

Development projects announced

Based on the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, to implement development projects on top of the projects of the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) currently under implementation, the Ministry of Finance has announced the list of projects to be implemented. **DETAILS ON P3**



ATTENTION TO ENHANCE ECONOMIC GROWTH

AUDIENCE EMBODIES SOLIDARITY BETWEEN THE LEADER AND THE PEOPLE

HIS MAJESTY REVIEWS ISSUES OF RELEVANCE TO PROJECTS AND FUTURE PLANS

EMPHASIS ON RECIPROCAL ACTION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENS

RO 650 MILLION ALLOTTED FOR ADDITIONAL PROJECTS IN DIFFERENT SECTORS

FINANCIAL LIQUIDITY OF BUDGET TO BE AUGMENTED BY ANOTHER RO 200 MILLION

HIS MAJESTY HAD AN OPEN DIALOGUE WITH SHAIKHS OF THREE GOVERNORATES

SUHAR: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik gave audience to shaikhs of the governorates of North Al Batinah, Al Dhahirah and Al Buraimi at Bait Bahjat Al Andhar here on Wednesday.

The audience was in pursuance of His Majesty's Royal meetings with citizens from all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman and within the context of collaboration that embodies solidarity between the leader and the people to bring about benefits for the nation and citizens.

At the outset of the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan gave thanks and praise

to the Almighty Allah for the riches He has bestowed on Oman, praying to Him to eternalise these bounties and safeguard the success of Oman's Renewed Renaissance.

Then, His Majesty the Sultan reviewed a host of issues of relevance to projects and future plans in the aforementioned governorates.

His Majesty laid emphasis on the significance of reciprocal action between the government and citizens to serve the overall goals of the nation.

His Majesty the Sultan gave his Royal directives to implement projects that are

added to approved projects of the Tenth Five Year Plan (2021-2025). The additional projects, with more than RO 650 million, will have to be implemented during the remaining period of the 5-year plan in different sectors.

His Majesty the Sultan also gave directives to augment by RO 200 million the financial liquidity of the Developmental Budget's allocations of this year, to bring the total of the earmarked sum to RO 1.1 billion. These Royal directives come within the context of His Majesty the Sultan's attention to enhance economic

growth, sustain services, complete the basic infrastructure, support private sector activities and provide more employment opportunities for citizens.

Then, His Majesty the Sultan engaged in an open dialogue with the shaikhs of the three governorates, who raised a variety of issues related to the development of their respective wilayats, as well as the services and projects that they wish to be implemented in their parts of the country.

The meeting was attended by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, Sayyid

Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, Dr Hamad bin Said al Aafi, Head of the Private Office, the governors and walis of these governorates.

May the Almighty Allah protect His Majesty the Sultan, grant him success and assist him with power to pursue the path of bounties. — ONA

SEE ALSO P2 & 3



HM gives audience to shaikhs of North Al Batinah, Al Dhahirah, Al Buraimi





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MORE PROJECTS

Based on the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Ministry of Finance has announced more projects, which will be implemented along with other projects of the 10th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025).

HEALTH

- Al Namaa Hospital in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate
- Samayil Hospital in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate
- Al Falah Hospital in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate

EDUCATION

- Construction of 76 government schools in different governorates

HOUSING

- Complementing compensations for Al Batinah Coastal Road

AVIATION

- Khasab Airport (phase 1)

TRANSPORT

- Daba-Lima-Khasab road and link to Kamzar in Musandam Governorate
- Dualisation of Al Ansab-Al Jefnain road (phase 2)
- Complementing Al Batinah Expressway (phase 1)
- Rehabilitation of roads linked to Al Sahwa roundabout and Al Mawalih intersections

EXPANSION OF MUSCAT EXPRESSWAY

- Dualisation of the road linking the Wilayat of Al Kamil W'al Wafi and the Wilayat of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali
- Complimenting Mahlah-Ghubbrat Al Tam-Ismaiyah road in the Wilayat of Dima W'attayeen
- Pavement of roads in the Wilayat of Maqshan
- Rehabilitation of roads in the Wilayat of Salalah

TOURISM

- Developing the seafront in Al Dahariz beach in Dhfoar Governorate
- Developing the seafront in the Niyabat of Al Ashkhara
- Developing tourism facilities and the ponds area in the Wilayat of Wadi Bani Khalid

MUNICIPALITIES

- Protecting wadi basins in Dhofar Governorate
- Rainwater drainage projects in Muscat Governorate



In brief

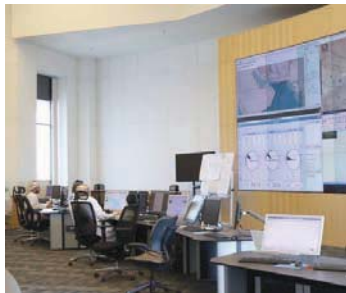
■ RIYADH



SAI PARTICIPATES IN ARAB CONFERENCE

RIYADH: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the State Audit Institution (SAI) is taking part in the 4th edition of the Conference of States Parties to Arab Convention Against Corruption. The conference is held from 22-23 March 2022 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Oman's delegation is headed by Shaikh Nasser bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of SAI. In his speech, Al Maawali expressed Oman's gratitude to all the efforts exerted at the international and Arab levels in cementing the values of integrity and preserving national resources.

■ MUSCAT



OMAN MARKS WORLD METEOROLOGICAL DAY

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), on Wednesday joined the world in marking World Meteorological Day. This year's celebration is themed "Early Warning and Early Action". It highlights ways of developing early warning systems against extreme weather risks, as well as tsunami warning systems. It also sheds light on the importance of climate data and boosting coordination between national meteorological centres and disaster management authorities to improve prevention, preparedness and response.



OMAN-KOREA SMART FARM INITIATIVE

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources organised Oman-Korea Smart Farm Initiative Seminar on Wednesday. The event was organised in coordination with Korea Trade-investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) and the Korean embassy in Muscat. The seminar highlighted the latest smart agricultural technologies and models of developing smart farms, as well as the types of greenhouses used in smart farms. The seminar saw the participation of several experts from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Sultan Qaboos University and various international companies in the agriculture sector.

Foreign Minister receives Honorary Consuls of Oman

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, held a meeting in Muscat on Wednesday with Honorary Consuls of the Sultanate of Oman to Portugal, Slovakia, Zimbabwe, Manila, Monaco, Petersburg-Pennsylvania, Milan, Munich and Lithuania. The meeting was held within the framework of visits organised by the Foreign Ministry for Oman's Honorary Consuls in other countries. The meeting reviewed means of enhancing cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and their respective countries.

It also touched on possible opportunities for partnership. The Honorary Consuls expressed their thanks to the Foreign Ministry for inviting them and organising their visit programme, which includes meetings with officials in the government and private sector. Those meetings introduce them to Oman's economic directions and policies within Oman Vision 2040. The meeting was attended by Khalid bin Hashil al Musalhi, Head of the Minister's Office Department.

The Honorary Consuls toured Oman's pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai. They lauded the pavilion's representation of Oman's civilisation and its future outlook, particularly in the fields of sustainability

and environment, as well as the economic and tourism diversification opportunities.

They also met Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Deputy Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones.

During the meeting, different economic-related topics were highlighted, including alternative energy and green hydrogen projects and enhancing cooperation. The economic and investment opportunities were discussed between the Sultanate of Oman and those countries.

Further, the consuls were briefed on the capabilities of the special economic zones and free zones in terms of infrastructure and speed in completing investors' transactions through the one-stop shop, which facilitates the transactions and accelerates issuing relevant permits for investment purposes.

The consuls commended the great efforts made by the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones to make these zones successful investment destinations. Accordingly, all zones will contribute to promoting economic diversification, providing job opportunities, developing local communities and encouraging entrepreneurs to establish their projects. — ONA

Shura to host TCIT minister on Sunday

MUSCAT: Majlis Ash'shura will be hosting Engineer Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology to deliver his statement at the council's ninth regular meeting of the third annual session (2021-2022) on Sunday.

This was stated by Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Nadabi, Secretary-General of Majlis Ash'shura.

The statement will also

discuss aspects related to the information technology sector with emphasis on the strategic plans overseen by the ministry in addition to infrastructure projects and foreign investments and partnership.

This is in addition to the legislations related to smart technology programmes, laws on protecting privacy and personal data and the legal frameworks for the granting of licenses. Al Nadabai said.

■ OMAN, INDIA FOREIGN MINISTERS HOLD TALKS



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, held talks and political consultations with Dr S Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of India, in New Delhi on Wednesday. The talks dealt with the bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and ways to enhance them further. It also highlighted close strategic partnership that binds the two countries and the importance their leaders attach to their bilateral relations based on mutual trust and cooperation.

MDO bets on copper and limestone projects

MUSCAT: Nasser al Miqbali, CEO of Minerals Development Oman (MDO) unveiled several projects undertaken by MDO that boost the capabilities of the mining sector and augment its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In his interview with OIA's quarterly bulletin 'Enjaz and Eejaz,' Al Miqbali highlighted Mazoon Mining as one of the most promising mining projects. The project is located in Yanqul in Al Dhahirah, with a total area of 16 square kilometres. It consists of five mines with considerable copper reserves of up to 16 million tonnes and a production capacity of 1.56 million tonnes annually.

The project has an estimated cost of around \$300 million. MDO is continuing its explorations and there are some promising initial results of finding copper ore in areas surrounding these mines within block No. 10, which is known for its promising mineral potential.

The CEO proceeded to delve into another critical project, the Industrial Minerals Project in Shaleem, a project the company began developing in 2017. MDO was granted exploration and development rights after conducting the first geological study in Shaleem, which found large gypsum reserves and high purity limestone and dolomite.



This was followed by a preliminary analysis of the market and logistical solutions necessary for the project's feasibility in 2020. He added that if it is implemented according to the company's vision, the project will mark a turning point for the mining sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

Al Miqbali mentioned that the company is considering several commercial opportunities to develop the salt industry in another important project.

There are currently two key projects in the area, one of which is to produce sea salt in Mahout. The other is related to the study of salt production from deep, highly saline waters associated with crude oil extraction activities in collaboration with PDO.

The salt production project in Bar Al Hikman, Mahout, will focus on producing high-purity salt by building salterns with a capacity of up to 1.5 million tons of raw salt annually using seawater, to be used as a raw material in chemical projects and other industrial applications.

MDO is also collaborating with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) to study the possibility of producing raw salt from the deep waters associated with oil production. He elaborated that the saline solution produced from deep water is 3.5 times more saturated with sodium chloride than seawater.

Therefore, a project will be developed this year to produce one million tonnes of limestone annually, which will be supplied to steel plants and several customers in Sohar Port and the Free Zone. Moreover, the company hopes to develop a calcination unit in Sohar Free Zone during the project's second phase.

The 3rd issue of 'Enjaz and Eejaz' covered an array of other matters concerning OIA and its Companies. In the bulletin's foreword, Abdulsalam al Murshidi, Chairman of OIA, referenced the growing momentum of business and responsibilities. He also highlighted the multitude of accomplishments by OIA and its companies. — ONA

‘Finiqia: The legend lives on’ on Thursday, Friday

MUSCAT: The Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) said Caracalla Dance Theatre will perform 'Finiqia: The legend lives on' at the ROHM House of Musical Arts on Thursday and Friday. The first part is set in ancient world, where neighbouring regions sit on the brink of warfare. Searching to solidify his kingdom, Phoenician King Ahiram's only choice is to extend his hand towards the Dynasty of Egypt and its celebrated Pharaoh Ramses II and as an allegiance, offers his daughter Cedrus in marriage to Amun-her-khepeshef the son of Ramses II.

Cedrus must choose between honour and love as her heart belongs to another man. From ancient Finiqia, we travel through the sands of time, witnessed only by the once-majestic temples of Ahiram, now laying in ruins.



Locals gather in a typical village where feuding families struggle to keep the peace. Once again, a marriage is brokered to appease the stormy relations. The legend may influence the outcome. The Caracalla Dance Theatre is celebrating its 54th anniversary since its foundation in Lebanon in 1968.

One of the most prominent dance theatres in the middle east, it has established itself as a cultural institution, renowned for presenting vibrant artistic productions portraying the richness of Arabian cultural heritage.

Driven by the vision of the Caracalla family, its founder and artistic director Abdel Halim Caracalla, director Ivan Caracalla and choreographer Alissar Caracalla, the Caracalla Dance Theatre is defined by tradition, excellence and innovation. — ONA



Unity Charity exhibition today

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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The Association for Children with Disability is set for the sixth Unity Charity exhibition at Fraser Suites, Bausher.

The event is to be held under the auspices of Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. The three-day exhibition will begin on Thursday from 10 am to 10 pm.

Oman Association for Children with Disability is a non-profit government organisation established in 1991 by a Royal Decree.

Among the Association's nine centres, three are in Muscat, one in Athaiba, one in Al Khoudh and one in Qurayat. Three centres are in Al Batinah, one in Barka, one in Musannah and one in Saham. Two centres are in Al Dhahirah, one in Yanqul and one in Dhank. One centre is in Al Sharqiyah.

"Disability among these children is different. It ranges from mental, physical and a mix of both in addition to some with autism. We serve children of all nationalities free of charge," said HH Sayyidah Hujaija al Said, Chairperson of Omani Association for Children with Disability.

"We are a non-profit organisation, and to cover our costs and expenses, we depend on donations from the private and government sectors and through fundraising initiatives. One of our fundraising programmes is to organise a charity exhibition to raise funds for the Association for Children with Disability."

The Association has already hosted five successful charity exhibitions before Covid-19. The 'Unity Charity' is an exhibition of clothing, accessories, perfume and other items, available under one roof, needed for Ramadhan and Eid celebrations.

Fish farming to spur economic diversification

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

Fish farming is one of the main economic activities in the Sultanate of Oman. The Food and Agriculture Organization confirms fish farming as one of the main pillars that diversify the country's national economy with its geographical features and long coastlines of more than 3,000 km.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources aspires to develop the aquaculture sector as a sustainable, competitive and environment-friendly sector that meets customers' needs of high-quality marine products.

In 2001, the FAO established the Regional Commission for Fisheries to enhance cooperation in fisheries among the member states of the Commission and serve as a governmental forum that helps countries discuss issues of common interest in these areas. Since its establishment, the Commission has implemented many important initiatives in fisheries and fish farming, including the establishment of two sub-working groups for fisheries and fish farming.

The Sultanate of Oman relied on various other sources to promote economic diversification within the initiatives and projects of the national programme. The country focused on the fisheries sector as one of the main aspects of economic diversification.

