

Horse races season kicks off today

In response to the Royal orders of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the horse races season (2021-2022) will kick off at Al Rahba Racecourse in the Wilayat of Barka today. The season is organised by the Royal Horse Racing Club. The season includes 20 races and will see three major races including the National Day Cup on November 19. **DETAILS ON P5**

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INDIA CRUISE
PAST AUSSIES,
ENGLAND
EDGE NZ



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OMAN'S
NEW DATA
PROTECTION LAW
IN DRAFT STAGE



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POPULARISING
OD FOR
THE MODERN
MUSIC LOVERS



MUSCAT

CAMEL FESTIVAL CLOSING CEREMONY

HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, will preside over the closing ceremony of the Camel Festival. The event is organised by Oman Camel Racing Federation from October 29 to November 1 at the Royal Camel Corps Racecourse in Al Fulaj, Barka. Top winners in each race will be honoured with cars and valuable gifts. — ONA

DEP SET TO BOOST DIGITAL ECONOMY

The Council of Ministers has approved the national Digital Economy Programme (DEP), which will be endorsed by the Sultanate of Oman as one the goals to build a vibrant economy. The DEP envisages a set of medium-term and long-term approaches aligned with Oman Vision 2040. Its salient features include creating national industries based on the digital economy, fostering the in-country value (ICV), establishing strategic partnership with the private sector and empowering economic sectors of the 10th Five-Year Plan. **SEE ALSO P15**

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FAREWELL TO ALGERIAN AMBASSADOR

On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received at his office on Wednesday Dr Mohammed Yarqi, Ambassador of Algeria to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty. **DETAILS ON P2**



STAMPS ON OMANI WOMEN'S DAY

A collection of four postage stamps have been issued by Oman Post on Omani Women's Day, representing four different costumes of women in Oman. They are now available at Stamps and Collectibles at Opera Galleria which is open from 10 am to 10 pm. The stamps were launched at the Sultanate's pavilion at Dubai Expo 2020, marking Omani Women's Day. **DETAILS ON P4**

Covid-19 situation in Oman under control as cases fall

EXPERT SAYS CASES IN BRITAIN ARE AMONG UNVACCINATED

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabalnassri

The Ministry of Health reported 35 new Covid-19 cases and one death in 48 hours, bringing the total number of cases to 304,101 since the outbreak of the pandemic in the Sultanate in February 2020. The total deaths reached 4,107, and the recovery rate stands at 95.5 per cent.



Immunisation protects against infection in general and prevents hospitalisation and death.

The statistics assume significance amid fears of a new wave of the virus, as indicators in Britain, the Netherlands, and Russia are showing an increasing trend. The British government said on Tuesday it was “closely following” the spread of a new sub-mutant of the Coronavirus in light of high number of infections in the country. However, it has not yet been determined whether it is more contagious. “We are following the new mutant closely and will not hesitate to take action if necessary,” a government spokesman said, but stressed that “nothing suggests it is spreading at a higher speed.”

The United Kingdom is recording an increasing number of infections, exceeding 40,000 per day, which is a much higher rate than recorded in the rest of Europe. It also reported a total of about 139,000 deaths from the pandemic. Some scientists attribute the deterioration of the epidemiological

situation, especially among adolescents and young adults, to poor vaccination of minors, diminishing of the immunity among the elderly who were vaccinated too early, and lifting of preventive measures in the country in July. Dr Zakariya al Balushi, Infectious Disease Consultant, Royal Hospital,

confirmed that the situation was not worrying and was being monitored. He called upon news sources not to spread panic in an unintended manner without having a correct understanding of the epidemiological situation and its interpretations. **TURN TO P5**

Maintenance work to affect water supply in wilayats

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, OCT 20

Water supply service is likely to be affected for a period of 48 hours from October 25 in all the wilayats of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, and wilayats of Wadi al Maawwil and Nakhl in the South Al Batinah governorate due to reinforcement and improvement works. The Oman Water and Wastewater Company (OWWSC) will carry out the works in Barka, Al Khoudh and

Samayil pumping stations and the main water transmission lines in Al Dakhiliyah and South Al Batinah governorates on October 25. These works align with the continuous plans and efforts to enhance the services provided to the customers and beneficiaries to accommodate the increasing demand for water in the next stage and ensure sustainability in the service, said a press release from the company. **TURN TO P5**



DUQM FISHING PORT HANDED OVER TO CONSORTIUM

The Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) announced on Wednesday the formal handover of the multi-purpose fishing port in Duqm to a consortium of Oman Fisheries Development Company (FDO) and Oman Food Investment Company (both subsidiaries of Oman Investment Authority) and the French port of Lorient. **DETAILS ON P13**

Greek minister hails Sultanate's role in region

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, described the talks session held on Wednesday between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Greece as 'positive'. Addressing a press conference along with Nikolaos Georgios Dendias, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Greece, at the Foreign Ministry, Sayyid Badr added that the talks touched on a wide spectrum of cooperation in various spheres, particularly in economic and investment fields. Sayyid Badr said: “The talks discussed many agreements and MoUs that the two sides are willing to sign in the future. These agreements will cover fields of civil aviation, trade and investment to bolster economic cooperation between the two countries”. **TURN TO P5**



Nikolaos Georgios Dendias



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Sayyid Asaad bids farewell to Algerian Ambassador



MUSCAT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office on Wednesday Dr Mohammed Yaqi, Ambassador of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty.

The ambassador expressed his thanks to His Majesty the Sultan for the support extended to him during his tour of duty in the Sultanate from His Majesty, the government and the Omani people,

which had enabled him to carry out his duty. He wished His Majesty good health, happiness and a long life, and the Sultanate further progress and growth under the wise leadership of His Majesty.

On his turn, HH Sayyid Asaad expressed his utmost thanks to the ambassador for the efforts he exerted in serving the relations between the two countries, wishing him permanent success, and the brotherly Algerian people further progress and prosperity.

The meeting was attended by the Secretary-General and the two advisers at the Office of HH Sayyid Asaad. — ONA

Theyazin to preside over Camel Festival closing ceremony

MUSCAT: His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, will preside over the closing ceremony of the Camel Festival. The event is organised by Oman Camel Racing Federation from October 29 until November 1, 2021 at the Royal Camel Corps Racecourse in Al Fulajj, Barka.

The top winners in each race of the four-day festival will be honoured with new cars and valuable awards. The participation will be open for all camel owners and caretakers from all governorates of Oman. — ONA



Oman, Greece seek to enhance relations

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received in his office on Wednesday Nikolaos Dendias, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Greece.

The guest expressed his thanks and appreciation for Oman's role in enhancing means of cooperation to achieve both countries' joint interests.



During the meeting, the two sides reviewed the bilateral relations and touched on a range of matters of common interest.

The meeting was attended by the Ambassador of the Republic of Greece to the Sultanate of Oman and the delegation accompanying the guest.

POLITICAL TALKS

The Sultanate and Greece held at the Foreign Ministry a session of political talks. The Omani side was headed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, while the Greek side was chaired by Nikolaos Georgios Dendias.

The session reviewed aspects of the bilateral cooperation in economic, scientific and cultural fields between the two countries, as well as means of promoting them in all spheres.

The two sides also exchanged views on a range of current regional and international issues of common interest.

The session of political talks was attended by Khalid bin Hashil al Musalhi, Head of the Minister's Office Department, Alexis Konstantopoulos, Ambassador of the Republic of Greece to the Sultanate of Oman, and officials from both sides.

INVESTMENT POTENTIAL

Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), received in his office on Wednesday Nikolaos Georgios Dendias.

The two sides explored fields of the joint cooperation between them. Al Sunaidy explained to the Greek side the available potentials at investment environment in the Special Economic Zone in Duqm (SEZAD) and the free zones in

Visa waiver pact, MoU on political consultations inked



MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Greece signed at the Foreign Ministry here on Wednesday an agreement on mutual visa waiver for holders of diplomatic, special and service passports between the Sultanate and Greece. The agreement was signed on behalf of the governments of the two countries by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, and Nikolaos Georgios Dendias, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece. The two sides also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for political consultations between Oman and Greece. The agreement signing ceremony was attended by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs, Alexis Konstantopoulos, Ambassador of the Republic of Greece to the Sultanate of Oman, and officials from both sides. — ONA

Suhar, Salalah and Al Mazyounah, as well as the incentives offered to investors.

OPAZ chairman also highlighted the government's efforts to localise clean hydrogen projects at SEZAD. He also affirmed the available opportunities to export ammonia and green hydrogen to the global markets.

GRAND MOSQUE VISIT

Later in the day, Nikolaos Georgios Dendias visited the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque.

The guest was briefed on history, designs of various Omani and Islamic architecture at the mosque.

He was also acquainted with the facilities at the Grand Mosque, such as the Institute of Islamic Sciences, the library and the lecture hall.

The minister was received on arrival by Dr Khalid bin Said al Jaradi, Head of the Protocols Department at the Foreign Ministry.

— ONA



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CHILDREN BACK TO SCHOOL NEED SUPPORT

KABEER YOUSUF
@kaberyousef

Children who are going back to school after staying home for nearly 18 months need emotional support, as they are experiencing acclimatising issues in the “new environment”, according to experts.

Some are seeing their friends after a long gap, while others are getting to experience the school environment for the first time.

In the new normal situation, the teachers encourage the students to talk in the class, which was a complete ‘no’ during the normal situation. The pandemic necessitated this measure because the students generally were found with loss of confidence in schools.

Reports suggest that many children were found gloomy and withdrawn. “Yes, there’s a visible difference in the kids’ behaviour and majority are still trying to break the walls within themselves as they had been confined to the four walls of their homes most of the time in the past 18 months,” says a teacher from an expatriate school. “To me, the predominant reason could be that they were cut off from their friends, got accustomed to electronic gadgets and remained themselves in their rooms most of the time,” she adds.

From the many calls that I receive, many families are managing anxious and depressive symptoms in their kids and teens who have been isolated for months

DR BENNY VARGHESE PADUVAN

Vice-Principal at the Village International School

Dr Benny Varghese Paduvan, Vice-Principal at the Village International School, says that it’s not just the children but the parents and the teachers are experiencing withdrawal symptoms, insecurity issues, panic, and panic attacks and the like and emotional support needs to be given to the children.

“From the many calls that I receive, many families are managing anxious and depressive symptoms in their kids and teens who have been isolated for months. This rise in social anxiety

and withdrawal in school children and teens during the Covid-19 pandemic may be best explained by the cycles that perpetuate these symptoms in “the new normal,” says Dr Benny.

Additionally, the social distancing measures resulted in less face-to-face and social contacts communication was mainly through electronic devices. Added to it, longer screen times during the pandemic also led to such issues, he said.

Many kids feel like returning to their homes as soon as the classes begin and feel unmotivated, experience low energy and helplessness.

“Children might also feel low on problem-solving skills, exploration, and they feel attending classes just for the sake of their parents, and there are of signs dependency,” adds Dr Benny.

These experts in child psychology suggest cognitive-behavioural strategies to reduce anxiety and depression among schoolchildren and teens.

“One cannot swim until exposed to the water... the students should be sent to schools by giving all sorts of moral support and they shall be given opportunities for social interaction with classmates, peers and family members,” Dr Benny suggested.

MoH-MoE team to ensure students’ safety

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, OCT 20

A joint working group comprising the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education has been formed to ensure the safe return of students to schools.

The Department of School and University Health and the Directorate-General of Nursing Affairs of the MoH and Guidance and Awareness Department of the Ministry of Education are part of the working group.

The formation of the



working group is aligned with continuous cooperation between the MoH and MoE. It is based on the guidance of the Supreme Committee on Covid-19 and other competent authorities working for the safe return of students to the schools.

The teams are conducting field visits to schools to follow up on the implementation of the school’s precautionary measures and identify the challenges facing the implementation of school

health services.

The work teams have been divided into three groups, each consisting of members from the ministries of health and education. The groups cover all the governorates in the Sultanate according to an agreed schedule.

Meanwhile, a unified supervision visit form has been prepared for all the groups that covers heads like school clinic, environment, school cafeteria, health awareness, and other health and guidance services.



Campaign to replant damaged trees

MUSCAT: The Environment Authority (EA) on Wednesday launched a campaign to replant and replace trees damaged during the recent tropical condition Shaheen.

A large number of volunteers joined hands with the municipalities of North Al Batinah and

South Al Batinah, Oman Environment Society and Sidr Oman Society.

Fahd bin Said al Nasri, who oversees the campaign, said that the campaign seeks to maintain the biodiversity of the Sultanate and develop plant cover and combat desertification.

— ONA



SAF Chief reviews restoration work in cyclone-hit areas

MUSCAT: Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF), on Wednesday toured the site of the Military Emergency Committee (MEC) at Muaskar Al Murtafaa.

Al Raisi listened to a briefing about plans to contain the impact of the recent climatic condition Shaheen and the ongoing coordination with the National Committee for Emergency



Management (NCEM) to rally efforts to restore normalcy to the stricken areas in North Al Batinah and South Al Batinah.

He commended the performance of the MEC, other military and security units, civil and non-governmental organisations that joined hands to serve citizens and residents who suffered the impact of the cyclone.

— ONA

Stamps on Omani Women’s Day issued

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

A collection of four postage stamps have been issued by Oman Post on Omani Women’s Day, representing four different costumes of women in Oman. They are now available at Stamps and Collectibles at Opera Galleria that is open from 10 am to 10 pm.

The stamps were launched at the Sultanate’s pavilion at Dubai Expo 2020, marking Omani Women’s Day. The costumes were chosen and put together by the popular designer in Oman Noora Karim. She depicted traditional attire worn by women in different regions. The dresses include Balushi, Dhofari, Suri and Dishdasha Omania.

Making it empowering women project, Shamsah al Ghatrifi of Oman Post has designed the stamps.

“At Oman Post, we would like to promote talent and give opportunities to SMEs whether they are designers, artists or from other related fields. But Most importantly, the stamps reflect history, events and moments,” said Nasser al Sharji, CEO at Oman Post and Asyad Express.

The postage stamps portray and reflect the rich cultural heritage of Oman and giving



it the originality is that the subjects are barefoot, giving it a timeless appeal because

the footwear could have given away the period, whereas the beauty of Omani dress is that the

designs continue to stay true to traditions.

Omani women dresses are also known for their vibrant colours, prints and textiles ranging from cotton, voile, silk and velvet. The Dhofari Thob is the only dress that uses velvet extensively. The dresses are also extensively embroidered with silver and gold threads known as zari. The designs and style can vary from one governorate to the other.

This set of stamps has keen interest from philatelists. One can subscribe from any country in the world to the Oman Post Philatelist Department and get the latest stamp issuances that touch on various national, environmental, social, economic and artistic issues.

The first post office was opened in Oman in 1856 by the British Postal Department. A little over a century later, the department became a full-fledged part of the Omani government. In the beginning of Oman’s renaissance, in the early 1970s, post offices with full range of services were established across the country. Oman Post was established in 2005 by a Royal Decree in partnership with the Universal Postal Union. It has the complete capacity to provide international services with world standards.

Over 182K visit Oman pavilion at Dubai expo



MUSCAT: As many as 182,348 people visited Oman's pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai during the period from October 1 to 20.

The visitors of the pavilion are treated to a marvellous visual display of modern technologies and sound management.

