

Chinese Foreign Minister arrives

Wang Yi, State Councillor and Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China, and his delegation arrived in Muscat on Sunday on an official visit to the Sultanate. The Chinese guest and his delegation were received upon their arrival by Dr Khalid bin Said al Jaradi, Head of the Protocols Department in the Foreign Ministry.

SEE ALSO P2



P11

CONWAY,
SODHI
LEAD KIWI
CRUISE



P14

HIGH-LEVEL
TEAM VISITS AL
MAZUNAH FREE
ZONE



P15

INVESTORS LOOK FOR
WAYS TO PROTECT
THEMSELVES FROM
MARKET DOWNTURN



MUSCAT

DOCTORS PERFORM RARE SURGERY

A surgical team from the Royal Hospital's Paediatric Surgery has succeeded in performing a rare surgery on an eight-month-old baby with Fetus in Fetu condition. The team was led by Dr Mohammed al Sajwani, Head of Paediatric Surgery, along with three paediatric surgeons Dr Said Bani Oraba, Dr Mahmood bin Ibrahim and Dr Mohammed bin Hamid, with the cooperation of anaesthetists and nurses. The patient's post-surgery examinations and vital signs showed success and she was discharged after three days. **SEE ALSO P2**

ENVIRONMENTAL NORMS IN FREE ZONES ISSUED

Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), issued a decision regulating procedures covering the issuance of environmental permits in the special economic zones and free zones in the Sultanate. Lubna bint Hamoud al Sabariyah, Environmental Specialist at the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones, said that the decision applies to all projects developed in the special economic zones and free zones. **DETAILS ON P13**

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OMAN OBSERVER

INSIDE



PHILIPPINES TO REIMPOSE STRICTER COVID-19 CURBS IN CAPITAL

P7



LEBANON FROZEN BY POLITICAL INTRANSIGENCE

P9

National plan for organ transfer, transplant

MUSCAT: Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, issued a decision establishing the National Programme for Human Organ Transfer and Transplant. The programme aims to enforce prescribed principles in the field of transferring and transplanting human organs and tissues, developing clinical research and implementing the recommendations of the technical committee tasked with regulating the profession.

This specialised national programme tackles one of the most sophisticated areas (human organ transfer and transplant) that poses the greatest challenge to health systems and requires co-

ordination among different departments and specialists to find solutions to the challenges.

Transplanting alternative organs is considered the sole means of saving the life of patients suffering total organ failure, when donation remains the only option provided exclusively by people allowing re-use of their kidneys and livers during their life or after death. Public collaboration is needed to encourage organ donation to save the life of about 3,000 patients suffering total kidney failure and relying on dialysis. A live donor has a chance to save the life of eight such patients. — **ONA**

SEE ALSO P4

STRUGGLE TO FREE SHIP



A view of a tugboat by the Panama-flagged MV Ever Given container ship, which has been wedged diagonally across the span of the canal about 6 km north of the Suez Canal's entrance by the Red Sea port city of Suez since March 23, blocking the waterway in both directions. **DETAILS ON P15**

Sultanate's peace role hailed

MUSCAT: Agence France-Presse (AFP) has broadcast a documentary film titled "Message of Peace from Oman".

The film features the history and culture of Oman and examples of coexistence of Omani people with other nations of the world. It indicates that the Sultanate has been able to present a universal model of dialogue and

coexistence between religious sects and rejection of all forms of violence and extremism. The documentary, released on Sunday, lays emphasis on the Sultanate's international "Message of Islam" which toured 135 cities around the world and familiarised people with the deep-rooted Islamic concepts of tolerance, coexistence and understanding. **TURN TO P3**

NIGHT BAN ON MOVEMENT BEGINS



ONA & KABEER YOUSUF

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The 12-day night ban on movement came into effect from 8 pm on Sunday with essential services, health and media professionals being exempted from the ban.

The nationwide partial curfew, ordered by the Supreme Committee prevents movement of individuals and vehicles between 8 pm and 5 pm.

Over the weekend in 72 hours, as many as 2,249 cases were reported, while 11 people lost their lives to Covid-19, according to the statistics released by the Ministry of Health.

The fresh measures imposed after nearly a month-long night closure of commercial activities, is the latest against the community spread of the coronavirus.

It has been found that the period from April 1 to May 31 is very crucial and critical for the Sultanate in combatting the spread of the virus, and the lockdown is part of various measures mooted to avoid serious problems.

NATIONAL DUTIES

The Royal Oman Police (ROP)

Health sector activated for new wave

VINOD NAIR

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All healthcare workers have been urged to activate the plans that were followed when the pandemic was at its peak previously. The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Sunday reported 2,249 new cases of Covid-19, bringing the total number of cases registered to 156,087. It may be noted that Oman reported 4,703 cases and 30 deaths the previous week.

Oman also reported 11 new Covid-19-related deaths, bringing the total death toll to 1,661.

Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, presided a meeting to discuss

the epidemiological situation and the surge of cases as well cases hospital admissions, particularly in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

Sixty-five patients were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 466, including 145 in ICUs.

Specialists expect the period from April 1 to May 31 to be an extremely difficult stage in the pandemic's development in the Sultanate. The ministry has called on everyone to understand the measures taken, cooperate with the health sector and strictly adhere to preventive measures such as wearing masks, physical distancing and maintaining the hygiene of the hands.

continues to perform its national duties by activating checkpoints and deploying patrols all across the governorates of the Sultanate to enforce the decision taken by the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the developments resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and related to the nighttime closure of commercial activities and ban on individual and vehicle movement between 8 pm and 5 am.

Brig Mohammed bin Nasser

al Kindi, Director-General of Operations, has affirmed ROP's preparedness to carry on with its role in handling emergencies and keeping safety and security across the Sultanate as well as taking maximum preventive measures to stem the spread of coronavirus by deploying traffic and security patrols and monitoring public places with support of the police aviation and monitoring the implementation of health isolation and social distancing. **TURN TO P3**

Migratory birds love to flock along Al Wusta wetland reserve

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

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The wetland reserve in the Wilayat of Mahout in the Governorate of Al Wusta has been ranked among the top 25 sites of international importance for migratory birds in the Middle East region. It is an important site for the winter migratory birds within the migration path of Asia and East Africa.

It is one of the pristine sites with complex ecosystems and unique biodiversity that make it one of the rare reference sites in the world for studying biological diversity and the sustainable use of wetlands located between the intertidal zones.

The reserve is spread over an estimated 2,621 square kilometres, and is considered a tourist resort for nature lovers and bird watchers, and wildlife enthusiasts.



Dr Thuraya al Saririyah, Assistant Director-General for Nature Conservation at the Environment Authority, pointed out the importance of the wetlands to the environment and their contribution in maintaining the environmental balance between the diverse animal and plant species. "Wetlands help in reducing soil erosion and beach erosion and they are valuable stops for migratory birds." **TURN TO P2**

■ CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTER BEGINS OMAN VISIT



Wang Yi, State Councillor and Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China, and his delegation arrived on an official visit to the Sultanate on Sunday. The Chinese guest and his delegation were received upon their arrival by Dr Khalid bin Said al Jaradi, Head of the Protocols Department at the Foreign Ministry. Chinese guests visited the historic Nizwa Castle, in the Wilayat of Nizwa. The guests were briefed on the history of the castle and its historical role via successive periods of times. — ONA



■ FROM PAGE 1

Migratory birds love to flock along Al Wusta

The Wetland Reserve is considered a tourist resort for nature lovers. It is important for bird-watching and enthusiasts who are interested in wildlife. It can contribute to the Omani economy due to its economic value and most importantly, giving sustainability to natural resources.

Bar al Hikman peninsula constitutes the largest part of the wetlands reserve, and it of coastal and inland plains of salt, huge landfills, and some saltwater lakes, which are of unique natural and geological importance, overlooking the western coast of the

Masirah Island.

The reserve is distinguished by several natural components, such as a group of islands, lagoons, mangroves, nesting and feeding sites for sea turtles, mating marine mammals, including the rare and endangered Arab humpback whales.

It also has a group of coral reefs, seaweeds, and several endemic organisms, like Omani clownfish, krappi, green and rimani turtles, large sandpiper, red sandpiper, common vulture, curlew, and others, that do not exist in other places of the world.

Since the mid-eighties, Bar al Hikman has become a centre for the study and inventory of a number of waterfowl in the Sultanate. The studies have been carried out by volunteers and experts from international organisations.

The area, with its large landfills and quantities of salt, is of great importance in the migration of thousands of waterfowl, as it is one of the most important stations in the Middle East for feeding, rest and reproduction.

Field surveys carried out by the Environment Authority in cooperation with international

experts revealed an increase in the number of migratory birds that visit the reserve annually, as their numbers exceed half a million during the winter period.

About 18 species of these birds were classified among the types that exceeded one per cent of the total migratory birds that use the path to Asia and the east of the African continent, including oysters, the Alexandrian catfish, the small sand picker, the big sand picker, the dowager, the small form, the red-legged sandpiper, the green-legged sandpiper, and the dusty sandpiper.

OCA's executive board election on Tuesday

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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The Oman Cancer Association is to hold its General Assembly virtually on Tuesday. After the General Assembly election will be held for the new executive board, the sixth election since OCA was officially registered in 2004.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the present board served for three years as per the guidelines of the Ministry of Social Development.

At the press conference Dr Wahid bin Ali al Kharousi, Chairman of Oman Cancer Association, said, "OCA has been badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic."

Dr Wahid al Kharousi said, "With the grace of God and the support of our sponsors, the community and our hard-working staff and our valued volunteers we have managed to continue with our work serving cancer patients, their families and the community at large."

Through the beginning of the pandemic, the OCA continued the programmes of MMU, Dar Al Hanan supporting the patients with their needs such as supplements, in some instances medication and their needs. Dar Al Hanan had just celebrated its 10th anniversary.

"We made sure that all the running programmes fulfil the Covid-19 protocols laid down by our government to abide by the rules and regulations and importantly to protect our patients and our staff. I am proud to say that

all through this period not a single case of Covid-19 was reported in Dar al Hanan. Our Mobile Mammography Unit provided service for women over the age of 40 years and we have now done mammograms to over 24,000 ladies," pointed out Dr Al Kharousi.

Awareness and advocacy programmes were modified to comply with the rules of the pandemic and OCA's presence in the malls was extremely limited, however, the NGO continued to offer services of the Clinical Breast Examination and the ultrasound services.

"We are pleased to inform you all that we have now the second MMU for which we are grateful to Occidental Oman for donating the facility to Oman Cancer Association," he expressed.

The Association was to host the Union International Cancer Control (UICC) World Summit and Congress in October 2020 but had to be cancelled due to Covid-19.

"I would like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow board members for their hard work, understanding, and excellent co-operation. I am blessed for their support and diligence. Finally, I would on behalf of the Oman Cancer Association members thank all the private, corporate sector for their solid and strong continued support, the government sector for their support, the community and the philanthropists for their working with us and providing support," said Dr Al Kharousi.

OIAFCO LLC wins coveted ISO 9001 certification

SOHAR: Oman Insecticides and Air Freshener Co LLC (OIAFCO), the leading aerosol manufacturing company in the region, has been awarded the prestigious ISO 9001 certification. The internationally recognised standard was granted to OIAFCO's state-of-the-art factory at Sohar following a rigorous two-year certification process overseen by leading British-based international accreditation agency UKAS in collaboration with SGS Middle East.

For OIAFCO, the coveted international certification will reinforce its impressive credentials as the unrivalled aerosol filling and packing services provider in the Middle East. Popular among its 'Made in Oman' line-up are TOX insect killer spray, AYAM air freshener spray and CLAIR Home brands – part of a sizable portfolio of products that include insect sprays, domestic and household sprays, body sprays, perfumes and gels.

Commencing operations in the mid-80s as the first aerosol filling company in the Sultanate, OIAFCO has since evolved into a formidable player with a market presence that spans much of the Middle East and North Africa, besides the domestic market. Underscoring its immense market appeal, more than 90 per cent of the company's output is distributed across 15 countries in the region.

A cornerstone of the company's longstanding commercial success is the high-tech Sohar plant, which boasts a capacity to produce a world-scale 60 million finished



Quality control team that achieved ISO 9001 accreditation

goods per annum. By leveraging the superior capabilities of the facility, OIAFCO has succeeded in holding its own against leading international brands for over three decades. Today, the company's products are available in major retail outlets across the Sultanate, attesting to their strong consumer appeal.

Welcoming the award of the certification, Mr. Gregory Brown, General Manager of OIAFCO, said: "We are delighted to have been recognised for our efforts to introduce and entrench internationally accepted practices that contribute decisively to the quality of our products and services. This is a testament to our commitment to providing the highest customer satisfaction."

Overseeing the quest for the ISO 9001 certification was a dedicated Quality Control team led by Edwin Pereira and Ethiraj Padmanabhan supported by their colleagues Abir Hamdan Al Darmaki and Asma Humaid Al Raisi. Together, they exemplify what a well-motivated and capable workforce can accomplish in support of the company's corporate goals.

A source of great pride for the company is its Omani employees who presently make up around half of the workforce. Their important contribution, coupled with the continuing support extended by the government of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, will bolster the leading position of OIAFCO regionally.

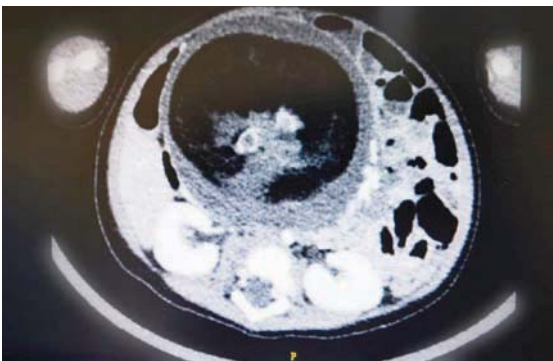
Royal Hospital team performs rare surgery on 8-month-old baby

MUSCAT: A surgical team from the Royal Hospital Paediatric Surgery has succeeded in performing a rare surgery on an eight-month old baby with Fetus in Fetu condition.

The surgical team was led by Dr Mohammed al Sajwani, Head of Paediatric Surgery at the Royal Hospital, along with three Paediatric Surgeons; Dr Said Bani Oraba, Dr Mahmood Ibrahim and Dr Mohammed Hamid, with the cooperation of anaesthetists and nurses.

