

Corporates must earmark 20 per cent of CSR budgets for OCO

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has issued a decision requiring businesses and organisations to set aside 20 per cent of their annual budgets for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes to Oman Charitable Organisation (OCO). Decision 205/2021 says the allocation will enable OCO to play a stronger role in providing charitable services to underprivileged segments of society. **SEE P 13**



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SEEB OVERWHELM AL ITTIHAD TO GO TOP IN LEAGUE ORDER



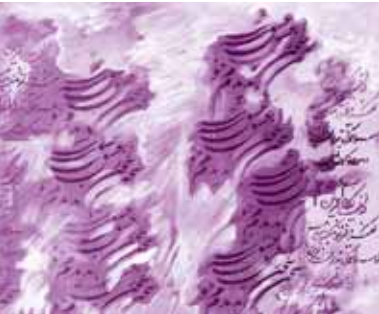
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BUS OR TRAIN? WORLD'S FIRST 'DUAL-MODE VEHICLE' TO BEGIN OPERATION



P20

IS ART JUST PLEASING TO THE EYES OR IS THERE MORE TO IT?



MUSCAT

EJADAH TO BE LAUNCHED ON JAN 2

The Sultanate of Oman’s government will launch the Excellence System (Ejadah), the system for measuring individual performance and institutional proficiency, on Sunday, January 2. The system is among the main enablers for Oman Vision 2040. It comes at the behest of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik aiming at boosting the efficiency of the State’s Administrative Apparatus. **SEE P3**

SHURA REVIEWS OIA’S INVESTMENT PLANS

The members of Majlis AshShura were briefed on the most prominent local and global government investments overseen by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the reality of the current national investments and the contributions of OIA to supporting the state’s general budget, on Sunday. Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of OIA and CEOs of companies under OIA, staged a visual display before the members of Majlis AshShura in the presence of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis AshShura and Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Nadabi, Secretary-General of Majlis AshShura. **SEE P2**



HM issues royal decrees, appoints State Council member

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Sunday issued six Royal decrees reading as follows:

Royal Decree No 74/2021 on the appointment of a non-resident ambassador.

Article (1) appoints Nassir Mohammed Khalifa al Busaidi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the People’s Republic of China, as Oman’s Non-Resident Ambassador to the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea and Mongolia.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of publishing.

Royal Decree No 75/2021 on the appointment of a member of the State Council.

Article (1) appoints Maha Sulaiman Barakat al Lamki as member of the State Council in lieu of Lubna Mohammed Sameer al Kharousi.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of publishing.

Royal Decree No 76/2021 on the ratification of the Sultanate of Oman’s joining the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, dated 27 January 1967.

Article (1) ratifies the Sultanate of Oman’s joining the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, dated 27 January 1967, in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) instructs the authorities concerned to deposit the above-mentioned treaty’s joining document in accordance with its provisions.

Article (3) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of publishing.

Royal Decree No 77/2021 ratifies the Sultanate of Oman’s joining the Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space, dated 14 January 1975.

Article (1) ratifies the Sultanate of Oman’s joining the above-mentioned Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space, dated 14 January 1975 in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) instructs the authorities concerned to deposit the above-mentioned Convention’s joining document in accordance with its provisions.

Article (3) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of publishing. **TURN TO P2**

Two vaccine doses must for entering the country

MUSCAT: The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on Sunday decided to make two-dose vaccination as a prerequisite for entry of non-Omanis aged 18 years and above to the Sultanate of Oman from all checkpoints, and to allow entry to only those arriving passengers who show negative PCR test issued within a maximum of 72 hours.

The Committee also cancelled a previous decision that bans entry from countries South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Eswatini and Mozambique.

The decision comes into effect and addressing its different impacts.

The committee studied the epidemiological situation of Covid-19 locally and internationally in light of the latest data that points to a spate in confirmed lab cases in many countries around the world, including the Sultanate of Oman.

The committee took note of instances of non-abidance with the precautionary measures endorsed by the authorities concerned. To protect members of society against this disease and, to safeguard the Sultanate of Oman health system’s capacity to deal with this disease and other diseases... **TURN TO P5**

Supreme Committee reaffirms that vaccination remains as a condition to enter public and private establishments

from the date of publication of the statement till January 31, 2022.

The Supreme Committee’s meeting, held under the chairmanship of Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, also reviewed updates about the pandemic, measures of protection against the disease and ways of curbing its spread

WORK BEGINS ON MUSANDAM ZIPLINE PROJECT



Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran Group) has commenced work on the zipline project and its ancillary facilities in Wilayat of Khasab, Governorate of Musandam. The Group is currently deploying the 1,800-metre dual zipline project, which begins from Jabal Fitt and passes through scenic landscapes of Khor Qadi and the Mokhi area over the coast of the Wilayat of Khasab. **DETAILS ON P 13**

Muscat is Arab Digital Capital for 2022

MUSCAT: The Council of Arab Ministers for Communications and Information announced that Muscat will be the Arab Digital Capital for 2022. The decision was at the conclusion of the 25th session of the Arab minister’s council hosted on Sunday via video-conferencing by the Arab League’s technical secretariat general of Arab Ministers of Communications and Information. Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, said that the decision reflects the confidence of Arab countries in the digital and legal capabilities of the Sultanate of Oman, the latest of which the Council of Ministers’ endorsement of the National Digital Economy Programme. The Minister told Oman News Agency (ONA) that the Sultanate of Oman seeks to create a hallmark of digitalisation in the Arab world. The Sultanate of Oman’s candidacy file was presented under the logo “Digital Future That Generates Opportunities”, which aligns with Oman Vision 2040, said the minister, adding that the file laid emphasis on three main axes, which are “cyber-security, digital innovation and digital capabilities development”.

The Ministry has a programme to develop the talents of Arab youth in the field of digital skills, besides enriching the Arab digital content, fostering cooperation among member countries and encouraging investment in digital economy, the minister explained. Al Maawali pointed out that Muscat Governorate spearheads digital transformation in the Sultanate of Oman and espouses advanced techniques

The selection of Muscat as Arab Digital Capital is testimony to model digital capabilities and resources to attract promising investments in the field of technology and communications

SAYYID SAUD HILAL AL BUSAIDY
Minister of State and Governor of Muscat

Ranked among prosperous Arab countries

The Sultanate of Oman is among the most prosperous Arab countries in the World Prosperity Index 2021 published by the British Legatum Institute. At the global level, the Sultanate of Oman came 67th out of 167 countries around the world across 104 different variables. “The Sultanate of Oman performs most strongly in social capital and safety and security. The biggest improvement compared to a decade ago came in education”, remarks the Institute in its report. **SEE P3**

that boost economic and social growth, while at the same time empowering other sectors, attracting local, regional and international investments and bolstering intra-Arab digital integration. **TURN TO P3**

■ FROM P1

HM issues royal decrees

Royal Decree No 78/2021 on the ratification of the Sultanate of Oman's joining the Agreement on the Rescue of Astronauts, the Return of Astronauts and the Return of Objects Launched into Outer Space, dated 22 April 1968. Article (1) ratifies the Sultanate of Oman's joining the Agreement on the Rescue of Astronauts, the Return of Astronauts and the Return of Objects Launched into Outer Space, dated 22 April 1968 in accordance with the version attached to this decree. Article (2) instructs the authorities concerned to deposit the above-mentioned agreement's joining document in accordance with its provisions. Article (3) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date

of publishing. **Royal Decree No 79/2021** on the ratification of the Sultanate of Oman's joining the Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects, dated 29 March 1972. Article (1) ratifies the Sultanate of Oman's joining the Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects, dated 29 March 1972 in accordance with the version attached to this decree. Article (2) instructs the authorities concerned to deposit the above-mentioned Convention's joining document in accordance with its provisions. Article (3) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of publishing. — ONA

100 beneficiary families receive free houses

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

As many as 100 families have so far received free houses, thanks to the ongoing initiative of Dar Al Atta'a, a charity wing registered under the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), since it began its journey of building houses and providing shelter to deserving families since 2003. The 100th house will be handed over to a deserving citizen at the association's premises under the patronage of HE Dr Laila al Najar, Minister of Social Development; Maryam al Zadjali, Chairperson;

and Shamsa al Harthy, General Manager of the association on Monday. "This is a moment of satisfaction that we have been instrumental in providing houses to the neediest families in the country," said Shamsa al Harthy, General Manager of the Dar Al Atta'a. "We have been identifying the financially backward families, whose income has been affected as the breadwinner passed away or is suffering from some life-threatening disease, widows, orphans or those who don't have any means to build a house," she added.

'Etimad' receives 2nd batch of leadership trainees

MUSCAT: The National Leadership Programme to Empower Omani Median and Senior Leaderships in the Private Sector 'Etimad' received the second batch of trainees, which comprises 255 senior leaders in the private sector, of them 25 are entrepreneurs. The programme aims to empower national human resources in the private sector and to sharpen their leadership and supervisory skills. The programme's trainees come from various sectors, such as tourism, technology, industry, communications, transportation, logistics, constructions, banking, mining and energy. Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, the Ministry of Labour's Under-Secretary for Human Resources Development, said that the objectives of the ministry's Human Resources Development sector's focus on elevating national cadres on the



leadership level and in various development sectors. On her turn, Dr Yasmin bint



Shanan al Balushiyyah, Project Manager of the programme, said that Etimad was designed

in collaboration with prestigious international universities. She affirmed that it is comprehensive and relies on modern and diverse training techniques. As many as 500 trainees were in the first batch of the programme. It should be noted that Etimad targets thousands of national cadres in the private sector as it contributes to achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040. — ONA

Nation observes GCC Statistics Day

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), joined the GCC countries in celebrating the GCC Statistics Day, which annually falls on December 24. The celebration, themed "Statistics keeping pace with extraordinary circumstances", reflects the lessons learned by statistics centres in the GCC and the world at large on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic's consequences changed work environments and



caused an information boom due to the economic repercussions, which increased demand on specific types of information. The Electronic Census 2020

of Population, Residences and Establishments (eCensus 2020) conducted by the Sultanate of Oman is considered as a role model at the regional and

international levels in terms of swiftly transforming from a traditional field census to administrative records. The Sultanate of Oman, represented by NCSI, accomplished a global achievement in the field of Big Data by benefiting from the data generated through smart phones, which are considered sources of mega data in drawing official statistic indicators on tourism, residences, and population movement in the country. — ONA

Majlis Ash'shura reviews OIA's investment plans



MUSCAT: The members of Majlis Ash'shura were on Sunday briefed on the most prominent local and global government investments overseen by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the reality of the current national investments and the contributions of OIA to supporting the state's general budget. Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of OIA and CEOs of companies under OIA, staged a visual display before the members of Majlis Ash'shura in the presence of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura and Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Nadabi, Secretary-

General of Majlis Ash'shura. The chairman of OIA stressed that the Authority is keen on establishing an investment portfolio based on the diversification of investment tools and assets in addition to its objectives to enhance economic diversification and attract investments as well as empowering the private sector through the public-private partnership to generate job opportunities for citizens and achieve fiscal sustainability. Al Murshidi indicated that OIA distributed its investments between local and foreign investments for several reasons including the geographical and sectoral distribution of

investments to reduce risks and build financial reserves to enhance savings for future generations and stabilise credit rating. OIA also targets to bring global advanced knowledge and technologies to the Sultanate of Oman in order to serve strategic sectors. Local investments include stocks, bonds and deposits as well as companies and factories in more than 10 sectors in addition to various funds with friendly and brotherly countries, he said. The chairman of OIA talked about some programmes and initiatives launched by the Authority including the In-Country Value Programme

THE OIA CHAIRMAN STRESSED THAT THE AUTHORITY IS KEEN ON ESTABLISHING AN INVESTMENT PORTFOLIO BASED ON THE DIVERSIFICATION OF INVESTMENT TOOLS AND ASSETS IN ADDITION TO ITS OBJECTIVES TO ENHANCE ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION AND ATTRACT INVESTMENTS

which aims at prioritising Omani local products at an increasing preferential price in the range of 10 per cent and allowing negotiation for Omani product in case the unit price is 10 per cent higher than the lowest offered price. He also spoke about the OIA's initiatives to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through a set of measures that aim at supporting and sustaining SMEs. This is in addition to OIA's initiatives aimed at training and employing nationals by generating job opportunities in various vital sectors such as the logistics, energy and the industrial sectors. The members of Majlis

Ash'shura raised a number of questions that were mainly focused on the assets of the OIA, the annual net profits, the volume of international investments and the OIA's plan to privatise a number of companies. The issue of investment in the healthcare sector and achieving pharmaceutical security and the investment orientations in this regard, were also discussed. They also inquired about the expected risk level of foreign investments and the extent of the experience of the companies' boards of directors in managing these companies in order to meet expectations and achieve objectives.





NATION TO LAUNCH EJADAH NEXT WEEK

THE SYSTEM IS FOR MEASURING INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL PROFICIENCY

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman's government will launch next Sunday the Excellence System (Ejadah), which is designed to measure individual performance and institutional proficiency.

This system is among the main enablers for Oman Vision 2040. It comes at the behest of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik aiming at boosting the efficiency of the State's Administrative Apparatus.

The Ministry of Labour



supervises the implementation of this system, which seeks to find the tools and standards necessary



to build a culture of proficiency in job performance and improve performance measuring systems.



This can be accomplished by governance and assessment of individual performance of

employees and comparing it with the key objectives and indicators of the unit.

The system covers 57 civil units of the State's Administrative Apparatus and other public legal persons, as more than 175,000 employees in the public sector benefit from the system.

It will also contribute to achieving Oman Vision 2040 and improve the quality of government services for individuals and institutions. Consequently, it will reflect

positively on boosting beneficiaries' confidence in government units.

Additionally, the Excellence System (Ejadah) will clearly define employee's work tasks, create harmony between organisation's plans and the employee's plan, as well as enhancing the level of transparency in the distribution of work among employees, and linking incentives and rewards with the level of productivity.

— ONA

Sultanate of Oman among most prosperous Arab countries



SAMUEL KUTTY

@smuelkuttyvp

The Sultanate of Oman is among the most prosperous Arab countries in the World Prosperity Index 2021 published by the British Legatum Institute.

At the global level, the Sultanate of Oman came 67th out of 167 countries around the world across 104 different variables.

"The Sultanate of Oman performs most strongly in social capital and safety and security. The biggest improvement compared to a decade ago came in education", remarks the Institute in its report.

The most prosperous countries in the world have high levels of freedom, safety and security, education, and health. These countries also have healthy natural environments and conditions that allow for economic prosperity such as protection of investments, favourable business regulations, and market infrastructure.

According to the report, in social capital the Sultanate of Oman ranks 33rd while in safety and security it stands at 39 globally.

In health, living conditions

The Sultanate of Oman performs most strongly in social capital and safety and security. The biggest improvement compared to a decade ago came in education

BRITISH LEGATUM INSTITUTE REPORT

and education, the Sultanate of Oman ranks at 57th, 67th and 76th positions, respectively. In economic quality it ranks 87, enterprise conditions 47 and investment conditions it stands at 51.

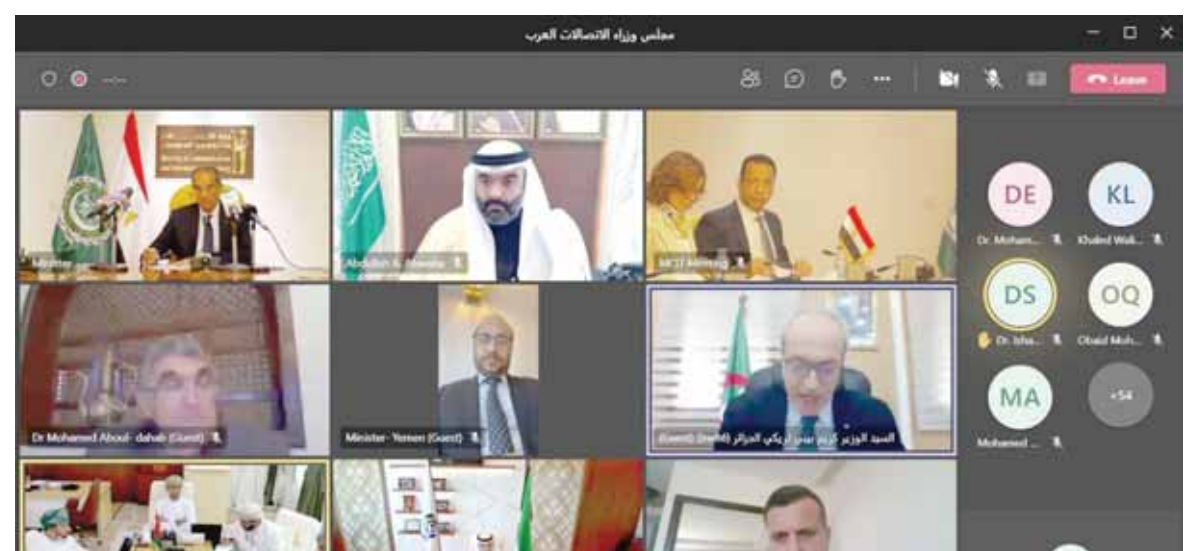
The Legatum Prosperity Index is an annual ranking developed by the Legatum Institute, a London-based think-tank with a bold vision to create a global movement of people committed to creating the pathways from poverty to prosperity and the transformation of society.

