

Oman's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 2 per cent at constant prices to reach RO 26.4 billion as at the end of quarter 3 of this year compared with RO 25.9 over the same period of last year despite a 0.9-pre cent decrease in oil production. This was stated by Dr Nasser bin Rashid al Maawali, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Economy. He added that value-added of economic activities at constant prices increased by 0.5 per cent making up 34.3 per cent of the GDP as at the end of the third quarter of 2023 whereas the valued-added of non-oil activities grew by 2.7 per cent to 68.8 per cent. **DETAILS P13**



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OMAN SEEKS SOLUTIONS TO HAZARDS OF SAND CREEP ON DESERT ROADS

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RED WARRIORS STUN CHINA IN ABU DHABI

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SUR IS A CITY STEEPED IN HERITAGE AND HISTORY

MUSCAT

OCCI APPROVES 2024 BUDGET

The Board of Directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) stressed the government's interest in supporting the private sector and enabling it to carry out its roles in order to integrate with the Omani economic system as the sector witnessed tangible and effective activity in economic development during this year and has contributed significantly to the economic diversification efforts. It came at the eight meeting of the OCCI Board of Directors held under the chairmanship of Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, board chairman. The board agreed to conduct a study on business competitiveness in the Sultanate of Oman to serve as a reference for various authorities in the country to improve the business environment. **DETAILS P4**

LONDON

EUROSTAR PASSENGERS STRANDED AFTER TUNNEL FLOODS

Eurostar chaos has left travellers bound for the continent on the verge of tears as they told of "cancelled" New Year's plans in Paris, "ruined" trips to Disneyland and skiing trips in jeopardy. The railway company, which runs services from London to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam, has cancelled all of its Saturday services because of a flooded tunnel in Kent. A thronging London St Pancras International on Saturday saw crestfallen travellers sitting on suitcases in the concourse, as people could be heard frantically trying to find alternative routes to their destinations. A man, presumed to be a taxi driver, was also seen wondering around the station clutching an iPad which said "taxi to Paris." **DETAILS P7**

Desert Tourism Forum from Jan 24



Oman Desert Tourism Forum is scheduled to take place from January 24 in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate.

BIDIYA: The branch of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate organises the desert tourism forum in the Wilayat of Bidiya in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate under the title 'Oman Desert Tourism Forum' with the participation of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism as well as a number of public and private institutions from January 24. The event will be attended by a number of officials from the investment and tourism sectors, travel and tourism companies, desert reserves and owners of projects related to the desert winter season. The tourism components of North Al

Desert Tourism Forum to ignite investment and exploration in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate

Forum showcases rich cultural heritage and diverse experiences

Sharqiyah Governorate which include diversity of the terrain, natural beauty and tourist sites, attract a large number of local, regional and international tourists. A lot of tourists flock to the governorate to enjoy its diverse atmosphere and tourist places as private sector institutions hold tourism forums that help develop tourism in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate. Salah bin Salem al Hajri, Chairman

of the Tourism Committee at the OCCI branch in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate, explained that the forum will be implemented for the first time in the Sultanate of Oman and is considered of great importance as it sheds light on investment and economic activity in the desert tourism sector in the governorate. The forum will discuss the laws regulating desert tourism, the investment opportunities

available to local and international investors, the cultural and social dimension of desert tourism and the experiences of the GCC countries in this field. Oman Desert Tourism Forum will highlight the tourism components, the cultural and historic heritage, the diversity of desert tourism experience that the Sultanate of Oman can offer and its importance as a tourist attraction for local and international tourists. A number of initiatives will be announced in cooperation with other entities as well as specialised training courses in the field of tourism media, the official said. — **ONA**



A woman and a child injured in an Israeli bombardment lie side by side at the emergency ward of the Al Aqsa hospital in Deir al Balah in the central Gaza Strip. — **AFP**

Israeli tanks advance deeper into Gaza, 12 weeks into war

CAIRO/GAZA: Israeli tanks pushed deeper into central and southern Gaza on Saturday under heavy air and artillery fire, residents said, pressing a deadly offensive that has razed much of the enclave and that Israel has said may last months more. Fighting was focused in al Bureij, Nuseirat, Maghazi and Khan Younis, backed by intensive air strikes that filled hospitals with wounded Palestinians. The bombardment has killed 165 people and wounded 250 others in Gaza over the past 24 hours, health authorities in the territory said. At Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, the biggest and most important medical facility in the south of the tiny, crowded territory, a Red Crescent video showed

paramedics rushing a tiny, dust-covered baby into a busy hospital as one shouted "there is breathing, there is breathing". Almost all of Gaza's 2.3 million residents have been forced from their homes by Israel's 12-week assault. The offensive has killed at least 21,672 Palestinians, according to health authorities in Gaza, with more than 56,000 injured and thousands more feared dead under the rubble. Israel says 170 of its military personnel have been killed in the Gaza fighting. Bombardment has smashed houses, apartment blocks and businesses and put hospitals out of action. On Saturday, the Palestinian Culture Ministry said Israeli strikes had struck a medieval bathhouse. **SEE ALSO P6**

SCIENTISTS DEVISE EASIER WAY TO SPOT HABITABLE EXOPLANETS



Scientists discover new way to identify liquid water on exoplanets.

LONDON: Scientists say they have found a new and easier way to identify liquid water - and potentially life - on other planets. The process involves measuring the amount of carbon dioxide in a planet's atmosphere and comparing those measurements with that taken from neighbouring worlds. The researchers said that if a planet has a reduced amount of CO2 in its atmosphere compared with its neighbours, it suggests there is liquid water on its surface. The theory is that the CO2 in the planet's atmosphere is being dissolved into an ocean - just like Earth - or absorbed by a planetary-scale biomass, the team said. The researchers said that until now there had been no practical method for detecting the presence of liquid water. The closest scientists had come to identifying liquid on a planet's surface was to use its glint - how star light reflects off water - which can be too weak for current observatories to detect. The researchers said they have devised what they call a new 'habitability signature' which can determine whether a planet is capable of hosting and retaining liquid water on its surface. Amaury Triaud, professor of exoplanetology at the University of Birmingham, said: "It is fairly easy to measure the amount of carbon dioxide in a planet's atmosphere. "This is because CO2 is a strong absorber in the infrared, the same property causing the current rise in global temperatures here on Earth. "By comparing the amount of CO2 in different planets' atmospheres, we can use this new habitability signature to identify those planets with oceans, which make them more likely to be able to support life." — **dpa**

2023 saw few landmark events happening locally and internationally. The global stories centred around aggression, earthquakes and climate change. For the Sultanate of Oman, it was about taking the country forward through key reforms and achievements.

SOME OF THE KEY IMPORTANT EVENTS ARE:

- MARCH 6:** His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik presided over the official inauguration of the Royal Academy of Management at the ministries' area in Al Khuwair.
- MARCH 13:** His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik patronised the official opening of the 'Oman Across Ages Museum' in Manah, Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah. His Majesty the Sultan viewed the exhibition of the foundation stone of 'Oman Across Ages Museum', passing by the vehicle that was once used by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said when the latter laid the foundation stone of the museum
- APRIL 16:** His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Decree No 23/2023 on Omanis' marriage to foreigners. Article 3 stated that the provisions of this decree shall not prejudice the provisions of the Islamic Sharia or public order or any provision cited in the laws, Royal decrees, or applicable systems stipulating non-marriage to a foreigner as a condition for occupying or continuing to occupy certain public jobs of significance or special nature.
- MAY 18:** His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Decree No 31/2023 promulgating the School Education Law, after presenting the same before the Council of Oman.
- MAY 21:** His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and President Abdul Fattah el Sisi of Egypt held an official session of talks at El Ittihadiya Palace in Cairo. The two leaders reviewed the distinguished relations and the



REFORMS, DIPLOMATIC TRIUMPHS, AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

deep-rooted historical bonds binding the Sultanate of Oman and Egypt. They also explored various aspects of the existing bilateral cooperation in all fields and contemplated ways of consolidating the joint interests in a manner that generates benefits for the two countries' peoples.

- MAY 28:** His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and Dr Ebrahim Raisi, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, held a session of talks at the Iranian presidential building in Tehran. The session dealt with various aspects of bilateral cooperation between Oman and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The two leaders also exchanged views on current issues of common concern in the backdrop of developments in the regional and international arenas.
- MAY 31:** His Majesty the Sultan presided over the inaugural ceremony of the 'Sultan Haitham City' at Al Barakah Palace. His Majesty listened to a complete description of the smart futuristic city. The demonstration showcased a model of the city, which is coming up in the Wilayat of Al Seeb. The city constitutes a new model for setting up sustainable cities. His Majesty the Sultan took note of the facilities of 'Sultan Haitham City' and was also briefed about the brand identity and message of Sultan Haitham City, codenamed 'Treasure the Future.'
- JULY 19:** His Majesty the Sultan issued Royal Decree No 52/2023 promulgating the Social Protection Law, after presenting the same before the Council of Oman. Article 2 instructed the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Social Protection Fund to issue the executive regulation of the law attached to the decree, within a period not exceeding 6 months from the date of issue of this decree, as well as the decisions necessary for the implementation of provisions of the law attached to this decree.

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MOH NO. 384/2023

SHURA ELECTIONS

Citizens enthusiastically participated in the Tenth Term of Majlis Ash'shura Elections (2023-2027), marking an unprecedented milestone as the region's first fully-digitised election.

The groundbreaking event utilised an AI-powered mobile application named 'Intakhib,' allowing voters to conveniently cast their ballots.

The elections witnessed a remarkable increase in voter turnout across the Sultanate, attributed to the user-friendly Intakhib app. The digital format, including the use of wireless mobile technology and innovative features like near field communication, audio reading, and sign language support for voters with disabilities, contributed to the success of the election.

A total of 843 candidates, including 32 women, contested the elections. Although women constituted 48 per cent of the total number of voters, no female candidate could win a seat in the council



KEY EVENTS

LABOUR LAW

JULY 25: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Decree No 53/2023 on the promulgation of the Labour Law, after presenting the same before the Council of Oman. Article 2 instructs the Minister of Labour to issue the Executive Regulation of the attached law, as well as the decisions necessary for the implementation of its provisions.

OCTOBER 11: His Majesty the Sultan chaired a meeting of the Council of Ministers at Al Barakah Palace.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: His Majesty the Sultan who reviewed domestic affairs expressed his satisfaction with Oman's fiscal performance over the past three years.

SPORTS CITY: His Majesty the Sultan gave directives to begin steps to carry out a project for establishing an integrated Sports City capable of hosting regional and international tournaments and competitions.

PROMOTIONS: The Council of Ministers approved the promotion of Omani employees at units of the State's Administrative Apparatus (seniors of 2013 to 2016) so that the employees could access higher grades during 2024 and 2025, in accordance with the scheduled programme.

SEPTEMBER 12: His Majesty the Sultan received at Al Barakah Palace Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Prince Mohammed bin Salman was on a private visit to the Sultanate of Oman.



HIS MAJESTY VISITS SINGAPORE
During the state visit to Singapore (December 13-15), His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik called on President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and met with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. They discussed ways to enhance bilateral cooperation in areas such as green energy, trade and investments, technical and vocational training, and promoting cultural exchanges. Prime Minister Lee and His Majesty welcomed the good momentum in bilateral exchanges and the convening of the inaugural Singapore-Oman Strategic Dialogue in December 2022. They agreed there was scope to strengthen economic cooperation for mutual benefit including the review of the Gulf Cooperation Council-Singapore Free Trade Agreement.

HM'S INDIA VISIT
At the invitation of the President of India, Droupadi Murmu, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Sultan of Oman, paid his maiden state visit to India on December 16. This visit is of special significance as it marks the Sultanate of Oman's Sultan's first visit to India in over 25 years since the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos' visit in 1997. His Majesty's visit follows the visit of the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, to the Sultanate of Oman in February 2018. The two Leaders expressed satisfaction at the excellent state of bilateral relations, which have stood the test of time, evolving into a strong and enduring partnership built on historical ties, mutual trust and respect, and shared interests.

DEC 17: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik offered condolences to Shaikh Mishal al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, the Al Sabah family and people of Kuwait on the death of late Emir of Kuwait Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, when Shaikh Mishal received His Majesty the Sultan at the Emiri Airport.

FOREIGN POLICY RECEIVES ACCLAIM

Foreign ministers taking part in the 27th meeting of the Joint GCC-EU Ministerial Council hailed the Sultanate of Oman's foreign policy and the country's regional and international efforts to establish dialogue for peace and build pillars of prosperity and stability.

They stressed that Oman's foreign policy should be taken as a model for consolidating regional and global security and stability.

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission, said, "The Sultanate of Oman plays a positive role as a reliable mediator at regional and international levels."

In this context, Borrell referred to Oman's stance on the Yemen crisis, noting that this role receives the full appreciation and respect from the European side.



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Educational Forum ends with 72 papers, focus on improvement



Educational experts at the 3-day Educational Research Forum.

KABEER YOUSUF
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MUSCAT: With 72 expert research papers on further improving the quality of education in Oman, the 3-day Educational Research Forum, held under the auspices of Prof Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education, concluded on a high note at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Organised by the Ministry of Education represented by the Specialised Institute for Professional Training for Teachers, the Educational Research Forum held from December 25 to 27 hosted educational experts and international speakers from ALESCO, ISESCO, the Arab Education Bureau for the Gulf States, and SQU, besides teachers and educational experts and others related to educational research, over 300 specialists, decision-makers, academicians, and the educational body including teachers, school principals, administrative supervisors and trainers, and the presentation of 72 papers over several brainstorming sessions and presentation of research

papers during the three days. “With the three-day forum on educational research, we aimed at developing research in education for further improving the standards by reviewing the results of studies and procedural research supervised by the Specialised Institute and aligning educational research with the development needs of the education field,” said Dr Intisar bint Abdullah Ambusaidiyah, Director-General of the Specialised Institute for Vocational Training for Teachers.

