

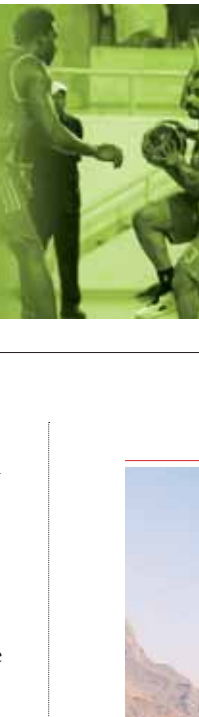
Kuwaiti FM arrives on visit

Shaikh Salim Abdullah Al Jaber al Sabah, Foreign Minister of the sisterly State of Kuwait, arrived in Muscat for a two-day official visit to take part in the meetings of the 9th session of the Oman-Kuwait Joint Committee hosted by the Sultanate of Oman. The Kuwait foreign minister and his delegation were received by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. **DETAILS ON P2**



P10

AL BASHAYER, SEEB QUALIFY FOR OBL GOLDEN SQUARE



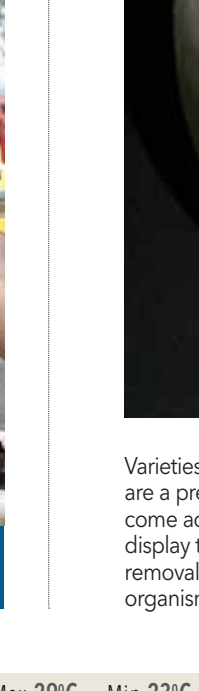
P13

OMAN'S DOMESTIC PRODUCTION OF NATURAL GAS RISES 14.6%



P20

A CYCLIST'S JOURNEY TO DISCOVER THE BEST OF OMAN'S BREATHTAKING LANDSCAPES



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO NEW PRESIDENT OF NEPAL

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to Ram Chandra Paudel for being elected as the new President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings to the president-elect wishing him good health, happiness and success in achieving the aspirations of the friendly Nepalese people and hoping that the friendship relations between the two countries will see further progress. — ONA

HM GREETINGS TO MAURITIUS PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Prithvirajsing Roop-un of the Republic of Mauritius, on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to the President and the friendly people of Mauritius further progress and prosperity. — ONA



INSIDE



IRAN TO BUY SU-35 FIGHTER JETS FROM RUSSIA

P5



HOW GOVERNMENTS CAN REACH THOSE FURTHEST BEHIND FIRST

P9

PLAN FOR NATURAL RESERVE IN MUSANDAM



The Environment Authority (EA) has issued an administrative decision, approving management plan for National Natural Park Reserve in the Musandam Governorate. The decision stipulates that work should be done in the matter of organising and managing the reserve in accordance with an integrated plan and the rules and regulations regulating it since the date of its issuance. The decision also included a comprehensive annex for the management of the Natural Park Reserve in the Musandam Governorate from 2023-2027. **DETAILS ON P2**

Yemen's warring groups discuss prisoner swap in Geneva

GENEVA: Representatives of Yemen's government and Ansar Allah fighters kicked off talks in Geneva on Saturday for an exchange of prisoners, with the UN urging both sides to engage in "serious" discussions.

The new round of closed-door negotiations amid years of civil war are being overseen by the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

"I hope the parties are ready to engage in serious and forthcoming discussions to agree on releasing as many detainees as possible," UN special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said in a statement. The talks, reportedly set to last 11



Hans Grundberg

days, mark the seventh meeting aimed at implementing an agreement on prisoner exchanges reached in Stockholm five years ago, the UN said.

Under that deal, the sides

agreed "to release all prisoners, detainees, missing persons, arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared persons, and those under house arrest", held in connection with Yemen's nearly decade-long conflict, "without any exceptions or conditions".

The ICRC noted in a statement that past meetings mediated by Grundberg's office had "resulted in the release of prisoners on both sides".

"In 2020, more than 1,050 detainees were released and provided with transportation to their region of origin or home country following an agreement reached by the sides," it said. — AFP

LEAVE SEASHELLS ON SHORES



Varieties of shells, placed in transparent glass vessels or in decorated pottery, are a pretty sight. One who frequents the beaches and shores of Oman can come across people who look for seashells. We love to gather seashells and display them on our shelves in homes and offices without realising that the removal of shells from beaches could damage ecosystems and endanger organisms that rely on shells for their survival. **DETAILS ON P4**

Major focus on housing sector and Surooh

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 11

Oman Real Estate Conference and Oman Design and Build Week will open on Monday under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan.

The three-day conference is organised by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, in cooperation with Oman Real Estate Association at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

More than 32 speakers and 30 government and private institutions are participating in the real estate development conference, which includes 11 dialogue sessions, targeting real estate developers, brokers, financial and legal service providers, and those interested in real estate development.

The conference aims to focus on investment opportunities in the Sultanate of Oman, enhance complementary communication between sectors, enable partnership with partners in the real estate sector, and exchange views and experiences to develop the real estate sector.

The conference will be accompanied by Oman Design and Build Week, aimed at enhancing communication with industry owners and manufacturers,

The conference aims to focus on investment opportunities in Oman, enhance complementary communication between sectors, enable partnership with partners in the real estate sector, and exchange views and experiences to develop the real estate sector

integration with suppliers and distributors, displaying building materials and solutions to architects, consultants, contractors, distributors, purchasing managers and decision-makers, accelerating business growth and announcing many mega projects in line with the economic growth plans in the real estate sector in Oman.

Oman Real Estate Conference 2023 will review the projects of the Integrated Residential Quarters Initiative (Surooh) and the National Plan for Developing Real Estate Sector which enables the sector to contribute to the GDP, boost national economy and investment opportunities by understanding the current status of the real estate sector, and proposing solutions for the challenges facing the sector.

Ozone pollution linked to increased heart disease: study

PARIS: Ozone air pollution is linked to a higher rate of hospitalisations for heart diseases, according to a large study, the latest warning of the health dangers posed by greenhouse gases.

While a layer of ozone in the upper atmosphere helps block harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation from reaching Earth, at ground level it is a major component of the smog polluting most big cities.

Scientists have warned that a different kind of air pollution, fine particulate matter known as PM2.5, causes 8.8 million premature deaths a year, but ozone's full impact on health is still becoming clear.

Ozone is created in the



atmosphere by a chemical reaction when two pollutants, often emitted by cars or industry, combine in the presence of sunlight, and has been shown to interfere with plant photosynthesis and growth.

The new study said it was

the first to evaluate the risk of hospitalisation for heart disease when ozone levels rise above the World Health Organization's daily guideline of 100 microgrammes per cubic metre of air.

For the study, published in the European Heart Journal, a team of China-led researchers looked at data on hospital admissions from 2015 to 2017 in 70 Chinese cities collected for health insurance purposes. The data covered 258 million people across 70 cities, representing roughly 18 per cent of China's population.

The researchers compared the hospitalisations to air quality data tracked in real-time across the cities. — AFP



Plan for natural reserve in Musandam approved

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The Environment Authority (EA) has issued an administrative decision (31/2023), approving the management plan for the National Natural Park Reserve in the Musandam Governorate.

The decision stipulated that work should be done in the matter of organising and managing the reserve in accordance with an integrated plan and the rules and regulations regulating it since the date of its issuance.

The decision also included a comprehensive annex to the management of the Natural Park Reserve in the Musandam Governorate from 2023-2027.

In June 2022, a Royal Decree was issued to establish the National Natural Park Reserve in the Governorate of Musandam.

The decree recognises the richness of Musandam Governorate in terms of the geographic and natural diversification and the tourism potential attractive to tourists from other countries.

The total area of the reserve is 1149.40 square kilometres, according to the surveys conducted by the Environment Authority in cooperation with



the Office of the Governor of Musandam.

The islands in Musandam Governorate are the key locations not affected by human intervention and are of high national and regional significance and a habitat for birds. The islands represent a natural museum and are formed of limestone and coral reef.

According to the EA surveys, the waters around the islands host various types of coral reefs, fungi and sea herbs that attract fish, green turtles and other sea creatures.

The surveys also affirmed the presence of rich wildlife including wild rabbit, hedgehog, lynx, mountain fox, red fox, wild cat and reptiles among others, while the survey on wild plants reaffirmed the presence of over 200 species of plants including rare and endangered plants.

The sea islands in Musandam Governorate also enjoy a rich vegetation cover.

Sea mammals, dolphins, whales, red foxes, wild cats and reptiles are also common at the islands of Musandam Governorate.

KUWAIT'S FM ARRIVES IN OMAN



Shaikh Salim Abdullah Al Jaber al Sabah, Foreign Minister of Kuwait, arrived in Muscat on Saturday for a two-day official visit to take part in the meetings of the 9th session of the Oman-Kuwait Joint Committee hosted by the Sultanate of Oman. The Kuwait foreign minister and his accompanying delegation were received by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. – ONA

Waqf Forum seeks social action

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Collective action of various societal arms and consolidation of social cooperation for the benefit of the society is of paramount importance, according to His Eminence Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili, Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, who is also the founder of the Imam Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation (JBZF).

Speaking ahead of the 2nd Waqf (Endowments) Forum on Sunday, at Sheraton Muscat, he said a kind gesture for the less privileged in the society, a charity or any support to those who deserve is a great deed, the best of them is the one which lasts even after one is no more on earth.

“While spiritual spending (Infaq) for the sake of the Almighty Allah is deemed one of the tasks that bring one closer to Allah, the best Infaq is the type of

endowment that lasts even after one passes away,” His Eminence said.

The 2nd Waqf Forum is organised by Jabir Bin Zaid Waqf Foundation in cooperation with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs aiming to empower the role of Waqf foundations in the Sultanate of Oman, and in alignment with its vision to encourage Islamic Awqaf (endowments) and develop the endowments sector contributing to the economic growth and social welfare in the country.

Waqf, the Omani Endowment Partnership portal, aims to enhance the concept of community-based endowment service and offer digitised solutions to streamline the process of humanitarian donation and will spearhead the activities of donations made through the Omani endowment organisations.

The forum will be held under

the auspices of Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, the head of Oman Investment Authority, in the presence of a host of industry experts and representatives from the public and private sectors.

The one day brainstorming sessions will focus on key topics related to Islamic endowments, including activating the partnership between endowment foundations, the mechanism of managing endowment foundations, and adopting the best practices to organise Awqaf in the country, as well as assessing the regulatory and framework of Waqf investments and its related challenges, at a time when Awqaf sector in Oman is witnessing rapid progress, thanks to the efforts made by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs to broaden the role of community participation in developing endowments in accordance with specific governance and controls.

Huge turnout at Tadhmun expo to raise funds for disabled kids

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Tadhmun Exhibition, which was held in support of children with disability and to raise funds for the activities of the Oman Association for the Welfare of Handicapped Children, turned out to be a major attraction.

The annual event saw participation from established brands and SMEs. This year also saw exhibitors from other GCC countries as well.

Timed just before the onset of Ramadhan, the exhibition had an array of products ranging from oudh and frankincense, lotions and perfumes, fabric and dresses, gems, crystals and jewellery, not to forget cosmetics.

“More than 3,000 to 4,000 people have visited the exhibition. We had more than 200 exhibitors participating. Our next exhibition is expected to be held in June just before Eid Al Adha,” said HH Sayyida Hujaija al Said, Chairperson of Oman Association for the Welfare of Handicapped Children.

Over the years the event has become an opportunity for many who look forward to showcasing their creativity.

Asmahan al Balushi started one year ago making bead chains for mobile phones and eye glasses as well as pouches.



Faiqa al Harrasi has made her passion for fragrances her business and she has made her own designer bakhoor and perfume oils and given it a twist with eye catching gift boxes inspired by traditional patterns. r1.accessories only has a presence on Instagram but has been a popular participant over the years and she has a new collection of jewellery for this season too.

This year men have come up with a variety of options such as oudh and perfumes.

Crystalista.om is a pet project of Abdullah al Wahaibi who imports crystals from Asia and South America.

“We supply to our neighbouring countries too. But here this is a great opportunity to introduce everyone to the beautiful world of crystals. All our crystals have certificates,” said Abdullah.

Stalls with dresses seemed to

occupy most of the space giving a wide choice for shoppers.

Fatima al Awami is from Bahrain and her label is titled Al Bahrain. “I have been participating at this exhibition organised by the Association for the last eight years. This year also has been busy,” she said as she packed the purchased dresses for her customers.

“They like the new designs,” she said happily. The trend is colourful Abayas and the long sleeves are in. The Royal blue is in trend and so is gold. Most ladies do not want black this season, said the designer.

What inspires her? “My designing begins with the fabric. I buy fabrics wherever I go. Once I collect all my fabric then it is time for me to lock my room and start working on my designs,” said Fatima. The most satisfying moment is to see the excitement in shoppers’ eyes.



INVITATION TO TENDER

OMAN AND ETIHAD RAIL COMPANY

The developer and operator of the railway network connecting
THE SULTANATE OF OMAN AND UAE

Invites specialized Contractors to apply for the prequalification for tendering of the civil works

The potential Contractor(s) must demonstrate individually or in JV/Consortium that they have the necessary resources and required expertise to meet the requirements as follows:

- Be a local company or a JV/Consortium led by local company registered in Oman or UAE to deliver the package(s) in the relevant country.
- Have recent experience executing projects of a similar size, nature (earthworks, structure, tunnels, freight facilities, roads and depots, etc), in particular:
 - Design and build experience
 - On time completion of projects and to the required quality

HOW TO APPLY

The Prequalification documents will be available for purchase and downloading through an e-Payment Services Gateway from:

13/03/2023 at 10:00 am till 27/03/2023 at 6:00 pm

for a **non-refundable** amount of **5,240 OMR or 50,000 AED**(excl. VAT)

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SUNDAY | MARCH 12 | 2023

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UAE accounts for majority of tourists in 2022; India second

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Indian nationals dominated the number of Asian tourists coming to the Sultanate of Oman in 2022, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT).

The ministry said that of the 2.9 million tourists who visited the country in 2022, 1,337,559 were from UAE and 335,459 from India followed by Germans (81,829), Britons (63,570), Iranians (48,835), French (44,815), Saudis (42,770), Americans (37,087), Chinese (31,704) and Italians (29,986).

According to sources in the industry, "The ease of getting affordable tourist visas, robust air connectivity, and large expatriate population, including GCC residents, certainly encouraged more Indian nationals to explore the Sultanate of Oman and other countries in the region."

Asma al Hajri, Deputy Director General of Tourism Promotion, said, "2021-22 was an exceptional year for tourism due to lockdowns, but the fact is that the 2.9 million tourists we received in 2022 are only 16 per cent away from figures of 2019 when we received around 3.5



million tourists. Travel bookings by our partners in the GCC and Europe suggest that Q1 of 2023 will be healthier compared to 2022."

Asma added, "There were several roadshows and trade fairs in which the ministry participated and that also helped last year."

The total revenues of the hotels in the Sultanate of Oman in 2022 were RO186 million.

It may be noted that total revenues of three to five-star hotels increased by 50.8 per cent to RO20,790,000, while the occupancy rate recorded a growth

of 31.3 per cent to reach 53.7 per cent, compared to 40.9 per cent during the same period in 2022.

The number of guests in three to five-star hotels until the end of January 2023 was 173,313, an increase of 65 per cent compared to the same period in 2022.

Over 200 exhibitions held across governorates

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 11

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) said that the number of exhibitions held during the year 2022 in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman was more than 200.

The ministry called on business owners, companies, and institutions operating in the exhibitions sector to correct their statuses by the end of March 2023, in line with Ministerial Resolution 527/2022.

New regulations were made to pace with the current conditions and help event management companies to hold more exhibitions and conferences in the Sultanate of Oman.

The regulation will contribute to strengthening partnerships



between the public and private sectors to attract investments in line with the objectives of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

The regulation clarified the mechanism for granting

a permit to hold consumer exhibitions through bidding by the competent authority. The regulation emphasised that its provisions do not apply to exhibitions of paintings, photography, and cultural

exhibitions held by universities, colleges, schools, and exhibitions selling used books organised for charitable purposes, provided that a licence is obtained from the competent authority. The decision introduces new categories of virtual exhibitions, exhibitions of products from industries based in the GCC, and specialised exhibitions.

