



P10

SEEB STAY ON TOP OF OMANTEL LEAGUE AFTER BEATING BAHLA



P13

\$2 BILLION INVESTMENTS PLEDGED IN BLOCK 10



P20

AL ZAJRA SYSTEM: AN EXAMPLE OF A RICH HERITAGE



MUSCAT

OMANI FIRMS TO FUND PAKISTAN RAIL PROJECT

Anwar Asia Investment Company, a subsidiary of an Omani investment firm, has signed an agreement to partially fund the construction of a rail project of state-owned Pakistan Railways, Oman News Agency (ONA) revealed. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed to this effect against the backdrop of the visit by an Omani business delegation led by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) to Pakistan. SEE P13

SAILING FESTIVAL HEADS TO HAWANA

The Oman Sailing Festival brings fun and excitement as it rolls into Hawana Salalah from January 6-9. For two days, visitors to the destination will be able to try sailing and windsurfing with Oman Sail coaches for free from 10 am to 5 pm each day. The Oman Sailing Festival has been incredibly popular up and down the coastline so far with people of all ages. SEE P5

OMAN ENVIRONMENT DAY OBSERVED



Cormorants are seen on a beach in Musandam, close to their nesting grounds. The Sultanate of Oman celebrated the Oman Environment Day as part of its commitment to participate in global efforts to preserve environmental resources. The Environment Authority on the occasion said is preparing the national strategy for environment protection. The goals of the strategy are linked to the Oman Vision 2040 and will endeavour to enhance environmental performance.

Cold wave to continue for a few more days

VINOD NAIR @vinot_nair

The Sultanate of Oman will continue to experience drop in temperature for few more days, according to Oman Meteorology. There has been reports of the formation of frost on mountain heights and some weather stations in the desert areas recorded less than ten degrees Celsius on Friday. The temperature in Jabal Al Sarat in the Wilayat of Ibri reached below zero, which resulted in the freezing of water in ponds and the frost formation. Jabal Al Sarat is 130 kilometres from the city of Ibri and can be reached through Wadi Al-Ain.

READ IN

OPINION

KAZAKHSTAN AND THE PRICE OF RUSSIA'S EMPIRE

Nina L Khrushcheva P8

HOW TO STOP TRUMP AND PREVENT ANOTHER JAN 6

Thomas L Friedman P9

INSIDE

21 DIE IN VEHICLES TRAPPED BY PAKISTAN SNOWSTORM

P6

DJOKOVIC ARGUES HE HAD AUSTRALIA GREEN LIGHT

P12

4,000-year-old stone game board found

SAMUEL KUTTY @samkuttyvp

Archaeologists have discovered a 4,000-year-old stone game board whilst excavating a Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement near the village of Ayn Bani Saidah in the Sultanate of Oman. The excavations were done as part of an Omani-Polish project called "The development of settlements in the mountains of northern Oman in the Bronze and Iron Ages" headed jointly by Dr Sultan al Bakri, Director General of Antiquities at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and Prof Piotr Bieliński from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW). The project is an endeavour to study the settlements within the Qumayrah Valley, where preliminary surveys have earlier located prehistoric campsites, burials, settlements and tower structures, all within close vicinity of Ayn Bani Saidah. In the latest study, the researchers identified an ancient settlement from the Umm al-Nar period (2500-2000 BC), where they unearthed the remains of several large circular towers and Bronze Age buildings. TURN TO P5

GCC hails Oman's efforts to contain pandemic

OHOOO AL JAILANIYAH MUSCAT, JAN 8

A joint report between the GCC Health Council and the GCC Statistical Centre (GCC-STAT), on the great efforts made by the GCC countries with regard to measures and policies they adopted to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The report indicated that the Sultanate of Oman had contributed to the official development assistance of the GCC against Covid-19 by providing medical aid to several neighbouring countries. It also provided ventilators, medicines and medical equipment and dispatched shipments of medical supplies, foods, medicines and electricity generators and other

The Sultanate of Oman had contributed to the official development assistance of the GCC against Covid-19 by providing medical aid to several countries

forms of financial and logistic support to health institutions in neighbouring countries. The report indicated that the proper monitoring and the building of information systems is one of the most important efforts that support and provide both the decision-makers and the public with accurate, up-to-date and credible information. The GCC countries set up a database to follow up the developments

of the Covid-19 pandemic which contributed to making information available to various users at all levels. The confirmed coronavirus cases in the Sultanate of Oman made up 12 per cent of the total cases in the GCC countries and 2 per cent of the total active cases until the end of November last year. The report indicated that one of the GCC developmental efforts in the health sector to address the pandemic was the establishment of the GCC Centre for Disease Prevention and Control which came with the blessing of the leaders of the GCC countries at the meeting of the Supreme Council of the Al Ula Summit held in January 2021, where the leaders agreed to establish... TURN TO P5

Space firm warns of 'malicious' space junk

BREMEN: Space debris is increasingly causing headaches for satellite builders and space companies, according to German space firm OHB. "It's a problem", said Chief Executive Marco Fuchs from OHB, whose core business comprises low-orbiting and geostationary satellites. What is needed, he said, are binding rules to ensure that satellites are

cleared away after their end of use and do not pose a danger. "The basic rules already exist", Fuchs, who is Vice President of the German Aerospace Industries Association (BDLI), told the media. But there is still a need for sanctions and monitoring. "Malicious" space junk is also a problem, he said. "We have now had the case of a deliberate launch by Russia. Of course, that's



disastrous when you pollute whole space areas with junk just to show that you can shoot down satellites." Russia recently shot down an out of service spy satellite with a special rocket. The head of the space agency Roskosmos, Dmitri Rogozin, did not rule out further tests in principle. Space debris is a global challenge where all 100 or so space agencies must ensure that certain rules are followed. — dpa



Online shoppers warned

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

Online shoppers need to be more cautious as cybercriminals are on the prowl since people's shopping habits have changed thanks to the pandemic and spammers find it more comfortable to catch their bait easily, according to cyber experts.

While shopping on multiple e-commerce websites to grab the best deal, beware of the potential risk of being duped by someone online.

While cashing in on the convenience and accessibility that these sites provide, the risk of falling prey to cybercriminals is also high.

Majority of all sites are safe to deal with, but some sites are not safe and can cost you a fortune. Hence efforts should be made to deal with the website that carries a security certificate and lock on, they advise.

"Always, shop with reputable retailers only and avoid browsing on WiFi because using public domains can help spammers access you easily," says Tariq Hilal al Barwani, Founder of Knowledge Oman and an IT specialist.

"Also, a background study of the website, feedback from those who have bought from the site are essential before proceeding with



While shopping on multiple e-commerce websites to grab the best deal, beware of the potential risk of being duped by someone online

less known sites."

A study conducted by Kaspersky showed that 62 per cent of people in a GCC country dealt with fraudsters who were trying to steal money, bank card details, Internet banking credentials in 2020.

"When it comes to being safe and secure when shopping online, you need to know what to watch for," says Maher Yamout, Senior Security Researcher, Global Research and Analysis Team at Kaspersky.

Even though search engines come handy when you're looking for products, one runs the risk of unintentionally clicking on

malicious search results that could lead him/her to phishing websites instead. These malicious search results are created and designed by cybercriminals to capture the user's personal data such as credit card details and steal money.

"Also, one shouldn't make his password an easy-to-guess word or place name. Creating a password with a mixture of numbers and letters and even punctuation marks is always helpful."

Credit card users, according to Tariq, should use only one card whereby he/she can lower the risk of having information from multiple cards being spread all over the Internet. It may be possible to restrict the credit limit for your 'online credit card' or to hold a limited amount of money on your 'online debit card'.

Also, one shouldn't fall flat for amazing offers as many of the 'unbelievable prices' can be seemingly lucrative but deceptive.

Empty Quarter Festival concludes

THAMRAIT: The first Empty Quarter Festival, organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in cooperation with a number of public and private establishments in Dhofar Governorate, wrapped up after 17 days.

The closing ceremony included a training workshop on the skills of collective work, the challenge of the Empty Quarter coordinates and a 5-km walkathon, in addition to tree plantation and clean-up campaigns.

Khalid bin Abdullah al Abri, Director-General of Heritage and Tourism in Dhofar Governorate, said that the organising of the first edition of the Empty Quarter Festival comes within the framework of efforts exerted by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism to encourage domestic tourism and the utilisation of tourist and natural potentials of the Sultanate of Oman.

Commenting to ONA, Al Abri said that the festival managed to draw a great number of tourists and visitors from inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman thus stirring winter tourism in the desert of Dhofar.

The ministry is going to evaluate the first edition of the Empty Quarter Festival to identify the challenges it faced.



The organising committee conducted an electronic survey to identify the opinions and suggestions of the festival-goers for the purpose of improvement in the second edition, Al Abri

said adding that the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism seeks to study the improvement of the festival and is mulling to attract regional competitions in the coming editions.



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MORE THAN 370,000 TREES PLANTED
AT GOVERNMENT, MILITARY AND
PRIVATE ESTABLISHMENTS



Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri

World Environment Day observed



MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Environment Authority, marked on Thursday the World Environment Day, which is celebrated on January 8 each year.

Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of the Environment Authority, valued the attention accorded by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the environmental affairs specially the preservation and protection of wildlife.

In comments to Oman News Agency (ONA), the chairman of the Environment Authority said that the Authority is preparing the national strategy for environment protection. The goals of the strategy are linked to the Oman Vision 2040 and will endeavour to enhance environmental performance.

The work teams of the Environment Authority have accomplished 52 projects and initiatives that were implemented in various environmental sectors.

The Authority set up stations for the measuring and monitoring of air quality, Al Amri said, adding that there is cooperation between the Environment Authority and the private sector to relocate some of the existing stations to ensure better measurement of air quality in North Al Batinah Governorate and the Wilayat of Sur. Besides, the Authority set up and operated additional stations. The Authority has a programme with the industrial free zone in Dhofar Governorate to set up a number of stations to ensure continuous monitoring of air quality in various Omani environments in the industrial and free zones.

The chairman of the Environment Authority pointed out that the Authority has planted more than 370,000 trees at government, military and private establishments. It also distributed seedlings to citizens to plant in their homes. —ONA





CAN TRAVEL CURBS BE EASED?

BLANKET
TRAVEL BANS
WILL



PREVENT
THE INTERNATIONAL
SPREAD: WHO

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

As international travel continues to be restricted, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) is urging countries to work towards the gradual relaxation and removal of the Covid-19 health protocols. While outbound and inbound travel has relatively increased in the Sultanate of Oman since October this year, the sudden emergence of Omicron and lack of daily flights to most international destinations are forcing people to rethink every travel decision they make. The *Observer* has been getting queries about whether flights will be closed or quarantine-type restrictions introduced as the number of Covid-19 cases has seen a surge in recent weeks.

“Measures should remain in place only for as long as they are needed. It is also important that the removal of measures is carried out in a managed and coordinated manner given the global nature of the air transport industry and the need for international consistency, not least to reinforce consumer confidence and facilitate compliance with rules,” the IATA said. Replying to a query from the *Observer* during a virtual press conference, Willie Walsh, IATA chairman, said, “WHO is saying is that blanket travel bans will not prevent the international spread. The best thing governments can do here is to look and assess the risk based on the data and make decisions based on that.” As our understanding of the SARS-CoV2 virus and its transmission dynamics has evolved, it has become clear that some measures are not effective or that their

Vaccination offers the single best protection against Covid-19. Therefore, states should ensure that vaccines are available to all as quickly as possible. Also, vaccinated travellers should not face any additional barriers

benefit is small compared to the cost and disruption that they cause. Temperature screening is an example of a measure that remains widespread despite considerable evidence that its effectiveness in detecting positive cases is very low. Similarly, high-frequency deep cleaning and disinfection of aircraft are not justified given that the evidence indicates very clearly that surface spread is not a major driver of transmission and given the considerable cost and time that such protocols involve. Contactless passenger processing at airport touchpoints enables physical interaction between people to be minimised and limits the exchange of documents, helping to protect passengers, as well as airline, airport, security and government employees from cross-contamination. In addition, the passenger is less likely to be required to queue

The emergence of new variants in late 2020 and early 2021 changed the dynamics of transmission of the virus. The Delta variant has gradually become dominant around the world, and its increased transmissibility has led to almost all countries. Vaccination offers the single best protection against Covid-19. Therefore, states should ensure that vaccines are available to all as quickly as possible, facilitating vaccine supply for low-income countries. Vaccinated travellers should not face any additional barriers. For those without access to vaccines, including minors, testing should enable quarantine free international travel. Antigen tests are the key to cost-effective and convenient testing regimes, and governments should pay for testing so it does not become an economic barrier to travel.



Covid plays spoilsport with expats on leave

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

With the number of Covid-19 cases growing globally, expatriates on leave are in a hurry to come back to the Sultanate of Oman even if they still have some more days of leave and tickets booked for some scheduled dates.

Most countries had relaxed travel restrictions from September 2021 onwards with fewer Covid cases, but the scenario started changing in the last week of December after a new variant of Covid-19 was found in some African countries. Omicron worked like an alarm bell, and the governments around the world started reimposing safety measures against Covid-19.

Some expatriate workers from the Sultanate of Oman chose to visit their countries after a gap of two years, as almost for two years flights were either not operational or were permitted to carry only passengers with an emergency.

Rakesh Jha, a businessman, went on leave in the last week of November last year and was supposed to come back in mid-January. He, however, decided to advance return journey by 15 days due to news of the rising number of Covid-19 cases.

"I had gone to India with family in November last year and was supposed to come back by January 15, but I decided to come back early keeping in mind lockdowns and suspension of air traffic. I left my family back home and came alone so that my business does not suffer," he said

agreeing with the idea that people should be extra cautious even if they are fully vaccinated.

Taking a lesson from previous waves of Covid-19, those expatriates who are employed in the country do not want to take any chance even if they have to pay extra bucks in rescheduling their tickets.

"I know how so many people suffered during the last two waves. They were stuck for eight to 12 months in India due to several reasons. Even though flights started operating, many did not have proper vaccination or had vaccines that were not approved in the Sultanate of Oman. That is not the case now, but I do not want to take any chance and have decided to come back next week," said George, who was supposed to be on leave till the end of January.

He admitted to having paid RO 70 extra to reschedule his ticket. He also admitted that there is a panic-like situation among those who are away from their work destinations.

Covid is spreading again. This is forcing people to book tickets at short notice. This is proving to be a costly affair for them as from some destinations, the one-way ticket price is coming at around RO 300. Pre-Covid days same destination had cost between RO 70 and 90.

The uncertainty caused by Covid-19 is forcing many workers to advance their leave calendar and come back to work destinations as early as possible even if they are not sure about suspension of services.

4,000-year-old stone game board found

FROM PI

"At the end of December, another season of archaeological fieldwork in Qumayrah Valley in Northern Oman came to a close. Archaeologists identified another tower in a Bronze Age settlement, unearthed evidence of copper smelting and discovered a 4,000-year-old... game board", said a statement from PCMA UW.