INTERACTIVE APPROACH Dr Maasoma al Ajmiyah, Councillor to the Minister of Education for Developing Linguistic Performance, headed the first session which included presenting six papers. Dr Basma al Riyamiyah presented a paper titled ‘Effectiveness of an Educational Enrichment Programme based on Interactive Approach’ to include Nanotechnology Applications related to Environmental Sustainability for Grade 11 students in Oman. Ali al Muqbali presented a paper titled ‘Career Future Anxiety and its relation to Professional Self-Efficacy’ and the Level of Professional Ambition among General Education Diploma Students in South Al



Batinah Governorate. Ohood al Jabriyah presented a paper titled ‘Effectiveness of Teaching using the Six-Dimensional Strategy (PDEODE) to Develop Academic Achievement among Grade 11 Students’. Kawthar al Habsiyah presented the fourth paper titled ‘Impact of Self-Assessment on Achievement in Social Studies and Meditative Thinking among Grade 10 Students.’ Eman al Jabriyah presented a paper titled ‘Second Cycle Science Teachers’ Practice of 21st Century Skills from their Point of View’, and Safa al Zaabiyah presented the last paper in the first session which was titled ‘The Role of Teacher in Enhancing Educational Security among Students from the Point of View of Educational Supervisors.’ The second session was headed by Dr Fatma al Kaaf from SQU and the session included the presentation of six papers. Hamad al Riyami (The Performance Level of Basic Education Teachers in Oman in Preparing Continuous Evaluation Tools in light of Education Quality Standards), Mohammad al Jaradi (Effectiveness of the Five-Year Learning Cycle in Developing Mathematical Thinking among Grade 11 Students in the

Sultanate of Oman), Maryam al Muzahmiyah (Impact of School Principals’ Support on Teachers’ Job Satisfaction and Proposals for Developing it in Oman), Manal al Hattaliyah (Effectiveness of Teaching with Interactive Infographics in Acquiring Scientific Concepts and Developing Visual Thinking Skills in Science among Grade 4 Students), Asma al Salmiyah (Science Teachers’ Perceptions of Grades (5-8) about the Effectiveness of Google Classroom Platform in Providing Students with Self-Learning and Problem-Solving Skills), Aziza al Abbadiyah (Impact of a Training Programme in Solving Problem-Solving Questions on Academic Achievement in Mathematics among Grade 2 Students at Al Wadi Al Abyad School) are the papers presented in the second session and this was followed by four more sessions hosting educationists presenting specialised papers to the gathering. “The forum focused on developing the school education system, improving learning outcomes, raising the quality of school education and developing the professional competencies of teachers,” Dr Intisar, who is also the chair of the organising committee of the forum, added.

Psychiatrist urges early delirium recognition for enhanced elderly care

NASRULAH AL AJMI

MUSCAT: A leading Omani psychiatrist has underlined the importance of early diagnosis of delirium in the elderly in enabling the effective management of such cases, thereby contributing to their rapid recovery.

In a recent interview, Dr Hamed al Sinawi, a senior consultant old age psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital (SQUH), shared insights on the multifaceted impact of delirium on patients such as aggression and agitation.

“In my experience at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, we encounter approximately 3-4 cases of delirium among elderly patients per week,” Dr Hamed noted. He highlighted the multifaceted impact of delirium on patients, ranging from behavioural changes such as agitation and aggression to challenges in recognising family members and refusing assistance.

The expert emphasised the intricate nature of identifying delirium causes, citing medical problems such as dehydration, constipation, infection, or cardiac issues. He underscored the pivotal role of early recognition in the management process, as prompt identification and treatment of the underlying cause significantly contribute to a patient’s rapid recovery.

Dr Hamed further advocated for preventive measures, including routine delirium screening upon admission, presence of a family member to provide orientation and reassurance, and maintaining well-lit



Dr Hamed al Sinawi

environments to prevent hallucinations.

Discussing potential improvements in delirium management, Dr Hamed suggested holistic approaches. “Training nursing and medical staff in recognising delirium symptoms are crucial. Creating elderly-friendly wards with adequate space and lighting, regular medication reviews, and actively involving family members during hospital admission can substantially enhance the overall care of patients with delirium,” he explained.

While acknowledging the absence of ongoing research initiatives on delirium at SQUH, Dr Hamed expressed the importance of continuous exploration in this field. “Ongoing research and clinical trials are vital to uncovering more effective management strategies for delirium, and I anticipate future endeavours in this direction,” he remarked.

Dr Hamed’s insights shed light on the complexities of delirium management, emphasising the critical role of early recognition, preventive measures, and comprehensive improvements in healthcare settings to enhance the well-being of elderly patients.

Oman Traditional Music Centre wraps up 2023

MUSCAT: The Oman Centre for Traditional Music, which operates under the auspices of the Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science at the Diwan of the Royal Court, successfully concluded its activities for 2023 at its headquarters. The closing programme featured a poetry session showcasing various facets of Omani singing. Renowned poet Khamis bin Juma al Muwaiti led the session with a collection of ‘Al Razha’ poems, while Hamoud bin Ali al Rawahi presented verses in the art of ‘Al Masbaa’. Abdullah bin Amer al Ghunaimi shared his poetic mastery in ‘Al Razha’ and ‘Al Taghroud’, and Mubarak bin Muslim al Salti showcased a poetic collection in the genre of ‘Al Midan’. Salim bin Mubarak al Harthi contributed with poems in the art of ‘Al Tashahshah.’ The event also featured dialogue session on Omani traditional music, highlighted by two insightful papers. Dr Abdullah bin Said al Saeedi, a trainer at the Ministry of Education’s training centre in the North Al Batinah Governorate, presented a comprehensive analysis of the book ‘Symbolic Languages in the North.’ The paper delved into various themes, exploring the influence of symbolic languages on traditional Omani poetic arts, their types, and their relationship to the broader traditional arts. In the second paper, Nasser bin Mohammed al Naabi, Director, Oman Centre for Traditional Music, addressed the challenges and solutions in Omani traditional musical styles. The director of the Oman Centre for Traditional Music expressed gratitude and recognition to the participating poets and researchers. The event was attended by invitees and enthusiasts of Omani traditional musical arts. — **ONA**

OCCI approves 2024 budget



OCCI Board of Directors met under the chairmanship of Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, board chairman. — **ONA**

MUSCAT: The Board of Directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) stressed the government’s interest in supporting the private sector and enabling it to carry out its roles in order to integrate with the Omani economic system as the sector witnessed tangible and effective activity in economic development during this year and has contributed significantly to the economic diversification efforts. It came at the eight meeting of the OCCI Board of Directors held under the

chairmanship of Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, board chairman. The board agreed to conduct a study on business competitiveness in the Sultanate of Oman to serve as a reference for various authorities in the country to improve the business environment. It also approved to float a tender for conducting a study on the challenges of financing economic diversification sectors. During the meeting, the board approved the OCCI’s budget for 2024 which encompasses projects, activities and events that will be held

in the governorates in order to achieve the strategic directions of the OCCI with regard to expanding the base of economic diversification and boosting the economy of the governorates. The board discussed some topics related to economic affairs, improving the business environment and strengthening partnership and cooperation with various parties as the OCCI general budget for the year 2024 enhances the projects, activities and events that it carries out through its branches in the governorates to boost national economy. — **ONA**



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Labour felicitated nine students from the Sultanate of Oman who emerged as winners of Huawei Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Competition for the Middle East and Central Asia 2023-2024.

competitors who qualified within their local communities' communications networks, e-clouds and cloud computing. The ceremony was held under the auspices of Sayyid Salim bin Musallam bin Ali al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources Development.

Professors at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences and the National University of Science and Technology were also honoured in appreciation for their efforts to help nurture and refine the skills of young students and assist in grooming future ICT leaders. — ONA

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth, through the Directorate General of Youth, announced the winners of the Tawasul Short Film Award Competition during its inaugural session in 2023. The award ceremony, coinciding with World Cinema Day, took place at VOX Cinema, Mall of Oman.

Out of nine outstanding qualifying films, five emerged as the top contenders, with the first place intentionally withheld.

'The Film Uncertainty' secured the second position, followed by 'The Film Space of an Idea' in third place, 'The Best Film One' in fourth place, and 'Dr Heba's Film' claimed the fifth spot. Additionally, an incentive award was granted to 'The Fund's Film.'

Dr Abdullah bin Habib al

Muaini, Chairman of the Jury, emphasised the competition's thematic focus on balanced dialogue, future skills, and self-employment.

The objective was to foster dialogue spaces, and encourage the comfortable presentation of ideas and opinions. The overarching goal was to facilitate effective communication and convey the core ideas and messages within the films.

Dr Al Muaini also expressed that empowering them in constructive social and cultural dialogue, along with enhancing their visual culture, aligns with the ministry's official mandate.

The responsibility and care extended to these sectors are integral to the ministry's mission.

The evaluation of the winning

films was meticulously based on criteria such as the fundamental idea, artistic expression, and the qualitative nature of the dialogue.

Dr Al Muaini observed that the participating films showcased a commendable understanding and awareness among the youth regarding balanced dialogue and future skills. He expressed hope for upcoming works to bring forth diverse artistic ideas and perspectives.

The occasion was sponsored by Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth. The event witnessed the presence of esteemed personalities, officials from various government and private entities, and enthusiastic participants. — **ONA**

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

MUSCAT: Acclaimed Pakistani poet and writer, Zahid Fakhri was accorded a warm welcome by the Pakistani community residing in the Sultanate of Oman under the guidance of Ch Abbas, Ex-Director of the Pakistan Social Club at a luncheon gathering graced by the presence of Syed Fiaz Ali Shah as the chief guest.

Zahid Fakhri, with his innate quality of rendering profound and humorous poetry in Punjabi and Urdu, has captured the hearts of many with his versatile and thought-provoking literary works. His unique ability to blend poetic

depth with humour has earned him admiration and a special place in the literary landscape.

“Zahid Fakhri’s poetry has not only entertained us but has also enlightened our minds. Today, we gather to express our appreciation for his remarkable talent,” Ch Abbas, chief organiser of the event. He expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to celebrate Zahid Fakhri’s contributions to literature and art.

Syed Fiaz Ali Shah added an extra layer of significance to the celebration, emphasising the importance of cultural and literary contributions to the community identity.

Several prominent personalities

from the Pakistani community, including Mian Munir, Ex-Chairman of the Pakistan Social Club, Mohammad Iqbal, Akhmat Hayat Rara, Tajamal Hussain Jami, Ch Aslam, Kashif Zaeem, Nasir Maroof along with many others, underscored the communal admiration for Zahid Fakhri.

“The luncheon also served as a testament to the unity and vibrancy of the Pakistani community in Muscat. The event concluded with warm wishes for Zahid Fakhri’s continued success and a commitment to fostering cultural and artistic endeavours within the community,” said Mohamamd Kaleem Akhtar, Ex-Director Pakistan Social Club.

The Oman Across Ages Museum in the Wilayat of Manah welcomed the three-day 2023 Mobile Scout and Guide Exhibition. Organised by the General Directorate of Scouts and Guides under the theme 'Oman Scouts and Guides is a Vibrant Giving', the event was inaugurated by Dr Khalaf bin Salem al Ishaqi, Member of the State Council. Featuring 42 diverse paintings, the exhibition provides a comprehensive view of scouting and guiding initiatives, including camps, courses, and seminars for leaders. — ONA



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كلية مجان الجامعية

BOARD REPORT FOR THE FIRST QUARTER ENDED 30 NOVEMBER, 2023

Respected Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of Majan College SAOG (Majan University College), I am pleased to present this report on Majan's financial performance and the accompanying un-audited interim condensed financial statements for the three-month period ended 30 November 2023.

Financial Performance

In comparison to the same period in previous financial year, total income has increased by 8% to be OMR 1.12 Million mainly from increase in new and returning undergraduate students and increase in investment income. Total expenses have decreased by 6% to be OMR 0.88 Million mainly decrease in staff cost and decrease in depreciation expense. Therefore, net profit before tax and taxation increased by 120%. Consequently, overall net profit after tax has increased by 120% to be OMR 0.21 Million. Earnings per share has increased from 10 Baiza per share to 23 Baiza per share.

Appreciation

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to his Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for his unlimited support and guidance to higher education. Our sincere thanks to the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for its support to the private higher education sector. This resulted in tremendous growth in the sector. It is our intention that Majan College SAOG (Majan University College) continues to support to achieve the

vision of his Majesty by continuously improving and enriching the standards of its academic programmes and its resources.

Dr. Salam Salim Al Mur Al Kindi
Chairman

UNAUDITED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

	30/11/2023	30/11/2022	31/03/2023
NON CURRENT ASSETS			
Property, plant and equipment	3,171,690	3,387,773	3,229,768
Deferred tax asset	282,748	271,575	275,285
Total non-current assets	3,454,438	3,659,348	3,505,053
CURRENT ASSETS			
Financial assets at fair value through profit or loss, Current	1,256,016	1,263,340	1,275,722
Financial assets carried at amortized cost, current	7,370,730	7,042,047	7,370,730
Trade and other current receivables	2,308,211	2,193,086	789,350
Cash and bankbalances	604,716	220,465	1,065,295
Total current assets other than non-current assets or disposal groups classified as held for sale or as held for distribution to owners	11,539,673	10,718,938	10,501,097
Total current assets	11,539,673	10,718,938	10,501,097
Total assets	14,994,111	14,378,286	14,006,150
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
EQUITY			
Share capital	9,000,000	9,000,000	9,000,000
Statutory reserve	1,641,710	1,580,447	1,621,157
Retained earnings (Accumulated losses)	1,978,062	1,426,696	1,793,087
Other equity interest	0	0	0
Total equity	12,619,772	12,007,143	12,414,244
LIABILITIES			
NON-CURRENT LIABILITIES			
NON-CURRENT PROVISIONS			
Non-current provisions for employee benefits	656,392	566,929	650,614
Other non-current provisions	250,755	264,405	236,755
Total non-current provisions	907,147	831,334	887,369
Total non-current liabilities	907,147	831,334	887,369
CURRENT LIABILITIES			
CURRENT PROVISIONS			
Trade and other current payables	1,320,433	1,338,008	580,613
Current tax liabilities, current	146,759	201,801	123,924
Total current liabilities other than liabilities included in disposal groups classified as held for sale	1,467,192	1,539,809	704,537
Total current liabilities	1,467,192	1,539,809	704,537
Total liabilities	2,374,339	2,371,143	1,591,906
Total equity and liabilities	14,994,111	14,378,286	14,006,150
Number of outstanding shares	90000000	90000000	90000000
Net assets per share	0.140	0.133	0.138

UNAUDITED PROFIT OR LOSS

	01/09/2023- 30/11/2023	01/09/2022- 30/11/2022
Revenue	983,930	962,100
Other income	40,597	42,355
Service expenses	70,144	74,052
Employee benefits expense	586,145	618,280
Depreciation, depletion and amortisation	68,380	85,951
Other operating expenses	137,682	143,549
Profit (loss) from operating activities	162,176	82,823
Investment income	99,192	40,760
Finance costs	0	0
Impairment loss (reversal) of non-financial assets	19,570	13,430
Profit (loss) before income tax	241,798	109,953
Income tax expense, continuing operations	36,270	16,461
Profit (loss) from continuing operations	205,528	93,492
Profit (loss) for period	205,528	93,492
PROFIT (LOSS), ATTRIBUTABLE TO BASIC AND DILUTED EARNINGS PER SHARE BASIC EARNINGS PER SHARE	0.0023	0.0010

Note: The complete accounts are available on Muscat Stock Exchange (www.msx.om)



Villagers return from a market to Yechila town walking past scores of burned vehicles, in Tigray, Ethiopia. – Reuters file photo

Ethiopia dismisses claims Tigray on brink of famine

NAIROBI: The Ethiopian government on Saturday dismissed warnings by the Tigray authorities that the war-ravaged region was on the brink of famine.

