

State Council to discuss draft of education law

MUSCAT: The State Council will discuss on Sunday, the draft 'School Education Law' and 'Higher Education Law', and the opinion of the Education and Research Committee in preparation during the third session. The fourth session of the seventh term will be held by the Council under the chairmanship of Shaikh Abdul Malik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the Council. SEE P5



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UNDERSTANDING THE ARCTIC POLAR VORTEX



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TEJARAH TALKS: TELLING UNTOLD STORIES



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LENDING A HAND TO DISABLED PEOPLE



MUSCAT

WINNERS OF QURAN CONTEST TO BE FETED

Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, will preside over the honouring ceremony for the winners of the 30th edition of Sultan Qaboos Holy Quran Competition 2022, on Monday. The event will be held at the lecture hall of Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. — ONA

AIR TROUGH EFFECTS TO CONTINUE

Northeasterly winds are likely to bring rains to Musandam and the coasts of the Sea of Oman in the coming hours, while southerly winds will impact the weather in the rest of the governorates. Oman Meteorology has predicted Precipitation of varying intensity and heavy rains leading to the flow of valleys, accompanied by thunderstorms.

The trough effects will continue on Sunday with clouds advection and chances of isolated rain and occasionally thundershowers over the governorates of Musandam, North al Batinah, and Al Buraimi.

Isolated rain in the range of 10-30 mm will cause wadies to overflow, followed by fresh downdraft winds with a speed of 15 to 30 kt (30-60km/h).

The sea state will be moderate to rough, with a maximum wave height of 2.5m.

Another upper air trough will likely affect the Sultanate of Oman starting gradually on Monday afternoon and will continue until Wednesday night, associated with clouds advection over northern governorates with a chance of rain showers ranging between 10-50 mm.

INSIDE



THE COLDEST XMAS: EPIC STORM WALLOPS US

P6



WHY IS THERE A CANDLE FOR EVERYTHING?

P7

NUMBER OF ELIGIBLE VOTERS	NUMBER OF MEMBERS	NUMBER OF CANDIDATES	NUMBER OF FEMALE CANDIDATES
731,767	126	727	27

All set for municipal council elections

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, Dec 24

The municipal council elections for the third term will be taking place today from 7 am to 7 pm.

A total of 731,767 eligible voters will be using their smartphones to elect 126 members from 727 candidates including 27 women through Intakheb app.

Earlier, the Ministry of Interior announced the preparedness of all the election committees and full readiness for the elections scheduled for December 25 for citizens at home.

Intakheb mobile application has been designed in accordance to security standards taking into account all the requirements of secret ballot. It requires the availability of an Internet-connected phone equipped with the feature of near-field communication (NFC) and a valid ID card. The app can be



A total of 27 women are vying for membership of the municipal councils (third term). The number of female members of the municipal councils has risen by 5.2 per cent between the first and second terms. – ONA

downloaded from electronic stores for phones with iOS or Android operating systems. The app requires entering a 2-sided copy of the voter's ID card.

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Royal Oman Police, has recently developed voting methods and mechanisms. In the first term municipal

councils elections (2012-2016), voting was done through the ballot boxes while the final sort-out was done electronically which reduced the time needed for counting

the votes and expedited the announcement of the final results.

The second term (2017-2022) saw qualitative utilisation of technology which became a significant landmark for the elections. Registration in the electoral register and the transfer of registration went electronic and e-voting was adopted in all election centres.

In this third term municipal council elections (2023-2026), the voting process will be done electronically through Intakheb smartphone app which enables the voters to easily cast their ballots online.

As per their powers and responsibilities, the municipal council, particularly in their third, are consistent with the System of Governorates, decentralised system and the local administration of the governorates, in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

DETAILS ON P2 & 4

TRA open to WhatsApp calls if provider accepts rules

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The Telecom Regulatory Authority in the Sultanate of Oman is open to adopting changing trends in the sector, it was revealed recently.

Speaking to the Observer, Omar Hamdan al Ismaili, CEO of TRA, said, "We welcome companies and programmes or applications that comply with legal frameworks and licenses. We will welcome services such as the OTT or WhatsApp video and audio or other Voice



Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) services, provided they comply with our regulations."

He added that banning applications have a legal aspect as well as the aspect related to the

type of digital content.

On the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), he said, "We follow a flexible policy with the use of VPNs, but if we come across that they have been used for illegal purposes, like in crimes, we do intervene and try to stop such activities. We have certain regulations for VPNs and are currently reviewing their implementation by businesses."

Al Ismaili added that the government had implemented new regulations to use video-conferencing applications for enterprises.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!



Children pose with a performer dressed as Santa Claus during a Christmas lighting ceremony at a shopping mall in Hong Kong. – Reuters

Movie fans can sue over misleading trailer, US judge rules

LOS ANGELES: Movie fans disappointed that their favourite actor was cut from a film after appearing in the trailer can sue the studio for false advertising, a US judge has ruled.

Two film buffs say Universal Pictures tricked them into renting 2019 flick "Yesterday" because the trailer featured actress Ana de Armas.

Peter Michael Rosza, 45, of San Diego, and Conor Woulfe, 39, of Maryland, say they forked over \$3.99 each to watch the

Richard Curtis comedy on Amazon Prime, only to discover that de Armas had not made the final cut.

ANA DE ARMAS

A class action suit filed earlier this year alleges fans had been led to expect the Cuban "No Time To Die" star would feature prominently.

However, they "did not receive a movie with any appearance of Ana de Armas at all," says the suit, reported by US media



Fans who wanted to see Ana de Armas in 'Yesterday' can sue the studio that made the movie for false advertising, a US judge has ruled. – AFP

on Friday. Accordingly, "such consumers were not provided with any value for their rental or purchase," the suit added.

Universal had asked US District Judge Stephen Wilson to throw out the complaint, arguing that trailers are protected by the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees free speech.

But in his ruling, Wilson rejected the studio's argument, saying trailers are commercial speech and subject to laws

around honest advertising.

"At its core, a trailer is an advertisement designed to sell a movie by providing consumers with a preview of the movie," the judge wrote. The suit is claiming at least \$5 million on behalf of disappointed fans. Lawyers will convene again for the case on April 3.

Danny Boyle's "Yesterday" tells the story of a musician, played by Himesh Patel, who is thrust into an alternative reality where The Beatles do not exist. — AFP



Steady rise in number of female candidates



MUSCAT: The number of female members of the municipal councils has risen by 5.2 per cent between the first and second terms.

A total of 23 women stood for the first term municipal council elections (2012-2016) of whom 4 women made it to the municipal councils.

In the second term (2016-2020), 23 women contested for the municipal council membership and seven of them were elected. A total of 27 women are vying for membership of the municipal councils (third term).

Dr Anfal bint Nasser al Wahaibiyah, Assistant Dean for Social Services at the Deanship of Student Affairs, said: “Important developments have taken place

“

Women are now part of the human resources and they actively contribute to the development process currently taking place in the Sultanate of Oman

MAIMOUNA BINT MOSA AL WUHAIBIYAH
Writer, HR trainer



in a number of Arab and Gulf countries in terms of women’s political role as many women were appointed in councils and authorities in addition to the parliaments

Shura councils. Omani women were part of this development.”

Maimouna bint Mosa al Wuhaibiyah, writer and human development trainer, said: “Omani women are getting jobs and education opportunities at par with their male counterparts. Hence, Omani women assumed leadership roles in various sectors. Women make up 49.6 per cent of Oman’s population. Women are now part of the active human resources and they actively contribute to the development process currently taking place in the Sultanate of Oman.”

Sausan bint Saud al Yaqoubiyah, senior educational researcher at the Ministry of Education, commended the attention and empowerment that Omani women

obtained in education, parliament representation and politics. Oman women have proven their competence in various fields and became partners in development.

She added that the Omani women’s participation in the municipal councils is yet another source of empowerment with the statistics indicating an increase of the number of female members of the municipal councils.

Sana bint Said al Hemediyah, an artist, said: “Omani women are active partners in development. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik gives a great attention to women and the activation of their role in politics and economy and other fields as well as empowering them to assume senior management roles.”

3RD TERM MUNICIPAL COUNCILS ELECTIONS TODAY

FROM PAGE 1

As per the statistics of third term municipal elections, **MUSCAT GOVERNORATE** has 103,949 registered eligible voters, 85 candidates of whom 12 will be elected as members of Muscat Governorate Municipal Council.

DHOFAH GOVERNORATE has 84,818 registered eligible voters, 145 candidates of whom 20 representatives will be elected.

MUSANDAM GOVERNORATE has 11,864 registered eligible voters, 22 candidates of whom 8 representatives will be elected .

AL BURAIMI GOVERNORATE has 16,696 registered eligible voters, 20 candidates of whom 6 representatives will be elected to the municipal council.

AL DAKHILIYAH GOVERNORATE has 83,338 registered eligible voters, 85 candidates and of whom 18 will be elected as members of the municipal council.

NORTH AL BATINAH GOVERNORATE has 148,849 registered eligible voters, 97 candidates of whom 12 will be elected as members of the municipal council.



SOUTH AL BATINAH GOVERNORATE has 91,988 registered eligible voters and 49 candidates of whom 10 will be elected to the municipal council.

NORTH AL SHARQIYAH GOVERNORATE has 63,358 registered eligible voters and 45 candidates of whom 14 will make it to the municipal council.

SOUTH AL SHARQIYAH GOVERNORATE has 75,729 registered eligible voters and 61 candidates of whom 10 will



be elected as members of the municipal council.

AL DHAHIRAH GOVERNORATE has 38,583

registered eligible voters and 31 candidates of whom 6 will be elected as representatives at the municipal council.

AL WUSTA GOVERNORATE

has 12,595 registered eligible voters and 56 candidates of whom 8 will make it to the municipal council.

As per their powers and responsibilities, the municipal councils, particularly in their third, are consistent with the System of Governorates, decentralised system and the local administration of the governorates, in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, at his meetings with the dignitaries and shaikhs of the governorates of the Sultanate of

Oman, stressed the importance of activating the roles of the governorates and tapping their resources.

The municipal council is chaired by the governor of the respective governorate, appointed members and elected members representing the wilayats of the governorate (each wilayat has 2 representatives) as well as two members who are known for their competence and wise opinion provided that they are not employees at any of the state’s administrative apparatus.

The municipal council provide opinions regarding the development plans and projects within the respective governorate, performance of the government departments, proposed sites for the development, service and economic projects as well as the governorates’ needs of public facilities and government services and related projects.

In addition, the municipal council provides recommendations pertaining to public health and propose public health standards and take part in deterring the public interest in development projects, urban planning, holding cultural, entertaining and tourism festivals and following up on the implementation of the development and service projects.

— ONA





OHRC chairman holds talks with Pakistani senator

MUSCAT: Shaikh Abdullah bin Shuwain al Hosni, Chairman of the Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) met with Senator Walid Iqbal, Chairman of the Standing Committee on Human Rights at the Senate of Pakistan, on Saturday.

The chairman of OHRC acquainted his guest with the works and activities of the OHRC and its relations with international organisations and committees as well as its role in monitoring and receiving reports in the Sultanate

of Oman. The two sides also discussed joint cooperation and ways of enhancing them to serve the issues pertaining to human rights.

The meeting was attended by Amir Hamza, adviser to the Ambassador of Pakistan to the Sultanate of Oman and Shatha bint Abdulmajeed al Zedjalyah, Director of Organizations and International Relations at OHRC and Eman bint Khalid al Saeediyah, acting head of International Organizations. — ONA

Holy Quran competition winners to be felicitated tomorrow

MUSCAT: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, will preside over the honouring ceremony for the winners of the 30th edition of Sultan Qaboos Holy Quran Competition 2022, on Monday December 26.

The event will be held at the lecture hall of Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque.

The honour of winning the first place from the first level (memorising the entire Holy Quran) was won by Faisal bin Muhammad al Balushi, while the second place was bagged by Abdullah Hajj Ateeq.

The third place was won by Imad bin Khalfan al Rawahi.

In the second level (memorising 24 consecutive parts), Muhammad bin Saeed al Ghamari won the first place, Abdullah bin Muhammad al Amiri got the second spot and Saeed bin Abdullah al Habsi won the third place.

In the third level (memorising 18 consecutive parts), Hajar bint Saleh al Kindi won the first place, Salem bin Saeed al Mushrafi the



second place and the third place went to Abeer bint Muhammad al Hamdiya.

In the fourth level (memorising 12 consecutive parts), the first place was won by Ahmed bin Saif al Muqimi, the second went to Azza bint Saeed al Sawafia, and the third place was bagged by Saleh bin Muhammad al Mushrafi.

As for the fifth level (memorising 6 consecutive parts),

Sarah bint Youssef al Mahrezia won the first place, Al Hanouf bint Hammoud al Nayria ranked second, and Hajar bint Jumaa al Maasabiya got the third place.

In the sixth level (memorising 4 consecutive parts), the first place was bagged by Tasneem bint Salem al Shibliyya, the second place was won by Al Mutasim bin Walid al Khazimi, and the third place went to Jumana bint Mahdi al Qasimia.

As for the seventh level (memorising two consecutive parts), the first place was won by Suhaib bin Hilal al Siyabi, the second place was crowned by Atika bint Hammoud al Naabiya, the third place was jointly won by Altaf bint Hilal al Habsiya, and Lilas bint Qais al Majrafiya.

A total of about 2,881 male and female participants took part in the competition this year. — ONA

Egyptian naval commander on visit



MUSCAT: Lieutenant General Ashraf Ibrahim Atwa, Commander of the Naval Forces of the Arab Republic of Egypt, and the accompanying military delegation arrived on Saturday on an official visit to the Sultanate of Oman that will last for several days. Upon their arrival at the Muscat International Airport, they were received by Rear Admiral Saif bin Nasser al Rahbi, Commander of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO), a number of senior officers, the Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the Sultanate of Oman, and the Military Attaché at the Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt in Muscat. — ONA

Oman at 43rd session of ISESCO Executive Council

RABAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Education, participated in the 43rd session of the Executive Council of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), which concluded on Friday and was held over two days at the organisation's headquarters in the Moroccan capital of Rabat.

During the current session, members of the Executive Council discussed many of the organisation's reports, mainly the general perception of ISESCO's draft charter for Artificial Intelligence.

During the session, some articles of the statute for ISESCO employees were amended, and the Young Professionals Programme was implemented. Through this, the organisation seeks to



provide an opportunity for young competencies in the countries of the Islamic world to qualify professionals in one of the sectors, departments and centres of the organisation.