According to Prof Bieliński, in the current season, settlements from the Umm an-Nar phase of the Bronze Age and Iron Age II situated near the village of Ayn Bani Saidah were the main focus of the team's work.

"The abundance of traces of settlement from different periods proves that this valley was an important place in prehistory, and perhaps also in the history of Oman", she explains. Qumayrah Valley is a micro-region that contains many archaeological remains located along a 10-km-long L-shaped hollow between massifs forming part of the Jebel Hajar Mountain range. In ancient times this was a major route connecting Bat in the south, Buraimi and Al-Ayn in the north, and the sea coast near Suhar in the east.

"Ayn Bani Saidah is strategically located at a junction of routes connecting Bat in the south, Buraimi and Al-Ayn in the north, and the sea coast near Suhar in the east. Along this route, there are some



major sites from the Umm an-Nar period. So we hoped that also our site would be in the same league", explains Prof Bieliński.

The most notable find is a stone board game with marked fields and cup holes, consistent with games based on a similar design that has been found in India, Mesopotamia, and the Eastern Mediterranean basin.

According to Dr Agnieszka Pieńkowska of the PCMA UW, the settlement is exceptional for including at least four towers: three round ones and an angular one. One of the round towers had not been visible on the surface despite its large size of up to 20 metres in diameter.

Dr Agnieszka, who is analysing the Bronze Age remains within the

project, said, "the function of these prominent structures present at many Umm an-Nar sites still needs to be explained".

But new discoveries have also been made in other Bronze Age buildings.

"We finally found proof of copper working at the site, as well as some copper objects. This shows that our settlement participated in the lucrative copper trade for which Oman was famous at that time, with mentions of Omani copper present in the cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia", says Prof Bieliński.

But the most unexpected discovery is not related directly to economy or subsistence.

"In one of the rooms, we've found... a game-board!", beams

the project director.

The board is made of stone and has marked fields and cup-holes. Games based on similar principles were played during the Bronze Age in many economic and cultural centres of that age.

"Such finds are rare, but examples are known from an area stretching from India, through Mesopotamia even to the Eastern Mediterranean. The most famous example of a game-board based on a similar principle is the one from the graves from Ur", explains the archaeologist.

Next year, the Omani-Polish team will continue work in the Qumayrah Valley, both in Ayn Bani Saidah and in Bilt, on the other end of the valley where further Umm an-Nar remains are located.

GCC hails Oman's efforts to contain pandemic

FROM PI

... the centre as one of the joint GCC actions to face the Covid-19 pandemic and other epidemic and to alleviate public health emergencies and promote healthy communities across the GCC.

The contributions of the GCC countries in the battle against

the Covid-19 pandemic varied. The Sultanate of Oman produced about 2 million medical gloves per day and 100,000 medical masks. The UAE produced 250 devices per day and developed and produced ventilators for emergency cases from local materials.

The Kingdom of Bahrain

produced masks, medical supplies, the production of medicines and nutritional supplements, and participated in the production of anti-coronavirus vaccines as part of the international efforts.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched the first ventilator with international specifications that can be used at home.

The State of Qatar manufactured 200 locally-made and identical ventilators per week that met the specifications of the US food and drug standards.

The State of Kuwait produced 9 million medical masks per day according to a joint report between the GCC Health Council and GCC Statistical Center.

Oman Sailing Festival heads south to Hawana Salalah



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 8

The Oman Sailing Festival brings fun and excitement as it rolls into Hawana Salalah from January 6-9.

For two days, visitors to the destination will be able to try sailing and windsurfing with Oman Sail coaches for free

from 10am to 5pm each day.

Ali al Shuhaimi, Centre Manager of Al Mouj Sailing School and project manager of the Oman Sailing Festival, said, "The Oman Sailing Festival has been incredibly popular up and down the coastline so far with people of all ages reconnecting with Oman's maritime history and trying the sport for the

first time. Now we are heading south to Salalah and look forward to sharing the thrill of being on the water with crowds at Hawana Salalah."

Karim Boushra, Hawana Salalah Destination Director said, "Everyone at Hawana Salalah is looking forward to welcoming the Oman Sailing Festival to the destination. We

have hosted several stages of Sailing Arabia — The Tour in the past and having the chance to try sailing and windsurfing, for free, is an opportunity not to be missed.

The beaches at Hawana Salalah are the perfect setting for Salalah locals, residents at the destination and visitors to learn how to sail and windsurf in our wonderful clear blue seas."

To date, the Oman Sailing Festival has welcomed over 2,000 visitors at stops across the country.

After wrapping up in Salalah, the festival will visit Duqm for the final stop from January 12-15, 2022.

The Oman Sailing Festival is supported by platinum sponsor OQ, gold sponsors Oman Air and Salsabeel, and environmental partners Be'ah, the Environment Society of Oman and the host venue in Hawana Salalah.

One can pre-register for Oman Sailing Festival events, by visiting www.omansail.com/sailing-festival-activities or search #SailWithUs on social media.

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Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender committee of **Ministry of Social Development** hereby announces the following tender :-

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Grade	Last date for obtainment of Tender Document	Last date for Tender Submission	Tender Document Price (non- refundable)
1/2022	Provision Care Staff for Dispensary for Severe Disabilities, Nutrition Specialist, Care Technician at Dar Al Aman Al Khud	Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board, which have the activity of hospital services and care homes, and are registered in the excellent or first class	Sunday 23-1-2022 02:00 PM	Sunday 13-2-2022 10:00 AM	R.O. 25/=

❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at the Tender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>), On Tuesday 4/1/2022.

❖ Tender shall be submitted in compliance with the technical specifications and terms along with a local bank warranty at (1%) of the tender value, valid ninety (90) days from the date of e-submission.

❖ For Inquiry , please contact through the e-tendering website (reg@tenderboard.gov.om) tel. (24402200).

“ The lowest or any other tender shall not be binding to the Ministry “

www.mosd.gov.om

21 die in vehicles trapped by Pakistan snowstorm

ISLAMABAD: At least 21 people died in an enormous traffic jam caused by tens of thousands of visitors thronging a Pakistani hill town to see unusually heavy snowfall, authorities said on Saturday.

Police reported that at least eight people had frozen to death in their cars, while it was not immediately clear if others had died from asphyxiation after inhaling exhaust fumes in snow-bound vehicles.

Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid said the military had mobilised to clear roads and rescue thousands still trapped near Murree, around 70 kilometres north-east of the capital, Islamabad. Video shared on social media showed cars packed bumper-to-bumper, with one-metre-high (three-foot) piles of snow on their roofs.

“The heavy snowfall caused a traffic jam and the closure of roads,” Babar Khan, a tourist who was stranded for hours, said.

“Roads were also closed due to falling trees in many places.”

The website of Pakistan’s National Weather Forecasting Centre said heavy snowfall was expected in the area until Sunday afternoon, while Information Minister Fawad Chaudry said “decades” of weather records had been broken in the last 48 hours.

For days, Pakistan’s social media has been full of pictures and



Tourist vehicles stuck on a street leading to the tourist resort Murree on the outskirts of Islamabad on Saturday. – AFP (Inset) People stand next to cars stuck under fallen trees on a snowy road, in Murree. – Reuters

videos of people playing in the snow around Murree, a picturesque resort town built by the British in the 19th century as a sanatorium for its colonial troops.

The Punjab province chief minister’s office said the surroundings

had been declared a “disaster area” and urged people to stay away.

Prime Minister Imran Khan said he was shocked and upset at the tragedy.

“Unprecedented snowfall & rush of ppl proceeding without

checking weather conditions caught district admin unprepared,” he tweeted.

“Have ordered inquiry & putting in place strong regulation to ensure prevention of such tragedies.”

TRAFFIC WARNING

Authorities warned last weekend that too many vehicles were trying to enter Murree, but that failed to discourage hordes of daytrippers from the capital.

“It’s not only the tourists, but

the local population is also facing severe problems,” Usman Abbasi, another stranded visitor, said.

“Gas cylinders have run out and drinking water is not available in most areas — it’s either frozen or the water pipes have been damaged due to severe cold.”

He said hotels were running out of food, and mobile phone services were patchy.

“People are facing a terrible situation.”

The town of around 30,000, at an altitude of 2,300 metres, clings to the sides of steep hills and valleys and is serviced by narrow roads that are frequently clogged even in good weather.

Sheikh Rashid said residents had sheltered people trapped in the town and provided blankets and food to those they could reach on the outskirts.

Authorities said schools and government buildings had taken in those who could make it to the town from the clogged roads.

Helicopters were also on standby for when the weather cleared.

Rescue 1122, Pakistan’s emergency service, released a list naming 21 people it said had been confirmed dead.

It included a policeman, his wife and their six children.

Hasaan Khawar, a spokesman for the Punjab government, said they had frozen to death inside their snow-covered car. — AFP

UN Security Council to meet on Wednesday on Sudan

UNITED NATIONS, US: The UN Security Council will meet next Wednesday in an informal session to address the latest developments in Sudan as demonstrations against military rule in the African nation continue, diplomatic sources said.

The session will be behind closed doors, the sources said on Friday, adding that the meeting was requested by six of the council’s 15 members: the United States, Britain, France, Norway, Ireland and Albania. A common position of the Security Council “is not expected, as China and Russia would oppose it,” a diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

Beijing and Moscow in the past have stressed that the situation in Sudan, which has been on the edge of chaos since an October 25 military takeover, was an internal matter for the country and did not threaten international security.

The meeting will allow the UN special representative for Sudan, Volker Perthes, to brief Security Council members on

conditions there since prime minister Abdallah Hamdok resigned on Sunday amid protests against the junta.

Hamdok had been the face of the transition to civilian rule launched after the ouster of General Omar al Bashir, but concerns have swelled about a slide back to dictatorship.

The United States and European Union warned Sudan’s military against naming its own prime minister after Hamdok quit.

On Thursday, three demonstrators were shot dead in the capital Khartoum and its suburbs, according to doctors and witnesses, as people gathered there and elsewhere in the country to protest against military rule.

Since the coup led by General Abdel Fattah al Burhan on October 25, the crackdown on anti-military protests has left 60 people dead and hundreds injured, according to the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors, an independent association. — AFP

Kazakhstan arrests ex-security chief as it cracks down on protests

ALMATY: Kazakhstan’s former intelligence chief has been arrested on suspicion of treason, the state security agency said on Saturday, as the former Soviet republic cracks down on a wave of unrest and starts to assign blame.

The detention of Karim Massimov was announced by the National Security Committee which he himself headed until he was fired by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on Wednesday as violent protests swept across the Central Asian nation.

Tokayev’s office said he had told Russian President Vladimir Putin in a phone call that the situation was stabilising.

“At the same time, hotbeds of terrorist attacks persist. Therefore, the fight against terrorism will continue with full determination,” it quoted him as saying.

The Kremlin said Putin backed Tokayev’s idea to convene a video



A destroyed bank in central Almaty on Saturday. – AFP

call of leaders from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), under whose umbrella Russia and four other former Soviet republics have sent troops into Kazakhstan to help restore order. It was not clear when this

would take place.

Dozens of people have died, thousands have been detained and public buildings across Kazakhstan have been torched over the past week in the worst violence experienced in the major

oil and uranium producer since it became independent in the early 1990s as the Soviet Union collapsed.

Tokayev has ordered his troops to shoot, to kill, to put an end to what he has called attacks by bandits and terrorists.

He said on Friday the state had “slept through” instigators’ preparations to launch attacks on the biggest city, Almaty, and across the country. The arrest of Massimov indicated that moves against those deemed responsible are under way.

Apart from heading the intelligence agency that replaced the Soviet-era KGB, Massimov is a two-time ex-prime minister who worked closely with former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country’s ruler for three decades until he turned over the presidency to Tokayev in 2019. — Reuters

AZAZ

Syrians seek word of loved ones missing in jails

More than 70 families gathered in the rebel-held Syrian town of Azaz on Friday to highlight the plight of loved ones missing in the government’s feared jail system.

Since civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, nearly one million people have been detained in the network of prisons and camps run by the various security services, according to Britain-based monitoring group the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Of those, around 105,000 have died in custody, while others have been released, but tens of thousands remain unaccounted for, according to Observatory figures.

WASHINGTON

World Bank okays \$90m in pandemic aid for Iran

The World Bank has approved \$90 million in additional financing for Iran, to help fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, a spokesperson said on Friday.

The Washington-based development lender’s board of directors approved the aid on December 21, a World Bank spokesperson said, which “will be utilised only for procuring additional lifesaving, essential medical equipment to strengthen Iran’s pandemic response.”

“This funding will not go to

the Iranian budget and all loan proceeds, as well as procurement and disbursements, are being managed by the World Health Organization,” the spokesperson said.

NEW DELHI

Polls in India’s most populous state from Feb 10

India’s most populous state Uttar Pradesh, currently ruled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, will hold a state election in seven phases starting from February 10, Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra said on Saturday.

The election commission said voting in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh will be finished on March 7. Three other states — the Congress-ruled Punjab, and the BJP-ruled Himalayan state of Uttarakhand and tourist

and mining hotspot Goa in the West — will hold elections on February 14, Chandra said.

The northeastern state of Manipur, also ruled by the BJP, will have elections in two phases on February 27 and March 3.

Confronting the virus

How Biden and Boris Johnson reached the same place on coronavirus policy

LONDON: On the evening of December 21, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson appeared from 10 Downing St to tell anxious Britons they could “go ahead with their Christmas plans”, despite a surge in new coronavirus cases. At nearly the same moment, the US President Joe Biden took to a White House lectern to give Americans a similar green light.

It was a striking, if unintended, display of synchronicity from two leaders who began with very different approaches to the pandemic, to say nothing of politics. Their convergence on how to handle the Omicron variant says a lot about how countries are confronting the virus, two years after it first threatened the world.

For Johnson and Biden, analysts said, the politics and science of Covid have nudged them towards a policy of trying to live with the virus rather than putting their countries back on war footing. It is a highly risky strategy: Hospitals across Britain and parts of the United States are already close to overrun with patients. But for now, it is better than the alternative: shutting down their economies again.

“A Conservative prime minister trying to deal in a responsible way with Covid is very different than a Democratic president trying to deal responsibly with Covid”, said Geoff Garin, a Democratic pollster in Washington. And yet, he said, their options are no longer all that different.

“From both a medical perspective and a political perspective”, Garin said, “there’s not as strong an imperative for people to hunker down in the way they were hunkering down a year ago.”

Some analysts say the two leaders had little choice. Both are dealing with lockdown-weary populations. Both have made headway in vaccinating their citizens, although Britain remains ahead of the United States. And both have seen their popularity erode as their early promises to vanquish the virus wilted.

Several of Biden’s former scientific advisers this week publicly urged him to overhaul his strategy to shift the focus from banishing the virus to a “new normal” of coexisting with it. That echoes Johnson’s words when he lifted restrictions in July. “We must ask ourselves”, he said, “When will we be able to return to normal?”

Devi Sridhar, an American scientist who heads the global health programme at the University of Edinburgh, said, “The scientific community has broad consensus now that we have to use the tools we have to stay open and avoid the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. But it’s not easy at all, as we are seeing.”