"Global prosperity has been undermined by the continuous weakening of many of the key facets of governance, which have deteriorated for the third successive year", the report points out. In governance, the Sultanate of Oman occupies the 87th position and the ranking for infrastructure and market access stands at 53.

In a prosperous society, says the report, "people live in peace, free from the threat of violence, oppression, and crime. Everyone's inherent dignity is respected, and freedom of speech, worship, and assembly are protected".

Denmark took the number one spot from Norway in the 2019 rankings. Denmark ranked first for living conditions, second for personal freedom and social capital, and third for effective governance.

The other countries in the list of top 10 are Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Germany and Luxembourg. The Arab countries include the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.



Muscat is Arab Digital Capital for 2022



FROM P1

Meanwhile, Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Muscat, said that the victory is an incentive to exert more efforts towards digital transformation that responds to the goals of Oman Vision 2040, notably creating smart technical systems that motivate innovation, developing skills and consolidating institutional partnerships.

Al Busaidy told ONA that the selection of Muscat as Arab Digital Capital is testimony to model digital capabilities and resources to attract promising investments

in the field of technology and communications.

"By hosting the event, Muscat Governorate's Office seeks to make the capital's digital programmes harmonious with the four axes of the Capital's Strategy of Excellence, namely sustainable environment, corporate/institutional governance, economic development and society. The strategy puts the city on track for the incarnation of a desired digital reality that will reflect positively on the daily life of individuals and establishments," said Al Busaidy.

Sultanate of Oman's delegation at the 25th meeting of the Arab Minister

of Communications and Information Technology was headed by Dr Ali bin Amer al Shidhani, Communications and Information Technology Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

The Arab digital capital is selected on an annual basis to host successful initiatives and models. The city organises a cluster of events that highlight its excellence in upgrading the economic, social, health and educational environment, besides augmenting the welfare of society and showcasing its capabilities to become a global leader in the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). — ONA

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FOOD OF
THE
FUTURE

Scientists agree that insects may be a good alternative to high-quality proteins, which do not deplete natural resources. Today, delicious insect dishes have begun to infiltrate European meals. And insects such as



LOCUSTS



COCKROACHES



WORMS



SPIDERS



CATERPILLARS

seem to be on their way to the tables around the world



ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zinabalnasseri

Insects have of late become a popular delicacy in most countries of the world. With the rise in population, it is very necessary to check the depletion of natural resources by taking measures such as cutting down on the consumption of animal protein foods. Anticipating this imminent danger, scientists had to propose alternatives to animal proteins whose production drains the Earth's resources.

Recently, scientists have agreed that insects may be a good alternative to high-quality proteins and at the same time do not deplete nature's resources such as animal food. Even though insects cause some damage to agricultural crops, they have another function as food for humans, and it can even be manufactured and exported as different food items. This indicates that insects may constitute a rich food source for the inhabitants of the Earth in the future.

In light of the growing need for other sources of food, as well as the desire to treat animals more humanely, some expect that eating insects will eventually spread greatly in the Western and developed countries. They expect pancakes made of flour extracted from crickets or falafel stuffed with weevil flour to become favourite dishes like sushi.

Executive Director of the Oman Centre for Animal and Plant Genetic Resources, Dr Nadia al Saadi, has said in a statement: "It is widely accepted that by 2050 the world population will be 9 billion, which means that current food production will need to be nearly doubled".

She continued, "This is not a simple task, as land is becoming scarce. Expansion of the area devoted to agriculture is rarely feasible and viable.

Moreover, the oceans currently face problems like overfishing, climate change and a lack of water which will have far-reaching effects on animal husbandry and crop production. So facing food and nutrition challenges is making governments, scientists and the food industry re-evaluate what we eat and how it is produced", confirming "I'm very serious when I tell you that bugs are a big choice on the table".

Insects are among the major resources readily available in forests, as a protein-rich food source. They form part of the traditional diet of at least two billion people around the world. Since the collection and breeding of insects is a source of employment and income, this activity currently takes place mostly at the domestic level and can also be practised on an industrial scale. Insects do not require much energy to produce food, due to their cold-blooded nature. On an average, insects consume two kilograms of food to produce one kilogram of "insect meat". On the other hand, cattle require eight kilograms of feed to produce one kilogram of beef.

Moreover, insects produce only a tiny fraction of emissions from exhausts such as methane, ammonia and other greenhouse gases. Insects can also be used to reduce waste, aiding in the natural fertilisation of the soil by returning nutrients to the earth, as well as reducing unpleasant odours.

Today, delicious insect dishes have begun to infiltrate European meals after a long wait, as many people of the world have preceded them in various continents. Frogs, however, have occupied their place on European tables for a long time ago. But many other insects such as spiders, cockroaches, worms, locusts and caterpillars seem to be on their way to the tables around the world. So, are you ready for food of the future?

Arab Parliament affirms stand on regional issues



AMMAN: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Council of Oman, on Sunday took part in deliberations of the 2nd sitting of the 3rd legislative term of the Arab Parliament chaired by Dr Adel al Asoumi, Speaker of the Arab Parliament.

At the outset of the session, held in the Jordanian

Parliament, Dr Adel al Asoumi affirmed that the Arab Parliament will always back the Arab issues in all international fora, particularly the Palestinian cause.

He commended the outcomes of the last GCC Summit held in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). He

also reiterated the Arab Parliament's support for the upcoming Arab Summit, scheduled to be held in Algeria in March 2022.

Further, the members of the Arab Parliament were briefed on the reports of the subcommittees stemming from the permanent committees.

The most significant conclusion reached by the committees' reports laid emphasis on the importance of setting laws and visions, as well as devising guiding policies related to sustainable development, such as climate change legislation, among others.

— ONA

■ COAST GUARD POLICE FOILS DRUG SMUGGLING ATTEMPT



MUSCAT: The Coast Guard Police Command, in cooperation with the Directorate-General for Combating Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, seized an Asian boat carrying three infiltrators while entering the Omani regional waters near the coast of Muscat Governorate and recovered more than 46 kg of crystal meth from them.

Two vaccine doses must for entering the country

FROM P1

(while at the same time maintaining other health services), the Covid-19 Supreme Committee took the decisions listed below, which apply with effect from date of publication of this statement till January 31, 2022.

Firstly, to apply two-dose vaccination as a prerequisite for entry of non-Omanis aged 18 years and above to the Sultanate of Oman from all checkpoints.

Secondly, to allow entry to the Sultanate of Oman only for arriving passengers who show negative PCR test issued within a maximum of 72 hours.

Thirdly, to cancel the decision that bans entry of arrivals from countries listed before, namely: South

Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Eswatini and Mozambique.

Covid-19 Supreme Committee reaffirms that vaccination remains as a condition to enter public and private establishments.

It stresses that all precautionary measures have to be applied: prohibiting people who suffer from pulmonary diseases from entering workplaces and applying all precautionary measures within and outside workplaces, including wearing face masks properly, observing physical distance, keeping the hands clean, avoiding unauthorised assembling and crowdedness and physical greeting like shaking hands and embracing.

— ONA

Concern grows as Covid cases surge in the region

VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Sunday reported 121 new cases of Covid-19 and one death.

The Minister of Health will hold a press conference of the Supreme Committee on Monday amidst concerns of a new wave of Covid cases across the region, including in the Sultanate of Oman.

Of 121 cases announced on Sunday, 43 cases were reported on Thursday, 31 on Friday, and 47 on Saturday, bringing the total number of cases registered to 305,105, including 4,114 deaths.

The last Covid-19 related death recorded in the Sultanate of Oman was 53 days ago on November 3.

The recovery rate dropped slightly to 98.4 per cent as active

OF 121 CASES ANNOUNCED IN THE COUNTRY ON SUNDAY, 43 CASES WERE REPORTED ON THURSDAY, 31 ON FRIDAY, AND 47 ON SATURDAY, BESIDES ONE DEATH

cases shot up to 64 from 38 on Thursday.

In the last 24 hours, three patients were admitted to hospitals across the country, taking the number of inpatients to 13, including two in the intensive care units.

Elsewhere in the neighbourhood, the UAE recorded 1,803 new cases on Sunday, including two deaths.

Authorities there have urged

people to act responsibly during the holiday season and continue to abide by precautionary measures such as the wearing of masks when outdoors.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has instructed mosques across the kingdom to ensure worshippers' compliance with precautions against Covid-19 in view of the rising cases.

The ministry has called on imams and preachers to educate society about the importance of maintaining public health and adherence to the regulations.

Saudi Arabia has increased the push for the vaccine, announcing that everyone 18 years of age or older will need to get a booster dose by February 2022.

Jordan, UAE, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia have been added to Qatar's red list.

Film society screens flicks at Dubai expo

DUBAI: Oman Film and Theater Society is taking part in Expo 2020 Dubai during the period from December 26 to 28.

The society will screen more than 15 films, coinciding with launching a campaign codenamed 'Make Your Film in Oman'. The campaign aims at encouraging film-makers to work in the Sultanate of Oman, as well as highlighting the landmarks and unique nature in the country.

Eight Omani films were screened on Sunday at Expo 2020 Dubai while 13 short films will be screened on Monday.

— ONA

Labour Department of Al Dakhiliyah discusses private school appointments

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, DEC 26

The Department of Private Schools for the Directorate of Education in Al Dakhiliyah has organised a meeting with the Labour Department of Al Dakhiliyah, within the framework of the existing cooperation between the two departments.

The meeting was attended by Amal bint Khalfan al Shukri, Director of the Private Schools Department, and representatives of the two departments.

The director said that such meetings are important as they help resolve issues and difficulties with regard to employment and appointments in



private schools. It also gives the opportunity for the representatives of the Labour Department to familiarise themselves with the frameworks and mechanisms used in appointments.

Badr bin Hilal al Abri, a second supervisory specialist in the Private Schools Department, presented

a working paper entitled Appointment Procedures in Private Schools in accordance with the procedures followed in the ministry after receiving the initial approval for the appointment of teaching staff.

He talked about the jobs that are assigned directly by the Labour Department without

referring to the Department of Private Schools in the governorate. Then he gave the introduction of the latest developments in the labour law and contracts related to private schools, with the development of proposals for topics submitted by the Labour Department.

The Labour Department of Al Dakhiliyah participated with presenting a working paper in the second programme of the Private Schools Forum for owners, and principals of private schools.

The meeting concluded with a discussion on finding employment solutions in private schools through the data of job seekers in the Labour Department.



Sultanate of Oman
The Council of Administrative Affairs for the Judiciary

Re-Tender Announcement

The Administrative Affairs Council of the Judiciary announces its desire to re-tender the following tender:

Tender No	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Vendor Grade	Tender Document Fee
10/2021	Unified Communications Project.	28/12/2021	05/01/2022	Excellent & First & Second	RO. 25/-

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

Bidders should submit their offers electronically via the aforementioned site and attach to each bid an electronic copy of the provisional insurance in the form of a bank guarantee or a certified check from one of the banks operating in the country at a rate of (1%) of the bid value and is valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submission. The offers are meant in the name of the Chairman of the Internal Committee for Tenders in the Council of Administrative Affairs for the Judiciary, And based on the Tender Board Circular No. (07/2020), we confirm that the necessity of uploading the soft copy of the bid bond when submitting the tender in a support system while preserving the original bid bond without the need to hand it over to the board until the council is asked to hand over the original one.

- 1- **For inquiries and clarifications on the tender:**
Submit inquiries related to the project electronically through the website of the electronic tender system (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
- 2- **For inquiries and clarifications on the electronic bidding system:**
Submit inquiries regarding technical support for the electronic bidding system via e-mail and the phone number shown below:

Phone: +968 24166670
Email: etenderhd@ita.gov.om



Relatives of the 16 Kurds, killed when their boat sank in the Channel while trying to reach England, attend their funeral in Arbil on Sunday. – AFP

Bodies of 16 killed in Channel boat disaster repatriated to Iraq

ARBIL, Iraq: The bodies of 16 people killed when their boat sank in the Channel while trying to reach England were repatriated early on Sunday to Iraqi Kurdistan where their families were awaiting them, an AFP photographer saw.

The plane carrying them arrived around 2:00 am at Arbil, capital of the autonomous region in northern Iraq.

The remains were transferred to ambulances to transport them to their hometowns of Darbandikhan, Ranya, Soran and Qadrawa.

At least 27 people perished in the November 24 tragedy, the deadliest disaster since the Channel became a hub for clandestine migrant crossings from France to England.

At the terminal at Arbil airport, emotional families waited for the arrival of the remains of their loved ones,

some hugging each other or showing photos of their late relatives. Originally scheduled for Friday, the repatriation had been postponed twice.

The 27 victims were mostly men but also included seven women, a 16-year-old and a seven-year-old child.

Besides the 16 Iraqi Kurds, the 26 identified included an Iranian Kurd, four Afghan men, three Ethiopians, a Somali and an Egyptian.

Only two people were rescued after their inflatable boat capsized, an Iraqi Kurd and a Sudanese national, according to the French interior ministry.

According to the Iraqi survivor there had been a total of 33 people aboard.

French investigators are still trying to establish a clearer picture of what happened during the disaster. — AFP

Coalition hits Yemen rival camp in ramped up air war

RIYADH: The coalition fighting in Yemen said on Sunday it struck an Ansar Allah fighter camp in the capital Sanaa, as it intensified an aerial bombing campaign against the group.

The coalition, which backs Yemen's internationally recognised government against the Ansar Allah in a civil war, said it destroyed weapons storehouses in the Ansar Allah-held capital, according to the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA).

"The operation in Sanaa was an immediate response to an attempt to transfer weapons from Al Tashrifat camp in Sanaa," it said in a statement, adding it "destroyed weapons warehouses".

The coalition was scheduled to hold a news conference on Sunday at which it has said it will show evidence of involvement by Hezbollah in the Yemeni conflict.

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014 pitting the government against the Ansar Allah who controls much of the north.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed, in what the United Nations has described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The coalition launched a "large-scale" military operation against the Ansar Allah on Saturday, the Saudi authorities said, after missiles fired by the fighters killed two people in the kingdom, the first such deaths in three years.

Those air raids left dead three civilians, including a child and a woman, Yemeni medics said.

The coalition maintains its op-



An armed man walks at the site of a Saudi-led air strike in Sanaa on Friday. The coalition fighting in Yemen said on Sunday it struck an Ansar Allah fighter camp in the capital. – Reuters

erations are carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law, repeatedly urging the Ansar Allah against using civilians as human shields.

It said it will present during Sunday's news conference "evidence of involvement of Hezbollah in Yemen and use of (Sanaa) airport to target the kingdom", according to SPA.

The Ansar Allah attack was also condemned by the French and US embassies in Saudi Arabia, as well as the kingdom's Gulf Arab allies.

"Ansar Allah attacks are perpetuating the conflict, prolonging the suffering of the Yemeni people,

The operation in Sanaa was an immediate response to an attempt to transfer weapons from Al Tashrifat camp in Sanaa

SAUDI PRESS AGENCY

and endangering the Saudi people alongside more than 70,000 US citizens residing in Saudi Arabia,"

the US embassy said in a statement on Saturday.

French ambassador Ludovic Pouille took to Twitter to offer condolences to the families of the victims of what he called the "barbaric Ansar Allah attack".

The coalition has intensified its air strikes on Sanaa, targeting earlier this week the airport, whose operations have largely ceased because of a Saudi-led blockade since August 2016, with exemptions for aid flights.