The patient's post-surgery examinations and vital signs showed success and she was discharged after three days.

"Fetus in Fetu" is a rare medical phenomenon that is estimated to occur in 1 in 500,000 live births. — ONA





Health sector activated for the new wave

- ★ No vaccinated patients in ICU: Royal Hospital
- ★ Number of active cases in Oman cross 12,000

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Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, presided over a meeting to discuss the epidemiological situation and the surge of cases as well as cases of hospital admissions, particularly in the Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

Sixty-five patients were hospitalised during the past 24 hours, taking the total number of inpatients in hospitals to 466, including 145 in Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

The meeting, which was attended by Dr Mohammed al Hosni, MoH's Undersecretary for Health Affairs, reviewed the challenges and solutions to encounter this crucial phase of the pandemic that require mobilising health sector resources to take care of the

increasing numbers of patients.

Provision of services has been decided to be reduced to cover only basic services at primary health care, in addition to returning to the plan that was adopted when the epidemic was at its peak previously.

The total recovery cases reached 142,420, which is 91 per cent of the total cases reported.

Specialists expect the period from April 1 to May 31, 2021, to be an extremely difficult stage in the pandemic's development in the Sultanate.

To avoid worsening the situation, the Supreme Committee will take a series of tougher and more comprehensive measures that might culminate into lockdown and total ban on movement during the above-mentioned period.

MoH called on everyone to understand the measures taken, cooperate with the health sector, and strictly adhere to preventive measures such as wearing masks, physical distancing and maintaining the hygiene of the hands.

That number of patients in intensive care rooms reached 18 patients at the Royal Hospital, and for the first time in 152 days, active cases of infection reached 12,000.

Royal Hospital said no person who entered the intensive care unit had taken vaccination against the virus.

■ FROM PAGE 1

Night ban on movement begins

The director-general of operations said to ensure that the basic services and emergency cases are not affected by the lockdown and movement restriction, ROP will allow the passage of emergency vehicles (electricity, water and telecommunications), cleaning and sanitary drainage vehicles, ambulances and all types of trucks weighing 3 tonnes or more.

He noted that movement will be permissible for airport staff, ports and refinery workers, health workers, incoming and outgoing passengers with only one escort



Brigadier Mohammed bin Nasser al Kindi, Director-General of Operations

provided that they carry a travel document, journalists and media people whose work nature requires their presence at the workplace, emergency and sheltering sector teams in the governorates and imams of mosques.

Brig Al Kindi said that the owners of companies and stores should allow their employees enough time to reach their homes before 8 pm, urging citizens and residents to finish their work prior to the lockdown timing in order not to violate the orders.

He affirmed that the decision

also includes movement outside home by any means whatsoever.

Meanwhile, the emergency centre of the Directorate-General of Operations will receive reports related to violations of the Supreme Committee's decisions and handle them in coordination with relevant authorities.

ROP has called on citizens and residents to comply with the instructions and warnings issued through official channels and to report violations by calling the number 1099 dedicated to following events related to the round the clock.



Follow Covid code or face fine, hotels, travel operators told

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The Minister of Heritage and Tourism has issued a decision stipulating regulation for hotel establishments and travel and tourism operators who violate the decisions of the Supreme Committee on Covid-19.

A fine will be imposed on hotel establishments and travel agencies that violate the decisions issued by the committee, which will be doubled in case of repetition with the facility to be closed for a month. The ministry will collect the fines and transfer them to the account dedicated to the pandemic.

A fine of RO 2,000 against hotel establishments and travel and tourism agencies not registering on the (Sahala) platform, RO 1,000 if establishments fail to contract with a health institution to treat isolated cases that need medical intervention, RO 1,000 for failing to inform the Royal Oman Police and the Relief and Shelter Sector about cases that violate the requirements of institutional isolation, RO 1,000 for allowing



isolated individuals to leave the facility or move between rooms or allowing visitors from outside, RO 500 for raising the prices of the hotel rooms designated for the institutional quarantine, RO 500 for failing to maintain the

cleanliness of the facility and the quality of the services provided, RO 1,000 for giving permission to isolate more than one person in one room with no relationship, and others coming from the same flight or from the country

they are travelling to, RO 1,000 for failure to disclose to the relief and shelter team about visitors who are required to be isolated, RO 1,000 fine if the property does not adhere to the guidelines on preventive measures against Covid-19 in hotel establishments and restaurants, cafes and workers, RO 1,000 if the property is not committed to allocating three of the rooms for affected cases.

The decision is based on SC guidelines that gave the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism the mandate to monitor the extent to which hotel establishments and travel and tourism offices comply with its decisions.

The mandate includes imposing fines and closing the establishments and offices of those who violate the decisions.

"The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has the mandate to enter the hotel establishments and travel and tourism offices to verify their compliance with the decisions of the SC. It will seek the assistance of the competent authorities in implementing the provisions of these decisions," the decision said.

■ FROM PAGE 1

Sultanate's peace role hailed

FROM PAGE 1

The documentary hosts four main speakers — Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, retired ambassador Dr Richard J Schmierer, Head of the Middle East Studies Centre based in Washington, Prof Suzanne Stetkevych, Chair of Arab and Islamic Studies Department at Georgetown University in Washington DC, and Dr Michael Harrower, Associate Professor of Archaeology, Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Maryland.

The specialists, who undertook the programme, strive to highlight the role of the Sultanate in spreading the culture of dialogue and rapprochement among countries of the world.

They seek to provide an ongoing message which broadcasts information to news agencies and international

television channels.

Their work underscores Oman's contribution to human civilisation by advocating peace and respect for human beings, their culture and beliefs in all times and places.

The landmark exposition themed "Message of Peace from Oman" imparts these values to world peoples and it has been well received in international milieus, which is testimony to the success of Omani diplomacy and the country's benign efforts in the global arena.

Through its wide network of participants, the exposition established a broad database, thanks to active coordination among various international organisations, including the Unesco and many centres interested in religious studies, the values of moderation and the call for peace and coexistence among people belonging to different cultures and religions.

— ONA

DONATE LIFE!

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
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ORGAN TRANSPLANTATION IS THE ONLY LIFE-SAVING METHOD FOR PATIENTS WITH END-STAGE ORGAN FAILURE

We can donate a new life to someone by donating organs, but that needs proper ethics, therapeutic and clinical protocols. To address this issue, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, issued a ministerial decision to develop the National Programme to regulate the transplantation of human organs and tissues. The decision aims at achieving the established principles in the field of the transfer and transplantation of human organs and tissues, contributing to the development of clinical scientific research, and initiating the implementation of Technical Committee recommendations to regulate the practice of the human organs and transfer of tissues. The programme strives to develop evidence, therapeutic and clinical protocols, in addition to ethics of practice in the human organs and tissue transfer. It further addresses the establishment of a base that includes the registration of organ deficiencies as well as information about organ and tissue donors. The National Programme for Regulating Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues also has priority to develop standard prac-

tices for performing human organ and tissue transplantation, control mechanisms and inspection of medical practices in this area, and develop a plan to enhance community awareness about the significance of tissue donation. It also has plans to inculcate the concept of medical will for body part donation. Developing and regulating the transplantation of human organs and tissues are complex and difficult tasks in front of policymakers. Therefore, the programme would allow coordination among many parties and specialists to deal with the challenges and find out appropriate solutions.

ORGAN DONATION
Alternative organ transplantation is the only life-saving method for patients with end-stage organ failure. Organs can be donated either through living organ donation for kidneys and liver or by deceased donor organ donation for the rest of the organs. The list of patients who are waiting for an organ donor is very long. Due to a lack of awareness, not many donors are available. There are approximately 3,000 patients with end-stage renal failure and currently relying on dialysis. Consequently, all efforts to encourage the community to donate with a living organ or after death are required as one living donor can save eight lives.

3,000
PATIENTS WITH END-STAGE RENAL FAILURE AND CURRENTLY RELYING ON DIALYSIS

EU hopes vaccine push can boost Europe's tourist season

PARIS: European Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton said on Sunday that he hoped Europe will have a summer tourist season this year, supported by a ramp-up in its Covid-19 vaccination efforts.

Breton, who heads the European Union's executive's vaccine task force, reiterated on RTL radio and TV channel LCI that the European Union should deliver 420 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines by mid-July, enough to allow the bloc to reach collective immunity.

"We have to shift to the next gear", he said of the EU's vaccination campaign.

"This will be the price for having a tourist season that I hope will be comparable to last year's, which in the end wasn't so bad in the context we're in." The planned introduction of a common EU vaccine certificate in June would support the resumption of travel, he added.

The tourism and travel sectors have been hammered by the year-old coronavirus pandemic,



A healthcare worker administers a dose of the 'Comirnaty' Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at South Ile-de-France Hospital Group in Melun near Paris as part of the coronavirus disease vaccination campaign in France. — Reuters

despite a partial revival last summer between the first and second waves of the virus in Europe.

The EU has blamed big shortfalls of AstraZeneca doses for its slow vaccine roll-out, in a dispute that has created tensions with former EU member Britain.

Breton reiterated that the

EU will ensure that coronavirus vaccines produced by AstraZeneca within the bloc stay there until the company returns to fulfilling its delivery commitments.

Meanwhile, the European Medicines Agency approved two factories for the production of Covid-19 vaccines, with the European Union banking on

The EU has blamed big shortfalls of AstraZeneca doses for its slow vaccine roll-out

them to boost deliveries in the second quarter and accelerate the slow pace of inoculations in the bloc.

The EMA said in statement it had cleared the Halix production site in the Netherlands that makes the AstraZeneca vaccine and a facility in Marburg in Germany producing BioNTech/Pfizer shots.

The European Union has blamed massive shortfalls of AstraZeneca doses for the slow roll-out of vaccines across the bloc, while BioNTech/Pfizer has plans to sharply increase its deliveries in the second quarter.

European Internal Markets Commissioner Thierry Breton said vaccines produced by AstraZeneca within the bloc would stay there until the company returns to fulfilling its delivery commitments. — Reuters

Nine network hit by suspected cyber attack

SYDNEY: Australian broadcaster Nine Entertainment was unable to air its Sunday news bulletin from its Sydney headquarters due to "technical difficulties" which a source with knowledge of the matter blamed on a suspected cyber attack.

Nine's Weekend Today show which runs from 7 am to 1 pm did not go to air. In a statement, Channel Nine said it was "responding to technical issues" affecting its live broadcasting.

"At this stage we're working through the impacts and will provide updates as we resolve the systems."

The network, which owns the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) and The Age newspapers, did not confirm the cyber attack.

But the source who did not want to be identified as he was not allowed to speak to media said Nine management had informed staff

that a "malicious" cyber attack was suspected.

Nine is now trying to get a news bulletin out through Melbourne "using a server that hasn't been compromised", the source told Reuters.

The *Australian Financial Review* which is also owned by Nine, also reported that the media house was likely the target of a suspected cyber attack, the effects of which could last beyond Sunday.

The suspected attack also disrupted operations at Nine's publishing business, with Internet access unavailable at its Sydney headquarters while some publishing tools were also down, the AFR reported.

Nine said its coverage of the National Rugby League season, 6 pm news bulletins and evening news programme 60 Minutes would go ahead as normal.

— Reuters

13 states threatened with EU restrictions on visa policy



BRUSSELS: Thirteen states in Africa and the Middle East are reportedly being threatened with restrictions on the issuing of visas for the European border-free Schengen area due to a lack of cooperation in the readmission of rejected asylum seekers.

These countries are on a list compiled by the European Commission, Sunday's edition of Germany's *Die Welt* newspaper reported with reference to the document.

Their willingness to comply with the obligation under international law to take back their own citizens is "inadequate", the report said. This concerns above all rejected asylum seekers.

A spokeswoman for the European Commission said on Sunday that it was not possible to confirm specific countries at the moment.

In February, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson presented a report examining cooperation with 39 countries in the return and readmission of rejected asylum seekers.

She said that cooperation with more than one-third of the countries examined needed to be improved. The European Commission did not name specific countries at the time, as the report is confidential.

The EU's repatriation rate has been low for years.

After a meeting of EU interior ministers in mid-March, Johansson announced that negotiations would be initiated with a limited number of countries outside the EU.

If progress was insufficient, she said, she would be prepared to make proposals by the summer on which countries should be subject to positive or negative changes in visa policy. The spokeswoman for the Brussels-based authority confirmed this perspective on Sunday. Because of a code on visas, which has been in force since February 2020, the EU can exert pressure on countries outside the bloc through its visa policy.

According to the newspaper report, the European Commission now wants to "start a dialogue" with Iraq, Iran, Libya, Senegal, Somalia, Mali, Gambia, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Guinea-Bissau.

If cooperation does not improve, restrictions could be proposed to the EU states from the summer onwards. The first step would be to lift the current 15-day limit on the processing of visa applications or to suspend the exemption from visa fees for diplomats. — dpa

PUTIN URGES RUSSIANS TO GET VACCINATED

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday called on his fellow citizens to get inoculated against the coronavirus, as Russia's vaccination roll-out remains sluggish and vaccine scepticism in the population remains high.

Speaking on Kremlin-controlled television, the Russian leader — who received a jab a few days ago — said that getting vaccinated was "needed, even

necessary".

"If a person wants to feel confident, does not want to get sick and have serious consequences after an illness, then it is better to get this vaccine, of course", news agencies quoted Putin as saying on Rossiya-1.

The 68-year-old received his first dose on Tuesday, but did not reveal which of Russia's three home-grown jabs — Sputnik V, EpiVacCorona or CoviVac — he

had been given. Unlike many world leaders, Putin also chose to be vaccinated in private.

Russia began its vaccination campaign in early December, but only about four million of the country's 144 million people have so far received two doses of a vaccine, while another two million have had a first dose.

Vaccine scepticism runs high in Russia, with a recent opinion poll showing fewer than a third

of people are willing to have a jab, and close to two-thirds saying they believe the coronavirus is a man-made biological weapon.

The country has been among the hardest hit by Covid-19, with more than 4.5 million cases.

Official data have also shown that Russia has seen more than 200,000 virus-related deaths — double the daily count published by an official coronavirus tally. — AFP

Millions in Brazil thrown back into poverty as pandemic aid dries up

BRASILIA: Tatiana Araujo de Sirqueira, a 33-year-old single mother of six, and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro are almost neighbours. But they inhabit different universes. Sirqueira lives by a landfill less than a mile from the Planalto presidential palace in Brasilia, along with 36 other families, and scrapes together cash by recycling trash.

