

High seas biodiversity pact secured

Negotiators from more than 100 countries completed a UN treaty to protect the high seas, a long-awaited step that environmental groups say will help reverse marine biodiversity losses and ensure sustainable development. The legally binding pact to conserve and ensure the sustainable use of ocean biodiversity, under discussion for 15 years, was finally agreed after five rounds of protracted UN-led negotiations that ended in New York on Saturday, a day after the original deadline. — AFP



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HOLD ON TO SEAL
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OMANI CEMENT
ACHIEVES RECORD
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MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO GHANA PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Nana Akufo-Addo of the Republic of Ghana, on his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes to President Akufo-Addo and the people of Ghana further progress and prosperity. — ONA

SANAA

TOP QAEDA FIGURE KILLED IN YEMEN

Al Qaeda on Sunday confirmed the death of a senior figure in the network's Yemen branch in a suspected US air strike last month, SITE Intelligence Group reported. Security and local government sources said Hamad bin Hamoud al Tamimi had been killed, identifying him as a top leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which Washington regards as among the group's most dangerous branches. Tamimi, also known as Abdel Aziz al Adnani, died in a drone strike on February 26 that targeted his residence in war-torn Yemen's northern Marib province, according to the statement reported by SITE, which monitors militant websites. — AFP

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TENDER FOR PART OF AL SHARQIYAH EXPRESSWAY



The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, in coordination with the Secretariat-General of the Tender Board, floated a tender for the remaining work of Al Sharqiyah Expressway (second part of phase 2). This portion of the road stretches between the Wilayat of Al Kamil W'al Wafi and the Wilayat of Sur in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate. — ONA

Don't forget poorest nations: UN

DOHA: UN leader Antonio Guterres on Saturday slammed the world's rich countries and energy giants for throttling poor nations with "predatory" interest rates and crippling fuel prices. Guterres told a summit of the most deprived states on the planet that wealthy nations should provide \$500 billion a year to help others "trapped in vicious cycles" that block their efforts to boost economies and improve health and education. The summit of the 46 Least Developed Countries (LDC) is normally held every 10 years

but has twice been delayed since 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic. Delegated by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, is representing the Sultanate of Oman at the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5). Afghanistan and Myanmar, two of the poorest countries, are not present at the meeting in Doha because their governments are not recognised by UN members. No leader from any

of the world's major economies attended. At the summit opening, Guterres hit out straight away at the way poor nations are treated by the more powerful. "Economic development is challenging when countries are starved for resources, drowning in debt, and still struggling with the historic injustice of an unequal Covid-19 response," he said. The LDCs have long complained that they did not get their fair share of the Covid vaccines that were concentrated on Europe and North America.

Oman becoming a hotspot for film shooting

KABEER YOUSUF @kabeeryousef

MUSCAT: The landscape of the Sultanate of Oman will be the backdrop of many films post Covid-19, thanks to the highly supportive guidelines and cost-effectiveness, besides a perfect combination of landscapes that the country has to offer. The latest in the series is the full-length feature film, 'Agent', a multi-lingual Indian film originally made in Telugu and

being shot in the country for which the desert and sands of Oman and downtown Ruwi are featured as characters. "Oman is a country that has immense visual possibilities. This is the country that has a rare combination of deserts, seas and rugged mountains, which offer a wonderful treat to the eyes," said Surender Reddy, Director of 'Agent' movie. 'Agent' is a spy action thriller film directed and written by Vakkantham Vamsi and stars Mammooty, Akhil



Akkineni, Sakshi Vaidya, Dino Morea And Vikramjeet Virk and many junior artists set in the Hungarian capital, Budapest. "We are done with most of the production, and in the Sultanate of Oman, we are shooting a crucial action sequence involving a series of car racing and other spine-chilling scenes," he added. Besides Akshay Kumar's 'Once Upon a Time in Mumbai Dobaara', several English and Indian films besides regional Arabic movies have been shot in the country. TURN TO P2

VINOD NAIR @vinot_nair

The Sultanate of Oman's tourism sector performed exceptionally well, and exceeded expectations in 2022, two senior officials of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism told the Observer in an exclusive interview. Reviewing the performance of the tourism industry in 2022, Eng Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Heritage, said: "Even after taking into account the pandemic-related circumstances of 2020, the performance of the tourism sector in 2022 has exceeded our expectations for many reasons, which include the keenness of people to get out of their homes and travel, and the fact that Oman has a lot to offer to the incoming tourists."

Pitching in, Asma al Hajri, Deputy Director General of Tourism Promotion, said: "We all know that 2020-21 was an exceptional year for tourism due to lockdowns, but the fact is that 2.9 million tourists we received in 2022 are only 16 per cent away from figures of 2019, when we received around 3.5 million tourists. Travel bookings by our partners in the GCC and Europe suggest that Q1 of 2023 will be healthier compared to 2022."

TRADE FAIRS

Asma said that being a Fifa partner country did help the tourism sector, but it was only one of the factors. "There were several roadshows and trade fairs in which the ministry has participated, and that has also helped last year."

In 2023, we will focus on bringing tourists from the GCC. Europe has been slowing down, but we expect a recovery by 2024. Overall, we expect the tourism sector growth to reach 2019 levels this year and fully recover by 2024

ASMA AL HAJRI
Deputy Director General of Tourism Promotion

Al Kharousi said that the focus of the ministry is to continue to promote leisure and adventure tourism. "We have to target different segments of society. Some people have low expectations of the country, but they are shocked when they come here to find the opportunities and options we have." Asma said the Saudi Arabian market is among the important ones and the second best after the UAE. "In 2023, we will focus on bringing tourists from the GCC. Europe has been slowing down, but we expect a recovery by 2024. Overall, we expect the tourism sector growth to reach 2019 levels this year and fully recover by 2024." Asma added that a number of new initiatives and projects are in the pipeline, but details cannot be revealed at this stage. TURN TO P2



University of Technology approves academic promotions regulation

MUSCAT: The board of directors of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences on Sunday approved the Academic Promotions Regulation to be endorsed at the university.

The second meeting of the year was held under the chairmanship of Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, who is the Board Chairman of the university.

During the meeting, the university's board studied a follow-up report for the implementation of decisions of its first meeting for the academic year 2022-2023. They include the endorsement of an admission plan for the academic year 2023-2024, with an intake estimated at 9,000 students.



The board has coordinated with the Higher Education Admission Centre about the allocation of seats for the university through 2023-2024 academic year.

The coordination also covers measures to plan graduation

requirements for programmes, majors and academic qualifications for the university's branch in Musandam. It includes steps to implement mechanisms for merging the university's branches in the wilayats of Nizwa, Salalah

and Ibri, to form one branch in each wilayat.

The merger process materialises when its basic elements (academic, financial, administrative and technical) are finalised in accordance with legislations regulating the university's status within two years from the date of issuance of the decision.

The board commended the achievements made by the university's students in the 9th sports tournament of GCC higher education universities and institutions. The university's students won the "silver shield of excellence" at the level of all games in the session and bagged 16 assorted medals. — ONA

33,356 register for Haj with MERA



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

MUSCAT: Less than 50 per cent of the total who registered for Haj pilgrimage will be able to fulfill their religious rituals this year through Awqaf as 33,356 people have registered their intention to carry out the same. This was revealed when the online portal closed registration process on Saturday.

According to a representative from the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA), as many as 29,930 Omanis and 3,606 expatriates are in the list of incumbent pilgrims from Oman this year.

"However, we will be choosing 14,000 people from the total number of applicants to perform this year's Haj through the ministry and preference will be given to first timers as well as people suffering from chronic diseases and cancer," Ali al Ghafri from the Department of Haj and

Umrah told the Observer. The number is based on an agreement with the General Authority for Awqaf (GAA) of Awqaf of Saudi Arabia where it was agreed to maintain the number of Haj pilgrims before Covid-19 time.

The Awqaf portal for registration was opened on February 21 for all those who wanted to register to perform Haj, the largest human gathering in the world where nearly 2 million people from across the globe are expected to participate.

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate topped the number of pilgrims in Oman with 5,701 registrations while capital city Muscat has 4,739 incumbent pilgrims.

Applicants from other governorates include: Al Dhahirah (1,704), Al Wusta (240), Dhofar (3,277), Musandam (252), Al Buraimi (485), Al Batinah North (5,016), Al Batinah South (3,055), Al Sharqiyah North (2,350), and Al Sharqiyah South (3,111).

Oman becoming hotspot for film shooting

FROM PAGE 1

"Rastha", another Indian movie made in Malayalam, just got packed up last week and is scaled to release next month while local filmmakers make several short films and feature films.

"More films will be made in the country as several companies have shown interest in benefiting from the perks offered by the government authorities," Renee Johnson, one



who facilitates film-making in the country," he said.

The Ministry of Tourism has joined forces with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the Ministry of Information and Omran to promote the country as an ideal location for film and TV productions as it provides opportunities for investment in this field, especially to SMEs.

Update death and childbirth reports: Ministry of Health

A STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 5

The Ministry of Health (MoH) has urged citizens and residents to complete and update the death and childbirth reports.

MoH said in a circular that there are efforts to implement a number of development programmes and electronic projects through coordination between many government agencies. This comes due to negligence and delay by the citizens and residents alike in

The delay in completing these procedures is a violation of the provisions of Articles (13) and (27) of the Civil Status Law issued by Royal Decree No. (66/99)

reporting the incidents of births and deaths by issuing birth and death certificates.

Such behavior negatively

affects the implementation of the national strategy for electronic transformation, the provision of which is an important tributary for the National Center for Statistics and Information. The delay in completing these procedures is a violation of the provisions of Articles (13) and (27) of the Civil Status Law issued by Royal Decree No. (66/99).

The Ministry of Health called upon all citizens and residents who have birth or death incidents to do the following:

To expedite the completion of procedures and issue a birth or death certificate as soon as possible, by approaching the institution where the incident occurred, even if a long period of time has passed.

The institutions at whom these incidents are recorded in future must issue a birth or death certificate immediately upon their occurrence, through the communication channels available at the health institutions where the incident occurs.

MoH has made many facilities to complete these procedures, by opening channels of communication via e-mail, phone calls, or sending the required documents via the WhatsApp service to those institutions.

BGP - The Road to Discovery

First BGP Seismic Acquisition Workshop at GU National Institution



BGP Oil & Gas Services LLC held its first university level workshop in Oman at the German University (GU) of Technology in Muscat, on February 28th 2023. As part of the ongoing commitment and efforts to support and development of Omani Youth and local communities, the beginning of a collaboration between the two organizations was successfully embarked.

BGP company arranged for an International technical expert, Mr. Zhou Heng, a Senior Geophysical Specialist from BGP International, to conduct this workshop. A vast number of GU students and staff members attended this event.

The workshop introduced BGP Oil & Gas Services to the audience and provided an overview of geophysical services the company provides, a fundamental concept of seismic acquisition, the work flow of field seismic operations and the development of seismic acquisition techniques, and finally the way forward where BGP will further establish a network for young graduates to carry out field visits at BGP sites in Oman.

It is important to emphasize that the German University of Technology provided a platform to facilitate the transition of knowledge and expertise.



The workshop was followed with an open dialogue with the representatives of BGP about the future direction of the exploration and most importantly Oil & Gas market and encouraged students to start thinking about future technologies. Planting the seeds of research and development was key and a great opportunity. The type of motivation all parties experienced has given hope and stimulated enthusiasm to those who will be tomorrow's leaders in the geophysical, seismological field in the Oil & Gas Sector; the movers and shakers.

The significance of the workshop was contributing

to the development of local institutions (an In-Country Value Element), visually illustrating the practical side of the education received in a university setting, and commencing a long term collaboration. Subsequently the immense feedback from students confirmed this achievement. The General Manager of BGP, Mr. Tian Jianhui, stated that this is only the beginning and looks forward to further collaborations with the local institutions to develop the In Country wealth to a sustainable growth of Sultanate of Oman.

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Thank you for making our first year one to remember. As we celebrate our one-year anniversary in Oman, we want to express our gratitude for your unwavering support and collaboration.

Together, we have achieved growth beyond our expectations, and we look forward to continuing our journey of success with you.

Shukran,
Bader Al Zidi, CEO Vodafone Oman



Countdown for Ramadhan... as families get ready for holy month



MAI AL ABRI
MUSCAT, MARCH 5

Only around 16 days to go for the Islamic world to get the most awaited religious event of the year, Ramadhan. Families make numerous plans for daily religious rituals for the whole month.

Many Muslims look forward to Ramadhan for positive improvements in their behaviours, plans, daily routines, and acts. Ramadhan instils discipline and commitment in people.

Choose three goals you wish to achieve by the end of Ramadhan, and begin working on them, and the results will be as positive as the resolutions. The resolutions could include regulating temper, avoiding backbiting, and communicating with family members more frequently.

Ramadhan signifies something different to everyone.

For some, it means hours of Holy Quran reciting, while for others, it means a lavish iftar meal and charitable giving. Ramadhan is also a time for believers to reflect on their faith and life's purpose. Hence, for Muslims, Ramadhan preparations include not just storing food supplies for the massive iftar feast commonly shared with family and friends, but also clarifying goals and preparing the mind to submit entirely to Allah.

Muslims should be aware of what is expected of the communities to begin rationalising spending during Ramadhan and before the commencement of the month.

Despite the fact that many marketplaces are announcing

massive discounts on food products, individuals should be aware that the regular portion of food supplies they used to consume should remain the same.

CLEANING & DECORATING

Hawa al Balushi, a housewife, stated that preparing for Ramadhan does not imply purchasing food items. "Ramadhan, I like to think, is the month of cleanliness. Deep cleaning and decorating the house with my kids is how I officially flag off Ramadhan preparations."

"This cements the importance of the holy month among children as well", she adds.

"Changing the thinking of the entire community may be unachievable, but we can start with some simple personal efforts that other people can follow," stated Amal al Abri, Head of a

charity group.

"One month before Ramadhan, as a charity group, we start collecting food items from households. We deliver them five days before the month begins. So we've been very busy this month of Shaaban. Around the mid of Ramadhan too we do disperse the rest of the things".

"What I particularly like about the people of the Sultanate of Oman is their determination to help these families. We get a lot of money and food. This month, the rewards double, and Muslims are eager to help others in the joy of this month, and as they say, sharing is caring. Then, when we distribute the food, we ensure that we provide them what they require without piling up food that will wind up in the trash can," Amal added.

Fog might affect horizontal visibility, rains expected

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Aerial images on Sunday from Oman Met Office showed the formation of cumulus clouds over parts of the Eastern Hajar Mountains and the surrounding areas.

Met Office has raised alert and caution as horizontal visibility might reduce during fog and thundershowers.

The Met Office stated that there are chances for the expansion

of the formation of the clouds resulting in sporadic rain during the upcoming days.

The weather forecast for Monday stated mainly clear skies over most of the governorates with chances for cloud development over the Al Hajar Mountains towards the afternoon. The week began with the prevalence of low clouds and fog over parts of the coasts of the Sea of Oman and parts of the governorates of Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, South Al Sharqiyah and Al Wusta.