The fighters often launch missiles and drones into Saudi Arabia aimed at its airports and oil infrastructure. — AFP

Young Iraqi film students tell their own stories from Mosul

MOSUL: A budding Iraqi filmmaker yells "action!" as an actress clammers over rubble in Mosul's Old City, proud students of a nascent film school in the former militant bastion.

Mosul still bears the scars of the brutal reign of the IS group, who overran the northern Iraqi city in 2014 and imposed their ultraconservative interpretation of religious law.

They destroyed everything from centuries-old churches to musical instruments, before being routed in a devastating battle in 2017.

Now, in a collaboration between the Mosul fine arts academy, a Belgian theatre company and UN cultural agency Unesco, 19 students are getting a chance to

make their first short films.

"We live in Mosul, we know everything that happened," said 20-year-old theatre student Mohammed Fawaz. "We want to show it all to the world through cinema."

Over a four-month course, students get a taste of everything from writing and shooting to acting and editing, according to Milo Rau, artistic director of Belgian NTGent theatre company who is behind the initiative.

Cameras and microphones in hand, the students are now hitting Mosul's streets to tell stories from their wounded city.

'STONE AGE TO MODERNITY'
An actress dressed as a bride



Students of a film school, prepare to shoot a scene, in the war-ravaged northern Iraqi city of Mosul. – AFP

searches for her husband, only to discover he has stepped on a land mine.

Children and other residents crowd around curiously, while a neighbour refuses to turn off a noisy generator.

"We're losing the light," one of the instructors reminds students, as the December sun goes down.

Studying at the fine arts academy after the IS defeat was a bit like "passing from the Stone Age to modernity", said student Fawaz.

A fan of blockbuster movies like the Marvel and "Fast and Furious" franchises, Fawaz spent several of his teen years at home with no television or schooling under the extremists, learning English

through books and thanks to a neighbour.

He and some classmates have already decided "to make films on Mosul and its war", Fawaz said.

After a month-long intensive session in October, the students have been trying out different roles as they pair up to make their films, said Belgian instructor, cameraman and filmmaker Daniel Demoustier.

All the equipment like lenses and sound gear brought in from abroad will stay, he said, with the goal for the students to "pick it up again and start making their films on their own".

Even if only three or four do so, "that will be a great success," he said. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TELAVIV

Israel orders Pfizer's new Covid-19 pill

Israel has ordered 100,000 units of Pfizer Inc's anti-viral Covid-19 pill Paxlovid for people aged 12 and older at risk of severe illness, an Israeli official said on Saturday, confirming a television report.

Channel 12 TV said Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett agreed the deal in a phone conversation with Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla. There was no immediate confirmation from the company.

The first oral and at home



treatment for Covid-19, Paxlovid was nearly 90 per cent effective in preventing hospitalisations and deaths in patients at high risk of severe illness, according to data from Pfizer's clinical trial.

TRIPOLI

28 migrants found dead on Libyan coast

The bodies of 28 migrants have washed up on Libya's western coast after their boat sunk, a security official said on Sunday, the latest tragedy on the world's deadliest migration route.

"Libyan Red Crescent teams recovered 28 bodies of dead migrants and found three survivors at two different sites on the beaches of Al-Alous," some 90 kilometres from Tripoli, the source said.

Meanwhile, Tunisian coastguards have rescued 48 illegal



migrants trying to reach Europe from neighbouring Libya in a makeshift boat.

Red Crescent official Mongi Slim said the migrants were intercepted and rescued off Zarzis when their boat broke down.

CAIRO

Sudan says 58 policemen hurt in protests

Sudanese authorities said on Sunday that 58 police personnel had been injured during protests the previous day against military rule, and that tear gas had been used only to confront attacks on security facilities and vehicles, state TV reported.

The Khartoum security committee's statement added that 114 people had been arrested and faced prosecution after Saturday's protests, the latest in a series of rallies against an October 25 coup that upended a transition



towards democratic elections.

Medics aligned with the protest movement said earlier that violence by security forces had caused 178 injuries among demonstrators, including eight with live bullet wounds.

In brief

■ BEIJING



XINJIANG COMMUNIST PARTY CHIEF CHEN REPLACED

China has replaced Chen Quanguo, who as Communist Party chief in the Xinjiang region oversaw a security crackdown targeting ethnic Uyghurs and others in the name of fighting extremism.

Chen, in his post since 2016, will move to another role and Ma Xingrui, governor of the coastal economic powerhouse Guangdong province since 2017, has replaced him, the official Xinhua News Agency said. It gave no other details.

United Nations researchers and human rights activists estimate more than one million people have been detained in camps in western China's Xinjiang region.

■ YANGON



CHARITY'S STAFF MISSING IN DEADLY ATTACK

Aid group Save the Children said it was suspending operations in Myanmar's strife-torn Kayah state after two staff members went missing in an attack that left at least 30 people dead, including women and children, with many bodies burnt.

The two staff were travelling to their home villages for the year-end holidays when they were caught up in the violence in the eastern state, Save the Children said in a statement late on Saturday.

"We have confirmation that their private vehicle was attacked and burned out," the statement said.

■ MANILA



UN SEEKS \$107M AID FOR TYPHOON VICTIMS

The United Nations has launched an appeal for \$107 million in humanitarian assistance for more than 3.3 million people affected by the worst typhoon to hit the Philippines this year.

At least 375 people were killed and nearly 630,000 were displaced by Typhoon Rai's onslaught in central and southern provinces last week, officials said.

The humanitarian assistance plan will support government efforts to provide water, sanitation and hygiene, food and emergency shelter for the next six months, said Gustavo Gonzalez, UN resident and humanitarian coordinator.

Taliban bans women from travelling longer distances without male relative

KABUL: Afghanistan's Taliban authorities said on Sunday that women seeking to travel long distances should not be offered road transport unless they are accompanied by a close male relative.

The guidance issued by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice drew condemnation from rights activists and called on vehicle owners to refuse rides to women not wearing headscarves.

The move follows the Taliban barring many women in public-sector roles from returning to work in the wake of their August 15 seizure of power, and as girls remain largely cut off from state secondary schooling.

It also comes despite the authorities seeking to project a moderate image internationally in a bid to restore aid suspended when the previous government imploded during the final stages of a US military withdrawal.

"Women travelling for more than 72 kilometres should not be offered a ride if they are not accompanied by a close family member," ministry spokesman Sadeq



A Taliban fighter checks the document of a motorist at a checkpoint in Kabul. — AFP

Akif Muhajir said, specifying that the escort must be a close male relative.

The new guidance, circulated on social media networks, also asked people to stop playing music in their vehicles.

Weeks ago, the ministry asked Afghanistan's television channels to stop showing dramas and soap operas featuring women actors. It also called on women TV journalists to wear headscarves while presenting.

Muhajir said on Sunday that the hijab would likewise be required for women seeking transport.

Human Rights Watch blasted the guidance.

"This new order essentially moves... further in the direction of

making women prisoners," Heather Barr, the group's associate director of women's rights, said.

It "shuts off opportunities for them to be able to move about freely, to travel to another city, to do business, (or) to be able to flee if they are facing violence in the home", Barr added.

Early this month, the Taliban issued a decree in the name of their supreme leader instructing the government to enforce women's rights. But it did not mention girls' access to education.

Women's rights were severely curtailed during the Taliban's previous stint in power in the 1990s.

They were forced to wear the face-covering burqa garment, only allowed to leave home with a male chaperone and banned from work and education.

Respect for women's rights has repeatedly been cited by key global donors as a condition for restoring aid.

The UN has warned that Afghanistan faces an "avalanche of hunger" this winter, estimating that 22 million citizens face "acute" food shortages. — AFP

■ BOXING DAY IN HONG KONG



People pose for a selfie in front of a Christmas Tree during Boxing Day at Tai Kwun in Hong Kong Central district on Sunday. — AFP

Dozens still missing after ferry blaze kills 39 in Bangladesh

DHAKA: Rescue workers are still searching for dozens of people who are missing after a fire broke out on a crowded ferry in southern Bangladesh killing at least 39 passengers, officials said on Sunday.

The ferry, *MV Obhijan-10*, was carrying nearly 800 people on Friday as it travelled along the Sugandha river in Jhalakathi district, nearly 150 kilometres south-west of Dhaka.

"We have prepared a list of 29 passengers still missing based on reports from relatives," chief of the district administration Zohar Ali said. Fire Service and Civil Defence department workers who are searching for people did not find anyone on Sunday, he said.



Villagers look at a burnt-out ferry in Jhalakathi. — AFP

"We are not quite sure whether they are alive," he said.

The local administration buried 23 bodies after collecting DNA samples, as they could not

be immediately recognised by relatives, he said, adding that the other bodies had been handed to relatives.

Images on television showed

several hundred people on the river bank, waiting for news of those still missing.

Poor safety standards and broken fire-fighting equipment led to higher casualties in the blaze, according to an official investigating the accident.

"The fire safety management was nearly inoperative, and those who were in charge of the operation could not manage it," Lieutenant Colonel Zillur Rahman of the Fire Service and Civil Defence said, based on preliminary investigations.

It would have been easier to fight the flames with a working pump and hosepipe system, he said. He was not able to say what had caused the fire. — dpa

India expands vaccination drive

NEW DELHI: India will expand its Covid-19 vaccination campaign to include everyone above 15 years old and administer booster jabs to front line workers and some older citizens amid fears that the Omicron variant could trigger a new wave of infections in the country.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an address to the nation late on Saturday, said vaccinations would begin for those between 15 and 18 years from January 3.

He also said booster doses will be administered beginning January 10 as "precaution" to health workers as well as those above 60 years with co-morbidities after recommendation from doctors.

"Today the infection is spreading in many countries of the world due to the new corona variant Omicron. In India too, many people have been found to be infected with Omicron. I would urge all of you not to panic, but be careful and vigilant. Remember to wash hands and mask," Modi said.

The number of Omicron cases increased to 422 across 17 Indian states by Sunday, according to the health ministry.

Several major Indian states have announced moves to restrict social gatherings and other measures to curb infections. — AFP

Russia denies withholding gas supplies to Europe

MOSCOW: Russian energy giant Gazprom has rejected accusations that Moscow is limiting gas deliveries to Europe and denounced Germany's resale of gas to Poland amid soaring prices.

Poland this week accused Moscow of having stopped its deliveries via the Yamal-Europe pipeline that sends Russian gas to Western Europe, accusing Gazprom of "manipulation".

The pipeline was operating in reverse mode this week, sending gas from Germany to Poland, public data showed, as European gas prices ticked up.

President Vladimir Putin on Friday denied that the flow direction was a political move and said that Poland had "sidelined" Russia in managing the pipeline.

"All accusations against Russia and Gazprom that we are not supplying enough gas to the European market are absolutely groundless and unacceptable and untrue," Gazprom spokesman Sergei Kupriyanov said late on Saturday, calling the accusations "lies".

He said some buyers of Russian gas, in particular Germany and France, have not made additional orders, and slammed the reverse flow of gas that came as "winter is just beginning" as "not the most rational decision."

"I don't even want to talk about



Russia has announced that more than 10,000 troops had finished month-long drills near Ukraine. — AFP

the price of such reverse supplies. These prices are significantly higher than the prices for contract volumes set by Gazprom, he said in an interview on state television.

"All problems in Western Europe have been created by themselves and there is no need to

blame Gazprom for this. It is better to look in the mirror."

Western countries have for weeks accused Russia of limiting gas deliveries to put pressure on Europe amid tensions over the Ukraine conflict and to push through the controversial Nord

Stream 2 pipeline set to ship Russian gas to Germany.

Germany's energy ministry, for its part, on Sunday poured cold water on accusations of Russia withholding deliveries.

"Long-term supply contracts, including the Russian ones, are

being adhered to and the long-term quantities of gas are arriving in Germany," the ministry said.

On Saturday Russia announced on Saturday that more than 10,000 troops had finished month-long drills near Ukraine, amid Western accusations that Moscow was

plotting an invasion of its ex-Soviet neighbour.

The defence ministry said in a statement that the drills for Southern Military District forces had taken place in a host of southern regions including Rostov, Krasnodar and Crimea, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014. But the drills also took place further afield, including in Stavropol, Astrakhan, North Caucasus republics and even in Russia's Caucasus ally Armenia.

The defence ministry said the troops were returning to their permanent bases and that stand-by units would be readied for the New Year's holidays.

Western countries have accused Russia of massing upwards of 100,000 troops near Ukraine ahead of a possible winter invasion.

According to Kiev's estimates, the number of Russian troops along Ukraine's borders has increased from around 93,000 troops in October to 104,000 now.

Russia says it is free to move its forces on its territory how it sees fit and denies that it is planning a large-scale attack.

It has presented the West with sweeping security demands, saying Nato must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet republics. — AFP

S African icon Desmond Tutu dies at 90, tributes pour in

JOHANNESBURG: Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and veteran of South Africa's struggle against white minority rule, died on Sunday at the age of 90.

In 1984 Tutu Key dates in the life of South African cleric and activist Desmond Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize for his non-violent opposition to apartheid. A decade later, he witnessed the end of that regime and chaired a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up to unearth atrocities committed during those dark days.

The outspoken Tutu was considered the nation's conscience by both Black and white, an enduring testament to his faith and spirit of reconciliation in a divided nation.

He was diagnosed with prostate cancer in the late 1990s and in recent years was hospitalised on several



occasions to treat infections associated with his cancer treatment.

"The passing of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu is another chapter of bereavement in our nation's farewell to a generation of outstanding South Africans who have bequeathed us a liberated South Africa," President Cyril Ramaphosa said.

"Desmond Tutu was a patriot without equal."

The presidency gave no

details on the cause of death.

Tutu preached against the tyranny of the white minority but his fight for a fairer South Africa never ended, calling the Black political elite to account with as much feistiness as he had the white Afrikaners.

In his final years, he regretted that his dream of a "Rainbow Nation" had yet to come true.

"Ultimately, at the age of 90, he died peacefully at the Oasis Frail Care Centre in Cape Town this morning," Dr Ramphela Mamphela, acting chairperson of the Archbishop Desmond Tutu IP Trust and Co-ordinator of the Office of the Archbishop, said in a statement on behalf of the Tutu family.

A frail-looking Tutu was seen in October being wheeled into his former parish at St George's Cathedral in Cape Town, which used to be a safe haven for anti-apartheid activists, for a service marking his 90th birthday.

— Reuters

‘Best Christmas present’: La Palma volcano eruption ends

MADRID: The residents of the Spanish island of La Palma received a Christmas present to remember when the volcanic eruption that has unleashed rivers of lava for three months was finally declared over.

The volcano, which started erupting on the Atlantic island on September 19 after half a century of dormancy, suddenly went dormant again on the evening of December 13. There have been no fissure-style eruptions or major seismic activity since.

The local emergency committee Pevolca said on Saturday that because there had been a cessation of activity for more than 10 days, experts were confident that the volcano had once again fallen silent.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez called it "the best Christmas present."

"All my appreciation to the people of La Palma," he tweeted. "We will continue working together, all the institutions, to



An aerial view of houses covered with lava and ash following the eruption of volcano on the Canary Island of La Palma. — AFP

relaunch the wonderful island of La Palma and repair the damage caused."

It will be a tall order: Although no lives were lost, more than 2,900 homes and other buildings were destroyed and nearly 1,200 hectares of the island were covered in a metre-thick layer of lava. The damage is estimated at more than \$1 billion.

Parts of the island look like

a moonscape, with only the chimneys of buried houses sticking out of the ash in places. More than 7,000 people were forced to flee their homes to avoid the encroaching lava flows.

People returning to their homes were told to open their windows for at least 15 minutes to make sure any toxic gas that had accumulated could escape, state broadcaster RTVE reported.

SHORT TAKES

SAO PAULO

Bam burst forces thousands from homes

A dam collapsed in the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia after weeks of heavy rains, swamping already swollen local rivers and threatening flash floods, regional authorities said late on Saturday.

The Igua dam is near the city of Vitoria da Conquista in southern Bahia, leading authorities to evacuate residents at risk down river, mainly in the town of Itambe.

Bahia Governor Rui Castro said at least 300 people have been evacuated from each of some 20 towns in the state that were hit by



floods caused by heavy rainfall for almost two months. "Thousands of people have had to leave their homes because the water rose one or two meters, even three meters in some places," he told reporters.