The alignment of Johnson and Biden is significant because Britain has often served as a Covid test case for the United States — a few weeks ahead in seeing the impacts of a new wave and a model, for good or ill, in how to respond to it.

It was the first country to approve a vaccine and the fastest major economy to roll it out. Its frightening projections, from Imperial College London, about how



Members of the advisory board that counselled Joe Biden argue for a new pandemic strategy of living with the virus, not to wiping it out.

many people could die in an uncontrolled pandemic helped push a reluctant Johnson and an equally reluctant President Donald Trump to call for social distancing restrictions in their countries.

That Johnson and Trump initially resisted such measures was hardly a surprise, given their ideological kinship as populist politicians. When Johnson locked down Britain, several days after his European neighbours, he promised to “send the virus packing” in 12 weeks. Trump likewise vowed that Covid, “like a miracle”, would soon disappear. Both later suffered through bouts with the disease.

Biden, taking office, promised a different approach, one that paid greater heed to scientific advice and embraced difficult measures such as “expanded masking, testing and social distancing.” Although Johnson never flouted scientific advice like Trump, he was sunnier than Biden, continuing to promise that the crisis would soon pass.

But both he and Biden have languished politically as new variants have made Covid far more stubborn than they had hoped. On July 4, with new cases dropping and vaccination rates rising, Biden claimed the United States had gained “the upper hand” on the virus. Weeks later, the delta variant was sweeping through the country.

In England, with nearly 70% of adults having had two doses of a vaccine, Johnson lifted virtually all social distancing rules on July 19, a bold — some said reckless — move that the London tabloids nicknamed “Freedom Day.” After a midsummer lull in cases that appeared to vindicate Johnson’s gamble, the Omicron variant has now driven new

cases in Britain to more than 150,000 a day.

Biden and Johnson have different powers in dealing with the pandemic. As prime minister, Johnson can order lockdowns in England, a step he has taken twice since his first lockdown, in March 2020. In the United States, those restrictions are in the hands of governors, a few of whom, such as Florida Republican Ron DeSantis, have become vocal critics of Biden’s approach.

Some critics argue that Biden and Johnson are both out of step with their countries. Britons have proved far more tolerant of lockdowns than the lawmakers in the prime minister’s party. In parts of the United States, by contrast, popular resistance to lockdowns is widespread and deeply entrenched.

“Biden suffers from seeming to do too much and Boris suffers from seeming to do too little”, said Frank Luntz, a Republican strategist who was a classmate of Johnson’s at Oxford University. “Biden would have done a better job if he had led Britain, and Boris would have done a better job if he led the US.”

Others pointed out that Biden’s determination to keep schools and businesses open, despite the soaring number of cases, signalled that a change in thinking was under way in the White House — if a few months later than that at Downing Street.

“When Biden says we ought to be concerned but not panicked, he’s meeting Americans where they are”, said Garin, the Democratic pollster. “He’s also meeting the science where it is.”

Airlines strand passengers who partied without masks

OTTAWA: It was promoted as a New Year’s Eve celebration in Cancún, Mexico — a six-night trip that included parties with open bars and a day exploring Tulum, a popular tourist destination in the Yucatán Peninsula known for its ancient ruins and the turquoise water of its beaches.

It would begin with a privately chartered plane from Montreal where the guests — a coterie of Canadian social media influencers, reality TV personalities and others — would be entertained by a DJ on the flight to Mexico.

But the trip has turned into a fiasco, with airlines shunning the group and stranding many of its members and the Canadian authorities vowing to investigate after videos of the passengers surfaced on social media showing them flouting Canada’s Covid-19 restrictions.

In the videos, the passengers are seen dancing and jumping in the aisles, yelling without masks on and passing around bottles of alcohol. One woman can be seen vaping in the cabin. Another passenger, his mask hanging under his chin, yells at his fellow travellers over the cabin intercom to sit down and then “to keep the energy up.”

“Let’s hear some noise, welcome to 111 Private Club!” the same passenger says in a video, referring to an online group described as “invitation only” that was founded by James William Awad, a musician and self-described entrepreneur who organised the trip. The passengers, many of them without masks on, yell back in approval. About 27 of the 130 passengers on the flight are back in Canada, the country’s Health Minister, Jean-Yves Duclos, told reporters on Friday.

“They were all stopped and interrogated at the border”, he said, adding that they were tested for Covid and asked about their proof of vaccination and their quarantine plans.

Many passengers apparently remained stranded in Mexico after at least three airlines said they would not fly

them back.

“The 111 private club is working tirelessly to get everyone back home safely as quickly as we can”, Awad said in a statement posted on Thursday on a personal blog. “I understand why many fellow citizens are upset about the current situation”, he said earlier in the statement. “As someone who enjoys bringing people together, I committed to hosting a private and safe event in Cancún with my group from the 111 private club.”

Transport Canada, the country’s transportation authority, said it was investigating the conduct of the passengers, who could face fines of up to \$5,000 for violating Canada’s Covid restrictions, which forbid passengers from travelling without masks.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called the behaviour seen on the plane “a slap in the face” to people who have abided by Covid restrictions on planes and at home.

“I think, like all Canadians who’ve seen those videos, I’m extremely frustrated”, he said. “We know how hard people have worked to keep themselves safe, to limit their family gatherings at Christmas time, to wear masks, to get vaccinated, to do all the right things.”

Sunwing Airlines, which flew the group to Cancún on December 30, said it cancelled the return flight to Canada after an internal investigation found that the passengers “exhibited unruly behaviour and did not respect aviation or public health regulations.”

“Our decision to cancel the return flight was based on the group’s refusal to accept all terms and our security team’s assessment that noncompliance would be likely based on their previous disruptive on board behaviour”, the company said in a statement on Friday.

Awad said in his statement that he had agreed to “every demand” made by the airline but had objected to Sunwing’s refusal to provide meals during the five-hour

I think, like all Canadians who’ve seen those videos, I’m extremely frustrated”, he said. “We know how hard people have worked to keep themselves safe, to limit their family gatherings at Christmas time, to wear masks, to get vaccinated, to do all the right things

JUSTIN TRUDEAU
Prime Minister of Canada

return flight. He later wrote on Twitter that the sticking point was not over meals and that he had “simply asked Sunwing to try and do something about it.”

In its statement, Sunwing did not elaborate on how the flight crew responded to the passengers or whether the captain was aware of what was happening during the flight to Mexico.

Air Canada said it denied flights to 19 people who were linked to the group, according to CTV News.

“To the extent that we can identify the passengers who were part of the group, we are denying boarding to ensure the safety of other passengers and our crews,” Air Canada said.

Air Transat, another Canadian airline, said on Twitter that it refused to take the passengers back home after they tried to book a flight through the airline.

“We confirm that they will be denied boarding based on our legal and regulatory obligations to ensure the safety of both our passengers and crew, which is our top priority,” Air Transat said.

The passengers crowding the aisles compromised the ability of flight attendants to move through the cabin and help anyone who could have been hurt or needed medical attention, said Mark Millam, vice president of technical programs for Flight Safety Foundation, which provides safety guidelines for the aviation and aerospace industry.

Had sudden turbulence hit the airplane, the passengers standing in the aisles could have been seriously injured, Millam said. “The aircraft wasn’t designed to be a dance floor,” he said.

In his statement, Awad said the trip was the first travel event planned by the 111 Private Club, which he described as “a dream and a vision.”

He added: “I have significantly learned, and I am still learning from this experience.”

Well-being at work



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
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The writer is a senior consultant Psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

Last week a middle-aged man in Cairo ended his life by jumping to his death from the third floor of the company where he worked. His colleagues attributed this to work pressure as, according to theme, he was threatened to be terminated from his job due to poor performance. Whatever the exact cause of this sad incident one should learn from it how stress at the work can have negative consequences to our mental health wellbeing.

For most working age people, a job is more than a source of income, it is the place that we go to on daily bases and have social connections with our work colleagues who become our friends. Sometimes our job title defines us so you get to be called doctors, teachers or

engineers even out side the work place so it's not surprising that the way we feel at work affects our social life one way or another.

Work-life balance is a concept we all struggle to achieve at one point in our professional lives especially when times are hard, and people must work harder to meet deadline to avoid a demotion or termination. Therefore, some companies and organizations started developing employee's wellbeing program that focus on the physical and mental health of the employees. By doing this they are not simply being kind to their staff but that are addressing the interest of the organization as such programs are likely to avoid loss of productivity and time taken off due

FOR MOST WORKING AGE PEOPLE, A JOB IS MORE THAN A SOURCE OF INCOME, IT IS THE PLACE THAT WE GO TO ON DAILY BASES AND HAVE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

to sickness and staff resignation. An interesting survey conducted in the UK asked employees about the causes of their stress reported that 34% of employees saying heavy workload, followed by 35% saying its "unfriendly colleagues" while 66% believed bad management to be the main cause of their stress and burnout at the workplace. These findings highlight the importance of acquiring practical skills such as

showing empathy, compassion, and effective communication skills in improving staff wellbeing.

So what do wellbeing programs look like? There are various programs developed by companies around the world , some focus of creating a relaxing atmosphere at work by providing nurseries for working mothers , free or subsidized meals at the company canteen, free gym membership and regular social gathering for the staff outside the workplace so they get to connect and know each other at a personal level, while other companies focus more on providing health dedications materials about common mental health conditions or employe Councilors o support the employees, or sign up for a staff

wellness program with a private mental health clinic so staff can get psychological support paid for by the organization.

All these initiatives are helpful but not all organizations can afford them and not many staff would be willing to discuss their personal problems with a counselor employed by the same organisation for fear of being terminated or discriminated against due to their mental health issue. Therefore one needs to look after his or her own wellbeing by adopting a healthy life style which includes getting enough sleep, eating healthy diet and regular exercise, learning essential skills such as time management, and before all being kind to your self all the time.

As health concerns rise, car gadgets proliferate

PATRICK FALLON & JULIETTE MICHEL

With personal health a rising priority around the world, the auto industry is on the hunt for new gadgets and accessories to make the car cockpit feel safer for the driver and passengers.

Items on display at this week's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) include air purifiers, car seat alarms and intelligent sun visors.

The objective is to transform the automobile "into a sort of health cocoon," Christophe Perillat, deputy chief executive of Valeo said at a press conference at the show held in Las Vegas.

The French auto supplier's wares at CES include devices to monitor drivers' attention and air filters and systems that allow personalised climate controls for passengers.

The company's filtration system for cars and buses clears out more than 95 per cent of viruses, including Covid-19.

CabinAir and Marelli also showcased car air purification systems that could be installed inside the cockpit or in a cup holder.

Another offering by Gentex is a sensor composed of nano-fibers capable of surveying the air and identifying contaminants. The latest generation of technologies comes after earlier efforts focused initially on the trucking industry, where lengthy periods behind the wheel marred physical health, said Carla Bailo, head of the Center for Automotive Research.

After developing more ergonomic seats, auto suppliers have begun focusing on tools to help drivers get ahead of other health problems such as cardiovascular issues, and to maintain driver awareness. Some of the systems follow government requirements on autos.

The Italian startup Filo developed an alarm system for children's car seats following a law in its home country intended to prevent kids from being left in the car on hot days. The company was in Las Vegas to launch the technology for the United States, where there are dozens of casualties each year due to hyperthermia.

"With the hecticness of life, stress, et cetera, sadly, it happens more than we would like to admit that parents actually have on occasion lapsed... and they leave their children in the car," said Rudolf Jantos, who works in marketing for Filo.

The company's Bluetooth-based system will alert if a child remains in the seat when the driver moves away from the vehicle. — AFP

Kazakhstan and the price of Russia's empire



Nina L Khrushcheva

The writer is a Professor of International Affairs at The New School, is the co-author (with Jeffrey Tayler), most recently, of In Putin's Footsteps: Searching for the Soul of an Empire Across Russia's Eleven Time Zones

Paratroopers from Russia's elite Spetsnaz brigade, the shock troops of the Russian military, have arrived in Kazakhstan to suppress violent, nationwide protests against the country's Kremlin-friendly regime. The action comes at a time when Russian troops are already massed near Ukraine's border, and just 15 months after a Russian rifle brigade intervened to end the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. Is President Vladimir Putin really attempting to rebuild the Russian Empire?

Of course, it is impossible to know with any certainty what the Kremlin sphinx has in mind. But, whatever Putin's intentions, his actions are fatally undermining the idea that underpinned the Russian Federation's creation 30 years ago.

Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first post-Soviet president, is rarely a topic of conversation nowadays. If Russians mention him, they are most likely recalling his more important, the inflation and poverty that pervaded Russia's transition to a market economy. They are probably not crediting him with profound historical insights.

It was Yeltsin who recognised the monumental costs of sustaining the Soviet empire — costs that contributed to immiserating Russians and keeping them imprisoned in a police state. Only by shedding these costs — by dissolving the empire and establishing a free-market economy — could Russia deliver liberation and prosperity to its people.

But, on New Year's Eve 1999, Yeltsin might have doomed his own vision. The man to whom he handed power that night now seems determined to discard his keenest insight. While Putin may not seek to rebuild the Russian Empire per se, he seems resolved to establish suzerainty over former Soviet states. That is a highly costly proposition.

The precise share of Soviet GDP that went towards maintaining the empire is unclear. But, given the demands of industrial production and the Soviet military-industrial complex — which together claimed up to 80 per cent of all government revenues — it is safe to say that the Soviet Union could not afford, say, subsidies to unproductive factories in isolated areas of its constituent states. And this is to say nothing of the empire's price in blood, highlighted in the years following the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.

These costs were not lost on ordi-

nary Russians, who resented having to shoulder them, just as British, French, and Austro-Hungarian citizens did during their own empires' heydays. But the same cannot be said of those in charge. From the czars to Lenin and Stalin to Putin today, Russia's leaders have almost universally believed that the cost of empire was justified.

This may partly reflect ideology. As the Palestinian scholar Edward Said famously observed, every empire "tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate." Russians have said much the same about their empire, particularly when discussing the Belarusians and their "little brothers" in Ukraine.

IF RUSSIA'S LEADERS DID BELIEVE IN LA MISSION CIVILISATRICE, THEY BELIEVED EVEN MORE STRONGLY THAT THE EMPIRE STRENGTHENED NATIONAL SECURITY. BUT HISTORY TELLS ANOTHER STORY. IN FACT, IMPERIAL CONTROL QUICKLY LEADS TO OVERREACH, MAKES A POWER LESS SECURE, AND HASTENS THE EMPIRE'S COLLAPSE

If Russia's leaders did believe in la mission civilisatrice, they believed even more strongly that the empire strengthened national security. But history tells another story. In fact, imperial control quickly leads to overreach, makes a power less secure, and hastens the empire's collapse.

For Russia, the costs of Putin's ambitions are mounting. Consider the country's military expenditure, which increased from 3.8% of GDP in 2013 – the year before Russia invaded Ukraine,

annexed Crimea, and supported secessionist forces in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions – to 5.4% in 2016. While military expenditure as a share of GDP declined in 2017 and 2018, it is now climbing once again. With Russian troops stationed in the occupied Georgian region of Abkhazia, the breakaway Moldovan region of Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus, this is not a surprise.

