

Tender Board clears projects worth RO 131million

The Tender Board awarded a number of projects to the tune of RO 131,430,118 on Monday. The projects were awarded during the Tender Board's 7th meeting of the year (2022), chaired by Dr. Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, Chairman of the Tender Board. **SEE P5**



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KANE SPARKS SPURS FIGHTBACK AS EPL RETURNS



P13

SHARP INCREASE IN TOURIST TRAFFIC INTO OMAN



P20

WHAT MAKES OMAN SO FRIENDLY



TOKYO

17 DEAD IN DAYS OF HEAVY SNOW IN JAPAN

Heavy snowfall across large parts of Japan has killed 17 people over the last 10 days, with thousands of homes suffering power outages, Japanese officials said on Monday. Much of the country's west coast as well as the northern region of Hokkaido have seen persistent heavy snow in recent days. Some areas have seen almost a metre of snowfall in 24 hours. **SEE P6**

KABUL

UN URGES TALIBAN TO LIFT BAN ON WOMEN

A senior UN official has urged Afghanistan's Taliban administration to reverse a ban on female humanitarian workers that charities fear will worsen winter hardships. The administration on Saturday ordered all local and foreign non-governmental organisations not to let female staff work until further notice. It said the move was justified because some women had not adhered to the Islamic dress code. **SEE P7**

KYIV

UKRAINE SOLDIERS TAKE ENGLISH LESSONS

When Olena Chekryzhova followed in her grandmother's footsteps and began teaching English, she never dreamt the job would lead to a months-long stay at a frontline military base. But that has become her new reality as Ukrainian soldiers scramble to learn English -- military terms especially -- so they can make the most of combat aid from abroad. **SEE P9**



SAVAGE US BLIZZARD LEAVES 32 DEAD **P6**



XI URGES STEPS TO 'PROTECT' LIVES **P7**

Royal Decrees set up embassy in Singapore, names envoys

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik today issued two Royal decrees reading as follows: Royal decree No. (97/2022) establishes an embassy for the Sultanate of Oman in the Republic of Singapore. Article (1) establishes an embassy for the Sultanate of Oman in the Republic of Singapore. Article (2) cancels Royal decree No. (111/2010) on establishing a consulate general for the Sultanate of Oman in the Republic of Singapore. Article (3) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. Royal decree No. (98/2022) appoints ambassadors. Article (1) grants the title of ambassador to the following and determines their placements: 1- Plenipotentiary Minister Shaikh Mohammed bin Ahmed bin Salim al Shanfari (as Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia). 2. Plenipotentiary Minister Eng. Nasser bin Said bin Abdullah al Manwari (as Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of the Philippines). 3. Adviser Issa bin Saleh bin Abdullah al Shibani (as Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of India). Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — ONA

HOLY QURAN CONTEST WINNERS FETED



MUSCAT: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, presented Sultan Qaboos Contest for Holy Quran Memorisation 2022 awards to winners at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque on Monday. **SEE P2**

State Council session reviews draft education laws

MUSCAT: The State Council expressed observations about draft versions of "School Education Law" and "Higher Education Law" in preparation for submitting the same to His Majesty the Sultan, along with the opinions of the State Council and Majlis Ash-Shura. The deliberations took place during the 4th session of the council's 4th annual convening of the 7th term. The session was held under the auspices of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council. The discussions highlighted the need to regulate the provision of education laws in line with Oman Vision 2040, as well as the aspirations of Omani society for an educational system that keeps pace with the requirements of the modern age. — ONA

SQU trials bus powered by biodiesel from dates kernels

STAFF REPORTER
Muscat, Dec 26

In a first-of-its-kind experiment in the world, a team of researchers at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) trialled a bus powered by biodiesel from dates kernels on Monday. The Mwasalat bus's journey started from the SQU Cultural Center in Al Khoudh, which continued to Sultan Qaboos Street, the Al Alam Palace, and then back to the starting point. The biofuel was produced in the laboratories of SQU. The bus was flagged off by His Highness Sayyid Dr Fahd bin Al Julanda al Said, Vice Chairman of SQU, in the presence of Eng Khamis bin Mohammed al Shamaki, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Transport, and officials. The Vice Chairman of the University expressed his happiness with this achievement, pointing out that it translates the importance of cooperation between scientific research institutions, and the government and private sectors to transforming knowledge into viable commercial projects that will help to reach zero carbon neutrality by 2050. Al Shamaki said that this achievement coincides with the government's initiatives to shift towards renewable energy, as the transport sector accounts for a large part of carbon emissions. The project started in 2015 with the aim of finding highly efficient method to extract maximum amount of date kernel oil that can be used to power diesel vehicles. The project helps to create a diverse mix of renewable energy sources in line with the indicators of Oman Vision 2040. The team comprised Dr Lamia bint Adnan al Hajiyah of College of Science and Dr Alia bint Hamid al Muhtasib, Deputy Director of Sustainable Energy Research Centre at SQU.

Zero-paper poll evokes praise

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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Zero-paper Municipal Council elections drew appreciation from voters, electoral officers and other stakeholders. Addressing a press conference, Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Under-Secretary, Ministry of Interior and Chairman of the Main Committee of the Municipal Council election, said the electoral process was at par with the technological advancement that helped automation and integration of data and other operations. Apps were deployed in line with the government's digital transformation programme under Oman Vision 2040, which promises upgraded information and communication technology in the country. The whole process, starting from registration in the electoral register, candidacy, voting and results followed a zero-paper policy. Mohammed bin Said al Balushi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Information for Radio and Television and Chairman of the Media Committee, said, "The pioneering experience in the municipal council elections for the third term through smartphone voting contributed to the speed of voting, community interaction, and quick announcement of results." Intakhib and Intekhab apps were designed by an Omani team from the Ministry of Interior. This proved the technical prowess of Omanis in keeping pace with the digital transformation that Oman is witnessing. **TURN TO P3**



Intakhib and Intekhab Apps were deployed in line with the govt's digital transformation programme under Oman Vision 2040, which promises upgraded information and communication technology in the country



Winners at Sultan Qaboos Holy Quran Contest feted



MUSCAT: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, presided over the felicitation of winners at 30th edition of Sultan Qaboos Contest for Holy Quran Memorisation 2022.

The ceremony took place at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque.

The contest seeks to encourage Omani youth to memorise the Holy Quran and adhere to its teachings. It also aims to groom a generation of Holy Quran reciters who can serve as an element of social reform and teach the Holy Quran in accordance with the norms set by scholars and established reciters.

The guest of honour handed over the prizes to the top winners of 7 levels of the Sultan Qaboos Competition for Holy



Quran Memorisation 2022, as well as the jury, the Holy Quran community and participants from the segment of the disabled.

The competition levels were stated as follows: Memorisation of the whole Holy Quran, memorisation of 24 successive parts, memorisation of 18 successive parts, memorisation of 12 successive parts, memorisation of 6 successive parts, memorisation of 4 successive parts and memorisation of 2 successive parts.

The conditions of age groups apply to the last three categories.

— ONA

Majlis Ash'shura discusses maritime draft law

MUSCAT: The Majlis Ash'shura on Monday discussed about the draft version of the Maritime Law forwarded by the government for review.

The Majlis Ash'shura tasked its specialised panels to study and comment on a number of law drafts: A proposal to amend Article (1) of the law promulgated under Royal Decree No. 9/72 and a draft proposal to amend Article (12) of the Law on 'Expropriation for Public Interest' and a draft proposal to amend the Foreign Capital Law by adding a term that requires a foreign investor to deposit RO 100,000 as a condition for exercising investment in Oman.



The Majlis Ash'shura also studied the views of the Services and Social Development Committee about the draft version of Oman-EU Air Transport Agreement, a draft version of an air services agreement between the government of Sultanate of Oman and the government of Republic of South Africa, the draft version of an air services agreement between the government of Sultanate of Oman and the government of the Republic of Rwanda and a draft version of the air services agreement between the government of Sultanate of Oman and the government of Republic of Cape Verde.

— ONA

RCC holds exhibition at King Abdulaziz Camel Festival

As part of its participation in the seventh edition of King Abdulaziz Camel Festival, the Royal Camel Corps (RCC) is holding an exhibition to display its activities and accomplishments. The exhibition was opened by Engineer Bandar bin Ali al Qahtani, Executive Director of the Camel Club and the festival's general supervision in the presence of Hamed bin Ali al Zarai, Director-General of RCC.

The expo showcases pictures of the camel races organised by the RCC. It involves Ardha shows, camel beauty and milking contests, His Majesty's Camel Race Cup as well as some trophies won by the RCC won in various competitions, photos displaying skills of dealing with camels, photos of traditional camel heritage and photos of the RCC's participations in the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival.

Commenting on the RCC's participations in the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival, Hamed bin Ali al Zarai, Director-General



of RCC, said this year the RCC is presenting several camel shows that are peculiar to the Royal Camel Corps such as the camel drawn carriages.

The Royal Camel Corps' participation in the festival began in the middle of December and will continue until the middle of January 2023.



MUSANDAM GETS RAIN Jabal Shams records 2.6 degrees Celsius

VINOD NAIR
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Musandam received rains on Monday, which will be extended to North and South Al Batinah, Al Dhahirah, and South Al Sharqiyah governorates.

Jabal Shams recorded the lowest temperature of 2.6 degrees Celsius during the last 24 hours.

Meanwhile, the aerial picture shows the beginning of the flow of clouds over Musandam and in Liwa. Oman met said that upper air troughs will likely continue to affect the Sultanate of Oman until December 28.

The latest weather system event will be associated with clouds advection and chances of different intensities of rain showers, occasionally thundershowers over the

governorates of Musandam, North Al Batinah, South Al Batinah, Al Buraimi, Al Dakhiliyah, Muscat, Al Dhahirah and North Al Sharqiyah and South Al Sharqiyah.

Oman Meteorology warned that Rain showers from 10-50 mm may cause wadis flow and fresh downdraft winds with speeds of 15 to 35 kt (30-70knv/h). The sea state will be moderate to rough, with maximum wave height will be between 2 metres to 3.0 metres along the coasts of Musandam Governorate and the coastal areas of Oman Sea. Civil Aviation Authority has advised all to take precautions during rain and wadis flow and to check the visibility and sea state before sailing and follow the issued weather bulletins & reports.

Qatari Defence College team visit ASDS, CSC, MSC

MUSCAT: Maj Gen Hamid bin Ahmed Sakroon, Chairman of the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies (ASDS), received in his office at Bait Al Falaj on Sunday the delegation of the college of defence of Qatar, which is headed by Brigadier Rajeh Mohammed Aqeel al Thabit.

The two sides discussed several matters of mutual interest. The meeting was attended by Brigadier Abdullah bin Hamad al Harthy, Director of Studies and Academic Affairs at the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies, and the Deputy Military Attaché of the Qatari Embassy at Muscat.

Meanwhile, the delegation headed by Brigadier Rajeh Mohammed Aqeel al Thabit, also visited the Joint Command and Staff College (CSC) at

Bait Al Falaj. The guests went on tour of the CSC and they were briefed about the college, its general curriculum and the advanced technologies in its facilities. Deputy Military Attaché of the Qatari Embassy at Muscat was present at the occasion.

The delegation also visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC). Upon the guest's arrival at the centre, he was greeted by Commodore Adil bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Head of the MSC.

The guest toured the centre's facilities and viewed its latest equipment and technologies used in carrying out its national duties. He was also briefed on the tactical roles and tasks carried out by the centre in the safety of the maritime environment.

— ONA





MUNICIPAL COUNCIL POLLING

DHOFAR RECORDS HIGHEST VOTING

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 26

Polling for the municipal council elections in Dhofar Governorate saw a huge turnout of voters on Sunday. As many as 60,679 eligible voters cast their ballots across the governorate, underscoring the strength of awareness among the local population about the role of community participation in decision-making surrounding growth and development issues.

A breakdown of polling numbers received from election authorities shows voter turnout in Dhofar was the highest at 60,679, followed by North Al Batinah (57,168), South Al Sharqiyah (37,824), South Al Batinah (31,090) and Muscat (26,542).

The Observer had the opportunity to interact with some voters in the Dhofar Governorate.

Mohammed al Rawas from Salalah was impressed with the ease of voting.

“The voting process for the third term of the Municipal Council took place smoothly and easily, as the Intekhab App ensured simple and easy voting. Many thanks to the Ministry of Interior for keeping pace with modern technology in the electoral process. This shows the digital transformation that is underway in the Sultanate of Oman.”

Mohammad bin Salim Hardan from Wilayat of Rakhyouat noted: “For the first time, I felt that voting was easy and smooth. It saved our time, especially for those living far from the urban centres. The voting



Nasir al Shehri



Mohammad Hardan



Mohammed al Rawas

process has improved hugely. During past elections, we used to wait in long queues at specific locations called proposal centres, often resulting in overcrowding and long waiting hours. This time, the efforts of the Ministry of Interior and other relevant authorities have contributed to a seamless process.”

Nasir al Shehri from Wilayat of Taqah was all praise for the authorities for elevating the standards of the electoral system. “The election process was simple for everyone, leaving no scope for vested interests intervention. The digital platform allowed citizens to exercise votes based on their judgment of the merit of the candidates. My experience says it was easy, and the winning candidates were declared a few minutes after the conclusion of the voting process. We also hope to see this successful technology applied during the Majlis Ash’shura elections for the next term.”

The final list of candidates for membership of the municipal councils for the third term indicated that a total of 727 candidates, including 28 women,

were competing for council positions.

The Salalah Electoral Caucus was one of the first and largest in Oman, featuring a group of the most prominent citizens drawn from social, cultural and scientific backgrounds.

A selection committee vetted the candidates based on their professional credentials, contribution to specific sectors of the economy, understanding of local affairs of state, accessibility to voters and popular appeal.

In other parts of the Sultanate of Oman, local sheikhs and elders of some tribes adopted a structured approach to facilitate voting for the municipal council elections, which is one of the important axes in the comprehensive sustainable development agenda witnessed by the state in various fields and sectors.

Since the beginning of the first term of the municipal councils in 2012, the role of civic bodies in nurturing growth at the local levels has been growing. In December 2012, a total of 192 members were elected, rising to 202 in the 2016 elections. Each term is for four years.

Zero-paper poll evokes praise



FROM PAGE 1

Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology and Chairman of the Technical Committee, stated that no technical challenges were detected during voting via smartphones.

The Ministry of Interior is working on evaluating and reviewing the polling percentage which stood at 39.42 per cent

No objections were raised regarding the election results.



Dr Al Shaithani said: “The use of smartphone voting contributed to reducing the financial cost of the electoral process.

The call centre received nearly 3,000 calls and they were resolved. Nearly thousand inquiries were

received in Intikhab.

Even though women candidates were small in number, the victory of Faiza al Shamsiyah proved the competence of Omani women in polls and their ability to win.

Al Shamsiyah said: “I was a member of the municipal affairs committees, and I also took part in other initiatives, so I wanted to be in the municipal council this time. Every person aspires to serve their country, which I am proud of, and will be up to the responsibility.”

The elderly people also found it easy to vote through smartphones.

Voters glee over high tech election

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, DEC 26

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate elected 18 candidates to the municipal council elections from about 85 who contested. Fifteen were from Nizwa, 14 from Bahla, five from Manah, six are from Al Hamra, six from Adam, 10 from Izki, 15 from Samayil, 15 from Bidbid, and three from Al Jabal Al Akhdhar.

The number of voters in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate reached 22,337 out of a total of 288,469 votes.

