

P12

TOP ASSIGNMENTS AWAIT OMAN'S OLYMPIC TEAM HEAD COACH



P13

CYBERCRIME COSTS TO TOP \$1 TRILLION THIS YEAR: RESEARCHERS



P18

HOW THIS 17-YR-OLD ARTIST TURNED HER TALENT INTO A CLOTHING BRAND



OMAN

HM THANKED BY EGYPT AND INDIA

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, in reply to His Majesty's cable of greetings to him on the occasion of the 23 July Revolution Anniversary. President Sisi expressed his utmost appreciation and gratitude to His Majesty the Sultan, wishing His Majesty and the Sultanate permanent progress and prosperity. His Majesty also received a cable of thanks from President Ram Nath Kovind of India, in reply to His Majesty's cable of greetings to him on the occasion of his country's 74th Independence Anniversary. In his cable, President Kovind expressed his sincere thanks and appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan's greetings. He affirmed his keenness to strengthen the existing relations between the two friendly countries, wishing His Majesty good health and happiness. — ONA

HM CONDOLENCES TO KUWAIT EMIR

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, on the death of Shaikh Nasser Fahd Sabah Al Nasser al Sabah. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy, praying to Allah the Almighty to rest the departed's soul in peace in paradise and grant his family patience. — ONA



INSIDE



UNICEF SEEKS \$2.5 BILLION FOR MIDEAST CHILDREN

P6



BIDEN TO NOMINATE FIRST BLACK DEFENCE SECRETARY

P8



Margaret Keenan, 90, is applauded by staff as she returns to her ward after becoming the first person in Britain to receive the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at University Hospital. — Reuters

Britain starts first COVID-19 shots

WASHINGTON: US regulators stepped closer to approving the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine on Tuesday as a 90-year-old British woman became the first person outside of trials to receive the shot, offering hope of slowing a pandemic that has pushed hospitals to the brink.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration sought to shore up the US vaccine supply and Congress progressed towards a stop-gap COVID-19 relief package on Monday, when another 203,474 infections were reported and another 1,582 people died.

Pfizer Inc is on the cusp of winning US approval for the vaccine it developed with Germany's BioNTech, clearing a hurdle on Tuesday when the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released documents that did not raise any new issues about its safety or efficacy.

Britain has already authorised the Pfizer vaccine, enabling Margaret Keenan, 90, to receive the first shot at a local hospital in Coventry in central England.

"It's the best early birthday present I could wish for because it means I can finally look forward to spending time with my family and friends in the new year after being on my own for most of (this) year," she said.

The United States could

“

It's the best early birthday present I could wish for because it means I can finally look forward to spending time with my family and friends in the new year after staying alone

MARGARET KEENAN

soon follow as an FDA panel of outside advisers will meet on Thursday to discuss whether to recommend emergency use authorisation of the Pfizer vaccine.

Outgoing President Donald Trump will sign an executive order on Tuesday to ensure that priority access for COVID-19 vaccines procured by the US government is given to the American people before assisting other nations.

The signing follows a *New York Times* report that Pfizer may not be able to provide more of its vaccine to the United States until next June because of its commitments to other countries. SEE ALSO P8

66.2 per cent drop in accidents in 5 years

VINOD NAIR

[@vinot_nair](#)

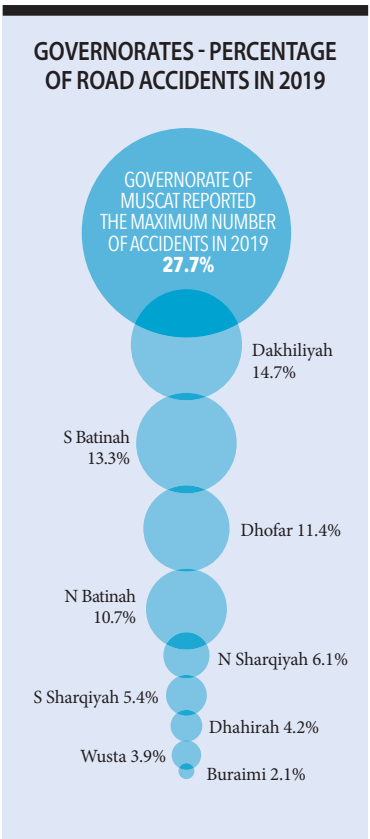
There has been a drastic fall in road accidents and deaths over the past five years due to concerted efforts of the authorities, especially the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

The number of road accidents reported in Oman fell during the past five years by 66.2 per cent, from 6,279 in 2015 to 2,120 accidents in 2019. It may be noted that nearly 1.55 million use 40,000 km of paved roads in the Sultanate.

Apart from major awareness campaigns, a new and stricter traffic laws came into effect from March 1, 2018, that was made to make Oman roads safer for everyone.

The key highlight of the law was motorists getting more than 12 black points in a year, will have their driving licence suspended for six months.

If a motorist gets more than 12 points again the following year, the licence will be seized for a year. If the black points exceed more than 12 points for a third consecutive year, the licence will be cancelled. The driver will have to take the driving test afresh af-



The Governorate of Muscat reported the maximum number of accidents in 2019 (27.7 per cent), followed by Al Dakhiliyah 14.7 per cent, South Al Batinah 13.3 per cent, Dhofar Governorate 11.4 per cent, North Al Batinah 10.7 per cent, North Al Sharqiyah 6.1 per cent, South Al Sharqiyah 5.4 per cent, Al Dhahirah 4.2 per cent, Al Wusta 3.9 per cent, Al Buraimi 2.1 per cent, and Musandam 0.5 per cent,

In 2019, 903 accidents were due to collisions between vehicles (42.6 per cent), followed by 419 incidents of vehicles hitting fixed objects (19.8 per cent).

The percentage of accidents that occurred during night was 53, while 1,098 accidents or 51.8 per cent of total mishaps were due to overspeed.

Meanwhile, 511 accident deaths and 2,442 injuries were recorded in 2019 of which Omanis accounted for 74.5 per cent of injuries and 62.2 per cent of deaths.

Over-speeding caused 46.3 per cent of injuries and 52.6 per cent of deaths due to road accidents.

The report also revealed that 265,000 driving licenses were either newly issued and renewed in 2019.

AL JISR CHARITY DONATES 16 AMBULANCES



Al Jisr Charity Association on Tuesday handed over 16 ambulances to the Directorate-General of Health Services in Al Dakhiliyah, South Al Batinah and North Al Batinah. This initiative of Al Jisr Charity Association in funding the purchase of 16 ambulances for the governorates underlined the foundation's social responsibility in uplifting community services and development projects for the common good across the Sultanate. DETAILS ON P2

Raising awareness for reading books despite odds

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH

[@patkaushal](#)

It is very difficult not to notice some books kept on one of the corner benches adjacent to the walkway on the Muscat's Al Qurum beach. New visitors, who look for reasons for the books kept amid the humdrums of walkers and merrymakers, find a decent young man standing just behind the books telling them that he is



there to raise awareness for books and more importantly to inculcate reading habit among youngsters.

Tariq bin Ali al Kaabi explains about the books to the curious onlookers in an effort to convince them that there is no alternative to books in paper form as he wants to spread sense for books among one and all while enjoying the fresh air at the beachfront.

From doing his diploma in mathematics to serving his

father's law firm, Tariq wore many hats at a very young age of 24. His chance visit to Oman from Iran as a tourist and getting stuck in the country during the COVID-19 travel restrictions, changed his course of life. By his forced overstay in Oman, he started liking the country, its people and way of life.

Tariq came to Muscat as a tourist just before the spread of the COVID-19. TURN TO P2

■ FROM PAGE 1

Raising awareness for reading books despite odds

He managed to visit Muscat International Book Fair where he got in touch with some good people and got a sense that some Omanis have fairly better sense for books. He added some more books to his existing collection. By the time he decided go back to his home country, there was ban on international flights. Left with no option he started passing time by reading books and managed to make both ends meet with the help of some local friends.

Asked for the reason behind choosing the location to keep his collection of books to raise awareness, Tareq

quipped, "Simply it was an idea after I went to the beach on one night and spent time there. Since the facilities at the beach were too expensive for me, I decided to do something constructive and sat with my collection of books at one corner of the beachfront. Moreover, I love the sea and calmness around it."

"I did not count the number of visitors, but I can say with confidence that no one can pass without having a look at the platform, even for taking pictures or carefully reviewing the titles being offered. Since I am keeping only English books, many

suggested adding Arabic titles," said Tareq, while talking about response for his venture to encourage reading habit among the youngsters.

For books, Tareq does not find any competition from Internet, as he believes that the "Internet world is beautiful, and it is no secret that it has provided us many new things... but for me it has not succeeded in replacing the books in paper form."

He is hugely thankful to Professor Ayman al Maashari and Shaikh Talal al Ahseni for being with him in difficult times and making him able to stay in this beautiful country.

■ SECRETARY-GENERAL RECEIVES UK'S CHIEF OF AIR STAFF



Mohammed bin Nasser al Rasbi, Secretary-General at the Ministry of Defence, received Admiral Tony Radakin, Chief of the British Naval Staff and his accompanying delegation, in his office at Mu'askar Al Murtafa on Tuesday. They exchanged cordial conversations and reviewed a number of views on several topics of common concern. The meeting was attended by the British Ambassador to the Sultanate and the Defence Attaché of the British Embassy in Muscat.

Applications invited for those who wish to work as foster-father

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabalnasseri

The Ministry of Social Development announced plans to conduct a training programme for those who wish to work as a foster-father.

A source at the ministry said that the foster-fathers would be responsible for taking care of young orphans at the childcare centres, where they have to supervises the boys over 12 years of age and have been transferred to youth integration homes distributed in Muscat and other governorates.

Those willing to get the position will have to pass through a special contract system and must register for the programme within five days from Tuesday. The source confirmed that the selection would be done on merit, as registration only is not the criterion for getting a contract. The right candidate will receive a monthly reward of RO 500.

According to the ministry source, children raised at childhood care centres are trained to develop their personality and general abilities.

Currently, there is a foster-father who has been appointed for each of these homes to supervise the wards. He follows them up until they get their own homes through the housing programme in cooperation with the Ministry of Housing.

Through its announcement, the ministry clarified the conditions for occupying the position of the foster father. His academic qualification should not be less than the general diploma or its equivalent, the applicant should not be a retired citizen from the public, private or from the military and security authorities. He should be of a good conduct and medically fit for service. He should be ready to accept the conditions and tasks necessary for the foster father in accordance with the terms



of the contract and should be in the age group of 40-50 years.

Some other conditions include, the candidates not been sentenced to an imprisonment for a felony or punishment for a crime involving dishonour or breach of trust, and to accept full-time work and residence in youth integration homes in accordance with the terms of the contract.

The ministry said preference is there for those having qualification, certificates, experiences, or interests in the educational, religious, social and psychological fields, or those who have contributions in the voluntary field.

The childhood care centres are social institutions which provide care to orphan children and those in need of care. It works as one of the departments of the General Directorate of Family Development at the Ministry of Social Development. The centre provides a range of integrated and comprehensive services with the aim of helping children integrate into society and have a decent life.

The centre follows the villages system, which is a system comprising 24 neighbouring houses. Each house accommodates 4-6 children Each house has a substitute mother or a foster mother who takes care of these children, raises them and serve them just as her own children. The philosophy of this social project is based on caring for orphans and helping them approach family and community life.

Al Jisr Charity donates sixteen ambulances to health ministry



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 8

Al Jisr Charity Association on Tuesday handed over 16 ambulances to the Directorate General of Health Services in Al Dakhiliyah, South Al Batinah and North Al Batinah. The Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah was provided with eight Ambulances, and Al Batinah South, and Al Batinah North got the rest.

The handover ceremony was held in the presence of Dr Fatima bint Mohammed al Ajmiyah, MOH's Under-Secretary for Administrative, Financial, and Planning Affairs, and Dina al Khalili, Head of Al Jisr Foundation, as well number of the ministry's senior officials at MOH's headquarters.

The Under-Secretary said that this initiative of Al Jisr Charity Association in funding the purchase of 16 ambulances for the governorates underlined the Foundation's social responsibility in uplifting community services



and development projects for the common good all across the Sultanate.

General Manager of Al Jisr Foundation emphasised the company vision in strengthening the health sector in the Sultanate as part of its sustainable projects.

Al Khalili also stressed the importance of the partnership between civil society and the government sector, as well the Foundation's keenness to support the efforts of the Ministry of Health in the Sultanate, especially during the COVID-19

pandemic. It is notable that the funding of ambulances was within the Foundation support for the Ministry of Health in combating COVID-19 pandemic. The Foundation allocated RO 2 million for the pandemic.

Vision-2040 gives roadmap for future plans

MUSCAT: The Sultanate has taken giant strides and is looking forward with confidence to future development, based on Oman Vision-2040.

This was stated by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, during the 9th Arab-Greek Economic Forum (AGEF).

Al Yousuf represented the Sultanate at the two-day meeting, held via videoconferencing.

He described Oman Vision-2040 as a road map to plans, programmes and projects that Oman intends to accomplish over the next 20 years. The Sultanate seeks to join the club of advanced countries by implementing the strategic vision and espousing the approach of economic diversification, "which secures to our country a balanced and sustainable



development", said Al Yousuf.

The minister added that the Sultanate sought to establish an attractive investment climate and provide solid infrastructure to support investment (including world-class roads, high-tech airports and seaports, advanced industrial estates and information societies). Oman has set up one of the Middle East's largest economic zones (Special Economic

Zone in Duqm), to accommodate major international investments, he said.

The Sultanate is also working to attract foreign investments by offering them the necessary incentives and localising technology so that Oman-made products could penetrate the global market by adding new destinations, said the minister, noting that new laws and legislations are in

place to enhance economic growth and equate Omani norms with international practices in this field.

Business developments in Oman-Greek relations bode well for the expansion of future economic cooperation, said Al Yousuf, who called upon Greek businessmen and investors to explore investment opportunities available in the Sultanate.

Organised to foster economic relations between Arab countries and Greece, the AGEF, in particular, sheds light on the economic potential of the Sultanate, given its strategic location and its proximity to major global commercial corridors. A special session in the AGEF event was accorded to the Sultanate to familiarise investors about incentives and opportunities in Oman.

— ONA

WHO urges caution as temperatures drop

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

With the winter setting in across the region, WHO has warned the risk of increased transmission of COVID-19.

WHO released updated mask use guidance that advises the use of masks in indoor spaces when with other people, and where ventilation is poor or where air quality is unknown.

"A few countries have made progress in controlling the outbreak, while others are still seeing unprecedented increases in the number of cases, and sometimes even the number of deaths," Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO regional director for East Mediterranean, said.

He said that WHO and partners are trying to ensure equitable distribution of effective vaccines to low- and middle-income countries once they are granted emergency use listing or authorisation by an appropriate regulatory body. Through COVAX, approximately 20 per cent of populations at highest risk will be prioritised for the vaccine.

"However, this will leave many more people still at risk and the virus with an opportunity to continue to spread. We need to remain absolutely committed to promoting and adhering to all of the public health and social measures that we know work, including testing all suspect cases, isolating all confirmed cases and tracing contacts," he said.

CBSE board exams in Feb-March

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 8

The CBSE Class 10, 12 board exams for 2021 will be held in February-March.

The Central Board of Secondary Education has no plan to delay 2021 Class 10, 12 board exams, an official said. The CBSE official made the statement few days after the CBSE announced that the board exams for 2021 will be conducted offline.

The CBSE official said that it is likely that students will get more gap days between their exams than 2020 due COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of classes due to the lockdown.



MoH honours project teams

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 8

The Ministry of Health honoured the team members who participated in the Leadership and Decision-Making book and the Privileged Initiatives of the Annual Leadership Forum (2017-2018) at the National Bank of Oman (NBO) headquarters on Tuesday.

