

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in reply to His Majesty's greetings cable on the occasion of the Founding Day. In his cable, King Salman expressed his utmost thanks for His Majesty the Sultan's sincere sentiments and prayers, wishing His Majesty good health and happiness. King Salman also wished the Omani people further progress and prosperity.



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HM CUP CAMEL RACING KICKS OFF IN BARKA



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DHOFAR'S SHALEEM AND AL HALANIYAT ISLANDS SET FOR MAKEOVER



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EXPERIMENT CAPTURES WHY POTTERY FORMS ARE DISTINCT



HEAVY RAIN ALERT

CLASSES SUSPENDED IN 3 GOVERNORATES

The Ministry of Education announced the suspension of studies in the governorates of North Al Batinah, Al Buraimi and Al Dhahirah on Tuesday. The Ministry stated in a statement that a reference to Alert No 1 of heavy expected rain issued by the National Centre for Early Warning of Multiple Hazards, and to the follow-up of the ministry's Central Committee for Emergency Situations Management regarding some governorates of the Sultanate of Oman being affected by a depression, and out of the ministry's concern for safety. For its students, it has been decided to suspend studies in all public, private and foreign schools in the governorates of North Al Batinah, Al Buraimi and Al Dhahirah, for Tuesday and studies will resume on Wednesday. — ONA

11TH EDITION OF FAK KURBAH

The initiative to relieve distress (Fak Kurbah) was launched in its eleventh edition, in order to relieve the suffering of those imprisoned, to help in their release, as a continuation of the solidarity and humanitarian of the Omani society. The eleventh edition of the Fak Kurbah Humanitarian Initiative, which carries the slogan "Because we believe that humans deserve a second chance," was organised by the Omani Lawyers Association and in partnership with community individuals and institutions. The initiative is concerned with collecting financial donations to release those imprisoned in prisons due to financial claims imposed on them in civil and other cases. SEE P2

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Dr Muamar bin Ali al Tobi

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Tariq Al Barwani

Debriefing MWC 2024

WHO lists Al Buraimi Healthy City in sustainable cities

AL BURAIMI: The Office of Wali of Al Buraimi and the Ministry of Health (MoH) on Monday celebrated the recognition of Al Buraimi Healthy City in the list of sustainable healthy cities in the Eastern Mediterranean Region by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The celebration took place in Al Buraimi under the auspices of Dr

Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health. The event was attended by Sayyid Dr Hamad bin Ahmed al Busaidy, Governor of Al Buraimi, along with Dr Jean Jabbour, WHO Representative to the Sultanate of Oman, several walis and members of Majlis Ash'shura, and senior officials of the ministry.

Shaikh Dr Faisal bin Saleh al Maskari, Deputy Wali of Al

Buraimi, pointed out that the phases of the official signing of Al Buraimi Healthy City since 2020 went through many stations to achieve the national targets and implement the concept of 'Health for All'.

In this regard, Dr Majid bin Rashid al Maqbali, Director-General of Health Services in Al Buraimi Governorate, stressed that Al Buraimi has successfully

implemented 80 criteria in line with international standards. As a result, Al Buraimi has implemented community initiatives in various fields over four years. These initiatives have led to WHO recognition, including health-promoting schools, the development of Aflaj interfaces, an alternative power initiative, an environment hygiene

initiative, the development of traditional agriculture systems in Falaj Al Buraimi and Sa'ara, mobile food carts, the development of driving school locations, the 'Our home, Our Medic' initiative, and other initiatives. Dr Jean Jabbour handed over the recognition certificate to Shaikh Rashid bin Said al Kalbani, Wali of Al Buraimi. — ONA

BAHLA'S OLD DISTRICTS



The Wilayat of Bahla in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate is one of the ancient Omani governorates dating back to ancient times, and its archaeological sites are represented by Bahla Castle, its great wall, its old market, Salut Fort, Jibreen Fort, and other archaeological monuments that stand as witness to the archaeological treasures that this governorate abounds with.

DETAILS ON P20

New initiatives to boost public services

MUSCAT: The Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) launched four new initiatives aimed at improving the quality of services offered to subscribers and enhancing the efficiency of energy and water supplies.

The launch of the new initiatives took place during APSR's annual gathering held at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre on Monday. The launch was also aimed at meeting the rising demand for electricity and water services in line with population growth and

economic activity.

The first initiative deals with direct compensation for supply companies' failure to deliver proper electricity service to subscribers. It provides that if the operating companies do not adhere to standards, the licensee must pay the compensation due to the subscriber by deducting the equivalent sum from the subscriber's electricity bill.

The second pertains to the announcement of 5 new stations to produce electricity with wind energy. They are Dhofar 2 station (capacity of 132 megawatts),

Sadah station (capacity of 99 megawatts), Duqm station (capacity of 270 megawatts), Mahout station (capacity of 400 megawatts) and Jaalan Bani Bu Ali station (capacity of 105 megawatts).

These stations augment the contribution of the renewable energy sector in the Sultanate of Oman to 30 per cent of the total electrical energy production by 2030. They also raise the proportion of investment in energy production from alternative sources.

SEE ALSO P13

Tourism sector eyes \$31 billion investments

BERLIN: The Sultanate of Oman received a record-breaking 4 million visitors, up from 2.9 million in 2022, a rise of almost 38 per cent including 231,000 of these visitors were from Germany — up 182 per cent on the previous year.

This was stated by Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, at a press conference held here on Monday, prior to the kick off of ITB Berlin.

He underscored Oman's keenness to give a window at ITB Berlin into the rich variety of incredible experiences available for the visitor to its shores throughout the year.

Al Busaidy said that the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism focuses on creating an environment where tourism can flourish and grow. This, he said, is achieved through streamlining visa application processes and easing visa restrictions for citizens of over 100 countries, as well as investing in infrastructure and attractions.

He further added: "In fact, we have ambitious plans for our tourism sector, with over \$5.9 billion of investment currently

The ministry is focusing on creating an environment where tourism can flourish and grow, and is streamlining visa application processes and easing visa restrictions

AZZAN BIN QASIM AL BUSAIDY

Under-Secretary

funnelled into over 360 projects. We lay emphasis on Oman's 2050 Net-Zero target, sustainable practices and our responsibilities to future generations, these range from hotel accommodation and resorts to the preservation of heritage sites and historical monuments."

Haitham bin Mohammed al Ghassani, Director-General of Tourism Promotion at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, affirmed that Oman has completed all arrangements to participate in the ITB Berlin Convention 2024.

TURN TO P1

Omani volunteer doctor in Gaza Strip spreads hope amid war

SHADDAD AL MUSALMY

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An Omani surgeon, Dr Ayman al Salmi who works at Khoula Hospital, is currently at the European Hospital in Gaza to provide much-needed medical assistance to the wounded amidst the ongoing conflict.

Dr Salmi had to endure a dangerous journey through

the Rafah crossing into the heart of Rafah city determined to help injured Palestinians with healthcare. His presence, alongside other aid workers from the GCC, is a beacon of hope for the people of Gaza.

Upon arrival in Rafah, Dr Salmi wasted no time in beginning his humanitarian work, focusing on delivering critical medical care, especially to the children affected

by the violence. "I am an Omani corrective orthodontics surgeon. I am currently at the European Hospital in Gaza. Every day, I see many wounded along with bodies that come to us due to this brutal war. We perform surgeries for them and assist them at this hospital," Dr Salmi said.

"We conduct about 10 to 11 surgeries daily with the help of a complete medical team including



Dr Ayman al Salmi

anesthesia, nurses, and general surgery surgeons.

It was a humanitarian call that prompted me to come to Gaza after seeing the atrocity happening here and this unjust war against the people of Gaza," he added.

He described entering Gaza as a complex process, requiring coordination with international organisations that are working

on the deployment of medical professionals.

Dr Salmi said after seeing Gaza's children being killed, he decided to contact an international organisation. "Of course, initially, it was without the knowledge of anyone, but after crossing the Rafah border, I informed everyone in Oman that I am now in Gaza," he said.

TURN TO P2

Social Protection Fund clarifies on ‘decrease in security pensions’

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The Social Protection Fund (SPF) issued a clarification regarding what was circulated on social media platforms regarding the previous rejection of social security pensions, stating that the difference between the security pension due to the head of a family and the social protection benefits disbursed to all family members was disbursed as a first stage.

After what was observed of the decline in social security pensions, the SPF made observations related to it, stating that the difference between the security pension due to the head of the family and the social protection benefits disbursed to all family members was disbursed as a first stage, which represented part of the value of the benefit due.

Previously, the social security pension disbursed to a deserving family of six members stood at RO 208, but currently, in order to ensure that families are not affected by social security, the disbursement of the difference between the social security pension and the total benefits included in calculating the income. Registration for the family income support benefit has been opened for all social security cases, which will determine the total value of the family income support benefit due in accordance with the provisions of the Social Protection Law and its executive regulations.

The “Family Income Support Benefit” programme provides monthly financial support to families with the lowest income and least earning opportunities. Eligibility for this benefit depends on the level of the family’s income



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and the ability of its members to earn. The value of the targeted benefit is linked to the number of family members and the total income of the family. The benefit aims to improve the living conditions of these families.

The benefit is valued at an amount disbursed monthly by calculating the difference between the target level (the square root of the number of family members x RO 115) and the total family income. The family includes the husband, wife and non-working sons up to the age of 26, and non-working daughters who have not reached the age of 40 if she is unmarried or divorced

and has no children. Even foster children are considered as sons of the family. Some categories are considered family members that will be detailed in the executive regulations of the Social Protection Law.

The conditions for obtaining the family income support benefit include one of the applicant’s family members must be an Omani. The non-Omani widow of an Omani who has no children can submit an application provided that she resides in the Sultanate of Oman after the death of her Omani husband. The total family income, including the equivalent income, must be for

the ability to earn less than the target level, disclosure of income and assets in the form designated for that purpose when submitting the application and cooperation with the social researcher if entitlement to the benefit requires conducting social research.

While the fund will decide on the application, within a maximum period of 30 days from the date of submitting the application, fulfilling the required conditions and data, and for this purpose, it may coordinate with the Ministry of Social Development and other parties for the purpose of verifying the accuracy of the data and the benefit will be payable as of the date of submission.

The request is made if the Fund confirms that the eligibility conditions are met. The value of the benefit after calculating it and proving its entitlement must not be less than RO 25 for a family consisting of two individuals or more and RO 15 for a family consisting of one person.

SQCCRC meeting looks at latest advancements in diagnosing, managing cancers

MUSCAT: The Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre hosted the 2nd Scientific meeting of Omani Urology Society (OUS), on “Genitourinary Malignancy”. The event focused on discussing the latest advancements in diagnosing and managing prostate, bladder, testicular and kidney cancers. Dr Hilal al Rashdi, Consultant Urological Surgeon said, “The scientific event served as a valuable platform for physicians and healthcare experts to exchange insights and expertise regarding the latest innovations in the field.”

He added that the meeting shed light on advancements in therapeutic and diagnostic methods, along with patient management protocols that all aimed at enhancing the quality of clinical care for individuals with genitourinary cancers. The participants deliberated on the latest research and innovative treatments for patients with Genitourinary Malignancy. During the event, Dr Hilal al Rashdi, Consultant Urological Surgeon and Dr Mohammed Mazrouk, Senior Consultant Urological Surgeon, presented scientific papers on the latest advancements in the treatment

of bladder cancer and the management of localised cancers. Dr Jamsari Khalid, Senior Consultant, Radiation Oncologist, addressed the management and diagnosis of prostate cancer. Dr Munjid al Harthy, Consultant Urological Oncologist, emphasised the importance of incorporating adjuvant therapies into the renal cell carcinoma (RCC) treatment programme to reduce the recurrence risk and improve outcomes. Dr Khurram Saddiqui, Consultant Urological Surgeon at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, provided a brief into the latest therapeutic techniques for kidney cancer. Dr Suleiman al Saadi, Consultant Urological Oncologist, delivered a presentation on the latest medical advancements in the treatment of testicular cancer. In conclusion, participants highlighted the importance of deliberating cancer cases through a multidisciplinary team, including surgical, oncology, radiation oncology, radiology and pathology specialists, along with psychologists, nutrition and rehabilitation specialists. This integrated approach aims to develop a comprehensive treatment plan that meets the diverse needs for each individual patient. — ONA



The participants deliberated on the latest research and innovative treatments for patients with Genitourinary Malignancy. – ONA

11th edition of ‘Fak Kurbah’ initiative kicks off

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The Omani Lawyers Association launched the 11th edition of the Fak Kurbah initiative which aims to collect financial donations to relieve the families of insolvent people due to claims incurred by them in civil, commercial, legal, or labour cases. It lasts for two months. Dr Mohammed bin Ibrahim al Zadjali, President of the Omani Lawyers Association, who supervises the Fak Kurbah Initiative, said, “the 11th edition of the initiative for this year comes as a continuation of the efforts of those in charge of the initiative, including lawyers and it is an affirmation of the successes that the initiative has achieved over the past years.” The initiative was able to release more than 5,890 cases from 2012 until now. “The association, in its current version, is looking forward to

broader participation from members of society, individuals and institutions, as the good people of this generous country are accustomed to and to contributing to the return of hope to the needy and their families,” he said. It is noteworthy that the Fak Kurbah initiative began in 2012 in its first edition, targeting five courts in the Sultanate of Oman, where 10 volunteer lawyers worked in them and contributed to the release of 44 insolvent prisoners. Last year, the number of insolvent persons included in the initiative in its tenth edition reached 925 people, through the efforts of a number of lawyers at the level of all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.



OMANI VOLUNTEER DOCTOR IN GAZA



FROM PAGE 1

Many have welcomed Dr Salmi’s act of humanity. “Dr Salmi’s bravery is something that inspires me more than anything. Such

individuals who have such dedication need to be treated with high dignity. I wish him luck and a safe return back home,” Mohammed al Balushi, an Omani citizen from Sohar told

the Observer. Others said Dr Salmi’s safety is a concern. “Dr Salmi’s mission in Gaza is well appreciated but I just wish to convey a message of love to him.

His safety is all we want so that he can continue such acts of kindness. Thank you Dr Salmi for all that you are doing,” Abdullah al Nuamani, another concerned citizen, said.

Science, technology, engineering, mathematics — jobs of future

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, MARCH 4

Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) have emerged as one of the most significant fields in an era of innovation and rapid technological progress, providing various and interesting work prospects for students and professionals.

STEM careers play a pivotal role in shaping the future by developing technology and addressing current societal challenges. Whether it is in medicine and bio-therapeutics, in renewable energy and sustainability, or in communications and information technology, these industries require advanced scientific and technical skills.



STEM careers play a pivotal role in shaping the future by developing technology and addressing current societal challenges

Currently, there is a rising demand for professionals with strong expertise in STEM fields. Advanced technology, such as artificial intelligence and data analysis, forms an integral part of daily life and opens new horizons

for innovation and development. Investing in STEM education and training is a strategic investment in the future, does not only create diverse employment opportunities but also significantly contributes to economic growth,



societal progress and overall prosperity. Recently, the General Directorate of Education in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate organised activities and events for the National Week of Science, Technology,

Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) for the year 2024, which lasts for five consecutive days. The week’s programmes were allocated to a variety of institutions, including schools, cultural centres, educational facilities and research

centres within the governorate. The primary objective is to enhance awareness and foster interest in scientific and technological fields among students and youth. This year’s events were distinguished by their emphasis on various key areas, such as energy resources, green jobs, human resources, mineral wealth, water management, animal and agricultural resources, waste management, carbon neutrality, sustainable construction and sustainable transportation. The 2024 edition included the implementation of 27 diverse activities, spread across workshops, discovery trips, innovation competitions and scientific hackathons.



MOHUP UNVEILS PLANS FOR NEW ADDRESSING SYSTEM

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The Minister of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP) has issued a decision 200/2024 for regulating the addressing system in the Sultanate of Oman, which will include a geographic description to identify the location of a specific place.

The regulations will cover naming and numbering neighbourhoods, streets, roads, public squares, residences, and facilities. It will be prohibited to change or modify the use of the approved address data.

A property owner will be obligated to place address plates on buildings, residential or commercial complexes, and their internal units.

The decision stated that the ministry shall establish an intelligent and advanced addressing system, and for this purpose, it may develop a General Unified Addressing System in the governorates.

The basic elements should consist of the governorate's name, the wilayat's name, the street's name, and the unit number.

The sub-elements should include the city name - village name - neighbourhood name.

The ministry will be responsible for establishing a central national database related to address, and each governorate must provide the ministry with this data continuously through the



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available databases.

The ministry is responsible for managing the central national database related to addressing, and for this purpose, it will develop a classification for the central national database - as open and classified data, maintain data security, and ensure the accuracy of data received from the governorates.

It will also determine fees for using the classified addressing system data after the approval of the Ministry of Finance.

The governorate shall implement the addressing in coordination with the competent municipality and ensure that the data is updated

in the event of changing the address or creating a new address, determining and assigning the approved names for streets, if they are distinctive in the state, and writing names in Arabic.

When writing names in Latin letters, care must be taken to transcribe them literally and alphabetically from the Arabic language according to the mechanism prepared by the concerned authority.

It should consider the integration of addressing requests with the governorate's database for the addressing system, notifying the address unit owner of the address, whether there is a change in

the address or not, and it is considered.

The address is official after the governorate creates the addressing data in its database.

Benefits The Unified Addressing System will facilitate the delivery of emergency services such as ambulance and civil defence, assist the supply of postal and telephone services, and electricity and water invoices, save time to reach the intended destination, address proof in official records like; ID cards, residence permits, driving licenses and help in the planning and decision-making process related to urban expansion.



SAF Chief of Staff participates in DIMDEX

DOHA: Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) took part on Monday in Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX

2024). The SAF Chief of Staff and his accompanying delegation toured the various corridors of the exhibition, which includes the participation of several international institutions.

— ONA

NCSI conducts confidence survey



MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) began on Monday conducting the 41st session of the Consumer Confidence Survey for the first quarter of 2024.