The votes obtained by the candidates are as follows: Ahmed bin Zaid al Busaidy 396 votes and Saud bin Salim al Furqani 381 votes for Nizwa. Khalil bin Khalfan al Qarni 1,044 votes, and Bader bin Hamoud al Julandani 518 votes for Samayil. Saud bin Ali al Shueili 1,106 votes, and Nasser bin Humaid al Wardi 872 votes for Bahla. Nasser bin Mohammed al Dari 1,625 votes and Sultan bin Said al Mahrouqi with 677 votes from Adam. Hamed bin Sulaiman al Abri with 761 and Saud bin Said al Abri with 485 votes from Al Hamra. Obaid bin Said al Junaibi with 867 and Said bin Khairallah al Arini with 662 votes from Manah.

Mubarak bin Yousif al Amiri with 490 votes, and Nasser bin Salim al Amiri with 389 votes from Izki. Waleed bin Said al Siyabi with 545 votes and Yasser bin Fadhil al Maharbi with 456 votes from Bidbid. Walid bin Saif al Zakwani with 163 votes and Ahmed bin



Hamad al Nabhani with 155 votes from Al Jabal Al Akhdhar.

Talal bin Ahmed al Saadi, rapporteur of the central committee for the elections of members of municipal councils, said “The use of high tech application had both direct and indirect effect. Also, the number of organisers of the electoral process decreased from 8,000 from various government sectors to just 500 employees. Now the electoral process can be organised within a week, unlike before.”

Dr Khalifa al Hinai, a lawyer, judge from Al Dakhiliyah, said: “In the App, there was an option not to elect anyone because I do not see the right person to represent me in this state, meaning that I do not find a suitable candidate according to my estimation. But I abstained from voting without examining the terms of reference of the municipal councils. I saw the terms of reference, and they are found in the municipal councils. I wonder if anyone who encourages non-voting has read the law and terms of reference. “

Sami al Hinai, a voter from Nizwa, said: “The voting process was super easy. The usual effort vanished in a few moments and, on the hand, thanks to the Ministry of Interior and other institutions. The application is so smart that it knows that you are the card owner by showing your image directly. This is a move that we are proud of.”

Results in record time due to Intekhab App

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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Voters in 63 Wilayats in the various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman cast their votes to choose their representatives for the first time through the (Intekhib) application.

The digital transformation contributed to the development of the electoral process model for municipal councils for the third term by employing modern technologies to improve the digital user experience, simplify government procedures and provide distinguished digital services.

Ahmed bin Abdullah al Maamari, Director of the Electoral Register Project, said: “The counting process and the results took place in record time, and it was directly approved and officially announced.”

Talal al Saadi, the rapporteur of the main committee for the elections, said “with the use of the Intekhab App, the number of organisers of the electoral process decreased to 500 employees and the electoral process can be organised within a week, unlike from the earlier 3 to 4 months.”

The elections witnessed an easy way for everyone to go beyond downloading the app, registering, and selecting the candidate within a few minutes,



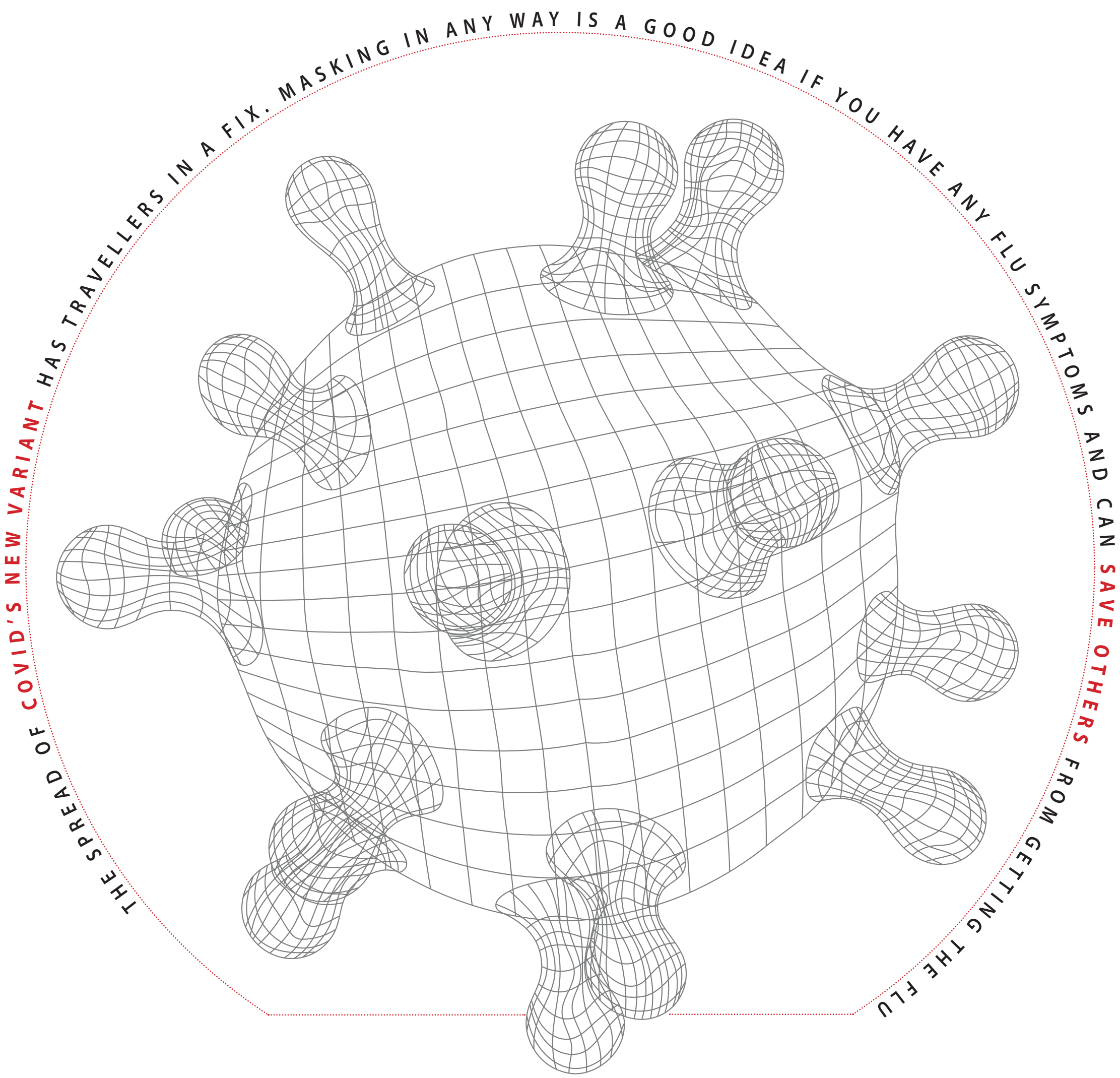
in order to participate nationally. Refraining from participation is more negative than all justifications.

Voter statistics in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate recorded 75,729 voters and 61 candidates. The arena included a main section entitled “Main Axes”, under which several topics related to the conduct of the electoral process are included, allowing participants to interact and comment.

Several academics and specialists were also hosted to participate in the topics raised in the dialogue arena. In addition, another section entitled “Sub-Axes” allowed the user to create a topic for dialogue. The dialogue arena hosted, through the app, Dr Yahya bin Bader al Maawali, Governor of South Al Sharqiyah, talked about how the community participates in the municipal council elections.



COVID FEAR LOOMS AGAIN!



KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
[@patkaushal](#)

After months of hibernation, Covid seems to have raised its head again. It is time for the governments to come out with advisories, as people are in the middle of many questions giving the rumour mongers plot to perform again. With the start of the holiday season and closure of schools, many are already enjoying vacation, while others are waiting in the wings. The spread of Covid's new variant has put all travellers in a fix. Mentally, they have gone to the days when there were travel restrictions, Covid tests, and the many documents to be readied before their actual travel. Yusuf Ali, a Muscat resident with three school-going children, delayed departure to

his home country to avoid high-ticket prices soon after the closure of the schools. Now he is in a fix whether to go ahead with his travel or not. Because there may be restrictions in the days to come, and he would be stuck. He is looking for some assuring notes from the governments and experts to give his vacation plan the go-ahead. "So the situation is back when people have to monitor news sources on a daily basis to know and act accordingly as per the advisory of the competent authorities," says Yusuf. Taking note of the rising cases of Covid globally, the time has come when health, administrative, tour and travel agencies have to work in tandem and have a collaborative spirit, as was done during the previous surges. So far, no case of the new variant has

been found in the Sultanate of Oman, and things have been moving at a normal pace. The country has also achieved a good rate of vaccination among its citizens and residents. Some countries, however, have started random testing for travellers after BF.7 variant cases surge in China. The variant, according to experts, has a high transmissibility as one carrier can infect up to 10 people. At a time when Covid-related restrictions were relaxed in most countries, its renewed outbreak in some areas, particularly China, has reignited concerns, and people are asking – should they start wearing a mask again? "It is a wait-and-watch situation for everyone," say experts, but the people have to be on guard. "Masking in any way is a good idea if you have any flu symptoms. This responsible behaviour at public places and offices will save others from getting the flu."



Tender Board clears projects worth RO 131 million

MUSCAT: The Tender Board on Monday awarded a number of projects to the tune of RO 131,430,118. The projects were awarded during the Tender Board's 7th meeting of 2022, chaired by Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, Chairman of the Tender Board.

The tasks endorsed by the Tender Board included the construction of a dyke for projection against flood water at the gorge of Wadi Addai, Wilayat of Al Amerat, at a cost of RO 38,660,023 and a 5-year project to supply, design and install the 'Government Financial System' for the Ministry of Finance at a

cost of RO 21,345,353.

The Government Financial System's project is undertaken by Mohsin Haider Darwish (MHD) and a number of international partners specialised in electronic financial systems. This tender also offers rights to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to implement some tasks of the project, which will be operational after five years.

The Ministry of Finance pointed out that the financial system's users will move gradually to the new electronic system codenamed 'Maliyah' within the next five years, with support from the project's team based at the ministry and the main partner. — ONA

MoH launches e-health portal



EGYPTIAN NAVY CHIEF VISITS MSC

Vice Admiral Ashraf Ibrahim Atwa, Commander of the Egyptian Navy, along with the military delegation accompanying him and the Defence Attaché of the Egyptian Embassy at Muscat, on Monday visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC).

The guests were accompanied during the visit by Rear Admiral Saif bin Nasser al Rahbi, Commander of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO).

Upon their arrival, the guests were greeted by Commodore Adil bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Head of the MSC. During the visit, the guests toured the centre's facilities and viewed its latest equipment and technologies used in carrying out its national duties. They were also briefed on the tactical roles and tasks carried out by the centre in the safety of the maritime environment. — ONA

MUSCAT: As part of the digital transformation, the Ministry of Health launched e-health portal 'Re-engineering' project on Monday at an event at the Grand Millennium Hotel.

The launch ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, with the presence of Dr Fatima bint Mohammed al Ajmiyah, MoH's Under-Secretary for Administrative, Financial, and Planning Affairs, along with director generals at the MoH and governorates, and heads of

information technology in the directorates and hospitals.

The health minister said the ministry is committed to government transformation plan (2021-2025) as well implementing digital initiative in the health sector. Al Sabti added that ministry is determined to complete the project of the National Digital Health Strategy in order to consolidate efforts among sectors.

The health minister emphasised the importance of integrating Artificial Intelligence in the health

sector to boost health services in the community, pointing out that the ministry is keen to enact laws and regulations to activate electronic link and sharing medical record data with the public and private health institutions

DESIGN REQUIREMENTS

The event highlighted basic elements of the system and the authorities concerned with approving the system's design requirements, and clarified the details and work plan.

During the event, the

methodology of streamlining e-services procedures and the implementation and development plan of the project were reviewed. A presentation on the digital health was also displayed.

The first phase of the MoH Digital Transformation project would focus on automating the electronic health services in the directorates of private health establishments, pharmaceutical affairs and drug control, in addition to medial staff licensing and other services related to business and individuals.

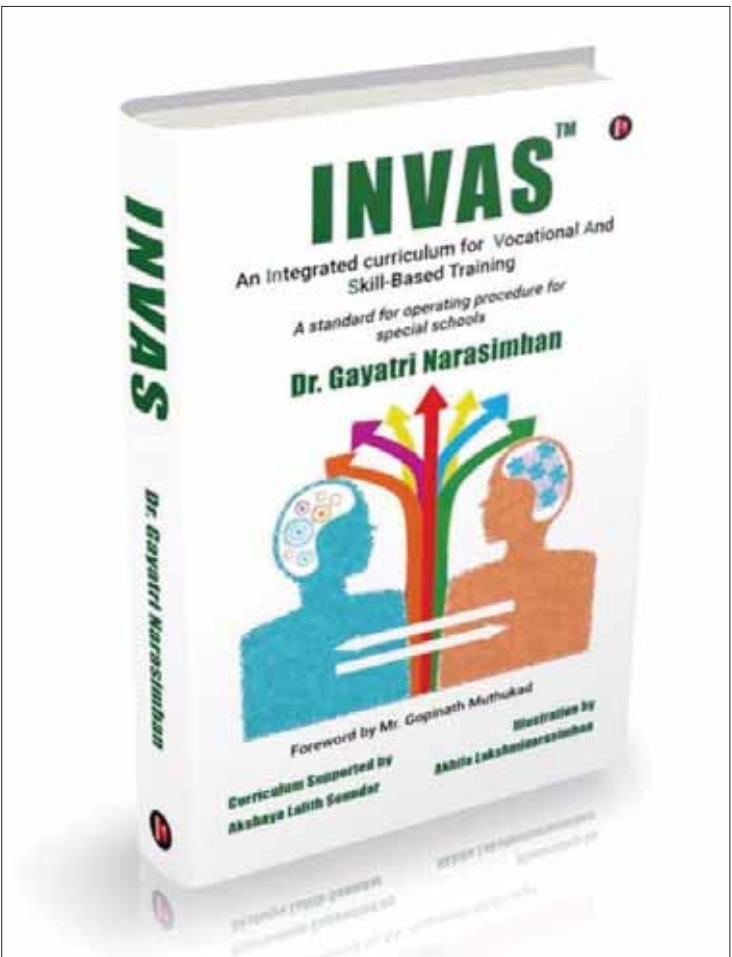
Special educator introduces standards operating procedures for schools

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

MUSCAT: A Muscat-based teacher has come out with a book on standards operating procedures (SOP) for special schools to help assess the level of education or skills of the neurodiverse.

The book entitled 'INVAS' discusses how a uniform curriculum can be introduced in special schools. It advocates bringing a structured, uniform and measurable curriculum among special schools. Disability is a vast umbrella, but to make inclusion more successful and to make a neurodivergent included in the workplace, we need a measurable standardised accountable curriculum uniform throughout the special schools.

Speaking to Observer, Dr Gayatri Narasimhan said the book is the culmination of her unyielding efforts to uplift specially-abled children. Dr Narasimhan is a passionate special educator, inclusive education specialist, vocational trainer and counsellor with years of hands-on experience



in special education.

"Parents with neurodiverse children, when they relocate from one city to another, face a big challenge in continuing the learning process for their neurodiverse child. Similarly,

socially responsible employers who would like to employ neurodiverse as part of their inclusion and CSR strategies also encounter challenges as they cannot assess the level of education or skills of the

neurodiverse. The reason for both is a lack of standardisation in teaching methodology for the neurodiverse," Dr Gayatri said. Her book offers a pioneering solution through an integrated curriculum for vocational and skill-based institutions.

The curriculum has 13 topics, divided into five levels – early childhood, pre-skill level, basic level, intermediate level and advanced level.