Based on the legislations on aquaculture in 2004 and updated in 2012, and cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Sultanate of Oman has developed a national strategy for the development of aquaculture.

Emphasising that the experience gained from projects funded by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and the subsequent technology transfer, stimulated the



Among these projects, the South Korean Haego Group opened new horizons for marine development projects by opening the largest fish hatchery in the Middle East

interest of entrepreneurs in commercial aquaculture projects. There are currently two commercial aquaculture projects: The Indian white prawn (*Penaeus indicus*) and the sea bream (*Sparus aurata*).

The ministry has also recently worked to open the registration for institutions and companies wishing to establish commercial aquaculture projects as per specific conditions.

These announcements are renewed from time to time. Considering that the Sultanate of Oman is located on several open seas, the Indian Ocean, and the border adjacent to Yemen, the demand for Omani fish is high, and the country has the capability to cater to the needs of internal and external demand for fish.

In recent years, the ministry has made efforts to develop fish farming as a strategy to develop the sector in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization.

The ministry has taken important steps to develop the sector to make it attractive for investors. It aims to set up environmentally sustainable projects throughout the country.

Among these projects, the South Korean Haego Group opened new horizons for marine development projects by opening the largest fish hatchery in the Middle East.



UoB, University of West London sign MoU

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

University of Buraimi (UoB) received a high-ranking delegation from the University of West London (UWL), led by Dr Peter John, Vice-Chancellor, accompanied by the British Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman, Bill Murray. Memorandum of understanding (MoU) between University of Buraimi and University of West London will foster collaboration in the fields of scientific research and consultancy in industry, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Dr Abood bin Hamed al Sawafi, Vice-Chancellor of UoB and Chair of the Executive Board, welcomed the visiting delegation.

The University of West London is a public university in the United Kingdom founded in 1860.

For more than 150 years, UWL has excelled in academic as well as vocational education supplying the workforce and labour market with young professionals in the fields of business administration, computing, engineering, film, media, design, hospitality, tourism, humanities and social sciences, law, criminology, music and healthcare.

Hotels line up Ramadhan delicacies

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With the holy month of Ramadhan around the corner, hotels and retail outlets are lining up offers and services to woo guests not only with food for Iftar and Suhoor, but also with ambience during all 30 days.

They are ready to take the guests over a delightful culinary journey incorporating various dishes depending on their choice.

Apart from food, some outlets are offering an exclusive package of health club membership.

Speaking to the Observer, many hotel representatives said they started preparing for the holy month two months before. They were on a 'wait and watch' mode to see what their counterparts in other countries were doing.

Sheraton Oman Hotel is inviting guests to experience delicious dishes, traditional beverages, inspiring surroundings and enthralling music to welcome Ramadhan. The Hotel has planned culinary offerings that include Iftar, Suhoor, and traditional live music and activities amidst a



special ambience.

"We are looking forward to welcoming our guests and offering them an unforgettable experience with a collection of unique culinary options. Guests can enjoy authentic 'oud' melodies throughout the holy month in a perfect backdrop," said Samir Messaoudi, General Manager.

Cliff Deck Café is a new addition that caters outside the hotel. Located in Muscat Bay and managed by Sheraton Oman Hotel, the café offers a trendy dining experience that blurs the boundaries of indoor and outdoor eatery options.

"There is no better way to enliven the dining experience

than with a little fresh air and great views. The café boasts breath-taking bird's eye views of Muscat Bay skyline, promising an inimitable al fresco dining experience," he added.

Representatives of Kempinski Hotel Muscat said the property would be presenting celebrity master chef Joe Barza during Ramadhan this year. Known for his on-air appearances in several popular cooking shows such as 'Top Chef and Chopped', Chef Joe returns to Kempinski again to celebrate the holy month. He will be featured at 'The Kitchen' restaurant and Zale Arabesque Lounge with his expertise in Levantine cuisine.

'The Kitchen' will feature a unique Iftar buffet every day with live cooking stations and culinary wonders, while Zale will be transformed into an Arabesque Lounge, the perfect backdrop to spend Layali Ramadhan every night from sunset onwards. Chef Joe will present his signature creations, influenced by homemade Lebanese dishes and delectable specialties in an exclusive a la carte menu.

Bukhara restaurant will offer a three-course Indian Iftar, including a selection of North Indian dishes prepared by Chef Ashish Tiwari; the opulent Amwaj Lounge will feature 'a la carte' menu every night.



MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY

Advertisement No. (8/2022)

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following tenders:

Tender No.	Tender Description	Document Fee	Last date for Inquires Submission	Last Date for Obtaining Tender Docs.	Last Date for Submission
96/2021/MM/PA-22-Recall-1	Supply of Tools and Pesticides for Insect Control	25/- OMR	12/04/2022	28/04/2022	08/05/2022
16/2022/MM/PA-3	Cleaning & Maintenance Works for Public Toilets at The Central Market for Vegetables and Fruits at Wilayat Al-Seeb	25/- OMR	12/04/2022	28/04/2022	08/05/2022

- Specialized Companies with a valid registration certificate from Tender Board can obtain tender documents from the website through the following link: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. Starting from the date of this announcement until the end of deadline mentioned above.
- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically through link mentioned above.
- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond which is equivalent to (1%) of the total value of the tender to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality and valid for (90) days starting from the deadline for submission.
- Tender not accompanied by a tender bond will be rejected.**
- Clarifications and support:**
 - For any inquiries regarding tenders, please contact us through e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
 - For technical support of e-tendering system, please send an email to (etenderhd@mtc.gov.om) or call (+968 24402200).
 - For technical support of E-Bond through e-tendering system please send an email to (esnad@gstb.gov.om) or call (+968 24402200 / 24402330).

Website: www.mm.gov.om



Iran’s FM says N-deal ‘closer than ever’

DUBAI:Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said on Wednesday that the Islamic Republic and world powers are closer than ever to reviving the 2015 nuclear deal.

During a press conference in Damascus alongside Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad he also said Tehran welcomes new talks between Syria and certain Arab countries.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Amirabdollahian arrived in Damascus on Wednesday and said Iran’s priority was to strengthen strategic ties in a changing global scene after Russia’s assault on Ukraine.

Amirabdollahian told reporters on his arrival that his country stood with Syria in “the same trench” and that ties with Damascus were going through their best phase.

“We are talking about strategic ties and today, aside from all the dimensions of our relationship, the issue of economic relations



Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian is welcomed by Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad at the tarmac of Damascus’ airport. — AFP

is the priority,” he told reporters. Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad said the Ukraine crisis

and its repercussions would be a focus for talks between the two Middle East allies, both under

Western sanctions. “We are holding talks after the major developments after

Iran’s priority was to strengthen strategic ties in a changing global scene after Russia’s assault on Ukraine

the Russian operation (in Ukraine) and we will discuss our joint positions towards these developments,” Mekdad added.

President Bashar al Assad was able to turn the tide of Syria’s civil war, which erupted from pro-democracy protests in 2011, with crucial help from Iran’s proxy militias and with Moscow’s major military intervention in 2015.

Iran has consolidated its military position in Syria, where bases run by its fighters are frequently targets of attacks. Tehran’s economic influence in the war torn country has grown in recent years, supplying Assad’s government with credit lines and winning lucrative business contracts. — **Reuters**

Protests bring life to halt in Khartoum

KHARTOUM: Sudanese demonstrators erected barricades that paralysed much of the capital Khartoum for the second day on Wednesday, protesting against a military coup whose leader called for dialogue. Sudan has been in political deadlock and economic turmoil since a coup in October ended a civilian-military power-sharing agreement. Military leaders have not appointed a prime minister.

In an interview with Asharq Al Awsat, the head of the ruling council, General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, said that a premier would not be named before talks with political forces, an apparent softening of his position.

“When all the civilian forces sit together and come to a consensus between them, we are ready to sit and come to an understanding with them or to present them with whatever they need from the military side,” he said. — **Reuters**

Black box of crashed Chinese flight found



Zheng Xi, chief of Fire and Rescue Corps of Guangxi Zhuang Region and Shangguan Xuemin, official with China Eastern Airlines attend a news conference in Wuzhou. — **Reuters**

WUZHOU: A black box from the crashed China Eastern airliner was recovered on Wednesday as investigators try to determine what made the jet carrying 132 passengers nosedive into a mountainside in southern China. The cause of the disaster has mystified aviation authorities who have scoured rugged terrain for clues, finding no survivors from what is almost certain to be China’s deadliest plane crash in nearly 30 years.

Aviation officials confirmed they had found a black box they believed to be the cockpit voice recorder, which should provide important clues to the cause of the crash. Zhu Tao, an official at China’s aviation authority, told reporters that the exterior was “severely damaged and the storage unit was also damaged to a certain extent, but it was relatively complete”.

The stricken jet, a Boeing 737-800, was equipped with two recorders: One in the rear passenger cabin tracking flight data, and the other a cockpit voice recorder.

Officials have not declared all of the passengers dead despite the pulverised mass of twisted metal and charred belongings that recovery teams found at the crash site.

Zheng Xi, head of the area’s rescue service, said that some human remains had been found.

Earlier in the day reporters saw a small crowd of people guided by officials across the police cordon that marks entry to the site, huddled under umbrellas in the driving rain.

One middle-aged man later confirmed that he was the relative of someone on the flight, and asked the media not to crowd around him. — **AFP**

Start-ups put India’s used car market in fast lane; use AI tech

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
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Some start-ups have made the life of used car buyers easy by offering them genuine prices based on artificial intelligence (AI). They have injected transparency in the second-hand automobile market, which otherwise was known for bargaining power between the buyers and sellers.

The start-ups have not only worked as catalysts behind increased sales reinvigorating the sector but also as change agents for the used vehicles in the global market.

“The start-ups named Droom Technology, CarDekho and Cars24’s have done wonders in the automobile car market by injecting transparency in pricing, which ultimately has boosted second-hand car sales in India and abroad,” said Aksah Srivastava, who served the automobile sector for a long year in India and GCC countries. “The start-ups have built trust among the buyers. They are in an expansion mode, as CarDekho has entered the Philippines market and Droom is partnering with Toyota Tsusho, a Japanese trading house. Toyota Tsusho is also a major investor involved in developing used car



markets in emerging economies,” he said. The online platform of Cars24’s has been successful in building trust among car buyers by standardising the prices of used cars with the help of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

“Earlier, every used car buyer had doubts about the prices of the vehicles. But Cars24’s online portal has ruled out any misinformation about a car with the help of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which minutely analyses the performance of the vehicles and gives report in a few minutes,” said Srivastava.

The start-up claims to have 300-point inspections performed

The start-ups have not only worked as catalysts but also as change agents for the used vehicles in the global market

on vehicles based on the picture of the auto and the engine sounds. The system can determine the price within some seconds.

Artificial intelligence helps quick history search of the vehicles when owners bring them to sell used cars.

“These start-ups have fuelled a renaissance in India’s used car

market. Sales of pre-owned cars are projected to reach 7.1 million units in 2024 fiscal year, predicts Indian Blue Book, up from 4.2 million in fiscal 2019. Used vehicles outsold new autos by 50 per cent in fiscal 2019, but that margin is expected to approach 100 per cent in fiscal 2024,” says a Nekkies Asia report.

The report cited an investor who said, “Cars24 has a strong competitive advantage because of its broad product lineup and the depth of its data science technology. The company, founded in 2015, is now valued at \$3.3 billion, according to CB Insights.”

SHORT TAKES

COLOMBO

US asks Sri Lanka to end detentions

The US urged Sri Lanka to end detentions under its draconian anti-terror laws and ensure justice for wartime atrocities.

Sri Lanka’s rights record has drawn the ire of the international community with Colombo accused of carrying out wartime atrocities against its Tamil minority during the decades-long civil war that ended in 2009.

Under pressure from the European Union — which threatened to revoke the country’s favourable trade status — Sri



Lanka’s parliament amended its controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) but opposition lawmakers have said the changes will not stop abuses under the law. — **AFP**

LA GOULETTE

First cruise ship docks in Tunisia after 3 years

A cruise ship docked in a Tunisian port for the first time since 2019, carrying over 700 passengers and rare good news for tourism operators battered by the Covid pandemic.

The Spirit of Discovery, run by UK operator Saga, landed at La Goulette port on the edge of Tunis where it was welcomed by camels and a band playing traditional Tunisian music.

“We were not trading for about 18 months... but we’ve been back in business since last



July and this is our first call here to northern Africa”, said Captain Kim Tanner. British tourist John Hilton, 75, said he was “absolutely delighted” to be in Tunisia. — **AFP**

LONDON

WikiLeaks’ Assange marries in prison

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and his fiancée Stella Moris married at the high-security London prison where he is being held during his extradition case.

Assange, 50, is fighting attempts to remove him from Britain to face trial in the United States over the publication of secret files relating to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Last week, the UK Supreme Court turned down a request to hear his appeal against the move, bringing the long-running legal saga nearer to a



conclusion. Assange and Moris announced their engagement in November and were given permission to marry at Belmarsh prison in southeast London where he is on remand. — **AFP**

Veteran Putin aide quits over war and leaves Russia



Anatoly Chubais

LVIV/MYKOLAIV/KHARKIV: A veteran aide of President Vladimir Putin has resigned over the Ukraine war and left Russia with no intention to return, two sources said on Wednesday, the first senior official to break with the Kremlin since Putin launched his attack a month ago.

The Kremlin confirmed that the aide, Anatoly Chubais, had resigned of his own accord. Chubais hung up the phone when contacted by Reuters. The sources did not say where he was.

Chubais was one of the principal architects of Boris Yeltsin's economic reforms of the 1990s and was Putin's boss in the future president's first Kremlin job. He later ran big state businesses under Putin and held political jobs, lately serving as Kremlin special envoy to international organisations.

US President Joe Biden flies to Europe for an emergency Nato summit on Ukraine, where attacking Russian troops are stalled, cities are under bombardment and the besieged port of Mariupol is in flames.

Four weeks into a war that has driven a quarter of Ukraine's 44 million people from their homes, Russia has failed to capture a



Kyiv's mayor Vitali Klitschko addresses a press conference in front of monument dedicated the the city's protector Archangel Gabriel in Kyiv. — AFP

single major Ukrainian city or depose the government, while Western sanctions have ostracised it from the world economy.

Russian forces have taken heavy losses, been frozen in place for at least a week on most fronts and face supply problems and fierce resistance.

They have turned to siege tactics and bombardment, causing massive destruction and many civilian deaths.

Moscow says its aim is to disarm its neighbour, and its "special military operation" is going to plan. It denies targeting civilians.

