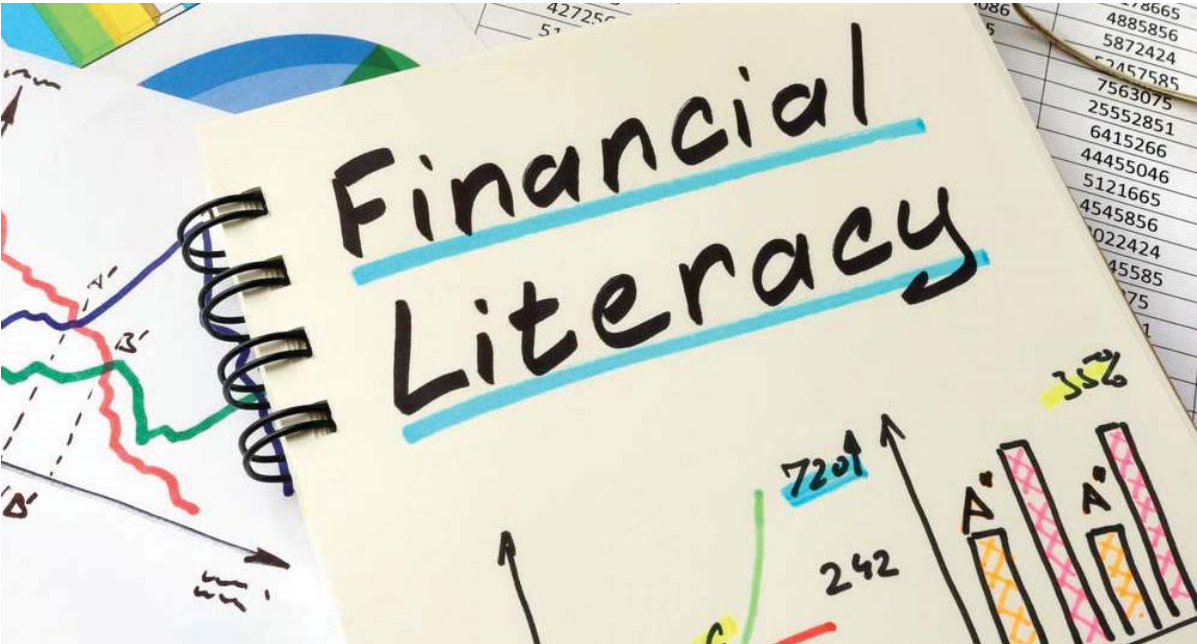
Nation-building through knowledge building

Achieving a good profitability and a sustained cash flow is the dream of every entrepreneur, and this becomes a reality only when all the vital functions of an organization work in close cohesion with each other.

Enhancing the professional skills of nationals, training them to be at their professional best in the work place and sharpening their potential to match the job requirements are focus areas identified by the government for priority action. Huge financial allocations have been made in every annual budget and meticulous steps initiated towards upscaling the Oman's human capital.

At the outset, fresh graduates are ushered into a well-laid out training spectrum, wherein they are nurtured in personality and soft skills development, customer relationship, salesmanship, networking, leadership and various organisational functions, all intended to make them worthy instruments in their places of work. Besides, extensive guidance and mentoring process are being rolled out for SMEs to instill entrepreneurial skills, which will help in managing their business routine efficiently.

Considering the need to prepare Omanis to come to the forefront, many business houses have expanded their training agenda. The new discipline being embarked upon is teaching "Finance for Non-Finance Professionals" (FNFP). This gives an orientation of basic concepts of finance functions to non-finance background members, be it Technical, Production, Sales, Marketing, Supply Chain or Human Resources (HR).



FNFP deliberates on the Finance and Accounting (F&A) functions covering Financial Accounting, Cost Accounting and Management Accounting, Ratio Analysis, Budgets and Management Information System (MIS) and more importantly on the technique "How to read and interpret Financial Statements?"

Understanding the basics of finance functions by all becomes a compulsion these days and not an option anymore. Such an understanding acts as a binding glue, weaving a well-knitted team and placing them in the same wavelength and solidarity.

