

Logo contest for museum launched

The Royal Court Affairs has launched a competition to design a logo for the upcoming Oman Across Ages Museum, which has been completed at Manah. A statement from RCA said that the logo must be based on ancient history of the Sultanate of Oman till the Blessed Renaissance, achievements witnessed during the Blessed Renaissance, also the nature and geographical diversity of the country. **DETAILS ON P5**



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RONALDO ARRIVES AT MAN UTD TRAINING GROUND TO DISCUSS FUTURE



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SALALAH PORT SET TO BECOME LEADING BUNKERING HUB IN REGION



P20

DHOFAR DAM IS BOTH AN ATTRACTION AND LESSON ON WATER SUSTAINABILITY



MUSCAT

CRUDE PRICE AT \$105.17 A BARREL

Oman oil price for September delivery on Tuesday reached \$105.17, comprising a rise by \$3.63 from the price of Monday, which was \$101.54. The average price of Oman oil for July delivery has stabilised at \$107.22, thus \$4.82 per barrel higher than June delivery. World oil prices rose further on expectations Russia's reduction in natural gas supply to Europe could encourage a switch to crude, with Brent futures last up 1.5 per cent at \$106.68 a barrel and US crude up 1.6 per cent at \$98.21 a barrel.

2 NEW BACHELOR PROGRAMMES

The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation approved two new Bachelor degree programmes for high-performing students. The first is the Applied Sciences (STEM) programme, while the second is the Humanities (ESAM) programme. The move aims to diversity internal scholarship programmes for various levels. STEM is an acronym which refers to Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences, while ESAM is an acronym that refers to Education, Sciences, Social, Art and Management. **DETAILS ON P5**

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INSIDE



TUNISIA PRESIDENT HAILS VOTE SET TO BOLSTER RULE

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US, TALIBAN MAKE PROGRESS ON AFGHAN RESERVES

P9

New rule seeks to streamline home-based business

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, July 26

The number of small units licensed to practise home-based business activity stood at 9,000 as of July 24.

This was stated by the Authority for the Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED),

during a press conference on Tuesday on practicing home-based production businesses, as well as the mechanism to offer professional support to such activities.

Speaking at the press conference, Mubarak bin Mohammed al Dohani, Director General of Commerce at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry

and Investment Promotion, said that the recent decision to regulate practice of home-based business comes as an update of an earlier decision.

He said that the new decision seeks to streamline home-based business, build confidence between business owners and clients and support low-income segments by attracting

permanent customers, thereby allowing their businesses to grow and prosper.

He added that the decision also provides legal cover for homemade products, as well as consumer protection. This will in turn facilitate the ministry's supervision of such business activities, create a true database and secure business owners'

status as job-seekers, allowing them to try for new jobs which might be announced in any sector.

ASMED Deputy Chairman Qais bin Rashid al Yaqoubi said that as many as 30 business activities are listed in the Sultanate of Oman, among them 16 are classified as professional and accredited. **TURN TO P3**

ACTION AGAINST ANYONE WHO CROSSES FLOODED WADIS

Authorities ready to tackle impacts from low pressure

MUSCAT: The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority has affirmed the activation of its centres to handle the impacts of the current low pressure in the Sultanate of Oman.

Since the announcement of the depression, the authority has devised plans and supplied its centres with specialised human resources and equipment to carry out tenant emergency evacuation and related search and rescue operations.

The authority has advised all not to take risks during rains, keep away from flooded, coastal or low lying or inundated areas. In particular, it cautioned against frequenting wadis that may see large volumes of water anytime. It urged all to fully abide by the instructions and alerts issued by the authorities concerned to save lives and properties.

Meanwhile, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) has said that anyone who risks crossing flooded wadis or endangers the lives of others will be dealt



The ROP has cautioned that anyone who risks crossing flooded wadis or endangers the lives of others will be dealt with firmly.

with firmly.

The ROP pointed out that most SOS calls sent out to the rescue teams turned out to be the outcome of negligence in

the part of the victims who happened to have deliberately crossed flooded wadis.

The ROP has reiterated that its contingency management

centres are open round the clock and that its emergency response teams will assess and address each case as deemed necessary.

Sub-committees for Emergency Management tasked with tackling impacts of low-pressure rains in Oman have affirmed their preparedness to handle the situation.

The latest meteorological data indicate an impending influx of cumulonimbus (thunder rain clouds) over the coast in North Al Batinah, with chances of sporadic rains in the governorates of South Al Sharqiyah, Muscat, South Al Batinah and Musandam. Thunder rains are reported from North Al Sharqiyah, with a persisting overcasting of northern governorates.

The Civil Aviation Authority urged all to exercise caution during rains, avoid crossing flooded wadis or inundated areas and, in particular, not to risk going out to sea. — **ONA (SEE ALSO P3)**

Russia says to pull out of ISS 'after 2024'

MOSCOW: Russia said on Tuesday it was leaving the International Space Station "after 2024", amid tensions with the West, in a move analysts warned could lead to a halt to manned flights.

The confirmation of the long-mooted move comes as ties unravel between the Kremlin and the West over Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine and several rounds of devastating sanctions against Russia, including its space sector. Space experts said the departure from the International Space Station (ISS) would seriously affect the country's space sector and deal a major blow to the programme of manned flights, a major source of Russian pride.

"Of course we will fulfil all our obligations to our partners but the decision to leave this station after 2024 has been made," Yuri Borisov, the new head of Russian space agency Roscosmos, told President Vladimir Putin, according to a Kremlin account of their meeting.

"I think that by this time we will start putting together a Russian orbital station," Borisov added. — **AFP**

Faster growth may help bacteria remove lake plastic waste: study

PARIS: Chemicals leaking from plastic waste make bacteria grow faster in European lakes, according to research published on Tuesday that authors said could provide a natural way to remove plastic pollution from freshwater ecosystems.

Microplastics have been found in virtually every corner of the globe — from the highest glaciers to the bottom of the deepest sea trench — but the impact of plastic

pollution in lakes is less well researched than in oceans.

When plastic materials such as carrier bags break down in water, they release simple carbon compounds slightly different to those produced when organic matter such as twigs and leaves disintegrate.

Researchers from the University of Cambridge wanted to see what effect these compounds had on bacteria

populations in 29 lakes across Scandinavia.

They cut up plastic bags from four major British shopping chains and mixed them with water until the carbon compounds were released.

Overall, they found that the bacteria in the plastic water samples grew nearly twice as easily (1.72 times) as the lake bacteria with no plastic water added. — **AFP**



DECKED FOR THE SEASON

The illuminated Burj Al Nahdha clock tower in Salalah during khareef celebrations.

PHOTO BY DR SACHIN SINGH

Congratulations and best wishes to

His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham Al Said

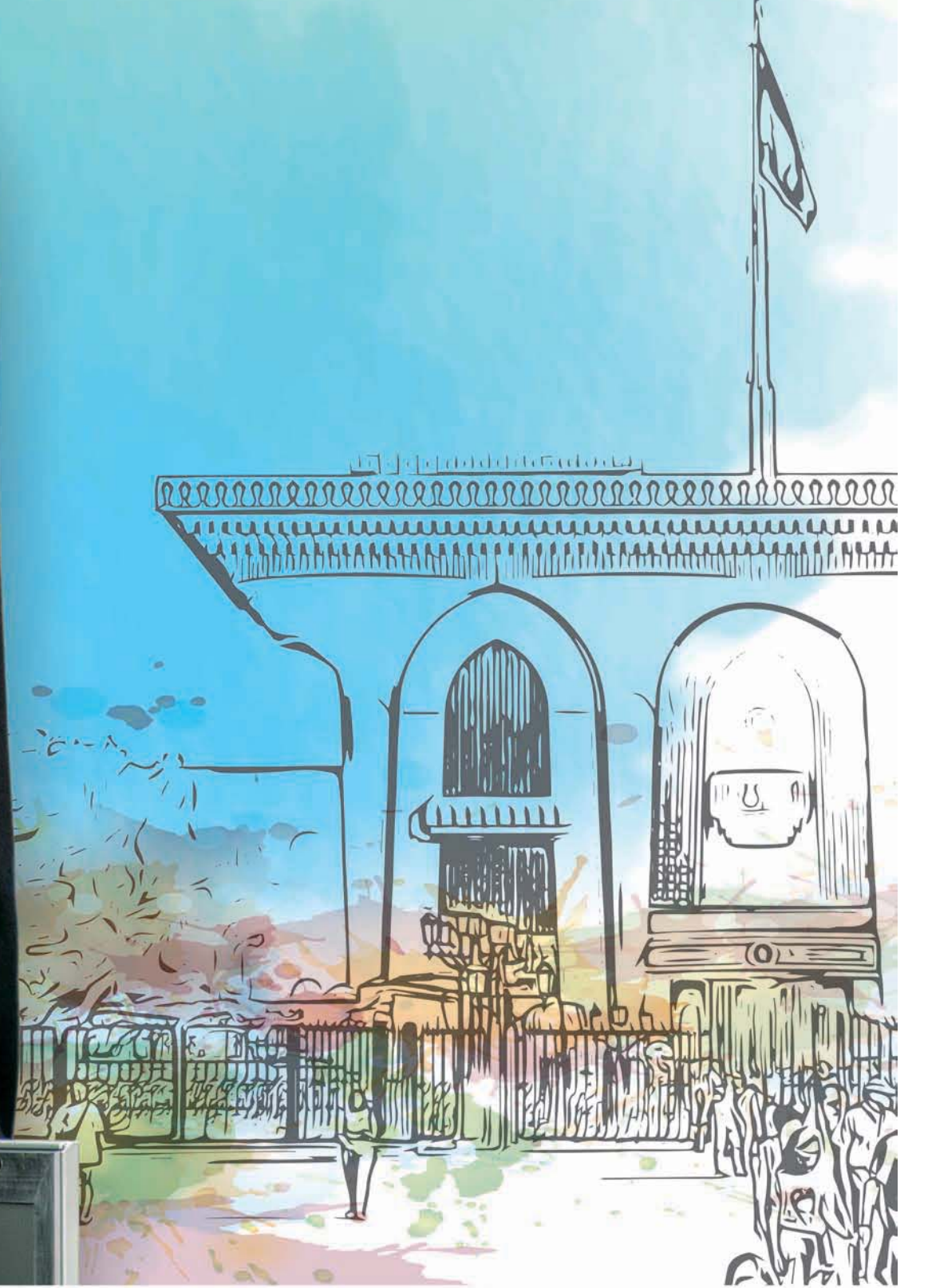
Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth

On the occasion
of his graduation from the



Royal Military Academy Sandhurst,
United Kingdom

May he attain even
greater heights of
success and achievements





Oman has 1,500,000 diverse mangroves

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Oman has a rich collection of 1,500,000 diverse mangroves along its coastal areas and manifold programmes are in place to protect, preserve and nourish them, according to the Environment Authority (EA).

Speaking to the Observer on the sidelines of the International Day for the Conservation of the Mangrove Ecosystem which is celebrated on July 26 each year, Bader bin Saif al Busaidy (pictured), Ecosystems Specialist at the EA said the nation attributes great importance to the mangrove plants as it balances our ecosystem to a great extent.

“Primarily, the specialist team visits 5 to 10 sites each year to transplant one to two year old mangroves,” he said.

The team visits the sites every three months to ensure their soil Ph, water salinity, birds’ inhabitants and to observe any visible changes to the plants.

Worldwide, since 1980, half of the mangrove forest reserves



has been lost due to many reasons, predominantly human behaviour. Some countries have lost more than 80 per cent of their mangrove population.

“In order to inculcate the habit of preserving this rich reserves, we invite students from different schools, colleges and universities to experience and learn about these trees and the ‘World Wetlands Day’ on February 2 is dedicated to the conservation of mangrove plants, called ‘Wetlands Day’ when all governorates will do multiple programmes for their

preservation,” Al Busaidy adds.

Oman’s mangroves are scattered but dense and are mostly located on the northeast coast. Oman’s six coastal governorates, Musandam, North Al Batinah, Muscat, South Al Sharqiyah, Al Wusta and Dhofar have rich varieties of mangroves. The Al Qurm Natural Reserve mangroves in the capital is one of the largest mangrove forests in the country followed by the mangrove woodland in Al Khiran which provides nutrients and shelter for fish, crayfish and birds.

There are six varieties of the more common mangroves and are, Yellow mangrove, Milky mangrove, Grey mangrove, Red mangrove, Orange mangrove and River mangrove.

Researches are ongoing to identify the marine plants’ values and importance to our ecology and it was found that mangrove trees absorb CO2 six times more than any other tree does, a decade ago.

“We have plans to begin next research on accounting the CO2 storage in these trees by 2023-2024,” he added.

Focus on protection, promotion of human rights

CAIRO: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by a team from Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC), took part in the 4th high-ranking Arab regional conference on the protection and promotion of human rights.

The conference was held at the headquarters of the Arab League’s Secretariat-General in Egypt.

The conference aimed to highlight the exerted efforts to reduce the economic and social repercussions of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, analyse existing challenges and benefiting from learned lessons. It also aimed at enhancing cooperation and coordination between various institutions and build future plans to ensure the achievement of sustainable development goals, as well as promoting the rights of women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and migrant labourers.

The conference highlighted the role of civil society organisations in spreading awareness and contributing to the efforts aimed at establishing peace, stability and development in a manner consistent with official efforts and national legislations.

— ONA

New rule seeks to streamline home-based business

FROM PAGE 1

ASMED has 19 training programmes in place operating across various sectors. The programmes fall in two categories — a technical and business learning category and a marketing category, said Al Yaqoubi.

He said that the number of artisans registered in Oman stands at 23,000. Al Yaqoubi added that home-based business card holders benefit from services offered to crafts people, in addition to necessary information that might be crucial in decision-making and sustainable development.

The household production activities include packaging activities (for third parties), retail sale of flowers and natural plants, retail sale of artificial flowers and plants, hairdressing and types of cosmetics for women, retailing of textiles and fabrics of all kinds, retailing of ready-made garments, making of Omani khanjars, craft products from silver, craft products by distilling flowers and herbs, making handicraft products, production of water and frankincense oil, production and refining of olive oil, manufacture of craft products from cotton or wool, manufacture

of craft products from leather, manufacture of craft products from fronds, manufacture of craft products from wood, manufacture of craft products of cosmetics and perfumes, making and processing of incense.

In addition to making craft products from pottery and porcelain, craft products from stone and gypsum, making craft products from copper and metal, making craft products from traditional fishing tools, making craft products derived from bones, tailoring and sewing Arab and non-Arab women’s clothing, and renting textiles, clothing and shoes) including wedding dresses (packaging parcels, wrapping gifts, tailoring and sewing women’s abayas, organising parties, making Arabic sweets and wrapping dates.

It was also revealed that citizens who wish to practice these professions need not require registration in a commercial registry, but only a license is enough. They will also coordinate with the Ministry of Labour so that obtaining a license is not linked to obtaining a job for job-seekers. Therefore, this decision will not affect job-seekers who are engaged in productive home work.

■ TORRENTIAL RAINS DRENCH NORTH AND SOUTH AL BATINAH



The Wilayats of Al Rustaq, Al Awabi, Nakhl, Wadi Al Maawil, Barka and Al Musannah in the Governorate of South Al Batinah witnessed torrential rains on Tuesday due to the current low pressure in the Sultanate of Oman. Rainfall continued for several hours, accompanied with strong winds, which resulted in the overflow of wadis and streams. The wilayats of Suhar, Saham, Liwa, Shinas, Al Suwaiq and Al Khabourah in the Governorate of North Al Batinah were also impacted by moderate to heavy rains. — ONA



Rains bring relief as well as traffic snarls



KABEER YOUSUF
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Life was partially put on hold as incessant rains lashed parts of the Sultanate of Oman and places adjacent to Al Hajar Mountains and north and south Al Batinah bore the brunt of the same.