However, for Monday, the weather experts say there are chances of late-night to early-morning low-level clouds or fog patches over parts of South Al Sharqiyah, AL Wusta and Dhofar governorates.

The chances of the formation of low clouds/fog will continue with a decrease in the level of horizontal visibility at times during the late night and early morning on Monday over parts of the governorates of Al Sharqiyah South, Al Wusta, Dhofar and Al

Dhahirah, and on parts of the coastal areas of the governorates of Muscat, South and North Al Batinah.

Along the coastal areas of the Oman Sea, winds are expected to be easterly to northeasterly light to moderate, while over the rest of the governorates, it is forecast to be easterly to southeasterly light to moderate.

Sea condition is reported to be slightly over most of the coasts with a maximum wave height of 1.25 metres.



Ilayaraja mesmerises Muscat audience

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The music director, composer, lyricist and singer, Ilayaraja, entertained an audience full of his fans at the Oman Automobile Association Grounds with his unique style on Friday.

The octogenarian entered the stage, his first time in Muscat, with full anticipation of the audience demand and started off with 'Janani'. He was accompanied by his orchestra and versatile singers for the concert organised by Muscat Beats. Although most of the songs he directed were in Tamil, he made sure to sing in all the South Indian languages.

Brig Jamal bin Said al Tai, Chairman of Muscat Beats Organising Committee, invited Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman, on stage to present a special memento to the Maestro. In his note, Al Tai said although he did not understand the language of the song, he could 'feel' the music and understood it as a universal language "which was very uplifting to one's mood and spirits." Ilayaraja made the concert interactive with the audience. The exciting part was when he reflected on his experiences and often looked back at life.

A humble Ilayaraja said, "I don't know music till today. Had I known it, I would have sat comfortably at home. So for what use would it be to continue to do what I already know about?" Ilayaraja only takes 30 minutes to compose a song, and he admitted, "Throughout my career, this has been so. There is just one song that took 47 minutes, the song 'Sundari.'" The composer is known for his

orchestrations. He asked how one could compose music without wonderful singers and musicians. He gave a special treat to his audience each time he sang the songs he had sung on his own in the movies, like 'Nayakan' - 'Thenpandi Cheemayile' and others.

Many in the audience were nostalgic as he and the musicians churned out songs recorded 40 years ago. He began his musical career in 1973 with a film titled Deepam, but the film was stalled. Soon came the next opportunity, and he composed the song, 'Annakili', released in 1976 and followed by the song, 'Machane Pathingala'. From then on, it has been hit after hit.

"Some songs become classics, and they remain in your memory forever. Why do you think that happens?" He asked the audience.

He explained, "Why it sticks in your mind is because of its melody." On stage, he requested the pianist to play the notes solo. He said, "The piano rendition of 'Machane Pathingala' made it sound like a lullaby." The most important explanation was on the composer and singer.

"The composer travels in frequencies, and the singers use the seven musical scales," he pointed out. The writer or the poet excels when he can write the words that suit the tune everything flows.

Veteran singer, the late SP Balasubramaniam, had come to Oman several times, but in this concert, his son, Charan, sang the song his father had originally sung under the direction of Ilayaraja. Likewise, popular singer Manu and other artists joyfully entertained the audience on cue with the direction from the Maestro.

‘Small consumers deserve better protection’

AFRAH AL BALUSHIA
@afrahalbalushia

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) announced that Arab Consumer Protection Week will begin from March 8 to 14. The Arab countries, represented by the respective authorities, unanimously agreed to start the week by shedding light on regional consumer issues.

CPA organised a press conference under the theme 'The Small Consumer' on Sunday to announce 'Arab Consumer Protection Week' and its accompanying activities.

Dr Khalid al Alawi, official spokesperson for the organising committee of the week-long activities, said, "In conjunction with the Arab Consumer Protection Week, CPA will implement a number of activities, the most prominent of which is the Arab Forum entitled 'Small Consumer and sustainable consumption' in addition to various awareness activities and programmes in the Sultanate of Oman's governorates." The Arab Forum will be held on Wednesday (March 8) under the auspices of Sayyid Mohammed bin Sultan al Busaidy, Deputy



Chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council. Chaired by the Sultanate of Oman, the forum will have representation from Arab countries. The idea is to share the Sultanate of Oman's experience in consumer protection and its role in protecting small consumers.

The forum seeks to achieve several objectives, including identifying the reality of legislation for the small consumer, the role of legal regulations and legislation in providing protection from traditional and electronic commercial fraud cases and achieving sustainable consumption.

It will also review the media role and its impact in achieving awareness among small consumers and international experiences in the field and identify policies and efforts made by the Sultanate of Oman in achieving sustainable consumption for small consumers.

It will also look into practical and applicable proposals and recommendations that would raise awareness among small consumer segments and improve legislation to deal with their issues.

The forum will include some working papers. Dr Haitham Hassan Abdel-Salam, Director

of Public Relations and Media at the Sudanese Standards and Meteorology Authority, will present a paper entitled 'Awareness of the Small Consumer: The Future of a Nation.' "The forum will look at different topics related to society and the small consumers," Said Dr Mohammad al Arami, Chairman of the Scientific Committee of the Arab Forum.

Al Arami told Oman Observer, "We target the small consumers because they need to be supported. The more capable they are in dealing with consumer issues, a general awareness would be spread."



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Meeting discusses strategy for safety, cybersecurity

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, on Sunday participated via video-conferencing in the first meeting of the GCC Executive Committee for Cybersecurity.

The Omani delegation was represented at the meeting by Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the

Oman takes part in meeting of GCC executive committee for cybersecurity

Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology.

During the meeting, the structure, tasks

and terms of reference of the Ministerial Committee for Cybersecurity were discussed. The meeting also discussed updating the guiding strategy for safety and cybersecurity.

The meeting also reviewed the guiding framework for the privacy of personal data in the GCC countries. It also discussed a set of GCC initiatives related to the cybersecurity industry. — ONA

Over 70pc drop in road accidents in 2022



SALALAH: Dhofar Governorate Police Command inaugurated activities of the Gulf Traffic Week at the commercial complex 'Salalah Gardens Mall' on Sunday.

The inauguration ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Bakhait bin Ahmed al Mahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Higher Education, in the presence of Brigadier General Salim bin Mohammed al Ghaithi, Police Commander in Dhofar Governorate, and officials.

The Gulf Traffic Week aims to spread awareness on the importance of adhering to traffic rules and regulations among all segments of society and road users to reduce the risk of accidents.

The activities of the Gulf Traffic Week include holding a three-day exhibition containing interactive screens, traffic competitions, paintings and visual displays, in addition to models of rescue equipment and devices used in accidents, in addition to distributing pamphlets and guidebooks.

Competitions for children are also organised during the event.

The competitions aim at raising awareness of the importance of traffic safety with the participation of the

Gulf Traffic Week aims to spread awareness on the importance of adhering to traffic rules and regulations and to reduce the risk of accidents

Salalah Traffic Department and Civil Defense and Ambulance Authority, the Department of the Public Authority for Consumer Protection, Sultan Qaboos Hospital, the Omani Women's Association in Salalah, and the Department for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

The activities also include a blood donation campaign at the Traffic Safety Institute, in addition to holding several awareness lectures at the University of Dhofar, the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Salalah, Sultan Qaboos Hospital and the Vocational College. A traffic event will be also organized in the Chinese Village that will continue until next Thursday.

The new statistics indicate a decrease in traffic accidents by more than 70 per cent, injuries by 49 per cent, and deaths by 51 per cent in 2022 compared to the 2012 statistics. — ONA

Riyadh meet discusses judicial technologies

RIYADH: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, is taking part in the International Conference on justice being held in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

The Omani delegation is led by Dr Yahya bin Nasser al Khusaibi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs.

The two-day conference discusses a range of issues related to the future of judicial technologies, especially those related to technology that supports and enhances judicial practice, in line with the latest global experiences and digital transformations.



The conference, which is attended by a group of jurists from more than 30 countries around the world, reviews the prospects for investing artificial intelligence technologies in developing judicial work, international expertise and model agreements for judicial cooperation.

It also discusses the implementation of foreign judgments and arbitration within the framework of judicial cooperation agreements and international law, as well as the harmonisation of domestic legislation with judicial cooperation agreements and facilitating their procedures. — ONA

2.9m tourists visited Oman in 2022



Eng Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi

FROM PAGE1

Earlier in this speech at the Global Travel Week at Jumeirah Muscat Bay, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Al Kharousi, said that Oman saw a rise in number of tourists, which, he said, stood at 2.9 million in 2022 - which grew by 348 per cent, compared to 2021. The number of tourism projects and hotel establishments also increased relatively, he added.

TOURISM WEEK

The Global Travel Week Middle East, hosted by Oman, is exploring vistas of enhancing partnership and communication between international luxury travel and tourism companies, on one side, and their counterparts in Oman, on the other side.

This was realised through tourism service providers' use of innovative communication methods to establish long-term relationships and exchange expertise.

As many as 200 specialists in the field of luxury tourism from different countries of the world are participating in the week, which is organised by Oman represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The event seeks to introduce tourism hotspots, exchange tourism experiences and reaffirm commitment to support and



Asma al Hajri

develop travel and tourism in the region.

The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Eng Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Heritage.

Al Kharousi pointed out that the Global Travel Week seeks ways to establish long-term relations between international markets and GCC states. This is in addition to attracting major tourism companies and institutions specialised in luxury, entertainment and adventure tourism, with the prime aim of showcasing Oman's tourism potential.

Meanwhile, Ayman al Qudwa, an expert in travel and tourism sector and Manager of Qatar-based Falcon Travel Company, said that Oman is one of the

most important destinations in the travel and tourism sector.

He added that his company's participation in the event opens channels of communication with travel and tourism companies, allowing them to conclude agreements and partnerships for tourism and tourism programmes and commercial exchange.

The Global Travel Week attracts tourism companies and various entities operating in the tourism sector from different countries of the world. It offers them an opportunity to meet their counterparts from tourism here, enables all to explore joint cooperation and introduces Omani culture to international companies.

The activities of the event, which runs till Tuesday, include familiarisation trips to the governorates of Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah, North Al Sharqiyah and Musandam. The trips will introduce participating companies from abroad to se tourist attractions in Oman. The programme will be carried out with the participation of 40 Omani tourism firms and hotel establishments. (With ONA inputs)

TENDER FLOATED FOR REMAINING PART OF AL SHARQIYAH EXPRESSWAY



The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, in coordination with the Secretariat-General of the Tender Board, floated a tender for the remaining work of Al Sharqiyah Expressway (second part of phase 2). This portion of the road stretches between the Wilayat of Al Kamil W'al Wafi and the Wilayat of Sur in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate. — ONA



INDIAN SCHOOL, SUR

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Email: issuroman@gmail.com; www.indianschoolsur.com

TENDER NOTICE

Sealed tenders are invited from authorized construction companies (having previous experience in constructing PT Slab Structure) for the below mentioned project.

Construction of "KG Block and Multipurpose Hall" at Indian School Sur.

Interested parties shall remit a sum of RO 50/ (RO Fifty Only) at the school office and collect the tender document between 9.00 a.m. and 1.00 p.m. on all working days from Monday, March 6, 2023 to Thursday, March 16, 2023.

Indian School Sur reserves the right to accept or reject any tender.

Last date of submission: 27/03/2023 before 1.00 pm



‘Major’ fire at Cox’s Bazar refugee camp under control

DHAKA: A “major” fire that broke out at a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh on Sunday, destroying several homes, is now under control, police officials said, adding that there were no casualties.

The blaze hit Camp 11 in Cox’s Bazar, a border district where more than a million Rohingya refugees live, with most having fled a military-led crackdown in Myanmar in 2017, Rafiqul Islam, additional police superintendent at Cox’s Bazar said.

“We currently don’t have an estimate for damages

but there are no reports of casualties,” Islam said, adding that the blaze was under control and senior officials from the fire, police and refugee relief departments were present at the site.

Faruque Ahmed, a local police official, said the cause of the fire was not clear.

The refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar in southeastern Bangladesh are prone to such blazes. Similar fires occurred in Jan 2022 and March 2021. While the fire in 2022 only damaged homes, the massive blaze in 2021 killed at least 15 refugees and destroyed over 10,000 homes. — **Reuters**



Fire and smoke bellows from burning buildings at Cox’s Bazar refugee camp, Bangladesh. — **Reuters**

China increases military spending in face of ‘escalating’ threats

BEIJIN: China said on Sunday its military spending would rise at the fastest pace in four years, warning of “escalating” threats from abroad at a meeting of its parliament that will hand Xi Jinping a third term as president.

The increase in the world’s second-largest defence budget came as Beijing announced an economic growth goal of around five per cent for this year.

The country’s planned budgets for the year put defence spending at 1.55 trillion yuan, a 7.2 per cent rise and the quickest rate of increase since 2019. It officially rose 7.1 per cent last year.

“The armed forces should intensify military training and preparedness across the board,” he said as he presented the government’s annual work report to thousands of amassed delegates in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People. The military must “devote greater energy to training under combat conditions, and... strengthen military work in all directions and domains”, he added. China’s defence spending still pales in comparison with the United States, which has allotted over \$800 billion for its military this year. But analysts have said Beijing spends much more money than the officially announced sums. The ramped-up spending comes during a low point in relations between China and the United States.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and other officials applaud at the opening session of the National People’s Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. — **Reuters**

Beijing and Washington have butted heads in recent years over trade and other issues, but relations soured even further last month when the US shot down a Chinese balloon it said was being used for surveillance — a claim strenuously denied by Beijing.

James Char, an expert on China’s military at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University pointed out that several countries across Asia were boosting their defence spending, in part due to “their respective threat perceptions of the regional

security landscape”.

Experts expect few surprises at this week’s carefully choreographed NPC, with thousands of politicians coming from across China to vote on laws and personnel changes pre-approved by the ruling Communist Party (CCP).

Also top of the NPC’s agenda will be Friday’s reappointment of Xi as president, after he locked in another five years as head of the party and the military — the two most significant leadership positions in Chinese politics — at

an October congress.

But many issues are certain to be avoided at this week’s Beijing conclave, which will also see the unveiling of Xi confidant and former Shanghai party chief Li Qiang as the new premier.

Delegates to the NPC — and to the concurrent “political consultative conference” (CPPCC) that began on Saturday — will also discuss issues ranging from the economic recovery to improved sex education in schools, according to state media reports. — **Agencies**

India’s digital infrastructure helps achieve national goals

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
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India’s robust digital infrastructure has emerged as a major driver to achieve multiple national goals, as long-term investment in the sector has started paying dividend in terms of savings, productivity gains and long-term gains.

India’s Chief Coordinator for G20 Presidency Harsh Vardhan Shringla addressed the ‘Knowledge & experience exchange programmes for emerging economies of the global south’ and informed the august gathering that the G20 partners endorsed the robust digital infrastructure in India and its role in achieving multiple national goals.

