

New protests erupt in France over security law

Fresh protests were held on Saturday against a French security bill which critics say will restrict the filming of police and posting images to social media, notably to document cases of police brutality. A broad cross-section of protesters turned out in dozens of French cities, including activists from the anti-government "yellow vest" movement and others calling to protect the cultural sector. "I have two reasons for coming today – the comprehensive security law and also to support culture", said Kim, a civil service intern. **DETAILS ON P8**



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'ENGLAND WILL BE HAPPY WITH JADEJA'S ABSENCE'



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US LOBBY GROUP URGES INDIA NOT TO TIGHTEN FOREIGN E-COMMERCE RULES



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WHEN IT COMES TO CARS, OLD IS STILL GOLD



MUSCAT

GALLERY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Oman will have the first art gallery for people with disabilities. The 2,500 sqft house of art will be home to more than 35 paintings and other artworks of people with disabilities, including children from various schools. The gallery is likely to open in the first quarter of this year. A section of people working behind the project said the art gallery is a part of various initiatives aimed at helping people with disabilities merge with the national mainstream and speed up their recovery process as engaging in artworks works as an agent of healing. **DETAILS ON P2**

TEHRAN

IRAN REJECTS NEW TALKS ON N-DEAL

Iran's foreign ministry on Saturday rejected any new negotiations or changes to the participants in Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers, after French President Emmanuel Macron said any new talks should include Saudi Arabia. "The nuclear accord is a multilateral international agreement ratified by UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which is non-negotiable and parties to it are clear and unchangeable", Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh was quoted by state media as saying. **DETAILS ON P6**

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YOUNG AND PROMISING



HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, visited Oman Cricket Academy in Al Amerat and praised the top-class playing and training facilities for the players. Welcomed by Oman Cricket's Board of Directors, he was shown around the indoor and outdoor facilities including net practice arena and gymnasium equipped with state-of-the-art apparatus as well as a variety of pitches to play on. It was heartening to see that Oman was placed so high in International Cricket Council's rankings, 13th in One-Day Internationals and 18th in T20 Internationals, out of 104 members. **DETAILS ON P10**

US first lady to help reunite migrant kids with parents

WASHINGTON: US First Lady Jill Biden will participate in efforts by her husband's administration to reunite families split apart by former president Donald Trump's hardline immigration policies, the White House said.

In line with his campaign promises, President Joe Biden plans to announce on Tuesday "his launch of a task force on reunifying families and children. Something that he is personally committed to, his wife Dr Biden is personally committed to and invested in," said White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki.

The task force will be under the command of Alejandro Mayorkas, who is due to be confirmed by the Senate as head of the Department for Homeland Security on Monday, she added.

Jill Biden, 69, has a doctorate in education and plans to keep teaching at a university close to Washington while her husband



serves as president. In December, she visited a migrant camp in Mexico, close to the border with Texas. "We are a welcoming nation, but that's not the message that we're sending at the border", she said at the time.

Her tone was in marked contrast with her predecessor Melania Trump, who in 2018 visited children who had been locked up by her husband's policy of "zero tolerance" at the border and who wore a jacket with the logo, "I really don't care, do u?" — AFP

Job application changes to check malpractices

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The new policies unveiled last week by the Ministry of Labour aims to abolish the permit system, which has been prevailing in the country for long, and often misused by some sponsors and enterprises. The press conference also emphasised on generating more job opportunities for the nationals.

Speaking on move to abolish permit system, sources in the ministry said: "On the positive side, it is likely to stop some of the hidden activities under which workers were recruited on the permit issued to them, but they end up doing something else."

With the new application system, the entire process will be online, direct and smooth after paying the fee.

"The new employment application system for Omanis and expatriates will replace the proc-

The new employment application system for Omanis and expatriates will replace the process of bringing foreign workers on permits. This is considered a radical regulatory action

MINISTRY OF LABOUR

ess of bringing foreign workers on permits. This is considered a radical regulatory action", the ministry officials added.

The application system will be launched in the second quarter of this year.

Inspections to offices prior to issuing permits (for recruitment

of expatriate workforce) will be stopped.

Among others, quick services will be provided to investors and companies through a service centre, companies will submit a labour compliance report every September of the year to ensure their commitment to the provisions of the Labour Law.

Companies, private institutions and recruitment companies will be allowed to offer job opportunities directly. Currently, the first step of the sponsorship process is for the employer to obtain a Labour Licence from the Ministry of Labour to bring an expatriate for employment.

The employer submits a procurement application form to be submitted to the specialised directorate in the Ministry of Labour. Under the current system, the first step of Labour Licence provides Labour Clearance for the employer to hire expatriates.



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SalamAir celebrates 4 years of operation

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 30

SalamAir celebrated four years of its operation with a special flight to where it all began, Salalah. The airline boasts a steady rise in passenger numbers to four million an increase driven by its growing network of destinations.

Technologically SalamAir has been engaged in improving their web services with the bespoke, state-of-the-art booking engine, travel agent portal to enhancing the overall user experience for their travellers. Furthermore, the airline also has updated an array of ancillary services such as new fare class 'benefit fare', a comprehensive insurance product that is extended across the network, seat selection with an extra seat booking option, and an updated in-flight food & beverage menu.

Over the last year, SalamAir had furthered themselves in moving towards in-house training of ground operations & handling divisions with cross-functional training aspects to

boost productivity and readiness while increasing the utilisation of resources and reducing its cost centres; the airline has already trained over 97 Omani staff members. The airline asserts a steady increase in their Omanisation rate at over 63 per cent taking the total number of Omanis employed to 300.

Captain Mohamed Ahmed, CEO of SalamAir said, "While 2020 was a challenging period in aviation history, our team worked hard in assisting and facilitated travel for passengers during these difficult times and their efforts were highly appreciated by all communities and we will continue to be part of their travels in the new normal future and keep making every effort in our expansion plans. As we look back at our many achievements in the last 4 years, I'm confident that it is the same hard work, support & resilience of our team that we will continue to celebrate. I am optimistic that with the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine air travel will resume and normalise in the coming years and we will have many more victories to celebrate."



On-the-job training for nationals

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As part of developing the country's human capital, the Ministry of Labour seeks to train its national workforce in accordance with the needs of the market.

For this purpose, the ministry's action plan for the year 2021 suggests to carry out on-the-job training programme for the job-seekers to maximise their chances of getting employed.

"The ministry will implement policies and strategies for the development of national human capital and organise training programmes for job-seekers to make them suitable for employment," said Sayyid Salim bin Musallam bin Ali al Busaidy, Under-Secretary for Human Resources Development at the ministry.

According to data provided by the ministry during a press conference which saw the unveiling of the plan, there are about 65,438 job-seekers in the country including 40,572 women. Referring to Oman Vision 2040, Al Busaidy said that there are 12 economic sectors and 14 priorities, while explaining about the national strategy.

"It is the responsibility of everyone to work towards its



success. Traditional recruitment processes such as large-scale employment initiatives, cannot continue. The government's needs for workers will be based on the actual requirements of different sectors," he said.

Each sector will need to make their requirements known to the Ministry of Labour, "so that it can coordinate with them to serve the growth of these sectors", he added. The ministry has identified 10 challenges in labour market which need to be addressed to help bring maximum development.

According to the ministry's 2021 plan, investors and job-seekers must put an end to the practice of relying on government

for projects and employment.

"There is absence of real investments by the country's private sector, which is mostly dependent on government projects. This needs to change," the plan points out.

With regard to the rise in number of job-seekers in the country, the ministry noted that the supply was huge and demand was not in proportion to it.

The ministry's executive plan includes supporting various sectors by on-the-job-training and employment of 6,000 job-seekers through programmes for holders of General Education Diplomas and below.

It will also provide on-the-job training programmes for

holders of diploma and above, or its equivalent diploma from technical and university colleges.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the ministry will also train a further 10,000 job-seekers to enhance their skills under the 'Khabraat' programme.

This programme will be run and funded across all governorates of the Sultanate, and will give them the skills required to perform in today's job market.

A total of 3,000 job-seekers will receive training from the Public Authority for SME Development (riyada), while 1,000 have been registered for training under the Etimad scheme.

ICAI felicitates commerce toppers

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 30

The Muscat chapter of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India organised the third edition of the ICAI Awards to felicitate AISSCE 2020 commerce toppers from among all Indian Schools in Oman.

The event was held recently at Indian School Al Seeb.

Dr Baby Sam Saamuel, Chairman, Board of Directors,

was the chief guest and Ramananda Prabhu, Co-founder and Executive Director of Middle East Chartered Accountants, Dr Debashis Mitra, Chairman, Board of Studies (academic), were the Guests of Honour.

In his inaugural address, Dr Baby Sam Saamuel said, "All are destined to grow emotionally, academically, spiritually in their dreams and ambitions and daily growth and change will take a person to the pinnacle of success."

He congratulated all the toppers and lauded the unflinching support extended to the students of Indian schools in Oman, by the Muscat Chapter of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India.

The five outstanding achievers procuring the first, second and third positions in the AISSCE 2020 commerce stream from among all Indian schools in Oman were felicitated by the Muscat Chapter ICAI.

Oman to have first art gallery for people with disabilities

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Oman will have the first art gallery for people with disabilities, an initiative touted as part of the all-round efforts to rehabilitate them and bring them back to life.

The 2,500 Sq ft wide house of art will be home for more than 35 paintings and other art works of people with disabilities including children from various schools. Gallery will be open by first quarter of 2021.

Speaking to the *Observer*, people working behind the project said that the art gallery is a part of various initiatives aimed at helping them lead a normal life and to help speed up their recovery process as engaging in art is great thing against disability.

"The art gallery in Al Athaiba for the people with disabilities will be another milestone. This project will give them a sense of pride, a sense of belonging boosting their morale," people who are also associated with 'diving for disabled' initiative since nearly two decades added.



According to statistics released by NCSI and reports from the Ministry of Social Development, there are nearly 70,000 people with disabilities in the Sultanate. This shows that about 4 per cent of total population is disabled.

The country has been initiating stronger steps to care and protect for the disabled across the country. They include the Welfare Act and the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons, issuance of Royal Decree No 63/2008, ratification of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by a Royal Decree No 121/2008.

Additionally, a regulation for the establishment of rehabilitation centres for the disabled was issued by Ministerial Decree No

124/2008 and the issuance of a disabled card was launched by Ministerial Decree No 94/2008.

A National Committee for the care of disabled was issued by Ministerial Decree No 1/2009, headed by the minister comprising top ministry officials, a representative of rehabilitation centres for the disabled and a representative of people with disabilities.

A person with disability, Abdullah Saleh al Ruqaishi, opened the first retail outlet in Al Hail where he is selling the handicrafts, candles, chocolates, soaps, jewellery, greeting cards, flower bouquets, toys and other curios.

"Green Ivy, as Abdullah named it, has become an icon of inspiration for children with disabilities to turn their scars into stars and disability into opportunity to the society," Gayathri Narasimhan, a special education teacher who helped Abdullah over the years to rise above his disability and make his dream come true, told the *Observer*.



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Workshop sheds light on subsidies, tariff

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Mazoon Electricity Company organised a workshop recently on redirecting government subsidies in the electricity sector as part of the company's awareness campaign on the new system.

The workshop, held under the auspices of Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, was also attended by the Municipal Council members.

Speaking on the occasion, Salim bin Said al Kamyani, CEO of the company, said the workshop aimed at explaining the details of the new system and its applications on different groups, the requirements for obtaining national support and the importance of updating subscribers' data.

A film showing the company's activity, the geographical area it covers and its services in the

field of electricity supply, was also screened. Abdullah bin Said al Kindi, acting head of Supplies Operations, made a detailed presentation, in which he addressed the policy and time-frame for reorienting electricity and water subsidies.

He explained the types of approved tariffs and gave a brief summary of the reflected tariff on the cost. He also spoke about the tariff for residential groups and their value, besides entitlement to the residential tariff. He pointed out the importance of updating the data.

Explaining the national support system, he reviewed the data update procedures chart. He provided examples of the change in electricity bills for subscribers according to the new tariff and the expected additions to the electricity bill.

At the end of the workshop, attendees' doubts were cleared.

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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Oman, along with the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, is celebrating the 6th Gulf Cancer Awareness Week in the first week of February.

At the virtual press conference, Dr Taha al Lawati, Oman Cancer Association Board Member, said, "The incidence rate in developed industrial countries is much higher than in developing countries. Also, several studies indicate the possibility of having 27.5 million new cases of cancer each year by 2040, an increase of 61.7 per cent from 2018 if the current trends continue. From this standpoint and as a continuation of the efforts made to fight cancer worldwide and as part of the GCC countries, the Sultanate of Oman will participate in the 6th Gulf Cancer Awareness Week that will take place from February 1-7, 2021."

Speaking to the *Observer*, Dr Taha said, "The concern is generally about the people in our region, and with that I mean in GCC, Middle East, Africa, India, Pakistan and other countries in Asia tend to avoid the issue of

40 per cent of the cancer diseases can be prevented by following a healthy lifestyle and maintaining an ideal body weight, while 40 types of cancer can be cured if detected early and managed with the appropriate treatment

cancer and delay health checkup. "But the fact is early diagnosis has more than 90 per cent chance to overcome whereas on late detection the mortality rate is high."

"The activities of the week will include health awareness lectures, walkathons and entertainment events in various governorates of the Sultanate. These events are organised in partnership with various stakeholders from the public and private sectors. The closing ceremony will take place on February 7.

"Due to Covid-19, all the activities, lectures and walkathon



will be held online.

"The slogan of the week '40/40' was chosen based on the scientific evidence that indicates that 40 per cent of the cancer diseases can be prevented by following a healthy lifestyle, adopting correct dietary habits, practicing regular physical activity and maintaining an ideal body weight, while 40 types of cancer can be cured if detected early and managed with the appropriate treatment.

"The GCC countries adopted the 1st week of February every year as a Gulf Cancer Awareness Week in line with the celebration of the World Cancer Day which

takes place on the 4th of February every year. The Gulf Cancer Awareness Week aims to raise health awareness about risk factors leading to cancer; to encourage the community to adopt a healthy lifestyle including diet and physical activity as well as to encourage saving the environment, public health, professional health and the importance of early detection of cancer for better prognosis. Further, it also aims to activate national cancer control programmes and the shared responsibility of the governmental and non-governmental sectors in these programmes."

