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OMAN AI SUMMIT PROMOTES INVESTMENTS



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JORDAN LEAVE IT LATE TO BEAT IRAQ



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WAKING UP TO A SEA OF CLOUDS IN JABAL SHAMS



■ LONDON

BRITAIN’S KING LEAVES HOSPITAL



Britain’s King Charles and his daughter-in-law Kate, the Princess of Wales, both returned home from hospital on Monday after undergoing planned treatments. Charles, 75, who had spent three nights in hospital after undergoing a corrective procedure for an enlarged prostate, smiled and waved to crowds as he left the London Clinic accompanied by his wife Queen Camilla. A few hours earlier, Kate also headed home after spending two weeks at the same private hospital following abdominal surgery. Buckingham Palace said in a statement that Charles, who was visited in hospital by Camilla each day of his stay, wanted to thank his medical team and all those who had supported his hospital visit. “The King was this afternoon discharged from hospital following planned medical treatment and has rescheduled forthcoming public engagements to allow for a period of private recuperation,” Buckingham Palace said. Kate was making “good progress”, her Kensington Palace office said. — AFP

Measures to improve infrastructure facilities in Wakan village

SAID AL SALMANI
MUSCAT, JAN 29

In implementation of the Royal directives issued by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to set a schedule for developing the village of Wakan, a ministerial team visited the village to inspect services and to check the

proposed route of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar road.

The ministerial team had Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili,

Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, Eng Masoud bin Said al Hashmi, Governor of Al Batinah South, and Shaikh Khalifa bin Saleh al Busaidy, Wali of Nakhal.

The village of Wakan in Wadi Mastal in the Wilayat of Nakhal is witnessing a great visitor turnout at this time of the year as it is one of the most wonderful

tourist attractions. It combines a mountainous and plain nature and boasts archaeological landmarks that are deeply rooted in history.

In order to improve tourism services in the village of Wakan, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism worked on the infrastructure in the village. The

ministry built a 1.1-km rock steps walkway that leads to the highest peak in the village. At the end of the 700-step walkway you look down on a valley extending from the borders of the village to the end of the foothills of the mountains surrounding the Wilayat of Nakhal known as Wadi Mastal. **SEE ALSO P2**

Bandar Al Khairan project a boost for tourism sector



The RO 36 million project is located on the outskirts of Muscat.

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Bandar al Khairan Resort project was formally launched on Monday in the presence of Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism.

To be completed in 24 months, the RO 36 million project is located on the outskirts of Muscat, surrounded by the mountains and the Sea of Oman on a total area of 189,000 sqm.

Agreements were signed with the Anantara group for the management of the property and with Al Adrak Trading and

Contracting, who will be the main contractor of the project.

With a total exploited area of 49,000 sqm, the resort will provide 121 hotel rooms, restaurants, and facilities that cater to the comfort of visitors and their different tastes, amid stunning views and a charming atmosphere.

The resort will provide an experience through the services provided by the health club, sports club, and various water activities.

Speaking on the occasion, Al Mahrouqi said that the project will support the tourism sector in the Muscat Governorate, **TURN TO P2**

Priority for projects to conserve nature

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 29

The Environment Authority has reviewed 168 projects and initiatives that were accomplished last year.

Addressing the media briefing on Monday, Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of the Environment Authority, said that the authority has launched many projects aimed at conserving and sustaining natural resources as well as preserving wildlife in the local environment through modern scientific methods.

The authority pointed out that 714 sites were surveyed by the National Biodiversity Survey Project which resulted in the documentation of 40 species after surveying an area of 26,600 km which represent 75 per cent of the total targeted area.

The gene bank was established with a view of preserving the genetic origins of wild animals. The gene bank also has an economic value by freezing the genes off-site to ensure its sustainability for a three-year period, it said.

Regarding the project for planting 10 million trees, the authority said that a total of



Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri

132,980 wild trees were planted so far and 11,126,876 seeds were planted.

The authority stated that there was a significant improvement in the area covered with trees in the Dhofar Governorate compared to 1994 by 5.09 per cent.

The authority said it has recorded 603 environmental violations and dealt with 518 complaints.

The visual presentation by the authority reviewed the efforts made by the national campaign project for combating invasive birds. As a result of the campaign a total of 442,440 invasive birds were eliminated as of January 2024, including 369,576 mynas, 72,864 crows. Information about invasive birds was included in educational curricula and college courses.

Oman make history to reach Hockey5s World Cup quarterfinals

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 29

The hosts Sultanate of Oman stormed into the historic quarterfinals of the FIH Men’s Hockey5s World Cup (Oman 2024) as they edged US 6-4 on Monday at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat. Oman’s players confirmed leading the group as they claimed seven points in their tally of Pool D following two wins against Fiji (8-3) and US (6-4) besides a 3-3 draw against Malaysia in the opener. Malaysia joined the hosts Oman to the quarterfinals as they finished as

second with the same credit but less goals difference.

In the concluding round of the group matches, Barminski Michael gave US lead but one minute later Rashad al Fazari equalised for Oman while Madit Aiman found the net to make it 2-1 for Oman in the 14th minute and end the first half. In the deciding half, Oman head coach Aikman Siegfried entered the match with a different plan as the players were attacking in order to secure the second straight win after they played out a 3-3 draw in the opener and then beat Fiji 8-3.

Khalid al Shaaibi (20, 29),



Oman edge US 6-4 on Monday at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat.

Mahmood Bait Shamaiaa (22) and Khalid al Lawati (25) struck Oman’s goals in the second half while Harris Pat struck two goals within one minute in the 23rd minute while Gandhi Mohan netted the fourth goal for US.

Khalid al Shaaibi expressed his joy post the match and he said: “It is a great historic moment to reach into the quarterfinals in this inaugural edition of the FIH Men’s Hockey5s World Cup. This does not come in an easy way as we worked very hard before the tournament and during the event. Thanks to the coaching staff and fans for their

continuous support. Special thanks for the association and we will do our level best in the forthcoming matches,” he ended.

Oman will meet Kenya in the quarterfinal on Tuesday. The match will start at 9:10 am. Malaysia will face Trinidad & Tobago in another quarterfinal. Pool B toppers Egypt will meet Poland, who finished second in Pool A. India, who came second in Pool B, will play against the Pool A toppers the Netherlands in a tight clash. Egypt confirmed their progression to the next stage as the top team in Pool B after they defeated Switzerland 9-1.



OFFICIALS INSPECT SERVICES AT WAKAN VILLAGE



In implementation of the Royal directives issued by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to set a schedule for developing the village of Wakan, a ministerial team visited the village to inspect services and to examine the proposed route of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar road. The ministerial team was composed of Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, Eng Masoud bin Said al Hashimi, Governor of Al Batinah South, and Shaikh Khalifa bin Saleh al Busaidy, Wali of Nakhal.

SPF wraps up meetings in Al Wusta

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JAN 29

The Social Protection Fund (SPF) concluded its introductory meetings across all governorates in Oman, wrapping up in Al Wusta Governorate, specifically in the Wilayat of Haima, in collaboration with Al Wusta Governorate office.

The event, attended by dignitaries including Shaikh Mohammed bin Ali al Ghufaili, Wali of Haima, brought together elders, experts from child and disability care associations, Omani Women's Associations and civil society institutions.

The meeting focused on introducing the social protection system and aiming to enhance the quality of life and provide social protection and care by developing and implementing policies and programmes targeting social and economic aspects.

Emphasis was placed on achieving national goals and visions, ensuring sustainability, integration, inclusivity, stability, and the impact on community partnership values, while preserving the rights of current and future generations.

Furthermore, the meeting highlighted the benefits of social protection and the eligibility mechanism



The meeting focused on introducing the social protection system that aims to enhance the quality of life

for various benefits, including those for the elderly, orphaned children and widows, persons with disabilities, and family income support.

These benefits represent a set of rights and responsibilities executed by the SPF to provide care and support across various aspects of life, aiming to protect deserving groups in society,

foster social solidarity and justice, and achieve social and economic stability for the community. It's worth mentioning that the SPF organised its introductory initiatives across Oman starting from November 2023.

Social protection is considered a comprehensive system with integrated coverage for sustainable community

care, aligning with international best practices.

The system is based on the state's fundamental principles, national directives, and the vision of 'Oman 2040', aspiring to achieve social justice, equality, and enhance economic development efforts for the welfare of citizens.

Project to boost tourism

FROM PAGE 1

...and is in continuation of the ministry's efforts to strengthen partnership with the private sector by providing land in line with comprehensive tourism development plans.

The minister said that reaching this stage of the project was the result of continuous efforts and continuous coordination between the various departments and directorates in the ministry on one hand and the developer on the other hand.

"We are confident of the developer's ability to provide a resort that meets the aspirations of visitors and residents based on the shared local experience enjoyed by both the developer and operator, in compliance with the technical and engineering standards for this type of resort. The ministry will have a role in following up on the implementation of the project to enhance community partnership and local added value to provide job opportunities for Omani youth."

The project will offer 200 jobs apart from helping small and medium enterprises in the Al Khiran area to provide products and services, including handicrafts, agricultural and fishing products, and tourism businesses.

Al Mahrouqi added that the resort will meet the aspirations of guests and residents. The ministry, he affirmed, will follow-up on the implementation of the project to augment local added value and provide jobs for youth.

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OJA honours outstanding members



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Oman Journalists Association (OJA) felicitated journalist members working in different media under the auspices

of Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, in the presence of Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health as the guest of honour at the OJA premises in Al Seeb on Monday.

Journalists working in TV, Radio and different newspapers also assessed their contribution to the nation in terms of their writings.

Awards for best article and best photography was also

held and winners of Ejada programme too were hailed.

Side by side, a photo exhibition of the selected works of Omani photographers was inaugurated by the Guest of Honour.

Oman-KSA mull opportunities in agriculture

MUSCAT: A meeting was held on Monday between the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources with the Agricultural Development Fund (ADF) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

The two sides underlined funding mechanisms of the two funds in a bid to enhance

agriculture development programmes and projects in both countries.

The meeting was attended by Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Chairman of the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund and Munir Fahd Al Sahli, General Manager of the ADF.

— ONA





‘BAN ON SINGLE-USE PLASTIC BAGS DID NOT ACHIEVE GOALS’

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The ban on the use of single-use plastic bags, which was implemented in the Sultanate of Oman in 2024, is yet to yield 100 per cent results, according to top official of Environment Authority (EA).

Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of EA, said that the decision was to ban only the use of plastic bags that are less than 50 microns. “Bags that weigh more than 50 microns are still on the market. These bags are easy to collect from places and do not fly around and land in places such as the seas and mountain tops. The decision did not achieve its ultimate goal, but we hope to make amends in the future,” he said.

It may be noted that while



Oman banned the import of plastic bags from January 1, 2023

several retailers encourage reusable bags, including cotton-made, thicker plastic reusable bags are still available across the country, leaving it to the consumers to decide whether they need to use them or not.

“These days all supermarkets offer plastic bags and customers use them as per their requirements or commitment to the cause of saving the

environment. I always wonder whether they lifted the ban or went soft on the violators for some reason. This ban was the need of the hour and should be implemented strictly,” said Sajid Ahmed, a resident, who is also tempted to pick some of those bags for home purposes.

Oman banned the import of plastic bags from January 1, 2023. Companies, institutions and individuals are prohibited from importing plastic bags and violators will be fined RO 1,000 on the first offence, which will be doubled on the violation.

The Sultanate of Oman is also supporting and developing environmental monitoring work by installing vehicle tracking devices with units to determine locations and monitor fuel consumption and environmental efficiency of cars.

MoHERI, Peking University review joint cooperation

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) explores means of enhancing scientific exchange and boosting cooperation with Peking University of the People's Republic of China.

This took place when Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation received in her office on Monday Qiao Jie, Executive Vice-President of Peking University and her accompanying delegation.



discussed means of enhancing cooperation in training fields. – ONA

The two sides discussed means of enhancing cooperation in training fields. They also highlighted the matter of connecting Omani universities with Peking University through the exchange of sabbatical leave programmes.

The meeting was attended by Nasser bin Mohammed al Busaidy, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the People's Republic of China and several specialists from the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

— ONA

Agreement signed to support growth of SMEs

MUSCAT: In partnership with bp Oman, Sharakah will launch the sixth cycle of the Khazzan Project for SME Development, to support the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across Oman. This programme has played a pivotal role in supporting the performance of more than 120 SMEs which includes hospitality, retail, finance, manufacturing, agriculture and education sectors in Oman over the five previous cycles, contributing to their success and sustainability. Several SMEs such as Inno Tech, E Mushrif, and Lotus Oil Lubricants among others have benefited from the programme.

The sixth cycle of the programme will select 12 SMEs across various sectors and will identify and address their developmental challenges through comprehensive assessments. This will allow the programme to develop each SME's business strategies, actions plan, financial plans as well as enhance the performance of each business across various aspects such as compliance, quality, marketing, human resources and finance. The 12-month

programme will also offer workshops and mentorships to entrepreneurs to meet their market needs.

Ali bin Ahmed Muqaibal, CEO of Sharakah said, “We are proud to continue our journey with bp Oman in developing the SME sector. Our shared vision goes beyond financial assistance and is about building a sustainable ecosystem where Omani SMEs can thrive and contribute to the national economy. The success of over 120 SMEs under the Khazzan Project is a testament to our collective effort and commitment to Oman's prosperous future.”

Ibrahim al Hinai, Social Investment Manager at bp Oman, Kuwait and Qatar, commented: “Our partnership with Sharakah through Khazzan for SME Development programme, contributes towards the sustainability of the local businesses. Through this project, we are supporting businesses, empowering their success and continuity in our local markets which in turn contributes to the nation's socio-economic growth and aligning with the ambitions of Oman Vision 2040.”



The sixth cycle of the programme will select 12 SMEs across various sectors.

‘Late Abdullah bin Saeed al Shueili will be remembered forever’

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Oman media fraternity continued to pay tributes to their late colleague and a well-known journalist, Abdullah bin Saeed al Shueili, who passed away in an accident over last weekend.

Al Shueili was a programme presenter on the Sultanate of Oman Television and held several leadership positions in the media field, the most recent of which was the Director General of the General Directorate of Radio and Television in the Dhofar Governorate.

The deceased was also famous for presenting the ‘Economic Vision’ programme on the Sultanate of Oman Television, and presented many television programmes for more than 20 years. He was appointed head of the visual division at the former General Authority for Radio and Television.

Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili, Editor-in-Chief of Oman Observer Daily remembered him as an enterprising and very loyal friend and a colleague. “Abdullah had been a very humble, smiling, and laughing person who was keen on

serving his guests by himself. He would insist on serving his friends irrespective of the times he met with us in his office. And would not accept that anyone else did that, despite the fact that most of the people in that meeting were either younger or of lower rank than him. With his departure, we lost a solid friend and a colleague who traced Oman's growth path through his programmes on TV and radio, and with his latest programme ‘Economic Vision,’ he said.

Badr bin Khamis al Dhafri, Head of Proof-reading and translation section and an interpreter said Abdullah was an eloquent and humble person who shined in both art and administration alike. “Abdullah was distinguished by his beautiful rhetorical language, which always appeared in the reports he wrote on major national occasions. We used to wait for his eloquent report with poignant metaphorical images, which was equivalent in its quality and wording to the reports of Fawzi Bushra or the reports of Abbas Nasser on the channel. At the same time, he was a classic, old-fashioned management man. He liked to follow-up on everything by himself,



Late Abdullah bin Saeed al Shueili

put the building blocks in the right place in his administrative system, and loved to use pen and paper to take notes and to write stories and articles despite the development of computer technologies,” he said.

The values of humanity and journalism that Abdullah left with his Omani peers and followers will remain unchanged and the void that created by his exit will stay unbridged. His report, which was broadcast four years ago on the death of late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, entitled ‘Sultan Qaboos, may God rest his soul: He was a nation' still lingers in our memories, as he said in his introduction, “The

Omanis burst into tears, their eyes turned pale with grief, and their eyelids sunk with overwhelming loss. And the land was dry, almost dates, when they bid farewell to their late father, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, may God have mercy on him”, which people who listened to him that day still remember.

Madreen al Maktoumi, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Al Roya said: “When we mourn and bid farewell to our colleague Abdullah al Shueili, it means that we have lost an honest national voice, who continued to struggle throughout his professional life, which he devoted to the media, in order to provide the best for

Oman. Some of our colleagues who had close association with him told me that it was heartbreaking news that Abdullah al Shueili himself became the news, after many years of creativity in reading news bulletins.”

“Oman's media fraternity remembered one of the influential reports by the late Abdullah al Shueili about the war in Gaza, as he summarised the essence of the Palestinian issue in his television report, “Do you not see?!” When he described the martyrs of Gaza as “giving life to death and the Palestinian blood flowing in the body of the cause to keep it alive for the Arab and human conscience,” she added.

Mubarak al Araimi from Oman Journalists Association said his association with Abdullah al Shueili has been for more than 29 years. “We cherished every meeting that we had, whether casual or official. He had been a best friend whose memories will last forever and ever because some faces are not forgotten that easily,” Araimi said.