Shringla highlighted India’s success story in financial inclusion through digitisation in his inaugural

address, which was attended by participants from over 40 countries and regional organisations from the Global South on India’s experience in financial inclusion, media reports quoting statements from Shringla said.

“The unique feature of India’s digital architecture is its open source, which is owned by public institutions and backed by the Reserve Bank of India and not by private monopolies,” he said.

He mentioned recent agreement between India and Singapore linking India’s UPI with Singapore’s Pay Now for payments across national borders as an important development to increase interoperability of financial systems in the days to come.

“In India, delivering lost-mile services to the poorest of the poor has been one of the government’s



key priorities over the last seven or eight years. In recent years, we have shifted focus in our financial inclusion strategy from every household to every adult,” he added.

Shringla lauded India’s Unified Payments Interface (UPI) system an example of how digital payments in public infrastructure can allow an entire ecosystem of digital payments to flourish.

Shringla said that the G20 would focus on the most vulnerable people of the world. The robust digital public infrastructure, according to him, plays a major role in achieving multiple national goals. These include economic growth, improved innovation and competition, financial inclusion, productivity gains, financial stability, digital sovereignty, and access to services such as healthcare, credit and education.

SHORT TAKES

TEHRAN New cases of poisoning in different regions

More cases of mysterious poisoning of Iranian schoolgirls were reported on Sunday in several provinces, sparking calls for the authorities to act amid growing concern among parents.

Since late November, hundreds of cases have been reported, mainly in the holy city of Qom, with at least 52 schools targeted. The latest spate of poisonings affected several students in two schools in the western city of Abhar and in



the southwestern city of Ahvaz, ISNA news agency said.

The poisoning cases, which have led to some girls being hospitalised, have been at the centre of national discussion.

AMMAN US defence secretary lands in Jordan

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin arrived in Jordan on Sunday at the start of a Middle East tour that will also take him to Israel and Egypt.

Austin wrote on Twitter before his departure that he would meet key leaders and “reaffirm the US commitment to regional stability and advancing the shared interests of our allies and partners.”

The US Defence Department said ahead of the visit that discussions would focus on



the growing threat poses to regional stability, and on advancing multilateral security cooperation with integrated air and missile defences.

— **Reuters**

PAMPLONA Three arrested over killing of governor

Three people have been arrested over the murder of a Philippine provincial governor and eight others, authorities said on Sunday, adding another suspect was killed in a shoot-out.

Seventeen people were also wounded in the audacious attack on Saturday in the sugarcane-growing heartland of the Philippines.

At least six gunmen armed with rifles and wearing military-style uniforms opened fire in the governor’s home in Pamplona



municipality in the central province of Negros Oriental.

Governor Roel Degamo became the latest victim of a recent rash of assaults on local Philippine politicians. — **AFP**



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In brief

■ VATICAN CITY



STOP HUMAN TRAFFICKERS, SAYS POPE FRANCIS

Pope Francis on Sunday called on authorities to stop human traffickers operating in the Mediterranean, as he expressed his sorrow over last week's migrant boat disaster off Italy's Calabrian coast, in which dozens of people were killed. "I renew my appeal to prevent such tragedies from happening again. May traffickers of human beings be stopped," the pope said in his weekly address to crowds in St Peter's Square. Local authorities said 70 bodies had so far been recovered following the incident. The migrants had departed from Turkey and were from countries including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Somalia and Syria.

■ TUNIS



TUNISIANS RALLY AGAINST PROTEST BAN

Hundreds of Tunisians rallied on Sunday in defiance of a protest ban, demanding the release of more than 20 prominent figures opposed to the president who were arrested in recent weeks. President Kais Saied sacked the government and froze parliament in a 2021 power grab and imposed sweeping changes to the political system of the country. More than 20 political figures have been arrested in the North African country in recent weeks, including members the main opposition coalition, the National Salvation Front (NSF) and its main component, the Ennahdha party.

■ TALLINN



ESTONIA VOTES IN ELECTION TEST FOR PRO-KYIV GOVT

Estonians headed to the polls on Sunday in an election pitting one of Europe's most staunchly pro-Kyiv governments against a far-right party seeking to capitalise on anger at rising living costs and which would stop admitting new Ukrainian refugees. If, as opinion polls predict, Prime Minister Kaja Kallas' liberal Reform party wins the national election and successfully crafts a coalition it would cement the Baltic nation's pro-European direction. Estonia would also stay on course to adopt more green energy and continue to accept refugees from Ukraine. — **Agencies**

Thousands protest in Athens after Greece's deadly train crash

ATHENS: Clashes erupted briefly between police and a group of demonstrators in central Athens on Sunday on the fringes of a protest by thousands of students and railway workers over Greece's deadliest train crash in living memory.

A small group of protesters hurled petrol bombs at police, who responded with tear gas and hand grenades, before dispersing to nearby streets.

At least 57 people were killed and dozens were injured on Tuesday when a passenger train with more than 350 people on board collided with a freight train on the same track in central Greece. After protests over the past three days across the country, some 10,000 students, railway workers and groups affiliated with leftist parties gathered in an Athens square on Sunday to express sympathy for the lives lost and to demand better safety standards on the rail network.

"That crime won't be forgotten," protesters shouted as they released black balloons into the sky. A placard read: "Their policies cost human lives"

The train, travelling from Athens to the northern city of Thessaloniki, was packed with university students returning after a long holiday weekend. The disaster has triggered an outpouring of anger, as well as a sharp focus on safety standards. Railway workers, who also lost colleagues in the accident, have staged rotating walkouts since Wednesday to denounce cost-cutting and underinvestment in the rail infrastructure, a legacy of Greece's debilitating debt crisis



A petrol bomb explodes next to riot police as clashes take place during a demonstration near the city of Larissa, in Athens, on Sunday.

— Reuters

from 2010 to 2018.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' government has blamed human error for the crash. However Mitsotakis said on Sunday that human error should not deflect from responsibilities for a long-suffering railway network. "As prime minister, I owe everyone, but most of all

the relatives of the victims, an apology," he wrote on Facebook. "Justice will very fast investigate the tragedy and determine liabilities."

A station master in the nearby city of Larissa who was on duty at the time of the crash was charged this week with endangering lives and disrupting public transport.

The station master, who cannot be named under Greek law, appeared before a magistrate on Sunday after his lawyer requested extra time on Saturday to respond to the charges following new information concerning the case. Those proceedings were ongoing.

Railway workers' unions say safety systems throughout the rail

network have been deficient for years as a remote surveillance and signalling system has not been delivered on time.

Mitsotakis said on Sunday that if there had been a remote system in place throughout the rail network "it would have been, in practice, impossible for the accident to happen". — **Reuters**

France faces massive strikes over pension reform

PARIS: French trade unions are heading for what is expected to be a decisive showdown with President Emmanuel Macron over pension reform, with massive strikes from Tuesday aiming to bring the country "to a standstill".

After five separate days of protests so far this year, this week's stoppages herald a new phase in the battle between the centrist government and opponents of the changes, which includes an overwhelmingly majority of French voters.

"We always said that we would go into a higher gear if necessary," the head of the influential hard-left CGT union, Philippe Martinez, told the Journal du Dimanche newspaper on Sunday. "It will be the case on Tuesday."

More than 260 demonstrations are expected nation-wide, many in small and medium-sized towns where opposition to the reform is strong, while strikes will affect transport, the energy sector and public services. Police are expecting between 1.1-1.4 million people to hit the streets, a source said on condition of anonymity.

The upper limit of that range would represent the biggest day of protests in decades, higher than the 1.27 million who took part

After five separate days of protests so far this year, this week's stoppages herald a new phase in the battle between the centrist government and opponents of the changes, which includes an overwhelmingly majority of French voters

in demonstrations on January 31, and bigger than previous pension reform protests in 2010.

Unions representing workers on the national SNCF railways, the Paris metro and the energy sector, including refineries, have called for rolling strikes for the first time, with other industries expected to join in. All eight major French trade unions have called for the stoppages to bring the country "to a standstill" on Tuesday, with shopkeepers also encouraged to down shutters.

"The 7th (Tuesday) is going to be very difficult," Transport Minister Clement Beaune admitted on Friday, calling on workers to stay home

where possible.

Macron's plan to raise the official age of retirement from 62 to 64 is a flagship policy of his second term in office, which began last year after he defeated far-right leader Marine Le Pen.

He has called the change "essential" because of deficits forecast for the system for most of the next 25 years, according to analysis by the independent pensions ombudsman.

France also lags behind its neighbours and other major European economies where the retirement age has already been hiked to 65 or above to reflect higher life expectancy.

But opponents see the changes as unfair, penalising low-skilled workers who start their careers early, while reducing the right to leisure and a long retirement at the end of working life.

Labour Minister Olivier Dussopt insisted in an interview on Saturday that 1.8 million low-income retirees would see their pensions increase by up to 100 euros a month from September if the reform is enacted.

"That won't make them rich, but it's a substantial effort that has never been carried out despite announcements over the last 20 years," he said. — **AFP**

If you come to UK illegally, you will not be able to stay: Sunak

LONDON: Anyone arriving illegally in Britain will be prevented from staying, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in an interview published on Sunday, ahead of new legislation which is expected to be set out next week.

Under pressure from his own lawmakers to find a solution to the flow of migrants arriving in Britain across the channel from Europe, Sunak has made stopping small boats one of his five key priorities.

"Make no mistake, if you come here illegally, you will not be able to stay," Sunak told the Mail on Sunday newspaper.

A new law to tackle the issue is due to be set out on Tuesday, the newspaper reported.

Last year, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson agreed a deal to send tens of thousands of migrants, many having made the journey from Afghanistan, Syria or other countries suffering war, more than 6,400 km to Rwanda.

The policy has faced a legal battle after the first planned deportation flight was blocked by a last-minute injunction granted by the European Court



Prime Minister Rishi Sunak

of Human Rights. It was ruled lawful by London's High Court in December, but opponents are seeking to appeal that verdict.

Asked on Sky News whether those arriving in Britain illegally would be banned from claiming asylum, government minister Chris Heaton-Harris said: "I believe so, yes."

"Should people come to this country illegally then they will be returned or sent to somewhere like Rwanda."

Asked about how genuine asylum seekers would be able to seek refuge, Heaton-Harris said: "I'm quite sure there will be more safe and legal routes."

— **Reuters**

Books and community engagement



Sandhya Rao Mehta

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

As the Muscat International Book Fair concluded on March 4, with wide participation across all ages, it brings back hope that the habit of reading has not yet disappeared. But much needs to be done to keep this hope intact, and indeed to normalise it.

If the doomsday pundits who predicted the end of reading were happily proved wrong, the battle is not won yet.

The distractions for the young, and not so young audience, is immense: think gaming, streaming and playing. All these activities are evolving, colourful and heavily marketed. Books don't really seem to stand a chance.

And yet, evidence from book festivals across the world show that

the appetite for new books, new ways of telling tales, and even old stories has not waned. If anything, the new packaging of book fairs as festivals of letters has given new life to an old form.

But to keep the momentum of interest going, it is important to involve the community from the grassroots.

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, in an article in 'The Guardian', spoke about how schools in England were using innovative ways of engaging children by empowering them with choices of what to read, how to read (in small bits, lying down on a bean bag or together in the school park), and even having whole school book swaps. He adds, "The key to reading for pleasure is having a

CULTIVATING A HABIT OF READING IS NOT JUST ABOUT STRATEGICALLY PUTTING FEW BOOKS WITHIN EYE SHOT OF KIDS BUT IT IS ABOUT SPENDING TIME WITH CHILDREN AND THEIR BOOKS, AND SETTING AN EXAMPLE BY READING OURSELVES

choice about what you read".

The ideas are endless, with sufficient motivation. It does not even require a lot of funding – just the enthusiasm and collective responsibility to raise a generation of children who would learn to love

the written word.

We all know that children learn, and do, by example. Cultivating a habit of reading is not just about strategically putting a few books within eyeshot of kids at school, or even at home. Nor is it about buying them some colourfully illustrated books that have been sold with a disk, or read-along audio books. It is about spending time with children and their books, even setting an example by reading ourselves.

The tips for individuals are simple: spend an hour a day, even less, reading together as a family; discuss what children have read and enjoyed – listen to them instead of talking to, or at them; involve extended family members

like grandparents by listening to the wealth of stories they have. For the wider community, the challenges are not insurmountable. Creating local spaces to exchange and share books is a great start. So is starting a small library with books collected from the neighbourhood, run collectively. Again, inviting elders of the community to read, narrate or recite their life stories would be a wonderful way to connect generations together.

The present century has emphatically shown us that books are not going away, in spite of all previous fears. Everybody loves a good story, told well. We would do well to not wait for book festivals to celebrate books but make it part of our everyday lives.

Austria far-right eyes comeback under new hardline leader

BLAISE GAUQUELIN

Sunk by a corruption scandal four years ago, Austria's far-right is rapidly regaining lost ground under its new hardline leader and topping polls in the small Alpine nation.

Freedom Party head Herbert Kickl delighted 300 cheering supporters at an event ahead of weekend elections in southern Carinthia state, setting out his party's stall.

Besides its trademark opposition to migration, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) has been able to tap into voter anxieties over the Ukraine war and inflation, as well as anger over strict Covid-19 measures during the pandemic.

It has also lured back voters from the conservatives, who lost their charismatic leader Sebastian Kurz when he stepped down in 2021, facing a string of corruption accusations.

Since Kickl, a 54-year-old former interior minister, took over the FPÖ in 2021, it is polling 29 per cent, according to recent voter intention surveys, up significantly from 16 per cent won at 2019 elections.

The opposition Social Democrats and the conservatives — whose mandate to govern with the Greens runs until 2024 — lag behind, polling head-to-head at around 24 per cent in the country of just over nine million.

While Kickl is not known for close ties with his European counterparts, his virulent rhetoric is typical of other prolific far-right figures.

In last week's political rally, he accused "political elites" of running a "big programme of uprooting ordinary people".

He appeared on posters across Carinthia ahead of the polls dressed in a military-green jacket and his trademark stubble and spectacles alongside the slogan: "Fortress Austria — closing borders, guaranteeing security".

Kickl has also seized on anger over Covid restrictions, including a now-scrapped mandatory vaccination law, to turn the FPÖ into an anti-jab party.

"The FPÖ was really the only party here in Austria that always sided with us," said Fabian Nicolasch, a 24-year-old who joined the party in protest at being restricted during the pandemic.

While a folk group plays under electric blue neon lights, the party's colour, at the rally, Nicolasch also complained about price increases caused in part "probably by the sanctions against Russia" which have made oil and gas "very expensive".

