

ROP to celebrate Annual Day

HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, will preside over a ceremony marking the annual day of the Royal Oman Police (ROP) on Sunday (January 7). The ceremony will take place at the military parade grounds of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in the Wilayat of Nizwa. It will see the passing out of batches of ROP officer recruits.



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SNAPS
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OMAN TARGETS 11
PPP PROJECTS FOR
IMPLEMENTATION



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OMANI TRAILBLAZERS
REACH NORTH POLE IN
A CLASSIC CAR



Revamp of paragliding regulations for safety



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) on Wednesday announced an overhaul of the hang-gliding permitting procedures in the Sultanate of Oman.

The authority CAA, the central body overseeing aviation activities, has ratified a critical cooperation agreement with the Omani Aviation Sports Committee (OASC) and the International Association of Hang-Gliding Pilots and Instructors (APPI). This agreement is a cornerstone in the CAA's efforts to streamline paragliding activities in the country. It aims to share and

update educational resources extensively, ensuring that pilot licensing and trainer preparation meet international standards.

In addition to this, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) has been signed between the CAA and the Omani Committee for Air Sports. This MoU is a strategic move to regulate recreational aviation activities more effectively.

A significant aspect of this understanding is the preparation of a comprehensive training policy document, which is expected to lay down clear guidelines and protocols for paragliding and other air sports.

Underpinning these developments is the CAA's firm stance on safety. The authority

has reiterated the paramount importance of adhering to safety regulations and standards when flying paragliders.

In a statement, the CAA has emphasised the need for pilots to comply strictly with safe practices, highlighting that safety remains the foremost priority in all aviation sport activities.

Furthermore, the authority has issued a stern warning against non-compliance of the regulations. Legal action will be taken against any violations, demonstrating the CAA's commitment to enforcing these rules stringently. This move is seen as a deterrent to potential violators and a step towards ensuring a safer paragliding environment.

HM thanked by Qatar Emir, China President

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, in reply to His Majesty's greetings cable on the occasion of Qatar's National Day.

In his cable, Shaikh Tamim expressed his appreciation for His Majesty's heartfelt

sentiments, wishing His Majesty the Sultan good health and wellbeing. He also wished the Omani people further progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty. Shaikh Tamim wished the bilateral relations further development and growth.

His Majesty the Sultan has also received a cable of thanks

from President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable on victims of the earthquake which struck the northwestern province of Gansu. In his cable, President Xi Jinping expressed his thanks for His Majesty the Sultan's heartfelt sympathies to the President and the Chinese people. — ONA

SNF TO INVEST \$250 MILLION IN POLYMER OPERATIONS IN OMAN



SNF's project facilities in Plaquemine LA, USA.

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, Jan 3

SNF, the world's leading manufacturer of polyacrylamide (with more than 1.5 million tonnes capacity of active content) and the foremost global supplier of integrated solutions for chemical EOR, has confirmed a significant investment cycle in the Sultanate of Oman, totalling \$250 million in self-financing and partnerships.

These funds will enable SNF to develop its own production capabilities within the country, meet the infrastructure needs of its key clients, expand its workforce in the region, and promote academic collaborations and R&D activities in the Oil & Gas sector. In 2024, SNF will open its Regional SNF Technical Center in Muscat, known as RSTC Oman, which will serve as SNF's R&D hub for the entire



SNF's plant in Andrézieux, France.

Gulf region. This facility expands the commitment of SNF in developing world-leading polymer expertise to support customers achieve both their production and sustainability objectives at every phase of the oil and gas lifecycle. The Technology Centre brings faster access to SNF global expertise, locally, allowing closer technology collaboration opportunities and more efficient regional project support.

SNF will develop the capability of the Technology Centre through sharing expertise, training students and young professionals and the hire and training of local talent.

"SNF takes pride in its long-term commitment to its partners in Oman, as it has demonstrated over the past 20 years through its continuous presence in the country and numerous industrial successes!" it said in a statement.

First autologous kidney transplant a success

MUSCAT: A medical team specialised in organ transplants at the Royal Hospital succeeded in performing the first autologous kidney transplant for a patient in the Sultanate of Oman.

The patient, a woman, was suffering severe bleeding after the Caesarean section for childbirth, which required a partial hysterectomy, and later, a full hysterectomy that incurred damage to the left ureter of the kidney.

The patient underwent four surgical operations within days.



This necessitated the removal of the damaged ureter and the placement of a catheter tube in the left kidney to drain urine.

Due to the patient's prolonged

stay at the intensive care unit, the medical staff faced the difficult challenge of having to choose between two options: either remove the kidney or

try to save it. The medical team decided to do its best to save the kidney. In a bold attempt, the team performed an autologous kidney transplant that involved the removal of the left kidney, along with a healthy part of the ureter, and replanting of the organ in the lower abdomen near the urinary bladder. The operation, which took several hours, was successful. The kidney began functioning normally after a short recovery period. The patient left the hospital within four days. — ONA

OMAN CONDOLES WITH IRAN ON VICTIMS OF KERMAN BLASTS



The Sultanate of Oman expressed its sincere condolences and sympathies to the friendly Islamic Republic of Iran and the families of the victims of the twin blasts that targeted a procession in Kerman province. The Foreign Ministry affirmed its constant stance in condemning all forms of violence and terrorism. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi strongly condemned the terrorist attack in Kerman that left more than 100 dead.

— Agencies



OVER 100,000 VISIT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN DHOFAR

SALALAH: The number of visitors to the Land of Frankincense sites in the Governorate of Dhofar in 2023 stood at 107,268 visitors. Meanwhile, the number of visitors to Taqah Castle and Mirbat Castle stood at 10,288. Rowas bin Hafeedh al Rowas, Assistant Director-General for Heritage and Tourism in Dhofar, said that visitors to Al Baleed Archaeological Park and the Museum of the Frankincense Land during 2023 stood at



The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism develops the sites to serve the goals of cultural and archaeological tourism in the governorate. – ONA

61,974, while the visitors of the Samahram Archaeological

Site stood at 32,694. Moreover, the number of visitors to the



Wbar Archaeological Site (Shsir) reached 12,600.

Al Rowas added that the number of visitors to Taqah

Castle in 2023 stood at 5,224, while the number of visitors to Mirbat Castle stood at 5,064. The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, represented by the Directorate-General of Heritage and Tourism in the Governorate of Dhofar, develops the sites and provides them with service and aesthetic facilities to serve the goals of cultural and archaeological tourism in the governorate. — ONA

Agreement signed to operate Mirbat Castle, adjoining facilities

MIRBAT: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism on Wednesday signed an agreement with Mirbat-Sadah Development and Investment Company to manage and operate Mirbat Castle. The agreement also covers the rebuilding and operation of the archaeology antiques market and customs office in the Wilayat of Mirbat in Dhofar Governorate. The agreement was inked by Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Heritage, and Braik bin Musallam al Amri, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Mirbat-Sadah



The agreement builds on the success ventures undertaken by the ministry to initiate investment opportunities for small and medium enterprises. – ONA



Development and Investment Company. The agreement builds on the success ventures undertaken by the ministry to initiate investment opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It also aims to utilise cultural heritage in a way that ensures its sustainability and maximises benefits. It constitutes a link in a series of actions to achieve the 10th Development Plan and its strategic programmes. The ministry plans to float many historical landmarks for privately-owned companies and SMEs. — ONA



SOHAR AIRPORT RECEIVES WORLD'S LARGEST AIRCRAFT

SUHAR: Sohar Airport on Wednesday received Emirates Airbus A380, world's largest aircraft. The landing was part of agreement with Oman Airports for Sohar Airport to be part of the training programme for trainee pilots at the Emirates Academy. This was within efforts of Oman Airports to promote Sohar Airport regionally. These flights include the process of repeated landing and takeoff (touch & go).

558 graduate from UTAS Ibra, Sur

The University of Technology and Applied Sciences celebrated the graduation of 558 graduates from five different colleges under the auspices of HH Sayyid Mohammed bin Thuwaini al Said, at Ibra Sports Complex. The graduates were from two branches, 406 from Ibra branch and 152 from Sur branch graduated from five different colleges namely College of Engineering and Technology, College of Creative Industries, College of Computing

and Information Sciences, College of Economics and Business Administration and College of Applied Sciences and Pharmacy. The list of graduates included 216 bachelor's degree graduates, 65 advanced diploma graduates and 277 diploma graduates. The ceremony started with a speech delivered by Dr Hafith bin Said al Rahbi, Assistant Vice-Chancellor at Ibra branch, where he stated that the university is very proud of its graduates which will

be definitely a great addition to the labour market in the country. He also highlighted the achievements of both branches over the last academic year organising national events, winning advanced prizes nationally and internationally as well as getting various funds for scientific research. "Graduating today is the beginning of a new chapter in my life and I can't really describe how happy and proud I am after years of studying and facing many

challenges," Zwaina bint Ahmed al Harthi, one of the graduates said. Al Fadhil bin Yahya al Barwani, another graduate, said, "The journey wasn't easy, reaching this stage came after years of dedication and hard work. My dream came true, and I thank all who supported me through my journey." "It is a very amazing moment and I'm sure this is the starting point of another stage of life," Hamed bin Jalal al Shehab, Bachelor of Mass Communication graduate, said.

Oman's population registers 1.2% growth

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) announced on Wednesday that Oman's population registered a growth of 1.2 per cent, surpassing 5 million at the end of 2023. This marks a significant milestone for the Sultanate and reflects its continued economic growth and development. According to the NCSI statement, Omanis now constitute 43.3 per cent of the total population, with a figure of 2,236,645. Expatriates make up the remaining 56.7 per cent, totalling 2,928,957. Muscat Governorate remains the most populated



area, housing 29.7 per cent of the national total, or 1,546,667 residents. Al Dakhiliyah Governorate follows with 20.3 per cent of the population, equivalent to 1,044,388 individuals.

‘Sultanate of Oman ideal location for film-making’

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The first international movie covering most of the Rub al Khali as well as the beauty of Oman is all set for worldwide release on January 5, thanks to the joint efforts of the Oman Film Society (OFS), AUL productions, Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and the Royal Oman Police (ROP) in enabling the making of the 126-minutes-long Malayalam film during the last summer. "We are finally to the theatres after a hectic, life-and-death 37 days and nights shooting in the largest sand desert in the world and thanks to the citizens and expatriates who made this big film happen," said Aneesh Anwar, director of the film. Titled 'Raastha' (The Way), the highly anticipated survival thriller film has both Omani actors sharing screen space with the Indian actors including Sarjano Khalid, Anagha Narayanan,

Aaradhya Ann, Sudheesh, Irshad Ali, TG Ravi, and Anish Anwar, the film is produced by Linu Sreenivas under the banner of ALU Entertainments. Oman has been a plot for scores of movies from across the world and some of the best cast movies were shot in the country. While talking to the media, Aneesh said he would recommend Oman to the film industry as a favourable destination for shooting movies. "Certainly, Oman has all the ingredients of making a film of any genre, catering to any age group or any audience of a different taste and preference for films," he said. He added that 'Raastha' is a movie which talks about an incident set in the backdrop of the Rub al Khali desert, which is ten times the size of his home state Kerala. But the biggest factor, people with love, affection and empathy are the biggest asset besides the natural richness of the country, if not for the limited



The first international movie covering most of the Rub al Khali is all set for worldwide release on January 5

availability of equipment and properties required for a film. "I'd recommend Oman as the best location to my fellow film-maker friends for any film that has a flavour of an Arabian country and the culture and tradition of the people, the biggest asset of the country, is really worth mentioning. I'm pretty sure, many more films would choose Oman to be their spot before film-making becomes a major tourist avenue," said Aneesh. At a press conference

organised at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) under the auspices of Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of OCCI, the cast n crew of the movie shared their rich experience of shooting in Oman and the story which is based on real previous incidents. Humaid al Amri, Chairman of Oman Film Society, while sharing his experiences, said the movie will give a boost to Oman's entertainment industry and will inspire more movie makers to

come to Oman and shoot movies here. Haitham Mohammed Rafi, acclaimed Omani singer, who sings in multiple languages, sang the film song for the audience to a standing ovation. Abdul Latheef Uppala, the owner of ALU Entertainments, Board Member of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Managing Director of Badr al Samaa Group of Hospitals said that the story of the movie motivated him to consider it as it is based on true facts and how it showcases the true nature and culture of Oman. He said he feels it is his responsibility to contribute to the promotion of the entertainment and tourism industry of Oman and this movie is the first such step in this direction. A heart-wrenching story of a girl who travels to the Gulf to find her mother, Raastha has all the ingredients to make it dear to the family audience and the

makers claimed that it would be a sureshot to entertain audiences of different genres. Penned by Shahul and Faiz, 'Raastha' promises an enthralling cinematic experience with its gripping story, screenplay, and dialogues. Vishnu Narayanan handles the cinematography, while Avin Mohan Sithara contributes the musical score, ensuring a captivating auditory journey. While speaking on the intricate film-making process, Sudha Shah, Line Producer of the film said that the support from the various ministries and other local authorities has helped a lot in the making and it wouldn't have been possible without their support. Edited by Aftar Anwar, 'Raastha' boasts stellar performances complemented by the artistic direction of Venu Thopil. The film features outstanding songs sung by Vineeth Srinivasan, Alphonse Joseph, Suraj Santhosh, and Avin Mohan Sithara.



‘Lesson on Air’ from Friday: MoE

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The Ministry of Education (MoE), represented by the Department of Communication and Media, and in cooperation with the Ministry of Information, represented by the Sultanate of Oman Television (Oman Live Channel), will begin broadcasting the first episodes of the educational television programme ‘Lesson on Air’ from Friday evening for general education diploma students for the first semester of the current academic year 2023/2024. The programme will continue broadcasting until January 24.

The first episode of the programme with a general session will discuss the specifications of the exam paper, the most important strategies that the student relies on when studying, an explanation of the correction mechanism, the most important controls that exam takers must adhere to, and practical advice to help students get rid of anxiety and stress.

The episodes on Saturday and



The first episode of the programme with a general session will discuss the specifications of the exam paper and important strategies

on Monday will be dedicated to advanced mathematics, and the one on Sunday will be for basic mathematics. The programme will continue its episodes on Saturday, January 13, with the Arabic language subject, and the episodes of the second week of the programme will continue until Wednesday for the subjects of social studies (This is My Homeland), chemistry, geography, and modern technologies, and then chemistry

again, respectively.

The third week of the programme begins with the subject of physics, for which Friday and Saturday were allocated. On the last week of the programme, Sunday’s episode will be for the English language subject, and the biology subject will be on Monday and Tuesday, and the programme’s final episodes will be on Wednesday with the history subject (The World Around Me).

The programme aims to help students of the General Education Diploma (Grade 12) in reviewing their academic subjects by hosting a number of supervisors and teachers specialised in the academic subjects who answer the students’ questions, whether by phone call via the programme’s phones: (2494621/ 24601538), or through e-mail, or through the programme’s websites on social media accounts, or with the hashtag #Live_Lesson.

It is worth noting that the programme broadcast is at exactly four o’clock in the evening, for an hour and a half, and is being prepared by the Department of Communication and Media, in cooperation with the Department of Educational Supervision at the Ministry of Education, and is presented by Fayza al Salti, directed by Nasser al Shukaili, and in coordination and follow-up by Khalid al Rahbi. Note that the schedules for the programme’s episodes were published through the ministry’s social media accounts on (X and Instagram).

Survey to explore fish resources in the Arabian Sea and Sea of Oman



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, represented by the Directorate-General of Fisheries Research, is conducting a survey to explore fish resources in the Arabian Sea and the Sea of Oman as part of its efforts to tap fisheries in a sustainable manner during the coming period.

The survey aims to provide accurate data on the available fish biomass in the seas of the Sultanate of Oman, provide estimates of the sizes, distribution and seasonal abundance of the targeted fish species, and provide physical environmental information to understand the biological and environmental diversity of the Arabian Sea and the Sea of Oman. It also aims at exploring artisanal fishing areas that are less exploited, verifying the existence of new fishing areas that can be exploited for deep-sea fishing for marine invertebrates and lightfish, providing data on the nutritional levels of important fish species and identifying seasonal changes and spatial distribution of plankton biomass and its availability along the coast of Oman.

Dr Dawood al Yahyai, Director-General of Fisheries Research at

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, explained that this national survey aims to preserve the sustainability of marine resources as part of the food security system as well as provide the data and information required to develop optimal and sustainable exploitation plans and develop administrative policies to preserve marine resources and environmental balance. He noted that conducting the survey is in line with the goals of the Oman Vision 2040 specifically with regard to the sustainable environment axis, the economy and development axis, economic diversification and the environment and natural resources.

The survey for exploring fish resources in the Arabian Sea and the Sea of Oman would contribute to enhancing food security by sustaining fish supply and marine species by managing them in accordance to scientific data and stock estimates. It also contributes to determining the seasonal bans and the sizes of aquatic resources that are allowed for fishing as well as proposing models of fisheries management to protect the living aquatic resources in the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA



The survey aims to provide accurate data on the available fish biomass in the seas of the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

Health leadership forum addresses health system challenges

SUHAR: The 4th Health Leaders Forum, organised by the Ministry of Health, kicked off on Wednesday under the theme of ‘Sustainability’.

The two-day forum seeks to follow up developments associated with the health system in the Sultanate of Oman, the challenges it faces and ways to address them.

In a speech at the forum, Health Minister Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti stressed the importance of consolidating various patterns of cooperation and health integration. He laid emphasis on the need to study health issues, listen to different points of view and make proposals to overcome the difficulties facing the health sector and develop its operations.

“The Ministry of Health is developing a database to monitor the challenges that require interventions from



The two-day forum seeks to follow up developments associated with the health system in the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

central authorities and other sectors,” said Dr Hilal.

During the forum, visual presentations were made about the initiative of the best primary health care

institution, opportunities for health integration among governorates and success stories.

The forum also focused on the Ministry’s strategic

programmes to achieve the objectives of Oman Vision 2040. This included a review of different projects implemented by the Ministry.

— ONA

EA marks Gulf Wildlife Day

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The Environment Authority (EA) celebrated the Gulf Wildlife Day this week under the slogan, ‘Balance of life, it’s harmony with nature and its protection.’

