

UK's Johnson faces demands to resign

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday dismissed calls to resign from opponents and some of his own lawmakers, fighting to save his premiership amid a deepening revolt inside his party over a series of lockdown parties in Downing Street. Johnson, who in 2019 won his party's biggest majority in more than 30 years, is now fighting to shore up his authority after a series of revelations about parties in his Downing Street residence. **SEE PAGE 7**



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SANIA MIRZA TO QUIT TENNIS THIS YEAR



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BANK NIZWA, SOHAR INTERNATIONAL GET CBO NOD TO EXPLORE MERGER



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PAINTING ABSTRACT DREAMS



Royal Decree ratifies double tax avoidance pact with Qatar

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has issued a Royal Decree No. 4/2022 on the ratification of an agreement between the governments of the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar on avoidance of double taxation and prevention of income and capital tax evasion, signed in Doha on 22 November 2021, after presenting the same before the Shura Council.

Article (1): ratifies the above-mentioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and takes effect from its date of issue.

— ONA

Mutual respect & peace pivots of Sultanate of Oman policies

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy (pictured), Foreign Minister, said that the Sultanate of Oman's foreign policy is based on strategic principles that are constant and far-reaching. The pivots of these principles are mutual respect and the country's belief in peace as an approach to domestic and foreign policies.

The Sultanate of Oman seeks to foster cooperation and friendship with everyone in a manner that doesn't harm anyone.

In an interview with the Egyptian



newspaper *Akhbar El Yom*, the foreign minister said that the Arab countries should show more solidarity and intensify and coordinate efforts to address their top issues and challenges and achieve the desired effectiveness on the international level.

On Yemen, Sayyid Badr affirmed that serious work requires optimism and

entails positive energy. "We will spare no effort and will continue to support all efforts to stop the conflict in Yemen and bring all parties to the negotiating table in order to reach peaceful political solutions to the crisis," the minister said.

Commenting on the Iranian nuclear talks, the foreign minister confirmed that the return to the nuclear agreement between Iran and the group of major countries is an important strategic necessity for the security of the region and the world.

TURN TO P2

Oman unveils first women's hockey team

The Oman Hockey Association (OHA) launched the first Oman national women's team on Wednesday during a ceremony to unveil the trophy of the 2022 Women's Asia Cup.

AHF CEO, Dato' Tayyab Ikram, said the Sultanate of Oman represented by OHA achieved another big milestone through hosting the 2022 Women's Asia Cup in Muscat.

"Oman is a leading country in GCC and among Arabian countries to host continental and International hockey events.

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OPINION

CHILDREN THRIVE WHEN PARENTS PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

MASSRAT SHAIKH

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PUTIN TO UKRAINE: 'MARRY ME OR I'LL KILL YOU'

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VOICES



Meet SCALES

RO 40 million food city to attract investments

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Construction of Khazaen Food City will begin in Q1, 2022, according to authorities associated with the project. The project will boost country's self-reliance on fruits and vegetables.

The RO 40m initiative is a major public-private partnership project which will replace the present Fruit and Vegetables Market in Mawaleh. The wholesale and storage activities of Khazaen Economic City will also enhance the country's food security and make it a hub for shipment and transshipment activities.

The project's capital subscription and financial closure worth RO 40 million were completed by the private sector and a local bank at

a ceremony held under the auspices of Isam bin Saud al Zadjali, Head of Muscat Municipality. Dignitaries from government and private sectors were present on occasion.

"We look forward to making the market an investment destination that attracts local and foreign investments. The proximity of the market to the airport and the current Al Mawaleh market is a great attraction for investing in the project," said Al Zadjali.

The project financing agreements, part of relocating the fruit and vegetable storage and wholesale activities from Al Mawaleh Central Market to Khazaen Central Market in Khazaen Economic City in the Wilayat of Barka, were signed on Wednesday.

TURN TO P2

Table tennis to be taught in schools

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

The Ministry of Education (MoE) and Oman Table Tennis Association (OTTA) signed a memorandum of understanding for including table tennis in the school syllabus. The signing ceremony took place on Wednesday in presence of Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education and OTTA Chairman Abdullah bin Mohammed Bamakhalif.

The agreement was signed by Dr Yahya bin Khamis al Harthy, GM of General Directorate of



Curriculum Development, who represented MoE side while Abdullah BamaKhalif signed on behalf of OTTA.

The OTTA chief announced the launch of 'Future Champions' project which aims to provide 282 schools with all the necessary

equipment including TT tables, balls and rackets besides delivering workshops for the teachers of sports curriculum. The project will focus on educating generations about the table tennis and boosting the game in the schools.

The MoU is targeted to form a team between both parties to specify the activities, basic skills of table tennis which to be distributed to the syllabus of 1st grade in elementary until 10th grade school. Also, the team will study implementation of internal activities, festivals and other events related to table tennis.

TURN TO P2



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EA studies Saudi’s management of mines

MUSCAT: Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of the Environment Authority and his accompanying delegation, visited Saudi Arabian Mining Company, to review its experience in managing the mining sector, on Wednesday.

The delegation reviewed a number of topics related to environmental issues and was acquainted with the roles undertaken by the company in environmental protection since



its inception.

They discussed the company’s most prominent roles in environmental projects such as the replantation of original trees which embodies the company’s

attention to environmental preservation.

The chairman of the Environment Authority stressed the importance of cooperation in the field of environmental preservation, health and safety of mines, environmental rehabilitation and environmental programmes to address the environmental impacts of mining projects in balance with supporting the national economy.

He underscored the importance of adherence to the local and international standards in mining activities and the need for a protected environment that achieves a balance between environmental, economic and social requirements in line with the Oman Vision 2040 which addressed the issue of environmental protection and the preservation of natural resources.

Mutual respect and peace pivots of Oman policies

FROM PAGE 1

This would inaugurate a new phase of constructive cooperation in the region and between the various parties.

Regarding the Syrian crisis, the foreign minister said that the Sultanate of Oman has remained steadfast in its attitude since the outbreak of the crisis in Syria and has long called for the return of Damascus to the Arab League, affirming that any differences should be addressed within the framework of the Arab family.

The foreign minister expressed his regret over the events taking place in Libya as a result of the parties’ failure to complete the transitional process and bring stability to the country, calling for an end to polarisation and foreign interference in the Libyan affairs.

Answering a question about the developments in the Palestinian cause, the foreign minister reiterated the importance of achieving Palestinian reconciliation in a way that restores the strength of Palestinian cause in the international level.

The resumption of dialogue with the Israelis should be based on Palestinian consensus and a sustainable vision within the framework of the international legitimacy and the legal references of peace and the Arab peace initiative.

RO 40m Khazaen Food City to attract investments

FROM PAGE 1

The first agreement for the shareholders’ capital subscription and the second for bank financing agreement with Sohar Islamic Bank was signed in pursuance of the royal directives that called on the private sector and businessmen to invest in local opportunities in all sectors to boost the country’s position as an attractive and leading investment destination.

The first agreement was concluded to complete the equity subscription with Oman Infrastructure Fund (Rakiza), Salim and Partners LLC, Al Kalbani Group and Khazaen Development and Investment Company, as shareholding partners in Khazaen Fruit and Vegetable Central Market SAOC, which will fund, develop and manage the new market in Khazaen Economic City.

“The signing of both agree-



ments marks the completion of the project capital subscription and total financing amounting to about RO 40,000,000, which will be allocated to the development, establishment and operation of the Khazaen Central Market,” Eng Kallat al Balushi, Board Chairman of Khazaen Economic City told the Observer.

“We are happy with this strategic partnership with major partners from the private sector and we highly value and appreciate the trust of the government, represented by the Muscat Municipality, and its support in enabling the private sector to play its part in the development of quality and national projects that contribute significantly to achieving food security and an economic revenue for the country in the framework of Oman Vision 2040 considering the private sector to be a major driver of the national economy,” he added.

The bank financing agreement

was signed between Sohar Islamic Bank and Khazaen Fruit and Vegetable Central Market SAOC to provide financing facilities for the new market project.

“The first priority of moving from the present market to Khazaen Central Market will be for the existing merchants in Al Mawaleh Market,” according to Engineer Tariq al Mujaini, Project Manager of Khazaen Central Market for Fruits and Vegetables.

“While all priorities are given to our existing merchants, new initiatives are welcome, and a special hall for the local produce will be set up at the Khazaen Central Market targeting farmers,” Al Mujaini added.

The new fruit and vegetable market in Khazaen Economic City consists of high-quality logistics facilities and services, such as an air-conditioned wholesale market

and trading floor, truck sales area, onion and potato sorting and selling sheds, dry warehouses, agricultural products reception building, forklift operation station, ten gates for customs inspection and plant quarantine, administration offices for the companies working in the market, agriculture samples examination laboratory under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources. The market will also include retail outlets to cover the incoming demand from the surrounding areas of the city. Additionally, there will be a large refrigerated trading room strategically located in the Centre of the Khazaen Market for the use of the stakeholders. Abdulwahid, MD of Suhul al Fayha, KV Group International, hoped the Khazaen Market would be the ideal place for investments and trade in the future.



Table tennis to be taught in schools

FROM PAGE 1

Moreover, the both parties should work on scientific research that linked to execution of table tennis practical skills in the educational curriculum.

Abdullah BamaKhalif said the agreement with MoE is a good step to promote the knowledge of table tennis to the students. “Imparting the skills of table tennis to the students will boost the sport in the schools and community. We hope that table tennis will be the one of the favourite sports and to be played among the students during the classes of sports syllabus. Our target from the future champions project is to discover potential faces that add value in the future national teams. And then accomplish top positions in the future participations,” he ended.

On the other hand, Dr Yahya bin Khamis al Harthy, affirmed that MoE aims to achieve the



comprehensive development of the student’s personality and contribute to the Omani sports at all levels including competitiveness.

The project with OTTA aims to enhance students attitude towards physical activity in various sports activities including table tennis. It will also diversify curriculum programmes and activities to be in line with the characteristics of the students’ age. Table tennis is one of the popular sports that can contribute to increase the physical activity for our students by practicing at home or school. Then, this will assist in reflecting it positively on raising the level of health and their physical and mental fitness,” he concluded.

Oman Pavilion steps up activities at Expo 2020

VINOD NAIR
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Oman Pavilion has stepped up activities at the Expo 2020 Dubai, which has received over 10 million visitors.

The Sultanate of Oman has been promoting itself as the land of opportunities, business, culture, and education.

On Tuesday, Mohsin al Balushi, Commissioner-General of the ‘Oman Pavilion’, conducted a draw to offer 12 scholarships for the master’s and bachelor’s programmes offered by the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation.

Oman Post also launched a commemorative stamp for the Sultanate of Oman’s participation in Expo 2020 Dubai as part of its participation in the Emirates 2022 — World Stamp Exhibition.

Expo 2020 Dubai’s Global Goals Week has been focusing on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that focus on ending poverty, and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth while also tackling climate change and working to preserve oceans and forests.

Expo 2020’s virtual visitation passed the 65 million mark, driven by the range of entertainment as well as coverage of the Global Goals Week.

Health and safety remain a



priority, with stringent rules across the site. All Expo visitors ages 18 and above must show either proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test result taken within the previous 72 hours, while on-site measures include mask-wearing — indoors and outdoors — for visitors, staff and participants, and PCR testing facilities for Country Pavilion staff, frontline workers and entertainers.

Young people and the private sector have key roles to play if the world is to achieve global climate-change goals, speakers told delegates attending the COP26 Reflections: Accelerating the Path Forward. Describing COP26 as “truly a private sector COP”, Sanda Ojiambo, CEO and Executive Director of the UN Global Compact, set the tone at the SDG Media Zone session,

which was hosted by the UNHub.

The SDG Media Zone is hosted by the United Nations, in collaboration with the PVBLC Foundation, and aims to take the conversation on advancing the Sustainable Development Goals out of the policy sphere and into the public discourse.

While expressing disappointment that no consensus has been reached on climate financing, the private sector has a real role to play, Sanda said, “I thought the private sector was bold, I thought the private sector was ambitious.

The private sector was actually asking governments and policy leaders to be very clear about what their ambitions were, what the goals and targets would be, to support country efforts and country actions,” she added.



New batch of recruits graduates at Rafo



MUSCAT: The Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo) celebrated the graduation of a new batch of recruits at the military parade ground in Ghala Base and the Sultan Qaboos Air Academy, under the auspices of Maj Gen Musallam bin Mohammed Jaaboub, Commander of the Sultan's Special Force, on Wednesday.

Oman, Austria seek to enhance tech ties



MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received here on Wednesday Dr Margarete Schramböck, Federal Minister for Digital and Economic Affairs in Austria.

The two sides reviewed ways of enhancing bilateral relations and cooperation in the fields of economy, digital technology and exchanging expertise.

During the meeting, a presentation was given on the Foreign Ministry's role in utilising knowledge and technology through its cooperation with the country's regional and international partners.

The meeting was attended

by a number of senior officials from both sides.

Meanwhile, the Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) also received the Federal Minister for Digital and Economic Affairs of the Republic of Austria.

Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the OCCI, received Dr Margarete Schramböck and her delegation, in the context of strengthening economic cooperation between the Sultanate and the Republic of Austria.

Al Saleh stressed the importance of commercial visits and coordinating bilateral

meetings between businessmen from the two countries in order to enhance trade and investment relations.

The Chairman also reviewed the economic sectors targeted by the Sultanate of Oman in its future plan aimed at diversifying sources of income, which are manufacturing industries, tourism, food security, transport, logistics and mining, referring as well to other supporting sectors, namely energy, information technology, health and education.

"The Sultanate has recently sought to improve the business environment and make it attractive to foreign capital

and investors, by amending laws and legislation in line with the requirements of the current and upcoming stage", Al Saleh said

Dr Margarete Schramböck, emphasised the improvements and modifications that the Sultanate of Oman witnessed during the last stage in the investment and legislative environment.

The minister indicated that Oman Vision 2040 works to place the Sultanate of Oman in the ranks of developed countries, stressing that this visit aims to open broader horizons of trade and investment relations between the two countries. — ONA

Pact signed to fund scholarships



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation signed an agreement of cooperation with Asyad Group to fund scholarships in the logistics field for General Education Diploma (GED) graduates from the School Year 2021/2022.

The agreement was signed by Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, and Eng Abdulrahman bin Salim al Hatmi, CEO of Asyad

Group.

The agreement embodies the keenness of the two sides in enhancing cooperation in academic fields and providing the labour market with specialised graduates in logistics.