The components of the curriculum and the learning outcomes at each stage demonstrate that the main educational goal for neurodiverse is not only to equip them with the right skills but also to train them to be highly independent. This will also pave the way for them to lead a very dignified life in society and reduce their dependence on the near and dear.

To cater to the educational and training needs of neurodiverse children as well as adults, Dr Gayatri founded Prakramika Vocational Institute (PVI) in Chennai in 2015. It works to equip specially-abled children to lead independent and dignified life.



MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. (51/2022)

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following tenders:

Tender No.	Tender Description	Document Fee	Last Date for Inquires Submission	Last Date for Obtaining Tender Docs.	Last Date for Submission
9/2022/MM/PA-1 Recall-4	Supply of Spare Parts for Chain Saw Machines	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023
64/2022/MM/PA-20 Recall-2	Supply of Carpenter Material	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023
66/2022/MM/PA-21 Recall-2	Supply of Plumbing Materials	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023
67/2022/MM/PA-22 Recall-2	Supply of Painting Materials	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023
116/2022/MM/PA-27 Recall-1	Supply of Containers for Collecting Coal	25/- OMR	15/01/2023	31/01/2023	05/02/2023

1. Specialized Companies with a valid registration certificate from Tender Board can obtain tender documents from the website through the following link: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. Starting from the date of this announcement until the end of deadline mentioned above.

2. Bidders shall submit their offers electronically through link mentioned above.

3. Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond as per details mentioned in E-Tendering and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality and valid for (90) days starting from the deadline for submission.

4. **Tender not accompanied by a tender bond will be rejected.**

5. **Clarifications and support:**

- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please contact us through e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
- For technical support of e-tendering system, please send an email to (etenderhd@mtc.gov.om) or call (+968 24402200).
- For technical support of E-Bond through e-tendering system please send an email to (esnad@gstb.gov.om) or call (+968 24402200/24402330).

Website: www.mm.gov.om



A snow plow is left stranded on the road following a winter storm that hit the Buffalo region on Main St. in Amherst, New York on Monday. – Reuters

Savage US blizzard leaves 32 dead

NEW YORK: A brutal winter storm that brought Christmas chaos to millions of Americans will be slow to dissipate, the US National Weather Service said on Monday, after intense snow and frigid cold caused power outages, travel delays and at least 32 deaths across the eastern part of the country.

“Much of the eastern United States will remain in a deep freeze through Monday before a moderating trend sets in on Tuesday,” the NWS said in its latest advisory.

In Buffalo, western New York, a blizzard left the city marooned, with emergency services unable to reach the worst-hit areas.

“It is (like) going to a war zone, and the vehicles along the sides of the roads are shocking,” said New York Governor Kathy Hochul, a native Buffalo, where eight-foot (2.4-meter) snow drifts and power outages made for life-threatening conditions.

Hochul told reporters on Sunday evening that residents were still in the throes of a “very dangerous life-threatening situation” and warned anyone in the area to remain indoors.

More than 200,000 people

17 dead in days of heavy snow in Japan

TOKYO: Heavy snowfall across large parts of Japan has killed 17 people over the last 10 days, with thousands of homes suffering power outages, Japanese officials said on Monday. Much of the country's west coast as well as the northern region of Hokkaido have seen persistent heavy snow in recent days.

Some areas have seen almost a metre of snowfall in 24 hours, including the town of Oguni in northeastern Yamagata region, local media said.

Japan's weather agency has warned residents in the affected regions to avoid travel where possible, after cars got stuck on roads in heavy snow.

Government officials said on Monday that 17 people have been killed and dozens more injured in the snow since December 17. National broadcaster NHK reported the dead included a man who fell from a roof while clearing snow and a woman found dead of suspected carbon monoxide poisoning in a car.

In Hokkaido, tens of thousands of homes have lost electricity in recent days as the snow brought down power lines, though most connections have now been restored. The heavy snowfall is expected to ease from Monday. – **AFP**



A man clears snow at a parking lot in Kitami, Hokkaido Prefecture. – Reuters

across several eastern states woke up without power on Christmas morning and many more had their holiday travel plans upended, although the five-day-long storm featuring blizzard conditions and ferocious winds showed signs of easing.

The extreme weather sent wind chill temperatures in all 48 contiguous US states below

freezing over the weekend, stranded holiday travellers with thousands of flights cancelled and trapped residents in ice- and snow-encrusted homes.

Thirty-two weather-related deaths have been confirmed across nine states, including at least 13 in Erie County where Buffalo is located, with officials warning the number is sure to rise.

Officials described historically dangerous conditions in the snow-prone Buffalo region, with hours-long whiteouts and bodies discovered in vehicles and under snow banks as emergency workers struggled to search for those in need of rescue.

The city's international airport remains closed until Tuesday and a driving ban remained in effect

for all of Erie County.

“We now have what will be talked about not just today but for generations (as) the blizzard of ‘22,” Hochul said, adding that the brutality had surpassed the region's prior landmark snowstorm of 1977 in the “intensity, the longevity, the ferocity of the winds.”

Due to frozen electric substations, some residents were not expected to regain power until Tuesday, with one substation reportedly buried under 18 feet of snow, a senior county official said.

The NWS earlier warned that blizzard conditions in western New York's Great Lakes region had continued into Sunday, with “additional snow accumulations of 2 to 3 feet through (Sunday night).”

One couple in Buffalo, across the border from Canada, said on Saturday that with the roads completely impassible they would not be making a 10-minute drive to see their family for Christmas.

“It's tough because the conditions are just so bad... a lot of fire departments aren't even sending out trucks for calls,” said 40-year-old Rebecca Bortolin.

— **AFP**

8 killed in failed IS prison assault in Syria

QAMISHLI: Six members of Kurdish-led security forces and two extremists were killed on Monday in a failed IS group assault near a prison for extremists in northern Syria, a war monitor said.

The failed assault targeted a Kurdish security complex in Raqa, the group's former de facto capital in Syria, which includes a military intelligence prison, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. “The extremists were targeting the military intelligence prison” housing hundreds of jihadists, including 200 high-level militants, said Rami Abdel Rahman, who heads the Britain-based monitor.

Kurdish-led authorities announced a state of emergency in Raqa and have put the city on lockdown as security forces hunt down jihadists at large.

IS claimed responsibility for the attack, saying two of its fighters had launched it, one of whom had escaped. The group said the attack came to avenge “Muslim prisoners” and female relatives of jihadists living in the Kurdish-administered Al-Hol camp.

Al-Hol, home to more than 50,000 people, is the largest camp for displaced people who fled after the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led the battle that dislodged IS group fighters from the last scraps of their Syrian territory in 2019. The spokesperson of the SDF, which controls Raqa and Al-Hol, confirmed the death of six security forces to AFP. The assault was near a prison with IS inmates, he said, but “IS failed to attack the prison because our forces thwarted their attack”, Farhad Shami said. Security forces are still searching the area to arrest members of the cell, he added.

This is the most significant jihadist attack on a prison since IS fighters launched their biggest assault in years in January, when they attacked the Ghwayran prison in the Kurdish-controlled city of Hasakah. — **AFP**

Deadliest year for Rohingya at sea in years as 180 drowned

NEW DELHI/DHAKA: The possible sinking of a boat in recent weeks with 180 Rohingya Muslims on board could make 2022 one of the deadliest years at sea in almost a decade for the community, a UN agency said, as refugees try to flee desperate conditions in Bangladesh camps.

Nearly 1 million Rohingya from Myanmar are living in crowded facilities in Bangladesh, including tens of thousands who fled their home country after its military conducted a deadly crackdown in 2017. The number of Rohingya leaving Bangladesh in boats this year has jumped more than five fold from a year earlier, rights groups estimate. It is not clear if the lifting of Covid restrictions in Southeast

Asia, a favoured destination, has led to the rush of people. In Buddhist-majority Myanmar, most Rohingya are denied citizenship and are seen as illegal immigrants from South Asia.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said it feared that a boat that set sail at the end of November was missing, with all 180 on board presumed dead.

The UNHCR said the vessel, which was not seaworthy, may have started to crack in early December before losing contact. It added it was not clear where the boat started, but three Rohingya men, including one whose family were onboard, said it set off from Bangladesh.



Health workers check a Rohingya refugee who was feeling sick after his arrival by boat in Krueng Raya, Indonesia's Aceh province on Sunday. – **AFP**

Nearly 200 Rohingya were already feared dead or missing at sea this year. “We hope against hope that the 180 missing are still alive somewhere,” said UNHCR spokesperson Babar Baloch.

Thai authorities said four women and one man were found floating near Thailand's Surin Island and another woman at Similan Islands and were rescued by fishermen. Authorities had not yet confirmed their identities.

A local fisherman told Reuters he and his crew had rescued people hanging onto a floating water tank.

UNHCR's Baloch said 2022 was one of the worst years for dead and missing after 2013 and 2014, when 900 and 700 Rohingya died

or went missing in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal after inter-communal violence forced them to flee.

Sayedur Rahman, 38, who fled to Malaysia in 2012 from Myanmar, said his wife and three teenaged children were among the missing on the vessel.

“In 2017, my family came to Bangladesh to save their lives,” Rahman said. “But they are now all gone ... I'm totally devastated... We Rohingya are left to die ... on the land, at sea. Everywhere.”

Bangladesh has in the past arrested people smugglers. The densely populated country has also asked the international community to help it ease the load of hosting so many refugees. — **Reuters**



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In brief

■ KABUL



AFGHAN CAR BLAST KILLS POLICE OFFICIAL, 2 OTHERS

A car blast in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province killed three people on Monday, including a provincial police chief, the Taliban-Run Afghan interior ministry said.

Two others were injured in the blast near Badakhshan's police headquarters, interior ministry spokesperson, Abdul Nafi Takor, said, adding that four people had been arrested in connection with the incident.

IS claimed responsibility for the blast, the militant group posted on Telegram. Omar is believed to be the highest Taliban security official slain since the hard-line group seized power in August 2021.

■ MALE



FORMER MALDIVES PRESIDENT TO APPEAL 11-YEAR JAIL TERM

Former Maldives president Abdulla Yameen will appeal as soon as possible against his conviction and jailing for 11 years on corruption and money laundering charges, said his lawyer.

Yameen, the opposition Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) candidate for the next election due in 2023, was sent to a prison on Maafushi island on Sunday to start his sentence following the order from the Maldives criminal court.

Yameen, 63, has denied any wrongdoing and will serve his time in a special compound in the prison which has been previously used to jail other high profile politicians.

■ MANILA



8 DIE IN PHILIPPINES AFTER RAINS, FLOODS

Philippine authorities on Monday reported at least eight deaths mostly due to floods triggered by heavy rains in the southern provinces, as Christmas celebrations were disrupted for thousands of residents who were forced to evacuate.

Images on social media showed rescue workers helping residents out of chest-deep flood waters caused by two days of moderate to heavy rainfall in central and southern Philippines.

The national disaster agency reported eight casualties, five of whom died from drowning, while 19 were missing.

CHINA EXPERIENCING THE PLANET'S BIGGEST SURGE IN INFECTIONS

Xi urges steps to protect lives

BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping urged officials on Monday to take steps to protect lives in his first public remarks on Covid-19 since Beijing dramatically loosened hardline containment measures this month.

Having mostly cut itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic, China is now experiencing the planet's biggest surge in infections after abruptly lifting restrictions that torpedoed the economy.

Studies have estimated that around one million people could die over the next few months. Many in the population are now grappling with shortages of medicine, while emergency medical facilities are strained by an influx of undervaccinated elderly patients.

"At present, Covid-19 prevention and control in China are facing a new situation and new tasks," Xi said in a directive, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

"We should launch the patriotic health campaign in a more targeted way... fortify a community line of defence for epidemic prevention and control, and effectively protect people's lives, safety and health," Xi



Commuters ride a subway train during the morning rush hour amid the coronavirus disease outbreak in Beijing on Monday. — Reuters

said. Hospitals and crematoriums across the country have been overflowing with Covid patients and victims, while China's National Health Commission on Sunday announced it would stop publishing daily nationwide infection and death statistics.

The decision to scrap the daily

virus count comes amid concerns that the country's blooming wave of infections is not being accurately reflected in official statistics.

Beijing has admitted the scale of the outbreak has become "impossible" to track following the end of mandatory mass

testing, as people are now not obliged to declare test results to authorities. And last week, Beijing narrowed the criteria by which Covid-19 fatalities were counted — a move experts said would suppress the number of deaths attributable to the virus.

— AFP

Cyclists brave Lahore smog to get people to ditch cars

LAHORE: Cyclists in Pakistan's smog-smothered Lahore are enduring hazardous pollution levels, abuse from drivers and social stigma in a campaign to get people to ditch their cars.

Each week around 100 adults and children, some wearing masks or scarves wrapped around their mouths and noses, jump on their bikes to cycle around landmarks in the city of more than 11 million people.

"The smog is a huge concern for us because there are so many cars now and the population has increased so much," said Afia Khan, who joined the initiative in August.

But it is an uphill challenge encouraging people to take up the environmentally friendly mode of transport, and the group often require a police escort to keep them safe in a city that lacks dedicated bicycle lanes.

Cyclists are "at the mercy

of these ruthless motorbikes, chingchies (auto rickshaws) and cars" that have not embraced the idea of sharing the roads with cyclists, said Rana Sohail, the head of Clean Pakistan Green Pakistan, which launched the venture with Critical Mass Lahore.

"The government needs to create a more cycling-friendly infrastructure," participant Humayun Qureshi told AFP at the latest event on Sunday, which he attended with his wife and two daughters.

There is also a pervasive attitude in deeply conservative Pakistan that sport, including cycling, is inappropriate for women, who risk harassment from men.

"Going biking alone as a woman can be difficult because of the harassment you're going to face," Zarwa Jamal, a student who was cycling with her whole family, said.

"It's truly great to be able to go with the group because I'm ensured of my safety."

Lahore consistently ranks as one of the world's most polluted large cities, with industrial pollutants, smoke from seasonal crop burn-off, fumes from vehicles and colder winter temperatures coalescing into toxic smog.

In November a court ruling forced authorities to close schools on Fridays and Saturdays, as well as the usual Sunday break, due to high levels of air pollution.

Understanding about the terrible health impacts of smog has increased in the past few years, putting pressure on the authorities to come up with measures to tackle the problem.

"The point of reaching actual awareness is still far, but hopefully we will slowly achieve it," said cyclist Tanzeel ur Rehman.

— AFP



Cyclists take part in a pollution and smog awareness campaign as they ride along a street towards the Wagah border, in Lahore on Monday. — AFP

Happy holidays to the whole world



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The writer is an entrepreneur and innovation adviser

No matter what gift you will receive in any upcoming holiday, chances are it is not going to receive the same global attention as the gift received by Lionel Messi.

Christmas came early for Messi, the Argentinian world's top football player, and for Argentina, as they did not only rightfully earn with his team Qatar 2022 Fifa World Cup, the Emir of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad al Thani gifted him a black bisht robe and helped him wear it, as he was celebrating and lifting up the World Cup trophy as hundreds of millions around watched.

Holidays are the times of celebrations and giving each other much needed positive attention.

Yet, this Argentinian celebration with Messi wearing the black bisht robe received is mixed, and is definitely about work analysis and

discussion.

What is a bisht?

Bisht is an Arabised word from Farsi language that carries the same meaning - a rope that covers the back and is open from the front.

I believe its roots come from texts documenting ancient mythology of Mesopotamian civilisations.

These civilisations wrote that their deities of nature and water wore a similar robe, so that they could swim like fish under water.

Later, many cultures, especially spiritual figures to enhance their authority, around the world adopted wearing robes as a sign of status, prestige, and authority.

Many historians believe that the religious style and attire of Pope has its roots in this ancient tradition.