The survey, which runs till March 14, targets Omani citizens over the age of 18, including at least 1,500 citizens from various governorates, considering the representation of males, females, different age groups and educational levels as well.

Data will also be collected by telephone through the NCSI's call centre.

The Consumer Confidence Survey for the Q1 of 2024 aims to measure several factors that affect the Omani economy, including the financial condition of families, factors that negatively or positively affect the economy, future expectations of the economy, and the availability of job opportunities. — ONA

'Ishraqat Ahad' initiative receives more than 300 applications

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

An artistic forum and initiative, 'Eshraqat Ahad', which endeavours participants to draw a picture of the Honourable Lady, and an artistic demonstration that stimulates creativity to express thanks and gratitude for the role she is playing at the national level, received more than 300 applications, of which 213 were approved.

Maryam al Zadjali, Chair of the Supervisory Committee and President of the Omani Women's Association in Muscat, said: "Through this initiative, we express our thanks and appreciation to the Honourable Lady for the support she provides to Omani women who can carry out their national roles to the fullest, and for representing Oman in foreign forums."

Maryam added that the forum's supervision committee is composed of academic specialists from Sultan Qaboos University and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, and was keen to select applications that meet the conditions stipulated for 'portrait' art.

In regards to the prize value, Maryam said, "The first prize is worth RO 5,000, the second prize is RO 4,000, the third prize is RO 3,000, the fourth prize is RO 2,000 and the fifth prize is RO 1,000."

Areej Amer al Hajri, a



The first prize is worth RO 5,000, the second prize is RO 4,000, the third prize is RO 3,000, the fourth prize is RO 2,000 and the fifth prize is RO 1,000

participant from Muscat Governorate, said, "The competition represents a valuable opportunity for participants to experience new challenges in the world of drawing and art. It also allows them to interact with the artistic community and

artists and expand the circle of knowledge and experiences."

Visual artist Saif bin Ali al Kindi from Wilayat of Liwa told Oman Daily Observer that he is proud to be part of this forum and this initiative. "I thank the organisers for the continuous

support in providing the appropriate place and tools, and hopes that the artists will continue to be supported and motivated," he said.

Painter Abdullah bin Amer al Hajri from Wilayat of Bidiya said, "It is a great challenge between



the contestants and the artists and everyone is making their efforts."

This event began on February 19 and will continue until March 19, to allow artists to produce their artistic works in sufficient time. Then the supervisory committee will meet to prepare

to organise an exhibition for all participating works, noting that the jury will be selected from experienced specialists in the Sultanate of Oman, as well as by external arbitrators. Winners will be announced at a special ceremony.



Oman media on right track: Information Minister

SHATHA AL BALUSHIYAH
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information said that the Sultanate of Oman is reemerging anew and this revival is based on the roles undertaken by everyone in the construction process led by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the leader of the renewed Renaissance and the builder of the nation who is keen that every citizen lives a happy life.

This was stated by the Minister of Information in an interview with Al Shabab Radio Oman Youth. The minister spoke about the Sultanate of Oman registering progress in the media index for the second year in a row advancing by 6 notches and ranking 40th in the Global Soft Power Index 2024 published by the British Brand Finance.

The minister said: “We are making great headway thanks to your efforts and the efforts of your colleagues in the Ministry of Information as well as the private media outlets including radio stations, newspapers. We also have the Majan TV channel. We should also mention the electronic media. Everyone is doing a great job on social media and are undertaking significant and effective roles. There are good indicators that we are moving on the right path which will surely lead us to the desired destination and all these efforts will be crowned with success, Almighty God willing.”

Regarding the reasons that led to the Sultanate of Oman’s progress in the media index for the second year in a row and the advanced ranks it achieved in the global soft power index, the minister said: “The Omani media is broad even though some associate it with radio and television which being the most important forms of media. We also have 3 television channels

each of which plays a fundamental role in promoting and introducing the Sultanate of Oman to the outer world. We also have 5 radio stations, in addition to *Oman* newspaper, *Oman Daily Observer* newspaper, *Nizwa* magazine, Oman News Agency (ONA), the news centre, the government communication centre and the Ain platform.

Speaking about the Sultanate of Oman advancement in the Global Soft Power Index, the Minister of Information said there is integrated work in all aspects of media work which undergoes great changes and we have a plan to present an electronic media that introduces the Sultanate of Oman and achieve our national goals.

The Ain platform contains an audio book library. Omani books are available in print, but technology has made the audio book available and this is provided by the Ain platform. We have a strong presence on e-platforms and there is great interaction and our electronic platforms are credible and trustworthy among the Omani society and this is yet another evidence of the development of the Omani media.”

Speaking about the book fair, which concluded its 28th edition recently, the minister of information who is also the Chairman of the main organising committee of the Muscat International Book Fair said: “Muscat Book Fair is the most important cultural event in the Sultanate of Oman. It is one of the most important events in the Arab world as it sees the participation of well-known Arab publishers. Oman books have made their presence felt among Arab and international books and are sought-after by a wide segment of book readers,”

Speaking about the Oman Youth Encyclopedia which was launched at the opening of



THE NEW MEDIA LAW AIMS TO ENHANCE FREEDOM OF OPINION

HIS MAJESTY CLOSELY FOLLOWS THE LOCAL MEDIA

OMANI MEDIA MADE A STRONG PRESENCE AND REPRESENTED THE ASPIRATIONS OF THE OMANIS AND EXPRESSED THEIR ISSUES

HIS MAJESTY IS KEEN THAT THE SULTANATE OF OMAN'S CULTURE AND OTHER FORMS OF SOFT POWERS BE PRESENT AND INFLUENTIAL GLOBALLY

GENERAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE OMANI MEDIA IS TO EXPRESS THE CITIZENS AND THEIR INTERESTS

the Muscat International Book Fair, the minister said: “The publication of Oman Encyclopedia is one of the most important cultural achievements in the Sultanate of Oman. It was overseen by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik when he was the minister of culture. His Majesty honoured me to be the editor-in-chief and supervisor of the Oman Encyclopedia. It is a great book that sums up all available knowledge and information about the Sultanate of Oman, the Omani people, nature, society, trees, seas, living organisms, human life, basic books, arts, etc.

The Ministry of Information held a workshop last year on the governorates’ media in line with His Majesty’s approach to develop the governorates and promote decentralisation. Certainly, for this approach to succeed the media is required to address and express the governorates and promote their activities. Specialised workshops were held in this regard which were attended by the governors, media specialists from the governorates and officials from the public and private media outlets. The workshop was aimed at explaining how the media plays its role in the success of the decentralisation of the governorates. It came up with many recommendations that would improve the media and the results will be felt by everyone in the form of strengthening of the governorates media and their coverage by the media, the minister said.

Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information pointed out that the Omani media, from the beginning, made a strong presence and represented the aspirations of the Omanis and expressed their issues.

Since the accession of His Majesty Sultan Haitham, the Omani media has highlighted the full range of developments,

policies, programmes and projects that have been implemented. His Majesty closely follows the local media, he listens to the radio, follows the press, follows the Sultanate of Oman TV as well as the e-media. His Majesty issues directives to develop media performance and follows citizens feedback in all media forms.

Speaking about the documentary series dubbed Bait Al Ajaib ‘House of Wonders’, the minister of information said: “His Majesty is keen that the Sultanate of Oman’s culture and other forms of soft powers be present and influential globally in order to achieve our national goals, especially Oman Vision 2040 and the documentary series come within this context within the Ministry of Information’s plan to enhance international presence. The three documentaries highlight the Omani presence and influence in East Africa.”

The minister concluded: “The Council of Ministers referred the Omani media bill to the Council of Oman, and now in Majlis Ashshura. I am not going to talk about specifics, but the general philosophy of the Omani media is to express the citizens and their interests. It is the platform in which the citizens express their opinions and talk about their hopes, ambitions.

This can even express their criticism and this is guaranteed by the law. We always say that opinion is a duty that must be presented on various issues that touch the life of the citizen. The law keeps pace with the developments as it includes e-media platforms, artificial intelligence. We have revised the draft law so that it includes articles covering the aspect of artificial intelligence.

The goal of the law is to enhance freedom of opinion and the transfer of our experience, heritage, and history to future generations and to strengthen the unity of the nation.”

Dakhiliyah in celebration with entrepreneurial events



Such pioneering events confirm the pivotal role of entrepreneurs in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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This week, the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority is organising a series of events in the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah, with the aim of celebrating entrepreneurs and highlighting their projects.

The first of the events will begin on today (Tuesday) with an entrepreneurial evening, which is an enrichment meeting for entrepreneurs in the governorate during which entrepreneurial experiences will be reviewed through an entrepreneurial talk event with promising models of small merchants in Nizwa Market and examples of expertise from the governorate with pioneering projects with extensive experience.

Issa bin Saleh al Subaihi, Director of the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Department in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, said, “Such pioneering events confirm the pivotal role of entrepreneurs in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate and continue to support the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority, empower entrepreneurs, and celebrate their efforts.”

The pioneering activities will conclude on Thursday with ‘Oman Crafts’ exhibition that will be held at the Oman Across Ages Museum with the participation of 30 institutions to raise the level of Omani crafts, highlight the talents of craftsmen and their creative products and present innovative craft products.

Tourism sector eyes \$31bn investments

FROM PAGE 1

He pointed out that a total investment of \$31 billion is targeted by 2040.

The ministry on Sunday concluded the last preparatory rehearsals for the opening ceremony.

The opening ceremony includes a set of performances, with the participation of the Royal Symphony Orchestra and a group of Omani artists and Omani folklore groups. The performances include scenes that demonstrate the Sultanate of Oman’s tourism features.

Al Ghassani pointed out that



Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, at a press conference in Berlin.

the ministry also completed preparations related to the Omani pavilion, which will showcase the exhibits of 70 government and private sector establishments in an area of 800 square metres. This is in addition to two additional galleries for promoting adventure tourism and the culinary skills most common in Oman, he added.

During 2023, the Sultanate of Oman saw a rise in the number of inbound tourists - 4 million tourists by 2023, compared to 3.5 million in 2019.

“Through our participation in ITB Berlin 2024, we aim to attract more tourists during the

upcoming period. This calls for more efforts from all participants at the Omani pavilion”, said Al Ghassani.

He added that the ITB Berlin Convention is one of the largest international extravaganzas, in which 160 countries are participating this year. He said that the exhibition offers a good opportunity to promote the tourism and investment potential of Oman.

The ministry is keen to have Oman-based tourism partners and developers meet their international counterparts and consider means of promoting the existing projects in Oman. — ONA

experience
oman

The Sultanate of Oman is the official host country of ITB Berlin 2024, making it the first GCC country and the second Arab country

5-7
March 2024,
Berlin,
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Oman's Participation

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SYMPOSIUM ON EDUCATIONAL SPECIALISATIONS KICKS OFF

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

Symposium on educational specialisations outcomes and strategic implications for education and quality of outcomes kicked-off on Monday under the auspices of Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education in the presence of Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour.

The symposium targets 300 participants from education sector and emphasises the importance of improving the school educational system in the Sultanate of Oman by improving its inputs and prepare qualified generations and competent national capabilities in all aspects of development.

The implementation of the symposium comes within the framework of measures that the relevant authorities have sought to establish, with the tendency to continue accepting the outcomes of educational specialisations at the bachelor's level or its equivalent and the educational qualification diploma programme in governmental and private universities and colleges inside and outside the recognised Sultanate of Oman, in addition



On the sideline of symposium, Dr Madeeha al Shaibaniyah inaugurated the accompanying exhibition

to opening the scope for public and private higher education institutions.

Dr Sulaiman al Jamoudi, Director-General of Directorate-General of Educational Supervision delivered the Ministry of Education speech, in which he said: “The symposium emphasises the importance of improving the school educational system in the Sultanate of Oman, by improving its inputs of teachers

to prepare qualified generations.” The symposium aims to identify a number of challenges facing the acceptance of those wishing to study educational specialisations, most notably the acceptance of large numbers in educational specialisations that do not constitute a need for the school education sector, in addition to the challenges facing the educational planner in the weakness of databases for students in teacher

preparation institutions outside the Sultanate of Oman, which is an issue that should be taken into consideration.

The first day of the symposium included two main sessions, the first of which came under the topic of ‘Professional Standards of Teacher Preparation Programmes’ and headed by Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambosaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education.

Farm in Salalah discovers new type of banana plant

ABDULLAH AL NASRI
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

Specialists under the management of Razat Royal Farm affiliated to the Royal Court Affairs in Salalah, successfully made a new discovery of a new type of a banana plant after its appearance in its natural form, as a result of its spontaneous mutation classified as the Williams [AAA] Class, one of the main types that are cultivated in the Sultanate of Oman that belongs to the Cavendish Collection.

According to Oman News Agency, the work begun by choosing some small seedlings from this new type in 2015 and its cultivation was monitored over a period of 3 years and through this procedure, a new type of the banana plant was produced.

It turns out that the new type of the banana plant that was produced had a distinct genetic

characteristics, in addition to its good adaptability with the soil, water and weather conditions.

It was characterised by the length of the stem that carries the flower was shorter than the original; which considered a positive factor to carry the cluster and protect it from wind damage, and it all came into fruition after confirming the genetic stability of this type and its results and through making a comparison between the new type and the original type “Williams.”

The new type is characterised by its strong leaves and an early harvest in three weeks time in comparison to the original type, which also had a heavier weight and straight banana stems that are less curved. In order to enhance the economic growth and in addition to its scientific importance, this new type was called ‘Razat Banana’, in reference to that farm where it was discovered in.



The new type is characterised by its strong leaves and early harvest

Oman is a hub for innovation, research in new technologies

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, MARCH 4

In today's rapidly evolving world, fostering a culture of student research is essential to encourage innovation, critical thinking and intellectual growth. Encouraging students to engage in research not only cultivates their academic prowess but also equips them with essential skills needed for success in the 21st century.

By involving them into scientific life and contexts, students learn to analyse complex problems, think creatively and develop solutions that address real-world challenges. The intersection of student research

with modern technologies, such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and data analytics, show the impact and relevance of their findings.

All this was evident when the fourth Student Research Conference 2024 which was held at Sohar University participants shared insights on how knowledge and innovation are the driving forces of societal advancement.

Dr Nedhal al Shamali, head of the programmes and activities in the conference highlighted the objectives and themes of a conference in the fields of language, literature and education. “The conference emphasises the



The conference emphasised the importance of integrating scholarly research into practical contexts

importance of integrating scholarly research into practical contexts and fostering academic and research connections among student researchers in Oman” Dr Nedhal said.

“The conference aims to address contemporary issues in Arabic language studies, language learning methods, Omani literature, educational curricula development, modern teaching approaches and the impact of artificial intelligence on education. These topics are aligned with Oman's strategic Vision for 2040,” he added.

Rapid advancements in the field of artificial intelligence have made it possible to develop learning

systems to analyse data and provide customised recommendations for each student based on their abilities and educational needs.

“Artificial intelligence can be used to develop interactive and customisable learning systems that allow students to access diverse educational materials tailored to their academic level and personal interests. With continued advancements in this field, we can expect further improvements and innovations in the field of artificial intelligence education in the future,” said Dr Daoud al Hamadani, Dean of Master and PhD programmes at Sohar University.

OHRC, civil society organisations officials meet



During the meeting, the development of humanitarian action mechanisms in the Sultanate of Oman was discussed

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

The Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) convened a meeting with several civil society organisations in the presence of Dr Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi, OHRC Chairman, HH Sayyidah Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, President of the Children First Association (CFA), and a number of heads of civil society

associations in the Sultanate of Oman along with representatives from the General Federation of Oman Workers.

During the meeting, the development of humanitarian action mechanisms in the Sultanate of Oman was discussed.

Furthermore, various topics concerning women, children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups in society were reviewed during the meeting.

The meeting, hosted at the OHRC headquarters, saw the participation of various organisations including the General Federation of Oman Workers, the Lawyers Association, the Journalists Association, the CFA, the Oman Sociological Association, the Omani Association for People with Disabilities, the Omani Association for children with disability, and the Omani Women Association in Muscat.

جمعية البيئة العمانية
Environment Society of Oman



Invitation to the 2024 Annual General Meeting

The Board of Directors of the Oman Environment Society is pleased to invite its esteemed members to attend the Annual General Meeting (AGM), to be held at the Cultural Club - Qurum on Wednesday, March 27, 2024, at 9:30pm.

Agenda:

- Presentation of the Annual Report on the previous year's activities and the draft work plan for the upcoming year.
- Discussion on the balance sheet, final accounts for the fiscal year, and the draft budget for the new year.
- Auditor's report.
- Election of the Board of Directors.
- Appointment of an auditor and determination of remuneration, in accordance with the State Financial Control Law.
- Any additional topics deemed appropriate by the Board of Directors.

Kindly note that the deadline for Board of Directors membership nominations and membership renewals is March 7, 2024. Applications received after this date will not be considered.

All reports will be available at the ESO office and on our website. We encourage all members to review these reports prior to the meeting. Should you have any inquiries, please call 93211353

Mediators seek Gaza truce as US calls for ‘immediate ceasefire’



Palestinians gather at the site of an Israeli strike, in Rafah. – Reuters

GAZA: Mediators in Cairo pushed on Monday with efforts towards a Gaza truce after Israel’s top ally the United States stepped up pressure for a halt in fighting and more aid to enter the besieged Palestinian territory.

Bombardment and combat claimed 124 more lives within 24 hours, said the health ministry in the territory which has been devastated and gripped by dire food shortages in the war sparked by October 7 attacks.

Qatari and Egyptian mediators met with US and Hamas envoys -- but no Israeli delegates so far -- in Cairo for a second day of talks aiming for a halt in fighting before the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan starts.

An Egyptian TV channel linked to the intelligence service reported “significant progress” towards a truce deal without

giving any more details, while an official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the talks were continuing.



Given the immense scale of suffering in Gaza, there must be an immediate ceasefire for at least the next six weeks, which is what is currently on the table

KAMALA HARRIS
US Vice President

The plan on the table aims for a six-week truce, the exchange of scores of remaining hostages for

hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, and for more aid to enter Gaza -- but sticking points remain.

