

HM receives thanks from Kuwait Emir

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received thanks from Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jabir al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable to him on the death of Shaikha Moudhi Salem Ali Al Malek al Sabah. In the cable Shaikh Nawaf expressed his sincere appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan's heartfelt sympathies, praying to the Almighty Allah to rest the deceased's soul in peace in paradise and to protect His Majesty against all harm.



HM PRESIDES OVER POLICE DAY PARADE

NIZWA: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, presided over a celebration marking Police Day and the passing out of new batches of officers on Wednesday. The event took place at the parade grounds of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in Nizwa.

As soon as His Majesty the Sultan arrived in the Wilayat of Nizwa, he was accompanied by a fleet of Police motorcycles to the gate of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences where a Guard of Honour performed the military salute to His Majesty the Sultan.

Then, the Royal motorcade headed to the celebration grounds, flanked by a cavalcade of senior horsemen of the Royal Oman Police (ROP). There, His Majesty the Sultan was received by Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs.

When His Majesty the Sultan mounted the Royal Dais, columns of the graduate officers gave the military salute to His Majesty the Sultan. Then, the ROP band played the Royal Anthem.

MILITARY SALUTE

Then, the commandant of the graduates' column stepped forward, requesting His Majesty the Sultan to give the signal to start the military parade in slow motion. Passing in front of the Royal Dais,



the column performed the military salute to His Majesty the Sultan. Then, top graduates came forward to receive the Honorary Sabre from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander.

Then, the graduating officers of the 44th batch passed over the colours to the 45th batch of cadet officers. Then, the column of the passing out batch chanted the ROP Anthem "Humaat Al Haqq" and performed the oath of allegiance,

proclaiming faith in the Almighty Allah and allegiance to the nation and the Sultan. They pledged to diligently serve Oman and His Majesty the Sultan and to keep vigilance on the security of the country's citizens and residents. Then, the graduates performed the military salute to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander.

The ROP band played the Royal Anthem signalling the conclusion

of the parade. After the ceremony, His Majesty the Sultan accepted a commemorative gift from the ROP. Lt Gen Al Shraiqi had the honour of presenting the memento to His Majesty the Sultan.

Along with His Majesty the Sultan, the event was attended by members of the Royal Family, ministers, commanders of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), military and security services, senior staff officers of the ROP and

heads and commandants of GCC security colleges and institutions.

The ceremony was also attended by the members of the State Council, the Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, under-secretaries, members of the Majlis Ash'ishura from Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, walis of the governorates, shaikhs, dignitaries, directors-general of government administrative establishments in Al Dakhiliyah and parents of graduating officers.

AFTER THE CEREMONY, HIS MAJESTY THE SULTAN ACCEPTED A COMMEMORATIVE GIFT FROM THE ROP. LT GEN AL SHRAIQI HAD THE HONOUR OF PRESENTING THE MEMENTO TO HIS MAJESTY THE SULTAN

The Royal patronage of the annual Police Day celebration takes place in the backdrop of a host of tangible accomplishments of police departments. It also caps the ROP's remarkable performance in the field of security and associated services rendered to citizens and residents whose transactions are finalised within an integrated electronic system.

This Royal attention demonstrates the advanced role undertaken by the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in providing training to police corps. The Academy takes keen interest in developing the mechanisms of work in terms of developments and qualitative expansion of security tasks, in addition to maintaining a high level of readiness to deal with any new scenarios. — ONA



HM presides over Police Day celebration





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ROP marks Annual Day

NIZWA: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) marked its Annual Day which falls on January 5 each year, on Wednesday. The 5th of January is an exceptional date for ROP as it marks the anniversary of the opening of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences.

The ROP pays great attention to the grooming of its affiliates according to the nature and tasks entrusted to each of its formations and in line with the emerging security challenges through the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences and the training departments and sections of the various formations of the Royal Oman Police. ROP utilises the latest training educational programmes and practical applications that provide the police personnel with the necessary skills to handle various security issues and events.

Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences includes a number of specialised training centres such as the Officers Institute, the Non-Commissioned Officers Institute, the Institute of Police Recruits and the Institute of Female Police. This is in addition to the Centre for Research and Studies, the Practical Applications Centre and the College of Police. Among the Academy's objectives is to provide the best and latest educational methods to the trainees to hone their

skills and leverage their competency in addition to providing a suitable environment for them to perform their duties and tasks assigned to them after their graduation to serve the national security and development and achieve the goals of the national economic strategies.

Speaking on the occasion, Brigadier Salim bin Rashid al Alawi, Commander of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences, said that the celebration of the ROP Annual Day commemorates the inauguration of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences under the Royal patronage of late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, may his soul rest in peace, on January 5, 1980. From then on, the 5th of January was designated as the ROP Annual Day. This occasion carries a great significance for all police affiliates and a motivation to renew their determination and continue to achieve more efforts in various fields for this dear nation to enjoy security and stability.

The commander of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences added: "This year, the Royal Oman Police marks its Annual Day while looking forward to a bright future through the Royal blessing accorded to it by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Supreme Commander."

— ONA



Clean-up operations on war footing after rain, flood



The massive clean-up efforts to remove debris left behind by heavy rain and floods are under way in the governorates.

Muttrah Souq limping to normal

SAMUEL KUTTY
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Even as Muscat Municipality has launched clean-up operations on a war-footing following the incessant rains, businesses in Muttrah Souq are yet to get out of the woods.

“Come rains, we are the worst hit. This time we were just returning to normal business after continuous lockdowns and cyclone Shaheen. The rains have left us in the lurch again”, said Adil Ahmed, owner of a shop selling antique goods.

Even though we get proper alerts from the authorities regarding rains and the likely floods, very often we are unable to remove all items from the shops. Some of them are ruined in the gushing water, he said. Along with the rainwaters from the nearby mountains and gushing water from the sea enter the market and flood within minutes.

Although the municipal authorities have already started cleaning operations in the souq and the adjoining sea road, owners of the shops said it would take time for normal business.

“This is the time of the year we have good business thanks to the tourist arrivals. Even though the roads and the alleys have mostly been cleared, there are no visitors”, said Firoz Ahmed Abdullah, who owns a carpet shop.

The nearby fish market also wore a deserted look with only a handful of counters.

“There are no arrivals of boats, and so are the customers”, said Mohamed Saleh, who had a small quantity of sardines at his coun-

ter on Wednesday morning. In a statement, the Municipality said it was making all-out efforts to clean the dusty roads and passageways and disposing waste and opening the paths for the accumulated water to flow.

“Great efforts are being made to open the affected roads, remove sand and waste, clean sites, suck up water bodies, spray insecticides and move fallen trees in many parts of the city”, a statement from the civic body said on Wednesday.

In addition to the weather impacts, the Muttrah Souq has been a victim of lockdowns following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. For months, the traditional souq, which is steeped in history and is popular among tourists, was closed along with other commercial establishments.

Muttrah, which is steeped in history and is popular among tourists, will be undergoing massive redevelopment.

The Muscat Municipality, in association with Haya Water, has already initiated a project to give further facelift to the souq. The work is in progress. This includes ramping up services, making it more accessible, more facilities to residents and tourists, addressing the traffic problem and reworking storm water and sewage systems, among others.

The areas to be covered by the redevelopment plan are Muttrah Souq and surrounding areas, the entire old Muttrah district from Bait Oman to Soor Al Lawatia and the stretch from Riyam Park to the roundabout at the entrance of the Port Sultan Qaboos.

Avoid exposure to communicable diseases, MoH urges volunteers involved in cleaning



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The Ministry of Health (MoH) has called on citizens, residents and volunteers engaged in cleaning rain-affected areas to avoid getting affected by infectious diseases as stagnant water can become a source of germs and bacteria that may cause health risks.

Accordingly, the MoH has requested all who are engaged in the rehabilitation works to protect

themselves and others while cleaning the affected areas, which may have corpses of rodents, flies and other animals that can spread diseases.

“We request all citizens and residents to wash every part of the house that have been submerged, remove any mud, waste and accumulated dirt, and take care to dry and ventilate the area properly to eliminate chances breeding of germs which may cause health issues”, a statement from the Health Ministry said.

Make sure that the corpses of any animals, such as cows, rodents and camels, which were washed away in the flash floods, are treated at the municipality facilities and water clogs from houses and public places are dried up. They may emerge as breeding grounds for diseases.

Meanwhile, cleaning was under way in the affected areas in Muscat, Al Batinah, Al Wusta and Khasab since Wednesday morning. Several civic workers and volunteers were seen making

the homes livable and roads commutable.

“We have deployed our workers in the affected wilayats with support from NGOs and volunteers”, a source at the civic body said.

Areas like Al Ghubra and Al Khuwair witnessed flash floods that forced commercial outlets to shut down and families living on ground floors shift to upper floors. In some areas, the security forces airlifted affected people to safer places.



Omani delegation explores boosting mutual investments with Pakistan

KARACHI: An Omani trade delegation headed by Eng Ridha bin Juma a Saleh, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), visited the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The delegation, comprising representatives from the private sector, sought boosting trade and investment cooperation between private sector institutions and ways to increase the volume of trade between both countries.

On the sidelines of the visit, Eng Ridha met with Syed Murad Ali Shah, Sindh Chief Minister.

The meeting reviewed the investment opportunities in the Sultanate of Oman as well as the facilities and incentives provided to investors. The meeting was attended by members of OCCI and the Omani trade delegation. It was also attended by Pakistani businessmen representing several commercial sectors.

Omani imports from Pakistan stood at RO 62.3 million in 2019, while the value of Omani exports to Pakistan amounted to RO 56.1 million.

B2B MEETINGS
Eng Ridha also met with Imran



Ismail, Governor of Sindh province, and several other officials in Karachi.

The meeting explored prospects of trade and investment cooperation between the two countries in the fields of agriculture, fisheries, medicine, education, exports and imports.

Moreover, business people

Omani imports from Pakistan stood at RO 62.3 million in 2019, while the value of Omani exports to Pakistan amounted to RO 56.1 million

from the two countries held B2B meetings to enhance trade and investment cooperation, as well as to increase trade exchange between the Sultanate of Oman and Pakistan. The meetings also touched on means of establishing partnerships between private establishments and companies from both sides.

Champion of disability rights passes away

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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Have you been using the ramp instead of the steps? You have Mukhtar bin Mohammed al Rawahi to thank for.

From the 1990s to the millennium, he worked tirelessly to ensure each public building was accessible for all.

He campaigned, questioned and recommended organisations and individuals to promote inclusiveness. He was doing all this before accessibility and inclusiveness became popular terminologies.

In the early 1990s, I met Mukhtar at Sultanate of Oman Television. He was one of the senior video editors for programmes. Profession aside, he was the Chairman of the Oman Association for the Disabled. He had a vision, and he was not going to settle for anything less for the welfare of the members of the society who were physically challenged.

As a journalist, I was still hesitant to ask what caused his disability, but he was practical in explaining it.

He wanted to change society's attitude on how it viewed physical disability.

Mukhtar was an abled body individual who had to be on a wheelchair due to a car accident. He was only 20-year-old when he met with a car crash on a morning that changed his life forever.

He had said, "Those days there were no seat belts. The car skidded due to ice. I was travelling with friends to work, and I remember on many other occasions, I had spoken to my friends about fitting seat belts in the car for our own safety, and here we were in the accident — I was thrown out of the car. It resulted in a spinal injury," he explained in the interview with Lahunna Oman.

The shock must have been a challenge on its own, but he



adapted and excelled by building a career, being a social worker and a pioneer in championing the rights of the disabled, whether it is education, jobs or accessibility.

His spirit to overcome challenges had him move towards sports to demand rights for the disabled. Mukhtar took up Table Tennis and other team members took up individual sports and

they travelled abroad as a team.

Speaking to Lahunna Oman, he had said, "In the Sultanate of Oman there was no segregation. Men and women who had disabilities had their rights. But women were not that active in sports. They did not have teams, also did not have the special equipment needed."

Marhoon al Ghafri met



Mukhtar and soon, he joined hands with Mukhtar. He has been with Mukhtar as a board member of Oman Association for the Disabled. "What can I say about Mukhtar? He started the whole awareness about the needs of disabled individuals in the Sultanate of Oman. He started the Association. We will be forever grateful to him."

"The Omani Association for Persons with Disabilities lost today one of its main pillars, the spiritual father of the disabled in the Sultanate of Oman (Mukhtar bin Mohammed al Rawahi), the former president of the Association, who throughout his life had been striving for a safe and stable life for the disabled in the Sultanate of Oman. He was the first person to represent the disabled in the Sultanate of Oman and abroad in the local and international forums.

"He was loved among the people and among all the disabled, and he did not differentiate between one and the other. All are equal. He was a spiritual father for the disabled.

"He entered the sport of the disabled and was one of the first disabled athletes in the Sultanate of Oman.

"He participated in several tournaments. He was a manager and player in the foreign games where the disabled team participated. We hope from God, the highest, he will enter heaven and his soul may rest in peace," Marhoon said.

Royal Directives will accelerate development in governorates

VINOD NAIR
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The Royal Directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday will contribute to accelerating the development in the governorates as the government embarks on a strategic transformation towards decentralisation.

This was stated by Dr Nasser bin Rashid al Mawwaj, Under-Secretary of Ministry of Economy, who welcomed the Royal Directives to increase the financial allocations for the Governorates Development Programme.

On Wednesday, the Ministry of Economy shared details of the strategic programmes for the Development of Governorates and Sustainable Cities as per the priorities of the 10th Five-Year Plan.

The Royal Directives had increased the financial allocations for the Governorates Development Programme from RO 10 to RO 20 million to every governorate during the 10th Five-Year Plan, starting from this year.

The directives mandated the governors to submit annual execution plans to the concerned authorities on how these financial allocations will be utilised in addition to following up with the concerned government units for the implementation of social and services projects in their respective governorates.

The general guidelines for the distribution of the

allocated amount for each governorate are that projects should be in line with the targeted sectors of the 10th Five-Year Development Plan.

Projects must focus on enhancing the social aspect for development and providing public services that meet the needs of citizens in the governorate.

Priority will be given to projects which the private sector is reluctant to carry out. This means that the projects that can be fully financed by the private sector or civil society organisations or grants are excluded.

Projects should promote SMEs and create job opportunities for locals in the governorate.

A committee at each governorate is to be set up to approve and utilise the allocations for projects (the committee mandates have been defined).

The governors shall prepare bi-annual follow up reports in June and December and submit them to the Ministry of Economy. The reports should include a breakdown of the amounts allocated for the governorate for different projects.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning has been developing programmes to develop all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, which will address the issue of population concentration in Muscat.

According to estimates, population concentration in Muscat is nearly 29 per cent of the total population of the Sultanate of Oman.

Covid cases surge across the region

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The latest surge in daily Covid-19 cases has raised concerns that stricter restrictions will be imposed in the Sultanate of Oman and its neighbours, including on travel.