Achieving a good profitability and

a sustained cash flow is the dream of every entrepreneur, and this becomes a reality only when all the vital functions of an organization work in close cohesion with each other.

By imparting FNFP at all levels, the corporations have experienced success by achieving higher productivity, cost savings, improvement in production process, innovation with new features, faster documentation, improvement in working capital cycle, higher utilization of the plant capacity, reduction of wastage and optimum utilization of various resources. Obviously, all these positive actions resulted into higher profits and better returns to the investors.

Financial reports such as Profit and Loss Statement, Balance Sheet and Cash Flow statement are not mere statements showing the past but to be seen as a tool for systematic analysis and assessment of the business.

This process called Ratio Analysis indicates both the strengths and pressure points in the operations for corrective action.

Similarly, the Annual Budget is a forward looking process that prepares the management to have a unified action plan ready on paper for implementation during the subsequent year. Planning for Capital Investments and Funding become special features in this exercise.

MIS is a dash board for the management that shows the flash light of actual operations in comparison with the budget and the variance analysis serves as a reminder to set the house in order.

The costing technique plays a great role in arriving at the computation of cost of products, processes or services in a systematic manner.

It also makes a distinction in cost namely, Fixed or Variable, Product or Period, Controllable or Uncontrollable. Such an orientation hands over a lesson on Marginal Costing and Break Even Analysis that help in better pricing strategies.

"Prevention is better than cure" is the narrative for management accounting also. This special testing dissects probable decisions in advance, including make or buy, lease or own, expansion, Investment in New Projects, Capital Budgeting, Capital Restructuring, Dividend Declarations. Interestingly, "Time value of money" is the driving key in this process.

On the whole, FNFP is not a mere teaching exercise but a strategy towards achieving the financial objectives of an enterprise. Besides, it sets in motion a new wave of managerial skills of the nationals, that will surely make the slogan "Nation Building through Knowledge Building", a reality.

[The author is CEO of Wisdom Business and Training Services (email: avm@wisdomoman.com)]

Growing calls to widen debt relief for poor nations

WASHINGTON: The World Bank and International Monetary Fund should seek case-by-case solutions to ease debt burdens on middle-income countries hit by the coronavirus pandemic, key shareholders said on Friday, fueling calls to widen relief already provided to the poorest countries.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in separate remarks, also urged creditors to grant a debt standstill for all developing countries, not just the poorest, warning that many faced debt distress due to a major global recession caused by the pandemic.

Guterres told a virtual conference on Africa hosted by the World Bank and IMF that the continent alone needed more than \$200 billion to combat the sometimes-fatal disease caused by the novel coronavirus and mitigate its economic impact.

Earlier this week, the IMF forecast the global economy would contract by 3 per cent in 2020 due to the pandemic, marking the steepest downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

World Bank Group President David Malpass (pictured) said the global recession would be deeper than the one seen during the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, and would hit the poorest and most vulnerable countries the hardest.

More than 2.14 million people in more than 210 countries and territories have been reported to be infected by the coronavirus globally and 143,744 have died, according to a tally.

In remarks to the 25-member Development Committee of World Bank and Fund shareholders, Malpass



An elderly woman is seen with a food parcel she received from volunteers at a relief distribution in Lagos, Nigeria. – Reuters

urged private creditors to support Wednesday's agreement by the G20 major economies and the Paris Club to suspend bilateral official debt service payments for the world's poorest countries through year-end.

Echoing a statement from the Group of 20 countries, the committee urged the Bank to explore suspension of debt payments for the world's



The global recession would be deeper than the one seen during the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, and would hit the poorest.

poorest countries.

China on Thursday also chimed in, saying the world's biggest multilateral development bank should "lead by example."

Nigerian Finance Minister Zainab Ahmed appealed to the World Bank and other multilateral institutions to find ways to participate in the debt relief push for the poorest countries,

FEDERAL

SUPPORT

US announces \$19 billion COVID-19 aid for farmers

CHICAGO: President Donald Trump announced a \$19 billion relief programme to help US farmers cope with the impact of the coronavirus, including \$16 billion in direct payments to producers and mass purchases of meat, dairy, vegetables and other products.