Palestinian groups wants Israel to withdraw all forces, while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted the army will finish its campaign, including in far-southern Rafah where about 1.5 million Palestinians are sheltering.

Israel has also demanded a list of all remaining captives. Israel has said it believes 130 of the original 250 captives taken by Hamas remain in Gaza, but that 31 have been killed.

US Vice President Kamala Harris called for the six-week truce deal to be accepted, while criticising Israel in unusually strong language over insufficient aid deliveries into Gaza.

“Given the immense scale of suffering in Gaza, there must be an immediate ceasefire for at least the next six weeks, which is what is currently on the table,” she said in a speech in Selma, Alabama.

The vice president also stressed that Gazans are starving and that conditions are “inhumane” and demanded the Netanyahu government “must do more to significantly increase the flow of aid. No excuses.”

Her comments come as President Joe Biden faces acute pressure in an election year over his steadfast support for Israel and Gaza’s soaring civilian death toll, which the health ministry there put at 30,534, mostly women and children.

Harris as well as Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, were set to meet Israel’s former military chief Benny Gantz in Washington. — AFP

‘Powder keg’ could spark wider war, says UN rights chief

GENEVA: The Gaza war between Israel and Palestinians is a “powder keg” with the potential to spark broader conflict in the Middle East, UN human rights chief Volker Turk said on Monday.

Turk said it was imperative to take all possible measures to avoid a wider conflagration.

“The war in Gaza has already generated dangerous spillover in neighbouring countries,” he said in his global update to the United Nations Human Rights Council.

“I am deeply concerned that in this powder keg, any spark could lead to a much broader conflagration. This would have implications for every country in the Middle East and many beyond it.”

He said that overlapping emergencies made the spectre of spillover conflict very real, and cited the examples of Yemen and Lebanon as places where the Gaza war is having a wider effect.

“The military escalation in southern Lebanon between Israel and armed groups is extremely worrying,” Turk said.

The UN high commissioner for human rights said almost 200 people had been killed in Lebanon and some 90,000 internally displaced.

“Incidents in which civilians, including children, paramedics and journalists, have been killed in attacks must be fully investigated,” said Turk.

Some 80,000 people have also been displaced from areas in northern Israel along the country’s border with Lebanon, he added.

“It is imperative to do everything possible to avoid a wider conflagration,” he said.

The Gaza war began after the October 7 attack, which resulted in the deaths of about 1,160 people in Israel, according to a tally of Israeli figures.

The Palestinian groups also took captives, 130 of whom remain in Gaza.

Israel’s retaliatory bombardment and ground offensive in Gaza have killed more than 30,000 people in under five months, most of them women and children.

Yemen’s groups have been targeting Red Sea shipping for months in protest at the war in Gaza. Yemenis say they are attacking Israeli-linked shipping in solidarity with Palestinians in the besieged territory.

The unrest has forced several companies to reroute shipments in the commercially vital waterway, driving up delivery times and costs.

The United States, Israel’s key ally, has led reprisal strikes on targets in Yemen in a bid to quash the attacks. — AFP



Demonstrators holding placards take part during a protest urging to open the Rafah border, in Jakarta, Indonesia. – Reuters

Israel carries out biggest Ramallah raid in years

RAMALLAH: Israeli forces raided the Palestinian administrative capital of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank overnight, killing a 16-year-old in a refugee camp during their biggest such operation into the city in years, Palestinian sources said on Monday.

The Israeli military said that during the action, a riot broke out between Palestinians throwing rocks and petrol bombs and the soldiers, who responded with live fire.

Witnesses in Ramallah said the Israeli forces had driven dozens of military vehicles into the city, the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority (PA) led by President Mahmoud Abbas which exercises limited self-rule over parts of the West Bank.

The Palestinian health ministry said Israeli forces shot and killed 16-year-old Mustafa Abu Shalbak while raiding Am’ari refugee camp. The Palestinian news agency Wafa said confrontations

broke out as Israeli forces stormed the camp, “during which live bullets were fired at Palestinian youths”, wounding Abu Shalbak in the neck and chest.

The Israeli military said security forces had conducted a six hour-long operation in the camp, apprehending two wanted suspects, questioning others and seizing “inciting material spread”.

“During the operation, a violent riot developed, in which suspects hurled rocks and Molotov cocktails at Israeli security forces, who responded with live fire. A hit was identified,” it said.

An Israeli border police officer was lightly injured during the exchanges. The Palestinian foreign ministry said Israeli occupation authorities were making lives of Palestinians in the West Bank “an unbearable hell” with actions including raids, detentions, and movement restrictions, warning of “serious risks” of plunging the West Bank

into “violence and anarchy”.

Violence has surged across the West Bank in parallel to the Gaza war, with at least 400 Palestinians killed in clashes with Israeli soldiers and settlers, and Israel regularly raiding Palestinian areas across the territory it occupied in 1967. Israeli forces also tore up a main road by the Nur Shams refugee camp in the Tulkarm area of the West Bank, witnesses said.

“Every time they enter the camp they destroy more than the previous time,” said Ibrahim Hamarsheh, a resident of the camp who heads the Tulkarm branch of the Palestinian Prisoners’ Club, which advocates for Palestinians in Israeli jails.

Wafa also reported that Israeli forces had stormed the West Bank city of Nablus, and blew up the home of a man previously accused by Israel of carrying out an attack in which a British-Israeli mother and her two daughters were killed in April in the West Bank. — Reuters



Israeli soldiers detain Palestinians during a raid, in Ramallah. – Reuters



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In brief

■ FRANKFURT



UNIONS CALL FRESH STRIKES IN RAIL, AIR TRAVEL

German travellers braced for fresh upheaval after unions on Monday called for renewed walkouts at Lufthansa and rail operator Deutsche Bahn, the latest escalation in a series of rows over inflation-busting pay rises. Lufthansa ground staff will stage a two-day strike from Thursday, the Verdi union announced, accusing management at the airline group of showing “no willingness” to come up with an improved offer.

The stoppage would impact passenger services from Thursday until Saturday. The call comes after the last strike, when ground staff of technical support and aviation training units downed tools. — AFP

■ LISBON



POLICE SEIZE 1.3 TONNES OF COCAINE HIDDEN IN FISH

Portuguese police seized over 1.3 tonnes of cocaine hidden inside frozen fish due to be distributed across Europe, detaining seven men of different nationalities as part of the operation, they said on Monday.

The haul, from Ecuador, was unloaded at the Lisbon port. The drugs, which were found in a warehouse in the western region of Portugal, were hidden inside frozen fish, which was wrapped and packed in cardboard boxes.

“The way in which the drug was hidden in the frozen fish made it extremely difficult to detect it and, in order to remove it, the fish had to be destroyed,” Judiciary Police said. — Reuters

■ GENEVA



EU LEADS CALL FOR PROBE INTO NAVALNY'S DEATH

A group of more than 40 countries on Monday reiterated calls for Russia to allow an independent international investigation into the death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in prison.

The call was made by European Union Ambassador Lotte Knudsen at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva on behalf of all 27 EU states and 16 other countries.

“We are outraged by the death of the Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny, for which the ultimate responsibility lies with President Putin and the Russian authorities,” Knudsen said. — Reuters

China's largest political gathering begins

BEIJING: China kicked off its key political event of the year on Monday with large floral displays, sniffer dogs and red flags aplenty as Beijing put on a carefully choreographed display of national unity.

The country's “Two Sessions” — parallel conclaves of its rubber-stamp parliament and a separate political advisory body — are an annual spectacle that draws thousands of delegates from across China to the capital.

Large swathes of the city centre were closed off and traffic slowed to a crawl, with police standing guard at checkpoints along Chang'an Avenue, which runs past Tiananmen Square.

Security officers patrolled major streets with sniffer dogs, while elderly volunteers in red armbands monitored pedestrians for suspicious behaviour.

Train passengers travelling to the capital were subjected to additional security checks, with disembarking crowds squeezing through a metal detector and scrambling to shove suitcases onto an X-ray belt at Beijing South station on Sunday night.

Inside the palatial Great Hall of the People on Monday, the country's political elite were



China's President Xi Jinping (C) applauds as he arrives for the opening ceremony of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. — AFP

welcomed with red carpet and lush flower arrangements.

Immaculately coiffed attendants guarded rows of large baby-blue thermoses, waiting to serve the hot water that is a prerequisite at Chinese meetings.

Smiling attendees clapped in time to a festive march as President Xi Jinping entered

the main conference hall for the CPPCC's opening ceremony.

“I've been really looking forward to this,” said Yang Yuni, a delegate from southwestern Yunnan province, dressed in the elaborately embroidered traditional garb of the Hani ethnic minority.

The two-time delegate said that

she had been “extremely nervous” as a rookie last year, but was glad to see “familiar faces all around this year”.

Yang arrived in Beijing hoping to raise interest in the traditional agricultural customs of the Hani people.

The CPPCC has no direct role in government policy but is

The country's “Two Sessions” are an annual spectacle that draws thousands of delegates from across China to the capital

often a stage for representatives to highlight local concerns and niche interests.

New fertility policies and better regulation of the troubled property sector will be among issues raised by delegates at China's annual political gathering, which kicked off on Monday.

With voting tightly controlled and legislation pre-approved by the ruling Communist Party, it is unlikely any of their proposals will be enacted into law. The conference “can reflect the wishes of the masses to the central (government), and better express the voice of the people,” Su Haizhen said, a delegate from southern Guangxi province.

The Two Sessions usually coincide with a period of heightened censorship and political repression. — AFP

Ukraine urges West to give it frozen Russian assets

KYIV: Ukraine urged the West on Monday to transfer control of confiscated Russian assets to Kyiv so they could be used to rebuild the country and fund its recovery.

Calls have been mounting in Washington and Europe to set up a fund for Ukraine using billions of dollars in Russia bank accounts, investments and other assets frozen by the West over Moscow's 2022 attack of its neighbour.

“The confiscation of Russian assets should become a reliable source of support for our state and funding for our recovery,” Prime Minister Denys Shmygal told a press conference.

Ukraine has warned it desperately needs more military and financial assistance, while a fresh \$60-billion package of US aid remains stalled in Congress.

Shmygal urged Western countries to act quickly ahead of elections and political changes which could disrupt the efforts.

“We need predictability and stability, regardless of time, regardless of political fluctuations (and) electoral cycles that will take place in the world,” he said.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said last week there was a strong “moral case” for seizing the assets and giving them to Ukraine.

She urged G7 nations to explore options.

Russia has vowed to retaliate if its confiscated assets are redirected to Ukraine and has condemned the proposal as “destructive”.

Meanwhile, Ukraine said it blew up a railway bridge in Russia's southwestern Samara region on Monday because it



Relatives and friends of Ukrainian prisoners of war from the Azov Brigade and sub-units hold placards during a rally in Kyiv. — AFP

“The confiscation of Russian assets should become a reliable source of support for our state and funding for our recovery

DENYS SHMYGAL

Ukrainian Prime Minister

was being used to transport “military cargo”.

The incident is the latest in a string of explosions targeting Russia's rail network, which Kyiv says Moscow uses to move troops and equipment for its attack of Ukraine.

“A railway bridge over the Chapaevka River in Russia's Samara region was blown up. On 4 March 2024, at around 6:00 am, the bridge was damaged by blowing up its support structures,” Ukraine's military intelligence said.

Russia was using the railway line to transport ammunition from a plant in the town of Chapayevsk, it said.

“Given the nature of the damage to the railway bridge, its use will not be possible for a long time,” it added.

Russia's railway operator announced earlier that “an intervention by non-authorised persons” had caused the incident but said that no-one had been injured.

“An explosive device damaged a pillar on a rail bridge” over the Chapaevka river, Russia's official TASS agency quoted a source in the rescue services as saying.

— AFP

S. Korea to start action against striking doctors

SEOUL: South Korea said on Monday it will take steps to suspend the licences of striking trainee doctors who have defied orders to return to work in a standoff over medical training reforms.

Around 9,000 junior doctors walked out nearly two weeks ago to protest against an increase in medical school admissions from next year which is meant to help combat shortages and meet the demands of an ageing society.

The striking trainees have defied a February 29 government deadline for them to return to work or face legal action, including possible arrest or suspension of their medical licences.

Despite repeated government appeals, the number returning to work “has been minimal,” Second Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo told a press conference.

“Starting today the government is enforcing legal measure,” he said, noting inspections at hospitals nationwide would be conducted on Monday to find out who had returned or not.

If doctors’ “absence is confirmed” from the on-site inspections, he said, the government would notify them that procedures to suspend their licences were under way.

“If they violate the

government's back to work order, a three-month-suspension is inevitable.”

Such a suspension would lead to a delay of at least a year in getting a specialisation medical certificate, he warned, and negatively affect career prospects.

As of Thursday nearly 9,000 trainee doctors, or 72 per cent of the whole junior workforce, were on walkouts, Park said.

Only 565 doctors had resumed work by the deadline, according to figures released by the health ministry. The mass work stoppage has taken a toll on hospitals, with crucial treatments and surgeries cancelled, prompting the government to raise its public health alert to the highest level. Around half of the surgeries scheduled at some major hospitals have been cancelled since last week, according to the health ministry.

Under South Korean law, doctors are restricted from striking, and the government has requested police investigate people connected to the stoppage.

The warning on Monday followed the government's February 29 deadline for the trainee doctors to return to hospitals while remaining firm on its plan to increase medical school admissions by 65 per cent.

— AFP



Doctors hold up placards during a rally against the government's plan to raise the annual enrolment quota at medical schools, in Seoul. — AFP

Kerry bolsters US climate reputation



Valerie Volcovici

The writer covers US climate and energy policy from Washington, DC

As John Kerry prepares to depart as President Joe Biden’s special envoy on climate change on Wednesday, he leaves the United States in a stronger position in global climate diplomacy despite lingering mistrust on the world stage over American policy intentions.

The 80-year-old Kerry, capping off over six decades in public service, is credited with restoring US climate ties with China and courting private capital for climate action. But these accomplishments were made even as the United States has become the world’s biggest producer of climate-polluting oil and gas.

In an interview ahead of his departure, Kerry said he plans to continue climate advocacy outside of government, though he did not specify whether he will join any boards or organisations.

“I will be in a better position to be able to try to leverage, push, cajole, work at the effort” after leaving his envoy post, Kerry said.

John Podesta, named by Biden to succeed Kerry, faces a challenging year on climate policy in the run-up to the November 5 US election in which Biden,

a Democrat, is seeking re-election, with former President Donald Trump the runaway frontrunner for the Republican nomination to challenge him.

According to news reports, Biden’s administration may weaken proposed climate regulations for power plants, automobiles and climate financial disclosures amid resistance from industry and other groups.

Kerry assumed the envoy post in 2021 after Trump, during his four years as president, reversed American leadership on climate issues. Trump withdrew the United States from the 2015 Paris agreement that commits most of the world’s nations to combating climate change — and has threatened to do it again if he wins the election.

Kerry’s efforts have been hamstrung by a politically divided Congress constraining what the United States could offer in climate finance, with Republicans resisting Democratic efforts.

“This is a glaring challenge for US climate policy, and the whole world knows that both political parties are not on board with the agenda,” Samantha Power, administrator of the US Agency for International Development, said in an interview.

Kerry turned to building public-private sector

JOHN KERRY IS CREDITED WITH RESTORING US CLIMATE TIES WITH CHINA AND COURTING PRIVATE CAPITAL FOR CLIMATE ACTION

coalitions to create momentum, Power added.

Under the 2021 Global Methane Pledge, almost 150 countries pledged to slash methane emissions and raised more than \$1 billion in grant-funding. The First Movers Coalition involved nearly 100 companies including automaker Ford and cement-maker Holcim pledging to buy new climate-friendly technologies. Through Kerry, the United States also joined other Western governments and banks in launching “just transition” partnerships with South Africa, Indonesia and Vietnam aimed at shuttering coal plants.

Kerry has had “one hand tied behind his back,” said Oxford University professor Rachel Kyte, a former World Bank and UN climate official.

“He’s tried to find numerous creative ways to keep the conversation moving forward. Time will tell whether these initiatives get off the ground,” Kyte added. Kerry acknowledged a “dangerous trend” in recent weeks, with investment firms including Blackrock and JPMorgan rolling back climate commitments. “I’m concerned about anything that pushes back against common sense, good policy, without presenting an alternative,” Kerry said.

Nepal PM forms new coalition, dumps old allies

GOPAL SHARMA

Nepal’s Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal named three ministers, including one each from two opposition parties, in a new coalition on Monday, dumping the centrist Nepali Congress party which had dominated his previous government.

Dahal, a former Maoist guerrilla leader in the mountain nation, formed a coalition cabinet including the Nepali Congress and other smaller groups last year. But his Maoist Centre party, which is the third biggest group in the 275-member parliament, had criticised the Nepali Congress for not giving him free hand and putting “hurdles” to removing some ministers with whom he was not satisfied.

Dahal named a three-member cabinet including one minister each from the new coalition partners — the Communist Party of Nepal (UML) and the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). The third minister is from his own Maoist Centre party.

No portfolio was allocated to any minister for now.

President Ram Chandra Paudel administered the oath of office to the new ministers, a presidential statement said.

“It is clear that the prime minister himself broke the coalition with us,” said Bishwa Prakash Sharma, Nepali Congress general secretary.

But an aide to the prime minister blamed the Nepali Congress for not cooperating with him.

“There were mainly policy differences that made it difficult for the prime minister to continue to work with the Nepali Congress. So he is bringing in the UML and RSP as new coalition partners,” Govinda Acharya, Dahal’s press secretary, told Reuters without elaborating.

Party officials said Dahal, 69, wanted to remove some “non-performing” ministers including Finance Minister Prakash Sharan Mahat, who is from the Nepali Congress, saying he had not done enough to boost growth of the \$40 billion economy.

Mahat has said the economic condition of the country was better now than last year.

Dahal’s Maoist Centre and the Nepali Congress are also claiming the chair of the upper house of parliament the National Council, a parliamentary body key to making new laws.

