

HM congratulates Hungary President

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to President Tamás Sulyok, of Hungary on the occasion of being sworn in as his country's new president. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere sentiments to President Tamás Sulyok, wishing him success in leading the people of Hungary towards further progress and prosperity. His Majesty also wished the bilateral relations further development and growth.



HM gets message from King of Jordan

B I L A T E R A L R E L A T I O N S , S I T U A T I O N I N P A L E S T I N I A N T E R R I T O R I E S D I S C U S S E D



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a written message from King Abdallah II of the Kingdom of Jordan dealing with bilateral cooperation in various fields.

His Majesty the Sultan received the message when he gave an audience at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday to Ayman Safadi, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Kingdom of Jordan. The guest conveyed the King of Jordan's greetings and best wishes of continuous good health and wellbeing to His Majesty the Sultan. The Jordanian King also wished the Omani people further progress and prosperity.

Meanwhile, His Majesty the Sultan asked the guest to convey his greetings and best wishes of good health and well-being to the King of Jordan. His Majesty also wished the people of Jordan further development and prosperity.

During the audience, the advance bilateral relations were underscored. The developments of the situation in Palestinian territories and the ceasefire efforts were also discussed. The audience was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, Amjad Jamil al Quhaiwi, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Jordan to the Sultanate of Oman and officials from both sides. — ONA

His Majesty receives ambassadors' credentials



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik receives credentials of Shaikh Mubarak bin Fahad bin Jassim al Thani, Ambassador of the State of Qatar to the Sultanate of Oman.

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received, separately, at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday credentials of Ambassadors of several countries appointed to the Sultanate of Oman.

His Majesty the Sultan received credentials of the following ambassadors: Shaikh Mubarak bin Fahad bin Jassim al Thani, Ambassador of the State of Qatar to the Sultanate of Oman; Ana A Escrogima, Ambassador of the United States of America to the Sultanate of Oman; Alfredo Cesar Martinho Leoni, Ambassador of the Federative Republic of Brazil to the Sultanate of Oman; Abdusalam Khatamov, Ambassador of Republic of Uzbekistan to the Sultanate of Oman; and Mousa Farhang, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Sultanate of Oman.

During their sidelines meetings with His Majesty the Sultan, the ambassadors conveyed greetings of their countries' leaders and their best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to His Majesty. They

also wished the Omani people further progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty.

They also expressed their great honour and delight at presenting their credentials to His Majesty the Sultan. They affirmed to exert sincere efforts to promote relations of their respective countries with Oman in various spheres in a manner that serves the joint interests of the Omani people and their countries' citizens. His Majesty the Sultan welcomed the ambassadors, expressing his gratitude for their leaders' greetings and best wishes. His Majesty affirmed that they would receive all support from him, the Government and the Omani people to facilitate carrying out their duties. The credentials presentation ceremony was attended by the Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, the Foreign Minister, the Commander of the Royal Guard of Oman, the Head of the Royal Protocols and the Military Aides to His Majesty.

— ONA (SEE ALSO P2)

RAMADHAN WORKING HOURS ANNOUNCED

MUSCAT: On the occasion of the holy month of Ramadhan 1445 AH, the Ministry of Labour announced that official work hours at units of the State's Administrative Apparatus and private sector establishments during the holy month to be as follows: Units of the State's Administrative Apparatus (civil): Flexible work hours: The official work hours will be from 9 am to 2 pm. The Head of a Unit may determine the hours of attendance and leave that suit the unit's work as per scheduled work hours based on the following time frames: From 7 am until 12 pm. From 8 am until 1 pm. From 9 am until 2 pm. From 10 am until 3 pm.

REMOTE WORK: The Head of a Unit may implement remote work for employees whose jobs' nature allows for remote work, without prejudice to the workflow in that unit.

In all cases, the number of employees who are required to attend their workplaces shall not be less than 50 per cent of the total employees of the unit.

Private Sector Establishments: Work hours for Muslim workers in private sector establishments is reduced to be 6 hours per day, with no more than 30 hours per week.

— ONA

Oman calls for world conference to bring peace in Gaza Strip

CAIRO: The Sultanate of Oman took part in the 161st session of the Arab League Council at the foreign ministers level held at the Secretariat-General of the Arab League in the Egyptian capital Cairo, on Wednesday.

The Sultanate of Oman's speech was delivered by Abdullah bin Nasser al Rahbi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Arab Republic of Egypt and Permanent Representative to the Arab League.

Al Rahbi, head of the Sultanate of Oman's delegation, stressed the need to conduct an independent investigation into the Israeli aggression and to prosecute Israel for its deliberate targeting of civilians in the Gaza Strip and their facilities, depriving the Palestinian population of their humanitarian needs, starving them, and subjecting them to siege and collective punishment.

Al Rahbi said that Oman is following with great concern the continuing escalation in the region without a solution while the unjust Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip is claiming tens of thousands of innocent civilians, including children, youth and women. He pointed out that Oman affirms that the establishment of a Palestinian state constitutes an existential necessity without which the world would have condemned the Palestinians to be under constant threat of destitution, extermination and death.

The permanent representative of the Sultanate of Oman to the Arab League, called for holding an urgent international conference that brings together international parties to reach executive agreements that guarantee the achievement of a quick and effective solution. — ONA

OPINION

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message from
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Abdusalam Khatamov, Ambassador of Republic of Uzbekistan to the Sultanate of Oman.



Mousa Farhang, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Sultanate of Oman.



Royal Academy of Management celebrates first anniversary

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

The Royal Academy of Management (RAM) celebrated the first anniversary of its opening with the unveiling the academy's strategic plan for 2024 as well as a presentation of its key achievements and projects.

A commemorative postage stamp was also issued on the occasion, under the auspices of Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the RAM.

The opening remarks at the press conference emphasised that the RAM embodies the vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to develop national leaders with renewed capabilities and skills in line with Oman Vision 2040.

The academy's efforts aim to strengthen communication between different leadership communities, recognising that these are essential principles for



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success and important tools for bridging the gap between society and government.

RAM's 2024 plan includes continued implementation of strategic programmes that it has initiated since its inception. The government sector track includes several diverse programmes, including the Public Policy and

Strategic Planning Programme, the National Programme for Leadership Development and Future Foresight, the Future of Work in Government Programme, the Executive Strategic Planning Programme, the Professional Project Management Programme, the New Employee Orientation Programme in the Public Sector, and the Risk Management Programme.

The press conference included a guided tour of the RAM building, showcasing its departments and specialised centres. These centres are guided by the Royal Directives on enhancing the efficiency of the state's administrative apparatus, emphasising the importance of the private sector, directing development to the governorates, and the RAM's efforts related to developing human capital in various sectors. The tour also highlighted the environment provided by the RAM to achieve its vision of being a leading beacon of knowledge in leadership and modern executive management.

Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs receives Iranian official



MUSCAT: Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, received in his office on Wednesday Dr Hamid Shahriari, Secretary-General of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought from the

Islamic Republic of Iran. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed aspects of bilateral cooperation. They also discussed means of exchanging expertise and knowledge among scholars and specialists in religious affairs. — ONA

Oman, Japan explore boosting cooperation in trade, investment



The two sides explored aspects of cooperation between the two countries. — ONA

MUSCAT: Khalid bin Hashil al Muselhi, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Administrative and Financial Affairs, received here on Wednesday Iwata Kazuchika, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan.

During the meeting, the two sides explored aspects of

cooperation between the two countries.

They also discussed ways to strengthen joint cooperation in areas of trade and investment cooperation, renewable energy and the exchange of experiences to serve common interests.

The meeting was attended by officials from both sides. — ONA

MoHT minister meets officials at ITB Berlin

BERLIN: Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT), Head of Oman's delegation participating in the ITB Berlin, on Wednesday held meeting with Wolfgang Schyrocki, State Secretary of the Senate Department for Finance in the Federal Republic of Germany, at the Omani pavilion.

The Minister of Heritage and Tourism also held a meeting with Clayton Bartolo, Minister for Tourism in the Republic of Malta.

The two meetings discussed means of enhancing cooperation relations between Oman and these countries in the tourism field.

The meetings were attended



The Minister of Heritage and Tourism also held a meeting with Clayton Bartolo, Minister for Tourism in the Republic of Malta. — ONA

by Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, and a number of officials at the ministry.

Meanwhile, Oman Post, an affiliate of Asyad Group, launched in Berlin a set of stamps featuring the most important tourism sites in different governorates of the

Sultanate of Oman.

The launch ceremony took place at the Oman's pavilion at ITB Berlin under the auspices of Haitham bin Mohammed al Ghassani, Director-General of Tourism Promotion at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The stamps highlight tourism landmarks in the Empty Quarter Desert, Barr Al Hikman peninsula in the Wilayat of Mahout, Burj Al Seera tower in the Wilayat of Qurayat, Sharbathat Beach in the Wilayat of Shaleem and Al Halaniyat Islands, Ain Khor waterfalls in the Wilayat of Salalah and Misfat Al Abriyeen tourist village in the Wilayat of Al Hamra. — ONA

Second depression of 'higher intensity' from Friday

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre issued a report on expected weather conditions from March 8 to 10.

The latest analysis indicates that the atmosphere of the Sultanate of Oman will continue to be affected by a depression from Friday until Sunday. This depression is expected to bring in rains of higher intensity.

Meanwhile, Al Buraimi recorded the highest amount of rainfall of

110 mm, followed by Khasab with 96 mm, and Madha with 71 mm between March 4-6, due to the impact of the air trough of low pressure.

Moving towards weekend, clouds are expected to flow and form over most of the governorates of Oman, with chances of heavy to very heavy rain ranging between 30-150 mm (as per preliminary indicators), accompanied by active descending winds and hailstones, which may lead to sweeping flow of wadis, and the possibility of sea waves rising

from medium to rough waves 2-3 metres along most coasts, with gusts southeasterly winds 15-25 knots over most of the governorates.

Rainfall of varying intensity is expected on Friday in the governorates of Musandam, Al Buraimi, Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Al Dhahirah, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Sharqiyah North, and Al Sharqiyah South with thunders at times and could lead to the flow of wadis. Active wind gusts ranging in speed from 15 to 35 knots is expected on Saturday.



Heavy rains are reported from the Wilayat of Adam in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate on Wednesday.

3 new modern schools come up in Amerat

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Education has received 3 new modern schools in the Wilayat of Al Amerat at a cost of RO 4,806,653.

Dr Ali bin Humaid al Jahwari, Director-General of Education in Muscat Governorate and the official spokesperson for the Ministry of Education, said in an interview with Oman News Agency (ONA) that Muscat Governorate has received many projects in different wilayats including the Wilayat of Al Amerat where the ministry received at the beginning of the current academic year a new school for grades 1 to 4 at a cost of RO 1, 444, 853 in the village of Al Hajer to which the male and female students of Al Shifa Evening School were shifted.

The ministry also received another two new schools in Al Mahaj one of which is a 40-classroom girls school for grades 9 to 12 at a cost of RO 1,955,000, in addition to a 40-classroom school for grades 1 to 4 at a cost of RO 1,046,800.

— ONA

— ONA

NRAA opens exhibition at Royal Cemetery in Zanzibar

ZANZIBAR: The National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA) on Wednesday opened a permanent documentary and historical exhibition of the Royal Cemetery in Zanzibar. The ceremony was held under the auspices of Mudrick Soraqa, Minister of Tourism and Heritage in Zanzibar, in the presence of Dr Hamed bin Mohammed al Dhawani, Chairman of the National Records and Archives

Authority.

The NRAA worked in cooperation with the authorities concerned in Zanzibar to set specifications and requirements for the restoration of the Royal Cemetery. The works included conducting a historical study based on Omani, Zanzibar and European archival documents on the history of the cemetery, the names of dignitaries buried in the cemetery and the stages of its expansion, right from



The NRAA worked in cooperation with the authorities concerned in Zanzibar to set specifications and requirements for the restoration of the Royal Cemetery. — ONA

the dynasties of sons of Sultan Sayyid Said bin Sultan.

The documents also gave briefings about the graves of the Sultan and the rest of the family members, related rewritten evidence and other necessary data.

In its three halls, the exhibition focused on the personage interred there, the dates of death and the periods in which each one lived.

— ONA



ORGAN DONATION IS A BLESSED ACT



Comparing the lives of patients before and after organ transplantation and the phase of returning to a normal life, we have found that organ donation during one’s life doesn’t harm the donor

DR QASIM AL JAHDHAMI

The National Organ Transplant Programme

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

Organ donation, whether during life or after death, should be encouraged, according to the National Organ Transplant Programme of the Ministry of Health (MoH).

One should instil the concept of a medical will for organ donation since humans are the only source of organs and developing protocols to save several lives around us.

Speaking at an awareness-raising seminar on the importance of organ donation organised by the Ministry of Health, represented by the National Organ Transplant Programme Department, at the main branch of Ooredoo, Dr Qasim al Jahdhami, Head of the Organ Donation Department at the National Organ Transplant Programme, said that organ donation does not affect the health of the donor.

“Comparing the lives of patients before and after organ transplantation and the phase of returning to a normal life, we have found that organ donation during one’s life doesn’t harm the donor.

Everyone should disseminate the ethics of donation, and that there is no harm in doing so,” said Dr Al Jahdhami.

“We need to have a culture of organ donation and every step should be taken to spread awareness on the same so that those who are in need of organs

can dream of a new life,” the seminar opined.

The four different types of organ donation are living donation, deceased donation, tissue donation and paediatric donation. And, due to the poor supply of organs than what is actually needed, many people on the organ transplant list are in long wait.

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

The Ministry of Health had launched the national campaign to raise awareness of organ donation in 2022, coinciding with the Omani Organ Donation Day, in cooperation with the Omani Association for Organ Transplantation, with the aim of educating community members about organ donation.

Scholars say that the Holy Quran has a verse regarding the same and says ‘If anyone saves a life, it is as if he saves the lives of all humankind’. Accordingly, donating one’s organs is a blessed act in that it saves a life. It is a moral responsibility to allow our organs to be used for transplantation, if that will help save lives and improve the quality of life for others. The awareness-raising introductory symposium on the importance of organ donation was also accompanied by a mini-exhibition to answer questions related to organ transplantation and how to register in the Shifa application for organ donation.



ASMED and SMEs look into entrepreneurship challenges

AMAL AL RIYAMI
MANAH, MARCH 6

The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) concluded its latest meetings with entrepreneurs in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate at the Oman Across Ages Museum in the Wilayat of Manah, under the auspices of Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah.

The meetings, coming as an enhancement of the participation approach and a continuation of the series of meetings organised by the ASMED with entrepreneurs in 10 governorates in the Sultanate of Oman, aim to review the authority's efforts, plans, directions, and initiatives in support of entrepreneurs, consolidate the approach of communication and listening to the challenges facing owners of small and medium enterprises and find appropriate solutions for them.

This is in addition to engaging them to come up with innovative solutions that contribute to facing various challenges and sustaining the growth of small



The meetings aimed to review the plans, directions, and initiatives in support of entrepreneurs

and medium enterprises.

The meeting was preceded by an entrepreneurial evening held on Tuesday, organised by the ASMED in corporation with the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate in Harat Al Aqur in the Wilayat of Nizwa.

The evening was held under the auspices of Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidi, President of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ).