She is one of Brazil's 40 million or so "invisibles", a term coined by Economy Minister Paulo Guedes for those without formal employment who had flown largely under the radar of Brazil's government — and society.

"I live beside the president. I see him and his security pass by here every day", she said on a hot, dusty afternoon outside her improvised shack. "How can he pass here every day and not see the families here?"

Last year, however, Sirqueira was not invisible. From April to December, she and some 66 million other Brazilians received the government's most generous cash transfer programme ever, emergency aid to help the most vulnerable through the pandemic.

That nearly \$60 billion burst



Residents of Paraisopolis hold pots during a protest against hunger amid the pandemic in Sao Paulo. — Reuters

of basic income softened the economic blow of the coronavirus, boosted Bolsonaro's popularity and beat back poverty — but its expiration at the end of 2020 is unravelling many of those effects.

Sirqueira now relies on the pre-existing 'Bolsa Familia' social benefit of up to 205 reais (\$36) a

month, about a third of last year's emergency aid, missing out on a smaller second round of the cash transfer programme that starts in April.

"They said I no longer met the criteria and so I can no longer be part of the programme. My life has gotten much more difficult since,

with six children to raise", she said.

Millions of Brazilians like her were briefly lifted out of poverty only to be tossed back again. The national poverty rate dropped suddenly to 4.5 per cent in August from almost 11 per cent at the start of 2020, calculates the Getulio Vargas Foundation. — Reuters

In brief

GENEVA



UN CALLS FOR SUPPORT
AHEAD OF SYRIA
DONOR MEETING

The UN is hoping for generous support for the five countries with the most Syrian refugees at a donor conference scheduled in Brussels this week. Programmes in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt would need \$5.8 billion, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said in Geneva.

“If we cannot resource these programmes adequately, we cannot exclude more population movements,” Grandi warned. “We have seen boats moving from Lebanon to Cyprus.” The EU is coordinating the donors conference which is to be held on March 29-30. — dpa

BENGHAZI



SUSPECTS ARRESTED
OVER KILLING OF LIBYA
MILITIA LEADER

Libyan authorities announced increased security measures in second city Benghazi and the arrest of two suspects in connection with the killing of a militia leader wanted by the International Criminal Court. Security is precarious in Benghazi with frequent tit-for-tat violence and executions.

Mahmoud al Werfalli, a member of forces loyal to eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, was shot dead along with his cousin in the city, cradle of the country’s 2011 revolution. Libya descended into chaos after the Nato-backed uprising that ousted and killed veteran dictator Moamer Kadhafi, with rival militias and administrations vying for power.

BEIRUT



LEBANON PM WARNS OF
‘DANGEROUS CHEMICALS’
IN OIL FACILITY

Lebanon’s outgoing prime minister said that experts had found “dangerous chemicals” at a warehouse at the Zahrani oil installations in the south. Hassan Diab said the country’s atomic energy authority identified the substances as “nuclear” after reviewing a report by German company Combi Lift, which Lebanon had tasked with clearing hazardous material at Beirut port.

The comments came nearly eight months after a stockpile of chemicals detonated in Beirut, killing nearly 200 people in one of the largest non-nuclear explosions on record. The ammonium nitrate went up in flames after being stored unsafely at the port for years.

Urgent aid needed for Yemen: MSF

ADEN: Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned on Saturday that the number of critically Covid-19 patients was rising across war-ravaged Yemen, urging assistance from donor countries and specialised groups.

“Medecins Sans Frontieres is seeing a dramatic influx of critically ill Covid-19 patients requiring hospitalisation in Aden, Yemen, and many other parts of the country,” MSF said on Twitter.

“We are urging all medical humanitarian organisations already present in Yemen to rapidly scale up their Covid-19 emergency response,” said Raphael Veicht, MSF head of mission in the country.

The southern port city of Aden is Yemen’s de facto capital, where the internationally recognised government is based after being routed from Sanaa in the north by Ansar Allah fighters.

A military coalition intervened in 2015 to shore up the government, and since then the conflict has killed tens of thousands of people, mostly



A Yemeni man wearing a protective mask against the coronavirus stands among others waiting for a food aid distribution in front of a hospital in Sanaa. — AFP

civilians, and displaced millions.

Already an impoverished country, six years of war in Yemen has battered the economy and left its healthcare system in ruins.

The United Nations calls the

situation there the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

“All aspects of the Covid-19 response are lacking and need greater international support, from public health messaging, to

vaccinations to oxygen therapy,” said Veicht.

“Support is needed across the board,” he pleaded, including from “international donors who cut their humanitarian funding to

We are urging all medical humanitarian organisations in Yemen to rapidly scale up their Covid-19 emergency response

RAPHAEL VEICHT,
MSF head of mission

Yemen”.

Early this month, the United Nations tried to raise \$3.85 billion from more than 100 governments and donors, but only \$1.7 billion was offered.

MSF said Yemeni hospitals are facing a “critically low supply of oxygen to treat patients”.

“Unfortunately, many of the patients we see are already in a critical condition when they arrive,” said MSF medical coordinator Line Lootens.

— AFP

US offers \$15 million to
vaccinate Palestinians

WASHINGTON: The United States said it was providing \$15 million to help vaccinate Palestinians against Covid-19 as Israel comes under criticism for not making greater efforts in the occupied territories.

The US Agency for International Development is providing the funding for vaccination efforts by non-governmental Catholic Relief Services in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as well as for emergency food assistance, the State Department said.

“This small step in advancing the well-being of the Palestinian people is fully in keeping with American values,” State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement.

The step comes as President Joe Biden resumes humanitarian assistance for the Palestinians in a shift from the pro-Israel stance of his predecessor Donald Trump.

Israel has been a leader in



A health worker inoculates a Palestinian woman with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, at a vaccination centre in Gaza City. — AFP

inoculating its own citizens against Covid-19, with more than half of its population receiving both doses of the Pfizer/BionTech vaccine.

The Palestinian Authority has been far slower, relying on donations and limited supplies from Israel.

Israel has vaccinated more than 100,000 Palestinian workers with

permits to enter Israel or Jewish settlements on the West Bank but says that vaccinations are the responsibility of the Palestinian Authority.

The United Nations has said it plans to deliver enough doses to inoculate one million Palestinians through the Covax programme for developing countries. — AFP

One man’s mission offers Beirut a vision of hope

BEIRUT: The sheer scale of the destruction in Beirut’s Karantina district after the massive explosion at the port last August made rebuilding a daunting feat. That was where Marc Torbey El Helou, a charity worker, came in.

The low-income neighbourhood was one of the closest to the blast that killed 200 people. It stands across from the giant, mutilated grain silo that has become a symbol of the tragedy.

Helou decided a day after the explosion to dedicate himself, and the aid group he runs, to rebuilding the neighbourhood.

Just removing the rubble required 300 truckloads. Some buildings needed immediate help to stop them collapsing. Helou says the same of Karantina’s residents. “There were children here who would not laugh or play for months.”



Marc Torbey el Helou, head of Lebanese NGO Offre Joie, talks with a woman in Beirut. — Reuters

The neighbourhood is home to Lebanese, Syrian and other residents, a fire brigade and dozens of stores selling everything from car parts to clay pots. All

were hit hard.

Helou’s charity, Offre Joie (Joy of Giving), has repaired Lebanese districts hit by war and violence since 1985.

I understood that I had a mission now and I’m on it

MARC TORBEY EL
HELOU,
a charity worker

“Unfortunately, it means we have the experience for this,” said Helou, 33, who has used a wheelchair since a diving accident in 2016.

With the Lebanese state hollowed out by decades of corruption and failure, it fell to aid groups and volunteers like Helou to rebuild the city.

Offre Joie took on six blocks in Karantina and nearby. That

includes the homes of about 350 families. More than seven months after the explosion, one of the largest non-nuclear detonations on record, many residents have yet to return. But the streets are bustling with life again, and the buildings never looked so good.

“We never dreamed we’d have a neighbourhood like this. I have called it the French neighbourhood because it looks like the elegant streets in France,” said Vera Yaghelian, 75, pointing from her balcony to facades painted in bright pastel colours.

“Look, there’s nothing more beautiful.”

Born in Karantina, the mother of four never left, even during the massacres of Lebanon’s 1975-1990 civil war. When she sees Helou with teams of volunteers and engineers, she often sends over coffee. — AFP

Global outrage at Myanmar deaths

YANGON: Defence chiefs from a dozen countries on Sunday jointly condemned the bloodbath in Myanmar a day earlier, when at least 90 people — including several children — were killed after security forces opened fire on anti-coup protesters.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the generals ousted and detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, triggering mass protests demanding a return to democracy.

The junta on Saturday staged a major show of might for its annual Armed Forces Day as the death toll since the February 1 coup climbed to at least 423, according to a local monitoring group.

The defence chiefs of 12 countries including the United States, Britain, Japan and Australia condemned the Myanmar military's use of lethal force against civilians.

"A professional military follows international standards for conduct and is responsible for protecting — not harming — the people it serves," the rare joint statement said.

"We urge the Myanmar Armed Forces to cease violence and work to restore respect and credibility with the people of Myanmar that it has lost through its actions."

Funerals were held on Sunday for some of the victims, after the bloodiest day since the putsch.

In Mandalay, the family of Aye Ko, a father-of-four, commemorated his life at a service after he was killed overnight.

"We are told by the neighbours that Aye Ko was shot and thrown into the fire," a relative said.

"He was the only one who fed the family, losing him is a great loss for the family."

Despite the dangers, protesters hit the streets again in parts of Yangon including Hlaing, and in the cities of Dawei, Bago and Monywa.

"One girl was shot in the head and



Demonstrators hold flags as they sit on motorcycles during a protest in Launglone, Dawei district, Myanmar. — Reuters

Defence chiefs of 12 countries condemned the Myanmar military's use of lethal force against civilians

died at the hospital meanwhile two guys were shot dead on the spot," a rescue worker from Monywa said. In Hlaing, a 16-year-old boy lost a hand in a blast, trying to throw back a grenade security forces had lobbed at protesters, a rescue worker said.

A day earlier, violence erupted across the country with the military using live rounds in nine regions, including the largest city Yangon, local monitoring group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) said.

By sunset, AAPP said at least 90 people had been killed. Local media, however, put the death toll higher at 114.

"Junta forces shot machine guns into residential areas, resulting in many civilians, including six children

between ten and sixteen years old, killed," AAPP said. "The fact the illegitimate military regime is targeting children is a grave act of inhumanity."

Rebels in eastern Myanmar's Karen state said they had been targeted in air strikes late on Saturday, hours after the ethnic armed group seized a military base.

Hsa Moo, an ethnic Karen and human right activist said three people were killed and at least eight were

injured.

It was the first air assault in 20 years in the state, and targeted the Fifth Brigade of the Karen National Union (KNU) — one of the country's largest armed groups — which says it represents the ethnic Karen people. The junta did not immediately comment, and there was no official confirmation of any casualties.

There was a grand parade of troops and military vehicles in the capital Naypyidaw on Saturday where junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing defended the coup and pledged to yield power after new elections.

But he also issued a threat to the anti-coup movement, warning that acts of "terrorism which can be harmful to state tranquillity and security" were unacceptable. — AFP

Afghanistan reports first cases of British Covid variant

KABUL: Afghanistan on Sunday reported its first cases of a coronavirus variant first detected in Britain last year.

"Unfortunately, we have recorded seven positive cases of the British type of the Covid-19 virus," Health ministry spokesman Ghulam Dastagir Nazari said.

According to the official, the variant was detected in the country's eastern Nangarhar province and the people who tested positive had recently travelled to neighbouring Pakistan.

Nazari said they had traced 148 people who were in contact with the infected people in the past 10 days. They have been advised to go into quarantine.

Currently, no coronavirus-related restrictions have been imposed Afghanistan.

Officials anticipate a third wave of infections would have less of an impact on Afghanistan than on other countries because "a large number of people had been infected in the first and second wave already."

According to the official figures, more than 75,000 people have been vaccinated after the country received 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from India in early February.

Health workers, members of the armed forces, teachers, and media staff are currently eligible for the jab.

More than 56,000 cases and 2,470 deaths have been recorded in the country. The actual number of infections is believed to be much higher due to limited public health resources and testing capacities. — dpa

Philippines to reimpose stricter Covid curbs in capital

MANILA: Manila and nearby provinces will return to stricter quarantine measures from Monday, a senior official said on Saturday, as the Philippines battles to contain a surge in Covid-19 cases that has strained hospitals.

Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said the measures, which will be in place until April 4, will ban non-essential movement, mass gatherings, dining in restaurants. They represent a further tightening of curbs imposed on March 22.

Roque said the government will intensify tracing and conduct house-to-house visits to search for people with Covid-19 symptoms.

There will also be a "heightened presence" of police and military personnel to enforce protocols, he added.

The health ministry on Saturday reported 9,595 new coronavirus cases, marking the second straight day the daily jump in infections remained above 9,000.

The capital region, a congested urban sprawl of 16 cities that is home to at least 13 million people, has accounted for more than two-fifths of the country's more than 712,000 Covid-19 cases. There have been more than 13,000 deaths nationwide.

Authorities attribute the spike in infections to the more



Residents shop at a market in Manila after the Philippines announced that people in and around Manila will go into lockdown as hospitals struggle to cope with a surge in Covid-19 coronavirus infections. — AFP

transmissible new coronavirus variants like those first identified in South Africa and Britain. Both have been detected in the Philippines. Roque told a media briefing that the threat was drastic and warranted a "drastic response", adding the tighter measures will give health workers breathing space as hospitals in the capital near critical capacity.

Lockdowns have taken a huge toll on the Philippine economy, which contracted by a record 9.5 per cent last year. Roque said the government timed the reimposition of tougher curbs during the week ahead of Easter.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

KATHMANDU

Bhutan begins biggest vaccination drive

Thousands of Bhutanese travelled to schools and public buildings for vaccination on Saturday as the Himalayan kingdom launched its biggest inoculation drive against Covid-19 with the AstraZeneca shots provided by neighbouring India.

Ninda Dema, a 30-year-old woman born in the year of the Monkey as per the Buddhist astrology, became the country's first to receive the shot at a school-turned vaccination centre in the capital Thimphu, an event



that was televised live.