More difficult to quantify are the strategic costs of empire, which Putin is loath to recognize. The Kremlin's imperial agenda, especially the annexation of Crimea, has called into question the post-Cold War settlement in Eurasia, from the Baltic to the Bering Sea. The world's other powers – particularly the United States and China – are strongly invested in upholding the status quo that Putin is seeking to upset.

The post-Cold War settlement enabled governments to divert resources from military budgets to social programs. The peace dividend not only enabled Russia's economic transition; it also supported the long economic boom in the West that ended with the 2008 financial crisis.

But the biggest beneficiary was China. Recall that 40 years ago, vast armies were positioned along the Chinese-Soviet border, and thousands of Russian nuclear warheads were trained on Chinese cities. The Cold War's end thus enabled China to redirect resources toward economic development and poverty reduction. China's success on these fronts over the last 30 years speaks for itself.

Against this backdrop, one wonders how Chinese President Xi Jinping views Russia's intervention in Kazakhstan, which shares a nearly 1,800-kilometer border with China, especially in light of Putin's earlier comments diminishing the history of Kazakhstan's independent statehood.

The domestic costs – and polling by the Levada Center in Moscow suggests that few Russians are willing to trade their living standards for enhanced global status – ought to be sufficient to convince Putin to abandon his imperial ambitions. If not, the possibility of reigniting a rivalry with China surely should. But it is far from guaranteed that Putin will give reason its due. He is already ignoring the lessons of Russia's own history.

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Shakespeare’s icons, Dylan’s lyrics, love... actually



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AS TEACHERS,
WE MUST LOVE
AND ENCOURAGE
OUR STUDENTS,
BUT NOT ONLY
TOWARDS
ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENT,
TOWARDS BEING
BETTER STRONGER
PEOPLE

Shakespeare’s characters are impeccable, each for their distinctive identities, appreciated, not only for the many positive and admirable characteristics they display, but because in their tragic flaws, we identify something of ourselves. Whether it is with Othello’s jealousy, Anthony’s capriciousness, or Macbeth’s naked ambition, there is something in each of those characters, and in their fatal flaws, loved and unloved, that we can relate to.

Our children too have their individuality, their characteristics, their ways of doing and not doing things.

They may work hard... or not, may be tidy... or not, may be athletic and healthy... or not, be articulate, intelligent, and academically driven... or not, may feel loved... or not. I never said they may not be loved, but that they may not feel loved, and in that, a part of them will be forever in the shade. As the ancient and revered Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “Being loved gives you strength,” and in strength, you always find the will to carry on.

Maybe, whether as parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, we should devote more time, display more understanding, exercise greater wisdom, offer more empathy and compassion, and perhaps engage with the tree-hugging, dolphin stroking, organic intimacy of our vulnerable selves, to open ourselves, to engage with, and draw these young people closer to the fold, to draw the deep and emotional responses from those who, whether it is always clear or not, look to the adults around them to enrich and enhance their life experience? It may be... no... it is certainly, a conversation worth having, with them.

You see, it’s not enough sometimes to say that you love them, because it’s either said in such a casual manner as to have little genuine emphasis, and ironically it is expressed almost as a duty, “I love you,” that is said in front of others, not for the child’s benefit, but more for the other adults in the room. It may not lack emotion, but the message of love needs to be delivered in an intensely private setting to be heard, understood, and inwardly celebrated by children who one day will grow to be adults.

Another dramatist, Frenchman Victor Hugo wrote that the greatest happiness in life is the certainty that we are loved for ourselves, or maybe more correctly, in spite of ourselves, whatever our failings, and also that “There is no other pearl to be found in the dark folds of life.” Our children need to know they have found that pearl, that place in your heart that is only for them, and though they, or you may err, may stumble as you both journey through your life’s path... that place is your shared Nirvana, not in a religious, but in a distinctly spiritual sense.

As teachers, we must love and encourage our students, but not only towards academic achievement, towards being better stronger people. We, teachers, are not the be all and end all, of our student’s lives, but we must make ourselves relevant to their lives and life experiences. We also need to be those closest to them, not family or friends, upon which they can examine, or challenge, or test, each new step on their adult journey. They will need to know that they are appreciated, respected, needed, valued, as young adults and members of a class, cohort, school, and society. They must be guided towards an understanding of the subtle characteristics of respect, dignity and compassion, these being the qualities that set some apart from others, not evident in all of Shakespeare’s characters, for sure, but then Shakespeare did write for the stage, for drama, and effect, and our lives, while dramatic enough, could not sustain the pace and intrigue of the eminent bard.

Let’s take our inspiration from a man of words and music, of today... Bob Dylan, who wrote, “There is nothing I wouldn’t do... to make you feel my love.”



DELHI UNDER CURFEW

A worker rests besides shops with the shutters down at a closed market area amid the ongoing state-wide weekend curfew imposed by the directive of the Delhi government to curb the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus in New Delhi. – AFP

How to stop Trump and prevent another Jan 6



THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

The writer is an American political commentator and author. He is a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner who is a weekly columnist for *The New York Times*

On Christmas morning, I woke up early and flipped on CNN, where I found the newscaster toggling among three news stories — two really depressing ones and an amazingly uplifting one.

The first depressing story was the rapid spread of the omicron variant. The other was the looming anniversary of the January 6 insurrection. Both the threat from the virus and the distorted beliefs about the attack on the Capitol were being fuelled by crackpot conspiracy theories circulated by Facebook, Fox News and Republican politicians.

But then there it was — sandwiched between these two disturbing tales — a remarkable story of US and global collaboration to reach a new scientific frontier. It was the launch at 7:20 am Christmas Day of the James Webb Space Telescope. According to Nasa, “thousands of scientists, engineers and technicians” — from 306 universities, national labs and companies, primarily in the US, Canada and Europe — contributed “to design, build, test, integrate, launch and operate Webb.”

Thank you, Santa! What a gift to remind us that a level of trust to do big, hard things together is still alive on planet Earth. By operating from deep in space, Smithsonian magazine noted, “Webb will help scientists understand how early galaxies formed and grew, detect possible signatures of life on other planets, watch the birth of stars, study black holes from a different angle and likely discover unexpected truths.”

I love that phrase unexpected truths. We have launched a space telescope that can peer far into the universe to discover — with joy — unexpected truths.

Alas, though, my joy is tempered by those two other stories, by the fact that here on Earth, in America, one of our two national parties and its media allies have chosen instead to celebrate and propagate alternative facts.

This struggle between those seeking unexpected truths — which is what made us great as a nation — and those worshipping alternative facts — which will destroy us as a nation — is THE story on the anniversary of the January 6 insurgency and for the coming year. Many people, particularly in the American business community, are vastly underestimating the danger to our constitutional order if this struggle ends badly.

If the majority of GOP lawmakers continue to bow to the most politically pernicious “alternative fact” — that the 2020 election was a fraud that justifies empowering Republican legislatures to override the will of voters and remove Republican and Democratic election supervisors who helped save our democracy last time by calling the election fairly — then America isn’t just in trouble. It is headed for what scientists call “an extinction-level event.”

Only it won’t be a comet hurtling past the Webb telescope from deep space that destroys our democracy, as in the new movie “Don’t Look Up”

No, no — it will be an unravelling

from the ground up, as our country, for the first time, is unable to carry out a peaceful transfer of power to a legitimately elected president. Because if Donald Trump and his flock are able in 2024 to execute a procedural coup like they attempted on January 6, 2021, Democrats will not just say, “Ah, shucks, we’ll try harder next time.” They will take to the streets.

Right now, though, too many Republicans are telling themselves and the rest of us, “Don’t look up! Don’t pay attention to what is unfolding in plain sight with Trump & Company. Trump won’t be the GOP’s candidate in 2024.”

WHO WILL SAVE US?

God bless Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger, the two Republican House members participating on the January 6 investigation committee. But they are not enough. Kinzinger is retiring, and the GOP leadership, on Trump’s orders, is trying to launch Cheney into deep space.

I think our last best hope is the leadership of the US business community, specifically the Business Roundtable, led by General Motors CEO Mary Barra, and the Business Council, led by Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella. Together those two groups represent the roughly 200 most powerful companies in America, with 20 million employees. Although formally nonpartisan, they lean centre-right — but the old centre-right, the one that believed in the rule of law, free markets, majority rule, science, and the sanctity of our elections and constitutional processes.

Collectively, they are the only responsible force left with real leverage on Trump and the Republican lawmakers doing his bidding. They need to persuade their members — now — not to donate a penny more to any local, state or national candidate who has voted to dismantle the police or dismantle the Constitution.

Yes, that’s false equivalency. Nothing is as big as the Trump cult’s threat to our constitutional order. But it’s still relevant. For a lot of Americans, watching a smash-and-grab gang ransack their local mall and violent crime jump — and then seeing the far-left trying to delegitimise, defund or dismantle their police — is just as frightening as those trying to dismantle their Constitution on the Capitol mall.

I believe there are many Americans in the centre-left and centre-right who vigorously oppose both, and they think it’s a disgrace when progressives tell them not to worry about the first or when Trumpers tell them not to worry about the second.

When you take both seriously, many more people will listen to you on both. Individually, in their hometowns — like mine, Minneapolis — business leaders have effectively pushed back on dismantling the police. Now it is time for America’s business leaders to just as forcefully push back on the Trump

Republicans trying to dismantle the Constitution.

Why should they risk alienating pro-Trump lawmakers who soon may control both the House and the Senate? Besides love of country?

Let me put it crassly: Civil wars are not good for business. I lived inside one in Lebanon for four years. Corporate America shouldn’t be lulled by 2021’s profits, because once a country’s institutions, laws, norms and unstated redlines are breached — and there is no more truth, only versions, and no more trust, only polarisation — getting them back is almost impossible.

Company Can’t happen here? It sure can.

Rick Wilson, a longtime GOP strategist opposed to Trump, recently described to The Washington Post what will happen if the campaign by Rep Marjorie Taylor Greene and other Trump cultists succeeds to get more Big Lie promoters elected in 2022 — and the GOP takes the House or Senate or both: “We’re looking at a nihilistic Mad Max hellscape. It will be all about the show of 2024 to bring Donald Trump back into power.” He added, “They will impeach Biden. They will impeach Harris. They will kill everything.”

So what will big business do? I wish I were more optimistic.

CNBC reported on Monday that data compiled by the watchdog group Accountable. US “shows that political action committees of top corporations and trade groups — including the American Bankers Association, Boeing, Raytheon Technologies, Lockheed Martin and General Motors — continued to give to the Republican election objectors.”

Kyle Herrig, president of Accountable. US, said in a statement, “Major corporations were quick to condemn the insurrection and tout their support for democracy — and almost as quickly, many ditched those purported values by cutting big checks to the very politicians that helped instigate the failed coup attempt. The increasing volume of corporate donations to lawmakers who tried to overthrow the will of the people makes clear that these companies were never committed to standing up for democracy in the first place.”

The leaders of these companies are totally underestimating the chances that our democratic institutions will unravel. And if American democracy unravels, the whole world becomes unstable. That will not exactly be good for business, either. Neutrality is not an option anymore. As Liz Cheney put it on Sunday, “We can either be loyal to Donald Trump, or we can be loyal to the Constitution, but we cannot be both.”

So my New Year’s wish is that item one on the agenda for the next meetings of both the Business Roundtable and the Business Council will be: Which side are we on?

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Seeb stay on top of Omantel League after beating Bahla

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 8

League leaders, Seeb, hold the lead of the 2021/2022 Omantel League ahead of the close of the winter season with four rounds to play. The league champion of 2019/2020 defeated Bahla 4-3 in a thriller on Friday at Nizwa Sports Complex in the 9th round of Omantel League. Marwan al Siyabi scored the winner in the dying minutes to deliver the crucial win for the visitors. The draw 3-3 remained in the most of the regulation time as Mohsin al Ghassani put Seeb ahead earlier while Mohammed al Habsi netted the equaliser for Bahla in the sixth minute. Ali al Busaidy returned Seeb to the lead as he scored the second goal in the 13th minute but Mohammed al Habsi registered the equaliser again in 46th minute. Seeb players were dominated and seeking for the victory as they made pressure in the opponent side. Mohsin al Ghassani scored the third goal in the 46th minute while Waleed al Musallami brought the match to the draw point in the 75th minute. Before the match concluded, Marwan al Siyabi managed to score the winner for Seeb in the 90th minute. With the triumph, Seeb moved to 21 points while Bahla remained on ten points and were placed in the eighth position. Seeb will meet Al Suwaiq in the forthcoming

round on Tuesday while Bahla will face Al Nasr. The runner up, Dhofar, thrashed Sohar 6-0 at Al Saada Stadium. Yazeed Salim was the best performer in the match as he netted a hat-trick while the other goals were scored by Qasim Said, Awadh Mohammed and Mohammed Salim. The win took the Salalah giants to 20 points and behind the leaders by one point only while Sohar were in the tenth place with nine points only. The last win for Sohar was in the sixth week and then the team registered two draws Bahla and Al Nasr. After their loss against Dhofar in the previous round, Al Nahdha bounced to the winning loop as they secured an important victory against Muscat 1-0. The victory increased their tally to 15 points at fifth place while Muscat are in danger area four points. Al Musannah struggled in this round as they suffered a 3-2 loss against Oman club in Al Rustaq Sports Complex. Oman clubs's tally jumped to 12 points with the victory at seventh point while northern Batinah team is in third place with 16 points. Oman club will clash with Saham in the next round while Al Musannah will take on Al Rustaq. Al Nasr did not benefit from Al Musannah's defeat as they were held to a goalless draw by Al Itihad at Al Saada Sports Stadium. In other fixtures, Saham and Nizwa ended their match in a goalless draw too.