Analysts said after the change in coalition partners the prime minister must take a vote of confidence in the parliament within 30 days, which he is expected to win.

The full cabinet is likely to be announced after that, party officials said. — AFP

Social media... evolution and risks



Dr Muamar bin Ali al Tobi

The author is an academic and researcher

The significance of discussing social media platforms and their impact lies in their prominent role in influencing societal and global trajectories in terms of individual, social, cultural, economic and political aspects, among other important facets of human societies.

According to a statistics published by ‘Statista’ there are an estimated 4.95 billion social media users worldwide in 2023, with projections suggesting this number could rise to 5.85 billion by 2027. The same source noted that the number of Internet users reached 5.3 billion in 2023. Facebook leads the pack in terms of monthly active users, followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram; a Forbes article, citing ‘Statista,’ reported approximately 2.9 billion monthly active users for Facebook, 2.5 billion for YouTube, and 2 billion each for WhatsApp and Instagram. According to the same source, up to 84 per cent of the 18-29 age group uses at least one social media platform and statistics also showed that about 39 per cent of social media users in the United States admit to being addicted to social media and excessively interacting with it. Conversely, data published in Forbes indicate that social media platforms earned \$207.10 billion from advertising in 2023, with profits expected to reach \$247.30 billion by 2027.

The statistics and figures mentioned in the previous paragraph underscore the significant impact that social media can have due to the large number of users and subscribers who drive the wealth of these platforms’ owners. This comes not only through visible and official means like commercial advertising but also through less visible means, such as profiting from users’ private and public data.

In 2018, a scandal was uncovered where Facebook sold user data to Cambridge Analytica for political and advertising purposes without users’ consent or knowledge. The objectives of social media platforms extend beyond financial gains and data collection and sale; they also systematically influence — mostly negatively — the intellectual orientations of individuals and societies in most areas of life, including



There are an estimated 4.95 billion social media users worldwide in 2023.

DATA PUBLISHED INDICATE THAT SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS EARNED \$207.10 BILLION FROM ADVERTISING IN 2023, WITH PROFITS EXPECTED TO REACH \$247.30 BILLION BY 2027

politics, economics, and culture. The collective impact on societies is significant, especially among teenagers and young adults. This is evident in many real-world examples, such as significant collective behavioural shifts and the formation of a collective mindset that follows a virtual pattern, leading to the spread of globalised ideas that override local customs and cultures. This has resulted in negative manifestations such as behaviours and trends that clash with the values and traditions of some societies, the spread of atheism and unrestrained freedom, the easy spread and acceptance of rumours by the collective mind and the fragmentation of public opinion, thereby disconnecting the collective mindset from reality and engaging it with a less credible virtual reality.

Despite the risks posed by social media to individuals and societies, there are positive aspects to these platforms, such as global social interaction among diverse individuals,

communities, and cultures and the dissemination of knowledge, facts, and events without restrictions or censorship, as seen in conflicts like the Gaza war. However, these positives do not absolve social media platforms from their predominantly negative impacts. These platforms have fuelled political and sectarian conflicts through the unregulated flow of published information, often of unknown origin. They have become security tools for some states with political and economic agendas, launching cyber wars and spreading fake news to influence public opinion for political and economic gains. With advanced digital tools like artificial intelligence models capable of creating fake content, it has become easier to spread such content, written, visual, or auditory, across social media platforms, thereby destabilising individuals’ and societies’ cognitive processes and leading them into a maelstrom of scattered and contradictory ideas, creating ideologically influenced individuals and societies disconnected from their real-world context.

Today, we are facing a digital deluge that encompasses social media, and it’s difficult to prevent the negative impacts associated with these platforms. However, it is possible to mitigate these risks by spreading community awareness regarding how we use these platforms and interact with them. It’s important for everyone to understand that these platforms operate within the realm of financial profit and the pursuit of interests of all kinds.

Being desensitised is no small matter

A conversation is special. A good conversation picks your brain, generates ideas and can even begin healing process.

Be a journalist and go for reporting to explore minds. And you wouldn't be disappointed. A conversation is like having a good karak tea or an aromatic coffee. You would want to go on but you know you have to take the last sip.

If holding a conversation is an art, then starting one is the beginning of a beautiful process. The cream of course is knowing when and how to conclude. Most importantly on what note you end it on. The beginning of everything is auspicious - a new day, a new idea, a new life, a new hope and so on. But we know from life's experience that nothing in life is permanent no matter how hard we wish. The rule of nature is that an end gives a space for a new beginning. The emotional beings that we are, we fail to see the beauty in the transitions. We do not realise that an end is an opportunity to be embraced.

Once upon a time, one had to meet to greet. And long before the post office, the pigeons carried the messages. Being so gentle they hardly minded, until we thought of telegrams, then letters and emails. Pigeons have been waiting around, and we have moved on to mobile phones and social media messages. We think of communicating stills, thankfully.

If one sentence would have conveyed a personal message in the days of the pigeons, we now want to share details personally and publicly.

The WhatsApp might have changed its format of sharing to five numbers at a time, but what we share is still in the hands of the sender.

Since the last seven months or so the social media has crossed the bar when it comes to graphic content. Just a few years ago, studying media meant being educated on what can be shown on television and pictures that could be published in newspapers and magazines without hurting readers and viewers sentiments. It also meant governments had a say in the policies of what could be graphic content. However, with



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SINCE THE LAST SEVEN MONTHS OR SO THE SOCIAL MEDIA HAS CROSSED THE BAR WHEN IT COMES TO GRAPHIC CONTENT

social media moving beyond borders the content is most of the time in the hands of the individual who is the owner of his or her content which he thinks is worthy of sharing. When that content could be sensitive, it could also mean more viewership.

My friend said: "I have been desensitised from what I have been seeing in the last few months."

But that is not okay. Maybe there could be a time where me might need a community counselling if ever it is there. Violent images do have an impact on the mind. The problem is not just that the videos and images exist there in the public domain. They are often shared personally never knowing the capacity of the person who receives the video on their personal mobile number and what if their children happen to see the video.

Violence is not okay for any age group. We used to be bothered about violence in cartoons, movies and video games. They were made up and designed, but now we are talking about real life actions and words.

The impact of this can only be truly known and understood in the years to come. Is it alright to watch sufferings and what does it trigger in the minds of the young? Is it okay to express violence?

Psycholog.com states, "Research has shown that violent movies have a negative impact on individuals' minds irrespective of their age. It psychologically impacts if they are adults or children. This effect is more pronounced in adolescents and children as they are in a stage of building up their morals and values."

So how about war images? The article on belongly points out that clinical studies have shown that prolonged exposure to violent images can trigger symptoms similar to those experienced by individuals directly involved in war, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression.

Experts say while desensitising could be a quick process, re-sensitization is a slow process because removing a fear is a difficult and a lengthy process.

RED KITE AND THE RAINBOW!



A red kite flies as a rainbow shines in the sky in Luton, Britain, on Monday. – Reuters

Corporations need to know on public health

Corporations are increasingly moving into the public-health domain. Companies like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft are being "pulled" by market opportunities for non-traditional actors to "disrupt" healthcare. Others are being "pushed" by the imperative – highlighted by events like the Covid-19 pandemic – to act as responsible community stakeholders, such as by helping to address health inequities.

When such pull and push forces intersect, there are often important opportunities to align economic and social objectives. But if strategic corporate philanthropy is to improve public health, those charged with making decisions and allocating resources must have a deep understanding of the health system, including the institutions, organisations, and resources that comprise it, and the complex interactions among them.

According to a framework established by the World Health Organisation, health systems have six pillars: service delivery; development and deployment of a health workforce; collection, analysis, and use of critical health information; provision of essential medical products, vaccines, and other health technologies; financing; and effective leadership and governance. To meet a population's health needs, all six must work in harmony, in an elaborate process involving inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact.

Consider Covid-19 vaccination



Tom Achoki

The writer is a former Sloan fellow at MIT, is an adjunct faculty member at Baylor University and Co-Founder of the Africa Institute for Health Policy

IF COMPANIES GETTING INVOLVED IN THE PUBLIC-HEALTH DOMAIN HOPE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, THEY MUST HAVE A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF HEALTH SYSTEMS

programmes, which depend on inputs – including financial resources, workers, equipment, and the vaccines themselves – that are partly outputs from activities like medical-product development and service delivery, with all the logistics, infrastructure, personnel training, and supervision this entails. Together, all these factors lead to an outcome – getting a large enough share of the population vaccinated – with the impact being a reduction in mortality and morbidity from Covid-19.

As the WHO also explains, an effective health system is fair and equitable, both in the distribution of health goods and services and in the way it is financed. It emphasises efficiency and cost-effectiveness as well, and responds to the legitimate non-health expectations of those seeking healthcare, such as respect and compassion. Ultimately, an effective system ensures that anyone in need of a specific health good or service can access it and derive the relevant benefits.

This framework should guide corporations — and all stakeholders — as they engage in the public-health domain. So should the principle that any direct investment in the health system must serve to strengthen one or more of the framework's six pillars. To this end, a clear, data-based strategy for measuring health-system performance is crucial.

Only a comprehensive monitoring and evaluating plan – identifying not only what data need to be measured, but also how, when, and by whom – can ensure that decision-makers have the information they need to plan, organise, and implement effective public-health programmes. For example, it can help to ascertain high- and low-priority areas, as well as areas where services are being duplicated, thereby improving the allocation of scarce resources. It can also show which public-health interventions are making the biggest difference, and be used to track progress in health outcomes, potentially revealing gaps between segments of the population.

Organisations seeking to engage in public health can use such data – together with a broader understanding of the health-system framework – to

identify where they are best suited to make a difference, based on their competitive or comparative advantages. The better they know the terrain they are entering, the easier it will be to pinpoint unmet needs and anticipate their actions' likely impact (including possible unintended consequences).

Health actors need to engage effectively with other stakeholders, because public-health programmes often involve diverse groups with different priorities and objectives that must be harmonised to meet overarching health goals. For such engagement to work, however, trust and credibility are key. An effective impact-measurement strategy can help here, too, by supporting transparency and accountability.

For example, while basic principles of privacy and confidentiality must be respected, organisations should share the

results, positive or negative, of any public-health investment or intervention – including relevant datasets, where feasible – with other stakeholders. Beyond fostering confidence, letting others know what works and what doesn't would accelerate progress on improving health outcomes. Independent evaluations of programmes would also help here.

All of this requires a set of key performance indicators to be established at different levels of the framework used to measure short-, medium-, and long-term changes resulting from any given programme. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. On the contrary, KPIs should be aligned with global standards, as established in existing policy documents, so that stakeholders are all using the same language.

The final critical insight for companies entering the health-care domain is that not only are health systems highly complex, but they also operate within an environment in which they must continually interact with various political, socioeconomic, and sociocultural forces. All of these forces – not just interactions within the health system – shape public-health outcomes. The better newcomers understand these interactions, the more likely they will be to have a positive impact on public health.

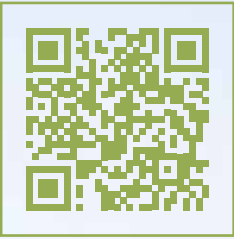
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Health actors need to engage effectively with other stakeholders.

sport

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NINE CARS WON ON FIRST DAY OF FESTIVAL

HM Cup camel racing kicks off in Barka

WALEED AL JAHWARI
BARKA, MARCH 4

The competitions of His Majesty the Sultan Camel Festival were launched on Monday at Royal Camel Corps Racing Track in Barka. The 4-day competition is supported by Royal Court Affairs represented by the Royal Camel Corps (RCC), and organised by Oman Camel Racing Association. The RCC will buy the best camel that records the best time.

The event includes 62 rounds in different categories to win valuable prizes including 27 cars and 18 icons including daggers and cups.

The first day was dedicated for the 'Hagayeg' category, two-year-old for 4-km distance. Sixteen races took place in the morning with cash prizes for the top 10. In the afternoon, nine main races were held with car prizes for the

winner and cash prizes for the top 10.

'Samaha,' which snatched the title of the opening round, is coached by Hammoud bin Hamad al Wahaibi and owned by Hammoud bin Hamad al Wahaibi. 'Moyah' owned by Mohammed bin Shliouh al Junaibi, claimed the second round. 'Al Nasser' owned by Hilal bin Jamil al Saedi, snatched the third round award. 'Mahabah' owned by Mohammed bin Ali al Wahaibi, won the fourth round prize. 'Shomok,' owned by Mansour bin Nasser al Lahifi, finished first in the fifth round.

'Al Zaheyah,' owned by Mohammed bin Sultan al Darai, was the champion in the sixth round. 'Mukalif,' owned by Abdullah bin Hamad al Hashemi, snatched the seventh round honours. 'Wasef,' owned by Ali bin Rashid al Omari, grabbed the title in the eighth round.



'Al Thabi,' owned by Ali bin Rashid al Omari, won the ninth round. 'Al Saab,' owned by Nasser bin Suleiman al Wahaibi, finished first in the 10th round. In the 11th round, 'Lamha,' owned by Abdullah bin Humaid al Omari, was on top. The 12th round was won by 'Mlabi' owned by Rashid bin Obaid al Wahaibi. The 13th round was won by 'Shahenyah' and is owned by Abdullah bin Saeed al Wahaibi, while 'Hamlool'

owned by Mohammed bin Amer al Maliki topped the 14th round. 'Azwah' owned by Salem bin Saeed al Maqbali won the 15th round. The 16th and concluding race was claimed by 'Aseal,' which is owned by Badr bin Abdullah al Darai.

In the afternoon competition, 'Latha' owned by Mohammad bin Salem al Wahaibi, snatched the car and trophy. 'Al Fares' owned by Abdulah bin Bakheet al Owasi and 'Al Thabi' owned by Yasser bin

Al Sagheer al Maliki claimed the car and a dagger.

'Al Thabi' owned by Hamad bin Humid al Darai won the fourth car and a trophy. 'Al Nasr' owned by Hamad bin Shuttayet al Wahibi grabbed the fifth car. 'Aeran' owned by Humid bin Hamad al Omari, won the sixth car.

'Shahean' owned by Saeed bin Mubarak al Omari, was the champion of the seventh car. 'Ealan' owned by Mazen bin Saeed al Burtomani topped the eighth round to have a car. The last car in the category won by 'Ghayth' owned by Jassim bin Obaid al Wahaibi.

The second day of the race on Tuesday will be for the 'Lagaya' category, three-year-old, for 5-km divided into 10 races in the morning with cash prize for the top 10. In addition, there will be competitions for human riders, three races for 2 km. The winner

will receive a SUV car and cash prizes for the top 10. Six main races will start in the afternoon, six cars for the winners and cash prizes up to 10th place.

On the other hand, RCC has opened a festival village, exhibitions and activities accompanying the camel festival.

The village includes many heritage pillars and handicrafts for the productive families, entrepreneurs, and from Omani Women Association. Furthermore, the village includes the arts of Wanah, Tagrood, Tariq and Al Hambel, in addition to musical performances and camel skills and handball matches on the back of camels. Moreover, there are corners for bicycles, classic cars and visual performances about the participation of the RCC in various events within the Sultanate of Oman and GCC.

Egypt impress in Arab U-18 3x3 Basketball Championship

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MAR 4

The Egyptian national team claimed the title of the Arab Under-18 3x3 Basketball Championship for boys after defeating Algeria 21-7 in the final clash on Monday at Al Mouj Muscat.

The Egyptian girls' team also managed to win first place after outclassing Iraq 17-7 in the concluding match. The tournament was hosted by the Oman Basketball Association on Sunday and Monday in cooperation with the GCC Basketball Coordinating Committee and the Arab Basketball Federation, in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, The Al Mouj Muscat, and Oman Sail.

The closing ceremony was held under the patronage of His Highness Sayyid Mohammed bin Salim al Said and was attended by Eng Khalfan bin Saleh al Naabi, Chairman of the OBA,



Abdulrahman Masoud, Vice President of the Arab Basketball Federation.

TIGHT FINALS

In the boys' final, Egypt defeated Algeria 21-7. Egypt started strong, scoring the first five points. Algeria responded with a point to make it 5-1, but Egypt did not give up and added five more points. Despite repeated attempts from both sides, Algeria managed to add only one more point, making the score 10-2. Both teams continued their attempts, and despite each team scoring a number of points,

Egypt won the match 21-7.

In the girls' final between Egypt and Iraq, Egypt players started the match strongly, scoring four points. Iraq tried to get back into the match, but Egypt's defence kept them out. Egypt then scored three more points to make the score 7-0. Iraq managed to close the gap by scoring two points, but Egypt doubled the score by scoring six points to make it 13-2. The excitement continued between the two teams as Egypt added four more points, while Iraq added five points, to end the match 17-7.



GIRLS' THIRD PLACE

Kuwait Girls' team claimed the third place after defeating Algeria in the third and fourth playoff while in the boys' third-place match, Saudi Arabia defeated Kuwait 15-11 to claim the bronze medals.

AWARDS

Post the conclusion of the final match, His Highness Sayyid Mohammed bin Salim al Said handed over the trophies and medals to the winning Arab teams. The Egyptian boys' team was crowned champion, Algeria came second and Saudi Arabia

third while the Egyptian girls' team was crowned champion and Egypt second and Kuwait third.

CLOSING CEREMONY

His Highness Sayyid Mohammed bin Salim al Said, the chief guest of the closing ceremony, expressed his great admiration for the high level of the final matches for the boys' and girls' categories. His Highness praised the organisation of the GCC and Arab Championships for Boys and Girls Under-18 3x3 Basketball, describing it as part of the efforts of the Oman Basketball Association, with the support

and guidance of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, led by His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth.

Eng Khalfan al Naabi expressed his happiness with the success of the tournament, pointing out that it went according to the planned schedule. He stressed that the matches witnessed a high technical level from all the participating Arab teams in the boys' and girls' categories, which reflects the development of the 3x3 basketball game in the Arab region.

He added that the successful organisation of the tournament included choosing the right venue and providing all the necessary requirements, including courts, equipment, and logistical aspects such as changing rooms and other facilities. He thanked the authorities responsible for providing the venue and facilities, such as The Wave Muscat and Oman Sail, as well as the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for the financial support provided.