Abdullah al Rubaiey, Presenter and Newsreader at Oman TV and Radio stated that memories of

Abdullah are mostly of a dedicated, perfectionist who gave his more than hundred per cent to the profession that he loved the most. “His experiences with him are also associated with his travels, junkets, foreign visits and being part of convoys of high level visits to foreign countries together,” he said.

“Abdullah was a great mentor who inspired many of the journalists of our time. He was very focused, sought perfection or at least excellence in everything that he did. He never let any of the nuances of his stories go unnoticed but always tried to give more than asked for. I still remember an incident some twenty years ago when we went to Beijing for a multinational conference,” he said.

Yousuf Ahmed, another journalist, said: “Abdullah lived a life of a legend in journalism for he had always had a nose for the unseen and the unheard and possessed a clear-cut vision on economy and society alike. His long years experience would have contributed in enriching the journalism scenario in the country and students as well as professionals had a lot to learn from him.”



Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili



Mubarak al Araimi



Abdullah al Rubaiey



Madreen al Maktoumi



Badr bin Khamis al Dhafri



Yousuf Ahmed



E-COMMERCE TAKES OFF

SHADDAD AL MUSALMY
@shadadm

As Oman sees a significant rise in e-commerce business, there seems to be a huge demand for delivery jobs in the country, hence a good scope for young Omanis to take up the opportunities.

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) had earlier said that creating a positive environment for Omanis in the 'delivery business' comes in the light of the growth of e-commerce and the changing consumer behaviour in Oman.

The delivery business has gained unprecedented attraction by Omani youth due to its association with e-commerce and the use of modern technologies in tracking, automatic transaction, customer satisfaction and gaining skills.

According to the ministry, a few electronic platforms have a daily average of 15,000 delivery requests. Economists expect that this business will witness significant growth during the next ten years in the light of the growth of e-commerce that the world is witnessing.

With a very high smartphone user penetration and a shift in online shopping, Oman's e-commerce market is expected to record more. Omani e-shoppers mostly buy clothing, airline tickets, beauty care products, and hotel services.

There is an increasing trend among businesses, especially among Omani-owned SMEs and entrepreneurs, to promote and sell their merchandise through social media. The biggest hurdle in the e-commerce market is the changing mindset of people.

Customers want to buy products directly from shops.

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion is continuously influencing people to adopt e-commerce for shopping, import, and other activities.

HUGE POTENTIAL FOR OMANIS TO TAP
DELIVERY SERVICES MARKET



Tanks charge back ground invasion into Gaza City

GAZA: Israel launched an assault overnight on Gaza's main northern city weeks after pulling back from there, residents said.

Inside Gaza, air strikes on neighbourhoods across Gaza City killed and wounded many people. While tanks shelled the eastern areas of the city, naval boats fired shells and gun rounds at the beachfront areas in the west, they said.

Israel said late last year that it had largely completed operations in northern Gaza. The push back into Gaza City, where residents reported fierce gun battles near the main Al-Shifa hospital, indicated that the war was not going to plan.

Among those killed were two Palestinian journalists, Essam El-lulu and Hussein Attalah, along with several members of their families, health officials and the journalist union said.

Gazans said the renewed violence made a mockery of a ruling by the World Court calling on Israel to do more to help civilians. Health officials say more than 26,637 Palestinians have been killed in the conflict with thousands more bodies likely under the rubble of destroyed buildings across the coastal territory.

"The war continues in a dirtier manner," said Gaza City resident Mustafa Ibrahim, a Palestinian human rights activist now displaced with his family in



Smoke rises during an Israeli ground offensive, in Khan Younis, as seen from Rafah.

— Reuters



Smoke rises during an Israeli ground offensive, in Khan Younis.

— Reuters

Tanks shelled the eastern areas of the city, naval boats fired shells and gun rounds at the beachfront areas in the west

refugees, UNRWA.

The United States and another major donor, Germany, are among countries to have suspended aid to the agency since Friday after Israel said 12 of UNRWA's 13,000 staff in Gaza were involved in the Oct. 7 attacks on Israel.

UNRWA, which says more than 150 of its staff have been killed since October, said it

would have to end operations within a month if funding was not restored.

Air strikes also hit the southern city of Khan Younis. Israel said that four among dozens of Palestinian gunmen it had killed in the past 24 hours had been preparing to ambush troops near Al-Amal hospital.

People fled south on foot carrying children and bedding. Suleiman Abusari, in a wheelchair pushed by his father, said his legs were amputated after an Israeli drone hit him.

In the middle of Gaza, health officials said 13 Palestinians were killed in the Al-Rimal Neighborhood after Israeli forces stormed a shelter for displaced people.

— Reuters

Israel escalates war in Syria strikes

BEIRUT: Israeli strikes in Syria on Monday killed seven people, a war monitor said, in the latest such attack in the country against groups.

"Israeli strikes targeted a base belonging to Hezbollah, killing seven people" including fighters, said Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Two of those killed were Syrian, including a security escort to an officer, he said, adding it was unclear whether civilians were among the dead in the attack, which struck Sayyida Zeinab, south of Damascus.

The Syrian defence ministry also reported an "air attack" which it blamed on Israel. It said strikes around 1:00 pm targeted multiple locations south of Damascus.

It said in the statement, posted on social media, that "a number of advisers" were killed, before later revising it to remove any mention of the advisers stand.

Hossein Akbari, Iran's ambassador to Syria, denied in a social media post that an advisory

centre had been struck or that "any Iranian citizens or advisers (were) martyred" in the attack.

A previous air strike in Sayyida Zeinab in late December, also blamed on Israel, killed a senior Iranian general.

Quds Force commander Razi Mousavi was the highest-ranking general to be killed outside the country since a January 2020 US drone strike in Baghdad killed the elite force's chief Qasem Soleimani.

And on January 20, a strike on Damascus's Mazzeh neighbourhood targeting the Revolutionary Guards' Syria spy chief killed 13 people, the Observatory had said.

They confirmed five members were killed in that attack, which they blamed on regional arch-foe Israel.

Since the outbreak of the Gaza war, Israel and its top ally the United States have faced attacks from, and struck back at, multiple armed groups with violence flaring in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

Lebanon's Hezbollah and Israel have traded near daily cross-border fire, and Yemen's groups have launched attacks on Red Sea shipping, sparking US and British strikes on their bases.

US forces in Iraq and Syria have also been targeted more than 150 times, the Pentagon says. Most attacks were claimed by the resistance groups in Iraq.

On Sunday, a drone attack on a remote base in Jordan, near the borders with Iraq and Syria, killed three US troops and wounded 25 others, the US military said.

Biden blamed "radical groups operating in Syria and Iraq" and pledged to hold "all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner of our choosing".

Palestinian movement Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri called the Jordan attack "a message to the American administration" and warned that "the American-Zionist aggression on Gaza risks a regional explosion".

— AFP



A Palestinian man holds a flour bag as others wait to receive theirs from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), in Khan Younis.

— Reuters file photo

Gazans lament suspension of UN agency funding

GAZA: Palestinians in Gaza lamented on Monday the suspension of funding to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees by several donor countries after Israel charged that some UNRWA staff took part in Hamas's October 7 attack.

The agency has fired several staff over Israel's accusations and promised a thorough investigation into these claims, which were not specified.

Several countries, including the United States, France, Britain, Germany and Japan, have announced the suspension of further funding to the agency.

In the southern city of Rafah, where 1.5 million displaced people have taken refuge, Gazans said that the support they received from the agency amounted to a lifeline.

"We live on aid from UNRWA. If it stopped, we would die of hunger, and no one would look at us," said Sabah Musabih, 50.

Amal Abdel Moneim, a refugee from Gaza City in the

north, said there were no other organisations offering help.

"Our people are supported by no one except UNRWA," he said.

"If UNRWA stops supporting us, our people will be lost and dead."

Since October 7, Israel's relentless military offensive has killed at least 26,637 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the Hamas government's health ministry in the territory.

Israel has vowed to stop the agency's work in Gaza after the war.

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said on Monday he had cancelled a meeting with UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini scheduled for later in the week.

"Lazzarini should draw conclusions and resign," Katz posted on X, formerly Twitter.

An UNRWA source said that the suspension of funding announced by several countries had yet to have an effect on the

ground.

"There is no change in the aid distribution mechanisms implemented by UNRWA in the Gaza Strip," the source said on condition of anonymity as he was not supposed to talk about the sensitive issue.

"The situation is very dangerous, and if the United States and the supporting countries insist on stopping their support for UNRWA, this will be a major disaster," the source said.

While Washington has announced it had stopped funding the agency, it was still weighing options for the future.

UNRWA has "literally helped save thousands of lives" in Gaza, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told CNN on Monday.

"So while this is very serious, and it needs to be taken that way, I think we also need to remember not to impugn the good work of the entire agency,"

— AFP



This picture shows an Israeli army tank rolling in Gaza's main southern city of Khan Yunis.

— AFP



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attends a submarine-launched cruise missile test with military officials at an undisclosed location in North Korea. – Reuters

Kim oversaw test of cruise missiles launched from submarine

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has hailed the test launch of a new strategic cruise missile from a submarine as a key moment in building the nation's naval power, state media said on Monday.

Pyongyang has accelerated weapons testing in the new year, including tests of what it called an "underwater nuclear weapon system" and a solid-fuelled hypersonic ballistic missile.

Kim expressed "great satisfaction" over Sunday's test, state-run news agency KCNA said, "which is of strategic significance in carrying out the plan... for modernising the army which aims at building a powerful naval force."

The North Korean leader separately inspected "the building of a nuclear submarine" and discussed issues related to the construction of other new warships, the report added without giving details.

A nuclear-powered submarine has been on a laundry list of strategic weapons set out by Kim at a key party congress in 2021, along with a hypersonic warhead, spy satellites and solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles. KCNA said Sunday's

"submarine-launched strategic cruise missiles" (SLCM) were in the air for approximately two hours, but did not say how far they flew or whether they had been launched from above or below the water.

Photos carried by state media showed a missile soaring up into the sky from the water leaving a huge trail of white smoke, but it was not clear whether it had been fired from a submarine.

Unlike their ballistic counterparts, the testing of cruise missiles is not banned under current UN sanctions against Pyongyang. Kim "guided" the launch of the two Pulhwasal-3-31 missiles on Sunday, KCNA reported. The Pulhwasal-3-31 is a new generation of strategic cruise missiles that Pyongyang said it had only tested for the first time on Wednesday.

Cruise missiles tend to be jet-propelled and fly at a lower altitude than more sophisticated ballistic missiles, making them harder to detect and intercept.

North Korea's exact sea-based launch capabilities remain unclear, and previous tests were carried out from older vessels, including from a submergded platform.

— AFP

Iraq condemns deadly drone attack on US troops in Jordan

BAGHDAD: Iraqi authorities on Monday condemned the drone attack that killed three US military personnel in Jordan, calling for an "end to the cycle of violence" in the Middle East.

"The Iraqi government condemns the ongoing escalation," government spokesman Bassem al-Awadi said in a statement, adding that it was willing "to collaborate on establishing fundamental rules to prevent further repercussions in the region and curb the escalation of conflict".

The attack against Tower 22, a logistics base located at Jordan's border with Syria, killed three US troops and wounded 34.

It is the highest number of American casualties in a single incident since groups in October escalated their attacks against US and coalition forces.

"Have no doubt — we will hold all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner of our choosing," US President Joe Biden said on Sunday has he blamed "radical groups" for the attack.

Since mid-October, there have been more than 150 drone or rocket attacks against US and coalition forces in Iraq and Syria.

The majority have been claimed by the a resistance group in Iraq, a loose alliance of armed groups that oppose US support for Israel in the Gaza conflict and wants them out of Iraq.

None of the other groups in Iraq, Syria or Yemen has so far claimed responsibility for the drone strike that killed the US soldiers.

But on Sunday the resistance



Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani attends the first session of negotiations between Iraq and the United States to wind down the US-led International Coalition mission in Baghdad, Iraq. – Reuters file photo



Satellite view of the US military outpost known as Tower 22, in Rukban, Rwaished District, Jordan. – Reuters

in Iraq claimed to have launched three drone attacks at bases in Syria, including near the Jordanian border.

The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said late on Sunday the attack had hit the remote Tower 22 logistics support base and that 34 personnel were also

wounded, eight of whom required evacuation.

There are around 350 US Army and Air Force personnel at the base who operate in support roles, including for the international coalition against the militant group, CENTCOM said.

Jordan's government

Since mid-October, there have been more than 150 drone or rocket attacks against US and coalition forces in Iraq and Syria

spokesman Muhannad Mubaidin condemned the attack, as did Bahrain, Egypt and Iraq.

The escalating Middle East conflict poses a challenge to Biden in an election year.

Republican politicians were quick to take aim at Biden over the deadly attack, including his predecessor Donald Trump, who described the situation as a "consequence of Joe Biden's weakness and surrender". — AFP

Violence in the disputed Sudan border area kills 54

JUBA: More than 50 people including women, children and two UN peacekeepers were killed in attacks along South Sudan's border with Sudan, officials said, the deadliest in a spate of incidents since 2021 related to a boundary dispute.

Armed young men from South Sudan's Warrap State carried out the raids into the neighbouring Abyei region on Saturday, Bulis Koch, the information minister for Abyei, said on Monday.

Abyei is an oil-rich area that is jointly administered by South Sudan and Sudan, which have both staked claims to it.

Koch said that 52 local people, among them women, children



Sudanese refugees react at the Gorom Refugee camp hosting Sudanese refugees who fled recent fighting, near Juba, in South Sudan. – Reuters

and police officers, were killed during the attacks on Saturday. A further 64 people were wounded.

"Because of the current dire security situation at hand, which has created fears and panic, we have imposed a curfew," he said.

A Ghanaian peacekeeper from a United Nations force based in Abyei was killed when its base in the town of Agok was attacked amid the violence, the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) said on Sunday.

In further violence a day later, a second peacekeeper was killed and four of his colleagues and a civilian wounded while transporting civilians from a UNISFA base to a hospital, UNISFA said on

Monday.

It gave no further details.

Koch said hundreds of

displaced civilians had sought shelter at a UNISFA base.

William Wol, Warrap State's information minister, said his government would conduct an investigation jointly with the Abyei administration.

Last week, Norway is part of a group together with the United States and Britain, called the Troika, seeking to steer Western policy on Sudan.

There have been repeated clashes in Abyei between rival factions of the Dinka ethnic group related to a dispute over the location of an administrative boundary where significant tax revenue is collected from cross-border trade. — Reuters

52 local people, among them women, children and police officers, were killed during the attacks on Saturday. A further 64 people were wounded. In further violence a day later, a second peacekeeper was killed and four of his colleagues and a civilian wounded

KUALA LUMPUR

Ex-minister charged over failure to declare assets

Malaysia's former finance minister Daim Zainuddin was charged on Monday with failing to disclose luxury cars, properties and other assets, part of a corruption crackdown triggered by revelations of tax evasion by the rich.

Daim, 85, served as finance minister twice between 1984 and 2001. Daim, who arrived at court on Monday in a wheelchair with his family, stands accused of failing to declare assets including luxury cars and premium



condominiums after being ordered to do so by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

If convicted, he faces up to five years in jail and a maximum fine of \$21,140. — AFP

NEW DELHI

Indian Ocean naval forces rescue two boats

Indian Ocean naval forces said on Monday they had freed two fishing vessels hijacked separately by Somali pirates, with Indian sailors rescuing an Iranian boat and commandos from the Seychelles releasing a Sri Lankan trawler.

India's navy said it had deployed its warship INS Sumitra — which was on anti-piracy patrol off the east coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden.

"The fishing vessel had been boarded by pirates and the crew



taken as hostages," Indian navy spokesman Commander Vivek Madhwal said, adding that the warship intercepted the boat and then worked to "coerce" the hijackers. — AFP

DHAKA

Bangladesh reports first death from Nipah virus

Bangladesh reported on Monday its first fatality this year from the brain-damaging Nipah virus when a man died after drinking raw date juice.

The nation's first case of 2024 was reported in Manikganj, some 50 km from the capital Dhaka, said Tahmina Shirin, director of the health ministry's Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

"The sample was sent for a laboratory test and it turned positive. We came to know that



the person drank raw date sap," she said.

The health ministry has warned people against eating fruits partially eaten by birds or bats, and consuming raw date juice. — Reuters



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In brief

THE HAGUE



PHILIPS STOPS SELLING DEVICES AMID RECALL WOES

Under-fire Dutch medical device maker Philips said on Monday it would halt new sales of sleep machines in the United States after a series of recalls that continued to weigh on results.

The firm said it had clinched a “consent decree” deal with US authorities that consists of a “roadmap” of targets to allow Philips to conform with regulatory requirements.

“Until the relevant requirements of the consent decree are met, Philips Respironics will not sell new... sleep therapy devices or other respiratory care devices in the US,” the company said.

— AFP

TBILISI



GEORGIAN PRIME MINISTER RESIGNS AHEAD OF ELECTIONS

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili resigned from office on Monday, saying he wanted to allow his replacement time to prepare for parliamentary elections due in the South Caucasus country by October.

