

HM thanked by Saudi King

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 condolences cable to him on the death of Prince Mamdouh bin Saud bin Abdulaziz al Saud. In his cable, King Salman expressed his sincere appreciation for His Majesty's heartfelt sympathies and sincere prayers. King Salman also prayed to Allah the Almighty to protect His Majesty against all harm. – ONA



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VERSTAPPEN CONTINUES WINNING STREAK IN SAUDI ARABIA



P15

LOCAL OMANI COFFEE SHOPS REPORT SURGE IN SALES



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CELEBRATING OMAN'S RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH FLORAL ARTISTRY



MUSCAT

HM CONGRATULATES PAKISTAN PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to President Asif Ali Zardari on being elected and sworn-in as the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of success to President Asif Zardari in leading the people of Pakistan towards further progress and prosperity. His Majesty also wished the bilateral relations further development and growth.

STONE FOR RO 520M POLYSILICON UNIT

Sohar Freezone in Al Batinah North Governorate will on Monday celebrate laying of the foundation stone for a polysilicon factory project with an investment of more than RO 520 million. The unit is expected to open during 2025.

The project, which will occupy an area of 160,000 square metres, will produce high-quality metallic silicon with an annual capacity of 100,000 tonnes.

The production process involves pouring liquid metallic silicon from furnace into moulds, cooling, casting, grinding and then packing the ore for global export.

The project reflects the government's keenness to encourage local investment and attract foreign investors, as part of the objectives of Oman Vision 2040. **DETAILS ON P13**

First day of Ramadhan on Tuesday

H M E X C H A N G E S G R E E T I N G S W I T H A R A B , I S L A M I C L E A D E R S

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA) announced on Sunday that Tuesday (March 12) will be the first day of the holy month of Ramadhan 1445 AH, due to the lack of confirmation of sighting the crescent of the holy month. Therefore, Monday will be the completing day of the month of Shaaban.

The committee convened to receive reports about the sighting of the crescent that determines the beginning of the month of Ramadhan for the year 1445 AH.

On this noble occasion, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs is honoured to extend its sincere greetings and blessings to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, praying to the Almighty Allah to bring back this occasion at a time His Majesty the Sultan enjoys health and blessings. The ministry also extends its best greetings and wishes of blessings and success to all Muslims.”

His Majesty Sultan Haitham

bin Tarik has exchanged cables of greetings on the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan with leaders of Arab and Islamic countries.

In his cables, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments along with his best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to them. His Majesty also wished their peoples further progress and prosperity. His Majesty also prayed to the Almighty Allah to bestow his blessings on all Muslims, wishing that it would be a month of security and harmony. In their cables, the leaders expressed their sincere greetings along with their best wishes of continuous good health, happiness and long life to His Majesty the Sultan. They also wished the Omani people to achieve aspirations of progress and prosperity. They prayed to the Almighty Allah for the return of this occasion on His Majesty, the Omani people and the Arab and Muslim nations with glory and prosperity. — ONA



His Majesty, Bahrain King exchange greetings

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik exchanged greetings in a telephonic call with King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain, on the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan.

During the call, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments to King Hamad, wishing him good health, happiness and long life. His Majesty also prayed to the Almighty Allah for the return of this occasion on King Hamad while the people of Bahrain realise aspirations of further progress and welfare.

On his turn, King Hamad expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health, wellbeing and long life to His Majesty the Sultan. King Hamad also wished for the return of this occasion on His Majesty while the Omani people realise aspirations of further development and prosperity. – ONA

War rages in besieged Gaza on eve of Ramadhan

GAZA STRIP: Deadly fighting raged in Gaza on Sunday between Israeli forces and Hamas, with no truce in sight as the holy month of Ramadhan neared and a dire humanitarian crisis gripped the besieged Palestinian territory. A Spanish charity ship with food aid prepared to sail from the Mediterranean island-nation of Cyprus to help alleviate the suffering in the coastal Gaza Strip, now in its sixth month of war. The non-governmental

group Open Arms said its boat would pull a barge with 200 tonnes of food, which its partner the US charity World Central Kitchen would then unload on the shores of Gaza.

Vessel tracking websites showed the Open Arms still in Larnaca on Sunday evening. It was expected to depart “in the coming hours”, Cypriot government spokesman Konstantinos Letymbiotis told Cyprus News Agency.

With the UN repeatedly warning of famine,

United States, Jordanian and other planes again airdropped food aid, but the United Nation's aid coordinator for the area has said more supply by land is the best way to get assistance to territory's 2.4 million people.

Weeks of talks involving United States, Qatari and Egyptian mediators have aimed for a six-week truce and the release of many of the roughly 100 captives in return for Palestinian prisoners released from Israeli jails. **SEE P6**

USING MOBILE PHONES EVEN FOR NAVIGATION IS A VIOLATION: ROP

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

Using mobile phones should always be avoided while driving, even to find a location or address of a particular place.

A Royal Oman Police (ROP) spokesman confirmed to the Observer, “Any attempt to use your mobile phone and GPS application like maps will be considered a violation. The general advice is not to get distracted by any means while driving. So if you want to just double-check the location, pull the vehicle on the shoulder and can use your mobile phone to double-check or find the exact location.”

When asked about the hands-free, he said: “The simple answer is do not use a mobile phone

while driving.”

According to experts, “The driver should never text, browse online, or watch videos while driving. It is too dangerous. If there is a need to use GPS navigation, just confirm your direction before starting the trip, you don't have to focus on them again while driving.”

Other tips include not answering calls while driving, avoiding conversations on the phone, or taking photos or videos.

As per the Traffic Law, using mobile phones or other electronic devices while driving can cost RO 15 as a fine and two black points. The Royal Oman Police (ROP) recently confirmed that smart radars to detect violations are in use on a trial basis.

MAHADHA DAMS FILLED TO THE BRIM!



The rainfall monitoring stations of the Directorate-General of Agriculture and Water Resources in Al Buraimi Governorate recorded rainfall amounts exceeding 60 mm. Eng Zayed bin Khalifa al Jabri, Head of the Agricultural Development and Water Resources Department in the Wilayat of Mahadha, said that the wilayat's six dams (Mahadha Dam, Abu Qala Dam, Masah Dam, and Haywan Dam, Mesalik Dam and Al Jawif Dam) are now filled to the brim after receiving 3.011 million cubic metres of water due to extreme heavy rainfall brought by the Al Rayyan depression.

OPINION

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Mohammed Anwar
Let's embrace our animal nature...

P9



Abdulaziz Al Jahdhami
Opportunities are created not granted

P16



Qasim Al Maashani
Unemployment can stifle progress



Majlis Ash'shura's media committee discusses draft Information Law



The meeting looked into proposals to amend articles in the information law and it provided justifications for such amendments. – ONA

MUSCAT: The Majlis Ash'shura's Media, Tourism and Culture Committee on Sunday hosted Mohammed bin Said al Balushi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Information, and other ministry officials to discuss queries and observations about the draft version of a new Information Law.

The meeting provided answers to queries raised by media professionals and those interested in the field of information.

Al Balushi said that the draft new Information Law was compiled years after the implementation of laws regulating media practices and activities in the Sultanate of Oman.

In this context, Al Balushi said that “developments that took place in the field of information — equally in terms of tools and methods of practise, underlined the need for a new law that regulates media action and contributes to the development of information in Oman”.

Al Balushi pointed out that the new Information Law is also envisaged to serve journalists, media professionals, media institutions and all those operating in the field of information, in its conventional

and modern forms.

He added that the new draft law stems from the provisions of Article (35) of the Basic Law of the State, which stipulates that “freedom of opinion, speech, writing and other means of expression is guaranteed within the purviews of the law”, as well as Article (37), which stipulates that “freedom of the press, printing and publishing is guaranteed in accordance with the terms and conditions set forth by law.

The law prohibits all that leads to strife or hatred or harms the security of the State or hurts human dignity or harms human rights.

The meeting was chaired by Abdullah bin Hamad al Harthy, Chairman of the Media Committee. It discussed all articles of the draft information law regulating aspects of media action in the Sultanate of Oman.

The meeting looked into proposals to amend articles in the information law and it provided justifications for such amendments in accordance with the requirements of media practices and meetings held earlier to discuss the new draft law.



First day of Ramadhan on Tuesday

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs announced on Sunday that Tuesday March 12, 2024 will be the first day of the holy month of Ramadhan 1445 AH, due to the lack of confirmation this evening of sighting the crescent of the holy month. Therefore, tomorrow March 11 will be the completing day of the month of Shaaban.

This was unveiled in a statement reading as follows: “The main moonsighting committee for Hijri months convened this evening, Sunday the 29th of Shaaban 1445 AH, corresponding to March 10, 2024, under the chairmanship of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and membership of Dr Kahlan bin Nabhan al Kharousi, Assistant Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, Ahmed bin Saleh al Rashidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, Shaikh Mohammed bin Salim al Akhzami, Judge at the Supreme Court, Shaikh Abdulrahman bin Abdulsattar al Kamali, Judge at the Supreme Court, Shaikh Mohammed bin Salim al Nahdi, Judge at the Supreme Court.

The Committee convened to receive reports about the sighting of the crescent that determines the beginning of the month of Ramadhan for the year 1445 AH.

It should be noted that the committee did not receive any report about the sighting of the crescent, and,



The Committee convened to receive reports about the sighting of the crescent that determines the beginning of the month of Ramadhan for the year 1445 AH. – ONA



accordingly, Monday March 11, 2024 would be the 30th day of the month of Shaaban 1445 AH and Tuesday March 12, 2024 will be the first day of the month of Ramadhan for the year 1445 AH.

On this noble occasion, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs is honoured to extend its sincere greetings and blessings to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, praying to the Almighty Allah

to bring back this occasion at a time His Majesty the Sultan enjoys health and blessings. The ministry also extends its best greetings and wishes of blessings and success to all Muslims.” — ONA



جهاز الضرائب
TAX AUTHORITY



Announcement

The Tax Authority would like to call the attention of income tax taxpayers whose fiscal year ends on **December 31, 2023**, to file their tax returns and pay their tax dues as follows:

- ▶ Taxpayers paying (0%-3%) of income tax should file their tax returns no later than **March 30, 2024**.
- ▶ Taxpayers paying (15%) of income tax should file their tax returns no later than **April 30, 2024**.

All tax returns should be submitted according to the forms set for that purpose using the Tax Authority's online portal at www.taxman.gov.om

We hope all taxpayers comply with filing their tax returns on the deadline.



[taxoman](https://www.taxman.gov.om)

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Yemen's tradition, lifestyle on display

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Yemen's rich cultural heritage, agricultural history and lifestyle are on a display at the InterContinental Hotel long traditional souqs as part of a series of events called 'Yemen Journey', thanks to the efforts of Nabil al Sharafi, a young entrepreneur and a curios collector.

'Yemen Journey' is a Yemen-based group of people dedicated to connecting Yemen to the world which source unique handmade products from farmers and artisans from all corners of Yemen, and export them to retailers internationally.

It showcases Yemen's

flavours and its beauty represented through unique handicrafts such as alabaster lamps, lanterns, baskets, stone pots, qamaria lights and silver jewellery, as well as authentic green coffee beans, all single sourced micro lots directly from selected farms in Sa'ada and Haraz, inviting interested retailers, coffee roasters and cafes as well as individuals to love to have a taste of authentic Yemeni life.

"Yemen has a rich cultural and agricultural history and through these events we wish to show that Yemeni artisans and farmers have adapted to modern designs and practices while preserving ancient crafts and agriculture practices. As Oman has maintained close

ties with Yemen on trade, we want to introduce Yemeni high-quality products to the Omani market," Nabil al Sharafi, founder of 'Yemen Journey', said.

"We have set up an office in Muscat and believe that through transparency, quality control and fair trade practices it is possible to connect Oman and Yemen on trade for high quality coffee, almonds, raisins, honey and handicrafts," he added.

Nabil, with his team, works with farmers in two of Yemen's most famous coffee regions, such as Sa'ada and Haraz, where the coffee is grown organically and the cherries handpicked and sundried. Yemen Journey

provides the farmers they work with ongoing support enabling them to increase quality and yield in their production, besides ensuring full transparency to buyers in the methods of cultivation, drying and processing, as well as the price the farmer receives for his crop.

"We celebrate the resilience of Yemenis and we honour the hard work and dreams that have gone into each one of our traditional Yemeni products. By bringing their work to an international audience, we give Yemeni farmers and artisans an opportunity to sell their unique products internationally, bringing them income and hope," adds Nabil.



'Yemen Journey' is a group of people dedicated to connecting Yemen to the world showcasing Yemen's flavours and beauty



Optimize your well-being
with our exclusive
Pre-Ramadan Package
At Burjeel Hospital, Al Khuwair

- Consultation with GP
- Kidney Function Test (3 tests)
- Liver Function Test (8 tests)
- Lipid Profile (4 tests)
- Thyroid Stimulating Hormone (TSH)
- Complete Blood Count (CBC)

20 OMR

37 Tests

- Fasting Blood Sugar
- HbA1c
- Vitamin D
- Vitamin B12
- Magnesium
- Calcium

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www.burjeelhospitaloman.com

All set for Ramadhan: Muscat Municipality

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 10

Within Muscat Municipality’s preparations for the blessed month of Ramadhan, ensuring safety of the most commonly consumed foods during the month as per the health requirements.

The work team in the Food and Laboratories Department of the General Directorate of Health Affairs stated that continuous campaigns will be organised throughout Ramadhan

to ensure the extent to which food establishments fulfil the requirements for transporting, storing, preparing and displaying products and foodstuffs.

The inspection campaigns will include two campaigns focusing on food products that are frequently consumed during Ramadhan as well as focussing on central markets, multi-activity stores, stores selling vegetables, fruits, and dates, stores selling coffee and nuts, activities selling meat and poultry, and stores selling various kinds of sweets.

This is to ensure compliance with health requirements during the storage, display and sale of consumed foodstuffs as consumer shopping increases during Ramadhan.

During this period, there always much consumption of fried foods. The quality of used oils in foods frying will also be monitored. Additionally, there will be monitoring of places where food is stored and prepared, and cooking methods, preparing, preserving and transporting it.

Muscat Municipality confirms its concern for the consumers’ safety and health and ensuring the quality and safety of food and products which are offered in local markets.

It calls on community members to report any notice regarding foods’ quality and safety or products that are offered in markets and shops or food in restaurants.

It can be done through the call centre 1111 or through the Baladiyati application.

Slaughterhouses ready to meet demand

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 10

Muscat Municipality has coordinated with a company to manage slaughterhouses and to develop a precautionary plan for any emergency in the event of a breakdown of equipment.

All slaughterhouse workers take precautionary measures and health requirements while providing service to ensure the health of workers and customers.

The company operating the slaughterhouses is also equipped with waiting rooms in the two slaughterhouses to ensure comfort for the consumer before receiving the carcass.

For the benefit of customers, the working hours of the municipal slaughterhouses have been rescheduled and set in proportion to the peak demand before and during the



Receiving consumers in Ramadhan will be limited to the morning period only

holy month of Ramadhan.

Muscat Municipality official stated that during the holy month of Ramadhan, receiving consumers will be limited to the morning period only — for companies and meat shops (between 6 and 8 am) and individuals (between 8 am and 1 pm).

Muscat Municipality has advised all institutions, charities, meat companies, and stores to communicate in advance with the company operating the slaughterhouses.



The inspection campaigns will include food products that are frequently consumed during Ramadhan as well as on central markets and stores

MANY HOPEFUL OF SOCIAL IFTARS MAKING A COMEBACK

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

With Ramadhan beginning, bachelors are in the high hopes that social Iftars, which used to be the norm of the past, would return.

There used to be mass Iftar gatherings every nook and corner of the cities and remote areas before

the Covid-19 in 2020 and these feasts used to be a great relief to those who live without their families in Oman.

But, such gatherings took a back seat during the lock downs owing to social distancing and the new norm was followed even after the pandemic. Major social Iftar gatherings including in many of the mosques, except some Iftar camps

remained suspended up until last year.

“We sincerely hope that such Iftar gatherings will come back and help us break our fast in a better way,” said one of the bachelors who works on odd timings said.

“The only hope till last had been the Iftars organised by corporates from time to time and we hope

these Iftar would continue which is a great relief for many like us,” another youngster admitted. Social Iftars, also known as mass Iftars, have been the rhythm of Iftar scenario and so did the iftar kits and sumptuous meals which are distributed close to the time of breaking fast.

These community Iftars, free food and refreshments aimed to help a

believer break his or her fast and to bolden the social fabric of the people who took part, had been received overwhelmingly.

