

HM greetings conveyed to Marcos Jr

President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr of the Republic of the Philippines received Eng Nasser bin Said al Manwari, who presented his credentials as Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Philippines. During the meeting, the ambassador conveyed greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to President Ferdinand. **DETAILS ON P3**



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BIDIYA INTERNATIONAL SAND CHALLENGE TODAY



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2022 WAS A RECORD YEAR FOR MENA IPOs



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ROHM FOLK MUSIC FEST BRINGS CULTURE OF FOUR COUNTRIES IN ONE PLACE



MUSCAT

NEP, BAKER TILLY ACADEMY SIGN MOC

The National Employment Programme (NEP) signed a memorandum of cooperation (MoC) with Baker Tilly Academy to develop the capabilities of Omani nationals in the fields of career planning, strategic planning, systems of future skills, entrepreneurship and self-employment. The academy offers a range of specialised training courses, instruction manuals and visual content designed to suit the development of Omani capabilities in target areas. **DETAILS ON P3**

RO 87M RIMA WATER PLANT INAUGURATED

The Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) celebrated the inauguration of its second nature-based project, Rima Water Treatment Plant. The project, valued at RO 87 million, follows the success of the company's award-winning Nimr Wetlands, which treats produced water using a series of sloping reed fields and evaporation ponds. The inauguration ceremony was held at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre under the auspices of HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar. The chief guest said, "It was a pleasure to attend today's inauguration of the Rima Water Treatment Plant, a remarkable environmentally friendly project that applies natural technology to treat and manage water associated with oil production. **DETAILS ON P13**

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TOO SOON FOR GLOBAL OPTIMISM

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HM GETS MESSAGE FROM KAZAKHSTAN PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a written message from President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The message was handed over to HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, when he received at his office Mukhtar Tileuberdi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan. During the meeting, the guest conveyed greetings and best wishes of the Kazakh President to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people. **DETAILS ON P2**

Oman, Saudi sign 13 deals to boost trade

QASIM AL MAASHANI
RIYADH, FEB 1

The Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia signed a raft of agreements, including a memorandum of understanding to finance the construction of the infrastructure of a new integrated economic zone in Oman's Al Dhahirah Governorate at a cost of around RO 100 million. In all, 13 agreements were signed between the two brotherly countries spanning a number of economic and commercial sectors, against the backdrop of the Saudi-Omani Investment Forum under way in Riyadh.

Later, in remarks to journalists, Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, stated that more than 100 companies from the two countries are also taking part in an exhibition being held

in parallel with the forum. Deliberations during the forum, Al Yousef said, have focused on the need for strengthening supply chains by encouraging Omani and Saudi industries to integrate based on their competitive strengths and capabilities.

"For example, inputs for a certain product can be sourced from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, value-added in Oman and re-exported to Saudi Arabia, and vice versa. We are looking for this type of cooperation in the industrial sector to help strengthen supply chains for the benefit of the two countries and for the wider economy," the minister added.

Al Yousef also outlined the potential for Omani and Saudi companies to open branches of their operations in the other countries. **DETAILS ON P13**

DEVELOPMENT PLANS IN LINE WITH HUMAN RIGHTS

Rights and development should go hand in hand

MAI AL ABRI
MUSCAT, FEB 1

Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) monitors the best human rights practices in the Sultanate of Oman, while ensuring sustainable development goals into national development strategies and plans, making them a major component of the long-term national development strategy (Oman Vision 2040). This vision is enhanced by a broad community in designing, implementing and evaluating plans.

This was revealed by officials at a symposium on the objectives of sustainable development and its relation with human rights on Wednesday.

The symposium is held in collaboration with the Forum of Arab Parliamentarians on Population and Development (FAPPD) in Jordan and the OHRC to highlight the importance of sustainable development, its objectives and results, which is reflected in the human well-

The symposium will advance and defend human rights, raise awareness on related issues and shed light on the mechanisms in place easier to uses

DR HAMOUD AL YAHYA'EE
OHRC Member

being, which enhances human rights, preserves his dignity and guarantees him more care.

Dr Hamoud bin Ahmed al Yahya'ee, Chairman of the Services and Social Development Committee at the Majlis AshShura, member of OHRC, gave the opening address.

He said that the commission has organised the symposium to advance and defend human

rights, raise awareness on related issues and shed light on relevant topics to make the mechanisms in place easier to use.

By saying that the core idea behind sustainable development is to meet the requirements of the present generation and ensure their well-being without compromising the capacity of future generations to do the same, he said governments are therefore anxious to consider their intrinsic responsibility to promote just economic and social progress, with their commitment to rational resource use, maintaining the integrity of environmental systems, safeguarding natural resources and making them renewable.

"Every international convention or agreement that Oman's Government ratifies is incorporated into Omani legislation. Development plans are more in line with justice and human rights concerns when the legal provisions of international covenants and accords are included into state law. **TURN TO P2**



EXPO ON SWISS NON-CONFORMIST DESIGN

HH Sayyid Bilal bin Haitham al Said presided over a ceremony at the National Museum on Wednesday to inaugurate the exhibition of Swiss Non-Conformist Design. The exhibition was held in cooperation with the Embassy of the Swiss Confederation in Oman, within the context of celebration of the 50th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between the two friendly countries. HH Sayyid Bilal bin Haitham al Said also opened another exhibition titled 'Hope: Housing, People and Environment 2023,' organised by the German University of Technology (GUTech). **DETAILS ON P2**

Over 800 triathletes in action at Ironman 70.3 Oman

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 1

More than 800 triathletes from 63 countries will participate in Ironman 70.3 Oman triathlon championship in Muscat on Thursday. The official opening ceremony will be held under

the auspices of Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary for Sports and Youth at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth. The triathlon will be the first and largest series event of its kind in the Middle East for the 2023 season.

The race will kick off at 6:30



am on Thursday on a route that takes athletes through some of the capital city's most spectacular scenery. With the race's start and finish line situated at the same location at Shatti Al Qurum, the triathletes as well as the large number of spectators are expected to turn out. **DETAILS ON P11**



Bilarab opens Swiss Non-Conformist Design, Hope 2023 exhibitions

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said presided over a ceremony at the National Museum on Wednesday to inaugurate the exhibition of Swiss Non-Conformist Design.

The exhibition was held in cooperation with the Embassy of the Swiss Confederation in Oman, within the context of celebration of the 50th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between the two friendly countries.

HH Sayyid Bilarab also opened another exhibition titled "Hope: Housing, People and Environment 2023", which is organised by the German University of Technology (GUTech).

HH Sayyid Bilarab toured the Swiss Non-Conformist Design exhibition, which celebrates the uniqueness of modern and contemporary Swiss design, right from the beginning of the 20th century, notably upon the emergence of the "Dada" movement in Zurich, through to postmodern expressions.

This exhibition, which will last until July 22, 2023, is the first appearance of this genre of Swiss design in the Middle East. It is one of the first exhibitions of its kind in the world outside Switzerland.

The exhibition is distinguished for its special focus on non-conformist design. Nearly 40 per cent of the pieces exhibited in Muscat have not been displayed before.

The exhibits are carefully selected from among high-level museum designs of pioneers of architecture



exhibition is held within the framework of celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Swiss Confederation — with more celebratory events that will follow.

He said that through this exhibition, the National Museum organised an open space for creative thinking, for reflection and exchanges between Omani and Swiss perspectives on art and design that will add a new dimension to the existing strong bilateral ties between the two countries.

HH Sayyid Bilarab toured the "Hope: Housing, People and Environment 2023" exhibition, which highlights the idea of building healthy, modern and sustainability cities.

Prof Dr Michael Braun, Rector of the German University of Technology in Oman (GUTech), said that "Hope: Housing, People and Environment 2023" exhibition is an initiative to promote people-centred planning to activate urban environments in Oman.

This initiative, he added, combines architecture, urban planning, social sciences, technology, environmental and sustainability aspects and many more.

Pedja Hadži-manović, a Swiss designer, presented a commemorative gift to HH Sayyid Bilarab at the conclusion of his visit to the two exhibitions. HH Sayyid Bilarab signed the VIP visitor's book and expressed his admiration for the two exhibitions.

— ONA

NEW BATCH OF CITIZENS JOINS RGO



The Royal Guard of Oman (RGO), in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, received a new batch of citizens on Wednesday to undergo the basic military training as army recruits after passing the admission and evaluation tests and medical and physical examinations.

Rights and development should go hand in hand

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"It is understood that legality has a key function in regulating the movement of life, governing the relationships and rights of individuals, groups and institutions, and extending the range of contemplation," Al Yahyaee added.

PROTECTION OF RIGHTS

When formulating plans and policies, care is taken to ensure that they contribute positively to the development and protection of rights.

In his paper 'Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goals', Tomasito Villarin, member of Parliament, the Philippines, mentioned that human rights have high priority or they would not have the ability to compete with other powerful considerations such as national stability and security, individual and national self-determination, and national and global prosperity.

He also pointed out the equality between genders, referring to the International Covenant on

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The Social Covenant's list of rights includes non-discrimination and equality for women in economic and social life (Articles 2 and 3), freedom to work and opportunities to work (Article 4), fair pay and decent conditions of work (Article 7), the right to form trade unions and to strike (Article 8), social security (Article 9), special protections for mothers and children (Article 10), the right to adequate food, clothing and housing (Article 11), the right to basic health services (Article 12), the right to education (Article 13), and the right to participate in cultural life and scientific progress (Article 15).

Dr Rana Kharouf, Legal Adviser to the Arab-Asian Parliament for Human Rights, stated that the overlap between human rights and development in light of globalisation is a reality. No matter what, development and human rights cannot be divided because they are mutually dependent and complementary on a global and

local scale.

She claimed that in the modern world, human freedom - which enables a person to exercise their choices and take part in making important decisions that have a lasting impact on their life - shares a vision with human rights.

It is necessary to make a variety of proposals, such as creating long-term national strategies to enhance development indicators, primarily represented by improvements in health, education, training, housing and the environment. To achieve sustainable development at all scales, she emphasised the significance of creating a government advisory council that works on creating a national strategy and recommending studies and proposals that would link the efforts of the public and private sectors. She recommended that human rights be included in educational institutions in a way that allows the individual to formulate developmental policies and achieve sustainable human development actively.

On his turn, Thomas Oertle, Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to the Sultanate of Oman, said that this unique exhibition of Swiss Non-Conformist Design displays objects from iconic artists such as Le Corbusier or Sophie Arp Täuber, to

items never exhibited before such as furniture of Pierre Jeanneret from the UNESCO World Heritage Site Chandigarh Capitol Complex in India, and finally to designs from contemporary Swiss artists such as Tom Strala.

Oertle pointed out that the

Oman affirms pioneering approach in supporting health security

GENEVA: The Sultanate of Oman has reiterated its resolve to press ahead with its pioneering approach in supporting current and future national health security.

This was unveiled during an event held here to celebrate the 75th anniversary of foundation of the World Health Organization (WHO).

The event was held on the sidelines of the 152nd session of the WHO Executive Board in Geneva.

During Oman's speech at the event, Health Minister Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti stressed the country's keenness to promote its future plans for advancing the health sector. In this context, he cited Oman Vision 2040, which, he said, sets a road map for the country's strategic planning.

Al Sabti added that Oman boasts a variety of economic opportunities, the outcome of which will be seen in economic growth and economic diversification aimed (among other goals) to ensure sustainability in providing health services, since health constitutes one of the most important priorities of Oman Vision 2040.

Al Sabti pointed out that the vision seeks to empower the health sector and make it capable of facing challenges by raising the quality and efficiency of services and upgrading the standard of



prevention against health risks.

Oman Vision 2040 also promotes investment in the medical industries, the pharmaceutical sector, medical supplies, the rehabilitation of human resources, digital transformation, digitisation and automation of health services,

said Al Sabti.

Oman was invited to the meeting to discuss the future of health during the forthcoming 25 years as a member of the Executive Office and one of the WHO's member states in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

— ONA



Oman, Kazakhstan sign pact to form joint committee



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a written message from President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The message was handed over to HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, when he received in his office Mukhtar Tileuberdi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan. During the meeting, the guest conveyed greetings and best wishes of the Kazakh President to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people. On his turn, HH Sayyid Asaad asked the guest minister to convey greetings and best wishes of His

Majesty the Sultan to President Tokayev and the people of Kazakhstan. The meeting discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and means of promoting them in various field. It also reviewed a set of matters of mutual interest. The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, the secretary-general and the two advisers at the Office of HH Sayyid Asaad, as well as the Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Oman and members of the delegation accompanying the guest. The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Kazakhstan held a session of political talks here on Wednesday. The session reviewed areas



of bilateral cooperation in fields of economy, renewable energy, tourism and food security. The Omani side was headed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, while the Kazakh side was headed by Mukhtar Tileuberdi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan. During the session, the two sides exchanged views on various regional and international matters of mutual interest. The two sides signed an agreement to establish the Joint Oman-Kazakhstan Committee, in addition to inking a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on political consultations. The talks session was attended by Khalid bin Hashel al Muselhi, Head of the Minister's Office

Department, Munthir bin Mahfoudh al Manthari, Head of the International Organisations Department, Shaikh Hamad bin Saif al Rawahi, Head of the International Cooperation Department, Najmedin Muhametali, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Oman, and several officials from both sides. Meanwhile, Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, received in his office on Wednesday Mukhtar Tileuberdi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed means of enhancing cooperation in areas of mutual interest. They also exchanged views on various economic and investment matters. — ONA



Ambassador of Oman to Philippines presents credentials

MUSCAT: President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr of the Republic of the Philippines received here on Wednesday Eng Nasser bin Said al Manwari, who presented his credentials as Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Philippines.

During the meeting, the ambassador conveyed greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to President Ferdinand. On his turn, President Ferdinand expressed his appreciation for His Majesty and affirmed his country's keenness to boost joint cooperation on all levels and spheres. — ONA

NEP signs MoC with Baker Tilly Academy to enhance Omani capabilities

MUSCAT: The National Employment Programme (NEP) on Wednesday signed a memorandum of cooperation (MoC) with Baker Tilly Academy to develop the capabilities of Omani nationals in the fields of career planning, strategic planning, systems of future skills, entrepreneurship and self-employment. The Academy offers a range of specialised training courses, instruction manuals and visual

content designed to suit the development of Omani capabilities in target areas. The courses are designed in accordance with the most modern developments, information technology and data published in the NEP electronic platform. The MoC was signed by Khalid bin Salim al Ghammari, Head of Capacity Building at the NEP, and Abbas al Humaid, Managing Partner at Baker Tilly Academy, Middle East and Africa. — ONA



VINOD NAIR
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The Central Blood Bank in Bausher has issued an urgent appeal for individuals with blood groups A negative and B negative to donate blood on Wednesday. The bank has experienced a significant drop in the stock level of these blood types and is in need of more donations to maintain a safe supply of blood units. Donors can register through the Blood Bank application by clicking on the "Register as a donor" button. The director of Blood Bank Services praised the community's increasing awareness of the importance of blood donation and credited media organisations for spreading the humanitarian message. Donors must log into the eHealth portal and register as a

donor to participate. The bank has been encouraging the community to continue donating blood as health services continue to expand in the country. There is a daily need for more than 15 platelet donors, as platelets can only be kept alive for five days and many cancer patients require daily platelet transfusions for seven days. Platelets are small blood cells that help the body form clots to stop bleeding. They are crucial in repairing damage to blood vessels. The Central Blood Bank emphasised that there is a great need for negative blood types and encouraged those with such blood types to not delay their donation.



Symposium discusses e-investigations in trafficking cases



MUSCAT: The National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking (NCCHT) concluded its annual symposium, on Wednesday. The three-day symposium was organised in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in the GCC. The concluding day saw the

presentation of five working papers. Dr Mohanad Dweikat, a UNODC expert, spoke about e-investigations in human trafficking cases. He reviewed the methods and ways of using information technology to communicate with the traffickers, affirming that cyberspace is being exploited by human traffickers to accomplish their illicit activities.

Perhaps the most tricky point in human trafficking crimes is that many of these crimes go undetected by the victims, be them individuals or institutions, he said. In another paper, Dr Mohanad Dweikat touched on the parallel financial investigations in human trafficking crimes. He reviewed the links between human

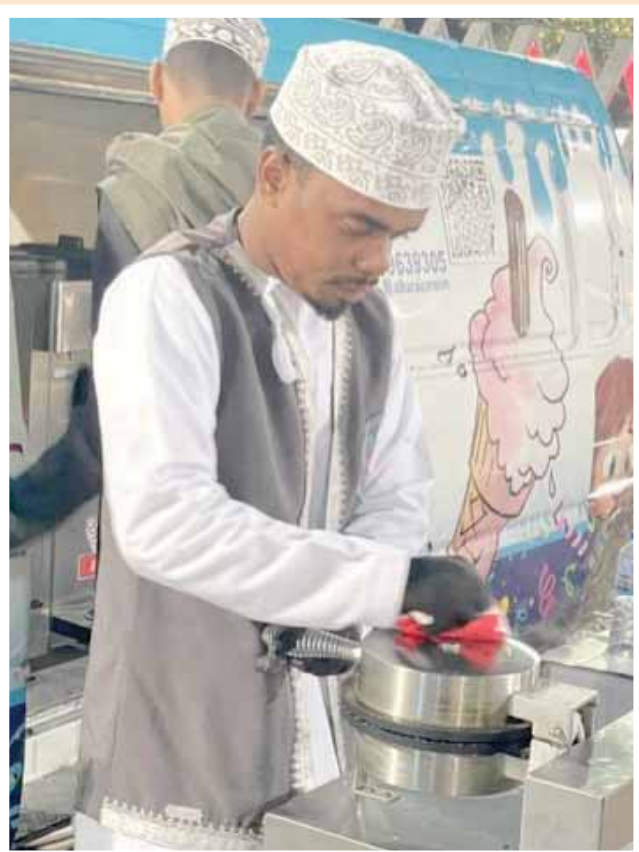
trafficking and money laundering crimes and investigations into human trafficking. Adviser Nasser bin Abdullah al Riyami, a UNODC expert, presented a paper titled 'The retrieving of properties in human trafficking cases' in which he touched on the international legislations for enhancing cooperation to combat organised

crimes through extraditing criminals and exchanging legal assistance in accordance with Palermo protocols and the Convention Against Organised Crime. A third paper delved into the joint coordination in handling trafficking in persons cases. The paper reviewed the best practices for coordinating and

managing criminal investigation files and assistance and protection files. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in collaboration with the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking, reviewed partnership and identified the national priorities in fighting trafficking in persons.



AN ENTREPRENEUR'S DELIGHT



AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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Blended with heritage and modernity, the Muscat Nights is a platform for entertainment, learning and product marketing. The festival draws people from across the country to the historic and modern city of Muscat, where they love to enjoy the festivities during the nice winter months. The festival takes place from mid-January to early February each year.

The Heritage Village is the main attraction at the Muscat Nights. Despite being smaller than in previous years, the village has been reconfigured with better technology and is operated by Omani youth.

Muscat Municipality is offering a unique experience that aligns with the cultural identity and heritage of the Sultanate of Oman. The Muscat Nights has become a platform for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Oman.

At Al Naseem Park, SME entrepreneurs can engage with incubators, and there is a tent dedicated to supporting SME operators through consumer exhibitions. Private projects and self-employment are at the forefront, with Omani business owners showcasing various projects that demonstrate their willingness to pursue business management through starting small and growing.

Salem al Ghamari, owner of the Al Hara Ice Cream project, operates a mobile cart that sells ice cream in different flavours. Despite the challenges he faced participating in the festival, he was able to become an active member of the Heritage Village through his efforts.

Wafaa al Maawali, owner of the Al Wafa Crystal project for incense and perfumes, said, "I am pleased with my participation in the festival for the first time. My project has a great demand for incense products and has received a positive response from both Omanis and non-Omanis." She added, "We aim to introduce these Omani products, even if we don't see sales, as it is our pleasure to introduce them to a large audience."

The festival aims to harness the skills and energy of volunteers in organising and making the events successful by showcasing the capabilities of productive families and business owners on different display platforms throughout the Muscat Nights activities. This also involves SMEs and entrepreneurs in events and activities.

Omani youth keep pace with time, adhere to their national identity and participate in sustainable development through ideas and initiatives that stimulate domestic tourism and productivity, which is what the Muscat Nights highlighted in its appearance this year.





Bidiya Sands come alive during Desert Adventures Festival

BIDIYA: The Desert Adventures Festival is underway in Al Sharqiya Sands, attracting a wide community participation from inside and outside the governorate.

The festival, organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in cooperation with the Office of the Governor of Al Sharqiyah North Governorate and several government and private agencies, is taking place from January 29 to February 3.

The festival features a variety of cultural, sports, entertainment and heritage events and activities, targeting different groups of society and tourists. Mohammed bin Nasser al Hajri, a member of the municipal council, said the festival aims to boost winter tourism in the region and create a community movement to visit the sands of Bidiya.

Hamad bin Saif al Badawi, Head of the Tourism Promotion Department at the Heritage and Tourism Department in the North Al Sharqiyah Governorate, emphasised the importance of supporting small and medium enterprises and also raising reservation rates in hotel establishments and tourist camps.

The festival includes activities such as the exhibition of small and medium enterprises, classic car exhibition, international rally championship, and a number of accompanying events such as the royal balloons, sand skiing,



camelback tours, sand biking, adventure tourism exhibition and theatre. The festival also features sailing, mobile carts, bands performances, Oman International Motor Championship, and an exhibition of camping, tourism and adventure tools.

In conclusion, the Desert Adventures Festival is a fantastic opportunity for tourists and locals to experience the rich culture and heritage of Bidiya and its golden sands. — **ONA**

Child protection panel examines Muscat Nights accident

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The Child Protection Committee in Muscat Governorate held a meeting with officials from the Ministry of Social Development to find out the details of the accident that took place at the Muscat Nights venue in the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre on Tuesday.

The children had suffered moderate injuries, and the committee communicated with the concerned authorities to ensure their safety.

The committee also stated that psychological support and counselling should be provided to the injured children and their families and wished for their speedy recovery.

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority reported that seven children and a woman were injured due to the collapse of an electric toy game at the convention centre.



Muscat Municipality expressed regret for the incident and stated that an investigation was underway. The medical authorities referred those with minor injuries to the hospital for safety. There were no serious injuries reported.

The authorities urged people to seek information from official sources and not spread rumours. They affirmed their concern for the safety of everyone and their commitment to following approved standards. They will announce the measures taken soon.

Sea Lion drill wraps up



MUSCAT: The naval drill Sea Lion 1/2023, carried out by the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) at Al Batinah and Al Wusta maritime zones, concluded on Wednesday.

Naval ships from the RNO fleet took part in the drill with the support of aircrafts of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO).

The ships that participated in the drill headed back to the Said bin Sultan Naval Base. The naval drill was part of the RNO's annual training plans that aim at sustaining the preparedness level of its ships and personnel.

Life beyond IQ: Emotional intelligence and leadership explored

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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Is life just about Intellectual Quotient (IQ), or is there something more that can define success in life? Dr Virat Chirania, an author and meditation teacher at the Art of Living Foundation and TEDx speaker, began his career journey as an engineer in the IT field in the US with a high-paying job when he came across a meditation class. What he discovered made him become an author and a meditation teacher and take a PhD in Emotional Intelligence.

If accumulating wealth was an essential factor in the past, now he is intrigued by the thoughts that crossed his mind.

“The more I meditated, the more I took the advanced programmes. The more I read the ancient scriptures, I realised

this is not a modern concept; instead, saints have been talking about it for thousands of years,” Dr Virat said. This led him to do a PhD in Emotional Intelligence, connecting it with leadership qualities.

He explained, “I saw that an increase in Emotional Intelligence increases one's leadership ability. There is a strong connection between these two. That is where the journey started about 20 years ago for me. In terms of practical Emotional Intelligence, not just a concept, I realised that when we meditate, Emotional Intelligence becomes higher.”

According to him, he was a typical left-sided brain, but now he is more balanced.

“I view life as a mixture of things we understand and learn from the intellect, things you need to experience and acknowledge that is beyond the intellect. I

think intelligent people are the ones who truly understand this. So life is about what we know and the unknown X factor. Logic is important for sure, but to deny that there is a world beyond logic is being immature,” he reasoned.

Dr Virat has travelled to Iraq, Turkey, Singapore and the US in addition to different corners of India, from villages to big cities, educational institutions, the corporate world and social service projects teaching Emotional Intelligence and leadership.

So how is Emotional Intelligence linked with leadership?

He explained, “Leadership is about handling people, chaos, handling uncertainty. In fact, leadership is about leading only when there is uncertainty. Emotional Intelligence teaches us how to understand emotions in ourselves and relate to them,

as well as understand emotions in other people and help regulate that.

“If you can do that by having these soft and abstract life skills, then chances of success are high. I think modern-day leadership is all about that. It is well-connected with emotions and intelligence,” he noted.

The concept of intelligence is also constantly changing.

“First, there was Intelligence Quotient (IQ), then it was Emotional Intelligence (EQ), and now there is the Spiritual Quotient (SQ). Life is definitely evolving, and we live in an uncertain world,” he said, adding that leaders today are the ones who can cope with the uncertainty. Emotional Intelligence is something that has an impact on a person at a personal level and a professional level.

“If you are not able to handle emotions, not able to be happy and

do not have a sense of purpose, then you tend to look back at life with regret because there might be a success but not happiness. I think many leaders realise that it is not just about bank balance and stock value; it is also about a sense of purpose and an element of contentment without that it is not worth it,” he pointed out.

How can one develop a sense of purpose and recognise the inner call?

He explained that everyone has an inner voice, and it is just that the outside noise is so loud that it drowns the inside voice. He said that to listen to the inner voice, we need to learn the art of stilling the mind and to cut out the external noise. Then the inside voice is quite clear.

Only when the mind is quiet will we be able to ask the question, what can I do for society?

His message is to be part of the

solution. “No one else can tell you about your purpose in life. You have to discover that yourself. Those who know will not tell you,” he reflected, adding that the journey is eternal. The journey continues until there is a body with a mind.

“But when I sleep every day, I sleep very content and happy knowing that I have lived my day to the fullest and doing what I believe adds value to the world given my resources and constraints. So the question to ask is: What am I doing adding to the world? Am I going to leave this place more beautiful, or am I just going to accumulate wealth and knowledge? If we are not asking this question, then we are living a minimal life, so this is a very important question.

Other questions are: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose for being here?



India boosts spending, cuts deficit in \$550 bn budget

NEW DELHI: India's government on Wednesday unveiled one of its biggest jumps in capital spending in the past decade in its budget for the coming year and said the fiscal deficit would fall, as it tries to create jobs while maintaining financial discipline.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, which faces elections in key states this year and a national vote in 2024, has been under pressure to create jobs in the country of 1.4 billion where many have struggled to gain employment despite it remaining one of the world's fastest-growing major economies.

"After a subdued period of the pandemic, private investments are growing again," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said as she presented the 2023/24 budget in parliament.

Total spending will rise 7.5 per cent to Rs 45.03 trillion (\$549.51 billion) in the next fiscal year starting on April 1.

"The budget makes the need once again to ramp up the virtuous cycle of investment and job creation," she said.

"Capital investment is being increased steeply for the third year



An onlooker takes a selfie next to the bronze bull beneath a digital broadcast showing India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presenting the union budget outside the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) in Mumbai on Wednesday. — AFP

in a row by 33 per cent to Rs 10 trillion."

The capital spending increase to about \$122.3 billion, which would amount to 3.3 per cent of gross

domestic product (GDP), will be the biggest such jump after an increase of more than 37 per cent between 2020/21 and 2021/22.

"In the backdrop of an

anticipated slowdown in global growth, reliance on public capex as a countercyclical policy will help in supporting overall growth," said Vivek Kumar, an economist at

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, which faces elections in key states this year and a national vote in 2024, has been under pressure to create jobs

QuantEco Research in Mumbai.

The finance ministry's annual Economic Survey, released on Tuesday, forecast the economy could grow 6 per cent to 6.8 per cent next fiscal year, down from 7 per cent projected for the current year, while warning about the impact of cooling global demand on exports.

India's economy was "on the right track, Sitharaman said, despite the global slowdown because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war.

Sitharaman said the government would target a budget deficit of 5.9 per cent of GDP for 2023/24, down from 6.4 per cent for the current year.

A Reuters poll had pegged the

deficit for the next fiscal year at 6 per cent.

The deficit plan will be aided by a 28-per cent cut in subsidies on food, fertiliser and petroleum for the next fiscal year at Rs 3.75 trillion.

The government cut the spending on a key rural jobs guarantee programme to Rs 600 billion - the smallest in more than five years - from Rs 894 billion for this fiscal year.

The minister also pledged to reduce the fiscal deficit further to 4.5 per cent of GDP by 2025/26.

Moody's Investors Service said the narrower fiscal deficit projection pointed to the government's commitment to longer-term fiscal sustainability.

"Although the gradual fiscal consolidation trend remains intact and will help to stabilise the government's debt burden relative to nominal GDP, the high debt burden and weak debt affordability remain key constraints that offset India's fundamental strengths, including its high growth potential and deep domestic capital markets," said Christian de Guzman, its senior vice-president. — AFP

Austin's Manila visit to see deal on base

MANILA: US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to the Philippines this week is expected to bring an announcement of expanded US access to military bases in the country, a senior Philippines official said on Wednesday.

Washington is eager to extend its security options in the Philippines, while Manila wants to bolster defence of its territorial claims in the disputed South China Sea.

Austin arrived in Manila on Tuesday night, and will meet his Philippine counterpart and other officials on Thursday "to build on our strong bilateral relationship, discuss a range of security initiatives, and advance our shared vision of a free and open Pacific," he said on Twitter.

On Wednesday morning, Austin visited US troops stationed at a Philippine military camp in the southern city of Zamboanga, according to Roy Galido, commander of the Western Mindanao Command.

"Our working relationship to them is very strong," Galido told reporters, adding that US troops help in counter terrorism, and humanitarian and disaster response missions.

US officials have said



US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin III visits the Armed Forces of the Philippines' Western Mindanao Command in Zamboanga City, Philippines, on Wednesday. — AFP

Washington hopes for an access agreement during Austin's visit, which began on Tuesday, and that Washington has proposed additional sites under an Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) dating back to 2014.

"There's a push for another four or five of these EDCA sites," the a senior Philippines official said. "We are going to have definitely an announcement of some sort. I just don't know how many would be the final outcome

of that."

The official declined to be named because of the sensitivity of the matter.

Manila and Washington have a mutual defence treaty and have been discussing US access to four additional bases on the northern land mass of Luzon, the closest part of the Philippines to Taiwan, as well as another on the island of Palawan, facing the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

EDCA allows US access to

Philippine bases for joint training, pre-positioning of equipment and building of facilities such as runways, fuel storage and military housing, but not a permanent presence.

The US military already has access to five such sites. The Philippines official said increased US access needed to benefit both countries.

"We don't want it to be directed to just for the use of the United States purely for their defence capabilities... it has to be mutually beneficial," he said.

"And obviously, we want to make sure that no country will see... anything that we're doing... was directed towards any conflict or anything of that sort," he added.

Manila's priorities in its agreements with Washington were to boost its defence capabilities and interoperability with US forces and to improve its ability to cope with climate change and natural disasters, the official said.

He said that after cancelling an agreement for the purchase of heavy-lift helicopters from Russia last year, Manila had reached a deal with Washington to upgrade "a couple" of Blackhawk helicopters that could be used for disaster relief. — Reuters

Myanmar streets empty in protest on coup anniversary

YANGON: Streets emptied and shops closed in protest across Myanmar on Wednesday, the second anniversary of the coup that toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's government, with the junta hinting it may extend a state of emergency and delay new elections.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military's power grab and crackdown on dissent, which has sparked fighting across the country and tanked the economy.

Western powers launched a fresh broadside of sanctions against the generals on the anniversary but previous rounds have shown little sign of throwing the junta off course.

Streets in the commercial hub Yangon largely emptied from late morning, AFP correspondents said, after activists called for people across the Southeast Asian country to close businesses and stay indoors from 10 am to 4 pm.

Roads leading to the

famous Shwedagon pagoda — a Buddhist shrine that dominates Yangon's skyline and is usually thronged by worshippers — were largely deserted.

Most buses on roads elsewhere in the city were empty and there was a heavy security presence.

It was similarly quiet in the second city of Mandalay, a resident said.

"There are a few people walking here and there in neighbourhoods but almost no activity on the main roads," the resident said, requesting anonymity.

Local media images also showed empty streets in the eastern city of Mawlamyine.

Around 200 supporters of the military marched through Yangon's historic downtown in the early afternoon, escorted part of the way by soldiers, correspondents said.

The US Embassy in the city warned of "increased anti-regime activity and violence" in the days around the anniversary. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

BEIJING

China's Xi condemns Pakistan attack

China's President Xi Jinping strongly condemned an attack at a mosque in neighbouring Pakistan, state media reported on Wednesday, after rescue work ended with the death toll at 101.

The suicide blast on Monday in Peshawar struck inside a police compound as hundreds of officers gathered for afternoon prayers. The city's police chief said on Tuesday that the attack was revenge for the force's frontline operations against Islamist militants. In a call with



Pakistan's President Arif Alvi on Wednesday, Xi said China "opposes all forms of terrorism and strongly condemns the incident", according to state broadcaster CCTV.

GULMARG

Two Polish skiers dead in Kashmir

Two Polish nationals were killed and 21 other skiers were rescued from the site of an avalanche that hit the Indian resort of Gulmarg on Wednesday, police said.

A huge snowslide barrelled down from the 4,390-metre peak of Mount Apharwat in Indian Kashmir and buried nearly two dozen people on the slope, all foreigners except for two local guides.

High-altitude rescue teams rushed to the site on snow scooters and retrieved the bodies



of the two Polish skiers, police officer Amod Nagpuri said. "During the rescue ops, 19 foreign nationals and 2 local guides have been rescued," a police statement said.

TOKYO

Nato chief hails Japan plans on defence spend

Nato chief on Wednesday applauded Japan's plan to double its defence spending, saying the pledge reflected the country's resolve for greater security involvement in a volatile world.

Speaking in Tokyo, Jens Stoltenberg said Japan's renewed focus on security made the nation "even more" of a partner "for peace". "I am glad that Japan is planning (a military budget) to reach the Nato benchmark of two per cent of GDP devoted to defence," he said. For decades,



Japan has capped military spending at around one per cent of GDP, but late last year Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government approved a new security strategy.



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In brief

■ BRUSSELS



‘VERY CONSTRUCTIVE’ BREXIT TALKS WITH UK ON NORTHERN IRELAND

The EU is having “very constructive talks” with Britain on post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland, but no deal has yet been reached, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said on Wednesday.

“You know the principle: that everything is only negotiated at the very end when you know what the result is and you give a final signature,” she told a news conference following UK press reports that a deal was all but agreed.

She said she had an “excellent relationship” with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who took office in October, adding that “our teams are working together to find solutions” on the issue.

■ WASHINGTON



AUTHORITIES SEARCH BIDEN BEACH HOME

US law enforcement began a search on Wednesday of President Joe Biden’s beach house in Delaware, his lawyer said, in the latest stage of an operation to track down improperly stored classified documents.

The search in Rehoboth, which attorney Bob Bauer said was done “with the president’s full support and cooperation,” followed similar searches that turned up small numbers of documents in Biden’s home in Wilmington and a former office space in Washington, DC.

The drip of revelations has been a drag on Biden as he celebrates the mid-point in his term.

■ TEXAS



AIRLINES CANCEL OVER 1,400 US FLIGHTS

Airlines cancelled over 1,400 flights in the United States on Wednesday, after an ice storm hit states from Texas to West Virginia. A total of 1,467 flights within, into or out of the United States were cancelled, while 527 flights were delayed, according to website FlightAware.

The Federal Aviation Administration on Tuesday warned in a tweet that travellers could expect to see some snowy conditions in certain areas including Dallas, Fort Worth and Memphis, which could delay certain flights. The ongoing winter storm will continue to bring hazardous impacts.

UK teachers and civil servants join mass strike



Teachers hold placards as they take part in a protest organised NEU and other affiliated trade unions in central London, on Wednesday. — AFP

LONDON: Up to half a million British teachers, civil servants, and train drivers walked out over pay in the largest coordinated strike action for a decade on Wednesday, with unions threatening more disruption as the government digs its heels in over pay demands.

The mass walkouts across the country shut schools, halted most rail services, and forced the military to be put on standby to help with border checks on a day dubbed “Walkout Wednesday”.

According to unions, as many as 300,000 teachers took part, the biggest group involved, as part of wider action by 500,000 people, the highest number since 2011, when civil servants walked out en masse.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak condemned the strikes which forced millions of children to miss school.

“I am clear that our children’s education is precious and they deserve to be in school today being taught,” he said.

His government has taken a hard line against the unions, arguing that giving in to demands for large wage hikes would further fuel Britain’s inflation problem.

Tens of thousands of education workers marched through central London with placards which read

**According to unions,
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servants protested**

“Children Deserve better” and “Save our Schools, Pay Up”.

Taking part in the march, primary school teacher Hannah Rice, 32, said she hoped the scale of the action would send the government a strong message.

“This government should be ashamed of the way they are managing things,” she said. “It’s clear people are unhappy, it’s clear that there needs to be a change.”

The PCS Union, representing about 100,000 striking civil servants from more than 120 government departments, warned of further co-ordinated strikes.

“If the government doesn’t do something about it, I think we will see more days like today with more and more unions joining in,” PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka said.

“We need money now,” he added.

With inflation running at more than 10 per cent — the highest level in four decades — Britain has seen a wave of strikes in recent months across the public and private sectors, including health and transport workers, Amazon warehouse employees and Royal Mail postal staff.

Next week, nurses, ambulance staff, paramedics, emergency call handlers and other healthcare workers are set to stage more walkouts, while firefighters this week also backed a nationwide strike.

The strikers are demanding above-inflation pay rises to cover rocketing food and energy bills that they say have left them struggling to make ends meet.

So far the economy has not taken a major hit from the industrial action, with the cost of strikes in the eight months to January estimated by the Centre for Economics and Business Research at about 1.7 billion pounds (\$2.09 billion), or about 0.1 per cent of expected GDP.

It put the estimated impact of the teachers’ strikes at about 20 million pounds a day.

But the strikes may be having a political impact on Sunak’s government. — Reuters

Turkey says positive on Finland’s Nato bid

ANKARA: Turkey looks positively on Finland’s application for Nato membership, but does not support Sweden’s bid, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said on Wednesday.

“Our position on Finland is positive, but it is not positive on Sweden,” Erdogan said of their Nato applications in a speech to his AK Party deputies in parliament.

Sweden and Finland applied last year to join the trans-Atlantic defence pact after Russian war on Ukraine, but faced unexpected objections from Turkey and have since sought to win its support.

Ankara wants Helsinki and Stockholm in particular to take a tougher line against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which is considered a terror group by Turkey and the European Union, and another group it blames for a 2016 coup attempt.

The three nations reached an agreement on a way forward in Madrid last June, but Ankara suspended talks last month as tensions rose following protests



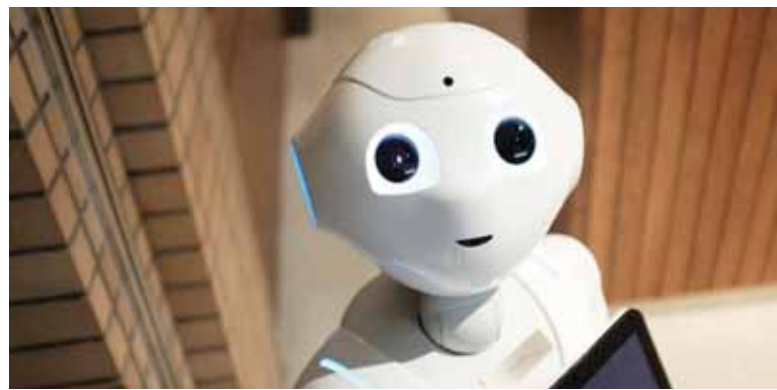
Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

in Stockholm.

“Sweden should not bother to try at this point. We will not say ‘yes’ to their Nato application as long as they allow burning of the holy book,” Erdogan said.

On the weekend, he signalled that Ankara could agree to Finland joining Nato ahead of Sweden. But Finland’s Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto said on Monday his country was sticking to its joint application plan.

Of Nato’s 30 members, only Turkey and Hungary are yet to ratify the Nordic countries’ memberships. — AFP



Humanoid robots to take centre stage at UN meet

GENEVA: Eight humanoid robots will be the star attractions when the United Nations hosts its first summit since the start of the pandemic on the benefits of artificial intelligence, it said on Wednesday.

The AI for Good Global Summit, first held in 2017, will return to Geneva on July 6 and 7 after a three-year Covid-imposed break, the UN’s International Telecommunication Union (ITU) said.

The event will aim to showcase how artificial intelligence and other new technologies can help reach the UN’s so-called sustainable development goals (SDGs), including on fighting climate change and boosting humanitarian action.

“It’s in our collective interest that we can shape AI faster than it is shaping us,” the ITU’s new chief Doreen Bogdan-Martin said in a statement. — AFP

Ukraine allies under pressure to send warplanes

PARIS: Western countries have only just approved sending battle tanks to Ukraine, but Kyiv is already requesting F-16 warplanes to help repel the Russian war.

While the United States has for now ruled that out, a few European nations appear more open to the idea.

US President Joe Biden on Monday appeared to draw the line on supplying American fighter jets to Kyiv.

“No,” he said when asked by reporters at the White House if he was in favour, though the next day he said he would talk to his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky about his latest requests for advanced weaponry.

In the early months of Russia’s war on Ukraine, Kyiv’s partners were reluctant to provide too much military aid, eager to avoid a more direct confrontation between the West and Russia.



German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius rides a tank as he visits Leopard II tanks that are due to be supplied to Ukraine at the tank brigade Lipperland of Germany’s army and part of the Bundeswehr, in Augustdorf, Germany, on Wednesday. — Reuters

But as the war grinds on, they have repeatedly given in to Ukraine’s appeals for more

substantial weapons.

In December, Washington finally agreed to send its high-

performing Patriot air defence missiles. In January, it announced it would also be sending Abrams

battle tanks. After pressure from allies, Germany in January approved sending Leopard tanks to Kyiv — and said it would agree to requests from other European countries who wanted to send their own German-made Leopards.

Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said on Tuesday during a visit to France that his country was used to having its pleas for more equipment denied at first.

“For each initial request, we first have to fight against this ‘no’. (But) it means ‘no today,’” he said.

“Let me remind you that, with the German Leopard tank, it was ‘no’ at first. But now we have a coalition of tanks.”

Olivier Schmitt, a researcher at the Denmark-based Center for War Studies, said he did not think sending planes would escalate the conflict. — AFP

From wadi to forever home: Ulfat Hanim’s journey



Rasha al Raisi
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The writer is a certified skills trainer and author of *The World According to Bahja*

On the first day of January and as the world was waking up to a new year with a plus digit number, I was in the wadi picking up empty plates of the dogs’ last night meal.

As I was climbing up, I saw a swarm of flies hovering on one of the ditches and I approached to have a closer look. I found a tiny puppy lying there and looking sick.

I recognised her as one of the two months old puppies from my pack who stopped eating a few days back. I patted her head and when she didn’t flinch, I headed home and brought one of my cat carriers to put her inside.

At the clinic, the vet announced that she was infested with ticks that caused her severe anaemia. He wasn’t sure of her survival but promised that he’d try his best.

By evening, he called to say that she had started eating and that he’d keep her for a few days on antibiotics till the swelling of her back paws reduced. I decided to call her Ulfat Hanim (Madam Ulfat), a name that’s always related to Egyptian aristocrats during monarchy time on their television series.

After leaving the clinic, she had to stay indoors for a few days before vaccinating and releasing her. However, she developed a sudden diarrhoea due to the antibiotic treatment.

This incident gave me an eye-opening insight on the canine species: they don’t use litter boxes like felines.

I was welcomed every single morning by a disastrous mess where I had to wash the floor and

A TALE OF RESILIENCE
AND HOPE, REMINDING US
THAT A NEW BEGINNING
CAN ALWAYS BE FOUND
WITH A LITTLE LOVE
AND CARE

lay absorbent pads all over the place that Ulfat seemed to miss most of the time. She was taken again to the clinic and stayed for a few more days and when discharged she was put on a strict diet.

It took almost a week for her to become better and as I was getting ready to take her for vaccination, Abu-the brute black cat- managed to open her window and bite her ear

(he survived a dog attack a month back. It was payback time for the whole race, according to him). Ulfat was back at the vet’s and was put on an antibiotic cream till the wound healed, by this time she’d been with us for more than two weeks.

Bad luck seemed to be striking Ulfat constantly and I was worried about the pack forgetting her, although I was enjoying her company and looking forward to her meal and playing times.

This was my first experience of rescuing a puppy and there was always something new to learn about their behaviour.

As days passed by, everyone started doubting my decision of putting her back in the wadi.

I knew that the Kitzanians would never welcome her in their territory,

yet I decided to experiment. I took Ulfat out one day and the minute I set her on the ground, Borsia attacked her.

Ulfat fell on her side with a cry and I picked her up quickly, as the rest of the cats were getting ready to pounce- a very strong resemblance to Jurassic Park’s closing scene.

Poor Ulfat was traumatised by the experience for a few hours but then she forgot about it. Fortunately, my friend Lorraine heard her story and decided to adopt her, along with her old dog Piper and a few friendly cats.

Ulfat loved her new home and adapted so quickly to the loving surroundings, which filled my heart with happiness and gratitude. I still miss her but remind myself that my year had started positively by saving Ulfat Hanim.

Pakistan’s brain drain: Cost of economic crisis

ZOFEEEN T EBRAHIM

Tahir took a leap of faith when he left Pakistan four months ago in search of a better and more prosperous future in Canada.

Even with no job lined up, he made up his mind to leave as his homeland grapples with a worsening economic crisis that is driving thousands of young, educated workers to pack their bags.

“I felt I needed a powerful passport and an escape plan if things go badly,” said Tahir, a former education worker who is currently job-hunting in Toronto and hopes one day to attain dual Pakistani-Canadian citizenship.

He asked to use a pseudonym to protect his identity. More than 800,000 Pakistanis left the country of 220 million to take up jobs last year, according to regulatory and monitoring body the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, up from a pre-pandemic total of 625,876 in 2019, and 382,439 the year before that.

Many more leave for education or other reasons, and do not return. Devastating floods last year compounded Pakistan’s economic problems, which include shortages of staple foods linked to a dearth of dollars and persistently high inflation that tipped 24 per cent in January. Pakistan is struggling to quell default fears in domestic and international markets, with a \$1.1 billion bailout tranche from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stuck due to differences over a programme review that should have been completed in November.

As the government battles to alleviate the crisis, officials are also increasingly worried about the snowballing brain drain that could hamper the country’s eventual recovery.

“The huge exodus of educated youth is of great concern,” Ahsan Iqbal, minister for planning, development and special initiatives, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

“It is our responsibility to provide them an enabling environment to stem the emigration.”

The government has launched several development initiatives which it hopes will help retain talent, he added.

They include establishing 200,000 paid internships for young engineers, a Rs 10 billion (\$37.35 million) innovation fund and a 40 billion rupee programme to develop 20 poor districts.

Even before the current crisis, many young workers were keen to leave -- frustrated by a decline in purchasing power and limited opportunities to improve their standard of living.

Almost one in three Pakistanis aged under 30 would like to take a job abroad, found a survey carried out by polling firm Gallup Pakistan and its nonprofit subsidiary the Gilani Foundation last June, before the floods struck. — **Reuters**

A warning of what’s to come



MICHELLE GOLDBERG

The writer is an American journalist and author, and an op-ed columnist for The New York Times

Thank goodness Speaker Kevin McCarthy has created a House subcommittee on the weaponisation of the federal government!

Last week, The New York Times reported on an outrageous example of such weaponisation, the flagrant use of federal law enforcement powers to target an administration’s political enemies.

I’m talking, of course, about the John Durham special counsel investigation, which was meant to root out the ostensibly corrupt origins of Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation, and quickly came to embody the sins that Donald Trump and his allies projected onto the FBI.

Trump’s circle insisted, falsely, that the Mueller inquiry was a hit job that employed Russian disinformation — via the Steele dossier — to frame Trump, all part of a plot cooked up by the Hillary Rodham Clinton campaign.

Durham seems to have bought into this Trumpist conspiracy theory, and to help prove it, he tried to employ what appears to be Russian disinformation to go after the Clinton camp.

More specifically, he used dubious Russian intelligence memos, which analysts believed were seeded with falsehoods, to try to convince a court to give him access to the emails of a former aide to George Soros, which he believed would show Clinton-related wrongdoing.

Astonishingly, the Times found that while Trump’s Attorney General Bill Barr and Durham were in Europe

A PERFECT
DEMONSTRATION OF
HOW THE RIGHT’S
SCANDALMONGERING
WORKS

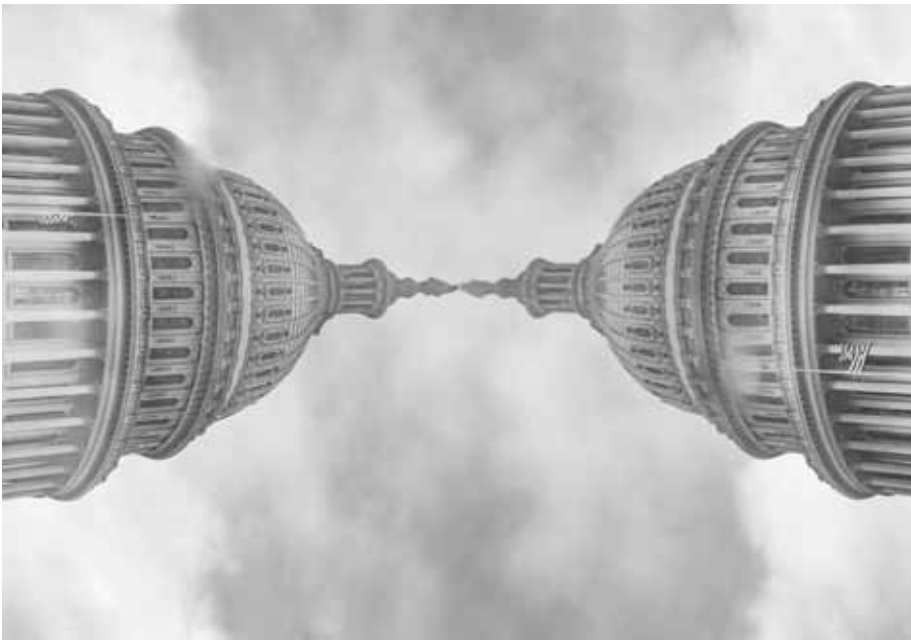
looking for evidence to discredit the Russia investigation, Italian officials gave them a “potentially explosive tip” linking Trump to “certain suspected financial crimes.”

Rather than assign a new prosecutor to look into those suspected crimes, Barr folded the matter into Durham’s inquiry, giving Durham criminal prosecution powers for the first time.

Then the attorney general sat back while the media inferred that the criminal investigation must mean Durham had found evidence of malfeasance connected to Russiagate. Barr, usually shameless in his public spinning of the news, quietly let an investigation into Trump be used to cast aspersions on Trump’s perceived enemies. (The fate of that inquiry remains a mystery.)

This squalid episode is a note-perfect example of how Republican scandal-mongering operates. The right ascribes to its adversaries, whether in the Democratic Party or the putative deep state, monstrous corruption and elaborate conspiracies.

Then, in the name of fighting back,



McCarthy has stacked the Oversight Committee, central to the House’s investigative apparatus, with flame-throwing fantasists, including Marjorie Taylor Greene, Paul Gosar and Lauren Boebert.

it mimics the tactics it has accused its foes of using.

Look, for example, at the behavior that gave rise to Trump’s first impeachment.

Trump falsely claimed that Joe Biden, as vice president, used the threat of withholding American loan guarantees to blackmail the Ukrainian government into doing his personal bidding.

Hoping to get Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to substantiate his lies, Trump tried to use the threat of withholding American aid to ... blackmail the Ukrainian government into doing his personal bidding.

The symmetry between accusations and counter-accusations, in turn, fosters a widespread cynicism about ever finding the truth.

It’s important to keep this in mind because we’re about to see a lot more of it. Now that they control the House, Republicans have prioritised investigating their political opponents.

McCarthy has stacked the Oversight Committee, central to the House’s investigative apparatus, with flame-throwing fantasists, including Marjorie Taylor Greene, Paul Gosar and Lauren Boebert.

Further, as Politico reported in a “field guide” to the coming Republican inquiries, McCarthy has urged Republicans to treat every committee like the Oversight Committee, meaning all investigations, all the time.

There are going to be investigations into Hunter Biden, and investigations into the origins of the pandemic. There will likely be scrutiny of the FBI’s search of Mar-a-Lago and Biden’s handling of classified documents.

And, as my colleague David Firestone on the editorial board put it over the weekend, “Republicans in the House are launching a new snipe hunt” for proof that the FBI and other intelligence agencies were “weaponised” against conservatives.

These all promise to be congressional equivalents of the Durham inquiry.

Certainly, most if not all congressional investigations are politically motivated, but there is nevertheless a difference between inquiries predicated on something real, and those, like the many investigations in the Benghazi attack, meant to troll for dirt and reify Fox News phantasms.

— *The New York Times*

Festivals an opportunity for all

The festivals organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in some of the governorates of the Sultanate of Oman are aimed at bolstering domestic tourism. It will lead to enrichment of wilayats with avenues of various types of activities and events. It will help introduce ancient history and heritage of this country and its legacies are preserved. This will give opportunity to visitors and tourists to learn about the local customs and traditions.

The entertainment activities will be enjoyed by the younger generations. Such festivals are very important for the respective governorates as well as others. This shows the potential of tourism and adds value to it. In the near future, we will see the benefits of this approach as it will meet the aspirations of the common people.

There is no doubt that organising festivals in various governorates in itself is a qualitative step. This is to strengthen the governorates and give them an opportunity to match with the day to day trends. This will give these governorates more independence in their economic development. They will be able to progress further riding on the back of initiatives related to tourism development.

The heritage, culture and the diversity of each governorate has the potential to attract massive tourists from within the country and abroad.

This will also help the coming generations to inherit their cultural legacies of which all those who lived along with them have felt pride. This is the right path to development without ignoring local culture and heritage.

The governorates are in their initial stage of cooperation with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in this area. This is the phase of laying foundation of any similar future plans. It will train new generations of the country on preserving local culture, arts, heritage and traditions and promote them everywhere.

This is a purposeful work as envisaged by the ministry and will pave the way for investments in the



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THE HERITAGE, CULTURE AND THE DIVERSITY OF EACH GOVERNORATE HAS THE POTENTIAL TO ATTRACT MASSIVE TOURISTS FROM WITHIN THE COUNTRY AND ABROAD

governorates in tourism and ultimately lead to achievement of the objectives of the Oman Vision 2040.

The festivals organised in the governorates are showcasing local traditions, cultures, heritage and values. It gives exposure to life in deserts, villages, on and around mountains. This is a unique tourism experience for locals, residents and those who come from abroad looking forward for such festivals. Recently Desert Adventure Festival was held in the Wilayat of Bidiyah, North Al Sharqiyah Governorate. There were some sporting events such as car racing and sand skiing as part of the festival. Such activities also have a large following.

The Sur Maritime Festival will highlight the maritime heritage of Oman and will showcase the traditions in the area and pass it on to the next generation. Soon it will be enjoyed by the people who live in the area and many from other governorates are also expected to visit the venue and enjoy it.

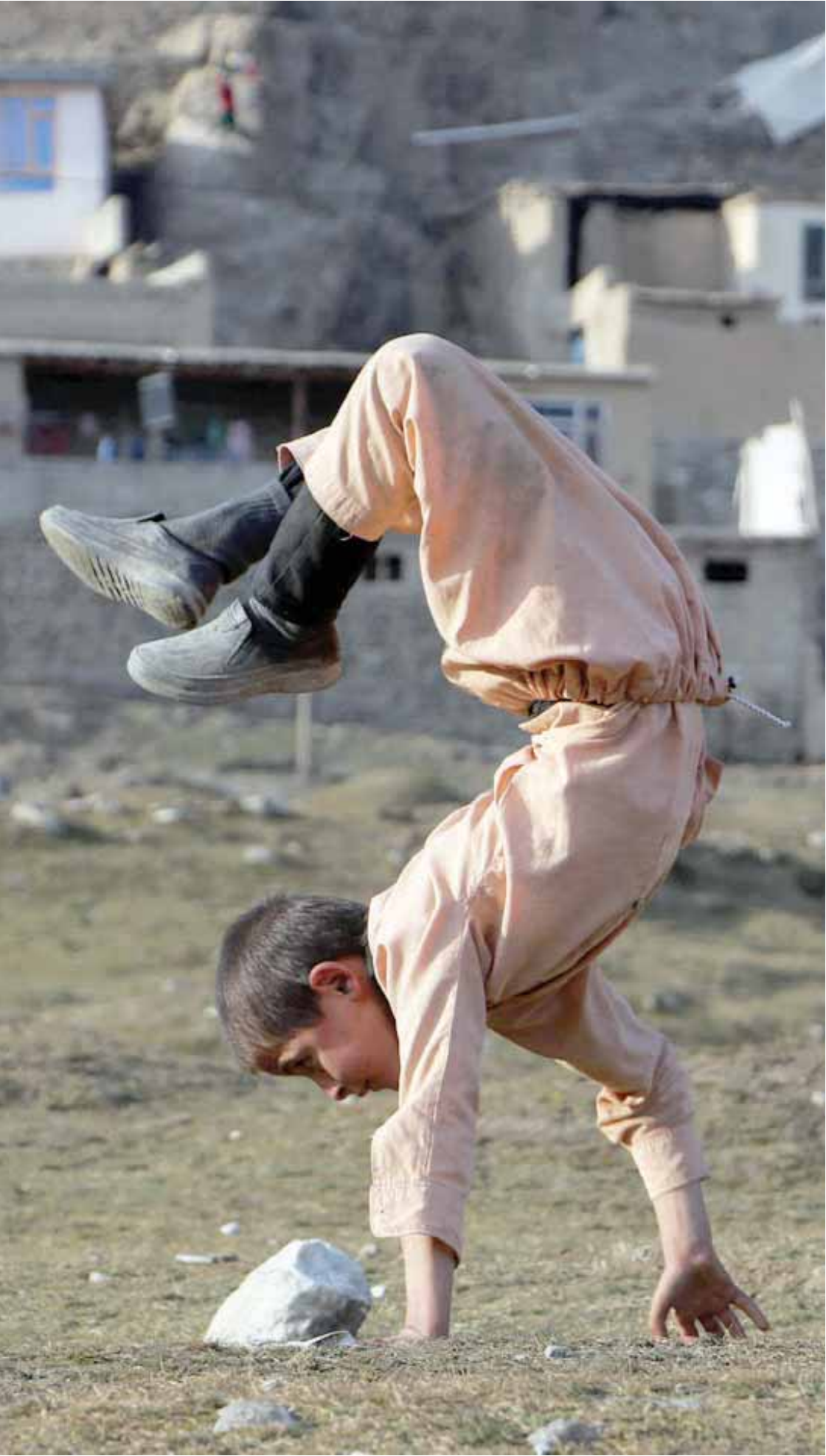
This festival will not only be an event which has little value except for the amusement of the people involved in it. Instead, it is highly educational for those who want to learn about them and show interest in preserving such heritage.

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate would soon unveil the details of the festival. People are anxiously waiting for the details so that they can plan their visit as per their convenience. For them it will be an opportunity for amusement as well as business. The small and medium enterprises will benefit from this activity.

They can engage in activities related to providing goods and services to those who would rush to the area to be present in the festival.

What can be better than experiencing traditions of the governorates, in the place where they grew and became a matter of pride for the local people. This is why such festivals are organised. They are cultural activities with a lot of business and commercial opportunities.

PLAY TIME



A boy plays in a field in Fayzabad, Badakhshan province, Afghanistan, on Wednesday. – AFP

Too soon for global optimism...

Many of those who attended this year's meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos were struck by the jubilant mood of the CEOs in attendance. It was hard to reconcile the optimism of these business leaders with the short-term and long-term economic uncertainty caused by the war in Ukraine.

To be sure, there are grounds for cautious optimism, like China's 180-degree turn on its draconian zero-Covid strategy. Soon, the country could see a huge wave of "revenge spending," driven by pent-up demand from consumers who have spent much of the past three years in lockdown and now have the equivalent of trillions of dollars in savings to spend. Many have pinned their hopes for a global recovery on this scenario, hoping that Chinese shoppers can boost growth and push oil prices back to \$100 a barrel. But regardless of what happens in China, India continues to enjoy strong growth, aided by purchases of discounted Russian oil.

Europeans, for their part, seem thrilled by over-confident forecasts that the continent's economy will not fall into recession in 2023 – or at least not a bad one. Even Italy has revised upward its growth estimates and is now expected to grow by 0.6 per cent this year. Given that climate change is at the top of the European Union's policy agenda, it is ironic that global warming seems to have saved Europe



Kenneth Rogoff

The writer is Professor of Economics and Public Policy at Harvard University and recipient of the 2011 Deutsche Bank Prize in Financial Economics

IT IS HARD TO RECONCILE THE JUBILANT MOOD OF MANY BUSINESS LEADERS WITH THE UNCERTAINTY CAUSED BY THE WAR IN UKRAINE. WHILE THERE ARE SOME POSITIVE SIGNS OF RECOVERY

from the gas shortages and price spikes that many analysts had predicted.

Many Europeans might also argue that the United States is more at risk of a significant recession, given that the full effect of the Federal Reserve's aggressive interest-rate hikes will not be felt until later this year. They would be half right, as the US would need a healthy dose of luck to bring down inflation to the Fed's 2 per cent target without a major downturn. At the same time, European policymakers seem scared that the clean-energy subsidies included in the US Inflation Reduction Act will siphon off much-needed investment from the continent.

But whatever economic growth these countries experience is contingent on the war in Ukraine. With no endgame in sight, the war could severely destabilise the global economy, causing both short-term and long-term disruptions.

For example, suppose that Russian President Vladimir Putin becomes exhausted and desperate enough to use battlefield nuclear weapons. In that case, all bets are off, and a global stock market crash would be all but certain. But China's likely response remains far less clear. If Chinese President Xi Jinping denounced Putin for using nuclear weapons but at

the same time continued to buy Russian oil and commodities, the West would be forced to impose secondary sanctions on the countries enabling the Russian war machine – namely, India and China.

While it is difficult to quantify the long-term growth effects of today's heightened geopolitical tensions, the International Monetary Fund estimates that deglobalisation could shrink global GDP by 7 per cent, perhaps even more if combined with technological decoupling. The net-zero transition, already a herculean challenge, will be far more difficult to accomplish in a fragmented global economy.

Meanwhile, defence spending, which many already expected to rise by at least 1 per cent of global GDP over the next 10 years, will

probably increase further. While US President Joe Biden has repeatedly said that he will not start World War III over Ukraine, a second Cold War, which seems far more likely, would be awful as well, even if we discount the growing risk of regional nuclear wars and nuclear terrorism. Whatever one thinks of the benefits of globalisation, we will miss one of its primary benefits: international stability.

The Ukrainian people understandably want to restore their pre-war borders and receive Nato guarantees of future security and hundreds of billions of dollars in reconstruction aid, as well as bring war-crime charges against Putin and his cronies. They are clearly not going to be cowed by Putin's nuclear threats. But Germany's reluctance to provide

Ukraine with modern tanks suggests that Western leaders, in general, are uncomfortable with the prospect of Nato directly engaging in war with Russia.

The West's plan, at least for now, seems to be to supply Ukraine with enough equipment to help it regain some of its territory (but not so much that Putin lashes out), or at least force a stalemate. While economic sanctions are a key part of the Western strategy, it would be utterly naïve to think that sanctions alone could end the war. The only place where sanctions helped produce regime change in modern times is South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s. Back then, the world was largely united against South African apartheid. But that is not the case with the war in Ukraine.

Russia's war caused an inflationary spike that affected the entire world. But at this point, an escalation will likely have a deflationary effect in the short term, as consumers and markets will panic. Long-term growth prospects do not look promising either, as the balkanisation of the global economy will likely exacerbate uncertainty.

It is certainly possible (albeit unlikely) that Putin's regime will implode and that whoever succeeds him will seek peace.



Europeans, for their part, seem thrilled by over-confident forecasts.

sport

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T20 INFLUENCE MAKING CRICKET MORE ENTERTAINING, SAYS KIRSTEN

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, FEB 1

The twenty20 format has revolutionised cricket with the par score for One-Day Internationals also going to another level, opined South African cricket great Gary Kirsten.

In an exclusive interview with *Oman Daily Observer*, the former coach of India and South Africa said the Twenty20 influence had done nothing bad to the game.

“In the purest form of the game, you want to have a good competition between the bat and ball. With all the influence and change to stroke-making that was affected by the T20 format, the game still has the classical trait of fair competition,” the former left-handed opener for South Africa said on the sidelines of Gary Kirsten Cricket (GKC) clinic at the Oman Cricket Academy in Al Amerat.

“The teams are confident of taking 20

wickets in a Test match after posting a good first innings total. Now, the Test matches have also gone to raise the level in terms of entertainment with aggressive brand of cricket from the teams.”

On a query about the impact of personal life’s discipline for a sports person, Kirsten said it reflects in the game too.

“It’s about the value you share in your life. The way one conducts his life also does have an impact in the sporting career as well. With discipline you will be able to make an impression and progress to success,” he said.

Winning the World Cup with India remains Kirsten’s top moment in the coaching career.

“It was a great period with the Indian team and finally winning the World Cup. Great experience for me in the role as a coach,” Kirsten, who coached India to World Cup glory in 2011, said.

The South African had also won the Indian Premier League title with Gujarat Titans in

their debut tournament in 2022.

At present, Gary said he is fully focused on his Gary Kirsten Cricket academy and has no plans to coach any national teams on a full-scale basis.

“I am focused on my academy (GKC) at present. I have no ambition to coach any national teams on a full-scale basis,” Kirsten, who was among the front-runners for an England coaching role earlier, said.

The cricketing mentor said it is important that parents of the young sportspersons remain educated about the sport and its demands.

“Getting parents educated about the sport makes them better persons to intervene in the sports careers of their children. Our academy focuses on such aspects,” Kirsten said.

SENSIBLE APPROACH

Earlier, Kirsten interacted with the parents during a talk session on the role

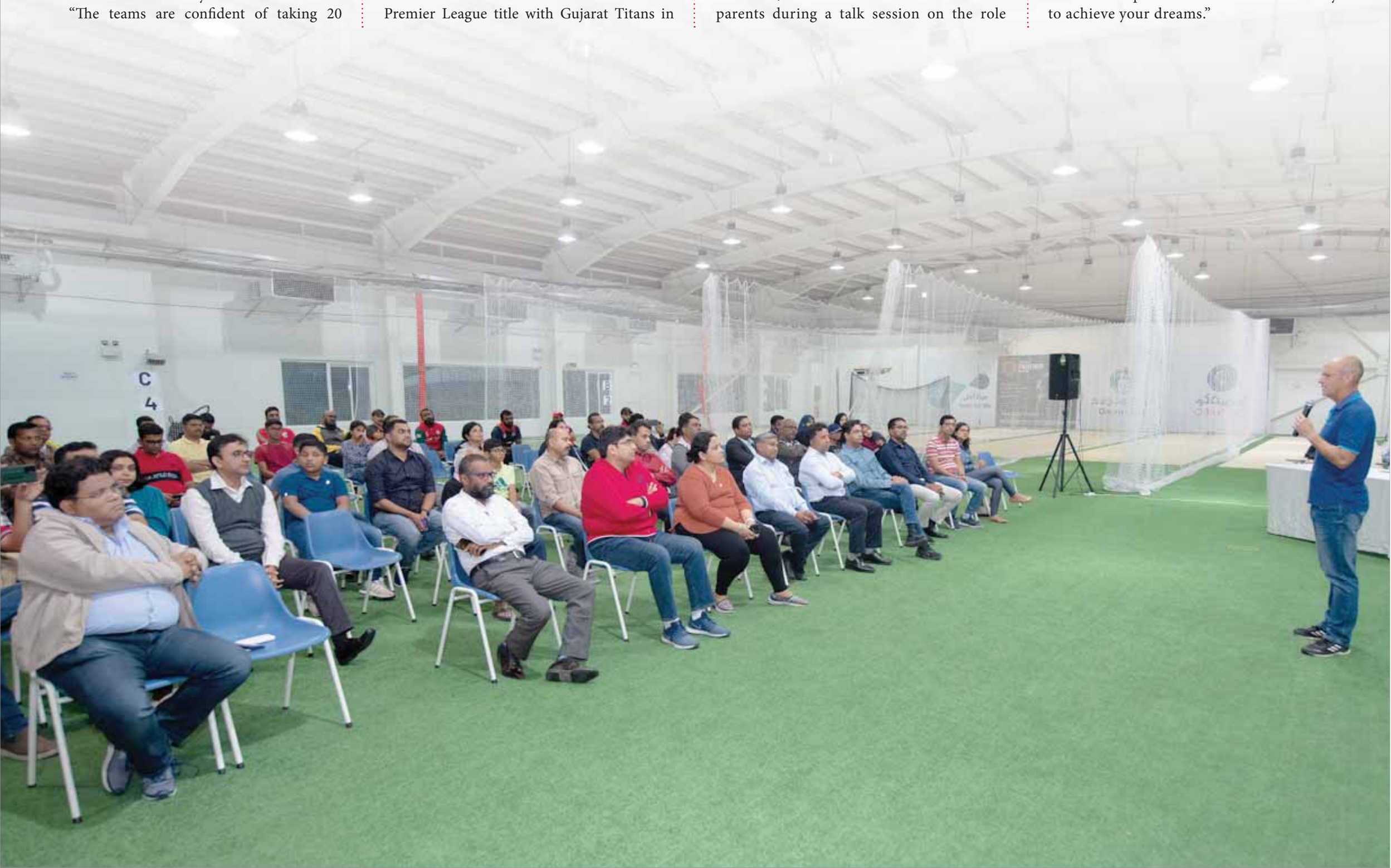
of parents in sports at the Oman Cricket Academy.

“The parents should not be emotional while handling the sports performance of their children. Instead they should take a sensible approach of bringing out the best in the children by making them work hard towards the goals,” the South African great told the parents.

“The parents should be able to make a right intervention in the sports careers of their children if needed. For that, they should be better educated with the different aspects of the sport as well.”

Kirsten in his message to the upcoming cricketers in Oman called on to continue their passion.

“This game needs patience and it takes time to settle in with some good performances. If you love the game, continue the passion. Work well consistently to achieve your dreams.”





800 triathletes in action at Ironman 70.3 Oman

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 1

More than 800 triathletes from 63 countries will participate in Ironman 70.3 Oman triathlon championship in Muscat on Thursday.

The official opening ceremony will be held under the auspices of Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary for Sports and Youth at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

The 2023 Ironman 70.3 Oman triathlon will be the first and largest series event of its kind in the Middle East for the 2023 season.

The race will kick off at 6:30 am on Thursday on a route that takes athletes through some of the capital city's most spectacular scenery — via a 1.9 km swim, 90 km road bike, and final 21.1 km run — for a total race distance of 113 km.

With the race's start and finish line situated at the same location at Shatti Al Qurum, the triathletes as well as the large number of spectators expected to turn out to watch the event can look forward to an action-packed race.

Saleh bin Ali al Khayfi, Director of Tourism, Marketing and Promotion at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, said:



"For the Sultanate of Oman, this globally-recognised triathlon event serves to further enhance the country's reputation as a premier host destination for regional and international sporting events, as well as for outdoor and adventure tourism activities of all kinds.

It also serves to showcase the rich cultural beauty and modern infrastructure that Oman's capital Muscat is renowned for. To all athletes making their way into Oman for the first time, I welcome you to our beautiful capital city."

The event is organised by

the leading multi-sport events company, Triathlon Middle East LLC (TRI.ME).

Mohammed al Obaidani, Chief Executive Officer and Founder of Triathlon Middle East, said: "It took a long time to organise this event, and we are finally set to host 2023 Ironman 70.3 Oman Muscat for the people of Oman and for the estimated 800-plus athletes who are scheduled to take part. I encourage all sports fans and families in Muscat to visit the Ironman race village this weekend to witness the action. And I wish all athletes the very best for their race day performance."

"The 90 km non-turning racetrack in Muscat is the only one of its kind, so the athletes love to compete in it," Al Obaidani added.

The route will entail a swim in the Sea of Oman waters off Shatti Al Qurum, followed by a bike and run route that will take athletes through Muscat's magnificent urban settings and historic Old Quarter, as well as through the spectacular mountain and desert terrain surrounding the capital. In addition, the route will track its way past many of the capital's tourism highlights including the Muttrah Corniche and Souq, Al Alam Palace, Royal Opera House Muscat and Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque.

Saudi Arabia wins bid to host 2027 Asian Cup



Fifa President Gianni Infantino (L) poses with AFC President Salman bin Ibrahim al Khalifa during the 33rd Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Congress at the Gulf Convention Centre in Manama. — AFP

MANAMA: Saudi Arabia has won a bid to host the 2027 Asian Cup, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said on Wednesday.

The announcement was made at the AFC Congress in the Bahraini capital of Manama.

Saudi Arabia was the sole bidder after India withdrew in December.

"We are excited to deliver the greatest tournament in the competition's history," the kingdom's sports minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki al Faisal said after the announcement.

"The kingdom is transforming before our eyes and we are filled with excitement for what it will look like in 2027."

The world's biggest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia has thrown hundreds of millions at sports deals including the acquisition of Cristiano Ronaldo, Formula One in Jeddah and the lucrative LIV Golf tour.

In the coming years the Saudis, who watched as neighbours Qatar hosted the World Cup in November and December, will hold the women's Asian Cup, the Olympic-sized Asian Games and even the Asian Winter Games on artificial snow.

The desert kingdom is also eyeing a World Cup and Summer Olympics, perhaps even a Winter Olympics, together with a swathe of other major events.

It is all part of grand plans by the de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, to modernise the Saudi economy and end its reliance on oil before the world moves on to other fuels.

"I'm sure Saudi Arabia will

host a fantastic Asian Cup," Fifa President Gianni Infantino said at the Manama congress.

The 2023 Asian Cup will be hosted by Qatar. It was previously set to be held in China but the country withdrew because of Covid.

The Asian Cup is staged every four years. Qatar won the tournament's last edition, in 2019, which was hosted by the United Arab Emirates.

Saudi Arabia has won three AFC Asian Cup titles.

**SALMAN RE-ELECTED
AFC CHIEF**

Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa officially retained his role as the Asian Football Confederation's president for a final four-year term on Wednesday as Saudi Arabia was confirmed as the host of the 2027 Asian Cup.

The Bahraini, who took over at the head of the Asian confederation in 2013 when he was elected to complete the remaining two years of deposed former president Mohammed bin Hamman's reign, stood unopposed and was elected by acclamation.

His new four-year term will be his last due to limits imposed under the governing body's statutes and the 57-year-old will have been in charge of Asian football for 14 years by the time his stint ends in 2027.

"I'd like to thank you all for placing your faith in me for another four-year term," Sheikh Salman told delegates. "It really humbles me, gives me such honour to have all the trust of the Asian confederation. — Agencies

Muscat CT beat Renaissance; Oman Stallions thump Zawawi

MUSCAT: Muscat CT beat Renaissance by 7 wickets and Oman Stallions thumped Zawawi Powertech by 7 wickets in the Premier Division of the Oman Cricket League 2022-23 powered by Muscat Pharmacy.

In gloomy and overcast conditions, Muscat CT elected to bowl first. Oman's one of the profound batsmen making his comeback, Aqib Ilyas (61 off 57b; 6x4,1x6) steered the Renaissance batting but couldn't find a support other than tailender Bilal Muhammed (29 off 46b; 3x4,1x6) who helped them post 190 all out in 46.3 overs.

Samay Shrivastav's magical spell for his 6-20 was the key to restrict Renaissance.

In response, Muscat CT got off to a flying start by Aiyappa CR (56 off 66b; 6x4) and Kashyap



Hemal Tandel of Oman Stallions

Prajapati (52 off 60b; 6x4) setting the tone for the chase.

Although due to rain interruptions, the target was reduced to 156 which was successfully chased down by Muscat CT in 31.5 overs. Bilal Muhammed (3-39) was the sole bowler to bag wickets for Renaissance. The win was Muscat



Samay Shrivastav, Kashyap Prajapati and Aiyappa CR of Muscat CT.

CT's fifth of the season out of six games.

HEMAL, FAISAL SHINE

In another match, Powertech elected to bat first in overcast conditions against Oman Stallions.

The Stallions pacers made optimum use of the conditions and wreaked havoc in the Zawawi

Powertech batting not allowing them to stitch a partnership. Hemal Tandel (5-30) and Faisal Shah (3-15) were the key to the Stallions bowling unit bundling Zawawi Powertech down to just 84 in 29.2 overs. In reply, Oman Stallions chased down the target in 12.5 overs registering their fourth win in five games.

Oman resident coach selected to play in ITF tourney

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

A professional tennis coach residing in the Sultanate of Oman is all set to play at the International Tennis Federation (ITF), at the 5 days tournament in southern Indian state of Kerala from February 6 to 10.

Sivan Govind, a trainer at the Indian Social Club (ISC) for the last seven years as tennis coach, will be playing in the category of 40+ out of the five categories, namely, 35+, 40+, 50+, 60+ and 70+ in the Kerala capital of Thiruvananthapuram.

Govind, who has been playing tennis for the last 39 years, was Kerala Number 1 and a sub junior top 5 in India as well. He has also played at All India Inter University and won third place. As a tennis coach, he had worked in Dubai for 17 years before he moved to Oman.

He also had the opportunity to work 10 years at the Dubai Tennis



Sivan Govind

Championship and boasts of many career highlights as well. He had earlier played seniors ITF 35+ at Dehradun and reached doubles final runner-up, besides reaching the semifinal of Chennai ITF 35+ section.

More than 100 tennis players will be participating in the International Tennis Federation tournament in Thiruvananthapuram. The finals will be held on February 10.

Qatar, Uzbek camps to shape Oman U20 players for Asian Cup



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 1

Two abroad preparatory camps in Qatar and Uzbekistan will shape Oman U20 football team players for the forthcoming AFC U-23 Asian Cup in Uzbekistan, which is scheduled to take place in Tashkent from March 1 to 18. The first external camp in Qatar will take place from February 11 to 19 while the next camp in Uzbekistan is scheduled from February 19 until the start of the tournament.

David Gordo, head coach of Oman U20 team, announced the probabilities of the domestic training camp which began on Wednesday in Muscat. The declared list featured two players from RC Celta de Vigo club (Spain) represented by Khalid al Sulaimi and Nasser al Saqri besides other members including: Turki Abdullah, Al Muhtadi al Abri, Jebran al Amri, Abdullah al Rajhi, Ayman al Nabhani, Abdullah al Afifi, Salah al Jadidi, Ahmed al Harmali, Osama al Rawahi, Osama al Mahrouqi, Salim al Abdali, Sultan al Marzooq, Al Mutasim al Sameen, Said al Ghanbousi, Mamoon al Oraimi, Musaab al Shamsi, Ahd al Mushaikh, Mazin Saleh, Ali al Balushi and Mohammed Abdulhakeem.

Oman team began their actual warm-up for the Asian assignment in January through a domestic camp in Muscat from January 12. The preparatory match ended in a 1-1 draw. Salah al Jadidi scored for Oman in the 50th minute before the Chinese equalised in the 77th minute.

Dubai's camp was very crucial for the players as they had played tough games and learnt from their strength and weakness areas. The coaching staff of the team are monitoring the readiness of the players ahead of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup in Uzbekistan. The ongoing local warm-up gathering is part of the team's preparation for the Asian event where the head coach and his assistant are working to finalise the starting line-up prior to the Asian assignment.

Oman will face tough challenge in the Asian Cup as they will play against South Korea, Tajikistan and Jordan in Group C, while the hosts Uzbekistan will vie for the title with Indonesia, Iraq and Syria in Group A. Qatar will play against Australia, Vietnam and Iran in Group B. China will play against Saudi Arabia, Japan and Kyrgyzstan in Group D. The top four teams in the Asian finals will confirm their presence in the Fifa U20 World Cup 2023, which will return to Asia in Indonesia from May 20 to June 11.

Couple of months ago, Oman U20 team had played two tough friendly matches against the Iran team. Both games had ended in favour of Iran. The visitors won the opening preparatory match 1-0 and the second match 2-1 at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.



AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 1

The first round of the Oman International Car Championship (OICC) will start on Thursday at the Bidiya hill course in the Governorate of North Al Sharqiyah. The event is organised by the Bidiya Endurance Racing Club, in cooperation with the Oman Automobile Association (OAA), under the supervision of the Office of the Governor of North Al Sharqiyah, and with direct support from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The organisation of the international race comes within the calendar of the Desert Adventures Festival, which is hosted by the golden sands of Bidiya during this period for the first time and includes more than 20 activities accompanying the event, including various sports races for adventure lovers.

The OICC is the latest edition of

the Car Challenge Championships in the golden sands of Bidiya as it will be held on February 2 and 3. Participants include drivers from the Sultanate of Oman, GCC and amateurs who love adventures, as the number of registrants has reached 74 so far. Contestants from Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates dominate the field.

The tournament's organising committee had recently completed all its field preparations for the event, which coincides with the course of the Desert Adventures Festival, which is being hosted by Bidiya these days.

The organising committee allocated valuable prizes to encourage the participants. The total prize money is RO 12,000 with the cups and shields for the winners.

CHAMPIONSHIP CATEGORIES

The championship will include five categories, six-cylinder, eight-

cylinder unmodified, six-cylinder, eight-cylinder modified, and the open challenge category. The first qualifiers are held on the first day, followed by final qualifiers on Friday, and each contestant is assigned two attempts to climb the sandy hill and record the best time.

RACE CONDITIONS

The organising committee has set laws for each category in addition to the instructions for security and safety, which were approved by the (OAA) to ensure the safety measures for drivers and their vehicles. Therefore, registration takes place and then the implementation of the requirements is strictly monitored.

The competitor is required to follow the safety and security conditions used in club races, starting at a distance of 20 metres, and the length of the racetrack from the beginning of the sensor device

to the endpoint is 60 metres, and the total is 80 metres. Each contestant is entitled to only two attempts. The attempt is counted if the vehicle touches the starting point of the sensitive device while giving the competitor a period of 15 minutes if his vehicle suffers a technical malfunction, and it is necessary to inform a member of the organising committee, and if the period ends, it is considered one attempt failed.

The committee has the right to exclude the vehicle if security and safety supports are not available in the vehicle. It is required to wear the full sports uniform, wear a seat belt and helmet, and have a fire extinguisher. Due to security and safety concerns in this category, it is permitted to remove the driver's assistant seat, it is also allowed to remove the engine cover, and it is allowed to change the original fuel tank in a manner that does not conflict with security.



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MAISARAH



Global giant UltraTech cements ties with Seven Seas for strategic partnership in Duqm

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 1

A strategic partnership agreement was signed in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) between UltraTech Cement Limited, India (UltraTech), the flagship Cement company of Aditya Birla Group, and Seven Seas to invest in Duqm Cement Projects International (DCPI) which was fully owned by Seven Seas Company LLC.

The partnership is expected to contribute to the twin national objectives of economic diversification and employment generation.

The team is working in close coordination with SEZAD (a zone affiliated with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones) officials to fast-track various approvals, infrastructure and providing investment environment in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm.

Aditya Birla Group (ABG)

THE PARTNERSHIP IS EXPECTED TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE TWIN NATIONAL OBJECTIVES OF ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION AND EMPLOYMENT GENERATION.

is a \$60-billion multinational conglomerate with presence in 36 countries and over 140,000 employees belonging to 100 nationalities.

In India they hold leadership position in grey cement, caustic soda and specialty chemicals, copper and viscose filament yarn. Globally ABG is the leader in aluminium rolling and holds the second position in Viscose Staple Fibre and Carbon Black.

UltraTech currently has a cement production capacity of 121 million tonnes in India which is expected to go up to 159 million tonnes by the end of FY 2025. In the region, they have manufacturing facilities in the UAE and Bahrain.

Oman-Saudi MoU to support new economic zone in Al Dhahirah

Strong momentum: 13 agreements signed against backdrop of Saudi-Oman Investment Forum

QASIM AL MAASHANI
RIYADH, FEB 1

The Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia signed a raft of agreements, including a memorandum of understanding to finance the construction of the infrastructure of a new integrated economic zone in Oman's Al Dhahirah Governorate at a cost of around RO 100 million.

In all, 13 agreements were signed between the two brotherly countries spanning a number of economic and commercial sectors, against the backdrop of the Saudi-Omani Investment Forum underway in Riyadh.

Later, in remarks to journalists, Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, stated that more than 100 companies from the two countries are also taking part in an exhibition being held in parallel with the forum.

Deliberations during the forum, Al Yousef said, have focused on the need for strengthening supply chains by encouraging Omani and Saudi industries to integrate based on their competitive strengths and capabilities.

Through partnerships and integration, companies from one side can join hands with a potential partner from the other side to



leverage their respective strengths, be it access to specific resources, technologies and expertise.

"For example, inputs for a certain product can be sourced from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, value-added in Oman and re-exported to Saudi Arabia, and vice versa. We are looking for this type of cooperation in the industrial sector to help strengthen supply chains for the benefit of the two countries and for the wider economy," he said.

Al Yousef also outlined the potential for Omani and Saudi companies to open branches of their operations in the other countries.

He added that the new land port established in the Empty Quarter on the border between the two countries has the potential

to spur trade and commerce in the coming years. Boding well for this growth is a special investment fund announced recently by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia to support investments in the two countries, he noted.

According to Al Yousef, bilateral trade climbed 219 per cent during the first nine months of 2022, compared to the same period in 2021. Omani non-oil exports to Saudi Arabia totalled RO 659 million in 9M 2022, which was up 33.98 per cent over the corresponding figure for 2021.

Saudi exports into Oman climbed to more than RO 1.270 billion during the same period.

Earlier, Eng Khalid bin Abdulaziz al Falih, Minister of Investment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, stressed the

importance of the private sector's role in Oman and Saudi Arabia in pushing the wheel of development forward and acts as an active partner and contributor to the development of the economic, investment and trade sectors between the two countries.

During the first half of 2022, bilateral trade had soared to 11.392 billion Saudi riyals, he said.

Activities of the forum included dialogue sessions to review prospects for promising investment sectors between the two countries, including: opportunities for integration in renewable energy and supply chains, tourism and real estate development, and other activities of common interest, which contribute to advancing and accelerating investment flows between the two sides.

On the sidelines of the forum, B2B meetings were held between representatives of the private sector in the two countries. The meetings discussed opportunities for cooperation and partnership and reviewed the available investment opportunities in the two countries.

Present at the opening of the forum were Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones, HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Ambassador of Oman to Saudi Arabia, Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and dignitaries from Oman and Saudi Arabia.

PDO inaugurates RO 87m Rima water plant project

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, FEB 1

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) celebrated the inauguration of its Rima Water Treatment Plant project under the auspices of HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, yesterday. The RO 87-million project located in Al Wusta Governorate has a capacity to treat 60,000 cubic metres of wastewater per day.

"Rima Water Treatment Plant represents a significant step forward in our commitment to sustainability and reducing our environmental impact. By using nature-based solutions to treat wastewater, we can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and create new habitats for wildlife," shared Managing Director Steve Phimister.

The plant utilises gravitational separation to separate oil



and water, and has a capacity of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 53,000 tonnes per year. The separated water is then treated using a natural biological treatment process.

Previously, 60 per cent of the wastewater was utilised for waterflooding operations, while the rest was disposed in deep reservoirs, according to the

company.

"It is a breakthrough technology that provides an eco-friendly alternative to traditional deep-water disposal (DWD) methods, and can be utilised in many other



industries that produce wastewater as a by-product," added Phimister.

HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, shared, "This project showcases a commitment to using natural technology and green solutions to preserve the environment and make the most of our natural resources. It sets a strong example to be followed in the region and

worldwide, especially in terms of sustainable water management and addressing the challenges faced in the oil and gas industry."

The Rima Water Treatment Plant follows the success of the company's 'Nimr Wetlands', a treatment plant that utilises reed plants to treat contaminated water with a production capacity of 690,000 barrels per day.

Bank Nizwa awarded ‘Most Innovative Islamic Bank’ in Oman



MUSCAT: Bank Nizwa, the fastest-growing Islamic Bank in Oman, was recently honoured with the ‘Most Innovative Islamic Bank’ award from the International Finance Magazine, a prestigious business and finance magazine that connects investors, corporate leaders and companies from around the world.

Held at the Jumeirah Emirates Tower Hotel in Dubai, the event was attended by Khaled al Kayed, the Chief Executive Officer of Bank Nizwa, who also received the award on behalf of the bank.

Bank Nizwa is leading the charge in the FinTech space in Oman and is actively driving transformation. It has been rewarded for its commitment to streamlining its activities by incorporating digital technology.

This recognition is a testimony to the Bank’s dedication to providing innovative Shari’ah-compliant products and services. In the past year, the Bank shifted its focus to aiding customers by launching new digital financial options.

Additionally, it has been extending its reach into the untapped retail and wholesale Islamic banking areas.

Al Kayed celebrated the

award by stating, “We are thrilled to receive this esteemed international recognition as a home-grown Islamic bank.

A fundamental part of our accomplishment has been our commitment to excellence in delivering a full-scale Islamic banking solution to our customers, along with superior, customer-focused banking experiences that are both gratifying and unforgettable.

We will persist in attempting to upgrade our reputation as an Islamic bank that firmly backs the Sultanate of Oman’s mission of becoming the international hub of the Islamic economy.”

“Over the last year, we have created digital products and services to meet the demands of the market.

This award is proof of our remarkable success in making the transition to a digital and innovative approach to keep our promise of simplifying our customers’ financial matters and this is something we will keep doing,” he added.

Bank Nizwa, a leader in digital progression, has made various noteworthy strides in utilising new technologies. Recently, they opened their first digital-only, paperless and unmanned branch at the Mall of Oman.

Bank Muscat opens state-of-the-art branch at Madinat Sultan Qaboos

MUSCAT: In line with Bank Muscat’s customer-centric vision “To serve you better, everyday”, the bank inaugurated a new state-of-the-art banking branch at Madinat Sultan Qaboos in the presence of Murtadha Ahmed Sultan, Director, WJ Towell Group, Ahmed bin Faqir al Balushi, Chief Banking Officer, Bank Muscat, and senior officials from the bank.

The new branch features a number of unique facilities like a Private Banking Branch, an Asalah Priority Banking Centre and a customer-centric reception desk that can promptly and efficiently assist customers in their banking needs.

Also, as part of the bank’s focus on improving access to persons with disabilities, the new branch will have disabled-friendly access, teller counters and ATMs.

Speaking on the occasion, Abdulnasir al Raisi, General Manager – Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, said: “Bank Muscat has earned a name over four decades of operations in the Sultanate of Oman for its customer-centricity, which is backed by the largest branch and ATM-CDM-FFM network, state-of-the-art Mobile and Internet banking, and world-class products and services.

The opening of the new branch will further strengthen the bank’s leadership position in Oman by helping it serve its customers better everyday in line with its aim for an enhanced Customer Experience. I take this opportunity to thank all our customers for their confidence and trust in the bank, and for being our partners in the progress and development of the Sultanate of Oman.”



He added that the bank would be opening more such high-tech branches to meet the needs of different customer segments in the near future.

Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, Deputy General Manager – Interior Regions, Bank Muscat, added: “We are pleased to open our new Madinat Sultan Qaboos branch to reach out and provide the best services to different segments of the bank’s customers, especially Premier Banking customers.

The bank’s continuously expanding branch and ATM-CDM-FFM network, which serve different customer and demographic segments, highlight its efforts to remain the bank of first choice in Oman.”

He added that the current branch was chosen to meet current and future customer needs and was an implementation of the bank’s vision to serve its customers better, everyday. He thanked customers for their confidence in the bank.

The new branch, which will

work from 8 am to 2 pm, will be a convenient option for the community in Madinat Sultan Qaboos in general and Premier Banking customers.

Staffed by well qualified and experienced Omani employees, it aims to provide prompt and efficient customer services thereby building further on the bank’s reputation as a listening bank that constantly strives to do better, everyday.

Bank Muscat leads the financial services sector in the Sultanate of Oman with a total of 174 branches and more than 820 touchpoints including Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs), Cash Deposit Machines (CDMs) and Full Function Machines (FFMs) installed across the country.

It is the first choice for over 2 million customers in Oman and has been playing an important role in enhancing financial inclusion in Oman with different innovative products for its customers.

The bank’s continuously upgraded omnichannel Internet

and mobile banking offer customers a fast and secure banking experience, and today, over 1.4 million retail banking customers use various features like real-time bill payments for utilities in Oman, fund transfers within the bank and in Oman, fund transfers across the world via the SWIFT network amongst a number of other services and benefits.

There has also been a rapid uptake in contactless payment through its various debit, credit and prepaid cards as well as contactless wearables.

Meanwhile, Premier Banking clientele have the advantage of being able to benefit from some of the most exclusive and differentiated services available in the Sultanate of Oman through Bank Muscat Private banking, Asalah Priority banking and Al Jawhar Privilege banking.

A number of exclusive offers, products and services are available for customers of Bank Muscat’s Premier Banking services.

Sohar International receives ‘Best Place to Work in Banking Sector – Oman 2022’ award

MUSCAT: As a progressive bank that acknowledges the quintessential role played by its human capital, Sohar International has continuously focused on inspiring, involving, and incentivising employees to nurture a conducive work environment that fosters sustainable growth. Recognising these efforts, the Bank was honoured with the coveted ‘Best Place to Work in Banking Sector – Oman 2022’ Award by The Global Economics, UK.

Representing Sohar International at The Annual Global Economics Awards Ceremony which was held recently at the Shangri-la, Dubai, were Mahira al Raisi, Chief Human Resources Officer and Mazin al Raisi, Chief Marketing Officer. The evening witnessed in attendance key delegates, top officials from leading corporate houses, and industry experts from different sectors.

On receiving the recognition, Ahmed al Musallami, Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International said, “As an organisation that shares the national agenda of progress and prosperity, Sohar International



is committed to creating and nurturing a knowledge based culture that enables our people to grow personally and professionally, therefore contributing to themselves as well as the organisation and the nation as a whole.

With a keen focus on a holistic approach to employee well-being, the bank has been able to deliver exceptional employee experience propelling the bank forward in its growth strategy resulting in ‘wins’ for all stakeholders.

We continue to invest in our employees focusing on creating an inclusive and collaborative

work environment that upholds people-centric values in line with the overall brand values.”

Apart from advocating a favourable and inclusive work environment, strong corporate ethics, and ample career progression opportunities within the organisation, Sohar International has also been applauded for its employee engagement programmes, internal campaigns encouraging self-growth, providing ongoing internal and external professional trainings, promoting a flat organisational structure approach, and investing in the right human

capital.

In addition, the bank’s well-defined, open, and transparent channels of interaction have not only increased efficiency, productivity, and performance but have also driven greater cooperation between teams and boosted employee morale.

Meanwhile, its strong and effective leadership stance and its keen focus on motivating employees to achieve transformation have been critical components that contributed to this recognition.

Commenting on being recognised as the Best Place to Work in Banking Sector, Mahira al Raisi, Chief Human Resources Officer said, “We are indeed delighted to have received such a prestigious award which further attests to our commitment in empowering employees to thrive.

Considering that people are our top priority, we continuously invests in their ongoing development through focused and customised training programmes strengthening their technical and leadership competencies thus helping employees attain sustained growth at every stage of their career.”

Ooredoo supports SMEs with bulk and mass SMS services

MUSCAT: Playing a supporting role in driving the sustainable growth of Small and Medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Oman, Ooredoo offers Bulk and Mass Short Messaging Services (SMS) to help businesses reach their existing and potential customers all at once.

Ooredoo’s Bulk SMS is a secure and cost-effective web-based service that enables entities to circulate promotional and service-based messages to an audience, while using their own database. Text messages can be tailored to the needs of different audience segments using a variety of filters, including age, gender, and location, while entities can monitor the progress of their campaign through Ooredoo’s online portal.

Meanwhile, companies can also share permission-based marketing, promotional text messages and other important updates to a wide customer base using Ooredoo’s Mass SMS service.

Saud al Riyami (pictured), Ooredoo’s Director of Business Sales, said, “Ooredoo has always been committed to offering a



variety of affordable services that will help small and medium-sized businesses in Oman flourish. We realise that for these companies to thrive in today’s digital world, they should leverage the latest available technologies to further improve and maintain their competitive edge. Our Bulk and Mass SMS services are designed to further improve our customers’ communication with their existing and potential customers in a cost-effective manner.”

Subscription to the Ooredoo Bulk and Mass SMS services is free of charge, and comes with 1,000 free SMS credits. To find out more about these and other products and services, customers can visit www.ooredoo.om. To sign up, existing customers can contact their assigned Account Manager or head to one of Ooredoo’s stores across Oman.



Fixed peg regime cushions impact of soaring global inflation on Oman: CBO

KEYTREND: Domestic inflation contained well-below global levels: Executive President

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT, FEB 1

The Sultanate of Oman's longstanding currency peg regime, which ties the Omani rial to the US Dollar based on a fixed exchange rate, has been credited with helping mitigate the effects of runaway global inflation on the Omani economy.

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has characterised the fixed peg regime as a "credible nominal anchor" for the Omani economy, helping also blunt the impact of surging inflation witnessed across the world in 2022.

"In a global inflationary environment, (the currency peg) helped contain domestic inflation in Oman well below the global levels," said Tahir bin Salim al Amri (pictured), Executive President - CBO.

Writing in the apex bank's maiden Macroeconomic Stability



Report, issued on Tuesday, Al Amri added that the US Federal Reserve had raised its target federal rates by a total of 425 basis points in seven stages as part of a sustained bid to rein in inflation in 2022.

"The CBO followed each of these rate hikes within the framework of a fixed exchange rate regime," the Executive President noted. According to the Macroeconomic Stability Report, the currency peg supports price stability by weakening the pass-through effect of imported inflation. The latter is a "significant determinant" of inflation in Oman due to the nation's heavy reliance on imports. "(The fixed peg regime) limits

excessive changes in domestic inflation by transmitting prevailing monetary conditions in the USA to Oman.

Higher US inflation, especially in regular times when price stability is given the utmost priority, triggers a rise in the Fed's policy rate, raising US interest rates and curtailing demand-pull inflationary pressures. In the absence of bottlenecks in local markets and domestic policy shocks, this would keep Oman's inflation in line with inflation levels in the USA and Oman's major trading partners," the Central Bank explained.

Accordingly, inflation in Oman remained "well-contained" at

much lower levels than in the US during January – September 2022 despite a dramatic spike in inflation globally, the report points out.

Inflation averaged 3.0 per cent (YoY) during this period, which was considerably lower than consumer inflation rates in the US, other Advanced Economies (AEs) and most Emerging Market & Developing Economies (EMDEs), it said.

Citing the most recent estimates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Central Bank noted that consumer inflation was expected to 3.1 per cent in Oman in 2022, versus 4.0 per cent for the rest of the GCC, 7.2 per cent in Advanced Economies, and a steep 8.1 per cent in the United States.

It was even higher at 9.9 per cent for EMDEs – driven by booming energy and commodity prices. Furthermore, average inflation trends in Oman were also "slightly lower" than the corresponding average in other GCC countries, which in turn have been significantly lower than the US average – a testament to the "success of the fixed peg regime

adopted by the GCC countries in preserving price stability", it stated.

While the fixed peg does play a "predominant" role in curbing inflationary pressures in Oman, other factors have contributed as well, according to the Central Bank. The list includes residual subsidies on utilities, price caps on some energy products and basic food commodities, and the exemption of several key consumer products from VAT.

"With rising US interest rates since March 2022, the USD strongly appreciated, and so did the OMR versus the other currencies of Oman's major trading partners. This raised the effective exchange rate of the OMR and made Oman's imports cheaper to domestic consumers, greatly limiting imported inflation.

Moreover, CBO followed the Fed's policy rate hikes during the year, tightening monetary conditions and limiting the inflationary impact of the excess liquidity in the interbank market," the Central Bank added in conclusion.

Oil prices stable as Opec+ sticks to policy ahead of Fed meeting

LONDON: Oil prices remained relatively stable after Opec and its allies stuck to their output policy while the market awaits a US interest rate decision and data on US crude and fuel stockpiles later on Wednesday.

Brent crude futures were down 14 cents, or 0.1%, at \$85.47 a barrel by 1419 GMT. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) US crude futures rose 13 cents, or 0.2%, to \$79.09.

Ministers from the Opec+ producer group comprising the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and allies including Russia kept their output policy unchanged at a virtual meeting on Wednesday.

Opec's oil output fell in January, as Iraqi exports dropped and Nigerian output did not recover, with the 10 Opec members pumping 920,000 barrels per day (bpd) below Opec+ targeted volumes, a survey found.

The shortfall was bigger than the 780,000 bpd deficit in December.

Elsewhere, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister said he expected oil demand to rise on the back of Chinese economic activity.

Tamer US rate hike expectations helped to lower the dollar index, which supported oil prices, said PVM analyst Stephen Brennock. A weaker US currency makes dollar-priced oil cheaper for buyers holding other currencies.

The US Federal Reserve is expected to deliver its interest rate decision at 1900 GMT. Data from the American Petroleum Institute shows US crude stocks rose about 6.3 million barrels, more than expected, in the week ended Jan 27, market sources said. Government stockpile data is due at 1530 GMT.

"Commercial storage in North America is ample," said Norbert Ruecker, economist at the bank Julius Baer. "The improved market mood has lifted prices of late, but this support should remain temporary. We see lower prices longer term, in line with the futures market's expectations."

WTI is trading in contango, which means front-month delivery contracts are trading higher than later deliveries, indicating current oversupply. Brent is in a shallow backwardation, the opposite market structure.

Meanwhile, Oman oil price yesterday reached \$83.55 per barrel, recording an increase of \$3.15 per barrel compared to Tuesday's price of \$79.91 per barrel.

The average price of Oman oil (February 2023 delivery) has stabilised at \$77.43 per barrel, registering a decline of \$8.72 per barrel than January 2023 delivery. — Reuters

Implications of mass layoffs in tech companies



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

Over the past three decades, the advent of new modern technologies has necessitated the acquisition of new skillsets and expertise.

Families hastened to educate, train and prepare their children in these specialisations that we have begun to rely on for our daily work and services.

Our lives have become dependent on smart communications to accomplish what we want to achieve through these technologies.

But what we see today is that there are problems with giant tech companies, especially those that manage global websites and platforms, as they lay off thousands of workers, among other industrial and commercial companies that retrenched thousands of their workers during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in recent years. Against the backdrop of these mass layoffs, we also see a shortage of workers in key specialisations - medical, pathological, environmental and other fields.

These services are increasingly in demand at the present time

due to rising poverty, epidemics and natural disasters that often ravage the world. The need for adequate numbers of qualified cadres is even more imperative during this time.

Today, it is clear that major tech giants are doing away with their employees after earning millions in profits. Their motivations are driven by soaring inflation, threat of recession and even accumulating debt.

Google, Twitter, Amazon and Meta are among the tech giants that have laid off thousands of employees during in the recent past. At the same time, medical institutions, health centres, and hospitals need qualified staff to serve rising patient populations.

Amid this skewed backdrop, families must take judicious decisions to encourage their children to pursue careers in disciplines that will endure notwithstanding technological changes.

Some experts in the field of technology believe that the layoffs in tech giants will continue for months and years.

This is also evident in companies operating in the Gulf region that have laid off some of their tech staff despite healthy profit earnings. These layoffs enable the employers to reduce costs.

Companies lay off their workers in any sector in the world because of global economic circumstances, which requires them to restructure their administrative and financial operations in order to be suitably geared for future difficulties.

Some of those institutions can operate efficiently with small numbers of workers – a trend we are seeing increasingly around the world.

2022 was a record year for MENA IPOs

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, FEB 1

The MENA region saw a record number of IPOs in 2022 with 51 IPOs and combined proceeds of \$22.0 billion, according to EY's MENA IPO Eye Q4 2022 report. The year witnessed a 143 per cent increase in the number of listings when compared to the 21 announced in 2021, and a 179 per cent hike in value when compared to last year.

The strong run across the MENA region's markets included 20 IPOs in Q4 2022 that raised \$7.3 billion in proceeds. In terms of value, Q2 2022 was the strongest quarter with \$9.2 billion in proceeds raised across nine IPOs.

Brad Watson, EY MENA Strategy and Transactions Leader, says: "MENA IPOs had a stellar 2022, with interest and liquidity in the region continuing to defy global trends. The number of IPOs in Q4 2022 was the highest at 20; however, Q2 marked the highest proceeds with the listing of Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) on the Dubai Financial Market (DFM) which raised a record \$6.1 billion.

The year to watch will be 2023 as there is a healthy IPO pipeline across the region against the backdrop of a challenging and volatile global economic environment."

Globally, 2022 saw a total of 1,333 IPOs raising \$179.5 billion in proceeds, a 45 per cent decrease in volume and 61 per cent decrease in value year-on-year. In contrast to the record-breaking 2021, IPO activity hit long-term lows by volume and value across several regions, with the strongest downward trend observed in the Americas.

The MENA region, however, continues to buck the trend, with listings remaining strong until end-2022, and a positive outlook for 2023. Several companies have already announced their



THE IPO OF PEARL REAL ESTATE INVESTMENT FUND (PEARL REIF) RAISED \$60.7 MILLION ON THE MUSCAT STOCK EXCHANGE (MSX), AKDITAL HOLDING S.A. RAISED \$75.6 MILLION ON THE CASABLANCA STOCK EXCHANGE, AND ASSURANCES MAGHREBIA VIE SA RAISED \$14.6 MILLION ON THE TUNIS STOCK EXCHANGE.

IPO plans for the new year. MENA equity performance experienced volatility throughout 2022 due to rising interest rates, inflation, and geopolitical unrest, which impacted investor sentiment. At the closing of the year, 24 out of the region's 51 IPOs had a negative return compared to their IPO price.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia continued to dominate listing activity in Q4 2022. This included seven IPOs on the Saudi Exchange (Tadawul) Main Market, raising \$4.7 billion in proceeds, and six IPOs raising \$65.2 million as well as two direct listings on the Nomu – Parallel Market.

The largest public offering belonged to Saudi Aramco Base Oil Company (Luberef), which raised \$1.3 billion – an amount that alone exceeded the total value of Saudi listings for Q3 2022.

Meanwhile, Americana Restaurants International PLC (Americana) brought a first-time dual offering and concurrent IPO

on Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange (ADX) and the Tadawul. In total, the company offered 30 per cent of the equity to raise \$1.8 billion.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), DEWA raised \$6.1 billion in Q2 2022, becoming the largest MENA IPO for the year in terms of proceeds raised.

In Q4 2022, ADX welcomed three listings — Americana, Burjeel Holdings PLC, and Bayanat AI PLC, which raised a total of \$14.0 billion. Furthermore, there were two new listings on DFM – Emirates Central Cooling Systems Corporation (Empower), raising \$724.1 million, and Taaleem Holdings PSC with \$204.2 million.

Despite a lower number of IPOs and trading volumes, the Egyptian Exchange (EGX) outperformed the largest GCC markets — Tadawul and ADX — in 2022 with an annual gain of 22.2 per cent.

The fourth quarter of 2022 saw an increase in IPO activity across the wider MENA region with smaller listings in Oman, Morocco, and Tunisia.

The IPO of Pearl Real Estate Investment Fund (Pearl REIF) raised \$60.7 million on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), Akdital Holding S.A. raised \$75.6 million on the Casablanca Stock Exchange, and Assurances Maghrebria Vie SA raised \$14.6 million on the Tunis Stock Exchange.

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ROHM folk music fest brings culture of four countries in one place

In this year's edition of the Folk Music Festival by the Royal Opera House Muscat, four countries including Oman came together to present the best of their culture and heritage. Here's what you have to know about the stellar performances... **P20**



Murakami to publish first new novel in six years

CELEBRATED JAPANESE AUTHOR Haruki Murakami will release his first new novel in six years this April, publisher Shinchosha announced on Wednesday. There was little detail given about the new work, which will be Murakami's first novel since "Killing Commendatore" was published in February 2017.

In a brief statement in Japanese, Shinchosha said the new work would be published on April 13, but gave neither its title nor details of the plot. The book is expected to be published in Japanese initially, with translations following later. Shinchosha said it could not confirm when translations of the book might be released, or even when the



name of the book would be announced. The title will be 1,200 Japanese manuscript pages long, but the exact number of book pages that will amount to was also not yet confirmed, the pub-

lisher added. Murakami is an internationally renowned writer who is perennially pegged for the Nobel literature prize. The 74-year-old has a cult following

for his surreal works peppered with references to pop culture, which have been translated into around 50 languages. Readers are drawn into the so-called "Murakami world" where giant frogs challenge salarymen in battle and mackerel rain down from the sky. Murakami is known as a reclusive figure, but the author has delighted fans in recent years by moonlighting as a radio DJ. And in 2021, a cavernous new library filled with his novels, scrapbooks and vinyl opened at Waseda University in Tokyo — featuring a replica of the writer's minimalist workspace, a cafe, and a radio studio. For the 2017 release of "Killing Commendatore", major bookstores in Tokyo stayed open past midnight to allow eager fans to get their hands on the book immediately. Details of the plot were kept under wraps to respect Murakami's desire for "readers to discover it without knowing anything beforehand", Shinchosha said at the time. — **AFP**

READ

THE STOLEN HEIR

BY HOLLY BLACK

Runaway Queen Suren and Prince Oak embark on a deadly and dangerous mission to the north.



LIFESTYLE

Children browse books at the Cairo International Book Fair at Egypt's International Exhibition Centre as about 51 countries participate in the 54th edition of the Cairo International Book Fair in Cairo, Egypt. — **AFP**



ART

French glassmaker Flavie Vincent-Petit, works on cleaning and restoring stained glass windows of Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral, at her workshop in the town of Troyes, northeastern France. A magic wand, for lack of a lead wand? Heirs to an ancestral expertise, the craftsmen of "La Maison du Vitrail" in Paris fear the banning of this material on a European scale, yet essential to their profession, and the survival of their heritage. — **AFP**





Restoring the wetlands

By Samuel Kutty

Every year February 2 is an important day in the ecosystem. On this day, the world celebrates Wetlands Day, with the theme "Revive and restore degraded wetlands" to increase awareness and understanding of the important part of humans and the globe in wetlands.

Wetlands are geographical regions that are either continuously or periodically saturated or inundated with water. World Wetlands Day helps to be aware to individuals that wetlands have a beneficial impact on Mother Nature.

Wetlands are among the world's most productive environments. They're a valuable resource for nature and people, but they are under threat from climate change, pollution, water extraction, and urban development.

"We are losing wetlands three times faster than forests. Yet, wetlands are critically important ecosystems that contribute to biodiversity, climate mitigation and adaptation, freshwater availability, world economies, and more", says a United Nations report on the occasion of World Wetlands Day 2023.

According to the report, 35 per cent of the world's wetlands have disappeared in the last 50 years. "It is urgent that we raise national and global awareness about wetlands in order to reverse their rapid loss and encourage actions to conserve and restore them", the report adds.

The Sultanate of Oman is one of the leading countries in dealing with all issues related to the environment and climate, and it is keen on supporting international solidarity to address the problem of climate change and its negative effects.

Recognising the importance of wetlands, the Sultanate of Oman joined the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of its International Importance under the Royal Decree No. 64/2012 dated November 25, 2012.



According to Ramsar.org, the Convention on Wetlands came into force in the Sultanate of Oman on August 19, 2013, by designating Qurum Nature Reserve as a Wetland of International Importance.

The Environment Authority is carrying out many environmental programmes for the maintenance of wetland environments, and implementation of many environmental programmes for the maintenance of wetland environments. In fact, one of Oman's wetlands, the Nimr Water Treatment Project in south Oman, is billed as

the largest industrial-constructed wetland system in the world. The main purpose of this wetland was to reuse brackish treated effluent water which is a major by-product of oil refining.

The large experimental field created to test the irrigation of various salt-tolerant plants is now a beautiful patch of greenery planted with five native reed species, enhancing resilience and biodiversity.

The combined system of the wetlands and ponds created a new valuable habitat in the desert,

attracting thousands of migratory birds. This one project has also resulted in cost-savings in treated water disposal, apart from ensuring greenhouse gas emissions reduction, and has also contributed to Oman's contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by two per cent.

Oman has also created another wetland very much within the capital city of Muscat -the Al Ansaab wetland. Another wonderful ecosystem, this one is a major hub for migratory birds, nature enthusiasts, and informed tourists.



Home to over 300 species of birds, many of which come to Oman during their biannual migratory flights across the world, the Al Ansaab Wetland is a nature lover's paradise that few have heard of so far, but many will soon know of, given the area's fast-growing popularity.

Sea-wading birds such as the Black Winged Stilt are full-time residents at the wetland, while many species of eagles come to Muscat during the winter months, where they fly into the Sultanate of Oman in November and leave once the cold season is over.

Al Ansaab Wetland is not just a special place for birds, it is also a safe haven for Oman's plants, butterflies, and other living species.

BOOK REVIEW



Azeez Jasim
Mohammed

Toss up! East or West?



NABEEL, THE HERO of Clouds Player; a novella by Iraqi Diaspora Ali Badir, finds himself torn between living in his native place and immigrating to the West. Though the decision of joining such an immense exodus during the 1990s in Iraq, and departing such a fragmented society in which he was living, was not taken easily, he did.

The core of the novella's idea is logo-centred on Nabeel's musical instrument, to whom it is a symbol of a flourishing future, liberation from the fatigued way of living, and the hope for achieving his ends as a cellist. Unexpectedly, his musical instrument is savagely destroyed by fundamentalists on both sides; his native place and abroad. He is mentally tortured by the extremists who are found living everywhere, like mosquitoes, and he is left in a state of mind by the atrocities of their conduct.

The innermost conflict that mankind used to live on, as it is put by psychologists, is not something new. This is true with the conflict inside the hero himself, which is a result of the conflict inside the extremists who forced the hero, unconsciously, to immigrate. The fact is that the societies are unlike each other, and they do not meet in so many points like culture, social conventions, religious rites, and the way of living except for radicalism; they all agree. This idea is found true in two different societies in the novella where the hero lives and he is in touch with their natives directly; one stands for the East and the other is an example of the West. Nabeel escapes exhausted radical thinking in his native place to find it abroad, and this supports our assumption that societies meet altogether at the point of radicalism.

You may find different conducts in the target society but you cannot cope with them all. Coping with foreign cultures is not an easy task as we may expect. It may take time, indeed, to adjust yourself to the culture of the society that you are heading to. Nabeel is able to; speak their language, eat their food and drink with them by attending parties and joining in the inns, shave his beard and moustache, and have his hair cut exactly like theirs, but still, he cannot feel that the natives treat him as one of them. He is treated as a refugee by the natives, and there are so many discussions with which he does not have the right to share his opinion, though he is a member of that group. If a diaspora is able to change his conduct and gets rid of his own social conventions just to cope with the society he lives in, hardly it will be possible for him to change the society itself. This is because leaving a society means denying it or at least denying the conduct of its natives. But the farcical in the individual's conduct when he continues living in the society that he flees to though it carries the same features of his native place!

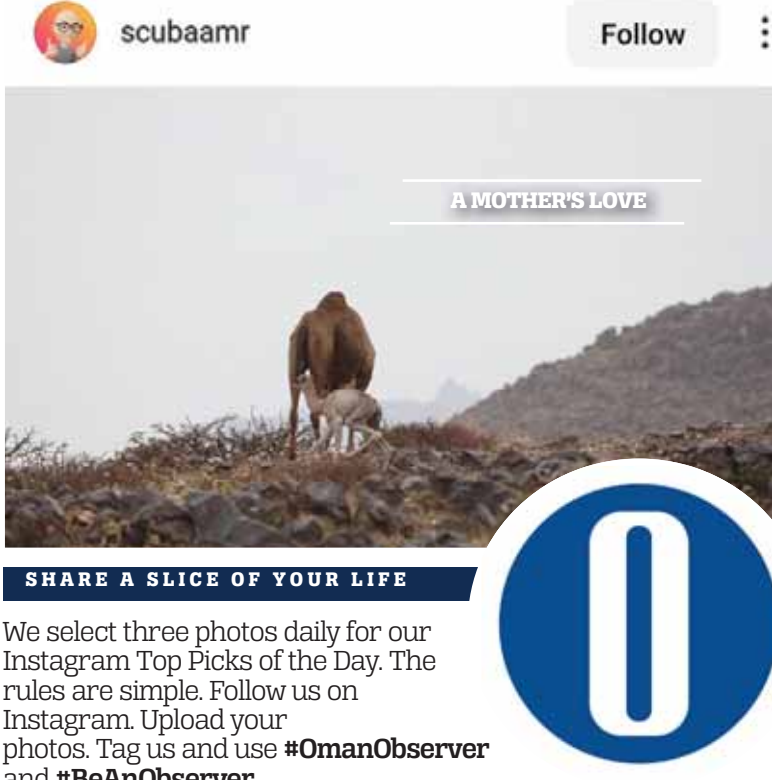
The hero is shocked to find out, finally, that the Eastern and Western societies are not more than two sides of a coin. In this conclusion, the author advises those who plan to immigrate abroad to rethink well before making a decision of departure, and they spend their life where they are born because "East or West, Home is Best".

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AROUND THE WORLD

MOVIES

Does Asterix have the magic potion to save French cinema?



"ASTERIX" RETURNS to the big screen on Wednesday as France tries to match Hollywood by weaponising nostalgia in the battle for box office success.

Critics may bemoan the crushing lack of originality in Hollywood in recent years, as risk-averse studios fall back on their catalogue of familiar superhero and sci-fi franchises.

But there is no doubting that it works: the top 10 of almost every country's box office last year comprised nothing but Hollywood sequels, reboots and video game adaptations.

That is particularly frustrating for France, where ministers wonder whether they are getting a return on vast state subsidies lavished on the film industry.

Roselyne Bachelot, culture minister from 2020 to 2022, was scathing about her country's filmmakers in a recent book.

"Direct subsidies, advances on receipts, tax exemptions... have created a protected industry which not only doesn't care much about audiences' tastes but even expresses contempt for 'mainstream' and profitable films," she wrote.

Paris-based Pathe wants to be an exception, not least because it also runs a large chain of cinemas.

Borrowing from the Hollywood playbook, it has thrown large budgets at "Asterix and Obelix: The Middle Kingdom," and "The Three Musketeers" which follows in its wake.

A reworking of "The Count of Monte Cristo" and a Charles de Gaulle biopic are also in the pipeline.

Pathe president Ardavan Safaee said last year that the French system of producing hundreds of small, arty films "isn't viable in the long-term" and that France needs "more spectacular" fare to compete with Hollywood blockbusters and streaming platforms.

- 'THE JOY, THE CELEBRATION' -

The strategy will likely work at home: the four previous live-action Asterix movies (between 1999 and 2012) sold some 35 million tickets in France and almost the same again around Europe.

The latest takes no chances, with popular stars (including Marion Cotillard and Vincent Cassel as Cleopatra and Julius Caesar) alongside cameos from rappers, YouTubers and even footballer Zlatan Ibrahimovic designed to tempt younger viewers back to cinemas.

"Big films like this represent the joy, the celebration of making cinema in a very free and very broad way," said Gilles Lellouche, who inherits the large britches of Obelix from previous star Gerard Depardieu.

Outside Europe, the prospects are less clear.

The makers had hoped for success in China, where the film is set. Director Guillaume Canet (who also stars as Asterix) travelled with President Emmanuel Macron to Beijing in 2019 to win the right to film on the Great Wall. But the pandemic ultimately scuppered the plan, and the film has yet to find a Chinese distributor.

Britain and the United States are also tricky markets since audiences are unaccustomed to dubbed or subtitled family fare.

It has been more than a decade since "The Artist" and "The Intouchables" broke records abroad. But despite occasional blockbusters like "Lucy" and "Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets" from Luc Besson, overseas ticket sales have been on a downward trend. — AFP

LIFESTYLE

Protest artist calls for peace amid Russia's war on Ukraine



Women tour an exhibition of pacifist paintings by Yelena Osipova in Saint Petersburg. — AFP

AN EXHIBITION of anti-war drawings was unveiled in Russia despite government efforts to snuff out any criticism of President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine.

Yelena Osipova, a 77-year-old protest artist from Russia's second city Saint Petersburg, presented 15 of her drawings created between 2014 and 2022.

One work shows the face of a little girl with big eyes. "Mom, I am afraid of the war," read the words next to the image, in Russian and Ukrainian.

Another drawing features a white crane and proclaims: "Russia is not Putin."

"It's an anti-war exhibition," Osipova said, calling the event a protest and a gesture of "repentance."

"We need to avoid casualties. And it depends on one person, but no one can do anything," she said, apparently referring to the Russian president.

Since the start of the military campaign in Ukraine all public criticism has been outlawed including the words "war" and "invasion."

A number of prominent and ordinary Russians have been given lengthy prison terms for publicly opposing the Kremlin's offensive in the pro-Western country.

Osipova, who has been a critic of the Kremlin for many years, said she was not afraid of speaking out.

"What could be worse than what is happening?" said the



Yelena Osipova opens her exhibition of pacifist paintings in Saint Petersburg on Tuesday. The exhibition will run until February 24. — AFP

activist dubbed "the conscience of Saint Petersburg."

"This is my country, my homeland, why can't I speak?"

Osipova first staged a protest in 2002, after Chechen gunmen stormed a Moscow theatre and took 850 people hostage. Since then, she has held regular protests and been arrested several times.

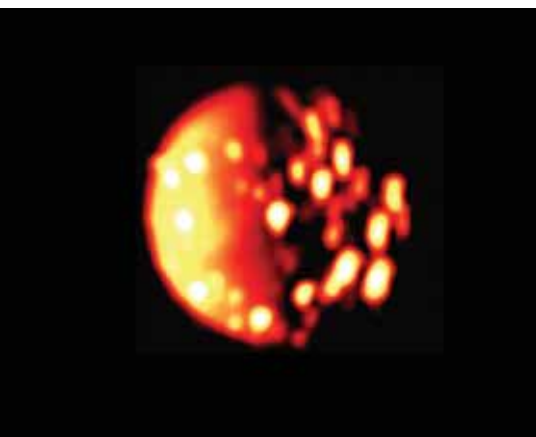
Alexander Shishlov of the local branch of the liberal Yabloko party that organised

the exhibition said some of the activist's works would violate the current legislation and therefore could not be displayed.

"As long as there are people like Yelena Osipova, there is hope," said Sergei, one of the first visitors, who did not give his last name. The exhibition will run until February 24, the day the Kremlin marks the one-year anniversary of Moscow's war on Ukraine. — AFP

DISCOVERY

A New View of the Most Explosive Moon in the Solar System



IO, THE THIRD largest of Jupiter's moons, is caught in a pressurised, explosive dance.

Orbiting near Ganymede and Europa, two of the other largest Jovian moons, and the planet itself, Io's mineral composition is constantly pulled and pushed by gravity, creating frictional heat deep inside the moon. This makes it extremely volcanically active — there are hundreds of volcanoes and extensive networks of lava flows marking Io's surface.

"It's being squeezed like an anger ball," said Jeff Morgenthaler, an astrophysicist at the Planetary Science Institute.

Despite a number of close-flying spacecrafts over the past few decades — including the Voyager 1 and Galileo missions — as well as constant observation from Earth, there are lasting mysteries about the kind of volcanic activity on Io and how the moon's fiery energy interacts with Jupiter and other nearby bodies.

Last year, Morgenthaler, who studies gases Io emits and the cloud said gases create around Jupiter, picked up signs that a different kind of eruption — a more powerful or more persistent one — was occurring.

"It's an exciting observation," said Ashley Davies, a planetary scientist and volcanologist at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory who was not involved in Morgenthaler's study. "It's showing that Io is certainly one of the most energetic bodies in the solar system, and you have no idea how it's going to appear when you turn your telescope on it."

The observation could help to guide future study of Io, including preparations for Nasa's Juno space probe, which has been orbiting Jupiter since 2016 and is scheduled to fly only a couple hundred miles from the Jovian moon this December.

Because Io is far from the sun and has a very thin atmosphere, its surface, on average, sits at around minus 200 degrees Fahrenheit, and it is coated in a frosty layer of sulfuric compounds. Volcanic eruptions there, which come in many different forms and intensities, can reach temperatures up to 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit. When super hot meets super cold, molecules like sulfur dioxide and sodium can be shot into space. Some of the most explosive eruptions come from fissures in the surface and throw fountains of lava half a mile into space. The charged molecules create what is known as a "plasma torus" in Io's wake: a doughnut-shaped cloud of ionized gas that collects in Jupiter's magnetic field.

It is possible to look directly at Io's volcanic hot spots with infrared telescopes. However, since 2017, Morgenthaler has taken a different approach, focusing on the moon's plasma torus through the Planetary Science Institute's Io Input/Output observatory (IoIO), in Arizona. Instead of using infrared light, Morgenthaler uses IoIO to block light from Jupiter and measure the gas around it.

Davies said that while infrared telescopes can tell us where volcanoes are erupting on Io and how powerful they may be, studying the plasma torus can tell us when an eruption is chemically rich — signalling that it may be more powerful, more persistent or just more peculiar. One eruption could push more ionized gas into the torus. Another could send out a lot of neutral gas. "It doesn't happen every time, and it's an interesting link," Davies said. — NYT

art & life

Local Scene

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THURSDAY | FEBRUARY 2 | 2023



الأوبرا السلطانية
دار الفنون الموسيقية

ROYAL OPERA
HOUSE OF MUSICAL ARTS



ROHM folk music fest brings culture of four countries in one place



By Georgina Benison
Photos by Khalid al Busaidi

The Muscat weather did not favour Friday's outdoor Folk Festival in the ROHMA Maidan Al Bahri, so when it was postponed to Saturday evening, the public arrived in droves with bated breath and full of anticipation. The rain held off and the 90-minute show was able to proceed unhindered.

Curiously, all four dance troops in this year's extravaganza were founded in the late 1950s, but have gone on to develop in style, ability and technique into the present decade.

First up was the "Kamzar Traditional Arts Group" from Khasab which opened with some stunning video footage of the beautiful Musandam scenery including spectacular sea cliffs, the famous fjords, a traditional dhow, and dolphin watching among scattered islands. The 20 male performers entered the arena to a backing track in white dishdashas beating traditional sticks, swords and drums. Their short introductory set concluded with jumping and singing, chanting, and lively call and responses.

They were followed by "The Flor Ribeirinha" group from Cuiabá in Mato Grosso, Brazil. They danced to a contemporary remix recording of indigenous dance music with electronic samba rhythms in perfect synchronisation which barely missed a beat. In "Siriri" (flying ant) their tribal costumes of effective feathered headdresses and leg coverings reflected the ethnic diversity of the state, including African, Portuguese, Spanish and indigenous influences. In "Boi Bumbá" - a ritualised Amazonian Bull Game - a shift to the iconic, colourful swirling dress associated with Brazilian Samba made a fine visual spectacle between fast virtuoso solos and swirling, spinning choruses in a flurry of vivacious colour. As usual, the Brazilian ladies and gentlemen did themselves proud for sheer speed and exuberance.

Most surprising and eye-opening of all perhaps, was the substantial Bayanihan Folk Dance group from the Philippines' presentation of their dance heritage. They brought five percussionists - no prerecording for them - and each style or region was represented with such exquisite attention to detail, it was hard to believe that this was just one nation's culture.

Five male dancers with ceremonial swords provided a martial arts display of almost military, gymnastic precision, reflecting Chinese

influences while rhythmic beating on the floor with hands in precise timing suggested Japanese Taiko drumming from the 1940s.

Girls appeared with parasols in a demure, stylised movement to a Gamelan-like accompaniment reflecting Malay or Indonesian influences. They danced some intricate, fast footwork between bamboo poles laid parallel on the floor; then were carried off stage triumphant by the boys, as the poles became palanquins for their beloveds. Stringed instruments played as a trio danced with glasses balanced on their heads, Indian-style, but were interrupted by six men in coconut-shell body percussion, comically beating a rhythm upon themselves. Spanish influences were bound to surface, and shoes came off to play percussively upon the floor like castanets, or back on their feet in a passionate Flamenco. The finale was lush and romantic as ladies in hats were swept off their feet by stick-clashing men - with much-needed accuracy!

The Transylvania National Folk Ensemble of Romania provided a powerful last Act to Saturday's show, bringing their own 12-piece orchestra under conductor, Eduard Albina. The ten men sang and shouted authentic folk song, dancing in traditional black boots and headscarves while ten ladies were dressed in red and white costumes, spinning and dancing to the fast klezmer-style music, featuring clarinet and shawm solos. The Orchestral Suite performed by the virtuoso musicians was captivating, contrasting a romantic ballad with fiddle solos from the Carpathian Mountain regions and bird effects in fast, mesmerising technique from each of the seven violinists.

An Oaş Wedding Ceremony saw the men, Cossack-like, with feathered caps and captivating footwork as they kicked and hit their heels high in the air. All were dressed in embroidered blouses while the girls' dance movements were more stately and restrained.

"The wild rhythm of the music, as well as the liveliness of the dancers, took the audience back to ancient times of Thracia" and they received resounding applause as the show drew to its close.

The Omani troupe returned with drums and live chants as the Filipino dancers entered the front of the stage to take another Curtain Call. The Brazilians had a plane to catch after their performance, so the vibrant movement of their flamboyant style left no chance to miss that connection with a final bow.