The celebration included visual presentations about the authority’s efforts to preserve wildlife in the Sultanate of Oman in partnership with various entities.

On the sidelines, an exhibition displaying handicrafts made from natural resources was held. It also highlighted a group of initiatives related to enhancing social responsibilities in protecting wild life.

It was only just few days ago when the Environment Authority released a video of a family of Sand Fox in the Arabian Oryx Reserve in Al



Balancing life, finding harmony with nature and protecting it could be a key value in life

Wusta Governorate. It is locally called as Al Aws or Al Hussaini. Khalid al Balushi, who once had a close encounter while driving at night said, “I was driving at night from Al Amerat to Al Sharqiyah, and had just entered Qurayat and a fox crossed the road very fast. It could have caused an accident,

but couldn’t find it later. We have to keep them in mind while driving.”

Protection of wildlife also means protecting their habitats. And Oman has reserves, which are protected areas such as the one for the Arabian Oryx, which was one of the first environmental initiatives taken

as part of the renaissance.

Recently there was a workshop on updating management plans for the Jabal Samhan and Western Hajar Starlight Reserves, which also had the participation of experts from the Royal Jordanian Society for the Conservation of Nature.

The workshop discussed efforts to preserve the reserve and the most important solutions to overcome the challenges, in addition to reviewing a number of working papers.

The workshop examined the possibility of improving environmental standards and looked at ways to enhance the capabilities of local professionals in the field of nature protection and conservation, stated the authority. Every year the Gulf Wildlife Day is marked on December 30th.



“Tender Announcement” Supply of Food Parcels for the “Ramadan Iftar Program” for the Year 1445 AH / 2024 AD for Al Mahrah Governorate and Surrounding Areas in the Republic of Yemen Tender No. 1/2024

Oman Charitable Organization (O.C.O.) announces a tender for the supply of 27,900 (Twenty Seven Thousand and Nine Hundred) food parcels for the “Ramadan Iftar Program” for the year 1445 AH / 2024 AD, and distributing them to all the districts of Al Mahrah Governorate and the surrounding areas according to the attached list of locations (16 locations).

Specialized merchants and suppliers wishing to submit their bids for this tender can obtain the terms and conditions from the Financial Department of Oman Charitable Organization against payment of nominal fees, during the period from Monday 1 January 2024 to Thursday 04 January 2024. The last date for bid submission and acceptance shall be Wednesday 10 January 2024.

Bids shall be deposited in the tender box at the Financial Department, O.C.O. Headquarters Building at the Wilayat of Baushar, Muscat Governorate, Al Khuwair 33, Southern Street No. 47, near Sultan Said bin Taimur Mosque. Bids shall be placed in closed envelopes sealed with red wax and addressed to H.E. the Chairman of the Projects and Tenders Committee of O.C.O. before the specified date.

“O.C.O. is not obligated to award the tender in whole or in part or to consider the lowest price.”

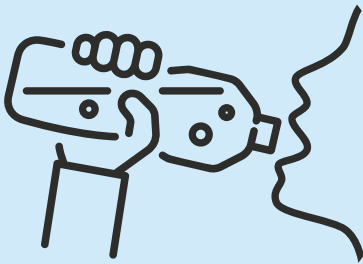


Are you DRINKING enough WATER during winter?

WALEED
AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, JAN 3

Remembering to drink enough water is easy during the summer, when higher temperatures are on higher side but staying hydrated is just as important during the winter. Lack of water in winter season may result in dehydration and can increase the risk of kidney stones, urinary tract infections, and constipation as the human body naturally loses water constantly in the process of breathing, sweating and tears. In addition, the body can loses water through the skin when it becomes dry. While human body loses the feeling of the need to drink water in winter season especially night times, cold weather and less movement which lead to the dehydration, diseases such as severe low blood pressure, cramps due to imbalance, kidney problems, may be life-threatening.

The Ministry of Health has been creating awareness on the importance of drinking water in the winter through various social media channels. Dr Fatima al Jahwari, Retired General Practitioner, said, “drinking water is very important for an individual’s health, and the individual must remind himself or herself to drink water even by using the alarm, especially in winter, as many cases of headaches caused by dehydration reported. In addition, cases of cold and flu cases which are more common in winter are treated with drinking plenty of water.” Drinking water before bed also has a number of health benefits,



including maintaining the body’s pulse during sleep, combating dry mouth during to reduce bad breath and reducing the chances of fungal infection in the lips.

According to experts, drinking pure water is one of the main factors in burning calories and fat accumulated in the body, which helps in losing weight by increasing the rate of metabolism and reducing appetite. They say drinking a cup of pure water balances salts in the body and enhances the vitamins, nutrients and minerals.

Tap water is also important because it contains added minerals, including calcium, magnesium, and potassium which may be considered healthy.

Also, unpurified tap water may contain a higher percentage of minerals, which are also considered healthier.

It is important to focus more on drinking sufficient quantities of water daily according to weight, size, level of physical activity and the location.

In general, the daily rate of drinking water is estimated to be between 12 to 28 millilitres per half a kilogramme body weight, meaning that a person who weighs about 75 kilogrammes should drink 2.12 litres to 4.25 litres of water daily.

Over all, drinking a lot of water does not cause health harm, especially if distributed over different times of the day. However, drinking large amount of water at one time may lead to health problem known as water intoxication which causes a decrease in salt in the body as a result of the excretion from frequent urination.



Israeli forces engaged in ‘intense fighting’ in Khan Younis

BEIRUT/CAIRO/GAZA: Israeli forces intensified their bombing of the Gaza Strip on Wednesday and told civilians to leave a refugee camp in the north of the Palestinian enclave after the war stretched into Lebanon with the killing in Beirut of the Hamas deputy leader.

Israel has neither confirmed nor denied that it killed Saleh al Arouri in a drone strike in the Lebanese capital on Tuesday.

But military spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari said Israeli forces were in a high state of readiness and prepared for any scenario.

The assassination was a further sign that the nearly three-month war between Israel and Hamas was spreading across the region, drawing in the occupied West Bank, Hizbullah forces on the Lebanon-Israel border, and even Red Sea shipping lanes.

Arouri, 57, who lived in Beirut, was the first senior Hamas political leader to be assassinated since Israel began its offensive against the militant group in response to its deadly rampage into Israeli towns on October 7.

Hamas politburo member Hossam Badran said in a eulogy for Arouri: “We say to the criminal occupation (Israel) that the battle between us is open.”

Israel had long accused him of orchestrating attacks on its citizens. But a Hamas official said he was also “at the heart of negotiations” conducted by Qatar and Egypt over the outcome of the Gaza war and the release of Hamas-held Israeli hostages.

Hizbullah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah was due to make a speech in Beirut on Wednesday afternoon. Previously he had warned Israel



Palestinians inspect the site of an Israeli strike on a house in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip. – Reuters

against carrying out assassinations on Lebanese soil, vowing a “severe reaction”.

Hizbullah has been exchanging near-daily fire with Israel across Lebanon’s southern border since the Gaza war began. Following Arouri’s killing, the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon said it was deeply concerned about the possibility of an escalation “that could have devastating consequences for people on both sides of the border”.

The Israeli military said in its daily briefing that “intensive battles” with fighters were continuing in Gaza on Wednesday in the southern city of Khan Younis. It has said previously it is trying to flush out Hamas leaders in the area.

Residents and Palestinian media said Israeli forces bombed Al Nusseirat refugee camp in the northern part of the Hamas-ruled enclave overnight and into Wednesday, destroying several multi-floor buildings.

Israeli planes also dropped leaflets on Al Nusseirat ordering people to leave seven districts.

“You are in a dangerous combat area. The IDF is operating heavily in your area of residence. For your safety the IDF urge you to immediately evacuate this area and leave towards the known shelters in Deir Al Balah (west),” the leaflets said.

Israeli war planes and tanks also stepped up attacks on the Al Bureij refugee camp.

Hamas’ armed wing said it had killed 10 Israeli soldiers in fighting in Al Bureij and hit five tanks and troop carriers. The Israeli military said the number of its soldiers killed since its first incursion into Gaza on October 20 had reached 177.

In the Al Maghazi refugee camp, health officials said at least four people were killed in an Israeli air strike on a house. They said three people were also killed in an air strike on a house in Rafah in the south of Gaza.

Israel says it tries to avoid harm to civilians. But the total recorded Palestinian death toll had reached 22,313 by Wednesday, 128 of them in the past 24 hours, the health ministry said.

— Reuters

Arouri was a key player until death

CAIRO: Deputy Hamas leader Saleh al Arouri had long expected the Israeli drone strike that security sources said killed him in Beirut on Tuesday, three months after his group’s surprise cross-border assault that triggered a devastating war in Gaza.

“I am waiting for martyrdom and think that I lived too long,” he said in August, as he urged Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank to take up arms amid a surge of violence.

His killing comes at a defining moment for the organisation, as Israel attempts to eradicate it in retaliation for the October 7 attack, when Hamas fighters rampaged across the border, killing 1,200 people and seizing 240 hostages.

Israel has long accused him of lethal attacks on its citizens, but a Hamas official said he was also “at the heart of negotiations” over the outcome of the Gaza war and the release of hostages conducted by Qatar and Egypt.

“Whoever did this did a surgical strike against the Hamas leadership,” said Mark Regev, a senior adviser to Israel’s prime minister. Israel does not typically confirm or deny responsibility for such attacks.

Though less influential than Hamas’ leaders in Gaza, Arouri was seen as a key player in the movement, masterminding its operations in the West Bank from exile in Syria, Türkiye, Qatar and finally Lebanon after long stints in Israeli prisons.

Hamas has confirmed his death but not otherwise commented. An allied group, swore revenge for his killing in a statement on Tuesday, saying it would “not go unpunished”.



Saleh al Arour

Within Hamas, Arouri was described as a leading advocate of reconciliation between Palestinian factions, enjoying a good relationship with Fatah, the party of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas which holds sway in the West Bank.

But when it came to the conflict with Israel, Arouri was seen as a hardliner. He helped found the group’s military wing, the Izz el Deen al Qassam Brigades, and Israel accused him of orchestrating deadly attacks over the years.

It says he was behind the kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank in 2014, an act that triggered a seven-week Israeli assault on Gaza that killed 2,100 Palestinians.

As Israel’s occupation of the West Bank continued, with Jewish settlements expanding and Palestinian statehood appearing ever more distant, Arouri said there was “no other option” but to engage in what he called comprehensive resistance.

He was one of the senior Hamas officials behind the group’s strong expansion into the West Bank, where its gunmen have carried out a string of attacks on Israeli settlers over the past 18 months.

— Reuters

TENDER NOTICE


Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries
Wealth and Water Resources

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources Announces the following Tenders:-

Tender No.	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales Start Date	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Companies that are Eligible to Participate	Tender Document fee (R.O)
583/2023/ MAFWR/ HQ-59 - Recall - 1	Consulting Services for Design & Supervision of Food Security Warehouses in the Governorates	Tuesday 2/1/2023	Monday 22/1/2024	Sunday 11/2/2024	Specialized companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board with Excellent grade	(37/500) Omani Riyals for local companies ----- (10/-) Omani Riyals for SMEs
2/2024/ MAFWR/ HQ-1	Manufacturing and Supplying Boat for Fish Control Operations in Musandam Governorate	Monday 1/1/2023	Sunday 21/1/2024	Sunday 11/2/2024	Specialized companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board with Specialized grade	(25/-) Omani Riyals for local companies ----- (10/-) Omani Riyals for SMEs
8/2024/ MAFWR/ HQ-2	Maintenance Part of the Qwall at AlSeeb Fishery Harbour	Tuesday 2/1/2023	Monday 22/1/2024	Sunday 11/2/2024	Specialized companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board with Specialized grade	(25/-) Omani Riyals for local companies ----- (10/-) Omani Riyals for SMEs

- Interested Companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board (in the above mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.
- The value of the document will be paid & submitted on line on given website.
- The Tenderer should attach Bid Commitment Declaration for local companies, and for International company that not have head quarters in the Sultanate of Oman should attach Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman (as required in the tender) and addressed to the Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources.
- All correspondence pertaining to the tender inquiry must be online at e-tendering System.
- All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: +968 24402200 or etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om.

TENDERS COMMITTEE
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources

Borrell urges world to ‘impose’ solution to Gaza conflict

LISBON: EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell on Wednesday said the international community had to “impose” a solution to the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

“What we have learned over the last 30 years, and what we are learning now with the tragedy experienced in Gaza, is that the solution must be imposed from outside,” Borrell told diplomats in Portugal.

“Peace will only be achieved in a lasting manner if the international community gets involved intensely to achieve it and imposes a solution,” he said, pointing to the United States, Europe and Arab countries.

Borrell warned that a strike in Beirut on Tuesday that killed a senior Hamas leader was “an additional factor that can cause an escalation of the conflict”.

The EU’s top diplomat said he had planned to travel to Lebanon on Thursday but the trip might be cancelled due to security concerns. Although Israel



High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell.

did not claim responsibility, it is widely assumed to be behind the killing of Saleh al Arouri, 57, the political number two of Hamas and one of the founders of the group’s military wing.

Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas and has launched a relentless military campaign in Gaza that has claimed over 22,000 lives, according to the territory’s health ministry.

The Gaza war started after the bloody October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel that killed around 1,140 people, most of them civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official Israeli figures.

— AFP

TENDER NOTICE

Minerals Development Oman SAOC (MDO) would like to announce the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Closing Date of Selling	Submission Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee
(MDO-TD-2024-01)	Drilling Framework Agreement	10.01.2024	30.01.2024	Local Registered Companies who are experienced and certified in this kind of service	OMR 500/- Five Hundred Omani Rial (Non-Refundable)

- SMEs with Riyadh card are exempted from the bid fee payment.
- The tender fee shall only be accepted through bank deposit through the following bank account:

Account Name : Minerals Development Oman SAOC
Bank Name : Sohar International Bank
Branch : Qurum Branch
Account : 005020046853
Swift Code : BSHROMRXXX

- **Please note:** The original copy of the bank deposit receipt shall be handed over to Minerals Development Oman before collecting the tender document or complete the payment electronically by submitting a clear deposit receipt via tender’s email: tenders@mdo.om along with the company’s registration documents providing company name, tender number, and contact person. Any payment received after the closing date of the tender document distribution will not be refunded.

- Tender documents can be obtained from Minerals Development Oman main office, Contracts & Procurement Department located at Airport Heights, Building No.53, 4th Floor, Al Seeb, Sultanate of Oman from the date of publication of this announcement. (Office Hours: 09:00 AM to 02:00 PM, Sunday to Thursday).

- All technical queries/clarifications shall be sent to: tenders@mdo.om





Japan probes plane inferno after ‘miracle’ escape

TOKYO: Japanese investigators on Wednesday probed a collision at Tokyo’s Haneda Airport of a coast guard plane and a passenger jet that killed five people, with almost 400 others narrowly escaping a raging inferno.

All but one of the six people on the smaller aircraft were killed, but all 379 Japan Airlines passengers and crew escaped down emergency slides minutes before the Airbus was engulfed in flames late on Tuesday.

The blackened husk of the airliner, still sitting on the tarmac on Wednesday, bore witness to just how dangerous their escape had been. Several hundred metres (yards) away lay the remains of the coast guard’s DHC-8 aircraft.

The captain of the coast guard plane -- which had been bound for the New Year’s Day earthquake zone in central Japan -- was its lone survivor but suffered serious injuries.

Takuya Fujiwara from the

The flight recorder and the voice recorder from the coast guard plane had been found, but those of the passenger jet were still being sought

Japan Transport Safety Board told reporters that the flight recorder and the voice recorder from the coast guard plane had been found, but those of the passenger jet were still being sought.

“We are surveying the situation. Various parts are scattered on the runway,” Fujiwara said, adding that the authority planned to interview several people involved.

Asked at a briefing whether the Japan Airlines flight had landing permission, officials at the major carrier said: “Our understanding is that it was given.”

But JAL and the land ministry



An aerial view shows burnt Japan Airlines’ (JAL) Airbus A350 plane after a collision with a Japan Coast Guard aircraft at Haneda International Airport in Tokyo, Japan. – Reuters

declined to comment directly on exchanges between flight controllers and the two planes, citing the ongoing investigation. The Transport Ministry released the transcripts of flight

controllers’ communications, which approved the JAL flight to land while telling the coastguard

plane to go to a spot near the runway.

In a recording from Haneda’s control tower apparently made in the moments before the collision, available on a site that broadcasts live air traffic signals, a voice is heard advising JAL’s flight to “continue approach”.

NHK reported that the control tower had instructed the coast guard plane to hold short of the runway.

But the broadcaster also quoted an unnamed coast guard official as saying that the pilot, Genki Miyamoto, 39, said immediately after the accident that he had permission to take off.

Dozens of domestic flights were cancelled on Wednesday from Haneda, one of the world’s busiest airports, but international arrivals and departures were little affected.

The passenger plane had arrived from New Chitose Airport serving Sapporo on the northern island of Hokkaido. — AFP

S Korean opposition leader ‘could have been killed,’ says party

SEOUL: South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung narrowly escaped death when he was stabbed in the neck, a party lawmaker said on Wednesday, as police were granted a warrant to search his assailant’s property.

Lee was surrounded by journalists in southern Busan city when a man pretending to be a supporter pushed through a crowd and lunged at him, stabbing him on the left side of his neck with a knife.

Lee, who suffered a wound to his jugular vein, was first taken to a hospital in Busan, then flown to the capital Seoul where he underwent a two-hour surgery.

“Busan medical staff stated that if the attacker’s knife had struck Lee’s carotid artery he could have been killed instantly at the scene,” Democratic Party lawmaker Jung Chung-rae said during a party meeting on Wednesday.

Kang Cheong-hee, a medical doctor and a member of the Democratic Party, later said Lee suffered “a severe injury”.

Lee was admitted to the intensive care unit following the procedure.

He was then transferred to the general ward on Wednesday evening, as per the hospital



South Korea’s opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung arrives on a stretcher at Seoul National University Hospital, in Seoul, South Korea. – Reuters

guidelines, Yonhap news agency reported citing his party.