At the end of the session, the guide to the organised governance system, the cooperation strategy between the national committees and ISESCO exemplary experiences were reviewed, and

the venue for the 44 session of the Executive Council were also discussed.

On the sidelines of the 43rd session of the Executive Council of ISESCO, the Omani National Commission for Education, Culture and Science participated in the first consultative meeting on strategic indicators for development in the Islamic world. — ONA

Mountain walk for girls in North Al Sharqiyah

DIMA W'ATTAYEEN: The Department of Culture, Sports and Youth in the North Al Sharqiyah Governorate organised the first mountain walk for girls, in the Wilayat of Dima W'attayeen, in cooperation and supervision with Omani climber Nadhira bint Ahmed al Harthy.

More than 30 girls participated in the march, starting from the village of Sumout, passing through a number of valleys, waterfalls and landscapes that characterise and abound in the village. The march concluded in one of the governorate's valleys after the participants covered about 5 kilometres.

The walk included a number of accompanying entertainment programmes and activities.

The Department of Culture, Sports and Youth in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate is preparing to hold the second march for girls in Wadi Bani Khalid next month. — ONA





THIRD TERM MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTION

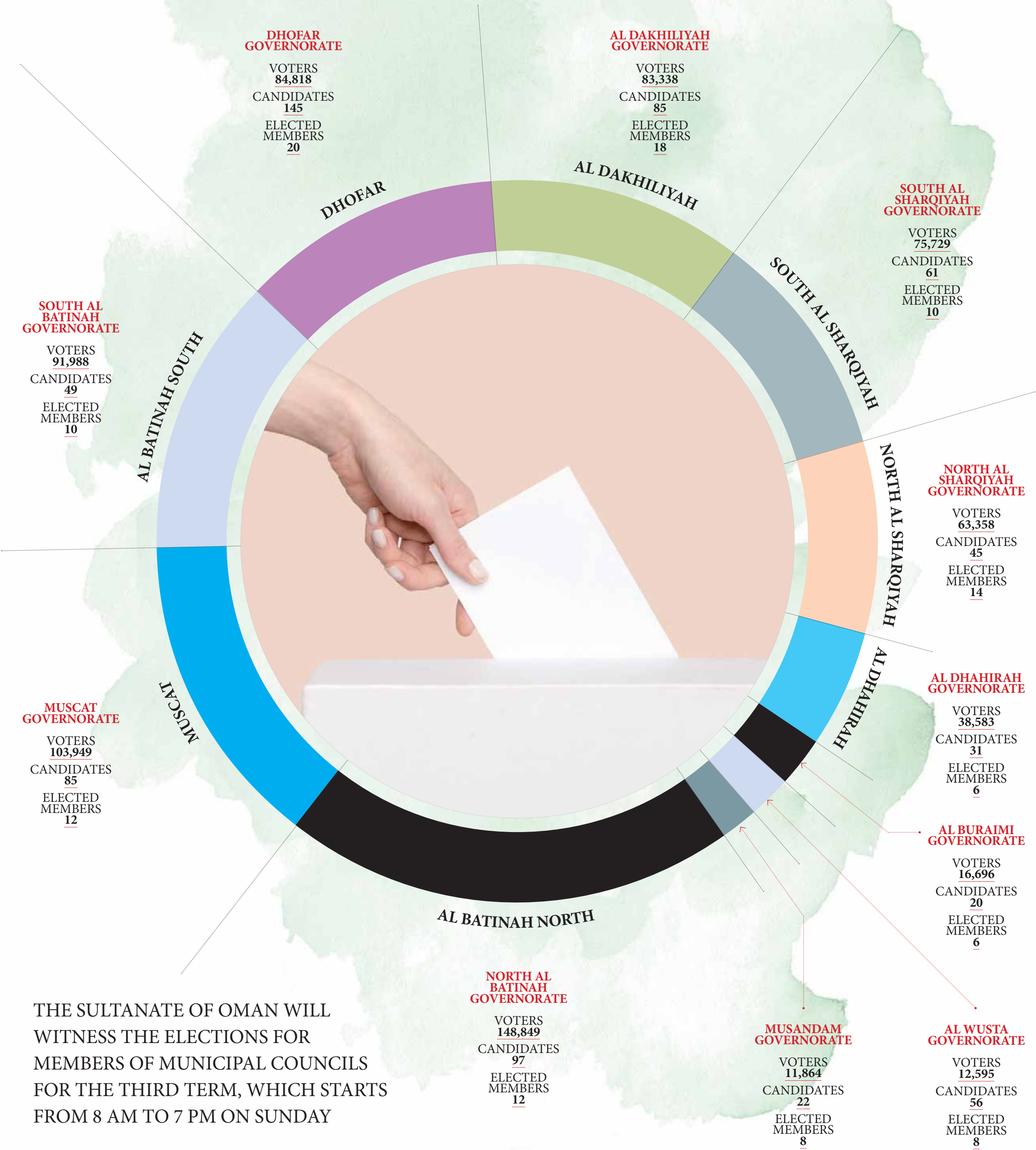
TOTAL
NUMBER OF ELIGIBLE
VOTERS
731,767

TOTAL
NUMBER OF
REPRESENTATIVES
126

TOTAL
NUMBER OF
CANDIDATES
727

TOTAL
NUMBER OF FEMALE
CANDIDATES
27

— 1 1 G O V E R N O R A T E S —





Toll in well collapse climbs to four



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 24

With the recovery of two more bodies, the death toll in the well collapse incident in the Wilayat of Al Khabourah has gone up to four. According to the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority, “referring to the previous communication, and after search

efforts in the Falaj stream in Sana’a Bani Ghafir area in the Wilayat of Al Khabourah, the rescue teams of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Department in North Al Batinah Governorate were able to retrieve two more bodies, bringing the number of killed people to four.” To avoid such incidents, the CDAA has called on institutions,

companies and individuals to follow safety procedures during the maintenance of wells and Falaj systems. “Rescue teams of the CDAA in North Al Batinah Governorate responded to a report of the collapse of earth on workers while they were carrying out the maintenance work of a well in the Wilayat of Al Khabourah,” said

CDAA in a recent statement. As per earlier CDAA reports, two persons were killed after the wall collapse of a well on the workers who were carrying out the maintenance work of the well in the Wilayat of Al Khabourah in North Al Batinah Governorate. Rescue teams are continuing their search operation to locate other missing persons.

State Council to discuss draft of education law

MUSCAT: The State Council will discuss on Sunday, the draft ‘School Education Law’ and ‘Higher Education Law’, and the opinion of the Education and Research Committee in preparation during the third session. The fourth session of the seventh term will be held by the Council under the chairmanship

of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the Council. The session’s agenda includes the speech of the chairman and will review the report of the General Secretariat on the Council’s activities for the period between the second and third sessions.

— ONA

Omani Investment Authority reviews investment in Jordan



AMMAN: A delegation from Omani Investment Authority (OIA), during its visit to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, met with a number of officials in the public and private sectors to learn about the investment opportunities available in various sectors. Kholoud Al Saqqaf, Minister of Investment in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, said the visit was in follow up on the outcomes of the visit of His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein, King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, to the Sultanate of Oman, and his meeting with His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik last October.

The recommendations that emerged from it sought to enhance joint investment opportunities between the two brotherly countries in various fields. The minister also explained that enhancing joint investment between the two countries will contribute to increasing economic and trade cooperation. The minister also noted the role of the private sector in this field and benefiting from investment opportunities in the two countries in various fields namely energy, tourism, education, information technology, logistics and other sectors.

— ONA

39,000 OMANIS GOT MARRIED IN 2021

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 24

The National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI) recently released data that showed 56 per cent of Omanis are married, 37.6 per cent are unmarried, 2.4 per cent are divorced, and 3.6 per cent are widows.

In 2021, 39,000 Omanis got married, among them 34,000 married for the first time, 6,000 new widows, and 6,000 divorces. The results indicated that the number of marriage documents registered in the Governorate of Muscat for the year 2021 amounted to 3,980 documents, 2,236 in Dhofar, 191 in Musandam,

420 in Buraimi, 2,292 in Al Dakhiliyah, 3,783 in North al Batinah, 1,949 in South Al Batinah, 1,643 in South Al Sharqiyah, 1,470 in North Al Sharqiyah and 176 in Al Wusta. As for wilayats with most cases of marriage between an Omani and an expatriate, Wilayat of Seeb recorded 67 cases, Wilayat of Salalah 46 cases and Al Buraimi 16 cases, among others.

Aviation sector in Oman benefits from FIFA World Cup travel: IATA

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The aviation sector in the Sultanate of Oman benefited from the Fifa Football World Cup, according to the latest figures released by the International Air Transport Organisation (IATA). As bookings to Qatar skyrocketed by 77 per cent in November 2022, bookings between the World Cup host and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, and Saudi Arabia also increased because international travellers lodged in these countries and then shuttled to Qatar for specific matches. The share of passengers booking a return flight from Saudi Arabia to Qatar with only 0-1 night of stay increased from 5 per cent in October to 16 per cent in November. For the UAE, the share increased from 14 per cent to 51 per cent, and for Oman, from 5 per cent to 44 per cent. Looking more closely at bookings to Qatar, ticket sales originating in Morocco — a surprising semifinalist to some — increased considerably in



the week following its national team’s knockout of Spain in the round of 16. In particular, spontaneous bookings from Morocco to Qatar for the day of the match against Portugal increased from a total of four bookings three days prior to the match to 1,171 bookings two days before the match. For the match against France, bookings jumped from five bookings three days before to a total of 1,565 bookings two days before the match.

The same applies to ticket sales from Argentina, the tournament’s winning team. Once it qualified for the final against France, bookings to Qatar almost doubled. The majority of tickets for flights before the final were purchased two days before, indicating the Argentinian fans reacted quickly to travel to Qatar to see the final match. Air transport is vital for international sports events, allowing people to travel and support their teams. After

two and half years of travel restrictions, people are eager to travel again despite the challenging circumstances that the world is facing at present, the IATA said. The Middle East is shifting to growth mode in Q4, with international arrivals at +4 per cent, long ahead of the global average of -30 per cent. “The Fifa World Cup is certainly the key driver for its travel recovery”, said Juan Gomez, head of market Intelligence at ForwardKeys.

Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Center

Tender Advertisement

Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Centre announces the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Title	Site Visit Date	Last Date for Collection of Tender Document	Bid Submission Closing	Tender Fees
CCCCRC/T/804/2022	Laundry Services (2023-2025)	29/12/2022 09:00AM Meeting Point: SQCCRC Main Lobby	29/12/2022	08/01/2023	70 OMR

Qualified companies interested in participating in this tender shall collect the tender specifications from the date of this advertisement from the following address:
Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre – Purchase Department.
Biddings that meet the above requirements should be submitted in a sealed envelope (hardcopy & softcopy) and should be delivered and deposited in the tender box at SQCCRC.
Please note:
- Bids received after the deadline indicated above, for whatever reason, will not be considered.
- Queries/ clarifications should be submitted immediately, but not later than One week before the date of tender submission.
- For Queries you may Contact via e-mail: purchase@ccrc.gov.om
- The committee is not obliged to accept the lowest price of the bid or any other bid.

■ SPREADING FESTIVE CHEERS



Members of a Palestinian scout band walk during Christmas celebrations, with Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa (not seen), in Bethlehem, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on December 24, 2022. – Reuters

The coldest Xmas: ‘Epic’ winter storm wallops US



A woman waits for a bus on Jefferson Street as below freezing temperatures arrived with winter storm in Kentucky. – Reuters

CHICAGO: More than a million US power customers were in the dark on Friday as a “bomb cyclone” winter storm walloped the country, closing highways, grounding flights and causing misery for Christmas travellers.

Heavy snow, howling winds and air so frigid it instantly turned boiling water into ice took hold of much of the nation, including normally temperate southern states.

Over 200 million Americans were under weather warnings, as wind chills sent temperatures down as low as -55 Fahrenheit (-48 Celsius), according to the National Weather Service (NWS).

In Hamburg, New York, 39-year-old Jennifer Orlando hunkered down with her husband.

“I can’t see across the street,” she said. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Her power was out for four hours after a vehicle slid into a power line on the highway, she said.

The biting cold is an immediate concern for hundreds of thousands of electricity customers who were without power, according to tracker poweroutage.us.

In El Paso, Texas, desperate migrants who had crossed from Mexico huddled for warmth in churches, schools and a civic center, Rosa Falcon.

But some still chose to stay outside in -15 Fahrenheit temperatures because they feared attention from immigration authorities, she added. — Reuters

RUSSIAN POLITICIAN ACCUSES KREMLIN CHIEF OF BREAKING HIS OWN LAW, FILES LEGAL CHALLENGE

Ukraine ‘war’: US asks Putin to keep acknowledging reality

WASHINGTON: The United States on Friday derisively called on Russian President Vladimir Putin to acknowledge reality and pull troops from Ukraine after he finally called the conflict a “war.”

Since Putin ordered the invasion in February, Russia has officially spoken of a “special military operation” and imposed a law that criminalises what authorities call misleading terminology.

But at a news conference on Thursday, Putin himself used the word “war” as he said that he hoped to end it as soon as possible.

“Since February 24, the United States and rest of the world knew that Putin’s ‘special military operation’ was an unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine. Finally, after 300 days, Putin called the war what it is,” a State Department spokesperson said.

“As a next step in acknowledging reality, we urge him to end this war by withdrawing his forces from Ukraine.”

The State Department said that, whatever Putin’s terminology, “Russia’s aggression against its sovereign neighbour has resulted in death, destruction and displacement.”



Putin on Friday told Russia’s defence industry chiefs to up their game to ensure that the Russian army quickly got all the weapons, equipment and military hardware it needed to fight in Ukraine. – AFP

“The people of Ukraine no doubt find little consolation in Putin stating the obvious, nor do the tens of thousands of Russian families whose relatives have been killed fighting Putin’s war.”

Meanwhile, a St Petersburg politician has asked prosecutors to investigate Putin for using the word “war” to describe the conflict in Ukraine, accusing the Kremlin chief of breaking his own law.

Putin has for months described his invasion as a “special military

UK health workers plan more strikes

LONDON: Britain’s health workers on Friday announced a fresh round of strikes in January, with their long-running dispute over pay and conditions with the government set to continue into 2023. The new strike dates will heap more pressure on Britain’s state-funded National Health Service (NHS) which is already stretched by staff shortages and record backlogs.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told reporters he was disappointed about the disruption caused by strikes, adding that he was trying to “make the right long-term decisions for the country for everybody’s benefit.”

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) said thousands of its members would strike again on January 18 and 19 over pay after walking out on two days in December.