THIS ARGENTINIAN CELEBRATION WITH MESSI WEARING THE BLACK BISHT ROBE RECEIVED IS MIXED, AND IS DEFINITELY ABOUT WORK ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Regional context and controversy

For hundreds of millions of people who are familiar with Arabic culture, bestowing upon someone your bisht is one of the greatest, extraordinary signs of hospitality and honour.

For over a millennia, records show that generous hosts, from ordinary people to rulers, gifted

their guests bishts to welcome them and share with them a symbol that is always near and dear to them.

When Messi celebrated wearing the bisht gifted by the Emir of Qatar a number of commentators in Europe criticised the Qatari gesture, and viewed it an unnecessary move that undermined the winning occasion.

These views added fuel to the fire to conversations that have been taken part involving people familiar with the Arabic and western cultures.

Many people in the Arab world found the constant negative views about Qatar World Cup inconsistent with the values of fairness in judging other cultures.

Since the first industrial revolution in 1860s, many parts around the world started adopting

many cultural symbols promoted by the world's top economic and military powers.

These symbols became a soft power, and include the English language, the western history, clothing, food along with ideals promoted as universal rights. I see the signs of a slowly brewing global backlash against these symbols because influential voices in the west are taking the rest of the non-western world for granted.

Events such as World Cup finals are investments that bring us together to celebrate our part of our talents and cultures. I pray that the lesson learned from these times is that gifts and holidays spread togetherness and love, when we open our hearts and minds to learn about each other. Happy holidays to the whole world.

‘Changed radically’: How women fight in Ukrainian city

JORIS FIORITI

The very day Russia launched its attack on her country, Svitlana Taranova enlisted in the Ukrainian army in the southern city of Mykolaiv, her birthplace.

“At 11 am on February 24 my contract with the territorial defence was signed,” said the former construction firm manager who is in her 50s.

“It was the only possible decision, not a sacrifice,” she said. Mykolaiv came under threat rapidly after Kherson, 70 kilometres to the east, was taken by Russian forces.

President Vladimir Putin's army needed to take Mykolaiv if it was going to conquer the Black Sea transport hub of Odessa, its main target and a two-hour drive to the west.

So the Russians began to pound Mykolaiv with artillery, massively and methodically.

Taranova, by now in the infantry, often found herself in close combat with Russian troops.

“In the beginning, I was terrified of the cluster bombs, my heart missed a beat every time one went off,” she said. But then the fear gave way to grim determination. “I no longer feel I need to hide. All I want is revenge,” she said.

While a team was in Mykolaiv in September and October, the city was bombarded almost every night.

As Taranova was battling Russians in combat, other women contributed to the war effort in different ways.

“We’re fighting here, too,” said Svitlana Nitchouk, 41, a bakery employee. “We feed the soldiers.”

When we met with her, she was watching an emergency unit clearing the rubble of an old apartment block in the city centre. The bakery where she works, on the ground floor, was badly damaged.

The remains of a nearby regional authority building miraculously holds up after a Russian missile destroyed seven floors.

Julia, a resident living nearby, said her apartment had already been hit three times.

The IT worker in her thirties took her daughter to the relative safety of western Ukraine, but regularly returns to Mykolaiv — mostly to distribute cars or military equipment to the fighters, funded by online appeals she has launched.

In another neighbourhood Julia Kirkina, a musicologist, sings and plays piano in a restaurant every Friday. “Music is one of the best cures for the spirit,” she said. — AFP



Sarah Blesener

The author is a photographer working on long form projects

For newly arrived New Yorkers, a chance to celebrate

Margo Tipán fed a plate of beans and arepas to her 8-year-old daughter, Genesis, on Christmas Day, a respite after a long and challenging month.

“This is the first time we have celebrated anything since arriving in this country,” Tipán said.

They came to New York City just a few weeks ago from Ecuador.

On Sunday, they celebrated Christmas with about 125 other recently arrived migrants.

The party was held at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism on the Upper West Side.

Volunteers from a diverse array of nonprofits and individuals from across the state — most of them from other religions — helped organise the event.

“When none of the churches could be available on Christmas, well, the temples naturally stepped up, since we don’t celebrate Christmas,” said Ruth Messinger, a former Manhattan borough president.

Evie Litwok, another volunteer, said the newcomers needed more help from New Yorkers — and not

EVIE LITWOK, A VOLUNTEER, SAID THE NEWCOMERS NEEDED MORE HELP FROM NEW YORKERS — AND NOT JUST OVER THE HOLIDAYS

just over the holidays.

“I’m drawn to this event today because this is a population needing other humans to care about them,” she said. “I’m thrilled we are doing this, but this is only one day.”

The party guests received gift bags full of warm clothes, scarves, hats, gloves and toys.

The highlight of the party was the

menu full of South American cuisine: pollo guisado, pabellon criollo, arepas, queso and more.

Santa Claus even made an appearance, posing with children at a makeshift photo booth in the hallway.

While waiting for his family picture to print, Alexander Frías Canario joked about the cold weather and food in New York, comparing them with his life back in Peru.

Canario arrived in the United States with his wife and two children in early October.

The arts and crafts table was crowded with children of all ages, who were busy decorating picture frames and drawing with markers and crayons.

Danieliza Piamo, 12, spent half an hour decorating a Christmas tree with her 8-year-old cousin, Steiberlin Vasquez.

“I am just so happy for those that have helped us, and that we can be together as a family,” she said.

“And, I miss my grandma, because she is back home.”

— *The New York Times*



Guests play chess during a Christmas Day party for newly arrived migrants in New York.

Ukraine soldiers take English lessons

ROBBIE COREY-BOULET

When Olena Chekryzhova followed in her grandmother's footsteps and began teaching English, she never dreamt the job would lead to a months-long stay at a frontline military base. But that has become her new reality as Ukrainian soldiers scramble to learn English — military terms especially — so they can make the most of combat aid from Washington and elsewhere against Russian forces. Donated supplies like HIMARS rocket systems have already been a battlefield game-changer, and President Volodymyr Zelensky's lightning visit to Washington this week yielded further pledges — including, for the first time, the Patriot missile defence system. Soldiers have found, however, that training materials for this equipment are available mainly in English, which is often also necessary to communicate with foreign volunteer fighters they encounter in the field. To help topple the language barrier, 35-year-old Chekryzhova has traded in her quiet life of classroom conjugation to give crash courses to the armed forces. The work has included a five-month stint at a base in the eastern industrial Donetsk region, where she lived alongside soldiers and took part in training sessions. "Some people think I'm crazy," she said at the facility in Kyiv where she is currently stationed. But she added, "I think that teaching English in this case is the small contribution that I can do for my country, for the people of my country and for the military, who are protecting us from this terrorist attack." Nearly all Ukrainian soldiers had at least some English instruction in school, but it was not always useful — especially for the older ones. "It was back in Soviet times, and this English I learned at school is like nothing, basically," said 50-year-old Igor Soldatenko, one of Chekryzhova's

THEY CAN MAKE THE MOST OF COMBAT AID FROM WASHINGTON AND ELSEWHERE AGAINST RUSSIAN FORCES

students in Kyiv. "The whole system was inadequate, as I see now. We were just learning texts without understanding them... Nobody could use it in real life." The recent lessons, by contrast, have been more practical — giving him words like "wounded", "semi-automatic" and "cache" as well as phrases such as "killed in action". The learning goes both ways, with Chekryzhova gleaning a new understanding of tactics and strategy -- and an appreciation of the trials of military life. While in Donetsk, she grieved along with soldiers who lost comrades — some of whom she taught directly — in fighting in her hometown of Bakhmut, a target of incessant Russian assault in recent months. "For me it's a double pain. Because on the one hand it's my hometown, and on the other hand it has now become the grave of my students," she said. During a recent one-hour conversation lesson in Kyiv, the only time Chekryzhova's students slipped briefly into Ukrainian was when discussing those they have lost. But despite fighting back tears, 36-year-old soldier Yuriy Kalmutskiy insisted on completing his idea in English, even if it was somewhat broken. "I lose a lot of friends... It was my circle of close people, and I lose... they. I lose they," he said. "It's very hard." As they work towards ultimately mastering English, Chekryzhova's students said they drew some inspiration from Zelensky's journey with the language. "A few years ago, he (had) awful English. Everybody knows this," Kalmutskiy said. "But he learned." That progress came in handy on Wednesday when Zelensky addressed the US Congress in English, declaring that "Ukraine is alive and kicking" while appealing for more aid. Yet while individual students have made similar strides, Chekryzhova said she is struggling to scale up her programme to reach even more. — AFP

SUN DRIED



People riding scooters on a section of a parched river bed along the Yangtze River in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province. — AFP

Biden's America finds its voice

DAVID BROOKS

The cameras mostly focused on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during his address to Congress on Wednesday night, but I focused my attention as much as I could on the audience in the room. There was fervour, admiration, yelling and whooping. In a divided nation, we don't often get to see the Congress rise up, virtually as one, with ovations, applause, many in blue dresses and yellow ties. Sure, there were dissenters in the room, but they were not what mattered. Words surged into my consciousness that I haven't considered for a while — compatriots, comrades, co-believers in a common creed. Zelensky and his fellow Ukrainians have reminded Americans of the values and causes we used to admire in ourselves — the ardent hunger for freedom, the deep-rooted respect for equality and human dignity, the willingness to fight against brutal authoritarians who would crush the human face under the heel of their muddy boots. It is as if Ukraine and Zelensky have rekindled a forgotten song, and suddenly everybody has remembered how to sing it. Zelensky was not subtle about making this point. He said that what Ukraine is fighting for today

IT IS AS IF UKRAINE AND ZELENSKY HAVE REKINDLED A FORGOTTEN SONG, AND SUDDENLY EVERYBODY HAS REMEMBERED HOW TO SING IT.

has echoes in what so many Americans fought for over centuries. I thought of John Adams, Frederick Douglass, Theodore Roosevelt, George Marshall, Fannie Lou Hamer, the many unsung heroes of the Cold War. His words reminded us that America supports Ukraine not only out of national interest — to preserve a stable liberal world order — but also to live out a faith that is essential to this country's being and identity. The thing that really holds America together is this fervent idea. This liberal ideal has been tarnished over the past six decades. Sometimes America has opposed authoritarianism with rash imprudence — the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, Iraq. Other times, America has withdrawn behind its ocean barriers and done little while horror unfolded — the genocide in Rwanda, the civil war in Syria, the failure during the Obama and Trump administrations to support Ukraine sufficiently as Putin tested the waters and upped the pressure. U.S. policy has oscillated between a hubristic interventionism and a callous non-interventionism. "We overdo our foreign crusades, and then we overdo our retrenchments, never pausing

in between, where an ordinary country would try to reach a fine balance," George Packer wrote in The Atlantic recently. The result has been a crisis of national self-doubt: Can the world trust the United States to do what's right? Can we believe in ourselves? Finding the balance between passionate ideals and mundane practicalities has been a persistent American problem. The movie "Lincoln" with Daniel Day-Lewis was about that. Lincoln is zigging and zagging through the swamps of reality, trying to keep his eye on true north, while some tell him he's going too fast and others scream



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US President Joe Biden walk together at the White House in Washington. — NYT

he's going too slow. Joe Biden has struck this balance as well as any president in recent times, perhaps having learned a costly lesson from the heartless way America exited from Afghanistan. He has swung the Western alliance fervently behind Ukraine. But he has done it with prudence and calibration. Ukraine will get this weapons system, but not that one. It can dream of total victory, but it also has to think seriously about negotiations. Biden has shown that America can responsibly lead. He has shown you can have moral clarity without being

blinded by it. Both Zelenskyy and Biden have been underestimated. Zelensky had been a comedian and so people thought he was a lightweight. He dresses like a regular guy and eschews the trappings of power that obsess people like Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. For his part, Biden doesn't fit the romantic "West Wing" fantasy that many progressives have in their heads. A progressive president should be delivering soaring, off-the cuff speeches that make you feel good about yourself! But the truth is that both men have delivered again and again. The military struggle in Ukraine might turn grim in the coming months, but both men are partly responsible for a historic shift in the global struggle against brutality and authoritarianism. A few years ago, democracies seemed to be teetering and authoritarians seemed to be on the march. But since, we've had heroic resistance from Ukraine and steady leadership in the White House. As I look at the polls and the midterm results, I see Americans building an anti-Trump majority, which at least right now seems to make it far less likely Trump will ever be president again. — The New York Times

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Ahli Sidab head coach Aiman al Katheri



Al Nasr and Ahli Sidab players pose with their jerseys.



Al Nasr team



Al Nasr head coach Mohammed al Battrani



Team coaches and captains with officials at the press conference.



Ahli Sidab team

AHLI SIDAB AND AL NASR PRIMED FOR HM CUP FINAL

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, DEC 26

Eight-time HM Cup winners Al Nasr are keen to brush off their disappointment in the OHA League when they take on 12-time champions Ahli Sidab in the final of the 52nd His Majesty's Cup hockey championship at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat on Tuesday. The match will kick off at 7 pm.

Shaikh Salim Mustahail al Mashani, Advisor at the Diwan of Royal Court, will be the chief guest for the final.

Al Seeb edged Salalah 6-5 in

penalty shoot-out to finish third after the play-off match on Sunday. After the final round, Al Nasr topped with 13 points, followed by Ahli Sidab in second place with 11 points and qualified for the final.

Al Seeb came in third place with 7 points. Salalah were fourth with 6 points and Bausher finished in fifth place with 5 points. Nizwa came sixth with no points.

Defending champions Sohar failed to get through to the final round from Group A with other three – Al Nasr, Seeb and Bausher advancing to next stage. From Group B, Ahli Sidab, Nizwa and Salalah made it to the final round as Saham were eliminated.

Speaking on the eve of the final, Al Nasr head coach Mohammed al Battrani said they hope to win the title after their disappointment in the OHA League.

"We want to win this edition of HM Cup final as we missed out in the semifinal of the OHA League," Battrani told a press conference at the Oman Olympic Committee headquarters.

"All our players are in good shape for the final. We are ready to put up a good challenge," he added.

Ahli Sidab won the OHA League in October after beating Seeb 4-1 in the final. Ahli Sidab thrashed Sohar 6-0 and Seeb edged Al Nasr 2-1 in the semifinals.

Ahli Sidab head coach Aiman al Katheri said his team is in top form. "Our players are in top form. We want to conclude our good performance in this edition of HM Cup with the trophy. We expect a strong match and our players are prepared for it."

EXCITING ACTION

Oman Hockey Association general secretary Khamis al Rahbi said the teams have presented an exciting version of hockey in this edition.

"We saw the eight teams putting up a good competition in this HM Cup. Now in the final we expect another exciting match between the strong teams of Oman," the

OHA official said.

Tournament director Abdullah al Harrasi congratulated all the teams for their match spirit during the tournament.

"We had some excellent hockey actions till now. The final is expected to be a cracker of a match," Al Harrasi said.

Ahli Sidab captain Salah bin Nasser al Saadi with their Indian recruit Ravinder Valmiki and Al Nasr skipper Bassim al Durbait with their Indian player Jasjeet Singh also took part in the press conference.

Salah al Saadi said his players are eager to continue their good work. "We are confident to lift

the second title of the season after the OHA League," the Ahli Sidab captain said.

Al Nasr's Bassim echoed the coach's sentiments.

"We have a good chance to win the first title for the season. Our boys will work hard for this target," he said.

Professional players Valmiki and Jasjeet opined the Oman hockey has grown up in terms of technical standards and player skills. "We have been playing the HM Cup for some years now. We can feel the difference in technical standards and match competitions over the years," the Indian international players said.