Getachew Reda, the president of Tigray’s interim administration, said that 91 per cent of the population was “exposed to the risk of starvation and death”.

He likened the situation to the devastating famine in northern Ethiopia in the 1980s that cost the lives of around one million people. But federal government spokesman Legesse Tulu on Saturday denied the claims, while acknowledging that several million people in northern Ethiopia have been affected by drought as well as flooding.

“Recently, a statement that in the Tigray region the crisis is transitioning to a famine and drought that rivals the 1984-85 famine and drought is completely wrong,” Legesse said at a televised press briefing in Addis Ababa.

However, he said that in several areas of Tigray as well as the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar, 3.8 million people “have encountered drought risk”.

Another 1.1 million people have been affected by flooding, he said, adding that the federal government had been providing aid to those in need. Getachew had said in a statement on X that Tigray faced a “looming humanitarian catastrophe” because of drought and the lingering effects of the war.

The conflict between federal government forces and Tigrayan rebels that erupted in November 2020 killed hundreds of thousands of people by some estimates, and around one million people remain displaced. — AFP

ISRAEL PRESSES A DEADLY OFFENSIVE INTO GAZA CAMPS

GAZA: Israeli tanks pushed deeper into districts in central and southern Gaza overnight under heavy air and artillery fire, residents said, pushes deeper into camps that has razed much of the enclave and that Israel has said may last months more.

Fighting late on Friday and early Saturday was focused in Al Bureij, Nuseirat, Maghazi and Khan Younis, backed by intensive air strikes that filled hospitals with injured Palestinians.

The bombardment has killed 100 Palestinians and injured 150 in the central Gaza Strip over the past 24 hours, a senior health official in central Gaza said.

At Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, the biggest and most important medical facility in the south of the tiny, crowded territory, Red Crescent images posted online showed ambulances operating amid smashed streets, carrying injured children.

Almost all of Gaza’s 2.3 million residents have been forced from their homes by Israel’s withering 12-week assault.

The offensive has killed at least 21,500 Palestinians, according to health authorities in Gaza, and the conflict risks spreading across the region.

Bombardment has smashed houses, apartment blocks and businesses and put hospitals out of action. On Saturday the Palestinian Culture Ministry said Israeli strikes had struck a medieval bathhouse. The old Great Mosque was hit earlier in the war.

The little aid reaching the enclave since the start of the war,



Children embrace as people inspect the damage following Israeli bombardment in Rafah. – AFP

when Israel imposed a near total blockade on all food, medicine and fuel, has come across the border with Egypt.

Israel has only allowed access to the south of the enclave, where it started ordering all Gaza civilians to move from October, and aid agencies have said Israeli inspections have stopped all but a small fraction of needed supplies getting in.

A Palestinian journalist working for Al Quds TV was killed along with some of his family members in an air strike on their house in the Nuseirat camp in central Gaza Strip, health officials and fellow journalists said.

Gaza’s government media office says 106 Palestinian journalists have been killed in the Israeli offensive.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said last week that the first 10 weeks of the war were the deadliest recorded for journalists, with the most journalists killed in a single year in one location.

Most of the journalists and media workers killed in the war were Palestinian. The report by the US-based CPJ said it was “particularly concerned about an apparent pattern of targeting of journalists and their families by the Israeli military.” — AFP

High-impact ‘drop bombs’ retake the sky from Myanmar junta

NAMHSAN: A squad of Myanmar pro-democracy fighters works quickly to ready drones for an attack on a nearby military base, the latest target in a wave of aerial assaults that has helped turn the war against the junta.

The team stood back as one contraption named “Bomber VIII” carrying a new six-kilogram explosive soared over a line of trees.

“The military position is four kilometres away from us,” said Soe Thuya Zaw, the drone unit’s leader, as he punched coordinates into a map on his phone.

Minutes later the drones had reached the position and at the push of a button released their “drop bombs” over the target.

The team counted two blasts. One had failed to detonate, but all three drones returned safely.

Opponents of Myanmar’s junta use such attacks to challenge the military’s dominance of the skies through its jets and helicopters.

“While military pilots are flying fighter jets themselves and attacking us, we are also trying to conquer the sky of the battlefield,” said Soe Thuya Zaw of the “Mandalay People’s Defence Force”.

Soe Thuya Zaw said his group’s drone operations were entirely “the creations of our generation Z”.

Myanmar’s junta chief Min



This photo shows members of the Mandalay People Defence Forces (MDY-PDF) releasing a drone near the frontline amid clashes with Myanmar’s military in northern Shan State. – AFP file photo

Aung Hlaing has admitted the drone barrages have forced the military to retreat from its positions.

An alliance of a minority armed groups had used 25,000 “drop bombs” in their recent offensive, he said last month.

At one workshop hidden in the hills of northern Shan state diesel generators splutter alongside power tools, coils of wire and stacks of plastic piping.

Gunpowder cooks in a pan over a log fire. It will later be poured into plastic shells that will be filled in with deadly shrapnel.

The Mandalay PDF drone unit was started by two engineering students and now has more than 50 members, said Soe Thuya Zaw.

The group uses 3D printers to produce prototype “drop bomb” shells which are filled with non-explosive materials and launched from drones in test missions.

In recent weeks the Mandalay PDF has launched hundreds of “drop bombs” in fighting in Shan state, said Soe Thuya Zaw.

He added his unit has given training to a powerful alliance of ethnic minority armed groups in the region and carried out joint operations with them during a recent offensive.

Analysts say it is the biggest challenge the military has faced since it seized power in 2021. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

ISTANBUL

Authorities round up 189 IS suspects: minister

Turkish authorities have detained scores of suspects over alleged links with IS group in a nationwide sweep ahead of New Year celebrations, the interior minister said on Saturday. Posting on X, Ali Yerlikaya said that 189 suspects had been detained as part of simultaneous operations dubbed “HEROES-38” carried out in 37 cities including Istanbul.

Twenty-seven suspects were detained in the capital Ankara alone and 22 in Istanbul, he said.

Türkiye has intensified



operations against IS members who have claimed a number of deadly attacks on Turkish soil including the January 1, 2017 attack in Istanbul which killed 39 people. — AFP

KARACHI

Election body rejects Khan’s nomination for 2024

Pakistan’s election body has rejected former Prime Minister Imran Khan’s nomination to contest the 2024 national elections in two constituencies, officials said on Saturday.

Khan has been disqualified from contesting the national elections scheduled for February 8 because of the corruption conviction, but he nevertheless filed nomination papers for the elections. In a list of rejected candidates from Lahore, the Election Commission of



Pakistan said Khan’s nomination was rejected because he was not a registered voter of the constituency and because he is “convicted by the court of law and has been disqualified”. — Reuters

KUALA LUMPUR

Anti-graft body probes ex-finance minister

Malaysia’s anti-graft agency said on Saturday it was investigating a former finance minister under the country’s abuse of power and money laundering laws.

In a statement, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) confirmed media reports this month that it had seized Ilham Tower, a 60-storey building in Malaysia’s capital Kuala Lumpur, as part of its investigation into Daim Zainuddin.

Daim, 85, said in a statement



that he denied all wrongdoing and said he was not informed what offence he had allegedly committed despite repeated queries to the MACC. — Reuters



In brief

■ PRAGUE



SCHOOL HIT BY SHOOTING STAYS CLOSED TILL FEBRUARY

The Faculty of Arts at Prague's Charles University, where a student killed 14 people earlier this month, said it would remain closed until at least the end of January.

It also said its students would not be required to take exams after the winter term ending on January 12.

A 24-year-old student opened fire at the faculty on December 21, killing 14 people and then himself. Twenty-four people were wounded.

"All student assessments will be conducted on a voluntary basis, and the format may be adjusted depending on the circumstances," the faculty said.

— AFP

■ BUENOS AIRES



ARGENTINA FORMALLY REJECTS BRICS MEMBERSHIP

Argentine President Javier Milei has sent letters to BRICS leaders to formalise his decision to reject an invitation to join the grouping of major emerging economies, the presidency said.

The letters signed by Milei and published by several media houses said Argentina's membership was "not considered appropriate at this time." The libertarian outsider Milei took office this month after his resounding defeat of Argentina's traditional political parties, and he had vowed on the campaign trail not to join BRICS. — AFP

■ AMSTERDAM



CLIMATE ACTIVISTS BLOCK AMSTERDAM HIGHWAY

Climate activists blocked a major highway in Amsterdam on Saturday to demand an immediate end to the financing of fossil fuel projects by the country's largest bank, ING.

Hundreds of activists walked onto the A10 highway to the south of the city at about noon, police said, after road authorities had shut the road down to avoid casualties.

Organised by the Extinction Rebellion group, the protest took place at the site of the former headquarters of ING, which the climate activists said is the main financier of fossil fuel projects in the Netherlands.

Police said in a statement they were looking for a way to peacefully end the demonstration. — Reuters

Rescuers comb rubble after Russian strikes

KYIV: Rescuers in Ukraine searched through rubble on Saturday after Russian strikes killed at least 39 people the day before, one of the fiercest attacks since the early days of the war.

Schools, a maternity hospital, shopping arcades and blocks of flats were among the buildings hit in Friday's barrage, Ukrainian officials said.

The strikes — during which a Russian missile passed through Polish airspace — triggered international condemnation and fresh promises of military support to Ukraine, which has been fighting off attacking Russian troops since late February 2022.

Ukraine's military estimated Russia had launched 158 missiles and drones on Ukraine and 114 of them had been destroyed.

Air force spokesman Yuriy Ignat said that this was a "record number" of missiles and "the most massive missile attack" of the

Ukraine's military estimated Russia had launched 158 missiles and drones on Ukraine and 114 of them had been destroyed

war, excluding the early days of constant bombardment.

Russia tried to overwhelm Ukraine's air defences across most major cities, launching a wave of attack drones followed by missiles of numerous types fired from planes and from Russian-controlled territory.

At least 39 people were killed in Friday's strikes, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said. "Work is still underway to eliminate the consequences of yesterday's Russian attack," he wrote in a post on social media on Saturday.

"In total, 159 people



Firefighters and municipal employees work at the site after a rocket attack in the city of Dnipro, Ukraine. — AFP

were injured in this attack. Unfortunately, 39 of them have been killed so far," he said.

Russia's army said it had "carried out 50 group strikes and one massive strike" on military facilities in Ukraine over the past

week, adding that "all targets were hit". The United Nations condemned the attacks and said they must stop "immediately".

In the face of sustained Russian attacks, Ukraine is urging Western allies to maintain military support.

Ukraine presidential aide Andriy Yermak said Kyiv needed "more support and strength to stop this horror".

US President Joe Biden called on Congress to overcome its division to approve new aid for Ukraine, after Washington released its final package of weaponry under existing agreements still to be renewed by Congress.

"Unless Congress takes urgent action in the new year, we will not be able to continue sending the weapons and vital air defence systems Ukraine needs to protect its people," Biden said.

"Congress must step up and act without any further delay."

Britain announced it would send hundreds more air defence missiles to Kyiv, after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared that "We must continue to stand with Ukraine — for as long as it takes".

— AFP

■ CELEBRATING THE NEW YEAR



A person takes a selfie with a New Year's Eve decoration at the Taksim Square in central Istanbul, Türkiye. — Reuters

Flooded tunnels near London disrupts Eurostar train services

LONDON: Eurostar trains were cancelled on Saturday due to flooded tunnels in southern England, causing misery for New Year travellers in the second major disruption in 10 days.

The latest cancellations follow a wildcat strike by French unions days before Christmas and weather warnings from the UK's Met Office for rain, snow and ice across large parts of the country.

Hundreds of travellers were left stranded at London's St Pancras station after Eurostar cancelled all services until at least 4 pm.

The services were cancelled after tunnels near Ebbsfleet International Station in Kent were flooded.

Eurostar runs services from London to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam via Ashford, midway between London and the southern English coast.

Posting on X, Southeastern Railway said: "No highspeed trains are expected to run today between St Pancras and Ashford International."

In a statement, Southeastern added that the flooding meant "all lines are blocked".

International train operator Eurostar said it had to cancel all journeys between London



Passengers wait for news of Eurostar departures at St Pancras station in London. — AFP

and the European mainland on Saturday, because of bad weather that caused flooding on the line running from London through southern England to the coast,

"Flooding in the tunnels between St Pancras International Station and Ebbsfleet has not improved and train services are unable to operate," Eurostar said in a statement, adding: "This is a total of 41 trains."

Britain's grid operator Network Rail is keeping Eurostar updated regarding how the situation is evolving ahead of Sunday. The disruption comes after French unions

ended a wildcat strike that had stranded holidaymakers and held up freight just days before Christmas.

The surprise walkout by workers that blocked the tunnel sparked hours of chaos at rail hubs in Paris and London.

Eurostar train services resumed on December 22 after an agreement was reached with unions saying negotiations had yielded "results that satisfy us".

Saturday's cancelled services top off a year of travel disruption for UK travellers due to strikes, storms and other problems.

— Agencies

Serbian opposition demands annulment of December 17 vote

BELGRADE: Thousands gathered in a square in central Belgrade on Saturday in the biggest protest yet over parliamentary and municipal elections on December 17, results of which the demonstrators want annulled.

Protesters waving Serbian flags and holding a banner reading "We do not accept" cheered Marinika Tepic, a leader of the opposition Serbia Against Violence alliance, who has been on hunger strike since December 18.

The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won 46.72 per cent of the votes in the December 17 snap parliamentary election, according to preliminary results from the state election commission.

"These elections must be annulled," Tepic, who came to the stage with the help of two colleagues, told the protesters, gathered in front of the landmark Moskva hotel.

Serbia Against Violence, which placed second in the general election, has accused the SNS of widespread vote fraud, which the authorities deny.

An international monitoring mission following the vote said the SNS had gained an unfair advantage through media

bias, the improper influence of President Aleksandar Vucic, and voting irregularities such as vote buying. Serbian authorities deny any irregularities.

Jovana Djokovic, a 29-year-old software developer, said she had come to the protest with her parents who drove to Belgrade from the central town of Kraljevo, 177 kilometres south.

"I came here to express my disagreement with election result. I feel responsibility to be here," Djokovic said. "Elections were not fair."

The opposition has since December 17 held daily protests against the election results in front of the election commission, mostly attracting several hundred people.

The Saturday protest was supported by students' organisations and by an initiative gathering public figures including prominent intellectuals and actors dubbed ProGlas.