According to Yonhap, police said on Wednesday that they planned to seek an arrest warrant for the 66-year-old suspect, identified only by his surname Kim, who was detained at the scene.

A district court issued a warrant to search the suspect’s house and office as part of the investigation, Yonhap said, adding that police will focus on finding the exact

motive behind the attack.

South Korean authorities plan to bring attempted murder charges against the assailant, and the attacker told the police, according to Yonhap, that he intended to kill Lee.

“The assailant’s confession that he had meant to kill is utterly shocking,” lawmaker Jung said.

In footage aired on South Korean television stations, police were seen wrestling the suspect, who displayed a pro-Lee slogan,

Busan medical staff stated that if the attacker’s knife had struck Lee’s carotid artery he could have been killed instantly at the scene

JUNG CHUNG-RAE
Democratic Party lawmaker

to the ground.

The 59-year-old politician was “walking to his car while talking to reporters when the attacker asked for his autograph”, a witness told local broadcaster YTN.

According to Yonhap, suspect Kim had been working as a real estate agent in South Chungcheong Province, around 115 kilometres south of Seoul.

Citing delivery messages for registered mail from banks at his office, among other materials, Yonhap reported Kim had been facing financial difficulties and was unable to pay the monthly rent for the office for seven months. — AFP

Philippine military says second joint patrol with US under way



Philippine and US soldiers salute while national anthems are being played, during the opening ceremony of Balikatan joint military exercise, at Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines. – Reuters file photo

MANILA: The Philippines and the United States began a two-day joint patrol in the South China Sea on Wednesday, the Philippine military said in a statement.

Security engagements between the treaty allies soared last year amid growing tensions in the South China Sea.

The Philippines and the US first launched joint patrols in November, holding military drills for three days in waters near Taiwan and in the West Philippine Sea.

The Philippine military said their second joint patrol this week involved four vessels from the Philippine

navy and four ships from the US Indo-Pacific command that include an aircraft carrier, a cruiser and two destroyers.

Philippine armed forces chief Romeo Brawner said the second such joint military activity this week marked a “significant leap” in Manila’s alliance with the US and its interoperability with the American military.

“Our alliance is stronger than ever, sending a message to the world. We are advancing a rules-based international order and a free and open Indo-Pacific region in the face of regional challenges,” Brawner said. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

KAMPALA

Controversial Ugandan pastor shot in ‘murder attempt’

An influential Ugandan pastor and outspoken supporter of President Yoweri Museveni was hospitalised after a shooting attack which killed his bodyguard, police said on Wednesday.

Aloysius Bugingo was shot when “unidentified assailants opened fire on (his) vehicle... before swiftly escaping the scene on a motorcycle”, said police.

They said an investigation had been launched into “the attempted murder of Pastor Aloysius Bugingo... and the unfortunate



killing of his bodyguard, Muhumuza Richard.” Bugingo is a controversial figure in Uganda, one of the most influential Pentecostal churches in the religious East African country. — AFP

TEHRAN

Bombs kill 103 at Iran commemoration ceremony

At least 103 people were killed in Iran on Wednesday as two bombs in quick succession struck a crowd commemoration ceremony, state media reported.

The blasts struck near the Sahab al Zaman Mosque in Kerman, as crowds gathered to mark the fourth anniversary of a general’s death.

At least 170 people were also wounded in the bombings, state media said.

Iran’s Tasnim news agency, quoting informed sources, said



“two bags carrying bombs went off” at the site.

“The perpetrators... of this incident apparently detonated the bombs by remote control,” Tasnim added. — AFP

DHAKA

Army to keep peace ahead of Sunday’s election

Troops were deployed across Bangladesh on Wednesday amid fears of violence ahead of a national election.

Soldiers travelled in armoured vehicles to temporary camps set up across the capital Dhaka to help the civil administration maintain peace and security.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is boycotting the election, set to take place on Sunday.

The troops will only act on request from polling officers, the



military said in a statement.

The navy was deployed in two coastal districts and the air force will provide helicopter assistance to polling stations in remote hilly areas, it added. — Reuters



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In brief

■ BRUSSELS



EUROPEAN NATO TO BUY 1,000 PATRIOT MISSILES

Nato members in Europe have signed a contract for up to 1,000 Patriot missiles to bolster air defences, the alliance said on Wednesday.

Nato's procurement agency said the deal agreed by an initial group of countries including Germany, the Netherlands, Alliance chief Jens Stoltenberg welcomed the "timely announcement to invest in up to 1,000 new Patriot air defence missiles to bolster the alliance's security".

The Nato Support and Procurement Agency said the new contract would see a missile production set up in Germany by a venture between Germany's MBDA and Raytheon. — AFP

■ PARIS



FLOODINGS CAUSE EVACUATIONS AND POWER CUTS IN NORTH

Flooding following Storm Henk has led to localised power cuts, evacuations and the interruption of drinking water supplies in northern France.

In the north-eastern district of Pas-de-Calais, where the highest storm warning level was declared, almost 600 firefighters were deployed on Wednesday, according to the prefecture in the regional capital Arras.

After heavy rain caused several rivers to overflow, almost 200 people had to leave their homes. The drinking water supply was interrupted for 2,100 people and 1,450 residents had no electricity. A number of roads were closed due to the amount of water. — dpa

■ GENEVA



UN SOUNDS ALARM OVER US NITROGEN GAS EXECUTION

United Nations experts on Wednesday called on US authorities not to go ahead with the planned execution of an inmate by nitrogen hypoxia, saying the method may subject him to "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or even torture".

Kenneth Smith is scheduled to be executed in the US state of Alabama on January 25 using the method, which is intended to deprive him of oxygen by using a face mask connected to a cylinder of nitrogen.

"This will be the first attempt at nitrogen hypoxia execution," four UN Special Rapporteurs said in a statement. — Reuters

Russian border regions and Crimea hit by new Ukrainian attacks

MOSCOW: Crimea and two Russian regions neighbouring Ukraine saw another wave of attacks on Wednesday, local officials said, a day after Kyiv was hit by massive bombardment and amid intensifying aerial attacks on both sides.

"The situation in Belgorod continues to be tense. There were two attacks in the morning," the governor of the Belgorod region Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

Russian air defence said it destroyed six missiles over the Belgorod region, which has been repeatedly struck throughout the conflict.

One person was killed and eleven injured the day before, Gladkov said.

An aerial attack damaged infrastructures and caused power cuts in the Kursk region, to the north of Belgorod, its governor Roman Starovoyt said on Telegram.

And another missile was downed near Sevastopol in the Crimean peninsula that Russia annexed in 2014, the city's governor said, with no reported damage.

Russian regions bordering Ukraine have seen regular strikes since the beginning of the offensive.

But Belgorod has been particularly hit in the wake of massive Russian strikes on Ukraine last week.

On Friday, a massive bombardment across Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, killed over 30 people.

Meanwhile, deadly strikes hit



People stand next to destroyed cars at a site of a Russian missile strike, amid ongoing conflict, in Kyiv, Ukraine. — Reuters

residential buildings in Ukraine as an escalation of aerial attacks also wounded dozens and prompted Kyiv to urge speedier Western weapons shipments.

The bombardment of mainly Kyiv and northeastern Kharkiv came less than 24 hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed to step up strikes following an unprecedented Ukrainian attack on the Russian city of Belgorod.

In total, five people were killed and 130 wounded, authorities said.

"The enemy has planned their trajectories to cause as much

RUSSIAN AIR DEFENCE SAID IT DESTROYED SIX MISSILES OVER THE BELGOROD REGION, WHICH HAS BEEN REPEATEDLY STRUCK THROUGHOUT THE CONFLICT

damage as possible. This is an utterly premeditated terror," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his nightly address.

Since December 29, Russia has launched nearly 300 missiles and more than 200 drones against Ukraine, he said.

Moscow claimed to have struck only military installations, but Ukrainian Defence Minister Rustem Umerov said Russia was deliberately hitting critical infrastructure and residential neighbourhoods.

Kyiv urged Western allies to respond to the bombardment

by speeding up the delivery of air defence equipment, combat drones and long-range missiles at a time when allied backing has wavered.

Zelensky's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, said late on Tuesday he had discussed the attacks with White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

"We agreed on the importance of strengthening Ukrainian air defence," he said.

Kyiv said Moscow fired 99 missiles on Tuesday but 72 were downed, while Russia said it had shot down nine Ukrainian missiles over the Belgorod region. — AFP

Full results give Serbia ruling party election win

BELGRADE: Full election results on Wednesday handed Serbia's ruling party a major victory in the parliamentary and local vote held on December 17, amid protests that triggered thousands to protest alleged fraud.

The Balkan country's President Aleksandar Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has won 46.75 per cent of ballots, while the main opposition camp united under the banner "Serbia Against Violence" (SPN) secured 23.66 per cent, data show on Republic Electoral Commission (RIK) website said.

RIK did not release comment on the published results, but rather just updated the data to show all polling stations had been reported.

Opposition groups have contested the results, and SPN demanded an international independent investigation from the European Union.

Among other alleged irregularities, they claimed that ethnic-Serb voters from neighbouring Bosnia had been allowed and bussed to cast ballots illegally in capital Belgrade.

International observers also reported irregularities — including "vote buying" and "ballot box stuffing" — while

several Western nations voiced concern over the electoral process.

On January 2, Vucic rejected any outside probe, saying that elections are "a matter for (Serbian) state institutions".

Over the last few days, Serbian citizens could vote again at some 30 polling stations — mainly in rural areas — where the election commission could not establish results clearly.

The vote was boycotted by the opposition, and SNS won an expected victory in those polling stations as high as nearly 85 per cent in one of them.



Several thousands of people wave Serbian flags as they attend a rally of "ProGlas", a Serbian pro-democracy movement, to protest against alleged electoral fraud, in Belgrade, on December 30. — AFP file photo

Since the elections, protesters have taken to the streets and erected sporadic roadblocks in Belgrade, demanding annulling the vote over suspicion of widespread fraud.

The rallies culminated on December 24, when demonstrators tried to storm Belgrade city hall and used rocks and flagpoles to break windows of the capital's administrative building.

Thousands of students marched in central Belgrade in response to the violent dispersion of earlier protests that included tanks on the streets. — AFP

Doctors in England start longest strike in NHS history



People hold British Medical Association (BMA) branded placards calling for better pay, as they stand on a picket line outside St Thomas' Hospital in central London. — AFP

LONDON: Hospital doctors in England on Wednesday began their longest consecutive strike in the seven-decade history of Britain's National Service (NHS).

Junior doctors — those below consultant level — started a six-day walkout at 07:00 GMT, in a major escalation of their long-running pay dispute with the UK government.

The industrial action, which ends next Tuesday, comes at one of the busiest times of the year for the state-funded NHS, when it faces increased pressure from winter respiratory illnesses.

It also quickly follows a three-day strike held by doctors just before Christmas, part of a wider series of stoppages across several sectors sparked by high inflation and a cost-of-living crisis.

Striking doctors say their wages have gone down by a

quarter in real terms under the current government, which has been in power since 2010.

On a picket line outside St Thomas' Hospital, across the River Thames from the UK parliament in London, medics held up signs calling for better funding for the overstretched health service.

Others read "£15/hour is not a fair wage for a junior doctor" and "Reduced pay keeps the doctor away", with a map of Australia, which has previously advertised for UK-based staff to move.

"A lot of doctors are moving to Australia, not just because of the pay but also the work-life balance is better," said one doctor, Georgia Blackwell, 28.

UK Health Secretary Victoria Atkins warned that the latest strikes will have a "serious impact" on patients across the country. — AFP

Siliconomy is changing our world



Khalid Alsafi Al Huraibi
khalidalharibi@gmail.com

The writer is an entrepreneur and innovation adviser

Small things can make a big impact, and the tiny computing chips in all our digital products is a great example of this. Since Covid-19 pandemic, we realised how our demand and reliance on computing skyrocketed over the past few decades.

Where in the past, the silicon-based chips, called semiconductors were mainly made for computers, they are now in our phones, watches, screens, medical equipment, industry machines, weapons, cars, and every other digital products.

This has created what the international technology giant company Intel called a Siliconomy.

With the market size of this semiconductors reliant economy growing from a few hundred million Riyals Omani in 2023 to reach RO 385,000,104,500 (or \$1 trillion) by 2030 it is important to explore how communities can grow along better. Mainly, for a better impact communities need to harness this synergy through investing in education, enterprises, and the sustainability.

Learning silicon language

While this new term semiconductors is essential for products in our daily life it can be still considered a technical jargon.

Even more so in Arabic language, where the terms is translated literally making it sound even less attractive. Steps to start synergising with this growing global business begin at schools.

Educators and young students need to be familiar with the meaning and the potential of these tiny chips in our digital products, and how mastering them can make or break future economy.

Curricula and community friendly content will need to be created and shared with all segments of the community so that the community can participate in innovating and improving chips use cases.

Think small first

It took almost two decades for the world's two leading semiconductors enterprises, Taiwan's TSMC and the Netherland's ASML, to be the giants they are today.

In mid 2023, Omani engineers succeeded to design

CURRICULA AND COMMUNITY-FRIENDLY CONTENT NEED TO BE CREATED AND SHARED WITH ALL SEGMENTS OF THE COMMUNITY SO THEY CAN PARTICIPATE IN INNOVATING AND IMPROVING CHIPS USE CASES

their first microchips to be tested by TSMC and this could open the door wide open for a semiconductor's startups-lead road-map and ecosystem, backed by the Digital Economy Programme of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology - MTCIT and other entities, according to the MoTCIT's Under-Secretary for ICT Dr Ali al Shidhani.

Sustainable siliconomy

With the world agreeing on environmentally friendly policies and emissions reductions, as in the recent COP28 agreements, communities will benefit from focusing on stimulating the demand for sustainable raw materials for siliconomy.

As we witness the advancement in computing and artificial intelligence being used and abused in regional and global conflicts by contributing to suffering of defenceless populations, the world needs to have a tough ethical conversation about divesting from markets that support rouge apartheid regimes and invest in ethical breakthrough sustainable medical, climate, housing, and food security markets.

Fears in Wales over legacy of its coal mining past

MARIE HEUCLIN

It was nearly four years ago but the memory of the landslip that sent 60,000 tonnes of old mining debris sliding down a Welsh hillside still haunts former miner Jeff Coombes.

First the river he was walking along with his dog in the heart of the Rhondda Valley in south Wales turned brown. Then the water slowed down. He noticed the coal tip was moving. After that it was the noise that hit him. "Well it was more of a roar," Coombes, 77, said.

The ever-present danger of disused coal tips, exacerbated by the effects of global warming, looms large in Wales.

On October 21, 1966, a slag heap collapsed onto a village school and houses in the small south Wales mining village of Aberfan.

The disaster killed 28 adults and 116 children. Nearly 60 years later, it still casts a long shadow.

No-one was hurt in the 2020 incident on the hillside at Tylorstown.

But it prompted the Welsh authorities to undertake a comprehensive census of old tips, also known as slag or spoil heaps.

It found more than 2,500 of the mini-mountains of debris from old mine shafts nationwide, a legacy of Wales's mining past.

Of those, 350 were deemed to pose a serious risk of collapse, including 79 located in the Rhondda Cynon Taf region north of Cardiff, according to the latest count.

They will now have to be monitored twice a year. The heaps can "become destabilised because they comprise of loose (unconsolidated) material" sitting on slopes, said Ashley Patton, a geological engineer at the British Geological Survey.

"The other major triggering factor for destabilising spoil heaps is water," he said, adding that intense rainfall had been implicated in the slippage at Tylorstown.

In 2021, an independent report on climate change risks highlighted the increasing likelihood of future landslides linked to former mining activity, as rains become more frequent and more violent. Along the road that winds through the Rhondda valley, the slopes on either side are now covered in vegetation, making the danger almost invisible.

"Most of them are covered over by trees (but) it's around you.

"People have become conscious of that after Tylorstown tip slid," said Phil Rowe, a former local councillor in neighbouring Ferndale.

The fear of another disaster had caused "a lot of panic" locally, he said, adding that he didn't believe the authorities were carrying out the necessary surveillance. — AFP

Trump team, burned in 2016, looks to close out Iowa



Michael Gold

The writer is the political correspondent for NYT



Kellen Browning

The writer is reporter for NYT based in San Francisco

As former President Donald Trump campaigned in Iowa in the fall, he projected the utmost confidence. He told his supporters during speeches that his advisers had constantly warned him not to take the state for granted. Buoyed by his dominance in state polls, Trump insisted he had no reason to worry.

"We're going to win the Iowa caucuses in a historic landslide," Trump predicted in speeches in September and October.

But as he returned to Iowa last month, with the state's caucuses on January 15 fast approaching, Trump injected a note of concern. Though he retained his confidence, he warned his supporters of a rising threat: complacency.

"The poll numbers are scary, because we're leading by so much," Trump said December 19 in Waterloo during his final trip to Iowa of 2023. "The key is, you have to get out and vote."

"Don't sit home and say, 'I think we'll take it easy, darling. It's a wonderful day, beautiful. Let's just take it easy, watch television and watch the results,'" Trump later added. "No, because crazy things can happen."

With just two weeks until Iowa's first-in-the-nation nominating contest, Trump's campaign is dedicated to meeting high expectations and avoiding a repeat of 2016, when Trump narrowly came in second in Iowa despite being ahead in polls.

But while his Republican rivals are more focused on knocking on doors and swaying minds, Trump and his campaign have directed their efforts toward teaching supporters how to caucus and recruiting a grassroots network to help guarantee they show up.

"We already have the votes to win," one aide said. "All we have to do is turn them out."

The campaign has focused much of its effort on enlisting and training its most ardent supporters to become "caucus captains" who can help recruit



Former President, Donald Trump (unseen), gives remarks during a Commit to Caucus event at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

other Trump supporters to be present at caucus sites and to speak on Trump's behalf.

The campaign is also engaged in the standard fare of political operations: distributing lawn signs, holding events where Trump addresses voters and collecting phone numbers and emails to solicit donations and motivate likely supporters.