More than 150 participants were divided into groups according to the subject areas and the general challenges that

the participants addressed in the registration form for the meeting.

Hamidah bint Humaid al Khasibiyah, Owner of the Perfect Pearl Foundation, said: "I thank the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority for this meeting, in which all the questions, inquiries and suggestions facing entrepreneurs were raised and answered by the relevant officials. This meeting contributed to resolving outstanding problems and finding appropriate solutions for them."

Eman bint Said al Shaibaniyah,

an entrepreneur in the field of design, printing and packaging, said: "This meeting came to empower and develop us as entrepreneurs, as well as support us to challenge risks, to empower us in the market, and to help us move towards the Omani and global market. As an entrepreneur, one of the challenges I face are job opportunities, contracts, and tenders that come from government institutions that we may not get. These contracts go to big companies. We should get priority as small and medium enterprises."



SAF Chief of Staff receives US military official

MUSCAT: Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Wednesday Daniel Shapiro, US Deputy

Assistant Secretary of Defence for Middle East Policy and his accompanying delegation. During the meeting, the two sides exchanged views and discussed several military topics of common interest. — ONA

Tariq returns to lead Knowledge Oman

MUSCAT: Tariq al Barwani, who founded Knowledge Oman in 2008, will return to lead the community-knowledge sharing platform with a new mission starting from April.

The announcement comes as Knowledge Oman celebrates its 16th anniversary this year.

Al Barwani was Knowledge Oman President until 2018. "Our mission initially was to connect the community with Knowledge Oman. Over the past 16 years, we successfully managed 74 projects through a pool of 700 volunteers along

with 35 partners. Our next mission is to primarily focus on empowering the youth with the necessary skills required to develop our economy" said Al Barwani.

Knowledge Oman received multiple awards since its inception in 2008 that includes the 'Best Community Leadership' in 2022; International Standard Web Technology Award 2009; Brand Leadership Award in 2010; outstanding contribution to the cause of education in 2012; and the Golden Strategic Award for Culture in 2013.

Environment conference seeks to tackle challenges

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, MARCH 6

The second international conference on environment, sciences and engineering which aims to shed light on environmental issues and sustainability challenges was held to look into possible solutions for environmental preservation and achieving sustainable development.

Dr Said bin Hammed al Rubaee, the UTAS vice-chancellor said, "In this conference, we seek to provide an opportunity for specialists and experts to discuss and study the concerns associated with ecosystem preservation using various aspects of knowledge and science, including but not limited to nanotechnology applications, renewable and alternative energies, artificial intelligence applications among others"

He mentioned that the current participants have been chosen out of 146 submitted abstracts, after a process of peer-review, following the highest academic and research standards to ensure the that the submitted research



The second international conference on environment shed light on sustainability challenges for clean environment

abstracts match the themes and objectives of the conference.

Prominent figures like Dr Danial Orejon from the University of Edinburgh and Dr Eni Oko from Newcastle University delivered speeches during the conference.

"Oman has made a huge progress both in investing and improving science researches to develop Environmental sustainability by sponsoring and branching and taking the benefit of changes around them in the world and proves that it is catching up and that was reflected positively in the different sectors in the country," Dr Danial said.

Moreover, since the inaugural edition, there

has been a notable increase in researchers' interest in sustainability issues, leading to successful funding acquisitions for research projects and the publication of over 30 research papers in high-impact journals which will definitely contribute in addressing environmental challenges and promoting sustainability.

The outputs of the second edition of the conference are expected to enrich the scientific community with rigorous research and stimulate further collaborative studies to address environmental challenges, achieve environmental sustainability, and realise sustainable development goals.

ahliGlobal equityfund

Notice of the Annual Ordinary General Meeting of Ahli Global Equity Fund

We, the Management of **Ahli Global Equity Fund** (the "Fund") hereby invite the unit holders to attend the Annual Ordinary General Meeting to be held at 3:30 pm, on Tuesday, 26 March 2024, at Ahli Bank HQ. In the event that the quorum to convene the Annual Ordinary General Meeting is not complete, the second general meeting will be convened at 3:30 pm, on Wednesday, 27 March 2024, at Ahli Bank's HQ to discuss and consider the following agenda:

- 1) To consider and approve the Fund Management Report for financial year ended on 31 December 2023.
- 2) To consider and approve the Auditors' Report on the balance sheet and profit and loss account for the financial year ended 31 December 2023.
- 3) To ratify the sitting fees for the Fund's Management Meetings for the financial year ended on 31 December 2023 and determine the sitting fees for the financial year ending on 31 December 2024.
- 4) To inform the general assembly of the related party transactions which took place during the financial year ended on 31 December 2023.
- 5) To appoint an auditor for the financial year ending on 31 December 2024 and determine their fees.

According to the Articles of Association of the Fund, any unit holder shall have the right to authorize in writing any other person to attend the meeting and vote on the resolutions taken thereat on his/her behalf. The authorization must be on the proxy forms, which is enclosed with the invitation. Natural persons must enclose copies of their IDs. Minor unitholders and unitholders who do not have IDs shall enclose copies of their passports. Non-Omani unitholders shall enclose along with their completed proxy forms copies of their passports or their resident card. Proxy forms for corporate persons shall be signed by their authorized signatories. Copies of commercial registration documents as well as ID/passport copies of their authorized signatories' must be enclosed with their completed and stamped proxy forms.

To prevent delay in starting the meeting, unitholders are requested to arrive about half an hour before the scheduled meeting time.

In case of any enquiries, please contact **Mrs. Duaa Al Zaabi** Phone No **24577922**.



Required Experienced MEP Professionals for Civil Construction Project		
Position	Education	Experience in Years
Supervisor – Electrical	ITI in Electrical/ Diploma	8-10
Supervisor – HVAC	ITI in HVAC/ Diploma	8-10
Supervisor - PDFF	ITI in Plumbing/ Diploma	8-10
Interested candidates may walk in for a one-on-one interview on 9 th , 10 th March 2024		
☎ (+968) 98509524/ 99785806 📧 hrrecruit@altasnim.com		

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TRUCE TALKS ENTER FOURTH DAY

GAZA STRIP: International mediators were set for a fourth day of talks with Hamas in Cairo on Wednesday after US President Joe Biden called on the group to agree a truce deal with Israel by the start of Ramadhan.

Envoys have discussed plans to halt the fighting that has raged since Hamas's October 7 attack before the fasting month starts on Sunday or Monday, depending on the sighting of the full moon.

As famine threatens the besieged Gaza Strip, US and Jordanian planes again airdropped food aid into the territory of 2.4 million people in a joint operation with Egypt and France on Tuesday.

The World Health Organization has reported children dying of starvation in two northern Gaza hospitals, and US Vice-President Kamala Harris has expressed "deep concern about the humanitarian conditions in Gaza".

Envoys from Hamas and the United States have been meeting Qatari and Egyptian mediators in Cairo to discuss a plan for a six-week truce, the exchange of dozens of remaining hostages for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, and a greater flow of aid to Gaza.

Egypt's Al Qahera News, which is close to the country's intelligence services, said the talks would continue on Wednesday.

Biden warned Hamas to quickly agree to a truce and hostage release deal after his top diplomat Antony Blinken urged the group to accept an "immediate ceasefire".

"It's in the hands of Hamas right now," the US president told reporters from Maryland.

"There's got to be a ceasefire because Ramadhan — if we get into circumstances where this continues to Ramadhan, Israel



Palestinians transport bags of flour as humanitarian aid arrives in Gaza City on Wednesday. — AFP

and Jerusalem could be very, very dangerous."

He did not elaborate but the United States urged Israel last week to allow Muslims to pray at Jerusalem's Al Aqsa mosque compound, a frequent flashpoint during Ramadhan.

The Israeli government said on Tuesday it would allow Muslim worshippers access to the mosque compound in annexed east Jerusalem "in similar numbers to those in previous years".

Israeli negotiators have so far stayed away from the Cairo talks, with Israeli media reporting that they boycotted them after Hamas failed to provide a list of living hostages. Senior Hamas leader

Envoys discuss a plan for a six-week truce, the exchange of dozens of remaining hostages for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, and a greater flow of aid to Gaza

Bassem Naim said details on the captives had not been "mentioned in any documents or proposals circulated during the negotiation process".

"The Hamas movement has shown the required flexibility with the aim of reaching an agreement

requiring a comprehensive cessation of aggression against our people," the group said in a statement. "The movement will continue to negotiate through mediator brothers to reach an agreement that fulfils the demands and interests of our people."

However, Osama Hamdan, a Hamas official in Beirut, warned the group would "not allow the path of negotiations to be open indefinitely".

Israel has said it believes 130 of the 250 captives taken by Hamas fighters in their unprecedented October 7 attack remain in Gaza but that 31 are presumed dead.

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Qatari Prime

Minister Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Thani met and agreed that "the release of sick, wounded, elderly and women hostages would result in an immediate ceasefire in Gaza over a period of at least six weeks".

The first phase of a ceasefire would enable "a surge of humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza, and provide time and space to secure more enduring arrangements and sustained calm", a White House readout of the meeting said.

Israel is facing increasing criticism from its top ally the United States as conditions in Gaza deteriorate.

— AFP

US supports 'immediate ceasefire' in Gaza in UN draft resolution

NEW YORK: The United States has submitted an amended draft resolution to the UN Security Council calling for an "immediate ceasefire" in the Gaza Strip after months of wrangling.

The draft resolution, made available to dpa on Tuesday, calls for "an agreement for an immediate ceasefire of roughly six-weeks in Gaza together with the release of all hostages as soon as the parties agree."

The wording reflects comments made by US Vice-President Kamala Harris at the weekend, when she called for an "immediate ceasefire, for at least the next six weeks" due to "the immense scale of suffering in Gaza."

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is dire, with hunger growing among the population.

So far, more than 30,000 people have been killed and more than 70,000 have been injured since the beginning of the conflict, triggered by the unprecedented attack by Hamas and other groups in Israel on October 7.

Since the outbreak of the conflict, Washington, Israel's closest ally, had opposed the word "ceasefire" and vetoed three corresponding resolutions in the Security Council, the most powerful UN body. However, in view of the rising number of civilian casualties and the threat of famine in the Gaza Strip, the US is now stepping up the pressure on Israel. The other 14 members of the Security Council can register changes to the draft. It is unclear when and whether a vote could be held.

Security Council resolutions are binding under international law. If an affected state ignores them, the body can impose sanctions.

— dpa

UN food agency says aid convoy turned away by Israel, looted

ROME: The UN's food agency said on Tuesday that its aid convoy had been turned away by Israeli forces at the Gaza border, after which it was looted by "desperate people".

The World Food Programme said the 14-truck food convoy waited at the Wadi Gaza checkpoint for three hours before being turned away by the Israeli army.

It was the first convoy attempted since the agency halted deliveries to the north of Gaza on February 20, after its convoy of trucks faced gunfire



A displaced Palestinian woman, who fled her house due to Israeli strikes, sits at a tent camp in Rafah on Wednesday. — Reuters

and looting.

At the time, the agency described the situation in northern Gaza as "complete chaos and violence due to the collapse of civil order".

In Tuesday's incident, after the trucks were rerouted they were stopped by "a large crowd of desperate people who looted the food", taking about 200 tonnes, the WFP said in a statement.

The agency said that it was exploring all ways to bring food to northern Gaza, but that roads were the only way to transport large quantities of food needed

to avert famine.

An airdrop earlier on Tuesday, in conjunction with Jordan's air force, dropped six tonnes of food, enough for 20,000 people, it said.

"Airdrops are a last resort and will not avert famine. We need entry points to northern Gaza that will allow us to deliver enough food for half a million people in desperate need," the agency's deputy executive director Carl Skau said.

Skau told the UN Security Council last week that a famine was imminent in northern Gaza

if conditions remain unchanged.

The UN estimates that 2.2 million people — most of Gaza's population — are on the brink of famine, particularly in the north where Israeli forces block aid from entering.

On Tuesday, the WFP said hunger had reached "catastrophic levels" in the north.

"Children are dying of hunger-related diseases and suffering severe levels of malnutrition," it said, calling for more entry points into Gaza, including the north. It said a ceasefire was urgently needed.

— AFP

Israel to allow same numbers into Al Aqsa during Ramadhan

JERUSALEM: Israel will allow a similar number of worshippers into Jerusalem's Al Aqsa mosque compound in the first week of Ramadhan as in previous years, a statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said on Tuesday, without specifying a number.

With war raging in Gaza, Israel said it may limit access to the holy site during the Muslim fasting month, citing security needs. Many Palestinians reject any such restrictions.

Al Aqsa, one of the holiest sites in the world for Muslims, sits on a hilltop in Jerusalem's Old City in a compound also revered by Jews as a vestige of their two ancient temples.

Israel captured the site in the 1967 Middle East war and illegally annexed it with the rest of East

Jerusalem, which Palestinians want as the capital of an independent state.

Israeli police raids, visits by Jewish officials and restrictions on Palestinian access to the site have been a source of friction in the past, particularly during holidays including Ramadhan, which begins this year on or around March 10.

Tuesday's decision came in agreement with top Israeli security officials during a meeting on preparations ahead of Ramadhan, the statement said.

"During the first week of Ramadhan, the entry of worshippers to the Temple Mount will be permitted, similar to the numbers in previous years," it said, using the Jewish name for the site. "A weekly assessment of the security and safety aspects will

be held; a decision will be made accordingly."

Earlier on Tuesday, Netanyahu said freedom of worship on the site would be ensured during Ramadhan while taking Israel's security needs into consideration.

In Muslim tradition, it is from the Al Aqsa compound that the Prophet ascended to heaven, and tens of thousands of Muslims usually visit the mosque every day during Ramadhan.

Israel has long limited access to Al Aqsa for younger Muslims and Palestinians from the occupied West Bank. Since the start of the war in Gaza in October, it has imposed extra restrictions on Palestinian citizens of Israel and residents of Jerusalem, citing security reasons, forcing hundreds to perform Friday prayers in the streets. — Reuters



Tourists take photos in front of the Dome of the Rock on Al Aqsa compound in Jerusalem's Old City on Tuesday. — Reuters



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In brief

■ LONDON



NAVALNY'S WIDOW TAKES UP HIS CALL FOR BIG POLL PROTEST

The widow of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny said on Wednesday the scale of public support for him since his death was proof that his cause lived on, and called for a massive election day protest against President Vladimir Putin. In a YouTube video, Yulia Navalnaya said she had drawn hope from the huge crowds that turned out last week for the funeral of her husband, who died in an Arctic penal colony on February 16. Since his burial, supporters have submerged his grave in a sea of flowers. "Looking at you, I am convinced that everything is not in vain, and this thought gives me strength," she said.

■ GENEVA



2023 WAS DEADLIEST YEAR FOR MIGRANTS, UN AGENCY SAYS

At least 8,565 people died on migration routes across the world last year, making 2023 the deadliest year on record for migrants, the UN migration agency said on Wednesday. The International Organization for Migration said the number of migrant deaths recorded last year surpassed the number of dead and missing globally in the previous record year of 2016, when 8,084 people died. Last year's death toll was also 20 per cent up on 2022. "These horrifying figures collected by the Missing Migrants Project are also a reminder that we must recommit to greater action that can ensure safe migration."