Worst hit has been Mariupol, a southern port completely surrounded by Russian forces, where hundreds of thousands of people have been sheltering since the war's early days, under

Chubais was Putin's first Kremlin boss under Yeltsin

Biden on first foreign trip since war began

Destruction of Mariupol seen in new satellite images

constant bombardment and with food, water and heat supplies cut.

New satellite photographs from commercial firm Maxar released overnight showed massive destruction of what was once a city of 400,000 people, with columns of smoke rising from residential

apartment buildings in flames.

No journalists have been able to report from inside the Ukrainian-held parts of the city for more than a week, during which time Ukrainian officials say Russia has bombed a theatre and an art school used as bomb shelters, burying hundreds of people alive. Russia denies targeting those buildings.

Biden, due to arrive in Brussels on Wednesday evening on his first foreign trip since the war began, will meet Nato and European leaders in an emergency summit at the Western military alliance's headquarters. The leaders are expected to roll out additional sanctions against Russia on Thursday. Sources said the US package would include measures targeting Russian members of parliament. — Reuters



Ukrainian students from the Kyiv Municipal Academy of Performing and Circus Arts and members of Czech La Putyka contemporary circus company during a joint performance in Prague. — Reuters

Circus students find new home at Prague company

PRAGUE: In-between somersaults, Ukrainian circus students handed out borscht and showcased some of their country's customs in a joint performance on Tuesday night with Prague's Cirk La Putyka, which gave two dozen teenage students a new home after they fled Kyiv.

The Prague contemporary circus company answered a call for help from the Kyiv Municipal Academy of Performing and Circus Arts after Russia launched its assault on February 24, providing training space, lodging, food and arranged English lessons.

The group includes a teacher and two students' mothers, deputy rector of the school, Nina Araya, said in Prague.

"Twenty-five teenagers came from a very stressful situation, their parents are still in a place where the war is," she said.

"They are communicating every day, they are super-stressed and it is not easy, it is

not easy even for adults. What we are trying to do is to focus them on their profession."

At their joint fund-raising event in a former Prague slaughterhouse, Czech and Ukrainian artists showed a part-spoken, part-acrobatic, part-pantomime performance they had just two days to practice.

"We are turning into a performance what we have lived through here in the past three weeks and what we are living through now, using metaphor and images," Cirk La Putyka director Rosta Novak said. This was a one-off show but more performances will likely be developed in the coming weeks, he said.

Cirk La Putyka supports the students, along with donations. "People contact us wanting to help, by bringing furnishings for their accommodation, others bring food. It will be tough but I did not hesitate for a second, none of us did," Novak said. — AFP

War's youngest victims fight for their lives

ZAPORIZHZHIA: Thirteen-year-old Milena was fleeing to safety from Mariupol, a key Ukrainian port city besieged by Russian troops, when she was struck by a bullet. Travelling in a car with a sign in the window that said "children," the rest of her family was unharmed.

The same Russian soldiers who opened fire then drove the wounded girl and her family to a nearby hospital, said Milena's mother, who declined to give her name.

Today Milena is at a special children's hospital in Zaporizhzhia, where the most critically injured children from eastern and southern Ukraine, where fighting has been hardest, are being brought for treatment.

Her dark brown hair in braids, a big laceration runs across Milena's cheek and across to her neck. An oxygen tube taped up her nose, Milena's eyes are dazed and her body convulses with pain.

Yet doctors say Milena is one of the more fortunate of the children at the hospital as she is likely to make a full recovery, although her case is not straightforward as one of her vertebrae was hit and her face will remain scarred.



French Health Minister Olivier Veran speaks with French Red Cross workers as 20 Ukrainian children who suffer from cancer and leukemia arrive at Orly airport in Orly, near Paris. — AFP

Milena's family was one of many trying to escape Mariupol, where Ukrainian authorities say almost 100,000 people are trapped among the ruins and facing starvation, thirst and relentless Russian bombardment.

Tens of thousands of residents have already fled, bringing harrowing testimony of a "freezing hellscape riddled with dead bodies and destroyed buildings", according to Human Rights Watch.

Yuriy Borzenko, the chief physician at the hospital, said many of the children being brought in have severe injuries. He shows a picture on his phone of a boy brought in recently from Mariupol. Laid out on a stretcher, he is attended to by ten medical professionals, and has bone-deep lacerations to his thighs, calf and lower legs, as well as burns to his groin.

"I don't think anyone wants to see the things we see," said

Ukrainians say almost 100,000 people are trapped among the ruins and facing starvation, thirst and relentless bombardment

Borzenko. "We have children with penetration lesions in the skull, amputations, perforated abdomens and bone fractures," he added. "Some of them are on the edge of death."

In the bed next to Milena is five-year-old Vladislav, who was shot in the abdomen as his family tried to escape advancing Russian troops in their village this week. Vladislav's tiny pale chest struggles up and down as he breathes with help from a ventilator and doctors fear he may not make it through the night.

If he survives, doctors said he will be given a colostomy bag and will have it for the rest of his life. Vladislav is alone as his parents are also in a serious condition with gunshot wounds and are being treated in another hospital in the city. — AFP

Biden heads to Europe with more sanctions

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden departed for Brussels for emergency talks with European leaders about the war in Ukraine, carrying with him plans for more sanctions that sources said include members of the Russian parliament. Biden's trip includes talks in Brussels with Nato and European leaders and a visit to Warsaw for consultations with Polish President Andrzej Duda. Western leaders have grown increasingly concerned that Russian President Vladimir Putin will use chemical weapons or otherwise escalate tactics four weeks into an attack where his troops have failed to capture a single major Ukrainian city.

Ukraine refugee exodus nears 3.6m

PRZEMYSL/SIRET: Kateryna Mytkovich endured four weeks living with the fear of planes, rockets and missiles raining on her native city of Chernihiv in northern Ukraine before deciding to flee with her child. "I have never seen such cruelty before," said the 38-year-old, speaking from the Polish city of Przemyśl, a transit hub near the border with Ukraine. "Chernihiv is fully destroyed, they are approaching Kyiv. Even Poland."

"There is no electricity, no gas, no mobile connection in Chernihiv. We came through Kyiv, and we didn't know whether Kyiv was still standing," she said, breaking into tears. Mytkovich is one of the almost 3.6 million refugees the UN says have fled Ukraine so far, with more expected as the conflict showed no sign of abating. About 6.5 million are internally displaced within the country.

More German anti-aircraft missiles on way

BERLIN: More Strela anti-aircraft missiles are headed for Ukraine from Germany, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said in Berlin. "Further Strela deliveries are on their way," she told German lawmakers. Ukraine has so far received 500 Strela air defence missiles from Germany out of up to 2,700 expected deliveries. Berlin is now one of Kiev's biggest arms suppliers, Baerbock told the Bundestag: "That is not something that makes us proud, but that is what we have to do now to help Ukraine."

Belarus expels majority of Ukrainian diplomats

MOSCOW: Russia's ally Belarus said it will expel most Ukrainian diplomats working in the country, accusing Kyiv of "interference" in its domestic affairs. "Belarus has decided to reduce the number of Ukrainian diplomats on its territory. This measure is aimed at stopping the non-diplomatic activities of several staff members of Ukraine's diplomatic institutions," Belarusian foreign ministry spokesman Anatoly Glaz said. Only Ukraine's ambassador and four other diplomats will continue working in Minsk, compared to over 20 people currently staffing the embassy. Belarus said it will also close the Ukrainian consulate in the western city of Brest "due to the effective absence of staff". — Agencies

Redefining the purpose of education



Massrat Shaikh

The writer is an educational psychologist

There are many assumptions of compulsory education. One among them is that young people need to understand and do certain things that will help them grow intellectually.

Another view is that education that helps young people grow is not enough. Intelligence plus character perhaps is the goal of proper education.

So, what does it mean to be educated today?

As our world changes, we know education should expand our consciousness, capabilities and understanding, and it should enlarge our worldview. We all live in two worlds — the world within, that exists only because we do, and the world around us. The core purpose of education should be to enable our young people to understand both worlds.

If we redefine education according to what our world needs today, then the purpose of education can

be divided into mainly four categories:

Personal growth: Our education today should enable young people to engage with the world within them and the world around them. There is a deep correlation between our experience of the world around us and our feelings.

Students do not come in standard physical shapes or their abilities and personalities, and they all have their aptitudes and dispositions and different ways of understanding things. Education is, therefore, deeply personal. It is about cultivating the minds and hearts of living people. Engaging students as individuals is at the heart of raising achievement. Therefore, education should be directed to the full development of the human personality and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. **Cultural tolerance:** As the world becomes more crowded and connected, it becomes more complex culturally.

EDUCATION IS DEEPLY PERSONAL. IT IS ABOUT CULTIVATING THE MINDS AND HEARTS OF LIVING PEOPLE

Living respectfully with diversity is not just an ethical choice; it is imperative. Education today should enable our students to understand their own cultures and to respect the diversity of others.

It is also one of the ways that communities pass on their values from one generation to the next. There should be three cultural priorities for schools: to help students understand their own cultures, understand other cultures, and promote a sense of cultural tolerance and coexistence.

Economic independence: Education should enable students to become economically responsible

and independent. How do we prepare our students for the coming future as we see the economic landscape changing?

Through education today, our students must connect their unique talents and interests by dissolving the division between academic and vocational programmes.

Fostering beneficial partnerships between schools and the world of work is essential today so that young people can experience working environments as part of their education.

Respecting interbeing
We are not just socially connected but rather interconnected to everything around us. Education should enable young people to become active and compassionate citizens.

We live in densely woven interconnected systems, and the benefits we derive from them depend on our working together to sustain them. The empowerment of individuals must be balanced by practicing the values and responsibilities of collective life and interbeing.

The purpose of education today is to teach our young people our interconnection — through our actions, feelings, thoughts, and everything else. These lessons should be interwoven from the beginning of a student's educational journey and nurtured throughout.

We need to provide them with forms of education that engage them with the global-economic issues of environmental well-being.

When properly integrated into education, our redefining the purpose of education will equip students who leave school to engage in the economic, cultural, social, and personal challenges they will inevitably face in their lives.

It will enable them to have curiosity, creativity, communication, collaboration, compassion, composure and citizenship, which is the true purpose of education.

Troops face chill of combat in Arctic exercises

PIERRE-HENRY DESHAYES

Thousands of Nato troops, some with little experience of operating in snowy conditions, are learning to survive and fight in freezing temperatures in exercises above the Arctic Circle. Up in Norway's Far North, a group of US Marines have swapped their usual desert camouflage outfits for mountain gear, thick mittens and big white boots.

It is a world away from the hot and humid climate of their home base of Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Lying in the snow on the roadside, the men and women of the Marines 2nd expeditionary force are keeping an eye on a fictitious enemy. They're providing cover for an extensive landing operation on the shore down the hill.

One after another, amphibious Snowcats emerge from the belly of the Rotterdam, a mammoth Dutch landing vessel. Once on the beach, each one in turn unloads tracked vehicles and other military equipment. "If a unit can train and win in the Arctic, I believe they can win anywhere," says Sergeant Samuel Whitehead. But here, more than anywhere, he adds, the smallest mistake can have dire consequences.

A few days earlier, four US Marines were killed during the exercise in a plane crash in mountainous terrain, a harsh reminder of the risks of operating in challenging weather conditions.

This month's Cold Response 2022 exercise in Norway is aimed at testing the ability of Nato members -- and non-members Sweden and Finland -- to come to the aid of another member state in difficult climate conditions. Some 30,000 troops are taking part in the air, sea and land exercises, the biggest manoeuvres Norway has organised since the end of the Cold War.

Planned long in advance, the exercise has taken on added significance following Russia's war of Ukraine. The message we are sending, one US marine confided, is: Don't mess with us -- though he found a blunter way of putting it.

"Many soldiers have been here several times over the years, so they have the right equipment, they have the understanding and the experience ... to fight under winter conditions," says German General Jorg Vollmer, tasked with securing Nato's Northern flank.

"And those who have not had the chance so far, that's exactly the reason why they are here and why they are training," he adds. — AFP

Odesa and the Ukraine that should have been



Paul Krugman

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

Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine has sent the prices of many commodities skyrocketing. And it is not just oil and gas. From a humanitarian point of view, the soaring price of food, especially wheat, may be an even bigger problem.

Before the war, Russia and Ukraine produced almost a quarter of the world's wheat, much of it exported. Both the direct effects of the war and the sanctions imposed on Russia are disrupting that supply.

Nobody knows how long this disruption may last or how much suffering high food prices will cause around the world, especially in poor countries.

But how and when did the world become dependent on wheat from parts of the former Soviet Union? (The US Department of Agriculture refers to the major wheat exporters as KRU, for Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine.) That is a more interesting story than you might think, for KRU became the world's breadbasket not once, but twice.

Communism did many things badly, but one of the things it did worst was produce food. Josef Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture led to

the Ukraine famine of 1932-33 — the Holodomor — which killed millions. In its final years, the Soviet Union wasn't starving, but it was dependent on large-scale imports of grain.

After the Soviet collapse, however, this turned around.

Starting around 20 years ago, KRU, taking advantage of the fertility of its famous "black soil" and the rise of globalisation in general, began to export ever-larger quantities of grain.

COMMUNISM DID MANY THINGS BADLY, BUT ONE OF THE THINGS IT DID WORST WAS PRODUCE FOOD

But while this was something new, it was also something old. As students of economic history know, globalisation actually began in the 19th century, made possible by the revolutionary technologies of railroads and steamships. If we think of globalisation



A Palestinian worker holds wheat grains at a traditional wheat mill in the southern Gaza Strip. Russia's war on Ukraine could mean less bread on the table for many countries in the Arab world. — AFP

as something more recent that is only because world trade went into retreat in the face of world wars and the Great Depression, recovering to pre-World War I levels only around 1980. And KRU initially became a huge wheat producer during that first era of globalisation.

What was the epicentre of this great agricultural complex? The city of Odesa, which in an economic sense became more or less the Chicago of the East, the place where railways gathered the abundance of a vast agricultural heartland and shipped it to the world. The city wasn't even founded until 1794 — by Catherine the Great — but it mushroomed along with the region's foreign trade, becoming the fourth-largest city in the Russian Empire, after St Petersburg, Moscow and Warsaw.

And the Odesa of 1913 seemed well on its way to becoming one of the world's great cities, and not just economically. As a gateway to the world, it attracted an unusually diverse population. As part of the Pale of Settlement — the part of the Russian empire in which others were allowed to reside — it was especially attractive to thousands of young people seeking escape from the confines of the town.