Ninda, a bureaucrat, folded the sleeve of her jacket and pressed her palms in traditional gesture of greetings and prayers as she received the dose from a masked nurse amid lighting of butter lamps and chanting of Buddhist prayers. — AFP

JAKARTA

14 injured in suspected blast at Indonesian church

A strong blast outside a church in Indonesia's South Sulawesi province was likely a suicide bombing attack carried out by two people, police said. "The body found at the scene is believed to be of the suicide bomber," provincial police chief Merdisyam said.

Two suspects were trying to enter the gate of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in the provincial capital, Makassar, on a motorcycle when they were stopped by security guards,



national police spokesman Argo Yuwono said.

Argo said 14 people were injured in the attack, including three security guards at the church.

Merdisyam earlier said that four worshippers were among the injured. — dpa

NARAYANGANJ

Violence breaks out in fresh B'desh protests

At least a dozen people were reported injured in clashes between police and demonstrators in Bangladesh, the third day of protests against the visit of India's leader.

Five people died on Friday, and another six the next day, after police shot at demonstrators in several major districts across the nation of 168 million people.

The protesters — mostly from the Hefazat-e-Islam — were angry at the visit of Indian



Prime Minister Narendra Modi as Bangladesh marked 50 years of independence, accusing him of stoking communal violence in his country. Hefazat supporters chanted "action, action, direct action" as they blocked the key highway linking Dhaka with the port city of Chittagong. — AFP

In brief

■ ANTANANARIVO



EX-MADAGASCAR
LEADER DIDIER
RATSIRAKA, 84, DIES

Madagascar's longtime former leader Didier Ratsiraka, a naval officer and instigator of a socialist revolution on the Indian Ocean island, died Sunday aged 84, president Andry Rajoelina announced. "The Malagasy have lost an illustrious patriot," Rajoelina posted on Twitter. The cause of the death was not immediately disclosed. Ratsiraka was in power from 1975 until 1991 and returned for another stint from 1997 to 2002. When he first came to power, he practised a form of Marxism and had close ties to North Korea's Kim Il Sung, Cuba's Fidel Castro and the Kremlin. — AFP

■ BEIJING



BEIJING SHROUDED
IN HAZARDOUS
SANDSTORM

The Chinese capital Beijing woke on Sunday morning shrouded in thick dust carrying extremely high levels of hazardous particles, as a second sandstorm in two weeks hit the city due to winds from drought-hit Mongolia and northwestern China. Visibility in the city was reduced, with the tops of some skyscrapers obscured by the sandstorm, and pedestrians were forced to cover their eyes as gusts of dust swept through the streets. "It's quite serious today. There's always a day or two like this (of pollution or dust) each month," said Fan, 39, who did not wish to disclose his full name. — AFP

■ VANCOUVER



1 DEAD, 5 HURT AFTER
STABBING ATTACK
IN VANCOUVER

A knifeman stabbed and killed a woman and wounded five others at a library in Vancouver, police said. Police arrested a lone suspect but the motive for the attack was not immediately known, said Sergeant Frank Chang of the Vancouver police. By Saturday evening, they had not yet interrogated him and did not give his name. "We know — we believe we know — the who, the what, the where and the when. It is our job now to determine the why," said Chang. "We haven't spoken with him yet, but our suspect has had police interactions in the past. He has a past criminal record," Chang told reporters at the scene of the crime. — AFP

UK on track for second vaccine doses despite supply concerns

LONDON: Britain is confident second doses of Covid-19 vaccines will be administered on time without mixing jabs, culture minister Oliver Dowden said on Sunday amid concerns over a slowdown in supplies.

The government warned earlier this month that its vaccination programme would slow down in April due in part to a delay of a shipment from India's Serum Institute.

The European Union has also threatened to block vaccine shipments to countries such as the UK with higher vaccination rates.

"We have borne in mind that we have to get that second top-up in so we are confident that we will be able to deliver it," he told the BBC's Andrew Marr Show.

"We are confident that it won't require mixing of vaccines."

Dowden also said that the government still expects the Moderna vaccine to arrive in Britain in April.

Asked about a report in The Sunday Times that the government was planning to offer 3.7 million jabs to EU member Ireland, partly to help lift lockdown measures in Northern Ireland, Dowden said Britain does not currently have extra doses.

"Should we get to the point where we have a surplus of vaccines, we'd make decisions on the allocation of that surplus," he told Sky News.

Meanwhile, certain lorry drivers arriving in England will need to take Covid-19 tests in



Culture Minister Oliver Dowden said that the government still expects the Moderna vaccine to arrive in Britain in April. — Reuters

a bid to tackle the spread of any future variants, the government said on Sunday as Heathrow Airport lobbied for the easing of an overseas holiday ban from mid-May.

From April 6, Hauliers arriving from outside Britain and Ireland for more than two days will need to take a test within 48 hours and one every 72 hours thereafter as part of the new rules.

"This is to ensure we keep track of any future coronavirus variants of concern," transport minister Grant Shapps said.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson suggested earlier this week that Britain might need to tighten

The govt warned that its vaccination programme would slow down in April due in part to a delay of a shipment from India

restrictions on arrivals from France.

A similar move by France in December caused chaos when it was introduced at short notice but the industry believes there is now enough rapid testing available for it not to cause too much of an impact, a source told Reuters on Friday. Most foreign

travel is currently banned but the government's Global Travel Taskforce (GTT) is due to report at the start of April on rules due to come into force from May 17.

In its submission to the GTT, Heathrow Airport backed a four-tier system that would impose hotel quarantining and tests for the worst affected countries on a sliding scale of restrictions to a 'green list' where limits are eliminated.

"Restarting trade and travel to key markets like the U.S. after May 17th will be key to the Government achieving its Global Britain ambitions," said CEO John Holland-Kaye. — Reuters

India's Maharashtra state imposes night curfew

MUMBAI/ NEW DELHI: India's western state of Maharashtra imposed night curfews on Sunday to tackle a surge in coronavirus cases, with the financial capital Mumbai reporting its highest single-day jump since last March.

"We are seeing a higher Covid positive rate in high-rise residential buildings than in slums ... to stop the spread only essential services will be allowed (at night)," said Mumbai Mayor Kishor Pednekar, adding that hotels, pubs and shopping malls

must observe the curfew.

Residential areas in Mumbai with five or more reported Covid-19 cases have been ordered to be sealed off.

India recorded 62,714 cases of the coronavirus in the space of 24 hours, the Health Ministry said — the highest single-day rise since October — as well as 312 deaths. Just under a 10th of the cases were in Mumbai.

Maharashtra's Principal Health Secretary Pradeep Vyas said 107,000 of the state's 357,000

isolation beds were occupied.

"In some districts, beds are not available and the capacity of the facility is falling short," he added in a statement.

Cases are also rising in the states of Kerala, Punjab, Karnataka, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh.

Gujarat made it mandatory for anyone entering to show evidence of a negative virus test within the previous 72 hours, a senior official there said.

In Delhi, Mumbai and

elsewhere, there were bans or restrictions on the Hindu festival of Holi and the Shab-e-Barat or Day of Forgiveness, which both fell at the weekend and would usually prompt large gatherings.

The surge in infections coincides with multi-stage state assembly elections in West Bengal and Assam, seen as a test of support for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's handling of the pandemic and mass protests over sweeping agriculture reforms.

— Reuters

Russian newspaper fights on despite attacks

MOSCOW: Captured on a CCTV camera late at night, a man on a bicycle with a food delivery backpack approaches the offices of Novaya Gazeta, Russia's leading independent newspaper.

In the grainy footage recorded in central Moscow earlier this month, the man sprays an unknown substance at the newspaper's front door, then slowly walks away, careful not to look up at the camera.

Sitting in the offices a few days later, editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov says he has no doubt the "chemical attack" was the latest attempt to silence one of the few media outlets in Russia willing to challenge the official line.

"This is the use of military-grade non-lethal poisonous substances to warn the paper's staff or as revenge on them," says Muratov, a grey-bearded 59-year-old who



Russian investigative newspaper Novaya Gazeta's editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov attends an interview in Moscow. — AFP

since 1995 has served several times as Novaya Gazeta's editor-in-chief.

Several employees felt unwell after the attack and it took days of cleaning to get rid of the horrible stench, with the strip of pavement that was sprayed having to be removed.

Since the early 2000s, six Novaya Gazeta journalists have been killed in connection with their work — their black-and-white portraits now hang together in the newspaper's office.

"It's no secret that when they killed Anna Politkovskaya I wanted to close this newspaper... This newspaper is dangerous for people's lives," Muratov says.

Politkovskaya, who spent years reporting for Novaya Gazeta on rights abuses and the Kremlin's war in the North Caucasus region of Chechnya, was shot dead outside her apartment in 2006 at the age

Armenia PM to resign ahead of snap election

YEREVAN: Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced Sunday that he will resign next month while staying in office until snap parliamentary elections due on June 20, as part of an effort to curb the political crisis gripping the Caucasus country.

Political unrest erupted in ex-Soviet Armenia after Pashinyan in November signed a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement with Azerbaijan that ended six weeks of fighting for control of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

The prime minister earlier this month announced snap parliamentary polls that he said were "the best way out of the current internal political situation".

In a visit to northwest Armenia, Pashinyan told villagers that he will "resign in April" ahead of the vote.

"I will resign not to resign, but in order for early elections to take place," he said, according to a video published on his Facebook page.

"I will continue to serve as interim prime minister," he added.

Pashinyan has been under pressure to step down after agreeing to the ceasefire with Azerbaijan, which many in Armenia saw as a national humiliation.

Under the deal, Yerevan handed over swathes of the disputed territory to Azerbaijan and allowed Russian peacekeepers to deploy to regions it had controlled for three decades.

Both anti-government protesters and Pashinyan's supporters have regularly taken to the streets in the months since. — AFP

Promoting peace, serving humanity too!

Wishing one another a happy and peaceful day or a year is not necessarily what we wish to come true! This usually happens as just a norm of greeting or wishing one on a special occasion probably. However, do people seriously mean what they wish others?! Possibly not every time they really mean it! Occasionally, some might express such a wish for the sake of sharing a moment of birthday or a New Year commemoration with others. Others might honestly wish someone a peaceful and a happy day or year, especially best friends or loved ones.

Regardless, having a peaceful mind and life is a wish of all mankind, but people are not always willing to share similar wish things with others. Though, Mother Teresa advised that peace begins with a smile, as simple as that! Perhaps, some people have lost their sense of humour, trust and faith in humanity, so they missed peace in their life. Likewise, they would never be able to give peace back to others too. Those perhaps should believe in Mahatma Gandhi's saying "You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty."

On the other hand, Gandhi guided that serving others could be another way of making peace. He addressed human beings, "The best way to



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LATE SULTAN QABOOS WAS AN EXEMPLARY MODEL OF PHILANTHROPIC DEEDS, REFLECTING THE PRINCIPLE OF SERVING OTHERS. THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE, HE WAS NOT ONLY SERVING HIS FELLOW OMANI CITIZENS, BUT PEOPLE OF OTHER NATIONS TOO

find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others". The term serving others comes in different forms as it is not necessary to be through offering direct services. In a way or another, this public-spirited deed comes out of love and respect to humanity, nation or a certain segment of people within society or the world overall possibly. This might be reflected in different spheres of life; social and political for instance.

To bring a case in point, late Sultan Qaboos was an exemplary model of philanthropic deeds, reflecting the principle of serving others. Throughout his life, the late Sultan was not only serving his fellow Omani citizens, but people of other nations too. His noble peacemaking gestures and directive orders and conflict-solving initiatives have become a commendable talk of politicians, governments and individuals alike. To tell the truth, the late Sultan's internationally acknowledged milestones for achieving peace in the world made him a one-of-the-kind peace ambassador.

Owing to the far-reaching international accomplishments of late Sultan as well as his wise and visionary leadership, Oman has been able to gain credibility and trust at the regional and international level. The country has become the epicentre of peace where conflicts and misunderstandings between

nations can be solved. Thanks to the outstanding foreign policy of Oman, which is undoubtedly distinctive from other parts of the region. It served very well the international peace process and bridged political gaps and conflicts among nations.

As a token of appreciation and tribute to late Sultan Qaboos, he was recently awarded Gandhi Peace Prize for the year 2019. This came as a recognition for his unparalleled vision and leadership in strengthening India-Oman relations and his efforts to promote peace and non-violence in the region. The late Sultan's policy of moderation and mediation in addressing international issues won him praise and respect across the globe.

Late Sultan Qaboos was awarded the prize as an acknowledgement of his outstanding contributions for social, economic and political transformation through non-violent and other Gandhian methods. Further, he played a significant role in supporting peace efforts in different regional and international disputes and conflicts. The Gandhi Peace Prize is an annual award instituted by government of India since 1995, the 125th birth anniversary commemoration of Mahatma Gandhi.

Humanity is undoubtedly very grateful to late Sultan Qaboos — a one of the kind leader.

WRITE FOR US

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

PEDAL POWER

Pioneering Indian city ditches cars for clean air

ANURADHA NAGARAJ

Every Saturday, Shankar Yadav dusts off an old bike and pedals to work, reliving his carefree schooldays and hoping fellow Indians will join him in ditching cars to protect the planet.

In one of India's most ambitious such plans, Ranchi city's 'har shanviar, no car' — every Saturday, no car — campaign goes well beyond other towns that have banned cars from a few lanes for set hours of the weekend, but risked nothing more.

"We are a small city and studies have shown that most residents live within a 5 km radius of their workplace, school or markets", Yadav, a deputy commissioner with the Ranchi Municipal Corporation, said.

"Though there is no law to implement this idea, we are hoping that people will embrace it because it is very doable here. Barring the elderly, our analysis shows that most people can easily switch to a bicycle or walk."

The scheme kicked off this month, a small-city initiative in a vast country that faces ever-worsening pollution.

Ranchi is among many Indian cities trying new ways to tackle this worsening air quality — be it with pop-up cycle tracks, free cycle repair clinics or pedestrian-only streets.

Akanksha, a first-time rider in Ranchi, said she enjoyed the ride and was "quite excited" by the eco-rationale, too.