“I do not wish to prolong this dispute but the Prime Minister has left us with no choice,” RCN

General Secretary Pat Cullen said on Friday.

Strike dates for the nurses union’s members in Scotland are also expected to be announced in the new year after they voted to reject a pay offer from the Scottish government this week.

Ambulance workers represented by the GMB union scheduled a new date for action on January 11 after suspending another walk out later this month.

“People across the country have been wonderful in backing us and we care so much about them too. That’s why we are suspending the proposed GMB industrial action on the 28th December,” GMB National Secretary Rachel Harrison said.

Health Minister Steve Barclay said unions had announced co-ordinated strikes in January “to cause maximum disruption at a time when the NHS is already under extreme pressure”.

— Reuters

Kurds clash with police in Paris again after killings

PARIS: Renewed clashes broke out in Paris on Saturday between police and members of the Kurdish community angry at the killing on Friday of three members of their community.

Several cars were overturned and small fires set alight near Republic Square, the traditional venue for demonstrations in the city where Kurds earlier held a peaceful protest.

Clashes broke out as some demonstrators left the square, throwing projectiles at police who responded with tear gas.

A gunman carried out the

killings at a Kurdish cultural centre and nearby cafe on Friday in a busy part of Paris’ 10th district, stunning a community preparing to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the unresolved murder of three activists.

Police arrested a 69-year-old man who the authorities said had recently been freed from detention while awaiting trial for a sabre attack on a migrant camp in Paris a year ago.

Following questioning of the suspect, investigators had added a suspected racist motive to initial accusations of murder and violence



Protesters throw stones during clashes following a demonstration of members of the Kurdish community, a day after a gunman opened fire at a Kurdish cultural centre killing three people, at The Place de la Republique in Paris. – AFP

with weapons, the prosecutor’s office said on Saturday.

After an angry crowd clashed with police on Friday afternoon, the Kurdish democratic council in France (CDK-F) organised a gathering on Saturday at Republic Square.

Hundreds of Kurdish protesters, joined by politicians including the mayor of the central 10th district, waved flags and listened to tributes to the victims.

“We know that we are under threat, Kurds in general, Kurdish activists and militants. France owes us protection,” Berivan Firat,

a spokesperson for the CDK-F told BFM TV.

Friday’s murders came ahead of the anniversary of the killings of three Kurdish women in Paris in January 2013.

An investigation was dropped after the main suspect died shortly before coming to trial, before being re-opened in 2019.

“The Kurdish community is afraid. It was already traumatised by the triple murder (in 2013). It needs answers, support and consideration,” David Andic, a lawyer representing the CDK-F told reporters on Friday. — Reuters

A Christmas tree brings life to a destroyed Palestinian village



The tree was put up for the first time last year, hoping to start a tradition for the families of people expelled from Iqrit decades ago, whose attempts to return to live there have been repeatedly blocked by the Israeli government and military

Agricultural land near Iqrit. Hundreds of depopulated and destroyed Palestinian villages in present-day Israel share a fate similar to Iqrit's — left behind as some 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled their homes during the war surrounding Israel's establishment as a state. — NYT

RAJA ABDULRAHIM

Amid the limestone ruins of homes in a village razed by Israeli forces long ago, a Christmas tree adorned with red and gold baubles went up on a recent evening, watched by a crowd of former residents and their descendants. Shahnaz Doukhy, 44, her husband and two sons were among about 60 people who attended the tree lighting in the shadow of a roughly 200-year-old church, the only structure left standing after soldiers destroyed the Palestinian Christian village during Christmas 1951. “It’s good for our kids to come and know that this is the land of their ancestors,” Doukhy said. “And for them to continue with their kids,” added her husband, Haitham Doukhy, 53. “This is what connects us here, even if the village is no longer here.” The couple put up a tree for the first time last year, hoping to start a tradition for the families of people expelled from Iqrit decades ago, whose attempts to return to live there have been repeatedly blocked by the Israeli government and military. They come to the church for monthly Mass, Easter, weddings and baptisms, driving from miles away across northern Israel, past Jewish towns that did not exist when

Iqrit was a small but thriving village. “We observe the main stations of our life — birth, marriage and death,” said Shadia Sbeit, 50, whose two children were baptized in the church. “What we miss is the years between.” The church, at the top of a hill overlooking agricultural lands and the village cemetery, was founded in the early 1800s by a priest from Syria, who is buried inside. Small imprints of crosses and crescents line the top of its bricks, a nod by its Muslim architect to the closeness of Islam and Christianity. Iqrit’s faithful say the church is about more than just religion. It represents feeling at home and a small salve for the pain of displacement, bringing them closer to the stories passed on by their grandparents. Hundreds of depopulated and destroyed Palestinian villages in present-day Israel share a fate similar to Iqrit’s — left behind as some 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled their homes in 1948 during the war surrounding Israel’s establishment as a state. Palestinians call the mass expulsions the Nakba, or catastrophe. On Nov. 8, 1948, the Israeli military ordered Iqrit’s nearly 500 residents to leave so it could create a military buffer zone near the border with Lebanon. They were told that they could return in two weeks, according to court

documents and residents. But their pleas to return were rejected by the regional military governor, government records show. In 1951, they appealed to Israel’s Supreme Court. That July, the court ruled that they were “permitted to settle the village of Iqrit.” But the military blocked their return. Then, during Christmas, the army blew up their homes, leaving only the church standing, according to a telegram sent to an Israeli state lawyer by Iqrit residents days later. In 2003, the residents appealed again to the court. This time, it ruled against them. Israel maintained that it could not allow them to return “due to the heavy consequences such a step would have on the political level,” according to the court decision. “The precedent of the resettlement of the displaced of the village will be used for propaganda and politics by the Palestinian Authority,” it added, citing the state’s argument and referring to the body that administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The right of return for the hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians and millions of their descendants has long been a key demand during Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations, but one that Israel has largely rejected. Still, many hope to return to their ancestral villages. — The New York Times

Why is there a candle for everything?

These days, the perfect candle exists for every occasion, no matter how niche. Dreaming of cheese but lactose intolerant? Adorn your charcuterie board with Gohar World’s hyperrealistic Gruyere candle. Craving your favorite childhood cereal but need to cut down on sugar? Your kitchen needs Froot Loops-inspired candles by Ardent that resemble — in smell and sight — the real stuff. Wish your home smelled like couture? Balenciaga debuted a candle infused with scents extracted from the walls of its Paris couture house. Welcome to the belle epoque of the candle. Candles that look and smell like just about anything are on the market. Whether it’s cigarettes, the Galápagos Islands or former President Barack Obama, one can find precisely what they are looking for. On Etsy, searches for dip dye candles, terrarium candles, food-inspired candles, seashell candles and ribbed candles are all on the rise, a spokesperson for the e-commerce site said. Searches for candles in general on Etsy are also increasing — up 80% in the past 12 months, compared with the same time pre-pandemic. Demand for higher end candles in particular is driving the trend. According to data from NPD Group, a market research firm, sales for candles over \$75 increased by 26% this year compared with last. Corporate-branded candles have also taken off: Chipotle, Dunkin’, McDonald’s, Shake Shack and Liquid Death have all made candles. We may ask ourselves, how did we get here? Is this wax haven, or is it a wax hell?

For last-minute gift givers, the candle mania is a dream come true. For companies, it’s the next frontier of marketing: What scent symbolises the ethos of one’s brand? There are also more and more companies being formed around the item itself, furthering the craft of the candle and showing consumers just how much a candle can do — smells can be conceptual, wax can hold politics and flames can be a form of wellness. For Ryan Bush, 32, the candle array leads to endless delight. Bush, an artist, has 100 candles in his New York apartment, of which his favorite is Loewe’s “Tomato Leaves” candle. “It smells like standing in a garden,” Bush said. “These scents really bring you into these other places and worlds that you are physically not in.” ‘An Ephemeral Pillar of Wax’ The National Candle Association, a trade organisation, estimates that one of the earliest uses of candles can be traced back to the Ancient Egyptians in 3,000 BC, as a way to provide light. Early on, candles have also been central to worship and religious ceremonies: both Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, and Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights, feature candle lighting and date back thousands of years. During the 1800s, candles were also consistently used as a method of time tracking. “People would take a beeswax candle down into the mines while they were mining, and they were marked with 12 lines, and that’s how they knew what a shift was, by burning a candle down to a certain line,” said Kathy LaVanier, a spokesperson for the National Candle Association.



During the 1800s, candles were also consistently used as a method of time tracking. — NYT

The National Candle Association, a trade organisation, estimates that one of the earliest uses of candles can be traced back to the Ancient Egyptians in 3,000 BC, as a way to provide light

Over the years, candles have evolved from utilitarian objects to malleable symbols of today’s over consumption. They started to be used commonly as décor in homes in the 1960s in the United States, and Yankee Candle, which was founded in 1969, helped popularise scented candles. While some have expressed concern about potential links between scented candles and cancer in recent times, some researchers have found that their use is still safe. Consumer interest has also been on the rise for status candles, a waxy way to show off wealth. And, the more someone smells a specific fragrance, the less they’re able to actually detect that scent, Herz added. So candles are not only disappearing in their physical form to the consumer, but also to the nose. “People spending \$350 on an ephemeral pillar of wax are making a statement about who they are and what they can afford,” she said. Uncommon Scents and Politics The social isolation and loss many people have endured throughout the pandemic also likely contributed to the candle craze. “Similarly, following 9/11, there was an increase in interest for home fragrance products,” Herz said. “Scent is so tied to emotion and creating moods, especially comfort. Candles gave many people a quick form of emotional solace in the pandemic.” The growing wellness industry has embraced candles as well. Some companies have hawked candles aimed at helping people sleep or heal. — The New York Times

‘Ergophobia’ is fear of work



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
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The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

‘Ergophobia’ is described as an extreme, irrational and debilitating fear of working and work related features such as performing tasks, social relationships, or speaking in work settings.

A young man in his mid twenties walks into my clinic with his parents who were very concerned about him.

He has been a job seeker for over three years yet after his first day at work he informed them he wanted to leave the job. Asked if the job required hard physical labour, he answered “quite the opposite. All I have to do is to promote video games to people who walk into the store.”

The store had a central air conditioner and was located inside a shopping mall. The young man had an hour lunch break that he could take whenever he wanted

and the mall had a variety of food outlets, the salary was reasonable. His parents were puzzled, he answered, “it’s the commitments that I hate, having to report to work at a certain time and ask my manager before taking a break.”

One would argue that this young man got used to the comfort of being a jobseeker. Being able to sleep and wake up whenever he wants and go out or not whenever he pleases. That is why he found the commitment to work challenging.

Psychologists introduced the term “Ergophobia” to describe an extreme, irrational and debilitating fear of working and work related features such as performing tasks, social relationships, or speaking in work settings.

This is considered a form of mental illness when the symptoms

PSYCHOLOGISTS SUGGEST THAT EXPERIENCING A FRIGHTENING EVENT IN A WORKPLACE SUCH AS BULLYING OR BEING PUBLICLY EMBARRASSED CAN CAUSE A PERSON TO AVOID GOING TO WORK FOR FEAR OF HAVING THE SAME EXPERIENCE AGAIN AND AGAIN

persist for over six months and are not caused by other psychological problems like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalised anxiety, or another phobia.

People with ergophobia have exaggerated or irrational levels of fear and may avoid even applying for

work or be chronically unemployed due to their fears. They may feel unduly stressed by common work situations, even when they are performing objectively well.

Some patients reject the idea of applying for jobs while others change jobs frequently, pause between jobs, or become extremely anxious about interactions with coworkers, or their boss.

Avoidance of taking on additional work responsibility and Inability to meet work deadlines are also common symptoms along with the physical manifestation of anxiety such as sweating, having racing heart or heart palpitations, dry mouth, and feeling suffocated or having difficulty catching one’s breath.

These symptoms can be confused with a heart attack.

So what causes a person to

develop Ergophobia? Psychologists suggest that experiencing a negative or frightening event in a workplace such as bullying or being publicly embarrassed can cause a person to avoid going to work for fear of having the same experience again and again.

This avoidance becomes more I handed as the person stays away from work. This is why one of the main methods of treating Ergophobia is getting exposure to work while being supported by a psychologist.

Other therapies like Eye Movement Desensitisation & Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR) and cognitive behaviour therapy CBT can also help.

Finally, addressing the issue early and seeking professional advice can help the person get back to work and reach his potential.

As energy crisis bites, Spaniards snap up solar panels

VALENTIN BONTEMPS

Demand for solar panels has shot up to unprecedented levels in Spain as Europe’s energy crisis shows no sign of letting up, in a welcome boost for a sector with huge potential.

“Here we have sun almost all year round,” said Paloma Utrera showing off the black panels installed on her roof in Pozuelo de Alarcon, a well-heeled suburb of western Madrid. “We need to make the most of it”

Like many Spaniards in recent months, Utrera has started producing her own electricity after installing 13 photovoltaic panels on her roof with a total output of 4.5 kilowatts. “It’s not cheap” but with the help of EU and government subsidies, “the savings we’ll make on the electricity bill, the investment isn’t that bad,” she said.

The 50-year-old airline industry employee said she’s halved her electricity bills since having the solar panels installed in September.

“It’s a really worthwhile investment,” said Utrera.

According to Engel Solar, which carried out the installation, rooftop solar panels can generate between 50 and 80 per cent of the average household’s electricity needs.

And given the current prices of electricity, that makes for an “interesting” proposal, said Engel Solar commercial director Joaquin Gasca.

Set up in Barcelona in 2005, the company with 200 employees has seen its turnover soar five-fold over the past two years and expects to see a further jump in 2023. “The phone just never stops ringing, it’s crazy,” said Gasca.

And it’s not just individuals. Businesses and public entities are also getting on board, driven not only by the energy crisis linked to the war in Ukraine but also encouraged by the public funding available through the EU’s vast Covid recovery plan. All of this has given an unprecedented boost to rooftop solar in the Iberian peninsula.

“Until about a year ago, if you looked at the rooves in your town or city, you would hardly see any solar panels for self-generation... but that’s totally different now,” said Francisco Valverde, a renewable energy specialist at Menta Energia consultancy.

Jose Donoso, head of Spanish solar power lobby UNEF which groups some 780 businesses, agreed.

