

228 young Omanis graduate through PDO Emdad Initiative

The Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) on Wednesday celebrated the graduation of 228 young Omanis as part of its Emdad initiative in collaboration with the 'Musalih' platform. Following an agreement signed in 2020 between PDO and the Musalih platform, the graduates joined a training programme in specialised technical fields including plumbing, fixing and installation of electrical connections. **DETAILS ON P5**



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MESSI TO JOIN INTER MIAMI AFTER PSG EXIT – BBC



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FORUM HIGHLIGHTS OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN TOURISM INDUSTRY



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CAMPING IN OMAN, AN INCREASINGLY POPULAR ACTIVITY



Royal Decree appoints Oman's Permanent Representative to UNWTO

HIS MAJESTY Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday issued Royal Decree No 38/2023 appointing a Permanent Representative for the Sultanate of Oman to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in Madrid, reading as follows: Article (1) appoints Omar bin Said al Kathiri, Oman' Ambassador to the Kingdom of Spain, as a Permanent Representative of the Sultanate of Oman to the World Tourism Organization in Madrid. Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. – **ONA**

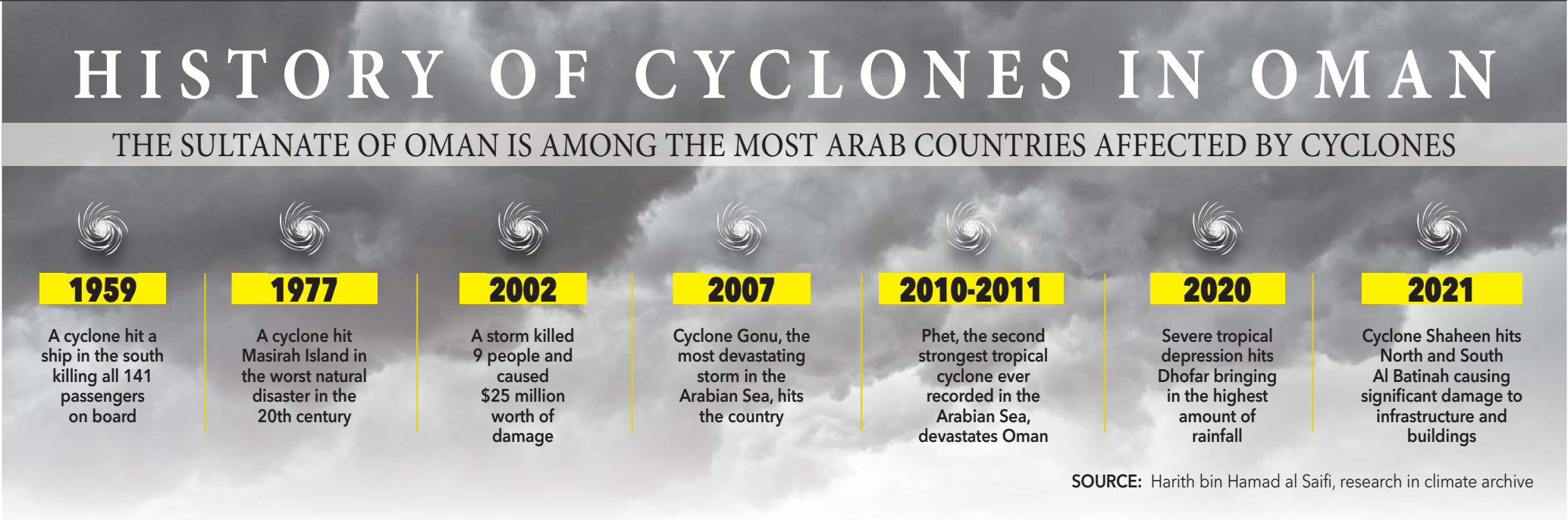
MUSCAT SAYYID BADR, TURKISH FM DISCUSS TIES

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, has expressed his heartfelt sentiment to Hakan Fidan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye on his appointment and wishing him success in carrying out his duties. During a phone call made between the two ministers on Wednesday, Sayyid Badr and Fidan underlined the joint keenness to continue promoting bilateral relations between Oman and Türkiye in various fields. — **ONA**

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CYCLONE BIPORJOY THREATENS OMAN, INDIA, AND PAKISTAN

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH @lakshmioman

Cyclone Biporjoy, named after the recommendation from Bangladesh, has intensified and is set to reach its peak. It is the second storm of the 2023 Indian Ocean cyclone season. The storm's centre is currently 1,133 km off the coast of Oman, with rain clouds at a distance of 740 km.

The Oman Met Office warns of potential high cloud flow over the next four days. The first-degree tropical cyclone, it intensifies in the central Arabian Sea and is currently moving north-northwest, posing a threat to Oman, India and Pakistan.

However, no direct impact on Oman is expected in the next three days, according to meteorologists.

The Indian Meteorology Department reports the system's location as southwest of Goa, southwest of Mumbai, and south of Karachi.

The tropical situation known as Biporjoy could develop into a second-degree hurricane on Thursday, with wind speeds estimated between 83 to 95 knots.

The system's movement towards the north-northwest brings the flow of high clouds along the Arabian Sea coasts.

The Oman Met Office warns of a potential third-degree cyclone by Friday, with wind speeds ranging from 96 to 112 knots.

Al Sharqiyah South and Al Wusta governorates can expect high sea waves, reaching 3-5 metres.

"Maximum wave height is expected on Friday and Saturday in Al Wusta, Al Sharqiyah and Dhofar — along the coastal areas of the Arabian Sea and accordingly, fishermen should not venture out in the Arabian Sea," said the weather expert at Oman Met Office.

On Saturday, the tropical system is expected to continue as a third-degree cyclone

- No direct impact is expected on Oman in the next 3 days
- Fishermen advised to avoid venturing into the sea
- Biporjoy strengthens, potential for hurricane status
- Warning of high sea waves, and possible monsoon delay
- Coastal areas at risk

accompanied by the flow of high clouds on the coasts overlooking the Arabian Sea, with an alert of sea waves rising on the coasts of the south of eastern and central regions. The weekend will also see the advection of high clouds.

Fishermen are advised to avoid venturing into the Arabian Sea.

The system's intensity may also cause a delay in the onset of monsoon in Kerala, as indicated by the Indian Meteorology Department.

The Oman Met Office has released classifications for tropical systems and cyclones.

Meanwhile, the Civil Aviation Authority, represented by the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre, held a meeting with the coordinators of the national emergency management system to discuss the latest updates on the tropical condition Biparjoy at the Arabian Sea, on Wednesday.

OFFICIALS ADVISE PRECAUTIONS

VINOD NAIR @vinot_nair

The Oman Meteorology has advised people to take all information that will be provided by official sources. At the time of writing the report, the tropical condition of Biparjoy has intensified into a category 1 cyclone.

According to Oman Meteorology, a tropical depression has wind speeds in the range of 17 to 27 knots, while a trough has a wind speed of fewer than 17 knots at the centre.

If the speed exceeds 34, then it is categorised as a tropical storm up to 63 knots, and if the speed is between 28 and 33 knots, it is described as a deep depression.

Wind velocity at the centre determines whether a tropical system is a cyclone.

If the speed is around 64 to 82 knots, then it is called a Category 1 cyclone, according to officials at the National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre. The Category 2 cyclone will have a wind speed of 83 to 95 knots.

Category 3 is a severe tropical cyclone, with 10-minute mean wind speeds (MWS) of 113-136 km/h and very destructive winds carrying a maximum three-second gust speed of 165-224 km/h. The Category 4 cyclone will have a wind speed of 137 knots or more.

With regards to this tropical situation, the Met said there is a probability of the tropical state evolving into a cyclone of category three, which will be accompanied by the flow of clouds and high sea waves (3 to 5 metres).

INSIDE



UNVEILING BANDAR AL KHAIRAN: EXPLORING GEOLOGICAL MARVELS IN OMAN

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Omani mobile app for sign language gets award

MUSCAT: The groundbreaking Omani sign language application, aimed at empowering individuals with hearing disabilities, has been honoured with the prestigious Mada-ALECSO award for the best mobile application benefiting persons with disabilities in the Arab world.

Developed under the guidance of the Small and Medium Enterprises Authority, the "Sign Translation" app serves as a vital link between individuals with hearing impairments and the hearing community by providing direct sign translation.

Sultan bin Nasser al Ameri, the supervisor of the Omani Sign Translation application,



highlighted that the app offers a range of services designed to facilitate seamless communication between individuals with hearing disabilities and those who can speak. By employing visual communication and simultaneous interpretation, the application boosts the self-confidence of

Sign language App receives prestigious award for empowering persons with hearing disabilities

users, creates an interactive communication environment, and ensures the timely and accurate delivery of written and audio content through the expertise of sign translation professionals.

The application caters to individuals with various disabilities, including hearing

and visual impairments, as well as those who aspire to learn sign language. Currently, the app boasts over 3,835 users utilising the simultaneous sign translation service via visual communication.

Furthermore, it has successfully translated over 742 visual content materials into sign language and provided more than 90 printed materials prepared in sign language through the implementation of QR-Codes.

Accessible on both iOS and Android platforms, the application offers institutional subscriptions to avail users with comprehensive services embedded within the app.

— **ONA**



■ GEN AL NUMANI RECEIVES SAUDI AMBASSADOR



MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received on Wednesday Abdullah bin Saud al Anezi, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to the Sultanate of Oman. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed bilateral relations and areas of joint cooperation. They also exchanged views on various matters of mutual interest. The ambassador lauded the relations binding the Sultanate of Oman with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. — ONA

UK short-stay trips to be simplified for Omanis

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Very soon, all GCC nationals, including Omani citizens, will be able to enter the UK under the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) scheme, which is applicable to visitors who do not need a visa for short stays, or who do not already have a UK immigration status prior to travelling.

The new scheme, already being followed in the United States, Australia and EU, will be launched in phases from October 2023. By the end of 2024, the scheme will be a requirement worldwide for visitors who do not need a visa for short stays, including those visiting from Europe.

From February 1, 2024, the scheme will be introduced for nationals of Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. It is anticipated that the ETA will be fully functional for all applicable nationals by the end of 2024.

According to official sources, the ETA scheme is being introduced as part of reforms to streamline and digitalise the UK's border and legal migration system whilst enhancing the security. It will help improve UK border security by allowing



the government to make the necessary security checks on travellers before they arrive in the UK. Those applying for an ETA will provide their biographic, biometric and contact details, and answer a short set of suitability questions. This will increase the government's knowledge about those seeking to come to the UK and prevent the arrival of those who present a threat.

The ETA is for visa-exempt travellers, otherwise known as non-visa nationals. Non-visa nationals are foreign citizens who can enter the UK for short stays without requiring a visa. If you are unsure whether you need a visa for short stays in the UK, visitors can use the Home Office 'check if you need a UK visa' tool.

Eligible individuals will be able to apply for an ETA online, either

using the 'UK ETA app' or by searching for 'Apply for an ETA to come to the UK' on the gov.uk website.

To apply for an ETA, nationals from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Jordan will only be required to pay £10 to apply for an ETA, which will allow them to visit the UK multiple times over a two-year period.

The application process for an ETA will be simple and fast to complete, with the process being entirely digital via a mobile phone app. To apply, individuals will need to provide biographic and biometric details such as a digital photograph and answer a set of suitability questions.

Currently, Gulf nationals are paying £30 per visit to the UK under the current Electronic Visa Waiver (EVW) scheme and Jordanian nationals £100 for a visit visa.

"By cutting costs and visa requirements, the ETA scheme will ensure visitors from the Gulf states and Jordan can enjoy travelling with ease to the UK, boosting business and tourism links between our countries. Over 790,000 Gulf visitors spent £2 billion during their stays in the UK last year," according to the UK government statement.

‘Towards inclusive youth employment in the Arab region’

BEIRUT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Social Development, took part in the 2nd Arab Forum for Equality, held in Lebanon.

The forum was themed 'Towards inclusive youth employment in the Arab region'.

Oman's delegation in the forum was headed by Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development.

The forum was organised by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies. It aimed to finalise dialogue between decision-makers and experts in the Arab region and other places of the world within the context of inequality in the Arab region.



The forum highlighted the effects of inequality resulting from current regional and international developments. It also showcased best practices in the social security sphere.

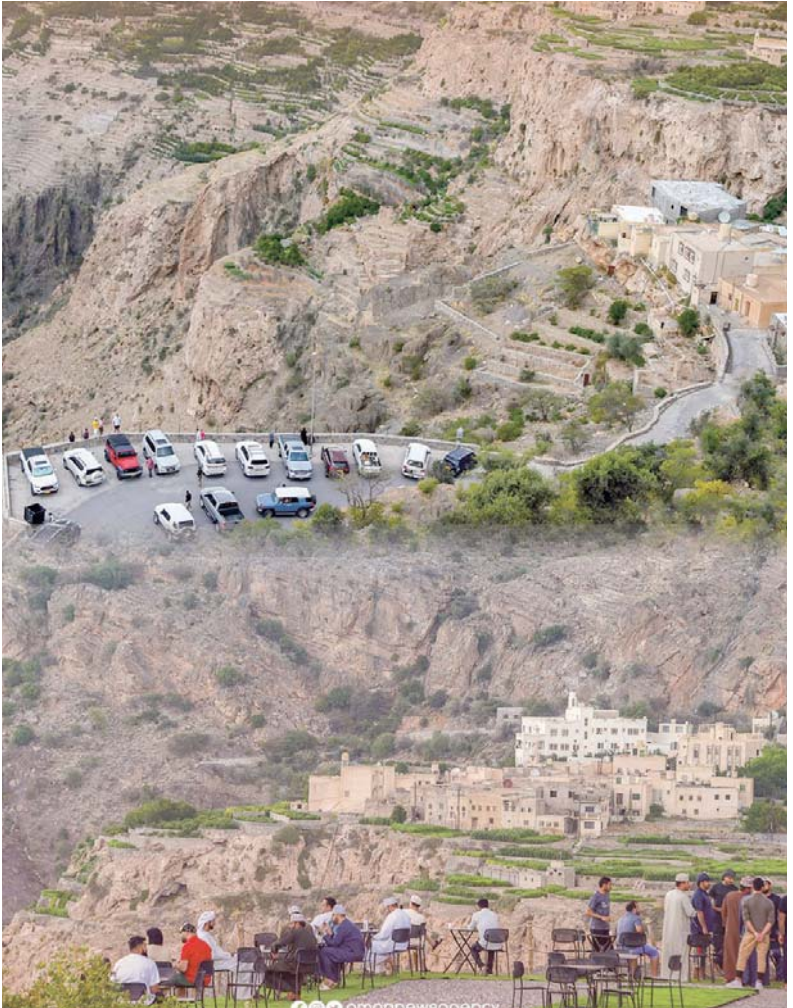
The forum touched on innovative and practical policies that tackle inequality, with a focus on food security as one form of such inequality. — ONA



‘Al Jabal Al Akhdhar’ sees surge in tourists due to mild summer

JABAL AL AKHDHAR: The Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate is currently witnessing a large tourist turnout from citizens, residents and visitors due to the mild weather that characterises the wilayat, especially during the summer. About 57,867 visitors, of which 16,476 Omanis have visited Al Jabal Al Akhdhar during the first five months of this year, as per statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

The wilayat, distinguished by its proximity to the Governorate of Muscat and a number of neighbouring wilayats, records active seasonal rains and high clouds in the summer, which made it a tourist destination that attracts various categories of tourists, in addition to the integration of the tourism system in it, and the availability of services and facilities such as international resorts and hotels of the highest classification. — ONA



Governmental efforts to promote entrepreneurship in Oman

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SMEDA organised a workshop to review the government's initiatives in promoting entrepreneurship, with the participation of various entities supporting the entrepreneurship system. The workshop emphasised the government's commitment to fostering entrepreneurship and strengthening the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) sector as a crucial pillar of the national economy. Support for SMEs is provided through a range of continuous packages of facilities, incentives and exemptions that align with the needs of the local market, as well as facilitating access for SMEs to global markets.

The workshop aimed at introducing the resources and support to the entrepreneurs by equipping them with knowledge and experience suitable for their growth.

It called for specialised training programmes in areas like economic feasibility studies, marketing,



project management, consulting and innovative financing. Stress was on specialised programmes in collaboration with private sector institutions and policies to encourage small enterprises and institutions to access international markets.

Ishaq al Shukaili, Acting Assistant Vice-President for Small and Medium Enterprises Development at SMEDA, highlighted the Authority's efforts to support entrepreneurs. He discussed the range of facilities, incentives, programme packages and initiatives provided, including the Entrepreneur Readiness

Programme and on-the-job training opportunities for job-seekers in small and medium enterprises across the Sultanate of Oman. Furthermore, he emphasised the importance of spreading the culture of entrepreneurship, the Authority's efforts in digital transformation, and creating spaces for dialogue and discussion with entrepreneurs through sessions and meetings held in various governorates of the country.

Dr Abdullah al Shukaili, Executive Director of the Centre for Entrepreneurship at the University of Nizwa,

provided insights into the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. He explained the report's methodology, its key data and indicators, and the significance of the Sultanate of Oman's presence in the report. He also discussed the benefits of the report's findings and put forth recommendations to enhance the entrepreneurship index.