While areas prone to water clogs and other low-lying areas

were guarded by the Royal Oman Police and brigades from Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA), the authorities have categorically reiterated that they would deal firmly with anyone who exposes himself and others to the risk of crossing valleys.

At many places, citizens and residents were seen enjoying the

rains while kids had a ball of time playing in the rains.

There were many accidents as vehicles lost control as visibility dipped to near-zero in the rains. However, no casualties were reported (till now), according to the CDAA spokesperson.

Since the alert of inclement weather in the Sultanate was announced days ago, the

authorities identified advanced deployment points of the CDAA in all governorates in order to respond and deal with potential reports due to the effects of the weather situation.

“Since the announcement of the adverse weather conditions, CDAA deployed officials at all key points and they stood guard in the rain to safeguard people from accidents, to educate community members and to urge them to stay away from low-lying and coastal places,” the spokesperson told the Observer.

He further said that there were incidents of rocks falling on the road while signals in most parts were down since the downpour from morning.

“Both citizens and residents

should be watchful of the weather conditions and pay close attention and to protect children from the water clogs which will be formed all low-lying areas,” he said, adding that “People should avoid driving as much as possible during the rains as chances of wheels slipping off the road and visibility turning near to zero are unavoidable.”

Seven injured in road accident

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

Seven people were injured in a road accident that took place in the Al Wusta Governorate on Tuesday. Of these, one person was critically injured, two persons suffered moderate injuries and four of them got minor injuries.

On July 20, one person died and five others of an Asian nationality were injured after the tires of their vehicle burst on the Adam-Thamrait road.

According to the Royal Oman Police (ROP), the Police Aviation department transported the injured people to the hospital in Nizwa. Keeping the heavy rush to the Dhofar Governorate from all over the region, authorities have started imposing tougher measures to regulate the movement of tourists.

The ROP deployed special

checkpoints and patrol teams on the roads leading to Dhofar Governorate.

The Directorate General of Police Aviation will also support the ROP efforts by providing flying ambulances in emergency cases such as traffic accidents that require urgent transportation of the injured.

ROP has advised all visitors to the Governorate of Dhofar to abide by the traffic laws and regulations and the speed limit to ensure their safety and that of the others and to pay attention to the presence of stray animals, especially at night, and sands that may accumulate on roads near desert areas.

Citizens and tourists heading to Dhofar Governorate can request service and assistance by calling the emergency phone (9999) or directly contacting the police personnel at checkpoints.

20-60 mm of rainfall recorded on Al Hajar

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
[@lakshmioman](#)

The amounts of rain according to satellite data during Sunday night to Monday ranged between 20-60 mm on the Al Hajar Mountains and Musandam Governorate, while Al Batinah coast had recorded 20-35 mm.

Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah, South and North Al Sharqiyah are the governorates that were in the area of impact of the low pressure system. “These places might continue to receive rain for some time. But on Tuesday the main focus was on Musandam, North Al Batinah and Al Dhahirah,” said the weather forecaster at Oman Met Office.

He added that wadis in Al Hajar Mountains, North Al Sharqiyah and coasts of North and South al Batinah as well as Dakhiliyah are flowing because they have significant amount in the last three weeks.

Weather forecast for Wednesday states that it will be partly cloudy



to cloudy skies over most of the governorates with chances of rain of varying intensity occasionally thundershower and over governorates of Muscat, North Al Sharqiyah, Al Dakhiliyah, South Al Batinah, North Al Batinah Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah and

Musandam. Partly cloudy skies along the coastal areas of Dhofar Governorate and adjoining mountains with intermittent drizzle and isolated rain.

There are also chances of blowing dust over desert and open areas.

According to satellite images, the chances of the flow and intensification of clouds and rainfall of varying intensity will continue, with a decrease in horizontal visibility at times over the northern governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.



Ministry approves two new Bachelor degree programmes

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabnassri

The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, approved two new Bachelor Degree programmes for outstanding students. The first is the Applied Sciences (STEM) programme and the second is the Humanities (ESAM) programme.

The move aims to diversify internal scholarship programmes for various levels to meet the aspirations of students.

STEM is an acronym which refers to Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences, while ESAM is an acronym that refers to Education, Sciences, Social, Art and Management.

Lara bint Ghassan Obeidat (pictured), Director General of Scholarships, said: “The ministry’s proposal for these programmes aims to attract good students, and allow them to choose the specialisation and educational institution according to their desires. The conditions of the (STEM) programmes included that a student obtain a general average of no less than 75 per cent in a General Education Diploma or its equivalent, and obtain a minimum average of 70 per cent in pure mathematics, English and one subject from biology, chemistry, or physics.

As for the ESAM programme, the student is required to obtain a general average of not less than 75 per cent in the General Education Diploma or its equivalent. A minimum average of 70 per cent in English language and one pure or applied mathematics subject.

She added: Students can view the details of these programmes on pages (67 and 68) of the student guide issued by the



Unified Admission Centre for the academic year 2022/2023, where the (STEM) programme, which bears the symbol (BS380), includes specialisations: sciences except for human medicine specialisations. General, oral and dental medicine and surgery, nursing, pharmacy, optics sciences, physical therapy, information technology, engineering and mathematics sciences.

As for the ESAM programme, it bears the code (BS390) and includes specialisations: social sciences, arts and management. Education majors were excluded from the programme; because it is linked to specific numbers based on the annual needs data of the Ministry of Education.

As for the mechanism for completing the registration in the flexible programmes, Lara Obeidat explained that he/she must choose the major (one of the majors listed under the symbol) and the institution he wishes to study in, provided that the institution offers the specific majors for these programmes. After that, the student must communicate with the institution to complete his/her registration during the period set by the Unified Admission Center.

Obeidat, Director-General of Missions, indicated the ministry’s keenness to strengthen partnership with the private sector, through continuous communication with

many companies to contribute to providing additional scholarships for internal scholarships. The ministry received a good response from private sector companies in the past year. In addition to the contribution of private higher education institutions in providing dozens of scholarships from which many students have benefited, whether they were full scholarships exempted from tuition fees or partial scholarships exempted from fees at 50 per cent.

This year, private higher education institutions contributed to providing 463 scholarships for a bachelor’s degree in various disciplines from 13 institutions. Petroleum Development Oman Company 150 scholarships for a bachelor’s degree with a monthly allowance for children from concession areas in a number of academic disciplines. The Oman Indian Fertiliser Company provided 5 scholarships with a monthly allowance for students from social security families and limited income from the governorates of South and North Al Sharqiya in engineering disciplines, and there are grants from other companies that the ministry is working on reviewing the conditions of these grants in preparation for the announcement about it through the Unified Admission Centre.

All these grants are subject to the Law of Scholarships, Grants and Study Aid and are supervised by the General Directorate of Missions. She said “We also stress to our students the importance of knowing the conditions and requirements of these grants as those provided by private higher education institutions do not allow the students to change the institutions after being accepted into it”.

Logo contest launched for Oman Across Ages Museum

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The Royal Court Affairs (RCA) has launched a competition to design a logo for the upcoming Oman Across Ages Museum, which has been completed at Manah in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

A statement from RCA said that the logo must be based on the ancient history of the Sultanate of Oman till the Blessed Renaissance, achievements witnessed during the Blessed Renaissance, also the nature and geographical diversity of the country.

The logo must be innovative and not borrowed from other logos or designs of any party, whether local or regional or international. The participant bears legal responsibility for the intellectual property rights.

The participant acknowledges that both the logo and the information describing it do not infringe the proprietary rights of any third party.

The logo should be reducible and enlargeable while retaining the clarity of all its elements. The logo can be textual, symbolic, or a combination of the two.

The creative works winning the first three places will be considered the property of the Oman Across Ages Museum.



The designers are not entitled in the future to demand the return of the submitted designs. The competition is open to all Omani creators, residents, and local institutions. Anyone can participate and submit more than one design and a maximum of three designs only. The museum reserves the right not to accept entries that do not meet the requirements. It has the right to withhold the award If the required conditions are not met. The winners of the first three places will be awarded cash prizes - first prize RO 1,500, second prize RO 800, and the third prize RO 500.

The last date for receiving the logo designs is August 25, 2022. The logo should include the name of Oman Across Ages Museum in Arabic and English.

The museum has the right to modify and add to the winning design according to what it deems

appropriate, and the winner is committed to making the required modifications. The owner of the winning logo is committed to providing an integrated visualisation of the museum’s visual identity and its applications derived from elements of the logo. The logo must be designed by the participant himself, and the guide for using the mark must be attached to it.

According to sources, the building includes galleries, a library, an auditorium, cafés, and social and research spaces.

The permanent exhibition space alone is 9,000 sqm and some galleries stretch more than 20 metres high.

When completed, the museum will be the largest of its kind in the region, offering visitors an interactive experience of the cultural and geographic diversity of the Sultanate of Oman.



Sultan Qaboos University

ANNOUNCEMENT

Sultan Qaboos University announces their desire to sell used audiovisual equipment in sealed envelopes. Those wishing to enter the auction must adhere to the following conditions:

- Interested parties can view the used equipment in auction stores and receive the bidding on Monday and Tuesday 01-02/08/2022 from 03:00 pm to 05:00 pm.
- Deposit of (100) Omani riyals in cash as an insurance. This amount will be refunded to the unsuccessful bidders.
- Submitting the offer in a sealed envelope after viewing the used equipment, entitled by the name of the head of the committee for selling used audiovisual equipment, and put the envelope in bid box.
- The presented offer is binding on its owner if it is placed on it, and in the event that the buyer does not pay the purchase price on time, the insurance amount will be forfeited, and the sale will be awarded to another applicant.
- Those who win the bidding will be contacted. They must pay the remaining sum, and they are responsible for moving their items on Sunday and Monday 07-08/08/2022 from 09:00 am to 03:00 pm.
- The used equipment is sold in their current condition, and SQU is not responsible for any loss or damage to the sold material if the moving is not completed after the end of the sale, and (10) Omani riyals will be imposed for each day after 09/08/2022.

Notes:

- Prices are sorted according to groups and the higher price is taken.
- Funds will be collected electronically through visa cards.
- Entering the auction stores through Gate No. (2).
- For more information, please contact 24141272.



OMAN PARTICIPATES IN ARAB LEAGUE MEDIA MEETINGS

AMMAN: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Information, is taking part in the media meetings (Media and Communications Sector), organised by the Arab League’s Secretariat-General.

The 3-day meetings, hosted by Jordan, are organised in cooperation and coordination with the Arab Commission for Satellite Broadcasting.

The first session of the meetings included a seminar on the role of Arab media in combating extremism and terrorism. Working papers were presented during the session by Jordan, Algeria, Palestine and the Arab League’s Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization.

A meeting will also be held by specialists to address video games that promote violence and their effects on Arab societies. — ONA



الشركة المتحدة للتمويل ش.م.ع.ع

United Finance Company SAOG

Board of Directors’ Report for the period ended 30th June 2022

Report on material events covering the interim financials

Overview and Future Outlook

The first half of 2022 has been a very positive for Oman and there is much to look forward to. S&P has upgraded Oman’s credit ratings to BB- from B+ with a stable outlook. The various initiatives taken by the government to curb spending and reduce the budget deficit have been successful. The high oil prices have helped, and so has the clear direction given by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said that the surpluses from the oil prices will be used to reduce the country’s debt, rather than any additional spending. This has buoyed both the Omani government bonds as well as the stock markets. Public debt to GDP ratio is expected to reduce from 63% in 2021 to less than 48% by the end of 2022, and real GDP is expected to grow by 5.6% in 2022.

This is excellent news for the economy and especially for the banks and finance companies. As the effects of the pandemic wind down, business activity has picked up and there is an air of positivity and hopefulness for the year ahead.

Performance highlights

United Finance Company SAOG has earned Installment Finance Income of RO 3.77 million for the period ended June 2022 compared to RO 3.55 million for the same period in the previous year. The Company recorded a net profit of RO 689K for H1 2022 as against RO 41K for the corresponding period last year. The Net Debtors portfolio stood at RO 82.4 million as at 30th June 2022 as against RO 76.3 million in June 2021. We expect the increase in loan portfolio will continue in H2 2022 as well. We are also being careful on who we lend to, and our capital adequacy ratio is in excess of 50%.

Provisioning position

The company has provided RO 379,586 as provision during H1 2022 taking the total provisions of the company to over RO 18.6 million, and we continue to maintain one of the highest provisions against non-performing loans amongst FLCs. In addition, the Company also maintains a special reserve of RO 2.37 million to guard against unforeseen delinquencies.

Funding

The company has adequate funds to meet its current business requirements. Market liquidity has improved and Banks have renewed/ replenished credit facilities to meet the business requirements of the company. We have managed to secure new funding lines and the Management is confident of mobilizing the required funds at reasonable interest rates to meet the budgeted business levels of the current year.

Acknowledgement

We thank His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, His Government, Central Bank of Oman, Capital Market Authority and other regulatory authorities for their support and guidance during the quarter. We also thank our bankers, dealers and customers for their continued trust, confidence and support. We also extend our thanks to the management and staff of the company for their continued support and hard work.

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AT 30 JUNE 2022

	2022 RO	2021 RO
ASSETS		
Property and equipment	2,312,993	2,360,438
Deferred tax asset	16,923	16,923
Deposit with the Central Bank of Oman	250,000	250,000
Investment securities	554,150	554,150
Instalment finance debtors	82,433,342	76,364,329
Other receivables and prepaid expenses	193,969	313,426
Cash and cash equivalents	695,148	2,764,443
TOTAL ASSETS	86,456,525	82,623,709
EQUITY		
Share capital	34,914,441	34,914,441
Share premium reserve	528,402	528,402
Legal reserve	5,160,755	4,904,496
Special reserve	2,368,989	2,368,989
Foreign currency reserve	-	294,514
Impairment reserve	1,911,736	1,911,736
Retained earnings	2,083,788	530,382
Total equity	46,968,111	45,452,960
Liabilities		
Borrowings	31,972,223	29,580,567
Corporate deposits	2,350,000	3,000,000
Creditors and other payables	5,032,145	4,603,790
Taxation	134,046	(13,608)
Total liabilities	39,488,414	37,170,749
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	86,456,525	82,623,709
NET ASSETS PER SHARE	0.135	0.130

STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE PERIOD ENDED 30 JUNE 2022

	2022 RO	2021 RO
Instalment finance income	3,773,489	3,549,670
Interest expense	(833,935)	(1,058,137)
Net instalment finance income	2,939,554	2,491,533
Other income	218,423	190,758
Operating expenses	(1,922,215)	(1,541,607)
Depreciation	(45,094)	(47,587)
Allowance for expected credit losses	(379,586)	(1,022,804)
Profit before tax	811,082	70,293
Income tax expense	(121,662)	(29,716)
PROFIT AND TOTAL COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE PERIOD	689,420	40,577
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.003	0.000

The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests them, in either Arabic or English within 7 days of the receipt of such request addressed to:

Chief Executive Officer, United Finance Co. SAOG
P O Box 3652, PC 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.
Tel: 24577300 Fax 24561557
E-mail: ufc@ufcoman.com, Website: www.ufcoman.com

Mohamed Abdulla Mohamed Al Khonji
Chairman



Tunisia president hails vote set to bolster rule

TUNIS: President Kais Saied said Tunisia had “entered a new phase” on Tuesday with a new constitution almost certain to pass in a referendum, concentrating almost all powers in his office.