LONDON

Armed man arrested on grounds of Queen's home

British police have arrested a man suspected of breaking into the grounds of Windsor Castle, where Queen Elizabeth II was spending Christmas, with what was reported to be a crossbow.

"An investigation is ongoing following this incident and we are working with colleagues from the Metropolitan police," the local force said in a statement late on Saturday, adding that the 19-year-old man was found on Christmas Day.

The Queen spent a low-key



Christmas Day at the castle, west of London.

The man was arrested on suspicion of breach or trespass of a protected site and possession of an offensive weapon.

WASHINGTON

Biden commends Americans' Covid resilience

US President Joe Biden on Saturday commended Americans for their strength and resilience in the face of the raging Covid-19 pandemic, urging "hope and renewal" during the holiday season.

In his first Christmas address as president, Biden praised "the enormous courage, character, resilience, and resolve in all of you who heal, comfort, teach, and protect and serve in ways big and small."

"You show there is much



to gain in appreciation and gratitude for the gift of time and goodwill we share as we look out for one another," Biden said in a statement with First Lady Jill Biden.

A weapon of war: Role of social media in conflicts

JAMES OKONG'O

Since clashes erupted between Ethiopian forces and northern rebels more than a year ago, another war has flared up online as the rivals spread false claims to control the conflict's narrative.

Digital activists have been engaged in a fierce battle to discredit their opponents, from pro-government sites claiming to promote independent fact-checking to opponents sharing doctored content of alleged attacks.

Experts warn that these online campaigns have fed into an already explosive situation in a country with a history of ethnic polarisation.

"Inflammatory messages have worsened the situation in Ethiopia by sowing fear and confusion and further igniting tensions," Ethiopian media and human rights law expert Yohannes Eneyew Ayalew told the AFP Fact Check.

The war in the Tigray region, which spilt into two neighbouring states in July, has killed thousands of people and sparked a severe humanitarian crisis. Fighters on all sides stand accused of committing atrocities. Although the rebels announced their retreat back to Tigray on December 20, no official peace talks have been launched yet.

Communications remain cut in the conflict zone and access for journalists is restricted, making it difficult to verify battlefield claims.

"(It's been) difficult to know with confidence what is happening on the ground — a feature of this conflict from the beginning," Joseph Siegle of the African Centre for Strategic Studies said.

"The prevalence of false narratives is contributing to increased scepticism towards all claims of abuse. This, in turn, is impeding a more coordinated and uniform international response to the crisis."

AFP Fact Check has verified multiple claims since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray in November 2020 after accusing the region's dissident ruling party of attacks on federal army camps.

They included photos being shared in a false context, fake official statements and manipulated content.

— AFP



Inflammatory messages have worsened the situation in Ethiopia by sowing fear and confusion and further igniting tensions

YOHANNES ENYEW AYALEW

media and human rights law expert



HOMAGE TO TSUNAMI VICTIMS

A fisherman ties up a black flag on his boat to pay homage to the victims of the 2004 tsunami at Pattinapakkam Beach in Chennai on Sunday.

— AFP

Learn a language, have a second soul



Abdulaziz Al Jahdhami
aljahdhami22@gmail.com

ONE LANGUAGE SETS YOU IN A CORRIDOR FOR LIFE, BUT TWO LANGUAGES OPEN EVERY DOOR ALONG THE WAY IN YOUR LIFETIME

Learning a language can sometimes be very challenging and frustrating experience for some people. Trying to acquire a new language is always a big task, but when that new language does not share a root with your native tongue, the learning process becomes even more difficult. Then, the task seems not as easy as it sounds when one gets the idea to learn a new language. It is easy to begin the learning journey, but challenging to see it through.

Mastering the language requires years of practice and study perhaps, but gaining conversation skills can make it easier if you dedicate yourself to the journey. Therefore, if you are one of those interested to learn a new language, sometimes you might feel that you have reached a dead-end and motivating yourself to continue can become hard. Thus, you need to be always self-motivated and remember that speaking a foreign language, not only opens new doors, but also brings many other advantages.

According to the British author, Frank Smith, one language sets you in a corridor for life, but two languages open every door along the way in your lifetime. Despite this, you may know some of the reasons why some people do not like learning new languages. Many are lacking the interest to learn another language other than their mother tongue. They underestimate the

importance and the value of learning to speak a different language. It is true that humans become enemies to what they are ignorant of in their life!

In fact, in today's increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, one has to learn another language, so he can easily mingle and communicate with others. For that reason, mastering a new language is an important skill that gives you the opportunity to engage with the world in a more professional manner. To learn a language means to have one more window from which you look at the world. Knowing a different language makes you a local no matter where you are and opens up your world literally and metaphorically.

It is attributed that language is the road map of a culture; it tells you where its people come from and where they are going. As Nelson Mandela said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language that goes to his heart". Learning a new language is not only acquiring the linguistic aspects, rather exploring another culture too. The community, kindness and humanity of those speaking that particular language will touch you in a way or another. Rather, you will see the rewards of learning that language for many years to come!

Being capable of speaking another language allows you to appreciate the

traditions, religions, arts, and history of the people associated with that language. Your greater understanding of their culture and language promotes greater tolerance, empathy and acceptance of others. Some studies indicated that children who studied another language are expressing more positive attitudes towards the culture associated with that language. Actually, having another language serves as possessing a second soul.

While learning a new language, there are different keys to assist the learning journey and becoming fluent. Thankfully, the modern technology does a lot to facilitate the learning process. Watching movies and children's TV programmes in that language simplifies the language acquisition as the language is much simpler. Watching visuals and hearing audios in the foreign language marks a better technique by which you gain a better "ear" for listening.

Seeing and hearing is not enough of course. Therefore, in addition to acquiring the vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure, practice is extremely important to learn the language. Conversing with native speakers is very critical, though sometimes it is difficult to find a conversational partner. Hence, keep learning and practicing as much as you can to boost your confidence.

A diplomatic way out of Russia-Ukraine crisis



CHARLES A KUPCHAN

Charles A Kupchan, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, is Professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University and the author of Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World

During his annual press conference on December 23, Russian President Vladimir Putin railed against Nato enlargement. "How would the US react if we delivered rockets near their borders with Canada or Mexico?" he pointedly asked.

Putin's increasingly combative rhetoric, coupled with Russia's huge troop buildup on its border with Ukraine, suggests that the Kremlin is readying an invasion to pull the country back into Russia's sphere of influence and prevent its accession to Nato. Europe could well be heading towards its deadliest interstate conflict since World War II.

But war is hardly foreordained, given the costs that Russia could face if it invaded its neighbour. Although Ukraine's military

forces are still no match for Russia's, they would be far better at defending the country than they were in 2014, when Russia grabbed Crimea and intervened in the eastern Donbas region to support separatists. Russian aggression has alienated most Ukrainians, making widespread popular resistance likely if Russia tries to seize a major chunk of the country. Putin can expect not only heavy Russian casualties, but also the severe economic sanctions that the United States and its European allies are currently weighing.

With Russia facing such clear downsides if it opts for war, diplomacy has a reasonable chance of averting conflict. Indeed, Moscow recently released a detailed agenda for broad

negotiations over European security. Even though many of Russia's proposals are non-starters, the US and its European partners appear ready to engage, with the US hinting that talks with the Kremlin could begin early next year. In preparation, the Western allies should identify a combination of carrots and sticks that will increase the appeal of a diplomatic route to de-escalation while raising the prospective costs if Putin chooses war.

As for the carrots, Nato should reassure the Kremlin that it is not about to integrate Ukraine or turn the country into a forward outpost of the West's best weaponry. Although Russia's aggression against and coercion of its neighbour is unacceptable, its concern about a

militarised Ukraine entering Nato is understandable. Major powers don't like it when other major powers show up on their doorstep.

Even so, US President Joe Biden and his Nato counterparts are right to reject Putin's demand for a guarantee that Nato will not offer membership to Ukraine. After all, one of the alliance's core principles is that sovereign countries should be free to choose their geopolitical alignments.

In practice, however, Nato membership for Ukraine is not in the cards. Admitting it would not only provoke Russia, but also saddle the alliance with defending a nation that has a 2,414-kilometre border with Russia. Biden has already made clear that "school's out" regarding Ukraine's potential Nato membership and that

sending US combat troops to the country is "not on the table."

That reality creates a diplomatic opening. With admission to Nato requiring the consent of all members, Biden can credibly reassure Putin that membership for Ukraine is not up for consideration. And Nato members can provide assurances that they would put quantitative and qualitative limits on the weaponry they provide to Ukraine. Meanwhile, the alliance can, at least in theory, stand by its open-door policy. Such understandings may fall short of Putin's demand for a codified guarantee, but they should be sufficient to ease his fears that Ukraine will become a Nato garrison on Russia's southern frontier.

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Sultanate of Oman player Abdulaziz al Maqbali was the star performer as he struck a hat-trick in the match. Seeb’s earlier goals were netted by Abdulaziz al Maqbali while Eid al Farsi added the third goal

Seeb overwhelm Al Ittihad to go top in league order

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 26

Seeb thrashed Al Ittihad as they won the fixture 5-0 in the seventh week of the Omantel League on Sunday night.

At Seeb Stadium, Seeb players dominated the encounter and the match was completely one-sided.

Sultanate of Oman player Abdulaziz al Maqbali was the star performer as he struck a hat-trick in the match.

Seeb’s earlier goals were netted by Abdulaziz al Maqbali while Eid

al Farsi added the third goal.

Al Maqbali returned again to score the fourth goal and his team-mate Al Mundher al Alawi registered the fifth goal.

The Seeb players managed to return back to the victories loop after they draw with Oman in the previous round.

The triumph took Seeb to the top as they reached to 15th point while the Salalah representative club is struggling in the danger zone at three points only and the team suffered fourth defeat in the league.



Al Nahdha, coached by former national team head coach Hamed al Azani, snatched one point from Al Nasr at Al Saada Stadium as the match ended at 1-1.

Despite Al Nahdha being the better side in the first half after missing many scoring opportunities, Hamed al Habsi put the hosts ahead in the earlier of second half after the first half ended in a goalless draw.

Mohammed Khaseeb’s header helped the guests to score the equaliser in the 68th minute. With the draw, Al Nahdha added one

point and reached 12 points while Al Nasr at 14 points.

Bahla continued missing points as they registered their third successive draw in the league.

The match against Suhar ended by 1-1 at Nizwa Sports Complex.

Despite Bahla leading the result by Majid al Shukaili in the 78th minute, Suhar’s Abdo Lai managed to score the equaliser within seven minutes only in the 85th minute.

The draw gave one point to each team as Bahla raised the tally to ten points while Sohar reached eight points.



Pat Cummins of Australia celebrates with team-mates after dismissing Zak Crawley of England in the third Ashes Test at Melbourne Cricket Ground. – Reuters

England on the canvas after Boxing Day pounding

MELBOURNE: England's hopes of keeping the Ashes alive plunged on Sunday as their batsmen again capitulated on a dismal opening day of the third Test against Australia in Melbourne.

Sent in to bat on a grassy wicket after returning Australia captain Pat Cummins won the toss, England were skittled for 185 to the delight of a festive Boxing Day crowd, leaving the tourists' bowlers with an improbable rescue mission.

By stumps, that mission appeared doomed, with Australia having pushed to 61 for one on the strength of a quickfire 38 by David Warner.

Marcus Harris was 20 not out and nightwatchman Nathan Lyon yet to score.

Leading 2-0 after thumping wins in Brisbane and Adelaide, holders Australia need only a draw in Melbourne to retain the urn.

But Cummins' men will be hell-bent on taking the series outright before the New Year test in Sydney.

Joe Root's England, meanwhile, need a miracle.

Only one team has ever turned around a 2-0 deficit to win the Ashes. That was Don Bradman's Australia, winning the 1936/37 series 3-2 on home soil.

SCOREBOARD

England first innings	
Hameed c Carey b Cummins	0
Z Crawley c Green b Cummins	12
D Malan c Warner b Cummins	14
J Root c Carey b Starc	50
B Stokes c Lyon b Green	25
J Bairstow c Green b Starc	35
J Buttler c Boland b Lyon	3
M Wood lbw Boland	6
O Robinson c Boland b Lyon	22
J Leach c Smith b Lyon	13
J Anderson (not out)	0
Extras (LB-4, NB-1)	5
Total (all out, 65.1 overs)	185
Fall of wickets: 1-4, 2-13, 3-61, 4-82, 5-115, 6-128, 7-141, 8-159, 9-176	
Bowling: Starc 14-3-45-2, Cummins 15-2-36-3, Boland 13-2-48-1, Green 8-4-7-1, Lyon 14-1-3-36-3	
Australia first innings	
M Harris (not out)	20
D Warner c Crawley b Anderson	38
N Lyon (not out)	0
Extras (LB-1, NB-2)	3
Total (For 1 wkt, 16 overs)	61
Fall of wickets: 1-57	
Bowling: Anderson 5-1-14-1, Robinson 5-0-23-0, Wood 4-0-15-0, Stokes 2-0-8-0	

England could do little to repel Cummins, whose pace bowling accounted for three wickets in the morning.

But several soft dismissals after lunch crushed England's hopes of salvaging a respectable total while highlighting the team's batting fragility this series.

Though Root chalked up his ninth half-century in Australia, he was culpable in his dismissal for 50, caught behind with a loose drive at a Mitchell Starc delivery.

The England captain now shares

with former Australia opener Bruce Laird the unenviable record of the most test fifties in Australia without making a century (9).

Ben Stokes (25) and wicketkeeper Jos Buttler (3) also paid the price for poor shot selection, the former caught trying to heave Cameron Green over point and the latter slogging Nathan Lyon straight to debutant paceman Scott Boland at deep midwicket.

"We've got to get a bit stronger and tougher with our dismissals," batsman Jonny Bairstow told reporters.

"That's just being honest with ourselves."

England's rejigged opening partnership of Zak Crawley and Haseeb Hameed lasted 12 balls before Cummins had Hameed caught behind for a duck.

Crawley, who replaced Rory Burns, managed 12 before edging Cummins straight to Green at gully.

The Australia skipper bagged his third wicket in the last over before lunch, with Dawid Malan (14) edging to the slips to break a budding 48-run partnership with Root. Bairstow battled for his 35 before going on the offensive in the search for quick runs as his batting partners dwindled.

— Reuters

India openers make solid start as South Africa toil

PRETORIA: Openers KL Rahul and Mayank Agarwal negotiated a toothless South African seam attack to steer India to a position of strength before Lungi Ngidi kept South Africa in the game with two wickets on day one of the first Test at Centurion Park on Sunday.

India were 157/2 at tea after losing the wickets of Mayank Agarwal (60) and Cheteshwar Pujara (0).

KL Rahul and Virat Kohli were at the crease trying to take India's fight further.

After India elected to bat, Agarwal (46) was the more aggressive of the two but was ably supported by Rahul (29) as they took advantage of a slow pitch that is expected to quicken up as the game goes on.

South Africa, playing their first test since June, could not build pressure as they bowled both sides of the wicket and did not make the batsmen play enough.

Fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi had not bowled a single delivery in red-ball cricket since their series win in the West Indies and they struggled to find the right line.

The home side toiled for 75 minutes before creating an opportunity, but it was spilled by wicket-keeper Quinton de Kock.

Debutant left-arm seamer Marco Jansen found the edge of Agarwal's bat but De Kock, who moved late to his right, dropped what should have been a regulation take.

It denied the 21-year-old his first test scalp and was a deflating moment for the struggling hosts.

Jansen was preferred to Duanne Olivier after the latter had been expected to play his first test since 2019 following a spell in English cricket. Jansen's performances in the recent tour by India A appeared to get him the surprise nod.



India's KL Rahul celebrates after scoring a half-century during the first day of the first Test against South Africa. – AFP

After India elected to bat, Agarwal (46) was the more aggressive of the two but was ably supported by Rahul (29) as they took advantage of a slow pitch that is expected to quicken up as the game goes on

He went for 12 in his first over and was wayward at times, but also beat the bat on a number of occasions and looked the most likely bowler to make a breakthrough. India selected batsman Ajinkya Rahane in the middle order ahead of Shreyas Iyer and Hanuma Vihari, and a seam attack of Mohammed Shami, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj and all-rounder Shardul Thakur.