Jalal al Hadhrami, Director of Small and Medium Enterprises Development at the Oman Investment Authority, presented the initiatives undertaken by the Authority to foster the growth of small and medium enterprises. He

highlighted the agency's support through programmes like the supplier development programme and the business privatisation programme.

Haifa al Saadiyah, a specialist in local content support and follow-up at the General Secretariat of the Tender Board, reviewed the exemptions provided by the Secretariat. She also discussed the circulars and publications issued by the Secretariat, which aim to support and facilitate small and medium enterprises.

Hammoud al Hamdan, Director of the Technical Environment Development Department at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, shared the experience of the SAS Centre for supporting small and medium enterprises. He highlighted the centre's key indicators in terms of beneficiaries and business development, achieved through field visits, activities, events, external engagements, and linking companies with business

opportunities. He also provided an overview of the centre's programmes.

Majed al Abri, media officer at the Capital Market Authority, presented on the Authority's role in promoting an entrepreneurial environment. He discussed the axes of innovative financing, insurance and commercial activities related to financial services.

Samira al Talia, Head of the Entrepreneurship Department at the Ministry of Education, detailed the ministry's efforts in spreading the culture of entrepreneurship. These efforts include incorporating entrepreneurship into academic curricula, organising seminars and conferences, and enhancing the roles of the Career Guidance and Student Counselling Centre.

Mohammed al Rasbi shared insights into the experience of the Oman Technology Fund in venture capital investment. He discussed the various stages of investment undertaken by the fund and its investment partners.



SERVICE ROADS IN AL KHUWAIR TO BE MADE ONE-WAY

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JUNE 7

To facilitate smooth traffic movement, Muscat Municipality will soon implement a new project on the service road, adjacent to the main Sultan Qaboos Street in Al Khuwair by converting the service road into a one-way road.

In a statement, Muscat

Municipality said the project includes converting approximately six kilometres of service roads into one-way roads with two lanes in one direction, starting from the intersection of Al Khuwair Street until the intersection of Ministries Street (below the bridge).

“The project includes the construction of two additional entry points to the main Sultan



Qaboos Street in the middle of the road along the service road, as well as at the end of the service road to reduce extra commuting times,” Muscat Municipality stated.

It added that the project aims at converting a number of side roads into one-way roads in order to ensure the smooth flow of traffic and congestion in one direction, which will

help avoid traffic hazards and side turns, reduce noise, raise traffic efficiency, and facilitate movement, and access between inner neighbourhoods and surrounding areas.

The project also aims to serve public facilities, enhance commercial activity in the region, in addition to developing and improving the region, and adding aesthetic touches to it.

Iranian medical office opens

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The first Iranian medical tourism office in the Sultanate of Oman opened under the auspices of Ali Najafi, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Sultanate of Oman. A delegation of officials from the Iranian province of Fars (Shiraz) arrived in Muscat for the occasion.

This office will work to increase aspects of tourism and economic cooperation between the two countries, according to the Iranian Embassy in the Sultanate of Oman.

“We believe that the opening of this office would be a strong and reliable bridge for the development of tourism, economic, trade and investment relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Islamic Republic of Iran,” said Ali Najafi, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to



the Sultanate of Oman.

He further said that since the centre carries out its activities under the direct supervision of the Shiraz Province, Omani citizens and residents can benefit from the activities and services of this centre with confidence in all Iranian provinces. This centre can be coordinated for medical tourism in all regions of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

“I rejoice at the inauguration of the liaison office, a few days after the successful visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The relations between the Sultanate of Oman and Iran are now at the highest level. I am confident that this centre and its activities will witness all support from the official Omani authorities, including the ministries led by the Ministry



of Heritage and Tourism, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.”

The diplomatic representative of Iran further said there had been great enthusiasm from all officials. They have announced their contribution and support for this centre. The liaising office has abundant potential to enhance bilateral relations between the two friendly nations.

Dhofar braces for Khareef season 2023



SALALAH: A meeting was held at the office of the Governor of Dhofar on Wednesday to assess the preparedness of government and private establishments for the Khareef (monsoon) season 2023.

The readiness procedures were discussed during the meeting, which was held here under the auspices of HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar.

HH Sayyid Marwan expressed gratitude for the directives of His Majesty the Sultan to provide direct subsidies on fuel prices at Salalah Airport and equate fuel prices with counterparts at Muscat International

Airport. This, he said, will encourage the operation of more direct inbound and outbound flights to Salalah Airport. He noted that the competitive prices will enhance tourism and economic movement in the governorate.

During the meeting, government and private establishments outlined their plans for the Khareef season.

The meeting also touched on the readiness of Salalah Airport, services and plans for regulating traffic and air traffic safety, as well as procedures on access through checkpoints, medical services, ambulance services, residency and accommodation. — ONA

GCC food safety committee discusses unified law

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman on Wednesday chaired the 7th preparatory meeting of the GCC Food Safety Committee. The committee comprises under-secretaries of ministries concerned with food safety in the GCC.

The Sultanate of Oman was represented during the meeting by Dr Ahmed bin Nasser al Bakri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and



Water Resources for Agriculture.

The meeting discussed the unified food law of the GCC, the GCC centre for assessing food hazards and the GCC guide for control on imported food, among other topics.

The meeting was attended by Khalid bin Ali al Sunaidi, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic and Development Affairs at the Secretariat-General of the GCC. — ONA

Every rock has some story to tell at Bandar al Khairan

TEXT & PHOTOS
BY YAHYA AL SALMANI

BANDAR al Khairan, located approximately 25 km from Muscat, is not just a destination for swimming and snorkelling in its turquoise waters. It is a natural oasis with a wealth of hidden treasures waiting to be explored. Among these treasures are ancient burials, rock carvings and rare geological formations.

To truly appreciate the archaeological sites in this area, visitors need to take the initiative to hike through the vast mountain plateaus. Hiking along the rocky edges overlooking the sea bays offers a unique panoramic view. After an exciting trip, visitors can relax and capture beautiful photographs of the semi-circular beaches surrounded by mountains that provide shade from the sun.

Signs along the hiking trails indicate the presence of archaeological sites, cautioning visitors not to disturb them. One of the most significant sites is a mountain rock with petroglyphs on the top of a high plateau. These rock drawings reveal ancient art and visual languages, transporting observers back to distant times.

These rock formations serve as historical documentation, bearing human signatures and expressive paintings. The significance of these rare paintings transcends time, becoming valuable from scientific, cultural and historical perspectives. Mohammed al Wahaibi, a history and geography teacher, describes Oman as an open geological museum, highlighting the symbols and meanings embedded in each rock drawing.

“Oman is an open geological museum, and it is considered one of the best geological stations in the



world. These drawings have symbols and indications, and each drawing on a rock has its own meaning. Each word carved in a rock slab is considered a part of a linguistic dictionary and an art album. There are many interpretations, and what we see here in Muscat can be seen easily in many other places in Oman,” he told the Observer.

Such artistic pages documenting historical, cultural and social stages can be found throughout the country, from the northern to the southern regions of Oman. Photography enthusiasts rush to document these discoveries, constantly uncovering new rock art. The advent of social media has played a vital role in locating and sharing these sites, allowing for wider dissemination of their content.

The drawings on these rocks depict interlocking lines and various faces of people, animals and birds. Fully comprehending their scientific

explanations requires multiple visits and detailed analysis. Reflecting on their visual content is crucial in uncovering their mysterious secrets.

In addition to the rock drawings, the shores of Bandar al Khairan boast beautiful and rare rock formations shaped over time by natural erosion factors. These formations add an additional aesthetic value to the area. Visitors traverse the beaches and are captivated by the geological formations resembling animals and birds. The presence of large rocks in lower areas provides insights into the region's geological history.

“To ensure the preservation of these sites for future generations, special restoration and protection operations are needed throughout the Sultanate of Oman. It is not enough to rely solely on existing literature; active efforts must be made to safeguard these invaluable treasures,” an Omani geologist recommended.



B  W A R E O F

REPTILES



D U R I N G S U M M E R



KABEER YOUSUF
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Summer not only dehydrates humans and other living creatures and causes plants to wither, but it also prompts snakes, scorpions, and other reptiles that inhabit in holes, burrows and deserts to venture out of their habitats.

During the scorching summer months, these creatures emerge from their hiding places in search of cooler areas. They even scale high walls to reach window sills, air conditioner exhaust areas, or bathroom ventilation fans, and find their way into homes.

A senior veterinary specialist associated with the Royal Oman Police (ROP) explained, “It is a common sight to see desert snakes, scorpions, and other reptiles seeking cooler environments. While snakes can be venomous, scorpions may or may not be.” He adds, “Scorpions usually sting when they feel threatened and can hide in beds, curtains and shoes. Therefore, people must exercise caution around these creatures.” A herpetologist associated with a university states, “Snakes may emerge from their hiding places during the scorching months to cool their bodies, just as they do in winter to bask in



the heat. The heat provides energy to aid in digestion and keep their bodies functioning.” According to him, scorpions awaken from hibernation during summer and search for cool places to hide, often choosing homes, shoes, or stacks of books and papers. As the weather gets warmer, scorpions become more active and their venomous sting can be fatal.

Before going to bed, make sure your surroundings are tidy, especially if you plan to take a nap. If you have a toddler at home, exercise extra vigilance, as they may not be aware of the presence of these creatures.

Regularly dust the curtains and keep inaccessible areas in the house, such as bathroom ventilation, window air conditioner covers, stacked toys, and spaces under the bed, clean and free from any opportunity for these creatures to settle.

Most importantly, thoroughly check your shoes before wearing them and store them in a place that reptiles cannot access.

According to the herpetologist, these animals in burrows significantly reduce their metabolic processes during summer, as they prepare for hibernation in winter and estivation in summer.



‘Upskill and reskill’ crucial to be successful

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JUNE 7

Filling the skill gap is important for students, and this applies the most to those who opt for Information Technology (IT) as a course and pursue their careers in the field. IT students of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), Ibri, were exposed to an event titled ‘Upskills and Reskills’ that gave them insight into many new developments in the IT sector.

The ultimate objective of this event is to fill the skills gap of the student community and to guide in preparing jobs and placements. This event will allow the students to discover themselves, their strengths and skills. The sessions in this programme will link their courses and goals for the future. Ahmed bin Said al Gharibi, Alumni of the IT Department, was the chief guest. His esteemed presence gave good confidence to student participants to target their life goals.

The participants comprised students, faculty members and speakers. Among the speakers, some were college Alumni who felt proud to be part of an event in the college where they studied.

The first speaker, Dr Wilfred Blessing NR, Lecturer of IT, presented a motivational session in two tracks -- self-confidence and role of LinkedIn in jobs search.



“Students should improve the optimal type of self-confidence by realising the student’s competence and thorough preparation is required to succeed in all the roles.” He put stress on getting rid of the inferiority complex and building self-confidence and over self-confidence. He added, “LinkedIn is a primary professional social network to connect researchers, recruiters and trainers. Students shall use this media for learning and professional connections.” Junath Nasser, IT faculty, provided practical tips and insights on navigating the job market and developing essential soft skills for success in the workplace. He shared useful techniques for crafting a strong resume, preparing for an interview and networking effectively. He emphasised the importance of developing emotional intelligence, communication skills and problem-solving abilities to thrive in today’s competitive job market.

Ahmed bin Said al Gharibi

presented his job experiences with the students and explored the skills required for the job placements. He also shared the expectations of the employers. He presented his CV as a model and explained the strengths and things to focus on.

Sara al Shukailiyah presented the CV writing tips. A sample resume was also presented for the knowledge of students. She presented top tips for writing a resume. It included tailoring students’ resume, resume styles and sections, things to do before submitting the resume and ATS (Applicant Tracking System) algorithms - streamlining and bringing efficiency to the hiring process, and top tips on how to prepare for the interview.

Mock interviews were conducted by considering the requirement of software engineers/ developers for an IT firm.

The students called the event a fruitful engagement with experts who were helpful in clearing their doubts.

228 Omanis graduate as part of Emdad initiative

MUSCAT: The Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) celebrated on Wednesday the graduation of 228 young Omanis as part of its Emdad initiative in collaboration with the ‘Musalih’ platform.

The ceremony was held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) in Muscat under the auspices of Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources.

Following an agreement signed in 2020 between PDO and the Musalih platform, the graduates joined a training programme in specialised technical fields



including plumbing, fixing and installation of electrical connections.

Qualified graduates will join Musalih, which is an online handyman services platform. It links Omani professionals with customers in need for household services. Through the platform, customers can choose the type and timing of service, with clear prices and within a short time.

The Emdad initiative seeks to improve employment opportunities for Omani job-seekers by providing vocational training, scholarship opportunities and apprenticeship programmes. Emdad continues to coordinate directly with relevant government and private sector entities to create sustainable opportunities aligned with job market needs. — ONA

Naval academy gets authorisation for safety training

AL MUSANNAH: The Sultan Qaboos Naval Academy of Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) has obtained accreditation from the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology to issue the ‘Certificate of Eligibility in Basic Safety Training’.

The go-ahead was granted in accordance with the criteria of the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW), 1978.

The ministry has approved a number of Omani doctors at Said bin Sultan Naval Base to conduct examinations for sailors. The physicians are authorised



to issue the prescribed medical examination certificate.

The accreditation reflects RNO’s keenness to ensure that its personnel obtain proper qualification and ongoing knowledge that is updated in accordance with international laws.

The certificate affirms its holder’s competence and

capability to perform salvage tasks related to ships and crew, including basic skills needed to deal with, report and respond to marine emergencies.

The naval safety training course covers personal survival techniques, first aid skills, fire prevention, combat abilities, personal safeguards and social responsibility. — ONA

North Al Batinah students shine at Innovation and Scientific Olympiads

SIHAM AL SAIDI
BATINAH, JUNE 7

Innovation and Scientific Olympiads play a significant role in achieving the strategic goals of the Ministry of Education, aiming for a better future for students. These programmes enhance students’ talents and abilities, fostering problem-solving skills and encouraging the discovery of innovative solutions to complex scientific and mathematical issues. They make the process of research and exploration enjoyable for students across various sciences.

Recently, the General Directorate of Al Batinah North achieved outstanding global results, extending beyond local recognition. They have devoted substantial efforts to developing students’ skills in various sciences, including innovation, robotics, research and mathematics.



The Creativity and Scientific Olympiad department at Al Batinah North devised a comprehensive plan involving training sessions and programmes implemented throughout the academic year, with the assistance of experts and coaches.

The students secured international and national awards in nine competitions. In the Science Olympiad, they obtained silver and bronze medals in the ninth session of the Gulf Mathematical Olympiad held in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Additionally, they received the highest level of recognition, four stars, for student research in the environmental GLOBE programme.

In Robotics and Artificial Intelligence, they achieved the best research award for their renewable idea in the second session of the ALECSO Olympiad in Tunisia.

At the national level, they emerged winners in Oman’s Robotics and Artificial Intelligence competitions in the drone category. They also achieved fifth place in the Shell Awards, sponsored by

the NXplorer programme. Furthermore, they secured second and tenth places in the National Olympiad in Informatics and third place in the GLOBE Environmental Programme in the Sultanate of Oman.

Additionally, they attained second and fourth positions at the Sultanate level in the Student Scientific Innovations Competition.

The General Directorate is making commendable efforts to engage and discover talented students throughout the region. Through training programmes in scientific research, STEM programmes, robotics, innovation and environmental concepts, they have involved approximately 500 students from different areas throughout the year. These students actively participate in competitions across various fields, showcasing their skills and abilities.



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Dhofar Services invites the specialize companies to participate and submit their offers for the below said tender in Dhofar Governorate.

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last Date for Collection of Tender Documents	Time & Last Date for Proposal Submission	Tender Fee (OMR) Including VAT (5%)
DISC/ 2023/093	UNE-LOT 05C-2023	22/06/2023	02/07/2023	RO. 52.500
DISC/ 2023/094	MODIFICATION OF EXISTING UNSAFE OVERHEAD SERVICE CONNECTION NDS DISTRIBUTION SH-03-2023	22/06/2023	09/07/2023	RO. 105.000
DISC/ 2023/095	MODIFICATION OF EXISTING UNSAFE OVERHEAD SERVICE CONNECTION NDS DISTRIBUTION SH-04-2023	22/06/2023	09/07/2023	RO. 105.000
DISC/ 2023/096	REPLACEMENT OF PILOT RELAYS IN 33kV CRP, RTU PANEL, 11kV CAPACITOR BANKS, LVAC PANEL & 110V DC SYSTEM (BATTERY & CHARGER) AT EXISTING 33/11kV AL-HUSN-1 PSS AND REPLACEMENT OF DISTANCE RELAY AT REMOTE ITTIN GSS END	22/06/2023	11/07/2023	RO. 52.500
DISC/ 2023/101	11kV & LV NETWORK ENHANCEMENT PROJECT IN WADI AREA-(LOT-01)	22/06/2023	02/07/2023	RO. 105.000

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Fate of Israel’s judicial plan may hang on June parliament vote

TEL AVIV: Israel’s Knesset will hold a vote next week that could tip the scales against a drive by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s hard-right coalition to curb the Supreme Court, a move that set off one of the country’s worst political crises in years.