On Wednesday, the Ministry of Health reported 252 new cases and no deaths. The number of inpatients went up by six to 19, including five in Intensive Care Units.

With several countries imposing lockdowns and travel curbs, the Observer has been getting queries on the same.

"As the number of Indian states have imposed curfews and travel restrictions due to a rise in the number of cases, I would want to know whether there will be any restrictions on travel to the Gulf," John Thomas, one of the several residents, stated to return to the Sultanate of Oman next week, asked.

With the authorities restricting the capacity on visitors to 50 per cent in commercial establishments,

including restaurants and malls, both citizens and residents have been inquiring about the possibility of stricter restrictions in the coming days.

The UAE reported 2,708 new cases, bringing the total number of recorded cases in the UAE to 774,897. New cases in Saudi Arabia touched the 3,000-mark on Wednesday with 3,054 new infections, while three died due to complications.

Meanwhile, Kuwait reported 1,482 new cases, Bahrain 880 and Qatar 1,068 on Tuesday.

According to health experts, more recent cases were among the unvaccinated, including children and people who received two doses more than six months ago.

The Directorate-General of Health Services in Muscat resumed the vaccination campaign for booster doses on Wednesday, as they were suspended due to heavy rains that lashed the city.

The MoH sources confirmed that a prior appointment is necessary while visiting the vaccination centres.

Taliban orders shop owners to cut off mannequin heads

KABUL: The Taliban have ordered shop owners in western Afghanistan to cut off the heads of mannequins. A video clip showing men sawing the plastic heads off women figures went viral on social media.

“We have ordered the shopkeepers to cut the heads off mannequins as this is against the law,” Aziz Rahman, head of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in the city of Herat, said on Wednesday. The Taliban have so far issued no national policy on mannequins or statues.

Under the former militants’ strict law, depictions of the human figure are forbidden.

During their first regime in the 1990s, the Taliban triggered global outrage after blowing up two ancient Buddha statues.

Since seizing power, they have banned girls from secondary schools in several provinces while women have largely been prevented from working in the public sector and excluded from government positions. Last week, authorities in Kabul said women seeking to travel long distances should not be offered road transport unless accompanied by a close male relative. — **AFP**

James Webb telescope

The new space telescope*, the successor to Hubble, will detect primarily infrared light outside the visible range to show otherwise hidden regions of space, when in position 1.5 million kms from Earth in early 2022

MISSION GOALS (10 YEARS)

- Measure planetary systems and investigate for potential life.
- Observe the formation of stars and evolution of galaxies
- Search for the first galaxies formed in the early universe*

LAUNCHED on an Ariane 5 rocket on Dec 25, 2021
Fully deployed its sunshield on Jan 4, 2022

Instruments: cameras and spectrographs must be kept very cold - to detect extremely faint heat signals in the universe

Primary mirror diameter: 6.5 m
18 segments

Secondary mirror: 0.74 m

Weight: 6.2 tonnes

SUNSHIELD
5 layers: 0.05-0.025 mm thick
Inner layer temp -235 °C (-390 °F)
Outer layer: 125 °C (260 °F)
Sunlight

ORBIT
Arriving 1.5 million kms from Earth one month after launch
Earth
Moon
Webb's orbit
Sun
Not to scale

Source: NASA *Joint project by NASA, ESA and Canadian Space Agency

AFP

Covid testing policy put under the microscope as Omicron sweeps world

LONDON/JERUSALEM: Britain and Israel are overhauling their Covid-19 testing policies as governments seek to reduce the burden on laboratories and struggle with tight supplies of kits amid soaring infection rates fuelled by the Omicron variant.

This time last year, vaccines offered hope that the pandemic could be over by now. But Omicron has brought new challenges, including overloading public health systems, even if — as many scientists say — it leads to less severe illness than the earlier Delta variant.

Demand for testing kits has squeezed supply. Last week, queues formed outside pharmacies in Spain’s capital Madrid in what has become a common scene since Omicron began driving up infections. Madrid, whose conservative government has put supporting the hospitality sector at the top of its agenda, is opting for increased testing and no restrictions on socialising.

A surge in demand for tests has led to issues in Italy and Britain. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) said that 100,000 more PCR booking slots per day had been made available since mid-December and that capacity had been doubled to 900,000 PCR and LFD test kits a day.

People in England who test positive for Covid-19 on rapid lateral flow device (LFD) tests will not need to confirm their results



A student at Park Lane Academy takes a Covid-19 lateral flow test in the school Sports Hall, which will be processed by a member of staff during a programme to test every pupil in the school on the first day of term, in Halifax, northwest England, on Wednesday. — **AFP**

with a follow-up PCR test if they are not showing symptoms, the UKHSA said on Wednesday.

RECORD-HIGH
A record-high one in 15 people had Covid-19 in England in the week ending on December 31, estimates published by the Office for National Statistics showed on Wednesday.

“While cases of Covid continue to rise, this tried-and-tested approach means that LFDs can be used confidently to indicate Covid-19 infection without the need for PCR confirmation,” said agency Chief Executive Dr Jenny Harries.

PCR tests are processed in a lab and can be used to determine

which variant a person has, while a LFD can be used at home and gives an indication of infectivity within half an hour.

Israel changed its quarantine and testing policy as part of efforts to save resources and ensure continued protection for vulnerable people.

PCR tests will be earmarked for people aged 60 and over or with weak immune systems, while those at lower risk will be checked with rapid antigen tests, the health ministry said.

“This is a significant change intended to identify risk populations sooner, intervene and prevent severe disease,” ministry director-general Nachman Ash told a news conference. — **Reuters**

Macron sparks backlash after warning unvaccinated

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday faced anger from opponents and chaos in parliament after warning French people not yet vaccinated against Covid-19 that they would be squeezed out of key aspects of life.

Macron, who has not yet formally declared his candidacy for re-election in April, came under fire from challengers already in the race, accusing him of overstepping the line with his remarks.

The uproar prompted a new delay to legislation aimed at tightening France’s Covid rules at a time when the country is facing record daily infection rates fuelled by the Omicron strain of the virus.

“As for the non-vaccinated, I really want to piss them off,” he told *Le Parisien* newspaper in an interview, using the French verb “emmerder”.

Derived from the word “merde” which means “shit”, the word is considered vulgar slang in France.

This would mean “limiting as much as possible their access to activities in social life,” he added.

“We have to tell (the unvaccinated)... you will no longer be able to go to the restaurant. You will no longer be able to go for a coffee, you will no longer be able to go to the theatre. You will no longer be able to go to the cinema,” the president said.



We have to tell (the unvaccinated)... you will no longer be able to go to the restaurant... You will no longer be able to go to the cinema

EMMANUEL MACRON
President of France

“If your freedom threatens others’ freedom, you become irresponsible. And irresponsible people are no longer citizens,” Macron added.

According to government figures, 91 per cent of French over-18s are fully vaccinated.

The rate surged over the summer after the introduction of a “health pass” which restricted many activities to those with proof of vaccination, a recent negative test or recovery from coronavirus infection. But that still leaves millions of people not covered as the Omicron wave breaks over the country.

In response, Macron’s

government plans to make vaccination the only way to maintain access to much of public life with a so-called “vaccine pass” introduced from January 15.

Parliamentary debate over the tightening was already acrimonious, with the opposition forcing a delay in debate over the draft law late on Monday.

Macron’s comments quickly derailed action in the chamber after it resumed late on Tuesday, again suspending examination of the bill and jeopardising the government’s timetable for it to come into force — although ministers insist that is still their aim. — **AFP**

SHORT TAKES

BEIRUT
Lebanon leader to convene Cabinet within days

Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati said on Wednesday he will convene the Cabinet within days for the first time in nearly three months, potentially ending a standoff that has paralysed the government during a financial crisis.

“We will convene Cabinet as soon as it receives the (2022) budget,” Mikati said following a meeting with President Michel Aoun, adding this should happen “within the next two days”.

The Hezbollah group and its ally the Amal movement have refused to allow the Cabinet to meet since October 12, demanding the removal of a judge investigating the devastating 2020 explosion in Beirut port.



DAR ES SALAAM
10 die in Zanzibar boat tragedy

Ten people died when a boat ferrying people to a funeral in the Indian Ocean archipelago of Zanzibar capsized, police said on Wednesday. Another 15 people were rescued after the incident late on Tuesday, and rescuers were still searching for others possibly missing. The vessel encountered a mechanical problem as it was transporting people from Chakechake on the island of Pemba to the Kisiwa Panza islet, said South Pemba police chief Richard Mchomvu.

“Rescue efforts are ongoing until we are satisfied that all people were removed from the water. There was no manifest in the boat and therefore it’s not clear how many people were on-board,” he said.



SAO PAULO
Bolsonaro: Cleared for release from hospital

Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro said on Wednesday he had been cleared to leave the hospital, two days after being rushed for emergency treatment of a partial intestinal blockage. “Authorized to leave now. Thanks to everyone,” the 66-year-old president tweeted along with a photo of himself flashing a thumbs-up, surrounded by his doctors at the Sao Paulo hospital where he was admitted on Monday. A hospital spokesman said Bolsonaro would give a news conference before leaving. Bol-



sonaro developed abdominal pain during a New Year’s beach vacation in the southern state of Santa Catarina, and was taken to the Vila Nova Star hospital early on Monday aboard the presidential jet.



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In brief

■ SEOUL



F-35 JETS GROUNDED AFTER MALFUNCTION

South Korea has grounded its entire fleet of advanced F-35 fighter jets, officials said on Wednesday, pending a probe into a dramatic emergency landing.

After the landing gear on a South Korean F-35A stopped working during a major systems malfunction, the pilot chose not to eject and instead landed the jet on its belly — walking away without any injuries.

The heart-stopping incident on Tuesday, at an air force base in the west of the country, has prompted a probe during which South Korean F-35s will be grounded.

“With the investigation under way, the entire (F-35) fleet is suspended from flying,” a defence ministry official said.

■ MUMBAI



THREE ARRESTED FOR ONLINE HARASSMENT

Indian police said on Wednesday had arrested three people involved in an online app that shared pictures of women for a virtual “auction” in an apparent case of communal harassment.

Pictures of dozens of women had been used without their consent and doctored to create an open source app on the GitHub platform before it was taken down.

Police in the western city of Mumbai, which is investigating the case, said they had arrested three people, two 21-year-old men and an 18-year-old woman.

“We are investigating whether this was a part of a larger conspiracy,” Mumbai’s Police Commissioner Hemant Nagrale told reporters.

■ HONG KONG



FLIGHTS BANNED AS OMICRON CASES SURGE

Asian financial hub Hong Kong banned flights from eight nations on Wednesday as part of strict new virus curbs, with Omicron outbreaks spiralling out of control from Europe to the United States.

The new coronavirus variant is spreading rapidly across continents, leaving governments rushing to roll out vaccine boosters and bolster healthcare systems as infection numbers reach new highs. Britain, the US, France and Australia have all announced record case numbers in recent days, while China has imposed lockdowns in two cities and rolled out mass testing for millions as it doubles down on its “zero Covid” policy ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Kazakhstan govt resigns amid protests

ALMATY: Kazakhstan declared emergencies in the capital, main city and provinces on Wednesday after demonstrators stormed and torched public buildings, the worst unrest for more than a decade in a tightly controlled country that promotes an image of stability.

The Cabinet resigned but that failed to quell the anger of the demonstrators, who have taken to the streets in response to a fuel price increase from the start of the new year.

An Instagram live stream by a Kazakh blogger showed a fire blazing in the office of the Almaty mayor, with apparent gunshots audible nearby. Videos posted online also showed the nearby prosecutor’s office burning.

Earlier on Wednesday, journalists saw thousands of protesters pressing towards Almaty city centre, some of them on a large truck. Security forces, ranked in helmets and riot shields, fired tear gas and flash-bang grenades.

The city’s police chief said Almaty was under attack by “extremists and radicals”, who had beaten up 500 civilians and ransacked hundreds of businesses.

A presidential decree announced a two-week state of emergency and night-time curfew in the capital Nur-Sultan, citing “a serious and direct security threat to citizens”. States of emergency were also declared in Almaty and in western Mangistau province, where the protests first emerged in recent days.

Authorities appeared to have



Protesters stormed the mayor’s office in Almaty on Wednesday. — AFP

shut the country off the Internet as the unrest spread. Netblocks, a site that monitors global Internet connectivity, said the country was “in the midst of a nation-scale Internet blackout”.

Kazakhstan’s reputation for political stability under three decades of one-man rule by former leader Nursultan Nazarbayev helped it attract hundreds of billions of dollars of foreign investment in its oil and

metals industries. The price of its dollar bonds plunged by nearly 6 cents, the worst showing since the height of the coronavirus market collapse of 2020.

PRESIDENT’S BIGGEST TEST

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev accepted the government’s resignation on Wednesday following the protests, which have spread from the provinces to main

cities since price caps on liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) were lifted on New Year’s Day.

Speaking to the acting Cabinet, Tokayev ordered the price hikes reversed and new caps placed on the cost of other fuels.

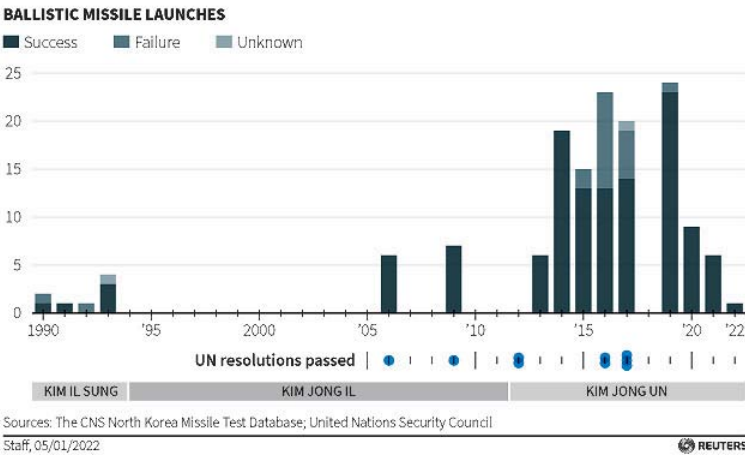
The unrest is the biggest test yet of Tokayev, 68, who took power in 2019 as hand-picked successor to Nazarbayev, a former Communist Party boss who had become

the longest-serving ruler in the former Soviet Union by the time he stepped down. Nazarbayev, 81, still retains substantial authority as head of the ruling party and chairman of the security council.

Kazakhstan is a close ally of Russia, and the Kremlin said it expected the country to quickly resolve its internal problems, warning other countries against interfering. — Reuters

North Korea’s missile tests

United Nations Security Council resolutions ban all ballistic missile and nuclear tests by North Korea, and have imposed sanctions over the programmes. Since 2006, the UN Security Council has passed a number of resolutions sanctioning North Korea for developing nuclear weapons and related activities.