Garibashvili said he'd been offered the job of leader of the ruling Georgian Dream party instead, a move he said would be discussed at a party congress on Thursday.

Georgian media, reported that Irakli Kobakhidze, the current leader of Georgian Dream, would succeed Garibashvili as prime minister.

— Reuters

MOSCOW



PUTIN REGISTERED AS PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

Russia on Monday officially registered Vladimir Putin as a candidate for the presidential election in March.

The Central Election Commission said it had registered Putin, who nominated himself, as well as right-wing firebrand and Putin-loyalist Leonid Slutsky as candidates for the vote.

The election will be held over a three-day period from March 15 to 17.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said on Monday the longtime leader would not take part in pre-election debates.

— AFP

French farmers start blockade of Paris

PARIS: French farmers began choking off major motorways around Paris on Monday, threatening to blockade the capital in an intensifying standoff with the government over working conditions.

In recent weeks there have been a slew of protests in the European Union's largest agriculture producing country by farmers angry about incomes, red tape and environmental policies they say undermine their ability to compete with less stringent countries.

Protesting farmers began to block motorways at 2:00 pm, starting with the A13 to the west of the capital, and the A4 to the east, reporters said.

Farmers said their objective was to establish eight chokepoints on major roads into Paris.

“We need answers,” said Karine Duc, a farmer in the southwestern Lot-et-Garonne department as she joined a convoy of tractors heading for Paris.

“This is the final battle for farming. It's a question of survival,” she told AFP.

A banner on a tractor in the convoy said: “We will not die in silence.”

In response, the government ordered the deployment of 15,000 police and gendarmes.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin told security forces to show restraint. But he also warned the farmers not to interfere with strategic spots.



French police stand next to tractors as farmers take part in a road block protest on the A4 highway near Jossigny, east of Paris. — AFP

“We're not going to allow government buildings or tax offices or supermarkets to be damaged or lorries transporting foreign produce to be stopped. Obviously, that is unacceptable,” he said.

Darmanin said the protests also not be allowed to affect Paris's Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports, or the Rungis international wholesale food

market south of the city.

Armoured police vehicles were deployed to Rungis on Monday after some farmers threatened to “occupy” it.

Police and gendarmes are also under orders to prevent any incursion into Paris itself, said Darmanin.

The government has been trying to keep discontent among farmers from spreading ahead of

European Parliament elections in June which are seen as a key test for President Emmanuel Macron's government.

Macron called a meeting with several ministers on Monday afternoon to discuss the situation, his office said.

During a visit to a farm on Sunday, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal sought again to address farmers' concerns, after a raft

of concessions announced on Friday failed to defuse the crisis.

“I want us to clarify things and see what extra measures we can take,” he said. Arnaud Rousseau, leader of the FNSEA main farmers' union, said he expected to meet Attal later on Monday.

In recent weeks, farmers' protests have grown in Germany, Poland, Romania and the Netherlands.

— AFP

Hungary open to using EU budget for Ukraine aid package

BUDAPEST: Hungary signalled its readiness on Monday for a compromise allowing a proposed European Union aid package for Ukraine to be financed from the bloc's budget ahead of an emergency summit on Thursday.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been a vocal critic of the EU's financial and military support for Kyiv and maintained close ties with the Kremlin since Russia's attack of neighbouring Ukraine in February 2022.

He previously blocked a revision of the EU budget that included the Ukraine aid, prompting its leaders to come up with a plan B and call an emergency summit.

However, in a big shift, Orban's political director said on Monday that Hungary was open to using the EU budget for a proposed 50 billion euro aid package to Ukraine.

The aide, Balazs Orban, confirmed on X that Budapest had sent a proposal to Brussels on Saturday showing it was open to using the EU budget for the aid package and issuing common EU debt to finance it if other “caveats” were added.

The *Financial Times* cited an EU document on Sunday saying the bloc would sabotage Hungary's economy if Budapest blocks the aid at a summit this week.

“The document, drafted by Brussels bureaucrats, only confirms what the Hungarian Government has been saying for a long time: access to EU funds is used for political blackmailing by Brussels,”



Ukrainian FM Dmytro Kuleba, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijarto visit a cemetery to pay tribute to fallen Ukrainian service members, in Uzhhorod, Ukraine. — Reuters

Janos Boka, Hungary's EU affairs minister, said on X.

A senior European Union official denied on Monday that member states were discussing financial coercion to force Hungary to agree to financing for Ukraine.

The document cited by the *Financial Times* was a background note that “does not outline any specific plan,” the official said in a statement.

In case Hungary did not agree to the original aid package, EU leaders had proposed a workaround that involved a deal between 26 members and Ukraine, which would also deny Budapest access to linked EU funds, such as on migration.

The EU has suspended a large chunk of funds for Hungary over concerns Budapest had damaged democratic checks and balances in the country.

The EU unlocked some of those funds at the end of last year saying Budapest had implemented a reform of its judiciary but about 20 billion euros still remain frozen.

Earlier on Monday, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto arrived in western Ukraine to meet his Ukrainian counterpart to prepare a possible meeting between Orban and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

— Reuters

Italy reveals migration plan at Africa summit

ROME: African leaders gathered at a Rome summit on Monday to hear Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's much-hyped plan for the continent, aimed at transforming Italy into an energy hub — and stopping migration.

Far-right leader Meloni, who came to power in 2022, has vowed to reshape relations with African countries by taking a “non-predatory” approach inspired by Enrico Mattei, founder of Italy's state-owned energy giant Eni.

The so-called Mattei Plan hopes to posit Italy as a key bridge between Africa and Europe, funnelling energy north while exchanging investment in the south for deals aimed at curbing migrant departures across the Mediterranean Sea.

Meloni said the plan would initially be funded to the tune of 5.5 billion euros, some of which would be loans, with investments focused on energy, agriculture, water, health and education.

Representatives of over 25 countries attended the summit on Monday at the Italian senate — dubbed “A bridge for common growth” — along with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and representatives of United Nations agencies and the World Bank.

Meloni told them that Europe and Africa's “destinies” were interconnected and she was determined to co-operate “as equals — far from any predatory temptation, but also from that charitable approach to Africa that is ill-suited to its extraordinary potential for development”.

Guests included African Union Commission chair Moussa Faki Mahamat, Tunisian President Kais Saied, Senegal President Macky Sall, as well as the presidents of the Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Kenya, Mauritania, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Other countries, including Algeria, Chad, Egypt and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), were represented by ministers.

The AU's Faki said Africa was “willing to discuss the content and implementation” of the plan but pointed out: “We would have liked to have been consulted beforehand.”

Rome holds the presidency of the G7 group of nations this year and has vowed to make African development a central theme, in part to increase influence in a continent where powers such as China, Russia, India, Japan and Turkiye have been expanding their political clout.

— AFP



Italy's Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni (C) addresses the guests of the Italy-Africa international conference ‘A bridge for common growth’ at the Italian Senate in Rome. — AFP

Colon cancer silent killer but curable



Karim Easterbrook

The writer is a former School Principal Cambridge UK

I had a recent colonoscopy which is when a camera is inserted into the colon to check if you have any pre-cancerous polyps. Polyps are common small growths and rarely cancerous. However following the colonoscopy I was surprised to be told that one of the polyps was malignant. This meant I had and have Colon Cancer. My first response was one of detached disbelief. The word cancer seems so alien. It's what other people get not me. It has taken several days for this diagnosis to sink in. I think I was in denial. I am writing this article to advise readers to be vigilant and hopefully to give them good advice. It is normal to be worried and yes a little, if not a lot, frightened. Let's start with why I decided to have a colonoscopy in the first place. I had various symptoms which were annoying but which I didn't regard as serious. I was breathless, occasionally dizzy when I stood up too quickly and felt fatigued and tired. I visited an excellent doctor in Muscat who arranged for me to have a number of blood tests. I wasn't surprised when the blood test results showed a low iron level. So, I thought, I have anaemia. Big deal. No

problem, I would visit the nearest pharmacy and buy a bottle of iron supplement tablets and get on with my life. I was somewhat taken aback when the doctor advised me to have an endoscopy (a camera down your throat) and a colonoscopy (a camera into the other end.) This struck me as excessive. After all I only had anaemia. However the doctor insisted and so I agreed. These procedures are a walk in the park. You are placed into a deep sedation which feels like having an afternoon nap and you feel no discomfort at all. Now here's the first bit of advice. Anaemia is not an illness. Anaemia always has an underlying cause which is the illness. It is the symptom of something else that needs to be treated. So if for any reason you feel breathless, fatigued or suddenly sleeping too much go to the doctor and get yourself checked out to find out what's causing these symptoms. Colon cancer is often referred to as the silent killer because people have no symptoms or they ignore the symptoms. It is the third most common cancer and the second deadliest. If caught early it is easily cured but people tend to ignore its symptoms or have no symptoms. So if you have a sudden

AFTER ALL YOU WOULDN'T HAVE YOUR CAR REPAIRED BY A MECHANIC UNLESS YOU KNEW HE WAS EXPERIENCED AND WELL TRAINED SO WHY WOULD YOU NOT DO THE SAME WHEN IT CONCERNS A DOCTOR AND YOUR HEALTH

change in bowel habits, blood in your stools, sudden weight loss, pain or bloating that doesn't go away or as in my case fatigue and breathlessness, go and see your doctor and don't be fobbed off with a quick diagnosis of "oh you must take it easier" or "that's what happens as you get older." Insist on blood tests and if you have low iron anaemia get an endoscopy and a colonoscopy. Early detection of colon cancer invariably leads to a complete cure. Next up for me is a CT scan to check whether the cancer has spread. After that it will hopefully be an operation to remove the cancer followed possibly by chemo therapy. My final bit of advice is to check out your doctor's qualifications. You need a doctor who specialises in the cancer you have been diagnosed with. Before I see any doctor I know everything about his qualifications and his experience. I will only see a doctor whom I feel has the right experience and qualifications to deal expertly with my health concern. After all you wouldn't have your car repaired by a mechanic unless you knew he was experienced and well trained so why would you not do the same when it concerns a doctor and your health?

Türkiye quake survivors seek justice one year on

FULYA OZERKAN

Zahide Seker contemplated suicide many times after losing almost her entire family in Türkiye's massive earthquake one year ago. Instead, the 48-year-old decided to pin her hopes on a fight for justice, demanding that those she holds responsible for the collapse of her building near the quake's epicentre in the city of Kahramanmaras are hunted down and brought to account. "I will not stay silent until justice is served," she said at one of the small container homes that serve as the temporary residences for hundreds of thousands of survivors across 11 quake-hit provinces. Seker lived in Kahramanmaras's Ebrar complex, a centrally located group of eight-floor buildings where 1,400 died when the first 7.8-magnitude tremor struck in the pre-dawn hours of February 6, 2023. Officials said nearly 7,500 buildings collapsed in the city centre alone, overwhelming rescuers in snowy storms that descended on the region at the time. Seker pulled out the bodies of her two children with her bare hands on the sixth day. "They took away my joy for life. It's been a year. I can't get over this trauma. I wanted to die many times," she said, breaking down in tears. "Only justice will console me now." The disaster, which killed more than 50,000 people in all, was Türkiye's deadliest in many centuries. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan blamed the scale of the toll on negligent building contractors, accusing them of cutting corners by using cheap concrete and ignoring basic construction standards. More than 200 contractors and developers were arrested in the immediate aftermath of the quake. Some tried to flee abroad and were detained at Istanbul airports. But lawyers representing victims' families fear that numerous contractors may escape blame because much of the incriminating evidence disappeared when bulldozers cleared the debris. Meanwhile, probes into public officials who approved building permits and signed off on the safety inspections may only be launched with the interior ministry's permission, which has been conspicuous by its absence. Nebahat Pacala, who lost her husband, daughter and granddaughter, said she kept warning contractors they were building on unstable ground and violating safety codes. "They built a prayer room below the first floor. They cut the supporting columns," 68-year-old said, adding that her apartment walls had begun to swell because of water damage. — AFP

Dreams of becoming doctor tested by war



Saleh Salem

The writer is a senior Desk Editor at Reuters' Global Pictures Desk

Palestinian medical student Aseel Abu Haddaf was due to graduate medical school in Gaza this year but instead she is living in a tent as her home and her university lie in rubble from Israeli air strikes, wondering if she will ever become a doctor. Israel's war in Gaza, triggered by the attack on October 7 that killed more than 1,200 people, has uprooted every vestige of normal life in the tiny, crowded enclave and killed about 25,000 Palestinians according to local health authorities. For students like Abu Haddaf the future is even more uncertain than for most, not knowing if their hard years of study will now count for anything or if what remains of the university still has any record of their academic progress. "Medicine has been my ambition ever since I was young. As a child I always used to see myself as a doctor because of the situation we live in Gaza," Abu Haddaf said, adding that the devastation of the war had made her yet more determined to achieve that goal. She had been in the final year of her six-year course at Al Azhar University in the southern part of Gaza City, ready to graduate later this year and start work as an intern to become a fully fledged doctor. She hoped eventually to become a surgeon. Gaza City has been largely cut off from the rest of the enclave for weeks after Israeli forces encircled it during their first major offensive into the enclave, but massive destruction has been evident from video, photographs and satellite pictures. Abu Haddaf has no idea what has become of her lecturers, other university staff or fellow students. "There is no connection. I know nothing about them, if they are alive or dead," she said of classmates. "I hope we can go back to our studies even if it is in tents and



Aseel Abu Haddaf, a Palestinian medical student, uses her mobile phone at a tent camp where they shelter, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. - Reuters

FOR MANY STUDENTS IN GAZA THE FUTURE IS EVEN MORE UNCERTAIN THAN FOR MOST, NOT KNOWING IF THEIR HARD YEARS OF STUDY WILL NOW COUNT FOR ANYTHING

to have access to the educational staff to teach us and help fulfil our dreams to become doctors," she said. The Abu Haddaf family had lived in Khan Younis, the biggest city in southern Gaza. Israeli strikes have pounded the entire strip since the start of the war but have greatly intensified in Khan Younis as ground forces invaded it this year. Their home was destroyed and like about 85 per cent of Gaza residents the family is now homeless. Like most others they are now in Rafah, hard against the Egyptian border and seen

as relatively safer from Israel's bombardment. Abu Haddaf spends much of her day cleaning the family tent, washing clothes, cooking the little food they can find and getting through the many hard chores required when living without a house or electricity. But she also volunteers for medical duties as far as she can with local authorities to get practical experience in doctoring, but she regards it as a poor substitute for her university training. Gaza needs all the medics it can get, with tens of thousands of people injured by Israel's bombardment, the enclave facing famine according to UN projections and much of the population at growing risk from disease. Whether medical students like Abu Haddaf will ever complete their training is yet another of the war's unanswered questions. Meanwhile, like everybody else in Gaza, her biggest focus is simply survival. "Here in the camp we live through tough days. All that consumes us is how to find food and drink," she said. — Reuters

Netanyahu’s flawed narrative

In the course of history, seldom have been the moments when we pauses to recall and deeply analyse history or its invocation. In the recent military operations against Gaza, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s use of the analogy between the Amalekites and Hamas calls for such a moment. This intentional historical reference deserves a thorough examination to evaluate its significance and potential projection on the severity and duration of the atrocities being committed in Gaza.

Netanyahu used this analogy to shape the narrative and foster a sense of unity among the Israeli people. While we cannot ascertain Netanyahu’s personal motivations, it may be argued that he aims to position himself as a defender of the nation, drawing parallels between his role and that of historic and biblical leaders like Moses (Peace BE Upon Him) and Joshua.

The analogy draws upon the ancient biblical account of the Amalekites and their hostility towards the Israelites during their journey in the desert. The story in Exodus recounts how Moses (PBUH) and Joshua led the Israelites into battle against this threatening force.

The narrative resonates with the modern-day conflict, symbolising the ongoing struggle faced by Israel against its enemies in more than one aspect.

Netanyahu’s utilisation of the Amalek analogy serves several purposes. Perhaps most notably, it aims to forge a historical and cultural connection, reinforcing a collective memory of past trials and victories.

By evoking the imagery of Moses (PBUH) and Joshua, he portrays himself as a strong and courageous leader, signalling his commitment to protecting the nation against external threats. Moreover, such an analogy will further entrench



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ASSOCIATING MODERN CONFLICTS TOO CLOSELY WITH BIBLICAL NARRATIVES MAY OVERSIMPLIFY COMPLEX GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES, POTENTIALLY HINDERING DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS AND PERPETUATING A CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the common religious and cultural traditions of modern-day Israelis in order to transcend ideological differences that have prevailed recently.

As a result, this strategic narrative serves to foster a sense of solidarity among the Israeli people. By depicting Hamas as the contemporary embodiment of Amalek, Netanyahu aims to rally support and unite the nation against a common enemy. In addition, the reference to a shared historical struggle is an attempt to strengthen the bond between the government and its citizens, presenting a rallying point for national identity. Such a bond has been under tremendous pressure under his leadership. However, it is essential to approach such comparisons with caution. Drawing historical analogies can be a powerful tool, but it also presents risks. Associating modern conflicts too closely with biblical narratives may oversimplify complex geopolitical realities, potentially hindering diplomatic efforts and perpetuating a cycle of violence.