Parliament on June 14 is set to elect two lawmakers to join a panel that will select judges, including to the Supreme Court, one of the few checks and balances in Israel’s political system.

The make up of the nine-member panel of lawmakers, senior judges, ministers and lawyers has been at the heart of a battle over the nature of Israel’s democracy, which began in January when the government announced a plan to overhaul the judiciary.

This touched off protests and Western powers voiced concern about what it meant for Israel’s democratic health.

If one of the two lawmakers chosen is from the opposition - keeping the status quo - it would be a sign of compromise by Netanyahu after weeks of talks with his opponents and a setback for hardliners in his religious-nationalist government who want more control over judicial appointments.

It could affect the Supreme Court, which must replace the chief justice and another judge, in coming months.

“There are no guarantees with someone you don’t trust,” opposition head Yair Lapid told Army Radio, although he and other lawmakers have indicated over the past week that agreements on candidates for the panel have been reached.

But Netanyahu’s Likud party has kept the opposition guessing, saying a decision would be made next week.

Critics denounce the judicial plan pushed by Netanyahu, who is on trial on graft charges that he denies. They say the move to let parliament override many Supreme Court decisions threatens the independence of the courts and endangers democracy.

Until now, Netanyahu’s talks with the opposition to defuse the crisis have yielded little. He has also sent mixed messages about the overhaul’s fate, compounding uncertainty that has hit the economy and the shekel.

The vote on the panel make-up could provide clarity for Israelis and Western allies, including Washington which has urged Netanyahu to reach a consensus over legal reforms. — **Reuters**



People take part in a demonstration against Israeli PM Netanyahu and his government in Tel Aviv. – **Reuters**

Saudi crown prince, Blinken hold ‘candid’ talks in Jeddah

JEDDAH: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had an “open, candid” conversation with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the early hours of Wednesday about a wide range of bilateral issues, a US official said.

The top US diplomat arrived in Saudi Arabia late on Tuesday for a much anticipated visit amid frayed ties due to deepening disagreements on everything from Iran policy to regional security issues, and oil prices.

Washington has struggled to steady the relationship with Riyadh, where the Crown Prince Mohammed has dominated the decision-making, and as the traditional oil-for-security alliance crumbled under the emergence of the United States as a major oil producer.

Blinken’s visit came days after top crude exporter Saudi Arabia pledged to deepen oil output cuts on top of a broader OPEC+ deal to limit supply, as it seeks to boost flagging oil prices.

Blinken and the crown prince met for an hour and forty minutes, a US official said, covering various topics and mutual ties.

“There was a good degree of convergence on potential initiatives where we share the same interests, while also recognising where we have differences,” the US official said.

Saudi Arabia is the Middle East powerhouse and home to Islam’s



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in Jeddah. – **Reuters**

enrichment of uranium or reprocessing of plutonium made in reactors - two routes to making nuclear weapons.

Two days after Blinken’s visit, Riyadh will host a major Arab-Chinese investment conference.

Jonathan Fulton, non-resident senior fellow at Atlantic Council, said China would help the Saudis in sectors where the US won’t but the relationship between Riyadh and Beijing did not have the same depth as with Washington.

“At this point I’d still characterise the US-Saudi relationship as strategic and the China-Saudi relationship as transactional,” Fulton said.

MbS and Blinken also discussed Yemen and potential ways to revive normal situation, while Blinken thanked the crown prince for the kingdom’s role in pushing for a ceasefire in Sudan and helping evacuate US citizens.

The kingdom has been pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into transforming and opening its economy to reduce dependence on crude oil. — **Reuters**

Sudan military factions battle over weapons and fuel depots

KHARTOUM: Sudan’s army has been battling to defend a military industrial complex believed to contain large stocks of weapons and ammunition in southern Khartoum, close to fuel and gas depots that are at risk of exploding, residents said on Wednesday.

The paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), in the eighth week of a power struggle with the army, had attacked the area containing the Yarmouk complex late on Tuesday before retreating after heavy fighting, witnesses said.

Fighting across the three cities that make up Sudan’s greater capital region has picked up since a 12-day ceasefire formally expired on June 3 after repeated violations.

“Since yesterday there has been a violent battle with the use of planes and artillery and clashes on the ground and columns of smoke rising,” Nader Youssef, a resident living near Yarmouk, said by phone.

Due to the proximity of fuel



Smoke billows behind buildings amid ongoing fighting in Khartoum. – **Reuters**

and gas depots, “any explosion could destroy residents and the whole area”, he said.

The conflict has wreaked havoc on the capital, triggered new outbursts of deadly violence in the long volatile western region of Darfur, and displaced more than 1.9 million people.

Most health services have collapsed, power and water is often cut, and looting has been spreading.

In Bahri, north of the Blue Nile from Khartoum, local activists said that more than 50 days of water cuts had driven many people from their homes and that they were caught between having nothing to drink and being trapped in the crossfire as they searched for water.

More than 1,428,000 people have been driven from their homes within Sudan and a further 476,800 have fled into neighbouring countries, most of which are already struggling with poverty and internal conflict, according to estimates published on Tuesday by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). — **Reuters**

ISTANBUL

Erdogan proposes destroyed dam probe

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday proposed, in a call with his Ukrainian counterpart, creating an international commission to probe the destruction of a major dam in southern Ukraine, his office reported.

“President Erdogan said that a commission could be established with the participation of experts from the warring parties, the United Nations and the international community, including Türkiye, for a detailed investigation into the explosion at Kakhovka dam,” his office said after the call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

The destruction of the dam caused torrents of water to pour into the Dnipro, pushing thousands of civilians to flee the flooded areas.



NAIROBI

Kenya to convert cult forest into memorial

Kenya will convert a vast coastal forest linked to a doomsday cult have been exhumed into a national memorial site, a minister has said.

The discovery of mass graves in Shakahola forest, a 325-hectare bushland that lies inland from Malindi town, has shocked Kenyans.

The forest “where grave crimes have been committed will not remain as it was,” Interior Minister Kithure Kindiki said.

“The government will convert it into a national memorial, a place of remembrance so that Kenyans and



the world do not forget what happened here,” he said in a statement.

Investigators began a third phase of exhumation, unearthing more bodies to take the death toll to 251.

BOUZNIKA

Factions agree terms for long-delayed vote

Envoys of rival Libyan factions have agreed on the legal steps to hold much delayed presidential and legislative elections in the conflict-scarred nation, both sides said early on Wednesday.

Election were due to be held in December 2021 but were never organised as differences persisted on key issues including who should run in the polls.

In Morocco, representatives from both sides struck a deal but stopped short of inking any agreement so far in a sign some differences may still need to be resolved.

No date has yet been named for when the vote may take place. The talks in Bouznika, the latest attempt by both sides to reach a deal, had been underway since May 22.





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In brief

THE HAGUE



GENOCIDE SUSPECT RULED UNFIT FOR TRIAL

UN war crimes judges ruled on Wednesday that ageing Rwandan genocide suspect Felicien Kabuga is unfit to stand trial but should still go through a stripped-down legal process.

Former tycoon Kabuga, who is 88 according to officials but claims to be 90, is accused of setting up a hate broadcaster that fuelled the 1994 slaughter of around 800,000 people.

The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals said in an order that “Kabuga is unfit to participate meaningfully in his trial and is very unlikely to regain fitness in the future.”

WASHINGTON



FORMER VP PENCE ANNOUNCES PRESIDENTIAL RUN

Mike Pence announced on Wednesday his entry into the 2024 United States presidential election, as the former vice president goes up against Donald Trump for the Republican nomination.

Pence is scheduled to appear at a campaign launch event the same day in the early-voting state of Iowa — joining an already crowded field that includes Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

“Today, before God and my family, I’m announcing I’m running for president of the United States,” he said in an online campaign video.

DUSSELDORF



POLICE BUST INTERNATIONAL SMUGGLING NETWORK

German police arrested a man in the western city of Essen during an operation targeting an internationally active people-smuggling network.

The 38-year-old was arrested early on Wednesday morning, according to a spokesman for the Federal Police in Potsdam.

Further searches were carried out in Nauen in Brandenburg, Regensburg in Bavaria and in the Romanian city of Timisoara. According to the authorities, four more suspects were arrested there.

During the operations on Wednesday, high-value cars, mobile phones, cash and other evidence was seized, the police reported. A total of 197 police officers were involved in Germany and Romania.

Thousands flee flooded homes after Ukraine dam destroyed

KHERSON: Thousands were fleeing their homes on Wednesday after the destruction of a frontline Russian-held dam in Ukraine flooded dozens of villages and parts of a nearby city, sparking fears of a humanitarian disaster.

Downstream from the breached Kakhovka dam, Ukrainian police and troops in the southern city of Kherson were bringing people out from inundated areas in inflatable boats, most clutching only a few documents and pets.

Ukraine and Russia have traded blame for the dam being ripped open early on Tuesday, prompting Türkiye’s president to propose to both nations’ leaders an international probe of the breach.

The destruction has also raised fears of an environmental disaster and nuclear safety risks as it provides cooling water for Europe’s largest nuclear plant.

The water was waist-deep in central streets of Kherson and ground floors of buildings were submerged.

A spokesman for Ukraine’s emergency services, Oleksandr Khorunzhyi, said that “currently there is no information about the dead or injured”.

Water levels in Kherson have risen by five metres, he said.

While finger-pointing continued over the dam’s destruction, Moscow accused Kyiv of blowing up a key pipeline that Russia used before the war to export ammonia and whose re-activation it has requested as part of grain deal talks.



A view shows a flooded area after the Nova Kakhovka dam breached, in Kherson, Ukraine. — Reuters

The governor of the Kherson region, Oleksandr Prokudin, said 1,700 people had been evacuated so far and reported that ongoing shelling was endangering rescuers and locals.

Moscow-installed officials on the Russian side of the river said that more than 1,200 people had been evacuated.

A policeman, Sergiy, 38, was

using a radio to coordinate the rescue boats.

“Today we’ve already saved 30 people, 10 pets. There was one child. We will work until we’ve brought out all the people,” he said.

Washington warned there would be “likely many deaths” due to the breach of the Kakhovka dam.

Kyiv said the destruction of the dam was an attempt by Moscow

to hamper its long-awaited offensive, which Ukraine’s leader stressed would not be affected.

While the United Nations warned that hundreds of thousands could be affected on both sides of the frontline.

The governor of the Kherson region, Oleksandr Prokudin, said

1,852 houses had been flooded by early on Wednesday.

An official in President Volodymyr Zelensky’s office, Daria Zariivna, said that in the occupied territory “the Russians simply abandoned people” and in the town of Oleshky on the opposite bank from Kherson, “many spent the night on the roofs of houses”. — AFP

French parliament chief to block bid to axe pension reform

PARIS: France’s opposition parties on Wednesday were debating a no-confidence motion against the government after the parliament speaker said she would block an attempt to repeal an unpopular pension overhaul that pushes back the retirement age to 64 from 62.

The law was enacted following months of mass protests via a controversial constitutional mechanism whereby the government avoided a vote in the lower-house National Assembly.

Speaker Yael Braun-Pivet, who is from President Emmanuel Macron’s centrist party but is officially neutral, confirmed she would reject on constitutional grounds the bid to introduce new legislation, infuriating its backers.

Speaking to BFM television, she said an amendment proposed by the small LIOT faction in parliament and backed by left-wing parties would be declared “inadmissible”.

She was alluding to Article 40 of the constitution, which bans legislative proposals from MPs that would add a burden to public finances.

Reversing the increase in the retirement age, the key measure of Macron’s hard-fought pension reform, would add billions to government spending, she said.

“You don’t bend the constitution



French far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party’s MP Laurent Jacobelli speaks during a parliamentary session, in Paris. — AFP

to please the opposition,” government spokesman Olivier Veran said.

LIOT called the speaker’s decision “an unprecedented attack on the rights of parliament”.

Mathilde Panot, a senior figure from the hard-left France Unbowed (LFI) party, said that her group would submit a no-confidence motion and that discussions with partners were ongoing over the tactics to adopt.

Senior Socialist party MP Boris Vallaud said different groups were debating the issue, while LIOT leader Bertrand Pancher said his MPs would decide later.

Opponents of the pension reform had seen LIOT’s parliamentary manoeuvre as their

An amendment proposed by the small LIOT faction in parliament and backed by left-wing parties would be declared “inadmissible”

Yael Braun-Pivet
President of the National Assembly

last hope of thwarting the changes, having previously tried and failed with an appeal to the country’s constitutional court.

Observers said Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne’s minority government risked losing a vote on the LIOT legislation, however, with left-wing parties, the far right and some centre-right MPs prepared to vote against the executive.

Panot said Braun-Pivet’s decision was an admission of “fear” and accused her of failing to uphold the neutrality of her post. The original legislation was rammed through the National Assembly in March without a direct vote using a controversial constitutional power that can be invoked by the prime minister. — AFP

EU seeks to boost ‘neglected’ ties with Latin America



Representatives of the European Union attend a press conference on the EU partnership with Latin America and the Caribbean at the EU headquarters, in Brussels. — AFP

BRUSSELS: The European Union put forward a plan on Wednesday to bolster relations with Latin America as the bloc seeks to increase its influence in the face of Russia-Ukraine dispute.

EU ties to the region have been hampered by the failure to wrap up a comprehensive trade agreement with the Mercosur group of four countries -- Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay -- during two decades of negotiations.

There have also been disagreements with key regional powers such as Brazil over Moscow’s attack of Ukraine and the fallout from that war.

“Sometimes this partnership has been taken for granted or even neglected,” EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

EU leaders are to hold in July the first summit with Latin American and Caribbean counterparts since 2015.

The push to improve relations with the region is spurred by

Spain, which takes over the EU’s six-month rotating presidency next month, and which has strong ties with parts of Latin America dating from colonial times.

The new strategy from the EU’s executive arm envisions pressing to conclude the Mercosur trade deal, unlocking funding for infrastructure projects and holding more regular summits.

The EU sees Latin America as an important potential source of crucial raw materials as Brussels seeks to wean Europe off reliance on China.

“The war in Ukraine has also opened our eyes on the need to work with trusted partners and to diversify our supply chains,” said EU trade commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis.

But Europe has struggled to counter Moscow’s narrative in Latin America that puts blame on Western sanctions for roiled supply chains and diplomatic tensions. — AFP

The struggles and woes of a football fan



SAIF AL SHAIBANY
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The writer is a banker by day and a storyteller by night

Never thought about how we can get affected when our team loses a match, especially when losing to a bitter rival. Ask any football supporter, or better ask any Real Madrid or Barcelona fan how their nerves are when the ‘El Clasico’ match is on.

Matches like the El Clasico will see fans fell up restaurants, cafes even the neighbour’s house, to watch eleven men on the pitch play football for ninety minutes.

The emotion of the supporters are at an all-time high during the match, and defiantly the moods will change after ninety minutes.

The struggles of being a fan are real.

This Sunday was the day my mood was off because of Saturday’s FA Cup final between Manchester City (Man City) versus Manchester United (Man Utd) held at Wembley Stadium, London. It was a big match as it was the finals between two big club rivals from the City of Manchester, UK.

I am a Manchester United fan and have been, since a young age, including my brothers except for

my father, an Arsenal fan.

If you followed the match, you would have known Manchester City had won the FA Cup and beaten Manchester United.

Naturally, I felt bitter for the rest of the day. The next day I had work so I avoided my colleagues talking about the match since they know I supported Manchester United.

The beautiful game always provides great conversation, especially the next day. Work colleagues would gather up during their lunch break to discuss the last team update, match analysis, coach’s strategies and summer signings.

What I also find interesting is parents, especially fathers who want their children to support the same team. To the point of buying them the jerseys.

I made a rule and told my children that this is the club that their father supports and you all should do too, no questions asked. We are united as a family.

But let’s not say, that there isn’t another sport which provides the same feel and excitement as football, but there are such sports as basketball, baseball, NFL and cricket, seeing your team gain a

EVERY FAN IS PART OF THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY CREATED BY MANY OF THOSE FOOTBALL CLUBS AND EACH SUPPORTER IS SEEN AS A BRAND AMBASSADOR REPRESENTING THEM

bad result is a mood changer.

But to be honest, nothing compares to football. Just watch the World Cup.

But the funny thing is that all that excitement can get a little too much, the time and emotions put in supporting your team and to some fans have become part of their lives.

I find myself also flicking through Twitter or browsing the last updates on Manchester United or keeping up on their league position and at times I feel as if I am representing the team and being part of the global community.

But in fact, every fan is part of the global community created by many of those football clubs and each supporter is seen as a brand ambassador representing them.

Buying your favourite team jerseys and merchandise, following them on social media, buying season tickets or TV subscriptions, Instagram posts, and others.

And yes it feels like a part-time job but you’re working for free because you’re invested and it is fun. The struggles of a football fan are real, but to be honest it is priceless.

Phoney claims swirl around Sri Lanka’s holiest tree

AMAL JAYASINGHE

When social media was inundated with rumours that Sri Lanka’s holiest tree was being harmed by 5G mobile signals, Colombo’s cash-strapped government pulled out all the stops.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe dispatched a high-powered team of experts to the 2,300-year-old Sri Maha Bodhi tree in the sacred city of Anuradhapura, an ancient capital of the South Asian nation.