N Korea fires suspected ballistic missile into sea

SEOUL: North Korea fired what appeared to be a ballistic missile into the sea on Wednesday, South Korea and Japan said, in the first such launch by Pyongyang this year. In the decade since Kim Jong Un took power, North Korea has made rapid progress in its military technology at the cost of international sanctions.

The nuclear-armed nation’s first apparent weapons launch of 2022 follows a year of major arms tests despite the severe economic hardship during the coronavirus pandemic.

The South Korean military said the North fired what is “presumed to be a ballistic missile” towards the sea east of the peninsula at around 8:10 am from Jagang province, which borders China.

After an emergency meeting, South Korea’s national security council “expressed concerns over the launch”, according to a statement by the president’s office.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida described it as a

“possible ballistic missile launch”.

“It is truly regrettable that North Korea has continuously launched missiles since last year”, he said. Kishida said the Japanese government was analysing details, including how many missiles may have been launched.

“There have been no reports of damage to Japanese aircraft and vessels so far”, Japan’s top government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters.

“We are continuing analysis, but if it took a normal orbit, it is expected to have travelled about 500 kilometres and fallen outside Japan’s exclusive economic zone.”

The launch followed a speech by Kim last week in which he said North Korea would continue to build up its military capabilities.

“I expect North Korea to continue refining its arsenal as a way to improve its strategic position at a time of political change in the region”, Jean Lee, a senior fellow at Woodrow Wilson International Center, said. — AFP

Philippines cancels ‘Black Nazarene’ parade again



Filipinos queue for a Covid-19 booster dose in Makati City. — Reuters

MANILA: A Philippine church that is home to a centuries-old statue of Jesus Christ will shut its doors to devotees for three days leading to its annual feast, its priests said on Wednesday, as the daily tally of Covid-19 cases climbed to a three-month high.

The Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene would be closed from January 7-9 after the government’s Covid-19 task force decided that a proposed plan for the celebration would not be effective in preventing a possible super-spreader event.

“It is sad because we did not expect this”, said Father Danichi Hui, one of the basilica’s parochial vicars, adding that the church had been planning for the January 9 feast for the past six months.

Millions usually attend the country’s largest annual procession honouring the Black Nazarene on January 9. During the event the statue is paraded

The Philippines’ daily tally of Covid-19 cases has been increasing since after the Christmas break due to increased mobility and gatherings

through the streets around the Minor Basilica in the district of Quiapo in Manila City.

The procession has been cancelled for the second year running, with devotees not allowed to enter the church from January 7 to 9 as an extra precaution, Father Douglas Badong, another parochial vicar, told a press conference.

The church usually sees a surge in visitors as activities begin ahead of the main feast day.

“The doors of the church will be shut”, Badong said. “There will be no physical Masses. We

encourage the devotees to go to Mass online or go to a church near you.”

The Philippines’ daily tally of Covid-19 cases has been increasing since after the Christmas break due to increased mobility and gatherings, and possibly due to the Omicron variant, the Department of Health said.

On Wednesday, the daily tally of new Covid-19 cases hit 10,775, a three-month high, bringing the country’s total caseload since the start of the pandemic to more than 2.87 million, the department said.

The death toll was up by 58 to 51,662, it added.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque urged devotees of the Black Nazarene to hold virtual celebrations of the feast instead, adding that even smaller events in other churches and communities could pose a risk. — dpa

Mental wellness essential for healthy adolescents



Massrat Shaikh
www.massratshaikh.com
The author is an educational psychologist

Good mental health is an essential part of healthy adolescent development. It helps young people build positive social, emotional skills and behaviour. It also lays the foundation for better mental health and wellbeing later in life. Good mental health is the foundation of young people's intellectual growth, underpinning the development of confidence, independence and a sense of self-worth.

As parents and educators, we have a tremendous influence on the mental health of our children. By providing our young people with support that promotes their mental wellness, we can promote their wellbeing, one of the most important aspects of their development.

These are the several ways to

support our children and give them the best chance to stay mentally healthy. Here are some of the strategies that parents, and educators can use.

1. An important way to support youth mental wellness is to teach them social-emotional learning (SEL). Social-emotional learning (SEL) can promote positive mental health in many ways. SEL teaches self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. SEL cultivates necessary protection to buffer against mental health risks. It can decrease emotional distress for young people and teach them self-empowerment.

2. When we are self-aware, we see ourselves as unique and separate individuals. It may seem too simple to be accurate but asking children

what they need makes them self-aware. After the blank stares and the "I do not know" subside, they begin to recognise that they have a voice and value it. Self-awareness will empower young people to make changes, build on their strengths, and identify areas where they would like to improve.

3. Good communication skills allow young people to develop and maintain positively toned relationships with other people that enhance the psychological quality of life. Communication plays a vital role in maintaining or disrupting personal wellbeing. As parents and educators, we should engage and facilitate discussions with our youth. Instead of directing and dictating them, engaging with them teaches critical communication

skills. It also teaches them to express thoughts, opinions, and feelings respectfully.

4. Choice and autonomy are more directly related to happiness than any other factor. Providing opportunities to children to make their own decisions teaches them independence and improves their self-esteem. It makes children confident in themselves, gives them a true sense of being supported, and is needed to feel happy.

5. As adults, when we model an environment of respect for others' thoughts, opinions, and values, we teach our youth a lesson in kindness and respect. Learning to respect others contributes to children's growth, maturity, and sense of self-confidence. Being kind and compassionate to others can also

help reduce stress and improve our emotional wellbeing.

6. Research studies show that unresolved conflict impairs psychological and physical wellbeing. Teaching young people to ask hard questions and find answers is fundamental in resolving conflict, and it will teach them to effectively regulate emotions and give them a safe space to talk. Learning to resolve conflict in healthy ways reduces the chances of depression in young people.

7. Caring for a young person can be challenging, and it is crucial to make sure that we adults take care of our mental health. Taking care of ourselves helps us stay mentally healthy and those we care for. When feeling low or overwhelmed, we need to seek help first.

After fuelling Capitol riot, disinformation stalks US politics

The storming of the US Capitol pushed social media platforms to crack down on those who peddled the "stolen election" claim that drove it, but the narrative has survived and flourished online, in right-wing media and among Republican politicians.

Donald Trump's supporters acted on the baseless allegation that widespread vote-rigging robbed him of victory in the 2020 presidential election, with the January 6, 2021 violence ultimately leading Twitter and Facebook to suspend his accounts.

His claims were rejected by election officials and dozens of courts, but polling shows many Americans still believe the "big lie" that he defeated Joe Biden — a falsehood that has damaging consequences far beyond the riot. "These persistent claims pose a threat to the sanctity and trust in our democratic system writ large," said Nina Jankowicz, global fellow at the Wilson Center.

False information about elections is not new — Trump made similar claims in 2016 before he defeated Hillary Clinton — but social media, which thrives on polarisation, offers a place for it to spread, and for people who believe it to organise and wreak havoc.

Trump — then Twitter's most powerful user — warned his millions of followers of potential cheating before election day in 2020, told them the race was being stolen as ballots were counted, and repeated the accusation in tweets and in a speech before the tumult at the Capitol.

"The January 6 attack was a product of social media," said Emerson Brooking, resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. "The 'Stop the Steal' movement captured millions of people in an alternative reality and funnelled them from mass delusion to hysteria to collective violence against the US Congress."

The movement, he said, "became the most important thing in the world for tens of thousands of Americans."

Social media companies have taken steps to halt the spread of false information and conspiracy theories about Biden's victory over Trump.

Facebook has removed content mentioning the phrase "stop the steal," and Twitter suspended tens of thousands of accounts linked to the QAnon conspiracy theory, adherents of which played a prominent role in the unrest one year ago.

The companies have "generally been effective in their ban on election-related falsehoods," Brooking said. But people who believe the election was stolen are still active on both websites, and "election denialism relies more heavily on coded language and closed communities." — AFP

Africa can't afford a second cold war



HIPPOLYTE FOFACK
The author is Chief Economist and Director of Research at Afreximbank

FOR CENTURIES, COLONIAL POWERS, AND THEN SUPERPOWERS, VIEWED AFRICA EXCLUSIVELY THROUGH THE PRISM OF THEIR ECONOMIC, SECURITY, AND GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS, UNDERMINING INCOME CONVERGENCE AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION

More than 20,000 Africans were killed in violent conflicts in 2020, an almost tenfold increase from a decade ago. Concurrently, and perhaps not coincidentally, Sino-American rivalry has escalated sharply. A new cold war, this time between the US and China, along with other regional security threats, could be disastrous for Africa's economic development and green transition.

The dramatic increase in high-intensity conflicts in Africa has coincided with two major trends: the expansion of terrorist networks, sustained by a glut of itinerant foreign fighters, and the proliferation of foreign military bases amid rising Sino-American geopolitical tensions. This global contest to project power has given rise to proxy conflicts raging across the region — including in Ethiopia, which hosts the headquarters of the African Union — as the US and China vie for control of natural resources and strategic trade routes.

As of 2019, 13 foreign countries were carrying out military operations on African soil — more than in any other region — and most have several bases across the continent. Africa is home to at least 47 foreign outposts, with the US controlling the largest number, followed by France. Both China and Japan established their first overseas military

bases since World War II in Djibouti, which is the only country in the world to host both American and Chinese outposts.

A growing number of foreign countries are influencing the outcome of local conflicts, from Central Africa and the Sahel to the Horn and Northern Africa. The US has invited many countries in the region to join an alliance aimed at curbing China's overseas ambitions. Unveiling a new US-Africa strategy in 2018, then-national security adviser John Bolton warned that African leaders who failed to support America diplomatically should not expect much US aid in the future.

In the 1950s, US President Dwight Eisenhower called proxy wars "the cheapest insurance in the world," reflecting their limited political risks and human costs for sponsors. But these conflicts are tremendously costly for the countries in which they occur.

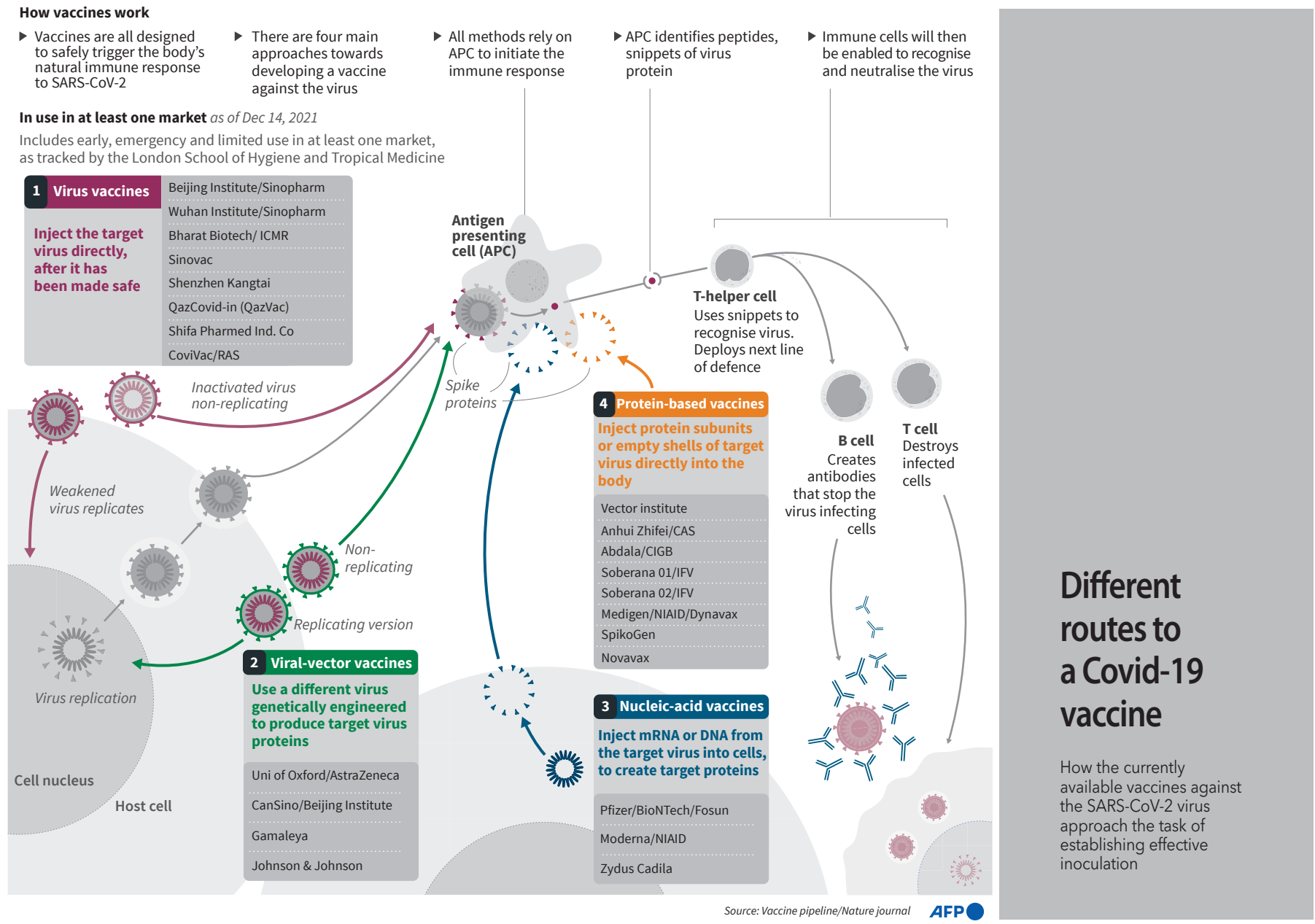
In Africa, besides causing huge loss of life, proxy wars are prolonging insecurity and locking countries into a spiral of intergenerational poverty. Moreover, they drain African countries' already limited foreign-exchange reserves and shrink their equally narrow fiscal space while reversing democratic gains, reflected in the recent resurgence of military coups. Even before the Covid-19

crisis erupted, most poor African countries already faced huge, persistent infrastructure financing gaps — and the increase in military spending has often come at the expense of investment in productive, climate-resilient projects. These shifts in government expenditure are undermining policymakers' ability to use robust public investment to crowd in private capital and thus keep Africa on the long-run growth trajectory required to ensure global income convergence.

The scars of the Cold War are still fresh, and the region cannot afford a sequel. In addition to its enormous human and economic costs, the Cold War exacerbated political fragmentation in Africa as countries aligned themselves with either the West or the Soviet bloc. That division sustained market segmentation, reinforced colonial borders, and undermined cross-border trade and regional integration. A second cold war would likewise weaken ongoing efforts to deepen integration under the nascent African Continental Free Trade Area.

The subordination of growth objectives to security priorities can only worsen intergenerational poverty, fuel migration pressures, damage the environment, and impede climate-change mitigation and adaptation.

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Herd immunity? Omicron sparks cautious hopes

ISABELLE TOURNÉ

With new versions forcing vaccine makers to re-test jabs, the virus that causes Covid-19 has proven highly unpredictable.