The decision stipulates conditions for licenses to organise exhibitions, including minimum staff strength of two employees, one of who must be an Omani administrative manager. The Omani employee should also be registered with the Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI). The decision also stipulates that the licence holder must have fixed headquarters, and a bank account, and must pay the prescribed fees to the ministry.

OMSB interviews 454 doctors for specialist training



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 11

The Oman Medical Specialty Board (OMSB) started interviews of 454 doctors, who applied to join the local medical training programmes (residency and fellowship) in the Sultanate of Oman for the academic year 2023-2024.

It also includes 268 doctors applied to join international residency and fellowship training programmes for the academic year 2024/2025.

The board conducted the local admission exam for doctors on September 17, 2022, where 540 doctors successfully achieved the required score in the exam for this year's admission.

Following the passing of the exam, applicants must face interviews by panel of experts.

Interviews are held in 17 medical specialties this year include anatomy, pathology, anesthesia, clinical biochemistry, dermatology, emergency medicine, family medicine, general surgery, hematopathology, internal medicine, medical microbiology, obstetric and gynaecology, ophthalmology, orthopaedic surgery, ENT, paediatrics, psychiatry, and radiology.

As for general dentistry and oral and maxillofacial surgery, it is required for applicants to have Membership in the Royal College of Dental Surgeons (MFDS).

Interviews for local

residency programmes are conducted at the headquarter of the Oman Medical Specialty Board, while local fellowship programme interviews are conducted in training centres for each programme (Royal Hospital and Sultan Qaboos University Hospital).

Interviews for international training programmes were also conducted during the same time until March 9.

The Board interviews doctors applying for international residency and fellowship programmes outside the Sultanate of Oman in the specialisations of heart and chest surgery, neurosurgery, paediatrics neurology, forensic medicine, urology, vascular surgery, plastic surgery, paediatric surgery, radiation therapy, public health, medicine neurology, general surgery, orthopaedics, ophthalmology, obstetric and gynaecology.

Accepted doctors for the academic year 2023/2024 will join 23 training programmes, 19 of which are residency programmes, and four local fellowship programmes.

Trainees of the Board are trained in a number of accredited training centres such as the Royal Hospital, Khoulia Hospital, Al Nahda Hospital, Al Masara Hospital, Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, Armed Forces Hospital, Royal Police Hospital, and a number of health centres in the various regions of the Sultanate of Oman.

Car park station for oilfield workers set up in Adam

ADAM: Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) opened an integrated car park station in the Wilayat of Adam in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Ali Zabanout, Wali of Adam.

The station contains 63 car parking spaces, waiting halls, a mosque, a café, short-stay rooms and a monitoring system.

The station aims to encourage the use of public transportation, enhance road safety and reduce carbon emissions. The project is the first in a series of similar projects that will be implemented in other locations in the upcoming period.

The station will contribute to spreading the culture of mass transportation for employees by providing safe parking spaces equipped with all the services and facilities that corporate employees may need during their commute



to and from their workplaces at oil fields.

Engineer Ahmed bin Saleh al Shaibani, Director of Facilities Development and Management

at PDO, said that the integrated car station project in the Wilayat of Adam aims at encouraging employees working in the oil sector to use mass transportation

provided by PDO in order to ensure traffic safety and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The project provides a safe parking station complete with



necessary facilities such as waiting halls with amenities, a café, a mosque, the official said, expressing his hope that similar stations will be established in other

locations in different governorates of the Sultanate of Oman over the upcoming period to encourage a culture of mass transportation.

— ONA



BETTER LEAVE SEASHELLS ON SEA SHORES

TEXT & PHOTOS BY YAHYA AL SALMANI

VARIETIES OF SHELLS, placed in transparent glass vessels or in decorated pottery, are a pretty sight. One who frequents the beaches and shores of Oman, which extends for more than 3,000 km, can come across people who look for seashells.

We love to gather seashells and display them on our shelves in homes and offices without realising that the removal of shells from beaches could damage ecosystems and endanger organisms that rely on shells for their survival.

“Omanis, like others, love to collect seashells for design and decoration. But they must take measures to prevent its depletion,” a specialist in the field of marine sciences told the Observer.

Some of these shells are sold in souvenir shops. It is sold in bottles, frames and vases of various shapes. Their prices vary according to the quality, sizes, shapes and scarcity. But the trade in seashell souvenirs is sometimes a threat to marine life.



ENVIRONMENTAL FUNCTIONS
According to experts, shells provide a diverse swath of environmental functions: they help to stabilise beaches and anchor seagrass; they provide homes for creatures such as hermit crabs and hiding places for small fish; they are used by shorebirds to build nests; and when they break down, they provide nutrients for the organisms and for those that build their own shells.

In the late nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of tree snails were collected from the Hawaiian Islands, which led to the extinction of 22 species of them, and that there are 19 other species threatened with extinction, despite the ban imposed on collection from those areas now. Many maritime countries look forward to the possibility of banning the collection of these shells for commercial purposes.

Historical sources indicate that shells were used in prehistoric times in Africa and Asia as coins, and the Phoenicians and Romans extracted a scarlet dye from sea snails and believed that the cloth that was dyed with that dye was more expensive than gold.

“In fact, it is difficult to completely ban the collection of shells in some countries because the economy of those countries relies heavily on the export of pearls. Among these countries are those located on the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Therefore, those countries issued laws prohibiting the collection of shells of certain sizes,” an expert said.

Shells are a source of income for people in some countries. If the shells become scarce, they will threaten the sources of livelihood for those who live on collecting them. Therefore, these countries encouraged the development of programmes that regulate these industries by closely following up the numbers of shells collected and the impact of collection on the numbers of mollusks in general.

BEFORE PICKING UP SEASHELLS
ONE MUST REALISE THAT THEY PROVIDE
A DIVERSE SWATH OF
ENVIRONMENTAL FUNCTIONS



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SUNDAY | MARCH 12 | 2023

5

■ ALEPPO AIRPORT REOPENS



Employees unload an aircraft from Iran carrying aid to earthquake victims, at the Aleppo airport, a day after it reopened. Syria's Aleppo airport, a key conduit for relief flights after the devastating February earthquake, reopened on March 10, an official said, following Israeli air strikes on March 7 that hit its runway. — **AFP**

South Sudan's Kiir holds 'frank talks' with V-P

JUBA: South Sudan President Salva Kiir held "frank deliberations" with opposition leader First Vice-President Riek Machar, the minister of presidential affairs said, a week after Kiir breached a peace agreement by sacking two top security ministers.

The meeting was held in a collegial spirit, but ended in deadlock, Machar's office said in a statement.

Kiir fired defence minister Angelina Teny, who is also Machar's wife, and interior minister Mahmoud Solomon, moves that threaten to unravel a fragile peace agreement that ended the 2013-18 civil war.

The president also handed the defence ministry to his party, a role which, under the agreement, Machar's party is meant to appoint.

South Sudan gained independence in 2011, but two years later was plunged into a civil war between forces loyal to Kiir and Machar that killed 400,000 people. Despite the 2018 peace deal, bouts of fighting have continued to kill and displace large numbers of civilians.

The implementation of the deal has been slow, and the two men have clashed frequently over how to share power. — **Reuters**

Iran says agreement reached to buy Russian fighter jets

TEHRAN: Iran has finalised a deal to buy Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets from Russia, state media reported, as defence cooperation between the two countries deepens.

The air force of Iran has an ageing fleet of aircraft and has struggled to acquire spare parts to keep its warplanes in the air.

In a statement to the United Nations, Tehran said it began approaching "countries to buy fighter jets" to replenish its fleet in the wake of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

"Russia announced it was ready to sell them" after the expiry in October 2020 of restrictions on Iran purchasing conventional weapons under UN Resolution 2231, said the statement carried late on Friday by the official IRNA news agency.

"The Sukhoi 35 fighter jets were technically acceptable for Iran," it added.

Tehran has forged strong ties with Moscow in various sectors including the military in the past year.

Kyiv has accused Tehran of supplying Moscow with Shahed-136 "kamikaze" drones used in attacks on civilian targets since Russia's war of Ukraine in February last year — an allegation the Islamic republic denies.



Sukhoi Su-35 jet fighter drives along the airfield during International military-technical forum 'Army-2020' at Kubinka airbase in Moscow. — **Reuters File**

The United States has expressed alarm over the growing military cooperation between Iran and Russia, with Pentagon spokesman John Kirby warning in December that Russia looked likely to sell Iran its fighter jets.

Kirby maintained that Iranian pilots had reportedly been learning to fly the Sukhoi warplanes in Russia, and that Tehran may receive the aircraft within the next year, which would "significantly strengthen Iran's air force relative to its regional neighbours".

Tehran has forged strong ties with Moscow in various sectors including the military in the past year

Iran currently has mostly Russian MiG and Sukhoi fighter jets that date back to the Soviet era, as well as some Chinese aircraft, including the F-7.

Some American F-4 and F-5

fighter jets dating back to before the 1979 Islamic Revolution are also part of its fleet.

The United States began reimposing sanctions on Iran in 2019, a year after its unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal under then-president Donald Trump.

The 2015 deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, gave Iran relief from international sanctions in return for curbs on its suspect nuclear programme. — **AFP**

California copes with latest 'atmospheric river' storm

LOS ANGELES: Emergency officials in several California counties spent Friday patrolling levies and swollen rivers as an "atmospheric river" storm drenched the already-sodden state with torrential rains, causing floods that washed out roads and prompted evacuations.

The latest deluge from dense streams of Pacific moisture sweeping California's skies soaked some mountain areas still clogged with piles of snow dumped by a recent spate of paralyzing blizzards, while bringing even more snow to higher elevations.

The San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department said it was investigating what role, if any, late-February snowstorms may have played in the demise of at least eight people, most of them elderly, found to have died alone while snowbound in their homes over the past two weeks.

Residents in the town of Big Bear and nearby mountain enclaves have said their communities were ill-prepared for the severity of winter storms that local authorities called unprecedented for Southern California's high country.

The latest blast of heavy showers and gusty winds arrived Thursday night and peaked early Friday, sweeping a vast region that is home to some 26 million people, including greater Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay area and metropolitan Sacramento.

Flood watches and advisories extended from San Diego and Mexican border to the Shasta-Cascade region of northern California.

The National Weather Service (NWS) reported rainfall totals



Workers install a new culvert after the road was washed out in an atmospheric river storm system in Soquel, California. — **Reuters**

About 2,000 residents were under evacuation orders and warnings in San Luis Obispo County, as crews spent the day monitoring levees, creeks and rivers and filling sandbags

ranging from 3 inches to nearly 10 inches across the region.

US President Joe Biden on Friday declared an emergency in California, ordering federal assistance to help state and local authorities cope with the severe weather.

The storm was the product of what meteorologists call an atmospheric river, a high-altitude current of dense, subtropical moisture streaming into the West Coast from the warm Pacific waters around Hawaii.

It marks the 10th such weather system to hit California

since Christmas, adding to an exceptionally wet, snowy winter in a state that in recent years has been plagued far more by drought and wildfires than by severe precipitation.

Among areas hardest hit on Friday were riverfront communities in central California where numerous streams engorged by runoff of rain and melting snow from surrounding mountains were transformed into raging torrents.

About 2,000 residents were under evacuation orders and warnings in San Luis Obispo County, as crews there spent the day monitoring levees, creeks and rivers and filling sandbags, said Rachel Monte Dion, the county's emergency services coordinator.

Some personnel spent hours in trailers watching for flooding in low-lying areas across the county, which was pummeled by heavy downpours in January, causing a levy to fail and damaging homes.

— **Reuters**



Request for Qualification for

Design, Construction, Finance, Operation, and Maintenance of Salalah-Thumrait Truck Road under Public Private Partnership Agreements

As part of Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects and in order to encourage private sector to invest in infrastructure projects and public services, the Ministry of Finance (MOF), in coordination with the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT), seeks to engage the private sector in Salalah-Thumrait Truck Road (STTR) development project under PPP agreement. The STTR is a 67-km road, the first of its kind in Oman, specifically designed for heavy vehicles.

Interested local and international companies may obtain the qualification document by sending an email outlining company name, competent staff name, contact number, and email ID to: ppp.roads.sttr@mof.gov.om.

RFQ No.	Last Date for Obtaining Qualification Document	Last Date for Clarification	Last Date for Submitting the Required Qualification Document
PPP2/2023	13 April 2023	13 April 2023	4 May 2023



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MACRON'S PENSION PLAN

French protesters back on streets

PARIS: Demonstrators in France took to the streets on Saturday for a seventh day of protest against President Emmanuel Macron's pension reform plans, with police expecting up to a million people at rallies nationwide.

Unions hope they can still force Macron to back down as parliament debates the draft law, with the National Assembly and the Senate moving towards a final vote as early as this month.

"This is the final stretch," said Marylise Leon, deputy leader of the CFDT union. "The endgame is now," she told the franceinfo broadcaster on Saturday.

This week, Macron twice turned down urgent calls by unions to meet with him in a last-ditch attempt to get him to change his mind.

"When there are millions of people in the streets, when there are strikes and all we get from the other side is silence, people

wonder: What more do we need to do to be heard?," said Philippe Martinez, boss of the hard-left CGT union.

"This country's leaders need to stop being in denial of this social movement," said CFDT head Laurent Berger on Saturday.

Police said they expect between 800,000 and one million people at 230 planned demonstrations across France, of which up to 100,000 were likely to march in Paris.

It was the second protest day called on a weekend, with unions hoping that demonstrators would show up in greater numbers if they did not have to take a day off work.

"I'm here to fight for my colleagues and for our young people," said Claude Jeanvoine, 63, a retired train driver demonstrating in Strasbourg, eastern France.

— AFP



French gendarmes stand in formation next to a smoke bomb during a demonstration, as part of a nationwide day of strikes and protests called by unions over the proposed pensions overhaul in Paris. — AFP

China names Li Qiang as new PM

BEIJING: China's People's Congress has appointed Li Qiang as the country's new premier, a high-profile politician known to be a close confidant of President Xi Jinping.

As expected, an overwhelming majority of the roughly 3,000 hand-picked delegates voted for the 63-year-old at the annual week-long meeting of the People's Congress on Saturday, a major Communist Party gathering in Beijing.

Li, the former party leader of Shanghai, replaced outgoing Premier Li Keqiang after two terms in office.

Traditionally, China's premier has been in charge of economic planning. However, this has changed significantly during Xi's time in office. He sought to concentrate power in his own hands in many areas.

Li Qiang has had a long career, mostly spent on China's prosperous east coast. He is said to have economic expertise and to look kindly on private enterprise.

During his time as Shanghai party leader, US electric car making giant Tesla built a major plant in the city.

Under his leadership, the city initially imposed less restrictive measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus but was eventually put under a strict two-month lockdown after struggling to contain a major outbreak in spring last year, a turn of events that apparently hasn't hampered Li's political trajectory.

Unlike his predecessor, Li is also considered a close confidant of President Xi who named him a high-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee, an elite group of top Communist Party leaders in charge of major decisions in China.



China's former Premier Li Keqiang with newly elected Premier Li Qiang during the fourth plenary session of the National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. — Reuters

State and party leader Xi, 69, was handed an unprecedented third term by the People's Congress on Friday, after he had already overturned former age and term limits at a Party Congress in October, cementing his hold on power in the world second-largest economy.

During this year's meeting of the People's Congress, which is scheduled to run until Monday, delegates also approved Xi's plans for the biggest reorganisation of the government in years.

The plans focus on China's "technological leadership," and involve cutting about 5 per cent of government jobs. Four years before Li Qiang gained notoriety as the force behind the two-month Covid-19 lockdown of Shanghai,

Li is also considered a close confidant of President Xi who named him a high-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee

the man who became China's premier on Saturday worked quietly behind the scenes to drive a bold revamp of the megacity's sclerotic stock market.

Li's back-channelling — sources said he bypassed the China Securities Regulatory Commission, which lost some of its power under the new set-up — demonstrated what became a reputation for pragmatism as

well as close ties with President Xi Jinping.

In late 2018, Xi himself announced Shanghai's new tech-focused STAR Market as well as the pilot of a registration-based IPO system, reforms meant to entice China's hottest young firms to list locally rather than overseas.