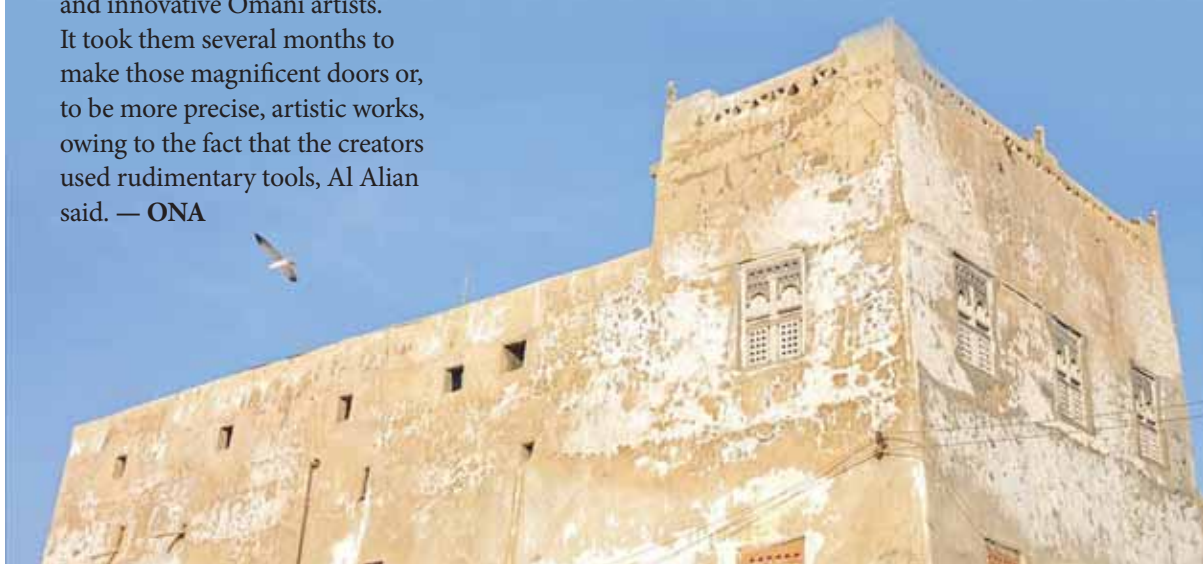
A blend of Omani and Islamic styles

SALALAH: The traditional architectural style of Dhofar Governorate is a blend of the Islamic and Arab influence when it comes to the unique architectural shapes and decorations that intermingle with the Omani architectural style since ancient times. Relics of those ancient Arab Islamic designs have remained through ages and acquired new innovative features but they maintained their connection with the Islamic architecture which reflects the richness of culture and traditions.

Abdullah bin Ali al Alian, an historical researcher, said the architectural heritage of Dhofar overlaps with the Islamic style and is distinguished by its sophisticated decorations that signify the high artistic sense of their designers.

Arches, which are part and parcel of the ancient Islamic architecture, have been utilised in different shapes and amazing designs all of which express the beauty of external decorations inspired by the Arab Islamic arts and embody unique Omani shapes such as the triangles and squares that are mostly seen in the doors in the wilayats of Salalah, Mirbat and Taqa as well as other places in Dhofar.

The doors in Dhofar Governorate, Al Alian said, were accorded a great importance. The main door was decorated with fine shapes created by experienced and innovative Omani artists. It took them several months to make those magnificent doors or, to be more precise, artistic works, owing to the fact that the creators used rudimentary tools, Al Alian said. — ONA



Indian school teachers awarded for excellence

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 30

The 'Navin Asher-Kazi Awards for Excellence in Teaching', instituted by the Board of Directors of Indian Schools in Oman, were conferred on eleven teachers at a function organised at Indian School Al Ghubra last week.

Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary for Education, Ministry of Education, was the chief guest. Munu Mahawar, Ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman, was the guest of honour and Dr Ali al Shukaili, Director-General of private schools, Ministry of Education, was the special guest.

The function was attended by Al Azhar bin Saud al Salmi, Assistant Director of International Schools, Ministry of Education; Kiran Asher and family, the patrons of the Award; Members of the Board of Directors, and the award nominees of Indian Schools.

Dr Ambusaidi expressed gratitude and appreciation for Indian Schools for providing quality education and for the collaborative educational endeavours taken up for the academic enhancement of students. He underscored the significance of teachers by quoting the words of famous Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi, who is known as 'Prince of Poets', that the teachers are almost like messengers who ensure safety and instil confidence in students, and whose role is indispensable to the overall development of children.

Navin Asher-Kazi Award for Excellence in Teaching was conferred on eleven teachers by Dr Ambusaidi. The teachers who won this award in different categories are Varsha Jaisimha (ISWK) and Charu Osahan (ISM) in the Kindergarten Category;

Suparna Banerjee and Bindhu Saji of ISM in the Primary School Category; Jona Ambrose Anthony (ISM) and Sandhya Prakash (IS Rustaq) in the Middle School Category; Gangadhara Naik Nalka and Soumia Harikrishna of ISM in the Senior School Category; Ganesan Marimuthu (ISAS) and Savio D'Souza (ISM) in the Co-Scholastic Category and Smitha Chandrashekar of (IS Salalah) in the Care and Special Education Category. The ambassador felicitated Regi Oommen in recognition of his long service as the Principal of Indian School Ibra. He also felicitated Eskalin Gonsalves and Venketeson Karthikeyan of Indian School Muscat, recipients of CBSE Best Teacher Awardees for 2019.

Dr Al Shukaili honoured teachers for their innovative teaching practices. The teachers who were awarded in this category are Reshmi R (ISM), Ambika Padmanabhan (ISWK), Ubaid Ahmed (ISM), Anam Sheikh (IS Suhar), Indira Sukumaran (IS Suhar) and Asha Mohan (ISWK).

The Board of Directors of Indian Schools also felicitated teachers who obtained 'Meritorious Achievements' in the last academic year. Four teachers who qualified for this unique award are Rakesh Singh Tomar (Principal, Indian School Bausher), Leena Francis (Principal, Indian School Seeb, Harikrishna Pillai (ISM), Kuldeep Singh (IS Sohar), and Dr Smitha D (ISD).

Computer training for school staff

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The General Directorate of Education in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, represented by the Private Schools Department — Educational Evaluation Section, recently organised a training workshop for new schools on the methods of dealing with computerised systems (the portal and correspondence), at the Great Hall of the Directorate-General in Nizwa.

The workshop was attended by 20 employees who handle the computerised systems in new private schools, besides the new staff in the existing schools.

The programme, meant to introduce computerised systems to the participants, also focused on the responsibilities of those in charge of managing the systems in private schools of the governorate.

It provided the employees with the necessary skills to deal with the ministry's correspondence system, which is the means of communication between the ministry and private schools.

The workshop was led by Ruqaiya al Harrasi.

Termination Notice

This is to inform all concerned that **Mr. Mohan Singh Soor**, holder of Indian Passport No. P2147837, Resident Card No. 60628385, employed in the capacity as General Manager has resigned from our organization w.e.f 1/1/2021.

Therefore, all concerned are requested to stop dealing with the above named for business transaction related to our organization. If anyone is dealing with him it is at their own risk and company will not take any responsibility hereafter. If anybody has any claim, he/she should report to the company within next 3 working days.

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TAP SUN TO SLASH YOUR POWER BILL

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

The recent decisions on electricity subsidy has forced every household to consume electricity rationally. The sectors involved in renewable energy, however, are on a fast track to emerge as an alternative source to meet the swelling energy demand from domestic and industry customers. The electricity consumers are gearing up to rationalise their consumption, as the Sultanate has decided to gradually lift the subsidy on water and electricity in a phased and planned manner over a span of five years, starting from January 2021.

To cope up with the situation, the industries have started looking for renewable energy options. The handiest among the renewable energy solutions is solar, as many of the projects are in the implementation stage.

In an interview with the *Observer*, Anil Nahar, Financial Adviser at Bahwan Renewable Energy company, gave insight into the capability of the solar energy to emerge as an alternative to the escalating electricity bills.

ZERO ENERGY DESIGN

“Alternative to increased electricity bills is to attain energy independence. Implementing ‘Zero Energy Design’ concept for buildings, following green building standards practised globally. Installation of standalone solar projects coupled with energy efficient equipment will help reduce consumption, while appliances would be a bunch of options to be explored by consumers for becoming self-sufficient.”

He endorsed the capability of solar energy technology and said, “Renewable has already been explored on large scale by global nations in their pursuit to reduce carbon emissions, fighting climate change etc. Since

Oman is blessed with more than 300 days of sunshine, solar energy can easily be considered as a complementary source to regular fossil fuel-based energy generation. It can be deployed on a larger perspective like creating utility scale storage systems, which can support the peak power needs or night-time power demand.”

SOLAR ENERGY

Oman, according to him, is ready to adapt to solar energy as the country. “Out of the government’s ambitious plan to have 3,000MW of renewable power in the grid by 2025, solar is given prime importance. With technical guidelines for small scale projects in place for the last three years and emergence of innovative and sustainable business models, rooftop solar has already started gaining good traction among high power consumers.”

Meanwhile, Jitendar Singhvi, Chief Financial Officer, Raysut Cement Company, endorsed the feasibility of solar energy in the country and called for popularising the concept in residential houses.

“I find the future of energy in solar sources. It should be popularised among the domestic users and thus the fossil energy can be kept for industry use. Most of the standalone villas in Oman have plenty of space to put up solar photovoltaic (PV) plates. To start with solar energy can be a reliable source of energy at home system, which can reliably produce electricity for home. It will help reduce the household electricity bill. Market will definitely produce a good financing option for the householder to invest in solar generating household equipment and give a boost to local employment”, he said.

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Fresh data show toll S African virus variant takes on vaccine efficacy

CHICAGO: Clinical trial data on two Covid-19 vaccines show that a coronavirus variant first identified in South Africa is lessening their ability to protect against the illness, underscoring the need to vaccinate vast numbers of people as quickly as possible, scientists said.

The vaccines from Novavax Inc and Johnson & Johnson were welcomed as important future weapons in curbing deaths and hospitalisations in a pandemic that has infected more than 101 million people and claimed over 2 million lives worldwide.

But they were significantly less effective at preventing Covid-19 in trial participants in South Africa, where the potent new variant is widespread, compared with countries in which this mutation is still rare, according to preliminary data released by the companies.

“Clearly, the mutants have a diminishing effect on the efficacy of the vaccines,” Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, said in a briefing. “We can see that we are going to be challenged.”

Novavax reported midstage trial results on Thursday that showed its vaccine was 50 per cent effective overall at preventing Covid-19 among people in South Africa.

That compared with late-stage results from the United



Demonstrators hold banners during a protest at the beach in Muizenberg against the government's ban on people enjoying the beach, in Cape Town, South Africa, on Saturday. — AFP

Kingdom, in which the vaccine was up to 89.3 per cent effective at preventing Covid-19.

On Friday, J&J said a single shot of its coronavirus vaccine was 66 per cent effective overall in a massive trial across three continents.

But there were wide differences by region. In the United States, where the South African variant was first reported this week, efficacy reached 72 per cent, compared with just 57 per cent in South Africa, where the new variant, known as B.1.351, made up 95 per cent of the Covid-19 cases reported in the trial.

Another highly transmissible variant first

discovered in the UK and now in more than half of US states has been less able to evade vaccine efficacy than its South African counterpart.

The new findings, however, raise questions about how highly-effective vaccines from Pfizer Inc with partner BioNTech, and Moderna Inc will fare against new variants. The two vaccines showed an efficacy of around 95 per cent in trials conducted primarily in the United States before the new virus versions were identified in other countries.

“It’s a different pandemic now,” said Dr Dan Barouch, a researcher at Harvard University Medical School’s

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston who helped develop the J&J vaccine.

Barouch said there are now a wide variety of new variants circulating, including in Brazil, South Africa and even the United States, that are substantially resistant to vaccine-induced antibodies.

Pfizer Chief Executive Albert Bourla said there was “a high possibility” that emerging variants may eventually render the company’s vaccine ineffective. “This is not the case yet... but I think it’s a very high likelihood that one day that will happen,” Bourla said at the World Economic Forum.

— Reuters



The pandemic has exposed and exploited the inequalities of our world, says WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Don’t repeat ‘bad history’ of vaccine hoarding: WHO

GENEVA: Faced with Covid-19, wealthy countries must avoid repeating past mistakes of hoarding medicines and vaccines, the World Health Organization has said, warning such behaviour would only drag out the pandemic.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus decried the skirmish in wealthy countries to secure large amounts of various vaccines against the coronavirus while few doses have yet to reach poorer nations.

“The pandemic has exposed and exploited the inequalities of our world,” he told journalists, warning that there is now “the real danger that the very tools that could help to end the pandemic — vaccines — may exacerbate those same inequalities.”

“Vaccine nationalism might serve short-term political goals. But it’s ultimately short-sighted and self-defeating,” he said.

The WHO co-leads the COVAX facility, which is working to procure vaccines and ensure doses are delivered equitably around the world.

The facility expects to begin delivering doses within a few weeks, and Tedros said the aim was for vaccination of health workers and older people to be underway in all countries within the first 100 days of 2021.

WHO has repeated ad nauseam that the only way to beat the pandemic and revive the global economy is to ensure that priority groups in every country are vaccinated.

Tedros urged the world to avoid repeating past mistakes, pointing to the HIV/AIDS crisis, where wealthy countries acquired life-saving medicines nearly a decade before they became affordable in poorer countries.

He also pointed to the

H1N1 flu pandemic in 2009, when vaccines only reached poorer nations after the outbreak was over.

“I don’t think that is a good history. It is bad history,” he said.

‘VERY WORRYING TREND’

The WHO chief cautioned that “if we hoard vaccines, and if we are not sharing... there will be a catastrophic moral failure.”

But in addition, he warned, “it keeps the pandemic burning, and... (will) slow global economic recovery.”

“Is that what we want? It is our choice.”

WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan said the battle unfolding between wealthy nations already rolling out vaccines was disconcerting considering health workers and at-risk populations elsewhere were likely to have a long wait in front of them.

“It looks like fighting over the cake, when they don’t even have access to the crumbs,” he said.

The European Commission on Friday launched a scheme to monitor and in some cases bar exports of vaccines produced in EU plants, amid a row with British-Swedish drugs giant AstraZeneca.

WHO criticised the move.

“It is a very worrying trend,” WHO assistant director general Mariangela Simao told journalists.

She pointed out that in an interconnected world, any medicine or vaccine is made from elements from multiple countries.

“It is not helpful to have any country at this stage putting export bans or export barriers that will not allow for the free movement of the necessary ingredients that will make vaccines, diagnostics and other medicines available to all the world,” she said. — AFP

WHO virus probe team visits China exhibit, hospital in Wuhan

WUHAN, China: A team of WHO experts investigating the origins of the coronavirus toured a propaganda exhibition celebrating China’s recovery from the pandemic in Wuhan on Saturday, after a meeting at the hospital that treated the first confirmed Covid-19 cases over a year ago.

Details of the trip have been scant so far, with the media kept at arm’s length and information on the itinerary dribbling out via tweets from the World Health Organization experts instead of China’s tight-lipped Communist authorities.

The group was driven to the Jinyintan Hospital, the first to receive officially diagnosed Covid-19 patients in late 2019, as the horrors of the virus emerged in the central Chinese city.

In a tweet, team member Peter Daszak welcomed the hospital visit as an “important opportunity to talk directly w/ medics who were on the ground at that critical time



Members of the WHO team investigating the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic arrive to visit a museum exhibition about China’s fight against Covid-19 in Wuhan, on Saturday. — AFP

fighting COVID!”

On Saturday afternoon, the team visited a cavernous exhibition that applauds the emergency response of Wuhan health authorities in the chaotic, terrifying early stages of the outbreak — as well as the agility of the Communist leadership in controlling a crisis without precedent.

On Friday, the WHO’s emergencies director Michael Ryan sought to manage

expectations.

Success “is not measured necessarily in absolutely finding a source on the first mission,” he told a press conference in Geneva.

“This is a complicated business, but what we need to do is gather all of the data... and come to an assessment as to how much more we know about the origins of the disease and what further studies may be needed to elucidate that.”