The honouring ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, in the presence of Dr Darwish al Maharbi, member of State Council along with senior officials of MoH and NBO.

These projects are incentives for the ministry's staff in all organisational divisions to provide their ideas and initiatives that contribute to improve their performance.

Al Saeedi praised all the projects of the Ministry of Health that promote the administrative and medical staff. He stressed that no institution could succeed without wise and empowered leadership. In addition, the Minister of Health pointed out that the Leadership and Decision-Making book will not be restricted only to the health sector workers but also the various government and private sectors. He added that the book is a chance to exchange experiences and

best leadership practices for the most important researches and studies that address the administration issues.

Dr Al Maharbi applauded the role of all the team members and the Minister of Health for supporting these projects. Al Maharbi affirmed that the book, which worked on for eight-year, addresses the leadership requirements and components.

The ceremony reviewed the idea and phases of the Leadership and Decision-Making book. The book reflects a series of scientific achievements of the ministry at a time when the health systems facing unusual challenges.

Regarding the Annual Leadership

Forum, Bader al Muqaimi, Assistant Director-General of Administrative Affairs of Human Resources and Head of Coordination & Follow-up Committee of the Leadership Forum, clarified that this is the seventh version of the Forum since 2013.

He added that this year's forum included different programmes such as medical care services like communicable diseases surveillance and control, and operationalises medical care departments in the hospitals including computerised programmes in the personnel and financial affairs, in addition to initiatives addressed to develop the health services and reduce their costs.

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Plan to standardise records, set up data backup centre

MUSCAT: The board of directors of the National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA) held its meeting on Monday. The meeting was chaired by Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, and Chairman of NRAA.

During the meeting, the NRAA reviewed the progress of work on a project (code-named “Wusool”) on the management of electronic records and archives, a key programme of the NRAA this year.

The project seeks to set up a standard, comprehensive schema featuring all necessary components of records and archives and documenting their stages till their final setup. The schema aims to streamline electronic records in line with the



During the meeting, the NRAA reviewed the progress of work on a project (code-named “Wusool”) on the management of electronic records and archives, a key programme of the NRAA this year

National Records’ Management Procedures Directory.

The board also looked into the functioning of the Data Backup Centre that looks after the records of different departments. Based in the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, the centre will

be the government’s operational cloud space for the management of records.

The electronic records and archives schema will be launched early next year. The board discussed the proposal to establish the Data Backup Centre of the NRAA outside Muscat Governorate. It also looked into reports of accomplished tasks and future visions to keep pace with developments in the field of records and archives.

The meeting followed up the implementation of past decisions of the board and studied the minutes of the 15th meeting of the board, as well as the 2021 plan of the NRAA, which will be submitted to the Council of Ministers. — ONA

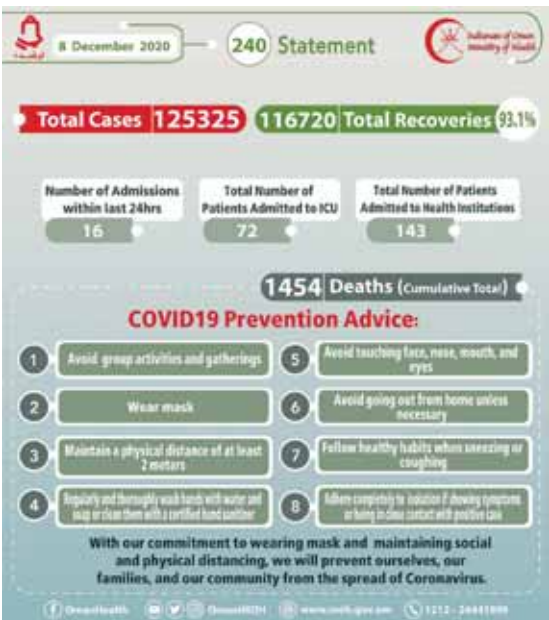
Oman takes part in GCC meeting

MUSCAT: The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, participated in the 82nd meeting of the GCC Negotiating Team on Monday.

The Sultanate was represented by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, head of the Omani negotiating team. The virtual meeting was attended by a number of officials from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy and the Directorate General of Customs.

The negotiating team is concerned with managing negotiations and international relations between the GCC countries and other economic blocs. The team discussed the general principle of strengthening the negotiation mechanism, increasing the effectiveness of the negotiating team’s work and the GCC Unified Deal with China, Australia and New Zealand. The meeting also touched on the results of the consultative meeting of GCC Commerce Ministers on negotiations of free trade agreements. — ONA

COVID-19 cases stand at 125,325



MUSCAT: The total number of positive COVID-19 cases in the Sultanate reached 125,325, while the number of recoveries stood at 116,720, comprising 93.1 per cent. Meanwhile, the total number of COVID-19 death cases stood at 1,454, the Ministry of Health said. The Ministry also pointed out that 16 cases were hospitalised over the past 24 hours, adding that the total number of current hospitalised COVID-19 infected patients stands at 143, of them 72 are in intensive care units (ICU). — ONA

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Agriculture and fisheries growth above 6% in 2019



SAMUEL KUTTY

@samkuttyvp

Despite a general contraction in demand, the agriculture and fisheries sector grew by a solid pace of 6.1 per cent in 2019.

The sector contributed 3.4 per cent of non-hydrocarbon GDP and 2.4 per cent of aggregate GDP in 2019, though the trend moderated from an average annual growth of 7.5 for the previous three years 2016-2018.

"As food security has become a more important area for development in the Sultanate, initiatives and projects driven by new technologies have already started to yield results," points out the 2019 annual report of the Central Bank of

Oman.

The report reveals that the state-owned Oman Food Investment Holding Company is considering establishing three more projects to promote food security: an integrated fruit and vegetable marketing company, an improved logistics programme and a food technopark.

Yet the report points out that with the exception of a few crops, agriculture has a limited scope in the Sultanate due to natural constraints, such as scanty rainfall and very limited underground water."

"As a result, Oman largely depends on imports for consumption needs of food grains and other agricultural products. Consequently,

Oman Food Investment Holding Company is considering establishing three more projects to promote food security: an integrated fruit and vegetable marketing company, an improved logistics programme and a food technopark

the price situation in Oman is mostly influenced by international commodity prices which on the other hand lead to imported inflation", the report said.

On the other hand, points out the report, the fisheries sector has immense potential with large marine endowments of over 3,000 KM coastline and accordingly, it was part of the ninth Five-Year Development Plan and the Tanfeedh programme.

Projects and initiatives for the development of the sector include development of dedicated fishing ports, farming of shrimp and abalone, and the revision of national aquaculture health management regulations. The ninth Five-Year Development Plan had set a target of an average annual growth rate of 6.5 per cent for fishing activities to increase its share in GDP to 0.6 per cent by 2020.

ROP TAKES PART IN INTERPOL MEET



The Royal Oman Police (ROP) participated in the meeting of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) on global police cooperation in light of COVID-19. The virtual meeting was chaired by Col. Salim bin Said Al Maamari, Assistant Director-General of Criminal Inquiries and Investigations. The meeting dealt with many topics related to international cooperation in security and the unprecedented challenges to address the emerging crimes due to the coronavirus pandemic. — ONA

JOB OPPORTUNITY

A leading local IT company is looking to recruit young, dynamic and result oriented applicants as part of expansion plans for its business in the Sultanate of Oman for the following position:

THE JOB:

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Ref: SL06

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- ❖ Liaise with and working alongside technical sales engineers.
- ❖ Offer customer training.
- ❖ Plan and schedule preventive maintenance to customers.
- ❖ Plan and schedule planned and unplanned work.
- ❖ Repair, test and maintain equipment sold to customers.
- ❖ Diagnose breakdown problems.
- ❖ Monitor the performance of products.
- ❖ Provide customers with regular reports and feedback on their service requests.
- ❖ Develop and maintain relationships with customers.
- ❖ Make recommendations to maintenance technicians.
- ❖ Offer feedback on future product development, features and functions.

Minimum Qualifications:

- ❖ University degree in IT, Computer or Networking.
- ❖ At least 6 years of experience in similar position is a must.
- ❖ Excellent command of English language.
- ❖ Excellent communication, negotiation and Presentation skills
- ❖ Work Under Pressure
- ❖ DELL Products Experience Like (VXRail , V SAN , HCI , Storages, Servers) is preferred
- ❖ Ability to learn new technologies in short time

PROCESS:

Interested Candidates who believe they have what it takes are advised to submit their comprehensive CV's any time before 15th of December, 2020. Please mention the job reference number in the email subject.

Email: hromanoffice1@gmail.com

Royal Hospital launches Oman's first advanced cancer therapy



STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 8

The National Oncology Center of the Royal Hospital launched the first advanced therapeutic technology in the Sultanate to treat cancers that affect lung, liver and spine.

The delivery of the new technology, called stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT) aims at boosting patient response to treatment, and minimising patient's pains experienced in advanced-stage of tumours, in addition to improving the quality of patients' life and their engagement in basic daily activities.

The procedure, stated

Dr Thuraya al Hajri, Head of Radiotherapy at NOC, enhances the effectiveness of conventional treatment. It pinpoints the exact location of a tumour so that the radiation can be more precisely pointed at cancer cells in a way that minimises damage to healthy tissues. Al Hajri emphasised that the department is acquiring the state-of-art equipment and devices while keeping pace with latest advanced technologies in the radiotherapy domain.

Eqbaal al Aamri, head of the physiatry, pointed out that the Center's physical medicine team performed tests and measurements of the radiation doses used to treat patients.

Since the procedure requires very intense doses of radiation, it was necessary to ensure safety and quality of the devices in addition to the accuracy of the therapeutic planning used before starting the treatment of any patient as per international radiotherapy standards.

It is worth to mention that the hospital's National Oncology Center is considered one of the best-specialised cancers treatment centres in the Middle East and the world, and is equipped with the latest medical equipment and devices. The center is striving to cope with the latest medical, diagnostic and therapeutic methods and techniques in the field of oncology.

Auction Announcement



Rural Areas Electricity Company (S.A.O.C) hereby announces auction as mentioned in the following table:

Auction No.	Material for Sale	Last date of Buying	Preview Date	Last date of Submission
04/2020	Selling of Electrical Scrap Materials in Shaab Assaib Power Station in Dhofar Governorate	15/12/2020	16-17/12/2020	20/12/2020

In accordance with the following conditions:

- Interested and Specialized Companies and Establishments registered with Tender Board and Rural Areas Electricity company may obtain the auction documents from Procurement & Contracts Department, against non-refundable payment of RO. 50/- (Rial Omani Fifty Only) for each set of documents. The fees for the tenders shall be deposited on Tanweer account 0423010783090041 – Bank Muscat and for more information please contact via email address i.e. tender.purchase@tanweer.nama.om , or call us on phone number : 24250824.
- Offers should be submitted in sealed envelopes addressed to the Chairman of Purchase Committee, Rural Areas Electricity Company (S.A.O.C), marked with the auction number and subject. Other marks or reference whatsoever should be printed on the envelope. The identity of the bidder should not be revealed and should be submitted before 1:00 P.M. on the assigned date for submission of the auction.
- The buyer must pay the complete amount of his offer within **Two Week** of such notification by deposit or certified cheque.
- The buyer must transfer all the material and clean the location within **One Month** from the date of client notification for taking the materials. If the buyer does not transfer the materials purchased within the specified period, the same will be confiscated by the company. Such confiscated materials will be released to the buyer upon payment of demurrage charges to be calculated by the Seller.
- Tanweer has the right to accept or reject any offer without giving reasons.
- Preview of the material will be during the formal working hours on the dates specified above.

For more information please call: 80077787



Tanweer

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■ UZBEKISTAN BRINGS HOME PEOPLE FROM SYRIA



People disembark from a plane upon their arrival from Syria at an airport in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on Tuesday. Uzbekistan brought home 25 women and 73 children from Syria where they had been staying at camps with other families of IS fighters, the Tashkent government said. — Reuters

Kuwait emir reappoints Shaikh Sabah as PM

KUWAIT CITY: Kuwait's Emir Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmad al Sabah reappointed Shaikh Sabah Al Khalid al Sabah as prime minister on Tuesday after he had submitted his government's resignation in a procedural step following parliamentary polls in the Gulf Arab state.

Emir Shaikh Nawaf, who took over the reins of the OPEC member state in September after the death of his brother, has asked Shaikh Sabah to nominate members of a new cabinet for



approval by the emir, said a decree carried on state media.

In another development, the

United Arab Emirates appreciates efforts by Kuwait and the United States to strengthen Gulf Arab unity, a senior Emirati official said on Tuesday.

The Twitter post by UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash comes after Kuwait and Saudi Arabia said progress had been made towards resolving the row that has seen Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt sever diplomatic, trade and travel ties with Qatar since mid-2017. — Reuters

Woman competes at Middle East's top falconry show

RIYADH: Athari al Khaldi stands out amid a sea of men and falcons at the Middle East's top falconry competition: the first Saudi woman to qualify and participate in the event.

"With my participation... I proved I am here, that women can join this field, that it's not only restricted to men," she said, alongside her falcon Ma'aned. Falconry is an important part of the desert heritage of Arabs of Saudi Arabia and neighbouring countries going back thousands of years.

The two-week King Abdulaziz Falconry Festival, which gathers more than 4,000 falcons



Athari al Khaldi holds a falcon during the show in Riyadh. — Reuters

from the Gulf and further afield, honoured Al Khaldi's presence with an award for the first female to make a qualifying competition flight with her bird. Al Khaldi first participated last year, but her bird refused to take flight. Determined, she returned this year and her bird successfully flew.

"Dealing with the birds, it is not easy... they are sensitive and need special treatment," she said, adding that it requires patience and persistence. "Falconry has been a well-known heritage since ancient times. We take pride in it," she said. — Reuters

Unicef seeks \$2.5b for Mideast children



AMMAN: The UN children's agency has appealed for \$2.5 billion in new funds for 39 million children in the Middle East and North Africa impacted by war, poverty and the coronavirus pandemic.

"The region is home to the highest number of children in need in the world," said Ted Chaiban, Unicef regional director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"This is largely due to man-made crises including armed conflicts, poverty and economic stagnation."

He said the latest appeal "aims to reach children with critical humanitarian assistance and continue responding to the massive needs emerging as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Children are most in need in war-torn Yemen, in and outside conflict-ravaged Syria, and in Sudan, Unicef said in a statement.

In Yemen, 12 million children, or almost every child, need assistance after five years of

conflict, it said.

In Syria, 4.8 million children need aid after a civil war has killed more than 380,000 people, displaced millions and ravaged the economy.

A further 2.5 million live as refugees in neighbouring countries after their parents fled the almost ten-year conflict.

In Sudan, 5.3 million children need aid because of unprecedented floods, an economic crisis and a sweeping political transition from autocratic rule toward democracy.

In Lebanon, 1.9 million children now rely on assistance as the economy has plummeted and following a massive explosion in Beirut that killed more than 200 people and ravaged large parts of the capital in August.

Most funds requested in Unicef's appeal would go towards supporting children's education, while the rest would ensure access to water, sanitation, healthcare and nutrition, and mental health support, it said. — AFP

Forgotten Syrians need winter help, says author

PARIS: The world can't forget the plight of Syrian refugees this winter despite the global upheaval caused by COVID-19, fantasy author Neil Gaiman said on Tuesday as he helped launch the UN refugee programme's cold weather appeal.

The award-winning writer said the pandemic had exposed weaknesses in governments' ability to respond to crises, and should serve as a reminder that refugees are ordinary people dealing with upheaval.

"The thing that if anything 2020 has intensified, is that we are all one step away from being refugees," Gaiman, Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, said.

"We all had plans for 2020. And God has given us a completely different 2020 instead.