TRUMP'S CAMPAIGN IS DEDICATED TO MEETING HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND AVOIDING A REPEAT OF 2016, WHEN TRUMP NARROWLY CAME IN SECOND IN IOWA DESPITE BEING AHEAD IN POLLS

Trump's advisers have pointed in particular to an extensive database that the campaign has compiled over his past two presidential runs, and that it has been using to identify potential caucus goers who need a nudge to show up on January 15.

The campaign has drawn on the contact information of voters who attended Trump events, and on the records of campaign donors who live

in Iowa. Many of those people voted for Trump in general elections but did not participate in the 2016 caucus, advisers said.

Staff members have sent a blitz of text messages, phone calls, emails and direct mail urging these supporters to caucus.

A senior adviser to the campaign who was not authorised to speak publicly said the access to that data might give the campaign a distinct advantage that reduced its dependence on door knocking, a costly and labour-intensive effort that is central to rival campaigns.

Super political action committees backing both Gov Ron DeSantis of Florida and Nikki Haley, a former governor of South Carolina, have undertaken large-scale door knocking operations aimed at identifying likely supporters or at persuading undecided voters.

The Iowa caucuses create a challenge for turnout different from primary elections, in which voters simply need to go to a polling place and mark a ballot.

Participants of the caucuses must arrive on time and stay until they end. The meetings open with speeches by attendees on behalf of their preferred candidates, in a final bid to win over their friends and neighbours. Then everybody votes.

— The New York Times

Deepfakes deceive voters!

Divyendra Singh Jadoun was busy making artificial intelligence-based visual effects and voice clones for film and television in India, when he began getting calls from politicians: could he create AI videos, or deepfakes, for their election campaign?

With a hotly-contested local election in his home state of Rajasthan last November, and a national election due by May this year, the opportunity for his company, The Indian Deepfaker, is tremendous. But Jadoun was reluctant.

“The technology to create deepfakes is so good now, it can be done almost instantaneously, with very little effort — and people cannot tell if it’s real or fake,” said Jadoun, 30.

“There are no guidelines on deepfakes, and that’s worrying, as it has the potential to influence how a person votes,” he said.

Instagram reels of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi singing in regional languages have gone viral recently, as have TikTok videos of Indonesian presidential candidates Prabowo Subianto and Anies Baswedan speaking in fluent Arabic. But they were all created with AI, and posted with no label.

With elections due in India, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan in the coming weeks, misinformation is rife on social media platforms, with deepfakes — video or audio made using AI and broadcast as authentic — being particularly concerning, say tech experts and authorities.

In India, where more than 900 million people are eligible to vote, Modi has said deepfake videos are a “big concern”, and authorities have warned social media platforms they could lose their safe-harbour status that protects them from liability for third-party content posted on their sites if they do not act.



Rina Chandran

The writer is Tech Correspondent for the Thomson Reuters Foundation

THE TECHNOLOGY TO CREATE DEEPFAKES IS SO GOOD NOW, IT CAN BE DONE ALMOST INSTANTANEOUSLY, WITH VERY LITTLE EFFORT

In Indonesia — where more than 200 million voters will go to the polls on February 14 — deepfakes of all three presidential candidates and their running mates are circulating online, and have the potential to influence election outcomes, said Nuurrianti Jalli, who studies misinformation on social media.

“From microtargeting of voters with disinformation to spreading false narratives at a scale and speed unachievable by human actors alone, these AI tools can significantly influence voter perceptions and behaviour,” she said.

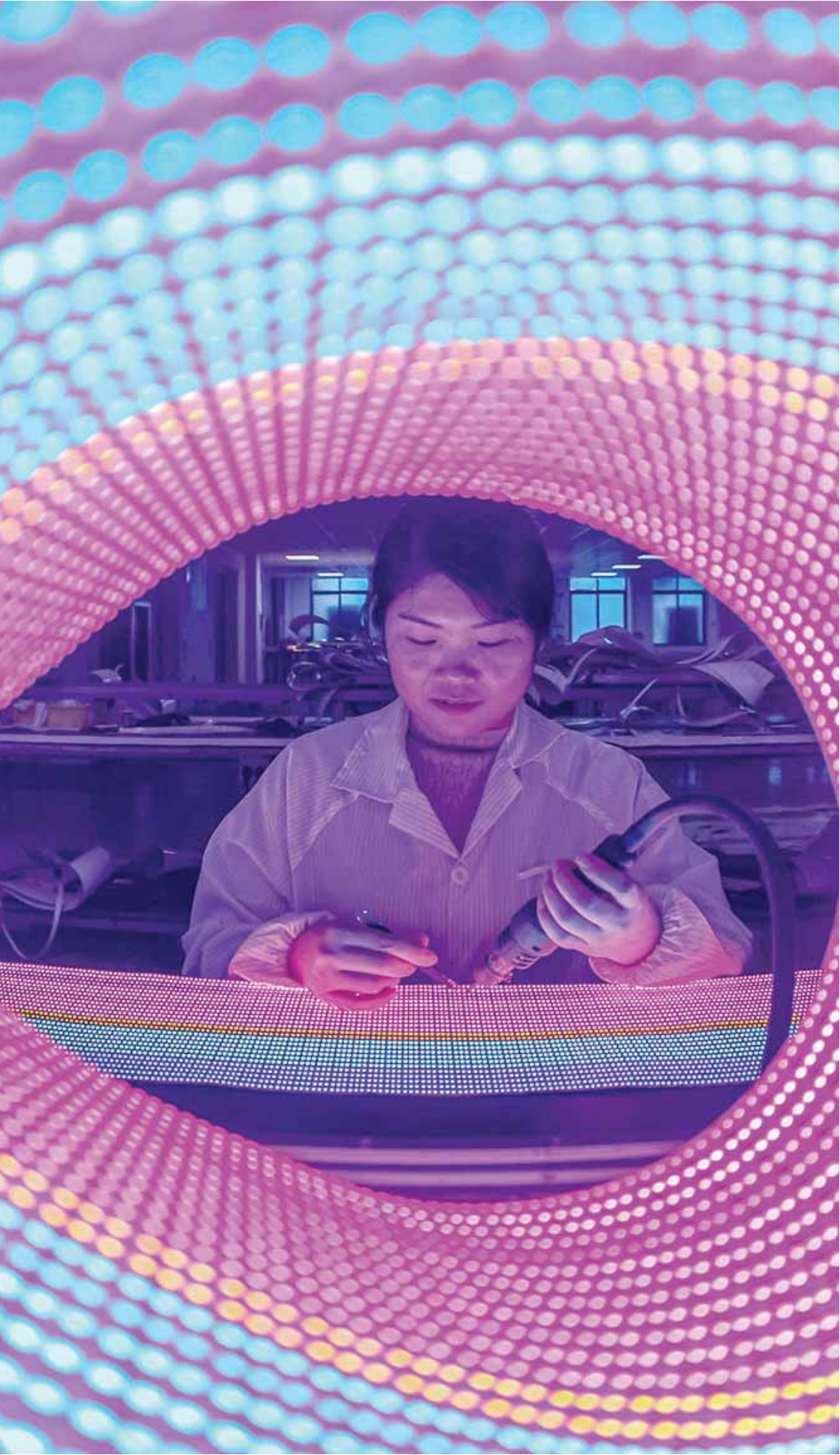
“In environments where misinformation is already prevalent, AI-generated content can further skew public perception and influence voting behaviour,” added Jalli, an assistant professor at Oklahoma State University’s media school.

Deepfake images and videos churned out by generative AI tools such as Midjourney, Stable Diffusion and OpenAI’s Dall-E popped up ahead of elections from New Zealand to Turkiye and Argentina last year, with growing concerns about their impact on US presidential polls in November.

AI makes the creation and spread of disinformation faster, cheaper and more effective, the US non-profit Freedom House said in a recent report.

In Bangladesh — where Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is set for her fourth straight term after polls on January 7 — deepfake videos of female opposition politicians Rumin Farhana and Nipun Roy have emerged. While they were debunked quickly, they are still circulated, and even poor-quality deepfake content is misleading people, said Sayeed al Zaman, an assistant professor of journalism at Bangladesh’s Jahangirnagar University, who studies social media.

CHECKING LIGHTS!



A worker checks LED lights dedicated for export at a factory in Ruichang, in central China's Jiangxi province, on Wednesday. – AFP

Clarifying America’s great inequality debate

Debates about inequality trends in the United States have leapt from the pages of academic journals to leading media outlets. While conservatives have long questioned whether US inequality has really increased, The Economist recently weighed in, concluding that “the idea that inequality is rising is very far from a self-evident truth.” Unfortunately, this debate has muddled several issues in an unhelpful manner.

There are different notions of inequality, each of which is relevant to a different question and complicated by its own unique measurement challenges. The most straightforward metric is labour-income inequality, which refers to what high earners receive relative to low earners. When we talk about how workers with college degrees are faring compared to those with just a high-school diploma, we are also talking about labour-income inequality.

Of course, measuring labour income is not a simple matter, because some earnings go unreported, and some very highly paid individuals deploy strategies to make their labour income look like capital income (which is taxed at a lower rate). Moreover, when it comes to determining if real (inflation-adjusted) wages have increased, there is a vigorous debate about whether the consumer price index is overstating true inflation. But even after accounting for these issues, there is no doubt that



Daron Acemoglu

The writer is a co-author of Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty

THE MITIGATING EFFECTS OF TAXES AND TRANSFERS DO NOT CHANGE THE FACT THAT THE MARKET ECONOMY HAS BEEN MALFUNCTIONING FOR THE PAST 40 YEARS

labour-income inequality has surged at least since 1980, and that the trend has continued since the post-2008 Great Recession.

This trend stands in stark contrast to the post-war era, when labour-income inequality was stable or declining. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, workers with a high-school diploma or less enjoyed real wage growth at the same rate as those with a college degree or more. But this pattern of shared prosperity ended sometime in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While the real earnings of workers with college degrees has continued to rise steadily, workers without one now earn less today than they did in 1980.

Contrary to what The Economist suggests, this general pattern is not in question. While a recent paper by David Autor, Arin Dube and Annie McGrew shows that wages at the bottom of the distribution did finally start increasing around 2015 — leading to a notable compression between the top and the bottom of after 2020 — those at the bottom still earn much less, relative to the top, than they did in 1980.

A second definition of inequality rests on overall (pre-tax and transfer) income, which includes not just labour income, but also income from dividends, capital gains and

business earnings reported on tax returns. The problem with this metric is that business income is not always reported, and other forms of capital income appear in tax records only when capital gains are realised (such as when someone sells stock for more than they paid for it).

Still, there is broad agreement on what has happened to “observed total income inequality” or “fiscal income inequality,” which simply captures total incomes on tax returns. Here, the share of the top 1 per cent has increased from about 8 per cent just before 1980 to almost 18 per cent by 2019; when capital gains are included, it rises to over 21 per cent. Much of the current debate

stems from seminal work by Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, and a complementary methodology they developed together with Gabriel Zucman. This trio allocates unreported capital income in a way that closely follows the distribution of reported capital income, thus finding a broadly similar increase in the overall income share of the top 1 per cent compared to its share of observed fiscal income. But now, recently published work by economists Gerald Auten and David Splinter challenges the trio’s famous findings.

Part of the disagreement concerns untaxed capital income, whether because of tax evasion or various exemptions, such as those that apply to corporate retained

earnings and income in various retirement accounts and trusts. Since this untaxed component is now estimated to account for nearly 90 per cent of all capital income, the question is how it is distributed. Auten and Splinter assume that untaxed capital income is much more equally distributed than Piketty, Saez and Zucman do, and they estimate the top 1 per cent’s claim to this income to be much less than its share of observed capital income (15 per cent versus about 50 per cent for taxed capital income today).

There are good reasons why the top 1 per cent may have a lower share of untaxed capital income compared to taxed capital income (for example, many small businesses do not report their incomes and many middle-class Americans have retirement accounts). Given the many options available to the very wealthy for tax avoidance and evasion, however, it seems unreasonable to assume that they truly command such a small share of untaxed capital income. Moreover, even with the Auten and Splinter adjustments, the top 1 per cent’s share of overall income increased from 1980 to today, albeit by significantly less than what Piketty, Saez and Zucman find. @Project Syndicate, 2023



There are different notions of inequality.

sport

‘ZEYARAH’, ‘SHAROOT’ WIN HUMAN RIDERS’ RACES IN BARKA

CONCLUDING DAY TO WITNESS SEVEN ROUNDS

WALEED AL JAHWARI
BARKA, JAN 3

‘Al Hanouf’ owned by Hijin Al Bashayer, snatched the main race of ‘Lagaya’ category, while ‘Zeyarah’ and ‘Sharoot’ owned by Amer al Zarei grabbed both races with human riders, on the second day of the general camel race in Barka on Wednesday.

The general race competitions will continue till January 4 at Al Fulaij Race field in Barka, supported by the Royal Court Affairs represented by Royal Camel Corps (RCC) and organised by Oman Camel Racing Federation (OCRF). As many as 75 races are being held over three days and a number of camels will qualify to the final race (HM Cup), which will be held in March to conclude camel racing season 2023-24.

The second day’s competition witnessed 16 races for ‘Lagaya’ category, three years old over a distance of 5 km, in addition to two races for human riders for 2 km. The top two winners will qualify to the HM Cup Festival from the first 7 races. Also, RCC will purchase a camel with the best record from this category.

The first race was won by ‘Al Hanouf’, owned by Hijin Al Bashayer under the trainer Hamid al Jahafi. While ‘Dhabiya’, owned by Ali al Amri snatched the second race. ‘Shawaheen’, owned by Abdullah al Ghufaili, came first in third race. ‘Ghara’ finished first in the fourth race, owned by Hamoud al Ghufaili. The fifth race was won by ‘Nouf’, owned by Amer al Amri. ‘Haflah’ grabbed the sixth race, owned by Mohammed al Wahaibi. ‘Al Shamikha’ claimed the seventh race, owned by Hamid al Jahafi. The eighth race was won by Hamid al Jahafi through ‘Al Lehafi’.

In the ninth race ‘Ghanayem’ came first, owned by Abdullah al

The second day’s competition witnessed 16 races for ‘Lagaya’ category, three years old over a distance of 5 km, in addition to two races for human riders for 2 km. The top two winners will qualify to the HM Cup Festival from the first 7 races.

Wahaibi. ‘Lafia’ snatched the 10th race, owned by Said al Maliki. ‘Al Gayoor’ won the 11th race, owned by Jassim al Maharbi. ‘Al Fateen’ was the champion of the 12th race, owned by Ahmed al Jahafi. ‘Al Shamekh’ won the 13th race, owned by Said al Lahifi. ‘Najd’ was the hero in the 14th race, owned by Said al Hajri. ‘Monhe’ claimed the 15th race, owned by Salem al Hajri and ‘Mubha’, owned by Othman al Darai, won the concluding 16th race of the category.

In the human rider’s race for 2 km, both races were claimed by ‘Zeyarah’ and ‘Sharoot’, owned by Amer al Zarei.

The concluding day will witness 7 rounds for ‘Al Ythaa’ category, four years old for 6 km. The top two winners will qualify to the HM Cup Festival from the first 4 races. The RCC will purchase a camel with the best record from this category. The competition will continue with three races for ‘Al Thanaya’ category, five years old for 8 km, the best 13 camels from top two races will qualify for HM Cup race. The race will conclude with the ‘Al Hawl’ category, above six years for 8 km. The best 21 camels from the top three races will qualify for the HM Cups race.



New Zealand first to arrive for Olympic Qualifier challenge

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 3

New Zealand were the first team to check in for FIH Men’s Olympic Qualifier as they arrived in Muscat on Wednesday almost 10 days before the start of the tournament.

During this period, New Zealand players, coached by Nicol Greg, will have an intensive preparatory programme ahead of both major events began including Olympic Qualifier

and then the inaugural edition of men’s and women’s FIH Hockey5s World Cup from January 24 to 31 at Oman Hockey Stadium. Upon their arrival at Muscat International Airport, the New Zealand team delegation was welcomed by the members from the main organising committee. England team is expected to be the following team to arrive in Muscat on Thursday.

New Zealand, an island country in the southwestern



Pacific Ocean, will compete for the three direct tickets to the Paris Olympics 2024 as they vie against other seven team namely Germany, Canada, Chile, England, Malaysia, Pakistan and China.

New Zealand will play their official opening match against Chile on January 15. Then, they will take on Germany in the second match on January 16 while they will face Canada in day three match on January 18. All the matches will be held at

Oman’s newly-built state-of-the-art hockey stadium located in Al Amerat. Three teams will qualify from the Muscat qualifiers to the Paris Olympics 2024.

FIH Men’s Olympic Qualifier will act as a best rehearsal ahead of the Men’s and Women’s FIH Hockey5s World Cup which will be staged in the same stadium. Moreover, the warm-up hockey pitch in the stadium will also be under test as the early arrived teams will have their training sessions in these venues.

INDIA IN CONTROL AFTER WICKETS TUMBLE

Siraj takes career-best 6-15 as SA skittled out for 55

CAPE TOWN: India hold a good chance of levelling the series with South Africa after 23 wickets fell on the first day of the second and final Test at Newlands on Wednesday.

After being bowled out for 55 in the first innings, South Africa were 62 for three in the second innings at the close, still 36 runs short of India's first innings total of 153.

Mohammed Siraj produced a sensational career-best spell of six for 15 as South Africa were bowled out before lunch after choosing to bat first on a pitch which gave considerable help to the fast bowlers throughout the day.

South Africa's total was their lowest in almost 92 years, since they were bowled out for 36 and 45 by Australia on a rain-affected pitch in Melbourne in February 1932.

It was the lowest total by any team in a Test against India, beating 62 by New Zealand in Mumbai in December 2021.

Siraj bowled superbly in an unchanged nine-over spell.