By taking part in Expo 2020 Dubai, the Sultanate of Oman aims to achieve several goals, such as highlighting civil and developmental achievements made in all spheres. The pavilion also promotes the Sultanate as a promising hub for tourism and investments.

Moreover, the pavilion's role will help enhance the regional and international relations of Oman and boost its connectivity with the international community. — ONA



Covid-19 situation under control

FROM PAGE 1

He explained in a series of tweets that the deaths in the UK, according to a report published by the Public Health England, were very clear that they were among the unvaccinated. Vaccinated cases were among those aged over 65 years. Studies have shown that 65 plus need to be given a third booster dose, not to mention various diseases in this category.

"It is correct that numbers are similar to the previous waves, but most importantly, it did not affect the rate of admissions and deaths," he asserted.

He stressed that immunisation protects against infection in general and prevents hospitalisation and death, but in very few cases, it is possible to suffer from minor symptoms.

He added: "Immunisation in Britain includes only adults over the age of 12 years, 86 per cent took a single dose, and 79 per cent took two doses. So there are millions in Britain who have not yet been vaccinated (whether younger than 12 years old or those who refused)".

"The number of inpatients is stable despite the increase in the number of infections. This is one of the results and benefits of the vaccine," he said, citing a chart published by the British health authorities.

Water supply in wilayats to be hit

FROM PAGE 1

"The water supply is expected to be affected for 48 hours in all the wilayats of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate and the wilayats of Wadi al Maawwil and Nakhl in the South Al Batinah Governorate," the release added.

Commenting on the company's preparations and readiness for the shutdown, Abdullah bin Ahmed al Arafati, Senior Operations Manager, Water, said: "The reinforcement in the network aims to meet the demand of drinking water."

"When the company approved the

expansion of the network, it decided at the same time to implement several improvements and maintenance works simultaneously to enhance the performance of the network," he said.

Al Arafati confirmed that the shutdown process is planned by the company, and work execution will be according to the approved plan. In the affected wilayats, the citizens and residences are requested to fill their tanks and rationalise the water consumption to ensure that the supply is not affected by the water service interruption, the release said.

Greek minister hails Sultanate's role in region

FROM PAGE 1

He further said that an agreement on mutual visa waiver for holders of diplomatic, special and service passports between the two countries, as well as a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on political consultations were signed.

Sayyid Badr pointed out that the talks session discussed views on various issues of common interest at all levels for the sake of achieving further stability and security in the region and the world at large.

He affirmed that the talks between the two sides shared identical views, which back endeavours to deepen understanding and to

resolve regional and international issues.

Speaking on the occasion, Nikolaos Georgios Dendias lauded the political efforts exerted by Oman at the regional and international arenas, particularly Oman's constructive role and enormous endeavours in dealing with the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

He expressed his satisfaction over the strong Oman-Greek relations, which yielded in signing of an agreement on mutual visa waiver and a MoU on political consultations, as well as holding the political talks between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Greece. — ONA

POLICE RECRUITS JOIN TRAINING INSTITUTE



NIZWA: A new batch of citizens holding the general education diploma (GED) joined the institute of police recruits at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences on Wednesday. The new recruits will undergo military training and academic programmes which include law and police sciences as well as practical training.

Commerce Minister meets Bahraini counterpart



MANAMA: Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion met with Zayed Rashid al Zayani, Bahraini Minister of Industry, Commerce and Tourism. The meeting was attended by Dr Mohammed bin Ali al Balushi, Chargé d'affaires of the Sultanate of Oman's Embassy to the Kingdom of Bahrain.

The meeting came on the sidelines of

the GCC Trade and Industry Ministers' meetings being held in Manama.

The two sides reviewed the fraternal, deep-rooted bilateral relations. They also discussed a range of matters related to meetings of the committees on commerce and industry cooperation. They also reviewed the joint GCC march in trade, industry and investment promotion sectors. — ONA

Defence official holds talks with Korean minister



SEOUL: Dr Mohammed bin Nasser al Zaabi, Secretary-General at the Ministry of Defence, met with Kang Eun-Ho, South Korea's Minister of Defence Acquisition Programme Administration (DAPA).

The meeting came within the framework of the visit of the Defence Secretary-General to the Republic of Korea to participate in Seoul

International Aerospace and Defence Exhibition (ADEX).

During the meeting, the two sides discussed a range of matters of common interest.

The meeting was attended by Shaikh Zakariya bin Hamad al Saadi, Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, and the military delegation accompanying the Defence Secretary-General. — ONA



Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Center

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Attacks kill 27 in Syria capital, rebel stronghold

DAMASCUS: A rare bombing of an army bus in Damascus and shelling shortly after of a town in rebel-held northwest Syria killed at least 27 people on Wednesday, in the deadliest flare-up in months.

Two bombs planted on an army bus in central Damascus were detonated early in the morning, killing 14 people, in the worst such attack in the capital in four years, state news agency Sana reported.

There was no immediate claim for the bombing, but government shelling shortly after killed 13 people in Idlib province, parts of which are controlled by groups that have claimed such attacks in the past.

“A terrorist bombing using two explosive devices targeted a passing bus” at a key bridge in Damascus, the state news agency said, reporting that at least three people were wounded.

Images released by Sana showed first responders searching the charred carcass of the bus and what it said was a bomb squad defusing a third device in the same area.

Sana quoted a military source as saying the bombs were detonated as the bus passed near the Hafez al Assad bridge, close to the national museum in the heart of the capital.

“We hadn’t seen violence of that type in a long time,” a fruit vendor who gave his name as Salman said at the scene.

“We thought we were done with such attacks. I hope this will be the last bombing.”

Damascus had been largely spared such violence in recent years, especially since troops and allied militias retook the last significant rebel bastion near the capital in 2018.

The attack is the deadliest in Damascus since a bombing claimed by the IS group targeted the Justice Palace in March 2017, killing at least 30 people.

Around an hour after Wednesday’s attack, Syrian army shelling struck the rebel-held town of Ariha in Idlib province.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said rockets struck a busy area as students were heading to school.

Four children were among 13 people killed, the Britain-based war monitor said.

It was the highest civilian toll since a March 2020 truce deal brokered by Turkey and Russia effectively put fighting in Idlib on standby, the Observatory said.

“At 8 am (0500 GMT) we woke



Syrian security forces stand guard as the charred bus is removed from the site of an early morning attack in Damascus on Wednesday. — AFP

up to the bombardment. The children were terrified and were screaming,” said Bilal Trissi, a father of two who lives nearby.

“They bombed us in our neighbourhood and in the market. There are children who died and

people who lost their limbs... We don’t know why, what are we guilty of?”

The UN children’s agency condemned the shelling, calling it a “reminder that the war in Syria has not come to an end”.

The Damascus bombing too will challenge the government’s assertion that the decade-old war is over and stability guaranteed for reconstruction efforts and investment projects to begin in earnest.

President Bashar al Assad’s government has been striving to claw itself out of international isolation and had been making inroads in recent months.

Iran’s foreign ministry condemned the “cowardly” Damascus attack, saying it “will not undermine the determination of the Syrian government and people in their fight against terrorism.”

The conflict that erupted with the brutal repression of unarmed protests demanding regime change in 2011 has left around half a million people dead. Assad’s position once hung by a thread, but Russia’s military intervention in 2015 marked the start of a long and bloody fightback.

The IS group’s “caliphate” that once straddled swathes of Syria and Iraq shrank to its death in eastern Syria in early 2019.

Since then, the government’s main focus has been the Idlib region, now home to many rebels who were forced to surrender elsewhere. It is dominated by the group Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), which includes leaders of Al Qaeda’s former Syria franchise and over which Turkey has some sway. HTS has not claimed attacks in Damascus in years. — AFP

Crisis-hit Lebanon hikes fuel prices in de facto end to subsidies

BEIRUT: Lebanon raised fuel prices on Wednesday in a de facto end to state subsidies, pushing the cost of filling a vehicle’s tank to more than the monthly minimum wage in the poverty-stricken nation.

Subsidies were gradually phased out over the past few months to shore up diminishing foreign currency reserves at the central bank, which could no longer fund fuel imports.

A revised price list published by the energy ministry set the cost of 20 litres of 95-octane petroleum at 302,700 Lebanese pounds, or around \$15 at the black market rate.

This is around five times the price of 61,100 pounds set at the end of June, adding to the economic pain in a country where power cuts are common and basic goods including medicine have become scarce.

The revised price “marks a complete lifting of petroleum subsidies,” Fadi Abou Chakra of the country’s fuel distributors’ association said.

“The fuel price hike will cause



A tuktuk taxi drives on a street in the Lebanese city of Batroun north of the capital. — AFP

the cost of services to also increase, especially transportation,” he added.

The energy ministry on Wednesday also raised the price of diesel and cooking gas following a drop in the value of the Lebanese pound against the dollar on the black market.

The nose-diving pound was selling for around 20,500 pounds to the greenback, its lowest value in months, money exchangers said. An energy ministry official said that the “latest petroleum prices were calculated on the basis of a currency exchange rate of 20,000 pounds to the dollar as per

a central bank request.”

The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because he is not authorised to comment on the issue.

The price increases have mostly erased massive queues at gas pumps that clogged streets across the country during the summer when importers and gas station owners severely rationed supply.

To fill a medium-sized vehicle’s tank, Lebanese would now have to pay more than the monthly minimum wage of 675,000 pounds, at a time when nearly 80 per cent of the population is estimated to live below the poverty line.

The International Monetary Fund and France are among creditors demanding an audit of the central bank as part of urgent reforms to unlock financial support for Lebanon.

The World Bank has called the country’s economic crisis one of the planet’s worst since the mid-19th century.

Officials said the audit by a New York-based firm resumes on Thursday. — AFP

UN alarmed by South Sudan state threats, intimidation

GENEVA: The UN commission investigating human rights violations in South Sudan said on Wednesday it was dismayed by the ongoing harassment and intimidation of rights defenders, journalists and civil society figures.

The world’s newest nation has suffered from chronic instability since independence in 2011, with a coalition of civil society groups urging the government to step down, saying they have “had enough”.

The commission said credible threats to their lives by the National Security Services had caused some people to flee the country, while the NSS continues to harass their colleagues and families. “Civic space in South Sudan is eroding at an accelerating pace, undermining efforts to achieve a sustainable peace,” the commission’s chair Yasmin Sooka said in a statement.

“The role played by overzealous security services in preventing dissent and criticism, causing key stakeholders involved in constitutional and transitional

justice processes to flee the country, discourages the participation of others.”

Commissioner Andrew Clapham said the state’s targeting of high-profile human rights defenders would have a “chilling effect” on civil society and corrode confidence in processes such as national elections. He said that while progress on a 2018 peace deal which ended a brutal civil war had been slow, in recent months government leaders had taken some forward steps.

However, such moves come while the NSS has been targeting prominent civil society figures. “The NSS threaten peace and must be reigned in,” said Clapham.

Numerous civil society leaders remain detained and the commission is concerned their detention is arbitrary.

“Any concerns authorities may have need be addressed within the rule of law, not through harassment and brutality, which only fuels further conflict and division,” said commissioner Barney Afako. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TELAVIV

Israel to issue 3,000 more permits to Gaza merchants

Israel said on Wednesday it would issue 3,000 more permits for merchants from Gaza to enter Israel, the latest measure aimed at boosting economic conditions in the blockaded strip.

The Israeli defence ministry body responsible for civil affairs in the Palestinian territories, COGAT, said the number of merchant permits would be increased from 7,000 to 10,000.

“The permits will be issued only to those already vaccinated against, or recovered from



Covid-19,” COGAT said.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett opposes Palestinian statehood but has said his government is committed to improving livelihoods in Gaza and the occupied West Bank.

ATHENS

Greece, Egypt and Cyprus sign energy deal

Greece, Cyprus and Egypt signed an electricity agreement that could include Egyptian solar power and potentially supply power to other European countries.

The protocol was signed during a meeting between Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and the presidents of Egypt, Abdel Fattah al Sisi, and Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, in Athens.

The deal concerns the “interconnection” of the neighbours and transfer of electricity to their respective



networks, Mitsotakis said. “As energy sources diversify, Egypt can become a supplier of electric power, which will be mainly produced by the sun, and Greece will become a distribution station for Europe,” Mitsotakis added.

SANAA

80 Yemen fighters killed near Marib: Coalition

A Saudi-led coalition said on Wednesday it killed more than 82 Ansar Allah fighters in air strikes near Yemen’s strategic city of Marib, during a second week of intense reported bombing.

The group rarely comment on losses, and the numbers could not be independently verified by AFP. This is the tenth consecutive day that the coalition has announced strikes around Marib, reporting a total of around 1,300 fatalities.

“Operations targeted 11



military vehicles and killed more than 82 elements” in the past 24 hours in the districts of Al Jawba and Al Kassara, the coalition fighting in Yemen said in a statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency.

In brief

■ SEOUL



**NORTH KOREA
CONFIRMS TEST OF
BALLISTIC MISSILE**

North Korea has announced that it successfully tested a ballistic missile on Tuesday, the eighth time the regime has done so this year.

North Korean state news agency KCNA reported that Pyongyang had tested a “new type” of submarine-launched ballistic missile that it said would help enhance the country’s defence technology and the navy’s underwater operational capability.

Photos published by KCNA showed a relatively small rocket with a limited range.

■ MANILA



**PHILIPPINES REPORTS
3-MONTH LOW IN DAILY
COVID-19 TALLY**

The Philippines on Wednesday reported a three-month low in its daily Covid-19 tally, but a health expert warned against being complacent ahead of the Christmas holidays.

The Department of Health logged 3,656 new coronavirus infections on Wednesday, bringing the country’s total caseload since last year to more than 2.73 million. The daily tally was the lowest since July 14. The death toll was up by five to 40,977, the department added, but noted that the low figure was due to technical issues with its data reporting system.

■ SINGAPORE



**SINGAPORE EXTENDS
COVID-19 CURBS FOR A
MONTH**

Singapore will extend its social curbs to contain the spread of Covid-19 for around a month in order to ease the pressure on the healthcare system, the government said on Wednesday.

The city-state in late September reimposed curbs that include limiting social interactions and dining out to two people in order to slow virus transmission.

While Singapore has vaccinated more than 80 per cent of its 5.45 million population, asymptomatic or mild cases have been rising steadily, spreading the virus and mounting pressure on hospitals and medical staff.

Russia says Taliban must meet expectations on rights



Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov speaks to the media in Moscow on Wednesday. — AFP

MOSCOW: The Taliban must live up to international “expectations” on human rights if they want to be recognised by governments around the world, the Kremlin’s representative on Afghanistan said on Wednesday.

During Moscow talks on Afghanistan that included representatives of the Taliban, Kremlin envoy Zamir Kabulov said the militants would be recognised when they “start fulfilling the expectations of the international community on human rights and inclusion,” Kabulov said. The Kremlin’s envoy to Afghanistan said the Taliban gave participants of the negotiations in Moscow, including China and Pakistan, assurances the group was making headway on rights and governance issues.

Taliban representatives told Kabulov they “are working on improving governance and improving human rights,” he told reporters. “We’ll see,” Kabulov said.

He also called on the international community to abandon its “bias” and unite to help the Afghan people.

“Not everyone likes the new government in Afghanistan, but by punishing the government,

we punish the whole people,” he said. He said that a joint statement from all 10 participating countries concluding the talks would call on the United Nations to convene a donor conference to raise funds for Afghanistan.