Last week, China warned

the United States against “political interference” during the trip, after the White House demanded a “robust and clear” investigation.

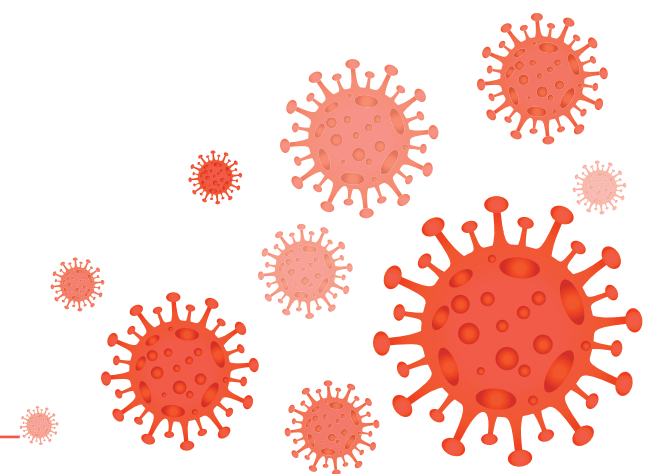
The WHO insists the probe will stick tightly to the science behind how the virus jumped from animals — believed to be bats — to humans.

The team is also expected to visit the market believed to have seen the first major cluster of infections, as well as the Wuhan Institute of Virology and other labs, in what the WHO’s Ryan described as a “very busy, busy schedule.”

Beijing is desperate to defang criticism of its handling of the chaotic early stages of the outbreak.

It has refocused attention at home — and abroad — on its handling of and recovery from the outbreak.

Since seeping beyond China’s borders, the pandemic has ripped across the world, killing more than two million people and wrecking economies. — AFP



Syrian constitution talks stumble at UN

GENEVA: Talks on a new constitution for Syria hit a brick wall last week, with the United Nations mediator concluding on Friday: “We can’t continue like this”.

The fifth round of discussions between 15 representatives each from President Bashar al Assad’s government, the opposition and civil society, staged all week at the UN in Geneva, concluded with little to no progress.

“I told the 45 members of the drafting body that we can’t continue like this. That the week has been a disappointment,” said UN envoy Geir Pedersen, voicing his frustration.

“I set out a few things I thought we should be able to achieve before we started this meeting — and I’m afraid we did not.”

The Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) was created

in September 2019 and first convened a month later.

The tentative discussions are aimed at rewriting the war-torn country’s constitution. It is hoped the talks could pave the way towards a broader political process.

Pedersen said opposition proposals for moving the process forward this week were rejected by Assad’s delegation.

He then made his own proposals, which were accepted by the opposition — but also rejected by the government.

Pedersen’s plan was a mechanism for finding areas of agreement and driving those forward into a drafting process.

“We need this mechanism in place,” the Norwegian diplomat told a press conference.

“This is not a debating committee. You can continue



Co-chair for the Syrian opposition Hadi al Bahra at a press conference following the conclusion of the Syrian Constitutional Committee session at the UN Offices in Geneva. — AFP

debating forever.

“You need to move this in a manner where the members



UN special envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen during a press conference following the fifth round of Syrian Constitutional Committee session at the UN Offices in Geneva. — AFP

themselves start to identify areas where they agree or disagree, and then move into the drafting phase.”

He added: “We cannot continue to meet if we do not change this.”

Pedersen is set to brief the UN Security Council on February 9.

Syria’s civil war erupted in 2011 after the violent repression of protests, quickly spiralling into a complex conflict that pulled in numerous actors, including jihadist groups and foreign powers.

More than 387,000 people have been killed, and more than half of Syria’s pre-war population of 20 million have been forced to flee their homes.

Throughout the civil war, the UN has been striving to nurture a political resolution.

Syrian opposition negotiations leader Hadi al Bahra voiced his frustration at the impasse.

“More than a year has passed since the establishment of the

SCC and we have held only five rounds of meetings, without being able to start to fulfil our mandate — which is to draft the new constitution of Syria,” he told reporters.

“Stopping the humanitarian tragedy in Syria is a duty for us all. “Procrastinating under some pretext is something unacceptable.”

Ahmad Kuzbari, the head of the government delegation, insisted they were not out to block progress.

“I cannot draft a principle before having discussed a principle,” he said.

“As for blaming us for stalling and for obstructing the work of the committee, well, we’re used to that. No matter what we do we will always be blamed for that.

“We shall continue to engage positively and actively.” — AFP

■ DEACTIVATING LANDMINES



A joint Saudi-backed Sudanese-Yemeni military experts force removes and de-activates some 5,000 landmines which they said were planted by Ansar Allah in Yemen’s northern coastal town of Midi, located in conflict-ridden Hajjah governorate near the border with Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea. According to a major in the Saudi-backed Yemeni forces, the mines that were destroyed varied between anti-vehicle mines, individual and ground mines and explosive devices of various sizes as well as remotely exploded, and unexploded ordnance, which were reportedly turned into mines. — AFP

Iran rejects any talks on nuclear deal

DUBAI: Iran’s foreign ministry on Saturday rejected any new negotiations or changes to the participants in Tehran’s nuclear deal with world powers, after French President Emmanuel Macron said any new talks should include Saudi Arabia.

“The nuclear accord is a multilateral international agreement ratified by UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which is non-negotiable

and parties to it are clear and unchangeable,” Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh was quoted by state media as saying.

Iran began breaching the deal’s limits on uranium enrichment activity after Washington withdrew from the pact in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump and reimposed economic sanctions on Tehran.

President Joe Biden’s new administration has said it will rejoin the deal but only after Tehran resumes full compliance with its terms.

In his comments on Friday, cited by Al Arabiya television, Macron stressed the need to avoid what he called the mistake of excluding other countries in the region when the 2015 deal was negotiated.

— Reuters

Palestinians replant trees after Israel uproots thousands

TUBAS, Palestinian Territories: Palestinians replanted hundreds of trees in the occupied West Bank, a day after Israel’s army uprooted thousands of trees in the area, saying they had been illegally planted in a military zone.

Carrying spades and pickaxes, dozens of Palestinian activists and staff from the Palestinian agriculture ministry worked to plant seedlings in a valley near Khirbeit Einoun, in Tubas governorate, a journalist said.

An estimated 500 trees were planted on Thursday and the operation is expected to continue for several days, agriculture ministry official Jaafar Salahat told the official Wafa news agency.

Palestinian activist Moataz Bisharat, who works to oppose Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, said the army had destroyed about 10,000 trees, including hundreds of olive trees, on Wednesday “on the grounds that the area is a restricted military zone”.

The Israeli military branch responsible for civilian affairs in the West Bank (COGAT) said it had “carried out an enforcement activity to evacuate an illegal agricultural invasion in a fire zone”.

In response to a query from AFP, COGAT said “the



A Palestinian man tries to replant his olive tree that was cut by Israeli forces near Tubas in West Bank. — Reuters

Trees are our roots, our history, our heritage, our identity

KHAIRI HANOUN
Palestinian activist

Palestinian activist Khairi Hanoun said the tree planting was aimed at sending “a message to the occupier”.

“Trees are our roots, our history, our heritage, our identity,” he said.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since the 1967 Six-Day War.

There are currently about 475,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank living in communities considered illegal by most of the international community, alongside some 2.8 million Palestinians.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

CAIRO

France’s Macron to visit Lebanon a third time

President Emmanuel Macron said that France’s road map for easing the crisis in Lebanon was still on the table and he planned to make a third visit there, Al Arabiya television reported.

Speaking at a media round table, he said the French plan was the only solution to Lebanon’s crisis and that he would do all he could to assist the formation of a government, according to the Saudi-owned channel.

Macron has been spearheading international efforts to rescue



Lebanon, once a French protectorate, from its financial meltdown — its deepest crisis since the 1975-90 civil war.

He has travelled twice to Beirut earlier. — Reuters

ALGIERS

Algeria begins vaccinations against Covid-19

Algeria on Saturday launched a national vaccination campaign against Covid-19, starting in a province hard hit by the virus.

Health Minister Abderrahmane Benbouzid launched the drive in the province of Bilda, about 50 kilometres west of the capital Algiers, the state news agency APS reported.

The province’s health chief was the first to get the inoculation in the drive that targets in its first stage health workers, the elderly and people with chronic diseases,



the agency added.

The vaccination start comes a day after the North African country received the first batch of the Russian-made vaccine Sputnik V. — dpa

UNITED NATIONS

UAE to cooperate with UN, US on Libya conflict

The United Arab Emirates issued a statement stating its readiness to work “closely” with the new US administration for a peaceful solution to the conflict. “There is an urgent need for renewed diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict in Libya,” Lana Nusseibeh, the UAE Ambassador to the UN, said in a letter.

“The UAE stands ready to work closely with all Security Council members, including the new US administration, to achieve a peaceful settlement for



the Libyan people,” she said. She said the country welcomed the Security Council’s “call for all foreign forces to withdraw from Libya. Foreign intervention in the conflict must end now.” — AFP

In brief

■ YANGON



MYANMAR ARMY DOWNPLAYS COUP RHETORIC

Myanmar's military vowed to abide by the country's constitution, in an apparent backtracking after its commander-in-chief spurred fears of a coup when he suggested the junta-scripted charter could be repealed. The powerful army has for weeks alleged widespread irregularities in November's election, won in a landslide by Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling National League for Democracy (NLD). Tensions ramped up Tuesday when a military spokesman refused to rule out the possibility of a coup. — AFP

■ KABUL



CAR BOMB IN EASTERN AFGHANISTAN KILLS 14

The Taliban claimed responsibility for a powerful car bombing at a military base in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province that killed at least 14 soldiers. The bombing in Shirzad district of the province wounded four other soldiers, according to a local councillor Ajmal Omar. A spokesman for the Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that in total 50 soldiers were among the dead and wounded. Both the Taliban and IS fighters are active in the province and occasionally stage large- or small-scale attacks on security forces. — dpa

■ ISLAMABAD



LAWYERS SEEK REVIEW OF PEARL MURDER ACQUITTALS

Pakistani prosecutors filed a last-ditch attempt to overturn the acquittal of a British-born militant convicted of masterminding the murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl, as the new US secretary of state directly pressed on the case. Pakistan's top court on Thursday dismissed an appeal against a lower court's decision to clear Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and three others over the killing, after nearly two decades in jail. The decision extended a legal tug of war between the Sindh provincial government. — AFP

Bangladesh sends more refugees to remote, flood-prone island

DHAKA: Bangladesh moved another group of Rohingyas on Friday to a remote island in the Bay of Bengal, despite concerns over the risk of storms and floods lashing the site, even as some refugees despaired of finding solutions to their plight.

The densely-populated south Asian country wants to transfer to the island a tenth of the 1 million refugees living in ramshackle border camps after they fled violence in neighbouring Myanmar. "What options do we have? How long can we live in the crowded camps under tarpaulins?" asked Mohammed Ibrahim, 25, as he sailed to the island of Bhasan Char, to which some of his relatives have also been moved.

"This is going nowhere, the way the international community is handling our crisis," he said by mobile telephone, referring to floundering efforts to return the refugees to their homeland.

The Rohingya are a minority group, most of whom are denied citizenship by Buddhist-majority Myanmar, which considers them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even though many trace their roots back for generations in the western state of Rakhine. Five ships moved 1,776 Rohingyas and their belongings, with more were moved on Saturday for a two-day total of more than 3,000 said Commodore Abdullah Al Mamun Chowdhury, the officer in charge of the island. "We are receiving them," he said by telephone. "So far, so good."



Rohingya refugees are seen on a Bangladesh's Navy ship as they are being relocated to Bhasan Char Island in the Bay of Bengal in Chittagong. — AFP

They will join the roughly 3,500 Rohingyas sent there since early December, making a journey of several hours from the southern port of Chittagong. Rohingyas living on the island, which emerged from the sea just two decades ago, are not allowed to move away unless they have government permission. Bangladesh says the relocation is voluntary, but some of the

ROHINGYA LIVING ON THE ISLAND, WHICH EMERGED FROM THE SEA JUST TWO DECADES AGO, ARE NOT ALLOWED TO MOVE AWAY UNLESS THEY HAVE GOVERNMENT PERMISSION

first group of refugees, moved in December, spoke of being coerced. The government also says overcrowding in camps in the Cox's Bazar district fuels crime. It has also dismissed flood concerns over the island, citing the building of a 12 km long stretch of embankment 6.5 feet high, in addition to housing for 100,000 people, hospitals and

cyclone centres. Bangladesh has drawn criticism for reluctance to consult with aid bodies, including the UN refugee agency, over the transfers. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says the agency has not been allowed to evaluate the safety and sustainability of life on the island. — AFP



Vietnam approves vaccine, cuts short Party congress

HANOI: Vietnam approved its first Covid-19 vaccine and cut short a key ruling Communist Party meeting, state media reported on Saturday, as the country battled its biggest coronavirus outbreak since the pandemic began. Vietnam, a country of some 98 million people that has so far been highly successful in combatting the virus, has recorded 180 new cases since reporting two locally transmitted cases in the northern province of Hai Duong on Thursday. That's a rapid spread given the country has recorded just 1,739 cases since the disease was first detected a year ago, including 873 locally transmitted infections, thanks to mass testing and a centralised quarantine programme. "We have experience handling

recent outbreaks," Deputy Health Minister Nguyen Truong Son said in a government statement on Saturday, adding that officials would try to contain the outbreak by February 6, ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday. The government statement on Saturday said that materials and equipment designed to combat a hypothetical scenario of as many as 10,000 cases would be deployed before the Lunar New Year holiday. The country's coronavirus taskforce chief had previously advocated a plan designed to prepare for a scenario of 30,000 cases. Authorities rushed to test thousands of people as authorities confirmed the outbreak had spread to Hanoi, where the ruling party is holding its five-yearly congress to pick a new leadership. — Reuters

A year after Covid-19's arrival, India's active cases fall

MUMBAI: India reported its lowest active number of novel coronavirus cases in seven months on Saturday, a year after the virus was first confirmed in the country. A year ago, a student from the southern state of Kerala tested positive for Covid-19 after returning to India from Wuhan in China, the global epicentre of the virus. To arrest the spread of the virus, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government imposed a nationwide lockdown on the 1.3 billion population in late March. The lockdown, in which domestic and international travel was banned and factories, schools, offices and all shops other than those supplying essential services were shut, crippled India's economy, which is set to contract 7.7 per cent in the current fiscal year to March 31. The government started easing the lockdown in June. India was reporting fewer cases until April 2020, but from May onwards cases started rising and peaked by mid-September to close to 100,000 daily cases. The infection rate has slowed significantly since September and on Saturday 13,083 new cases



A health worker inoculates a private medical staff member with a Covid-19 coronavirus vaccine at Sunshine Hospital in Hyderabad. — AFP

were reported, one of the lowest figures on record and down from more than 20,000 each day at the beginning of the month, federal health data showed. India has around 170,000 active Covid-19 patients, the lowest since June 2020. It has reported 10.7 million infections and 154,147 deaths — one of the world's lowest fatality rates, attributed partly to its relatively young population. The country has recorded the highest number of coronavirus cases in the world after the United

States and, with the likely true rate of infection even higher, one study suggests pockets of India have attained herd immunity through natural infection. India started its immunisation programme on January 16, with healthcare workers and a target of reaching 300 million people by July-August. The world's most populous country after China has vaccinated around 3.5 million healthcare workers in the first two weeks of the campaign. — Reuters

EU backtracks on restricting vaccines to Northern Ireland

BRUSSELS: The EU backtracked on Friday over threats to restrict vaccine exports to Northern Ireland after London voiced “grave concerns” over the proposed move.