"The CSRC was very unhappy," said a veteran banker close to regulators and Shanghai officials, declining to be named given the sensitivity of the matter.

"Li's relationship with Xi played a role here," enabling him to present the scheme directly to the central government, without going through the CSRC, the person added. The CSRC did not respond to a request for comment.

— AFP/dpa

Japan mourns 2011 disaster as nuclear support grows

TOKYO: Japanese offered tearful prayers on Saturday on the anniversary of the deadly tsunami that triggered the Fukushima disaster, but public support for nuclear power is growing as memories of the 2011 meltdown fade.

A minute's silence was observed nationwide at 2:46 pm, the precise moment when a 9.0-magnitude quake — the fourth strongest in Earth's recorded history — devastated northeastern Japan 12 years ago.

The undersea quake unleashed a tsunami that left around 18,500 people dead or missing and overwhelmed cooling systems at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, leading to the worst nuclear

catastrophe since Chernobyl.

All of Japan's nuclear reactors were taken offline after the disaster and the majority remain out of action today.

But the global energy crisis sparked by the war in Ukraine has caused electricity bills to soar in Japan, inspiring a government push to reboot reactors as polls show that public views on nuclear power are softening.

On Saturday, TV footage showed people who lost loved ones to the tsunami laying flowers, offering prayers and bowing in front of graves.

"Hi guys, it's been 12 years," public broadcaster NHK showed Fumiko Sugawara, 73, telling the grave of her family members,



People observe a moment of silence at 2:46 pm, the time when the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and tsunami struck off Japan's coast during its 12-year anniversary, in Iwaki, Fukushima prefecture. — Reuters

including her husband.

"We're surviving, so please watch over us," said the resident of

Kesennuma, a city flattened when huge waves rushed ashore.

No deaths have been directly

ascribed to the nuclear accident, after which around 165,000 people fled their homes in the area either voluntarily or under evacuation orders. Most areas around the plant have since been declared safe after extensive decontamination work, but many former residents have chosen not to return.

With Japan now facing its most severe energy crunch in decades, the government wants to speed up the revival of its nuclear industry.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has called for seven reactors approved by Japan's nuclear safety watchdog to resume operations, and for the nation to consider building "next-generation" reactors with new safety mechanisms.

Recent opinion polls by major

newspapers the Asahi Shimbun and Yomiuri Shimbun show that a majority of people support restarting the reactors for the first time since 2011.

"The government will continue to spearhead efforts toward the safe and steadfast decommissioning of the Fukushima Daiichi plant — a process crucial to recovery," Kishida said at the Fukushima memorial service.

"It is our responsibility to promote efforts to build a disaster-resistant country."

Mistrust of nuclear power still runs deep among campaigners who accuse TEPCO, the operator of the Fukushima plant, of safety lapses that upended local communities. — AFP

MAPUTO

Cyclone Freddy inches closer, again in Mozambique

Intense rains and winds started to lash parts of Mozambique as Tropical Cyclone Freddy bore down on the country for the second time as many weeks, authorities said. Freddy, which is on track to become the longest-lasting cyclone on record, slowed its advance towards the southern African nation and was 60 kilometres off the coast on Saturday morning, according to Mozambique National Meteorology Institute (INAM).

"Heavy rains and very strong



winds" were affecting the central provinces of Zambezia, Manica and Sofala, it added.

The cyclone was expected to make a second landfall in Mozambique later this weekend, after a first deadly hit in late February.

— AFP

ROME

More than 1,000 boat migrants arrive in Italy

More than 1,000 boat migrants arrived on the coast of Italy after crossing the Mediterranean Sea. During the previous night, a boat with 487 people reached the port city of Crotona in the Calabria region in the south of the country, the ANSA news agency reported. The coastguard escorted the boat into the harbour. In the morning, a coastguard vessel brought a total of 584 migrants to the port of the city of Reggio Calabria. The people had previously been taken on board



from overcrowded boats on the high seas. Because of the difficult weather conditions and the large number of people, the operation was "exceptionally complex," the authorities said. Hundreds of migrants were still drifting in the sea on boats that were actually unseaworthy. — dpa

KYIV

Shelling kills 3 Ukrainian civilians in Kherson

Three civilians were killed in Russian shelling of Kherson in southern Ukraine on Saturday, and one more died in the eastern Donetsk region, regional officials said. Regional governor Oleksandr Prokudin said three people, including an elderly woman, were also wounded during the artillery shelling of the city. "Today the Russian occupiers have hit Kherson again. On a Mykolayivsky road near a shop debris from a shell killed three people..." Prokudin told

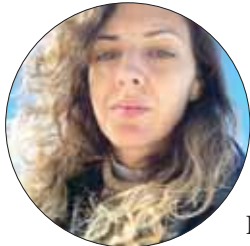


Ukrainian TV, adding that a car, several buses and a commercial property were damaged.

Ukraine recaptured Kherson in November after nearly eight months of occupation by Russian forces who seized it soon after the start of the large-scale attack.

— Reuters

A (literal) passport out of Russia: Give birth in Argentina



NATALIE ALCOBA

The passengers drifted away until only the pregnant women remained at passport control.

Among them was Maria Konovalova, who was pulled aside and asked about her pregnancy. She was 26 weeks pregnant, she said she told the immigration officials last month at Buenos Aires' international airport.

She was sent to join several other pregnant Russians in a common area of the airport, where they dragged furniture together and cracked jokes to calm their nerves.

"It was rather strange to see, it was a camp of pregnant women," recounted Konovalova, who was held for 24 hours until a judge ordered the release of all six detained women.

Since the Kremlin's attack of Ukraine, thousands of Russians have arrived in Argentina with a baby on the way, lured by the country's relatively easy and speedy path to a passport that will give their children and them more freedom than their Russian passports.

Russians don't need a visa to enter Argentina. And once they give birth, their children are automatically Argentine citizens, granting parents a right to permanent residency and opening a fast track to an Argentine passport.

"When I found out I was going to have a boy, I said, 'I have to move, I don't want him to become meat in that country,'" said Konovalova, 25, who is from St Petersburg.

What began as a trickle has exploded in popularity, according to Argentine migration officials. About 4,500 Russians arrived in January, four times as many as last January, though it is not clear how many were pregnant women. Two major hospitals in Buenos Aires say that Russian women delivered 25 per cent to 45 per cent of the babies born in their maternity wards in December and January.

Companies in Argentina are cashing in on the global turmoil spurred by the Russian attack of Ukraine by aggressively marketing child births in the country as a pathway to citizenship. "Childbirth in Argentina. The second passport for parents is the fastest in the world!"

RU Argentina, an organisation that assists Russians in Argentina, proclaims on its website. Its VIP package, which includes translators, Spanish lessons and permanent residency for parents, costs \$15,000.

Another agency, Eva Clinic, showcases private hospitals and tips for discovering Buenos Aires on its Instagram feed. One recent night at the international airport, it welcomed Ekaterina Bibisheva, a Russian sexologist and blogger with 4.8 million Instagram followers, with a banner and flowers as two men in Argentina soccer jerseys performed football tricks for her and her family.

"I heard childbirth in Argentina was like a fairy tale," Bibisheva, 34, told Dr Karina Fraga through a translator a few days later during an appointment in Buenos Aires. Sculptures of pregnant women adorned the obstetrician's office, and a bowl full of candy with Russian wrappers sat on her desk.

Already a mother of two, she had long wanted to experience a birth in Argentina. The passport "is a bonus," said Bibisheva, whose mission is to educate women on how



Maria Rashka, her husband Pavel Kostomarov and their daughter Alexandra, who was born in August, celebrate their wedding with friends at a park in Buenos Aires, Argentina. — The New York Times

to revel in their sexuality.

Some organisations have drawn the scrutiny of Argentine lawmakers who say their open door migration policy is being abused.

Florencia Carignano, Argentina's director of migrations, believes that most Russians expecting babies don't intend to live in Argentina, but are looking for a passport that allows them to enter more than 170 countries visa-free and to obtain a US visa that is valid for up to 10 years. Currently, Russians can enter 87 countries without a visa.

Her department is taking a harder look at Russians, cancelling the permanent residencies of people spending significant time outside Argentina and conducting address checks on recently arrived pregnant women to ensure they are actually living there.

"What is at stake is the security of our passport," Carignano said in a television interview, citing a case involving two people accused of being Russian spies in Slovenia who were found in possession of an Argentine passport.

The police are also investigating the possibility that some organisations helping Russians could be laundering money and involved in organised crime. Last month, officers raided an organisation that had been accused of using fraudulent documentation to help Russians obtain residency and citizenship papers.

Christian Rubilar, an immigration lawyer, who represented three of the six pregnant women who had been detained at the airport, called the reaction of Argentine officials discriminatory.

While it is true that an Argentine baby enables parents to avoid a two-year waiting period typically required before applying for citizenship, he said, other steps must still be

met.

"The most important one is living here," which means spending at least seven months of the year in Argentina, Rubilar said. It then takes one to three years to become a citizen, he said.

In Buenos Aires, the new Russian presence is noticeable in Palermo, a trendy neighbourhood, and Recoleta, an upscale district, where many have settled. Russian is often heard on the street and local hospitals have signs in Cyrillic script.

The New York Times spoke with 10 families with infants or a baby on the way. Most had come on their own, without the help of any organisation. Many are taking intensive Spanish lessons. They are looking for work, or managing remote jobs in different time zones. Networks of support on Telegram, a messaging app, offer tips on how to settle in and navigate a new culture.

Irina Bugaeva, 31, and her husband Aisen Sergeev, 32, chose Argentina because of its welcoming reputation. They are Yakut, Indigenous people who live in northern Russia. When President Vladimir Putin announced the mobilisation of soldiers in September, they feared that Sergeev would be enlisted.

"They were taking people from villages who don't know about their rights," said Bugaeva, who works in film production alongside her husband. Their son, Duolan, was born in November, and they have been living off savings and the money Sergeev brings in from freelance contracts. They also have a daughter, Leia, who is 5.

"I miss winter. I miss minus 50, even if it sounds crazy — but I do," said Bugaeva, who is also a women's rights and environmental activist. "I really want to come back home, but home is not home anymore."

According to Argentine migration officials about 4,500 Russians arrived in January, four times as many as last January, though it is not clear how many were pregnant women

Here's why the science is clear that masks work



ZEYNEP TUFEKCI

The debate over masks' effectiveness in fighting the spread of the coronavirus intensified recently when a respected scientific non-profit said its review of studies assessing measures to impede the spread of viral illnesses found it was "uncertain whether wearing masks or N95/P2 respirators helps to slow the spread of respiratory viruses."

Now the organisation, Cochrane, says the way it summarised the review was unclear and imprecise, and that the way some people interpreted it was wrong.

"Many commentators have claimed that a recently updated Cochrane review shows that 'masks don't work', which is an inaccurate and misleading interpretation," Karla Soares-Weiser, the editor-in-chief of the Cochrane Library, said in a statement.

"The review examined whether interventions to promote mask wearing help to slow the spread of respiratory viruses," Soares-Weiser said, adding, "Given the limitations in the primary evidence, the review is not able to address the question of whether mask wearing itself reduces people's risk of contracting or spreading respiratory viruses."

She said that "this wording was open to misinterpretation, for which we apologise," and that Cochrane would revise the summary.

Soares-Weiser also said, though, that one of the lead authors of the review even more seriously misinterpreted its finding on masks by saying in an interview that it proved "there is just no evidence that they make any difference." In fact, Soares-Weiser said, "that statement is not an accurate representation of what the review found."

Cochrane reviews are often referred to as gold standard evidence in medicine because they aggregate results from many randomised trials to reach an overall conclusion — a great method for evaluating drugs, for example, which often are subjected to rigorous but small trials. Combining their results can lead to more confident conclusions.

Masks and mask mandates have been a hot controversy during the pandemic. The flawed summary — and further misinterpretation of it — set off a debate between those who said the study showed there was no basis for relying on masks or mask mandates and those who said it did nothing to diminish the need for them.

Michael D Brown, a doctor and academic who serves on the Cochrane editorial board and made the final decision on the review, told me the review couldn't arrive at a firm conclusion because there weren't enough high-quality randomised trials with high rates of mask adherence.



Passengers, some masked and some not, on a bus in Ithaca, New York.

The question of whether a mask reduces a wearer's risk of infection is not the same as whether wearing masks slows the spread of respiratory viruses in a community

While the review assessed 78 studies, only 10 of those focused on what happens when people wear masks versus when they don't, and a further five looked at how effective different types of masks were at blocking transmission, usually for health care workers. The remainder involved other measures aimed at lowering transmission, like hand washing or disinfection, while a few studies also considered masks in combination with other measures. Of those 10 studies that looked at masking, the two done since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic both found that masks helped.

The calculations the review used to reach a conclusion were dominated by pre-pandemic studies that were not very informative about how well masks blocked the transmission of respiratory viruses.

For example, in one study of haj pilgrims in Mecca, only 24.7 per cent of those assigned to wear masks reported using one daily, but not all the time (while 14.3 per cent in the no-mask group wore one anyway). The pilgrims then slept together, generally in tents with 50 or 100 people. Not surprisingly, given there was little difference between the two groups, researchers found no difference from mask wearing and declared their results "inconclusive."

In another pre-pandemic study, college students were asked to wear masks for at least six hours a day while in their dormitories, but they were not obligated to wear them elsewhere.

So, you want to lose weight



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
@alsinawi

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

Roxane Gay is an American professor, editor, and social commentator and best seller writer. She is well-known for writing about her experience with obesity.

In her book, “Hunger, a memoir,” she takes the reader through her early adulthood emotional experiences and how they contributed to her eating habits. In one section she writes, “I often heard that stomach surgery is the only effective treatment for obesity, I believed my doctor was supposed to know what is best for me, and a psychiatrist talked to me about how to prepare for the surgery.”

“How do I deal with food once my stomach becomes the size of a thumb? And how to accept that “normal people may try to sabotage

your weight loss because they were invested in the ideas of us as fat people?

We learnt how our bodies would be nutrient deprived for the rest of their lives. How we would never be able to eat or drink within half-an-hour of doing one or the other, our hair will fall or thin out, our body being prone to dumping syndrome.”

Obesity is a worldwide problem that challenges scientists, health care providers and people suffering from it.

A recent study proved what we know many years ago that what you eat is the main determining factor to whether you are slim or obese.

Other factors such as metabolic rate and exercise do play apart but

‘OBESITY IS A WORLDWIDE PROBLEM THAT CHALLENGES SCIENTISTS, HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS AND PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM IT. A RECENT STUDY SAYS THAT IS FOOD IS THE MAIN DETERMINING FACTOR TO WHETHER YOU ARE SLIM OR OBESE’

food is the main culprit.

If you have been exploring the idea of weight loss you would have come across different diet regimes, some more famous than others. In the nineties, the Atkin diet was

famous in the US and Europe as it was adopted by several movie stars and celebrities, there was the weight watcher enterprise in the UK which combined pre-prepared healthy meals with support group sessions.

Here in Oman and other Gulf countries diet selling clinics are flourishing as modern lifestyle which combined more options of tasty and not so healthy food with less movement lead to people eating more than what their bodies can process which leads to obesity and other health complications related to it such as heart disease, increased blood sugar and even strokes.

As many visitors of weight loss clinics feel frustrated with the lack of progress, new methods are used

to draw people in and keep them more optimist about shedding more kilograms of their bodies.

Unfortunately, most people trying to lose weight do not address the emotional part of eating and how food is used to handle unpleasant feelings such as anger, frustration and low self-esteem.

This is why some people regain their original weight even after having stomach surgery.

The link between food and mental health is too important to be ignored and works both ways, your mood determines how much and what you eat and weight gain can impact your mental wellbeing and self-esteem. Only when we address both aspects can a successful diet programme be adopted.

Girl with AI earrings sparks Dutch art controversy

DANNY KEMP

At first glance it seems to be just a modern take on Johannes Vermeer’s masterpiece “Girl with a Pearl Earring”. But look more closely and things get a little strange.

Firstly, there are two glowing earrings in the image hanging in the Mauritshuis museum in the Dutch city of The Hague. And aren’t those freckles on her face actually... a slightly inhuman shade of red?