“I’m a bachelor living in Wattayah and I am confident that there would be social Iftars this year. I fast every day and the tents are great relief for me and friends,” Hussain, an expatriate who used to break his fast

at a tent sponsored by a corporate, said.

“I am a forced bachelor and my family is away from Muscat for familial reasons. For people like me, this (the tent in Ruwi) is a great boon as we don’t have to sweat in the kitchen making Iftar meals,” Mohammed Iqbal living in the country for the past 35 years, told the *Observer*.

CONDOLENCE



Mohammed Shakeel Ahmed
(1953 - 2024)

It is with heavy hearts that we announce the passing of Mr. Mohammed Shakeel Ahmed, beloved husband, father, grandfather, and friend.

His legacy of love and laughter will forever remain in our hearts and he will be remembered for his kindness, generosity, and unwavering commitment to his community.

Bid to operate Seeb Green Walk

MUSCAT: The Muscat Municipality on Sunday rolled out a bid for operating the facilities of the Green Walk in the Wilayat of Al Seeb.

The project is in line with the municipality’s efforts aimed at building sustainable and vibrant communities. Stretching over an area exceeding 152,000 square metres, the project includes recreational and sports facilities, its implementation rate currently stands at 70 per cent.

The project includes a 3.2-km-long walkway, sites for mobile cafes, a cycling track, green spaces and seating areas, multi-use sports fields, a skateboarding area, children’s playgrounds, physical sports equipment and car parks.



The project includes a 3.2-km-long walkway, sites for mobile cafes, a cycling track, green spaces and seating areas



FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS

TO EASE TRAFFIC CONGESTION, ACCIDENTS

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

THE FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS, which were introduced in 2023, somehow helped ease traffic on the main roads such as Sultan Qaboos Street and the Muscat Expressway as employees rushed home after the office timings at around 2 pm. And now, the implementation of flexible working hours as well as the option of working from home will further help the situation.

“Getting back home in the afternoon used to be a big challenge as all government and some private employees left for home at the same time after work, which led to traffic congestion for hours,” said one Maabela resident.

“Long queues of vehicles especially at Muscat Expressway towards Maabela and on Sultan Qaboos Street on Al Rusayl in the afternoon after 2 pm will be a story of the past once flexible working timings are implemented especially during Ramadhan,” he added.

With the new flexible working hours and the option for remote working, the movement of employees will be spread out and it will reduce not only traffic congestion but also reduce accidents.

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) is expected to prohibit truck movement on some roads in various governorates on Thursdays and Saturdays to avoid congestion.

The official working hours for employees during Ramadhan 2024 for employees in the departments of the state’s administrative apparatus will be flexible, starting from 9 am to 2 pm, and the head of the departments will determine the hours of attendance that suit the nature of the work.

The shift options are 7 am to 12 noon, 8 am to 1 pm, 9 am to 2 pm, and 10 am to 3 pm.

REMOTE WORK:

The head of the department may implement remote work for the employees whose nature of work allows them to opt for such, in a manner that it does not affect the workflow in that unit.

In all cases, the number of employees required to be present at their workplace may not be less than 50 per cent of the total number of employees per department. The maximum working hours for Muslim workers shall be six hours per day in private sector establishments or 30 working hours a week.

**RAMADHAN
SHIFT OPTIONS**
7 AM TO 12
NOON,
8 AM TO 1 PM,
9 AM TO 2 PM,
AND 10 AM
TO 3 PM



Al Rustaq Hospital diagnoses child with gastric wall vein

Al RUSTAQ: In a unique case of its kind, the Paediatric Gastrointestinal Endoscopy Department at Al Rustaq Hospital, Al Batinah South Governorate, succeeded in diagnosing bleeding in one of the veins lining the gastric wall of a 9-year-old child.

Dr Tawfiq al Lawati, Senior Consultant Paediatrics Gastroenterology and Liver Diseases, said that occurrence of such bleeding is rare in children. He explained the patient was brought to hospital vomiting frank red blood, prompting the operating team to conduct the surgery.

The surgical team used specialised endoscopy of the stomach, injected the vein and installed advanced clips to prevent bleeding.

— ONA



The surgical team injected the vein and installed advanced clips to prevent bleeding. – ONA

Doctor from Oman bags coveted title

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

A doctor from the Sultanate of Oman has bagged coveted European Board of Aligner Orthodontics' (EBAO) Clinical Excellence recognition for his outstanding contributions in the chosen field.

Dr Siju George, a specialist orthodontist based in Muscat, with over 20 years of clinical experience, has been chosen for this elite honour for his dedication to the field of aligner orthodontics.

Dr George specialises in treating children with preventive and interceptive orthodontics, as well as adults with invisible and conventional orthodontics.

The award function was held during the 5th European Aligner Society Congress on March 2 in Valencia, Spain.

He has been a certified provider of Invisalign since 2011 and holds the status of Diamond Invisalign Provider since 2019.

Dr George is known for his expertise in applying a variety of treatments, including the Damon



Dr Siju George

System and other aesthetic treatments, to meet the individual needs of his patients.

In addition to his clinical work, Dr George collaborates closely with other dental specialties to tailor treatments for patients requiring multidisciplinary care. His commitment to excellence and patient care has earned him the respect and admiration of his colleagues and patients alike.

Dr George is associated with Wassan Specialty Dental Center, which is specialised in Orthodontics (Brackets and Aligners), Prosthodontics (Dental Implants), Endodontics (Root Canal Treatment), Cosmetic Dentistry (Whitening, Veneers, and Digital Smile Design), Child and Pediatric Dentistry, and General Dentistry in Al Khuwair.

Ramadhan charity mood set



The initiative will be supporting 100 low income families with food boxes from various generous donors

MUSCAT: An initiative started by late Syedzada Sakhawat Ali Shah Bukhari, a philanthropist who was one of the oldest expatriate in the Sultanate of Oman, is all set for a charity drive which is well in its fifth year. It will be supporting 100 low income families with food boxes from various generous donors.

Shaandar Bukhari, son of late Sakhawat Bukhari who himself is also a known philanthropist, stated that the plan is to provide basic food to those in need.

"We plan to provide these families with food boxes twice during the holy month of Ramadhan," he said.

"This year, we have bought ready-made and custom-made boxes containing food supplies consisting of rice, oil, pulses, spices, milk powder and tea," he added.

Ateeq ur Rehman Khan, Community Welfare Attaché at the Embassy of Pakistan, presided over the inaugural of this charity drive and conveyed his best wishes to all for supporting this initiative and for Shaandar Bukhari and team who are carrying forward his father's legacy.

"This is the least they can do as a CSR initiative to give back to the society and promote a healthy and harmonious atmosphere that will strengthen our society's fabric," Khan stated.

For this year's initiative as per last year, Mohammed Ali Fazal, a philanthropist and businessman hailing from Barka, supported in arranging the funds and Hafiz Ibrahim Ahmed along with Sameer Talib, Syed Abbas and Zeeshan Haider were leading the deliveries process.

'AI Apex Challenge' contributes to creating dynamic environment

AL MUSANNAH: The University of Technology and Applied Sciences —Al Musannah (UTAS-A) represented by the Department of Information Technology organised the AI Apex Challenge on March 7 under the patronage of Shaikh Ammar bin Salim bin Mohammed al Saadi, Member of Majlis Ash' shura, Representative of Wilayat Al Musannah.

The event shed light on the National Strategy for Education 2040 fostering academic excellence and technological innovation. Dr Nihad bint Abdullah al Zadjali, Deputy of the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs delivered the welcoming speech for the event which witnessed the participation of 15 educational institutions, both private and governmental universities



The event shed light on National Strategy for Education 2040 fostering excellence

and colleges.

Through the AI Apex Challenge, UTAS-A strives to be a dynamic convergence point for students and researchers across various disciplines. The AI Apex Challenge brought together the brightest minds in artificial intelligence. Students and professionals from various disciplines showcase their skills, solving real-world problems using AI technology

in addition to providing an excellent opportunity for networking and the exchange of experience and cutting-edge solutions in this field.

The AI Apex Challenge contributed to creating a dynamic environment where individuals can explore valuable insights and express their innovative ideas by focusing on themes related to Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality.

NOTICE

This is to inform all our clients & business partners that **Mr. Sayfullah Jewel Md Musa, Bangladeshi Passport # EB0019820** (whose photo appears above) is no more associated with **Al Naseem International Trad. Cont. L.L.C, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman**, with effect from the date of this publishing.

Any company or person dealing with him will be on their own risk. Any transaction initiated by him after the said date will not be honored by our company and we will not accept any claim of any sort. He has no more authorization to receive any payments and orders or to represent us in any manner.

Regards,
For **Al Naseem International Trad. Cont. L.L.C**
Managing Director

الجامعة الوطنية National University

Science & Technology للمعلوم والتكنولوجيا

Job vacancy

The National University of Science & Technology (NU) is a private higher education institution in Oman committed to fostering academic excellence, and technological transformation. The University operates at 5 campuses offering a diverse portfolio of programs in Engineering; Medicine & Health Sciences; Pharmacy; Maritime Studies and School of Foundation Studies.

The University has a vacancy in the position of **Admission Specialist** who will facilitate student inquiries and manage the admissions and registration processes.

Minimum Qualification: Bachelor's degree in science/management/engineering
Experience: Minimum of 2 years of experience in the Higher Education Domain

Proficiency in Arabic and English is a must. The successful candidate will be offered a financial package commensurate with his/her qualifications and experience.

Applications can be emailed to hrd-nu@nu.edu.om and should contain an updated resume, cover letter, and other supporting documents. The last date of receipt of application is **21st March 2024**.

Please visit our website: <https://nu.edu.om/careers/> for more information.

Registration open for Upgrade programme

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation has announced the opening of registration for the latest edition of Upgrade programme that transforms the best graduation projects into startups, until April 30.

The programme targets Omanis and residents of the Sultanate of Oman who are students of higher education institutions (university diploma and above).

For this edition, the programme is divided into two tracks: Emerging Technologies Track and Water Track.

Sultanate of Oman The Supreme Judicial Council Tender Announcement

The Supreme Judicial Council announces its desire to submit the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Vendor Grade	Tender Document Fee
09/2024	Renting a building for the court complex in Al Seeb	24/03/2024	01/04/2024	Excellent, First, Second, Third, Fourth	RO 25/-

The specifications shall be as follows:

- The location of the building should be clearly visible, easily accessible, and suitable for security, in an open site.
- It is preferable that the building is under construction or that the age of the building does not exceed five years.
- Provided that there is sufficient space for parking for employees and visitors.
- The ground floor should be open (not divided from the inside to make the courtrooms)
- The upper floors should be open or the apartment space is wide to facilitate the division of offices.
- The number of elevators in the building shall not be less than two.
- Providing air-conditioning devices for the building and infrastructure, such as a computer network and a telephone exchange.
- The owner of the building should be fully prepared and agree to make any modifications and additions (whether structural or technical) in the building in proportion to the nature of the work.
- The building area should be about 9000 square meters.
- Provide The original drawings (pdf + AutoCAD) of the building and all the guarantees related to building materials, devices and equipment are attached to the building, in addition to the civil defense certificate.
- The owner of the building shall undertake all kinds of maintenance during the contract period.

Where you can buy the more detailed tender documents electronically via the link below website:
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

Bidders must submit a letter of commitment to the bid, addressed to the Chairman of the Internal Tenders Committee of the Supreme Judicial Council, based on directives from the General Secretariat of the Tenders Council and the latest updates to the electronic bidding system. Based on Circular No. (1/2024) issued by the General Secretariat of the Tender Board.

1- For inquiries and clarifications on the tender:
Submit inquiries related to the project electronically through the website of the electronic tender system (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).

2- For inquiries and clarifications on the electronic bidding system:
Submit inquiries regarding technical support for the electronic bidding system via e-mail and the phone number shown below:
Phone: +968 24402200
Email: etenderhd@ita.gov.om



War rages in besieged Gaza on eve of Ramadhan



A Palestinian boy inspects the damage to a building hit in an Israeli strike in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. – AFP

GAZA: Deadly fighting raged on in Gaza on Sunday, with no truce in sight on the eve of the Muslim holy month of Ramadhan and a dire humanitarian crisis gripping the besieged Palestinian territory. Weeks of talks involving US, Qatari and Egyptian mediators have aimed for a six-week truce and the release of many of the about 100 captives Palestinian groups are still holding in return for prisoners held in Israeli jails, with no result so far. The widely shared target had been to halt the fighting by

the start of Ramadhan, which is expected to begin Monday depending on the first sighting of the crescent moon. Both sides have blamed each other for failing to reach a ceasefire deal so far, after Israel had demanded a full list of surviving captives, and Palestinians had called for Israel to pull out all its troops from Gaza. US President Joe Biden reiterated on Saturday that Israel has “a right to continue to pursue fighting groups”, but also stressed his growing impatience with

Israel’s right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Fighting and bombardment again rocked Gaza, where 81 bodies arrived overnight at barely functioning hospitals

As the civilian death toll has surged, Biden told broadcaster MSNBC Netanyahu “must pay more attention to the innocent

lives being lost as a consequence of the actions taken”. At this stage, said Biden, Netanyahu’s approach to the war was “hurting Israel more than helping Israel”. The comments came after Israeli protesters again took to the streets of Tel Aviv in growing anti-government rallies, joined by some of the desperate families and friends of the remaining captives. Biden also signalled he would be willing to speak directly to the Israeli people through an address to the Knesset legislature, but

without revealing any further plans or details. Israel’s withering bombardment and ground offensive have killed 31,045 people, mostly women and children, the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said on Sunday. It has also said at least 23 children have died from malnutrition and dehydration. Inside Gaza, displaced Palestinians were lining up at a truck carrying scarce drinking water, which they filled into jerrycans and plastic containers. Fighting and bombardment

again rocked Gaza, where 81 bodies arrived overnight at barely functioning hospitals, according to the health ministry. The Israeli troops were also engaged in “close-quarter combat” in the southern city of Khan Younis, where strikes had killed 17 Palestinians. The army has reported that 248 of its forces have died in Gaza. Israeli military spokesman Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari said Israel was preparing for “all possible operational scenarios” during Ramadhan. — AFP

US, Jordan airdrop more aid to Gaza, says US military

WASHINGTON: The United States and Jordan carried out a new airdrop of humanitarian aid to Gaza’s Palestinians on Sunday, parachuting in more than 11,500 meals, the US military said. The Israeli offensive in Gaza, which is supported by the United States, has displaced most of the enclave’s 2.3 million people and led to critical shortages of food, water and medicine. The US military’s Central Command said that the latest airdrop took place over northern Gaza and included rice, flour, pasta, and canned food. The United States has dropped about 135,000 meals in airdrops this month, according to Pentagon data. US President Joe Biden has also ordered the US military to build a temporary port system to bring aid into Gaza by sea. The Pentagon said on Friday it could take up to 60 days to be up and running, a timeline that aid groups say is too long given the imminent risk of famine. The US Army has dispatched a ship to send humanitarian aid to Gaza, Central Command



Packages fall towards northern Gaza, after being dropped from a military aircraft, as seen from Israel’s border. – Reuters

(CENTCOM) said on Sunday. The General Frank S. Besson left Joint Base Langley-Eustis in Virginia “less than 36 hours after President Biden announced the US would provide humanitarian assistance to Gaza by sea,” CENTCOM said in a statement. The logistics support vessel is “carrying the first equipment to establish a temporary pier to deliver vital humanitarian supplies,” it said. Biden’s announcement in his

State of the Union address on Thursday followed UN warnings of widespread famine among Gaza’s Palestinians five months after Israel launched its offensive in the narrow strip in response to an attack by Hamas militants. Gaza has no port infrastructure. The US initially plans to use Cyprus, which is offering a process for screening cargoes that will include Israel officials, removing the need for security checks in Gaza.