Taliban representatives did not immediately address reporters following Kabulov’s comments to journalists.

Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi, a senior figure in the new Afghan leadership, however said earlier on Wednesday that Afghanistan’s new leadership was “already inclusive”.

“We don’t need foreign military aid, we need support for peace in Afghanistan, we need reconstruction and resettlement,” Hanafi said.

Russia also called for international aid to support Kabul, as it hosted the Taliban at a major international conference on Afghanistan for the first time since the group took power in August.

Pakistan, China, Iran, India and former Soviet Central Asian states joined Taliban officials at the Moscow meeting. But the United States stayed away, citing technical reasons, while saying that it could attend such talks in the future.

— Agencies



Commuters stand on a flyover on a flooded national highway after river Kosi overflowed following heavy rains near Rampur in India’s Uttar Pradesh. — AFP

Rain havoc: Floods, landslides kill 116 in India and Nepal

DEHRADUN, India: More than 100 people have died in several days of massive flooding and devastating landslides that swept away roads and houses in India and Nepal, officials said on Wednesday, with scores more missing.

In Uttarakhand in northern India, officials said that 46 people had died in recent days with 11 missing. In Kerala in the south chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that the death toll had hit 39 there.

At least 30 of those in Uttarakhand were killed in seven separate incidents in the Nainital region early on Tuesday, after cloudbursts — an ultra-intense

deluge of rain — triggered a series of landslides and destroyed several structures.

Five of the dead were from a single family whose house was buried by a massive landslide, local official Pradeep Jain said.

Another landslide in the northern Almora district killed five people after huge rocks and a wall of mud demolished and engulfed their home. At least six others were killed on Monday in two remote districts of the Himalayan state.

The Indian Meteorological Department extended and widened its weather alert on Tuesday, predicting heavy to very heavy rainfall in the region.

The weather office said several areas were drenched by more than 400 millimetres (16 inches) of rainfall on Monday, causing landslides and flooding.

Authorities ordered the closure of schools and banned all religious and tourist activities in the state.

Television footage and social media videos showed residents wading through knee-deep water near Nainital lake, a tourist hotspot, and the Ganges bursting its banks in Rishikesh.

More than 100 tourists were stuck inside a resort in Ramgarh after the overflowing Kosi river deluged several areas.

— AFP

Philippines to review ‘drug war’ killings

MANILA: The Philippines will look into thousands of killings in President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs, its justice minister said on Wednesday, after a review of a sample of cases indicated foul play in dozens of deadly police operations.

Menardo Guevarra said his Department of Justice (DOJ) would expand its review to the more than 6,000 killings during police operations, after which many officers were cleared of wrongdoing in internal police investigations. “Time and resources

permitting, the DOJ will review these thousands of other cases, too,” Guevarra said.

The decision indicates a shift from the Philippines’ vehement defence of the drugs war, which has seen the government scold critics and activists who alleged there were systematic executions of drug suspects by police.

The Philippines has come under pressure from the United Nations to hold a thorough probe and the International Criminal Court recently announced it would

investigate the crackdown.

The government, however, has said it will not cooperate because the Philippine justice system is functioning.

Wednesday’s release of details of 52 drug war deaths marks a rare admission by the state that abuses may have taken place.

In several of those, victims had no traces of gunpowder on their hands, or did not have a gun at all.

The DOJ also said police had used excessive force, shot suspects at close range and relevant medical and police records were missing. The findings, which are subject to further case build-up and criminal charges, could challenge the government’s narrative of the war on drugs.

— Reuters

Lack of vaccination pass, testing threaten Japan’s reopening

TOKYO: Japan’s lack of a vaccination passport and limited testing capacity is threatening ambitions to reopen the economy at a crucial year-end period when restaurants earn up to a half of their annual revenue and travel agencies are at their busiest.

This means businesses, wary of another pandemic wave through winter, are not rehiring laid-off staff or ordering more supplies until they know more about what the reopening scheme will look like and how long they can stay open. Local authorities have been largely left to fend for themselves, creating a patchwork of rules and

compliance schemes.

At stake is how quickly Japan can recapture some of the \$44 billion spent by foreign tourists in 2019 and whether the estimated \$53 billion in pent-up domestic spending can be unleashed to jump-start the battered economy.

If botched, the reopening could also prove costly for new Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who faces an election in under two weeks. His predecessor was ousted after his popularity ratings tanked due to perceptions his government bungled its Covid-19 pandemic response.

Year-end is critical for bars



and restaurants in Japan, where companies organise large “forget-the-year” parties and having a meal to round off the year with

business associates and friends is an important custom.

“I’ve always had a special event at the year-end, but I’m thinking of cancelling, because experts say a sixth wave of the coronavirus will definitely come,” says Mayumi Saijo, who owns “Beer Bar Bitter” in Tokyo’s trendy Kagurazaka district.

Saijo says she is nervous about ordering some \$4,000 in beer from the Czech Republic after pouring out kegs due to lockdowns last year and having trouble sleeping before the latest state of emergency was lifted. “Whatever I prepared for would cost me money,” she said. “I

want to avoid risk at all costs.”

While her place survived earlier pandemic restrictions on opening hours, government compensation did not prevent a record 780 bars and restaurants in Japan from going bankrupt in the year through April, and another 298 since then, according to private credit firm Teikoku Databank.

“How late will restaurants be allowed to stay open? Everything depends on that - hiring people, ordering supplies,” said Shigenori Ishii, an official at the Japan Food Service Association, a 75,000-member strong industry group. — Reuters



Servicemen of Russia's Emergencies Ministry wearing protective gear disinfect Moscow's Belorussky railway station amid the ongoing coronavirus disease pandemic. – AFP

Putin to order new virus restrictions as deaths soar

MOSCOW: Russia reported on Wednesday a record 1,028 Covid deaths in a single day, with President Vladimir Putin expected to introduce new nationwide restrictions in Europe's worst affected country.

The new figures bring Russia's official death toll to 226,353 — the highest on the continent even as authorities have been accused of vastly downplaying the severity of the pandemic. The country also recorded 34,074 new virus cases, according to an official tally.

Infection rates have soared in recent weeks amid a stalled vaccination programme, with only 35 per cent of the country fully



Russian President Vladimir Putin chairs a meeting with members of the government at the Novo-Ogaryovo state residence outside Moscow. – AFP

innoculated.

Despite multiple pleas, Putin has struggled to convince Russians to vaccinate themselves, with even his own spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying on Wednesday he

had not taken a Covid jab.

The Russian leader was expected to rule on a government proposal to introduce a nationwide week-long holiday at the end of the month to curb the spread of the virus. Under the plan, Russians will not go to work the first week of November, which coincides with national school holidays.

Putin has introduced paid holidays during coronavirus peaks before, most recently in May.

On Tuesday, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin ordered the capital's first coronavirus restrictions since the summer.

He told unvaccinated over-60s in Moscow to work from

home and extended mandatory vaccinations for service workers. Those restrictions take effect next Monday and are set to last until the end of February.

Sobyenin also told employers to move 30 per cent of their staff to home working.

The surge in cases has come without any strict restrictions in place to limit Covid-19's spread and as authorities struggle to counter widespread anti-vaccine sentiment. Life in Moscow, which is home to more than 12 million people, was normal on Wednesday, with restaurants and other indoor entertainment venues open as usual. — AFP

Germany rules out closing Polish frontier to stem migrant flow

BERLIN: Germany has no plans to close its border to Poland despite a sharp increase in asylum seekers arriving via Belarus, even as the EU neighbours discuss countermeasures, Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said on Wednesday.

Seehofer told reporters the outgoing government under Chancellor Angela Merkel had "no intention" of taking such a drastic step which he said would also be "legally questionable".

In a letter to his Polish counterpart Mariusz Kaminski seen by AFP on Tuesday, Seehofer proposed increasing joint patrols along its border with Poland in response to rising numbers of migrants coming via Belarus.

Seehofer said he had not yet received a response from Warsaw but praised its "very strong initiatives" to stem the flow of new arrivals.

A powerful German police union this week called for stepped-up checks at the border given the influx via Belarus, which the interior ministry said had reached around 5,700 since the start of the year.

Seehofer repeated EU accusations that the Belarusian authorities are flying migrants from the Middle East and Africa to Minsk and then sending



Germany's Interior Minister Horst Seehofer attends a news conference on migration in Berlin. – Reuters

them into the bloc on foot in retaliation for sanctions imposed over a crackdown on the opposition.

He said Merkel would be pressing the issue at a European Union summit this week.

But he stressed "the key to the solution of the problem lies in Moscow" given Russia's outsized economic and political influence on Belarus.

The surge in people crossing illegally over the EU's eastern frontier with Belarus has placed major strains on member states unaccustomed to dealing with large-scale arrivals.

Poland has drawn criticism for its hardline stance that has seen border guards push migrants back across the border with Belarus. — Reuters

UK health leaders call for Covid curbs as infections rise

LONDON: Healthcare leaders urged the British government on Wednesday to reinstate some coronavirus restrictions to ease pressures on hospitals because of spiralling case numbers.

But ministers remain opposed to reintroducing any curbs, arguing the situation is still far better than earlier this year and the country is learning to "live with the virus".

A total of 223 deaths from Covid-19 were registered on Tuesday — the highest 24-hour toll since March — while there is mounting concern at daily case rates. The country is averaging more than 40,000 new cases a day for the first time since the

There is mounting concern at daily case rates as the country is averaging more than 40,000 new cases a day for the first time since summer

summer, and the number of patients admitted to hospital is increasing.

Matthew Taylor, head of the NHS Confederation representing the state-run health service in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, said hospitals were feeling severe pressure and action was needed as the busier winter



A man walks beside the National Covid Memorial Wall, a dedication of thousands of hand painted hearts and messages commemorating victims of the pandemic in London. – Reuters

period approaches.

"We've got a very particular problem over this winter, and we need to act", he told Sky News.

Taylor said health leaders report the worsening Covid-19 situation means they are missing key targets in areas such as waits in emergency departments, ambulance response times and treatment backlogs.

"Is it better to act early and take measures which don't stop the economy working — but I recognise they are inconvenient for people — or do we wait for things to get worse and possibly risk having to take more severe measures?" he added.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

BERLIN

Police detain 11 across Europe in mafia probe

Police in Germany, Italy and Bulgaria detained 11 people and raided 46 residential and commercial buildings in an investigation into tax fraud by the Italian mafia involving the trade in luxury vehicles, German police said.

The main suspects who were detained belong to the 'Ndrangheta, the most powerful mafia group in Italy, and are accused of forming a criminal organisation and of tax fraud worth \$15.12 million, police said.



The perpetrators illegally claimed VAT by selling exclusive cars several times in different European countries, police said in a statement. The suspects will be brought before a magistrate shortly, the statement said.

— Reuters

LONDON

Queen 'advised to rest' on medical grounds

Queen Elizabeth II has cancelled a planned trip to Northern Ireland on medical grounds, Buckingham Palace said. Royal officials said in a statement that the 95-year-old monarch "has reluctantly accepted medical advice to rest for the next few days".

Britain's domestic Press Association news agency said the decision was understood not to be related to coronavirus and that she was resting at Windsor Castle, west of London. She was also expected to attend events



at the upcoming UN climate change summit in Glasgow next month, it added.

The Queen — Britain's longest-serving monarch — moved to Windsor in March last year as the coronavirus outbreak took hold. — AFP

VATICAN CITY

Persistent boy steals show at papal audience

A boy stole the show at Pope Francis' Vatican audience on Wednesday, getting a seat at his side and a white papal cap as a reward for persistence after walking onto the stage. The boy, who Francis later said had a medical 'limitation', was wearing a mask and a track suit and appeared to be about 10 years old.

He approached the pope with tottering steps at the start of the audience in the large Paul VI hall. He caused no alarm for security officials, who did not try



to stop him. He shook the pope's hand, jumping up and down in front of him. "I thank this boy for the lesson he has given all of us. May the Lord help him in his limitation, as he grows, because what he did came from the heart", the pope said. — Reuters

South Africa strikes new gold... helium

LINDA GIVETASH

In a grassy plain in South Africa, once the world's largest gold producer, prospectors have stumbled upon a new treasure: Helium. Popularly known for birthday balloons and squeaky voices, helium plays an underappreciated role in medical scanners, superconductors and space travel.

It's also rare — produced by fewer than 10 countries and often treated as a waste product in natural gas wells.

Natural gas is what Stefano Marani and Nick Mitchell had on their minds when they bought gas rights on this 87,000-hectare piece of land in the Free State province in 2012, for just \$1.

When they had their gas finds tested, they discovered unusually high amounts of helium mixed in with the gas that mean their dollar investment could be worth billions.

Their company Renergen is almost ready to start producing both natural gas and helium, placing South Africa on an elite map with helium reserves that could be the richest and cleanest in the world.

Those first tests revealed helium concentrations of two to four per cent. In the United States, helium is extracted at concentrations as low as 0.3 per cent.

“That was when we knew we had something special”, Marani said. “It really was right place, right time.”

Further exploration has found concentrations as high as 12 per cent, Renergen says.

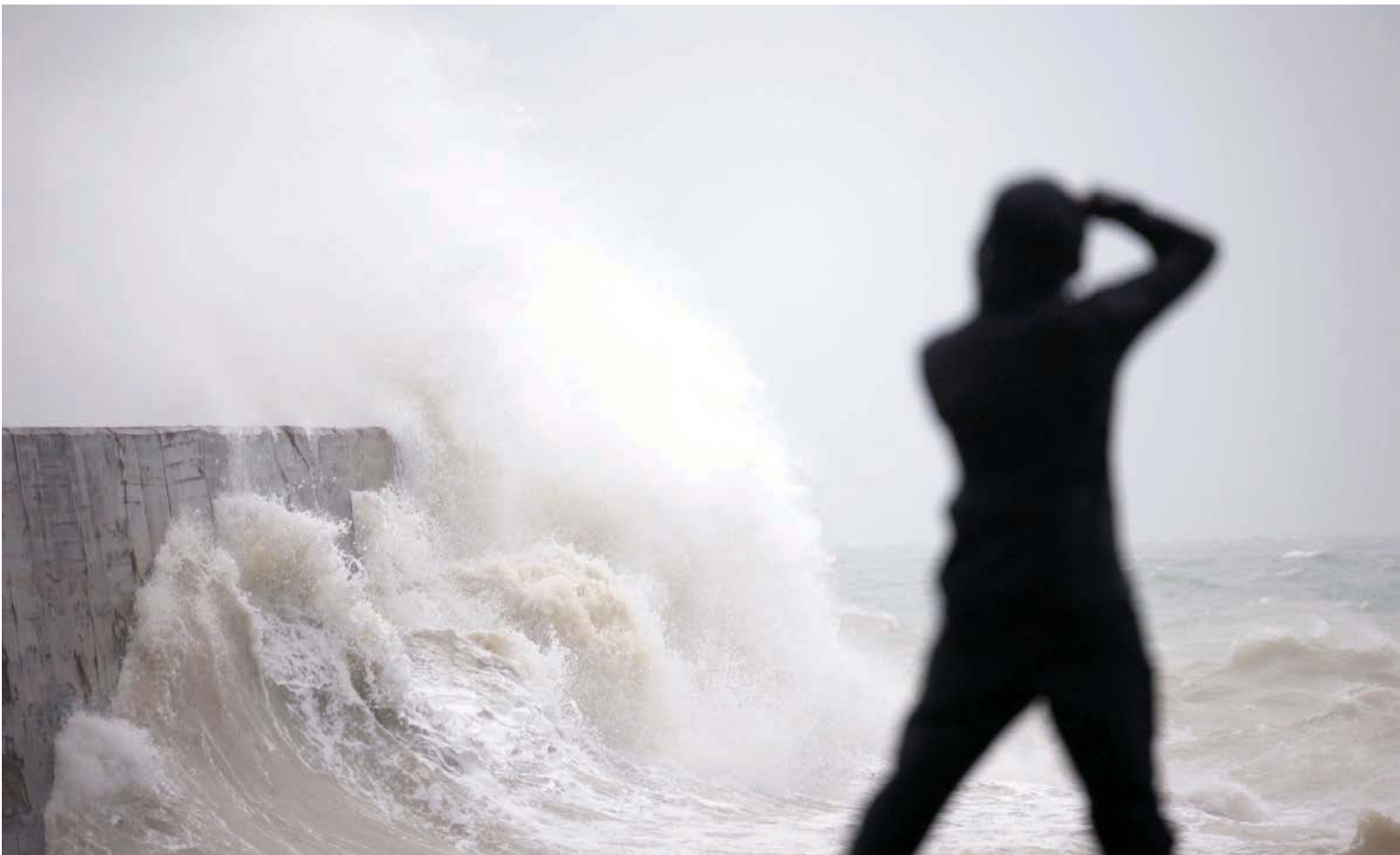
Other major producers are Qatar and Algeria. The global helium market was worth \$10.6 billion in 2019, according to the firm Research and Markets. Since few countries produce helium, supplies are frequently disrupted. Renergen estimates its helium reserve could be as much as 9.74 billion cubic metres — larger than the known reserves in the entire United States.

