



HIS MAJESTY CONFERS ORDER OF ROYAL COMMENDATION, EXCELLENT SERVICE ON SENIOR ROP OFFICERS

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, yesterday conferred the Order of Royal Commendation and medals of Excellent Service and Competence on senior officers of the Royal Oman Police (ROP). The medals were pinned by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik Al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs. **>A2**



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NIZWA



Sayyid Shihab presides over ROP Day celebration

NIZWA: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) yesterday celebrated its annual day, which falls on 5 January every year. HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik Al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, presided over the ceremony, held at the military parade grounds of the Sultan Qaboos Academy of Police Sciences in the Wilayat of Nizwa.

The ceremony saw the passing out of the 46th batch of cadet officers - holders of Diploma in Law and Police Sciences, the 43rd batch of university cadet officers, the 10th batch of service system cadet officers and the 54th batch of specialised cadet officers. The batches included officers from the Internal Security Service and the Royal Court Affairs.

The celebration began with a salute to HH Sayyid Shihab. The commandant of the parade requested HH Sayyid Shihab to inspect the front row of the column. The graduates presented a military show before the dais. Then, the chief guest handed over awards to top graduate officers.

This was followed by protocols of handing over the "Banner of Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences" from the 46th to the 47th batch of cadet officers.

Then, the column of the parade chanted the ROP Anthem and swore the Oath of Loyalty. They chanted thrice "Long Live His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin



Tarik, the Supreme Commander", after which they saluted HH Sayyid Shihab, marking the end of the parade.

A column of ROP Cavalry paraded past the dais to the accompaniment of musical tunes by the ROP Band.

The names of winners of ROP Awards 2023 were announced during the ceremony.

The ceremony was attended by Royal Family members, ministers and advisers, Camillus Wambura, Inspector-General of Police in the Republic of Tanzania, commanders of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), the ROP and security and military services, as well as members of the State Council and the Shura Council, directors general at government units, sheikhs and dignitaries of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. — **ONA**

AL SAFRIYA PALACE

Bahrain King receives HH Sayyid Theyazin, reviews bilateral ties

MANAMA: King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain, received HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham Al Said at Al Safriya Palace in Manama.

During the audience, HH Sayyid Theyazin conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to King Hamad and His Majesty the Sultan's wishes of good health and happiness to the Bahraini monarch, along with His Majesty's wishes of further progress and prosperity to the Bahraini people.

For his part, King Hamad asked HH Sayyid Theyazin to convey his greetings and sincere wishes to His Majesty the Sultan. He wished the people of Oman further progress and prosperity. The meeting reviewed bilateral relations between the two coun-

tries and matters of common concern.

In appreciation of the King of Bahrain to HH Sayyid Theyazin and, in a manifestation of the deep-rooted Oman-Bahrain relations, King Hamad conferred the Order of Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, First Class, on HH Sayyid Theyazin. HH Sayyid Theyazin expressed his appreciation for King Hamad's sincere gesture, which, he said, reflects the strength of Omani-Bahraini relations.

The meeting was attended by Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Bahrain, and Bahrain's Royal Family members, ministers and senior officials in the Kingdom of Bahrain. — **ONA**



TOP THREE INSIDE STORIES

OMAN

Over 1.6mn vehicles

1 Over 1.6mn vehicles were registered in Oman by November 2023 end. **>A3**

OMAN

Nama Water Services



2 Nama Water Services continues its commitment to Omani society. **>A4**

SPORTS

Rafael Nadal injured

3 Rafael Nadal will miss the Australian Open due to a hip injury. **>A8**

OVER 123,000 PEOPLE BENEFIT FROM SOCIAL SECURITY SCHEMES

67,693 beneficiaries of the social security scheme received a sum of OMR72,350,109 by the end of the first half of 2023

Times News Service

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Social Development has said that the total number of individuals benefiting from the social security scheme stood at 123,491.

The ministry pointed out that 67,693 beneficiaries of the social security scheme received a sum of OMR72,350,109 by the end of the first half of 2023.

The ministry explained that 44 beneficiaries registered in the social security scheme received OMR29,352 as disaster assistance by the end of the first half of 2023, while 140 "People with Limited Income" received OMR158,132 as disaster assistance during the first half of 2023.

During the same period, a total number of 10,023 social security scheme beneficiaries received 'temporary', 'emergency' and 'special' cash assistance to the tune of OMR925,549.

Similarly, a total of 820,693 "People with Limited Income" received OMR640,528 as 'temporary', 'emergency' and 'special' cash assistance.

The Ministry stated that it has adopted the Tamkeen programme which targets individuals benefiting from the social



10,023

beneficiaries of the social security scheme received 'temporary', 'emergency' and 'special' cash assistance to the tune of OMR925,549, according to the ministry

security scheme and those with limited income to make them self-dependent.

The ministry pointed out that 46 people including 27 males and 19 females joined its vocational programmes.

Disaster-related cases

The ministry said that it has con-

ducted several social researches, mainly related to social security and disaster-related cases, wherein the numbers reached 77,140 during the first six months of 2023.

The ministry reaffirmed that it supervises civil and vocational associations, Omani woman associations and the social community clubs to ensure they comply with the provisions of the law and the decisions and regulations of the Ministry of Social development besides supervising on their general meetings and following up with their activities.

Omani woman associations

The ministry also stated that the number of Omani woman associations and their branches in the governorates amounted to 66 with 9,971 members. **With ONA inputs**

AL BURAIMI GOVERNORATE

Efforts to save endangered owls in Oman

Times News Service

MUSCAT: Five endangered species of owls were spotted in Al Buraimi Governorate recently.

Specialists in the governorate's environmental management teams are trying to protect wildlife, preserve biodiversity, document its details, and enhance culture about saving the endangered species. These efforts have translated into monitoring and documenting five species of owls in the governorate.

Mohammed bin Salim Al Balushi, a specialist in the Environment Department in Al Buraimi Governorate, said that after an effort that lasted four years, he could monitor five rare species of owls in different places in the governorate.

Al Balushi explained that the species that were monitored in the governorate were the Bubo Ascalaphus, the short-eared owl, the barn owl, the little owl, and the barred tree owl, stressing that this monitoring process enabled him to know the characteristics that distinguish them, in addition



to their way of living and the seasons of their existence.

Al Balushi pointed out that the Bubo Ascalaphus is widespread in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Its size ranges from 50-70 centimetres, and its weight reaches 1-3 kilograms. Its wingspan is approximately two metres. The yellow-orange colour of its eyes distinguishes it besides the presence of two short tufts of feathers on its ears, and its face resembles that of a cat.

The deaf owl, or the short-eared owl, is found in many regions in

the Northern Hemisphere. It is one of the birds that lives in open areas such as swamps and often hunts during the day and nests on the ground.

Its medium size and golden colour distinguish it from the warehouse owl. While dark spots distinguish the female, and her face resembles the shape of a heart, in addition to black eyes.

It lives in open, wooded areas and farm and city environments and builds its nests in large warehouses and the gaps of trees and old buildings. **>A2**



Dhuhr.....	12:18pm
Asr.....	3:20pm
Maghrib.....	5:41pm
Isha.....	6:56pm
Fajr (Tomorrow).....	5:31am

SULTAN QABOOS ACADEMY FOR POLICE SCIENCES

HM confers Order of Royal Commendation, excellent service on senior ROP officers



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, yesterday conferred the Order of Royal Commendation and medals of Excellent Service and Competence on senior officers of the Royal Oman Police (ROP).
The medals were pinned by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik Al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs. The ceremony took place at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences.
HH Sayyid Shihab congratulated the officers on the Royal felicitations which, he said, reflects appreciation for the con-

tinuous efforts exerted by ROP personnel under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander.
The ceremony was attended by Lt. Gen. Hassan Mohsin Al Shuraiki, Inspector General of Police and Customs, Maj. Gen Abdullah Ali Al Harthy, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Operations, Maj. Gen Khalifa Ali Al Siyabi, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Administrative and Financial Affairs and several senior ROP officers.



NIZWA

Royal Oman Police celebrates annual day



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WILDLIFE

‘It took four years to track different species of owls’



<FROM A1 Al Balushi explained that a round head and long legs characterise the little owl, and the female's colour is grey, tending to brown. Its upper parts are characterised by the presence of white dots, in addition to its yellow eyes and light yellow beak, and its length ranges between 21-23 cm.
The striped tree owl is 21 centimetres long, and its colour is sandy grey, while its colour tends to be grey from below, with sharply clear black lines.
Al Balushi confirmed that the reproduction process through hatching has been monitored for these species, except for the short-eared owl, which is unstable and considered a migratory bird.
Pointing out that taking pictures of these different species



in the governorate was not an easy task, he said the process took four years in different places in the governorate, and the monitoring process contributes to informing community members, specialists and researchers about wildlife and the importance of preserving them, especially those that are threatened

with extinction.
He pointed out that the next stage is to preserve and protect them and follow up on their whereabouts, explaining that not disclosing their whereabouts is one of the methods that contribute to preserving them and preventing them from being subjected to poaching. -With Ona inputs



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COMMENTARY



Savouring the pleasures of idleness



SALEH AL-SHAIBANY

Doing nothing is not boredom but an art that can take you to the many paths of pleasures that you did not have time for them while you have been busy.

Idleness is not usually associated with a physical activity. But this is where many people are wrong. You do not need to take a single step to get into the world of adventures and many delights. Mental activities is better for our well-being.

It is when the mind can take us to the widest corners of the world without moving an inch from our favourite seats. It is not lazing around like many people would like us to think. The activities of the mind

served well the Omani legendary sailor Ahmad bin Majid in 1471 when he navigated in his ship from Oman to India and all the way to East and Central Africa. They say he first planned the whole epic trip in his mind before sailing.

I can imagine him sitting in his living room charting the sea routes in his mind for months before sailing the rough waters. But we don't have to be legendary navigators to put our minds into top gear. We see with our eyes and move with our feet and that is part of our physical routine. However, when the mind charts each careful step, we move forward with a well executed plan.

The Muslim mathematician Muhammad Al-Khwarizmi, who is credited to algebra, a branch of mathematics, went to formulate all the complex steps in his mind while he was sitting under the shade of his verandah in Baghdad. Both Bin Majid and Khwarizmi did not physically moved around when they revolutionized our world in their own respective fields.

This is in contrast with the army generals and dictators, where they have to send out soldiers on the field to do all the killings. Again, this also the notable difference between the two. The dictators use brutal physical force while

the 'intellectuals' use the creativity of their minds. I am not trying to demean people who do manual work. They have no other alternative but to move on with their limitations. But they can defend themselves that the rest of us have different tasks in life.

When a friend saw me in a coffee shop typing away my work on a laptop, he said I needed to do something more 'useful' than sitting around. I smiled because I saw the lighter side of it. I did not take his remarks as offensive but well meant. To him, I am just a lazy person sitting on my backside doing nothing while he was moving around most of the day.