The US military’s Central Command said that the latest airdrop took place over northern Gaza and included rice, flour, pasta, and canned food

Most of Gaza’s people are now internally displaced, with severe bottlenecks in aid deliveries at land border checkpoints. Gaza has been under an Israeli navy blockade since 2007, when Palestinian groups took control of the enclave. There have been few direct sea arrivals since then. Efforts to secure a deal on a ceasefire between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza are ongoing, despite dimming hopes for a truce during the Muslim holy month of Ramadhan. Hamas blames Israel for the impasse in negotiations for a longer ceasefire and the release of 134 captives believed still held in Gaza — saying it refuses to give guarantees to end the war or pull its forces from the enclave. — Reuters

Israel visa freeze on aid workers compounds the enclave woes

TEL AVIV: Along with cumbersome border checks and relentless Israeli bombardment, the humanitarian response in war-ravaged Gaza faces a new challenge: a de facto freeze on visas for many international aid workers. Israeli authorities have stopped issuing new visas or renewing old ones for foreign employees of international NGOs, most of whom occupy senior positions, according to three senior humanitarian officials and a body representing more than

80 groups. 57 aid workers’ visas had expired since the war broke out on October 7, while 42 more “will expire in the coming few weeks”, said Faris Arouri, director of the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA), whose members work in the Palestinian territories. At least 50 requests for new visas — for staffers ramping up the response to worsening humanitarian conditions in Gaza and the West Bank — have gone nowhere, Arouri said. — AFP



Displaced Palestinians transport their belongings in Rafah. – AFP



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7

In brief

■ WASHINGTON



US MILITARY AIRLIFTS EMBASSY PERSONNEL FROM HAITI

The US military said on Sunday it has carried out an operation in Haiti to airlift non-essential embassy personnel from the country and added US forces bolster embassy security, as Caribbean nation reels under a state of emergency.

“This airlift of personnel into and out of the embassy is consistent with our standard practice for embassy security augmentation worldwide, and no Haitians were on board the military aircraft,” the US said.

Haiti entered a state of emergency after fighting escalated while Prime Minister Ariel Henry was in Nairobi seeking a deal for delayed UN-backed mission. — Reuters

■ DIONS



7 MISSING AFTER FLOODS SNARE CARS IN SOUTHERN FRANCE

French rescue workers were on Sunday searching for seven people, including two children, missing after violent storms swept the south of the country with most believed to have been swept away in cars on flooded bridges.

A helicopter flew over the village and the bursting waters of the Gardon while large numbers of firefighters engaged in search efforts, helped by drones and dogs.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said rescuers had carried out 35 operations as the storm swept across the Ardeche and Gard departments. All the vehicles swept away had been found. — AFP

■ LONDON



MAN ARRESTED FOR CRASHING CAR INTO BUCKINGHAM GATES

Officers arrested a man who crashed a car into the gates of London's Buckingham Palace, police said on Sunday.

The Metropolitan Police said the car “collided with the gates” of the royal residence at 02:30 GMT on Saturday.

Armed officers arrested the man at the scene on suspicion of criminal damage and he was taken to hospital. They added that no one was injured and enquiries were ongoing to establish the circumstances, the spokesperson added.

Security measures at the Palace are stringent, with the building constantly monitored by armed officers. — AFP

Russian shelling attacks towns in east Ukraine

KYIV: Russian shelling of towns in eastern Ukraine killed three people on Sunday while a Moscow strike on a residential building in the town of Myrnohrad wounded a dozen, Kyiv said.

Ukraine also said Moscow launched missile attacks on the northeastern Kharkiv region and sent attack drones across the centre and south of the country.

Russia, meanwhile, said one woman was killed in Ukrainian shelling of a border village.

Moscow's attack of Ukraine has dragged on for more than two years, with intense fighting in the east and regular attacks far from the frontline.

“Three people died as a result of today's shelling in the Donetsk region,” the head of the embattled region Vadym Filashkin said on social media.

He said rescuers pulled out two bodies “from under the rubble of a house” in the town of Dobropillya, which he said Russia attacked with Iranian-made Shahed drones at night.

A 66-year-old man was also killed in the frontline town of Chasiv Yar, Filashkin said.

Further south, a Russian night-time strike on the east Ukrainian town of Myrnohrad wounded a dozen people, Kyiv said.



People take part in a rally of families of Ukrainian prisoners of war, calling for the return of their relatives from Russian captivity, in Lviv, Ukraine. — Reuters

“In Myrnohrad, the number of victims of the missile attack has increased to 12 people,” Filashkin said.

Myrnohrad is a town in the Donetsk region around 40 kilometres from the frontline with Russian forces.

Local prosecutors earlier

said Russia struck a residential neighbourhood with three S-300 missiles around 3:00 am.

The prosecutor's office said the strike wounded a “16-year-old boy, five women and five men aged 34 to 95” and that 17 “high rise buildings” were damaged in explosions.

Officials published photographs of destroyed cars and blackened walls of typical Soviet-era housing blocks with debris outside.

Kyiv also said Russia launched more than two dozen of attack drones across central and southern regions, including the Kyiv region.

Moscow's attack of Ukraine has dragged on for more than two years, with intense fighting in the east and regular attacks far from the frontline.

“As a result of combat operations, 35 drones were shot down” over 10 regions, the air force said on social media.

It said the drones were downed over central and southern Ukraine.

Russia on Sunday said Ukrainian shelling killed a woman in the border village of Kulbaki, some 10 kilometres from Ukraine in the Kursk region.

“As a result of a direct hit from a shell, a residential building caught fire and a local woman died. Her husband had extensive burns and is now receiving qualified medical care,” Kursk governor Roman Starovoyt said.

Russian-installed official Denis Pushilin said Kyiv had shelled a bread factory at night in the city of Gorlovka, wounding four workers. — AFP

Sudan army general rules out truce unless RSF leaves civilian sites

DUBAI: There would be no truce in Sudan in the Islamic holy month of Ramadhan unless the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group leaves the homes and sites of civilians, senior Sudanese armed forces General Yasser al-Atta said on Sunday.

The statement follows an appeal by the United Nations Security Council for a truce during Ramadhan, which begins this week. The paramilitary RSF said it welcomed the ceasefire call.

Atta's statement, issued on the army's official Telegram channel, cited recent military advances by the army in Omdurman, part of Sudan's wider capital.

It said there could be no Ramadhan ceasefire unless the RSF complied with a commitment made in May last year at Saudi and US-mediated talks in Jeddah to withdraw from civilian homes and public facilities.

It also said there should be no role for Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the RSF leader commonly known as Hemedti, in Sudan's future politics or military.

War between Sudan's army and the RSF erupted in mid-April 2023 amid tensions over a plan for transition to civilian rule. The two factions staged a coup in 2021.

The army has been on the back foot militarily for much of the conflict. The RSF occupied large swathes of the capital in the first days of fighting.

The UN says nearly 25 million people - half Sudan's population - need aid, some 8 million have fled their homes and hunger is rising



A Sudanese woman, who fled the conflict in Murnei in Sudan's Darfur region, walks beside carts carrying her family belongings upon crossing the border between Sudan and Chad in Adre, Chad. — Reuters file photo

The statement follows an appeal by the United Nations Security Council for a truce during Ramadhan, which begins this week.

Sudan's UN ambassador told the UN security council that the head of the army and ruling council Abdel Fattah al-Burhan commended Guterres' appeal, but was wondering how it could be implemented.

The US special envoy to Sudan, Tom Perriello, will

visit a number of countries in Africa and the Middle East from March 11 to 25, the State Department said on Saturday.

It said the trip will demonstrate “the priority the Administration places on ending the Sudan conflict, meeting the immediate and

dire humanitarian needs of the Sudanese people, and charting a path toward civilian, democratic government.”

Perriello will visit Uganda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Sudan's foreign ministry, which is aligned with the armed forces, said that for any ceasefire appeal to be successful, the RSF would need to withdraw from areas including El Gezira and Sennar states and several cities in Darfur, the RSF's stronghold. — Reuters

Portuguese head to polls in tight general election

LISBON: Portuguese voters headed to the polls on Sunday, facing a choice between switching to a centre-right government or keeping the centre-left in power, although neither appears to have a path to an outright majority.

The far-right Chega party has been growing in clout and could play a kingmaker role in post-election talks. Issues dominating the campaign in western Europe's country include a crippling housing crisis, low wages, sagging healthcare and corruption, seen by many as endemic to the mainstream parties. The election, triggered by Socialist Prime Minister Antonio Costa's resignation amid a graft investigation four months ago, pits against each other the two centrist parties - the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) - that have alternated in power since the end of a fascist dictatorship five decades ago.

“I hope life gets better than what it is now,” 86-year-old Diamantino Vieira said as he waited to vote at a polling station in the northern city of Espinho, where Luis Montenegro, who is at the helm of the Democratic Alliance (AD) of right-leaning parties, also cast his ballot. The AD, which comprises Montenegro's PSD and two smaller conservative parties, leads in most opinion polls but could struggle to govern without Chega's support.

Eduardo Velosa, a 35-year-old bookseller in Lisbon, said the election could mark the beginning of a new political cycle. “Everyone should vote because we have many problems,” he added. — Reuters



A member of a local electoral commission assists a voter as people queue to vote, at a polling station during the general election in Lisbon, Portugal. — Reuters

Digital content in education should be used effectively



Sandhya Rao Mehta

The writer is Associate Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature Sultan Qaboos University

As more and more students look to digital content to gain knowledge, hone a skill or improve their language skills, the role of online platforms has gained importance and recognition. No longer are websites with a lot of text and few pictures attractive. Today’s audience and learners want rich content that is updated and made appropriate for different age groups. Educational content in the digital sphere has jumped phenomenally in the last decade. After the Covid-19 pandemic, it has tripled and the opportunities and options only look to rise. From being a \$38 billion industry, it is now a \$58 billion market, with projections that it will treble in the next few years. The reasons are many. With the rise in digital literacy, there is a market for upskilling and independent learning for learners across all fields. In fact, the nature of learning itself has changed and become more inclusive, with people from all generations engaged in learning new skills ranging from languages, culinary arts, to playing a musical instrument.

In fact, the educational sector is seeing an increase in learning platforms through digital games, social media, and online applications. This has meant that digital content creators in the field of education have to work hard to survive in the very competitive market of digital education. There are many reasons why digital education is popular today: it caters to individual learners who can proceed with their tasks at their own pace; there is almost infinite information which can be accessed at all times; there is a digital communication of learners who can share information from any part of the world; and finally, there is access to latest information as the content is constantly updated. Applications are not only used for academic purposes. They serve multiple related areas like taking notes, transcribing lectures into text, turning teacher notes to editable ones, and even recording apps. For all the rise in mobile technologies, digital learning has yet to be made popular among students in any formal way. Schools across the world are hesitant to train students in online platforms and parents tend to discourage its use,

viewing it as a waste of time. There may be many ways of learning mathematics, for example, but these platforms need to be used and encouraged as out-of-class learning opportunities, even in-class ones when appropriate. Another reason for the hesitation in using digital platforms institutionally is that teachers are not sufficiently trained in using such technology efficiently and effectively. This includes having the facilities to train and use such methods, including having good computers, listening devices and a reliable Internet connection. Managing screen time, feeling isolated from a learning community and being easily distracted are other challenges faced by learners who are using digital content. But these need to be overcome. Whether used by individuals or institutions, digital education is now a crucial part of our lives and it needs to be used effectively to maximise learning opportunities. The benefits far outweigh the fears and hesitations that obstruct a constructive use of emerging technologies and platforms.

FROM BEING A \$38 BILLION INDUSTRY, IT IS NOW A \$58 BILLION MARKET, WITH PROJECTIONS THAT IT WILL TREBLE IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS

English just ‘badly pronounced French’, says Paris academic

TOM BARFIELD

French linguist Bernard Cerquiglini would like to send a copy of his new book, “The English language doesn’t exist: it’s badly pronounced French”, to King Charles III. Rather than aiming to make the monarch sputter into his morning tea, “it’s a book written from a humorous perspective, it’s deliberately in bad faith, arrogant, chauvinistic and so on,” Cerquiglini said. Beneath the provocative title and humour, the prominent academic hopes to convey the cross-Channel linguistic tangle since the Norman conquest of 1066 — and how ridiculous French resistance to “anglicisms” can be. “You can also see my book as an homage to the English language, which has been able to adopt so many words... Viking, Danish, French, it’s astonishing,” Cerquiglini said. Norman French’s use by the new colonial aristocracy endowed English with words that at first glance might look homegrown, like “cabbage”, “lure” or “wage”, in the 150 years after William the Conqueror took the throne. But Cerquiglini is most interested by the 13th and 14th centuries, when French — by then a second language used in trade, administration and law — bled freely into English because “a job, fortunes in land or cash, upholding a contract, liberty or even one’s life, could depend on mastering” the tongue. Half of English’s borrowings from French took place from 1260-1400, producing words like “bachelor”, from the old French word “bachelier”, meaning a young noble not yet a knight. “Travel” is related to the modern French word for labour, “travail”, while “clock” stems from the French “cloche”, a bell struck to sound the hours before mechanical timepieces were invented. By the time Shakespeare came to write his plays in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, around “40 per cent of the 15,000 words in his works are of French origin”, Cerquiglini notes. These days the place of “Anglo-Saxon” words in modern French can stir defensiveness in Paris, often from the Academie Francaise, charged since 1635 with preserving the language in its “pure” form. “Language in France is official, of the state, national. And so of course we have an academy” whose members enjoy “a ridiculous outfit, a sword, a palace by the Seine” river in Paris, Cerquiglini said. In recent years the academy has railed against imports related to Covid-19, such as “cluster” or “testing”, as well as tech terms like “big data.” — AFP



Mohammed Anwar Al Balushi

The writer is academic lecturer and adviser

Let’s embrace our animal nature...

Expanding upon the discourse initiated by this article, it is imperative to delineate its themes more comprehensively. Firstly, it is paramount to clarify that the scope of this discussion does not encompass the recent Indian cinematic endeavour, ‘Animal,’ featuring Ranbir Kapoor, nor does it delve into the literary world of George Orwell’s seminal work, ‘Animal Farm,’ penned in England during the tumultuous year of 1945. Orwell’s allegorical narrative, ‘Animal Farm,’ serves as a poignant reflection on historical events leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent emergence of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union. Embedded within its pages lies a profound commentary on the perils of totalitarianism and the erosion of democratic ideals. Contemplating the ramifications of warfare and violence, epitomised by the grim adage, ‘A Man kills a Man,’ forces us to confront the very essence of humanity itself. What delineates our species from the rest of the animal kingdom? Is the act of taking another’s life truly indicative of our humanity? Indeed, our species is plagued by a myriad of moral failings — deceit, duplicity, and betrayal pervade our interpersonal relationships. Despite these inherent flaws, many continue to ascribe lofty titles such as ‘hero’ and ‘great man’ to themselves, juxtaposing their self-perceptions against the stark realities of their actions. Remarkably, the animal kingdom, in its simplicity, seems devoid of such Machiavellian machinations. Monkeys, lions, goats, dogs, cats, and snakes operate within a realm untouched by the complexities of deceit and political manoeuvring. Nevertheless, the assertion of human superiority over animals based solely on our cognitive faculties or dietary habits is a contentious proposition. If anything, our propensity for self-destructive behaviour — akin to metaphorically ‘eating our own’ — calls into question our purported dominance. The annals of history are replete with examples of human folly and



Palestinians mourn the death of a family member in the courtyard of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al Balah in the central Gaza Strip. – AFP

PRESENTLY, THE PLIGHT OF GAZA SERVES AS A POIGNANT REMINDER OF THE FRAGILITY OF HUMAN LIFE. THE STAGGERING DEATH TOLL, SURPASSING 30,000 ACCORDING TO GAZA’S HEALTH MINISTRY, UNDERSCORES THE HARROWING REALITY OF CONFLICT-RIDDEN REGIONS

carnage — from the trenches of World War I to the ravages of World War II, and the protracted conflicts in regions such as Iraq, Syria, and the ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine. The toll of human suffering is immeasurable, with millions perishing due to genocide, warfare, and the relentless march of ideology. Presently, the plight of Gaza serves as a poignant reminder of the fragility of human life. The staggering death toll, surpassing 30,000 according to Gaza’s health ministry, underscores the harrowing reality of conflict-ridden regions. Delving into the origins of humanity and our relationship with the animal kingdom, we confront age-old questions that have perplexed philosophers and theologians alike. What sets us apart from our animal

counterparts? How do we measure our superiority, and what lessons can we glean from the natural world? Olaf Stapledon’s speculative masterpiece, ‘Last and First Men,’ provides a thought-provoking narrative on the trajectory of human civilisation. Through the eyes of a distant descendant of humanity, we are compelled to contemplate the evolution of our species and the ramifications of our actions. Undeniably, human ingenuity has propelled us to unparalleled heights of technological advancement and societal progress. From infrastructure marvels like roads, bridges, and skyscrapers to groundbreaking innovations in Artificial Intelligence and medicine, our achievements are testament to our capacity for innovation. Yet, alongside these triumphs, we must acknowledge the darker facets of human nature — the exploitation of resources, the perpetuation of violence, and the relentless pursuit of power. How, then, can we reconcile these disparate aspects of our identity? In conclusion, the conundrum of defining humanity remains as elusive as ever. If we cannot articulate what it truly means to be human, perhaps we would do well to emulate the innocence and simplicity of our animal counterparts.