That's enough to fill about 1.4 trillion party balloons. If proven, Marani said those reserves would be worth over \$100 billion. More conservative estimates remain substantial at 920 million cubic meters.

Chris Ballentine, chair of geochemistry at the University of Oxford, said helium is usually produced as part of liquified natural gas operations. Companies often treat it as a bonus, if they bother to separate it out. — AFP

“That was when we knew we had something special. It really was right place, right time.”

STEFANO MARANI



SHOOTING THE WAVES!

A man takes photographs as waves hit the harbour wall in Newhaven, Britain, on Wednesday. — Reuters

Love for Oman unlimited...



Ali Al Matani
alimatani2@gmail.com

NOBODY CAN UNDERSTAND THE FEELINGS SHE EXPRESSED ABOUT OMAN WITHOUT EXPERIENCING IT

The former Kuwaiti parliamentarian Safa al Hashem has always had a vigorous and emotional connection with Oman and its people. This relation has come from the depth of her heart. She visited the Sultanate regularly, and history recorded her famous saying about Oman: “Whosoever has not seen the Sultanate has not seen half of the world.” The bond becomes stronger with the passage of time.

Nobody can understand the feelings she expressed about Oman without experiencing it and seeing it with their eyes. She herself did it. She explored every nook and corner of the Sultanate and came to this conclusion. She visited most of the wilayats of the country beginning with Salalah.

She herself drove her Land Rover and crossed a thousands of kilometres between Salalah and Muscat. During her journey she stopped at all petrol pumps, wilayats, villages and spoke to people, young and old, men and women. She did all this to know Oman, not from outside but where it lives, i.e. the heart of the people. All parts of the country have the marks of her footsteps. She went from north to south and east to west of the country, and immersed herself in the beauty of Oman. She was aware of the cultural, civilisational and

historical elements of the Sultanate. She loved to talk about them in sweetest terms, with respect and devotion.

Whenever we talked about plans and investments of the government, Safa al Hashem was available. She has contributed to the investments in Oman. She always felt proud that she has a house in the capital Muscat. She was always available with projects which could generate jobs for the Omani youth.

We cannot forget her as a member of Kuwaiti parliament. She spoke there with all eloquence which was given to her by Allah. She always gave examples of the beauty of Oman for its nature, cleanliness and good organisation. She always had good words about Omani traffic rules. The coasts and cliffs of Oman and its greenery always enticed her as is evident in her statements.

At the time of the recent crisis to which the country was exposed, Safa always praised the societal and extraordinary support of the citizens to each other, and how they made an example for others.

She always urged Omani women to pursue the occupations of their fathers and grandfathers. In her words, they are worth it and they should not be lost. Safa al Hashem never lived in vacuum.

She talked about what she saw and experienced.

Writing about Safa al Hashem and describing her nature and standing in few hundred words is a herculean talk. Even if we do, we can't do justice with her and her personality. The only thing, I would like to say about her is that the planet earth needs people like her to live and grow. Wherever she went in the country she was adored with love, and affection for her passion she nurtured. She lived in Oman and talked about it. She is a friend of the country indeed.

This unlimited love was neither baseless nor meaningless. The Sultanate has always been an attraction for all. The cultural heritage, traditions, social practices, natural elements and environment has always attracted many people from around the world. People always come here to see the wonder which is Oman. But Safa al Hashem was an exception. She made the Sultanate her abode. Not only a house, but it became the mission of her life. She was mesmerised by it, and could not imagine her life without it. She proved her unlimited love for the country.

Safa al Hashem came to Oman as a gentle breeze from her country Kuwait, and became an integral part of the memory of the people of the Sultanate.

Asean countries must lead on biodiversity



TONY LA VIÑA
The author is Associate Director for Climate Policy and International Relations of Manila Observatory of the Philippines

The combined effects of Covid-19 and climate change have revealed profound vulnerabilities in Southeast Asia. In the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), the pandemic turned hospitals into mortuaries at the same time as natural disasters transformed coastal communities into washed-out mud flats. To improve regional resilience and promote sustainable growth, the post-Covid recovery must focus not only on decarbonisation, but also on the protection of nature.

Throughout the region, nature remains in a policy silo, and the importance of biodiversity, in particular, rarely features prominently in economic development plans. Biodiversity provides food, water, shelter and medicine. It contributes to social

cohesion and climate stabilisation, and can help humanity adapt to a changing environment. And yet the Asean Comprehensive Recovery Framework mentions biodiversity only once — in a footnote. Unless this approach changes, Asean member states risk sinking billions of development dollars into measures that fail to address a root cause of our current problems.

To lead our region towards recovery, resilience and long-term sustainable development, Asean member states should commit to the 30x30 plan to protect nature. This initiative, which aims to conserve 30 per cent of Earth's lands and oceans by 2030, is a key element of the proposed global biodiversity framework, due to be finalised by 196 countries later this year,

and is being championed by the High Ambition Coalition (HAC) of Nature and People. More than 70 countries have signed on to the HAC, but Cambodia is the only Asean member state among them.

Southeast Asia comprises just 3 per cent of Earth's land mass, but it contains almost 20 per cent of the world's biodiversity. More than 2,000 species have been discovered in the Asean region over the past 20 years, and three member states — Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines — are considered “mega-diverse” countries, with a variety of species akin to that of the Amazon rainforest and the Congo Basin. The region contains around 60 per cent of the world's tropical peatlands and has the world's most extensive and diverse coral reefs, accounting for 28 per cent of the

global total. The Coral Triangle is a global hub of marine biodiversity. Although Asean countries have taken steps to protect this natural patrimony, including creating the Asean Heritage Parks and marine protected areas, risks are mounting. In 2017, the Asean Centre for Biodiversity reported that the region is poised to lose 70-90 per cent of habitats and 13-42 per cent of species by 2100.

Some of this loss can be attributed to climate change, but the infrastructure to support population growth also poses a serious threat. The population of the Asean region increased 72 per cent between 1980 and 2017. Clearing areas for agriculture and housing development has caused habitat fragmentation and logging and mining operations continue to encroach on wilderness

areas at a rapid rate. As Asean's Biodiversity Outlook 2 noted: “The productivity and viability of the region's lakes, rivers and peatlands continue to decline.” And while “coastal and marine areas are... primary food sources for millions of residents in the region... studies show that most of the region's seas are overfished and degraded, threatening marine health and food security.”

By embracing the 30x30 goal, Asean countries could drive new sources of sustainable finance into conservation measures that connect ecological corridors along watersheds and integrated seascapes. These corridors could be established across borders to protect vital concentrations of species in carbon-rich forests and peatlands.

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Must-win Oman face tricky Scotland

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, OCT 20

Oman will have their task cut out against a rampant Scotland side standing on the cusp of history when they cross swords in the last Group B match of the ICC T20 World Cup 2021 at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground on Thursday.

After their heartbreaking loss to Bangladesh on Tuesday, Oman face a must-win situation against the Scots to have any hopes of progressing to the Super 12 stage.

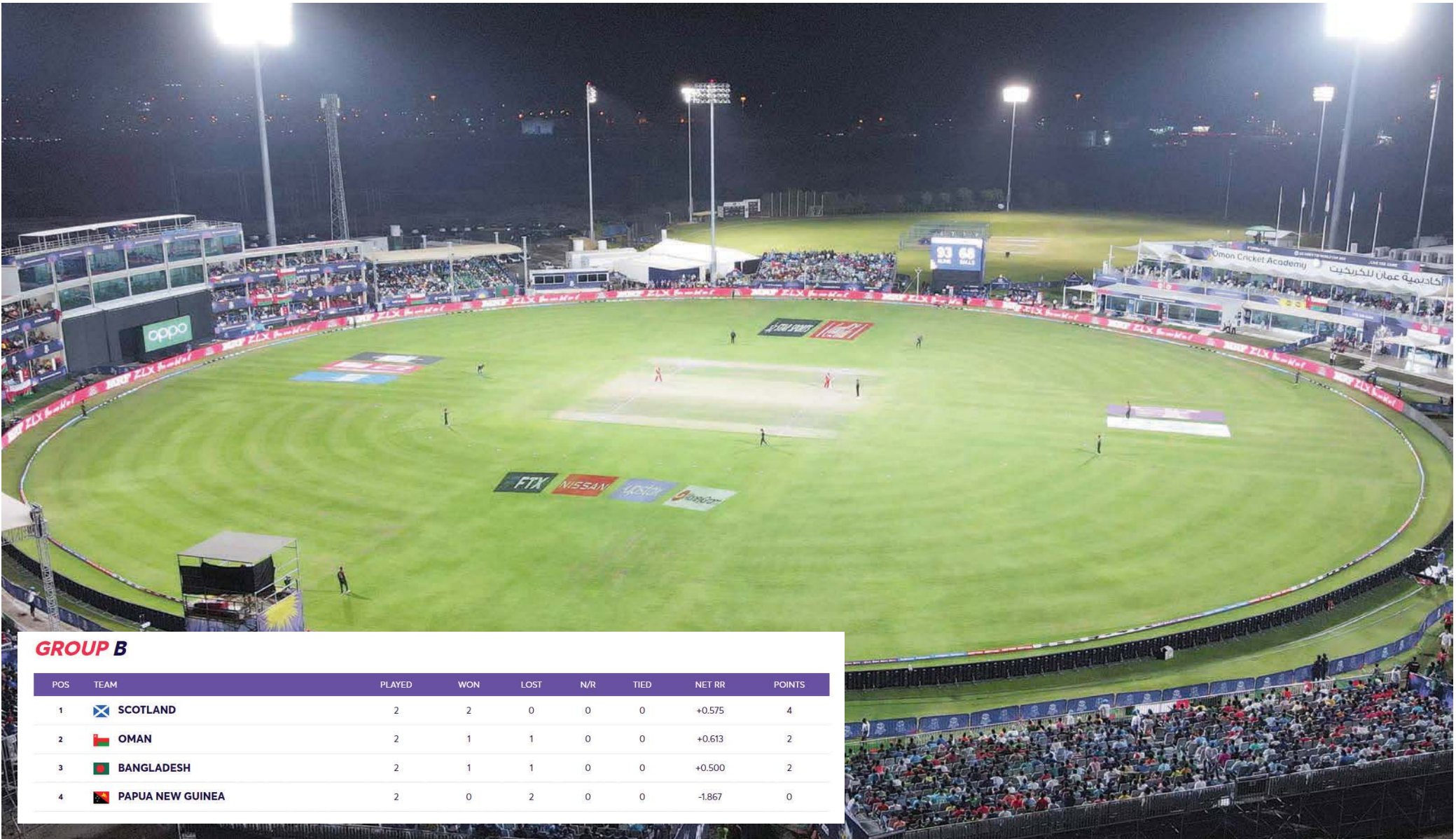
If Oman beat Scotland and Bangladesh beat PNG, then Scotland, Bangladesh and Oman would end up with four points each wherein the Net Run Rate (NRR) would come into play.

And then the top two teams with the higher NRR would qualify for the Super 12.

This is Oman's best scenario to advance and for this to happen they have to ensure they beat Scotland. However, that would take all of Oman's best efforts to make it happen as Scotland are a team possessed after their huge shape-shifting victory against Bangladesh on the opening day.

Oman will look to get their act together with some better fielding standards compared to the last game and they would expect their middle order batsmen to come good and play some impactful knocks.

There has been an over-emphasis on their best batsman Jatinder Singh to deliver and the right-handed batsman has been in sparkling form smashing 40 against a quality Bangladesh bowling attack. But Oman's other



batters will have to deliver the goods on match day to help the team's cause.

The positives for Oman have been their bowling as Bilal Khan, Kaleemullah and Fayyaz Butt have been right on the ball with crucial breakthroughs. Aqib Ilyas has been bowling well too with his slow right-arm off-breaks and has been electric on the field getting Oman that critical wicket of Shakib al Hasan in the Bangladesh game.

SCOTLAND RARING TO GO

October 21st could be a red-letter day in the history of Scottish cricket if things go their way.

The Scots are chasing what would be their greatest ever achievement, qualifying for the main round of a World Cup, and their coach Shane Burger is fully aware of the occasion against Oman.

"It's a hugely significant moment

for us as a team and for us as a cricketing nation, we've worked very hard to be where we are and are looking forward to the game," Burger added.

"Topping the group and qualifying for the Super 12 was something that we had discussed prior to the tournament and I'm very pleased that we've been able to execute our plans," he stated.

After vanquishing Bangladesh in a shock upset in their first game,

Scotland has been the taste of the cricketing world as the Associate nation that is on the rise.

And with a probable qualification on the cards, Scotland have everything to play for against a resilient Oman team that would be looking to make an impact of their own.

The Scotland coach had some wonderful things to say about Oman's organisation of the T20 World Cup.

"All that one has to do is look around and see the fantastic facilities on show and the great hospitality that has been provided. Cricketing wise, the Oman team has been very competitive whenever we have come up against them and most of our games are never over until it is over," he added.

"Tomorrow will be no different and we are looking forward to an exciting contest," Burger said.

Electric atmosphere at Amerat Stadium

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, OCT 20

In a game that had so much at stake for both teams, the emotional highs and lows that Oman and Bangladesh fans experienced had to be seen to be believed.

In what was probably the most high-profile international match ever played in the Sultanate, Oman gave Bangladesh quite a scare before surrendering to the experience of the Mahmudullah-led side.

The 3000-capacity Oman Cricket Academy (OCA) Ground was housefull on D-Day and the Oman supporters and Bangladeshi fans had thronged the stadium in large numbers.

Oman fans with their flags, placards and team merchandise adorned the stadium showcasing the passion of Oman cricket and their love for the national team.