The touring side are hoping to secure a first test series win in South Africa with matches to follow in Johannesburg and Cape Town. — Reuters

Khuwair, Amerat secure exciting victories in D20 League

MUSCAT: Amazing strokeplay by Sultanate of Oman veterans Amir Kaleem and Zeeshan Siddiqui powered Khuwair Warriors to a sensational five-wicket victory against Qurum Thunders in an Oman Cricket-organised D20 Cricket League game at OC Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Saturday.

Requiring 183 to win, the duo was involved in a whirlwind opening stand of 74 that came off only 3.3 overs, laying the foundation for a successful chase as Khuwair sealed the win in 18.4 overs thanks to the late onslaught by Sean Novak who smashed an unbeaten 26 off only 16 balls including 3 huge hits over the fence. Zeeshan whacked 39 off 14 including 4 fours and 3 sixes while Amir Kaleem clobbered 56 off 24 including 6 fours and 4 sixes.

Prolific opener Kashyapkumar Prajapati topscored for Qurum with a hurricane 95 off 48 that had 6 fours and an equal number of sixes, leading his side to an imposing 182

for 6. Khuwair pacer Muzahir Raza was quite impressive, picking up 3 for 24.

Brief Scores (D20): Qurum Thunders 182 for 6 in 20 overs (Kashyapkumar Prajapati 95 – 6x4, 6x6, Muzahir Raza 3-24) lost to Khuwair Warriors 186 for 5 in 18.4 overs (Amir Kaleem 56 – 6x4, 4x6, Zeeshan Siddiqui 39 – 4x4, 3x6) by 5 wickets.

TANDEL TEARS DARSAIT APART

In another D20 League game at the same venue on Saturday, Hemalkumar Tandel's fast and furious spell of 4 for 23 was the highlight of Amerat Royals' 76-run win over Darsait Titans.

Karan Sonavale's 42, Pratik Athavale's 33 and Rafi Ullah's swash-buckling 25 off 11 helped Amerat to 176 for 7 in 20 overs. Sachin Kumar bagged 2 for 31.

Darsait failed to rise to the occasion, scoring only 100 for 9 as Tandel ran through the side with



From left Nishanth Meethalveedu Shaheer Najeeb Nidhin Parameswaran Shankar and Nidhin Mohan of Al Jadidi Stars

a devastating spell. Mehran Khan bowled well too, taking 2 for 18. Only Khurram Khan (29) and Amanpreet Singh (23) batted with some authority.

Brief Scores (D20): Amerat Royals 176 for 7 in 20 overs (Karan Sonavale 42 – 5x4, 2x6, Pratik Athavale 33-4x4, Rafi Ullah 25 – 1x4, 3x6. Sachin Kumar 2-31) beat Darsait Titans 100 for 9 in 20 overs (Khurram Khan 29 – 2x4, Amanpreet Singh 23 – 1x4, 1x6,

Hemalkumar Tandel 4-23, Mehran Khan 2-18) by 76 runs.

NISHAD BOWLS ZAWAWI TO BIG WIN

Brilliant bowling by Nishad KS, who claimed 4 for 13, steered Zawawi Powertech to a thumping 153-run victory against Sarco in a 50-over A Division League clash at OC Turf 2 in Al Amerat on Saturday.

Opener Arun Dev topscored

with a patient 58 off 90 whereas Nishad contributed 32 off 56 as Zawawi scored 239 all out in 49.2 overs. Nazish Mohammed and Dileepa Srilal claimed three wickets each.

Sarco failed to make a match of it, getting dismissed for a disappointing 86 in 30 overs due largely to Nishad's superb spell. Tanuj Shivakumar and Suhil Kanagaraj bowled well too, taking three wickets each.

Brief Scores (A Division): Zawawi Powertech 239 all out in 49.2 overs (Arun Dev 58 – 5x4, Nishad K S 32 – 3x4, Nazish Mohammad 3-46, Dileepa Srilal 3-41, Zahid Hafiz 2-39) beat Sarco 86 all out in 30 overs (Ajay Menon 16 – 4x4, Nishad K S 4-13, Tanuj Shivakumar 3-20, Suhil Kanagaraj 3-22) by 153 runs.

NIDHIN STARS IN AL JADIDI WIN

Earlier, in another A Division game on Friday, Al Jadidi Stars rode on Nidhin Mohan's magnificent

111 and Parameswaran Shankar's outstanding 5 for 30 to thrash Sunlight by 196 runs at OC Turf 2.

Nidhin's ton was the highlight of Al Jadidi's 323 all out in 47 overs. Half centuries by Shaheer Najeeb and Nishanth Meethalveedu were the other notable scores. Punit Mehta bagged 3 for 38.

Shankar destroyed Sunlight with his 5-wicket spell and the whole side was bundled out for 127 in the 28th over. Ali Muhammed claimed 3 for 41. Hafiz Irfan (42) and Madhur Bhatnagar (36) were the Sunlight's main scorers.

Brief Scores (A Division): Al Jadidi Stars 323 all out in 47 overs (Nidhin Mohan 111 – 8x4, 1x6, Shaheer Najeeb 59 – 8x4, Nishanth Meethalveedu 57 – 6x4, 1x6, Punit Mehta 3-38, Qasim Ali 2-51, Ilyas Afreedi 2-58, Wasif Khan 2-73) beat Sunlight 127 all out in 27.4 overs (Hafiz Irfan 42 – 5x4, Madhur Bhatnagar 36 – 5x4, Parameswaran Shankar 5-30, Ali Muhammed 3-41, Muhammad Waqas 2-55) by 196 runs.



Golden State Warriors’ Stephen Curry (30) dribbles against the Phoenix Suns during the second half at Footprint Center. – USA Today Sports



Phoenix Suns guard Devin Booker (1) is fouled by Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry (30) during the second half at Footprint Center. – USA Today Sports

Curry powers Warriors past Suns, Nets thwart Lakers

LOS ANGELES: Stephen Curry scored 33 points to power Golden State to a 116-107 victory over Phoenix that moved the Warriors ahead of the Suns for best record in the NBA on Christmas Day.

The surge of Covid cases around the league robbed the festive five-game slate of some star power on Saturday, but there was no lack of drama.

“The fact that it came on Christmas, we’re on the road, what a great Christmas gift for our guys,” Warriors coach Steve Kerr said.

“They obviously gave it to themselves, but it’s fun playing on Christmas, there’s a special vibe and obviously this game with the two teams with the best record in the league had a special feel to it.”

Otto Porter Jr scored 13 of his 19 points in the fourth quarter as the Warriors pulled away to win a back-and-forth battle that featured 12 lead changes.

The Warriors arrived in Phoenix for the marquee clash with three of their top four scorers — Andrew Wiggins, Damion Lee and Jordan Poole — sidelined by Covid concerns.

Curry mostly filled the void and for the first time in nine Christmas games scored more than 20 points — despite connecting on just 10 of 27 shots from the field, including five of 16 from three-point range.

“I’m proud of everybody, man, because not a lot of people picked us to win tonight,” said Curry, who praised Porter’s poise after the Warriors ended the Suns’ 15-game home winning streak.

Porter, making his second start of the season after he was thrust into the lineup for the first time on Thursday, scored eight points in the final two and a half minutes, draining a three-pointer that sealed the win with less than a minute remaining.

“He can shoot the ball,” Curry said.

GIANNIS MAKES BIG RETURN

Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 36 points in his return from Covid protocols, powering the NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks to a 117-113 comeback win over the coronavirus-depleted Boston Celtics. There would be no miracle comeback for the Los Angeles Lakers, however, as their bid to rally against a Brooklyn Nets team returning from a week-long Covid hiatus came up short.

They obviously gave it to themselves, but it’s fun playing on Christmas, there’s a special vibe and obviously this game with the two teams with the best record in the league had a special feel to it

STEVE KERR
Warriors coach

The Nets, who had a league-high 13 players sidelined by Covid last week and had three games postponed, led by 23 points in the fourth quarter but saw the Lakers tie it up with 45 seconds remaining, before scoring the final seven points in a 122-115 victory in Los Angeles.

James Harden, who missed three games because of Covid, posted a triple-double of 36 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists. Patty Mills added 34 points for the Nets, whose Covid absences included superstar Kevin Durant and LaMarcus Aldridge.

Nic Claxton dunked over Lakers star LeBron James to break a tie with 40.7sec remaining and the Lakers, despite 39 points from James, suffered a fifth straight defeat. In Milwaukee, Antetokounmpo, who had missed five games, scored 29 points in the second half as the Bucks rallied to deny a gutsy Celtics squad.

Boston had nine players unavailable because of Covid-19 concerns, 10 counting Al Horford, who cleared protocols but was deemed not yet game fit.

Behind 14 first-quarter points from Jaylen Brown, the depleted Celtics raced to a 35-22 first-quarter lead.

Brown, Jayson Tatum and Marcus Smart combined for 69 points for Boston, who led by as many as 19 and were up by 13 with 5:28 remaining.

Antetokounmpo’s layup knotted the score at 111-111 with 1:29 to play.

Bucks reserve Wesley Matthews drained a three-pointer with 30.3 seconds remaining to put Milwaukee up by one — their first lead of the contest and one they wouldn’t relinquish. — AFP

OOC General Assembly to elect two athletes today

MUSCAT: Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) will today hold the meeting of the Ordinary General Assembly at the Crown Plaza Hotel in Al Irfan City to select two athletes from among the applicants for the announcement issued by OOC to fill two seats in the General Assembly for

the upcoming electoral phase (2020+1-2024).

During the meeting, the previous minutes of the Ordinary General Assembly held on April 22 will be ratified, after which the sports personalities who submitted their papers for membership in the general assembly will be selected:

Khalid bin Mohammed al Zubair, Farid bin Khamis al Zadjali, Qais bin Saud al Zakwani, and Ahmed bin Abdullah bin Omar al Marhoon, Saleh bin Abdullah al Farsi, Mohammed bin Khalfan al Asimi, Hilal bin Ali al Sinani, Khalid bin Saeed al Wahaibi, Obaid bin Zayed al Manuri, Salem

bin Abdullah al Masrouri, Badr bin Ali al Rawas and Al Mu’tasim bin Hammoud al Zadjali, provided that two sports personalities meet the conditions and controls approved by the General Assembly to fill the two seats of this category in the formation of the next General Assembly.

The members of the General Assembly will be presented with a proposal to form the Elections and Appeals Committees that will be tasked with supervising the process of electing OOC Board of Directors for the upcoming election phase (2020+1-2024), which will include legal persons

and specialists in the field of sports.

According to what is stated in Article No. (17) of OOC statute, the members of the association will be presented with the date of the meeting of the electoral general assembly for the next phase (2020+1-2024).



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Corporates must earmark 20% of CSR budgets for charitable orgs



MUSCAT: Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has issued a decision requiring businesses and organisations to set aside 20 per cent of their annual budgets for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes to Oman Charitable Organisation (OCO).

Decision 205/2021 says the allocation will enable OCO to play a stronger role in providing charitable services to underprivileged segments of society.

Established by Royal Decree in 1996, Oman Charitable Organisation is the government's principal charitable agency with the mandate to raise funding assistance in aid of a variety of civil charity causes, including humanitarian relief for those impacted by natural disasters.

Muscat-based OCO also runs a number of charitable programmes designed to provide assistance to low-income sections of the community.

(With inputs from ONA)

Work begins on Musandam Zipline Project, Visitor Centre

NEW ATTRACTION: Omran-led project marks the development of first adventure-oriented attraction in Musandam

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 26

As part of the strategic development agreement signed with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism to develop a number of touristic projects in the governorate, Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran Group) commenced work on the zipline project and its ancillary facilities in Wilayat of Khasab, Governorate of Musandam.

The Group is currently deploying the 1,800-metre dual zipline project, which begins from Jebel Fitt and passes through scenic landscapes of Khor Qadi and the Mokhi area over the coast of Wilayat of Khasab.

The landing point of the zipline will be connected to the upcoming Atana Khasab Hotel, where a visitor centre will be established to offer a host of facilities and book tourist experiences, including various leisure and adventure activities that can be carried out in the area.

The project is currently being developed in a prime location with exceptional sea views of the



Straits of Hormuz, complemented by the active movement of ships, yachts and major cruise ships, making it an important touristic attraction for visitors from inside and outside the Sultanate.

The abundance of exceptional natural components, and the cultural richness that is unique to the Governorate of Musandam, offers several horizons for future development.

Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Musandam, said: "The Musandam zipline project represents the cooperation between the Office of the Minister of State and the Governor of Musandam and Omran Group, within the framework

sector in the Sultanate of Oman."

Yusra bint Khalaf al Subhi, Assistant General Director of Planning at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism said, "We are delighted to begin the first phase of the Musandam Adventure Center, which will comprise of strategic elements of investment and development in the Governorate of Musandam.

This project comes in line with our relentless pursuit to achieve the outlined objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and the National Tourism Strategy, in addition to supporting the economic diversification in the Sultanate.

We are moving forward to enhance the offerings at the prominent tourist sites in the country, that will make the Sultanate of Oman an important destination for visitors to spend their holidays and to explore its rich natural, heritage and cultural treasures."

The scope of the agreement also includes the implementation of a wide array of multi-use spaces, hotels and resorts, entertainment activities and projects, and specialised facilities for adventure tourism. It further aims to strengthen the investment through establishing local and international partnerships, along with launching a number of activities in the short-term.

Bus or train?
World's first 'dual-mode vehicle' to begin operating in Japan



TOKYO: It's a bus, it's a train, it's a DMV! The world's first dual-mode vehicle, equally at home on road and rail, is set to make its public debut on Saturday in the town of Kaiyo in Japan's Tokushima prefecture.

The DMV looks like a minibus and runs on normal rubber tyres on the road. But when it arrives at an interchange, steel wheels descend from the vehicle's underbelly onto the rail track, effectively turning it into a train carriage.

The train wheels lift the front tyres off the track while the rear wheels stay down to propel the DMV onto the railway.

The CEO of Asa Coast Railway company, which operates the DMVs, said the vehicles could help small towns like Kaiyo with an ageing and shrinking population, where local transport companies struggle to make a profit. — Reuters

Hyport Duqm project eyes 1m mtpa of green ammonia

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

A utility-scale green hydrogen project due to be launched in the coming years at the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Duqm is anticipated to yield 1 million metric tonnes per annum (mtpa) of green ammonia when it is fully built, according to the venture's key partners.

Hyport Duqm — a partnership of OQ (the global integrated energy group of the Sultanate of Oman) and DEME Concessions (the renewable energy and offshore marine infrastructure arm of Belgium's DEME Group) — is set to be the first of many world-scale, green hydrogen projects slated to come on stream in the country over next couple of decades.

According to key officials representing the principal shareholders, Hyport Duqm — when fully developed over multiple phases — will boast a



production capacity of around 1 million mtpa of green ammonia.

This represents a three-fold increase from the project's Phase 1 capacity of 330,000 mtpa of green ammonia — a stable commodity that can be shipped globally for use as fertiliser or for reconversion into green hydrogen or an array of green chemicals or other derivatives.

Sharing details about the mega project at a recent green energy summit held in the city, Anwar al Battashi, OQ's Project Lead on Hyport Duqm, and Jean-Baptiste De Cuyper, Project Lead from DEME Concessions, said the landmark venture will be predominantly export-oriented.

"We are developing a sustainable business for Oman and for the world," said OQ's Anwar al Battashi.

"We are meeting the aspirations of Oman Vision 2040 with regard to renewable energy production, and diversification of the economy. We will also have excess power that we will be able to sell back to the grid."

DEME Concession's De Cuyper stated: "We are building

the full value chain at Duqm: from the electron all the way to the green molecule. We are building quite a substantial renewable asset base, which will be a combination of solar and wind. Right now, we are trying to develop the best ratio between solar and wind."

According to the executives, the upstream component of Hyport Duqm, featuring arrays of solar and wind farms, will come up on 150 sq kilometres of land leased to Hyport Duqm within the SEZ.

Renewable energy from this upstream component will be supplied to electrolyzers representing the midstream component located closer to the Port of Duqm.

Supplying this green electricity will be a dedicated connection to ensure the 'green label' of the energy being used to produce green hydrogen and eventually green ammonia, they stressed.