Opportunities are created not granted

Making a living is a difficult mission for a man as opportunities are limited and competitors are many. Whoever is having the skills and abilities, will get the job they are looking for. However, opportunities might take some time to come for some people. Thus, they have to wait patiently to catch the right opportunity at the right time. Likewise, one has to remember that good opportunities will never return. As it has been said that victory comes from finding opportunities in problems.

Many people seek new opportunities in their careers and personal lives for fulfillment, motivation or individual growth. However, opportunities do not knock when they come, so one has to build a door for them. Opportunities are never lost, but someone will take the one you missed. Just catch the fish before it lands in the hands of another person. Usually, opportunities do not come with their values stamped upon them. Everyone must be challenged.

In fact, a pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity, but an optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty. Accordingly, one shall spare no effort in looking for potential job opportunities. A person in need must approach organisations where you believe have jobs matching your qualifications, expertise, and ambitions too. He/she shall never undervalue any opportunity that gets your way; just try as it might be leading you to a better one.

Opportunities do not happen out of nothing; one has to create them. Similarly, you should be confident that the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. Dream of something and you will undoubtedly strive to make it come true. So as to get what you aim for, you have to believe in what Alexander Graham Bell said, “When one door closes, another opens. But, we often look so long and so regretfully on the closed door and we do not see the one which has opened for us.”



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YOU SHOULD
GET ADVANTAGE
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Those who are aiming high will always make the best of any opportunity that gets into their hands. Great achievements start with simple and humble challenges that one comes across. Remember that step by step, the ladder has to be climbed. Good opportunities might take longer time to come your way. Hence, look everywhere trying to catch the right opportunity. One should not lose hope as the best things in life usually happen when you are least expecting them!

You should get advantage of all opportunities that are offered to you and strive hard to make your own living. Fulfilling your dreams and ambitions sometimes would not happen without undergoing tough experiences and hard times. Therefore, always be patient and cautious until you get what you chased and strive for. Likewise, remember that all challenges are just opportunities.

In this regard, there are many young Omanis who stand as exemplary models for sacrifice, especially those working in the private sector. They have proved beyond doubt that they are very competent, hardworking and reliable resources. This has been proved by the increasing number of Omanis joining the private sector. It is really impressive that young Omanis are grabbing every possible opportunity in the market and fairly competing with each other. Instead, they are competing with other skillful and experienced expat colleagues.

It is just a matter of self-confidence and persistence that urges Omani youth not to underestimate any opportunity that allows them to serve the nation and achieve their dreams. Their belief in the noble mission of their professions helps them excel in what they do, regardless of the type of jobs they have. In fact, they are equally very much contributing in the nation-building march, each is playing a valuable role in this aspect.

The lesson learnt is that every twist and turn in life brings an opportunity to learn something new about yourself, your interests, your talents, and how to set and then achieve your goals.

RAMADHAN IN THE TENTS!



A woman looks on as displaced Palestinians prepare their tents for Ramadhan, amid the ongoing conflict in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, on Sunday. – Reuters

Trump and the global economic risks

We have entered a period of intensifying geopolitical rivalries and conflicts. Russia’s war on Ukraine is now in its third year; the Israel-Hamas conflict could still become a regional war; and the deepening cold war between the United States and China may yet turn hot sometime this decade.

If Donald Trump wins the US presidential election in November, the world will be even further destabilised. And yet, these risks have had only a limited effect on economies and markets so far. Might that soon change?

While the Russia-Ukraine war remains as brutal as ever, its global effects are likely to be more modest. The risks of direct Nato involvement or the use of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia are lower today than they were at earlier points in the war. Equally, while the war initially produced a spike in energy, food, fertiliser, and industrial-metal prices, even Europe — the most heavily affected region — has absorbed the shock with only a modest growth slowdown (or a stall in some cases), not the severe recession that many analysts feared. Russian hydrocarbons have been replaced with increased imports from the US and Middle Eastern countries. The impact on food prices has been reduced since Ukraine managed to reopen a Black Sea corridor for its grain exports.

The Israel-Hamas war has also had only a limited regional and global



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economic impact so far. True, Israel’s GDP contracted sharply in the fourth quarter of 2023 and will likely remain weak as long as the conflict continues. The economic damage to Gaza, obviously, is even more severe; and Egypt’s revenues from the Suez Canal — a major source of foreign-currency receipts — have fallen, owing to the Yemeni Ansar Allah attacks on freight shipping through the Red Sea. Nonetheless, if the conflict remains contained along its current lines, the global economic and market impact will remain limited, too.

After all, it would take a major regional escalation. A full-scale war between would drastically reduce energy production and exports from the Gulf, causing an energy-price spike akin to the global stagflationary shocks that followed the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Fortunately, the probability of a sharp regional escalation remains low for the time being.

While the cold war — or strategic competition — between America and China is likely to continue worsening over time, relations may not deteriorate much this year. US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, agreed to a tactical thaw late last year. China’s economic weaknesses and fragilities may lead it to be less confrontational with the US and the West.

At the same time, the West’s derisking, reshoring, friend-shoring, and restriction of trade in goods, services, capital, and technologies will not intensify much over the short term. As long as the strategic competition remains managed, the global economic impact will be modest.

The biggest geopolitical risk to growth and markets is the US election. But, here, it is important to recognise that Trump and Biden share some foreign-policy priorities. Democrats and Republicans alike are hawkish on China, and will remain so. Biden and Trump have both been strong supporters of Israel.



Trump and Biden share some foreign-policy priorities.

The biggest difference between Trump and Biden is on the issues of Nato, Europe, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Some worry that Trump would abandon Ukraine and let Russia win the war. But since he is likely to remain hawkish on China, he may worry about the signal it would send to let Russia take over Ukraine. Moreover, what Trump really wants is for European Nato members to spend more on defence. If they do that, he may recognise the alliance’s value as it pivots to Asia to deter China.

The biggest way a second Trump administration would affect markets is through its economic

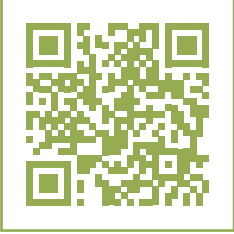
policies. There is no doubt that US protectionist policies would become more severe. Trump has already said he would impose a 10 per cent tariff on all imports coming to the US (the average tariff rate is currently about 2 per cent), and presumably even higher tariffs on imports from China. This would spark new trade wars, not only with strategic rivals like China, but also with America’s allies in Europe and Asia, such as Japan and South Korea.

A global trade war would reduce growth and increase inflation, making it the largest geopolitical risk that markets should consider in the months ahead. In this scenario, deglobalisation, decoupling, fragmentation, protectionism, the balkanisation of global supply chains, and de-dollarisation would become even greater risks to economic growth and financial markets.

Additional Trump-related stagflationary risks include his denialist attitude towards climate change and the likelihood that he would try to replace US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell with a more dovish, pliant figure. Finally, Trump’s fiscal policies would increase deficits that are already too high. Tax cuts that are poised to expire would be extended, as would higher spending on defence and entitlements.

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Dhofar edge Bahla to seal place in HM Cup final

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAR 10

Ten-time champions Dhofar secured the first slot in the His Majesty's Cup final, as they registered a tough 1-0 win over Bahla on Sunday in the former's home at Al Saada Sports Stadium. In a thrilling second leg semis match of the Coveted Cup, Oman national team player Motaz Saleh sealed the victory for his team Dhofar in the second half to end both games with 1-0 as the first match ended at a goalless draw on February 28 at Nizwa Sports Complex. Dhofar confirmed their 17th presence in the final and are much closer now to reach into their 11th title and make a record following to nine titles for Fanja.

Both teams began the match with very careful movements to avoid receiving an early goal. Qasim Said, Sultan al Marzooq, Awadh Ahmed, Motaz Saleh and beside other names from Dhofar did many movements but all their attempts were broken by the visitor's defence side. The first half ended with a goalless draw. In the second half, both coaches entered the game with a different tactics and scenarios as the winner will be decided in this crucial game. It was the hosts Dhofar

who began the game strongly. On the other side, Bahla's players made some dangerous movements as well through Ravel Bastos in the 70th minute as he tried to score but his strong header was saved from the Dhofar's goalie Mazin al Kaasbi. The main referee of the match, Nayef al Balushi, decided for a penalty for Salalah giants in the 80th minute and the penalty converted to a goal by Motaz Saleh to put his team ahead in the match for the first time. Bahla worked very hard to return into the match and Majid al Shukaili missed a golden opportunity to score the equaliser as he sent a strong ball inside the box but his ball went away from the target in the dying minutes. The main referee added six minutes as additional time for the second half but there were no any changes despite Bahla's scoring chances which were broken by Mazin al Kasbi to remain the result and end the match at 1-0 and Dhofar sealed an emphatic win and progressed to the final of the HM Cup.

The other match of the semis round between Al Nasr and Al Nahdha will be held on Monday at Al Saada Sports Stadium. The match will kick off at 10:00 pm. The winner of this match will meet Dhofar in the final match which will be decided later.



PSG held 2-2 at home by Reims after Enrique benches Mbappe

PARIS: Ligue 1 leaders Paris St Germain were held to a 2-2 home draw by Reims on Sunday after PSG boss Luis Enrique benched top scorer Kylian Mbappe, who played only the last 20 minutes. PSG extended their unbeaten run in Ligue 1 to 20 games but it was a third straight draw for the defending champions after Reims impressed despite an own goal. With both sides picking up a point, PSG extended their lead over second-placed Brest to 10 points while Reims are ninth with 35 points. "I can only wish Kylian Mbappe the best, the best things for the future," a smiling Luis Enrique said in a post-match interview as the manager continued to

dodge questions about the club's all-time top scorer. France skipper Mbappe has regularly played 90 minutes this season but has yet to play a full match for PSG since he informed the club last month that he would leave them as a free agent at the end of this season. "He is a very good player but even more a good person, and I wish him only the best of the best," added Luis Enrique. Reims shocked the league leaders by taking the lead in the seventh minute to silence the fans at the Parc des Princes after an error from PSG's Achraf Hakimi. The Morocco international dithered on the ball in the box before Oumar Diakite pinched



Kylian Mbappe greets supporters at the end of the match.— AFP

it from the full back near the goal line and teed up Marshall Munetsi for a simple tap-in. But PSG took little time to get the home crowd going again thanks to an own goal when a corner kick delivery into the box went in off defender Yunis Abdelhamid. Two minutes later, Goncalo Ramos gave PSG the lead when Lee Kang-in's floated ball into the box was not cleared and it fell kindly to the Portuguese forward, who fired home to make it 2-1. However, Reims made it 2-2 when Diakite took advantage of PSG's high line and beat the offside trap to latch on to Emmanuel Agbadou's superb pass to guide his shot

past Keylor Navas in goal. Enrique brought on both Mbappe and Ousmane Dembele — who tops the assists charts in the league with seven — in the 73rd minute as PSG looked for a winner. Mbappe, who has scored 21 league goals this season and scored twice four days ago in their Champions League victory at Real Sociedad, had a couple of shots on goal and even attempted an acrobatic bicycle kick late in the game. But his late introduction made no difference to the scoreline as Reims held on for a valuable point. (Reporting by Rohith Nair in Bengaluru; Editing by Louise Heavens and Pritha Sarkar)

OMAN SEIZES T20I SERIES VICTORY OVER PNG

MUSCAT: In a thrilling showdown at the Oman Cricket Academy ground in Al Amerat, the host nation, emerged triumphant in the three-match T20I series against Papua New Guinea (PNG), securing a 2-1 victory on Friday.

The visiting team, PNG, showcased their formidable skills, pushing Oman to their limits throughout the series.

Prior to the T20I face-off, both teams had battled to a 1-1 draw in the unofficial one-day international series, setting the stage for an intense showdown.

This series served as a valuable preparatory phase for Oman's cricketers, gearing up for significant upcoming challenges, notably their participation in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup, set to be co-hosted by West Indies and the USA in June.

Oman's head coach, Duleep Mendis, had the opportunity to closely assess his squad's



KHALID KAIL



BILAL KHAN



ASSADOLLAH VALLA



ZEESHAN MAQSOOD

capabilities, and he must be content with their performance in the three-match series with his experienced players coming good.

The decisive match on Friday saw Mendis' men clinching the series honours with a hard-fought four-wicket victory, following the teams' 1-1 tie.

Notably, each match in the series was won by the team chasing the target.

In the opener, Oman secured a three-wicket win, chasing down the target with just three balls to spare.

In the subsequent match, PNG

dominated, chasing down the target with eight wickets in hand and four balls to spare.

In the final match, Oman's Khalid Kail, making his T20I debut in the series, played a pivotal role in guiding the hosts to victory with an unbeaten 32 off 37 balls, as Oman successfully chased down PNG's target of 127 with an over to spare.

Veteran all-rounder Mehran Khan showcased his prowess in the T20 format, contributing significantly with both bat and ball, including a crucial 19 runs off 17 balls, and notable

performances throughout the series.

The series opener witnessed Oman's successful pursuit of a target of 136, led by Kashyap Prajapati's unbeaten half-century (57*) and skipper Zeeshan Maqsood's stellar all-round display that included 2/29 and a 36-ball 42.

Despite a strong comeback from PNG in the second match, Oman's performance in the series finale sealed their victory.

The second T20I saw PNG's Sese Bau (65* off 57 balls) and captain Assad Vala (51 off 41

balls) strike half-centuries as the tourists scored 148/2 with four balls to spare to chase down Oman's 145/7. Kail was the top-scorer for the hosts with 55 off 43 balls.

Kail emerged as a standout performer for Oman, finishing as the team's top-scorer with 88 runs, including a vital half-century. Pacer Bilal Khan, who will spearhead Oman's attack at the World Cup, claimed the maximum of four wickets in the series for 79 runs.

BRIEF SCORES:

First T20I: PNG 136/6 (Assad

Vala 40, Hiri Hiri 34, Charles Amini 24; Zeeshan Maqsood 2-29, Bilal Khan 2-31, Mehran Khan 1-26) lost to Oman 137/7 in 19.3 overs (Kashyap Prajapati 57*, Zeeshan Maqsood 42, Pratik Athavale 14; Chad Soper 3-26, John Kariko 2-18, Jack Gardner 1-26). MOM: Zeeshan Maqsood.

Second T20I: Oman 145/7 (Khalid Kail 55, Aqib Ilyas 28, Ayaan Khan 22*; Alei Nao 3-15, Assad Vala 2-24, Nosaina Pokana 2-32) lost to PNG 148/2 in 19.2 overs (Sese Bau 65*, Assad Vala 51, Tony Ura 17; Bilal Khan 1-19, Zeeshan Maqsood 1-25). MOM: Sese Bau.

Third T20I: PNG 127/6 (Hiri Hiri 53*, Assad Vala 22, Chad Soper 17*; Aqib Ilyas 2-20, Mehran Khan 1-19, Kaleemullah 1-27) lost to Oman 128/6 in 19 overs (Khalid Kail 32*, Mehran Khan 19, Aqib Ilyas 18; Kabua Morea 2-26, Sese Bau 1-9, Alei Nao 1-25). MOM: Khalid Kail.



Arsenal's Kai Havertz scores their second goal. – Reuters

Havertz's winner after howler by Ramsdale

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, MARCH 10

A late strike by Arsenal saw them to a 2-1 win against Brentford, keeping the top three teams tightly together at the head of the Premier League.

Arsenal manager, Mikel Arteta, delighted with Kai Havertz's 86th minute goal said: "If somebody told me after the first two or three months that the whole stadium would be singing his song with passion, that feeling, that chemistry, I would have found it hard to believe. That's what happens to good people. He's an exceptional player."

Arteta, who made it a point to embrace goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale at the end of the game after his glaring mistake enabled Brentford to equalise, said: "He is a person with huge personality and courage, very determined. Errors are part of football. It's how you react to it, especially for the keepers which is probably the most difficult position."

He added: "He did so in an amazing way. I'm not surprised because the whole team and the whole stadium was behind him. He earned that respect and admiration. We really wanted to win for him."



Arsenal's Gabriel celebrates after the match. – Reuters

Brentford manager, Thomas Frank felt Havertz should not have been on the pitch. He had been shown a yellow card for catching Kristoffer Ajer in the face and later took a dive in the penalty area but did not get a second booking which would have sent him off.

Frank said: "It's a clear, clear dive. That should have been a second yellow card and then a red card. Then he wouldn't have been able to score the winner. We are missing seven players and our captain goes off after 25 minutes, and we still put an unbelievable shift in."