But the latest variant to sweep the globe has persuaded some experts that long hoped-for collective immunity is in sight, and that the virus may be evolving into a relatively benign seasonal illness.

Omicron has proven particularly contagious, infecting people thought to have immunity conferred by vaccines or a bout with the disease itself.

But while Omicron is driving a record number of cases in countries around the world, the illness is generally less severe, compared to previous variants.

More people getting Omicron and recovering, combined with more vaccinations, could be the key to boosting collective defences against almost any form of Covid, some experts have said.

Lower rates of hospitalisation due to Omicron also suggests Covid-19 might evolve into a weaker form, similar to coronaviruses long circulating in the general population.

“Perhaps we are witnessing the beginning of an evolution towards a more banal virus like the others we know,” said Alain Fischer, who coordinates France’s pandemic vaccine response.

Clinical virologist Julian Tang reacting to a UK study on Omicron’s lesser severity, said he imagined one day repeat vaccination and other measures would only be necessary for the most vulnerable.

“I am still hopeful that the virus will eventually become more like the other common cold coronaviruses — perhaps over the next one to two years,” he said.

These conjectures have been embraced by public health officials.

Speaking before the legislature this week, French Health Minister Olivier Veran said “maybe this will be the wave that allows us to acquire a kind of immunity”.

Earlier, his Israeli counterpart, Nachman Ash, told an Israeli radio station that herd immunity was “possible”.

“But we don’t want to reach it by means of infections,” he said. “We want it to happen as a result of more people getting vaccinated.” — AFP

I am still hopeful that the virus will eventually become more like the other common cold coronaviruses — perhaps over the next one to two years

JULIAN TANG
Clinical virologist



GO CORONA GO

A health worker wearing a Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) suit comforts a child infected with Covid-19 inside a ward at the Commonwealth games (CWG) village sports complex, temporarily converted into coronavirus care centre, in New Delhi on Wednesday.

— AFP

Win-win for operator and subscriber



Ali Al Matani
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THE ENTRY OF VODAFONE WILL OPEN PROSPECTS FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES, AND LOCAL COMPANIES IN GENERAL

The entry of Vodafone into the telecommunications market of the Sultanate of Oman is a positive step. It will give more options and choices for users. The market will become more vibrant with more offers and options available. This will also encourage the consumers to use telecommunication and information technology more than ever before and in a more diverse manner than they have ever imagined.

In this competitive environment both the service provider, and the user would be in the win-win situation. This will bring the prices down and multiply the nature of services these companies would like to offer here.

There have been certain packages of Internet services which were a major challenge for the middle-income groups to afford. They were costly and of less use than in other countries. Vodafone’s entry may change the scenario. The consumer will benefit from this change. There are many who are keen to digitise their work, education, health, and other facilities by using the services offered by the telecommunication companies in the market. If these companies could satisfy this sort of the market, they are going to get what they are aiming for. Understanding the market and satisfaction of all types of needs is the key for success.

With the entry of Vodafone in itself is

a qualitative development which will alter the balance in the market towards what is right. This has happened after about 18 years when a new player has been given a licence to enter the Sultanate of Oman and operate its integrated telecommunication services as a competitor in the market.

There is no doubt that Vodafone has lots of expertise, technical capabilities and ability to provide high-quality services. It has extensive knowledge of customers’ aspirations and the means to meet them. This has already created ripple in the market. It is going to break the ice significantly. This is going to happen sooner than later because this company has international experience and has worked in varied types of markets and met different types of demands and requirements in the world. This is certainly going to benefit our local market and would enrich it.

The required competition has already begun. The telecommunication companies are getting ready to meet the requirements. They have started presenting new offers, packages and services.

There are also other developments which are no more a secret.

The technical solutions which are being provided by Vodafone will connect everybody in the Sultanate of Oman with their future. We look forward to having unique experience of the digital services provid-

ed by this new player in the market. It is now well placed to transfer all its expertise which it had everywhere in the world to the Sultanate of Oman so that the common people here also can benefit from it. This is how we expect to realise the role information technology plays in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The decision to open the doors of the Sultanate of Oman for Vodafone was not taken in vacuum. It is under a well thought out strategy formulated for the country to usher in the new era of technological advancement. This entry will certainly support Oman Vision 2040 for sustainable development as this is the sector which connects one end of the world to another end, on the one hand, and present with the future, on the other.

The Sultanate of Oman is well placed to utilise this sector for the achievement of the objectives it has set for itself.

I also believe that the entry of a major company to the market of this size will open prospects for small and medium enterprises, and local companies in general. It is now up to them to create cooperation, grab the opportunity and grow. It is also important to note that the Omanisation rate in Vodafone has reached about 95 per cent, which is a very strong start. For such companies which are coming to the market, sky’s the limit.

Security fears loom over football fiesta

SECURITY FORCES IN THE WEST ARE ON HIGH ALERT AFTER ARMED GROUPS SENT THREATENING MESSAGES TO TEAMS IN GROUP F, GATHERING TUNISIA, MALI, MAURITANIA AND GAMBIA

After overcoming fears of postponement because of the Covid pandemic, the Africa Cup of Nations now faces its next big worry: security.

Host nation Cameroon will ceremonially launch the month-long tournament on Sunday when they face Burkina Faso.

But the authorities are struggling with separatist gunmen in the west and extremist raiders in the north — and some fear militants will seize the country’s turn in the sporting spotlight to launch attacks.

Security forces in the west are on high alert after armed groups sent threatening messages to teams in Group F, gathering Tunisia, Mali, Mauritania and Gambia.

The four teams are scheduled to play in the coastal town of Limbe, and their training site is Buea, a hotspot of separatist unrest.

“The threats are very serious,” Blaise Chamango, head of an NGO in Buea called Human Is Right, said.

“On Wednesday, there was an explosion in a takeaway outlet in Limbe. That sent a very powerful message.”

He added: “The government has stationed heavily armed soldiers at nearly all the crossroads in Buea and Limbe. Security and defence forces are arresting and searching everyone they see in some districts.”

Buea is the capital of the Southwest Region, which with the

neighbouring Northwest Region is in the grip of violence sparked by a bid by Cameroon’s anglophone minority to secede from the French-majority country.

After years of frustration at perceived discrimination, separatists declared a “Federal Republic of Ambazonia” in October 2017.

The entity, which has no international recognition, is based on the former British Southern Cameroons, which joined Cameroon after the French colony gained independence in 1960.

More than 3,500 people have died and more than 700,000 have fled their homes. Rights monitors say atrocities and abuses have been committed by both sides.

In his New Year’s message,

Cameroon’s veteran hardline president, 88-year-old Paul Biya, warned that while some independence fighters had handed themselves in, the militants “continue to engage in criminal activity, increasing their use of improvised explosives and killing unarmed civilians”.

The government’s mantra is that “safety will be guaranteed” for AFCON, although neither the authorities nor the Confederation of African Football (CAF) responded to AFP requests for information on security measures.

“Security is only really a concern in the Northwest and Southwest regions and I think our defence forces have enough experience to respond adequately,”

said James Mouangue, head of the national human rights commission and a professor of public law.

“The security measures put in place are exceptional, given the level of risk, and there were no problems when we hosted the African Nations Championship in January 2021,” he noted.

Attacks have fallen back since militants from Boko Haram and the West African branch of the so-called IS group (ISWAP) began a bloody internecine war.

But some fear the groups could seek to grab attention by striking in Yaounde, the economic hub Douala or the north itself.

Others, though, say such plans may be too much of a stretch.

— AFP

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Sohar clinch maiden HM’s Cup hockey title

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, JAN 5

Sohar stunned 12-times champions Ahli Sidab 2-1 on penalties in the final to clinch their maiden His Majesty’s Cup hockey championship title at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex on Wednesday.

After being tied 1-1 after 60 minutes of regulation time, penalties from Ashraf Saeed and Qassem al Shibli catapulted Sohar

to the crown.

Sohar goalkeeper Amjab Abdullah al Hasani was the star of the show with four saves that turned out to be the clincher for Sohar.

SOHAR DOMINATE EARLY

The first quarter was evenly matched between the two teams as Ahli Sidab and Sohar probed each other frequently.

The fancied Ahli Sidab side attacked the Sohar defences

through skipper Salah Nasser al Saadi and Ammar Juma al Shuaibi.

Sohar attempted to thwart the Sidab backline through Ahmed Salem al Shibli and Ashraf Saeed Ahmed.

The Sohar defence stood tall through all the manoeuvres of the Sidab wingers and centre forwards.

When the second quarter began, both teams wanted to impose themselves on the other.

Sohar then upped the ante and created more pressure with their forays into the Sidab backline.

It was Sohar’s turn to upset the applectart and much against the run of play they stunned Sidab. Mohammad Ragab Ismail Abdullah’s 18th minute penalty stroke gave Sohar the all-important lead in the second quarter.

Sohar dominated the proceedings and threatened to score more goals.

SIDAB UP THE ANTE

In the third quarter, Ahli Sidab were desperately looking to equalise.

Their centre forward Rashad Salem al Fazari and winger Ashraf Taleb al Nasiri penetrated Sohar’s defences on a couple of occasions.

The much needed equaliser looked seemingly elusive to the 12-times champions.

Sohar kept poking at Sidab’s defence and even got close to

claiming a penalty corner that was turned down by the referee Salem al Balushi.

Sohar skipper Samir al Balushi was close to making it 2-0 but Sidab custodian Ghassan Gharib al Hasani parried the shot.

As the fourth and final quarter began, Ahli Sidab knew it was their last chance to salvage.

In the 50th minute, Ahmad al Balushi produced a fantastic goal to equalise for Sidab as the match turned on its head.

National futsal team gear up for AFC Asian Cup qualifiers

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 5

The draw of 2022 AFC Futsal Asian Cup Qualifiers will take place on Thursday in Kuala Lumpur city. The Sultanate of Oman futsal team is among the participating teams in the qualifiers for the West Zone. Seven teams from the zone will be divided into two groups. The first group will comprise of four teams while the second group will feature three teams only. The participating teams will be split into four Pots according to the team’s ranking in the 2018 AFC Futsal Championship in Chinese Taipei.

The national team accompanied by Palestine are placed in Pot four while Iraq and Lebanon teams head West Zone teams as they put in Pot one. The hosts of the qualifiers in the zone, United Arab Emirates (UAE), will be the only team in Pot three.

The national futsal team, coached by Younis al Fahdi,

travelled to Bahrain recently for an abroad camp. The team will play the first friendly match in the external warm up camp on Thursday against Bahrain and the second preparatory match will take place on Saturday with the same Gulf team.

The camp is part of the team’s preparation plan for the Asian qualifier event and beside other forthcoming participations. The team had a short domestic preparatory camp in December and lasted for one week under watchful eyes of coach Younis al Fahdi.

18 members have opted for the local preparatory gathering.

The qualifier matches of the west zone will be played in centralised venues as UAE will be the hosts for the zone fixtures. The duration of the matches will be held from April 1 to 15. Five teams will advance from West Zone and other ten qualifiers from different zones will join to compete for the prestigious Asian Futsal Cup in Kuwait.





Lens' Ivorian midfielder Seko Fofana (C) kicks the ball past Lille's Swedish defender Gabriel Gudmundsson during the French Cup. — AFP

FOFANA THE HERO AS LENS COME BACK TO BEAT LILLE

PARIS: Seko Fofana scored a dramatic equaliser five minutes into stoppage time and then converted the decisive penalty in the shootout to help RC Lens to a comeback victory over neighbours Lille in the French Cup on Tuesday.

Lens were 2-0 down midway

through the second half before the 26-year-old Fofana engineered a dramatic turn around, first pulling a goal back in the 67th minute before slamming home the last-gasp equaliser.

The tie then went straight to penalties where the Ivory Coast international took the last of Lens'

five attempts and scored to secure a 4-3 shootout victory.

Lille looked in comfortable command after Amadou Onana scored two goals in a four-minute spell in the first half to give them a two-goal cushion. They were the first goals for the French champions for Onana, who

signed from Hamburg at the start of the season.

Lens' reward is a home match in the last 16 against Monaco after the draw was also conducted on Tuesday.

The match will be played on the weekend of January 29-30.

— Reuters

Fit-again Eriksen returns to uncertain football future

STOCKHOLM: Christian Eriksen said on Tuesday he intended to return to football to play for Denmark at the World Cup but his interview with a Danish broadcaster posed many questions, with the playmaker's future still up in the air.

The Dane recently had his contract terminated by Inter Milan after having a heart starter device implanted following his dramatic collapse while playing for his country against Finland at Euro 2020 in Copenhagen.

Such devices are not permitted in Italy and his career there was effectively ended.

The interview, part of which was published by public service broadcaster DR on Tuesday, could be seen as a come-and-get-me plea from the softly-spoken 29-year-old, but his options for a return remain uncertain.

His former team mate Daley Blind had a similar device fitted and is playing at Ajax Amsterdam, the Dutch club where the mercurial Eriksen broke through before joining Premier League side Tottenham Hotspur and a number of clubs are likely to be in the market for a player of Eriksen's ability.

He is exactly the kind of creative spark needed at Premier League strugglers Newcastle United, who are awash with money after a recent takeover by a Saudi consortium.

Eriksen knows, however, he will have to convince any prospective employer that he is fit enough to play.

"That's really why I feel it's time to get out and do an interview, because I know what I

want — I want to play football

again," he told DR.

Eriksen looked relaxed as he discussed what the future might hold, and took the opportunity to assure clubs that his heart can be trusted.

"They (the doctors) have said 'fine', said it's good, so everything is stable, which therefore feels like a green light to be able to play football again," Eriksen said.

Virtually his last public gesture was to wave to fans as he was carried from the Parken Stadium pitch on a stretcher, having effectively died, only to be brought back to life.

Never one to court the spotlight, he has stayed out of public view during his rehabilitation until he felt ready to make a return.

Now without a club for the first time in his glittering career, his future in the game is unclear.

"In the world of football, you can never really decide for yourself where you are going," he said. — Reuters



Bank Muscat launches Green Sports Programme

MUSCAT: In line with its pioneering role in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Bank Muscat has launched the 2022 edition of its flagship CSR programme, Green Sports, on January 5, and invited all local sports teams who would like to apply for the programme to do so well before the deadline which will be on February 2. As part of improving the inclusivity and the reach of the programme, the bank will be accepting all applications digitally. For more information and to submit applications, teams should go to: <https://www.bankmuscat.com/greensports/> and complete the application form electronically using a computer, a tablet or a mobile phone.

Speaking about the launch of the 2022 edition, Talib Saif al Makhmari, Manager, Community & Media Relations, Bank Muscat, said: "As one of the pioneers of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Oman, Bank Muscat has always been committed to creating meaningful change for the good of society. Green Sports has been going from strength to strength over the years with the bank supporting the development of 143 Green Sports fields across different governorates in the Sultanate. We would like to encour-



age all teams who would like to apply for support to submit their applications through the specified link ahead of the deadline."