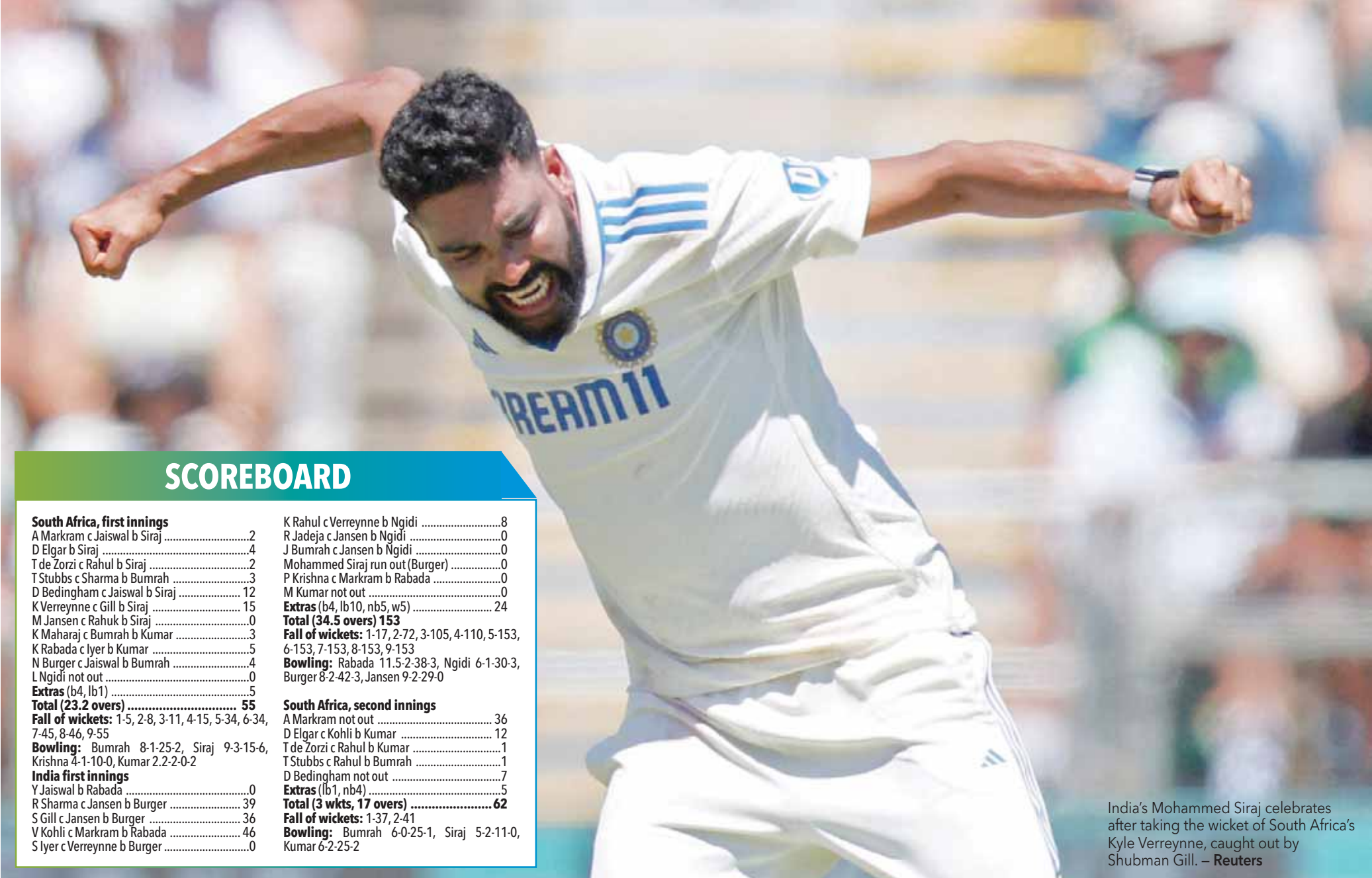
India cruised into the lead in 9.4 overs, before the afternoon drinks break.

The tourists seemed set for a substantial advantage when they reached 153 for four, with the experienced Virat Kohli and KL Rahul at the crease.

But the remaining six wickets fell for no runs in 11 balls.

Lungi Ngidi had Rahul caught behind and took two more wickets in the same over.

Kagiso Rabada had Kohli



SCOREBOARD

South Africa, first innings

A Markram c Jaiswal b Siraj	2
D Elgar b Siraj	4
T de Zorzi c Rahul b Siraj	2
T Stubbs c Sharma b Bumrah	3
D Bedingham c Jaiswal b Siraj	12
K Verreynne c Gill b Siraj	15
M Jansen c Rahuk b Siraj	0
K Maharaj c Bumrah b Kumar	3
K Rabada c Iyer b Kumar	5
N Burger c Jaiswal b Bumrah	4
L Ngidi not out	0
Extras (b4, lb1)	5
Total (23.2 overs)	55
Fall of wickets:	1-5, 2-8, 3-11, 4-15, 5-34, 6-34, 7-45, 8-46, 9-55
Bowling:	Bumrah 8-1-25-2, Siraj 9-3-15-6, Krishna 4-1-10-0, Kumar 2-2-2-0-2

India first innings

Y Jaiswal b Rabada	0
R Sharma c Jansen b Burger	39
S Gill c Jansen b Burger	36
V Kohli c Markram b Rabada	46
S Iyer c Verreynne b Burger	0

South Africa, second innings

A Markram not out	36
D Elgar c Kohli b Kumar	12
T de Zorzi c Rahul b Kumar	1
T Stubbs c Rahul b Bumrah	1
D Bedingham not out	7
Extras (lb1, nb4)	5
Total (3 wkts, 17 overs)	62
Fall of wickets:	1-37, 2-41
Bowling:	Bumrah 6-0-25-1, Siraj 5-2-11-0, Kumar 6-2-25-2

India's Mohammed Siraj celebrates after taking the wicket of South Africa's Kyle Verreynne, caught out by Shubman Gill. – Reuters

caught at second slip for 46 in the next over, Mohammed Siraj was run out and Prasidh Kumar caught at second slip.

Stand-in South African captain Dean Elgar was dismissed twice on the first day of his final Test

match.

Elgar was out for four and 12 in an ignominious end to a Test batting career which yielded 5347 runs in 86 matches at an average of 37.92.

Elgar was bowled by Siraj in

the first innings and caught by Virat Kohli at first slip off Mukesh Kumar in the second innings.

As he reluctantly left the field after his second dismissal Indian players ran to shake his hand.

Elgar's opening partner Aiden

Markram made just two in the first innings but was more in command in the second innings and was unbeaten on 36 at the close.

However, Tony de Zorzi and debutant Tristan Stubbs both fell

for one run.

South Africa won the first Test in Centurion by an innings and 32 runs in a match which lasted only three days.

The current match seems destined to be shorter. — AFP

Pakistan fight back to frustrate Australia

SYDNEY: Gritty Pakistan hit back from looming disaster to finish with 313 on the back of fighting half-centuries from Mohammad Rizwan, Agha Salman and Aamer Jamal on the first day of the third Test against Australia on Wednesday.

The tourists, staring down a meagre innings total when reduced to 96 for five after winning the toss, went on the counter-attack to frustrate the Australians late in the day at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

Rizwan clubbed 88 off 103 balls, number nine Jamal smashed four sixes in a spirited 82 off 97 and Salman hit 53 off 67 to give the tourists renewed hope after a car-crash start to the innings.

David Warner, playing in his 112th and final Test, had to see off a tense final over before the close and survived a scare when the ball ricocheted just over his stumps off spinner Sajid Khan before finishing with six in Australia's reply of 6-0.

Australia skipper Pat Cummins captured five for 61 for his third successive five-wicket haul in the series.

"When I came out to bat I knew the Australians were going to come hard after us, I was well prepared for that, they wanted to get us out as early as possible, so I was going after every ball," said Jamal, who reached his highest Test score.

"There was no personal milestone for me, because my milestone was just to represent my country and that I achieved. I was trying to get as many runs as I could."

On a day that began with elation



Pakistan's Aamer Jamal celebrates his fifty.

for Australia ended in frustration as Pakistan's tail wagged furiously to rescue their side after a terrible start.

Rizwan and Salman triggered the comeback with a spirited 94-run stand to defy the stellar Australia attack.

Rizwan, who had been dropped for the first Test, blasted two sixes and 10 fours off 103 balls before he fell to a legside trap set by Cummins.

Rizwan top-edged a pull shot for Josh Hazlewood to take the catch at fine leg after posting the highest individual score by a Pakistan batsman of the series.

ROUSING MORNING

Salman took up the cudgels with a half-century before he was caught by Travis Head off Mitchell Starc.

Jamal maintained the fightback and was nearing a century before he fell to Nathan Lyon.

That left Warner, who received a guard of honour from the Pakistan team, to see out the final over of the day and he began with a flourish, cutting the first ball for four from Sajid.

"Fair play to Aamer Jamal, he batted beautifully. We threw everything at him and I thought he batted really well," said Australia

all-rounder Mitchell Marsh.

"I think it finished a pretty even day. I think it's going to be a traditional SCG wicket with a lot of fielders in front of the wicket, we'll take that today."

It was a rousing morning session for Australia as openers Abdullah Shafique and debutant Saim Ayub were dismissed inside two overs.

The out-of-form Shafique fell to the second ball of Starc's opening over and Ayub, brought in for Imam-ul-Haq to make his Test debut, only lasted two balls before a Hazlewood outswinger was edged to Alex Carey.

Babar Azam caressed three glorious cover drives to the ropes before he was out for 26, lbw to Cummins, leaving the tourists tottering at 39 for three. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

Pakistan 1st innings

Abdullah Shafique c Smith b Starc	0
S Ayub c Carey b Hazlewood	0
S Masood c Smith b Marsh	35
B Azam lbw Cummins	26
S Shakeel c Carey b Cummins	5
M Rizwan c Hazlewood b Cummins	88
A Salman c Head b Starc	53
S Khan c Lyon b Cummins	15
A Jamal c Starc b Lyon	82
H Ali c Starc b Cummins	0
M Hamza not out	7
Extras (lb1, nb1)	2
Total (all out, 77.1 overs)	313
Fall of wickets:	1-0, 2-4, 3-39, 4-47, 5-96, 6-190, 7-220, 8-226, 9-227
Bowling:	Starc 16-2-75-2, Hazlewood 15-2-65-1, Cummins 18-1-61-5, Lyon 17-1-0-74-1, Marsh 7-1-27-1, Labuschagne 3-1-9-0, Head 1-0-1-0

Australia 1st Innings

David Warner not out	0
Usman Khawaja not out	6
Total (0 wkts, 1 over)	6
Bowling:	Sajid 1-0-6-0

IPL format for LIV Golf might get critic Mclroy on board

LONDON: Rory Mclroy says if LIV Golf was modelled like the Indian Premier League (IPL) and staged over two months then he would consider playing in it.

The 34-year-old Northern Irishman has been a vocal opponent of the Saudi Arabia-funded LIV Golf once saying he would retire rather than play in it "if it was the last place to play golf on earth".

However, he has toned it down of late — especially after his friend, fellow Ryder Cup star and formerly a stringent critic of LIV Jon Rahm decamped and is reportedly set to earn upwards of \$566.4 million.

Attracting some of world cricket's top stars with bumper salaries, the pioneering IPL helped make Twenty20 hugely popular, attracting hundreds of millions of viewers and spawning copycat events worldwide.

Last June, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) sold the broadcast rights for the next five IPL seasons to global media giants for an eye-watering \$6.2 billion.

LIV's circuit is based around team events with its 48 players split into 12 teams.

"I would love LIV to turn into the IPL of golf," Mclroy told the Stick to Football Podcast.

"They take two months of calendar. You go and do this team stuff and a bit different and is a different format.

"If they were to do something like that I would say 'yeah that sounds like fun' because you are working within the ecosystem."

Mclroy said he had "accepted" LIV is "part of our sport now" but he takes issue with the huge sums being paid to players when it could be used to invest in the sport.

"The thing I have come to realise is if you have got people,



Rory Mclroy

or a sovereign wealth fund, wanting to spend money in your sport that is ultimately a good thing," Mclroy said.

"But you just want to get them to spend it the right way and spend it on things that are important in the game.

"Instead of giving someone \$100m why don't you put \$50m into grassroots programmes for the R&A or USPGA. Spending that money to actually grow the game and not just buy talent would be a way better way."

Four-time major winner Mclroy said he hoped the divisions sparked by the breakaway would be healed but he feared there was a lack of will to do so. "I hope everyone comes back together," he said.

"You have got guys on both sides that don't want it to happen. The LIV guys don't want to come back to play on the PGA Tour because they don't think they have been treated very well.

"Some of the PGA Tour guys don't want to see those other guys.

"People need to put their egos and feelings aside and come back together and we all move forward because that would be a good thing for golf," he concluded. — AFP

De Minaur snaps Djokovic run

SWIATEK LEADS POLAND INTO UNITED CUP SEMIS



PERTH: Novak Djokovic crashed to his first defeat of the season and first in Australia for six years with a stunning 6-4, 6-4 loss to Alex de Minaur who put Australia on course for a 2-0 win over Serbia in their United Cup quarterfinal on Wednesday.

Djokovic was hampered by a right wrist problem in Serbia's victory over Czech Republic on Tuesday and the world number one had it worked on again by a trainer before De Minaur earned a late break and went on to clinch

the opening set.

Australian Open champion Djokovic dropped serve yet again to hand De Minaur a 4-3 advantage in the second set and saved three match points later, but was unable to prevent the shock loss ahead of the year's first Grand Slam later this month.

Djokovic was on a 43-match winning streak in Australia and preparing for a tilt at an 11th Melbourne Park title having last lost in the country to Chung Hyeon in the fourth round of the

2018 edition when he was plagued by an elbow issue.

"It's extremely special," said world number 12 De Minaur, who won 33 out of 34 points behind his first serve to claim his first win over a world number one.

"Novak's an unbelievable competitor and what he's done for the sport is pretty special. It feels surreal, it feels amazing and I'm happy to do it here in Perth and in Australia.

"Ultimately when you go against Novak, you've just got to

go out there, try and enjoy, back yourself and no matter what, keep fighting till the end. Today was my day. I'm happy I was able to get the win. This one definitely means a lot."

De Minaur also became the first Australian player to defeat a world number one since Nick Kyrgios downed Daniil Medvedev in the 2022 US Open and will carry his nation's hopes during the January 14-28 Australian Open.

Ajla Tomljanovic secured the tie for Australia and a last-four spot

with a 6-1, 6-1 win over Natalija Stevanovic.

Top seeds Poland earlier beat China to reach the semifinals of the 18-team event after the big-hitting Hubert Hurkacz eased past Zhang Zhizhen 6-3, 6-4 and Iga Swiatek fought back from 2-0 down in the first set to beat Zheng Qinwen 6-2, 6-3.

It was Swiatek's third straight singles victory in the event which the world number one is using to prepare for this month's Australian Open.

Caroline Garcia and Adrian Mannarino guided France into the quarterfinals with a victory over Italy. World number 20 Garcia beat Jasmine Paolini 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 after Mannarino beat Lorenzo Sonego 6-4, 6-4 in the Group D tie.

Greece beat Canada 2-0 in Group B as Australian Open runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas won his first singles match of the season beating Steven Diez 6-2, 6-3 before Maria Sakkari rallied past Leylah Fernandez 7-6(2), 6-3. — Reuters

Big-serving Pliskova ends Osaka comeback

BRISBANE: Naomi Osaka said on Wednesday she was "super disappointed" but just being on court was a "personal win" after her return to tennis at the Brisbane International was ended by defending champion Karolina Pliskova.

Pliskova, who won the tournament the last time it was held in 2020, bounced back from losing the first set to grind down the Japanese star 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 in the second round.

World number two Aryna Sabalenka, meanwhile, thumped Italian Lucia Bronzetti 6-3, 6-0 in a dominant display on Pat Rafter Arena, while second seed Elena Rybakina downed Australian qualifier Olivia Gadecki 6-4, 6-1.

"Even though it's super disappointing today, I know that if I keep training and if I keep putting in the work, then I'll eventually get to where I want to



Naomi Osaka

be," said Osaka.

"It's kind of tough because she has such a great serve — my break points could have been better, but I think other than that, we both played really well.

"Even stepping on the court is a personal win because a couple of weeks ago I was even doubting if I could play with everyone," she added.

"So I guess these two matches that I've had kind of prove to me that I am doing okay, and the year is just going to get better for me."

The four-time Grand Slam champion had not played a tournament since September 2022, citing mental health concerns.

She had a baby daughter in July before deciding to make a



Karolina Pliskova

comeback. After an impressive first-round win over Germany's Tamara Korpatsch, Osaka started strongly against the 39th-ranked Pliskova, breaking the Czech's opening service game.

Pliskova, a two-time Grand Slam finalist, levelled but Osaka broke again to take a 4-2 lead then held on to bank the opening set.

The momentum began to shift in the second set as the tall Pliskova began to find the mark with her serve.

She won the second set tiebreak then got an early break in the third, holding on with ease to take the match in 2hr 13min.

Pliskova has won the Brisbane International three times and said she felt better as the match

progressed. "I thought I played quite well — there are a lot of things to improve but it's a good start," said Pliskova, adding that, after a first-round bye and having not played since September, she needed time to find her feet.

"You can practise as much as you want but in matches it's always a little bit different," she said.

Reigning Australian Open champion Sabalenka was in imperious form against Bronzetti, breaking the Italian once in the first set and three times in the second.

"I'm super happy with the performance and I think I played a really great match," said Sabalenka, who won 24 points to Bronzetti's five in the second set.

"I just hope I can keep this same level for each match, or even better." — AFP





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Oman targets 11 PPP projects for implementation

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The Omani government has announced plans to progress the implementation of as many as 11 sizable projects and initiatives under its strategic Public-Private Partnership (PPP) programme during 2024.

The projects in question, outlined in the 2024 State Budget, span several sectors, including Transport & Logistics, Health, Education, Agriculture and Fisheries, Construction and Information & Communications Technology (ICT).

A key initiative set to make headway this year is the Salalah – Thamrait Truck Road project, a competitive tender for which is already underway in cooperation with the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology. Five international companies have been shortlisted to bid for a concession to design, construct, finance, operate and maintain the proposed 67 km long blacktop connecting Thamrait with the Port of Salalah in Dhofar



A first-of-its-kind Truck Road project linking Thamrait with Salalah is expected to progress this year

Governorate. The first-of-its-kind carriageway, designed to cater to heavy trucks, is envisaged to operate on a toll system. Also included in the PPP pipeline is a plan for private-

led investment in a road project linking Al Maabela in Muscat Governorate with Thamid in the

Wilayat of Bidbid in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, according to the Ministry of Finance.