Serbia Against Violence came second in the election with 23.56 per cent of the vote. The Socialist Party of Serbia was third with 6.56 per cent.

Full results of the elections are not likely to be published until some time next month. — Reuters



An aerial view of people attending a protest organised by ProGlas, the Serbian pro-democracy movement, amid opposition claims of major election law violations, in Belgrade, Serbia. — Reuters

Ditching the New Year resolution



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
@alsinawi

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

Each year many people around the world busy themselves with preparing new year resolutions such as keeping fit, learning a new language, or being more organised at work even though very few people would see these plans through. According to studies, among people who made New Year's resolutions, around 77 per cent stuck with their resolutions after one week, 43 per cent stuck with them after three months, and 19 per cent stuck with them for two years. New Year's resolutions are often divided into three types. The wish to stop avoiding something such as the need to stand up for yourself when bullied at work, the wish to stop doing something that makes you feel temporary good like eating too many sweets and junk food. Or it is the wish to start doing something that doesn't come naturally to you like keeping a journal or committing to regular exercise. Psychologists suggest that understanding your behaviour is the first step toward making lasting changes. One needs to understand that some

behaviours are often difficult to change because they serve a purpose in your life, at least in the short run. This is why psychologists suggest reviewing your achievements from the previous year as this would give you the confidence to build on them. Remember to make smart goals. I know this may sound like a cliché, but goals need to be specific, measurable, relevant, and time-bound to be more achievable. Unlike objectives, New Year resolutions are often unrealistic and too vague to be achieved and sometimes are simply undoable. Objectives are often related to your values in life which are things that are important for you and bring you happiness. Our values change as we grow older and progress through life so a young person would value success at work and getting a promotion even if that means spending long hours at work whereas an older person would value spending more time with family and friends and building lasting new relationships. Some people confuse themselves by comparing their achievements to those of other people, so they

‘ONE NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND THAT SOME BEHAVIOURS ARE OFTEN DIFFICULT TO CHANGE BECAUSE THEY SERVE A PURPOSE IN YOUR LIFE, AT LEAST IN THE SHORT RUN’

think their colleague at work has a better car or their children are scoring less than the neighbour's child at school which makes them feel jealous and frustrated. Such emotions are negative and can distract you from achieving your goals and make you feel unhappy with the good things in your life. Some people consider pleasure as an important value so they keep chasing after it despite the negative consequences the person would spend the time partying instead of studying for their exams or overspend on goods they do not need just because they enjoy doing that. Recent research showed that people who chase pleasure are more likely to develop depression, anxiety, and sometimes addiction. People who consider material success as a value often feel lost chasing the big villa, the fancy car, and the brand-new Rolex are not necessarily happy as recent studies showed that once you fulfil the basic needs in your life extra wealth does not increase happiness. Finally, whatever values you choose to focus on, I wish you a happy and prosperous new year.

Parent-friendly, office-free Korean firms

CAT BARTON AND KANG JIN-KYU

Early starts to workdays and late finishes are routine in South Korea, a country notorious for its hard-driving corporate culture, but Erin Lim knew she wanted to do things differently at her business. The 38-year-old entrepreneur pioneered office-free work to help working mums like her in 2017 -- well before work-from-home flexibility became a happy side effect of the pandemic, including for many parents. After the birth of her first son, Lim, who describes herself as an “overwhelmingly picky customer”, could not find a baby carrier she liked. So, with her six-month-old son in tow, she headed to Seoul's main fabric market. Soon, she had a prototype of the baby wrap she wanted and, despite having no manufacturing or entrepreneurial experience, launched a business making and selling the carriers out of her front room. “I’m a person who doesn’t take anything for granted. So, for example, when I started the company, I asked myself: why would I need an office?” Now, Lim’s company has 55 staff members -- 92 per cent women, the majority working parents -- and they all still work almost exclusively from home, offering flexible hours and keeping in-person meetings to the bare minimum. “The reason: I wanted to watch my children grow up,” Lim said, adding that family life should take priority over a rigid, inflexible work schedule. The daily school drop-off “is a really essential time -- to walk with them to school”, she said. So her company, Konny, enshrined the right to a school drop-off into its policies. “I didn’t want to have a company culture that didn’t understand that,” she added. South Korea has some of the lowest rates of female workforce participation among OECD countries, but the data -- 55 per cent for women versus 73.5 per cent for men -- disguises what activists say is an even worse reality of underemployment for working mothers. Many mothers are forced out of hard-won, high-paying jobs after having children due to childcare issues, experts say, with the official “economic participation rate” for women in their 40s far lower than for men -- 67.5 per cent compared to 92.1 per cent. Unlike companies in many countries, most major South Korean firms quickly required workers to return to the office after the pandemic, with minimal work-from-home options. — AFP



Megan Specia

The writer is the international correspondent at NYT

Foreigners who made Ukraine home stay put, despite war

It was just three months after the Russian attack of Ukraine in early 2022, but Marwa Yehea wanted to return to her home in Kyiv. Yehea, 31, who is originally from Syria, had fled the Ukrainian capital with her two daughters that February when the war began. In those early days of uncertainty, she was pregnant with her third child, and they spent weeks in Germany. But she was determined to be back home by the time her son was born. By May 2022, they had returned to Kyiv in time for his birth. “The war hasn’t ended, and the psychological toll that takes is tiring,” Yehea said during an interview in Kyiv this summer. “But you get used to it. And us especially, as Syrians who emerged from war — well, here we’re secure.” In the decades before the Russian attack, Kyiv had become an increasingly cosmopolitan city, a destination for international students and professionals looking to make their lives in Europe. Before the war, some 293,600 foreign nationals were residing permanently in Ukraine, according to government figures from 2020. Some have made the unlikely decision to continue living here, even as war grips the country and millions have fled. In some instances, returning to their country of origin is impossible, and they have stayed in Ukraine rather than becoming refugees for a second time. Others are simply unwilling to walk away from the lives they have built in the country. “We were happy here — our lives here were good, praise God,” said Yehea, who had been living in Ukraine since 2012. “We’ve lived comfortable lives here.” International college students have also returned, weighing the value of an affordable education against the risks of war. Wang Zheng, 23, who is originally from China, had been studying in Ukraine since 2017 and was just starting to work toward his master's degree when the war began. He went back to China and continued his studies online but returned to Kyiv last spring.



Wang Zheng, 23, who is from China and has been studying in Ukraine since 2017, exits the metro with his girlfriend in Kyiv.

His education “is the most important thing,” he said, adding, “I can’t give up.” Kyiv is where he first met his girlfriend, Wang Danyang, 26, a trained opera singer who is also from China. She returned to Kyiv in July and they moved in together. They want to build their life here, Wang said. “I feel like this is my second motherland,” he said. INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS HAVE ALSO RETURNED TO UKRAINE, WEIGHING THE VALUE OF AN AFFORDABLE EDUCATION AGAINST THE RISKS OF WAR Some 76,500 foreign students were enrolled in Ukrainian universities in 2020, with the largest per cent coming from India. Two students from that country, Jaanvi, 20, who has a legal single name, and her roommate, Mary Fiona, 22, were studying medicine in Kyiv when the war broke out. Jaanvi had arrived in December 2021, just months before the Russian attack began, and fled four days

into the fighting. She and other Indian students were told that Ukrainians were being given priority to board trains leaving the city, and she waited for hours. She finally made it to the Polish border, but foreign students again faced delay, an issue that many of those from Asia and Africa recounted at the time. Fiona, who had lived in Ukraine for four years, said that she experienced some discrimination in Ukraine before the war, which she described as “painful,” but that overall she had a positive experience living here. Ziad Hakim, 24, had spent five years studying mechanical engineering at Kyiv Polytechnic Institute when the war started and was unwilling to simply walk away from the work he had completed. Hakim, who is originally from Morocco, returned there at the start of the war but then came back to Kyiv in January 2023 to finish his final semester. He completed his degree this summer and then moved back to Morocco. “I needed to come here and complete it,” he said in Kyiv, just days before he left. “Otherwise, all of my work would go into the gutter — into the abyss.” Even some whose life here has not been ideal still say Ukraine is their home. — The New York Times

2023, the year of Norma and Nina

So, here we are again, and this New Year, I'm going to focus on some of the 'good stuff,' instead of my traditional 'ragging,' because we need so much more of that. I think we are still in recovery mode from the pandemic, and a virtual hug probably better reflects our needs, right now, than cheap laughs.

The new 'Oman Across Ages Museum' is, I believe, metaphoric of a progressive Oman, a phoenix rising from the plains towards the future. An epitome of past glories maybe, but already iconic. This perpetuation of history, civilisation, the Aflaj, its maritime and trade, the Ya'arubas, and Busaidys, the embrace of Islam, the Renaissance, and much more, traces a journey from the Omantherium, to the stars.

My good mate, Bernie Mackle, drove past the site frequently during construction, and must surely be impressed by what has been architecturally described as a 'contemporary masterpiece, while Andrew Hall, who worked on the project for several years, will be delighted with the completed article. It really is impressive.

Nearby in Firq, Vishal Srivastava lives close to his workplace. We talked cricket, watched old music videos, and had some laughs, but he had to return to India urgently. He is such a cool guy though, as Lena and I use his house and car keys, telling us to 'make ourselves at home!' What a good friend. Another expatriate buddy is Sandeep Jaitly, manager of the Golden Tulip Nizwa, a godsend for many of us in Al Dakhiliyah with its pool, sauna, and gym. What I like most though, is Sandeep's focus on team building among his employees, ensuring that every traveller or guest is met by genuinely happy and obliging staff.

Ali al Riyami, from nearby Izki, never ceases to be helpful to us, and apart from showing us 'what's new' he was ultra-helpful in assisting with the recovery of our lost luggage, which was mislaid en route to Muscat. We taught Ali to fish down in Al Sharqiyah, so as the old tale goes... he can now feed his



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THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED 'OMAN ACROSS AGES MUSEUM' APPEARS TO SYMBOLISE A PROGRESSIVE OMAN — A PHOENIX ASCENDING FROM THE PLAINS TOWARDS THE FUTURE

family every day! We stayed at Al Asala Resort, near Ras Al Ruwais. There's not much there, but to chill out, and recharge your batteries, if beach walks and the seaside are your 'thing,' Hussein al Masroori and his team of Ali, Roxy, and Hannah, alongside Binod and Mustafa in the kitchen, offer luxury for less, and quiet.

The leisure destination of As Sifah is thriving, and among the residents, Franz Kohler and wife Andrea report that their new 'kick bikes' become very popular in their Muscat bike shop near the Muscat Grand Mall, while Sifah domiciled entrepreneur and businessman David Mallinson appears to have established significant new overseas investment in the mining sector.

Elsewhere, we've managed to catch up at the University of Nizwa with Omani Foundation Institute administrators Ahmed al Rahbi, Khalid al Riyami, and Iman al Hajri. While we also met Jaroslaw and Joanna Didowicz, in the Department of Foreign Languages, and several other former colleagues. It is a shame that the 'new' campus is not open yet, and I guess the pandemic is to blame? A greater concern in the wider education sphere is that authenticity may be a casualty of the need to provide instant employment for Omani graduates, as language departments without native speakers cannot provide authentic, quality, learning experiences, no matter how hard everyone tries.

On a similarly sobering note, during '23, our daughter Sasha's mother-in-law, Norma, was hit by a bus, literally, and extensively injured. Sustained by the care and support of her husband Les, Norma now walks unaided, which is a phenomenal achievement. What was a tragedy, yet could have had far greater consequences, has been mitigated by love, resilience, and strong faith. An unbeatable combination.

That aside, 2023 has been a year of joy for us, as Sasha and Chris's daughter, our granddaughter, Nina has found her feet, is finding her voice, and is allowing Lena and I to be Grandma and Grandad, and we are loving it! So, bring on '24.

RALLY ALLEGES FRAUD



A student holds a placard reading 'Fight,' as several thousands of people attend a rally of 'ProGlas,' a Serbian pro-democracy movement, to protest against alleged electoral fraud, in Belgrade. Following the parliamentary and local elections, prominent figures from Serbia's intellectual, artistic, and celebrity communities have voiced their protest against what they allege to be electoral fraud. – AFP

The pillars of green wisdom

The ongoing war in Ukraine and the fighting in Gaza must not distract the world from our collective priorities: reducing our CO2 emissions, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2050, preserving biodiversity, and fighting poverty and inequality.

This is the doctrine France is implementing at an international level, through the Paris Pact for People and the Planet and the One Planet summits.

The cornerstone of our strategy must be to speed up the ecological transition as well as the fight against poverty.

After all, it is now crystal clear that no country will work to protect the planet if the price it must pay leads its citizens into a socioeconomic dead-end.

The world's most advanced economies, which have also been the main CO2 emitters since the industrial revolution, must move away from fossil fuels. If we want to meet the goals of the Paris climate agreement, this is nonnegotiable.

Science has set the trajectory: we must move away from coal by 2030, from oil by 2045, and from gas by 2050. While the G7 countries bear the greatest responsibility, China, which is now the second-largest emitter in history, must be fully committed, too.

The threat posed by coal must be addressed first.

Today, the 2,000 gigawatts of



Emmanuel Macron
The writer is President of France

WE MUST NOT ALLOW THE ONGOING WARS IN UKRAINE AND GAZA TO DISTRACT US FROM COLLECTIVE EFFORTS TO REDUCE OUR GREENHOUSE-GAS EMISSIONS, ACHIEVE CARBON NEUTRALITY BY 2050, SAVE OUR BIODIVERSITY, AND FIGHT POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

installed capacity emit enough CO2 to take us above 1.5°C. While the International Energy Agency recommends withdrawing 92 GW per year, 500 GW of additional capacity is already planned.

While it is the G7's responsibility to move away from coal by 2030 (France will have done so in 2027), emerging economies are now the biggest coal consumers. In these countries, we need to speed up the financing of renewables, as well as nuclear power, which, as a manageable and a decarbonised energy source, must play a key role.

We must also put private financing and trade at the service of the Paris agreement.

The cost of investment must be higher for players in the fossil-fuel sector. We need a green interest rate and a brown interest rate. Similarly, we need a climate clause in our trade agreements, because we cannot simultaneously demand that our industries become greener while supporting the liberalisation of international trade in polluting products.

For the most vulnerable countries, we must create conditions that enable them to finance their climate-change mitigation and adaptation efforts and access the green technologies

that are the new engines of growth.

This implies going further than traditional "official development assistance" and doing for vulnerable countries what rich countries did for themselves during the Covid-19 pandemic: pursue an unorthodox fiscal and monetary policy.