This mixing of people seeking freedom as well as opportunity led to a cultural efflorescence. Odesa was famed for its cafes, its literature, its music. Then history intervened.

I don't think it is silly or anachronistic to say that the things that made Odesa special, that should have made it one of the world's great metropolises, were precisely the things that ethno nationalists, then and now, hate: ethnic and religious diversity, intellectual curiosity, openness to the world.

On the eve of the Russian war, it looked as if Ukraine was finally managing to recover some of those things — which is, in turn, surely part of the reason Putin decided it had to be conquered. And maybe remembering what Odesa might have become will help remind us how important it is that this attempt at conquest fail.

— New York Times

Social media in warfare



SONIA AMBROSIO
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The war in Ukraine teaches us valuable lessons about communication, information and the role of the media. It is all about points of view, interests and target audiences. The weaponised media regulations coming from Russia, in contrast

to Ukraine's social media information dominance, bring us to the relationship between language and political power.

While calculated violence and bombings for political purposes can change the attitudes and behaviour of multiple audiences, social media is creating a highly complex information system. On both sides of the border, locals, volunteers and tourists are documenting their experiences. These humanised emotional narratives have resulted in a variety of communication scenarios as well as a diverse range of responses from around the world.

News organisations' efforts to report on military operations and geopolitical circumstances with objectivity face a deluge of digital misinformers willing to jeopardise people's suffering in the name of virality.

Misinformation is part of warfare. Just days before the war, Russia had claimed it was withdrawing its forces from the border with Ukraine. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) and newspaper organisations came out revealing that satellite imagery told a different story: In fact, Russia was massing troops. Old misinformation tactics used from the Trojan War to World War II now face the cyber battle – a fight without physical borders.

NEWS ORGANISATIONS' EFFORTS TO REPORT ON MILITARY OPERATIONS AND GEOPOLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES WITH OBJECTIVITY FACE A DELUGE OF DIGITAL MISINFORMERS WILLING TO JEOPARDISE PEOPLE'S SUFFERING IN THE NAME OF VIRALITY

The digital media landscape embraces its very first real war. It had a foothold in Syria and Crimea in 2011 and 2014, but nothing compared to the current situation. The 'first Internet war' could be the 1990s Yugoslavian Civil Wars. Now, trolls and bots take central stage along with social media influences to spread propaganda and disinformation – yet, that is what occurs in periods of conflict or political turbulence.

In this media chess game, OSINT researchers are becoming contributors

by publicly doing intelligence work simply by using the available technologies and the vast online information to provide analysis. This bridges traditional journalism to a new way of analysing events that does not contribute to governments' selective released information and objectives. Choosing content from credible sources, as the correct approach, can also be interpreted as governments' perspectives, which may be misleading depending on which side of the conflict a government is on. And so, the digital technology giants are in it: A tit-for-tat media war.

A digital information battle might be just as dangerous as any military operation. Control of information, control of expressing ideas are akin to using information as a weapon to instill fear, anxiety, and to rout out different viewpoints. Outside of Russia, civil society groups and activists are using ads to sneak news to Russians. Using location targeting, the ads provide veiled links to news websites or the activation of virtual private networks (VPNs) to skirt the news blockade imposed on foreign organisations. Digital detectives from all over the world have been carrying out attacks on Russia's Internet sites, including national television stations.

In the haze of Russia-Ukraine information warfare, ironically, there are countries such as China calling for tough regulations to prohibit 'false news'. This type of call has the potential to have a significant impact on journalistic operations, especially in countries that have a history of repressing press freedom. What is happening right now in terms of the flow of information is both an alert and a warning about the minefield that social media represents.

The emotionally appealing strategies of social media encourage users to share powerful images of violence. It means that the ethical boundaries of social networking do not correspond to the Geneva Convention norms on war. Social media companies have their own set of rules. We are witnessing a real-time and immersive conflict — as a media spectacle.



POPE AND THE CHEFS!

Pope Francis meets with members of the Italian Federation of Chefs (Federazione Italiana Cuochi, FIC) during the weekly general audience on Wednesday at Paul-VI hall in The Vatican. – AFP

Europe must sharpen its aims



JAVIER SOLANA

The writer is a former EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, secretary-general of Nato, and foreign minister of Spain, is President of EsadeGeo

Russian President Vladimir Putin has brought Europe back to a place we thought had been consigned to an unrepeatable past. We find ourselves confronting a leader whose foreign policy has been degenerating since the day, in 2001, when US president George W Bush looked him in the eye and said he had found a man he could trust.

The risk of a third world war is no longer within the realm of the impossible. Russia is now staging attacks just a few kilometres from Nato's borders, and, given Putin's unpredictability, we cannot dismiss the possibility of a direct confrontation between Russia and the Alliance. That would raise the almost unimaginable possibility of a nuclear conflict, which our leaders have the duty to avoid.

Because Russia and Europe are part of an uninterrupted land mass, stability at the edge of the continent is fundamental to regional peace. But diplomatic barriers between Russia and Nato are multiplying. Rarely have the post-World War II international organisations been so absent, or even helpless, in the face of conflict. Even the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which was established with the aim of guaranteeing stability between Russia, the United States, and Europe, is proving to be inadequate to today's challenge.

The European Union has responded firmly to Russia's war, demonstrating its unity by imposing severe financial and economic sanctions. But the war in Ukraine has shown that Europe is insufficiently prepared to address its most immediate challenges. The EU must now sharpen its focus on four priorities.

First, the EU must expand its security and defence capabilities, and the "Strategic Compass", which was adopted this week in the Council of the EU, should serve to guide policy in this domain. While Europe clearly must invest in its military capabilities, this means not only spending more money but also undertaking such efforts as Europeans rather than as individual states. According to the European Defence Agency, EU member states spend a total of about €200 billion (\$221 billion) annually on defence, more than India, Russia, and the United Kingdom combined.

The task now is to improve efficiency rather than merely increasing military spending at the national level. And this requires adopting a European vision in national military planning.

Second, the EU must rethink its energy dependence on Russia. Europe has been relying on Russian gas for too long and may have to pay a price for turning off the tap, as Germany has begun to do by suspending the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. As Nathalie Tocci of the Istituto Affari Internazionali says, no economic calculation should trump what is needed for European unity.

Third, Europe must develop a common migration policy with a geographic division of responsibility for accepting refugees from our respective neighbourhoods to the east or south. Starting in 2015, then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel unilaterally accepted hundreds of thousands Syrian refugees, while the rest of Europe mostly looked the other way. Today, EU member states must show a common willingness to help those fleeing war.

The exodus of two million Ukrainians to Poland since the war began has highlighted the incongruities of European migration policy. Europe's solidarity with the Ukrainian refugees is a positive gesture that has shown our citizens at their best; but it should also make us reflect on our far less welcoming attitude towards refugees from other parts of the world.

WHILE THE EUROPEAN UNION HAS SHOWN UNITY IN RESPONDING FIRMLY TO RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE, IT IS INSUFFICIENTLY PREPARED TO ADDRESS ITS MOST IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES. POLICYMAKERS MUST NOW FOCUS ON FOUR PRIORITIES IN PARTICULAR

Lastly, Europe must help to mitigate the war's effects on global food security. Because Ukraine and Russia together supply 19 per cent of the world's barley, 14 per cent of its wheat and 4 per cent of its corn, the conflict is also affecting many other economies. For example, Kenya, with a population roughly the same size as Ukraine's, sources half of its wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine. With 276 million people globally suffering from severe hunger, poorer regions in particular will suffer as a result of the current conflict.

As the EU tackles these immediate priorities, the Union's founding mission of building peace and preventing war must

remain at its core. A world that is still suffering from the Covid-19 pandemic and its fallout, and currently seems unable to reverse the consequences of climate change, cannot afford a conflict of this type.

Europe must therefore use the means at its disposal, including sanctions, to try to change Putin's behaviour. Above all, it must play a key role in preventing the hostilities in Ukraine from escalating into a war between major powers.

The role of China, which is allegedly considering selling arms to Russia to help Putin's war effort, will likely be crucial to averting a global conflict. The most recent meeting between Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, on the eve of this year's Winter Olympics in Beijing, seemed to suggest a near-alliance between the two powers.

Many have drawn parallels with US president Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China, which heralded a Sino-American rapprochement aimed at countering the threat posed by the Soviet Union. But while China may be tempted to form an alliance with Russia, a world war would not suit Xi and becoming part of such a conflict even less so.

Preventing a China-Russia alliance from taking root is fundamental to preserving the current balance in international relations. Europe can and must urge China to play a role in seeking a negotiated end to the Ukraine conflict. To that end, it is vital that the US, the EU, and Nato not be perceived as weak and divided in either domestic or foreign policy.

Despite the tragedy of the Ukraine war, I feel proud of what Europe has done over the past few weeks. The responses in Brussels, Paris, Berlin, Warsaw and Madrid have been unanimous: Putin's aggression must not go unpunished. A more assertive, decisive EU must reflect not only resonance between national governments, but also citizens' awareness that their security, interests and principles are being threatened. Only with this mindset will Europe realise its aims.

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Soldiers from the Norwegian Armed Forces operate a tank as they participate in the international military exercise Cold Response 22, at Setermoen, North of Norway, on Tuesday. – AFP

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Oman eyeing win over Vietnam in WC qualifier

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

Oman will take on Vietnam in their penultimate match of Group B in the AFC Asian Qualifiers – Road to Qatar on Thursday. The match will be played at the My Dinh Stadium and will start at 4 pm Oman time.

Despite no chance to compete for the top three places in the group, Ivankovic’s men will look to capture three points from Vietnam in Hanoi and end the Asian qualifiers campaign in the fourth place. Also, Red Warriors will target to repeat home win in Muscat which ended 3-1.

Coach Branko Ivankovic, the head coach of the national team, voiced confident to deliver top show as this match is away from the qualification. “There is no pressure for both teams and I am expecting an open game from both sides. We have some injuries in the team including Issam al Subhi and Al Mundher al Alawi who are available in Muscat. Also, the medical team is closely following up for Mohsin al Ghassani, Mohammed al Ghafri and Fayez al Rusheidi’s injuries and will confirm their status later,” he said in a pre-match press conference on Wednesday.

The 68-year-old affirmed that there are many other players who are in good status to take part in the game. “I assure that all the team members will deliver their top efforts for a good result. I observed Vietnam team in different games. They showed top game against China and delivered thrilling encounter in Australia’s



Oman head coach Branko Ivankovic

match despite the difference in the rankings,” he added.

The Sultanate of Oman football team performed different training sessions during the last few days. The team began internal camp in Muscat and then had different sessions in Hanoi city. The last training sessions took place in the same venue of the match at the My Dinh Stadium. The Croatian experienced coach implemented different technical and tactical approaches during the warm-up sessions.

Ivankovic affirmed that both teams gained the required experience during the last tough games. “I am sure Vietnam team will be different than the previous game in Muscat and the same thing for the national team. I am looking for a win as it will be crucial to improve the Fifa ranking,” he ended.

Oman midfielder Harib al

Saadi stated that the team’s goal in this match is to register the victory. “We know that the win will not help our qualification to the next round but for players we will fight for a win. It is difficult to predict the result but we will deliver all the efforts ending the match on winning note,” he said.

The qualifiers registered some memorable results for ‘Red Warriors’ including the most notably the historic win over the Asian heavyweights Japan in the opener in September. Oman suffered two successive defeats against Saudi Arabia (1-0) and Australia (3-1) in the next matches. Then, Oman beat Vietnam 3-1 before holding China to a 1-1 draw in Sharjah city. Later, Japan edged Oman 1-0 while Saudi Arabia repeated their win in the away game 1-0 while the last encounter against Australia ended in a 2-2 draw in Muscat.

Oman suffer two defeats in Asian beach handball

WALEED HASHIL
AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

Oman beach handball team lost their opening match against the Vietnamese team 2-1 in the eighth Asian Beach Handball Championship currently being held in Teheran until March 28.

In the second match on Wednesday, Oman suffered a similar 2-1 defeat against Qatar.

After losing the first set 15-14, Oman fought back to claim the second set 27-19 but lost the decided 14-12.

This is the second win for Qatar in the championship after blanking Philippines 2-0 in their first match.

Against Vietnam on Tuesday, Oman started with a strong performance in the first half but Vietnam took advantage of the mistakes by Oman to go 4-0. Oman came back after Asaad al Hasani scored two goals, then the Vietnamese team advanced again with good attacks to make it 16-14. In the last phase of the first



set, Vietnam took control to win it 24-16.

In the second set, Oman coach Hamoud al Hasani was able to change the game plan and Oman took control.

Oman goalkeeper Hussain al Jabri also rose to the occasion in saving the shots of the Vietnamese players. Oman prevailed 19-8.

In the deciding penalties, Vietnam edged Oman 13-12 to win the match.

Al Kamil W’al Wafi clinch OVA title



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

Al Kamil W’al Wafi club lifted the title of 2021-22 Oman volleyball first division league which concluded late on Wednesday at the main indoor hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. Southern Al Sharqiyah team representatives managed to defeat Seeb 3-2 in a thrilling concluding game.

The concluding match was attended by good turnout of

fans from both team under organisation of Oman Volleyball Association (OVA). Oman club won the third/fourth play-off as they beat Masirah club 3-1.

In the final, Al Kamil W’al Wafi claimed the first set 25-23 while Seeb players managed to return back to the match as they won the second set by 25-20. In the third set, Al Kamil W’al Wafi ended the set with 10 points difference at 25-15. Seeb again bounced back strongly in the fourth set to claim

it 25-20. In the deciding set, Al Kamil W’al Wafi benefited from Seeb players mistakes to win it 15-13 and clinch the championship.

At the end of the match, chief guest Tahir bin Salim bin Abdullah al Amri, Executive President of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), delivered the awards for the top three teams.

The concluding ceremony was attended by Basil bin Ahmed al Rowas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and

Youth for Sports and Youth and Ibrahim al Mahdawi, Chairman of Oman Volleyball Association, besides officials and invitees.

Individual awards: Best libero: Salim Walad Ahmed (Al Kamil W’al Wafi). Best setter Mohammed al Maqbali (Al Kamil W’al Wafi). Best player in position (No 2): Waleed al Badi (Masirah). Best player in position (No 4): Younis al Amri (Seeb). most valuable player: Hilal al Maqbali (Al Kamil W’al Wafi).

World No 1 Barty announces shock retirement

MELBOURNE: Ashleigh Barty dropped a bombshell on the tennis world on Wednesday, the 25-year-old announcing her retirement at the peak of her game and just two months after claiming a third Grand Slam title at the Australian Open.