That’s because the work — one of several fan recreations replacing the 1665 original while it’s on loan for a huge Vermeer show at Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum — was made using artificial intelligence (AI).

Its presence has sparked a fierce debate, with questions over whether it belongs in the hallowed halls of the Mauritshuis — and whether it should be classed as art at all.

“It’s controversial, so people are for it or against it,” Mauritshuis press officer Boris de Munnick said.

“The people who selected this, they liked it, they knew that it was AI, but we liked the creation. So we chose it, and we hung it”

Berlin-based digital creator Julian van Dieken submitted the image after the Mauritshuis asked people to send in their versions of the famous painting for an installation called “My Girl with a Pearl”. Van Dieken said he had used the AI tool Midjourney — which can generate complex pictures on the basis of a prompt, using millions of images from the internet — and Photoshop.

The Mauritshuis then chose it as one of five images out of 3,482 submitted by fans that would be printed and physically hung in the room where “Girl with a Pearl Earring” is normally housed.

“It’s surreal to see it in a museum,” van Dieken wrote on Instagram.

The budding artists ranged in age from three to 94, depicting the “Girl” in diverse styles ranging from a puppet to a dinosaur and a piece of fruit.

But the decision to choose an AI-generated image sparked a backlash.

One artist said on the Instagram feed for the Mauritshuis exhibition that it was a “shame and an incredible insult”, and dozens of others piled in.

A common complaint was that AI tools can breach the copyright of other artists by using their works as the base for artificially generated images.

Artist Eva Toorenent, of the European Guild for Artificial Intelligence Regulation, criticised what she called the “unethical technology”.

“Without the work of human artists, this programme could not generate works at all,” she was quoted as saying by the Dutch newspaper De Volkskrant. — AFP



Jim Tankersley

The writer is a tax, economics reporter for the NYT

Missing from Biden’s budget: His plan for social security



President Joe Biden speaks about his 2024 proposed budget at the Finishing Trades Institute, in Philadelphia on Thursday, March 9, 2023. — The New York Times

President Joe Biden campaigned for the White House on a plan to shore up Social Security’s finances over the coming decades and increase benefits for the lowest-earning retirees, all by raising taxes on people earning more than \$400,000 a year.

An independent analysis estimated that the idea would have lifted 360,000 older adults out of poverty immediately.

That proposal has vanished from Biden’s governing agenda, even though the programme has become a focal point in a brewing battle over raising the nation’s debt limit.

The president has spent months warning that Republican lawmakers plan to gut Social Security and has positioned himself as the programme’s champion who will protect benefits for generations of retirees.

The budget Biden proposed on Thursday detailed trillions of dollars in new federal spending programmes, offset by tax increases on high earners and corporations.

The White House billed one of those tax increases as a way to extend the solvency of another popular programme for retirees, Medicare, by 25 years, when combined with new efforts to save the government money on prescription drug costs.

Yet just like Biden’s previous budgets, his latest proposal made no mention of any tax or spending increases linked to

BIDEN PRESIDENT PROPOSED A RAFT OF CHANGES TO SOCIAL SECURITY DURING THE 2020 CAMPAIGN, AIMED AT ENHANCING AND STABILISING THE PROGRAMME

Social Security, which is set to exhaust its trust fund in just over a decade. At that point, the government will need to borrow additional money or reduce benefits for retirees.

Biden’s 2020 campaign plan appears to be a casualty of messaging and policy considerations, including an unwillingness by administration officials to muddle what they see as a winning argument that casts the president as the protector of a cherished programme and congressional Republicans as its foil.

That position is based in part on history: Presidents and candidates for the White House have struggled for decades to sell voters and lawmakers on plans to change the programme.

But some of Biden’s advisers also see a limit to the amount of tax increases that the public is willing to digest. The budget he released on Thursday, for the 2024 fiscal year, includes about \$5 trillion in plans to raise taxes on corporations and high

earners, largely to help pay for big new federal programmes for child care, prekindergarten, paid leave and other priorities that he failed to get passed while Democrats controlled Congress.

By piling another tax on top of that, Biden would risk sharply raising the top marginal tax rate for high earners.

Perhaps as a result, Biden and his aides have shifted from saying his latest budget would show his commitment to strengthening the programme to saying it would simply protect it.

“You’ll see that my budget will invest in America, lower costs, protect and strengthen Social Security and Medicare,” Biden said last month in Maryland.

On Thursday, when the president formally unveiled the budget in Philadelphia, his message focused purely on protection.

“I guarantee you I will protect Social Security and Medicare without any change,” Biden said.

The president proposed a raft of changes to Social Security during the 2020 campaign, aimed at enhancing and stabilising the programme.

The 12.4 per cent payroll tax that helps fund the programme applies to income up to about \$160,000 a year. Biden proposed to lift that cap for incomes above \$400,000 a year, effectively forcing high earners to pay significantly more in payroll taxes. — The New York Times

Healthy lifestyles: saving Oman

Being someone who has often flirted with, if not obesity, then certainly on-or-about overweight, I have an extraordinary admiration for those who are ‘challenged’ by their weight, and respond positively, doing something about it. But also spare a thought for those for whom weight is not a fashion statement, a fad, or a consequence of laziness.

More than our appearance, our weight is an issue that confronts us all, every day, in different ways, isn’t it? So called ‘skinny’ folk want to be bigger. Not much, just enough to ‘round out’ that angular look that they see every time they look in the mirror. The ‘middlins,’ those who have everything in the right places, in the right amounts, will try to convince you that they don’t, and they aren’t, and anyway... “weight is not a problem, it’s a choice.” Those of us, yes, me included, whenever we do look in the mirror and see ourselves ‘a bit over,’ don’t say much, but silently regret a low metabolism, rarely knowing what that means, but allowing us to justify the extra chocolates with a sneer at the skinnies, and an unsaid “well if you had my metabolism, you would look just like me!” We do get smug, most of us, in where we are on the ‘rickety’ scale, and come to terms with what we are, but not all!

It’s okay for us, we don’t really have an excuse, and the consequences of us turning the other cheek are, in many respects, meaningless. But what about those who are not lifestyle slaves, but who suffer under the yolk of genetics, diabetes, hypertension, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, cholesterol imbalances, heart ailments, gall bladder issues, diet, environmental factors, and mental health issues? They are so often prisoners in their own bodies, with little chance of reduced sentences.

MacDonalds, donuts, and a hundred brands of Southern fried chicken are blamed for the obesity of the entire US of A. Pies and fish’n’chips get the blame in the UK. Taro cops a bad rap in the South Pacific, and coffee and soda world-



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The writer is a media consultant

wide are certainly at fault. Chocolate in Switzerland, pizza in Italy, ice cream among the Eskimos, can all be blamed, to some extent, and we, the blithely unencumbered, will often ask “Who ate all the pies?” or tell the obese and overweight to, “Get off your backsides!” But really, for tens of thousands, it’s just not that easy.

Health issues, and particularly diabetes have challenged both Omani society, and its health sector, since long before I arrived in the Sultanate of Oman during 2009, and in fact for some years I worked closely with local fundraisers and endocrinologists in promoting healthier lifestyles. Their efforts received a massive boost when the government, I recall about 2015, wheeled its resources into the ring, and alongside OmanSail, and utilised the Al Mouj Marathon as a vehicle for promoting healthy lifestyles. Their focus was on encouraging local children to get out and about, to get active, to run, walk, climb, swim, and do stuff, rather than simply watching.

The authorities wisely decided that, rather than spending on what may have appeared to be lost causes, that by changing the youth and child perspectives on health, they were investing in an environmental change that would save millions of rials, invigorate and encourage future generations of Omanis towards healthier lifestyle futures, driven organically rather than pharmaceutically. It showed foresight, initiative, and displayed compassion. Here was a government putting the health of its people first, and today, continues to do so.

It may be subtle, but there must surely be a growing awareness of the significance, and the first effects of this policy of infinite wisdom, as a nation built on oil and gas, with its future in tourism and technology, is seeing its youthful generations perform with distinction in laboratories, classrooms, offices, sports venues, beyond all previous achievements.

Maybe salvation for past generations was but a dream, but for today’s, and future generations, healthy lifestyles are not only a reality, but lifesavers.

SPARE A THOUGHT FOR THOSE FOR WHOM WEIGHT IS NOT A FASHION STATEMENT

CLEANING TIME



Volunteers of the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Society clean the gold plating at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, on Saturday. – AFP

How governments can reach those furthest behind first

We are at the halfway point for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (from 2015 to 2030), but we are not halfway to achieving them. In fact, in many critical areas – from poverty to food security – progress has been reversed in recent years, owing to severe and compounding crises. In this difficult environment, governments worldwide must urgently recommit to the SDGs, including their underlying promise to leave no one behind.

The challenge is formidable. Consider SDG1, which aims to eliminate poverty in all its forms. According to the World Bank’s Partnership for Economic Inclusion, government-led poverty-alleviation programmes surged in 2021. But to reach those furthest behind, such programmes must recognise and account for the web of overlapping constraints that effectively “trap” people in poverty.

As the global Multidimensional Poverty Index highlights, poverty encompasses deprivation and exclusion in multiple areas, such as nutrition, sanitation, healthcare, and education. Factors like gender, disability, and displacement also play



Claire Hutchings

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ENSURING THAT POVERTY-ALLEVATION INITIATIVES REACH THOSE MOST IN NEED HAS BEEN SLOW AND DIFFICULT IN MOST DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

an important role in keeping people in poverty. Recent research, based on experience in rural Bangladesh, shows that below a certain income/asset threshold, households’ ability to access resources that could increase their income is severely limited. It also shows that large transfers of resources and/or support that create better jobs for the poor are an effective means of enabling people to escape the poverty trap over the long term.

An understanding of the various constraints and barriers that people in extreme poverty face within each unique context is thus vital to enable governments to devise and target optimal interventions.

This is easier said than done. People facing extreme poverty often live in isolation and thus may not be included in social registries or identified via other government mechanisms for determining eligibility for and ensuring enrollment in support programmes. They may lack adequate documentation or even the basic knowledge or ability to claim benefits (owing to factors such as limited mobility

or literacy). As a result, the people who need the most help often end up either excluded from government programmes altogether, or unable to access benefits for which they qualify. A June 2020 report found that 79 per cent of the poorest quintile of the population in low-income countries receive no social assistance.

But there are steps governments can take to improve programme targeting and reach. For starters, they can make greater use of registries linked to existing poverty-focused programmes. Tunisia’s government is already doing this. Using registries from its

national cash-transfer programme, the authorities identify households at the intersection of climate and socioeconomic vulnerability. Factors like monthly income, productive labour capacity, access to water, and land degradation are considered, as is whether the household is headed by a woman.

Combining information from other government registries or databases with existing social registries can also be effective. Colombia’s government combined data in the Unified Registry of Victims with a social registry used for an existing cash-transfer programme to identify victims of conflict who were already

receiving cash transfers. The government was then able to urge the recipients to invest the transfers in ways that boosted well-being and resilience.

The information in social registries can also be verified, updated, and enhanced through household surveys or local “vulnerability assessments,” which can help to identify the specific set of risks and deprivations faced by particular groups of people living in extreme poverty. Governments can also expand social registries, using mechanisms such as participatory community consultations that identify households that are unregistered or misrepresented in official databases.

In the Indian state of Bihar, Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana (SJY) is a programme focused on boosting “the human capital of the poorest and most excluded households through support of consumption and livelihoods, savings, and training.” The complex and time-consuming targeting method used during the pilot period was streamlined significantly to enable the programme to be scaled up.

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Governments can expand social registries, using mechanisms such as participatory community consultations.

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Al Bashayer, Seeb qualify for OBL golden square

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 11

The Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex hosted two exciting confrontations between Al Bashayer Club and Ahli Sidab, and Al Seeb and Nizwa Club, as part of the competitions of the Sultanate of Oman Basketball League for the season 2022-2023. The results of these matches have determined the four teams that have qualified for the golden square.

In the first match, Al Bashayer Club defeated Ahli Sidab 74-54, after fierce competition between the two teams. Ahli Sidab started the match strong, taking a 5-point lead with shots from Abdelridha al Batashi and Ahmed al Jahuri. Al Bashayer responded with points from Mahmoud al Souli and Aaron, and the attacks continued, with Ahli Sidab leading at the end of the first quarter with a score of 22-15.

In the second quarter, Al Bashayer made a comeback and took the lead, and the third and fourth quarters saw Al Bashayer maintain its advantage and win the match.

In the second match, Al Seeb defeated Nizwa Club with a score of 85-67. Nizwa started strong, equalising after a three-pointer from Osama al Riyami, but the team continued to score more points throughout the first half, ending with a lead of 49-40. However, Al Seeb changed the game in the third quarter, adding 27 points and bringing the score closer, achieving a tie and advancing. In the fourth quarter, Al Seeb continued its offensive advantage, adding 18 points and securing the victory. Ahli Sidab, Nizwa make the mark

As a result of these matches, Al Bashayer Club, Al Seeb Club, Ahli Sidab Club, and Nizwa Club have qualified for the golden square. The first match of the golden square will take place on March 14 at 5 pm between Al Bashayer, who are in first place with 19 points, and Nizwa Club, who are in fourth place with 16 points. The second match will take place at 7 pm on the same day between Ahli Sidab Club, who are in second place with 17 points, and Al Seeb Club, who are in third place with 16 points.

The matches were moderated by international referees Ahmed al Balushi, Issam al Siyabi and Ali al Salmami. The table officials were Jumaa al Hinai, Maya al Khabouriyah, Mahmoud al Ajmi, Majid al Akhzmi, Hafez Awlad Ahmed, Saeed al Ammari, Musa al Siyabi and Jumaa al Hanai.

The Sultanate of Oman Basketball League continues to showcase exciting matches and exceptional talents, and the upcoming matches in the golden square promise to be intense and thrilling.

Bournemouth battle to beat lacklustre Liverpool

BOURNEMOUTH, ENGLAND: Liverpool's Mohamed Salah missed a second-half penalty as his side fell to a 1-0 defeat away at Bournemouth, with Philip Billing's goal lifting the south-coast side off the bottom of the Premier League table and out of the relegation zone.

The win in the first league game of the weekend sees the Cherries rise from last spot to 16th in the table on 24 points, while Liverpool languish in fifth on 42 points after wasting a chance to close the three-point gap to fourth-placed Tottenham Hotspur.

Liverpool started well, with Mohamed Salah scuffing an early shot goalwards and Cody Gakpo having an effort ruled out for offside.

Bournemouth defender Jefferson Lerma also had to clear a Virgil van Dijk header off the line, but as so often before this season, the wheels quickly came off for the visitors.

Bournemouth's Dango Outtara fired wide after a one-on-one with Alisson but the Reds didn't heed that warning, and they paid for it in the 28th minute when he outpaced Van Dijk and squared the ball for



AFC Bournemouth's Philip Billing in action with Liverpool's Ibrahima Konate. – Reuters

Billing, who steered it home.

Former Liverpool player Dominic Solanke almost added a second just before the break and Billing went sprawling in the box, but his appeals for a penalty were waved away as Bournemouth closed out the half strongly.

Diogo Jota came on for Harvey Elliot at half-time and quickly made his presence felt, forcing a save from Neto with a stinging shot four minutes after the break.

Jota then won a penalty for Liverpool as his goal-bound header struck the arm of Adam Smith, but to the horror of the

travelling fans Salah blasted his spot kick high and wide of the goal. That miss in the 70th minute seemed to deflate Liverpool entirely, and they did precious little to threaten the Bournemouth goal, with Gakpo flashing a late opportune effort over the bar as his side's attack came up short again.

The home fans cheered every tackle and clearance and they erupted in joy at the final whistle as their side put some daylight between themselves and the rest of the clubs at the bottom of the table. — Reuters

Gill century, Kohli fifty lead India's strong reply on day 3

AHMEDABAD, INDIA: Shubman Gill's sparkling century and an unbeaten 59 by Virat Kohli kept India strong in their first innings reply against a persistent Australian spin attack in the fourth Test on Saturday.

India were 289-3 at stumps and still trailing Australia's 480 by 191 runs on day three at the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

Gill stood out with his 128 — the opener's second Test ton and first in India — as he built key partnerships including a 113-run stand for the second wicket with Cheteshwar Pujara, who made 42.