The results are already there: in two years, following the initiative we took in Paris in the spring of 2021, we have released over \$100 billion in special drawing rights (SDRs, the International Monetary Fund's reserve asset) for vulnerable countries. By activating this "dormant asset," we are extending 20-year loans at near-zero interest rates to finance climate action and



The cornerstone of our strategy must be to speed up the ecological transition as well as the fight against poverty.

pandemic preparedness in the poorest countries. We have begun to change debt rules to suspend payments for such countries, should a climate shock occur. And we have changed the mandate of multilateral development banks, such as the World Bank, so that they take more risks and mobilise more private money.

We are going to continue working on this, including within the framework of the new loss and damage fund, where we must mobilise new private insurance mechanisms in the face of climate risk. We will start from the specific needs of the hardest-hit countries. In the first half of 2024, France and Bangladesh will sign an agreement to finance

climate-change adaptation and loss and damage, with the French development agency contributing €1 billion (\$1.1 billion) in investment, and the IMF extending up to \$1 billion worth of SDRs in new loans.

This also implies identifying, on a global scale, governance mechanisms for the most crucial challenges we will have to face in the coming years, access to water being one of the most pressing. In this regard, France and Kazakhstan will convene a One Water Summit during the United Nations General Assembly in September 2024.

Moreover, we must focus on building the basis of a "bio-economy" that will pay for the services provided by nature. Nature is our best technology to sequester carbon on a large scale.

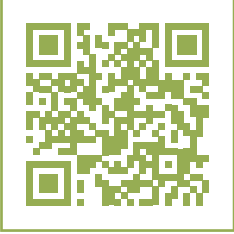
The countries with the most important carbon and biodiversity reserves, especially in the three main tropical forest basins, must obtain much greater resources, determined on a country-by-country basis, in exchange for their stewardship of these vital reserves.

France has already launched three contracts of this type at COP28, with Papua New Guinea, the Republic of the Congo, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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Red Warriors stun China in Abu Dhabi

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 30

The Oman national football team ended the year of 2023 on a winning note by defeating China 2-0, in an international friendly match at Baniyas Stadium in Abu Dhabi, UAE, on Friday night. Oman's both goals were scored in the second half by Arshad al Alawi (49th minute) and Mohsin al Ghassani (65th minute) respectively. Arshad's goal found the target in style after a long ball from outside the box while Al Ghassani doubled the lead as he received a perfect pass to continue the ball to the net to end the result at 2-0.

The head coach of Oman team Branko Ivankovic implemented different tactics during the warm-up game and did many substitutions during the match ahead of the major assignment in AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, which will kick off on January 12 in Doha. Six substitutions were made by coach Ivankovic. Abdulrahman al Mushefri entered as a replacement for Omar al Malki while Zahir al Aghbari entered in Abdullah Fawaz's position. Ali al Busaidi, Abdulaziz al Ghilani, Mohsin al Ghassani and Tamim al Balushi replaced Ahmed al Kaabi, Salah al Yahyaiei, Essam al Subhi and Harib al Saadi respectively.

The coach Ivankovic began the match with a starting line-up featured from Ibrahim al



The Oman national football team against China.



Arshad al Alawi after the winning.

Mukhaini who was guarding the goal. The four-man defence comprised from Khalid al Buraiki, Ahmed al Kaabi, Ahmed al Khamisi and Arshad al Alawi in the right side. The midfielders were Harib al Saadi, Abdullah

Fawaz, Jameel al Yahmadi and Salah al Yahyaiei. The forwards were Essam al Subhi and Omar al Malki.

Oman players were dominating all over the match as there were many scoring attempts created and only two successful goals netted in the match. The Red Warriors will have another preparatory game in its underway camp in Abu Dhabi and the game will be against UAE on Saturday. It will be the concluding match for the team ahead of their opening match in Group F of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 as they will take on Saudi Arabia. Then, they will meet a confident Southeast Asian team Thailand on January 21 before they will end their group matches against Kyrgyzstan on January 25.



Omani players Salah al Yahyaiei (R) and Arshad al Alawi celebrating the winning.

Thunder end Nuggets winning streak, Bucks rally to beat Cavs



Nikola Jokic (15) attempts a shot as Josh Giddey (3) defends in the first quarter at Ball Arena. – USA TODAY Sports

MIAMI: The Denver Nuggets' six-game winning streak came to an end on Friday with the defending NBA champions failing to a 119-93 loss at home to the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 40 points for the Thunder, shooting 14 of 20 from the field and making 10 out of 10 free throws.

The win moves the Thunder above the Nuggets into second place in the West on 21-9, behind leaders Minnesota (23-7).

The Nuggets' Serbian star Nikola Jokic made 19 points shooting nine of 10 from the field and had ten rebounds but gave up seven turnovers.

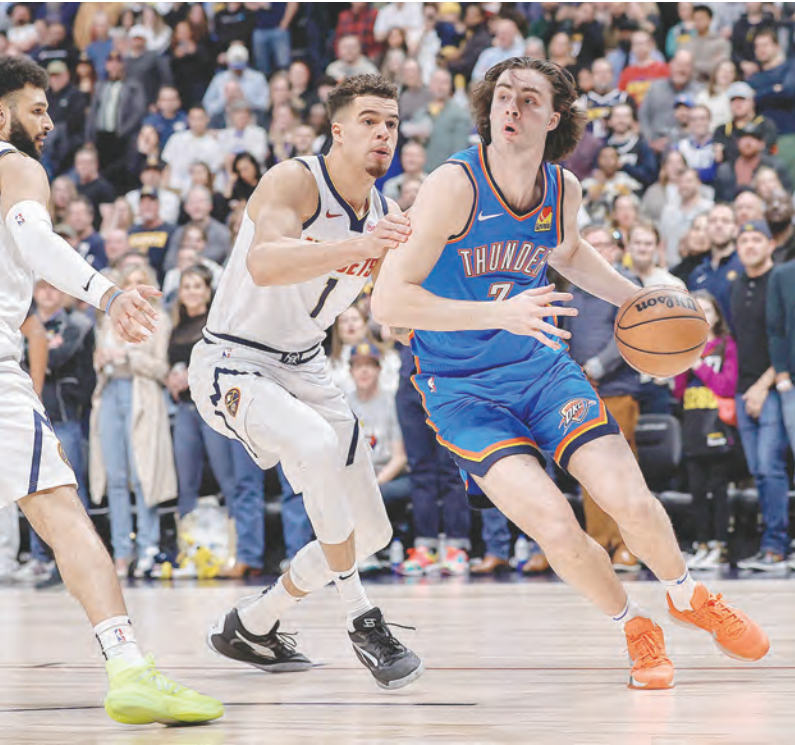
The Thunder led 54-48 at the break and extended their lead to 20 points by the end of the third quarter.

It was the fifth time this season that Gilgeous-Alexander enjoyed a 40-point game and he said it was a "super fun" performance.

"We have so many weapons on the floor that I get to play in space and when I play in space, in my comfort zone, I have pretty good nights," he said.

BUCKS FIGHT BACK

Giannis Antetokounmpo top scored with 34 points as the Milwaukee Bucks, second in the NBA's Eastern Conference, came back to win 119-111 at the



Josh Giddey (3) controls the ball under pressure from Michael Porter Jr. (1) and guard Jamal Murray (27). – USA TODAY Sports

Cleveland Cavaliers.

The Bucks trailed 59-52 down at half-time but dominated the third quarter to end a four-game road trip with a 3-1 record.

Antetokounmpo shot 14 of 22 from the field and grabbed 16 rebounds and five assists -- and he was well supported by Damian Lillard, who scored 31 points and converted all 11 of his free throws.

Lillard said Milwaukee (24-8) had faced up to their slow start during frank exchanges during

the interval.

"We came into the locker room and we just kind of addressed that we hadn't done a lot of things well," said Lillard, who scored 24 of his points in the second half.

"They started the game better than us. Our transition defence, you know, it was bad. They got to the spots they wanted to, they played a comfortable game and they're a good team," he said.

Lillard and Antetokounmpo took over in the third quarter, each

scoring 14 points as the Bucks shifted the momentum decisively.

"A good game on the road, end of a road trip, a team challenging us and, we had to show our character and I thought we came out in the third quarter and established that," added Lillard, who praised the team's improved defence.

"You've got to be on the string, five guys, and I thought that was where we made the biggest improvement. We did things together, our communication, getting to spots and supporting each other. We did that much more consistently in the second half," he said.

Donovan Mitchell returned after missing four games to provide 34 points, six rebounds and nine assists for the Cavs, who remain without the injured Evan Mobley and Darius Garland.

Eastern Conference leaders, the Boston Celtics, extended their 100 per cent home record to 16 games with a 120-118 win over the Toronto Raptors.

Jaylen Brown had 31 points, 10 rebounds and six assists for the Celtics with Derrick White adding 21 points and Luke Kornet 20 as Boston won their fifth straight game.

The game was tied at 116 when Kornet made a dunk with 32 seconds left to grab a lead that Boston held on to. — AFP

Murray longs to play against Nadal and Djokovic again

BRISBANE: Andy Murray conceded on Saturday he longed for the chance to play again on the big stage against superstars Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal.

Speaking ahead of the season-opening Brisbane International, the 36-year-old said he missed the days when he regularly met Djokovic, Nadal and Roger Federer at the business end of major tournaments.

Murray matched it with the big three for a decade between 2006-16 before a run of injuries resulted in time off court and a slide in his ranking.

While the others powered on to title after title, the Scotsman, now ranked 42, was forced to battle his way back, his career never reaching its former heights. The last time he met Nadal was in the semi-finals of the Madrid Masters in 2016 and while he played Djokovic in the Madrid Masters last year, he had not met him since 2017 before that. "Obviously I would like the opportunity to play against them again, ideally in the latter stages of big tournaments," Murray said.



The last time he met Nadal was in the semi-finals of the Madrid Masters in 2016 and while he played Djokovic in the Madrid Masters last year, he had not met him since 2017 before that

"That's something that obviously I've missed, that feeling, not had that opportunity really. "If I get the opportunity to practise with them, I still really, really enjoy that.

"It does bring back some good memories, but ideally, I'd want to be doing that in the tournaments, not in the first rounds."

Murray has been practising with Nadal in Brisbane as the Spaniard makes his comeback after almost 12 months away with injury.

He said Nadal was moving well and showing no signs of the hip injury that forced him off tour after the 2023 Australian Open. Murray also said Nadal appeared to have made only

minor changes to his game in his time away from the tour.

"His second serve is significantly harder than what he did earlier in his career," Murray said.

"But yeah, the rest of the game, unless there's a physical issue, there's not really much reason for him to make huge changes to that — it's been pretty successful.

"When he's fit and healthy, that game style is what has worked really, really well for him, looking for his forehand, trying to dominate with that shot.

"If he wants to be successful in the future, that's what he should be looking to do. That's how he was trying to play today,"

Murray takes on second-seeded Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov in the first round, a rematch of the 2013 Brisbane International final which Murray won in two close sets.

Dimitrov won their last encounter at this year's US Open. "I need to play really well, certainly much better than there, if I want to get through it," Murray said. — AFP

Former Indy winner De Ferran dies of heart attack aged 56

INDIANAPOLIS: Former Indianapolis 500 winner Gil de Ferran has died at the age of 56 after suffering a heart attack while racing in Florida, the Brazilian Automobile Confederation (CBA) said late on Friday.

The 2003 Indy winner, who also worked in Formula One as a consultant with McLaren after a stint as sporting director, fell ill at a private motor racing club in Opa-locka, Florida, the CBA said.

It added that he was "promptly taken to a local hospital, but did not survive."

The Paris-born Brazilian won the 2000 and 2001 Champ Car World Series driving for Team Penske.

"We are terribly saddened to hear about today's tragic passing of Gil de Ferran," Team Penske said in a statement.

"Gil defined class as a driver and as a gentleman. As an INDYCAR Champion and an Indianapolis 500 winner, Gil accomplished so much during his career, both on and off the track.

"He was a great friend to the Team Penske and INDYCAR family, as well as the entire international motorsports community. Gil's passing is a terrible loss and he will be deeply missed."

McLaren mourned the loss of "a beloved member of our McLaren family.

"Gil was an important and integral part of our Racing team. He was a formidable force on and off track and made a lasting impact on everyone racing and working alongside him," the team said. "He will be missed by everyone at McLaren Racing."

— Reuters



Alive crowned overall winner of Sydney-Hobart yacht race



SYDNEY: Australian yacht Alive was on Saturday crowned the overall winner of the prestigious Sydney-Hobart race, overcoming perilous storms that forced several damaged competitors to retire.

Supermaxi LawConnect was the first vessel to finish the blue water classic earlier this week, but Alive took overall honours once standings were adjusted for boat size and other factors.

Alive skipper Duncan Hine said his crew had fought to win the Tattersall Cup -- the 66-foot yacht's second in five years -- across more than two full days of gruelling sailing.

"It was a cliffhanger right up to the bloody finish wasn't it," he said after learning of the win.

"If someone had knocked us

off, they would have deserved it."

The 103-strong racing fleet has been battered by thunderstorms and bumpy swells since setting off from Sydney Harbour on Tuesday.

By Saturday morning, ripped sails, electrical malfunctions and crew injuries had forced 16 yachts out of the race.

With dozens of smaller vessels still due to finish on Saturday afternoon, organisers have already dubbed it "one of the toughest races in years."

This year marked the 25th anniversary of a violent storm that tore into the 1998 race fleet, with wild winds whipping up mountainous seas in which six people died, five boats sank and 55 sailors were rescued.

— AFP





Inter Milan's Marcus Thuram in action with Genoa's Radu Dragusin. – REUTERS

GENOA: Serie A leaders Inter Milan were held to a 1-1 draw away to Genoa on Friday as Marko Arnautovic's first league goal for the club was cancelled out by a header from Radu Dragusin.

Inter are top with 45 points but the result gives second-placed Juventus, on 40, an opportunity to close the gap as they host AS Roma on Saturday. Genoa are 13th with 20. Inter broke the deadlock after 42 minutes when Austrian Arnautovic found himself in the right place to tap home a rebound off the post following Nicolo Barella's volley.

He opened his account for the club in Serie A after being sidelined for several matches due to a hamstring injury following his loan move from Bologna in the close season.

However, Genoa equalised in first-half stoppage time when

Dragusin's powerful header from a corner eluded Yann Sommer despite the goalkeeper getting both hands on the ball.

"We knew the type of game that we were going into. Genoa are in great shape, both physically and mentally, it was a hard-fought match," Inter manager Simone Inzaghi told DAZN.

"The second half probably would have been different without conceding at that moment (in first-half added time). We wanted to win, we are not happy with the point, but we must continue and remember that every match holds dangers."

HEAVY SMOKE

The game was interrupted for about eight minutes just after the start with the release of several flares resulting in dense smoke that

reduced visibility following heavy rainfall.

As the smoke cleared Genoa showed little respect for injury-hit Inter, who were missing key players like Lautaro Martinez and Federico Dimarco, and came close to scoring several times.