The ministry aims through this agreement to bolster its partnership with the private establishments and stimulate cooperation to provide learning opportunities for GED graduates in Oman. — ONA

Oman participates in WHO council's session



MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Health, took part in the meeting of World Health Organization (WHO)'s Executive Council's 150th session which kicked off via videoconferencing on Wednesday.

Oman's delegation was represented by Dr Fatma bint Mohammed al Ajmiyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Health for Administrative, Financial and

Planning Affairs.

The meeting discussed the WHO's programme budget of the period 2020-2021 and the expected funding of proposed programmes for the period 2022-2023.

The Executive Council is the authority tasked with executing WHO decisions and policies. It also presents advice and recommendations on the international organisation's draft decisions. — ONA

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THE AMOUNT
OF ELECTRONIC
WASTE HAS MORE
THAN DOUBLED
IN THE LAST
FIVE YEARS

SOLID WASTE!

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH

@patkaushal

Any development has its side effects and the biggest side effect of today's emerging cities is piling up of daily waste and its proper disposal. The Sultanate of Oman takes maximum care in clearing day-to-day debris from residential areas to keep its cities clean, but there are many sources that cause immense pressure on the system when it comes to waste management.

According to a recent data, the country generates more than 2 million tonnes of solid waste each year, which is equivalent to more than 5,000 tonnes of municipal waste every day. One should keep in mind the numbers and the fact that these numbers are talking only about solid waste. The total waste creation must have been much more causing a herculean task for those involved in its management.

The main constituents of solid waste are primarily recyclables like, paper and cardboard, plastics, metals, glass, construction waste etc. The technological revolution has added a constituent in the form of electronic waste.

Oman Environmental Services Holding Company 'be'ah' has the responsibility to manage various kinds of waste management in the country. It has characterised the waste as green, electronic, construction and demolition, old vehicles, expired tyres, and waste lead acid batteries, to work on waste management and their proper disposal.

It is comparatively easy to manage green waste as the components here are waste from parks like dead and broken trees and grass. Still there are efforts to adopt the best practices so there is no harm to the environment.

Management of electronic waste is one of the most difficult tasks. Due to growing consumption of electronic goods in the civilised society, the amount of electronic waste is more than double in five years.

The government has been working on better plans for e-waste management, as e-waste has potential to cause damage to the environment.

For construction waste, be'ah has already identified sites to receive construction and demolition waste in all governorates of the country.

The World Bank's report on waste management reflects global concern on the issue. In its report, the World Bank raised concern over the global challenge and called for immediate intervention from the governments.

"Solid waste management is a universal issue affecting every single person in the world. Individuals and governments make decisions about consumption and waste management that affect the daily health, productivity and cleanliness of communities. Poorly managed waste is contaminating the world's oceans, clogging drains and causing flooding, transmitting diseases via breeding of vectors, increasing respiratory problems through airborne particles from burning of waste, harming animals that consume waste unknowingly, and affecting economic development. Unmanaged and improperly managed waste from decades of economic growth requires urgent action at all levels of society," the report said.

The world body calls for "systems with a suitable number of vehicles, establish efficient routes, set targets for diversion of waste, track progress and adapt as waste generation patterns change. With accurate data, governments can realistically allocate budget and land, assess relevant technologies and consider strategic partners, such as the private sector or nongovernmental organisations, for service provision."



■ OMAN, PAKISTAN LABOUR COOPERATION DISCUSSED



MUSCAT: Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Baowain, Minister of Labour, received Sayed Zulfikar Bukhari, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, on Wednesday. The two sides reviewed areas of cooperation between the two countries in the field of labour and ways of enhancing them to serve the joint interests. — ONA

Oman-Uzbek committee review cooperation

KABEER YOUSUF
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The Oman-Uzbek Joint Committee held a virtual meeting where matters of common concern were discussed, according to the Omani side of the committee.

The fourth session of the Oman-Uzbek Joint Committee was chaired by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs. Shahrat Wafayov, Deputy Minister of Investment and Foreign Trade and Head of the Development and Reconstruction Fund of the Republic of Uzbekistan, chaired from the Uzbek side.

The meeting reviewed



cooperation between the two friendly countries and bilateral cooperation of common interest, including economic, trade, education and culture.

Speaking to the *Observer*, the Uzbek representative said

the meeting was successful as both sides discussed bilateral relations and mutual cooperation.

Oman-Uzbek bilateral relations are deep-rooted and based on non-interference in

internal affairs.

“The relation between Oman and Uzbekistan is witnessing commendable progress, thanks to the mutual initiatives and concerns towards different regional and international issues as well as the role played by the joint committees between the two countries,” Bakhrom Umarov, Chargé d’Affairs at the Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Muscat told the *Observer*.

Ahmad al Kathiri, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Republic of Uzbekistan; Bakhrom Umarov, Chargé d’Affairs at the Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Muscat and officials from both sides participated in the meeting.



Plan to develop tourist sites in South Al Batinah

MUSCAT: A working paper on investment opportunities and projects in South Al Batinah was presented on Wednesday.

Some of these projects included a strategic plan as a priority has been given for the development of the governorates and sustainable cities.

The approved projects to be implemented in the governorates in

the first phase include developing tourist sites, heritage and cultural monuments, beaches, apart from providing other basic services.

The projects include developing and rehabilitating traditional souqs by establishing commercial markets, jogging tracks, taxi stations and setting up kiosks for various activities, including street food.



ABQ Education Group enables 300 more children to participate in marathon

MUSCAT: ABQ Education Group is once again an official partner of the 2022 Al Mouj Muscat Marathon. These educational trailblazers are showing their ongoing commitment to children’s health and wellness by sponsoring the three kids’ races (1, 2 and 3 kms) at the upcoming edition of the Marathon. ABQ has further extended their support by sponsoring 300 government school students to participate this year, including students from Al Izdihar School and Suhail bin Amr School.

Commenting on their involvement, Ibrahim al Salmi, ABQ Education Group Assistant CEO, said, “Out of our keenness to achieve cooperation with the Directorate General of Education - Muscat and the organisers of Al Mouj Muscat Marathon, ABQ Education Group’s initiative comes to support selected public schools to participate in the marathon taking place on 11 and 12 February 2022. The initiative falls within the framework of urging students to follow a healthier and more active lifestyle and instilling a culture of exercise in students and society in



general.”

He added, “The motto of our group is ‘We Care’ and this mindset is not limited to ABQ students only. ABQ is involved in various community initiatives throughout the year and are excited to enable the 300 additional students to compete this year. This initiative is a true embodiment of who we are as a school family. Participating in Al Mouj Muscat Marathon is an investment in their future.” Nick Cartwright, Managing Director of SABCO Sport, added, “We are delighted to be collaborating with ABQ Education Group for Al

Mouj Muscat Marathon 2022. More than 10,000 participants of all ages have registered so far with four weeks to go until the race. If you have always wanted to try a marathon or half-marathon, regain your fitness, or try something new, then do not miss out on a great opportunity to start building healthy habits and step out of your comfort zone to test yourself. The race weekend will be a festival of running with entertainment, food, arts and crafts - and a race for everyone.”

“We are pleased that ABQ Education Group sponsored a number of students to par-

ticipate in this year’s Al Mouj Muscat Marathon. We look forward to further cooperation in the future and opening the doors to a larger number of government schools in the future,” Nick added. The Al Mouj Muscat Marathon is the most popular event on the national sporting calendar and the Sultanate of Oman’s biggest race and students from all three ABQ schools will participate in this exciting event. Approximately 400 ABQ students have already registered and this number will most likely grow even more closer to the event.

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US Yemen envoy visits Gulf to renew peace process

WASHINGTON: The US special envoy for Yemen will visit the Gulf this week to try and reinvigorate the peace process, the State Department said on Wednesday, after a spate of attacks in the war between Yemen's Ansar Allah group and the coalition.

Envoy Tim Lenderking "will press the parties to de-escalate militarily and seize the new year to participate fully in an inclusive UN-led peace process", it said in a statement. Lenderking will also focus on the "urgent need to mitigate the dire humanitarian and economic crises facing Yemenis".

His visit follows further strikes this week that took the war to a new level. On Monday, a drone and missile attack on coalition partner the UAE killed three people and was claimed by the Ansar Allah.

Early on Tuesday, the coalition carried out air strikes on the Ansar Allah-held Yemeni capital Sanaa, killing at least 20 people including



Tim Lenderking

civilians, according to Ansar Allah media and residents — one of its deadliest attacks since 2019.

Washington has condemned the Ansar Allah strike against the UAE, one of the United States' leading Gulf Arab allies.

The UAE has called for the UN Security Council to weigh in on the attack. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has voiced concern regarding the coalition air strikes as well as condemned the attack on the UAE, his spokesman said.

Earlier, air strikes by the

coalition fighting Yemen's Ansar Allah group on the capital Sanaa killed at least 20 people overnight, including civilians, Ansar Allah media and residents said, in one of its deadliest attacks since 2019.

Around 14 people were killed when coalition planes struck the home of a high-ranking Ansar Allah military official, including his wife and son, according to neighbours and a medic.

The air strikes followed Monday's drone and missile attack on coalition partner the UAE that was claimed by the Ansar Allah and killed three people.

The coalition also said it intercepted eight Ansar Allah drones launched towards Saudi Arabia on Monday.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres "expressed his concern and deplores" the coalition air strikes, his spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday. Dujarric said on Monday that Guterres condemned the drone and missile attack on the UAE. — **Reuters**



A picture shows an installation of drone models in Tahrir Square in the Yemeni capital Sanaa. — **AFP**

6 die in fire at Spain retirement home

MADRID: Six elderly people died and two others were seriously injured when a fire ripped through a retirement home near Valencia in eastern Spain, the emergency services said on Wednesday. Ten ambulances rushed to the scene after the fire broke out at around 11:20 pm on Tuesday, with rescuers evacuating 71 people. Nine fire engines battled the blaze in Moncada, just north of the eastern resort city of Valencia.

Medics initially gave a toll of five dead and three seriously hurt, but one of the injured later died.

"I can confirm that a sixth

person has died, another elderly person", an emergency services spokeswoman said as the local authority declared three days of mourning. Three men aged 67, 79 and 85 were among the dead, along with three women aged 78, 89 and 95. As well as the two people seriously injured, 14 others suffered from smoke inhalation, including some of the rescuers.

The fire was raging when the fire engines arrived, firefighters said, consuming one wing of the residence, where many elderly residents were sleeping.

"When the first crew arrived,

they found the entire first floor full of smoke with the fire fully developed", local fireman Rafael Esteve told COPE radio. The evacuation was "complicated" because many people were already in bed, he added.

"Many were still sleeping, some had been woken up by the smoke. But in general, most were in bed and unable to move."

It was the smoke "that caused the most harm", he added. Regional fire chief José Miguel Basset said the fire broke out in a room on the first floor, admitting "survival there was impossible". — **AFP**

■ JOY AMIDST MISERY



Children play with snow at a camp for internally displaced people in the town of Raju in the rebel-controlled northern countryside of Syria's Aleppo province. — **AFP**

‘We are homeless’: Victims of twin Afghan quakes await aid

QADIS, Afghanistan: Survivors of twin earthquakes in Afghanistan were waiting on Wednesday for aid to arrive after spending their second night exposed to sub-zero temperatures following tremors that killed at least 22 people and wrecked homes.

Rescuers continued to comb through debris in search of survivors from Monday's quakes, as many survivors spent a second straight night out in the open while some took shelter in tents on Tuesday night, a AFP correspondent reported.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) said two earthquakes hours apart of magnitudes 4.9 and 5.3 rocked Qadis district in the western province of Badghis, damaging hundreds of buildings in a rural area not easily accessible by road.

Scattered aid has begun to reach the area but the vast majority of victims are still awaiting assistance.

"No aid has reached us", Najibullah Najibi, who became homeless along with 19 other family members after their house was destroyed, told AFP on Wednesday. "We spent the night in a tent given to us last year when we were hit by floods", he said.



A resident stands near a damaged house at Qadis district in the southern part of Badghis province, after an earthquake hit the region. — **AFP**

Many fear that rain could make houses even more vulnerable to collapse, exacerbating the crisis.

"We lost everything that we had. We are homeless. Everything is buried under the rubble", said Abdul Rahman, another survivor whose house in Qadis was damaged.

When the tremors began "everybody started screaming", he said. "Everyone from every house just ran out from their homes and fled."

Footage of the earthquake's aftermath showed destroyed mud houses, with survivors including children searching the ruins for their belongings.

One man, his face covered in mud, could be seen walking

through the debris carrying an infant, as clothes, carpets and household items lay scattered around.

"We were buried under the walls... only our heads were out of the mud", said Khair Mohammad, another resident of Qadis.

"We are alone here. We all live far from each other."

The Taliban government said up to 1,000 houses had been damaged and that tents, food and medicine were being sent to the victims.

The epicentre of the quake was near the city of Qala-i-Naw, the capital of Badghis, less than 100 kilometres from the Turkmenistan border, according to the USGS. — **AFP**

SHORT TAKES

TOKYO

Japan declares state of quasi-emergency

Japan has declared a state of quasi-emergency in Tokyo and a dozen other prefectures following a drastic recent increase in new coronavirus infections, the government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced. Tokyo has registered a record 7,377 new infections within the past 24 hours, while the number of new infections rose to a peak of more than 38,000 cases nationwide.

The Omicron variant now predominates in the world's



third largest economy as it experiences its sixth wave of the virus. The number of patients in intensive care units due to Covid-19 is rising again, albeit still relatively slowly.

MANILA

Philippines sees first deaths from Omicron variant

The Philippines confirmed the first domestic deaths caused by the highly infectious Omicron variant of Covid-19. The health ministry said those who died were elderly patients with existing health issues and had not been vaccinated against Covid.

Meanwhile, the Philippines must bring down Covid-19 cases, hovering at record highs, by April to ensure this year's presidential election will not become a "superspreader" event, a top government adviser said on



Monday.

The country of 110 million people, which is battling one of Asia's worst coronavirus outbreaks, is holding an election in May for thousands of positions.

NEW DELHI

India's new Covid cases hit eight-month high

India reported new coronavirus infections at an eight-month high and a government scientist warned it will take weeks before data on hospitalisations and deaths will show how severe the latest wave driven by the Omicron variant will be.

The federal authorities have said Omicron was causing fewer hospitalisations and deaths than the Delta variant, which killed hundreds of thousands last year. But Tarun Bhatnagar from the ICMR-National Institute of Epidemi-



ology in Chennai said the impact of the current run-up in infections will show up with a lag. "We have to worry about hospitalisation and deaths and that will come later", he said in a phone interview.



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In brief

ATHENS



GREECE RECEIVES RAFALE FIGHTER JETS FROM FRANCE

Six new Rafale fighter jets flew low over the Acropolis in central Athens, the first planes purchased under a defence deal with France that has further stirred tensions with Greece's historic rival and Nato partner Turkey.