A furious row over shortages of AstraZeneca’s Covid-19 vaccine has risked stoking conflict with the UK just weeks after London and Brussels sealed a Brexit trade agreement.

The EU had warned it would invoke Article 16 — overriding part of a deal with London allowing the free-flow of goods over the Irish border — but backed down after criticism from the UK and Ireland.

“The Commission will ensure that the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol is unaffected,” the EU Commissioner said in a statement late on Friday.

British Prime Minister Boris

Johnson had told EU chief Ursula von der Leyen of his “grave concerns about the potential impact” the European bloc’s decision might have.

The European scheme to monitor and bar exports of vaccines produced in EU plants has also been criticised by the World Health Organization.

The WHO said the move was part of a “very worrying trend” that could jeopardise the global supply chain for vaccines.

Although the EU has rowed back from the Article 16 threat, a Commission statement said if there were vaccines circumventing the European system, “the EU will consider using all the instruments at its disposal”.

The EU earlier justified the “safeguard measure” as an attempt



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson adjusts his face mask as he meets European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Brussels. — Reuters File Photo

to keep member states’ vaccine rollouts on track.

And Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides insisted: “We are not protecting ourselves against any specific country. And we’re not

in competition or in a race against any country”.

The Brexit deal’s Northern Ireland protocol allows goods to flow between EU member Ireland and Northern Ireland, which

The European scheme to monitor, bar exports of vaccines produced in EU plants has also been criticised by the WHO

is part of the United Kingdom, without the need for customs checks at the border.

Under the protocol’s Article 16, either party can unilaterally suspend the terms for specific goods if the agreement leads “to serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties that are liable to persist”.

Brussels had said it would invoke the article to monitor and in some cases block exports of vaccines produced in EU plants.

The move brought both sides of Northern Ireland’s Loyalist and

Republican divide together in condemnation.

Arlene Foster, leader of Northern Ireland’s loyalist Democratic Unionist Party, called the move to invoke Article 16 an “incredible act of hostility”.

Colum Eastwood, leader of the republican SDLP party, said the move was a “disproportionate and grave error” by the EU. There is little or no physical infrastructure on the border thanks to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

That deal ended decades of violence between those who want Northern Ireland to remain British and those who want it to be part of the Irish republic.

Maintaining a “soft” border was integral to Brexit negotiations, with local leaders warning of a potential return to violence. — AFP

■ CRISIS DUE TO LACK OF OXYGEN CYLINDERS



People queue to refill their empty oxygen cylinders in Callao, Peru, amid the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. Relatives of people with Covid-19 are desperate for oxygen to keep their loves ones alive in Peru, where patients have been dying for lack of oxygen. — AFP

New protests in France over security law

PARIS: Fresh protests were held on Saturday against a French security bill which critics say will restrict the filming of police and posting images to social media, notably to document cases of police brutality.

A broad cross-section of protesters turned out in dozens of French cities, including activists from the anti-government “yellow vest” movement and others calling

to protect the cultural sector.

“I have two reasons for coming today — the comprehensive security law and also to support culture,” said Kim, a 24-year-old civil service intern.

“Lots of stores are open, the metro is packed, yet cultural sites are closed, even though we can apply protective measures” against the coronavirus, she said.

Also among the protesters were

young people calling for the right to hold rave parties such as one in Brittany that attracted 2,400 at the start of the year.

The demonstrators are protesting draft legislation that would ban filming police activities, which the ruling LREM party of President Emmanuel Macron has said it would rewrite.

But people are also protesting the use of surveillance tools such

as drones and pedestrian cameras.

Footage of white police beating up an unarmed black man in his Paris studio on November 21 has fuelled anger over the legislation, condemned by many as signalling a swing to the right by Macron.

The number of protesters who turned out on Saturday was limited by bad weather and Covid-19 restrictions. — AFP

Serbia starts to clean up garbage filled lake

PRIBOJ, Serbia: Two barges sailed up and down a vast stretch of floating trash on the Potpecko artificial lake in Serbia on Friday, collecting tonnes of garbage that almost clogged the dam that crosses it.

The river Lim which fills the lake is swollen by melting snows and, according to activists, it has carried in more than 20,000 cubic metres of plastics from unregulated dumps along its banks in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia.

As the garbage also threatened the functioning of a hydroelectric plant, authorities in Belgrade ordered an immediate clean-up.

The operators collect up to 100 cubic metres of plastic and other trash daily and take it to a landfill about 80

km (50 miles) away.

“This problem is years old and it is difficult to say who is responsible,... from its source, the Lim river... flows through three states,” Dragan Ljeljen, an official from the nearby town of Priboj, said.

To counter the problem, Serbia’s Environment Minister, Irena Vujovic, and officials from Montenegro and Bosnia agreed on Monday to coordinate efforts to prevent further pollution.

In Priboj, environmental activist Slavisa Lakovic said the persistent pollution is harming wildlife and fish in the lake.

“Piling up trash affects the quality of water and reduces the quantity of oxygen in it... animals are coming to the banks to rummage through trash,” he said.

— Reuters



Workers collect plastic trash that litters the polluted Potpecko Lake near a dam's hydroelectric plant, near the town of Priboj, Serbia. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

TUNIS

Hundreds of Tunisians protest police abuses

Hundreds of Tunisians marched in the capital to protest against police abuses they say are endangering freedoms won in the 2011 revolution that swept away authoritarian rule. Hundreds of riot police confronted the demonstrators, leading to scuffles. Some protesters threw bottles, while police struck some demonstrators with batons. There have been near daily protests since the mid-January, the anniversary of Tunisia’s revolution that sparked uprisings



across the region in 2011. Amid sporadic clashes, police have arrested more than a thousand people during demonstrations over the past two weeks. — AFP

OSLO

Black Lives Matter proposed for Nobel Peace Prize

Black Lives Matter, a movement which became a rallying cry after the killing by US police of an unarmed black man, has been proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize, a Norwegian MP said. Founded in the US in 2013, the movement received an impetus in May after George Floyd died. A white policeman had knelt on Floyd’s neck for eight minutes ignoring Floyd’s pleas that he couldn’t breathe. The incident fuelled protests in the United States that sped across the world.



“This movement has become one of the strongest global movements for working with racial injustice,” Petter Eide, a socialist lawmaker who proposed BLM for the Peace Prize, said. — AFP

BERLIN

Merkel appeals to have patience amid lockdowns

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has described the coronavirus crisis as a “huge effort” for families in the face of the weeks-long lockdown and appealed for patience. “We are not yet ready to reopen daycare centres and schools,” she said in her weekly video podcast. “(But) the more consistent we are now, refraining from contact and keeping our distance where it is unavoidable, following hygiene rules and wearing masks, the sooner it will be possible again.”



The state health ministers were scheduled to discuss the progress of the vaccination campaign. The federal government has come under fire for the slow start to the vaccination. — dpa

A bold and progressive move...

The announcement that teaching in the Sultanate is to come under Omanisation policies is a bold and progressive move, and one that rightly confirms the need for Omanis to become the architects of their own destiny. There is nothing more anyone, with any compassion for coming generations of young Omanis, would rather see than their own societal and cultural role-models teaching them, with, however, three important caveats.

The first is that specialist native language teachers must be exactly that. Basic language may well be taught by second language, or non-native speakers, however the qualities of understanding, context, and even pronunciation are so pivotal to the language learning process, that there is no more effective language learning experience for students than that taught by native speakers, here in Oman, of English, French and German.

The second is to recognise that teaching is not something that is taught, or learned, in five minutes, and it is certainly not learned at college, university, or during the course practicum sessions... becoming a teacher is a lifetime experience. Yes, teaching is something that one can become relatively proficient at within three to five years of graduation, but



Ray Petersen
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TEACHING IS
NOT SOMETHING
THAT IS TAUGHT,
OR LEARNED, IN
FIVE MINUTES

the irony of teaching and learning is that as a teacher, the day you stop learning, is the day you should stop teaching. Your arrogance will have surpassed your ability to listen to, and to hear, and compromised your educational objectives.

Understanding the psychology of education when applied to a group, understanding the unique individuality of one's students or pupils, and coming to grips with the construction and progression of learning programmes... and the list goes on. It is not even about knowing, understanding, remembering what you have become accomplished at, but to become 'comfortable in your own skin,' as an educator. It is about understanding yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, your fragility and resilience, your... self... self-worth... and self-confidence.

To effectively manage teacher development is to ensure that meaningful mentoring and support structures are available 24/7 for new and developing teachers, to ensure that professional development courses and workshops are available, and that teachers have genuine opportunities to attend such workshops. Personally, I believe that new teachers should be mentored by retired teachers, who

will share experiences, and who will encourage those young people to talk about their teaching, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Having someone who knows and understands what you are going through, who can genuinely empathise, is like gold!

Finally, there must be a viable plan for teacher trainee retention. It is common knowledge that a significant number of graduate teachers simply do not stay in the profession, and it has little or nothing to do with teaching, pupils, or the classroom, and everything to do with teaching assignments. Significant numbers of new graduates have returned home, after postings to remote locations or far from home, which I guess is not so bad if you are a young man but if you are a young woman?

A legitimate suggestion could be that all young teachers should be assigned within commuting distance of their homes, unless they request otherwise, leaving them within the nurturing, supporting, protective framework of home, and letting them 'grow' their teaching. In terms of the isolated locations, why not offer meaningful incentives such as isolation payments, remote allowances, and the like? They will surely encourage young men to fill those vacancies.

FAST AND FURIOUS

Will climate change orders bring lasting change!

TIMOTHY GARDNER
AND JESSICA RESNICK-AULT

US President Joe Biden made quick work signing a slew of sweeping executive orders targeting climate change that ranged from freezing federal oil and gas leasing to eliminating the fossil fuel industry's lucrative subsidies.

But making these moves permanent and powerful enough to help his administration achieve its goal of a zero-emissions economy by 2050 will be tough, grinding work, requiring big battles with Congress and industry.

It also raises the stakes for the energy industry, which has benefited from the last decade's shale revolution to turn the United States into the world's biggest producer of oil and gas and reduce its dependence on foreign energy sources.

While executive orders can make a splash in the opening days of a presidency, they can be vulnerable to lawsuits and be reversed by a future president if not backed up by legislation.

Already, one independent oil group has sued the administration, and the nation's leading oil

lobby is taking a defensive stance.

"We pledged to work with (Biden's) administration when we can and oppose when we must," said Mike Sommers, president of the American Petroleum Institute, in a speech on Thursday. "Only eight days into his term, it is disappointing to report that we

We pledged to work with (Biden's) administration when we can and oppose when we must

MIKE SOMMER
American Petroleum Institute

find ourselves in a posture of strong opposition. But we have no choice."

Biden this week signed a batch of executive orders on climate change that included directing the Interior Department to pause new leasing for drilling on public lands and waters that account for about a quarter of US oil and gas production. The orders also directed federal agencies to ditch fossil fuel subsidies "as consistent with applicable law," potentially including ones worth tens of millions of dollars a year for research handled by the Energy Department. Biden also called for ditching some \$40 billion in subsidies in the annual budget, a more difficult task to accomplish. That came after his move to cancel a permit for the long-gestating Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada.

Those orders triggered cheers from environmental advocates and an outcry of opposition from the oil industry, but the administration's ability to follow through on them with lasting changes that advance the fight against climate change will depend on the decisions of judges and lawmakers.

Republican senators from oil-producing states introduced legislation on Thursday to block the order pausing new leasing. Pushing Congress to act on Biden's agenda could prove difficult with Democrats having only a small majority in the House and the slimmest majority possible in the Senate at 50-50 with Vice-President Kamala Harris having the tie-breaking vote.

Industry groups like the Independent Petroleum Association of America said they are meeting with senators from fossil-fuel producing states, including Joe Manchin of West Virginia, a Democrat, and others from Western states to protect themselves against drilling bans and the elimination of tax breaks. — Reuters

A NEW GOVERNMENT

Power struggle in Tripoli heats up as rivals work towards elections

ASHRAF AZABI

As Libya's rival delegations try to pave the way for national elections, there are worrying signs of a political struggle among Tripoli's ruling class that could scupper efforts to unite the country.

A new and unified transitional government is to be chosen in the coming week, and is intended to lead the country — under the watchful eye of the United Nations — until elections scheduled for December 24.

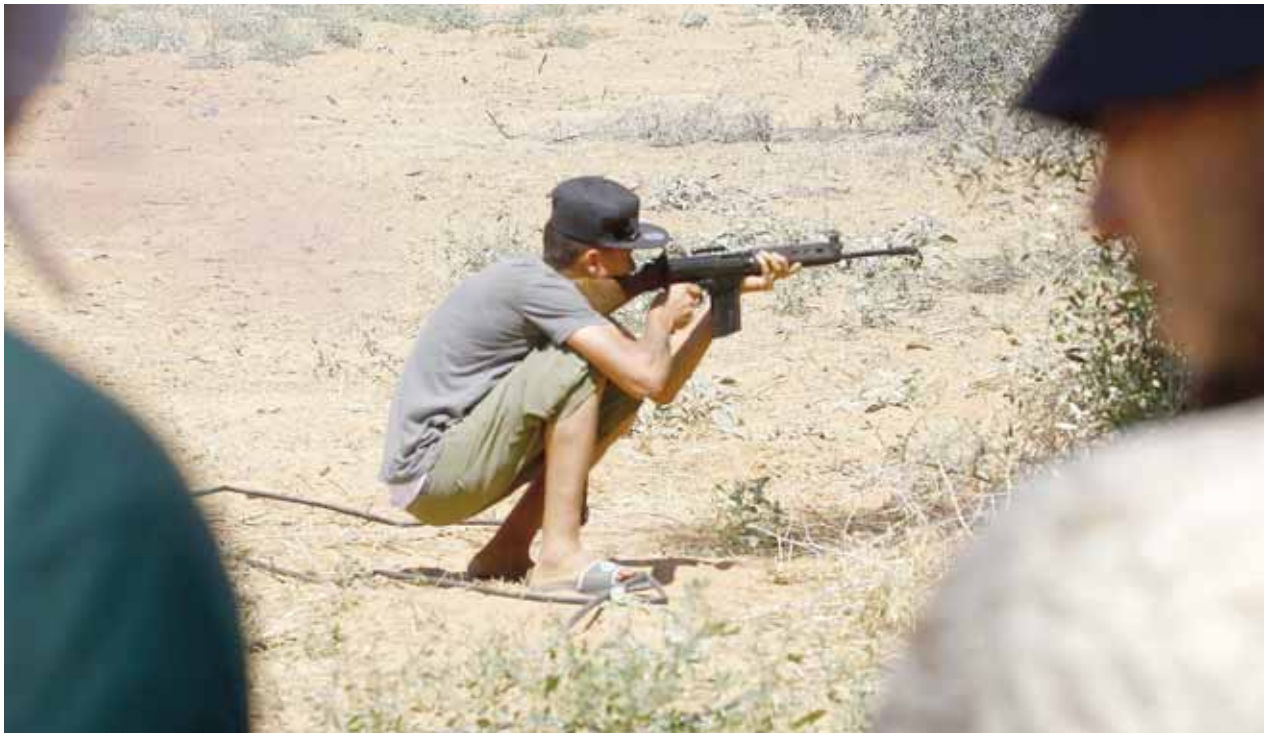
The elections aim to end a division that has lasted for more than five years with two rival administrations — and their affiliated militia groups — ruling different parts of the North African country.