Having already managed to hold Juventus to a 1-1 draw earlier in the month at Stadio Luigi Ferraris, Genoa were again driven forward by an enthusiastic home crowd.

Inter started to gain momentum around the hour mark and Francesco Acerbi almost put them back in front with a header only for Josep Martinez to make a fine save.

"It was not easy to play on a heavy pitch that made it tough for both teams," Inzaghi added. "We had a huge chance with Acerbi — their goalkeeper made a great save — and we tried to limit their

counter-attacks."

The match then fizzled out with few clear-cut chances and both sides appeared content to end the year with a draw.

"We must retain the solidity, the hunger and clearly try to bring more consistency," said Inzaghi. "We know that we're not even halfway through the season. It will be a long and tough road with difficulties that we must overcome."

In Friday's other late game, Lazio recovered from a goal down to beat visiting Frosinone 3-1 courtesy of Valentin Castellanos, Gustav Isaksen and Patric in a 14-minute spell late in the match. Maurizio Sarri's side are eighth on 27 points. Inter will start the New Year by hosting lowly Hellas Verona on January 6, while Lazio visit Udinese the following day. — **Reuters**

TURKISH SUPER CUP FINAL IN RIYADH POSTPONED AMID ROW

ISTANBUL: The Turkish Super Cup final between Galatasaray and Fenerbahce scheduled to be played in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh on Friday was postponed over what the clubs described as "some problems" in the event's organisation.

At the heart of those issues, according to media reports, was the wish of the two Istanbul teams to wear t-shirts featuring the founder of modern Turkiye, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, during the warm-up ahead of the evening kick-off.

Turkish media said Saudi officials had rejected this demand, though it was not clear why, and that the clubs refused to play in the Super Cup final at the King Saud University venue, which is also known as Al-Awwal Park stadium, as a result.

Saudi state TV cited a statement by organisers the Riyadh Season saying the cancellation of the final was the result of the teams not adhering to match regulations.

"We were looking forward to holding the match on time in accordance with the international soccer rules and regulations that require the sport to be presented without any slogans outside its scope, especially since this was discussed with the Turkish (Football) Federation in the framework of the preparatory meetings for the match," the statement said.

"Despite this agreement, it was unfortunate that the two teams did not adhere to what had been agreed upon, which led to the match not being held," it added.

The scheduled final coincides with the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the secular Turkish Republic. There was no immediate comment from Saudi officials. — **Reuters**





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China maintains stable refined fuel export quotas for 2024



Shale gas drilling rig run by Sinopec is seen in Chongqing. – Reuters

SINGAPORE: China has released its first refined fuel export quotas for 2024, amounting to 19 million metric tons. This volume remains unchanged from the previous year and aligns with market expectations, as reported by Chinese consultancies JLC and Longzhong on Friday.

China manages its refined oil exports through a strict quota system, strategically employing exports to balance and ensure adequate domestic market supply. State oil giants Sinopec and CNPC, the primary recipients of the quotas covering diesel, gasoline, and aviation fuel, were collectively granted 13.22 million tons, nearly 70% of the total, according to both consultancies.

Zhejiang Petrochemical Corp stands out as the sole private refiner allocated a refined fuel export quota totalling 1.73 million tons.

In addition to the refined fuel quotas, China also released the first tranche of low-sulphur fuel oil (LSFO) quotas, amounting to 8 million tons, consistent with the previous year's level.

Approximately 90% of these quotas were allocated to Sinopec and CNPC, according to traders with knowledge of the matter, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Chinese domestic demand for gasoline is projected to peak in 2024, according to international agencies.

Sinopec previously suggested that domestic gasoline demand may have peaked in 2023 following increased market penetration of electric vehicles. Similarly, domestic demand for diesel faces weak growth prospects due to challenges in the country's property market and construction sector.

Despite this, Chinese gasoline and diesel exports were constrained in late 2023 due to a lack of available quotas. The China Commerce Ministry did not immediately respond to a faxed request for comment.

In the first 11 months of this year, China exported nearly 39 million tonnes of refined fuel, including 14.3 million tons of jet fuel (up 56% YoY) and 13.1 million tons of diesel (up 61% YoY). — Reuters

Oman’s Q3 GDP at constant prices reaches RO 9.388 billion

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 30

The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) has released the latest data regarding Oman's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at constant prices for the third quarter of 2023. The report indicates positive signs of growth and stability in the country's economy.

According to the NCSI monthly bulletin, the GDP at constant prices witnessed a 2.2% increase in Q3 2023 compared to the same period last year. This growth reflects the resilience and strength of Oman's economy amidst global uncertainties.

Breaking down the figures, the report highlights the different sectors contributing to Oman's GDP. Petroleum activities, a core industry for the country, witnessed a slight decrease of 0.9% in Q3 2023 compared to the same quarter in 2022. Despite this minor decline, petroleum activities remained a significant driver of the overall GDP, contributing a total of RO 3.311 billion during the Q3 compared to RO 3.340 billion during the same period last year.

Within the petroleum sector, crude petroleum registered a decline of 2.7% in Q3 2023, while natural gas production saw an impressive growth of 10.3% during the same period. These figures underline the ongoing diversification efforts within the energy sector, as Oman seeks to reduce its reliance on crude oil and embrace cleaner sources of energy.

On the other hand, non-petroleum activities



Non-petroleum activities contributed significantly to Oman's GDP, reaching a total of RO 6.366 billion during the Q3 of 2023.

demonstrated a positive trajectory, showing a notable increase of 3.9% in Q3 2023 when compared to the previous year. This sector contributed significantly to Oman's GDP, reaching a total of RO 6.366 billion during Q3 2023.

Within the non-petroleum activities sector, agriculture, forestry, fishing, and industry activities played a vital role. Agriculture and related activities witnessed a growth of 9.5% in Q3 2023, with agriculture and forestry subsector growing at

10.2% and fishing at 8.6%.

In contrast, industry activities experienced a decrease of 2.6% in Q3 2023, mainly attributed to declines in mining and quarrying.

The services activities sector registered a commendable growth rate of 6.5% in Q3 2023. Notably, wholesale and retail trade, transportation and storage, and professional and technical services demonstrated positive trends, contributing significantly to the overall GDP.

Furthermore, the report

revealed a 2.4% increase in financial intermediation services indirectly measured, reflecting advancements in financial and banking sectors within the country.

Consequently, the overall Gross Domestic Product at producers' prices (GDP-P) marked a 2.3% increase in Q3 2023, amounting to approximately RO 9.514 billion. With the tax less subsidies on products amounting to RO 125.6 million, Oman's GDP at constant prices tops RO 9.388 billion.

Oman seeks solutions to hazards of sand creep on desert roads

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 30

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology is preparing to commission an international consultant to help identify solutions to the perils of sand creep occurring on key desert roads in the Sultanate of Oman.

Sand creep – also referred to as sediment deposit or sand accumulation – is a perennial phenomenon witnessed in parts of the country where roads cut through sandy desert terrain. Attributable to the action of wind during the khareef season in the south, or stormy weather in the

central and eastern parts of the country, they result in mounds of sand being deposited on such desert roads.

The consequences for unsuspecting motorists ploughing at high speed into these accumulations can be potentially disastrous. Often, by the time crews are despatched to install warning signs and clear the accumulations, vehicle mishaps are inevitable, particularly in times of poor visibility or in remote areas.

Now, in a bid to mitigate potential risks for motorists from this phenomenon, the Ministry has invited suitably qualified international consultants to bid for its contract to study the



Sand creep is a significant hazard for motorists, according to the Ministry.

problem of sand accumulation. The goal is to unearth “practical solutions to address this problem”, according to the Ministry.

Significantly, the study will cover a number of roads that are vulnerable to sand creep in the Sultanate of Oman. They include the Adam – Thamrait highway, Haima – Duqm carriageway, Al Sharqiyah Expressway and The Empty Quarter road -- parts of which intersect sand dunes.

According to experts, viable and sustainable solutions will have to be customised to each highway stretch prone to sand creep, based on prevailing wind conditions, the presence of sand dunes in the windward direction, and other environmental factors.

Elsewhere in the Gulf region, road authorities typically install nylon-net based sand barrier fences in combination with measures designed to control soil erosion and stabilise sand dunes. These measures are known to only partially address the problem.

In China, for example, road contractors opt for nylon net fences, reed-based barriers and fences, artificial vegetation and chemical and clay fixers – with varying degrees of success.

The initiative to tackle sand creep is in line with Oman's commitment to raising the overall motoring and safety standards of its national highway network, the Ministry noted.

Bank Muscat’s accessible branches cater to customers with disabilities



MUSCAT: In line with its commitment to its customer-centric vision and financial inclusion, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, upholds its leadership position by providing a full suite of banking services and facilities to all segments of society to meet their diverse banking needs. The Bank extends its support to customers with visual, hearing, and physical impairments by implementing a strategic development plan to offer them different banking services and amenities. The Bank also ensures the provision of these services in the new branches it inaugurates.

In this regard, Bank Muscat has taken proactive effective steps to equip its branches distributed across the Sultanate of Oman with suitable amenities and banking requirements customised to this group of customers.

Bank Muscat currently owns 180 branches and services centres featuring multiple banking amenities, appropriate spatial facilities and infrastructure. These branches are also supplied with modern technologies, including 11 interactive

ATM machines, corridors and reception desks, designated parking spots, waiting areas, stairs and elevators, and entrances to banking institutions.

In addition to this, the Bank has implemented a number of initiatives and promotional programmes to improve customers’ financial awareness. A number of Bank Muscat’s branches have 141 qualified and experienced staff who are trained to learn sign language, and 42 employees trained to serve customers with disabilities.

To emphasise the Bank’s commitment to providing distinguished services to customers with disabilities and enhancing their banking experience, the Bank has prepared a full manual that states all instructions and guiding tips set for employees to comply with when serving this segment of customers. The Bank also constantly ensures communicating to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) reports illustrative of Bank Muscat’s full suite of services and amenities offered to customers with disabilities to enhance financial inclusion and allow this segment to avail these services catering to their diverse needs.

Toyota’s Crossover SUV veloz now with Akeed Benefits

MUSCAT: Toyota Veloz Crossover SUV is now available with Service 3 Years/30,000 kms (whichever is earlier) and 1 Year Insurance. (Terms & Conditions apply. Customers can visit any Saud Bahwan Automotive showroom for exact details.)

The Veloz is perfect combination of fuel economy and manoeuvrability with ample interior space. The Veloz features three rows of seats that can comfortably accommodate seven passengers thanks to flexible configurations to offer an exceptional ride. The vehicle’s outstanding performance is ready to heighten the thrills and excitement in daily drives, while its enhanced safety features deliver added protection and peace of mind.

The Toyota Veloz features newly-developed MacPherson strut-type front suspension, which provides linear and direct driving dynamics, while the rear is equipped with a new torsion beam suspension system. Drivers can experience three different driving modes with a choice of ECO, Sport, and Power modes to suit a variety of driving conditions and styles. The vehicle also boasts excellent manoeuvrability, with a 5.0-metre turning radius.

The Toyota Veloz is equipped with a four-cylinder 1.5-litre capacity engine with 16-valve DOHC and dual VVT-i, which



Toyota Veloz Crossover SUV is now available with Service 3 Years/30,000 kms (whichever is earlier) and 1 Year Insurance.

produces 104.6 horsepower and 138 Nm of torque with fuel consumption of 19.3 km/l. Paired with Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT) that simulates a seven-speed sequential shift transmission to deliver powerful, smooth acceleration from start-off and at low speeds, as well as quiet, efficient transmission at higher speeds with excellent fuel efficiency.

A unique front design has been adopted, with the high nose and large trapezoid grille creating a proud expression. The slim LED headlamps and chrome mouldings give an elegant, yet sporty look. At the back, long rear combination lamps emphasise the vehicle’s wide stance and stability.

Toyota has prioritised comfort and convenience throughout the

Veloz’s interior. Upon entering the vehicle, passengers are welcomed by ambient lighting that complements the overall feel of the spacious cabin, which comes with a range of advanced and practical features. These include a 7-inch colour Multi-Information Display (MID), which is complemented by an 8-inch multimedia screen with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto™ integration for seamlessly connected journeys.

The Toyota Veloz’s three rows of seats can accommodate up to seven people, while the second and third rows can be folded together or individually for different layouts that provides passengers with more comfort and can carry more cargo, including longer items. Additional comforts include a 6-speaker sound system,

a powerful automatic air conditioning system with rear control panel, rear sonar, and smart entry and start systems. Meanwhile, parents benefit from the added peace of mind with the ISOFIX safety system, which attaches baby seats securely.

As with any Toyota model, the vehicle comes complete with a comprehensive array of safety features. These include six SRS airbags (front airbags for the driver and passenger, side airbags for the front seats, and side-curtain airbags for all three rows of seats), Vehicle Stability Control (VSC), Anti-lock Braking System (ABS), Electric Parking Brake (EPB) with Brake hold function, Emergency Stop Signal (ESS), Traction Control (TRC), Hill-start Assist Control (HAC), Tire Pressure Warning System (TPWS), and many more.

The Veloz is equipped with 17-inch machined finished 10-spoke aluminium wheels that further enhance the vehicle’s appeal.

Specifications of vehicle imported from Toyota Motor Corporation are as per the GSO Conformity Certificate applicable to the model/grade. Parameters such as vehicle weight, dimensions & fuel economy could vary from the GSO Conformity Certificate due to fitment of dealer installed accessories. Pictures and colours shown may differ from actual specifications.

Lynk & Co launches SUV range of 05

MUSCAT: Lynk & Co, recognised for its cutting-edge European technology and innovative designs in the automotive realm, has proudly showcased its latest SUV range model 05 in the vibrant city of Muscat. With a steadfast commitment to redefining the automotive experience, Lynk & Co has successfully revolutionised the Omani market by offering an unparalleled driving experience. The innovative model is now on the roads, prioritising the safety and peace of mind of Omani motorists.

Lynk & Co is a premium global automobile brand jointly owned by Volvo and Geely. In Oman, Lynk & Co operates under a new line of auto business ‘Mobility Auto LLC’ from Towell Group. Their vision is built on the pillars of innovation, connectivity, and sustainability. Embracing a global perspective while integrating European design and technology, Lynk & Co aspires to create a seamless connection between people, cars, and the world. As a



dynamic industry leader, the brand continuously pushes boundaries to offer exceptional driving experiences to its valued patrons.

For thrill-seekers yearning for exhilarating adventures and off-road odysseys, the Lynk & Co 05 emerges as the ideal partner. A fusion of style, power, and adaptability, the 05 is masterfully designed to triumph over challenging terrains, all the while

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highway driving.