He could be right but later that evening, while I was sitting at the beach watching the waves rolling to the sands, I saw ants crawling on the wall of the embankment that separated the sea and the pavement.

So, I dropped the crumbs of the cake I was eating to them. They started eating the crumbs gratefully while I watched them.

Then a mischievous thought crossed my mind. I told myself, next time, when someone tells me if sitting around doing nothing is a waste of time, then I could tell him that at least I feed hungry ants when I laze around.

Graduate Survey 2023 to meet needs of labour market

The Higher Education Graduates Survey would serve policy makers, higher education institutions and employers



MUSCAT: As many as 30,765 students from all higher education institutions in Oman and abroad took part in 4th Graduate Survey 2023, which was conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

The survey received a response rate of 43 percent out of the target segments, which comprised students who graduated in academic years 2018/2019, 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.

Dr. Rahma Ibrahim Al Mahrouqi, Minister of Higher Education,

Research and Innovation, said that the graduate survey constitutes the first building block for aligning higher education outcomes with the needs of the labour market.

The minister pointed out that the Higher Education Graduates Survey would serve several parties, including policy makers and decision-makers, higher education institutions, employers and students expected to enrol in higher education institutions.

She explained that the number of graduates of the target segment in the survey stood at 72,000. -ONA

MARITIME SECURITY CENTRE

Jordanian delegation visits MSC

MUSCAT: The delegation of the Royal Jordanian Command and Staff College (RJCS) led by Brigadier Sami Mohammed Al Harbi, today visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC).

Upon their arrival at the centre, the guests were greeted by Commodore Adil Hamoud Al Busaidi, Head of the MSC.

Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the roles and



tasks carried out by the centre in maintaining the safety of the maritime environment. They also toured the centre's facilities and viewed its latest equipment and technologies. -ONA

NCSI DATA



More than 1.6mn vehicles registered in Oman by November 2023

MUSCAT: The total number of vehicles registered in the Sultanate of Oman reached 1,660,803 by the end of November 2023, according to the data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Private registration vehicles constituted 79.5 percent of the total vehicles registered in Oman, to stand at 1,321,213.

Vehicles with a capacity of 1500-3000 cc constituted 54 percent to stand at 898,060.

Most vehicles come in the colour 'white' (comprising 42.7 per-

cent) to stand at 709,525.

Further, vehicles with commercial registration constituted 14.7 percent (243,834), while the number of rental cars stood at 33,305 (2 percent).

Meanwhile, the number of taxi vehicles reached 27,889 (comprising 1.7 percent).

As far as vehicles weights are concerned, the number of vehicles weighing less than 3 tonnes stood 1,503,627, comprising 90.5 percent of the total registered vehicles in the Sultanate of Oman.

- ONA

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NAMA CONTINUES TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO SAFE, CLEAN WATER IN OMAN

The company is also working to ensure operational efficiency and service sustainability to ensure that water meets Omani specifications and standards for drinking water

With a vision to become a leading company in water services that contributes to achieving sustainability, Nama Water Services continues its commitment to Omani society by meetings all its needs.

The core values that the company works include care, respect, empowerment, professionalism, team work, transparency and integrity. These values are combined in the company's mission of commitment to serving the community by providing water and sanitary services in a sustainable manner and preserving water for current and future generations.

Qais bin Saud Al Zakwani, Chief Executive Officer of Nama Water Services, said that the company continues with its commitment to working on the main plan for the water sector. The company works on developing strategic dimensions of the company's two segments of the business - the potable water and wastewater, wherein the company works to ensure the sustainability of potable water through water transmission and distribution networks, tanker filling stations, or through ship transportation to marine areas.

This commitment includes all activities necessary for sustainability, such as planning, construction, development, operation and maintenance of the entire network. It also includes adherence to all relevant health and quality standards to ensure the safe supply of drinking water to its valued customers.

Speaking on the sanitary field, he said that the company is working to collect wastewater from buildings through a sewerage network or tanks for treatment or disposal in an environmentally friendly manner. Wastewater is treated and treated water, muddy sediments and other by-products are disposed of. Water transmission of treated water are carried

The company continues with its commitment to working on the main plan for the water sector. The company works on developing strategic dimensions of the company's two segments of the business - the potable water and wastewater, wherein the company works to ensure the sustainability of potable water through water transmission and distribution networks, tanker filling stations, or through ship transportation to marine areas.

QAIS BIN SAUD AL ZAKWANI, Chief Executive Officer of Nama Water Services



Nama Water Services continues with its works in the execution of several strategic projects of water transmission lines between the Governorates of the Sultanate and initiation of integrated systems for water transmission within the efforts for achievement of the main plan of the water sector to cover 98 percent of the Sultanate's population in terms of the direct water networks service by 2040.

ABDULLAH BIN SALIM AL RASBI, Chief Executive Officer of Nama Water Services' projects



as the growing demand for water by tourist facilities, government and other development aspects until 2040. The total cost of the project exceeds OMR128 million. The project includes a new water transmission line for a length of 173 kilometres from the main pumping station in Al Khoudh, Wilayat of Seeb to the wilayats of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. The project also includes the design works and execution of a strategic tank with the capacity of 350,000 cubic metres between the Wilayat of Sumail and the Wilayat of Izki. The project also includes the design and execution of five balancing tanks at the pumping stations with the capacity of 12500 cubic metres along with the design of five new pumping stations.

Strategic line project for governorates of South and North Al Sharqiyah

Work is going on for execution of the strategic project for strengthening the water transmission line between the Governorate of South Al Sharqiyah and the Governorate of North Al Sharqiyah at a cost of OMR125 million. The project begins from the new water desalination plant with the capacity of 80,000 cubic metres a day at Asila area in the Wilayat of Jalan bani Bu Ali in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate and ends in the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi, where the project feeds the wilayats of the two Governorates. The project is nearly 85 percent complete and is expected to open in 2024. The project includes water pipelines for a length of 312 kilometres and construction of four new pumping stations besides three existing pumping stations and construction of 17 water tanks with a total capacity of 265,000 cubic metres.

Strengthening the water system between the desalination plants of Barka and Sohar

Work on the strategic project for strengthening the water transmission system between the wilayats of Barka and Sohar is progressing well and the project has reached 98 percent completion. The cost of the project is OMR86 million and is expected to open in 2024. The project provides water to all the wilayats of the two governorates and to enhance the interchange link between the water desalination plants in Quriyat, Al Ghubra, Barka and Sohar. The project includes installation of water pipelines for a length of 140 kilometres and construction of three pumping station to strengthen the pumping and with operational capacity of 238,000 cubic metres a day from the new water pumping station in Barka towards the main tanks at Oman Logistics and the tanks of the wilayats of Barka, Al Suwaiq, Al Musana, Al Rustaq and Saham.

Boosting the water transmission system to Al Dakhiliyah Governorate

The completion percentage of the project amounted to 91 percent and the project will be inaugurated this year (2024). The project aims to strengthen the current water transmission system to meet the growing demand for water, whether domestic or for industrial establishments, as well

out in accordance with the approved systems and agreements, he added.

Strategic programmes

Speaking on the company's strategic programmes, he said that the company works in accordance with six strategic programmes including setting and execution of the assets management programme, water control programme, data quality programme, merger of information through the systems and the contracts and procurement programme.

He said that the company has set its first strategic plan 2023-2027 which was established on development of the company's values, mission and vision along with the company's objectives, plans and strategic initiatives. He said that the company has been keen for the participation of the largest number of employees in the review of the strategic plan to ensure that it is consistent with Oman Vision 2040 document.

Customers service

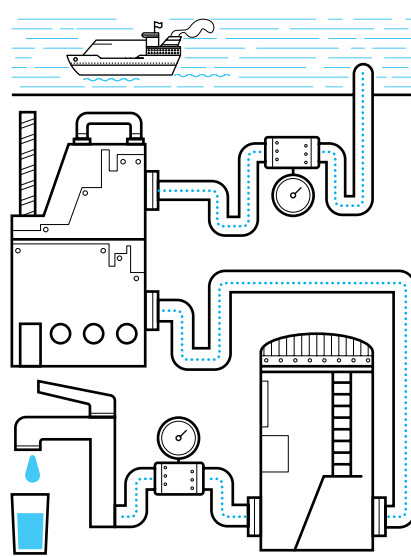
Al Zakwani said that the company pays due care and attention for

boosting the quality of service and achievement of the customers satisfaction, where the pre-paid meters would be launched in 2024, which would facilitate payment of dues and charges.

The company is also working on development of a database of the customers to understand the patterns of their usage of water and then to establish multiple channels for serving customers. The company also accords due attention and care in the fields of health, safety and environment to ensure achievement of zero-accident level where the company had succeeded in executing its operations without lost time injury in 2023.

Operational efficiency

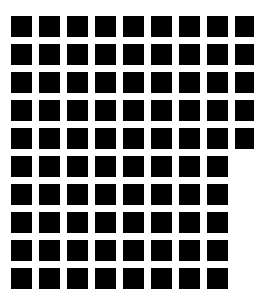
Al Zakwani added that the company is working to ensure operational efficiency and service sustainability to ensure that water meets the Omani specifications and standards for drinking water through testing samples at different sites according to a specific time schedule and to timely respond to the inquiries and calls of customers on the quality of water.