THE FOREIGN MINISTRY LAUNCHES THE 2ND EDITION OF THE OMAN GOLF TROPHY 2024

Muscat: Following the success of the inaugural diplomatic initiative held in partnership between the public and private sectors from 2022 to 2023 in Italy and the Sultanate of Oman, the Foreign Ministry, in collaboration with relevant entities, revealed the details of the second edition of the Oman Golf Trophy 2024 in a press conference held this morning at the Royal Opera House Muscat. The event was attended by Khalid bin Hashil al Muselhi, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Administrative and Financial Affairs and Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth and Eng Munthir bin Salim al Barwani, Chairman of the Oman Golf Association.

The upcoming tournament is set to attract a diverse mix of local and international golf enthusiasts, bolstering Oman's standing as a premier sports tourism destination. Across seven countries, 80 qualifying rounds will take place from April to October 2024 and will see 7,400 participants vie for a spot in the final. The finale of the Oman Golf Trophy 2024 will be held at Al Mouj Golf in December 2024, featuring 140 players,



The officials during the press conference

accompanied by guests, who will compete for victory. Notable economic and media figures from participating nations will gather in Muscat, adding prestige to the championship's conclusion.

Commenting on the launch of the second edition, Khalid bin Hashil al Muselhi stated, "The initiative aims to introduce Oman as a tourism destination and to establish a connection with golf enthusiasts, made up of businesspeople and high net worth individuals. It also aims to highlight Oman's potentials by attracting investors, business owners, tourists and media from participating countries, promoting it as an attractive destination for

golf and other sports."

Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas emphasised that the Oman Golf Trophy is the first sports championship bearing the name "Sultanate of Oman" held abroad. He highlighted that this year's edition saw the event grow to seven participating countries in the qualifying rounds, compared to the initial version which included only Italy and Oman. This presents a significant opportunity to promote investment opportunities, especially in sports tourism, in line with Oman's Vision 2040.

Al Rawas pointed out that organising the tournament aligns with the ongoing diplomatic and cultural efforts of the Sultanate



of Oman on the international stage, providing an opportunity to showcase Oman in those countries through the globally popular sport of golf.

He stressed the importance of supporting the tournament to ensure its sustainability and development, stating that this support plays a significant role in building a sports foundation that enables Omani athletes to compete at the global level. In conclusion, he expressed his anticipation for organising similar events in various sports, in collaboration with international partners and with the joint support of the public and private sectors.

Eng Munthir bin Salim al

Barwani, Chairman of the Oman Golf Association, stated, "The Oman Golf Trophy is an initiative from the Unified National Plan team to promote Oman under the auspices of the Omani Foreign Ministry. The first edition of the tournament was held in Italy from September to November 2022, with 800 participants in the qualifying rounds. Fourteen players qualified to compete in the final round at the Al Mouj Golf Course, where Enrico Pardazi won the men's category and Barbara Moratti the women's category."

This initiative demonstrates the strength of the partnership between the public and private sectors, working together towards a common goal of promoting Oman. The success of the Oman Golf Trophy extends beyond Italy and Oman, reaching a global audience and conveying the message that Oman is an open country welcoming investor, tourists, athletes, adventurers, luxury enthusiasts, and people from all walks of life.

The Oman Golf Trophy will be held at several renowned golf courses worldwide, with the final event taking place in Muscat from December 9 to 12, 2024. Qualifying rounds will be held

in various countries, including Italy (April to October), Austria (April to September), Germany (April to October), South Africa (May to August), India (August to November), France (September to October) and Japan (August to October). Omani players will have the opportunity to interact with international players and compete in an atmosphere blending fun and challenge. It is worth noting that the first edition of the Oman Golf Trophy took place on seven famous golf courses in Italy from September to November 2022, with 800 players participating in the qualifying rounds. Fourteen players qualified for the final round, held at the Muscat Hills Golf Course, where Enrico Pardazi and Barbara Moratti won the men's and women's categories, respectively. The initiative is supervised by the Oman Golf Federation (www.golfooman.com) and sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, with technical and financial support from the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and several prestigious Omani companies.

Bahrain's project on developing sporting talents claims first place of Sports Hackathon

Muscat: The project "Discovering, Nurturing, and Developing Sports Talents" from the Kingdom of Bahrain won first place at the conclusion of the GCC Women's Sports Hackathon event, organized by Oman Olympic Committee (OOC), represented by Oman Women's Sports and Gender Equality Committee, over two continuous days, where the closing ceremony was held the day before, "Monday," at the Youth Centre under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Harib bin Thuwaini al Said and in the presence of Sayyidah Sanaa bint Hamad al Busaidiyah, Chairperson of Oman for Women's Sports and Gender Equality Committee, and a number of OOC Board of Directors and members of Oman Women's Sports and Gender Equality Committee and participants in the hackathon from GCC countries.

Promoting women's sports

At the beginning of the ceremony, Sayyidah Sanaa bint



Hamad al Busaidiyah, Chairperson of Oman Women's Sports and Gender Equality Committee, delivered the opening speech, during which she welcomed the attendees. She pointed out the great developments that women's sports have witnessed at the GCC level, the efforts made in this regard, and the organisation of combined and individual championships for different categories, which it contributed to achieving rapid growth and desired development in the various specialisations of women's sports committees, in line with modern trends in women's sports in light of the expertise and experience gained.

The opening ceremony included a video presentation showing the programmes and workshops that were held over two days, in addition to brainstorming sessions and a summary of each project presented by the six teams.

Various projects and initiatives presented were distinguished by their diversity, as each team created a different project in terms of field and concept.

The Kingdom of Bahrain team presented the project "Discovery, Nurturing and Developing Sports Talents" in all sports for both genders in the junior category, while Oman "First" team presented

the initiative to form an integrated volunteer team to serve sporting events and activities related to the women's side. As for the Kuwaiti team, it presented the idea of reducing sports injuries through the use of professional trainers in the sports, psychological, and nutritional aspects, while the United Arab Emirates team presented a project to create an application that specialises in booking sports facilities available in the GCC countries and supports all segments of society. Oman "Second" team presented the project to establish the GCC Women's Centre for Sports Investment to support all community sports initiatives from all GCC countries, while the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia team presented the "Our Hero" project, which is concerned with spreading women's sports culture in primary schools from the age of 5 to 12 years. One year with the aim of preparing children to acquire multiple sports skills.

TECS claim A/B Division T20 title

Muscat: TECS beat Bank Muscat by 3 runs in the Final of the A/B Division T20 tournament powered by Khimji Ramdas LLC & Al Ansari Group of Companies at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground recently.

Electing to bat first, TECS posted a total of 147/9 despite having a bolstering start provided by Ravi Sharma scoring 28 and Abdul Malik scoring 57 to reach 84 at the half-way mark. Bank Muscat's Usman Ali Shah picking 3 wickets and Adnan Ul Haq picking 2 wickets restricted TECS from getting



a big total despite Mustaqeem Asif's effort scoring 25 at the end. In response, Bank Muscat lost early wickets courtesy Shanidh KT and Devansh Loya and could only score 17 off the first 5 overs. Although, Zain Raza's sublime 56 and Usman Ali Shah's pinching 35 helped Bank Muscat

recover to chase the target. However, it was a night for Jaleel Kannambath, who was the key to TECS' qualifying into the Final, to display his exemplary skill. Jaleel's two overs in the death went for mere 8 runs picking 2 wickets and taking TECS over the line by 3 runs.

The post-match prize distribution ceremony was graced by Anil Khimji, Director - Khimji Ramdas and Kiran Asher, Founder - Al Ansari along with Duleep Mendis, Chief Development Officer - Oman Cricket.

Duleep Mendis presented Jaleel Kannambath of TECS with the Man of the Match Award, Kiran Asher handed the Runners Up trophy to Abbas Al Balushi and Ajay Hirlekar of Bank Muscat and Anil Khimji handed the Winners trophy to Rahul Ramachandran and Jayaprakash Devaraju of TECS.

Brief Scores: TECS 147/9 in 20 overs (Abdul Malik 57(46); Usman Ali Shah 3/15) beat Bank Muscat 144/9 in 20 overs (Zain Raza 56(37); Jaleel Kannambath 3/24, Shanidh KT 3/23) by 3 runs.

Late Raspadori strike earns Napoli 2-1 home win over Juventus

NAPLES: Substitute Giacomo Raspadori scored an 88th-minute winner as champions Napoli beat visitors Juventus 2-1 in Serie A on Sunday to secure their first back-to-back wins in five months and boost their slim hopes of a late charge into the top four.

Napoli moved up to seventh in the standings on 43 points, three points behind sixth-placed Atalanta, four adrift of AS Roma in fifth and eight behind fourth-placed Bologna.

Juventus remained second with 57 points after 27 games as their cushion over third-placed AC Milan narrowed to a point. They are 12 points off leaders Inter Milan who host Genoa on Monday.

Napoli, who on Wednesday demolished Sassuolo 6-1 to celebrate their first win under new coach Francesco Calzona, won consecutive league games for the first time since they beat Udinese and Lecce in September.

"By winning this match the team gave a signal that it wants to reach important positions," Calzona told a press conference.

"Miracles cannot be achieved in 10 days, it would take time that we don't have. I ask the boys to learn quickly, which they are doing and which I am very happy about even if by nature I am never happy."

Dusan Vlahovic should have given Juventus an early lead from Federico Chiesa's lofted pass across the face of the goal but the Serb's header went narrowly wide.

The hosts, who had more than 70% possession throughout the game, responded with a golden chance in the 24th minute but Giovanni Di Lorenzo struck over the bar.

Vlahovic then hit the far post



after chipping Napoli keeper Alex Meret from a tight angle and Juve's Wojciech Szczesny denied winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia following a solo run.

Kvaratskhelia eventually put Napoli in front three minutes before halftime with a powerful volley that beat Szczesny at his near post before Chiesa levelled for Juventus in the 81st minute, driving the ball low into the far corner from the edge of the box.

Napoli won a penalty in the dying minutes when Victor Osimhen was taken down inside the area and Szczesny did well to deny the Nigerian striker from the spot.

However, Raspadori wrapped up the points for the hosts two minutes from time, firing home the rebound into the roof of the net from close range.

"We are in line, indeed even above initial expectations," said Juve coach Massimiliano Allegri.

"I would have signed to be second at this point (of the season). We have 10 points on fifth place which is Roma."

Napoli next host mid-table Torino on Friday while Juventus, who beat Frosinone 3-2 last weekend for their first Serie A win in five games, take on Atalanta next Sunday.

— Reuters



Napoli's Giacomo Raspadori celebrates scoring their second goal with Victor Osimhen REUTERS

MUNIR AL RAWAHI EMERGE CHAMPION

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

The national tennis team's young player Munir al Rawahi emerged champion of Oman Open Tennis Championship (OOTC) on Sunday in the Men's Pro Singles event. Al Rawahi managed to edge his opponent from Nigeria Emeruwa Ifeany 2/1 (5-7, 6-2, 6-1) in the final clash summit after a thrilling match. With this victory, Munir al Rawahi snatched the trophy on the concluding day of the 3-week event which ended at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

Munir secured a slot in the finals after he beat Brenden Nav Der Weide 5-7,6-1, 6-3 in the semis, while Emeruwa defeated Adehi Oche 4-6, 7-6(2), 6-1 in the other semifinal match.

"I am very glad with this achievement and living great moments to be crowned as champion of this tournament. The final match was very tight as my opponent was not easy in all the sets of the game, but I worked very hard to win this game. Thanks for OTA for this event, and I am looking for more success in the near future. I will have some more assignments in the coming months," the champion said.

Moutasim bin Hamoud bin Sangour al Zadjali, Chairman of Oman Tennis Association (OTA), was the chief guest and he gave away the awards to top winners in all the categories following the final match in presence of OTA officials.

The duo Younis al Rawahi and Pereira G managed to win the title of the Men's Pro doubles title following their crucial win over the pair of Adehi Oche and Sunday, while duo Mohammed al Yawer and Salim Abubaker won the title of Men's Veteran doubles event.

In boys U14 category, Ahmed Ehab won the gold medal, while Mutaz al Mazroui ended as runner-up while Oman's Abdulrahman al Rahbi bagged the first place as he beat Brejesh Sharun by 6/1, 4/6, and 10/7 in the final to claim the boys U-18 category title. The duo Ahmed Ehab and Abdulrahman al Rahbi excelled in the boys doubles event as they snatched the award in this category following their thrilling win over the pair Mutaz al Mazroui and Azzan al Busaidy. The youngster Aisha al Busaidy emerged champion of the girls U18 category as she produced an outstanding show in her final clash against Majda Kamil who ended in second place and the match ended with scores 6/5 and 6/2.



BACK AFTER ABSENCE

Moutasim bin Hamoud al Zadjali, Chairman of OTA, affirmed that Oman Open Tennis Championship (OOTC) is one of the top domestic events organised by OTA. "The tournament is back after two years

of absence and we are delighted on this strong return as more than 160 players are taking part in the event in different categories. Participation of such a number of players is a great success, and we are delighted to provide proper environment for

the national and expat players to compete," he added.

"This kind of tournaments and activities act as a great opportunity for local players to gear up for the forthcoming official events including the national team participation in

the Davis Cup, besides some other events in Bahrain soon. Oman had recently hosted a successful Central and West Asian qualification for World Cup in Muscat. There are future plans to host some more Asian events in the Sultanate of Oman and probably at ITF level," the OTA chief added.

TENNIS DEVELOPMENT

Said Safrar, Board member of OTA, said that participation of more than 160 players in Oman Open Tennis Championship is a great success. "Oman Open Tennis Championship is ranked as one of the top domestic tennis tournaments that help to improve the tennis in the country. There are many players in Oman who are playing tennis in different regions and at various venues including hotels, private courts and government courts which are available at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. As OTA, we are working hard to make this game as popular as we can across the country," he said.

"The tournament was open for all the nationalities and ages and this has helped to support and improve the technical level of the local players. I hope to see the tournament in the coming years with better technical performance and with more improvement," he added.



A h m a d

in top 4 after ‘interesting debut’ in WRT BMW

DOHA: Ahmad al Harthy got his FIA World Endurance Championship season off to a strong start during round one at Losail International Circuit in Qatar on March 2, with a highly competitive top four finish in LMGT3 alongside team-mates Maxime Martin and Valentino Rossi.

Marking his first race weekend as a Team WRT driver, and racing the new BMW M4 LMGT3 for the first time, the Omani overcame an unfortunate car issue in qualifying – which limited him to a single flying lap – to progress into the top 10 Hyperpole session.

Achieving ninth on the grid for the Qatar Airways Qatar 1812 km, Al Harthy worked his way into the podium placings during an excellent three hour-plus stint, with Martin and Rossi then sharing the balance of the

10-hour race. Holding third into the final hour, after the last of the pit visits with 45 minutes to go, Martin rejoined in fourth and just missed out on a deserved podium by 12 seconds.

Ahmad Al Harthy:

"It was a very interesting debut race for me in the WRT BMW in the 10 hours here in Qatar. We went with a very challenging strategy, I've never done it in my life, to have three hours in the car at the beginning of the race. This was very important to our chances, we knew we had to take a very aggressive strategy to compete against a few of the cars we knew were quicker than us.

EXCELLENT FIGHTBACK

Al Harthy brilliantly overcame the odds in his first FIA WEC qualifying session as a Team WRT driver on March 1. Limited

to just one lap in the 12-minute regular qualifying session due to a glitch with the No 46 BMW M4, having pitted twice the Omani rose to the occasion impressively and leapt from the back of the LMGT3 grid with a lap of 1m56.244 seconds (167.8 km/h) to place eighth.

Progressing to the grid-determining Hyperpole top 10 shootout, he was ninth with a time of 1m56.028 seconds (168.1 km/h) and focused on delivering a good opening to the race on Saturday morning where, for the first time in his career, he would have an unbroken three hours in the car.

Al Harthy, supported by prestigious partners OQ, Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel and BMW Oman, produced a strong launch and gained

two places in quick succession to move into seventh.

Bottled up behind the No 85 Lamborghini for the next 20 minutes or so, the Omani was edged back to eighth as a queue formed but by the end of the first hour he was up into fourth. Making his first pit-stop of the race soon after, Al Harthy rejoined in the same position before slipping to fifth.

Able to work his way into the podium placings with 90 minutes of action elapsed, he pitted for his second stop 20 minutes later and moved back up to third ahead of his next pit visit, with just over two and a half hours of racing complete.

Unfortunately losing some ground thereafter, dropping to eighth as the race reached the three hour mark, he climbed into sixth before pitting for a fourth time

around half an hour later – handing over the No 46 to Rossi.

Running eighth initially, the Italian made fantastic progress to move into the top five with four hours concluded and he remained in that group after his next pit-stop. Martin took over driving duties for his first stint with just under five hours left to go and similarly impressed, moving back into third spot after the team's seventh stop in hour seven.

Rossi and Martin shared the final few hours equally and maintained the podium challenge in third place under night skies in Qatar. The 11th and final pit-stop came with just 45 minutes to go, Martin at the wheel of the No 46 and pitting from third. He emerged in fourth where he remained to the flag, a very good start to the FIA WEC season for the Team WRT trio.



Oman Crude \$ 83.12
Brent Crude \$ 83.16
Light Crude \$ 79.45



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Key initiatives launched for energy efficiency in Oman

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

The Sultanate of Oman continues to chart a course towards renewable energy leadership, with a strong emphasis on sustainability and innovation. During the recent annual media briefing by the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR), Oman unveiled a series of ambitious initiatives aimed at accelerating the adoption of renewable energy, reducing carbon emissions, and enhancing energy efficiency across the country.

One of the key initiatives unveiled during the media briefing is the establishment of five new wind power stations across the country.

These stations, including Dhofar 2, Suhar, Duqm, Mahout, and Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, are set to significantly contribute to Oman's goal of achieving zero carbon neutrality by 2050. With capacities ranging from 99 to 400 megawatts, these wind power stations are expected to accelerate the country's progress towards its renewable energy targets.