Greece has ordered a total of 24 Dassault-made jets at a cost of more than \$3.4 billion as it seeks to modernise its armed forces amid a long-simmering dispute with Turkey over energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean.

Other areas of tension include air space, the status of some Aegean islands, and the ethnically-divided island of Cyprus, but the two countries re-launched exploratory talks last year.

BERLIN



MERKEL TURNS DOWN UN JOB OFFER

Former German chancellor Angela Merkel has turned down the offer of a job at the United Nations, her office said, a month after she stepped down as Europe's most powerful politician after 16 years at the helm. Merkel, 67, called UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres last week to thank him for the job he had offered her in a letter and to tell him she would not accept it, the office said, without elaborating.

German media reported that Guterres had offered Merkel the chair of a high-level UN advisory body on global public goods, one of his flagship reform projects.

STOCKHOLM



SWEDEN REGISTERS RECORD NEW COVID-19

Sweden set a new daily record for Covid-19 cases, registering 37,886 cases on January 18, health agency data showed on Wednesday, as a fourth wave of the virus mounted across the country.

The daily infection figures are typically revised somewhat as any delayed records of additional cases are added to the national total for a given day. The previous record of 26,566 cases was set on January 12.

The record came despite limited national test capacity. Kronoberg, one of Sweden's 25 healthcare regions, said on Wednesday it would pause all testing except for hospital and elderly care patients and staff.

UK's Johnson faces demands to resign

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday dismissed calls to resign from opponents and some of his own lawmakers, fighting to save his premiership amid a deepening revolt inside his party over a series of lockdown parties in Downing Street.

Johnson, who in 2019 won his party's biggest majority in more than 30 years, is now fighting to shore up his authority after a series of revelations about parties in his Downing Street residence during Covid lockdowns.

Johnson has repeatedly apologised for the parties and said he was unaware of many of them.

However, he attended what he said he thought was a work event on May 20, 2020 to which staff had been told to "bring their own booze". Johnson said on Tuesday that nobody had told him the gathering was against Covid rules.

"I expect my leaders to shoulder the responsibility for the actions they take," Brexit-supporting Conservative lawmaker David Davis told parliament.

Davis cited a quote from a Conservative lawmaker, Leo Amery, to then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain over his handling of war in 1940: "You have sat there too long for the good you have done. In the name of God, go."

Asked directly by an opposition lawmaker if he would resign, Johnson said: "No".

Toppling Johnson would leave the United Kingdom in limbo for months just as the West deals with the Ukraine crisis and the world's fifth largest economy grapples



LOCKDOWN PARTY REVELATIONS UNDERMINE JOHNSON AS HE FACES DEEPENING REVOLT BY LAWMAKERS

with the inflationary wave triggered by the Covid pandemic, with UK inflation rising to the highest level in nearly 30 years.

To trigger a leadership challenge, 54 of the 360 Conservative MPs in parliament must write letters of no confidence to the chairman of the party's 1922 Committee.

Implored to stay by one supporter, Johnson said he had not yet "sat here quite long enough, indeed nothing like long enough."

As many as 20 Conservative lawmakers who won their seats at the last national election in 2019 plan to submit letters of no confidence in Johnson, the

Telegraph reported. A handful of others have already said they had written such letters.

An analysis by *The Times* newspaper showed that 58 Conservative lawmakers had openly criticised the prime minister.

Leading rivals within the Conservative Party include Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, 41, and Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, 46.

'PORK PIE REVOLT'

Downing Street lockdown parties — some held when ordinary people could not bid farewell in person to dying relatives — have undermined

Johnson's authority.

Johnson on Tuesday denied an accusation by his former adviser that he had lied to parliament about a lockdown party, saying nobody had warned him the "bring your own drink" gathering might contravene Covid-19 rules.

"As he waded through the empty bottles and platters of sandwiches — he didn't realise it was a party? Does the prime minister realise how ridiculous that sounds?" Keir Starmer, leader of the opposition Labour Party, told parliament.

"Every week, the prime minister offers absurd and frankly unbelievable defences to the Downing Street parties, and each

week it unravels."

Starmer, who welcomed the defection of lawmaker Christian Wakeford who earlier on Wednesday left Johnson's Conservatives to join Labour, asked Johnson if a prime minister should resign if he had misled parliament.

"My decision is about much more than your leadership and the disgraceful way you have conducted yourself in recent weeks," Wakeford said. "I can no longer support a government that has shown itself consistently out of touch with the hard working people of Bury South and the country as a whole."

Support for Johnson and his party has plummeted after a series of revelations about the parties and other mis-steps.

His own former spokeswoman resigned after she was captured laughing and joking on camera about how to cast a Christmas party if asked about it by reporters.

Such was the revelry in Downing Street at one event that staff went to a supermarket to buy a suitcase of alcohol, spilled wine on carpets, and broke a swing used by the prime minister's young son.

The Mirror said staff had bought a wine fridge for Friday gatherings, events that were regularly observed by Johnson as he walked to his apartment in the building.

Johnson has given a variety of explanations of the parties, ranging from denials that any rules were broken to expressing understanding for the public anger at apparent hypocrisy at the heart of the British state. — AFP

Anti-vax singer dies after deliberate infection



PRAGUE: An anti-vax Czech folk singer has died after she deliberately contracted Covid to obtain a health pass that would have allowed her to visit the sauna and theatre, her family said.

Proof of vaccination or a recent infection is required to access cultural and sports facilities as well as for travel and for visiting bars and restaurants in the EU member state, which is facing a soaring Covid count.

Hana Horka, who was the vocalist for the band Asonance, died on Sunday at the age of 57, according to her son Jan Rek.

She voluntarily exposed herself to the virus when her husband and son, both vaccinated, caught it before Christmas, Rek told public radio iRozhlas.cz.

"She decided to continue

to live normally with us and preferred to catch the disease than to get vaccinated," he said on Monday. Two days before her death, Horka took to social media to say: "I survived... It was intense."

"So now there will be the theatre, sauna, a concert... and an urgent trip to the sea," she added.

Rek blamed the death on a local anti-vax movement, saying its leaders had convinced his mother against vaccination and thus had "blood on their hands."

"I know exactly who influenced her... It makes me sad that she believed strangers more than her proper family," Rek said.

"It wasn't just total disinformation, but also views on natural immunity and antibodies acquired through infection," he added. — AFP

US: Russian plans to increase force near Ukraine border

KIEV: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States knows that there are Russian plans in place to increase an already "very significant force" near the Ukrainian border on very short notice.

That would give Russian President Vladimir Putin the capacity, "also on very short notice, to take further aggressive action against Ukraine."

"We have been engaged in the past couple of months in an intense focus on Ukraine because of the significant buildup we've seen of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border," Blinken told US embassy staff in Kiev on Wednesday.

Blinken landed in Ukraine on Wednesday morning amid severe tensions and concerns that Ukraine's lingering conflict with Russia could be on the verge of heating up due to Russian provocation.

He is to meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, as well as his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba.

"This is a diplomatic effort to de-escalate tensions surrounding the unprovoked Russian military build-up on Ukraine's borders," he wrote on Twitter.

The US Embassy in Kiev released a video of the arrival of the secretary of state, who then plans to travel on to Berlin for talks scheduled for Thursday.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz also called on Russia to de-escalate tensions near the borders



Supporters of Ukrainian former president Petro Poroshenko hold a rally outside the presidential administration headquarters in Kyiv. — Reuters

with Ukraine during a virtual plenary at the World Economic Forum, saying that borders must not be moved by force.

"The Russian side is aware of our determination. I hope they also realise that the gains of co-operation outweigh the price of further confrontation."

"It is still too early to tell whether [talks] will help de-escalate the situation Russia created by concentrating 100,000 troops along the border with Ukraine," he said. "But after years of rising tensions, staying silent is not a sensible option."

On Friday, Blinken plans to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for talks in Geneva.

The US and Nato have been accusing Russia of planning an in-

cursion into Ukraine for months. Russia denies this.

"We stress once again: Russia will not attack anyone," Moscow's embassy in Washington announced. For its part, Russia accuses the US and its allies of arming Ukraine for years, thereby fuelling the confrontation.

The US and its allies need to stop weapons deliveries to Ukraine, because supplying them endangers Russia, according to the Kremlin's deputy foreign minister.

Sergei Ryabkov told a discussion forum that the European security situation is "critical" and put the blame on Washington and Nato, which he said are using Ukraine to apply pressure on Russia. — dpa

Children thrive when parents practice mindfulness



MASSRAT SHAIKH
The writer is an educational psychologist

Raising children is the ultimate mindfulness practice. Mindful parents tend towards more positive parenting strategies like using clear instructions, praising good behaviours, showing affection, warmth and communicating effectively.

Mindful parents also demonstrate fewer signs of negative parenting, such as being angry, hostile, coercive and intrusive. They share more positive parent-child relationships, healthier interactions and better child adjustment.

Mindful parenting behaviour is about setting an ongoing intention to be present at the given moment. This presence can take many forms: it may look like paying attention to your child, noticing your feelings when you're in conflict with them, pausing before responding and listening to your child's viewpoints, even if they differ from your own.

The biggest thing that a parent can do to be more mindful is pay

careful attention to what their child is saying, doing and their reactions. Careful attention often stops parents' automatic reactions, allows them a moment to calm themselves physiologically and mentally, and to be more present for their children.

Being a good parent is also learning to dial back your stress. Studies show that the most significant source of stress for children is their parents' stress. When parents resort to a mindful calm response in stressful situations, it helps the children calm down too. They see that their parents are not falling apart; they are in control, making them feel safe.

Research studies also show that mindful parenting affects teen behaviour and shows that parents are more optimistic after training and share better relationships with their teens. Additionally, the researchers made an interesting observation that adolescents of mindful fathers were also less

STUDIES SHOW THAT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT SOURCE OF STRESS FOR CHILDREN IS THEIR PARENTS' STRESS

aggressive.

These studies suggest that during the adolescence period, changes in positive parenting strategies can enhance relationships when parent-child interactions typically increase in conflict. Mindfulness strengthens parent-teen relationships, and it emphasises listening with full attention and avoiding knee-jerk reactions to unpleasant behaviours.

Research studies also show that fathers who receive mindful parenting instruction increase their children's emotional awareness

over time, whereas those without mindfulness instruction did not. Parents who report mindful parenting engage in more positive and less negative parenting behaviour, linked to more positive behaviour in their children, including less anxiety, depression and acting out.

Mindful parenting is a set of skills and ways of approaching parenting — that is, parents parent with attention, acceptance, emotional attunement and compassion. We create an opportunity to be more responsive, more productive, less in auto-pilot mode and less overwhelmed with mindful parenting. There is a strong link between mindful parenting, positive parenting practices and positive parent-teen relationships.

Being a mindful parent might seem like a high bar, given the everyday family stress we likely encounter. The idea of going through a whole day thinking that

we're going to be permanently mindful is beautiful yet fanciful.

The key to mindful parenting is breaking down our day into manageable chunks, moving forward task by task and learning mindfulness practice. In doing so, we gradually train the mind to be more present. Being more present, we experience more calm, clarity and a renewed sense of perspective, allowing for increased compassion and empathy.

The positive impact it could have on our children is worth the effort. Research shows that it can be an essential tool that assists parents in helping their children solve conflicts in a calm, kind and respectful manner. Mindfulness can be as simple as making one small change to the morning routine. It can mean giving your full attention to your children in the moment. It can mean being kind to yourself, which can make all the difference in the world.

More protected areas won't save biodiversity, warn experts

LAURE FILLON & MARLOWE HOOD

Expanding nature preserves will not be enough to stem a rising tide of extinctions, a panel of experts warned on Wednesday, taking aim at a draft treaty tasked with rescuing Earth's animal and plant life.

Setting aside at least 30 per cent of both land and oceans as protected zones is the cornerstone target of the so-called global biodiversity framework to be finalised in May at UN negotiations in Kunming, China.

But a report by more than 50 top experts said the draft plan still falls far short of what is needed. "We're in the middle of a biodiversity crisis, with a million species at risk of extinction," lead author Paul Leadley, a professor at Paris-Saclay University, said.

"There's good evidence that we will fail again to meet ambitious international biodiversity objectives if there's too much focus on protected areas at the expense of other urgent actions."

The plan, under negotiation by nearly 200 nations, sets a score of targets for 2030 — and aims by 2050 to reverse biodiversity loss and be "living in harmony with nature."

The world failed almost entirely to reach a similar set of 10-year objectives set a decade ago at UN talks in Aichi, Japan.

"We keep trying to treat a critically ill patient with plasters — that has to stop," said Leadley.

Echoing a similar warning issued by the UN's science advisory panel for climate change, Leadley and his colleagues said reversing the damage done to nature will require "transformative change" in society, starting with the way we produce and consume food.

Policymakers must also realise that all the drivers of extinction — habitat loss and fragmentation, over-hunting for food and profit, pollution, the spread of invasive species — must be tackled at once.

"Biodiversity loss is caused by multiple direct drivers in nearly all cases, meaning that actions on only one or a few will be insufficient to halt continued loss," the report said.

Climate change is also rapidly emerging as a major threat to many animal and plant species on land and in the oceans, outpacing their ability to adapt. Limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels — "essential" for protecting nature — is not adequately reflected in the draft targets, the authors say. — AFP



DAMIEN CAVE
The writer is the NYT bureau chief in Sydney, Australia

THE ERUPTION CAUSED 'A VOLCANIC MUSHROOM PLUME' AND TSUNAMI WAVES OF UP TO 15 METRES THAT HIT THE WEST COASTS OF SEVERAL ISLANDS

A local clean-up and evacuation operation has begun in Tonga after an epic volcanic eruption set off a tsunami, as the island nation's government, after days of silence, told of an "unprecedented disaster," and the first aerial photos emerged showing the normally green and verdant isles blanketed with gray dust and ash.

International efforts to deliver aid were being hampered by an ash cloud over the country's main airport, damaged communication lines and one less obvious long-term threat: the risk of foreigners bringing Covid into a country without the virus.

The communications void three days after the eruption on Saturday night had left the extent of the damage unclear. But in the first official update on Tuesday night, the government in Tonga said it had begun assessing the eruption's toll — confirming that three people had died, including a British national, a 65-year-old woman and a 49-year-old man.

The eruption caused "a volcanic mushroom plume" and tsunami waves of up to 15 metres, or nearly 50 feet, that hit the west coasts of several islands.

The Internet remained down and communications, which were severed because of eruption, were limited on the islands, according to the statement.