It included the head of the telecom regulator, his technical chief and the director of the National Botanical Gardens, along with university professors and district administrators.

Several visits were made, surveys were carried out, and the centuries-old tree was examined and monitored before a conclusion was reached: there were no 5G signals in the area in the first place.

The episode highlighted the speed with which fake news travels in Sri Lanka -- but even more so, it illustrated the reverence in which the country holds the Sri Maha Bodhi.

The tree is believed to have been grown from a cutting of the bodhi tree in India that sheltered the Buddha when he attained enlightenment more than 2,500 years ago. It is both an object of worship and a symbol of national sovereignty on the majority Buddhist island of 22 million people.

The first claims it was under threat appeared on a local website: 5G radiation from towers near the tree was supposedly turning its leaves black, and it was at “great risk” of eventually shedding them all and dying.

Memes were shared widely on Facebook and WhatsApp groups, and a television presenter repeated the theories on his YouTube channel.

The chief monk of the Bomaluwa Temple that houses the tree in Anuradhapura, 200 kilometres north of Colombo, was accused of taking bribes from phone operators to let them set up 5G base stations nearby.

“I am not a scientist, nor a botanist, so I raised the issue with the president in February,” monk Pallegama Hemarathana, 68, said. “He immediately appointed a panel of experts.”

“The government and the Buddhists will do whatever it takes to protect the Sri Maha Bodhi.”

— AFP



MARC SANTORA

MARC SANTORA THE WRITER HAS BEEN REPORTING FROM UKRAINE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR WITH RUSSIA

Flooding creates a new, slow-moving war disaster in Ukraine

For Ukrainians who have experienced all manner of catastrophe across more than 15 months of war, the rising waters that flooded towns and villages across southern Ukraine on Tuesday were a new and different kind of threat.

Unlike a missile strike that can come without warning and bring devastation in an instant, the surge of water unleashed after an explosion severed a dam on the Dnieper River was a slow-moving crisis, unfolding over hours in places where reliable information was already scarce.

In Mykolaiv, the southern port city, an emergency train pulled out of the station to collect people fleeing the rising waters in Kherson, about 40 miles to the east. Humanitarian groups were just starting to arrive to provide support for those forced from their homes by flooding.

Yevhen Chupyna, a Red Cross rescue worker, said that the scale of the disaster had yet to come into focus for many living in areas that might be flooded.

“The situation is difficult emotionally and psychologically,” he said as he helped unpack boxes of humanitarian aid.

“People don’t really know what happened. They have not realised this is a catastrophe.”

With communications spotty, he said it was difficult to get accurate information about the state of the flooding. The city of Kherson straddles the Dnieper River, which has become a front line in the war, dividing the warring armies.

The western bank, which is where the majority of Kherson’s residents live and work, is controlled by Ukraine, retaken last fall after eight months of Russian occupation. It mostly sits on elevated land but there are some neighbourhoods close to the river bank where flooding has already been reported. The eastern bank, controlled by the Russians, is kind of a bayou, with islands and marshes and many country homes accessible only by boat, even before the dam was breached.



A local resident is seen on an inflatable mattress in a flooded area in Kherson following the destruction of Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant dam. – AFP

Ukrainian officials, citing reports from emergency workers and volunteers, said some neighbourhoods near the river were already flooded. Vasyi, 40, a factory worker who lives in Kherson, said in a brief text message that people were trying to evacuate low lying neighbourhoods but that Russians were still shelling the area.

“Russians opened mortar fire as people prepared to evacuate from Ostriv,” he wrote. “They are terrorising us.”

Alim, who reached out from Kherson via text message, said people in the lower part of the city were in a panic. “Some are moving stuff to the upper floors and roofs of their houses, while others are packing the cars and trying to leave,” he wrote.

Buses were being organised to take people from their home to the train station, but only about 30 people were registered to take the first 10-car train as of noon local time. Chupyna said that they have hundreds of beds in Mykolaiv prepared for people who were forced from their homes.

Over 15 months of war, Ukrainian volunteer organisations have become adept at responding quickly to emergencies. But rising waters from a breached dam was a totally new challenge. Olha Napkhanenko, 40, a volunteer with the Serhiy Prytula Charity Foundation, said that her colleagues in the city of Kherson reported only about 5 per cent of the city being severely affected as of noon, but that the situation could get worse.

As she prepared snacks for the children who might arrive, the Ukrainian national anthem echoed through the station hall as workers stacked supplies.

“The worst will be on the eastern bank,” she said, referring to Russian-occupied territory. “Unfortunately, we can’t help them.”

Svitlana Sitnik, 52 a volunteer from a different organisation, said her aunt was in one of the towns on the east bank occupied by the Russians, Oleshky, and she was in contact with people there via a private Telegram channel.

“They painted an increasingly dire situation for the civilians there as Russian soldiers continued to patrol the streets and refused to provide assistance as the waters rose. The Russians announced an evacuation plan, people in the city reported, but details were scarce about how it would work.

For now, Sitnik said, it was neighbours helping neighbours in Oleshky. “Local volunteers are offering to help people get to Crimea,” she said.

— New York Times

Pitfalls in communication

Getting the attention of people who are at risk to enable them to take appropriate actions is the primary aim of emergency warnings. Individuals receive a message on their mobile phones about the actual threat and some advice on how to deal with the situation. This is great in theory; unfortunately, implementation and how people respond to the alert vary.

Since I had not heard of the phone warning testing, when my phone started making a funny noise, I wondered what was wrong with it. Hours later, I realised there was an emergency mobile phone test in Muscat. Surprise took several subscribers to the two major Internet providers.

I consider myself to be reasonably well informed. Maybe not so much after this. Following the testing performed in the middle of May, the English language local media published various articles. A few days earlier, there had been a message on social media about a link on YouTube to register for the alert. It seemed like a prank. The assumption was based on two reasons: first, I was unaware of mobile alert testing, and second, the message, which needed to be translated into English, was unclear.

Apparently, before the trial, some media interviews informed the population on how to activate the early warning alerts. Given that these were awareness initiatives, how is it possible that residents were surprised by the trial message? Some were clueless about it, local newspapers reported.

According to one article, the early-warning system is supposed to be a multilingual text message and is intended to inform citizens about extreme weather conditions such as hurricanes, tsunamis, heavy rains, strong winds, poor horizontal vision, or industrial disasters such as fires or gas leaks. Far-reaching, especially if the receiver gets a message in a foreign language. More importantly, mobile phone networks should remain functional during and after major



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EMERGENCY WARNING IS GREAT IN THEORY; UNFORTUNATELY, IMPLEMENTATION AND HOW PEOPLE RESPOND TO THE ALERT VARY

natural disasters. After the trial, news articles indicated that people who did not receive the alert were instructed to register at a certain link. Another article suggested that subscribers confirm receipt of the notification by clicking on the link in the message. How could people know it was not a hoax?

How can the community be properly informed if public communication is limited in scope? Consider this: what guarantees are there that the alert system has not been hacked and is not being used for malicious purposes? With the rise in cybercrime, adolescents and adults are being educated to be cautious of the information they receive on their mobile phones. Warning alerts can be sent accidentally. In 2018, residents in Hawaii were falsely warned of an incoming ballistic missile attack!

In any emergency, effective public communication can lessen the negative impacts of a disaster and save lives. However, the style of a text message – when clear – is mostly designed for an adult audience, which would be sophisticated or unfamiliar for young adults, adolescents, or children. Would alarms be sent to seniors who still use old models of phones without Internet service? What about public transportation drivers? Would they be checking their devices when the alarm rang? Will the conventional driving restrictions, such as not looking at or interacting with phones while driving, apply to warning notifications?

It is difficult to predict how individuals will react to alerts. People will begin to ignore communications if they receive them frequently, are poorly written, or are ambiguous. People can become numb to messages that are sent about situations that are not relevant to the recipient or that are not perceived as serious enough. Studies point to three factors that influence compliance with alerts: understanding, believing and personalising.

While warning alerts are still in the testing phase and many questions need to be answered, people are already browsing in settings for how to disable the notifications.

ENCHANTING TRADITIONAL PHOTOSHOOT



A woman and a girl wearing a traditional Chinese costume chat next to the Forbidden City during a photo session with a local photographer in Beijing. – AFP

State Council debates reflect collaborative decision-making

Tuesday's session of The Council of Oman is devoted to debating contentious articles in the draft Labour Law, Social Protection Law, and Biometric Fingerprint Law, which the State Council and the Majlis Ash'shura disagree on.

This step reflects the collaborative effort in the country's decision-making and highlights the parliamentary contribution to adopting laws that affect the lives of citizens and proves the existence of the State of institutions and the rule of law.

It also shows a belief in the important role of the legislative channels in issuing legislation and laws and demonstrates how it is crucial to activating the legal tools in the event of a disagreement between the State Council and the Majlis Ash'shura on draft laws submitted to the legislative authority.

Debating and voting on the points of disagreement in accordance with Article 50 of the Oman Council Law is a positive step towards allowing the society to express itself through its representatives in the Majlis Ash'shura and to suggest changes to the laws presented.

The disagreement, or call it varying views, on the articles of legislation between Majlis Ash'shura and the State Council is a healthy phenomenon that



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THE DIFFERING VIEWS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNCILS MAY RESULT IN CONSENSUS ON FRAMEWORKS AND LAWS BASED ON MEMBERS' PRINCIPLES, CONSIDERATIONS, AND OBLIGATIONS THAT THEY UNDERTAKE IN FULFILLING THEIR DUTIES AND FUNCTIONS AS MEMBERS

reflects the society's maturity and high level of its awareness. In the light of several considerations, the differing views between the two councils may result in consensus on frameworks and laws based on members' principles, considerations and obligations that they undertake in fulfilling their duties and functions as members.

Divergence of views is also regarded as an advanced stage in the process of establishing a legal framework on which laws are passed after members of the State Council and Majlis Ash'shura have sufficient convictions through the voting mechanisms.

The invocation of this conclusion will help consolidate the ideals of democracy we are pursuing based on values, principles and convictions.

The issuance of the disputed Social Protection Law in light of the proposed views is a positive step and qualitative leap for the country as a whole. It reflects an elevated level of care for the eligible groups and keenness to improve their financial conditions, including those with special needs and the elderly, regardless of their wealth, as well as housewives, and children.

Despite the State's economic

and financial circumstances, the allocation of monthly stipends to these groups is a great development.

Excessive demands that surpass the capability of the government are not a good thing. As the saying goes, "Something is better than nothing." Given the uncertain economic situation worldwide and not only in Oman, the privileges offered could not be predicted by those receivers in the first place. Despite these adverse conditions, the State pays salaries to non-working groups, for example. Undoubtedly, this demonstrates an Omani advanced symbiotic ideology for the country that is probably unmatched all over the world.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's vision is aimed at going beyond the equator's boundaries and intended to achieve an

appropriate standard of living for all segments of the population. This was clear from the moment he took office in the country.

Furthermore, prioritising assistance for the eligible groups is necessary to preserve the State's financial position, while focusing on financial sustainability, which has become a vital prerequisite in striking a balance between income and expenditures.

The preservation of the State's financial position and focusing on financial stability are crucial to strengthening the economic diversification initiatives, which require a variety of techniques. The balanced arguments at the two councils over the disputed articles need to take into account all these considerations.

Divergence of views and engaging in a debate are desirable, and listening to others'

perspectives is beneficial.

However, this must be done within the limits of the public interest, which must strike a balance between genuine requirements and available financial resources. As we can see, the global economic situation is dire. Every country, even the major powers, is in distress.

As a result, authorising an increase in responsibilities from a limited or electoral standpoint may result in future difficulties in fulfilling these commitments.

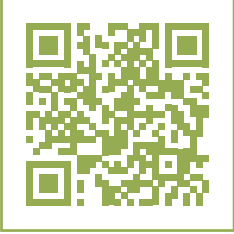
However, no matter how much we increase financial allocations, they will be insufficient to meet the rising life demands. It is the individual's responsibility to learn how to manage his funds and diversify his sources of income in order to keep up with the changes since citizens should be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances.

We hope that Oman Council will vote on the contested articles in the Social Protection and Labour Law, establish an appropriate balance, and strengthen efforts to keep up with the developments rather than acquiescence and submissiveness in the face of challenging circumstances.



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Kante joins Benzema at Saudi’s Al-Ittihad

RIYADH: World Cup-winning French midfielder N’Golo Kante has signed a three-year deal with Saudi Arabia’s Al-Ittihad, a club source said on Wednesday, a day after Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema also joined the team.

Kante, 32, underwent a full medical before the contract was signed, the source said on condition of anonymity, not being authorised to make the information public.

The departing Chelsea player, who lifted the 2018 World Cup in Russia, has a history of injuries and missed six months of this season with a hamstring problem.

The club source did not divulge the size of the deal, which comes as the oil-rich Gulf monarchy buys up a swathe of players for its domestic Saudi Pro League.

On Tuesday Benzema, the 35-year-old French Ballon



d’Or-winner, was confirmed as a major signing for Jeddah-based Al-Ittihad, also on a three-year contract. The latest signings come after Portuguese superstar

Cristiano Ronaldo joined Saudi Arabia’s Al-Nassr in January in a deal said to be worth more than 400 million euros.

Benzema, Kante and

Argentine great Lionel Messi are on a list of 10 targets who have been contacted by Saudi officials, a source close to the negotiations said this week. — AFP



Karim Benzema poses holding the jersey of Saudi Arabian soccer team Al Ittihad in this handout photo obtained by Reuters June 6, 2023.



Spain’s Carlos Alcaraz Garfia celebrates a point against Greece’s Stefanos Tsitsipas during their men’s singles quarter final match on day ten of the Roland-Garros Open tennis tournament at the Court Philippe-Chatrier in Paris. — AFP

Alcaraz sets up Djokovic showdown in French Open semis

PARIS: Carlos Alcaraz will play Novak Djokovic in a blockbuster French Open semi-final after the Spanish world number one beat Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-2, 6-1, 7-6 (7/5) on Tuesday.

The 20-year-old Alcaraz becomes the youngest French Open men’s semi-finalist since Djokovic in 2007 after defeating former Roland Garros runner-up Tsitsipas for the fifth time in as many attempts.

Alcaraz will face Djokovic for only the second time in his career. He beat the 22-time Grand Slam champion in three sets in Madrid last year.

“This match everyone wants to watch and I would say it is going to be a good match to play and watch as well,” Alcaraz said of his pending showdown with Djokovic.

“I really wanted to play this match. If you want to be the best you have to beat the best, and Novak Djokovic is one of the best in the world at the moment.”

Tsitsipas started the night session quarter-final with a

confident hold but Alcaraz soon grabbed control with two breaks to bag the opening set.

Alcaraz’s mix of delicate drop shots and blistering groundstrokes were too much for an overmatched Tsitsipas, who tamely surrendered the second set with a double fault.

The top seed broke early in the third set but failed to serve it out at 5-3 as Tsitsipas offered some belated resistance, saving five match points before ultimately going down in the tie-break.

“I lost my focus a little bit at the end of the third set,” said Alcaraz.

“He started to play better and of course, I lost my focus a little bit, I was in trouble. I am happy to recover from that problem and still focus and play a great level.”

Earlier on Friday, two-time Paris champion Djokovic defeated Karen Khachanov 4-6, 7-6 (7/0), 6-2, 6-4 to reach the semi-finals for the 12th time and 45th at the majors. — AFP

Swiatek into French Open semi-final as Haddad Maia makes history for Brazil

PARIS: Iga Swiatek cruised past Coco Gauff on Wednesday to reach the French Open semi-finals where she will face Beatriz Haddad Maia, the first Brazilian woman to make the last four of a Grand Slam in 55 years.

World number one and defending champion Swiatek, chasing a third title at Roland Garros, brushed aside 19-year-old Gauff 6-4, 6-2 in a rematch of last year’s final.

Swiatek improved her record in Paris to 26-2 after beating Gauff for the seventh time in as many meetings.

The 22-year-old from Poland is chasing a third French Open crown and attempting to become the first woman to successfully defend the title in Paris since Justine Henin in 2007.

“It wasn’t easy, the first set was really tight. Coco was really using the conditions, so I was happy to be able to work on it and win this match,” said Swiatek, who has yet to drop a set at the tournament.



Poland’s Iga Swiatek celebrates after winning against US Coco Gauff during their women’s singles quarter final match on day eleven of the Roland-Garros Open tennis tournament at the Court Philippe-Chatrier in Paris on Wednesday. — AFP

World number 14 Haddad Maia defeated seventh-ranked Ons Jabeur 3-6, 7-6 (7/5), 6-1.

The 27-year-old left-hander follows in the footsteps of seven-time major winner Maria Bueno who was the last Brazilian woman in the semi-finals of a major at the US Open 55 years ago.

Bueno, who passed away in 2018, made the last four in Paris in 1966 before the advent of the Open era.

“Ons is not easy to play against, you have to be patient but I believed in my body and tried to keep my rhythm,” said Haddad Maia. Jabeur, the runner-up at Wimbledon and the US Open in 2022, was playing in her first quarter-final at Roland Garros while Haddad Maia had never got past the second round of a Grand Slam before this French Open.

The Brazilian had saved a match point in the third round against Ekaterina Alexandrova and then

defeated Sara Sorribes Tormo in a three-hour 51-minute marathon, the third longest women’s match ever played at the tournament.