By executing these projects, Oman aims to achieve its 2030 renewable energy goals by 2027, increasing the contribution of renewable energy to 30% of total



Dr Mansour bin Talib al Hinai, Chairman of APSR, speaks during the annual media briefing held yesterday.

electricity production by 2030.

These initiatives are aligned with Oman Vision 2040 goals and signify a commitment to boosting investments in alternative energy production.

In an interview with the *Observer*, Dr Mansour bin Talib al Hinai, Chairman of APSR said, "We worked a lot on renewables and net zero initiatives. We have several projects that have been announced during the press conference today. We were able to give the approval to the licence entities to start the procurement process for the wind projects in Oman."

"These are five wind projects with a total capacity of around 1,000 MW. By implementing these

projects, we will be achieving the 2030 targets of the vision, Oman Vision 2040, which is the 30%. And this is a little bit earlier than what is planned. We will be able to achieve by finishing those projects and executing them. We will be able to achieve this target by 2027," Dr Al Hinai added.

"And on top of this, we had other initiatives related to the renewables and net zero. It was the award of Manah 1 and Manah 2 with a total capacity of 1,000 MW. Also the Nama Water and Power Procurement Company has floated the tender for Ibri III, which is of a capacity of 500 MW. So we believe that the renewables is on track at this point of time."

Furthermore, the

“With capacities ranging from 99 to 400 megawatts, these wind power stations are expected to accelerate the country’s progress towards its renewable energy targets

DR MANSOUR
AL HINAI

Chairman, APSR

announcement of the direct sales project in Oman's electricity market marks a crucial step towards enhancing transparency and attracting investments in the energy sector.

The regulatory framework introduced for this project allows power plants with expired contracts with the Oman Power and Water Procurement Company to directly contract with large consumers, fostering competition and innovation in the energy market.

With the recent approval for the second phase of the project, Oman is poised to attract more investments in the energy sector, bolster trust and transparency, and drive competitiveness in the market.

Additionally, the Household Sewage Treatment Plant project showcases Oman's innovative approach to addressing water management challenges. By recycling household sewage for agricultural reuse within the house boundaries, this initiative aims

to accelerate the coverage rate of sewage services in the country, reduce capital and operational costs, and promote environmental sustainability.

Subscribers are expected to benefit from significant water savings and enhanced environmental and health outcomes through this groundbreaking project. As Oman marches towards a sustainable future, these initiatives underscore the country's commitment to transitioning towards a greener and more resilient energy landscape.

By embracing renewable energy sources, enhancing energy efficiency, and promoting innovative water management solutions, Oman is paving the way for a more sustainable and environmentally-conscious future.

Dhofar’s Shaleem and Al Halaniyat Islands set for makeover

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, MARCH 4

The Governorate of Dhofar has unveiled a sweeping development plan for the Wilayat of Shaleem and Al Halaniyat Islands, aiming to revitalise the region through private sector engagement, tourism promotion, and infrastructure upgrades.

The plan — spanning the agriculture, tourism, infrastructure and mining sectors — prioritises attracting private investment, fostering economic growth and creating job opportunities in Shaleem and the islands. As part of the plan, around 179 acres of land in Rakhyab have been allocated for expanded frankincense cultivation, with a further 1,000 acres dedicated across the wilayat for broader agricultural production.

In a boost for tourism infrastructure, an eco-friendly resort powered by solar energy is proposed to be built on a 155,000 m2 plot in Shorbthat, alongside serviced apartments in the wilayat centre.

Further, to strengthen local infrastructure, the development plan sets out initiatives for a 500-metre waterfront project in Shuwaimiyah, construction of 10 kilometres of internal roads, establishment of a slaughterhouse, and improvement of the Shuwaimiyah escarpment.

Given the wilayat's promising mining potential, the strategic exploration and development of a mining site within the wilayat is also included in the plan.

Over the past year, several key projects have been completed across the wilayat.

The list includes the construction of an administrative building and service facilities at the fishing port, a new health centre, 20 new residences alongside the refurbishment of 32 existing ones, and the development of a park and football pitch in the Al Halaniyat Islands.

Other projects lined for implementation this year are: An 11 kV overhead power line to Shuwaimiyah, connection of Shorbthat and Wadi Rakhyab to high-voltage power lines, maintenance works at the administrative centre, and a new multi-purpose building housing the Omani Women's Association,



Investments in new infrastructure will catalyse economic activity in this promising wilayat in Dhofar Governorate.

the Department of Social Development, and the Wafa Centre for the Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities. An expansion of the Dhofar wind power station in the wilayat is also envisioned.

In recent years, the wilayat has witnessed the addition of a desalination plant, sports complex, fish collection centre in Shuwaimiyah, camel racetrack, passenger ferry terminal in the Hallaniyat Islands, and 28 kilometres of internal roads on the islands.

Ongoing projects include the maintenance of Abu Firas Al-Hamdani Primary School, construction of a multi-purpose building and a 2-kilometre health walkway in the wilayat centre, and the development of the wilayat sports centre.

Also envisioned for implementation is a wholesale market in Shuwaimiyah, and a fish collection project in Shorbthat. Importantly, a tourism festival is planned to showcase the cultural gems of the Wilayat of Shaleem and Al Halaniyat Islands.

This comprehensive development plan, encompassing various sectors, is expected to significantly transform the economic and social landscape of Shaleem and the Al Halaniyat Islands, positioning them as attractive destinations for investment and tourism.

Arabia Falcon Insurance التأمين العربية فالكون		
FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR 2023		
DIRECTORS' REPORT		
Dear Shareholders, On behalf of the Board of Directors of Arabia Falcon Insurance SAOG, I have the pleasure to present to you the financial results of the company for the financial year ending December 31, 2023.		
Business overview Although the economy has not improved significantly compared with previous years, there are some noticeable improvements in the macroeconomic outlook due to the stable oil prices and improvement in government finances and Oman economy outlook, accordingly; the insurance sector is expected to start showing improvement 2024 and thereafter. The insurance sector is expected to show 6% average growth in the coming few years. On the sales side the improvement started to show in the market compared with the previous year. However, the growth in claims was much higher than the growth in premiums, causing technical losses for most companies operating in the market.		
During the year the insurance industry observed a growth in premiums compared to the same period last year. The total premium underwritten by the insurance companies was RO 569.3 million against RO 545.5 million of last year same period, a growth of 4.4% (source Capital Market Authority portal).		
Income and Technical Results The international financial reporting standard IFRS17 replaced the old IFRS4 for reporting insurance contracts. The difference between both standards is large and caused variation in the net technical results reported under both standards, which reduced the net income reported under IFRS 17 compared with IFRS 4. The variation is expected to be temporary and not affect future years materially, as the impact is fully taken in the current financial statements.		
a. Gross written Premium increased by 5% from RO 23.1 million in 2022 to RO 24.3 million in 2023, which is in line with the growth in the market.		
b. Net insurance service results inclusive of net insurance finance expense decreased from RO 475k profit in 2022 to 614k loss in 2023.		
c. Investment income increased by 52% from RO 1.39 million in 2022 to RO 2.12 in 2023 due to the improvement in interest rates on bank deposits and realized income from bond and equity portfolios.		
d. The net profit for the year was RO 0.741 million compared with RO 1.03 million in the previous year, a decrease of 28% due to the decrease in net insurance service results.		
e. The shareholder's Equity was RO 19.967 million on December 31, 2023, compared with RO 19.843 million on December 31, 2022.		
f. Company distributed 6 Baiza per share totaling RO 619,810 in 2023. No dividend is planned for distribution in 2024 due to the insufficiency of retained earnings for any distribution in current year as the negative accumulated difference in changing accounting policy from IFRS4 to IFRS17 was accounted for in retained earning balance.		
Outlook for 2024 This year is expected to be challenging in terms of the increase in reported claims, Management took necessary measurements to tackle the increase in claims. The Management is committed to growing the insurance portfolio profitably and keeping control of the expenses with the main objective to deliver better technical profit at year-end. The company will continue implanting the strategy of digital transformation and heavy investment is planned to be the leader in the market in terms of digitalization and service quality. Meanwhile, AFIC will remain focused on increasing its shareholders' equity while maintaining compliance with all regulatory requirements.		
Acknowledgements I take this opportunity to wish all the success to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik bin Taimur towards further development and prosperity of the Sultanate. We would like to thank the Capital Market Authority and All Regulatory bodies for their continuous guidance and support. We highly value our clients and business partners. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would also like to thank the management team and all the employees of the company. We would like to convey our sincere thanks to the shareholders of the company for the confidence they have put in the Company and in its Board and for the support over the years.		
For & on behalf of the Board of Directors of Arabia Falcon Insurance SAOG Maroun Kyrillos Chairman of the Board of Directors		
Statement of financial position as at 31 December 2023 (Expressed in Omani Rial)		
	31 December 2023	31 December 2022
ASSETS		
Property and equipment	175,183	218,593
Right-of-use asset	19,602	98,008
Goodwill	555,883	555,883
Intangible assets	251,409	288,315
Investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	7,706,473	9,637,305
Investments at fair value through profit or loss	2,530,150	2,004,116
Deferred tax asset	210,585	177,272
Reinsurance contract assets	11,519,473	11,441,575
Other receivables and prepayments	730,207	954,656
Term deposits	25,444,383	22,066,486
Cash and bank balances	6,097,825	4,309,951
Total assets	55,241,173	51,752,160
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
EQUITY		
Capital and reserves		
Share capital	10,330,166	10,330,166
Share premium	1,749,442	1,749,442
Legal reserve	1,410,978	1,336,819
Contingency reserve	6,305,987	5,989,391
Investment fair value reserve	387,439	120,361
Insurance finance reserve	(264,501)	-
Retained earnings	47,356	316,408
Total shareholders' equity	19,966,867	19,842,587
Liabilities		
Lease liabilities	26,328	109,819
Insurance contract liabilities	31,925,426	30,613,211
Reinsurance contract liabilities	2,275,627	-
End of service benefits	186,723	134,469
Other payables and accruals	643,876	735,079
Provision for taxation	216,326	316,996
Total liabilities	35,274,306	31,909,573
Total equity and liabilities	55,241,173	51,752,160
Net asset per share	0.193	0.192

Statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December 2023 (Expressed in Omani Rial)		
	31 December 2023	31 December 2022 Restated
Insurance revenue	20,973,982	21,072,323
Insurance service expenses	(10,988,782)	(8,544,902)
Net income or expense from reinsurance contracts held	(10,042,816)	(11,804,100)
Insurance service result	(57,616)	723,321
Insurance finance expenses	(941,681)	(462,767)
Reinsurance finance income	385,147	214,786
Financial insurance result	(556,534)	(247,981)
Net investment income	2,121,803	1,394,571
Other income	437,121	402,266
Net investment return and other income	2,558,924	1,796,837
Other expenses	(1,097,183)	(987,174)
Profit before tax	847,592	1,285,003
Income tax	(105,998)	(255,597)
Profit after tax for the year	741,594	1,029,406
Other comprehensive income		
Net finance expense from Insurance and reinsurance contracts	(264,501)	-
Fair value changes in investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	267,078	(11,669)
Total comprehensive income for the year	744,171	1,017,737
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.007	0.010

Nesto Hypermarket opens new branch in Al Amerat

MUSCAT: Nesto Hypermarket Oman reinforced its standing in the retail market in the Sultanate of Oman by opening its new branch in the Wilayat of Al Amerat, which exhibits the number 15 in the Sultanate of Oman. This is the seventh branch of the retail giant in Muscat Governorate and the 122nd branch worldwide.

The new store was inaugurated by Shaikh Salim bin Rabie al Sunaidy, Wali of Al Amerat, the chief guest at the grand opening of Nesto Al Amerat, in the presence of Managing Directors K P Jamal, Regional Directors Haris Pallolathil, Mujeeb V T K, IT Directors Fayiz Basheer, top managements members and Nesto staff.

At the beginning, K P Jamal,

Management Director said, “We commend and appreciate the great role of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, in making the Sultanate of Oman an intention for investors, in accordance with his policy in managing this file”.

Haris Pallolathil, Regional Director, stated, “Let us not forget the effort made by the Wali of Al Amerat, Shaikh Salim bin Rabie al Sunaidy, by overcoming all the difficulties that faced the implementation of this project, which made the dream turn into reality by opening this branch.”

Mujeeb VTK, Regional Director of Nesto, said “ We hope this branch will contribute to providing a distinguished marketing service that serves the people of Al Amerat, with world class shopping experience of an



This is the seventh branch of the retail giant in Muscat Governorate and the 122nd branch worldwide.

affordable price. About the expansion plan, at this year, we are planing to open 3 more outlets in Muscat Governorate”. The total area of the project is 8200 sqm. The space was distributed in a distinct geometric format to include several sections such as grocery, fruits and vegetables, dairy products, poultry, meat, fish, hot foods and the famous baked goods. There is also a dedicated section for electronics, IT products, stationery, home appliances and garments which will be added soon. There are seventeen payment counters and spacious parking spaces to contribute to a comfortable shopping experience.



Sidrah 2.0 delivered a robust programme that successfully forges skilled, ethical leaders in line with the Oman Vision 2040 objectives.

Sidrah 2.0 celebrates graduation of 60 young Omani women

MUSCAT: Sidrah 2.0, a youth leadership programme for Omani women ages 20-30, recently celebrated the graduation of 60 participants representing nine governorates from its multifaceted development programme.

Under the auspices of Sayyidah Rawan bint Ahmed al Busaidiyah, Member of the State Council, the ceremony not only highlights the personal growth of each participant, but the evolvement of the programme itself, reaffirming its dedication to developing effective programmes to support the next generation of female leaders.

Co-created and executed by Lahunna Oman and Outward Bound Oman, Sidrah 2.0 delivered a robust programme that successfully forges skilled, ethical leaders in line with the Oman Vision 2040 objectives.

This second iteration received over 1,000 applications, with the top candidates being selected for their willingness to learn and contribute to positive change in Oman.

The programme included camping and hiking, in-person workshops, group coaching, personal coaching, online learning and community service.

It also provided an ensemble of exercises, conducive to fostering both self-development and professional development. Within this enriching environment, participants reported significant improvements in self-awareness,

confidence, and the ability to collaborate effectively. HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Patron of OBO said, “Since its establishment in 2009, Outward Bound Oman has taken on the responsibility of training and developing the human capital in the Sultanate of Oman, encompassing both males and females.

In our collaboration with Lahunna Oman, we reiterate our dedication to the Oman's approach, which recognises women's rightful contribution to advancing development and strives to provide them with suitable opportunities for growth and prosperity.”

Shatha bint Salim al Maskiriyah, Lahunna's Founder, said, “The graduation of these 60 women marks a strategic stride towards realising Oman's Vision 2040, with female leadership at its heart.

Through Sidrah 2.0, we are nurturing promising individuals who will spearhead innovation and sustainable development in Oman.

At Lahunna, we eagerly anticipate the bright futures awaiting these remarkable individuals.”

The ceremony marks 104 total Sidrah alumni, whose achievements extend far beyond the programme.

Among Sidrah 2.0 graduates, many report launching their own businesses, securing jobs, garnering prestigious awards, completing advanced degree programmes and earning scholarships.

All roads in the Ford Everest 4x4 SUV

MUSCAT: The Ford Everest 4x4 SUV is engineered to offer impressive experiences on your journey.

The 7-seater SUV offers ample space and comfort along with a range of features and technology offering exceptional ownership experiences.

The Ford Everest is built with capability at its core and can handle tasks impressively.

In terms of the interior, the Ford Everest has premium levels of craftsmanship while class-leading technology and safety features offer driver and passengers comfort and peace of mind on every journey.

With the advantage of a longer wheelbase, Ford designers were able to create a more progressive, muscular appearance.

They also put a lot of thought into the function and feel of the interior, taking inspiration from modern homes and bringing in plush materials, premium finishes and ambient lighting in areas customers will appreciate them best.

The interior of the Everest is spacious. A full-width coast-to-coast instrument panel and centre console with dual cup-holder recesses, plus dash-mounted 'pop-out' cup-holders for front-seat occupants make the interior impressive.

It is equipped with integrated wireless charging and a svelte new



The 7-seater SUV offers ample space and comfort along with a range of features and technology offering exceptional ownership experiences.

leather trimmed e-Shifter and an electric parking brake.

Access to the third row is much easier thanks to second-row seats that slide further forward than before.

Additionally, all occupants now have places to store their things and depending on the model, charge their devices with power outlets in all three rows.

In addition to a more refined and comfortable interior, Ford focused on incorporating the latest connectivity and technology features into the Next-Gen Ford Everest. It comes with an 8- inch digital instrument panel that replaces the traditional analogue cluster, in addition to large, high-resolution portrait 10.1-inch or best-in-class 12-

inch touchscreens. Next-gen Ford Everest is loaded with Ford's latest SYNC4 A system, which comes customer-ready with its voice-activated communications, entertainment and information systems.

The portrait-orientated 12-inch screen is linked to a 360-degree camera with split-view display to make parking a breeze in tight urban spaces or to assist when negotiating particularly tricky terrain while out exploring.

The Ford Everest is equipped with a 2.3L EcoBoost Turbo petrol engine, mated to an efficient 10-speed SelectShift automatic which delivers Best-in-Class 296HP power and 420Nm of torque.

BankDhofar launches SME business banking account

MUSCAT: In alignment with Oman Vision 2040, BankDhofar is pleased to announce the launch of SME Business Banking account. The account offers a diverse range of banking solutions, to the Small and Medium Enterprise segment of Oman.

The solution takes into consideration the day-to-day needs of the customers and provides features aiding their business enhancement along with expanded branch networks, cutting-edge digital solutions, and strategic technology integration.

Key features of the account include a simplified account opening process, POS connection support, wage protection system solutions, customised credit and debit cards, remote cheque capture and deposit service and a payment gateway.

The account offers a convenient account opening and documentation process, making it easier for businesses to get started with their banking journey. Customers can walk in to any of the 115 branches across Oman. With this account, customers can also take advantage of SoftPOS and normal POS (point-of-sale) systems. This will aid customers in their cash receivables and enhance their sales.

