

Search still on to find trapped at quarry site

Search and rescue operations are still going on to find people trapped under the debris following the collapse of rocks at a marble quarry in Al Aridh area in the Wilayat of Ibri. It may be noted that six people died in the accident. The Inspector-General of Police and Customs and a number of members of the National Council for Emergency Management visited the accident site in Al Dhahirah Governorate to oversee the search and rescue operations. **DETAILS ON P2**



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AL FAISAL SET FOR EUROPE CHALLENGE



P15

RELYING ON RENEWABLES A 'BIG MISTAKE' FOR FUTURE



P19

OSCARS RATINGS BOUNCE BACK AS WILL SMITH HOOKS VIEWERS



MUSCAT

CRUDE PRICE AT \$108.24 A BARREL

Oman oil price for May delivery on Tuesday reached \$108.24, comprising a decline by \$2.46 from the price of Monday, which was \$110.70. The average price of Oman oil for March delivery has stabilised at \$83.62, thus \$10.48 per barrel higher than February delivery. Meanwhile, Europe's benchmark Brent crude and New York's WTI sank by about 6.5 per cent as traders eyed easing Russian oil supply fears amid face-to-face Istanbul talks aimed at resolving the nearly five-week-old war.

FOCUS ON QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION

The two-day conference of GHEDEX titled 'Quality in Higher Education' held at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre looked at quality assurance and standards monitoring in higher education as well as accreditation and equivalence in the sector. An important focus was student preparedness for employment. The second day of the conference on Tuesday looked at Oman, globalisation and higher education, opportunities for women in higher education, investment in higher education, development of research infrastructure and concluded with careers of the future, higher education, training and skills.

DETAILS ON P3



INSIDE



BLINKEN IN MOROCCO FOR SECURITY TALKS

P6



WILL BIG BIODIVERSITY AMBITIONS SAVE NATURE?

P9

Oman ICT Group launches brand identity 'ITHCA'

STAFF REPORTER

Muscat, March 29

Oman Communications and Information Technology Group (OICT) celebrated the launch of the new brand identity 'ITHCA Group' under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Loay bin Ghalib al Said at the Royal Opera House on Tuesday. His Highness Sayyid

Kamil bin Fahd al Said, Chairman of the Board of Directors of ITHCA Group, was present on the occasion.

The ceremony was attended by Said bin Abdullah al Mandhari, CEO of ITHCA Group, several ministers, under-secretaries, CEOs, media representatives, investors and entrepreneurs interested in the technology and com-

munications sector.

ITHCA Group was established in 2019 to develop the infrastructure of the communications and information technology sector, expand the range of networks and enhance digital capabilities in the Sultanate of Oman through integration and partnership between the public and private sectors and international companies.

The Group will also expand investments in emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things (IoT), financial technologies and other technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

BOOSTING INVESTMENTS

In a statement to the media, HH Sayyid Kamil stressed that most

of the Group's investments were harnessed in modern technologies, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Internet of Things and high-performance cloud services, besides advancement of the technical innovations sector, betting on young national capabilities and the inspiration of pioneer business people in small and medium enterprises.

TURN TO P2

MOUNTAIN ROAD CUTS DISTANCE



The Engineering Services of the Ministry of Defence built the mountain road (Qardit-Ain Ghaydit) in the Dhofar Governorate to reduce the distance between Taqah and Mirbat to less than 5 km (it was more than 30 km before). This vital project is one of the projects which comes within the framework of the works undertaken by departments of the Ministry of Defence and the Sultan's Armed Forces in the areas of social, economic and tourism development, and within the framework of community service. — ONA

Russia says will scale down attacks near Ukraine capital

ISTANBUL: Peace talks in Istanbul between Ukraine and Russia yielded progress on Tuesday as Moscow promised to scale back its military activity near the capital Kiev and the northern city of Chernihiv.

Russian and Ukrainian delegations met in the Turkish city for face-to-face negotiations, more than a month after Russia launched an air and ground attack that has devastated towns and cities across the country and caused nearly four million people to flee.

The representatives met at the Dolmabahce Presidential Office, on the banks of the Bosphorus, for their first in-person talks in more than two weeks.

But after more than four hours the head of the Russian delegation, Vladimir Medinsky, emerged and told reporters the discussions had been "constructive" and that Kiev's peace proposals would be looked into.

President Vladimir Putin's envoy also said Russia was ready to



A woman arrives in Kyiv after fleeing her home in the outskirts of the city on Tuesday. — AFP

take military and political "steps to de-escalate the conflict."

Ukraine's "proposals will be examined in the near future, submitted to the president and we will respond accordingly," Medinsky said.

Shortly before Medinsky spoke, Russian Deputy Defence

Minister Alexander Fomin announced a significant reduction in "military activities" near Kiev and Chernihiv.

Russian troops have struggled to advance upon the centre of two northern cities due to fierce Ukrainian resistance.

SEE ALSO P7

NO MASS IFTARS IN MOSQUES AND PUBLIC PLACES

MUSCAT: As part of its ongoing convening, the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic followed up recent updates about the pandemic and reviewed means of protection against the disease and ways to curb the spread of the virus.

Upon the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan, the Covid-19 Supreme Committee took the opportunity to greet His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Omani citizens and residents in the Sultanate of Oman, as well as the Arab people and Islamic nation. The committee wished all good health and abundant bounties and blessings.

The Supreme Committee studied the epidemiological situation at the local front and international arena. It noted the decline in cases of infection and hospitalisation in the Sultanate of Oman at a time the rates of Covid-19 infections are again picking up in some countries of the world.

As the pandemic persists worldwide and upon the approach of the holy month of Ramadhan and in realisation of Islam's edicts calling for safeguarding human life and to maintain the gains made over the past period, the Supreme Committee took the following decisions which, it said, have to be followed throughout Ramadhan.

Attendance at Taraweeh congregational prayers has to be exclusively limited to worshippers who received two doses of vaccination against Covid-19. Unvaccinated people, including children aged below 12 years, are

prohibited to enter the mosques during the said period.

Mass gatherings for charity breakfast meals (Iftar Sa'im) continue to be banned in mosques and other public places, including tents and public assembly halls. Charity teams and private establishments concerned, including civil society institutions, may distribute the meals to target beneficiaries, but without organising gatherings.

TURN TO P2



Taraweeh prayers only for fully vaccinated worshippers



Children below 12 are prohibited to enter the mosques



Iftar Sa'im are banned in mosques and public places



Venues can operate with a maximum of 70% capacity



ROYAL OFFICE MINISTER RECEIVES SYRIAN ENVOY



General Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, Dr Bassam al Khatib, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Sultanate of Oman, in Muscat on Tuesday to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty. Al Khatib expressed his appreciation for the cooperation extended to him by all officials in the Sultanate of Oman. He also lauded the advanced relations between the two countries. On his turn, Al Numani thanked the ambassador for his efforts towards enhancing bilateral relations during his tenure, wishing him continuous success. -

Search still under way to find trapped at quarry site

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Search and rescue operations are still going on to find people trapped under the debris following the collapse of rocks at a marble quarry in Al Aridh area in the Wilayat of Ibri. It may be noted that six people died in the accident.

The Inspector-General of Police and Customs and a number of members of the National Council for Emergency Management visited the accident site in Al Dhahirah Governorate to

oversee the search and rescue operations.

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) said the search operations were hampered due to rockslides that continued at the site, where 55 workers were involved in the excavation work.

Residents in the area and industry experts said that such incidents happen because the contracting companies neglect occupational safety at work sites, while companies responsible for the project do not take appropriate action against violators.

In brief

RIYADH

OMAN PARTICIPATES IN GCC MEETING



The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), participated in the 78th meeting of GCC Committee for Central Banks Governors, held at the GCC Secretariat General in Riyadh on Tuesday. Oman's delegation was headed by Tahir bin Salim al Amri, CBO's Executive President. The Committee discussed the supervision and oversight over the banking sector in the GCC, as well as the payment systems, GCC FinTech developments and banking cyber security. It also reviewed combating money laundering and terror financing. The Committee reviewed the topics proposed by the GCC countries to be studied by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) within the context of the joint meeting between finance ministers and governors of central banks in the GCC countries and the IMF Managing Director.

MUSCAT

FRANCE TEAM VISITS MSC



Brigadier Olivier Le C., Deputy Director of International Public Relations in Africa and the Middle East at the Ministry of Defence, France, visited today the Maritime Security Centre (MSC). The guest was greeted upon his arrival by Commodore Mohammed bin Hamoud Al Zedjali, Head of the MSC. The guest and members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the tactical roles and tasks carried out by the centre in search and rescue missions, as well as the safety of the maritime environment. They also toured the centre's facilities

MUSCAT



UN-GGIM FOR ARAB STATES MEETING

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the National Survey Authority (NSA), on took part in the 9th meeting of United Nations - Global Geospatial Information Management (UN-GGIM) for Arab States Committee, held in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Held via video-conferencing, the meeting discussed means of enhancing cooperation among the member states of the committee. The meeting also stressed the importance of exchanging expertise of countries that would contribute in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). The meeting also reviewed the annual report of the Arab Committee and a report of the UN-GGIM, submitted to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Oman-Bahrain Forum explores investments



MUSCAT: The Oman-Bahrain Business Forum explored investment opportunities and incentives offered for investors, as well as means of enhancing trade exchange and investments between the two countries in Muscat on Tuesday. Several presentations were given by officials from Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and other government units on the investment milieu in Oman.

Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry said that Oman has gone a long way in terms of enacting legislations to attract investments. He added that in Oman, there are legal and financial guarantees for the inbound and outbound capital.

Oman launched several initiatives to ease investment, Dr Saleh said. On his turn, Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of OCCI, said that the forum is an opportunity to enhance business and investment partnership between the private sector of the two countries. Al Saleh further said that the Oman-Bahrain Investment Holding Company with a capital of RO 10 million is an embodiment of this partnership.

B2B meetings were held on the sidelines of the forum to sign agreements and establish partnerships, as well as expanding cooperation between the two sides.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) from the Kingdom of Bahrain in Oman reached RO 389.8 million during the third quarter of 2021. The volume of trade exchange between the two countries by the end of 2021 hit RO 323,353,757.

Demand for private schools goes high

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabalnassri

Specialists at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) clarified that growth indicators of private educational institutions are high and demand for private schools increased during the last ten years.

This trend was discussed at the seventh regular meeting of the third annual session (2021-2022) of the Education and Scientific Research Committee of the Majlis Ash'shura on Tuesday.

The meeting was chaired by Jamal bin Ahmed al Abri, Head of the Committee, in the presence of Ahmed bin Saeed al Balushi, Head of the Education Committee at the OCCI, officials and committee members. The committee met to study the issue of a partnership between the private and government sectors in education.

It discussed the role of the private sector in school education in enriching the educational process. The head of the Chamber's Education Committee stressed that the private education sector is promising and it achieved rapid growth and is ready for investment and partnership with the government sector.

A visual presentation during the meeting highlighted the private educational sector's awareness of the importance of



Private education sector achieved rapid growth and is ready for investment and partnership with the government sector.

public schools operations and its readiness to raise efficiency.

The attendees talked about the study conducted by the chamber's specialists on operational contracting for public schools, the premises of that study, and the patterns of a partnership between the government sector and the private educational sector. Some studies have reviewed the regional and global experiences highlighting the countries that have made strides in this field.

The committee members

inquired about the challenges of the contractual school system, the Sultanate of Oman's readiness to work according to educational and economic indicators and the legal and legislative frameworks currently in force.

They also threw light on the role of the operational contracting system in raising the efficiency of education in public schools and how to deal with them, with regard to the employment of teachers if the operational contract for public schools is approved.

Oman ICT Group launches brand identity 'ITHCA'

FROM PAGE1

On the sidelines of the launch ceremony, Said bin Abdullah al Mandhari, CEO of the Group, emphasised on the continuation of the efforts to develop the information technology sector, cloud infrastructure services and to promote digital transformation in the Sultanate of Oman.

The 'ITHCA' logo reflects the group's vision in the speed of its networks, transfer and use of modern data, and reliance on the creativity and aspirations of the ambitious generation of young people. "This is why the young man's face appears as he looks forward to the bright future ahead."

The new identity was chosen to reflect the Group's commitment to invest in modern technologies



and enable the employment of information and communication technology in the Sultanate of Oman in various sectors, keeping pace with the technological development

witnessed by the world that includes all aspects of life and the business environment. The revolution of things was selected to be the slogan of ITHCA Group.

No mass iftars in mosques and public places

FROM PAGE1

All members of the public have to continue observing precautionary protective measures, including wearing face masks and maintaining physical distance in closed areas, including mosques.

The Supreme Committee also underscores the need to continue operation of collective activity venues like halls, conference places, local and international exhibitions and other mass activity areas to a maximum of 70 per cent capacity of the said venues.

In the meantime, the committee urged all those who may have any symptoms of Covid-19 infection to avoid attending congregational prayers or entering public gathering areas, to help protect themselves and their society. The committee also advised citizens and residents in the country to take the Covid-19 booster dose as soon as possible, notably those who have completed six months of taking the second dose of vaccination. It added that the booster dose will bolster individual and communal immunity. — ONA



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Shura debates education partnership and Tender Law amendments

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

The Education and Scientific Research Committee of Majlis Ashshura on Tuesday met with the head of the Education Committee at Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and a number of OCCI specialists within the framework of studying public-private-partnership in the educational sector.

The OCCI specialists presented a visual display which showed growth indications at private schools and an increasing demand for private education over the past decade.

The OCCI specialists noted that the private sector is capable of

operating public schools.

The meeting reviewed a study conducted by OCCI specialists about operating contracts of public schools and explained the types of the public-private-partnership.

The members of the Education and Scientific Research Committee inquired about the efficiency of the private sector in upgrading the standard of public schools and the anticipated challenges that would face the contracting system.

Meanwhile, the Economic and Financial Committee of Majlis Ashshura discussed the proposed amendments of some provisions of the Tender Law promulgated by Royal Decree No 36/2008.

The amendments of the said law stem from the importance of the administrative contracts in light of the increasing state's liability in realising economic development and establishing more commercial and industrial projects in order to push forward the development process and achieve prosperity.

The proposed amendments also stem from the committee's observation of the increase in the change orders at public projects which often leads to a higher cost of the government project.

The committee members said the proposed amendments aim to keep pace with modern tendering practices and the new agreements and conventions in this field.

This device helps to find hydrogen underground

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

The Sultanate of Oman's pavilion at Expo 2020 celebrated the launch of Elaf-HI by Elaf Technology Centre. This first of its kind device helps to reveal the existence of hydrogen underground.

The technology was developed by German University of Technology (GUTech) in cooperation with Elaf company and Oman Hydrogen Centre. The technology coincides with the the Sultanate of Oman's move towards diversifying income sources.