Strategic projects for the water transportation system

Strengthening the water system between the South and North Batinah Governorates

The project will be opened in 2024



The cost of the project exceeds

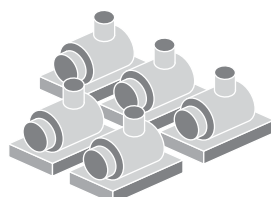
85 million Omani riyals

Water transmission line from South Al Batinah to North Al Batinah, with a length of

140 kilometres



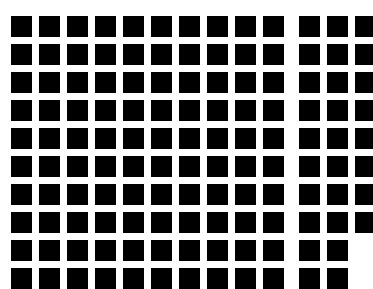
Establishing water tanks with a total storage capacity of 88,000 cubic metres



Establishment of 5 pumping stations

Project to strengthen the water transmission line for Al Dakhiliyah Governorate

The project will be opened in 2024

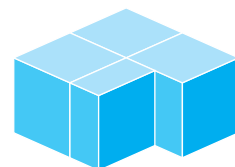


The cost of the project exceeds

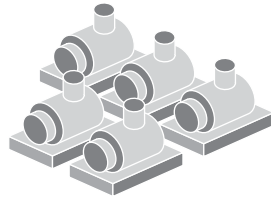
128 million Omani riyals

A water transmission line from the main pumping station in Seeb Wilayat to Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, with a length of

174 kilometres



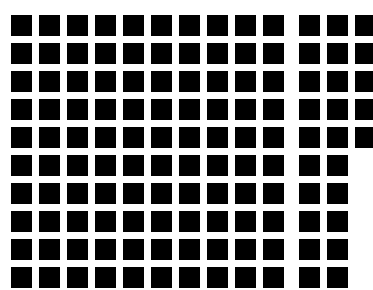
It includes a strategic tank with a capacity of 350,000 cubic meters and 5 balancing tanks in the pumping stations



Establishment of 5 pumping stations

A project to enhance the water transportation system between the South and North Sharqiyah governorates

The project will be opened in 2024

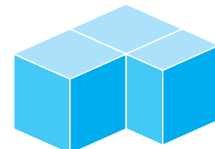


A total cost of

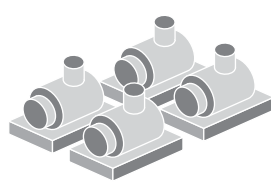
125 million Omani riyals

A water transmission line from South to North Sharqiya, with a length of

312 kilometres

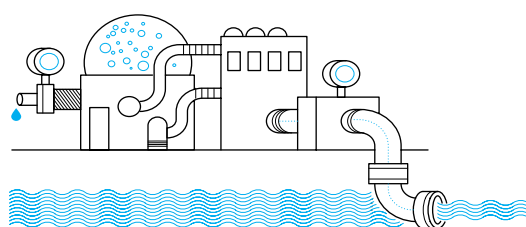


Establishing 17 water tanks with a storage capacity of 265,000 cubic metres



Construction of 4 pumping stations

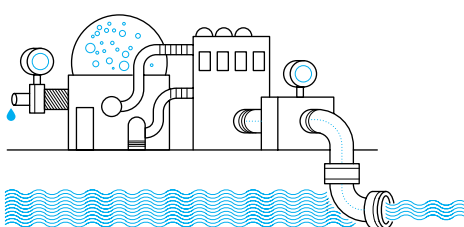
Some key projects completed in 2023



January

Water supply project from the desalination plant in Sohar to Al Dhahirah Governorate at a cost exceeding

150 million Omani riyals



February

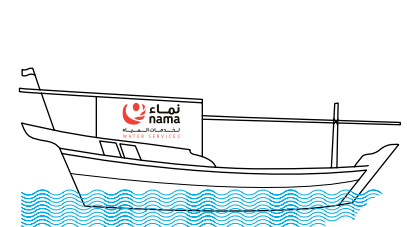
Water supply project for the state of Jabal Al Akhdar at a cost exceeding

41 million Omani riyals



March

Launching the new commercial identity Nama Water Services



May

Inauguration of the water system in Musandam Governorate at a cost of

24 million Omani riyals

BAHRAIN KING CONFERS THE ORDER OF SHEIKH ISA BIN SALMAN AL KHALIFA, FIRST CLASS, ON SAYYID THEYAZIN



YEAR OF THE CAMEL

Honouring the resilience of Arabic culture

RIYADH: The timeless bond between Arabs and camels weaves a tale of companionship and reliance in the vast desert landscape.

Bedouins, the desert dwellers, found consolation and great help in these majestic creatures as they traversed the arid terrain in search of sustenance. With their humps and resilient backs, camels bore the weight of countless journeys, their significance immortalised in the grand gestures of gifting them to noble leaders.

Chairman of the Saudi Society for Camel Studies Dr. Mohammed Al-Otaibi sheds light on the profound connection between Arabs and camels, tracing its roots back to ancient times.

The earliest mention of Arabs in history, he said, was linked to camels.

Among the notable camels of history, Al-Otaibi highlighted the



renowned she-camel Al-Qaswa, ridden by the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him. This camel, considered the second most famous in history after the she-camel of the Prophet Saleh, etched its mark in the collective memory of Arabs and Muslims.

The sacred texts also mention the significance of camels. The

Quran makes multiple references to these magnificent creatures, emphasizing their role as a sign of Allah's munificence. Various Hadiths shed further light on the revered status of camels in Arab society.

Deep-seated attachment

The Arabs' deep-seated attachment to camels is palpable. In ancient times, Arabs used the words wealth and camels interchangeably in their vernacular. Dr. Hind Al-Mutairi, a faculty member at King Saud University, explains that camels, often referred to as the "ships of the desert", symbolize the continuity of movement, work and survival in the barren and harsh environment. These resilient creatures serve as a lifeline, protecting their owners from the perils of the unforgiving desert. The Arabs, therefore,

developed an intimate bond with camels, carefully observing their well-being, strength, and unique characteristics.

According to Al-Mutairi, the Arabs bestowed a myriad names on camels, capturing their diverse characteristics. Hundreds of names were assigned to describe adult camels, herds, females, males, offspring, and camels distinguished by weight, blindness, milk production, or swiftness. Even camels carrying warriors or plagued by thirst were granted distinct names.

This rich lexicon of camel-related terms enriched the Arabic language and found expression in ancient poetry. In fact, Arabic boasts a staggering 10,046 words related to camels, as documented in the book "Camels in the Ancient Near East and the Arabian Peninsula".

— SPA

CREATOR ECONOMY

A contemporary economic sector flourishing in the UAE

DUBAI: The UAE has taken significant steps towards supporting the digital content production sector and investing in its capabilities to increase its contribution to the country's economy.

This initiative is a key focus of the UAE's National Strategy for Cultural and Creative Industries and complements a series of initiatives to attract professionals in the creative industries and innovative content creators.

Over the past decade, there has been a concerted effort to develop the creative industries and creator economy ecosystem, aiming to increase its contribution to 5 percent of the total GDP by 2031.

Examining the achievements of the UAE in this context reveals its competitive position in providing an ideal and supportive environment for creative industries and digital content production. The emirate of Dubai, in particular, secured the top global ranking in attracting foreign direct investment projects in cultural and creative industries in 2022.

The global creator economy is currently valued at around US\$250 billion and is projected to reach approximately half a trillion dollars by 2027, according to Goldman Sachs.

This significant contribution underscores the fierce competition among nations to lead and invest in current and future opportunities. This is evident as the UAE hosts the largest gathering of content creators and influencers globally through the "1 Billion



Followers Summit," organised by the New Media Academy on 10th and 11th January 2024, at the Emirates Towers and the Museum of the Future in Dubai, with a regional impact highlighted in the "Entertainment and Media Outlook in the Middle East and North Africa 2020-2024" report by Strategy. The report predicts that digital content will constitute 46 percent of the expected US\$22 billion spending on media in the Middle East and North Africa in 2024, marking a notable increase from 37 percent in 2019.

These figures indicate the emergence of a new economic sector on the horizon, necessitating the Arab world to pave the way for its growth. This involves continued establishment of platforms, specialised academies, infrastructure

support, and the development of laws and regulations ensuring the constructive progress of this industry. Simultaneously, attention must be given to the unique aspects of creative work. Strategic thinking by decision-makers is crucial to investing in and nurturing talent while fostering partnerships between individuals and relevant institutions and organisations.

In this context, Alia Al Hammadi, CEO of New Media Academy, said, "The UAE confidently strides towards a knowledge-based, innovative, and creative economy, where human ideas and talents are the primary resources. This is evident in various industries, with content creation at the forefront, emphasising talent excellence, impactful ideas, and exceptional

use of available technologies to achieve a positive influence among audiences.

Al Hamadi added, "In line with this vision, the UAE is working to foster the growth of the creator economy through programs and initiatives focused on developing the self-capabilities of human resources, providing support, and offering opportunities for their qualification. This is reflected in the harmony and alignment among all institutions and entities competing to support and develop the creator economy, with the '1 Billion Followers Summit' being a prominent example. All these efforts converge into one vision: the UAE as the land of talents and the preferred choice for those seeking to fulfil their dreams in this context."

Efforts to support the components of the creator economy ecosystem have become more specialised than ever. This is exemplified by the provision of a dedicated platform to support content creators, numbering over 300 million, according to a global study by Adobe in 2022. This support is manifested through the "1 Billion Followers Summit," the world's first and biggest specialised summit and interactive creative event that brings together digital content creators from around the world. They are followed by a community of over one billion users across various social media platforms.

The summit embodies the strategic vision of the UAE to be a nurturing ground for global creators and a pioneer in the region, establishing the foundations of a modern economic sector within its economic system and engines. The summit aims to attract the world's leading content creators and representatives of major social media platforms in one platform. Simultaneously, it transforms the experiences of participants into lessons and skills shared with emerging content creators.

Hussein Al Atouli, Director of the New Media Academy, shed light on the burgeoning growth of the digital content industry as a key contributor to global economies and an influential player in achieving comprehensive and sustainable development goals. He said, "The digital content production industry has emerged as one of the industries contribut-

ing to the economies of regional and global countries over the past decade. It has introduced dozens of job types and professions, simultaneously benefiting from the growing numbers of internet users and social media platform users worldwide."

Al Atouli continued, "Today, there are over 300 million content creators worldwide, while users spend more than double the time on the internet compared to watching television. The advancements in artificial intelligence technologies promise rapid and unprecedented growth in this sector in the coming years. Everything achieved and attained by this industry is expected to multiply rapidly in a short period with the artificial intelligence revolution and the evolution of its tools."

He added, "The significance of this industry is not only economic but also social and developmental. Content creators and influencers on social media platforms today address a wide audience of followers, allowing them the opportunity to be part of the developmental scene and supporters of the cultural and social context of each country. Therefore, at the New Media Academy, we have been keen on supporting the National Strategy for Cultural and Creative Industries for the UAE and working to make the UAE a hub for global creators. This is being realised today in the world's largest event bringing together digital content creators, the '1 Billion Followers Summit'." — WAM



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12TH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS



Counting begins as national polls end in Bangladesh

DHAKA: The counting of votes has begun in Bangladesh as polling for the 12th Parliamentary elections in the country ended on Sunday, with 27 per cent votes cast till 3pm (local time), according to media report.

The voting began at 8am at 261,912 polling stations in 42,024 voting centres and continued until 4 pm.

Amid calls for a boycott from the Opposition, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the country voted to elect members for 299 parliamentary seats.

However, polls were postponed in one seat due to the death of a candidate.

Overall, 27 per cent votes were cast in the first seven hours, from 8 am to 3 pm (local time), Md. Jahangir Alam, secretary of the Election Commission (EC), said during a news conference at the Agargaon Election Commission (EC) headquarters, according to Dhaka Tribune.

Bangladesh's 119.6 million citizens were supposed to vote in the 12th national parliamentary election.

Some 800,000 security personnel were kept on election duty to maintain the electoral atmosphere by checking for violations

of codes of conduct throughout the country.