Marwan al Siyabi scored the winner in the dying minutes to deliver the crucial win for the visitors

Canada stun holders Russia to make ATP Cup final

SYDNEY: Felix Auger-Aliassime and Denis Shapovalov stunned defending champions Russia on Saturday in a decisive doubles rubber to send Canada storming into an ATP Cup final against Spain. Their Sydney showdown went to the wire after Shapovalov neutralised Roman Safiullin 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 in the opening singles match. But world number two Daniil Medvedev then thrashed 11th-ranked Auger-Aliassime 6-4, 6-0 to level it up with a flawless performance in an ominous warning ahead of the Australian Open later this month. It forced the match into a doubles shoot-out which looked to be going Russia's way only for Canada to find an extra gear and grind out a 4-6, 7-5, 10-7 win to make their first-ever final in the team event. "Felix did an amazing job. I

had a little bit of a slow start, had trouble returning, but we did a good job to fight", said Shapovalov, who missed Canada's first singles match at the tournament while he recovered from Covid-19. "We have great team chemistry, team spirit, so it helped us a lot." Auger-Aliassime admitted he was down on confidence after crashing so heavily in the singles against Medvedev, but said his long-time friend Shapovalov helped him re-focus. "I had to try and stay positive. Of course, it was tough, especially (because) that second set went the way it went in singles", he said. "Denis helped me and the team to push myself. We had a tough start in the doubles, so to be able to come back in this way, it's really a team effort. "That's what the ATP Cup is about. You can still win after being 1-all and losing a tough singles" Their reward is a clash with 2020



Canada's Denis Shapovalov reacts during his semifinal doubles match with Felix Auger-Aliassime against Russia's Daniil Medvedev and Roman Safiullin. – Reuters

runners-up face Spain on Sunday and they have a big task ahead against the unflappable Roberto Bautista Agut and his solid team-mate Pablo Carreno Busta. Both players are both in red-hot form, each winning all four of their singles encounters so far. **SUPER TOUGH** Medvedev led Auger-Aliassime 2-0 in their singles head-to-heads going into Saturday's match, with his most recent triumph coming in a massive clash in last year's US Open semifinals, a tournament he went on to win. But Auger-Aliassime nevertheless had confidence heading into the match after defeating world number three Alexander Zverev on Thursday. The Russian master, however, never let him settle and cruised to victory in 69 minutes. The Canadian started well and used his serve to control points,

but when he was broken at 4-4 in the first set his game unravelled. "He was serving just aces, playing good, so I knew I just had to stay in the match, try to do what I can, what's possible against his big game", said Medvedev, who will be the top seed at the Australian Open should Novak Djokovic not play. "He definitely started to play a little bit worse and I managed to use it, and that was the key today." Shapovalov earlier had to work hard to put away the gritty Safiullin, with his serve and baseline game ultimately proving too much in the crucial moments. "Definitely super tough. Obviously Roman is playing with a lot of confidence", said Shapovalov. "He's a great player and surely he's going to have an amazing season, so I'm very happy to get the win. It was definitely very tough." — AFP

KHAWAJA TORMENTS ENGLAND AGAIN AS AUSTRALIA CHASE 4-0 LEAD

SYDNEY: Usman Khawaja finessed his second century of the match to place Australia in a commanding position to chase down yet another victory over weary England in the fourth Ashes Test in Sydney on Saturday.

The Pakistan-born Khawaja has been in imperious form in his comeback from a 30-month Test exile, hitting 137 in the first innings before adding an unbeaten 101 to break English hearts.

His domineering 179-run partnership with youngster Cameron Green set up a late declaration and left a beleaguered England having to defy history with a formidable target of 388.

The tourists got to the close without losing a wicket for 30, with Zak Crawley on 22 not out and Haseeb Hameed on eight. They trail by 357.

The highest winning run chase in the fourth innings at the Sydney Cricket Ground stands at 288-2 by Australia against South Africa in 2006. No touring team has gone past 200.

England, who surrendered the Ashes inside 12 days and have yet to pass 300 in the series, will hope to stop Australia going 4-0 up on Sunday's final day.

Khawaja became the third Australian player to score twin centuries in 140 years of Ashes cricket at the SCG, and the sixth in a Test match.

"I always wanted to score a century in both innings in first-



Australia's Usman Khawaja celebrates his century. – Reuters

class cricket and have never done it, but it's just a nice one to tick off," Khawaja said.

"It puts the team in a position where hopefully we can try win a Test match tomorrow. It all worked out pretty well, it doesn't always happen in life, in cricket, it's special."

He toyed with the England bowling with his hundred flowing

off 138 balls, laced with 10 fours and two sixes.

He had solid support from Green, who registered his second Test half-century with a confidence-boosting 74 before he top-edged Jack Leach to Joe Root.

Alex Carey surprisingly came out to bat and was out first ball to Leach, signalling the long-awaited declaration by skipper Pat

Cummins.

Leach finished with 4-84 off 21.5 overs.

Khawaja and Green rebuffed England's efforts after the loss of key batsmen David Warner, Marnus Labuschagne and Steve Smith to have the Australians at 86 for four.

Smith again failed to get going in a 31-ball stay and was bowled

for 23 after he was late on the shot from a Leach skidder.

So far in the series, Smith has scored a total of 217 runs after scoring 93 in the second Adelaide Test. His series average stands at 36.16, well below his current Test average of 60.84.

Mark Wood once again captured the valued wicket of the number-one-rated Test batsman Labuschagne, having him caught behind for 29.

The Durham express bowler has now taken Labuschagne's wicket three times among his eight wickets in the series, in the space of 52 balls.

Australia lost openers Warner (3) and Marcus Harris (27) before lunch.

The indefatigable Wood coaxed an outside edge off Warner for stand-in wicketkeeper Ollie Pope to take the catch.

Pope finished with four catches deputising for Jos Buttler, who had X-rays after taking a blow to his left index finger on day two.

Buttler's injury will be evaluated at the end of the Sydney Test, team officials said.

The stand-in gloved a catch to dismiss Harris off spinner Leach.

England earlier added 36 runs before they were dismissed for 294 to give Australia a 122-run innings lead.

Jonny Bairstow added 10 more runs before he was caught behind off Scott Boland.

The big Yorkshireman soaked

SCOREBOARD

SCOREBOARD	
Australia first innings: 416-8 decl	
England first innings (0/n: 258-7):	
H Hameed b Starc	6
Z Crawley b Boland	18
D Malan c Khawaja b Green	3
J Root c Smith b Boland	0
B Stokes lbw Lyon	66
J Bairstow c Carey b Boland	113
J Buttler c Khawaja b Cummins	0
M Wood c Lyon b Cummins	39
J Leach c Cummins b Lyon	10
S Broad c Carey b Boland	15
J Anderson (not out)	4
Extras (B-9, LB-6, NB-2, W-3)	20
Total (all out, 79.1 overs)	294
Fall of wickets: 1-22, 2-36, 3-36, 4-36, 5-164, 6-173, 7-245, 8-266, 9-289	
Bowling: Cummins 20-6-68-2, Starc 16-2-56-1, Boland 14-1-6-36-4, Green 9-4-24-1, Lyon 17-0-88-2, Labuschagne 3-0-7-0	
Australia second innings	
M Harris c Pope (sub) b Leach	27
D Warner c Pope (sub) b Wood	3
M Labuschagne c Pope (sub) b Wood	29
S Smith b Leach	23
U Khawaja (not out)	101
C Green c Root b Leach	74
A Carey c Pope (sub) b Leach	0
Extras (LB-3, W-5)	8
Total (For 6 wkts decl, 68.5 overs)	265
Fall of wickets: 1-12, 2-52, 3-68, 4-86, 5-265, 6-265	
Bowling: Anderson 12-1-34-0, Broad 11-3-31-0, Wood 15-0-65-2, Leach 21.5-1-84-4, Root 7-0-35-0, Malan 2-0-13-0	

up the crowd's applause as he left the field, after his first Ashes century in Australia.

Bairstow faced 158 balls and hit eight fours and three sixes, battling on after taking a nasty blow to his thumb from Cummins when he was on 60. Boland continued his remarkable series with his team's best figures of 4-36. Since his extraordinary Test debut in Melbourne, where he was man of the match with 6-7, he has captured 11 wickets at 8.27. — AFP

Bullish Bangladesh reject Hagley Oval fear factor

CHRISTCHURCH, New Zealand: Bangladesh's young guns have dismissed talk of Hagley Oval being a graveyard for visiting teams ahead of the second Test against New Zealand in Christchurch on Sunday.

The Black Caps see the picturesque central city ground as a safe haven and point to an impressive Test record of six wins, a loss and a draw at the oval.

The emerald wicket suits their swing and seam attack and they expect to atone for their shock loss to the tourists in the first Test.

But Bangladesh coach Russell Domingo said his side had the confidence of youth and were not impressed by Hagley Oval's reputation.

"They want to try and do what no other Bangladesh side's done before and that's win a series in New Zealand," he said.

"They're halfway there, the job's not done, but they're very driven to try and achieve something very special."

In the first Test at Mount Maunganui, which Bangladesh won by eight wickets, seven members of the New Zealand side were older than 30 and only two — Kyle Jamieson and Rachin Ravindra — were under 28.

In the victorious Bangladesh side, eight players were under 28 and Domingo said that was a critical element in their preparation.

"It's a young side so they don't



come here with all the scars that some of the older players have gained from playing against New Zealand so many times," he said.

New Zealand captain Tom Latham said he expected Bangladesh to be full of confidence but maintained the Hagley factor would favour New Zealand.

"It's a completely different surface to what was up at the Mount and we know we've played some really good cricket here in recent years," he said.

"With the extra pace and carry here it does suit our bowlers."

Latham added New Zealand had the additional incentive of providing a victorious farewell for senior batsman Ross Taylor, in his final Test before retiring from international cricket.

"Hopefully we can celebrate a nice Test win and obviously a great career as well," the captain said.

But Domingo warned New Zealand not to believe they were the only team to benefit from a green wicket.

"We've got some really quality fast bowlers at the moment and it's not often Bangladesh can say that they're actually looking forward to bowling on a wicket that has got a bit of grass on it," he said.

"Opportunities like this don't come around very often. You're confident, you're playing well and you've got a good balance to your side at the moment and conditions, as crazy as it might sound, could actually suit us." — AFP

FIDE-rated International Chess tourney from Jan 26-29

MUSCAT: Design Group Engineering Consultants, Muscat, is all set to sponsor and conduct a FIDE Rated International Chess tournament from January 26-29, 2022 at the Mall of Oman, Bausher.

The tournament is being held under the auspices of the Oman Chess Committee led by Ahmed al Bulushi, Chairman, and Musallam al Wadhahi will be the Chief Arbiter. A passionate chess lover and trainer from India VU Divakar will be the Tournament Director.

This tournament is seeing the light with the initiative of several parents of young chess players. Prominent among them are Dr Raj Mohan, Dinesh Sawlani, Raghavesh Dhandapani, Priyanka Bansal, Pankaj Goel, Karthikeyan Jaya Chandran, Ashwini Katti and VU Divakar.

Damodar Katti, Managing Director of Design Group, the sponsor of the first of its kind event in the Sultanate of Oman, released the brochure while sharing the above details.

Several players from the Sultanate of Oman, Philippines, India, Pakistan, Jamaica, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar are expected to participate. 15 cash prizes and age category medals will be distributed.

Omani players are allocated age category prizes. Katti opined that Omani children are now getting quite competitive — thanks to the unceasing efforts being put in by the Oman Chess Committee.

Ruwi crowned D20 Cricket League champion



MUSCAT: Khalid Kail's superb 49 off 39 and Muhammed Nadeem's sensational 3 for 9 powered Ruwi Rangers to the D20 Cricket League crown with a thumping 8-run victory against Darsait Titans at Oman Cricket Rurf 1 in Al Amerat on Thursday.

Having lost its first three wickets for 43 in 6 overs, Ruwi's innings was stabilised by a 65-run partnership between Kail and Wasim Ali (26 off 24), paving the way for its final total of 175 for 9. Mohammed Naseem Khushi provided the late impetus with a typically aggressive 22 off 8 including three huge sixes.

Oman all-rounders Khawar Ali and Ahmed Fayyaz Butt were the pick of Darsait bowlers, taking three wickets each.

With a rampaging Kaleemullah breathing down Darsait neck from the other end, Muhammed Nadeem was unplayable with a red hot cherry in hand. Darsait's chase was over inside 12 overs as it limped to 47 for 8 before being all out for 95 five overs later. Jitenkumar Ramanandi and Mohit Patel bowled well too, taking three and two wickets respectively.

Brief Scores (D20): Ruwi Rangers 175 for 9 in 20 overs (Khalid Kail 49 – 1x4, 3x6, Wasim Ali 26 – 2x4, Mohammed Naseem 22 – 3x6, Khawar Ali 3-35, Ahmed Fayyaz 3-40) beat Darsait Titans 95 all out in 17.1 overs (Khurram Khan 34 – 2x4, 2x6, Muhammed Nadeem 3-9 Jitenkumar Ramanandi 3-23, Mohitdhirubhai Patel 2-29) by 80 runs.



Supporters of Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic rally outside the Park Hotel, where the star athlete is believed to be held while he stays, in Melbourne. – Reuters

Novak Djokovic argues he had Australia green light because of recent Covid infection

MELBOURNE: Tennis world number one Novak Djokovic said in a legal challenge on Saturday to being refused entry to Australia that he had been given medical exemption from vaccination against Covid-19 because he had contracted the illness last month.

In a court filing ahead of a hearing on Monday over his visa cancellation, Djokovic said he had received the exemption from tournament organiser Tennis Australia, with a follow-up letter from the Department of Home Affairs saying he was allowed into the country.

The Serbian player, hoping to win his 21st Grand Slam at the Australian Open later this month, is on his third day in immigration detention in Melbourne — a case that has caused a sporting, political and diplomatic furore.

A vocal opponent of vaccine mandates, Djokovic has been confined since Thursday in a modest hotel after his visa was cancelled due to problems with the medical exemption from the country's immigration requirement for coronavirus vaccination that he presented.

The drama has caused tensions between Serbia and Australia and has also become a flashpoint for opponents of vaccine mandates around the world.

"I explained that I had been recently infected with Covid in December 2021 and on this basis I was entitled to a medical exemption in accordance with Australian Government rules and guidance," Djokovic said in the filing about his experience being detained at Melbourne Airport.

Australian Open: how to get a vaccine exemption

All participants must be vaccinated against Covid-19 or have a medical exemption

- 26 tennis players and support staff have applied for exemptions
- Novak Djokovic was granted an exemption but had his entry visa cancelled upon arrival in Melbourne on January 6

Applications are examined by two panels: Players' identities are hidden from the panels

- Panel of doctors
- Government-appointed panel of medical experts

Key exemption requirements

- A PCR test proving a Covid-19 infection within six months
- A "major medical condition" such as recent major surgery or hospitalisation for a serious illness
- A "serious adverse event" to a previous Covid vaccination
- People who are a risk to themselves or others during the vaccination process
- Proof of an inflammatory cardiac illness within the past three months

Australian Open Melbourne, February 21, 2021
Russia's Daniil Medvedev (L) plays Serbia's Novak Djokovic in the men's singles final
Photo: Brandon Malone

Djokovic said he told Australian Border Force officers that "I had correctly made my Australian Travel Declaration and otherwise satisfied all necessary requirements in order to lawfully enter Australia on my visa".

Djokovic returned his first positive Covid-19 test on December 16 but by December 30 "had not had a fever or respiratory symptoms of Covid-19 in the last 72 hours", the filing said.

On January 1, it said, he received a document from Home Affairs telling him his responses indicated that he met "the requirements for a quarantine-free arrival into Australia".

The federal court has ordered Home Affairs to file its response

by Sunday.

The Border Force, a unit of Home Affairs, did not respond to a Reuters request for comment on Saturday.

The Australian Open starts on January 17.

Many countries allow a recent Covid infection as a reason for an exemption from vaccine requirements.

Australia's federal government released a letter soon after Djokovic arrived showing that it had notified Tennis Australia that was not necessarily the case in the country.

The federal and Victorian state governments and Tennis Australia have denied responsibility for the dispute.