Bank Muscat is proud of the success and achievements of its CSR programs, which draws from the values of leadership and partnership so as to create a positive impact on Omani society. The Green Sports initiative, which was launched by Bank Muscat in 2012 has supported 143 sports teams across Oman till date. The scope



Talib al Makhmari

All local sports teams which are interested must apply before February 2

of Green Sports support for sports teams include greening of football fields with natural or synthetic turf, floodlights or water desalination equipment in areas facing problems of water salinity.

Ensuring wider representation,

the Green Sports programme extends to develop sustainable sports infrastructure in all parts of the Sultanate.

Also, the facilities developed as part of the programme are often used as a venue for other social activities, leading to stronger community bonding and greater positive behaviour among young people. In case of any queries or doubts, teams may email GreenSports@bankmuscat.com.

It must be noted that the bank's

CSR and sustainability programmes have been well appreciated and received a number of accolades. The bank was recently honoured by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry for its efforts in supporting persons with disabilities.

Earlier in 2021, the bank also won the Middle East Sustainability Award from EMEA Finance as a recognition of its stellar efforts in the field of sustainability and CSR.

James helps Lakers rally over Kings, Morant catches fire against Cavs

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James made several clutch baskets in the waning minutes of the fourth quarter as the Los Angeles Lakers rallied from a late seven-point deficit to beat the Sacramento Kings 122-114 on Tuesday.

James scored 14 of his team-high 31 points in the final quarter as the Lakers won for the fourth time in the last five games.

Los Angeles' Malik Monk also had a strong final quarter, scoring 11 of his 24 points in the last seven minutes of the contest in front of a crowd of 17,900 in Los Angeles.

Monk drained six three pointers in the game and James and Russell Westbrook put the finishing touches with layups in the final moments. Westbrook finished with 19 points.

Reserve Talen Horton-Tucker also scored 19 points for the Lakers, who beat a Pacific Division team at home for the first time this season.

De'Aaron Fox scored 30 points and Buddy Hield added 26 with seven three-pointers for the Kings.

In Cleveland, Ja Morant scored the go-ahead basket with 22 seconds left in the fourth quarter to lift the Memphis Grizzlies to a 110-106 win over the Cleveland Cavaliers. Morant scored six of his 26 points in the final minute as the Grizzlies won their sixth straight game.

"I don't fear nobody," said Morant. "If you are 7-foot-7 I don't care, I am coming straight at you."

Morant hit a short jump shot to give the Grizzlies a 106-104 lead, then stole the ball from Cavs Brandon Goodwin for another score with 22 seconds remaining.

Morant then sealed the win by hitting a pair of free throws as the Grizzlies won for the 10th time in the last 11 games on the road.



Los Angeles Lakers guard Talen Horton-Tucker (5) shoots the ball against Sacramento Kings guard Buddy Hield (24) in the second half at Crypto.com Arena. – USA TODAY Sports

The Grizzlies were coming off a 118-104 win over the Brooklyn Nets on Monday.

"We came in knowing we had back-to-back games. We just had to lock in defensively and find a way. We came up with some key stops at the end of the game to get the win," Morant added.

Morant also added six assists but his franchise-record run of 30-point games was halted at five.

VanVleet in hot form
Elsewhere, Devin Booker scored 33 points and Chris Paul finished with 11 points and 15 assists as the undermanned Phoenix Suns beat the New Orleans Pelicans 123-110.

Mikal Bridges scored 23, Cameron Johnson added 18, Bismack Biyombo had 16 and

Jalen Smith had 12 in the win.

The Suns were without head coach Monty Williams. They were also missing starters Deandre Ayton and Jae Crowder, and reserve players JaVale McGee and Abdel Nader, all because of Covid-19 measures.

Devonte' Graham scored 28, Jonas Valanciunas had 25 points and 16 rebounds, Brandon Ingram scored 16 and Josh Hart had 15 points and 11 rebounds for the Pelicans.

In Toronto, Fred VanVleet scored 24 of his 33 points in the first half as the Toronto Raptors won their third straight game with a dominating 129-104 victory over the San Antonio Spurs.

VanVleet also had seven assists and was seven of 14 in three-point

attempts at Scotiabank Arena.

VanVleet has scored at least 30 points in the past three games as the Raptors improved to 17-17 to reach .500 on the season.

He's the first Toronto player to score 30 or more in three straight since Kawhi Leonard did it in four straight in 2019.

"You recognise when you're in rhythm and you just try to hold on as long as possible because it's not always like that," VanVleet said.

"I try to keep my floor a little higher but when you're hot, you've just got to be aggressive and ride it out as long as you can." Pascal Siakam added 18 points, 12 rebounds and five assists, Gary Trent tallied 21 points, OG Anunoby and Justin Champagnie each scored 14 points in the win. — AFP

Hurkacz powers Poland to semi-final meeting against Spain in ATP Cup

SYDNEY: World number nine Hubert Hurkacz scored a comprehensive 6-1 6-4 win over Argentine Diego Schwartzman on Wednesday to seal Poland's spot in the ATP Cup semi-finals against Spain, who ousted former champions Serbia without much trouble.

The victory for the 24-year-old Hurkacz, who reached the Wimbledon semi-finals last year, followed Kamil Majchrzak's 6-3 7-6(3) win over Federico Delbonis in the opening singles match at the Sydney Super Dome.

"We're in the semis, so super proud of that achievement," Hurkacz said.

"We're a great team. We have great team spirit. We support each other. I think the atmosphere that we bring helps us play better."

This year's ATP Cup has featured 16 teams divided into four groups, with group winners proceeding to the semi-finals.

Poland advanced from group D with a perfect 3-0 record, having also beaten Georgia and Greece, and will take on group A toppers Spain for a spot in Sunday's final of the \$10 million team event.



Poland's Hubert Hurkacz in action during his group stage match against Argentina's Diego Schwartzman. – REUTERS

Serbia, winner of the inaugural team event in 2020 but missing world number one Novak Djokovic this time around, had to beat Spain 3-0 to top their group after Wednesday's 2-1 win for Chile over Norway at the Ken

Rosewall Arena.

Pablo Carreno Busta put on a dominant show in the opening singles of the evening session to put Spain in the last four with a 6-3 6-4 win over Filip Krajinovic before Roberto Bautista Agut beat

Dusan Lajovic 6-1 6-4 to seal the tie.

"It was the best match of the group," said Carreno Busta after his third straight win in the competition.

"I am close to 100 per cent. Today I played very well, very aggressively, very solid. I feel very comfortable on court, so it is going well." World number four Stefanos Tsitsipas' hopes of getting some decent match practice ahead of the Australian Open was, however, hampered when his Georgian opponent Nikoloz Basilashvili retired citing breathing problems while the Greek was leading 4-1.

Tsitsipas returned to play in the doubles with Michail Pervolarakis, who beat Aleksandre Metreveli 6-3 6-2 for his first Tour level win that also sealed the group D tie in Greece's favour.

Alejandro Tabilo earlier beat Viktor Durasovic 6-1 6-7(5) 6-1 to give Chile the lead before world number eight Casper Ruud levelled things up for Norway with a 6-4 6-1 win over Cristian Garin.

Tabilo and Tomas Barrios Vera then clinched the deciding doubles rubber for Chile. — Reuters

Arif, Shameer steer Earn Trust to big victory

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, JAN 5

Splendid 100 by Arif Hussain and Shameer Mohamed's 5 for 7 powered Earn Trust CT to a massive 147-run win over OCT Al Nahdha in an T20 F Division game of Oman Cricket League at OAC 3 ground in Seeb.

Opener Arif's 58-ball century was the highlight of Earn Trust's total of 196 for 3 that also saw 43 off 26 from his opening partner Manas Kapoor.

OCT Al Nahdha was shot out for a meagre 49 in 13.1 overs as leg-spinner Shameer Mohammed was literally unplayable in his 3.1 overs, taking five wickets. Moazzam Shah and Manas bowled equally well, taking two wickets each.

Brief Scores (F Division):
Earn Trust CT 196 for 3 in 20 overs (Arif Hussain 100 – 12x4, Maanas Kapoor 43 – 8x4) trounced Oct Al Nahdha 49 all out in 13.1 overs (Sharif Al Balushi 10 – 1x4, Shameer Mohamed 5-7, Moazzam Shah 2-16, Maanas Kapoor 2-12) by 147 runs.

Lakshmi stars in big win for OCA

Lakshmi Narayana's superb 105 laid the foundation for Oman Cricket Academy's (OCA) massive 308-run victory against Pakistan School Muscat in a 50-over Junior League Under-19 match at OC Turf 2 in Al Amerat on Saturday.

Apart from Lakshmi's 83-ball ton, Rishabh Gupta struck 63 off 73 while Saumya Bhavin contributed 54 off 57 to lift OCA to a monumental 369 for 8 in a 48-over game due to late start. Muhammed Anas bagged 2 for

41. PSM failed to make a match of I, folding up for a dismal 61 in 22.1 overs. Azam Ali picked up 3 for 22 while Saumya Bhavin and Amanpreet Singh took two wickets each.

Brief scores (Junior League Under-19): Oman Cricket Academy 369 for 8 in 48 overs (Lakshmi Narayana 105 – 12x4, Rishabh Gupta 63 – 4x4, Soumya Bhavin 54. Muhammed Anas 2-41) thrashed PSM 61 all out in 22.1 overs (Abubaker Iftikhar 19 – 2x4. Azam Ali 3-22, Saumya Bhavin 2-01, Amanpreet Singh 2-13) by 308 runs.

Bhakti leads Muscat

Women to victory

Bhakti Shetty's outstanding all-round show led Muscat Women to a 5-wicket win over Pakistan Women in a Women's League game at OC Turf 2 in Al Amerat on Monday.

The Sultanate of Oman star Fiza Javed topscored with a fluent 52 off 45 whereas Sameera Khan contributed a run-a-ball 27 as Pakistan Women posted 126 on the board. Bhakti's new ball spell was the major reason they could not compile a bigger total.

Bhakti excelled with the bat too, striking an elegant 40 off 46 while her opening partner Sai Sadhya scored 28 off 36 as Muscat sealed the win in the 19th over, scoring 127 for 5. Hira Javed claimed 2 for 15.

Brief Scores (Women's League): Pakistan Women 126 for 7 in 20 overs (Fiza 52 – 7x4, Sameera Khan 27 – 3x4, Bhakti Shetty 4-20) lost to Muscat Women 127 for 5 in 18.5 overs (Bhakti Shetty 40 – 3x4, Sai Sadhya 28, Hira Javed 2-15) by 5 wickets.

Saudi Arabia to hold new women's navigational rally Jameel in mid-march

JEDDAH: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has announced it will run Rally Jameel, an exciting new women's only navigational rally, on March 17th-19th.

The event is the first women's only off-road navigational rally-raid of its kind in Saudi Arabia and the GCC region. It follows hot on the heels of the Kingdom hosting the 44th Dakar Rally this month, where Saudi female racers Dania Akeel and Mashael Al Obaidan are taking part in the FIA T3 category for lightweight prototype vehicles.

The event is being organised by Abdullatif Jameel Motors (Toyota) and Bakhshab Motorsports and sanctioned by the Saudi Automobile & Motorcycle Federation (SAMF).

Additional support for the project comes from FIA Women in Motorsport (WIMC), through the presidency of former world rally star Michèle Mouton, Jutta Kleinschmidt, the 2001 Dakar Rally winner and President of the FIA Cross-Country Rally Commission, and Aseel Al Hamad, the Saudi WIMC



Prince Khalid bin Sultan Al Faisal, President of the SAMF and Samar Rahbini , who is interested in participating.

representative.

Rally Jameel will see women's driving and navigational skills tested over a three-day route between the north-central city of Hail and the capital Riyadh that includes hidden checkpoints and incorporates a race strategy needed to work with state-of-the-art navigational systems and road books. The route will pass Al Qassim city with further details being announced on International Women's Day on March 8.

business

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SME Authority inks pact with Khedmah

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 5

The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) signed a cooperation agreement with Oman Investment and Finance Company - OIFC (Khedmah) on Wednesday.

The agreement will provide a package of incentives and subsidy for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to press ahead in boosting the national economy. It was signed by Abdulaziz bin Said al Raisi, Vice-Chairman of ASMED and Saud bin Ahmed al Siyabi, CEO of Operations in Khedmah.

As per the agreement, Khedmah will allocate free-of-charge spaces in its branches, covering electricity and water expenses, for SMEs to display their products and services. It will also provide marketing outlets for the beneficiaries by advertising their products on Khedmah's media platforms.

Khedmah will also work

Khedmah will also work to enhance the SMEs' abilities by engaging them in technical and specialised development programmes in financial and administrative fields

to enhance the SMEs' abilities by engaging them in technical and specialised development programmes in financial and administrative fields.

Moreover, ASMED will be responsible for field inspections to supervise the performance of those SMEs and to offer marketing and technical support for entrepreneurs.

Al Raisi said that this co-operation realises the ASMED strategy in enhancing integration and active partnership with the public and private establishments.

(With inputs from ONA)

Pact signed for RO 16m labour township in Sur Industrial City



INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT:
Phase 1 of private-funded project to accommodate 5,600 workers

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 5

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madaayn) has signed a usufruct agreement with Bisham Real Estate Company to establish an integrated labour township in Sur Industrial City at a cost of around RO 16 million.

The project, which will be developed on an area of 180,000 sqm, will be divided into three categories, each with its distinctive standards and specifications.

In addition to a variety of accommodation options, the project will also include other services such as gyms and a shopping centre. Phase one of the project is expected to be completed within 36 months, and will accommodate 5,600 workers.

Moreover, the project will provide 300 direct job opportunities. The new private-led initiative

comes against the backdrop of a number of vital infrastructure projects being pursued in Sur Industrial City at a total cost of around RO 12 million.

These are due to completion in the early part of the second half of this year.

The package of improvements, which will enhance the industrial city's appeal to investors, include the construction of 17 km of water networks, 14 km of sewage networks, 10.6 km of road networks, 6.8 km of water drainage channels, two wastewater storage tanks with a total capacity of 1,230

m3, and water tanks.

Additionally, Madaayn has floated a tender for pre-qualification of consulting companies for the upgrading of the master plan of the industrial city.

As part of the contract, the selected consultant will identify suitable locations for heavy industries, service paths, and locations for infrastructure facilities, in addition to conducting hydrological studies for wadi channels, drainage and protection schemes, and creating additional leasable areas.

Expat remittances hit seven-year low in 2020: CBO

PANDEMIC IMPACTS: Outflows squeezed by 15.4% decline in expat population in employment

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](https://twitter.com/conradprabhu)

Remittances by expatriate workers slumped RO 3.373 billion in 2020, the lowest since 2013, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) revealed on Wednesday. It attributed the decline to broader pandemic impacts which, among other things, led to stagnant wages and a steep 15.4 per cent fall in expatriate numbers in 2020.

The apex bank stated in its 2020 Annual Report, published

this week, that expatriate remittances declined four per cent to RO 3.373 billion in 2020, down from RO 3.512 billion in 2019.