Phase 1 of Hyport Duqm

envisions investments in 1.3 GW of renewable solar and wind capacity necessary to operate a 500 MW electrolyser to produce an estimated 60,000 mtpa of green hydrogen. This will yield 330,000 mtpa of green ammonia for export.

However, upon the optimal utilisation of all 150 sq km of land leased for the project, renewable energy generation capacity can be ramped up to 3 GW which, in turn, can power 1.5 GW-capacity electrolyzers to produce 1 million mtpa of green ammonia.

German-based international energy corporation Uniper has been roped in by Hyport Duqm to secure offtake agreements for the project's green ammonia output. This effort will be supplemented by OQ's Trading Arm, OQ's Project Lead added.

A final investment decision (FID) on Hyport Duqm is slated during 2023, with Phase 1 of the project targeted for start-up in 2026.

Bank Muscat wins over 30 awards, accolades in 2021

MUSCAT: In recognition of its outstanding achievements and commitment to offering world-class banking services to its customers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, continued to win multiple awards across its different lines of business and operations.

In 2021, the bank won over 30 international, regional and local awards and honours as it demonstrated excellent performance across all aspects of its operations. The bank started the year on a very positive note winning 5 prestigious awards from EMEA Finance including the Best Bank in the Sultanate of Oman, Best Private Bank in the Sultanate of Oman, Best Local Investment Bank in the Sultanate of Oman and the Middle East Sustainability Award.

A prolific innovator in the financial sector in the region, Bank Muscat was recognised as one of the “Top 100 Companies in the Middle East” and as one of the “Top 50 banks in the Region” by Forbes Middle East later during the year. Energised by the



steady number of accolades, the bank continues to work steadily to further improve its excellent portfolio of services and provide greater financial inclusion across the Sultanate. In keeping with technological developments, the bank’s digital channels including Mobile and Internet banking have been witnessing tremendous

growth over the recent past.

With about 2 million customers, Bank Muscat is a clear leader in the banking sector in the Sultanate of Oman and has the largest portfolio in the country across the retail, corporate, wholesale and Islamic banking space.

Hence, it was not surprising that Bank Muscat won two prestigious awards for digital banking from Global Finance – for Best Consumer Digital Bank (the Sultanate of Oman) and Best Corporate/Institutional Digital Bank (the Sultanate of Oman) – at the Middle East Digital Bank and Innovators Awards 2021. The winners for these digital banking awards were selected based on

a number of criteria, including their strategy for attracting and servicing digital customers, success in getting clients to use digital offerings, growth of digital customers, breadth of product offerings, evidence of tangible benefits gained from digital initiatives, and web/mobile site design and functionality. As the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, Bank Muscat has the largest banking network in the Sultanate of Oman with 174 branches and over 800 ATMs, CDMs and other devices. The number of customers using digital banking services have increased manifold in recent years to over 1.2 million today. A strong supporter of Public-Private Partnership, the bank has been steadily and strongly partnering government institutions and civil society organisations to implement national goals of digital transformation and supporting the growth of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises. In recognition of its pioneering role in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Bank Muscat was honoured by the Oman Chamber

of Commerce and Industry at a grand event held recently under the patronage of Sayyid Kamil bin Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Assistant Secretary-General of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Cabinet Affairs. The bank also won the Bank of the Year (the Sultanate of Oman) award from The Banker as well as the Best Bank in the Sultanate of Oman awards from a number of prestigious international, regional and local publications including Global Finance, Euromoney, Asiamoney and Oman Economic Review. It is important to note that the bank is a repeat winner in the Best Bank in the Sultanate of Oman category across these prestigious international publications based on its growth in assets, profitability, geographic reach, strategic relationships, new business development and innovation in products. Meanwhile, Bank Muscat Private, targeted at ultra-high net-worth individuals (UHNIs), won three Best Private Bank in Oman awards during the year, from PWM/The Banker, Global Finance and EMEA Finance.

Mercedes-Benz trucks celebrate 125th year anniversary



MUSCAT: One hundred and twenty-five years have passed since Mercedes-Benz unveiled the world’s first motorised truck and yet the company’s commitment to market-defining quality and reliability remains as strong today as it ever was.

In what was quickly recognised as a standout moment for the automotive industry, engineer Gottlieb Daimler, one of the two founders of Daimler-Benz AG (the other being Carl Benz), unveiled his invention in 1896. The three-pointed-star is testament of the brand Mercedes-Benz that is the most famous brand of the

former Daimler-Benz AG.

A triumph of engineering, the truck known as the Phoenix had a four horse power strong, two-cylinder engine which linked to the rear axle by a belt. Protected by helical springs, this engine was somewhat sensitive to vibrations. The driver meanwhile was positioned up front on a bench seat and used a large wheel mounted on a vertical column to steer.

The truck, that would go on to define the global trucking industry was sold weeks later to the British Motor Syndicate, a London-based automobile company, and the rest is history.

BankDhofar inks strategic partnership with Visa

MUSCAT: BankDhofar has recently signed a strategic partnership agreement with Visa, the world’s leader in digital payments, to strengthen the business relationship between the two parties and to enhance the Bank’s customer experience.

The signing ceremony took place at BankDhofar’s Head Office and the agreement was mutually signed by Abdulhakeem bin Omar al Ojaili, Chief Executive Officer of BankDhofar and Dr Saeeda Jaffar, Senior Vice-President and Group Country Manager, GCC region, Visa, with the presence of a number of officials from both sides.

On signing the agreement, Abdulhakeem bin Omar al Ojaili, Chief Executive Officer at BankDhofar Said: “We are glad to continue our partnership with Visa, the world’s leader in digital payments. This agreement reflects our endeavour to constantly provide seamless services and advanced payment solutions to our customers. We understand the tremendous technological development in various aspects of the financial industry, and as one of the leading banks



in the Sultanate, our strategic partnership with Visa will put us at the forefront of providing cutting-edge banking solutions.”

Over the years, BankDhofar has worked closely with Visa to provide innovative fintech digital solutions that are in line with the bank’s digital transformation vision. BankDhofar has been one of the pioneering financial institutions that have re-shaped the banking experience in the Sultanate through adopting the latest technologies and following best international practices in the industry.

Dr Saeeda Jaffar, Group Country Manager, GCC region, Visa, said: “We are delighted to renew our long-standing partnership with BankDhofar. Over the years, we have closely worked together to develop several attractive products that deliver seamless, secure and rewarding experiences to cardholders in the Sultanate of Oman on their daily, retail, leisure and travel spend.

As we renew our partnership, we remain committed to growing digital payments in the Sultanate of Oman by bringing more customer-centric products

to market and supporting the government’s ambitions of helping more consumers and local businesses enjoy the benefits of being part of the digital economy.”

Providing a convenient banking experience has always been the top priority for BankDhofar since its inception, putting technology and innovation at the core of its strategy to improve the experience of customers.

BankDhofar is considered one of the best banks in the region, with a strong presence in Corporate Banking, Retail Banking, Treasury, and Project Finance.

The bank caters to customers’ needs and requirements and sets the standard for the best customer experience within the banking industry in the Sultanate through innovative products and creative solutions.

Following best international banking practices, provision of outstanding customer experience, in addition to its commitment to community development and contribution to the growth of the national economy, has placed BankDhofar at the top of the list of best banks in the region.

Exclusive benefits on Toyota Corolla 1.8L Hybrid EV

MUSCAT: Here is the perfect opportunity to own the Toyota Corolla Hybrid Electric vehicle and benefit with impressive fuel-economy and advanced technology that is based on pioneering Hybrid Electric energy.

The Toyota Corolla HEV is available with service 8 years/80,000 kms (whichever is earlier), 1 year insurance or cash gift in lieu of insurance RO 175. The campaign is valid until December 30, 2021. (Prospective buyers may be advised that the benefits vary between model variants, model year and manufacturing year. Terms & Conditions apply. Visit the showroom for exact details.)

The 1.8L Toyota Corolla

Hybrid Electric vehicle makes for a better option when compared to many petrol version vehicles in the category. That means lesser stops at the fuel station and more savings than expected.

Based on the TNGA platform, the Corolla offers some of the smoothest and stable driving experiences too. The Corolla HEV’s striking look is characterised by a frontal treatment with a two-step rendering of the front corners, flanking a strongly projecting lower grille.

The LED projector headlamps with integrated daytime running lights give the Corolla HEV a sleek and stylish look.



Meanwhile, the rear of the car echoes the look of the front through the shape of the bumper and the inverted trapezium design

wide stance. The Corolla HEV is equipped with 17-inch alloy wheels that further express its elegance and sportiness.

The Corolla HEV’s distinct personality is completed by its expansive and comfortable cabin, which displays exceptional quality and finishing throughout. The interior design adopts a simple yet appealing style, with comfortable spaciousness and integrated functional parts combining to create a refined elegance.

The ergonomically designed seats, the armrest and ample legroom offer superior comfort for the rear-seat passengers. The cabin is accentuated with an extensive range of features, which

vary based on the trim level.

Occupants also benefit from Auto Air Conditioner with vents for the rear seat, a moonroof, a 7-inch colour multi-information display (MID), 7-inch touch-screen multimedia infotainment display, rear view camera, cruise control, six-speaker sound system and 60:40 split-folding rear seats.

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Omantel wins top honours at AIWA awards

MUSCAT: Omantel, Sultanate's pioneering integrated telecommunications services provider, bagged top honours at the recently held Alam Al-Iktissad Wal-Amal (AIWA) awards. While Omantel was named the 'Nation Builder of the Year', Talal bin Said al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, was honoured with the 'CEO of the Year in the telecom sector'.

The commendation reaffirmed Omantel's prowess as a leader in network, ICT, operations, new implementations, innovative products and services. The only telecom company to be honoured at the awards, Omantel was recognised for its leadership in building the nation, supporting the society, encouraging the youth and sustaining its business partnerships.

Talal al Mamari was honoured for leading Omantel, a world-class telecom company, through a major evolution towards greater sustainability. He was recognised for manoeuvring the company by embracing change and enhancing its focus on innovation, technology, and digitalisation.

Under his leadership, Omantel has achieved

operational distinction while setting global standards in finding sustainable social solutions benefitting businesses, people, and communities.

He has led & supported many of the company's major projects and initiatives such as its initial public offering to divest government's stake.

He also played an important role in Omantel's second IPO and in the company's acquisition of 21.9 per cent stake in Kuwait-based Zain Group.

Talal al Mamari said, "We are delighted to receive this prestigious award which recognises the hard work of our team during a period that changed the work and life landscape. Committed to globally benchmarked quality, Omantel believes in constantly innovating to offer the very best for our customers.

I am also personally honoured to be named the 'CEO of the Year' for which I owe to the team at Omantel. We believe in contributing to the nation's growth and are committed to taking on bigger challenges in the future.

We will strive to continue to offer customers a best-in-class experience to meet and exceed their needs."

'Go greener, yield more returns'

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

'Go greener, go more sustainable and yield more returns' was the slogan at the launch of the second edition of Eco-Innovate (EIO), the flagship accelerator programme for Omani businesses seeking to make their commercial operations even greener by the Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah).

EIO is a business accelerator programme that helps to develop the skills sets and growth trajectories of Omani SMEs that aspire to green their businesses, fight climate change, and maximise financial, environmental, and social returns in the wider vision that the world is moving towards a green economy to fight climate change.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Dr Farah al Barwani, Research and Development Manager at Environmental Centre of Excellence in be'ah said that a large number of Omani SMEs and corporates have been doing wonderfully good in the transformation of their businesses into greener entities for a sustainable future.

"It's all about working



together to achieve the common goals of a greener economy and help oneself to be helped for a wider result. Large international companies are including sustainability in their tendering decisions while the governments and others are adopting similar approaches," she said. EIO aims to increase the level of competitiveness among Omani SMEs enabling them to compete locally and internationally as investors are looking for innovative sustainable SMEs to invest in.

EIO initiative will train Omani SMEs to evaluate their operations and their value chains

using Greenhouse Gas (GHG) accounting which is considered the first step in identifying ways to make their operations greener and more sustainable.

"We help these SMEs and other corporates in investment, product development, and providing signposts as to how and where to begin and how to progress and how to achieve the desired goals in their business as we continue our journey towards Green Economy through this foster adaption of Sustainable Best Practices among Omani SMEs."

Launched in December of 2019, the first Eco-Innovate

Oman (EIO) contributed to accelerating the skills sets of SME owners working in the waste management, resource recovery, and other eco-conscious sectors.

"Sustainable Best Practices are increasingly becoming a litmus test for doing business with large multinational companies and governments and for attracting funding from equity investors," said William Crew, CEO of Inspired Solutions, adding that "SMEs will embrace sustainable business practices within their organisations, and become more competitive which will open up new horizons for SMEs growth through this programme".

World economy to top \$100 trillion in 2022

LONDON: The world's economic output will exceed \$100 trillion for the first time next year and it will take China a little longer than previously thought to overtake the United States as the No 1 economy, a report showed on Sunday.

British consultancy Cebr predicted China will become the

world's top economy in dollar terms in 2030, two years later than forecast in last year's World Economic League Table report.

India looks set to overtake France next year and then Britain in 2023 to regain its place as the world's sixth biggest economy, Cebr said.

"The important issue for

the 2020s is how the world economies cope with inflation, which has now reached 6.8 per cent in the United States," said Cebr deputy chairman Douglas McWilliams.

"We hope that a relatively modest adjustment to the tiller will bring the non-transitory elements under control. If not,

then the world will need to brace itself for a recession in 2023 or 2024."

The report showed Germany was on track to overtake Japan in terms of economic output in 2033. Russia could become a Top 10 economy by 2036 and Indonesia looks on track for ninth place in 2034. — **Reuters**

Optimism is back in the boardroom: Report

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 26

CEOs of the world's largest businesses are increasingly optimistic about the outlook for their own business and, despite Covid-19 variants slowing down the 'return to normal', their confidence in the global economy has returned to levels not seen since the start of the pandemic.

The KPMG 2021 CEO Outlook, which interviewed 1,325 global CEOs from 11 major markets, found that 60 per cent of leaders are confident about the global economy's growth prospects over the next 3 years (up from 42 per cent in the January/February's pulse survey).

The prospect of a stronger global economy is leading CEOs to invest in expansion and business transformation, with 69 per cent of senior executives identifying inorganic methods (e.g. joint ventures, M&A and strategic alliances) as their organisation's main strategy for growth.

A majority (87 per cent) of global leaders stated that they are looking to make acquisitions in the next 3 years to help grow and transform their businesses.

The survey found that 30 per cent of CEOs plan to invest more



than 10 per cent of their revenues towards sustainability measures and programmes over the next 3 years.

Kenneth Macfarlane, Office Managing Partner — Oman, KPMG Lower Gulf, said: "Well managed by government leadership, the Sultanate of Oman has handled the pandemic effectively and is turning a crisis into an opportunity for growth. This stability creates a foundation for CEOs to project a positive, optimistic environment and encourage employee productivity and creativity. To tackle the potential environmental

challenges, CEOs would do well to invest in digitalisation and disruptive technology. CEOs are also pushing investment in ESG strategies up the business agenda to deliver expected returns and help build a more equitable and sustainable future."

Among the many socio-economic, social and environmental challenges facing the world, stakeholders are putting immense pressure on businesses to tackle climate change and leave a positive impact on society. Over half (58 per cent) of CEOs said that they face increased demands from stakeholders (e.g. investors,

regulators and customers) for more reporting on ESG issues.

Three out of four (77 per cent) global executives believe that government stimulus will be required if all businesses are to reach net zero. Furthermore, three-quarters (75 per cent) of global CEOs have identified COP26 as a pivotal moment to inject urgency into the climate change agenda.

More than eight out of ten (86 per cent) global leaders state that their corporate purpose will shape capital allocation and inorganic growth strategies. The research found that corporate purpose, what the company stands for and

its impact on communities as well as the planet, is driving 74 per cent of CEOs to act in addressing the needs of their stakeholders (customers, employees, investors, governments and communities).

There has also been a 10-point increase since the beginning of 2020 in the number of CEOs who say their principal objective is to embed purpose into the decisions they make to create long-term value for their stakeholders (64 per cent).

When looking at risks for growth over 3 years, senior executives identified three areas they see as top risks: supply chain, cyber security and climate change.

Further, about 56 per cent of global CEOs mention an increase in stress on business' supply chain during the pandemic. 79 per cent respondents mentioned a rising need for cyber defenses, while 75 per cent stressed the need for a strong cyber strategy to continue building stakeholder trust.