Monday’s referendum came a year to the day after Saied sacked the government and suspended parliament in a dramatic blow to the only democracy to have emerged from the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

There had been little doubt the “Yes” campaign would win, and an exit poll suggested that votes cast — just a quarter of the 9.3 million electorate — were overwhelmingly in favour.

Most of Saied’s rivals called for a boycott, and while turnout was low, it was higher than the single figures many observers had expected — at least 27.5 per cent according to the electoral board, controlled by Saied.

“Tunisia has entered a new phase,” Saied declared as he addressed celebrating supporters in downtown Tunis hours after

Kais Saied, a 64-year-old law professor, dissolved parliament and seized control of the judiciary and the electoral commission on July 25 last year

polling stations closed.

“What the Tunisian people did... is a lesson to the world, and a lesson to history on a scale that the lessons of history are measured on,” he said.

The National Salvation Front, a coalition of Saied’s main opponents, said the draft constitution would enshrine in a “coup d’etat” and that “75 per cent of Tunisians have refused to approve a putschist project”.

Saied, a 64-year-old law professor, dissolved parliament and seized control of the judiciary and the electoral commission on July 25 last year.

His opponents say the moves



President Kais Saied celebrates with his supporters on Habib Bourguiba Avenue in the capital Tunis on Tuesday after the projected outcome was announced. — AFP

aimed to install an autocracy over a decade after the fall of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, while his supporters say they were necessary after years of corruption and political turmoil.

UNCHECKED POWERS

A poll of “Yes” voters by state television suggested “reforming the country and improving the situation” along with “support for Kais Saied/his project” were their main motivations for backing the constitution.

Thirteen per cent cited

being “convinced by the new constitution”.

Rights groups and legal experts have warned that the draft gives vast, unchecked powers to the presidency, allow him to appoint a government without parliamentary approval and make him virtually impossible to remove from office.

The charter “gives the president almost all powers and dismantles any check on his rule,” Said Benarbia, regional director of the International Commission of Jurists said.

“None of the safeguards that could protect Tunisians from Ben Ali-type violations are there anymore,” he added.

Saied has repeatedly threatened his enemies in recent months, issuing video diatribes against unnamed foes he describes as “germs,” “snakes” and “traitors”.

On Monday, he promised “all those who have committed crimes against the country will be held accountable for their actions”.

— AFP

Israel army razes homes of 2 Palestinians

QARAWAT BANI HASAN: Israeli forces on Tuesday demolished the homes of two Palestinians in the occupied West Bank accused of shooting dead a Jewish settler in April, an army statement said.

The army said it had destroyed the homes in Qarawat Bani Hasan, in the northern West Bank, belonging to Yusef Aasi and Yehya Miri, accused of perpetrating “a deadly shooting

attack at the entrance to the city of Ariel, murdering the Israeli security guard Vyacheslav Golev”.

Aasi and Miri were arrested a day after the April 29 attack and are being held by Israel.

They have not yet faced trial in Israeli military court, which exercises jurisdiction over offences committed by Palestinians in parts of the West Bank, a territory occupied by the Jewish state since 1967. — AFP

Hundreds rally in Sudan against coup, tribal violence

KHARTOUM: Hundreds of protesters rallied on Tuesday against last year’s military coup in Sudan and a recent spike in tribal violence which killed more than 100 people, AFP correspondents said. Sudan’s main civilian group, the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), which was ousted in the coup, had called for mass demonstrations with hashtags urging co-existence and a “unified nation”.

In the capital Khartoum, demonstrators were seen carrying the Sudanese flag while chanting “Sudan is a nation for all people!” Protesters also chanted “No to



Sudanese women chant slogans during an anti-coup demonstration in the Bashdar station area in southern Khartoum, on Tuesday. — AFP

tribalism and no regionalism!” while others called on the military “to go back to barracks”, according to a correspondent.

Senior civilian politicians including Mohamed al Fekki and ex-minister Khaled Omar Youssef, were seen at the demonstrations.

The two men, key leaders of the FFC, were among civilian officials who have been removed from power since the coup.

Some pro-democracy activists and protesters were opposed to the FFC’s participation, saying the rallies should not be overshadowed by partisan motives, AFP correspondents said. — AFP

Myanmar defends executions as condemnation grows

YANGON: Myanmar’s ruling military on Tuesday defended its execution of four democracy activists as “justice for the people”, brushing off a deluge of international condemnation including from its closest neighbours.

The military, which seized power in a coup last year, announced on Monday it had executed the activists for aiding “terror acts” by a civilian resistance movement, Myanmar’s first executions in decades.

Junta spokesperson Zaw Min Tun said the men were given due process and insisted those executed were not democracy activists, but killers deserving of

their punishment.

“This was justice for the people. These criminals were given the chance to defend themselves,” he told a regular televised news briefing.

“I knew it would raise criticism but it was done for justice. It was not personal.”

News of the executions triggered international outrage, with the United States, Britain, Australia, the European Union and United Nations leading a chorus of condemnation accusing the junta of cruelty.

Myanmar’s Southeast Asian neighbours issued a rare, stinging rebuke of the military on Tuesday, calling the executions “highly



Activists including Myanmar residents take part in a rally to protest against Myanmar’s junta execution of four prisoners, including a former lawmaker from Aung San Suu Kyi’s party, outside the United Nations University in Tokyo on Tuesday. — AFP

reprehensible” and destructive to regional efforts to de-escalate the crisis.

The 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in a statement from chair

Cambodia said it was “extremely troubled and deeply saddened by the executions”, as well as by their timing.

“The implementation of the death sentences just a week before the 55th ASEAN ministerial meeting is highly reprehensible,” it said, adding it showed the junta’s “gross lack of will” to support ASEAN’s UN-backed peace plan.

It was unclear how the executions were carried out and when they took place. Family members of the condemned prisoners said on Monday that they had not been informed of the executions beforehand, and had not been allowed to retrieve the bodies.

Junta spokesperson Zaw Min Tun said the return of the bodies was up to the prison chief.

The executed men were among more than 100 people whom activists say have been sentenced to death in secretive trials by military-run courts since the coup.

Malaysia’s Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah said on Tuesday that his country viewed the executions as a crime against humanity.

He also accused the junta of making a mockery of the ASEAN peace plan and said it should be barred from sending political representatives to any international ministerial level meetings.

— Reuters

SYDNEY

Covid hospital admissions, deaths rise

Hospital admissions for Covid-19 in Australia have reached a new high for a second straight day, data showed on Tuesday, while the daily death toll rose to its second-highest as an outbreak fuelled by a coronavirus sub-variant sweeps the country.

Nearly 5,600 patients infected with Covid are in hospital while 100 new deaths were reported, just short of a record 102 deaths on Saturday. Nearly 330,000 infections have been reported over the last seven days.



“It’s time to come together again and fight: get vaccinated, use a mask in crowds and indoors, and stay home if you’re sick,” said the premier of Queensland state, Annastacia Palaszczuk.

TOKYO

Japan executes man over stabbing rampage

Japan on Tuesday executed a man convicted of killing seven people in a truck ramming and stabbing rampage in Tokyo’s popular Akihabara electronics district in 2008, the justice ministry said.

Justice Minister Yoshihisa Furukawa said Tomohiro Kato had undertaken “meticulous preparation” for the attack and displayed a “strong intent to kill”.

Furukawa said he “approved the execution after extremely thorough scrutiny,” noting that



Kato’s death sentence had been upheld by the court system.

Kato went on the rampage on June 8, 2008, telling police: “I came to Akihabara to kill people. It didn’t matter who I’d kill.”

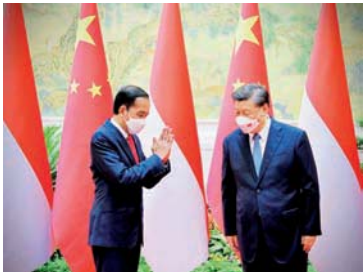
BEIJING

China, Indonesia pledge deeper ties

The leaders of China and Indonesia pledged on Tuesday to scale up bilateral trade and expand cooperation in areas such as agriculture and food security, following a rare visit to Covid-wary China by a foreign head of state.

China and Indonesia believe their relations have great strategic significance and far-reaching global influence, the Chinese foreign ministry said after a meeting of the countries’ leaders.

Indonesian President Joko



Widodo met Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang in Beijing on Tuesday. The last time China hosted foreign leaders was during the Winter Olympics in February.



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In brief

■ MOSCOW



RUSSIA TO QUIT INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION ‘AFTER 2024’

Russia has decided to quit the International Space Station “after 2024”, the newly-appointed chief of Moscow’s space agency told President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday.

The announcement comes as tensions rage between the Kremlin and the West over Moscow’s military intervention in Ukraine and several rounds of unprecedented sanctions against Russia. Russia and the US have worked side by side on the ISS, which has been in orbit since 1998.

“Of course, we will fulfil all our obligations to our partners, but the decision to leave this station after 2024 has been made,” Yury Borisov told Putin.

■ FRANKFURT



FOREST FIRES SPREAD THROUGH EASTERN GERMANY

Local officials in Germany were planning more evacuations on Tuesday as forest fires tore through the east of the country in the wake of punishing heatwave.

Authorities in the eastern region of Saxony triggered a “disaster alert” in the Bad Schandau area, as wildfires spread through the Saxon Switzerland National Park.

Scientists say climate change is making heatwaves around the world more frequent and more intense, which increases the risk of fires. The alarm was due to the “continuing terrible forest fire situation” in the park, which is close to the border with the Czech Republic, officials said.

■ BELFAST



GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT ARCHITECT DAVID TRIMBLE DIES

David Trimble, the Northern Irish leader who steered the region’s Protestant majority into an historic peace deal with their Catholic rivals that earned him a Nobel Peace Prize, has died aged 77, his family said on Monday.

Trimble, who became Northern Irish first minister in the power-sharing government that emerged from the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, was one of the chief architects of the accord that mostly ended three decades of bloodshed in the region. “Time after time during the negotiations he made the hard choices over the politically expedient ones,” former US President Bill Clinton said.

Europe agrees gas curbs as Russia squeezes supply

BRUSSELS: European Union countries approved a weakened emergency plan to curb their gas demand on Tuesday, after striking compromise deals to limit the cuts for some countries, as they brace for further Russian reductions in supply.

Europe faces an increased gas squeeze from Wednesday, when Russian’s Gazprom has said it would cut flows through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline to Germany to a fifth of capacity.

With a dozen EU countries already facing lower Russian supplies, Brussels is urging member states to save gas and store it for winter for fear Russia will completely cut off flows in retaliation for Western sanctions over its war with Ukraine.

Energy ministers approved a proposal for all EU countries to voluntarily cut gas use by 15 per cent from August to March.

The cuts could be made binding in a supply emergency, provided a majority of EU countries agree to this. But countries agreed to exempt numerous countries and industries from the binding 15 per cent cut, after some governments opposed the EU’s original proposal to apply it to every country.

German Economy Minister Robert Habeck said the agreement would show Russian President Vladimir Putin that Europe remained united in the face of

Russian strikes pummel Ukraine’s Black Sea coast



Firefighters work at site of a residential area damaged by a Russia missile strike in the settlement of Zatoka, Odesa region, Ukraine on Tuesday. — Reuters

KYIV: Ukraine said on Tuesday that Russian forces had launched multiple missile strikes at targets on the Black Sea coast near the southern port city of Odessa and in Mykolaiv.

The attacks come days after Russian strikes hit the port of Odessa, calling into question a breakthrough deal to resume exports of grain from Ukraine, that have been disrupted by

Moscow’s attack.

“A massive missile attack, with the use of aircraft, was launched from the Black Sea on the south of Ukraine,” the country’s southern military command said on Facebook.

Rescuers were working on the ground near Odessa where “residential buildings” near the coast were hit in the strikes, the military said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky published a video showing debris scattered around heavily damaged houses in Zatoka, a popular resort village to the west of Odessa.

“No military bases, no troops. Russian terrorists just wanted to shoot. They will be held accountable for all this,” Zelensky said in an Instagram post. — AFP

Moscow’s latest gas cuts.

“You will not split us,” Habeck said.

Hungary was the only country

that opposed the deal, two EU officials said.

Russia’s Gazprom has blamed its latest reduction on needing to

halt the operation of a turbine - a reason dismissed by EU energy chief Kadri Simson, who called the move “politically motivated”.

Pope apologises for ‘evil’ of Indigenous abuse in Canada

MASKWACIS, Canada: Pope Francis on Monday apologised for the “evil” inflicted on the Indigenous peoples of Canada on the first day of a visit focused on addressing decades of abuse at Catholic-run residential schools.

The plea for forgiveness from the leader of the world’s 1.3 billion Catholics was met with applause by a crowd of First Nations, Metis and Inuit people in Maskwacis, in western Alberta province — some of whom were taken from their families as children in what has been branded a “cultural genocide.”

“I am sorry,” said the 85-year-old pontiff, who remained seated as he delivered his address at the site of one of the largest of Canada’s infamous residential schools, where Indigenous children were sent as part of a policy of forced assimilation.

“I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples,” said the pope, citing “cultural destruction” and the “physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual abuse” of children over the course of decades.

Francis spoke of his “deep sense of pain and remorse” as he formally acknowledged that “many members of the Church” had cooperated in the abusive system.

As he spoke, the emotion was palpable in Maskwacis, an Indigenous community south



Pope Francis wears a headdress presented to him by Indigenous leaders at Muskwa Park in Maskwacis, Alberta, Canada, on Monday. — AFP

of provincial capital Edmonton that was the site of the Ermineskin residential school until it closed in 1975.

Several hundred people, many in traditional clothing, were in attendance, along with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mary Simon, the country’s first Indigenous governor general.

Many lowered their eyes, wiped away tears or leaned on and hugged neighbours, and Indigenous leaders afterwards placed a traditional feathered headdress on the pope.

Counsellors were waiting to provide support to those who may need it, and volunteers had

earlier distributed small paper bags for the “collection of tears.”

CRY LOVE

“The First Nation believes that if you cry, you cry love, you catch the tears on a piece of paper and put it back in this bag,” explained Andre Carrier of the Manitoba Metis Federation.

Later the bags will be burned with a special prayer, “to return the tears of love to the creator,” he said.

From the late 1800s to the 1990s, Canada’s government sent about 150,000 children into 139 residential schools run by the Church, where they were cut off from their families, language and culture. — AFP

Firefighters tackle California wildfire as heat grips parts of US

MIDPINES, US: Firefighters were battling California’s largest wildfire of the summer on Monday, a blaze near famed Yosemite National Park that has forced thousands of people to evacuate, officials said.

The Oak Fire in central California broke out on Friday and is raging while parts of the United States swelter through a heat wave, including the usually cool Pacific Northwest.

The fire in Mariposa County has engulfed 17,241 acres and is 16 per cent contained, Cal Fire, the state fire department, said.

“Fire crews are working aggressively using bulldozers, hand crews and aircraft,” with only “minimal growth on the fire” seen on Monday, the department said.

It is the most destructive blaze so far this fire season, according

to Cal Fire, destroying more than three times the acreage of the nearby Washburn Fire, which has been nearly 90 per cent contained.

But it remains much smaller than last year’s Dixie Fire, which burned nearly one million acres.