“People are seeing how their neighbours are putting in self-generating installations, that they’re happy with them and are saving money, so they themselves are encouraged to get solar panels,” he said. — AFP

What is the polar vortex? And other cold-weather climate questions



Henry Fountain

The writer covers climate change, with a focus on the innovations needed to overcome it

SOME SCIENTISTS SAY ARCTIC WARMING IS CAUSING DISRUPTIONS IN THE VORTEX, THROUGH THE CHANGES IN THE POLAR JET STREAM

The polar vortex is descending on the midsection of the United States, bringing bitterly cold Arctic air and causing temperatures to plunge rapidly in many areas. The deep freeze will be accompanied by a major snowstorm that is expected to cause travel chaos.

The vortex is a large rotating expanse of cold air that generally circles the Arctic, but occasionally shifts south from the pole. Vortex-related cold snaps occur regularly in the United States.

One of the most damaging occurred in February 2021, when the frigid air reached deep into Texas, resulting in temperatures that were as much as 40 degrees Fahrenheit below normal.

That freeze led to at least 250 deaths and caused extensive damage to the state’s power infrastructure.

As global emissions of heat-trapping carbon dioxide continue, the Arctic is warming nearly four times faster than other parts of the planet, according to the latest analysis, and the region’s sea-ice coverage is shrinking. So when the vortex meanders southward, two basic questions arise. What role, if any, does climate change play? And will extreme freezes increase as warming continues?

The short answer: Scientists aren’t sure, yet. There are clues, but still more to learn.

“I wish I had a clear answer,” said Steve Vavrus, a climate scientist at the University of Wisconsin. With Jennifer Francis, now at the Woodwell Climate Research Center in Massachusetts, Vavrus wrote a seminal 2012 paper that presented the idea that Arctic warming was affecting the polar vortex. “Unfortunately the state of things is still ambiguous,” he said.

What is the polar vortex, exactly? The vortex is a mass of high-altitude, rotating air that, as the term suggests, occurs over the North Pole region.

The vortex strengthens and becomes much colder in winter, because with the Northern Hemisphere tilted away from the sun at that time of year, little or no sunlight reaches the Arctic to warm it up.

If you were looking down at the North Pole, the air would look like



President Joe Biden delivers an update on severe weather at the White House in Washington.

it was rotating counterclockwise. Some scientists have compared it to a spinning top. The vortex is encircled by the polar jet stream, a band of winds that blows from west to east around the planet.

What happens during a deep freeze?

In normal conditions, the vortex is stable and confined to the Arctic. But just as a spinning top can start to wobble and drift if it bumps into something, the vortex can be disrupted. It is accompanied by changes to the jet stream, which develops a wavy, snakelike pattern as it circles the globe.

Sometimes the vortex splits into several fragments that move southward. Sometimes, as appears to be the case this week, it becomes stretched, like a rubber band. Either way, the disruption can have several major effects.

Temperatures in the atmosphere over the Arctic can rise, sometimes dramatically. At the same time, the frigid Arctic air moves southward.

If the movement is rapid enough, temperatures in the areas exposed to the mass of cold air can fall by tens of degrees within hours, and can stay extremely low for days or even weeks until the vortex becomes stable again in the North Pole region.

How does the vortex get disrupted? For climate scientists, this is the crux of the debate.

Some scientists say Arctic warming

is causing disruptions in the vortex, through the changes in the polar jet stream. Others say that modeling suggests naturally variable factors are driving disruptions instead and that an increase in vortex disruptions that occurred previously — including a noticeable uptick in the 2000s — has not continued.

Judah Cohen, a climate scientist at Atmospheric and Environmental Research, a weather-risk assessment firm in Lexington, Massachusetts, is an author of a paper this year that linked the 2021 Texas freeze to Arctic warming. He sees the same thing happening now.

The basic idea, he said, is that the warmer conditions create larger and more energetic atmospheric waves that make the jet stream wavier, with greater peaks and troughs. That affects the polar vortex circulation.

To use the spinning top analogy, “it’s like if it started banging into things,” he said. “It loses its nice circular shape and in this case becomes more stretched out.”

One lobe stretches down into Canada and the United States, bringing an outbreak of cold weather.

Cohen said he’s been studying the subject since 2005, and is more confident than ever about the link to changes in the Arctic. “The evidence is only growing,” he said.

— New York Times

The ‘Grinch’ shows his Santa claws

Seeing as it’s Christmas Day, and from memory the first time this column has been published on this festive occasion, I thought I would wrap some Christmas wisdom. I’m a wee bit short of goodwill though, so there may be a tongue-in-cheek edge to these, some famous, words of others, given their context. Cynical or sarcastic, but I’m neither talented nor witty enough for either. So, maybe just call me the grinch this year huh?

Civil servants are rarely visible, infrequently held to account, faceless, humorless, tragic really, they were the ‘almost’ kids in class, but never invited to parties. Often, they did ‘turn up,’ oblivious to their idiosyncrasies, the affectations that have molded them beyond choosing the civil service because it was ‘safe.’ Sir Winston Churchill was right when he intimidated, they were “no longer civil,” and “no longer servants.” He found an unlikely ally in Quentin Crisp, of ‘Naked Civil Servant’ fame, who identified them as, “the outcasts. Those who once inhabited the suburbs of contempt, eventually find that without moving, they live in its metropolis.” However, they pale into insignificance when compared to politicians and lawyers.

Politicians greet us all, but we can smile and reflect that we usually get what we voted for, aka asked for, so can’t really complain, can we? Though that sonorous wit, Mark Twain said something like, ‘if our votes made any difference, they wouldn’t let us do it.’ But an obscure Portuguese diplomat and author with the grand name of José Maria de Eça de Queirós said, we ‘should regularly change both diapers and politicians, for the same reason.’ So, he may have been obscure, but that, for me, is cutting edge humor. Likewise, Henry Menken made his living as a satirist, and commented that ‘the odds of finding a good politician were as unthinkable as finding a good burglar.’ I just love this stuff.

Lawyers. Well, we can’t do with them, and can’t do without them. It’s in



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their DNA to see good people at their worst and bad people at their best I guess, but just trying to get a house purchase across the line, even after a mortgage broker has sourced the funds, is a challenge that always seems to be held up by Father Time. It’s almost inconceivable that the change of ownership for a motor vehicle can take just minutes, and cost only a pittance, whereas house conveyancing can take months. When a seller wants to sell, a buyer wants to buy, and the money is sorted, is it only the cynic in me that suspects chicanery? Maybe I should ask a lawyer? They do have long lunch breaks.

Put them all together and you have a cluster for the ages, for as famed ‘Monkey trial’ lawyer Clarence Darrow wrote, “lawyers are natural politicians,” and career mob boss Carlo Gambini said, “lawyers and politicians have a license to steal, I don’t need a license.” Now we may or may not believe the No 1 most wanted of his time, but who are we to contradict him? And the glitterati of culture and the arts have a distaste for either, George Orwell calling both ‘egoists,’ Renoir saying they were ‘monsters,’ Plato labelling them, ‘irresponsible,’ while Joan Giraudoux wrote, “No poet ever interpreted nature as freely as lawyers interpret the truth.”

It’s been said that gamblers are the greatest students of human nature, pilots are playboys, that blondes have more fun. That our theologians see our foolishness, teachers understand us, doctors identify our weaknesses, politicians survive on, and play on, our naivety, dance keeps us young, and exercise keeps us alive. However, it’s lawyers who see and exploit our wickedness, so it’s I guess only fair that we can see them in the image of a rhinoceros! Short-sighted, thick-skinned, and always ready to charge.

At least the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, whose ‘halo’ has tarnished recently, had the good grace to admit to her faux pas this week, so she survives, and we can all laugh about it now. Maybe that’s our naivety kicking in...

POLITICIANS GREET US ALL, BUT WE CAN SMILE AND REFLECT THAT WE USUALLY GET WHAT WE VOTED FOR, AKA ASKED FOR, SO CAN’T REALLY COMPLAIN, CAN WE? THOUGH THAT SONOROUS WIT, MARK TWAIN SAID SOMETHING LIKE, ‘IF OUR VOTES MADE ANY DIFFERENCE, THEY WOULDN’T LET US DO IT’

CHRISTMAS IN SHADOW OF WAR



Ukrainian serviceman waits with his weapon beside a decorated Christmas tree in the trenches on the front line on Christmas Eve in Bakhmut. – Reuters

All progress is local

Until the Covid-19 pandemic, humanity was making great strides in extending lives and increasing economic prosperity. It is critical that we return to that trajectory as the global economy recovers. New research, which examines progress at a granular level, can help us get there.

Typically, human progress is assessed at a country level. On average, the 178 countries where data are readily available have an area of 700,000 square kilometres, populations of some 40 million people, and produce around \$700 billion in GDP. But there obviously are vast differences across and within countries, and the effectiveness of efforts to enhance economic prosperity and human well-being depends on understanding these differences.

That is why our new report, Pixels of Progress: A Granular Look at Human Development Around the World, paints a picture that is 230 times more detailed than a country-level perspective. Using night-time luminosity and other cutting-edge techniques to gather and analyse data, we examine population patterns, economic performance, and changes in life expectancy from 2000 to 2019 across more than 40,000 microregions, each averaging 3,000 square kilometres in area, 180,000 people, and \$3 billion in GDP.



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This approach revealed, for example, that in 2019, almost half of the world’s population enjoyed living standards that, just 20 years earlier, had been attained by only 21% of humanity (largely in OECD countries). In 2000, 12 microregions along China’s coast — with populations of 71 million — boasted life expectancies of more than 72.5 years and GDP exceeding \$8,300 per capita, putting them in the top 30% globally for both of these metrics. By 2019, 86% of China’s population — 1.2 billion people — lived in a microregion with living standards exceeding those thresholds. Beyond China, microregions containing 920 million people spread across 75 countries crossed the same threshold.

Similar gains were made at the other end of the spectrum. In 2000, more than one billion people resided in microregions with the lowest standards of living. By 2019, the figure had dropped to just over 400 million people, despite population growth. India in 2000 accounted for 43% of microregions where longevity was less than 65.6 years and income was lower than \$2,400 (the bottom 30% globally); in 2019, it no longer had a single microregion in that category.

Overall, our granular approach

shows that living standards declined only rarely, and in places often identifiable only through a microregional lens. Country averages obscure differences in microregional realities: using regression analysis, we found that a country’s growth rate of GDP per capita explains only about 20% of the variation in growth rates in its microregions. In other words, economic progress is primarily explained locally.

For example, in places where a country-level view showed falling GDP per capita, our analysis tells a more nuanced story. A

country-level analysis shows that 191 million people living in 20 countries experienced negative income growth from 2000 to 2019. But as we zoom in, we can see exactly where GDP per capita fell: in 6,300 microregions that are home to three times as many people — 574 million — in 100 countries. For 80% of these people, income losses can be explained not by overall economic decline, but rather by rapid population growth.

Then there are the microregions that have made particularly rapid progress.

Consider Dibër, a microregion tucked away in the Albanian Alps. Dibër’s economy remains highly agrarian, but, since Albania joined Nato in 2009, the local authorities have been working to revive its once-thriving tourism sector — catering to affluent European travellers visiting the Peshkopi thermal baths — with the help of international agencies.

During the period we studied, the number of health tourists rose steadily as accommodations increased, while glacial lakes and old-growth forests attracted hikers and trekkers. Such developments may have helped to boost health and incomes in Dibër, where GDP per capita more than tripled — from \$3,300 to \$10,200 — between 2000 and 2019, and average life expectancy rose from 74.1 to 78.3 years.

Dibër’s experience is representative of a broader trend: income and longevity have grown faster in microregions that started out further behind, narrowing global gaps in health and prosperity. In 2000, the bottom 5% of the world’s population lived in microregions where life expectancy was less than 49.7 years, and the top 5% could expect to live over 30 years longer (more than 79.5 years). By 2019, that gap had narrowed to 23 years.

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The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted – and even reversed – progress on improving living standards globally, but it did not extinguish the potential for further gains. With a more granular understanding of how past progress unfolded, we can put ourselves on a path towards fulfilling that potential – and even chart a more efficient course



‘Haboob Muscat’ bags endurance race title in Ibri

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

‘Haboob Muscat’ clinched the title of the Oxy Endurance Race for a distance of 100 km, led by rider Ahmed bin Said al Saeedi in Ibri on Friday.

As many as 61 horses took part in the race, organised by the Oman Equestrian Federation with the support of Occidental Oman Company for the second year in a row, in cooperation with the Governor of Al Dhahirah.

The event was held under the auspices of Najeeb bin Ali bin Ahmed al Rowas, Governor of

Al Dhahirah, in the presence of Shaikh Saeed bin Mohammed bin Abdullah al Kalbani, Vice-Chairman of Oman Equestrian Federation, and Eng Nasser bin Issa al Maskari, Director of Social Responsibility at Occidental Oman Company.

The 100 km race witnessed strong competition among 61 participants through four stages. The first and second stages were run for 30 km, while the third and fourth stages were run for 20 km.

The first place and the car prize was won by Ahmed bin Said al Saeedi on ‘Haboob Muscat’, owned by Hala al Turki and



coached by Said bin Khamis al Hinai. The second place and car was claimed by Faisal Basem al Qadi on ‘Nebras Muscat’, owned by Hala al Turki and trained by Said bin Khamis al Hinai.

The third place and car was won by Khaled bin Youssef al Riyami on ‘Donderval’ from Al Buraq Stables and trained by Abdullah bin Khalifa al Azizi.

On the sidelines of the competition, the riders of Bahla Stable for purebred Arabian horses exhibited their skills of tent pegging, such as the round of capturing rings with sword and spear, and the relay round

for teams with spears, where the riders dazzled the audience with their show.

In addition, the knights of Ibri presented traditional horse sports shows, horse ‘humble’ which is traditional singing on the horses. Horse riding, which is one of the heritage sports of the Sultanate of Oman, was also on the show.

At the end of the ceremony, the top three winners of the 100 km race were presented with three cars. The Director of Social Responsibility at Occidental Oman was also honoured along with the Al Dhahirah Equestrian Committee.

‘SSR Ghazwan’ clinches Oman Derby Cup 2022

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

The horse ‘SSR Ghazwan’ owned by the Royal Cavalry snatched the Oman Derby Cup in the eighth round in the tenth race organised by the Royal Horse Racing Club at Al Rahba Racecourse in the Wilayat of Barka.

The race was held under the auspices of Dr Ahmed bin Nasser al Bakri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources for Agriculture.

The race included eight runs, six rounds devoted to purebred Arabian horses and two rounds to purebred horses. The eighth round was devoted to the Oman Derby Cup.

Al Mu’tasim bin Said al Balushi on ‘SB’ won the first round ‘Wadi Al Khoudh’ Dam race for purebred Arabian horses for local production for a distance of 1,200 metres. ‘SB’ is owned by Saad bin Suhail al



Mukhaini and trained by Youssef bin Mohammed al Hajri.