"For most refugees, that's their plot too. They had plans for their life, they were trying to be where they were because most people like being where they are, and then everything went wrong," he said.

Gaiman, famed for his surreal novel *The Sandman* comic series,



Many Syrian refugees in countries such as Lebanon are struggling to survive freezing temperatures and torrential rains in makeshift shelters. — AFP

collaborated with hundreds of fans and artists to release a new animated version of his crowd-sourced poem, "What You Need to Be Warm".

"People are incredibly resilient, people are imaginative, people are creative," he said. "But for a lot of people, and for a lot of refugees, 2020 may have been the final

aftershock of the earthquake that finally brings down the house."

UNHCR has warned that winter 2020 — for some their ninth away from home — is likely to be the harshest yet for the more than six million Syrian refugees who fled their country during the near-decade long civil war.

Annual challenges such as snow

and freezing temperatures will be harder to manage as COVID-19 has drastically affected relief campaigns.

"It's very easy to forget the refugee crisis, it's very easy to forget that there are nearly 80 million people forcibly displaced right now in the world," said Gaiman. "And we can't forget them." — AFP

CAIRO

Young Egyptian finds fortune in scorpions

Several years ago, a young Egyptian man abandoned his degree in archaeology to hunt scorpions in the country's deserts and shores, extracting their venom for medicinal use.

At just 25 years old, Mohamed Hamdy Boshita is now the owner of the Cairo Venom Company — a project housing 80,000 scorpions in various farms across Egypt as well as a range of snakes, also kept for their venom.

Caught using a coloured UV



light, the scorpions are exposed to a tiny electric current to stimulate the release of the venom, one gramme of which can produce between 20,000 and 50,000 doses of antivenom. — Reuters

GAZA CITY

Gaza receives virus test kits, resumes screening

Hamas said it had received nearly 20,000 coronavirus test kits from the World Health Organization, after warning it could no longer perform testing in the Gaza Strip due to a shortage.

The health ministry of the movement initially said on Monday the only laboratory in the territory able to analyse COVID-19 test samples had ceased its work "due to a lack of equipment" and called for urgent action.



In a later statement, the ministry said it had received 19,500 kits from the WHO, allowing testing to restart. But the newly arrived batch "is only enough for eight days", it added. — AFP

TEHRAN

Floods kill seven after heavy rains

Seven people have died in floods in southern Iran after torrential rain, state news agency IRNA said.

The fatalities were recorded in Bushehr and Hormozgan, IRNA reported, citing Mehdi Valipour, head of rescue and emergency operations for Iran's Red Crescent. Valipour said that flooding had also hit Isfahan, Yazd, Fars and Tehran provinces, noting that his organisation had helped more than 1,000 people in the last 24 hours. Rains were particularly



heavy in November, bringing relief for arid areas, but authorities have become increasingly concerned about the effect of the intensified downpours of recent days. — AFP



In brief

■ NEW DELHI

**LOWEST DAILY RISE
IN VIRUS CASES
SINCE JULY 10**

India reported 26,567 new coronavirus infections, data from the health ministry showed on Tuesday, the lowest daily increase since July 10, according to a Reuters tally. Daily cases have been falling in India since hitting a peak in September. The country has 9.7 million cases, the second-highest caseload in the world after the United States. Deaths rose by 385, the health ministry said, with the total now at 140,958.

Meanwhile, in Andhra Pradesh authorities are investigating if organochlorines used as pesticides or in mosquito control caused the death of one person and hospitalisation of more than 400 in the state in the past few days. — **Reuters**

■ MANILA

**AFP RECEIVES
MILITARY EQUIPMENT
FROM US**

The Philippines has received 1.4 billion pesos (\$29 million) worth of military equipment from the United States, its defence minister said on Tuesday, part of efforts to bolster the country's external defence and counter-terrorism capabilities. Equipment including sniper rifles and anti-improvised explosive device gear was handed over during a visit by acting US Defence Secretary Christopher Miller, who is on a two-nation visit in Southeast Asia. "The modernisation of the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) will ultimately allow us to respond more effectively to both traditional and non-traditional security threats to our maritime nation," Philippines Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said in a statement. — **Reuters**

■ TOKYO

**ASTEROID SAMPLE
ARRIVES AFTER 6-YEAR
SPACE ODYSSEY**

Samples of an asteroid 300 million km from Earth arrived in Japan on Tuesday to applause and smiles, the climax of a six-year odyssey by a space probe pursuing the origins of life. Named for the peregrine falcon, the Hayabusa2 blasted off for the asteroid Ryugu in December 2014, overcoming an unexpectedly rough landing surface to collect samples of asteroid dust in a capsule. That capsule plunged to earth in Australia on Sunday and was flown to Japan. The final stage of its journey was by truck to the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) research centre outside Tokyo, where it was greeted by a crowd of excited researchers. — **Reuters**

Farmers protest across India

NEW DELHI/MUMBAI:

Farmers' protests against new laws liberalising agricultural markets spread across India on Tuesday, as farm organisations called for a nationwide strike after inconclusive talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

In eastern and western states, farmers blocked roads and squatted on railway tracks, delaying hordes of people getting to work, and preventing perishable produce from reaching markets.

Farmers from the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, neighbouring New Delhi, have been at the vanguard of the agitation since last month, and have set up protest camps in and around the capital.

"We will not allow the government to change the rules because they want to hurt farmers' income by filling the pockets of big companies," said Gurwinder Singh, a 66-year-old farmer from Punjab, a state known as the food bowl of India.

The reforms enacted in September loosened rules around



Indian security personnel stand guard at the Delhi-Haryana state border in Singhu on Tuesday during a nationwide general strike called by farmers. — **AFP**

the sale, pricing and storage of farm produce that have protected farmers from an unfettered free market for decades.

Assured of floor prices, most currently sell the bulk of their produce at government-controlled wholesale markets, known as

mandis.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has said the reforms would not hurt farmers' incomes. More talks between the government and farmer organisations are due on Wednesday.

Meantime, social media has fanned sympathy for the farmers' cause among the Indian diaspora abroad. During recent days, thousands of people have protested in support of the farmers outside the Indian embassy in central London. — **Reuters**

■ SOUTH KOREA COLLEGE-ENTRANCE EXAM



High school students make their way to and from sitting 'Susi' college admissions exams, amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, outside the gates of Yonsei university in Seoul on Tuesday. — **AFP**

Nepal, China agree on revised height of Everest

KATHMANDU: Nepal and China have agreed for the first time on the height of Mount Everest: 8,848.86 metres.

The revised snow height — some 86 centimetres taller than Nepal's previous official figure — was announced jointly during a Tuesday videoconference attended by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Nepalese counterpart, Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, after independent surveys carried out by both countries.

Nepal had sent a team of surveyors to the top of the peak in May 2019, while China sent a team earlier this year — the only climbers to reach the summit this year, because of coronavirus travel restrictions.

It was the first time Nepal had independently carried out such measurements on the world's highest peak, amid speculation of a possible change in height due to global warming and a 2015 earthquake.

Nepal used to recognise 8,848 metres as Mount Everest's official snow height, according to the results of a survey conducted by India in the early 1950s. But more recent measurements have



Nepal and China jointly announced a 'revised height' for Mount Everest on Tuesday. — **AFP**

come up with different figures.

Although China had measured Mount Everest a few times in the past, it also decided to remeasure the peak after Nepal announced its own initiative.

The two countries last year signed an agreement to jointly announce the height, and the new figure is expected to put an end to the debate surrounding the highest point in the world.

Janakraj Joshi, a spokesperson

for the Ministry of Land Management Cooperative and Poverty Alleviation - the ministry that conducted the survey - said that it was a historic moment.

"It's important to remember that Nepal has never measured the peak although it has been measured multiple times in the last 200 years. It's certainly a proud moment for us all," Joshi said. — **dpa**

US military rejects report on Afghan civilian deaths



Afghan National Army soldiers keep watch outside of a military compound in Ghazni. — **Reuters**

KABUL: The US military in Afghanistan on Tuesday rejected a "one-sided" report that found civilian casualties caused by American and coalition airstrikes soared after Washington relaxed its rules of engagement.

The number of civilians killed annually in the strikes increased by 330 per cent from 2016 to 2019 as the US escalated attacks on the Taliban, according to the Costs of War Project at Brown University.

The report linked the increase to Washington loosening the criteria for strikes as it reduced the number of US troops on the ground.

Airstrikes killed 700 civilians last year — the highest toll since the war began in 2001-2002 — with the Afghan Air Force now "harming more Afghan civilians than at any time in its history", said Neta C. Crawford, co-director of the project.

But Colonel Sonny Leggett, spokesman for US forces in Afghanistan, said

the analysis was "one-sided", and relied on disputed data that "ignores civilian casualties caused by the Taliban and ISIS".

Leggett also defended Afghan security forces, saying they had taken an "extraordinary amount of effort and care" to prevent civilian casualties.

The US eased back on airstrikes after agreeing on a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020, but Afghan forces have filled the breach even as they entered talks with the insurgents.

While total deaths from airstrikes have fallen this year, casualties from Kabul's forces have accelerated in recent months, the report said.

Crawford said some 86 Afghan civilians were killed and 103 injured in Afghan airstrikes in the first six months of this year.

In the next three, despite Afghan-Taliban talks in Doha, the toll intensified — with 70 civilians killed and 90 injured. — **AFP**

PUSHING THE RESOLUTE DESK!



The grandchildren of wrestler Dan Gable lean against the Resolute Desk as US President Donald Trump speaks during a ceremony presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Gable, making him the first wrestler in history to receive the honor. Describing Gable's collegiate record, Trump said: "He won 117 consecutive matches and lost only one. Well, you know, in politics, I won two, so I'm 2-0, and that's pretty good, too. But we'll see how that turns out." – AFP

Irish leaders welcome UK-EU deal on N Ireland



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson leaves 10 Downing Street in London to attend the weekly cabinet meeting. – AFP

LONDON: Britain and the European Union on Tuesday announced a deal to manage post-Brexit trade with Northern Ireland, which will have the UK's only land border with the bloc from next year.

Irish leaders welcomed comments from senior UK minister Michael Gove and European Commission vice president Maros Sefcovic that agreement had been made "in principle" to cover border arrangements.

The deal, after talks between the pair in Brussels on Monday, will see London cut three controversial clauses in a bill that would have denied Brussels a say in future trading arrangements between the province and EU member Ireland.

That could in turn lighten the fraught atmosphere facing Prime Minister Boris Johnson when he heads to Brussels this week for wider talks to try to clinch an elusive trade pact with the EU.

Irish prime minister Micheal Martin welcomed the breakthrough announced by

Gove and Sefcovic, who co-chair a committee tasked with implementing the UK-EU divorce treaty.

"Protecting the Good Friday Agreement is vital," Martin said, referring to the 1998 peace deal that ended three decades of violence over British rule of Northern Ireland.

Ahead of Johnson's trip, Irish foreign minister Simon Coveney noted the deal had wider implications.

"Of particular significance is the commitment by the UK to withdraw clauses 44, 45 and 47 of the Internal Market Bill bringing it back into line with its obligations under the (EU) Withdrawal Agreement," he said.

"I hope this may also provide some of the positive momentum necessary to instil confidence and trust, and allow progress in the wider context of the future relationship negotiations."

Northern Ireland's border with the Republic of Ireland is meant to stay open in all circumstances as part of the 1998 peace deal.

— AFP

Biden picks defence secretary

WASHINGTON: President-elect Joe Biden has chosen Lloyd Austin, who led US troops into Baghdad in 2003 and rose to head the US Central Command, as the first African-American secretary of defence, US media reported on Tuesday.

A veteran of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the retired four-star army general, 67, beat out the favorite for the job, former under-secretary of defence Michele Flournoy, amid pressure on Biden to nominate more minorities for positions in his cabinet.

CNN, Politico and The New York Times cited unnamed sources familiar with the decision, after Biden said that he had made his choice and would announce it on Friday.

Austin would require Senate confirmation to take up the post. He would also require a special waiver from the Senate due to federal law that requires military officers to wait seven years after retirement before serving as the Pentagon chief.

The rule is rooted in the view that only a civilian should serve as defence secretary.

The waiver has happened twice -- most recently for General Jim Mattis in 2017, President Donald Trump's first defence secretary.

But members of the Senate agreed begrudgingly, and several said at the time that they wouldn't want to do it again.

Austin spent four decades



Army General Lloyd Austin III, commander of the US Central Command, speaks during a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington, DC. – AFP

in the army, graduating from West Point Military Academy and following a career with a wide range of assignments, from leading platoons to running logistics groups and overseeing recruiting, to senior Pentagon jobs.

In March 2003, he was the assistant division commander of the 3rd Infantry Division when it marched into Baghdad.

From late 2003 to 2005, he was in Afghanistan commanding the Combined Joint Task Force 180, the principle US-led operation

seeking to stabilize the security situation in the country.

In 2010, he was made commanding general of US forces in Iraq, and two years later became the commander of the Central Command, in charge of all Pentagon operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

That put him in charge of the fight against the IS as it captured large swathes of Iraq and Syria.

During that period, he reportedly earned the trust of Biden, who was vice president at the time.

Austin would take responsibility for the 1.2 million active service members, of whom about 16 percent are Black.

But Black people serve disproportionately in the lower ranks, and few have achieved high command positions.

The issue became more clear over the past year when African-American servicemen and women expressed support for the national Black Lives Matter movement against police racism and abuse.

— AFP

Deforestation wiped out 8% of Amazon



The Amazon lost 500,000 km2 -- an area equivalent to the one of Spain -- due to deforestation between 2000 and 2018. – AFP

SAO PAULO: Deforestation in the Amazon destroyed an area bigger than Spain from 2000 to 2018, wiping out eight percent of the world's biggest rainforest, according to a study released Tuesday.

The Amazon plays a vital role in curbing climate change, but destruction of the rainforest has only accelerated in recent years, found the study by the Amazon Geo-Referenced Socio-Environmental Information Network (RAISG).

Since the turn of the millennium, 513,000 square kilometers of the rainforest have been lost, according to the updated Amazon atlas produced by the organization, a consortium of groups from across the region.

It is RAISG's first such atlas since 2012.

The consortium found that after hitting a high of 49,240 square kilometers of forest loss in

2003 -- a record for this century -- deforestation eased to a low of 17,674 square kilometers in 2010.

However, the destruction has since surged to startling levels.

"The Amazon is far more threatened than it was eight years ago," RAISG said in a statement.

"Deforestation has accelerated

since 2012. The annual area lost tripled from 2015 to 2018," the study found.

"In 2018 alone, 31,269 square kilometers of forest were destroyed across the Amazon region, the worst annual deforestation since 2003."

The Amazon stretches across

eight South American countries -- Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Suriname and Guyana -- and the territory of French Guiana.

Brazil, which holds most of the Amazon -- about 62 percent -- is also responsible for the worst deforestation, the study found: 425,051 square kilometers from 2000 to 2018.

The destruction in Brazil has only accelerated since far-right President Jair Bolsonaro took office in 2019, according to the government's own figures.

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon surged to a 12-year high of 11,088 square kilometers from July 2019 to July 2020, according to the Brazilian space agency, which analyzes satellite images to track forest loss.

That was a 9.5-percent increase from the previous year, when deforestation also hit a more than decade-long high. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

OSLO

Govt accuses hackers of parliament attack

Norway's domestic spy agency on Tuesday blamed a Russian hacker group linked to Moscow's military intelligence for a cyberattack on the Norwegian parliament earlier this year.

The Norwegian intelligence agency (PST) said the likely perpetrators were the Fancy Bear collective -- a group regularly accused of attacks including on the US election -- but there was not enough evidence to pursue charges.

A "vast" cyberattack on August



24 gained access to the emails of some MPs and parliamentary employees, officials announced at the time, without speculating on the identity of the attackers.