FOOD AND LAPTOP DELIVERED TO PLAYER

Djokovic's court filing confirmed a media report that he had asked to be moved to lodgings with access to a tennis court but that his request was denied. The Park Hotel, where he is staying, is also home to dozens of asylum-seekers trying to enter the country.

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said the player had been provided with gluten-free food, tools to exercise and a sim card.

"He's staying in Park Hotel until the final decision is made," Brnabic told Serbian media.

"We've managed to make sure gluten-free food is delivered to him, as well as exercising tools, a laptop and a sim card so that he is able to be in contact with his family."

"It's a positive tone from the Australian side. The Serbian government is ready to provide all the guarantees necessary for Novak to be allowed to enter Australia, the Serbian president (Aleksandar Vucic) is also involved," Brnabic said.

SHOCK AND CONFUSION

Djokovic's filing said he had expressed "shock," "surprise" and "confusion" when he was held overnight, and had a bed prepared near his airport interview room so he could rest while waiting until the morning when he would be able to reach legal representatives and Tennis Australia, the filing says. Customs officers ultimately "pressured" Djokovic to undertake an interview before he had spoken to either, the filing said.

— Reuters



Barty storms past Swiatek to set up Adelaide final against Rybakina

ADELAIDE: Australian world number one Ash Barty breezed past holder Iga Swiatek 6-2 6-4 in their Adelaide International semifinal on Saturday to set up a showdown with Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina.

Barty, who won the tournament in 2020, was dominant from start to finish, winning 76.3 per cent of her first serve points.

The 25-year-old took a 3-2 lead after getting the first break of the opening set and followed up with another break and a couple of love holds to take the first set.

The Australian carried her winning momentum into the second set, breaking early to take a 2-1 lead, and then successfully defending a break point to hold serve at 4-2.

Despite her best efforts, Poland's fifth-seeded Swiatek could do little to stem Barty's tide, eventually surrendering the match in one hour 27 minutes.

"This is unreal honestly. It's so

much fun playing out here tonight and Iga is an exceptional champion, she made me play my best tennis. There was not a lot in it," Barty said.

"Each match this tournament I feel like I've got progressively better, hopefully there's a little more left in the tank for tomorrow."

Earlier on Saturday, seventh seed Rybakina put in a solid performance to beat Japan's Misaki Doi 6-4 6-3.

Rybakina went down a break in the second game of the first set, but immediately broke back. She then sent down five aces to claim the first set 6-4, before breaking Doi's serve twice in the second to seal victory.

"It was tough. I started really slow, and my focus was up and down. She played so well, I'm just happy to win. My serve really helped me today," Rybakina said. In the men's Adelaide ATP 250 event, French top seed Gael Monfils will meet second-seeded Russian Karen Khachanov in Sunday's title match.

— Reuters



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Omani private firm signs MoU to partly finance Pakistan rail project



BUSINESS REPORTER
LAHORE, JAN 8

Anwar Asia Investment Company, a subsidiary of an Omani investment firm, has signed an agreement to partially fund the construction of a rail project of state-owned Pakistan Railways, Oman News Agency (ONA) revealed.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed to this effect against the backdrop of the visit by an Omani business delegation led by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) to Pakistan.

On Friday, Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of the Board of Directors of OCCI, held talks with Chaudhry Mohammed Sarwar, Governor of Punjab province in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

A number of officials of Lahore also attended the discussions, which explored prospects for trade and investment cooperation between the two countries in tourism, agriculture, education, health and manpower.

Also in Lahore, bilateral meetings were held between businessmen of the two countries at the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry to promote trade and investment cooperation, increase trade between the Sultanate of Oman and Pakistan and create business partnerships between private sector institutions and companies in the two countries.

\$2 billion investments pledged in Omani Block 10 gas development

NEW RESOURCES: A concession agreement signed last month involves the drilling of wells and connecting them with production lines to achieve an output expected to reach 500 million cubic feet per day within the next two years

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 8

Investments totalling around \$2 billion are anticipated in projects linked to the development of natural gas reserves in Block 10, agreements for which were signed here recently, according to a high-level official of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Last month, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals signed a concession agreement with Shell Integrated Gas Oman BV, a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell plc, along with its partners, OQ and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC (a joint venture between TotalEnergies and OQ).

The agreement aims to develop and produce natural gas from Block 10. The parties also signed a separate gas sales agreement for gas produced from the block.

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA), Dr Saleh al Anbouri, Director-General



of Exploration and Production at the Ministry, said the concession agreement will attract \$2 billion investment over the 18-year tenure of the pact. It involves the drilling of wells and connecting them with production lines to achieve an output expected to reach 500 million cubic feet per day within the next two years.

The concession agreement, signed on December 21, 2021, is a major step for strategic and long-term cooperation to harness the energy resources required by the Sultanate of Oman to support the fuel and feedstock needs of industry and meet other economic demands per objectives set out in the Oman Vision 2040, he

said.

In conjunction with the development of Block 10, the partners will also study prospects for the utilisation of gas in low carbon projects, the output of which will also include hydrogen — an important resource for further value creation, he stated.

Earlier, Dr Al Anbouri said the Ministry was focused on attracting local and international investment in all kinds of energy projects, including upstream exploration, production or development of the oil and gas resources, and investments in downstream gas-based projects and services supporting the petroleum industry.

These investments will help sustain crude oil and natural gas output, he said, noting that gas production from the Mabrouk North field in Block 10 will increase by 15 million cubic metres per day.

Last month's concession agreement establishes Shell as the operator of Block 10, holding a 53.45-per cent working interest, with OQ and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC holding 13.36 per cent and 33.19 per cent respectively.

For the initial phase, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) is building the infrastructure for the project, including the main pipeline to the Saih Rawl gas processing facility, on behalf of the Block 10 venture partners. The



The concession agreement is a major step for strategic and long-term cooperation to harness the energy resources required by the Sultanate of Oman to support the fuel and feedstock needs of industry and meet other economic demands per objectives set out in the Oman Vision 2040

SALEH AL ANBOURI
Director General of Exploration and Production

venture will drill and hook up wells to maintain the production beyond the initial phase. The block is expected to reach production of 0.5 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day (bscf/d). Start-up is expected within the next two years.

In addition, Shell and Energy Development Oman (EDO) signed an agreement to process the natural gas from Block 10 in EDO's Saih Rawl facility.

CBO working to enable direct debit, 24x7 fund transfers

Digital society: Central Bank of Oman to launch new e-payment initiatives in 2022

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

A number of measures to support the roll-out of e-payment initiatives are planned for launch this year, according to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) in line with its broader strategy to advance the digitalisation of payment transactions and entrench the growth of a digital economy in the Sultanate of Oman.

These initiatives, the introduction of which were accelerated during the pandemic

starting in 2020, include plans for a direct debit scheme in place of cheque-based recurring payments, as well as a 24x7 fund transfer system between individuals and from individuals to businesses.

“The digitalisation of payment systems is the key initiative towards achieving the objective of inclusive digital society in the Sultanate of Oman,” said the country's apex bank.

“Digitalisation of payment systems will help providing affordable and accessible payment services that paves the way to achieve inclusive financial system in the country,” it stated in its newly published 2020 Annual Report.

Notable is the planned



introduction of the direct debit instrument — billed as an “alternative secure payment option” that will help make redundant the current system of issuing cheques for recurring payments of rent instalments, loan

EMIs, monthly or quarterly utility bills, and so on.

Additionally, the Central Bank is currently upgrading the real time gross settlement (RTGS) system — the centrepiece of the country's national payments

system infrastructure — to enable its operation 24x7.

The upgrade will also enable enhanced liquidity management and better gridlock resolution, according to the CBO. Its planned integration with the RTGS system of the GCC will also facilitate cross-border payments to recipients in the Gulf states.

At the same time, the automated clearing house (ACH) will be operated round-the-clock to facilitate affordable fund transfers between person-to-person or person-to-business, paving the way for instant credit services, the Central Bank noted.

In other initiatives being weighed by the CBO, a new countrywide electronic bill presentment and payment

platform is proposed to be introduced. Additionally, the Central Bank is exploring the viability of hiving off the operations of retail payment systems to a separate entity.

Furthermore, to facilitate cross-border remittances, interconnections with various payment systems globally are envisaged as well.

Besides, as reported earlier by the Observer, the Central Bank is preparing to roll out the International Bank Account Number (IBAN) system in the Sultanate of Oman — a move that will help speed up electronic verification of bank accounts when making electronic payments and reduce the risk of errors in bank account numbers.

Oman International Hospital is now fully open

MUSCAT: Oman International Hospital (OIH), Oman's newest multi, super-specialty hospital that soft-opened in May 2021, was officially inaugurated on the Thursday, January 6, 2022 by Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, in the presence of Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Executive President of Oman Investment Authority, Her Highness Basma al Said, Shaikha Amal bint Suhail Bahwan, Chairperson of Al Afia Healthcare Development and Investment company and Vice Chairperson of Suhail Bahwan Group Holding, several ambassadors and distinguished guests.

Oman International Hospital is a joint venture by Suhail Bahwan Group Holding, Oman Brunei Investment Company and IdealMed GHS, Portugal. The high-profile event started off with a ceremonial ribbon cutting by the chief guest Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health declaring the hospital fully open with all its services and treatments available to the people of the Sultanate of Oman.

Addressing the distinguished gathering, Shaikha Amal bint Suhail Bahwan Chairperson of Al Afia Healthcare Development and Investment company and Vice Chairperson of Suhail Bahwan Group Holding said, "Just a few years ago, Oman International Hospital was a dream by a group of visionaries to set up a world-



class, comprehensive healthcare institution for the people of Oman, according to the highest international standards, to be a milestone in the development of the health sector in the Sultanate of Oman in order to contribute to the achievement of visions and objectives of our contemporary renaissance under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik."

She further added, "Oman International Hospital was not conceived to be just another hospital but a holistic healthcare destination that offers world-class standard in its treatment, facilities and services in Oman and in



the region. That's why we have brought together highly qualified and experienced medical team from Oman as well as from across the world. We have also equipped the hospital with state-of-the

art equipment and cutting-edge technology so that our guests can get the best healthcare service."

"Within a short span of its soft opening, our hospital has achieved several milestones, but

our ambition has no limit. We promise you more achievements in the months and years as we continue to progress ourselves," Shaikha Amal bint Suhail Bahwan concluded.

Fathi al Balushi, Vice Chairman, Board-member of Al Afia Healthcare Development and Investment Company and CEO of Oman Brunei Investment, said: "Since the beginning of the renaissance, the Omani government has focused on the health and medical sector, recognising that with a good healthcare system, a country can offer its people a better quality of life and the opportunity to live well and age well."

"Oman International Hospital is the result of a successful collaboration between Oman Brunei Investment Company, a subsidiary of Oman Investment Authority, and Suhail Bahwan Group, a family owned business. Under the guidance of our shareholders, we are extremely proud of the role Oman Brunei Investment Company has played in supporting the government's vision."

Representing the IGHS, the official operators of the hospital, Dr José Alexandre Cunha, Board Member of Oman International Hospital and Chairman of IGHS Group said, "Today Oman can celebrate the formal opening of its largest private hospital, which has been designed and equipped

to provide the best healthcare services, and which should be assumed as a flag of the country in its commitment to Excellence. At the Oman International Hospital excellence is a permanent goal that guides our daily challenge and, despite our recent existence, our internal level of exigence allow us to present today the "Oman International Hospital" as the first hospital in the entire GCC region awarded by the European Foundation for Quality Management with the accreditation "Committed To Excellence".

Dr José Alexandre Cunha presented Shaikha Amal bint Suhail Bahwan with a key as a symbolic mark that the Hospital is now ready to operate in full capacity. The guests were treated to an audio-visual presentation of the hospital's state-of-the-art facilities, world-class services, high quality treatments, cutting edge technology, global expertise and other unique features.

Later, the distinguished guests were taken on a tour of the hospital visiting the Centers of Excellence, Hybrid Operation Theater, medical spa and other facilities. Strategically located in the centre of capital Muscat's Al Ghubra area, just across the road from the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Oman International Hospital is easily accessible from any part of the city.

Bank Muscat launches 'Integrated Transaction Banking Platform'

MUSCAT: In line with its pioneering role in introducing new and innovative digital banking services for the benefit of its customers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate has announced the launch of its next-generation digital solution 'Integrated Transaction Banking Platform'.

The integrated transaction banking platform offers a comprehensive suite of advanced digital solutions that includes payment, account services, collections and receivables, liquidity and trade solutions for the corporates, SMEs and government institutions.

The launch of this platform is a key move towards the bank becoming the leading 'Transaction Banking Solutions' provider in the Sultanate of Oman to service bank customers with a full array

of products for their local and international transaction banking needs.

The platform will greatly help customers to streamline their operational processes, reduce business complexities and minimise costs. Bank Muscat's digitally-enabled services ecosystem will play a major role in accelerating corporate B2B and B2C transactions, unfolding a digital economy and promoting a customer-centric business model, which is vital to Oman Vision 2040.

With the "Integrated Transaction Banking Platform", customers can gain full visibility and control over their funds position across geographies in multiple currencies through account services, benefit with flexibility in collections of funds through direct debit and virtual



account solutions, automate the management of funds efficiently through sweeps mechanism and can benefit from straight through reconciliation tools available in the platform.

This digital transformation will ease business operations, bring insights, and provides complete control on visibility

& management of funds. With the availability of customised reports and information at their fingertips, the platform will help customers with making strategic decisions in addition to efficiently managing daily operations.

Bank Muscat is always addressing the entire value chain of corporates by developing and adopting new technological solutions. With this technology rollout, Bank Muscat has ensured that the bank's products, services and processes are designed in innovative ways around customer needs.

Speaking about the bank's Integrated Transaction Banking Platform, Wafa Ibrahim al Ajmi (pictured), Assistant General Manager — Transaction and Government Banking, Bank Muscat, said: "We are excited to launch our Integrated Transaction

Nama Group selects projects for Wiyakum initiative



MUSCAT: Nama Group has announced the selected projects for the sixth edition of Wiyakum, the volunteering initiative empowered by the group for the employees of electricity and water sectors in Oman. Nama Group is willing to empower the selected projects to reach the implementation phase.

Wiyakum is one of many projects driven by the sustainability programmes and policy aims at promoting the volunteering culture among its employees and to incorporate their initiatives with the society.

The sixth edition of Wiyakum has witnessed participation of 32 volunteering projects, where eight projects have been qualified for the semifinals phase. The qualified projects in this phase will be assessed based on key evaluation areas such as budgeting and performance, creativity and presentation, target audiences and project objectives, project marketing and communication plan, project implementation and sustainability aspects.

The main areas of the projects should meet the group's sustainability pillars which are economic, social and environmental.

Live the moment with the all-new Kia Sorento



MUSCAT: The all-new Kia Sorento is a well-designed, power-packed and a capable companion

for any journey. The first vehicle to be based on Kia's new-generation midsize SUV platform,

the Sorento is equipped with a larger body; enabling drivers to maximise cargo and luggage space.