Mohsen bin Khamis al Balushi, Consultant at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and General Commissioner of the Sultanate of Oman at Dubai Expo 2020, said: "The launch of Elaf device in the Sultanate of Oman's pavilion comes as one of the Omani innovations and is in line with the aspirations and goals of the country's participation in the Expo. It reflects Expo's theme of



The technology was developed by German University of Technology (GUTech) in cooperation with Elaf company and Oman Hydrogen Centre.

'Connecting minds and creating the future', as well as the sub-themes 'Mobility, opportunity and sustainability'.

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals focuses on strategic work and collecting energy data to support renewable energy development projects, including the development of green hydrogen in the Sultanate of Oman by 2030.

Dr Sawsan bint Saeed al Riyami, Director of the Oman Hydrogen Centre, highlighted the centre's role in technology transfer and localisation, and its reliance on scientific research in the energy sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

"Renewable energy will increasingly replace fossil fuels, and reduce carbon emissions and preserving the environment. The cooperation with Elaf is meant to expand scope of future use of new technology," she said.

Focus on quality in higher education and employability

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The two-day conference of GHEDEX titled Quality in Higher Education held at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre looked at quality assurance and standards monitoring in higher education as well as accreditation and equivalence in the sector. An important focus was student preparedness for employment.

The second day of the conference on Tuesday looked at Oman, globalisation and higher education, opportunities for women in higher education, investment in higher education, development of research infrastructure and concluded with careers of the future, higher education, training and skills.

Dr Nabila al Macki, Deputy Dean for Academic Affairs from Majan University College, looked at quality assurance challenges in higher education under profit-driven motives — the Omani experience. Meanwhile, Dr Nithiya Ramachandran, lecturer, Department of Business Studies, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ibra, highlighted the importance of student participation in the quality assurance process of HEIs in the Omani context.

Dr Yousuf al Khamisi, quality assurance specialist and assistant professor at Sultan Qaboos University, focused on using lean management to enhance quality and eliminate non-value added activities in academic institutions.

Dr Ammar al Balushi, Head of



Business Management at Majan University College, presented alliances in the Omani Higher Education Industry.

As the three-day event concluded, the exhibition will now be at Suhar for another two days.

The hospitality sector is one of the sectors that is expected to continue in growth. Dr Ahmed bin Sulaiman al Mahrizi, Director of Training and Professional Development Unit at Oman Tourism College, said to the

Observer that they try to align their activities, their offerings to the nation to the Sultanate of Oman strategy — 2040.

"We are trying to provide the students whether they are aiming for a bachelor's degree or diploma or the need of the sector or at the vocational level — short courses where we see the market for their entry-level into the labour market with skills qualified in different areas related to hospitality and tourism," Dr Al Mahrizi said.

"If we talk about academic programmes, we have the bachelor's degree, we have four years plus a foundation year, and there are three years for the academic diploma plus a foundation year for the vocational training programmes. It's normally six to nine months, depending on the area. We also

have areas that are related to the front office, culinary services, customer services, different types of languages, housekeeping, room attendance, different courses in business enterprises, hospitality and tourism management, in addition to event management and tourism."

The college normally trains about 800 students annually.

When asked what is unique in the training for hospital staff, he said: "Because the hospital hosts patients and they stay there overnight, so they are guests. And if they get the same treatment as five-star hospitality, that's an added value for any hospital. We do the front office, the front line, whether it is in hospitals, whether it's in companies, ministries, or in hotels."

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SHAPING THE FUTURE

SAMUEL KUTTY
@samkuttyvp

Healthcare in Oman has been effective in increasing life expectancy, decreasing child mortality and detecting diseases because there is a focus on preventative care. Preventive care is intertwined with the idea of accessible primary care because it encourages early detection of disease as well as easy and unburdened emergency care

THE ACCOMPLISHMENT of healthcare in any country depends entirely on the strength and reliability of its primary healthcare system, which helps people enhance their physical and mental health, as well as social well-being, thanks to its equitable, cost-effective and efficient approach. In the Sultanate of Oman, the healthcare sector has developed by leaps and bounds in the last few decades, with the authorities placing it in line with international standards as one of the main strategic directions of Oman Vision 2040.

The Health Vision 2050 is an attempt to channel all available healthcare resources and plan for the future needs of the population. The Vision takes into consideration various factors, including predicted population growth and challenges related to technology and products.

According to the 2020 Annual Report of the Ministry of Health, there are over 200 healthcare units throughout the Sultanate of Oman which mainly come under three categories based on location, size and services offered.

Health centres and polyclinics come under the primary healthcare units and provide general treatment services to both rural and urban areas.

Multi-speciality regional hospitals come under the secondary healthcare units, whereas the tertiary healthcare units comprise large national hospitals with various core specialisations.

The public, private and civil sectors – all are working jointly in order to set up an expanded system that provides universal and just healthcare across the Sultanate of Oman. Such action is in complete harmony with the way forward for the Omani health system laid down by the Health Vision 2050.

“The Sultanate of Oman has made tremendous headway in the area of health development, which was reflected positively in the main health indicators,” points out the report 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In particular, death rates dropped remarkably over the past years, especially among infants and children under five years of age, which led to a rise in average life expectancy at birth, adds the report.

Healthcare in Oman has been effective in increasing life expectancy, decreasing child mortality and detecting diseases because there is a focus on preventative care. Preventive care is intertwined with the idea of accessible primary care because it encourages early detection of disease as well as easy and unburdened emergency care.

The average lifespan of Omanis reached as high as 77.2 years, with 75.2 for men and 79.2 for women at the end of 2019 against 49 years in 1970.

Women outlive men by approximately 4.1 years on average, with the female life expectancy at 78 years and the male life expectancy at 73.9 years. These averages are by no means abnormal on a global scale and are due to men being more prone to heart disease and accidents on the roadways.

The country ranks eighth in life expectancy out of the 19 Middle Eastern countries and fifth out of the seven countries on the Arabian Peninsula. The UN projects that the average Omani life expectancy will reach 80 years in the early 2030s. This is in large part due to the country’s advancing healthcare system.

On the other hand, the maternal mortality ratio decreased from 26.4 per 100,000 live births in 2010 to 20.2 in 2017. Similarly, the child mortality rate and infant and newborns — aged less than one month — mortality rate dropped to 9.5 and 6.3 per 1,000 live births, respectively.

As for children under the age of five, they also registered a decline in mortality rate to 11.6 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2017, in contrast with 21.7 in 2000.

The UN projects that the average Omani life expectancy will reach

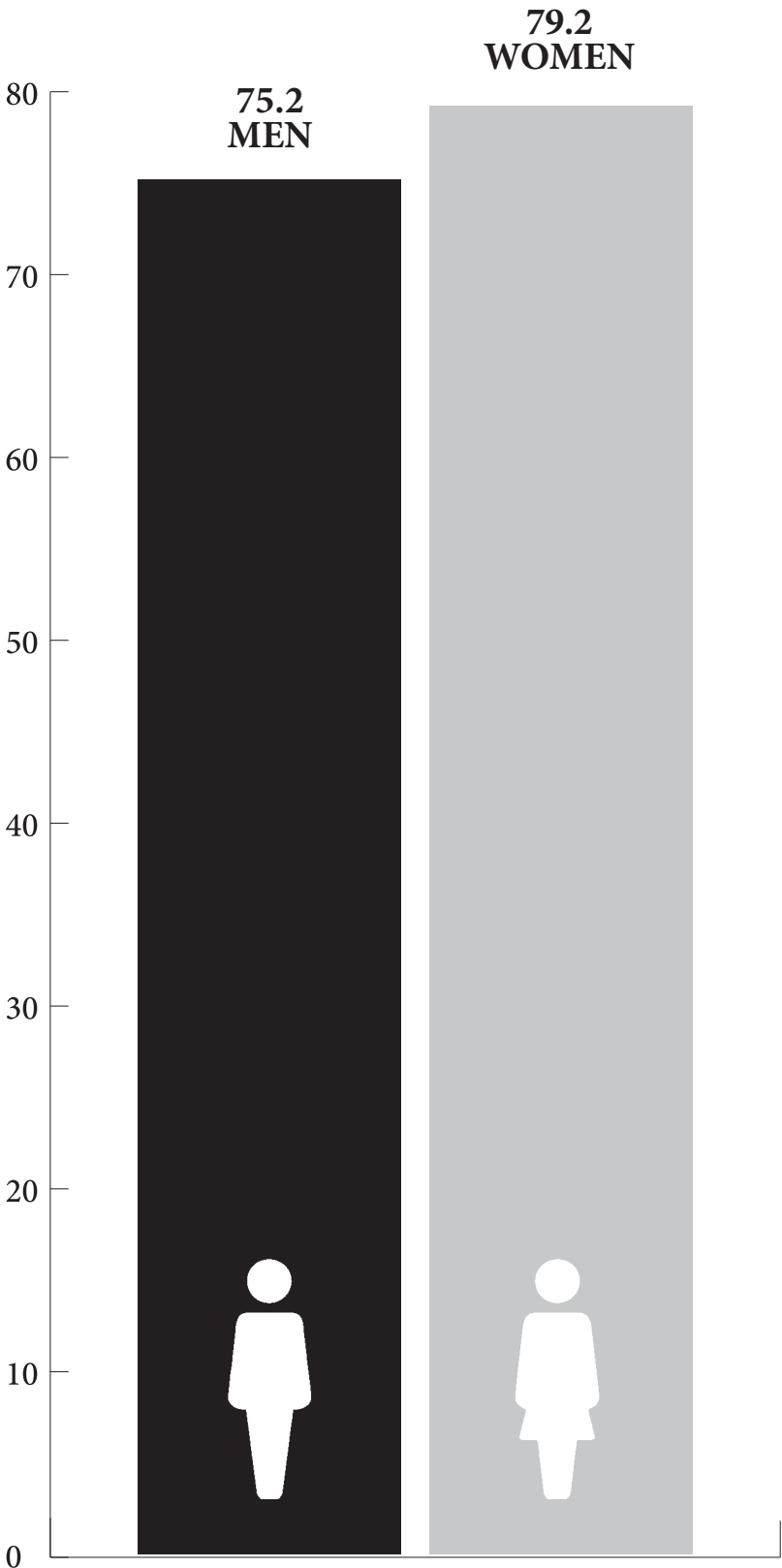
80 years

in the early 2030s. This is in large part due to the country’s advancing healthcare system.

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77.2 years

in 2019 against 49 years in 1970





■ MOAFWR MISSION TO COMBAT RED PALM WEEVIL



Dr Ahmed bin Nasser al Bakri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources for Agriculture, visited Ibri in Al Dhahirah Governorate to see the mission to control the red palm weevil which poses threat date palm orchards. The Under-Secretary said red palm weevil is one of the most dangerous pests that affect the date palm, pointing to the importance of coordination and community partnership to save date palms from damage.

SQU hosts training for teachers to improve teaching



The Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS) organised Active Learning Awareness Raising Day at Al Wahat Club last week.

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARHC 29

The Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS), Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), organised Active Learning Awareness Raising Day at Al Wahat Club last week. The event is considered a training opportunity aimed to raise teachers' awareness about active learning and improve teaching practices. There were a number of activities during the day.

Dr Badriya al Shihi, the Deputy Chairperson of State Council and the CPS Director, delivered the welcome speech in which she emphasised that this awareness-raising day is in line with Oman Vision 2040 since we are committed to improving educational outcomes and increasing the quality of foundational and higher education. She also stressed that learning and learner centred approaches to education should be employed to facilitate the development of life-long learning and skills of communication, critical thinking, collaboration and creativity.

Dr Zahra al Lawati, CPS Deputy Director for Academic Programmes, introduced the SQU Operational Plan in relation to Active Learning and the CPS measures. She said that the first strategy prioritised by order on the second SQU Operational Plan of 2021-2025 is "Enrich curricula with active learning techniques

Learning and learner centred approaches to education should be employed to facilitate the development of life-long learning and skills of communication, critical thinking, collaboration and creativity

and student-centred activities". The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) is the percentage of courses with active learning techniques and activities. The target for 2025 is to have at least 40 per cent of the CPS courses implement active learning in their teaching, materials, and assessment.

Dr Khalid Al Saadi, Assistant Professor at the College of Education, Department of Instructional and Learning Technologies, delivered a plenary training session in which he shared his experience and expertise in using active learning strategies and techniques, encouraging attending teachers to apply them in their teaching practice.

The CPS Active Learning Team who organised the event were Dr Nazanin Dehdary, Dr Zakiya al Nadabi and Sally al Hurmuzi. The team briefed attendees about the active learning project findings and achievements as well as future plans for enhancing active learning

at the CPS. The team reported the outcomes of the multi-phased active learning project they have been working on since Spring 2021 including the findings in relation to the status of active learning in the CPS curricula, the challenges reported by teachers and the actions taken by the CPS so far and future plans.

A published Google Site on active learning at the CPS was launched at the event. The site has been developed by the team to facilitate the integration of active learning into courses by providing resources and information about active learning, its importance, strategies and techniques that promote active learning, and so forth.

The CPS Active Learning Team also introduced the initiative, a Technology-Enhanced Active Learning (TEAL) classroom and how it is planned to be set up with furniture and technologies that support active learning and student-centred activities. The team then moderated a focus group activity called Discussion Circle, in which teachers worked together in teams as they engaged in discussion circles to do the following tasks: design active learning activities aimed to achieve learning outcomes; identify opportunities provided by their suggested active learning activities; evaluate the implementation challenges; and recommend ways to mitigate these challenges.

Cyberknife used to treat facial pain at SQCCCRC

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

The Radiotherapy team at Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre (SQCCCRC) has successfully performed the first radiosurgery in the Sultanate of Oman to treat trigeminal neuralgia using CyberKnife S7.

Dr Layth Mula-Hussain, consultant radiation oncologist at SQCCCRC, said, "The radiation oncology team performed the first radiosurgery to treat a patient who was suffering from trigeminal neuralgia, which is a chronic pain condition that affects the trigeminal or fifth cranial nerve." Although the patient had taken several drugs and had undergone two previous surgeries (Radio-Frequency Ablation), the pain still persists. Dr Furqan Hashemi, the Senior Specialist in Radiation Oncology, explained that the recovery rate for these cases using stereotactic radiosurgery is more than 80 per cent and patients may begin feeling better within a day after the surgery, while others may take up to 6 months for recovery. Furthermore, the patient stated that the pain was significantly reduced within an hour of the



surgery and we will continue to monitor her condition to ensure that the treatment is effective."

"The radiosurgery was performed by directing a very high dose of 6000 cGy into a small area ranging from 3 mm to 6 mm, close to the brainstem with a distance of at least 3 mm, which requires high accuracy in directing radiation beams to damage the nerve and reduce the pain," said Mahmoud el Fishawy, medical physicist.