OCT Ruwi stun Orient Travels, Design Group win

MUSCAT: OCT Ruwi beat Orient Travels by 48 runs in the A Division League powered by Khimji Ramdas and Design Group brushed past Manis CT by 2 runs in the B Division League powered by Al Ansari Group of Companies.

OCT Ruwi were put to bat as Orient Travels called right and elected to field. Orient Travels picked 2 wickets in the powerplay with the score tinkering at 32-2.

Zubair al Balushi once again being their batting backbone scored an half century to hold the OCT Ruwi innings helping them cruise through the middle overs when wickets kept falling at regular intervals at the other end. Wasim al Balushi's 33 off 19 balls blitz helped OCT Ruwi to post 236 runs at the end of the innings.

Ibrar Hussain bagged 3 wickets and Tanveer Rana, Syed Amir Ali and Qayyum Mudasir claimed 2 wickets each.

In reply, Orient Travels lost 2 wickets within 5 balls in the fifth and sixth overs but Adil Khan and Ibrar Hussain's determined approach stitched a 83-run partnership putting Orient Travels ahead in the chase. But middle overs charisma from Zubair al Balushi and Nawed al Balushi claiming 3 wickets-a-piece bundled down Orient Travels at 188, 48 runs short of the target.

DESIGN EDGE MANIS

In the B division clash, Design Group won the toss and elected to bat first. They found themselves in a puddle with three of their top order batters back in the hut within the powerplay. However, a 130-run stand and half centuries by Alif Khan and Altaf Mohammed challenged



Zubair al Balushi of OCT Ruwi

the Manis CT bowlers with a quickfire 39 by Nishan S taking them to a respectable total of 225 runs. Rana Zeeshan and Aneek Chakraborty picked two wickets each for Manis CT.

In reply, Manis CT also lost their first three batsmen within the powerplay with the target looking far from reachable. However, Krishna Pradhan and Adnan Ul Haq's half-centuries helped Manis CT get back onto the chase and hunt for the victory.

Samir Osman's quickfire 34 off 22 balls brought them close but left 2 runs short of the target. Akhil Anilkumar and Midhun Sathyan took 4 wickets and 2 wickets respectively for Design Group.

BRIEF SCORES

OCT Ruwi 236 all out in 49.4 overs (Zubair al Balushi 69 (91b, 8x4); Ibrar Hussain 3-46, Tanveer Rana 2-30, Syed Amir Ali 2-37, Qayyum Mudassir 2-44) beat Orient Travels 188 all out in 45.2 overs (Adil Khan 56 (56b, 6x4); Zubair al Balushi 3-34, Nawed al Balushi 3-36) by 48 runs.

Design Group Engg Consultants 225-6 in 30 overs (Althaf Mohammed 81 (67b, 12x4), Alif Khan 50 (46b, 6x4); Rana Zeeshan 2-36, Aneek Chakraborty 2-40) beat Manis Cricket Team 223 all out in 29.4 overs (Krishna Pradhan 69 (58b, 8x4, 1x6), Adnan Ul Haq 50 (44b, 9x4); Akhil Anilkumar 4-34, Mithun Sathyan 2-32) by 2 runs.

Green takes five as Australia seize control in second Test

MELBOURNE: Cameron Green celebrated landing one of the richest contracts in Indian Premier League history by taking a career-best 5-27 as Australia ripped through South Africa's fragile batting in the second Test on Monday.

After the visitors were dismissed for 189, an aggressive David Warner, in his 100th Test, was unbeaten on 32 and Marnus Labuschagne was not out on five to steer the hosts to 45-1 at stumps on day one.

Usman Khawaja was out for one, caught behind by Kyle Verreynne off Kagiso Rabada.

"That's cricket summed up," Green told reporters. "You can have a really slow start to the summer and think cricket's so tough and then you have a few days like this, and it brings you back.

"It's a very special feeling (getting five wickets)."

Australia won the first of three Tests by six wickets inside two days on a hostile and green Gabba pitch in Brisbane last week.

The deck at the Melbourne Cricket Ground was less bowler-friendly, but captain Pat Cummins surprisingly chose to field at a venue where toss-winning teams normally bat first.

It proved to be an inspired decision in front of 64,876 fans with the Proteas losing early wickets as they again struggled against the hosts' bowling firepower.

After slumping to 67-5, Verreynne and Marco Jansen launched a stirring fightback in a gutsy 112-run stand.

But then Green -- the second-most expensive buy at the IPL auction last week behind England's Sam Curran -- went on a blitz, snapping the partnership when Verreynne got an outside edge on 52 that Steve Smith collected.

Two balls later, Jansen was gone, caught by wicketkeeper Alex Carey for 59 off Green before the



giant Australian bowled Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi.

Green took 4-8 in the spell with the Proteas losing their last five wickets for 10 runs.

EARLY PRESSURE

South Africa started nervously, losing Sarel Erwee and Theunis de Bruyn cheaply.

They were stunned just before lunch when Elgar, who

passed 5,000 Test runs, and the experienced Temba Bavuma departed in consecutive balls.

It left them in trouble at 58-4 and the inexperienced middle order facing a daunting task.

When Khaya Zondo was out in the fifth over after lunch for five, courtesy of a stunning Marnus Labuschagne diving catch, the end looked nigh before Verreynne and Jansen dug in.

SCOREBOARD

AUSTRALIA 1ST INNINGS

D Warner not out ----- 32
U Khawaja c Verreynne b Rabada -- 1
M Labuschagne not out ----- 5
Extras (lb5, nb2) ----- 7
Total (1 wicket, 12 overs) ----- 45
Fall of wickets: 1-21
Bowling: Rabada 5-1-24-1, Ngidi 3-2-1-0, Jansen 3-0-8-0, Nortje 1-0-7-0

SOUTH AFRICA 1ST INNINGS

D Elgar run out ----- 26
S Erwee c Khawaja b Boland ----- 18
T De Bruyn c Carey b Green ----- 12
T Bavuma c Carey b Starc ----- 1
K Zondo c Labuschagne b Starc ----- 5
K Verreynne c Smith b Green ----- 52
M Jansen c Carey b Green ----- 59
K Maharaj c Cummins b Lyon ----- 2
K Rabada b Green ----- 4
A Nortje not out ----- 1
L Ngidi b Green ----- 2
Extras (b3, lb3, nb1) ----- 7
Total (68.4 overs, all out) ----- 189
Fall of wickets: 1-29, 2-56, 3-58, 4-58, 5-67, 6-179, 7-182, 8-186, 9-186, 10-189
Bowling: Starc 13-2-39-2, Cummins 14-4-30-0, Boland 14-2-34-1, Lyon 17-3-53-1, Green 10-4-3-27-5

"The occasion was awesome, but unfortunately it wasn't the best day for our team," said Verreynne.

"I felt today was probably the first time in the last couple of games that we had more soft dismissals than not, and that is probably the most disappointing thing."

On a humid day, Cummins asked some searching early questions, dropping Elgar on seven off his own bowling and then having two big lbw shouts against Sarel Erwee denied.

Erwee lived dangerously and was no match for local hero Scott Boland. The seamer, who took 6-7 in the corresponding Test against England a year ago, came on to thunderous applause and got the breakthrough in his second over, with Khawaja taking a low catch at slip to remove Erwee for 18. — AFP

Azam, Sarfaraz punish sloppy NZ

KARACHI: Babar Azam knocked a fighting hundred and the recalled Sarfaraz Ahmed hit a half century to guide Pakistan to a healthy 317-5 on the opening day of the first Test against New Zealand in Karachi on Monday.

The pair led Pakistan's recovery from 110-4 during a 196-run fifth wicket stand, as the home team lost only Sarfaraz in the last two sessions.

New Zealand spinners had taken three early wickets on a spin-assisting National Stadium pitch and one before lunch but had to wait until the closing moments when Ajaz Patel got Sarfaraz caught in the slip for 86.

At close, Azam was unbeaten on 161 and Agha Salman three as the home team looked to lift from last week's 3-0 loss at the hands of England, their first ever whitewash at home.

Azam now has 1,170 runs in nine Tests this year — the highest run scorer in Tests in 2022.

He also beat Mohammad Yousuf's 2006 aggregate of 2,435 in all three formats, taking 2,584 runs across the board this year.

The Pakistan skipper swept spinner Michael Bracewell for a six towards mid-wicket to



reach his ninth Test century. He has also hit 16 boundaries.

Sarfaraz, playing his 50th Test and first since January 2019, cracked nine boundaries in his 256-minute knock but missed out on a century.

"It's something I am sad about, but then I look back and think, 'what if I had fallen without scoring?'" he said.

Happy to return to the field after fearing he would not play for his country again, he confessed to needing some support from his team.

"When I went in and played the first three deliveries I had a very fast heartbeat, so during the lunch break my fellow players and Azam told me to relax, so I was calmer afterwards," he said. — AFP

RCC to launch the first qualifying race in Suhar

WALEED AL JAHWARI

MUSCAT, DEC 26

The Royal Camel Corps (RCC) in cooperation with Oman Camel Racing Federation will launch the first qualifying race for the annual festival camel racing on Wednesday, as part of the 20th edition for the season 2022-23 at the Suhar camel racing track.

The race includes 45 rounds, where 30 rounds will be held on Wednesday, including 19 for the 'Hagayg' category which is two years old for a distance of 3 km, and 11 rounds for the 'Laqaya' category which is three years old for 4 km.

Fifteen rounds will be run on Thursday, include six rounds for 'Jadhaa' category which is four years old for 5 km, while three rounds will be held for the 'Thanaiya' category which is five years old for 6 km, two rounds will be for 'Hool' category which is above six years for 6 km, in addition to two rounds for the



human riders for 2 km.

Recently, the RCC announced about the positions that will qualify from some runs to the final race in March. The first three places from the first to the seventh rounds will qualify from the 'Hagayg' category. In the category of 'Laqaya', the first to fifth places qualify in the first round, while in the 'Jadhaa' category the top five winners from the first three

rounds will qualify to the final.

From the 'Thanaiya' category, camels will qualify from first to tenth place in the first round, and in the 'Hool' category, the top 10 in the first two rounds, also the top 10 will qualify in the first round in human rider's race.

The participation is limited to purebred Omani camels wholly owned by Omani, while the use of stimulants are strictly prohibited.

Al Danube seals final date with Al Masaa XI

MUSCAT: Al Danube booked a final date with Al Masaa XI in the Challengers trophy league. In the second semifinal, Al Danube beat their opposition comprehensively by 9 wickets to seal the date in the final against Al Masaa Elezens who won their first semifinal against their opposition by 6 wickets last week on Friday. The final is set to be played at Al Shabab Club in Barka on December 30.

The Challengers trophy is hosted by Barka Champions League-BCL Committee who are also in their fourth edition final on the same ground. The committee urged the sports lovers to attend the grand finale.





Tottenham Hotspur's Harry Kane scores their first goal against Brentford during the Premier League match at Brentford Community Stadium, London. – Reuters

Kane sparks Spurs fightback as EPL returns

LONDON: Harry Kane shook off his World Cup disappointment to spark a Tottenham Hotspur revival in an entertaining 2-2 draw at Brentford on Monday as the Premier League roared back to life. An early goal by Vitaly Janelt and Ivan Toney's close-range strike shortly after the interval put Brentford 2-0 up as Tottenham struggled to deal with their hosts. But Antonio Conte's side have made a habit of playing their best football when trailing and so it proved again. Kane, whose missed penalty just over a fortnight ago condemned England to a quarter-final defeat by

France, headed home in the 65th minute to give his side a lifeline. Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg, one of five Tottenham starters who featured at the World Cup, levelled with a calm finish and Kane almost won it with a header against the crossbar. Tottenham are in fourth place with 30 points while Brentford are ninth ahead of the rest of the day's fixtures. Forty four days after the Premier League shut down for the first mid-season World Cup, all eyes were on those players involved in Qatar and especially Kane. The striker equalled England's

international scoring record with his 53rd goal in the clash with France but the abiding memory of that evening was his late missed penalty as England suffered a 2-1 defeat. Kane, along with most of team mates, was barely in the game at Brentford before half-time. **ENGLAND HEARTACHE** But any suggestion his England heartache might weigh him down were answered when he rose to meet Clement Lenglet's cross and plant a header past David Raya. It instantly galvanised a Tottenham team who have trailed

in six successive Premier League games and six minutes later a superb passing move ended with Dejan Kulusevski's cut back reaching Hojbjerg who coolly shot past Raya. Tottenham suddenly appeared full of energy after their early lethargy and looked like taking all three points as they finished the game in dominant fashion. It could not have been more different from the opening 55 minutes as Brentford continued where they had left off last month in a shock win over champions Manchester City. They were physically superior to

Tottenham, quicker to the ball and offered far greater threat on a crisp Boxing Day morning in south west London. Brentford took the lead in the 15th minute when Bryan Mbeumo's deep cross was met on the volley by Mathias Jensen and the ball was only half stopped by Spurs keeper Fraser Forster, in for the rested France keeper Hugo Lloris, before dropping for Janelt to convert from close range. Tottenham responded with Kulusevski creating a couple of opportunities but Brentford were denied a second goal before halftime when Toney's effort was

deemed offside. When Toney did make it 2-0 in the 54th minute with a tap-in from a corner comically conceded by Tottenham defender Eric Dier with a sliced clearance, it appeared Brentford were in complete control but Tottenham suddenly flicked the switch. Conte's side have now earned 13 points from losing positions this season, the most in the Premier League. "Until the Kane goal there was only one team on the pitch," Brentford manager Thomas Frank told Amazon Prime. "It was a very good performance and the players are disappointed." — Reuters

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Sharp increase in tourist traffic into Oman

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 26

The number of travellers has risen sharply in the Sultanate of Oman with both inbound and outbound traffic witnessing significant growth, underscoring the strong recovery under way in the tourism sector.

In the first 11 months of this year, the number of visitors arriving to Oman reached 2.5 million till end-November 2022, while the visitors departing from Oman reached 4.7 million, according to National Centre for Statistics and Information data.

According to the figures, GCC citizens were among the top nationalities that visited Oman till November, followed by Indian, Yemeni, Pakistani and German citizens. While 1.4 million people from the GCC visited Oman till November, there were 292,000 Indian, 98,000 Yemeni, 65,000 Pakistani and 57,000 German visitors.

A comparison of figures of November 2021 and November 2022 shows a remarkable increase of visitors. 273,014 visitors came to Oman in November 2022, compared to 111,432 in 2021. The figure also shows 43.18 per cent



AMONG THE NATIONALITIES THAT VISITED IN NOVEMBER 2022, GCC GUESTS TOPPED THE LIST WITH 117,878 FOLLOWED BY ASIANS (60,095), EUROPEANS (59,368), OTHER ARABS (18,346), AMERICANS (12,187), AFRICANS (3,495) AND OCEANIANS (1,645).

increase of GCC visitors and 22 per cent increase of Asian visitors to Oman.

Among the nationalities that visited in November 2022, GCC guests topped the list with 117,878 followed by Asians (60,095), Europeans (59,368), other Arabs (18,346), Americans (12,187), Africans (3,495) and Oceanians (1,645).

Meanwhile, the number of outbound visitors in November 2022 reached 390,464, a 39.9 per cent increase compared to November 2021 with 279,019.

The figures also include 241,892 Omanis (compared to 168,576 in the same period last year) and 158,574 foreigners (110,442 in November 2021) departing from the country.

Hotel revenues soar as tourism sector posts strong recovery

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 26

Luxury hotels across the Sultanate of Oman registered a remarkable 91.7 per cent growth in revenues, which climbed to RO 161.262 million for the first 11 months of this year.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NSCI), 3 to 5-star rated properties posted a 33.9 per cent increase in guests during the January – November 2022 period, compared to the same period of 2021.