"It feels great to be able to get a hundred in India," Gill, 23, told broadcaster Star Sports.

"The pitch was pretty good to bat on. Anything that was happening off the pitch was off the rough area."

Spinners kept coming back with wickets as Nathan Lyon, Matthew Kuhnemann and Todd Murphy took one each on a pitch favouring the batsmen.

Gill, who replaced a struggling KL Rahul in the third Test, hit 12 fours and one big six in a good show of batting to surpass his previous Test best of 110 despite cramping towards the end of his knock.

He finally fell lbw to Lyon's off-spin in the third session before Kohli took charge along with the left-handed Ravindra Jadeja, on 16, to see out the day's play.

"The way Shubman played was exceptional to be honest," Lyon said.

"That one I got him on was probably a little bit flatter, a little bit faster than what he was expecting," he added.

"A decent ball on my behalf, but I thought the way he went about it was pretty special... He's definitely a special player."

Kohli reached his first Test half-century since January 2022 after a jittery start to his innings when he got off the mark on the 12th ball.

Australia delayed taking the second new ball, available to the fielding side after the 80th over, by 14 overs.

TEST OF PATIENCE

Earlier, Gill overcame a tough spell of run-making in the second session to raise his ton with a fine sweep off Murphy, taking a bow as the raucous weekend crowd



SCOREBOARD	
AUSTRALIA 1ST INNINGS 480 ALL OUT	
India 1st Innings	
R Sharma c Labuschagne b Kuhnemann	35
S Gill lbw Lyon	128
C Pujara lbw Murphy	42
V Kohli not out	59
R Jadeja not out	16
Extras (b4, lb3, nb2)	9
Total (3 wickets, 99 overs)	289
Fall of wickets: 1-74, 2-187, 3-245	
Bowling: Starc 17-2-74-0, Green 10-0-45-0, Lyon 37-4-75-1, Kuhnemann 13-0-43-1, Murphy 22-6-45-1	

India's Shubman Gill celebrates after reaching his century at the Narendra Modi Stadium. — Reuters

applauded, but lost his partner Pujara four balls later.

Murphy trapped Pujara lbw, ending a stand which prospered after skipper Rohit Sharma fell to Kuhnemann's left-arm spin for 35 in the morning session.

"It's a big moment for the two young spinners and I think they bowled exceptionally well," Lyon said of Murphy and Kuhnemann.

"I think it's pretty even. We know games in this part of the

world can speed up quickly."

Australia's stand-in-skipper Steve Smith rotated his bowlers, who remained disciplined in their line and length to test the batsmen's patience for much of the hot afternoon.

Gill broke the shackles with two successive boundaries off Cameron Green to bring the crowd alive with delightful cover drives.

India started the day on 36-0

and kept attacking.

Mitchell Starc bowled to plan with his short balls and a heavy leg-side field, but Rohit took on the challenge as he smashed the left-arm quick for a four and a six at long leg.

The pitch has been vastly different from the viciously spinning tracks in the previous three Tests and Usman Khawaja brought Australia the early advantage with his 180. — AFP



South Africa ease to 284-run victory to sweep series

JOHANNESBURG: Captain Temba Bavuma smashed a career-best 172 and Gerald Coetzee and Simon Harmer shared three wickets each as South Africa completed a 284-run victory over West Indies for a clean sweep of the two-match Test series at The Wanderers on Saturday.

South Africa had set the tourists an improbable 391 for victory on day four but skittled them out for 106 in 35.1 overs as spinner Harmer took advantage of the turn on offer to record figures of 3-45 and Coetzee put in a fiery spell to finish with 3-37.

Joshua Da Silva was the innings top scorer for the West Indies with 34, but as has been the case all series they battled to keep out the home attack on wickets with pace and bounce.

"I think from the time we made the decision about the composition of the team (playing two spinners), we were hoping the conditions would end up playing this way and fortunately we got it right," Bavuma said at the post-match presentation.

"The guys played their role. Simon, Kesh played really well. I'm very satisfied and glad I was able to contribute."

The victory may have come at a cost for South Africa

though, with spinner Keshav Maharaj stretchered off the field after he injured himself while exuberantly celebrating a wicket.

South Africa started day four on 287 for seven with Bavuma seeking to record a maiden test double-century having reached three figures for only the second time in his 56-match career.

But he added just one run to his overnight score before he was caught on the pull by Kemar Roach off the bowling of the excellent Jason Holder (3-48). West Indies eventually dismissed the hosts for 321, one more than South Africa's first innings score, but never looked likely to chase down the victory target themselves.

Fast bowler Kagiso Rabada (2-19), who has been troubled by a bad back in the last few days, picked up touring captain Kraigg Brathwaite (18) for the fourth time in as many innings, and the visitors were soon reeling on 34-6.

The major damage was done by Harmer and Maharaj (2-4) as they bamboozled the West Indies batsmen with some excellent guile on a wicket offering assistance.

They ripped through the middle order before Coetzee finished things off with three late wickets. — Reuters

Rajeev clinches men's singles title at ISC TT

MUSCAT: Rajeev Agarwal continued his fine form to take the men's singles trophy in the annual table tennis tournament organised by Indian Social Club Oman.

In the final, Rajeev clashed against Soman Ukkath who was unseeded, coming through the draw after beating seeded players in the earlier rounds.

Rajeev started the first game comfortably and built up a commanding lead as Soman struggled to get his game together. He was not able to find his rhythm and Rajeev had an easy game winning 11-7.

The second game saw Soman coming out in a positive frame of mind, matching Rajeev and took the second set 11-6. However, third set Rajeev had a slight advantage and the game progressed neck and neck with both players exhibiting very good singles strategy. Rajeev, with his experience, took the third set 11-9. Soman came back in the fourth set upsetting Rajeev with his steady and quick movements



winning it 11-8.

In the decider, Rajeev absorbed the pressure with difficulty and combined with the errors made by Soman, he managed to win the final set 11-8, thereby claiming the men's singles title.

The awarding and closing ceremony were held right after the men's singles final, making a perfect end of the ISC Annual Table Tennis Tournament 2023.

Sports Secretary Saji Abraham thanked all the officials, tournament committee, staff, coach and parents for

their support and dedication in conducting the tournament successfully. ISC General Secretary Babu Rajendran appreciated the efforts of organising committee and extended all the support to forthcoming ISC Open Table Tennis tournament which will be held in August 2023. Babu along with Shakeel distributed the trophies to the winners. Executive committee members Suhail Khan, coach Manoj, Mohammed Zaheer and Dr Simon Joseph were also present during the ceremony.

Mitchell, Tickner lead NZ fightback

CHRISTCHURCH: A stubborn century from Daryl Mitchell, a blazing 72 from Matt Henry and three wickets to Blair Tickner swung the momentum New Zealand's way in the first Test against Sri Lanka on Saturday.

Sri Lanka had claimed the initiative on the first two days of the Christchurch Test but were 83 for three in their second innings at stumps on day three, a lead of 65 runs.

New Zealand have "swung the game to their side," Sri Lanka assistant coach Naveed Nawaz conceded.

Angelo Mathews was not out 20, with Prabath Jayasuriya also at the crease on two, and Nawaz suggested Sri Lanka would need

at least 200 more runs.

"Daryl Mitchell and Matt Henry, the partnership, took the game away from us," he said.

"But we have to back ourselves that a couple of our batsmen will go in there and get stuck in and get some big runs to swing the game back to our side.

"It's a good wicket to bat on and gives a little bit to the fast bowlers still so I suppose anything above 275-300 would be a good score."

New Zealand earlier recovered from 151 for five to be all out for 373, an 18-run lead, after a dogged 102 from Mitchell and Henry's swashbuckling performance that included 58 runs from boundaries.

Tickner claimed the wickets of captain Dimuth Karunaratne

for 17, Oshada Fernando for 28 and Kusal Mendis for 14 in the 38 overs before stumps to finish with three wickets for 28 runs off 10 overs.

Sri Lanka, who need to sweep the two-Test series to keep their hopes of making the World Test Championship final alive, had ripped through the New Zealand top order.

But Mitchell, who has so often been New Zealand's saviour in his 17-Test career, refused to give in as he toiled through 193 deliveries for his eighth century.

The 31-year-old right-hander, son of former All Blacks player and coach John Mitchell, lifted his average to a remarkable 58 from 25 innings. — AFP



Jordan Thompson (AUS) hits a forehand shot during his second round match against Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE) during the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden. – USA Today Sports

THOMPSON TOPPLES TSITSIPAS AT INDIAN WELLS

INDIAN WELLS, UNITED STATES: Unseeded Australian Jordan Thompson grabbed one of the biggest wins of his career on Friday, ousting third-ranked Stefanos Tsitsipas 7-6 (7/0), 4-6, 7-6 (7/5) to reach the third round of the Indian Wells WTA and ATP Masters.

“It’s unreal at a Masters 1000 ... to have a win like that is incredible,” said Thompson, the world number 87 whose only prior victory over a top-10 player came back in 2017 against Andy Murray at Queen’s Club.

He admitted he felt a little lucky when a stinging forehand from Tsitsipas on match point was ruled a hair wide. “I’m thankful that last ball was out — I thought it was in,” Thompson told fans on court.

While Tsitsipas led the third-set tie-breaker 2-1 and 4-3, Thompson’s coolness under pressure paid off as Tsitsipas belted a forehand into the net to give the Aussie a match point before succumbing with the near miss.

Thompson next faces Chilean qualifier Alejandro Tabilo, who hung on to beat American Maxime Cressy 7-6 (7/3), 7-6 (15/13).

For Tsitsipas it was another setback in the wake of his sparkling run to the Australian Open final in January.

He departed Melbourne energised despite falling to Novak Djokovic in the title match, but shortly thereafter suffered a shoulder injury.

Playing his first tournament since a second-round exit at Rotterdam, Tsitsipas admitted earlier this week that his shoulder was still troubling him and he

didn’t have high hopes of a third Masters 1000 crown.

Tsitsipas and women’s second seed Aryna Sabalenka — playing just her second tournament since winning the Australian Open — headlined Friday’s second-round action.

Sabalenka moved smoothly into the third round with a 6-2, 6-0 victory over Evginiya Rodina, who was playing her eighth match since a return to competition at last year’s US Open after three years away from the game.

“Happy to win this match in two sets without struggling too much,” said Sabalenka, who has never made it past the round of 16 in the California desert.

Sabalenka, still barred from playing under her native flag of Belarus because of the Russian attack of Ukraine, next faces Ukraine’s Lesia Tsurenko, who beat 29th-seeded Croatian Donna Vekic 2-6, 6-2, 6-2.

In other women’s matches, last year’s runner-up Maria Sakkari salvaged Greek pride with a battling 2-6, 6-4, 6-0 victory over American Shelby Rogers. Sakkari, trailing 1-4 when rain halted play for about 90 minutes, managed to turn it around in the second set.

MEDVEDEV ROLLS ON
Fifth-seeded Daniil Medvedev, fresh off three straight ATP victories Rotterdam, Doha and Dubai, continued his red-hot form with a 6-4, 6-3 victory over American Brandon Nakashima. Medvedev didn’t face a break point in the first set, but had to fight off half a dozen in an entertaining second set before closing it out with his third break of Nakashima’s serve. — AFP



Maria Sakkari (GRE) celebrates after winning a point during her second round match against Shelby Rogers (USA). – USA Today Sports



Aryna Sabalenka during her second round match against Evgeniya Rodina. – USA Today Sports

Nasr al Wahaibi emerges ‘champion of champions’

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MAR 11

The first day of the 18th Oman Open Championship for Bodybuilding and Physique was a great success, with a number of talented athletes competing for the coveted titles. The competitions were held in the main hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher and witnessed a large turnout of spectators, including Adel Fahim, President of the Arab and African Federations, and Dr Salim bin Saeed al Bahri, Chairman of the Oman Committee for Bodybuilding.

The highlight of the day was the crowning of Nasr al Wahaibi with the title of ‘Champion of Champions’ for the competitions of the first day. This was a well-deserved victory for Al Wahaibi, who competed in the physique competitions up to 168 cm and won first place.



OTHER WINNERS ON FIRST DAY

In the junior physique category, Abdulmajid al Raisi won first place, Mazen al Lamki came in second place, Musa al Balushi in third place, and Suhaib Habib in fourth place.

In the physique competitions up to 168 cm, Nasr al Wahaibi won first place, Asaad al Wahaibi took

second place, Marwan al Wahaibi was ranked third and Abdullah al Jabri was fourth.

In the physique competitions up to 174 cm long, Omar al Masoudi won first place, Abdulmajeed al Hadrami took second spot, Mazen al Lamki was ranked third and Ishaq al Farsi finished fourth.

In the physique competitions up to 178 cm long, Mazen al



Wahaibi achieved first place ahead of Abdulmajeed. Ibrahim al Ghafri was ranked third, while Malik al Kasbi took fourth spot.

In the 178 cm physique competition, Amer al Balushi won first place, Ahmed Bahjat claimed second, Suhaib Habib won third place and Ibrahim al Alawi took fourth place.

In the masculine competition

up to a length of 175 cm, Khaled al Shaarani won first place, Hob Mohammed al Hashmi came in second place, while Mohsen al Balushi and Obaid al Balushi claimed third and fourth places.

In the challenges of the masculine over 175 cm, Imran al Dhafri bagged the first place, Ahmed al Hadidi took second place, Arslan Javed and Badr al

Hosani finished third and fourth respectively.

SECOND DAY
The competitions continue on the second day, with a range of bodybuilding competitions, bodybuilding classics, and wheelchair owners for people with disabilities. These competitions will include weights of 65 kg, under 75 kg, 85 kg, and over 85 kg, in addition to the Champion of Champions competition. Classic bodybuilding competitions will be held for a length of 174 cm and 175 cm and above 175 cm.

The Oman Open Championship for Bodybuilding and Physique is one of the most prestigious sporting events in the region and attracts top athletes from around the world. The competition is a testament to the dedication and hard work of the athletes, as well as the support of the Omani government and the event organisers.

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Block 21 to produce sizable volumes of nickel, cobalt and iron oxide

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 11

Substantial quantities of commercially valuable nickel and cobalt are expected to be generated from the newly awarded Block 21 during the pilot and development phases, according to the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Earlier this month, the ministry had signed a mining concession agreement with Knights Bay of Britain covering the mining concession rights to Block 21 in the Wilayat of Ibra in the Governorate of North Al Sharqiyah. Under the agreement, the UK firm will extract nickel and its derivatives with high purity without any carbon emissions (zero carbon).

The promising nickel and cobalt potential of Block 21 was outlined by the ministry in a social media post on Thursday. "10,000 tonnes of nickel per year will be produced in the pilot phase, at an estimated cost of \$400 million, with seven years," the ministry noted in its



post. "The aggregate annual production of nickel and cobalt is 132,000 tonnes and 6,300 tonnes respectively," it further stated.

10,000 TONNES OF NICKEL PER YEAR WILL BE PRODUCED IN THE PILOT PHASE, AT AN ESTIMATED COST OF \$400 MILLION, WITH SEVEN YEARS.

Significantly, the extraction of iron oxide is also targeted by Knights Bay in its concession, the ministry said. "Knights Bay is the first company that will extract nickel,

and cobalt and iron oxide from laterite ore. The extraction process will be carried out without any carbon emissions (zero carbon). It targets ores and minerals related to clean energy."

During the exploration phase, Knights Bay will undertake geological surveys and the drilling of a number of exploratory and appraisal holes. Further chemical analysis will be done to confirm the quantities of mineral reserves based on approved international standards, it said. Importantly, the project is expected to support the development of high-value investments in the mining and downstream sectors.

"With the production of closely related substances like nickel and cobalt, as well as products from other sources like copper and iron oxide with the potential presence of lithium, the project allows the Sultanate of Oman to complete all of its facilities (to support) the manufacture of electric vehicles," the ministry added.