The Sorento's redefined exterior and attractive cabin set it apart as much more than a work of engineering efficiency. Its innovative design catches the eye, adding a new layer of luxury to the Kia driving experience. The Sorento stands out with 19" alloy wheels, LED headlamps, LED daytime running lights, LED front and rear fog lamps, LED rear combination lamps, remote engine start and panoramic sunroof.

The interior of the Sorento is enlivened by a modern suite of leading-edge features that firmly establish the Sorento as Kia's most high-tech car ever.

The features include smart phone wireless charger, mood light, Android auto and car play, 8" audio display, audio remote control, power passenger seat, power driver seat, leather seats, dual full automatic A/C, 3rd row AC vents and more. Powering the all-new Sorento SUV is the 3.5L engine with 268 hp and 33.8 kg.m. torque.

This is paired to an 8-speed automatic transmission for

smooth driving experiences.

Kia Sorento enthusiasts interested in experiencing the all-new Sorento SUV are invited to visit any Kia showroom.

Reliable International Automotive (RIA), the distributor for Kia in the Sultanate of Oman provides a rewarding ownership experience for customers.

Excellent product attributes and unmatched facilities easily ensure their absolute satisfaction, every mile of the way. No wonder then that Reliable International Automotive has been ranked amongst the top Kia distributors worldwide.



MSX closes first week of 2022 on positive note

MUSCAT: The MSX30 Index ended the week up by 1.42 per cent. All Sectors ended positively except Industrial. The Financial Index ended the highest and up by 1.37 per cent. Services Index was higher by 0.99 per cent while Industrial Index closed down by 0.86 per cent. The MSX Shariah Index also closed down by 1.37 per cent.

A'Saffa Foods SAOG company signed a cooperation agreement with Stallions United Trading Company in Saudi Arabia to carry out commercial activity between two companies by exporting high quality poultry from A'Saffa Foods SAOG from the Sultanate of Oman to Saudi Arabia.

The Board of Directors of Global Financial Investments Holding (SAOG) announced the Ordinary General Meeting resolutions and discussed the following agenda: Approved the proposal of the Board of Directors to exchange the company's share in Ithraa Tower building in the United Arab Emirates, Dubai in exchange for the equivalent of the shares owned by a related party in United Finance Company, according to the conditions contained in the explanatory memorandum.

Al Madina Insurance Company SAOG operating as the Wakeel of the Participants' (Policyholders) Fund and proposes to charge the Wakala Fees for the year 2022 at 20 per cent of the Gross Written Contributions with respect to General Takaful funds and Family Takaful funds.

Al Madina Insurance Company SAOG operating as the Mudarib of the Participants' Fund proposes 55 per cent profit sharing ratio from the total investment income generated from the investments of the Participants' Fund for the financial year ending on December 31, 2022.

Vodafone Oman announced the launch of its service operations in the Sultanate of Oman. The CEO of Vodafone in Oman said that their main objective is to advance digital progress, initially by bringing next-generation 5G network and cloud service and then subsequently going into ecosystems that reach far beyond telecommunication.

The company's focus is on giving opportunities to small and medium enterprises and the country's youth.

Even before the launch, the meaningful in-country value was delivered through employment (95 per cent Omanisation) and an amazing local partnership ecosystem across key sectors.

The Omani government announced an expansionary budget for the year 2022, with main consideration given to maintaining the level of spending on basic services such as

The total number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) registered in the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development till the end of November 2021 increased by 30.4 per cent to reach 62,335 compared to 47,802 in November 2020

education, healthcare, housing, and social welfare. Other considerations are reflected by measures aiming to improve the business environment and expanding public-private partnership (PPP) projects. Revenue estimated RO 10.58 bn for 2022 vs RO 10.9 bn revenue estimated to have been achieved in 2021.

Expenditure is budgeted at RO 12.13 bn, 11.5 per cent higher compared with the budgeted figures of 2021. Deficit has been budgeted at RO 1.55 bn, lower than last budgeted year but higher than full year preliminary deficit of RO 1.2 bn or 3.8 per cent of GDP for 2021. Apart from the planned budgetary expenditure, RO 5 bn worth of investments have been planned for non-budgetary sources.

OIA-led projects account for RO 2.94 bn while RO 1.2 bn investment is planned by Energy Development of Oman while RO 0.9 bn will arise from development projects and initiatives planned via the Public Private Partnership and the Partnership for Development Program.

Overall, a considerable amount of projects has been outlined from both budgetary and non-budgetary measures which should give comfort to the investment community.

The total number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) registered in the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development till the end of November 2021 increased by 30.4 per cent to reach 62,335 compared to 47,802 in November 2020, according to the data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Among the governorates, the Governorate of Muscat topped the list by reaching 21,068 enterprises, comprising a rise of 31.5 per cent, followed by the Governorate of North Al Batinah with 9,830, comprising an increase by 30.4 per cent, the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah with 7,604, going up 25.9 per cent and the Governorate of Dhofar by 5,318, constituting a surge by 33.7 per cent compared to the same period in 2020.

(Courtesy: U-Capital)

SMEs in Oman



Source: NCSI

Oman Budget 2022: Maintaining balanced financial stability



The State's General Budget for 2022 is consistent with the objectives of the 10th FDP, as the general budget aims to achieve a number of economic and social development goals, says multinational professional services network PwC in its budget analysis

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 8

The FY 2022 Oman budget represents the second year of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025) (FDP), which paves the way to implement Oman Vision 2040 development objectives.

The budget was prepared in context of similar themes to the previous year, in that financial and economic challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic persist, and the Sultanate of Oman continues to be committed to the agreement of Opec+ in limiting the production of oil to 1.055m barrels a day alongside ongoing economic and geopolitical challenges.

The Sultanate of Oman had good reason to be cautiously optimistic in preparing the 2022 budget, as 2021 afforded a number of positives that would have factored into the budget, such as:

- The world economy slowly recovering from the initial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the IMF projecting a medium-term global economic growth of 3.3 per cent and forecasting Oman's GDP to grow around 2.5 per cent in 2021 and about 3 per cent average growth over the medium-term;
- Omani actual 2021 revenues exceeding budget, and therefore strengthening the Sultanate of Oman's efforts to meet its Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (2020-2024) of reducing its deficit;
- VAT and Excise Taxes "going live" in 2021, which allowed the Sultanate of Oman to include a new revenue stream in the 2022 budget, and



to begin reaping the benefits of implementing the new fiscal policies; and

- The country's credit outlook having improved across the three main agencies.

As such, while the 2022 General Budget is very much shaped by Oman's Vision 2040 priorities such as achieving fiscal sustainability and reducing the ratio of the size of public debt to GDP, it does so already having hit initial milestones under the short- and medium- terms plans underpinning Vision 2040.

2022 Budget Objectives

The State's General Budget for 2022 is consistent with the objectives of the 10th FDP, as the general budget aims to achieve the following set of economic and social development goals:

- 1) Encouraging investment and pushing the private sector to lead and revitalise the economic sectors, and to expand partnership projects with the private sector.
- 2) Maintaining safe and sustainable levels of public spending through continued implementation of the medium-term financial plan initiatives.
- 3) Continuing efforts to maintain balanced financial stability and intensifying efforts to support and stimulate economic activity without prejudice to the sustainability of budget indicators and public debt.
- 4) Giving priority to the implementation of projects that serve the economic and social objectives related to the productive sectors, especially the sectors of economic diversification, and delaying the implementation of non-urgent projects, and giving great importance in return for the operation of projects that are

completed during the year.

5) Providing the necessary incentives to encourage the establishment of private sector companies (especially public joint stocks companies) to serve development and provide the necessary opportunities for investment.

6) Continuing work to improve the credit rating of the Sultanate of Oman and increase investor confidence.

Precautious approach

The 2022 budget was built on the basis of \$50 per barrel and the Ministry of Finance confirmed that a precautionary approach was taken once again in this regard.

This is especially in consideration of the ongoing uncertainty of the oil price scene in light of the new Covid-19 variants, and the approaching date of the end of the Opec+ agreement in April 2022.

This is despite the estimates of the International Energy Agency, the International Monetary Fund and credit rating agencies (Fitch, Moody's, Standard & Poor's, and other global agencies) that put the average price during 2022 between \$53 and \$84.

Revenue is budgeted to increase by 23 per cent to RO 10.6 billion (FY21 RO 8.6 billion), with oil and gas revenue representing c.68 per cent (FY21 RO 7.2 billion).

The Ministry of Finance confirmed in a statement that, should revenues in excess of those budgeted at \$50 per barrel be achieved, any excess will be utilised to further reduce the deficit and repay loans.

The Sultanate of Oman also foresees a rise in non-oil revenue to around RO 3.3 billion in 2022, up 6 per cent from around RO 3.2 billion in 2021 budget.

This continued growth in non-oil revenues supports the country's objective of reducing its dependency on oil and gas revenues. The budget included higher revenues from local taxes & fees at RO 1,759 million (FY21 RO 1,622 million).

VAT and Excise Tax are expected to contribute RO 450 million and RO 85 million of these revenues, respectively. Customs taxes are expected to

contribute RO 260 million in revenues.

The forecasted revenue from corporate tax is estimated at RO 465 million (FY21 RO 400 million) with an increase of 17 per cent in comparison to taxes budgeted to be collected in year 2021.

This is mainly due to an effective vaccine rollout and other containment measures have allowed the economy to open, while higher international oil prices have supported a broader recovery.

Sustainable expenditure

One of the most important pillars of the 2022 general budget is maintaining safe and sustainable levels of public spending, while continuing to raise non-oil revenue contributions, and giving priority to the implementation of projects related to the productive sectors and others.

The budget aims to spend 40 per cent of the total current spending on basic services, which will be distributed as follows: 17 per cent on education, 7 per cent on social security and welfare, 11 per cent on health and 5 per cent on housing.

Government expenditure, meanwhile, will rise to RO 12.1 billion in the 2022 budget, up 11 per cent from its 2021 estimates. Actual investment expenditures represent about 24 per cent of total expenditure or RO 2.9 billion.

A total of 110 investment projects will be implemented and developed in 2021-2022, and it is expected that more projects are to come from the series of deals signed by a raft of state-owned and private Omani firms with Saudi Arabian companies during the visit by the Saudi Crown Prince to the Sultanate of Oman.

In addition, the Government appears keen to outsource other services and projects to the private sector to further ease expenditure, with the aim of bringing improved efficiency and cost savings. According to the estimates of the Ministry of Economy, it is expected that the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at current prices by the end of 2021 will reach about RO 30 billion. (Courtesy: PwC)

US safe-haven risks shift one year after riots

A lot has changed in the US economy one year after protesters stormed the Capitol building. As the election of US President Joe Biden was being validated by Congress, the global pandemic was still raging with a vaccine in the nascent stages, and the American economy was on shaky ground.

Now, with business booming, the risks are shifting. While divisions that spurred violence remain, the US dollar is even stronger, helping it keep its grip on its safe-haven status.

In a speech marking the one-year anniversary, Biden on Thursday blamed his predecessor, Donald Trump, and said democracy was under threat.

The former reality TV star has repeatedly claimed the 2020 presidential elections were rigged, spurring supporters to try to stop lawmakers from certifying results.

Trump's claims have been rejected by several US courts and election officials. And in the past year, the US economy has blown past where it was on that violent day.

The reopening of businesses and pent-up demand created a tight labour market, with 0.7 unemployed persons per each job opening in November.

The US dollar, relative to a basket of other major foreign currencies, has risen more than 7% while the S&P 500 Index is up by about 23%.

The threats facing companies now are disconnected from politics. Supply-chain bottlenecks have roiled business and their customers, spurring the highest pace of inflation in 40 years. The consumer price index rose 6.8% in November year-over-year.

On Thursday, Treasury yields rapidly gained after the US Federal Reserve released minutes of its December meeting showing central bankers expect hiking interest rates at a faster pace.

Still, America has had a remarkably fast recovery given the pandemic. US GDP exceeded pre-Covid levels in the third quarter of 2021, compared to the other six countries of the G7 that were still below, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. High consumer sentiment, even in the face of rising inflation, still makes the dollar a good bet. — Reuters

While divisions that spurred violence remain, the US dollar is even stronger, helping it keep its grip on its safe-haven status



COVERED INFLATION

A shopper wearing a face covering to combat the spread of the coronavirus, leaves a store in Camden Market in London, as UK businesses and consumers face mounting fallout from surging inflation, including higher interest rates. Restrictions imposed in the wake of the Omicron coronavirus variant have 'wiped out' much of a recent recovery enjoyed by UK bricks-and-mortar stores, the British Retail Consortium revealed. — AFP

What is the metaverse, really?



STEFANO VIRGILLI stefano@virgilli.com

GENERALLY IT REFERS TO ONLINE SPACES THAT ALLOW PEOPLE TO INTERACT IN A MORE IMMERSIVE WAY THAN A TRADITIONAL WEBSITE

I visited a friend and was surprised to see a virtual reality gear on her table. She told me that she occasional goes to a virtual cinema with her virtual friends to watch movies. I realized that the metaverse is more tangible than I thought.

Facebook has recently re-branded itself with a new name to focus on the metaverse. South Korean "millennials" and "gen z" are also gathering in virtual alternative worlds. The term metaverse is fast becoming a buzzword in tech and business, but what does it really mean?

According to Elizabeth Halcroft, from Reuters: "The word metaverse is quite a broad term, but generally it refers to online spaces that allow people to interact in a more immersive way than a traditional website.

This could be through the use of virtual reality so wearing a VR headset, but people also use the term metaverse to refer to virtual environments where you have an avatar a little cartoon person representing yourself and you can walk around and interact with other people's avatars like in a video game.

Fans of the metaverse see it as the next stage in the development of the Internet."

Meta's CEO Mark Zuckerberg said that Facebook will transition from being a social media company to a metaverse company in the next five years.

They have already invested heavily in developing virtual and augmented reality headsets and glasses and will reportedly create 10,000 jobs in the European Union to bring their metaverse plans to life. Zuckerberg said that: "We should not really have to have to physically be together to feel present or collaborate or brainstorm."

Facebook is certainly not alone in this space. Other investors and companies are getting excited about being a part of the next big thing.

The term metaverse is popular in Silicon Valley with Microsoft also talking about converging the digital and physical worlds, because of the global health crisis over the past 18 months more people have been working from home and going to school remotely, spending a lot more time online and missing out on human interaction.

At the moment we connect with people who are not physically near us by going to websites such as social media platforms or using messaging apps and video calls, but now some people think there's more demand for online spaces where human

interaction can be more multi-dimensional and life-like allowing people to immerse themselves in digital content rather than simply viewing it.

There is also a specific type of metaverse which uses blockchain technology, the same technology that's behind Bitcoin. One of such blockchain based virtual worlds is decentraland.

In there users can buy digital assets such as clothes, and even land using cryptocurrencies.

Fashion companies are noticing the trend experimenting with making virtual clothing which people's avatars can wear in metaverse environments. While the metaverse offers a new space for people to socialize trade game and even attend music concerts, right now it's still no comparison to the real world.