Additionally, BankDhofar offers a unique Wage Protection System (WPS) solution that simplifies salary payments, offers a convenient and efficient way to manage employee payroll. It allows the customer to process the salary online by uploading a file or walk-in to the extensive branch network and provide a bar-coded document to process the salary.



The solution takes into consideration the day-to-day needs of the customers and provides features aiding their business enhancement.

OOMCO celebrates two decades of leading the fuel retail industry in Oman

MUSCAT: Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) celebrated its 20th anniversary in the fuel retail sector by reflecting on its success and a host of key milestones. Under the auspices of Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the leading Oman-based fuel marketing company brought together a host of its stakeholders to mark the special occasion.

Hilal bin Ali al Kharousi, Chairman of OOMCO, said, “Our journey has always been defined by putting the growth of Oman and its people first while we are a company of many firsts, we



OOMCO brought together a host of its stakeholders to mark the special occasion.

remain committed to aligning our strategy with Oman Vision 2040.

Over the years, OOMCO has consistently been taking the next strategic steps in the transformation of the fuel supply

industry and we will continue to achieve more milestones for generations to come.”

Through a laser focus on quality fuel, strategic national and regional expansion, innovation,

diversification, Omanisation, a green mindset, and supporting communities across the nation, customer-centric OOMCO has been at the forefront of transforming the fuel supply

industry.

Currently, OOMCO operates over 230 service stations locally, including 30 in Saudi Arabia and 12 in Tanzania, which are among key growth markets for the company, which forecasts the total number of services stations to reach 308 locations.

OOMCO's portfolio also includes a total of 86 service stations that include electric vehicle charging points.

Moreover, 12 of these sites are powered by solar panels, while 24 service stations across Oman have a Vapor Recovery System, significantly reducing the carbon footprint of these sites.



Oman pushes for accountability and innovation in public utilities sector

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

Oman's commitment to improving the quality of services provided to subscribers and enhancing energy efficiency is exemplified through the launch of innovative initiatives aimed at empowering consumers and ensuring accountability in the public services sector.

During the annual media briefing held by the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR), four new initiatives were unveiled to enhance service quality, meet the growing demand for electricity and water, and protect the rights of subscribers.

One of the key initiatives introduced is the direct compensation initiative for electricity service subscribers, which allows consumers to receive direct compensation if operating companies fail to meet approved service quality standards.

By holding licensees accountable and requiring them to compensate subscribers for any deviations from service quality benchmarks, this initiative aims to improve service levels and safeguard the rights of consumers.

Licensees are mandated to deduct compensation amounts from electricity bills, fostering a culture of accountability and transparency in the sector.

Furthermore, the integration of electricity companies' shares in the development of services and efficiency improvement signifies a strategic approach towards cost



Smart metres not only enhance consumer experience but also contribute to overall energy conservation efforts in Oman. Image for illustration only.

reduction, financial performance enhancement, and increased investments in the sector.

By encouraging collaboration and shared responsibility among industry stakeholders, Oman seeks to drive operational excellence, innovation, and sustainable growth in the electricity sector.

The integration of smart technology in the energy sector, exemplified by the installation of over 642,000 smart metres in the electricity sector and 332,000 smart metres in the water sector, represents a transformative step towards enhancing consumer empowerment and operational efficiency.

Smart meters enable real-time monitoring, accurate billing, and precise control over energy consumption, empowering consumers to make informed decisions and optimise their usage patterns.

This technological advancement not only enhances

consumer experience but also contributes to overall energy conservation efforts in Oman.

The annual briefing also highlighted the significance of establishing regulatory frameworks and policies to govern the water and sanitation sector in Oman.

Through the issuance of key regulations, including the Drinking Water Regulation List, Incident Reporting Regulations, Risk Prevention Regulations, and Customer Service Supply Licensees Care Regulation, the Authority aims to strengthen operational controls, enhance safety measures, and streamline customer service processes in the sector.

Moreover, service level indicators for subscribers, such as achieving a 40 per cent resolution period for complaints and reducing necessary working days for service connections, underscore Oman's

ONE OF THE KEY INITIATIVES INTRODUCED IS THE DIRECT COMPENSATION INITIATIVE FOR ELECTRICITY SERVICE SUBSCRIBERS, WHICH ALLOWS CONSUMERS TO RECEIVE DIRECT COMPENSATION IF OPERATING COMPANIES FAIL TO MEET APPROVED SERVICE QUALITY STANDARDS.

commitment to enhancing customer satisfaction and governance in the public services sector. By prioritising consumer welfare and service excellence, Oman is laying the foundation for a more responsive, efficient, and consumer-centric public services landscape.

Dr Mansour al Hinai, Chairman of APSR said, "For 2024, we will continue the work that we have started in 2023. We have our vision, which is built on enabling the renewables, which is very critical for us. Also, the quality of service offered to the customers is a key priority for us during 2024."

"Enhancing the efficiency of the whole system is actually one of the important matters. We need to set all the fundamentals together to ensure that we will continue.

Digitisation is one of the things that we are starting in 2024, and building and enabling the licenced entities to adopt more of the digitisation and technologies in their operations," Al Hinai

Research shows sarooj mortar as a cost-effective cement alternative

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

A Muscat-based scientist has scooped the 10th National Research Award for his pioneering study of the Omani traditional building material – the sarooj mortar – which has contributed to advancing economic sustainability in the construction industry.

Dr Mohammed Seddik Meddah (pictured), Associate Professor at the Department of Civil and Architectural Engineering, College of Engineering, Sultan Qaboos University, was cited for his research project, titled 'Sarooj Mortar: From a Traditional Building Material to an Engineered Pozzolan - Mechanical and Thermal Properties Study.'

This research not only secured recognition but also unveiled a locally developed solution that has the potential to notably reduce production costs in the construction sector.

The study focused on the mechanical and thermal properties of Sarooj mortar and strategically explored the use of locally sourced raw clay as an engineered pozzolan.

Dr Meddah's team conducted a comprehensive analysis, examining the chemical, mineralogical, physical, microstructural, and thermal characteristics of the raw clay, both in its raw and calcined



states.

The core of the research lies in creating mortar mixes using Sarooj as a substitute for Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC). Various mortar mixes were meticulously designed and produced, showcasing the adaptability of Sarooj in combination with natural sand from Wadi Al Khoud.

The study delves into the economic advantages of substituting OPC, a traditionally costly component in construction. Dr Meddah's findings suggest that integrating Sarooj mortar can lead to substantial cost reductions in cement production.

The locally developed pozzolana proves to be not only economically viable but also environmentally friendly, as the thermal treatment required is significantly less energy-intensive compared to the traditional clinker cement manufacturing process.

Published in the Journal of Building Engineering with a remarkable cite score of 8.3 and an impact factor of 6.4, the research underscores the potential impact on cost-effectiveness in construction materials.



Omani enterprises flourished in the wake of contracts awarded last year.

Dhofar municipality injects RO 4 million into local SMEs in 2023

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

Seeking to support the growing small and medium enterprise (SME) community in the governorate, Dhofar Municipality allocated a total of RO 4 million in 353 contracts benefiting small businesses during 2023.

Mohammad al Ghassani, Director of the SME Department in Dhofar Governorate, said the beneficiaries primarily included SMEs operating tourist sites and engaging in tourism-related activities during the khareef and winter holiday seasons in the governorate.

"These contracts helped stimulate the local economy, as well as sustain the growth of small and medium enterprises in the Governorate of Dhofar, given their pivotal role in the success of the various tourist seasons in Dhofar.

Part of our objective was to affirm our confidence in SMEs as important players in driving the local economy, and providing an array of goods and services to the

local community," he stated.

The support packages, Al Ghassani said, have helped create a mix of full-time and part-time employment opportunities for local Omanis corresponding to the tourism season the beneficiary SMEs are actively engaged in. The contracts also helped create livelihoods for locals and bolster family incomes as well, he stated.

Several sectors witnessed significant growth due to the Municipality's initiatives. As a result of support packages disbursed by the Municipality, local shops and stores experienced an expansion in both reach and customer base, contributing to a more vibrant local economy. Cafes and mobile food carts burgeoned as well, offering residents and visitors a wider spectrum of dining options.

The growth of businesses focusing on amusement facilities contributed to creating a family-centric environment and bolstering the region's tourism potential. Likewise, tech firms provided essential services and solutions, contributing to the overall development of the region.

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 4

General cargo volumes handled at the Port of Salalah – a major regional gateway port and transshipment hub on the Arabian Sea – soared to a record General Cargo Terminal to a record 20.6 million tonnes in 2023, entailing a significant 12 per cent jump from the previous year's total of 18.4 million tonnes.

Keld Mosgaard Christensen, Chief Executive Officer, attributed the uptick in general cargo throughput to rising exports of gypsum and limestone, among other bulk commodities generated locally.

"The General Cargo Terminal (GCT) achieved a remarkable milestone reaching record volumes of 20.6 million metric tons (MMT), a 12 per cent growth compared to the previous year.

The general cargo business grew significantly in the first half of 2023, while the second half of the year was disrupted by adverse events, such as the impact of cyclone Tej and the situation in the Red Sea.

GCT's ability to attain record volumes amidst these challenges underscores its effectiveness and strong foundation," Christensen stated in the company's Management Discussion and Analysis Report for fiscal 2023.



Mineral exports from Salalah Port.

Containerised cargo throughput, on the other hand, slumped 16 per cent to 3.8 million TEUs in 2023, down from 4.5 million TEUS a year earlier.

Reflecting on this downtrend, the CEO said: "The container terminal faced a series of challenges during the year, including the ongoing upgrade project, deployment of the new FLOW operational system, disruptions stemming from Cyclone Tej and the ongoing disruptions in the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden. However, the terminal showcased resilience and adaptability in navigating these challenges during the year."

Work on the terminal upgrade project is progressing, with the first berth having been completed

in 2023. Earlier this year, an initial batch of four quay cranes had also arrived for installation at the Container Terminal – part of an initiative to equip Salalah Port for the handling of mega containerships in the future.

The CEO stated: "The ongoing upgrade project will continue to constrain capacity during 2024 and is expected to go live in Q1 2025 with an increased capacity of 6 million TEU and ability to handle the biggest vessels in the world."

The upgrade, first announced in October 2022, entails an investment of \$66 million towards the construction of civil infrastructure necessary to support the installation of special cranes to handle Ultra Large

Container Vessels (ULCVs) that are expected to begin arriving at the port starting from 2025.

A total of 10 cranes are proposed to be installed at the Container Terminal under lease from APM Terminals, one of the world's largest port operating companies, which also owns a 30 per cent stake in Salalah Port Services (SPS).

At the same time, global shipping and logistics giant Maersk has pledged to channel large volumes of containers to Salalah Port by routing its mega containerships via the Omani hub.

A mega containership is typically 366 metres long and capable of carrying over 14,500 containers.

Debriefing MWC 2024



TARIQ AL BARWANI

The author is Knowledge Oman Founder knowledgeoman.com

I am back from an amazing, thrilling yet edutaining week in Barcelona, Spain, out of which, I had spent 4 full days at the Mobile World Congress (MWC) 2024, which occurs every year, bringing the leading technology & telecom organisations, along with enthusiasts, senior leaders, from the public & government sector, and professionals under one roof, to meet, network, exhibit and collaborate for the global good.

My article last week was on the sneak peek of the event; this week I would like to debrief MWC as a summary report.

MWC is organised by GSMA, the Global System for Mobile Communications Association that brings together numerous mobile carriers from around the world and more than 400 companies involved in the mobile ecosystem.

The event is sponsored by major telecom & technology

companies.

The goal of the event is to promote telecom innovation, and so as build a platform of communication and collaboration among its stakeholders.

The theme this year was on Future First, which works towards solving challenges of today and tomorrow.

The event was hosted at the Fira de Barcelona Gran Via, cutting-edge, functional venue with 240,000 square metres of floor space.

Over 100,000 visitors attended, 2,700 exhibitors participated, 1,100 speakers presented, and 1,000 investors were available to fund various startup projects that were pitched during the 4 days session, from February 26 to 29 last week.

There were a number of singing ceremonies, MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) strategic

partnerships formed, and awarding bodies that recognised several projects & organisations as a whole which can be obtained via the MWC official website.

I was delighted to see companies from Oman e.g. Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel), participating at this global event (with its innovation labs), aligning with Oman Vision 2040 to drive innovation and shape the future of telecommunications in Oman, and also Ooredoo, actively being involved in forming innovative partnerships and engaged in the prestigious GSMA Ministerial Programme.

The focus this year was primarily on 5G advanced (a.k.a 5.5G), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Cloud.

This of course is in addition to highlighting latest products and services that are built on top of the prime focus of the event.

Major telecos presented their

case studies on adopting 5.5g networks (bringing 10x the speed of the existing network we operate on, i.e. 10 Gbps download) and the value they attained from the same, from strengthening application capabilities, reducing latencies to securing the network in overall.

Solution providers (e.g. Huawei) have presented 10 innovative Ai technologies for cloud as I have elaborated in my last week article, while others have shared evolutionary enhancement to their offerings – from new mobile phones, smartwatches, wearables and the likes.

Impressive concepts were also demonstrated, from flying cars, air taxis, bendable and flexible hybrid wearable, smart rings, Ai pin tags, Smart Glasses, robot dogs and dolls.

I was thrilled to see a transparent laptop presented, so as amazed with Xiaomi's new entrance into Electric Vehicle

Market, with is SU7 vehicle, fully connected car.

I also had the opportunity to be hosted by an Ai podcast, which of course was interesting but scary as well, for not it only presents an opportunity, but surely loss of jobs to many as well, not-so-thanks to Ai revolution of course.

Vibrant and engaging discussions, innovative products and solutions, productive meetings and networking sessions, fruitful partnerships and alliance formed were some of the outstanding outcomes of the 4 full-days jam packed event at MWC this year.

I look forward to see how and when will some of these technology concepts presented become live and a reality. Many of which will surely help government, businesses and individuals transform and ultimately prosper.

Until we catch up again next week, stay positive.

Forced to change: Tech giants bow to global onslaught of rules

By Thursday, Google will have changed how it displays certain search results. Microsoft will no longer force Windows customers to use its Bing Internet search tool. And Apple will give iPhone and iPad users access to rival app stores and payment systems for the first time.

The tech giants have been preparing before a Wednesday deadline to comply with a new European Union law intended to increase competition in the digital economy. The law, called the Digital Markets Act, requires the biggest tech companies to overhaul how some of their products work so smaller rivals can gain more access to their users.

Those changes are some of the most visible shifts that Microsoft, Apple, Google, Meta and others are making in response to a wave of new regulations and laws around the world.



ADAM SATARIANO

The author is a technology correspondent based in Europe, where his work focuses on digital policy and the intersection of technology and world affairs.



DAVID MCCABE

The author covers technology policy from the Washington bureau. He reports on how increasingly sceptical regulators are trying to rein in major tech companies and how industry lobbies policymakers.

THE TECH GIANTS HAVE BEEN PREPARING BEFORE A WEDNESDAY DEADLINE TO COMPLY WITH A NEW EUROPEAN UNION LAW INTENDED TO INCREASE COMPETITION IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY. THE LAW, CALLED THE DIGITAL MARKETS ACT, REQUIRES THE BIGGEST TECH COMPANIES TO OVERHAUL HOW SOME OF THEIR PRODUCTS WORK SO SMALLER RIVALS CAN GAIN MORE ACCESS TO THEIR USERS.



A man looking at a phone is seen through a digitally decorated glass during the World Internet Conference (WIC) in Wuzhen, Zhejiang province, China. – Reuters

devices and features of their social media services, which have been especially noticeable to users in Europe. The firms are also making consequential shifts that are less visible, to their business models, deal making and data-sharing practices, for example.

The degree of change is evident at Apple. While the Silicon Valley company once offered its App Store as a unified marketplace around the world, it now has different rules for App Store developers in South Korea, the European Union and the United States because of new laws and court rulings.

The company dropped the proprietary design of an iPhone charger because of another EU law, meaning future iPhones will have a charger that works with non-Apple devices.

The modifications mean that people's technology experiences will increasingly differ based on where they live. In Europe, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat users younger than 18 no longer see ads based on their personal data, the result of a 2022 law called the Digital Services Act.

Elsewhere in the world, young people still see such ads on those platforms.

The tech industry is

essentially maturing and becoming more like banking, automobiles and health care, with companies tailoring their products and services to local laws and regulations, said Greg Taylor, an Oxford University professor focused on competition in technology markets.

"This represents a sea change in how we regulate the tech sector," he said. "Although the EU is the first out of the gate, other jurisdictions around the world are trying to do similar things."

Yet even as the Big Tech firms make changes, smaller rivals like Spotify say much more government action is needed worldwide to seriously address their vast power. Many of the firms continue to report record profits and sales.

Microsoft, Meta, Amazon, Apple and Alphabet, Google's parent company, have helped push the stock market to new highs. Their combined market value has more than doubled since the end of 2019 to nearly \$10.6 trillion.

Even policymakers behind some of the new rules said it was unrealistic to assume the new laws and regulations would immediately dislodge dominant

companies like Google or Apple.

Andreas Schwab, a member of the European Parliament who helped write the Digital Markets Act, said the hope was that over time, the rules, if strongly enforced, would provide space for new entrants to emerge and grow.

"The tipping point will be reached when we have more competition and not just a change of some products," said Schwab, who travelled to Brazil, Japan, South Korea and Singapore over the past year to discuss the European Union's new tech rules.

"Maybe in one year we say they were important, or maybe in one year we say it's a joke because the changes didn't mean anything," Amazon, Apple, Google, Meta and Microsoft declined interview requests.

Few laws have forced the tech firms to make as many adjustments as the Digital Markets Act.

The EU law was passed in 2022 to bar the biggest tech companies from using their interlocking services and deep pockets to box in users and squash rivals.

The law affects everything from online advertising to messaging apps to app payment

methods.

Violators could face penalties of up to 20 per cent of their global revenue.