Search-and-rescue teams were sent beginning on Sunday morning, the statement said, with nearly all the houses on some hard-hit islands, including Mango, Fonoifua and Nomuka, damaged or destroyed. The government also said that it had set up evacuation centres and was supplying relief items. Volcanic ash had "seriously affected" supplies of clean water.

Australia and New Zealand have mobilised to deliver assistance by air and sea, as they have after cyclones and other natural disasters in the region. Any effort to provide outside help to Tonga, a country of about 100,000 people that shut its borders in 2020 and has yet to reopen them, will have to overcome logistical hurdles while protecting a fragile state of public health.



HMAS Adelaide departs Fleet Base East at Garden Island, Sydney, Australia, for Brisbane in preparation to provide disaster relief and assistance to Tonga. — Reuters

"The front-of-mind issue has to be: How do we 100 per cent ensure that we don't bring Covid to this country?" said Jonathan Pryke, director of the Pacific Islands Program at the Lowy Institute, an independent think tank in Sydney. "Whatever good will might be built up by the response would be completely undone if they bring Covid into Tonga." The Australian and New Zealand governments say there are safe ways to deliver aid. Still, ever since the undersea volcano erupted, throwing ash 12 miles into the air and sending a tsunami to countries across the Pacific, officials and overseas Tongan families have expressed concern about the risk of international aid workers causing a Covid outbreak.

Their fears are an echo of past trauma. Throughout Polynesia, a region of around 1,000 islands spread across the Southern Pacific, disease delivered by outsiders is a theme that runs through hundreds of years of history. Regular contact with Europe's colonising forces came relatively late to places like Tonga — Capt James Cook toured the archipelago in 1773, 15 years before the first group of British settled in Australia — but with devastating effect. Over the following century or so, epidemics of measles, dysentery and influenza, carried in by Europeans, devastated island communities all over the South Pacific.

One historical study published in 2016 found that in Hawaii, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and Rotuma (a Fiji dependency), the spread of measles alone in the early 19th century killed up to one-quarter of the population across all ages.

And in Tonga, another round of death arrived under even more dubious circumstances with the Spanish flu.

In November 1918, according to Phyllis Herda, a historian at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, a steamship called the *Talune* is believed to have introduced the virus because its captain, John Mawson, hid the risk after leaving Auckland.

When the ship landed in the Tongan capital, Nuku'alofa, with 71 sick passengers and crew members, he reportedly gave the order that everyone on board was "to get dressed and pretend they were not ill," so the steamer could be unloaded. Almost 2,000 Tongans died in the outbreak that followed — about 8 per cent of the population.

Covid, not surprisingly, has been viewed through the lens of that experience. Tonga has reported just one case, in October, and it requires travellers arriving in the country to quarantine for 21 days. About 60 per cent of the country's population has received two doses of a Covid vaccine.

— The New York Times

The GenNext taking Oman to the globe



DR ANCHAN C K

International Adviser — Business, Economy & Investments.

The Sultanate of Oman the oldest independent state in the Arab World, has been a knowledge giver, a beacon of light and hope. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that Oman was the original knowledge society in the Arab Peninsula and is considered a hidden jewel at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Oman was the leader in town planning, architecture, sculpture, painting, agriculture, astronomy, medicine and more. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that Oman was known for its knowledge society.

The future economic prospects of Oman depend increasingly on the country’s capacity to shift from traditional and declining sectors and to fully integrate the new international economic order. This requires a strategy that will provide Oman with the necessary skills and a knowledge-intensive base to overcome the major constraints.

Oman Vision 2040 is the Sultanate of Oman’s gateway to overcome challenges, keep pace with regional and global changes, generate and seize opportunities to foster economic competitiveness and social well-being, stimulate growth and build confidence in all economic, social and developmental relations nationwide. One of its strategic objectives and its executive programmes to promote citizenship, identity, heritage and national culture. Oman has embraced modernisation and progress while retaining the core aspects of its culture and heritage.

The Vision 2040 lays down the foundations for an empowered knowledge based society whose members are creative, proud of their identity and culture, committed to their civic duties and values and living in dignity and sustained well-being; a society endowed with leading healthcare system, an active lifestyle and an inclusive education for lifelong learning to develop skills for the future, promote scientific research, build national capabilities and achieve economic growth and social well-being; in a State with flexible yet strong agencies, all-encompassing governance, effective supervision, swift justice, efficient performance, active and ever renewing media, aided by an empowered civil society that

OMAN VISION 2040 IS GATEWAY TO OVERCOME ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE, CHALLENGES, KEEP PACE WITH CHANGES, GENERATE AND SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES TO FOSTER COMPETITIVENESS AND WELL-BEING, STIMULATE GROWTH AND BUILD CONFIDENCE IN ALL SPHERES

The future of Oman will be inextricably linked to its capacity to acquire knowledge and apply new knowledge through a highly-trained and specialised workforce, equipped with a range of educational qualifications, experience and commitment. The creation of a knowledge hub will be instrumental in supporting the development of a new economic model for the country. It is proven that a country’s development is primarily based on its people and its resources.

Oman has aptly embraced modernisation and progress while retaining the core aspects of its culture and heritage. Oman has never lost sight of its roots. Traditional Omani culture is embedded in nearly every aspect of daily life, from clothing and food, arts and crafts. The uniquely Omani culture and heritage continues today in many of the same ways it has been for hundreds of years.

Oman will be known by its talent and the difference is very vivid in the knowledge hub it currently possesses in every industry, be it aviation, banking, insurance, manufacturing, oil & gas, healthcare, tourism, trading, contracting, shipping, agriculture, education and so on, every industry has now its local experts with credentials to acknowledge from education to experience to run and lead any industry.

In addition the younger generation is taking on entrepreneurship and they are seeking challenges and opportunities in every sector, it’s the new generation which want and will create the difference and take Oman to the globe as one of the best growing economies in the world.



SNOW BLANKET

An aerial view shows a camp for internally displaced people covered in snow in the town of Raju in the rebel-controlled northern countryside of Syria's Aleppo province on Wednesday. — AFP

Putin to Ukraine: ‘Marry Me or I’ll Kill You’



THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Why is Vladimir Putin threatening to take another bite out of Ukraine, after devouring Crimea in 2014? That is not an easy question to answer because Putin is a one-man psychodrama, with a giant inferiority complex towards America that leaves him always stalking the world with a chip on his shoulder so big it’s amazing he can fit through any door.

For starters, don’t look for the answer in Ukraine. If Putin decides indeed to take another bite out of Ukraine, it will be first and foremost because Putin thinks it will strengthen his chance of staying in power in Russia, which for him is always paramount.

To understand how invading Ukraine again could serve that end, one has to go back to the shift Putin made in the last decade: He went from selling himself to the Russian people as the leader who would enable them to overcome their poverty of wealth in the post-Cold War era to the leader who would enable them to overcome their poverty of dignity in the post-Cold War era.

I learned this from Leon Aron, a Russia expert at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of “Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life”, who is now writing a book about the future of Putin’s Russia. The way Aron put it, when Putin came to power at the end of 1999, he was able to benefit from the restructuring of the Russian economy by Boris Yeltsin; from significant foreign investment; from rising oil, gas and mineral prices; and from improved political stability.

Russians associated Putin’s first two terms — 2000 to 2008 — “with unprecedented wealth accumulation in modern Russian history”, said Aron.

But beginning in 2011 and stretching all the way to 2019, Russia’s economy stagnated because of lower energy prices and, most of all, institutional impediments to growth: Putin’s preference to tap Russia’s natural resources, not its human resources. No Silicon Valleys for him — except cyberhackers. That would require real rule of law, secure property rights and the unleashing of talented people, who ask too many questions like, “Vlad, where did your money come from?”

“Putin’s response to this economic stagnation and the political peril it represented was to shift the basis of his regime’s legitimacy from economic progress, which made Putin so popular in his first two terms in office, to Putin as the defender of a motherland besieged by the West”, Aron told me.

Writing in The Hill, Aron quoted Russian opposition columnist Sergei

Medvedev as recently observing: “Putin has forged a nation of war that has battered the hatches and looks at the world through a lookout slit of a tank. The degree of military-patriotic hysteria [in] Russia today brings to mind the USSR of the 1930s, the era of athletes’ parades, tank mock-ups and dirigibles.”

This is classic wag-the-dog politics. His obsession with the Soviet Union and his nostalgia for the power,

IF PUTIN DECIDES INDEED TO TAKE ANOTHER BITE OUT OF UKRAINE, IT WILL BE FIRST AND FOREMOST BECAUSE PUTIN THINKS IT WILL STRENGTHEN HIS CHANCE OF STAYING IN POWER IN RUSSIA, WHICH FOR HIM IS ALWAYS PARAMOUNT

glory and dignity it gave him and his generation of Russians run deep. He was not exaggerating when he declared in 2005 that the breakup of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century.

And because Ukraine, and its capital, Kyiv, played a central role long ago in Russian history, and because Ukraine was a bulwark and breadbasket of the Soviet Union in its heyday, and because perhaps 8 million ethnic Russians still live in Ukraine (out of 43 million), Putin claims that it is his “duty” to reunite Russia and Ukraine. He blithely ignores the fact that Ukraine has its own language, history and post-Soviet generation that believes its duty is to be independent.

For Putin, losing Ukraine “is like an amputation”, remarked political scientist Ivan Kratsev, Chairman of the Center for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, Bulgaria. “Putin looks at Ukraine and Belarus as part of Russia’s civilisational and cultural space. He thinks the Ukrainian state is totally artificial and that Ukrainian nationalism is not authentic.”

The reason Putin has accelerated his Ukraine threat — which I would call “marry me or I will kill you” — is that he knows that under Ukraine’s current president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the process of Ukrainisation has accelerated and the Russian language is being pushed out of schools and Russian television out of the media space.

Said Kratsev: “Putin knows that in 10 years the young generation in Ukraine will not be speaking Russian at all, and it will have no identification with Russian culture.” Maybe best to act now, thinks Putin, before the Ukrainian army gets bigger, better trained and better armed — and while Europe and America are in disarray over COVID and in no mood for war.

And then there are just the raw geopolitical motives. In creating the crisis around Ukraine, said Kratsev, “Putin is inviting the West to a funeral for the post-Cold War order.”

For Putin, the post-Cold War order was something imposed on Russia and Boris Yeltsin when Russia was weak. It involved not only pushing Nato into Eastern European countries that were once part of the Soviet Nato — the Warsaw Pact — but also pushing Nato and European Union influence into the former Soviet empire itself, in places like Ukraine and Georgia.

Putin’s troop buildup says to the West: Either we negotiate a new post-Cold War order or I will start a post-post-Cold War confrontation.

As longtime readers of this column know, I was a vigorous opponent of Nato expansion after the Cold War. It is one of the stupidest things we ever did — focusing on “NATOising” Poland and Hungary rather than building on an amazing, largely nonviolent, democratic revolution in Russia and locking it into the West. Nurturing that Russian revolution to fruition would not have been simple, but by pressing ahead with Nato expansion we made it easy for an autocratic nationalist like Putin to lock himself in power by telling the Russian people that only he could keep Nato and the West from destroying Russia — militarily, culturally and religiously.

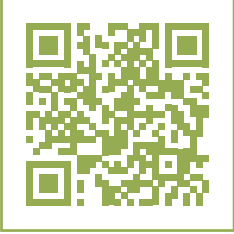
That said, I don’t weep for Putin. He is the human embodiment of one of the oldest Russian fables: A Russian peasant pleads to God for aid after he sees that his better-off neighbour has just obtained a cow. When God asks the peasant how he can help, the peasant says, “Kill my neighbour’s cow.”

The last thing that Putin wants is a thriving Ukraine that joins the European Union and develops its people and economy beyond Putin’s underperforming, autocratic Russia. Putin would rather see our cow die than do what it takes to raise a healthy cow of his own. He’s always looking for dignity in all the wrong places. He’s rather pathetic — but also armed and dangerous.

— The New York Times

sport

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AHF CEO Tayyab Ikram and OHA Chairman Dr Marwan bin Juma al Juma with the team captains after unveiling the Women's Asia Cup hockey trophy in Muscat on Wednesday. – AbdulWahid al Hamdani

WOMEN’S ASIA CUP HOCKEY
FROM TOMORROW

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Women's Asia Cup hockey will make its first appearance in the Sultanate of Oman when the 2022 edition will kick off at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat on Friday.

Defending champions India are grouped with Japan, Malaysia and Singapore in Pool A, while China, South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia make up Pool B.

Asian Hockey Federation (AHF) CEO Tayyab Ikram said it is

a historic moment for the Sultanate of Oman in pioneering among the Gulf and Arab region to host women's hockey for the first time.

“It is a historic occasion for the Sultanate of Oman and Oman Hockey Association (OHA) as they host the Asia Cup women's hockey for the first time in the region. This was possible only through the solid support from the Government of Oman,” Ikram told a press conference to introduce the captains and unveil the trophy at the Grand Marooj Hotel on Wednesday.

“This was a bold decision by the authorities to stage the event in Muscat following strict Covid-19 protocols. I congratulate the Oman Olympic Committee, the OHA and other officials involved to make the tournament a reality in Muscat,” the International Hockey Federation (FIH) board member said.

He said the event will be live streamed by FIH through its website and media channels.

OHA Chairman Dr Marwan bin Juma al Juma said Oman hockey will strive to achieve more heights.

“We want to make our presence felt in the global map of hockey by hosting top events like Asia Cup. We also want that the young generation of hockey players in the country take advantage of getting exposure with the top talents of hockey across the world,” he said.

The top-4 teams of the Women's Asia Cup Muscat 2022 will qualify for the FIH Hockey Women's World Cup 2022.

Indian captain and goalkeeper Savita said the title defenders will put up their best performance in Muscat.

“This tournament is important for us and we have worked well on several aspects of the game. We are waiting to perform on the ground after an intense training and preparation,” she said.

The Indian team had missed a bronze closely in the Tokyo Olympics 2020 after missing out to Great Britain 4-3. Savita said the team will focus on their strengths as they open campaign against Malaysia on Friday.

Japan captain said their team had arrived early for getting acclimatised to the conditions in

the Sultanate of Oman.

“We had a small camp in Muscat and hopefully we can perform our best in the tournament.”

The South Korean captain said they had prepared hard for the top Asian tournament and hoped to deliver their top performance.

China captain expressed her delight to be in the Sultanate of Oman and promised a good show from the side.

Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysian captains also voiced confidence for a good competitive tournament.

OHA launches Oman national women’s team

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

The Oman Hockey Association (OHA) launched the first Oman national women's team on Wednesday during a ceremony to unveil the trophy of the 2022 Women's Asia Cup.