Maicon de Souza on ‘Al Afyah Sur’, owned by Hilal bin Khalfan al Hasani and trained by Walid bin Mohammed al Yahya’i, came second. Yahya bin Juma al Hamdani on ‘NAS Al Shams’, owned by Shaikh Harib bin Suleiman al Nabhani and trained by Nasr bin Hareb al

Nabhani, finished third.

‘Ace Kayf’ clinched the second race ‘Wadi Dayqah’ for purebred hybrid horses for a distance of 1,200 metres. Amer al Rasbi rode ‘Ace Kayf’, owned by Khalifa al Jahdami and trained by Zahran al Jahdami.

The ‘Palmetto Dunes’, owned by Samir al Hashemi, came in second place. It was ridden by Al Siyabi

and trained by Othman al Hashemi.

‘Creek Horizon’ owned by Ahmed al Naabi, and rode by Moanis al Siyabi finished third. Mohammed al Balushi was the trainer.

In the ‘Wadi Khasab’ race for purebred Arabian horses for a distance of 1,600 metres, ‘Ahtar’ owned by Abdullah bin Amer al Mashaikhi bagged the top honours.

‘IH Zakher’ owned by Idris bin Hammoud al Balushi took the second spot and ‘Abas’, owned by Mohammed bin Salem al Rasbi came third.

‘Faith and Fortune’ dominated the ‘Wadi Tanuf’ race for purebred horses for 1,600 metres to finish on top. It was owned by Mohammed bin Amer al Mashaikhi and rode



by Al Mu’tasim bin Said al Balushi. Marwan bin Hammoud al Balushi was the trainer.

In the ‘Wadi Al Sahtan’ Race for 1,600 metres, ‘Jathjath’, owned by Sultan bin Saif al Busaidy, claimed the top honours.

‘Valentino’ clinched the top spot in the ‘Sahlanot Valley’ race for 1,600 metres. It was owned by Mohammed bin Saud al Khalili, led by Ahmed al Siyabi and trained by Hussein bin Ali al Sunaidi.

‘Hilal Muscat’ snatched the ‘Wadi Al Maiden’ race for 2,000 metres. It was owned by Khalid bin Mohammed. Ibrahim bin Khamis al Hinai was the rider of ‘Hilal Muscat’, trained by Hamad bin Said al Saeedi.

‘Nino horse’ dominated the ‘Wadi Al Jizzi’ race for purebred Arabian horses for 2,000 metres. Al Mu’tasim bin Said al Balushi won the race on ‘Nino’, owned by the Royal Cavalry and trained by Fahd bin Abadi al Hajri.

Al Subhi, Saleh strike as Oman defeat Syria



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

Oman edged Syria 2-1 in an international friendly at Shabab Al Ahli Stadium in Dubai on Friday night as part of the team's preparation for the upcoming Arabian Gulf Cup.

The Arabian Gulf Cup will take place in Basra, Iraq during January 6-19, 2023.

Essam al Subhi (22nd minute) and Motaz Saleh (58th minute) scored the Red Warriors goals in the fixture.

Ahmed al Ashqar scored the

goal for the Syrian team.

Both teams will meet again in another warm-up game that is scheduled on Friday at the same venue.

Oman head coach Branko Ivankovic began the match with a starting line-up that featured Fayez al Rushaidi as the goalkeeper while Ahmed al Khamisi, Fahmi bait Durbeen, Ahmed al Kaabi and Amjad al Harthi formed the defence. Playmaker Harib al Saadi led the midfield with Mousab al Mamari, Mahmood al Mashaeferi and Yazeed al Mashani. Al Mundher al Alawi and Essam

al Subhi were the strikers in the front line.

TRAINING SESSIONS

The team reported back to the daily training sessions in the ongoing abroad camp in Dubai. The coaching staff will focus in the remaining sessions on the harmony among the players ahead of the Gulf Cup assignment. In the coming days, the Croatian coach will announce the final squad who will represent the Red Warriors in the upcoming Gulf Cup.

After the second preparatory game, the Branko Ivankovic-

coached team will depart to Basra city in Iraq to take part in the Arabian Gulf Cup.

Oman will play against hosts Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen in Group A while holders Bahrain will defend their title in Group B which comprises Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. The Red Warriors will commence their campaign in the tournament with a tough match against Iraq in the opening match on January 6. Oman will then face Yemen on January 9 and they will conclude group matches with a match against Saudi Arabia on January 12.



Dromedary CC clinch Camel Trophy



MUSCAT: To add joy to the festive season, Dromedary Cricket Club celebrated victory in the annual cricket fixture for Camel Trophy against the Chairman's XI at the Oman Cricket Academy ground recently.

In an entertaining 25-over-a-side match, Dromedary CC defeated Chairman's XI by eight wickets.

Organised by Oman Cricket, the Camel Trophy is played between Dromedary CC, a team of British expatriates in Oman, and OC's Chairman's XI since 2018.

Put to bat first, Chairman's XI, led by Alkesh Joshi, were restricted to 139 for five. Parviz Abdul Qadir al Balushi top-scored with 19 before retiring out while Syed Aamir Ali and Hemal Mehta scored 18 runs each.

Five of the seven bowlers picked up a wicket each. Dromedary CC opening batters – Crossy and Goose – shared an explosive opening stand of 47 runs in three overs. Goose had to retire first, scoring 31 in just eight deliveries that included three sixes and three boundaries.

Crossy retired for 30 and Luke's unbeaten 29 sealed the win in just 15 overs as they reached 140 for 2. Alkesh Joshi and Zeeshan Siddiqui picked up a wicket each.

As it is an exhibition game, batters are forced to retire out after reaching 30 runs or playing out 25 balls.

Later, Dromedary skipper James Lansdell said: "It was indeed our pleasure to come and play at the lovely turf of the Oman Cricket Academy Ground. Oman Cricket

has always been cordial hosts and we enjoy playing some quality cricket with the stalwarts of the game. We are looking forward to have a fixture in February to retain the coveted Camel Trophy."

Chairman's XI captain Alkesh Joshi said: "I am honoured to captain Chairman's XI against the Dromedary Cricket Club. It was a good game and we thoroughly enjoyed the atmosphere and camaraderie between both sides in the spirit of the game."

BRIEF SCORES: Chairman's XI: 139/5 in 25 overs (Parviz Abdul Qadir 19*, Hemal Mehta 18, Syed Aamir Ali 18; William 1/14, Luke 1/29, Bainers 1/26, Goose 1/22, Gray 1/19) lost to Dromedary CC: 140/2 in 15 overs (Goose 31*, Crossy 30*, Luke 29*; Alkesh Joshi 1/22, Zeeshan Siddiqui 1/10).

BANGLADESH BOWLERS RATTLE INDIA TO LEAVE MATCH HANGING IN THE BALANCE

DHAKA: Bangladesh fought their way into what earlier appeared a lost cause on Saturday, knocking over four Indian wickets to leave the visitors teetering after Liton Das compiled a gritty half-century on the third day of the second Test in Dhaka.

The Bangladesh bowlers were given 145 runs to defend after Liton's steely 73 and a wagging tail steered the hosts to 231 all out.

Despite the subpar score, spinners Mehidy Hasan and Shakib Al Hasan rose to the challenge, reducing India to 45-4 at stumps with 100 still left to chase, leaving the match unexpectedly hanging in the balance.

Mehidy claimed three wickets after Shakib's initial breakthrough, removing Cheteshwar Pujara (six), Shubman Gill (seven) and Virat Kohli (one). Shakib started the slide with the wicket of captain KL Rahul for two.

Axar Patel survived the day to stay unbeaten on 26 alongside nightwatchman Jaydev Unadkat (three), with first-innings heroes Rishabh Pant and Shreyas Iyer yet to come in.

Liton said after the close of play that Bangladesh could keep India under pressure and eke out a win with early wickets on Sunday.

"It is possible to win if we can take one or two more wickets in the early morning," he said.

"Rishabh and Iyer are yet to come, they are of course good players, but as I said if we can take one or two more wickets they will remain under pressure."

For India, building a partnership remains vital.

"I feel we should not overthink that four wickets have gone. If one of our batsmen get set, there won't be much pressure on us," fast bowler Mohammed Siraj said.

REGULAR WICKETS

Axar had earlier downed three Bangladesh batters and all of India's bowlers were among the wickets.

But Liton rode his luck in an innings where he was dropped twice by Kohli — first off Axar

and then Ravichandran Ashwin — to score what could be 73 vital runs.

There was little support for him on the other end after opener Zakir Hasan (51) fell soon after lunch until wicketkeeper Nurul Hasan joined him at the crease and the pair compiled an aggressive 46-run stand.

That stand was broken by Axar when he drew Nurul out of his crease to set up an easy stumping for Pant.

Liton then added another brisk 60 runs alongside Taskin Ahmed (31 not out) before he was bowled by a Siraj delivery that nipped back in and found the gap between bat and pad.

Even with those small pockets of resistance, India looked to be in complete control of the match, picking up regular wickets with all their bowlers getting a part of the spoils.

Ashwin had Najmul Hossain trapped leg-before for five in the second over of the day before Siraj removed Bangladesh's first-innings top-scorer Mominul Haque for the same score.

Unadkat then got skipper Shakib (13) to spoon a length delivery to Gill at cover in his first over of the day.

With the hosts struggling, Axar added to their misery on the stroke of lunch, trapping the experienced Mushfiquir Rahim lbw for nine.

He added two more to his tally after the break, getting Mehidy lbw for nought before dismissing Nurul for 31.

Siraj, Ashwin, and a run-out accounted for the final three wickets.

The Bangladesh bowlers had given their side a glimmer of hope in Friday's final session, restricting India's lead to 87 runs just when the visitors looked like they might amass a mammoth score.

Pant and Iyer were running rampant, with both crossing fifty at rapid pace, ending at 93 and 87 respectively, but Bangladesh knocked over the last six Indian wickets for 61 runs to restrict India to 314.

India won the first Test of the two-match series by 188 runs in Chittagong. — AFP



Brown takes Celtics back to top of the East, Bucks lose to Nets

MIAMI: Jaylen Brown scored 36 points as the Boston Celtics returned to the top of the Eastern Conference standings with a 121-109 win over the Minnesota Timberwolves on Friday.

The Celtics (23-10) moved above Milwaukee (22-10) into first place after the Bucks fell to a 118-110 loss to the Brooklyn Nets.

Brown scored 23 of his 36 in the fourth quarter as Boston picked up just their second win in seven games, outscoring the Timberwolves 33-23 in the last quarter.

Jayson Tatum scored 30 points for the Celtics, the 17th time he and Brown have both scored 30 or more in the same game.

Brown had missed his first seven 3-point attempts and the

momentum shifted when he sank three early in the fourth.

"You have just got to play through it," said Brown.

"This game will take you high and then take you low. I stayed with it and I was able to get over the hump," he added.

"It was super important to get this win, we have been in a little rut, it felt good to get back on the winning side."

The top spot is up for grabs again on Sunday when the Celtics host the Bucks, who will be looking to bounce back from their loss at Brooklyn.

Kevin Durant scored 24 points and Brooklyn managed to stop Milwaukee's star Giannis Antetokounmpo from scoring in the fourth quarter.



"I think we were locked in all night on both sides of the ball, it was a great team win," said Durant.

The Nets, fourth placed in the East, have now won eight in a row and have a 19-7 record since Jacques Vaughn took over from Steve Nash as head coach.

The Philadelphia 76ers completed a seven-game homestand sweep beating the Los Angeles Clippers 119-114.

Joel Embiid scored 44 points and James Harden provided a career-best 21 assists as part of a triple-double.

Kawhi Leonard top-scored for the Clippers with 28 points, with Paul George adding 22 but only five in the second half.

It is the first time since the 1977/78 season that the 76ers

swept a seven-game homestand and it has seen them improve to a 19-12 record and rise to fifth in the East.

DeMar DeRozan's jumper in the final second clinched a 118-177 win for the Chicago Bulls over the New York Knicks.

RJ Barrett had a season-high 44 points for the Knicks while Zach LaVine led the Bulls with 33 points.

The Orlando Magic picked up their eighth win in nine games with a 133-113 win over the struggling San Antonio Spurs.

Orlando welcomed back Wendell Carter Jr and Gary Harris after lengthy injury absences — both entering from the bench. Cole Anthony top scored with 23 points off the bench, while German Franz Wagner added 21 points. — AFP



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To know more



34% of 2023 budget estimates earmarked for basic services

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

Preliminary estimates of the 2023 State Budget, released by the Ministry of Finance last week, indicate that 34 per cent of the total budgetary allocations for the coming year are earmarked for basic services, such as education, health, housing and social welfare.

The sizable allocation made towards basic services further underscores the Omani government's commitment to sustaining the well-being of the Omani population, while strengthening social welfare and the overall safety net designed to help vulnerable sections of the local community.

Public expenditure is projected at RO 12.950 billion in the 2023 Pre-Budget estimates, which is higher by 7 per cent (RO 820 million) in nominal terms compared to the RO 12.310 billion in public expenditure estimated to have been incurred during the current 2022 Budget.

Indeed, social care is recognised as one of the pillars of the comprehensive developmental strategy pursued by the state to enable citizens to benefit more widely from the services provided to them, in order to ensure the provision of an ideal environment for a dignified life.

Education takes the largest share of this allocation, followed by social care, health and



housing.

According to experts, the social protection system set in place in the Sultanate of Oman demonstrates that the government's spares no effort in securing the essential needs of the local community through various programmes and initiatives.

This is also evident from the regular gestures of support extended by the government last year in response to, for example, soaring prices of food grain, animal feed and other commodities in the wake of global developments, notably the Ukraine War.

Sharing details about the 2023 Pre-Budget estimates, Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, indicated that Oman succeeded in reining in inflation at safe limits, not exceeding 3 per cent, as a result of monetary policies and other intervention. The total support for the year 2022 amounted to over RO 1.6 billion, he said.

Oman, IEA deepen cooperation with three hydrogen joint projects

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 24

The Sultanate of Oman and the International Energy Agency (IEA) currently have three joint projects to develop and enhance the production of green hydrogen in Oman. Dr Abdullah bin Sulaiman al Abri, adviser and representative of the Sultanate of Oman at Paris-based IEA, said there are three joint projects being worked on between the Sultanate of Oman and the agency, praising the existing cooperation between the two sides in this field.