On Russia's attack of Ukraine, Kickl insists on upholding Austria's neutrality, while his party has criticised EU financial aid to Kyiv and opposes Ukraine's EU membership aspirations. — AFP

A massacre that rippled through generations in Thailand



Ryn Jirenuwat

The writer is a freelance journalist and producer



Sui-Lee Wee

The writer is the Southeast Asia bureau chief for NYT

When a former police officer in rural Thailand shot and stabbed more than two dozen children as they napped in their preschool in October, the episode became the worst mass shooting by a lone attacker in Thailand's history.

After the attack — which killed 36 people, 24 of them children — Thai authorities ordered law enforcement agencies to tighten gun ownership rules in Thailand, which has more guns than anywhere else in Southeast Asia.

But little else has changed. And the families continue to grieve.

Many of the children were cared for by their grandparents as their parents worked in faraway cities. "These kinds of families — we call them 'skipped-generation families,'" said Patcharin Lapanun, an assistant professor at Thailand's Khon Kaen University. "In these kinds of households, there are the grandchildren and grandparents living together, but their parents leave home."

That distance amplified the pain that has rippled across generations where the attack occurred, in Uthai Sawan.

Chatchai Geecharoen said he typically took care of his son, Chaiyot "Yot" Keecharoen, 3. But over the summer, he had left their small town to work in a factory in Bangkok. Uthai Sawan, in the northeast of Thailand, is one of the poorest regions in the country. "There was no job here," said Chatchai, 31.

IN THAILAND, BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL IS ESPECIALLY PROMINENT IN RURAL AREAS AND SEVERAL PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS IN UTHAI SAWAN SPOKE OF SEEING OMENS THE DAY OF THE ATTACK

He said Yot was a lively boy who loved eating, dancing and playing with toy cars and dinosaurs. When Yot's grandfather told Chatchai that there had been a shooting at the day care, he said he dropped everything and drove 332 miles from Bangkok. "It is hard to come to terms with this," he said.

Thanathep "Chelsea" Kamsorn was 2. Duangporn Kumsorn, his paternal grandmother, said she raised him together with Chelsea's mother. Chelsea's father works in Israel and had never seen his son.

Chelsea loved playing doctor with a toy stethoscope and pretending to give injections with toy syringes. If he saw his grandmother lying down, he would check to see if she was sick and try to feed her. "He had just started to speak more and more," Duangporn said. "It was adorable when he spoke."

Vorrapat Norrabutr, 3, was the stepson of Panya Kamrap, the shooter. On the day of the attack, Panya had



Mourners pray outside the child care centre in Thailand's Nong Bua Lamphu province, where a recently-fired police officer armed killed at least 36 people, 24 of them children, on October 7, 2022.

gone to the centre to look for his stepson, but Vorrapat was not there.

Investigators said Panya had argued with his wife, Kampan Chantakool, that morning. Vorrapat's father, Khomsan Norrabutr, said he and Vorrapat's mother separated when the boy was only a few months old.

Khomsan, 33, took care of the boy until Kampan told him that she wanted custody, saying that Panya's benefits as a police officer meant Vorrapat could go to school free. "We were worried about my son's future, so we decided to let him go with them," Khomsan said.

On October 7, after his rampage in the day care centre, Panya stormed into their house and shot Vorrapat, his wife and himself.

Phattanan Mumklang, 4, was called "Nong Mo," or "Little Mo." She loved soccer but disliked taking showers, something that her paternal grandmother, Saowanee Donchot, nagged her about.

Her parents were separated and lived in towns far away from each other — and away from her. Phattanan did, however, have a close relationship with her grandmother. "We were each other's shadow. We did everything together," Saowanee said.

Pattarat Jamnongnit's mother wanted her son to be a pilot. The boy, 2, lived with his father, a mechanic, and his grandparents while his mother worked at an electronics factory in Khon Kaen, around 90 miles away. He had only entered the day care in July, at the start of a new semester.

Pattarat was a voracious milk drinker, his grandmother recalled, and could drink five boxes in a row. He was also very polite, never forgetting to show respect to his grandmother by bowing to her with his hands clasped to say thank you, even when he was sleepy.

"Are you tired from working, Mom?"

Although his parents worked in a factory in Bangkok and he was being raised by his grandmother, Aphiwut Manochart, 3, spoke to his mother every day on the phone. "He loved asking me, 'Are you tired from working, Mom?'" said Rassamee Tunawa, his mother.

— The New York Times

Books are oxygen to soul

Bookworms never go to bed alone, but with a book on their chest! This is a fact that metaphorically reflects how passionate are book lovers about reading. Perhaps, most of them regard reading as a must-to-do task in their daily routine. Can you imagine that they never skip a day without reading a few pages of a book?! Probably, it is an addiction rather than a passion. The life of those bookworms is meaningless without the blessing of a book being kept in their cars, bedrooms or offices. They are never alone!

If truth to be told, it is just a book that makes their day! Possibly, deep down they believe in the saying, “Let books be your dining table, and you shall be full of delights. Let them be your mattress, and you shall sleep restful nights”. It is true what has been said that there is no friend as loyal as a book. One said that a room without a book is like a body with no soul. Thomas Wharton, a Canadian novelist, said: “An hour spent reading is one stolen from Paradise”. This reflects how enthusiastic bookworms are when reading a book.

Based on this, one has to ask himself a very important question to better realise the value of reading in one’s life. The question is, “What exactly do people get from reading books? Is it just a matter of having pleasure, or are there benefits beyond enjoyment? The answer is undoubtedly “yes”, there are other benefits of reading beyond enjoyment. In fact, reading books benefits both one’s physical and mental health, and those benefits can last a lifetime.

According to the study “Reading skill and structural brain development, published in the American National Library of Medicine website, using MRI scans, researchers have confirmed that reading involves a complex network of routes and signals in the brain. As one’s reading ability matures, those networks also get stronger and more sophisticated. In one study



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THE LIFE OF BOOKWORMS IS MEANINGLESS WITHOUT THE BLESSING OF A BOOK BEING KEPT IN THEIR CARS, BEDROOMS OR OFFICES

conducted in 2013, researchers used functional MRI scans to measure the effect of reading a novel on the brain. Study participants read the novel “Pompeii” over a period of 9 days. As tension built in the story, more and more areas of the brain lit up with activity.

Brain scans showed that throughout the reading period and for days afterwards, brain’s connectivity has increased, especially in the part of the brain that responds to physical sensations like movement and pain. Hence, one has to always remember that reading books can change our brain and your body for the better. That is why bookworms are addicted to reading. Most of them, perhaps, started reading in early childhood and continue throughout the years until it became a habit that could never give up.

In view of this, let’s think aloud and evaluate our reading ability and interest. Are we reading enough? Are you among the reading enthusiasts and bookworms? In other words, how much we care about reading as parents, students or professionals? While thinking about these questions, one shall recall that generally the biggest pleasure comes from what we read, not from on what we read. It is said that there is a great difference between an eager man who wants to read a book and the tired man who wants a book to read.

All that matters is attitude towards reading, which is a good habit that not many people are accustomed to. Unfortunately, with the addiction of new technology and social media, reading is being undervalued and ignored. Most people are getting busier everyday in life, so reading is not accorded that much of attention. This might be due to people misallocating sufficient time for reading, though some have the interest. However, without having the serious passion to read, people will not get that time to do it. If this is missing from their life, then reading would be neither a habit nor important.

TOKYO MARATHON



Runners fill the street in front of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building at the start of the Tokyo Marathon 2023 in Tokyo on Sunday. – AFP

Artificial intelligence and the global south

ROBERT MUGGAH, GABRIELLA SEILER, GORDON LAFORGE

Recent months may well be remembered as the moment when predictive artificial intelligence went mainstream. While prediction algorithms have been in use for decades, the release of applications such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT3 – and its rapid integration with Microsoft’s Bing search engine – may have unleashed the floodgates when it comes to user-friendly AI. Within weeks of ChatGPT3’s release, it had already attracted 100 million monthly users, many of whom have doubtless already experienced its dark side – from insults and threats to disinformation and a demonstrated ability to write malicious code.

The chatbots that are generating headlines are just the tip of the iceberg. AIs for creating text, speech, art, and video are progressing rapidly, with far-reaching implications for governance, commerce, and civic life. Not surprisingly, capital is flooding into the sector, with governments and companies alike investing in startups to develop and deploy the latest machine-learning tools. These new applications will combine historical data with machine learning, natural language processing, and deep learning to determine the probability of future events.

Crucially, adoption of the new natural language processing

PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS ARE BEING DEVELOPED AND DEPLOYED AT AN UNPRECEDENTED PACE AND SCALE, INCLUDING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES THAT ARE STILL IN THE MIDST OF THEIR OWN DIGITAL REVOLUTIONS

and generative AIs will not be confined to the wealthy countries and companies such as Google, Meta, and Microsoft that spearheaded their creation. These technologies are already spreading across low- and middle-income settings, where predictive analytics for everything from reducing urban inequality to addressing food security hold tremendous promise for cash-strapped governments, firms, and NGOs seeking to improve efficiency and unlock social and economic benefits.

The problem, however, is that there has been insufficient attention on the potential negative externalities and unintended effects of these technologies. The most obvious risk is that unprecedentedly powerful predictive tools will strengthen authoritarian regimes’ surveillance capacity.

One widely cited example is China’s “social-credit system,” which uses credit histories, criminal convictions, online behaviour, and other data to assign a score to every person in the country. Those scores can then determine whether someone can secure a loan, access a good school, travel by rail or air, and so forth. Though China’s system is billed as a tool to improve transparency, it doubles as an

instrument of social control.

Yet even when used by ostensibly well-intentioned democratic governments, companies focused on social impact, and progressive non-profits, predictive tools can generate sub-optimal outcomes. Design flaws in the underlying algorithms and biased data sets can lead to privacy breaches and identity-based discrimination. This has already become a glaring issue in criminal justice, where predictive analytics routinely perpetuate racial and socio-economic disparities. For example, an AI system built to help US judges assess the likelihood of recidivism erroneously determined that Black defendants are at far greater risk of re-offending than white ones.

Concerns about how AI could deepen inequalities in

the workplace are also growing.

So far, predictive algorithms have been increasing efficiency and profits in ways that benefit managers and shareholders at the expense of rank-and-file workers (especially in the gig economy).

In all these examples, AI systems are holding up a funhouse mirror to society, reflecting and magnifying our biases and inequities. As technology researcher Nanjira Sambulinotes, digitisation tends to exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, pre-existing political, social, and economic problems.

The enthusiasm to adopt predictive tools must be balanced against informed and ethical consideration of their intended and unintended effects. Where the effects of powerful algorithms are disputed or unknown, the precautionary principle would

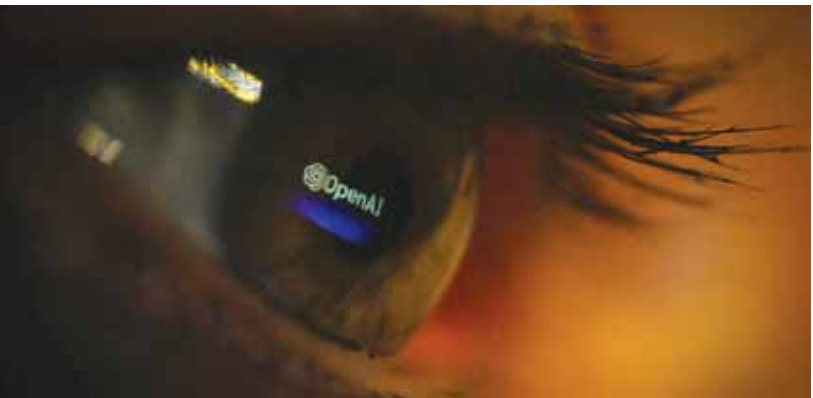
counsel against deploying them.

We must not let AI become another domain where decision-makers ask for forgiveness rather than permission. That is why the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and others have called for moratoriums on the adoption of AI systems until ethical and human-rights frameworks have been updated to account for their potential harms.

Crafting the appropriate frameworks will require forging a consensus on the basic principles that should inform the design and use of predictive AI tools. Fortunately, the race for AI has led to a parallel flurry of research, initiatives, institutes, and networks on ethics. And while civil society has taken the lead, intergovernmental entities such as the OECD and Unesco have also gotten involved.

The UN has been working on building universal standards for ethical AI since at least 2021. Moreover, the European Union has proposed an AI Act – the first such effort by a major regulator – which would block certain uses (such as those resembling China’s social-credit system) and subject other high-risk applications to specific requirements and oversight.

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The chatbots that are generating headlines are just the tip of the iceberg.

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The first-place winners of 44Cup Oman.



The second-place winners of 44Cup Oman.

Team Ceeref hold on to seal 44Cup Oman victory

MUSCAT: Igor Lah's Team Ceeref powered by Hrastnik 1860 took the honours on a dramatic final day of the 44Cup Oman. Going into the last day of racing, Nico Poons' Team Charisma of Monaco held a seven-point lead over Team Ceeref from Slovenia, but that lead evaporated after Charisma faltered in the first two races while Ceeref posted two second placed finishes to take the lead by just one point.

Igor Lah and his crew received the trophy from Shaikh Nasser bin Sulaiman al Harthy, Deputy President for Operations at the Oman Investment Authority, guest of honour, in front of an ecstatic crowd at Al Mouj Muscat Marina.

The final race saw neither team triumph as Huges Lepic's Aleph Racing from France crossed the line first, Team Aqua from Great Britain second and Team Nika from Monaco third.

Ceeref struggled, ending the race in sixth, but Charisma also

encountered difficulty and finished just behind in seventh.

This left Ceeref in first place, two points ahead of Charisma in second and Aleph Racing five points back in third. The battle for third and fourth was equally tight but John Bassadone's Team Peninsula Racing of Great Britain missed out by a single point even after winning the first race of the day.

Team Oman Sail struggled all weekend in challenging conditions on board a new boat but will learn from this weekend and take the positives from this experience into the forthcoming season.

Igor Lah, owner-driver of Team Ceeref powered by Hrastnik 1860, said, "Last year we didn't finish well in Oman, and I am really happy that we were able to claim victory. It was tough until the last metre but we managed to do it. We have changed the crew, adding two time European Champion Tina



Mrak, and it was a little different but everything is brilliant, and I am looking forward to take our chances this season."

The 44Cup is unique

international sailing circuit where 'owner-drivers' compete alongside and against the world's best sailors in some of the most beautiful and diverse sailing venues around the

world. The multi-city yacht racing series gives business owners the opportunity to network with global businesses, C-class executives, group founders, entrepreneurs

and investors during a weekend of spectacular offshore action and VIP onshore hospitality.

Lah added, "While I am in Oman I am going to explore several business opportunities here. From the outside it looks extremely promising, and I am sure this is the right location to be in this part of the world."

The 44Cup Oman was presented by official partners Oman Sail, organisers of the event, and host venue Al Mouj Muscat, in association with Automotive partner Mercedes-EQ, and official supporters TRANSOM Catering and Tanuf Water.

The 44Cup continues in Marstrand, Sweden, from June 28 - July 2, and then Cowes, UK, from August 9-13. The fourth event of the season will be at the Alcaidesa Marina in Spain, next to the border with Gibraltar, before heading to Calero Marinas in the Canary Islands for the season finale.