As many as 1.449 million guests stayed at Omani luxury hotels this year, up from 1.082 million during the corresponding period of 2021. The occupancy rate also recorded a growth of 18.2 per cent, Oman News Agency (ONA) said in a report.

Guests from the GCC states surged 418.8 per cent to 145,192 this year, up from 27,985 last year. This was followed by European tourists, whose numbers jumped 327 per cent to 307,268 this year, up from 71,951 last year.

Omanis made up a significant number of hotel guests as well. However, their numbers declined 14.9 per cent to 643,859 this year, down from 756,661 last year.

As of the end of November 2022, the number of American guests reached 52,625, representing an increase of 185.1 per cent compared to the same period in 2021.

Hotel guests from African states totalled 7,807, with a growth rate of 98.4 per cent, while those from Asian countries increased by 53 per cent to 190,700, up from 124,675 during the same period in 2021.

Ministry of Commerce regulates marketing, promotion of goods

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, DEC 26

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) recently issued Ministerial Decree No. 619/2022, a by-law that aims to regulate the marketing and promotion of goods and services through websites and social media platforms.

The Ministerial Decree stipulates that individuals must apply for a licence through the ministry before promoting products or services on online websites and social media platforms with or without charge.

Licensees will have to adhere to a set of guidelines when engaging in the promotional activities online.

The guidelines prohibit the promotion of counterfeit goods and unlicensed projects, in addition to the promotion of tobacco and smoking in all forms and methods of consumption.

The guidelines will also prohibit the infringement of intellectual property within the promotional materials.

Permittees must display their licence number during the activity, and avoid the spread of rumours and misleading news.

In addition to promoting content in a clear and unambiguous manner, without exaggeration.

Failure to adhere to the guidelines might result in a warning, a fine not exceeding RO 1,000, a suspension of the licence for a period no longer than a year, or the termination of the licence.

Exceptions to the Ministerial Decree include promotional activities of non-profit practices, such as charity or voluntary work, and the marketing of goods or services by traders and service providers.

Interested applicants may apply to obtain a licence from the Department of Commercial Affairs and E-Commerce at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

Approved applicants will be informed within 15 days of receiving their complete application, and the licence will last for 3 years and will be subject to renewal.

Positive move: Review of two-year-old order scheduled to begin today, December 27

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 26

The International Trade Administration — part of the US Department of Commerce — has issued notification of its “intent” to revoke an anti-dumping duty order issued against imports of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) sheet from the Sultanate of Oman.

The notification, marking the start of a review of the anti-dumping duty order issued by US authorities more than two years ago, will come as good news to, among others, Oman-based Octal Holding, one of the world’s largest producers of PET sheet for the global packaging industry.

Octal’s flagship investment is a PET manufacturing complex located in Salalah Free Zone, output from which is marketed globally but primarily in the United States.

In notifying the general public about its planned review of the anti-dumping duty



order, the US International Trade Administration said: “On November 18, 2022, the US Department of Commerce (Commerce) initiated a changed circumstances review (CCR) of the anti-dumping duty order on polyethylene terephthalate (PET) sheet from the Sultanate of Oman.

We preliminarily determine that revocation of the order is warranted. Interested parties are invited to comment on these preliminary results.” The notification comes just over two years after the Commerce Department published its anti-dumping duty order on PET sheet

from Oman on September 10, 2020. It followed a determination made by the International Trade Commission (also part of the Commerce Department) that PET sheet imports from Oman, as well as South Korea, “materially injured” the US domestic PET manufacturing industry and were thus subject to anti-dumping duties.

Octal Petrochemicals, backed by the Omani Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, strongly disputed the order and vowed to contest it. In October this year, domestic

US producers of PET sheet requested, through a Changed Circumstances Review (CCR), the revocation of the order. This was supported by OCTAL Extrusion Corporation, a US producer of PET sheet.

An initiation notice issued by the International Trade Administration elicited no further objections from the domestic market, leading to the latest notification of its intent to revoke the order.

That review is scheduled to take place on Tuesday, December 27, 2022.

A final revocation of anti-dumping duty on PET sheet will have beneficial impacts for Oman, which is a major exporter of the commodity to the US market.

Salalah-based Octal Petrochemicals has been exporting PET sheets valued in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually into the United States, capitalising on the Oman-US Free Trade Agreement.

Mexican-headquartered petrochemicals conglomerate Alpek currently owns Octal Holding SAOC following the acquisition of the Oman-based group in June this year.

Omantel offers online programme for select group of employees

MUSCAT: In continuation of its commitment to bringing best-in-class trainings to its workforce, Omantel, a leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the Sultanate of Oman, recently offered a select group of employees a custom educational programme delivered by the Stanford Centre for Professional Development in the Stanford University School of Engineering.

Catalysing Digital Transformation, an intensive twelve-week educational programme, was offered through Omantel's Digital School, whose mission is to keep employees abreast of emerging technologies and strengthen Omantel's digital capabilities to create and capture new value in the market.

The programme covered key topics on digital technology trends and practices and equips employees with digital mindsets and skills to contribute to and lead strategic digital transformation initiatives at Omantel.

Omantel brought together a cohort of 50 employees from cross-functional units, including both technologists and engineers and business and operation managers, to collaborate on developing and implementing innovative ideas.

Participants gained knowledge and skills on impacts of emerging technologies, customer centricity, design thinking, product opportunity assessment, product strategy and roadmaps, network and platform strategy, and collaboration with agility.

"The Catalysing Digital Transformation programme was aimed at bolstering our employees' capabilities in keeping up with Omantel's



current and future needs, as well as the company's ability to avail of new market opportunities that arise with the advancement of technology.

It is in line with our focus on bringing best-in-class training and workshops to ensure that our employees can deliver effective and high-quality work on par with international standards," commented Dr Ghalib al Hosni, Chief People Officer at Omantel.

The components of the course included live virtual workshops, self-paced online courses, discussion sessions, all facilitated by Stanford instructors, as well as Capstone presentations.

Dr Ghalib al Hosni added that educational programmes like this help position Omantel as a company that leads the future of telecom and technology in the Sultanate of Oman by developing and nurturing talents, and demonstrate that Omantel is working well beyond the traditional telecom ambit, actively developing its employees' skills in technology, data, and all emerging strands.

Omantel is the Sultanate of Oman's first and leading integrated telecommunications services provider, enabling the digital society to flourish, allowing new ways of doing business and delivering a world of information, news, and entertainment. While striving to ensure an optimum customer satisfaction, Omantel plays a key social role to provide the required support and assistant to all sectors amongst the Omani society.

Honor X6 debuts in Oman market

MUSCAT: MHD-ITICS officially announced its appointment as the exclusive distributor for Honor mobiles in Oman during an event held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Qurum on December 22 to launch the Honor X6.

Delegates present from Honor included House Ma - GCC CEO, Amol Govind Sonake - VP, GCC Sales, Jack Chen - Product Manager, GCC and Russell Huo - Country Manager, Oman who attended the event along with the management team of MHD-ITICS.

Addressing the event, House Ma, GCC CEO, Honor stated, "Honor team considers Oman as one of our key strategic markets in the Middle East. Our partnership with the Consumer Division of MHD-ITICS is the result of our study of their excellent distribution network, logistics capabilities, and infrastructure.

Through this strategic partnership, we are targeting accelerated growth in market share for Honor. Their inherent zeal for business, responsible and practical distribution practices and an unwavering commitment to delivering best-in-class customer service is what inspired Honor to



work with MHD-ITICS.

This alliance will also improve the availability of our products in the market, enhance the shopping experience of our customers and will help us achieve our ambitious business goals," he added.

During the event, Honor launched its new smartphone - Honor X6, which is the latest addition to its state-of-the-art "X series". The Honor X6 is equipped with a triple camera system that includes a 50MP main camera, a 2MP macro camera and a 2MP depth camera, an ultra-large 5000 mAh battery and expandable storage to go along with its 4GB+64GB memory.

Users can effortlessly capture, record and express themselves creatively through photography. Fitted out with a 6.5-inch Honor Full-View Display, it offers an excellent viewing experience.

Coupled with a host of eye care features including Eye Comfort Mode and Dark Mode, the Honor X6 delivers an incredibly comfortable viewing experience in a variety of user circumstances, making it ideal for reading articles, streaming movies, or browsing images in sunlight or poorly lit environments.

MHD-ITICS, under the guidance of Honourable Lujaina Mohsin Darwish, has achieved

commendable growth in recent years. Moreover, the company has been at the forefront of setting high benchmarks in the industry and supporting local talent.

The core management team has devised a three-pronged business strategy that includes growing existing businesses, expanding into adjacencies and diversifying into new business areas. As a key part of the organisation, the consumer division has always endeavoured to bring customers in Oman the latest technologies and products.

The strategic partnership with Honor represents a milestone for the Company in this direction.

Muzn expands CCDM network

MUSCAT: National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Islamic banking window, Muzn, continues to expand its diverse network of Cash Deposit Machines (CCDMs). With more than 135 locations across Oman, it's now easier than ever to make secure cash deposits through NBO's CCDMs, 24/7, without having to visit a branch.

Operated by Muzn's parent organisation NBO, the state-of-the-art self-service terminals are part of the bank's ongoing commitment to make it effortless for all customers to manage their finances.

Salima al Marzouqi, Assistant General Manager and Chief Islamic Banking Officer of Muzn, said, "At Muzn, we always aim to provide our customers with access to innovative, simplified and Islamic Shariah-compliant solutions, while making their everyday banking experience



as seamless and convenient as possible.

Our growing network of CCDMs, which are conveniently found at various locations, offer a practical alternative to waiting in line in a branch and represent just one of many ways to bank with us."

Muzn offers a host of innovative, competitive and quality financial solutions with the values of Islamic Shariah at the core and has been recognised for its customer-centric approach throughout 2022.

OETC acquires assets from Tanweer

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 26

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC), a member of Nama Group, has announced that it has acquired from Rural Areas Electricity Company (Tanweer) electrical transmission networks in the Governorate of Musandam and the Wilayat of Haima in Al Wusta Governorate, as of September 1, 2022.

The acquisition makes OETC the owner and the operator of these assets, comprising a total of four 132 kV Grid stations, which are: Tibat 132kV grid station in Bukha area, 132kV grid station in Khasab Wilayat, 132kV grid station in Dibba Wilayat, and 132kV grid station in Haima Wilayat. It also includes the acquisition of the associated transmission lines 132 kV (100 km).

The production capacity of the transmission network in the Governorate of Musandam is 2.337 MW. The acquisition is part of OETC's strategic plans to provide and connect all wilayats and governorates of the Oman with the Main Interconnected Transmission Network.



Bank Muscat's new trade portal well received by customers

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat's new trade portal DigiTrade, which was launched earlier this year has been well received by the bank's corporate and institutional customers for facilitating online initiation of trade transactions and real-time tracking.

Introduced in line with the bank's customer-centric vision "To serve you better, everyday" and commitment to digital transformation in line with Oman Vision 2040, Bank Muscat DigiTrade helps corporate customers log in from their office or home and perform a number of paperless transactions for different trade products and services.

Corporate customers have particularly benefited from the single sign-on process using their Online Banking credentials instead of having to visit a branch and submit requests in person

during regular banking hours.

In particular, the new Trade Portal enables speedier, efficient and highly-secure trade-financing solutions for corporate customers who will receive auto notifications and email alerts upon the processing of transactions by the bank, and can generate electronic copies of all transaction advice and related SWIFT messages.

Easy-to-use templates, an in-built search tool for easy retrieval of records, and a calendar menu option to schedule transactions are some of the other salient features of the Bank Muscat DigiTrade, which is easily accessed through the bank's online banking platform.

Bank Muscat, which is recognised as one of the leading Trade Finance providers in the region provides tailor-made global trade products and services as part



of its trade financing solutions, which are simple to use and come with a highly-competitive pricing

structure.

The bank issues Letters of Credit, all types of Guarantees,

Standby LCs, handles documents under collection, offers document checking services under export

Letters of Credit, confirms Letters of Credit and provides various trade financing solutions including forfeiting, receivable financing, trust receipt financing etc., and facilitates secured trade payments and receipts between buyers and sellers.

With a strong network of over 500 correspondent banks across the globe and a highly-experienced pool of trade specialists, Bank Muscat offers a number of customised solutions to meet the varying demands of its customers.

The bank also offers Global Trade Services through its Corporate Banking branches at Ruwi, Al Nahda Towers (Ghala), Sohar and Salalah as well as at its Head Office in Seeb. Customers may contact the Global Trade Services Help Desk through email at gtshehelpdesk@bankmuscat.com for assistance and queries.

Central banks deliver historic rate hike blast in 2022

Major central banks ramped up interest rates at the fastest pace and biggest scale in at least two decades in 2022 as policy makers went all out in the battle to contain surging inflation. Central banks overseeing the 10 most heavily traded currencies delivered 2,700 basis points (bps) of tightening in 54 rate hikes over the past 12 months, calculations show.

All major central banks bar the Bank of Japan raised rates this year, though policymakers in Tokyo roiled markets in December with a surprise policy tweak to its yield target, fuelling speculations that an actual rate hike might be on the cards in the not too distant future. However, it was primarily the US Federal Reserve's 225 basis points of hikes over the past 12 months that has kept markets on edge against a backdrop of sharply slowing growth. "When you look at the

tightening in the US it is basically one of the sharpest ever in the past 20 years," David Hauner, head of emerging markets cross-asset strategy and economics, EMEA at Bank of America Global Research told said. "Normally when you have such a sharp tightening in financial conditions you basically have something more than just a small recession, which seems now the general consensus." On a monthly basis, data showed that seven out of the 10 major central banks

lifted rates in December. The US Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank, the Bank of England, the Reserve Bank of Australia, Norway's Norges Bank, the Bank of Canada and the Swiss National Bank all raised their benchmarks by a cumulative of 300 basis points. This compares to the monthly peak of 550 bps in September, though not all central banks meet on a monthly basis. The Reserve Bank of New Zealand and Sweden's Riksbank did not hold rate setting meetings

in December. Meanwhile, there was more evidence that the tightening cycle in emerging markets was slowing down. Five out of 18 central banks delivered a total 260 bps of rate hikes in December, down from 400 bps in November and some way off the 800-plus bps monthly tallies in June and July. The majority of those came from policymakers in Asia, who are lagging in the tightening cycle. Latin America and emerging Europe.

Central banks in Indonesia, India and the Philippines raised rates, alongside Colombia and Mexico. "Most emerging market central banks are close to having completed their rate hike cycle," said Charles-Henry Moncheau, chief investment office at Syz Group. Emerging market central banks have raised rates 93 times this year to lift benchmarks by a total of 7,425 bps this year, nearly three times the 2,745 bps tightening in 2021. — Reuters

East-West battleground will shift from fossil fuels to metals



LISA JUCCA

The writers is Breakingviews' European Business Editor. Based in Italy, she focuses on key corporate trends across the European Union.

EUROPE NEEDS TO CUMULATIVELY SPEND \$5.3 TRILLION ON CLEAN ENERGY PROJECTS BY 2050. THAT REQUIRES A SIXFOLD INCREASE IN THE GLOBAL PRODUCTION OF COPPER, LITHIUM, GRAPHITE, NICKEL AND SOME RARE EARTHS BY 2040.