She summoned all that fighting spirit in the second set against Jabeur, holding her nerve on a fourth set point.

WORKED HARD

Haddad Maia then swept into a 3-0 lead in the decider, saved four break points to stretch to a 5-1 advantage and took the match after two and a half hours when Jabeur hit long.

“I had a day off after my fourth round match. My amazing team worked hard on my body,” said the Brazilian.

Thursday’s other semi-final will see Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka tackle unseeded Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic. “I think I rushed my way back on tour, but that’s because I wanted to be ready for the French

Open,” said Jabeur, whose build-up to Paris had been curtailed by a calf injury.

While anticipation grows over Friday’s men’s semi-final between Carlos Alcaraz and Novak Djokovic, attention on Wednesday is focused on who will join the two heavyweights in the last four.

Twelve months ago, Casper Ruud came through against Holger Rune in a four-set quarter-final before the pair continued their battle in the locker room.

Rune, then just a precocious 19-year-old, accused his Norwegian rival of a “lack of respect”.

Ruud, who went on to finish runner-up to Rafael Nadal, responded by advising his Danish rival to “grow up”.

Fourth-ranked Ruud holds a 4-1 career edge over the world number six but Rune won their most recent clash on clay in the Rome semi-finals.

LESS DRAMA

“Obviously there was drama last year and I hope we can make less drama this year,” said Rune who needed almost four hours and five sets to defeat Francisco Cerundolo last time out.

Ruud is the in-form clay court player with 85 wins on the surface since 2020.

The winner of that clash will face either German 22nd seed Alexander Zverev, playing in his ninth quarter-final at the majors, or unseeded Tomas Martin Etcheverry, the world number 49 from Argentina, appearing in his first.

Last year, Zverev suffered season-ending ankle ligament damage in his semi-final against Nadal.

The Olympic champion, a two-time semi-finalist in Paris, is in the quarter-finals for a fifth time in six years. — AFP

18 horses qualify for endurance competition in Dhofar Governorate



WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, JUNE 7

18 horses qualified at the conclusion of the endurance competition, organised by Oman Equestrian Federation, at Khor Al Dahariz beach in Salalah.

The qualified race included one stage for a distance of 40 km, in the presence of Ahmed bin Saif al Abri, Secretary-General of the Federation.

The race started at four o'clock in the afternoon, after the completion of the veterinary examination. where 18 horses were passed successful and 4 horses were excluded from the race for not passing the veterinary examination.

Ahmed bin Saif al Abri, Secretary-General of the Oman Equestrian

Federation, said "The qualifying race is held in cooperation with the Dhofar Equestrian Committee, where great efforts have been made by the Oman Equestrian Federation to prepare the tracks for the qualifying race, and there is a great awakening of citizens who own horses, trainers and riders to deal with horses to pass This race".

Al Abri explained, "22 horses participated in the race, and this number is considered good, and we hope the number of participants will increase in the coming days, with real and clear knowledge of the all competitions vision which organised by the Oman Equestrian Federation in cooperation with the Dhofar Equestrian Committee, and all thanks to the technical and administrative staff that contributed to the success of this race".

OBA to launch the second edition of Credit Oman Tournament

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JUNE 7

The Oman Basketball Association (OBA) and Credit Oman have renewed their memorandum to launch the highly anticipated of second edition of the Credit Oman Elite Basketball Cup. Following the overwhelming success of the inaugural tournament, this partnership aims to further promote basketball and support the development of talented young athletes.

The agreement was formally signed by Engineer Khalfan bin Saleh al Naabi, head of the OBA, and Shaikh Khalil bin Ahmed al Harthy, CEO of Credit Oman, in the presence of esteemed dignitaries.

Expressing his enthusiasm, Shaikh Khalil al Harthy, emphasised the significance of the partnership with the OBA. He stated, "This agreement exemplifies our commitment to supporting sports association and fulfilling our social responsibility to empower youth and the sports sector. We take great pride in our ongoing partnership for the second consecutive year."

Al Harthy further emphasised that Credit Oman's sponsorship initiatives aim to provide a conducive environment for young men and women to pursue various sports disciplines. Additionally, the tournament will benefit clubs to preparing them for future competitions, facilitating talent discovery, and nurturing athletes who can contribute to national



teams and clubs.

Acknowledging the successful collaboration, Eng Khalfan al Naabi, expressed his delight at renewing the partnership with Credit Oman. He affirmed, "This partnership renewal underscores our commitment to the sustainability of the Elite Basketball Clubs Championship. Building upon the success of the inaugural tournament, we are confident that this continued cooperation will help us to achieve our vision, goals, and plans for the development of basketball in

Oman."

Al Naabi highlighted the importance of marketing basketball tournaments to enhance the sport's growth. He emphasised that the basketball sector is a promising field supported by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, which has launched youth preparation centres in several clubs across the Sultanate of Oman. The association also collaborates closely with Oman School Sports Association (OSSA) to promote basketball in schools and identify promising players for

further training opportunities.

Furthermore, the association works in partnership with private academies dedicated to basketball, providing comprehensive training to various age groups. This cooperative effort facilitates the expansion of the game and enables clubs to recruit talented players from these academies.

Al Naabi emphasised that the association's plans include hosting basketball tournaments in collaboration with government and private institutions. Notably, they have successfully organized basketball trio tournaments in cooperation with Muscat Municipality, along with upcoming events in populous areas, commercial complexes, and festivals throughout the Sultanate of Oman. The association values the private sector's support and partnership, as it contributes significantly to the growth and presence of basketball in the country.

He emphasised the crucial role of the government and private sectors in supporting basketball and expressed this by saying support will be appreciated by OBA. Al Naabi concluded by highlighting the success of the Credit Oman Elite Basketball Championship, now in its second edition, as a stepping stone towards further support, particularly from the private sector. Such support will enable the association to build formidable national teams capable of representing the Sultanate of Oman in international competitions.



Health insurance deal for Oman national cricket team

MUSCAT: In a first for any sports associations in the Sultanate of Oman, a sports-centric health insurance policy has been inked between Oman Cricket (OC) and a leading insurance company.

The long-term policy arrangement will ensure that the national team cricketers currently in South Africa, en route to play the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup Qualifier in Zimbabwe which will held on June 18-July 9, will be covered for any injuries or health issues.

Confirming the three-year deal between OC and Dhofar Insurance Company, Alkesh Joshi's, OC treasurer, said: "This is the first time that an exclusive sports-centric health policy has been introduced in the Sultanate of Oman. This is one-of-its-kind health insurance policy for its national team players. We are happy to have taken the pioneering step.

"This policy ensures that the national team players do not have worry, God forbid, in case of any injury happening as they will be provided the best healthcare and flown to any part of the world for the best of the treatment. From air travel to getting the treatment from the best experts, they would be taken care by Oman Cricket."

Joshi said: "The policy has provided a great relief for the players, who can now focus on what they do the best: performance on the field."

"We have the biggest mission ahead for Oman Cricket as our players attempt to make history by qualifying to the ICC Cricket World Cup. The Zimbabwe Qualifier is the ultimate test for our players, and we wanted them to go into the tournament in the best shape and mindset," added Joshi.

A former domestic cricketer himself, Joshi said: "We have never had so much talent in one squad in recent times. Be it



ALKESH JOSHI

Bilal Khan, the highest wicket-taker during ICC World Cricket League Division 2, or skipper Zeeshan Maqsood, who was named the ICC Associate Player of the Year or Jatinder Singh, one of the most flamboyant strikers. We have a balanced squad with the selection made on pure merit and horses for courses policy. I am sure, we will be no pushovers in Zimbabwe."

Oman are among the ten teams who will vie for the two available Cricket World Cup slots to be played in India later this year. Divided into two groups, Duleep Mendis-coached Oman are clubbed with World Cup winner Sri Lanka, Ireland, Scotland and the UAE in Group B. Group A comprises hosts Zimbabwe, two-time winners West Indies, Nepal, Netherlands and United States.

Incentives doubled for Zimbabwe Qualifier

With the stakes high in Zimbabwe, Joshi said that "OC has doubled the players bonuses for the Cricket World Cup Qualifier."

He added: "After the team finished second in Division 2, we increased their monthly contracts significantly and the incentives have been doubled. The idea is that players shouldn't worry anything other than their display on the field. We have declared incentives and have also chalked out a plan to reward them on each match performances."

Warner falls on opening day of WTC against India

LONDON: India struck at either end of the session to leave Australia 73-2 at lunch on the first day of the World Test Championship final at the Oval on Wednesday.

Australia were in trouble in the opening overs when Usman Khawaja fell for a duck before opening partner David Warner counter-attacked.

The under-pressure left-hander was in fine touch, making 43 that included eight boundaries.

But his innings ended in unlucky fashion when he gloved an attempted pull off Shardul Thakur and was well caught down the legside by diving wicketkeeper Srikar Bharat.

Both Thakur and fellow paceman Mohammed Siraj had lunchtime figures of 1-16.



India's Mohammed Siraj celebrates after taking the wicket of Australia's Usman Khawaja with Virat Kohli. — Reuters

Marnus Labuschagne was 26 not out and Steve Smith two not out.

India captain Rohit Sharma

won the toss and elected to bowl under overcast skies and on a green-tinged pitch that promised to assist his four-man pace attack.

It was not long before a bowling unit missing injured paceman Jasprit Bumrah justified Rohit's decision.

Mohammed Shami started with a lively maiden to Warner, who had managed just one century in his previous 32 Test innings.

But it was Khawaja who fell for a 10-ball nought when caught behind off an excellent wobble seam delivery.

Australia, to the raucous delight of a mostly pro-India crowd, were then 2-1 in the fourth over.

Siraj struck Labuschagne a painful blow on the right hand when an 89 miles-per-hour (143 kilometres-per-hour) delivery rose off a good length, forcing the world's top-ranked Test batsman to drop his bat. — AFP



MESSI TO JOIN INTER MIAMI AFTER PSG EXIT — BBC

LOS ANGELES: Lionel Messi will snub a lucrative contract in Saudi Arabia and move to Major League Soccer side Inter Miami as a free agent after parting ways with French champions Paris St Germain, the BBC reported on Wednesday.

Messi, who played his final game for PSG over the weekend, was also linked with a return to Barcelona but the Spanish club have had their hands tied due to LaLiga's financial fair play rules.

Should the deal with Miami go through, the 35-year-old Argentine will play outside Europe for the first time since he joined Barca's academy at the age of 13 and became the Spanish club's all-time record goalscorer with 672 goals.

MLS could not confirm the BBC report and said that the league approves all player contracts.

Inter Miami did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Messi had wanted to go to a club where he could eventually have

an ownership stake, a source with knowledge of the negotiations told Reuters this week. He also wanted to maximise his existing deal with Adidas and MLS's relationship with Apple.

MLS earns a flat fee of around \$250 million per year from Apple until it reaches a certain threshold of subscriptions, after which point it will earn a share of the revenue from those subscriptions.

Messi's move to MLS is expected to drive viewers to the Apple TV streaming platform, as the world's most recognisable soccer player.

Messi, who led Argentina to World Cup glory in Qatar in December and has earned a record seven Ballon d'Or awards, won the Ligue 1 title in his two seasons with PSG as well as the French Super Cup in 2022.

The forward was also linked with a move to Saudi Arabian side Al-Hilal after he received a formal offer.

The Gulf country has been looking to bring the game's biggest players

Messi had no choice in the manner of his exit from Barcelona in 2021 as the club failed to make it financially feasible to retain his services. His move away from PSG, however, is of his own volition as he felt the French club lacked a project for the future while fan unrest only hastened his exit

to its league and was successful in convincing Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo to join Al Nassr soon after the World Cup. French striker Karim Benzema joined Al Ittihad this week.

Inter Miami are co-owned by former England captain David Beckham, who was one of the first major European stars to move to the United States to play in the MLS, winning the MLS Cup twice with Los Angeles Galaxy.

PSG EXIT

Once the crown jewel of European football, Messi has effectively been let go by two super clubs in two years — for free.

At Barcelona, Messi has several records to his name at the club he did not want to leave, in a city he had called home since he was a teenager.

But Messi had no choice in the manner of his exit from Barcelona in 2021 as the club failed to make

it financially feasible to retain his services. His move away from PSG, however, is of his own volition as he felt the French club lacked a project for the future while fan unrest only hastened his exit.

The highs after winning Argentina's first World Cup in 36 years were quickly offset by the lows he experienced in Paris.

Even before he could rest on his World Cup laurels he found himself in the eye of a storm when, for the first time in his illustrious career, his club's fans turned against him amid PSG's troubling form.

Supporters of PSG, owned and funded by Qatar Sports Investments, have become accustomed to winning domestic titles in the past decade. They won their ninth title in 11 seasons last month.

But the holy grail — the Champions League — remains elusive after yet another meek exit in the last 16.



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Mining sector to unlock new opportunities in Oman

MUSCAT: With the issuance of the Mineral Resources Law, coupled with the recent tendering and award of a number of mining concessions, the mining sector in the Sultanate of Oman is poised for a new phase of vigorous growth.

Overseeing this sector is the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, which has affirmed the presence of commercial deposits of metallic mineral ores such as copper, chromium, iron ore, manganese, and non-metallic ores such as marble, limestone, gypsum, clay, silica, dolomite, sandstone, kaolin, various quarry commodities, and others.

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals seeks to develop and organise the sector by completing and developing the geological, geophysical and geochemical maps of Oman, continuing the exploration of minerals of all kinds and understanding their uses in the field of industry in general, and making the most of the available

resources to diversify the sources of national income and expand its production base.

Further, through investments, the Ministry is encouraging the establishment of industries that depend on available minerals such as the glass industry, the production of copper alloys, and metal industries.

The mining sector is one of the economic pillars upon which the goals of “Oman Vision 2040” are sought to be achieved.

Eng Saud bin Khamis al Mahrouqi, Director General of Minerals, said: “The current strategic direction of the ministry is to identify and equip concession areas for metallic minerals and general sites for non-metallic areas to achieve the principle of transparency and equal opportunities, as all these areas will be offered by bidding system according to standards and technical and financial evaluation for the real investor.

Those wishing to enter the mining sector in the Sultanate of Oman.”

In a statement to Oman News Agency, he explained that the Ministry is identifying new concession areas for investment and development targeting chrome, copper, limestone and other ores.

At present, seven concession areas currently up for bidding.

So far, the Ministry signed 16 agreements with Minerals Development Oman (MDO), covering a total of 12 concession areas for metallic minerals development.

Besides, an agreement for laterite ore exploration has been signed with Knights Bay of the UK, while 3 agreements for concession areas for potash and lithium ore development with Mawarid Mining, Al Tasnim and Ara.

Zubair bin Mohammed al Zubair, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Ara Natural Resources Company, explained that the mining sector is a promising industry with the potential to support economic diversification and to increase its contribution to the gross domestic product.

He welcomed efforts by the Ministry to attract serious investors from inside and outside Oman to explore for valuable commodities such as lithium and potash. — ONA

Forum highlights opportunities for women in tourism industry

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JUNE 7

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), in collaboration with its Business Women's Committee and Tourism Committee, launched the ‘Women in the Tourism Sector’ forum on June 7, 2023. The forum features a group of accomplished Omani women who possess significant expertise in the tourism industry.

Areej bint Mohsin al Zaabiyah, Chairperson of the Chamber's Business Women's Committee and a Member of the Board of Directors, emphasised that the primary objective of the Women's Forum in the tourism sector is to strengthen women's roles and empower them within this industry.

It also aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and successful practices among women, while fostering their capacity-building efforts.

The forum holds immense

importance as it provides an opportunity to benefit from the experiences and knowledge of women already engaged in the sector.

Al Zaabiyah further explained that the forum serves as a platform for women to learn from experts and specialists in the tourism industry, enhancing their skills and increasing professional opportunities. The forum seeks to transform ideas into successful projects while encouraging participants to collaborate and tackle common challenges.

Dr Siham bint Ahmed al Harthiyah, Chairperson of the Chamber's Tourism Committee and a Member of the Board of Directors, highlighted the growing significance of women's contributions to the tourism sector.

Updated statistics indicate that approximately 54 per cent of the global tourism workforce comprises women, emphasising their pivotal role in the sector's development. **TURN TO P14**

Consultant sought to master-plan green hydrogen corridors in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JUNE 7

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has invited proposals from qualified consultants for the master-planning of sites earmarked for renewable and green energy projects within its vast concessions distributed across the Sultanate of Oman.

Oman's three main gateways at Suhar, Duqm and Salalah, as well as ports envisioned in the future, are expected to host the large majority of industries and storage sites constituting the downstream components of major green hydrogen projects due to come up in the coming years and decades.

Indispensable to their successful operation are dedicated service corridors for pipelines and other utilities that will link the upstream components, to be established deeper in the hinterland, with the downstream elements located closer to the ports – a goal that OPAZ seeks to ensure together with Hydrogen Oman (Hydrom), the orchestrator and master-planner of the nation's nascent green hydrogen industry.

Following the recent award of land blocks for green hydrogen projects – which will come up in the close vicinity of the SEZ at Duqm – OPAZ says it is now gearing up to support the establishment of key infrastructure elements that will be necessary for the project developers to progress their mega-

scale ventures through to fruition.