— AFP

ADDIS ABABA

Humanitarian situation 'critical' in Tigray

The humanitarian situation in Ethiopia's Tigray region is "increasingly critical", the UN refugee agency said on Tuesday, warning that access to deliver aid was desperately needed.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered troops into Tigray on November 4 following alleged attacks by Tigray People's Liberation Front forces on federal military camps in the northern region.

Abiy, the winner of last year's Nobel Peace Prize, declared



victory in Tigray on November 28, but said on Monday that efforts were ongoing to restore order, amid continued fighting and lawlessness that is hampering relief efforts. — AFP

BERLIN

Schools, shops closed as virus cases soar

The eastern German state of Saxony has imposed drastic measures shuttering schools, kindergartens and most shops to curb transmission, after it became the worst-hit coronavirus hotspot in the country.

"The situation in hospitals are not only tense, but extremely dangerous," Saxony state premier Michael Kretschmer said, warning that in some hospitals, intensive care wards were already full. The state has reported an incidence rate of 319 cases per



100,000 people in the last seven days -- more than twice that of the national average at 147.

The situation is even more severe in some towns within the state, the infection rate is above 500 cases per 100,000. — AFP

Let us work together to bring COVID-19 vaccine home

Some anxiety is definitely warranted, especially during worrisome situations like the current coronavirus pandemic. This applies not only to basic health questions such as the risk of becoming infected or becoming severely ill.

While fear about illness and death brings nervousness in life and prospects of avoiding it is a cause for optimism. This is what the world is facing today — anxiety about the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine!

And with the arrival of the vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech in Britain, the first Western country to begin vaccinating its population against the pathogen on Monday, people in other parts of the world have become more anxious about its availability even as there are huge logistical and infrastructural challenges to its rollout!

Yet there is now an extended anxiety after reports that the US, Canada, Malaysia, Japan, India and many European countries are getting ready for introducing the shots to their people. Like in other parts of the world, public expectations and anxiety



SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyvp

PUBLIC
EXPECTATIONS
AND ANXIETY IS
GROWING ABOUT
THE VACCINE'S
ARRIVAL

is growing about the vaccine's arrival in the Sultanate.

Even though there have been deliberations about the availability and the effectiveness of the vaccine, I heard an unmatched question asked in a group discussion that who would be getting it first in Oman despite government announcements that the elderly and vulnerable in the society and frontline staff will get them in the beginning and then in a descending order of priorities. It amazed me as if the question was raised out of the eagerness in availing the vaccine or wanted to become the first in the fray!

But for the government it will definitely be a Herculean effort if it is to take delivery of the Pfizer vaccine, which needs to be stored at the ultra-cold temperature of -70°C. This means the vaccine must be kept in specialised freezers. It is also a resource-intensive task that even the world's most sophisticated systems have them in their possession. It involves the kind of logistical support, coordination and synchronisation of other state

machinery as it is the first time that such an initiative is being undertaken.

To help with distributing its vaccine, Pfizer claims that it has developed a shipping container that can maintain the required temperature for up to 10 days unopened. With regular refills of dry ice, it can maintain that temperature for up to 30 days.

So the government and the society need to come together to be able to get the vaccine across to the length and breadth of the country regardless who will get it first. And our government is up for the challenge and is just waiting for the time.

It is worth mentioning what Dr Margaret Harris of the World Health Organization said in response to a question at a Geneva briefing, "Vaccines are a great tool, they will be very helpful, but the effect of the vaccine in providing some kind of immune barrier is still far off. The things that must be done to prevent an increase, an uptick, a surge or whatever you want to call it are the public health measures."

CLIMATE POLICY

Farmers must grow more on less land

MICHAEL TAYLOR

Tropical farmers will struggle to meet rising food demand unless they sustainably boost yields on the same land, with rising forest protection and carbon prices aimed at fighting climate change expected to hinder agriculture expansion, researchers said.

A report by thinktank Orbitas looked at the financial risks to tropical farmers and agricultural businesses — including palm oil, soybean and beef — if they do not adapt to new climate actions by governments, companies and consumers.

It found that those risks are as significant in agriculture as they are in the energy and transport sectors. If temperature increases are capped at 1.5 degrees Celsius, in line with the lower temperature goal of the Paris climate accord, up to 1.5 billion acres of agricultural land — or more than 10 per cent of agricultural land globally — will need to revert to forests, the report said.

This is partly due to an expectation that prices paid for carbon storage in forests could rise above the revenue that could be obtained from using that same land for agriculture, said Mark Kenber, managing director of Orbitas.

“A response to climate change that gets the world anywhere close to net-zero emissions will require farming and agro industry to transform,” Kenber added. “This is an enormous blind spot for investors.”

In 2019, tropical rainforests — whose preservation is considered crucial to limiting planetary heating — disappeared at a rate of one foot-

MARK KENBER
Orbitas

ball pitch every six seconds, according to data from online monitoring service Global Forest Watch.

Green groups blame the production of palm oil, the world's most widely used edible oil, and other agricultural commodities for much of the destruction, as carbon-storing forests are cleared for plantations, ranches and farms. Environmentalists say conserving existing forests and restoring damaged ones reduces the risk of drought and flooding, stores more planet-warming carbon and protects threatened biodiversity.

The Orbitas study focused on tropical farmers and agriculture businesses, many of which have large land banks for future expansion on their balance sheets.

It analysed the consequences for these firms from changing climate change policy — such as government carbon financing and forest protection schemes, corporate zero-deforestation and emissions pledges, and changes in consumer habits. It found that companies whose business strategies rely on expansion into forested territories will confront vastly increased land prices and possibly no access at all.

Those that already hold forest concessions as land banks will face significant asset stranding, although they could benefit from carbon credits if they adapt their businesses and become more sustainable and transparent. “Even under pretty modest policy, deforestation will have to end quite soon — and that's between 2025-2040 — depending on the carbon price and strength of policy,” London-based Kenber said.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

RISKY STRUCTURES

Can Istanbul stand up to the next big quake?

TESSA FOX

Leaning out of the ground-floor window of her home on a quiet street in suburban Istanbul, Aylin Yilmaz knows the house she has shared with her husband and two children for 20 years could easily be destroyed by an earthquake.

Scientists have long predicted that Bagcilar district, where Yilmaz lives, would suffer some of the highest rates of casualties and building damage if a major earthquake hits Turkey's largest city. But, her family cannot afford to make the structural changes that would keep their house standing through a massive seismic event and the government has offered no help, said Yilmaz, whose name has been changed to protect her identity.

“What can I do about it if there is an earthquake? I can't do anything. I'm just sitting here. So if I die or not, it's up to God,” she said.

Following a magnitude-6.9 earthquake that destroyed or heavily damaged more than 340 buildings and killed 115 people in the city of Izmir in October, scientists are sounding the alarm over how much damage Istanbul could sustain in the next big earthquake.

Pointing to the dangers of unregulated construction and old building stock, they warn that the government urgently needs to act on the city's earthquake preparedness plans to reduce the risk of mass casualties. “We have the rules, recommendations and road map,” said Haluk Eyidogan, an expert in seismology engineering and member of the Chamber of Geophysical Engineers of Turkey, a nonprofit organisation.

“We have to (start) immediately... to make a disaster-resilient society and system,” he said. Earthquake researchers predict there is a 95-per cent chance that an earthquake of



Old houses can be seen in front of modern skyscrapers in Istanbul during a week-end curfew aimed at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus. — AFP

SCIENTISTS HAVE
LONG PREDICTED
THAT BAGCILAR
WOULD SUFFER
SOME OF THE
HIGHEST RATES OF
CASUALTIES

magnitude 7.0 or stronger will strike the city within the next 70 years.

An earthquake of that strength would heavily damage or destroy an estimated 194,000 buildings, according to the latest version of Istanbul's Earthquake Master Plan, published in 2018. That would leave more than 10 per cent of Istanbul's 15 million residents homeless, said Eyidogan.

Much of the risk comes from the rapid, largely unregulated development carried out as the city struggled to accommodate all of the people migrating from the Anatolia region to find work in the financial capital over the past 15 years, he explained.

The head of the municipality's Earthquake Risk Management Department, Tayfun Kahraman, said in e-mailed comments that the city

now places more emphasis on stopping uncontrolled construction.

“As we do not believe that building regulations were applied correctly in Istanbul in the past, we... have increased risk avoidance efforts by 2020, both in terms of legal tools and implementation,” he said.

In the rush to house the city's growing population, many construction projects — such as adding floors onto existing buildings — are unplanned and skirt building standards, said Dogan Kalafat of the Kandilli Observatory and Earthquake Research Institute. Hoping to tackle the wave of illegal construction, the government launched a building amnesty in February 2019, which received applications from 7.4 million illegal structures.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

sport



Rafael van der Vaart and Daniele De Rossi with Fifa Director of Tournaments Jaime Yarza during the draw at Hallenstadion, Zurich, Switzerland. – Reuters

Holders France handed awkward draw

ENGLAND FACE POLAND IN 2022 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

PARIS: Holders France were handed an awkward draw in qualifying for the 2022 World Cup on Monday, with Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina standing in their way on the road to the finals in Qatar, while England will face Robert Lewandowski and Poland in their group.

Gareth Southgate's England, semifinalists in 2018 in Russia, will also take on Hungary and Albania as well as two of international football's minnows, Andorra and San Marino, in Group I.

France will also face Finland — who recently beat Les Bleus in a friendly in Paris — in Group D, with Kazakhstan completing the group that was drawn in a virtual ceremony at Fifa's headquarters in Zurich due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Didier Deschamps' side are in a group of just five teams because they will be involved in the finals of the Uefa Nations League in Italy next October.

One of the most significant results of Deschamps' time as France coach came in qualifying for the 2014 World Cup, when his side faced Ukraine in a deciding play-off. They lost 2-0 in the first leg in Kiev before winning 3-0 in the return.

"A qualifying campaign is always a long road where there can be pitfalls," Deschamps said. "It is better to avoid them."

As for England, it is the seventh time they have been drawn with Poland in World Cup qualifying.

Their most recent encounters came in the campaign for the 2014 finals, with the sides drawing 1-1 in Warsaw before England triumphed 2-0 at Wembley.

Most famously, England missed out on a place at the 1974 World Cup after losing 2-0 in Poland and

Qatar World Cup 2022: qualifying groups for European nations

Group A	B	C	D	E
Portugal	Spain	Italy	France	Belgium
Serbia	Sweden	Switzerland	Ukraine	Wales
Ireland	Greece	Northern Ireland	Finland	Czech Rep.
Luxembourg	Georgia	Bulgaria	Bosnia-Her.	Belarus
Azerbaijan	Kosovo	Lithuania	Kazakhstan	Estonia

F	G	H	I	J
Denmark	Netherlands	Croatia	England	Germany
Austria	Turkey	Slovakia	Poland	Romania
Scotland	Norway	Russia	Hungary	Iceland
Israel	Montenegro	Slovenia	Albania	North Macedonia
Faroe islands	Latvia	Cyprus	Andorra	Armenia
Moldova	Gibraltar	Malta	San Marino	Liechtenstein

Matches scheduled between March and November 2021

Source: FIFA

13 teams qualify: 10 group winners and 3 others determined after play-offs

AFP

then being held 1-1 at Wembley.

"There's a great history of that fixture. There was a spell when we seemed to draw them every time," said Southgate.

FIXTURE PILE-UP

The European qualifying competition begins in March, with 13 countries from the continent going through to the 32-team finals.

There will be three rounds of fixtures in March, three more in September and two each in October and November.

That will only increase pres-



sure on a fixture calendar that is already packed, especially with the postponed Euro 2020 set to go ahead in June and July.

That means a team that reaches the final of Euro 2020 can expect to play 17 competitive games between March and November next year.

Only the winners of the 10 groups will qualify automatically for the finals, which are to take place in November and December of 2022.

The 10 runners-up will go into play-offs alongside the two best

Nations League group winners who miss out on qualifying via the traditional path.

Those play-offs, in March 2022, will produce three more qualifiers in total.

Germany, whose coach Joachim Loew has been under severe pressure after poor recent results for the 2014 World Cup winners, will be expected to come through a group in which Romania and Iceland appear their main threats.

Reigning European champions Portugal's main opposition will come from Serbia and the Republic of Ireland in Group A. Cristiano Ronaldo will be 37 by the time the finals come around.

Spain notably drew Sweden and Greece in Group B, while Italy must take on Switzerland in Group C.

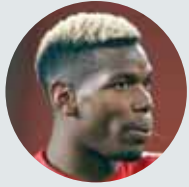
Belgium, the world's top-ranked team, will meet Wales. The sides met in the Euro 2016 quarterfinals with Wales coming out on top.

"We are not going to complain about the draw," said Belgium coach Roberto Martinez.

"It will also be an emotional reunion for me because it was in Wales, at Swansea, where I started my coaching career in 2007."

After qualifying for Euro 2020 to reach their first major tournament since the 1998 World Cup, Scotland were handed just about as kind a draw as possible on the road to 2022 as they were placed in Group F with Denmark and Austria.

"We have to be happy with the draw but very, very wary that it will be a dangerous draw as well," said Scotland manager Steve Clarke, whose side also face familiar foe Israel, the Faroe Islands and Moldova. — AFP



'Unhappy Pogba wants to leave United'

Paul Pogba is "unhappy" at Manchester United and should leave in the next transfer window, his agent Mino Raiola said, in comments that may signal the exit of the one-time world's most expensive player. Raiola said Pogba, needs a "change of scene" after struggling to establish himself under Solskjaer.



Norway coach Solbakken fined for violating quarantine

Norway's new national football coach, Stale Solbakken, has been fined for violating quarantine rules, a news report said on Tuesday. Solbakken told Oslo daily VG he has accepted a fine of 20,000 kroner (2,300 dollars) for failing to uphold a 10-day self-isolation period.

Australia win final T20I, India take the series

SYDNEY: Virat Kohli blasted 85 but it wasn't enough to prevent Australia from fighting off a T20 series sweep with a thrilling 12-run victory in the final match in Sydney on Tuesday.

While Kohli was at the crease in his imperious 61-ball knock, India had hopes of pulling off victory, but when he fell to a sensational diving outfield catch by Daniel Sams 11 balls from the finish India's hopes went with him.

Before a raucous crowd of over 30,000 — with attendance limits lifted in new COVID-19 protocols by the New South Wales state government — Australia set India a competitive 187-run target to chase.

But India could not replicate their dynamic batting at the Sydney Cricket Ground two nights ago when they sealed the T20 series after losing the preceding one-day international series 2-1 to the home side.

"At one stage when Hardik (Pandya) started going we thought we could pull it off," Kohli said.

"The middle over phase during our batting cost us the game. A partnership of 30-odd would've made it easier for Hardik.

"We are finding ways to come back and give the opposition a scare and the series win is a little asterisk for us to finish the 2020 season on a high."

Matthew Wade blasted his highest T20 score and an eventful Glenn Maxwell half-century lifted Australia to 186 for five after India had won the toss.



India players pose as they celebrate with the trophy after winning the series. — Reuters

Maxwell had a night out.

He survived two reviews, was caught off a no-ball, had a six prevented by athletic Sanju Samson fielding over the rope and finished with three sixes before he was out for 54 off 36 balls.

Wade put on 90 with Maxwell for the third wicket before he was leg before wicket to Shardul Thakur for 80 — his highest T20 score — off 53 balls with seven fours and two sixes.

"It was a great series, and we just happened to be on the wrong end of the first two," Australia captain Aaron Finch

At one stage when Hardik (Pandya) started going we thought we could pull it off. The middle over phase during our batting cost us the game. A partnership of 30-odd would've made it easier for Hardik

VIRAT KOHLI
Indian captain

said.