The global trade war will shift from fossil fuels to metals and raw materials. Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted the risk of relying on autocratic states for energy. Even if Europe's gas crisis eases, Western manufacturers' focus will switch to reducing China's dominance in materials key to a cleaner economy. Europe needs to cumulatively spend \$5.3 trillion on clean energy projects by 2050. That requires a sixfold increase in the global production of copper, lithium, graphite, nickel and some rare earths by 2040, International Energy Agency estimates show. Yet China dominates the processing, and to a lesser extent the extraction, of many critical industrial ingredients. It refines 58% of lithium produced globally, 65% of cobalt and over one-third of nickel and copper. Ostracised Russia is also big in nickel, palladium and cobalt. Europe, which imports between 75% and 100% of most metals, looks particularly vulnerable. In response, Western companies can strike deals

with suppliers in friendly countries, open mines at home, or boost recycling. The first approach is the fastest and is underway. In 2022 carmakers have ramped up partnerships with mines and invested directly in mining projects, data from Fitch Solutions shows.

General Motors took a stake in Australia's Queensland Pacific Metals to secure nickel and cobalt for green SUVs. Opening new mines at home looks safer but takes longer.

Take lithium. Europe doesn't currently mine an ounce of the key electric-vehicle battery component. And the United States only supplies 2% of global demand. But things are changing.

Sibanye Stillwater is aiming to operate Europe's first lithium mine in Finland in 2025; France's Imerys is seeking to extract 34,000 tonnes of lithium hydroxide annually from a mine opening in 2028. If all European lithium mining projects transpire, they could supply around 40% of its expected demand of 600,000 tonnes of lithium carbonate equivalent a year by 2030, says one European miner.

The United States, which only holds 3% of the world's lithium reserves, has passed legislation to subsidise domestic extraction of crucial materials.

Neither approach is foolproof. Mining in developed markets may mean pushback from environmentally conscious citizens. Critical metals producers could also make life trickier for buyers by forming cartels.

That's why Western nations' best option is ultimately to recycle metals from used appliances. Companies like Umicore and Redwood Materials already own the technology to reuse batteries and smartphones. Europe recycles 17% of the globe's battery production.

But this share will rise to 48% by 2025, Fitch Solutions suggests. Unfortunately, recycling is costly. But in a polarised world, protecting Western industries and jobs will merit a premium. — Reuters



MELISSA EDDY

The author is a correspondent based in Berlin who covers German politics, social issues and culture for The New York Times.

Tightly stacked cords of wood line the side of a couple's home in southern Germany, while members of another family farther north have lined their basement with shelves stacked with pasta, rice, cooking oil and cans of chickpeas, lentils and tomatoes.

In central Germany, a man long wary of relying on the government has ensured that he can make it through weeks without power or heat; he's filled his attic with coolers to hold food, along with a camping stove, gas canisters and solar power equipment to keep the lights on and stay connected online.

Others brave the chilly waters of a local lake for a daily dip, forgoing a hot shower at home.

Across Europe's largest economy, people are stocking up and battening down. Even as authorities publish lists of essential items to prepare for power outages or natural gas rationing, many Germans are taking matters into their own hands to ensure that they have a warm home and food on the table through the winter.

A majority of Germans, a full 60 per cent, trust their government, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. But with a seemingly endless barrage of Russian-fired missiles falling on Ukraine, helping to send prices for energy and food at home soaring, many Germans have decided that if faced with the worst, they might be on their own. They want to be prepared.

THE WOODSMAN

Leo Bäumlér spends his afternoons splitting logs from trees that he fells in a forest that is owned by his sister, near



Leo Bäumlér, who uses his wood stove to heat his house and cook meals, in his woodshed near Weiden, Germany. — NYT

his home near Weiden, in the southern state of Bavaria.

He stacks them in his woodshed until he feeds them into the stove in the kitchen of the low-slung house where he grew up.

While thousands of people across Germany have reopened sealed-off fireplaces and installed wood-burning stoves to avoid burning natural gas, which doubled in price over the past year, Bäumlér heats his rooms, boils water for his morning coffee and bakes pizza with his wood-burning stove as ever.

Years ago, he recalls, his father refused to install a gas-fired central heating system, back when the first pipelines reached his home region, connecting Siberian gas fields with then-West Germany, across the Iron Curtain.

For decades, natural gas piped in from Russia was abundant and cheap. Half the homes in Germany use gas for their heating. Even before the Russian army invaded Ukraine in February, flows of Russian gas had started to dwindle, causing the wholesale price to more than double.

But German leaders, citing the reliable deliveries since the Soviet era, refused to believe that President Vladimir Putin would deprive Europe of gas in retaliation for the European Union's support for Ukraine.

Many Germans, though, whose bills were already

beginning to soar at the end of 2021, began to prepare.

By the time Russia had made their first cut to gas deliveries in late spring, the government began floating the idea that Germans might have to face rationing come winter. That sent many people to heating supply stores to purchase wood stoves, and since then the price of cords of wood and wood pellets has jumped by more than 87% compared with 2021.

But Bäumlér hasn't noticed. "Since I live in the middle of the forest in eastern Bavaria, surrounded by trees," he said, "I don't have to worry that I will run out of wood."

THE ICE BATHER

While some Germans are readying for an eventual blackout or gas stoppage, still others are focusing on ways to conserve energy. The country's economy minister, Robert Habeck, became the butt of jokes over the summer when he encouraged Germans to take shorter, cooler showers.

Gregor Ranz and his friends didn't need the encouragement.

Every morning between 8 and 9, they meet to skinny dip in a lake in the Wedemark district, north of Hanover.

They have been holding their morning ritual since well before the energy crisis — even when the temperatures dip below freezing.

Although the gathering is social as well, Ranz said that

once the energy crisis set in, it made more sense. Bathing nude — common in much of Germany — each morning served as effectively taking the cold shower approach to the extreme.

"I shower once a week, when I go to the sauna," he said. "Of course I have a shower at home, but I don't use it. A washcloth works just fine."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Bernd Sebastian has relied on a 25-year-old gas furnace to power the boiler that provides warm water and heating for his home. When the price of gas began to rise, he upgraded his furnace, but he also hooked up his wood-burning stove to heat the water in his main boiler.

"We sit in front of our fireplace everyday, and it warms the water in my boiler, and the heater draws from that," he said. When the fireplace is off, the gas furnace kicks in.

He said that he contemplated getting a heat pump, which draws warmth from the air.

"That would be ideal, but that runs on electricity, and with power prices going up, it wouldn't save me money unless I installed solar panels, which is another outlay."

Sebastian gathers wood from a nearby forest that is managed by a friend who alerts him when trees have fallen or been felled. Then he gathers it up and brings it home to be split and stacked.

— The New York Times



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A graphic of a smartphone screen with a light beige background featuring faint, repeating icons of various communication symbols like speech bubbles, envelopes, and social media icons. At the top, a dark grey header contains the text "Now get news on the go" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. Below this, centered on the screen, is the green and white WhatsApp logo. Underneath the logo, the text "To receive news updates from OMAN OBSERVER," is displayed in a dark grey, sans-serif font. Further down, the word "WhatsApp" is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. Below that, the text "<your name> to" appears in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the screen, the number "96473232" is shown in a large, bold, blue, sans-serif font. The bottom edge of the phone frame shows a dark grey bar with several social media icons: a globe, Facebook 'f', Twitter bird, Instagram camera, a speech bubble, a mail icon, and a YouTube play button. To the left of these icons is the text "omanobserver.om" and to the right is "@omanobserver".

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An advertisement for property rental services. It features a 3D orange figure holding a blue and white megaphone. The text is arranged in a dynamic, overlapping layout. At the top, a grey box contains the text 'HAVE A PROPERTY'. Below this, a red banner with white text reads 'FOR RENT?'. To the right of the figure, the text 'Advertise' is in large black font, with 'with us.' in smaller black font below it. At the bottom, a red box contains the text 'Contact us on:' in white, followed by the large yellow number '99639264'.

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'Doctor Who' fans receive Christmas Day teaser clip

THE BBC has given a glimpse of the forthcoming "Doctor Who" mini-series which is set to air in 2023, in celebration of the show's 60th anniversary.

The one-minute teaser clip features footage of David Tennant as the 14th Time Doctor, and Catherine Tate who returns as Donna Noble, in the trilogy of anniversary episodes.

The BBC also disclosed that Jacqueline King and Karl Collins will reprise their roles as Sylvia Noble and Shaun Temple, while Ruth Madeley joins

the cast as Shirley Anne Bingham.

The trailer, which landed on Christmas Day, begins with a view of London at night as the Tardis thrums before landing in an alleyway.

Tate says: "Sometimes I think there's something missing. Like I had something lovely and it's gone."

Meanwhile Tennant says: "I don't know who I am any more." He later adds: "I don't believe in destiny but if destiny exists then it is heading for Donna Noble. If she ever remembers she will die."

The mini-series is expected to explain why The Doctor has regenerated, which leads to another regeneration into the 15th Doctor, played by "Sex Education" star Ncuti Gatwa.

The teaser clip features Gatwa sporting a mustache, saying: "Will someone tell me what the hell is going on here?"

It also features US guest star Neil Patrick Harris' character declaring: "The show is just beginning. Worldwide premiere."

This month it was announced that "Coronation Street" star Millie Gibson would play Gawtwa's on-screen companion Ruby Sunday, who will travel alongside him as they embark on a new set of adventures.

The BBC said "Doctor Who" will return in November 2023 with three special episodes to coincide with the 60th anniversary — with Tennant as the 14th Doctor.

Gatwa will then take control of the Tardis, with his first episode airing over the festive period in 2023

— dpa

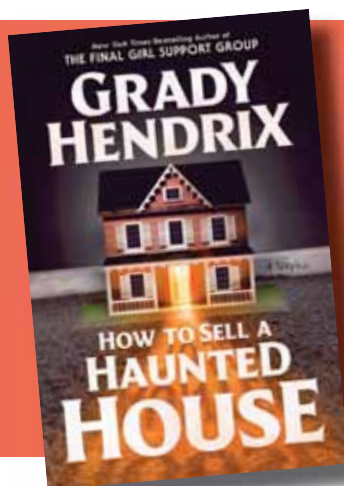


READ

HOW TO SELL A HAUNTED HOUSE

BY GRADY HENDRIX

When their parents die at the tail end of the coronavirus pandemic, Louise and Mark Joyner are devastated but nothing can prepare them for how bad things are about to get. The two siblings are almost totally estranged, and couldn't be more different. Now, however, they don't have a choice but to get along.



FESTIVAL

A Salsa dancer poses for a photo at the Salsodromo prior to the Salsa schools parade in the framework of the Cali Festival in Cali, Colombia, on December 25, 2022. — **AFP**



CELEBRITIES

Bollywood actors Sidharth Malhotra (R) and Rashmika Mandanna pose for pictures during the song launch event of their upcoming Indian Hindi-language movie — **AFP**





Sports and Fashion Won Big Together This Year

LAST SUNDAY, as Lionel Messi and the Argentine national team stood on the podium in Qatar with their World Cup trophy, the general mood was one of joy and admiration, though in some corners of the Internet a few viewers had noticed a detail that had them raising their eyebrows.

Why had the gold statuette arrived on the field in a logo-bedecked steel-toned Louis Vuitton trunk?

The same reason that before the final game, Qatar had hosted what was billed as “the world’s biggest fashion show,” with looks by more than 150 designers from 50 countries, all of it orchestrated by former French Vogue editor Carine Roitfeld.

When it comes to cultural influence, fashion and sports have increasingly teamed up to be a force in the game.

Both offer a shared language spoken across the world, communicated in an instant. And in 2022, the relationship reached a new level, one driven by the tangles of social media, the growth of influencer and sneaker culture, and a pandemic-spurred shift in cultural consumption. Something more essential has been

going on. When you start looking, the connections are everywhere.

Just about a week before the World Cup began, the New York Knicks announced that they had named Ronnie Feig, otherwise known as a founder of Kith and a “legend of streetwear culture,” as their first creative director.

And just a few weeks before that, the Arizona Coyotes of the National Hockey League announced that they had appointed Rhuigi Villaseñor, the founder of the Los Angeles menswear line Rhude, as their creative strategist, a job he got not long after he became the designer of Bally, the Swiss luxury brand.

The news came in the wake of Serena Williams announcing that she was stepping back from tennis and onto the runway as the opening model in the Vogue World show; Tom Brady introducing Brady, his brand of lifestyle casual wear created with Jens Grede (the man who is behind the Kim Kardashian Skins line) and designed by Dao-Yi Chow, formerly of the Public School label; track and field’s Allyson Felix introducing her

brand, Saysh; Ferrari holding its first fashion show on the official schedule at Milan Fashion Week; and Michael Jordan’s brand choosing to open its first concept store in Milan rather than Chicago.

As to why, well, “it’s a fashion capital of the world,” Craig Williams, the brand’s president, told WWD. “People come here because they are thinking about what’s new, what will be hot a year or two from now. And when we think about the impact we want to have with consumers, in the industry, in streetwear, and in culture too, there are a lot of synergies between our aspirations and everything Milan represents.”

Grede said: “It comes down to the intersection of commerce and entertainment. They have converged.”

THE LANGUAGE OF INFLUENCE

Villaseñor said his deal with the Coyotes would allow him to get his hands on everything from, potentially, “the campaigns to the colour palette of the arena, the drinks, the lighting, the logo and the design, including outside the stereotypical merchandise programme to dressing the team on

both a street and formality level.”

And not unlike what he is trying to do in reinventing Bally, where he added some louche dazzle to the Alpine ephemera. “If you really dissect it, it’s about honouring the heritage and amplifying it,” Villaseñor said.

That’s the sort of fashionspeak traditionally found in design ateliers, not weight rooms. But, said Scott Malkin, an owner of the New York Islanders, it’s not the only connection. Malkin is also the founder of Value Retail, a group of luxury outlet malls in Europe and Asia, and this year he broke ground on a new shopping village next to the recently opened UBS Arena in Elmont, New York.

Sports and fashion are both, he said, “about creative energy married to execution,” about managing talent that often doesn’t easily fit into a rigid structure and that has to evolve as society does. They both deal with a relentless schedule and can have enormous psychic impact and reach, he said, and both love to talk about the “curation of experience.”

— NYT



CINEMA

Despite ‘Pinocchio’ success, del Toro fears for Mexican cinema



DESPITE HIS INTERNATIONAL success, including a new adaptation of the classic puppet tale “Pinocchio,” Oscar-winning Mexican director Guillermo del Toro fears that his country’s cinema industry is facing “systematic destruction.”

Del Toro’s animated version of “Pinocchio,” in which an elderly woodcarver and his living puppet find themselves in 1930s fascist Italy, was the most watched film on streaming platform Netflix in the week of December 12-18.

Its debut on December 9 came a week before the release of “Bardo,” an autobiographical tale of a journalist-film-maker returning home after years in Los Angeles, by fellow Mexican Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu.

Mexican actors have also enjoyed recent success in Hollywood, including Tenoch Huerta, the rising star of the sequel to “Black Panther,” the first major Black superhero movie.

Del Toro, Inarritu and Alfonso Cuarón represent a golden generation of Mexican film-makers who have won the best director trophy at the Oscars five times since 2013.

Del Toro’s fantasy romance “The Shape of Water” earned best picture and best director at the 2018 Oscars.

The following year Cuarón scooped three golden statuettes for “Roma” — an intimate black-and-white movie about a family in turmoil in 1970s Mexico City.

BRUTAL’ DESTRUCTION

But in stark contrast to the international acclaim for the trio, dubbed “The Three Amigos,” del Toro has now warned that the country’s film industry is facing “unprecedented” challenges.

“The systematic destruction of Mexican cinema and its institutions — which took decades to build — has been brutal,” he tweeted recently.

Del Toro highlighted an announcement by the Mexican Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences that next year’s Ariel Awards — the country’s equivalent of the Oscars — were postponed until further notice due to a “serious financial crisis.”