Citing the fulfilment of her tennis goals and fatigue with life on the Tour, the world number one walks away with 15 titles to her name, the last coming at Melbourne Park where she ended Australia's 44-year wait for a home champion.

"I know how much work it takes to bring the best out of yourself... I don't have that in me anymore", she said in video posted on her Instagram account on Wednesday.

"I don't have the physical drive, the emotional want and everything it takes to challenge yourself at the very top level any more. I am spent."

It marks Barty's second retirement from the sport, having walked away from the game as a teenager in late-2014 after becoming disaffected by the Tour.

She returned in 2016 and rose rapidly up the rankings, earning global acclaim for her tennis and fans' affection for her sportsmanship and laid-back demeanor.

Spending 121 weeks as world number one, Barty won the 2019 French Open and Wimbledon in 2021 and appeared well set for more Grand Slam success to take her place among the game's greats.

Ashleigh Barty AUSTRALIA

Age: 25 | Height: 1.66 m

Plays: right-handed

Turned pro: 2010

Announces retirement March 23, 2022

WTA Ranking	1
Career wins	305
Losses	102
Titles	15
Grand Slams	3
Career prize money	US\$ 23,829,071

AFP Source: WTA



Winner, Wimbledon July 10, 2021
Photo: Jed Leicester

However, she never made any secret of her dislike for the touring life and her battles with homesickness.

She said realising her "one true dream" by winning Wimbledon last year had changed her perspective.

"Ash Barty the person has so many dreams she wants to chase after that don't necessarily involve travelling the world, being away from my family, being away from my home, which is where I've always wanted to be", she said in the video interviewed by her close friend and former doubles partner Casey Dellacqua.

"I'll never, ever stop loving tennis, it's been a massive part of my life, but I think it's important that I get to enjoy the next part of my life as Ash Barty the person, not Ash Barty the athlete."

'WHAT A PLAYER'

Barty suffered depression on the Tour after turning professional as a teenager, leading her to quit and briefly reinvent herself as a professional cricketer in her home state of Queensland.

When Covid-19 halted tennis in 2020 she took nearly a year off to stay home with family rather than rejoin the circuit when it

resumed.

As players battled at the delayed 2020 French Open, Barty was spotted in the crowd at an Australian Rules football match in Brisbane, cheering her beloved Richmond Tigers with a cup of beer in her hand.

Wearing a simple blue sports top and with her hair pulled back in her trademark bun, Barty wiped away tears during the interview with Dellacqua.

"I know I've done this before, but in a different feeling", she said.

"I'm so grateful for tennis, it's given me all of my dreams, plus more, but I know the time is right

I know how much work it takes to bring the best out of yourself... I don't have that in me anymore. I don't have the physical drive, the emotional want and everything it takes to challenge yourself at the very top level any more. I am spent

ASHLEIGH BARTY
World No 1

now for me to step away and chase other dreams and to put the racquets down."

She bows out with almost \$24 million in career prize money and as a national hero by beating American Danielle Collins in the Australian Open in the final in January.

As the second Aboriginal Australian to win a Grand Slam title, following in the footsteps of the great Evonne Goolagong Cawley, Barty has also become an idol for her country's Indigenous population.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison thanked Barty for "inspiring a

generation of young people and particularly a generation of young Indigenous people" in Australia.

"You are all class, your commitment to excellence in your chosen field in tennis... I'm sure anything you turn your hand to you are going to be a great success", he added.

Barty's bombshell triggered tributes from players and officials.

"Happy for @ashbarty, gutted for tennis", said Briton Andy Murray, former men's world number one. "What a player."

WTA boss Steve Simon said Barty led by example through her professionalism and sportsmanship in every match.

"With her accomplishments at the Grand Slams, WTA Finals, and reaching the pinnacle ranking of No 1 in the world, she has clearly established herself as one the great champions of the WTA."

Her retirement echoes Justine Henin's decision to quit in 2008 as a 25-year-old world number one with seven Grand Slam titles. Henin came out of retirement in 2010, inspired by fellow Belgian Kim Clijsters' comeback.

2005 US Open champion Clijsters retired in 2007 at the age of 23 but returned after a two-year hiatus to claim another three Grand Slam titles.

Women's tennis will have a new world number one in Poland's Iga Swiatek. Australia will hope Barty's second retirement ends up like her first, broken by another comeback and more Grand Slam silverware. — Reuters

Al Hail CT to hold Danube cricket tourney



MUSCAT: The Al Hail Cricket Club will organise the 3rd edition of the Danube Ramadan Tennex Ball cricket tournament 2022 at the Al Hail Cricket grass ground in Maabala on April 4.

The tournament matches will be played on a knock-out basis with participation limited to 32 teams. The tournament is open for all the teams that are participating in Oman Cricket's 'A' division and all other divisions below. The organisers have decided to give some interesting prizes besides the main trophy and cash prizes for the winners and runners-up teams. There will also be prizes for the best bowler and best disciplined team apart from the regular prizes.

In addition, there are other prizes that will be given away in various categories. To make it more exciting for the viewers as well, the organisers will also give away surprise gifts on weekly basis to the visitors and viewing audience. A separate area will be provided for children to play during the course of the tournament.

All the matches will start at 9:30 pm. The interested teams can register their team through our website. The website can be accessed on the following URL www.alhailcricketclub.com.

Registration will be on first-come first-served basis with limitation up to 32 teams max. The tournament draw is scheduled to take place in HCT ground in Maabala at 7.30 pm on March 31 in the presence of all the team captains and managers.

The organisers thanked Thamim Ansari, Country Head-Oman- Danube, for his support to cricket in the country. He is also an accomplished cricketer and currently playing soft ball cricket in Oman for the Danube team. In the past, Thamim had played first class cricket in UAE for Danube team and scored century as well. The main sponsors of the tournament are Al Danube, a top building materials company in the Sultanate of Oman. Danube are sponsors for this grand event for the third year in a row.

For details contact: 00968 99623536 and 00968 96972291

Oman Cricket announces new board of directors

MUSCAT: Oman Cricket announces 2022-25 Board of Directors list Oman Cricket's Annual General Meeting was held at the Al Falaj Hotel on March 21, 2022 to elect the new Board of Directors from 2022-25.

The results saw Pankaj Khimji and Madhursinh Jesrani continue in their respective roles as Oman Cricket's Chairman and Secretary. Paul Robert



Sheridan and Alkesh Naranji Joshi were elected Vice-Chairman and Treasurer.

The full list of the Board of Directors of Oman Cricket from 2022-25 is as fol-

lows: Pankaj Kanaksi Gokaldas Khimji - Chairman, Paul Robert Sheridan - Vice-Chairman, Madhursinh Jamnadas Jesrani - Secretary, Alkesh Naranji

Joshi - Treasurer, Kiran Navinchandra Asher - Member, Maqbool bin Hussain bin Moosa al Lawati - Member, Dilipkumar Shamaldas Mehta - Member, Syed Anwar Ahsan - Member, Ali bin Moosa bin Yousuf - Member

All the Directors remain fully committed to build on the success that Oman Cricket has garnered and to further grow the game of cricket in Oman.

Ruwi Rangers crowned D10 champions

MUSCAT: The 10th and final day of the D10 league saw the Ruwi Rangers beat the Qurum Thunders by 8 wickets to lift the tournament's inaugural trophy at the Oman Cricket Academy on Tuesday night.

The Rangers were the competition's most dominant force. They won 10 of their 11 games - the only loss coming in the league stage against the Qurum Thunders, who were their opponents in the final.

The Thunders were excellent too. They lost 4 games in total, but beat the Bousher Busters and Amerat Royals in back-to-back eliminators in the Super League stage to set up a showdown with the Rangers.

The final itself began brilliantly for the side from Qurum. Coming out to bat after losing the toss, the opening pair of Kashyap Kumar Prajapati and Jatinder Singh looked imperious. Kaleemullah saw his deliveries dispatched to all parts of the Amerat field - his and the game's first over costing the Rangers 22 runs. The



Oman national team's openers put together a 63-run partnership to place the Thunders in the driver's seat.

However, three wickets in three successive overs brought the D20 champions back into the game. Jatinder walked first after making 38 runs. Kashyap was the next casualty and Sandeep Goud completed the sequence. Yet the Thunders marched on with Ayaan Khan and Suraj Kumar Singh in the middle. Ayaan in particular looked at his blistering best, sending three deliveries of the penultimate over into orbit to propel his side past the 100-run mark. He was run

out in the final over and the Thunders finished on 125-4.

The second innings got off to a disastrous start for the Rangers who lost an in-form Hanan Rizwan in the very first ball. But what followed was a display of skill, grit and intelligence that made them worthy champions in the end. Khalid Kail and Shafqat Ullah stitched together an 88-run partnership over the next 36 balls. They created openings in the field and used their feet smartly to force the bowlers to constantly adjust their lines and lengths. The Thunders were profligate in their catching too and the pair capitalised to maximum effect.

Sandeep Goud sent Shafqat back for a 20-ball 43, but Khalid Kail stayed put until the very end to take the Rangers over the line. He made 62 runs and finished as the competition's leading run-getter. Mohammed Naseem kept him company for the final 4 overs. He hit the six that sealed the victory with 2 balls and 8 wickets to spare.

In the post-match presentation ceremony, Pankaj Khimji - Chairman, Oman Cricket, Vivek Chandra - Director, ITW, Paul Sheridan - Vice-Chairman, Oman Cricket, Kiran Asher, Senior Board Member, Oman Cricket and Duleep



Mendis - CDO, Oman Cricket were all present to hand out the awards. Khalid Kail picked up the player of the tournament prize, following which the ground staff, umpires, scorers, ACUs and members of security received their tokens of appreciation to close out an evening that brought the 10-day festival of cricket at the OCA to a fitting end.

BRIEF SCORES:

Qurum Thunders 125-4 in 10 overs (Jatinder Singh 38 (16b, 2x4, 4x6), Ayaan Khan 33 (15b, 4x6), Kashyap Kumar Prajapati 28 (14b, 4x4, 1x6); Wasim Ali 1-10) lost to Ruwi Rangers 130-2 in 9.4 overs (Khalid Kail 62 (28b, 8x4, 2x6), Shafqat Ullah 43 (20b, 3x4, 4x6); Munis Ansari 1-22) by 8 wickets.

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Traders warned against rebar price gouging

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabalnasseri

Seeking to clamp down on attempts by some traders to cash in on the severe dearth of construction materials, the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has carried a number of supervisory inspection campaigns covering shops selling steel rebars – a key ingredient in building and infrastructure construction.

The inspections in Al Dhahirah Governorate are aimed at ensuring that traders comply with the laws and legislations related to consumer protection. The drive aims to ensure that rebar sellers do not exploit current market shortages to raise prices, the CPA said, reminding merchants to stay committed to existing laws and legislations that contribute to the stability of markets.



During the campaign, distributors were reminded of their responsibility to abide by the provisions of the Consumer Protection Law and its executive regulations issued in this regard, to abide by transparency, credibility and honesty when dealing with consumers and not to exploit external circumstances to either

raise prices or hoard goods.

The Authority confirmed that rebar is available in adequate quantities in the governorate's markets. The suppliers, for their part, are keen to replenish supplies as soon as they run out.

The Consumer Protection Authority has also urged the general public to report any

instances of market violations, reminding customers to preserve their invoices if they feel they have been overcharged.

Iron and cement prices rose in the wake of the Ukrainian-Russian crisis, impacting the construction sector in the Sultanate of Oman, prompting calls for government intervention to find solutions to

increase production and reduce prices in the local market.

Earlier, the CPA stated through its Twitter account that it had taken the necessary measures regarding a much-circulated video clip appearing to show the hoarding of steel at a site in an apparent bid to raise prices. The Authority said it had visited the

site for investigation and legal procedures were taken. It affirmed its goal to stabilise markets in an effort to protect the rights of consumers in the Sultanate of Oman.

Seeking to support to growth of a strong steel sector in the country, Samayil Industrial City announced on Tuesday that it has signed an agreement with the Gulf Petrochemical Services and Trade Company to establish a steel facility with an investment of RO 3 million in the first phase.

Samayil Industrial City represents an important link between the governorates of Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah and South and North Al Sharqiyah. It was designed according to the latest international standards and provides an integrated environment for work through its diverse range of facilities and services.

No increase in prices, says Oman Cement



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

Responding to the public outcry, voiced on social media platforms, about the rising prices and scarce supplies of cement, leading cement manufacturer Oman Cement Company (OCC) said it would ramp up production to ease what appears to be a severe shortage of this key construction material.

In a filing to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) on Wednesday, Oman Cement CEO Eng Salim Abdullah al Hajri acknowledged that the shortfall has resulted in long lines of trucks and waiting customers.

"The Company confirms that no increase in prices has been made by OCC so far, and that the long queues of waiting trucks is due to severe shortage of imported cement due to its high prices as well as the shortage of the supply from the local cement which has driven those customers

who used to buy cement from the neighbouring countries and other local producers to buy cement from OCC."

The CEO further added: "In light of this frustrated and increased demand of cement, the Company has increased its production capacity to the optimum extent possible averaging (10,000) TPD.

However, cement demand is still beyond OCC capabilities to meet. As OCC emphasises its main role in supplying the local market with cement, it further confirms its commitment to work with all its partners to provide high quality products at reasonable prices according to the optimum production capacity possible."

The government's 51 per cent stake in Oman Cement, the country's first cement manufacturer, is held by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the integrated sovereign wealth fund of the Sultanate of Oman.

Sultanate of Oman's Islamic banking on positive trajectory: Fitch

JOMAR MENDOZA
@JmObserver

International credit rating agency Fitch says the Islamic banking sector in the Sultanate of Oman is likely to sustain its positive trajectory in the short-to-medium term despite a number of structural challenges.

Supportive government regulations, strong retail demand for Islamic products and a strong push from the Islamic windows of conventional banks all contribute to the growth of the sector. Growth in both Islamic and conventional banking is also driven by expected positive real GDP growth, higher oil prices, improving operating environment, the easing of the coronavirus restrictions and the rise in interest or profit rates.

In 2021, the Islamic banking sector's financing growth topped 11.6 per cent y-o-y, in contrast to the conventional banking sector's 3.1 per cent, with a compounded annual growth rate of 9 per cent in 2017-2021.

Surging public demand and low-base effect propelled the growth. As a result, the market share of Islamic banking and Islamic windows increased to 15.2 per cent at end-2021 (end-2020: 14.3 per cent), with total assets of RO 5.9 billion (\$15.3 billion).