"CyberKnife S7 surgery is commonly used for the treatment of brain tumours, especially deep brain tumours that are hard to remove during surgery, as well as treating non-cancerous conditions such as trigeminal neuralgia. Indeed, we have started treating a number of cases using

the device since mid-January," said Dr Iqbal al Amri, radiation oncology medical physicist.

Jaishan Jalahran, radiation therapist, mentioned that, in addition to the high accuracy, treatment using radiosurgery is characterised by the fact that it does not require inserting internal fixators into the skull and usually a treatment session lasts about 30 minutes, while in previous versions of radiotherapy devices, the treatments last about an hour.

"We are happy to provide this advanced and safe treatment service to all patients in the Sultanate of Oman who are suffering from trigeminal neuralgia, instead of sending patients abroad to receive treatment," said Amna al Ajmi, radiation therapist.

Oman Air Holidays launches digital platform for SMEs

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

Oman Air Holidays, the tour operating arm of Oman Air — has launched a digital platform giving locally owned and operated SMEs in travel and tourism sector greater online presence and visibility in front of a broader range of international customers. Helping local SMEs digitise their offer is a commitment Oman Air Holidays has undertaken in recent months to help empower local tour operators, guides, hotels and other small business and solopreneurs in Oman's growing leisure and hospitality

ecosystem.

"Empowering Omani SMEs through digitisation initiatives brings them out of the shadows and into the spotlight where they can truly shine as local service and product providers," said Mundher bin Yaqoob al Shaikhani, Senior Manager Oman Air Holidays. "Creating opportunities where SMEs can flourish is a key component of the tourism pillars contained in Oman Vision 2040 and Oman Air Holidays is proud to do its part to help. Our platform is connected to a truly global audience and we know it will give local SMEs a step up in the right direction as we continue our

efforts to attract more inbound tourists to Oman."

The new digital platform now connects local SMEs to a larger, growing network of international partners associated with Oman Air Holidays. In 2021, Oman Air Holidays partnered with several international travel operators, including WebBeds (a division of Webjet Limited), to enhance its digital booking experience and to provide more choice, flexibility and convenience to guests in search of innovative custom holiday packages. It also introduced stopover packages offering the flexibility to discover some of the most desirable tourist spots in and around Muscat.



Sultanate of Oman The Council of Administrative Affairs for the Judiciary

Tender Announcement

The Administrative Affairs Council of the Judiciary announces its desire to submit the following tender:

Tender No	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Vendor Grade	Tender Document Fee
16/2022	Rent a Building for the Court Complex at Sur	14/04/2022	09/05/2022	Excellent, First, Second, Third, Fourth	RO. 25/-

The specifications shall be as follows:

- The location of the building should be clearly visible, easily accessible, and suitable for security, in an open site. It is preferable that the building is under construction or that the age of the building does not exceed five years.
- Provided that there is sufficient space for parking for employees and visitors.
 - The ground floor should be open (not divided from the inside to make the courtrooms).
 - The upper floors should be open or the apartment space is wide to facilitate the division of offices.
 - The number of elevators in the building shall not be less than two.
 - Providing air-conditioning devices for the building and infrastructure, such as a computer network and a telephone exchange.
 - The owner of the building should be fully prepared and agree to make any modifications and additions (whether structural or technical) in the building in proportion to the nature of the work.
 - The building area should be about 7000 square meters.
 - The original maps and drawings of the building and all guarantees related to building materials, devices and equipment are attached to the building, in addition to the civil defense certificate.
 - The owner of the building shall undertake all kinds of maintenance during the contract period.

Where you can buy the tender documents electronically via the link below website:
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

Bidders shall submit their bids electronically via the aforementioned website. An electronic bank guarantee certified by one of the banks operating in the country shall be delivered at a rate of (1%) of the bid value with each bid, valid for a period of (90) days from the date of submission of bids and addressed in the name of the Chairman of the Internal Committee of Tenders in the Council of Administrative Affairs for the Judiciary, based on directives from the General Secretariat of the Tender Board, and the latest updates to the electronic tender system.

- For inquiries and clarifications on the tender:**
Submit inquiries related to the project electronically through the website of the electronic tender system (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
- For inquiries and clarifications on the electronic bidding system:**
Submit inquiries regarding technical support for the electronic bidding system via e-mail and the phone number shown below:
Phone: +968 24402200
Email: etenderhd@ita.gov.om



A makeshift oil refining installation near the city of Al Bab in the north of the Aleppo province. – AFP

Syria camp clashes with IS leave 3 dead

BEIRUT: Three people were killed in clashes between IS group fighters and Kurdish forces in a northeast Syria camp housing relatives of militants, a war monitor said on Tuesday.

Around 56,000 people live in Al Hol, an overcrowded Kurdish-run camp for displaced people that has been plagued by murders and regular escape attempts, according to the United Nations.

The camp hosts about 10,000 foreigners, including the wives and children of IS fighters who are detained in a high-security annex guarded by Kurdish forces.

“Violent clashes between security forces responsible for the camp and IS cells” broke out on Monday night, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The clashes “resulted in the death of a woman and a child (...) and the killing of one member of an IS cell”, the Observatory added.

Four women and six children were also injured in the fighting, said the Britain-based monitor, which relies on a wide network

of sources inside Syria.

Kurdish Asayish security forces said that clashes started after members of an armed “cell” attacked one of their patrols in Al Hol.

The perpetrators used kalashnikovs, pistols and rocket-propelled grenades during the attack, the Asayish said in a statement.

The Asayish did not identify the attackers but said they were hiding among IS relatives held in the camp.

“Our forces managed to kill one of the cell members,” the statement said.

Kurdish forces warned last week that a lack of international support risked allowing for a resurgence, as they marked three years since the declared defeat of IS’s so-called caliphate.

Kurdish authorities have repeatedly called on Western countries to repatriate their nationals held in northeast Syria, but most have been reluctant due to fears of a domestic political backlash. — AFP

Blinken in Rabat for security talks

RABAT: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was visiting Morocco on Tuesday to discuss regional security and meet the UAE leader Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan.

The trip comes in the shadow of Russia’s war on Ukraine, which along with sanctions has sent wheat and fuel prices soaring in a serious blow for import-dependent North African countries.

“We know this pain is keenly felt in the Middle East and North Africa, where most countries import at least half of their wheat,” State Department Acting Assistant Secretary Yael Lempert said before the trip.

Blinken flew late on Monday from Israel where he had joined top diplomats from the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain and Egypt for a meeting that underlined a seismic shift since 2020.

On Tuesday, he started talks with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita ahead of a meeting with Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, with the Western Sahara dispute and security cooperation on the agenda—including the fight against the IS group and Al Qaeda in the Sahel.

The same subjects will loom large in meetings the following day with Morocco and Algeria.

Blinken also met on Tuesday evening with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed at the Emirati leader’s Moroccan residence.

The UAE has refrained from criticising Russia, recently sent its top diplomat to Moscow, and hosted the Russia-backed Syrian President Bashar al Assad.

Blinken and Prince Mohammed are set to discuss efforts to



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken with Morocco’s Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita during their meeting in Rabat. – AFP

revive the 2015 landmark Iran nuclear deal, which aimed to limit Iran’s nuclear development in exchange for loosening sanctions—an agreement dropped by former US president Donald Trump in 2018.

Blinken will also meet a group of Moroccan women involved in science and technology. In Morocco, Blinken is set to discuss the Western Sahara, a phosphate-rich former Spanish colony with a vast Atlantic coastline home to rich fisheries.

Morocco controls 80 per cent of it including a key highway towards West Africa, while the rest—a desert area bordering Mauritania and Algeria—is run by

The trip comes in the shadow of Russia’s war on Ukraine, which along with sanctions has sent wheat and fuel prices soaring

the Polisario Front independence movement.

Trump in 2020 recognised the region as sovereign Moroccan territory in a break with decades of US policy, after Rabat agreed to re-establish relations with Israel under the so-called Abraham Accords.

President Joe Biden’s adminis-

tration has been tight-lipped on how it will follow up on the move, which came just weeks after the Polisario declared a 1991 ceasefire null and void, sparking fears that the long-frozen conflict could flare up again.

Morocco has urged the US to take a step further and open a consulate there, like the UAE—a move to which the Biden administration has not committed.

The State Department said in a report that it supports a Moroccan autonomy plan and the work of recently appointed UN envoy Staffan de Mistura.

The UN sees the territory as a “non-self-governing territory”. — AFP

■ CAMPAIGNING HOTS UP



Philippine Vice-President and opposition presidential candidate Leni Robredo speaks to supporters during a campaign rally ahead of the May presidential election in the town of Palo, Leyte province. – AFP

Lebanon faces education ‘emergency’: UN official

BEIRUT: Lebanon is grappling with an education “emergency,” a United Nations official said, as years of economic collapse weigh heavily on students and teachers.

“We are now in an emergency situation. Education in Lebanon is in crisis because the country is living in crisis,” Maysoun Chehab (pictured) of the UN education and culture body (Unesco) said.

She spoke on the sidelines of an event on Monday celebrating the completion of a \$35-million Unesco project to rehabilitate 280 education centres damaged by a 2020 blast. The explosion caused by haphazardly stored fertiliser at



Beirut port killed more than 200 people, destroyed swathes of the capital and disrupted the education of at least 85,000 youths.

Unesco chief Audrey Azoulay visited Beirut weeks later, driving efforts to restore heritage sites and damaged schools.

Students and teachers now have brand new classrooms but they are still suffering from the twin effects of an unprecedented economic crisis in Lebanon and the coronavirus pandemic.

Since late 2019, the Lebanese pound has lost over 90 per cent of its value, pushing most of the population into poverty.

“Schools do not have enough funds to operate as they should, teachers do not have sufficient salaries to live in prosperity, students do not have transportation means due to high fuel prices,” said Chehab, Unesco’s education chief for Lebanon. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TUNIS

Tunisia flays parliament sessions as ‘illegal’

Tunisian President Kais Saied has condemned “illegal” meetings of a parliament he suspended last July, saying those responsible for the planned virtual sessions were trying to sow chaos. The North African country is in the throes of a deep political and economic crisis which took a dramatic turn last July 25 when Saied sacked the government and suspended parliament, later moving to rule by decree.

His opponents have labelled the moves a “coup” against the



fraught democracy that emerged after the 2011 revolution and sparked the revolutions.

The assembly’s speaker Rached Ghannouchi, head of Ennahdha party, has called for a plenary session.

TEHRAN

Ceasefire plan can help end Yemen war

Iran offered its support for a ceasefire plan put forward by fighters it backs in Yemen’s war, saying it could be an “appropriate platform” for ending the conflict. The Ansar Allah fighters announced the proposal and offered peace talks on condition Saudi Arabia stops its air strikes and blockade of Yemen and removes “foreign forces”.

The offer came a day after the insurgents fired on 16 targets inside the kingdom, which heads a military coalition fighting on



the side of Yemen’s internationally recognised government. On Tuesday, Iran’s foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said the Ansar Allah “plan contained a strong message of determination to end the war”.

COLOMBO

Lanka hospitals running out of life-saving drugs

Sri Lanka’s state-run hospitals are running out of life-saving medicines due to a shortage of dollars needed to import essentials as the country reels from a dire economic crisis, officials said. Teaching Hospital Peradeniya which serves a population of 2.4 million people in the Central province said it was suspending all routine surgeries and was out of anaesthetic drugs and other essentials for operations.

A key health trade union said the problem at Peradeniya was



common in most state hospitals where suppliers had not been paid for over six months. A surgeon at the main National Hospital in Colombo said they were short of many vital medicines and patients.

Russia pledges to scale back Ukraine war

ISTANBUL: Peace talks in Istanbul between Ukraine and Russia yielded progress on Tuesday as Moscow promised to scale back its military activity near the capital Kiev and the northern city of Chernihiv.

Russian and Ukrainian delegations met in the Turkish city for face-to-face negotiations, more than a month after Russia launched an air and ground attack that has devastated towns and cities across the country and caused nearly 4 million people to flee.

The representatives met at the Dolmabahce Presidential Office, on the banks of the Bosphorus, for their first in-person talks in more than two weeks.

But after more than four hours, the head of the Russian delegation, Vladimir Medinsky, emerged and told reporters the discussions had been “constructive.”

President Vladimir Putin’s envoy also said Russia was ready to take military and political “steps to de-escalate the conflict.”

Ukraine’s “proposals will be examined in the near future, submitted to the president and we will respond accordingly,” Medinsky said.

Shortly before Medinsky spoke, Russian Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin announced a significant reduction in “military activities” near Kiev and Chernihiv.

Russian troops have struggled to advance upon the centre of two northern cities due to fierce Ukrainian resistance.

If Russia follows through and the attacks are reduced, it would mark an important step on the path towards ending the war Russia launched on February 24.

A broader cessation of hostilities was still out of reach, Ukraine said.

Securing international security



ISTANBUL TALKS



MISSILE STRIKE, KYIV REGION



AFTER BOMBING, NEAR MYKOLAIIV

TALKS

- Ukraine and Russian negotiators hold face-to-face talks in Istanbul

POISONED?

- Istanbul talks come after Wall Street Journal report that delegates at a previous meeting were poisoned

EVACUATIONS

- Ukraine reopens humanitarian corridors and evacuates civilians from regions including battered city Mariupol

REFUGEES

- Nearly 3.9 million people have left Ukraine: UN. More than 10 million Ukrainians have fled their homes

KYIV SUBURB RETAKEN

- Ukrainian forces have “liberated” much fought-over western Kyiv suburb of Irpin, says country’s interior minister

Sources: AFP bureaus

Photos: AFP/Turkish Presidential press service/Murat Cetin Muhurdaar

AFP

guarantees for Ukraine remains a key issue before Kiev can agree to a ceasefire, Mykhailo Podolyak, a senior adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, said.

He said Nato members Britain, Turkey, France, Germany and the United States could serve as guarantor states in case of a possible peace deal with Russia.

Kiev also offered to extend negotiations on the political status of Russian-invaded Crimea for as long as 15 years, he tweeted.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addressed the participants, who were seated across from each other at a long table, at the outset on Tuesday morning.

He once again appealed for a ceasefire and for Putin and Zelensky to come to the table themselves, although Kiev and Moscow have indicated more progress needs to be made and that such a high-stakes meeting could still be



Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak speaks to the press after first Russia and Ukraine face-to-face talks at Dolmabahce palace in Istanbul. — AFP

far off.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry said the Istanbul talks had concluded on Tuesday and were not expected to continue on Wednesday.

Kiev wants a withdrawal of

Russian troops and security guarantees. Moscow is demanding Ukraine renounce attempts to join Nato, recognise breakaway eastern Ukrainian separatist regions as independent and recognise the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea,

annexed in 2014, as part of Russia. Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich was among those at the Istanbul talks.