The Asian event briefing function featured participation of Tayyab Ikram, IOC Commission Member, FIH Executive board member and CEO of AHF, in presence of Dr Marwan bin Juma al Juma, Chairman of OHA, and team officials and captains of the participating nations.

The OHA chief welcomed the delegates in his speech. “Thanks to all for their attendance in this function. We wish you a pleasant stay in the Sultanate of Oman. We are proud to host this continental



event (the Asia Cup for Women) despite the health conditions that the whole world is going through. But sports can overcome challenges, and we will take this as an opportunity to encourage the women's hockey in the Sultanate of Oman,” he said.

Highlighting on the women's hockey, he said that, “We have

outlined programme for the Oman women's hockey and to establish female technicians in this sport. We are all eager to start the 10th edition of the Asian Women's Cup in Muscat. I congratulate the Asian Hockey Federation (AHF) for these honourable efforts to promote hockey in our country and special thanks to the sponsors.

We look forward to host a great tournament.”

Big milestone

AHF CEO, Tayyab Ikram, said the Sultanate of Oman represented by OHA achieved another big milestone through hosting the 2022 Women's Asia Cup in Muscat. “The Sultanate of Oman is a leading country

in GCC and among Arabian countries to host continental and international hockey events. There is a great development in Sultanate of Oman's sporting field under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. Hosting of 2022 Women's Asia Cup and the World 5s Cup in 2024 are significant steps towards

development and improvement of hockey in the Sultanate of Oman,” he said.

Ikram appreciated the efforts taken by the OHA to launch the women national team. “It is a great initiative to see the Omani women hockey team. Congratulations to OHA for their efforts in this field. Also, the launch of women hockey activities in the Sultanate of Oman as apart of the Asian event is a good move for women sport. We hope to see Omani women team competing in the forthcoming events soon,” he ended.

It is the tenth edition for 2022 Women's Asia Cup. The first edition of the Asian event was organised in Seoul in 1985. The event act as World Cup qualifiers with four teams qualify for Women's Hockey World Cup to be hosted in Spain and Netherlands in July 2022.



In brief

MUSCAT



DHOFAR EDGE
AL SUWAIQ IN HM CUP

Awadh al Shahri netted the lone goal as Dhofar edged Al Suwaiq 1-0 in the first leg quarterfinal of the HM Cup football championship on Wednesday.

The goal came in the 66th minute of the keenly-contested match at Al Saada Sports Complex in Salalah.

The second leg of the quarterfinal will be held at the Al Rustaq Sports Complex on February 10.

NEW DELHI



SANIA MIRZA TO QUIT TENNIS THIS YEAR

Indian former doubles world number one Sania Mirza said on Wednesday she will retire from tennis at the end of this season with injuries taking their toll.

It came after the 35-year-old, regarded as her country's greatest women's tennis player, bowed out of the Australian Open in the first round with her partner Nadiia Kichenok of Ukraine.

"I have decided this will be my last season. I'm taking it week by week, not sure if I can last the season, but I want to," she told press in Melbourne, in comments later confirmed by her father.

"I still feel I can play well, go deep into tournaments and all that. But beyond this season I don't see my body do it either. It's beat," Mirza, who has won six Grand Slam doubles titles, is paired with America's Rajeev Ram in the mixed doubles at the Australian Open.

YAOUNDE



COMOROS SEND GHANA CRASHING OUT

Four-time champions Ghana were eliminated from the Africa Cup of Nations after crashing 3-2 to minnows Comoros in Group C on Tuesday in Garoua.

The Black Stars had captain Andre Ayew sent off after 25 minutes and, after wiping out a two-goal deficit, lost when Comoros' Ahmed Mogni scored his second goal five minutes from time.

Morocco and Gabon drew 2-2 in Yaounde in the same group to retain first and second places respectively and qualify for the round of 16, which kicks off on Sunday.

Comoros, representing a tiny island nation off the south east coast of Africa, finished third and must wait until Thursday to know if they are among the best four third-placed teams, who get last 16 spots.

'SMILING ASSASSIN' OSAKA, RUTHLESS BARTY STRIDE CLOSE

NADAL ROLLS ON, ZVEREV AND BERRETTINI ADVANCE

MELBOURNE: Naomi Osaka played the role of smiling assassin and top seed Ashleigh Barty was ruthlessly efficient at the Australian Open on Wednesday as they moved closer to a potential fourth-round showdown.

Rafael Nadal ramped up his march towards an unprecedented men's 21st Grand Slam crown but needed five match points to put away tenacious qualifier Yannick Hanfmann.

The impressive Barty, chasing a first title at her home Slam, barely broke sweat in her second round match, breezing past Italian qualifier Lucia Bronzetti 6-1, 6-1 in just 52 minutes in the heat of Rod Laver Arena. Not to be outdone, defending champion Osaka rushed through the first set 6-0 against Madison Brengle but then had a couple of dicey moments in the second set, before polishing it off 6-4, greeting the beaten American with a smile at the net.

Rivals Barty and Osaka, who share six major titles between them, are now one victory away from a last-16 showdown at Melbourne Park. But first Barty, the Wimbledon champion and hot favourite in Melbourne, faces a potentially tricky task against 30th seed Camila Giorgi.

"She is an incredible ball striker and one of the most athletic girls out there," said the world number one of the experienced Italian.

The ultra-consistent Barty, who won the lead-up tournament in Adelaide, hasn't dropped her



Japan's Naomi Osaka reacts during her second round match against Madison Brengle of the US. — Reuters

serve for 48 straight games over five matches this year.

Japan's Osaka faces American Amanda Anisimova, a budding talent who sprang a shock in defeating Olympic champion Belinda Bencic. Osaka, winner of the 2019 and 2021 Australian Opens, has vowed to have more fun on court this year, following a difficult last year in which she said she had suffered from depression.

"I am a bit of a perfectionist. I feel that if I compare myself to the past I will never be satisfied," she said, to cheers from the crowd.

In-form eighth seed Paula Ba-

dosa, who won the Sydney warm-up tournament, and French Open champion Barbora Krejickova both sailed through to round three in two sets. Maria Sakkari, the Greek fifth seed, also won with little fuss.

NADAL QUEST FOR 21

With defending champion Novak Djokovic deported on the eve of the season's first Grand Slam, the men's draw has opened up for Spanish veteran Nadal.

The 20-time Slam winner, who recently won his first tournament after five months out battling a foot injury, was never really trou-



Australia's Ashleigh Barty in action during her second round match against Italy's Lucia Bronzetti. — Reuters

bled by the German Hanfmann until the end.

Down 3-5, 0-40, the world number 126 fought back to extend the contest and saved two more match points, before finally succumbing 6-2, 6-3, 6-4.

Next up for the 35-year-old Nadal is Russian 28th seed Karen Khachanov, which should be an altogether bigger test of his title credentials.

Nadal, the sixth seed, could face third seed Alexander Zverev in the quarterfinals but he is refusing to look that far ahead. "I don't know, I am in the third round, I

need to win very tough matches to be there," the Spanish great said.

Olympic champion Zverev made light work of Australian hope John Millman, dismissing him in three sets, the German's power game silencing the partisan crowd. Seventh seed Matteo Berrettini, who endured frequent lavatory trips in a gutsy four-set win on Monday, defeated American Stefan Kozlov and plays teenage 31st seed Carlos Alcaraz.

Also through, after surviving in five sets over Korean Kwon Soon-woo, was Canadian 14th seed Denis Shapovalov. — AFP

Waqar steers IAS to exciting victory, Rafique stars in thrilling Sunlight win

MUSCAT: Rao Waqar's solid 57 not out helped IAS Engineering and Construction to a 3-wicket victory against AER International Trading and Contracting in a 50-over Premier Division League game at OC Turf 1 in Amerat on Friday. AER struggled to score freely and was bowled out for 161 in the 47th over.

Riding on Waqar's marathon 103-ball 57, AER reached the target in 40.2 overs, scoring 162 for 7.

Brief Scores (Premier Division 50 overs): AER 161 all out in 46.5 overs (Rubel Satter 28 – 2x4, Haythim Bahar 3-12, Rashid Khalid 2-32, Imran Muhammed 2-37, Waseem Akhtar 2-26) lost to IAS 162 for 7 in 40.2 overs (Rao Waqar 57 – 4x4, Arsalan Bashir 36 – 5x4, Hammad Mirza 35 – 4x4, Amir Kaleem 2-45, Rubel Satter 2-22) by 3 wickets.

RAFIQUE STARS

Rafique Mujib's fluent 53 off 39 aided Sunlight to a nail-biting 9-run win over Orient Travels/Abu Amin Metal in an A Division T20 League match at OC Turf 2 on Saturday.

Brief Scores (A Division T20): Sunlight 172 for 5 in 20 overs (Rafique Mujib 53 – 4x4, 2x6, Nasir Siddique 38 – 2x4, 3x6, Ishtiaq Muhammed 36 – 1x4, 1x6, Tanveer Rana 2-24, Tauseef Ahmad 2-31) beat Orient Travels / Abu Amin Metal 163 for 7 in 20 overs (Adil Khan 40 – 4x4, Rajesh Devashya 2-25, Ilyas Afreedi 2-29) by 9 runs.

AVINASH, NEIL SHINE

Excellent all-round show by Avinash Sharma and brilliant batting by Neil Paily were the highlights of Royal Gulf's huge 106-run victory against OCT Al Nahdha in an F Division T20 League game at OAC 3 ground in Seeb on Friday.

Brief Scores
F Division: Royal Gulf 198 for 7 in 20 overs (Neil Paily 59 – 8x4, Avinash Sharma 45 – 7x4, Vineesh Raj 38 – 6x4, Sharif Al Balushi 3-40, Arif Al Balushi 2-14) beat OCT Al Nahdha 92 for 8 in 20 overs (Zakariya Bakhsh 21 – 2x4, Tibin C Thomas 3-24, Avinash Sharma 3-14) by 106 runs.

Women's League
Wadi Kabir Women 65 for 5 in 20 overs (Shreya Suresh 20 – 2x4) lost to Muscat Women 66 for 2 in 7 overs (Bhakti Shetty 13) by 8 wickets.

Junior League U19
Pakistan School Muscat U19 104 all out in 36 overs (Abdullah Iftikhar 24 – 2x4, 1x6, Muhammad Asad 24 – 4x4, Aditya Gurumukhi 2-2, Arjun Suresh 2-21, Glen Alexei 2-14) thrashed by Indian School Muscat U-19 105 for 0 in 11.4 overs (Aditya Gurumukhi 54 – 7x4, Aditya Girish 27 – 3x4) by 10 wickets.

Junior League U16
Indian School Al Seeb 228 for 6 in 30 overs (Aneek Chakrovorty 111 – 7x4, Vishwas 55 – 2x4, Kavish Rajeshkumar 3-39, Hemanath Balasubramanian 2-27) trounced ISWK-A 160 all out in 26.5 overs (Hemakesh Balasubramanian 43 – 8x4, Atharvashrikant Akojwar 41 – 5x4, Rajnesh 2-22, Vaishnav Raj 2-27) by 68 runs.

SPORTS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 19

Oman Equestrian Federation (OEF) will host the second international show jumping championship (Masters 2022) in Barka on January 28 and 29.

More than 110 men and women horse riders from 12 countries will participate in the one-star championship.

Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Britain, America, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Canada, Italy, Iraq, Morocco along with hosts the Sultanate of Oman will participate in the two-day event.

The women's championship will be held for a first time in the Gulf, said Hasan bin Mahboob Hashmani, OEF chief executive.

The first round of the female riders championship will be held in preparation for a future GCC female horse riders championship, he said.

"The championship will give good exposure to the local officials in preparing for international show jumping. The track of the competition has to prepared well and the event will be held under strict medical protocol and medical examination for all participants and horses," Hashmani added.

The championship will be in

three days through 14 strokes as

7 strokes each day.

The first day, January 27, will be devoted to technical preparation (veterinary examination and temperature measurement).

The second day, January 28, is the first day for competitions in 7 strokes divided as per the different categories for unisex, and the strokes are: first half for new local horses and new riders for 70 to 80 cm high. The local beginner's category for 90 to 95 cm high and the third half of the international women's category, 105 cm high. The fourth half for International Pan class, 105 cm high, the fifth half for international pan for 110 cm high, sixth half for international pan ,120 cm high and the seven half for International pan height 130 cm. The competitions will be repeated on the third day.

The championship will be in

India Maharajas clash with Asia Lions in LLC opener

KAIF, MISBAH LAVISH PRAISE ON OCA GROUND IN AL AMERAT

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, JAN 19

It will be a treat for cricket fans across the world and especially for fans in the Sultanate of Oman when Mohammad Kaif's India Maharajas take on Misbah ul Haq's Asia Lions in the Legends League Cricket opener today.

Mohammad Kaif and Misbahul-Haq lavished praise and had rave reviews for the Sultanate of Oman's scenic and picturesque Oman Cricket Academy Ground in Al Amerat, where the matches will be played.

The three-team event featuring retired international cricket legends also includes the World Giants side comprising former icons such as Brett Lee, Jonty Rhodes, Kevin Pietersen etc.

The Indian side will see the likes of Yuvraj Singh, Harbhajan Singh, Kaif, Irfan Pathan, Yusuf Pathan, Stuart Binny among others in the mix.

The legendary Virender Sehwag will join the team later and Kaif will captain the side for the first couple of games in his absence.

The Asia Lions led by Misbah will have former heavyweights such as Shoaib Akhtar, Shahid Afridi, Muttiah Muralitharan and Tillkeratne Dilshan fighting it out for them.

Misbah felt there will be no dearth of motivation for him nor his team-mates when they take the field despite being retired cricketers.

"Most of the players are not active anymore and don't play regularly. But whenever we do play, we take it seriously. We will give our best, go there and have fun. We will play to our potential and overall I feel it's nice to play with these legends and against them in a tournament like this", he added.

Misbah gave a huge thumbs up to the Oman Cricket Academy Ground in Al Amerat where the matches will be played.

"I am really impressed by the ground and it's a very beautiful and scenic stadium. With mountains in the



background, it's a great place to play cricket. This is my first time in the Sultanate of Oman and I've really liked it as a place and feel very good to be here", the former Pakistan captain added.

On a lighter note, when a journalist asked Misbah about Shoaib Akhtar's ability to bowl those lightning quick deliveries that he's famous for, Misbah replied in the affirmative.

"He (Akhtar) can still bowl

at 140 plus and I would say if he's fit, he can bowl as quick as he used to back in the day", Misbah stated.

KAIF LOOKING FORWARD

Former India legend Mohammad Kaif also had great things to say about the Sultanate of Oman.