While this might have been an additional layer or motivation behind the strategic deployment of such analogy by Netanyahu, it most probable will fire back at him sooner or later. Oversimplification of geopolitical realities to mobilise the masses will most definitely render the internal political landscape unmanageable.

Israel, with or without Netanyahu, should pursue a just resolution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is crucial for people of Israel to balance historical narratives with empathy, moral responsibility, and a commitment to peaceful coexistence.

Only through a comprehensive understanding of the present realities, acknowledging the rights and aspirations of all parties involved, can a sustainable peace be achieved in the region.

SIEGE OF THE CAPITAL!



French farmers drive tractors in a convoy, after calls of the CR47 union to go block the Rungis market, in La Croix-Blanche, near Agen, southwestern France, on Monday, amid nationwide protests called by several farmers unions on pay, tax and regulations. Local branches of farmer unions FNSEA and Jeunes Agriculteurs announced a “siege of the capital for an indefinite period” starting at 2 pm on Monday as some farmers feel that the government’s announcements in favour of the sector are insufficient. – AFP

Has the ‘polycrisis’ overwhelmed us?

This year’s World Economic Forum in Davos was even more exhausting and bewildering than usual. Politicians love to say that you should never let a crisis go to waste, but even they seemed overwhelmed by a conference agenda that aimed to capture the full sweep of today’s “polycrisis.”

The issue is not just that individual problems become more difficult to solve when there are many of them at once. It is that today’s crises are increasingly feeding one another and competing with one another for attention. Against the backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions and the escalating conflict in the Middle East, Ansar Allah attacks on shipping in the Red Sea have become a source of unease across the global economy. Making matters worse, drought conditions in Central America — a byproduct of both cyclical weather patterns and the longer-run effects of climate change — have simultaneously curtailed shipping through the Panama Canal.

In Gaza, the humanitarian consequences of the war have worsened by the day, with the Palestinian death toll now exceeding 25,000. On panel after panel at Davos, US officials and assorted European and Arab diplomats outlined their visions for stopping the war through regional integration and a two-state solution.

At a time of waning American and European support for Ukraine’s defence, all this attention on the Middle East has left Ukrainian President Volodymyr



Mark Leonard

The writer is Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, is the author of The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict

TODAY’S GLOBAL CRISES ARE NOT ONLY COMPETING FOR POLICYMAKERS’ FINITE ATTENTION; THEY ARE INCREASINGLY FEEDING ONE ANOTHER IN UNPREDICTABLE WAYS

Zelensky desperately trying to put his country back on the strategic map. Just ahead of the conference, Zelensky organised a meeting of national-security advisers, to whom he delivered an impassioned keynote speech. Ukrainian officials were then dispatched to participate in discussions on everything from artificial intelligence to global trade, always finding ways to tie the issue back to the war in Ukraine.

Ultimately, there was widespread agreement about what it will take to address the crises in both Ukraine and the Middle East.

With respect to Gaza, the five key ingredients are: a deal to free the remaining Israeli captives; progress towards regional normalisation between Israel and its Arab neighbours; a realistic pathway towards a two-state solution; a regional effort to revitalise the Palestinian Authority; and a suspension of open hostility on Israel’s northern border with Lebanon.

As for Ukraine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a conversation with the journalist Thomas Friedman, argued that the country would need to maintain a sense of perspective regarding EU and Nato membership. But Blinken also thinks the West has a responsibility to put Ukraine on a sound military, economic, and democratic footing. That all sounds eminently reasonable; but

the biggest challenge is reconciling aspirations with political realities in this year of high-stakes elections. While Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin seem determined to stick around forever, the reality is that Blinken himself could be a private citizen a year from now.

Weighing heavily on the audience’s mind was the crisis of American democracy. Donald Trump may not have been physically present in Davos, but that didn’t stop him from looming over the proceedings.

Many questioned whether the Biden administration has enough political capital to pursue the solutions proposed by Blinken and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. And even if they can pursue their policy preferences,

what would happen to them if Trump wins?

Of all the competing crises, however, the one that stole the show was AI. All the biggest names in the industry where there, including Sam Altman of OpenAI, Satya Nadella of Microsoft, former Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt, and DeepMind co-founder Mustafa Suleyman — among many others.

In weighing the opportunities and risks involved, everyone present agreed that AI represents an entirely new — indeed, unprecedented — challenge.

There was no shortage of serious discussion about AI regulation, the appropriate role of the state, and what advancements to expect next. But I was most struck by the level of disagreement on how important AI will prove to be. While Suleyman

and his fellow technologists believe that it is as consequential as fire or electricity, the historian Niall Ferguson argued that AI — like crypto — has been completely overhyped.

Just as social media competes for individuals’ attention, so do global crises. As new, unexpected variables interact with one another in unpredictable ways, a sense of overload complicates the search for solutions.

The fact that 2024 is an election super-year — with four billion people eligible to vote in more than 70 jurisdictions — adds even more uncertainty.

It is no surprise that people are anxious. A major new poll conducted by my own organisation, the European Council on Foreign Relations, shows that the five big crises of the past 15 years (the post-2008 global recession, the 2015 migration crisis, Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, and climate change) have split Europeans into “crisis tribes.” In the process, they have forged new, frequently competing political identities.

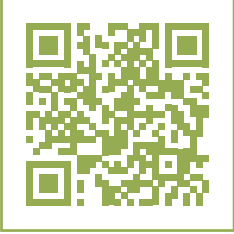
We often complain that the politicians, business leaders, and diplomats who huddle annually in Davos are out of touch with everyday people. But in today’s attention economy, they are just as confused as the people they are meant to represent.



Are those who huddle annually in Davos are out of touch with everyday people?

sport

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OMAN TAKE ON KENYA IN QUARTERS



Oman and the USA players in action at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat, Muscat.

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 29

Oman, who qualified for the FIH Men's Hockey5s World Cup (Oman 2024) as third placed team in the Men's Hockey5s Asian Cup 2023 in Salalah, rather than as the hosts made their ambitions clear after securing a quarterfinal spot in the World Cup.

It was their thrilling exploits in the group round of Hockey5s World Cup that put the hosts team on the spotlight. Oman earned a creditable quarterfinal against Kenya after beating US 6-4 at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat. Oman topped the group with seven points bettering Malaysia on goal difference,

who also have the same points. Oman will be looking for more glory when they take on Kenya in the last eight clash. Oman will meet Kenya in the quarterfinal on Tuesday. The match will start at 9:10 am. Malaysia will face Trinidad & Tobago in another quarterfinal. Pool B toppers Egypt will meet Poland, who ended second in Pool A. India, who came

second in Pool B, will play against the Pool A toppers the Netherlands in a tight clash. Egypt confirmed their progression to the next stage as the top team in Pool B after they defeated Switzerland 9-1. It was only the Netherlands and Egypt teams who finished the group matches on full marks from three games. The African team thumped Jamaica

10-2 in the opener before edging India 8-6 in a thrilling match on Sunday. Then, they outclassed Switzerland 9-1. Netherlands men's team will aim to duplicate the women's team's triumph as they were crowned champions of the FIH Women's Hockey5s World Cup. The Dutch began their campaign strongly with 6-3 win over Poland before outclassing

Pakistan 5-3 in the following match. They concluded their group games with a crucial 8-6 win over Nigeria on Monday. Pakistan, who missed out on quarterfinals after finishing third in Pool A, thumped Jamaica 15-2 in their placement match for 9-16th positions. Australia beat USA 6-3 while Switzerland edged Nigeria 5-4 in other placement matches.



Sultanate of Oman
MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH, Muscat, hereby give notice of tenders for the following projects:-

Tender No.	Project Category	Location	Grade in Tender Board Registration	Last Day to Purchase Tender Documents	Last Date of Tender Submission
1/2024	Supply	MODIFICATION WORKS FOR REPLACEMENT OF CHILLERS & AHU AT SULTAN QABOOS SPORTS COMPLEX AT BAUSHER	Excellent	10/02/2024	11/03/2024
2/2024	Services	RENOVATION OF GRASSED FOOTBALL PITCH WITH AUTOMATIC IRRIGATION TO MUSCAT SPORTS CLUB	First, Second	10/02/2024	11/03/2024
3/2024	Services	CONSTRUCTION OF SYNTHETIC TURF FOOTBALL PITCH AT MUSCAT SPORTS CLUB, MUSCAT GOVERNORATE	First, Second	10/02/2024	11/03/2024
4/2024	Construction and Maintenance	REHABILITATION WORK FOR ALSLAM CLUB - SHINAS	Second	10/02/2024	11/03/2024

Companies, which are registered with the Tender Board and engaged in same category with experience in and same Grade as noted above, can obtain the Tender Documents at the Tender Board E-tendering digital portal link (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).

The last date of tender submission on above E-tendering site

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

Any participants have doubt in adopting e-tendering can contact over the phone 24402200 or through email etenderhd@ita.gov.om

Al Bashayer camel fest to kick off in Adam on Feb 12

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, JAN 29

Al Bashayer Square Committee for Arabian Camels revealed the details of the seventh edition of Al Bashayer annual festival 2023, which will be held on February 12 to 17, at Al Bashayer Square in the Wilayat of Adam. The camel festival will be organised with the support of HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan.

The seventh edition of the festival will continue for six days with Omani and GCC participants, competing in 74 rounds in different categories to win the valuable prizes, 20 cars and 15 icons including the Cups, the golden and silver swords.

The first day, February 12, will be for 'Hagayeg' category,



The sixth edition race for 12 km.

two years old, for 4 km. Nineteen races will be in the morning with cash prizes for the top ten. In the afternoon, there will be six main races with car prizes for the winner and cash prizes for the top 10.

The second day, February 13, will be for the 'Lagaya' category, three years old, for 5 km divided into 15 races in the morning time with cash prize for the top 10. Five main races will start in the afternoon, five cars for the

winners and cash prizes up to 10th place.

The third day, February 14, will be for 'Yathaa' category, 4 years old, for 6 km race. Eleven races will be in the morning with cash prizes for the top 10. Four main races will be in the afternoon, the winners will have cars and cash prizes for the top ten.

Fourth day morning, February 15, three races will be for 'Thanaya' category, 5 years

old, for a distance of 8 km. Four races are allocated for 'Al Hawl' category, 6 years and above. Both categories will have cash prize for the top 10.

The afternoon competitions will be for human riders, two races will be for 1,500 metres and the main race will be for 12 km. The winner will receive a SUV car and cash prizes for the top 10.

The concluding ceremony will be held on the final day, February 17, afternoon. The competition will include 4 main races for 8 km for old category — two races will be for individuals with SUV cars prizes for the winners and two races will be for organisations. The camel owners will compete to have the Cup and a car in the first two races. The winner in the fourth race will have the golden sword and a SUV car, while the third race winner will get silver sword and a SUV car.

Technical issues force retirement of Getspeed Mercedes in Dubai

MUSCAT: Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair teamed up with Austria's Dominik Baumann and Martin Konrad, Germany's Fabian Schiller and American racer Anthony Bartone Getspeed Mercedes-AMG GT3 Evo for the 19th Hankook 24H Dubai at the Dubai Autodrome. While lying in second place after 15 hours of the race, fuel pump and transmission issues forced the team to retire the car.

Al Zubair said: "The weekend started off quite strong and we felt very positive with the car in testing. We led up to qualifying and a bronze (driver) had to qualify for the first session. It was open for the second two. Martin (Konrad) was slightly slower than the other bronzes in his qualifying, so when Dominik (Baumann) and Fabi (Schiller) did a great job, it was difficult to get the average down, so we started the race from P4 overall and P1 in the Pro class.

"Leading into the race, we had a great strategy and the car felt quite good. The Audis were fast but, I think with our strategy of having the pros drive the last six hours, we had an advantage in the pocket. But, unfortunately, with nine hours to go we got a fuel pump issue and a gearbox failure as well. We weren't able to continue the race while running in P2. Honestly, we had a good chance for the win this year. That's racing. This will make victory at a future Dubai 24 feel even better..."

Victory, after 603 laps, fell to the Eastalent Racing Team Audi R8 LMS GT3 EVO II, crewed by Christopher Haase, Simon Reicher, Markus Winkelhock, Mike Zhou and Gilles Magnus. Sven Muller brought the Proton Huber Competition Porsche 911 home in second place and Jack Barlow pushed the Century Motorsport BMW M4 GT3 on to the bottom step of the podium.

The Getspeed crew started the race strongly and led through the first hour mark after 29 laps. Al Zubair was in the hot seat in third behind the Proton Huber Competition and MRS GT-Racing Porsche 911s with the race approaching the two-hour mark. The Omani then pitted for fuel and slipped to fourth.

The team climbed to second place behind the Eastalent Racing



Al Faisal al Zubair

Audi after four hours and ran in third for the next two hours.

After seven hours, and with Schiller at the wheel, the Getspeed car was running in fifth place behind the three Eastalent Racing, HAAS RT and Attempto Racing Audis and the Herberth Motorsport Porsche. The car moved up to second place behind the eventual winners after nine hours and held that position for three hours before slipping back to third. But they had regained second place at the 14-hour mark.

Sadly, the dream of winning the race ended when Baumann suffered technical issues and was forced to pit the Getspeed Mercedes after 360 laps.

The crew finished fourth in the first official practice session on Friday morning with a best run of 1min 59.990sec in a stint won by the Manamauri Energy by Ebimotors Porsche 911 GT3 R with a lap of 1min 58.940sec. The Proton Huber Competition Porsche came home second ahead of Grove Racing's Mercedes-AMG GT3 Evo.

The Getspeed car was placed sixth in the first of three qualifying sessions and a best lap of 2min 00.559sec with Konrad at the wheel. The Leipert Motorsport Lamborghini claimed the early bragging rights from the HAAS RT Audi and Audi.

Baumann took the wheel in Q2 and finished the five-lap stint in fourth position with a best run of 1min 59.630sec. The Sainteloc Junior Team, Leipert Motorsport and the Dragon Racing Ferrari secured the top three times.

The Getspeed crew achieved a similar position in Q3 with Schiller carding a best tour of 1min 59.893sec in a stint won by the Dragon Racing Ferrari from the HAAS RT Audi and the Eastalent Racing Team Audi.



Egypt hopes dashed by DR Congo

GUINEA REACH AFCON QUARTERFINALS



Guinea's Mohamed Bayo celebrates scoring his team's first goal during the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2024 Round of 16 match between Equatorial Guinea and Guinea at the Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Ebimpe, Abidjan. – AFP

ABIDJAN: The injured Mohamed Salah will not get the chance to return to the Africa Cup of Nations after his Egypt side were knocked out of the competition on Sunday in a dramatic penalty shoot-out against the Democratic Republic of Congo, while Guinea progressed to the last eight.

Record-seven time champions Egypt lost 8-7 on penalties against the Congolese after their last-16 tie ended 1-1 at the end of extra time.

Meschack Elia put DR Congo ahead in the Ivorian coastal city of San-Pedro in the 37th minute, only for Mostafa Mohamed to equalise for Egypt from the penalty spot in first-half stoppage time.

With no further scoring, Egypt held on for a shoot-out after having Mohamed Hamdy sent off for a second booking in the first half of extra time.

They were involved in three shoot-outs in four knockout ties at the last Cup of Nations in Cameroon two years ago, when they lost the final on penalties to Senegal.

Mohamed missed the target with the Pharaohs' second kick, but Arthur Masuaku then squandered the Leopards' next attempt.

Egypt goalkeeper Mohamed Abou Gabal, better known simply as Gabaski, then put Egypt's ninth penalty over, and Congolese keeper Lionel Mpasi made no mistake to take DR Congo through to the quarter-finals.

It is a bitter pill for the Egyptians,



DR Congo players celebrate after the match against Egypt. – Reuters

who had come to Ivory Coast hoping to win a first Cup of Nations since 2010, a year before Salah made his senior international debut.

SALAH DREAM OH HOLD

But they stumbled out of their group with three draws, and lost the Liverpool superstar to a hamstring injury in their second game against Ghana.

He had gone back to his club to continue treatment, in the hope of being able to return for the latter stages of the competition, but now his dream of winning the title with his country remains on hold.

Meanwhile, it is the first time DR Congo have won a knockout tie at the tournament since reaching the semifinals in 2015. "We practised penalties a lot in training over the last few days and I knew I would need to be ready," Mpasi, the former Paris Saint-Germain youngster now playing for Rodez in the French second tier, told broadcaster Canal Plus Afrique.

"When I saw Gabaski shoot, we were looking each other in the eyes and I could see he looked a bit nervous. "When I put the ball on the spot I just tried to stay calm. I thought about the last penalty I took in training and luckily it went well."

BAYO HITS LATE WINNER

Sebastien Desabre's team will head to Abidjan for a quarterfinal on Friday against Guinea, who beat Equatorial Guinea 1-0 earlier with a dramatic winner by Mohamed Bayo in the eighth minute of injury time.