In the Health Sector, the Finance Ministry is seeking to tap private investment and expertise in the “management, operation and development” of diagnostic centres of the Ministry of Health in Muscat Governorate.

Likewise, private players are also invited to manage and maintain health facilities for the Health Ministry in Muscat Governorate, Al Batinah North, and Al Batinah South governorates, under a separate PPP initiative.

Another PPP project slated for implementation this year centres on a plan for the development and operation of a drug rehabilitation centre in Suhar. The proposed Taafi Suhar Centre is envisaged to be a modern de-addiction and rehabilitation facility designed to enable users of narcotics and psychotropic substances to reintegrate back into the society.

Significantly, the Education Ministry’s massive fleet of public school buses is also proposed to be placed in the hands of a private operator under a PPP arrangement.

In the Agriculture & Fisheries sector, the Ministry plans to invite the private sector to support the “development, management and operation” of the Liwa and Sur fishery harbours. Private sector investment is also envisioned in the operation of veterinary clinics in Al Buraimi, Raysut and Saal.

Also listed for implementation this year is a project for the construction of the new headquarters of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion on a PPP basis. Furthermore, the development and operation of the ministry’s Invest Easy platform is proposed to be moved to the private sector.

By leveraging the PPP model, the “Ministry of Finance endeavours to broaden the involvement of the private sector in investing and innovating in infrastructure projects and public services. The goal is to enhance the efficiency of utilising economic resources and public utilities,” the Ministry added.

Fiscal Sustainability Programme to boost competitiveness of financial sector

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The Fiscal Sustainability and Financial Sector Development Programme (Estdama) aims to target six main priorities, according to Abdullah bin Salim bin Abdullah al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance.

Speaking at the 2024 State Budget press conference, held earlier this week, Al Harthy said the programme seeks to improve the overall financial position of the state, enhance the readiness of the financial sector, and increase competitiveness and participation within the private financial sector in the country.

“The programme primarily focuses on ensuring the continued improvement of the country’s public finances and the sustainability of related initiatives. Additionally, it aims to enhance the readiness of the financial sector to adapt to upcoming transformations in investment and economic sectors, making it a key facilitator in achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040,” he shared.

“The programme also aims to increase the competitiveness and participation of the private financial sector, supporting it in providing suitable financing options for various categories while expanding the volume of financing,” the Under-Secretary further noted.



Finance Ministry Under-Secretary Abdullah al Harthy addressing local media on Monday.

The programme’s priorities will include financing small and medium enterprises, supporting economic diversification sectors, green and sustainable financing, boosting local capital, increasing foreign investment flow and improving the insurance sector.

Al Harthy shared that the programme will establish a system to provide necessary funding for SMEs. “The first aspect relates to financing small and medium-sized enterprises by establishing a system to facilitate obtaining the necessary financing or initial capital for establishment and operation.”

“Moreover, the programme, in collaboration with financial institutions, aims to direct financial resources towards economic diversification sectors, focusing on those targeted by Oman Vision 2040,” he added.

The Under-Secretary added that the programme will develop policies and regulations to

help the green and sustainable financial industry. “Furthermore, the third aspect is related to green and sustainable financing. The programme proposes a set of policies, legislation and initiatives, in coordination with relevant entities, to promote investments and finance projects that support environmental and social sustainability.”

“Concerning local capital, the programme seeks to enhance liquidity by increasing deposits and encouraging local investors to participate in the stock and local debt markets,” he stated.

“Additionally, the programme targets a fifth priority related to developing the flow of foreign investments by implementing policies and initiatives to attract foreign investments in economic diversification sectors. This includes reclassifying the Muscat Stock Exchange from a solutions market to an emerging market, which would enhance the attractiveness of the Muscat market, alongside securing the development of the insurance sector to support economic activities,” he added.

The national programme is a collaborative effort between the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up and the Ministry of Finance and entered its executive stage in the third of 2023. Ministry officials shared that more information will be unveiled this upcoming February.

Contracts signed for agricultural projects worth RO 3 million

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The Directorate General of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources in Al Buraimi Governorate has signed usufruct contracts for the establishment of agricultural and livestock projects in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning.

This initiative is part of the governorate’s plan to promote investment in the agricultural and livestock sectors. The signing ceremony was attended by Sayyid Dr Hamad bin Ahmed bin Saud al Busaidy Governor of Al Buraimi.

A total of 16 usufruct contracts were signed, covering various projects with a combined investment value of over RO 3 million. In the Wilayat of Mahadha, 9 contracts were signed for projects such as greenhouse vegetable production with an investment value of RO 466,000 vegetable cultivation projects with a total investment value of RO 577,000, agricultural projects with a value of RO 95,000, grape and garlic cultivation project valued at RO 51,000, poultry farming project with an investment of RO 100,000 Omani garlic cultivation project worth RO 164,000 greenhouse and open-field vegetable cultivation project with an investment of RO 100,000 and wheat cultivation



A total of 16 usufruct contracts were signed, covering various projects with a combined investment value of over RO 3 million

project with an investment of RO 350,000.

In the Wilayat of Al Sinainah, 6 usufruct contracts were signed, including projects for vegetable production and marketing with an investment value exceeding RO 453,000 vegetable cultivation projects with a total investment value of RO 875,000 seasonal crops production project worth RO 47,000 and wheat cultivation project with an investment of RO 350,000. Additionally, a project for seasonal crops production with an investment of RO 47,000 was signed.

Eng Nasser bin Ali al Marshoudi, Directorate General of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Buraimi governorate, highlighted that one of the ongoing projects in the Wilayat of Al Sinainah is the cultivation of 50,000 palm trees with an investment exceeding RO 3 million.

He emphasised the importance of leveraging Al Buraimi’s relative advantages to attract investors in the agricultural and livestock sectors, citing abundant water resources in certain areas, fertile soil for agriculture, especially in Mahadha and Al Rawdha, and partnerships with various entities to facilitate investment procedures for investors.

Such initiatives taken to boost and support the agricultural sector in Al Buraimi marks a significant step towards fostering economic development and investment in the governorate.

PKE rings in new year with inclusive CSR initiative

Embracing Diversity and Inclusivity as a Cornerstone for a Better Tomorrow

MUSCAT: In a heartfelt New Year's address, Purshottam Kanji Exchange (PKE) General Manager Supin James took center stage to unveil the company's ambitious new initiative aimed at fostering a more inclusive and diverse corporate culture.

With a strong emphasis on corporate social responsibility (CSR), the company is making significant strides to share the joy of the season with people with disabilities.

In his speech, the GM underscored the importance of embracing a broader perspective on corporate social responsibility. "As we enter this new year, we are not only committing to our business goals but also to the betterment



Purshottam Kanji Exchange rings in the new year with inclusive corporate social responsibility initiative

of the communities we serve. Our responsibility extends beyond profits and operations to making a positive impact on the lives of those who may face

unique challenges," he stated. The General Manager announced that the company is ushering in the New Year by organising festivities for groups of individuals with disabilities. The celebration will include games, activities, and the distribution of gifts, aiming to create enjoyable moments for all participants.

Following the GM's speech, the Head of Operations Mr. Binoy Simon Varghese addressed the audience, reinforcing the

company's commitment to these principles. "Our operations are not just about efficiency and productivity; they are about creating a workplace culture that values every individual, regardless of their abilities. This initiative aligns seamlessly with our mission to foster a workplace culture that celebrates diversity," the Head of Operations declared.

The Human Resource Manager Nasra al Habsi underscored the humanitarian dimension of the company's New Year's resolution. "Every Person Matters".

Presently, 2 per cent of our workforce comprises employees with special needs. By broadening our commitment to the humanitarian facet of corporate responsibility, we are not just giving back to the community but also cultivating a more compassionate and considerate workplace," expressed the Human Resource Manager.

National Finance, Dar Al Atta'a's greenhouse project for special needs individuals

MUSCAT: As a brand deeply invested in the economic progress of the nation, National Finance remains unwavering in its commitment to sustainable social welfare initiatives. In line with this vision, the company recently achieved a significant milestone by completing eight greenhouses as part of the ongoing Greenhouse Project in collaboration with Dar Al Atta'a.

Launched in 2021, this innovative programme falls under Dar Al Atta'a's 'Tamkeen' initiative, specifically designed to support individuals with special needs at Al Wafa Social Centres, as well as families with limited income participating in Dar Al Atta'a's beneficiary programmes.

Conceived with dual objectives, the project not only empowers individuals with required training in agriculture and entrepreneurship but also generates sustainable employment opportunities and income for those with special needs.

National Finance's commitment to community engagement, economic empowerment, and environmental stewardship is exemplified in this noble initiative. These values are also integral to the 'Imtidad' Social Responsibility Programme, highlighting the company's dedication to promoting social welfare and sustainable economic development.

Commenting on the progress of the Greenhouse Project, HH Sayyidah Wisam al Said, AGM of Marketing, Corporate Communication, Events, and ESG at National Finance, said, "At



National Finance and Dar Al Atta'a Greenhouse Project Helps Build Sustainable Income for Individuals with Special Needs.

National Finance, we believe that the success of an organisation is intertwined with the prosperity of the communities it serves. Through our CSR programmes, we extend a helping hand to those in need, offering them opportunities to broaden their horizons, forge sustainable and resilient income streams, and establish themselves as significant contributors to the economy.

In doing so, we also align ourselves with the national objective of creating an equitable and inclusive society."

Ooredoo, Tally solutions showcase smart solution for SMEs

MUSCAT: Ooredoo leaves no business behind and constantly looks to give its B2B customers even more great products and services that will digitise and facilitate their operations.

During an event for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), Ooredoo and Tally Solutions, a renowned accounting software specialist, showcased how Tally's products can streamline and simplify financial processes.

Tally is a simplified and easy-to-use digital solution that can be used by anyone running a business, even if they are not tech-savvy and have zero financial background.

Ooredoo recently added Tally's software to its revamped Maktabi plans, Ooredoo's one-stop fixed line and mobile communication solutions.

The upgrade enables SMEs

to digitise accounting and bookkeeping processes and focus on business growth while staying compliant with Oman's finance regulations. Saied al Lawati, Director of Business Marketing at Ooredoo, said, "Ooredoo aims to deliver the best for businesses of all sizes and across all sectors in Oman, which aligns with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

TallyPrime and Maktabi support the digital transformation of entities and support entrepreneurs in saving time and resources so they can focus on their growth and stability."

Vikash Panchal General Manager - MENA, TallySolutions, said, "With SMB Pulse our aim is to up-skill the businesses and assist them in optimising growth potential and efficiency with the help of technology.

Bank Muscat celebrates Sayyarati's partners

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat recently organised a special event in Muscat to celebrate its valued partnership with local auto dealers and car showrooms.

Attended by Ahmed bin Faqir al Bulushi, Chief Banking Officer, Abdunaser al Raisi, General Manager- Personal Banking, and other Bank Muscat executives alongside representatives from partner institutions, the event aimed to strengthen relationships with both individual and corporate partners.

Saleh bin Mohammed al Maaini, Deputy General Manager - Capital Regions, expressed satisfaction with the successful cooperation, emphasising the positive outcomes achieved



Bank Muscat recently organised a special event in Muscat to celebrate its valued partnership with local auto dealers and car showrooms

and the bank's commitment to enhancing services for customers. Al Maaini highlighted the importance of continuous development in services for individual and corporate partners, aiming to improve product quality and achieve financial inclusion that caters to diverse customer needs.

Acknowledging the success of "Sayyarati," a product that has played a vital role in realising customers' automotive dreams, Al Maaini extended gratitude to partners, including companies, agencies, and car showrooms, for their hard work and contribution

to the development of the automotive sector.

Radhiya bint Hassan al Lawati, Head of Sales, emphasised the significance of such events in fostering cooperation.

She noted the thriving commercial movement in the automotive sector, citing statistics from the National Centre for Statistics and Information indicating over one million and 600 thousand registered vehicles in the Sultanate of Oman by December 2023.

Al Lawati outlined Bank Muscat's efforts to strengthen partnerships, providing competitive banking facilities and financing at reduced rates for car purchases.

Own the exciting Toyota Crown with exclusive benefits

MUSCAT: The Crown has been a successful model in the Toyota line-up since it was first introduced in the 1950s. When the first generation was launched, the Crown came to symbolise "innovation" and "pushing the limit" within Toyota.

Since then, it has gained recognition in Japan as Toyota's premium sedan.

The Toyota Crown is built around the Toyota New Global Architecture (TNGA-K) platform. It is available with a choice of two engine options. The first hybrid electric powertrain consists of a front electric motor and Toyota's first-ever 2.4-litre inline four-cylinder turbo engine with All Wheel Drive, paired with direct shift six-speed automatic transmission with a combined power of 340 HP and 40.7 Kg.m. torque.

The second hybrid electric powertrain consists of two electric motors and a 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol engine, generating a total power of 222 HP. The hybrid-electric system, paired with an Electric Continuously Variable Transmission (e-CVT), achieves the lowest fuel efficiency, with a



Toyota enthusiasts looking to own a Crown can now benefit with Service 3 Years/30,000 kms (whichever is earlier). (Terms & Conditions apply. Customers can visit any Saud Bahwan Automotive showroom for exact details.)

consumption rate of 21.6 km/l. Enhancing the driving feel in the Crown are several driving modes, including NORMAL, ECO, SPORT, SPORT+ which allows drivers to adjust system settings individually to their exact driving habits.

The Crown's interior is thoughtfully designed to amplify experiences. The Crown's cabin is accentuated by a range of advanced

power and ventilated front seats, and 60/40 split and reclining rear seats.

For added convenience, the Crown is equipped with a hands-free, electrically powered trunk that can be activated using a foot-operated system when the user's hands or arms are full.

As with any Toyota model, the Crown comes complete with a comprehensive array of safety features.

The Crown is equipped with Advanced panoramic view monitor system for all-round coverage of the vehicle's surroundings for efficient parking.

The next generation Toyota Safety System delivers cutting edge safety technology like pre-collision system, Dynamic Radar Cruise Control, Lane Trace Assist, and Adaptive high beam system.

The Crown also features Toyota's first-ever Safe Exit Assist (SEA) which uses the Blind spot Monitor (BSM) to help prevent accidents.

Specifications of vehicle imported from Toyota Motor Corporation are as per the GSO Conformity Certificate applicable to the model/grade.



In brief

■ LONDON

**UK ELECTRICITY FROM FOSSIL FUELS HITS 1957 LOW: STUDY**

Britain's electricity production from polluting fossil fuels sank in 2023 to its lowest level in almost 70 years as the nation embraces renewables, a study showed on Wednesday.

Coal, gas and oil generated 104 terawatt hours of electricity, a total last seen in 1957, according to analysis from specialist website Carbon Brief, which added that it was 22 per cent lower than 2022.

Fossil fuels accounted for around one third of total UK electricity supplies last year, attaining the lowest ever share.

Low-carbon energy sources comprised 56 per cent, with renewables on 43 per cent and nuclear on 13. — **AFP**

■ SEOUL

**HYUNDAI MOTOR, KIA SELL MORE THAN 7 MILLION CARS IN 2023**

Hyundai Motor and its smaller sister company Kiatogther sold last year more than 7 million cars for the first time since 2019.

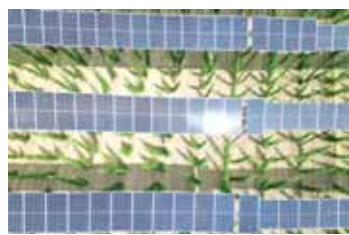
The South Korean group's target of 7.52 million cars set at the beginning of 2023 was missed by 3 per cent. Still, global deliveries increased by 6.6 per cent year-on-year to 7.3 million.

The group sales target for this year was lowered slightly to 7.44 million cars.

Hyundai Motor alone aims to sell more than 4.24 million vehicles, including models of its Genesis luxury brand.

Last year, Hyundai sold 4.22 million cars, marking an increase of 6.9 per cent. — **dpa**

■ FRANKFURT

**GERMANY ACHIEVES 55 PER CENT RENEWABLE ENERGY IN 2023**

Renewable energy accounted for 55 per cent of electricity transported on German networks in 2023, bringing the country closer to its climate targets, the energy regulator said on Wednesday.

Germany aims for green power to constitute 80 per cent of its energy mix by 2030.

It has abandoned nuclear power and plans to phase out most of its coal generation, utilising remaining gas plants primarily for grid backup.

Within renewables, offshore wind contributed a 31.1-per cent share, solar accounted for 12.1 per cent, and biomass 8.4 per cent, while the remaining 3.4 per cent came from hydropower and other renewables, as stated by the Bundesnetzagentur.

— **Reuters**

Economic concerns offset Red Sea supply worries



Equinor's Johan Sverdrup oilfield platforms and accommodation jack-up rig Haven are pictured in the North Sea.

LONDON: Oil prices were little changed in Asian trade on Wednesday after sharp moves earlier in the week, as markets weighed concerns about the US economy against potential supply disruptions from ongoing tensions in the Red Sea.

Brent crude fell 1 cent, or 0.01 per cent, to \$75.88 a barrel by 0733 GMT, while US West Texas Intermediate crude futures slipped 8 cents, or 0.11 per cent, to \$70.3 a barrel.

Oil prices had climbed around \$2 earlier in the week following attacks on vessels in the Red Sea by Ansar Allah over the weekend and the reported arrival of an Iranian warship on Monday. A wider conflict could close crucial waterways for oil transportation and disrupt trade flows.

However, the market fell in the previous session as optimism about early and aggressive US interest rate cuts ebbed ahead of the release of Federal Reserve

meeting minutes and jobs data.

"The geopolitical risks are not being priced in at the moment on the assumption that a regional flare-up will continue to be avoided," said Suvro Sarkar, energy sector team lead at DBS Bank.

He said markets were expected to be choppy in the near term but muted overall in the first quarter compared with the second half of last year.

Expectations of ample oil supply in the first half of 2024 have kept a lid on prices ahead of OPEC+ plans to hold a meeting of its Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee (JMMC) in early February.