They include 38,154 Army personnel, 2,827 Navy personnel (19 districts), 45,185 (1,158 platoons) BGB personnel, 2520 (75 platoons) Coast Guard personnel, 600 RAB teams and 95 RAB reserve teams, 184,959 police personnel, and 558,500 Ansar men. Furthermore, 653 judicial judges and 2,076 executive magistrates were deployed in the field to penalise violations of the election code of conduct, the Dhaka Tribune reported.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to win a fourth straight term in the absence of the main opposition BNP, which on Saturday began a 48-hour nationwide strike against the 'illegal government' amidst violence and a crackdown on protesters, according to Al Jazeera.

The Supreme Court on December 27 provided clearance for the Election Commission (EC) to proceed with the general elections.

The poll panel made thorough arrangements ahead of the 12th national elections. As many as 127 foreign observers will track the election process to assess the election's fairness.

— ANI





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Flights cancelled as US grounds Boeing 737 Max 9s

The US aviation regulator said 171 Boeing 737 Max 9s must be grounded for checks after part of an Alaska Airlines plane’s fuselage fell off last Friday

NEW YORK: Thousands of passengers face flight cancellations after major US airlines grounded dozens of Boeing jets after a mid-flight blowout over Oregon. The US aviation regulator said 171 Boeing 737 Max 9s must be grounded for checks after part of an Alaska Airlines plane’s fuselage fell off last Friday. Alaska said flight disruptions are expected to last into next week. United Airlines has grounded 79 planes.



Disruptions are likely to primarily affect flights in the US, BBC news reported. It follows regulator the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordering “immediate inspections” of 737 Max 9s worldwide. Required inspections would take around four to eight hours per aircraft, it said. The European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) is following the FAA approach, but flight disruptions on the continent are expected to be minimal. EASA said it believes no European airlines operate Max 9s with

the configuration covered by the FAA order. One of the world’s largest intercontinental airports, London Heathrow, said there was no impact on flights. The bulk of the affected planes are owned by US airlines. United Airlines has grounded all 79 of its Max 9 planes. Alaska said it cancelled 160 flights last Saturday, affecting about 23,000 passengers. Other airlines which also fly the planes have temporarily taken them out of service. Boeing said it welcomed the FAA’s decision, adding its teams

were in close contact with the regulator. During Friday’s incident, Alaska Airlines flight 1282 from Portland, Oregon, to Ontario, California, reached 16,000ft (4,876m) when it began an emergency descent, according to flight tracking data. Passengers on board said a large section of the plane’s outer shell fell to the ground shortly after take-off. The plane, carrying 177 passengers and crew, landed safely back in Portland. Alaska said several passengers were injured, but not seriously. — **ONA**

RENOVATED PALACE



Alexander the Great monument reopens in Greece

ATHENS: The site of one of the most important monuments in classical antiquity - the palace where Alexander the Great was crowned king - has reopened after a 16-year restoration. The Palace of Aigai, near Greece’s northern port city of Thessaloniki, was built more than 2,300 years ago. It was later destroyed by the Romans and unearthed through excavations beginning in the 19th Century. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who attended a ceremony for the site’s reopening, described it as a “monument of global importance”. “The

significance of such monuments becomes the heritage of the entire world,” he said. Among the restored sections are some of the palace’s massive colonnades, BBC news reported. The site reopened to the public on Sunday. The palace was built by Philip II, Alexander the Great’s father, who ruled over the powerful kingdom of Macedonia. Aigai, near what today is the town of Vergina, was its capital. The palace was the largest building in classical Greece — covering an area of 15,000sqm — and featured large banquet halls, places of worship and courtyards. — **ONA**

CENTRAL JAPANESE PREFECTURE

Death toll hits 126 in Japan’s devastating earthquake

TOKYO: The death toll has surged to 126 in the central Japanese prefecture of Ishikawa after a series of earthquakes of up to 7.6 magnitude struck the prefecture and its vicinity, amid fears of secondary hazards and escalating casualties despite intensified rescue and search efforts on day six of the quake on Saturday. The figure as of 1 p.m. local time marked the first time since the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake, which claimed 276 lives, that Japan has witnessed over 100 casualties due to an earthquake, including related fatalities, according to the weather agency. Meanwhile, 516 people in Ishikawa suffered injuries due to the quakes, with 210 residents in the prefecture still unaccounted for as of 2 p.m. local time, according to local authorities. The strongest temblor, officially named the 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake, is classified as a reverse fault earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.6 by a government panel, and intermittent aftershocks are hampering recovery support to the affected areas.

Striking at a shallow depth centered around 30 km east-northeast of Wajima, the devastating quake on New Year’s Day registered a maximum intensity of 7, with tremors felt in large metropolises such as Tokyo and Osaka. The combination of frequent aftershocks and severe weather conditions poses a dual threat to the affected region, hampering rescue and relief operations and heightening the risk of secondary hazards. In the latest update from the Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA), a 5.4-magnitude earthquake hit the Noto region at 5:25 a.m. local time on Saturday at a depth of 10 km, measuring upper 5 on the country’s seismic intensity scale of 7. Citing an unprecedented surge in seismic activity in the Noto region following the earthquake, the JMA said over 1,045 earthquakes registering intensity 1 or higher have been observed as of 8 a.m. on Saturday, over twice the total number of similar-intensity tem-



blors recorded in the area over the past three years. Officials warned that roads, already cracked from the dozens of earthquakes that continue to shake the area, could collapse completely. Rain and snow expected over-

night and Sunday for the region might further complicate the disaster-relief work, and the JMA also warned local residents to stay alert for possible mudslides and other possible secondary hazards. On day six of the earthquake, the most-hit coastal city of Wajima

confirmed 59 deaths, facing about 100 reports about people being buried and trapped under collapses of buildings. Japan has deployed its Self-Defense Forces to strengthen their presence from about 5,000 to 5,400 personnel, in collaboration with local police and fire departments to intensify search and rescue efforts. At a meeting of the emergency disaster response headquarters on Saturday, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida urged relevant departments to “spare no efforts in conducting search and rescue work,” noting that “fatigue and stress are accumulating” for those taking shelters due to prolonged evacuation life. With the full extent of wreckage still unknown, infrastructure has suffered severe damage in Ishikawa, with around 24,000 households facing power outages and 66,000 households left without water in 14 cities and towns as of 8 a.m. local time on Saturday, the national news agency Kyodo reported.

While some 31,400 people were staying at evacuation centers in Ishikawa, issues related to sanitation and hygiene were emerging, with some reports of COVID-19 infections and flu coming in, local media reports showed. The prefecture was planning to initiate the installation of temporary housing in the cities of Wajima and Suzu starting next Friday to secure living accommodations for the affected residents. More damage reports were coming in even outside Ishikawa, with liquefaction caused by continuous aftershocks being a major reason. As of Saturday, the New Year’s Day quake has wrecked more than 2,000 homes in the city of Niigata alone, with over 150 buildings damaged. The earthquake’s direct economic impact, based on the current damage reports, could surpass 800 billion yen (about \$5.5 billion), which amounts to about 0.15 percent of Japan’s nominal gross domestic product, according to Japanese economist Takahide Kiuchi. — **Xinhua**

COAL MINERS IN NORTH DAKOTA

Mammoth tusk buried for thousands of years unearthed

NORTH DAKOTA: The first person to spot it was a shovel operator working the overnight shift, eyeing a glint of white as he scooped up a giant mound of dirt and dropped it into a dump truck. Later, after the truck driver dumped the load, a dozer driver was ready to flatten the dirt but stopped for a closer look when he, too, spotted that bit of white. Only then did the miners realize they had unearthed something special: a 7-foot-long mammoth tusk that had been buried for thousands of years. The miners unearthed the tusk from an old streambed, about 40 feet deep, at the Freedom Mine near Beulah, North Dakota. After spotting the tusk, the



crews stopped digging in the area and called in experts, who estimated it to be 10,000 to 100,000 years old. Jeff Person, a paleontologist with the North Dakota Geologic Survey, was among those to respond. He expressed surprise that the mammoth tusk hadn’t suffered more damage, considering

the massive equipment used at the site. Mammoths once roamed across parts of Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. Specimens have been found throughout the United States and Canada, said Paul Ullmann, a University of North Dakota vertebrate paleontologist. — **ONA**



Royal Oman Police

ANNOUNCEMENT

On the occasion of ROP Annual Day, Royal Oman Police - Directorate of Public Relations and Security Information - announces to all citizens and residents that Wednesday 10/01/2024 shall be observed as an official holiday for ROP formations that follow the official-working-hours system.

As for police stations, they will be practicing their regular duties and providing all services entrusted to them around the clock.

Best wishes for all

SPORTS

Rafael Nadal withdraws from Australian Open

Nadal stated that a minor rupture in his muscle was sustained during his quarter-final defeat at the Brisbane International

SYDNEY: The 22-time Grand Slam champion Rafael Nadal has pulled out of the Australian Open 2024 due to a muscle injury, the Spaniard said in a post on social media on Sunday.

Nadal stated that a minor rupture in his muscle was sustained during his quarter-final defeat at the Brisbane International. However, Nadal said the “good news” is that it was not a recurrence of his hip issue and he is preparing to return to Spain for rest and recovery.

“Hi all, during my last match in Brisbane I had a small problem with a muscle that as you know made me worried. Once I got to Melbourne I have had the chance to make an MRI and I have a micro tear on a muscle, not in the same part where I had the injury and that’s good news. Right now I am not ready to compete at the maximum level of exigence in 5 sets of matches. I’m flying back to Spain to see my doctor, get some treatment and rest,” Nadal posted on X.

Nadal remained hopeful about the 2024 season, saying the newest injury was not “very bad news” and that he withdrew from the Aus-



tralian Open knowing he would not be at his best.

“I have worked very hard during the year for this comeback and as I always mentioned my goal is to be at my best level in 3 months. Within the sad news for me for not being able to play in front of the amazing Melbourne crowds, this is not very bad news and we all remain positive with the evolution for the season. I really wanted to play here in Australia and I have had the

chance to play a few matches that made me very happy and positive. Thanks all for the support and see you soon! Rafa,” it further read.

Nadal missed the rest of the 2023 season due to injury after losing in the second round of last year’s Australian Open. The lefty returned this week to Brisbane, where he beat Dominic Thiem and Jason Kubler in straight sets before losing to Jordan Thompson.

-ANI

INDIAN SPINNER

Indian test team is one of the best travelling sides: Ashwin

NEW DELHI: Indian spinner Ravichandran Ashwin hit back at former England skipper Michael Vaughan’s remark that India are ‘underachievers’ and stated that the team has been one of the best travelling sides in Test cricket.

Recently, Vaughan termed the Indian men’s cricket team “one of the most underachieving teams in the world” for not being able to win big despite a massive amount of resources and talent. Vaughan made this point on the FOX Cricket panel during the Australia-Pakistan second Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG).

“Here’s a question for you: India, in terms of cricket, are they one of the most underachieving sports teams in the world?” Vaughan said.