The match at the Ebimpe Olympic Stadium was also heading for extra time when Bayo, of French side Le Havre, headed in a cross by Ibrahim Diakite to spark frenzied celebrations among the Guinea team and their large support in a crowd of 36,340.

It was a historic moment for the Syli National, who had never previously won a Cup of Nations

knockout tie — they were runners-up in 1976, in an era when the final four played a round-robin format to decide the winner of the trophy.

"It means a lot. We knew that this could be a historic occasion," said Guinea coach Kaba Diawara, who was in tears at the final whistle.

He called for calm among supporters after reports that six people died amid celebrations in the capital Conakry following the 1-0 win over Gambia during the group stage.

"We had a catastrophe in December and another after the game against Gambia. So that is enough. Let's stay calm and enjoy this," Diawara added.

Meanwhile, Equatorial Guinea, who had midfielder Federico Bikoro sent off in the 55th minute, will wonder what might have been had captain Emilio Nsue not squandered a penalty midway through the second half. — AFP

Africa Cup of Nations last-16 results on Sunday (aet denotes after extra time):

In Abidjan
Equatorial Guinea 0 Guinea 1 (Bayo 90+8)

In San Pedro
Egypt 1 (Mohamed 45+1-pen) Democratic Republic of Congo 1 (Elia 37) aet

DR Congo win 8-7 on penalties

Played Saturday
In Bouake
Angola 3 (Dala 38, 42, Mabalulu 66) Namibia 0

In Abidjan
Nigeria 2 (Lookman 36, 90) Cameroon 0

Oman goalball team loses against Iraq in WAPG

AHMED AL KAABI

MUSCAT, JAN 29

The Omani national blind goalball team lost to Iraq 11-1 in its first match in the fourth edition of the West Asian Paralympic Games (WAPG) at Al Thiqah Club for Disabled in Sharjah, UAE from January 27 to February 3.

The Iraqi team started the match well and managed to take early lead of three goals through their players Mustafa Abdullah and Ahmed Hussein. Meanwhile, the Omani players were unable to penetrate the solid defence of the Iraqi team. Following this, the coach of the

national team, Asaad al Zahli, requested a timeout to instruct the players, but the situation remained

the same with Oman failing to score while the Iraqi team added a fourth goal. Oman continued to struggle to score due to the precise defence of the Iraqi team, with the latter adding a fifth goal through Mustafa Abdullah.

Subsequently, the team made a change with Khamees al Sultani replacing Saqr al Qasimi, but Oman's attempts to score were thwarted by the Iraqi players' accurate reading of the incoming balls. The referee awarded a penalty to Iraq which was saved by Khamees al Sultani, but Iraqi player Karar Dakhil managed to score a sixth goal.

Iraq extended their lead by adding a seventh goal through Mustafa Abdullah, and eighth goal through Ahmed Hussein,



Oman goalball team at the West Asian Paralympic Games in Sharjah.

prompting the coach of the Omani team to request another timeout in this half to guide the players. The first half ended with Iraq leading 8-0.

In the second half, Oman's Emad al Hajji succeeded in scoring the team's first goal.

However, Iraq responded by scoring a ninth goal, continuing

their scoring spree with a 10th goal. Iraq maintained their dominance to score an 11th goal, and winning the match 11-1.

Commenting on the match, Akram bin Saif al Maawali, manager of Oman team, attributed the loss to the experience gap between the two teams. He acknowledged Iraq's strength as a frontrunner in the championship, citing their extensive experience and well-established league structure. Despite the challenging start, Al Maawali expressed confidence in Omani players' ability to bounce back in the upcoming matches.

Looking ahead, Oman's national athletics team is set to begin their participation in the West Asian Paralympic Games on

Tuesday.

Mohammed al Mashaikhi a team member mentioned they are all geared up and optimistic about their chances, aiming for a podium finish despite facing tough competition. He highlighted the excitement and challenge of the tournament, with teams competing fiercely for medals.

Al Mashaikhi emphasised their aspiration to make Oman proud, hoping to hear their national anthem play multiple times during the awards ceremony. He mentioned their intense training sessions at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, especially in the weeks leading up to the championship, instilling confidence in their abilities despite their modest preparations.



JORDAN LEAVE IT LATE TO BEAT IRAQ



DOHA: Jordan advanced to the Asian Cup quarterfinals after two stoppage-time goals secured a 3-2 win over Iraq, who had striker and tournament top scorer Aymen Hussein sent off late on for his goal celebrations on Monday.

With Iraq looking destined to move into the last eight when the clock struck 90 minutes, Jordan's Yazan al Arab equalised in the 95th before Nizar al Rashdan scored two minutes later with a glorious long-range effort to break Iraqi hearts.

Jordan will now face tournament debutants Tajikistan in the last eight.

"The confidence that we have made us believe we could come back and this is what we've done," Jordan coach Hussein Ammouta told reporters.

"In added time we came back, we equalised and we exploited Iraq being down one man. We have a strong mentality and we have to maintain it so we can go further in this tournament."

Jordan went ahead on the stroke of half-time when Yazan al Naimat pounced on a sloppy pass and raced past the defence.

The 24-year-old chipped the ball over goalkeeper Jalal Hassan to score before celebrating with his teammates by sitting on the turf and pretending to eat a meal.

Iraq struck back in the 68th when Saad

Natig headed home from a corner before Hussein scored eight minutes later when he controlled a cross and fired into the bottom corner. The joy of scoring his sixth goal of the tournament quickly turned to shock when the referee produced a second yellow card for excessive celebrations after the striker mimicked Jordan's players and sat on the turf, pretending to eat by himself.

"In a big tournament like the Asian Cup you cannot exclude a player after celebrating a goal. The same happened in the first half with the Jordanian players (celebrating) and the referee didn't take any action," Iraq coach Jesus Casas said.

"The problem was in the timing of this red card. It took place after we had used all our substitutions, so it was a very difficult situation. We didn't have the chance to make any changes inside the pitch."

While Iraq fumed, Jordan took full advantage of the extra man and when Mousa Tamari's stoppage time effort was parried by Hassan, Al-Arab was on hand to fire home the rebound.

The comeback was complete when midfielder Al Rashdan was left unmarked outside the box and curled his shot past the keeper to spark wild celebrations in the stands among the Jordanians while the Iraqis sat in stunned silence. — Reuters

Jordan's Nizar al Rashdan celebrates scoring their third goal with Mousa Tamari and Yazan Al Naimat. — Reuters

From small fry to dark horses, Segrt makes Tajikistan dream

DOHA: Tajikistan coach Petar Segrt is warm and affable with a booming voice but after gaining popularity for his charm at the Asian Cup, he is now turning heads after his side's dream run to the quarterfinals.

The only team making their debut at the tournament in Qatar, Tajikistan were the competition's minnows and were barely given a second look when the 24-team group stage got underway.

But they shocked the continent by first reaching the knockout stage before delivering the upset of the tournament by eliminating the United Arab Emirates on penalties in the last 16 on Sunday. "We are now the dark horses in this

tournament. Nobody knows how far we can go. I have no limits for my players, they've surprised me again," the 57-year-old Segrt told reporters.

A well-travelled coach who has taken charge of teams such as Georgia, Afghanistan and Maldives, the Croatian has become a national hero in Tajikistan in the past week.

His demeanour and showmanship came across as a ploy to shift the limelight away from his young squad, and the tactic has clearly worked. "It's like when you have children, you must wait for the right moment," Segrt had said when he was asked whether his personality protected his team during the group stage.



Tajikistan players celebrate with coach Petar Segrt after the match. — Reuters

"Now they are ready... I will still try to put all the pressure on me, but they must work like adults and do it themselves."

Conceding only one goal against Qatar, a comeback win over

Lebanon and nearly beating UAE in 90 minutes before dumping them out in the shootout is proof that his team is perhaps better than their ranking of 106 would suggest. "We are among the eight best teams in Asia," said Segrt, whose side will next face either Iraq or Jordan.

Croatia's Segrt makes a point of shaking everyone's hand in the room before his press conferences.

It is something he says he has done out of respect for 27 years.

"I come from a very poor (background), a very difficult situation in old Yugoslavia and in Germany. I learned to respect everybody because for me, as a child it was very difficult," he said.

"I never forget where I come from... I think I have an honest soul, this is my most important thing."

His style of management has clearly struck a chord with his young players, who engulfed him and broke his glasses when they qualified for the last-16. "He's very positive every time, very kind. But he knows when he has to be friendly and kind, and when he has to be hard and strict towards us," Tajikistan defender Zoir Dzhraboev said.

When some players sat on the turf in the dugout before the shootout against the UAE, Segrt asked them to get back on their feet and present a united front, standing shoulder to shoulder. — Reuters





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Oman emerges as one of India’s leading trading partners



Indian officials addressing a visiting group of journalists from the GCC states in New Delhi recently.

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 29

Trade between the Sultanate of Oman and India has reached record highs, solidifying Muscat’s position as India’s leading regional trading partner. According to Indian Ambassador Amit Narang, bilateral trade between India and Oman has flourished in recent years, doubling to \$12.4 billion in fiscal year 2022-2023.

“This growth is a testament to the strong economic partnership between our two nations. The bilateral comprehensive economic partnership agreement has played a key role in facilitating this trade expansion, and discussions are currently under way to further deepen and strengthen this partnership for even greater mutual benefit,” he said in a speech during the Republic Day celebrations at the embassy.

Bilateral trade between India and the GCC has also surged to a staggering \$184 billion between April 2022 and March 2023, marking a 42% year-on-year increase and highlighting the flourishing economic ties between the two sides.

“The GCC, and especially Oman, has emerged as our most important regional

trading partner,” declared Muktesh K Pardeshi, Secretary in charge of India’s relations with the Gulf region.

Addressing a group of Gulf journalists visiting New Delhi recently, he said relations with the broader GCC bloc were underpinned by a deep-rooted connection. “We share a long history and cultural ties that bind us together,” emphasised Pardeshi.

Shailesh Pathak, Secretary-General of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), echoed this sentiment. He praised the “unique model of constructive cooperation” between Oman and India, citing numerous joint developmental projects as testaments to the strength of the partnership.

This collaboration extends beyond bilateral trade. High-level exchanges play a vital role in fostering broader cooperation. Aseem Mahajan, Joint Secretary for the Gulf at the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, highlighted the significance of the recent visit by the Sultan of Oman to India. The signing of several memorandums of understanding during this visit further cemented the strategic partnership and paved the way for enhanced collaboration in diverse fields.

Estidamah unveils bold plan to supercharge Oman’s financial sector

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 29

The National Programme for Fiscal Sustainability and Financial Sector Development (Estidamah), spearheaded by the Ministry of Finance, has unveiled a comprehensive roadmap to propel Oman’s financial sector into a new era.

Encompassing both banking and capital markets, the plan boasts over 74 transformative initiatives grounded in six key pillars and fuelled by four critical enablers.

Estidamah (meaning ‘Sustainability’) aims to achieve demonstrably positive outcomes by 2025, with a clear baseline established in 2022. Its execution will be a collaborative effort with relevant authorities, seamlessly dovetailing with the 10th Five-Year Plan.

Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Finance and General Supervisor of Estidamah, underscored the impetus behind this ambitious move: “This plan builds upon the remarkable success of the 2020-2024 medium-term financial plan. We’ve reduced the average oil break-even price, shrunk public debt, and witnessed a credit rating upgrade.

The government remains steadfast in its commitment to strengthening financial indicators and propelling the financial sector forward.” Estidamah, approved under Royal Directives, kicked off in 2023 and spans three years, serving as a pivotal force in realising the “Oman Vision 2040.”

Al Jashmi elaborated, “Financial sustainability unlocks efficient allocation of resources towards high-yielding development projects



Mahmood bin Abdallah bin Ahmed al Aweini, Director of Estidamah, outlined the programme’s core objectives.

that catalyse economic progress. Estidamah will engage public and private stakeholders to cultivate a vibrant and sophisticated financial landscape, a potent contributor to our Gross Domestic Product.”

Mahmood bin Abdallah bin Ahmed al Aweini, Director of Estidamah, outlined the programme’s core objectives: “Our focus spans enhancing national financial indicators and evolving the financial system to empower individuals and institutions in their diverse developmental roles.”

He further emphasised, “We aim to invigorate private sector participation, ensuring diverse financing options reach key groups like SMEs, entrepreneurs, investors, nascent companies, and sectors driving economic diversification.”

The programme’s working themes included providing financing options for small and medium enterprises, directing funding to targeted sectors, developing a sustainable green finance system, activating the role of the capital market, enhancing attractiveness for foreign investments, and activating the insurance sector.

The programme also focused on four enablers: fintech, Legal & Regulatory Landscape, financial literacy, and Human Capital Development. During the study phase, the programme identified challenges such as limited financial services and products suitable for different groups, concentration of financing opportunities in traditional sectors, low liquidity levels in the capital market, and the absence of opportunities related to fintech and sustainable green finance.

Furthermore, there was limited qualified human resources in the financial sector.

Estidamah has already made significant strides in collaboration

with relevant authorities. Notable examples include:

Market Maker and Liquidity Providers Initiative: Working with the Capital Market Authority to issue regulations for market makers and liquidity providers, licensing two companies — United Securities and Ubhar Capital — to act as market makers and liquidity providers.

The actual activity of the liquidity provider commenced in mid-January 2024, contributing to enhancing market liquidity and making Muscat Stock Exchange a more attractive emerging market globally.

Green/Sustainable Financing Initiatives: Estidamah program unified efforts to ensure legislative and regulatory readiness in Oman, enabling the public and private sectors to access green financing at minimal costs.

This includes the issuance of a reference framework for sustainable sovereign financing by the Ministry of Finance and the launch of a guidance directory and triple governance disclosure platform for listed companies by the Muscat Stock Exchange.

Insolvency Law Initiative: Developing a systematic regulatory framework for increasing individual insolvency cases and establishing a system that balances the rights of creditors and debtors.

The programme collaborated with the Supreme Judicial Council, the Central Bank, and the Ministry of Social Development to formulate a draft personal bankruptcy law along with the executive regulations, with the hope of adoption through the legislative process.

Oman attracts RO 33m worth investments in AI projects

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 29

The Oman AI Summit launched here on Monday January 29, 2024, under the patronage of His Highness Sayyid Dr Kamil bin Fahd al Said, Secretary-General of the Secretariat-General of the Council of Ministers.

Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Communications and IT Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, underscored the significance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in achieving Oman Vision 2040.

During a panel discussion, Dr Al Shaithani shared that the National Digital Programme — which aims to achieve a five-fold increase in the contribution of the digital economy to the GDP — currently



(L-r) Rebecca Olson CEO at Oman American Business Council, Dr Ali al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, Munther al Busaidy, Vice-Chairman of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, Dr Talal al Saadi, Director of the Under-Secretary’s office at the Ministry of Interior and Joerg Bienert, Co-Founder and Chairman at German AI Association speak during the opening panel discussion of the Oman AI Summit 2024.

includes an executive programme for Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Technologies. According to the Under-Secretary, the programme which was launched last year,

aims to fulfil four main pillars: Embedment of AI in economic sectors, Embedment of AI in services such as health, Developing human capabilities and startups in AI, and Governance of AI.

He shared that the programme is measured through KPIs including such as the country’s rank within the Oxford Insight AI Index and the volume of private sector investments in AI.

Dr Al Shaithani also announced that the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology was able to attract RO 33 million worth of investments in AI in 2023.

He added that the value of total investments within the last three years amounted to around RO 55 million. Significantly, the Summit also highlighted the importance of

Artificial Intelligence regulation.

Speaking at a panel discussion, Dr Talal al Saadi, Director of the Under-Secretary’s office at the Ministry of Interior, shared that Artificial Intelligence regulations are necessary and integral to achieving Oman Vision 2040.

Dr Al Saadi shared that the regulations will need to be implemented to ensure data privacy and protection, accountability and transparency.

Dr Al Shaithani pointed out that some legal statutes, such as the Personal Protection Law and the Information Technology law, contain some clauses that can protect individuals from the misuse of the AI in the short term, stressing that a longer term alternative is required.

The forum concludes today, January 30.

Bank Muscat wins two awards by JP Morgan Chase for excellence in STP rates

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, was awarded by the global banking giant JP Morgan Chase; one of the top institutions that provide financial solutions to important corporates around the world, for its best-in-class Straight-Through Processing (STP) rates for US dollar clearing operations.

The Bank is proud to be recognised for its best-in-class STP rate of 99.46 per cent on MT103 category and of 99.92 per cent on MT202 category for its excellent STP technique in 2023.

Speaking about this outstanding achievement, Talal bin Abdulhameed al Zadjali, Deputy General Manager – Operations, Bank Muscat, said: “The Bank prioritises excellence in managing its operations and services, evident through consistent recognition from financial institutions and international banks.

The awards received highlight the Bank’s operational efficiency, particularly in electronic payment services, showcasing its commitment to technological advancements and delivering exceptional services to both individual and institutional customers.

The Bank is keen to adopt high efficiency standards in fund transfers and transactions that minimise manual intervention, ensuring quality and preventing payment delays.