The United States Agriculture Department is partnering with regional and local distributors to purchase \$3 billion in such farm goods to be distributed to food banks, churches and aid groups as millions of Americans face unemployment with much of the economy shut down.

"American agriculture has been hard-hit, like most of America, with the coronavirus, and President Trump is standing with our farmers and all Americans to make sure that we all get through this national emergency," Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said at a White House news conference.

The agency said it will make monthly purchases totaling about \$100 million each of fresh produce, dairy products and meat products. Perdue said USDA will work with companies like Sysco Corp to help procure, package and distribute food boxes.

Long lines have formed at US food banks in recent weeks.

Farmers and ranchers have struggled to get their goods to market because of disruption caused by the pandemic, forcing some to throw out food and call for government help.

"Having to dump milk or plow under vegetables ready to market is not only financially distressing but it's heartbreaking as well for those that produce them," Perdue said.

Direct payments will be sent "as quickly as possible" as farm commodity producers have experienced "unprecedented losses," Perdue said, who hoped checks could be sent by the end of May.

The \$16 billion in direct payments to farmers and ranchers will include \$9.6 billion for the livestock industry — with \$5.1 billion for cattle, \$2.9 billion for dairy and \$1.6 billion for hogs, according to a statement released late Friday by US Senator John Hoeven of North Dakota, chairman of the Senate Agriculture Appropriations Committee.

In addition, \$3.9 billion will be paid to row crop producers, \$2.1 billion for specialty crop farmers and \$500 million for other crops, according to the statement. The payments are capped at \$250,000 per individual farmer or entity.

The Renewable Fuels Association (RFA), which represents corn-based ethanol producers that have suffered due to lack of demand for motor fuels as Americans stay home, was quick to

criticize the package.

"USDA missed a crucial opportunity to lend a helping hand to an industry that is suffering the worst economic crisis in its history," RFA President Geoff Cooper said in a statement.

Perdue acknowledged that constituents may consider the direct payments "insufficient" and said USDA is trying to cover "small farmers as well as larger farmers."

Funding for the immediate aid programme will be pulled together from a number of sources, including recent coronavirus-related aid laws passed by Congress and other funding authorities that USDA has access to, according to Perdue.

But going forward, he said, "I anticipate we will need additional money." — Reuters



US President Donald Trump listens as US Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue addresses the daily coronavirus task force briefing at the White House. – Reuters

UBS, HSBC sell down AMS stake left after rights issue



A man fixes the UBS logo in Vienna. – Reuters

VIENNA: Lenders UBS and HSBC have cut their combined stake in AMS to below 1 per cent from the 15 per cent they were forced to take after weak demand for the sensor maker's capital increase, a notification to the Swiss stock exchange showed.

AMS issued 190 million new shares via the rights issue, raising 1.75 billion francs (\$1.8 billion) to help fund its purchase of German lighting group Osram, with which it wants to form a global leader in sensors and lights.

Because of low take-up, UBS and HSBC, which along with Bank of America Merrill Lynch are providing a 4.4 billion euro bridge loan for the purchase, were left with an AMS stake of 7.7 per cent and 7.2 per cent respectively.

Investors, who have been concerned from the outset that AMS might overstretch itself with the planned takeover, reacted with relief to Friday's news, boosting AMS shares as much as 11.2 per cent to 10.34 Swiss francs (\$10.67).

The European technology index .SX8P was up around 3 per cent at 1245 GMT.

Analysts have said a combination of the two firms could make sense. AMS is known for its state-of-the-art optical sensors, used for facial recognition in smartphones, and has long been keen on diversifying into applications for the auto industry.

Osram could open that door.

However, AMS's much smaller size, its dependence on Apple, the billions of debt it took on to finance the deal, and Osram's badly performing business have also triggered scepticism towards the tie-up.

The coronavirus pandemic, which has hit many industries, and in particular the car sector, has added to the concerns.