In a statement to Oman News Agency, Dr Al Abri said that the first project is to develop green hydrogen markets for energy and local industry uses, as it will work to identify the industrial and productive sectors that currently depend on natural gas and develop the possibility of converting them to green hydrogen.

This will eventually leads to reducing dependence on natural gas and provide for the development of other industrial projects that raise the economic value of natural gas and work to attract investors and technology makers to the Sultanate of Oman.

The second project is to build the local capabilities in green hydrogen production and to benefit from the infrastructure Oman's possesses in the fields of oil, gas, ports, the spot electricity market and others.

The third project, expected to be completed by 2023, is to build a system that simulates the total income of the state. It will allow



GLOBAL INVESTMENT FUNDS, IMPORT AND EXPORT COMPANIES HAVE ALLOCATED HUGE SUMS TO INVEST IN GREEN HYDROGEN PROJECTS WORLDWIDE, ESTIMATED AT \$500 BILLION, WHICH IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE SULTANATE OF OMAN TO WORK TO ATTRACT THESE INVESTMENTS IN ITS PROJECTS RELATED TO GREEN HYDROGEN.

calculating the development of green hydrogen on the national income of Oman in 2050, the quantity to be exported abroad, trade balance and business and

employment opportunities.

There are other projects that have been discussed with the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, such as ways to store renewable energy — whether by batteries, converting it into hydrogen, or pumping seawater through artificial lake need to generate electricity. It also include discussing opportunities for localising supply chains and ways of cooperation with Tanmia, Oman Energy or with the Oman Investment Authority.

"The IAE works in the fields of energy, renewable energy and climate change and seeks to motivate member states and countries represented in the agency to use renewable energies in order to achieve energy security

and preserve the environment from pollutants that lead to climate changes," Al Abri added.

Global investment funds, import and export companies have allocated huge sums to invest in green hydrogen projects worldwide, estimated at \$500 billion, which is an opportunity for the Sultanate of Oman to work to attract these investments in its projects related to green hydrogen.

"Oman has been successful in this (green hydrogen) field, and, with the country's determination to invest in this sector, it is expected that it will contribute to attracting large investments that will enhance efforts in the field of production and export of green hydrogen," he added.

OQ weighs blue ammonia production from Omifco plant

Promising prospects: State-owned energy conglomerate explores potential for harnessing tidal and offshore wind resources

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 24

OQ, the global integrated energy group of the Sultanate of Oman, says it is exploring the possibility of upgrading the Sur plant of partly-owned Oman-India Fertilizer Company (Omifco) to produce low-carbon blue ammonia in place of conventional ammonia associated with planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

The move is part of an array of initiatives currently being weighed — or under development — by the state-owned energy conglomerate

in support of the nation's energy transition strategy.

Omifco, a joint venture between OQ Group (50 per cent) and a pair of Indian public sector farming cooperatives (50 per cent), operates a two-train 5,000 tonnes/day urea plant alongside a pair of 3,500 tonnes/day capacity ammonia units. While the urea output was until recently shipped to India under a now-concluded long-term offtake agreement, the ammonia has been marketed internationally.

According to a high-level official of OQ, a new study jointly commissioned with Omifco seeks to achieve a partial decarbonisation of ammonia output from the plant. Conventional ammonia — also known as 'brown ammonia' — comes with a sizable CO2 footprint as a byproduct of the production process. By capturing



View of Omifco's jetty facilities at Qalhat near Sur.

and storing the CO2, conventional ammonia can be upgraded into blue ammonia — a commodity sought by a growing number

of 'green' industries globally. "We have signed with Omifco a study to basically explore converting its plant hopefully into

something close to what we call as Blue Ammonia," said Ghalib al Maamari, Vice President — Low Carbon Molecules, OQ.

Addressing a green energy forum held in Muscat recently, Al Maamari said the initiative is in line with OQ's broader strategy to support the decarbonisation of Oman's economy and the achievement of its Net Zero objectives. "We in OQ are already engaged in four large scale (green hydrogen and ammonia) projects," he noted.

"Once they are developed across all of the phases, the investment level for all of the four projects is going to be in excess of \$40 billion.

And with that, these projects can actually generate in excess of 30 gigawatts of energy, which will be almost triple the size of the electricity grid capacity today.

So it's very ambitious, but also doable!"

Aside from solar and wind-based green hydrogen and green ammonia schemes, OQ is also exploring the potential to harness other renewable resources, the Vice President for Low Carbon Molecules stated.

"There is also huge potential from our assessment for tidal and offshore wind prospects that we are looking into as we speak. We are also exploring other low carbon molecules, whether it's blue ammonia or blue hydrogen or any other forms of fuels.

Further, as you know, we signed a few days ago a number of MoUs with international companies to explore these opportunities. We have signed with Maersk and Sumitomo to study the potential of setting in Oman a bunkering hub for e-fuels," he added.

NBO launches online direct debit service



MUSCAT: In line with its digital growth strategy, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has recently launched its ‘Online Direct Debit’ processing service to streamline payment processes for corporate clients.

The new digital offering has been implemented under the guidance of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) and for the first time in Oman, enabling companies to automate their Periodically Collections online (Monthly and Yearly), eliminating the need for cheques. ‘Online Direct Debit’ ensures that payments are made automatically on a set date, while it is no longer required to wait for authorisation.

Mohammed bin Yahya al Jabri, Assistant General Manager and Head of Global Transaction Banking at National Bank of Oman, said, “Providing convenient, one-stop and efficient online access to financial products and services is part of our digital banking transformation.

He added, “The ‘Online Direct Debit’ service simplifies Collections of payments underpinned by an easy registration process. This service will see our corporate clients streamline their banking requirements, improve, while enjoying elevated levels of security and flexibility.” Corporate clients can seamlessly apply for the new ‘Online Direct Debit’ service through NBO’s Corporate Internet Banking (CIB) platform.

They can activate the Direct Debit Module, complete the direct debit mandate, and submit the document online. Using cutting-edge technology and leading security features, NBO’s CIB platform empowers companies and government entities to make instant transactions, payments and transfers, access account balances, make on-the-spot enquiries, access non-financial services and complete transactions.

Lulu, Khimji Ramdas hold Gillette ‘best fan face’ Guinness Record breaking campaign

MUSCAT: Lulu Hypermarket teamed up with the P&G division of Khimji Ramdas in a unique and exciting attempt to break the Guinness Record for the most number of people moisturising their beard simultaneously to pick up the “best fan face” during the season of football.

The event was held at Lulu Bausher under the campaign Gillette “Shave and show your best fan face” on December 20, 2022. The event, which was held to promote Gillette brand from the P&G stables, brought together 300 consumers who participated in the campaign with the aim of breaking the world record.

The event also gave an experiential moment for the consumers to try Gillette products as they were allowed to keep the grooming bag with various products, they consumed for the record breaking execution.

As part of the event, Lulu had set up a grooming area in the parking area of its Bausher outlet, providing consumers a chance to present their smartest look using the Gillette Mach3 razor which is



built for precision and made for comfort, with stronger blades that stay sharper longer, as well as the best in category KCG beard oil.

Consumers were then invited to “present their best fan face” by

showcasing their best emotions to different football-related activities, such as penalty kick etc. All consumers participating in the campaign also received a gift hamper.

Shabeer K A, Regional Director — Lulu Hypermarkets, Oman, remarked “The timing of this activity is perfectly in sync with the season. With the just concluded football world cup

football fans all over the country are still basking in the excitement the season has provided. We are happy and privileged to be again a part of P&G’s record breaking initiatives and hope that this platform provides an eco-system to encourage some out of the box marketing concepts and innovative products. P&G as a brand has been supporting our outlets with one of the strongest portfolios of trusted and quality brands.”

Sridhar Moosapeta, CEO Consumer Products Cluster, Khimji Ramdas stated, “We are extremely happy with the response we received through this campaign and we thank Lulu for their continuous support towards all our initiatives. We are also happy to have reached out to as many people as possible, as we could witness the thrill and enthusiasm of fans as they showcased what they loved the most about the game.

“At P&G, we are committed to introducing fresh and innovative ideas to serve the heightened needs and behaviours of consumers worldwide” he added.

BankDhofar signs pact with Dalilee to provide Soft POS service

MUSCAT: BankDhofar and Dalilee recently signed an agreement for payment solutions. The agreement was mutually signed by Dr Amjad Iqbal al Lawati, Chief Retail Banking Officer, at BankDhofar, and Dawood Sulaiman al Amri, CEO of Dalilee, with the presence of executive management team members. As part of the agreement, BankDhofar will provide Dalilee with the innovative Soft POS payment solution.

Upon signing the agreement, Amjad Iqbal al Lawati, Chief Retail Banking Officer at BankDhofar, said: “We are proud to sign the agreement with Dalilee to provide them with the first of its kind payment solution in the Sultanate of Oman. This partnership illustrates our on-going support to the SME sector.

In a short time, Dalilee became one of the well-recognised Omani delivery SMEs, and we are confident that our solution will reflect positively on their operations and enhance the customer experience. At BankDhofar, providing innovative products, services, and solutions to our customers have always been our priority, and we look forward to further similar agreements.”

BankDhofar realises the importance of integrating new technologies into its business. The first-of-its-kind solution in the Sultanate of Oman is a low-cost, maintenance-free solution that allows merchants to accept payments quickly and conveniently through their NFC-enabled Android devices. Dawood Sulaiman al Amri, CEO of Dalilee, stated that “signing this agreement is within the company’s strategy to strengthen the technological transition in



daily receivable and withdraw the manual financial transactions.

We seek to provide a convenient solution for our customers through providing Soft POS payment solution using mobile phone by courier drivers and receptionist in all governorates” This agreement expresses the bonds of partnership and institutional cooperation between Dalilee and leading private sector institutions such as Bank Dhofar in achieving the economic goals and Parallels set by Oman Vision 2040.”

With the Soft POS solution, businesses can accept payments from any contactless-enabled card or mobile wallet from their NFC-enabled Android device. Items can be selected on the mobile application, where the merchant can receive the payment using their mobile or tablet device as a point of sale (POS) device. The service requires no additional hardware and delivers quick and convenient payment experiences.

Oman to host 34th General Arab Insurance Federation’s Conference

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Oman Insurance Association hosted the meeting for the General Arab Insurance Federation (GAIF) Council which aimed at discussing the GAIF’s main updates in addition to the preparations for hosting the 34th Session of the General Arab Insurance Federation’s Conference that will take place in Muscat from February 18-21, 2024. It is considered to be an important event for those interested in the Insurance Industry globally and in the Arab World.

During the meeting of the Secretary-General of the Federation, Chakib Abuzaid, and the hosting committee of the conference, the attendees discussed the necessary arrangements for the conference such as forming a preparatory committee which includes Secretary-General of the Federation, Ahmed bin Ali Al

Maamari — Vice-President of the Insurance Sector in the CMA, Nassir bin Salim al Buisaidy — Chairman of the Board of Directors of Oman Insurance Association, Romel Tabaja-Vice-Chairman of the Board of Directors of Oman Insurance Association, Omar bin Ahmed al Sheikh — Member of the Board of Directors of Oman Insurance Association and Hasan al Lawati — Member of the Board of Directors of Oman Insurance Association.

The Oman Insurance Association announced previously that the Sultanate of Oman has won hosting the conference by acclamation. This reflects the confidence of the Arab and global insurance markets in the Omani insurance sector. It also adds a tremendous economic value for the sector since it will be at the focus of attention of the Arab Insurance Companies.

Own a luxury Lincoln vehicle before campaign ends

MUSCAT: Own and experience distinctive Lincoln luxury and benefit with service 5 years/ 100,000 kms and 1 year registration. The campaign will end on December 31, 2022. (Conditions apply. For details visit a Lincoln showroom Wattayah.)

Lincoln’s distinctive luxury has contributed to offering some of the most inspiring and memorable journeys. With a combination of style, luxury, advanced features and technology and power, Lincoln vehicles are indeed extraordinary. Lincoln’s range of vehicles in Oman includes the Aviator and the

Navigator.

The luxury family SUV — the Lincoln Navigator combines modern luxury with advanced technology. A twin-turbo V6 engine that can produce 450 horsepower provides smooth power whenever you need it, delivered through a 10-speed transmission. Navigator’s lighter, high-strength aluminium-alloy body helps create a more refined ride.

The Navigator is equipped with a clean and uncluttered interior layout, with a simple, soothing ambience. At night,



interior ambient lights sequentially illuminate each of the SUV’s three rows. During the day, a panoramic roof fills the cabin with natural

light.

Occupants can enjoy available Revel Ultima audio with 20 speakers that work in concert with

Navigator’s interior design and acoustics.

Standard SYNC 3 enables clients to manage audio, phone, navigation and more from the vehicle touch screen or steering wheel-mounted controls.

Second-row passengers have their own audio and climate control, while third-row seats feature power recline capability.

The stylish and luxury Aviator is packed with advanced technologies that let the luxury SUV rise up to greet you, and scan the road ahead to glide through an uneven pavement.

Aviator offers the kind of capability premium clients require in a three-row SUV, with available all-wheel drive.

Customers wishing to own their dream Lincoln with exclusive benefits are encouraged to visit their nearest Lincoln showroom. In Oman, Lincoln vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co LLC. Please log on to www.lincolnoman.com, or www.facebook.com/lincolnoman or www.instagram.com/lincoln_oman for the latest news, test drive requests and the latest press releases.

Smart contracts and real estate tokenisation



STEFANO VIRGILLI

The author is member of the International press Association

When the concept of smart contracts originated back in 1994, almost no one knew that blockchain technology would make it so easy to incorporate these contracts into computer code, while also providing transparency and security for all records.

A smart contract could therefore be programmed by a developer although more and more, organisations using blockchain for business are providing templates, Web UIs, and other online tools for making it easier to structure smart contracts.

Smart contracts are executed on blockchains such as the Ethereum blockchain, which handles all transactions within a contract; thus, no intermediaries are needed for executing transactions. Smart contract technology could also transform documentation and the process of transactions, by incorporating the blockchain applications into real estate for example.

Smart contracts may also leverage blockchain and other distributed ledger technologies to keep verifiable records of all activities related to executing complex processes, and which cannot be altered due to its decentralised nature. Blockchain applications enable tools that could potentially automate manual processes, from processes for complying with legal requirements to the distribution of the contents of wills as digital contracts.

Real estate tokenisation refers to the process of fragmenting the asset into digital tokens representing the underlying real property, with all of its rights and obligations. By means of tokenisation a property can be segmented and then represented with a digital token.

Whereas traditional investment into real estate requires locking up capital over an extended period, digital tokens can be transferred safely and effectively over the blockchain network. Tokens can represent interest in a property, as well as being used to crowdsource capital to invest in a development, thus enabling a wider variety of investors and developers to engage with the real estate market.