Safety is a priority in the 05 model, with the inclusion of the Adaptive Cruise Control and Queueing Assistant (ACQCA) to provide unbeatable security. An additional layer of vigilance and safety is granted by the Door Opening Warning (DOW) feature. The Smart Adjustable Powertrain+ (SAP+) system enriches your driving encounter, while the 8-speed automatic transmission ensures smooth gear shifts. The Borg Warner 5th Generation Intelligent 4-Wheel Drive system lets you effortlessly navigate a variety of terrains.

As Lynk & Co introduces the 05 model to the Omani market, the brand wholeheartedly commits to offering a world-class ownership experience. With a focus on customer satisfaction and unmatched after-sales support, Lynk & Co ensures that every customer embarks on a journey of excellence.

Bank Nizwa participates in AAOIFI conference

MUSCAT: Bank Nizwa, reinforced its pivotal role in the Islamic banking sector by actively participating in the AAOIFI Week for Training and Qualification Programmes and the 18th AAOIFI-IsDB Annual Islamic Banking and Finance Conference in Bahrain. The two-day conference focused on strategies for navigating economic challenges and leveraging Islamic finance. Bank Nizwa’s experts engaged in enlightening workshops and discussions, contributing to the sector’s discourse.

The conference witnessed a significant milestone as Bank

Nizwa inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with AAOIFI, signifying a commitment to advance Islamic banking awareness. The MoU outlines Bank Nizwa’s dedication to extending its Islamic Finance Knowledge Sessions (IFKS) by launching a comprehensive academic programme. The programme, facilitated by Bank Nizwa experts, aims to enhance skills in the Islamic finance sector, with participants receiving certifications from AAOIFI upon completion.

The collaboration also involves accrediting four Bank Nizwa trainers as certified trainers by



The MoU outlines Bank Nizwa’s dedication to extending its Islamic Finance Knowledge Sessions (IFKS) by launching a comprehensive academic programme.

AAOIFI, emphasising the bank’s dedication to building expertise in Islamic finance. Mr Salim al Maharbi, Bank Nizwa’s Chief Financial Officer, expressed pride in promoting Islamic finance education and awareness. He highlighted the importance of sharing knowledge about Sharia-compliant banking practices, enabling individuals to make informed financial decisions aligned with their principles.

Parallel to the conference, the inaugural ‘Capacity Building Week’ emphasised the significance of developing human capital in Islamic finance. Bank Nizwa actively participated

in enlightening sessions, contributing to the event’s success.

Bank Nizwa’s commitment to fostering understanding of Sharia-compliant finance is evident through its Islamic Finance Knowledge Sessions series, reaching communities across Oman. By collaborating with various institutions, the bank continues to raise awareness and empower individuals to make informed financial decisions. The bank’s active role in conferences and educational initiatives underscores its leadership in promoting Islamic banking principles.



YEAR-END 2023 GREEN ENERGY TRANSITION SET TO GAIN MOMENTUM

IN WHAT HAS BEEN A MOMENTOUS YEAR FOR THE REALISATION OF OMAN'S CLEAN ENERGY AMBITIONS, THE FOUNDATIONS OF A FUTURE GREEN HYDROGEN-POWERED ECONOMY HAVE BEEN BROADLY CONCEPTUALISED AND SET INTO PLACE

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 30

The blistering pace at which Oman has gone from incubating the transition to a clean energy future — in a short span of four years or less — has surprised most international experts.

The International Energy Agency (IEA), no less, declared in June that Oman is on track to become the sixth largest exporter of hydrogen globally, and the largest in the Middle East, by 2030.

More recently, the World Economic Forum (WEF) listed Oman among six 'high-potential' hydrogen countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region based on their low-carbon hydrogen readiness. Ranked alongside Oman as 'high-potential' hydrogen economies are Morocco, Egypt, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In characterising Oman has a 'high-potential' hydrogen economy, the WEF report noted: "As of 2023, the country potentially has the most advanced regulatory framework, strategy, and project development policies for hydrogen in the region... The strategy focuses on exporting hydrogen to both Asia and Europe and also includes decarbonisation strategies for existing demand representing 1.1 Mtpa. The hydrogen sector is seen as a vital post-oil and gas era opportunity for Oman."

Agreements signed over the course of the year have culminated in the award of a total of six blocks for green hydrogen development, mainly in Al Wusta Governorate. They include two blocks auctioned by Hydrom, the master-planner and orchestrator of Oman's green hydrogen industry, and four other blocks firmed up under the 'Legacy Stream' of projects conceived prior to the formalisation of a regulatory framework. Targeting a massive \$38 billion in investments, these six projects will offer a combined renewable electricity capacity of 22.5 gigawatts with the goal of producing 925 kilotonnes per annum of green hydrogen by 2030.

The *Observer* traces some of the key highlights of 2023 in the clean energy realm:

ROYAL DECREE EARMARKS LAND BLOCKS FOR CLEAN ENERGY

Feb 16: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issues Royal Decree 10/2023, centring on the allocation of land plots for renewable and green hydrogen projects — a critical piece of legislation that will underpin the accelerated implementation



Landmark agreement being signed for green hydrogen projects in Oman

of mega-scale green energy projects. It specifies the range of land areas suitable for the purposes of renewable energy and clean hydrogen projects, which will enhance the development of this promising sector, attract investments to it, plan and develop the necessary infrastructure for it, and maintain the competitiveness of green hydrogen production in the Sultanate of Oman.

FIRST THREE GREEN HYDROGEN PROJECTS ANNOUNCED

June 1: Hydrom has signed three agreements awarding the first green hydrogen projects in Oman. At the same time, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, Ministry of Energy and Minerals and Hydrom signed a Head-Usufruct Agreement, granting land rights for renewable energy and clean hydrogen projects. The total investments in the three projects signed with the consortia of Amnah, Green Energy Oman (GEO) and BP Oman are expected to exceed \$20 billion.

TERM SHEETS SIGNED FOR FIRST GREEN HYDROGEN PROJECTS

March 14: In a significant step towards achieving sustainable energy goals, Hydrom signed multiple term sheets with a number of developers in Green Hydrogen projects. They cover six projects located in the proximity of Duqm or Salalah ports: BP Alternative Energy Investments Limited (for a project in Duqm and another in Dhofar), Green Energy Oman (GEO), Green Hydrogen and Chemicals SPC (owned by ACME), Hyport Duqm consortium and SalalahH2 consortium.

These developments will require an installed capacity of approximately 15GW of renewable energy in Oman and total expected investments around \$20 billion (including shared infrastructure). These projects are expected to provide over 700 thousand tonnes of green hydrogen which would be further processed in local industries and into energy carriers for export.

DEME, OQ TEAM UP TO CERTIFY GREEN HYDROGEN

May 9: DEME, the Belgian



Eng Salim al Auli, Minister of Energy and Minerals, with other key officials at the opening of the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman (GHSO) 2023 exhibition

OQGN TO EXPLORE H2, CO2 NETWORKS

Oct 24: Building on its vision to support the development of low-carbon energy infrastructure in Oman, OQ Gas Networks (OQGN) — the newly listed gas transportation company — has announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Belgian-based energy infrastructure group Fluxys to explore cooperation in the establishment of hydrogen and carbon dioxide (CO2) infrastructure projects in Oman.

PACT TO STUDY LIQUID HYDROGEN SUPPLY CHAIN

Dec 3: Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals and Hydrom (Hydrom) have signed a Joint Study Agreement (JSA) with Port of Amsterdam, Zenith Energy Terminals and GasLog, to collaborate on the development of a liquid hydrogen route to market for green hydrogen produced in the Sultanate of Oman. The agreement underscores the clear ambitions of the partners to make the world's first commercial scale liquid hydrogen corridor a reality.

SALALAH2 CONSORTIUM TO BUILD GREEN AMMONIA PROJECT

Dec 12: The SalalahH2 Consortium, comprising Marubeni Corporation; OQ Alternative Energy LLC; Dutco Overseas Limited, a subsidiary of Dutco Group, a conglomerate involved in construction, energy, hospitality and trading; and Samsung C&T Corporation (Korea); signed a Project Development Agreement for a green ammonia project and a Sub-Usufruct Agreement with Hydrom. Under the agreements, the Consortium will conduct detailed studies for the development of the project and the supply chain of green ammonia.

OIA, SIEMENS ENERGY TO EXPLORE ELECTROLYSER MANUFACTURING

Dec 12: Hydrom signed a joint MoU with Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and Siemens Energy to explore the development, construction and operation of an electrolyser manufacturing facility in Oman.

HYDROGEN CARRIER VISITS MUSCAT

Aug 16: Oman received at Sultan Qaboos Port in Muscat the first liquefied hydrogen tanker in the world, the Japanese ship "Suiso Frontier", which is touring a number of countries in the Middle East.

POTENTIAL FOR GEOLOGIC HYDROGEN DEVELOPMENT

Sept 24: The Ministry of Energy and Minerals entered into two Memorandums of Understanding with the American company 'Eden Geopower' and the Omani Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre. These agreements aim to facilitate scientific dialogues to conduct extensive preliminary studies for assessing the potential and opportunities in Geologic Hydrogen exploration. Furthermore, they will identify suitable locations for conducting experimental research in collaboration with the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

OQ, ASYAD, AIR LIQUID TO EXPLORE HYDROGEN FUELLING STATIONS

Oct 22: OQ Alternative Energy has signed an agreement with the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, ASYAD Group, Oman Oil Marketing Company, and Air Liquide Group. The goal is to conduct a joint study pilot project on green hydrogen fuelling stations in the Duqm Special Economic Zone.

HYDROM, ASYAD TO COLLABORATE ON ADVANCING LOGISTICS

Dec 12: Hydrom and Asyad Group signed an MoU to collaborate on advancing Oman's logistics sector by supporting innovative green hydrogen projects. The goal is to not only meet but exceed anticipated requirements and global standards, thereby enabling the seamless deployment of hydrogen solutions across diverse industries.

INFRACO INCORPORATED FOR COMMON INFRASTRUCTURE

Dec 12: Hydrom has announced the incorporation of a new 'Infra-Company' to invest in, operate and manage the common infrastructure critical to the smooth operation of Oman's green hydrogen projects. This infrastructure comprises pipelines for the transportation of ultrapure desalinated water for electricity, potable water and wastewater, and potential hydrogen gas, in addition to electrical networks, specialised storage capacity for hydrogen, ammonia and methanol, and so on. It will be set in place well before the latter ventures come on stream starting in 2029.

NEW UNIT TO SUPPORT DELIVERY OF HYDROGEN PROJECTS

Dec 16: The Omani government is set to shortly roll out a high-powered 'Support Unit' to help smooth the way for international investors preparing to simultaneously implement a raft of mega-scale green hydrogen projects worth billions of dollars over the next several years in the Sultanate of Oman. Mindful that the scale, magnitude, geographical concentration and limited window for delivery of these projects would pose a logistical nightmare for developers, a 'Delivery Support Unit' is being assembled by the government, according to Mohsin al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

ROUND 2 OF OMAN'S HYDROGEN BLOCK AUCTION GARNERS SIZABLE INTEREST

Dec 17: International investor interest in three land blocks offered by the Sultanate of Oman as part of its Round 2 Public Auction, continues to be significant, according to Hydrom. More than 180 companies had submitted their qualifications by last month's deadline to register their interest in participating in the round. Of this total, around 40 companies will be granted access to an online Request for Qualifications (RFP), some of which will go on to submit firm bids by January 28, 2024, the deadline set by Hydrom for Round 2.

'24 outlook: Summaries from top consulting firms

As we look towards 2024, the insights from PwC, EY, and Deloitte collectively paint a picture of a global economic environment that is cautiously optimistic but fraught with challenges. The ability to navigate these challenges will depend on a careful balancing of economic policies, strategic adaptation to technological advancements, and a keen awareness of the global interconnectedness of markets. For businesses, policymakers, and investors, these insights offer valuable guidance in crafting strategies that are resilient, agile, and forward-looking.

While PwC, EY, and Deloitte each offer unique insights, their reports converge on several pivotal themes that are likely to shape the economic landscape of



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2024. PwC's report paints a picture of resilience in the face of adversity. The capital markets, though rattled by the tumultuous events of 2023, are showing signs of stabilisation. Mike Bellin, PwC US IPO Services Leader, optimistically states, "All eyes are now on 2024, when we expect more IPO activity... We are cautiously optimistic a sustained re-opening of the IPO market is finally coming." This sentiment reflects the broader economic recovery, marked by a notable GDP growth of 5.2 per cent in the third quarter, surpassing previous expectations.

A central theme in all three reports is the recognition of the economic uncertainties that have defined the recent past and the resilience shown by markets. PwC highlights the recovery of capital markets and predicts a

slow yet steady growth trajectory. EY, however, presents a more cautious stance, pointing to the risks of a mild recession triggered by rapid monetary tightening and banking sector turmoil. This divergence in viewpoints underscores the inherent unpredictability of global markets, yet there is a shared understanding that 2024 will be a year of cautious navigation through these economic uncertainties.

Another common thread is the discussion around inflation and interest rate policies. Both PwC and EY emphasise the central role of the Federal Reserve and other central banks in managing the delicate balance between combating inflation and fostering economic growth. This dynamic is critical, as decisions made by these institutions will

have far-reaching effects on global economic health. The reports suggest that 2024 will continue to see these issues at the forefront, with businesses and investors keenly watching for shifts in policy that could signal changes in the economic environment.

Deloitte's focus on technology and cybersecurity is echoed to varying degrees in the other reports. The advancement of technologies like quantum computing and the increasing reliance on digital solutions across sectors highlight a growing trend. This technological evolution, while offering tremendous opportunities for efficiency and growth, also brings with it significant cybersecurity risks. The reports collectively acknowledge that firms must be proactive in adapting to these

technological changes while also safeguarding against emerging threats.

All reports agree on the necessity for strategic adaptation to the changing economic and technological landscape. PwC's optimism about the IPO market, EY's caution regarding economic fragilities, and Deloitte's emphasis on investment in technology and alignment with organisational purpose, all point towards a need for businesses to remain agile and forward-thinking. Events in one region can have ripple effects across the globe, as seen in EY's discussion on financial contagion and Deloitte's focus on quantum computing's global implications. This interconnectedness necessitates a more holistic approach to economic planning and risk management.

Mainstream economics' medieval inflation medicine

When assessments of the quasi-inflation of 2021-22 appeared in major US media outlets this month, the prognosis was good: the fever has receded and may already be gone.

The latest reports on personal consumption expenditures were jubilant. If trends continue, "such a success would be likely to shape [US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell's] legacy," noted Jeanna Smialek of The New York Times. Smialek's article illustrates the fetish of Fed worship.

The two economists she quotes, a former Fed official and a banker, are resolute in crediting Powell and his colleagues. "The Fed right now looks pretty dang good," says one. "Certainly they've done very well," says the other. Still, some readers may harbour doubts, because, as Smialek notes, we have "an outcome that [the Fed's] own staff economists viewed as unlikely just six months ago."