The Swiss stock exchange notification did not say at what price UBS and HSBC had managed to reduce their stake. For the rights issue, AMS demanded 9.20 francs per share. — Reuters

BECAUSE OF LOW TAKE-UP, UBS AND HSBC, WHICH ALONG WITH BANK OF AMERICA MERRILL LYNCH ARE PROVIDING A 4.4 BILLION EURO BRIDGE LOAN FOR THE PURCHASE, WERE LEFT WITH AN AMS STAKE OF 7.7 PER CENT AND 7.2 PER CENT RESPECTIVELY.

Airbus furloughs 3,000 French aerospace workers



An Airbus A320neo aircraft is pictured in Colomiers near Toulouse, France. – Reuters

TOULOUSE: Airbus will furlough some 3,000 French aerospace workers by tapping a government-backed scheme for four weeks starting from Monday, the planemaker said, in its latest effort to cope with the coronavirus crisis.

The company said the measures would apply to those unable to work because their workstations "cannot be fully secured" in line with health measures imposed during a country-wide lockdown in force since March 17.

Confirming a report, the company said some 3,000 workers would be affected at factories in Toulouse, Nantes and Saint-Nazaire.

The CGT union said this represented 20 per cent of the Airbus workforce in France. It employs 130,000 people worldwide.

Airbus has announced plans to cut jetliner production by at least a third after demand for air travel collapsed and most airlines found themselves unable to take delivery of aircraft.

Airbus said the furlough or "partial activity" scheme may be extended beyond a planned May 17 end-date if needed to address an unprecedented downturn and recently lowered production rates.

The "partial activity" or "partial unemployment" scheme, which is widely available to companies in France, allows firms to reduce working hours and provide workers with partial compensation that can be recovered from the government.

Unions backed the scheme which sources said would allow employees to receive some 92 per cent of their usual salary during the furlough.

— Reuters

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A JEWELLERY DESIGNER REFLECTING MODERNITY

MAZOUN AL GHILANIA

Her special touch converts stones into jewellery and when she works aesthetically on them they become fashion statements making many others to follow her. She keeps a vast range of ideas and offers customised designs suiting to individuals' personalities. Sara al Lawati has blurred the boundaries of fine jewellery. Her passion in creating pieces has resulted in jewellery that is crafted in luxurious metals, vivid and high-quality gemstones and twinkle them with a heavy dose of diamond accents. Sara has pushed through to become a new wave of jewellery designer, creating collections that weave together old-world techniques with

modern technology. Deep down, Sara gives uniquely local touch that makes her unique Omani jewellery designer. She believes one day she would be part of the world of jewellery, the dream she grew up with since her family work in the same profession. She went on to complete her Master's degree in Financial Analysis at University of New South Wales in Australia, and launched her brand in 2018. "After gaining a rich practical experience for about eight years in my job, I started to work in jewellery business and opened my own project in gold and diamond jewellery. I made my own page on Instagram to promote for my collection," Sara said. Sarah welcomes her customers in her private office to display her collection or to work on her customers' designs. "These

steps helped me to understand the market as well as to create a future vision for my project and work on this basis," Sara added. Her collection is a must-have for any woman who wants to update her fine jewellery wardrobe with pieces that can still mix easily yet offer a high dose of fashion and the longevity to live on past the trends. She did not choose "Sarah Jewels" name for her project randomly. One of the most important reasons for linking the brand name to her name is creating a direct link between the owner of the project and the product or service that been provided. "This linkage plays a great role for the customer in terms of trust in dealing with the project owner. It also gives the project owner the sense of responsibility and concern to provide the best," she pointed out.

Sara has faced numerous challenges in different phases of her project, but still the complexity of procedures with the competent authorities was a big challenge for her. "Jewellery domain combines art, flair and garnish, which generated my passion in this field. I'm almost certain that the metal of gold itself has a great role in the energy and psyche of human, so how is it if it is an essential part of daily life," she said. Diamonds and precious stones are the main items that Sara uses in designing jewellery crafted with gold for women and platinum for men. She loves the designs that combine diamonds as the most expensive precious stones with other gems. She is also keen to use the finest types of gems and implement special designs for her clients as they desire.