"I'm really impressed by the venue. I went to the pitch and spend some time at the ground and it's lovely. Looking forward to playing games here. Hopefully, we will have some high scoring

matches that will entertain the crowds and cricket fans", he added.

Kaif said he was also excited to play with his former India team-mates Yuvraj, Harbhajan, Pathan brothers etc and feel the same vibe as their playing days.

"Yes, it will be great to be back amongst my team-mates from the Indian dressing room. I had also played the Road Safety World Series where Sachin Tendulkar was there as well. But, that was in India and this is the first time abroad for an event like this, so looking forward to it", he added.



I am really impressed by the ground and it's a very beautiful and scenic stadium. With mountains in the background, it's a great place to play cricket. This is my first time in the Sultanate of Oman and I've really liked it as a place and feel very good to be here

MISBAH-UL-HAQ

Asia Lions captain

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51

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Workshop reviews readiness of AI infrastructure



MUSCAT: Oman Data Park (ODP), the leading provider of IT managed services, says the Sultanate of Oman has well-established infrastructure to support Artificial Intelligence (AI) service offerings.

Participants reviewed the AI roadmap of ministries, cybersecurity solutions and the framework of planning AI projects. The event, which saw the participation of 30 government units, discussed the technical support provided by ODP's Nebula AI, which is powered by Nvidia and hosted in the Sultanate of Oman.

Eng Maqbool al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park, said the workshop contributes to achieving the goals of the Sultanate of Oman's National Programme for Artificial Intelligence.

The national programme aims to enhance the productivity of targeted sectors for economic diversification and to develop human resources in the AI field, among other goals. — ONA

Bank Nizwa and Sohar International get CBO approval to explore merger

CONSOLIDATION: Both Sharia-compliant lenders reported healthy bottom-lines in 2021

CONRAD PRABHU @conradprabhu

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has given its provisional approval to Bank Nizwa and Sohar International Bank to begin the due diligence process culminating in the planned merger of the two Sharia-compliant lenders.

Both institutions said in separate filings to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) on Wednesday that they had received 'in-principle approval' for the due diligence process to commence.

It follows a disclosure made by the two banks last November affirming their interest to explore the feasibility of merging their operations.

Both banks achieved healthy bottom-lines in 2021 despite challenging economic conditions.

Bank Nizwa, the first dedicated Islamic Bank to be established in the Sultanate of Oman, reported a 13-per cent increase in post-tax profit of RO 12.526 million in 2021, up from RO 11.067 million



a year earlier.

Total assets were up 16 per cent at RO 1.404 billion compared with the previous year's total of RO 1.206 billion.

According to preliminary unaudited results for the 12 months ended on December 31, 2021, customer deposits climbed 20 per cent to RO 1.109 billion, up from RO 924.208 million in 2020. Financing to customers also increased 13 per cent to RO 1.146 billion in 2021, up from RO 1.014 billion for the previous year.

Sohar International Bank saw its net profit climb 41.6 per cent to RO 28.34 million for the year ended on December 31, 2021, up from RO 20.01

Both institutions said in separate filings to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) on Wednesday that they had received 'in-principle approval' for the due diligence process to commence

million for the previous year. Announcing its preliminary unaudited results for the year, the lender posted a 29.0-per cent increase in net operating income (before impairment provisions) to RO 60.40 million last year, up



from RO 46.83 million a year earlier.

The increase was driven by growth in all revenue streams including gains in the sale of investment securities, it said.

Total assets climbed 14.5 per cent to RO 4.134 billion in 2021, compared to RO 3.611 billion in 2020 — a growth driven mainly by an increase in investment securities.

Loans, advances and financing (net) increased 4.3 per cent to RO 2.612 billion, up from RO 2.503 billion in 2020. Customer deposits rose 7.3 per cent to RO 2.394 billion in 2021, up from RO 2.331 billion a year earlier.

A 19.6-per cent increase in

shareholder equity to RO 396.58 million was aided by a highly successful rights issue of RO 50 million, the Bank added.

Islamic banking entities have growth robustly over the past years, according to the Central Bank of Oman. Financing provided by Islamic lenders totalled RO 4.8 billion as of end-November 2021, recording a growth of 13.1 per cent y-o-y.

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

Sultanate of Oman to host Global HSE Conference

Ministry of Energy and Minerals is main sponsor of 4-day forum focusing on the theme, 'Excellence in HSE – leadership, sustainability, technology'

BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, JAN 19

Reflecting the continuous support of the Sultanate of Oman towards achieving the desired goals and objectives of HSE, the eighth edition of Global HSE conference and exhibition will be held in Muscat next month under the theme "Excellence in HSE — leadership, sustainability, technology".

At a press briefing, it was announced that the Global HSE forum will be held during February 13-16 under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals, at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Global HSE 2022 conference hosted by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals comes as an initiative



of Petroleum Development Oman in cooperation with iCONEX, international event organiser. It will witness local and international participation of public and private organisations, in addition to interested professionals in HSE practices.

The conference aims to continue the tradition of creating a sustainable platform for the industry to discuss and debate on various challenges faced by

the industry and community and ultimately conclude with solutions for protecting the lives of people and environment.

It also aims to lay more emphasis on 3 pillars — Leadership Commitment, Use of Technology and mainstream focus on Sustainable Goals that organisations can persist in the current competitive and challenging market while having to meet legal requirements and

communities' expectations.

A number of local and international speakers, experts, technicians, specialists and academics are expected to participate to introduce their experiences in HSE field, in addition to a number of regional and international countries and more than 50 companies from different local and international organisations to highlight the latest technologies and experiences

related to HSE, such as devices, equipment and modern system applications.

The participants will have the opportunity to network and meet a large number of global companies participating in this event, including Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), Saudi Aramco, OQ, Sadara Chemical Company, Saudi Arabian Mining (MA'ADEN), Asyad, Occidental Oman (OXY),

Bahrain National Gas Company (BANAGAS), Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO), Shell, NAMA Holding Company, Oman LNG, BP, Petrofac, CC Energy Development, Daleel Petroleum, Aluminum Bahrain (ALBA), Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company (GPIC) and other international companies and other institutes and companies.

It will include an opening ceremony, 3 keynote address sessions, 4 panel discussions, 16 technical sessions and 7 workshops that will address various currents HSE related topics, such as process safety management, international HSE management standards, pandemic risk and response management for major industries, energy efficiency and climate change, and successful practical experiences in the areas of health, safety, and environment, and related specialised topics.

The press conference was attended by representatives from the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Petroleum Development Oman, in addition to a number of companies and sponsors.

OABC hosts ‘LinkedIn Hacks’ session on equipping professionals

MUSCAT: Oman’s most active business networking organisation, the Oman American Business Center (OABC), hosted “LinkedIn Hacks” for member executives on Wednesday, January 12 at the Royal Tulip Muscat Hotel.

The session was designed to equip professionals from companies within the OABC looking to level up their own LinkedIn skills and techniques but was especially directed towards sales, business, development and commercial roles engaged in B2B marketing.

Unlike OABC’s first Linked In session hosted in 2020, this more advanced workshop required attendees to have prior experience on LinkedIn and an existing account on the platform.

OABC member and presenter Mohammed al Tamami, known as one of Oman’s top digital strategists, covered a variety of ways to “hack the system” and get posts seen, liked, shared, and noticed by the right people, creating new opportunities to do business.

The workshop included a brief time of networking and coffee, a presentation, and time for Q & A. Tamami says, “Linked In, similar



to any social media tool, requires utilising a certain etiquette and specific methods in order to access the wealth of resources it can bring to us.

Sharing my experience with others through OABC’s last Linked n session for members made a big difference to those who are now actively using it, and this inspired us to hold more such workshops.

The focus of this event was

to focus on that B2B and B2C sales aspect of Linked In: What to remember, what to avoid, and examples for those involved in online relationship building with clients.”

“One thing we’ve learned from the Covid-19 era is that sometimes without warning, our online life takes front and centre and the physical is no longer easily accessible”, says Rebecca Olson, Executive Director of the

OABC.

“LinkedIn was a useful resource before, but now it is an essential platform for those in corporate roles. Its use is growing daily in Oman as a place to explore new connections, vet people before you meet them, or present oneself and one’s services to the business community.

Creating an effective personal and business profile can open new doors for both new professionals and those who’ve been in the business community for a long time.

As Oman’s largest and most active networking group, OABC is focused on supporting the relationships between member companies both online and in person.

We’re thankful for Mohammed al Tamami for his time in preparing the session, and for his great passion in equipping others to excel in their own online networking.”

As the official affiliate of the US Chamber of Commerce in Oman (AmCham Oman), the OABC promotes understanding, partnerships & other matters of mutual economic interest between business communities in Oman and the United States.

Attractive interest rates with BankDhofar’s loans

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its commitment to provide the best services, products and financial solutions to its customers, BankDhofar announces special offers and discounted rates for the loans. Customers who avail for the personal, housing, and car loans will get attractive rates.

For the housing loan the interest rate starts from 4.99 per cent, while for the housing and car loans the interest rate starts from 4.95 per cent.

Commenting on the offer, Muhannad al Raisi, Executive Manager — Assets Products Development and Bancassurance, said: “This offer highlights our endeavour to design the best financial solutions that cater to the various needs of our customers. We have all gone through tough times financially, due to Covid-19 which affected various aspects of our lives. Thus, we are offering our customers attractive interest rates on personal and housing loans.”

To avail the offer, customers may visit nearest BankDhofar branch to apply for the personal or housing loan during this period.

More details on the terms



and conditions and the eligibility are available on BankDhofar’s website (<https://www.bankdhofar.com/en-GB/Loans.aspx>).

BankDhofar is one of the best banks in the region, catering to customers’ needs and requirements, and setting the standard for the best customer experience within the banking industry in the Sultanate through innovative products and creative solutions.

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

LEXUS LAUNCHES ALL-NEW 2022 NX

MUSCAT: At a Lexus digital event, Saud Bahwan Automotive, unveiled the all-new 2022 Lexus NX, recently. The event offered viewers the convenience of viewing the launch of the NX from the comfort of their home or wherever they were.

The event premiered on all the Lexus Oman social media pages on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

Joining the event and sharing his views via a special video message was Chief Engineer Takeaki Kato. He said, “The new NX is designed to meet the diverse lifestyles of customers around the world with a complete renewal of its key strengths, including electrification, design, driving performance and advanced technologies to broaden its appeal.”

The NX programme has brought about a major change in Lexus’ approach to new vehicle development, applying digital modelling and computer techniques for smarter engineering that can achieve a higher level of quality assurance.

Lexus design enters a new period of evolution with the launch of the new NX, while remaining true its core L-finesse philosophy. At the front, the hallmark Lexus spindle grille plays a more integral role in the design.

The elegant shape of the bonnet also supports good forward visibility from the driver’s seat. L-shaped daytime running lights are positioned above the headlights and have seamless surface illumination with a fade-out function



when the driver uses the turn indicators.

The standard headlights are bi-beam LED-type with Automatic High Beam (AHB). The rear view is distinguished by new L-shaped all-LED light clusters, and Lexus’ signature L-shaped light bar that spans the width of the vehicle.

On the tailgate, the Lexus emblem has been replaced with the “LEXUS” name, creating a more modern and simpler look and strengthening the car’s identity.

The NX F SPORT models feature dark chrome exterior details, a mesh grille and 20-inch alloy wheels with a 10-spoke design inspired the wheels used on Lexus’ LC flagship coupe.

There are also new front and rear bumper designs with larger



side vents cut into the front bumper.

The meters on high grade models are High Definition and their appearance can be customised; there is an exclusive meter design for the F SPORT models, featuring a tachometer and speedometer. Touch tracer switches on the steering wheel

can be used to change or update the contents of the multi-information display without having to look away from the road ahead.

The new NX is the first model to feature Lexus’ Tazuna concept for the driver’s cockpit. It focuses on giving the driver direct, intuitive control of the vehicle,

following the principal of “hands on the wheel, eyes on the road”.

To help keep the driver’s attention focused on the road ahead, the primary sources of information — the multi-information display, multimedia screen, gauges, meters and optional head-up display — are grouped so they can be read at-a-glance.

Passengers enjoy a greater sense of space with the feeling of a luxurious lounge. Applying the Vital x Tech concept has created a cabin that is innovative, elegant and practical.

The design, quality and finish exemplify the Lexus traditions of omotenashi hospitality and takumi artisan craftsmanship, using fine-quality materials and precision methods to ensure everything you see,

touch and hear is perfect. Cabin illumination can be adjusted for ambient lighting in the footwells, door panels and centre console.

The NX is the first Lexus model to be fitted an e-latch electronic door release system. This allows the door to be opened with a smooth, simple and near-silent motion.

Lexus has introduced two new petrol engines in the NX range, a 2.4-litre turbo and a naturally aspirated 2.5 litre. The 2.4 turbo, featured in the new NX 350, is engineered for high output and high torque, giving the driver a sense of flowing, uninterrupted power.

Maximum power of 275 hp produced at 6,000 rpm, with peak 430 Nm of torque delivered from 1,700-3,600 rpm. The turbocharger is a new, high-efficiency unit that achieves power performance, fuel economy and emissions compliance with quiet operation.

A new 8-speed Direct Shift automatic transmission, replaces the 6-speed transmission previously featured in the NX. The 2.5-litre engine featured in the new NX’s hybrid electric system, is tuned to produce a combined output of 240 hp. The CVT transmission enhances acceleration performance and combines a smooth drive with excellent fuel efficiency.

Those wishing to catch up on the most happening digital launch event, that they missed, can view the event on Lexus Oman social media channels. The All-New Lexus NX vehicle is now on display at the Lexus showrooms.



Omantel, SQU cooperate to boost digital economy

New partnership: For the fifth year in a row, the company supports R&D in ICT and nanotechnology

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Omantel announced that it will continue supporting scientific research and innovation in the Sultanate of Oman by extending its research partnership with Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). The telecom company will lend its weight — for the fifth consecutive year — to the research scholarship initiative, the Omantel Research Fund. The fund will cover deserving and pathbreaking research topics in the field of ICT and Nanotechnology.

The agreement was signed by His Highness Sayyid Dr Fahad

bin al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), and Talal bin Said al Mamari, CEO, Omantel. The support is part of Omantel's CSR Pillar, 'Education' which aims at contributing to a digital competent society in which everyone has equitable access to quality education, including technical and vocational skills. It aligns with the company's commitment to the nation and aims to support the Omani march towards a knowledge-based economy.

The funding by Omantel will contribute to the government's efforts to boost the Sultanate of Oman's ranking in UNESCO's Global Innovation's University/ Industry Research Collaboration Index, Knowledge Creation Index and the Gross Expenditure on R&D Financed by Business Enterprise as a Percentage of Total Gross Expenditure on R&D.