Fitch says key structural challenges persist mainly due to the sector's recent inception in Oman (around 10 years ago). These include gaps in the distribution channels, limited product offerings, a



still-developing regulatory framework, a small capital base, limited sukuk investment options and insufficient Islamic liquidity management products.

Fitch says, "We continue to see consolidation. In January 2022, Bank Nizwa and Sohar International Bank received Central Bank of Oman (CBO) approval to start due diligence for a potential merger. The proposed structure of the merged entity is still unknown.

This follows the takeover of Alizz Islamic Bank by Oman Arab Bank in 2020. Consolidation could be a credit-positive as it generates cost-efficiencies, deepen distribution channels and strengthen capitalisation levels. Consolidation could also support faster growth in the Islamic subsidiary or window through the larger conventional banks' capitalisation and liquidity profiles."

"We expect mild asset quality deterioration following the end of payment holidays and

flexibility as banks will not have to classify financing as impaired when payments are deferred. This is likely to arise in the more vulnerable sectors, particularly in real estate, construction, tourism and manufacturing. We expect profitability to improve with rising rates and lower impairment charges, but a return to pre-pandemic levels is unlikely before 2023-2024", the ratings agency added.

Omani Islamic banks have in the past been adequately capitalised, but at lower levels than conventional banks. Oman's Islamic banking regulatory framework allows Islamic banks to use a 30 per cent alpha factor which can uplift capital ratios, unlike conventional banks.

However, Islamic banks continue to apply their undiscounted risk-weighted assets and do not benefit from discounted risk-weights for assets financed by profit-sharing investment accounts.

The capital bases of Islamic

Supportive government regulations, strong retail demand for Islamic products and a strong push from the Islamic windows of conventional banks all contribute to the growth of the sector.

FITCH RATINGS

banks are also smaller than those of conventional peers, which may limit the scale of participation in large government financing projects.

However, amid rising core capital and reserves at Islamic banks and windows, Islamic banks are increasingly financing government and public enterprise projects, with their share of total financing jumping to 10.4 per cent at end-2021 (end-2020: 4.6 per cent). It was lower than that of conventional banks whose share was 16.1 per cent at end-2021.

The CBO is developing a medium-term strategy for the Islamic banking sector, including a lender of last resort facility for Islamic banking entities, with a sharia-compliant deposit insurance scheme. In 2021, the Omani Capital Market Authority released draft rules for sukuk and bonds, including for ESG-linked instruments. Sukuk issuance represents about 19 per cent of total listed government bond and sukuk in Oman in March 2022.

Bank Muscat AGM elects Board of Directors, approves 35% dividend



MUSCAT: Bank Muscat held its Annual Ordinary General Meeting (AGM) and an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) of the bank's shareholders on March 22, 2022 at the Hormuz Grand Muscat Hotel.

Shareholders were given the option of joining the meeting in-person or through the electronic platform of Muscat Clearing and Depository's website. Both meetings were presided over by Shaikh Khalid bin Mustahail al Mashani, Chairman of the Bank's Board of Directors. During the AGM, shareholders of the bank elected by acclamation the board of directors for a three-year term (2022-2025).

Shareholders of the bank also granted their approval for the pay-out of 35% dividend for 2021, including a cash dividend of 30% and 5% dividend as bonus shares. Bank Muscat shareholders will thus receive cash dividend of RO 0.030 per ordinary share of RO 0.100 each.

In addition, they will receive bonus shares in the proportion of 5 bonus share for every 100 ordinary shares.

The distribution of bonus shares will result in the increase of the issued share capital of the Bank to 3,753,198,531 shares of a nominal value of RO 0.100 each. During the AGM, shareholders also approved the report of the Sharia Supervisory Board of Meethaq, the bank's Islamic banking window as well as the appointment of the Sharia Supervisory Board members.

After the AGM, the Board of Directors held a meeting and appointed Shaikh Khalid bin Mustahail al Mashani as the Chairman of the Board of Directors and Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamed bin Hilal al Saadi as Deputy Chairman.

Speaking on the occasion, Shaikh Khalid bin Mustahail al Mashani thanked the regulators, shareholders, clients and partners for their support and commitment

to the bank.

He added, "Driven by its proactive customer-centric strategy, Bank Muscat continued to demonstrate leadership in Oman's financial services sector and ended 2021 on a positive note by working prudently to overcome challenges.

The Sultanate of Oman's leading financial institution is now poised to further consolidate its leading position as it completes 40 years of successfully serving the nation and the people of Oman in 2022."

The bank posted a net profit of RO 189.63 million for the year, compared to RO 163.36 million reported during the same period in 2020, an increase of 16.1 per cent.

Net Interest Income from Conventional Banking and Net Income from Islamic Financing stood at RO 335.54 million for the year ended December 31, 2021, compared to RO 322.13 million for the same period in 2020, an increase of 4.2 per cent.

Non-interest income was RO 139.94 million for the year ended December 31, 2021 as compared to RO 134.41 million for the same period in 2020, an increase of 4.1 per cent. Net Loans and Advances, including Islamic financing receivables, increased by 2.3 per cent to RO 9,191 million as against RO 8,983 million as at 31 December 2020.

Customer deposits including Islamic customer deposits increased by 3.7 per cent to RO 8,775 million as against RO 8,459 million as at December 31, 2020.

The basic earnings per share was RO 0.051 in 2021 against RO 0.044 in 2020.

The bank's capital adequacy ratio stood at a very healthy level of 21.30 per cent as at December 31, 2021 after appropriation for proposed dividend for the year 2021 against the minimum required level of 13.25 per cent as per Basel III regulations issued by the Central Bank of Oman.



Nesto opens new hypermarket in Barka

MUSCAT: Nesto Hypermarket Oman announced the opening of its latest store in As Sawmhan in Barka yesterday. The new store was inaugurated by Barka Wali Shaikh Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Abdullah al Buraiki, in the presence of Sayyid Khalid bin Mahfoudh bin Salim al Busaidy, Haris Palollathil & Mujeeb VTK A, Regional Directors, Nesto group, and the Senior Management of Nesto Oman.

The new store will further strengthen the group's presence in the country and will offer customers a new level of standard in price, convenience, comfort, quality in-store service levels and above all, a new shopping experience.

The new branch features state-of-the-art facilities, elegant interiors, well-planned retail floor layout, ample aisle space,

extensively laid out counters and liberal parking space.

Speaking at the launch, Haris Palollathil said, "We are happy to launch our 13th store in Oman at Barka. The opening of the new hypermarket is in line with our ambitious plans to rapidly expand our footprint in the country and a reflection of our commitment towards the local community.

As part of our expansion plan, we are planning to launch more stores across the Sultanate of Oman in the coming years. The country's robust economy and investor-friendly policies have always been conducive for us to firmly establish our presence here. The government has been readily supporting us in all our ventures to date and helping us contribute to the economic and social development of the country."

Ahlibank celebrates opening of new branch in Ruwi

MUSCAT: Enduring its vision of expansion in various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, ahlibank has celebrated the opening of its new branch in Ruwi, Muscat. The ceremony was held under the auspices of Sayyid Ahmed bin Hilal al Busaidy, Wali of Muttrah, in the presence of a number of Bank officials and employees.

Ahlibank aims to enhance its presence in the market, bringing its products and services closer to its customers through a strategic expansion roadmap.

The Bank's consistent opening of branches in prominent locations is a part of its ambitious strategy to provide banking solutions that meet the evolving needs of its customers. The bank also looks at offering banking products and services for various segments in the society, as well



as keeping pace with the trends within their modernised world.

Qais al Hasani, Head of Branches, ahlibank, said, "We are pleased to announce the opening of the new branch. This milestone reflects the bank's dedication towards implementing its expansion plan that aims to make the bank's products and services easily accessible by customers.

It further resonates with the bank's objectives of providing comprehensive and secured banking services. It is also in line with its endeavours towards strengthening its relationship with its customers by meeting their changing requirements, surpassing their expectations and cementing its leading position in the market."

Lulu announces World Food '22 festival promotion winners

MUSCAT: Lulu Hypermarket concluded the first season of its World Food '22 by announcing the winners of the raffle draw held as part of the festival.

The two-week annual food fest, which was organised from February 21 till March 5, 2022, not only gave customers a chance to savour the unique flavours from across the globe but also the opportunity to win Lulu ShoppinGift Cards. A digital raffle draw was conducted under the supervision of officials from the concerned Municipality to select 250 winners. The winning customers were from different nationalities, age and gender. Each winner received Lulu ShoppinGift Card worth RO 50.

A slew of promotions have been lined up following The World Food '22 coinciding with pre-Ramadhan shopping season. Lulu has special offers and discounts on a wide array of products, including Groceries, Frozen & Fresh food, Hot food & Bakery, Cleaning products & Accessories, Home Furnishing & Decor, as well as Household and Home Appliances. Customers can also purchase all their Ramadhan essentials right from home using the online app. Special Ramadhan kits containing groceries, such as rice, milk powder, sugar, oil and



other essentials, are also available at attractive prices.

Shabeer K A, Regional Director - Oman, remarked, "I congratulate all the winners of the promotion held as part of The World Food '22. The positive response from customers has always been the driving force behind organising such events every year. Through this food fest, our goal is to unite people from diverse countries, ethnic backgrounds and cultures through food. It was also the perfect occasion for our shoppers to enjoy the ambience, excellent food, as well as some amazing prizes."

Lincoln unveils rewarding wish list campaign across the range

MUSCAT: Own a Lincoln vehicle and avail exclusive benefits like service 5 years/100,000 kms, 1 year registration and 3M window tint. (Conditions apply. For details visit a Lincoln showroom.) The campaign is valid up to May 18, 2022.

In Oman, Lincoln range includes the family-size Lincoln Navigator, Lincoln Nautilus, the Lincoln Aviator and the Lincoln Corsair. The Navigator, combines modern luxury with advanced technology - elevating family travel to first class. A twin-turbo V6 engine that can produce 450 horsepower

provides smooth power whenever you need it, delivered through a 10-speed transmission. Navigator's lighter, high-strength aluminium-alloy body helps create a more refined ride.

The Aviator is packed with advanced technologies that let the luxury SUV rise up to greet you, and scan the road ahead to glide through an uneven pavement. Aviator offers the kind of capability premium clients require in a three-row SUV, with available all-wheel drive. The standard twin-turbocharged 3.0-litre V6 engine, paired with a 10-speed SelectShift



automatic transmission, it delivers an impressive 400 horsepower and 562 Nm of torque for effortless acceleration.

The Corsair embraces elements of both the full-size Lincoln Navigator and three-row Lincoln Aviator while building

on these cues with even more flair. Painstakingly sculpted in clay, Corsair features exquisite contouring throughout the body section of the door, offering a deep landscape of curvature and relief with a fast-falling roofline. Staying true to its Quiet Flight DNA, Corsair is engineered to deliver the effortless drive experience and sensation of gliding over the road.

A standard 2.0-litre with a targeted 245 horsepower is mated to a new 8-speed automatic transmission for agile performance.

The attractive and luxurious

Lincoln Nautilus is bold, stylish and powerful. The Lincoln Nautilus is equipped with a turbocharged engine line-up. Delivering a luxurious driver environment with SUV flexibility, the Nautilus offers a stunning exterior design.

In Oman, Lincoln vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co. LLC. Please log on to www.lincolnoman.com or www.facebook.com/lincolnoman or www.instagram.com/lincoln_oman for the latest news, test drive requests and the latest press releases.



A pump jack operates at sunset in an oil field in Midland, Texas. – Reuters

Oil rises in volatile trade

LONDON: Oil prices rose in volatile trading on Wednesday, supported by disruption of Russian and Kazakh crude exports via the CPC pipeline. Brent crude futures were up \$3.13, or 2.7 per cent, at \$118.08 a barrel at 11:00 GMT. Prices had earlier fallen to a low of \$114.45. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures rose \$2.69, or 2.5 per cent, to \$111.03 a barrel. The contract had earlier slipped to a low of \$108.38.

The market remains on edge over the prospect of further sanctions on Russia, the world's second-largest crude exporter, after its attack on Ukraine, actions that Moscow calls a "special operation".

US President Joe Biden is set to announce more Russian sanctions when he meets with European leaders on Thursday in Brussels, including an emergency meeting of Nato.

European Union member countries remain split on whether to ban imports of Russian crude and oil products which still continue to flow, but this might change once short-term contracts run out.

"Next up are Russian exports in April and there we see cancelled cargoes and problems for Russia to find buyers. India and China will buy but that won't be enough to avoid declining Russian exports," said SEB analyst Bjarne Schieldrop.

Russia on Tuesday warned of a drop in oil exports via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) of up to 1 million barrels per day (bpd), or 1 per cent of global oil production, because of storm-damaged berths. CPC exports stopped fully on Wednesday and repairs will take at least one and a half months, according to a port ship agent.

— Reuters

NEW BOOST: Dedicated investment complexes planned at industrial parks

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) has unveiled opportunities for investment in a series of new dedicated complexes planned in various industrial cities operated around the Sultanate of Oman.

According to Eng Samar al Hosni, Director of Planning and Geographical Systems at Madayn, investment opportunities available in Madayn Investment Complexes in Sur, Samayil, Suhar and Al Buraimi Industrial Cities. In Sur Industrial City, investment opportunities are offered in food investment complexes on an area of 42,000 sqm, and multiple industries investment complexes on an area of 41,000 sqm.

Samayil Industrial City offers investment opportunities in food investment complexes (53,000 sqm), multiple industries investment complexes (22,000 sqm), and logistics investment complexes (61,000 sqm). Suhar Industrial City has investment



complexes for food (60,000 sqm), multiple industries (60,000 sqm), and plastic industries (50,000 sqm). Al Buraimi Industrial City also offers investment opportunities linked to food (27,000 sqm) and multiple industries (32,000 sqm).

The announcement came during a seminar entitled "Nizwa Industrial City: Reality and Prospects" held on Wednesday under the auspices of Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah. Held as part of Madayn's Oman Manufacturing Group (OMG) series of events, the seminar highlighted current investment opportunities in

Nizwa Industrial City.

Speaking at the seminar, Ahmed al Hajri, Director General of Nizwa Industrial City, said total investment in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate has touched approximately RO 900 million.

Of this total, RO 600 million worth of investments have flowed into Nizwa and Samayil Industrial Cities. The number of localised projects in these two industrial cities has reached nearly 300, which employ around 6,647 workers.

According to Mariya al Zadjali, Director of Strategic Planning and Corporate Performance

Assessment at Madayn, the Madayn Vision 2040 aims to create world-class business cities while maintaining the Omani identity.