"I did have to deal with the city traffic and the pollution, but am hoping as the idea catches on, these problems will get addressed", said the music teacher, who goes by just one name. "I think cycling with a guitar might be difficult — but I definitely wanted to set an example for my students."

The cost of inaction is steep. Bad air was linked to 1.24 million deaths, or one in eight of those who died, in India's latest nationwide pollution study.

Ranchi, the capitol of eastern Jharkhand state with an urban population of 1.5 million, has ambient air pollution levels that are seven times higher than World Health Organization (WHO) recommended standards, according to studies.

It has also been identified by the National Clean Air Programme as one of 122 "non-attainment cities" that consistently fall short of national standards.

"It is a welcome move and heartening to know that smaller cities are starting these initiatives", said Sarika Panda, who set up the country's first lasting car-free initiative in 2013.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

OPEN-ENDED CRISIS

Lebanon frozen by political intransigence as it hurtles towards collapse

SAMIA NAKHOUL AND MAHA EL DAHAN

Just 18 months have passed since mass protests against Lebanon's political class brought down one government, and nearly eight more months since a huge explosion destroyed the port of Beirut and toppled its successor.

Since then the currency has lost 90 per cent of its value, inflation has driven more than half the population below the poverty line, the country has defaulted on its debts, and banks have all but cut clients off from their dollar deposits.

Scenes of shoppers brawling over scarce goods, protesters burning tyres to block roads, and hundreds of shuttered businesses are now commonplace.

A vibrant Beirut has turned into a ghost-town in eerie darkness, as the outgoing energy minister warns that a total black-out is looming as fuel for electricity runs out.

Yet even as Lebanon hurtles towards outright collapse, in the worst crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war, bickering politicians are either unwilling or unable to form a government.

Saad al Hariri, the three-time prime minister designated by parliament to form a cabinet, stormed out of his 18th meeting with President Michel Aoun this week. He said Aoun's Christian party, led by the president's son-in-law Gebran Bassil, wanted to dictate cabinet seats and have veto power over decisions.

"As of today you have to satisfy Gebran Bassil's conditions; he has



A demonstrator holds a Lebanese flag during a protest against the fall in Lebanese pound currency and mounting economic hardships, in Beirut, Lebanon, on March 12. — Reuters

A VIBRANT BEIRUT HAS TURNED INTO A GHOST-TOWN IN EERIE DARKNESS, AS THE OUTGOING ENERGY MINISTER WARNS THAT A TOTAL BLACK-OUT IS LOOMING AS FUEL FOR ELECTRICITY RUNS OUT

the pen of the president", said one government source.

Hariri, son of Rafik al Hariri, the post-war premier assassinated in 2005, has called for a technocrat cabinet that must enact reforms long demanded by the IMF and donor countries such as the United States and France. He is backed by the Amal party, led by influential House Speaker Nabih Berri and others.

Overshadowing what might otherwise look like a sectarian squabble over sharing the diminishing pie of Lebanon's spoils system is the

power of Hizbullah, the group that dominates Lebanon politics and underpins Aoun's presidency.

With a new administration in Washington reassessing policy towards Iran, the regional balance of power is shifting. For now, Hizbullah appears reluctant to back a new government that might be seen as offering a concession to rivals such as Hariri.

While it agrees on the need for a government, Hizbullah is not ready to pressure Aoun and risk its alliance with his large Christian party.

— Reuters

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Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24649351/24649360

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PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY:

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

VOLLEYBALL EXPERT CALLS FOR NATIONAL COACHING PROGRAMME

FIVB international instructor Shihab Al Din Ahmed al Riyamy has completed yet another accomplishment with his club side Al Salam after they defended their title in the Oman volleyball first division league 2020-21 recently. The Asian Volleyball Confederation panel member talks in-depth about the game and its challenges in Oman.

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH

What is the status of volleyball at present in Oman?

Oman is still a young country in sports and there is a long way to go. Volleyball is the second most popular game in Oman after soccer. The sport has witnessed rapid growth in 18 years due to the low-cost, easier equipment for playing. Also, Oman's demography with a coastline of sandy beaches with a length of 1,700 kilometres makes it an ideal venue for beach volleyball. The presence of long beaches enables a lot of youngsters to play beach volleyball and extend the volleyball culture in all the wilayats.

Recently, the Oman government has built sports halls and infrastructures of modern facilities mostly in more than 35 clubs. Surely, this is a great step for developing all sports such as basketball, handball and especially volleyball in the governorates. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth has been coordinating with the Oman Volleyball Association (OVA) for technical assistance in youth volleyball training centres, which are considered as the factory of volleyball players. Lately, Oman has a good reputation in volleyball after great achievements in Gulf and Arab tournaments.

What are the challenges facing the sport here?

Oman's main challenge is to improve the level of the game and players' performance. I had presented a primary study that focused on the challenges facing the development of volleyball in the Sultanate. I had conducted this study taking the opinions of 81 volleyball specialists, which reflected the status of the game in Oman. Also, it compared with similar studies on volleyball in the neighbouring countries. The output of this research has led to a greater understanding of the challenges facing the game's development in Oman. In particular, the lack of qualified

coaches, low presence in school sports, short coverage by media, sponsors and marketing issues were found.

In 2013, Lap Lambert Academy published my project as a primary study which reflected the current situation of volleyball in Arab countries. According to my international expertise in volleyball, the main problem is the lack of qualified volleyball coaches because most of the coaches in Oman aren't certified, trained or professionals in the coaching field.

The OVA and Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) are trying to conduct several courses for coaches. But we need a national coaching programme which will help all national coaches upgrade their knowledge.

In 2014, I presented a second book which is about a coaching education programme. I had prepared for over five years in research on the topic. With my experience at the professional level and after having undertaken over 50 courses across the world, I am still insisting that the top sports authorities in the Ministry and OOC set up a national certified coaching programme that develops technically compatible national coaches.

Any remedies you suggest to meet these challenges?

Globally, sports is now an industry and has an impact on the economy of any country. So, sports needs a good plan from the government. In Oman, we hope it is integrated with the Oman Vision 2040.

Until that time, the authorities can plan the sports vision such as developing physical education programmes in schools, giving financial and logistical support to all clubs and training centres, building sports facilities and infrastructures, hosting international tournaments and main events for activating sports tourism and developing mechanisms for talent hunt. The main aim should be setting up a national certified coaching programme which will raise the number of qualified coaches and trainers in the sports field.



Are there many promising players coming up?

Actually, the Ministry of Sports (training youth centres) and national sports associations are coordinating in developing the new generation of players. But this is not enough as we need more focus on sports in school, which is the grass-roots level. Conducting youth and juniors' volleyball league is vital for improving the upcoming players' performance and developing their experience. Recently, we faced lack of talents and young players due to a lesser number of clubs.

How good is Oman's league standard?

This season is an exceptional sports season in the world because of Covid- 19 pandemic.

FACTBOX
SHIHAB AL RIYAMI
PhD in Sports Exercise Physiology
FIVB International Volleyball Coach Instructor II
(Euro-Asia) Coaches Cooperation Project Expert Member
Asian Volleyball Confederation Coaches Committee Member
Sultan Qaboos University volleyball head coach
Technical Director at Al Salam volleyball team

Honestly, it is a short duration for the league but we appreciated the OVA for conducting two events (volleyball league and OVA Cup). Despite the pandemic

situation, more than 22 clubs participated in this season and we saw great competition in the first and second divisions.

Personally, I am happy this season because I found former players in the national team, clubs and students became coaches with clubs such as Khalid al Shezawi, Darwesh al Aabi, Suleiman al Tobi, Mohammed al Aqamshoei, Assad al Battashi, Faisal al Muqbali and Qosai al Kalbani. I'm optimistic about the future of volleyball in Oman with the availability of advanced courses for players and technical experts. But we need longer leagues and more tournaments to really make the game develop.

How Oman team is performing internationally?

Since 2004, Oman have got more than six medals each in Arabian Gulf championships and GCC beach volleyball championships and 5 times medals in the Arab championships. Also, the national youth team got two medals in Arab championships. Lastly, Oman participated in AVC senior and youth championships with good results.

The Federation of International Volleyball (FIVB) has ranked Oman as 78th in the latest ranking, a rapid stride from 135 before 10 years.

To conclude, Oman volleyball requires a clear future plan and support from the government in setting up a coaching education programme and modern methods in talent hunt and player selection.



Zimbabwe to host Pakistan in Test and T20 series

Zimbabwe will host Pakistan next month for two Tests and three Twenty20 internationals, all behind closed doors at Harare Sports Club, Zimbabwe Cricket said on Sunday. They will start with three T20 internationals on April 21, 23 and 25, followed by Tests from April 29-May 3 and May 7-11.



Archer to undergo surgery on right hand, says ECB

England's Jofra Archer is set to undergo surgery on his right hand, the country's cricket board said, after the fast bowler was sent home from the one-day international series in India due to a worsening elbow injury. Archer, who returned to Britain on Tuesday, is also set to miss the start of the IPL season on April 9.

Conway, Sodhi lead Kiwi cruise

HAMILTON, New Zealand: An unbeaten 92 from Devon Conway and a four-wicket burst from Ish Sodhi ensured New Zealand romped to victory by 66 runs in the opening Twenty20 against Bangladesh in Hamilton on Sunday.

Conway, whose rollicking innings included 11 fours and three sixes, shared in a 105-run stand with debutant Will Young (53), as New Zealand posted an impressive 210 after winning the toss and electing to bat.

Mohammad Naim made an enterprising start to the Bangladesh reply with two boundaries off the opening over from Tim Southee. But once the tourists reached 39 in the fifth over the innings fell apart as first Lockie Ferguson removed Naim for 27 and then Sodhi suffocated the momentum with his four wickets in eight deliveries.

At the end of their 20 overs, Bangladesh were 144 for eight and Sodhi had the impressive figures of four for 28. New Zealand went into the match without six frontline players including Kane Williamson and Trent Boult and stand-in captain Tim Southee said it was pleasing to see the

New Zealand went into the match without six frontline players including Kane Williamson and Trent Boult

new blood perform with the bat. "Devon is just carrying on what he's done at this level, making it look extremely easy," Southee said with Conway now having four fifties and a 65.42 average from 12 Twenty20s.

"It's great to be able to see guys come in and perform. If you had five or six guys out a few years ago we would be scratching around but there's a number of guys now knocking on the door."

'LET OURSELVES DOWN'

A disappointed Bangladesh skipper Mahmadullah pointed the finger at a mediocre batting display from his side and called for a big improvement before game two in Napier on Tuesday.

"We have let ourselves down in our batting department," he said.

"Ish (Sodhi) is an experienced campaigner, he uses conditions really well, the ball was gripping a



New Zealand's Ish Sodhi (L) is congratulated by wicketkeeper Devon Conway after taking the wicket of Bangladesh's Soumya Sarkar during the first Twenty20 match at Seddon Park in Hamilton. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

NEW ZEALAND
M Guptill c Soumya b Nasum35
F Allen b Nasum0
D Conway not out92
W Young c Hossain b Mahedi53
G Phillips not out24
Extras (lb2, w4)6
Total (three wickets; 20 overs) ----- 210
Fall of wickets: 1-1, 2-53, 3-158
Bowling: Nasum 4-0-30-2, Saifuddin 4-0-43-0, Shoriful 4-0-50-0, Mustafizur 4-0-48-0, Mahedi 4-0-37-1

BANGLADESH
M Naim lbw Ferguson27
L Das c Sodhi b Southee4
S Sarkar c and b Sodhi5
M Mithun b Sodhi4
Mahmadullah b Sodhi11
Afif Hossain b Ferguson45
Mahedi Hasan b Sodhi0
M Saifuddin not out34
S Islam c Guptill b Bennett5
N Ahmed not out0
Extras (lb2, w7)9
Total (eight wickets; 20 overs) 144
Fall of wickets: 1-20, 2-39, 3-43, 4-44, 5-59, 6-59, 7-122, 8-133
Bowling: Southee 4-0-34-1, Bennett 4-0-20-1, Ferguson 4-0-25-2, Sodhi 4-0-28-4, Chapman 1-0-9-0, Phillips 1-0-5-0, Mitchell 2-0-21-0

little bit here but we can't make the same mistakes again and again."

After the Sodhi rout, Afif Hossain (45) and Mohammad Saifuddin (34 not out) stretched the innings with a 63-run stand for the seventh wicket but they were unable to lift the scoring rate for a solid chase. — AFP

Dutch beat Latvia for first points of WC qualifying campaign

AMSTERDAM: Steven Berghuis and Luuk de Jong scored either side of half-time as the Netherlands got their World Cup qualifying hopes back on track with a 2-0 home win over plucky Latvia on Saturday.

The Dutch were looking for a strong response after a shock 4-2 loss to Turkey in Istanbul on Wednesday at the start of their Group G campaign.

The victory left them three points behind early group leaders Turkey, who beat Norway 3-0 on Saturday.

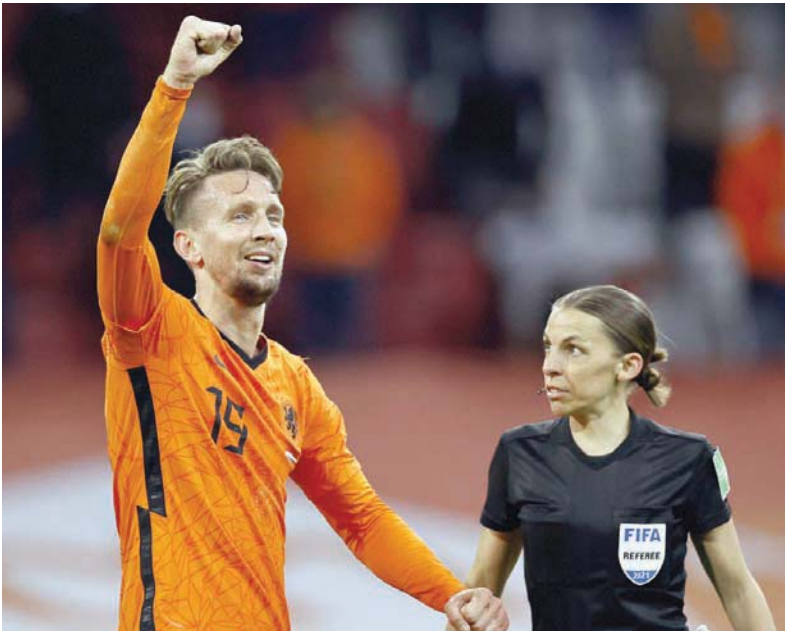
Despite a ferocious onslaught from kickoff — the Dutch had 11 attempts on target in the first 25 minutes — they took until past the half-hour to score when Berghuis, who had waited until his 23rd cap for his first international goal, lashed home from the edge of the area.