We will continue to apply the latest practices that save time and effort of our valued customers.”

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NBO privilege banking offers premium services

MUSCAT: Marking a significant stride towards delivering an unparalleled banking experience to its customers, the National Bank of Oman (NBO) offers Privilege Banking, a bespoke financial solution curated for high-end clients.

This offering provides a personalised portfolio, unlocking financial opportunities through diverse saving and investment products to help clients realise their future aspirations.

Specifically designed for individuals earning between RO 1,000 up to RO 2,999, or maintaining a deposit base of RO 10,000, Privilege Banking underscores a commitment to delivering high-quality financial products.

Sharing his insights on the product, Ali bin Mustafa al Lawati, Assistant General Manager – Head of Private & Segments Banking at NBO, stated, “Privilege Banking is not just a service; it’s a commitment to providing a superior financial journey to our valued customers.

We understand their diverse needs and aspirations, and this product is designed to cater to them comprehensively.

Privilege Banking clientele enjoy exceptional services facilitated by advanced digital solutions, ensuring prompt and convenient access to banking services, ultimately saving time. NBO is dedicated to redefining banking experiences, with Privilege Banking standing as a testament to our unwavering zeal for excellence.” Privilege Banking incorporates various features, including the Systematic Investment Plan (SIP), which necessitates only a minimum monthly investment of RO 100.

ahli Islamic launches ‘Al Majd’ segment for its upper mass customers

MUSCAT: As part of its ongoing endeavors to appeal to its growing customer base, ahli Islamic, has introduced its exciting, all-new Al Majd segment.

The launch event was held at ahlibank HQ and was graced by the presence of ahli Islamic’s top executives and key personnel.

Al Majd, a service segment tailor-made for ahli Islamic’s discerning upper mass customers, comes with a host of greatly rewarding benefits, fully aligned with the principles of Sharia.

As an exclusive launch offer, customers will get 10 per cent cashback on salaries as a onetime Hiba.

Customers who have a salary between RO 1,000 - 3,499 or who make a deposit of RO 10,000 – 34,999 can join the Al Majd segment

and enjoy the host of offers and benefits, such as, access to 25 airport lounges across the globe up to 6

times a year, and a bonus of 2,000 pearl points as a joining bonus.

Moreover, in conjunction with the offers, Al Majd also provides a special service desk made available for customers in selected branches for further assistance.

Speaking on the launch of Al Majd, Noora Sultan, AGM - Head of Retail Banking at ahli Islamic, stated, “This new venture of bringing an exceptional banking experience that goes beyond the norm is a delight to us here at ahli Islamic.

We strive to set benchmarks in what can be provided to our customers whilst catering to their specific needs.

Al Majd further underscores our dedication to instill world-class services and products to our substantial portfolio, in conjunction with our commitment of serving our customers with grace and efficiency.”

Al Majd provides customers with a uniquely designed platinum credit card and debit card, fully secured with chip and PIN feature, in addition to the contactless tap & go technology. The card has worldwide acceptance at more than 30 million locations.

Notably, the Bank also provides customers with a cheque book, as per their request.

Internet and mobile banking services are at the disposal of Al Majd customers, alongside 3D-security verified by Visa for safe online transactions.

The card has 24/7 direct access for withdrawals or purchases through POS terminals. Special finance rates and dedicated offers, among a host of products and services, are provided to Al Majd customers. And in the case of any queries, customers can contact customer services at ahlinconnect at any time of the day.

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Chery’s technology facilitates building luxury land flight cabins

MUSCAT: Chery’s flagship SUV, Tiggo 8 Pro Max is a masterpiece of Chery’s core technology. Whether in terms of intelligent cabin within reach, highly efficient power or leading safety configuration, Tiggo 8 Pro presents the brand connotation of “Technology Chery” to users with the most cutting-edge technology and the most comprehensive configuration.

When entering the interior of Tiggo 8 Pro Max, the design of the duplex screen is particularly impressive with a size of 24.6 inches, integrated seamless design, curved structure, multi-touch, and smooth operation; it also features the W-HUD head-up display function,

which can display various forms including speed, dynamic ADAS, navigation, phone, etc., and also allows users to be more focused, thus facilitating safe driving.

In addition, based on the large high-definition screen, Tiggo 8 Pro Max also integrates 540° image function to achieve a dead-angle view of the outside environment, and achieves better vehicle machine interconnection by meeting the cell phone mapping of both Car play and Android Auto.

Besides, it possesses 50W high-power wireless charging function, which is the most applicable model in the same class, and the charging status can be displayed on the centre control screen, moreover,

it adds the considerate cell phone forgetting reminding function; additionally, the intelligent voice control function is also extremely practical, you can make phone calls, start music and wake up navigation by just speaking, so that the driver will no longer be bothered by the button operation and will not be distracted by the operation of the button during driving.

Since its establishment, Chery has been focusing on engine as its main business and has been maintaining continuous research and development on core technologies, which is the important credo for Chery to rank on the top list of Chinese passenger vehicles in terms of

export for 20 consecutive years.

After more than 20 years of technology development, Chery has set up 5 R&D centres and organised an R&D team of more than 10000 talents worldwide, with its core R&D personnel coming from more than 10 countries, many of whom are top technical talents from well-known auto enterprises such as Jaguar Land Rover, GM and Ford.

Chery is ranked as the best Chinese global brand builder in cars and 14th in the overall list and its brand power has achieved strong growth.

Chery Automobile took the first spot among all Chinese automotive brands in J.D. Power 2023 China Initial Quality



Tiggo 8 Pro Max is a masterpiece of Chery's core technology.

StudySM(IQS).

In Oman, Chery vehicles are distributed by Saud Bahwan

Group. For the latest Press Releases, Test Drive requests and more, please visit www.chery.om,



Mushroom-based protein project to introduce new whole food in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT, JAN 29

US-based foodtech startup MycoTechnology, which is partnering with Oman Investment Authority (OIA) in the establishment of a landmark mushroom-based protein project in the Sultanate of Oman, says the initiative will support the introduction of a novel whole food with beneficial impacts for food security.

According to a senior executive of the Colorado-based company, Oman's rich date output will serve as a resource base for the production of this new protein-rich whole food utilising the startup's proprietary mushroom fermentation technology.

That breakthrough technology harnesses the natural power of mycelia — the invisible root system of mushrooms — to develop a range of alternative protein-based foods that address sugar reduction, sustainable protein, nutrient density,



Products from mushroom mycelia can help solve major challenges in the global food industry

and other nutrition-based factors.

"In partnership with the Oman Investment Authority, we are upcycling dates in the region that would otherwise go to waste and using them as a fuel source for our mushroom mycelial biomass," said Dr Ranjan Patnaik, Chief Technology Officer at MycoTechnology.

"The result is a premium whole food that is rich in naturally occurring nutrients including

protein, fibre and micronutrients.

This versatile meat alternative could be a valuable new culinary ingredient that is not only nutritious and sustainable, but a scalable solution for a more stable food supply," the official stated in an interview featured in the latest edition of 'Food Engineering & Ingredients' (FEI) magazine.

Vital Foods Technologies — a joint venture of Oman Investment Authority and MycoTechnology

Inc — has been set up to establish the project on a 10-hectare site in Oman.

Initial processing capacity is envisioned at 16,000 tonnes per annum of Omani dates, sourced primarily from the plantations of the Million Dates Palms Project.

OIA is also an investor in MycoTechnology, which says its products from mushroom mycelia can help solve major challenges in the global food industry. By scaling the deployment of its mushroom fermentation technology, the company says it can boost the availability of "healthy, sustainable, clean label and high-quality food options".

Chief Technology Officer Dr Patnaik added: "In addition to MycoTechnology's existing commercial ingredients, we are leveraging our technological expertise to address challenges in food security, food waste and food quality through the development of a new, mycelia-based whole food."

Oman's Mercury Investments acquires stake in Polymetal

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 29



Well-known gold producer Polymetal International plc has announced that a 23.9 per cent stake (113,201,189 shares) held by Powerboom Investments Limited, a subsidiary of ICT Holding Limited, has been acquired by Maaden International Investment LLC, a company 100 per cent owned by a consortium of investors from the Sultanate of Oman, led by Mercury Investments International LLC.

Mercury Investments International LLC is state-owned company ultimately owned by the Government of Oman.

The investment falls within the strategic goals of Mercury's group as well as within the broader goals of the Omani government through Oman Vision 2040, which focuses on economic diversification

in key sectors such as the global metals and mining sector, a press statement issued by Polymetal noted.

"We welcome our new significant shareholders led by Mercury Investments International LLC and we look forward to our engagement with our new Omani investors.

We are pleased that MII LLC has confirmed its full support of Polymetal's strategy, which includes de-risking the Company's business by disposing its Russian operation and further developing its asset base in Kazakhstan and the wider region," said Vitaly Nesis, Group CEO of Polymetal International plc.

Agreement signed to establish data computing centre in SOHAR Freezone

MUSCAT: SOHAR Port and Freezone signed a land lease agreement with Green Data City to develop a Data Computing Centre in SOHAR Freezone for hosting, processing, and data mining, solidifying our position as a key player in the digital economy, fostering technological innovation and economic growth.

With a total investment of \$210 million, the Green Data City project is set to strengthen our technological landscape, bringing forth a state-of-the-art facility that houses approximately 20,000 servers from leading manufacturers.

Hosted in 40-foot containers, these servers will be connected to immersion and hydro systems with dry coolers, ensuring efficient and sustainable cooling for data processing and other computing processes on the internet.

Covering a land area of 45,000 sqm, this project is considered a vital facility for modern companies. It provides the necessary infrastructure for storing, processing, and managing data. Additionally, this project is a fundamental initiative towards digital transformation, economic development, and the enhancement of communication and information technology services in general.

Olivier Ohnheiser, CEO of Green Data City stated: "Collaborating with SOHAR Freezone is a strategic



move for Green Data City.

Our infrastructure not only transforms SOHAR into a global hub for innovation but strategically reinforces our geographical diversification, adding significant value to our business footprint. This agreement reflects our commitment to pioneering solutions and ensures mutual success in the dynamic digital landscape."

Omar bin Mahmood al Mahrizi, CEO of SOHAR Freezone, DCEO SOHAR Port said, "Our agreement with Green Data City represents a step forward for SOHAR in the digital realm. While emphasising our commitment to technological innovation, this agreement contributes to our broader goal of supporting Oman's economic diversification and sustainable development, placing us as a participant in the nation's digital future."

Oman posts increase in production of refineries and petroleum products

MUSCAT: According to preliminary statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the production of refineries and petroleum industries increased by 1.2% by the end of December 2023 compared to the same period in 2022.

The statistics indicate that the production of M-91 increased by 13.7% by the end of December 2023, with sales rising by 11.2%.

Furthermore, liquefied petroleum gas, paraxylene, and gasoline products led to an increase in exports, with growth rates of 82.8%, 163.8%, and 76.8% respectively.

The production of M-91 reached 15,705,600 barrels by the end of December 2023, with sales amounting to 14,640,900 barrels. In contrast, the production of M-95 decreased by 25.6% to 11,044,300 barrels, and sales also declined by



3.9% to 12,087,500 barrels. Diesel production decreased by 0.4% to reach 32,425,900 barrels, with sales totalling 14,353,700 barrels.

Additionally, aviation fuel production increased by 25.3% to reach 9,866,500 barrels, with sales reaching 4,429,200 barrels. Liquefied petroleum gas production also increased by 13.9% to reach 7,861,000 barrels. Regarding petrochemicals, the statistics indicate a 59.1% increase

in gasoline production, reaching 138,200 metric tonnes.

Paraxylene production stood at 494,900 metric tonnes, marking a significant increase of 162.4%. On the other hand, polypropylene production decreased by 11.1% to 222,900 metric tonnes. Oman's exports of M-91 decreased by 23.9% to reach 1,221,900 barrels, while exports of M-95 reached 580,400 barrels, down by 81.3% compared to the same period in 2022.

Oman AI Summit promotes investment and innovation

JOMAR MENDOZA

MUSCAT, JAN 29

"The Oman AI Summit 2024 explores opportunities for economic growth and innovation", this according to Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), during the opening keynote of the Oman AI Summit 2024, being held at the Grand Millennium Hotel.

Al Rawas said the holding of the Oman AI Summit is a step towards envisioning a desired future of a smart digital environment and sustainable technological wealth. Such efforts will enhance the innovation system, develop capabilities, and promote national (artificial intelligence) AI products and future technologies, positioning Oman internationally in the field of AI.

He further emphasised that AI technologies provide solutions to complex problems, enable companies to increase productivity, and forecast future trends, thereby assisting in decision-making that supports business sustainability.

"The AI sector is a supporting pillar for economic diversification, attracting investments and providing opportunities to expand business operations, enhance competitiveness, and achieve the strategic vision of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry aligned with Oman Vision 2040," he said.

The Oman AI Summit 2024, endorsed by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, kicked off on Monday under the auspices of HH Dr Kamil bin Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Secretary-General of Oman's General



Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of OCCI delivers the opening keynote during the Oman AI Summit 2024.

Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers.

The summit aims to facilitate investment procedures and establishment of foreign companies to encourage

investments and attract investors in the field of artificial intelligence. It also highlights the competitive investment opportunities available in the Sultanate of Oman.

Additionally, the summit

aims to support development and innovation in the field of artificial intelligence, encourage participants to present new solutions and innovations, showcase the latest technologies and innovations in the field of artificial intelligence, and analyse the best strategies for investing in this field.

The summit witnesses wide participation from officials, experts from both the public and private sectors in Oman, as well as experts in technology and artificial intelligence from different countries around the world.

The summit will discuss three main topics: "Artificial Intelligence and Governments," which will discuss the role of artificial intelligence in achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040, the impact of artificial intelligence on national

security and cyber security, and the role of governments in supporting and promoting startups in AI development.

The second topic, entitled "Artificial Intelligence and Business Environment," will discuss artificial intelligence and legal legislations, investment in artificial intelligence and its impact on the digital economy and development, artificial intelligence and its role in developing the financial sector, and AI-driven business innovation.

Meanwhile, the third topic, "Artificial Intelligence and the Economy," will shed light on artificial intelligence and green hydrogen, artificial intelligence and sustainable environment, and the impact of artificial intelligence on logistics sector transformations.

Reacting systematically to an unfair appraisal

Last week, my article revolved around creating an effective appraisal system that one could follow in order to avoid surprises at the end of the year.

Now that you have received your performance rating; be it excellent, good, average or poor. What's next? Of course depending on the outcome of the appraisal, you would need to take certain action in order to make the best out of your career goals and potential goals.

My article this week is on the "Appraisal aftermath" i.e. what action or steps should an employee take and do after he or she receive their end-of-year appraisals.

Let's first start with receiving a positive appraisal feedback or positive performance outcome. Understand and analyse the feedback received: What did you do well, what improvements do you require or need, and how could have you done things differently. Celebrate your achievements, be it individually or with your team (depending on your role in the respective organization).

The impact (personally and professionally) and the morale (individually or as a group) that one attains out of acknowledging feedback, celebrating feats and setting new goals is tremendous.

The proof is in the pudding, from the outstanding performance organisation gets as an output from the respective employees.

What about receiving a negative appraisal feedback i.e. being unfair or unjust? Yes I know, it can be disheartening and demoralising. The employee may end up not performing, and the organization may be serving dead bodies as a result.



TARIQ AL BARWANI

The author is an award-winning technology expert & renowned motivational speaker

ORGANISATIONS NORMALLY END UP CREATING A PIP, PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN, IN ORDER TO GIVE THE UNDERPERFORMING EMPLOYEE WITH A PLAN THAT INCLUDES TASKS THAT HE OR SHE NEEDS TO FOLLOW IN ORDER TO ADDRESS THE FAILURES AND CONSEQUENTLY SUCCEED (OR IMPROVE)



First and foremost, stay calm, be professional and ensure you reflect.

Organisations normally end up creating a PIP, performance improvement plan, in order to give the underperforming employee with a plan that includes tasks that he or she needs to follow in order to address the failures and consequently succeed (or improve). Think of it as an organization's tool for employee's survival.

What should the unfairly treated employee do (especially if the PIP is just an excuse from the organization before asking the respective employee to leave)? That's what I wish to focus on primarily today.

First and foremost, stay calm, be professional and ensure you reflect. It's important you take the necessary time (but not too long) to process what had happened, what was shared during the end-

of-the-year appraisal session, and the emotions that emanated as well.

The key is to avoid reacting immediately, as this may only portray you as being impulsive.

Taking an external input as a form of advice (from a trusted source, be it a friend or family) can be valuable as well to consider, as this may provide an objective view of the feedback i.e. was it constructive or destructive in nature.

Once you have all the data (as a form of input) in place, prepare a detailed response that includes evidence to each and every point you wish to address from the feedback received during the appraisal.

Ensure that you clearly explain and list your contribution and achievements that links directly

to what was agreed at the beginning of the year, and what you have achieved at the end of the year. Use tangible examples to support your case.