"It's the first time in a T20 series we've had two leg-spinners in the side, and they were bold with the short boundaries here, so credit to both of them."

SWEPSON SHINES

Maxwell was given the new ball and got KL Rahul's wicket with his second delivery in India's innings, hitting down the throat of Steve Smith at deep mid-wicket.

But Smith put down a similar catch when Kohli was on nine in Maxwell's next over in what could have been a major turning point.

Sams took a superb diving catch at the second grab in the deep to dismiss Shikhar Dhawan for 28 off leg-spinner Mitchell Swepson in the sixth over.

Smith made amends for his earlier costly fumble to catch Samson for 10 off Swepson and then pulled off an incredible leap over the ropes to prevent a six off Kohli next ball.

Sweepson finished his final over with the wicket of Shreyas Iyer, lbw for a first-ball duck to finish with three for 23. He was named man-of-the-match.

Sams had 20 runs taken off his second over, two sixes by Kohli

SCOREBOARD

Australia	
M Wade lbw Thakur.....	80
A Finch c Pandya b Sundar.....	0
S Smith b Sundar.....	22
G Maxwell b Natarajan.....	54
M Henriques (not out).....	5
D Short (run out).....	6
D Sams (not out).....	4
Extras (LB-1, NB-1, W-10).....	12
Total (for 5 wks, 20 overs).....	186
Fall of wickets: 1-14, 2-79, 3-169, 4-175, 5-182	
Bowling: Chahar 4-0-34-0, Sundar 4-0-34-2, Natarajan 4-0-33-1, Chahal 4-0-41-0, Thakur 4-0-43-1	
India	
KL Rahul c Smith b Maxwell.....	0
S Dhawan c Sams b Swepson.....	28
V Kohli c Sams b Tye.....	85
S Samson c Smith b Swepson.....	10
S Iyer lbw Swepson.....	0
H Pandya c Finch b Zampa.....	20
W Sundar c Tye b Abbott.....	7
S Thakur (not out).....	17
D Chahar (not out).....	0
Extras (B-1, W-6).....	7
Total (for 7 wks, 20 overs).....	174
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-74, 3-97, 4-100, 5-144, 6-151, 7-164	
Bowling: Maxwell 3-0-20-1, Abbott 4-0-49-1, Sams 2-0-29-0, Tye 4-0-31-1, Swepson 4-0-23-3, Zampa 3-0-21-1	

and another one from Pandya to rev up India's run-rate.

India needed 43 runs off the last three overs to win, but leg-spinner Adam Zampa crucially removed Pandya for 20, caught by Finch.

Pandya was subsequently named man of the series for his match-winning innings to guide India to a series win in the second T20 on Sunday.

"After the 2nd ODI we thought we'd think of this as a four-match series and we managed to get three wins, so we're happy with that," Pandya said.

Sams took another super diving catch to finish Kohli's innings and India's hopes off Andrew Tye in the penultimate over. — AFP



Y Horizon team after the victory.

Mazoon Dairy, TCM score emphatic victories

MUSCAT: Mothilal Thiru's superb work with bat and ball powered Y Horizon to an emphatic eight-wicket victory against Mazoon Dairy Company in an F Division T20 League game at OAC 3 ground in Seeb on Friday.

Sakil Khan's stroke 63 off 41 was the highlight of Mazoon Dairy's 162 for 8. Prashant Rana and Mothilal bowled exceptionally well, taking three and two wickets respectively.

Y Horizon faced no trouble overhauling the target in 16 overs, scoring 164 for 2 thanks to a wonderful 119-run second-wicket partnership between

BRIEF SCORES

F Division: Muscat Young Stars 98 for 9 in 20 overs (Ram Mohan 18 - 2x4, Sardar Ali Khan 3-13) lost to Team Coorg Muscat (TCM) for 99 for 1 in 12.2 overs (Arjun Halai 50 - 9x4, 1x6, Milind Bhujwala 32 - 5x4, Karthyic Ayush 1-14) by 9 wickets.

F Division: Mazoon Dairy Company 162 for 8 in 18 overs (Sakil Khan 63 - 6x4, 3x6, Mohammed Ali 27 - 3x4, Prashant Rana 3-20, Mothilal Thiru 2-11) lost to Y Horizon 164 for 2 in 16 overs (Mothilal Thiru 83 - 11x4, 2x6, Rasheed Rudhi 46 - 6x4) by 8 wickets.

opener Rasheed Rudhi (46) and Mothilal (83 not out off 44).

SARDAR, ARJUN HELP TCM TO VICTORY

In another F Division match at the same venue, Sardar Ali Khan's brilliant 3 for 13 and Arjun Halai's scintillating 50 not out were the highlights of Team Coorg Muscat's (TCM) 9-wicket

drubbing of Muscat Young Stars on Friday.

TCM did exceptionally well to restrict Stars to just 98 for 9 thanks largely to Sardar's bowling and good fielding and returned shortly to chase down the small target in the 13th over, scoring 99 for 1. Arjun's fifty came off only 27 balls including 9 fours and a six.

Australia Test hopeful Pucovski concussed by helmet blow

SYDNEY: Australian batsman Will Pucovski suffered "mild concussion symptoms" after a delivery struck his helmet in a warm-up match between India A and Australia A in Sydney on Tuesday, casting doubt on his chances of Test selection.

Facing a delivery from Kartik Tyagi, Pucovski attempted to hook the short ball but it instead caught him on the helmet, dropping the 22-year-old to his hands and knees.

After visibly struggling to get up from the crease, Pucovski left the field unassisted, retiring for 23.

The head knock reduces the chances of a Test debut for the prolific Victorian against India in Adelaide on December 17, and adds to selectors' problems after opener David Warner suffered a groin strain.

Cricket Australia's chief medical officer John Orchard said Pucovski, who has already



suffered several concussions in his career, experienced "mild concussion symptoms" but had communicated freely once in the dressing room.

"Will will remain with the Australia A squad but will not play in the three-day tour match against India at the SCG," Orchard told cricket.com.au.

The incident also follows a disappointing outing on

Monday for the Aussie after he mishit straight to fielder Shubman Gill for one in the first innings.

Pucovski has been firing domestically, snaring back-to-back double centuries for Victoria, but is unproven at Test level.

The match between Australian A and India A ended in a draw several overs after Pucovski's exit. — AFP



DARIO BASIC WILL LEAD THE TEAM AT THE WEST ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIP 2021 IN UAE, THE GCC GULF GAMES IN KUWAIT IN MARCH AND IN THE QUALIFIERS FOR OLYMPIC GAMES IN 2024

Top assignments await Olympic team head coach

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 8

Dario Basic, head coach of Oman national Olympic football team, will have many top assignments in the next year.

The Croatian coach, who was appointed earlier this year, will lead the team at the 10th edition of the West Asian Championship which will be held in UAE, the GCC Gulf Games in Kuwait in March and the football qualifications for Olympic Games in 2024.

The coaching staff had completed four domestic training camps until now and the development plan will continue in the following year.

The team had many friendly games during the last few camps including the two matches against the national senior team and ended both in favour of the latter 3-0 and 4-1.

The Olympic team had played with the local teams and suffered a 2-0 loss against Bausher and lost 2-0 to Omantel League champions Seeb.

The Olympic team ended the match against Al Khabourah in a 1-1 draw.

Despite the results of the friendlies, the coaching staff are confident on the players' readiness and tested their fitness along with other technical and tactical aspects.

Also, the Croatian coach tested the potential faces in the squad to move forward with them in the development plan for the forthcoming events. The training was divided into two periods including morning and evening sessions. The morning warm-up concentrated on the fitness part as it was done in gymnasium while the evening training focused on implementation of the tactical side on the field.

The current squad of the U-23



team feature the following: Yousef al Malki, Essam al Makhzoomi, Awadh al Shari, Ibrahim al Rajhi, Omar al Salti, Mahmood al Alawi, Basil al Jabri, Qasim al Mubarek, Sultan Basheer, Yousef al Shiyadi, Mohammed al Buraiki,

Mohammed al Ghafri, Mousab al Mamari, Moyad al Balushi, Abdulaziz al Zaabi, Mohammed al Seem, Mohammed Mustaeel, Mohammed al Shukaili, Fahad al Hajri, Issa al Noubi, Jaweed al Balushi and Mohammed al Hinai.

Breakdancing gets Olympic green light for Paris 2024

LAUSANNE: Breakdancing was one of four new sports along with skateboarding, surfing and sport climbing to get the Olympic green light on Monday for inclusion at the 2024 Paris Games.

The four sports were included as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) executive board met to confirm the Paris 2024 programme. Skateboarding, sport climbing and surfing have already been added to the programme for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, which will take place in 2021 after being postponed by a year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The introduction of breaking was "one of the results of the Olympic Agenda 2020", IOC President Thomas Bach said. "We had a clear priority to introduce sports (that are) particularly popular among the younger generation and taking into consideration the urbanisation of sport."

Breakdancing, which grew up alongside hip hop in the South Bronx of New York in the 1970s and is officially known in sport terms as 'breaking', appeared at the 2018 Youth Olympics in Buenos Aires, in the form of head-to-head



Brazil's breakdancer Mateus de Sousa Melo aka Bart (white shirt) competes during the Red Bull BC One, the breakdance one-on-one battle world championship in Mumbai on November 9, 2019. — AFP

'battles'. Russia's Sergei Chernyshev, competing under the nickname Bumblebee, won the first breakdancing gold medal for boys in that event, while Japan's Ramu Kawai won the girls' title.

"Today is a historic occasion not only for b-boys and b-girls but for all dancers around the world," said Shawn Tay, President of the World Dance Sport Federation (WDSF). "The WDSF could not be

prouder to have breaking included at Paris 2024... It was a true team effort to get to this moment and we will redouble our efforts in the lead-up to the Olympic Games to make sure the breaking

Today is a historic occasion not only for b-boys and b-girls but for all dancers around the world

SHAWN TAY
President, World Dance Sport Federation

competition at Paris 2024 will be unforgettable."

PARIS PODIUMS DOWN TO 329
Federations of sports that already have Olympic status were left disappointed in their bid to increase events within their sports as IOC President Thomas Bach said that none of the proposed 41 events would be included in Paris.

While some sports substituted in some events within their existing event numbers, Bach said medal events had actually gone down from 339 to 329. He said the athletes' quota for

Paris had been fixed at 10,500, including those participating in the four new sports. That represents a decrease of 600 from Tokyo Games, while gender equality would be attained for the first time in Olympic history in Paris.

The question of gender equality led to the demise of the men's 50km race walk, which first appeared at the 1932 Olympics.

IOC sports director Kit McConnell said the event would be replaced by a "mixed gender event".

There was a decision to "reach gender equality by removing the men's 50km race walk", rather than introducing a women's version, McConnell said, adding that the men and women's 20km race walks would remain.

The replacement event will not, however, be a mixed cross-country, which World Athletics had been pushing hard for.

"The event had to fit into an existing Olympic venue," McConnell said, explaining that a potential re-fit of the equestrian or mountain-bike venues to accommodate a cross-country was shown to be "too expensive and complex". — AFP

business

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Oman banks dole out RO 10.24 bn in personal loans

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Personal loans disbursed by commercial banks climbed to RO 10.242 billion in 2019, up from RO 10.006 billion a year earlier, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) stated in its 2019 Annual Report released here this week.

Banks can provide personal loans up to 40 per cent of their total loan portfolio in line with CBO regulations.

However, with banking credit growing year-on-year, the volume of disbursements in the form of consumer loans has grown as well.

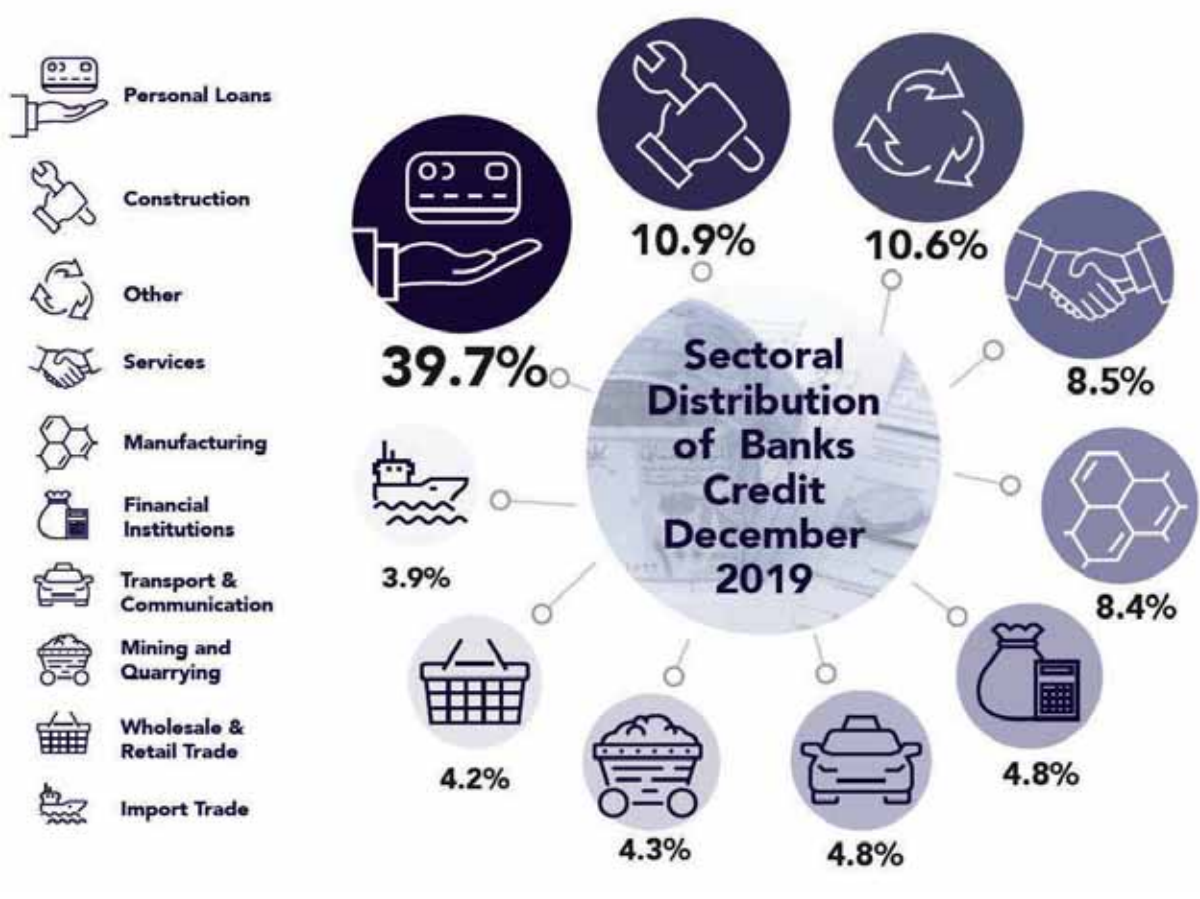
“Notwithstanding the economic slowdown, bank credit growth remained reasonable at 3.1 per cent during 2019,” the apex bank said.

“Personal loans continued to hold the major share in total credit that stood at 40 per cent (RO 10.2 billion) in 2019,” it noted.

Personal loans – broadly categorising all types of consumer credit – have been growing at an annual rate of about 5 per cent in recent years, buoyed by robust appetite on the part of retail customers, and relatively easy and competitive lending terms by banks.

Disbursed typically to salaried employees of public and private sector organisations, personal loans may be utilised towards, among other things, home purchases or improvements, tuition and other education services, travel, purchases of cars or other consumer durables, settling of credit card dues, and so on. Personal loans rose from RO 9.123 billion in 2016 to RO 9.642 billion a year later.

A distant second came the construction sector, which received RO 2.803 billion in credit last year, representing 10.9 per cent of total banking credit of RO 25.830 billion.