Before that Davy Klaassen had hit the woodwork and not long after the opening goal De Jong headed an effort against the crossbar.

Latvia goalkeeper Roberts Ozols continued to face a barrage in the second period, coming out on top in several goalmouth scrambles and making some smart stops as he and his team lived a charmed life.

Yet their heroic defending was absent at a 69th-minute corner as De Jong leapt unchallenged and headed forcefully home for a second Dutch goal.

A counter-attack five minutes from full time offered Latvia a lone chance which Andrejs



The Netherlands' Luuk de Jong celebrates scoring his team's second goal flanked by referee Stephanie Frappart during their World Cup qualifying Group G match against Latvia at the Johan Cruyff Arena in Amsterdam. — AFP

Ciganiks hit against the outside of the post. The match was played in front of 5,000 spectators in the Amsterdam Arena as part of a government-supported study into the amount of contact in crowd situations.

The Dutch now meet Gibraltar in their next group game on Tuesday while Latvia visit Turkey. — Reuters

WORLD CUP 2022 EUROPEAN ZONE QUALIFYING RESULTS ON SATURDAY:

**Group A
At Belgrade**
Serbia 2 (A. Mitrovic 46, Kostic 60)
Portugal 2 (Diogo Jota 11, 36)
At Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0 Luxembourg 1 (Rodrigues 85)

**Group E
At Prague**

Czech Republic 1 (Provod 50)
Belgium 1 (Lukaku 60)
At Minsk
Belarus 4 (Lisakovich 45-pen, 83, Kendysh 64, Savitski 81)
Estonia 2 (Henri Anier 31, 55)

**Group G
At Amsterdam**
Netherlands 2 (Berghuis 32, L. de Jong 69)
Latvia 0
At Malaga, Spain
Norway 0 Turkey 3 (Ozan Tufan 4, 59, Caglar Soyuncu 28)

At Podgorica
Montenegro 4 (Beciraj 25, Simic 43, Tomasevic 53, Jovetic 80)
Gibraltar 1 (Styche 30-pen)

**Group H
At Trnava, Slovakia**
Slovakia 2 (Strelec 49, Skriniar 53)
Malta 2 (Gambin 16, Satariano 20)
At Rijeka, Croatia
Croatia 1 (Pasalic 40)
Cyprus 0
At Sochi, Russia
Russia 2 (Dzyuba 26, 35)
Slovenia 1 (Ilicic 36)

A Division T20 wins for ACT, Zawawi, ARTT and E&Y

MUSCAT: ACT upset table topper Sarco by 15 runs as the race for the eight-team A Division's T20 League title intensified with the top four teams having 6 points each from 4 games and only net run rate separating them halfway into the competition.

Sarco, Zawawi Powertech, ACT and ARTT have all won three matches out of four played so far in a tournament that continues to throw surprises as it nears completion.

ACT's win handed Sarco their first loss of the T20 league on Saturday. Jeethesha Shridhara picked up 5 for 25 to slow down ACT's charge towards a big total, restricting it to 176 for 8. Qasim Ali (47) and Ghufuran Anjum (31) were their leading scorers at OC Turf1 in Amerat.

Sarco suffered an early setback, slumping to 51 for 4 in the first 9 overs and could manage to score 161 for 7 before they ran out of overs. Ajay Menon top-scored with a 47-ball 74 that included 6 sixes.

DHARVESH STARS IN ZAWAWI WIN

In another A Division T20 League game, Dharvesh Asath's fantastic 52 helped second-placed Zawawi Powertech to a 29-run win over Basta CT at OC Turf 2 on Saturday.

Zawawi posted 153 for 9 on the board and then bowled Basta out for 124 in the final over. Vijeesh Channengadan and Yagnik Ashwin claimed three wickets each.

Shahid Mahmood was Basta's main scorer with 40 off 20 balls that included 3 sixes.



Essa al Balushi, Krishnan Karthik and Omar Sarfraz of E&Y.

ARTT BEAT AWTAD

Arabian Region Travel and Tourism (ARTT) added another win to their credit, beating Awtad International by 4 wickets in an A Division T20 League match at OC Turf 2.

Vijayanand Dhayanandan's 74 not out was the highlight of Awtad's 140 for 7 which ARTT chased down in the final over, scoring 145 for 6 thanks to vital knocks by Shehbaz Nasar (31) and Aqil Khan (27). Mohammed Moshin took 2 for 13 in his four overs for ARTT.

KRISHNAN, ISSA STEER E&Y TO VICTORY

Krishnan Karthik's 38 and Issa al Balushi's 3 for 12 were the highlights of Ernst and Young's (E&Y) 32-run victory against OCT Muscat in the same competition at OC Turf 2.

E&Y were dismissed for 120 in 19.5 overs, Krishnan (38) and Omar Sarfraz (30 not out) being the main scorers. Muhammed Aslam picked up 3 for 11. OCT Muscat managing to score only 88 for 8 in 20 overs due to

brilliant bowling by Issa and Amir Hussain (3 for 20). Rashad Mohammed top-scored with 35.

BRIEF SCORES

A Division T20

ACT 176 for 8 in 20 overs (Qasim Ali 47 – 6x6, Ghufuran Anjum 31 – 4x4, 1x6, Jeethesha Shridhara 5-25) beat Sarco 161 for 7 in 20 overs (Ajay Menon 74 – 5x4, 6x6, Toseef Ul-Hassan 3-24) by 15 runs.

Zawawi Powertech 153 for 9 in 20 overs (Dharvesh Asath 52 – 4x4, 3x6, Shihab Said 2-25) beat Basta CT 124 all out in 19.4 overs (Shahid Mehmood 40 – 1x4, 3x6, Vijeesh Channengadan 3-10, Yagnik Ashwin 3-18) by 29 runs.

Awtad International 140 for 7 in 20 overs (Vijayanand Dhayanandan 74 not out – 2x4, 7x6, Nidhin Mohan 31 – 3x4, Muhammed Moshin 2-13) lost to Arabian Region (ARTT) 145 for 6 in 19.1 overs (Shehbaz Nasar 31 – 3x4, Aqil Khan 27 – 1x4, 1x6, Mohammed Irfan 2-20, Sunil Baby 2-25, Sujithkumar Rajagopalan 2-26) by 4 wickets.

Ernst & Young 120 all out in 19.5 overs (Krishnan Karthik 38 – 4x4, 1x6, Omar Sarfraz 30 not out – 1x4, 1x6, Mohamed Aslam 3-11, Majid Hussein 2-32, Arif al Balushi 2-18) beat OCT Muscat 88 for 8 in 20 overs (Rashad Mohammed 35 – 1x4, Issa al Balushi 3-12, Amir Hussain 3-20) by 32 runs.



Defending champion Hamilton alongside on front row

First time since 2013 that Mercedes not on pole for opener

Alonso shines on return after two years out

Vettel and Perez lose out with new teams

Verstappen puts Red Bull on pole

MANAMA: Red Bull's Max Verstappen set himself up as favourite for the first race of the Formula One season after seizing a perfect pole position in Bahrain on Saturday.

The Dutch 23-year-old put in a stunning final flying lap as he denied champions Mercedes the top slot in the season-opener for the first time in the V6 turbo hybrid era that started in 2014.

"Well done Max, that's the perfect start," said a jubilant team boss Christian Horner over the car radio as the mechanics celebrated.

Verstappen's pole time of one minute 28.997 seconds was 0.388 quicker than Mercedes' seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton, who had been only 0.023 behind after his first effort in the final phase.

"I absolutely gave it everything I had but unfortunately it wasn't good enough," said Hamilton. "I got absolutely everything I could

from the car," he added.

Hamilton's Finnish team-mate Valtteri Bottas, winner of the last two season-opening races held in Australia and Austria, will start third.

The pole was the fourth of Verstappen's career and second in a row after the 2020 season-ender in Abu Dhabi, which he went on to win.

It continued an impeccable start to the year, with the Red Bull driver quickest in pre-season testing and all three practice sessions in Bahrain.

"So far the car has been working really well and it's just been really enjoyable to drive," said Verstappen. "It all worked out perfectly in qualifying."

Sunday's floodlit race at Sakhir, hosting the opener instead of Australia which has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, will be the first time Verstappen has lined up on pole



Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen gives the thumbs up after claiming pole position in the qualifying session on the eve of the Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix at the Bahrain International Circuit in the city of Sakhir.— AFP

with Hamilton alongside.

"The fight is on," commented Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff.

NO SOMERSAULTS

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc qualified fourth, but on softer tyres than

those ahead on mediums, with AlphaTauri's Pierre Gasly fifth.

"We know now where we are in terms of qualification pace and it's a pleasant surprise," said the Monegasque.

McLaren's Daniel Ricciardo will

line up sixth for the Australian's first race with the team since he moved from Renault.

"I don't want to do somersaults or backflips just yet, but it's certainly a nice start for the campaign and I think we'll do alright tomorrow," he said.

Lando Norris qualified seventh for McLaren, ahead of former team-mate Carlos Sainz who will be making his Ferrari race debut on Sunday.

Sainz suffered a scare when his car switched off on track in the first phase but he got it going again and made it back to the pits.

Spain's two-time world champion Fernando Alonso, 39, will start his first race since 2018 in ninth place with Renault-owned Alpine and looked like he had not been away.

The big losers were four-times world champion Sebastian Vettel, now at Aston Martin after leaving Ferrari, who qualified 18th and

Verstappen's team-mate Sergio Perez who managed only 11th on the grid.

"He's only had 1.5 days of testing and everything is very new for him in terms of how the car feels, but he will be competitive in the race tomorrow and should not be counted out," said Red Bull boss Christian Horner of Perez.

Vettel had to slow for yellow flags waved after Russian rookie Nikita Mazepin spun and was summoned to stewards on Sunday.

"We would have hoped for a better start but it is what it is," he said. "For sure I'm upset and angry but it wasn't our fault."

Japanese rookie Yuki Tsunoda qualified 13th for AlphaTauri but raised plenty of excitement when he lapped second fastest in the opening phase.

At the back, Michael Schumacher's son Mick will start 19th for Haas, one spot ahead of team-mate Mazepin. — Reuters

Barty, Tsitsipas and Rublev advance

MIAMI: World number one Ashleigh Barty looked sharp in a straight-set victory over Jelena Ostapenko on Saturday at the Miami Open, where men's second seed Stefanos Tsitsipas cruised past lucky loser Damir Dzumhur.

Defending champion Barty defeated the former French Open champion from Latvia 6-3, 6-2 to set up a fourth-round clash with former world number one Victoria Azarenka.

Greece's Tsitsipas — ranked fifth in the world but seeded second behind world No 2 Daniil Medvedev in the Masters 1000 event that is missing top-ranked Novak Djokovic, world number three Rafael Nadal and

No 4 Dominic Thiem as well as Roger Federer and Andy Murray — was untroubled in a 6-1, 6-4 over Bosnian lucky loser Damir Dzumhur.

Tsitsipas, coming off a runner-up finish at Acapulco last week, hit 10 of his 18 winners off his forehand and committed only nine unforced errors as he relentlessly pressured his opponent.

"There isn't much I can tell you. It was a great match," Tsitsipas said. "I started the match very strong, breaking him twice and taking a big lead in the score, and I think the things worked out by myself after that."

"I created lot of opportunities with my serve, finding the right

angles and executing it perfectly. Even with my second serve I felt like I did a lot of damage, not giving him a chance to press first and apply pressure with his shots."

The three-time Grand Slam semifinalist next faces Japanese 28th seed Kei Nishikori, who outlasted Slovenia's Aljaz Bedene 7-6 (8/6), 5-7, 6-4.

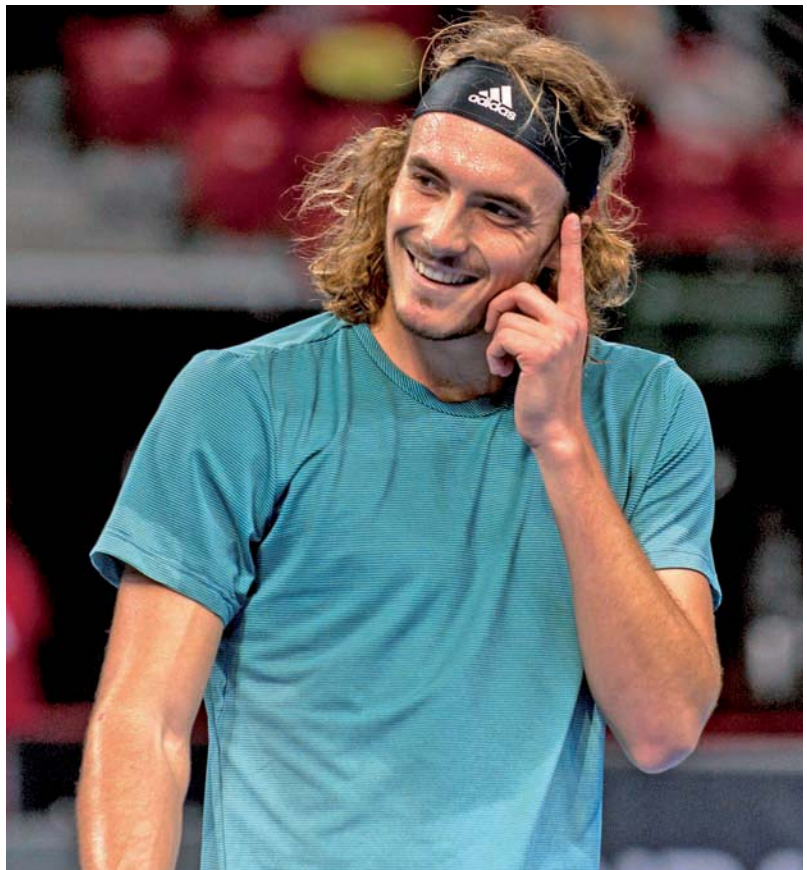
Rain was the only thing that slowed down men's fourth seed Andrey Rublev in a 6-1, 6-2 victory over American Tennys Sandgren. Rublev, up 6-1, 5-2, was unable to convert three match points before the players had to leave the court for the second of two rain delays, but he wasted no time in closing out the match when play resumed.