“With all the talent that they have, I think they are, yeah. Well, they do not win anything. When was the last time they won something? With all the talent they have, all the skillsets... they won here (Australia) twice, magnificent but the last few World Cups, been nowhere, T20 World Cups, nowhere. You go to South Africa, where you know, useful in Test match cricket and to produce a performance like that... I mean, with all the talent they have, and the resources they have, I do not think they win anything,” he added.

To this, Ashwin hit back, saying on his YouTube channel that though India has failed to capture ICC trophies, its Test team is one of the best travelling sides.

“Michael Vaughan made a statement after the first Test that India is an underachieving team. Yes, we haven’t won ICC trophies for years. We call ourselves the powerhouses of the game. But the Test team has been one of the best travelling teams in the vicinity. We have seen many great results,” he said.

“After he said that, so many experts from our own country

started questioning if India is an underachieving team. Frankly, it made me laugh,” he added.

Ashwin also said that Indian cricket critics nitpick too much, causing them to overlook a lot of team’s success.

“So, both cricket and Test cricket are differentiated by fine margins. In a country like India, where we talk cricket in every nook and cranny and consider the sport a religion, I feel we criticise and nitpick too much and get into unnecessary details. I think these are blinding us,” Ashwin concluded.

Over the years, India has seen some big success in Test cricket. They beat Australia at their home territory twice in a row, in 2018-19 and later 2020-21, with the second one being extremely special as the team battled the absence of key players like Virat Kohli, injuries and inexperience. It also managed to draw the Test series 2-2 during the tour of England, having a 2-1 lead under Virat’s captaincy before COVID-19 postponed the final Test. Besides this, Team India also recorded big Test wins in South Africa, most notably in Cape Town within just

two days.

India has also been invincible at home, recording wins over Sri Lanka, West Indies, New Zealand, South Africa, England, Australia, Bangladesh etc at home in Tests. This has helped India reach two ICC World Test Championship finals.

But, India last won a major ICC tournament back in 2013, the ICC Champions Trophy. Since then, India has reached the final of the 2014 ICC T20 World Cup, the semis of the 2016 and 2022 T20 World Cup, the semifinals of the 2015 and 2019 ICC Cricket World Cup, the final of the ICC Cricket World Cup at home this year and the finals of the 2019-21 and 2021-23 ICC World Test Championship, but has failed to win any of these tournaments despite putting in incredible performances in each of these tournaments and sending teams filled with some of the biggest superstars of the sport.

The most painful of these losses was the one in the final to Australia in the Cricket World Cup at home, following a dominant 10-match winning streak in the tournament. -ANI



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GLIMPSES OF BUDGET

The recently released Oman's Budget - 2024, encompassing the financial programme of the country reveals the objectives, priorities, strategies and the resources, paving the way for all-round improvement in the socio-economic structure of the country. > B2

MARKET
BUSINESS & FINANCE



MSX INDEX ENDS HIGHER

Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) general index (30) gained 18 points, comprising a rise by 0.39 per cent to close at 4594.94 points, compared to the last session, which stood at 4576.98 points. > B2

Concession agreement inked for oil and gas exploration in Dhofar

The company will conduct geological and geophysical studies and seismic surveys necessary for oil and gas prospecting in the designated zone



logical and geophysical studies and seismic surveys necessary for oil and gas prospecting in the designated zone.

Located in the southwestern part of the Dhofar Governorate, concession Area No. 38 extends approximately 17,425 square kilometres, while Concession Area No. 74, in the south-eastern part of

the governorate, covers an area of 3,064 square kilometres.

The agreement was signed by Eng Salim Nasser Al Afi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and Marwan Shafiq Salloum, Director of CC Energy Development Company.

Commitment

Al Afi said that the agreement re-

flects the ministry's commitment to expand exploration and prospecting for oil and gas resources in the Sultanate of Oman. The agreement also underscores the confidence of local and international investors in Oman. He pointed out that the deal will consolidate the productive capacity of the oil and gas sector. -ONA



COLLABORATION



ahli Islamic signs MoU with AAOIFI

Times News Service

MUSCAT: As part of its ongoing efforts to support the Islamic banking industry, ahli Islamic, recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Accounting and Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI).

The primary goal is to reinforce collaboration in capacity building within ahli Islamic and foster the growth of the Islamic finance sector in the Sultanate of Oman. The signing ceremony occurred concurrently with the AAOIFI-IsDB 18th Annual Islamic Banking and Finance Conference.

The signing occurred on the second day of the conference, attended by Sheikh Ebrahim bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, Chairman of AAOIFI's Board of Trustees, alongside members of ahli Islamic's Sharia Supervisory Board. Yousuf Al Rawahi, DGM - Head of ahli Islamic, signed the MoU, solidifying the commitment to advancing Islamic banking in Oman.

This unique MoU aims to synergise the expertise of ahli Islamic and AAOIFI, by way of collaboration that involves a series of technical and professional activities intended to fortify the development of Islamic banking and subsequently, the economy.

Commenting on the signing of the MoU, Dr Mohammed Taher Al Ibrahim, Chairman of Sharia Supervisory Board at ahli Islamic, said, "The Islamic finance industry greatly values the role of AAOIFI in developing and progressing the standards of global Islamic finance. This MoU reflects ahli Islamic's commitment to collaborate with AAOIFI within their respective domains for the mutual benefit of both institutions and their stakeholders."

Yousuf Al Rawahi, AGM - Head of ahli Islamic, views the MoU signing as a significant milestone for the bank. He said, "We are delighted to enter this noteworthy partnership with AAOIFI. The advancement of professional ca-

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The Islamic finance industry greatly values the role of AAOIFI in developing and progressing the standards of global Islamic finance. This MoU reflects ahli Islamic's commitment to collaborate with AAOIFI within their respective domains for the mutual benefit of both institutions and their stakeholders

Mohammed Al Ibrahim
Chairman of Sharia Supervisory Board at ahli Islamic

pabilities and the expansion of Islamic banking in Oman are crucial in our current landscape. We are confident that our collaboration will make a positive impact on the Islamic banking sector in the Sultanate."

It is important to note that the MoU encompasses collaboration in various areas such as research, events, and ongoing advancements. It facilitates a meaningful exchange of information and discussions addressing pertinent issues within the Islamic finance industry in Oman.

RECOGNITION

Moody's upgrades Bank Nizwa's foreign and local currency deposit ratings with stable outlook

Times News Service

MUSCAT: In a significant development that lauds its strategic growth and resilience, Bank Nizwa, the Sultanate of Oman's leading Islamic bank, has been recognised for its exceptional performance as Moody's Investors Service (Moody's) upgraded its long-term foreign and local currency deposit ratings to Ba1 from Ba2.

Furthermore, Moody's recent rating action included upgrading Bank Nizwa's Base Credit Assessment (BCA) and Adjusted BCA ratings from b1 to ba3. This significant achievement highlights the bank's outstanding financial prowess and underscores the success of its strategic initiatives.

While the upgraded deposit rating is influenced by government support, the BCA rating serves as a testament to Bank Nizwa's standalone creditworthiness. With these upgrades, Bank Nizwa now stands on par with major banks, marking a significant milestone in its journey of excellence in the finance sector.

Commenting on the development, Khaled Al Kayed, Chief Executive Officer at Bank Nizwa said, "The recent upgrades by Moody's are a resounding acknowledgment of Bank Nizwa's resilience and stability. Our robust capitalisation, coupled with the consistent trajectory of improving profitability, has been underscored by these upgrades, further solidifying our position in the financial landscape."

He added saying, "The upgraded credibility bestowed by Moody's upon Bank Nizwa resonates powerfully with both investors and depositors. It signals not only a



validation of our financial soundness but also instils confidence in our capacity to navigate economic uncertainties and financial challenges efficiently. Furthermore, these upgrades represent a reiteration of the core value proposition we extend to our esteemed customers. It emphasises our commitment to delivering fully Sharia-compliant financial solutions that align with their diverse needs and aspirations."

Bank Nizwa has made strategic advancements, fostering cautious growth and fortifying Risk Management systems. This concerted effort is distinctly reflected in the bank's financial performance metrics and its robust capital position. The stable outlook for Bank Nizwa's long-term deposit ratings

mirrors the stable outlook assigned to the Sovereign Ratings of the Government of Oman. Within this framework, Moody's foresees the bank's resilient solvency buffers playing a pivotal role in balancing factors such as asset risk, concentrated funding, and restricted liquid resources.

The upgraded BCA to ba3 from b1 demonstrates Bank Nizwa's unwavering commitment to robust risk management, epitomised by the establishment of an in-house internal risk model and the adoption of the IFRS9/FAS30 accounting standard. This upgrade is also a direct result of the bank's judicious approach to growth, prioritising sustainability in its practices. Furthermore, the elevation of Bank Nizwa's long-term deposit ratings,

aligned with the upgraded BCA, reaffirms the enduring collaborative partnership between the bank and the government.

Looking forward to the next 9-18 months, Bank Nizwa envisions a positive trajectory, expressing optimism about Oman's anticipated elevation to Investment Grade status. In parallel, Bank Nizwa is poised to emulate this achievement, further cementing its position among esteemed financial institutions in the region.

As the most-trusted Islamic bank in the country, Bank Nizwa continues to navigate the evolving financial terrain, and remains rooted in its dedication to providing unparalleled service and value to customers, investors, and the broader financial community.

EXPANSION

Oman Oil inaugurates 5 new service stations in KSA

Times News Service

MUSCAT: Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) has continued the acceleration of its expansion programme in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) with the inauguration of five new service stations during December 2023.

The new locations in Jeddah, Mecca and Dammam take the number of fully operational service stations in KSA to 30 stations as of end of 2023.

Based on OOMCO's experience in the fuel retail sector that extends for more than 20-years, the company is committed in developing integrated service stations for its customers that extends beyond fuel which are in line with the competitive standards of the market. Each convenient one-stop-shop service station takes into consideration other needs of customers such as a convenience store, ATMs, fast food



cafes and specialty coffee shops, in addition to essential automotive services including a car service centre and car wash.

The recent opening of these stations in KSA is in line with OOMCO's regional and international expansion strategy to enhance the company's presence.

Jaber Al Wahaibi, General Manager, Global Markets, Strategic Planning and Business Development at OOMCO, said, "The pro-

gress we have made towards our regional expansion goals reflects our commitment to connecting with customers across our entire network and is a result of our cumulative experience in the sector, which undoubtedly contributed to the development of cutting-edge, convenient, and competitive service stations. OOMCO looks to support growing trade relations between Saudi Arabia and Oman in pursuit of the objectives of both

Oman Vision 2040 and Saudi Vision 2030."

"We are pleased to announce the opening of these additional service stations to our network of stations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and we look forward to more achievements by launching new stations during 2024 and the coming years which aims to strengthen our presence," added Nasser Al Maawali, Regional Director of OOMCO's Branch in KSA.

With its forward-thinking strategy, OOMCO strives to become one of the top five fuel marketers in the GCC by 2027. As it continues to grow, OOMCO's service stations now serve a variety of customer segments and due to its non-fuel growth and retail transformation strategy have become becoming a destination of choice for premium fuel, food, beverages, and other convenient items and quality automotive services.