The organisation said it regretted that “the support of public resources has decreased considerably in recent years.”

“The state, which was the motor and support of the academy for a long time, has renounced its responsibility as the main promoter and disseminator of culture in general and of cinema in particular,” it added.

Del Toro even offered to pay for the Ariel statuettes out of his own pocket.

“He’s a generous colleague, an artist who is always aware of what is happening not only with Mexican cinematography but with the arts in general in the country,” said Academy president Leticia Huijara.

She would, however, prefer an agreement with the state.

In the meantime, the Ariels have been postponed, Huijara confirmed.

PROMOTING INDIGENOUS FILM

Maria Novaro, the general manager of the Mexican Film Institute (Imcine), a government agency, thinks the warnings are exaggerated.

“Del Toro says that there is no more Mexican cinema in the year when there have never been so many productions,” she said, hailing a “record” 256 films in 2021.

“And 56 per cent received support from public money. Imcine devotes 900 million pesos (\$45 million) a year to financing Mexican cinema,” said Novaro.

“It’s good that Netflix produces a lot of content in Mexico. But it does not replace what Imcine does,” she added.

Mexican cinema enjoyed a golden age between the 1930s and 1950s, featuring movie stars such as Dolores del Rio and Pedro Armendariz.

But the industry went through a quiet period before enjoying a revival, helped in recent years by the success of “The Three Amigos.”

Mexican cinema has now become decentralised and diversified, according to Novaro, mirroring President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador’s priorities to help impoverished and Indigenous Mexicans.

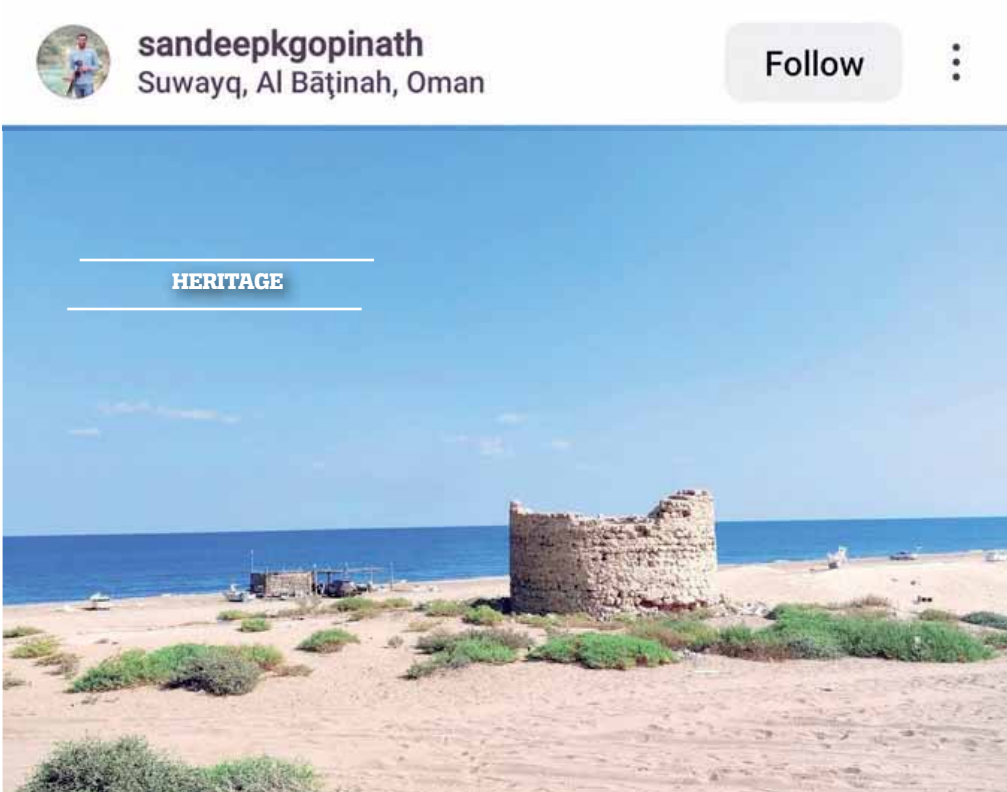
Since 2019, there has been a programme to encourage Indigenous and Afro-descendant cinema, with 56 such films in production, Novaro said.

“Films are starting to come out that tell about migration from the perspective of Indigenous migrants themselves,” she added. — AFP



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AROUND THE WORLD

CULTURE

Nobel-winner Ishiguro pens Oscar-tipped 1950s remake 'Living'



NOBEL LAUREATE Kazuo Ishiguro has been obsessed for half a century with "Ikiru," a classic Japanese film about an aging bureaucrat who after being diagnosed with cancer races to find meaning in what remains of his monotonous life. The Japanese-born British novelist and movie buff, 68, began to imagine a remake of Akira Kurosawa's heartbreaking masterpiece, still set in its original 1950s era, but transplanted to London.

"I'm one of these terrible people who come up to film-makers and say 'Look, here's a great idea for a film, please go and make it, and let me know when you've done it,'" joked Ishiguro.

But when he pitched the idea of a remake "that married the material of the old Kurosawa movie to a certain study of Englishness and particular kind of English gentleman," Hollywood producer Stephen Woolley quickly persuaded the author to pen the screenplay himself.

The result is a critically adored drama which has already earned Golden Globes and Critics Choice Awards nominations for its star Bill Nighy, and is a frontrunner for the best adapted screenplay Oscar.

The film plays on the "many parallels between Japanese and English culture," particularly in the 1950s when both countries were rebuilding from the ruins of World War II, Ishiguro, who won the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature, told.

Echoing Kurosawa's original, "Living" follows the sudden realisation of Nighy's Mr Williams character that he has achieved nothing in his decades of robotic, bureaucratic stasis.

Facing his own mortality, and unable to open up to his family, the London civil servant finally decides to help a group of housewives who have begged him for years to help construct a modest playground for their children.

The film is about how, with an effort, "even if you've got a small, stifling life, you might be able to find something... that tips it over into being something magnificent, that you can be proud of," Ishiguro said. But Ishiguro said "Living" is also a metaphor for modern life — in particular, a warning about the sense of detachment many people feel in their jobs today.

"Not being able any more to connect up the contribution you make at work to anything out there in the real world... You don't even know how it links up with a guy down the corridor in your office," said Ishiguro. "I think our world has become even more like that now with a virtual world, after the pandemic."

Terribly sorry

Nighy, most widely known for playing rakish, extroverted characters in movies such as "Love Actually" and "About Time," puts in a deeply restrained performance.

The interesting challenge was having "to express quite big things with very little," Nighy told AFP during the film's AFI Fest premiere in Hollywood last month. — AFP

ROYAL FAMILY

Prince's Christmas painting suggests he shares King's artistic talent



BRITAIN'S THE PRINCE and Princess of Wales have shared a festive picture painted by their nine-year-old son, Prince George, which indicates that the future king might share his grandfather's artistic talent.

William and Kate tweeted the image of a reindeer in the snow with two robins, alongside the message "Happy Christmas!"

Painting runs in the royal family, with the King known to have an artistic streak.

Charles has previously described how he finds painting so relaxing that it "transports me into another dimension".

Earlier this year, 79 of Charles's water colours — the first full exhibition of his work in the medium — were exhibited at the Garrison Chapel in Chelsea, south-west London.

The atmospheric paintings depicted Scottish landscapes such as the Huna Mill in John O'Groats and Glen Callater near Balmoral, as well as outdoor scenes from Provence in the south of France and Tanzania in East Africa — one of his favourite places to paint.

In a display panel, Charles revealed that the hobby "refreshes parts of the soul which other activities can't reach", and that he turned to painting after finding little joy in photography.

The King admitted he was "appalled" by the quality of his early sketches.

He wrote: "I very quickly discovered how incredibly difficult it is to paint well in such a spontaneous medium, and the feeling of frustration at not being able to achieve on paper the image that your eye has presented you with is intense."

"Looking back now at those first sketches I did, I am appalled by how bad they are. But, nevertheless, the great thing about painting is that you are making your own individual interpretation of whatever view you have chosen."

He added: "I am under no illusion that my sketches represent great art or a burgeoning talent."

"They represent, more than anything else, my particular form of 'photograph album' and, as such, mean a great deal to me."

In October, a print of a water colour of Balmoral by Charles was bought at auction for more than eight times its estimate.

In what was thought to be the first time a print by a reigning monarch has been sold at auction, a private British collector paid £5,738.

Prints that Charles has done in the past have usually fetched between £400 and £600.

The framed print of the castle in the Scottish Highlands, where the late Queen spent her final days earlier this year, was signed and dated "Charles 2001" in pencil and was

accompanied by a certificate of authenticity.

Charles paints whenever his schedule allows and he usually takes his treasured sailcloth and leather painting bag with him on royal tours in the hope he will have time to do so.

His interest — fostered by his art master at Gordonstoun school, Robert Waddell — grew in the 1970s and 1980s as he was able to meet leading artists.

He discussed water colour technique with the late Edward Seago and received further tuition from professionals such as Derek Hill, John Ward and Bryan Organ.

An exhibition at Hampton Court Palace in 1998, held to mark the prince's 50th birthday, displayed 50 of his water colours, while the National Gallery of Australia's exhibition in 2018 to celebrate his 70th birthday showed 30 pieces.

George's great-grandfather, the late Duke of Edinburgh, was also interested in art and design, having painted mostly landscapes in oils, according to the Royal Collection Trust.

One such picture, featured on the trust's website, is Duart Castle from the Sound of Mull.

It was painted during one of the Royal Yacht Britannia's summer cruises around the Western Isles, the trust said.

— dpa

A WINDOW INTO CONTEMPORARY OMANI LITERATURE



Dr Khalid Mohammed al Balushi
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An Army Man but in a Different Form (3)

THE FOLLOWING is my English translation of excerpts from "A Soldier from Oman, Memory's Nectar" by (ret.) Inspector-General Said bin Rashid Al Kalbani.

After the promotions mentioned in the previous column, the structure of the police force was organised in the following way:

Maj. William Hockett
Commander
Capt. Galland
Deputy Commander
Capt. Phelix De Silva
Chief of Muscat Police
Capt. Lashkran
Migration Officer
Capt. Barar
Officer in Muscat Police
Captain D'Souza
Criminal Investigations Officer
Lieut. Salim Al Sobhi
Criminal Investigations Deputy Officer
Lieut. Hasan Al Balushi
Civil Status Officer (Reception)
Lieut. Said bin Rashid al Kalbani
Training Supervisor at the Muttrah Police Station. (To put things in perspective, I understand I may be excused to go off at tangent a little and give biographical information about figures that played a leading role in the early history of the Omani police: Nazim Al Farsi, Azizullah, a Pakistani national, and Jawad bin Darwish Al Lwati, Lashkran, Shokat Hossain, William Hockett and Phelix De Silva.

It is believed that Nazim Al Farsi was born in Muscat on December 21, 1912. At first a student in the Saidi School, he went ahead and educated himself. He learnt how to fire guns while working under his father when the latter was the head of the Meerani Fort guard. He then participated in the Muscat-Muttrah (via Riyam) road project in 1929. After his military training in 1930 in Bait al Falaj, he became the police commander.

In the second stage of his life, he taught in the Saidi School, to become later its headmaster, succeeding Sayyad Hilal bin Mohammed Al Busaidy. Famous for his handwriting and knowledge,

Al Farsi befriended important figures such as the poet Sayyid Hilal bin Badr Al Busaidy and the writer Abdullah Al Tai. He travelled in 1946 to East Africa, where he worked as a translator in the Zanzibar Court, the Green Island Court and the Department of Endowments and Inheritance.

He came back to Muscat to assume a variety of posts. In August 1969, he was appointed manager of nationality and passports in the interior ministry. On February 15 of the following year, he became a director in the ministry of justice and later an administrative manager in the interior ministry after the whole department of nationality and passport was transferred to the police in 1973.

Azizullah was a police officer in India under the British rule. After retirement, he came to Oman to be appointed by Sultan Said bin Taymur a police inspector with the rank of first lieutenant after the resignation of Al Farsi. Azizullah was the first to place a daily sheet for reports in the then new police station in the Meerani Fort. He moved to Karachi after World War Two broke out, leaving his post to Jawad bin Darwish Al Lawati.

Born in Muttrah in 1919, Jawad Al Lawati learnt the Quran in his home and then joined the Saidi School at the age of ten. He was given lessons on Arabic literature and philosophy by Sayyid Hassan bin Asadullah Al Asfahani, who came to Muttrah from Najaf. After being introduced to Sultan Said by the poet laureate, Hilal Al Busaidy, Al Lawati recited a congratulatory poem to the Sultan on ascending the throne. After a one-year military training course in Bait al Falaj and upon the departure of Azizullah, he took over as the new commander of the police with a salary of 200 Rupee. After his resignation, he went to Karachi to settle there for a long period of time. He came back to Oman in 1981.



art & life

Local Scene

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TUESDAY | DECEMBER 27 | 2022

What makes Oman so friendly



Liju Cherian
@lijucherianoman

CAN you guess which is the world's first friendliest country in the world. Yes, it is the Sultanate of Oman. Oman has been ranked as the top friendliest country in the world from among a list of 50 countries.

The rankings were based on InterNations's 2019 'Ease of Settling in Index' which used the pre-pandemic numbers for its accuracy.

Among the ranking for 50 countries, the Sultanate of Oman scooped the top spot followed by Mexico and Portugal in the second and third spot.

This was followed by Taiwan, Vietnam, Colombia, The Philippines, Indonesia, Costa Rica with Bahrain in the tenth spot.

According to the InterNation's survey, the 50th place went to South Korea.

The reason for this was mainly pertaining to language barriers, with a good knowledge of Korean being necessary for things like opening up bank accounts and finding a place to

live.

The Sultanate of Oman got the sixth ranking for the ease of settling in the country, the 19th for feeling at home and 20th among finding new friends.

The online story mentions Oman splitting its attractions between cities, where ancient and stunning mosques invite tourists to visit, with special mention of the Rimal Al Sharqiya, one of the most popular destinations for adventure lovers and the famous sand dunes region.

The survey mentions that Oman was perhaps a surprising choice for No 1 on the list.

It also mentions how tourism from the West is increasing in the Sultanate of Oman, which made significant efforts to modernise in the first decade of this century.

Far and Wide published pictures of Omani musicians providing music for a tribal dance and a panoramic sunset view of the long stretch of

Muttrah sea front.

"Travellers can expect a modern, bustling destination and people who will go out of their way to embrace outsiders. Indeed, 87 per cent of expatriates describe the locals specifically as 'welcoming,'" it mentions.

The ranking survey was published in Big Edition, a digital media company which reports on the smaller stories that spark conversations, widen perspectives and build communities of like-minded readers.

The five brands of Big Edition are Always Pets, FamilyMinded, Far & Wide, Stadium Talk and Work+Money.

The survey was published in the

online edition of Far & Wide which is a modern take on traditional media delivering classic Sunday newspaper experience from online to the sports or travel verticals.

Far & Wide encourages travellers of all types to see the world and enjoy adventures basically from big countries to small towns and take people places.

The article also mentions how for many travellers, the warmth of the welcome they receive in a foreign country can make or break their trip.

"Who wants to travel halfway around the world only to be met with hostility?" it asks.

Feeling appreciated by the people of your destination can help you forget long flights, stomach complaints and all of the other horrors of journeying abroad.

The article notes that the friendliest countries in the world will help plan the next vacation and learn about a few hidden gems ideal for those seeking a warm welcome from locals. And naturally Oman came out as the first choice in this regard.

Pictures by Bavish Kizhakoodan Balan