Arsenal took the lead in the 19th minute from an excellent cross by Ben White after he had exchanged passes with Bukayo

Saka and Declan Rice rose to head the ball in after poor marking by Mads Roersley.

Despite Arsenal continuing to dominate possession Brentford achieved parity in the fourth minute of added time of the first half. It came after a harmless looking back-pass from Gabriel to Ramsdale who was too slow to clear the ball up-field and Yoane Wissa slid in to deflect Ramsdale's shot into the net.

Ramsdale made a superb save in the 56th minute when the managed to get his fingertips to a 40-yard drive by Ivan Toney and later did well to tip over a header from Nathan Collins. Later, a penalty appeal by Arsenal was turned down by VAR for a foul on Leandro Trossard.

Arsenal came close to scoring a second goal but Gabriel's header was stopped close to the line by Vitaly Janelt. And in the 74th minute Rice was unlucky to see his 20-yard curling shot hit the junction of the post and cross bar.

Finally, with 4 minutes of normal time remaining, the Gunners completed their eighth consecutive win in the Premier League when Havertz nodded in powerfully from a fine cross by White for his fourth goal in four successive matches.

New Zealand sense upset after cleaning out Australia top order

CHRISTCHURCH: New Zealand cleaned out the top four Australian batsmen on Sunday to leave the tourists on 77-4 and facing an uphill task in their chase of 279 to win the second Test in Christchurch.

The hosts set a demanding target for an Australian side struggling for runs on a ground where the highest successful fourth innings is 285-8, set by New Zealand against Sri Lanka last year.

Steve Smith, Marnus Labuschagne, Usman Khawaja and Cameron Green were all swiftly sent back to the Hagley Oval pavilion by New Zealand's seamers.

Matt Henry had figures of 2-37 with debutant Ben Sears on 2-22. Australia still need 202 runs.

At the close of play on day three, Mitchell Marsh was not-out 27 with Travis Head unbeaten on 17.

With two days remaining and no rain forecast, a draw is out of the equation as New Zealand battle for their first win over Australia since 2011.

The tourists are looking to sweep the series after dominating the first Test.

With the pitch flattening out and not providing as much movement as it did over the first



Australia's Mitchell Marsh plays a shot on day three of the second Test. – AFP

two days, New Zealand were well placed when they went to tea at 345-6 and eyeing an imposing 300-plus target.

But momentum swung back Australia's way as the New Zealand tail added just 27 and the last three wickets contributed only one run.

At the top of the order, there were half-centuries from Tom Latham, Kane Williamson, Rachin Ravindra and Daryl Mitchell, but no one was able to push on to three figures.

New Zealand resumed the day at 134-2 and quickly lost Latham, who added eight to his overnight 65 before he was caught behind off Pat Cummins.

Ravindra and Mitchell calmly put on 123 for the fourth wicket,

forcing Cummins to use seven bowlers before Josh Hazlewood made the breakthrough with Mitchell caught behind for 58.

Three overs later Ravindra on 82 feathered a Cummins delivery to give wicketkeeper Alex Carey his ninth catch in the Test.

The ball was moving away and it was an out-of-character shot from Ravindra, who had displayed considerable patience until then in his 153-ball innings.

Glenn Phillips and Henry added 16 apiece before Nathan Lyon removed Scott Kuggeleijn for 44 to end the innings.

Cummins was the most successful bowler with 4-62 while Lyon took 3-49.

Any momentum Australia gained quickly evaporated in the face of a torrid onslaught from the New Zealand attack in a spirited 24 overs before stumps.

Smith again went cheaply, trapped in front by Henry for nine while Henry also had Khawaja caught one-handed by Tim Southee at third slip for 11.

Sears had little time to fret when he had Labuschagne dropped in slips on six as he completed the job himself with a fine caught-and-bowled two balls later.

He backed that up by bowling first-Test century-maker Green for five. — AFP



New Zealand's Ben Sears (R) celebrates with team-mates. – AFP

Verstappen continues winning streak in Saudi Arabia

JEDDAH: Max Verstappen won the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix from pole position on Saturday as Red Bull continued their dominant start to the Formula One season with a second one-two in as many races.

Sergio Perez was runner-up under the Jeddah Corniche floodlights, last year's winner taking the chequered flag 13.643 seconds behind his triple world champion team mate who now has a 15 point lead in the standings.

Charles Leclerc finished third for Ferrari, also setting the fastest lap on the way to his first podium of the season, but rookie stand-in team mate Oliver Bearman stole the show — finishing seventh and voted Driver of the Day.

It was the first time Verstappen, winner of a record 19 of 22 races last year, has won the first two races of a season. He has also won 19 of the last 20.

“Overall, a fantastic weekend for the whole team and myself. I felt really good with the car and it was the same in the race,” Verstappen said.

The victory was a ninth in a row for Verstappen, dating back to Japan last September, and 56th of the 26-year-old Dutch driver's career.

It was also his 100th career podium while Red Bull's 115th win lifted them ahead of Williams in fourth place on the all-time lists.

“Max was clinical in his execution of that race,” said team boss Christian Horner.

Britain's Bearman, making his F1 race debut at 18 years and 305 days old, started in 11th place as Ferrari's youngest rookie and was a hugely impressive replacement for Spaniard Carlos Sainz, sidelined by appendicitis.

The youngest ever British Formula One driver was also the 66th driver since the start of the championship in 1950 to score on his debut.

Sainz, who underwent surgery on Friday, was back at the track — walking gingerly — to watch his stand-in's extraordinary day of glory.

“Today he's been

incredible,” said Leclerc of Bearman. “It's hugely impressive and I'm sure he's extremely proud. Everybody has noticed how talented he is and I'm sure it's just a matter of time before he's in F1.”

BRITISH DRIVERS

Oscar Piastri was fourth for McLaren, with Fernando Alonso fifth for Aston Martin and George Russell sixth for Mercedes and the first of four British drivers following each other across the line.

McLaren's Lando Norris was eighth and seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton ninth for Mercedes with Nico Hulkenberg taking the final point for last year's bottom team Haas.

The safety car was deployed on lap seven after Aston Martin's Lance Stroll hit the wall and then crashed into the barriers at turn 22.

The Canadian walked away unhurt as all but four drivers, including Norris and Hamilton, dived into the pits.

Norris, who was later cleared of a suspected jumped start off the grid, led when the new Aston Martin Vantage safety car returned to the pits on lap 9 but Verstappen was back in front by lap 13 and pulling away.

Perez was handed a five-second penalty for an unsafe release from his first pitstop and Haas's Kevin Magnussen collected a 10-second penalty for causing a collision with Williams' Alex Albon.

The Dane was later handed another 10 second penalty for leaving the track and gaining an advantage but his main role was to create a sufficient gap behind Hulkenberg for the German to be able to pit and still finish with a precious point.

Alpine's Pierre Gasly was told to pit and park on the opening lap due to a suspected gearbox issue, becoming the first retirement of the season after all 20 cars finished the opener in Bahrain a week earlier.

Red Bull now have 87 points with Ferrari on 49 and McLaren on 28. The next race is the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 24.

— Reuters



Max Verstappen celebrates winning the Saudi Arabian Formula One Grand Prix. — AFP

Djokovic claws out win in return to Indian Wells

INDIAN WELLS: Novak Djokovic struggled to a winning comeback at the ATP-WTA Indian Wells Masters five years after his last appearance, defeating Aleksandar Vukic 6-2, 5-7, 6-3 on Saturday.

World number one Djokovic, who had not played since losing an Australian Open semi-final to eventual champion Jannik Sinner in January, is chasing a sixth title at the desert venue in the season's first Masters event.

The 36-year-old Serb captured the 400th Masters-level victory of his career, joining Rafael Nadal as the only men to reach the 400 milestone at the elite level.

The 24-time Grand Slam champion has won his last 11 Masters matches, collecting titles last season in Cincinnati and

Paris Bercy.

Djokovic wasn't the only top player to be tested.

Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka saved four match points on the way to her 6-7 (2/7), 6-2, 7-6 (8/6) second-round victory over 64th-ranked Peyton Stearns, and US Open champion Coco Gauff rallied in the final set to beat France's Clara Burel 2-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

Djokovic admitted to some nerves in his first match since Melbourne. He claimed the opening set in 35 minutes with two service breaks but had to come from a break down in the third against his 69th-ranked Australian opponent.

Vukic held for 6-5 in the second set and landed a reflex service return winner on the line



Novak Djokovic (SRB) hits a shot in his second round match against Aleksandar Vukic. — USA TODAY Sports

to square the match at a set each.

In the third, top seed Djokovic broke for a 3-2 edge and closed out victory with a second break after just over two

hours, notching his 51st win at the tournament where he first competed in 2006.

“I was a bit nervous at the beginning, you know, whether

I'm going to start off well,” Djokovic said. “I had not played a match in more than five weeks.

“He made me produce some really important points in games in order to prevail. “I'm glad that I was pushed, which is important.”

Women's world number two Sabalenka had an even tougher time against Stearns. After saving four match points she needed four of her own and rolled an ankle along the way.

“This match definitely goes into the book of craziest and the best matches of my career,” she said.

“She played incredible tennis. I kept telling myself, ‘Stay there, fight for every point. You never know what's going to happen.

“This is the match for crazy comebacks - and I did it,” added

Sabalenka, who next faces Emma Raducanu who advanced when Dayana Yastremska retired while trailing 4-0 because of illness.

Third seeded Gauff, who turns 20 next Wednesday, trailed her 47th-ranked French opponent 4-0 and 5-2 in the deciding third set, but was able to power back and throw it into a tie-breaker.

She paved the way by breaking Burel to love as the Frenchwoman served for victory leading 5-4.

Mental fight

In the tie-breaker, Gauff advanced on her third match point as Burel swung wide.

“I'm happy with the mental fight,” Gauff said. “It was not my best tennis... but it's how you show up on your worst days, not your best ones, that counts.”

— AFP



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Pact signed to revolutionise school transportation in Oman

MUSCAT: The General-Secretariat of the Tender Board, gathered in Muscat yesterday for their annual meeting, has inked a milestone unified framework agreement with the Karwa Automotive Company.

The purpose is to revolutionise school transportation by replacing outdated buses with customised technical specifications tailored to the needs of various government agencies. Engineer Badr bin Salem al Maamari, the Secretary-General of the Tender Board, emphasised the significance of this framework contract, aimed at overhauling the school bus fleet over the next five years.

This all-encompassing agreement will cater to government entities such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology, among others.

The contract's flexibility ensures that the needs of each agency are met promptly. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education has also joined forces with the Karwa Automotive Company and the Development Bank to embark on an ambitious project aiming at replacing 5,000 school buses over a span of five years.

Commencing in 2024, the initiative targets the gradual replacement of aging school buses, starting with those manufactured



General-Secretariat of the Tender Board and Karwa Motors official pose for a photo after the signing ceremony.

between 1980 and 1997.

Notably, the Development Bank is extending interest-free financing options to bus owners to facilitate the transition. This support includes funding up to a maximum of RO 22,500 per bus owner, with a repayment period of up to eight years. Additionally, for those not meeting the interest-free financing criteria, the bank offers financing at a nominal rate of 3 per cent.

Majid bin Saeed al Bahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Administrative and Financial Affairs, outlined the meticulous planning behind the project, detailing the annual replacement of 1,000 school buses over five years.

The focus is on enhancing safety and security features through advanced technologies

and driver training programmes.

Dr Ibrahim bin Ali al Balushi, CEO of Karwa Automotive Company, hailed the agreements as a significant step towards bolstering Oman's bus manufacturing industry. By localising production and introducing cutting-edge technologies, the company aims to elevate the standards of the school transportation system, ensuring a safe and efficient mode of travel for students.

The initiatives discussed at the annual meeting, held under the auspices of Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, signify a transformative shift in the realm of school transportation in Oman. With a focus on innovation, safety, and sustainability, these agreements pave the way for a brighter future

for education and mobility in the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

MoCIIP signs agreement to establish smart cloud call centre

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) yesterday signed an agreement to establish, operate and manage an integrated Cloud Call Centre with the Labbik Telecom Services to improve services offered to the Ministry's customers.

The step will help speed up the process of responding to reports in the call centre and enhance operational efficiency through the use of modern technology.



The agreement was signed by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, and Khalid bin Saleh al Husaini, founder and CEO of Labbik Telecom Services. — ONA

Work on RO 520m polysilicon project to launch at Sohar Freezone today

MUSCAT: Sohar Freezone in Al Batinah North Governorate will celebrate today, March 11, 2024, the laying of the foundation stone of a first-ever polysilicon manufacturing project with an investment of around RO 520 million. The strategically significant project is expected to launch during 2025.

The project, which will built on a 160,000 square metre site, will produce high-quality metallic silicon with an annual capacity of 100,000 tonnes. Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, will preside over the foundation laying ceremony in the presence of key figures representing the investors, Sohar Port and Freezone, and other stakeholders.

The production process takes place by pouring liquid metallic silicon from the furnace into the moulds, and then cooling it through moulds or continuous casting. After cooling, Silicon metal grinding and packing for global export.

The project reflects the desire to continue the efforts initiated by the Sultanate of Oman to encourage local investment and attract foreign investments, as a translation of the



Sohar Freezone has begun attracting a growing number of strategic industrial and manufacturing related investments.

objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

Dr Saleh bin Saeed Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, said the industrial sector is of great importance as it is considered a locomotive that achieves comprehensive development in the Sultanate of Oman, while also catalysing the growth of other interlinked economic sectors.

In a statement to ONA, he said the project is being developed by United Solar Company in line with the government's Industrial Strategy 2040, which seeks to drive investments in certain industries,

notably tech and knowledge-based industries that rely on research, development and advanced technology. The Strategy also seeks to enhance the deployment of high technologies and harness innovation to foster the growth of knowledge-based industries in a move to position Oman as a leading player in the industrial and technological arena.

In addition, the project will enhance the position of Sohar Port and Freezone by generating ample cargo volumes, both incoming and outgoing. It will also meet the growing demand for silicon metal in the markets of Asia, Europe and North America.



Invitation From Bank Muscat (S.A.O.G)

For an Extraordinary General Meeting and an Annual Ordinary General Meeting of the Shareholders of the Bank

Bank Muscat "SAOG" takes pleasure in inviting all its shareholders to an Extraordinary General Meeting and an Annual Ordinary General Meeting at 3:00 p.m. on Tuesday, 26th March, 2024. The meetings will be convened via the electronic platform to hold the general meetings, which can be accessed via Muscat Clearing and Depository's website (www.mcd.om). If the quorum for this meeting is not met, a second meeting will be convened at 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday, 27th March, 2024 through the same electronic platform. The meeting will consider and decide on the following Agenda:

First: The Agenda for the Extraordinary General Meeting

- To approve the renewal of Euro Medium Term Note (EMTN) Programme (the **EMTN Programme**) (as approved at the Extraordinary General Meeting held by the Bank on (25th March, 2019) (including the capital markets Alternative Programmes) and the issue of international Additional Tier 1 instruments which will not be listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (**AT1 Instruments**) by the Bank for maintaining compliance with regulatory capital requirements applicable to the Bank, up to an aggregate amount of US\$ 2 billion. Issuances under the EMTN Programme and the AT1 Instruments involve issuing negotiable bonds and instruments in regional and international markets through public subscription or private placements. The issuances made pursuant to the EMTN Programme and the AT1 Instruments could be in different currencies, in different amounts on different dates and with varying terms of subscription. The total outstanding bonds following the renewal of the EMTN Programme and AT1 Instruments in aggregate shall not exceed US \$ 2 billion.
- To authorize the Board of Directors of the Bank or such person or persons as the Board of Directors may delegate or authorize from time to time, to determine and approve the terms of any issuance under the EMTN Programme, the establishment of and any issuances under any Alternative Programme and any AT1 Instrument including the amounts (including final issue amounts), currencies, all relevant dates, disclosure standards, methods and forms of distribution, listing and ratings requirements, engagement with the Central Bank of Oman, other government entities and regulatory authorities on behalf of the Bank, appointment of advisers and service providers, legal and regulatory documentation and the detailed terms and conditions of, each issuance under the EMTN Programme, any Alternative Programme and any AT1 Instrument, "as applicable".
- To approve that the Board of Directors of the Bank or its authorized representative or delegates shall, from time to time, determine the period of presentation of, the bonds to be issued under the EMTN Programme, any issuance under any Alternative Programme and the AT1 Instruments, "as applicable" and the times of issuance thereof provided that all issuances under the EMTN Programme, any Alternative Programme and the AT1 Instruments, "as applicable" are offered and fully subscribed within a period not exceeding five years from the date of the Extraordinary General Meeting approval of the shareholders of the Bank. Each issue under the EMTN Programme, any Alternative Programme and any AT1 Instrument, "as applicable" shall be available for subscription on obtaining the required approvals of the regulatory authorities.