JAMES K GALBRAITH

The writer is Professor of Government and Chair in Government/Business Relations at the University of Texas at Austin



What should we make of this? Supposedly, the Fed's actions "played a role in...keeping consumers from adjusting their expectations."

Yet none of the experts, including the professionals who guide policy, shared the inflation optimism now attributed to the consuming masses or even detected its presence. With all their surveys and all their models, they were surprised. Smialek admits that other factors were at work, noting that "higher interest rates didn't heal supply chains."

She could have gone further, reminding readers that inflation peaked back in June 2022, only three months after the Fed started hiking interest rates.

At that time, the Fed's policy rate had risen just 75 basis points, and no one knew how much higher it might go. In fact, we have no evidence that monetary policy had any significant effect on the course taken by prices – certainly not before the June 2022 turning point, and not thereafter, either.

In modern medicine, a specific diagnosis normally leads to a specific treatment. But that is not the case in modern economics. Instead, the absence of an orderly sequence in

the recent episode recalls the medieval approach to medicine, according to which all disease stemmed from an imbalance of the four bodily "humours." And, as in pre-modern medicine, the treatment is always the same, regardless of the nature of the humoral imbalance.

Medieval doctors drew blood; modern central bankers raise interest rates. The parallel is exact, because the thinking hasn't changed. In mainstream macroeconomics today, blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile have been replaced by money, government spending, jobs, and expectations.

While the few remaining monetarists blame "money printing," fiscalists focus on budget deficits. Then there are the Phillips-curve holdovers, for whom a low unemployment rate must signal danger.

Expectations theories cover the gaps left by the other three. Consider Lawrence H Summers, the Harvard University professor and former US Secretary of the Treasury, whom the Financial Times rightly describes as "one of the most influential economists of our time."

From early 2021, he was also America's leading inflation hawk,

predicting high and persistent inflation and demanding sharp increases in interest rates. Summers's early analyses boiled down to two claims: the labour market was too hot, and fiscal stimulus – pandemic relief, infrastructure spending, investment incentives – was too strong. The first concern rested on the Phillips curve, a relic of the 1960s; the second was informed by the experience of the Vietnam war, also dating to the 1960s. As Summers reveals in a recent interview with the Financial Times, his diagnostic tools have not evolved much since his adolescence.

Though he concedes that "it certainly hasn't been a glorious period for the Phillips curve," he then hastens to add: "But I'm not sure we have a satisfactory alternative theory."

Assuming that "we" refers to mainstream economists, Summers is correct. He relegates Milton Friedman's monetarism to "extreme" cases like Argentina, and he is ambivalent about expectations.

Under the expectations theory, he notes, "inflation is set by inflation expectations, and inflation expectations are set by the people who form inflation

expectations."

Given this circular reasoning, Summers concludes, "inflation theory is in very substantial disarray." Except that it's not. There was, and is, a competing view, dismissed at the time as "team transitory."

Summers acknowledges our existence, and he even concedes that we have prevailed for now. But he cannot bring himself to confront our arguments. Instead, he claims: "Ironically, if team transitory proves to be vindicated, it will be because their policy advice was not taken. It will be because the Fed moved strongly enough."

Here we encounter the late medieval spirit in full flower. The counsellors are clueless, and the shaman is blind, but his magic powers cannot be challenged.

On December 18, 2023, Washington Post reporters Rachel Siegel and Jeff Stein wrote that "the economy is ending the year in a remarkably better position than almost anyone... in mainstream economics had predicted."

The reference to "mainstream" reminds us that there is an alternative, whose predictions, on this occasion, were more accurate.

The Post writers explain the temporary factors that actually drove the 2021-22 quasi-inflation: energy shocks, supply-chain disruptions, housing. And then they venture a step closer to the forbidden line.

While still crediting the Fed, they also point to steps that the Biden administration took to address these specific problems.

This is half right. White House policies – including sales from the strategic petroleum reserve and pressure on ports to stay open around the clock – were important.

So were market forces and the simple passage of time. Fed policy had nothing to do with it. Of course, conceding that much would be a step too far.

It would mean that economics is moving from the age of bloodletting and incantations to one inspired by, say, Louis Pasteur (a pioneer of immunology) and Alexander Fleming (the discoverer of penicillin).

If economics finally became a discipline in which specific diagnostics led to specific cures, the necromancers would have to go. We are not there yet, but perhaps that time will come.

– Project Syndicate

DECODING THE QUASI-INFLATION OF 2021-22: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FED INFLUENCE AND ECONOMIC PREDICTIONS

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SURF CHAOS

A surfer catches a wave after huge waves caused damage and injuries in Ventura, California. — AFP



MARKETPLACE

Vendors arrange oranges as they wait for customers in Amritsar. — AFP



SNOW WALK

Visitors wearing traditional hanbok dress walk in the snow at Gyeongbokgung palace in central Seoul. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

People take a ride at a holiday carnival in Hong Kong. — AFP



CONCLAVE

Choristers from various nations attend Pope Francis' private audience for members of Pueri Cantores, an international federation of children and youth choirs, at the Paul-VI hall in the Vatican. — AFP

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Bangladesh's 'tiny houses' tackle giant flood challenge

SHAFIQUOL ALAM

AN AWARD-WINNING architect in Bangladesh, one of the nations most at risk from flooding driven by climate change, has developed an ingenious two-floor housing solution to help people survive what scientists warn is a growing threat. This year, when the annual monsoon floodwaters swelled the country's mighty Brahmaputra river, 40-year-old farmer Abu Sayeed did not have to abandon his home for the first time in his life — but merely climb up a ladder and wait out the waters. The 'Khudi Bari' or 'tiny house' — resilient



Architect Marina Tabassum, who designed the 'tiny house', speaks during an interview in Dhaka. — AFP

homes made on bamboo stilts rising out of the floodwaters that are also easy to move to safer locations when needed —



A man works near the 'Khudi Bari' or 'tiny house', a mobile modular shelter, in Char Shildaha. — AFP

offer hope to millions.

"Khudi Bari has saved us," Sayeed said, who like millions, lives on Bangladesh's vast river

floodplains because the fertile soil is good for the maize and chilli crops he grows. "We did not leave... we

slept on the upper floor. I hope we will never have to flee our homes thanks to this house." Bangladesh is listed as the seventh most vulnerable to extreme weather caused by climate change and rising sea levels, according to the environmental rights organisation Germanwatch. Much of Bangladesh is made up of deltas as the Himalayan rivers of the Ganges and Brahmaputra slowly wind through the low-lying country towards the sea. With millions at risk, relocating people to higher ground is a near-impossible task. "Fleeing your home during the floods is part

of your life," said Sayeed, from the northern village of Shildaha, where 17 prototype Khudi Bari houses have been built by Bangladeshi architect Marina Tabassum. "And often, when the floodwater recedes, you come back to see that your goods were all stolen." Scientists warn of the growing impact of climate change — increasing the intensity of monsoon rains, as well as warning that ice in the Himalayas is melting faster than ever before. Floods in 2022 in Bangladesh's northeastern Sylhet region were some of the worst on record, leaving millions stranded and around a hundred killed. — AFP

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AROUND THE WORLD

Libya's theatre stages comeback after country's years of turmoil

DRESSED ALL in white, a man pretends to aim a slingshot towards another who, running away, tries to dodge the imaginary rock flung towards him.

"Hassituha" (You Felt It), a mostly silent play from eastern Libya, symbolises both the country's divisions between west and east, and the rebirth of Libya's National Theatre Festival, which staged a comeback this week in Tripoli after a 15-year hiatus.

When it last took place in 2008, the festival was to be held again in four years.

Before that could happen, a Nato-backed uprising led to the overthrow and killing of longtime dictator Moamer Kadhafi in 2011. With a myriad of militias subsequently vying for power, more than a decade of stop-start conflict followed before a period of relative stability.

Taking to stages in the capital Tripoli and Misrata, about 190 kilometres (120 miles) to the east, performers came from 11 cities around Libya, a country split between a United Nations-supported government in the west and a rival administration backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar in the east.

"Hassituha", performed at Tripoli's Scouts Theatre by a group who travelled from Marj in eastern Libya, was well received by an audience of more than 1,000 people.

"Some of them burst into tears" over the actors' performances, Muhammad al-Khaitouni, a spectator, said after seeing the play. He said the actors "mostly used gestures and other non-verbal expressions, but they quickly conveyed

the meaning to us".

Accompanying his father and two brothers, Khaled al-Muwadhaf, 14, said the actors demonstrated the suffering brought by the chaos, poverty, and political corruption that has gripped the North African nation despite its oil wealth.

Ali al-Qadiri, who directed the play, said he believed the show was a success because it touched on the circumstances of ordinary Libyans, including a "lack of opportunities, and the economic stagnation that most cities in Libya suffer from".

UNITING LIBYANS

Anwar Alteer, director of this year's festival, said, "we want to rekindle the flame and celebrate

great artistic figures that the public must not be deprived of".

More than 60 playwrights and performers took part in the festival, alongside dozens of directors and authors.

Like "Hassituha", other performances touched on the painful aftermath of Kadhafi's fall and the chaos that ensued.

Salwa al-Maqjabi, a Libyan actress who came from the eastern city of Benghazi to perform in Tripoli, said arts and theatre were a means of overcoming divisions among Libyans.

"I am happy to be present in this sweet gathering," she said. "Theatre unites and does not divide, and it will succeed where politicians have failed."

"Ajyal" (Generations), a theatrical group from Derna, said they were optimistic about reviving the country's theatre despite the many challenges Libyans face.

On September 10-11 a flash flood in Derna swept entire neighbourhoods into the sea, leaving thousands dead or missing and more than 40,000 displaced.

On top of the country's other challenges Derna still faces the task of rebuilding after the disaster. But Milad al-Hasadi, head of Derna's National Theatre, expressed hope for Libya's future.

"Today we are here burdened, it is true, with wounds, pain and loss, but we are optimistic for our country and its artists who succeeded in reviving the national theatre", said Hasadi.

"The conflict in Libya has isolated theatre from artists, and today we need to encourage and support every Libyan theatre, because their role is great in rejecting division, uniting Libyans, and sowing smiles and hope in our lives," Hasadi added.

The Tripoli-based government funded the festival's return, and members attended the opening.

Abdel Basset Buganda, under-secretary of the Libyan culture ministry, said that Libya's theatre had gained lasting momentum.

"The Libyan artist has always sought to communicate with the public, but the interruption was caused by the neglect and political strife that harmed the arts, especially theatre", said Buganda.

"Today, we are united with all Libyan artists to overcome this strife." —AFP

China regulator to 'earnestly study' public concerns over draft video gaming rules

CHINA'S DRAFT ONLINE video gaming rules were designed to promote the healthy development of the industry, regulators said on Saturday, adding that the government would further improve the proposed rules after "earnestly studying" public views.

The statement from the press and publications watchdog came a day after China released proposed sweeping rules aimed at curbing spending and time on video games, dealing a blow to the world's biggest games market and knocking the value of Tencent Holdings, Netease and other gaming stocks.

Under the draft rules, online games will be banned from giving players rewards if they log in every day, if they spend on the game for the first time, or if they spend several times on the game consecutively.

All are common incentive mechanisms in online games.

The draft rules were "designed to safeguard and promote the healthy and prosperous development of the online gaming industry," the National Press and Publication Administration said in a statement on its website.

The regulator said the government had collected opinions widely during the drafting process, and "soliciting public views for the rules is a process aimed at listening to opinions more broadly, and improving the provisions of the rules."

Responding to anxiety over the proposed measures, the regulator said it will "earnestly study expressed concerns and views", and will further amend the rules after absorbing opinions from related government bodies, companies and users.

To restrict excessive spending, the draft rules also require that games must set limits on how much players can top up their digital wallets for in-game spending. Games would also be banned from enabling the speculation and auction of virtual gaming items.

The administration is seeking public comment on the rules by Jan. 22, 2024.

— REUTERS



TRAVEL

Sur is a city steeped in heritage and history



BY BALQEES AL ORAIMI

Sur, a city steeped in maritime history, stands as one of the oldest coastal gems with its commanding view of the Sea of Oman and proximity to the Arabian Sea. Throughout the ages, it has served as a navigational beacon, a sanctuary for sailors and traders, and a bustling hub in the region. Today, Sur boasts a distinctive character, earning the prestigious title of Arab Tourism Capital for 2024.

Renowned for its shipbuilding heritage, folk tales, and timeless maritime chants, Sur is not merely a maritime centre but also a realm of valleys, caves, springs, farms, mountains, reserves, castles, fortresses, falaj, and breathtaking beaches. Scattered throughout are

charming villages, each offering unique tourist attractions. Sur is also known for its traditional industries and craftsmanship, encompassing weaving, goldsmithing, palm frond work, and the creation of delectable Omani sweets.

Visitors to this city enjoy several activities, including a visit to the ancient city of Qalhat. The port of Qalhat, one of the Sultanate of Oman's oldest, has witnessed the arrival of ships from all corners of the ancient world. A city steeped in heritage and history, Qalhat has hosted significant events and notable travellers like Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo.

Famous for breeding Arabian horses in the past, Qalhat boasts the magnificent "Bibi Maryam" shrine, adorned with exquisite architecture and inscriptions, alongside various other structures and a city wall. Exploring Qalhat provides a captivating journey through

its rich ancient past.

The selection of Sur as the Arab Tourism Capital for 2024 underscores the city's allure in terms of tourism and heritage.

Amid urban expansion and population growth, Sur reflects the comprehensive renaissance experienced by the Sultanate of Oman, particularly in the tourism sector. The governor highlights the collaborative efforts between the ministry and tourism sector partners, emphasising the alignment of infrastructure, tourism resources, diversified offerings, and sustainable practices in environmental preservation.

Dr Hilal al Habsi elaborates on the significance of Sur's selection, noting its diverse tourism components. From pristine beaches overlooking the Arabian Sea to the Ras al Hadd Turtle Reserve and mountain tourism destina-

tions like Kawadi al Shab and the Mebam area, Sur offers a multifaceted experience.

The UNESCO World Heritage-listed Kafil al Jila, the archaeological city of Qalhat, and the rich, famous heritage and cultural arts further enrich the visitor's exploration.

The Ras al Jinz Reserve beckons for nature enthusiasts as a haven for rare green turtles. This pristine beach is a crucial nesting ground, drawing thousands of turtles worldwide. The reserve's mission is to protect these turtles, ensuring their survival and the continuity of their species. Visitors can observe turtles from a respectful distance, explore the scientific centre, and embark on guided group excursions to witness the magical sight of turtles laying their eggs in the sand pits — a programme designed to introduce the reserve and its ecosystem.