Tajikistan defeat ends Oman hopes in AFC U20 Asian Cup

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 5

Oman suffered their second successive defeat on Sunday when Tajikistan beat them 1-0 in the second round matches of the AFC U20 Asian Cup Uzbekistan 2023. At Stadion Lokomotiv, Amadoni Kamolov revived his Tajikistan's chances to earn one of the two spots from group while the loss dashed Oman's hopes to continue in the Asian event and the team exits from an early stage for the third participation after 2014 and 2000 editions.

On the other hand, South Korea advanced to the quarterfinals as they managed to blank Jordan 2-0 on Sunday at JAR Stadium. The second win for the Koreans confirmed their presence in last-eight stage before their last game against Tajikistan. The second and third-placed teams, Jordan and Tajikistan, will fight for the remaining second ticket. The extra significance for the AFC U20 finals in Tashkent, which will conclude on March 18, is that it acts as the qualifier for 2023 Fifa U20 World Cup in Indonesia in May and June this year.

On Sunday, Spanish coach David Gordo aimed for a different show and registering a bounce back after the heavy defeat in the opening game against South Korea 4-0.

The first half started with attacks from Tajikistan as they were looking to score first. Kamolov was close to score his first as he

benefited from a loose ball inside the box but his shot went left side of Oman goalkeeper Mazin Saleh. The miss-passes cost Oman a lot in the previous game against South Korea and in this match, the mistakes duplicated again in the field.

Daler Sharipov took advantage of a miss-pass in Oman's defensive area to beat the goalkeeper from a tight angle but the post saved Oman from a goal.

LONE GOAL

Oman's first actual scoring attempt came through midfielder Ali al Balushi who tried to snatch a ball and went towards the net before Tajikistan keeper S Yusupov did a perfect save.

In the last 10 minutes of the match, the opponents pressed hard in order to score the winning goal. Captain Amadoni Komolov delivered the joy for his team as he netted the only and most-important goal in the match in the 80th minute. Alijoni Ayni sent a ball from the corner which was headed towards the near post by Sunatullo Azizov and fell for Komolov, with the skipper firing it first-time into the bottom corner for his side's first goal of the tournament.

Oman will play their third match against Jordan at the same venue on Wednesday while Tajikistan face group leaders Korea Republic on the same day at Bunyodkor Stadium.





DUBAI: Daniil Medvedev conquered all remaining doubts as he completed an impressive hat-trick, picking up a third title in as many weeks with a 6-2, 6-2 victory over Andrey Rublev in the Dubai final on Saturday.

“Not over yet,” scribbled the third-seeded Medvedev on the TV camera lens after his triumph, referring to his current 14-match winning streak amassed over the last 19 days, starting with the title in Rotterdam, followed by Doha and now Dubai.

“It’s amazing because the start of the year was not perfect; in tennis, when you don’t win tournaments you’re always doubting no matter what happens in practice,” said Medvedev, who briefly dropped out of the top 10 last month before recovering in tremendous fashion.

“I was doubting a lot and now it just feels better. I’m really happy with these three weeks and I’m looking forward to the next ones.”

Playing free-flowing tennis throughout the week, which earned him a coveted victory over world number one Novak Djokovic in the semifinals before ending Rublev’s title defence in the final, Medvedev fired a total of 119 winners through five matches, including 27 in the championship decider.

“A lot of shots this tournament were landing, which were maybe not supposed to be, and that’s when confidence is going sometimes, so that helps a lot,” said Medvedev, who has now won his last four consecutive matches against top-10 opposition after losing nine in a row.

Rublev was the victor in his previous two clashes with Medvedev coming in, but had no answers for his compatriot on

MEDVEDEV WINS IN DUBAI FOR THIRD TITLE IN THREE WEEKS



Russia’s Daniil Medvedev kisses his trophy after winning against Andrey Rublev in the ATP Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championship final match in Dubai. – AFP

Saturday. He tried to venture up to the net, moving forward on 18 occasions, but was only successful on 12 of those approaches as Medvedev punished him from the back of the court.

“I think it was a very tactical match, I know that Andrey can cause a lot of troubles for everyone on tour. So for sure every time we play he tries to make me suffer, I try to make him suffer.

“Today I managed to be on top, but next matches could be a different story,” said Medvedev, who leads his childhood friend 5-2 head-to-head in tour-level meetings.

BRISK START

Former world number one Medvedev put Rublev under pressure on serve from the start, and the No 2 seed had to come up with a courageous volley winner to fend off a first break point in the opening game. But Medvedev still found a way as he carved a 3-1 opening.

Rublev saved two break points to hold in game five but Medvedev still widened the gap with some exceptional returning two games later for a 5-2 advantage.

Medvedev confidently served out the opening set to take secure a one-set lead in 36 minutes. The 2021 US Open champion had dropped serve just twice all week and he kept that statistic intact in the final.

The 27-year-old blasted a forehand winner to break for 3-2 in the second set and he consolidated with ease as he marched towards victory shortly after.

Rublev has yet to successfully defend any of his 12 career titles but can take positives from his runner-up showing this week in Dubai.

“I had great matches, great victories, I was supposed to lose in the second round,” said Rublev, who saved five consecutive match points in his encounter with Alejandro Davidovich Fokina earlier in the week.

“But in the end I found a way to be alive until the final, and then Daniil destroyed me tonight.

“Only four games, I don’t know how he’s doing that, three titles in a row, it’s my first final of the season, I told him I’m completely destroyed and he won three titles in a row. I think I never said this to Daniil face to face, but I have huge, huge respect for him.” — AFP

De Minaur downs Paul to take Mexico Open crown



Australia’s Alex De Minaur celebrates with the trophy. – AFP

ACAPULCO, Mexico:

Australia’s Alex de Minaur defeated Tommy Paul of the United States in three sets on Saturday to win the Mexican Open in Acapulco.

The 24-year-old de Minaur fought back after dropping the opening set to clinch the seventh title of his professional career with a 3-6, 6-4, 6-1 victory.

The win was the seventh title of de Minaur’s career and his first in an ATP 500 event.

It was another battling fightback from de Minaur, who had also recovered after dropping the opening set of his semi-final against Holger Rune on Friday.

De Minaur’s dogged performance was epitomised by the opening game of the final set, when he saved five break points to hold before winning in 2hr 27min.

“It feels great, it feels amazing,” De Minaur said in an on-court interview following his win.

“I know the hard work that’s put in to be here and it’s good to see the results.

“It’s not always that you win the tournament and you get to finish a week unbeaten, so I’ll definitely cherish this going into Indian Wells and Miami.” — AFP

AKSHAJ SCOOPS TWIN TITLES AT ISC TOURNEY

MUSCAT: Akshaj Kumar claimed the boys under-13 title after beating top seed Arnov Mohnot 3-2 at the Indian Social Club Oman Annual Table Tennis Tournament recently.

All the sets went neck-to-neck with rallies and smashes from both ends. Akshaj took the first set by scoring 11-9 but Arnov held his nerves to edge out his opponent in the second and third set scoring 5-11 and 6-11.

However, Arnov made a lot of errors and finally lost to Akshaj who scored 11-7 and 11-4 in the



Under-10 finalists Gokul and Mohith.



Under-15 finalists Arnov and Akshaj.



Zara Zabil, U15 girls champion.

fourth and fifth sets.

Akshaj and Arnov again competed for the boy’s

under-15 title but this time Akshaj was in full confidence and used his technical movements to

surpass the threat of Arnov. Akshaj defeated Arnov in straight sets scoring 11-4, 11-7 and 11-7.

Verstappen leads Red Bull front row sweep in Bahrain

MANAMA: Formula One world champion Max Verstappen showed Red Bull remained the team to beat by leading Sergio Perez to a front row sweep in qualifying for the season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix on Saturday.

Ferrari’s Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz were the closest challengers in third and fourth with evergreen charger Fernando Alonso fifth in what will be the 356th race of his career and first for Aston Martin.

Red Bull came to Bahrain as favourites after winning 17 of 22 races last year and being quick in testing. But their struggle for balance, while Alonso set the practice pace, had encouraged others’ dreams of a different battle.

Instead, Verstappen found the time when he needed it to deliver the perfect 51st birthday present for his father Jos with a career 21st pole.

“I hope he was watching, I’m pretty sure he was watching,” said



Red Bull’s Max Verstappen celebrates with an award after qualifying in pole position. – Reuters

the Dutch driver, who clocked a best lap of one minute 29.708 seconds around the floodlit Sakhir circuit. Perez was 0.138 slower.

“It’s been a bit of a tough start to the weekend yesterday and today not really finding my rhythm, but luckily in qualifying we managed to put the best pieces together.

“I was actually positively

surprised we were on pole after the struggles I had in practice,” added the double world champion. “Normally our race car is better, so let’s see.”

FERRARI FAST

Ferrari, runners-up last season and under the new management of Fred Vasseur, showed also that

they remained in the mix despite suggestions they might have fallen back.

Sainz was fastest in the first phase of qualifying and Leclerc top in the second, with Verstappen seventh and second respectively.

Leclerc then did only one flying lap in the final phase, opting instead to get out of the car before



Red Bull Racing’s Dutch driver Max Verstappen competes during the qualifying round of the Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix at the Bahrain International Circuit in Sakhir. – AFP

the end of the session and save a set of new tyres for a race at a circuit with a particularly abrasive surface.

That move allowed Perez to jump from third to second, while Sainz could only manage to leapfrog double world champion Alonso, the oldest driver on the grid at 41, with his final effort.

“I think we were in the fight for pole, which was a good surprise to be honest,” said Leclerc. “I don’t know if I would have been on pole or not but it would have been close.”

Mercedes qualified sixth and seventh with George Russell and seven times champion Lewis Hamilton running out of tyres for the final phase.

“Today was a lot better than we expected,” said Russell. “We had a tough Friday; we expected to add a little bit of performance overnight, but we exceeded expectations.

“We are in a good place to fight for third. Qualifying three tenths behind Ferrari when they have probably been the fastest car on single-lap pace is positive. Fernando is probably more of a dark horse than Ferrari.”

Alonso’s Canadian team mate Lance Stroll, who broke his wrists in a cycling accident in Spain last month and missed testing, will start eighth. — Reuters

GUNNERS CLAW BACK FROM 2-0 DOWN TO EDGE BOURNEMOUTH



Arsenal’s Reiss Nelson celebrates scoring their third goal with William Saliba and Granit Xhaka. – Reuters

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE TABLE AFTER SATURDAY’S MATCHES (PLAYED, WON, DRAWN, LOST, GOALS FOR, GOALS AGAINST, POINTS):

Arsenal	26	20	3	3	59	25	63
Man City	26	18	4	4	66	25	58
Man Utd	24	15	4	5	41	28	49
Tottenham	26	14	3	9	46	36	45
Newcastle	24	10	11	3	35	17	41
Liverpool	24	11	6	7	40	28	39
Fulham	25	11	6	8	36	31	39
Brighton	23	11	5	7	43	29	38
Brentford	23	8	11	4	37	30	35
Chelsea	25	9	7	9	24	25	34
Aston Villa	25	10	4	11	31	38	34
Crystal Palace	25	6	9	10	21	32	27
Wolves	26	7	6	13	19	35	27
Nottm Forest	24	6	7	11	18	42	25
Leicester	25	7	3	15	36	43	24
West Ham	25	6	5	14	23	33	23
Leeds	25	5	7	13	29	40	22
Everton	25	5	6	14	17	36	21
Southampton	25	6	3	16	20	41	21
Bournemouth	25	5	6	14	24	51	21

PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS ON SATURDAY:

Arsenal 3 (Partey 62, White 70, Nelson 90+7)
Bournemouth 2 (Billing 1, Senesi 57)
Aston Villa 1 (Andersen 27-og) Crystal Palace 0
Brighton 4 (Mac Allister 18-pen, Veltman 52, Mitoma 69, Welbeck 89) West Ham 0
Chelsea 1 (Fofana 53) Leeds 0
Manchester City 2 (Foden 15, Silva 67) Newcastle 0
Southampton 1 (Alcaraz 35) Leicester 0
Wolves 1 (Traore 82) Tottenham 0

Last-gasp Nelson winner sees Arsenal through

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, MARCH 5

A last-gasp strike by Reiss Nelson brought a dramatic end to Arsenal’s remarkable 3-2 win over Bournemouth. The Gunners hit back from two-nil down after Bournemouth had taken the lead within ten seconds of the start, the second fastest goal scored in the Premier League.

An ecstatic Arsenal manager, Mikel Arteta said of his team’s late winner: “When that goal went in it was just crazy. I lost sight of where I was and didn’t know where I was running to. But just looking in the faces of everybody, the players and

the supporters with those smiles, the joy in their eyes, it’s just great.”

He added: “It was an extraordinary day, a beautiful experience at the end. Very dramatic, but worth living it, because it was a great end. Everybody was overwhelmed. It was madness from the first 10 seconds of the game and we had to climb a mountain against 10 players behind the ball.

“Suddenly we were 2-0 down and after that it’s don’t lose the shape, don’t lose the discipline, do the simple things right, score the first goal and we did that. We showed a lot of maturity and resilience to do that and when we’ve done that the

atmosphere of the place changed the energy.”

Bournemouth’s early lead came after a mistake by Arsenal defender Gabriel Magalhaes, who failed to stop the ball in the box and allowed Philip Billing to easily score. Thereafter, Arsenal dominated the first half with 85 per cent of possession.

But the visitors kept the lead at half-time although Arsenal felt they should have had a penalty when, in the 34th minute, Chris Mepham went for a header but missed and the ball fell on his arm.

After the break, in the 57th minute they extended the lead when Marco Senesi moved away from Thomas Partey

to meet Joe Rothwell’s corner and put in a firm header.

QUICK RECOVERY

Arsenal seemed to recover quickly from the shock of 2-0 down and scored twice within the next 13 minutes. First, Partey scored at the far post with a fine volley after Neto’s punch had not been cleared and Emile Smith Rowe headed the ball back into the six yard box.

Then came the equaliser.

Nelson had come on as substitute and his cross from the left came to Ben White who scored his first goal for the club which was checked to see the ball had

crossed the goal-line.

Finally, just when it seemed that the league leaders would have to settle for just one point from a draw, came the match winning shot just about at the end of the six minutes of added time. Nelson chested down a corner and from just inside the box he unleashed a left-footed shot into the far corner of the net to start wild celebrations.

Bournemouth manager, Gary O’Neil said: “I’m bitterly disappointed, as are the players. Most teams that come here get dispatched easily but we didn’t. No one expected us to come here and trouble them like we did. Everyone is devastated.”

Ahli Sidab, Salalah enter youth basketball final

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 5

Ahli Sidab thrashed Nizwa 67-31 to set up a final against Salalah in the Oman Youth Basketball League 2022-23 semifinal at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher on Saturday.