Other economic sectors benefiting from banking credit last year were: Services RO 2.193 billion (8.5 per cent), manufacturing RO 2.173 billion (8.4 per cent), electricity – gas – water RO 1.302 billion, financial services RO 1.244 billion, transport and communications RO 1.240 billion, mining and quarrying RO 1.113 billion, and wholesale and retail trade RO 1.075 billion.

The Central Bank cautioned however that sector-wise classification of credit may “lack precision due to the inability of banks to identify the exact end-use” notably because borrowers may be engaged in multiple activities spread across diverse industrial groups.

Banks are also required to set aside at least five per cent of their credit towards funding the requirements of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Sultanate.

Airbnb to increase IPO price



Home-sharing giant Airbnb, which is scheduled to go public this week, will significantly raise its IPO price, valuing the group at more than \$40 billion, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Sunday.

The group is expected to announce a price range of between \$56 and \$60 a share, up from \$44 to \$50, the paper said.

Airbnb did not respond when contacted Sunday for comment.

The vacation rental platform, which has managed to turn the tide after a few difficult months at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, said its initial public offering would include 51.9 million shares.

The group will go public on Thursday and will be listed on the Nasdaq stock exchange platform under the symbol “ABNB.”

At the increased price, the champion of the gig economy could reach a stock market valuation of \$42 billion.

Meanwhile, Airbnb, is making it harder to book apartments on New Year’s Eve in Paris, New York, London and other top destinations to limit the risks of illegal parties in the time of COVID-19. As of Thursday, travellers who don’t have positive reviews on their Airbnb profile won’t be able to rent a place for a single night on December 31 in the United States, France, Britain, Canada, Mexico, Australia and Spain, the San Francisco-based company said in a statement.

Upgrade of National Payments System to unlock new functionalities

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 8

Ongoing enhancements to the National Payments System infrastructure will enable the roll-out of new features and services, which in turn will hasten the digital transformation of Oman’s banking and financial services sector, according to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

The apex bank said in its newly published 2019 Annual Report that the ongoing upgrade is designed to keep pace with technological trends and developments in payment services globally, as

well as cater to projections in the growth of transactions handled by the country’s payments infrastructure.

“The efficient and secure National Payment Systems (NPS) infrastructure remains pivotal for efficient financial intermediation to support economic growth and financial stability. The expansion in the volume of transactions made through each component of NPS and their value display the efficient role played to achieve the above goals during 2019,” it stated.

The main components of NPS are Real Time Gross Settlement (RTGS), Automated Clearing

House (ACH), Electronic Cheque Clearing (ECC), and ATM/POS Switch. Transactions under RTGS jumped from 597K (valued at nearly RO 180 billion) in 2018 to around 650K (valued at RO 212 billion) in 2019. Likewise, transactions under ACH soared from 7.2 million (valued at RO 4.6 billion) in 2018 to 8.7 million (valued at RO 5.5 billion) in 2019.

“The CBO continued with its efforts of upgrading the existing payment systems with new business and security-related enhancement, publishing directives that enable banks to launch new age payment channels

and paving the way for new initiatives and projects,” it noted.

The National Payment Systems Law (NPSL), enacted in February 2018, provided legal backing to the payment system activities while fortifying the regulatory and supervisory responsibilities and powers of CBO.

Significantly, the Central Bank is currently in the process of upgrading the RTGS system, which will include new functionalities, such as supporting payments on a 24/7 basis, integration with regional RTGS systems, automated credit services, and other business

functions.

Furthermore, the Automated Clearing House (ACH) system is undergoing developments to implement new functionalities, including direct credit and direct debit transactions coupled with Mandate Management System (MMS) for direct debit transactions, and the Wages Protection System (WPS) module in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Dispute Management System (DMS).

The DMS, which was launched in July 2018, is currently integrated into two payment systems (ACH & MPCSS).

Cybercrime costs to top \$1 trillion this year: researchers

WASHINGTON: Cybercrime is expected to cost the global economy more than \$1 trillion this year, up more than 50 per cent since 2018, a research report said on Monday.

The report by McAfee Corp with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) concluded that the cost of online criminal activity is more than one per cent of global economic output, and also had significant non-monetary impacts.

The researchers noted a surge in a range of attacks including ransomware, phishing, business email takeovers, spyware and cryptocurrency theft.

Some of the increase can be attributed to weaker security with more people working remotely outside their workplace.

“The severity and frequency of cyberattacks on businesses continues to rise as techniques evolve, new technologies broaden the threat surface, and the nature of work expands into home and remote environments,” said Steve Grobman, chief technical officer at McAfee.

“While industry and government are aware of the financial and national security implications of cyberattacks, unplanned downtime, the cost of investigating breaches



A member of the hacking group Red Hacker Alliance who refused to give his real name, uses his computer at their office in China’s southern Guangdong province. – AFP

and disruption to productivity represent less appreciated high impact costs.”

The report was based on a survey of 1,500 technology professionals in government and business in the US, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and Australia.

The impact of cybercrime included the loss of intellectual property and monetary assets, but also system downtime and damage to an organisation’s reputation, according to the report. — AFP

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Investment in UK fintech drops by 40pc amid pandemic

There are not many areas of business where the pandemic has not had an effect. We find investors, who have such a significant role in the economy, have become cautious as a result of it. It has caused venture capital investment in UK fintech firms to slump by nearly 40 per cent in the first half of this year, with investors mainly using their cash to fund well-established firms amid the coronavirus crisis.

According to figures from UK fintech industry body Innovate Finance, there were 167 deals worth \$1.84 billion during the first half of 2020.

This is a 39 per cent fall in the same period last year, with over half of the funding going to big companies in deals worth over \$100 billion.

Digital banking app Revolut

raised \$500m in February, while payments start-up Checkout.com followed its \$230m series A fundraise in 2019 with another \$150m in June. Starling Bank and Onfido have also raised significant sums this year.

Despite the slump in fundraising, Innovate Finance said that demand for fintech investment in the UK remained high, with the first half figure 26 per cent higher than the amount raised in the final six months of 2019. However, CEO of Innovate Finance, Charlotte Crosswell, said that the drop in fundraising had impacted early-stage companies.

“We need to highlight the significant drop in the amount of capital raised during the first half of the year,” she said. This is particularly impacting start-ups, with a recent survey showing that 75 per cent of smaller fintech



ANDY JALIL
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THE UK TREASURY LAUNCHED A REVIEW OF THE £7 BN SECTOR BACK IN JULY, CLAIMING THE COVID-19 CRISIS HAD SHOWN UP A NEED TO FOSTER THE ‘WIDE-SPREAD ADOPTION’ OF FINTECH

firms are concerned about their next funding round.”

An investment manager at Albion VC, Jay Wilson, said: “Anecdotally it very much feels we are backfiring on all cylinders, deal activity at all stages of the funnel is happening. From my conversations with other investors, I understand this is true for my peers too.”

The UK Treasury launched a review of the £7 billion sector back in July, claiming the COVID-19 crisis had shown up a need to foster the “widespread adoption” of fintech. The probe will seek to ensure that UK fintech “has the resources to grow and succeed”.

On a matter of diversity, it appears that companies with more diverse boards outperform their rivals. According to a report by the consultancy, New Street Group, the share prices

of FTSE250 firms with more gender-diverse boards have fared better than others during the coronavirus pandemic.

Shares in the top 25 FTSE250 firms by board diversity suffered a 24 per cent decline in their shares in the first half of this year, compared with a 29 per cent decline in the closest comparable portfolio of FTSE250 firms with a less diverse board.

“There is a clear economic case for making sure that boards are diverse. This ensures different voices are amplified and companies benefit from having a much broader range of skillsets and experience,” said Doug Baird, CEO of New Street Group.

The insurance companies Direct Line and Lancashire Holdings were cited as examples of firms with diverse boards whose share prices fell less sharply than rivals.

Direct Line’s board is 40 per cent female, while Lancashire’s is 37 per cent female, according to the Hampton-Alexander Review. According to New Street Group, Direct Line’s share price was shown 9.17 per cent during the first half of the year, while Lancashire’s shares fell just 1.79 per cent, compared with a 23.4 per cent drop in FTSE250 share prices among comparable firms with less diverse boards.

Baird suggested that increased flexibility in working structures brought about by the pandemic could see women ascending to and retaining more senior positions.

“Company directors should be considering how work practices may be adapted post-coronavirus to make workplaces more inclusive to women,” he added.

(The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK).

VAT implications for the real estate



ALKESH JOSHI AND
AMEERA AL SIYABI



Alkesh Joshi



Ameera al Siyabi

THE term real estate refers to land, the buildings on the land and the natural resources such as water and minerals associated with the land.

Real estate can generally be sub categorised into three main segments: Bare land, commercial real estate and residential real estate. So how does VAT affect each of these segments?

Bare land: For a piece of land to be considered as bare land for VAT purposes, it should not be covered by a completed building, partially completed building or a civil engineering work.

Generally, around the world, the supply of bare land by either sale or lease is VAT exempt. The interesting bit lies in establishing whether a piece of land can really qualify as bare land.

Commercial real estate:

Around the world, commercial real estate constitutes of properties that are used specifically for business-related purposes (income-related or industrial proposes) such as office spaces, hotels, resorts, restaurants, warehouses, retail store buildings, shopping malls, medical centres, etc. Generally, sale or lease of commercial property attracts VAT on the sale value or rental amount. In most cases, the recipient is a business and able to claim back the input VAT (when registered).

Residential real estate:

A residential real estate is a building that is used and designed for human occupations and includes (but is not limited to) single-family homes, multi-family homes, condos and nursing homes. The VAT treatment applied on residential

The Oman VAT law appears to have provided a relief on residential property wherein the first lease, the subsequent lease or the subsequent sale of a residential property should be treated as VAT exempt

properties varies around the world. One would need to look at four different scenarios for a residential property i.e. first sale after construction, first lease, subsequent sale and subsequent leasing of a residential property. Generally subsequent leasing or subsequent sale of a residential property is VAT exempt in most parts of the world, while some countries tax the first sale or first lease of a residential property.

Mixed-use real estate:

A mixed-use property is a term describing a building or a plot of land which blends two or more different type of uses (commercial, residential, institutional, entertainment), and each use may have a different VAT treatment when supplied. For example, a building where ground floor is used for renting shops while the residential apartments on the other floors are leased. How would VAT be applied in this case?

For mixed-use development, the VAT liability will depend

on the use of the specific part of the building. In the example above, the rent of the commercial property on ground floor (shops) would attract VAT while the rent of the residential property should be VAT exempt.

Other VAT peculiarities around real estate:

As the supply of real estate does not include the movement of the real estate, the place of supply is considered as the place where the property is located thereby subjecting the supply of real estate to the VAT under the jurisdiction where it is located, irrespective of the status of the residency of the buyer or the seller. The applicability of local VAT is not limited to just the estate but is generally extended to the services which are directly associated with real estate such as a supply of Services involving the preparation, coordination and performance of construction, destruction, maintenance, conversion and similar work.

Fortunately, the Oman VAT law appears to have provided a relief on residential property wherein the first lease, the subsequent lease or the subsequent sale of a residential property should be treated as VAT exempt.

More details regarding the VAT treatment on real estate in Oman is expected in the impending VAT Executive Regulations.

In the coming weeks we will provide more insights into the impact on business and industry so stay tuned for more articles on VAT from EY Oman.

[Alkesh Joshi is Partner — Oman Tax Leader & MENA Energy Tax Leader at EY (email: Alkesh.Joshi@om.ey.com), while co-author Ameera al Siyabi is Assistant Manager — Indirect Tax at EY]

PRESS RELEASE



OMAN ARAB BANK RECEIVES AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN DIGITAL BANKING

Oman Arab Bank has recently won the award of Excellence in Digital Banking at *Alam Al Iktisaad* Magazine Awards ceremony 2020, held at Sheraton Hotel Oman in November. Commenting on receiving the accolade, Rashad al Shaikh, Acting Head of the Retail Banking Division at OAB, said, “Oman Arab Bank has always strived to ensure that technological development and innovation are the key pillars of its transformational strategy, making it renowned as one of the most advanced local financial institutions today. The Bank began its technological journey several years ago, which in turn, led to the launch of its pioneering initiative, “Step to the Future” in 2018. This initiative brought together several creative minds, to collaborate and develop new innovative solutions that were aimed at enhancing the overall experience of the Bank’s customers”. Oman Arab Bank is considered as one of the most digitally advanced local banks, with its ATMs and POS allowing for NFC payments with debit cards, its mobile app that special features such as instant utility bills payment, as well as a platform for digital donation and vehicle insurance.

OMINVEST AWARDED FOR ‘EMPOWERING WOMEN FOR CAREER GROWTH, EXCELLENCE’



Oman International Development and Investment Company (OMINVEST) received Al Mar’a Excellence Award 2020 for ‘Empowering Women for Career Growth and Excellence’. The award was received during an event organised by United Media Services (UMS) and attended by Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development; Honourable Lujaina bint Mohsin Darwish, Member, State Council; and Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion. Al Mar’a Excellence Awards recognise the achievements and entrepreneurial zeal of women, encouraging Omani women who have conquered the odds and have reached challenging positions in diverse areas like business, government, industry, fashion, sport, education and other relevant fields. Al Mar’a Excellence Awards committee presented OMINVEST with this special award in recognition of the company’s tremendous efforts in empowering women over the years. “We have always believed in the importance of enabling and empowering women due to their vital role in achieving sustainable socio-economic development.

OTC holds annual alumni meeting

MUSCAT: Oman Tourism College (OTC) organised its annual alumni meeting virtually through Zoom on December 2. The meeting was conducted as part of the OTC’s keenness to maintain an ongoing relationship with its alumni.

Latest developments in the local tourism and hospitality sectors, as well as associated activities such as events management were discussed in the meeting.

Commenting on the importance of this annual forum, Dr Abdulkarim bin Sultan al Mughairi, Dean of OTC said, “The college has always been eager to keep in touch with its students, even after graduation and employment. Apart from maintaining strong bonds, we believe that this enriches the college’s role above and beyond just traditional education, making us an academic institution that is focused on



empowering and developing all its students and graduates alike. This is made possible through short professional development courses and various programme, thanks to our association with several international leading institutions in the sector. Our primary objective is to qualify Omani talents, to the highest possible levels of competence and preparedness. Organising such forums familiarises us with the reality of the labour market, its challenges and requirements.

The experiences shared by our graduates assist us in updating our academic programmes and courses that we offer, so as to keep pace with changes and developments in the local market.”

The annual forum kicked-off with a speech by the Dean of the college, welcoming the alumni, followed by a review of the latest updates of the college, regarding partnerships with entities working in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Lexus launches All-New 2021 IS



17-per cent weight reduction.

The new bold exterior styling and athletic silhouette of the 2021 IS signifies the agile changes that have taken place below the surface. The new IS evokes lower, wider proportions with muscular fenders, reflecting the vehicle's high performance. The sleek lines are also complemented with aggressive sharpness carved into the side and shoulder character lines.

The 2021 IS's newly designed spindle grille features an intricate pattern that emphasises a sense of presence, while the slender headlamps and daytime running lights with a sharp L-shape signature have been redesigned to complement the low-profile hood. New rocker panels accent a side profile that features a sharper contour and carries into the muscular shoulders over the rear wheel wells. At the back of the vehicle, the rear fenders blend into the extended, lowered rear deck, creating a low stance and emphasising the L-shaped full-width rear light.

The new model's distinct personality is completed by its exquisite interior, which invites drivers and passengers to enjoy a range of advanced features for a refined cabin experience. These include a new 10.3-inch touchscreen multimedia system featuring Apple CarPlay and Android Auto compatibility, a 4.2-inch colour multi-information display (MID) and a dual-zone automatic climate control system with touch-sensitive controls. The vehicle also offers SmartAccess with push-button start, a 17-speaker Mark Levinson sound system, a power moonroof, 8-way adjustable power and ventilated front seats, as well as ample luggage space thanks to the 60:40 split-folding rear seats.