MARKET

MSX index ends marginally higher

The trading value stood at OMR2,227,994, comprising a drop by 46.1 per cent, compared to the last session

MUSCAT: Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) general index (30) gained (18) points, comprising a rise by 0.39 per cent to close at 4594.94 points, compared to the last session, which stood at 4576.98 points. The trading value stood at OMR2,227,994, comprising a drop by 46.1 per cent, compared



to the last session, which stood at OMR4,133,835. The report released by MSX pointed out that the market value went up by 0.104 per cent to reach about OMR23.84 billion. The report added that the value of shares bought by non-Omani in-

vestors reached OMR56,000, comprising 2.53 per cent. The value of shares sold by non-Omani investors reached OMR108,000, comprising 4.86 per cent. The net non-Omani investment decreased by 2.34 per cent to OMR52,000. - **ONA**

ECONOMIC STRENGTH

US employers add surprisingly strong 216,000 jobs

WASHINGTON: The nation's employers added a robust 216,000 jobs last month, the latest sign that the American labour market remains resilient even in the face of sharply higher interest rates. Friday's government report showed that December's job gain exceeded the 173,000 that were added in November. The unemployment rate was unchanged at 3.7 per cent the 23rd straight month that joblessness has come in below 4 per cent. Some details of the report, though, may disappoint the inflation fighters at the Federal Reserve, who might now be inclined to delay any cuts in their benchmark interest rate. Average hourly wages rose 4.1 per cent from a year earlier, up from a 4 per cent gain in November, which could make it harder for the Fed to slow inflation back to its 2 per cent target. Still, taken as a whole, the December jobs report reflected a healthy economy, with steady job growth, rising wages and cooling inflation. It provided the latest evidence that the Fed may be able to achieve a notoriously difficult "soft landing," in which the central bank would conquer inflation without causing a steep



recession. Yet despite the low unemployment and easing inflation, polls show that many Americans are dissatisfied with the economy. That disconnect, which will likely be an issue in the 2024 elections, has puzzled economists and political analysts. A key factor is the public's exasperation with higher prices. Though inflation has been falling more or less steadily for a year and a half, the lingering financial and psychological effects of the worst bout of inflation in four decades have soured many Americans on the economy. Prices are still 17% higher than they were before the inflation surge began and are still rising. Pollsters and economists say there has never been as wide a gap between the underlying health of the economy and public perception. A poll conducted in No-

vember by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, about three-quarters of respondents described the economy as poor. Two-thirds said their expenses had risen. Asked why many Americans remain dissatisfied by the economy, Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su said Friday that "part of the unfortunate reality is we live in polarised times." Despite their stated discontent with the economy, Americans have kept spending. Average hourly pay has outpaced inflation over the past year, leaving consumers with more money to spend. Indeed, as they did for much of 2023, consumers, a huge engine for US economic growth, hit the stores in November, shopped online, went out to restaurants or travelled. - **BNA**

COMMENTARY

Budget paves way for all-round improvement in socio-economic structure

MUSCAT: The recently released Oman's Budget - 2024, encompassing the financial programme of the country reveals the objectives, priorities, strategies and the resources, paving the way for all-round improvement in the socio-economic structure of the country. The Financial Plan has been crafted against the backdrop of numerous global challenges, as indicated by IMF (International Monetary Fund), such as geo-political tensions, weakening economic growth, oil price volatility, increasing interest rates, climate change and natural disaster, which all had a role in denting the global financial stability and the individual countries as well. The Budget 2024 lays down the guide-posts for accelerating the growth and creating a conducive business environment. Achievement of fiscal sustainability, stimulating national economy, accelerating non-oil revenue, improving spending efficiency, attracting foreign investments, controlling deficit, lowering of public debt, stabilising the inflation rate, sustaining employment creation, implementation of high-priority projects, fulfilling basic needs, continuing welfare subsidies and harnessing human



resources are all the chosen areas for priority. It is heartening to note that the proactive steps taken in the earlier years towards the management of the economy under the broad frame-work of the Tenth Five Year Plan (2021 - 2025) have yielded positive results during 2021 to 2023. Overall reduction in Fiscal Deficit in 2021 by OMR1,233 million, achievement of Fiscal Surplus by OMR1,146 million in 2022 and OMR931 million in 2023 have therefore added new dimensions to the V year Plan of the Country. Going by the strategies being followed towards management of the fiscal figures, it is likely

that the year 2024 will again end with a decent amount of fiscal surplus, though the Budget 2024 projects a Fiscal Deficit of OMR640 million. Any upward swing in oil price from \$60 per barrel, being taken in Budget 2024 against the Global price of \$80 projected by IMF for 2024, will augur well for this optimism and favourable shift in the fiscal position. In terms of Real GDP Growth, the main indicator for assessing the efficiency of the economy, Oman will achieve 2.3 per cent in 2023 and 2.4 per cent in 2024. However, the biggest impetus being given towards acceleration of investments in projects in the country will pave the way for enhancing the income stream and contributing to the growth of the economy in the future. Reduction in public debt by OMR2.4 billion in 2023 i.e from OMR17.6 billion in 2022 to OMR15.2 billion in 2023 is a notable achievement. The surplus generated from Oil Revenue has been substantially deployed to reduce the borrowings and consequently the debt service costs. The expected Fiscal Deficit of OMR640 million is proposed to be funded by External Borrowings by OMR240 million, (In 2020, it was OMR2 billion), substantially reduced from the

earlier years and OMR400 million from Sovereign Reserves, as in earlier years. Despite the heightened financial shocks faced globally in 2023, inflation was minimal at 1.03 per cent in 2023 in Oman, thanks to the measures taken towards curbing inflation in the area of subsidies on food and fuel. It is heartening to note that the above salient measures such as strengthening of public finance, reduction in public debt and rebound in oil prices have resulted in enhancing the Credit Rating from the various agencies such as Moody's, S&P and Fitch and the outlook for the country, which will set the trend for generating higher inflow of Capital into the country by way of investments. While analysing the Income stream, the proportion between Hydro Carbon (Oil & Gas) and Non-Hydro Carbon which was 72:28 in 2023 is expected to become 68:32 in 2024, which is indeed a good development. The 5.7 per cent increase in Non-Hydro Carbon revenue by OMR190 million (From OMR3,330 million in 2023 to OMR3,520 million in 2024) has made a shift in this ratio, which is a welcome feature. Gross revenue is estimated

to grow by 9.5 per cent over Budget 2023 in 2024 to touch OMR11,010 million (Hydro Carbon Revenue OMR7,490 million and Non-Hydro Carbon Revenue and taxes aggregating to OMR3,520 million). Gross spending is likely to go up by 2.6 per cent over 2023 Budget in 2024 to OMR11,650 million, (OMR3,070 million for Defense & Security, OMR4,453 million for Civil Ministries Expenditure, OMR1,050 for Public Debt Service, OMR900 million for development of projects in education, health, sports, housing, transport and agriculture sectors and OMR2,177 towards social protection contributions, subsidies and other expenditure. As the spending is more than the income generation, the Budget 2024 carries a Fiscal Deficit of OMR640 million, working out to 6 per cent of the total revenue and 1.5 per cent of the GDP of the nation. Oman's Investment and Development landscape includes proposed spending of OMR3.9 Million in 2024 through government's investment arms namely OMR1.25 billion by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), OMR1.5 billion by Energy Development Oman (EDO) and OMR1.14 billion through development budget allocations. Be-

sides, Oman Future Fund, Oman Development Bank, Public Private Partnership Programme shall continue to enhance the investment climate in Oman. The government's initiative in setting up a National Programme for Fiscal Sustainability and Development Financial Sector (ESTIDAMAH) is a major step in National Building Process. It aims to empower financial sector's twin pillars namely banking and capital market to achieve economic and investment goals as set forth in Vision 2040. SME financing, supporting target sectors, green and sustainable finance, boosting domestic capital, foreign investment flow and insurance have been identified as the focus areas. Fintech, Laws and legislation, Financial Literacy and Human Competency Development Programme are determined to be the programme enablers in this process. Overall, Budget - 2024 is a well-crafted blue-print of action, comprehensively covering different facets of the economy and balancing between the challenges on hand and the objectives set for achievement in future.

The writer, A. V. Manohar is the Chief Executive Officer of Wisdom Business and Training Services.

MACROECONOMIC STABILISATION PLAN

Will paradigm shift help Cuba's economic crisis?

HAVANA: Cuban Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz had only just presented his government's macroeconomic stabilisation plan when President Miguel Diaz-Canel had to calm things down again. The measures are not the implementation of a "neoliberal package against the people," he assured lawmakers in the last parliamentary session of the year, but they do contain "complex decisions, as complex as the situation" in which Cuba finds itself. The Caribbean island has been in the midst of a severe economic and supply crisis for the last three years, with rampant inflation, fuel and medicine shortages. Frequent power cuts have dominated daily life, sparking an unprecedented wave of emigration. In response, the Cuban government has announced one of the biggest macroeconomic adjustment plans of recent decades for 2024. Increasing energy prices and ending general subsidies for basic provisions, the announcement by Marrero came as a surprise when he presented it to the National Assembly of People's Power, Cuba's congress, in late December. **Deficits at every level** "We are very dissatisfied that we have not made the necessary progress and mitigated the effects of external phenomena," Marrero told members of parliament, referring to the US blockade on the country. "We could have done more. There are still shortcomings and subjective problems that affect the



capacity of programmes and economic forecasts." Marrero's assessment was devastating. Cuba hasn't achieved its planned export revenues, and there is still a huge foreign exchange deficit. Goods and services aren't diversifying, and there hasn't been a sustainable production increase, particularly with regard to food. Meanwhile, foreign investment in economic development is insufficient. Marrero's plan aims to reduce government spending by raising the prices previously capped by the state. At the same time, public spending on subsidies will be reduced by providing financial support to socially vulnerable groups instead of subsidizing products - a paradigm shift in policy. "It's not fair that those who have a lot receive the same as those who have very little," he said. "Today we subsidise an old pensioner just as much as the owner of a large private company who has a lot of money."