■ OSLO



NORWAY KING LIKELY TO GET PACEMAKER NEXT WEEK

Norway's 87-year-old King Harald, who was flown home at the weekend after contracting an infection in Malaysia, will have a pacemaker inserted likely early next week, the palace said on Wednesday. Europe's oldest reigning monarch, King Harald fell ill while on a holiday on the Malaysian island of Langkawi. He was hospitalised for several days before a medical transport flight flew him home on Sunday to Oslo, where he has remained in hospital. "His Majesty the King's health is steadily improving, and his general condition is satisfactory," the palace said in a health update.

STAGE SET FOR TRUMP-BIDEN REMATCH, THE FIRST REPEAT US PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST SINCE 1956

Trump hails Super Tuesday wins as Haley ends campaign

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump marched towards a White House rematch with President Joe Biden in November as his final Republican rival Nikki Haley was reportedly set to drop out on Wednesday after a heavy defeat in the "Super Tuesday" primaries.

Haley, 52, the former US ambassador to the United Nations under Trump, was about to suspend her campaign, the *Wall Street Journal* and CNN reported. She was due to speak in Charleston, South Carolina, on Wednesday.

Former president Trump swept 14 out of 15 states up for grabs on the biggest day of the 2024 race so far, with Haley denying him only in the northeastern state of Vermont as he covets a second term in the Oval Office.

Incumbent Biden also swept the Democratic "Super Tuesday" primaries, although he was effectively uncontested, and the 81-year-old will now turn his attention to his crucial State of the Union speech on Thursday.

Eyeing a historic comeback to the US presidency, Trump told cheering supporters at his Mar-a-Lago beach club in Florida that they had witnessed "an amazing



Donald Trump arrives to speak during a Super Tuesday election night watch party at Mar-a-Lago Club in Florida, on Wednesday. — AFP

night and an amazing day." "They call it 'Super Tuesday' for a reason," said Trump, 77. "This is a big one. They tell me, the pundits and otherwise, that there has never been one like this, never been anything so conclusive."

This year's Super Tuesday was sapped of much of its suspense as Biden and Trump had effectively secured their parties' nominations before a ballot was cast on

It's Trump or me, folks: Biden

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden has told top campaign aides to ramp up attacks on Trump, sometimes using profane language in private meetings to describe his Republican rival, according to two sources familiar with the discussions.

Some advisers have suggested that the campaign abandon its hopes of raising Biden's approval ratings and instead focus on driving down Biden himself hit that note as results came in from the Super

Tuesday state nominating contests.

"Tonight's results leave the American people with a clear choice: Are we going to keep moving forward or will we allow Donald Trump to drag us backwards into the chaos, division, and darkness that defined his term in office," he said in a statement.

Biden is hoping to use his State of the Union address to Congress on Thursday to help sharpen those contrasts.

— AFP

Tuesday.

Haley, a former South Carolina governor, has failed to throw significant obstacles in Trump's path to the nomination since finishing a distant third in the opening contest in Iowa in January.

Impeached twice, beaten by seven million votes in 2020 and facing 91 felony charges in four trials, Trump has a profile unlike any US presidential election

candidate in history. Yet his appeal among working-class, rural and white voters, particularly on issues like immigration and the economy, has propelled him toward the nomination in one of the most lopsided primary seasons ever seen. Haley — a favourite of affluent, suburban voters and university graduates — was set to collect only a handful of the delegates needed to secure the nomination. — Reuters

'Israel PM bears responsibility for deadly stampede'

JERUSALEM: A probe into Israel's worst civilian disaster on Wednesday found Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "bears personal responsibility" for the 2021 stampede which killed 45 Jewish pilgrims.

Tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews had converged on Mount Meron, near Israel's border with Lebanon, on April 30, 2021 for an annual pilgrimage to the tomb of a reputed second-century rabbi.

The stampede in the male section of the gender-segregated crowd is believed to have started as people moved through a narrow passageway that became a



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits Meron. — AFP file photo

deadly choke-point. At least 16 children and teenagers were among the 45 dead.

"The prime minister is responsible for identifying proactively, by himself or through mechanisms on his behalf, issues that require the attention of his office and, if necessary, his intervention, in particular those related to a risk of human lives," said the commission of inquiry report into the stampede.

The inquiry found that from 2008 up to the day of the tragedy, the prime minister's office was notified on several occasions of the potential hazards caused by high traffic around the tomb of rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, also known by the Hebrew acronym Rashbi. — Reuters

Top Haitian gang leader warns of civil war, genocide

PORT-AU-PRINCE: A powerful Haitian gang leader warned on Tuesday that the chaos engulfing the capital Port-au-Prince will lead to civil war and "genocide" unless Prime Minister Ariel Henry steps down.

The stark comments from Jimmy Cherizier, known as "Barbecue," came as Henry appeared to be struggling to fly home, with the main airport under attack and neighbouring Dominican Republic refusing permission for him to land.

Henry — who was supposed to step down last month — was out of the country last week when armed criminal gangs, who control large swathes of the country, launched a coordinated assault to oust him.

"If Ariel Henry doesn't resign, if the international community continues to support him, we'll be heading straight for a civil war that will lead to genocide," Cherizier, a former police officer who is under UN sanctions for human



A man looks inside one of the vehicles which were set on fire by armed gangs in Port-au-Prince on Wednesday. — Reuters

rights abuses, told reporters in the capital.

"Either Haiti becomes a paradise or a hell for all of us. It's out of the question for a small group of rich people living in big hotels to decide the fate of

people living in working-class neighbourhoods," the 46-year-old added.

As the latest crisis in the violence-wracked Caribbean nation spiralled, gunfire shut down some flights at Toussaint

Louverture International Airport in Haiti's capital.

Henry was denied entry into the neighbouring Dominican Republic, according to Dominican news group CDN.

On Tuesday evening a

Bhutto, hanged 44 years ago, didn't get a fair trial'

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Supreme Court ruled on Wednesday that former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was hanged 44 year ago after being convicted of murder, didn't get a fair trial.

Bhutto, the founder of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) now run by his grandson and former foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, was hanged in 1979 after a trial under the military regime of late General Zia-ul-Haq.

"We didn't find that the fair trial and due process requirements were met," said Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa in remarks telecast live of the ruling that he said was a unanimous decision by a nine-member bench headed by him.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif hailed the ruling. "It is a positive development that a wrong done by a court has been corrected by a court," he said in a statement from his office. The ruling came in response to a judicial reference filed by Bhutto Zardari's father, Asif Ali Zardari, during his tenure as president in 2011. It sought an opinion by the top court on revisiting the death sentence awarded to the PPP founder. "Our family waited 3 generations to hear these words," Bhutto Zardari said later in a post on X.

The court will issue a detailed order later. "It is an admission of colossal miscarriage of justice under Zia's martial law regime," said Yousuf Nazar, London-based political commentator and a close aide of the late Benazir Bhutto, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter and also a former PM. She was assassinated in 2007. Rights groups say Haq's 11 years of dictatorship were marked by an assault on democracy, persecution and jailing of PPP workers and public flogging of opponents and critics. — Reuters

Crafting a greener, more inclusive future



Rumaitha al Busaidi
rumaitha@rumaithabusaidi.com

The writer is an environment strategist and advocate for sustainable development

As someone working in the green transition space, I've spent years examining the intersection of economic growth, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship. Oman Vision 2040 was one that I was involved in and, in my opinion, serves as a compelling blueprint for the future, embodying ambitious strategies for economic diversification and sustainability. This vision, deeply rooted in inclusivity, aims to empower all segments of society, particularly women and marginalised communities, setting a remarkable precedent for global development strategies.

In my exploration of Oman's strategic plan, it's evident that key sectors such as fisheries, tourism, logistics, manufacturing, and green energy are pivotal. Yet, it's the emphasis on technology as the linchpin for achieving economic goals that truly signifies Oman's forward-thinking approach. For instance, advancements in the fisheries sector have not only increased production but have done so in a manner that conserves marine biodiversity, showcasing a commitment to sustainable practices that can serve as a model worldwide.

Digital platforms in tourism are empowering

women entrepreneurs, creating new avenues for business, and contributing to Oman's broader economic objectives. This highlights a significant shift towards leveraging technology for inclusive growth, a principle I've long advocated for in my writing. However, the journey toward realising Oman Vision 2040 is not without hurdles. Stereotypical and generational barriers often pose significant challenges, necessitating a strategic approach to policy formulation that fosters a more inclusive environment. Oman's response, through legislative reforms and targeted education and training programmes, exemplifies a commitment to breaking down these barriers, paving the way for a more inclusive society.

The Environment Society of Oman's women's empowerment programme is a prime example of how targeted initiatives, especially in rural areas, can catalyse change, fostering environmental awareness and community leadership among women. Such programmes are essential for the kind of society Oman envisions—one where inclusivity and sustainability are the bedrock of economic and social development.

Through my own personal lens, Oman's dedication to supporting women's entrepreneurship

INITIATIVES THAT PROMOTE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES UNDERSCORE OMAN'S HOLISTIC APPROACH TO GROWTH.

and its focus on sustainability stand out as critical components of its vision. Initiatives that promote women's economic participation and sustainable development practices underscore Oman's holistic approach to growth. The country's investment in green energy and sustainable building practices align with global sustainability goals, illustrating a commitment to environmental stewardship alongside economic development.

As the world marks International Women's Day, Oman's strides towards inclusive growth and women's empowerment offer valuable insights. The nation's approach underscores the importance of integrating inclusivity and sustainability into economic planning, principles that are increasingly recognised as essential for future development.

In sharing these observations, I hope to contribute to the dialogue on how countries can navigate the complexities of modern economic growth while ensuring that inclusivity and sustainability are at the forefront. Oman Vision 2040 provides a blueprint for achieving a more prosperous, sustainable, and inclusive future, serving as a beacon for striving to balance economic development with environmental and social responsibilities.

Impersonation in educational institutions

Impersonation is a form of identity change that occurs online or is perpetrated via technology. This type of intimidation has increased in recent years, thanks to children spending more time online, both for academic purposes and socialisation.

Many reports state that a large number of students have been the victims of traditional bullying all over the world. It can be particularly challenging for educators to prevent, as it can't be seen in academic institution hallways and can occur of college or school grounds and after class hours.

Despite this, impersonation still impacts students and can be an in-house problem. Preventing it often involves education, both for potential cyberbullying victims and perpetrators. Nowadays cyberbullying takes place on social media, through videos and texts, or as part of online games.

Obviously, it is generally defined as involving an imbalance of physical or emotional power, intent to cause physical or emotional harm, and behaviour that is repeated or likely to be repeated. It occurs online frequently through social media or other forms of digital communication. We live in a world now where bullying doesn't begin and end with school bells, but rather it encompasses a kid's entire life. Cyberstalking can be hard for both educators and parents to recognise because they don't overhear or see it occurring, and it might take place in private text chains or on message boards that adults don't monitor frequently.

In fact, students may also be reluctant to admit that it is happening. To prevent cyberbullying, students should be taught digital citizenship and literacy. These lessons and activities should emphasise online safety, remind students to think before posting, that posts are permanent, and that there are important implications to that permanence.

Eventually, other key steps are for academic leaders to prioritise empathy education. That way, if cyberbullying does occur, caregivers of both the victim and the perpetrator can be enlisted to help put an end to it. While some educators and parents might be inclined to ban technology use as a way to protect students from cyberbullying, which is not the answer because technology is part of kids' lives. Educators and parents need to teach children how to use technology responsibly and guard themselves against the negative effects of cyberbullying.



SAJITH UTHUPPAN



Awadh bin Said Baqwaier

Soft power's impact on global politics

The notion of "soft power" surfaced decades ago as a counterpoint to the long-standing dominance of "hard power" in international relations. Historically, the concept of hard power prevailed, particularly during the eras of British, Portuguese, French and Italian colonialism.

This epoch saw the assertion of military might, commercial influence, and economic dominion over nations, playing a central role in the colonial philosophy that shaped the East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The legacy of colonial oppression and subjugation by military force birthed a philosophy of resistance and nonconformity to the tyrannical colonial powers, notably the British and French empires. In response to centuries of colonial rule marked by catastrophic atrocities in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Arab territories, the tide turned with the emergence of a resolute spirit of resistance against the aggressive colonial machinery.

The tragedy of occupied Palestine, epitomised by the establishment of the Zionist entity in 1948 — a year etched in memory as the Nakba — bore witness to ongoing brutal assaults, particularly evident in Gaza, where a ruthless Zionist offensive has claimed the lives of over thirty thousand individuals, predominantly women and children, in a manner reminiscent of genocidal campaigns unseen in modern history.

Despite these challenges, a historic moment unfolded on October 7, where the might of the Israeli military machine met its match in the formidable resistance put forth by the Palestinian forces, heralding prospects of reshaping the geostrategic dynamics of the tumultuous Middle East through the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its rightful capital.

Amidst this global narrative, the ascendancy of soft power as a potent force has come to the fore, heralding an era where strategic influence eclipses the traditional realms of hard power. The Chinese model, embodying a sophisticated approach to international relations, highlights the astute utilisation of soft power

mechanisms facilitated by trade and financial investments. These strategic manoeuvres, informed by China's historical ambitions along the Silk Road trade routes, demonstrate a departure from a traditional reliance on hard power mechanisms. China's nuanced approach, underpinned by a philosophical stance possibly

OMAN'S COMMITMENT TO HUMANITARIAN CAUSES, EXEMPLIFIED BY ITS LONG-STANDING SUPPORT FOR THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE, UNDERSCORES THE NATION'S PROWESS IN SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY.

influenced by Confucian precepts, advocates for dialogue and economic engagement over militaristic posturing.

China's formidable trajectory in leveraging soft power assets underscores a transformative shift in the global power dynamics, especially evident in regions like Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Arab world. Furthermore, the limitations of hard power approaches have become

glaringly apparent, especially with the United States – the predominant colonial power of our times – embroiled in a series of military engagements that have exacted a heavy toll on human lives across the globe. The legacy of over eighty armed conflicts, marred by civilian casualties and tragic retributions, underscores the pitfalls of hard power strategies in modern geopolitics.

Conversely, China's strategic shift towards soft power diplomacy, bolstered by cohesive economic engagements, underscores a paradigm shift in global leadership — positioning the nation as a prodigious influencer across diverse realms including trade, diplomacy, arts, and cultural heritage.

In conclusion, as the global political arena witnesses a resurgence of soft power, Oman's strategic positioning and rich cultural heritage pave the way for a proactive role in shaping regional and international dialogues. Oman's commitment to humanitarian causes, exemplified by its long-standing support for the Palestinian cause, underscores the nation's prowess in soft power diplomacy. Through skilful deployment of soft power assets, Oman stands poised to wield influence, projecting its civilisational ethos and ethical foreign policy objectives onto the global stage.

Translated by Badr al Dhafari
The original version of the article was published in Oman Arabic newspaper on March 6, 2024.



The Sultanate of Oman, represented by Oman Charitable Organization, sent food trucks to Al Mahra Governorate in Yemen to provide iftar meals for people during Ramadhan. Photo courtesy: @ccooman

Women deserve new narratives

International Women’s Day is approaching with much marketing hype about love, dinner celebrations and expensive gifts. Women deserve all this and more.

Not many decades ago, women had a legal obligation to obey their husbands, fathers, or brothers. In some countries, they remain subordinate to their male relatives. It was only after the 1960s that women were permitted to open bank accounts or sign contracts.

They endured a long journey to be allowed to study, work, play sports, enter politics, drive, or go to space. Employers are no longer allowed to fire pregnant women; divorce laws have been liberalised, though some countries still do not allow women to initiate divorce; and the narrative on fertility treatment, which is taboo in many societies, has begun to shift.

Though the political, social and economic roles of women have been changing gradually, the deep-rooted discourse about youth and physically and mentally blossoming women still persists. It is critical to look into the past. Nevertheless, it has been a remarkable step-by-step emancipation. These were snail-paced advancements that have empowered women in the 21st century. Progress is a slow process, and our realities have been shaped by women who came before us.

Still, in several places or circumstances, women are allowed only within the boundaries established by their male partners, male colleagues, working environment, or brothers. Societal norms and gender discrimination can limit what women can do. It appears that there is a constant power struggle between the genders. Male-dominated society typically decides what is acceptable to women. Also, depending on the political or social context, women’s rights or choices may be taken away or simply ignored.

It is a daunting reality that often the lives of women differ based on colour, race, class, clan, or geographic area. With that, there are male dominant groups that set stereotypes for women and believe they are entitled to apply



SONIA AMBROSIO
soniambrosio@gmail.com

The writer is journalist, academic, researcher in media studies

PROGRESS IS A SLOW PROCESS, AND OUR REALITIES HAVE BEEN SHAPED BY WOMEN WHO CAME BEFORE US

their prejudice against women wherever they migrate, regardless of race or background. This seems to be the rationale behind the 2024 International Women’s Day theme, “Inspire Inclusion.”

Today’s women are better educated, yet there are still significant educational disparities between socioeconomic and racial groups. In many corners around the globe, women are becoming stronger and more vocal, but let’s not be foolish; there are women, even educated ones, who would rather enjoy the benefits than contribute. We are invited to, and we should recognise the scale of the rights and opportunities available to us, not just take advantage of or merely appreciate them.

The current social context for women revolves around a string of issues, including new dating dynamics, reproductive rights, singlehood, cyberbullying, career growth, worthiness, and so on. Modern women are choosing what they want to become; sometimes, they are victimised because of their choices. Skills and abilities know no gender, and that is how it should be.

This reflection on women’s emancipation, combined with the International Women’s Day celebrations, is an opportunity to think critically about why we wanted and still want changes, how changes can be achieved, and how the changes can benefit women in future generations.

The celebrations should not be about tapping on the shoulders of a few women to express how great, smart, or empowered they are. Or clapping in gratitude for a few men who have consented to some positive laws for women’s progress. There could be a reason for their agreement. We can look at the claims through factual or critical lenses.

Modern women deserve new narratives. The re-evaluation of women’s role in society, their status, and their leadership potential is essential. The new issues they face deserve to be considered in both the present and future contexts.

Flowers, gifts, and special greetings are welcome, regardless of the occasion.

HOMAGE TO THE CITY OF MEDELLIN



A tourist poses for a photo in the Pachamama sculpture by artist Jorge Jaramillo, aka Jordy, and 3D printer Juan David Escandon, which pays homage to the nature of the city of Medellin, Colombia, on Wednesday. To create the 5.5 metres high by 5.5 metres wide sculpture, the artists joined 1,500 pieces printed with 20 low format 3D technology printers. – AFP

American interests in the Middle East: A moment of truth approaching

In the sprawling narrative of post-World War II geopolitics, America’s foray into the Middle East stands as a testament to strategic ambitions interwoven with the complex fabric of regional history. Anchored by the desire to secure vital oil arteries, guarantee the nascent state of Israel’s security, and counter Soviet encroachments, US policy has evolved to address emerging paradigms of terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

The inception of US-Israel ties, merely 11 minutes post its declaration in 1948, was emblematic of America’s geopolitical chess game — marrying moral imperatives with the strategic calculus of securing domestic electoral advantage. This pivotal moment, however, cast long shadows over the Middle East, birthing a series of events that reshaped the region’s destiny amidst the lingering spectre of British colonial legacies.

The narrative of American involvement in the Middle East is punctuated by episodes of profound consequences. The odyssey of war and diplomacy has left indelible marks on the socio-political landscape, from the sectarian fissures in Iraq to the maelstrom of violence in Syria, painting a picture of profound human and political cost.

The tales of Sudan and Libya



Yahya Al Ouafi
An author, columnist, creative writer, translator and a communications professional

THE NARRATIVE OF AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS PUNCTUATED BY EPISODES OF PROFOUND CONSEQUENCES

further embroider this complex tapestry, revealing the deep scars of instability and the tumult of geopolitical gambits. The arithmetic of US military and economic involvement in the region is stark.

By the close of 2022, a significant portion of US arms exports found their way to Middle Eastern shores, embedding the US deeply into the regional security apparatus. This militaristic footprint, juxtaposed with the deployment of nearly 30,000 American troops, underscores a strategic paradox, ostensibly aimed at diluting Russian and Chinese influence, yet perpetuating a cycle of dependency and contention. Beyond the military ledger, the economic and educational synergies between the US and the Middle East narrate a story of intertwined destinies.

The robust trade ties, culminating in a staggering \$121 billion by late 2023, alongside the vibrant academic exchange hosting over 100,000 Middle Eastern and African scholars, underscore a relationship of profound depth and complexity. Yet, beneath the veneer of these engagements lies a tableau of missed diplomatic overtures and protracted strife. The unwavering US allegiance to

Israel, while historically rooted in a complex interplay of moral and political imperatives, has become a focal point of contention, diminishing US stature and fueling disillusionment within the region.

This stance, starkly contrasted against the backdrop of historical injustices and the ongoing Palestinian plight, calls for a moment of introspection and recalibration. As we stand at this historical juncture, the US is

beckoned to ponder the legacies of its Middle Eastern engagements. It is a moment ripe for redefining America’s role — not merely as a geopolitical titan but as a steward of peace and stability. The challenge lies in harmonising strategic interests with the legitimate aspirations of the Middle Eastern peoples, crafting a narrative that transcends mere power politics to foster a landscape where dignity, sovereignty, and peace are not just

aspirational ideals but tangible realities. In the intricate mosaic of Middle Eastern geopolitics, the path forward demands wisdom, empathy and a profound commitment to rewriting the narratives of engagement. It is within this crucible of history that the prospects for a just and enduring peace will be forged, shaping the contours of US-Middle Eastern relations for generations to come.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken with the US Marine Corps embassy security guard detachment in Baghdad, Iraq. – Reuters

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Silhavy to announce Red Warriors squad soon

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Oman's newly appointed head coach, Jaroslav Silhavy, will begin his first task officially when he will lead the team's first domestic training camp in Muscat on Wednesday. The camp will be part of the team's preparation for the joint qualifiers for World Cup 2026 and Asian Cup 2027.

The camp will be the Red Warriors' first gathering after it crashed out from the 2023 AFC Asian Cup Qatar in the group stage. Oman began their campaign in the Asian Cup with a 2-1 defeat against Saudi Arabia followed by a goalless draw against Thailand. In the concluding must win match, Oman drew 1-1 draw against



Jaroslav Silhavy

Kyrgyzstan to crash out from the Asian event.

Oman is gearing up for the third match in the Asian joint qualifiers for the AFC Asian Cup and Fifa World Cup in group D which featured Malaysia,



Oman National Football Team

Kyrgyzstan and Chinese Taipei. Oman under watchful eyes of the coach Silhavy will take on Malaysia in Muscat on March 21 and then play away in Kuala Lumpur on March 26.

The match in Muscat will be

held in Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex and the game will start at 10:00 pm (Oman time) while the following encounter will be in national stadium Bukit Jalil in Kuala Lumpur city and the match will begin at 6:00

pm (Oman time). Oman began their campaign with a 2-0 win against Chinese Taipei but then shocked with a 1-0 defeat against Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek in their second match.

It is expected the Czech coach

will announce the squad of the national senior team very soon after he observed many players in the previous rounds of the Omantel League and attended some matches in the HM Cup. Coach Silhavy signed a two-year contract with the Oman Football Association (OFA) in February to replace the Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic whose contract was not renewed after the AFC Asian Cup in Qatar. The recently appointed 62-year-old coach served as manager of the Czech national team from 2018-2023.

The new head coach will look for new accomplishments with the national football team as Red Warriors fans are looking ahead to see a strong football team competing in different regional and international events.



Sur blank Dhofar; Oman edge Bahla in 13th round

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Sur secured a thrilling 4-3 victory over Dhofar on Tuesday at the Sur Complex Stadium in the 13th round of the Oman League. The first half saw Salalah giants take the initiative, dominating possession and creating several chances. The first real threat came in the fifth minute when Qasim Said's shot was saved by Sur goalkeeper Bilal al Balushi. Dhofar continued to press and their efforts were rewarded in the 10th minute when Said scored the opening goal, assisted by Mohammed al Simahi. Two minutes later, Said doubled Dhofar's lead after a well-worked move, capitalising on a mistake by Sur defender Yahya al Hudaifi.

Sur struggled to respond and Dhofar continued to threaten,

but the Sur defence managed to hold firm until the half-time break. The second half saw a change in approach from Sur as they began to press for a goal. Their efforts were converted to a goal in the 50th minute when Mohammed al Najashi pulled one back with a direct free-kick. Dhofar responded quickly and restored their two-goal advantage in the 54th minute. Said turned provider this time, setting up Sultan Badar to score. Sur continued to push forward and were rewarded for their efforts in the 64th minute when Al Najashi scored his second goal of the game with a powerful strike. The pressure continued and Sur found the equaliser in the 79th minute, with Al Najashi completing his hat-trick. Sur continued to attack and they grabbed the winning goal in the 87th minute

through Robert. Sur managed to maintain the lead until the end of the match, winning 4-3.

With this win, Sur's points raised to 13, temporarily lifting them to ninth place in the overall league table, while Dhofar remained at 16 points in seventh place.

Oman Edge Bahla

Oman secured a narrow 1-0 victory over Bahla at the Nizwa Sports Complex on Tuesday in the 13th round of the Oman Professional League. The only goal of the game came in the 24th minute through Mohammed al Ghafri and Oman managed to hold on for the win. The victory moved Oman's points to 26, temporarily taking second place in the league table from Al Nahda, while Bahla remain bottom of the table with 6 points.



French forward #07 Kylian Mbappe vies with Real Sociedad's Spanish midfielder #05 Igor Zubeldia during the UEFA Champions League. — AFP

Mbappe brace fires PSG into Champions League quarters

SAN SEBASTIAN: Paris St Germain's Kylian Mbappe scored twice to lead them into the Champions League quarter-finals with a comfortable 2-1 win away to Real Sociedad in their last-16 second leg that wrapped up a 4-1 aggregate victory on Tuesday.

Bidding to win their first Champions League title, a disciplined PSG made the most of their chances from counter attacks, with the lightning fast Mbappe a constant menace.

After a remarkable group stage when they went unbeaten to finish ahead of last-year's finalists Inter Milan in Group D, LaLiga side Real Sociedad, who are struggling with injuries and have won one of their last 10 matches in all competitions, ran out of steam.

Mbappe was enjoying an inspired night and his speed and agility were too much for the hosts' defence to handle.

He was virtually unstoppable down left channel and Tuesday's brace means he has scored 11 of PSG's last 15 Champions League knockout goals.

"We knew right away that we couldn't go to sleep. If they had opened the scoring, they would have pushed on with their fans' backing," Mbappe told Canal Plus.

"We had to dampen their hopes early on. That's what we did, and we're very happy to be back in the quarter-finals."

Mbappe created a couple of opportunities early on before scoring the opener with a fabulous curling strike in the 15th minute. After receiving a long pass from Ousmane Dembele, he surged into the box, darting in from the byline and feigning to shoot, before shifting the ball out of his feet again and creating just enough space to fire a curling effort into the far corner. — Reuters

Kane double sends Bayern past Lazio 3-0 and into quarter-finals

MUNICH: Bayern Munich top scorer Harry Kane struck once in either half to steer the Germans to a 3-0 win over Italy's Lazio on Tuesday and into the Champions League quarter-finals with an 3-1 aggregate victory, reigniting title hopes among their fans.

Kane headed in for the lead in the 38th minute to cancel out the Lazio's first leg 1-0 advantage and then tapped in their third goal on the rebound in the 66th after Thomas Mueller's first half stoppage time effort had made it 2-0.

The win provides instant relief for coach Thomas Tuchel, who will leave at the end of the season, and his team as they had won just one of their last five matches in all competitions prior to Tuesday and are currently 10 points off the top in the Bundesliga.

"It's a perfect evening for us. It was a big game," said Kane, who has scored six goals for Bayern in the competition and another 27 in the Bundesliga this season.

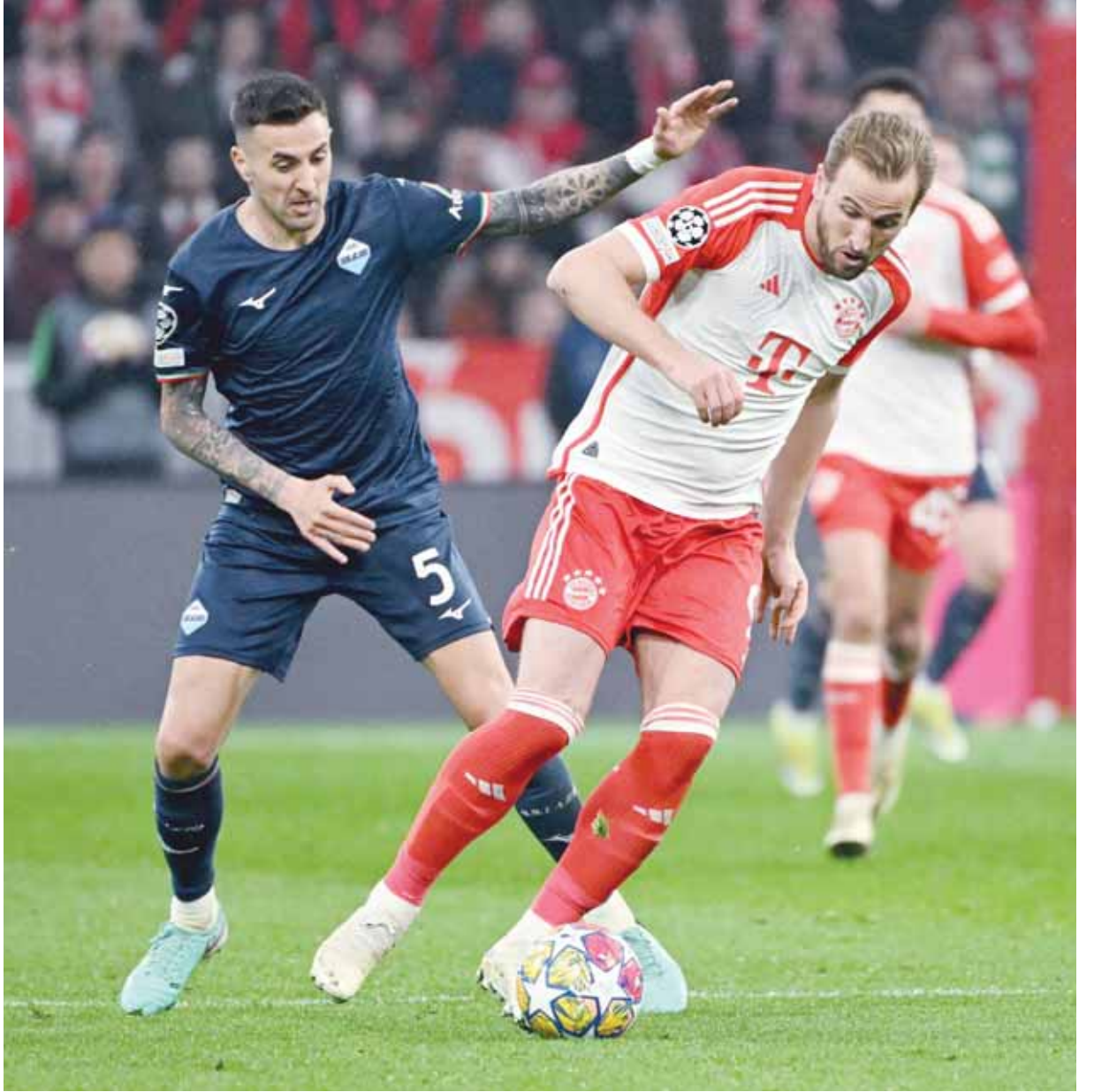
"We were 1-0 down in the first leg. It's obviously a big moment in our season. It was a top performance."

"Of course we know we have to improve, but nights like this can really change the season. I'm really proud of the boys and we just have to keep this momentum going."

Lazio were on the backfoot from the start and waited to hit the Germans on the break.

Ciro Immobile's header was their best chance but it sailed narrowly wide a minute before Kane bagged his first knockout stage goal in the competition in five years with a diving header.

The Italians, bidding for their



Lazio's Matias Vecino in action with Bayern Munich's Harry Kane. — REUTERS

first quarter-final spot in 24 years, had succeeded for half an hour in keeping Bayern outside the box but could do nothing when Kane, who had missed an earlier chance, headed in from team mate Raphael Guerreiro's miskick.

Jamal Musiala almost added another seconds later but his sliding shot just missed the target

before Thomas Mueller headed in a Matthijs de Ligt volley on the stroke of halftime.

Kane now has 27 Champions League goals, with Wayne Rooney the only Englishman to have scored more in the competition (30).

The former Tottenham Hotspur striker killed off any hopes of an Italian comeback

in the 68th, tapping in on the rebound after Leroy Sane's shot was palmed into his path.

The Bavarians refused to step off the gas and Mueller almost scored a second himself but keeper Ivan Provedel tipped his shot onto the post in the 71st.

Bayern have now made it to at least the final eight in 12 of the last 13 campaigns. — Reuters



Quick-fire double gives Al-Hilal advantage in Asian Champions League

RIYADH: Al-Hilal will take a 2-0 lead into the second leg of their Asian Champions League quarter-final with fellow Saudi Pro League side Al-Ittihad next week after two goals in two first-half minutes earned the Riyadh-based outfit a healthy advantage on Tuesday.

Aleksandar Mitrovic's 40th-minute penalty put Jorge Jesus's side in front at the Kingdom Arena in Riyadh with Salem Al Dawsari doubling the advantage two minutes later as the Al-Hilal winger struck to finish off a devastating team move.

Al-Ittihad finished with 10 men after N'golo Kante was dismissed for a dangerous tackle on his former Chelsea team mate Kalidou Koulibaly with 25 minutes remaining, referee Shuan Evans dismissing the Frenchman after a video review.

The teams will meet again in Jeddah next Tuesday, with the winner taking on either Al-Ain of the United Arab Emirates or Cristiano Ronaldo's Al-Nassr in the semi-finals next month.

Al-Ain hold a 1-0 advantage

The teams will meet again in Jeddah next Tuesday, with the winner taking on either Al-Ain of the United Arab Emirates or Cristiano Ronaldo's Al-Nassr in the semi-finals next month

having defeated the Saudi Pro League side in Monday's first leg.

Mitrovic scored from the spot to claim his 30th goal in 31 games in all competitions since joining Al-Hilal from Fulham after he had been wrestled to the ground by Madallah Al Olayan.

Al Dawsari then added his side's second when Malcom was released down the right by Ruben Neves's incisive pass from deep and the Brazilian centred for the current Asian Player of the Year to pounce.

Earlier in the day, Ulsan Hyundai claimed a 1-1 draw at Jeonbuk Motors as Lee Myung-

jae's late strike cancelled out Song Min-kyu's fourth-minute opener in the first leg of their quarter-final at Jeonju World Cup Stadium.

Lee scored 13 minutes from time to level the scores ahead of the second leg in Ulsan next Tuesday with Jeonbuk's Brazilian striker Tiago Orobó having missed a first-half penalty.

Jeonbuk went in front when Song swept a close-range finish past Jo Hyeon-woo after Lee Dong-jun was released down the right to deliver an inch-perfect cross that unlocked the defence.

The home side squandered the chance to double their lead when Ulsan's Lee Myung-jae upended Lee Dong-jun inside the penalty area but Tiago clipped the bar with his spot-kick.

Ulsan and Jeonbuk will play again next week, with the winners due to face either the Harry Kewell-coached Yokohama F Marinos of Japan or Chinese Super League side Shandong Taishan, who meet in the first leg of their quarter-final in China on Wednesday. — Reuters

AL ZUBAIR TO COMPETE IN WORLD CHALLENGE ENDURANCE CUP



PAUL RICARD (FRANCE): Al Faisal bin Khalid al Zubair and Al Manar Racing by Getspeed have confirmed that the Omani driver will team up with Austrian Dominik Baumann and Canadian racer Mikaël Grenier to compete in the 2024 Fanatec GT World Challenge powered by AWS Endurance Cup.

The team has been taking part in pre-season testing for the world's premier endurance series with their Mercedes-AMG GT3 Evo at the Paul Ricard circuit in France, which will host the opening round of the five-race series on April 5-7. They have been gathering vital data and fine-tuning the car's set-up before the season gets underway.

There are also five sprint races in the GTWC programme but the Al Manar Racing by Getspeed Team will concentrate on the Endurance element,

which sees them head from Paul Ricard to additional races at Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium (June 27-30), the Nürburgring in Germany (July 27-28), Italy's Monza circuit (September 21-22) and a new finale at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit (November 21-23).

Al Faisal said: "I am happy to return to this championship, which is one of the most prominent global endurance championships. I will participate in five rounds, beginning at the Paul Ricard circuit and ending at the Jeddah Corniche circuit. Of course, our ultimate goal is to compete for the title, which will have a different prospect now with the strong entry list we expect this year, featuring the most prominent car manufacturers and teams. We expect to have 55 cars on the grid, which will add more

excitement."

Recently, Al Faisal teamed up with Germany's Fabian Schiller and China's Anthony Liu to take part in the 2023-2024 Asian Le Mans Series. Al Zubair and Schiller were well-placed to challenge for the title after the opening of two races at Sepang in Malaysia and round three in Dubai. They were not able to

push on from pole position and 10th and eighth-placed finishes in the last two races in Abu Dhabi cost them the chance of claiming the title.

The Omani also teamed up with Baumann, Martin Konrad, Fabian Schiller and American racer Anthony Bartone recently to take part in the 19th Hankook 24H Dubai

at the Dubai Autodrome. While lying in second place after 15 hours of the race, fuel pump and transmission issues forced the team to retire the car.

Baumann, 33, started his career in 2005 and has been a professional Mercedes driver in the GTWC, ADAC-GT, NLS/VLN and IMSA series since 2010. He won the overall Blancpain GT Series in 2016 with German team-mate Maximilian Buhk.

New recruit Grenier, also 33, will race alongside Al Zubair for the first time. Hailing from Stoneham-et-Tewkesbury in Québec, he started his career in karting before switching to the Formula BMW Americas series in 2008. After competing in the Star Mazda Championship and Indy Lights Series, Grenier had a season racing in the Porsche Carrera Cup Italia and won

the 2017 Lamborghini Super Trofeo Europe. He switched to the International GT Open and Blancpain GT Series, going on to represent Emil Frey Racing, Winward Motorsport and the Mercedes-AMG Team GruppeM Racing in the GTWC before joining Al Manar Racing by Getspeed for 2024.

Adam Osieka, Getspeed's CEO, is delighted to renew his association with Al Manar Racing for a second season. "The team has a strong line-up and three drivers who are very capable of competing and challenging for victories," said Osieka. "Al Faisal and Dominik have good experience in GT racing and have achieved some excellent results together in the past. Mikaël will be a strong addition to the team. He was one of our arch-rivals in the 2022 edition of the 24 Hours of Spa."

Cavaliers comeback stuns Celtics, Suns hold off Nuggets

LOS ANGELES: The Cleveland Cavaliers overturned a 22-point fourth-quarter deficit to snap the Boston Celtics' 11-game winning streak with a 105-104 victory on Tuesday.

A week after coming back from 10 points down in the fourth quarter to defeat Dallas, Cleveland conjured an even more remarkable late show to stun Boston, the Eastern Conference leaders.

Boston looked to be cruising to a 12th straight win after a clinical display left them leading 93-71 early in the fourth quarter in Cleveland.

But Dean Wade erupted for 20 points in the final frame, draining a string of three-pointers to haul Cleveland back into the contest.

Wade, who finished with 23 points, made the winning layup with 19 seconds remaining to put Cleveland ahead after Kristaps Porzingis's free throw had helped the Celtics take a 104-103 lead.

Boston thought they had been thrown a lifeline when Jayson Tatum appeared to be fouled as he



Cleveland Cavaliers guard Caris LeVert (3) drives to the basket against Boston Celtics guard Payton Pritchard (11) during the second half at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse. — USA TODAY Sports

went for a late shot.

But the call was overturned in Cleveland's favor and time ran out to give the Cavaliers a victory made all the more impressive given the absence of key starters Donovan Mitchell and Max Strus.

"It feels good, my team-mates had the trust in me to make those shots," Wade said afterwards.

"Them just having that belief

in me gave me the confidence and motivated me, and luckily they went in," added Wade, who was congratulated at courtside by Cleveland native and Kansas City Chiefs NFL star Travis Kelce following the win.

Wade finished with 23 points, including six-of-nine from three-point range, with eight rebounds.

Jarrett Allen had 21 points while



Phoenix Suns forward Kevin Durant (35) drives around Denver Nuggets guard Kentavious Caldwell-Pope (5) in the second half at Ball Arena. — USA TODAY Sports

Darius Garland and Isaac Okoro added 16 points apiece.

Boston were left wondering where it had all gone wrong after an extraordinary late collapse.

"We just went cold," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said. "I thought we had some good possessions where we didn't make the shot. But credit to them — Wade played really well and they made plays

down the stretch."

- Durant shines in Suns win -

The drama in Cleveland was rivalled by a thrilling battle in Denver later on Tuesday, where the Phoenix Suns recovered from blowing a 22-point third-quarter lead to defeat the Nuggets 117-107 in overtime.

Kevin Durant poured in 35 points for Phoenix while Grayson

Allen added 28 including eight three-pointers to help the Suns over the line.

But the Suns almost blew their chances of victory after a dismal fourth quarter display which saw them shoot just five-of-24 from the field.

Phoenix rediscovered their shooting touch in overtime however, outscoring Denver 15-5 to close out the win.

"We missed like 10 straight shots in the fourth quarter... but that's the name of the game, you just stick with it," Durant said afterwards. "In overtime we were able to get stops, rebound and get easy shots."

Jamal Murray topped the Denver scorers with 28 points while Nikola Jokic had 25 points, 16 rebounds and five assists.

In other games on Tuesday, Luka Doncic put up a 39-point triple-double with 10 rebounds and 11 assists, but it was not enough to prevent the Dallas Mavericks falling 137-120 to the Indiana Pacers.

—AFP



The Central Market for Vegetables and Fruits is gearing up to launch operations.

Khazaen Central Vegetables & Fruits Market nears completion

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Khazaen Economic City, a prominent investment destination in the Sultanate of Oman, boasts significant progress across various projects, with the Khazaen Central Market for Vegetables and Fruits reaching a remarkable 98% completion and initiating trial operations. This milestone marks a significant step forward for the city, aiming to become a key player in the region's food sector.

The central market, upon full operation, is expected to serve as a vital hub for fresh produce, connecting farmers, distributors and consumers.

Other Key ventures making headway at the Economic City are: Khazaen headquarters complex, Opal Biopharma Phase II, Saudi Arabia's Al Watania Al Khaliyyah for Paper Products, Al Zayzafon Factory for Sanitary Materials, Industrial Logistics Complex (Phase II) and Salalah Mills facility.

The city's Khazaen Dry Port is now fully operational, offering businesses a seamless gateway for trade.

Additionally, the Khazaen International Logistics Centre is attracting regional companies, further solidifying the city's position as a logistics hub.

Construction is well underway on various fronts, with 80% of the workers' housing village

completed.

An agreement has also been signed for the establishment of an integrated truck rest stop, catering to the needs of the transportation sector.

Furthermore, four agreements have been signed in the building materials industry, indicating potential growth in this crucial sector.

Infrastructure development continues at a steady pace, with Phase 2 completed and Phase 3 already awarded. The city's headquarters building is also complete, showcasing Khazaen's commitment to establishing a strong presence.

Efforts are underway to connect the city seamlessly to the wider region.

Half of the work on the connection to the Batinah Expressway has been finalised, improving accessibility and fostering further economic development.

Khazaen Economic City has attracted 30 investment contracts, spanning an area of half a million square metres.

This significant figure reflects the growing confidence of investors in the city's potential.

While the focus of this report is the 98% completion of the Central Market, Khazaen Economic City appears to be on track to become a major commercial and industrial centre in Oman, with progress evident across various sectors.

Investments in OPAZ zones, industrial cities valued at RO 19bn



Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, OPAZ Chairman, Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Theeb, OPAZ Vice Chairman, CEOs of the special, free, industrial and economic zones supervised by OPAZ are pictured during the annual media briefing held yesterday.

MUSCAT: The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) recently held its annual media briefing, which was attended by Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, OPAZ Chairman, Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Theeb, OPAZ Vice Chairman, CEOs of the Special, Free, Industrial and Economic Zones supervised by OPAZ.

The briefing was attended as well by several high-ranking officials, CEOs of various economic zones and representatives from the media. The purpose of the briefing was to highlight the achievements of OPAZ and the regions under its supervision in 2023, as well as to outline the targets and plans for 2024.

One of the key topics discussed during the briefing was the growth of investments in several vital sectors, including green, metal, pharmaceutical and petrochemical industries.

OPAZ emphasised its commitment to attracting environmentally friendly industries and achieving zero-neutrality by 2050, in line with Oman Vision 2040.

These efforts aim to enhance investment opportunities and create a favourable investment environment.

OPAZ oversees a total of 22 areas, which include 14 special economic zones such as the Special Economic Zone at Duqm and Khazaen Economic

14
THE NUMBER OF AREAS SUPERVISED BY OPAZ STOOD AT 14 EXISTING AREAS AND 8 UNDER DEVELOPMENT IN VARIOUS GOVERNORATES.

2,200 SQ KM
AN INTEGRATED INFRASTRUCTURE WITHIN THE ALLOCATED LAND AREAS EXCEEDING 2,200 SQUARE KILOMETRES CAPABLE OF ACCOMMODATING THE REQUIREMENTS OF VARIOUS ECONOMIC SECTORS.

75,000
THE AVERAGE OMANISATION RATE HITS 34%, OF WHICH MORE THAN 75,000 DIRECT EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AT VARIOUS ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNICAL LEVELS.

City, three free zones including the Sohar Free Zone, Salalah Free Zone and Mazyna Free Zone and nine industrial zones operated by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn).

Additionally, there are eight other zones currently under development, two of which are 2 economic zones and the rest are free zones.

Furthermore, there are five

industrial zones spread across various governorates of Oman. The average Omanisation rate hits 34%, of which more than 75,000 direct employment opportunities at various administrative and technical levels.

Investment size

OPAZ announced during its annual media briefing that the cumulative committed investment in all regions until the end of December 2023 amounted to approximately RO 19 billion.

The Special Economic Zone at Duqm accounted for a total cumulative investment volume of around RO 6 billion by December 2023.

Additionally, the free zones recorded a cumulative investment volume of about RO 5.3 billion, while the industrial zones reached a cumulative investment volume of RO 7.3 billion. Khazaen Economic City witnessed an investment volume of RO 429 million.

Accomplishments in 2023 Throughout the year, the total volume of committed investment increased by RO 3.5 billion in all areas overseen by OPAZ.

In the Special Economic Zone at Duqm alone, the amount of committed investment added in 2023 reached approximately RO 2.3 billion. This substantial growth can be attributed to the successful completion of several major projects in the region.

Moreover, the free zones

experienced an increase of over RO 800 million in committed investment during 2023, while the industrial zones saw an addition of more than RO 203 million.

Khazaen Economic City also witnessed a noteworthy increase in committed investment, amounting to about RO 126 million for the year.

In terms of services, OPAZ facilitated the establishment of 2,187 new commercial registers in the areas under its supervision.

Furthermore, it issued 2,183 public service licenses, 1,921 activity licenses, and 258 building permits.

Additionally, OPAZ granted 3,351 licenses to work and investors, along with 465 environmental permits and licenses. These one-stop services provided by OPAZ demonstrate its commitment to supporting businesses and streamlining the regulatory processes.

92% satisfaction rate of beneficiaries of OPAZ services

During the annual media briefing, OPAZ unveiled the impressive results of its customer satisfaction indicators, showcasing a satisfaction rate of 92% by the end of December 2023, a noticeable increase from 86% in June 2023.

These results encompassed the evaluation of various services provided by OPAZ in the supervised areas.

TURN TO PAGE 15

Oman attracts RO 20 million in space sector investments

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

The Sultanate of Oman has attracted RO 20 million worth of investments in the space sector within the last two years, according to Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani (pictured), Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology.

While speaking to *Observer* at the

Ministry's recent media gathering, Dr Al Shaithani stated that investments within the space sector grew after the release of the Executive Space Programme in 2023.

"As the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology started building momentum around space, companies from around the world started to recognise Oman as a place where there is an opportunity for space activities.

And as a result, the number of space companies that were established in Oman



increased in 2022 and 2023.

We have counted an investment of roughly RO 20 million in the last two years within space activities," the Minister stated. According to the Under-Secretary, some of the companies included local ones such as ETCO, the company behind Oman's first satellite Aman-1, and NASCOM, which is building the first spaceport in the MENA region in Duqm. Others are international companies, notably SatMENA, that have established a base in Oman.

Dr Al Shaithani also shared that some

non-space companies have ventured into the space sector.

"Some of the activities are driven by other technology companies. For example, Omantel, who have also opened up a new line of business for them in the space sector."

Moreover, the Ministry is currently developing 5 to 6 space projects out of 14 projects identified in the programme. These include a space cloud partnership, a space accelerator, a public satellite, and a space global conference. **TURN TO P15**



Bank Muscat opens new Asalah Centre in Adam branch

MUSCAT: Within its commitment to provide the best banking services to customers, Bank Muscat- the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman- celebrated the inauguration of a new Asalah Centre in the Bank's branch in the Wilayat of Adam, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, under the auspices of Salim bin Hamed al Mahrooqi, Representative of the Wilayat of Adam in the Majlis Ash'shura, in presence of a number of management members and customers.

The new centre is opened to fulfil the banking needs of Asalah Priority Banking customers and bringing services closer to them in the wilayat, which is witnessing rapid growth in various aspects of development.

Customers can enjoy various

banking services and facilities in the Adam Asalah new centre, which has been equipped with the latest technologies to provide an exceptional banking experience.

On the occasion, Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, Deputy General Manager - Interior Regions, Bank Muscat, said: "We are delighted with the inauguration of Asalah Center in Adam which is projected to serve a wide segment of privilege banking customers in this wilayat in particular and Al Dakhiliyah Governorate in general. Bank Muscat pays close attention to its customers and ensure its services are accessible and reachable for all. I would like to thank all customers for their continuous trust in the Bank and the products and services it provides and we will work to provide the best continuously."

Own a Lexus this Ramadhan and get exclusive benefits

MUSCAT: Lexus Oman is offering customers an opportunity to own a Lexus and get exclusive benefits. Service up to 10 Years / 100,000 kms (whichever is earlier), 1 year free registration and a chance to win 1 from 9 iPhone 15 phone. (Conditions apply. For details visit any Saud Bahwan Automotive showroom).

The Lexus range in Oman includes the LX, RX, NX, UX, LC, LS, ES and IS. The models are also available in Hybrid Electric Vehicle options and F Sport options too.

The luxurious and impressive Lexus LX is an icon of luxury and capability. The LX makes any drive rewarding with its choice of two powertrain options. The V6 twin-turbo 3.5-litre petrol engine achieves class-leading performance that surpasses that of a conventional V8, producing 409 hp and up to 66.28 Kg.m torque.

The pioneering Lexus RX with its sleek style and dynamic performance is a popular choice in the Lexus range.

The RX is equipped with inline 4-cylinder, 2.4-litre turbocharged engine that produces 275 hp



and 430 nm of torque is paired to a new 8-speed Direct-Shift automatic transmission (8AT).

The Lexus NX is a great choice for those looking for enhanced city driving experiences. The NX is equipped with two powertrain options.

A newly developed inline 4-cylinder, 2.4 L turbocharged engine that produces 275 hp and 430 nm of torque and is mated to a new 8-speed Direct-Shift automatic transmission (8AT).

The compact, powerful and luxury UX reflects the "Yet

Philosophy," in many ways, but especially in terms of design, performance and utility.

The flagship Lexus LS is an inspiring luxury sedan which is available in 3.5-litre V6 Multi Stage Hybrid System producing 354 hp, a 3.5-litre V6 naturally aspirated Atkinson-cycle producing 311 hp and 38.7 Kg.M Torque, and a 3.5-litre twin-turbo V6 engine producing 415 hp and 61.2 Kg.M of Torque.

The stylish, classy and popular Lexus ES is available with two powertrain options. ES350 is

powered by a 3.5 litre, 24 valve, V6 engine that produces 298 hp and 36.3 kg.m. of torque. While the ES250 is powered by high efficiency 2.5 litre, 16-valve DOHC engine that produces 204 hp and 24.8 kg.m of torque.

For more information, please visit www.lexusoman.com or subscribe to YouTube channel "Lexus Oman", or like Lexus Oman on Facebook or Follow Oman. Lexus on Instagram. For further details, please visit your nearest Saud Bahwan Automotive Showroom or call 93320817.

Samsung and SARCO inaugurate Azaiba service plaza

MUSCAT: Samsung Gulf Electronics has recently unveiled its new state-of-the-art customer service plaza in the Azaiba area in Muscat, Oman.

Operated by Samsung partner SARCO Oman, the newly upgraded Plaza is designed to provide a modern customer service experience that is in line with global standards.

Strategically located in the heart of Muscat, in the Azaiba area, the store offers comprehensive mobile and tablet repairs, software updates, and mobile phone recycling services.

Strategically located in the heart of Oman's electronics district of Azaiba, the store offers comprehensive mobile and tablet repairs, software updates, and mobile phone recycling services.



Strategically located in the Azaiba area, the store offers comprehensive mobile and tablet repairs, software updates, and mobile phone recycling services.

Kiran Tewari, Director of Customer Service, Samsung Gulf Electronics, said, "We are delighted to introduce our brand-new Customer Service Plaza

only provides comprehensive repair and update services but also fosters a collaborative environment for customers to discover our latest devices and enjoy enhanced customer experiences."

Sanjeev Awasthi, CEO SARCO Oman said, "The cutting-edge facility is meticulously crafted with the customer in mind, providing a contemporary and inviting space for unparalleled care and support for their devices.

At the heart of this facility lies a commitment to exceptional customer experiences. As we open this new space, we look to welcoming our customers in the country and delivering high-quality service that is synonymous with Samsung and SARCO Oman."

Talabat unveils customer ordering trends throughout 2023

MUSCAT: Talabat, the region's leading platform for everyday deliveries has unveiled the most popular orders and food trends observed in 2023 - highlighting just how customers across the region love to use the app everyday.

During 2023, customers ordered fried chicken over 971,037 times, making it the favourite cuisine of the country, followed by burgers and sandwiches.

Customers loved starting their mornings with karak tea from Tea Time during the hours of 7AM-11AM - ordering it over 31,121 times. After all, breakfast is the most important meal of the day! Insights show that customers loved to indulge in twister sandwich from My Berry during the hours of 12am-3am, ordering it over 16,417 times.

In 2023, support for local Omani brands poured in, where



the original chicken sandwich from Kucu reigned supreme - with customers across Oman ordering it over 60,502 times.

While talabat Mart offers a diverse range of items, Mazoon Milk, Oman Oasis Drinking Water and Dahabi Arabic Bread conquered all when it came to the most loved groceries to fly off the shelves quickest.

Customers absolutely loved fruit salad in 2023, sweetening the deal by ordering it over 2053 times - which goes to show that there's always room for dessert!

Digitising corporate banking: a necessity for business growth?

MUSCAT: In the midst of a significant digital shift in the global financial landscape, banks such as Sohar International stand at the forefront, driving a strategic transformation in Oman's corporate financial sphere through advanced platforms and services.

The banking industry stands on the cusp of profound digital transformation. The 2023 Financial Access Survey by the International Monetary Fund highlighted the widespread increase in access points for digital financial services, resulting in a notable surge in both the quantity and scale of digital financial transactions.

This trend aligns with the Top 10 Emerging Banking Trends of 2024, emphasising the transformative influence of technology in reshaping security measures, operational efficiency,



Sohar International's platform distinguishes itself in the industry through flawless integration and bespoke solutions

and the overall customer experience within the banking industry. This shift is pertinent for businesses of all sizes – small, medium, and large.

For banks, it necessitates a nuanced understanding of their clientele within a flexible

ecosystem that integrates cutting-edge technological advancements.

Core modernisation, interoperability, and integration play critical roles in aligning with this corporate digital evolution.

The payment sector is rapidly evolving in Oman and globally, driven by emerging technologies that are reshaping payment methods, transfers, and savings and investment decisions.

In Oman, there is a clear and rapid trend among banking sector consumers and businesses, favouring electronic means of transfer over traditional cash and cheques. Looking at automated clearing house (ACH) transactions, both volume and value have consistently grown.

In just five years, the volume has increased over 2.5 times from 7.2 million transactions in 2018 to 18.5 million transactions in 2022. A similar trend of 2.5 times

growth can be observed in the value of ACH transactions, rising from RO 4.7 billion in 2018 to RO 11.5 billion in 2022.

This transformation underscores the dynamic shift towards digital transactions in Oman.

The imperative for digital transformation in corporate banking is driven by the need for banks to swiftly adapt to changing customer demands and market dynamics.

Banks are compelled not only to differentiate their offerings but also to pioneer innovative solutions that attract and retain corporate clients, enabling them to manage and grow their businesses.

Banks strategically investing in digital tools gain a distinct advantage, positioning themselves as market leaders in an era where adaptability and technological

prowess are paramount for corporate success.

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) recognises the immense potential of technology in shaping the future of finance and is committed to fostering an environment that embraces innovation while safeguarding its citizens' interests.

One such initiative is the introduction of the PSP licencing framework, establishing clear guidelines and standards for payment service providers.

This framework promotes transparency and accountability, creating a competitive marketplace benefiting both businesses and consumers.

From a corporate banking perspective, the CBO directed all banks operating in the country to use online methods for salary transfers instead of traditional means.

Oman attracts RO 20 million in space sector investments

FROM PAGE 13

In 2023, Oman witnessed significant developments in its space sector. The first Omani satellite, Aman-1, was successfully launched in November following a failed attempt earlier in the same year. NASCOM also announced plans to build the first spaceport in the MENA region in Duqm.

Additionally, the Global Space and Technology Company revealed the creation of Zone 88, a “scientific and economic area dedicated to space sciences and industries,” which will include multiple space projects such as a space habitat centre and a ground launch station.

Furthermore, earlier this year, ETCO Space announced plans to launch a joint venture project to manufacture satellites in Oman.

Raysut Cement slashes losses to RO 5m in 2023, down from RO 97m in 2022

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 6

Financially-troubled cement manufacturer Raysut Cement — the largest cement producer in the Sultanate of Oman — has dramatically pared its net losses for 2023 to RO 5.079 million, down from an unprecedented RO 97.634 million a year earlier.

The Salalah-based company is currently governed by an interim board of directors instituted by the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

That action followed the discovery of financial anomalies that threatened to destabilise the publicly listed company.

“Raysut Cement Company and its subsidiaries demonstrated enhanced performance when compared to the prior year,” said Hamdan bin Ahmed al Shaqsi, Chairman of the Board of Directors, set up by the market regulator to help turnaround the financially-beleaguered company.

“During the financial year 2023, the company effectively managed its costs through



Raysut Cement's flagship plant in Salalah.

optimisation measures, resulting in operating profit compared to the loss reported in the previous year 2022,” he stated in the Directors' Report for the financial year ended on December 31, 2023.

Raysut Cement Group owns and operates a string of subsidiaries and associate companies that together ensure an expansive market presence encompassing the Gulf, Yemen and East African regions. While parent company Raysut Cement

covers markets in Dhofar, Yemen and East Africa, Sohar Cement has its focus on northern Oman.

UAE-based Pioneer Cement, a wholly-owned subsidiary, caters to both the Oman and UAE markets.

Through its associate firm Mukalla Raysut Trading & Industrial Company, the Group targets the Yemeni market. Coverage of the Indian Ocean island of Maldives is handled by another subsidiary, Raysut

Maldives Cement Pvt Ltd.

Cement production across the Group totalled around 3.090 million tonnes in 2023, which was marginally lower than the previous year's tally of 3.160 million tonnes.

However, production of clinker — an essential component of cement manufacturing — climbed to 3.144 million tonnes, up from 3.004 million tonnes in 2022.

Total revenue across the Group dipped to RO 65.54 million in 2023 versus RO 69.07 million a year earlier. Operating profit improved to RO 2.45 million against an operating loss of RO 41.85 million in 2022.

Board Chairman Hamdan al Shaqsi added: “The Group aims to achieve optimum capacity utilisation in all the plants while continuing with the cost reduction initiatives and focusing on increasing the sales revenue.

“The steps taken towards setting strategic direction, improving the internal control system and strengthening corporate governance system and

competency in human resources are also progressing as planned.”

In December 2022, the market regulator invoked its powers under the Commercial Companies Law and the Securities Law to dissolve the existing Board of Directors.

It cited in this regard the Group's failure to suitably address concerns over “material misrepresentations” uncovered in Raysut Cement financial reporting for Q2 2022.

The Authority instituted a new ‘temporary board’ with a mandate to restore the company's organisational and operational stability and thereafter to also address all of the shortcomings that led to its financial upheaval.

Last October, the CMA announced that a criminal case brought against certain senior representatives of Raysut Cement had been referred to the competent court for trial.

It follows an investigation spearheaded by the Authority that uncovered “suspected financial and administration violations” at Raysut Cement.

ITHCA signs cooperation pact with Saudi telecom firm

MUSCAT: ITHCA Group signed a cooperation agreement with Integrated Telecom Company, (Salam) on Tuesday.

The agreement aims to enhance mutual cooperation in the field of connecting international interconnection cables and expanding international land connectivity between Oman and Saudi Arabia.

The signing falls within the framework of ITHCA Group's participation in LEAP 2024 tech event, held in Riyadh, on March 4-7, 2024.

The agreement was signed by Eng Said bin Abdullah al Mandhari, CEO of ITHCA Group, and Eng Ahmed al Anqari, CEO of Salam.

From his side, Al Mandhari stated: Through this partnership, both ITHCA Group and

Salam will work on enabling international land connectivity between Oman and Saudi Arabia by laying cross-border land cables.

ITHCA Group will undertake the investment, financing and implementation of the work phases of the project from the Omani side.

This will be carried out through one of the group's companies, which is Oman Data Networks (DATAOM), whereas Salam will non-exclusively carry out the project from the Saudi side.

Salam is one of the telecommunication companies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that provides various telecommunication products and services to its customers in the country.

Businesses in Oman navigate significant changes in the region's evolving tax landscape

MUSCAT: EY Oman hosted its Annual Tax Seminar 2024 in Muscat, helping businesses navigate the evolving tax landscape in the country and the Mena region.

The tax and regulatory landscape in Oman and the wider Mena region continues to evolve alongside global fiscal developments.

The seminar had participation of around 180 C-suite executives and finance professionals from Oman-based companies as well as representatives of several multinational corporations. EY regional tax leaders discussed how the future of tax is being reshaped and the growing significance of tax in the Mena region.

Areas of discussion included the Oman tax developments, base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS) and what is expected from business to comply with transfer pricing and BEPS 2.0 rules. Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) and Sustainability tax development conversations



People shop inside a shopping mall in Muscat.

leveraged the knowledge and practical experience of EY's senior tax professionals to offer comprehensive insights.

Updates on indirect taxes, e-invoicing and the ongoing digitalisation of tax compliance by the Oman Tax Authority with a focus on the e-filing of returns on its portal.

In addition, the sessions explored the state of the country's economy and the opportunities it presents to companies and investors, as well as international tax reforms

and their impact on the local tax environment.

Taxation has emerged as an important revenue generator for Oman's government, accounting for around 15 per cent of the national GDP. In comparison, the largest contributor — the oil and gas sector — represents 70 per cent of the GDP. Oman currently has three main tax streams in place — excise tax, value-added tax (VAT) and corporate tax, including withholding tax.

Ahmed al Esry, EY Mena Tax

Leader, says: “In line with its drive to adopt the latest technologies, the Oman Tax Authority is striving to digitalise taxation. This has resulted in a shift toward electronic interaction with taxpayers, paperless assessments, more thorough data analytics based on detailed information requests and shorter assessment timelines.

“Businesses will be expected to have more transparent record retention, which will enable them to engage with the tax authorities in a more meaningful way.

Therefore, digital readiness will become crucial going forward.”

The seminar further examined regulatory updates and recent tax trends across Mena region with a focus on the GCC, which affect Omani businesses operating in other jurisdictions. These included the implementation of corporate income tax (CIT) in the UAE and Bahrain, the introduction of e-invoicing in Saudi Arabia and major amendments to the tax law in Kuwait.

Investments in OPAZ zones, cities valued at RO 19 bn

FROM PAGE 13

Notably, the assessment included the Omap platform, a comprehensive digital mapping system that offers integrated geographical maps for special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities. This platform empowers users to access services and detailed information through digital maps and tools, facilitating efficient navigation and utilisation of the areas.

The evaluation results also encompassed the central compliance system “Eltizam,” the investor relations management system, the unified electronic cadastral drawing service, environmental permits, trademark registration, the central inspection system, electronic registration of small and medium enterprises, and other services.

The high satisfaction rate



Sohar Free Zone

reflects the effectiveness and quality of these services, demonstrating OPAZ's commitment to briefing the needs and expectations of its customers.

Institutional Transformation Programme

In pursuit of continuous improvement, OPAZ initiated

the implementation of the Institutional Transformation Programme, which underwent several stages, beginning with a comprehensive study and analysis of the current situation within OPAZ and the regions it oversees.

This process resulted in a series of recommendations, projects and initiatives aimed at supporting

transformation and developing a strategy for OPAZ. The strategy encompasses six main pillars and 28 sub-objectives derived from the tasks and competencies of OPAZ.

Prominent objectives within this strategy include assessing the current situation, enhancing institutional performance and

work mechanisms, fostering staff training and knowledge transfer, formulating and implementing marketing and promotion strategies, attracting local and foreign investments, identifying infrastructure requirements, services and facilities, and reviewing regulations and policies to better serve investors.

These efforts are dedicated to creating an attractive investment environment across all regions in the Sultanate of Oman.

As part of its commitment to environmental sustainability and digital transformation, OPAZ ceased the use of paper in both internal and external correspondence starting from July 1, 2023, except specific interactions with certain official bodies.

This transition reflects OPAZ's dedication to embracing innovative practices and

reducing its ecological footprint while maintaining effective communication channels.

New areas overseen by OPAZ are under development

OPAZ is developing a number of new zones such as the Economic Zone at Al Dhahirah EZAD, which covers an area of 388 square kilometres, as well as the Economic Zone at Al Rawda with an area of 56 square kilometres, and the Muscat International Airport Free Zone with an area of 1.7 square kilometres, which will be operated by Asyad Group.

Work is also underway to develop a number of industrial zones supervised by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), such as Mahas Industrial City, Ibri Industrial City, Seih Al Sarya Industrial City, Al Mudhaibi Industrial City, and Thamrait Industrial City.

Why revitalising the events sector can help drive economic growth

The Exhibitions, Conferences, and Events Committee of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) plays an important role by discussing issues of interest to companies operating in the events space.

The committee also addresses challenges facing the sector, especially after the recent pandemic that greatly impacted the events space for four long years.

It seeks to enable members of the Chamber to play their desired role in promoting economic growth through the organisation of exhibitions and other such events.

According to Committee officials, the events sector can help promote economic growth by showcasing opportunities for



HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

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

internal and external investment through exhibitions.

This requires empowering this sector while also enhancing incentives and facilities for its workforce.

Oman can leverage its vast natural, historical, and cultural assets, in addition to its modern infrastructure, to encourage international companies and institutions to participate in the exhibitions held in the country annually.

In this regard, the Chamber's Exhibitions Committee stresses the importance of integration between the Omani private sector and various stakeholders in the country to enhance the attractiveness of exhibitions and work to enhance their competitiveness.

The Chamber organises many events and activities aimed at achieving the goals

OMAN CAN LEVERAGE ITS VAST NATURAL, HISTORICAL, AND CULTURAL ASSETS, IN ADDITION TO ITS MODERN INFRASTRUCTURE, TO ENCOURAGE INTERNATIONAL COMPANIES AND INSTITUTIONS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE EXHIBITIONS HELD IN THE COUNTRY ANNUALLY.

enshrined in the Oman Vision 2040, especially those related to improving the business environment and expanding economic diversification.

From this standpoint, the Chamber is currently working on implementing a proposal related to revitalising exhibitions by holding an expanded symposium that brings to together all stakeholders operating in the field of conferences and exhibitions.

The forum will discuss challenges that contribution to a decline in private players organising international exhibitions.

Various proposals for invigorating local players will be deliberated upon as well.

The Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) is considered the hub for international exhibitions held

in Oman. Located close to Muscat International Airport, it features many modern halls equipped with technologies and capabilities for organising major international exhibitions and conferences.

This centre offers world-class services with ample capacities to host major conferences and exhibition with delegate and visitor turnouts in their thousands.

During the coming months, Oman is set to host a number of large exhibitions with a focus on technology, building materials, food, health, education, and infrastructure.

By providing platforms for networking, trade and information exchange, and product displays, these events will contribute to stronger investment inflows and economic development.

Bitcoin hits record high, completing a stunning comeback

Bitcoin hit a record high of more than \$69,000 on Tuesday, capping a remarkable comeback for the volatile cryptocurrency after its value plunged in 2022 amid a market meltdown.

Bitcoin's price has risen more than 300 per cent since November 2022, a resurgence that few predicted when the price dropped below \$20,000 that year. Its previous record was just under \$68,790 in November 2021, as crypto markets boomed and amateur investors poured savings into experimental digital coins.

The cryptocurrency was "pronounced dead for the 150th time," said Cory Klippsten, CEO of Swan, a financial services firm focused on bitcoin. "And bitcoin continues to do what bitcoin does, which is win people over as they take the time to actually learn about it."

Bitcoin's recent surge has been driven by investor enthusiasm for a new financial product tied to the digital coin. In January, US regulators authorised a group of crypto companies and traditional finance firms to offer exchange-traded funds, or ETFs, which track bitcoin's price. The funds provide a simple way for people to invest in the crypto markets without directly owning the cryptocurrency.

As of last week, investors had poured more than \$7 billion into the investment products, propelling bitcoin's rapid rise, according to Bloomberg Intelligence.

The price of ether, the second-most-valuable digital currency after bitcoin, has also risen more than 50 per cent this year, reaching about \$3,800. Its increase has been driven partly by enthusiasm over the prospect that regulators may also approve an ETF tied to ether.

But cryptocurrencies remain volatile. Within a few minutes of hitting the record, bitcoin's price dropped to about \$67,500.

And despite the euphoria, the crypto industry is still



DAVID YAFFE-BELLANY

The author is a technology reporter for The New York Times.



A person operates a crypto currencies ATM in Barcelona, Spain. – The New York Times

BITCOIN'S RECENT SURGE HAS BEEN DRIVEN BY INVESTOR ENTHUSIASM FOR A NEW FINANCIAL PRODUCT TIED TO THE DIGITAL COIN. IN JANUARY, US REGULATORS AUTHORISED A GROUP OF CRYPTO COMPANIES AND TRADITIONAL FINANCE FIRMS TO OFFER EXCHANGE-TRADED FUNDS, OR ETFs, WHICH TRACK BITCOIN'S PRICE. THE FUNDS PROVIDE A SIMPLE WAY FOR PEOPLE TO INVEST IN THE CRYPTO MARKETS WITHOUT DIRECTLY OWNING THE CRYPTOCURRENCY.

navigating the legal aftermath of the 2022 crash. Sam Bankman-Fried, the disgraced founder of the collapsed FTX crypto exchange, is set to be sentenced to prison at the end of March. The Securities and Exchange Commission has sued several prominent crypto firms, including the US exchange Coinbase, arguing that the companies offer unregistered securities.

Courts have begun weighing in on some of those lawsuits, and the outcome could determine whether crypto companies can continue operating in the United States. Many sceptics remain unconvinced that digital currencies offer much real-world utility.

"There's no inherent value," said John Reed Stark, a former SEC official and an outspoken critic of the crypto industry. "There's no proven track record of adoption or reliance."

Bitcoin was invented in the aftermath of the 2008 financial

crisis by a mysterious developer using the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto.

The digital coin was originally envisioned as a decentralised alternative to the traditional financial system, a way for people to exchange funds without relying on banks or other intermediaries.

But as bitcoin's value increased, it became a vehicle for financial speculation.

The currency's price rose rapidly before falling just as quickly — minting new millionaires one day and erasing their savings the next.

In the early part of the pandemic, a surge in day trading by amateur investors helped turn cryptocurrencies into a hot commodity.

The industry promoted itself in splashy magazine spreads and Super Bowl commercials, sending bitcoin's price soaring.

Within a year, the bubble burst. A series of corporate implosions culminated in November 2022 with the

collapse of FTX. Investors lost billions of dollars as bitcoin's price plummeted to around \$16,000.

The industry's fortunes started improving in August, when a federal appeals court paved the way for companies to offer ETFs tied to bitcoin. An ETF is essentially a basket of assets broken up into shares. Investors buy shares in the basket, rather than owning the assets directly.

In the crypto world, that means investors can gain exposure to bitcoin without mastering the technical details of a digital currency wallet or entrusting large amounts of money to fly-by-night firms with checkered legal histories.

Financial giants like BlackRock and Fidelity are offering the bitcoin investment products, providing a measure of stability to a volatile industry.

For years, crypto advocates predicted that the approval of bitcoin ETFs would bring billions of dollars in new

investment to the industry, though some analysts expressed scepticism about those projections.

Early data suggests the impact has been significant. Over recent months, the approval of the investment vehicles has combined with other factors to send bitcoin's price up.

"During every period when you're in despair, it looks like crypto and bitcoin will never come back," said John Todaro, an analyst at Needham who tracks the crypto industry. "But we've seen time and time again that it continues to go forward."

The amount of new bitcoin that goes into circulation will decrease because of an event known as "the halving."

The event, which was programmed into bitcoin's underlying code, will reduce by half the amount of bitcoin that people receive when they run software to validate crypto transactions (a process commonly known as "mining").

— The New York Times

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LIFESTYLE

Men steer boats during sunset at the Dal Lake in Srinagar. — AFP



FASHION

A model presents a creation by Saint-Laurent for the Fall/Winter 2024-2025 menswear collection on the sidelines of the Paris Fashion Week, in Paris. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

Bollywood actress Sonakshi Sinha gestures as she attends an event at the FICCI Frames 2024 in Mumbai. — AFP



FILM

An Oscar statue is seen during the 96th Oscars Governors Ball preview at the Ray Dolby Ballroom in Hollywood, California. — AFP



TRAVEL

The Hundertwasser House, an apartment building, one of the city's most visited sites and designed by Austrian visual artist and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, is pictured in Vienna, Austria. — AFP

art & life

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BUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF PROFESSIONAL FILM INDUSTRY IN OMAN

Oman Daily Observer delves into the transformative journey of aspiring film-makers in Oman and Morocco, navigating the challenges of low budgets and limited resources... P20



THE CHANGING WORLD



Shaddad al Musalmy

Let's make the coming Ramadhan free of food waste

Shaddad al Musalmy is a seasoned Omani journalist who worked for top newspapers in the country. He's currently one of Oman Observer's senior editors and contributes across different beats. His commentaries about life in general paints a vivid picture of the changing landscape in Oman.

FOR FEEDBACK, EMAIL THE AUTHOR AT shadadm75@gmail.com

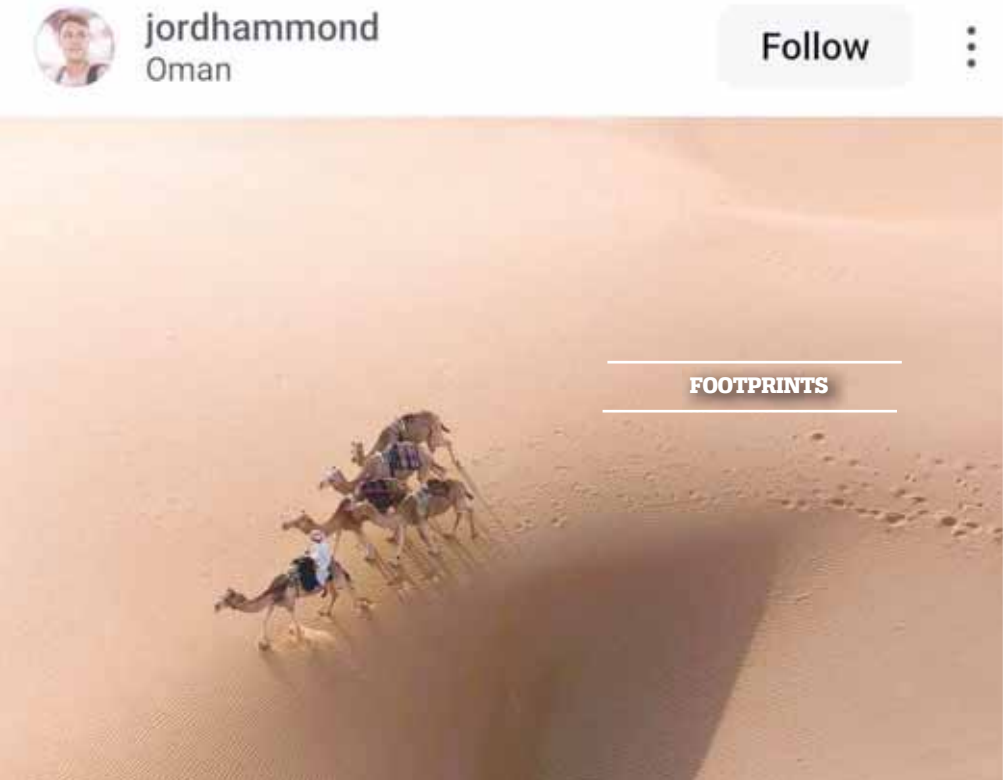
RAMADHAN, THE MONTH of fasting and prayers, starts next week. But I am worried about food wastage. I may not have any control over what people prepare in their homes for iftar, but through this column, I hope to remind people that we need to take note of the effects of food wastage. Ramadhan in Oman, just like in

any other country, is the most sacred month and hence deserves adequate and timely preparations. To many, Ramadhan is a month of togetherness, and this means a lot of iftar meal preparations. Let me emphasise that food wastage is prohibited in Islam. It is sinful to throw away food that is still good. Instead, it should be given to the poor and the needy if possible or refrigerated for future use. However, there is no objection to throwing it away if the food is rotten. Muslims should avoid extravagance. 'Eat and drink but waste not by extravagance; certainly, He (Allah) likes not those who waste by extravagance' – Quran 7:31. During my ignorant days of food wastage, my home was full of food life during Ramadhan. The lady of my house used to start the preparation for the iftar at 3 pm. Our family gathered at

the table and broke the fast with milk and dates. The iftar table had luqaimat and fruits. After Maghrib prayers, we went for our dinner which consisted of different varieties, including a whole meal that mostly consisted of rice and curry, chapati and beans, green bananas, salad and samosas, and different other snacks. After the Taraweeh prayers (evening prayer), we used to have dessert, which was usually yogurt and peach, fruit salad, or custard. All these were prepared for just one-day iftar, but half of them would end up unconsumed. However, after I became aware of the dangers of food wastage, I made it a point to make sure there was no food wastage in my own home. We now follow a few tips that anyone can use. Always plan meals. When food is prepared in excess quantities, it tends to be thrown away. The first step, therefore, is to

reduce the amount of food prepared. Here I mean prepare only the food that is needed. This is a very simple way to reduce food wastage. Another simple tip is to enjoy meals in moderation. And leftovers can be managed if consumed the next day. Or, we can be more creative with leftovers and transform them into suhoor. For many of us, food wastage has become a habit. This puts extra strain on our natural resources and damages our environment. When we throw away food, we waste labour, effort, investment and precious resources. I believe reducing food wastage is essential in a world where millions of people go hungry every day. It's up to us to change our habits. Wasting food can't be a way of life. Never and I refuse. Till we meet next, think twice before you prepare more than you need.

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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THAILAND IS RENOWNED among hard-charging tourists for night-life in Bangkok, full moon parties on Koh Phangan island and hedonistic walking streets in Pattaya. It's also a magnet for the bohemian and wellness crowds who flock to the mountain destinations of Chiang Mai and Pai.

But mostly ignored by foreign tourists is Lampang, in northern Thailand. This utterly charming, riverside city of about 90,000 people has preserved the historic architecture and stately squares from its days as a major city in the ancient Lanna kingdom and a hub in the teak lumber trade. Wooden temples from centuries ago and two-story teak mansions from the late 1800s and early 1900s still stand, and alongside the Wang River, the streets in the Kat Kong Ta enclave are like an open-air museum of well-preserved Chinese shophouses and European gingerbread-style buildings.

ping. Even the horse carriages that clip-clop around town carrying tourists were originally the main transit for train passengers after the station opened in 1916.

RIVER VIEWS, KHAO SOI AND THE POWER OF BUDDHA

I first heard about Lampang in 2022, when my wife, Susan, and I moved to Chiang Mai, and we met a doctor named Lawrence Nelson, a retired physician-researcher known as Doc with the National Institutes of Health in the United States. He recommended a visit, and in early January, we finally started our five-day visit to Lampang in a spartan, four-car train from Chiang Mai (for less than \$1 each) on a 2.5-hour ride into the forested valley nestling the city.

You can find dozens of suitable homestays and hotels for less than \$50 a night, and few pricier than that. We lucked out with a spacious room at Kanecha's Home, a homes-

baht or about \$340, including several tasty black bean bars sprinkled with sesame seeds.

Late that afternoon, we meandered around the town. The weather was perfect, in the mid-80s, and the sky was block-printed with cumulus puffs. We strolled through the grassy, tree-shaded town square, past a tiered shrine with three tall teak pillars that locals wrapped with colourful ribbons for an auspicious start to 2024.

A square-block market building made of concrete was closing down when we stopped at a sidewalk flower shop across the street. A man named Reangprakaiy Decha nodded hello and went on to share that his family has been selling bunches of daisies and chrysanthemums and garlands of orange marigolds for temple offerings for 50 years.

Reangprakaiy, 39, meditates daily "to be sharper; not to cheat people, but to help them," he said. Why, I asked, did the city seem so

Reangprakaiy said, "and it spreads out for the Thai people to be peaceful and happy."

BANANA TREES AND UBIQUITOUS CHICKEN BOWLS

Mornings are for markets in Lampang, and before sunrise the main market on the north side of the Ratsada Phisek Bridge is a smorgasbord of everything from pig heads to live eels, fried fish to fresh vegetables.

That afternoon, we rented a motorbike and headed 2 miles southeast to get to the bottom of the city's chicken fixation.

Local Thais tell the story of how Buddha came to town, and the deity Indra disguised himself as a rooster to ensure the residents woke up to offer alms. A more recent explanation can be found at Dhanabadee ceramics factory, which claims to be the original source of Lampang's ubiquitous chicken bowls.



All around town are extremely friendly residents, as well as statues and images of chickens — from maintenance hole covers to traffic circles. Chickens are the symbol of Lampang and appear on its ceramics, acclaimed across Thailand, that include bowls and cups hand-painted with black-and-red roosters.

The charm in Lampang comes not from amusements and attractions built for tourists, but in exploring integral parts of a functioning city. Shophouses have evolved into boutiques and cafes. Ceramics factory stores are ideal for gift shop-

ping. Even the horse carriages that clip-clop around town carrying tourists were originally the main transit for train passengers after the station opened in 1916.

We rode bikes along the quiet lane next to the river, glossily reflecting the silver spires of a temple, in search of a signature dish of Northern Thailand, khao soi. We found a delicious version of the curry noodle soup at the roadside restaurant Jay Jay Chan (a banner with Thai script that looks like "17" signified that it was vegetarian), with a tidy buffet station on the shaded sidewalk and a large wok gurgling with vegetable soup. Total bill: 120

peaceful, the people so friendly? He told us that it had to do with the power of a certain Buddha statue.

Nearby is a beautiful temple, Wat Phra Kaeo Don Tao Suchadaram, Reangprakaiy said, where legend has it that in the 1400s, an elephant carrying Thailand's sacred emerald Buddha statue diverted to Lampang and wouldn't budge. The statue graced the temple for 32 years. It's now enshrined in the Grand Palace in Bangkok, but its energy remains, he said.

"We believe that the power of this Buddha statue is very strong,"



On a tour of the factory and museum, an English-speaking guide shared that the factory founder moved from China in the 1950s, discovering that the local white kaolin mineral was ideal for making ceramics. He opened a factory and, borrowing a motif popular in China for centuries, hand-painted chickens on cups and bowls. Admiration of the Lampang chicken bowls spread across Thailand over the decades, and now there are scores of workshops and factories producing chicken-adorned tableware. — NYT



NATURAL PREDATORS LIKE birds, beetles and bugs might be an effective alternative to pesticides, keeping crop-devouring pests populations down while boosting crop yields, researchers said on Wednesday.

Pests are responsible for around 10 per cent — or 21 million tonnes — of crop losses every year, but controlling them has led to the widespread use of chemical pesticides.

Could birds, spiders and beetles among other invertebrate predators do the job as well?

Researchers in Brazil, the United States and the Czech

damage that pesticides cause to ecosystems and biological control was well documented, from biodiversity loss and water and soil pollution to human health risks.

The researchers found that predators were more effective at pest control in regions with greater rain variability — which is expected to increase because of climate change.

The researchers were also surprised to find that having a single species of natural predator was as effective as having multiple species, Boldorini said.

"Generally speaking, the



Republic analysed past research on predator pest control and found that they helped reduce pest populations by more than 70 per cent, while increasing crop yields by 25 per cent.

"Natural predators are good pest control agents, and their maintenance is fundamental to guaranteeing pest control in a future with imminent climate change," lead author Gabriel Boldorini, a PhD student at the Federal Rural University of Pernambuco in Brazil, said.

Although the researchers did not directly compare the effectiveness of invertebrates versus pesticides, he said, the

more species there are, the better ecosystems function. But there are exceptions," he said, adding that a single species could do the job just as well.

Climate change and rising carbon dioxide levels affect both crop yield and pest dynamics by expanding the distribution of pests and increasing their survival rates.

Meanwhile, other studies have shown that invertebrates vital for ecosystem health are suffering a rapid decline globally. Boldorini said the conservation of invertebrates "guarantees pest control and increased productivity, without damaging ecosystems". —AFP

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF PROFESSIONAL FILM INDUSTRY IN OMAN

MAKING A FILM ON A LOW BUDGET IS AN ENCOURAGING CHALLENGE, ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNG INDIVIDUALS STARTING THEIR ARTISTIC OR CINEMATIC JOURNEY.

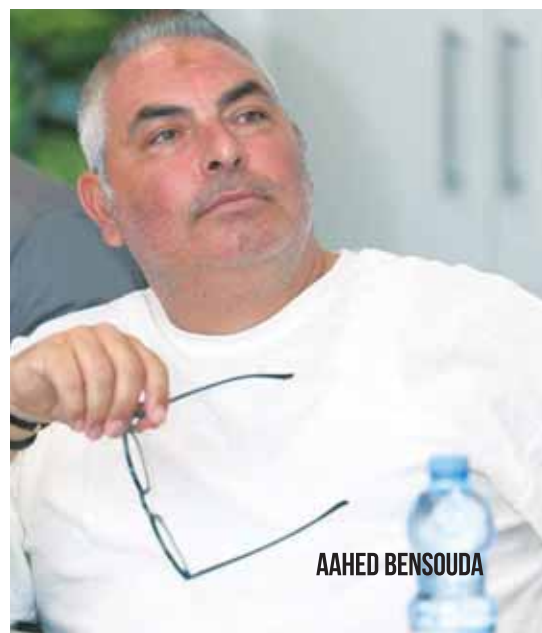


KHALID AL BALUSHI
@KHALID_ALBALUSHI94

Cinema is a magical window that tells stories, addresses issues and sheds light on the pain of society. It is not just an art but a unique industry that allows directors, actors and cinematographers to stand as creative readers creating vivid scenes that dance on the strings of reality and imagination. All successes start from nothing — learning, stumbling, falling, then rising to embark on a new beginning, climbing and clinging to the ropes of hope to reach the peaks of success.

Making a film on a low budget is an encouraging challenge, especially for young individuals starting their artistic or cinematic journey. A cinematic director, Aahed Bensouda, emphasises the importance of understanding that cinema now is an industry. Encouraging youth to join amateur cinema helps them to take the initial steps in the field, and learn how to deal with modest resources that elevate them to professionalism.

Bensouda also stresses that the Omani youth's keen interest in cinema needs specialised film institutes to develop their skills,



AAHED BENSOU DA



SAID AL NIZAM

encouraging innovation and creativity. This would contribute to building the foundations of a professional film industry in Oman. The experiences of Omani youth in cinema showcase how they are creative in thinking. "I was fortunate to mentor more than 50 young people in the field of cinema, and they are now working in the cinematic field and directing beautiful short films and documentaries," he said.

Reflecting on his experience in Morocco, Bensouda notes the lack of film institutes in the early 1990s. However, the involvement of youth with foreign films as technical assistants marked the beginning. With time, they progressed from amateurs to professionals, "Morocco now earns an estimated \$200 million from the cinema sector," he said.

"Creating a film with minimal resources is about having creative imagination and exploring cost-effective topics. Beginners can use natural settings for scenes, reducing the need for professional sets. Involving non-professional actors and building relationships for cost reduction are also essential," he added.

Said al Nizam advises aspiring film-makers to "watch diverse films and study various directors from different cultures and different language".

He stresses the importance of cultivating a rich visual memory and recommends organised and directed viewing sessions to explore the works of talented directors globally.

"The challenge we face with the youth is that they are having poor visual memory due to extensive interaction with social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which do not reflect cinematic art," he said.

In terms of cinematic improvement, directors should focus on developing compelling stories. Experimentation is crucial for amateur film-makers, and self-learning through online tutorials and workshops is valuable. Al Nizam emphasises the significance of self-improvement and the willingness to learn from mistakes and evolve creatively.

"The rapid technological advancements allow shooting good scenes with mobile phones, utilising applications to enhance production quality," he said.

Al Nizam encouraged youth, "there are international and regional amateur film festivals that provide opportunities for recognition and can be a starting point for young film-makers."

Al Nizam ended his talk by saying, "The professional always remains an amateur, as he is the feeder for creativity and the production of new ideas. He moves to the world of professionalism, administratively, way of working, commercially, and in technical matters.

"Sometimes professional films may disappoint, while exceptional films can be created with minimal resources, emphasising the importance of content over resources."