“OPAZ, working in partnership with Hydrom and other stakeholders, is leading the development of an integrated renewable energy strategy, and has identified the most attractive areas in Oman to produce renewable energy, green hydrogen and associated derivatives, such as ammonia,” the Authority said in a brief overview on its latest tender.

“In this context, the Special Economic Zone at Duqm is in the process of attracting integrated projects from leading international companies across the full green hydrogen value chain including renewable energy production, hydrogen production, hydrogen conversion and offtakes.

OPAZ is looking for a competent consultant to do the master-planning of plots, corridors and infrastructure, and carry out the required studies,” the Authority noted.

The successful bidder, according to OPAZ, will also support the Authority in developing a set of regulations and standards that will be applied during the development of future green energy projects.

Additionally, as part of its remit, the consultant will provide advisory services linked to the development of the downstream components of the green hydrogen projects, which are expected to come up close to the Port of Duqm.

In addition to identifying the most appropriate areas for these downstream components, the consultant is also required to master-plan the service corridors, as well as the linkages between the upstream and downstream components.

The location of export sites and associated facilities will be suitably delineated as well.

Significantly, the tender adds to a busy week that saw the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, along with Hydrom, sign agreements with consortiums set to invest around \$20 billion in three green hydrogen projects with a commitment to jointly produce around half a million tonnes of green molecules by 2030.

Separately, Hydrom signed an MoU with OQ Gas Networks (OQGN), the sole transporter of natural gas in Oman and owner of the natural gas transportation network, to study the development of green hydrogen network infrastructure in the country. Bids for OPAZ's consultancy tender are due in by July 5, 2023.

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MUSCAT: The Ford Taurus with its stylish profile, powerful performance, impressive comfort and space is a good choice for families to make the most of.

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The Ford Taurus is engineered to offer a blend of seamless connectivity, high on-road performance and an entirely new sleek modern design. Boasting an attractive and stylish design, on an entirely different platform, the Taurus exudes refinement with numerous premium touches.



Featuring 19-inch, 10-spoke polished alloy wheels, a new flatter streamlined hood and a power-deployable door handle, Taurus is sleeker in its stance.

A dynamic shield-like, clipped trapezoidal grille with active shutter, black mesh and chrome surrounds hint at the power

contained within, with a dual exhaust adding a strong sense of style and substance. Auto high beams and a full LED two-piece headlamp design guarantee Taurus is always seen in the best light.

The Taurus has a detailed and well-appointed interior.

The materials used throughout the cabin reinforce the feeling of comfort and exceptional, uncompromised quality. 10-way power driver, six-way power passenger seats and seven ambient colours – including a light interior colour palette.

In the Taurus, extensive use

of sound-deadening materials, advanced technologies and precise engineering, as well as cooling dual zone auto AC, ensure that whether in the front or rear seats, all occupants are treated to an exceptionally quiet cabin matched by a smooth and comfortable ride, and an incredible view from the expansive dual panel panoramic moon roof.

A cavernous trunk boasting 520-litres capacity adds even greater practicality to the newly-designed flagship Ford sedan.

At the heart of 'Taurus' connective experience is the large, best-in-class, multi-function 13.2-inch centre touchscreen – complementing the big 8-inch digital instrument panel cluster – loaded with Ford's intuitive SYNC4 technology, which comes customer-ready with its voice-activated communications, entertainment and information systems.

Inductive wireless charging

means no unsightly cables clog the cabin when your smartphone is low on power, while your favourite tunes can blast through six strategically-placed speakers. For safer more hassle-free driving experiences, the Ford Taurus is equipped with BLIS – Ford's blind spot information system – with collision mitigation, adaptive cruise control, and lane departure warning.

A forward-looking camera and fixed rear-view camera give Taurus excellent vision, aurally-aided by rear parking sensors when parking.

Six air bags complement the seat belt pre-tensioner capabilities, while an SOS post-crash alert system has been designed to help draw attention to a vehicle disabled in an accident, by flashing the lights and sounding the horn repeatedly.

A standard feature individual tyre pressure monitor system also adds an extra sense of safety.

Omantel invests in byanat for data analytics solutions expansion

MUSCAT: Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the Sultanate of Oman, has invested in byanat's Seed Funding Round to expand the provision of data analytics solutions through a software-as-a-service (SaaS) analytics platform for telecommunications operators and service providers.

The funding round featured participation from 500 Global in collaboration with Sanabil Investments, an investment fund owned by the Public Investments Fund (PIF) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Al Jabr MENA, a startup development and innovation firm.

This funding is set to expedite byanat's technology and product development and enable entry into the Saudi market. byanat is one of the tech companies that was incubated at Omantel Innovation Labs.

The company aims to enhance infrastructure in the telecom,

energy, and utilities sectors. Their SaaS analytics platform assists businesses in effectively scaling and maintaining connected infrastructure, by unifying communication management, device management, and data analytics.

Talal bin Said al Maamari, CEO of Omantel, commented, "This historic investment partnership is an eloquent endorsement of the trust global investors have in Omani startups. It also reflects Omantel's far-sighted vision towards innovation and technology.

Omantel's investment in byanat is driven by our confidence in its potential to revolutionize the technology industry, not just in Oman but worldwide. As we continue to focus on enhancing and growing our innovative services and infrastructure, we also place a high priority on empowering startups through various programs offered by Omantel Innovation Labs".

BankDhofar expands branch network in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate

MUSCAT: Reinforcing its expansion strategy, BankDhofar has recently announced the official opening of three more branches in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate; which are Sur branch, Al Ashkhara branch and Masirah branch.

This step translates BankDhofar's endeavour to be closer to customers across the Sultanate of Oman, and provide them with the best banking experience. The opening ceremonies were held in the presence of a number of prominent members of the society and BankDhofar executive management team.

Sur branch was officially opened under the patronage of Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maawali – Governor of Al Sharqiyah South, Al Ashkhara branch was opened under the auspices of Shaikh Nayef bin Hamoud al Maamari- Deputy Wali of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, while Masirah branch was opened under the auspices of Shaikh Abdulhameed al Abri – Deputy Wali of Masirah.

On this milestone of its branch



network expansion efforts, Amjad bin Iqbal al Lawati, Chief Retail Banking Officer at BankDhofar, stressed that the opening of these branches in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate is part of a broader strategy to grow BankDhofar's presence across the country. “

The new branches will offer a range of banking services to customers. We will continue our efforts to get closer to our customers and open more branches,” he added.

BankDhofar has a nationwide network of 92 branches (including BankDhofar and Maisarah branches) & 2 Corporate

branches. The branches are in prime locations and are easily accessible, offering a wide range of services to customers.

BankDhofar has set a clear banking strategy that is in line with Oman Vision 2040 and has effectively contributed to driving the growth of the national economy.

Since its inception in 1990, BankDhofar has established itself as one of the leading financial institutions in the Sultanate of Oman, with a strong presence in Corporate Banking, Retail Banking, Treasury and Project Finance.

Forum highlights opportunities for women in tourism industry

FROM PAGE 13

Moreover, data from the World Tourism Organization reveals that women occupy more than 40 per cent of jobs within the Middle East's tourism industry, signifying their increasing presence and influence.

Al Harthiyah further noted that women's ownership of tourism companies is on the rise in several countries. In the United States, women currently own around 35% of travel and tourism businesses.

Studies also suggest that promoting women's participation in the tourism sector can contribute to economic growth.

According to a report by the International Labour Organization, achieving gender parity in the labour market could lead to a GDP increase ranging between 3% and 9%.

Furthermore, Al Harthiyah emphasized that the tourism sector offers women the opportunity to engage in diverse economic and social activities, fostering financial independence, self-confidence, decision-making abilities, and skill development.

Additionally, women play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage within the industry.

Many women now work as tour and cultural guides, promoting positive views about national heritage, and highlighting the significance of preserving customs and traditions.

The dialogue session featured the participation of prominent individuals such as Al Zahraa bint Yahya al Sarhaniyah, co-founder of Anat Café; Nour al Huda bint Majid al Manthriyah, co-founder of the Odo project; Dr Salama bint Nassib al Farsiyyah, a member of the Chamber's Tourism Committee; and Nadira bint Ahmed al Harthiyah, an athlete and mountain climber. Hamad al Maamari, an employee of "Visit Oman" company, also contributed to the session.

JAC Motors celebrates 53 JAC Day event

MUSCAT: On May 21, car enthusiasts and automotive experts gathered at JAC Motors showroom, Al Hail in Muscat, Oman to celebrate the 53rd JAC Day event.

The event was organised to showcase the latest automotive technology and innovation by JAC Motors, a leading Chinese automaker. The event was a major success, with attendees from across the region coming together to explore and experience the latest JAC vehicles on display.

From sleek sedans to powerful SUVs, JAC Motors had something for everyone at the event. JAC Motors also showcased a range of their vehicles at the event, including the JAC J7 a premium sedan, the JAC T8 pickup powerful lifestyle truck,



the JAC JS4 a compact SUV, JAC S3 a Subcompact SUV and powerful Titan trucks.

Each of these vehicles features the latest technology and innovation from JAC

Motors, and provides drivers with a comfortable and enjoyable driving experience. Attendees at the JAC Day event were also treated to a range of exciting activities, including test drives of the latest JAC vehicles, competitions, and giveaways.

The event provided a unique opportunity for car enthusiasts and team at Towell Auto Centre to come together and celebrate the latest advancements in automotive technology. The event was organised by Towell Auto Centre, one of Oman's leading automotive dealerships.

Towell Auto Centre has been a trusted partner of JAC Motors for many years, and is committed to providing customers with the best possible automotive experience.

Speaking about the event, a representative from Towell Auto

Centre said, "We are thrilled to have hosted the 53rd JAC Day event and to have provided customers with the opportunity to experience the latest JAC vehicles. JAC Motors is known for its commitment to innovation and excellence, and the vehicles on display at the event are a testament to that commitment."

The JAC Day event at Towell Auto Centre was a celebration of automotive excellence, showcasing the latest advancements in automotive technology and innovation. With a range of exciting vehicles on display, along with activities and competitions for attendees, the event was a major success and a testament to the growing popularity of JAC Motors in the region.



Oman and WIPO collaborate to strengthen intellectual property and education

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JUNE 7

A key seminar on Intellectual Property Protection concluded on Wednesday with Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion; and Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry affirming the event's contribution to reinforcing the intellectual property system and strengthening ongoing collaborative between the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the Sultanate of Oman.

The focus of the seminar also extended to cooperation in higher education and specialised WIPO schools, along with WIPO's projects that generate employment opportunities and foster intellectual property assets in member states.

The contribution of these projects to supporting national creative industries that drive economic growth was assessed as well. Besides, the seminar explored WIPO's approach and expertise in measuring creative outcomes. The Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion, in collaboration with WIPO and the Omani Society for Intellectual



Property, organised the "High Level Dialogue between the Sultanate of Oman and WIPO."

The dialogue recommended establishing connections between higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman to benefit from WIPO's training and capacity-building programmes in the field of intellectual property.

The project for an Omani version of the general course in intellectual property was also emphasised, with a dedicated working group assigned to its development. Additionally, the establishment of a national training centre in intellectual property, in cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, and the Ministry of Labour, was recommended.

A designated point of contact

with WIPO was proposed to initiate collaboration on this project.

Furthermore, the dialogue advocated for the approval of the existing cooperation project between WIPO and Sultan Qaboos University, focusing on a joint master's programme in intellectual property. It emphasised the need to prepare a national programme linking intellectual property with education in the Sultanate of Oman, in partnership with WIPO.

This programme should incorporate intellectual property into the curricula of schools, universities, and academic institutions. The outcomes of the dialogue highlighted WIPO's cooperation with Oman in designing a training programme for incubators and entrepreneurship.

Additionally, WIPO's assistance in enhancing the National Intellectual Property Office's service provision to stakeholders was underscored.

Recommendations were made to develop an efficient administrative infrastructure for creative industries, establish rights management mechanisms, and leverage WIPO's aid in strengthening and enhancing the capacity of national institutions in assessing the economic significance of the creative sector and managing intellectual property within the creative industries. The dialogue also called for the utilisation of WIPO's support in training law enforcement officials and judicial authorities in the Sultanate of Oman. It proposed the formation of specialised

councils and committees to settle intellectual property disputes, the establishment of a dedicated intellectual property department within the Sultanate of Oman's courts, and the preparation of a specialised training programme at the Judicial Institute.

Lastly, an action plan was recommended to activate technology and innovation support centres, along with the continuation of the existing cooperation programme with WIPO.

Moreover, the dialogue emphasised the importance of collaborating with WIPO to raise awareness of intellectual property among entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized companies.

Support should be provided to enable these entities to utilise intellectual property for the development and marketing of their products.

Additionally, a working group consisting of relevant authorities in the Sultanate of Oman should be established to monitor the progress of the Omani frankincense project and leverage research outputs and literature on frankincense in Omani universities. Lastly, a training programme for diplomats is set to commence in the final quarter of this year in cooperation with the Diplomatic Academy of the Foreign Ministry.

Oil prices edge higher as Saudi cut outweighs bearish backdrop



Saudi Aramco's Ras Tanura oil refinery and oil terminal is pictured in this image. — Reuters

LONDON: Oil prices edged higher on Wednesday as Saudi Arabia's surprise weekend pledge to deepen output cuts outweighed weak Chinese export data and rising US fuel stocks.

Brent crude futures were up 36 cents, or 0.5%, at \$76.65 a barrel by 09:49 GMT while US West Texas Intermediate crude futures gained 37 cents, or 0.5%, to \$72.11.

Both benchmarks jumped more than \$1 on Monday after Saudi Arabia's decision over the weekend to reduce output by 1 million barrels per day (bpd) to 9 million bpd in July.

"As things stand, the oil market is on the cusp of a massive shortfall," said PVM Oil's Stephen Brennock.

"Additional Saudi cuts are expected to deepen the market deficit to more than 3 million bpd in July by some estimates".

Prices fell earlier in the session on weak Chinese economic data and rising US fuel inventories.

China's exports shrank much faster than expected in May and imports fell, albeit at a slower pace, as manufacturers struggled to find demand abroad and domestic consumption remained sluggish.

Wednesday's data also showed that crude oil imports into China, the world's largest oil importer, rose to their third-highest monthly level in May as refiners built up inventories.

A JP Morgan note showed forward crude cover in the country has climbed, indicating refiners have not increased processing rates but are instead storing oil.

US gasoline inventories, meanwhile, rose by about 2.4 million barrels and distillates inventories were up by about 4.5 million barrels in the week ended June 2, market sources said on Tuesday, citing American Petroleum Institute figures.

The unexpected build in fuel inventories raised concerns over consumption by the world's top oil user, especially as travel demand grew during the Memorial Day weekend.

The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) on Tuesday said that US crude oil production this year would rise faster and demand increases would be slower than previously expected.

— Reuters

China's exports tumble as global demand falters



An aerial view shows containers and cargo vessels at the Qingdao port in Shandong province, China. — Reuters

BEIJING: China's exports shrank much faster than expected in May while imports extended declines with a grim outlook for global demand, especially from developed markets, raising doubts about the fragile economic recovery.

The world's second-largest economy grew faster than expected in the first quarter thanks to robust services consumption and a backlog of orders following years of Covid disruptions, but factory output has slowed as rising interest rates and inflation squeeze demand in the United States and Europe.

Exports slumped 7.5% year-on-year in May, data from China's Customs Bureau showed on Wednesday, much larger than the forecast 0.4% fall and the biggest decline since January.

Imports contracted 4.5%, slower than an expected 8.0% decline and April's 7.9% fall.

"The weak exports

confirm that China needs to rely on domestic demand as the global economy slows," said Zhiwei Zhang, chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management.

"There is more pressure for the government to boost domestic consumption in the rest of the year, as global demand will likely weaken further in the second half."

Highlighting the extent of the weakness, the data shows trade was worse even than when the port of Shanghai, China's busiest, was shut down due to strict Covid curbs a year earlier.

The figures also add to a growing list of indicators that suggest China's post-Covid economic recovery is quickly losing steam, bolstering the case for more policy stimulus.

Asian stocks fell into the red after the data as did the yuan and the Australian dollar, a commodity currency that is highly sensitive to swings in demand. — Reuters

OECD raises world GDP growth forecast to 2.7%

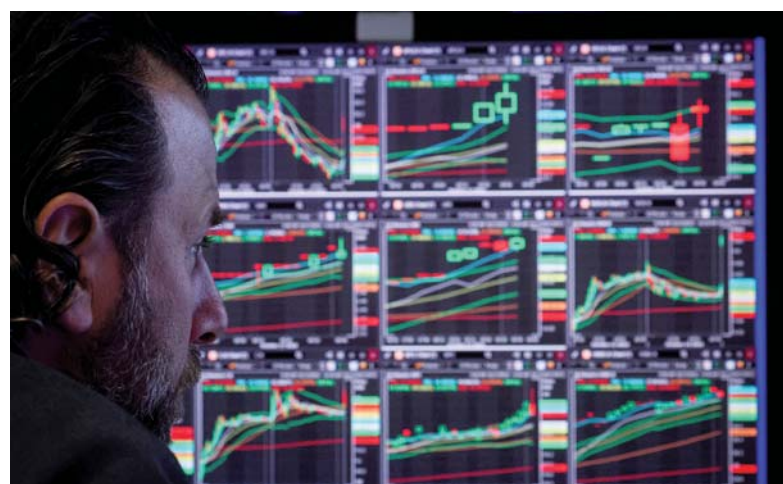
PARIS: The OECD slightly raised its growth outlook for the world economy on Wednesday as inflation eases and China has dropped Covid restrictions, but it warned the recovery faces a "long road".