Rublev, who took his tour-leading number of 2021 match wins to 17, didn't face a break point, his dominance on full display as he held serve for a 4-1 lead in the opening set with a love game that lasted just 59 seconds.

Canadian Denis Shapovalov also had to wait out the delay to finish off a hard-fought 6-7 (5/7), 6-4, 6-4 victory over Ilya Ivashka.

Azarenka, of Belarus, beat 24th seed Angelique Kerber of Germany 7-5, 6-2 in a battle of former world number ones.

World number three Simona Halep of Romania, withdrew from her scheduled match with Latvian Anastasija Sevastova with a right shoulder injury. — AFP



Second seed Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece cruised past lucky loser Damir Dzumhur.



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Permits for industrial investors to be streamlined

COORDINATED ACTION:
Madayn, Environment Authority to cooperate in expediting requests for environmental permits

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) has signed a cooperation agreement with the Environment Authority to facilitate procedures for the investors and business owners in all industrial cities to obtain the necessary environmental permits for their projects through Madayn's Masar Service Centre and in accordance with the provisions of the regulations organising the issuance of environmental permits.

The agreement was signed by Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of the Environment Authority and Hilal bin Hamad al



Hasani, Chief Executive Officer of Madayn.

Al Amri emphasised that the cooperation programme with Madayn aims at facilitating and simplifying procedures for the investors through providing a specialised environmental team of

the authority who will be present on an ongoing basis in all the industrial cities.

"The team will be responsible for issuing and renewing environmental-related licenses and requirements. Moreover, the cooperation programme

aims at providing a number of job opportunities for specialists in the environmental field, as

Madayn will provide them with the financial resources while administratively they will be employees of the authority", he said, adding: "We hope to see more of these cooperation programmes signed in order to enhance the investment climate in the Sultanate through facilitating the procedures for the investors."

Ibtisam bint Ahmed al Faroojiyah, Director General of Investor Services at Madayn, commented that the cooperation programme comes along the lines of the objectives of Madayn Vision 2040 to manage and operate world-class business cities with an emphasis placed on the environmental standards.

"One of the key objectives of this cooperation programme is to reduce the operating cost for the investors by ensuring their compliance to the environmental

standards in all production stages.

Representatives of the Environment Authority at Masar Service Centre will ensure that the standards are applied by the investors before commencing with the inspection operations at the industrial units", Al Farooji stated.

Madayn established Masar Service Centre to enhance flexible, easy and transparent dealings between the business community and the government, and provide a reliable and secure environment for the companies to conduct day-to-day transactions with the concerned bodies.

Madayn inaugurated Masar Service Centres in Al Rusayl and Suhar Industrial Cities last year, and is currently working on inaugurating Masar Service Centres in all the industrial cities during the current year.

OPAZ to enforce environmental norms in free zones

KEY DECISION: Projects established in special economic zones and free zones have been classified into three categories based on their impacts to the environment and health of human beings



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), issued a decision regulating procedures covering the issuance of environmental permits in the special economic zones and free zones in the Sultanate.

Lubnabint Hamoudal Sabariyah (pictured), Environmental Specialist at the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones, pointed out that the decision applies to all projects developed in the special economic zones and free zones.

It specified the procedures for obtaining environmental permits, as well as identified the projects that require preparing a detailed environmental assessment study for their potential impacts.

According to the decision, the projects established in the special economic zones and free zones have been classified into three categories based on their impacts to the environment and health of human beings, based on their nature, location, materials

used in production and production capacity.

The First Category includes high-risk projects, as identified in Annex 1.

These projects are required to submit their environmental and social impacts assessment study.

Among the most prominent projects of this category are those related to the development and management of industrial plans, logistics storage sites, fishing ports and fish industries complexes, tourist villages with an area of 10 hectares or more, chemicals and oil storage tanks of around 5 hectares and more, heavy industries, oil refineries, chemical and petrochemical industries, power plants, seawater desalination plants with a production capacity of over one million cubic metres per year, and fish farming projects with a production capacity of more than 500 tonnes per year for the localised fish and any quantity of unusual species.

The Second Category includes projects with medium environmental risk, which require submitting environmental management plan.



However, the Third Category is for projects with low environmental risk, requiring compliance with the specified general and technical environmental requirements, while submitting an environmental and social impact assessment study or an environmental management plan is not required.

Commenting on this decision, Lubna al Sabariyah, stated, "Through this decision, OPAZ is intending to facilitate the procedures for investors and accelerate the issuance of environmental permits. For instance, the environmental permits for projects falling into the second and third categories are issued prior establishing the projects.

These permits will be issued in five working days for the Third Category projects, while it takes ten 10 working days for the Second Category projects. However, for the projects that require developing an environmental assessment study, it takes a maximum of 30 working days for reviewing the environmental permit applications."

STS Wins PDO Framework Agreements – Major Step Forward for Omanization



STS Group has secured two long-term Framework Agreements with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), viz. the Project Delivery Contracts (South PDC) and Maintenance Integrity Contract (North MIC) for major Oil and Gas projects. Significantly, these new contracts will require STS to **develop and employ over 200 new Omani Nationals per year**, representing **significant opportunities for Omani employment**.

The signings took place at an official contract awards ceremony at PDO's Mina al Fahal headquarters, which was attended by PDO Managing Director - Raoul Restucci, and STS Group Managing Director - Alex Clark and Chief Executive Officer - Rejeesh Mani.

Restucci said: "These strategic agreements create a win-win culture for PDO, our partner contractors, and Oman, in that they maximize capital efficiency, generates multi-million-dollar savings and enhance In-Country Value (ICV) opportunities. They represent a benchmark of best practice by capturing the lessons learned over the past 17 years from engineering, maintenance, and construction contracts across our concession area. We expect to transition seamlessly from our existing on-plot deals in the coming months, working hand-in-hand with AIP and STS to deliver a large portfolio of projects safely, responsibly, and efficiently. Considering the sheer size and dimensions of these contracts, embedding such improvements within 15 months of the tendering period during the COVID-19 pandemic is an outstanding achievement."

"I congratulate and thank all those responsible for bringing these agreements to fruition, as they will generate exceptional value both for our Company and the country."

Alex Clark, Managing Director, STS Group said: "These landmark contracts mark a new level of collaboration between PDO and STS. It builds upon a long-standing relationship which spans more than three decades and encompasses a significant number of projects undertaken in Oman. Most importantly, the award of these contracts represents a major step forward for development and employment of the local workforce. In collaboration with PDO, STS will be developing Omani's at all levels of the contract organization from the site workforce to the contract leadership and management. The award of these contracts will ensure STS can build further on its impressive and dedicated track record of National growth and training."

These contracts are **awarded for 7 years** with an additional 3-year optional extension. The scope of these contracts is mainly divided into four major services: a) Integrated Project Services, b) Integrated Support Services, c) Management Services and d) Maintenance Services.

The key deliverables for these contracts in terms of projects and maintenance are:

- Greenfield and Brownfield EPC projects

- Civil and Electrical infrastructure projects
- Road Construction, Maintenance and Repairs
- GRE, CS, DSS pipelines & Flowlines
- FCP, PSM and Integrity projects
- Preventive and Corrective maintenance of various equipment including storage tanks
- Specialized secondments

Rejeesh Mani, Chief Executive Officer, STS said: "This is a major milestone in the recognition of STS Group Engineering, Procurement, Construction & Maintenance services delivery capability. We have a strong track record with PDO and are delighted to have been awarded these contracts under the long-term framework agreements. The mix of intellectual capital, investment in human capital, field knowledge, proven HSE and Quality Systems, ICV initiatives, trained Nationals across the board, established industrial facilities and camps as well as our large fleet of sophisticated construction equipment makes STS a key differentiator as a service provider."

We look forward to continuing to demonstrate our commitment to a sustainable and long-term presence in the Sultanate through the safe and timely delivery of these projects for PDO"

Ibrahim Al Khusaibi, General Manager HR & Admin, STS said: "Under our current EMC contract, we have engaged over 2,000 Nationals. We recruit, train and develop Omani Nationals as well as utilise and develop local service providers and vendors. We are focused on maximising the local supply chain & resources and working as an integral part of the local community"

STS along with Tebodin & Partner LLC in Oman, part of Bilfinger, have been working for PDO under Engineering & Maintenance Contract (EMC) contract since 2011, providing engineering, construction and maintenance services, procurement support to PDO's oil and gas field development in the North of Oman.

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) is the leading exploration and production company in the Sultanate of Oman. PDO delivers the majority of the country's crude oil production and natural gas supply. It is a majority state-owned company, with Royal Dutch Shell the second largest shareholder.

About STS Group:
Special Technical Services L.L.C. (STS) was established in 1980 as a member of The Oman Oilfield Supply Centre L.L.C. (OOSC) group of companies, headquartered in the Sultanate of Oman, STS is a leading multidisciplinary contracting group specializing in Construction, Fabrication and Maintenance services for the Energy and Industrial sectors.

Further information about the Group is available at www.stsoman.com

OPAL organises AGM, elects new Board

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL) held its Annual General Meeting under the auspices of Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, at Kempinski Hotel Muscat. Also in attendance were the Society's Board of Directors and Financial Auditor, while members were invited to participate online.

In welcome remarks, Abdulrahman al Yahyaie, CEO of OPAL, explained the most important achievements of the past year: "During the closure of the airports, as part of the measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, and in coordination with the government, Opal was able to organise more than 133 charter flights to repatriate more than 27,000 employees



of the sector employees to their homelands.

In addition, facilitating the return of more than 11,000 employees to their employers to support business continuity in their organisations, an effort that has saved more than RO 66 million for the industry.

Al Yahyaie added: "The long-awaited unified defensive driving license for the energy

sector will be valid during the second quarter of this year, which will lead to enhancing road safety, saving lives and reaching practical efficiency, as it is expected to save RO 6 million annually."

Dr Amer bin Awadh al Rawas, Chairman of the Board, in his address, affirmed OPAL's keenness on sustaining "In-Country Value" and the

prosperity of the business community. "In order to achieve this, OPAL continued to build on the remarkable success achieved in the Training for Employment Programme and the Training for Development Programme.

With the aim of preparing capable and productive Omanis in various fields of work, we have achieved great success in attracting key players in the

energy sector to sponsor and support training programmes for employment, and I am pleased to express my gratitude for the continuous support in this regard to all government and private agencies for their continuous support to OPAL."

At the end of the AGM, the Chief Guest presented mementoes to the outgoing Board members in recognition of their efforts over the past two years.

Voting for the new Board, which was held via the Tasweet Voting System, saw seven candidates being elected: Dr Aflah al Hadhrami (124 votes), Eng Saeed Amer al Habsi (97 votes), Dr Amer al Rawas (67 votes), Eng Hussam bin Abdullah al Jadhmi (41 votes), Moosa al Moosawi (34 votes), Eng Ali al Lawati (33 votes), and Saif al Darai (18 votes).

Over 45,000 kg of
bullion, precious
stones stamped



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

Bullion, gold, silver and platinum artefacts that were stamped last year totalled 45,853 kg by weight, according to Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

Gold jewellery and ornaments imprinted in the Precious Metals Laboratory of the Directorate General for Standards and Metrology during 2020 included precious and semi-precious stones, precious metals and ordinary metals clad with a crust of precious metals, and natural or industrial pearl products, traditional jewellery and coins.

The Ministry plays a major role in controlling precious metals and precious stones in order to curb illegal practices and to protect consumers and merchants from potential fraud. These measure also encourage the manufacture of precious metals locally, while also preserving the Sultanate's jewellery-making legacy.

Over 12,000
industrial licenses
registered with
MoCIIP last year

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

The number of industrial licenses registered by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) during 2020 climbed to 12,176 licenses. They included 5,775 B-type permits, which are typically issued to investors of GCC states, authorising customs-free imports of materials for their industrial establishments.

In addition, the Ministry also approved 119 applications for land to be utilised under the right of usufruct for industrial projects.

Ibtisam bint Mohammad al Alawiyah, Secretary of the Industrial Registry at the Ministry, said: "Based on Ministerial Decisions 65 and 66/2009 issued by the Ministry of Finance regarding the controls of customs exemption for industrial establishments, the industrial establishments shall adhere to all provisions of the decisions regulating customs exemptions and to ensure that the exempted materials are used for the purpose for which they were exempted."

She added that in order to implement the customs exemption controls properly and to avoid any problems may face the companies in obtaining Customs exemption incentives in future, the industrial establishments shall submit their requests for customs exemption for each industrial license separately, and shall use the exemption decision for each branch separately too.



Own a Toyota
Avalon &
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benefits

MUSCAT: The best time to own a Toyota Avalon is now. Get cash gift from RO 3300 up to RO 3500, insurance 1 year comprehensive or cash gift in lieu of insurance up to RO 350 and service 2 years / 20,000 kms (whichever is earlier).

(Prospective buyers may be advised that the benefits vary between model variants, model year and manufacturing year. Terms & Conditions apply. Visit the showroom for exact details, please).

Complementing the Avalon's stunning looks is a thrilling drive personality imbued by a 3.5-litre V6 engine, which produces a maximum output of 298 HP and 36.3 Kg-m of torque and is equipped with a Direct Injection 4-Stroke Gasoline Engine Superior Version (D-4S) and Variable Valve Timing-intelligent Wide (VVT-iW) systems to achieve top-notch power performance, environmental performance, and fuel efficiency. The engine is paired to an eight-speed automatic transmission that merges smooth, precise gear selection throughout the RPM range with alacrity for fuel efficiency and on-demand power.

For the latest Press Releases, Test Drive requests and more, please visit www.toyotaoman.com, www.youtube.com/toyotaoman or www.facebook.com/toyotaoman, www.instagram.com/toyotaomanofficial/.

High-level team visits Al Mazunah Free Zone

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 28

Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, accompanied by Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, head of Oman Investment Authority, visited Al Mazunah Free Zone to get acquainted with the ongoing and future projects in the free zone.

The delegation was received by Said bin Abdullah al Balushi, Director General of Al Mazunah Free Zone, who elaborated on the incentives that are offered to the investors which include customs' exemptions, 100 per cent foreign



ownership, no minimum capital requirements, and Omanisation rate stands at 10 per cent.