The vision revolves around promoting comprehensive and sustainable economic and social development through strengthening Public-Private Partnership, developing and operating business cities with integrated services, keeping pace with the variables and adopting best solutions and technologies to meet business requirements while conforming to the environmental standards.

British Finance Minister cuts taxes to soften cost-of-living hit

LONDON: British Finance Minister Rishi Sunak (pictured) cut taxes for workers and reduced a duty on fuel on Wednesday as he sought to soften a severe cost-of-living squeeze against the backdrop of fast-rising inflation and slowing economic growth.

Announcing a half-yearly budget update in parliament, Sunak said he was increasing the threshold at which workers start to pay national insurance, or social security, contributions by 3,000 pounds (\$3,958.50) this year.

"That's a 6 billion pound personal tax cut for 30 million people across the United Kingdom", he said, adding the cut was equivalent to more than 330 pounds a year per worker, making it the largest single personal tax cut in a decade.

But Sunak stuck to his plan to increase national insurance contributions from next



month, part of his plan to fund more spending on health and social care after the Covid-19 pandemic.

In his Spring Statement, he announced a reduction of one pence in the pound in the basic rate of income tax in 2024 while a cut in fuel duty of 5 pence per litre would start later on Wednesday and last until March next year.

Sunak and Prime Minister Boris Johnson have been under pressure, including from lawmakers within their Conservative Party, to do more

to help households as they struggle with the rising cost of living.

Sunak announced new forecasts showing the British economy will grow more slowly this year than previously predicted, hit by uncertainty caused by Russia's war on Ukraine, and that inflation will be much higher.

The forecasts drawn up by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) showed the economy was likely to grow by 3.8% in 2022, a sharp slowdown from a forecast of 6.0% made in October. Inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, is now seen at 7.4% in 2022, compared with October's forecast of 4.0%.

Earlier, data showed Britain's consumer price inflation hit a 30-year high of 6.2% last month, driven by soaring costs for energy and food, which poorer households especially may find hard to cut back on. — Reuters

Madayn launches KOMmunity initiative at Knowledge Oasis Muscat

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

Muscat Knowledge Oasis Muscat, the technology arm of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), launched on Wednesday the KOMmunity initiative aimed at bringing together KOM tenants under one platform to network, share business opportunities and ideas, and address problems that need to be solved.

KOMmunity event is an outcome of a newly formed advisory team created by Madayn, which includes representatives from leading firms in the field of knowledge and technology.

By creating a business community that will strengthen the economic base and help tenants to engage and partner in doing business, this initiative is expected to reflect on sustaining businesses and providing quality job opportunities.

Speaking at the event, Eng Jaafar al Ajmi, Director General of KOM, stated that the rapid



developments seen by knowledge and technology industries worldwide have made it essential for the economic zones to explore flexible strategies that keep pace with these developments and achieve business sustainability.

"From this standpoint, Madayn's management formed an advisory team to develop strategic policies and plans for KOM in a phased manner.

This team launched KOMmunity initiative to maintain effective communication, exchange expertise in knowledge and technology fields and discuss developments triggered at local

and global business scenes," Al Ajmi added.

Officials of KOM then highlighted the key projects that are currently being implemented by Madayn in KOM, which comprise the Ring Road project and its associated services that include road works and lighting, rainwater drainage, sewage network, water network, firefighting system, electrical works, CCTV and pedestrian and cycling paths.

The officials also pointed out that Masar Service Centre is in its soft launch phase in KOM 3 building since last month.

EU eyes joint gas buying to tackle energy crunch

BRUSSELS: The European Union recommended on Wednesday that EU countries jointly buy gas to shore up supply, but warned that seeking to cap wholesale prices would cause problems and undermine efforts to shift to green energy.

The European Commission will unveil a detailed plan in May to quit Russian fossil fuels by 2027, in response to the invasion

of Ukraine by Russia, which supplies 40 per cent of EU gas. Meanwhile, countries are scrambling for ways to quickly limit soaring energy bills and find alternative supplies in case Russian flows are disrupted. Brussels on Wednesday proposed a range of options to do this, which EU leaders will discuss at a summit on March 24-25.

The Commission recommended



European Union flags flutter outside the European Commission headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. – Reuters

EU countries jointly purchase gas from suppliers, following a similar model to how the bloc bought Covid-19 vaccines, with a Commission-led task force of negotiators pooling demand and seeking gas ahead of next winter.

The Commission assessed other options - such as price caps, which Spain and Belgium have called for ahead of the EU leaders' summit. One option would be for a

government-controlled entity to buy electricity and sell to certain consumers below market prices.

Another would be to cap power prices and compensate generators for the difference between the cap and the market price. However, if countries did this individually, it could push power into countries without the cap and cause supply concerns elsewhere, the Commission said. — Reuters

Aramco health adds spice to Saudi’s yuan dilemma

Saudi Aramco is giving Mohammed bin Salman extra firepower in his beef with Joe Biden. Saudi Arabia’s \$2.3 trillion oil behemoth wants to increase its maximum output as crude prices soar. That adds spice to tensions between the Saudi Arabian crown prince and the US president that are spilling over into how the kingdom prices its oil.

Right now, Saudi Arabia’s crude contracts are denominated in dollars. That makes sense, given that the Saudi riyal is pegged to the dollar and nearly 25 per cent of Saudi’s \$493 billion of central bank assets are US Treasuries.

Abruptly repricing Saudi’s main export could destabilise the economy and undermine Saudi’s decades-long US friendship.

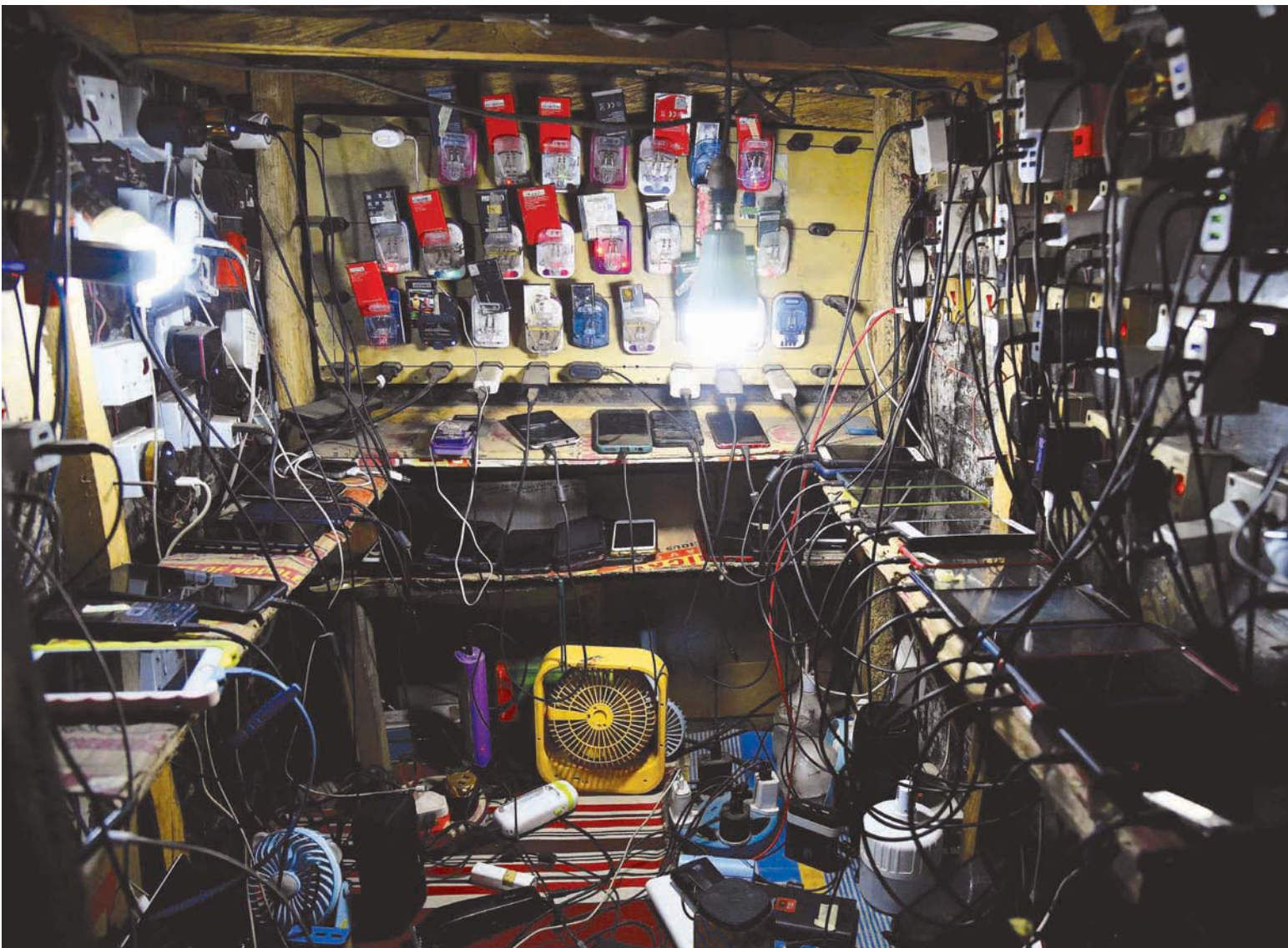
Meanwhile, China buys three times as much oil from Saudi as the United States does. The People’s Republic is Saudi’s biggest trading partner, purchasing nearly 20 per cent of the kingdom’s goods, compared to 5 per cent two decades ago. And Chinese telco Huawei Technologies and steel producer Baosteel are building telecoms networks and factories in Saudi Arabia, while Aramco is planning to build a \$10 billion refining project in China.

Over the past decade, Saudi’s trade surplus with China has averaged \$24 billion, Capital Economics estimates. If all trade with China were to be conducted in renminbi, the Chinese currency could within five years generate up to 25 per cent of Saudi’s official foreign exchange reserves. If most of Aramco’s hiked output was sold to China, then this effect might be exacerbated.

A decisive China pivot by MbS is not guaranteed, though. Even if Saudi accepts yuan for 25 per cent of its oil sales, the other 75 per cent would still be in dollars. Given the need to protect the peg, that may lead to Saudi only repricing a portion of its crude.

Still, Aramco’s rude health may encourage MbS to sell a further chunk of its shares to foreign investors to finance the transitioning of the domestic economy away from oil. If China emerges as the buyer of these shares, it would say something about how much Saudi oil winds up priced in yuan. — Reuters

Abruptly repricing Saudi’s main export could destabilise the economy and undermine Saudi’s decades-long US friendship.



CHARGED UP

A general view of a shop with dozens of phones of clients without electricity being charged with multiple chargers at night at Ojodu district of Lagos, Nigeria. Blackouts are common in Africa's top petroleum producer, where dilapidated infrastructure often fails to distribute even insufficient electricity supplies. Many businesses rely on diesel generators to keep the lights on when power is out, and since Ukraine's crisis doubled fuel prices in Nigeria, operating costs are sky-high. — AFP

Cooperation key enabler for Gulf Common Market



HAIDER AL LAWATI
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The author is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for the CBO and OCCI

Last November, the General Secretariat of the Gulf Cooperation Council launched the electronic window (Takamul) for the submission of queries, complaints and suggestions related to the Gulf Common Market.

This initiative is not new to Gulf citizens. It was envisioned to stimulate investment and growth, and open up job opportunities for GCC citizens in a number of economic and commercial fields. But many businesses have faced different challenges, particularly during spells of political and economic turbulence among the six countries.

Experts believe that the Gulf’s experience in the common market space is not as successful as that of the European Union countries, whose governments facilitated a lot of procedures for goods and merchandise to flow without any obstacles, such as trucks remaining stranded for hours or even days at border customs due to some unforeseen problem.

Such problems have resulted in spoilage of perishables and destruction of many

goods and products, causing losses to local businesses and economies.

In the next phase of the Gulf Common Market’s development, it is hoped that the new electronic window will facilitate greater cooperation and advance joint Gulf action.

Inauguration of the General Secretariat will enable easier and faster resolution of problems and impediments in the flow of goods between the GCC states. At the same time, it important that all sides cooperate to provide facilities for businesses whose goods are in transit. This will help drive economic integration among the GCC states.

The establishment of the Gulf Common Market was first announced in December 2007 in Doha - Qatar at the conclusion of the 28th GCC Supreme Council summit. It was conceived on the fundamental principles of the Gulf Cooperation Council basic system and the GCC economic agreement.

The continued functioning of this market has many positive benefits at the

political and economic levels, given that the main objective is to ensure the flow of goods between the GCC states, and to enhance cooperation between private institutions operating in trade, industry and services.

This enhances competitiveness among them and reduces time delays. The consumer is able to obtain the goods and merchandise he needs in a timely manner, particularly when supply disruptions – notably of the kind being witnessed in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict – is causing shortages of some commodities.

The Gulf peoples, like those of other blocs, have aspirations and hopes for achieving Gulf integration so that they can move and work in an environment characterized by equal treatment in terms of travel, residence, work, investment, education, health, social services and everything that concerns the Gulf individual.

The treatment of citizens of the GCC states, both natural and legal, should be equal and without differentiation or discrimination in all economic fields.

Building the green-recovery consensus



LOLWAH AL KHATER

The author is Executive Director of the Doha Forum



BRIAN FINLAY

The author is president and CEO of the Stimson Centre

While Russia’s war in Ukraine is capturing global headlines, Covid-19 continues to wreak socioeconomic havoc around the world. The pandemic has taken more than six million lives, pushed 124 million people into extreme poverty, and impeded progress towards achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Fortunately, around five billion people have now received at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, and the World Health Organization and Gavi have set a goal of vaccinating 70 per cent of people in all countries by this July.

Notwithstanding the horrific war in Ukraine, the pandemic and its lasting toll will continue to top the list of pressing global concerns alongside climate change. The effects of the latter

crisis are already being felt daily, as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Sixth Assessment Report shows. Just recently, extreme temperatures and droughts have ravaged West Asia and North Africa. Rising sea levels are threatening many island states and low-lying countries. Catastrophic flooding has inundated parts of Europe and China. And wildfires have torn across the American West and large swaths of Australia.

Scientists now warn that “business as usual” will likely increase the average global temperature, relative to the pre-industrial level, by a catastrophic 3-4°C by the end of the century. To keep global warming at a far safer level, below 1.5°C, carbon dioxide emissions will need to fall by 45 per cent (from 2010 levels) by 2030, and then to net zero by 2050.