The support also contributes to



wards the country's effort in meeting United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 9, which aims to spur innovation and drive sustainable industries that work for everyone, and Goal 17 related to partnerships, especially the public-private partnerships, and indirectly towards Goal 4 on the quality of education.

Saba bint Said al Busaidi, Senior Manager Corporate Affairs at

Omantel, said, "Omantel is proud to be an enabler in the Sultanate of Oman's economic growth. Omantel is always looking for opportunities for contributing to the country's intrinsic and global objectives in every sphere.

"The association with SQU in this regard has been a long and fruitful one, and we are confident that such initiatives will act as a catalyst for more and more people

to take up relevant research, the results of which can be applied to boost efficiency, productivity and national growth."

Following this, the joint committee between Omantel and Sultan Qaboos University met to evaluate and determine the winning ICT research proposals to be funded by Omantel in 2022.

Omantel was represented by Dr Yousef bin Salem al Hinai, General Manager of Information and Communication Technologies, and Dr Ali al Hashimi, General Manager of Networks, whilst the university was represented by a specialised committee headed by Dr Amer bin Saif al Hinai, Vice-President for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research.

The committee approved funding a number of researches which reflect the applied aspect of scientific research in the two mentioned fields.

Omantel's funding of scientific researches at Sultan Qaboos University is part of an ongoing collaborative project for the fifth year in a row, and it falls under the umbrella of Omantel's projects for community service and development. By supporting faculty and researchers in information and communications technology (ICT) and Nanotechnology, Omantel will enable researchers to collect and analyse data by using latest facilities and will encourage development of nanotechnology applications and usage in medicine, agriculture, environment, technology and engineering, and align national objectives with those listed under UNSDGs.

So far, 40 researchers and 20 research projects have benefitted from the Omantel Research Fund. More will be added this year as the partnership opens yet another chapter of possibilities.

Oil market could face another volatile year: IEA warns

PARIS: The oil market could face another volatile year, but demand is surging higher as the sector has weathered the impact of the Omicron coronavirus variant, the International Energy Agency said on Wednesday.

The IEA revised its demand estimates, saying it increased by 5.5 million barrels per day in 2021 and would grow by 3.3 million bpd in 2022 — 200,000 bpd higher than its previous estimate. This will take total demand above pre-Covid levels in 2022, at 99.7 million barrels per day.

While Covid cases have soared, "measures taken by governments to contain the virus are less severe than during earlier waves and their impact on economic activity and oil demand remain relatively subdued", the IEA said. But the agency, which advises governments on



The sun sets behind an oil pump outside Saint-Fiacre, near Paris. — Reuters

energy policy, said supply growth expectations were being tempered by "disruptions and production shortfalls" by some members of the OPEC+ group of top oil producers. — AFP

■ MADAYN, IRANIAN BUSINESS DELEGATION DISCUSS COOPERATION



An Iranian business delegation visited Al Rusayl Industrial City to get familiarised with the investment climate and business opportunities in the Sultanate of Oman. Mustafa bin Maqbool al Lawati, CEO of Oman Investment and Development Holding Company (Mubadrah), discussed prospects for cooperation with the Iranian delegation and briefed them about the incentives offered by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn). The delegation was also given an overview of Madayn's vision to enhance the Sultanate of Oman's position as a leading regional centre in manufacturing, ICT, innovation and entrepreneurship excellence.

China drafts nationwide rules to give property developers more access to escrow funds

HONG KONG: China is drafting nationwide rules to make it easier for property developers to access funds from sales still held in escrow accounts in its latest move to ease a severe cash crunch in the sector, four people with knowledge of the matter said.

Regulatory curbs on borrowing have driven the sector into crisis, highlighted by China Evergrande Group which was once China's top-selling developer but is now the world's most indebted property firm with liabilities of \$300 billion.

The new rules would help developers meet debt obligations, pay suppliers and finance operations by letting them use the funds in escrow that are currently controlled by municipal governments with no central oversight, the people said on condition of anonymity due to sensitivity of the matter.

"An abrupt clampdown on escrow accounts by local authorities after Evergrande's crash choked liquidity for some good quality names. A correction by the central government is much needed," said Nan Li, associate professor of finance at Shanghai Jiao Tong University.



Employees set up model apartments as they prepare a real estate exhibition in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. — Reuters

Chinese developers are allowed to sell residential projects before completing them but are required to put those funds in escrow accounts.

The cash held in escrow typically accounts for 50 per cent to 70 per cent of developers' pre-sale funds, one of the people said, without giving an estimate on the amount held. Guided by the cabinet-level Financial Stability and Development Committee, the sector's main regulator, the

Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and other authorities are drafting the new rules. Beijing aims to roll them out as early as end of January in a push to prevent a wider crisis, the people said.

The Hang Seng Mainland Properties index rose 1.6 per cent in afternoon trading after the Reuters report and ended nearly 6 per cent higher on Wednesday. Chinese property developers Shimao Group Holdings, Sunac China Holdings and Country

Garden Holdings led the sector's gains, closing up 11.3 per cent, 7.6 per cent and 8.3 per cent, respectively.

US dollar bonds issued by developers including Sunac and Country Garden also rose following the report.

The property sector accounts for about a quarter of China's economy, the world's second-largest after the United States. The State Council Information Office and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development

did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Many local governments curbed withdrawals from the escrow accounts in 2021 amid fears of contagion after news of Evergrande's debt problems, leaving several projects across the country unfinished and worsening cash flow for developers.

While some municipalities have eased withdrawal restrictions since late last year, one of the sources said that due to lack of nationwide rules on this front, local enforcement had already gone too far in several cities.

The proposed new rules are aimed at allowing developers to use escrow funds to first complete unfinished buildings and then for other purposes, three of the sources said.

The rules would also prioritise the repayment of onshore debt of developers with better credit profiles, the fourth source said. Nomura estimates that Chinese developers would need to meet onshore and offshore maturities of about \$33 billion each in the first two quarters of 2022, compared with 191 billion yuan in the last quarter of 2021. — Reuters

Morgan Stanley profit surges on M&A wave

NEW YORK: Morgan Stanley beat quarterly profit expectations on Wednesday by capitalising on a boom in deal-making and earning robust fees from managing assets for wealthy clients, sending the shares of the Wall Street investment bank up 5 per cent.

Full-year profit as well as revenue was a record for the bank, which advised on some of the world's biggest mergers during the year.

Net income surged 37 per cent to \$15 billion and revenue jumped 23 per cent to nearly \$60 billion.

Morgan Stanley's results rounded out a mixed earnings season for the nation's largest banks that cashed in on the M&A wave, but were dragged down by weak trading and higher expenses, which swelled as they spent heavily to retain key personnel in a race for talent.

In 2021, Wall Street investment banking giants have advised on several major business combinations, initial public offerings (IPOs) and helped put together deals involving special purpose acquisition companies.

— Reuters

Microsoft’s Activision deal has on virtual goggles

Microsoft Chief Executive Satya Nadella’s deal to splash out \$69 billion for Activision Blizzard makes a lot of sense, virtually. The software giant is paying a huge premium for its gaming rival, which should help it take on other technology giants in the metaverse.

The problem is that in real-life, the deal is likely to catch the attention of watchdogs, who have mostly let the \$2.3 trillion company skate by.

Microsoft on Tuesday agreed to pay \$95 in cash for each Activision share, a 45% premium to the target’s closing price on January 14. The extra value being handed to Activision certainly comes with risk given the “Call of Duty” publisher is fighting California regulators who sued the company for gender bias and a toxic environment.

Still, the offer price is less than where Activision’s shares traded a year ago and the publisher slots in with Microsoft’s larger narrative of building out its version of the metaverse.

It also complements read more Microsoft’s gaming platform Xbox and it opens the door for mobile given Activision also creates “Candy Crush.” So Microsoft in some ways is being opportunistic.

Just how opportunistic is the sticking point. Microsoft didn’t say how much it would save by combining the two businesses, and it didn’t give analysts the opportunity to ask questions on its call discussing the deal.

Wedbush estimates it could save \$1 billion annually, which, taxed and capitalised on a multiple of 10 times, would cover only a third of the premium. That may be one reason the tech titan’s shares were down on Tuesday.

Microsoft might have also undersold the deal. More disclosure that validates a big premium could help, but that also leaves Microsoft exposed.

Touting big synergies like the ability to cross sell, raise prices, or cut staff could suggest its gaming business has too much control over the market. Microsoft did say that the deal will make it the third-largest gaming company by revenue behind Tencent and Sony. — Reuters

Microsoft didn’t say how much it would save by combining the two businesses, and it didn’t give analysts the opportunity to ask questions on its call discussing the deal



P-RICE UP

A shopkeeper waits for customers at a market in Karachi. Pakistan’s inflation hit about 10 per cent last year, according to the World Bank, with cooking oil prices up 130 per cent since Prime Minister Imran Khan took power, as well as the cost of fuel up 45 per cent. — AFP

Inflationary trends expected to ease



HAIDER AL LAWATI

The author writes business articles in Oman newspapers. He used to work in the economic and media sections in OCCI and the Central Bank of Oman

OTHERS BELIEVE THAT INFLATION IS A TEMPORARY PHENOMENON AND WILL EASE WHEN MORE INTERNATIONAL MARKETS RETURN TO STABILITY

Experts around the world have voiced concern over the increase in prices of products and services during the current year.

There are differing views on the factors contributing to this trend, which some experts insisting that 2022 will witness an uptick in the prices of goods, products and services.

Others believe that inflation is a temporary phenomenon and will ease when more international markets return to stability following pandemic-induced disruptions.

The latest Covid variant continues to exert negative pressure on markets at a time when imports and exports are still in the throes of a transportation and supply crunch fueled by high prices of freight, transport, insurance and other costs.

In this regard, some institutions expect inflation to peak at around the middle of this year before declining to moderate and more reassuring levels for the rest of the year and into the early part of 2023.

Investment management firm Invesco believes that the inflationary impact may

not be as adverse as it was at the beginning of the pandemic in January 2020, as most economies began shutting down. But today we see that markets have begun to adapt to a large extent to the current pandemic situation amid an intensifying vaccine rollout, stimulus measures and pro-business policies.

According to Rob Waldner, Chief Strategist and Head of Macro-research at Invesco, 2023 will see world economies transitioning to a more normal economic environment.

During the pandemic, consumers spent more on tradable goods compared to services, which contributed to supply chain problems and increased inflation.

With these issues addressed, the central banks are expected to raise the interest rate to counter the high levels of inflation.

The problem of inflation will remain present at least in the short-term, but it affects consumers and worries investors as well. The current inflation is linked to the pandemic, and this happened as a result of the increase in demand for some commodities since the beginning of the pandemic.

Experts see no reason to be wary of more negative fallout going forward, now that countries are taking measures to vaccinate their populations and facilitate economic recovery, which in turn will spur the resumption of spending and the demand for goods, particularly essential commodities and products, especially essential ones.

Also, we should not forget that the problem of energy price inflation from oil and gas is currently increasing with the recovery of economies and the demand for certain goods and services.

However, suppliers today are working to provide a large assortment of different goods to display in their stores to reduce the price crisis, while people boost spending as economies recover.

It is normal for the markets to fluctuate during the transitional period, at a time when the concerned companies are working to solve the problems of shortage of supplies, logistical problems in the field of transportation and delivery, and shortage of labour, all of which contribute to creating significant upward pressures on prices and inflation levels in general.

Why did almost nobody see inflation coming?



JASON FURMAN

The writer, a professor of the Practice of Economic Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, is a former chairman of president Barack Obama’s Council of Economic Advisers

In 2008, as the global financial crisis was ravaging economies everywhere, Queen Elizabeth II, visiting the London School of Economics, famously asked, “Why did nobody see it coming?”

The high inflation of 2021, especially in the United States, where the year-on-year increase in consumer prices reached a four-decade high of 7 per cent in December, should prompt the same question. Inflation is not nearly as bad as a financial crisis, particularly when price increases coincide with a rapid improvement in the economy.

And whereas financial crises may be inherently unpredictable, forecasting inflation is a staple of macroeconomic modelling. Why, then, did almost everyone get the US inflation story so wrong last year?

A survey of 36 private-sector forecasters in May revealed a median inflation forecast of 2.3

per cent for 2021, measured by the core personal consumption expenditures price index, the US Federal Reserve’s (Fed) de facto target gauge. As a whole, the group put a 0.5 per cent chance on inflation exceeding 4 per cent last year, but, by the core PCE measure, it looks set to be 4.5 per cent.

The Fed’s rate-setting Federal Open Market Committee fared no better, with none of its 18 members expecting inflation above 2.5 per cent in 2021.

Financial markets appear to have missed this one as well, with bond prices yielding similar predictions. Ditto the International Monetary Fund, the Congressional, President Joe Biden’s administration and even many conservative economists.

Some of this collective error resulted from developments that forecasters did not or could not expect. Fed Chair Jerome Powell, among many others, blamed the Delta variant of the coronavirus for slowing the reopening of

the economy and thus driving inflation higher.

But Powell and others had earlier argued that the increase in inflation in the spring of 2021 was spurred by an overly rapid reopening as vaccination reduced case numbers. It is unlikely that both of these excuses are correct. The emergence of Delta, like the pandemic in 2020, probably kept inflation lower than it otherwise would have been.

Supply-chain disruptions were another unanticipated development that allegedly blew up inflation forecasts.

But while the pandemic has caused some genuine bottlenecks in production networks, most are churning out much more than last year, with both US and global manufacturing output and shipping up sharply.

This brings us to a more important source of forecasting error: Not taking our economic models seriously enough.

Forecasts based on extrapolation

from the recent past are nearly always as good as, or better than, those based on more sophisticated modelling. The exception is when there are economic inputs that are well outside the realm of recent experience.

For example, the extraordinary \$2.5 trillion in fiscal support for the US economy in 2021, amounting to 11 per cent of GDP, was far larger than any previous fiscal package since World War II.

A simple fiscal multiplier model would have predicted that average output in the last three quarters of 2021 would be 2-5 per cent above pre-pandemic estimates of potential.

To think that a stimulus of this magnitude would not cause inflation required believing either that such a huge adjustment was possible within a matter of months, or that fiscal policy is ineffective and does not increase aggregate demand.

Both views are implausible.

Economic models also gave us

substantial reason to believe that several factors would reduce the US economy’s potential in 2021.

These included premature deaths, reduced immigration, foregone capital investment, the costs of hardening the economy to Covid-19, pandemic-induced exits from the workforce and all of the difficulties of rapidly reassembling an economy that had been torn apart. Such constraints made it very likely that additional demand would push inflation even higher.