The owner of the Chelsea football club was slapped with British and EU sanctions as part of the Western response to Russia’s attack of Ukraine. During the past month, the influential oligarch has been shuttling between venues and cities.

Abramovich was reportedly among three people who suffered symptoms consistent with chemical weapons poisoning after an earlier round of talks, the Wall Street Journal and the investigative journalism outlet Bellingcat reported on Monday.

But on Tuesday Kiev and Moscow threw cold water on the explosive report. Zelensky’s adviser Podolyak suggested it was conspiracy theory while the Kremlin said it was “definitely not true” and

“part of an information war.” Meanwhile, Russia continued its hostilities against Ukraine.

In the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolayiv, the regional administration building was attacked by the Russian army, presumably with a missile.

According to the local civil defence, three people were killed and at least 22 others injured in Tuesday’s attack.

“They hit my study, the bastards,” regional governor Vitaliy Kim said on Telegram. He showed a photo of a huge hole and debris in the administration building.

It is impossible to independently verify information from either side.

Russia claims it is only targeting military sites, even though there are daily confirmed reports of the destruction of bridges, schools, hospitals and residential neighbourhoods. — dpa

5,000 dead in ‘catastrophic’ Mariupol siege

KYIV: Ukraine said on Monday that at least 5,000 people have died in the “catastrophic” humanitarian crisis gripping pulverised Mariupol, as fighting raged around Kyiv including in a strategic suburb where defenders claim to have driven out Russian assault.

Multiple cities in Ukraine remained under crushing Russian bombardment on the eve of new face-to-face peace negotiations on Tuesday in Turkey, as Kyiv — and its allies in the West — seek to end the month-long war.

In the besieged southern port of Mariupol at least 5,000 people have already been buried, according to a senior Ukrainian official who said as many as 10,000 may have died — appearing to confirm the darkest scenarios of devastation in the city.

“The burials stopped 10 days ago because of continued shelling,” Tetyana Lomakina, a presidential adviser now in charge of humanitarian corridors, said by phone on Monday.

Russian attacks near Kyiv cut power to more than 80,000 homes, officials said, underscoring the peril facing the capital despite an apparent retreat in Moscow’s war aims to focus on eastern Ukraine.



Volunteers assemble sand bags to protect the Monument to Princess Olga, St Andrew the Apostle and the educators Cyril and Methodius in Kyiv. — AFP

“To capture Kyiv is essentially a captured Ukraine, and this is their goal”, warned Ukraine’s Deputy Defence Minister Ganna Malyar, who said Russia was “trying to break through the corridor around Kyiv and block transport routes.”

Fierce Ukrainian resistance however reclaimed the strategically vital Kyiv suburb of Irpin from Russian troops, by sweeping the area block-by-block, according to Ukraine’s Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky.

Journalists said heavy shelling continued to be heard on the road

leading to Irpin, however, as residents including 86-year-old Olga Molchanova evacuated from the devastated commuter town.

“I just pray to God for salvation. I pray every day for the soldiers who defend us. Let them have courage”, Molchanova cried after reuniting with her daughter Agnesa Brovkina who described hellish conditions in Irpin.

“My mother was deafened by a rocket. All the time, non-stop, shelling.

All day and night, bombing, shelling, all of it”, said Brovkina, a 62-year-old office worker. — AFP

UK detains Russian superyacht

LONDON: Britain on Tuesday detained a Russian-owned, \$50-million superyacht boasting a fresh-water swimming pool, in what it called a “warning” to Moscow of the consequences for attacking Ukraine.

The impounding of Phi, the first superyacht ever to be held in British waters, comes after the UK sanctioned hundreds of Russian individuals and entities in recent weeks over the Kremlin’s war.

Authorities held the vessel, which was docked at Canary Wharf in London, after the “combating kleptocracy” unit of the National Crime Agency (NCA) uncovered that its ultimate owner was a Russian businessman. — AFP

Dutch expels 17 Russians for alleged spying

THE HAGUE: The Netherlands is expelling 17 Russian diplomats who were “secretly active” as intelligence officers, the Dutch foreign ministry said. The move is one of the latest in a snowballing series of tit-for-tat expulsions of Russian diplomats by Western countries and retaliatory measures by Moscow.

“Today, the ambassador of Russia was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” and informed of the expulsion, the Hague-based ministry said. “The reason is that there is information... showing that the persons concerned, accredited as diplomats, are secretly active as intelligence officers,” it said.

“The cabinet has decided to do this because of the threat to national security posed by this group,” the statement added, saying the intelligence threat against the Netherlands remained high.

Orthodox patriarch slams war with Ukraine

WARSAW: The leader of the world’s Orthodox Christians met Ukrainian refugees in Warsaw on Tuesday, offering them his support and denouncing Russia’s “horrible” military action in their homeland.

“It beggars the imagination the amount of havoc this horrible invasion has caused in Ukraine and all over the world,” Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University.

The 82-year-old had also denounced the war as “unjust” and “groundless” after meeting with Polish President Andrzej Duda on Monday, adding that “a war between Orthodox Christians is absolutely unacceptable”.

Edu materials for children forced to flee conflict

DOHA: The Education Above All Foundation (EAA) launched its play-based educational materials in both Ukrainian and Russian for Ukrainian children forced to flee the conflict. In order to support the more than 1.5 million children from Ukraine who have recently been forced to become refugees, EAA has made its Emergency Education Programme available in Ukrainian and Russian. The programme’s modules have been developed as part of the global educational foundation’s award-winning Internet Free Education Resource Bank (IFERB) for marginalised children in emergencies.

Janhvi Kanoria, EAA Programme Director and Education in Emergency Team Lead, says, “We are specifically making our Education in Emergency toolkit for Ukrainian children in languages that they are fluent in to help them manage their emotions, generate hope, and practice math and English through games and play. We hope to keep children productively engaged and do what we can distract them from the continuous stress of the ongoing conflict.”

— Agencies

Why hybrid experiences in tourism are here to stay



MIRIAM KUGEL
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For many tourism and culture providers, the pandemic was a painful realisation of just how far behind they were in their digital transformation journey.

Providers who successfully launched virtual and digital culture and travel experiences initially thought they would only be in operation for a short time.

However, almost two years later, with Covid-19 still impacting our lives, the sector has realised the benefits and sheer necessity of maintaining and scaling its digital solutions.

While people are gradually returning to physical tourism and cultural activities, hybrid experiences that include physical, digital and virtual elements are proving to provide the most engaging visitor experience overall.

Anne Hoffmann, Head of

Digital at Les 2 Musées de la Ville Luxembourg, whose focus lies in creating digital visitor experiences to convey cultural heritage and history through the implementation of new technologies, says: “In my opinion, museums and cultural institutions have almost to reinvent themselves radically to stay relevant in this ever-changing environment. The pandemic has shown that we should work even harder on becoming a place — both physical and digital — where meaningful visitor experiences and interactions are created, pre-, during and after visiting. Online and offline experiences need to go hand-in-hand to continue stimulating not only our existing audience but also to attract and target new audience groups.”

When organisations integrate both layers effectively, physical

PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL VISITOR EXPERIENCES CAN REDUCE EFFORT AND FRICTION AND CREATE A MORE ENRICHING AND IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

and digital visitor experiences can reduce effort and friction and create a more enriching and immersive experience. At the same time, opportunities to create brand new “moments that matter” during the experience journey emerge through boosting one or several of the three critical experience elements:

1. Increasing the sensory appeal of the experience

The “Imagine Van Gogh” exhibition has created an immersive experience where visitors can walk through enormous Van Gogh artworks. The

experience designers employed advanced techniques of multi-projection and immersive audio to add emotional depth to each image, allowing us to live and feel the artist’s creative energy.

2. Raising the stakes by adding gamified layers to the physical experience

Museums or travel providers have an opportunity to add Pokémon-Go style seek and find activities to their physical experiences to engage different (i.e. younger) visitor profiles and add additional appeal to the experience.

3. Reimagining endings through greater reach into people’s homes

Through the adoption of digital tools, experience endings can also become extended beyond the moment a visitor is leaving the physical space to create a stronger connection and greater brand

loyalty.

Likewise, for predominantly digital experiences such as virtual events, experience designers need to consider bringing the sensory appeal of physical experiences into the digital sphere.

Take, for example, the Qualtrics (SAP) partner summit, where organisers sent physical goody bags to all attendees, sharing a piece of the local cuisine in the form of a cookbook and an apron.

They also included the event lanyard, other giveaways and small souvenirs to mimic the physical experience and to create experience artefacts.

The future of visitor experiences and travel is hybrid and here to stay, and companies have an opportunity to use digital tools to create additional elevation and moments that matter as part of the reimagined visitor experience.

Senegal’s water-stressed capital faces difficult future

LAURENT LOZANO

Many residents of the Senegalese metropolis Dakar get up in the middle of the night hoping to collect water from their taps, which mostly run dry. “We wake up at 4 or 5 am to get water, says Sidy Fall, 44, in her kitchen in a working-class neighbourhood, filled with large bottles of stored water.

If she doesn’t get up in time, the water often runs out by 5:30 am. Fall’s taps are sometimes dry for two or three days at a time.

A population boom in Senegal is intensifying pressure on scarce water resources in its semi-arid capital of five million people, with problems set to increase over the coming decades.

This is common to many African cities, where infrastructure investments have lagged behind strong demographics and demand for water from industry and agriculture. In Dakar, a recent World Bank report pointed to poor water management as part of the reason for shortages, along with over-exploitation and groundwater pollution.

But demand for water has kept increasing too, sending municipal officials racing to improve infrastructure to secure supply.

“Water is a source of life, but here water is a source of problems,” said Khadija Mahecor Diouf, the mayor of the Dakar suburb Golf Sud, at a public meeting last week.

Golf Sud’s population has risen from 70,000 to 125,000 people in 10 years, Diouf said, and is predicted to double in the next decade.

Half of all households in the suburb have problems with water, she said.

“We have a population that has exploded, urban planning schemes that have not been respected,” Diouf added, predicting that the problem would get worse. About a third of Senegal’s population of 17 million people lives in the Dakar region, which is also the country’s economic nerve centre.

But there are myriad complications tied to the runaway expansion.

The sewage system is often lacking, and parts of Dakar routinely flood during the rainy season.

Diouf said water cuts are a problem “all year round”. Senegal’s government, for its part, said 99 per cent of urbanites and 91 per cent of rural dwellers had access to water. The authorities are pushing to remedy supply issues in the capital and the government says it has made considerable infrastructure investments. Babou Ngom, from the state water company Sones, said new investments meant that supply would soon match demand. — AFP



PAUL KRUGMAN

The writer is an American economist, public intellectual, and a columnist for TNYT

Putin and the myths of Western decadence

Vladimir Putin’s assault on Ukraine was, above all a blunder. In less than five weeks, Putin has destroyed Russia’s military reputation, battered his country’s economy and strengthened the democratic alliances he hoped to undermine. How could he have made such a catastrophic mistake?

Part of the answer is surely strong-man syndrome: Putin has surrounded himself with people who tell him what he wants to hear. Everything indicates that he entered this debacle believing his own propaganda both about the martial prowess of his army and the willingness of the Ukrainians to submit to Russian domination.

But there is also reason to think that Putin, like many of his admirers in the West, thought modern democracies were too decadent to offer effective resistance.

And here’s the thing: when I look at the US, I worry that the West is, in fact, weakened by decadence – but not the kind that Putin and like-minded people are obsessed with.

Our vulnerability comes not from the decline of traditional family values, but from the decline of traditional democratic values, such as a belief in the rule of law and a willingness to accept election results that do not suit you.

Of course, the idea that cowardly morals destroy great powers goes back centuries. In the Hollywood version of the story, the Roman Empire fell because its elites were too busy with orgies to bother with defeating the barbarians. Actually, the timing is wrong for this story, but I’ll get to that in a minute.

Tucker Carlson warned that China’s military was becoming “more masculine” while ours was becoming “more feminine, regardless of the feminine meaning, since men and women no longer exist.”

Senator Ted Cruz retweeted a video comparing a US Army recruiting video with footage of a Russian paratrooper with a shaved head and said a “woke and emasculated army” might not be a good idea.

It would be interesting to know what happened to this paratrooper since Putin attacked Ukraine. In any case, the heavy losses suffered by Russia’s anti-revival army, which failed to attack vastly inferior Ukrainian forces, confirmed what anyone who has studied history knows:

the wars are not won with braggadocio machismo.

Courage and endurance, physical and moral, are more essential than ever; but the same goes for more mundane things like logistics maintenance of vehicles and communication systems that actually work.

PUTIN’S RESPONSE TO THE FAILURE IN UKRAINE HAS BEEN EXTREMELY TRUMPIAN: INSISTING THAT HIS ASSAULT IS GOING ‘ACCORDING TO PLAN’

By the way, I can’t help but mention that recent events have also confirmed the truism that many, perhaps most men who pass themselves off as badass... aren’t. Putin’s response to the failure in Ukraine has been extremely Trumpian: insisting that his assault is going “according to plan”, refusing to admit mistakes and lamenting the cancellation culture. I half expect him to release crudely edited battle maps with a Sharpie.

But back to the kind of decadence that really matters.

As I said, the Hollywood version of the decline and fall of Rome does not stand up to scrutiny. Certainly, the spoils of the empire allowed a few people to live in great luxury, including perhaps an occasional orgy; the closest modern counterpart to this elite would be... the Russian oligarchs. But Rome retained its territorial integrity and military effectiveness for centuries after the emergence of this pampered libertine elite.

Obviously, what is happening in the US today bears no detailed resemblance to the troubles of the ancient world. Yet hardly a month goes by these days without more revelations revealing that much of the American body politic, including largely members of the political elite, despises democratic principles and will do whatever it takes to win.

It’s amazing how quickly we normalised that the last president tried to hold on to power despite losing the election and a mob he incited stormed the Capitol. Many people were involved in the effort to overturn the election – among them we recently learned was the wife of a sitting Supreme Court justice, who didn’t even recuse herself in the cases. Attempted coup.

And while Donald Trump’s effort to stay in power has failed, most of his party has, indeed, retroactively backed that effort. — New York Times



A worker watches an excavator clearing the rubble of a government building hit by Russian rockets in Mykolaiv. — AFP

Enjoy good health and true spirit of Ramadhan!



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyvp

The writer is a senior journalist, author and columnist

The holy month of Ramadhan will begin in a few days. It will be the beginning of another period of time for renunciation as well as reflection and spiritual growth.

During the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, we found the believers experiencing Ramadhan in a new world amid lockdowns and ban on movements. Believers found ways of replacing the usual

social traditions with new customs, in efforts to protect themselves and their loved ones.