Jon Heggie, a Cal Fire battalion chief, told CNN the latest wildfire was “very indicative” of other blazes seen in the region over the last two years.

“These fires are burning with just such a velocity and intensity, it makes it extremely challenging and extremely dangerous for both the public and the firefighters,” Heggie said.

“It’s moving so quickly it’s not giving people a lot of time, and they sometimes are just going to have to evacuate with just the shirts on their back.”

— AFP



Smouldering trunks that were once a living forest are all that remain after the destructive Oak Fire near Mariposa, California on Monday. — AFP

The importance of Project Based Learning in education



Sandhya Rao Mehta

The writer is Associate Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature, Sultan Qaboos University

We are all familiar with the old saying that children learn better by doing than listening. It is no surprise then that Project Based Learning is fast becoming one of the most effective ways of teaching children of all ages.

In fact, educationists have been ranking PBL (Project Based Learning) as one of the most popular methods being implemented in schools internationally.

Broadly speaking, Project Based Learning is a strategy in which students develop certain identified skills and knowledge by being involved in a set of problems which are solved collectively or individually. Such a project need not be a large one.

Based on class levels, students could be asked to solve real world problems like climate change by

setting up a small garden, visiting the beach to understand damage to corals or even making a scrapbook on everyday ways of solving climate change (without even having to call it so).

In all such cases, students have typically shown higher levels of involvement, collaboration and participation. Not only does this activity based classroom technique provide variety from textbook based reading and listening, it also helps youngsters in their soft skills like team work, time management and working with technology.

In fact, a 3-year study conducted by Stanford University found that when project based learning was used, “students took more active roles... work was seen as more interesting and worthwhile... and students paid more attention to their

ACTIVITY BASED CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES PROVIDE VARIETY FROM TEXTBOOK BASED READING AND LISTENING AND ALSO HELPS YOUNGSTERS IN THEIR SOFT SKILLS LIKE TIME MANAGEMENT OR TEAM WORK

peers and teacher”.

Perhaps more attention is paid when students can see how their learning is actually tied to the real world outside the classroom.

A 5-step template is usually used to implement PBL.

This includes planning the outcomes, training students with necessary skills, designing a project, executing it and finally,

presenting the outcomes to all stakeholders, including parents, the administration and the students themselves.

Being able to articulate the process and results of the project helps in reflecting and planning for future action.

Like every other teaching method, Project Based Learning comes with its own set of challenges. The most important is finding the time for projects in a traditional classroom where the syllabus needs to be completed in a specific amount of time. Equally challenging is making students and teachers be engaged in activity which may not at first seem to be educational.

PBL cannot also be used across the curriculum for all subjects and it often requires a budget for raw material and even some extra

professional help in case of a slightly more complex venture.

It can also be seen to be inequitable when given as homework as all students may not have equal access to material, time and resources to complete a project within a specific time span.

Parents are often known to complete children’s projects, even outsourcing it to a professional for accuracy and finish.

Given all these challenges, Project Based Learning continues to be seen as an important teaching tool but is not always implemented successfully across schools.

Yet, given its capacity to develop much needed soft skills among youngsters, along with its capacity to develop students’ own stakes in their learning, PBL must continue to be encouraged and implemented.

German nuclear exit wobbles as energy crisis looms

MICHELLE FITZPATRICK

A looming energy crisis has rekindled debate in Germany about the wisdom of shutting down the country’s last three nuclear power plants, with even members of the ruling coalition saying an extension is no longer taboo.

The German government on Monday said it would await the outcome of a new “stress test” of the national electric grid before determining whether to stick with the long-promised nuclear phase-out by year’s end.

The results are due in the coming weeks and could mark a pivotal moment for Europe’s biggest economy, where households and businesses are bracing for a difficult winter.

The war in Ukraine has sent energy costs soaring and Russia has been squeezing gas deliveries to Europe, thwarting German efforts to fill stores before the cold weather arrives and raising the prospect of emergency energy-saving measures.

It is a dramatically different picture from earlier this year, when an initial stress test in March found that Germany’s remaining nuclear power plants were not needed to ensure energy security.

After the first report, the government maintained the plants would go offline by December 31.

Germany, under then-chancellor Angela Merkel, decided to definitively quit nuclear power in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan, a move that had widespread public support.

Within Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s three-party coalition government, his Social Democrats and their Green party partners have long argued against changing course — citing the costs, technical issues and safety concerns in keeping the nuclear plants going.

Supporters of the nuclear farewell have also pointed out that atomic power accounts for only around six per cent of Germany’s electricity supply and can contribute little to resolving the main problem, which is a lack of gas for heating.

But with the energy outlook rapidly worsening — Russia’s Gazprom has said it will reduce gas flows through the vital Nord Stream 1 pipeline to 20 per cent of capacity from Wednesday — Merkel’s own conservatives are among the loudest voices calling for a rethink.

Countries like France that are persisting with nuclear energy may have the right idea, opposition leader Friedrich Merz from the centre-right CDU has said.

He suggested that nuclear power can replace some of the gas used for electricity production.

“I’m predicting that the lifetime of the nuclear power plants will be prolonged at the end of the year,” Merz recently told public broadcaster ZDF. Scholz’s junior coalition partner, the liberal FDP, is also turning up the pressure.

— AFP

How to live with Covid-19 when you are tired of living with Covid-19



KNVUL SHEIKH

The writer is a NYT health reporter



HANNAH SEO

The writer is a science journalist

The United States is in the midst of another coronavirus surge, this time thanks to the omicron subvariant BA.5. Scientists warn that the new subvariant appears to be the virus’s most transmissible version to date, and it is reinfecting people who have already dealt with previous variants once or twice, sometimes as recently as a few weeks ago.

The small percentage of people who avoided Covid-19 for 2 1/2 years are also finding out BA.5 has ways of slipping past their defences. Even President Joe Biden, who had managed to avoid an infection, tested positive on Thursday. Like many Americans, Biden and his aides had let their guard down, loosening stringent Covid-19 precautions previously employed at the White House.

Everyone just wants to get back to normal, although polls show that few Americans are sure what living with Covid-19 should really look like. Most cities are unlikely to bring back mask mandates or other protective measures used earlier in the pandemic, or even in the original omicron surge.

“We’ve had a shift in our baseline,” said Michael Osterholm, a public health researcher and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. Hospitalisations have roughly doubled since May and more than 400 Americans are dying everyday, but these numbers are significantly lower than the peak of the winter omicron wave.

“Earlier in the pandemic, we would never have accepted these numbers,” Osterholm said.

There’s also the potential for developing symptoms of long Covid-19, which researchers are trying to fully understand. Still, experts are weighing in on those concerns.

“We can live our lives knowing very well that this risk exists,” said Dien Ho, a bioethicist at Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences.

The question is: Which public health measures does the nation need to prioritise. And what can you do individually to lower your risk of exposure, slow the relentless cycle of new variants and minimise the disruption to daily life? Here are five

steps to take, if you haven’t already.

1. Max out your vaccines and boosters.

If you have not received your booster — or any shots at all — experts say that the current surge is a good reason to schedule an appointment now. Vaccines provide excellent protection against serious illness and booster shots can amplify those benefits. But fewer than half of Americans have received boosters, and less than one-third of adults who are eligible for their

MOST CITIES ARE UNLIKELY TO BRING BACK MASK MANDATES OR OTHER PROTECTIVE MEASURES USED EARLIER IN THE PANDEMIC, OR EVEN IN THE ORIGINALOMICRON SURGE

second booster (or fourth shot) — those who are immunocompromised or older than 50 — have received it.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s use of the term “fully vaccinated” to describe the first two doses of vaccines early in the pandemic has not helped. Although the agency has since switched to saying that people should be “up to date” with all their shots, the early use of “fully vaccinated” has unfortunately stuck.



A health care worker administers a Covid-19 vaccine in Washington.

“A lot of people have said, ‘I’ve had my two shots and I’m done,’” Osterholm said.

2. Find your new community Covid-19 indicators.

You should keep an eye on Covid-19 statistics to figure out your own risk and decide when to add more levels of protection. For a majority of the pandemic, the CDC’s colour-coded map of community-level risk was a good indicator of cases and transmission rates. But the agency recently changed the way it calculates these risk levels to put more emphasis on local hospitalisation rates.

Case numbers no longer closely track with hospitalisations because of the mix of natural or vaccine immunity, home testing and treatments that are available, blurring real-time tracking of the virus. Instead, experts recommend using other ways to stay informed of your community’s Covid-19 risks: Check local news and tap into your social networks.

Talk to your family and friends as well as other members of your community to find out whether they’ve had Covid-19 recently or know anybody who has or recently had Covid-19, said Ajay Sethi, a public health researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Because you’re more likely to interact with people in your network, you may get a better sense of incidence in your community and what your own risk of getting sick may be. — The New York Times

I have retired, a big “thank you” to all...



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyp

The writer is a senior journalist, author and columnist

Finally, the moment came on July 18, 2022, to say goodbye to a fantastic journey that I started 24 years ago with Oman Daily Observer. While I took off my employee hat officially with the newspaper, a very big “Thank You” to all my colleagues at the Ministry of Information, readers, friends, and benefactors with whom I spent those wonderful years.

During my career with the Observer, I was witness to the huge growth that the country has achieved during the years of my stay here, though it set out on its growth path more than five decades ago with the blessed Renaissance march. I could also relish the warmth of the incredible hospitality, generosity, and friendliness of the people of this country with a congenial atmosphere.

I will be going back with the memories of late Sultan Qaboos who led this country to a modern state with a high standard of living and the succession of power to the new leadership under His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

I am glad that I could become an author during the period of my job with the Observer to document the history of Oman and its centuries-old relations with India in my book — *Across Sea and Space*.

What’s also truly meaningful to me was the outpouring of love and support that I received during my tryst with coronavirus infection last year. Whether in the form of prayers, wishes for healing, positive energy, kind phone calls, texts, emails, or any other form of support, I am infused with an unbelievable sense of gratitude to everyone for helping me be alive.

WHAT’S TRULY MEANINGFUL TO ME WAS THE OUTPOURING OF LOVE AND SUPPORT THAT I RECEIVED DURING MY TRYST WITH CORONAVIRUS INFECTION LAST YEAR

The kindness and compassion I’ve seen have touched my life and lifted my spirits. It has made all the difference in my recovery from the complex illness.

Now when I pen this column, I go back to the very famous quote “Retire from work, but not from life”. Yes, I stepped out of the office smilingly as I had a great time in this country of liberal oasis. And the course of my stay with this newspaper, with which I have a lot of memories to cherish, has been

incredibly enjoyable though intense.

Each phase of life has its own charm but professional life is a rollercoaster ride, full of ups and downs filled with accountabilities and responsibilities leaving one with mixed experiences of happiness and stress as well!

Looking back at my career which started in the days of clattering manual typewriters, hot metal, and the so-called ‘copy boys’ nearly four decades back in India, for me journalism is the best profession in the world, albeit I never had my hands on any field other than this!

Back then, it was still a much simpler time. Leave alone e-mails, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, even the Internet was not in use when set off in my profession as a trainee journalist after my graduation!

I’ve seen a rapid transformation over the last three decades — in both journalism and technology — and although it’s unclear what opportunities the future will bring us, I’m excited that I was part of that journey. During my ride in this profession, I have met many who have abandoned the field for the unsociable life that journalists do have. To be frank, this profession is not for those who prioritise socialising, shorter hours, and holidays. The job very often is gruelling and night shifts appalling.

But I do not regret and repent for choosing journalism as my main avocation. It has been interesting because it exposed me to a broad spectrum of human behaviour, some of it wonderful and thrilling, some less so, some even worse!

Although I started as a sub-editor trainee in India’s well-known Free Press Journal in the early 80s, writing, rather than editing, was the key and understanding for me to shift to writing despite the fact that subs are the silent army of journalism.

My career with the prominent Indian Express Group of Newspapers in its editions in different Indian cities was exciting for the new vistas that opened before me. I experienced the belief “Pen is mightier than the sword” during my almost a decade of professional growth in the group.

My most exhilarating reporting assignment was covering the world’s worst industrial gas disaster in the Central Indian city of Bhopal which claimed thousands of lives and affected many more in the toxic gas leak in November 1984. There were also occasions, I risked my life while travelling through the riot-hit Indian cities.

What I have learned all these years of my journey is getting the facts about government, the economy, social justice, and more is, what it takes to make good decisions. Good journalism is gathering raw information and crafting it into a form that conveys the facts to the audience in a way that is compelling, maybe even entertaining. I believe in the solid ethical core that characterises a good journalist and good journalism is clear, direct, and engages the reader!



DRESSED FOR THE DAY

Palestinians wear traditional costumes on the occasion of the dress day for Palestinian heritage, on Tuesday in the city of Ramallah in the West Bank. — AFP

US and Taliban make progress on Afghan reserves, but big gaps remain

CHARLOTTE GREENFIELD AND JONATHAN LANDAY

US and Taliban officials have exchanged proposals for the release of billions of dollars from Afghan central bank reserves held abroad into a trust fund, three sources familiar with the talks said, offering a hint of progress in efforts to ease Afghanistan’s economic crisis.

Significant differences between the sides remain, however, according to two of the sources, including the Taliban’s refusal to replace the bank’s top political appointees, one of whom is under US sanctions as are several of the movement’s leaders.

Some experts said such a move would help restore confidence in the institution by insulating it from interference by the group that seized power a year ago but which foreign governments do not recognise.

Freeing up cash may not solve all of Afghanistan’s financial troubles, but it would provide relief for a country hit by a slump in foreign aid, persistent drought and an earthquake in June that killed 1,000 people. Millions of Afghans are facing a second winter without enough to eat.

While the Taliban do not reject the concept of a trust fund, they oppose a US proposal for third-party control of the fund that would hold and disburse returned reserves, said a Taliban government source who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The United States has been in talks with Switzerland and other parties on the creation of a mechanism that would include the trust fund, disbursements from which would be decided with the help of an international board, according to a US source who also declined to be named in order to discuss the matter.

A possible model could be the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, a World Bank-administered fund created to get donations of foreign development assistance to Kabul, the US source added.

“No agreement has been reached yet,” said Shah Mehrabi, an Afghan-American economics professor who is on the Afghan central bank’s supreme council.

The US State Department and Switzerland’s Federal Department of Foreign Affairs declined to comment. The Afghan central bank did not respond to requests for comment.

US Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West, speaking at an Afghanistan-focused conference in Uzbekistan on Tuesday, welcomed

the dialogue.

“We have made it clear that a future recapitalisation of the (Afghanistan) central bank and the Afghan financial system is possible provided that reasonable and serious steps are taken to professionalise the central bank, to enhance its AML/CFT (anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing) architecture and its independence,” he said.

FREEING UP CASH MAY NOT SOLVE ALL OF AFGHANISTAN’S FINANCIAL TROUBLES, BUT IT WOULD PROVIDE RELIEF FOR A COUNTRY HIT BY A SLUMP IN FOREIGN AID, PERSISTENT DROUGHT AND AN EARTHQUAKE IN JUNE THAT KILLED 1,000 PEOPLE

Some \$9 billion in reserves have been held outside Afghanistan, including \$7 billion in the United States, since the Taliban overran Kabul last August as US-led forces withdrew after 20 years of fighting the militants.

Foreign governments and rights groups have accused the Taliban of abuses including extrajudicial killings during and after the insurgency, and the movement has curtailed women’s freedoms since regaining power.

The international community wants the group to improve its record on women’s and other rights before officially recognising it. The Taliban have promised to investigate alleged killings and say they are working to secure Afghans’ rights to education and free speech within the parameters of law.