The government that arises out of the poll will include a three-member Presidency Council and a prime minister.

With these posts in mind, the spotlight has turned to three of the most prominent figures in the capital Tripoli, who were once allied against their administration's main rival, military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

The three are members of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA): Prime Minister Fayez Serraj, his deputy Ahmed Maitiq and Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha.

Tensions began in August when Serraj launched an investigation against Bashagha after militias opened fire at protesters. "This is when Serraj realised he was in danger," said Farag



In this file photo a fighter loyal to the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) holds a rifle from a position in the Al Sawani area south of Tripoli during clashes. — AFP

THREE OF TRIPOLI'S
SENIOR FIGURES
SEEM INTENT ON
SOLIDIFYING THEIR
POSITIONS

Dardour, a political analyst and professor at Tripoli University.

"When Bashagha was summoned for investigation, he brought with him a convoy of about 500 vehicles in flagrant defiance [to show] the readiness of that force to intervene if he was dismissed. So, a settlement was reached and he retained his post," Dardour said.

Then, Serraj said he will hand over power by the end of October 2020, which was supposed to mark the end of political talks by choosing a new presidential council and premier. As

dialogue slowed down, Serraj backed down. Since then, he took some decisions that observers say are meant to protect his power.

In December, Serraj restructured the prominent Special Deterrence Forces, making it directly affiliated to him rather than the Interior Ministry.

A month later, he created the Stability Support Apparatus with broad powers, and assigned Abdul-Ghani al Kikli, a militia group leader, to head it with three deputies. The four men are not part of Bashagha's loyalist groups. — dpa

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Sports Minister visits Oman Cricket Academy



Oman Cricket Board of Directors presenting a memento to the Sports Minister.



Sports Minister with Oman men's cricket team.

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, visited Oman Cricket Academy in Al Amerat recently and praised the top class playing and training facilities for the players.

Welcomed by Oman Cricket's Board of Directors, he was shown around the indoor and outdoor facilities including net practice arena and gymnasium equipped with state-of-the-art apparatus as well as a variety of pitches to play on. He viewed with keen interest Oman Cricket's Hall of Fame corridor that also displayed a collection of coveted trophies Oman's various teams had recently won in international tournaments.

Briefing him on a host of wonderful achievements by Oman's cricket team in recent years, Pankaj Khimji, senior Board member, said it was heartening to see that Oman was placed so high in International Cricket Council's rankings, 13th in One-Day Internationals and 18th in T20 Internationals, out of 104 members.

HH Sayyid Theyazin was also introduced to the country's men's and women's teams by

HH Sayyid Theyazin was also introduced to the country's men's and women's teams by Duleep Mendis, Chief Development Officer, Oman Cricket, and national coach, and Vaishali Jesrani, captain of girls' team, on the famed OC Turf 1 ground that now enjoys Test match status from ICC

Duleep Mendis, Chief Development Officer, Oman Cricket, and national coach, and Vaishali Jesrani, captain of girls' team, on the famed OC Turf 1 ground that now enjoys Test match status from ICC.

The distinguished guest was also presented a special bat by OC Board of Directors as a memento marking his first visit to OCA.



Sports Minister with young trainees at OCA.



Sports Minister with Oman women's cricket team.



Bopanna gets doubles boost with new Aus Open partner

India's Rohan Bopanna will emerge from his 14-day quarantine in Melbourne later on Saturday with a spring in his step after his quest for a new doubles partner for next month's Australian Open finally ended.



Wawrinka reveals Covid-19 fight

Former Australian Open winner Stan Wawrinka said on Friday he tested positive for coronavirus at the end of 2020. The 35-year-old, who won the first of his three Grand Slam titles in Melbourne in 2014, said he self-isolated at home in Switzerland.

Zverev remains confident amid personal upheaval



Germany's Alexander Zverev in action. — Reuters

MELBOURNE: US Open finalist Alexander Zverev insisted on Saturday he is on track to contend for a maiden Grand Slam title despite a mounting personal toll off the court.

The world number seven will spearhead Germany in the ATP Cup starting in Melbourne on Tuesday as he eyes a first Slam trophy at the subsequent Australian Open.

But Zverev, who fell agonisingly short in New York to Dominic Thiem, has endured a tumultuous period including allegations of domestic abuse by a former girlfriend and a recent split with coach David Ferrer.

The 23-year-old, however, said

he remained buoyed by his strong showing in the majors last year, which included a semifinal finish at the Australian Open.

"I worked extremely hard in the off-season," he said. "I'd like to think that I did everything I could to be as well-prepared as I can be."

Zverev received criticism last year, most notably from outspoken Australian Nick Kyrgios, for flaunting social distancing rules at the ill-fated Adria Tour exhibition tournament organised by world No 1 Novak Djokovic.

The German, however, backed the strict measures imposed on players ahead of the Australian

I worked extremely hard in the off-season. I'd like to think that I did everything I could to be as well-prepared as I can be

ALEXANDER ZVEREV
Germany

season.

"I don't think I lost much (fitness)," he said. "Being able

to play in front of a crowd, not living in a bubble now during the tournament, I think a lot of players really appreciate that.

"We shouldn't really complain too much about the circumstances."

But Zverev did agree with sentiment from some players that superstars Djokovic and Rafael Nadal were given an advantage by preparing in the southern city of Adelaide rather than Melbourne.

"I think maybe the only real mistake there was maybe the Adelaide thing for the top players," he said. "They did get more practise time on court. They did have more freedom in a way."

— AFP



'England will be happy with Jadeja's absence'

NEW DELHI: Joe Root and his men will be happy with Ravindra Jadeja's absence in India's Test squad, having recently displayed their vulnerability against left-arm spin in Sri Lanka, former England batsman Mark Butcher has said.

England won both the Tests in Sri Lanka but struggled to read left-arm spinner Lasith Embuldeniya who claimed 10 wickets in the second match at Galle.

All-rounder Jadeja will miss the first two tests after fracturing his thumb in Australia and left-arm wristspinner Kuldeep Yadav is not a certainty in India's slow bowling attack led by off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin.

"Our batters had problems facing Embuldeniya," Butcher, who played 71 tests between 1997-2004, told Saturday's *Times of India* newspaper.

"England will be buoyed by Jadeja's absence. India possesses a world-class bowling attack but Jadeja adds a different dimension to it."

Assistant coach Graham

Thorpe warned the England batsmen on Friday against overdoing the sweep shot against the Indian spinners in the four-test series beginning in Chennai on February 5.

The tourists are expected to alter their opening pair and Butcher expected Zak Crawley to make way for Rory Burns who is back from paternity leave.

"Burns and (Dom) Sibley should be opening in the first test.

"A left-right combination is handy and England will want to stick with them. If the two get off to a good start, the rest of the batsmen too will gain confidence," Butcher said.

Burns, speedster Jofra Archer and all-rounder Ben Stokes arrived earlier in India after being rested for the series in Sri Lanka.

The trio, having served their quarantine period, began training at Chennai's M.A. Chidambaram Stadium on Saturday.

The full squad will train for the first time on Tuesday afternoon, a team spokesman said.

— Reuters

Buttler backs England team's rotation policy in India

CHENNAI: England star Jos Buttler on Saturday defended his country's player rotation on their Asian tour, insisting that players could not put up with pandemic bubbles to appear in every game.

As he sat out quarantine in Chennai ahead of England's first Test in India next Friday, the wicketkeeper-batsman said it was hard to complain about playing when so many people have had "their worlds turned upside down" by the pandemic.

But it was "challenging" for the squad, Buttler told a virtual press conference, backing the England board's use of rest periods that saw Ben Stokes and Jofra Archer

miss the Sri Lanka Tests this month.

"Spending time away from your family, being in quarantine, locked up in hotels, can be tough and the ECB have been really forward thinking I feel for us as an England group to rotate players in and out of this series," Buttler, who will go home after the first of the four Tests in India, said.

England coach Chris Silverwood has already given strong support to the policy.

"I am sure at times there are frustrations because you want to see all the best players on show all the time," said Buttler.

"But it's just not possible with

the amount of cricket and the amount of time spent in bubbles to keep people healthy."

Players also have to "look after ourselves as best we can", Buttler added, meaning that few were looking beyond the India series.

"When you look ahead there is so much uncertainty, I certainly find it tough knowing there is no real certainty at the moment in most of the things we are doing."

While they will face an India side boosted by their sensational series upset in Australia and the return of captain Virat Kohli, Buttler said England were confident after their 2-0 series win in Sri Lanka.



The match also helped younger players acclimatise to South Asian conditions before their first taste of Tests in India's intense conditions, Buttler said.

"Spending time in India you start to understand the magnitude of the game here and coming up against some of the best players in the world," he said.

"It is a huge challenge for us as England players coming to play India in India, but that is why we play the game. These are the guys we want to test ourselves against."

The last time India lost a series at home was against England in 2012-13.

— AFP

A year of Fernandes transforms Man Utd from pretenders to contenders

LONDON: Manchester United may have surrendered top spot in the Premier League with a shock home defeat to bottom-of-the-table Sheffield United, but the fact the Red Devils are even involved in a title race is testament to Bruno Fernandes's first 12 months at Old Trafford.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men travel to Arsenal on Saturday a year to the day since the Portuguese midfielder joined a side languishing 30 points off the top in fifth place.

Solskjaer's days in charge looked numbered after a toxic response from the home support to a 2-0 defeat to Burnley in United's final league game before Fernandes's arrival.

In 52 appearances, the 26-year-old has scored 28 goals and provided 18 assists, earning comparisons to Eric Cantona's talismanic turnaround in United's fortunes.

Over the past year, no team has taken more Premier League points than United.

However, Fernandes's impact goes beyond the stats.

For a side badly in need of a leader, the former Sporting Lisbon captain has come to the fore, demanding that others match his standards.

"I don't do anything like saying 'I want to be a leader or I want to do things in a different way to someone', it's the natural way I have. It's something that's in my game", said Fernandes.

"For me the point is helping everyone with my voice when I can and also with my energy and everything I do in the game to help the team."

That has led to on-pitch rebukes of his teammates and frustration at Solskjaer whenever he is substituted or rested.

But it is also a commitment to excellence has often been missing from United in the eight years since legendary former manager Alex Ferguson retired.

"He's never happy with



me when I tell him to go inside after training when he's playing the next day so he got some practice yesterday", said Solskjaer after Fernandes came off the bench to score the winner with a stunning free-kick against Liverpool in the FA Cup last weekend.

"When you leave him out like I did today, he stayed about 45 minutes after training yesterday shooting free-kicks so I was pretty confident he



could score one if he got the chance."

The most successful club in English football history when it comes to league titles have not even competed for one since Ferguson's departure.

"My mentality, my way to be in my life and football is about winning", said Fernandes this week.

"I don't conform with losing games is normal stuff. For me, losing is not normal so my



I don't do anything like saying 'I want to be a leader or I want to do things in a different way to someone', it's the natural way I have.

It's something that's in my game
BRUNO FERNANDES

Manchester United striker

mentality comes from that."

United had not suffered defeat in the league for 13 games stretching back to November until they were blunted by the Blades in midweek.

Manchester City have moved into the pole position at the top of the table with an ominous run for the other challengers of 11 consecutive wins in all competitions.

If United are to remain in the race, a return to winning ways is needed at the Emirates on Saturday, where they have lost on their two previous visits under Solskjaer.

Those defeats came prior to Fernandes's arrival. In the past year, United have undoubtedly progressed, but without trophies to show for it.

Solskjaer's men have lost four cup semi-finals in the past two seasons and crashed out of the Champions League at the group stages in December.

"I come to the club because I knew I will come to a club who wants to win everything", Fernandes said on the attraction United still holds for top players.

A four-year drought without any silverware is too long for a club of United's size, but it is thanks to Fernandes they are at least now contenders. — AFP

Man Utd's Lingard joins West Ham on loan for rest of the season

LONDON: Manchester United midfielder Jesse Lingard has joined Premier League rivals West Ham United on loan for the remainder of the 2020-21 campaign, the clubs announced on Friday.

The England international has not played a league match for the Manchester side this season, making only three appearances in the League Cup and FA Cup.

The 28-year-old fell out of favour with Manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and was limited to nine league starts in the previous season, scoring in the club's final game of the campaign.

Lingard will be reunited with his former Manchester United

Manager David Moyes at West Ham and is keen to kick-start his career under the Scot's guidance at the London Stadium.

"It's another new chapter in my life. Nothing is guaranteed but I've come here to work hard and help the team and bring my experience. That's the main aim", he told West Ham TV.

"I just want to enjoy my football and get back playing again and get my feet back on the pitch."

Lingard was not signed in time for West Ham's Premier League game with Liverpool on Sunday but he will be a welcome addition to Moyes' improving side who are vying for a European spot.

The midfielder, who has 24 England caps, said on social media in July last year that he was "lost as a player and person" during the previous campaign.

He has played 210 games and scored 33 goals for United with whom he has won the FA Cup, League Cup and Europa League.

Lingard's contract at Old Trafford ends in June 2022 and Solskjaer earlier told a news conference that he wanted him to return to the club refreshed after his loan move.

"We want Jesse to come back here revitalised and having shown at West Ham how good a player he is, of course", he said.

"We've had little to no injuries

and he's not forced his way into the team unfortunately. I want him to go there, enjoy himself, show how good a player he is and come back as a United player through and through", added Solskjaer. — Reuters



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Luxury hotels post 63 per cent revenue decline in 2020

MUSCAT: Revenues earned by luxury hotels in the Sultanate in the 3- to 5-star categories plunged 62.9 per cent to RO 85.077 million in 2020, down from RO 229.531 million a year earlier.

The latest figures from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) attest to the brutal impact of the coronavirus pandemic to Oman's tourism and hospitality sector.

Room occupancy had slumped to a low of 26.4 per cent last year.

A total of 842,491 guests stayed in luxury hotels last year, down from 1,774,258

Room occupancy had slumped to a low of 26.4 per cent last year.

guests in 2019, a 52.5 per cent decline, according to the NCSI report.

Omanis accounted for the majority (479,336 guests), followed by Europeans (176,743), Asians (72,513), nationals from the GCC (37,357), non-GCC Arab tourists (23,943), Americas (20,668), Oceania (6,345), and Africa (4,243), while a further 21,343 visitors hailed from a host of other countries. — ONA

New Spot Market to be boon for Oman's renewable energy players

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](#)

A keenly anticipated Spot Market for the electricity sector — due to be introduced soon in the Sultanate — will open up opportunities for, among others, investors in the burgeoning renewable energy space to offer their surplus output at competitive prices, according to a top official of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Under-Secretary said the proposed platform is among a number of initiatives due to be unveiled by Oman's energy sector authorities in support of efforts to further liberalise the electricity sector, as well as enhance energy efficiency.