Although the holiest month in the Muslim calendar will again be observed under the shadow of the dreaded pandemic, which is still a real threat, the relief is that there are no stringent measures except for the precautionary measures like controls on gatherings and ban on mass iftars.

Of course, as experts suggest, this Ramadhan, too, is more important than ever as we are required to remain vigilant and make compromises for the sake of our health, as well as the health of our communities and others.

We should not ignore the recent statement by Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, that the coronavirus is still prevalent, and that the precautionary measures should not be scrapped or neglected.

We were witnesses last year to social events marking the season leading to increase in the number of infected people over the following weeks. This Ramadhan, we must not let our short-term desire to spend time with others putting more people at risk.

Let us all pledge to keep a safe distance, so that we can celebrate the many more happy occasions like the Eids to come. The guidelines and recommendations issued by the World Health Organization last year on safe practices on physical distancing measures that need to be taken during prayers, pilgrimages, communal meals and other social or religious events are still valid.

The vaccination drive by the government has provided us new hope in our fight for survival. Still there is much to be done in a pandemic-free world. The precautionary measures, if followed in the right earnest, will allow us to enjoy good health and the true spirit of Ramadhan.

As the holy month is that of giving, let us make use of its spirit to help individuals, communities and countries in need. Instead of setting up big iftars, we should endeavour to help the poor and the needy.

During Ramadhan, people tend to buy more than their normal requirements for self-consumption plus for taking care of guests. Due to the limited quantity of food to be consumed by people this additional quantity of cooked or made food becomes waste.

Arab nations in particular, generate huge quantities of food waste which increases substantially during the month of Ramadhan and festivals whereby the consumption and wastage of food increase at an alarming level.

Food wastage can lead to an increase in food prices as it increases demand in relation to supply. Moreover, we are highly dependent on food imports which are usually transacted in US dollars.

Need to remember that fasting is an act of worship, a way to become more compassionate to those in need, and a chance to get closer to God! Along with the key tenets of this holy month – prayer, reflection, charity – also ensure our physical and mental well-being, causing no harm to others and helping the poor!



CHERRY BLOSSOM

People row a boat under fully-blossoming cherry trees in Tokyo, Japan, on Tuesday. – AFP

Will big biodiversity ambitions be enough to save nature?



LAURE FILLON

The writer is an environment journalist and reporter

After the world missed almost all of its targets to protect fast-dwindling nature for the last decade, observers following a new round of negotiations are focusing as much on how goals will be put in place as the headline targets.

Nearly 200 nations are taking part in talks until Tuesday, aimed at fine-tuning a draft text to preserve biodiversity by 2050, with key milestones at 2030, which will be adopted at the United Nations COP15 conference later this year.

Countries are striving to increase their ambitions in the face of stark warnings that humanity is driving devastating declines in the biodiversity that supports all life on the planet. But the world failed almost entirely to reach a similar set of 10-year objectives set a decade ago at UN talks in Aichi, Japan.

“The Aichi targets were largely missed because of lack of political will and parties not prioritising them enough”, said Anna Heslop, of the NGO ClientEarth, which is following the Geneva talks.

“There was just a lack of implementation. We can’t afford to be in that position again in 10 years.”

The text under negotiation includes a series of proposals to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

“What we need is a better system for encouraging parties to plan and report, and then the global community needs to do something. It is keeping these three elements is the challenge”, said a delegate

from a Global North country, who asked not to be named.

Member countries should develop stronger action plans to use natural resources sustainably, said the IDDRI think-tank said to be more effective. There should also be a more robust reporting system, with countries periodically measuring progress and passing on data that feeds into a global assessment, it added.

MEMBER COUNTRIES SHOULD DEVELOP STRONGER ACTION PLANS TO USE NATURAL RESOURCES SUSTAINABLY, SAID THE IDDRI THINK-TANK SAID TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE

Currently, each country draws up its national biodiversity plan on a different basis, making comparisons difficult.

To address this, the delegations in Geneva are trying to develop common indicators to measure progress.

“Let’s put in place mechanisms for collective and individual review, which will increase the pressure and this affects ambitions and implementation at the

national level”, said Juliette Landry, researcher at IDDRI.

Experts and conservation groups want national action plans to be updated regularly after COP15 with progress reports and a global stocktake before 2030.

That way, nations and the international community can see if they are going off track and increase their efforts.

But more reporting and administration requires more funding, and biodiversity-rich developing countries stress they will need both financial and technological support to meet these obligations.

“You cannot ask people to do spatial planning if they don’t have the means”, said a delegate from the Global South.

Another IDDRI proposal is the creation of a compliance mechanism, although Landry stressed that this would not be an exercise in finger-pointing.

Instead she said it would show the “gaps between what the countries had planned and what they implemented” and enable problems to be addressed and for countries to share their experiences, she said. So far, there has been little appetite for such a mechanism.

But without one “all of this process is meaningless” said Oscar Soria, of the advocacy group Avaaz.

“Because nobody will take responsibility and nobody will take the convention seriously from the outside”, he said. — AFP



A dead cormorant pictured after an oil spill off Peru’s coast. – AFP file photo



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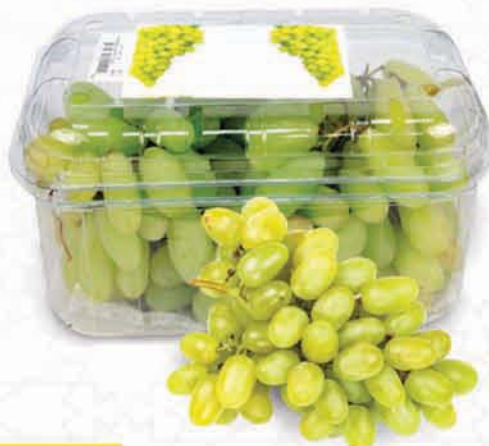
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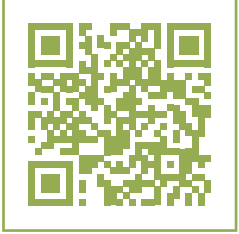
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Gujarat win battle of IPL newcomers against Lucknow

MUMBAI: Mohammed Shami's three wickets and a batting blitz by Rahul Tewatia helped Gujarat Titans begin their IPL journey with a thrilling win over fellow debutants Lucknow Super Giants on Monday.

Chasing 159 for victory, Gujarat were in trouble at 78-4 but Tewatia smashed an unbeaten 40 off 24 balls to make his team win by five wickets and two balls to spare in Mumbai.

Shami set up the win for Gujarat after he returned figures of 3-25 to restrict Lucknow, led by KL Rahul, to 158-6.

"This was the right game for us to be on either side and learn, but have learnt a lot by winning," said Gujarat skipper Hardik Pandya.

"Shami is known for his seam positions and he got us to a great start. We would have any day taken 160 on this wicket"

Gujarat, owned by CVC Capital — a US capital venture fund, slipped when Pandya fell for 33 to elder brother Krunal Pandya's left-arm spin.

The wicket ended a 57-run

partnership with Matthew Wade, who soon got out for 30.

David Miller, who made 30, and Tewatia — both left-hand batters — put together 60 off 34 balls to swing the momentum back in Gujarat's favour.

"The wicket was so good that Miller and I were discussing that we would take it deep and it's a matter of just one over," said Tewatia. "After I hit that six with the reverse sweep, that got (Ravi) Bishnoi thinking."

Tewatia completed the chase with his fifth four — he also struck two sixes — with partner Abhinav Manohar hitting 15 off seven balls.

Earlier Shami rattled the Lucknow top-order with three early strikes including getting Rahul caught behind for nought on the first ball of the match and bowled Quinton de Kock for seven.

Shubman Gill took a stunning catch to send back Evin Lewis out for 10 off Varun Aaron before Lucknow hit back with fifties from Deepak Hooda (55) and Ayush Badoni (54). — **AFP**

Oman take part in West Asian U-12 tennis tournament



MUSCAT: The Oman team is taking part in the West Asian Under-12 Championship for boys and girls which began in Lebanon on March 26. The tournament will conclude on April 2.

The Oman delegation included Azzan al Busaidi, Moataz al Mazroui and Abdul Rahman al Rahbi led by coach Sufian Doub in the boys section and the girls team consisted Aren Azkawiya, Salma al Riyamiya and Talia Al Busaidiah, led by coach Sergey and administrator Faisal al Balushi.

In the boys section, eight teams namely Sultanate of Oman, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, Syria, Iran and Yemen are in fray.

Oman were placed in Group B along with Lebanon, Qatar and Bahrain. Group A included Iran, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

In the girls section, six teams including Lebanon, Iraq, Qatar, Syria, Iran and Sultanate of Oman are competing for the top honours.

Al Faisal set for Europe challenge

OMANI RACER TO REPRESENT AL MANAR RACING IN FANATEC GT WORLD CHALLENGE

IMOLA, Italy: Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair begins a brand new challenge for honours in the Fanatec GT World Challenge Europe Powered by AWS at the opening round of the increasingly popular championship on Italy's demanding Imola race circuit this weekend.

Al Zubair will represent the Al Manar Racing by HRT operation in the 17-strong Silver Cup category, alongside team-mates Fabian Schiller and Axcil Jeffries. Schiller actually posted the fastest lap time during pre-season testing in the team's Mercedes-AMG GT3 in France.

A further four HRT Mercedes-AMGs will line-up on the grid, alongside four Lamborghinis, a quartet of Audis, two McLarens and a pair of Porsche GT3s.

With 52 cars scheduled to line up at the start of the three-hour race across all the classes, officials have confirmed this is the biggest Endurance Cup grid, outside of the 24 Hours of Spa in Belgium since 2018, and a record number of entries in the Silver Cup.

Al Zubair said: "I am really looking forward to the start of the championship. It is definitely the toughest championship that I will have participated in. I am in the silver category, which is extremely tough. I believe there are 17 entries in the silver class. So, it will be extremely difficult, especially with a grid of over 50 cars.

"I think for the first weekend we just need to go and make sure that we have a relatively strong position in our class. That will be our target. The target for the season will be to finish in the top three in the silver class and maybe even win it. No expectations to really win, but we



will be doing our best. We have a strong line-up and an extremely strong team. I am excited now to get the season started."

Team-mate Jeffries, 24, was born in Zimbabwe and is a professional racing driver and a senior race instructor at the Yas Marina circuit in Abu Dhabi. Last year he took part in Asian Le Mans Series, International GT Open and FIA World Endurance Championship races.

Schiller is also 24-year-old and began his career in karting, before moving into formula and sports car racing. Last year, he competed in the GT World Challenge Europe and Nurburgring Endurance Series.

Earlier this season, Al Zubair had teamed up with Dutchman Indy Dontje, Germany's driver Luca Stolz and Austrian Martin Konrad to finish fifth overall in the second of two Mercedes-AMG



Al Faisal al Zubair

GT3's run by the Haupt Racing Team to take part in the Hankook Dubai 24H.

The 2022 series will be run over 10 rounds at Imola, Brands Hatch, Magny-Cours, Circuit Paul Ricard, Zandvoort, Misano, Spa, Hockenheim, Valencia and Barcelona.

Officially known as Autodromo Enzo e Dino Ferrari, Imola first hosted the Fanatec GT World Challenge Europe in 2020.

Action for the Silver Cup teams on the 4.9km anti-clockwise circuit begins with free practice between 09.00hrs and 10.30hrs on Saturday morning. This precedes a pre-qualifying session (13.40hrs-15.10hrs).

Sunday's track action gets underway with a one-hour qualifying stint, starting at 09.00hrs, and the lights go out at the start of the opening three-hour endurance race of the season from 15.00hrs. Nine manufacturers will be represented on the grid across the classes.

The weekend's timetable also features support races for the Lamborghini Super Trofeo, Fanatec GT2 European Series and GT4 European Series.

Competitions continue in Sultan's Cup camel racing in Barka

WALEED AL JAHWARI
BARKA, MARCH 29

The competitions continued in Royal Camel Corps camel racing for the Sultan's Cup, organised by the Oman Camel Racing Federation in Barka track on Tuesday.

The races started in early morning for 'Legaya' category, three years old, for 4 km in nine rounds, six rounds for female 'Bkar' and three rounds for male 'Gedan'. Winners got cars in last four main rounds and cash prizes for other five rounds.

The race started with four rounds with cars as prizes. Amer bin Salim al Amri snatched the first car by 'Mashkorah', the second car was won by 'Remas' owned by Hilal bin Abdullah al Shidi, in the third round 'Aryam' owned by Sultan bin Guthai al Gfeali won the car, the fourth car was claimed by 'Shoalah' for Abdullah bin Godyer al Wahaibi.

In the cash prizes round, fifth round was topped by 'Mahaba' owned by Humaid bin Hamed al Amri, in the sixth round it was 'Alfares' owned by Ali bin Salim



al Wahaibi, Hamed bin Said al Hajri claimed the seventh round by 'Elag' and Saud bin Ali al jabri by 'Alshahenya' bagged the eighth round honours. The ninth and last round was won by Essa bin Salim al Wahibi through 'Shahin'.

Amer bin Salim Al Amri, the winner of the car in the first round said. "Thanks to God, this is the beginning with a good achievement, today the camel was in full health which was not present the case in most of the

races."

"We will participate on Thursday, conclusion day (Cups day) and we hope to achieve the Cup in the first round, this is my target for this season," Amer al Amri added.

business

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Market cap of Oman’s bourse climbs to \$57 bn in 2021

KEY TRENDS: Listing of government entities, issuance of bonds and sukuk lift market cap

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

The market capitalisation of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) rose nearly 9.3 per cent to reach a value of \$57.458 billion at the end of 2021, up from \$52.576 billion a year earlier, attesting to a year of healthy growth despite the lingering effects of the economic slowdown.

According to Haitham bin Salem al Salmi, CEO of Muscat Stock Exchange and Chairman of Muscat Clearing & Depository, closed companies accounted for a \$26.515 billion share of this market cap, followed by equities with \$18.731 billion and Bonds & Sukuk with a contribution of \$11.623 billion.

Addressing a virtual event hosted recently by the Armenia-headquartered Federation of Euro-Asian Stock Exchanges (FEAS), Al Salmi attributed the uptick in the market cap to the listing of a raft of new government-owned companies, as well as the issuance of new bonds and sukuk.

“Although the market situation was challenging, a lot of new companies established



Oman is very unique in terms of having closed companies listed. As long as they have shares issued, they can be listed on the exchange, and that gives us a very good source of information on which of these companies can be transferred to the main market and eventually become a public company.

HAITHAM BIN SALEM AL SALMI
CEO, Muscat Stock Exchange
Chairman, Muscat Clearing & Depository

in the sovereign sector by the government supported the market cap overall. Plus, because of the financial situation the government issued a lot of sukuk



and bonds, as a result of which the market cap increased,” he said.