Investments made using tokens dramatically lower costs, but they also provide greater freedom, as one — or a collective of investors — can purchase shares of a property and utilise it at any point. Using a blockchain technology and token exchanges could potentially lower significantly the transaction costs associated with real estate.

From a technology perspective, ERC is technical guidelines to developers for creating various types of tokens to meet their needs. Each ERC standard has their own approach for different subjects and use cases, such as tokenising traditional assets, or adding additional features in ERC-20 standards.

In addition to ERC-20 and ERC-721, there are also many other ERC token standards that emerged in order to support various different use cases, which are increasing in popularity across the entire Ethereum ecosystem.

In ERC-721, only one smart contract could handle a single type of token, while the ERC-1155 allows one smart contract to support infinite amounts of tokens and functions.

The ERC-1155 token standard is focused on consolidating the best aspects from its predecessors for building token contracts without dependencies on fungibility and with low transaction “gas” costs. ERC-1155 allows for the batch transfer of multiple assets in a single smart contract which results in the transfers of all tokens being done simultaneously, leading to less crowded networks and, therefore, lower gas costs.

In theory, tokenisation of real estate sounds like a great idea, but in practice, we cannot simply ignore the existence of securities laws and other regulations that might prevent the smooth implementation of such an interesting concept.

Tejarah Talks: Telling untold stories

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 24

With its informed and insightful panels, Tejarah Talks 2022 has enjoyed considerable success attracting large and enthusiastic audiences with online participants joining from around the world. We sat down with Maymuna al Adawi (pictured), organiser of this Oman Business Forum initiative to learn more.

Q: What is Tejarah Talks?

A: Tejarah Talks is organised by Oman Business Forum in association with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and generously supported by SOHAR Port & Freezone, HSBC, Omantel and Oman FM. It's a series of informal, interactive evening discussions that brings together some of Oman's most inspirational and innovative thinkers and doers to share their stories with a warm and enthusiastic crowd. It's a platform for positive interaction.

Q: What's Tejarah Talks looking to achieve?

A: With a firm focus on the future, Tejarah Talks looks to draw in the community to explore and understand the issues shaping Oman's business and investment landscape. We're motivated by the belief that everyone needs to



be part of the conversation about the future if they're to get the most from it. In simple terms, it's an initiative designed to inspire, educate and hopefully entertain.

Q: For the uninitiated what does a typical Tejarah Talks evening look like?

A: It's an in-depth conversation with four panellists and a moderator that lasts about 100 minutes. Thankfully, there are no presentations, it's all discussion led. And we wrap-up each session with some great food and networking.

Q: What did the 2022 season cover and what's been the response?

A: We ran seven sessions this year covering topics ranging from sustainability and corporate

culture to the creative industries and why manufacturing matters. Twenty-eight expert panellists and nearly a thousand highly curious attendees. We couldn't be more pleased with how well Tejarah Talks has been received. It's been an incredible 12 months.

Q: Who's your audience?

A: There are so many different types of people who attend. They come from all walks of life, we get everyone from CEOs to teachers. It's an eclectic bunch with an eclectic mix of panellists.

Q: Who are the panellists?

A: They're a carefully curated group of gifted innovators, creatives, entrepreneurs, real doers who ask bold 'out there' questions that help broaden horizons to imagine better alternatives. Let's just say they're challengers of thought and provokers of debate.

Q: You've published a set of Tejarah Talks reports?

A: We have. Very simply, they're designed to help make the ideas discussed at Tejarah Talks more accessible to a larger audience here at home and internationally.

Q: You've also branched out into podcasts?

A: That's right. Tejarah Talks podcasts are casual but engaging conversations featuring business leaders and influencers. We like to think of them as practical but

inspirational. If most podcasts enter via the front door, we're perfectly happy using the side entrance. It's a space where we explore big, bold and optimistic business ideas shaping Oman.

Q: What does Tejarah Talks have lined-up for next year?

A: We look forward to 2023 with optimism, positivity and renewed vigour. With sessions on Oman's journey to net zero; M-commerce; Web 3.0; the relationship between cities and business; and nurturing and cultivating second stage companies we'll be tackling issues that are at the heart of Oman Vision 2040 and of critical importance to our business community. What we'll do however is approach them in a considered and thoughtful manner. Going forward, we're excited about inviting our audience to join us on a positive journey of discovery.

Q: How do you see Tejarah Talks going forward?

A: If we do interesting things that are important to us, then maybe they'll be interesting and important to others. By being smart with the themes we select, Tejarah Talks can only grow in popularity and influence.

Q: How would you sum up Tejarah Talks in three words?

A: Thoughtful, optimistic, crafted.

MSX 30 Index closes week lower

MUSCAT: The MSX 30 Index closed lower by 0.37% W-o-W. GCC and foreigners were net buyers of about \$0.8 million worth of securities. Within the sub-indices, the Financial Index dropped the most by 0.56% while the Industrial Index also closed down by 0.11%.

The Services Index, however, closed up by 1.27%. The MSX Shariah Index also climbed 1.13% W-o-W. Oman's government announced an expansionary budget for the year 2023, with main consideration given to increasing the level of spending.

The Government expects to earn a revenue of RO 11.65 billion in 2023 which is 10% higher than the budgeted revenue of 2022 and 18% lower than the actual revenue estimated to have been achieved in 2022.

The Government has budgeted an 11.2% increase in its oil production, which at a higher budgeted price of \$55/bbl (2022:



Budgeted oil price: \$0/bbl), is expected to increase the revenue.

The Government has budgeted spending of RO 12.95 billion for 2022 compared to RO 12.13 billion in 2022, higher by 6.7% when compared to last year's budgeted numbers and about 1% lower than the preliminary actual expenditure numbers of 2022. The budget deficit for 2023 is estimated at RO 1.30 billion vs. RO 1.55 billion deficit budgeted for 2022 and an actual surplus estimated at RO 1.15 billion for 2022.

In terms of last year's preliminary performance, actual

total revenue is projected to have reached RO 14.2 billion compared with the budgeted figure of RO 10.58 billion, higher by 34.5%. Public spending is estimated to have grown to RO 13.09 billion, higher by 7.9% as compared with 2022 Budget.

However, instead of a budgeted deficit of RO 1.55 billion for 2022, the country is on track to post a budget surplus of RO 1.15 billion. This is a direct result of oil prices averaging at \$94 per barrel against an assumed price of \$50 per barrel, leading to an oil revenue increase of RO 7.46 billion, while gas revenue increased to RO

3.56 billion and non-oil revenue increased to RO 3.22 billion.

National Life & General Insurance Company announced the offer acceptance from shareholders of Al Ahlia Insurance Company SAOG, with reference to the offer announcement dated November 20, 2022 regarding the offer made by NLGIC to acquire 47.5% of the issued share capital of Al Ahlia Insurance.

The status of the offer acceptance is: Total number of shares amounting to 47.5% of issued share capital of Al Ahlia Insurance is 47.5 million.

Total number of shares for which the acceptance has been received is 45.4 million. Acceptance rate of the offer is 95.6%. Pearl REIF announced that its fund management body meeting was held on December 19, 2022 that approved the financial statements ending 9M22 and payment of an interim dividend of RO 0.002 per unit for 9M22.

Courtesy: U-Capital

Omani energy firm receives first batch of biodiesel from Wakud refinery

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 24

Alshawamikh Oil Services, an Omani Local Community Contractor (LCC), received the first quantity of environmentally friendly bio-fuel (bio-diesel) from 'Wakud International', the first biofuel production plant in the Sultanate of Oman, located in Khzaen Economic City in the Wilayat of Barka.

The biodiesel will be used in the operations of Alshawamikh Company aiming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and achieve zero carbon neutrality.

This comes within the sustainability strategy of Alshawamikh Company — a local

community company in the oil and gas sectors — in line with “Oman Vision 2040” to support renewable energy projects, and achieve the Sultanate of Oman's goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and reach zero carbon neutrality by 2050.

The partnership is considered a direct support for the circular economy in Oman in terms of encouraging medium and small companies to collect used cooking oils, recycle them and produce Biodiesel and in the factory.

Dr Aflah al Hadhrami, CEO of Alshawamikh Oil Services, commented that the use of Biodiesel aims to reduce dependence on gas in generating electricity and support the Sultanate of Oman's



strategy to reach zero carbon neutrality by 2050.

He added: “This step comes as a continuation of the partnership with Wakud and an enhancement of the Sultanate of Oman's

contributions to the renewable energy sector by 20% by 2030”, indicating that the Sultanate of Oman is taking advanced steps to achieve optimum utilisation of energy and develop renewable

energy projects to support economic diversification plans and promote sustainable energy, in line with the Paris Climate Agreement.

He also stressed that Alshawamikh Oil Services Company, within its responsibility, works to promote renewable energy use projects by expanding partnerships with various sectors and institutions to meet the growing needs of the Sultanate of Oman for energy and contribute to its prosperity. The partnership with Wakud is a continuation of Alshawamikh's approach towards the optimal use of environmentally friendly energy.

From his part, Maher al Habsi, CEO of Wakud International, confirmed that the export of

the first shipment of biodiesel is one of the fruits of cooperation with Alshawamikh Company in renewable energy projects, which was proactive in supporting Wakud.

“This partnership is only in support of the Sultanate of Oman's directions towards expanding the use of renewable energy projects and making it at the forefront of countries in this vital and promising sector.

Alshawamikh has implemented and installed a solar energy system in Wakud Biodiesel factory, which feeds the electrical loads of the entire plant and thus makes it the first Biodiesel refinery in the world powered by solar energy,” he explained.

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HIS MAJESTY ADMINISTERS OATH TO NEW MINISTER

MUSCAT: Before His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Dr. Saif bin Khalfan bin Ahmed al-Saidi, Chairman of the Supreme Court Saif bin Khalfan bin Ahmed al-Saidi, Chairman of the Supreme Court Saif bin Khalfan bin Ahmed al-Saidi, Chairman of the Supreme Court

NEW RO 50 BANKNOTE FROM THIS MONTH

MUSCAT: To mark the 50th anniversary of the Omani Revolution and in commemoration of the memory of the founder late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) issued a sixth series of new RO 50 banknote, which will begin circulating this month.

SAMEL BUTTY

MUSCAT: The frequent orders and arrests issued by the authorities to follow social distancing guidelines are being ignored in some cases.

SOME PEOPLE ARE NOT FOLLOWING SOCIAL DISTANCING GUIDELINES

and in some cases, it is necessary to police the behaviour of other people as well, said Saif bin Khalfan bin Ahmed al-Saidi, Chairman of the Supreme Court.



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Offering a helping hand to people with disability

There had been a significant improvement in society's attitude towards these differently-abled people. As part of the event, the handicrafts prepared by disabled people were displayed in Salalah Hall... **P20**

Scientists uncover 'first record of a dinosaur eating a mammal'

SCIENTISTS BELIEVE they may have uncovered the first known incident of a mammal being eaten by a dinosaur. Paleontologists in Britain have analyzed fossil remains from around 120 million years ago, showing a small, feathered dinosaur — known as Micro raptor — with the foot of an animal inside its rib cage. The experts said their findings, published in

the Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology, is "the first record of a dinosaur eating a mammal." Dr David Hone, from Queen Mary University of London, who is first author on the study, said: "It's so rare to find examples of food inside dinosaurs, so every example is really important as it gives direct evidence of what they were eating. "While this mammal would absolutely not



have been a human ancestor, we can look back at some of our ancient relatives being a meal for hungry dinosaurs. "This study paints a picture of a fascinating moment in time — the first record of a dinosaur eating a mammal — even if it isn't quite as

frightening as anything in Jurassic Park." Micro raptors lived in the ancient forests of what is now China, somewhere between 125 and 113 million years ago. While it moved on its two legs, experts believe some species may have been capable of guided flight. About the size of a crow or a small cat, Micro raptors would have been gliding from tree to tree to prey on small animals. Although the specimen was first described in 2000, the researchers said the previous team had failed to see the remains of another animal inside the dinosaur. Further analysis suggests the prey was a mammal about the size of a mouse, which likely lived on the ground and was not a good climber. Previous research has shown other Micro raptor specimens with preserved food in their stomachs, such as a bird, a lizard and a fish. However, the team added that it is not certain if these dinosaurs had directly preyed on these animals or found them already dead and had scavenged them." — dpa

READ

MAAME BY JESSICA GEORGE

An utterly charming and deeply moving portrait of the joys — and the guilt — of trying to find your own way in life.



LIFESTYLE

The Belgian "Garden of Santa Claus" will be open only 23 days this year instead of the usual 34 days because of a surge in energy prices — **AFP**



CELEBRITIES

Maya Ruiz-Picasso, daughter of the Spanish painter, died on Tuesday at the age of 87. She had illuminated the life and work of the painter. — **dpa**





Girls strike new note at ancient German boys' choir school

FOR over a millennium, Germany's imposing Regensburg Cathedral has swelled with the sound of choirboys singing Mass. But this Christmas, for the first time, girls' voices are ringing out too.

It has been an unusual few months for the Regensburg cathedral school in Bavaria, home to the world-renowned Domspatzen boys' choir.

In September, the school broke with 1,000 years of tradition and opened its doors to girls, setting up a separate girls' choir.

After weeks of rehearsing traditional Christmas songs, the girls gave their first performance on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

Wearing sweaters and gloves against the winter chill, the girls were greeted with warm applause when they made their debut in front a packed cathedral.

"History is being written here," said 17-year-old Nepomuk Dillitzer, who came to watch his sister sing, and was himself once a member of the boys' choir.

His grandmother, Margareta Dillitzer, said she had enjoyed her granddaughter's maiden concert and praised the choir school for opening up.

"It's important because it's a matter of equality," she told.

Among the new crop of students at the school is Dorothea Krakowsky, 11, who enrolled alongside her twin brother, Johannes.

"It always annoyed me that the boys were favoured. That's why I think it's really great that there are girls here too now," she said, speaking ahead of the concert.

Founded in 975, the Regensburger Domspatzen -- which translates as "cathedral sparrows" -- is one of the world's oldest and most famous boys' choirs.

INTERNATIONAL STARDOM

The school created alongside the choir offers pupils a standard German education, but with a heavy focus on music and at least one hour of choir practice every day.

There are a total of 305 students



aged between 10 and 19, around two-thirds of whom are boarders.

Full tuition and board costs 570 euros (\$600) a month and students must pass a gruelling audition before being offered a place.