In the other semifinal, Salalah got the better of Al Seeb 59-53 to reach the final on Wednesday.

Al Seeb and Nizwa will meet in the play-off for the third place also on the same day.

In the first semifinal, Ahli Sidab made a strong start against Nizwa by scoring five points after two baskets and a point from a mistake by Nizwa’s Abdulaziz al Balushi. Nizwa opened the scoring through Al Jald al Qasimi, but Ahli Sidab continued their attack to add four points and move up 9-2.

Ahli Sidab’s attacks yielded them 23 points, while Nizwa scored 6 points, so the first-half ended with Ahli Sidab powering ahead by 42-10.

In the third quarter, Ahli Sidab continued the onslaught to add 13 points, while Nizwa scored 11 points to make the score 55-21.

In the fourth quarter, Ahli Sidab added 12 points, while Nizwa added 10 points. The match ended with Ahli Sidab completing a dominant win over Nizwa by 67-31.

EXCITING CONTEST

In the second match, Salalah Club succeeded in defeating Al Seeb 59-53, in an exciting match that Al Seeb started by scoring through Abdul Rahman al Maamari after a shot from under the basket, followed by a two-point basket for his teammate Munther al Mandhari.

Salalah opened the scoring through Saeed Mutuna. Then, Abdulrahman al Maamari scored a point for Al Seeb, followed by a three-pointer by teammate Faisal al Abri to keep Al Seeb at 8-2. The first quarter ended with Al Seeb ahead of Salalah 13-11.

In the second quarter, Salalah scored 11 points to take lead by two points at 22-20 as Al Seeb added 7 points.

In the third quarter, Salalah’s advantage continued as they scored 15 points, while Al Seeb netted 13 points. Going into the final quarter, Salalah increased their lead to five points with a score of 37-32.

In the fourth quarter, Salalah added 22 points, while Al Seeb added 21 points. The match ended with Salalah qualifying after defeating Al Seeb with a score of 59-53.



business



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New veterinary pharma project to start trial production in May



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 5

Al Farabi Company for Veterinary Medicines Agricultural Co LLC, a subsidiary of publicly traded Al Batinah Development & Investment Holding Co SAOG, will commenced trial operations of its new plant in Al Buraimi Industrial City in May this year.

The parent company said in a filing to the Capital Market Authority that an earlier plan to establish the plant on a land plot has now been cancelled. It follows a decision to set up operations in a readymade factory building on an area of 9,966 sq metres – a move that also helps accelerate the implementation of the project and reduce costs, it stated.

Following the signing of the new lease agreement, three production lines have been constructed – for capsule production, liquid production and powder production line. The project is now being prepared for production.

Last June, Al Batinah Development & Investment Holding Co SAOG had revealed that the new veterinary pharma project would be managed by Syrian-based Al Farabi Company for Veterinary and Agricultural Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd.

The plant will initially commence operations with six production lines for medicines in the form of injections, liquids and sterilisers, powder formulations, capsules, ointments, vitamins and feed additives.

The project aims to cover the needs of the domestic and regional markets through the appointment of agents in a number of Arab and African countries.

Al Farabi Company for Veterinary and Agricultural Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd, a leading player in this space, has more than 25 years of experience and owns more than 350 medical preparations registered under its trade name ‘Al Farabi’.

Transport Ministry earmarks sizable funding package for road works in 2023

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, MARCH 5

Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, shared that the estimated cost of the Ministry’s road projects in 2023 will amount to RO 1 billion.

At a press conference last week, Khamis bin Mohammed al Shamakhi (pictured), Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Transport, stated that the Ministry will focus on completing and constructing strategic road projects, raising the efficiency of roads, and road rehabilitation.

Al Shamakhi unveiled the ministry’s plans for constructing and completing strategic road projects with a total length of more than 1300 km.

They include the completion of Al Sharqiyah Expressway (260 km), the construction of the Herweb — Al Mazyunah — Mitam road (210 km) in Dhofar, construction of



connecting roads in the Wilayat of Muqshin (170 km) in Dhofar, construction of the Dibba-Lima-Khasab road (120 km) in Musandam, and the completion of the South Batinah Coastal road (Barka-Al Suwaiq) including links (30 km). Additionally, the Ministry is planning to expand nine existing roads in the Sultanate of Oman. Most notably

is the dualisation of the Adam-Thamrait Road which connects the Ad Dakhiliyah governorate with Dhofar Governorate spanning over 437 kilometres. Moreover, the Ministry intends to start and continue a variety of road rehabilitation projects with a length exceeding 128 km. According to Al Shamakhi, the periodic maintenance and road

rehabilitation programme cost more than RO 250 million in 2022.

Of this figure, more than RO 150 million was allocated towards repairing damages caused by climate conditions, RO 57 million went towards road maintenance contracts (spanning over a period of five years), and RO 27 million for dirt and mountain roads maintenance contracts. As a

result, Al Shamakhi shared that the Ministry intends to release a set of road maintenance initiatives such as the decentralisation of road maintenance and management through provincial offices, development of an application for reporting road damages, creating a road assets management system strategy, and utilising modern road construction technologies.



THE MINISTRY IS PLANNING TO EXPAND NINE EXISTING ROADS IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN. MOST NOTABLY IS THE DUALISATION OF THE ADAM-THAMRAIT ROAD WHICH CONNECTS THE AD DAKHILIYAH GOVERNORATE WITH DHOFAR GOVERNORATE SPANNING OVER 437 KILOMETRES.

Oman Cement achieves record production and sales in 2022



Brightening outlook: Gas supply issues necessitates relocation of proposed Sahawa Cement project in Duqm SEZ

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 5

Majority Omani government-owned Oman Cement Company recorded an impressive 44.73 per cent growth in cement sales of 3.456 million MT in 2022, up from 2.388 million MT a year earlier.

The publicly traded company, which is owned 59.58 per cent by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), generated revenues of RO 66.695 million in cement sales last year, up from RO 46.944 million in 2021, an increase of 42.07 million.

Net profit after tax climbed 13.35 per cent to RO 5.040 million, up from RO 4.447 million in 2021.

Commenting on the company’s overall performance, Rashid bin Sultan al Hashmi, Chairman of the Board of Directors – Oman Cement, said: “Your company has produced and sold record quantities of Cement during the period to help the nation and the consumers in overcoming a scarcity created by various challenges faced by consumers due to short supply of cement from other manufacturers and prevailing global macroeconomic trends.”

Muscat-based Oman Cement is also progressing the delivery of a portfolio of initiatives to expand overall capacity and diversify its energy resource base, said the official.

Notable is the company’s ambitious expansion plan centring on the construction of a new production line (Line 4) with a capacity of 10,000 tonnes per day (TPD) of cement at its complex in Misfah near Rusayl.

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Invitation From Bank Muscat (S.A.O.G)

For an Annual Ordinary General Meeting of the Shareholders of the Bank

Bank Muscat “S.A.O.G” takes pleasure in inviting all its shareholders to an Annual Ordinary General Meeting at 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday, 22nd March, 2023. The meeting will be convened via the electronic platform to hold the general meetings, which can be accessed via the Muscat Clearing and Depository’s website (www.mcd.gov.om). If the quorum for this meeting is not met, a second meeting will be convened at 3:00 p.m. on Thursday, 23rd March, 2023 through the same electronic platform. The meeting will consider and decide on the following Agenda:

1. To consider and approve the Report of the Board of Directors for the financial year ended 31st December, 2022.
2. To consider and approve the Report on Corporate Governance for the financial year ended 31st December, 2022.
3. To consider the Auditor’s Report and approval of the Balance Sheet and Profit and Loss Accounts for the financial year ended 31st December, 2022.
4. To consider the report of the Shari’a Supervisory Board of Meethaq, the Islamic Banking window, for the financial year ended 31st December, 2022.
5. To consider and approve the recommendation to distribute cash dividend of 15 Baiza for each share for the financial year ended 31st December, 2022.
6. To consider and ratify the sitting fees for the Board of Directors and its committees’ meetings for the financial year ended 31st December, 2022 and approve sitting fees for the current financial year.
7. To consider and approve the Board of Directors’ remuneration of RO. 300 K for the financial year ended 31st December, 2022.
8. To consider and approve the Related Party Transactions that will be concluded during the financial year ending 31st December, 2023.
9. To consider and approve a proposal to put in place standards for appraising the performance of the bank’s Board of Directors for the fiscal year ending on 31st December, 2023.
10. To appoint an independent third party to appraise the performance of the bank’s Board of Directors for the financial year ending on 31st December, 2023, and fixing their fees.
11. To appoint the statutory auditors for the Bank and the external independent Sharia auditors for Meethaq, the Islamic banking window of the Bank, for the financial year ending 31st December, 2023 and fixing their fees, subject to the applicable regulatory approvals.

In accordance with the regulations for holding general meetings using modern technology issued by the Capital Market Authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

1. A Juristic person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person to attend the general meeting and vote on its behalf through the electronic platform, provided that this natural person has an investor number at Muscat Clearing and Depository Company.
2. Voting on any of the agenda items begins no more than three days before the date of the meeting until the end of the voting process during the meeting. In the event that the shareholder’s shareholding balance is changed by increase or decrease, the voting process will be canceled, and he/she will have to vote again on the day of the meeting.

For any clarifications in respect of the agenda of the above meeting, please contact **Ms. Samiya Salim Al Busaidi, Tel. No. (24767197), E-mail (SamiaS@bankmuscat.com).**

Khalid bin Mustahail Al Mashani
Chairman of the Board of Directors

Ernst & Young
Statutory Auditors of the Bank and External Independent Sharia Auditors for Meethaq, the Islamic Banking Window

Legal Advisor

OQ outlines vision to support sustainable operations

MUSCAT: OQ, the global integrated energy group has laid the foundations for sustainability for its activities and operations for the next three years. This falls under its stalwart commitment for a sustainable future that enhances the added value of Oman's natural resources.

The plan is based on a comprehensive framework that focuses on several vital goals such as carbon neutrality, health and safety, and reducing work accidents, diversity as well as promoting inclusiveness within its work environment.

Furthermore, the Group aims

to participate in sustainable procurement practices, which is not only reflected across all its activities but also on the energy value chain.

OQ is focused on achieving its own sustainability agenda based on global best practices within field, using a wide range of sustainability methodology and frameworks.

OQ places carbon footprint management amongst its priorities by applying effective controls and restrictions, harnessing technology and digital solutions.

The long-term effects of these will manifest towards carbon neutrality, energy efficiency,



reducing and managing carbon emissions, adopting a policy of managing carbon emissions to

gradually shift to a sustainable future for clean energy, as well as developing other sources of income

by building an economy based on recycling carbon particles.

The Group seeks to implement green hydrogen projects and promote clean energy initiatives from renewable energy sources. In the field of health and safety, OQ considers the human element as one of the basic pillars that leads to business advancement.

Since its inception, OQ has paid great attention to applying the highest standards to maintain the safety and well-being of its employees, workers and members of the community in its areas of operations. Towards sustainable procurement

practices, OQ works in tandem with contractors and individuals to improve procurement efficiency while applying the principles of Global Compact to the practices in force in the United Nations.

This is further achieved by addressing corporate social responsibility issues, procurement that considers environmental and sustainability conditions to add value and develop Small and Medium Enterprises through sustainability programmes. This ensures strengthened financials in addition to a safe working environment for employees and contractors.

O Bunkering silver sponsor of IBIA Annual Dinner 2023

MUSCAT: O Bunkering is proud to be a Silver Sponsor of the International Bunker Industry Association (IBIA) Annual Dinner, which took a place on February 27, 2023.



The event, which marked the association's 30th anniversary it was an unforgettable evening of celebration, recognition, and networking opportunities.

As a leading provider of marine fuel and lubricants, O Bunkering is committed to promoting the growth and development of the bunker industry in Oman.

The IBIA Annual Dinner is an ideal platform for O Bunkering to demonstrate its commitment to the industry and its support of IBIA's efforts to promote responsible and sustainable bunkering practices, while raising awareness about the strategic location and capabilities of Omani ports.

"We are honoured to be a Silver Sponsor of the IBIA Annual Dinner 2023," said Salim al Bimani, Bunker Trader. "This sponsorship supports our commitment to the bunker industry and reinforces Oman's position as a global logistics hub, with world-class infrastructure and a dedicated focus on enhancing the maritime sector. We look forward to a successful event and a bright future for the industry in Oman."

Oxy Oman completes Phase 5 of Tasharuk Programme

MUSCAT: With the aim of supporting and promoting entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) as one of the core elements of Oxy Oman In-country value (ICV) strategy, three SMEs were awarded support agreements as part of Phase 5 Tasharuk Programme, focusing on Solar Energy services.

The recipients of the solar hybrid power system for wells and support agreements were: Continental Shelf of Solar Tech (CSOST), Green Universe Enterprise (GUE), Rimal Global Technical Services LLC.

The Tasharuk Programme was established in 2013, and each phase has awarded support agreements to the selected SMEs to enhance their development in various fields, and support capacity building of Omani-owned SMEs that demonstrate high potential for ICV and creating jobs for Omanis.

Phase 5 of the Programme was launched in 2019, inviting Omani SMEs to apply to the Programme in accordance with set criteria.



The ceremony concluding Phase 5 of the Tasharuk Programme was held at Oxy Oman Headquarters in Muscat, under the auspices of Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Steven Lauver, President and General Manager of Oxy Oman, attended along with the representatives of the three awarded companies: Majid al Alawi, General Manager of Continental Shelf of Solar Tech; Nasser al Rawahi, General Manager of Green Universe Enterprise; and Salim al Jassasi, General Manager of Rimal Global Technical Services LLC.

Abdulkarim al Ghassani, Vice President of Supply Chain at Oxy Oman, and other senior executives of the company were present at the ceremony.

"We are proud to successfully conclude Phase 5 Tahsaruk Programme, as the programme has seen steady growth since its inception in 2013," said Lauver.

"As Phase 5 is completed, we are hopeful that the Programme will encourage a pursuit of excellence in SME development, such that the awarded SMEs will be able to compete locally and internationally, as well as serve as essential sources for economic growth and job creation in the country."

Oman Cement achieves record production and sales in 2022

FROM PAGE 13

Additionally, the existing Line 3 production facility is proposed to be upgraded to a capacity of 5,000 TPD of cement, up from the present 4,000 TPD capacity.

The selection of a contractor to implement the projects on an Engineering-Procurement-Construction (EPC) basis is currently underway, according to the Chairman. A separate plan to set up a new cement plant in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Duqm has "encountered issues in the supply of gas", Al Hashmi noted in the Directors' Report for fiscal 2022.

The new project, named Al Sahawa Cement, envisions a clinker production capacity of 5,000 TPD.

"The matter is under discussion with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) for exploring alternatives such as re-location of the plant site to the close proximity of facilities and utilities...", the Chairman stated.