Second: The Agenda for the Annual Ordinary General Meeting:

- To consider and approve the Report of the Board of Directors for the financial year ended 31st December, 2023.
- To consider and approve the Report on Corporate Governance for the financial year ended 31st December, 2023.

- To consider the Auditor's Report and approval of the Balance Sheet and Profit and Loss Accounts for the financial year ended 31st December, 2023.
- To consider the report of the Shari'a Supervisory Board of Meethaq, the Islamic Banking window, for the financial year ended 31st December, 2023.
- To consider and approve the recommendation to distribute cash dividends of 15.5 Baiza for each share for the financial year ended 31st December, 2023.
- To consider and ratify the sitting fees for the Board of Directors and its committees' meetings for the financial year ended 31st December, 2023 and approve sitting fees for the current financial year.
- To consider and approve the Board of Directors' remuneration of RO. 300,000 (Three hundred thousand Omani Rial) for the financial year ended 31st December, 2023.
- To consider and approve the Related Party Transactions that will be concluded during the financial year ending 31st December, 2024.
- To consider and approve the board assessment report for financial year ended 31st December 2023 by an independent party.
- To appoint the statutory auditors for the Bank and the external independent Sharia auditors for Meethaq, the Islamic banking window of the Bank, for the financial year ending 31st December, 2024 and set their fees, subject to the applicable regulatory approvals.
- To elect one person to fill a vacant seat in the Bank's Board of Directors. Those who wish to nominate themselves for the election of the Board of Directors, whether shareholders or not, must fill-in the nomination forms prepared by the Capital Market Authority (CMA) for such purpose. Nomination forms are available at the CMA's site and the Head Office of the Bank. The completed and signed nomination forms and the supporting identity documents, an ID copy for an Omani National or a copy of a Resident Card and a copy of a passport for a non-Omani, must be submitted to the Secretariat of the Board of Directors at the Head Office of the Bank **not later than 2:00 pm on Thursday, 21st March, 2024.**

In accordance with the regulations for holding general meeting using modern technology issued by the CMA, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- A Juristic person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person to attend the general meeting and vote on its behalf through the electronic platform, provided that this natural person has an investor number at Muscat Clearing and Depository Company.
- Voting on any of the agenda items begins no more than three days before the date of the meeting until the end of the voting process during the meeting, in the event that the shareholder's shareholding balance is changed by increased or decreased, the voting process will be canceled, and he/she will have to vote again on the day of the meeting.

For any clarifications in respect of the agenda of the above meeting, please contact
Ms. Samiya Salim Al Busaidi, Tel. No. (24767197), E-mail (SamiaS@bankmuscat.com).

Khalid bin Mustahail Al Mashani
Chairman of the Board of Directors

Ernst & Young
Statutory Auditors of the Bank and External Independent Sharia Auditors for Meethaq, the Islamic Banking Window of the bank

Legal Advisor

Enjoy 5 years peace of mind with Ford’s Season of Generosity campaign

MUSCAT: Ford Oman is offering customers the perfect benefit this Ramadhan season. Own a brand new Ford and get 5 years service, 5 years manufacturer’s warranty, 5 years/100,000 kms roadside assistance and 1 year registration. The campaign is valid from March 10, 2024 up to May 9, 2024. (Conditions apply. For details visit a Ford showroom.)

Sharing his thoughts on Ford Oman’s Season of Generosity campaign, a representative from Arabian Car Marketing Company said, “Now owning a Ford will become even more delightful than before. It is indeed a remarkable range of benefits that Ford Oman is offering which are designed to encourage customers to enjoy 5 years of a rewarding ownership period. I’m sure this campaign will draw a lot of interest among Ford enthusiasts in Oman.”

Ford has an impressive range of vehicles in Oman. They include the Territory, Everest 4x4 SUV and Taurus sedan.

The value for money 5-seater Territory SUV combines a modern and striking look, ample cabin space,



and confident driving with smart, safe technologies and empowering experiences for young professionals and small, busy families. Ford Territory’s interior provides a convenient and sophisticated experience space that caters to a wide range of customer needs, whether for work, play, or family.

The horizontal coast-to-coast design evokes a connecting space in an embracing gesture, creating openness and spaciousness.

Comfort and function are maximised through Premium Leather seats, with a 10-way adjustable ergonomic driver’s seat.

Ford Territory is equipped

with an EcoBoost 1.8L engine, delivering 320Nm torque using moderate fuel and impressive power up to 190 hp. The vehicle is equipped with Seven-Speed automatic transmission providing smooth, responsive gear shifting.

With capability at its core, the Ford Everest is engineered to take on tough tasks with ease. Inside, premium levels of craftsmanship have created a quiet and refined seats for up to seven, while class-leading technology and safety features offer driver and passengers comfort and peace of mind on every journey.

Powering the Ford Everest is 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.

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.

The Ford Taurus blends seamless connectivity, high on-road performance, and

an entirely new sleek modern design.

Boasting an all-new design, on an entirely different platform, the all-new Taurus still exudes refinement with numerous premium touches.

Featuring 19-inch, 10-spoke polished alloy wheels, a new flatter streamlined hood, and a power-deployable door handle, Taurus is sleeker in its stance. Under the bonnet, Ford’s proven 2.0-litre EcoBoost engine powers the all-new Taurus, mated to an eight-speed automatic transmission, producing 232 Hp and 388 Nm of torque.

Offered with front-wheel drive and three driving modes — Normal, Sport, and Eco — the Blue Oval’s flagship sedan enjoys an impressive economy of as much as 15.3 km/L.

In Oman, Ford vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co. LLC. Please log on to www.fordoman.com, or www.facebook.com/FordOman or www.youtube.com/FordOmanChannel or www.instagram.com/ford_oman for the latest news, test drive requests and the latest press releases.

Sohar Aluminium appoints business development and strategy executive

MUSCAT: Sohar Aluminium announced the appointment of Matt Liddy (pictured) as its Business Development and Strategy Executive.



Matt is a professional with more than 30 years of experience in business development, smelters projects development, systems improvement & support, carbon operations, industrial minerals and brings ample experience in research and development, strategies and frameworks development, negotiation, and project studies.

Prior to joining Sohar Aluminium, he was a Board Member of Sohar Aluminium and worked as Vice President Business Development in Rio Tinto Aluminium in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Brisbane, Australia. Before that, he has worked as a General Manager Smelter Project Development in Australia, Malaysia, and UAE.

Academically, Matt has a Bachelor of Engineering, Chemical, from the University of Queensland, Australia and holds other professional certificates from Georgetown University and Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Bank Muscat’s Investment Banking receives local and global recognition

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat’s Investment Banking Department continues its successful track record of providing innovative and customised financial structure and financial advisory solutions to suit the unique requirements of customers.

The Investment Banking Division had another stellar year in 2023, providing financial advisory and fundraising services for a number of prestigious customers including Government Related Entities (GREs) as well as large corporate entities.

Hence, during the year, the bank won several awards from renowned publications including Best Project Finance Bank (Asian Banking & Finance), Best Corporate and Investment Bank (Asian Banking & Finance), Best Local Investment Bank (EMEA Finance) and Best Investment Bank in Oman (Arab Federation of Capital Markets).

During 2023, Bank Muscat successfully advised on multiple transactions which resulted in aggregate fundraising and public offering in excess of \$ 2 billion.

Some of these transactions included marquee transactions such as the OQ Gas Networks Initial Public Offering (IPO) which was the largest ever IPO in Oman.

These transactions spanned across various sectors including energy, insurance, financial services, gas transportation network, utilities, real estate, and electricity among others.

Providing insights into the success of the Investment Banking business, Khalifa bin Abdullah al Hatmi (pictured),



Deputy General Manager, Investment Banking and Capital Markets, Bank Muscat, noted: “I am very pleased with the results achieved by the bank in 2023, which demonstrates the bank’s commitment to its values of ‘Better Everyday’ in all its engagements and aims to deliver contemporary, unique, and customer-centric solutions to all its customers.

Bank Muscat has invested heavily in building knowledge and capabilities within financial advisory and fundraising advisory services domain which has enabled the Investment Banking Department to successfully conclude a number of prestigious transactions over the past year.

We strive to be the leading investment banking franchise in the country, and our achievements over the previous year are testimony to the team’s hard work and commitment to our customers.”

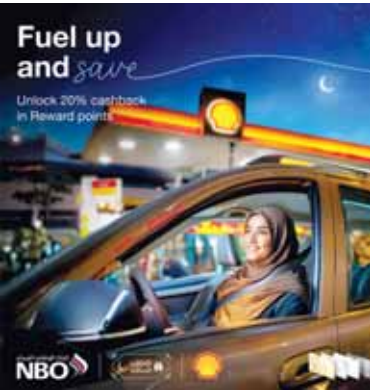
Al Hatmi added: “The bank is synonymous with innovation, customer-centricity, agility, and trustworthiness and it always aims to deliver dynamic solutions which suit the unique requirements of our customers. We are committed to delivering on these principles consistently.”

NBO unveils exciting 20% cashback offer

MUSCAT: Creating value for its loyal customers, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has announced an exclusive 20% cashback offer in collaboration with Shell Oman Marketing Company (Shell Service stations).

This exciting offer is extended to the first 2,000 customers in the form of reward points on transactions at Shell service stations throughout March and April.

The cashback will be awarded based on the first transaction



made by each customer per month using their credit card.

This limited-time promotion

aims to provide valuable benefits to its customers and enhance their overall banking experience.

Maha al Raisi, Assistant General Manager and Head of Retail Products at NBO, said: “We at National Bank of Oman, aim to enhance the banking experience for our credit cardholders by providing valuable rewards.

Through our partnership with Shell Service Stations, we seek to provide our customers not only with cashback benefits but also a hassle-free and rewarding

experience when they fuel up at Shell Service Stations. It’s a testament to NBO’s dedication to making banking more enriching and customer-centric.

We strongly encourage our customers to take advantage of this exclusive offer by fuelling up, saving, and enjoying the exceptional benefits we’ve specifically tailored for you.”

Throughout the promotional period, a total of 4,000 customers will be entitled to receive reward points.

St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort introduces executive leadership lineup

MUSCAT: Stirring excitement in the tourism sector, The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort has unveiled its Executive Committee poised to launch the first St Regis in Oman into a realm of opulence and service excellence.

Each member of the Executive Committee contributes unique insights to elevate The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort. Together, the ensemble possesses a wealth of international luxury hospitality experience from distinguished hospitality brands and locations around the world.

At the helm is General Manager, **Tarek Mourad**, a passionate hotelier with a lineage of experience opening hotels around the globe, including Raffles Hotels & Resorts in Istanbul, Four Seasons Hotel in Baku, and Four Seasons Hotel in Istanbul at Sultanahmet.

Hotel Manager, **Jason Xuereb**, with 16 years of experience managing GCC luxury hotels, combines dynamic leadership with a deep understanding of the region and the changing demands of today’s luxury guests.

Director of Rooms, **Yomi Egbele**, with his rich 15-year legacy at Marriott International that includes several luxury brand



Joining the Executive Committee team are hoteliers each recognised as top professionals in the hospitality market.

pre-openings such as St Regis, The Ritz-Carlton, and EDITION, excels in crafting luxurious and welcoming guest experiences

Bringing a wealth of culinary experience from the world of business and entertainment, and from his time at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, The Ritz-Carlton and Raffles, along with pre-openings including the EDITION London, Director of Food and Beverage, **Deniz Kinali** is tasked with leading

the resort’s collection of dining venues as well as delivering elevated customer experiences.

Maha Bourachi, a strategic sales and marketing powerhouse, has been named the Director of Sales and Marketing at The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort.

With a career spanning across 20 years in luxury hotels in the Middle East, from Istanbul to Muscat, Director of Revenue Management, **Orhan Karadeniz** brings a wealth

of experience and exceptional market knowledge.

In this new leadership role, he is tasked with driving the resort towards financial success and operational excellence.

Haitham Loulak, a seasoned financial leader with a decade of experience at The St Regis Doha, has been appointed as the Director of Finance.

A seasoned Multi-Property Director of Engineering, **Taha Mokhtar** joined Marriott in 2002 and since then has played a pivotal role in openings and supporting hotels in Egypt, Ghana and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Khalid al Abri, Director of Human Resources, brings over 20 years of HR experience from the United States and Oman. With an expertise in localisation and career development, Al Abri excels in creating cultures of excellence and inclusivity.

Director of Residences, **Asma Hamila**, brings 23 years of international experience in hospitality, including key leadership roles at various Marriott brands, and has recently excelled as Hotel Manager at Marriott Executive Apartments during major international events in Doha.



Oman airports see 21.6% increase in passenger traffic

MUSCAT: The number of passengers passing through the airports of the Sultanate of Oman increased by 21.6 per cent by the end of January 2024, to 1,417,442, from 1,165,556 passengers at the end of January 2023.

As per the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the number of passengers travelling through Muscat International Airport reached 1,290,552 passengers by the end of January, an increase of 22.7 per cent.

The number of flights operated during this period increased by 16 per cent to 8,756 flights, including 8,090 international flights, and 666 domestic flights.

Indian nationals topped the number of passengers using Muscat International Airport, with 86,234 arriving and 82,807 departing passengers, followed by Bangladesh nationals with 16,388 arriving and 24,877 departing passengers, Pakistan nationals with 23,529 arriving and 25,303 departing passengers.

The number of passengers travelling through Salalah Airport was 120,506, an increase of 14 per cent from 809 flights (an increase of 4.5 per cent).

The number of international flights through Salalah Airport was 423 with 58,657 passengers, while the number of domestic flights was 386 with 61,849 passengers.

The number of passengers travelling through Sohar Airport was 1,140 (32 flights), while the number of passengers travelling through Duqm Airport was 5,370 passengers (54 flights).

Amidst boycotts of international brands, local Omani coffee shops report surge in sales

HIBBA AL KINDI

MUSCAT, MARCH 10

Local coffee shops in Oman are reporting a surge in sales amidst the ongoing boycotts against international coffee brands in response to the Gaza genocide.

While speaking to the *Observer*, several coffee shop-owners shared that there has been an increase in sales since the beginning of the boycott.

In Muscat, Kadm Café reported an increase of 10-15 per cent in sales, while Musannah-based ARTe Café, reported an increase of 7-10 per cent. Nizwa-based coffee shop Grano reported a jump of more than 20 per cent in sales.

Co-founder of Kadm Café, Amjad al Jadidi, attributed the increase to the “redistribution of traffic”, as consumers shied away from global brands in favour of local ones.

ARTe Café owner, Saif al Haddabi, described the change as a much-awaited consumer shift that will boost local businesses.

“We’ve observed a shift in



In Muscat, Kadm Café reported an increase of 10-15 per cent in sales.

consumer mentality, something we’ve been hoping for a long time, and thankfully, the boycott has accelerated this.”

According to Al Haddabi, the boycotts have led consumers to recognise the value of local businesses.

“The boycott diverted consumers from global chains, that offer poor quality coffee at high prices, to Omani brands, and made them witness firsthand the



staggering difference in the price and quality.”

Similarly, Grano Café CEO Ahmed al Harrasi agreed that the boycott has boosted support for local products. In addition, consumers have also begun questioning the use of certain international ingredients used in local fare.

“During the boycott period, we noticed a change in consumer strategy,” he noted, adding, “This

prompted us to directly change the supported products. For example, for our mojito drink, we no longer use (a certain international beverage brand), and instead opt to use another soda brand.”

Other coffee shop owners also shared that they had to replace certain products, subject to international boycotts, from their stores.

While the boycott has inevitably boosted local businesses, it has also resulted in several job cuts.

A recent report by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry indicated that boycotted companies are resorting to cost-cutting measures like reducing work hours and branch closures.

Last week, Reuters reported that Kuwait-based Alshaya Group, a leading international franchise operator, is planning to cut over 2,000 jobs in the region due to the impact of the boycott.

Earlier, in November, MySpace Oman, a local Omani coffee brand, published a social media post inviting baristas from boycotted companies to work for them.

Omar al Malki, Branch Manager of MySpace, explained the reasoning behind this.

“When the boycott happened, we noticed that many Omani staff members were working in these chains, and they were let go from their positions; we understood that although the issue was global, these individuals would suffer financially.”

Accordingly, the company hired two full time baristas who were formerly employed at outlets targeted by the boycott.

Furthermore, MySpace Oman hopes to showcase lesser-known Omani brands, by platforming talented Omani staff, said Al Malki.