Gems give a special touch to jewellery; cutting stones method plays a big role aesthetically. There are other dimensions for precious stones related to energy, science and astronomy. "I love the designs that combine diamonds as the most expensive precious stones with other gems," she said. Her philosophy of design is simplicity, clarity and quality. These three elements make the difference. "I love to believe that all my clients can understand the meaning of every piece I make. It is important to me that they know what they are wearing". "One of the most beautiful designs that is closest to my heart are the wedding rings because of their moral value, the bond that it implies especially to their owners, we can say that it is the most important piece

acquired by women," she said. Her designs significantly depend on her customers. She focuses on what the customers want, as she also works on other designs that combine tradition and modern with renovated touches. These designs are highly competitive and on a great demand by her clients. Her focus at the beginnings was women's jewellery, but over time she decided to make men's jewellery as well. "I received many questions about men's jewellery especially gifts for occasion. I discovered that men have a unique taste for jewellery," Sara said. "The development process will continue, God willing, there are plans that I look forward to and work to achieve in the next phase. I hope that I will always meet the high expectations of my customers," she said.



Laver Cup called off due to French Open switch

PARIS: The 2020 Laver Cup will not go ahead in September as planned and will return next year due to the clash of dates with the French Open, the organisers of the exhibition event said on Friday.

The French Tennis Federation, in a surprise move, switched the claycourt Grand Slam tournament to September 20-October 4 from its May start due to the novel coronavirus outbreak.

The new Roland Garros dates clashed with the September 25-27 Laver Cup, which is a team event co-created by Roger Federer and featuring the best of Europe against a World team.

Boston's TD Garden will remain host for the fourth edition of the event, which will now be held from September 24-26 in 2021.

"It's unfortunate that the Laver Cup has to be pushed back a year, but at this stage it's the right thing to do for everyone concerned," Federer said in a statement from the organisers.

"Although disappointing, the good news is that TD Garden will still be able to host the event next year and I really look forward to finally playing in Boston for the first time at Laver Cup 2021."

The men's ATP Tour and the WTA, which runs the women's circuit, suspended all tournaments until mid-July after

countries started locking down borders to contain the spread of the flu-like virus which has infected over two million people.

The grasscourt Grand Slam at Wimbledon has been cancelled while the French Open's new slot means the tournament will start a week after the US Open takes place on the hard courts of Flushing Meadows in New York.

In recent weeks tennis governing bodies have discussed the scheduling logjam with little clarity on when the sport can restart.

Tennis Australia, who run the opening Grand Slam of the year at Melbourne Park, and US Open organisers, the United States Tennis Association, are stakeholders in the Laver Cup, which was part of the 2020 ATP Tour calendar.

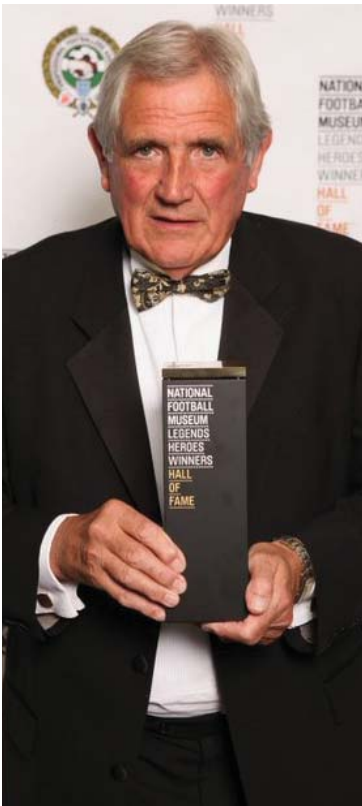
Organisers said the tickets purchased for the 2020 Laver Cup will be valid next year or fans can receive a full refund.

"We needed to make a decision now on our event," said Laver Cup Chairman Tony Godsick, who is also Federer's agent.