An exact date has not been decided, three sources from the alliance said. OANDA's senior market analyst Kevin Wong said the decision to hold the meeting in early February showed OPEC+ seemed to be getting uneasy about current weak oil market conditions because

voluntary cuts of 2.2 million barrels a day for the first quarter agreed at the previous meeting on November 30 had failed to stabilise the market.

"Due to a lack of fresh catalysts, WTI oil is likely to trade sideways in the short term between \$68.90 and \$72.30 a barrel (close to the downward-sloping 20-day moving average)," he added.

Ahead of weekly US crude and product inventory reports, analysts polled by Reuters expected crude stockpiles fell last week, while distillate and gasoline stocks likely rose.

Data from the American Petroleum Institute industry group is due at 4:30 pm (2130 GMT) on Wednesday, and data from the Energy Information Administration, the statistical arm of the US Department of Energy, is due at 11:00 am (1600 GMT) on Thursday, delayed by a day due to the New Year's holiday on Monday. — **Reuters**

Global shares slip again as rate cut hopes ebb

LONDON, SYDNEY: Global stock markets extended a New Year slide on Wednesday, while the dollar stayed strong, as market optimism about early US interest rate cuts ebbed and the latest escalation of hostilities in the Middle East weighed on sentiment.

MSCI's broad index of world equities was 0.2 per cent lower, following a 0.8-per cent fall on Tuesday, marking a weak start to 2024 that may signal the end of the blistering gains for stocks and bonds that began late last year.

Europe's STOXX 600 share index dipped 0.1 per cent, and Asia Pacific shares outside Japan fell 1.3 per cent.

Caution dominated markets ahead of the release of minutes from the US Federal Reserve's December meeting, due at 1900 GMT on Wednesday, along with a slew of important US data.

Fed officials in December predicted 75 basis points (bps) of rate cuts in 2024, prompting a cross-market year-end rally.

However, some are now pausing for reflection amid uncertainty about economic conditions.

Futures markets still see a 70-per cent chance of the Fed starting to lower US borrowing costs from their current 22-year



Traders work on the floor of the NYSE in New York

high from March.

However, recent analysis of Fed policymakers' comments indicates that while improvements on inflation have been noted, most have not emphasised the urgency of monetary easing.

This week's important US data, including ISM's manufacturing survey due later on Wednesday, is expected to clarify the outlook, with the market-moving US non-farm payrolls report due on Friday.

Market sentiment soured further after tensions escalated in the Middle East.

Israel's killing of Hamas deputy leader Saleh al Arouri in Beirut raised the risk of wider conflict in Gaza, while Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd announced that their container ships would continue to avoid the Red Sea due to attacks blamed on Ansar Allah militants. — **Reuters**

Foreign funds accelerated China equity sell-off in December

HONG KONG: Global long-only funds off-loaded Chinese equities at the fastest pace of 2023 in December as they rushed to meet redemption requests and diversify away from the world's second-largest economy, according to analysts from Morgan Stanley.

China and Hong Kong equities experienced a combined net outflow of \$3.8 billion from active long-only managers last month, marking the worst month in 2023 and the third-largest monthly outflow on record, as per a report released by Morgan Stanley's quantitative research team to clients on Tuesday.

"Both investors' redemptions from equity funds and portfolio managers' rebalancing to deepen their underweight on China contributed to the outflows," noted the analysts, led by Gilbert Wong. China and Hong Kong stocks concluded 2023 as the worst performers among the world's major indexes, impacted by geopolitical risks, a sluggish economic recovery and policy uncertainties.

The China benchmark blue-chip CSI300 Index slumped 11 per cent in 2023, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng Index tumbled 14 per cent. — **Reuters**

Court relief for Adani after Hindenburg attack

NEW DELHI: An Indian court has ruled that the Adani Group does not need to face further investigations beyond the current scrutiny by the market regulator, providing significant relief to the conglomerate that faced allegations of wrongdoing from a US short-seller.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has been investigating the Adani Group, led by billionaire Gautam Adani, following Hindenburg Research's January 2023 allegations of improper use of tax havens and stock manipulation by the group.

Despite the Adani Group's denial of these allegations, Hindenburg's report resulted in a \$150-billion reduction in its stock market value.

Although some investor confidence has returned in recent months, with Adani gaining support from bankers

and investors, the Hindenburg saga and regulatory scrutiny have continued to impact the group's business dealings and reputation.

The Supreme Court of India, ruling on cases brought by public interest litigants seeking a special investigation team, stated that "the facts of this case do not warrant" such a change, even though the court had the power to transfer the investigation.

The verdict indicates that there will be no increased regulatory or legal risk on the Adani Group beyond the current SEBI investigation.

In response to the court's decision, shares of various Adani Group companies rose, with Adani Energy Solutions up 9.1 per cent, Adani Total Gas surging 7.1 per cent, Adani Green Energy jumping 5.5 per cent, and the flagship business Adani Enterprises rising 2.6 per cent.



A logo of the Adani Group is seen on a commercial complex in Mumbai

The court, overseeing the SEBI probe, also stated that there was no need to order any changes in the country's disclosure rules for offshore funds.

Hindenburg had alleged that Adani's offshore shareholders were

used to violate certain SEBI rules, despite the company maintaining its compliance with all laws.

After the Supreme Court ruling, Gautam Adani expressed on the social media platform X that the court's judgment shows truth

has prevailed, and the group's "contribution to India's growth story will continue."

Deven Choksey, managing director of KRChoksey Shares and Securities Pvt Ltd, a broker, commented, "Post this verdict, global investors will have more confidence in investing in the shares of the company."

The regulator had previously informed the Supreme Court that it would take appropriate action based on the outcome of its investigations. The court has given SEBI three months to complete its investigations.

The Supreme Court also stated on Wednesday that it does not need to intervene in the current regulations governing offshore investors of Indian companies.

SEBI tightened those regulations in June, making disclosures more stringent to bring clarity to opaque corporate structures. — **Reuters**

Strengthening business competitiveness is an imperative



HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

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

The concerned authorities in Oman are actively working to facilitate business operations, aiming to attract both local and foreign investments in the upcoming stage. As 2024 begins, there is optimism that the challenges and bureaucratic hurdles disrupting daily business activities will be resolved. These authorities are committed to establishing new foundations for business in the country, and the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry has recently decided to support government efforts.

The Chamber's recent decision to conduct a study on business competitiveness aims to fulfil

its role in integrating with the Omani economic system, promoting comprehensive development, and accelerating economic diversification. This study is expected to serve as a reference for various authorities, offering visibility into the challenges faced by merchants in their daily work. Given the current global circumstances, it is crucial for the country to establish more commercial and industrial projects. Some Arab countries face challenges in establishing projects due to restrictions imposed by Western powers. However, there are now opportunities for collaboration with non-Western countries that

are willing to engage in various developmental issues. Over the next two years, approximately one billion people, including 600 million in emerging markets in Oman's proximity, will join the world's consumer class. This necessitates a proactive approach from companies to understand and respond to these changes by establishing projects within the country. Oman's strategic location, abundant resources, expertise, leadership, and infrastructure make it an ideal environment for such endeavours. To tap into global markets, it is essential to assist Omani companies in entering both developed and emerging markets. The goal is to double the

value of Omani non-oil exports in the coming years, building on the 2022 achievement of reaching \$9.11 billion, a 41% increase over 2021, and spanning more than 130 countries. Oman's memberships in the World Trade Organization, the Common Market for GCC countries, the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA), and free trade agreements with various nations position it to export more Omani products and establish joint projects and factories with foreign partners. The success of these endeavours relies on streamlining business facilitation processes, allowing incoming companies to select and employ national and

foreign workers based on their needs and working conditions. Maintaining customs exemptions on the import of industrial machinery and waiving import duties on raw materials for five years from the start of production is crucial. Additionally, efforts should be directed towards strengthening probity in institutions and addressing bureaucracy, fostering an environment where the next generation can work freely and competitively. These measures will support the Omani business community, ensuring continuous production, desired business results, and competitiveness in global markets.

US fintechs push into fixed-income trading as retail investor interest grows



HANNAH LANG

The author covers financial technology and cryptocurrency, including the businesses that drive the industry and policy developments that govern the sector. Hannah previously worked at American Banker where she covered bank regulation and the Federal Reserve. She graduated from the University of Maryland, College Park and lives in Washington, DC.



year and eventually lower that minimum to \$10. Sikes said Public's Treasury account was its most successful product in 2023, as measured by investor flows. Although retail investors have long been able to purchase Treasury bills directly from the Treasury Department or a retail brokerage, the process is cumbersome and often requires a minimum investment of anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000. While bond-focused ETFs are readily available, experts note that some investors might prefer to purchase individual bonds in order to lock in yields and gain tax efficiencies. Apex, which provides software to fintech companies, is also rolling out a new product that allows retail investors to buy portions of corporate bonds and treasuries. Trading platform Webull is among the clients exploring using the new feature, Apex said. "Do I think it's going

to take over the equity side in terms of the velocity of people interacting? No, I don't. But I do think this is just a natural next step," said Bill Capuzzi, CEO of Apex. "THE CATALYST" The benchmark 10-year Treasury note yield breached 5% in October for the first time since July 2007, making bonds more competitive with stocks. Yields have retreated since then as investors bet the Fed will cut rates in 2024, but they are still elevated on a historical basis. For example, a six-month Treasury now yields around 5.25% - a far higher payout than the government-backed securities offered over much of the last decade-and-a-half. "This is probably the catalyst that the market needed to finally improve" bond products, said Kevin McPartland, head of market structure and technology

research at Coalition Greenwich. Individuals buying Treasury bills through the Treasury Department's TreasuryDirect site purchased \$319.75 billion of the notes auctioned by the US government from June 1 through Nov. 30, 2023, up from \$144.96 billion during the same period in 2022, Treasury data shows. "We're pretty excited about fixed income," said Wealthfront CEO David Fortunato. "It's a huge hurdle to overcome to be able to invest in bonds in the recommended way using the tools that exist today." Wealthfront last year introduced automated portfolios that personalise a mix of bond ETFs to a customer's individual tax situation. Of course, many have historically viewed bonds as less exciting than stocks - though the goals of equity and fixed-income investors can differ. The total return for the S&P

500 since 2000 is about 412%. By contrast, the total return for the Morningstar US Core Bond TR USD index, which tracks US dollar-denominated securities with maturities greater than one year, has been around 160% in that period. "Even though bonds are more interesting now than they were in 2021, they still don't move like stocks do," said McPartland, of Coalition Greenwich. Retail investors' love for fixed income may also be tested if interest rates fall and yields become less attractive, said Robert Siegel, a venture investor and lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. The Fed has pencilled in three rate cuts for 2024, while investors are pricing in substantially more. "As (fintech) platforms become more mainstream, they will need to adjust for various economic cycles to offer the product solutions that customers will want," Siegel added. —Reuters

FINTECHS BELIEVE THEY HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSFORM RETAIL BOND INVESTING WITH FEATURES THE INDUSTRY USED TO POPULARISE STOCK TRADING.

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Mohammed al Rashdi: 99841230
m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com

Ali al Maashari: 99639264
ali.almashari@omandaily.om

Saada al Rashdi
95919344

94501166
24649593
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ACCOUNTANT & sales Executive, Indian male, 31 years, BA English, specialised in Accounting. 2 years experience in India & 6 years experience in Oman. Seeking position in Accounts/ Sales fields (has Oman license). Mob: 78805951. Gmail: akhilgopinath2017@gmail.com

INDIAN male 14 years experience light/ heavy driver. Looking for suitable opening currently in Oman. Contact: 77050986/ 91280205, email: kokkadmou@gmail.com

LOOKING for part time - VAT return submission, adult work, accounting work. Contact: 77498125.

M.COM graduate with Oman driving licence, residing in Muscat with 1 year and 4 months work experience as Media Finance Executive in India, seeking for Accounts Assistant or other related eligible jobs. Contact: 71755901, E-mail: krishnanmahesh02@gmail.com

MBA Finance, Bcom, Diploma in HR, 22yrs experience in Accounts/ Finance in Muscat; seeking Senior/Middle level post. Please contact 91245950.

STAFF nurse, 10 years experience in Oman, looking for suitable placement. Contact W/P: 98800721.

EXPATS light driver, looking for job in Muscat, 8 years driving experience in Muscat, speaks, Arabic, English and Hindi. Contact: 97987644/ 78729814.

SITUATION WANTED

Finance Manager

Chartered Accountant with 8 years of experience in Oman, well versed with Budgeting, Finalization, Insurance, VAT seeks suitable opportunity.

Available immediately **+968 91282051**

PART time accountant 22 years in Muscat. Please contact: 78293476

A SUDANESE resident in Salalah, Bsc of administrative sciences with 21 years of experience in the fields of (sales/ management/ logistics and fleet). Contact: +968 98510880



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Please Contact with our Team:

Head Office

Mohd Al Rashdi
99841230
m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com

Ali Al Maashari
99639264
wadialmeeh@yahoo.com

Salalah Office

Bakhit Al Shihri
92998577
bakhit.omandaily@gmail.com

Nizwa Office

Abdullah Al Abri
99429094
nizwaofc@omandaily.net.om

Suhar Office

Musalam Al Saidi
99429192
sohardaily@outlook.com



ZOO
A tiger walks in his enclosure during the annual stocktake at ZSL London Zoo in central London. — AFP



LIFESTYLE
Fisherwomen walk towards a fish market off the Arabian Sea shore in Mumbai. — AFP



MUSIC
Panamanian musician, singer and politician Ruben Blades performs at the monument Angel de la Independencia during the New Year 2024 celebration in Mexico City. — AFP



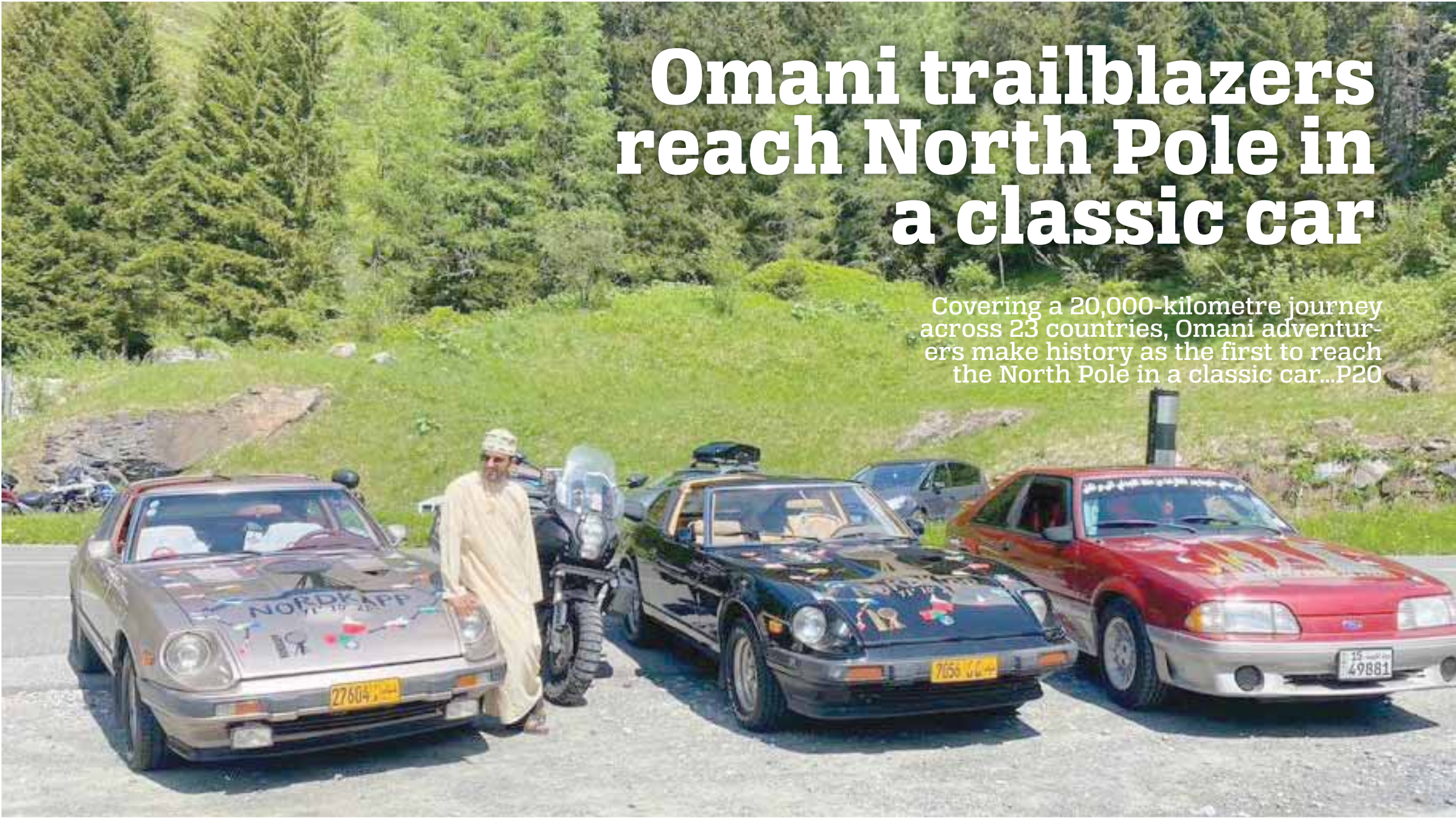
ADVENTURE
Portugal's Joao Monteiro drives his South Racing CAN-AM near the bivouac during check-ups, ahead of the Dakar 2024 rally in Al Ula, Saudi Arabia. — AFP



TRAVEL
A woman looks at the Manhattan midtown skyline at dusk in New York. — AFP

art & life

THURSDAY | JANUARY 4, 2024 | JUMADA AL THANIA 21, 1445 AH | **OMAN OBSERVER** | [f](#) [x](#) [@](#) [v](#) [t](#) [y](#) [www.omanobserver.om](#) [features@omanobserver.om](#)