Lastly, schedule and request for a meeting with your line manager (if you feel the appraisal was unfair) to discuss the feedback. Present your justification and positively explain why you feel the initial assessment does not reflect your actual contribution.

The goal is to get the reassessment, and for your line manager to acknowledge your hard-earned efforts (if deserved) in a positive manner. At most of the cases, this works. In worst case scenario, get the HR involved.

Most organisation have a formal complaint on such cases (known as Employee Grievance)

that may raise as an employee and where a committee is tasked to review the case objectively.

The last thing you need is to work in an unproductive environment. It's unhealthy and deteriorating to do nothing, trust me.

Reacting systematically to unfair appraisal can sometimes be difficult as it involves emotions - we are humans after all.

Yet, by being calm, professional and objective through-out the journey, I trust the experience can be rewarding in whatever the outcome may be.

If you did not succeed at your first attempt, I can confidently assure you that the next time would be a walk in the park, especially with the learning and experience you gained out of the activity.

China small-bank take private offers big relief



A clerk counts renminbi banknotes at a bank outlet in Haian city. – Reuters

ANSHUMAN DAGA

Delisting might be the easy way out for China to keep its troubled, small lenders out of the public eye.

Bank of Jinzhou, which was rescued by a \$1.7 billion bailout from the central bank and local authorities in 2020, has received a rare takeover offer from an entity owned by the Chinese province of Liaoning for just over \$1 billion.

The provincial government, which oversees China's northeastern rust belt, is offering to buy all the Hong Kong and mainland shares it does not already own. The deal represents a discount of 72% to the troubled lender's book value per share as of June 2022.

Its Hong Kong stock has been suspended for a year since the bank failed to publish 2022 results.

Bank of Jinzhou went public in 2015, only to lurch from crisis after crisis including ties to the controversial Hanergy Thin Film Power Group and its exposure to local government financing vehicles.

S&P Global Ratings estimates that regional banks could face a combined \$306 billion hit in capital losses over the next few years due to debt restructuring at LGFVs.

Going private might make it easier for Bank of Jinzhou and property-exposed peers, including Bank of Guizhou and Bank of Zhengzhou to clean up their finances.

More deals could be in the works. — Reuters

Debunking crypto myths



STEFANO VIRGILLI stefano@virgilli.com

The author is a member of the International Press Association

So, this is my 7th year working in crypto, and I am amazed at the confusion that still prevails among those who are not involved in this industry. Starting with my own mother, who certainly has no idea about what I do for a living.

"He works with the flying money," she says to her incredulous enquiring friends. In this article, I won't go into details to explain what I do for a living, but rather explain why there is so much confusion when it comes to cryptocurrency and more broadly, blockchain technology.

As always, this is not in any shape or form financial advice.

The best financial advice is always: "Do your own research."

There are a couple of initial points that I think it is essential to clarify.

The first one is that this whole industry is primarily technology, unlike what many might think; it is finance. I would place finance — or decentralised finance — as a subset of the industry, not as the parent category.

Secondly, the industry is quite small in terms of market participants.

You certainly know someone involved in the industry to a certain level, maybe also someone who works in crypto full time for several years, but probably — unless you yourself are working in crypto too — the majority of your network of people would not be involved in blockchain or crypto, except for the occasional trader who might have bought Bitcoin at some point.

However, we — those who work in the industry — tend to perceive it as much bigger than it is, especially because we attend events, gatherings, conferences, and we tend to mingle among fellow crypto workers.

Yesterday night I went kart racing with a small group of friends. All of us work full time in crypto.

Having cleared the definition and the size, let me move to the

next elephant in the room: is crypto profitable? The simple answer: it depends. Except for the magic imaginary world of the "flying money," there is no such thing as an industry that is always up.

Even real estate gets pretty beaten up at times. I had a quick diatribe with a salesperson at the Mall of Emirates last month. He was insisting that the price of the property he was trying to sell me would have gone up forever. "How much were you selling this for last month?"

I asked him provocatively. "2.2M AED," he replied promptly. And today? "Sir, today it's already 2.6M AED."

So I continued: "What about next month?" He replied, "Maybe 2.8M, Sir," urging me to put down a deposit.

But I persisted in asking what would happen next until he realized that I had put his ridiculous thesis in an inescapable corner of logic.

There is no such thing as forever growth. Crypto is the same.

Sometimes it is up, sometimes it is down. Nobody can predict it, except for supercomputers and algorithmic trading. And even those eventually get it wrong sometimes.

So never let yourself be fooled by someone launching a new

project promising that it will "certainly go up."

The only certainty is that there is no certainty.

Let's look at some low-hanging fruits in terms of current certainties, meaning facts that cannot be disputed for the time being. Take Bitcoin \$BTC. It has gone up and down countless times in its 15 years of life.

Obviously, those investors who bought high and sold low lost money, while those who bought low and sold high made money.

This logic is inescapable.

However, statistically, anyone who bought and hasn't sold yet within a span of 4 years hasn't lost any money yet.

In other words, BTC can be a speculative asset to trade daily, but it could also work as a store of value for those looking at long-term appreciation.

As I'm writing, BTC is hovering between \$40k and \$42k. Just a few months ago, it was still below \$30k.

Those who wanted to have a quick speculation could have bought BTC just 6 months ago and profited much more than investing in most of the other asset classes out there.

Is that the norm? Of course not. Extraordinary profits beg extraordinary conditions. And as always, do your own research.



German central bank reports rise in counterfeit banknotes in 2023



The European Central Bank (ECB) presents the new 50 euro note at the bank's headquarters in Frankfurt

Frankfurt: German authorities found significantly more counterfeit euro banknotes in circulation in 2023 than in previous years, the German Bundesbank announced on Monday.

Police, retailers and banks in Germany discovered almost 56,600 counterfeit banknotes, a 28% increase over 2022, according to the central bank.

"The increase in the number of counterfeit notes is due to a few major cases of fraud, mainly involving counterfeit ?200 and ?500 banknotes," explained Bundesbank board member Burkhard Balz. Those banknotes are worth roughly \$217 and \$541, respectively. — dpa

Qatar inks 15-year deal for Bangladesh gas supply

DOHA: Qatar has signed a deal with US-based Excelerate Energy to supply Bangladesh with natural gas for 15 years, state-owned QatarEnergy said on Monday.

Doha will supply Excelerate with one million tonnes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) a year to be delivered to floating storage units in Bangladesh over the 15-year period starting in January 2026.

The agreement follows a flurry of announcements for Qatari gas supply deals with China's Sinopec, France's Total, Britain's Shell and Italy's Eni, all announced last year.

Those deals, lasting 27 years, are the longest agreed in the history of the industry.

"We are pleased to sign this agreement with Excelerate for the supply of up to one million tonnes per annum of LNG to Bangladesh," Qatar's Energy Minister Saad al-Kaabi said in a statement.

"This new agreement will further strengthen our



Qatar and Bangladesh officials at the signing of the 15-year LNG supply deal

relationship with Excelerate while also supporting the energy requirements of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and its stride towards greater economic development," added Kaabi, who is also chief executive of QatarEnergy.

Asian countries led by China, Japan and South Korea are the main market for Qatar's gas, which has been increasingly sought by European countries

since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In June, QatarEnergy signed a deal with Bangladesh's state-owned energy company Petrobangla to supply 1.5 million tonnes of LNG annually for 15 years.

Qatar is one of the world's top LNG producers, alongside the United States, Australia and Russia. It is the largest natural gas supplier to Bangladesh. — AFP

Swedish economy shrank 0.3% in 2023

STOCKHOLM: Sweden's economy shrank by 0.3 per cent in 2023 but technically emerged from recession in the last three months of the year, official statistics showed on Monday.

One of the weakest performers in the European Union, the Scandinavian had entered recession in the third quarter but it grew 0.1 per cent between October and December.

But a "strengthening" of net exports helped to offset weaknesses elsewhere in the economy in the fourth quarter, said Mattias Kain Wyatt, economist at Statistics Sweden.

The country has been struggling with stubbornly high inflation for more than a year as well as a depreciating krona — prompting the central bank to successively raise its key rate to four per cent, its highest level in 15 years.

"The Swedish economy continues to move sideways," Swedbank said in an economist note, adding that the annual GDP figure was in line with expectations.

"The monthly data shows



A Swedish flag flutters in front of residential houses in Stockholm, Sweden. — Reuters

that domestic economic activity continued to slow somewhat during the fourth quarter, with weak retail sales numbers in both November (revised up to negative 0.2 per cent) and December (negative 0.2 per cent)," it said.

Consumers have been hit hard by the higher prices and interest rates, with many households having mortgages with variable interest rates.

For 2024, the central bank expects the rate of inflation to slow to 4.4 per cent and the economy to shrink again by 0.2 per cent. — AFP

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FASHION

Models present creations by Fendi during the Women's Haute-Couture Spring/Summer 2024 show as part of the Paris Fashion Week at the Palais Brongniart in Paris. — AFP



ART

Two environmental activists from the collective dubbed "Riposte Alimentaire" (Food Retaliation) hurled soup at Leonardo Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" (La Joconde) painting, at the Louvre museum in Paris. — AFP



CULTURE

A man wears a traditional kankurang mask during the Festival of Kankurang, a combination of the Mandingo words "kango" and "Kurango", literally translated as "voice" and "force", in Janjanbureh. — AFP



ANIMAL PLANET

Blonde d'Aquitaine cow, a modern French breed of large domestic beef cattle, is seen in a farm in Mareuil-la-Motte, France. — Reuters



TRAVEL

A man waits for his order at a Turkish street food stall in Souq Waqif in the Qatari capital Doha. — AFP

art & life

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Waking up to a sea of clouds in Jabal Shams

The thrill of waking up to a frost-kissed landscape and misty morning adds an extra layer of magic to the camping experience in Jabal Shams. But to wake up with a sea of clouds before you is another level of magic... **P20**

DISCOVERY

Long-lost Klimt painting resurfaced in Austria

A LATE PAINTING BY Austrian artist Gustav Klimt has resurfaced in a private collection and will be sold in April, Viennese auction house Kinsky said on Thursday. "Bildnis Fraulein Lieser" (Portrait of Miss Lieser) was commissioned by a wealthy Jewish industrialist's family and painted by Klimt in 1917 shortly before he died. The well-preserved painting, which shows a dark-haired woman, was presented to the public in Vienna for the first time on Thursday.

It is due to be auctioned off on April 24 on behalf of the current Austrian owners and the legal successors of the Lieser family on the basis of an agreement in accordance with the Washington Principles. That 1998 international agreement set out the procedure for returning art stolen by the Nazis. The work was last seen at a Viennese exhibition in 1925, documented by a black-and-white photo cited as the only previous proof of its existence. The photo identifies the last owner of the painting as a member of the Lieser family, who lived at Vienna's "Argentinierstrasse 20". Henriette Lieser, who had remained in Vienna despite the Nazi rule, was deported in 1942 and murdered in Auschwitz in 1943. The unfinished portrait re-emerged when the current owner sought legal advice from lawyer and art law expert Ernst Ploil before inheriting it.

TRACING ITS PROVENANCE Despite extensive research, it



remained unclear how the family of the current owner, who has possessed the artwork since the 1960s, obtained it, Ploil told journalists on Thursday. "We have a gap between 1925 and the 1960s," he added.

But he stressed that they had found no evidence that the work had been looted, stolen or unlawfully seized before or during the Second World War. The back of the painting is "com-

pletely untouched" and has "no stamps, no stickers, nothing", Ploil said. "There are no indications of any illegal confiscation during the Nazi era, i.e. the usual stamps from the Gestapo or a shipping house where looted art was stored," he added. No claims have yet been made by the descendants of the Lieser family, but some of them have travelled to Vienna to see the painting. Klimt portraits rarely come on to the open market. The Kinsky auction house estimates its value at 30 to 50 million euros (\$33-55 million), but considering recent Klimt auctions, higher sums are conceivable. Last June, Klimt's "Dame mit Faecher" (Lady with a Fan) was sold in London for £74 million (\$94.3 million at the time), setting a new European art auction record. The previous auction record for an artwork sold in Europe was for Alberto Giacometti's "Walking Man I", which went for £65 million in February 2010. — AFP

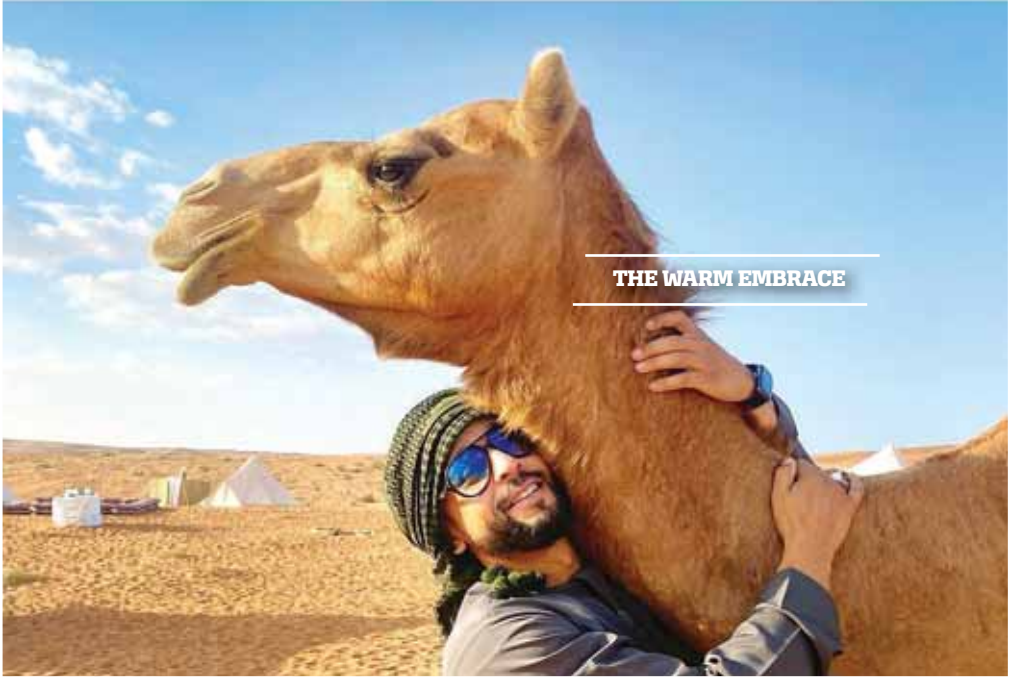
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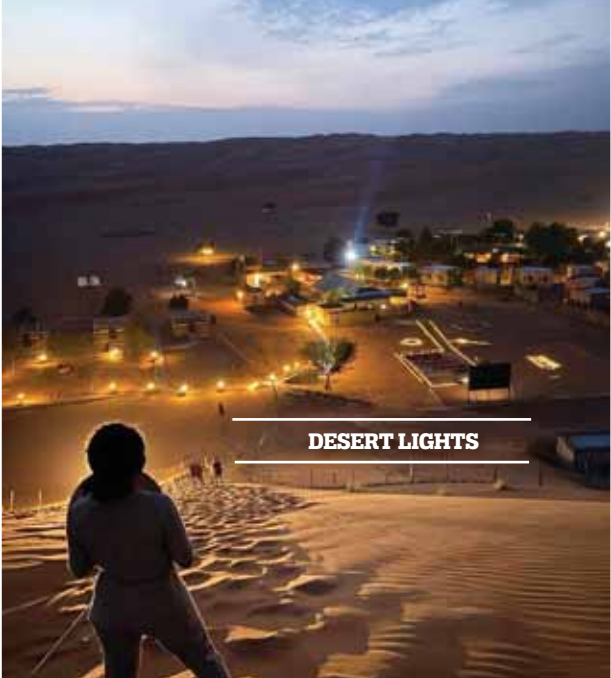


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HISTORIC WALK

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Balletcore, dunes and vamps at Paris couture week

HAUTE COUTURE WEEK in Paris showcases the fashion world's most elite outfits -- one-off, made-to-measure creations that the labels hope will adorn red carpets and high society events around the world.

Here are some of the highlights from four days of shows in the French capital.

BALLETCORE
Ballet is hot right now.

Andie MacDowell's daughter, actress Margaret Qualley, in a neck ruff and white tights, was the catwalk star as Chanel marked 100 years since founder Gabrielle Chanel first dressed the Russian Ballet in Paris.

It came just a few days after Dior paid homage to ballet icon Rudolf Nureyev during the menswear week, and Chanel offered the ultra-chi-chi

women's version, with lots of tutu skirts, translucent whites, leotards and dance pumps.

FENDI, DIOR FABRICS
Fendi's show, graced by Zendaya and Reese Witherspoon, in the front row, was one of the more delicately fabulous.

Shimmering, almost liquid, dresses in silk, sequin and mohair. Glasses that you wouldn't want to accidentally sit on, since they are made from 18-carat gold and white diamonds.

Designer Kim Jones said he was inspired by his predecessor Karl Lagerfeld's "futurism" but with "a humanism at the heart of this future".

Christian Dior, meanwhile, put on a varied show with everything from brown trenchcoats to white Grecian-goddess-style dresses and velvet pant-



suits.