The CEO noted in particular the significant role that closed companies play in positioning the stock market for growth when they are eventually listed.

“Oman is very unique in terms of having closed companies listed. As long as they have shares issued, they can be listed on the exchange, and that gives us a very good source of information on which of these companies can be transferred to the main market and eventually become a public company. So we are very unique in that, although they are not reflected in the market

cap because there are no market prices (associated with them), it gives us a good sense of which companies can be transferred to the main market.”

Additionally, the market turnover totalled \$2.128 billion in 2021, with equities accounting for \$1.676 billion worth of shares traded, while Bonds & Sukuk made up the balance \$449.7 million in traded shares.

While the number and value of traded shares were significantly higher than the previous year, liquidity challenges weighed on turnover last year – in comparison with the market’s performance over the past five years, he noted.

“We have lost a lot of our

trading volumes due to the economic situation in Oman,” the CEO explained.

“Oman is a country where more than 70 per cent of financing comes from (hydrocarbons). Because of low oil prices, we faced as a country a huge deficit in the budget, resulting in the loss of a lot of our market trading. The recovery started only in 2022.”

Significantly, all of the indices of the stock market recorded positive growth in 2021. The Main MSX 30 Index climbed to 4,129.542 points at the end of last year, up from 3,658.770 points a year earlier, registering an increase of 13 per cent.

The MSX Shariah Index too

grew 2 per cent to 531.770, while the MSX Total Return Index soared 19 per cent to 4,969.307 last year. The sectoral indices too posted strong gains, led by the Industrial Index which shot up 41 per cent as industrial companies made the transition from losses to profits over the year.

Omanis remained the biggest investors in the stock market, accounting for 85.49 per cent of total shares purchased (worth \$1.816 billion) and 86 per cent of shares sold (worth \$1.827 billion). Share purchases by non-Omani investors totalled \$308 million in value (14.51 per cent) while share sales amounted to \$44.21 million (14 per cent).

MSX to allow full foreign ownership in listed companies

JOMAR MENDOZA
@JmObserver

In a move to attract more international investors and foreign capital inflows into the country, the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) plans to allow 100 per cent full foreign ownership in joint stock companies, according to a tweet from the Muscat bourse.

The Muscat Clearing and Depository has finalised the technical requirements in accessing emerging markets to open up the market, the tweet added. This move will make the bourse more attractive to international investors and provide them with a more flexible environment for their investment.

In January this year, MSX said it plans to list 35 state-owned companies in the next five years, with one or two firms from the oil sector making the cut this year. Raising the percentage of foreign investment in public companies is one of the vital steps to include MSE in the global emerging market indices.

“The move has increased the percentage of investments available to foreigners by 78 per cent,” Haitham bin Salem al Salmi, CEO of Muscat Stock Exchange and Chairman of Muscat Clearing & Depository was quoted as saying by CNBC Arabia.

Oil volatility ‘worse’ without Opec+ bloc that includes Russia: Saudi Arabia

DUBAI: Volatility on oil markets sparked by Russia’s attack on Ukraine would be worse without Opec+, the Saudi energy minister said on Tuesday, insisting the alliance that includes Russia deserves credit.

Oil shot up to nearly \$140 on supply fears after Russia sent troops into its neighbour on February 24, and the price of crude is still trading at well over \$100 a barrel. “I certainly believe that if it wasn’t for Opec+ existing, we would not be celebrating a sustainable energy market... even with today’s volatility,” Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman said.

“Volatility would have even been worse if Opec were not together and did not exist,” the Saudi minister told the World Government Summit in Dubai.

The 13-member, Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) has so far resisted calls to lift production further following the Russian attack on Ukraine. Opec+ comprises another 10 countries including Russia. Prince Abdulaziz said Opec was strictly non-political.



(L to R) CNBC’s anchor and session moderator Hadley Gamble, Saudi Arabia’s Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman al Saud, Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government Premier Masrour Barzani, and the UAE’s Energy and Infrastructure Minister Suhail bin Mohamed al Mazrouei attend a plenary session titled “Is the World Ready for A Future Beyond Oil?” at the World Government Summit in Dubai on Tuesday. – AFP

“When we get into the Opec meeting room or building, everybody leaves his politics outside the door of the building, and that culture has been with us,” he said. He also warned that attacks by Yemen’s Houthis rebels on Saudi oil facilities, including a wave of drone and missile strikes on Friday, “put into question

our ability to supply the world with the necessary energy requirements.”

The United Arab Emirates’ Energy Minister Suhail al Mazrouei called for “trust” from the West, rather than being told to “do this or do that.” “What we need is pragmatism, we need to look at the objective of the energy and

what we are asking for, not to tell us do this or do that,” Mazrouei said.

“We need their understanding that what we are doing is to the benefit of the consumers,” Mazrouei added, referring to Washington, which he described as an “important partner.”

“When we say this is the right way to do it, we know it from experience, so trust us.”

The Opec+ alliance plans to increase output by 400,000 barrels a day in April, the same pace as in past months, despite calls for it to accelerate production by even more. Since launching its assault on Ukraine, Russia has been hit by a raft of Western sanctions and expelled from world organisations, including the Group of 20 major economies.

Mazrouei said that ousting any Opec+ member from the alliance would not benefit consumers. “Our aim is to calm the market, trying to come up with volumes as much as possible, and if we are asking anyone to leave, then we are raising the prices, then we are doing something against what the consumers want,” he said. — AFP

Shell Oman
appoints
first female
Omani
CFO



MUSCAT: Shell Oman Marketing Company SAOG (Shell Oman) has appointed Lamees bint Dawood al Lawatiyah (pictured) as Chief Financial Officer (CFO), effective April 1, 2022.

This appointment is a new milestone for Shell Oman's Omanisation story as Lamees has become the first Omani female to occupy the role of CFO in the history of Oman's downstream oil and gas industry.

As CFO, she will become a member of Shell Oman's Executive Management Team and will lead key finance functions along with Legal, Contracts and Procurement and IT.

On the other hand, the incumbent CFO, Ian Fong, will move to a new role where he will remain available to assist the company with transition while leading key strategic projects.

Shell Oman's CEO, Dr Mohammed al Balushi, said: "I am delighted to welcome Lamees to the leadership of our company. She combines diverse finance experience with a deep knowledge of Shell and inherent qualities of a visionary leader who demonstrates a progressive outlook.

As a prominent Omani leader, we believe that Lamees will continue to inspire and develop the younger generation of leaders in Shell and the society which will contribute to further reinforcing our 96% Omanisation.

Meanwhile, we thank Ian Fong, the incumbent CFO, on his leadership and his contribution to Shell Oman during his tenure. Ian has been instrumental in navigating the company throughout the pandemic and the parallel challenges while remaining focused on developing national talents in Finance functions. We wish both Lamees and Ian all the best in their new roles and all future endeavours."

Lamees started her career with Shell more than 15 years ago in finance after graduating from Sultan Qaboos University. Since then, she has held several increasingly senior finance roles at Shell in both downstream and upstream sectors.

Bank Muscat joins SQU Career
and Training Opportunities Fair

MUSCAT: In line with its commitment to create rewarding internship and job opportunities for Omani youth, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, is participating in the 22nd Career and Training Opportunities Fair organised by Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) on March 28-30, 2022.

The 3-day annual event is being held with participation from 30 different institutions from both the government and private sectors under the auspices of Dr Nasser bin Musabab al Zidi, Deputy Vice Chancellor For Administrative & Financial Affairs.

Bank Muscat is keen to participate in the annual career fair organised by The Centre for Career Guidance at SQU. As the nation's leading bank, Bank Muscat attaches great importance to national initiatives, especially human resources development aimed at contributing to Oman's future.

Investing in human resources and talent is the real wealth of the nation. Bank Muscat makes use of every opportunity to extend support to Omani nationals seeking career development and training opportunities by regularly participating at career fairs organised by leading educational institutions.



Throughout its 40 years journey, Bank Muscat has always seen its employees as its core strength and partners in various successes and accomplishments. Hence, the bank constantly invests resources and time to further develop their skills and reach their peak potential. This in turn helps to retain talent. From the moment of joining, the bank provides suitable training and development opportunities to enable employees to perform to the best of their abilities.

Bank Muscat focuses on enhancing employees' morale and satisfaction. The bank is responsive to employee feedback and strives to ensure a professional work environment. The bank takes pride in the fact that it has achieved over 95% Omanisation and has an excellent gender ratio as over 48% of its employees are female.

With over 3,800 employees, Bank Muscat is a dream employer for Omani youth, particularly those who are interested in

the financial services sector. Bank Muscat has a formal talent identification process for developing its human resources for building a pipeline of leaders. It offers excellent leadership programmes, which are facilitated by faculty from some of the best business schools around the world. Employees are provided with learning and development opportunities throughout the year so as to build their on the job capabilities as well as soft skills.

National
Finance
launches
Ramadhan
campaign



MUSCAT: National Finance has announced the launch of its new campaign #RamadanFursati. As part of the offer, customers who purchase a new car can benefit from competitive interest rates and the liberty to pay their first instalment only after 2 months. With a focus on fast, easy and flexible procedures, customers will be able to purchase their dream car this Ramadhan.

Commenting on the new offer, Tariq al Farsi, Chief Executive officer of National Finance said: "During the month of Ramadhan there is an increase in interest amongst customers to purchase new vehicles. This is mainly due to the innumerable promotions presented by dealers and showrooms during this specific month. Hence, we decided to launch this attractive Ramadhan offer to meet customers' aspirations and provide them with seamless services that enable them to purchase their cars without any hassle."

To facilitate the process of applying for a loan, National Finance boasts of a wide range of channels.

Clients can apply for a loan by visiting one of the company's 20 branches across the Sultanate of Oman or via the website or the phone application. In addition, customers can also directly get in touch through WhatsApp and the call centre.

National Finance has built a reputation for thirty five years as a market leader in the segment and has earned the trust of thousands of customers across the Sultanate of Oman.

Through its various branches, National Finance offers financial solutions for customers, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Corporates. Recognising its efforts, the company won many accolades last year.

BankDhofar holds annual general meeting

MUSCAT: The Board of Directors of BankDhofar has conducted its Annual General Meeting (AGM) on Tuesday, March 22, 2022. The meeting, was chaired by Eng Abdulhafidh bin Salim bin Rajab al Aujaili, Chairman of the Board, and attended by the board members, senior management of the bank and shareholders.

The Annual General Meeting (AGM), approved the Report of the Board of Directors of the bank on the business and financial position of the bank for the financial year ended December 31, 2021. The meeting approved the cash dividend, which will be distributed to the shareholders, at the rate of 2 baisas per share.

The meeting brought to the attention of Shareholders the transactions in which the bank entered with related parties



during the financial year ended December 31, 2021.

The sitting fees being availed by the members of the Board of Directors and members of the Board sub-committees along with the members of the Sharia Supervisory Board for the financial year ended December 31, 2021, were ratified and the sitting fees for the next financial year were specified. The meeting

approved the proposed Directors' remuneration of RO 150,000 for the financial year ended December 31, 2021. The meeting ratified the donations made during the financial year ended December 31, 2021 to help the families affected by the tropical Cyclone Shaheen of RO 500,000.

Additionally, the meeting approved allocating RO 120,000 for supporting local community

services for the financial year ending December 31, 2022. The meeting appointed the new members of the Sharia Supervisory Board and elected the members of the Board of Directors for a new term of office.

The meeting also agreed to appoint the External Auditors and Sharia External Auditors for the financial year 2021 and specified their fees.

New 2022 Chevrolet Traverse arrives in Oman



MUSCAT: One of the world's most highly rated mid-sized SUVs has arrived in the Omani market, offering large families the ultimate solution to their motoring needs

in a roomy, luxurious, safety-enhanced and performance-packed setting.

The 2022 Chevrolet Traverse, with a three-row configuration

that can comfortably seat up to 8 passengers, is simply peerless in its segment. Its stylish looks, incredible roominess, top-class technology features, powerful V6 engine, user-friendly infotainment system and host of standard safety features, makes it the enduring mid-size SUV of choice for families in the Sultanate of Oman.

It is also designed and outfitted with an eye on adventure trips to the rugged outdoors, thus making the 2022 model an ideal option for family getaways. The 2022 Traverse's exterior styling communicates robustness, albeit with a sporty edge.

Accentuating its distinctive persona is the model's all-new front fascia and grille design. But it's the Chevy's interior that speaks to its incredible value proposition.

With the inclusion of a third row, the cavernous SUV can comfortably accommodate an entire family of up to eight passengers and yet offer ample cargo space in the rear.

Fold away the third row and you have a cargo-hauling champ in the 2022 Traverse with more space than any of its rivals in the segment. Even with a full load of passengers and cargo, the 2022 Traverse can pack a powerful punch. Standard

across the trims is a 3.6L V6 engine that provides a substantial 310 horsepower and 266 lb.-ft. (approximately 360 Nm) of torque.

"With its stunning looks, spacious cabin and fuel-efficient powertrain, the 2022 Chevrolet Traverse cements its position as the ideal family SUV. It's a solid, safe and sporty alternative to mini-vans, and aligns perfectly with the lifestyle choices of our high-end customers, particularly those with large families", said Mandeep Singh, General Manager - Chevrolet, exclusive distributors of Chevrolet in the Sultanate of Oman.



Vietnam's Q1 economic growth higher year-on-year

HANOI: Vietnam's economy expanded more than five per cent in the first three months of the year, the government said on Tuesday thanks to a pick-up in exports as the country emerges from the worst of the global pandemic, though officials warned of headwinds.

The communist state has long been a success story among Asian economies, posting growth of seven per cent in 2019. But growth came in at just 2.9 per cent in 2020 as the pandemic shut most of the world down, while last year saw just 2.6 per cent expansion. — AFP

DME, DFM ink pact to jointly explore diversified financial products opportunities

Investment opportunities: DFM plans to launch a new retail product derived from the Oman Crude Oil Futures, DME's flagship contract that provides investors with unique opportunity to access this significant asset class

BUSINESS REPORTER
DUBAI, MARCH 29

Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME), which is jointly owned by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), has announced that it will partner with the Dubai Financial Market (DFM) in the joint exploration of financial products opportunities. This follows the signing of an agreement that will cater to DFM's large and



diversified investors base of over 852,000 investors.

The new initiative stems from both exchanges' commitment to jointly implement Dubai's strategy to develop financial markets and exchanges through various synchronized efforts.

The agreement was signed by Hamed Ali, CEO of DFM and

Nasdaq Dubai, and Raid al Salami, Managing Director of DME, in the presence of Ahmad Sharaf, Chairman of DME, during the 'Derivatives Day in Dubai', the joint forum organised by the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) in partnership with DME and CME Group, the world's leading and most diverse

derivatives marketplace.