The Paris-based organisation forecast an economic expansion of 2.7 per cent, up from 2.6 per cent in its previous report in March, with upgrades for the United States, China and the eurozone.

But it is still under the 3.3 per cent growth recorded in 2022. "The global economy is turning a corner but faces a long road ahead to attain strong and sustainable growth," OECD chief economist Clare Lombardelli wrote in the OECD's Economic Outlook. "The recovery will be weak by past standards," Lombardelli wrote.

The growth forecast for 2024 remains unchanged at 2.9 per cent, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development said. A drop in energy prices, the untangling of supply chain bottlenecks and China's sooner-than-expected reopening are contributing to the recovery, the OECD said.

Among its 38 members — an eclectic group ranging from the United States to Germany, Mexico, Japan and New Zealand — inflation is expected to slow to 6.6 per cent this year, after soaring to 9.4 per cent in 2022. But core inflation, which strips out volatile energy and food



A specialist trader works on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in New York City. — Reuters

prices, is higher than previously expected, according to the OECD.

The international organisation said this may force central banks, which have already raised interest rates in efforts to tame consumer prices, to further hike borrowing costs. "Central banks need to maintain restrictive monetary policies until there are clear signs that underlying inflationary pressures are abating," Lombardelli said.

James Pomeroy, an economist at HSBC bank, said: "The period we are going through is slow growth but that's what policy makers want to see because we are trying to rein in some of the inflationary pressures."

At a press conference, Lombardelli said central banks faced a "delicate balance". "Obviously they shouldn't tighten too much to the point that it would have a greater impact on growth than it is necessary," said

the OECD's new chief economist, who took her post last month.

The OECD warned that higher interest rates around the world are "increasingly being felt", notably in property and financial markets. "Signs of stress have started to appear in some financial market segments as investors reassess risks, and credit conditions are tightening," the report said.

The banking sector was rocked in March by the collapse of US regional lender SVB, whose demise was partly blamed on high rates bringing down the value of its bond portfolio.

The crisis reverberated across the Atlantic, with the Swiss government forcing Swiss banking giant UBS to take over troubled rival Credit Suisse.

"Should further financial market stress arise, central banks should deploy financial policy instruments to enhance liquidity and minimise contagion risks," Lombardelli wrote. — Reuters

At long last a surplus in the Omani budget



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The author is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for the CBO and OCCI.

After several years, the Sultanate of Oman has achieved a surplus in its annual State budget, according to the final account data for the year 2022.

Prior to this milestone, a deficit budget has been a dominant feature of Oman's financial performance for several years, with the economy depending on financial flows from the oil and gas sectors over the past decades.

The surplus in the 2022 budget amounted to about RO 1.144 billion, from a deficit of RO 1.223 billion in 2021.

The statement issued by the Ministry of Finance shows that Oman recorded actual revenues

of RO 14.473 billion (\$37.340 billion) in 2022, an increase of RO 3.278 billion over 2021.

The increase in revenues was achieved through three main items, which are oil revenues, that amounted to RO 7.6 billion, accounting for 52.5% of total revenues, followed by revenues from the gas sector of RO 3.5 billion, or 24.18% of the total, and finally other revenues, amounting to RO 3.2 billion, or 22.11% of the total.

The average price of a barrel of Omani oil approved for the 2022 budget was around \$50, but the actual price reached \$94 from production, which rose to 1.060 million barrels per day. This helped reduce the external debt

and fund the implementation of some scheduled projects.

As for actual spending, it amounted to RO 10.092 billion last year, with defence and security expenditures at RO 2.928 billion (29% of total public spending), while civil ministries' expenditure amounted to RO 4.449 billion, or 44% of total expenditure.

Debt serving for 2022 amounted to RO 1.076 billion, representing 10.7% of the total, which greatly affects the country's development issues, with the Sultanate of Oman seeking to reduce the effects of public debt.

Moody's credit rating agency indicates that Omani efforts have had a tangible impact in maximising financial surpluses,

and a decline of more than 15% of total debt in 2022, down from 68% in 2020 to 40% in 2022 as a percentage of GDP.

The agency also recently raised Oman's credit rating from Ba3 to Ba2, while maintaining a positive outlook, as a result of its commitment to pay public debt dues, the decline in its burdens, and the improvement in its ability to meet these financial obligations.

Oman is witnessing these positive developments as a result of the tangible efforts made by the concerned institutions in improving the financial performance of government bodies, earmarking financial surpluses to reduce public debt, thereby helping improve and

strengthen fiscal policy and the efficiency of financial governance.

These measures have also helped bolster financial support for educational, health and social institutions, while enabling the provision of housing loans, developmental funding and other support.

The increase in the revenues of the Tax Authority sector and fees collected from companies and institutions, in addition to the revenues of the Oman Investment Authority, the revenues of the Royal Oman Police and the Ministry of Labour, revenues from value-added tax and customs tax, had a positive impact in enhancing the financial position of Oman during the past year.

Private equity hurtles towards hard Asia reset

UNA GALANI

Sequoia's decision to carve out its China business formalises a push for a hard reset in Asia that private equity firms have until now largely been grappling with behind the scenes.

The People's Republic is the industry's regional powerhouse, accounting for over 40% of the \$323 billion-worth of deals struck between 2012 and 2021, data from consultancy Bain & Co show.

Now, thanks to geopolitical tensions, money managers are under pressure from investors including global pension and sovereign funds in the West to limit exposure to the world's second-largest economy.

On one level, Sequoia had a head start: its two Asia-focused businesses each already operated with a degree of independence before the investment firm revealed its three-way split on Tuesday.

Now China boss Neil Shen and his counterpart running India and Southeast Asia, Shailendra Singh, will be free of remaining constraints; Sequoia is not keen, for example, on investments that potentially overlap with portfolio companies in other geographies.

The industry, though, has been shifting away from country-specific funds. The amount raised by Greater China-focused entities dropped 77% last year, compared with a 44% increase for pan-Asian investment vehicles, such as the special situations and credit funds Bain Capital and KKR set up last year. These country-agnostic funds accounted for just over half the money raised in 2022 in the region, a 22-year high.

At the same time, regardless of fund structures, there's growing investor interest in deploying more of the region's \$676 billion of dry powder in places including India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand – the target market for Peak XV Partners, the Sequoia offshoot run by Singh.

Hillhouse Capital, founded by Chinese rainmaker Zhang Lei in 2005 and once labelled "Asia's largest private equity firm", has been steadily expanding its presence in Singapore, a gateway to much of the region.

Granted, these South and Southeast Asia markets are small at present compared to China; that's why more firms are seeking bigger-ticket buyouts in Australia and Japan.

There's an inherent risk of having a bigger pool of capital actively chasing a narrower universe of opportunities: buyers are likely to start overpaying. That will eventually weigh on performance in the region, which for top-quartile Asia funds last year was a very respectable median 25% net internal rate of return, per Preqin.

Shen at HangChan, as Sequoia's China outfit will now be called, may be somewhat insulated from such pressure. Politically driven investment decoupling means buyouts as a proportion of overall deal volume in the country could rise from last year's 9% if multinational companies hive off local business from their global operations.

Private equity's cooling relationship with China, though, is likely to hit hard for most. — Reuters



OTMAIR ISSING

The author, former chief economist and member of the board of the European Central Bank, is Honorary President of the Center for Financial Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt.

While the European Central Bank has hiked interest rates rapidly to make up ground in its fight against resurgent inflation, it is having a harder time reversing years of massive asset purchases. How can policymakers remove surplus liquidity without creating even bigger problems?

It is now widely acknowledged that most central banks underestimated the threat of inflation when they persisted with extremely low interest rates and massive asset purchases throughout 2021 and into 2022.

Fortunately, when they did finally change course, they showed remarkable determination, with the European Central Bank raising interest rates by 375 basis points in less than a year (and the US Federal Reserve raising its policy rate by 500 basis points).

But reversing the policy of massive bond purchases is proving more difficult. A decade of quantitative easing (QE) has significantly expanded the ECB's balance sheet and created a liquidity glut, leaving policymakers in a trap from which they are struggling to escape.

The size of the ECB's balance sheet peaked at nearly €9 trillion (\$9.6 trillion) in 2022, when the volume of its bond purchases amounted to around 56% of eurozone GDP. Though it ended its net purchases of securities in July 2022, and though cuts to the subsidy that banks could earn on targeted longer-term refinancing operations (TLTROs) led them to repay large sums, the excess liquidity in the banking system still amounts to around €4 billion.

True, in March, the ECB started decreasing what it was reinvesting from maturing securities by €15



Workers maintain the huge Euro logo in front of the headquarters of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt. — Reuters

billion per month. Following the governing council's May 4 meeting, the ECB expects to reduce its balance sheet by €25 billion per month from July 2023 onward.

Given the scale of the ECB's bond holdings, however, its approach to quantitative tightening (QT) seems downright homeopathic.

At the current rate, bringing the asset-purchase programme to zero will take roughly 15 years (and this does not even account for the fact that the ECB continues to reinvest all maturing assets purchased under the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme).

These issues raise a fundamental question about the relationship between the ECB's interest-rate policy and its securities transactions. When it comes to cutting interest rates to stimulate aggregate demand, the zero-bound acts as a lower limit.

If interest rates fall into negative territory, it becomes economically attractive to withdraw bank deposits and exchange them for cash.

By contrast, there is no limit to how much interest rates can be hiked, and, as the past year of monetary policymaking has shown, the policy rate has become central banks' primary instrument again.

But what role do bond purchases and sales play in this new context?

While additional net purchases of securities would be counterproductive in the fight

against inflation, net sales of securities would reduce commercial banks' surplus liquidity.

The same goes for scaling back special measures such as the TLTROs. The associated increase in a bank's cost of refinancing will boost the anti-inflationary effect of the interest-rate hike.

Owing to the direct effect of QT on bank liquidity, the timing and extent of the ECB's efforts to unwind its balance sheet must account for financial-market conditions.

There is a certain asymmetry between QE and QT, in that banks may have become accustomed to a high liquidity position after an extended period of selling large volumes of securities to the central bank.

Moreover, when considering how much to reduce excess liquidity, the ECB will have to account for any changes in the regulatory environment.

But such considerations are not an argument against swiftly reducing net security holdings when QT is being deployed from a starting point of extremely high surplus liquidity, because one must account for fiscal policies as well.

The massive fiscal stimulus that was deployed to stabilise the eurozone economy during the pandemic, and then during the past year's energy crisis, has relied heavily on central-bank bond purchases. QE largely eliminated the risk that the financing of high

public deficits would lead to a significant rise in interest rates. The ECB's hesitation to pursue a forceful QT policy thus fosters expectations that fiscal policies will continue to be expansionary, which will ultimately extend the period of too-high inflation.

We are witnessing a case of fiscal dominance.

But if the ECB keeps its massive bond holdings in its portfolio, there will be less monetary-policy space in the next crisis. What effect would another huge wave of bond purchases have if the central bank is starting from its current bloated position? It is safe to say that the picture would not be pretty.

Central banks need to extricate themselves from this situation for the sake of their own independence and credibility.

In the ECB's case, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that its massive bond purchases have held down interest rates for bonds issued by highly indebted member states, thus reducing pressure on those governments to consolidate their public budgets.

Striking the right balance between interest-rate policies and QT will not be easy. But as a guide for their decision-making, central banks should stay focused on their primary mandate of maintaining price stability. That will be the best way to ward off the growing threat to their independence.

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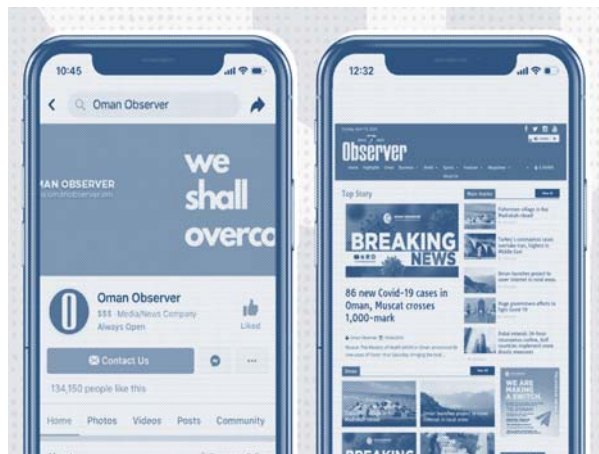
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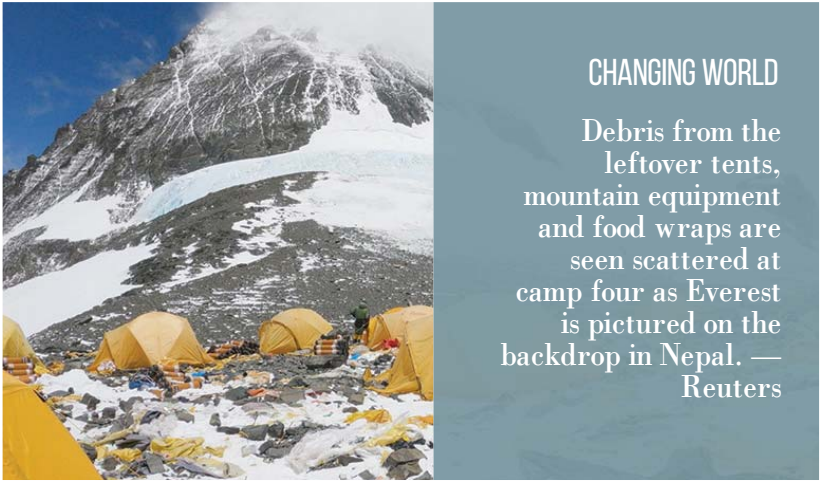
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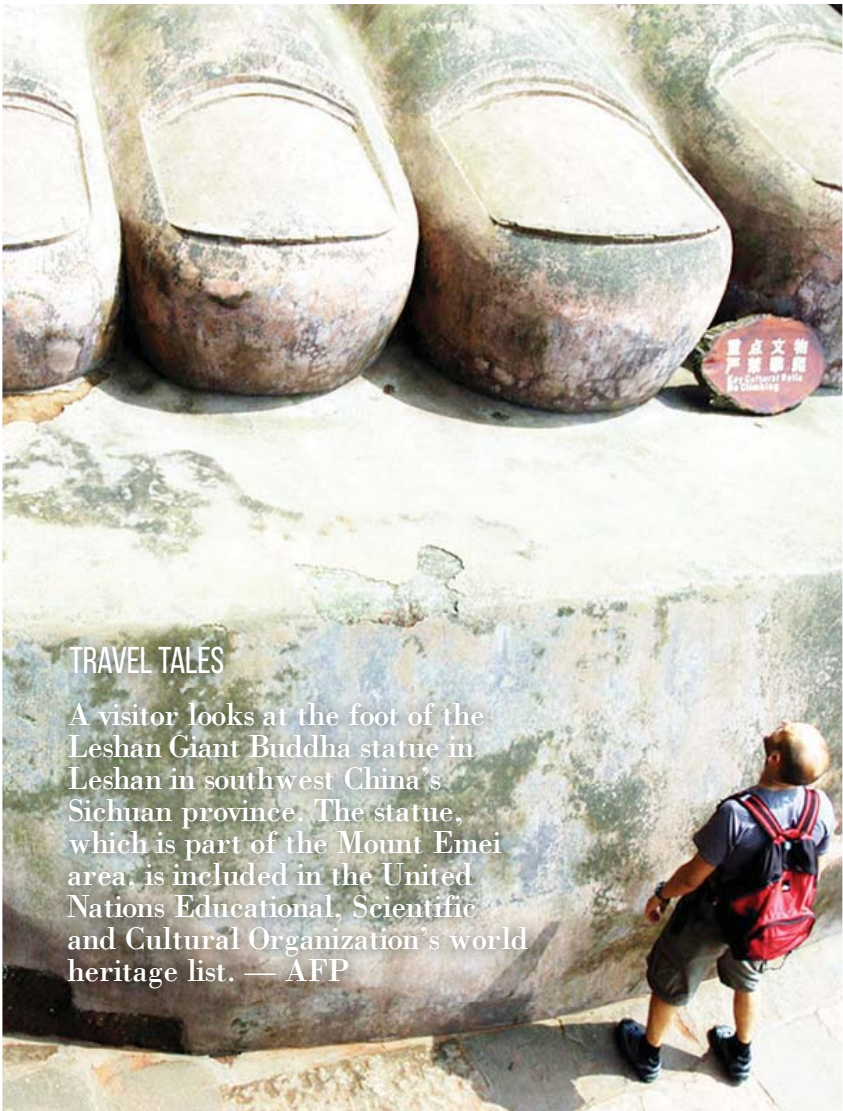
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CHANGING WORLD
Debris from the leftover tents, mountain equipment and food wraps are seen scattered at camp four as Everest is pictured on the backdrop in Nepal. — Reuters



LIFESTYLE
Midtown Manhattan from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The Big Apple is gradually sinking partly because of the weight of the skyscrapers that make the concrete jungle famous. —AFP



TRAVEL TALES
A visitor looks at the foot of the Leshan Giant Buddha statue in Leshan in southwest China's Sichuan province. The statue, which is part of the Mount Emei area, is included in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's world heritage list. — AFP



CULTURE
Syrian pilgrims attend a training session on performing the rituals of Haj and travel procedures to Mecca in the town of Hazzanu in the northwestern rebel held Idlib province. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT
US actors Ryan Hansen (L) and Martin Starr attend STARZ's "Party Down" Season 3 FYC (For Your Consideration) screening at the Hollywood Athletic club in Los Angeles. — AFP



art & life

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Camping in Oman, an increasingly popular activity

Venturing into the untamed heart of Oman unveils a myriad of camping possibilities, each offering a unique blend of awe-inspiring vistas and authentic cultural encounters. But as camping becomes popular, so do the accompanying challenges

MUSIC

'Girl from Ipanema' singer Astrud Gilberto dead at 83

ASTRUD GILBERTO, the Brazilian singer whose soft, beguiling voice made "The Girl from Ipanema" a worldwide sensation in the 1960s and provided a huge boost to the budding bossa nova genre, has died at age 83, her family said.