Efforts to uncover lithium deposits in Oman



MUSCAT: Work is under way to delineate a new set of mining blocks to be offered for investment in the first quarter of this year, according to the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

The proposed blocks will target the production of chrome ore, copper ore, limestone and other ores. Dr Salah bin Hafeez al Dahab (pictured), Director General of Investment at the Ministry, told Oman News Agency (ONA) that the ministry is currently in the final stage of negotiations with specialised companies about several concession areas, most of which focus on developing potash ore (potassium chloride) and evaluation of lithium ore.

He said Oman has deposits of copper, chromite, laterite, magnesium, manganese and other mineral ores, in addition to industrial ores such as gypsum, silica, limestone and gabbro stones.

Surveys and exploration operations carried out by Minerals Development Oman (MDO), will confirm their presence, he said, adding that the targeted minerals will help support decarbonisation goals.

Last year, the ministry had signed 12 agreements with MDO, which has started exploratory work, including geophysical aerial surveys. These blocks will be developed by the company with local or external investors.

JORC standards will be employed to estimated mineral reserves in each block.

— ONA

Vale in Oman appoints first Omani CEO

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 11

Vale in Oman has announced the appointment of Nasser bin Sulaiman al Azri (pictured) as its new CEO. Al Azri, 34, is one of the first Omani CEOs of a 100 per cent foreign-owned company in the Sultanate of Oman.

A finance executive leader with expertise in industrial and logistics operations management, Al Azri is known for his resourcefulness and results-oriented leadership, managing multiple initiatives concurrently in high-pressure environments with strong change management, people development, collaboration, decision-making, and follow-through capabilities.

Guilherme Reinisch Neves, Chairman of Vale Oman, said: "We are very pleased by this appointment which illustrates that Vale is a talent-



driven organisation that promotes the personal development of employees and values the people who built it.

That is why Vale has appointed a CEO who has been part of the organisation for the past 10 years and has a deep understanding of the local market, cultural nuances, and social dynamics, to help the company better serve its customers and build stronger relationships with local, regional, and global stakeholders, bringing a truly 'global' approach to

the business."

Al Azri has achieved significant accomplishments by focusing on safety, people, creativity, and diversity in his role as Vale in Oman CFO. "I am honoured to receive this incredible recognition from a company that I have called home for over a decade. During my tenure, I will focus on strategic investments and partnerships, and work to position the organisation for long-term success and growth. My aim is to benefit not only the organisation but also its employees, community, and customers," Al Azri said.

Al Azri will oversee Vale's growth in the region in terms of both increased community engagement, amplified sustainability initiatives and the development of the new briquetting plant in Suhar, which is expected to lend more flexibility to Vale's operations to serve a wider choice of steel mills in the region.

Oman's domestic production of natural gas rises 14.6%

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman's domestic production of natural gas, including imports, increased by 14.6 per cent until the end of January 2023 to reach 4.35 billion cubic metres, compared to 3.95 cubic metres during the period in 2022.

The data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) indicated that the production of associated gas increased by 11.7 per cent to reach 909 million cubic metres, while the production of non-associated gas, including imports, increased by 15.3 per cent to reach 3.62 billion cubic metres.

Natural gas consumption increased in oil fields was 19.9 per cent, followed by industrial zones at 19 per cent, industrial projects at 13 per cent, and gas consumption in power plants increased by 11.6 per cent. — ONA



Food industries centre to launch in Khazaen in Q1 2024

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 11

Dhofar-based Salalah Mills, a publicly-traded company that owns and operates Oman's biggest flour mill complex by capacity, says its new investment in Khazaen Economic City at Barka in South Al Batinah Governorate will be operational by the first quarter of 2024.

The company had announced last year that it is setting up a Food Industries Centre at Khazaen with an initial investment of RO 12.5 million — part of its strategy to expand its flour-based food processing industrial base.

Envisaged in the first phase of its implementation is an industrial

bakery and multiple production lines for frozen and semi-baked pastries, it had stated.

"The production lines have been bought and Letters of Credit were opened," said Ahmed bin Abdullah bin Saeed al Rawas, Chairman — Salalah Mills Co SAOG. "The project is expected to be in production by the end of the first quarter of 2024," he added in the company's newly published Directors' Report for fiscal 2022.

The investment marks a significant expansion of Salalah Mills' geographical footprint, which will now cover the northern part of the Sultanate of Oman. The company is also mulling a major expansion of its animal feed mill plant in Salalah, while also ramping



up the capacity of its bagging unit. Total revenue for fiscal 2022 climbed 25.5 per cent to RO 75 million, up from RO 60 million in 2021, the Chairman said.

"The increase is attributed to the higher selling prices due to higher cost of raw materials and higher sales quantity. The export revenues represented 51 per cent

of the total revenues. The net profit made by the company was RO 1.68 million, showing an increase of RO 280 thousand compared to the previous year, representing a 20 per cent increase," he stated.

Located at Raysut Industrial City, Salalah Mills has a flour milling capacity of 1,500 metric tonnes (MT) per day, effectively making it the largest miller in the Sultanate of Oman. Complementing this capacity is a complex of silos that can hold up to 161,500 MT of wheat, which is also the largest of its kind in the country.

In addition, the company owns three unloading machines at Port of Salalah with a discharge capacity of 1,500 MT per hour.

Significantly, Salalah Mills'

Food Industries Centre constitutes just one of multiple building blocks that will together constitute the ambitious new Food City project under development at Khazaen Economic City. Set to be the largest of its kind in Oman, the Food City initiative was first unveiled early last year.

Covering an area of over 1 million square metres, the Food City will be anchored by the Khazaen Central Fruit and Vegetable Market, as well as host a food industries zone earmarked for food packaging and distribution related activities, and a food processing cluster for value-adding investments. Total investments in the Food City are projected at over RO 40 million.

Apply for loans and credit cards through Bank Muscat Internet and Mobile banking

MUSCAT: In line with its customer-centric vision ‘To serve you better, everyday’, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has launched a new service within its Internet and Mobile banking channels, which enables customers to submit applications for loans and credit cards digitally.

The new service further expands the list of options available to customers through the bank’s various digital channels and enhances banking convenience leading to reduce waiting times when visiting branches.

The new features enable customers to apply digitally



for a number of loan facilities across various categories such as Personal, Vehicle, Marriage, Travel, Educational, and Health and Beauty loans.

Customers may also apply online for a variety of credit cards including Visa Infinite credit card, Gold credit card, Oman Air credit

card, Lulu credit card, Al Jawhar Visa Platinum credit card, Asalah Visa Signature credit card and the Private Banking Visa Infinite credit card according to the eligibility norms for the same.

To apply for a product, the customer needs to log into their Internet or Mobile banking and go to ‘Accounts > Apply for New Products’ and choose the appropriate loan or card and follow instructions to complete the application process by updating the details required.

Once the application is submitted successfully, the customer will get a confirmation SMS and email containing the

Application Reference Number on their mobile phone as well as the email id registered with the bank. The customer should then visit the branch selected during the submission process within 5 days and submit all the required documents to complete the process.

Speaking on the occasion, Abdulnasir N al Raisi (pictured), General Manager, Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, said: ‘Bank Muscat is committed to provide innovative services that are in line with the latest technological developments.

This new feature will allow our customers to use their Internet or

Mobile banking to experience the power of banking convenience in line with our strategy of serving our customers better, every day. In fact, our customer-centric strategy is one of the key pillars that Bank Muscat is proud to have initiated in our continuing efforts to improve and enhance customer experience and achieve our strategic goal of sustainable and long-term relationships within the community that we serve.’

The new service is yet another addition to the bank’s growing portfolio of customer-centric products, services and features, which are being constantly launched.

Royal Tulip Muscat wins top award at ITB Berlin



MUSCAT: The Royal Tulip Muscat Hotel won the award for the best four-star hotel suitable for an Arab family within the Arab Union Tourism Media Awards for 2023, which were distributed on the side-lines of the activities of the Berlin International Tourism and Travel Exhibition held in Berlin from March 7-9.

Ismail Ibrahim, General Manager of the Royal Tulip Muscat Hotel, expressed his happiness at winning this prestigious award, which enhances the strategic growth process of the hotel during the coming period in line with the tourism movement witnessed in the Middle East region.

Ismail added: ‘Our winning of the award for the best four-star hotel in the Arab world confirms our steadfastness in recording more successes and achievements thanks to the tireless efforts of our team, which includes some of the best workers in the tourism sector in the Arab world.’

Bank Nizwa has become a signatory of the UN principles for responsible banking



MUSCAT: Bank Nizwa, the leading Islamic bank in Oman, has become a signatory of the UN Principles for Responsible Banking and a member of the UN Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI), aligning the bank’s strategies and practices with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and the Paris Climate Agreement.

As a signatory to the Principles, Bank Nizwa will identify and measure its business activities’ environmental and social impact, set and implement targets where it has the most significant impact and regularly report publicly on its progress.

Bank Nizwa’s decision to become a member of UNEP FI will provide access to a global

network of like-minded financial institutions, enabling it to share knowledge and best practices in sustainable finance.

Khalid al Kayed, CEO of Bank Nizwa said, ‘We are proud to be the first and only Omani bank that has become a signatory of the UN Principles for Responsible Banking and a member of the UN Environment Programme Finance Initiative.

At Bank Nizwa, we have always been committed to delivering value to our stakeholders and by signing these principles, we reaffirm our commitment to sustainability and responsible banking. We are excited to be part of a global community of banks committed to creating a positive future for both people and the planet.’

MUC hosted Oman’s first national symposium on academic integrity

MUSCAT: Majan University College (MUC) held the first National Symposium on Academic Integrity on March 8, 2023, under the auspices of Prof Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, the Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. Dr Jokha bint Abdullah al Shukaili, CEO of OAAAQA was also in attendance.

Turnitin, the global Internet-based plagiarism detection service provider, was the exclusive sponsor for this international event. The symposium was also supported by The Oman Association for Quality Higher Education (OAQHE) and OMREN, The event was a resounding success, with almost 300 registered participants attending from various local higher education institutions, as well as representatives from industry.

The symposium began with an introduction from Dr Maha Kobeil, Dean & CEO of Majan University College, who welcomed attendees and introduced the motivating presentation by Prof Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah about the importance of



Academic Integrity between supervisors and their students.

This was followed by a keynote by Aaron Yeverski, Turnitin’s Regional VP for EMEA, with another keynote from Dr Thomas Lancaster, from Imperial College, London, reminding participants that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is here to stay.

Ten symposium speakers presented their insights into Academic Integrity with enthusiasm, honesty and courage, answering questions from the audience. Topics included ChatGPT, building a culture of Academic Integrity by emphasising personal morality, the role of assessment design and challenges in Healthcare,

as well as the individual roles of students and staff in promoting Academic Integrity.

Protecting students against contract cheating and other forms of academic misconduct, as well as the importance of self-efficacy were also covered in the student panel discussion.

The symposium was a unique opportunity for academics, researchers, and policymakers to come together and discuss this critical issue in an open and informative manner. Presenters shared good practices and innovative strategies and attendees left with a clearer understanding of the ways that academic Integrity can be promoted in the education sector.

OQ to showcase sustainability projects at OSW

MUSCAT: OQ, the global integrated energy group, will participate in the second edition of the Oman Sustainability Week Conference, which takes place during March 12 – 16, 2023.

Speaking on the Group’s strategy, Shaima Murtadha al Lawati, Vice President of Sustainability at OQ said, ‘Investing in Alternative Energy projects, managing our carbon footprint, managing water resources and waste resulting from OQ’s operations, diversity, inclusiveness as well as occupational health and safety are some of the pillars of OQ’s strategy over the next three years, some of which are amongst the main themes of the Oman Sustainability Week Conference.’

At the Conference, Ghalib Saeed al Maamari, Vice President - Low



Carbon Molecules, will present the Group’s decarbonisation and Alternative Energy strategy.

Topics under discussion are digital sustainability in wastewater treatment, a paper entitled In-Country Value and Sustainability as well as the agricultural investment project involving the use of drones for early detection of

the Dubas bug and the Red Palm Weevil.

OQ seeks to manage its carbon footprint through adopting best practices and modern technologies. In 2021, OQ launched a comprehensive decarbonisation strategy based on three themes: energy efficiency, clean energy as well as low-carbon

molecules.

As part of the Group’s commitment to implementing this strategy, the Bisat C Oil Treatment Plant was designed to the highest standards in accordance with HSE and sustainable methodology, with the goal of reducing 55% of carbon emissions, more than 50% of equipment and reduction of 40% of iron consumption.

Al Maamari added, ‘The group is presently focused on four major projects across Alternative Energy and green hydrogen to reinforce Oman’s global position, namely the Hyport Oman, H2Oman, Salalah2 and Green Energy Oman (GEO) projects.

These initiatives are made possible through worldwide and regional collaboration, along with the signing of agreements and

memorandums of understanding’.

In terms of optimal water utilisation, the Group is doing its utmost to preserve water, the core component of life, through a variety of integrative initiatives and activities.

In 2021, the Group applied water technology solutions to the design and building of the early production facility for Bisat Oilfield, through which the company processed 300,000 barrels of water associated with production operations daily.

As for waste management in its operations and activities, the Group employs a sustainable methodology by collaborating with stakeholders to classify waste into grades, employing specialised companies for safe disposal, while exploring recycling solutions.

NBO holds ‘market outlook’ session for private banking customers



MUSCAT: In keeping with its commitment to creating value for its customers, National Bank of Oman’s (NBO) has recently held the Market Outlook 2023 event for its high-net-worth clientele at the bank’s headquarters.

The unique experience was part of NBO’s comprehensive Private Banking proposition, which it created to guide clients towards long-term financial well-being.

Tapping into its 50-years of experience, NBO welcomed James Ashley, an expert in asset management from Goldman Sachs, to share valuable insights and benchmark best investment practices during this interactive event.

Ali bin Mustafa al Lawati, Assistant General Manager and Head of Private Banking at National Bank Oman, said, ‘We created this distinctive value proposition to meet and exceed the unique wealth management requirements and expectations of our clients. Private Banking is carefully curated to provide a host of comprehensive, confidential, and holistic solutions that meet the expectations of our premier client segment.’

The inspiring growth of the Omani SME private sector



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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The author is a member of the International Press Association.

Oman, the beautiful country situated on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and that I had the honour to call home for a few years, has a thriving entrepreneurial spirit that has been the backbone of its economic growth. Omani citizens are known for their ability to see opportunities where others see challenges and their willingness to take risks in pursuit of their dreams. The late Sultan Qaboos, who ruled Oman for almost fifty years, was a strong believer in entrepreneurship and the organic development of the private sector. He encouraged Omani citizens to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams and provided them with the necessary support and

resources to turn their ideas into successful businesses. Through various government initiatives, the Sultanate of Oman began a process of diversifying away from its reliance on oil and encouraging the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). One such initiative is the National Business Centre (NBC), which was established in 2013 to support and develop Omani entrepreneurs. The NBC offers training, mentorship and networking opportunities to Omani entrepreneurs, and it has played a significant role in the success of many Omani start-ups. Another initiative — which I was proudly part of as a mentor — is the Riyada programme, which aims to support the development of SMEs in Oman.

The programme offers a range of services, including business incubation, access to finance, and training and development programmes. Thanks to these initiatives and the support of the Omani government, the entrepreneurial scene in Oman has flourished, with many success stories emerging from the country in recent years. Here are three of the best entrepreneurial ideas pitched to me by Omani entrepreneurs in the past decade: One entrepreneur who embodies this spirit of innovation is Ibrahim. He founded a digital marketing agency when social media was still a nascent industry, demonstrating his ability to spot trends before they became mainstream. With his skills in digital

marketing, Ibrahim was able to help businesses establish a strong online presence and grow their customer base, showing the power of entrepreneurship and innovation. Another example of entrepreneurial success in Oman is Maryam. She identified a gap in the market for high-quality, locally sourced ingredients for use in traditional Omani cuisine. By sourcing ingredients directly from local farmers and producers, Maryam was able to offer a unique product that quickly gained a following among chefs and home cooks alike. Her success highlights the importance of creativity and supporting local businesses. Nur is another Omani entrepreneur who has demonstrated a remarkable ability to identify opportunities and turn

them into successful businesses. She founded a health-conscious cafe that offers a range of vegan options while maintaining Halal food at the core of her menu. With her focus on healthy, sustainable food and her ability to provide a unique experience for customers, Nur has built a thriving business that is helping to promote healthier eating habits in Oman. These three examples showcase the entrepreneurial spirit that is thriving in Oman today. By continuing to support entrepreneurship and innovation, Oman can continue to diversify its economy and build a brighter future for all its citizens. With the government's ongoing support and the creativity and drive of its citizens, Oman is well-positioned for even greater success in the years to come.