Speaking at a key Energy Efficiency Conference organised last week by OQ, the global integrated energy group of the Sultanate, Al Aufi said the Spot Market, when eventually rolled out, will come as "good news" for generators of renewable energy.

Producers of electricity from renewable energy sources, such as solar wind, can offer to sell their uncontracted output via the Spot Market and thus optimise the return on their investments.

Large consumers, for their part, can keep a tab on spot market quotes and opt for suppliers offering the best tariffs, he explained.

The proposed Electricity Spot



Market — the first of its kind in the Middle East — was initially planned to be brought into operation in 2020 — initially on a pilot basis and subsequently as a full-fledged commercial operation.

Its launch has been deferred primarily due to the protracted economic downturn, compounded more recently by the pandemic, which have dampened power demand growth in the Sultanate.

Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP), the single buyer of all power and water output in the Sultanate,

has pledged to put in place an autonomous Market Operator that will operate and manage the Spot Market.

When operational, the Spot Market will enable power plants that are no longer covered by electricity supply contracts with OPWP, as well as renewable energy projects with uncommitted output, to compete for the opportunity to offer some or all of their capacity to the grid.

As the region's first wholesale electricity spot market, the initiative will drive further efficiency improvements and provide a means for generation

capacity that is not contracted to OPWP to sell power into the national grid, according to OPWP.

In other initiatives designed to drive competition and energy efficiency, the sector regulator — the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) — is formulating guidelines authorising direct Power Purchase Agreements between generators and large consumers — an exercise dubbed as 'bilaterals'.

This direct route does away with the need for OPWP to serve as the traditional intermediary between generators and consumers, said Al Aufi in his keynote address.

Oil majors' credit ratings under threat: S&P Global

S&P Global Ratings has warned that it is considering downgrading its credit ratings on a number of major oil and gas producers, including ExxonMobil, Shell and Total, to reflect a growing risk to their businesses from the energy transition, price volatility, and future profitability.

ExxonMobil, Total, Chevron and Shell are among 13 oil companies being placed on "CreditWatch" with negative implications, meaning S&P Global Ratings could downgrade their credit ratings within a few weeks, S&P Global Ratings said in a statement.

The ratings agency said it sees "significant challenges and uncertainties" from the energy transition, including market declines due to the expected growth of renewables and downward pressure on profitability. In particular, it said it sees downward risks to return on capital, as a result of the capital investment levels over 2005-2015 period and lower average oil and gas prices since 2014.

In addition to the credit rating reviews, which include China's national oil giants CNOOC and CNPC, it said it has revised its credit outlooks for BP and Suncor



Energy to negative from stable.

"The change in our industry risk assessment for oil and gas E&P and integrated companies reflects our evaluation of increased and likely increasing risks for oil and gas producers," S&P Global Ratings said. "We see these factors as more material for ratings now than they were previously," the agency added.

Global oil majors are being forced to reevaluate the resilience and cost of new oil and gas projects to accommodate weaker demand outlooks and lower long-term prices in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

The West's top nine oil majors alone are sitting on more than 28 billion barrels of oil equivalent of

undeveloped resources, according to company filings, and low prices in 2020 have already sidelined about a third of global oil and gas investments, raising concerns on the potential for future "stranded assets."

According to the International Energy Agency, some 250 billion fewer barrels of oil and

30 Tcm less gas will need to be developed by 2040 for the world to hit its Sustainable Development Scenario, an outlook compliant with the Paris Agreement to hold the rise in global temperatures to below 2 degrees. Over the same time, surging supplies of renewable energy such as wind and solar will displace demand for oil and gas, the IEA forecasts.

S&P Global Ratings said, in most cases, it does not anticipate downgrading its oil major credit ratings by more than one notch at the end of the review. But a combination of the higher industry risk and potential for "negative surprises" from the Covid-19 pandemic mean two-notch downgrades cannot be ruled out, it said, adding that it does see materially different dynamics for producers of oil compared with gas.

"We are placing on CreditWatch those ratings in which we see industry risks as having the greatest incremental impact on credit quality," S&P Global Ratings said. "These include some of the highest ratings in our oil and gas portfolio, as these companies bear the burden of sustaining the strongest credit quality over time,

in the face of current and future industry uncertainties."

Ratings agency Moody's took negative rating actions on five major international oil companies in early 2020 citing risks from the energy transition and a weaker earnings outlook due to lower long-term oil prices.

Since then, Western oil majors have slashed their spending plans by billions of dollars and taken huge writedowns on their upstream assets after reducing their long-term oil and gas price assumptions in the wake of the pandemic. The oil price collapse of early 2020 as travel curbs hit demand has already taken its toll on a number of Western oil companies.

In 2020, the oil and gas sector was the biggest single source of global corporate debt defaults, according to S&P Global Ratings, as the coronavirus pandemic hit earnings and asset values. Driven mostly by companies in the US and Europe, defaults by the oil and gas sector more than doubled to 50 companies, S&P Global Ratings said in early January, predicting that corporate defaults are expected to remain at elevated levels in 2021. [Credit: Platts]

How much is worth a preschool? (Part 2)

Preschool is not a business that will make you rich overnight. But if you work on building a community a step at the time, the cumulative effects of that effort will snowball over time.

Preschools are constantly evolving. In the earlier times they were meant to provide standard education to children, without much attention to issues such as disabilities or different learning method. But with time, modern preschools fine-tuned and customised the learning approach to address everyone's needs.

Especially through multiple available curricula such as Montessori (proudly Italian), Reggio Emilia (the city where I was born) and Waldorf, parents are now able to pick and choose the learning style for their precious children.

As a business, a preschool can include extra-curricular activities. Some of them could be catered

to children only, while others involves parents. For as naive as it could have sounded 10 years ago, some preschools are already offering yoga and dance lessons that involve both the parents and the children.

Arts are by far the simplest extra-curricular activities to implement in order to further build community and generate additional income for the school.

Moreover, a significant trend is the segmentation of the learning angles. For instance, some parents might be more inclined to send their children to schools that hold religion as a solid value to be transferred rather than suppressed.

This could be seen as a market approach to access different profiles, similarly to those banks that are hybridly offering traditional banking as core business, yet integrate the offering with Islamic banking.

When it boils down to the business valuation of preschools



STEFANO VIRGILI
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ESPECIALLY THROUGH MULTIPLE AVAILABLE CURRICULA SUCH AS MONTESSORI (PROUDLY ITALIAN), REGGIO EMILIA (THE CITY WHERE I WAS BORN) AND WALDORF, PARENTS ARE NOW ABLE TO PICK AND CHOOSE THE LEARNING STYLE FOR THEIR PRECIOUS CHILDREN

and schools, it is certainly hard to get an accurate value given that Covid-19 has influenced the way that these entities are allowed to operate. The standard operating procedures and the restrictions put in place might end up eating quite a bit of revenues.

For instance, maximising the space between students equals to fewer children in each classroom.

Adding layers of health safety such as multiple temperature screening throughout the day might require additional staff.

All together, less revenues and more costs. On the flip side of the coin, schools have been stocking up technology over the past decade or so, therefore when authorities require schools to close down in order to reduce chances of Covid spread, parents will continue paying fees — although sometimes reduced — and children will learn from home.

In this colu million I do not want to enter in the debate on the

efficacy of remote learning, as I am just analysing preschools as a long term business opportunity, one that indeed will be around for a while, but is undergoing tremendous rethinking, innovation and structural changes.

According to my friend Bharat Kanodia, who helped me with this research, the 3 pillars on which it is important to invest are:

■ Academic qualification, social reputation and work ethic of staff

■ Anticipating cash-flow with advanced payment of fees by offering discount for long-term enrolment

■ State-of-the-art facilities, technology and learning material

If you are considering buying an existing preschool, aim for those counting larger amount of students, especially when the real estate is owned by the business. It will cost much more, but will make the investment more valuable in the long run.

PRESS RELEASE

NDC ACHIEVES IMPRESSIVE GROWTH IN PROFITS

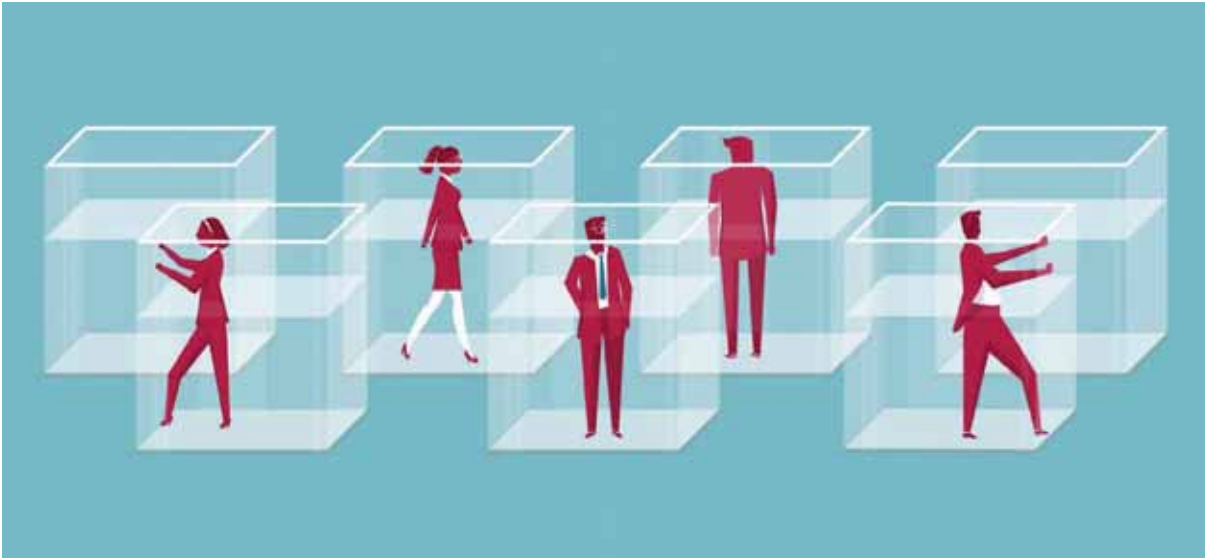


Oman's local marketing and manufacturing company NDC achieves an increase in annual sales of 3.6 per cent and an increase in profitability of 43 per cent in 2020 over 2019 according to NDC's preliminary report submitted to the Muscat Securities Market.

The increase in sales is attributed to the customer response to the consumers' response to the high quality of NDC's products says AK Shaji Head of Sales for NDC.

NDC is honoured to be recognised by consumers with Bahar winning the Most Trusted Brand Award.

How to overcome a 'silo mentality' to ensure growth outcomes



GERHARD HARTMAN

Everyone working for a large corporate is familiar with the frustrations of organisational silos. As we adapt to a new hybrid way of working with a growing number of employees working from homes or from other offices around the world, organisational silos remain a problem that is keeping CEOs up at night!

Different departments or teams cannot — or do not — interact with one another. What silos end up doing is preventing the sharing of resources and information, making it impossible to build and sustain trust, transfer ideas, collaborate and ultimately, achieve organisational goals.

In your own daily work environment, you may have experienced this when a project you were working on for weeks was cancelled because a second department was doing something similar.

Or perhaps you spent months trying to solve a crucial business issue, only to discover much later that someone on a different team has the skills or resources to solve your problem in minutes. If silos are such a challenge, why are they still so common in larger Middle East organisations?

Undoubtedly, breaking down boundaries within an organisation is challenging as there is no one-size-fits-all solution to

Undoubtedly, breaking down boundaries within an organisation is challenging as there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem

the problem. These challenges are not about technology — although, an integrated corporate application suite might form part of the solution. Instead, these challenges are linked to cultural issues and a lack of communication and collaboration.

So, what does it take to break down organisational silos? It all starts with the three Cs:

Collaborate effectively: Through introducing collaboration tools across your business, you can help everyone in various departments to communicate better — more employees are now working remotely, which calls for an urgent adoption of collaborative technology.

Through working remotely and collaboratively, employees can easily provide feedback to colleagues and managers. Doing so, fosters a culture of information and knowledge sharing.

Create cross-functional teams: In creating cross-functional teams, you open up opportunities for different departments to interact and work together,

thereby also ensuring shared accountability.

When your team members get to know people from other teams, they're more likely to ask one another for help because they know what skills or competencies exist within the organisation.

Cultivate common goals: In establishing a shared organisation-wide goal, different individuals and teams are more inclined to collaborate because they're working towards the same outcome.

To ensure the effectiveness of this approach, communicate with each member of your team. Everyone should understand their role in achieving the desired end goal.

The organisation's leadership team must be the first to champion any effort to eliminate silos, considering it is currently compelled to switch to new ways of working due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The leadership team needs to be responsible about building a shared vision that aligns with the company's goals and trickles down to managers and employees.

Only once you've changed the mentality of those working within your organisation will you be able to encourage everyone to successfully and effectively work in synch.

(The author is Vice President: Medium Business, Sage Africa & Middle East)



MSM WEEKLY REVIEW

Financial and services sectors pull down MSM 30 Index

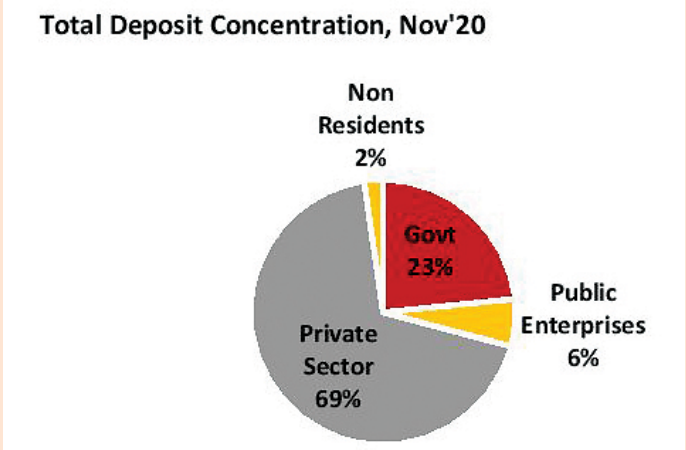
The MSM30 Index ended the week down by 2.63 per cent. The Financial index declined 3.97 per cent and the Services Index declined 1.53 per cent, while the Industrial Index posted a gain of 0.79 per cent on week-on-week basis. The MSM Shariah Index decreased by 0.31 per cent.

Moody's Investors Service last week assigned a Ba3 rating to the proposed senior unsecured notes to be issued by Oryx Funding Limited, a special purpose vehicle established in the Cayman Islands (Aa3 stable) by Oman Electricity Transmission Company SAOC (OETC, Ba3 negative).

The outlook is negative. The proceeds from these notes will be used to refinance OETC's existing RO 100 million shareholder loan, for capital spending and general corporate purposes. OETC's liquidity will improve as a result of the proposed issuance, to a more adequate level.

Last week we witnessed Omani financial institutions announcing their exposure to Abou Nabil, LLC, the flagship company of Darvesh Group. As per the disclosure on MSM, aggregate exposure to the Group is to the tune of RO 70.7 million. CBO's latest statistics show that Oman banking sector's total credit stood at RO 26.33 billion (-0.4 per cent MoM and +1.9 per cent YoY) as at the end of Nov 2020.