When Bangladesh batted



first and lost couple of early wickets, Oman fans really got into the act with their chanting and shouting in support.

When catches were dropped, the oohs and aahs and the shrugging of shoulders were all on display as the Oman cricket fan experienced a gamut of emotions as the pendulum swung from one end to the other.

The DJ leading the cheerleading egged on the fans with a lot of zest and it got

the fans on their feet as well as Oman, Oman!! reached a crescendo.

At the innings break, one could say the Oman fans were the more confident lot as compared to the Bangladeshi ones with the latter wary of another huge upset.

FRENZIED PRESS BOX

The 35-odd strong media contingent from Bangladesh present in the Press Box were a nervy lot as the game

progressed. While Oman were in a strong position when Jatinder Singh and Kashyap Prajapati were going hammer and tongs, there was some serious concern and chatter among the Bangladeshi journo.

It was gloomy for the first 10 overs of the Oman batting after which the mood lifted up a bit as Bangladesh picked up crucial wickets.

When Oman were in total disarray after losing 3-4 wickets in a jiffy, there was a celebratory atmosphere in the Press Box among the dominant Bangladeshi media contingent.

It was a huge relief of having salvaged and kept alive their hopes of qualifying for the Super 12 of the T20 World Cup.

Post the match, there was drum-beating and music playing as the Bangladeshi fans showed their elation coming out of the venue while it was pretty downcast among the home fans.



Sultanate of Oman
MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH
TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH, Muscat, hereby give notice of tenders for the following projects:-

Tender No.	Project Category	Location	Fees R.O	Grade in Tender Board Registration
21/2021	Services	CLEANING SERVICES TO ENTIRE CAMPUS AND FACILITIES TO MINISTRY'S VARIOUS BUILDINGS AT MUSCAT GOVERNARATE FOR THE PERIOD OF 1st JANUARY 2022 TO 31st DECEMBER 2022	25/-	Excellent Grade
22/2021	Services	MAINTENANCE OF LANDSCAPING WORKS TO MINISTRY'S CAMPUSES IN MUSCAT GOVERNORATE FOR THE PERIOD OF 1st JANUARY 2022 TO 31st DECEMBER 2022	25/-	First Grade
23/2021	Electromechanical and Telecommunications Contracting and Maintenance	MAINTENANCE & OPERATION OF ELECTRO-MECHANICAL AND AIR-CONDITIONING UNITS TO MINISTRY'S VARIOUS BUILDINGS IN MUSCAT GOVERNORATE FOR THE PERIOD OF 1st JANUARY 2022 TO 31st DECEMBER 2022	25/-	First Grade

Companies, which are registered with the Tender Board and engaged in same category with experience in and same Grade as noted above, can obtain the Tender Documents at the Tender Board E-tendering digital portal link (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) until 06/11/2021.

The last date of tender submission on above E-tendering site at 10:00am 29/11/2021.

A Tender Bond equivalent to 1% of the tender sum issued from a registered bank, in the prescribed form, in Sultanate of Oman and valid for 90 days should enclosed with the tender.

Any tender without the bond will be reject and the tender committee is not bound to accept the lowest or any tender received.

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

Any participants have doubt in adopting e-tendering can contact over the phone 24166670 or through email etenderhd@ita.gov.om

‘Awesome’ Wiese gives Namibia first win

FIRST WORLD T20 WIN KEEPS NAMIBIA HOPES OF MAKING SUPER 12

ABU DHABI: David Wiese bludgeoned an unbeaten 66 as Namibia stayed alive at the T20 World Cup on Wednesday with a six-wicket triumph over the Netherlands.

In a sweltering Abu Dhabi, where temperatures soared to 36 degrees, former South Africa international Wiese hit five sixes and four boundaries as Namibia chased down their target of 165 with six balls to spare.

It was Namibia’s first ever win at the World Cup and kept alive their hopes of making the Super 12 stage.

In their opening game on Monday, they had crashed to 96 all out and lost by seven wickets to 2014 champions Sri Lanka.

“It’s awesome,” said man-of-the-match Wiese.

“It means a lot to me to be in a World Cup. To be on the international stage is special and to put in a big performance for Namibia, I’m glad to get this opportunity to play international cricket.”

Defeat almost certainly means the Dutch, who lost their opener to Ireland, also by seven wickets, will be eliminated.

Even a win over Sri Lanka in their concluding Group A game on Friday may not be enough.



GROUP A

POS	TEAM	PLAYED	WON	LOST	N/R	TIED	NET RR	POINTS
1	SRI LANKA	1	1	0	0	0	+2.607	2
2	IRELAND	1	1	0	0	0	+1.755	2
3	NAMIBIA	2	1	1	0	0	-1.163	2
4	NETHERLANDS	2	0	2	0	0	-1.240	0

Wiese, the 36-year-old all-rounder who played for his native South Africa in the 2016 T20 World Cup, set Namibia on their way with a half-century off 29 balls.

He was well-supported by captain Gerhard Erasmus who contributed 32 off 22 balls with the pair putting on 93 for the fourth wicket.

In a desperate attempt to stop the barrage, Dutch skipper Pieter Seelaar employed seven bowlers.

“It’s a special moment in Cricket Namibia history, first win on the

“It means a lot to me to be in a World Cup. To be on the international stage is special and to put in a big performance for Namibia, I’m glad to get this opportunity to play international cricket”

DAVID WIESE
Namibia batter

SCOREBOARD

NETHERLANDS

M O'Dowd run out (Erasmus/Wiese)70
S Myburgh c Baard b Frylinck17
R van der Merwe c Scholtz b Wiese6
C Ackermann c Erasmus b Frylinck35
S Edwards not out21
L van Beek not out2
Extras: (b1, lb4, w8)13
Total (4 wickets, 20 overs)164
Fall of wickets: 1-42, 2-55, 3-137, 4-157
Bowling: Scholtz 4-0-31-0, Wiese 4-0-32-1, Truempelmann 4-0-32-0, Frylinck 4-0-36-2, Smit 4-0-28-0

NAMIBIA

S Baard b Seelaar19
Z Green b Klaassen15
C Williams b Ackermann11
G Erasmus c Edwards b Van der Gugten .32
D Wiese not out66
J Smit not out14
Extras (b2, lb2, nb1, w4)9
Total (4 wickets, 19 overs)166
Fall of wickets: 1-34, 2-47, 3-52, 4-145
Bowling: Klaassen 4-0-14-1, Ackermann 3-0-32-1, Van Beek 4-0-39-0, Van der Gugten 3-0-32-1, Van der Merwe 2-0-22-0, Seelaar 2-1-8-1, De Leede 1-0-15-0

World Cup stage,” said Erasmus.

Earlier, opener Max O’Dowd made a second successive half century to lead Netherlands to 164-4 after being put into bat.

The New Zealand-born O’Dowd batted for virtually the entire innings, making 70 off 56 balls with one six and six boundaries.

He was eventually run out off the third ball of the final over after a knock which followed on from his 51 in his side’s opening loss to Ireland.

Colin Ackermann also played a solid role with the bat as the South African hit 35 off 32 balls.

Scott Edwards added a quickfire, unbeaten 21 from 11 balls to give the Dutch innings added extra impetus. “Namibia bowled well, not entirely great but we were worse,” said Seelaar.

“If Ireland beat Sri Lanka (later on Wednesday) then there’s hope but otherwise we go back with a performance that hasn’t been good enough.” — AFP

India cruise past Aussies, England edge NZ

DUBAI: India cruised to their second straight warm-up win over Australia and England beat New Zealand despite some late drama in the warm-up games ahead of the Super 12 stage of the ICC Men’s T20 World Cup 2021 on Wednesday.

All the Indian batters contributed to the eight-wicket win, with Rohit Sharma leading the way with a fantastic half-century.

India spun a web around the Australian top-order before Steve Smith’s half-century and Marcus Stoinis’ cameo propelled Australia to 152.

Rohit Sharma and KL Rahul started steadily on a sluggish track where shot-making was difficult against the pacers. Against the spinners, however, Rahul looked at absolute ease as he smashed Agar and Zampa down the ground for two sixes and a four. Rohit, at the other end, seemed happy to play second fiddle.

KL Rahul eventually fell to Ashton Agar, trying to clear the boundary once again only to find David Warner in the deep. By the time Rahul was out, Rohit Sharma had got his eye in and took over the mettle of run-scoring. He brought up his half-century with a wonderful cut off Stonis.

Suryakumar Yadav too got some valuable runs to boost his confidence ahead of India’s Super 12 opener against Pakistan. When India needed 26 off 30, Rohit decided to retire himself out to give Hardik Pandya some much-needed game time and it was



eventually him who sealed the game with a straight six.

Earlier in the day, Australia skipper Aaron Finch chose to bat first against Rohit Sharma-led Indian team.

India chose to start with spin at one end and reaped instant rewards as Ashwin sent David Warner and Mitchell Marsh back to the pavilion off consecutive balls.

Ravindra Jadeja scalped Aaron Finch off his first ball after which Steve Smith and Glenn Maxwell have steadied the ship as Australia go into the drinks break at 57/3.

Just when it looked like Maxwell was getting in the groove, Rahul Chahar got the better of him with the googly.

Though Virat Kohli did not come out for the toss, he did roll

his arm over for a couple of overs.

Steve Smith soon brought up a well-made half-century after smashing Shardul Thakur for three consecutive fours. Stoinis’ unbeaten 25-ball 41 helped Australia post 152/5 at the end of 20.

BUTTLER POWERS ENGLAND

New Zealand recovered from 103/9 to take their game against England to the last over, but fell short by 13 runs in the end in Abu Dhabi.

After Guptill got New Zealand off to a flyer, England roared back into the game and threatened to finish it early before Ish Sodhi and Todd Astle strung together a 47-run stand for the final wicket.

Defending 165, England’s

decision to open the bowling with Liam Livingstone backfired after Martin Guptill smashed two sixes in the first over. Tim Seifert’s stay at the crease did not last long but Guptill at the other end showed no signs of slowing down, hitting Mark Wood for three fours in an over.

Going strong at 59/1 after the Powerplay, three wickets in four overs pegged New Zealand back as they went into the drinks breaks at 87/4.

The Kiwis never got their innings going after that as wickets kept tumbling. Adil Rashid struck twice in two balls to remove Mark Chapman and Mitchell Santner. Wood ran through the lower order and was on a hat-trick after he dismissed Tim Southee and Kyle Jamieson off consecutive balls.

Earlier, Kane Williamson won the toss and chose to put England in to bat first.

Jos Buttler led the recovery after England lost Jason Roy to the first ball of the game, with Buttler hitting a classy 73 off 51.

The introduction of spin helped New Zealand put the brakes on the scoring. Ish Sodhi, who had earlier scalped Dawid Malan, trapped Morgan in front and then bagged the big wicket of Buttler in the deep.

Spinners continued to make merry as Glenn Phillips scalped Liam Livingstone for 1, but Jonny Bairstow and Sam Billings helped England finish strongly.

En route to his 27, Billings smashed Jamieson for 20 in the penultimate over as England finished on 163/6. — ICC

Pattinson announces international retirement

SYDNEY: Australia fast bowler James Pattinson has announced his retirement from international cricket ahead of the upcoming Ashes series against England, Cricket Australia said on Wednesday.

Pattinson decided to step away from international cricket to focus on his family, continue playing for his state team Victoria and help nurture the next generation of fast bowlers.

Pattinson announced himself on the world stage with a five-wicket haul on his Test debut in December 2011 in a win over New Zealand. He was named the best player of the two-test series, thanks to his 14 wickets.

The paceman, who has battled injuries throughout his decade-long career, took 81 wickets at an average of 26.33 from 21 Test matches. He also played 15 one-day and four Twenty20 international matches for the national team.

The 31-year-old’s decision to retire leaves Australia short of bowling options for the five-Test Ashes, which is due to begin on December 8 in Brisbane.

“Leading into pre-season I really wanted to give the



Ashes a crack but, in the end, I haven’t had the preparation I would have liked heading into the coming season,” Pattinson said in a statement.

“If I was to be part of the Ashes I would need to do myself and my team-mates justice. I didn’t want to be in a position of battling with my body when you need to be 100 per cent fit and ready to go at any time. That would not be fair to myself or the team.

“Now I have made the decision I am hoping to really enjoy the last three or four years of cricket.”

Pattinson played a key role in Australia’s 2019 Ashes campaign in England, where they retained the trophy after a 2-2 series draw. — Reuters



Paris St Germain's
Lionel Messi
celebrates scoring
their second goal.
— Reuters

MESSI BRACE POWERS PSG; REAL, CITY WIN

Liverpool battle past Atletico

PARIS: Liverpool survived an Atletico Madrid fightback to win 3-2 and Lionel Messi scored twice as Paris Saint-Germain came from behind to beat RB Leipzig by the same score on a breathless night of Champions League action on Tuesday.

In other games, Karim Benzema netted for Real Madrid as the 13-time European champions thrashed Shakhtar Donetsk 5-0 in Ukraine on the eve of the start of his trial in France on charges of complicity in blackmail.

Much of the night's drama happened at the Wanda Metropolitano in the Spanish capital where Mohamed Salah scored another impressive goal, twisting away from a string of Atletico defenders before his shot deflected in off James Milner to open the scoring.

Naby Keita doubled Liverpool's lead with a stunning volley but Atletico hit back with French international Antoine Griezmann scoring twice to fire up the home crowd.

Just as Atletico seemed to have the upper hand, Griezmann was

given a straight red card for a high boot in the face of Roberto Firmino.

A pulsating game was decided from the penalty spot in the 78th minute as Salah sent Jan Oblak the wrong way after Mario Hermoso pushed Diogo Jota. The Egyptian's 31st Champions League goal makes him the club's top scorer in the competition, overtaking Steven Gerrard.

In a dramatic finish, Atletico were denied a penalty when the referee studied the VAR and decided Jota had not fouled Jose Maria Gimenez.

Liverpool Manager Jurgen Klopp told BT Sport: "We played a really solid second half in a tough game with intense football from both teams.

"We got the penalty, then there was a red card and obviously it was in our favour."

The Reds are top of Group B with three wins out of three while Atletico are equal on four points with Porto, who beat AC Milan 1-0 in Portugal.

MBAPPE PENALTY

At the Parc des Princes, Messi scored twice and Kylian Mbappe

sparkled but later missed a penalty as PSG came from behind to beat RB Leipzig 3-2.

Mbappe had given the Qatar-backed club the lead but a Leipzig side crushed 6-3 at Manchester City earlier in the competition held their own. Leipzig went ahead through goals from Andre Silva and Nordi Mukiele as PSG suddenly looked disjointed.

But Messi was set up by Mbappe for the equaliser and then deftly chipped in a 74th-minute penalty awarded for a foul on the France striker. Mbappe's missed spot kick proved unimportant.

PSG top Group A with seven points but Manchester City bounced back from their defeat in Paris in the last matchday by crushing Club Brugge 5-1 in Belgium.

Pep Guardiola declared City's win "one of the best performances in Europe we've done so far" after Riyad Mahrez scored twice and 19-year-old Cole Palmer was among City's scorers.

In Kiev, Benzema scored the final goal in Real's rout of Shakhtar.