Powell leads markets on a needlessly wild ride

BEN WINCK

The market is quickly getting to grips with a new Jerome Powell. The chair of the US Federal Reserve signalled that not only are interest rate cuts not likely any time soon, but larger rate hikes could come later this month. That's different from what investors expected from the Fed just two months ago. As investors' perception of Powell takes a U-turn, upcoming economic data could make for a bumpy transition. Powell hinted to a Senate committee, and a House of Representative panel the following day, that the central bank is prepared to raise rates, potentially aggressively, should the economy continue to run hot. The comments dashed any remaining hopes that the Fed would soon ease up in its inflation fight. All three major US stock indexes closed more than 1 per cent lower on Tuesday as investors braced for even higher borrowing costs. The futures market now expects the Fed to lift rates by 50 basis points later this month, according to the CME FedWatch tool, double the size of the prior month's increase. In fairness, the Fed had said in December that it expected another 50 basis-point increase, in aggregate, during 2023. Yet investors largely expected the central bank to raise by a little less, and start cutting later in 2023. Still, the market's new view of Powell will be tested over the next week. Employment data due on Friday is expected to show job growth slowing in February, according to economists polled by Reuters. Experts also see inflation easing last month after picking up in January. Both outcomes would support another quarter-point increase more than a half-point hike. By some measures, the economy did cool off last month. LinkedIn's measure of national employment showed that 6.5 per cent fewer people were hired in February than the preceding month, the largest such decline since April 2020. Indeed, meanwhile, signals job openings fell last month. Powell has repeatedly emphasised that the Fed's rate decisions will rely heavily on the latest economic data. His comments to Congress cracked open the door to a larger increase, and investors barged right through it. But just because Powell is prepared to bring out the big guns doesn't mean he will have to. As markets get used to a more forceful Fed chair, the pivot may have been a step too far. — Reuters

What's next for globalisation?



DANI RODRIK

The author is President of the International Economic Association and the author of Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy (Princeton University Press, 2017).

The narrative that underpins the current global economic system is in the midst of a transformative plot twist. Since the end of World War II, the so-called liberal international order has been premised on the free flow of goods, capital and finance, but this arrangement now seems increasingly anachronistic. Every market order is supported by narratives — stories we tell ourselves about how the system works. This is especially true for the global economy, because, unlike individual countries, the world has no central government acting as rule-maker and enforcer. Taken together, these narratives help create and sustain the norms that keep the system running in an orderly fashion, telling governments what they should and should not do. And, when internalised, these norms undergird global markets in ways that international laws, trade treaties and multilateral institutions cannot. Global narratives have shifted numerous times throughout history. Under the late-nineteenth-century gold standard, the global economy was viewed as a self-adjusting, self-equilibrating system in which stability was best achieved when governments did not interfere. Free capital movement, free trade, and sound macroeconomic policies, the thinking went, would achieve the best results for the world economy and individual countries alike. The collapse of the gold standard, together with the Great Depression, put a significant dent in this benign-markets narrative. The Bretton Woods regime that emerged after World War II, which relied on Keynesian macroeconomic management to stabilise the global economy, gave the state a much more prominent role. Only a strong welfare state could provide social insurance and support those who

fell through the cracks of the market economy. The Bretton Woods system also altered the relationship between domestic and global interests. The world economy, built on a model of shallow integration, was subservient to the goals of ensuring full domestic employment and establishing equitable societies. Thanks to capital controls and a permissive international trade regime, countries could create social and economic institutions that suited their individual preferences and needs. The neoliberal hyper-globalisation narrative that became dominant in the 1990s, with its preference for deep economic integration and the free flow of finance, was in many ways a return to the gold-standard narrative of benign and self-adjusting markets. It did, however, acknowledge a critical role for governments: to enforce the specific rules that made the world safe for large corporations and big banks. The benefits of benign markets were meant to extend beyond economics. The economic gains from hyper-globalisation, neoliberals believed, would help to end international conflict and strengthen democratic forces around the world, especially in communist countries such as China. The hyper-globalisation narrative neither denied the importance of social equity, environmental protection and national security, nor contested governments' responsibility to pursue them.

But it assumed that these goals could be achieved through policy instruments that did not interfere with free trade and finance. Simply put, it would be possible to have one's cake and eat it. And if the results were disappointing, as they turned out to be, the blame lay not with hyper-globalisation, but with the absence of complementary and supporting policies in other domains. Hyper-globalisation, in retreat since the 2008 financial crisis, ultimately failed because it could not overcome its inherent contradictions. Ultimately, the governments that gave corporations the power to write the narrative were unlikely to persuade that narrative's authors to support domestic social and environmental agendas. As the world abandons hyper-globalisation, what will replace it remains highly uncertain. One emerging economic-policy framework, which I have called "productivism," emphasises the role of governments in addressing inequality, public health and the clean-energy transition. By putting these neglected objectives front and centre, productivism reasserts domestic political priorities without being inimical to an open world economy. The Bretton Woods regime has shown that policies that support cohesive national economies also help promote international trade and long-term capital flows. Another emerging paradigm

could be called hyper-realism, after the "realist" school of international relations. This narrative emphasises the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China and applies a zero-sum logic to economic relations between major powers. The hyper-realist framework views economic interdependence not as a source of mutual gain but as a weapon that could be wielded to cripple one's adversaries, as the US did when it used export controls to block Chinese companies from accessing advanced semiconductors and the equipment to manufacture them. The future path of the world economy will depend on how these competing policy frameworks play out on their own and against each other. Given the overlap between the two when it comes to trade, governments will most likely adopt a more protectionist approach over the next few years and increasingly embrace reshoring, as well as other industrial policies that promote advanced manufacturing. Governments will also likely adopt more green policies that favour domestic producers, such as the US Inflation Reduction Act, or erect barriers at the border, as the European Union does through its carbon border adjustment mechanism. Such policies would serve both domestic and foreign-policy agendas. © Project Syndicate, 2023



Lines of trucks are seen at a container terminal of Ningbo Zhoushan port in Zhejiang province, China. — Reuters

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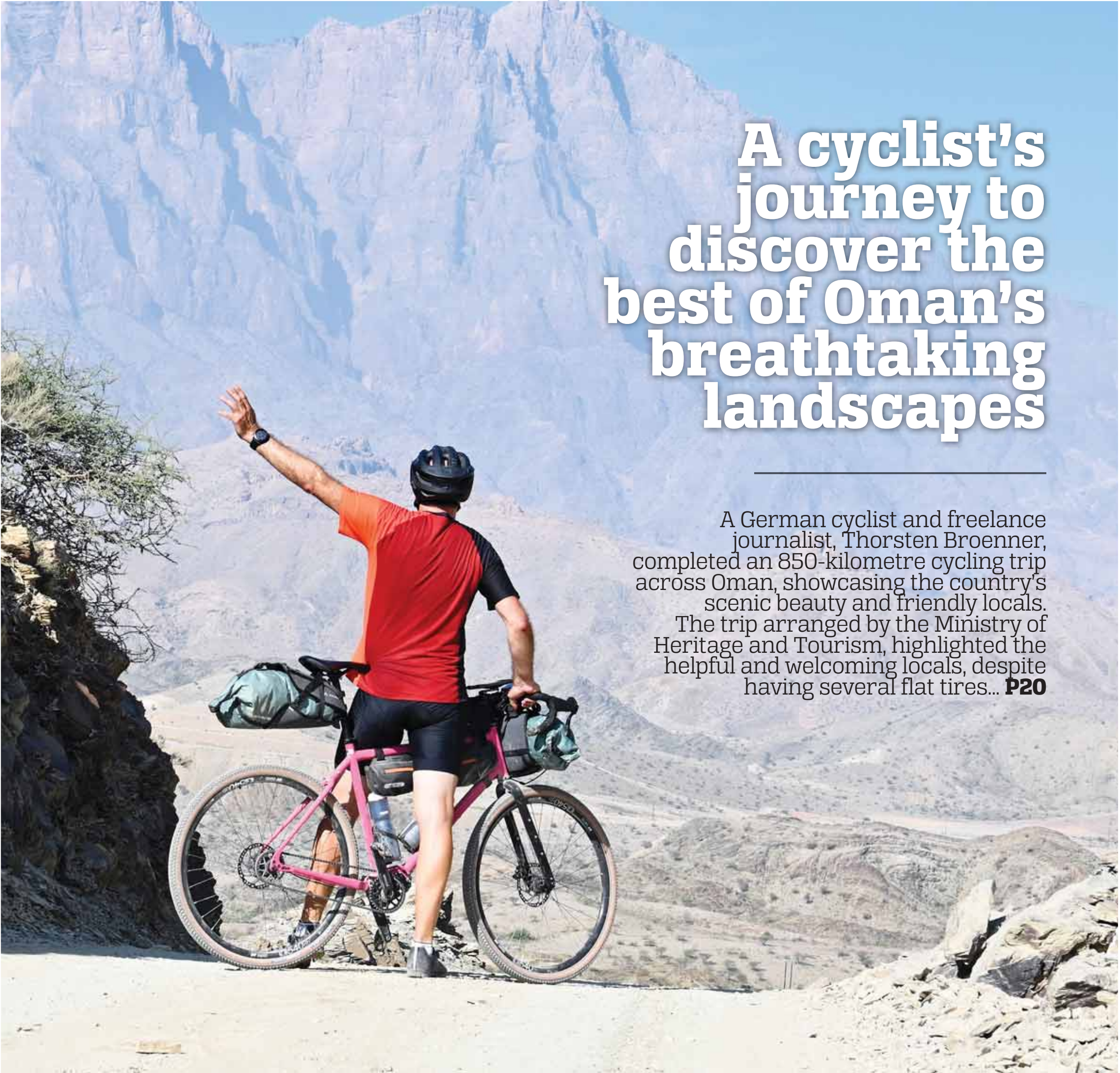
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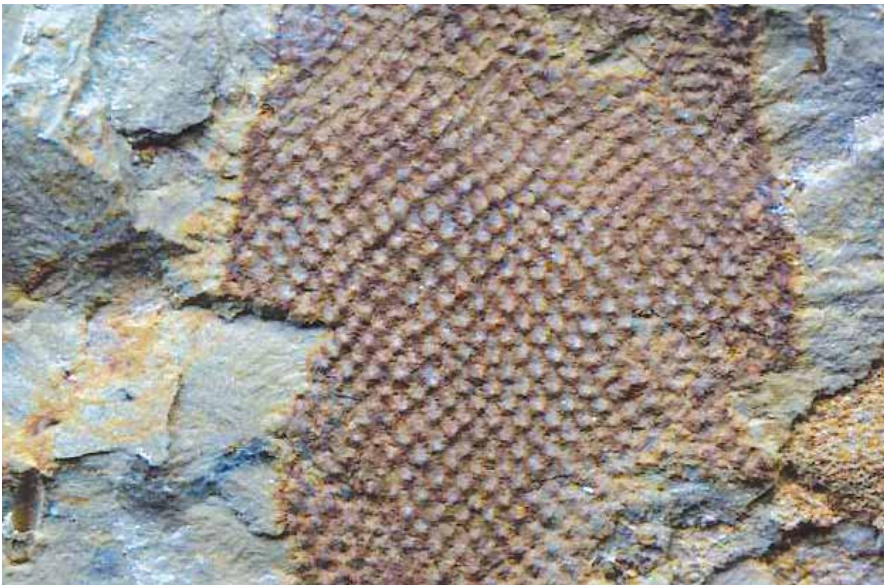
A cyclist's journey to discover the best of Oman's breathtaking landscapes

A German cyclist and freelance journalist, Thorsten Broenner, completed an 850-kilometre cycling trip across Oman, showcasing the country's scenic beauty and friendly locals. The trip arranged by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, highlighted the helpful and welcoming locals, despite having several flat tires... **P20**

Study: Oldest fossils of mysterious animal group are seaweeds

A NEW STUDY HAS revealed that a group of mysterious prehistoric sea creatures are not as ancient as scientists thought, as their earliest fossils are actually seaweeds. Research carried out by experts from Durham University, and Yunnan University and Guizhou University in China found that the fossils -previously thought to be the oldest Bryozoans - are in fact green algae. The findings mean Bryozoans - tentacle-bearing animals that lived in skyscraper-like underwater colonies - are millions of years younger than previously thought. They appeared only in the Ordovician

period (480 million years ago),making them the only group of fossil animals not to appear in the Cambrian "explosion", a rapid burst of evolution 40 million years earlier. Researchers suggest the delayed appearance of the creatures shows the Cambrian was not a unique period of innovation as conventionally thought. Instead, new body plans continued to be carved out by evolution over a much longer time period. Study co-author Dr Martin Smith, of the Department of Earth Sciences,Durham University, said: "We tend to think of the 'Cambrian explosion' as a unique period in evolutionary



history, in which all the blueprints of animal life were mapped out. "Most subsequent evolution boils down to smaller-scale tinkering on these original body plans. "But if Bryozoans truly evolved after

the Cambrian period, it shows that evolution kept its creative touch after this critical period of innovation - maybe the trajectory of life was not set in stone half a billion years ago." The ancient fossil material was

discovered in the hills of China, and revealed previously unseen "soft parts" of Protomelissia gateshousei, formerly believed to be the earliest Bryozoan. This fragile tissue allowed the researchers to interpret Protomelissia as a member of the green algal group Dasycladales. Study co-author Professor Zhang Xiguang, of Yunnan University, said:"Where previous fossils only preserved the skeletal framework of these early organisms, our new material revealed what was living inside these chambers. "Instead of the tentacles we would expect to see in Bryozoans, we discovered simple leaf-like flanges - and realised we were not looking at fossil animals, but seaweeds. "This means that the oldest convincing Bryozoan fossils do not evolve until the next geological period, the Ordovician." The researchers suggest while the origin of animal groups may not have been so sudden, humble seaweeds played a larger part in the early oceans than previously thought. The findings are published in the Nature journal. — PA Media/dpa

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STORM WATCH

BY C.J. BOX

The 23rd book in the Joe Pickett series. Joe and Nate might be on opposite sides for the first time.



TRAVEL TALES

UNESCO chief Audrey Azoulay (L) tours the national museum in Baghdad during a three-day visit to Iraq where many priceless cultural treasures have been damaged or destroyed during decades of conflict. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

A child attends a class with Buddy, a TED-i robot, at the Paul Chevalier school in Rillieux-La-Pape, near Lyon. The scheme aims to allow students that are hospitalised or permanently based at home due to a serious illness, to have a robotic tele-presence system allowing them to interact with their class in school. — AFP





In Turkiye's quake-devastated city of Antakya, an antiques seller is determined to stay put

FROM AN OLD black cassette player, Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" rings out through a damaged neighbourhood of the ancient Turkish city of Antakya, where few residents remain since a devastating earthquake left it in ruins nearly a month ago.

Almost all of the city's shops were closed and rows of buildings lay in heaps of rubble, but Mehmet Serkan Sincan, an antique trader who decided to stay put, laid out his wares on the street and played music for passersby — just as he did before the quake struck.

A print of Salvador Dalí's famed melting clocks hung prominently on the outside wall of his damaged shop, alongside tapestries of a large mosque and another depicting Jesus leading a flock of sheep to water.

Close by was a mosaic portrait of Atatürk, the founder of modern Türkiye, old magazines and several Turkish flags.

In a city where life has come to a standstill, 50-year-old Sincan, who counted friends and neighbours among the more than 50,000 killed in the disaster, said setting up the display as usual was a way to maintain some semblance of normalcy.

"Even before the earthquake, these chairs were outside, I had items outside to show that we run an antique shop ... This is normal, classic life for us ... So we have returned to normal," he said. "We're happy here."

In streets once bustling with tourists, most passersby are now soldiers, police officers and other emergency workers.

Sincan said the historic building housing his store has been

deemed safe by engineers, with the damage limited to plasterwork and a few non-load bearing walls.