Remittances have been on a downward trend since 2015, when outflows hit a peak of RO 4.226 billion.

The slide in remittance outflows provided a bit of relief to the apex bank in the management of the country's current account, which had come under pressure due to the sharp fall in international oil prices as well as a decline in exports amid the pandemic.

"The current transfers consisting mainly of workers remittance declined amidst stagnant wages and falling expatriate population, providing

some cushion to external sector management. As a result of these developments, the Current Account Deficit (CAD) increased to RO 3.330 billion in 2020 from RO 1.639 billion in 2019," the Central Bank noted.

A contracting economy

attributable to the oil price collapse and the pandemic led to a 15.4 per cent decrease in the total size of the expatriate population in employment in the Sultanate of Oman in 2020, the apex bank stated.

According to figures released

“

A contracting economy attributable to the oil price collapse and the pandemic led to a 15.4 per cent decrease in the total size of the expatriate population in employment in the Sultanate of Oman in 2020

CENTRAL BANK OF OMAN

by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), an estimated 270,000

expatriate workers (and their dependents) left the Sultanate of Oman during 2020.

While expatriate remittances will still remain a reality of the financial landscape in the Sultanate of Oman, as is the case elsewhere around the world with large migrant workforces, some experts see outflows easing a bit in response to government-led initiatives to incentivise local investment.

The introduction of Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), foreign ownership of apartments in designated areas, and more recently, crowdfunding opportunities, will open up avenues for expatriates to consider investing part of their earnings in the local market, they point out.

Go places on every journey in the Toyota Land Cruiser

MUSCAT: The Land Cruiser has been one of the most inspiring 4WD SUVs due to its leading stance in terms of power, performance and capability. Standing tall for over 70 years, the Land Cruiser has been a symbol of reliability and dependability and always successfully risen above challenges to fulfil every desire.

The 2022 Land Cruiser is equipped with a choice of three powertrain options, including two newly developed V6 twin-turbo engines. The V6 twin-turbo 3.5-litre petrol engine achieves class-leading performance that surpasses that of a conventional V8, producing 409 hp and up to 650 nm.

Meanwhile, the V6 twin-turbo engine 3.3-litre diesel variant, which will be available to buy in the region soon, is capable of 302 hp and up to 700 nm. Both of these newly developed engines are mated to a 10-speed automatic transmission.

The vehicle is also available



with a naturally aspirated 4.0-litre V6 petrol engine that produces 271 hp and up to 385 nm mated to a 6-speed automatic transmission. Additionally, the vehicle is available with Adaptive Variable Suspension System (AVS), the All-Wheel Drive Integrated

Management (AIM) concept, which delivers integrated control of the vehicle's drive force, AWD, suspension, braking and steering systems according to driving conditions to enhance driving pleasure.

The all-new Land Cruiser

is equipped with the latest off-road driver assistance features, including the new 3D-Multi Terrain Monitor (3D-MTM) assists the driver in determining the road conditions around the vehicle, a first for Toyota that facilitates safer and more confident

low-speed manoeuvring.

A new AUTO mode enhances the capabilities of Multi-Terrain Select by adjusting according to road conditions such as sand, rock, dirt and mud. The vehicle also features crawl control and turn assist functions.

The all-new interior cocoons passengers in a sophisticated and comfortable space unaffected by the external environment. The cabin offers a range of advanced features such as wireless charging for smartphones, Active Noise Control and a 4-zone automatic air conditioning system with rear control switches.

The cluster gauge features a 7-inch colour Multi-information Display (MID) and a 12.3-inch Multimedia display.

Additional features available include a 14-speaker JBL sound system, Rear Seat Entertainment (RSE) system with 11.6-inch touch-screen displays that are Wi-Fi and HDMI connection enabled, ventilation for the first

and second-row seats, a multi-adjustable power driver seat, 40:20:40 split-folding second-row seats, a kick-sensor operated power tailgate, and smart entry and start systems.

Safety remains a top priority for the all-new Land Cruiser, which comes with an advanced safety system.

In the Sultanate of Oman, the nationwide parts and service network of Saud Bahwan Automotive supports Toyota's outstanding product quality. No wonder that today, Toyota is one of the most trusted and well-known brands.

For the latest press releases, test drive requests and more, please visit www.toyotaoman.com, www.youtube.com/toyotaoman or www.facebook.com/toyotaoman, [instagram.com/toyotaoman](https://www.instagram.com/toyotaomanofficial/). For any further details & to ascertain availability of stocks, please visit your nearest Toyota showroom.

Mutual Funds: Invest today for a better tomorrow with ahlibank



MUSCAT: ahlibank has announced the launch of Mutual Funds, opening up lucrative avenues for customers to invest and seek a 'better tomorrow'. The investment vehicle will provide access to a host of global mutual funds to invest through a tie-up with Allfunds Bank, a leading platform for global fund investment technologies and corporate money distribution.

The Mutual Funds will be available for all its customers who are willing to invest.

Customers will be able to choose their mutual fund portfolio as per their preference. The mutual funds' portfolios of the customers will be managed by highly experienced, specialized investment managers working with the respective firms.

Reiterating the merits of Mutual Funds for clients who are driven towards the investment market for a secure future, Najla bint Murtadha al Lawatiah, AGM- Private Banking & Wealth Management of ahlibank, described the funds as a 'beneficial channel' to invest. Explaining further, she said: "The Mutual Fund is a highly professionally managed investment fund that pools money from several investors to invest in bonds, shares and other securities.

This contributes to diversifying the investment portfolio and achieving returns that exceed those which are non-professionally managed Investments. It will not only provide an easy access to global markets, without any hitches, but also ensure high liquidity with projected profits."

Sohar International supports Int'l Day of People with Disabilities event

MUSCAT: Sohar International has been at the forefront of community service and has collaborated with a significant number of charitable institutions to extend a helping hand to those in need. In a recent endeavour, the bank sponsored the International Day of People with Disabilities 2021 themed under 'Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities toward an inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-Covid 19 world'.

The event, which was organised by the Ministry of Social Development was graced by the presence of Her Highness Sayyida Dr Mona bint Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), who was the Guest of Honour.

Through the years, Sohar International has joined hands with the Oman Association for the Disabled to carry out several critical campaigns aimed at enhancing the well-being of this particular segment of society.

Apart from providing financial support, these initiatives have helped raise awareness of the importance of creating a more inclusive society where people with disabilities can enjoy work opportunities, showcase their abilities and lead a more self-reliant life. Sohar International's ongoing support to the association was also recognised by



the Ministry of Social Development while earning much appreciation in the community.

Ahmed al Musalmi, CEO of Sohar International said, "This initiative is part of the bank's ongoing CSR activities that focuses on enhancing the well-being of the community, thereby playing a pivotal role in the country's philanthropic roadmap.

Sohar International has built a strong relationship with the Oman Association for the Disabled and we will continue to support the various initiatives of the association and help them realise their noble goals."

Ooredoo celebrates 20th wave of Springboard graduates

MUSCAT:

Continuously empowering the women across Oman, Ooredoo has celebrated the 20th wave of graduates from its pioneering Springboard

programme, an initiative that falls under its corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme, Ooredoo Goodwill.

The graduation events of 150 participants was held under the shaikhs and respected guests from Al Kamil W'al Wafi, Al Rustaq and Ibri. During the event, the evaluation committee recognised 19 of the amazing projects presented.

Raed Mohamad Dawood, Director of Government Relations and Corporate Affairs at Ooredoo, said, "It is truly inspiring to see the participants boost their personal and leadership skills as they use these tools to turn their projects into viable businesses.

The Springboard programme continues to equip the Omani women with the skills and know-how to further enrich their livelihood and become successful in their fields. We are proud to celebrate the graduation of a new batch of entrepreneurs who are now able to contribute to strengthening the national economy."

As part of its commitment to supporting women and future SMEs and SoHos, Ooredoo launched the Springboard programme in 2014 under the umbrella of 'Ooredoo Goodwill'. Today, it has become one of the main pillars of the company's CSR strategy.



New Maserati Classiche programme begins

MUSCAT: Maserati Classiche has officially begun, following the announcement made last year at the "MMXX: Time to be Audacious" event which inaugurated the brand's new era. The first road car to receive the Maserati certification of authenticity is a Mistral 3700.

Maserati Classiche is the department that protects and promotes the preservation and originality of the company's automotive heritage. An exclusive assistance service — dedicated to the brand's customers and collectors — now also includes a process to certify authenticity.

The first road car certified by the Maserati Classiche programme is a Mistral 3,700, built in March 1969, with the silver Auteuil livery.

This Maserati Mistral received a certificate of originality after a thorough verification of the car (with over 300 checks made),



matched against all the documents held by the Historical Archive.

The certification process is guaranteed by a committee of experts and is offered for Maserati cars from more than 20 years ago plus the special series, including those from the recent past such as the MC12 and the Quattroporte limited editions.

Also included in the programme

is a maintenance service for in-house minor repairs and routine maintenance, as well as an on-demand car detailing service.

Alongside collectors and customers, the programme provides a service to support the preservation of the cars and the restoration of every detail to match the original. A dedicated service plan offers owners of Classiche,

Youngtimer and Speciali cars follow-up in the various stages of the maintenance or restoration work done.

The next step in the Classiche Programme consists of a series of major assistance services, scheduled for 2022 and to be taken care of by Maserati itself, with the inclusion of the "Classiche" spare parts management and both assistance and support with restoration.

The primary tasks of Maserati Classiche include the manufacture of spare parts no longer available on the market, following indications taken from the original designs. The process uses the best technology there is to improve the reliability and functionality of the components, with no changes to their aesthetic appearance.

On the Maserati Classiche website, you can book your

request for Maserati Certification of Authenticity and discover all the services and details of the programme, made especially for Trident-brand enthusiasts.

In addition, to accompany the launch of the Maserati Classiche programme, a new Capsule Collection is also available, for fans of the Brand's heritage. The collection combines style with tradition and includes garments for men, women and "mini-me" versions.

The design pays attention to the smallest details, and to customisations that reflect the hallmarks and traditional colours of Maserati Classiche. Innovative by nature, Maserati looks to the future yet never forgets its DNA of over 100 years of history, packed with sporting successes and cars that still make you dream today.



Banking sector credit rises 5.4% to RO 27.8 billion

POSITIVE GROWTH TRENDS:

Total assets of Islamic Banks and Windows increased by 13.1 per cent on a Y-o-Y basis to RO 5.8 billion and constituted about 15.2 per cent of the banking system's assets

JOMAR MENDOZA

@JmObserver

Credit extended by conventional and Islamic banks (collectively known as Other Depository Corporations or ODCs) grew 5.4 per cent to RO 27.8 billion at the end of November 2021, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO)

announced here on Wednesday.

Credit to the private sector alone grew a modest 2.3 per cent (Y-o-Y) to reach RO 23.4 billion, the apex bank stated in its latest monthly report.

The non-financial corporate sector, with a 46.5 per cent share, received the highest share of the total private sector credit, followed by the household sector (45.2 per cent), financial corporations (4.7 per cent) and other sectors (3.6 per cent).

Total deposits held with ODCs registered a Y-o-Y growth of 5.7 per cent to reach RO 25.4 billion at the end of November 2021. Total private sector deposits increased by 5.3 per cent to RO 17.3 billion.

In terms of sector-wise



composition of private sector deposits, the biggest share goes to household deposits at 51.2 per cent, followed by non-financial corporations (31.7 per cent), financial corporations (14.2 per

cent) and other sectors (2.9 per cent). The combined balance sheet of conventional banks showed a Y-o-Y growth of 4.0 per cent in total outstanding credit as of end-November 2021,

according to the CBO.

Credit to the private sector increased by 1.8 to reach RO 19.1 billion while their overall investments in securities went up by 21.6 per cent to RO 5.2 billion as of end-November 2021.

Investment in Government Development Bonds increased by 20.9 per cent compared to the same period last year to RO 2.2 billion while their investments in foreign securities declined by 25.8 per cent to RO 0.803 billion.

Aggregate deposits held with the conventional banks increased by 3.6 per cent Y-o-Y to RO 21.0 billion at end-November 2021. Government deposits with conventional banks witnessed an increase of 7.5 per cent at RO 4.7 billion.

Similarly, deposits of public enterprises went up by 5.5 per cent to RO 1.2 billion. Private sector deposits, which accounted for 69.3 per cent of total deposits with conventional banks, increased by 2.8 per cent to reach RO 14.6 billion.

Islamic banking entities provided financing totalling RO 4.8 billion as of end-November 2021, recording a growth of 13.1 per cent y-o-y.

Total deposits held with Islamic banks and windows increased by 16.8 per cent to RO 4.4 billion. The total assets of Islamic Banks and Windows increased by 13.1 per cent on a Y-o-Y basis to RO 5.8 billion and constituted about 15.2 per cent of the banking system's assets.

Euro zone private sector growth eases to nine-month low

MADRID: The euro area private sector growth eased to a nine-month low in December, resuming a slowdown trend amid a resurgence of Covid-19 infections, survey results from IHS Markit showed on Wednesday.

The composite output index fell to 53.3 in December from 55.4 in November. The score was slightly below the flash first estimate of 53.4. The direction of growth differed by area, with a slowdown in the euro zone's dominant services sector to blame for a weaker improvement at the composite level.

At the same time, manufacturing upturn remained subdued relative



Workers assemble engines at the Daimler Powertrain plant in Bad Cannstatt, Germany. — Reuters

to the 2021 average. The services Purchasing Managers' Index came in at 53.1, down from 55.9 in the previous month. The flash score was 53.3.

While difficulties in obtaining inputs was once again noted as a major headwind for manufacturers, a resurgence in

the pandemic across the euro area was a considerable drag on activity and demand in the services sector.

"As euro area nations deal with the latest developments in the pandemic, it's clear that risks to the economy are now greater as tighter restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19 are more likely than they have been recently," Joe Hayes, a senior economist at IHS Markit said.

The final composite PMIs for December confirmed that the euro zone economy ended 2021 on a weak note, consistent with the assessment that GDP rose by only about 0.2 per cent sequentially in the fourth quarter, Jack Allen-Reynolds, an economist at Capital Economics, said. — dpa

Vietnam seeks \$15.3 billion stimulus package to strengthen economy

HANOI: Vietnam plans to spend 347 trillion dong (\$15.25 billion) for the 2022-23 period to cushion the economic blow from the pandemic and assist businesses hurt by tough curbs, the country's planning ministry said.

The latest stimulus package, which is well below the proposal of 800 trillion dong submitted in November, includes measures to reduce bank loan interest rates by about 1 percentage point and delay loan payments for businesses.

According to the plan, Vietnam's central bank, which has plan to sell \$3 billion of government bonds domestically, should stand ready to intervene in the market and stabilise foreign exchange rates if necessary.