Meanwhile, a novel initiative to utilise shredded tyres as an alternative fuel resource for the company's Misfah operations is currently in the commissioning stage, according to the Chairman. Under an agreement signed two years ago, Oman Environmental Services Holding Company (be'ah), which oversees the country's solid waste services sector, has committed to supplying 30,000 tonnes of tyre-derived fuel (TDF) annually in the form of shredded tyres.

But despite the brightening outlook for cement demand in the Sultanate of Oman, intense competition from producers from neighbouring countries remains a persisting challenge, the CEO has warned.

"Though the demand for cement in Oman continues to remain reasonably stable and is expected to remain at 2022 levels, unreasonably low priced cement being supplied by competitors remains a major challenge and the company will continue to monitor market situation," Salim Abdullah al Hajri added in the Management Discussion & Analysis report accompanying the financial statements for the year.

Bank Muscat extends strong support to MSX Investors Roadshow in Riyadh

MUSCAT: In line with its aim to support Oman Vision 2040, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, extended its strong support to the second MSX Investor Roadshow, which was recently held in Riyadh.

The second edition of the MSX Roadshow was aimed at attracting the attention of the global investment community towards listed companies in the Sultanate of Oman, and introducing the latest developments and growth prospects of the companies to regional funds.

Attendees at the roadshow had the opportunity to enjoy direct face-to-face communication with regional portfolio managers, asset managers, and prospective investors.

The Riyadh roadshow featured high-level keynote speeches and presentations on the National Programme for Financial Sustainability, Oman Investment Authority's privatisation plan, the performance of capital



markets in Oman, the strategy and performance of Muscat Stock Exchange as well as the performance of the companies listed on MSX. Bank Muscat hosted a stall at the event where employees were able to explain more about its new strategy, operational aspects and financing solutions to high-profile investors and analysts.

The Bank also showcased how

it has been playing an integral part in several large-scale and key infrastructure projects of national importance as well as small and medium-sized enterprises covering a wide range of sectors like oil and gas, manufacturing, mining, transport and logistics, tourism, fisheries and food security.

Today, Bank Muscat's extensive network of correspondent banking

relationships across the world is instrumental in channelising trade business and fund-raising activities at favourable terms from lenders across the globe. The second edition of MSX Roadshow was organised this year in Saudi Arabia, which is one of the top global economies and also the biggest in the region.

The roadshow will play a major role in boosting the Sultanate

of Oman's capital markets and bolstering its privatisation efforts as part of the Sultanate of Oman's continued drive to sustainable growth under Oman Vision 2040.

Bank Muscat is committed to deepening its cooperation with MSX and other institutional partners.

The Bank is keen to strengthen its support to the financial sector in Oman by attracting the attention of international investors and introducing to them the developments and the opportunities within the Sultanate of Oman through its participation in various local and international forums.

As a keen participant in the development of the Sultanate of Oman, Bank Muscat remains the only Domestic Systemically Important Bank (D-SIB) in Oman, and has now further sharpened its focus on internal synergies so as to offer quality service to its customers and maintain a sustainable competitive edge in the future.

REACHING YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

A guide to digital marketing for the modern entrepreneur



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In today’s digital age, reaching your target audience is more important than ever. Digital marketing is the process of promoting your business, products, or services using digital technologies, such as the Internet, social media, search engines, and mobile devices.

In this article, we’ll explore the key components of digital marketing and how you can use them to reach your target audience and grow your business.

The first step in digital marketing is to define your target audience. You need to understand who your customers are, what

they want, and what motivates them to buy.

This information will help you create a marketing strategy that is tailored to their needs and interests. You can use tools like customer surveys, demographic data, and social media analytics to gather information about your target audience.

Next, you’ll need to create a website that is optimised for search engines. Your website is often the first point of contact with your customers, so it’s essential that it is professional, user-friendly, and optimised for search engines.

You can use techniques like search engine optimisation (SEO) and pay-per-click (PPC) advertising to improve your website’s visibility and attract more traffic.

Social media is another important component of digital marketing. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram offer a range of advertising options, from sponsored posts to influencer marketing.

You can use social media to reach your target audience, build brand awareness, and drive traffic to your website. You can also



use social media to engage with your customers, respond to their questions, and provide customer service.

E-mail marketing is another effective tool for reaching your target audience. You can use email to promote your products, services, and events, and to keep your customers informed and engaged.

You can also use e-mail to build relationships with your customers and collect information about their preferences and behaviours.

In addition to these digital marketing channels, you can also use content marketing to reach your target audience.

Content marketing is the process of creating and sharing valuable content, such as blog

posts, videos, and e-books, to attract and retain customers. By providing valuable information and solutions to your customers’ problems, you can build trust and establish your business as an authority in your industry.

Finally, you’ll need to measure and analyse your digital marketing efforts to ensure that they are effective.

You can use tools like Google Analytics, social media analytics, and email marketing software to track your website traffic, social media engagement, and email campaign results. This information will help you make informed decisions about your marketing strategy and optimise your efforts for maximum impact.

In conclusion, digital marketing is a critical component of reaching your target audience and growing your business in the modern era. By defining your target audience, optimising your website, using social media, email marketing, and content marketing, and measuring and analysing your results, you can reach your target audience, build your brand, and achieve sustainable business growth.

We hope you have enjoyed this article on digital marketing. As a closing enthusiasm question, are you ready to maximise your reach and grow your business with the art and science of sales and marketing in the digital age?

Stay tuned for our next article on Sales and Marketing: “Maximising Your Reach: The Art and Science of Sales and Marketing in the Digital Age.”

China leans on coal amid energy security push

ANDREW HEYLAY

China’s state planner underlined a greater role for coal in its power supply on Sunday, saying the fossil fuel would be used to improve the reliability and security of its energy system.

Soaring global energy prices following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and domestic supply disruption have prompted Beijing to step up its focus on energy security in recent years.

The world’s second-biggest economy relied on coal to generate 56.2 per cent of its electricity last year, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, but has significantly boosted its use of natural gas and renewable energy in recent years to lower carbon emissions.

Fluctuating output from renewable plants, however, has led policymakers to lean on reliable and easily dispatchable coal power to shore up the country’s baseload supply. Last year, scorching summer temperatures and a drought in China’s southwest caused hydropower output to dwindle, leading to power outages.

“We will strengthen the basic supporting role of coal (and) take orderly steps to increase advanced coal production while ensuring safety,” said the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in a report to the annual gathering of parliament.

China approved the construction of another 106 gigawatts of coal-fired power capacity last year, four times higher than a year earlier and the highest since 2015, driven by energy security considerations, research showed last week.

About 50GW of that went into construction. “The energy security narrative is still going strong,” said Greenpeace China policy advisor Li Shuo. “This has given impetus to China’s coal sector as seen in the rapid approval of coal plants across the country,” he said.

The NDRC also stressed the importance of ramping up domestic oil and gas supply. “We will intensify the exploration and development of petroleum and natural gas at home to discover more untapped reserves and increase production,” it said. Despite a strategy to boost use of natural gas as a bridge fuel to achieve its 2060 carbon neutrality, China is slowing an aggressive campaign started in 2017 to replace coal with gas.

Concerned about supply shortages amid high global prices, the planner pledged to “strictly control the expansion of projects to replace coal with natural gas”. The state planner also reiterated its efforts to further reform the oil and gas sector, with a focus on improving the pricing mechanism for natural gas to better reflect the cost of production and procurement. — Reuters

Consultants and the crisis of capitalism



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In recent years, McKinsey & Company has become a household name, but for all the wrong reasons. One of the “Big Three” consulting firms, its work for major corporations and governments has increasingly become a source of scandal and intrigue around the world.

In the United States, for example, McKinsey agreed to pay nearly \$600 million for its role in the deadly opioid epidemic, following allegations that it had advised Purdue Pharma on how to “turbocharge” sales of OxyContin.

In Australia, the firm’s work on the previous government’s national net-zero strategy was criticised as a flagrant attempt to protect the country’s fossil-fuel industry. And in Puerto Rico, a New York Times investigation found that McKinsey’s investment subsidiary, MIO Partners, was positioned to

profit from the very same debt that its consultants were helping to restructure.

This list could go on and on. But as we show in our new book, The Big Con: How the Consulting Industry Weakens Our Businesses, Infantilises Our Governments, and Warps our Economies, such scandals are only the tip of the iceberg. While there are a few bad apples in every company, the real problem lies with the consulting industry’s underlying business model.

In 2021, the global market for consulting services was estimated to be \$700-900 billion. Yet despite the industry’s growing role in economic and political life, its activities are hardly ever viewed as what they are: symptoms of deeper structural problems with contemporary capitalism.

The consulting industry may not be wholly responsible for the financialisation of the economy, corporate “short-termism”, or the gutting of the public sector, but it certainly thrives on them. Throughout the history of modern capitalism, the Big Con (as we call the industry) has been there to surf each new wave of dysfunction.

In government, big consultancies promoted and profitted massively from the push towards privatisation, management reform, private financing, outsourcing, digitalisation, and austerity.

In business, they helped to entrench new models of governance, from the spread of cost accounting and multidivisional corporations in the decades after World War II, to the rise of King Shareholder in setting priorities and allocating resources. Today, the consulting industry is promising to reverse the very problems it helped create, hence the boom in new contracts to provide “environmental, social, and governance” (ESG) advice.

Not surprisingly, this new line of business has come with all kinds of conflicts of interest. McKinsey, for example, has previously advised at

least 43 of the 100 biggest polluters.

The role played by consultancies in the Covid-19 crisis was especially revealing. During the pandemic’s first two years, governments spent enormous sums on consulting contracts, but the results were dubious at best, and harmful at worst.

In France, consultancies were deeply involved in the country’s vaccination drive. Yet far from being an exemplar of efficiency, the French programme was widely seen as a disaster.

By early January 2021, a mere 5,000 doses had been administered, compared to 316,000 in Germany and 139,000 in Spain (all three countries started their programmes around the same time).

Sometimes, governments hire consultants to fill gaps in their own capacity. Unfortunately, awarding consultancies with wide-ranging, lucrative contracts has simply become the default approach, even for areas that should obviously fall under the government’s remit.

Thus, in 2020, one British Conservative peer complained that civil servants are routinely deprived “of opportunities to work on some of the most challenging, fulfilling, and crunchy issues,” and that the “unacceptable” reliance on private consultants was infantilising the civil service.

When everything is outsourced, government agencies cannot develop the internal skills and knowledge needed to manage new challenges. This should concern all of us. Epidemiologists warn that the next global pandemic is a matter of “when”, not “if”. We urgently need to invest in governments’ and public-health agencies’ ability to detect new outbreaks and contain them before they can spread.

After all, the big consultancies should not be trusted to have the expertise for which they are hired. As the New York Times found, citing a researcher from the French National Centre for Scientific Research, the consultancies behind France’s shambolic vaccine rollout

“tended to import operating models used in other industries that weren’t always effective in public health”.

The growing reliance on big consultancies with extractive business models stunts innovation and state capacity, undermines democratic accountability, and obfuscates the effects of political and corporate actions.

In an age of climate breakdown, these consequences have become existential. We all pay the price when public funds and other resources are wasted, and when decisions in government and business are made with impunity and little transparency.

Making matters worse, well-intentioned, intelligent young professionals have increasingly been lured away from public service by the promise of purposeful (and higher-paid) work in the consulting industry.

Battling any addiction begins with acknowledging the problem.

Only then can we reduce our dependency. At a time when more people than ever are questioning economic orthodoxies and searching for alternatives, unpacking the Big Con’s role in today’s economy can point the way to solutions.

To build a better-functioning economy, we must invest in state capacity and know-how, bring public purpose back to the public sector, and rid the system of costly, unnecessary consulting-industry intermediation.

Around the world, governments are waking up to the dangers of an overreliance on consultancies, and of the form of capitalism that they have helped bring about. Reformers are developing innovative new governance models, from in-house public-sector consultancies to policy “labs” and local community-oriented procurement programmes.

Transforming our economies in the public interest requires changing how we think and talk about the role of government.

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Omani documentary 'Al Manyour' competes in Lebanon film festival

Omani director Mohammad al Ajmi's film 'Al Manyour' was selected for the inclusion at the Tyre International Film Festival held from March 4 to 6 with 18 countries participating and 29 films shortlisted... **P20**

Acrobatic drum show *Beyond Time* to entertain ROHM audience

THE ROYAL OPERA House Muscat is delighted to present 'Beyond Time', the internationally successful show merging acrobatics and drumming from the acclaimed U-Theatre of Taiwan.

U-Theatre has become synonymous with meditative

performance, bringing together great world mysteries and cultural musical heritage to create large-scale stage shows, which uplift and inspire audiences across the world. 'Beyond Time' asks us to think beyond the confines of our everyday life and consider the



greater space beyond our planet, where time takes on a different context.

The resulting performance is an presentation which thrills audiences of all ages, appealing to the budding philosopher and performer in all of us. U-Theatre actors and musicians are disciplined athletes in mind and body, carefully chosen to embrace the company's methods and aspirations. The whole performance uses imaging technology to construct a more distinct three-dimensional and multi-layered stage as well as a virtual 4D space using projection and mirrored floors.

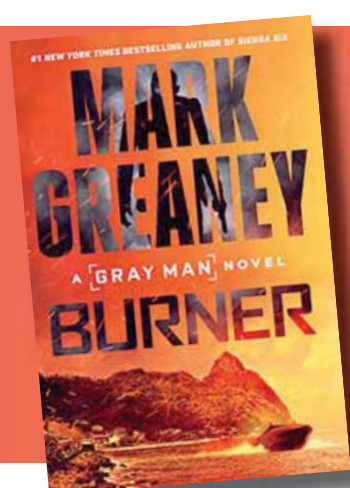
Bring the whole family to enjoy the final world music show of the 2022/2023 season. For information or to book tickets, contact the Box Office or visit the website or ROHM app.

READ

BURNER

BY MARK GREANEY

The 12th book in the *Gray Man* series. Stolen records, the Russian mafia and the CIA complicate things for Court Gentry and his lover.



TRAVEL TALES

Participants parade with heaps of durian during the 'Kenduren' festival in Jombang, East Java. The annual festival, held as thanksgiving for the good harvest of the fruit, attracts many tourists from the region. Grown across tropical Southeast Asia, the durian is hailed as the 'king of fruits' by its fans. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

US actress Michelle Rodriguez (L) and US actor Chris Pine get slimed during the 36th Annual Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards at the Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles, California. — AFP





An evening of music with Sham-e-Ghazal

By Kaushalendra Singh
@patkaushal

Renowned Ghazal and Sufi singer Mohammed Vakil mesmerised the Muscat audience with his soulful voice, wit and spontaneity at the packed Al Bustan Palace's Oman Auditorium. The event titled Sham-e-Ghazal had an audience drawn from a wide range of music lovers.

The event was presented by The Desert Stories as a mark of celebration for entrepreneurs.

Vakil engaged the audience for more than three hours, while another singer Bhumika Malik sang selected songs from Bollywood and lifted the mood of the audience. Vakil took over the dais again and took the audience to a different level of music with the fusion of popular Ghazals, Sufi songs, Bollywood beats and his own compositions.