— AFP

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE RESULTS ON TUESDAY			
Group A		Group C	
At Bruges, Belgium		At Amsterdam	
Club Brugge (BEL) (Vanaken 81) 1		Ajax (NED) 4 (Reus 11-og, Blind 25, Antony 57, Haller 72) Borussia Dortmund (GER) 0	
Manchester City (ENG) 5 (Cancelo 30, Mahrez 43-pen, 84, Walker 53, Palmer 67)		At Istanbul	
At Paris		Besiktas (TUR) 1 (Larin 24) Sporting Lisbon 4 (Coates 15, 27, Sarabia 44-pen, Paulinho 89)	
Paris Saint Germain (FRA) 3 (Mbappe 9, Messi 67, 74-pen) RB Leipzig (GER) 2 (Andre Silva 28, Mukiele 57)		Group D	
Group B		At Kiev	
At Madrid		Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 0 Real Madrid (ESP) 5 (Kryvtsov 37-og, Vinicius Junior 51, 56, Rodrygo 64, Benzema 90+1)	
Atletico Madrid (ESP) 2 (Griezmann 20, 34) Liverpool (ENG) 3 (Salah 8, 78-pen, Keita 13)		At Milan	
At Porto, Portugal		Inter Milan (ITA) 3 (Dzeko 34, Vidal 58, de Vrij 67) Sheriff (MDA) 1 (Thill 52)	
Porto (POR) 1 (Diaz 65) AC Milan (ITA) 0			

Al Zubair, Soucek prepare for GT Open finale in Barcelona

BARCELONA, Spain: Al Faisal al Zubair and Andy Soucek bring the curtain down on their first season of International GT Open racing together at this weekend's final round in Barcelona.

The Lechner Racing Porsche 911 GT3 R duo have performed impressively together since the season began and head to the northern Spanish circuit with Soucek still holding a mathematical chance of sealing the title. Illness forced Al Zubair to miss the mid-season race meeting at the Hungaroring and he currently holds third in the series, 18 points behind his team-mate in the Drivers' Championship.

The clear favourites to clinch the title are Michele Beretta and Frederick Schandorff at the helm of their Vincenzo Sospiri Racing Lamborghini. The ever-consistent duo have won four races and lead Soucek by 22 points heading into a 70-minute race on Saturday and a one-hour finale on Sunday. Soucek would need non-finishes for the Lamborghini crew to stand a realistic chance of snatching the title at the 11th hour.

Saying that, it has still been a tremendous season thus far for the Omani and the Spaniard with a race one victory at Spa and a race two win at Imola already under their belts.

Belgium's Baptiste Moulin and Japan's Yuki Nemoto are their closest rivals after six rounds and 12 races on some of the most famous circuits in Europe.

Al Zubair said: "I am very excited to be back for the last round of the GT Open. It is great to be at a track like Barcelona, where we tested before. I think we will be quite strong. It's been



Al Faisal al Zubair

a great season and I am looking forward to ending it on a high. No matter what happens, we cannot complain about our first season in endurance racing. That will not stop us pushing flat out for the last round."

Three practice sessions have been sanctioned in Barcelona for Friday (October 22) from 09.58hrs, 14.22hrs and 17.16hrs before the first 30-minute qualifying session for race one starts at 10.40hrs on Saturday morning.

After sharing the circuit with various Caterham and Euroformula racing disciplines, International GT Open race one fires into life with a rolling start at 14.55hrs.

The second 30-minute qualifying session is scheduled for the earlier time of 09.00hrs on Sunday (October 24) morning and precedes the one-hour second race, starting at 13.25hrs.

- 2021 International GT Open — overall standings after 12 races:**
1. Frederick Schandorff (SUI)/ Michele Beretta (ITA) 130 pts
 2. Andy Soucek (ESP) 108 pts
 3. Al Faisal al Zubair (OMN) 90 pts
 4. Baptiste Moulin (BEL)/Yuki Nemoto (JPN) 85 pts
 5. Ollie Millroy (GBR)/Brendan Iribe (USA) 67 pts
 6. Loris Spinelli (ITA) 55 pts



Over 100 racers take part in Tomb Raider mountain bike race

MUSCAT: Shihab al Qamshoui and Zabrine Cornejo won the fifth annual Tomb Raider Mountain Bike Time Trial in Al Khoudh Village on Friday.

Over 100 racers took part in the 7.5 km race round the popular single-track trails built by the Oman Trailbuilders group. The weather was favourable, and the recent rain combined with the efforts of the volunteer trail maintenance crew meant conditions were perfect for some close racing.

In the female category, last year's series winner Zabrine Cornejo completed the course in 37 minutes 38 seconds to beat Greyz Orio into second place by just over two minutes. Recently crowned downhill champion Tara Atkinson came home in third place a further 20 seconds adrift to complete the 1-2-3 for the Oman Trail Foxes team.

In the male 19-49, an intense

battle between Oman's two fastest cross-country racers saw Shihab al Qamshoui of the Al Bashayer Team pip Shabib al Balushi of Gulf Cycles for the win by just 4 seconds, following a mistake by Al Balushi on the final descent. His winning time of 23:18 was over a minute ahead of Joe Bunn of Beduminati in third place.

The Al Dhahirah team showed their dominance in the youth category with Hamed al Manthari (28:23) and Salim al Ghafri taking the top two steps on the podium, with Sem Geilenkirchen of Loose Riders completing the podium.

Local fans' favourite and National Downhill Champion Hamed al Wadhahi of Al Waal team took home gold in the veterans' race, with his time of 29:09 enough to keep Mehboob Somani, riding for OQ, in the silver position.

In addition to the adults' races, children joined in the fun too,



Action during the Tomb Raider mountain bike race.

racing round the twisty kid's track that tested their cornering and braking skills. In the 2-6 category, Al Qasim al Gharbi took the win

from Alex Jarratt and Yinuo Xue Mafeng. Mohammed al Khayari won the 7+ normal route race, with Ibrahim al Brashdi and Neoh

Cornejo in second and third respectively.

The final category was the 7+ MegaPro, which saw the most

intrepid children taking on some of the adult's track, including the fast and loose final descent. Al Qaisar al Gharbi took the top step of the podium, with Al Harith al Abri and Hatim al Rahbi finishing close behind to complete the podium.

Race organiser Joe Bunn enthused that "each year the standard of riding in each category improves and it becomes harder to predict who will be on the podiums. The atmosphere was fantastic, with smiles all round. The draw prizes provided by our sponsors, AdventuresBox, Bikeshef.om, Kelly's Mountain Bikes and Muscat Bike Shop meant that everyone had a chance of being a winner, and in the end mountain biking in Oman was the ultimate winner."

The next race takes place on October 29 at the beginner friendly Bousher Mount Everest trail.

business

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CMA announces joint team to assess cyclone-related losses

SHAHEEN-AFTERMATH:
CMA instructs insurance companies to facilitate speedy settlement of claims

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, OCT 20

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has announced the formation of a joint team to assess the damage caused by Cyclone Shaheen with a view to evaluating the overall exposure to the insurance industry from compensation claims.

The sector regulator said in a statement that the measure follows meetings held by CMA Executive President Shaikh Abdullah Salim al Salmi with representatives of insurance companies in the wake of the Shaheen disaster.

It is also in line with the mandate of the Ministerial Committee tasked with assessing and mitigating the damage inflicted by floodwaters on the properties of citizens located in the governorates directly impacted by the storm.

At the latest meeting held earlier this week, the CMA underlined the role of insurance companies in the handling of claims submitted by businesses, organisations and individuals who hold some insurance coverage against natural calamities.



It called upon insurance companies to deploy all necessary resources to facilitate

the speedy processing and settlement of the claims of insurance policyholders in the

wilayats affected by Cyclone Shaheen. Such claims may pertain to home insurance, motor vehicle insurance or other types of insurance cover.

With regard to motor insurance coverage, the Authority noted: “The motor comprehensive insurance policy covers natural calamities and the third party insurance policy covers natural calamities in case the policyholder adds this service to the insurance as optional benefit when concluding the insurance contract.”

The CMA instructed the insurance companies to open multiple channels through their offices and branches and employ modern technology to receive and decide in the claims to ensure swift compensation for those who incurred damage.

It also urged the insurance companies to exercise their “social responsibilities and support the local communities through the customers who incurred damage due to the Tropical Cyclone Shaheen and this is the suitable time for all private sector companies to support the community.

“Thus, a team was constituted comprising representatives from the CMA and the insurance companies to assess the damage and collect data on the policyholders who incurred damage to assess and evaluate the situation,” the Authority added.



Duqm fishing port handed over to operating consortium

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, OCT 20

The Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) announced on Wednesday the formal handover of the multi-purpose fishing port in Duqm to a consortium of Oman Fisheries Development Company (FDO) and Oman Food Investment Company (both subsidiaries of Oman Investment Authority) and the French port of Lorient.

Eng Yahya bin Khamis al Zadjali, In-Charge of Managing Operations at SEZAD, said the handover follows the completion of the construction works of the port. All superstructure works as well as the operation of the fishing port will be in the hands of the consortium, he noted.

“The multi-purpose Fishing

Port has high potential to serve a number of sectors, including fisheries, fruits and vegetables, livestock, and tourism. The Port brings additional yards that can be used for tourism purposes and containers handling food activities, and it can attract the wooden ships supplying foodstuff. Further, the Port is characterised by its ability to host commercial fishing activities,” Al Zadjali stressed in a press statement.

Duqm fisheries port is the largest in the Sultanate with a depth of 10 metres, two breakwaters that are 3.3 km long, a 1.3-km fixed berth, and 6 other floating berths. In addition, there is land designated for tourism purposes associated with the port, which is connected with the Fisheries Industries Zone and other projects in Duqm SEZ via a road network.

Oman’s new Data Protection Law in draft stage

KEY MEASURES:
‘Central Bank of Oman is developing a comprehensive customer protection framework’

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Oman’s authorities are drafting a Data Protection Law that when promulgated will introduce robust, internationally accepted standards of personal data protection in the Sultanate.

The proposed legislation will also fuel the pace of the digital transformation of local businesses, the banking and financial services sector, and the wider national economy,

according to the Executive President of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

“The law relating to data protection is in the draft stage,” Tahir bin Salim al Amri said. “Data, as you are aware, is the critical core in digitalisation, but needs to be handled with the requisite care, as existing and new start-ups embarked on their digital journey need to factor in this important consideration of requisite care in their business models.”

Speaking at a banking forum held in the city recently, Al Amri further stated: “The industry needs to be cognizant about (data use) authorisation. They should also ensure confidentiality and security of data, and exercise caution in



sharing customer data within the confines of the law.”

On a related note, the country’s apex bank is also formulating guidelines to strengthen customer protection in general, the Executive President said.

“The Central Bank is working on a comprehensive customer protection framework for customers of our licensed institutions,” he stated.

When eventually enacted, the new Data Protection Law will

add the Sultanate to the ranks of countries that have put in place strict legislation to safeguard privacy of persona data.

According to data experts, the international benchmark on which the data privacy laws of most countries are modelled is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a groundbreaking piece of legislation that came into force across the European Union (EU) in 2018. It confers international protection to the personal data of any EU national, effectively safeguarding their data and information from potential misuse within and outside the EU. Such threats can take the form of fraud, phishing scams and identity theft, among other perils.

Types of personal information that will be covered by the proposed data protection law will include common pieces of data, such as names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mails, banking and credit card details, health information, and so on. Businesses and employers, for example, will also be obligated to protect, among other data, employee records, customer details, loyalty schemes, financial transactions, and so on.

Besides safeguarding all such personal data from possible misuse and abuse, businesses and employers are also barred from sharing these details with unauthorised third-parties. They are also required to invest in robust IT and cyber-security measures to keep their data safe.

Bank Muscat hails graduation of ACCA Affiliates

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate, has announced that the first batch of Omani youth supported by the Bank have become ACCA-affiliates with excellent results in their qualifying examinations.

In line with the objective of developing national human resources, the Bank had partnered with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) in 2018 under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour to provide scholarships for a group of Bachelor's degree holders to complete the internationally-recognised Chartered Certified Accountant course from the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA).

In addition to the ACCA scholarship, Bank Muscat has offered the graduates job opportunities across its various departments. The ACCA candidates have already achieved remarkable progress and milestones towards attaining the goals of this first of its kind initiative by the Bank to develop Omani youth.

Speaking about this important achievement, Said al Aufi, Group Deputy General Manager — Human Resources, Bank Muscat, said: "Comprehensive and continuous development of Omani youth is key to achieving the goals of the landmark Oman Vision 2040 and the Renewed Renaissance of the Sultanate.



Said al Aufi

Aligned to its pioneering role in sustainable development, Bank Muscat has always given top priority to the development of Oman's human resources.

"In 2018, Bank Muscat embarked on a journey partnering with Petroleum Development Oman to provide new opportunities for talented Omani youth to gain an internationally-recognised ACCA qualification. The success of the first 3 young achievers from that path-breaking programme is a great encouragement to the strategy of promoting banking excellence and professionalism in the Sultanate."

Said al Aufi thanked ACCA and education specialist Kaplan for their resolute efforts to successfully continue the programme online, overcoming all challenges brought about by the global pandemic.

He congratulated Fajer al Akhzami, Jumana al Qassabi and Nusaiba al Manji for their success in not only becoming ACCA-



Nusaiba al Manji

affiliates, but also for surpassing important academic benchmarks in their long journey to get there. He also wished the very best to all the other students in the programme and added that the Bank would continue to nurture and support Omani talent so as to build a pipeline of future leaders for different sectors in the country.

Fajer al Akhzami, who scored the top marks in Advanced Performance Management in the region, and currently working in Corporate Banking, said: "We are grateful to Bank Muscat for providing us with this excellent opportunity to build our capacity and skills. Completing this programme will help us advance in our professional careers and help towards building a large pool of talented Omani youth, who will contribute to the future growth and development of the Sultanate."

Jumana al Qassabi, who did well in Advanced Financial Management and at present



Fajer al Akhzami

THE BANK HAD EARLIER PARTNERED PDO TO PROVIDE SCHOLARSHIPS TO TALENTED OMANI YOUTH TO GAIN THESE INTERNATIONALLY-RECOGNISED QUALIFICATIONS

working in Investment Banking, said: "Thanks to this excellent opportunity from Bank Muscat, I have succeeded in my dream to become an ACCA-affiliate. Through my ACCA studies, I have been able to gain a lot of valuable insights and skills, and I am confident that this will greatly help me in my career and improve our contributions to the success of the Omani economy."

Nusaiba al Manji, who became an ACCA-affiliate with excellent marks, and currently working in the Bank's Agency and Custody Services, added: "Through the



Jamana al Qassabi

ACCA programme, Bank Muscat has helped us to enhance our knowledge in accounting and finance. We will always be indebted to the Bank for providing us this with this valuable opportunity to develop and build our skillsets. Completing this programme and becoming an ACCA-affiliate will impact us positively."

With over 3,800 employees and an overall Omanisation ratio of about 95 per cent, Bank Muscat has adopted many innovative strategies to equip talented Omani nationals to take up leadership positions.

The Bank has a comprehensive Learning and Development strategy for skills and knowledge-enhancement vis-à-vis the requirements of its various departments and lines of business. It is a matter of great pride for Bank Muscat that most of its senior and middle management have been promoted from within the Bank's employees.

Awasr exempts North, South Al Batinah subscribers from paying Oct bill

MUSCAT: Awasr, the leading Omani company in providing Internet services using optical fibers in the Sultanate, has announced that all subscribers affected in the wilayat within the governorates of North and South Al Batinah will be exempted from paying the monthly bill for the month of October 2021.