A final set of errors arose because our models were missing key inputs or interpretations. To the degree that people relied on economic models, they often used a Phillips curve to predict inflation or changes in inflation based on the unemployment rate. But these frameworks had difficulty reckoning with the fact that the natural rate of unemployment likely rose, at least temporarily, as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.

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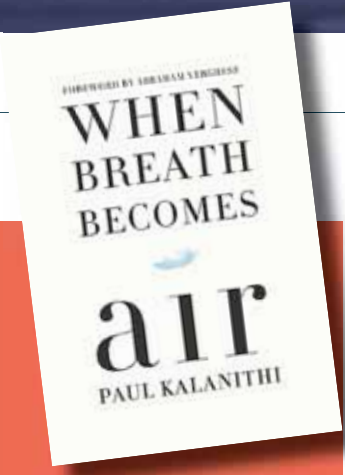
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features



Sudani artist Abdelrahman Saad held his maiden solo art exhibition to rave reviews. Saad loves dabbling with bright colours expressing his sense of abstract art which he says is an 'expression of nature and beauty.' He loves paintings as it changed his life for the better and his dreams may one day come true...**P20**

READ



WHEN BREATH BECOMES AIR
BY PAUL KALANITHI

It is a non-fiction autobiographical book written by American neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi. It is a memoir about his life and illness, battling stage IV metastatic lung cancer. It was posthumously published by Random House on January 12, 2016.

LIFESTYLE

No bidders for Rome villa with world's only Caravaggio mural

AN ONLINE AUCTION for a villa in central Rome, which has the only known ceiling mural by Italian baroque artist Caravaggio, failed to draw any bidders on Tuesday, meaning it will now be offered at a discount.

The property was put on the market following a drawn-out inheritance dispute and was initially valued by court-appointed experts at 471 million euros

(\$533 million), making it potentially one of the most expensive homes in the world.

The minimum bidding price was set at 353.25 million euros, but there were no takers and the sale was called void by a judicial auction website www.fallcoaste.it.

The villa will be put up for sale again on April 7, with the price due to be cut by some 20 per cent, Italian media reported.



Under Italian law, properties that fail to find buyers at court-ordered auctions can be placed back on the block with a discount of up to 25 per cent. There

was no immediate comment from the Rome tribunal auction authority.

Caravaggio was commissioned to paint the ceiling of a

small room on the first floor in 1597. The 2.75-metre wide mural was painted in oil directly onto the plaster and depicts an allegorical scene with the gods Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto representing the transformation of lead into gold.

Caravaggio painted his own face and body on each of the three figurines. The mural alone is valued at 310 million euros.

The walled villa is what is left of a country retreat established in the 16th century by Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte and sold to its current owners, the noble Ludovisi family, in the early 1600s.

Following the death of Prince Nicolo Boncompagni Ludovisi in 2018, the property became the target of a legal dispute pitting Ludovisi's children from his first marriage against his third wife, Princess Rita Boncompagni Ludovisi, who was born and raised in Texas but has lived in the villa for 18 years. — Reuters



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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



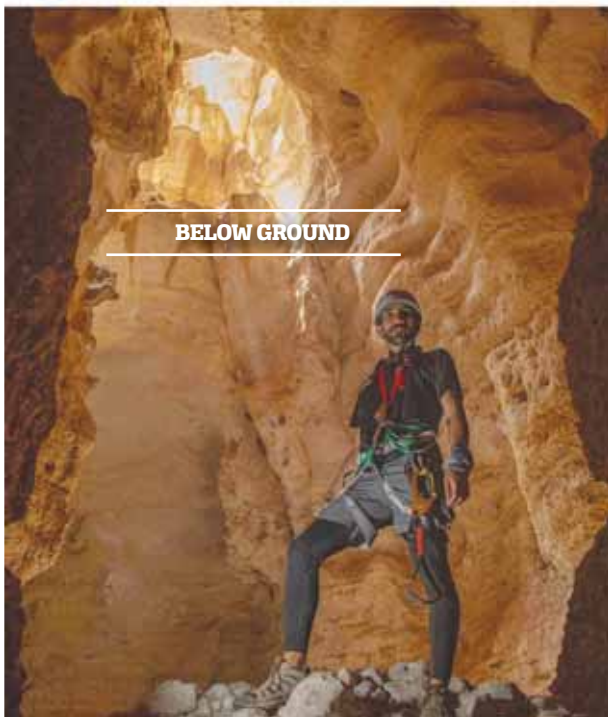
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VOICES - PODCAST



Lakshmi Kothaneth

Music with Scales



The podcast, Voices, will be aired on Thursday, January 20, 2022, at 6 pm.

MEET SCALES — The six-member band that connects western classical notes with Arabic musical instruments. On Voices this week, we met two of the band members Younis al Siyabi, who came up with the idea and Yousuf al Foori, the western classical flautist.

It was a conversation between Younis and his brother Talal al Siyabi who plays the Arabic drum, Rak, that gave the final push for Younis to take the step forward to gather band members. Today, they are a six-member band playing instruments that include Kanoon, Rak, Flute, Viola, Violin and Cello.

According to the musicians, the person who made it all possible and has been a guiding force has been Brigadier Ramis bin Jaman al Awara.

"Our journey has been special and we will always be grateful to late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos for founding Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra and giving us the opportunity", noted Younis and Yousuf.

"We are breaking the rules of music by combining classical and totally traditional Arabic musical instruments. We play western classical music with Arabic instruments", said Yousuf who has been performing western classical music for decades and now has his flute churning out Arabic musical notes.

"This is totally different but is a fantastic experience", he

said adding, "The good thing is I have been listening to Arabic music all my life so it is in my ears."

Traditionally, the wind instrument that is used in Arabic music is Nai.

The band members are Yousuf Said al Foori on flute, Tahra Jamal al Balushi on Violin, Zayana Salim al Rajhi on Cello, Younis Nasser al Siyabi on Viola, Farah Jamal al Balushi on Qanon and Talal Nasser al Siyabi on Percussion.

All of these musicians have been touring the world as members of the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra. They started their musical training as young as nine to 10 years of age and now have more than 25 years of experience performing on world stages for an international audience.

"It is the quarter-tone of Arabic instruments that is fascinating explained Younis.

"In classical music, we have the two scales minor, which is close to Arabic music and major scale that is the typical classical scale. But with Arabic, there are 30 to 50 scales — so many that we have not learned in classical music so it is difficult. The Qanon and violin are also tuned differently. But the Arabic instrumentalists are able to easily follow us and are able to combine it beautifully and they have already adapted to minor and major scales", explained Younis.

Note: A quarter tone is a pitch halfway between the usual notes of a chromatic scale or an interval about half as wide (aurally, or logarithmically) as a semitone, which itself is half a whole tone.

CULTURE

In ancient rite, Spanish horses brave fire to fight virus



AT FULL GALLOP, the horse emerges from the darkness and races through a string of bonfires in an ancient ritual to ward off sickness performed every January in a tiny Spanish village.

Known as Luminarias, the festival takes place every January 16 in San Bartolome de Pinares, a village perched high in the hills about 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of Madrid.

By the light of an almost full moon, several local officials are sweating copiously, despite freezing temperatures, as they pile branches onto the bonfires blazing along the main street of this village of just 600 residents.

As the bells ring out, there's a sudden clatter of hooves as the first horse and rider come charging out.

After the first horse passes another follows, then a group of them, sparks flying from their hooves as they gallop down the street, cheered on by hundreds of onlookers here to witness this mystical, medieval-like spectacle.

The tradition takes place every year on the eve of the feast of San Anton, Spain's patron saint of animals, and dates back to the 18th century when an epidemic devastated the horse population.

"Before when animal died because of infection, they had to be burned", said Leticia Martin, a 29-year-old physiotherapist riding a horse called Fiel.

"So when the epidemic

disappeared, people began to believe that the smoke protected the animals."

PURIFYING FIRE

"These fires, which purify animals from all diseases, are lit on the eve of San Anton's day, which is celebrated on January 17", said Anton Erkoreka of the Museum of the History of Medicine in Spain's Basque Country region.

During the feast, masses are held across Spain to bless animals.

"Fire is always a purifying element and this festival asks the saint for his protection on animals."

In other Spanish villages, bonfires are lit at different times of the year to remember earlier plagues and epidemics, although the global pandemic has given the Luminarias festival a slightly new dimension.

But locals such as Emmanuel Martin insist the tradition has nothing to do with Covid. It is only about blessing the animals and keeping them "healthy all year round as the smoke from the green branches purifies them", he says.

"It's not a show to entertain people", insists this 26-year-old who first witnessed the event when he was two years old.

Urged on by the crowd, one rider crosses the bonfires with his arms spread wide in a cross, his horse's mane plaited, its tail rolled up in a type of topknot, to avoid catching fire.

ADRENALINE

Although the tradition is widely criticised by animal rights groups, Martin insists it doesn't harm the horse nor the rider.

"You don't even notice it", says his cousin Andrea Lenela, who compares it to brushing a finger quickly through the flame of a cigarette lighter.

Every year, the event is attended by vets and firefighters brought in by the local authorities.

"If I thought there was any risk to the horses, I wouldn't do it", says local resident Mario Candil.

"Nothing has ever happened to anyone, ever", insists Monce García, 49, who has come along to enjoy the "atmosphere, the smoke and the typical village tradition".

Dismounting from her horse, a 46-year-old pharmacist Noelia Guerra speaks animatedly about "the emotions and the adrenaline" which flood through both horse and rider.

"You don't have to force them, they just go on their own," she says of the festival, which was celebrated this year for the first time since the pandemic began.

"In this village, there wasn't a single case of Covid until December 2021," when Omicron arrived, says Leticia Martin.

"We laughed about that, saying it was because we didn't celebrate the Luminarias in January 2021." — **AFP**

A PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE



Dr Yousuf Ali al Mulla

To be a different person!

WE USUALLY HEAR some people preach that forming new habits is not impossible but while it may come easy to some, it can be really tough for other individuals. For me, however, I treat this like a dream. When you decide to start forming a habit, get past the first phase first especially the hard part and continue doing it in the coming days, months or years.

Lots of people throw themselves doing something new in the hope of developing a new habit. Without a proper strategy, however, a lot of them fail as well. But why is it that most people fail to develop a new and productive habit, something that affects our lives greatly in the long run?

I believe the failure rely on individuals doing certain things not being conscious about their decisions. In this struggle for a much better life and habit, your fate is largely in your hands.

Let's take brushing for example. For a lot of us, we've developed the habit of brushing our teeth before going to bed that it no longer feels like a hard task. It is so ingrained into our system that it becomes more of an automatic function rather than a laborious ritual. It is, therefore, possible to form a new, long-term behavioural pattern but we have to uncover first how to make it a laborious task but rather as an automatic function.

People who have high self-control are able to develop new habits faster. Not that they are special but it all boils down to mentality and the ability to break down processes. For people with high self-control, they are not distracted from their target as often or as effectively as the rest of us!

What I am trying to emphasise here is that personal change is not impossible. Most people can change their habits and create new ones if they set realistic goals and are able to create cues and rewards that effectively encourage repetition. Much of that involves manipulating the conditions of your existence that you can influence.

In the end, before you decide that you failed, it will likely be worth coming to terms with who you are as a person. What you can actually do for yourself during this year for instance and to improve your life probably won't involve spontaneously giving up daily exercise. This might include more careful attention to reading or drawing may be — for example — things that you really like and maybe good for you.

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

features

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Painting abstract dreams

By Liju Cherian

Riot of colours! That's what a Sudani artist in Muscat paints focusing on normal and digital abstract art that speaks for his love for the environment and nature.

Abdelrahman Saad prefers abstract art to express his deep feelings through acrylic as a medium. This he says reminds him of the printing ink that he used to smell before reading any new books.

"The smell of acrylic leads me into the world of painting which is my first love", he said.

Saad loves to dabble with colour expressing his high sense of abstract art which he takes as an expression of nature and beauty. The majority of his artworks are acrylic on canvas. He loves these types of painting because they changed his life for the better, he paints dreams that maybe one day turn true.

While he also paints along with the genre of expressionism and surrealism, the majority of his works are abstract, showing the artistry of colour and its overlaps and ambiguity to discover cosmic beauty. His recent public exhibition saw 60 works which evoked an amazing response.

Saad appreciates colour and its manifestations and plays with it to create a world full of joy, transcending the world's cosmic sorrows to reach the spirit of things. He extracts rich details from them, producing some brilliant ideas of artwork. Saad appreciates colour and plays with it to create a world full of joy, transcending the world's cosmic sorrows to reach the spirit of things.

'Soul of Colours' was his maiden solo exhibition held at

Art & Soul Gallery hall at the Water-Front in Al Qurum, Muscat last week.

The exhibition was characterised by the contrast of cold and hot colours and mixing them with high-quality methods that show the artist's ingenuity in choosing them to meet.

tyrannizes the other.

His work on 'Dualism', deals with the second meaning of life, as individuality cannot continue in today's world, dualism works to enrich and develop existence in order to preserve it and build the beauty of the universe.

Saad plans to hold an exhibition during February-March in Muscat and also participate at the Toronto Outdoor Art Fair (TOAF) in July and the Munich art exhibition



Saad uses many different items for painting as watercolours, oil, soft pastel and acrylic. Notable among his recent exhibition canvases on acrylic include those titled 'Core of Fire', 'The Goldish Darkness', 'Strength of dual' and 'Vanishing of Faces.'

In 'Vanishing of Faces', the artist aims for substitution in the world of life that can be ruined by man as a result of his greed, which cancels out and

While in 'Goldish Darkness', it is the beginning of there being hope to get out of the darkness of life, to its vast spaces.

"It is the transition from the stage of nothingness to the joy of the bright, creative light that floods us with love and humanity", he adds.

Saad has participated in a number of exhibitions and publishes his paintings on his Instagram and Fine Art America accounts.

in September later this year.

He has set up his own art website supported by Fine Art America where art lovers can purchase his canvas prints, framed prints and more featuring artworks.

A budding writer, Saad has so far published 'Rally at the Shadow of the Poem' in 2014 in Lebanon and 'Emancipation', a collection of short stories in 2012 in the UAE.

Saad passed out from

Khartoum University in 2000 with a BSc in Chemistry and Botany but his inner love was towards art and poems which he has expressed through his works.

Since 2016, he is a resident in the Sultanate of Oman and works as the Quality Manager at Safi Global Water Company which manufactures bottled drinking water under the brand name Jibal Mazoon in Al Khabourah. **His Instagram handle is @rahmiarts.**