But there was also damage to thousands of antique items he has gathered over the years.

and smashed wooden furniture.

Sincan walked through the store salvaging what he could: a portrait of his father, a cartoonish image of Albert Einstein with his tongue out; a faded copy of the

few more glasses will come out, God willing," he said with a toothy grin.

'WE'LL REBUILD'

The earthquake left many of the historic buildings in a city with a strong history of religious diversity in ruins — including churches dating back to antiquity and many of the city's old mosques.

The imams who used to make the Muslim call to prayer five times a day also left, Sincan said, prompting him to take on the sacred task himself.

"I'm not hearing the calls for the prayers. I have been praying for 20 years, and so that hurt me," he said.

Several times a day, he climbs up the stairs of his building onto a patio perched above the street and, in a loud voice, calls believers to pray.

"It is a matter of honour for Turks. We say that the flag doesn't go down and the Adhans (call to prayer) don't stop," he said.

A man who has made a living from old things, Sincan said he took a historical view of the earthquake's devastation.

Antakya, formerly called Antioch, has been heavily damaged or destroyed several times over more than 2,000 years, both by earthquakes and conquest as it changed hands between ancient Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Ottomans.

Sincan said he was confident the city would rise again.

"Antakya has fallen six times, this was the 6.5th time. God willing, we'll rebuild it until the 7th time."

— Reuters



Inside the building, vases, teacups, saucers and other crockery lay jolted from their places in cabinets and shattered multicoloured glass and broken stone covered the floor among pieces of silverware, a candelabra

Mona Lisa.

In one room, a wall collapsed on top of his collection of Turkish antique glassware.

"I saved a bit, the rest is under there and I don't think it's all broken. When we tidy up here a

FASHION

No Dirt. No Distractions. Balenciaga Offers Just Clothes, and Contrition.



CAN YOU DESIGN A redemption narrative for yourself without dramatically changing your identity?

This was the question at the heart of the Balenciaga fall 2023 show, perhaps the most high-stakes collection of the whole fashion season that began in New York on February 10 and ends, finally, on March 7.

It's also, of course, a question posed repeatedly in this particular moment, where the behaviour of our sacred cows gets adjudicated in the court of public opinion, and those who rise on virality fall on it, too.

That made the Balenciaga show less of a collection than a cultural test case: essentially the black mirror version of the grand spectacles of social commentary masquerading as shows that helped drive the brand's stratospheric success and \$2 billion in annual revenues, masterminded by the brand's mononymic creative director Demna; shows about celebrity, war, capitalism and even dirt (in all its iterations). Only this time, it was personal.

A brief recap, for those who don't remember how we got to here.

About a month after the dirt show in October, which had been opened by Ye, the artist formerly known as Kanye West (a relationship that created its own mini-story of controversy with Ye's subsequent White Lives Matter show and spate of antisemitic and anti-Black remarks), Balenciaga published two ad campaigns. Of those, one involved young children holding bags that looked like teddy bears in bondage gear; the other depicted an office in which buried in a giant mess of papers were documents about a Supreme Court case on child pornography.

A maelstrom of Internet outrage, chaos and conspiracy theories ensued and took on a life of its own, with Demna and the house's CEO, Cédric Charbit, at its centre. The brand's seemingly unstoppable rise was halted in its tracks.

Since then they have been quietly working to put things right, including one-on-one post-mortems with industry insiders and mea culpas about the systemic and judgment failures that allowed the campaigns to happen, but the show on Sunday was the biggest public statement since the furor.

It was held in the old Carrousel du Louvre, a generic convention-like area in the museum that once, briefly, had been used as the centre of fashion week, before designers decided they didn't want to share the same plain white spaces, no matter how storied the address, and started trying to one-up each other with national monuments.

This time, gone were the theatrics, the grandiose framing of Balenciaga prior. Gone were the celebrity guests.

Instead there was a claustrophobically low ceiling, a hush in the air as if everyone was holding their breath, and a long, long runway, like a road back, lined with cream-colored toile: the base material out of which fashion patterns are cut, and the fashion equivalent of the blank page.

On it, Demna offered up a collection of Just Clothes — which really means, he said in a preview, he offered up himself — set to a piece of music composed by his husband, Loik Gomez (professional name BFRND). Gomez composed the piece when he was 12, Demna said, and had played it on their first date.

Then Demna dared everyone to judge him on his strength as a designer.

Fair enough.

According to Demna, in the depths of the brand's crisis and his own personal despair, he retreated to his home in Switzerland with a rack of pants and started cutting them up, as he had when he was a child. "Tailoring was my therapy," he said, so that's where he began: with tailored day-wear all made from reconfigured trousers.

There were trousers-as-jackets, the fly of the pants left open to become the vent and the waistbands turned into hems; trousers-as-trench coats, the rise of the pants turned into the flap at the back; six pairs of trousers (at least) pressed together into a sort of swinging tunic dress reminiscent of Balenciaga's sack dress from the 1950s. Trousers layered one atop the other, so one flowed from the sides of the other like a train. If it was very Margiela-reminiscent (Margiela being a formative influence and a former employer of Demna's), it was also newly polished.

Then came a section of leathers, puffers and denim, inflated from the inside into extreme curves and turtle shapes by the technology normally used to protect motorcyclists and skiers from crashes, which may have been a new way to put the focus on silhouette but which also seemed a metaphor too good to resist.

Next a section of haute bourgeois florals in pleated silk and leather, sleeves skimming down almost to the floor, shoulders rounded in a permanent, slightly tense, little shrug. And finally, a set of glimmering, modernist high-neck, long-sleeve evening gowns in silver, lace and beaded fringe, like wearable skyscrapers.

It was elegant. Adult. Contrite. But was it enough to stoke new desire? — NYT





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AROUND THE WORLD

RECIPE

Shrimp Tacos



I'M READY FOR SPRING. I love soups and stews — but this week I'm looking for food that veers away from heavy flavours and winter classics. I hope these dish speak to you, too.

Spiced shrimp and quick-pickled red cabbage fill corn tortillas for dressed-up tacos that are easy to put together and sure to be a favourite. The seasoned shrimp is cooked in a heated skillet for a slight char, but resist the temptation to move the pieces before the contact side is properly browned. You can keep the add-ons simple with slices of creamy avocado, bits of fresh cilantro and acidic bursts from lime slices. Or bulk up with dollops of guacamole, chunky pico de gallo, and sour cream. The choice is yours!

By Yewande Komolafe
Yield: 4 Servings
Total time: 35 minutes

INGREDIENTS:
1 pound peeled and deveined shrimp, tails removed
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1/2 teaspoon onion powder
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
3 tablespoons neutral oil, such as grape seed or canola
Kosher salt (such as Diamond Crystal)
1 1/2 cups thinly sliced red cabbage (1/4 small cabbage)
2 limes
12 corn tortillas
Guacamole
Sour cream or crema
Pico de gallo
Cilantro leaves

PREPARATION:
1. In a medium bowl, toss the shrimp with the cumin, cayenne, onion powder, garlic, black pepper and 1 tablespoon oil. Season the shrimp lightly with salt. If you have time, you can refrigerate the shrimp to marinate for at least 30 minutes and up to 12 hours.

2. Squeeze 1 tablespoon juice from 1 lime. Slice the remaining lime into wedges for serving. In a small bowl, quick pickle the cabbage by combining the shredded cabbage with the lime juice and a pinch of salt. Toss together and set aside.

3. Heat a large (12-inch) skillet over medium. Warm a tortilla in the dry skillet, flipping once, until soft and pliable, about 30 seconds. Place in a dish towel to keep warm. Repeat until all the tortillas are warmed, stacking and wrapping them in the dish towel until ready to use.

4. Heat a tablespoon of oil in the skillet over medium-high. Add half of the shrimp and cook without stirring until the contact side is browned around the edges, about 3 minutes. Flip to cook the other side for 1 to 2 minutes, until the shrimp is fully cooked. Move to a plate and cook the remaining shrimp, heating up the remaining tablespoon of oil before adding the shrimp to get a nice sear.

5. To assemble, spread some guacamole down the middle of each tortilla. Divide the shrimp among the warm tortillas and top with crema, pico de gallo, quick pickled cabbage and cilantro leaves. Serve immediately with lime slices for squeezing. — **NYT**

TRAVEL TALES

Disaster to destination: Fukushima woos tourists with snow



TOURIST BENJAMIN Tuffy's family spent their winter holidays in Japan's picture-perfect snow. But they weren't at the country's famed ski resorts in Hokkaido or Nagano — they picked Fukushima.

It's a choice officials hope is becoming increasingly popular as they market the region's snow resorts and try to shed the stigma that lingers more than a decade after the 2011 nuclear disaster.

Fukushima's ski industry was already struggling with warm winters and a decline in domestic visitors when a tsunami triggered the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl.

Officials worked hard to attract foreign visitors despite the disaster, but then the pandemic struck and border closures kept tourists away for more than two years.

Tourism resumed normally in October, and Fukushima is again aggressively promoting its attractions, including at industry expos in Sydney and Melbourne.

Tuffy, a 40-year-old Australian, chose the region's Bandai Resort for a holiday along with his wife and two children.

He said that the resort's location, about 100 kilometres (62 miles) from the coast, had helped assuage any concerns.

"You have some distance, you've got mountains and you've got range, you've got a lot of clean air and clean life over here," he said as he removed his snowboarding gear.

"We are aware, but we're not concerned. It was more like understanding the situation."

It has been 12 years since the three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant went into meltdown after an earthquake-triggered tsunami that left 18,500 dead or missing.

Evacuation orders were once in place for a 20-kilometre (12-mile) radius around the plant, but most of the prefecture was never affected by radiation.

And after extensive decontamination, just 2.4 per cent of the region remains off-limits.

But "Fukushima's popularity remains low among foreign tourists, 43rd among 47 prefectures in Japan", said Go Morimoto, managing director of the Bandai Resort.

In pre-Covid 2019, nearly 50 per cent of inbound tourists visited Tokyo, 30 per cent went to Kyoto and eight per cent visited far northern Hokkaido, according to the Japan National Tourism Organization.

Just 0.3 per cent went to Fukushima, which is only 90 minutes from Tokyo by bullet train.

The US investment fund that once owned the Bandai Resort decided to sell in 2015, convinced "it was simply unlikely that tourism

three decades in Ouchijuku, an ancient rest stop for travellers.

"At one point I didn't know what to do, because we didn't see anyone at all here," the 59-year-old said as tourists snapped selfies by a row of traditional thatched houses under heavy snow.

The area is particularly popular with tourists from areas of Asia with little or no snow.

"I see more people from Taiwan... They buy stamps at my shop and send postcards," Abe said.



would make a comeback", Morimoto said.

Still, inspired by the success of snow destinations like Nagano's Hakuba and Niseko in Hokkaido, Fukushima has tried to promote its plentiful white stuff.

"Japan's powder snow, popularly known as 'Japow' is a world-class tourism resource," said Morimoto.

"Niseko and Hakuba have benefited from it, but Fukushima, not so much, despite the potential."

It was the main draw for Anne Cathcart, 68, on her third trip to Fukushima. But she acknowledged some reservations before her first visit.

"I thought 'Ermm Fukushima? I've heard of that, the nuclear disaster'," the Australian said.

But she found the region's snow "so amazing", that she has been back multiple times.

"It's never disappointed," she said.

INSTAGRAM-SAVVY VISITORS
The influx is a welcome relief for locals like Miwako Abe, who has run a souvenir shop for around

LIFESTYLE

How Nature Comes Alive in the Winter



"IN WINTER, THINGS are down to their essence and their bare bones," said David Lamon, manager of Fields Pond Audubon Center in Holden, Maine.

For those in northern climates, the outdoors in winter, with few flowers bursting or bees buzzing, might appear to be... dead.

"People think it's too cold and there's nothing much going on," said Sarah Gladu, director of education and community science for the Coastal Rivers Conservation Trust. "In nature, there's actually a lot going on. People just need to slow down and look closely."

What is going on in your backyard or nearby park?

Gladu leads winter nature walks in the Midcoast region of Maine, where she points out the dark red of a Hemlock varnish shelf fungus, the spots where porcupines have stripped the bark off trees and the distinctly large tracks left by a snowshoe hare.

The hares often seek shelter under fir and spruce trees, where the branches have been weighed down by snow, making a little tent.

Deciduous trees have dropped their leaves, but that makes it easier to see their branching, shapes and bark.



Conifer trees appear especially green against the snow, their waxy needles still photosynthesising through the winter months.

Woodpeckers forage. Small rodents can use these holes for dens in spring, their chew marks sometimes visible around the edge.

Hopefully, there is snow.

"No two snowfalls are exactly the same," Lamon likes to say.

Digging down into the season's snowpack shows how each layer has a different moisture content and accumulation.

Isolating a few snowflakes, such as those caught on a branch, reveals the hexagon structure they all have in common.

Fresh snow is ideal for spotting animal tracks. A jumping mouse can leave its trace before burrowing down.

In the subnivean layer below, where the warm earth melts the snow, small mammals can spend the whole winter tunnelling between dens and seed caches. A spider can hide out in a barn. Some spiders do survive outside in the cold, relying on the glycol in their blood to keep their cells from freezing, similar to the chemicals used to keep your car running in the winter.

Now, there is more sunlight every day and nature is responding. A tree, bare but still alive, radiates heat that melts a circle of snow around its trunk. A female bufflehead — a small diving duck — will soon head back northwest to breed.

The ice is letting go. — **NYT**



By Liju Cherian
@lijucherianoman

German cyclist and freelance journalist Thorsten Broenner recently cycled 850 kilometres in Oman over a period of 10 days.

The individual press trip was arranged by the Munich-based German office of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) to showcase Oman as an ideal destination for cyclists.

Broenner cycled from Muscat through the Hajar Mountains, Rimal Sharqiyah sands, several wadis, and along the Sea of Oman before returning to Muscat.

Broenner describes Oman as a country full of secrets and friendly people, with an exciting destination for cycling enthusiasts.

During his trip, Broenner had many welcoming encounters with locals who provided water, food, and even spare bike parts when he had a flat tyre. He had many positive interactions with friendly locals, who were always willing to help him when he needed it.

"Oman is an exciting country full of secrets and friendly people. What made my trip special was the very helpful locals," confesses Broenner.

To make his trip possible, the ministry worked with hotel partners along the route to provide support, including the Kempinski Hotel Muscat, Starry Domes Desert Camp, and Wadi al Arbiyeen Resort. Broenner was also provided with a guide from Infinite Tours for his trip.

Broenner rides a gravel bike for his trips, which allows him to ride on both asphalt and gravel roads and carry necessary supplies.

He experienced several flat tires on this trip but was prepared with spare tubes and

art & life

Local Scene



@omanobserver

SUNDAY | MARCH 12 | 2023

A cyclist's journey to discover the best of Oman's breathtaking landscapes



assistance from a local bicycle shop.

Broenner was provided with a guide and stayed in different places every evening. He rode a gravel bike and carried his luggage on the handlebars, frame, and under the saddle.

Julia, a cyclist from Austria,

accompanied Broenner for several days. They encountered a trader who gave them vegetables, and a family who offered them water, fruits, and cakes. Broenner recommends Oman as an exciting and friendly destination for cyclists. He is writing two magazine articles about his trip, with photos and information about the country, to help readers plan their own trips.

He also plans to publish three new books about cycling in Germany, on the Adriatic Coast, and in Europe by 2024. He also has plans of new cycling trips later this year in Tanzania, Germany, Jordan, Spain, Northern Europe, Italy, Azerbaijan, and the United States.

The ministry also worked with Infinite Tours, a Muscat-based Destination Management Company (DMC), to add a few bits and pieces to Broenner's programme. The DMC arranged a caravan for him to spend the night in a very remote area where no accommodation was available.

He has been on the road for months every year as a freelance author and photographer for various publishers and trade magazines since 2005.

Over the past 30 years, Broenner has covered 330,000 km and enjoyed 234 bike tours worldwide. He takes more time for photos and encounters along the way.

"The main thing is to be on the road. The bike is a door opener to great experiences," he says joyfully.

Besotted by Oman, Broenner (IG@thorstenbroenner) is currently planning a group bike tour with an Italian tour operator called FunActive Tours later in November.