Their total deposits stood at RO 24.0 billion (-0.1 per cent MoM and +3.5 per cent YoY). Total private sector



credit stood at RO 22.9 billion, (-0.1 per cent MoM and +0.5 per cent YoY) and total sector's Loan-to-deposit Ratio contracted to 109.7 per cent in Nov 2020 vs 110.1 per cent in Oct 2020, and is down from 111.5 per cent in Nov 2019, due to a relatively slower decline in deposits as compared to credit.

Conventional credit growth slowed to +1.0 per cent YoY in Nov 2020 as compared to +1.4 per cent YoY Oct 2020 and +1.3 per cent YoY in Sept 2020. Total conventional credit reached RO 22.09 billion (-RO 140 million on MoM basis or -0.6 per cent MoM). Conventional credit contracted on MoM basis largely on account of a 38 per cent MoM decline in Government credit (-RO 160 million) and a 0.2 per cent MoM (-RO 47 million) decline in Private Sector credit. Credit to non-residents increased by about 21 per cent (up RO 26.4 million) and credit to Public Enterprises rose 1 per cent MoM (+RO 40.6 million).

Conventional deposits growth remained at 3.0 per cent in Nov 2020 as in Oct 2020, compared to 4.5 per cent YoY in Sept 2020.

Total conventional deposits stood at RO 20.27 billion (-RO 96.6 million on MoM basis or -0.5 per cent MoM).

Sector Loan-to-deposit (LTD) ratio decreased slightly to 109.0 per cent in Nov 2020 as compared to 109.2 per cent in Oct 2020 and 111.2 per cent in Nov 2019.

Conventional deposits decreased on MoM basis on account of contraction in all categories of deposits except Non-Resident deposits:

Government deposits dropped 2.9 per cent MoM (RO 133.4 million), Public enterprises' deposits dropped 2.2 per cent MoM or by RO 26.2 million, and finally, Private Sector deposits dropped 0.1 per cent MoM or by RO 7.3 million. Non-resident deposits rose by RO 70.3 million or 14.9 per cent MoM.

The share of Government & Public Enterprises deposits, which had grown to 29.1 per cent in Sept 2020 after dropping for some time previously, has now once again dropped to 27.4 per cent as compared to a simple average of 30.5 per cent over the trailing 12 months.

[Courtesy: U-Capital]



US consumer spending decreases; inflation creeps up

WASHINGTON: US consumer spending fell for a second straight month in December amid renewed business restrictions to slow the spread of Covid-19 and a temporary expiration of government-funded benefits for millions of unemployed Americans.

The report from the Commerce Department also showed inflation steadily rising last month. Expectations that inflation would perk up this year were supported by other data showing a solid increase in labour costs in the fourth quarter.

But a rise above the Federal Reserve's 2 per cent target, a flexible average, is unlikely to worry policymakers. The US central bank is expected to maintain its ultra-easy monetary policy stance for a while as the economy battles the pandemic.

Excess capacity remains throughout the economy, which could limit companies' ability to raise prices.

"The Fed would like inflation to average 2 per cent, so it would like inflation to temporarily move above 2 per cent", said Gus Faucher, chief economist at PNC Financial in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

"Inflation pressures will



A child rides a shopping cart inside a supermarket in Portland, Oregon. — Reuters

remain limited to a few sectors as high unemployment will restrain wage growth."

Consumer spending, which accounts for more than two-thirds of US economic activity, slipped 0.2 per cent last month as outlays at restaurants declined. Spending at hospitals also fell, likely as patients stayed

away in fear of contracting the coronavirus. Households also cut back spending on recreation.

Consumer spending tumbled 0.7 per cent in November.

Another drop in January is not expected as states, including New York and California, have started easing pandemic-related restrictions. But outlays on long-

lasting manufactured goods, the main driver of spending during the pandemic, fell for a second consecutive month in December.

Spending on nondurable goods dropped for a third straight month. Services gained 0.1 per cent.

"Goods spending has clearly rolled over, and we anticipate the

Consumer spending, which accounts for more than two-thirds of US economic activity, slipped 0.2 per cent last month as outlays at restaurants declined. Spending at hospitals also fell, likely as patients stayed away in fear of contracting the coronavirus. Households also cut back spending on recreation

through December, the so-called core PCE price index increased 1.5 per cent after advancing 1.4 per cent in November.

The core PCE price index is the Fed's preferred inflation measure. Gradually firming inflation was reinforced by a fourth report from the Labour Department showing its Employment Cost Index, the broadest measure of labour costs, rose 0.7 per cent last quarter after advancing 0.5 per cent in the third quarter.

The ECI is widely viewed by policymakers and economists as one of the better measures of labour market slack and a predictor of core inflation, as it adjusts for composition and job quality changes. Wages jumped 0.9 per cent last quarter. But with employment still 10 million jobs below the pre-pandemic peak, the rise is probably unsustainable.

Still, inflation is seen accelerating in the months ahead as weak readings last March and April drop from the calculation. Strengthening economic growth is also expected to boost price pressures. Bottlenecks in the supply chain are raising costs for manufacturers, and the increases are being passed on to consumers. — Reuters

United sends 14,000 furlough warnings

CHICAGO: United Airlines said it warned some 14,000 employees that they might be furloughed, and aviation unions made a new request to Congress and President Joe Biden for another \$15 billion in government assistance to keep workers on the payroll through at least Sept. 30.

Chicago-based United warned that once a second round of payroll support expires on April 1, airlines could be forced to make drastic new cuts as the coronavirus pandemic has slashed demand for air travel.

United had recalled 13,000 employees from furlough when a \$15 billion airline industry payroll package was passed in December to protect jobs through March.

"Despite ongoing efforts to distribute vaccines, customer demand has not changed much", United told



A United Airlines plane takes off at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, Illinois. — Reuters

employees.

The \$15 billion in December helped bring back more than 32,000 airline employees and followed a \$50 billion package in March for passenger airlines divided between payroll assistance and low-cost government loans.

Union leaders representing 75,000 flight attendants wrote congressional leaders seeking quick action to extend the payroll support program "with \$15 billion to protect jobs" through September 30 or later.

— Reuters

US lobby group urges India not to tighten foreign e-commerce rules

NEW DELHI: A US lobby group which represents firms including Amazon.com and Walmart has urged India not to tighten foreign investment rules for e-commerce companies again.

India is considering revising the rules after traders in the country accused Amazon's Indian division and Walmart's Flipkart of creating complex structures to bypass investment regulations.

The US companies deny any wrongdoing. India only allows foreign e-commerce players to operate as a marketplace to connect buyers and sellers but local traders say the US giants promote select sellers and offer deep discounts, which hurts business for smaller local retailers.

In 2018, India changed its foreign direct investment (FDI) rules to deter foreign firms offering products from sellers in which they have an equity stake.



Amazon employees scan packaged products at Amazon's fulfillment centre in Bangalore, in this file photo. — Reuters

The government is now considering tightening those rules again to include sellers in which a foreign e-commerce firm holds an indirect stake through its parent.

Such a change could hurt Amazon as it holds indirect stakes in two of its biggest online sellers in India, Cloudtail and Appario.

The US-India Business Council

(USIBC) urged the Indian government not to make any more material restrictive changes to e-commerce investment rules.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

NEW YORK

Wells Fargo CEO Scharf's pay drops 12 per cent

Wells Fargo & Co Chief Executive Officer Charles Scharf's annual pay fell by about \$3 million, or 12 per cent, in 2020, a regulatory filing showed. Scharf will receive \$20.3 million for his work during the year, compared with \$23 million in 2019, the bank said.

Scharf, who served as a top lieutenant to JPMorgan Chase and Co Chief Executive Jamie Dimon during the financial crisis of 2008, took over the reins at Wells Fargo in 2019.



The fall in Scharf's pay compares with a 36 per cent drop in Goldman Sachs Chief Executive David Solomon's salary and a 20 per cent jump in compensation for Morgan Stanley's top boss James Gorman.

— Reuters

WASHINGTON

Global equity funds see jump in inflows

Global equity funds witnessed higher inflows in the seven days to January 27, as investors remained hopeful of an economic recovery despite worries about a potential delay in stimulus and short-term hurdles in vaccine distribution.

Investors purchased \$19.3 billion in equities funds during the period, compared with \$14.9 billion in the previous week, Lipper data showed.

Funds focused on information technology sector attracted \$4.3

billion in inflows, the biggest in six weeks, an analysis of 12,739 equity funds based on Lipper's sector classification showed.

"While recent Covid-19 news and snail-paced vaccine rollouts are frightfully discouraging, the big picture does not change in terms of markets outlook," said Stephen Innes, chief global markets strategist at Axi.

Investors purchased \$15.3 billion in bond funds, while money market funds also attracted \$12.4 billion. — Reuters

NEW YORK

GE gets dismissal of most of shareholder lawsuit

A US judge in Manhattan has dismissed most but not all of a shareholder lawsuit accusing General Electric Co of concealing billions of dollars of insurance liabilities and using questionable accounting to prop up its power business.

US District Judge Jesse Furman dismissed fraud claims based on GE's alleged misrepresentations about its long-term care insurance portfolio, and most claims concerning long-term service agreements in its power



division.

The judge allowed shareholders to pursue claims that Boston-based GE should have disclosed its reliance on factoring, or the sale of future revenue for cash. — Reuters

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features



When it comes to cars, old is still gold

The first car arrived in Oman in 1928 for one wealthy family. Seeing a car in that era was astonishing and by then, an anomaly. The love for classic cars is a growing trend in the country and members of this classic car group is trying to build more interest to make it accessible to the public... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

LOCAL SCENE



THE FASCINATING DETAILS OF BAHLA'S JABREEN CASTLE

Jabreen Castle is one of the most beautiful and historic places in Oman. This castle was constructed in the late 17th century as per historic research and is located in Bahla... **Story on Page 20**

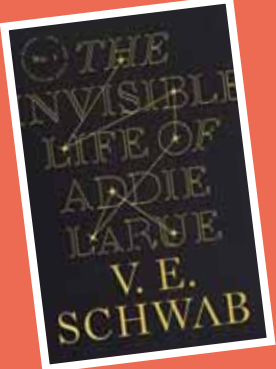
DISCOVERY



POMPEII SHOWS OFF TREASURES, SORCERER'S MAGIC CHARMS

Decades worth of archaeological finds went on public display last week in Pompeii, shedding further light on the ancient Roman city destroyed by a volcanic eruption nearly 2,000 years ago... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE

BY V.E. SCHWAB

A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries.

ANIMAL PLANET



CZECH TRAINERS TEACH DOGS TO SNIFF OUT COVID

In a dog training centre built inside a shipping container located in a Czech mountain village, Renda, Cap and Laky are being put to the test... **Story on Page 19**

FASHION



CHANEL HOSTS FAMILY REUNION IN ABSENCE OF BIG HAUTE COUTURE SHOW

French fashion house Chanel chose to put family at the forefront of its Spring-Summer 2021 Haute Couture show, with models strutting under flower arches at a socially-distanced presentation with a few famous faces.

When it comes to cars, old is still gold

BY BARAAH AL MUJAINI

Who among us is not mesmerised when we see a classic car? From its spectacular design, cheerful colours and to its unique existence that reminds us of some eras, old cars always have the power to make us do a second take.

Classic cars are cars that were produced between 1915-1948 according to CCCA (Classic Car Club of America). They are distinct compared to other types of cars in many characteristics, mainly, their external and internal outstanding design which cannot be seen in modern cars.

The first car arrived in Oman in 1928 for one wealthy family. Seeing a car in that era was astonishing and by then, an anomaly. Gradually, the number of cars increased. Owning classic cars and all matters relating to them is considered as a hobby and

The Omani Old Cars Club has been involved in many festivals and occasions, for instance, the Muscat Festival in 2018, Al Sahwa Public Garden in 2017, in National day celebrations and collaborations with many charities

passion. They are owned not primarily for practical usage but nostalgia. Besides, the repair costs alone as well as getting spare parts cost a fortune.

Amateur lovers of the classic cars succeeded to some extent in preserving them and keeping their existence incessantly away from vanishing throughout the years. Most antiques had the tendency to fade away with time.

Ways to acquire classic cars require extreme patience besides a great deal of money since they are rare and limited in numbers. This makes these cars only accessible to those with different taste and people who prefer having unique acquisitions.

Sometimes car enthusiasts collect single car parts from different places that require travelling to finalize its final shape and design. In addition to the hard acquisition of spare parts as well as

the high cost to get them, many classic car fans travel around the world to attend auctions to find what they are looking for.

In Oman, there is an 'Old Cars Club' within the Oman Automobile Association founded in September 2016. It is comprised of people who have special interest in classic cars.

The club plays a vital role in spreading the classic car culture and its history. They have participated in many events locally (over 40 participations) and globally (8 participations in many countries) as they attempt to show the public, especially who have the same interest as to how these cars work and what makes them special.

"Classic cars have a very strange way of operation. It is not easy to be driven by anyone", Elias al Zadjali said in an interview.

"I enjoy repairing and changing spare parts of these cars and driving them is very entertaining. I have an exhibition in my home that includes 14 different classic cars, the oldest produced in 1914", he shared.

The cost of the classic cars fundamentally correlates directly with its uniqueness. The harder the car to find, the higher its price will be. Moreover, its originality and the absence of spare parts also contribute to the soaring prices.

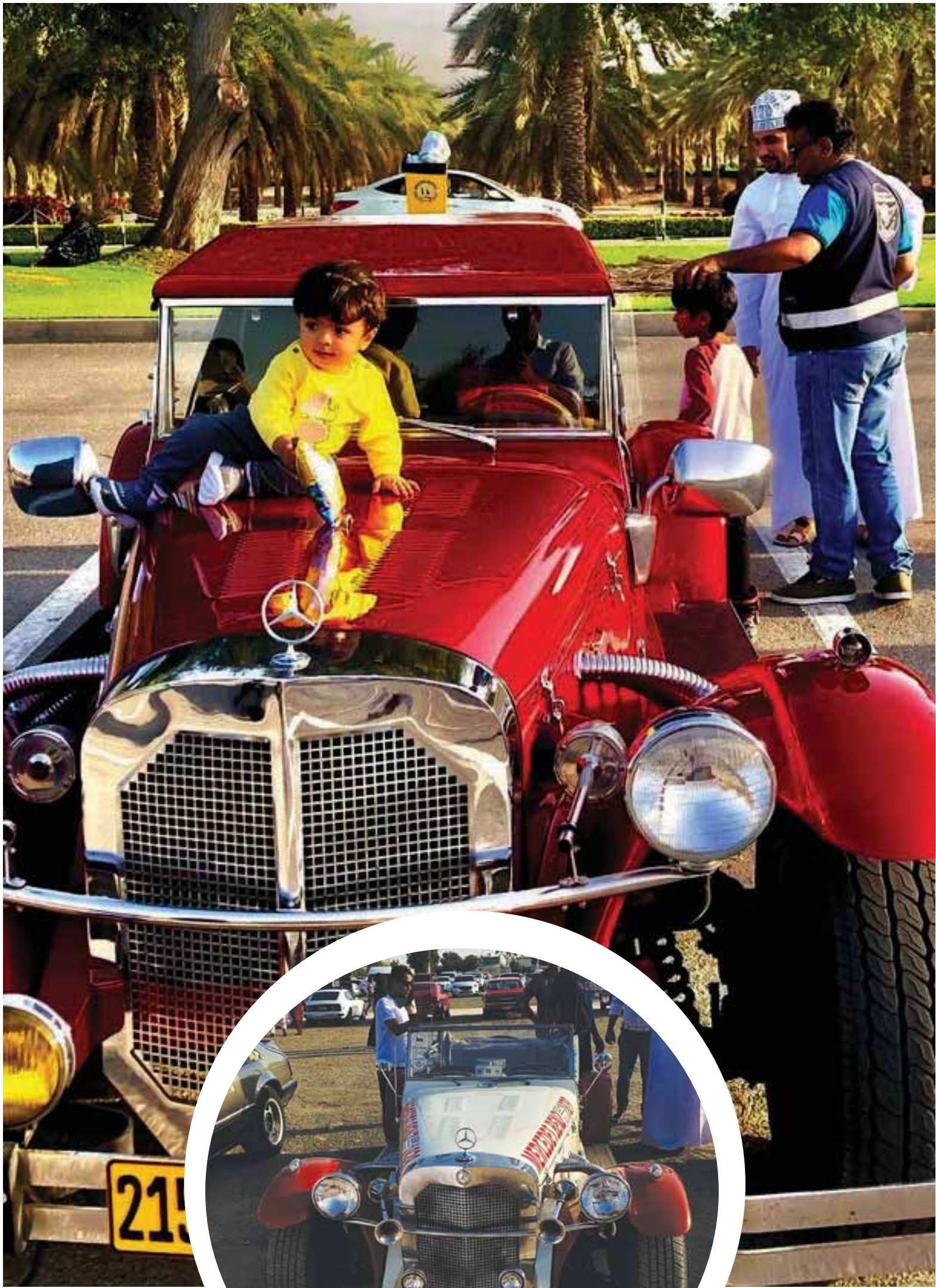
The Omani Old Cars Club has been involved in many festivals and occasions, for instance, the Muscat Festival in 2018, Al Sahwa Public Garden in 2017, in National Day celebrations and collaborations with many charities.