"We know our passionate fans will be disappointed that they have to wait an extra year for the Laver Cup in Boston, but this is the responsible course of action, necessitated by the emerging calendar conflicts." — **Reuters**

Leeds great Hunter dies at 76 after contracting COVID-19

- ♦ Played 726 times for Leeds, winning two league titles
- ♦ Tough-tackling stopper lifted the FA Cup and League Cup
- ♦ Hunter earned 28 England caps, played at '70 World Cup



LONDON: Former Leeds United and England defender Norman 'Bites Yer Legs' Hunter has died at 76 after contracting the new coronavirus, the Championship (second-tier) club said on Friday.

"Norman was taken to hospital last week after being diagnosed with COVID-19 and despite continuing to battle and the best efforts of NHS staff, he sadly lost his fight earlier this morning," Leeds said on their website www.leedsunited.com

Hunter made 726 appearances for Leeds in 15 years at the Yorkshire club and earned his fearsome nickname for his tough tackling.

He won two top-flight league titles, an FA Cup and a League Cup with Leeds and played in their 1975 European Cup final defeat by German side Bayern Munich.

He was also part of England's 1966 World Cup-winning squad, without playing, and came on as a substitute in the 3-2 defeat by West Germany in the 1970 World Cup quarterfinal.

Hunter, who won 28 caps for England, was also the first winner of the PFA Players' Player of the Year award



in 1974.

"He leaves a huge hole in the Leeds United family, his legacy will never be forgotten and our thoughts are with Norman's family and friends at this very difficult time," Leeds said.

The Professional Footballers Association (PFA) said the game had lost a legend.

Former England team-mate Alan Mullery remembered a man who never lost his competitive spirit, even when on holiday.

"We used to go on cruises together," he told Sky Sports television.



"I remember we were on a trip once and we were playing the crew and I was the referee and he was playing. And he's hit this fellow in a 50-50 tackle and this fellow did three somersaults and landed on his backside.

"I said to him 'Norman, these passengers have paid a lot of money to come on it.' And he said 'We've still got to win, Alan. We can't let them win'.

"To talk about him as a footballer, he was probably one of the hardest footballers you would ever come up against. And off the field he was absolutely gentle." — **Reuters**

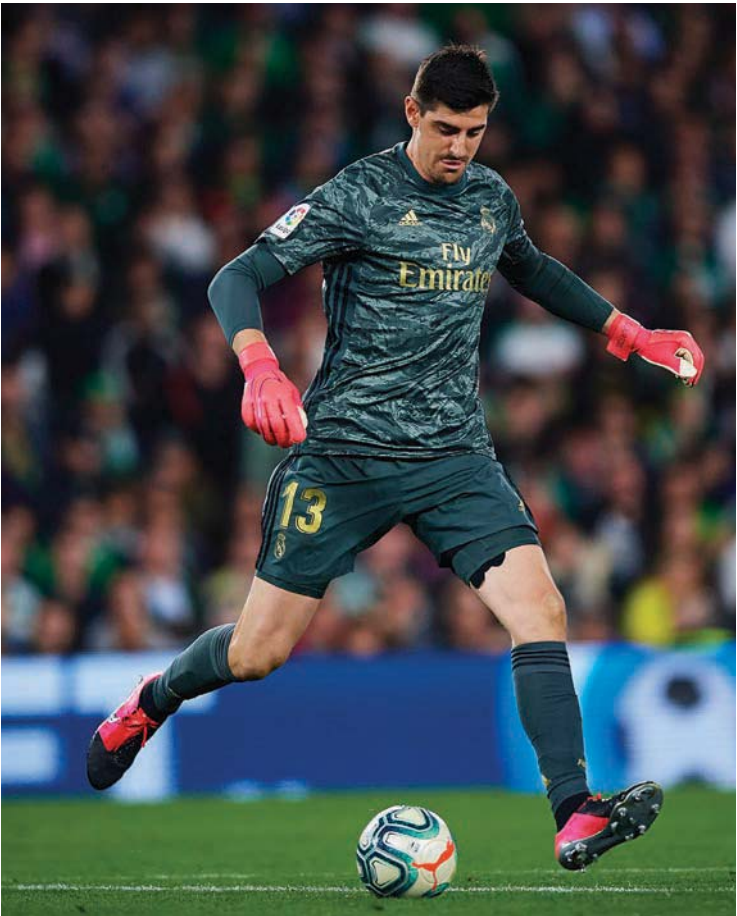
Top four will qualify for CL even if season is abandoned: Spanish FA

MADRID: If the La Liga season is cut short or abandoned due to the coronavirus pandemic, the four teams on top of the most recent completed round of standings will qualify for next season's Champions League, the Spanish Football Association (RFEF) said.