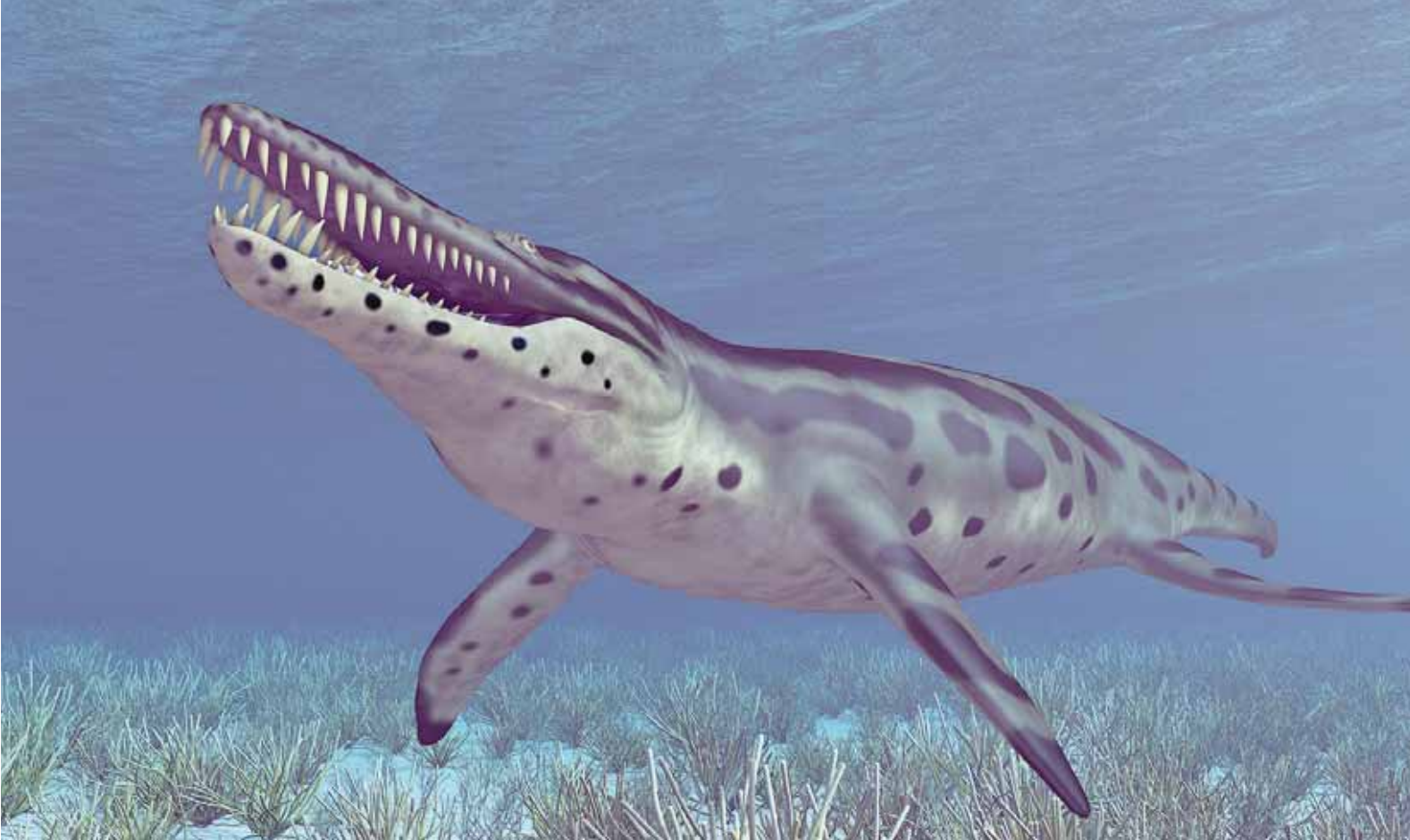
Omani trailblazers reach North Pole in a classic car

Covering a 20,000-kilometre journey across 23 countries, Omani adventurers make history as the first to reach the North Pole in a classic car...P20

Colossal pliosaur sea monster skull on display in Dorset

THE SKULL OF a colossal sea monster that was unearthed from the Jurassic Coast is going on display. The 2m-long fossil belongs to a pliosaur — one of the most fearsome predators the planet has ever seen. Sir David Attenborough investigated the discovery in a BBC film which aired on New Year's Day, BBC news reported. The public can see the 150-million-year-old marine reptile at the Etches Collection in Kimmeridge in Dorset, a county in southwest England, close to where the beast was found. The rest of its skeleton may still be entombed in the crumbling cliffs. The hope is it may eventually be recovered. The snout of the pliosaur was discovered by a fossil enthusiast on a beach near

Kimmeridge Bay. The rest of its skull was extracted from half-way down a fast-eroding cliff face by a team precariously dangling from ropes. Steve Etches led the effort to remove and prepare the fossil. It's now being unveiled at the museum that bears his name, sitting alongside the Jurassic fossils he's spent a lifetime collecting. The pliosaur skull is one of the most complete specimens ever found and it is exquisitely preserved. It doesn't take much imagination to see that this would have been the ultimate killing machine. Its enormous crocodile-like jaw is packed with 130 razor sharp teeth, and cavernous holes on either side of the skull would have been filled with huge muscles. — **ONA**





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Keeping a constant connection with nature



IF YOU'VE EVER BEEN to a high school reunion, you know that some people seem to age faster than others. Twenty-five years after graduation, one classmate can appear a decade younger than the rest, another a decade older.

"People know that intuitively," said Dr. Nir Barzilai, director of the Institute for Aging Research at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, "but they don't understand that it's a biology that we're trying to discover."

Scientists are working to quantify this phenomenon and put a number to a person's "biological age" by looking at their cellular health instead of how many years they've been alive. Some of these measurements are now marketed as direct-to-consumer blood tests. But before you shell out hundreds of dollars to find out how old you really are, make sure you know what you're paying for. Experts caution that while these tests are interesting in theory, and could be valuable research tools, they aren't ready for prime-time.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE BIOLOGICAL AGE?

Researchers define biological age as "the accumulation of damage we can measure in our body," said Dr. Andrea Britta Maier, co-director of the Centre for Healthy Longevity at the National University of Singapore. That damage comes from natural aging, as well as from our environment and behaviours.

The concept is often attributed to British physician-scientist Dr. Alex Comfort (perhaps better known for writing "The Joy of Sex"), who published a 1969 paper on the idea. But for decades, scientists didn't know how they might measure someone's biological age.

A major advance came in 2013 when Steve Horvath, a professor of human genetics and biostatistics at the University of California, Los Angeles, proposed using a "clock" based on the emerging field of epigenetics. Over the course of our lives, our DNA accumulates molecular changes that turn on and off various genes. Horvath analysed these changes in thousands of people and developed an algorithm to determine how they correlate with age.

These changes happen naturally as we get older, said Jesse Poganik, an instructor at Harvard Medical School who researches biological aging; they can also be sped up by behaviours that affect health, such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. As a result, estimates of biological age have been shown to be associated with things like life expectancy and health, he said.

WHY YOU SHOULD BE WARY OF CONSUMER TESTS

Several companies now sell tests for around \$300 that use this technology to calculate your biological age by analysing your blood or saliva and comparing changes in your

epigenome to population averages.

But experts caution that epigenetic clocks can't actually tell you much about your own health. That's because they were designed to assess large groups of people, not individuals. Consequently, their results can be unreliable.

At a recent conference where Horvath spoke about the topic, an audience member said he had taken two different tests and received two different ages, 10 years apart. Horvath said that the man should have saved his money.

"I think you could say the best of them are not completely useless," said Daniel Belsky, an associate professor of epidemiology at Columbia University who developed an epigenetic clock himself. "But these are not tried and tested clinical tools yet, so they're more for the curious."

Another problem with the tests is that it's unclear what to do with the results. Scientists don't know how to reverse someone's biological age — or whether that's even possible.

In part, that's why the epigenetic clocks were developed in the first place. Researchers hope to use them in clinical trials for anti-aging interventions to measure potential changes in the life spans of hundreds or thousands of people at a time.

None of this has stopped companies from selling these tests alongside personalised health and lifestyle recommendations, in addition to supplements they say will roll back an individual's biological age.

PUTTING A NEW SPIN ON OLD INFORMATION

Epigenetic clocks aren't the only products on the market promising to measure biological age. Some companies offer a panel of conventional blood tests you might receive at the doctor's office, such as cholesterol or hemoglobin A1C, a marker for diabetes. They say that because many of these numbers increase as we get older, they can be used as a proxy for a person's biological age. For example, if you're 45 but your cholesterol levels look more like the average 50-year-old's, the test results might say your biological age is older than your 45 years.

Whether blood marker tests actually track biological age as opposed to general health is up for debate. But an advantage of this kind of test is that it measures factors that can be modified; we know how to lower blood sugar levels through medication and lifestyle changes, for example. In contrast, epigenetic age is more of a black box.

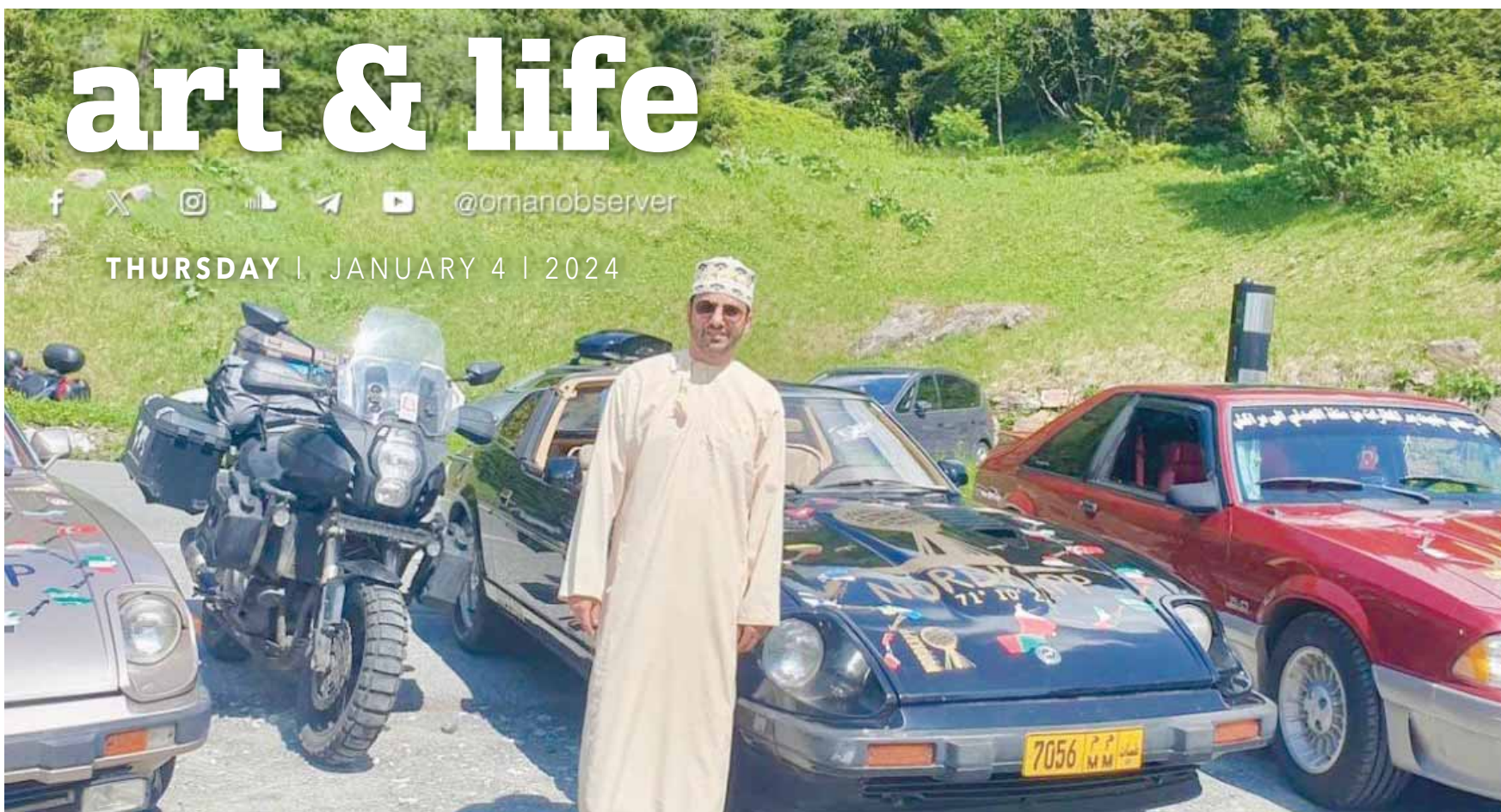
"Expanding access and using more frequent testing to optimise health seems fairly reasonable to me," Poganik said via email. But, he added, "any claims of accurate, individual-level determination of biological age should be approached with caution." — **NYT**

HEALTH STUDY

Pets may preserve cognitive health for seniors living alone

A RECENT STUDY published in JAMA Network Open suggests that for the increasing number of older adults living alone, having a pet, such as a dog or cat, may contribute to maintaining a healthy brain. The research, involving 7,945 participants aged 50 and older, revealed that pet ownership was linked to slower rates of decline in verbal memory and verbal fluency among individuals living alone, but not those living with others. The study suggests that pet ownership could offset the higher risk of cognitive decline associated with living alone. The researchers emphasize the role of loneliness as a potential mediator in the association between living alone and dementia, noting that pet ownership may help reduce this risk factor. — **ONA**





TRAVEL

Omani trailblazers reach North Pole in a classic car

BY ARWA AL HASHIMI

Classic cars are far more enthusiastic to travel than by air-planes to enjoy wonderful trips around the world. A group of passionate Omanis undertook an extraordinary road trip to the North Pole in a classic Nissan ZX 280 in a 1982 model.

In 40 days, the team had the honour of enjoying rich history, diverse cultural tapestry and breathtaking landscapes. This alone has ignited the passion of classic car lovers to undertake similar journeys.

Ameer al Mahrizi, Ahmed al Saadi, Nasser al Quraini and Muath al Saadi were part of the 20,000-kilometre trip touring 23 countries.

They shared that one of the most amazing moments of the trip was when they met others who shared the same spirit of wanderlust.

Rashid al Mazmi and Mohammed al Hoti from the UAE joined them from Iraq, passing by Turkiye, to Bosnia. Saleh al Aayed, a famous Saudi traveller, travelled the world on his bicycle and then continued his impassioned journey in his superb motor-bike. They met in Austria and spent a whole day together amused by the iconic destinations. From Kuwait, they met with Haider Bather and Ali Bather who joined them in Austria and spent several days with them touring around Zell am See, Salzburg as well as Gross Peak.

"Meeting those wonderful men from the neighbouring countries made us feel the strength of our relationship and it is surely a cause of pride to share such an experience with dear brothers," Ameer said.

Emotionally speaking, Iraq has stolen the group's hearts with its people's generosity and kindness, which made them feel exactly like they were in their homes.

Norway was captivating and eye-catching, in terms of natural beauty. Only a few places on Earth offer the same level of inspirational beauty where every amount of money spent is an investment and mental well-being.

The group explored 23 countries like UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Turkiye, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, France, Germany, Czech, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Sweden and finally Norway.

They made sure to keep Oman in their hearts making sure it was well represented wherever they went. That was achieved in the presence of the Omani costume along the journey.

Travelling from the fantastic Pare Mountains to the green forests was not that easy as the group faced



some challenges.

"The trip cost RO 10,000, which was a fortune, and we hope that the competent authorities in Oman might sponsor such trips in the future," Ameer said.

Ameer also recommends such trips for young people who are aspiring to get out of their comfort zones and try something new. It is an opportunity to open up to new cultures, make bonds with people from all over the world, and enjoy a variety of incredible sceneries.

CHANGING WORLD



Shaddad al Musalmy

Omanisation gathers steam

THE GOVERNMENT'S job Omanisation efforts is progressing in earnest and the Ministry of Labour (MoL) has in recent past intensified a long-standing programme to create employment opportunities for citizens by training and equipping them with additional skills.

According to figures, the rate of replacing expat employees with Omanis has risen remarkably in different sectors such as commercial banking, oil and gas, communications, insurance and hospitality.

The government is exerting efforts to ensure the well-being of youth in the labour market as the Sultanate of Oman is pushing forward its Omanisation programme with the aim of creating employment opportunities for citizens.

The attention accorded by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to youth got reflected in the Royal support to employment initiatives and during the meeting of the Council of Ministers last year, he touched on the executive position of employment initiatives and programme.

He underlined the importance of raising the awareness of youth about global standards of work culture and the need to encourage them to undertake self-employment.

In this context, His Majesty the Sultan instructed the departments concerned to furnish appropriate environment for citizens to take all types of jobs and enterprises.

Giving preference to nationals when offering jobs is a key government policy for all countries, and Oman too has been working towards achieving a right mix of Omani and expatriate workforce in the private sector.

The new policies issued by the Ministry of Labour (MoL) is gathering steam, more so to tackle the difficult economic conditions.

The visa ban on specific job roles for expatriate workers in the private sector and in-depth training programmes introduced to sharpen the skills of Omanis have definitely had a positive impact on Omanisation.

His Majesty the Sultan had spoken about the role of education and vocational training in supplying the labour market with skilled national workers.

In this context, His Majesty the Sultan gave directives to devise an integrated executive plan to develop this sector in cooperation with international institutions.

He also called for the development of the technical education sector to help provide the labour market with technical expertise.

I have to mention that there is a need to classify the unemployed workforce and look at what the capabilities and qualifications of the youth are and then look at Oman Vision 2040.

This will help locate projects that can be activated as soon as possible so that adequate training can be given to Omani candidates to take the jobs as the projects take shape.

The Royal directive to support the wages of new Omani entrants to the labour market in the private sector by an amount of RO 200 provided that the employer bears the difference in the salary agreed upon, for 15,000 job opportunities for a period of two years, was a good move and it boosted the economy while helping the private sector to employ more Omanis.

However, replacing all foreigners is not a solution. We need more people in order to have a more sustainable economy. Who will live in the apartments? Who will do shopping in stores? Who will stay at the hotels? Who will go to private clinics?

The solution is to get more projects into the country, as quickly as possible.

Till then ...

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

FOR FEEDBACK, EMAIL THE AUTHOR AT shadadm75@gmail.com