CEOs are focused on providing increased flexibility for their workforce with 51 per cent looking to invest in shared office spaces. Furthermore, 37 per cent of global executives have implemented a hybrid model of working for their staff, where most employees work remotely 2-3 days a week.

China proposes tighter rules but no ban for offshore listings



Signage for Alibaba Group covers the front facade of the New York Stock Exchange. — **Reuters**

BEIJING: China's securities watchdog on Friday proposed tightening rules governing Chinese companies listing abroad, which it said would improve oversight while allowing them to continue to do so, the latest in a spate of regulatory moves by Beijing in 2021.

The draft rules, which had been keenly awaited by investors and were posted by the China Securities Regulatory Commission on its website, extend the CSRC's oversight of offshore listings to Chinese firms with variable interest entity (VIE) structures.

There had been much uncertainty among investors and Chinese firms over how much tighter the new rules would be. — **Reuters**

Shipping giants will plot course for landbound M&A

Shipping giants are heading for port, but not in the traditional sense. Companies like Denmark's AP Moller-Maersk and Germany's Hapag-Lloyd are riding a record valuation wave thanks to a year of sky-high container rates.

Gobbling up land-based logistics rivals would be one use for the cash burning a hole in their pockets. It would also serve as a handy buffer against future supply-chain crunches.

Pandemic upheaval has benefitted the shipping industry. Government support, such as cheques mailed out to US households, fuelled a consumer spending spree. Freight rates have soared.

In September, a container from China to New York cost \$22,000, eight times its 2019 price. That has boosted shipping firms' bottom lines. Market leader Maersk's EBITDA will nearly treble in 2021 to over \$23 billion, according to analyst estimates compiled by Refinitiv.

Government support, such as cheques mailed out to US households, fuelled a consumer spending spree

The firm, which the market valued at \$59 billion in mid-December, is likely to be carrying over \$17 billion of net cash in 2022.

The normal response would be for chief executives like Maersk's Soren Skou to splash out on ever bigger boats. Yet Moller's blockage of the Suez Canal shows the dangers of excessive bulk. And the arrival of lots of new vessels in three or four years may overwhelm demand for container space, catering freight prices and shipping company margins.

A smarter move may be to invest in getting containers seamlessly from port to customer. Danish shipping and freight specialist DSV bought the logistics unit of Kuwait's Agility Public Warehousing in April for \$4.1 billion for just such a reason. France's CMA CGM and Maersk both pulled similar moves in December. At \$51 billion, DSV is too big even for Maersk.

Switzerland's Kuehne und Nagel, at \$34 billion, would also be a challenge.

However, its shares shed 25 per cent in September and October as freight rates eased. If those trends continue, the company could come into play in 2022.

Bringing sea and land services under one roof would allow for cost savings. It would also make it easier for operators to plot a course through future supply-chain bottlenecks and charge a premium for speedier delivery.

Danish wind turbine giant Vestas Wind Systems, which has struggled to get parts throughout 2021, signed just such a deal with Maersk in November. In 2022, there are a lot of incentives for sailors to step ashore.

— Reuters



CHECKING THE MONEY DISPLAY

An Afghan man (R) looks at the currency notes on display at the money exchange Sarai Shahzada market in Kabul, Afghanistan. — AFP

Taxing economic credibility



MICHAEL J. BOSKIN

The author is Professor of Economics at Stanford University and Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution.

TO THE AVERAGE VOTER, TRANSITORY MEANS “GONE QUICKLY,” A DESCRIPTION THAT DOES NOT FIT A PROBLEM THAT HAS NOT ONLY PERSISTED BUT WORSENERD

One are the days when political leaders saw credibility as their most precious asset. From presidents and prime ministers on down, economic policymakers have crossed into territory beyond the familiar terrain of political hyperbole, becoming increasingly disconnected from voters' own understanding of reality.

There are multiple explanations for this. First, today's communication environment favours extreme statements over cold, dispassionate, fact-based analysis. In a polarised society, politicians have grown more interested in feeding their extremist base than in offering moderation or compromise.

Second, forecasts sometimes turn out badly. The claim that “inflation is transitory” was not unreasonable at first; but it became more dubious with every passing month, partly because the public has a different understanding of the term than economists do.

To the average voter, transitory means “gone quickly,” a description that does not fit a problem that has not only persisted but worsened.

Third, political leaders hate to be the bearers of bad news, preferring to blame problems on their opponents or some political foil like the oil and gas industry. Every time gasoline prices spike, the left claims it is the result of a nefarious

conspiracy of domestic producers.

Yet to my knowledge, no such conspiracy has ever been found. Though the OPEC cartel may seek to profit from market shifts, the price at the pump is ultimately subject to the forces of supply and demand.

The failure to see this reflects widespread economic illiteracy, which is the fourth reason for the current situation. Most voters have limited capacity or time to absorb seemingly subtle points such as the differences between “high” and “rising,” “net” and “gross,” and “short run” and “long run,” let alone to understand probability. And, unlike economists, politicians usually don't bother much with nuance.

Consider inflation. To economists, statistical agencies, central banks, and finance ministries, inflation means prices are rising. But to the general public, inflation implies that prices are uncomfortably high for one's budget.

Suppose the 6.8 per cent year-on-year increase in the US consumer price index were to fall to zero over the next 12 months. Many people would still feel that inflation was not under control, because the previous increase in prices would not have been reversed.

Or, consider how economists and statistical agencies define a recession. Technical issues aside, it means that the economy is contracting — hence the oversimplified rule of thumb that a recession occurs when real (inflation-

adjusted) GDP growth is negative for two consecutive quarters.

A recession therefore ends when the economy starts to grow again. But to the layperson, a recession hasn't really ended until good times and plentiful jobs have returned. That is why slow economic recoveries are painful for those in power.

The difference between net and gross is another frequent source of confusion.

A good example is the (usually exaggerated) claim that millions of jobs would be created by rapidly phasing out fossil fuels by relying on subsidies and mandates for wind and solar power.

Never mind all the fossil fuel-related jobs that would be lost. This argument emphasises the gross while ignoring the net effect.

Feeling increasing pressure from rising inflation, Biden often repeats the claim by some prominent economists that his BBB bill will reduce inflation. The logic here is that greater subsidies for childcare, paid family leave, and the like will enable more parents to work. That is a debatable empirical proposition. But even if true, the argument relies on a claim about inflation in the coming years, not in the coming weeks or months. It would be absurd to claim that massive additional government spending will quickly reduce short-run inflation in an economy that is already close to full employment.

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How Afghanistan's asset freeze hurts everyone

DUNCAN WOODSIDE

Afghan businessman Shoaib Barak is struggling to pay his workers and suppliers, unable to access funds from a banking system crippled by the freezing of the nation's overseas assets. They, in turn, can't pay their bills — and so the country's economic woes trickle down and hurt everyone along an unbroken chain of misery.

“I feel very ashamed,” said Barak, who until recently employed some 200 people across the country — mostly in his construction business. “For me, for every Afghan, it's really disgusting. I do not even have the ability to pay salaries for my staff.”

To avoid giving the Taliban access to Afghanistan's reserves,

Washington froze an estimated \$10 billion held by the central bank abroad after the group seized power on August 15.

Equating to around half what the country's economy produced last year, that move in turn starved banks used by Afghan businesses and citizens of access to dollars.

Ordinarily, the reserves could be dipped into to pay overdue government bills and development projects, but the freeze has trickled down to the rest of the economy.

Barak's cash flow crisis illustrates the problems faced by tens of thousands of Afghans who simply can't access most of their money.

He says he has around \$3 million tied up in Afghan banks — money earned over the years from lucrative private and government contracts, which were paid in dollars as aid poured into the public purse under

the pre-Taliban regime.

But with local banks limiting weekly withdrawals to five per cent of a business account's balance — up to a maximum of \$5,000 — Barak is months behind on both invoices and salaries to his staff.

It isn't just Barak's employees who are suffering.

Ehsanullah Maroof's now-defunct law business relied heavily on a monthly retainer from Barak's construction company. “The kids went to a very good school,” he said, noting proudly that his nine-year-old daughter Rana topped her year.

But now he can't afford the right medicine for an epileptic son, and Rana has been expelled because the family can't pay school fees.

The misery trickles down even further — to the Maroof family maid, who is now jobless.

Gulha, 42, earned 8,000 Afghanis a month and was the main breadwinner in her seven-strong family.

Now she is two months behind on rent and running out of food.

“I have 14 kilogrammes (30 pounds) of rice, 20-21 kilogrammes of flour and some oil,” she said in a one-room apartment where she allows neighbours to share the nightly warmth of a wood-burner as winter descends.

“It will last 10 days.” Once that is gone she will join millions of her compatriots who are utterly dependent on aid.

The United Nations Security Council on Wednesday unanimously adopted a US resolution to help humanitarian aid reach desperate Afghans while seeking to keep funds out of Taliban hands — a move

welcomed by the group as a “good step”.

But whether enough cash arrives to contain the unfolding humanitarian disaster ultimately still depends on “the viability of the banking system”, said Hanna Luchnikava-Schorsch, Principal Asia Pacific economist at IHS Markit.

Many Afghan banks are “pretty close to collapse”, she said, and overseas institutions will probably be “terrified” of falling foul of sanctions despite the United Nations resolution.

For many ordinary Afghans, any relief will come too late.

International organisations warn one million Afghan children could die this winter, Barak notes. “Who do you think will be blamed — the Taliban, or the US?”, he added. — AFP

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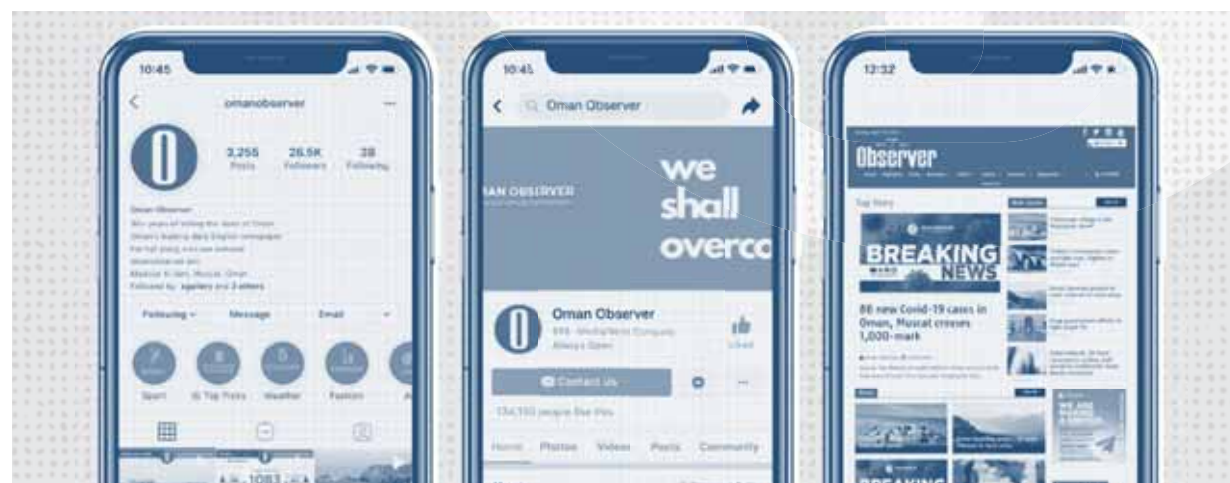
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Ali Al Maashari
99639264
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Nizwa Office
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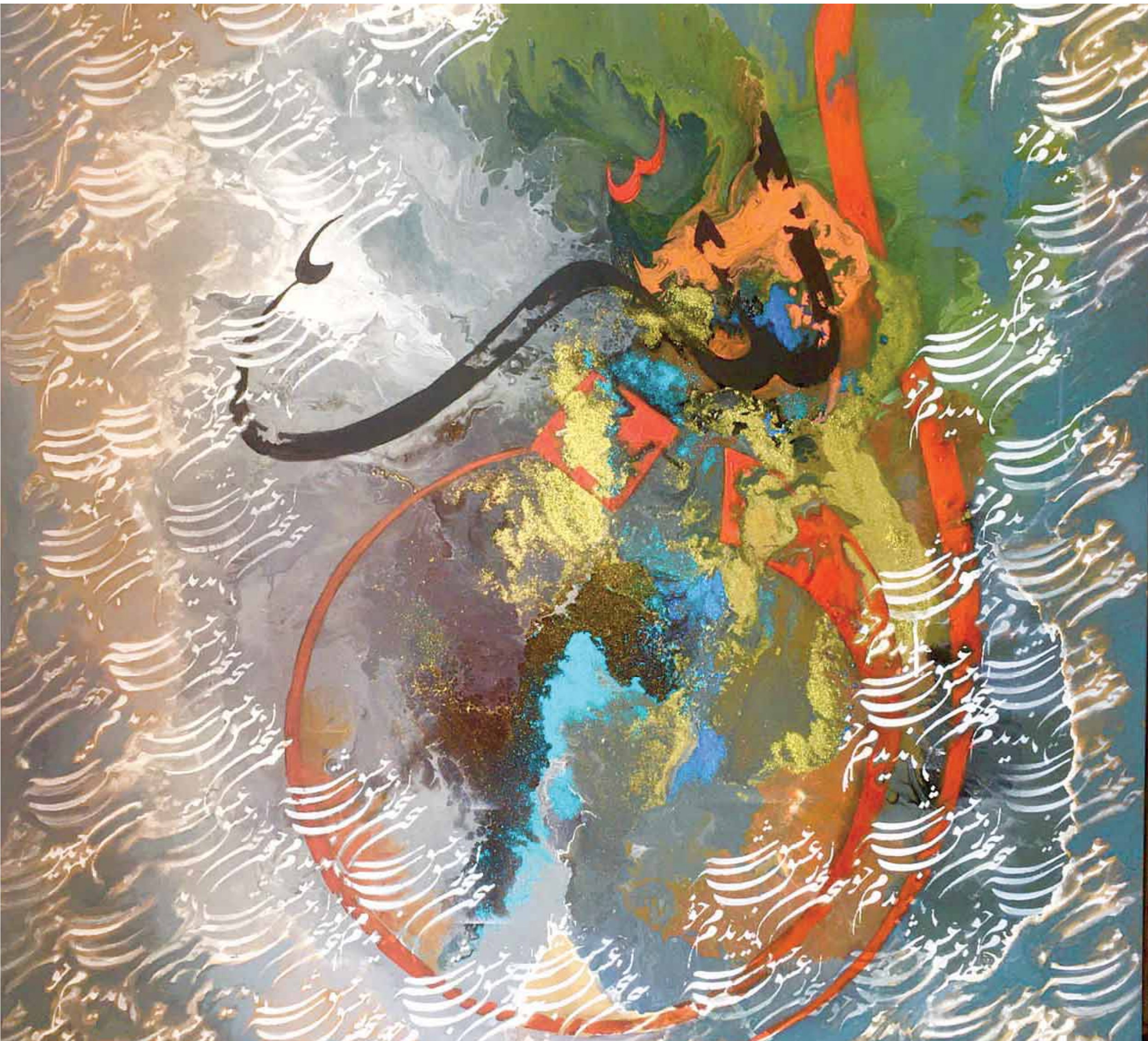
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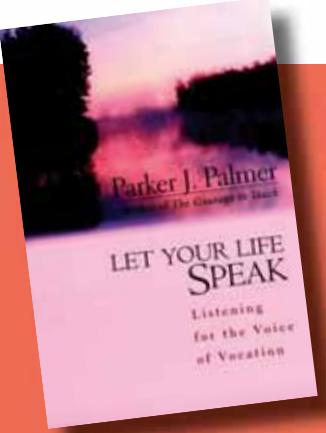
features



WORDS IN ART

My quest is to showcase the rich Middle Eastern culture and heritage. One of the most sought-after style in Middle Eastern art is calligraphy, whether for Arab-speaking or Persian-speaking artists... **P20**

READ



LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK
BY PARKER PALMER

Palmer shares his winding career journey, which includes wrong turns to fit into roles not meant for him. He shares his search for his ideal vocation, which turns into the ultimate existential crisis: "Who am I?"