More incentives include easy access of individuals and investors to the free zone without entry visas being required for Yemenis, facilitation of employing Yemeni

workforce without work visa being required. Al Balushi emphasised on the strategic location of the free zone on the border of the Sultanate and Yemen, making it a gateway for transit trade to Yemen and East Africa.

He added that Al Mazunah

Free Zone is currently working on several projects, which include the construction of the Facility Building. Expected to be completed by mid-2022, the Facility Building project is valued at more than RO 3 million and will comprise office space, exhibition space and commercial stores.

The visiting delegation also included Shaikh Muhanna bin Saif al Lamki, Deputy Governor of Dhofar, Dr Ahmed bin Nasser al Bakri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources for Agriculture, Shaikh Bakhit bin Salim al Mashani, Wali of Al Mazyouna, in addition to a number of officials.

PRESS RELEASE

OIH ORGANISES SERIES OF INTRODUCTORY TOURS



Oman International Hospital has recently organised a series of exclusive introductory tours for the public and private sector entities and institutions, as well as insurance companies.

The hospital's management team showcased a detailed presentation on the services that will be available in the upcoming weeks after the official opening of the hospital.

Oman International Hospital is a joint investment between Oman Brunei Investment Company, Suhail Bahwan Group and Idealmed GHS, a modern multi-specialty hospital that focuses on providing the highest standards of healthcare.

Oman International Hospital comprises a team of the most qualified health professionals in various specialisations, both within and outside the Sultanate, as well as recognised partners from the academic field as also hosts medical and pharmaceutical domains.

OOMCO OPENS NEW AHLAIN STORE NEAR SQU

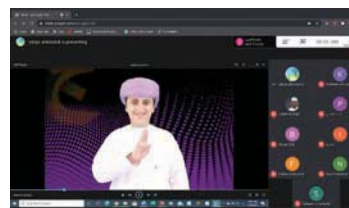


Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) has inaugurated a brand new Ahlain store at its soon-to-be completed mega service station at Al Khoudh 6, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

To celebrate the opening, OOMCO held a special lucky draw for customers who shopped through the OOMCO World App, giving away prizes that included an iPhone 12, iPhone 11, PlayStation 5 & 4 and gold bracelet. The new branch opening is part of a new concept for the company's popular convenience store, which is being rolled out at flagship OOMCO fuel stations across the country.

"We're thrilled to have opened our newest Ahlain store, strategically located at Sultan Qaboos University. It also marks the next level of completion of our mega service station, which is part of our long-term strategy to transform the fuel marketing industry," said Ramzi Al Mejri, Manager - Shop Food and Services Marketing at OOMCO.

OOREDOO BOOSTS SOCIAL INCLUSION WITH SIGN LANGUAGE WORKSHOP



In line with Ooredoo's core value of caring, the telecoms company recently hosted a first of its kind sign language webinar, for employees at the Omani Association for the Hearing Impaired.

Sign language specialist Yahya bin Mohammed al Brashdi delivered three online workshops, teaching participants the basics of sign language, including the alphabet and numbers, as well as its history.

Through this and similar initiatives, Ooredoo aims to spread awareness about those with disabilities, and the importance of creating a more inclusive and accessible world for them.

Raed Mohammed Dawood, Director of Branding, Communications and Corporate Affairs at Ooredoo, said, "We are delighted to be able to support these workshops, which aim to facilitate better communication between the hearing impaired and the rest of society."

MALABAR GOLD & DIAMONDS ON AN EXPANSION SPREE



Malabar Gold & Diamonds, one of the largest gold and diamond retail chains in the country, has announced that it will launch 56 stores globally with 40 across India and 16 internationally in FY21-22 to further boost its retail presence across the country. The move is expected to amount to an overall investment of \$220m and generate 1,750 new jobs.

In India, the expansion strategy is centred in states like Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Delhi, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Kerala. Internationally, the expansion will further strengthen its position in markets like Singapore, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and UAE.

The move marks a major investment in expansion at a time when many gold and jewellery retailers have struggled to manage their existing operations due to challenging global economic environment. Despite the challenging market conditions, Malabar Gold & Diamonds has decided to push ahead with expansion, which demonstrates its confidence in the growth of these markets in future.



Lufthansa unit Swiss could announce more job cuts



Planes of Lufthansa's unit Austrian Airlines parked at Vienna International Airport. — Reuters

ZURICH: Deutsche Lufthansa's unit Swiss could announce additional job cuts in the second quarter as the pandemic crimps air travel, its chief executive told Swiss newspaper SonntagsBlick.

Last October, Swiss announced 1,000 job cuts through attrition over two years. The company has about 9,000 staff "From the 1,000 announced positions, we completed 500 of the job cuts through the end of 2020," Dieter Vranckx told the newspaper.

"How many additional positions we will potentially have to cut is something I can answer only in the second quarter. We're in the middle of the analysis."

Like most of the travel industry, Swiss is expecting less business travel in the future as companies will likely use more video conferencing rather than in-person trips even once the coronavirus crisis subsides.

Switzerland's 1.5 billion Swiss franc (\$1.60 billion) state credit guarantee for the airline is currently sufficient, Vranckx said. "For now, it's enough," he said, adding that planes flying now are profitable and the cargo business has grown in significance. — Reuters

Investors look for ways to protect themselves from market downturn

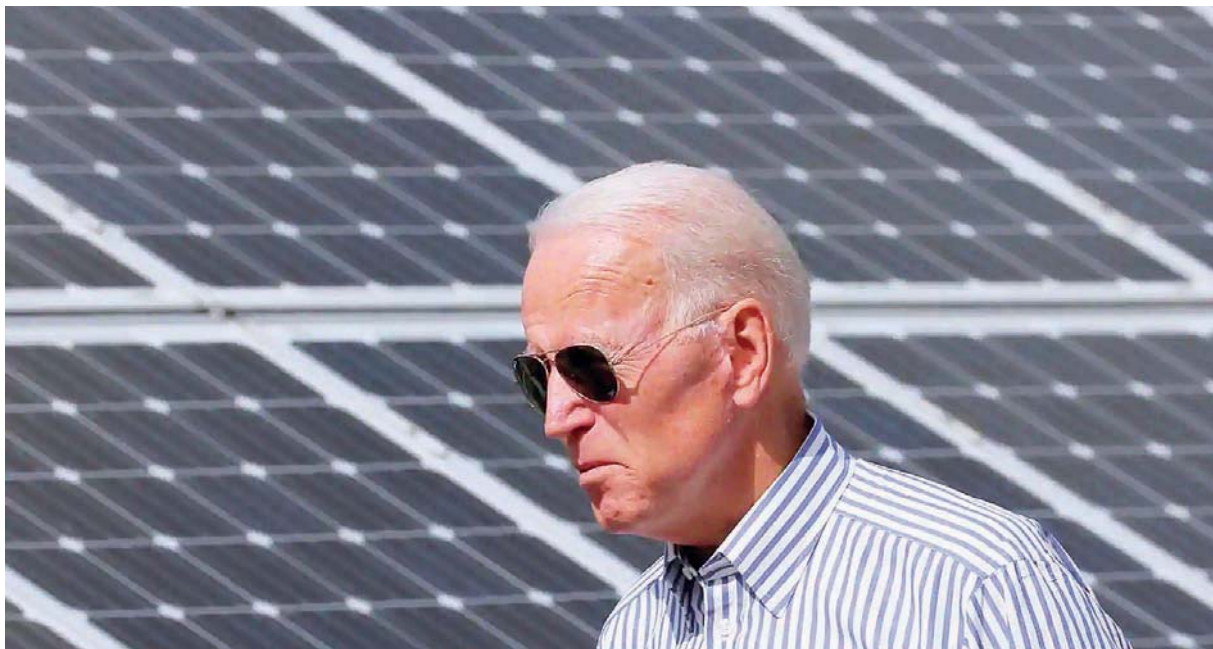
WALL STREET
WEEK AHEAD

NEW YORK: Investors looking for ways to protect themselves from a potential market downturn and rising inflation have been warming to utilities, sometimes seen as bond substitutes, as attractive alternatives.

The S&P 500 utilities index has outperformed the broader market this month, rising 9.3 per cent so far compared with a 4.3 per cent gain in the benchmark index and leading gains among sectors for March. Driving the gains may be a defensive move by investors to position themselves against a potential slide in equities, with worries mounting over higher inflation as seen in the jump in 10-year Treasury yields and over pricey stock valuations, some strategists say.

Utilities tend to do better in a downturn because they pay dividends and offer stability. "It's a little defensive positioning," said Joseph Quinlan, head of CIO market strategy for Merrill and Bank of America Private Bank in New York.

"We have some clients who want to be more defensive but want to stay in the market." While the economy is expected to rebound sharply this year from



US President Joe Biden walks past solar panels while touring the Plymouth Area Renewable Energy Initiative in Plymouth, New Hampshire, in this file photo. — Reuters

Some investors say utilities also may be benefiting from hopes that there will be a bigger push toward green energy under the Biden Administration.

the impact of the coronavirus, that optimism may be dampened by next year if unemployment remains elevated and growth slows more than expected.

Some investors say utilities also may be benefiting from hopes that there will be a bigger push toward green energy under the Biden

Administration. President Joe Biden is expected to unveil next week a multitrillion-dollar plan to rebuild America's infrastructure that may also tackle climate change.

"If you get any acceleration of the decarbonization rhetoric, that's a positive for utilities," said Shane Hurst, managing director and portfolio manager at ClearBridge Investments.

But whether the recent surge in utilities has further room to run is a matter of debate, and many strategists and investors, including Quinlan, still favour cyclical that benefit from economic growth

over defensive-leaning groups such as utilities.

The gains in utilities have come amid a rotation from technology and other growth stocks into so-called value stocks.

The Nasdaq Composite has fallen in March after four straight months of gains.

Cyclicals, which investors dumped during the early part of the pandemic, have benefited the most from the rotation.

An end-of-quarter rebalancing of investment portfolios by institutional investors may be adding to the recent rotation from growth into value. — Reuters

ECB must remain euro zone's stabiliser: chief economist

FRANKFURT: The European Central Bank must remain a key stabiliser of the euro zone economy as the bloc is at risk of suffering longer-term damage from its pandemic-induced double-dip recession, ECB chief economist Philip Lane said on Saturday.

A sustained period of low activity reduces labour productivity, weakens corporate balance sheets and saps confidence, leading to a potential downward spiral, Lane said in a speech to the Spring workshop of The European House — Ambrosetti.

"There is a clear risk of self-fulfilling adverse dynamics taking hold, through which uncertain economic prospects induce households, firms and governments to hold back on expenditure plans, leading to a decline in overall demand that validates the loss in confidence about the future," he said. — AFP

US readies tariffs against six countries over digital taxes

WASHINGTON: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said she was maintaining the threat of US tariffs on goods from Austria, Britain, India, Italy, Spain and Turkey in retaliation for their digital services taxes.

In a statement, Tai announced that her office would proceed with steps to impose potential tariffs, including filing public notices and collecting public comments as part of investigations launched originally by the Trump administration into the taxes aimed largely at American Internet companies and e-commerce platforms.

The taxes target in-country revenues of digital services platforms, such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon.com.

The Office of the United



An activist wearing a mask depicting Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg is seen outside the EU headquarters in Brussels, in this file photo. — Reuters

States Trade Representative (USTR) announced the decision despite Democratic President Joe Biden's renewed commitments to pursue a global agreement on

digital services taxes through the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Tai also said that the USTR was

The United States remains committed to reaching an international consensus through the OECD process on international tax issues

KATHERINE TAI
US trade representative

terminating "Section 301" tariff investigations against Brazil, the Czech Republic, the European Union and Indonesia because these jurisdictions have not adopted or implemented digital

services taxes that were previously under consideration. If they do adopt a digital services tax, USTR said it may open a new tariff probe.

The move is among the first negotiating tactics revealed by Tai since she took office last week. Tai said in her confirmation hearing in February that tariffs were a "legitimate tool" for US trade policy.

"The United States remains committed to reaching an international consensus through the OECD process on international tax issues," Tai said in a statement. "However, until such a consensus is reached, we will maintain our options under the Section 301 process, including, if necessary, the imposition of tariffs." — Reuters

Tugs, dredgers still struggle to free ship blocking Suez Canal



Stranded container ship Ever Given is seen after it ran aground, in Suez Canal, Egypt. — Reuters

ISMAILIA, Egypt: Suez Canal salvage teams were alternating between dredging and tugging on Sunday to dislodge a massive container ship blocking the busy waterway, while two sources said efforts had been complicated by rock under the ship's bow.

Dredgers working to dislodge the stranded vessel have so far shifted 27,000 cubic metres of sand, to a depth of 18 metres, and efforts would continue around the clock according to wind conditions and tides, the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) said in a statement.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has ordered preparations for the possible removal of some

of the ship's 18,300 containers, SCA Chairman Osama Rabie told Egypt's Extra News.

Any operation to lighten the ship's load would not start before Monday. The 400-metre (430-yard) long Ever Given became jammed diagonally across a southern section of the canal in high winds more than five days ago, halting shipping traffic in one of the world's busiest waterways.

At least 369 boats are waiting to transit the canal, Rabie said, including dozens of container ships, bulk carriers, oil tankers and liquefied natural gas (LNG) or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) vessels.

Shippers affected by the

blockage may be offered discounts, Rabie said, adding that he believed investigations would show the canal was not responsible for the Ever Given running aground.

Rescue workers from the SCA and a team from Dutch firm Smit Salvage have been weighing whether some cargo will need to be removed by crane in order to refloat the Ever Given, one of the world's biggest container ships.

Experts have warned that such a process could be complex and lengthy. Rabie said he hoped it would not be necessary, but that Egypt would take up offers of international assistance if it did switch to that strategy.

"There are positive indicators

from yesterday and the day before yesterday," Rabie said.

"The rudder was not moving and it is now moving, the propeller is working now, there was no water underneath the bow, and now there is water under it, and yesterday there was a 4-metre deviation in the bow and the stern." However, sources said that a mass of rock had been found at the bow of the ship, complicating salvage efforts.

"We're dividing the day into two halves, 12 hours for dredgers and 12 hours for tugs, because not all times are suitable for tugs due to the tide," said Rabie, adding that 14 tug boats were being deployed. — Reuters