This comes in implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, may Allah protect him, in facilitating ways of life for citizens to face the effects left by Cyclone Shaheen in the governorates of North and South Al Batinah, in addition to the company's willingness to enhance its social responsibility and appreciation for the situation experienced by those affected.

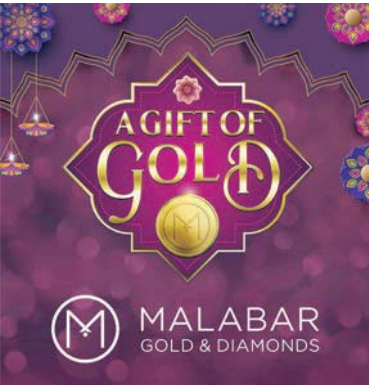
It is worth noting that Awasr is the first company specialised in the Sultanate to provide high-speed Internet services through a broadband network using only optical fibers, and the Omani company that won an award for the fastest fixed broadband provider, and provides its services to individuals, government institutions and companies.

Guaranteed gold coins on gold, diamond jewellery purchases

Malabar Gold & Diamonds, one among the largest jewellery retailers globally with a strong retail network of over 260 outlets spread across 10 countries, has announced attractive in-store offers to lure customers.

The latest campaign from the brand gives customers the opportunity to get guaranteed gold coins on purchase of gold and diamond jewellery. As part of the festive season, Malabar Gold & Diamonds has also unveiled the festive jewellery collection, featuring the most eye-catching and unique trends in gold and diamond jewellery, bound to captivate jewellery lovers at the best price.

An exclusive jewellery collection in the name of 'Artistry



Edition' has also been launched; exquisite designs in diamonds, studded with precious stones including rubies, sapphires and pearls, giving a splendid look at special occasions. Through the latest offer announced by Malabar Gold & Diamonds, customers can get guaranteed gold coins on purchase of gold or

diamond jewellery from October 21 to November 2

"The next 6 months are all about festivities and celebrations. With the ease of restrictions and tourists returning, we have started experiencing a significant transformation in the market. And now with the festive season soon approaching, we are expecting an increase in footfall across our stores in the coming weeks as well. It is to add more value to our customers' shopping experience that we have created this campaign, wherein they can get the best designs at the best prices, while getting guaranteed gold coins," said Shamlal Ahamed, Managing Director – International Operations, Malabar Gold & Diamonds.

Maisarah's special draws next month

MUSCAT: Maisarah Islamic Banking Services, BankDhofar's Islamic banking window, has unveiled special draws as part of the Prize Account scheme.

With a total prize amount of RO 52,800 for 68 winners, special draws will be held in December for healthcare professionals, teachers, retirees, Ministry of Defence and Royal Oman Police employees, as well as new Maisarah customers and existing customers with new credit cards.

Elaborating on the special draws, Nasser bin Said al Bahantah, Maisarah's Chief Retail Banking Officer, said: "We have seen a surge in the number of savers among Maisarah's customers since the introduction of the Prize Account — which does not only promote the culture of adequate financial management by encouraging



Nasser bin Said al Bahantah

people to save, but also rewards them for it through proper tools that are designed to meet their respective requirements. In addition to their eligibility to win valuable cash prizes in the special draws, eligible customers also have the chance to win more cash prizes in weekly, monthly and year-end draws."

As per the Special Draws guidelines, 10 healthcare professionals, 10 teachers and

10 members of the Ministry of Defence and Royal Oman Police will receive RO 1,100 each (one winner per branch in each group) with a total prize value of RO 33,000. Moreover, eight winners will receive RO 600 each in the draw exclusive for retirees, with the total prize value of RO 4,800.

To be eligible to win as part of Maisarah Prize Account scheme, customers need to maintain a minimum balance of RO 100 in their accounts for 30 days. For every RO 100 balance, they get one chance to win, so the more they save, the greater their chances of winning.

Over the years, Maisarah has demonstrated a high degree of product innovation with an expansive range of Shariah-compliant financial solutions that cater to the needs of its retail and corporate customers.

Hyundai grabs market spotlight with offers on all models

OTE Group has unveiled a bonanza of offers on a wide selection of Hyundai models in a special promotion that runs for a limited period only. In addition to some of the most attractive and easy EMI options in the market, customers can also look forward to benefits in the form of 3-years unlimited km service, 80 per cent assured buy back, 1-year registration, 1-year insurance, and much more.

The stellar line-up, along with their corresponding EMI starting values, is as follows: Creta (EMI from RO 120), Kona (RO 130 onwards), Santa Fe (RO 207 onwards), Tucson (RO 152 onwards), Sonata (RO

150 onwards), Veloster (RO 135 onwards), Elantra (RO 117 onwards) and Ioniq (RO 142 onwards). Outlined herewith is a brief description of the favourite models on offer and the immense value proposition associated with each of them: Creta:

Kona: A new offering alongside Hyundai's family-oriented SUVs, the Kona made its first debut in the region barely three years ago.

Santa Fe: An upscale family SUV, the 2021 Santa Fe benefits from bold design, cutting-edge technologies, and an array of driver assistance features. The latest iteration of the fourth-generation, Santa Fe has



undergone a dramatic overhaul of its exterior.

Tucson: The all-new Tucson NX4 2022 sets a new benchmark in styling, technology and performance. Longer and wider than the earlier model, the NX4 offers generous cabin capacity – be it legroom, headroom or boot capacity.

Sonata: From the exterior styling to the driving dynamics, the enduringly popular Sonata projects sensuous sportiness. And because today's drivers want a smart, personalised experience, the Sonata answers the call with a suite of connectivity and convenience features.

Veloster: Ideal for cool urban living, the 2+1 door Veloster sports coupe stands apart from any other car on the market. The latest generation of this enormously successful brand from Hyundai features a comprehensive exterior and interior redesign, powertrain enhancements, and a bevy of new and improved infotainment and connectivity features.

Elantra: Benefiting from a complete makeover is the 2021 Elantra, the seventh generation of Hyundai's much-loved compact sedan. Modern exterior and impressive interior styling

complement a generous array of standard and optional features that accentuate the brand's longstanding reputation for performance and value.

Ioniq: Blending stunning design and superlative aerodynamic performance, the Ioniq is in a class of its own. This stylish family car with sporty and dynamic exterior lines, features the perfectly matched combination of an efficient gasoline engine, an electric motor and a Lithium-ion polymer battery. In the upshot, driving the Ioniq is not only sustainable and economic but fun as well.



Mazoon Dairy production climbs to 400,000 ltr/day

FLAGSHIP BRAND:
State-backed dairy firm celebrates two years of successful operations

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, OCT 20

Mazoon Dairy, the flagship dairy brand of the Sultanate, has seen its portfolio grow to a total of 140 different products, across various types, sizes and flavours, the majority state-owned company announced on the second anniversary of the commencement of marketing operations. Production has hit the 400,000 litres per day mark, it stated.

Mazoon Dairy, based at Al Sinainah in Al Buraimi Governorate, celebrated its second anniversary on October 20, 2021 marking its marketing

debut of high quality products two years ago.

The company began with the distribution fresh milk and yoghurts in the governorates of Muscat and North Al Batinah, followed by the rest of the Sultanate's governorates within the first 100 days of its launch.

Ahmed bin Mohammed al Ghafri, Chief Support Officer, praised the strenuous efforts made by employees from various departments of the company from its inception, to the advanced levels it reached in its operations, spread in the markets and its diversification of products.

"Mazoon Dairy has reinforced its position in the Sultanate's markets by cover all the governorates. It has also started exporting its products to a number of markets in the neighbouring countries, gaining the confidence of the local community in the quality of its



products", he said.

In line with its CSR commitments, Mazoon Dairy continues to pay great attention to society by implementing several social responsibility initiatives in various fields such as education, development, training and rehabilitation, in addition to empowering a number of Omani entrepreneurs by providing them opportunities for partnerships

in the company's sustainable projects.

Al Ghafri said the company contributed more than RO 8.5 million during the past nine months under the 'Athar' initiative, which focuses on building, developing and qualifying entrepreneurs, creating eco-friendly solutions, supporting alternative energy, and fostering the growth of a

circular economy team.

Several agreements have also been signed with entrepreneurs in the manufacture of packaging materials and other industry inputs.

Since its establishment, the company has sought to rehabilitate and develop local companies by providing technical support to contract with these companies and divert the import

of materials from outside the Sultanate to local manufacturers.

The most prominent of these materials are packaging materials, rubber floors for cows and other industry inputs. The company succeeded in reducing the number of imports through these partnerships with local manufacturers.

Jamal bin Yousef al Rahbi, Human Resources Director at Mazoon Dairy, said the company's 'Quodrat' programme aims to boost Omanisation by enhancing the skills of nationals in various fields.

Omanisation now stands at 70 per cent of the total workforce of about 1,200 employees. In addition, 'Quodrat' programme has trained 232 young Omanis in two batches, with a 80 trainees enrolled in its current edition.

A further 106 young Omani will be recruited by the end of the year, he said.

In brief

CALIFORNIA



FACEBOOK PLANS REBRAND WITH NEW NAME, SAYS THE VERGE

Social media giant Facebook Inc is planning to rebrand itself with a new name next week, the Verge reported, citing a source with direct knowledge of the matter.

Facebook Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg plans to talk about the name change at the company's annual Connect conference on October 28, but it could be unveiled sooner, the Verge reported.

In response, Facebook said it does not comment on "rumor or speculation." The news comes at a time when the company is facing increasing US government scrutiny over its business practices.

— Reuters

LONDON



BURBERRY HIRES VERSACE BOSS AS ITS NEW CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Luxury fashion group Burberry has named Gianni Versace boss Jonathan Akeroyd (pictured), as its new chief executive. Akeroyd, 54, will take up the post on April 1 next year with a 'golden hello' worth around £6 million in deferred cash and shares in lieu of bonuses he has forfeited on leaving Versace.

He replaces Marco Gobetti, who in June announced unexpected plans to quit after nearly five years in the role. Gobetti leaves at the end of the year to head up Italian rival Salvatore Ferragamo. Chairman Gerry Murphy will lead Burberry on an interim basis until Akeroyd joins next April. Akeroyd has headed up Milan-based fashion house Gianni Versace since 2016. — dpa

Improving environment of Omani banks leads to stable outlook: Moody's

STRONG GROWTH:
Commercial fleet expected to more than double to serve passenger and cargo demand

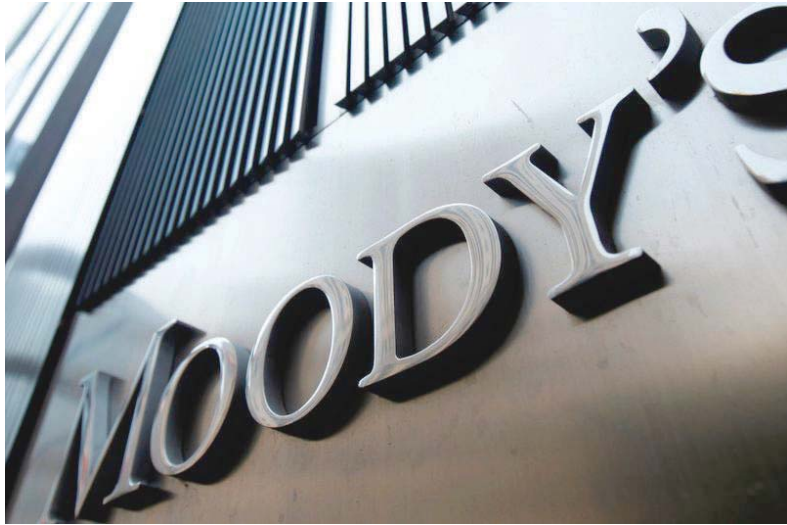
BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, OCT 20

Leading international rating agency Moody's has cited the improving environment in which banks operate for its decision to revise its outlook for seven Omani banks to stable from negative.

The revised outlook also comes fresh off last week's affirmation by Moody's of the Omani government's rating at Ba3.

"These actions reflect Moody's expectation of continued improvements in the operating environment where the banks operate, as highlighted by the affirmation of the Government of Oman's Ba3 issuer rating and change the outlook to stable from negative", the New York-based investors' service announced this week.

"This reflects a large reduction in external vulnerability and government liquidity pressures, mainly as a result of significantly higher oil prices since the middle of 2020, and Moody's expectation that oil prices will average above \$60/barrel during the next several years, increasing the likelihood



that these pressures will remain contained. Higher oil prices and ongoing implementation of the government's medium-term fiscal adjustment programme will also underpin a steady decline in the direct government debt burden to the pre-pandemic level," it further noted.

In the announcement, Moody's affirmed the long-term local and foreign currency deposit ratings of seven Omani banks: Bank Muscat, HSBC Bank Oman (HBON), Bank Dhofar, National Bank of Oman (NBO), Sohar International Bank, Oman Arab Bank (OAB) and Bank Nizwa. Moody's has changed the outlook to stable from negative on these ratings of all seven banks.

At the same time, Moody's affirmed the Baseline Credit Assessments (BCAs) and Adjusted BCAs of the seven Omani banks. A secondary driver of the rating actions for Bank Muscat and HBON is

the interlinkages between their creditworthiness and that of the sovereign, as the banks' standalone BCAs continue to be constrained at the level of the sovereign rating.

Moody's expects that the government's willingness to provide support to banks in case of need will remain high or very high, depending on the bank, reflecting the importance of the country's banks in the domestic financial system and the significant government shareholdings and deposits in several banks.

The change in outlook to stable from negative on the Omani banks' long-term deposit ratings reflects the rating agency's expectation of continued improvements in the operating environment where the banks exercise their business activities, and also mirrors the stable outlook on the sovereign ratings, it said.

Oman launches digital economy programme

MUSCAT: The Council of Ministers has approved the national Digital Economy Programme (DEP), which will be endorsed by the Sultanate as one the goals to build a vibrant economy.

The DEP envisages a set of medium-term and long-term approaches aligned with Oman Vision 2040. Its salient features include creating national industries based on the digital economy, fostering the in-country value (ICV), establishing strategic

partnership with the private sector and empowering economic sectors of the 10th Five-Year Plan.

Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communication and Information Technology, said that the endorsement of the DEP will speed up digital transformation in the public sector, upgrade the level of electronic services rendered to citizens and serve as a strategic reference point for coordination among components of the

economy in the Sultanate of Oman.

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA), the minister said that the DEP will expedite and facilitate the digitisation of tasks in economic and strategic sectors.

It will focus on cloud services, cybersecurity and techniques of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), among other measures aimed to spur economic growth and help attract foreign investments to the Sultanate.

— ONA



Mideast commercial jet, services market valued at \$1.4 tn over next 20 years

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, OCT 20

Boeing said on Wednesday that airlines in the Middle East will require 3,000 new airplanes valued at \$700 billion and aftermarket services such as maintenance and repair worth \$740 billion, with the region positioned to capitalise on the recovery of regional and international travel and cargo demand.

Boeing provided the estimate in its 2021 Commercial Market Outlook (CMO), a forecast of 20-year demand for commercial airplanes and services.

Middle East passenger traffic and the region's commercial fleet are projected to more than double over the 20-year forecast period, according to the CMO.

More than two-thirds of airplane deliveries to the Middle East will accommodate growth, while one-third of deliveries will replace older airplanes with more fuel-efficient models such as the 737 MAX, 787 Dreamliner and 777X.