Labourers work at a garment export factory in Hung Yen, Vietnam. — Reuters

Vietnam's economy grew 2.58 per cent in 2021, slipping from a 2.91 per cent expansion the year before, official data showed. The government is

targeting GDP growth for 2022. The plan also includes 64 trillion dong tax reduction and 110 trillion dong in assistance for businesses. — Reuters

Oil price ends up at \$80 per barrel as Opec+ sticks with February output hike

VIENNA: Global benchmark Brent crude jumped on Tuesday to \$80 a barrel, its highest since November, as Opec+ agreed to stick with its planned increase for February based on indications that the Omicron coronavirus variant would have only a mild impact on demand.

Brent futures settled up \$1.02, or 1.3 per cent, at \$80 a barrel, almost back to the level they were at on November 26 when reports of the new variant first appeared, sparking a more than 10 per cent decline in prices on that day.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude rose 91 cents, or 1.2 per cent, to \$76.99. "The oil market is bullish today as a result of optimism sourced from today's monthly Opec+ meeting, which is helping oil prices trade higher," said Rystad Energy's head of oil markets, Bjornar Tonhaugen.

Opec+, comprising of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies, agreed to stick to its planned increase of 400,000 barrels per day



3D printed oil barrels and percentage symbols are seen in front of dollar banknotes in this illustration. — Reuters

(bpd) in oil output in February. Its decision reflects easing concerns over a big surplus in the first quarter, as well as a wish to provide consistent guidance to the market.

Crude stockpiles in the United

States, the world's top consumer, were forecast to have dropped for a sixth consecutive week.

The White House welcomed the decision by Opec+ to continue increases in production which will help facilitate economic

recovery, a spokesperson said.

"It appears that the market is making the bet that Omicron is the beginning of the end of Covid-19," said Scott Shelton, an energy specialist at United ICAP. In Britain, people being

hospitalised with Covid-19 were generally showing less severe symptoms than previously.

While in France, the finance minister said some sectors were being disrupted by the surge of the fast-spreading Omicron variant, but there was no risk of it "paralysing" the economy and stuck to a forecast of 4 per cent GDP growth in 2022.

Global manufacturing activity remained strong in December, suggesting Omicron's impact on output had been subdued.

Libyan output is likely to be about 500,000-600,000 bpd lower in the coming weeks, more than offsetting the planned monthly increase in Opec+ production, chief commodities economist at Capital Economics Caroline Bain said.

Libya's state oil firm said oil output would be reduced by 200,000 bpd for a week due to maintenance on a main pipeline, adding to disruptions two weeks ago after militia blocked operations at the Sharara and Wafa oilfields.

— Reuters

Philippines inflation slows to 3.6 per cent

MANILA: The Philippines' headline inflation slowed for the fifth month in a row to the lowest for the year and core price growth eased in December, data from the Philippine Statistics Authority showed on Wednesday.

The consumer price index rose 3.6 per cent annually in December, following a 4.2 per cent increase in November. Economists had expected a 3.8 per cent rise.

The average inflation for the year 2021 was 4.5 per cent versus 2.6 per cent in 2020. The statistical office attributed the latest easing to the slower annual increase in food and non-alcoholic beverages at 3.1 per cent versus 3.9 per cent in November.

Food inflation slowed to 3.2 per cent from 4.1 per cent. On the other hand, prices rose at a faster pace for utilities at 5 per cent, and for communication at 0.3 per cent. Education costs rose 0.7 per cent for the third month in a row.

Core inflation eased to 3 per cent in December from 3.3 per cent in the previous month.

— dpa

Apple’s \$3 trillion valuation is ripe fruit

Apple has raced to a \$3 trillion market value from \$1 trillion in just 41 months. Despite that surge and significant risks, the technology giant run by Tim Cook can continue to evade the law of large numbers. No public company has ever been as big as the iPhone maker, which now accounts for 7 per cent of the S&P 500 Index.

Apple’s revenue, \$366 billion in the most recent fiscal year, is in the same ballpark as the GDP of Hong Kong.

The company returned nearly \$200 billion to investors through share buybacks and dividends last year, more than the entire market value of any but the top 40 or so groups in the S&P 500.

For more than a decade leading up to 2019, the company’s shares typically traded at a price-to-earnings ratio discount to the broader market. That’s no longer the case, but today’s stock price doesn’t look badly overstretched.

Adjusting for one year’s forecast growth, per Refinitiv, provides the only hint that Cook has his work cut out: A higher price-earnings-to-growth or PEG ratio suggests more demanding expectations for Apple than for most other tech giants.

There are threats to the hefty percentage that Apple extracts from app developers like Epic Games, which is challenging Cook’s company in court. Those income streams matter for top-line growth.

And China, which accounted for a fifth of revenue last fiscal year as well as being a key supplier for sales elsewhere, is a source of both supply-chain and trade-policy uncertainty.

Still, after a decade at the helm, Cook has capitalised on the crown-jewel smartphone created by his predecessor, Steve Jobs . With what seem like only incremental product enhancements and merely ancillary revenue from the app store and services, Apple’s financial results have surprised doubters.

Microsoft, for one, may be surfing surer technology waves. But it would ignore the lessons of recent years to count Apple out. Next stop \$4 trillion? — Reuters

Apple’s revenue, \$366 billion in the most recent fiscal year, is in the same ballpark as the GDP of Hong Kong



NEW YEAR TUNA AUCTION

A wholesaler stand in front of the lined up frozen tuna during the New Year’s auction at Toyosu fish market in Tokyo, Japan on Wednesday.

The buyer of a \$145,000 tuna at Tokyo’s traditional New Year auction said he hoped the purchase would “brighten” a Covid-hit 2022.

The top price paid for a tuna at the first auction of the year at Tokyo’s Toyosu fish market fell for the third year running, with demand hit by the pandemic. — AFP

Fintech’s importance in growth visions



Hader al Lawati

haiderdawood@hotmail.com

THE COUNTRIES OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL HAVE GIVEN IMPORTANCE TO THIS ISSUE IN ALL COMMERCIAL, BANKING AND FINANCIAL BUSINESSES

Interest in financial technology (fintech) has been growing around the world, with many countries including fintech initiatives in their visions for economic growth over the coming decades.

The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council have given importance to this issue in all commercial, banking and financial businesses, while making continuous efforts in enabling local populations to use modern fintech in their transactions.

Fintech’s goals are numerous. They include aspirations to accelerate the pace of development of new financial technologies, promoting awareness around the importance and benefits of fintech, encouraging private small and medium enterprises to adapt and specialize in the use of such technologies, and to create new products and services that advance commercial, financial and banking initiatives.

Qatar is preparing to the “Fintech in the Middle East” conference with the participation of a number of speakers from international institutions specializing in banking, financial services and information

technology issues, in addition to providers of technical solutions and investors in technology.

Such large events are aimed at exchanging experiences among the participants and gaining modern visions and perceptions about the latest developments in digital technologies and financial transactions in their four specific areas: Payments, savings, investments and transfer operations.

These events also aim to understand options for supporting the growth of finance and business, improving banking services, and employing modern methodologies in enhancing governance, combating corruption and protecting the integrity of financial and banking systems.

The upcoming conference is especially important in light of the increasing reliance on technology and electronic systems in financial and banking services, which helps counteract the impacts of the ongoing pandemic.

With social distancing and other pandemic prevention protocols, it is imperative digital transformation enables continuity of banking and business services.

Such conferences also aim to present

ideas that are embodied in financial technology innovations and ways to employ them in enhancing the operations of institutions and their role in facilitating and enhancing compliance with anti-money laundering rules and enhancing transparency.

Life has become simple with the use of these technologies, as they meet the people’s needs, and make things easier for individuals, whether in daily business or in the educational, social and other fields.

At the same time, innovators seek to invent more devices, equipment and software and find solutions to drive business towards more improvement and productivity.

The theme of “Fintech” will work to integrate more traditional financial transactions in the world in the coming years, and reduce bureaucracy and red tape that may be encountered in daily operations.

Through “Fintech” techniques, many of us have become dependent on making purchases and sales through the use of credit cards, and transferring amounts outside the borders in a short time.

Turkey’s risky inflation experiment



Şebnem Kalemli-Özcan

The author, a former senior policy adviser at the International Monetary Fund, is Professor of Economics at the University of Maryland, College Park

Monetary policy in most economies today is anchored by an explicit inflation target, because targeting price stability has served both developed countries and emerging markets well.

Until pandemic-related disruptions to supply chains and labour markets began fuelling rapid price growth, inflation was well below target in major economies, and, sooner or later, the question of what to do in such situations will return.

The twentieth-century American economist Irving Fisher had an answer. Economic orthodoxy dictates that central bankers should increase nominal interest rates when inflation exceeds policymakers’ target.

After all, raising interest rates reduces borrowing and spending, cooling the economy and curbing inflation.

Fisher, however, argued that when inflation is too low,

central banks should raise their targets for nominal interest rates. He maintained that there is a positive correlation between nominal interest rates and inflation.

This relationship, known as the Fisher effect, can be seen in economic data. Modern macroeconomists interpret the causality as going from inflation to nominal interest rates.

Turkey is the first country to put Fisher’s theory to the test — but with a crucial twist. Turkish officials believe that high interest rates cause inflation, so they claim that there is causation in the other direction.

Lowering interest rates, the Turkish authorities say, should reduce inflation. After all, as Fisher argued, the nominal interest rate is the sum of the real interest rate and future inflation.

If the real interest rate is constant, then the only long-term effect of decreasing the nominal interest rate will be lower inflation because any effect on the real interest rate

from lowering the nominal interest rate will disappear in the long run.

But in the short run, such monetary neutrality is absent, so a drop in the nominal interest rate also decreases the real interest rate.

And that hurts both domestic and foreign savers, which is a major problem for a country like Turkey, which runs a persistent current-account deficit to finance its economic growth.

With the real interest rate currently negative, the neo-Fisherian experiment will make Turkey’s inflation problem worse.

A country that needs both domestic and foreign savings to finance rapid growth cannot offer those savers negative returns.

To encourage continued domestic saving, the government recently announced a new policy: If the lira’s decline against major currencies exceeds banks’ short-term deposit interest rates, the government will pay holders of lira deposits the difference.

For example, if banks pay 15 per cent on 12-month lira deposits,

and the lira depreciates 20 per cent during this period, the treasury will make depositors whole.

While this policy might protect domestic savers and prevent them from abandoning the lira, it does nothing to encourage foreign savers. The resulting outflow of foreign capital will accelerate lira depreciation and fuel further inflation.

And, because the policy puts the entire currency risk on the government, it will weaken public finances and eventually could lead to debt monetisation.

Why would the government put in place a costlier alternative to a tighter monetary policy? The answer is straightforward: Turkey’s short-run growth model runs on credit, which requires that domestic borrowers be able to borrow at low interest rates.

But the role of foreign capital flows in those domestic lending rates betrays the model’s fatal flaw. If a country has external financing needs and funds its growth with foreign savings, capital flows are

a more important determinant of short-term domestic lending rates than the monetary policy rate — a phenomenon known as the “short rate disconnect.”

This is because domestic banks depend on international financial markets to fund themselves.

For foreigners who lend to these banks, there should not be any difference between lira deposit rates and dollar deposit rates once they are adjusted for expected depreciation. This is not true in the Turkish case.

If foreign institutions lend in lira, they charge a risk premium, which now has increased, owing to massive exchange-rate depreciation. And if they lend in dollars, they charge a premium for default risk, which also has grown.

The recent record-high Turkish credit-default swap spreads are a good example of this. As foreign investors abandon Turkish markets — or charge higher risk premiums to stay — both currency depreciation and inflation will increase. © Project Syndicate 2022

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ESTABLISHED IN 1981 EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: ABDOULAH BIN SALIH AL SHARIEL VOL. 39 NO. 229 | PAGES 16

HIS MAJESTY ADMINISTERS OATH TO NEW MINISTER

UN HAILS OMAN'S SUPPORT FOR PEACE IN YEMEN

NEW YORK: Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, has commended the role of the Sultanate in upholding international efforts to establish security and peace in Yemen.

In a virtual video call, he expressed his appreciation for the Sultanate's role in enhancing regional and international peace and security in Yemen.

"The United Nations is grateful to the Sultanate of Oman for its crucial role in enhancing regional and international peace and security in Yemen," he said.

Guterres added that the "Sultanate represents a major model not only in the Middle East but also in the world" for upholding international law and the sovereignty of the Sultanate in addressing the conflict in Yemen.

He said the "Sultanate's role in enhancing regional and international peace and security in Yemen" is a testament to its commitment to peace and stability.

STAY APART AND BREAK THE CHAIN

NEW RO 50 BANKNOTE FROM THIS MONTH

MINISAT: To mark the 10th anniversary of the Omani Renaissance and in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Omani Renaissance, the Omani Bank of Commerce (OBC) has issued a new RO 50 banknote, which will begin circulation this month.

"OBC will also issue new banknotes for all other denominations during the last quarter of 2020," OBC said.

The new RO 50 banknote is a testament to the Omani Renaissance and the Omani Renaissance.

The new RO 50 banknote is a testament to the Omani Renaissance and the Omani Renaissance.

The new RO 50 banknote is a testament to the Omani Renaissance and the Omani Renaissance.

features



History of a nation in cards

An expat has a huge collection of cards that illustrate different decades of the Sultanate of Oman, various five-year plans, major crops, agriculture, dressing styles, people of various wilayats, major events that took place such as the Gulf Cup, First Asian beach ball and the like... **P20**

CELEBRITIES

READ



JANE EYRE
BY CHARLOTTE BRONTË

As an orphaned child, Mia Wasikowska is first cruelly abused by her aunt, then cast out and sent to a charity school. Though she meets with further abuse, she receives an education and eventually takes a job as a governess at the estate of Edward Rochester.