Now that we know Omicron to be less deadly than earlier

Covid-19 variants, we should use this moment to build on the momentum generated last November at the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow. The world needs to draft a recovery plan that goes well beyond pandemic response by also starting to tackle climate change. The recovery must be not only broad-based but also green.

What does this mean in practical terms? In advance of the 20th edition of the Doha Forum on March 26-27, our organisations teamed up to explore 20 targeted initiatives for driving a just, healthy, and sustainable global recovery. These are outlined in a recently published report, Building Back Together & Greener.

To make the recovery green and sustainable, we propose a Global Green Hydrogen Alliance to facilitate more efficient, climate-friendly methods of producing

hydrogen. Once established, the next steps would include setting up a global inventory of green hydrogen programmes, protecting intellectual-property and licensing rights while expanding global access, and encouraging alliance-wide standard setting for safe storage and transportation.

A fair and inclusive recovery requires more investment in human capital, particularly to upgrade workers’ skills and an emphasis on supporting the people who are most at risk. Planning processes should privilege public and private financing for low-carbon activities and infrastructure that have the greatest potential to generate jobs for young people and other vulnerable groups facing employment challenges.

To ensure that the recovery supports health and well-being, we need a Global Fund for Social Protection to assist developing-

country governments in providing adequate social programmes. Such a fund would boost coordination efforts and mobilise domestic and external resources to provide a buffer against economic shocks, including those induced by climate-related environmental disasters.

Finally, to realise the potential of digitalisation in advancing the recovery, we need to promote large-scale investment in information- and communications-technology infrastructure, both to achieve digital equity and to leverage the economic, health and environmental potential of new technologies.

International organisations and governments should work with businesses to provide effective and reliable digital connectivity, including through targeted investments in the steady digitalisation of most (if not all) public services.

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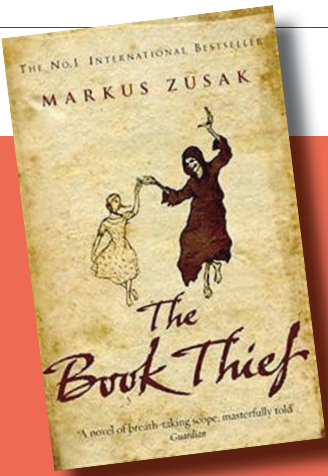
features

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Ahlam El Asr: Surreal Art experience in Muttrah Fort concludes

Ahlam El Asr, a surreal art experience, opened on Thursday, March 17, giving people in Muscat an opportunity to see and interact with artists who had the audacity to challenge the status quo and usher viewers to a different world within the borders of the physical world...**P20**

READ



THE BOOK THIEF BY MARKUS ZUSAK

The book is all about a girl growing up in Germany during World War II. She steals books, learns to read, and finds comfort in words. She and Max, the Jew her family protects, are the only main characters that survive the war.

TRAVEL TALES

Eiffel Tower grows six metres after new antenna attached

THE EIFFEL TOWER grew 6 metres (19.69 ft) on Tuesday after a new digital radio antenna was attached to the top of the Paris monument. The tower, built by Gustave Eiffel in the late 19th century, now measures 330

metres after the DAB+ (digital audio) antenna was airlifted onto its peak by helicopter under a leaden sky. During its construction, the Eiffel Tower surpassed the Washington Monument to become the tallest man-

made structure in the world, a title it held for four decades until the Chrysler Building in New York City was topped off in 1929. The wrought-iron lattice tower is among the most visited tourist sites in the world, according to TripAdvisor. It has, however, also been used for broadcast transmissions for more than 100 years, with the height of its pinnacle changing numerous times as ageing antennas were replaced. Live television images showed the helicopter lowering the antenna onto its base atop the tower, where workmen made it secure in an operation that lasted less than 10 minutes. — Reuters





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AROUND THE WORLD

FASHION

Philippine designer fashions gowns out of recycled trash



LEONORA BUENVIAJE has been making dresses out of waste materials for the past seven years and says wearing clothes made from such items as recycled newspapers, plastic wrapping and rice sacks can be both economical and fashionable.

Using a foot-operated sewing machine, the 51-year-old Philippine seamstress stitches and weaves plastics and other materials into inventive and fashionable frocks and gowns, sometimes completed by headresses.

"The bubble wraps from delivery packages are nice looking and make for a good design, especially the black and white wraps," she said. White wraps were good for making fairy or wedding gowns, she said.

The dresses sell for between \$30 to \$50 and are used for everything from debuts - a coming-of-age party for a woman's 18th birthday - to weddings.

In Asia, there is plenty of waste material for Buenviaje to work with: About 80 per cent of global ocean plastic is estimated to come from Asian rivers, and the Philippines alone contributes a third of that, according to a 2021 report by Oxford University's online publication, Our World in Data.

"It's important to recycle or utilise used materials so we can help our earth," said Buenviaje client Lalaine Alcalde.

The recycled material used for each dress depends on what her clients are looking for, said Buenviaje, who lives in Cainta, about 15 km (10 miles) east of Manila.

Her gowns are sometimes used in beauty contests and pageants, she also said.

"I get delighted whenever they win, the designs are simple but they still win."

Buenviaje hopes in-person fashion shows and competitions that were halted during the pandemic will soon resume.

She also aims to organise fashion events herself to showcase and inspire others to create clothing out of recycled materials. -- **Reuters**

ENTERTAINMENT

British royals dance, make chocolate in Belize as tour brightens



BRITAIN'S PRINCE William and his wife Kate danced with Belizean villagers and helped make traditional chocolate on Sunday as the second day of their Caribbean tour passed off smoothly following an awkward start to the week-long trip.

The arrival of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to the Central American country coincides with the celebration of Queen Elizabeth's 70th year on the throne and comes at a time of growing scrutiny of past British conduct in the Caribbean.

Before the couple had even left Britain, a local protest prompted organisers to change their planned itinerary on Sunday in Belize, which was known until 1973 as British Honduras.

Their visit takes place nearly four months after Barbados voted to become a republic, cutting ties with Britain's monarchy but remaining part of the British-led Commonwealth of Nations.

An event for the duke and duchess planned for Sunday morning in the southern village of Indian Creek was cancelled after a few dozen residents staged a protest

on Friday.

Villagers said they were upset that the couple's helicopter was given permission to land on a soccer field without prior consultation. Locals are also in a land dispute with a conservation group backed by the royal family.

On Sunday, a few dozen villagers of Indian Creek staged a counter-protest, apologising for the earlier incident and holding up placards with messages like "I want you back Prince and Princess" and "welcome Duke and Duchess of Cambridge."

By then, the royal couple were on their new itinerary, which saw them embark on the Che'il Mayan Chocolate tour nearby. William and Kate both ground cacao seeds on the ka'ah, a traditional stone tool used by both Q'eqchi' and Mopan Mayas.

Afterward the queen's grandson and his wife went to Hopkins village, a traditional Garifuna community. The Garifuna are descendants of Africans and indigenous Kalinagos who moved along the islands and coast of the region to escape slavery.

Musicians at Hopkins

struck up a gunjei rhythm, encouraging Kate to dance with a female group, while William joined a senior member of the community to groove along to the drumming.

After trying the local food, the couple helped to plow the earth with a shovel to plant a tree. On Monday, they are due to explore the Chiquibul Forest Reserve in central Belize where they will visit British armed forces on jungle training.

The duke and duchess are due to stay in Belize until Tuesday morning, then visit Jamaica and the Bahamas.

Debates over colonial-era abuses and plans to seek reparations for slavery in Jamaica could push more countries to follow the recent move by Barbados, academics say.

Some Belizeans said they hoped the royal couple would come away from the visit with a deeper understanding of the country. Others said they would not be paying much attention.

"We're not even going to see these people," said Yamira Novelo, a resident of Belize City, "so I feel indifferent other than I wonder how this will affect traffic."-- **Reuters**



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In the Lap of Nature, between Mountains and Plains

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

I SIMPLY DON'T know when I was born, as my father, Rashid bin Mohammed didn't tell me. To me, the whole world was but Miskan, a village in the Wilayat of Ibri in Al Dhahirah Governorate. In those days, no one knew when they were born, as there were no hospitals to record dates of birth. People usually remembered their birth date by linking it to certain events such as deaths or the planting of a date palm. One would say he was born the day on which another person was born or some days before or after.

There is nothing in, "Said", suggesting that my father named me as such as an omen of good fortune or happiness*. Indeed, its pronunciation, with the first letter "s" unstressed and "i" stressed, reflects the hardship we experienced in our childhood.

My position was the third in the family after two females; destiny thus dictated I be the first male in the family. Our rural life, nonetheless, paid no heed to such hierarchies, as it didn't really matter who came first and who last. I was raised, like the other members of my generation, in the lap of nature, between mountains and plains. Like others, I looked for a better life amidst mountains and deserts. Despite the harshness of nature, I kept cattle, hunted birds and raised honeybees.

When just two years old, I caught a rather severe disease known locally as "hamaathom", (I don't know the exact medical term) which almost caused my death. My condition deteriorated to the extent that my father abandoned any hope of my recovery. His despair was

so severe, I was told, that he was about to lose his own life. I don't quite clearly remember my pain, but I do feel now my father's, unable to do anything in the face of a disease they knew nothing about except its name.

There was no medical care as such during those days, no hospitals, no clinics, except for local treatments. I was treated with a number of wasm**. With honey and lemon, I passed the first test in my life with the grace of God.

As I grew older, my father saw me qualified enough to study in the then only available educational institution, the Quranic school of Ali bin Salim al Kalbani, almotaw-wa***. I still fondly remember Ali al Kalbani, a great influence upon me and my generation. I learnt at his hands about religion and finished reading the whole of the Quran. The school was, nonetheless, just a tree under whose shadow we would meet. Helped with dedication by Bati bin Saif al Kalbani, Ali worked as hard as he could to educate and discipline us. At pains to make us memorise, he would go around with a stick in his hand, making sure that everyone properly recited what he had said. If a student failed to do so, he would hit him on his back with his stick.

* "Said" in Arabic means "happy" (the translator).

** An old traditional treatment whereby an expert applies a hot iron rod on the pain area (the translator).

***An Arabic word which has come to mean in the local dialects of the Arabian Peninsula a religious person, equivalent to "mullah" in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent as well as in parts of Central Asia (the translator).



Ahlam El Asr: Surreal Art experience in Muttrah Fort concludes



By Kabeer Yousuf
Photos by Burair al Kishri

It was simply a convergence of history, art and culture at the Muttrah Fort last Thursday when artists from Oman exhibited their works at the tall tower of history built in the 16th century. Ahlam El Asr, a surreal art experience, opened on Thursday, March 17 attended by Sayyid Badr al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Sayyidah Meyyan bint Shihab al Said, an Omani photographer and digital artist, and Sayyidah Saraya bint Shihab al Said, including other officials, diplomatic representatives and creatives.

Visitors were able to travel on a surreal and nostalgic voyage amid the various installations by Omani artists, including installations by Brash Collective, an art initiative spearheaded by Majeda al Hinai, a 28-year-old Omani artist, after they climbed the 120 steps leading up to the fort.

One of Majeda's installations titled 'Us', was a sculptural piece with mirror elements that explored identity, self-reflection and mindfulness.

"Its human-like figures establish a sense of familiarity and upon turning the corner the viewer is left searching for more. The mirror introduces another dimension, a sense of 'utopia' where another reality exists. It is a space of otherness that is simultaneously physical and mental. Viewers were led to gaze at themselves in the mirror and discover more about what lies beyond the image", shared Majeda.

"With these pieces, we hoped that the viewer was put in a space to explore 'otherness' beyond the literal and physical. The motif of the mirror is symbolic of the threshold between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. By looking into the mirror, the viewer may have felt a sense

of self-discovery and infinite possibility. We wanted the audience to engage with an inverted reality, a world of fantasy and delight, while spreading the message: 'We can be whoever we want to be.'"

Visitors to Ahlam El Asr were also able to see a mixed media installation made by Omani artist Safa al Belushi in collaboration with Taher Majid, Rayan al Balushi and Tara Atkinson. Titled The Folding City, the media installation took the visitors through an abstract sensual trip to Muttrah, retracing and unfolding the layers of what makes this city magical. Walking through the folds, one was able to experience not only what this city has in offer, what we see, smell, taste, touch and hear but also the hidden gems: The abandoned houses and the untold stories. In The Folding City, textile was used as a canvas, and each layer was created from materials that were collected and recycled from Muttrah.

In addition, visitors were able to view an art installation by Grid and Grain Studio Oman that was composed of colourful mattresses and pillows.

The one-of-its-kind art experience was born out of a collaboration between Sekka, a London-based independent magazine and integrated creative platform that is dedicated to art, culture, literature and opinions from the Arab world, Zawraq Collective, a duo of creative Omani women who reimagine Muscat's art scene as belonging to its youth and their explosive talents, and Teepee Oman, an Omani pop-up glamping experience that creates one of a kind experiences that encourage cultural immersion, reconnecting with nature and ignite a sense of adventure.

"Ahlam El Asr was a nostalgic and surreal pop-up where visitors walked through Muttrah Fort and explored a maze of illusive installations created

by contemporary Omani artists", say Zaima al Adawi and Noor al Mahrouqi, the founders of Zawraq Collective, and the event's art curators. "We all yearn for a rose-tinted past that only exists in our imagination. In this space, visitors travelled through a utopia of nostalgia that intertwined cultures of the past and the present."

Indeed, it takes ages of persistence, hard work and consistency before we could see the fruits of labour. And for Ahlam El Asr too, it took several months of collaborative planning and organising between Sekka, Zawraq Collective and Teepee Oman before the experience was brought to life.

As Noor and Zaima explain, "Ahlam El Asr is a commonly used term in Arabic that refers to a kind of psychedelic daydream that is both strange and entertaining. It has some double entendre that could also mean 'the dreams of the generation', which fits perfectly with this experience." They add, "The inspiration behind the title came from an innate desire to create something for the youth, by the youth. It was exciting to be able to juxtapose the historical fort with the fantasies of young people."

"Muttrah Fort played a major part in the history of the country defending the sovereignty of our nation and today, it will play the role of inspiring our young generations through our history and unity. It will be a blend of history and culture", says Hilal al Busaidy, Chairman of Muttrah Fort Tourism LLC, the main sponsor of the event and who provided the venue for it.

Aside from the artworks, visitors also enjoyed slushies, softies and popcorn provided by the Muscat-based Hafsah, and open-tent outdoor seating set up by Teepee Oman. The set-up enabled visitors to network and socialise with some of Oman's creatives in an artistic setting.