At talks in Doha last month, the Taliban submitted to US officials their response to the US proposal for a mechanism to free up Afghan assets, said Mehrabi, the Taliban official and a senior diplomat.

Experts cautioned that releasing funds would bring only temporary relief and new revenue streams were needed to replace direct foreign aid that financed 70 per cent of the government budget before it was halted after the Taliban takeover. But the exchange of proposals was seen by some as a glimmer of hope that a system can be created that allows for the release of Afghan central bank funds while ensuring they are not accessed by the Taliban.

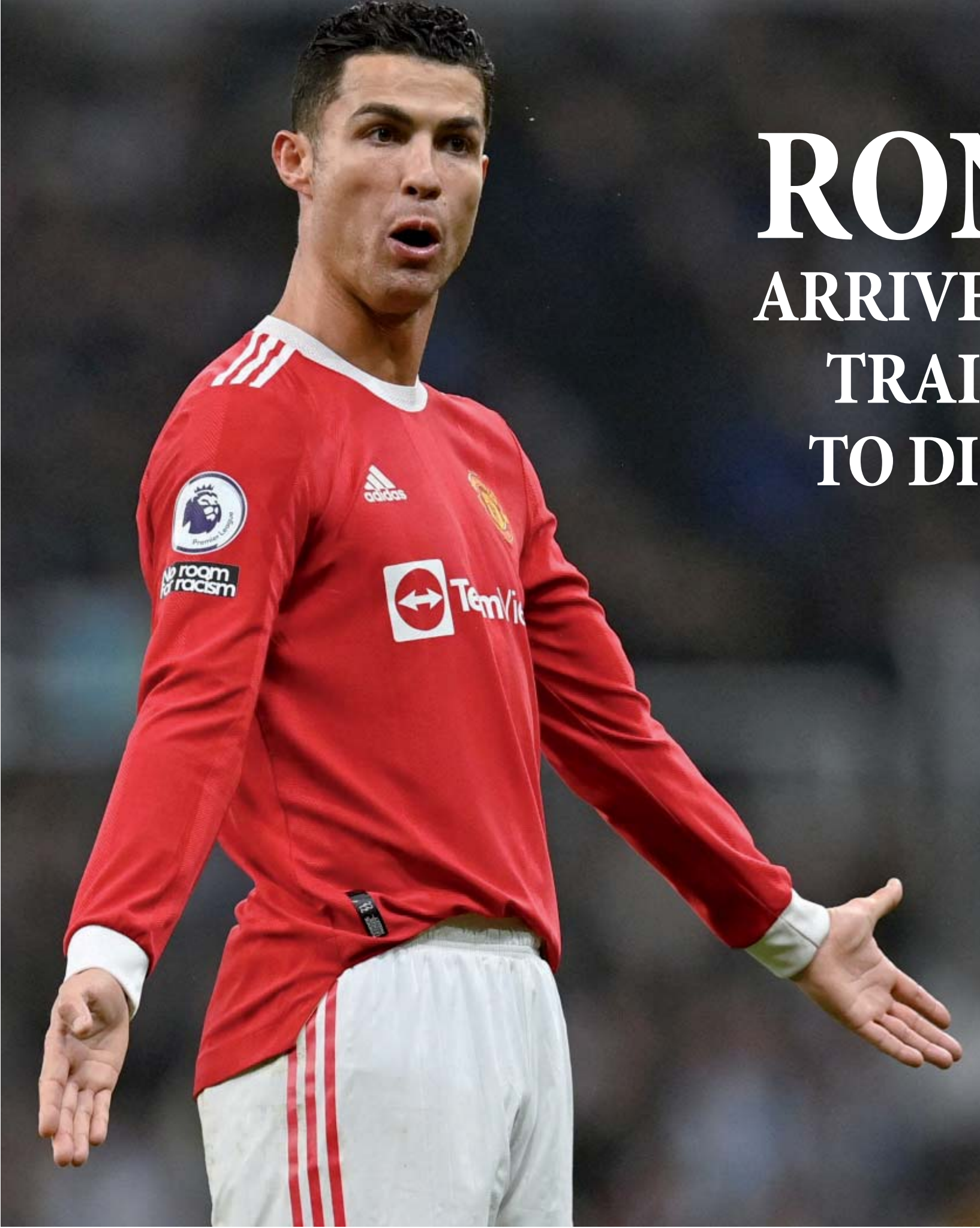
Negotiations on the assets and other issues faltered after Washington cancelled meetings in Doha in March when the Taliban reneged on their promise to open girls’ high schools.

“It is a positive move overall,” that the Taliban did not reject the US proposal, said Mehrabi, who added that he had not seen the Taliban counter-offer.

The Taliban official said the group was open to allowing a State Department-appointed contractor to monitor Afghanistan’s central bank compliance with anti-money laundering standards, and that monitoring experts would be able to go to Afghanistan. — Reuters



An Afghan money exchange dealer carries bundles of banknotes at an exchange market in Kabul. — Reuters file photo



RONALDO ARRIVES AT MAN UTD TRAINING GROUND TO DISCUSS FUTURE

LONDON: Cristiano Ronaldo has arrived at Manchester United's training ground to discuss his future at the club. Ronaldo arrived with his agent Jorge Mendes at Carrington on Tuesday morning ahead of talks with manager Erik ten Hag. The Portugal forward missed United's pre-season tour to Thailand and Australia because of personal reasons amid speculation over his future. New boss Ten Hag has previously said the 37-year-old is "not for sale" and "in our plans", but it has been reported that Ronaldo wants to play Champions League football. United failed to qualify for this season's Champions League after finishing sixth in the Premier League last term. Ten Hag's team instead will compete in the Europa League this season. Ronaldo has a year left on his United contract after rejoining from Juventus last August. He made his name at United after signing from Sporting Lisbon in 2003, spending six years at Old Trafford before joining Real Madrid for a then-world record transfer fee of £80 million (\$96 million). Ronaldo, who was United's top scorer with 24 goals last season, has been training at the Portuguese national team's headquarters in Lisbon. United start their Premier League campaign at home to Brighton on August 7 after final pre-season games this weekend against Atletico Madrid in Norway and Rayo Vallecano at Old Trafford. — dpa

■ ROYAL CAVALRY SNATCHED THREE MEDALS AT HORSE BEAUTY CHAMPIONSHIP IN POLAND



Royal Cavalry Snatched three medals at Horse Beauty Championship in Poland. The Royal Cavalry achieved three medals in the 2022 Sopot Arabian Horse Championship in Poland. The foal 'Prestige RC' won the silver medal for two to three years old category and managed to earn 91.90 point. At the stallion above four years category, 'Shrim RC' claimed bronze medal with 92.5 point. At more than four years category while AKS Shakira' won the silver medal with 92.70 point and all the three horses qualified for the final qualifiers.

■ ROYAL CAVALRY ACHIEVED FIRST AND SECOND PLACE IN FRENCH



The Royal Cavalry claimed first and second places at the French Pompadour Racecourse for purebred Arabian horses over a distance of 1,700 metres. The WC accomplishment 'Jalil' led by jockey Michael Forest and 'Khalsa' led by jockey Maxime Folon respectively won in the second half competitions.

Oman TT team paddlers taking part in West Asian Table Tennis Championship in Jordan

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JULY 26

As many as six paddlers from Oman Table Tennis team are taking part in the West Asian Table Tennis Championship which began in Amman, Jordan, on Tuesday and will continue until Sunday. Oman team paddlers are competing in U-11, U-13, U-15 and U-17 categories. The head coach of Oman TT team, Iranian Omid Shamas Sharbabki, opted Ahmed al Riyami, Loqman al Farsi, Turki al Abri, Moayad al Mutawa, Iyad al Jassasi, and Ali al Rawahi as squad members of the Oman team. In U-13 category, Oman team suffered a 3-1 loss against Lebanon in the opener on Tuesday. Oman U-13 paddlers placed in group A beside Lebanon and United Arab Emirates (UAE) teams. Oman's U-13 team is represented by Turki al Abri, Moayad al Mutawa, Iyad al Jassasi and Ali al Rawahi. In U-15 category, Oman team was



clubbed with Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait teams in Group 2. In this group, UAE team beat Kuwait 3-2. Oman U-15 team comprised Ahmed al Riyami, Turki al Abri and Moayad al Mutawa. A total of 12 countries are attending the tournament in Amman including: Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and the hosts Jordan. Oman's international umpire Maryam al Alawi has been nominated to officiate as an umpire in the event. She has

officiated many games in the opening day including Qatar and Iraq match in the U-15 category competitions. The match finished for Qatar team 3-1. In the 2019 edition of West Asian Championships in Jordan, Omani paddlers had showed an impressive performance as they managed to capture third place. Oman's paddlers had defeated United Arab Emirates 3-1 in the third/fourth place match. It is expected Oman paddlers may achieve top places in the existing edition in different junior categories.

Garcia to ‘hold off’ on quitting DP World Tour to keep alive Ryder Cup hopes

LONDON: Sergio Garcia, who plays on the rebel LIV Golf circuit, says he is going to “hold off” on quitting the European-based DP World Tour as he assesses his Ryder Cup future.

The former Masters champion said at this month’s British Open he was likely to quit the tour, which would have ended his chances of playing in the team competition between the United States and Europe.

But the 42-year-old, Europe’s all-time record points-scorer at the event, held every two years, has decided to wait to see how things unfold.

“I want to at least see what’s happening when the Ryder Cup qualification starts,” he told ESPN. “See what kind of rules and eligibilities they have in there.

“If I agree with what they (are), I’ll definitely keep playing whatever I can on the tour and try to qualify for that Ryder Cup team. And if not, then we’ll move on. But it is definitely something that is in my mind.”

The next Ryder Cup starts on September 29, 2023 at the Marco Simone Golf and Country Club in Rome.

US players who have signed up to LIV Golf have been indefinitely suspended from the PGA Tour, meaning they are no longer eligible to play in the Ryder Cup.

The DP World Tour fined its members who played in last month’s inaugural LIV event in London and banned them from three events but no indefinite suspension has been imposed.

Henrik Stenson was last week stripped of the European Ryder Cup captaincy, hours before it was confirmed he was signing up for the Saudi-backed LIV Golf series.

Spain’s Garcia, who won the Masters in 2017, said he wanted to remain on the DP World Tour.

“I told Keith Pelley (CEO of the tour), ‘I want to keep being a member of the DP World Tour. I want to play my minimum, still support the tour, still have my eligibilities to make Ryder Cup teams,’” Garcia said.

“He said, ‘That’s great, but we got to do what’s best for us. We’ll see what that is.’”

The third event of the LIV series starts in Bedminster, New Jersey, on Friday.

— AFP



Olympic javelin champion Chopra out of Commonwealth Games

NEW DELHI: India’s Olympic javelin champion Neeraj Chopra was ruled out of the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham with injury on Tuesday, two days ahead of the opening ceremony.

Chopra, 24, picked up the injury during the World Athletics Championships in Oregon, where he won silver at the weekend.

The Indian Olympic Association did not say what the injury was but after coming second behind Grenada’s Anderson Peters he complained about “discomfort” in his thigh. Chopra was the reigning champion at the Commonwealth Games, which start on Thursday.

“Chopra had called me earlier today from the US to convey his inability to take

part in the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games owing to fitness concerns,” Indian Olympic Association secretary general Rajeev Mehta said in a statement.

“(He) had an MRI scan done on Monday and, based on it, he has been advised a month’s rest by his medical team.”

Chopra made history for his country when he won the javelin at last summer’s Tokyo Games, becoming India’s first Olympic athletics gold medallist.

Speaking after the World Championships in Oregon, Chopra was quoted as saying by the NDTV news network: “After the fourth throw I did feel a bit of discomfort in my thigh, I wasn’t able to put in that much effort.

“That was on my mind, but I

just wanted to make sure I can throw. So I strapped my thigh.”

Hunger for gold

Chopra threw farther in Oregon than he did in Tokyo and declared himself “satisfied” with the silver medal, local media reports said.

“The hunger for gold will continue in me,” he said. “But I have to believe we cannot get gold each time.”

Chopra’s injury means that he will no longer be the flag-bearer for the over 200-strong Indian contingent in Birmingham, Athletics Federation of India president Adille Sumariwalla said.

“Neeraj has said that since he is not 100 percent fit to compete at the Commonwealth Games, he would not be the flag-bearer of the Indian contingent at the athletes’

parade in the opening ceremony,” Sumariwalla said in a statement.

Chopra, who won gold at the last edition of the Games at the Gold Coast, in 2018, had been in top form this season until the injury struck.

He broke his own national record at the Diamond League in Stockholm in June as he registered a personal best throw of 89.94m.

India, the Commonwealth’s most populous country, is not generally known as a sporting powerhouse — except for cricket — but it has regularly performed well at the Games.

Its athletes came third in the medals table behind hosts Australia, and England, at the Gold Coast and were in the top five at the previous four. — AFP

Stano edges Kawano by one second to grab gold

EUGENE, Ore: Italy’s Massimo Stano won the men’s 35km race walk at the World Athletics Championships in dramatic fashion on Sunday, edging Japan’s Masatora Kawano by one second.

Stano and Kawano battled shoulder-to-shoulder as the leading pair in the final 4km, but the Italian coped well with the pressure and accelerated in the final 300m to seal the gold medal.

Grabbing an Italian flag when he was on the final stretch, the 20km race walk Olympic champion finished in a time of 2:23:14, while Kawano sank to his knees in despair after crossing the line a second later.

“I can’t believe even if I won the Olympic gold. In theory, it would be easy to understand what happened today, but it is not,” Stano said.

“I am happy to win gold in a different distance and show that I can compete in other distances...”

Kawano did a great race. I had to change pace a few times to win today. He really tired me.”

Stano’s gold is Italy’s second medal at this year’s championships after Elena Vallortigara won bronze in the women’s high jump on Tuesday.

Kawano, the fastest race walker coming into Sunday’s event, had to settle for silver but the Japanese said he was happy, having suffered anaemia six months ago.

Sweden’s Perseus Karlstrom took the bronze, mirroring his achievement from the 20km race walk last week, and he was all smiles as he crossed the line wearing a blue-and-yellow Viking helmet.

Earlier, Japan’s Daisuke Matsunaga had looked well set for a medal when he led the race following an electric start but he ran out of gas after the 20km mark, eventually finishing 26th.

— Reuters



Nigerians bask in Amusan’s record-breaking athletic glory



LAGOS: Nigerians, including three presidential candidates, basked in the glory of the country’s first world athletics gold medal, welcoming a respite from bad news about economic hardships and deepening insecurity.

Tobi Amusan, 25, won gold in the women’s 100m hurdles on Sunday in the World Athletics Championships after breaking the world record in a semi-final where she clocked 12.12sec in Eugene, Oregon.

Her winning time of 12.06sec in the final will not be recognised as a world record, however, due to regulations over a strong tailwinds assisting runners.

President Muhammadu Buhari praised the “outstanding feat by a compatriot and two-time African Games champion, who in one night stunned the athletics world with her superlative and stellar performance”.

He said Amusan’s feat would inspire upcoming generations of Nigerian athletes.

Buhari, who came to power in 2015, will step down after next year’s presidential elections.

The three main challengers in the February ballot also hailed Amusan’s success as well as that of Nigeria’s Ese Brume who won silver medal in the long jump.

Atiku Abubakar of the main opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) said he was “particularly proud of this feat... it underscores my plan to refocus investments in sports, and creative sectors, amongst others.”

Peter Obi of the Labour Party said the athletes’ feats showed Nigeria was “a great country blessed with talents ready to rule the world.”

Ordinary Nigerians also showed their appreciation.

“She has done it for us, Tobi Amusan, you have written your name boldly in our history and posterity will be kind to you. Thank you, Nigeria is proud of you!!!” said Enetomhe Stephen on social media.

Praise for the athletes comes as Nigeria is struggling with high inflation and unemployment as well as power outages and jihadist and gang attacks, including killings and kidnappings for ransom.

Kyrgios handed wildcard for US Open tune-up in Cincinnati



OHIO: Wimbledon runner-up Nick Kyrgios has been handed a wildcard into next month’s US Open tune-up event in Cincinnati, Ohio, organisers of the Western & Southern Open said on Monday.

For the 27-year-old Australian, who two weeks ago fell to Novak Djokovic in his first Grand Slam singles final, this will mark his sixth appearance in Cincinnati and first since 2019.

The entry list for the August 13-21 Western & Southern Open includes world number one Daniil Medvedev and former champions Alexander Zverev (2021) — who missed Wimbledon with injury — Grigor Dimitrov (2017), Marin Cilic (2016) and Rafa Nadal (2013).

Twice champion Novak Djokovic is also on the Cincinnati entry list but is unlikely to play due to his refusal to be vaccinated against Covid-19. Travellers seeking to enter the United States have to provide proof of vaccination. — **Reuters**

Germany’s Buehl out of women’s Euros semi-final due to Covid



ENGLAND: Germany forward Klara Buehl will miss their women’s European Championship semi-final meeting with France on Wednesday after testing positive for Covid-19, her team announced on Tuesday.

“She is currently symptom-free and was immediately isolated. Further tests of the entire team and staff were negative,” the team said on Twitter.

Germany beat Austria 2-0 last week to reach the semi-finals, continuing their quest for a record-extending ninth title.

Buehl has featured in four games in the tournament scoring one goal — in the 2-0 group stage win over Spain that ensured they would go through to the quarter-finals with a match to spare. She has also provided one assist so far.

She made her debut for the national team in 2019 and has netted 13 goals for them.

Hosts England will take on Sweden in the other semi-final for a spot in the Wembley title clash on July 31. — **Reuters**





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HSBC, Sohar Int get initial nod for merger proposal

NEW GROWTH: HSBC Bank Middle East Limited (HBME) weighs plan to establish new wholly owned banking branch in Oman



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JULY 26

HSBC Bank Oman SAOG and Sohar International Bank SAOG announced on Tuesday that they have agreed to enter into a non-binding memorandum of understanding on proceeding to exclusive discussions in relation to the possible merger between the two entities.

The publicly listed banks said in separate filings that the basis of a merger will be by incorporation whereby HSBC Oman would be

dissolved and its shareholders offered a consideration valuing HSBC Oman at 1.0x book value, with such consideration consisting of shares of Sohar International with the option for the shareholders of HSBC Oman to elect to receive the consideration in cash, provided that the maximum cash consideration payable by Sohar International to the shareholders of HSBC Oman that elect to receive cash consideration shall not exceed 70 per cent of the total consideration payable by Sohar International.

The shares of Sohar International that would form part of the consideration to the shareholders of HSBC Oman would value Sohar International at 1.0x book value.

The respective book value of each bank would be calculated at a later date.

The ongoing exclusive discussions, negotiations and the potential merger shall remain subject to due diligence and entry into definitive agreements, in addition to obtaining final approvals from the banks’

respective boards, regulators and shareholders, the lenders said.

HSBC Oman CEO Melika Betley further added that the bank has been informed by HSBC Group, its major shareholder, of its intention for HSBC Bank Middle East Limited (HBME) to establish a new wholly owned banking branch in Oman.

“If the proposed merger discussions were to lead to a binding agreement, HBME would then request regulatory approvals for the setup of this new branch,” Betley added.



Salalah Port set to become leading bunkering hub in region

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 26

Port of Salalah and FECO have signed an agreement to pave the way for Salalah to become one of the leading bunkering hubs in the region.

FECO has already commenced its operations in Salalah effective June 2022. Having stationed the M/T “Sea Dweller” at Salalah, FECO is already supplying bunkers by ship-to-ship transfer, ex pipeline and by road tankers.

With the implementation of IMO regulations, the demand for low sulphur fuel has increased, however ship owners are challenged by its supply in the region, FECO intends to offer fuel of various types and grades while the ship is visiting the port as well as at the anchorage apart from using the Salalah capacity for storage and bunker trading.

The principals of FECO have vast experience in physical bunkering operations which span over 22 years. Furthermore, FECO and its principals have been providing bunkering vessels and running bunkering terminals for Oil Majors (including the Salalah bunkering

facility) for over 20 years.

FECO is a customer-oriented company providing the best quality fuels in the world at most competitive prices resulting from a low cost and highly efficient operation.

Salalah, geographically located in the most significant spot in the busiest East West shipping route is ambitious of offering bunkering as a value-added service not only for the ships visiting the Port but also for the ships plying in this route.

With this objective in mind Port of Salalah invited international tenders in November 2021, for its tank farm which has a storage capacity of 100000 MT of liquid fuel, through a competitive bidding process and subsequent evaluation culminated in finalising the deal in April 2022.

“We are excited at this partnership with Port of Salalah and we hope to expand our presence in the region and are confident of being able to offer bunkering at very competitive pricing to a wide range of customers visiting the Port of Salalah and off Salalah,” said Ioannis Koilakos, Partner and Director of FECO.

Usufruct agreements worth RO 3 million signed

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning on Tuesday signed 19 land development (usufruct) agreements in various sectors and in different governorates.

The project, worth RO 3 million, will be set up on a total area exceeding 372,000 square metres. The agreements were signed with the companies executing the projects by Dr



Mohammed bin Ali al Mutawa, Ministry’s Under-Secretary for Urban Planning.

The agreements include the establishment of a service centre, a multi-purpose hall, factories

Which sectors stand to benefit from a UK-GCC trade deal?

MUSCAT: As part of plans to expand and diversify its global trade partners, the GCC has launched negotiations with the UK on a free trade agreement that is expected to bolster the bloc’s economy, help attract investment and provide greater opportunities for local businesses.

On June 22 the two parties officially launched talks on a comprehensive trade deal, with Anne-Marie Trevelyan, the UK trade secretary, meeting with Nayef Falah al Hajraf, the GCC secretary-general, in Riyadh.

Trevelyan then travelled to Dubai to meet with representatives from the six GCC countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The talks, which followed months of exploratory discussions,

are focused on securing a free trade agreement that would reduce or remove tariffs on a series of goods and services. Current annual trade between the GCC and the UK stands at around \$40 billion.

While there is no official timeline for the completion of the deal, UK and GCC policymakers hope to launch the first round of negotiations in the third quarter of this year, with local and international media reporting that both sides are hopeful of securing a deal before the end of 2023.

ENERGISING RENEWABLES

One area where the deal is expected to have a significant impact is renewable energy.

While the GCC’s oil and gas reserves are not likely to be included in the deal, any



prospective agreement is expected to help Gulf countries diversify their respective energy sectors and reduce their reliance on hydrocarbons.

Talks are set to look at removing tariffs on renewable energy infrastructure such as UK-made

wind turbine parts, while GCC countries would also benefit from greater access to UK clean energy technology, such as innovations that improve energy efficiency in homes, buildings and businesses.

To this end, on July 27, Wednesday, Omani authorities

will host a conference in London highlighting the various renewable energy and decarbonisation investment opportunities in the country.

Organised by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, in partnership with the Oman Investment Authority and others, the “New Energy in Oman” event will feature a series of speakers from both Oman and the UK, and aims to provide a forum for bilateral meetings with UK companies operating in the sector.

Like many Gulf countries, Oman has set ambitious renewable energy targets, with the country aiming to generate 30 per cent of electricity from renewable sources by 2030.

The event builds on recent developments between the GCC and the UK in the energy sector. In January Oman and UK energy major BP signed two deals to support the construction of renewable energy and green hydrogen projects in the Sultanate of Oman.



GBM Oman names new GM

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 26

Gulf Business Machines (Oman), a 100 per cent Omani-owned company, has announced the appointment of Mahmoud el Kordy (pictured) as General Manager succeeding Eddy Abboud.

In his new role, El Kordy will continue leading GBM Oman's efforts in support of the Sultanate's Digital Strategy, which strives to transform Oman into a modern digital society.

El Kordy brings over 30 years of experience in the IT industry across multiple geographies, and joins GBM from IBM Middle East and Africa where he held several sales and leadership positions across Systems and Big Data & Analytics. Prior to that, El Kordy was in IBM Europe for several years leading Services Sales.

As GBM's General Manager, he will work hand-in-hand with GBM's clients in the Sultanate of Oman, as they embark on their digital transformation journeys.

Commenting on his appointment, El Kordy said: "I am very excited to lead GBM's Oman operations to drive the company's strategy aimed at accelerating the Oman digital transformation and aligning with Oman Vision 2040. Our focus will be around Hybrid Cloud, AI and Security to meet The National Program for Digital Economy."

Omantel participates in 'Khareef season'

MUSCAT: Omantel continues to mark the Khareef (Monsoon) season in Dhofar yearly by engaging with local communities and visitors through entertaining and fun activities.

Visitors from Oman and abroad flock to the Governorate of Dhofar during the Khareef season to enjoy the beauty of the region as it acquires its green scenery and sees frequent rainfalls with moderate weather conditions.

Omantel's campaign reflects on the cultural heritage of the Governorate of Dhofar, and it supports and carries out activities at various touristic spots in the region.

Commenting on the campaign, Saba al Busaidy, Senior Manager of Corporate Affairs at Omantel, stated "The khareef season is a unique time for us to enhance



Saba al Busaidy

our engagement with both the communities in Dhofar and visitors from different governorates of Oman and other countries".

"We have commenced all the necessary preparations well in advance to expand our network coverage in the region, especially for 5G, to provide a unique

and seamless experience to our customers. In addition, we have taken all the necessary measures to ensure continuity in meeting the growing communication needs, as a result of the remarkable hike in the number of visitors to Dhofar during this period" she added.

Al Busaidy pointed out that Omantel has established two temporary outlets in Dhofar Governorate, one in Ittin and the other at Al Hafa, enabling an easy and efficient delivery of Omantel's services to the visitors.

Realising Omantel's key involvement in the khareef season in Dhofar since its launch, Omantel dedicates its services and capabilities to fulfil the increased communication needs in the region during this period to ensure the success of the season.



Salalah FZ, Advanced Industries to set up hi-tech power unit

SALALAH: Salalah Free Zone and Advanced Industries Inc. of the United States have signed an agreement to the tune of RO 29 million to set up a unit for the production of photovoltaic solar panels.

The agreement provides for the establishment of a factory for production of photovoltaic solar panels having a lumpsum capacity of 200 million-watt

per annum—each producing 390-watts of electricity—on a total area of 10,000 sqm.

The pact helps the refurbishment of investment in the solar energy sector, the diversification of industries at Salalah Free Zone and the empowerment of public-private partnership. It comes as a boon to investors in renewable and sustainable energy. — ONA

Own a Kia Sonet, get a chance to win fully paid trip to Fifa World Cup

MUSCAT: Get the most out of a new Sonet with Kia's latest offer. Own a Kia Sonet and get a chance to win a fully paid trip to watch Fifa World Cup event in Qatar. Kia customers buying a brand new Kia can get a chance to Scratch & Win more than 100 match tickets where they can witness teams like Belgium, Brazil, Germany, Japan and more, LIVE in action. Apart from Fifa Qatar match tickets, customers will also get Comprehensive Service up to 50,000 kms and 1 Year Insurance. The campaign will end on November 4, 2022.

Whether it is enjoying a relaxing weekend, or shop hopping for the latest offers, the Kia Sonet SUV makes your driving experiences a breeze. Loaded with impressive power, space, feature and more, the Sonet offers more than you wish for.

The Sonet makes every drive fun with a potent 1.5L Engine that is paired to a CVT Transmission and offers 17.5Kmpl fuel average.

The Sonet is appealing in every sense. Its focus on placing various features around the driver makes journeys even more convenient for the driver. A well laid-out, intuitive infotainment and cluster interface, the Sonet is built taking into consideration the end user's experience.

The Sonet comes with Android Auto and Apple CarPlay feature, Audio Remote Control, Bluetooth, USB charger. Harbours functional qualities in every inch of its ergonomic space.

The Sonet's attractive exterior is underlined by the body colour outside mirror, 2-tone bumper, power outside mirror, body colour door handles, side repeater lamps in outside mirror, 16" alloy



wheels, chrome radiator grille, rear fog lamps, LED front fog lamps, roof rack, LED headlamps, LED daytime running lamps and more.

Boasting multiple segment-first features that offer the ultimate driving experience for customers,

the Sonet provides comfort, convenience, and safety.

Fitted with 8" Audio Display, the Sonet also comes with other smart features such as remote engine start, auto cruise control and more. Adding to increased levels of convenience as features

like keyless entry system, smart key with button start, central door lock and more.

Kia has ensured that every drive with the Sonet is as hassle free and safe as possible, thanks to a rigorous set of measures created in line with Kia's pillars of safety. Among the Sonet's key safety features are driver and front passenger airbags, ABS (anti-lock braking system), ESC (Electronic Stability Control), Rear parking assist system, Rear view camera, tyre pressure monitoring system (TPMS) and ISOFIX child-seat anchoring points.

Reliable International Automotive (RIA), the distributor for Kia in Oman provides a rewarding ownership experience for customers. Excellent product attributes and unmatched facilities easily ensure their absolute satisfaction, every mile of the way.

Which sectors stand to benefit from a UK-GCC trade deal?

FROM PAGE 13

Meanwhile, during bilateral talks in March, then-UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged Saudi Arabia to increase oil output to help secure global energy supplies, highlighting the key role that Gulf countries play in ensuring global energy security.

Bolstering food security Elsewhere, free trade talks are also expected to yield progress on agricultural imports and food security.

Figures involved in the discussions have flagged the possibility of the GCC reducing or removing tariffs on food and drinks imports from the UK, which currently range from 5 per cent to 25 per cent for various products.

In addition to providing a boost to farmers in the UK, such a deal would help shore up food security in the GCC.

Following the disruption of global supply chains associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and, more recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, food security has become a more pertinent issue for governments in the GCC, which has some of the most import-

dependent countries in the world when it comes to food.

As OBG has detailed, at the beginning of the pandemic countries in the bloc imported around 85 per cent of their food. Almost all rice consumed in the region was imported, as well as some 93 per cent of cereals, approximately 62 per cent of meat and 56 per cent of vegetables.

While countries in the region have reacted to recent events by increasing investment in agri-tech and improving efforts to bolster agricultural self-sufficiency, any agreement easing the import of food and drink products could further benefit the bloc's food security.

GCC trade footprint

Aside from individual sectors, the launch of free trade talks is significant for the GCC as it seeks to diversify its trade partners and improve its position in global trade.

On top of existing free trade deals with New Zealand, Singapore and the European Free Trade Area countries of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, the GCC is in trade negotiations with the EU, Japan,



China, South Korea, Australia, Pakistan, India, Turkey and the Mercosur member countries of South America.

These agreements are expected to play a key role in attracting foreign investment to the region, particularly as GCC countries embark on broad economic transformation strategies to diversify their economies.

For example, as part of its long-term economic plans, Saudi Arabia has launched a series of mega-projects designed to stimulate economic activity in non-oil sectors.

They include the \$500bn NEOM start city, which operates as a high-tech city for residents and businesses and functions as a tourist destination; the \$8bn

Qiddiya entertainment city outside Riyadh; and the Red Sea Project, a 34,000-sq-km luxury tourism development.

The launch of trade talks is in many ways the culmination of a recent increase in cooperation between the UK and individual GCC countries.

In January Oman and the UK signed an agreement to strengthen their already close economic ties. UK companies have a long history of investment in Oman, and accounted for around 50 per cent of foreign investment in the country in recent years, according to data from Oman's National Centre for Statistics and Information.

"The UK-GCC free trade agreement will deepen the

historic business ties we already enjoy with the UK, unlocking significant opportunities for the Sultanate of Oman's ambitious business community. It will help enhance our competitive position in the UK market, as well as boost growth across goods, services and investment," Qais al Yousef, Oman's Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, told OBG.

"It will also present opportunities in renewable energy, manufacturing, logistics, tourism, mining, fisheries and education – sectors important to the success of Oman Vision 2040 and areas where the UK is a global leader. Indeed, it has the potential to create sustainable, green jobs from Dover to Dhofar. It is an agreement that, when enacted, will be good for Omani workers, businesses and families. A milestone in bilateral relations."

Elsewhere, in a sign of a similar strengthening of ties, in March Saudi Arabia and the UK signed a memorandum of understanding to form a strategic partnership council to bolster bilateral investment and cooperation.

With \$13.2bn in bilateral trade last year, an increase of 3.9 per

cent on 2020, Saudi Arabia is the UK's largest trading partner in the GCC, accounting for one-third of its business with the bloc.

This was followed in late May by the announcement that Qatar would invest \$12bn in the UK's economy over the next five years as part of a new strategic investment partnership.

The deal, which builds on the estimated £40bn (\$47.9bn) in existing Qatari investment in the country, will focus on sectors such as financial technology, zero-emissions vehicles, life sciences and cybersecurity.

The agreement follows a similar deal struck between the UK and the UAE. Signed in March last year, the UAE-UK Sovereign Investment Partnership will see Mubadala Investment Company, Abu Dhabi's private investment vehicle, invest £800m (\$959 m) in UK life sciences over the next five years.

The partnership was significantly expanded in September last year, with Mubadala committing to invest an additional £10bn (\$12 bn) in technology, infrastructure and the energy transition.

(c) Oxford Business Group

India’s economic outlook at the mercy of monsoon

RAJENDRA JADHAV AND MAYANK BHARDWAJ

The monsoon, which accounts for about 75 per cent of India’s annual rainfall, is the lifeblood of its nearly \$3 trillion agriculture-dependent economy.

Asia’s third-largest economy and the world’s top producer of a host of critical crops such as rice, wheat and sugar has received 11 per cent more than average monsoon rain since the four-month season began on June 1. An average monsoon is rainfall between 96 per cent and 104 per cent of a 50-year average of 89 cm over the season.

However, the uneven nature of this year’s monsoon — patchy in some areas, with torrential downpours in others — has raised concerns about crop yields and output, complicating government efforts to tame inflation.

The spread and distribution of monsoon rainfall has been erratic across India. Overall monsoon rains were 8 per cent below average in June, with a shortfall as high as 54 per cent in some regions.

A sudden surge in the first half of July, however, erased the deficit and caused flooding in many states. While the southern, western, and central parts of the country have received above-average rainfall, farmers in the northern and eastern regions have suffered from a lack of summer rain.

Though the sowing of cotton, soybeans and sugar cane is higher than last year, traders are worried about crop yields after planting was delayed by the suboptimal June rain.

Meanwhile, a prolonged period of above-average rain in the cotton, soybean and sugar cane belt could cripple the country’s food output.

A dry spell in June and heavy rains in July have hit almost every summer-sown crop, but rice, cotton and vegetable crops are the worst hit.

India’s top rice regions in the east — Bihar, Jharkhand and some parts of West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh states — have recorded a rainfall deficit as high as 57 per cent.

As a result, rice planting has dropped by 19 per cent so far this season.

Conversely, incessant rain and floods have hit the cotton, soybean and pulse crops in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states.

Rice is the most critical crop for India, the world’s biggest exporter of the staple. Lower output could force New Delhi to curb rice shipments to ensure sufficient supplies for the country’s 1.4 billion people.

Any protectionist measure by India, the world’s second-biggest producer of the grain, will drive up prices in global markets already hit by record food price inflation. — Reuters

A prolonged period of above-average rain in the cotton, soybean and sugar cane belt could cripple the country’s food output



PRIZED LAUNCH

Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) Governor John Mangudya poses for a photograph with a sample of a gold coin during its launch in Harare. — Reuters

Despite tough times ahead, pays soar in law firms



ANDY JALIL
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The writer is our correspondent based in the UK

London law firms have been posting bumper results this year and passing the £ 1 million mark for average pay for firms’ partners. Firms, such as, Pinsent Masons, Osborne Clarke and Simmons & Simmons, among others, have reported strong numbers for the last financial year, a sign of a solid period for the UK legal sector.

Simmons boosted revenue by 6 per cent to £465 million in the year to 30 April, with profit up 8 per cent to £185 million, and profit per equity partner up 2 per cent to just over £1 million, the firm said last week.

Pinsent Masons posted a nearly 6 per cent revenue increase to £531.1 million, with profit per equity partner rising to 16 per cent to £739,000, it said earlier this month.

Osborne Clarke boosted its revenue 19 per cent to £407 million, with UK partner pay rising 11 per cent to £796,000 the firm said last month. Magic Circle law firms Allen & Overy, Linklaters, Freshfields Bruckhaus and Clifford Chance are expected to announce their results over the coming weeks.

Tougher times
Despite the strong run of early results, there are signs that London law firms are worried the good times may be drawing to a

close, and are preparing for tougher times to come. Simmons’ managing partner Jeremy Hoyland said in a statement: “The firm is well-positioned to meet the challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead of us.”

International law firm Baker McKenzie announced last week, that it has boosted salaries for newly qualified lawyers in London to £110,000, from £105,000 effective 1 July, the firm said in a statement earlier this month.

Baker McKenzie’s pay increase comes after Linklaters and Allen & Overy said last month that they were holding newly qualified lawyer salaries steady at £107,500 after two years of raging pay inflation in the sector.

Allen & Overy cited a potential market slowdown for its reluctance to increase salaries, with a spokesperson pointing to a “more challenging business environment.”

In May, Clifford Chance boosted salaries for newly qualified lawyers to £125,000 per year, while earlier this month Herbert Smith Freehills said that it was increasing pay for its newly qualified lawyers to £120,000.

The firm’s chair and senior partner Rebecca Maslen-Stannage said that the pay increase made sense even in the face of a potential economic slump.

“In tougher markets, if you are willing to hold your nerve and back yourself, that’s actually where there’s the best opportunity for market repositioning,” she said. Pay at US law firms has soared even higher with newly qualified lawyers in the London office of Akin Gump now on £179,000, Roll on Friday reported.

The firm’s newly qualified are paid \$164,000 which equates to nearly £180,000 because of the exchange rate that the firm has adopted to calculate their pay amid a slide in the value of sterling against the US dollar.

Bonus
Baker McKenzie said it was holding its pay rates for trainee lawyers steady at £50,000 for first years and £55,000 for second years. Solicitors undertake a two-year training contract at a law firm before qualifying to the profession. The firm’s lawyers will also be eligible to receive a discretionary bonus on top of their base salary, the firm said.

“We believe in rewarding in a fair, consistent and competitive manner. The attraction, retention and development of our people is key to the success of our firm and is at the heart of our strategy,” the firm’s London managing partner Ed Poulton said in a statement.

As prices soar in Ukraine, war adds economic havoc to the human toll



LIZ ALDERMAN

The writer is the Paris-based chief European business correspondent for NYT

At his compact stall in Lviv’s main outdoor food market, Ihor Korprii arranged jars of blueberries that he and his wife had picked from a nearby forest into an attractive display. Fragrant dill and fresh peas harvested from their garden lay in neat piles on a table.

A schoolteacher surviving on modest pay, Korprii peddles produce during summers to supplement his family’s income. But this year, he has had to raise prices by over 10 per cent to make up for a surge in fuel and fertiliser costs brought on by Russia’s invasion. Now, buyers are scarce, and sales have slumped by more than half.

“War has driven up the cost of almost everything, and people are buying much, much less,” said Korprii, pointing with weather-beaten hands to a heap of unsold carrots. “Everyone, including us, is tightening their belts. They’re trying to save money because they don’t know what the future will bring.”

Since Russia attacked Ukraine, food, energy and commodity prices have climbed around the world, worsening global inflation and inflicting financial hardship on millions of vulnerable people.

Few countries are feeling the bite as much as Ukraine, where Russia’s deadly campaign of attrition is piling economic havoc atop a devastating humanitarian toll. Prices here have jumped more

than 21 per cent from a year ago, one of the highest rates on the continent, as Russian attacks on critical infrastructure and Russian occupation of major industrial and agriculture-producing regions in the southeast sow chaos in supply chains. Fuel prices are up 90 per cent from a year ago, while food costs have surged over 35 per cent, according to the National Bank of Ukraine.

The economy is expected to contract by over one-third this year, and the government has warned it faces a fiscal shortfall of over \$5 billion a month because of the war. Ukraine narrowly avoided a sovereign debt default last week.

Although international institutions have provided nearly \$13 billion in financing

for Ukraine, the support is only going so far: The central bank has devalued the hryvnia, the country’s currency, by 25 per cent against the US dollar to head off a financial crisis — a move that will make many goods even more costly.

That is hardly welcome news for businesses such as CSAD-Yavoriv, a family-run trucking company that transports commercial goods, as well as vital grain and humanitarian supplies, in Ukraine and across European borders.

Trucks have become critical for transport after Russia blocked Ukrainian ports and bombed train tracks. The price of fuel has tripled since the invasion in February, in part because Russia also destroyed numerous Ukrainian fuel depots,

said Marichka Ustymenko, the company’s deputy director.

Not everyone is hard-hit. At The Citadel, an upscale hilltop hotel in Lviv, the parking lot was filled with Mercedes-Benzes and other luxury cars owned by wealthy Ukrainians on a recent day. People working in the country’s thriving tech sector also have abundant work.

But for older people with fixed pensions and millions of Ukrainians who have been displaced or whose salaries or jobs have been cut, finances are being squeezed. Lviv, a Unesco world heritage site that was a major draw for tourists before the war, has been spared heavy Russian attacks, attracting a flood of internally displaced Ukrainians.

— The New York Times

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Dhofar dam is both an attraction and lesson on water sustainability

Oman is one of the countries in MENA that has been blessed with diverse landscapes and fertile soil that make agriculture a reliable source of food for its citizens and residents. Check out how this dam in Dhofar is helping on water sustainability efforts... **P20**



Expat gifts one of the oldest labour cards to National Museum

ONE OF THE OLDEST Pakistani expat family residing in the Sultanate of Oman has gifted a unique and the oldest labour cards in its type to the National Museum of Oman. Shaandar Bukhari who gifted this card to the National Museum stated that this bilingual card which he had kept safely for all these years along with other family documents is very unique in its type and nowadays it is called Resident card. "It is made of thick paper

and was in use almost half a century ago and has an emotional connection with us as it holds the memories of departure from home land and starting a new life here in the Sultanate," he said. He said that over the years expat community has played a vital and significant role in supporting the economy and also in the early years of 'Al Nahdha' developing the education, health care and defence services hand in hand with the nationals as per the vision



of late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said and that's the inspiration that fuelled the idea of somehow contributing in returning the good will back to the Sultanate in shape of this card which will help educate visitors to the museum as how this department of labour and the card has evolved over the years to its current shape which is a smart card. Shaandar Bukhari

& his father Mr. Sakhawat Bukhari the Bukhari duo who are a well-known names among the Pakistani diaspora residing in the Sultanate due to their social work towards their and other communities residing in the Sultanate of

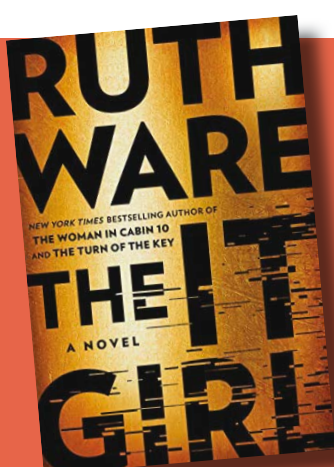
Oman, Sakhawat Bukhari who is well in his 70's is a retired philanthropist and has also served as the Secretary General of the Pakistan Social club for 4 tenures. He is a resident of Oman since 1970's when he first arrived as a personal Tutor of English language. Shaandar Bukhari also thanked the wonderful team of National Museum for a smooth process namely Safiya al Kalbani and Mouza al Wardi from the collections department.

"During my visit i also got to meet the Secretary-General of the National Museum Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi and had the opportunity to congratulate him on receiving the 'Order of the Star of Italy' from Government of Italy.

READ

THE IT GIRL BY RUTH WARE

A decade after her first year at Oxford, an expectant mother looks into the mystery of her former best friend's death.



BUFFALO RACE

Thai farmers raced their water buffaloes at a muddy annual race on Sunday to mark the beginning of the new rice growing season at the start of the monsoon weather, in a tradition dating back to the 1800s which celebrates the beasts of burden. Scores of spectators watched the racing on a 200 meter-long dirt track in the seaside province of Chonburi, some 80 km (50 miles) southeast of the capital, Bangkok. — Reuters



MONKEES CO-CREATOR DIES

Bob Rafelson, co-creator of "The Monkees" and director of the film "Five Easy Pieces" died on Saturday at the age of 89, Monkees singer Micky Dolenz said on Twitter. Dolenz, singer and drummer of the Monkees, who featured in a 1960s TV comedy series about a rock quartet modelled after the Beatles, took to Twitter to express his grief and confirm reports of Rafelson's death.





It Will Change Your View of African Fashion



THE INFLUENCE of Africa and its fashion scene has redefined the geography of the fashion industry in recent years, breaking barriers with its vitality and its reimagining of what creativity can be.

A continent whose fashion has often been imitated, yet gone largely underrecognised by the West, is having a long overdue moment in the spotlight. Magazine editors and stylists like Edward Enninful and Ibrahim Kamara, have helped spur its celebration, along with critically acclaimed explorations of the African diaspora by designers like Grace Wales Bonner and the late Virgil Abloh. The emergence of a new generation of homegrown designers like Thebe Magugu, Mowalola Ogunlesi and Kenneth Ize has also been key.

Last week, at a time when many museums with colonial legacies are reevaluating representation in their Eurocentric collections, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London opened a vibrant exhibition showcasing African fashion and textiles, the first in its 170 year history.

The exhibition, "Africa Fashion," does not try to survey the fashion of all 54 countries that make up the world's second largest continent, home to 1.3 billion people. Instead, it reflects on what unites an eclectic group of contemporary African pioneers for whom fashion has proved both a self-defining art form and a prism through which to explore ideas about the continent's myriad cultures and complex history.

"There is not one singular African aesthetic, nor is African fashion a monoculture that can be defined," said Christine Checinska, the museum's first curator of African and African diaspora fashion. Instead, the show focuses on the ethos of Pan-Africanism embraced by many of the continent's designers and artists.

"This show is a quiet and elegant kind of activism because it is an unbounded celebration of fashion in Africa," Checinska said. "It centres on abundance, not on lack."

Spread across two floors, the exhibition begins with a historical overview of the African independence and liberation years, from the late 1950s to 1994 and the cultural renaissance that was spurred by social and political reordering across the continent. The show explores the potency of cloth and its role in shaping national identity — notably in strategic political acts, as when Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanaian prime minister, eschewed a suit for Kente cloth to announce his country's independence from British rule in 1957.



The show also highlights the importance of photographers like Sanlé Sory of Burkina Faso, who captured the youthquake shift of the 1960s, and whose work is displayed alongside a section dedicated to family portraits and home movies that reflect the fashion trends of the day. Other work in the

show includes clothes by 20th-century designers who bridged cultures to put contemporary African fashion on the map but whose names have remained largely unknown outside the continent.

One of them is Shade Thomas-Fahm, often described as Nigeria's first modern designer. A former nurse in 1950s London, she created cosmopolitan reinterpretations of fabrics and shapes that were worn by the great and good of Lagos in the 1970s. On display is a raspberry red dress and hat in synthetic velvet with fluted Lurex sleeves. Chris Seydou, another designer in the show, made a name for himself in the 1980s by using African textiles like bogolanfini, a handmade Malian cotton fabric traditionally dyed with fermented mud, for tailored Western trends like bell-bottoms, motorcycle jackets and miniskirts.

A mezzanine gallery hosts a collection of work by a new generation of African designers. The garments are shown on specially created mannequins with various Black skin tones, hair styles that include Bantu knots and box braids and a face inspired by Adhel Bol, a South Sudanese model.

All of the designers, who were selected by museum curators, external experts and a group of young people from the African diaspora, were involved in the display process, the museum said.

"Now more than ever, African designers are taking charge of their own narrative and telling people authentic stories, not the imagined utopias," said Thebe Magugu, who is from South Africa and won the prestigious LVMH Prize in 2019. An elegant belted safari jacket ensemble from his 2021 Alchemy collection, which explored the changing face of African spirituality, features a print of the divination tools of a traditional healer, including coins, goat knuckles and a police whistle.

"I feel like there's so many facets of what we've been through as a continent that people don't actually understand," Magugu said. — **NYT**

ANIMAL PLANET

Why shark encounters are increasing along the US East Coast



SUN LOTION, insect repellent, and the Sharktivity app are this summer's must-have beach accessories along the US East Coast as human-shark encounters increase.

Ironically, conservation wins for vulnerable species might be behind the unfortunate uptick, say experts, while there might also be a link to climate as the apex predators' prey move to new waters.

Every summer, great whites move up the Atlantic coast of the United States, toward New England, their number peaking between August and October.

"There's a general increase in the population that we think is the population rebounding after being

of Long Island, half a dozen shark bites have already come to light, after three years of none at all.

Here, great whites are less likely to be the culprits than other species of shark that operate in the region, in particular tiger sharks, sand tiger sharks and bull sharks.

Nick Whitney, a senior scientist at the New England Aquarium, believes the increasing encounters here might be linked to the sharks' bait fish — menhaden, also known as pogies or bunnies, recovering.

This might be because of cleaner waters off New York and New Jersey, "but it's tricky to figure out how much of it is increasing



protected," Gregory Skomal, a senior fisheries scientist for the state of Massachusetts, said.

Around 300 of the animals, the world's largest known fish, have been tagged over the years, with roughly a hundred or so passing through the waters around Cape Cod every year.

The iconic movie "Jaws" was shot in this region, and the creatures are a major tourism draw, adorning baseball caps and t-shirts. On the flipside, however, there have already been temporary beach closures this year after confirmed sightings close to shore.

A major part of the reason is their main prey, seals, are also rebounding thanks to increased protections.

"If you have more sharks feeding close to land and you have more people swimming, the chances for those kinds of negative interactions increases," said Skomal.

Enter the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy Sharktivity app, which was developed with input from Massachusetts wildlife officials to provide information on shark sightings from researchers, safety officials, and user reports.

Surveillance patrols In New York state, the governor has just announced additional surveillance patrols, including via drones and helicopters. On the tourist beaches

populations or just populations moving around as a result of changing ocean conditions from climate change."

But if things can thus vary greatly from one year to another on a local level, the global level remains steady at around 75 shark attacks recorded each year, said Gavin Naylor, director of a research programme on sharks at the University of Florida.

This follows a brief drop to around 60 during the two first years of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Annual global deaths are around five. In the past twenty years, only two deaths have been reported north of Delaware in the United States, in Cape Cod in 2018, and in Maine in 2020.

But in the future, it is reasonable to think that the number of victims will increase.

"We are going to get more fatalities. There's more white sharks, the probability is going to increase," predicts Naylor, even though the trend isn't yet statistically significant.

Surfers, who venture farther into the water, accounted for half of unprovoked attacks in 2021. Farther south, Florida, with its many tourist beaches and tropical climate, is still where 60 per cent of US and 40 per cent of world attacks occur. — **AFP**



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AROUND THE WORLD

ANIMAL PLANET

Kaleidoscopic migratory monarch butterfly joins global endangered species list



THE MIGRATORY MONARCH butterfly, which has for millennia turned North American woodlands into kaleidoscopes of colour in one of nature's most spectacular mass migrations, is threatened with extinction, international conservationists said on Wednesday.

Every autumn, migratory monarchs fly thousands of miles (km) from breeding grounds in the eastern United States and Canada to spend the winter closely huddled in trees in Mexico and California.

Numbering in the millions in the 1990s, the butterfly's population has since shrunk by more than 85 per cent, scientists estimate.

On Wednesday it was placed in the endangered category of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species.

"What's happening to monarchs is like a death by a thousand cuts," said Karen Oberhauser, director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum.

Logging has destroyed much of the insects' winter grounds, agricultural pesticides have decimated the milkweed plants that their larvae feed on, and extreme temperatures due to climate change are triggering them to begin migrating too early, before the remaining milkweed is available.

In all, the IUCN says, more than 41,000 species are now at risk of going extinct in what scientists are calling the planet's sixth mass extinction event — and the first caused by humans.

"Today's Red List update highlights the fragility of nature's wonders," said IUCN director general Bruno Oberle.

GLIMMERS OF HOPE

Joining the migratory monarch on Wednesday's list were all remaining species of sturgeon — large prehistoric fish found in Eurasia and North America — following centuries of overfishing for their meat and caviar.

Of the 26 sturgeon species, 17 are now considered critically endangered, the IUCN said.

"There's something to be said about humanity, when a species that's outlived the dinosaurs is pushed to the brink of extinction by humans," said Beate Striebel-Greiter, leader of the global sturgeon initiative at World Wildlife Fund. The Red List update did provide glimmers of hope.

Tiger numbers increased 40 per cent since the last assessment in 2015, due to improvements in monitoring, with as many as 5,578 in the wild. However, some big cat biologists have taken issue with how numbers are counted, saying such growth is misleading. — Reuters

TRAVEL TALES

San Francisco Shines With New Museums, Restos and Parks



LATELY, IT SEEMS as if the news headlines from San Francisco have been negative, from the city's homelessness crisis and highly publicised recall elections to the area's astronomical cost-of-living and worsening fire seasons.

But San Francisco is still San Francisco. The fog still rolls in from the Pacific to blanket the city's jumbled hills, the sunset still flames crimson behind the Golden Gate Bridge and the smell of salt and eucalyptus still hits the moment you step outside of San Francisco International Airport. Always a city for lovers of the outdoors, pandemic restrictions led to the near-universal embrace of an indoor-outdoor city life. And at its core, the city's spirit, a heady brew of creativity, progressivism and experimentation, remains unbreakable.

San Francisco's pandemic recovery has been slower than other major metropolitan areas in the United States; according to data from the San Francisco Travel Association, forecasts for 2022 estimate 80 per cent of 2019's visitor volume. While the downtown and Union Square neighbourhoods remain quieter than pre-pandemic times, the city's singular neighbourhoods, from the Mission to Russian Hill and the Outer Sunset, are vibrant with packed restaurants and bars, and many boast of new parks and in-person events. San Francisco no longer imposes a mask mandate, but some businesses will require or request masks; masks are recommended but not required on MUNI and BART, the city's public transportation systems. Many indoor events, including concerts and theatre productions, require proof of vaccination to enter.

New Parks and Slow Streets

San Francisco's wealth of green spaces has increased thanks to a trio of new parks, including the Presidio Tunnel Tops, 14 acres of new national

park land hugging the city's north coast that opened this month. Boasting panoramic views of the Bay, the park was designed by the same group behind New York's High Line and is home to a changing roster of food trucks, art installations and performances. For more views, check out Francisco Park in the city's Russian Hill neighbourhood, which opened in April on the site

of San Francisco's first reservoir. In the southeastern Mission Bay neighbourhood, largely protected from the city's frequent westerly winds, Crane Cove Park has become a warm, sunny destination for stand-up paddle boarding, kayaking and lounging since it opened in 2020.

In addition to new parks, San Francisco has become more walkable and bikeable with the pandemic-driven development of the Slow Streets programme, which limits or prohibits car traffic on streets throughout the city. Destination-worthy ones include the Great Highway, which runs alongside Ocean Beach on the city's western shore (it's currently closed to car traffic on weekends and often, on windy days) and JFK Promenade in Golden Gate Park, which could be made permanently car-free in November. The 1-1/2-mile stretch of JFK takes you past destinations such as the

Conservatory of Flowers and the Rose Garden, plus the Skatin' Place, where you will often find a rocking roller disco.

A Return to In-Person Music Events

Golden Gate Park is also playing host to a number of major in-person events this year, including Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, a free, three-day music festival being held September 30 to October 2.

This year's lineup will feature Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle and Buddy Miller, with more artists to be announced soon. The Outside Lands Music Festival is taking place August 5-7 with artists including Green Day, Post Malone and Lil Uzi Vert (single-day tickets from \$195; three-day passes from \$409). Find even more music in the Sunset District at the Stern Grove Festival, now in its 85th year. The series of free weekly concerts, happening on Sundays through August 14, has acts ranging from the San Francisco Symphony to Phil Lesh.

The Portola Music Festival (single-day tickets from \$200, two-day passes from \$400), a new music festival coming to San Francisco from the team behind Coachella, takes place on September 24-25 at Pier 80 and will showcase electronic acts including Flume, James Blake, The Avalanches and M.I.A. — NYT

ENTERTAINMENT

Peele skewers modern obsessions with 'Nope' film, theme park attraction



"Nope," Jordan Peele's latest withering horror-satire about our modern obsession with attention and spectacle, lands in movie theatres — and at a fittingly Instagram-friendly Los Angeles theme park attraction — this Friday.

The Oscar-winning writer-director — who is widely credited with elevating and revitalising the horror genre with "Get Out" and "Us" — re-teams with Daniel Kaluuya, who plays OJ, a horse trainer spooked by otherworldly phenomena in the skies above his California ranch.

OJ and his sister Emerald (Keke Palmer) must juggle their fear of the mysterious and potentially dangerous UFO activity with their desire to achieve fame and wealth by capturing it on camera.

"The real villain is our addiction to attention and spectacle, and our inability to be able to actually react in real time," Palmer said on the red carpet at the film's Hollywood premiere this week.

"It's no different from all the rubbernecking on a freeway when there's an accident — no one calls but everyone stops to watch.

"That's the real horror that our film is talking about."

It builds on themes Peele introduced in his searing 2017 race satire "Get Out," which was made for less than \$5 million and grossed \$255 million. It also earned him an Oscar for best original screenplay.

He followed that up with another hit, "Us," securing a reputation as one of Hollywood's most in-demand, daring directors and top Black filmmakers.

'HIS VISION'

Such was Universal Pictures' confidence in Peele's latest project, it took the unprecedented step of opening a permanent new "Nope" attraction at its Universal Studios theme park on the same day the movie opens.

"This is the first time that we've ever opened an attraction day-and-date with a new film," said Universal Creative head Jon Corfino.

"It's the first time I've ever



heard of that happening."

The actual movie set of Jupiter's Claim — a fictional small Western-themed amusement park which features prominently in "Nope" — was carefully deconstructed when filming ended at the movie's California desert shooting location, and meticulously rebuilt in the real-world Los Angeles theme park.

"This whole set was the actual authentic set that was used in the production," said Corfino.

"It was actually broken apart and brought back here put together... it's basically exactly his vision."

Appropriately for the movie's themes, visitors who pay for the VIP studio tour have the opportunity to wander around its fake but hyper-realistic streets, snapping selfies and shooting TikTok videos in front of the saloon, sheriff's office and gold panning mill.

'AMBITIOUS'

It becomes the latest permanent attraction on Universal's studio tour, where tourists are ferried around working soundstages, and sets from classic movies such as Steven Spielberg's "Jaws" and Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho."

"Jordan Peele takes his place among that lineage," said Corfino.

Whether the film does so remains to be seen — early reviews have been mixed, with Empire praising an "ambitious, provocative swing," but the Guardian describing Peele's latest work as "clotted and heavy."

"There's a million storylines within this and metaphors that anyone in the audience can take differently," said "Nope" star Brandon Perea.

"You can take it how you take it, and I think that's great." — AFP

art & life

Local Scene

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Dhofar dam is both an attraction and lesson on water sustainability

By Arwa al Hashimi

Countries all over the world right now are suffering from the effects of climate change. Within the region, access to water has become more challenging posing threats not just to potable water but to food production in areas like Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Iran.

The Middle East is also impacted by desertification — a process in which fertile land becomes arid and loses its productivity thereby affecting farmers and their production of food and crops.

Oman is one of the countries in MENA that has been blessed with diverse landscapes and fertile soil that make agriculture a reliable source of food for its citizens and residents. The time-tested falaj system — the lifeblood of the country's agriculture continues to be a fine example of resilience allowing farmers even in remote locations to grow different crops.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources strives to achieve water sustainability in various regions of the Sultanate. Aside from edu-

cating farmers and fishermen concerning a sustainable livelihood, their efforts also continue to make sure that everyone is doing their bit into saving the planet.

Within Oman, the ministry has been developing Wadi Kaa' Dam in the Wilayat of Mirbat to create a more sustainable water resource for the Governorate of Dhofar.

Engineer Ali bin Bakhit Bait Saeed, Director of the Water Resources Department at the General Directorate of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources in Dhofar, said that the ministry pays attention to water projects to reduce the use of groundwater by constructing 13 surface storage dams in areas that suffer from water scarcity in the governorate.

Wadi Kaa' Dam is one of the most prominent of these dams. It was established in 2019 with a length of 45 metres and a height of 8 metres. It is one of the projects of surface storage dams in the villages located in the mountainous areas of Mirbat used to sequester part of the rainwater and save it to benefit the people during periods of drought.

The storage capacity of Wadi Kaa' Dam is estimated at about 2016 cubic metres,

and it is used for watering plants and feeding animals and for daily use for some households that live around the area of the dam.

Over the year, the dam is also becoming a local attraction not just to locals but also to tourists. During khareef, the large volume of water feeds the nearby lands creating a green, tropical paradise that is becoming a crowd favourite. Different animals are also attracted by this greenery and visits are not limited to land animals but also birds.

After every rain, the areas around the dam are also transformed into stunning waterfalls. These waterfalls led to beautiful ponds where people are often seen frolicking and swimming.

Wadi Kaa' is located in the upper part of Wadi Ain in the Wilayat of Mirbat. It is one of the four valleys including Awbadi, Aqdat, Kaa' and Thukab that flow into Wadi Ain Al Kabeer, where the site of Kaa' Dam is about 25 km from the centre of the Wilayat. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources is making great efforts to enhance water resources, develop its sources and maintain them in line with Oman's Vision 2040.