"I come bearing the sad news that my grandmother became a star today and is next to my grandfather Joao Gilberto," Sofia Gilberto wrote on social media early Tuesday, later confirming the death to AFP.

The singer died at home in Philadelphia, in the United States, where she had lived since the 1960s.

Gilberto was born in Salvador, capital of Brazil's northeastern state of Bahia, in 1940 and was married to Joao Gilberto, a pioneer of the bossa nova genre who died in 2019.

Astrud Gilberto recorded 19 albums in her career, but she had little professional music experience when she turned "The Girl from Ipanema" — the now-classic song by Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes — into a global smash, singing the English verses alongside American saxophonist Stan Getz and her guitar-playing then-husband.

The version made Astrud Gilberto the first Brazilian to be nominated for a Grammy — which she won, for song of the year, in 1965.

QUEEN OF BOSSA NOVA

The silky-smooth song changed Gilberto's life, turning it upside down both personally and professionally.

As she told the story, she owed her popularity to an off-the-cuff sug-



gestion by Joao Gilberto while they were recording it in New York to try singing a verse in English.

"That song is going to make you famous," Getz told her in the studio. It was apparently not just her

music that wowed the saxophonist — and vice versa.

She ended up leaving her husband for Getz and moving to the United States permanently.

But that turbulent period in her life produced some of the best-loved recordings of all time, including the live album of the three friends' concert at New York's Carnegie Hall in October 1964.

Aged just 24 at the time, Gilberto suffered from stage fright, which she overcame by taking theatre classes at the Stella Adler acting academy. The coy young brunette wowed audiences with her satin voice, which she took on tour with Getz. She earned the nickname "The Queen of Bossa Nova," bringing the syncopated, relaxed Brazilian musical style to the world.

But she claimed she never earned any royalties from her best-known song, saying she received just a day rate for recording it.

She remained in the US after separating from Getz, continuing her career with hits such as "Fly Me to the Moon" (1972) and "Far Away" (1977), and turning to songwriting with the albums "Astrud Gilberto Now" and "That Girl from Ipanema."

After a career touring the world, she retired from the stage in 2001. She was inducted into the International Latin Music Hall of

Fame the following year.

In 2008, she was awarded a Latin Grammy for lifetime achievement.

She devoted herself to painting and animal-rights activism in her later years.

INCOMPARABLE SWING

The music world mourned the passing of one of its iconic voices.

"Farewell Astrud Gilberto," English rocker Tim Burgess, front man for alternative rock band the Charlatans, wrote on Twitter, alongside a black-and-white video of a shy-looking Gilberto performing "Girl from Ipanema" in a vintage 60s beehive.

"Her contribution to bring Brazilian music to the world was immeasurable. Her incomparable swing and good taste will remain with me always," American musician Mark Lambert wrote on Instagram.

It was the latest loss for Brazilian music lovers, after rock icon Rita Lee died last month at age 75 and popular music legend Gal Costa, a leading figure in the "Tropicalia" movement, died in November at 77.

Bebel Gilberto, Joao Gilberto's daughter and a singer-songwriter herself, called Astrud her "eternal Muse."

"(May) you sing with birds and angels," she wrote on Instagram. — AFP



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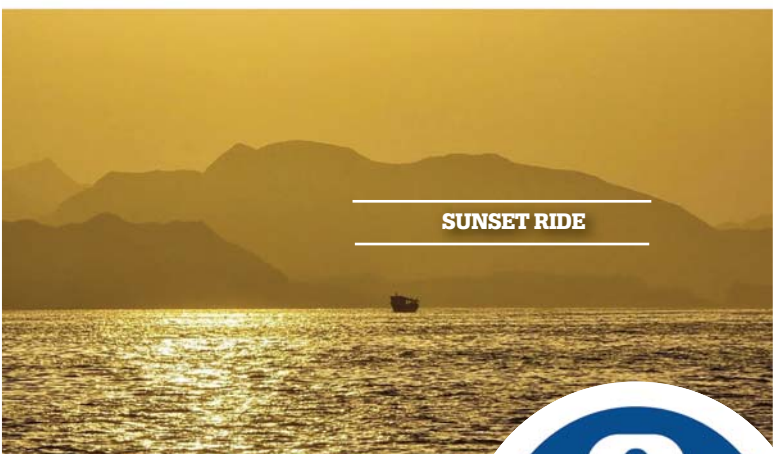
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By Khaled Abdul Malak

The Sultanate of Oman is extremely rich in stunning sites where campers can build their tents and enjoy intimate and direct contact with Mother Nature. Venturing into the untamed heart of Oman unveils a myriad of camping possibilities, each offering a unique blend of awe-inspiring vistas and authentic cultural encounters. From the sprawling dunes of Rimal Al Sharqiya to the majestic mountains of Al Jabal Akhdhar and the coastal wonders of Ras al Jinz, Oman boasts a cornucopia of natural wonders waiting to be explored.

The Omani coastline presents a picturesque setting for seaside camping, offering a captivating blend of azure waters, secluded coves and breathtaking coral reefs.

In winter, camping on the white, sandy beaches is a pure pleasure. One can enjoy the sound of the waves breaking on the sand, and, depending on the location of the camping site, one may enjoy the spectacular sunrise and sunset under the mesmerising changing colours of the sky and the sea.

Bird watching amateurs will have the chance to admire a big variety of birds like flamingoes, herons, seagulls etc. They can admire a great amount of exotic fish and other sea creatures while snorkelling.

For desert lovers, Oman offers different types of rolling and unending sand dunes. The Empty Quarter and Rimal Al Sharqiya are two magnificent deserts with different looks, colours and majestic sand dunes.

Oman is also rich with fabulous mountains and exceptional sites for camping, offering visitors a unique landscape with sublime views of the valleys and wadis around.

In the last few years, the number of campers has increased dramatically, which is a good thing for tourism, but has unfortunate consequences and impact on the sites. While Oman's camping scene offers unparalleled beauty and immersive experiences, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that come hand in hand with exploring its pristine wilderness. As the country's popularity among campers continues to rise, striking a delicate balance between adventure and conservation becomes paramount to preserve the very nature that draws visitors to this enchanting land.



cate balance between adventure and conservation becomes paramount to preserve the very nature that draws visitors to this enchanting land.

We have been camping with my family and friends since our arrival to Oman in 1996 and enjoyed pristine and clean sites. Nowadays we are barely able to camp without cleaning the thrash left behind by other irresponsible campers.

sponsible campers.

How is it possible to harm and destroy such a beautiful gift of the creator?

When one visits a place, one should leave nothing behind except foot prints and take nothing more than pictures.

I plead with the authorities to deploy more efforts to raise awareness about the damaging impact of littering and to put more severe sanctions against litterers.

While the country's untamed beauty invites adventurers to explore its vast wilderness, responsible camping practices are vital to preserve its delicate ecosystems. By embracing sustainable tourism initiatives, adhering to guidelines, and showing respect for

the environment and local communities, campers can help safeguard Oman's natural treasures for future generations. Ultimately, striking a harmonious balance between the rise of campers and the protection of nature ensures that Oman remains an extraordinary destination for outdoor enthusiasts to cherish and enjoy for years to come.

FASHION

Roberto Cavalli launches 'disruptive' capsule collection in London



ROBERTO CAVALLI LAUNCHED a "disruptive" capsule collection outside the traditional catwalk calendar on Thursday as the Italian fashion label seeks to rebrand itself after a few shaky years.

Designer Fausto Puglisi looked to a 1994 print drawn by the brand's founder Roberto Cavalli, itself inspired by a rococo depiction of the Greek myth of Leda and the swan, for the "Wild Leda" line, on show at London's Selfridges department store.

Previously seen in the fashion house's spring-summer 2023 line, the depiction, matched with animals

prints, features on floaty dresses, beachwear, accessories and home-ware.

"So rather than saying ok let's have the ritual of September fashion week and all the trimmings.. how do we twist that, how do we give a better understanding of what the brand stands for.. and therefore do some-

thing that is, in a way, disruptive," Chief Executive Sergio Azzolari said.

"Roberto Cavalli was always famous for obviously the gowns but.. he created really a lifestyle.. So you have your plates, you have your coffee cups, you have your shoes, you have your bag, you have everything.... (we thought) let's do something that is a bit larger and invites you to discover the world of Roberto Cavalli."

The label, founded by designer Roberto Cavalli in the early 1970s and known for its animal prints, is owned by Dubai's Damac Properties founder Hussain Sajwani, who rescued the Florence-based group in 2019 through his private investment company Vision Investments.

The fashion house had been struggling for years to relaunch its sales.

Azzolari joined in April.

"We are really in the midst of recreating a brand that was the epitome of luxury over the last 50 years," he said, adding he was looking to do things "very respectful to the past but bring the brand in another dimension with a different.. point of view."

"We'll relaunch the website... we're working on expanding quite a bit on retail, we're opening a couple of new stores in the US, we're looking at London to have a stronger presence... we're looking at revamping our flagship in Milan." — Reuters

TRAVEL TALES

Australia to create marine park the size of Spain

AUSTRALIA PLANS to create a marine park almost the size of Spain around remote islands off its southeast coast, the government announced on Sunday.

Under the proposals, the existing Macquarie Island Marine Park will be tripled in size, bringing a total of 475,465 square kilometres (183,578 square miles) under protection.

That is an area roughly the size of Spain or Cameroon and much larger than Vietnam or Japan.

The protections mean the area will be "completely closed to fishing, mining and other extractive activities", according to Australia's Minister of Environment Tanya Plibersek.

Existing fishery operations targeting the Patagonian toothfish will be allowed to continue.

Macquarie Island sits halfway



between Australia and Antarctica and is home to royal penguins, fur seals and a subantarctic science hub.

"Macquarie Island is an exceptional place. It's a remote wildlife wonderland — a critical breeding

ground for millions of seabirds, seals and penguins," said Plibersek.

Environmental groups have backed the plan, fearing the area could be targeted for seabed mining and unsustainable commercial fishing. — AFP



DISCOVERY

Scientists say world's oldest-known burial site found in S Africa

PALAEONTOLOGISTS IN South Africa said on Monday they have found the oldest known burial site in the world, containing remains of a small-brained distant relative of humans previously thought incapable of complex behaviour.

Led by renowned palaeoanthropologist Lee Berger, researchers said they discovered several specimens of Homo naledi — a tree-climbing, Stone Age hominid — buried about 30 metres (100 feet) underground in a cave system within the Cradle of Humankind, a Unesco world heritage site near Johannesburg.

"These are the most ancient interments yet recorded in the hominin record, earlier than evidence of Homo sapiens interments by at least 100,000 years," the scientists wrote in a series of yet to be peer reviewed and preprint papers to be published in eLife.

The findings challenge the current understanding of human evolution, as it is normally held that the development of bigger brains allowed for the performing of complex, "meaning-making" activities such as burying the dead.

The oldest burials previously unearthed, found in the Middle East and Africa, contained the remains of Homo sapiens — and were around 100,000 years old.

Those found in South Africa by Berger, whose previous announcements have been controversial, and his fellow researchers, date back to at least 200,000 BC.

Critically, they also belong to Homo naledi, a primitive species at the crossroads between apes and modern humans, which had brains about the size of oranges and stood about 1.5 metres (five feet) tall.

With curved fingers and toes, tool-wielding hands and feet made for walking, the species discovered by Berger had already upended the notion that our evolutionary path was a straight line.

Homo naledi is named after



the "Rising Star" cave system where the first bones were found in 2013.

The oval-shaped interments at the centre of the new studies were also found there during excavations started in 2018.

The holes, which researchers say evidence suggests were deliberately dug and then filled in to cover the bodies, contain at least five individuals.

"These discoveries show that mortuary practices were not limited to H. sapiens or other hominins with large brain sizes,"

the researchers said.

The burial site is not the only sign that Homo naledi was capable of complex emotional and cognitive behaviour, they added.

BRAIN SIZE

Engravings forming geometrical shapes, including a "rough hashtag figure", were also found on the apparently purposely smoothed surfaces of a cave pillar nearby.

"That would mean not only are humans not unique in the development of symbolic prac-

tices, but may not have even invented such behaviours," Berger said in an interview.

Such statements are likely to ruffle some feathers in the world of palaeontology, where the 57-year-old has previously faced accusations of lacking scientific rigour and rushing to conclusions.

Many balked when in 2015 Berger, whose earlier discoveries won support from National Geographic, first

aired the idea that Homo naledi was capable of more than the size of its head suggested.

"That was too much for scientists to take at that time. We think it's all tied up with this big brain," he said.

"We're about to tell the world that's not true."

While requiring further analysis, the discoveries "alter our understandings of human evolution", the researchers wrote.

"Burial, meaning-making, even 'art' could have a much more complicated, dynamic, non-human history than we previously thought," said Agustin Fuentes, a professor of anthropology at Princeton University, who co-authored the studies.

Carol Ward, an anthropologist at the University of Missouri not involved in the research, said that "these findings, if confirmed, would be of considerable potential importance".

"I look forward to learning how the disposition of remains precludes other possible explanations than intentional burial, and to seeing the results once they have been vetted by peer review," she said.

Ward also pointed out that the paper acknowledged that it could not rule out that markings on the walls could have been made by later hominins. — AFP



SHADDAD AL MUSALMAY

When the going gets tough for 'Men at Work'

AS LONG, HOT summer days are here, today, I dedicate this space to highlight the aspects endangering the health and lives of 'Men at Work' who are toiling out there under the scorching sun.

While driving to work every day, I am often overwhelmed to see these workers at many construction sites on the way, having no choice but to bear the heat.

Summer means suffering for anyone working outside, along with risks of dehydration, heat stroke, and heart failure.

"We work in very high temperatures. This is the nature of our work. And yes, the scorching sun makes it more difficult, but I have no choice. I have to feed my family back home," one of the thousands of construction workers told me.

Although summer has only just begun, temperatures have already topped 40 degrees Celsius.

Even a brief visit to any of the construction sites makes it amply evident that these men start work early in the morning, and by noon, they are worn out. It is indeed a hard life.

"We sometimes have to stop work just to be safe. We are lucky our supervisor understands the situation, but then work gets delayed," another construction worker said.

The government has banned working outside in the hottest hours of the day, from 12.30 pm to 3.30 pm.

While thanking the authorities for the gesture, many workers still say the ban should be extended by one or two more hours.

"Heat is always heat no matter the time of the day. Sometimes it's so unbearable in the morning and in the evening too," another contraction worker told me.

"But there is a question of finishing assigned work. We just can't stop work. We need to survive. We just have to take extra care while working," he added.

Heat leads to headaches, fatigue, dizziness and loss of concentration. It may even lead to fainting, if not hydrated enough. Experts say some modifications in daily lifestyle can help mitigate the effects of scorching heat on the body. However, these outdoor workers have no choice.

High temperatures too can cause exhaustion, which result in reduced concentration, vigilance and alertness and consequently increase the risk of crashing.

While no one can control the outdoor temperature, we can make sure that we do all that we possibly can to stay safe and healthy as a hot spell can become unbearable. It is also important to prioritise the well-being and safety of individuals working in such conditions and provide suitable measures to minimise the risks associated with working under direct sunlight during summer in Oman.

Always say a kind word to put a smile on these workers' faces. Until next time...

FEW TIPS TO STAY HEALTHY:

Working under direct sunlight during summer in Oman can have several consequences due to the extreme heat and intense sun exposure.

- To be safe during high temperatures, stay hydrated
- Wear cotton clothes while working out in the sun
- Avoid too cold water during and after working outside
- Seek medical attention if you do not feel well

Shaddad al Musalmay is a seasoned Omani journalist who worked for top newspapers in the country. He's currently one of Oman Observer's senior editors and contributes across different beats. His commentaries about life in general paints a vivid picture of the changing landscape in Oman.

FOR FEEDBACK, EMAIL THE AUTHOR AT SHADADM75@GMAIL.COM