The highlight of the evening was Omani singer Asma Mohammed Rafi, who regaled the audience with Bollywood songs. Asma was an instant sensation among Indians and Omanis when she took part in Zee TV's popular programme 'Sa Re Ga Ma Pa 2009'. Her presence during the Sham-e-Ghazal event worked as a warm-up session for the programme. Everyone in the audience enjoyed Asma's singing. She left the dais amid shouts of 'more' from the audience.

Mohammed Vakil's accompanists included, Gulzar Hussain on violin, Rahbar Hussain -- Keyboard, Mehraj - Tabla and Fareed Khan on Octopad. They kept on engaging with audience with their 'jugabandi' whenever Vakil needed a pause from singing.

Vakil stole the show with his famous and sought after Qawwali 'Aaya tere dar pe deewana' from film Veer Zara. He had sung the song in Shahrukh Khan starred film. There were timeless traditional ghazals and Bollywood numbers that he presented during the programme.

The audience was so much under his control that they came to the floor and started dancing when he started singing 'Damadam Mast Kalandar'.

This was Vakil's third performance in Muscat. "I love Muscat and its people. It has



unique charm and I feel it like home due to love of the people and their interest in Music."

Asked about Muscat and he replied with a song: "Tumhare shaher ka mausam bada suhana lage, Main ek sham chura loon agar bura na lage" (The weather in your city is very pleasant, I will steal an evening if you don't mind!)"

He kept the audience spellbound with mesmerising and soulful

renditions like "Hoton se choo lo tum," "Tum ko dekha to ye khayal aaya," "Tum itna jo muskura rahe ho", "Aaj jaane ki zid na karo", "Chhap tilak sab chheenee" and "Damadam mast Qalander" and many others.

"I see Oman a unique destination for music and when I see the Royal Opera House, it feels like an epitome of music," he says.

Vakil grew up listening to Ghalib

and his favourite Urdu poets are Waseem Barelvi and Bashir Badr. Along with his masters Ustaaad Ahmed Hussain and Mohammed Hussain, Vakil admires the Ghazal renditions of Mehdi Hassan, Jagjit Singh and Ghulam Ali.

Dr Ghaur Abbas Naqvi from The Desert Stories did compearing of the programme. He welcomed the guests and thanked the sponsors for their support.



DISCOVERY

Horseback riding may have begun 5,000 years ago in Europe: study



WHO WERE THE first people to ride horses? Researchers believe they have found the earliest evidence of horseback riding, by the ancient Yamnaya people in Europe some 5,000 years ago.

Their conclusions, based on an analysis of human skeletal remains found in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, were published on Friday in the journal Science Advances.

Domestication of horses for milk is widely accepted to have begun around 3500 BC to 3000 BC, the study said, but the "origins of horseback riding remain elusive."

The researchers from the University of Helsinki and other European institutions date the earliest horsemanship to 3000 BC to 2500 BC among members of the Yamnaya culture.

"Our findings provide a strong argument that horseback riding was already a common activity for some Yamnaya individuals as early as 3000 BC," the researchers said.

Horse bones have been discovered in Yamnaya settlements but they are not as well preserved as human skeletons, which were given proper burials in earth-covered mounds known as "kurgans."

The researchers said the human skeletons provided the best source of information about horse riding because any riding tack used by early riders would have been made using perishable materials.

The researchers said some of the human skeletons they analysed bore skeletal traits indicative of what they called 'horsemanship syndrome.'



"A skeleton of a living person is reacting," Martin Trautmann, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki and one of the authors of the study, said.

"If you sit on horseback you need to balance with every step of your mount, you need to cling tightly with your legs." Doing that repeatedly leaves tell-tale changes in bone morphology, Trautmann said, including "stress-induced vertebral degeneration," a common ailment among avid horse riders.

"We know that saddles and stirrups dated much later," Trautmann said, and the early horse riders were probably riding bareback and gripping the mane of the horse.

"Cowboys, not warriors" -

Volker Heyd, a professor of archeology at the University of Helsinki, said the findings "fit very nicely into the overall picture" of Yamnaya culture.

"We were already suspecting them of using horses," Heyd said, and it could help explain the "exceptional" geographic expansion of their society in a few generations.

"It is difficult to envision how this expansion could have taken place without improved means of transport," the researchers said.

"Using horses for transport was a decisive step in human cultural development," they said.

"Trade and cultural exchange as well as conflicts and migrations leapt with the increase in speed and range provided by horsemanship."

The researchers said the Yamnaya were probably not initially using horses for warfare.

"They were cowboys, not warriors," said Trautmann.

Heyd said the early horse riders "were probably helping the Yamnaya people in guarding their animals, their cattle and sheep mostly."

According to the researchers, the earliest figurative evidence of horse riding comes from the Mesopotamian Ur III period shortly before 2000 BC through depictions of a horse and rider.

Images and mentions in cuneiform texts of horseback riding are also found in the Old Babylonian period from around 1880 BC to 1595 BC. — **AFP**



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AROUND THE WORLD

FASHION

Fashion house Vivienne Westwood pays homage to late founder in Paris show



Fashion label Vivienne Westwood paid tribute to its late founder on Saturday, taking to the catwalk in Paris with a collection drawn up by her husband and design partner Andreas Kronthaler.

Models sauntered through the gilded halls of the Hotel de la Marine overlooking the Place de la Concorde in a chic, punk-infused lineup for the Paris Fashion Week show.

Playing with volumes, tailored coats had bold shoulders and wide sleeves, while the lines on tracksuit trousers curved inwards at the bottom, rather than running straight down the leg.

One look mixed a patchwork of floral patterns, with an ample hooded cape thrown over a slim, fitted skirt and carried on towering platform heels, as rock band AC/



DC's growling rendition of "T N T" thumped in the background.

Closing the show was the traditional bridal attire, with Kronthaler accompanying Westwood's granddaughter Cora Corre, who wore an ivory, lace body suit with matching platform boots.

Scores of fans dressed in punk styles gathered to see the arrival of guests, who included fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier and actor Jared Leto.

London Fashion Week, held last month, was dedicated to Westwood, one of British fashion's biggest names, who rose to fame dressing punk band the Sex Pistols. She died in December aged 81. — Reuters

ENTERTAINMENT

'Everything Everywhere' dominates Spirit Awards week before Oscars



"EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE" "All At Once" swept up yet more film prizes on Saturday, as it was named best feature at the Spirit Awards — one of the last major Hollywood ceremonies before next weekend's Oscars.

The trippy sci-fi won in every category it was nominated, at a ceremony held in a giant tent at Los Angeles' Santa Monica beach to celebrate low- and mid-budget movies.

Its voters granted a whopping seven awards to the film, which was made for around \$25 million and became independent studio A24's biggest-ever hit, with a global box office gross above \$100 million.

"This is too many. We're so lucky!" said co-director Daniel Scheinert, collecting the night's final prize.

Michelle Yeoh won best lead performance, and Stephanie Hsu won best breakthrough performance.

It is the first year in which the Film Independent Spirit Awards have opted for gender-neutral acting categories.

"Michelle, you beat a bunch of men!" yelled Jamie Lee Curtis in the backstage press room.

Curtis was the film's only nominee who failed to win — losing best supporting performance to her co-star Ke Huy Quan.

Scheinert and Daniel Kwan won director and best screenplay, and the film also won best editing.

The absurdist sci-fi comedy stars Yeoh as the matriarch of a Chinese-American laundromat-owning family, who end up fighting a universe-hopping supervillain while undergoing a tax audit. "You believed in us. You believed in the masterpiece from the Daniels," said Yeoh, addressing the studio's producers.

"My boys, thank you for writing such an incredible script that

gave us the opportunity to be here, to be seen, to be heard."

SO HUMBLING AND SO COOL

This year's Spirit Awards were held the weekend before the Oscars. Voting for the season-concluding Academy Awards is currently under way.

Final Oscars voting closes on Tuesday, before Hollywood's most coveted golden statuettes are handed out at a glitzy ceremony next Sunday.

Among the films that could

and directors' guilds, the night's big winner was "Everything Everywhere," which cemented its already clear Academy Award frontrunner status.

"It's been so humbling and so cool," producer Jonathan Wang said on Saturday's red carpet.

The movie — which features characters with hot dog fingers, sex toy-shaped trophies and talking rocks — has overcome predictions from some pundits that it would prove too bizarre for mainstream audiences and voters.



receive a late Oscars boost from their Spirit Award wins on Saturday were best documentary "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed," best first feature "Aftersun," and best cinematography winner "Tar."

"Women Talking" received the pre-announced Robert Altman Award, which honours a film's director, casting director and overall cast. But in a repeat of scenes at recent high-profile prize-giving ceremonies from Hollywood's actors', producers'

It leads the nominations at the Oscars, with 11 nods.

"What's happened is a lot of people went out and they gave our movie a chance," said Wang.

"They said 'let's watch it for what it is' and they got past the kind of things that were going to be 'too edgy' for them. And then they were bulldozed by the emotion of it."

"That's what we wanted to do. So that's the highest compliment — that we were able to actually do that." — AFP

LIFE

It feels like yesterday: Türkiye quake overturns lives



A man walks among debris of collapsed buildings in Kahramanmaraş. — AFP

FULYA OZERKAN

BEFORE THE TURKISH earthquake, Abdullah Senel had nerves of steel. But these days, just being inside a house makes him nervous — and it only takes the sound of a plane flying overhead to put him on edge.

"I was fearless in the past, but now a single noise is enough to freak me out," the 57-year-old former weightlifter said. "Everything reminds me of the earthquake — even the sound of a plane," he said.

Last month's devastating 7.8-magnitude earthquake flattened entire cities, killing more than 50,000 people across southeastern Türkiye and parts of Syria. In Kahramanmaraş, a Turkish city near the quake's epicentre, survivors remain haunted by the trauma one month on.

"It's been a month now but for me, it feels like yesterday," said Adem Serin as he watched heavy machines remove the piles of rubble in the complex of high-rises where hundreds lost their lives.

"We couldn't get over the shock. I was caught by the quake on the 11th floor of a high-rise building," said Serin, whose wife is five months pregnant. "I can still hear the screams of people crying for help on every floor. This pain will never go away."

Efforts to remove the ubiquitous rubble now dominate the city of 1.1 million people.

Workers who arrived from all over Türkiye spray water on the debris and rubble-laden trucks trundle along the road waiting to dump the waste into a landfill outside the city.

Columns of dust emerging from the clean-up cover the horizon, carried by the wind and generating grey clouds seen from kilometres away, blurring the visibility in the region surrounded by mountains.

"200 to 250 tonnes of debris is removed here daily, we are irrigating so that it will not disturb the environment and not create dust," said Eren Genc, of the forestry directorate in the eastern Sivas province.

He said: "We didn't spot any bodies but yesterday there was a strong smell," directing a hose at the concrete slabs. "I think it will be done here in 10 days."

Operators sometimes come across precious objects while looking to remove the rubble.

Levent Topal, from the waterworks authority in the Black Sea region, said his team spotted a safe deposit box in the rubble full of dollars, euros, gold and documents.

"We never touch them, we deliver it to the police who find the owner," he said.

A 54-year-old man took a big risk and climbed to the seventh floor of his building to retrieve items — despite the danger and the more than 11,000 aftershocks that followed the earthquake.

"I know it's risky," admitted Veli Akgoz as he loaded a door and curtain rods onto the roof of his car.

His entire family of 13 people, who used to live in five different flats, will now squeeze into a village house.

Officials say nearly two million people left homeless by the quake are now housed in tents, container homes, guesthouses or dorms in and beyond the region — but this is far from meeting the needs of many others.

Some people spend the night in damaged houses because of a lack of tents, despite the authorities' warnings.

"We are scared but we have no other choice," said Solmaz Tugacar, desperately looking for a tent with her neighbours in the city's main square, where quake survivors line up to get food or tea from aid trucks.

Some residents are mobilised at the neighbourhood level. — AFP

art & life

Local Scene

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Omani documentary 'Al Manyour' competes in Lebanon film festival

By Yeru Ebuen
Instagram: yru_here

Oman is a country with a rich cultural heritage that spans centuries. These unique cultures and traditions are an important part of its identity. Documenting these traditions on film is an important way to preserve them for future generations.

Many ambitious young Omanis are starting to venture into photography and filmmaking, and important work is being accomplished not just on wildlife preservation but also on some important traditions that are threatened by modernity.

In the area of film, Oman has been hosting an international film festival, and efforts by pioneering film-makers in the country had led to many developments in this field. One of the recent triumphs is when an Omani film found a space on Netflix – a great start in showcasing the emerging film industry of Oman.

For Omani director Mohammad al Ajmi, the inclusion of his documentary film Al Manyour which documents the complexities of "Al Zamat" is already a big win, giving him an opportunity to interact with other like-minded creatives and develop his filmmaking voice even further.

Al Ajmi is a member of the board of directors of the Omani Society for Cinema and Theatre and from March 4 to 6, his film will be showcased at the Tyre International Film Festival held in Lebanon.

With 29 participating films covering fiction, documentary,

and animation from 18 countries, the three-day festival will award the best narrative film, the best documentary, the best animation, the best actor and actress, the best cinematography, and the Jury Award.

Al Manyour is an important part of Al Zamat – the traditional method of drawing fresh water from underground wells by villagers from coastal areas of Oman.

A bucket is usually sent down into the well, and once it's filled with water, the lever and the help of a bull bring the water up for the villagers to use. In the absence of a bull, the villagers have to manually pull it out.

This tradition was heavily practised from the early days of Oman's Renaissance, but modern machinery, including government water infrastructure, resulted in the tra-



“Participating in the festival is a great chance to present a film-maker’s skills and learn from the experience. These festivals also allow film-makers to learn from each other through exchanges and communications.”

Mohammed Al Ajmi
Omani film-maker

dition being unnecessary.

In Al Ajmi's film, he managed to document the practice in an area where water is still not readily accessible like in the rest of the country.

“Participating in the festival is a great chance to present a film-maker's skills and learn from the experience. These festivals also allow film-makers to learn from each other through exchanges and communications,” Al Ajmi said.

Attended by hundreds of other industry experts, the ground is rich for learning and taking something to develop the film even more, and in return, the platform is perfect to showcase some of Oman's most treasured traditions.

“The main goal of joining the festival is to introduce the cultural heritage of Oman. We are rich in these traditions. Documenting and promoting these traditions also motivates film producers to enhance the cinema industry in Oman,” Al Ajmi shared.

Al-Manyour won the best Omani film award at the Al-Sharqiya Film Festival this year.

The jury for this year's film festival included Spanish director Ana Sanderó Alfrez, Sudanese director Nasser Youssef, and directors Muriel Abu Al-Rous, Walid Mones, Fadi Syriani, and Shadi Zidan from Lebanon.

Other than Oman and Lebanon, some films also come from Algeria, Bahrain, Belgium, China, the Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Syria, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom.