

P13

MEASURES IN PLACE TO PROMOTE FOOD AVAILABILITY LOCALLY



P11

MARTIN WINS INDIAN GP SPRINT AFTER BEZZECCHI CRASHES



P18

LOCAL SHORT FILM 'CLOUDS' FEATURES EMOTIONAL THEMES



MUSCAT

HM CONDOLENCES TO ITALY PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to President Sergio Mattarella of the Italian Republic on the death of former Italian president Giorgio Napolitano. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy to the president, the family of the deceased and the friendly Italian people. — **ONA**

HM GREETINGS TO GUINEA-BISSAU

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Umaro Sissoco Embaló of Guinea-Bissau, on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings to the President wishing him good health and wishing the friendly people of Guinea-Bissau more progress and prosperity. — **ONA**

OPINION

P8



Dr Hamed Al Sinawi

What makes a successful awareness campaign?

P9



Ray Petersen

Half a world away, a journey continues

US and Iran rapprochement good for region: Sayyid Badr

NEW YORK: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, affirmed that the rapprochement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran provides a path to regional peace, and that the recent prisoner exchange between the two countries will lead to more dialogue and closer relations in the coming months.

During his participation in the

dialogue session at the Middle East Summit organised by the Al-Monitor Media Foundation in New York, the minister called on the United States and Iran to maintain the momentum of confidence and stop escalation to protect the stability of the global economy.

Expressing his support for the existence of a platform through which Iran can hold bilateral talks, Sayyid Badr referring to the Iranian

nuclear agreement, described it as “the best we have” in light of concerns about Tehran’s regional foreign policy.

The minister stressed that the key to security and integration in the Middle East is “to recognise that we are all part of this region, including Iran, and therefore we all have a vested interest in the future of the region.”

Meanwhile, Sayyid Badr

received Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Vatican Secretary for Relations with States and International Organisations, on the sidelines of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), at the headquarters of the Permanent Delegation of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations in New York, on Saturday.

During the meeting, the two

sides discussed topics of common interest affirming their support to dialogue between civilisations and cultures and their commitment to the values of tolerance, understanding and respect of rules of international law and the United Nations Charter. They agreed to enhance constructive cooperation and common benefits for the good and harmony among nations.

SEE ALSO P2

OMAN’S DELEGATION AT ASIAN GAMES



Members of Oman's delegation take part in the athletes parade during the opening ceremony of the 2022 Asian Games at the Hangzhou Olympic Sports Centre Stadium in Hangzhou in China's eastern Zhejiang province. **DETAILS ON P10**

NEW VOTERS STAND AT 139,963

PREPARATIONS ON FOR MAJLIS ELECTIONS

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Elaborate arrangements are under way for flawless electoral process for the Majlis Ash'shura elections for the 10th Term as the Ministry of Interior prepares for the October 29 ballots.

Besides dedicating a voting app which can be downloaded on both Apple and Android phones for ease of use, and a website to provide all relevant information. The team designated to carry out the elections process is working round the clock for a flawless and hassle-free elections.

Speaking to the Observer, Sumaya al Balushi, member of the media team of the Election Department at the Ministry of Interior, said that there has been an overwhelming response from the voters especially the new ones predominantly women for the elections process.

“Multi-layered preparations are currently going on for the elections on October 29, as we are seeing an overwhelming response from the voters who are getting ready to cast their ballots. The number of newly-registered voters during this period reached 139,963 male and female voters, and North Al Batinah Governorate stood on top with the highest number of voters in the electoral register,” she said.

“Besides, anyone can file a grievance against the names included in the preliminary lists of voters with a request submitted through the elections website, within five days from

“Multi-layered preparations are currently going on for the elections on October 29, as we are seeing an overwhelming response from the voters who are getting ready to cast their ballots

SUMAYA AL BALUSHI

Election Department
Ministry of Interior

the date of announcement of these lists, indicating the reasons for objections and attaching the documents supporting it.”

The ministry has announced the preliminary lists of voters to elect the members for the 10th Term, through the ‘Intekhab’ application and the elections website ‘elections.om’ where the number of voters stood at 753,952, including 362,924 women.

Majlis Ash'shura consists of members who represent different wilayats of the Sultanate of Oman elected by direct secret ballot. The wilayats shall be represented by two members if the number of its population exceeds 30,000 and by one member if the population is less than 30,000.

No brain, no problem... tiny jellyfish can learn from experience, say researchers

PARIS: Caribbean box jellyfish are barely a centimetre long and have no brain.

But these gelatinous, fingernail-sized creatures are capable of learning from visual cues to avoid swimming into obstacles — a cognitive ability never before seen in animals with such a primitive nervous system, researchers said.

Their performance of what is called “associative learning” is comparable to far more advanced animals such as fruit flies or mice, which have the notable benefit of having a brain, the researchers said.

The Caribbean box jellyfish, or Tripedalia cystophora, is known to be able to navigate through murky water and a maze of submerged mangrove roots.

These scenarios throw up plenty



A swimming Caribbean box jellyfish is seen in a laboratory at Kiel University, northern Germany. — **AFP**

of dangers that could damage the jellyfish’s fragile gelatinous membrane which envelops its bell-shaped body. But they avoid harm thanks to four visual sensory centres called rhopalia, each of

which has lens-shaped eyes and around a thousand neurons.

For comparison, fruit flies are packing 200,000 neurons in their tiny brains.

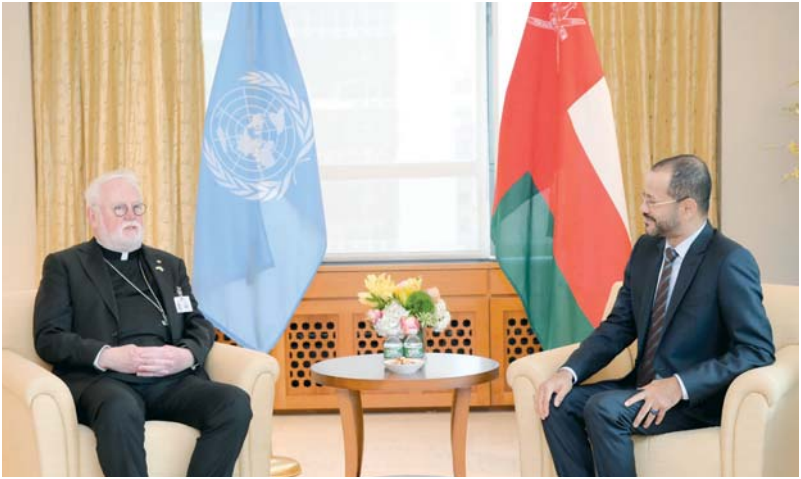
Cnidarians — the animal

group which includes jellyfish, sea anemones and coral — are brainless, instead getting by with a “dispersed” central nervous system. Despite this considerable disadvantage, the Caribbean box jellyfish responds to what is called “operant conditioning,” according to the study in the journal Current Biology.

This means they can be trained to “predict a future problem and try to avoid it,” said Anders Garm, a marine biologist at the University of Copenhagen and the study’s lead author. Garm said that this capacity is “more complex than classical conditioning,” which is best known for Russian neurologist Ivan Pavlov’s experiments showing that dogs cannot help but salivate when they see their food bowl. — **AFP**



Foreign minister receives officials on UN sidelines



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy with Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher of Vatican



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy with Mauritania's Mohamed Salem Ould Marzouk

NEW YORK: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations, on the sidelines of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), at the headquarters of the Permanent Delegation of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations in New York, on Saturday.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed topics of common interest affirming their support to dialogue between civilisations and cultures and their commitment to the values of tolerance, understanding and respect of rules of international

law and the United Nations Charter. They agreed to enhance constructive cooperation and common benefits for the good and harmony among nations.

Sayyid Badr also received Mohamed Salem Ould Marzouk, Mauritania's Minister of Foreign Affairs. They discussed cooperation relations between the two countries in various fields and ways of fostering them to serve the common interests of the two brotherly peoples. They also exchanged points of view on a number of regional and international issues.

Sayyid Badr received Miguel Moratinos, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC). They



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy after signing memoranda of understanding with Serbia's Ivica Dacic



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy with Belarus's Sergei Aleinik

reviewed efforts being made to enhance understanding and tolerance and combat phenomena of hatred, intolerance and

discrimination based on religion or race. They exchanged views on fostering cooperation and partnership between the Sultanate of Oman and the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations.

The foreign minister received Ivica Dacic, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia. During the meeting, the two sides discussed various aspects of bilateral cooperation between the two friendly countries and ways to enhance them and exchanged opinions and viewpoints on a number of current regional and international issues of common interest.

Within the framework of fostering relations between the Sultanate of Oman and



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy with Algeria's Ahmed Attaf



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy with Miguel Moratinos of UNAOC

the Republic of Serbia, two memoranda of understanding were signed by the foreign ministers of the two countries regarding political consultations and cooperation in the fields of diplomatic studies and training between the two diplomatic academies.

Sayyid Badr also received Ahmed Attaf, Algeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs. They reviewed bilateral relations binding the two brotherly countries. They discussed various aspects of cooperation and ways of enhancing them and exchanged opinions and viewpoints on a number of current regional and international issues of common interest. They agreed to hold the next session of the Omani-

Algerian Joint Committee within the next few months in Algeria.

The foreign minister of the Sultanate of Oman also received Sergei Aleinik, Belarus Minister of Foreign Affairs. They discussed the friendly relations and cooperation between the two countries and ways to enhance them in various fields to serve the aspirations of both countries and discussed regional and international developments.

The meetings were attended by Dr Mohamed al Hassan, Permanent Representative of Oman to the UN, and Shaikh Humaid bin Ali al Maani, Head of the International Affairs Department at the Foreign Ministry, and officials from both sides. — **ONA**



Dr Salim al Shukaili, Salim bin Hamad al Kamyani and Dr Hafez bin Ahmed Ambusaidi at the seminar in Nizwa last week.

Nizwa seminar discusses Shura and elections

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, SEPT 23

A discussion on Majlis Ash'shura and elections was held at Nizwa Public Library last week.

The seminar was hosted by Nizwa Club's Scientific Cultural Committee coinciding with Majlis Ash'shura elections under the auspices of Shaikh Saif al Nabhani. Distinguished participants included Dr Salim al Shukaili, a professor of constitutional and administrative law and former legal adviser to Majlis Ash'shura; and Salim bin Hamad al Kamyani, a former member of both the State and Shura Councils. Dr Hafez bin Ahmed Ambusaidi, Assistant Dean of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Nizwa, skillfully moderated the seminar.

Zaher bin Sulaiman al Zakwani, a member of the Scientific Cultural Committee, delivered an opening address. He highlighted the significance of the seminar against the background of the 10th Shura elections. The seminar's objective was to elucidate various matters of

concern to voters through a constructive dialogue with two seasoned parliamentary experts.

He also emphasised that the seminar is a testament to the committee's commitment to staying attuned to local events, a dedication that has endured since the committee's inception in 2015.

The discussions revolved around the significance of Shura in nurturing democratic principles and the evolution of the Shura system within the Sultanate of Oman. Furthermore, the dialogue touched upon the Majlis Ash'shura's roles within the Council of Oman as well as the influential role of societal culture in upholding Shura principles, with the aim of guaranteeing the election of highly qualified candidates.

It explored strategies for ensuring the successful implementation of Shura practices in the Sultanate of Oman. It provided insights into the expected roles of Majlis Ash'shura members, emphasising their pivotal contribution to the success of the Shura elections.

Echoes of distant past return in Al Safa

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, SEPT 23

Nestled in the lush Wadi Shafan is Al Safa, a charming old village that draws visitors curious about Oman's rich heritage.

Al Safa village is about 55 kilometres away from Al Khabourah, Al Batinah North Governorate.

One of Al Safa's standout features is its historic buildings and landmarks. These old structures have stood for a long time and showcase the incredible craftsmanship of the villagers who have lived here for generations. Although people have moved to the city for better life standards and services, thanks to the government's commitment to enhance life there and the commitment of villagers for preserving their area where their grandparents used to stay, some of them came back to live there and restore their homes.

Jabal Al Ilm, a stunning mountain, is a symbol of Al Safa's deep-rooted history. Locals believe that this mountain was created by a higher power, and it represents a significant part of the village's heritage.

Another fascinating aspect is the ancient defensive towers, Boma and Al Huraydah. These towers were strategically built to



Al Safa village is about 55 kilometres away from Al Khabourah, Al Batinah North Governorate.

protect the village and its historic homes. Today, they stand as silent guardians, their stone walls filled with stories of resilience and protection that go back centuries. Despite the passage of time, the towers' architectural beauty continues to amaze visitors.

Saif bin Mohammed al Saidi, one of the people who returned to the area and restored his ancestral house, said, "The area means a lot to us as it tells the story of our families' courage and commitment to the land. We came back to our land to preserve our heritage and to be close to the charming village."

One feels time is still as one

explores the village's narrow streets and charming old houses, each with its unique character. Even though the elements have taken a toll on these buildings, they still retain traces of their glorious past. History seems to hang in the air, and the intricate details of the structures tell stories of days gone by.

As you wander Al Safa's historic streets, you can't miss the connection with nature. Indigenous plants like Al Sirh, Al Asbaq, Al Shaka and Al Shuwa grow in the landscape. For generations, villagers have used some of these plants to treat various ailments and injuries.



They add another layer of cultural significance to Al Safa's heritage.

Al Safa's historical market and Al Qahfah are central to village life. These ancient landmarks serve as meeting places for both locals and visitors.

"Despite the nature of the wadi, Al Safa has green areas for agriculture where we grow grapes, dates, mango, lemon and other fruits," Al Saidi added.

The village is a unique blend of natural beauty, ancient traditions and historic landmarks that make it a must-visit destination. Listen closely, you'll hear the echoes of history that still resonate in this charming village where the past truly comes to life.



TRUSTED SINCE 1920

SEND USD WORLDWIDE
FOR BUSINESS, EDUCATION,
FIXED DEPOSITS & MORE

OMR 4 SERVICE FEE

SIMPLE | SECURE | SWIFT

OMAN'S 1 EXCHANGE

SEND MONEY TO ANY
BANK ACCOUNT IN UAE FOR
CORPORATES AND INDIVIDUALS

OMR 2.5 SERVICE FEE

PURSHOTTAM KANJI EXCHANGE

شركة برشوتم
كانجي للصرافة

Download & NOW

917873279 | 918492891 | 917873279

www.pkexchange.com

Oman joins Saudi Arabia’s National Day celebrations

IBRI: The Sultanate of Oman joined Saudi Arabia in its 93rd National Day celebrations with a ceremony organised by the Secretariat-General of National Celebrations (SGNC) in cooperation with the Royal Oman Police (ROP) at the Empty Quarter border crossing in the presence of Dr Mohammed al Fraih al Sharari, adviser at the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Muscat, on Saturday.

Dr Fraih, pointed out that this celebration of the Saudi National Day is an embodiment of the depth and the strength of the relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He hailed the fraternal relations binding the two brotherly countries stressing that the Empty Quarter border crossing plays an important role in linking roads and trade exchange routes between the two countries. — ONA



Celebrations at the Empty Quarter border crossing on Saturday



Tender floated for RO 4 million road in Al Sharqiyah South



SUR: The Secretariat-General of the Tender Board has floated a tender for the design and execution of the second phase of the road linking Wadi Bani Jabir area to the Wilayat of Sur in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate at a cost of more than RO 4 million.

Wadi Bani Jabir area is one of the tourist places in the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate and a key destination for nature-lovers especially domestic tourism thanks to

its picturesque mountainous terrain.

Engineer Yousef bin Abdullah al Mijaini, director of road construction department at the Directorate-General of Roads and Land Transport, stated that the second phase of the project involves pavement of 6 km and the work will begin by the end of this year and is expected to be completed within a year.

In comments to ONA, Al Mijaini said the importance of the road lies in its economic

value as well as the services it renders to the adjoining areas, noting that the road will boost tourism in the area. He added that the road’s path is bumpy at some points and requires a lot of cutting and backfilling work.

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, completed the first phase of the project, a 16.7 km-long road which connects Wadi Al Minqal and Wadi Bani Jabir in the Wilayat of Sur. — ONA

High power bills talk of the town

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The surge in electricity bills is trending on social media platforms in the country, which prompted Nama Group to issue a statement.

According to both citizens and residents, authorities should take steps to find solutions to high utility bills that are a shock to low-income groups as there is no respite from summer even in the

second half of September.

Abdul Rahman, a citizen, said that the bills have been touching around RO180 to RO200 and there is no way one can survive these weather conditions without air-conditioners.

“Several landlords have installed pre-paid smart meters in their apartments and the tenants have no option but to recharge a sizable amount every week. I recharge RO50 and it lasts around a month,” an expat said.

The general view is that a bill of around RO100 and above for someone with salaries of RO500 plus is virtually unaffordable.

Namaa said it followed with great interest what was being circulated on social media regarding the issue of electricity bills for the summer period.

The company said all citizens must ensure that the data is updated to avail the government support allocated to the basic account.

RAFO’S AL SUBHI GETS UK HONOUR



Air Lieutenant Qais bin Ahmed al Subhi of the Royal Air Force of Oman received the International Sword of Honour from the Royal Air Force College Cranwell in the United Kingdom. This award is given to an international officer who excels in leadership performance. — ONA



Arabian gazelle. – PHOTO BY YAHYA AL SALMANI

Ras Al Shajar enjoys unique biodiversity

YAHYA AL SALMANI
MUSCAT, SEPT. 23

If you are interested in watching wild animals and birds in their natural habitats, visit Ras Al Shajar Natural Reserve in the Wilayat of Qurayat (90 km south of Muscat). The sanctuary is unique tourist and environmental location that combines the sea and the mountains.

The reserve is home to Arabian gazelle (pictured), Arabian ibex, the red fox and the lynx. It is also considered a safe haven for species of resident and immigrant birds including hoopoe, Indian hawk, owl, falcon and eagle.

One can see hordes of the Arabian gazelle especially in the plains located between the villages of Fins and Bama. The most important characteristic of the Arabian gazelle is its dark brown colour and its thick, arched horns. It can often be seen feeding on the leaves of Al Sumur and Al Ghaf trees.

The reserve is characterised by the presence of a number of wild plants that sustain honey bees and herbivorous animals in the reserve.

Other tree species in the reserve include Babul, Dhamasa, Rock Fig, and Caralluma

Arabica which people still use as medicine even today.

The reserve is composed of rocky beaches, low plains and high mountains that reach 1,800 metres. In the areas surrounding this reserve there are many archaeological sites, the most important of which are Majlis Al Jinn Cave, Kabikab graveyard and Hawiyat Najm Park.

Geological surveys have confirmed the presence of many archaeological sites dating back thousands of years in more than one location in the reserve. The reserve is also famous for the presence of many valleys like Wadi Al Ajama, Wadi Al Souqa and Wadi Al Harsh, which are frequented by wild animals and birds to drink water.

NATURAL ELEMENTS

The local community in this reserve is aware of the importance of preserving natural elements. The majority of them are livestock herders. Others are craftspeople who use palm fronds to make products with elegant colours. Some community members collect leaves of thyme that grows in the mountains of the reserve. They sell it in the souqs of the wilayats of Qurayat and Muttrah. There are few beekeepers whose honey is known for its purity and distinct

THIS NATURAL RESERVE COMPRISING SEA AND MOUNTAINS IS HOME TO GAZELLE, IBEX, LYNX AND BIRDS LIKE HOPOE, HAWK AND FALCONS

taste. Citizens, in cooperation with the Environment Authority, recently planted hundreds of seedlings of Al Ghaf (*Prosopis cineraria*), Al Sumur (*Acacia tortilis*) and Al Sidr (*Ziziphus spina christi*).

A team of the Environment Authority has been guarding the reserve and filing status reports.

“Wildlife observers are making great efforts to monitor the mountainous, plain and coastal areas. This monitoring aims to update the sighting of various animals and birds. The monitoring programmes also aim to report poaching and attacks on wild animals,” an official said.

One must obtain a permit to visit the natural reserve. The visitors must follow regulations displayed at the site. These include warnings about animal crossing and speed limits. They must also desist from dumping waste and not leave plastics which some animals tend to consume thinking it as food.

The regulations also prohibit barbecuing within the boundaries of the reserve to avoid the risks of wildfires.

“Field studies reveal that the numbers of animals, birds, reptiles and butterflies in the reserve have increased significantly. Camera traps found many new types of animals and birds,” the official said.

THE RESERVE IS COMPOSED OF ROCKY BEACHES, LOW PLAINS AND HIGH MOUNTAINS THAT REACH
1,800 METRES



Gunmen kidnap over 30 people in Nigerian university raid

KANO: Gunmen have kidnapped more than 30 people, including at least 24 female students, in a raid in and around a university in northwest Nigeria's Zamfara state, residents said Saturday.

Dozens of gunmen from criminal gangs called bandits stormed Sabon Gida village on the edge of a Federal University outside the state capital Gusau in a predawn attack on Friday breaking into three female hostels and taking away the occupants, residents said.

The attack was the first mass kidnapping at a college since President Bola Ahmed Tinubu came to power, promising to tackle the country's security challenges.

"The bandits rode into the village on motorcycles and broke into the hostels and gained access into rooms by bringing down the windows," Sabon Gida resident Sahabi Musa said.

"They took away at least 24 female students from the hostels along with two male neighbours, one of whom is a staff member of the university,"



A soldier sits on one of the trucks used to bring back the girls who were kidnapped in the northwest Nigerian state of Zamfara. — Reuters file photo

said Musa. The attackers went into the university and seized nine welders working on a new building while they were sleeping, said Shehu Hashimu, another resident.

One of the welders managed to escape and returned to the school, Hashimu said.

Troops deployed from Gusau, 20 kilometres away and engaged the

attackers in a gunfight but a group of the kidnappers herded the hostages away while another group faced the soldiers.

"The attackers had a field day. They operated in the village from 3:00 am to 6:00 am unchallenged before troops arrived," Hashimu said. A video shared online after the assault showed ransacked rooms

in one of the hostels with their windows pulled down.

Yazid Abubakar, Zamfara state police spokesman, confirmed the attack but declined to provide details, saying security personnel were working to free the captives.

A military officer said a military operation was under way as soldiers were confronting the attackers in a forest close to the nearby town of Tsafe.

"Six of the female students have been rescued by troops who pursued the terrorists into the forest," said the officer.

Zamfara is one of several states in northwestern and central Nigeria terrorised by bandits who raid villages, kill and abduct residents as well as burn homes after looting them.

The gangs maintain camps in a huge forest straddling Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger states.

The criminals have been notorious for mass kidnappings of students from schools in recent years. — AFP



Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam is seen as it undergoes construction work on the river Nile in Guba Woreda. — Reuters file photo

Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan resume Nile dam talks

NAIROBI: Ethiopia said on Saturday that it has begun a second round of negotiations with Egypt and Sudan over a controversial mega-dam built by Addis Ababa on the Nile, the source of long-running tensions between the three nations.

Ethiopia this month announced the completion of the fourth and final filling of the Grand Renaissance Dam, prompting immediate condemnation from Cairo, which denounced the move as illegal.

Egypt and Sudan fear the massive \$4.2-billion dam will severely reduce the share of Nile water they receive and had repeatedly asked Addis Ababa to stop filling it until an agreement was reached. For years at loggerheads over the issue, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed agreed in July to finalise a deal within four months, resuming talks in August.

"The second round of the tripartite negotiation among Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan on the... annual operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has commenced today, September 23, 2023, in Addis Ababa," Ethiopia's foreign ministry said on X.

"Ethiopia is committed to reaching a negotiated and amicable solution through the ongoing trilateral process." Protracted negotiations over the dam since 2011 have thus far failed to bring about an agreement between Ethiopia and its downstream neighbours.

Egypt has long viewed the dam as an existential threat, as it relies on the Nile for 97 per cent of its water needs. — AFP

Libya aid conference in October

BENEGHAZI: Libya's flood-devastated port city of Derna will host an international conference next month to aid reconstruction efforts, authorities in the east of the divided country said.

There was no immediate reaction from the internationally recognised government in Tripoli nor any details on how the rival administration would accommodate delegates in a city where entire neighbourhoods have been swept away.

A tsunami-sized flash flood broke through two ageing dams upstream from Derna after a hurricane-strength storm lashed the area on September 10, sweeping thousands of people into the sea.

"The government invites the international community to participate in the conference planned for October 10 in Derna to present modern, rapid projects for the reconstruction of the city," the eastern administration said in a statement.

It said the conference was being held in "response to the demands of residents of the stricken city of Derna and other towns that suffered damage" during the flooding.

Despite a wave of nationwide solidarity since the flood, there was no immediate show of support for the proposed conference from the Tripoli-based government of interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah.

And even the office of strongman Khalifa Haftar, the main military backer of the eastern administration, questioned how many donor governments would attend.

There is still no widely accepted death toll for the floods which devastated Derna and nearby coastal towns.

The latest official death toll released on Friday evening stood at 3,753 but the eventual count is expected to be far higher, with international aid groups giving estimates of up to 10,000 people missing. — AFP

MIGRANTS SEEK ASYLUM IN PANAMA



Migrants walk by the jungle near Bajo Chiquito village, the first border control of the Darien Province in Panama. — AFP

Lebanese army exchanges smoke bomb fire

CAIRO: Lebanon's army said it fired tear gas at Israeli forces over the border on Saturday in response to smoke bombs fired at its troops, though Israel said Lebanon started the confrontation.

Tensions have flared along the frontier this summer, with rockets fired at Israel during flare-ups of Israeli-Palestinian violence, and members of the heavily armed Lebanese group Hezbollah or its supporters facing off with Israeli forces.

"Elements of the Israeli army violated the withdrawal line and fired smoke bombs at a Lebanese army patrol that was

accompanying a bulldozer removing an earthen berm erected by the Israeli enemy north of the withdrawal line, the blue line, in the Bastra area," the Lebanese army said in a statement. The current demarcation line between the two countries is known as the Blue Line, a frontier mapped by the United Nations that marks the line to which Israeli forces withdrew when they left south Lebanon in 2000.

"The Lebanese patrol responded to the attack by firing tear bombs ... forcing them to withdraw to the occupied Palestinian territories," Lebanon's

army added.

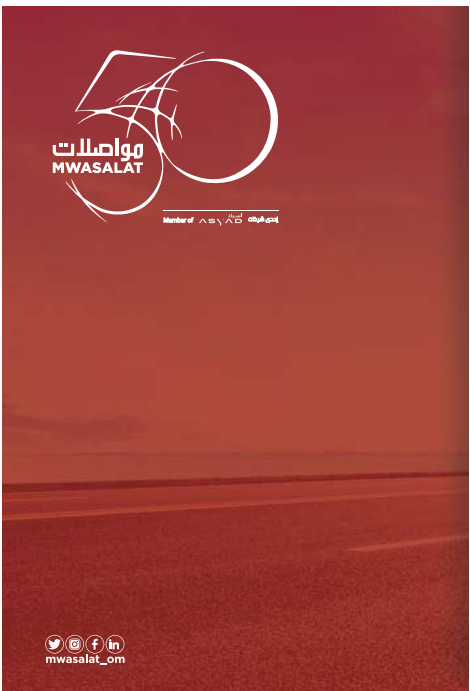
The Israeli military said it was Lebanon that started the violence.

"A short while ago, IDF soldiers spotted an engineering vehicle's shovel crossing the Blue Line from Lebanon into Israeli territory in the area of Mount Dov," a statement from the military said. "In response, IDF soldiers used riot dispersal means."

"The vehicle returned to Lebanese territory," the military said.

UNIFIL, the UN peacekeeping force in the area, said there had been tension on Saturday.

— Reuters



Tender Number

T- 41-2023

Tender Name

Call Off Agreement for the Supply of Consumable Items for MWASALAT Vehicles Maintenance. اتفاقية التوريد حسب الطلب للمواد الاستهلاكية الخاصة بحالة الصيانة للسيارات في شركة مواصلات

Project Summary

MWASALAT is seeking a qualified supplier to provide consumable items based on a call-off agreement for its vehicle's maintenance.

Tender Fee

NIL

Grade & Specialty

Qualified & Specialized Companies in the Field holding SME/Riyada cards

Start date for tender document distribution

Sunday 24, September 2023

Last date for tender document distribution

Sunday 1st, October 2023

Last date for submission

Sunday 15th, October 2023

The Tender documents may be shared by email during official working hours between 9:00A.M - 2:00 P.M.

Tenderers are requested to share commercial registration (CR) & business card through email tenders@wasalat.om and tender number as the subject of email. Tender Document shall be shared by email

The submission Date / Time shall be on or before the deadline specified in the above table.

Participants should submit their offers in the tender box located in the head-quarter Oman National Transport Company SAOC (MWASALAT) at Ghal, Muscat (Jabal Shams Building 5th floor), and any proposal submitted after the given Date & Time shall be rejected.

"Mwasalat" Head Quarter, Ghal, Tel: +968 1551 P.O.Box: 911 , Al Khuwair, P.C: 133, Sultanate of Oman

For more information please send to: tenders@mwasalat.om

Tender Announcement

المركز الإحصائي

لدول مجلس التعاون دول الخليج العربية

GCC-STAT

TENDER NOTICE

The Statistical Center for the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC-STAT) announces the invitation to the following tender:

Tender No	Tender Name	Tender Price	Companies	Deadline for receipt of Tender Brochure	The Closing Date
1/2023	IT OUTSOURCING SERVICES	50/= RO	Specialized	Thursday at 10:00 AM 12/10/2023	Thursday at 10:00 AM 09/11/2023

The Companies specialized in this field and wishing to apply for this tender must obtain the specifications brochure from the Financial and Human Resources Department during official working hours at the center building in Airport Heights, provided that a guarantee or bank check certified by one of the banks operating in the Sultanate is attached with the bid at a rate of (1%) of the value of the submitted bid, addressed in the name of the Chairman of the Center's Internal Tenders Committee and valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submitting the bid. Any bid that does not meet the required bank guarantee will not be considered. Bids shall be submitted in envelopes sealed with red wax and addressed to:

The Chairman of the Internal Tender Committee

GCC-Stat

P.O. Box 840, P.C 133

Tenders should be deposited in the Tender Box at the Center at Airport Heights. Any Tender that does not satisfy the above mentioned requirements will not be considered. The Ministry reserves the right to accept or reject any/all Tenders without assigning any reason.

For inquiries, please contact the phone number (+968 24346499) or by email (supportservices@gccstat.org)

http://www.gccstat.org



A satellite image shows smoke billowing from a Russian Black Sea Navy HQ after a missile strike, in Sevastopol, Crimea. – Reuters

Kyiv breaks through Russian lines in south

KYIV: Kyiv’s army has broken through Russian lines in southern Ukraine in the latest Ukrainian claims that it is making progress in the Zaporizhzhia area.

Ukraine launched its counteroffensive to claw back territory from Russian forces in June.

Progress has been slower than expected, with heavily mined territory, but Kyiv has in recent weeks reported making strategic advances in the Zaporizhzhia region.

“On the left flank, near the village of Verbove, we have a breakthrough and we continue to advance further,” general Oleksandr Tarnavskiy said.

He acknowledged the advance had been slower than Ukraine hoped.

“Not as fast as it was excepted, not like in the movies about the Second World War,” he said.

But he said it was important “not to lose this initiative.”

Last month Kyiv declared a strategic victory when it recaptured the southern village of Robotyne.

Tarnavskiy said a major breakthrough for the

counteroffensive would be if Kyiv recaptured the city of Tokmak — some 20 kilometres from the front line — which fell to Russian forces at the start of their attack.

Retaking Tokmak would allow Ukrainian forces to push further towards occupied Melitopol and annexed Crimea.

“I think it would happen after Tokmak,” he said, but warned: “At the moment, Russian forces are relying on the depth of their defensive line there.”

Tarnavskiy disagreed with some predictions that Ukraine’s push could be further slowed by the upcoming winter months.

“The weather can be a serious obstacle during advance, but considering how we move forward, mostly without vehicles, I don’t think it will heavily influence the counteroffensive,” he said.

He gave some insight into the type of fighting taking place in the south:

“Right now, neither the enemy nor us uses large formations, companies, battalions or brigades. We use assault squads, groups of 10 to 15 men,” he said. — AFP

Karabakh rebels hand in arms and negotiate withdrawal

KORNIDZOR: Nagorno-Karabakh separatists were negotiating the end of their long struggle against Azerbaijani rule on Saturday, surrendering their weapons after a lightning government offensive.

If the ceasefire holds it will mark the end of a conflict between Caucasus rivals Armenia and Azerbaijan that has raged, off and on, through the three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Moscow confirmed that the rebels had surrendered their first weapons and the process is expected to continue through the weekend, with the help of Russian peacekeepers.

Germany meanwhile called for the rights of the residents of the mountainous region to be guaranteed, as concern grew in the international community over the plight of the mainly Armenian-speaking civilians there.

A US congressional delegation was expected to meet Armenian leader Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to, in the words of the US Embassy, discuss “the impact of Azerbaijan’s recent military actions on the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh”.

The years of fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh have been marked by abuses on both sides and there are fears of a new refugee crisis.

In the Armenian border town of Kornidzor, civilians have been gathering, some of them waiting for days, at the last checkpoint before Azerbaijani territory hoping for news of relatives stuck in the embattled enclave.



Red Cross trucks pass next to stopped humanitarian convoys for Nagorno-Karabakh. – AFP

“I’ve been here for three days and nights, sleeping in my car,” said 28-year-old Garik Zakarian, as displaced Armenians borrowed a soldier’s telescope to scan a village on the other side of the valley. It was shelled by Azerbaijani forces on Tuesday.

No-one was killed, but witnesses who managed to escape report that 150 inhabitants were forced to take refuge close to a Russian peacekeeper base a kilometre from the last Armenian positions.

A spokeswoman for the Nagorno-Karabakh breakaway region said on Friday that fearful civilians in the main city Stepanakert were hiding in their basements, with Azerbaijan’s forces camped on the outskirts.

The situation there was “horrible,” said Armine Hayrapetyan.

In the separatist stronghold, food, water, medicine and fuel for the panicked population were scarce and displaced people

had arrived in the city from surrounding villages.

International pressure has mounted on Azerbaijan to re-open the only road leading to Armenia, dubbed the Lachin Corridor, so supplies and people can move in and out.

The separatists have said they are in Russian-mediated talks with Baku to organise the withdrawal process and the return of civilians displaced by the fighting. — AFP

Pope urges Europe against treating migrants as invaders

MARSEILLE: Pope Francis on Saturday urged European governments to welcome migrants instead of viewing them as invaders, during the second day of his visit to France’s Mediterranean port of Marseille.

The pontiff made the comments hours before he leads a mass in Marseille’s main stadium in a gigantic event due to be attended by French President Emmanuel Macron.

“Those who risk their lives at sea do not invade, they look for welcome,” Francis said in a speech closing a conference of bishops

and young people from around the Mediterranean.

Migration is “a reality of our times, a process that involves three continents around the Mediterranean and that must be governed with wise foresight, including a European response,” the pontiff added.

Noting the risk to the lives of migrants if they are not taken to safety, he warned against turning “the Mediterranean, the mare nostrum, from the cradle of civilisation into the mare mortuum, the graveyard of dignity.”



Faithful gather as they wait for Pope Francis’ arrival where he will celebrate mass at the Velodrome stadium, in the southern port city of Marseille. – AFP

The pope’s forceful interventions come as the migration debate has been stoked by mass arrivals on the Italian island of Lampedusa last week.

Speaking at a monument to people lost at sea on his arrival in Marseille on Friday, the pontiff had insisted that “people who are at risk of drowning when abandoned on the waves must be rescued”.

He thanked aid groups rescuing migrants in danger at sea, condemning efforts to prevent their work as “gestures of hate”.

Thousands were already starting to pour into the iconic venue which only on Thursday had hosted France’s clash with Namibia in the Rugby World Cup. Clutches of black- or white-robed priests and nuns were scattered through the crowds while volunteers tasked with distributing communion wafers during the service were taking up position.

Up to 100,000 are expected to line the Avenue du Prado for his “popemobile” tour and many roads are decked out with the white-and-yellow colours of the Vatican. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

MOGADISHU

Truck bomb kills at least 13 in Somalia

A truck bomb exploded at a checkpoint in the central Somali town of Beledweyne on Saturday, killing at least 13 people and obliterating nearby buildings.

It was not immediately clear who was responsible but the group Al Shabaab frequently carries out bombings in the Horn of Africa country.

“So far I have seen 13 dead people including soldiers and civilians and over a dozen others injured, but the death toll is sure to rise,” police officer Ahmed



Aden said.

Aden said the dead included five police officers who fired on the truck in a failed attempt to stop it ramming the checkpoint. — Reuters

LOS ANGELES

Nasa’s first asteroid sample on track for landing

A Nasa space capsule carrying a sample of rocky material plucked from the surface of an asteroid three years ago hurtled toward Earth this weekend headed for a fiery plunge through the atmosphere and a parachute landing in the Utah desert on Sunday.

Weather forecasts were favourable and the robotic spacecraft OSIRIS-REx was on course to release the sample-return capsule for final descent as planned, with no further



adjustments to its flight path needed, Nasa officials said.

Mission managers are expecting a “spot-on” touchdown on the US military’s vast Utah Test and Training range. — Reuters

STOCKHOLM

Swedish motorway crumbles in landslide

A landslide tore apart a stretch of motorway in Sweden on Saturday, injuring three people.

It ripped up a petrol station car park, overturned lorries and caved in the roof of a Burger King restaurant.

Three people were taken to hospital with minor injuries after the collapse in Stenungsund, 50 kilometres north of Sweden’s second-largest city Gothenburg.

Police have opened an investigation into possible links to a nearby building site.



The landslide “affected around ten vehicles, a forest area and a commercial area including a petrol station and a fast-food restaurant”, said regional emergency services chief Daniel Lyckelid. — AFP

Manufacturing jobs and unions



Paul Krugman

The writer is a Nobel Memorial Prize winner in Economic Sciences and has been an Opinion columnist since 2000

One way to think about the autoworkers' strike is that it's an attempt to make manufacturing good again. There's little reason to believe that manufacturing jobs were particularly good jobs before the New Deal

Are the United Auto Workers justified in seeking higher wages and benefits? Definitely. Is the union overreaching? I don't know — partly because I'm not an expert on auto industry economics, partly because the actual agreement, when it comes, may be more modest in scope than the union's current bargaining position. Still, I think it's important to understand the context. Both Donald Trump and now Joe Biden promised to revitalise US manufacturing. Trump, with his chaotic trade war, didn't deliver on his promise. Biden, with his embrace of industrial policy, seems to be having more success, although we don't yet know how many manufacturing jobs will be created by the surge in manufacturing construction currently underway. But why should creating more manufacturing jobs be a policy goal?

A large part of the answer is the widespread perception that manufacturing jobs are good jobs — jobs that pay well and come with good benefits.

Yet that isn't necessarily the case. Manufacturing jobs aren't inherently better than jobs in other sectors.

True, there was a long period — basically from Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan — when manufacturing jobs were, in fact, good jobs. Nostalgia for this period is part of the reason Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" got traction with blue-collar voters.

But those relatively high wages in manufacturing didn't just happen: They were negotiated by unions, which were much more powerful in manufacturing than in the rest of the economy. When the power of the unions went away, so did the manufacturing wage premium.

So one way to think about the autoworkers' strike is that it's an attempt to make manufacturing good again.

Let's start with the history. We don't have all the data we'd like for long-run comparisons — in particular, we don't have good data outside of manufacturing before the 1960s. But there's little reason to believe that manufacturing jobs were particularly good jobs before the New Deal.

There were exceptions. In 1914, Henry Ford famously doubled his workers' wages to \$5 a day, which was a lot at the time. His goal was to make boring, repetitive jobs desirable, and hence raise workers' efficiency, and he seems to have succeeded in doing so. But many, probably most, workers in US manufacturing continued to receive low wages while working long hours.

The big change came in the 1930s and 1940s. Here's a chart showing real manufacturing wages — the average hourly wage for production workers divided by the Consumer Price Index — from 1919 to 1995:

Notice the steep rise from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s. This corresponds to what Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo call the Great Compression, the sudden reduction in wage inequality that took place mainly during World War II and created the middle-class society I grew up in and that politicians on both the right and the left keep promising to restore.

But simply bringing manufacturing jobs back wouldn't accomplish that restoration. As you can also see in the chart above, real wages in manufacturing have in general been declining since 1980. The decline has been especially pronounced and persistent in auto manufacturing; here's a chart that tracks that decline since 1990:

Why did manufacturing jobs get good in the 1940s, then stop being good in recent decades? The answer, almost surely, lies mainly in the rise and decline of



UAW members and workers at the Mopar Parts Centre Line, a Stellantis Parts Distribution Centre in Centre Line, Michigan, hold signs outside the facility after walking off their jobs. — AFP

unions. Unionisation rates surged in the favourable political environment of the New Deal, then withered in the unfavourable environment of post-Reagan America; union power declined even more. Since both unionisation rates and union power were stronger at their peak in manufacturing than they were elsewhere, unions were what made manufacturing jobs good.

That diagnosis is upheld by a 2022 paper by researchers at the Federal Reserve Board. Kimberly Bayard, Tomaz Cajner, Vivi Gregorich and Maria D Tito find that the manufacturing wage premium — the difference between wage rates in manufacturing and elsewhere, once you adjust for differences in worker characteristics — was substantial in the 1980s, but has now disappeared. And they argue that this decline was caused by a sharp drop in unionisation, which was initially higher in manufacturing than in other sectors. This decline in unionisation didn't just reduce the number of workers benefiting from union wages. It also greatly reduced the ability of unions to negotiate higher wages for their workers, so the union wage premium itself fell too.

And the combined effect of fewer unionised workers and a lower union premium, they find, accounts for the bulk of the decline in the premium for manufacturing workers in general.

So what does this say about the current situation? While the Biden administration's policies may produce a partial revival of manufacturing employment (no, we're not going back to the days when manufacturing was a third

of nonfarm employment), the newly created jobs won't necessarily be especially good jobs.

This doesn't mean that a manufacturing revival would achieve nothing: It looks likely that many of the jobs Biden's policies will create will be in depressed regions of the United States, where any jobs will be welcome. But the new jobs will be good jobs only if the partial revival of manufacturing is accompanied by a restoration of worker bargaining power.

And here's the thing: There's no reason a union revival must be restricted to manufacturing. The centrality of manufacturing to the union movement in America was, in a way, a historical accident. Back when favourable political conditions allowed unions to thrive, manufacturing contained most of the big companies you might want to organise.

As America increasingly became a service economy, you might have expected unionisation to spread to other sectors, as it did in Nordic countries, where two-thirds of workers are still unionised. But America's shift away from manufacturing — during which Walmart displaced General Motors as the biggest private-sector employer — took place in a political environment that was hostile to union organising.

So if the autoworkers get major gains as a result of their strike, the lesson you take shouldn't be that we can make manufacturing jobs good again. It will, instead, be that we can make jobs in general better by helping workers make better bargains.

Budget drones prove their value in a billion-dollar war



Andrew E Kramer

The writer is the New York Times bureau chief in Kyiv

They are made of plastic or plastic foam, weigh only a few pounds and are often launched simply by having a soldier throw them into the air, as if tossing a javelin.

In a slow-moving counteroffensive against Russian forces that has been reliant at times on the smallest advantages, a fleet of cheap, mostly off-the-shelf drones is providing one for the Ukrainians.

The drones have begun to make a difference in one corner of a stagnant war, soldiers, commanders and pilots said in interviews, because their different materials and variable frequencies can evade enemy jamming systems. That has allowed them to venture farther in searches for enemy artillery positions and multimillion-dollar air defence systems, all while risking aircraft worth only a few thousand dollars apiece. Along one of their two main Ukrainian lines of advance in the south, they say, the Russian army has been forced to

move its howitzers out of range of Ukraine's guns, as drone pilots have adapted well enough to regularly evade Russian electronic jamming systems that had been spotting them reliably earlier in the war.

The fighting has come down to small steps with high stakes for Ukraine as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sought on a visit to the United States to dispel the sense of stalemate and shore up diplomatic and military backing for a longer fight. With sufficient modern weapons, the tide will turn more swiftly on the battlefield, Zelenskyy has argued.

In the months since the Ukrainian counteroffensive began in June, Ukraine's push to drive a wedge through Russian forces in the south has been a grueling, bloody infantry fight, with advances sometimes measured in yards. In most aspects, Russia holds an advantage in firepower, while also benefiting from fighting from well-prepared defences.

But starting in the summer, a flurry of tweaks to drone designs and radio frequencies began to allow Ukrainian pilots, who had initially lost dozens of drones in the opening weeks of a counteroffensive in the south, to send their drones far beyond the front line — drifting high above farm fields and villages — in search of Russian artillery pieces, tanks and other targets, even as those same targets hunt the Ukrainians.



A Ukrainian soldier preparing to release a drone that will fly over Russian-occupied territory in search of heavy weapons and air defence installations in the Zaporizhzhia region of Ukraine.

The fighting has come down to small steps with high stakes for Ukraine as President Zelenskyy sought to dispel the sense of stalemate and shore up diplomatic and military backing for a longer fight

"Oh, a missile flew past," one drone pilot said calmly after a plume of white smoke appeared only yards from the drone he was piloting during a flight last week. "It means we flew over something interesting."

The pilot, who asked to be identified only by his nickname, Hacker, for security reasons, and other members of his unit would later review the drone's video for clues to what the air defences were protecting — possibly a Russian artillery position, a jamming station or a garrison.

So many small drones are flying now along one section of the front line that Ukraine's military coordinates the flights with a dispatcher, akin to air traffic control.

"If the Russians get close, we will see them," said Lt Ashot Arutunian, the commander of the drone reconnaissance unit.

After 19 months of fighting, the war has settled into mostly static but bloody back-and-forth battles.

Most recently, the Ukrainian military has been fighting to deepen and widen two bulges pushed into Russian defences in the country's south, and to advance on the outskirts of the eastern city of Bakhmut.

Zelenskyy has publicly ruminated on the counteroffensive's flaws, saying his country waited too long for Western armoured vehicles, a delay that allowed Russian forces to entrench and lay minefields.

What makes a successful awareness campaign?



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
@alsinawi

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

Every September people interested in Alzheimer’s around the world conduct activities to mark World Alzheimer’s Month by sharing materials through social media while some conduct conferences and webinars.

Traditional media has also become very active in publishing articles and interviews about Alzheimer’s and dementia, but such activities should not be seasonal, and we must keep going the remaining months of the year.

Awareness campaigns are popular, effective, and flexible ways to raise public interest and educate the community about different health issues.

The World Health Organization allocates different days of the year to different events, so there is World Mental Health Day, world diabetes day, world HIV Day, and so on.

Organisations choose to mark these days depending on the public interest and the resources available. So what makes a successful awareness campaign?

The first step is to identify the main objectives of your campaign and spread awareness of these objectives in order to educate your audience and create a stronger base of support to drive your

mission.

Make sure you set specific key performance indicators to measure the success of your awareness strategies.

Such indicators include audience growth and digital engagement which can be measured by the number of views, likes, and shares of your social media posts.

While generating donations is important for your campaign it should not be the central purpose as fundraising will take place while you are showing your audience why your work matters.

To grab public attention around a certain health issue you should conduct your awareness campaign to coincide with international awareness days set by the WHO. However, you must plan ahead to make the best of your campaign.

The use of social media and virtual events such as webinars have made it easier to reach audiences in different locations yet physical attendance allows for more interaction with your audience.

Remember to use the media well to build up awareness campaigns either by conducting press releases or asking them to feature your message on their programmes.

Identifying your audience is essential before you

‘AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS ARE POPULAR, EFFECTIVE, AND FLEXIBLE WAYS TO RAISE PUBLIC INTEREST AND EDUCATE THE COMMUNITY’

start conducting your activities so you can target them well. Craft your awareness message well and use hashtags to facilitate reposting of your message.

In order to get your message through you will need to engage your board members, volunteers, and supporters with large social media followings, and business connections so you can expand your campaign’s visibility.

Some of your loyal supporters can become active advocates for your awareness campaign, promote virtual awareness events, and secure registrations.

The following step is to secure your campaign sponsors who could be local businesses, nonprofit influencers and news personalities like TV and radio hosts. Make sure you keep your supporters informed with the progress of your campaign by sharing major milestones such as when you gain 1,000 new followers across your social media platform, or when you’ve gained over 100 new donors.

Concluding your awareness campaign with an event enables you to thank your sponsors and celebrate all of the objectives you’ve met. Finally, while some awareness campaigns are seasonal one should not limit the activities to a specific time of the year.

Ensure your message is featured throughout the year and be creative in preparing for future events.

Robot machines take over at Asian Games

JING XUAN TENG

From autonomous bug zappers to android pianists and driverless ice-cream trucks, machines rule the world — at least at China’s Asian Games.

The Games opened after a one-year delay because of Covid with about 12,000 athletes and thousands of journalists, technical officials and spectators descending on Hangzhou.

The city is the unofficial home of China’s tech industry and robots and other mind-boggling gadgets are set to serve, amuse and police visitors.

An automated mosquito trapper roams the vast Games Village, zapping the pests after luring them in by mimicking a human’s body temperature and breathing.

Robot “dogs” that can run, jump and flip over patrol power-supply facilities. Smaller versions dance while a bright-yellow android plays the piano. Driverless minibuses are set to shuttle visitors through the nearby city of Shaoxing, where baseball and softball venues are located.

Athletes can put their reflexes to the test against a table-tennis playing “Pongbot”.

At the massive media centre, a blushing plastic-and-metal receptionist with a number pad and card slots built into its torso greets customers at a makeshift bank.

Even venues were built with the help of construction robots which organisers say are “very cute, with unique skills”.

Summing up how keen China is to push the theme at the Games, the mascots are three humanoid robots — Congcong, Lianlian and Chenchen, whose smiling faces adorn massive signs across Hangzhou and other nearby host cities.

Hangzhou, a city of 12 million people in China’s east, has built up a reputation as a home for tech startups.

That includes a thriving robotics sector eager to close the gap on industry-leading rivals in countries such as the United States and Japan.

At a business park, staff from DEEP Robotics put some of their most advanced models through their paces, commanding one four-legged bot to walk through construction rubble and sending another up a nearby pedestrian bridge slick with rain. At one point, a real dog turns up and sniffs its robotic equivalent curiously.

Elsewhere, office workers pick up lunch from vending machines that can steam the food and, according to maker Kuaie Fresh, check the temperature so the meal is just right. — AFP

India’s ‘Lake Man’ relies on ancient methods to ease a water crisis



Sameer Yasir

The writer is the South Asia Reporter at NYT

After Anand Malligavad tumbled into a lake, he thought he might die — not from drowning, but the stench.

Like hundreds of other lakes in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru, the one Malligavad suddenly found himself in was a receptacle for sewage, plastic debris and construction waste. His unplanned dip happened in 2017, when Malligavad, a mechanical engineer, was on a stroll with friends near his office.

Walking back home, he smelled so bad that a guard refused him entry into his own residential enclave. The next day, Malligavad made an unlikely pitch to his company: He would restore the 36-acre lake if it funded the project.

To his bosses at Sansera Engineering, one of the largest automotive components manufacturers in India, the proposal seemed miscalculated, even foolish.

That Malligavad had no knowledge of lake management made it only more unconvincing.

“They laughed at me,” said Malligavad, 43. “Everyone thought I was crazy.”

But he persisted, and his efforts spurred a remarkable career transition for Malligavad, who is now one of the foremost authorities on lake conservation in India, one of the most water-stressed countries in the world.

As he began his project, Malligavad turned to the knowledge left behind in records from the Chola dynasty that, starting about 1,500 years ago, ruled the surrounding Deccan Plateau for five centuries and built a sprawling, self-sustaining network of irrigation lakes.

After four months of studying the Chola methods — including how to trap silt and sludge using carved stones, which need no maintenance — he won a \$100,000 corporate social responsibility grant from his company for the cleanup project.

“Until I finished, they had no hope it would actually work,” he said.

In 45 days, using a dozen excavators and hundreds of workers, Malligavad

removed enormous amounts of muck, waste and plastic from Kyalasanahalli Lake. He opened its blocked channels, created five islands with the excavated mud and waited for the rains.

Six months later, after the monsoon season, he was boating in the clean water of the lake, amid ducks and

THE GROWING WATER CRISIS IN BANGALORE IS A DIRECT RESULT OF DRIED-UP AND CHOKED LAKES, EXPERTS SAY, WHICH ALSO CONTRIBUTE TO THE AREA’S FREQUENT FLOODS

migratory birds, with the same friends who had helped pull him out of the once-filthy spot.

“When I saw the lake, I felt younger, and I wanted to jump into it,” Malligavad said. “That is what motivates me to keep going.” And he has.

In the seven years since that first success, Malligavad has restored 35 lakes in Bengaluru with a combined surface area of about 800 acres and a water-holding capacity of about 106

million gallons. Thanks in part to his efforts, the groundwater level in the region over that time period has also increased by about 8 feet, according to the Groundwater Directorate, a government body.

For centuries, Bengaluru, was famous across India for a system of human-made lakes that provided water for agriculture and drinking to millions of its residents.

But over the last three decades, the city has become the centre of India’s high-tech industry, growing from some 4 million people in the 1990s to about 13 million today. Villages were turned into electronic cities, and the lakes, still critical sources for water, were filled in for bus terminals or a cricket stadium. As demand for housing grew, high-rise apartments rose up on and covered the canals leading to remaining lakes.

As a result, the city lost capacity to absorb rainwater. Out of the historical 1,850 lakes in Bengaluru, Malligavad said, only about 465 are left, and just 10 per cent of those have clean water, with the rest choked with litter.

Bengaluru is now facing a water shortage of about 172 million gallons per day, a figure likely to double by the end of 2030. The growing water crisis is a direct result of dried-up and choked lakes, experts say, which also contribute to the area’s frequent floods.

— The New York Times



Water-purifying plants in a canal in Bengaluru, India.

Half a world away, a journey continues

I reflect often upon how the Sultanate of Oman has been, for so long now, not only a beautiful jewel in the Arabian Gulf, but a warm, hospitable, oasis of tranquility within a wider region so often scarred by conflict, and I'm given pause to reflect upon how this peace and stability has delivered both peace and prosperity to the gentle and fortunate people of Oman. It's perhaps no accident, but maybe a divine rewards for faith and compassion.

Another gentle people, far, far away, are the indigenous people of Australia, the aboriginals, who though they have been around for close to 65,000 years, give or take a few generations, have been identified as a single entity for only the last 200 years. A gentle, often not so fortunate people, with 250 different languages and hundreds of diverse social and cultural identities contributing to an ethnic population of around one million people, slowly coming to terms with, and discovering their identity within this giant, progressive, complex, and culturally diverse nation.

The contemporary aboriginal is torn, it appears, between its past and future, and the first to represent them in the Australian Parliament was one Neville Bonner, a deep thinker and straight talker, on conservation, environmental and humanitarian issues, who said upon his election in 1972, "We, as aboriginal people, still have to fight prove that we are straight out human beings, the same as everyone else." In doing so, he tore off a 'sticking plaster' that had muted the aboriginal voice for decades and set them on a journey towards the acknowledgement of their 'place' and their rights.

So, you ask, why the aboriginal? Well, I feel that in many ways there exists a synergy with the Omani lifestyle. Not direct, and not complete, but sharing many of the qualities of another civilisation that has fought to retain its nature, and its identity, through an unsettled history. I was particularly taken with an aboriginal proverb that says, "We are just visitors to this time, to this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn,



Ray Petersen
r.j.petersen52@gmail.com

The writer is a media consultant

THE
ABORIGINALS
HAVE BEEN
IDENTIFIED AS A
SINGLE ENTITY
FOR ONLY THE
LAST 200 YEARS

to grow, and to love, and then we return home." Despite the religious imperatives that must be nudged briefly aside, I feel there is much in that ancient idiom that an Omani could empathise with.

I also see harmony in the encouragement to the youth of today by author, historian, and activist Jackie Huggins, who said, "It's a very aboriginal thing to do, to give young people greater responsibility within the community as they become able to take those responsibilities on. It is a culturally and societally appropriate transfer of roles that involves respect in both directions... from the younger to the older, and the older to the younger." Maybe she has a point, and maybe the younger generation should have greater voice, and greater responsibility, while they are younger, so they may learn to use it wisely.

Ken Wyatt, the former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, points to his people "retaining our resilience, our humour, and our cultural integrity, always retaining our dreams and a vision for our future." He focuses too on the value of community, saying they provide the "physical, cultural, spiritual, and social environments to support children, young people, families, and the aged." Thus, putting so much of the Omani respect for family and tribe, front and centre in maintaining a strength of meaning and purpose.

I am aware that the connection can appear tenuous, that any leap towards any sociological link must be a quantum leap of gigantic proportion, and I'm not really suggesting either anthropological or sociological symbiosis, but what I did want to demonstrate is that a world away, the wisdom of two very diverse cultures embraces community and youth in much the same way. One whilst rediscovering itself, establishing its contemporary identity, the other emerging from historical adversity in a wider geographical region, the Middle East, where peace is both fragile and rare.

Hands across the water? Well maybe. It's interesting too, that in Australia too they have 'dry water courses, that when filled with water after it rains,' are called 'billabongs.' That sounds very much like a wadi to me.

LIFE BETWEEN FENCES!



A migrant woman from Cameroon waits in the area between the primary and secondary fences of the border between Mexico and the United States in San Diego, California, on Saturday. – AFP

How to achieve universal cancer care

At the upcoming second United Nations High-Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage, the world's governments are expected to adopt a new set of commitments focused on accelerating implementation of UHC. No resolution will be complete without the explicit inclusion of comprehensive cancer services.

Cancer causes an estimated 10 million deaths each year. Beyond the human suffering, the disease has profound — and growing — economic consequences: by 2030, spending on cancer care worldwide is projected to reach \$458 billion. In many countries, patients have to pay for much of their cancer care out of pocket — a burden that often leads to financial catastrophe.

Given this, investing in cost-effective prevention and early-detection strategies is not only a moral imperative, but also an economic one. Prevention is far cheaper than treatment, and where cancer cannot be prevented, early detection makes successful treatment more likely, at a far lower cost.

When cancer does progress, the full range of quality therapies — including surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy — should be accessible and affordable to all. For noncommunicable diseases overall, every dollar invested in cost-effective interventions can generate a return of up to \$7 through reduced healthcare



SONALI JOHNSON
aljahdhami22@gmail.com

The writer is Head of Knowledge and Advocacy at the Union for International Cancer Control

UNIVERSALLY
ACCESSIBLE
COMPREHENSIVE
CANCER CARE
IS ESSENTIAL
TO ACHIEVING
SOCIAL-
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS RELATED
TO EQUALITY,
SOCIAL JUSTICE,
AND THE RIGHT
TO HEALTH

costs and improved productivity.

While prevention and treatment are vital, so is palliative care, which alleviates unnecessary suffering for patients, their families, and caregivers, and provides survivorship plans for remaining healthy. In the wake of a pandemic that significantly disrupted palliative-care services, and with a rising number of cancer survivors worldwide, investments in both areas are urgently needed.

Comprehensive cancer care is essential to achieving social-development goals related to equality, social justice, and health. And, with sufficient political will, universal care can be achieved. In Pakistan, the Shaukat Khanum Cancer Hospital network offers world-class cancer care. The King Hussein Cancer Center has significantly expanded cancer care and scientific research in Jordan, and collaborates with international partners such as St Jude Children's Research Hospital to deliver care to patients from Syria and Lebanon.

But countries face many challenges in incorporating cancer care into UHC schemes. In Kenya, for example, collaborative efforts by a range of cancer-control organisations have expanded access to services and removed financial barriers, but reaching rural populations remains difficult.

In Indonesia, a decentralised

health system has improved health equity, but gaps remain in cancer prevention and early diagnosis. Even in Thailand, which has integrated six areas of cancer control — cancer informatics, primary prevention, early detection, treatment, palliative care, and cancer-control research — into its UHC scheme, improved public-awareness initiatives are needed to ensure that the relevant services are being used.

Nonetheless, the Thai model highlights the potential public-health benefits of UHC schemes that include comprehensive cancer care. Recognising that potential, the Union for International Cancer Control, which has more than 1,150

members in more than 170 countries and territories, works continuously with governments and other stakeholders around the world to develop and implement national cancer-control strategies and integrate them into national health-insurance plans.

Just as a goal without a plan is merely a wish, a plan without dedicated resources gathers dust. Unless essential cancer services are covered by basic health-insurance schemes, they will remain inaccessible or unaffordable to many who need them. And where insurance exists, limits on out-of-pocket spending are crucial. Cancer patients often reach their

deductible soon after diagnosis, owing to the large number of tests and procedures that are required. But treatment often lasts months or years and involves numerous visits to doctors, tests, surgeries, radiation treatments, drugs, and other services.

An effective national cancer-control strategy must reflect a nuanced understanding of cost-effectiveness that encompasses not just upfront costs, but also long-term savings, including through improved quality of life and increased productivity. It must also include a commitment to addressing not only the illness itself, but each individual's holistic experience, and a firm resolve to break down financial and cultural barriers that prevent early diagnosis and treatment.

The UN High-Level Meeting provides a rare opportunity to elevate cancer care on the global UHC agenda. That is why it is welcome news that cancer has been referenced in the meeting's draft resolution. But governments must not stop at lofty pledges and verbal commitments. Only concrete action to implement UHC that includes quality cancer services and accounts for the diverse needs of populations across economic strata and regions, can ensure that cancer care does not become a missing piece in the global health puzzle.

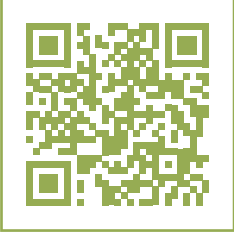
©Project Syndicate, 2023



Cancer causes an estimated 10 million deaths each year.

sport

Follow us on
omanobserver.om/sports



Oman takes part in Asian Games opening

HANGZHOU: Chinese President Xi Jinping declared the Asian Games open at a ceremony in Hangzhou on Saturday, launching a two-week sporting extravaganza that boasts more athletes than the Olympics. After being delayed by a year because of China's now-abandoned zero-Covid regime, more than 12,000 competitors from 45 nations and territories will battle it out in 40 sports.

Xi is scheduled to open proceedings in front of dignitaries including Syrian President Bashar al Assad, who is on his first visit to ally China since the war erupted in Syria in 2011.

Leaders from Cambodia, Kuwait and Nepal will also be at Hangzhou's 80,000-capacity Olympic stadium, also known as "the Big Lotus".

Security was tight in the area around the arena, with roads closed and police stationed on street corners.

Spectators were given thorough security checks before entering and staff confiscated food and umbrellas.

A military helicopter stood on a fenced-off patch of grass a few hundred metres from the stadium.

Jung-Woo Lee, sport policy expert at the University of Edinburgh, said the Games were "China's post-pandemic softpower exercise".

But they have already been rocked by a row between New Delhi and China, with a trip to the city by India's sports minister cancelled on Friday.

It came after three women martial arts fighters from the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh — which is claimed almost in full by Beijing — said they were denied accreditation and entry. China denied that.

In a speech ahead of the opening ceremony, Xi urged Asian nations to "use sport to promote peace, and insist on being good to our neighbours and achieving mutual benefit and win-win results".

China's status as a sporting and business destination took a severe hit during the pandemic, when snap lockdowns and strict travel rules saw almost all international events cancelled in the country.

OPEN TO ALL

The hosts are overwhelming favourites to top the medals table, with Japan and South Korea



Members of Oman's delegation take part in the athletes parade during the opening ceremony of the 2022 Asian Games at the Hangzhou Olympic Sports Centre Stadium in Hangzhou. — AFP

battling for second. North Korea has sent a team, ending three years of isolation from the global sporting arena. Games athletes will fight for medals in Olympic staples such as athletics, swimming, football, gymnastics and cycling.

ESports will make its debut as a medal event at the Games, in what is seen as a step towards inclusion one day in the Olympics.

There will also be regional specialities including dragon boat

racing, the Chinese martial art wushu and kabaddi.

Nine sports, among them boxing, break dancing and tennis, will serve as Asia qualifiers for next year's Paris Olympics.

A sprinkling of world and Olympic champions adds some stardust, including India's javelin king Neeraj Chopra, Qatari high jumper Mutaz Essa Barshim and Chinese swimming royalty Qin Haiyang and Zhang Yufei.

Olympic Council of Asia honorary life vice-president Wei Jizhong said having so many sporting disciplines was about giving opportunity to as many athletes as possible.

"We are open to all. This means our Games are not concentrated only for elite sportspeople," he said.

Although the Games officially open on Saturday, sports such as football, cricket, volleyball and table tennis have already begun.

The Games will be staged at 54 venues — 14 newly constructed — mostly in Hangzhou but also extending to cities as far afield as Wenzhou, 300 kilometres (180 miles) south.

Hangzhou, a city of 12 million people an hour's bullet train from Shanghai, is the unofficial home of China's tech industry and the Games will feature driverless buses, robot dogs and facial recognition. — AFP

CHINA'S XI OPENS BIGGEST-EVER ASIAN GAMES, A YEAR LATE



Kuwait to host 26th Gulf Cup in December 2024

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, SEPT 23

The Gulf Football Association (GFA) will be the new official name of the association instead of the previous name Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF). This decision was approved during the Executive Office meeting which was held recently in Kuwait in presence of Shaikh Salim al Wahaibi, Chairman of Oman Football Association (OFA). During the meeting, which was headed by Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al Thani, Chairman of GFA, the association also announced that Kuwait will host the upcoming 26th edition of Gulf Cup Championship in December



2024. Kuwait was the host city for the 23rd edition of the Gulf Cup where the Red Warriors were the champions in January 2018.

The last Gulf Cup of 25th edition was held in Iraq in January

2023 and the hosts managed to claim their fourth title after they defeated Oman 3-2 in the final clash in Basra city.

The meeting of the GFA featured different topics including

the revision and amendments to the statute and organisational structure of the federation. The members reviewed also the possibility of organising new events and championships

for the age categories. The federation forwarded this task to be studied and analysed by the competition committee to decide the appropriate dates for holding them during the coming period

of the year.

The members of GFA were briefed on the report of the inspection committee's delegation to Kuwait ahead of Kuwait's hosting next edition of the Gulf Cup. The report was delivered by Jassim bin Sultan al Rumaithi, Chairman of the Inspection Committee. He updated all the members on the host country's readiness for the tournament and the current situation of the sports facilities and hotels.

It was agreed to provide the Kuwaiti Federation with the committee's report to review it and work on its implementation as well as intensifying visits during the coming period to follow up on the progress of work in various sports facilities, in particular on construction work at Jaber Mubarak Al Sabah Stadium.



Jorge Martin (R) and Repsol Honda's Spanish rider Marc Marquez steer their bikes during the qualifying session ahead of the Indian MotoGP Grand Prix at the Buddh International Circuit. — AFP

MARTIN WINS INDIAN GP SPRINT AFTER BEZZECCHI CRASHES

UTTAR PRADESH: Pramac Racing's Jorge Martin won Saturday's sprint at the inaugural Indian Grand Prix ahead of Ducati's championship leader Francesco Bagnaia, after pole-sitter Marco Bezzecchi was involved in a crash at the first turn of the Buddh International Circuit.

Honda's Marc Marquez claimed only his second sprint podium of the season as he finished third ahead of Red Bull KTM rider Brad Binder.

"It was a tricky day, with the rains it was quite complicated. But I understood the track well and had good pace," Martin said in a post-race interview.

"I'm feeling comfortable, we'll see tomorrow. Bezzecchi had some bad luck today."

The sprint was delayed due to wet conditions following a spell of torrential rain earlier in the day, but apart from a few damp patches on the track dry conditions greeted the riders with the sun low on the horizon.

VR46 Racing's Bezzecchi had not put a foot wrong to claim his third pole of the season, but following a poor start he crashed on the first corner when he was clipped by his team mate Luca Marini, who suffered a left collarbone fracture.

Martin started second on the grid but had a perfect launch to take the lead going into the first corner ahead of Bagnaia and the two Hondas of Marc Marquez

and Joan Mir.

Mir had looked good in qualifying but he made a mistake on turn three after three laps and lost his balance, allowing Binder to move up to fourth and pressure Marquez for the final podium position.

Bezzecchi rejoined the race and the Italian was a man on a mission as he worked his way up the grid, setting multiple fastest laps. But with only 11 laps in the sprint, he ran out of time yet still managed to finish a creditable fifth.

With Martin and Bagnaia cruising, the biggest battle on the final laps was Marquez keeping Binder at bay for third place and it was the Spaniard who eventually came out on top to give the struggling Honda team a boost.

"This year has been very difficult," Marquez said. "I'm super happy, I know that in a single lap I was fast but always behind somebody. Pecco (Bagnaia) was very far."

The result leaves Bagnaia on 292 points in the riders championship, 33 points ahead of Martin, while Bezzecchi fell 69 points behind the reigning champion.

"We were just very lucky the conditions were better in the sprint," Bagnaia said. "I had a good race for the situation we're in. Finishing second was the maximum and we have to be happy with it." — Reuters

MUSCAT TO HOST THIRD GARY KIRSTEN CRICKET CAMP

MUSCAT: Following the success of previous two coaching camps since October 2022, Oman Cricket (OC) is now gearing up to host the third edition of the Gary Kirsten Cricket (GKC) coaching camp at the Oman Cricket Academy ground in Al Amerat from October 26-30.

OC's endeavour to promote cricket at grassroots level has been one of the primary goals of their development programme and the hosting of coaches from the renowned GKC is part of the efforts to achieve their goals. GKC hosted the inaugural camp last year and was attended by nearly 100 students and the second camp saw the visit of the famed cricketer Gary Kirsten to Muscat in February earlier this year.

According to Evert Laubscher, Oman Cricket Academy manager, the five-day camp will be split into grassroots development and high-performance camps.

Laubscher said: "The Gary Kirsten coaching team have really done a tremendous job to get to know and understand the young aspiring cricket players of Oman. We look forward to building on this relationship. "This time we are also including T20 matches along with the coaching sessions. These matches will also be closely observed by the Gary Kirsten coaching team, which will then allow them to help us identify future talent and also provide the players with valuable feedback."

Another bonus for cricketers who attend the forthcoming GKC camp will be a 20 per cent discount at the Oman Cricket Academy for three months, beginning from November.

Jimmy Cook, a leading trainer from GKC will be part of the coaching team during the third camp next month. The grassroots development camp will be for beginners and Omanis will be provided free lessons while the others will have to pay OMR10 for the camp.

The high-performance camp will be for under-14 and under-19 players and the four-day camp will also include three T20 matches at the Oman Cricket grounds and two days of coaching lessons. The fee for this camp is OMR60 with discounts available for siblings.

During his maiden visit in February, Gary Kirsten, the former World Cup-winning coach, had highlighted the role of parents in nurturing young cricketers. Kirsten had visited Oman during the second camp.

The South African great lauded the cricket system adopted by Oman Cricket and was impressed by the enthusiasm and eagerness to learn from the youngsters in Oman.

Since his retirement in 2004, Kirsten, a former opening batter, has devoted his time to running GKC, coaching international teams and franchises and tasted tremendous success, leading India to a World Cup title in 2011 and as a mentor of Gujarat Titans in IPL 2022.

Sur hold Sohar, Al Wahda claim 1st win

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, SEPT 23

Omantel League leaders Sohar were held to a draw by visitors Sur 1-1 in the fifth round match at the Sohar Stadium on Friday.

Sohar initiated the match with a strong offensive stance, demonstrated by Mohsen Jawhar, who scored the first goal in the fourth minute, giving the home team an early lead.

The match progressed with intense pressure from Sohar as they attempted to secure a second goal. In the 10th minute, Sohar players passionately appealed for a penalty kick, but the referee opted against it. Sur retaliated swiftly and launched several dangerous attacks on Sohar's goal, ultimately equalising the score with a direct free kick executed masterfully by Firas al Mukhaini in the 20th minute. The first half concluded with an exhilarating 1-1 draw.

Sohar Club started the second half with high organisation in all lines and was able to take possession of the ball and had several opportunities that lacked the



Oman Club and Ibri Players during Omani League Match.

finishing touch. On the other hand, Sur Club played defensively and tried to exploit the rebounds, but both teams remained unsuccessful in securing the winning goal, resulting in a 1-1 draw.

With this result, Sohar's total points climbed to 11, while Sur accumulated six points, having a postponed match from the fourth round against defending champions Al Nahda. However, Sohar's lead is currently under threat pending the outcome of Al Seeb's match (9 points) against Dhofar.

OMAN CLUB EDGE IBRI
Oman Club emerged victorious against Ibri by 1-0 in another match at Seeb Stadium on Friday.

The first half witnessed a slow-paced game from both teams. Ibri players got several chances that missed the final touch to score. On the other hand, Oman Club played very slowly without any chances on the goal, it ended in a goalless draw. The second half saw an improved performance from Oman Club, as they scored through Nigerian player Emmanuel Akshku in the

54th minute. Despite Ibri Club's attempts to equalise, they were unable to threaten Oman Club's goal, resulting in a 1-0 victory for Oman Club.

Oman's total points rose to nine, securing the third position based on goal difference behind second-placed Seeb. On the other hand, Ibri's score remained at three points, placing them in 11th position.

AL WAHDA CLAIM FIRST WIN
Al Wahda achieved their first victory in the Omantel League, defeating Bahla 1-0 at the Nizwa Complex Stadium in the fifth round.

Youssef al Saadi scored the goal for Al Wahda, breaking their streak of defeats and lifting them from the bottom position in the league.

Al Wahda's total points increased to four. Bahla, on the other hand, faced continued challenges, failing to secure their second victory and currently occupying the eighth position with seven points.

Messi out but Miami seek derby win as playoff race heats up

MIAMI: Inter Miami head into Sunday's Florida derby against Orlando City with their Major League Soccer playoff destiny in their own hands but without star performer Lionel Messi.

Messi and his former Barcelona team-mate Jordi Alba both limped out of the first half of Wednesday's 4-0 win over Toronto and were immediately ruled out of the Orlando game by coach Tata Martino.

On Friday, Martino confirmed that Messi is coping with some old "scars" while Alba has "muscle fatigue". Martino said that while Messi's problem is not serious, he cannot "play freely" in his current condition.

"It's bothers him. I don't know if it hurts. I can't really explain as it's more a medical topic," said the Argentine coach.

Miami already won the Leagues Cup since Messi's arrival, the club has a US Open Cup final against Houston on Wednesday and will hope to have the seven-times Ballon d'Or winner back for that game.

But without Messi, Finnish winger Robert Taylor made the most of his opportunity, scoring twice in a 4-0 win over Toronto.

The victory, along with other results going Miami's way, boosted the team's playoff hopes with six matches remaining in the regular season.

Put simply, if Miami, with games in hand, win all six matches, they will earn a place in the playoffs, regardless of how teams above them perform.

Orlando City still smarts from a 3-1 loss to Miami in the League Cup when coach Oscar Pareja blasted the refereeing, saying the game, Messi's third with Miami, had been a "circus".

Orlando, second in the East, are one of four teams in the conference to have secured a playoff berth, along with Columbus, Philadelphia and leaders Cincinnati.

Cincinnati rewarded Argentine playmaker Luciano Acosta with a new contract on Friday, tying him to the team until 2026 with an option for a further year.

The 29-year-old has 14 goals and 11 assists this season as the Ohio club is in a strong position to win the Supporters Shield for the best MLS regular-season record.

"He's capable of things that others aren't," said head coach Pat Noonan.

"When you find players like that and you're able to keep them on your team, it's positioning us to hopefully continue these successes as we move forward."

Cincinnati will host Charlotte on Saturday with the North Carolina team needing to turn promising performances into wins to make the post-season. MLS newcomer St Louis City have already exceeded expectations by securing a playoff spot in their maiden season but are in no mood to rest on their laurels.

MLS CUP FINAL REMATCH
In the West, St Louis head to Minnesota United on Saturday, five points clear at the top of the



Lionel Messi celebrates after winning the Leagues Cup final. – AFP

conference and staying on top will bring significant rewards.

MLS's playoff system this year features 'best of three' games in the first round with top four teams guaranteed home field advantage.

A number one spot would also secure home-field advantage

in the single game conference semifinals and the final.

"Now what's next for us? Can we now get a top-four finish? Once we get that box checked, then can we win the Western Conference? So it's all things in baby steps and stages," said St Louis' South African coach Bradley Carnell.

Saturday also sees a rematch of last year's MLS Cup final when the Philadelphia Union host champions Los Angeles FC. LAFC, third in the West, also beat the Union in the semifinals of this year's CONCACAF Champions League.

"It's always a really tough

game. They have great players, they're very well coached and organised," said Philly coach Jim Curtin.

"The history between us is a real one, and I think we respect each other a great deal, but neither team gives an inch when we get together." — AFP

China's Wang claims maiden WTA title in Guangzhou



Greet Minnen of Germany hits a return against Wang Xiyu of China during their women's singles semifinal match at the WTA Guangzhou Open tennis tournament in Guangzhou. – AFP

GUANGZHOU: China's Wang Xiyu captured her maiden WTA Tour title on Saturday as the world number 88 powered past Magda Linette 6-0 6-2 in the final of the Guangzhou Open, the first elite women's tournament in the Asian nation since 2019.

The 22-year-old Wang's victory marked the fourth time that a Chinese player has been crowned champion in Guangzhou, following Wang Qiang (2018), Zhang Shuai (2013, 2017) and Li Na (2004).

"It was very exciting and it's a very emotional moment because in this tournament, every player is really tough," Wang said. "It's so difficult to be here on the last day. I'm happy to be here."

"I wanted a title from the first day, even when I started tennis. It was really a dream for me. I think there's going to be bigger tournaments, tougher matches waiting for

me and I'm just trying my best like I did this week."

Wang is the third Chinese champion this season after Zhu Lin (Hua Hin) and Zheng Qinwen (Palermo) - the first time since 2006 that the country had enjoyed similar success in singles.

China last hosted a WTA tournament in 2019, before the Covid crisis wreaked havoc on the global sports schedule.

The WTA later suspended its tournaments there after former doubles world number one Peng Shuai said in a now deleted 2021 social media post that a former Chinese government official sexually assaulted her.

Peng then briefly disappeared from public view and later denied making the accusation, sparking an international outcry over her safety. The WTA was widely praised for suspending tournaments in China but reversed its decision in April.



Follow us on
omanobserver.om/business

The bank that understands you

Transfer your salary for more benefits

- Competitive rates on High-Yield Savings Account and deposits
- Fast loan approval
- Quick issuance of cards

24791111

www.bankdhofar.com

Oman’s GDP at current prices in H1 stands at RO 20.349 billion



Ships and containers are seen at the Port of Salalah in Oman.

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, SEPT 23

Oman's gross domestic product (GDP) at current prices for the first half of 2023 reached RO 20.349 billion, a slight decrease from the RO 20.889 billion recorded in the same period of 2022. According to the preliminary statistics from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the Q2 2023 saw a significant decline in overall GDP, with RO 10.085 billion compared to RO 11.146 billion in Q2 2022, reflecting a decrease of 9.5 per cent.

The petroleum sector, a crucial component of Oman's economy, experienced a decline in Q2 2023. Petroleum activities generated RO 3.646 billion, a decrease of 18.3 per cent compared to RO 4.460 billion in Q2 2022. Within the petroleum sector, crude oil contributed RO 3.170 billion in Q2 2023, down from RO 3.936 billion in Q2 2022. Similarly, natural gas revenue declined to RO 475 million in Q2 2023, compared to RO 523 million in Q2 2022.

On the other hand, non-petroleum activities remained relatively stable in Q2 2023. Total non-petroleum activities for the quarter amounted to RO 6.861 billion, slightly lower than the RO 7.121 billion recorded in Q2 2022.

Breaking down the non-petroleum activities, revenue from agriculture, forestry, and fishing activities totalled RO 205 million in Q2 2023, a slight decline from the RO 215 million recorded in Q2 2022.

The industrial sector — which include mining and quarrying, manufacturing, electricity and water supply and construction — experienced a significant contraction in Q2 2023.

Revenue from industry activities amounted to RO 1.630 billion, reflecting a decline of 26.7 per cent compared to RO 2.225 billion in Q2 2022. Service activities demonstrated positive growth in Q2 2023.

Total revenue from service activities reached RO 5.024 billion, an increase of 7.3 per cent compared to RO 4.680 billion in Q2 2022.

TURN TO P15

Duqm Economic Forum to focus on investment in green industries

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, SEPT 23

The Duqm Special Economic Zone (SEZAD) will host the Duqm Economic Forum on October 16 and 17. The event has been organised by the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), with the support of several government agencies and the participation of a number private sector companies.

Over the course of two days, the forum will address current advancements in the green industry sector as well as the most prominent initiatives that have attracted investment to SEZAD and the Sultanate of Oman as a whole.

These topics will be discussed in light of the growing local and international trend towards green industries and renewable energy. This is in line with the OPAZ's focus on green industries, encouragement of investment in this field in response to the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, and in support of Oman's 2050 Net-Zero target.

Among the strategic investments that SEZAD attracted in the green industries sector are the Vale Green Iron Production Complex, the Jindal Shaded Group's green iron production initiatives, and the reduced iron factory that Kobe Steel and two Japanese companies, Mitsui and Partners Limited, will construct.

These activities are crucial from a strategic standpoint in order to achieve Oman's goals of reducing carbon emissions.

A number of discussion sessions covering the benefits



The main office at Duqm Special Economic Zone.

of renewable energy in Duqm, supply and demand trends, consumer requirements, and chances for successful investment in green industries in SEZAD are part of the Duqm Economic Forum, which is organised in strategic partnership with Asyad Group, Oman's leading global integrated logistics provider, and Vulcan Green Steel Company, part of Jindal Shaded Iron & Steel Group.

The forum will also focus on the green hydrogen industry, solar and wind energy, energy transition efficiency, energy storage, the need for green energy in international markets, and the anticipated function of public-private partnerships in the success of renewable energy projects.

Additionally, the forum will cover renewable downstream projects in Duqm, utilising Duqm's enormous natural renewable energy potential, supplying renewable energy, decarbonisation, satisfying

industrial demand for green materials, IoT and smart manufacturing, and chances for exporting renewable energy.

The discussions will cover the prospects in the supply chain and the crucial role of Duqm Port as a green port in promoting investment in the green industries sector in light of the synergy between the various projects in SEZAD.

One of the primary SEZAD enablers, Duqm Port serves as a multimodal global logistics centre and a key entry point to both local and international markets. Along with the potential for large industrial companies that rely on infrastructure and the Port of Duqm for their operations, the potential for shipping, maritime, and transport companies in SEZAD will also be explored.

In addition, the outstanding investment prospects in this important hub for global commerce and pioneer in the distribution of renewable energy

will be discussed.

The forum will cover key innovations in the petrochemical sector and how they contribute to the production of numerous essential components of the renewable energy system, such as solar panels, wind turbines, batteries, thermal insulation, and electric vehicles.

Various presentations will focus on interest in green industries. The debate will also examine the opportunities for Duqm to attract these industries, as well as the general demand for these products.

The forum will showcase significant investments made in the Duqm refinery and crude oil storage terminal, the largest oil storage and export project in the Middle East, as well as the opportunities it offers to petrochemical manufacturers looking to tap into the expanding markets associated with the switch to clean energy and modern technology.

Measures in place to promote food availability locally

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, SEPT 23

Pivotal steps adopted by the Omani government in the wake of an upsurge in global prices of food commodities more than a year ago, have helped ensure the affordability and accessibility of basic foodstuffs for all segments of the population, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

One of the key measures taken by authorities is the establishment of committees and teams to monitor the impact of the global food crisis, sparked by the Ukraine War, on local food supply and pricing.

These committees are made up of representatives from the

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and other relevant government agencies.

They are tasked with monitoring the supply and demand of basic food commodities, as well as prices.

Furthermore, these committees have continued to coordinate with food companies and factories to ensure that they do not export basic food commodities. They also monitor prices to prevent them from rising, an official source told the *Observer*.

“The government is also taking steps to promote food availability locally. It has enhanced the stocks of rice and wheat to cover the needs of the Sultanate of Oman



A worker sifts wheat before filling in sacks at a market yard, in this illustration photo. – Reuters

for several months,” the official said.

“It has also exempted value added VAT for feed industry inputs, such as corn, barley,

soybeans, and bran. This will help to reduce the cost of production for livestock farmers, which will hopefully lead to lower prices for meat and dairy products,” the

official stated.

In addition, the government is providing social protection to the most vulnerable segments of the population. This includes providing school feeding for social security and limited income students. These measures are aimed at ensuring that everyone in Oman has access to affordable and nutritious food, the official noted.

At the same time, the Ministry is engaging with local communities, farmers, and relevant stakeholders to address food security concerns and ensure their active participation in the decision-making process. One way that the government is doing this is through the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural

Development Strategy.

This strategy emphasises the need to professionalise the agricultural sector and improve the income and livelihood of farmers in Oman. The strategy also calls for the development of organisations for collective action in the agricultural sector, such as civil society associations and professional associations.

The government is also working with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to strengthen the capabilities of the Omani Farmers Association.

The FAO is providing technical assistance to the association to help it become a more effective service provider and advocate for the interests of farmers.

Duqm Refinery succeeds in exporting first shipment of high-quality diesel

MUSCAT: The Duqm Refinery succeeded in exporting the first shipment of high-quality diesel in accordance with international specifications. This coincides with the company getting closer to achieving commercial operation, with trial operations continuing to progress, exceeding 81 per cent, while the percentage of construction work has exceeded more than 99 per cent.

The trial operations included testing all supply chains at the Duqm Refinery, including crude oil storage facilities at the centre head and an 80-kilometre-long crude oil transport pipeline, in addition to testing the readiness of the facilities for storing and exporting products at the Port of Duqm, all of which were successfully tested.

During the past months, the Ras Markaz crude oil tanks received more than 3 million barrels of Omani and Kuwaiti crude oil, which were later



Storage tanks are seen from above at the Duqm refinery.

pumped from Ras Markaz to the refinery complex in Duqm via the oil transportation pipeline.

The trial operations also included the export of the first shipments of naphtha and fuel oil via products storage and export dock at Duqm Port.

The Duqm Refinery Project is a joint project between the OQ

Group and Kuwait Petroleum International Company and is located in the heart of the Special Economic Zone in Duqm, which is distinguished by its strategic location, which is a competitive advantage due to its location on the path of international shipping lines on the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, and this would

facilitate marine transportation to and from the region.

The project includes three main packages capable of producing diesel, jet fuel, naphtha, liquefied petroleum gas, sulphur, and petroleum coal.

The first package includes the main processing units at the

refinery, the second package includes facilities and services, and the third package includes three sub-packages: storage and export facilities for liquid and bulk petroleum products located in the port of Duqm, crude oil storage facilities in Ras Markaz, and a pipeline to transport crude oil from RasMarkaz to Duqm Refinery with a length of 81 km.

Duqm Refinery's vision is to become a world-class refining company committed to providing high-quality oil products to customers all over the world, which would enhance economic growth in the Duqm region, as well as enhance the Sultanate of Oman's refining capacity to exceed 500,000 barrels per day of refined products upon the start of operations of the Duqm refinery.

The refinery a capacity of 230,000 barrels per day and is capable of dealing with various types of crude oil, including Omani and Kuwaiti crude.

— ONA

Oman crude deliveries in H1 via DME increase 18%



The DME logo is seen in this image.

MUSCAT: The actual delivery volumes of Oman crude oil on Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME) at the end of the first half of 2023 increased by 18 per cent, while the trading volumes of the crude witnessed a remarkable growth of 15 per cent.

Raid bin Khalifa al Salami, Managing Director of DME, explained that the Oman crude oil futures contract continues to attract a large number of traders from around the world, which confirms the status and importance of the contract in global oil markets as an ideal tool for hedging and managing financial risks.

He told the Oman News Agency that trading volumes for the month of delivery rose from 361 million barrels in the first half of 2022 to 415 million barrels during the same period of the current year, and trading volumes reached 106 million barrels from March to August 2023, compared to 90 million barrels during the same period for the previous year. — ONA

Bank Muscat Children account opening is available at select Lulu Hypermarket locations

MUSCAT: In emphasis of its customer-centric vision and commitment to enhancing financial inclusion through the delivery of various Banking services that cater the needs of all segments of the society, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, remains committed to consistently providing the best services and products to children of different age groups and which feature multiple distinguished advantages helping them achieve their financial needs.

Bank Muscat children saving accounts targeting different age groups constitute an excellent opportunity for customers to enhance their financial awareness and be encouraged to embark on a regular saving practices at an early stage of life for a financially secure future.

As part of its endeavour to make the services of opening children saving accounts accessible to customers, Bank Muscat has partnered with Lulu Hypermarket Oman, one of the biggest retail chains, by allocating specific Kiosks in various LuLu Hypermarket locations across the Sultanate of Oman.

This partnership came with the aim to serve the community and allow them to enjoy the various facilities offered across



the Lulu Hypermarket locations all over the Sultanate of Oman on all days of the week, from 5 pm to 9 pm, until September 30, 2023.

Therefore, customers are able to benefit from account opening services in the LuLu Hypermarket at Maabela North, Mall of Muscat, Oman Avenues Mall, Al Amerat, Al Khaboura, Barka, Al Suwaiq, Al Rustaq, Ibri, Al Buraimi, Nizwa, Salalah, Salalah Grand Mall, Sohar, Sur and Ibra.

Bank Muscat customers may also opt to request for opening children accounts online through the Internet Banking services and mBanking App.

In line with Bank Muscat's commitment to its vision "To serve you better, everyday" and to enhancing convenience and easy access for customers, the Bank has recently announced extra working hours at a number of 42 select branches across the Sultanate of Oman until September 30, from 3 pm to 6 pm, from Sunday to Thursday, to allow customers to open children account seamlessly.

The working hours are extended at the branches in Al Mahaj Al Amerat, Madinat Al Nahda, Al Khoudh, Muscat City Centre, Al Qurm, Mabela, Mabela Industrial, Oman Avenues Mall, Jibroo, Al Seeb, Azaiba Round About, Al Wadi Al Kabir, Al Hail, Markaz Al Bahja, Bausher, Quriyat, Al Kamil, Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, Sur Al Afiah, Sinaw, Bidiya, Ibra, Al Musanna, Al Washil- Al Rustaq, Barka Souq, Al Bidaya, Bat'ha Hilal- Suwaiq, Tharmad, Saham Corniche, Shinas, Falaj Al Qabail, Sohar, Al Khaboura, Dereez, Izki, Firq, Samail, Bahla Souq, Ibri Jubail, Salalah 23rd July Street, Taqa, and Al Buraimi- Main Road. Parents may take advantage of this opportunity by visiting the nearest branch or sending an email to the relevant email address (MinorAO@bankmuscat.com) attaching the required documents for opening children accounts.

Sohar International CEO named 'CEO of the Year'

MUSCAT: In a remarkable testament to his commitment to excellence, Ahmed al Musalmi, the Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International, has been once again honoured with the prestigious 'CEO of the Year' title at the Alam Al Iktisaad Awards 2023.

The much-coveted accolade not only underscores Ahmed al Musalmi's visionary leadership that embraces robust growth—most recently exemplified by a seamless national-scale merger, continuous innovation, and premium levels of customer-centricity, but also highlights his exceptional ability to align Sohar International's strategic endeavours with the national agenda. This alignment continually contributes to the development of a resilient banking ecosystem, spearheads economic diversification, and empowers the broader community.

Commending the efforts of Ahmed al Musalmi, Mohamed bin Mahfooth al Ardhi, Chairman of Sohar International said, "Going beyond navigating the complexities of a continuously evolving market, Sohar International has solidified its position as a trailblazer in the financial sector. Acting as a catalyst for transformation and progress, Ahmed al Musalmi has taken the lead to steer the bank to greater heights. His capacity to instil purpose and clarity of objectives within the organisation has been pivotal to the bank's extraordinary journey toward excellence."



Ahmed al Musalmi (left) receiving the award.

Chery Automobile ranks first in J D Power 2023 China IQS

MUSCAT: Recently Chery Automobile took the first spot among all Chinese automotive brands in J D Power 2023 China Initial Quality Study (IQS).

For more details please visit <https://china.jdpower.com/press-release/2023-IQS>

Chery vehicles in the list included the Chery Arrizo 5 and the Chery Tiggo 5X which won the first place in the compact sedan and compact SUV market segments respectively. The Initial Quality Study SM (IQS) is one of J D Power's global flagship industry joint studies.

The study covers 230 models of 48 brands, focusing on the quality problems encountered by owners of fuel vehicles with a

vehicle ownership period of 2 to 6 months.

The specific diagnostic questions include 218 problems in 9 categories (body appearance, body interior, driving experience, configuration / control system / dashboard, infotainment system, air conditioning, seating, powertrain, and driver assistance).

Expressed as the number of problems per 100 vehicles (PP100), the lower the score, the fewer the number of problems and the better the quality. In recent years, Chery has kept performing well in major JD Power awards.

In the "2023 Automotive Performance, Execution and Layout Study SM (APEAL)"



model ranking recently released by J D Power, Chery's Tiggo 7 series and Tiggo 8 series products won two market segments of mid-sized economical SUV and mid-

sized SUV respectively.

In "2022 Automotive Performance, Execution and Layout Study SM (APEAL)", the Chery Arrizo 5 PLUS won the first

place in the mid-sized basic sedan market segment. In the "2021 China Vehicle Dependability Study SM (VDS)", the Chery Tiggo 3X won the champion of the mini SUV segment.

Numerous awards have fully confirmed the strength and excellent quality of Chery's products. Chery has always adhered to the concept of "creating excellent brands with craftsmanship" and regarded quality as the life of the enterprise. Chery continuously improves product quality and wins users' trust with its full life cycle quality management and upgraded driving experience brought to users.

It is foreseeable that Chery

Automobile, adhering to the brand core of "green, technology, family, and companionship", will establish a closer emotional bond with consumers under a strict quality management system and become a value leader in the market. In the fiercely competitive automobile market, Chery will also bring more high-quality and reliable products to users.

Since its establishment, Chery has implemented a globalisation strategy and has always adhered to technology-driven development, with the corporate vision of building an auto brand with international competitiveness and influence. Chery will soon be launched in the Oman market by Saud Bahwan Group.



Oman's banking sector credit tops RO 30.3 billion



A view of the neighbourhood in Muscat, in this illustration image.

MUSCAT: The total credit granted by conventional and Islamic banks, or what is known as other depository companies (ODCs), increased by 6.8 per cent to reach RO 30.3 billion at the end of July 2023.

Regarding the total credit granted to the private sector recorded a growth of 9.3 per cent to reach RO 5 billion at the end of July 2023.

Data related to its distribution among various sectors indicates that non-financial companies received the largest share, which amounted to 45.9 per cent by the end of July, followed by the individual sector at 44.5 per cent, and the remaining percentage was distributed to the financial companies sector at 5.9 per cent and other sectors by 3.7 per cent.

The total deposits in the banking sector recorded a growth of 7 per cent, reaching RO 27.6 billion by the end of July 2023.

Within this total, private sector deposits in the banking system witnessed an increase of 6.5 per cent to reach RO 18.2 billion by the end of July 2023.

When looking at the distribution of the total deposit base of the private sector among the various sectors, the numbers indicate that the individual sector held the largest share, which amounted to about 51.1 per cent, followed by the non-financial companies sector and the financial companies sector with a share of 30.4 per cent and 15.6 per cent, respectively, while the remaining percentage was 2.9 per cent and distributed to other sectors. — **ONA**

Oman's GDP at current prices in H1 stands at RO 20.349 billion

FROM PAGE 13

Notably, the financial and insurance sector within service activities experienced substantial growth, with revenue of RO 920 million in Q2 2023, up from RO 706 million in Q2 2022, representing a growth rate of 30.4%.

Additionally, the telecommunication and IT sector showed positive performance, with revenue of RO 119.1 million, reflecting a growth rate of 23.6%. Other gainers in the service sector include public administration and defence with RO 880 million, or 11.5% increase from Q2 2022 with RO 789 million.

Accommodation and food service sector recorded 10.5% increase with RO 178 million in Q2 this year, up from RO 161 million during the same period last year.

Lastly, financial intermediation services indirectly measured witnessed a decline. Revenue in this sector amounted to RO 230 million in Q2 2023, compared to RO 225 million in Q2 2022, indicating a decrease of 2.5%.

Current prices refer to the actual prices of goods and services at a given point in time. They reflect the prevailing market conditions, including inflationary factors. On the other hand, constant prices, also known as real prices, are adjusted for inflation or changes in the general price level.

They aim to remove the effect of price changes over time, allowing for meaningful comparisons across different time periods. Constant prices are often used to analyse long-term trends and to measure real economic growth.

OQ Gas Networks targets completion of \$160 million worth projects this year

Strategic initiatives: Central 48-inch Rich & Lean Gas Pipeline Segregation project to boost rich gas supply to Oman LNG by 6 BCM/year

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT, SEPT 23

OQ Gas Networks (OQGN), the wholly state-owned operator of Oman's national gas transportation network (NGTN), says it is currently implementing a sizable portfolio of projects collectively valued at around \$160 million and slated for completion during 2023.

They include major development projects to expand the gas transportation system, connection projects designed to hook up new consumers to the gas supply network, and a host of maintenance projects aimed at maintaining the quality of the company's network assets and improve gas transportation to critical sectors of the Omani economy.

The portfolio of projects underscores OQGN's continued growth potential as it prepares to go public via an Initial Public Offering (IPO) as part of an initiative to offer up to 49 per cent of its share capital for public



OQGN's oil pipeline is seen in this illustration image.

subscription. The IPO opens on Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) on September 26, 2023.

Among the biggest of these projects currently under implementation is the South Grid De-bottlenecking initiative, centring on, among other things, the installation of a new 32-inch loop line between two block valve stations (approximately 32 kms) on the existing 24-inch southern grid gas pipeline to Salalah.

In addition, a new 32-inch loop line will be built from one of the valve stations to the Salalah gas supply station (approximately 177 kms) on the existing 24-inch southern grid gas pipeline to Salalah.

Work on the project, first launched in February 2021, is slated for completion next month.

Equally significant is the Central 48-inch Rich & Lean Gas Pipeline Segregation project, based

on a request by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to maximise rich gas utilisation in the network through the segregation of rich and lean gas supply to consumers. Rich gas supply is proposed to be prioritised for the LNG and LPG extraction plants.

Replicating the segregation of rich and lean gas in the southern network, which became operational in 2019, this new project involves similar

segregation for the central gas network.

As part of this latter project, the existing 48-inch loop line to Sur will be extended by around 65km and earmarked for the delivery of lean gas to consumers not requiring rich gas through a gas network hub construction.

Significantly, when completely, the Central 48 Rich & Lean Segregation project is expected to increase capacity of supply to Oman LNG by approximately 6 billion cubic metres (BCM) per year.

Launched in September 2021, it is due for completion in October 2024. Besides, in addition to a number of debottlenecking projects, OQ Gas Networks is hooking up the following industrial consumers to its gas networks: Keryas Paper Industries, Global Development & Cont, Saheer Al Maaden, Al Namariq, Pride Packaging, Bolten Beads & Horizon, Salalah Mills, Dhofar Fishers, and Gulf Gypsum Products.

Connection projects linked to the Duqm SEZAD Phase II Pipeline, as well as gas supply to Oman Oil Seed Crushing Factory and Oman Sugar Refinery are in various stages of progress as well.

OQGN's gas pipeline system currently extends a total length of over 4,000 kilometres.

Innovative carbon removal project in Oman receives acclaim from global leaders

JOMAR MENDOZA

MUSCAT, SEPT 23

In an era where combating climate change is of paramount importance, the role of technological innovations in carbon removal cannot be overstated. Recently, renowned philanthropist Bill Gates emphasised the significance of "massive carbon removal," stating that it is vital to address the persistence of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere for thousands of years.

During the Earthshot Prize Innovation Summit held in New York last week, Gates lauded 44.01, a pioneering Omani start-up engaged in carbon mineralisation, for their groundbreaking work in this domain.

Mineralisation, according to Gates, represents the "gold standard" in carbon removal, ensuring permanent elimination of CO₂ and averting its escape into the atmosphere.

Further endorsing the effectiveness of carbon removal technologies, former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg expressed his optimism in achieving global carbon emission reduction goals with the help of initiatives like 44.01's innovative approach. This recognition underscores the increasing importance of sustainable solutions in combating climate change.

In May this year, 44.01, an award-winning Omani carbon mineralisation start-up, has signed a historic pact with Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MoEM) to embark on the world's first commercial-scale peridotite mineralisation project.

Planned for initiation in 2024, this pioneering endeavour will be conducted in the Hajar Mountains and is expected to be the largest peridotite mineralisation activity in the world. Notably, it will also mark the first commercial demonstration of mineralising multiple tonnes of CO₂ each day.

The groundwork for this landmark project has already been laid by 44.01 through a successful pilot project in Al Qabil, a site where they achieved



Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, appears next to the Omani Talal Hassan, founder and CEO of 44.01, during the Earthshot Prize Innovation Summit in New York. © 44.01

conclusive results and proved the efficacy, safety, and permanence of their carbon removal process. In their approach, 44.01 captures CO₂ from either industrial processes or directly from the atmosphere.

They then dissolve it in water and inject it into peridotite formations deep underground. Through this innovative method, the CO₂ undergoes mineralisation, transforming into rock and preventing its release back into the atmosphere.

Peridotite, an abundant ultramafic rock in Oman, possesses natural carbon mineralisation capabilities, albeit over a prolonged timeframe spanning several decades.

However, 44.01's cutting-edge technology accelerates this process significantly, providing a secure, scalable, and time-efficient means of eliminating CO₂ in less than a year.

44.01 won the Earthshot Prize and an XPrize Milestone Award in 2022. The name 44.01 came from the molecular mass of carbon dioxide which is 44.01 g/mol.



Traders are seen inside the Muscat Stock Exchange.

Omani investors began to buy in last week's trading on the MSX

MUSCAT: Omani individual investors started buying in last week's trading on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), taking advantage of the low prices that stocks fell to, which have been declining for about 3 weeks, against the backdrop of the IPO in OQ Gas Networks Company, which will begin next week.

Trading data issued by the Muscat Stock Exchange indicated that purchases by Omani individual investors last week accounted for 34.1 per cent of the total trading value, compared to sales of 10.9 per cent.

This demand comes after stock prices declined to levels encouraging purchases in light of optimistic expectations that the financial results of public joint-stock companies listed on the stock exchange for the third quarter of this year will witness further improvement.

During the past week, the Muscat Stock Exchange witnessed more pressure on share prices with the approaching subscription for OQ Gas Networks Company,

which announced last week that subscription for 49 per cent of its shares offered for public subscription will begin on September 26 and end on October 5 for the second category, which includes small subscribers and October 9 for the first category, for which subscription starts at 100,000 shares. The share price was set at 126 baisas for the second category, and within a price range between 131 baisas and 140 baisas per share for the first category.

The pressure on stock prices led to a decline in the prices of 44 securities, compared to only 9 securities whose prices rose and 19 securities that stabilised at their previous levels.

This pressure led to a decline in the market value of the Muscat Stock Exchange to RO 23.503 billion, recording weekly losses at RO 245.8 million.

The declines witnessed by the stocks also pushed the main index of the stock market and the sectoral indices to decline.

— **ONA**

What’s the future for Web3 adoption



STEFANO VIRGILLI
stefano@virgilli.com

The author is a member of the International Press Association.

As the web3 and crypto space continues to evolve, the question of whether web3 and crypto adoption are necessary becomes increasingly relevant. After I attended Token2049 in Singapore last week - the largest industry event in the world, where industry leaders passionately advocate for mass adoption -

I’ve contemplated this question extensively. Approximately, over the past three years, the journey of adoption has been upheld by three core pillars: Finance, Economy, and Entertainment (in a broad sense). Let’s delve into each of these pillars before we tackle the elephant in the room: infrastructure.

FINANCE: The financial sector has been a driving force behind crypto adoption, primarily

through the rise of decentralised finance (DeFi).

During the so called “crypto summer” or “bull run”, the industry saw a surge in number of protocols promoting borrowing, lending, staking, and swapping. Among traders, DeFi dominated the conversation.

However, nowadays despite the impressive growth in Total Value Locked (TVL) in these protocols, the number of active DeFi participants has stagnated. For example, THORChain recorded over \$1 billion in transactions last month, yet other protocols struggled to maintain their traction.

This has led many to question whether DeFi alone can propel the next wave of adoption. In numerical terms there seem to be approximately only 2.5 million participants in DeFi. A very small

number for global adoption.

ECONOMY: Economic concerns have also played a pivotal role in fostering crypto adoption, particularly in regions with rapidly depreciating fiat currencies. In such contexts, individuals seek refuge from currency depreciation and look to cryptocurrencies, particularly Bitcoin (BTC), as a store of value.

Türkiye (formerly Turkey) has surpassed 50 per cent of the population holding crypto.

A recent report from KuCoin indicates that 71 per cent of crypto holders in Türkiye hold BTC, suggesting a widespread desire for stability in the face of economic uncertainty. This form of adoption, driven by a desire for financial security, is distinct from speculative trading.

ENTERTAINMENT: The world of entertainment,

notably through non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and gaming, has significantly contributed to global crypto adoption.

NFTs, in particular, have experienced remarkable growth globally, but it was short-lived. Gaming, under the umbrella of GameFi, has also played a pivotal role.

The Philippines serves as an illuminating case study, where a multitude of users are engaged in small transactions, collectively contributing to substantial and sustainable adoption.

The elephant in the room, Infrastructure: Infrastructure has become a buzzword within the crypto community, often overemphasised by industry players. Myself included. While it has spurred development and implementation, it’s essential to recognise that infrastructure

alone isn’t the driver of adoption; rather, it provides the essential highway. True adoption is witnessed through the activities on this highway—the “cars” racing towards a decentralised future.

As we reflect on the trajectory of crypto and Web3 adoption, the question arises: what will fuel the next wave?

The answer may be multifaceted, as innovation continues to drive the space forward. The Web3 evolving landscape changes things quite quickly, and it is crucial to keep an eye on emerging trends and technologies that could unlock the untapped potential of this transformative movement.

Dear readers, I extend an invitation to you to contribute your valuable insights and forecasts regarding the driving forces that will usher in the next wave of crypto and Web3 adoption.

The dollar’s full-spectrum dominance



CARLA NORRLÖF

The author, Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto, is a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

Many experts believe that the US dollar’s global hegemony, which has endured for nearly 80 years, is finally coming to an end.

This outcome is not impossible: economic crises, increased domestic polarisation, and strong geopolitical headwinds could indeed culminate in the currency’s meltdown. But it is not likely.

Debates about the future of the international monetary system often fail to appreciate the greenback’s full-spectrum dominance, which requires understanding its role in public and private markets, as well as the various incentives to hold dollars. So long as self-reinforcing synergies and forms of opportunism continue to prevail, narrowing the yawning chasm between the dollar and other currencies will remain difficult.

To be sure, there are threats to dollar supremacy.

The greenback’s primacy and pervasiveness in the global financial system has become a major bone of contention in the great-power struggle between the United States, China, and Russia.

These geopolitical challenges are happening against a backdrop of high interest rates and America’s polarised politics, which prompted the drawn-out negotiations over the US debt ceiling earlier this year; taken together, they risk undermining the perceived safety of dollar assets. But for the greenback to be unseated, multiple actors must support a substantial currency shift.

Moreover, the US – and potentially other countries – have a vested interest in preserving the dollar’s status as the world’s only truly global currency.

Americans benefit from the ease and convenience of transacting in dollars, seigniorage, monetary flexibility, and being the world’s safe haven in times of crisis. For the US government, it serves as a non-military instrument of coercion with which to police the world, as well as a source of prestige.

Measuring dollar dominance requires a closer look at the many functions – from medium of exchange to unit of account and store of value – the greenback



A man passes a foreign exchange office in Cairo, Egypt, in this file photo. – Reuters

serves outside the US.

Governments and monetary authorities use the dollar to intervene in foreign-exchange markets, to hold official reserves, and as a pegging currency. Private actors, meanwhile, rely on it as a vehicle currency, for invoicing and settlement of trade, and for investment purposes.

The interplay between these different actors and roles has propelled the currency to its hegemonic position.

The dollar outperforms its main rival – the euro – by the largest margin in the role of reserve currency, which foreign governments and monetary authorities use as an exchange-rate peg or for interventions. Government decisions thus matter for the dollar’s continued primacy

Official entities could coordinate foreign-exchange interventions to prop up or hold down the dollar. But that would require collective action, as would the successful implementation of alternative payment systems and liquidity arrangements, such as China’s Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), a renminbi-based rival to the US Clearing House Interbank Payments System (CHIPS), or the

proposed joint reserve currency issued by the BRICS group of major emerging economies. The question is whether such coordination is possible.

In the post-Cold War era, governments have been motivated primarily by economic factors when deciding whether to bulk up on a foreign currency.

The liquidity, depth, and breadth of the dollar market has made the greenback widely accessible and cheaper to use than alternatives. Feedback loops between official institutions and private actors have also encouraged governments and monetary authorities to accumulate dollar-denominated reserves. For example, in times of crisis, private actors rely on central banks to supply them with dollar assets, sometimes via swap lines extended by the US Federal Reserve.

Private actors’ willingness to use and hold dollars is also a choice based on economic considerations: these actors are likely to settle payments – and thus store value – in the invoicing currency.

But they coexist within a decentralised system in which each typically accounts for a small slice of the pie. Even the

considerable dollar assets held within large financial institutions comprise deposits by separate entities without the means or incentives to act collectively.

Thus, while independent decisions could chip away at the dollar’s global standing, a deliberate and coordinated private effort to subvert the current system is highly unlikely.

To bring about a dollar collapse and forge a new world order in which the greenback plays a diminished role would require all users to break these network effects and suffer the consequences. Governments would need to sever economic and political ties to the US.

To fulfill the BRICS’ pledge to create an alternative reserve currency and payment system, for example, many of its members would have to stop relying on US liquidity and consumer demand.

Such initiatives depend on the participation of major economic actors or a preponderance of minor ones. It is unlikely that the major economies would come on board, because, with the exception of China, they all enjoy access to dollar-swap lines.

Moreover, if governments abandon the dollar before another currency becomes dominant,

they risk losing a liquidity lifeline in times of crisis.

Many small actors would likewise be loath to jump ship, given that opportunism largely precludes collective action.

Apart from any direct economic costs, governments that conspire to thwart the dollar system risk losing America’s security guarantee. Even countries that do not benefit directly from US defence commitments will probably be reluctant to land on the wrong side of such a formidable military power.

Positive feedback across the greenback’s official and private functions, the network effects associated with its incumbency advantage, and opportunism discourage collective action against the status quo.

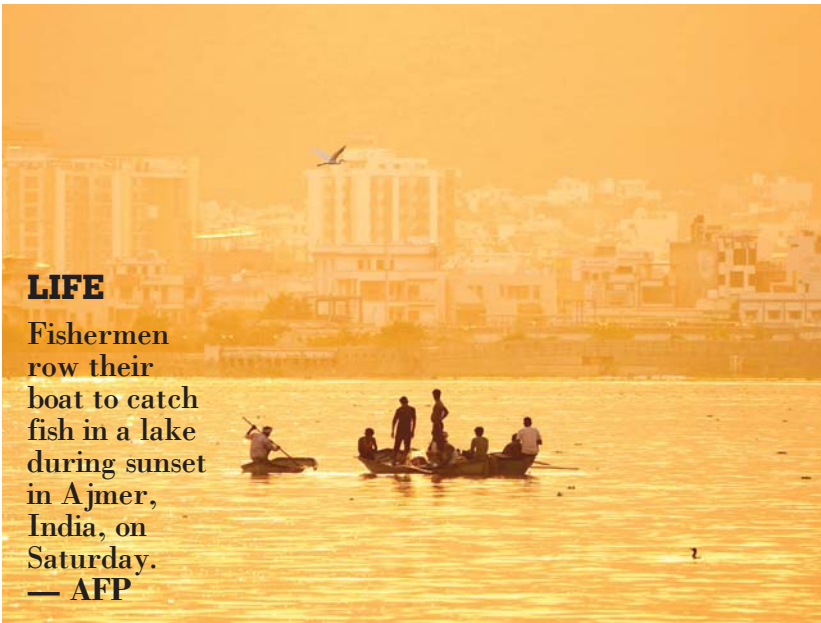
For governments, unplugging from the dollar system also means disconnecting from all that the US has to offer, including liquidity provision, consumer demand, dollar-swap lines, and a security umbrella.

Currency dominance is sticky. Absent major economic upheaval or a geopolitical realignment, the dollar’s global hegemony will continue to create the conditions for its own persistence.

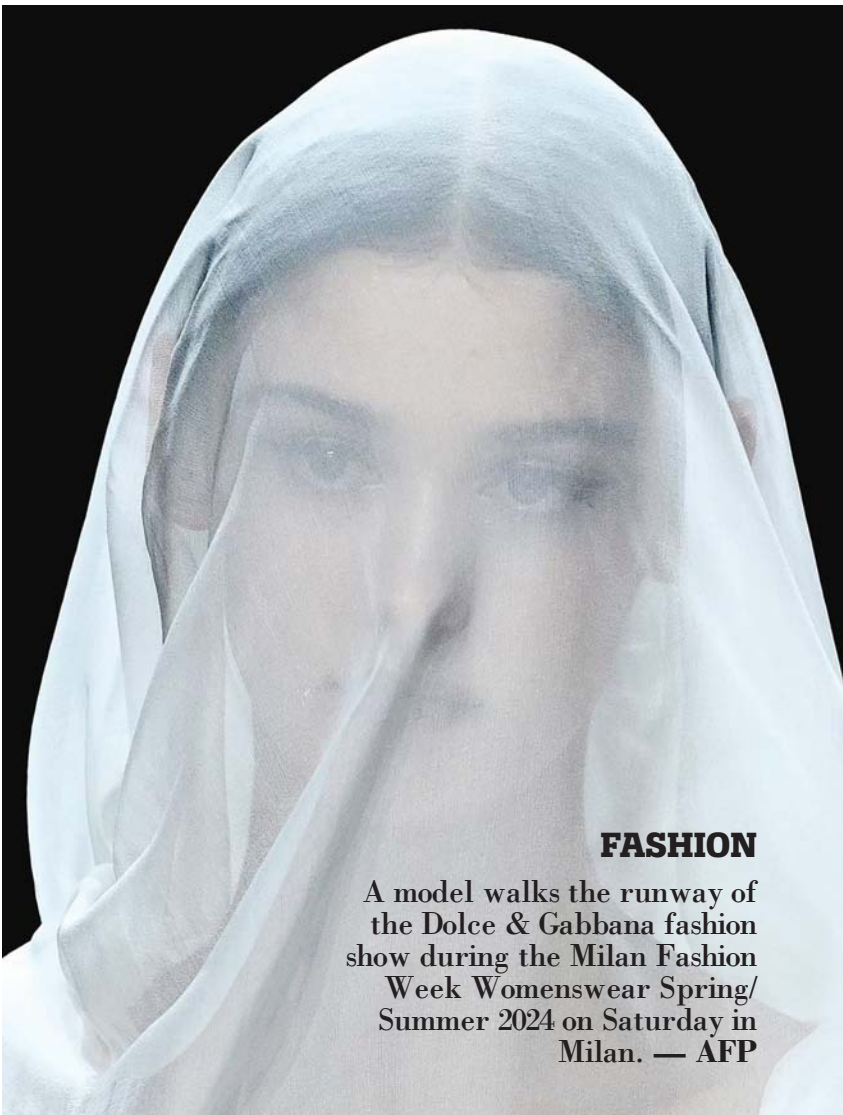
© Project Syndicate, 2023



FAITHFUL
A general view of an image representing Pope Francis, as faithful gather on the day Pope Francis holds a mass at the Velodrome Stadium as a part of his journey on the occasion of the Mediterranean Meetings in Marseille, France, on Saturday. — Reuters



LIFE
Fishermen row their boat to catch fish in a lake during sunset in Ajmer, India, on Saturday. — AFP



FASHION
A model walks the runway of the Dolce & Gabbana fashion show during the Milan Fashion Week Womenswear Spring/Summer 2024 on Saturday in Milan. — AFP



ENVIRONMENT

This aerial view shows smoke billowing from a fire in an area of the Amazon rainforest in Autazes, Amazonas, Brazil, on Saturday. According to the Space Research Institute (INPE), the number of fires detected in the state of Amazonas is already above the historical average for September, even before the month is over. — AFP



RETHINK
Demonstrators from National Rejoin March, express their support for rejoining the European Union outside the Houses of Parliament in London, Britain, on Saturday. — Reuters

art & life

SUNDAY | SEPTEMBER 24, 2023 | RABEE AL AWWAL 8, 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om

Clouds zooms in on Salalah's mountain life and dialect



Dr. Mohammad al Shehhi GM of Bait al Zubair honours Dr. Humaid al Amri President of the Oman Film Society.

Text by Khalid al Balushi
Photo by Abdullah al Amouri

MUZNA AL MUSAFAER, who loves images and nature, was able to complete her own painting in the world of films, as her short film 'Clouds' was screened at Bait Al Zubair in a premiere.

In 'Clouds', Muzna presented a new cinematic segment of Omani society, which is the mountainous community that lives in the mountains of Dhofar, the southern part of the Sultanate of Oman. She presented it beautifully through her wonderful vision and directorial prowess, in reviving the emotionally charged film with the participation of a professional film crew from Italy and France.

Muzna went to Rome, Italy, for 26 days to finish the editing, mixing and final touches to the film. She also did a good job by going to the mountains of Salalah to research and learn about the culture of the people of the mountain



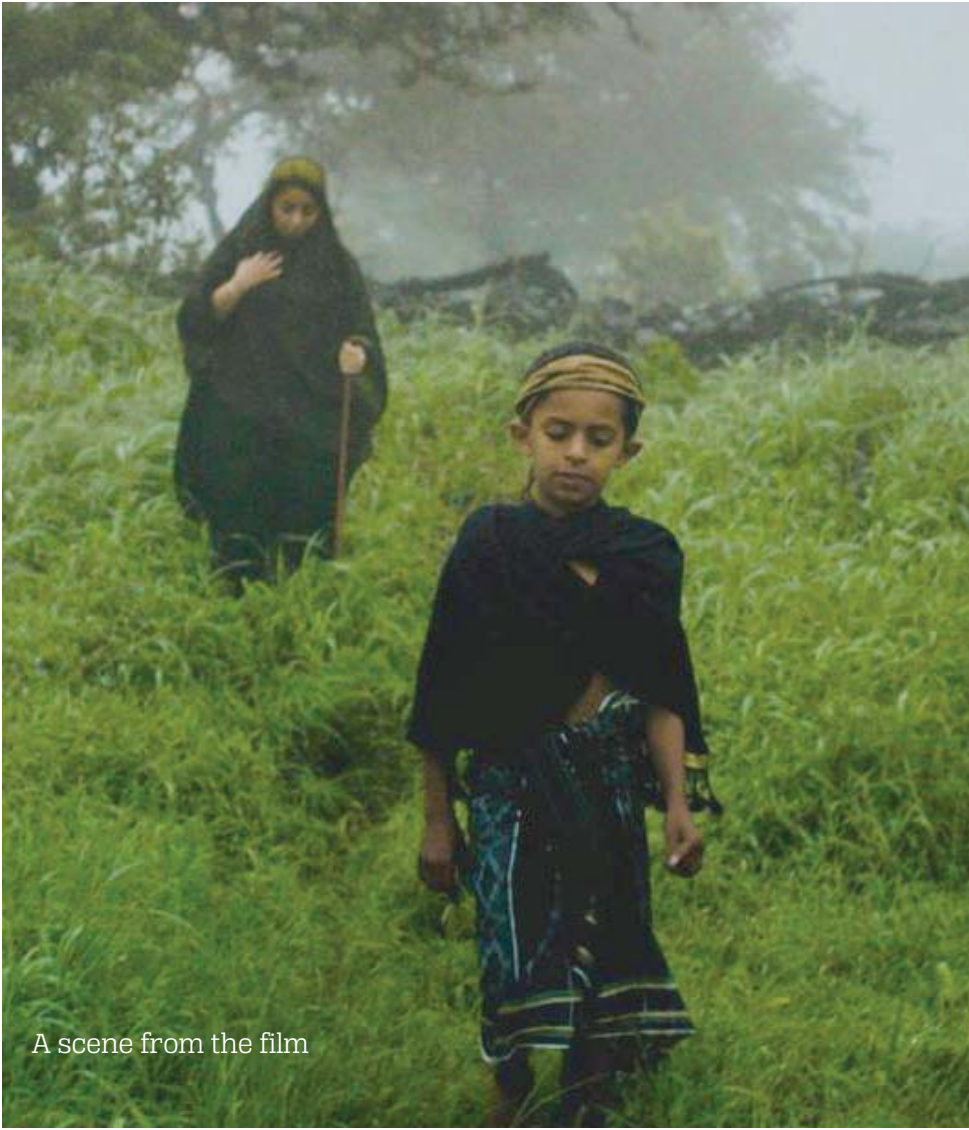
and their previous lives, as told to her by the residents of the region, and searching for the smallest details that took to realism.

This effort was clearly reflected in the details of the filmed scenes, and what is most beautiful of all is that the film was shown in the Shehri language, which is one of the languages of the people of Dhofar, in addition to the presence of mountain folklore, such as Nana art.

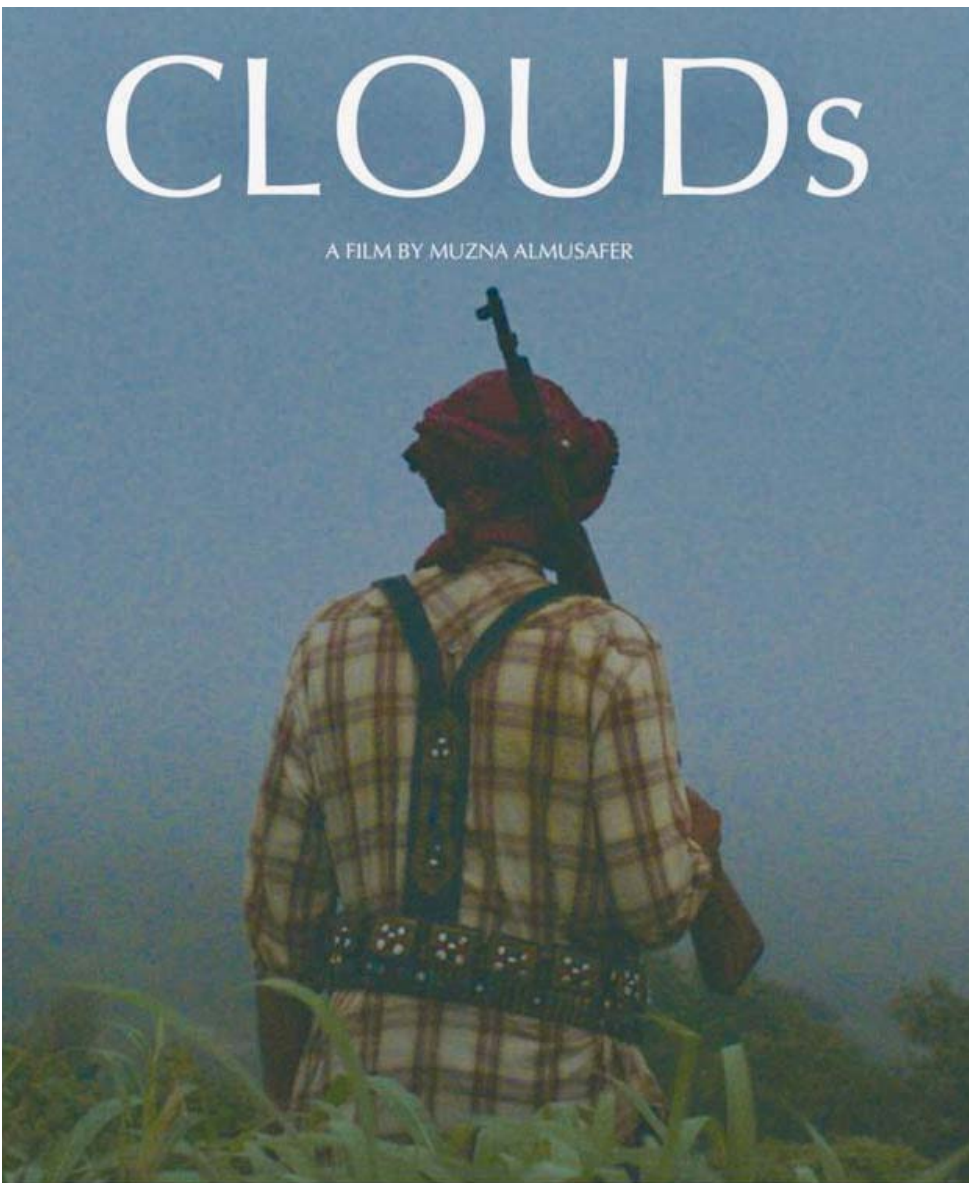
Muzna highlighted the specifics of the culture such as clothes, costumes, accessories, and general atmosphere that was appropriate for the people there during the year 1978.

The film begins with Dablan looking forward to hunting one of the forest animals that live in the mountains of Oman, namely the Arabian leopard, the expected animal that did not appear in the film.

Muzna tells her story well without letting viewers see it. She is able to capture the attention, through the feelings expressed in the dialogue words between the characters, so that viewers can wait throughout the film.



A scene from the film



Shatha al Balushi moderated the discussion

In the film, the child Omar's anticipation and his willingness to eliminate anyone who tries to undermine the security, reassures peace of his small family in light of the absence of his father, who is isolated in his home and far away from people and their social events after the death of his wife.

His wife, who was expressed in the film as being killed by mistake, the human tiger appeared to throw the young men who blocked the path of the seven-year-old Omar and his sister Salma, who tried to highlight his masculinity in defending his sister despite his young age. The tiger appears once.

Another character in the film is Shaikh Masoud, who looks around and approaches to devour Salma, but Dablan, the cheetah hunter who has been through life, manages to repel him and gives Salem the motivation to protect her from the rest of the tigers that still live with different skins, offering Salma a group of frankincense grains as a symbol of love or as a marriage dowry.

Speaking about the film, Muzna said, "The Eastern man always hesitates to utter words of love, but he offers love in the form of gifts, roses, etc. That is why Salem appears offering the finest frankincense to his beloved and future wife, Salma."

On the name of the film, Muzna explained, "The film was called 'Clouds' because of the fall season, which carries fog and clouds that bring rain and goodness. It may also symbolise the clouds surrounding our eyes and make us not see things clearly, or obscure our vision of the future and keep us stuck in the past, as Dablan did."

The film featured Hassan al Maashani taking the role of 'Dublan', Amal Bait Nawira taking the role of 'Salma' while child Bandar al Shahri taking the role of 'Omar'. Sharif al Omari played the role of 'Shaikh Masoud', Muslim al Shahri played the role of 'Salem', in addition to child actors Wanas, Bashar al Shahri and other actors from the region.

Muzna expressed that cinema is a space for human expression and expressed her desire to show this film in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman to gain the trust of the local audience in addition to its participation in the rest of the world.

During the screening, journalist Shatha al Balushi moderated the cinematic evening and the criticism session presented by Dr. Hamid al Amri, President of the Oman Film Society, at the end of the screening, which was entitled 'A Drop of Dew from the Clouds of Muzna,' in addition to the comments of the show's director and the audience.



find us on



Scan the QR Code or follow us on
www.twitter.com/omanobserver

OMANDAILYOBSERVER

SUNDAY | SEPTEMBER 24 | 2023

19

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



sanjoysengupta
ibra

Follow



sachinorthodoc16 and vibes_of_oman
Dhofar Mountains - Salalah



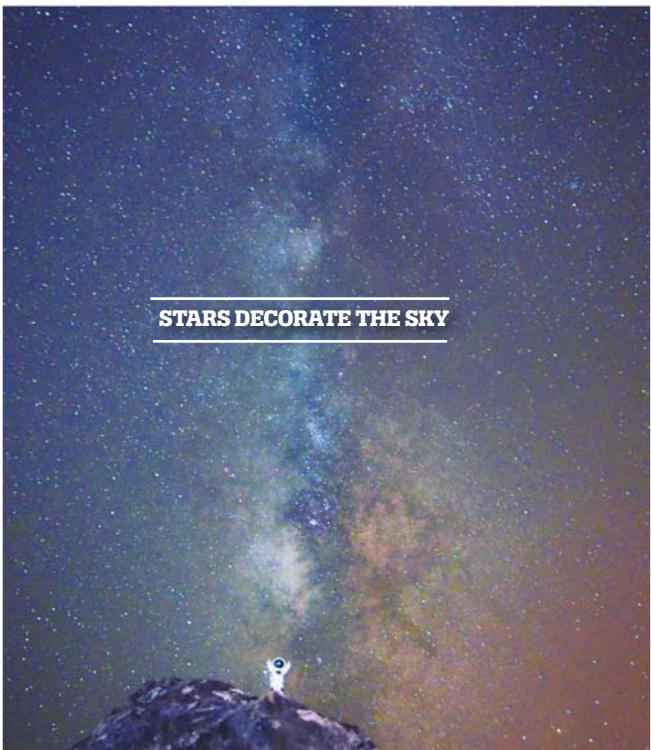
somewhere_around_theworld_
Almouj Marina - the Wave, Muscat.

Follow

...



HORSE RACING



STARS DECORATE THE SKY



THE WAVE - MUSCAT

SHARE A SLICE OF YOUR LIFE

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



Most species of 'world's largest flower' risk extinction



Most species of the famously large Rafflesia flower, which has long captured the imagination with its enormous speckled red petals, are now at risk of extinction, new research warned on Wednesday.

Rafflesia is actually a parasite, and lives on tropical vines across parts of Southeast Asia, producing blooms that are among the largest in the world.

It is something of an enigma, with its flowers emerging unpredictably, and botanists have had limited success propagating it outside its natural environment.

One species of the flower is currently classed as "critically endangered", according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

To better understand the plant and its conservation status, an international group of botanists examined 42 known Rafflesia species and their habitats — primarily Brunei,

Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

Based on the rapid disappearance of its forest habitats, as well as insufficient conservation strategies and protection plans, the plant is at far greater risk than previously known, they said.

"We estimate that 60 per cent of Rafflesia species face a severe risk of extinction," the researchers wrote in the study, published on Wednesday in the peer-reviewed Plants, People, Planet journal.

Some species risk going extinct before they are even known to science, the study said, urging more research into the unusual plant.

"We urgently need a joined-up, cross-regional approach to save some of the world's most remarkable flowers, most of which are now on the brink of being lost," said Chris Thorogood, deputy director of Oxford

University's Botanical Garden and a study author.

The research points out that the plant is believed to grow in fairly limited areas, making it particularly vulnerable to habitat destruction.

It also highlights several bright spots in conservation efforts, including successful propagation at a botanical garden in Indonesia's West Java, and sustainable ecotourism around the plant in West Sumatra.

Last year, nations pledged to protect 30 per cent of the world's land and seas by 2030 in a landmark deal to slow the disappearance of species and ecosystems.

Repeated studies have warned that the twin threats of climate change and environmental destruction caused by humans are dramatically reducing biodiversity worldwide.

—AFP

Met returns two antiquities to Yemen, retains possession for now



The Metropolitan Museum of Art on Tuesday announced it had transferred ownership of two antiquities to Yemen, but that the war-torn country had agreed to leave them in New York for safe-keeping.

Both pieces are stone sculptures — a sandstone female figure and a marble mortar — and date to the third millennium BCE from areas in modern-day Yemen, the Met said in a statement.

The museum said it had acquired the statue in 1998 from collector Jean-Luc Chalmin, who also donated the mortar in 1999.

"Provenance research led by Met scholars established that the works were found near Marib in 1984 and rightfully belong to the Republic of Yemen," the statement said, without any additional information.

The Met and other prestigious museums in the United

States and around the world have agreed in recent years to work with investigators on identifying looted or stolen art.

In New York, the Manhattan district attorney's office has been leading such a campaign since 2017.

Under District Attorney Alvin Bragg, in office since 2022, more than 950 pieces worth \$165 million have been returned to 19 countries, including Cambodia, China, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Iraq, Greece, Türkiye and Italy.

The Met announced in May that it would examine the provenance of "several hundred or more" objects that were possibly stolen from their country of origin, and then return them where necessary.

Separately, US authorities announced in February the return of 77 antiquities to Yemen but that they would

remain stored at the Smithsonian in Washington.

A similar agreement was struck between the Met and Yemen's government, the nation's ambassador to the United States said on Tuesday.

"Due to the current situation in Yemen, it is not the appropriate time to return these artifacts back to our homeland," said Mohammed Al-Hadhrani.

"We are pleased to have these objects remain on loan with The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, one of the world's most prominent and prestigious cultural institutions," he added.

Yemen has been devastated by an eight-year civil war that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and plunged the poorest country on the Arabian Peninsula into one of the world's worst humanitarian tragedies.

—AFP

SCIENCES

Scientists warn entire branches of the 'Tree of Life' are going extinct

Humans are driving the loss of entire branches of the "Tree of Life," according to a new study published which warns of the threat of a sixth mass extinction.

"The extinction crisis is as bad as the climate change crisis. It is not recognised," said Gerardo Ceballos, professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, and co-author of the study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS).

"What is at stake is the future of mankind," he said.

The study is unique because instead of merely examining the loss of a species, it examines the extinction of entire genera.

In the classification of living beings, the genus lies between the rank of species and that of family. For example, dogs are a species belonging to the genus canis — itself in the canid family.

"It is a really significant contribution, I think the first time anyone has attempted to assess modern extinction rates at a level above the species," Robert Cowie, a biologist

at the University of Hawaii who was not involved in the study.

"As such it really demonstrates the loss of entire branches of the Tree of Life," a representation of living things first developed by Charles Darwin.

The study shows that "we aren't just trimming terminal twigs, but rather are taking a chainsaw to get rid of big branches," agreed Anthony Barnosky, professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley.

73 EXTINCT GENERA

The researchers relied largely on species listed as extinct by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). They focused on vertebrate species (excluding fish), for which more data are available.

Of some 5,400 genera (comprising 34,600 species), they concluded that 73 had become extinct in the last 500 years — most of them in the last two centuries.

The researchers then compared this with the extinction



rate estimated from the fossil record over the very long term.

"Based on the extinction rate in the previous million years we would have expected

to lose two genera. But we lost 73," explained Ceballos.

That should have taken 18,000 years, not 500, the study estimated — though such estimates remain uncer-

tain, as not all species are known and the fossil record remains incomplete.

The cause? Human activities, such as the destruction of habitats for crops or infra-

structure, as well as overfishing, hunting and so on.

The loss of one genus can have consequences for an entire ecosystem, argued Ceballos.

"If you take one brick, the wall won't collapse, he said. "You take many more, eventually the wall will collapse."

"Our worry is that ... we're losing things so fast, that for us it signals the collapse of civilisation."

- 'Still time' to act -

All experts agree that the current rate of extinction is alarming — but whether this represents the start of a sixth mass extinction (the last being the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs 66 million years ago) remains a matter of debate.

Scientists broadly define a mass extinction as the loss of 75 per cent of species over a short period of time. Using that "arbitrary" definition, Cowie said, a sixth mass extinction has not yet occurred.

But if we assume that "species will continue to go extinct at the current rate (or faster), then it will happen," he warned. "We can surely say that this is the beginning of a potential sixth mass extinction."

Ceballos warned that the window of opportunity for humans to act is "rapidly closing."

The priority is to halt the destruction of natural habitats, and to restore those that have been lost, he said.

"But there is still time to save many genera," he said. "There are 5,400 genera, we can save many of them if we act now." — AFP



art & life

f X Instagram YouTube @omianobserver

SUNDAY | SEPTEMBER 24 | 2023

TRAVEL

DISCOVERING ALBANIA'S TIMELESS VJOSA RIVER



A JOURNEY ALONG southern Albania's Vjosa River, one of Europe's last undammed waterways, means traversing a landscape that looks much as it has for centuries. Flowing from Greece's northwestern border to the Adriatic Sea, the Vjosa rushes into box canyons and gorges formed by steep forests of maples, oaks and firs. Ancient stone bridges connect its banks, spanning turquoise water. Sheep graze the valley floor, and vineyards, family farms, orchards and olive groves intermingle with fields of dandelions and red poppies.

Earlier this year, Albania took a critical step towards preserving this timelessness with the establishment of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, a first in Europe, and a destination included on this year's 52 Places to Go list. The Albanian government, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, nongovernmental organisations from the Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign, and the adventure apparel retailer Patagonia worked together to protect Albania's 120-mile section of the river and its main tributaries. (The 169-mile Vjosa's source is in Greece's Pindus Mountains.) After years of protests against mining and dam projects, and support from Leonardo DiCaprio, the park's designation was a victory.

"Our support for the Vjosa really stepped up when we began partnering with the Albanian government in 2021, to do something that hadn't been done before," said Ryan Gellert, Patagonia's chief executive. According to Gellert, the plan is for the park to be fully operational, with a visitor centre and staff, in 2024.

For both locals and tourists, the park's designation is a boon, if not

a lifeline. Communities have depended on the river since before recorded history. And in a country already renowned for its food, the Vjosa Valley's terroir sets the bar even higher. Hearty fruits and vegetables, trout, mountain honey, lamb, wine, veal, raki (brandy), cheeses and herbs are in abundance — along with Balkan hospitality.

When I arrived in late April, snow still covered the peaks above the river: I'd come to raft, hike and cycle segments of the new park, which, including Vjosa's tributaries, safeguards around 250 miles of river and more than 31,000 acres: an ecosystem with around 1,200 species, 15 of which are threatened. I was also there to learn about tourism's growing influence.

"Ten years ago, everyone was running away from the villages," Mirela Kumburo, Albania's Minister of Tourism and Environment, wrote in an email. "Now we have more and more people who, after emigrating, are returning to their villages to open guesthouses, agritourism and agricultural farms," she wrote. "I see the future of tourism as friendly with the environment, with people who will value nature as a priceless asset."

PADDLING WITH THE QUEEN The valley bustled with visitors when I made my first stop in the town of Permet, which straddles a bend in the Vjosa about 20 miles from the Greek border. The second annual Vjosa n'Fest, celebrating the river's culture, was in full swing in the former Ottoman commercial centre called the "City of Roses," that's becoming an adventure hub. The festival's lineup included musical acts, guided hiking, horseback riding, cycling and rafting.

As evening fell, locals and foreigners in outdoor gear packed the streets, listening to the festival's headlining ensemble: Sazet e Permetit. With each sultry song — a blend of polyphonic voices, clarinets, violins and accordions — the crowd locked arms to revel under the stars.

The next morning, after a breakfast of traditional gliko — nuts or fruit boiled in sugar water and stored in syrup — and strong stove-cooked coffee, I walked from my guesthouse to the main square's riverside cafes and shops. Old men played dominoes in front of a produce stand. At the offices of Vjosa Explorer, a company that leads raft tours, I reserved the final spot in a raft of bleary-eyed festivalgoers.

We were awakened by the cold river, running high with snow melt, as it snaked between canyon walls. About halfway into the three-hour expedition, we pulled onto a pebbly beach. One of Vjosa Explorer's owners, Irma Tako, waited on the beach.

"The first time I visited Western Europe and saw fruit so shiny and perfect, I was ashamed of our ugly fruit in Albania," Tako said, passing out apples. "Then I ate that shiny fruit and realised it was tasteless. Our fruit in Albania is like the country itself: not polished, but full of flavour."

Behind us, 8,143-foot Maja e Papingut, the highest point in the Nemercka Range, poked through wispy clouds. Locals call the mountain by its mythical name: Maja e Dritës, or "Peak of Light."

"I really saw my country for the first time when I rafted the Vjosa," Tako said, handing me a cup of mountain tea with linden flowers, sage, lemon and honey. "I'm scared of mass tourism. I call Vjosa the queen, and the mountains are her



crown. We must show her, and her crown, respect."

FROM OBSCURITY TO ADVENTURE-TRAVEL MAGNET

On an infrastructural level, Albania is not, as Tako mentioned, polished. Where this country, especially its remote interior, shines is with local guesthouses, local interactions (yes, accept that glass of raki), and unscripted discovery.

"Because we're natural hosts and have a varied geography — sea, mountains and rivers like Vjosa — in a small area, the country always exceeds expectations," Gent Mati, the founder of Outdoor Albania, which has led adventure tours since 1991, told me over the phone.

This combination of hospitality and untapped potential makes the relatively undiscovered Vjosa Valley intoxicating. It also creates fertile conditions for over tourism.

Mass tourism and urbanisation is a risk, said Andrej Sovinc, a protected area expert with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the organisation that classified the Vjosa as a national park. "To address this, we are developing a vision for sustainable tourism development in and around the Vjosa WRNP that puts local people and the conservation of natural and cultural values at the focus."

WALKING WITH CULTURE'S CARETAKERS

For the next several days, I stayed at Ferma Albanik, a family-run guesthouse whose owner, Elona Bejo, works with local farmers for ingredients she doesn't grow herself.

"Farmers here are the caretakers of culture," said Bejo, who acts as Albanik's gardener, concierge,

yoga instructor and hiking guide. "It's important that the families with endurance — those who stayed in the valley instead of leaving — are shown appreciation as the economy shifts to tourism."

My initial hike was a moderate one up to the spring-fed, 65-foot Sopot Waterfall. The next trek was an hour's walk south of Permet to the 18th-century Orthodox St. Mary's Church in the hillside settlement of Leusa. The three-nave, stone-and-brick church, which has an intricately carved wooden iconostasis, is awash with frescoes and murals.

I then met Bejo, who guided me into the narrow Lengarica Canyon, which cradles the Lengarica River, a Vjosa tributary, and a series of hot springs near the village of Benja. We walked past the Ottoman-era Katiu Bridge that frames the largest of the thermal baths, already crowded. We ambled upstream, in knee-deep water, to more secluded pools. Each of the six sulfur baths has a specific medical benefit. We chose the one for rheumatism and relaxed as a rain shower passed over.

The next day, we made a 45-minute scramble from the riverside town of Kelcyra to the unmarked remains of a 2,400-year-old Illyrian fortress on a ridge overlooking the Vjosa. Hundreds of feet below the ruins, a tour of kayakers — orange boats and red helmets against electric-teal water — paddled through the Kelcyra Gorge. From this strategic vantage, ancient residents once communicated with smoke signals to other outposts, warning of invaders: Greeks, Macedonians, Romans.

Between treks, we walked to villages to visit families who work with Bejo. In Gostivisht, Flora and

Krenar Sali have 150 beehives making honey from mountain flowers called Bedunica. In the village of Peshtan, below the nearly 6,000-foot Mount Golikut, we met Mira Muka, who runs the Bujtina Peshtan guesthouse and camp site. She showed us her collection of weapons from the Vjosa's Italian-Greek front line during World War II. "About 10 years ago, 15 people stopped here," she said. "This year, it will be 1,500. The Vjosa gives us everything: people, fish, water. It is our past and future."

CYCLING TO THE ADRIATIC

For my last stretch, I hopped on the country's new, 675-mile UNESCO Cycling Route — part of which rolls through the Vjosa basin to the river's Adriatic terminus. My ride (around 30 miles per day over three days) began in Gjirokastra, a World Heritage Site inscribed for its "architectural character typical of the Ottoman period." The town's slate-roofed buildings are spread along the Drinos River, one of the park's newly protected tributaries.

The hometown of author Ismail Kadare and dictator Enver Hoxha, "Stone City" buzzed with visitors roaming its 13th-century castle and its bazaar's steep, cobble streets. In front of the GjiroArt Center, a cooperative of local artisans, I joined a group drinking fire-roasted coffee. "Our idea in Gjirokastra is to show traditions and hospitality matter," one artist said, filling cups.

The trail continued north along the Drinos, passing the 222-acre Archaeological Park of Antigonea, where stone blocks outline an ancient Greek city. The path followed a state road with rolling climbs and sweeping descents opening into valleys. Sheep glided across green pastures like bleating clouds.

In the city of Tepelena, a 19th-century castle stood guard near the confluence of the Drinos and Vjosa. I stopped at the Lord Byron Guest House, named for the English poet who visited the town in 1809. In the courtyard, surrounded by fruit trees, I sat down for lunch made with ingredients grown on the property's farm: green salad, grilled peppers and eggplant, pasta with olive oil and garlic.

From here, the route shifted back to the Vjosa, where solitude was broken by villages perched above farmland. Families looked up from work to wave. The course eventually took me past another archaeological treasure, Bylis, and the remains of an Illyrian city.

"Vjosa's big picture includes the environment, economic growth, and the balance between them," said Rezarta Bare, a tourism adviser for the German Agency for International Cooperation in Albania, which supported the UNESCO Cycling Route. "The real story, though, is about people. This region's people are warm and kind, the epitome of southern Albanian hospitality. The Vjosa conversation is important because it sheds light on the vulnerability of people, nature and culture — all intertwined on this untamed river." — **NYT**