Subsidising people instead of products Marrero was referring to the "libreta" ration booklet, through which basic foodstuffs such as rice, beans, cooking oil, chicken and other goods are distributed evenly to all Cubans at heavily subsidized prices. According to Economy Minister Alejandro Gil Fernandez, this amounts to an annual expenditure of \$1.6 billion (€1.44 billion) for Cuba. The aim is to create "a fairer and more efficient system" and "leave no one in the lurch," said Marrero, tacitly acknowledging the increase in social and economic inequalities. President Diaz-Canel later countered fears that the libreta could be abolished altogether. Marrero also announced tariff increases, declaring that the state could not continue the "wastefulness" of subsidies for water, electricity, liquid gas and fuel. Other measures will include future sales of petrol and diesel to tourists in exchange for foreign cur-

rency, more expensive local public transport and increased salaries in the education and health sectors, which have been particularly affected by staff shortages. The government will also adjust the official exchange rate of the Cuban peso (CUP) to the US dollar, Marrero said, based on recommendations from the central bank. The official exchange rate is currently 24 CUP per US dollar for legal entities and 120 CUP for private individuals. On the informal market, the US dollar has now risen to 265 CUP. **Numbers underscore crisis** The Cuban government recently published several macroeconomic figures underlining the economy's downward trend. The government estimates that gross domestic product will shrink by 1 per cent to 2 per cent for 2023, after forecasting growth of 3 per cent at the beginning of 2023. Inflation on the formal market was around 30 per cent at the end of the year, though informal inflation is much higher. Tourism also fell far short of expectations in 2023, with just under 2.45 million travellers to the country. Further measures in the macroeconomic stabilisation plan are therefore aimed at reviving the sector. Other efforts to boost the economy will include promoting the production of exportable products such as nickel, tobacco and rum, as well as the import of raw materials and intermediate products to boost domestic production. - **bw**

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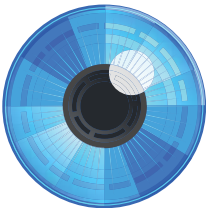
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LIFESTYLE



ne in five contact lens wearers find lenses to be less comfortable by the end of the day. If that describes you,

you may already know that cold air, wind, and indoor heating, especially during winter, can bring additional challenges.

The good news? It doesn't have to be that way. From your morning coffee to post-work happy hour (or gym session), you can help your lenses go the distance in cool weather with these comfort hacks:

1. Control indoor air:

Indoor heating reduces humidity, which can result in a drying effect on the lenses. You can help ease the resulting discomfort by turning down the thermostat a bit and by using a humidifier. These days, there are portable mini humidifier models, so it is easy to run one in most rooms or even to bring one to the workplace.

2. Protect winter eyes:

Whether you're building a snowman with the kids or enjoying a frosty winter walk in the neighborhood, cold air and wind can dry out the surface of your contact lenses. Add a layer of protection from the elements by wearing UV-blocking sunglasses before stepping outdoors.

3. Follow directions:

Whether you gave a huge presentation at work or stayed out a bit too late with friends, it's tempting to fast-track your bedtime routine at the end of a long day, especially as the winter days get shorter and darker. When it comes to contact lens care though, shortcuts like reducing rubbing and rinsing times, or topping off solution mean your lenses aren't getting proper care. Follow the instructions carefully, no matter how exhausted you are, and always remove your lenses before falling asleep.

4. Clean and moisturize:

Contact lens wearers who wear contacts that are replaced weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly may attribute various challenges to wearing their lenses during the winter season, including dryness and irritation. However, using a contact lens solution that conditions and hydrates lenses can help with all-day comfort. Choose a multi-purpose solution recommended by board-certified optometrists that's uniquely formulated for dry, uncomfortable contact lenses, such as Biotrue Hydration Plus Multi-Purpose Solution. Offering exceptional cleaning and disinfection, and dissolving protein build-up, it's formulated with your eyes' biology in mind to promote all-day hydration. In fact, it keeps more moisture on your contacts (for 12 hours compared to the original Biotrue Multi-Purpose Solution, based on a laboratory study) as well as provides up to 20 hours of moisture (based on a laboratory study). For more information and complete use instructions, visit [biotrue.com](https://www.biotrue.com).

5. Pack right for holiday and winter travel:

Long flights and dry cabin air can leave contact lenses feeling dry. Biotrue Hydration Plus Multi-Purpose Solution also comes in a convenient travel-sized bottle and meets TSA regulations as a medically necessary liquid, so it can be easily tossed into your carry-on to equip your contacts for comfort. And to provide instant moisture and comfort to lenses, try using Biotrue Hydration Boost Contact Lens Drops, a preservative-free hydrating formula enhanced with bio-inspired ingredients.

6. Take inventory of your habits:

Are you enjoying increased screen time as you spend more time indoors? Be sure to practice self-care and take regular screen breaks. Every 20 minutes, look 20 feet away for 20 seconds.

By employing these lens-related comfort hacks, you can help contacts feel comfortable this winter, and beyond. -StatePoint



WINTER COMFORT HACKS FOR CONTACT LENS WEARERS

SPORTS

Real Madrid through on day of no surprises in Spanish Cup



Real Madrid made heavy work of the first half and went in 0-0 at the break, despite having over 80% of ball possession

MADRID: Copa del Rey holders Real Madrid qualified for the last 16 of the tournament thanks to a 3-1 win away to fourth tier Arandina on Saturday night. Playing against a rival three levels below them, a much-changed Madrid side made heavy work of the first half and went in 0-0 at the break, despite having over 80 percent of the ball against a rival that didn't manage a shot on goal. They took the lead in the 54th minute from a Joselu penalty after the referee deemed that Brahim Diaz had been fouled inside the area, and Brahim doubled Madrid's lead a minute later to virtually seal the tie. Rodrigo added a third in the closing minutes, but Arandina got a late consolation when Nacho put the ball into his own net in injury time. The other good news for Real Madrid was that Arda Guler was finally able to make his debut after a series of injuries in the first half of the season.



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Girona also qualified for the last-16 with a 2-0 win away Elche, on a day which saw no surprises in the Cup. Daley Blind and Yan Couto rewarded Girona's greater efficiency in front of goal against a rival that had 22 shots, but failed to score. Memphis Depay netted twice as Atletico Madrid won 3-1 away to RFEF I (third tier) Lugo, with Angel Correa putting Diego Simeone's

side ahead in the second minute of the game. Deportivo Alaves won the only all-top flight tie thanks to Carlos Benavidez's slide-rule finish in the 56th minute against 2022 Cup winners Betis, who failed to react after the goal. Elsewhere, Getafe won a dull match 1-0 away to Espanyol and Rayo Vallecano left it late before beating Huesca 2-0 after extra time. *-Xinhua*

PRESTIGIOUS PRIZE

Tennis world No.1 Iga Swiatek wins Polish Sportsman of the Year award

WARSAW: Tennis world No.1 Iga Swiatek won the award of Poland's Sportsman of the Year for 2023 on Saturday evening. The Sportsman of the Year is considered to be one of the most prestigious sport prizes in Poland. Swiatek's victory was widely expected as the 22-year-old won six titles in 2023. The Pole defended her crown at Roland Garros and she also took the highest podium in Warsaw (WTA 250), Stuttgart and Doha (WTA 500) and WTA 1000 China Open in Beijing. Then she ended her season in a perfect way by winning the WTA Finals in Cancun, Mexico. "I regret that I cannot be at the gala, but as you know, I'm at the United Cup tournament. Every vote means a lot to me. It showed me how much support I have from my fans. That reward gives me additional motivation," Swiatek said in a recorded video. Her father, Tomasz Swiatek,



who appeared on the scene to collect the reward, emphasized that "Iga wouldn't be so successful without the hard work of her whole team."

Swiatek was followed by speedway rider Bartosz Zmarzlik in the second place while volleyball player Aleksander Sliwka came third in the vote. FC Barcelona

striker Robert Lewandowski, who won the La Liga top scorer title in 2023, didn't enter the top ten list, which was seen as a huge surprise in Poland.

AUSTRALIAN OPENER

Two chapters closed, one to go: Warner thanks everyone following retirement from Tests, ODIs

SYDNEY: After completing his final Test on a winning note, Australian opener David Warner thanked everyone who played with him and supported him throughout his career. Warner concluded his Test career on a winning note, securing an eight-wicket win over Pakistan in the third Test at his home arena of Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG). He hit scores of 34 and 57 in his final appearances in Test whites for Aussies. Notably, Warner also announced his ODI retirement ahead of the final Test match, though he stated that he would be available if he is needed for the ICC Champions Trophy to be held in 2025 in Pakistan. "Two chapters closed and one to go. I've got nothing but a big Thank you to everyone. I love you all #grateful #cricket," said Warner's Instagram post caption. Warner has retired from two of cricket's older formats as a legend, with an ICC World Test Championship, two ICC Cricket



World Cups and multiple Ashes wins under his belt. In his last ODI for Aussies, he won the Cricket World Cup with Aussies, defeating India in the final at Ahmedabad's Narendra Modi Stadium to capture his country's

sixth 50-over WC title. In 112 Test matches, Warner scored 8,786 runs at an average of 44.59, with 26 centuries and 37 fifties in 205 innings. His best score is 335*. He is the fifth-highest scorer for Australia in Tests.

In 161 ODIs, Warner has scored 6,932 runs at an average of 45.30, with 22 centuries and 33 fifties in 159 appearances. He is Australia's sixth-highest run-scorer in ODIs. His best ODI score is 179. Warner will continue to play T20Is, with the ICC T20 World Cup set to take place from June 1 in West Indies/USA. He has played 99 T20Is, scoring 2,894 runs at an average of 32.88, with a century and 24 fifties in 99 innings. His best score is 100*. He is Australia's second-highest run-scorer in T20Is. Overall, in 372 international matches, Warner has scored 18,612 runs at an average of 42.49, with 49 centuries and 94 fifties in 463 innings. His best score is 335*. He is Australia's second-highest run-getter in international cricket. These stats have established him as one of the greatest openers for Australia and overall international cricket, both in this generation and perhaps all time. *-ANI*

CRICKET



Skipper Cummins, Starc, Hazlewood on track to feature in all seven Tests in summer

MELBOURNE: The Australian pace trio of skipper Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood looks to be on track to feature in all seven Test matches of the summer against Pakistan, West Indies and New Zealand as the coach Andrew McDonald and Cummins are surprised with the physical fitness of the trio after a heavy year featuring the ICC World Test Championship final, The Ashes and ICC Cricket World Cup in India. Cummins, Hazlewood and Starc have appeared in 28 Tests together as a pace trio, but it is only the second time that they have played five successive Tests together, as per ESPNCricinfo. Their previous five successive appearances came in 2020-21, first playing a home series against India of four Tests from December 2020 to January 2021 then the first Ashes Test in December 2021. This was made possible by a 11-month COVID-19 induced gap between their fourth and fifth Test. This time around, the trio featured in last two Tests of the Ashes series and then the whole home series against Pakistan of three Tests. Cummins and Starc played in the ICC World Test Championship final. Cummins, Hazlewood and Starc played 10 out of 11 World Cup fixtures together as well. The trio will be playing the first Test against West Indies from January 17 onwards at Adelaide and could also play their next four matches against WI and Kiwis without any break, confirmed the coach McDonald. Both sides will play two Tests

each against the WTC title holders. "There is nothing to indicate they will need a rest," McDonald said after the four-day win in Sydney as quoted by ESPNCricinfo. "They have got a little bit of a gap to the West Indies Test match. I could see pretty much an unchanged bowling line-up for Adelaide. It is probably something we have noticed, they have probably got better across the [Pakistan] series. In particular, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins. And Mitch Starc, I think his ball speed in this game was at its highest," said McDonald. The Aussie selectors and support staff did not expect this lethal pace trio to be so durable despite a hectic 2023. There were plans to keep pacers Scott Bolland and Lance Morris ready for the first Test against Pakistan, anticipating that heavy workload would lead to some soreness and pain for the main pacers. But it never happened, causing Morris and Bolland to be sent back to the Big Bash League (BBL). McDonald said that they had planned for reinforcements but all three Tests against Pakistan ending in four days helped. "In the background, we sort of plan for five-day Test matches, and if we were to go five days it is going to put immense stresses and strain onto the bowling unit. I think we got, not lucky, but in the first Test match in Perth, there was a shortened second innings for the bowling unit," said McDonald. *-ANI*