We all have watched science fiction movies that are set in fully fledged meta verses or alternate digital worlds that are almost indistinguishable from real physical life, but that's still in fiction at the moment the most.

Virtual spaces look more like the inside of video games than real life. (The writer is a member of the International Press Association)

How Chinese competition helps Western conglomerates



DALIA MARIN

The author, Professor of International Economics at the School of Management of the Technical University of Munich, is a research fellow at the Centre for Economic Policy Research and non-resident fellow at Bruegel

In November, the US industrial powerhouse General Electric (GE) announced that it would split into three companies. The Japanese conglomerate Toshiba and healthcare giant Johnson & Johnson have since announced similar plans.

And these are just the latest in a string of such breakups, which include the likes of DowDuPont and Siemens. Is the age of the conglomerate coming to an end?

While tech companies such as Alphabet (Google's parent company), Amazon, and Meta (formerly Facebook) focus on acquisitions, conglomerates increasingly view breaking up and streamlining their businesses as a way to improve performance.

GE stock, for example, has been underperforming for years. Shareholders are betting that its healthcare, aviation and energy divisions will be able to reap higher profits and compete more

effectively over the next century if they can set their own paths, with more focused business models, tailored capital allocation and strategic flexibility.

This approach seems to have worked for Siemens, which credits deconglomeration with helping it to overtake GE, its historical rival, and post healthy profits for 2021. But the question remains: Why are conglomerates underperforming?

The answer comes down to the so-called conglomerate discount.

Markets tend to undervalue the stock of companies with a diversified set of businesses. If each of their divisions was valued at the level of a single-focus firm in their sector, they would be worth more overall.

The conglomerate discount reflects the fact that conglomerates have lower Tobin's Q — the ratio between a physical asset's market value and its replacement value — than single-product firms.

This is partly because capital is

often misallocated across divisions. When headquarters over-allocate to some divisions, the firm's return on assets declines

The conventional wisdom is that this misallocation of capital is a result of "corporate socialism" — when head offices allocate capital from more profitable to less profitable divisions, in order to give the underperforming division the resources and incentives to improve.

But, as my co-authors and I show in recent research, that is not the whole story. In fact, head offices are more likely to over-allocate capital to a conglomerate's best-performing divisions.

That is because, in deciding where to send more capital, they review proposals from division managers. Those divisions that promise to bring in the most profits get funded, with the specific amount determined by the estimated costs put forward in the proposal.

But managers are empire-builders, with a strong appetite for running larger divisions, so they often inflate the estimated costs of their projects.

If they are already running the conglomerate's more profitable divisions, the excess costs will not be enough to prevent headquarters from handing over the funds. Nonetheless, this arrangement obviously does not imply the most efficient use of capital — hence the conglomerate discount.

Yet abandoning the conglomerate model is hardly the only way to escape this trap.

More market competition can go a long way toward curbing division managers' empire-building behaviour, because it intensifies pressure on headquarters to allocate funds towards the most efficient projects. This is not mere speculation.

In our research, my co-authors and I find that since China joined the World Trade Organization 20

years ago, US conglomerates facing competition from Chinese firms have benefited from significant reductions in over-reporting of costs by managers.

Over-reporting dropped by 15% per standard deviation increase in Chinese imports, based on 7% average annual growth in imports from China between 1999 and 2007.

Costs fell the most in the companies' most productive business segments, which had previously been over-reporting by the largest margin.

These segments were then able to increase their output, while less productive business segments continued to underperform, or even contracted. This meant that the most efficient divisions received the most capital. These changes led to a sharp decline in firms' conglomerate discount — a 32% reduction, per standard deviation increase in Chinese imports. ©Project Syndicate 2022

Classifieds

		SUNDAY		JANUARY 9, 2022 JUMADA AL THANIA 6, 1443 AH	
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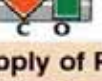
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ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcement of Capital Reduction

IN accordance with the provisions of Article 150 of the Commercial Companies Law. The company **Khoor Al Siabi United LLC ENT**, which is registered with the Commercial Registration No **1099145**, hereby announces that it is going to reduce its capital from **RO 250,000 to 50,000**. Whoever has any objection to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within 30 days from the date hereof.

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#Living_with_COVID19



features

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Al Zajra System: an Example of a rich Heritage

A sample of Al Zajra equipment is still preserved in Nizwa Fort that summarises a long history of the Sultanate of Oman and the stories of Omanis. Al Zajra, which is the unique system of farm irrigation has been maintained since ancient times...
P20

Photo by Sami al Hinai

AROUND THE WORLD

READ

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

BY EMILY BRONTË

It concerns two families of the landed gentry living on the West Yorkshire moors, the Earnshaws and the Lintons, and their turbulent relationships with Earnshaw's adopted son, Heathcliff.

'It was a surprise': California twins born in different years

IN YEARS TO COME, Aylin and Alfredo Trujillo who were born over New Year's, may feel they stand out in a crowd because they are twins.

They will certainly have a tale to tell about their birthdays, which fall on different days, months and years.

"It was a surprise," mother

Fatima Madrigal, 28, said on Tuesday in an interview from Greenfield, California.

At 11.45pm (0745 GMT) on New Year's Eve 2021, Fatima Madrigal gave birth to her son Alfredo Antonio Trujillo in Salinas, California. Fifteen minutes later, as the clock struck midnight and hospital staff



rang in the new year, Aylin arrived.

The twins were over two weeks early, as Madrigal's due

date was January 16. Aylin weighed in at 5 pounds, 14 ounces (2.66 kg), while big brother Alfredo weighed 6

pounds, 1 ounce.

Madrigal said her partner Robert Trujillo and their other three children, aged 11, 3 and 1, were over the moon with the new arrivals.

"I was kind of shocked because twins don't run in my family, nor in my partner's family," she said. "So we were really surprised that we got blessed with two babies, and it's a boy and a girl, so we're complete." For now, the twins will celebrate their birthdays on the same day, Madrigal said.

"I'll explain it to them the best I can. When they're older, if they want to celebrate their birthdays, like, different years, it's up to them, but right now that they're small and they're with me, they're going to celebrate their birthday together," she said.

— Reuters



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19

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LIFESTYLE

Rio de Janeiro cancels carnival street parade over Omicron



AUTHORITIES IN RIO de Janeiro announced on Tuesday the cancellation of next month's carnival street celebrations due to an increase in Covid-19 cases brought on by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

It is the second year running that the coronavirus has forced the Rio street parade, which was due to take place from February 25 to March 1, to be called off.

"The street carnival in the form that took place in 2020, which did not happen in 2021, will not take place in 2022," Mayor Eduardo Paes said in a live broadcast on social media platforms.

The street parade by musical bands called "blocos" is different to the better known procession by samba schools that takes place in Rio's Sambadrome.

The Sambadrome can hold 70,000 people in a stadium that allows authorities to control those that enter.

Amongst the options available to them are proof of vaccination, a negative Covid-19 test and the wearing of masks for those in attendance.

"The street carnival, given its nature and its democratic aspect, makes any type of control impossible," said Paes.

In 2020, there were an estimated seven million revellers for the days-long street parades, according to the Riotour travel agency.

Although previous meetings between Rio authorities and the blocos failed to reach a compromise, new talks are planned for Friday where the musical groups association president Rita Fernandes said they will make "a more decentralised proposal."

The arrival of the highly contagious Omicron variant, coupled with an increase in social gatherings over Christmas and the New Year, has seen Covid cases soar in Rio.

New Covid cases jumped from 21 on December 14 to 458 just two weeks later.

So far, though, the rise in cases has not led to a significant increase in hospital admissions or deaths. — **AFP**



TOURISM

Thailand allows visitors back to beach made famous by movie



THAILAND HAS REOPENED Maya Bay, a white sand beach made famous by the 2000 film "The Beach" starring Leonardo DiCaprio, more than three years after closing it to allow its ecosystem to recover from the impact of thousands of visitors each day.

The beach, surrounded by 100-metre (328-ft) high cliffs, lies on the island of Phi Phi Leh in the Andaman Sea, and is only accessible by boats from nearby spots such as the islands of Phuket or Phi Phi, or mainland Krabi.

Authorities shut the whole of Maya Bay to the public in 2018, saying coral reefs and beach areas had been damaged by constant tourist activities. But since the start of this year some visitors have been allowed to return.

"The sharks have come back, coral reefs are regrowing, and the water is clear again," Yuthasak Supasorn, the governor of the Tourism Authority



of Thailand, said.

"These things show that nature will heal if we give it time, and we have to work to keep it that way too."

To ensure it remains protected, authorities said only up to 375 visitors will be allowed to visit at one time and swimming will be prohibited for now. Boats will only be allowed to dock at a designated location at the back of the bay to avoid damaging coral reefs, they said.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, tourism accounted for about 12 per cent of Thailand's economy and was a key

driver of growth, with the country attracting 40 million visitors in 2019.

But mass tourism has often come at a cost to the environment in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asian, with once-beautiful tropical beaches becoming polluted and strewn with garbage.

"Maya Bay is beautiful, it's a marvellous place," said Manuele Panin, a 40-year-old tourist from Italy, who was visiting the beach.

"I think it is fine that it has been closed all this time to protect the nature and allow it to restore and recover." — **Reuters**

COLUMN



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The books I read and movies watched last year

2021 WAS THE WORST YEAR when it came to reading and finishing books. I managed to finish 14 books only, that's half what I finished the year before it with its endless lockdowns and curfews. In 2019, I managed to finish 24 books and wasn't happy at all which made me decide that my next year's resolution was to read more books. Well, I managed to finish 4 more — which isn't that much — but I never dropped that low in numbers before, 14 books only! I'd reviewed all the books that I'd read last year so I won't bother you — dear reader — with them again.

All I have to say is that I ended the year with the best read ever: The Damned Yard by Ivo Andrić (I'll be reviewing the book in the coming weeks, so watch this space!). As for movies, I managed to watch a huge amount of them, thanks to Netflix and Mom's insistence on watching a movie almost every night. The number of movies I watched was 204 (I feel much worst now comparing them to the number of books I read! Shame! Shame!).

The movies that I watched were a combination of classic films that I always wanted to watch, Netflix's releases and films that I watched ages ago and rewatched them again. As for the classics, I strongly recommend: The Apostle, Wild Things, Glory, Buggy, Midnight Express, O Brother Where Art Thou, The Last Emperor and The Crying Game.

As for Netflix's releases I enjoyed a few movies including: I Care a Lot, American Son (based on a Broadway play by the same name), Hillbilly Elegy (Glen Close in one of her best roles. As good as The Wife), Harriet (an unknown heroine to many of us from the American Slavery history), Selma (Martin Luther King's voting rights march in 1965), Marriage Story (how expensive and emotionally wrecking divorce process in the US is) and The Last Robin Hood (Hollywood's famous Errol Flynn's scandalous affair with an underage girl).

As for foreign movies, I would highly recommend Yara (an Italian movie based on a real crime), Chernobyl 1986 (a Russian movie that takes a closer look at what happened in the reactor itself. Not for the faint-hearted), Photocopy (a sweet Egyptian movie that highlights the technological gap between old and new generations, among other things), Axone (a comedy that displays how multicultural India is, that sometimes it's hard not to clash) and The Dirty Picture (an interesting biography of Silk Smitha, an 80's erotic Indian actress who performed in more than 450 movies. Vidya Balan's outperforms herself in this complicated role).

Moreover, I managed also to watch 22 series (44 if you consider different parts! O wasted precious reading time; I seek thy forgiveness!). There were a few that were a total waste of time and took months to finish. I had to suffer watching them joylessly, just because I'd started them (Riverdale is the first that comes to mind along with Welsh series Hinterland; tried and tested cure to Insomniac).

Belgian Tabula Rasa won the best disturbing series in my opinion. It's about a woman suffering from amnesia and is staying in a psychiatric hospital. The series comes with its own sense of foreboding that you can't shake off while watching. As for good series, I would recommend Italy's the Trial and Sweden's Quicksand. Besides, The One; how your perfect match could be found genetically without much looking around and wondering about. It's an intelligent series that makes you think while watching. Let's hope that 2022 has more books, less movies and series!

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Al Zajra System: an Example of a rich Heritage

By Ruqaya Al Kindi

It was not the advanced tools and equipment that allowed old Omanis to excel in their daily life and routines. It was their continuous search for alternatives, maybe the simple ones, to make the life go on smoothly. A simple example is Al Zajra, an ancient unique whole system of extracting water from wells to irrigate farms.

A sample of Al Zajra equipment is still preserved in Nizwa Fort that summarises a long history of the Sultanate of Oman and the stories of Omanis. Al Zajra, which is the unique system of farm irrigation has been maintained since ancient times.

Al Zajra, as the administration of the Fort said, was used in the past to extract water from the well. The technique is pushed by the power of some animals like bulls or cows in order to irrigate agricultural lands.

Zayed al Riyami, who uses this system in the Fort to revive heritage (since about 5 years), confirmed that it is an easy system and does not require high physical skills and abilities to deal with. "It requires the ability to tame a bull as well as knowledge of the components of the system," he said.

"The system consists of the well, the manjoor (wooden cog-wheel that rotates around an axis that is called hatbat al manjoor), the fakha (the lower wheel in which the animal pulls the rope), Al Jar (rope), and the bucket," the fort's administration explained.



Photo by Sami al Hinai



Photo by Ahmed al Saidi

The water is extracted in two stages. The first stage, as the administration shared, started when the bucket is lowered to the bottom of the well to extract the water from the well to be discharged into the falaj, then the empty bucket is returned to the well.

The process continues back and forth with the help of the farmer to guide the bull to pull the rope. The process often

continues until the plants are watered.

One of the challenges that this system faces, according to Suleiman al Shraiqi, who lives in Nizwa and has used this system in his farm for nearly 44 years, is the difficulty of finding wood used in the manufacture of Manjoor, "where we sometimes tend to repair the old manjoor and reuse them or make efforts to search for

wood used to manufacture it."

He added that this system is facing the danger of extinction, as the number of workers is gradually decreasing by time.

"The system requires about 15-20 workers to build it, and it takes about 7 months to complete it, starting from digging the well to the completion of the whole system. The cost of the system, as well, is RO2,000 due to the costly tools used in the manufacture in addition to the wages of the workers," he mentioned.

Some Omani villages still use the system to preserve the heritage. The team of the Aflaj Research Unit at the University of Nizwa organised a scientific trip to the Wilayat of Bahla (exactly in the village of Al Khattwa) in order to document the heritage related to the Al Zajra system in the Sultanate.

The team found that, "The most important crops grown and benefiting from this system are lentils, wheat, and fenugreek. The study has found that the production of one Al Zajra (that include one manjoor and pulled by one animal only) is equivalent to 45 bags of lentils, and 30 bags of wheat (each bag weigh 40 Kg). The Al Zajra working with two majoors can produce up to 100 bags.

The duration of work in Al Zajra System in the past, according to the team's results, extends from the period before dawn until the period of evening prayer, which is equivalent to 18 continuous hours per day, where two people extract water by using the Al Zajra system, while the third irrigate the farms. The three are rotated during the work.