With all teams having played 27 matches before the RFEF suspended play on March 12 due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, Barcelona, Real Madrid, Sevilla and Real Sociedad are the four teams that will go through to Europe's premier club competition if no more action is possible this season.

"The RFEF wants to have done its homework in case, in the event of a suspension of competitions, it receives the request from Uefa regarding the Spanish clubs that would have access to European competitions next season," RFEF general secretary Andreu Camps said in a statement on Thursday.

"Thus... it has been agreed in the RFEF Delegate Commission to make a plan in order to give certainty in an



extreme scenario, such as not being able to finish the competitions, so that all the clubs know the new scenario they are facing."

After the last round of games were completed on March 10, Barcelona topped La Liga with 58 points, two ahead of Real Madrid. Sevilla are third on 47, with Real Sociedad a point further back in fourth.

The teams in fifth and sixth place - which are currently Getafe and Atletico Madrid - will also qualify for the Europa League.

The result of the Copa Del Rey final, if that is contested, could impact which team grabs the final Europa League spot.

With Copa Del Rey finalists Real Sociedad already in the top four, their opponents Athletic Bilbao (10th in the league) are in pole position for the third Europa League spot unless they have climbed into the top six by the time the final league standings are decided.

Should that occur, the final Europa League spot will go to the seventh-placed team in La Liga. — **Reuters**

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OMAN EYE TOP HONOURS AT ASIAN BEACH GAMES

BEACH SOCCER TEAM KEEPING FOCUS WITH REMOTE TRAINING TECHNIQUES, SAYS COACH TALIB HILAL

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 18

Talib Hilal, is the name related to the success of Oman's beach soccer team over the years. In 2008 at the Asian Beach Games in Bali city, Indonesia, the Sultanate's beach soccer team had imprinted its name as one of the top teams in Asia as they had clinched the gold medal. National coach Talib Hilal's men are gearing up for taking part at the 2020 Asian Beach Games which will take place in Sanya city, Hainan Island, China, during November 28 until December 6.

"It is really difficult time nowadays as everyone is living through a tough situation due to spreading of the novel COVID-19 including the sports life. However, we are under way with our physical online training



Talib Hilal

for the second consecutive week under supervision of the fitness coach Ricardo Silva," he told Oman Daily Observer.

The 45-year-old will be leading the team in its sixth participation



at the 2020 Asian Beach Games. Oman beach soccer team had managed to win the gold medal after beating UAE in the final clash. The team had finished as runners-up twice in Muscat 2010 edition and Danang, Vietnam in 2016. Oman were crowned as champions of the Asian Championship in 2015 and positioned as runners-up in the 2009 edition.

"I am fully confident that our boys can do a lot in the next edition of the Asian Beach Games in Sanya city. I hope things will be clear for this tournament and the event will take place as many of the events were postponed and cancelled due to outbreak of COVID-19," the coach sounded optimistic.

The last participation of the Sultanate's beach soccer team was at

the global showpiece event at the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup in Paraguay in December. The third participation of the team at the world high-profile beach soccer tournament had registered a crucial win for Oman against Nigeria. The national team suffered two losses against Portugal and Brazil.

Talib, a former Fanja player, led Oman to the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup for first time in history in 2011 in Ravenna, Italy. Oman had crashed out in the first round as the team suffered three defeats against Portugal, Salvador and Argentina. The second participation for the team at the global level was in Espinho in Portugal in 2015. The team ended their campaign again in the first round as they lost to Italy and Switzerland and registered a win against Costa Rica.