As the first initiative under this agreement, the two exchanges are planning to create a working group, following Dubai's strategy to further develop financial markets. The collaboration with DME will enable DFM to develop investments opportunities related to the GCC crude oil industry and offer retail investors the opportunity to be directly involved in the biggest and most relevant asset class in the region.

DFM plans to launch a new retail product derived from the Oman Crude Oil Futures, DME's flagship contract that provides investors with unique opportunity to access this significant asset class. Since its launch in 2007, DME has traded around 18 billion barrels of Oman crude oil and it is considered home for the most transparent sour crude benchmark

in the Middle East and Asia. The DME Oman marker price is used by National Oil Companies of Oman, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain to price more than 5.5 million barrels per day of Middle East crude oil.

Commenting on this development, Hamed Ali said, "As part of DFM's efforts to diversify asset classes and product offering, we are delighted to sign this agreement with DME to introduce new investment opportunities to our investors, in particular retail investors."

The agreement underlines the two exchanges' commitment to identify synergies and potential opportunities, which ultimately strengthens Dubai's position as a capital markets hub, in line with the leadership's vision and the strategic plan to develop financial markets in Dubai." (WAM)

Oil prices sink, stocks soar on Russia and Ukraine talk 'progress'



LONDON: World oil prices dived and European equities rallied on Tuesday as apparent progress in peace talks between Moscow and Kyiv sparked hope of an end to the Ukraine conflict. Europe's benchmark Brent crude and New York's WTI sank by about 6.5 per cent as traders eyed easing Russian oil supply fears amid face-to-face Istanbul talks aimed at resolving the nearly five-week-old war.

Europe's major stock markets jumped higher, with Frankfurt soaring 3.5 per cent, Paris winning 3.1 per cent and London adding 1.2 per cent. The Russian rouble soared by 10 per cent against the dollar and by 1.2 per cent versus the euro.

Ukraine's top negotiator declared on Tuesday that enough progress had been made at talks to resolve the conflict with Russia to enable a meeting between the presidents of the two countries. Russia will "radically" reduce its military activity in northern Ukraine, including near the capital Kyiv, after "meaningful" talks in Istanbul, Moscow's negotiators said.

"It is the first time in this conflict where we have seen any indications for any form of easing of military action from the Russian side", SEB analyst Bjarne Schieldrop said. "Until this point the

Russian stand has been very firm of its goals. "Now for the first time the market is hoping that there might actually be a way forward not being a full destruction and takeover of Ukraine."

Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine on February 24, sending world oil prices rocketing and stock markets slumping. The rouble had plunged to an unprecedented level of 150 to the greenback in recent weeks.

Tuesday's progress raises the possibility of a meeting between presidents Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin that Moscow had shot down as recently as Monday. Later on Tuesday, Brent shed 5.0 per cent to \$106.88 per barrel. WTI stood at \$99.58, down 6.0 per cent from Monday.

"News coming from Turkey is looking increasingly promising, from the significant progress claimed by both sides to reports of Russia pledging to sharply reduce military operations", OANDA foreign exchange platform analyst Craig Erlam said. "It's looking more promising than at any stage since the invasion."

"Oil prices have fallen sharply on the latest headlines and with talks continuing tonight, there is potential for even more substantial progress to be made. —AFP

Al Mouj Muscat, ahlibank sign home finance pact

MUSCAT: Al Mouj Muscat has entered into a new partnership with ahlibank that provides finance on ready-to-move-in homes as well as those under construction at the Sultanate of Oman's premium lifestyle destination with the special arrangement marked by an official signing ceremony.

ahlibank is a leading financial institution and Al Mouj Muscat is signing the new financing framework agreement with the bank to help property buyers obtain the financing they need to secure their dream home in Al Mouj Muscat. Nasser bin Masoud al Shaibani,



CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, says: "Al Mouj Muscat continues to innovate across every aspect of our operation to meet the aspirations of buyers and investors. Our partnership with ahlibank allows people to access finance for

their dream property prior to its completion.

This creates opportunities for people to be part of Oman's most successful and exciting lifestyle destination." Muneer bin Ahmed al Balushi, AGM – Head of Retail

Distribution at ahlibank adds:

"We are an innovative bank that continually seeks ways to enable our customers to benefit from the best services and products. This new partnership is an excellent example of how we not only provide financial stability but support lifestyle goals and aspirations."

"Al Mouj Muscat is an exceptional place to live both in terms of the high quality of the properties it creates through to the lifestyle opportunities it presents and so we are pleased to be able to provide this bespoke banking solution that helps make owning a dream home here a reality."

Relying on renewables a 'big mistake' for future energy security: ENI

Realistic path: Oil and gas companies must be included in discussions around achieving the clean energy transition, energy chiefs, experts tell
Global Energy Forum at WGS2022

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 29

The global energy transition and future security of the sector cannot be achieved by ad hoc energy policies that focus on single energy sources, Claudio Descalzi, CEO of the Italian energy group Eni stated on Monday. "It is a big mistake to say we just need renewables", Claudio Descalzi, said at the Global Energy Forum organised by the World Government Summit (WGS2022) in Expo 2020 Dubai.

He added: "We know about all the different energy vectors that have been added over the last 200 years, but we never found a single energy source we can rely on. It's crazy to think there is one thing that can replace all sources. We need



to use all the different sources." Oil and gas companies must continue to be involved in conversations around energy security and transition, Descalzi said in a panel entitled 'Meeting the 2022 Challenge: Will Energy Security Derail the Energy Transition?' Descalzi added: "When we talk about energy, we have to know what we are talking about – competencies. High gas prices are not just down to the Russian situation. Worldwide, we have

underinvested [in gas].

Also speaking at the forum, Majid Jafar, CEO of Crescent Petroleum, noted that there is currently a sense that energy transition and energy security are in opposition. "There cannot be transition without security and affordability", he said.

"The focus is too much on supply. Starving investment in oil and gas while demand is increasing is not going to solve climate change." Jafar, speaking during the panel, noted that energy planning

must involve long-term, strategic thinking and policies. Anna Shpitsberg, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Energy Transformation at the US Department of State, said: "The path to decarbonisation has to be a realistic path. There have been conversations with IOCs. The oil and gas industry is critical to the transition. If we do not engage the industry, we will not meet our goals. Oil and gas companies have to be part of the conversation around transition."

BoJ stumbles into defensive minefield

War, Covid-19 and an aggressive-looking Federal Reserve are conspiring against the Bank of Japan's (BoJ) ultra-loose monetary stance. The yen has plummeted and the central bank is struggling to keep control of key bond yields. Governor Haruhiko Kuroda must contemplate adjusting policy proactively, or watching market forces do it for him.

The core of Japan's monetary strategy is a policy called "yield curve control" that caps treasury bond yields, some of them in negative territory. For a while it was effective, but major trading partners are now hiking rates as inflation spreads.

In Japan, though, domestic prices are tame and GDP growth is tepid, so it's senseless to follow suit. The ensuing divergence in returns has contributed to a dizzying depreciation of the yen, which has softened 17% against the greenback since the beginning of 2021, 7 percentage points of that in the past 16 trading days.

The current weak exchange rate, around 125 yen per dollar, has upsides: It will import a bit of welcome inflation, support exports and flatter the value of overseas earnings at listed companies. The bigger issue is bond traders' testing of the 10-year yield this week. Yield curve control policy dictates that note's rate be pegged around zero, with the central bank intervening if it rises towards 0.25%, as it did on Monday.

Worryingly, the BoJ's first intervention to pull the yield down failed, so it had to try again, offering to buy unlimited amounts of 10-year bonds for four consecutive days.

In theory yield curve control lessens the need for central bankers to do this sort of thing. The BoJ already owns around half of government issues. Too many interventions could break the market. Indeed that was probably one of the reasons Australia clumsily abandoned its peg in November.

So extended BoJ purchases pose a problem. Letting interest rates rise, though, could sabotage growth.

There is no perfect solution. A minor increase in the 10-year rate cap is one option; most loans are pegged to short-term rates anyway. Traders could just as easily attack that too. Alternatively a standing facility to buy unlimited 10-year bonds might intimidate the market. The most tempting option is to hope the yen finds a floor and bond speculators go away. But it's dangerous to try to outwait market forces in an environment where so much has changed for good. — Reuters

The core of Japan's monetary strategy is a policy called "yield curve control" that caps treasury bond yields, some of them in negative territory



BRICKS FROM PLASTIC WASTE

Kenyan Nzambi Matee, (L) entrepreneur and inventor, with workmate Thaddius Shem, sorting final product of the brick – made from sand and plastic waste – at the company's Gjenge workshop in industrial area in Nairobi. The plastic waste is initially mixed with sand in a machine at extremely hot temperatures, as it acts as a binder. Then the blended paste is compressed in the next machine into its brick form. – AFP

Russian bank suspension, deals fallout fears grow



ANDY JALIL andyjilil@aol.com

The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK

THE SUSPENSION COMES AFTER THE UK BANNED RUSSIA FROM ACCESSING STERLING CLEARING AND PAYMENT SYSTEMS, WITHOUT WHICH IT CANNOT TRADE IN POUND-DENOMINATED ASSETS.

The London Stock Exchange Group (LSE) suspended Russian bank VTB Capital's membership in response to UK sanctions on Russia.

"With immediate effect, the London Stock Exchange has suspended VTB Capital PLC's membership", the LSE said in a notice to the firm, which has an office in London and is headquartered in St Petersburg in Russia.

The suspension comes after the UK banned Russia from accessing sterling clearing and payment systems, without which it cannot trade in pound-denominated assets. VTB Bank is Russia's second-largest financial institution, owning nearly 20pc of banking assets in Russia, according to the US treasury. VTB earlier this month reported assets of some £190 bn in 2021.

Around half of Russia's trade is currently in US dollars and British pounds, the UK Prime Minister told Parliament recently, as he announced other sanctions including freezing Russian state-owned bank VTB's assets. VTB Capital was contacted for comment. It left two statements on its website, from its London-based firm VTB Capital and VTB.

In the first, VTB Capital said its goals have always been about delivering high-quality services for clients and partners,

in Russia and abroad. The firm said: "We have meticulously studied the possible negative scenarios for each business line, product and service and have developed an action plan that minimises the negative consequences."

The second statement noted VTB is "one of Russia's systemically important banks with a broad international presence and a stable financial position. Sanctions have been a reality for us over the past few years, and another round of politically motivated anti-Russian sanctions came as no surprise."

It added: "We have had time to learn the lessons and prepare for the most severe scenario, we have worked through several plans to counter the sanctions in ways which minimise the negative consequences for our clients."

On the matter of deals – bond markets have been affected as a result of Russia's war on Ukraine, is likely to put a stop on initial public offerings (IPO) and is almost certain to lose large M&A deals as concerns rise about the knock-on effects.

However, if international banks are frozen out of deals with Russian companies, the hit to revenues for dealmakers is unlikely to be severe.

Investment banks made only \$417m in fees from deals with Russian companies in 2021, according to data provider Dealogic.

This is the highest figure since 2013, but so little compared to the \$130bn banks made globally last year.

JPMorgan, which has around 160 employees in the country, was the only global bank to feature in a top four fee ranking for Russia from 2017-2022, making \$154m over that period and holding second place. VTB Capital, Sberbank and Gazprombank – all of which are majority owned by the Russian government – were the other banks in the top four. Banks worked on \$20.8 bn of debt capital markets deals in 2021 – the most since 2013.

Dealmakers might not be too worried over the impact of the war, on deals from Russian firms, but there are wider implications. The value of IPOs globally had already fallen by 70pc so far this year, according to Dealogic, because of volatile markets and others are likely to be put on hold.

But bankers are also concerned the record M&A boom could be hit by the war. Dealmakers have said there was a potential mismatch between buyers asking for a pause in deals and sellers trying to push through prices modelled before the crisis.

However, some remained optimistic. Frank Aquila, a partner in M&A at law firm Sullivan & Cromwell, said: "Unless it becomes a wider conflict, it should not have a significant impact on M&A activity.

Germany's Russian gas energy transition fiasco



HANS-WERNER SINN

The author is a professor of economics at the University of Munich and a former president of the Ifo Institute for Economic Research.

Germany long regarded its energy transition as cutting edge, compared with other Western industrialised countries. Policymakers expected that the country would be able to secure its energy supply entirely from renewable sources, so they resolved to phase out coal and nuclear energy simultaneously. The last three of Germany's 17 nuclear power plants are set to be shut down this year.

Green politicians in Germany always hoped that other countries would emulate this energy agenda once they saw how well it was working. But, in light of the war in Ukraine, the world is instead

witnessing how Germany's approach has created a policy disaster.

To cushion the twin phaseout of coal and nuclear, and to close supply gaps during the long transition to renewable energy, Germany decided to build a large number of additional gas-fired power plants.

Even immediately before Russian forces invaded Ukraine, policymakers assumed that the gas for these facilities would always come from Russia, which supplied more than half of Germany's needs.

After all, Russia had proven to be a dependable supplier of raw materials to Germany during many previous crises and even during the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was

expected to expand its deliveries further once the now-suspended Nord Stream 2 pipeline – which would have carried Russian gas directly to Germany via the Baltic Sea – began operating.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin's war has clearly undermined this calculation. The excessive dependence on Russian gas has now become a security risk for Germany and the entire Western world. It gives Putin the power to bring Europe's biggest economy to its knees, and it simultaneously limits the West's chances of imposing further energy-related sanctions on Russia.

Germany's pledge to abandon coal and nuclear, the very energy sources that would have given it

a degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy, has thus placed the country in great danger. Not so long ago, Germany was the world's second-largest lignite producer, after China.

And it easily could have procured the tiny amount of uranium needed to run its nuclear power plants, and stored it domestically for many years.

Committed Greens claim that the twin phaseout would not have been a problem had Germany pressed ahead with developing wind and solar energy to achieve green energy autonomy.

If anything, they say, the need to ensure energy security is an argument for, not against, Germany's renewables-based

strategy.

This view is debatable. Despite the fact that turbines and photovoltaic panels now dot much of the landscape, in 2021 the share of wind and solar power in Germany's total final energy consumption, which includes heating, industrial processing, and traffic, was a meagre 6.7%. And while wind and solar generated 29% of the country's electricity output, electricity itself accounted for only about a fifth of its final energy consumption.

Germany would not have come close to achieving energy autonomy even if the renewables sector had expanded at twice the speed that it did.

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features



Learning made easy by tapping into the familiar

Learning a new language can be difficult which is why a lot of educators have to constantly find ways how to break down lessons for their students. In Oman, a movement is starting to emerge which involved the introduction of STREAM textbooks, a collection of books by Omani authors that seek to enhance the learning experience of students who want to master English for academic purposes...**P20**

HUMAN STRUGGLE

READ



THE FOOD LAB
BY J. KENJI LOPEZ-ALT

The book contains close to 300 savory American cuisine recipes. The Food Lab expands on Lopez-Alt's "The Food Lab" column on the Serious Eats blog.