DESIGN

Chinese designer enjoys Olympic boost for figure skating costumes

CHINA'S UPCOMING WINTER Olympics is adding sparkle to a young costume designer's growing business, as more Chinese take to the ice and seek tailor-made outfits for figure skating.

Zhang Yifan, a 25-year-old designer based in Beijing, has seen business boom since the city won its bid for the 2022 Olympics and began a campaign to lure 300 million Chinese to embrace snow and ice sports.

"The effect is showing up on ice rinks," said Zhang.

But while fashion on the ice has long been a highlight of Olympic figure skating, there

have been few choices for China's skaters until recently.

Zhang noticed the gap in the market when her teenage sister, Zhang Yixuan, began competing in figure skating but struggled to find outfits that matched her music.

A student of theatre costume design at the time, the older Zhang quickly pivoted to skating costumes, learning the trade by experimenting on her sister.

"With figure skating, the drama just moves from the stage onto the ice," she said during a recent visit to her studio.

Skating outfits have to combine elegance with function so they can withstand powerful twists and turns on the ice. And crystals sewn onto dresses cannot be so heavy that they weigh the athletes down.

Though Yixuan is not on the



national team, her outfits for regional competitions are just as glamorous.

On a recent day's training, she showed off a jet-black jumpsuit, embellished with crystals on one shoulder and gold and black sequins across the body and sleeves.

The outfits, all handmade, take around a month to make and cost up to 15,000 yuan (\$2,352) each.

— Reuters



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AROUND THE WORLD

LIFESTYLE



New chapter for Baghdad's book street

THE IRAQI CAPITAL Baghdad on Saturday celebrated the renovation of the historic heart of its book trade, in the latest sign of an artistic renaissance after decades of conflict and strife.

In a city where explosions once could mean only one thing — violence — colourful fireworks lit up the sky during festivities organised by Baghdad municipality to inaugurate the renovated Al-Mutanabbi Street.

Its new look comes alongside art exhibitions, gallery openings, book fairs and festivals reflecting a fledgling cultural renaissance, and recalling a golden age when Baghdad was considered one of the Arab world's cultural capitals.

Al-Mutanabbi Street was first inaugurated in 1932 by King Faisal I and named after the celebrated 10th century poet Abul Tayeb al-Mutanabbi, who was born under the Abbasid dynasty in what would become modern-day Iraq.

A narrow street in the heart of old Baghdad, Al-Mutanabbi has long drawn students and young people, usually on Fridays. But it is also frequented by intellectuals and older bibliophiles.

Normality still hangs by a thread in the Iraqi capital, where rocket and drone attacks sometimes target its highly fortified Green Zone, and where a July suicide attack on a market killed more than 30 people.

There was high security for the costumed performers and musicians who performed along the car-free road of new cobblestones.

The road is lined with shops, freshly-painted and sparkling, but most were closed. Fairy lights garlanded the ornate brick facades and wrought iron balconies.

Private-sector banks financed the work, which began in August.

ISLET OF BEAUTY

"Since the 1960s, I would come here every week to look at the books on the stalls and to meet friends," veteran journalist and writer Zohair al-Jazairi told AFP, delighting over the street's latest transformation.

"It's an islet of beauty in the heart of Baghdad. You notice the difference compared to the rest of the city," he said, lamenting the oft-neglected heritage of the capital.

Stretching for just under one kilometre (0.6 miles), the street begins with a statue of its namesake overlooking the Tigris River and ends with an arch adorned with the poet's quotes.

Visitors can find Arabic translations of American best-sellers side-by-side with textbooks.

There are titles in an array of languages, and every once in a while a hidden treasure can be found nestled between the selections.

Years of sectarian violence followed the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein. — **AFP**

FASHION



Rice fields and Rihanna: the Vietnamese couturier with a celeb clientele

WHEN BILLIONAIRE SINGER Rihanna posed for an ad campaign by luxury shoemaker Manolo Blahnik, she also made a star out of the little-known Vietnamese designer who made the oversized white shirt she posed in.

For more than two decades, Nguyen Cong Tri has been crafting chic structured eveningwear made of Vietnamese-spun silk, organza or taffeta, but despite some success at home, his designs had gained less traction elsewhere.

But when Rihanna showcased his Em Hoa range, inspired by the flower sellers of Vietnam, one famous name after another — Beyonce, Naomi Campbell, Gwen Stefani, Katy Perry, and Rita Ora among them — began picking out his designs to wear to high profile events.

"I am so proud. Designs by a Vietnamese designer, all Vietnam-

ese production, being chosen and worn by Hollywood stars," he told AFP from his glamorous "Cong Tri" boutique in Ho Chi Minh City.

Some of his collections were dreamt up during flights over the rice fields of his homeland, another was influenced by the all-women militias of the Vietnam War.

With three stores in the country's business capital, a judging role on the local version of reality TV show Project Runway, and growing international interest — he is a firm believer Vietnam has more to offer fashion beyond its role of factory workhorse.

Tri now has a staff of more than 150 people and is hopeful his success can guide a new generation of talent.

He said: "It won't be too far in the future that Vietnam can stake its claim on the world fashion map."

VIETNAM'S STRONG WOMEN

One of eight siblings, Tri was

born in the central coastal city of Danang in 1978 — just three years after the war with the US ended.

He studied industrial arts and initially took a job sketching out CD covers for Vietnamese musicians.

But a fascination with the "resilience and strength" of Vietnam's women soldiers, who he had heard stories about at school, propelled his slide into fashion and led to his first collection — "Green Leaves", made using a patchwork cloth technique that took inspiration from the winter uniform and hard green hats of the fighters.

"When they were at home, they worked in the rice fields, taking care of their families," he said of the soldiers. "When on the battlefields, they became the militias: they were such strong women."

"In all of my collections... the characteristics that make a strong Vietnamese woman are always conveyed or hidden in my design, even in the material," added Tri, dressed head to toe in white plus a pair of thick-rimmed black glasses.

At Tokyo Fashion Week in 2016, Tri showed off a collection made from Lanh My A silk, a highly durable material made in just one village in the Mekong Delta that requires huge skill and patience to produce.

The fabric needs to be dyed up to 100 times using the ebony-coloured mac nua fruit to achieve its leather-like appearance, and it took Tri two years to get together enough material.

Those designs were influenced by the Ao Ba Ba — a traditional outfit worn by rice farmers — and his determination to bring his homeland into his clothes has won him fans far beyond Vietnam.

His flower girl collection was spotted by Rihanna's stylist at Tokyo Fashion Week — who promptly ordered three designs — and two years later, he became the first designer based in Vietnam with a show at New York Fashion Week. — **AFP**

ENTERTAINMENT



K-pop star Suga tests positive for Covid-19 after BTS return from US

POPULAR KOREAN BAND BTS' Suga has tested positive for Covid-19.

As per E! News, the group's record label Big Hit Music shared the news in a message posted to the fan community platform Weverse on Friday.

The company shared that the 28-year-old artist took the Covid-19 test upon returning to South Korea from the United States on Thursday and received the results while he was quarantining. Big Hit Music noted Suga had no contact with his bandmates Jin, J-Hope, RM, Jimin, V and Jungkook.

According to the statement, Suga had several personal engagements in the US amid BTS' period of rest, which was announced on December 6 as an opportunity for the artists "to get re-inspired and recharge with creative energy" and to "spend the holiday season with their families."

The message also said that Suga took a PCR test

before leaving the US, which came back negative.

Big Hit Music said Suga had completed his second shot of the Covid-19 vaccine in late August, making his coronavirus case a breakthrough one. The organisation said that Suga is practising self-care at home in accordance with the guidelines of healthcare authorities.

"The company places the artists' health as our top priority, and we will do everything we can to aid Suga in his speedy recovery," the statement read.

"We will also diligently cooperate with the requests and guidelines of the healthcare authorities," the statement added.

After learning about Suga's diagnosis, several fans took to social media to send the artist their well-wishes. "Get well soon," one social media user tweeted. Added another, "Wishing for a quick and speedy recovery." — **Reuters**

Mahershala Ali moves into the spotlight in 'Swan Song'



TWO TIMES OSCAR winner Mahershala Ali moves into the spotlight in "Swan Song" with his debut as a lead actor.

Ali, who won Oscars for his supporting roles in "Green Book" and "Moonlight," is starring in the new drama "Swan Song," which will begin streaming on Apple TV+ on December 27.

"Whether you're leading or supporting or in an ensemble, you're always trying to look for good material," Ali said. "And especially being an actor of colour in this business and coming up there... if you see yourself a certain way and you want to be of a certain type of ilk... you get stuck in these little weird pockets if you're not careful."

"Swan Song" is set in the near future and tells the story of a terminally ill man

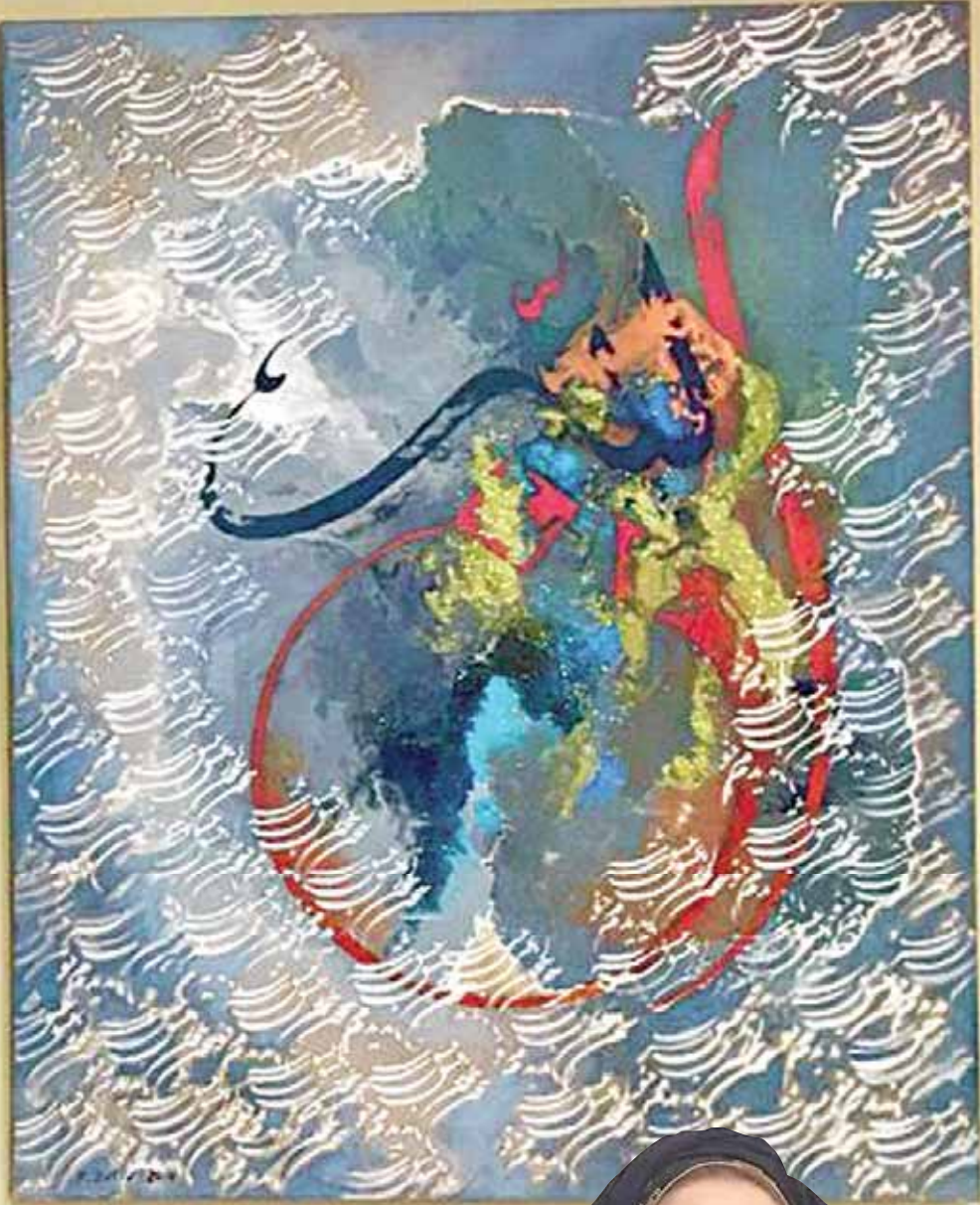
who gets a chance to duplicate himself to save his family from the sadness of his passing.

While it sounds high-tech, co-star Naomie Harris said it's not a sci-fi movie. "I think it's ultimately about love. It's an ode to love and real love, not the romanticised version of love, but real deep, meaningful love," Harris said.

Benjamin Cleary is the director and it's his feature film debut. Cleary won an Oscar in 2016 for his short film "Stutterer."

Cleary hopes "Swan Song" sparks thought-provoking conversations around death.

"I hope it's getting us to ask, 'What would you do in the situation?' and starting some interesting emotional conversations for people," Cleary said. — **Reuters**



Lakshmi Kothaneth

Is art just pleasing to the eyes or is there more to it? Art can convey spirituality says Farideh Zariv whose art exhibition titled Word in Art, inaugurated by Her Highness Sayyida Afra bint Talal al Said, is being held at Cure8Art, Grand Hyatt Muscat.

In the current collection of works on exhibition, Farideh uses the aesthetic power of Arabic and Persian letters in her paintings.

"The modern world needs spirituality and perhaps the task of today's artist is to recreate by bringing in contemporary spirituality by rediscovering the magic of spirituality in the ancient art and reusing it in the modern world," she said.

According to her the shape of Arabic and Persian letters is a symbol of culture, art and power of civilisations.

The exhibition consists of a collection of works that are being exhibited for the first time in the Sultanate of Oman, and the present book consists of her earlier works.

"My quest is to showcase the rich Middle Eastern culture and heritage. One of the most sought-after styles in Middle Eastern art is calligraphy, whether for Arab-speaking or Persian-speaking artists. In some of these works I have used Arabic and Quranic alphabets, and in others Persian letters and Persian poems, which are an integral part of our visual arts heritage. And it has always had an impact on the identity of the Middle Eastern artist. In this collection of work I have tried different techniques and materials, which have been the result of many years of experience, the Persian and Arabic letters being part of the identity and culture of the two lands, and in this work I have been searching for the aesthetic structure of the letters in visual expression," said the Australian/Iranian Artist Farideh Zarif, Art Curator and Gallery Art Director.

The exhibition will be on until January 15, 2022, from 11 am to 6 pm. On Sunday night, during the opening ceremony, her book was also launched. The book showcases about 30 of her artworks and comments and notes on her work from other artists of different nationalities. This is her second solo exhibition in the Sultanate of Oman, the previous one being at Bait al Zubair in 2017.

The role of the 'word' is very important in human life says Dr Nasser Palangi, Associate Professor at Scientific College of Design and Art.

"It is the source of human civilisations, the source of the growth of new sciences, ideas, and religions, and the source of human guidance and awareness. To the extent that human life is divided into "historical" and "prehistoric" periods by genesis, lineage and word. For this reason, writing was the beginning of the history of human life and the time when a man could embed his life story on the pages and remember a line on a page or the like. The word preserves the science and education of scientists, the link between past and future intellectuals, and even the connection between heaven and earth through the word.

However, these thoughts, which liberate people from darkness and ignorance, transmit hope and victory," said Dr Palangi.

"Her art takes you on a deep journey to discover the ancient spirit of the East using classic words and figures to create a beautiful rhythm on the surface. Calligraphic elements stimulate them with new meanings associated with contemporary themes and understanding," Hassan Mir, Artist and Artistic Director, Studio Stal.

Abdulrauf Ralph Wood describes, "Words: They record the Past, facilitate the Present and forecast the future," he added,

"The Persian and Arabic letters emerge from a skillfully constructed colour palette which gives movement and direction to letters, conventionally static, suggesting fluid meanings in the mind of the observer.

Drawing them into the world the artist has created without anticipating the route or destination of each individual "thought journey."

Beverley Wood, Former Art Teacher, Lecturer University of Canberra, Australia describes Farideh's work thus, "The abstract appearance of the image sits well in a contemporary art world but the level of meaning puts it into a higher level of understanding. Her cultural roots are on display as well as an understanding of the contemporary nature of art. Making the Word in visual form continues today through this new exhibition which successfully shows an ageless form of art asserting itself across both the Western and Middle Eastern cultures and art societies."



WORDS IN ART