Although the majority of brands attributed the increase in their sales to the boycott, it is also worth mentioning that the boycott period coincided with the winter season in Oman, which is also the peak tourism season.

Amjad al Jadidi, co-founder of Kadm café, located in Bait Muzna Gallery, noted that they usually experience higher sales during winter due to the pleasant weather.

OETC completes second phase of IMS external surveillance audit

MUSCAT: As part of its commitment to enhancing performance quality, continuous development, and improvement in all areas and operations, the Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) recently successfully completed the second phase of External Surveillance Audit for the Integrated Management System (IMS).

This certificate encompasses six different systems, including Quality Management, Environmental Management, Occupational Health and Safety Management, Asset Management, Business Continuity Management (Security and Resilience), and the Information Security Management Systems.

The second phase of external audit, conducted by the auditors of Société Générale de Surveillance “SGS Oman”, covered Quality Management, Business Continuity Management, and Information Security Management systems. These efforts aim to enhance efficiency and elevate performance across the OETC’s various operations. The company has obtained numerous quality certificates from the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), and it is the first in Oman to receive the quality certificate for the Integrated Management System (IMS) for six integrated systems.

Samira bint Salim al Mughairiyah, Communication and Sustainability



Manager, highlighted the significant efforts directed by OETC in various fields to ensure continuous development and growth, particularly regarding the quality of services provided by the company

She emphasised OETC’s commitment to applying the best international standards in electricity transmission, enhancing reliable and sustainable power supply to support all sectors and contribute to the developmental journey. Al Mughairiyah added, “There is no doubt that everyone across different sectors is in continuous competition to achieve the desired growth and elevate quality and productivity. This contributes to achieving developmental milestones and targets. At OETC, we believe in the necessity of adapting to developments in various sectors and the importance of interacting with others to gain more experiences, exchange knowledge and skills.”

Visit Oman partners with travel distribution platform TBO.com

MUSCAT: Visit Oman announced a partnership with TBO.com, which is one of the leading global travel distribution platforms, with presence in over 100 countries.

This collaboration aims to propel Omani tourism suppliers and SMEs onto the global stage by facilitating seamless bookings for international travellers.

The announcement coincides with Oman’s role as the Official Host Country for ITB Berlin, further highlighting the nation’s commitment to fast-tracking the digitisation of local tourism content.

By joining forces with TBO.com, Visit Oman further empowers Omani businesses to reach a broader audience, contributing to the growth of the tourism sector.

In addition, TBO.com welcomes new avenues for growth by connecting over 147,000 travel buyers operating on its platform.

“Our partnership with TBO.com marks a significant step forward in our efforts to attract tourists from a wider range of international markets and



empower Omani businesses and SMEs to showcase their unique offerings to a vast global audience,” said Shabib al Maamari, Managing Director of Visit Oman.

TBO.com has expressed excitement about its partnership with Visit Oman. “This collaboration aligns with our goal to empower all players within the travel ecosystem and create seamless, joyful travel experiences for global travellers.

We believe this partnership will unlock new growth opportunities for Omani tourism suppliers and SMEs, while simultaneously expanding our offerings and providing our network with access to this unique and captivating destination,” said Gaurav Bhatnagar, Co-Founder and Joint Managing Director, TBO Tek Limited.

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT, MARCH 10

Majan Glass, the country’s leading glass container manufacturer majority-owned by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), says its financial performance during 2023 was negatively impacted by a number of factors, chief among them the international boycott of prominent carbonated beverages over the Gaza War, as well as shipping surcharges linked to the Red Sea crisis.

Suhar-based Majan Glass, a publicly-traded company listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), posted a 6% dip in total revenue for the year to RO 12.26 million, down from RO 13.02 million in 2022. The company incurred a post-tax loss of RO 748K, which was however lower than the previous year’s net loss of RO 985K.

“Due to the ongoing tragic geo-political situation in the Levant Area, the sales of internationally recognised carbonated bottles dropped across Oman and some GCC/Levant markets in the last quarter,” Majan Glass’s Chairman said in the Directors’ Report for



Roughly half of Majan Glass’s 2023 revenue came from exports to international markets.

fiscal 2023.

“The increase in inflation and corresponding dip in demand driven by higher interest rates, also impacted some markets in Europe in the last quarter of the year. The company faced cost headwinds at the beginning of the year mainly driven by higher raw material prices which were largely passed on to the customers in terms of price increases with different timelines depending upon contractual arrangements,” the Chairman further stated.

While the “continued boycott of international carbonated beverages in some markets continues to be worrisome”, higher shipping surcharges stemming from disruptions in the Red Sea — an important shipping route for time-bound exports to the western world — is also a “cause of concern”, the Chairman noted.

According to the company, the boycott of international beverage brands intensified during the fourth quarter of the year,

ostensibly in the wake of Israel’s brutal assault on Gaza’s besieged Palestinian population.

Compounding matters for the company, which depends on the timely transportation of its goods by sea to markets in the wider Middle East and Europe, were disruptions of Israeli-allied maritime shipping mounted by the Ansar Allah movement in Yemen in solidarity with the Palestinians.

While sales to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states accounted for roughly a third of Majan Glass’s total revenue in 2023, exports further afield into Europe and beyond represented around half of gross earnings for the year.

Domestic sales accounted for a modest 15% share of total revenue. A local market leader in the manufacture and sale of empty glass containers, Majan Glass is 75.26% owned by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the state-owned integrated sovereign wealth fund. To help reduce input costs, the company says it is working to source its main raw materials locally to boost its competitiveness in the region.

When disguised unemployment can stifle economic progress



QASIM AL MAASHANI

The author is the head of business section at Oman Daily Observer

The phenomenon of disguised unemployment stands as a significant obstacle to Oman's economic progress. It manifests in three primary forms: underemployment, overstaffing, and skills mismatch. Underemployment occurs when individuals possess qualifications exceeding the demands of their jobs, leading to an underutilisation of their potential

and a sense of underachievement. Overstaffing, on the other hand, results in inefficiencies and hinders productivity as organisations employ more personnel than necessary to fulfil their tasks effectively. Finally, skills mismatch arises when individuals are placed in roles that don't align with their skillsets, leading to frustration, decreased engagement, and ultimately, diminished efficiency. Several factors contribute to disguised unemployment in Oman. The rapid expansion of the public sector in recent decades has created a surplus of workers in specific fields, exceeding the actual needs and leading to underemployment. Meanwhile, the private sector, often facing limitations such as access to capital and operating in a competitive global market, struggles to absorb the growing workforce at the same pace. This creates a significant imbalance in the labour market. Furthermore, a potential gap

exists between the skills the current education system fosters and the evolving needs of the modern labour market. While the education system might prioritise theoretical knowledge and traditional skillsets, the private sector often demands specific technical skills, adaptability, and a problem-solving mindset. This mismatch can leave graduates unprepared for the demands of the workforce, hindering their employment prospects and contributing to disguised unemployment. Cultural preferences also play a role in the prevalence of disguised unemployment. Societal values in some parts of Oman might favour public sector jobs due to perceived stability and benefits, even if these positions don't fully utilise an individual's potential. This can lead to a situation where individuals prioritise employment security over career advancement and personal fulfilment, even if it results in

underemployment. The consequences of disguised unemployment are far-reaching, impacting both the economic and social well-being of Oman. Reduced productivity due to underemployment and skills mismatch hinders economic output and limits the nation's potential for growth. Overstaffing burdens businesses with unnecessary costs, diminishing their competitiveness in a globalised market. On the social front, the lack of suitable employment opportunities, particularly for young professionals, can lead to demotivation, frustration, and a sense of discontent. This hinders the nation's human capital development and its ability to attract and retain skilled talent. A stifled and underutilised workforce ultimately weakens Oman's position in the global arena. The Omani government is actively tackling this challenge through various initiatives aimed

at creating a more efficient and dynamic labour market. Economic diversification plans are under way to foster the development of new industries beyond the traditional reliance on oil and gas. These plans aim to create new employment opportunities in diverse sectors, such as tourism, technology, and renewable energy. Investments in education and training programmes are also crucial. By equipping the workforce with the skills and knowledge needed in a rapidly evolving landscape, the government aims to bridge the existing skills gap and prepare graduates for the demands of the private sector. Additionally, the government provides financial and regulatory incentives to encourage private sector growth and job creation. This can involve tax breaks, subsidies, and streamlined regulations, making it easier for businesses to operate and expand, leading to increased job creation.

Promoting entrepreneurship is another important aspect of the government's strategy. By fostering a culture of innovation and self-employment, the government aims to generate new avenues for employment and encourage individuals to leverage their skills and talents to create their own opportunities. The road ahead necessitates a sustained and multi-pronged approach. Continued investment in education and training, coupled with fostering a dynamic and attractive private sector, remains crucial for long-term success. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of existing initiatives, with necessary adaptations based on collected data and changing market demands, are essential to create a more efficient and effective labour market in Oman. Only through such concerted efforts can Oman unlock its full potential and empower its workforce to thrive in a globally competitive environment.

Developing Oman's supply chain ecosystem: The protagonist of the education sector



UMAIR WAQAS

The author is Programme Chair Supply Chain Management and Logistics, College of Business, University of Buraimi, Oman

Oman's burgeoning economy hinges on the efficiency and resilience of its supply chain to support its diverse industries. As the nation progresses towards economic diversification and global competitiveness, driven by its strategic geographical location, advanced infrastructure, and prioritisation of the education sector, which stands as a cornerstone of Oman Vision 2040, it becomes evident that the role of education in nurturing talent and fostering innovation within supply chain management is paramount. An exemplary integration is observed between the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and higher education institutions, aligning students' skill sets with the evolving demands of the supply chain industry. Collaborations among stakeholders provide a platform for curriculum development and training programmes tailored to supply chain management, logistics, and digitalisation needs. Moreover, higher education institutions in Oman play a significant role in research and innovation, fostering the development of new technologies and methodologies to enhance supply chain efficiency and sustainability. Collaborative efforts among the ministry, higher education institutions, and industry stakeholders drive research

initiatives, catalysing structural changes through Industry 4.0 technologies like artificial intelligence and blockchain, revolutionising traditional supply chain practices. Oman's universities now offer specialised supply chain programmes, aligned with globally recognised institutions and certifications, contributing to the development of a skilled workforce capable of driving operational excellence and innovation within the country's supply chain ecosystem. In 2023, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology made a substantial investment of RO 30 million specifically in artificial intelligence (AI), resulting in an increase in local setups. Higher education institutions play a crucial role here, as confirmed by the ministry's collaboration with local academic institutions to bolster domestic artificial intelligence capabilities. Consequently, there is a concerted effort with universities to develop artificial intelligence algorithms, reflecting a strong integration between educational institutions and ministries, bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. In conclusion, Oman's journey towards establishing a robust and efficient supply chain management hub relies significantly on the contributions of its education institutions. By focusing on industry-led education, fostering innovation, and promoting sustainability, Oman's higher education institutions are at the forefront of shaping the future of supply chain management, not only within Oman but also across the GCC. As a determined nation continues to prioritise economic diversification and globalisation, investing in human capital through education initiatives remains essential for sustained growth and prosperity.

Gold and silver steal the limelight



OLE S HANSEN

The author is the Head of Commodities Strategy at Saxo Bank.

The commodities sector has started March on a firm footing with broad gains supporting the best weekly performance since October, and while obesity drugs and AI continue to receive a lot of bandwidth in the stock market, this week in commodities belonged to precious metals, not least gold which was heading for its strongest two-week gain since July, in the process racing higher to reach a record high. Supported by a softer dollar and lower Treasury yields after Federal Reserve Chair Powell said the central bank is "not far" from having the confidence to ease policy and that rate cuts can and will begin this year. As mentioned, these remarks helped send the dollar broadly lower — and risk appetite broadly higher — not least the Japanese yen, which got multiple boosts, which, apart from a dovish Powell included a strong wage growth print which raised chances the Bank of Japan will finally exit the world's last remaining negative-rates regime and hike rates, perhaps as soon as this month. The USD-JPY retreated and may have further to go as speculators reduce exposure to one of the most favourite short trades in the past three years. All sectors except energy, traded higher on the week



DESPITE ALL THE FOCUS ON GOLD, SILVER WAS THE TOP PERFORMER AFTER ENJOYING A TRIFECTA OF SUPPORT FROM RISING GOLD AND COPPER PRICES AS WELL AS THE SOFTER DOLLAR.

with broad gains seeing the Bloomberg Commodity Total Return Index trade back in black on the year. Despite all the focus on gold, silver was the top performer after enjoying a trifecta of support from rising gold and copper prices as well as the softer dollar. The Bloomberg Softs index remains the best-performing sector this year, despite emerging signs of profit-taking, not least cocoa which has witnessed a parabolic surge amid a substantial drop in supply from West Africa.

However, with buying pressure from producers closing short positions, put in place to hedge exposure, and starting to ease, it was coffee and cotton's turn to shine. Arabica coffee futures enjoyed the tailwind from surging Robusta coffee futures which surged to a new high on mounting concerns over weak supplies from Vietnam and Indonesia, two of the world's top three producers. **Gold focus shifts** Last week, the gold market showed signs of strength, trading flat on the month despite seeing US Treasury yields shoot higher after US data strength earlier in the month, which further delayed the expected timing of the first and depth of subsequent US rate cuts. Towards the end of February, the yellow metal was increasingly behaving like a coiled spring, wanting to trade higher despite yield headwinds but held back by worries about continued data strength. However, after an in-line US PCE core deflator print was followed by a weaker ISM manufacturing print, buyers threw caution to the wind.

They rushed into the yellow with momentum buying giving it additional strength once a key band of resistance, which is now support, between \$2,075 and \$2,088 was broken. **Crude can't get a break** Crude oil's current lack of momentum continues to support our view that Brent and WTI will likely remain rangebound for a while longer, an outlook that was given additional credence this past week with WTI trading softer following several failed attempts to break above 80 while Brent has yet to challenge key resistance near \$85. Overall, we see the risk of a breakout skewed slightly to the upside with focus on disruption risks in the Middle East and prolonged Opec+ production restraint. Biggest short-term challenge potentially being the risk of selling from hedge funds scaling back exposure amid profit-taking in response to crude oil's current struggle to break higher. Especially after their net long in Brent and WTI futures reached a four-month high at 430,000 contracts or 430 million barrels.