IN-PICTURES



Epiphany horse race held in Pietrosani, Romania
Decorated horses are seen ahead of the traditional Epiphany horse race in Pietrosani, Romania. *Xinhua*



Exhibition on ancient Greece held in Changsha, Hunan
Sculptures are on display at an exhibition titled “The Greeks: From Agamemnon to Alexander the Great” at Hunan Museum in Changsha, central China’s Hunan Province. *Xinhua*



Fog shrouds Cairo in Egypt
Buildings are shrouded in fog in Cairo, Egypt. *Xinhua*



Roadside concerts become a hit in SW China’s Guizhou
This aerial picture shows the site of a roadside concert at Wenchang Pavilion in Guiyang, southwest China’s Guizhou Province. *Xinhua*



Revellers enjoy Carnival of Blacks and Whites in Pasto, Colombia
Revellers enjoy their time during the Carnival of Blacks and Whites in Pasto, Colombia. *Xinhua*



Zambian president calls for enhanced efforts to tackle cholera
Health workers and relatives of patients are seen at a cholera treatment centre of a hospital in Lusaka, Zambia. *Xinhua*



Ranbir Kapoor, Anil Kapoor, Bobby Deol and others pose at the success party of the film Animal
Bollywood actors Ranbir Kapoor, Anil Kapoor, Bobby Deol, Rashmika Mandanna, Tripti Dimri, Soloni Batra, director Sandeep Reddy Vanga, and filmmaker Bhushan Kumar pose at the success party of the film Animal in Mumbai. *ANI Photo*

ROUND-UP

Bank Muscat hosts event for its customers working in public and private sectors in Muscat

The event was held to know more about customers' feedback regarding the services and facilities offered, which are encouraging factors for development



MUSCAT: In line with its customer-centric vision, and to introduce customers to banking facilities and exclusive offers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, hosted a special event for customers employed in the public and private sectors in Muscat governorate, with the aim to consider their feedback and suggestions on the various banking products and services.

The event was attended by Abdulnasir N. Al Raisi, General Manager – Personal Banking, in addition to other senior officials.

On the occasion, Saleh Mohamamed Al Maaini, Deputy General

Manager - Capital Regions, Bank Muscat, said, "Throughout the bank's long history, we have been keenly and continuously keeping pace with the latest developments in the banking and financial sector. We are proud of the many achievements so far and we look forward achieving many more successes in the future. These events are important as they allow us to know more about customers' feedback regarding the services and facilities offered, which are encouraging factors for development.

"I would like to take this opportunity to thank our valued customers on their continuous trust with

the services and products provided by the bank."

Addressing the gathering during the event, Radhiya Hassan Al Lawati, Head of Sales, Bank Muscat, said: "For the past years, Bank Muscat has been focusing on continuously enhancing banking services and facilities for the benefit of its customers across the Sultanate of Oman. We are continuously working to provide the most innovative banking solutions.

"The world is witnessing rapid changes brought about by the technological developments and digital transformations which have influenced the present in many aspects including the lifestyle. Bank Muscat is working hard to keep base with the rapid technologies and continuously update customers and keep them well-informed.

"We are pleased to once again enhance our partnership with our valued customers and offer them the best benefits and financing services. We will continue organising similar events to work together towards achieving our common goals."

As a leading financial services provider, Bank Muscat has an extensive branch network with 180 branches and service centers and more than 850 devices, including ATMs, CDMs and omnichannel devices distributed in all governorates. Bank Muscat is the first choice for more than two million customers in the Sultanate and plays a major role in enhancing financial inclusion in the country through the innovative products it develops continuously.

Bank Muscat's distinctive services and products reflect its commitment to market leadership in the Sultanate's banking sector. As part of its growth strategy, the bank regularly organises events, meetings and workshops to introduce customers to its diverse range of products and services as well as cutting edge electronic channels like mobile, Internet and Call Centre-based banking services, which provide customers with the means to process their transactions quickly and securely 24x7.

CONNECTIVITY TECHNOLOGY



Chery Tiggo 8 series impresses with L2 level advanced driver assistance system

MUSCAT: With the rapid development of connectivity technology and artificial intelligence, "driverless" is considered the ultimate direction of autonomous driving.

In the process of realising the implementation of "driverless", the mass production of ADAS not only provides automobile manufacturers with more differentiated product design but also delivers an improved driving experience and safety assurance for consumers.

Chery's autonomous driving technology boasts over a decade of profound accumulation. From 2010 to 2013, Chery engaged in R&D of active safety technology, successfully implementing vehicle detection, FCW (forward collision warning), lane detection, and LDW (lane departure warning), among other technologies. In 2014, Chery began constructing an intelligent driving platform and completed the development of the first generation of intelligent vehicles.

By 2016, Chery's second generation of intelligent vehicles had achieved autonomous driving based on map and positioning systems. In 2017, Chery achieved the development of the third generation of autonomous driving vehicles, with functionalities encompassing autonomous driving in high-speed road conditions

and fixed areas within urban zones. Currently, Chery has independently mastered intelligent processing technologies such as lane detection, millimeter-wave radar data processing, vehicle detection, local path planning, vehicle low-level control, and map data processing, achieving technological breakthroughs in the field of intelligent driving.

At the "Chery Tech Day 2023", Chery unveiled two new development routes in the field of intelligent driving. The first is the Chery Pilot, directly aimed at mass-produced vehicles. Chery has already implemented the Chery Pilot 2.0 system, capable of achieving L2 level ADAS capabilities. The Chery Pilot 3.0 system can achieve L2+ level high-speed NOA (Navigation on Auto Pilot) and is expected to enter mass production in the second quarter of 2024. The Chery Pilot 4.0 system will realise L2++ level urban NOA capabilities and is expected to enter mass production in the first quarter of 2025. The second route is the L4 level solution developed around Robotaxi, named "Drive". The Drive 1.0 version was launched in the third quarter of this year, with multi-scenario operations expected to be realized by the fourth quarter of 2024.

AT SQU

BankDhofar inaugurates its newest branch

MUSCAT: Under the patronage of Her Highness Mona Fahad Al Said - Assistant Vice Chancellor for External Cooperation at Sultan Qaboos University, BankDhofar announced the opening of its latest branch in Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

This new branch is set to serve the financial needs of the community, offering a wide range of banking services and innovative solutions. The opening ceremony was attended by esteemed dignitaries, officials, and members of the community and BankDhofar's executive management members.

The new branch Sultan Qaboos University aims to provide convenient, modern banking facilities with personalised services available to every customer. With the inauguration of this branch, BankDhofar reinforces its commitment to supporting the growth and development of the local economy, while catering to the evolving needs of customers across Oman in order to activate the principle of



financial inclusion, which is one of the bank's important strategies.

The design of the new branch is in line with the latest developments of the bank to achieve the highest levels of service excellence for its customers, including personal banking, corporate banking, trade finance, investments, and

more. With a team of qualified professionals, the branch will assist customers with their financial needs, offering tailored solutions to meet their requirements effectively.

BankDhofar continues to play a pivotal role in driving the economic development of Oman

in line with 2040 Oman Vision. The bank's extensive network of branches, ATMs, and self-service machines is designed to provide convenience and accessibility to its customers across the country and remains committed to leveraging innovative technologies to enhance the customer experience.

Over the last 18 months, BankDhofar's branch network has expanded from 65 to more than 110 branches, ensuring that its comprehensive range of financial services is now accessible to more communities bringing banking closer to its customers across the country. Simultaneously, the bank has invested significantly in enhancing its digital channels, providing customers with a seamless and modern banking experience with more than 310 ATMs, CDMs, FFMs and MFks. The increased network is located, in strategic locations across all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, including major cities and towns in the capital and interior regions.

PROMOTION

Live luxuriously by purchasing certified pre-owned Mercedes-Benz vehicle at exclusive price

MUSCAT: The luxury of owning one of the latest Certified Pre-Owned vehicles from Mercedes-Benz Oman has become an attainable reality with an exclusive offer. Valid until March 31 this year, the limited time offer includes a selection of luxury Certified Pre-Owned vehicles, with prices ranging from OMR 18,895 to OMR 59,845 including VAT.

All Certified Pre-Owned vehicles included in this exclusive offer were manufactured in 2023, except for the Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 4MATIC+ Coupé, which was made in 2022. The luxury vehicles have been meticulously cared for, and are well-maintained through the most demanding certification processes in the industry.

The available Certified Pre-Owned Mercedes-Benz vehicles



all have relatively low mileages starting from 3,080 kilometres up to 14,387km.

The range includes the A 200 in Iridium Silver Metallic with leather in two-tone Classic Red and Black; the CLA 200 Coupé in

Mountain Grey with leather in two-tone Classic Red and Black; and the C 200 in Polar White with leather in two-tone Power Red and Black. The range also includes the GLE 53 4MATIC+ Coupé in High-tech Silver Metallic with Artico

Leather Dinamica Microfibre, and the S 450 4MATIC in Designo Diamond White Bright with leather in Sienna Brown and Black.

The available cars have undergone the rigorous 150-point vehicle inspection performed by Mercedes-Benz technicians, and includes thorough engine and fluid checks, as well as on-road driving evaluations. All maintenance is performed using Genuine Mercedes-Benz Parts. Being part of the exclusive Certified Pre-Owned Mercedes-Benz family entitles customers to many complimentary benefits and rewards, such as an unlimited-mileage warranty of one year with an option to extend up to two years, 24/7 roadside assistance for certain vehicles, and a history of all services performed.

There are also several service packages available.



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Offer valid from 6th December 2023 to 5th February 2024 & applicable only on 2023 models and model variants. *For 1st year only. #For 1st year & in Oman only. Service- 5 Years/50,000 kms, whichever is earlier. **5 Years/100,000 kms manufacturer warranty+One year unlimited kms extended warranty. Conditions apply. Service Interval-10,000 kms/1 year, whichever is earlier. Vehicle shown are for illustrative purposes. For more details, please visit our showroom. Offer valid only for private vehicles. Not available on fleet, Ministry & Taxi / Rental / commercial car purchases.

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