For more than a year, tech companies have negotiated with EU regulators in Brussels about changes to their products, services and businesses to come into compliance.

In January, Google said it would reduce the visibility of its own services in search results and link more to rivals on queries for things like flights and restaurants.

The company also pledged to let European users limit personal data from being shared across services like search, YouTube and Chrome — a shift long sought by privacy groups.

That month, Apple said in addition to the change allowing rival app stores and payment services, customers in Europe with a new iPhone would see a screen to select a default browser instead of the iPhone's automatically defaulting to Apple's browser, Safari.

Around the same time, the Digital Services Act, intended to combat illicit content online, has also begun having an effect. European users have gained new tools to report toxic content.

— The New York Times

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TRAVEL

Men sort out a net on a fishing boat on the Bassac River, a distributary of the Mekong River, in Phnom Penh. — AFP



FASHION

French model and singer Yseult arrives for the presentation of creations by Balenciaga for the Women Ready-to-wear Fall-Winter 2024/2025 collection as part of the Paris Fashion Week, in Paris. —AFP



CULTURE

People wearing traditional African-themed clothing parade during the Carnaval Des Deux Rives in Bordeaux, southwestern France. — AFP



CHANGING WORLD

This picture taken from a position in southern Israel near the border with the Gaza Strip shows the sun setting behind destroyed buildings in Gaza amid continuing battles between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas. — AFP

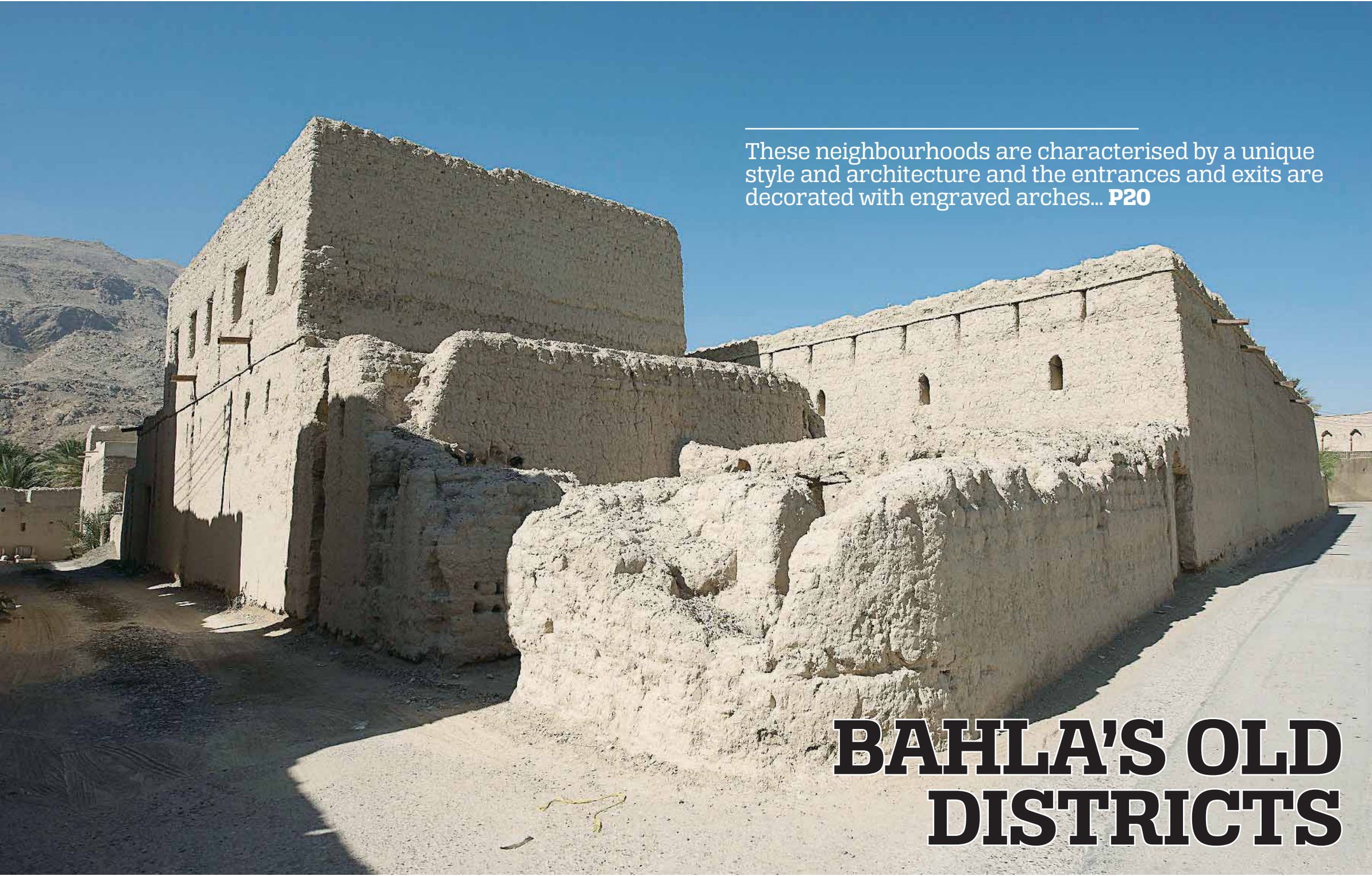


LIFESTYLE

Rider Nick Spatenfeldt pulls his brother, skier Cody during the 76th annual Leadville Ski Joring week-end competition in Leadville, Colorado. —AFP

art & life

TUESDAY | MARCH 5, 2024 | SHAABAN 24, 1445 AH OMAN OBSERVER www.omanobserver.om features@omanobserver.om



These neighbourhoods are characterised by a unique style and architecture and the entrances and exits are decorated with engraved arches... P20

BAHLA'S OLD DISTRICTS

FILM

“Dune: Part Two” spices up N.America box office with big opening

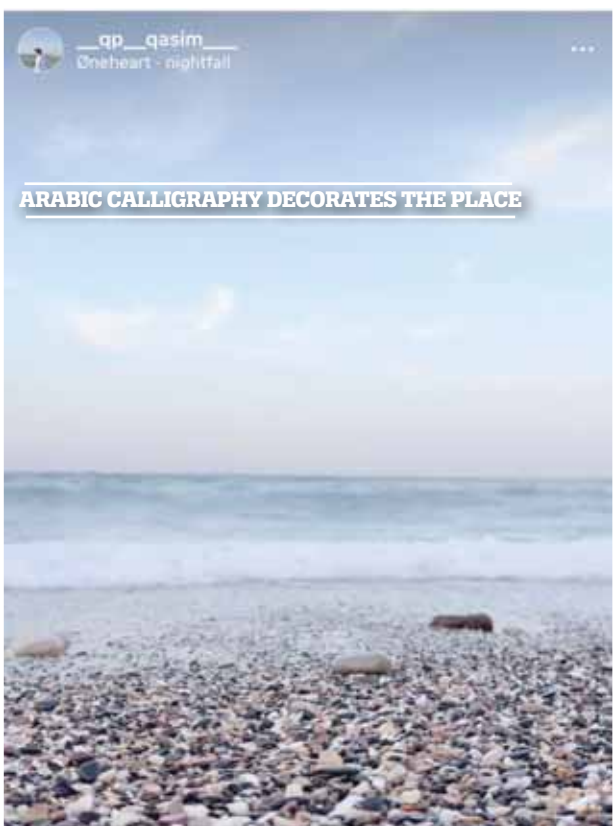
BRINGING SPICE TO a so-far lean movie year, Warner Bros.' new sci-fi film “Dune: Part Two” shot to the top of the North American box office this weekend, taking in an estimated \$81.5 million, industry

watcher Exhibitor Relations reported on Sunday. “This is an outstanding opening” for a sci-fi sequel, said analyst David A. Gross, adding that a sprawling international cast including Anya Taylor-Joy, Timothee Chalamet, Zendaya, Austin Butler, Florence Pugh, Rebecca Ferguson, Jason Momoa, Josh Brolin, Lea Seydoux and Javier Bardem had provided an added boost. Denis Villeneuve's epic sequel to the original “Dune” — based on Frank Herbert's 1965 novel about war and survival on the deeply inhospitable desert planet of Arrakis — saw the young year's largest opening, roughly doubling the original film's opening. “Dune: Part Two” has taken in an additional \$97 million abroad. Its strong opening left the box office leader of the past two weekends, Paramount's “Bob Marley: One Love,” in the dust — or sand — as the biopic took in just \$7.4 mil-



lion for second place. British actor Kingsley Ben-Adir stars as the iconic reggae singer. In third were the latest episodes of Fathom Events and Angel Studios' faith-based “The Chosen,” on the life of Jesus Christ, at \$3.9 million. Egyptian-born Jonathan Roumie plays Jesus in the crowd-funded series. Fourth spot went to Lionsgate's true-life drama “Ordinary Angels,” at \$3.8 million. Hilary Swank stars as a Kentucky hairdresser who rallies her town to help a widower with a gravely ill daughter. Sony's “Madame Web,” a “Spider-Man” spinoff starring Dakota Johnson, placed fifth for the week-end at \$3.2 million. Rounding out the top 10 were: “Migration” (\$2.5 million) “Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba” (\$2.1 million) “Wonka” (\$1.7 million) “Argylle” (\$1.4 million) “The Beekeeper” (\$1.1 million) — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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CULTURE

Experiment Captures Why Pottery Forms Are Culturally Distinct

A study led by Kobe University, published in PNAS Nexus, reveals how potters from different cultural backgrounds learn and reproduce new pottery forms, shedding light on cultural variations in archaeological artefacts. Researchers, including experts in pottery, motor control and shape analysis, conducted a field experiment involving 21 wheel-throwing potters from France, India and Japan. Despite no differential cultural evolution, they found distinct cultural differences in the final shape and shaping process trajectories of pottery forms. This suggests the existence of cultural attractors, influencing how artisans assimilate new cultural elements. Lead researcher Nonaka highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the study, crucial for its success. While cultural attractors don't negate selective transmission, they offer insights into how artisans incorporate new ele-



ments into their craft. This finding not only enriches our understanding of artisanal practices but also informs archaeological interpretations, potentially identifying community-specific patterns in artefact assemblages. The study underscores the complexity of human behaviour and its implications for cultural evolution and artefact analysis.— ONA



DESERT WONDERS

Secrets of Earth's magnificent desert star dunes revealed

WILL DUNHAM

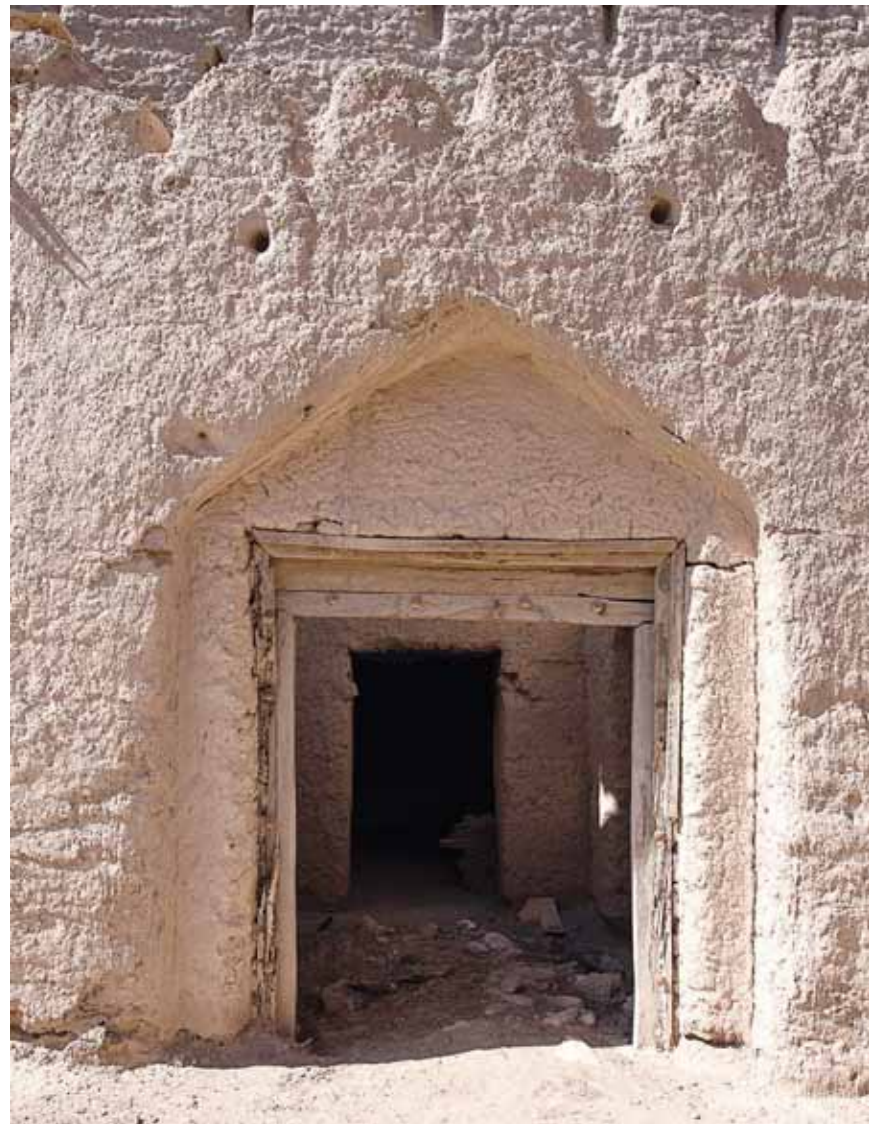
They are among the wonders of our deserts: star dunes, the vaguely pyramid-shaped sand formations up to about 1,000 feet tall with arms stretching out from a central peak to give them a star-like appearance when viewed from above. Scientists on Monday unveiled the first in-depth study of a star dune, revealing the internal structure of these geological features and showing how long it took for one of them to form - more quickly than expected but still a process unfolding over many centuries. The study focused upon a star dune in eastern Morocco called Lala Lallia, meaning "highest sacred point" in the local Berber language, situated within the Sahara Desert in a small sand sea called Erg Chebbi about 5 km from the town of Merzouga, close to the border with Algeria. Lala Lallia rises about 330 feet above the surrounding dunes and is approximately 2,300 feet wide, containing about 5-½ million metric tonnes of sand. The researchers used

ground-penetrating radar to peer inside the dune and employed luminescence dating to determine how long Lala Lallia has taken to form, a method based on the amount of energy trapped inside the grains of sand. The answer: about 900 years, accumulating roughly 6,400 metric tonnes annually as wind relentlessly blows sand through the desert. Star dunes make up just under 10 per cent of the dunes in Earth's deserts and are the tallest ones, surpassing other types such as crescent-shaped barchan dunes and straight and lengthy linear dunes. They also have been spotted on Mars and on Saturn's large moon Titan. "I first encountered star dunes in Namibia 20 years ago, and was instantly amazed at the size of them. I have a vivid memory of the long climb to the top, struggling up very loose sand in the heat of the day," said geographer Geoff Duller of Aberystwyth University in Wales, co-author of the study published in the journal *Scientific Reports*. — Reuters

art & life

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TUESDAY | MARCH 5 | 2024



BAHLA'S OLD DISTRICTS

TEXT & PHOTOS
BY YAHYA AL SALMANI

The Wilayat of Bahla in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate is one of the ancient Omani governorates dating back to ancient times, and its archaeological sites are represented by Bahla Fort, its great wall, its old market, Salut Castle, Jibreen Castle, and other archaeological monuments that stand as witness to the archaeological treasures that this governorate abounds with.

In addition to the historic Bahla Fort, which is one of the oldest Omani forts and its connection to many ancient civilisations, Unesco has included it on the World Heritage List since 1987 to include the Bahla Oasis with its fort, market, and surrounding archaeological areas, comes the importance of the ancient neighbourhoods that are located in the centre and suburbs of this governorate.

Among these neighbourhoods (Harat) are Al Aqar, Al Hawiyah, Al Ghuzaili, Al Ghafat, and Al Jannah districts. There are many initiatives undertaken by the citizens of this governorate. These initiatives paved way for investing in these ancient lanes in a way that develops eco-tourism in the Sultanate of Oman.

These sites are realistic exam-

tial neighbourhoods that have not been restored and may in the future be one of the important tourist attractions.

The area surrounding Bahla Fort is considered a vital and important area as it represents harmony and conformity with the designs of the ancient fort. Due to the historical status of Bahla Fort in the world, the fort is witnessing great demand by tourists coming to visit it from inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman, and many tourists stop to admire the neighbouring lanes to discover the aesthetics of the wonderful designs and its distinguished architecture.

The old Omani neighbourhoods constitute an ideal privacy for the citizen's connection to his land and his deep-rooted culture, with a unique historical depth. The Sultanate of Oman is full of many old neighbourhoods that tell within their walls the stories of the struggle of the people of these neighbourhoods.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism seeks to preserve the old neighbourhoods, as it makes continuous efforts represented by inventorying and documenting the old neighbourhoods and preparing a special register for them, including the historical, cultural, and social importance and the architectural condition of the neighbourhoods. In addition to



ples that tell about the advantages of ancient Omani lanes. These neighbourhoods are characterised by a unique style and architecture. The entrances and exits of these neighbourhoods are decorated with engraved arches, and each neighbourhood includes basic facilities such as Holy Quran schools, mosques, and meeting halls called (Al Sabla). There are also old markets near each neighbourhood built in the form of ancient architectural style.

The importance of investing in these sites comes to enhance the level of tourism in this ancient state. These old houses have been invested in by restoring them and turning them into heritage inns, museums and antique cafes, but there are old residen-

developing a commercial operational plan for the old lanes.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has so far launched 16 documentary studies of historical neighbourhoods, which contain a management plan for the heritage and tourism sector by evaluating the infrastructure of the neighbourhoods such as services, agriculture, and irrigation.

It also includes construction risks, the state of preservation and preservation, and a plan for the rehabilitation, development, and operation of the neighbourhoods.

The ministry has so far conducted an inventory and documentation. Around 320 lanes in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, including 50 historic lanes are in good structural condition.