In a 'dangerous' land: Tourists trickle back to Iraq

AN AMERICAN TOURIST poses for a holiday snap in Iraq, in front of the blue-brick Ishtar Gate that was rebuilt at the ancient site of Babylon under dictator Saddam Hussein.

Most foreigners here since Saddam's ouster in a 2003 US-led invasion have worn army fatigues and carried guns -- but more recently there has been a trickle of camera-toting travel pioneers.

"Iraq was in my top three countries", said the visitor to Babylon, 50-year-old Californian Ileana Ovalle, who was excited to see the millennia-old Mesopotamian site.

"This is where civilisation start-

ed", said the passionate globetrotter with some 40 countries under her belt. "I think too few people understand how important this region is."

Most Western governments still issue travel warnings for all or parts of Iraq, pointing to risks from kidnappings to bombings and unexploded ordnance from multiple wars.

But for some explorers who are unafraid of the odd military road-block, Iraq is a hot new destination with multiple World Heritage sites that is slowly reopening to the world.

Retirees and YouTubers, on



package tours or lugging backpacks, are braving Iraq's still basic tourist infrastructure to visit ancient sites that rival those of Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

Whether in Baghdad or Mosul, the northern city that was a militant stronghold, they can be seen strolling through streets that still bear

the scars of years of conflict.

Blogs and vlogs have proliferated with names such as "American in Baghdad, Iraq", "Two German guys alone in Iraq" and "Exploring Baghdad -- how dangerous is it?"

The tourist mini-boom has gained momentum since Iraq started granting visas on arrival for doz-

ens of nationalities a year ago.

Ovalle, along with 14 other tourists, said she was happy to take part in a trip organised by a travel agency which offers cultural, sports and adventure trips.

"The first thing that I noticed is the warmth, the generosity and the kindness of the Iraqi people", she said. "They smile, they welcome you, they are very polite."

In Babylon, more than 4,000 years old, weeds grow among the old bricks and rubbish is strewn about. Not so long ago, a nearby base housed US and Polish coalition troops.

"I think everyone has hesitations, especially coming from the United States", said another visitor, 35-year-old New Yorker Justin Gonzales.

"If you go on our government website, they have a travel advisory saying: 'Do not travel to Iraq, it's dangerous, you can get kidnapped, there is often violence.'"

"But I haven't seen any of that, and I don't think I will." — **AFP**



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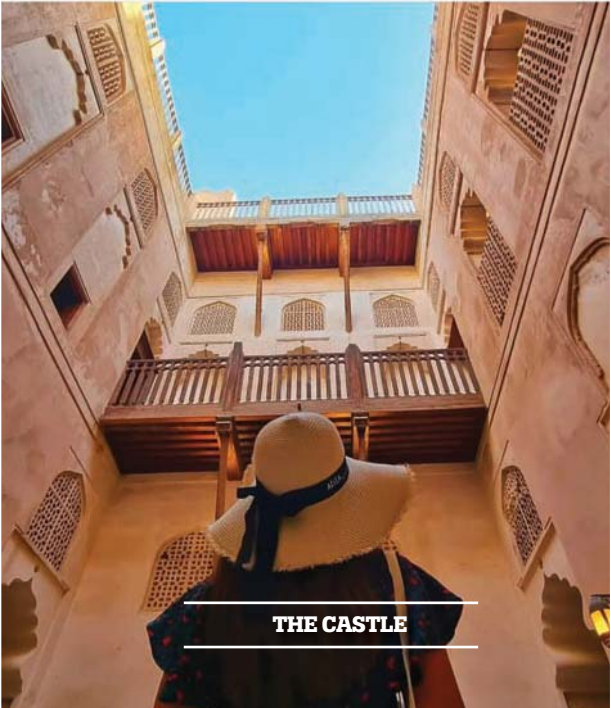


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AROUND THE WORLD

ENTERTAINMENT

Oscars ratings bounce back as Will Smith hooks viewers



THE OSCARS WERE in desperate need of a ratings boost — and, on a night when Will Smith stunned viewers by slapping Chris Rock on stage, some 15.36 million Americans tuned in.

Preliminary audience figures, revealed by broadcaster ABC on Monday, represent a significant recovery from last year's record-low 9.85 million live viewers, although they are still the second-lowest in televised Academy Awards history.

The moment when Smith struck comedian Rock for quipping about his wife's hair-loss condition immediately went viral online, launching countless memes and opinions both defending and condemning the best actor winner.

"Does the Academy want this kind of publicity? No, they don't. They don't want the kind of publicity that says violence takes place at the Oscars", Variety's Marc Malkin told AFP.

"That said, does it make more people talk about the Oscars in the Academy? For certain. I'm just not sure this is the way they want to be talked about."

The TV ratings recovery mirrors those of several other awards shows including television's Emmys in September and the recent Screen Actors Guild award ceremonies.

Many award shows were forced to stage virtual or low-key ceremonies in 2021 because of the pandemic and drew unusually low audiences.

Oscars figures last year fell by around 50 per cent from the previous ceremony's 23.6 million, which was already a record low, as award shows struggle to remain relevant in an era of social media and binge-watching on streaming networks.

Academy producers this year resorted to innovations such as pre-taping the announcements of winners in several less starry Oscars categories, and adding a "fan favourite" prize for a film voted by Twitter users.

Sunday night's show also ended with a historic win for "CODA", which featured a mainly deaf cast, and was the first best picture triumph for a streaming service.

But it was an unscripted and highly controversial moment that created the Oscars' talking point Sunday, as Smith strode onto the Oscars stage and slapped Rock for a joke comparing his wife Jada Pinkett Smith to the character "G.I. Jane."

Pinkett Smith suffers from alopecia, a condition causing hair loss.

Malkin said the planned changes to the schedule of the show ultimately "didn't turn the Academy Awards upside down and on its head."

"It's hard to even look at those changes now, with what happened after the awards", added Malkin, referring to the incident with Smith and Rock.

"It is sort of like, 'Okay, that didn't happen!'" Official ratings will be released on Tuesday. — **AFP**

DISCOVERY

In detecting alien life on a faraway planet, methane may be the key



FOR HUMANKIND, evidence for life beyond Earth is unlikely to be as dramatic as an alien spaceship landing, say, next to the Eiffel Tower in Paris. It is more likely to come from telescope observations of a faraway planet bearing atmospheric chemicals suggestive of biological activity.

Researchers on Monday said methane may be the first detectable sign of extraterrestrial life if discovered in the atmosphere of a rocky planet orbiting in the "habitable zone" — the area not too hot and not too cold for liquid water to exist on the planetary surface — around a sun-like star.

Scientists are working to understand the indicators of life — biosignatures — that might be present in observations of planets in other solar systems, called exoplanets, knowing that increasingly capable telescopes soon will be available.

The researchers, in a study published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, showed that abundant atmospheric methane could be a persuasive sign of life in the right planetary context. Methane is an important trace gas in Earth's atmosphere, at less than 2 parts per million by volume.

Unlike other potential biosignatures such as atmospheric oxygen, methane is one of the few gases that should be readily detectable using the James Webb Space Telescope, launched by Nasa in December and due to become operational within months.

"On Earth, the vast majority of methane is produced by

life," said study lead author Maggie Thompson, a University of California, Santa Cruz graduate student in astronomy and astrophysics.

Most of it is generated directly by life: methane-producing microbes in wetlands, rice fields or in the guts of large animals. Methane is also generated through human activities such as burning fossil fuels including coal and oil, which are remnants of dead organisms. The proportion of Earth's nonbiologically generated methane is miniscule.

The researchers made a three-part case for methane as a promising biosignature.

"First, it would be unsurprising for life elsewhere to produce methane. Even if the biochemistry of alien life was radically different to that of Earth's biosphere, methanogenesis is an obvious and easy metabolic strategy for any carbon-based life given the energy sources likely to be present on rocky exoplanets," said co-author Joshua Krissansen-Totton, a Nasa Sagan Fellow in UCSC's Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics.

Secondly, they said, methane would not persist for long in atmospheres of habitable rocky planets without constant replenishment, possibly by living organisms. On Earth, atmospheric methane is unstable — destroyed by the chemical effects of light — but has constant biologically-generated replenishment.

Thirdly, they said, it would be difficult for nonbiological processes such as volcanism or chemical reactions in mid-ocean ridges and hydrothermal vents to maintain replen-

ishment without leaving a "fingerprint" indicating the methane was not biologically generated.

Gas-spewing volcanoes, for instance, would release carbon monoxide alongside methane, but biological activity tends to devour carbon monoxide and reduce its atmospheric concentrations. Thus, they said, nonbiological processes cannot easily produce rocky planet atmospheres rich in both methane and carbon dioxide, as on Earth, but with little or no carbon monoxide.

Scientists are expecting greater insight into exoplanet atmospheres using Webb and other new telescopes, examining their chemistry as these distant worlds pass in front of their host stars from the perspective of Earth.

Oxygen, more plentiful in Earth's atmosphere than methane, is another potential biosignature. It too is fed into Earth's atmosphere via biological processes — in this case photosynthesis by plants and microbes. But oxygen could elude Webb's detection.

"Methane is not a hypothetical biosignature. We know life on Earth has been producing methane for essentially its entire history, and atmospheric methane concentrations may have been high on the early Earth, before there was oxygen in the atmosphere," Krissansen-Totton said. "But it's important to note that the diversity of planetary environments elsewhere is probably vast, and there could be other non-biological methane-making producing processes that no one has yet considered." — **Reuters**

A WINDOW INTO CONTEMPORARY OMANI LITERATURE



Dr Khalid Mohammed al Balushi
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"God bless you, Grand Teacher"

The following is an English translation of an excerpt from "A Soldier from Oman: Memory's Nectar" by (ret.) Inspector-General Said bin Rashid Al Kalbani

CONSCIENTIOUS AND

somewhat rigid in his approach, the teacher treated all his students as if they were his children. As for my father, he was educated enough to review my lessons. Like the rest of his generation, he wouldn't hesitate to resort to physical punishment. I had my share of such punishment, sometimes with a branch of a date palm. However, Uncle Salim, who had no children of his own, showed me considerable affection and love. Persuading my father that advice was more valid as a disciplinary tool than beating, he saved me a great deal of battering that was exercised against children in the name of the then universally approved method of "virtuous upbringing".

Whenever beaten by the "teacher", we would be so afraid of the news reaching our parents. There was perhaps something of a tacit assumption that beating was a form of mercy, and, as such, our parents had to do their duty. I should say that despite the pain we endured, beating helped us discipline ourselves. It was thus accepted in those days. I deem it to be an inappropriate method for raising children in these days, however.

I should also that I owe a great deal to Ali bin Salim. What he taught me has been of immense use in my life. He taught me how to write and read in Arabic, something I developed later through work.

I fondly remember how we treated our

teacher, the pivot of the school:

On seeing him in the morning, we would say, "Good morning, Grand Teacher"; in the evening, "Good evening, Grand Teacher". If we wanted to take our leave and go to the comfort room, we would say, "God bless you, Grand Teacher". If we wanted to drink water, we would say, "God give you water, Grand Teacher". If we wanted to wash our faces, we would say, "God guide you, Grand Teacher".

As mentioned earlier, our school was but the shadow of a tree, and our only school tool was a "slate", a small flat wooden frame or shoulder of a camel or a cow. If too expensive, then one would do with alkarba, material made of the palm tree's lowest part. As regards the pen we used, it was similar to chalk. We would make a'hn, "whitish" powder we brought from the mountain where there now stands a communication tower. We would leave the a'hn in water for some time to dissolve, and then soak the "pen" we cut from a tree called nasal. We used to sharpen the "pen" by breaking it from the middle, so that it would write with deep imprint. Those who don't know a'hn should note that it is the material from which we make mattresses today. All these primitive tools to write on and to write with are a reflection of the simplicity of our education as well as of our life in its entirety, dependent as it was on our local environment.

To be continued



Learning made easy by tapping into the familiar

By Arwa Al Hashimi

The progressive nature of academia constantly requires new teaching and studying materials. Those materials being attached to the local base and culture are a real step for students to get involved while learning as they already have a background in the content. It is good to introduce STREAM textbook which is a collection of books by Omani authors that highlights a significant area of studying for students who learn English for academic purposes.

WHAT IS STREAM (LANGUAGE AND STUDY SKILLS)?

STREAM (Language and Study Skills) is an English language teaching textbook that targets academic English language learners in Higher Education Institutions. There are four different levels of the textbook. STREAM (Language and Study Skills) is aligned with the Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programme (GFP) and the Common European Framework in Reference to Language (CEFR).

The textbook includes a wide range of contemporary engaging topics and activities that make English language learners more interested in the lessons. STREAM (Language and Study Skills) integrates all language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing), along with a grammar reference. The book also enables students to develop effective study skills that are essential to gaining success in academia.

WHAT MAKES STREAM A UNIQUE TEXTBOOK?

It is pleasing that STREAM (Language and Study Skills) is the first textbook

that is designed by Omani authors, Saleh al Hanshi and Abdullah al Hashimi. Thus, the textbook has plenty of contextualised texts, scripts and images from Oman beside the international context.

There is also an emphasis on academic vocabulary that has been carefully selected from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) and the General Service List (Bauman and Culligan, 1995). The authors selected the most relevant words that are required to succeed in higher education in Oman.

In addition, STREAM has some other remarkable features and this includes using students' background knowledge as a basis for learning, having IELTS and TOEFL question types as well as being a fully customisable textbook.

STREAM (Language and Study Skills) has been designed based on the best theories and practices for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The authors' observations on teaching English to Omani learners have also contributed to the development of STREAM (Language and Study Skills).

WHAT DOES STREAM OFFER TO OMANI ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

Each of STREAM (Language and Study Skills) textbooks has six units, and each unit has two Listening sections, two reading sections, a grammar section, a writing section and a studying section.

The listening and reading sections have vocabulary building, prediction, comprehension and critical thinking subsections. The grammar section has grammar rules and drilling questions. The writing section has model paragraphs/essays through which learners learn how an academic composition is

written and structured.

The last section of a unit teaches learners some studying skills. Learners can do this section on their own, but a teacher's guidance is always beneficial. The unit finishes with a vocabulary log, a tip to expand learners' vocabulary size, and a unit review.

HOW DOES STREAM COPE WITH ONLINE LEARNING?

STREAM has an online educational platform that is called EDUNITED

(<https://www.edunitedom.com/index.html>). The platform provides a variety of services to both teachers and students. This includes a modern book view, giving assignments and quizzes, an interactive learning space and more. All these services give the teacher the option to teach in different modes i.e. face-to-face, online or blended.