The Lexus IS has attractive looks, which are complemented by its balanced, linear and confident driving signature. Owners can choose from two engine options; an updated 2.0-litre, turbocharged and intercooled inline four-cylinder engine delivering 241 hp and 350 Nm of torque, and a sophisticated



3.5-litre V6 engine that produces 312 hp and 378 Nm of torque. The two engines paired with an eight-speed sport direct-shift automatic transmission that offers superb drivability, together with outstanding fuel efficiency and quietness even at high speed.

As with any Lexus vehicle, safety is a top priority for the new Lexus IS. Drivers can enjoy complete peace of mind thanks to the Lexus Safety System+, an advanced safety technology package that includes Pre-Collision System (PCS) which include Emergency Steering Assist (ESA), Daytime Pedestrian Detection (DPD), all-speed range Dynamic Radar Cruise Control (DRCC), Lane Departure Alert (LDA), Lane Tracing Alert (LTA), and Automatic High-beam System (AHB). The vehicle also includes comprehensive safety features designed to protect its occupants, such as 8 SRS airbags, Vehicle Stability Control (VSC), Traction Control (TRC), Anti-lock Braking System (ABS) with Electronic Brakeforce Distribution (EBD), Brake Assist (BA), Blind

Spot Monitor (BSM), Parking Support Alert (PKSA), Rear Cross-Traffic Alert (RCTA) and Hill-start Assist Control (HAC), among many others.

Further adding to its stylish visual appeal, the 2021 Lexus IS comes in a refined range of colour options that allow discerning owners to customise their vehicles according to their tastes. Customers can choose from seven distinctive exterior colours, including the newly developed Sonic Chrome and Sonic Iridium options. Meanwhile, the interior comes in three elegant colours; Ochre, Dark Rose, and the universal Black, which evokes a sense of calm within a gorgeous atmosphere. Two newly developed wheel designs have also been introduced in 18-inch and 19-inch sizes to further express the driving feel pursued by the Lexus brand.

For those seeking to experience the ultimate in thrilling responsiveness, the all-new IS, is also available in an F Sport version. Engineered for exhilaration, the F brand DNA has trickled down from the legendary LFA, which represents the pinnacle of refined performance.

The IS F Sport model boasts exclusive interior and exterior features, including a distinctive 'F' mesh pattern, a grille-bottom air intake, rear spoiler, and 19-inch alloy wheels. It comes equipped with an F Sport exhaust and diffuser, as well as improved Active Sound Control to enhance the performance notes of the V6 engine. Inside the cabin, the 8-inch colour TFT LCD meter features a movable meter ring that enables a dual display using a single meter. Owners can choose from a range of eight exterior colours that emphasise the vehicle's sportiness, including three colours exclusive for the IS F Sport model; Radiant Red contrast layering, Heat Blue contrast layering or White Nova GF, while the interior is available in White, Black and Flare Red.

The Lexus IS with its attractive design, advanced features and technology is inspired to thrill. Those wishing to catch up on the most happening digital launch event, that they missed, can view the event on Lexus Oman social media channels.

The All-New Lexus IS vehicle is now on display at the Lexus showrooms.

Australia to force Google, Facebook to pay for content

SYDNEY: Facebook and Google could be required to pay news outlets for their content in "world first" legislation set to be introduced to Australia's parliament on Wednesday.

In one of the most aggressive moves to check the power of the US digital giants, Canberra plans to compel the companies to pay media organisations when their platforms host their content or face millions of dollars in fines.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said the new rules, first mooted in July, will be introduced to parliament on Wednesday and are expected to come into effect next year.

"This is a huge reform. This is a world first. And the world is watching what happens here in Australia," he said.

The new media law will apply to Facebook's "News Feed" and Google searches.

The firms will be required to compensate Australian media outlets, including public broadcasters ABC and SBS, who were initially excluded from plans.

The government has decided to exempt other popular platforms such as YouTube and Instagram from the rules.

Measures to force transparency around the closely guarded algorithms that tech firms use to rank content were also watered down.

Frydenberg said the tech giants will now be required to notify media companies only when "conscious changes" to algorithms would have a "significant impact" on search rankings, with 14 days' notice rather than the 28 days first suggested. — **AFP**

Japan unveils \$708 b in fresh stimulus

TOKYO: Japan announced a fresh \$708 billion economic stimulus package on Tuesday to speed up the recovery from the country's deep coronavirus-driven slump, while targeting investment in new growth areas such as green and digital innovation.

The new package will include about 40 trillion yen (\$384.54 billion) in direct fiscal spending and initiatives targeted at reducing carbon emissions and boosting adoption of digital technology, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said in a meeting with ruling party



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. — **Reuters**

executives. Policymakers globally have

unleashed a wall of monetary and fiscal stimulus to prevent a deep and prolonged recession as the coronavirus closed international borders and sent millions out of work.

In the United States, a \$908-billion coronavirus aid plan is currently under debate in Congress. In Japan, the pandemic has forced the government to put its fiscal reform agenda on the backburner, despite holding the industrial world's heaviest public debt burden, which is twice the size of its gross domestic product.

"We have compiled the new measures to maintain employment, sustain business and restore the economy and open a way to achieve new growth in green and digital areas, so as to protect people's lives and livelihoods," Suga said at the meeting.

Suga's cabinet is set to endorse the stimulus package later on Tuesday, which would bring the combined value of coronavirus-related stimulus to about \$3 trillion.

The government will compile a third extra budget for the

current fiscal year worth around 20.1 trillion yen to fund the fresh economic stimulus, a government source said on Tuesday. Some investors expect the additional new bond issuance needed to fund the third extra budget to be around 15 trillion yen.

"Japan needs to make a plan for fiscal reform and shift to reconstructing public finance at some point. But now is the time to help firms and households hit by the pandemic," said Yuichi Kodama, chief economist at Meiji Yasuda Research Institute. — **Reuters**

Cyberpunk 2077 prepares for global debut

WARSAW: The developer of Cyberpunk 2077, the much-delayed video game that is reported to be one of the most expensive ever made, has promised a "new quality" in experience for users when it finally launches worldwide on Thursday.

With a global publicity campaign in full swing, Marcin Iwinski, director and co-founder of CD Projekt RED, spoke from a Warsaw studio decorated like a scene from the dystopian game.

He brushed off criticism over the delays and said: "This time it's happening."

"We are an innovative company and it is not in our DNA to take shortcuts," said the Polish developer, whose last game "The Witcher" became a global blockbuster.

With Cyberpunk 2077, he said he wants to draw gamers into an "immense" online world. The English version contains 450 hours of dialogue voiced by 125 actors.

The main character in the game is gun-toting, leather-clad



Cyberpunk character figures are seen in the headquarter of CD PROJEKT – the most important polish game developer company before the expected release of Cyberpunk 2077 game in Warsaw. — **AFP**

"V", who features in the yellow advertising posters in a marketing campaign spanning 55 countries including New York's Times Square.

The publicity is comparable "to that of a good film," said Iwinski, who declined to disclose the cost which media reports put in the tens of millions of euros.

The total budget for the game is

estimated at 1.2 billion zloty (\$328 million), according to analysts at Polish bank BOS, which would make Cyberpunk 2077 one of the most expensive video games ever made.

CD Projekt RED's hugely successful "The Witcher: Wild Hunt" was a sombre fantasy whose monster-slaying hero endowed with superhuman powers was

a product of the imagination of Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski.

It was launched in 2015 and is still much loved by gamers for its storyline, dialogue, graphics and humour, as well as the openness of its world.

Instead of simply producing a new version of The Witcher, CD Projekt RED decided to launch itself into the punk fantasy world of Cyberpunk — the popular pen-and-paper role-playing game written by Mike Pondsmith.

Iwinski said he wanted to bring "a new quality" into the video game work "in terms of immersing the player in the story, the interaction with other characters, the dialogue and the movement" in Night City — a conflict-ridden American megacity.

Adam Lach, a Polish photographer and avid gamer, said Cyberpunk 2077 was "something exceptional in popular culture".

The game raises "questions about our outlook on the world, where we are headed, while other games are just entertainment," Lach said. — **AFP**

In brief

■ PARIS



AIRBUS DELIVERED 64 JETS IN NOVEMBER

Airbus delivered 64 aircraft in November, bringing the total so far this year to 477, down 34 per cent from the first 11 months of 2019 as COVID-19 curbs demand, the planemaker said.

Deliveries included seven wide-body A350 jets and 56 single-aisle jets including 54 of the main A320neo narrow-body family.

Deliveries are being closely scrutinised by investors as they generate much-needed cash during the coronavirus crisis.

The figures confirm an earlier Reuters report that Airbus was heading towards a total of 550 or more deliveries in 2020.

features



Turning creative talent into a clothing brand

Fouz Hussain is an Omani artist and student, who was only sixteen years old when she started her own clothing brand, WYN designs, back in 2019. What makes WYN unique is that every single piece of clothing is individually hand-painted, adding a personal touch to each item and originality... **P18**

INSIDE STORIES

HUMAN INTEREST



SYRIAN ARCHIVES IMAGES OF DAMASCUS HOMES TO PRESERVE THEM

Strolling through the alleyways of war-torn Syria's capital, Rania Kataf snaps photos of the city's famed houses, capturing their nooks and crannies for posterity... **Story on Page P20**

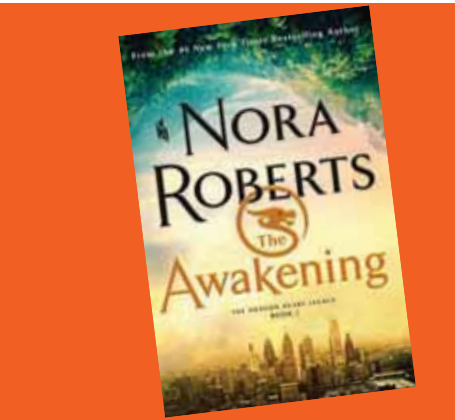
COOK LIKE A CHEF



AVOCADO MANGO SHRIMP SALAD

Chef Ajay is known for his ability to re-imagine many of our favourite dishes. In today's Cook Like A Chef, he wanted to focus on something healthy that is easy to prepare... **Story on Page 19**

READ



THE AWAKENING BY NORA ROBERTS

The first book in the Dragon Heart Legacy series. Breen Kelly travels through a portal in Ireland to a land of faeries and mermaids.

GASTRONOMY



GERMAN COOKING SCHOOL GETS CREATIVE WITH CAMPER VAN DINNERS

A cooking school in northern Germany has taken the concept of "meals on wheels" to new levels to stay afloat during a partial lockdown, offering candlelight dinners for those willing to bring their own camper van and dine in it... **Story on Page 19**

SCIENCE



MASSIVE PUERTO RICO TELESCOPE FEATURED IN JAMES BOND MOVIE COLLAPSES

A massive radio telescope at Puerto Rico's Arecibo Observatory - one of the world's largest - collapsed on Tuesday after sustaining severe damage since August, officials said, following 57 years of astronomical discoveries... **Story on Page 18**



How this 17-year-old artist turned her talent into a clothing brand

BY MOUJ HIJAZI

Fouz Hussain is an Omani artist and student, who was only sixteen years old when she started her own clothing brand, WYN designs, back in 2019.

Fouz graduated from The Sultan's School earlier this year, with an International Baccalaureate diploma. In order to achieve this, she had to think of a self-initiated project, so she decided to combine this with her passion for art. Hence, the concept for WYN came about.

What makes WYN unique is that every single piece of clothing is individually hand-painted, adding a personal touch to each item and originality. Much of the profits have also been donated to charity.

The name of the brand is an allusion to Fouz's name, which means 'victory' in Arabic, WYN being a play-on-words of 'win'.

Before deciding on clothing, she was struggling with how she wanted to share her artwork. "I realised that art accounts have been done before and I wanted to find something that's more personal and accessible to everyone."

"The idea of people wearing your art sounded really cool to me and I haven't seen it done before, especially not individually painted," said Fouz.

"So I thought, why not introduce something different into

the Omani art scene?"

Fouz's first collection was a realistic heart painted on a black T-shirt, inspired by her fascination with the heart and biology. 50 per cent of the profits from these shirts were donated to a heart health charity.

"I know that heart disease is one of the leading causes of death in Oman, and I thought it's important to raise awareness [and] funds for this cause," she said.

But how does a student balance schoolwork and a business, especially one that requires thorough attention to detail?

"I spend at least say 5 hours on each individual piece and produce more than 40 for each collection, so it is very time-consuming and I had to [improve] my time management skills, which is why I plan each collection months before," explained Fouz.

Fouz mentioned that having something productive to do other than schoolwork proved beneficial.

"When I find myself overwhelmed with school I tend to use WYN as a creative outlet for stress. It removes the guilt of procrastination because it's actually something important."

Fouz made it a point that she doesn't do everything by herself and gives credit to others who have supported her.

"I have a very strong support system. My friends model all my pieces for me, my siblings manage my finances. They help me

with the deliveries and orders, and so do my parents. They give me ideas, finding phrases and new concepts," said Fouz.

Save for a few critiques on pricing, the community's reaction has largely been positive, allowing WYN to start shipping internationally.

"I found my account being shared on stories and reaching so many people and that was just how it started."

Artists with much bigger followings have reposted WYN. "Omani artists support Omani artists and that's amazing," said Fouz.

"The fun thing about WYN is that it's not strictly one type of art; anything goes."

With no prior knowledge of marketing, she turned to her friends for help with modelling and sharing. "I'm very grateful that my friends are willing to

support me."

However, the challenges that come with this business are significant. "Our pieces get sold out in 30 minutes usually, which is amazing and our followers are very supportive."

WYN's second collection features black sweatpants with the words "everything is temporary" written in Arabic calligraphy.

For her next collection, Fouz will collaborate with her sister Farah, who will release her own line in January 2021. Fouz will also release some 70x100 canvases.

In terms of other plans, Fouz aspires to have an art gallery/lounge showcasing Omani artists, continue to produce more collections and expand her reach.

To order, message @wyn. designs on Instagram.

GASTRONOMY

Socially distanced gingerbread illustrates Sweden's pandemic year



WITH THE THEME of distance, this year's gingerbread house baking competition in Sweden was bound to feature coronavirus restrictions one way or another.

But some of the nation's bakers found eye-catching ways to illustrate the year of the pandemic.

With a laptop on his sleigh, Santa chatted on Skype to three piglets in one creation, while another showed Greta Thunberg with her school strike for climate placard at Stockholm's Arlanda airport, alongside planes grounded by the virus.

The exhibition, usually thronged with wide-eyed children and adults marvelling at the culinary creations, is normally held at Sweden's Museum of Architecture and Design but was moved online due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Others entries displayed in the three-dimensional scans created by the organisers showed lighthouses, the planets of the solar system or online calls between grandparents and grandchildren.

One baker reproduced the head of Sweden's Chief Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell - widely seen as the architect of the country's light-touch pandemic strategy - five times.

The reason, the baker explained, was that he wanted to be sure to get the social distancing message across.— **Reuters**

SPACE

Massive Puerto Rico telescope featured in James Bond movie collapses



A MASSIVE RADIO telescope at Puerto Rico's Arecibo Observatory - one of the world's largest - collapsed on Tuesday after sustaining severe damage since August, officials said, following 57 years of astronomical discoveries.

The deteriorating telescope's 900-tonne instrument platform, suspended by cables 450 feet (137 metres) above a 1,000-foot-wide (305 metres) bowl-shaped reflector dish, fell on Tuesday morning, the US National Science Foundation said. No injuries were reported, it added.