But there was an impressive tribute to a classic from the Dior archive, the La Cigale dress of 1952, and the unique rippling effect of its moire fabric.

EASTERN JOURNEYS
France's Stephane Rolland recreated the atmosphere of a Marrakesh garden, with women dressed like Middle Eastern princesses in beige, gold and blue, set against a background of desert dunes and a soundtrack by trumpeter Ibrahim Maalouf.



Rolland said he was thinking about the collection before the Israel-Hamas war broke out in October and had decided to stick with it in order to promote "tolerance and positivity".

Giorgio Armani plucked ideas from all over the world to take an audience including Gwyneth Paltrow and Glenn Close on an "imagined journey from West to East" that included decorative peacock motifs and kimono-style gowns.

Rahul Mishra latest evocation of his native India was inspired by insects, with huge glittering moths and bees adorning some outfits, and several turbans and maharajah outfits in the collection.



THEATRICAL FOURNIE
One of the most spectacular shows came from Julien Fournie, who sought to recreate the atmosphere of fashion's heyday, packing out a Paris theatre for a tribute to vamps and femmes fatales.

Cocked bowler hats and beige trench coats recalled film noir classics and cabaret, alongside dizzying stiletto heels that tested the balance of the models as they put on much more of a show than the usual up-and-back catwalk strut. Model Michaela Tomanova, seven months pregnant, stood out in a black gala dress made from a harness, while Fournie paid tribute to landmark styles over the past century, from suits to pencil skirts and big shoulders, all with modern twists.

"With this collection I wanted to return the joy, fantasy and lightness that we miss so much today," said Fournie, who joined the models on stage for an ecstatic finale in their arms. — AFP

HEALTH

WHO urges more countries to get tougher on trans fat



THE WORLD HEALTH Organization said on Monday that nearly half the world's population was now covered by solid rules limiting trans fat in foods and urged lagging countries to catch up.

The WHO appealed in 2018 for industrially produced fatty acids in foods to be eliminated worldwide by 2023, amid evidence they caused 500,000 premature deaths every year.

The target was not met and was pushed back to 2025.

But 53 countries covering 46 percent of the world's population are now implementing best practice policies on the toxic substance -- up from 11 countries and six percent in 2018.

The WHO estimates that about 183,000 lives a year are being saved.

"Trans fat has no known health benefit, but huge health risks," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a statement.

"We are very pleased that so many countries have introduced policies banning or limiting trans fat in food," he said.

Seven countries implemented best practice policies in 2023: Egypt, Mexico, Moldova, Nigeria, North Macedonia, the Philippines and Ukraine.

The solidified oil that clogs up arteries around the heart is often used in packaged foods, baked goods, cooking oils and spreads like margarine.

Food producers use trans fat because they allow a longer shelf life and are cheaper than some alternatives.

Best practice on eliminating trans fat means either a mandatory national limit of two grammes of industrially-produced trans fat per 100 grammes of total fat in all foods; or a national ban on the production or use of partially-hydrogenated oils, which are a major source of trans fat.

On Monday, Tedros awarded the WHO's first-ever certificates validating progress in eliminating industrially produced trans-fatty acids, during a ceremony at the UN health agency's headquarters in Geneva.

The recipients were Denmark, Lithuania, Poland, Saudi Arabia and Thailand.

To be eligible, countries must implement best practice, and then back it up with rigorous monitoring and enforcement systems.

Certified countries will have to submit updated data every three years to retain their status.

Tedros urged other countries to follow their lead, and called for talks to keep the food industry onside.

- 'Harmful' and 'unnecessary' - Danish ambassador to the UN in Geneva Ib Petersen said policies adopted in Denmark are thought to have reduced coronary heart disease in the country by 11 percent.

"It is the most financially disadvantaged groups who will benefit the most," he told the ceremony.

Cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of death globally. An estimated 17.9 million people died from such diseases in 2019, of which 85 percent were due to heart attacks and strokes.

Getting rid of trans fats is seen as an easy way to reduce the numbers.

"Trans fat elimination is economically, politically, and technically feasible and saves lives at virtually no cost to governments or consumers," said Tom Frieden, president of the non-profit organisation Resolve to Save Lives, which is partnering with the WHO on trans fat.

"This harmful compound is unnecessary, and no one misses it when it's gone," Frieden, a former director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, warned though that countries without regulations risked becoming trans fat "dumping grounds". — AFP

ENTERTAINMENT

Mattel is bringing 'Bob the Builder' to the big screen



RENOWNED TOY COMPANY, Mattel, is embarking on its latest toy-inspired film project, "Bob the Builder," the brand's first animated theatrical movie.

The movie stars "In the Heights" actor Anthony Ramos as the voice of Roberto, "Bob," who travels to Puerto Rico for a major construction job. There, he tackles various issues around the island and learns the true meaning of building as he experiences Caribbean-Latin culture.

Mattel has tapped Colombian-American writer Felipe Vargas to develop the story in collaboration with Alex Bulkley and Corey Campodonico of the animation studio ShadowMachine.

"Bob the Builder" is the latest in a number of film and television projects Mattel announced following the success of the Warner Bros

"Barbie" movie, which had box office sales that earned over \$1.4 billion.

Other upcoming projects include the Netflix animated series "Masters of the Universe: Revolution," centred on Mattel's "He-Man" franchise, and a live-action "Polly Pocket" film, directed by "Girls" creator Lena Dunham and based on the tiny 1980's dolls by Mattel.

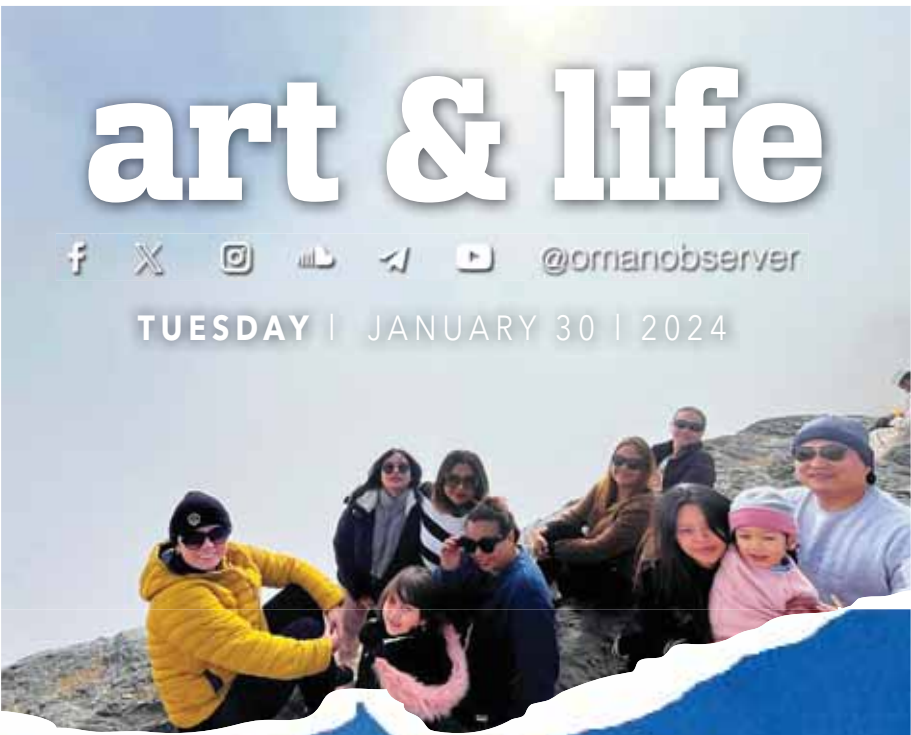
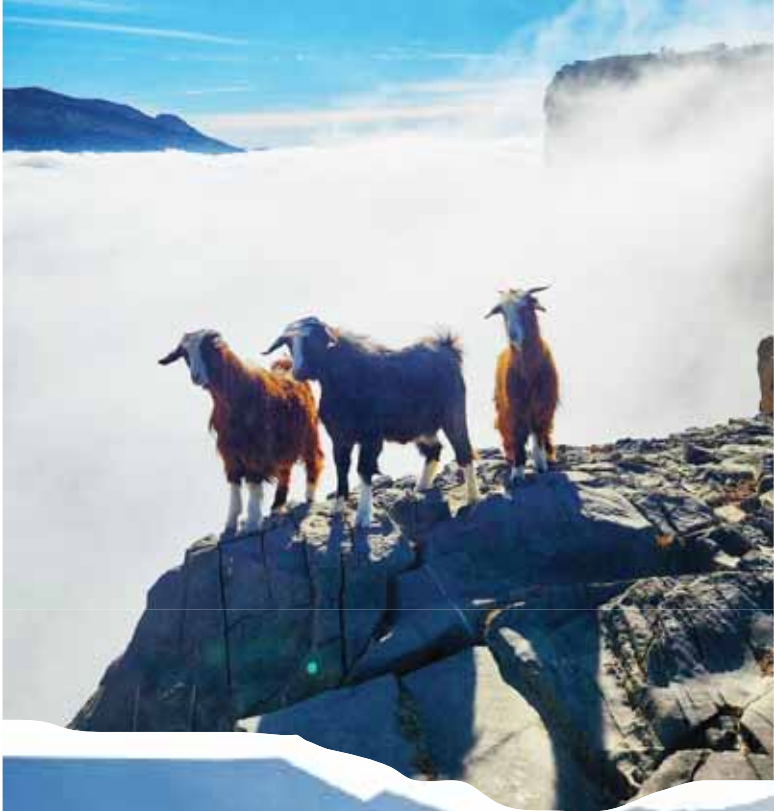
Mattel Films is also developing projects based on other popular toy lines, including American Girl, Hot Wheels, Magic Ball, Barney and more.

The "Bob the Builder" movie is

based on the early 2000's British animated children's series of the same name created by "PAW Patrol" writer Keith Chapman for Hit Entertainment and Hot Animation. The television show, centred on the namesake contractor and his friends, ran for 12 seasons.

Mattel purchased Hit, which owned the rights to "Bob the Builder," "Thomas & Friends" and other preschool properties, in 2011 for \$680 million.

Robbie Brenner, president of Mattel Films, said in a statement she hoped the project would introduce the character to new audiences. — Reuters



Waking up to a sea of clouds in Jabal Shams

BY YERU EBUEEN

Picture this: a panorama where soft, billowing clouds cascade down the mountain slopes, creating an ethereal landscape reminiscent of a dreamscape. In the morning, as the warm oranges and reds reflect off the Sea of Clouds, the colours

the dramatic landscapes of the Al Hajar Mountains. Travellers are treated to sweeping vistas of deep gorges, terraced fields, and traditional Omani villages clinging to the mountainsides. The journey is not merely a means to reach the destination but a captivating experience that showcases the diverse beauty of Oman's interior.

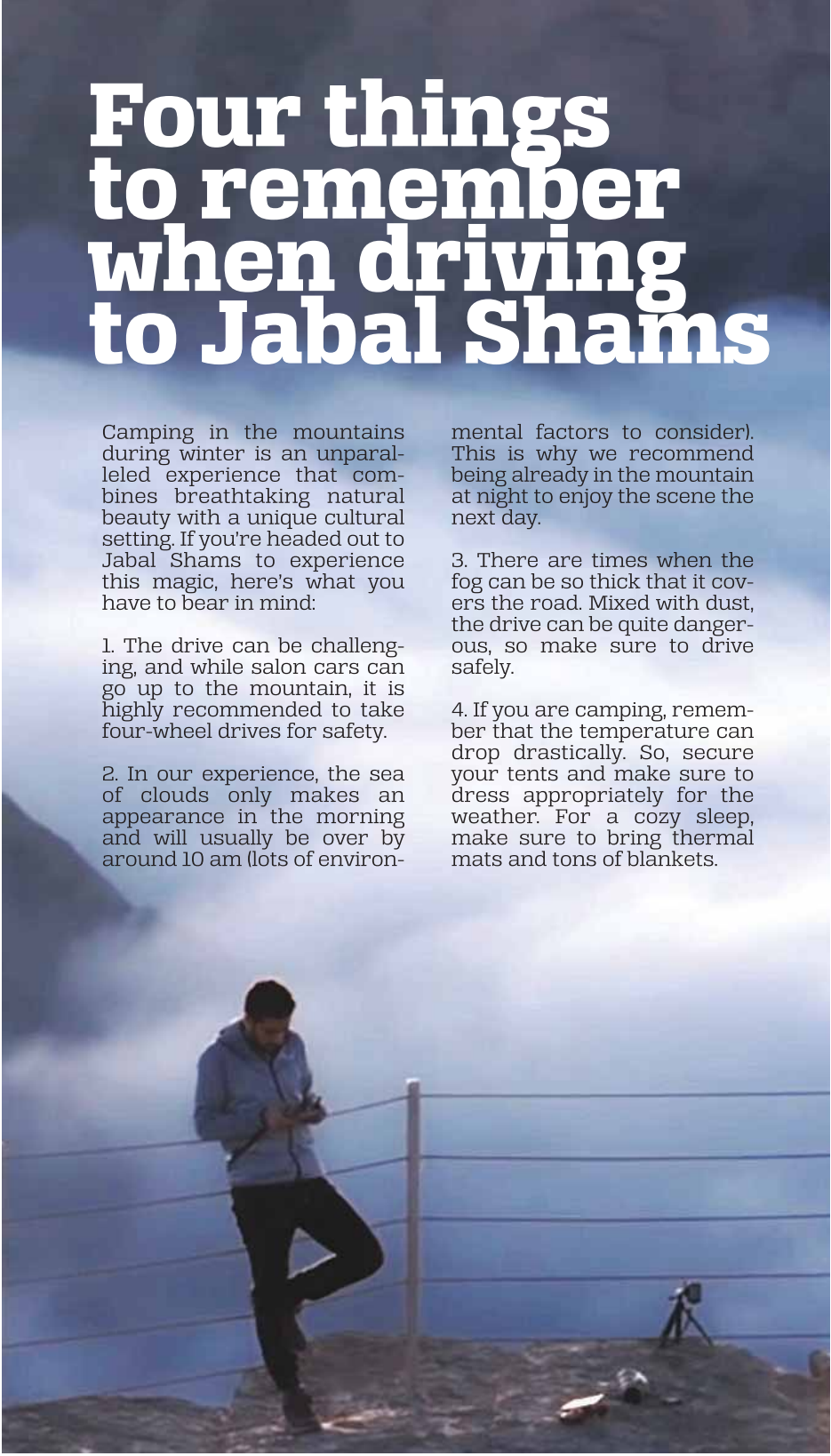
While Oman doesn't have snow-covered peaks commonly associated with winter mountain activities, it offers unique mountain experiences. In previous years, during the same period, we have explored the rugged terrain and scenic trails by taking long hikes and treks, particularly towards the abandoned village of Sab Bani



dance, revealing the undulating mountain peaks. This scene alone makes Jabal Shams an ideal destination for those seeking a unique winter camping experience. Standing tall at an elevation of 3,028 metres (9,934 feet), Jabal Shams becomes a surreal realm during the winter months. The road to the 'mountain of the sun' is an adventure in itself, winding through

Over the weekend, a group of like-minded campers decided on a whim to check out what is happening at Jabal Shams. Other than the expected drop in temperature to 8 degrees Celsius by nighttime, our group was looking forward to a nice bonfire while gazing at the dark night sky, not expecting the magic that would wake us up the next day.

Khamis and ultimately the peak of Jabal Shams. I've also joined a group that did rappelling and rock climbing, as Oman's tallest mountain offers challenging routes and breathtaking panoramas. For last weekend, we were set on just enjoying the clear, crisp winter nights, knowing the excellent conditions for stargazing. We set up camp about 5 km away from the



Four things to remember when driving to Jabal Shams

Camping in the mountains during winter is an unparalleled experience that combines breathtaking natural beauty with a unique cultural setting. If you're headed out to Jabal Shams to experience this magic, here's what you have to bear in mind:

1. The drive can be challenging, and while salon cars can go up to the mountain, it is highly recommended to take four-wheel drives for safety.
2. In our experience, the sea of clouds only makes an appearance in the morning and will usually be over by around 10 am (lots of environ-

mental factors to consider). This is why we recommend being already in the mountain at night to enjoy the scene the next day.

3. There are times when the fog can be so thick that it covers the road. Mixed with dust, the drive can be quite dangerous, so make sure to drive safely.
4. If you are camping, remember that the temperature can drop drastically. So, secure your tents and make sure to dress appropriately for the weather. For a cozy sleep, make sure to bring thermal mats and tons of blankets.

viewpoint. After a fun night of playing cards, indulging in home-cooked meals, and grilling marshmallows over charcoal, we settled for the evening by 12 midnight. Early the next day, we woke up to a cold mist entering the tents, and once we roused from our sleep, before us was a magnificent, awe-inspiring view as thick white clouds hovered by the canyon, with some

of the mountain peaks peeking every once in a while between the ebbing, moving fog. The thrill of waking up to a frost-kissed landscape and misty morning added an extra layer of magic to the camping experience. I'd always dreamt of seeing and having photos with the sea of clouds in the background, and as I anticipated, it was as magical as I always dreamt it would be.