As well as providing the music for services at Regensburg Cathedral, the boys' choir regularly embarks on prestigious international concert tours.

However, the school has not been spared from the Catholic Church's child abuse scandal and a 2017 report found that more than 500 choirboys suffered sexual or physical abuse at the institute between 1945 and the early 1990s.

The report criticised senior Church figures for failing to do enough to prevent the abuse. They include Georg Ratzinger, brother of former pope Benedict, who led the choir from 1964 to 1994.

The scandal "probably" contributed to a decline in applications in 2016 and 2017,

according to Christian Heiss, the current conductor of the Regensburger Domspatzen.

Then, having completed extensive renovations in 2020, the school also found itself receiving fewer applications as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

The extra capacity meant "the time was ripe... to start a new pathway, a girls' choir pathway", Heiss said.

A total of 33 girls joined the school in September, 15 of them in the reception year and the others in older year groups.

The girls' choir rehearses separately from the boys' choir but otherwise all lessons are now mixed.

BRIGHT, RADIANT SOUND

For 16-year-old Jakob Bauer, in his fifth year at the school, it's been a positive development.

"It's definitely different," he said. "At first I thought it was going to be a major change... but now it's actually pretty normal and quite cool too."

The girls' choir made its debut on Sunday under conductor Elena Szuczies.

The initial plan was for the choir to perform for the first time in 2023 but the girls had exceeded her expectations, Szuczies said.

There are currently no plans for the school to start a mixed choir, partly because the girls have their own "different sound", according to Szuczies.

"I personally love this bright, radiant sound," she said.

To begin with, the girls' choir will stick to singing at Sunday services in Regensburg cathedral.

But Heiss hopes they will eventually reach the same heights as their male counterparts.

"Boys' choirs are famous and have a certain reputation musically, but the girls' choir scene is not yet as established," he said.

"I think that by offering this pathway we will also help to make the girls' choir scene better known and raise its profile." — AFP

Iraqi conservators strive to preserve ancient manuscripts



IN AN ANNEX of Iraq's national museum, a conservator pores over a 17th-century manuscript, carrying out delicate restoration work as part of efforts to preserve and digitise 47,000 precious texts.

"Some manuscripts date back almost 1,000 years," said Ahmed al-Alyawi, who heads the House of Manuscripts body.

"There are writings in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hebrew and Kurdish," he added, noting the texts' "immense cultural diversity".

In a country that bears the scars of decades of conflict and has seen antiquities and cultural heritage regularly plundered, the House of Manuscripts' collection has managed to survive.

It was safely stashed away in the Baghdad suburbs, while the national museum was ransacked in the turmoil following the 2003 US-led invasion. Employees and residents prevented subsequent looting attempts at the "underground shelter" where it was stored, Alyawi said.

The collection, now ensconced in the national museum in the capital Baghdad, includes books, parchments and calligraphy boards, some of them damaged by humidity, pests and centuries of use.

Some manuscripts date from the early Abbasid era, while some seventh-century calligraphy boards in Kufic script were written on parchment "even before the manufacture of paper", Alyawi said.

To live longer
A conservator wearing a white lab coat brushed dust from a gnarled board, as a colleague cut fine paper to repair a 17th-century Persian text dedicated to the Shiite religious commemoration of Ashura.

Each intervention must "preserve the old appearance" of a work, said Tayba Ahmed, 30, who has been doing restoration for three years.

But it also must reduce any damage to the work "so that it can live longer", she added.

A text "may not have a cover, the pages might be detached, you may have to sew and make a leather cover", she said.

"You can spend several months with the same book."

Ahmed is one of seven Iraqi conservators who are currently undergoing training, funded by the Italian embassy, to help them carry out their colossal restoration mission.

The programme involves working with Italian expert Marco Di Bella, whose country has previously funded equipment for the House of Manuscripts' offices, including lighting.

Peering over an 18th-century Ottoman astronomy book, its pages filled with elegant black ink calligraphy, Di Bella made comments in English that were translated into Arabic.

"The most complex process is... deciding what to do and how to intervene on the manuscript", the Italian conservator told AFP.

"Every single manuscript is assessed... we describe the damage" and try "to understand... the origin" of each piece, he added.

The programme also helps reintroduce traditional conservation materials that are now coming "back into fashion", Di Bella said, such as starch as an adhesive.

Heritage of our country' -

While his team has just four scanners to digitise the entire archive, Alyawi decried a lack of funding that prevented purchasing other specialised equipment or hiring more staff.

Despite the obstacles, Alyawi expressed optimism that his teams could restore up to 100 works per year -- making a slow dent in the potentially thousands of works requiring attention.

The House of Manuscripts archive "is a leading collection in Iraq and the region", said Zakaria Haffar, Iraq project manager at the National Library of France (BNF).

In October, the House of Manuscripts signed a partnership with the BNF, following financial support from the Aliph Foundation, which works to protect cultural heritage in conflict zones.

In addition to providing materials -- such as specialist paper and leather -- the cooperation will see an "exchange of skills" to assist with digitisation, restoration and cataloguing, Haffar said.

Mayassa Shehab, who has worked in restoration for half her life, said the preservation and digitisation mission is of immense importance.

"It is the heritage of our country", the 52-year-old said. "As it has been handed down to us, we must pass it on to future generations." — AFP





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AROUND THE WORLD

LIBRARIES

Fairytale abbey library takes online stardom in its stride



ANCIENT MONASTERIES in deepest provincial Austria do not normally feature on the bucket lists of the TikTok generation.

But the Admont abbey library in the small Styrian town -- which claims to be the largest monastic library in the world -- is also the most Instagramable, with Baroque interiors so breathtaking they almost look like they have been Photoshopped.

"Go for Baroque in Austria and visit the Admont Abbey library," Oprah Winfrey's book club urged its two million members last year.

And Britain's Daily Mirror gushed that the library "could give Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel a run for its money with its beauty."

Once far from the beaten track, the near 950-year-old Benedictine abbey now struggles on some days in summer to accommodate all the influencers and selfie hunters who want to immortalise themselves amid its frescos and chequer-board marble floors reminiscent of the library in Disney's "Beauty and the Beast".

Media-savvy monks

Two of its 23 monks are active in the monastery's online promotion, as at ease with concepts like "content" as with the finer points of theology, even offering "online spiritual advice". A virtual tour of the library is also available.

"We have succeeded, together with the monks of our house, to transmit content that captivates and interests people," communications manager Mario Brandmueller told AFP.

The abbey's Facebook reach has rocketed to 25 million people per month -- 2,500 times its audience back in 2018.

From being something of a local gem nestled amid the mountains of central Austria, it has become an international "crowd puller", Brandmueller said, with photos and videos of the 18th-century library featured on travel and culture platforms in a dozen countries.

The abbey's promotional work even earned it an Austrian government prize for "special achievements in the field of public relations and institutional communication".

But this summer the monastery was pushed to its "organisational limits" handling the 15,000 visitors a month it was getting, although Brandmueller said more visitors could still be accommodated in winter.

— AFP

DINING

On the Arab Christmas Table, Kubbeh and Warak Dawali Are Nonnegotiable



The first time Nermine Mansour hosted Christmas dinner, she was working in Guatemala as a diplomat for the Egyptian foreign service. Five continents and a family later, she has hosted many more Christmas dinners, her table always surrounded by guests from diverse backgrounds and laden with diverse dishes to match.

But two offerings remain a constant: kubbeh, a bulgur- and meat-based shell encasing a lamb and nut filling seasoned with cinnamon and allspice, prepared as a pie or as croquettes; and warak dawali, grape leaves stuffed with a mixture of warmly spiced rice and ground beef cooked in a rich, tangy broth.

These dishes are usually associated with special occasions, Christmas in particular, because of the time required to prepare them and the lavish ingredients they call for. Mansour, who now lives in Alexandria, Virginia, is Egyptian American and was raised in the Coptic Christian tradition, in which it is common to abstain from meat and dairy for much of the year, including the 45 days before Christmas.

"Of course, we broke our fasting and celebrated with a plethora of meat dishes," she said.

Across many Arab Christmas tables outside the Middle East, regardless of

sect or fasting traditions, kubbeh and stuffed grape leaves are nonnegotiable. They are also a labor of love, requiring meticulous handwork and time. As with dumplings or tamales, the dishes are traditionally made en masse, with women gathering to divide the labor.

The task of rolling grape leaves takes on a different meaning when it is done alongside friends and family, explained Antonio Tahhan, a Syrian American food writer, making the task not only bearable, but enjoyable.

"I remember I always wanted to be around my mom and aunts while they were rolling grape leaves because it sounded like a party," he said.

The full splendor of this party is revealed when the pot is flipped over and lifted to showcase lamb chops atop layers of meltingly tender, glistening warak dawali. "These dishes speak to something deeper in our shared culinary heritage, to a communal approach to cooking," Tahhan said.

Margot Habiby, a Palestinian American living in Dallas and the deputy director of external affairs at the George W. Bush Presidential Center, said that before food processors, home cooks would pound the meat for the kubbeh in a large stone mortar and pestle.

"That pounding sound signaled a village in celebration,"

she said. "If someone from the village suffered a tragedy or death, you would never hear that sound coming from any house."

The pounded raw kubbeh can be served immediately after preparation, like a tartare. But the possibilities of what one can cook with that kubbeh paste are endless. Football-shaped, deep-fried croquettes might be one of the most recognized forms in the West, because of their prevalence in restaurants and mezze spreads. But they're also the most labor-intensive, so many Arabs prefer to make a pie form (suniyeh), especially during holidays when time is scarce and convenience is paramount.

"It's always been suniyeh for us," Habiby said. "My parents just didn't have the patience honestly to make the croquettes."

For the suniyeh, a layer of bulgur-based dough is pressed into a pan and topped with the meat filling, then another layer of the bulgur dough. The top layer is intricately scored, and finally the pie is baked.

"Until my father died at the age of 94, it was our ritual to make the kubbeh together for Christmas," said Habiby, adding, "but the design I was not allowed to touch, so it was a very emotional moment for me the first time I made it by myself." — NYT

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Corona kids!

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on constant conversation with the trillions of microbes that live inside our bodies. It is this group of microbes that are essential to digesting our food, training our immune system and since our childhood. I may say here -- figuratively -- that these dialogues between human and microbe originate in childhood, when the first three years of life are pivotal. Thus the bacteria colonize the babies and then the two parties need to enter into physiological synchronization. The idea here is that any major disruption during this time can lead to a change in this system, increasing children's risks of allergies, asthma, obesity and other chronic conditions later in life. Therefore, parents always hear and warn against the use of antibiotics without medical advice, especially since infants who receive large doses of antibiotics -- which can eliminate this microbial diversity -- are more likely to develop such problems. Moreover, after the Corona (Covid-19) pandemic, the children returned to nursery and school. Of course, people no longer keep their distance or avoid large crowds. If the wave of respiratory viral diseases that is hitting now and we are noticing its spread in society, the microbes are once again hovering between the small hands and mouths. There is no doubt that the children who were infected with the Corona virus during the pandemic had an unusual childhood. On average, their microbiomes are bound to look very different. However, the difference is not necessarily bad!

This reminds me of the days of Corona and its aftermath, as I believe that the children most at risk -- to the physiological fluctuations between those benign bacteria and their bodies -- are the children whose families entered into a mode of excessive hygiene, especially in the first two months of their lives and even when microbes are necessary to properly calibrate the immune system's counter-alarms. So if I can say that this is a miss of those opportunities, which the defensive cells in our bodies end up confusing enemies with allies or vice versa, which leads to severe infections or autoimmune diseases And this is what everyone is hearing about now! However, no one can accurately choose which microbes they will be exposed to. Measures that stop the transmission of known pathogens have a way of stopping the transmission of benign microbes as well. But context is important here. It is possible that behaviors that attract microbes, such as playing outdoors, coexist alongside those that avoid microbes, such as ventilating indoor spaces when there is a large outbreak of respiratory viruses.

Finally, those choices that people have made and continue to make, to protect their families from pathogens, should not be seen as a harmful mistake either! In the end, are there children that I can call - Corona children-; Those born before or during the height of the Corona pandemic, when the virus was everywhere and we as families and parents cleaned everything up because we didn't want it to be around us. So my question comes, which really worries me and may require follow-up and studies by our concerned authorities in the Sultanate: Will we see in the coming years from now, as a result of these disorders, a group of children with asthma and obesity?!

Dr Yousuf Ali Al Mulla is a physician, medical innovator and writer.

art & life

Local Scene

SUNDAY | DECEMBER 25 | 2022



OFFERING A HELPING HAND TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Vandana Jyotirmayee

Everyone is born with unique skills. They need to be tapped, nurtured and followed up with proper guidance. Society has a special responsibility towards people with disabilities to find the best ways to deal with them. As a mark of offering a helping hand and an outreach to the community, the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah, collaborated through a voluntary forum to serve people with disabilities in cooperation with the Al Wafa Social Care Center for the Disabled in the Governorate of Dhofar.

To impress upon the society that every member of it can emerge as a change agent, Muna al Nahdi, a staff member of the Students Services Centre, organised an event involving students to create awareness and spread the message of care for people with disabilities.

Commenting on the goal of the activity, Dr Jihad al Khalaf Bani Younis, Head of the Committee, said the first initial steps had been taken for this journey, aiming to shed light on the issue of disabilities and find the best ways to deal with them. "Using the participatory approach with all stakeholders, including Al-Wafa Social Center, we have a lot to do in the future," he added.

Mona Al Abd, the Director of the Al Wafa centre in the Governorate of Dhofar, shed light on the situation of disabled people in society.

"There had been a significant improvement in society's attitude towards these differently-abled people. As part of the event, the handicrafts prepared by disabled people were displayed in Salalah Hall.



The work showcased various skills of disabled people, again confirming the need to give positive directions to their abilities and rehabilitate them.

Speaking about the Al Wafa centre, Mona mentioned that the organisation ensured specific training and rehabilitation programs creating paths for children to be in schools and vocational training for adults to make them self-reliant.

Regarding the facilities of the

Salalah centre, she mentioned that the centre had education, speech, and occupational therapy specialists. Mona's prime message was about understanding the social and psychological aspects of dealing with people with disabilities.

Concerning the plans to spread awareness about disabilities and rehabilitation Dr Nawal Saleddin, HoD of the Mass Communication department and a committee member,

said that the department would conduct campaigns and other related activities.

Dr Salem al Mashani, a faculty member, shared his extensive experience and the challenges of disability that he faced due to being visually impaired. He also mentioned his positive response to the disability, which encouraged the listeners to take the initiative in helping people with disabilities.