The telescope - which received radio waves from space - had been used by scientists around the world to hunt for possible signatures of extraterrestrial life, study distant planets and find potentially hazardous asteroids. It also gained fame after pivotal scenes in the 1995 James Bond film "GoldenEye" starring Pierce Brosnan were shot there.

Two cables supporting the reflector dish had broken since August, causing damage and forcing officials to close the observatory as engineering firms retained by the University of Central Florida, which manages the observatory, studied ways to repair the damage.

In November, the engineering reviews led the NSF and the university to conclude that efforts to repair the structure would be too dangerous and that it would have to be demolished.

The NSF said that initial findings indicated that the top section of all three of the telescope's support towers broke off and that as the instrument platform fell, the telescope's support cables also plummeted.

The observatory also includes other scientific assets such as a 40-foot (12-metre) telescope used for radio astronomy research and a facility used to study the Earth's upper atmosphere and ionosphere. The observatory's learning centre, located next to the telescope, sustained significant damage from falling cables, the NSF said.

"We are saddened by this situation but thankful that no one was hurt," NSF Director Sethuraman Panchanathan said in a statement. "Our focus is now on assessing the damage, finding ways to restore operations at other parts of the observatory, and working to continue supporting the scientific community, and the people of Puerto Rico."

The NSF said it will authorise the university to continue paying Arecibo staff and to come up with a plan to continue research at the observatory. The agency said it has not determined the cause of the initial cable failure in August. — **Reuters**



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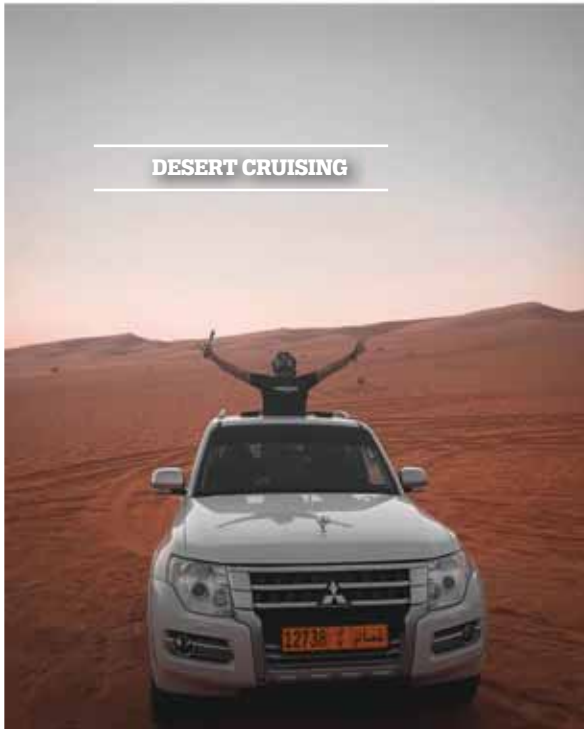
INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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Jabal Al Akhdar



shafeeksshas • Follow
Oman Desert



mr_picture • Follow
Eftalquot



SHARE A SLICE OF YOUR LIFE

We select three photos daily for our Instagram Top Picks of the Day. The rules are simple. Follow us on Instagram. Upload your photos. Tag us and use **#OmanObserver** and **#BeAnObserver**.



COOK LIKE A CHEF

Get full stories online at www.omanobserver.om

AVOCADO MANGO SHRIMP SALAD



GO FOR SALAD

Chef Ajay is known for his ability to re-imagine many of our favourite dishes. In today's Cook Like A Chef, he wanted to focus on something healthy that is easy to prepare. Salads are becoming the go-to dish for people who are on diet or are conscious about gaining weight. Mixing fruits like avocado and mango to shrimp is not only an appetising idea it sure will also capture the interest of your family including the kids.

INGREDIENTS:



150 gms Cleaned shrimp
1 tbsp Olive oil
Kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
1 Cup mixed lettuce
1/2 Avocado peeled and sliced
1/2 Mango peeled and sliced
Cucumber ribbons
4-5 pcs Cherry tomatoes cut 1/2
2 pcs Strawberry optional

DRESSING INGREDIENTS

1 Small shallot finely chopped
3/4 Cup extra virgin olive oil
3 tbsp Fresh lemon juice
3 tbsp Fresh orange juice
1/2 tbsp Lemon zest
Kosher salt and ground black pepper

INSTRUCTION

Combine all ingredients in a small jar, season dressing to taste with salt and pepper. Shake to blend.

PREPARATION METHOD

Mix season the shrimps with salt, ground black pepper. Add olive oil and grill.
Mix with all other ingredients, toss with dressing and serve.

ABOUT THE CHEF

CHEF AJAY DHOUNDIYAL

Executive Chef
In-Charge of F&B & Kitchen
Park Inn by Radisson Muscat

Executive Chef Ajay Dhoundiyal leads the culinary team of Park Inn by Radisson Muscat Hotel since September of 2012 and currently in-charge of F&B department. With over 2-decade experience in the culinary industry, Chef Ajay operates seamlessly to winch the dining experience of the hotel guests.

He has over 20 years of experience in the culinary industry. His career has taken him across various hotel brands like Hyatt, Kempinski,

Starwood, and Radisson hotel groups. As the Executive Chef of the hotel, he leads the culinary team, preparing and managing the operations of the hotel's dining outlets and banquets. He specialises in international cuisine and strives to create interesting banquet.



A COOKING SCHOOL in northern Germany has taken the concept of "meals on wheels" to new levels to stay afloat during a partial lockdown, offering candlelight dinners for those willing to bring their own camper van and

through the door. Germany imposed a "lockdown light" in early November, which closed bars and restaurants but allowed schools and shops to stay open.

Restaurants are allowed to offer takeout meals, but for many diners that



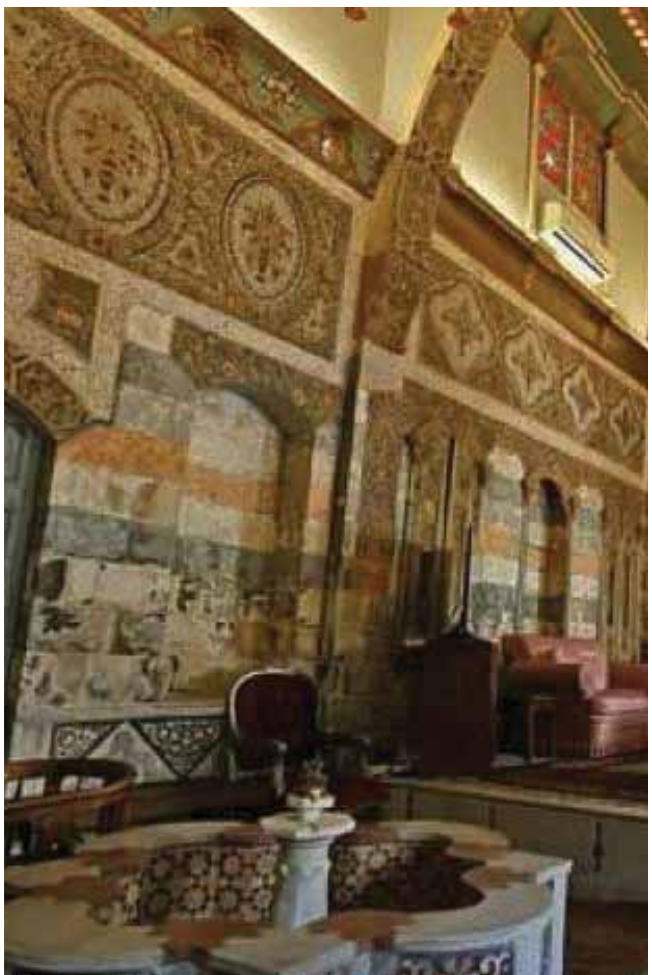
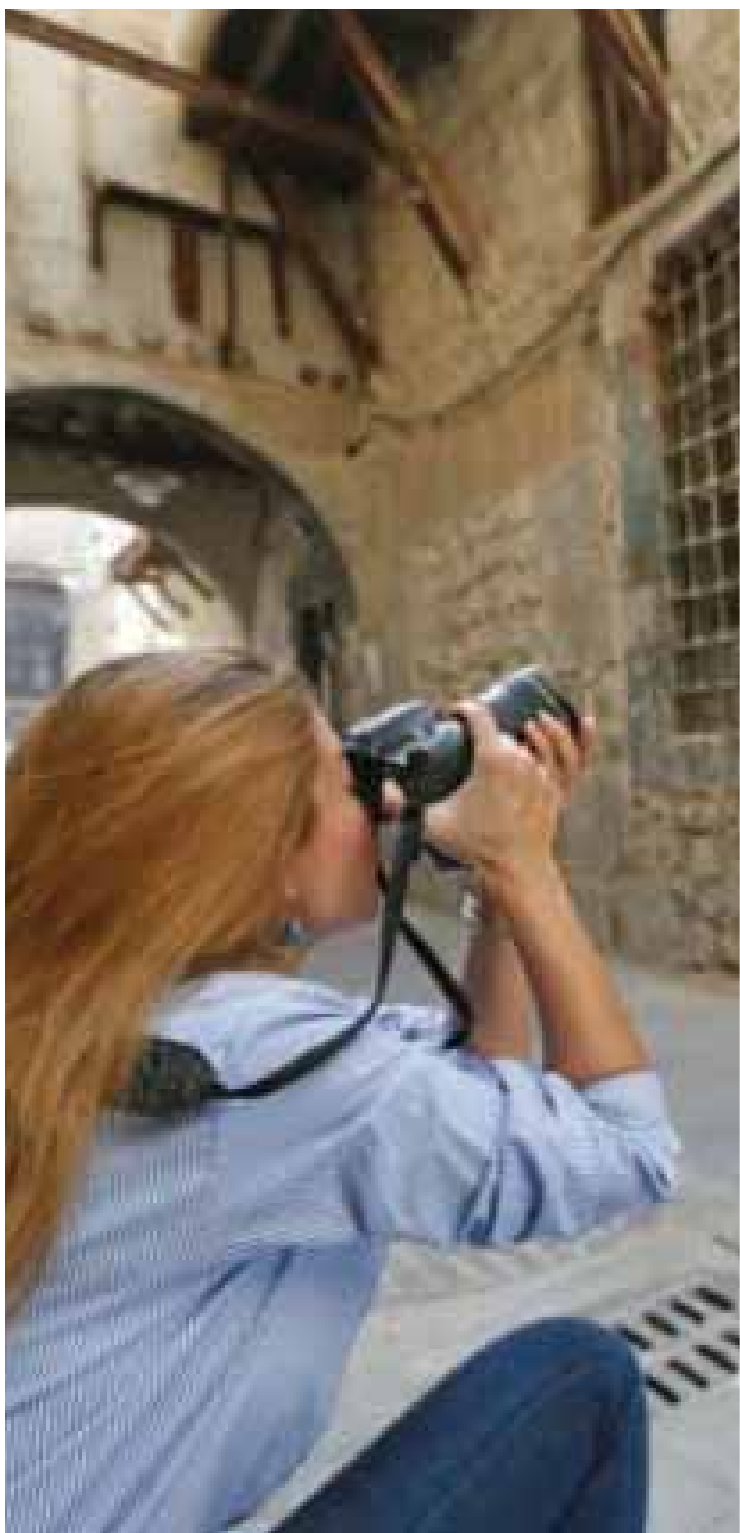
dine in it.

Diners pull up to the parking lot of the Neumuenster cooking school, where they are provided with white tablecloths, candles, cutlery and glasses so that they can re-create the experience of dining out in the back of their van. Waiters wearing face masks bring each course to the camper van, hot from the kitchen, and hand over dishes of duck, beef or other delicacies

means eating from plastic containers rather than proper plates. The camper van dinners at the cooking school are booked out until the end of January, but owner Bettina Seitz said she was working on adding more staff. "During the coronavirus crisis in the spring we had to let some of our staff go. But now there is so much demand for our motorhome dinner that we are short-staffed," she said. —Reuters



Syrian archives images of Damascus homes to preserve them



Strolling through the alleyways of war-torn Syria's capital, Rania Kataf snaps photos of the city's famed houses, capturing their nooks and crannies for posterity.

After seeing how vulnerable they had become during the country's devastating civil war, the 35-year-old began creating a digital archive of the buildings of Old Damascus.

"I was inspired by European photographers who tried to document buildings in their cities during the Second World War so architects could later rebuild part of them," she said.

The old city of the Syrian capital is famed for its elegant century-old houses, usually, two storeys built around a leafy rectangular courtyard with a carved stone fountain at its centre.

Their many rooms usually include both a summer and a winter guestroom, both looking onto the courtyard.

While the capital has been largely spared the violence of Syria's almost 10-year war, several of these traditional homes have been abandoned by their owners or damaged in the conflict.

Some have even become home to families displaced by the fighting, who have settled in their high-ceilinged rooms and sometimes made slight alterations to their interiors.

In 2016, Kataf created a group on Facebook called "Humans of Damascus", to which more than 22,000 Syrians from the capital have sent in photos of their homes.

"You don't need to be an expert to document something," she said.

GRAND FAMILY HOME

Already her pictures are proving useful in restoration efforts.

Inside a palatial Ottoman-era home called Beit al-Quwatli, Kataf painstakingly captures shots of each section of an ornate wall, then scribbles in her notepad.

The building once belonged to the family of Syria's first post-independence president, Shukri al-Quwatli.

Part of the home collapsed in 2016 after rebel rocket fire nearby cracked its walls, but today the authorities and private partners are sprucing it up to turn it into a cultural institute.

In a large hall, workers in yellow vests and blue hard hats dust off long beams painted in dark green and gold, propped up on trestles.

Kataf's pictures of surviving features of the building will help as a reference as they repair the damage.

In 2013, Unesco decided to add all six of Syria's World Heritage sites, including the Old Cities of Damascus and Aleppo and the ruins at ancient

Palmyra, to its World Heritage in Danger list.

Kataf, who studied nutrition in Lebanon's capital Beirut, said she was spurred into action after seeing the conflict damage or destroy architectural gems elsewhere in Syria.

"I was scared the same would happen to Old Damascus, so I started to document as many of its details as I could," she said.

Rebel rockets fell on Damascus in the early years of the war, but the guns have largely fallen silent since government fighters expelled the last rebels and jihadists from the city's outskirts in 2018.

The "Humans of Damascus" project has continued, however, with many photos posted on the Facebook group and others stored by Kataf, who makes them available to researchers on request.

Today some buildings are still at risk of "losing their identity because of money-making projects or becoming neglected and forgotten after their residents emigrated," Kataf said.

'I LIVE IN A MUSEUM'

But Raed al Jabri, sitting by the fountain inside his home-turned-restaurant, said he has done all he could to preserve the building's original beauty.

"We were going to lose the house completely. It was about to collapse and was in desperate need of repair," the 61-year-old said.

He converted the house into an eatery in the 1990s, investing his profits in the building's upkeep.

"A Damascus home is not just for its inhabitants," he said, reminiscing about better days before the war when tourists flocked to the city.

In another part of the Old City, 50-year-old businessman Sameer Ghadban said he was proud to still live in what was once the home of a famous 19th-century Algerian who had resisted the French occupation of his homeland then sought refuge in Syria until his death.

"My wife and I have been living here for 12 years, on the very spot where Emir Abdelkader did," he said.

During his time in Damascus, Abdelkader is credited with saving thousands of Christians from sectarian violence in 1860.

Ghadban said he has strived to preserve the building's uniqueness down to the very last detail, however much it costs, in honour of those who lived in it before him.

In a small summer living room open onto one of the house's two courtyards, the walls are covered in intricate carvings, including verses from the Koran, under a painted wooden ceiling.

"I feel like I live in a museum," he said. "I will never be able to live in a normal flat after this." — **AFP**