Britney Spears not ready to return to music business she calls 'scary'

BRITNEY SPEARS HAS signalled she is not yet ready to return to making music after 13 years under a conservatorship that took away control of her personal and business affairs and left her scared of the entertainment business. Spears, 40, who last month was freed <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/finally-free-judge-consider-ending-restrictions-britney-spears-2021-11-12> from the court-imposed arrangement in 2008 sought by her father, said in a lengthy Instagram post on Monday that she wanted to "push myself a bit more and do things that scare me but not too much" in 2022. "I guess it seems odd to

most why I don't even do music anymore... People have no idea the awful things they have done to me personally and after what I've been through, I'm scared of people and the business!!!," wrote Spears <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYAdri-qwZ2>, who last performed publicly in October 2018. "Not doing my music anymore is my way of saying 'Get Lost' in a sense when it only actually benefits my family by ignoring my real work. It's like I've subconsciously let them win," the "Toxic" singer added. Spears, who is engaged to boyfriend Sam Asghari, complained to the judge in charge of her conservatorship case earlier this year that she found her father Jamie Spears, who was in charge of her career, controlling. — **Reuters**





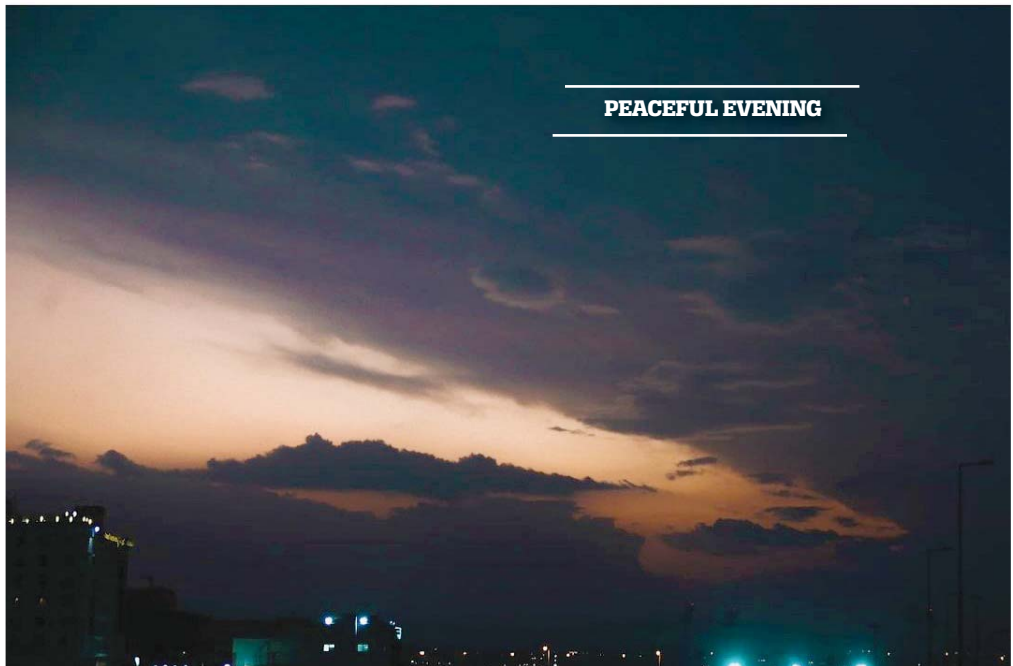
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BACK FROM EXTINCTION



Latvia's symbolic blue cow back from the brink

ONCE A RARITY, cows with light blue or dark ultramarine hides may again be glimpsed grazing on the Latvian countryside among the regular brown, black or white spotted cattle.

The unique and hardy breed, driven to near extinction during the Soviet era, has made a comeback over the last few decades as an unlikely symbol of Latvian national identity.

"Their worst days are over," said Arnis Bergmanis, head of the Ciruli animal park in the village of Kalvene, which serves as a breeding facility for the cattle.

"Blue cows are unique and wonderful. I'm glad we can help them thrive," he said while examining a baby calf.

In 2000 there were only 18 blue cows in Latvia, but today they number around 1,500 -- thoroughbreds as well as hybrids.

Originally found only on the Baltic coast in the Kurzeme region, they are increasingly popular in central areas too.

"We are happy to help every new farmer or guesthouse owner get their own special blue cow," Bergmanis said.

Rural innkeepers acquire the cattle as a tourist attraction, while farmers include a token blue cow in their herd for its strong maternal instinct. "If a calf of any colour loses its mother or gets separated, the blue cow will take the calf and raise it as its own," Bergmanis said.

Blue cows evolved on the coast, where they led a spartan lifestyle, able to subsist on bush branches and dune grass -- fodder considered inedible by other cattle.

Legend has it that they get their colour from the sea, though in fact they are born almost beige. Their coat soon turns blue however and gets darker with the years.

The pigment also influences the muscular tissue, producing beef that is exceptionally dark, though their numbers have always been too low for meat sales on a mass scale.

When the communists came to power under the Soviet occupation, they put an emphasis on mass production of beef and dairy. They favoured more generic cattle, causing the blue cow to almost go extinct.

But theatre, of all things, saved the day.

Following the highly popular 1970s play "The Blue One" by Latvian playwright Gunars Priede, the special cattle returned to public consciousness, becoming a symbol of vanishing national identity. — **AFF**

MUSIC

Abbey pushed for Elton John to play at Princess Diana's funeral



BUCKINGHAM PALACE RECEIVED a personal appeal from the Dean of Westminster to allow singer Elton John perform at the funeral of Princess Diana, newly released government documents show.

Wesley Carr, who himself helped conduct part of the funeral service for Diana at Westminster Abbey after her death in a Paris car crash in August 1997, urged a senior figure in the royal household to include a performance by John, a friend of the princess.

"This is a crucial point in the service and we would urge boldness. It is where the unexpected happens and something of the modern world that the princess represented," Carr wrote in the note released by the National Archives.

"I respectfully suggest that anything classical or choral (even a popular classic such as something by [composer Andrew] Lloyd Webber) is inappropriate. Better would be the enclosed song by Elton John (known to millions and his music was enjoyed by the princess), which would be powerful."

Documents show John's 1970 ballad "Your Song" was initially considered, but Carr noted that the singer's 1973 ode to Marilyn Monroe "Candle In the Wind" was already "being widely played



and sung throughout the nation". Its performance would be "imaginative and generous to the millions who are feeling personally bereaved".

He added that if the words were "too sentimental" they did not need to be printed in the order of service.

There is no detail of any response from the Palace, but John went on to perform the song, with revised lyrics dedicated to "England's Rose". It was one of the most poignant

moments of the funeral, watched by as many as 2.5 billion people.

The re-released version, lamenting a woman's death at a young age in the pitiless glare of fame, went on to become the second-biggest selling physical single of all time.

In 2019, John said he was so worried about getting the words wrong when performing at the funeral that he had a teleprompter installed by the piano. — **Reuters**

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Future Skills Needs of learners

IN VIEW OF GLOBAL changes, enhancing students' skills has become important. Researches' results show there are two significant tendencies in the world that pose a fundamental challenge to the educational system in the future: firstly, the world shifting from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy. Secondly, the new generation which is often known as the Millennials' generation has different motives for learning. According to the International Delphi Survey result (Ehlers, 2019), future skills are the current issue of education due to the major changes in the job market. In addition, today's learners' perceptions are expanding, shifting, and developing. While many studies focus on the changes brought through digital technologies, they relate future skills directly to digital skills, which is only represent one portion of the future skills demands.

The future skills were introduced by the (Framework for 21st Century Learning), its aim to bridge the gap between the academic areas and real-life applications. The future skills model is divided into three dimensions: The first dimension is the subjective dimension of future skills profiles. It relates to an individuals' subjective, personal abilities to learn, adapt, and develop to improve their opportunities to productively participate in the workforce of tomorrow. It contains seven future skill profiles. The second dimension is relating to an individual's ability to act self-organised in relation to an object, a task, or a certain subject related issue. It suggests taking knowledge in several steps up the ladder, connecting it to motivation, values, and purpose. It's not just a quest for knowledge but for dealing with knowledge effectively in different situations. The third future skill dimension is the social dimension, which relates to an individual's ability to act self-organised in relation to its social environment, society, and organisational environment. It's emphasis-

ing the individual's dual role as the curator of its social portfolio of membership in several organisational spheres and at the same time having the role of rethinking organisational spaces and creating organisational structures anew to make it future proof. It contains a set of five skill profiles (Ehlers, 2019, 3).

Mysirlaki (2018) points out that today's learners were brought up in a highly-sophisticated media and computer-supported environment. Information and Communication Technologies provide them with tremendous opportunities to find volumes of information. Nevertheless, they have different needs than those of their parents or teachers, and these needs should be considered when designing educational frameworks for educating tomorrow's workforce. Therefore, these students need to be constantly engaged with motivating educational activities, stimulating educational tools, and innovative teaching techniques. Moreover, digital games and virtual worlds are a big part of their lives. Thus, technologies like Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, could be a way to meet learners' needs for connectivity and co-learning spaces. On the other hand, these learners ought to cope with issues like economic, cultural, and political challenges that demand new skills to succeed in the 21st century. They need critical thinking and scientific literacy to search, process, and analyse information.

To conclude, how to hone learners' skills for the future? And what does today's formal education prepare for tomorrow's workers? Referring to the views of Darling & Hammond (2007) the most persuasive argument is that we do not know what the work of the future will be like, or how technology will influence health and financial issues. The challenge is to prepare students to think critically, "to engage in mental activity, or habits of mind, that use facts to plan, order and work toward an end".



History in CARDS

KABEER YOUSUF

Collecting the things that one uses everyday, be it those that have emotional values or experiences that last a lifetime, a man is chasing the bits and pieces of the days that he lived on the planet earth. Madhusoodanan Nair, an expat in the Wilayat of Sur is on a mission for nearly four decades of collecting the memories associated with his life in the Sultanate of Oman and documenting them.

He possesses nearly 50,000 telephone cards that portrayed important events that the country witnessed during the past few decades.

These cards comprise different decades of the Sultanate of Oman, various five-year plans, major crops, agriculture, dressing styles, people of various wilayats, major events that took place such as the Gulf Cup tourney, First Asian beachball and the like. Important diplomatic visits, milestones in bilateral history with various nations, sources of GDP and the like. These cards bore the images of various celebrations, landscape of Oman's governorates, life in the wilayats, and many more.

"I started collecting telephone cards as a passion from the day I arrived here some 37 years ago", said Madhusoodanan.

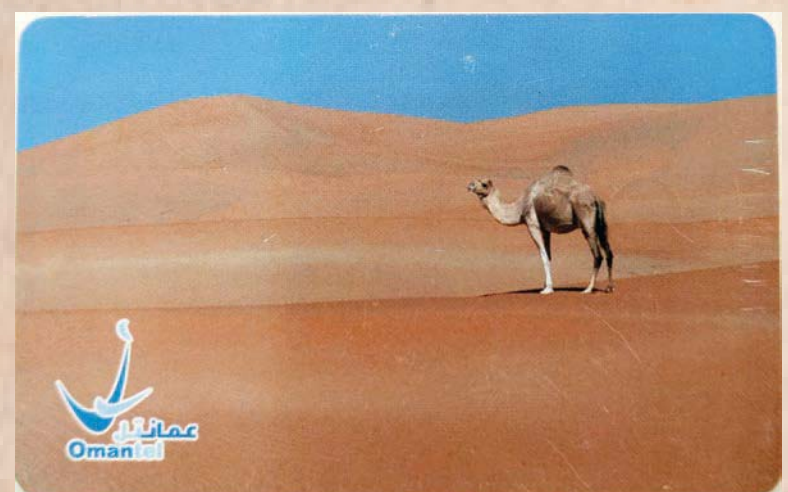
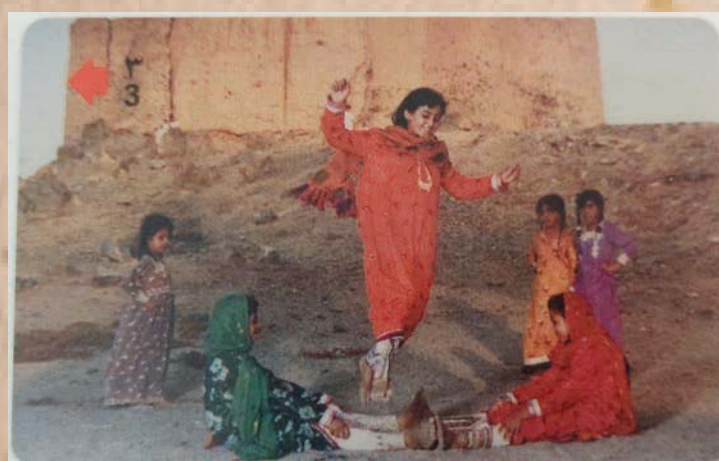
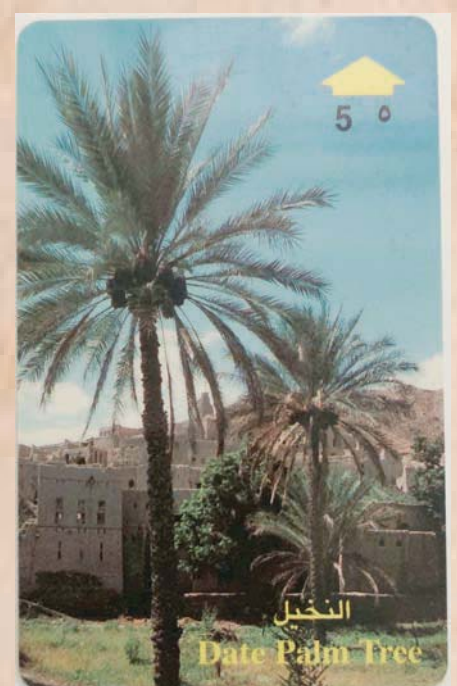
Madhusoodanan started travelling as soon as he completed his graduation and went as far as the Indian capital city of New Delhi from Kerala and other states before beginning his life in the middle east. Out of his 43 years in the Gulf, he spent 37 years in Oman.

The hobby started when he was very small. The little Madhu satisfied his urge to collect things that were of interest in the form of match boxes which had beautiful pictures of animals and birds and made a vast collection in no time which was appreciated by his friends and teachers.

"Next I collected glass pebbles which kids used to play with and was so fascinated with them. As buying newer ones involved shelling out a few paises, my passion was confined to broken ones and later, I managed to buy newer glass pebbles", Madhu adds.

As he started high schooling in 1969, his passion slowly shifted to stamps and coin collection just as many of his age then used to do. Currencies and coins of various countries found their place in his albums.

To achieve this, he was lucky to have his dad working in Malaysia as he kept sending new stamps and coins through his friends and sometimes, by post. Madhu got a dutch pen-friend called Hen Coning who helped him collect different nations' stamps, cards, etc and they started exchanging



stamps and telephone cards.

He used to collect visiting cards of those whom he met during the years he spent in north India. But this he had to let go as storing and carrying it to places he shifted proved to be logistically difficult.

He pursued the passion when he arrived in Oman in early 80s. He found the supplements published from the country were so colourful and began collecting them. Besides the supplements carried by *Oman Daily Observer*, other regional papers which published special stories and pictures on Oman national day and Renaissance Day have been documented after reading.

Madhusoodanan's focus shifted to telephone cards in the 90s that were decorated with beautiful images.

He was excited when *Observer* published an article on Latif al Balushi, a numismatist from Muttrah who then had over 50,000 telephone cards and stamps. Madhu got in touch with Latif and bought some of them besides gaining information on sources of getting these cards and together they exchanged many cards and ideas.

In 2002, when his family joined him in Sur, Madhusoodanan and his children would hunt for these cards near shops and market places. When he and family sorted

and stacked all the cards, they were surprised to see nearly 50,000 cards in the collection.

"That was a great inspiration and motivation. We continued our passion of collecting them all the more."

Any celebrity who would visit Sur used to receive an album of cards as a gift as many of the cards were contributed by his friends and relatives.

"I'm willing to give away the cards collection to anyone who is as passionate as I'm so that this vast history of the nation in cards wouldn't go to waste", Madhusoodanan, who has already retired from work, said.