The members of this club used to hold some exhibitions from time to time until they established a permanent official exhibition where they can unite their passion and all their classic cars. The absence of a headquarter for the club is also one of the obstacles as one of the club's members, Samer al Balushi, said.

Oman has always been keen to offer the best environment for the youth. It has been supportive of different interests. Similarly, while the support is just growing for this passion, members are very eager to work in getting more people to develop passion and appreciation for classic cars.

Lately, the Old Cars Club got more opportunities to flourish. One of the factors that create these opportunities is social-media which paved the ways between the club members and the public to know more about this hobby. As they promote the love for these cars, many achievements have been recorded. The latest was winning first place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2018.

Regarding the future plans for the club, Al Balushi said they hope "involving more members, engaging in more participation, and activating the club more in media."





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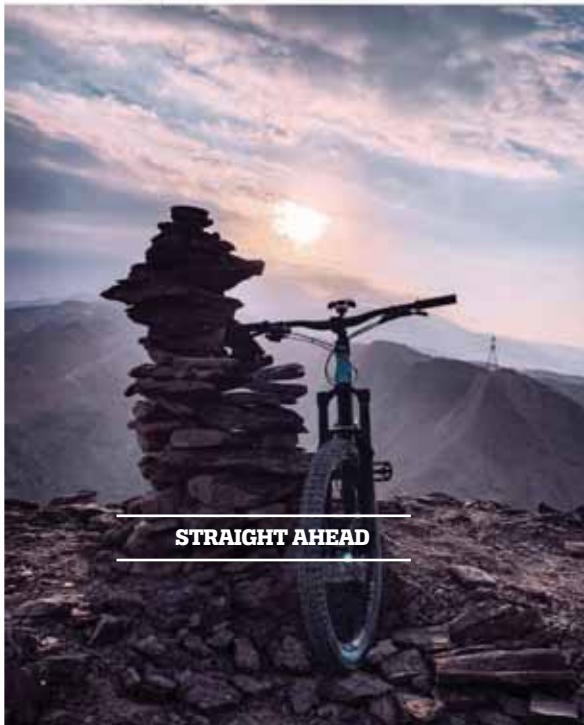
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DISCOVERY

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Pompeii shows off treasures, sorcerer's magic charms

Decades worth of archaeological finds went on public display last week in Pompeii, shedding further light on the ancient Roman city destroyed by a volcanic eruption nearly 2,000 years ago.

One is a sorcerer's toolbox including dozens of amulets, rings, statuettes and other good luck charms made of ivory, bronze, glazed ceramics and amber — that were clearly not enough to protect the city from doom.

"It's one of the most peculiar things we found during our excavations: amulets we found in a box in a house... which seem to belong to a woman —

or a man, perhaps — who used magic," said Massimo Osanna, the director of the Pompeii archaeological park near Naples in southern Italy.

He was speaking at the inauguration of the Antiquarium, a refurbished museum housing bronze statues, frescoes, gold and silver jewels as well as the haunting casts of those killed when Vesuvius erupted in October 79 AD.

"You have some of the most important objects uncovered here since the 19th century. So really, this Antiquarium takes you through the centuries of Pompeii's history, up until the fateful day of the eruption," Osanna said.

The room that chronicles

the last days of the city is "the most poignant part (of the exhibition)," the Italian archaeologist added.

The plaster casts of the dead, including small children, were made by filling voids left by their bodies in the calcified layers of ash.

Strong stench of wine

Osanna has headed the Pompeii park since 2014 and overseen a major conservation project, mostly funded by the European Union, which revitalised a UNESCO world heritage site formerly plagued by neglect and building collapses.

Last month, archaeologists announced the unique discovery of a thermopolium, a fast-food bar.

It had surviving polychrome decorations and traces of food and wine that offered an unprecedented glimpse of the snacking habits of the ancient Romans.

A team found duck bone fragments as well as the remains of pigs, goats, fish and snails in earthenware pots, one of which "gave off a very strong stench of wine", archaeologist Teresa Virtuoso said.

The frescoes decorating the site included electioneering slogans and graffiti, scribbled over the image of a dog, in which a man — presumed to be a former slave — was accused of practising sex with dogs.

Reduced to silence

In 2019, Pompeii had more than 3.9 million visitors, making it Italy's third most popular

tourist destination after the Colosseum and Roman forum complex and the Uffizi Galleries in Florence.

But, like most other cultural sites in Italy, it has been mostly shut in recent months due to the coronavirus pandemic.

It reopened on January 18 but has admitted fewer than 100 visitors per day, compared to a pre-Covid-19 average of around 8,000.

"We've lost 80 percent of our visitors, and this also means 80 per cent of our ticket revenues," Osanna said, adding that the site had to rely on generous subsidies from the Italian culture ministry to keep going.

On Monday, the vast archaeological park looked deserted, save for the journalists who came for the museum opening and the usual presence of archaeologists, restorers, guardians and unemployed tourist guides.

Its current state is surreal, but Osanna said it was nevertheless a great time to visit.

"It is almost as if you can see Pompeii's inner soul, its spirit," he said.

"This is an abandoned city, and seeing it empty of tourists perhaps makes you think harder about the dreadful catastrophe that forever ended life here and reduced to silence a place that was bustling." — AFP



Czech trainers teach dogs to sniff out Covid



IN A DOG training centre built inside a shipping container located in a Czech mountain village, Renda, Cap and Laky are being put to the test.

They sniff at six vessels, each containing a piece of cloth with scent from patients with Covid-19, negative donors, or fake samples.

"Good boy!" exclaims Lenka Vlachova, a trainer working at Prague's fire brigade, as jagdterrier Renda sits down by one sample, wagging his tail.

The team of dog trainers are working in their own time and report a 95-per cent success rate in Covid-19 detection in samples of human scent.

"The study is designed to verify dogs' ability to detect Covid-19 and generate a method enabling the use of trained dogs in combating the pandemic," project head Gustav Hotovy said.

"The method should also work with other diseases, even more lethal than Covid-19," Hotovy said.

"In the end, we should be able to detect a huge number of people in a very short time with a trained dog," he said, speaking in the snowy village of Klny near the German border.

Vlachova said the first study confirming dogs are able to detect tissue attacked by a virus was conducted in the United States about a decade ago.

"The virus changes the human tissue, affecting the scent signature of the person," she said.

Hotovy, a retired cynologist whose team started training the dogs last August, said that the signature changes "so much that it is immediately discernible for the dogs".

100 per cent accuracy?

The samples used are obtained merely by rubbing a piece of cotton against the

patient's skin.

The team then has to ensure the sample is virus-free to prevent the dogs from catching the disease.

Using the same sampling method, a Finnish team has been using dogs for testing at Helsinki airport, reporting its dogs can detect the virus with close to 100 per cent accuracy.

Vlachova said the Czechs would like to work together with the Finns or with French and German teams working on similar projects.

Unlike their western peers, the Czech team works in its free time and relies on scant financial means provided by a local dog food maker.

Looking for Wally

Cynologist Katerina Jancarikova said the virus-affected tissue made up "just a tiny fragment in the overall scent, a part of the dogs' puzzle".

"It's like looking for Wally," she said, referring to the popular children's books in which a tiny character in red and white stripes has to be found in pictures of a huge crowd.

Jancarikova said any dog can be trained for detection as long as it is cooperative.

As Vlachova led Renda back to the van, Hotovy walked into the training centre with a sturdy giant schnauzer named Laky who eagerly sniffed at the vessels, placed in a different pattern, before easily identifying the positive one.

"He was once reluctant to cooperate," he chuckled, adding that the dogs showed the same eager response when let loose in a nearby house where a guest who tested positive for Covid-19 had been staying.

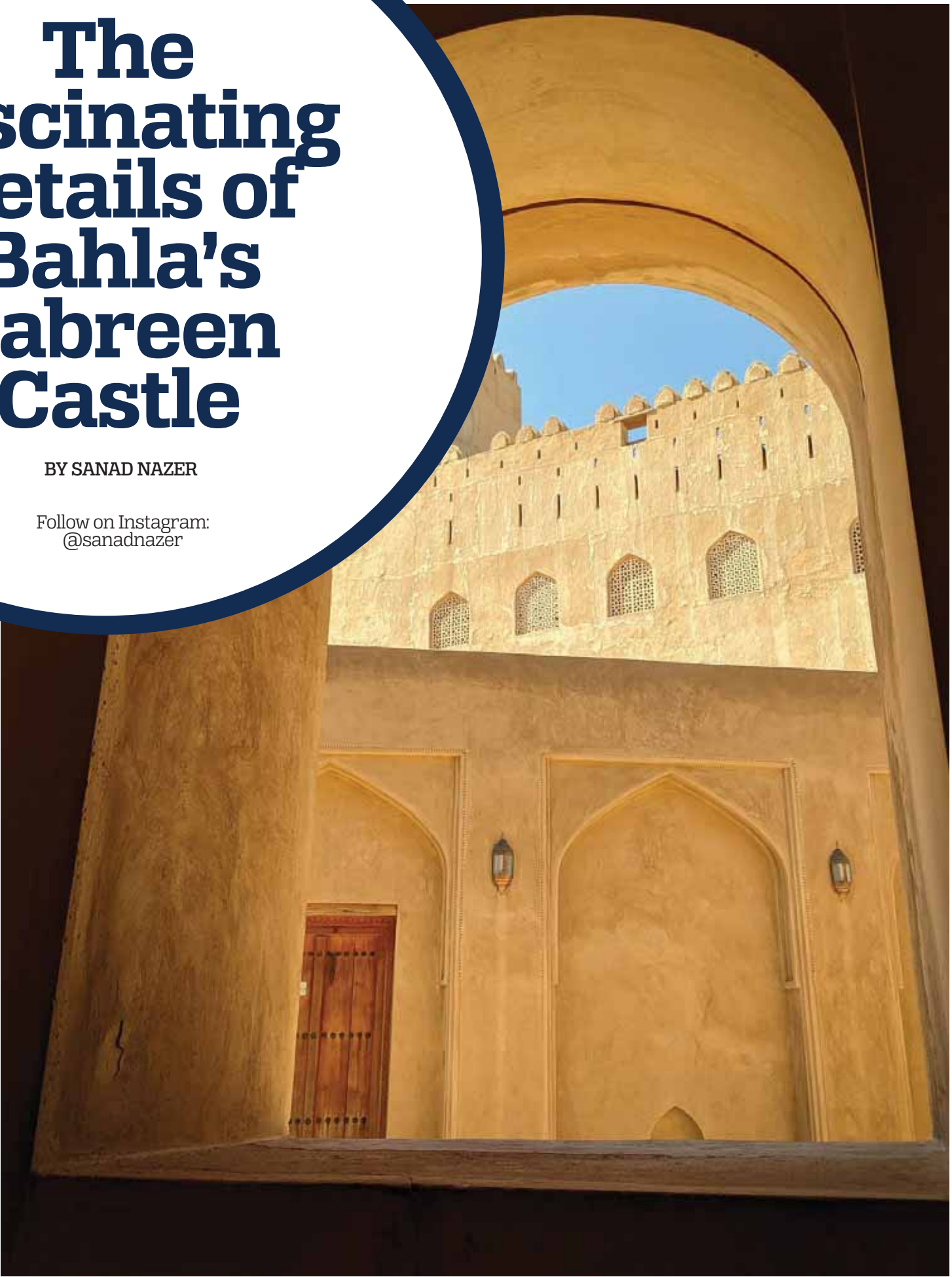
"They immediately jumped at his bed with the same happy reaction they show over a positive sample in the centre," he said. — AFP



The fascinating details of Bahla's Jabreen Castle

BY SANAD NAZER

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JABREEN CASTLE is one of the most beautiful and historic places in Oman. This castle was constructed in the late 17th century as per historic research and is located in Bahla in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate about 175 km away from Muscat.

Anyone planning a road trip from Muscat, I would suggest this destination! With a very low entry ticket price and beautiful sights, this place offers so much history and architecture wise.

The old style of architecture and the colour scheme reminded me of the video games that I had played in my childhood, the games such as Assassin's Creed and Prince of Persia, which have a historic setting.

Despite the hot mid-day sun, the castle was fairly cool on the inside, it is due to its huge and thick walls, and speaking of insides, we almost lost our way around the castle, it is that big!

WHAT NOT TO MISS:

THE SUN AND MOON HALL

Built by Imam Bel'arab bin Sultan al Yarubi, the sun and moon hall is his majlis where he would receive important guests. It has 14 windows divided into two rows. One of the rows faces the sun and the other half, the moon making sure that the room always had light.

Because of the way the room was built, fresh, natural air flows all

throughout the year making it a good area to cool down.

THE FASCINATING STAIRCASES

Jabreen Castle is an imposing structure that going up to its viewing deck at the very top will allow one to have a sweeping view of the surrounding area. If you can get to the top though, you would have to pass a series of rooms, hallways and stairs and each one of them served not only decorative purposes, but also practical reasons. When you visit Jabreen Castle, don't forget to check out how the stairs are built and how they are ornately decorated with calligraphy.

THE DATE STOREROOM

The castle allows for a quick visit to the past. In its kitchen, you will find the well that the occupants used to get water from which they then use for cooking and bathing. While the castle also has its own madrasa among other interesting divisions, make sure to stop by the date storeroom. The storeroom is the perfect place to learn that the occupants always thought of contingency and it is here that they stored most of their food supplies primarily dates to make sure that they don't get hungry in case of siege.