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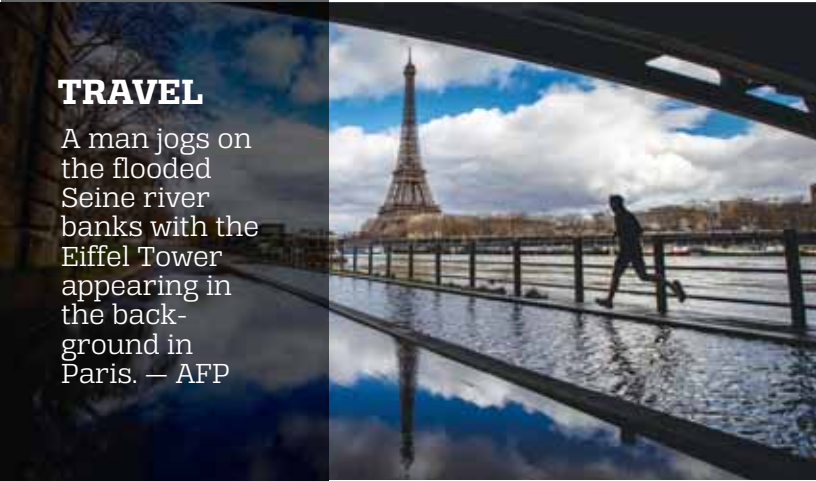


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TRAVEL

A man jogs on the flooded Seine river banks with the Eiffel Tower appearing in the background in Paris. — AFP



BEAUTY

Czech Republic Krystyna Pyszkova (L) and Lebanese Yasmina Zaytoun attend in the grand finale of the 71st Miss World pageant at Jio World Convention Centre, in Mumbai. — AFP



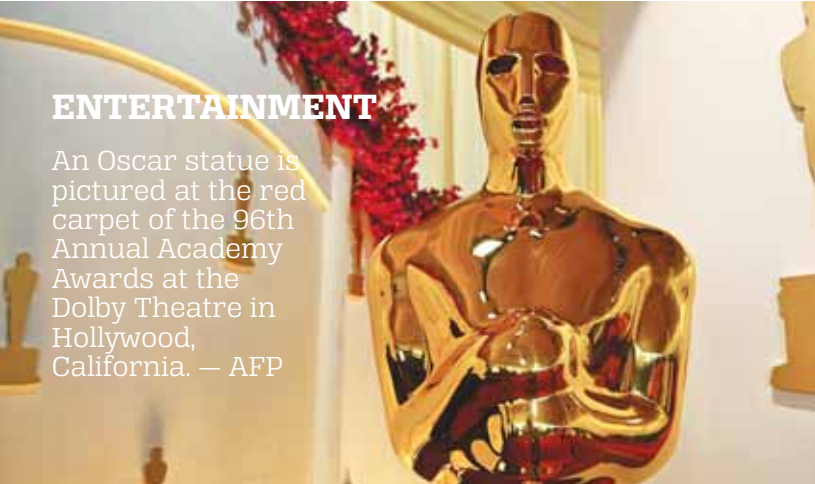
CULTURE

A Thai artist wearing traditional mask poses before the start of a popular "Khon" theatrical dance performance showcasing the story of the epic Ramayana, at the 17th century Wat Chaiwatthanaram temple in the ancient capital of Ayutthaya, a UNESCO world heritage site north of Bangkok. — AFP



MUSIC

Colombian singer Karol G performs onstage at the National Stadium in San Jose, Costa Rica. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

An Oscar statue is pictured at the red carpet of the 96th Annual Academy Awards at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

art & life

MONDAY | MARCH 11, 2024 | SHAABAN 30, 1445 AH OMAN OBSERVER www.omanobserver.om features@omanobserver.om

CELEBRATING OMAN'S RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH FLORAL ARTISTRY

Renowned international floral consultant, Phubast Chesdmethée, stepped into the limelight at 'Bloom Oman 2024', where the harmonious fusion of floral artistry and Oman's cultural richness took centre stage. Phubast shares his insights on the event's highlights, emphasising the unique combination of flower art and local materials in Oman... **P20**



ART

Van Gogh, Kandinsky stars of the show at Dutch art fair

A RARE EARLY WORK by Vincent van Gogh and a record-selling masterpiece by Wassily Kandinsky will be up for sale when one of the world's largest art fairs opens its doors this weekend. From Saturday until March 14, visitors at The European Art Fair, better known as TEFAF, will be able to marvel at a treasure trove of paintings, sculptures and jewellery — all up for sale — in the southern Dutch city of Maastricht. Among the many pieces up for grabs, which include famous names like Manet,

Rubens and Rodin, the undisputed stars of the show are two paintings: Van Gogh's "Tete de paysanne a la coiffe blanche" and Kandinsky's "Murnau mit Kirche II". Also known as "Head of an Old Peasant Woman with a White Cap", Van Gogh's early work, painted around 1884 has been put up for sale by M.S. Rau, one of the largest and best known galleries in the United States, based in New Orleans. "Van Gogh is such an incredibly timeless artist," said the gallery's vice president of acquisitions Rebecca Rau. "There is bound to be a lot of interest" from buyers, she said. Van Gogh made the painting while living with his parents in the southern Dutch town of Nuenen the year before he painted his other famous work from the period, the 1885 "The Potato Eaters". M.S. Rau's president Bill Rau said the asking price for the painting — which goes on sale on Thursday — was 4.5 million euros (\$4.9 million). "We knew that this would be a star at the fair," Rau said. "But we had no idea how excited people would get just walking by."

RECORD KANDINSKY Painted in 1910, Kandinsky's "Murnau

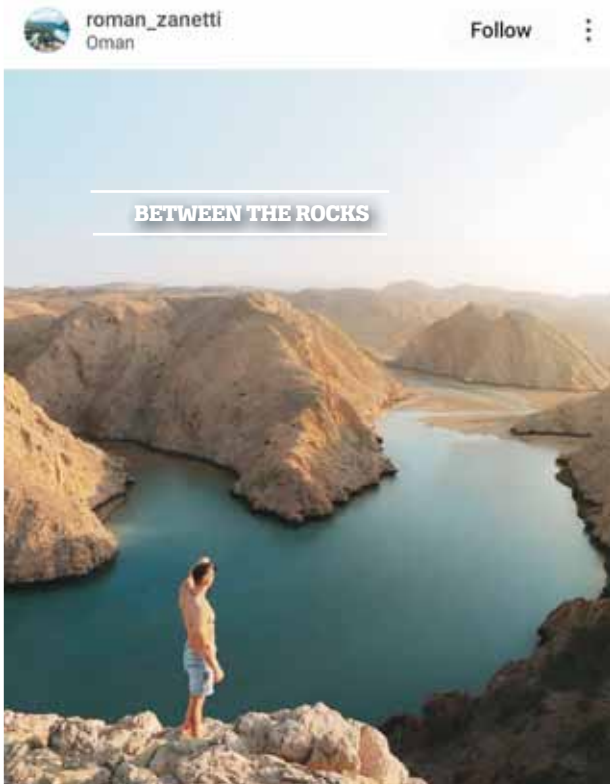


with Church 2" was sold by Sotheby's in London last year for a record \$45 million. A colourful vision of the German village of Murnau with its church spire stretched like the peaks of the Bavarian Alps, heralded the Russian master's move towards abstraction. The oil work once adorned the dining room of the Jewish couple Johanna

Margarethe Stern and Siegbert Stern, founders of a textile company. At the heart of Berlin's cultural life in the 1920s, counting Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and Albert Einstein in their circle, they built up a collection of around 100 paintings and drawings. Siegbert Stern died of natural causes in 1935.

His wife fled to the Netherlands but died in Auschwitz in May 1944 after being captured by the Nazis. "Murnau Mit Kirche II" was identified only a decade ago in a museum in the Dutch city of Eindhoven, where it had been since 1951. It was returned in 2022 to the heirs of the Sterns, whose 13 survivors shared the proceeds of the sale. It was bought on auction from Sotheby's last year by art dealer Robert Landau, *The New York Times* reported last month. Landau told the paper he invested around \$50 million dollars in the painting, which was the most expensive Kandinsky ever sold. The asking price at TEFAF was not disclosed. "I can't put a value on it. We won't know the price until it happens," Landau told *The New York Times*. But both paintings may not be seen by the public for the foreseeable future, should they land in the hands of a buyer for a private collection. But said Rebecca Rau: "The way I feel about most of the masterpieces, many of which are in this building at the moment, is eventually they will likely end up in a museum." — **AFP**

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RISING FROM THE CHALLENGES OF AMATEUR FILM-MAKING

BY KHALID AL BALUSHI
@khalid_albalushi94

Fatima's experience in amateur cinema has been captivating, as her connection with it dates back to her childhood, influenced by her parents' weekly movie outings. Her fascination with cinema grew as it led her to theatres, where she enjoyed Indian and cowboy films, where she immersed herself in the moments, often moved to tears by the unfolding events, whether sad or happy, because of her sensitive feelings as a child.

Passionate about the arts, Fatima shared, "I studied theatre and music at the Music and Theater Institute and joined the cinema club in Casablanca. This club played a significant role in solidifying my relationship with cinema."

Her life became intertwined with both theatre and cinema, engaging in work, viewing, and discussing films. She ventured into studying film history and direction, achieving notable success in film analysis and providing a strong impetus towards realising her cherished dream. She remarked, "My journey into the world of cinema began with my love for details and auditory and visual innovations. My first participation was in the 'Amateur Cinema Festival', transitioning from being a viewer to an active film producer. In this context, my experience evolved thanks to advice and guidance from professionals and fellow participants who encouraged me to deepen my knowledge and enhance my skills in the world of cinema."

Fatima's passion continuously drove her to produce advanced cinematic works. Regarding her artistic choices, she stated, "Most of my film ideas were embodied in collaboration with my husband, who wrote the screenplay. This partnership posed many challenges, especially in terms of communicating ideas and expressing diverse visions. He is a story writer, and I am in charge of producing."

Addressing challenges, she said, "I faced significant challenges dealing with limited resources, both in terms of technological advancements and financial resources. Technical challenges, such as directing in outdoor locations with the involvement of animals and children, were part of my journey. Despite the difficulties, I enjoyed the challenges, which catalysed innovation and enriched my experience."

Regarding the importance of story versus artistic aspects, Fatima emphasised, "I believe that the story and technical aspects must integrate into cinematic work to achieve a unique and impactful experience. The story forms the soul and heart, while technical aspects contribute to better detailing and expression of the planned idea."

Concerning actors, who often were non-professionals, she said, "My experience in theatre helped me effectively manage the actors since artistic direction is a significant part of my work."

Reflecting on challenges in amateur cinema, she stated, "I consider the challenges not as obstacles but as opportunities to develop my experience and create more impactful and high-quality works."

In terms of recognition and awards, Fatima revealed her dedication to putting all her energy into producing quality artistic works. While acknowledging the importance of awards as a significant form of appreciation, she emphasised that they are not the ultimate goal, considering the diverse perspectives of evaluation committees. She enjoys the art experience professionally.

Addressing negative criticism, Fatima said, "I accepted it with an open heart and learned from my mistakes." She stressed the importance of constructive criticism, considering it essential for personal and artistic development.

She highlighted the importance of culture and continuity in developing the skills of amateur cinema enthusiasts, emphasising that film narratives should not be direct but should stimulate thinking and leave room for viewers to draw their conclusions.



CULTURE

'Sacred job': Iraq Kurds digitise books to save threatened culture

HUDDLED IN THE BACK of a van, Rebin Pishtiwani carefully scans one yellowed page after another, as part of his mission to digitise historic Kurdish books at risk of disappearing.

Seen as the world's largest stateless people, the Kurds are an ethnic group of between 25 and 35 million mostly spread across modern day Iraq, Iran, Syria and Türkiye.

In Iraq, the Kurds are a sizeable minority who have been persecuted, with thousands killed under the rule of late dictator Saddam Hussein and many of their historic documents lost or destroyed.

"Preserving the culture and history of Kurdistan is a sacred job," said Pishtiwani, perusing volumes and manuscripts from Dohuk city's public library in Iraq's northern autonomous Kurdistan region.

"We aim to digitise old books that are rare and vulnerable, so they don't vanish," the 23-year-old added, a torn memoir of a Kurdish teacher published in 1960 in hand.

In Iraq, the Kurdish language was mostly marginalised until the Kurds' autonomous region in the north won greater freedom after Saddam Hussein's defeat in the 1990-1991 Gulf War.

After the US-led invasion of 2003 toppled the dictator, remaining documents were scattered among libraries and universities or held in private collections.

Once a week, Pishtiwani and his two colleagues journey in their small white van from the regional capital Arbil to other Kurdish towns and cities to find "rare and old" books.

They seek texts that offer insights into Kurdish life, spanning centuries and dialects.

- 'PROPERTY OF ALL KURDS' -

In Dohuk's library, the archiving team scours the wooden bookshelves for hidden gems.

With the help of the library's manager, they carefully gather an assortment of more than 35 books of poetry, politics, language and history, written in several Kurdish dialects and some in Arabic.

Pishtiwani holds up a book of old Kurdish folk stories named after 16th-century Kurdish princess Xanzad, before gently flipping through the fragile pages of another religious volume, tracing the calligraphy with his fingers.

Back in the van, equipped with two devices connected to a screen,

the small team starts the hours-long scanning process before returning the books to the library.

In the absence of an online archive, the Kurdistan Center for Arts and Culture, a non-profit founded by the nephew of regional president Nechirvan Barzani, launched the digitisation project in July.

They hope to make the texts available to the public for free on the KCAC's new website in April.

More than 950 items have been archived so far, including a collection of manuscripts from the Kurdish Baban principality in today's Sulaimaniyah region that dates back to the 1800s.

"The aim is to provide primary sources for Kurdish readers and researchers," KCAC executive director Mohammed Fatih said.

"This archive will be the property of all Kurds to use and to help advance our understanding of ourselves."

- OUT OF PRINT -

Dohuk library manager Masoud Khalid gave the KCAC team access to the manuscripts and documents gathering dust on its shelves, but the team was unable to secure permission from the owners of some of the documents to digitise them immediately.

"We have books that were printed a long time ago — their owners or writers passed away — and publishing houses will not reprint them," Khalid said.

Digitising the collection means that "if we want to open an electronic library, our books will be ready", the 55-year-old added.

Hana Kaki Hirane, imam at a mosque in the town of Hiran, unveiled a treasure to the KCAC team — several generations-old manuscripts from a religious school established in the 1700s.

Since its founding, the school has collected manuscripts but many were destroyed during the first war pitting the Kurds against the Iraqi state between 1961 and 1970, said Hirane.

"Only 20 manuscripts remain today," including centuries-old poems, said the imam.

He is now waiting for the KCAC website launch in April to refer people to view the manuscripts.

"It is time to take them out and make them available for everyone."

— AFP



CELEBRATING OMAN'S RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH FLORAL ARTISTRY

BY LIJU CHERIAN
@lijuchermanoman

Flowers are captivating in the eyes of the beholder, and Phubast Chesdmethee, an international floral consultant from Thailand, has made it his profession to provide artistic presentations of floral arrangements.

At the recent International Flower Arrangement Conference, 'Bloom Oman 2024', held at the National Museum of Oman, Phubast, affectionately known as Poo, was the cynosure of all eyes. In an interview, he shared insights into his role and experiences at the event.

Among the various aspects of Bloom Oman, what do you consider the highlight, especially your role? Was the crafting of the 60-metre-long grand centrepiece during the 'Beyond Blossoms' fashion show the standout moment for you?

PHUBAST: At 'Bloom Oman', I set up several highlights, each happening in Oman for the first time with unique concepts and scale. The flower-with-arts concept and

the style and techniques of the designs were unique. The scale was large and oversized, matching objects from the museum. I established 40 sets of floral installations for the National Museum of Oman, conducted a floral workshop for 100 participants of World Association for Floral Artists (WAFA) Oman, presented eight large designs on stage, and orchestrated a floral fashion show with ten models. The 60-metre-long gala dinner centerpiece was indeed grand.

Were the floral elements in your demonstration exclusively sourced from Oman, or did you integrate components from external sources?

PHUBAST: Most of my materials were from Oman, including dried leaves, branches, tree trunks and foliage. However, I also utilised some imported flowers and materials from countries like The Netherlands, Thailand, Kenya, China and Vietnam.

The Bloom Oman fashion show showcased models embodying different gemstones such as the Queen of Diamond, Peridot, Emerald, Tourmaline, and

Amethyst. Could you elaborate on the underlying concept that inspired this distinctive approach?

PHUBAST: The main title was 'Hidden Treasures.' I aimed to showcase the techniques and possibilities of arranging flowers, highlighting the beauty of floral materials alongside the imagination of models, makeup and jewellery.

Did the fashion show at Bloom Oman incorporate specific elements from Omani culture or draw inspiration from the country's traditions?

PHUBAST: Flowers, as a language, can showcase the culture of any country. The charm and popularity of gemstones are universal, and I believe Omanis would appreciate them. The floral designs were inspired by the daily life of people in Oman.

As an International Flower Master, what advice do you have for aspiring floral artists in Oman? How can they enhance their skills and contribute to the floral art scene in the country?

PHUBAST: My sincere advice is for floral artists everywhere to

learn correct theory, practice, and implementation. Be open-minded, ready to learn from various floral design styles globally, and encourage the use of floral products in daily life to showcase the country's culture through flowers.

You collaborated with artist Madhvi Ramesh Khimji, WAFA Oman, Honorary President, on eight demonstration designs that fused art and flowers. Could you provide insights into the creative process and elaborate on the inspiration behind these collaborative designs?

PHUBAST: It was an honour to be inspired by Madhvi and Radhika Khimji's artworks. I interpreted each artwork's concept and direction with my own floral design approach, respecting the creativity of fellow artists.

In what ways do you believe floral artistry can engage and connect with the local community, and how can it contribute to the cultural landscape of Oman? Can you share any upcoming projects or collaborations you have in mind, especially those that involve showcasing floral artistry

on an international stage?

PHUBAST: Floral materials and artistry act as soft power, connecting people and local communities. They serve as natural ambassadors, showcasing the originality and landscape of Oman. My next project is the Hong Kong Flower Show in March, where I'll display a 25-square-metre floral exhibit. I'll incorporate inspiration and memories from 'Bloom Oman' into the showcase.

How do you envision floral artistry engaging and connecting with the local community, contributing to the cultural landscape of Oman? Beyond floral design, what other activities do you enjoy and how do these personal interests influence or inspire your approach to floral artistry?

PHUBAST: I enjoy travelling, gardening, and charity works. Travelling provides imagination and inspiration, gardening fosters patience and concentration, and charity work exposes me to diverse stories, enhancing my skills and works.

I also have plans to visit Oman after the summer in order to see more of this beautiful country.