"The Middle East region's role as a global connecting hub continues to be important for developing markets to and from Southeast Asia, China and Africa", said Randy Heisey, Boeing Managing Director of Commercial Marketing for the Middle East.

"The region has been a leader in restoring confident

passenger travel through multi-faceted initiatives that aid international travel recovery."

Air freight represents an ongoing area of opportunity for Middle East airlines, with the freighter fleet projected to nearly double from 80 airplanes in 2019 to 150 by 2040. Notably, air cargo traffic flown by Middle East carriers has increased since 2020 by nearly 20 per cent, with two of the world's top-five cargo carriers based in the region.

The 2021 Middle East CMO also includes these projections through 2040:

To accommodate increased passenger and cargo traffic, airlines are predicted to grow their fleets to 3,530 jets.

•The region will continue to see robust widebody demand, with 1,570 deliveries supporting a growing network of international routes.

•The current single-aisle fleet of 660 airplanes is forecast to nearly triple to 1,750 jets.

•Commercial services opportunities include fleet renewal, maintenance, repair and parts supply, and operations optimisation.

•Boeing's 2021 Pilot and Technician Outlook forecasts that the region is estimated to require 223,000 new aviation personnel by 2040, including 54,000 pilots, 51,000 technicians and 91,000 cabin crew members.

Wage dispute deepens at German public banks as inflation fears persist

A labour dispute at Germany's public-sector banks deepened on Wednesday after a third round of talks failed to reach agreement, with inflation fears prompting unions to stand firm over demands for higher wages.

The impasse, which affects about 60,000 workers at Germany's Landesbanken and development banks such as KfW, mirrors stalled wage talks for employees of private banks such as Deutsche Bank and Commerzbank.

Germany has more banks per capita than most of its neighbours and other industrialised economies.

That makes for stiff competition and low profits, and has resulted in efforts to cut costs and reduce headcount.

Workers at public-sector banks have staged warning strikes to underscore union demands for a 4.5 per cent wage increase and rights for working outside the office.

Jan Duschek, an official overseeing negotiations for the Verdi labour union, said he was disappointed with the outcome of the latest round of talks.

"There was no concrete offer for salaries, nor did we seriously enter negotiations on the issue of mobile working", he said.

Annual inflation in Germany was 4.1 per cent in September, highlighting growing price pressures as Europe's largest economy recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic and its companies face with supply shortages.

Oliver Popp, spokesperson for the DBV union, said inflation concerns were playing a big role in the union demands.

"The normal bank employee isn't super rich", Popp said.

"Salaries are just enough to get by" and energy prices are "crazy", he said.

Negotiators for bank management said they hoped to secure an agreement at the next round of talks scheduled for November.

Last week, union officials called off planned wage talks with private banks after they said management counter-offers were unsatisfactory.

Unions want 4.5 per cent increases for the 140,000 private-bank employees represented in the talks.

Earlier this year, employees at Deutsche Bank call centres, some of whom were paid €12 (\$13.95) an hour, went on strike for higher wages and eventually reached a pay deal after a months-long dispute.

— Reuters



There was no concrete offer for salaries, nor did we seriously enter negotiations on the issue of mobile working

JAN DUSCHECK

Official from Verdi labour union



HIGH-TECH CAR

A car model at a stall of LG Electronics and displaying vehicle technology such as Soft V2X (Vehicle-to-smartphone) at the ITS World Congress on Intelligent Transport Systems and Services held at the CCH Congress Center in Hamburg, northern Germany. The congress concluded last week. — AFP

Will international oil prices hit the \$90/barrel mark?



Haider al Lawati
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

THE RISE IN GLOBAL OIL PRICES IS PRIMARILY DUE TO THE ENERGY CRISIS IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, ACCORDING TO SOME EXPERTS

Over the past ten months, global oil prices have risen by more than 60 per cent. International benchmark Brent crude, trading at \$55 a barrel in January 2021, reached more than \$83 this week — a trend mirrored across other benchmark crudes too. Market experts project that Arab oil prices during the first half of 2022 will surpass \$90 a barrel aided by global conditions.

This positive picture emerges against the backdrop of notable developments: a significant decline in the coronavirus epidemic, enhanced vaccination coverage amid improved available of vaccine doses, a global revival of air travel and recovery of industrial and economic activity.

It is well-known that Arab countries hold about 56 per cent of the world's oil reserves and account for 28.4 per cent of global production of oil. When it comes to natural gas, Arab states hold 26.7 per cent of total gas reserves and have a 17.9 per cent of total gas output. This gives them the ability to expand supply of oil and gas to help address the energy crisis facing many European countries amid a lack of adequate gas supply in the face of a severe winter.

This energy crisis is pushing a number of European states, as well as large energy consumers, to consider importing oil as an alternative to gas for their daily energy requirements — a trend that will likely lead to a rise in international oil prices. Exporting nations have the opportunity to benefit from this energy crisis and thereby recoup some of the losses arising out of the slump in oil price that began in mid-2014.

It is imperative that oil-producing countries use this opportunity to shore up their sovereign wealth funds on the one hand, and channel new funding for stalled service projects while also reducing their foreign debts, on the other.

According to the Institute of International Finance, the general foreign assets of the Gulf states — including foreign reserves and sovereign wealth funds — are expected to rise to more than \$3 trillion by the end of 2022, equivalent to 170 per cent of their collective GDP.

The rise in global oil prices is primarily due to the energy crisis in European countries, according to some

experts. This comes as a blessing to Arab countries, which undoubtedly would have racked up large debts in recent years on the back of low oil prices, the consequences of the pandemic, and their failure to diversify their economies.

The sudden rise in oil prices underscores the continuing importance of hydrocarbons as commodities of great value for years to come. This uptick in prices will enable countries to return to their rightful status prominence, enhance their financial resources from foreign revenues, and increase their financial wealth.

According to projections by Reuters, the demand for oil in the global market will recover during 2022-2023, helping reduce the budget deficits of the Gulf states.

On the flipside, Arab countries lacking oil wealth will see their economic pain increase with the rise in international oil prices, potentially impacting tourist inflows into their countries.

The outlook primarily depends on the conditions prevailing in some industrialised countries such as the US, China and key European nations.

A second chance for global development



REBECA GRYNSPAN
The author is former vice president of Costa Rica and Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

THE COVID-19 CRISIS HAS GENERATED GLOBAL POLITICAL MOMENTUM TO ALTER THE BALANCE OF POWER

Second chances are not common in this world, but one is arriving now. The scope and scale of government support for businesses and workers during the Covid-19 crisis of the last 18 months have swept aside entrenched policy dogmas.

This has generated political momentum across advanced and developing economies to change the balance of power between the state and the market, and thereby foster a new consensus for achieving more equitable and sustainable growth. By building on this impetus, we can avoid repeating the policy mistakes of recent decades.

The Covid-19 pandemic

has tested governments' responsiveness and the resilience of economic systems everywhere, and changed social behaviour and personal habits in previously unthinkable ways.

There has also been cause for genuine hope amid the suffering. The dedication of essential workers has been inspiring, while the global scientific community has harnessed the power of collaborative research and public money to develop safe, effective Covid-19 vaccines at breakneck speed.

A global economic recovery began in the second half of 2020, as countries found less draconian ways to manage the pandemic's

health risks and launched vaccination programmes. Global growth is expected to reach 5.3 per cent this year, the highest rate in almost a half-century. But the outlook beyond 2021 is uncertain, given disparities in countries' financial resources, the prospect of new coronavirus variants, and highly uneven vaccination rates.

If we are not careful, these challenges — like governments' misguided embrace of fiscal austerity after the 2008 global financial crisis — could slow the momentum for meaningful change. Moreover, the pandemic has revealed how unprepared even the wealthiest countries are

for unexpected shocks — a fact underscored by extreme weather events this year — and how divided the global economy has become.

A return to the pre-pandemic policy paradigm, which delivered the weakest decade of global growth since 1945, would be a disaster. This is especially true for developing countries, where the economic damage caused by Covid-19 has exceeded that resulting from the global financial crisis a decade ago — in some cases by a considerable margin.

The new US administration's wide-ranging economic initiatives, if complemented by similar actions in other

developed countries, could restore the global economy to a sounder footing.

Moreover, US backing for the recent \$650 billion allocation of International Monetary Fund special drawing rights (SDRs), as well as for a global minimum corporate tax rate and a waiver of Covid-19 vaccine-related intellectual-property rights, suggests a possible renewal of multilateralism.

The global economy's existing asymmetries, and the interlocking economic and environmental crises these have caused, should top the multilateral agenda.

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THURSDAY OCTOBER 21, 2021 RABEE AL AWWAL 14, 1443 AH

OMAN DAILY
Observer Classified Section

Mohammed al Rashdi: 99841230
m.alrahd186@yahoo.com

Ali al Maashari: 99639264
ali.almashari@omandaily.om

Saada al Rashdi
95919344

94501166
24649593
24649595

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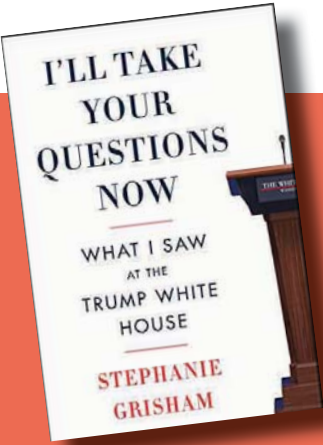
Popularising Oud for the modern music lovers

As a musician, Azoz al Hajri is one of the very few young Omanis who gained mastery in playing the Oud — an instrument that is popular within the Middle East but one of the trickiest instruments to learn. He shares why he loves using it and discusses its potential in modern music-making... **P20**



DISCOVERY

READ



I'LL TAKE YOUR QUESTIONS NOW
BY STEPHANIE GRISHAM

The former White House press secretary and communications director recounts her time in the Trump inner circle.

New skeleton find could reveal more about Vesuvius eruption

A SKELETON DISCOVERED in the ancient Roman city of Herculaneum, destroyed along with nearby Pompeii by Mount Vesuvius' eruption nearly 2,000 years ago, could offer fresh insights into the disaster, an Italian expert said on Friday. The remains of a man presumed to be aged 40-45 were found under metres of volcanic rock roughly where Herculaneum's shoreline used to be, before Vesuvius' explosion in 79 AD pushed it back by 500 metres (1,640 feet).

He was lying down, facing inland, and probably saw death in the face as he was overwhelmed by the molten lava that buried his city, the head of the Herculaneum archaeological park, Francesco Sirano, told the ANSA news agency. "He could have been a rescuer," Sirano suggested. As Vesuvius erupted, a naval fleet came to the rescue, led by the ancient Roman scholar and commander Pliny the Elder. He died on the shore, but it is believed that his

officers managed to evacuate hundreds of survivors. The skeleton might have otherwise belonged to "one of the fugitives" who was trying to get on one of the lifeboats, "perhaps the unlucky last one of a group that had managed to sail off," Sirano suggested. It was found covered by charred wood remains, including a beam from a building that may have smashed his skull, while his bones appear bright red, possibly blood markings left as the victim was engulfed in the volcanic discharge. Archaeologists also found traces of tissue and metal objects — likely the remains of personal belongings he was fleeing with: maybe a bag, work tools, or even weapons or coins, the head of the archaeological park said. Other human remains have been found in and around Herculaneum in the past decades — including a skull held in a Rome museum that some attribute to Pliny — but the lat-



est discovery can be investigated with more modern techniques. "Today we have the possibility of understanding more", Sirano said. Researchers believe that in Herculaneum temperatures rose up to 500 degrees — enough to vaporise soft tissues. In a phenomenon that is poorly understood, a

rapid drop in temperature ensued, helping preserve what remained. Although much smaller than Pompeii, its better-known neighbour outside the southern city of Naples, Herculaneum was a wealthier town with more exquisite architecture, much of which is still to be uncovered. — **AFP**

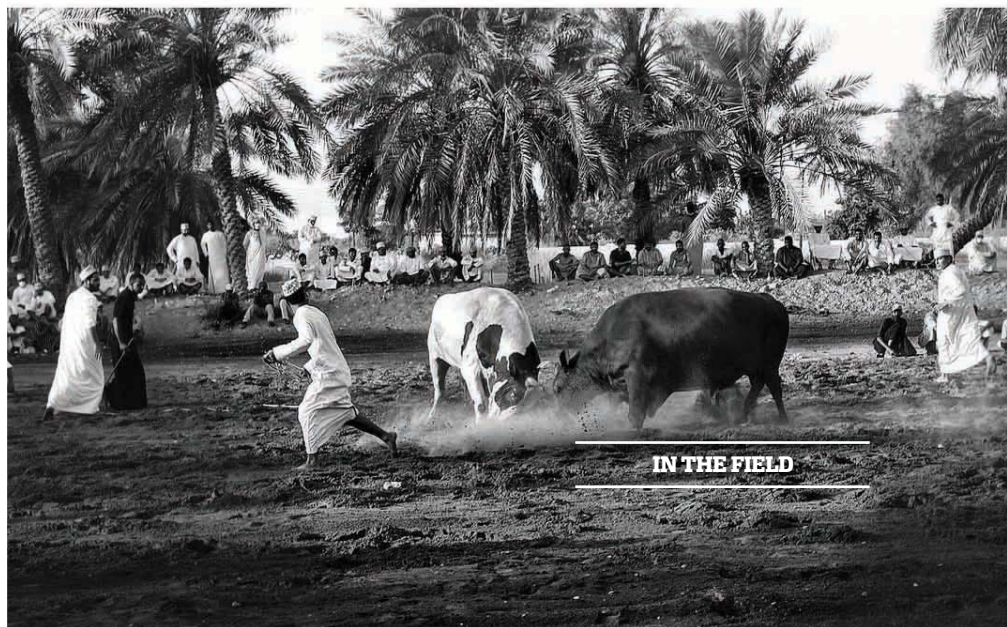


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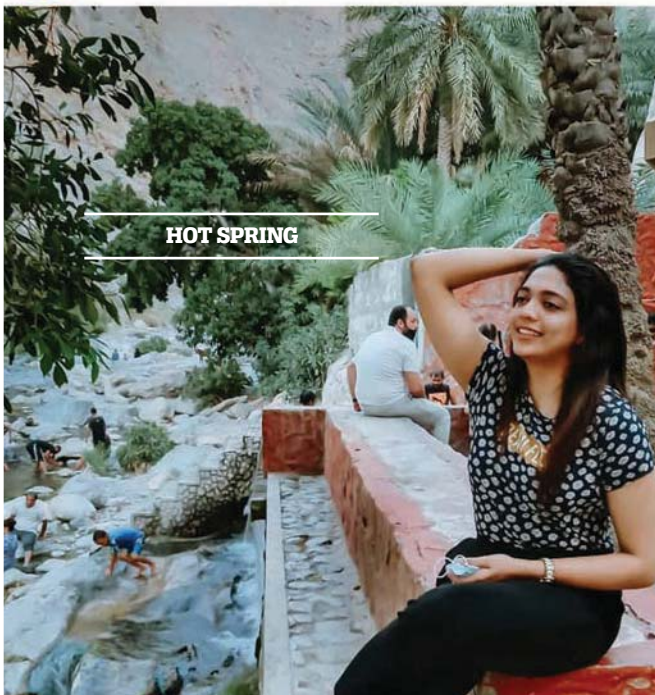
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ENTERTAINMENT

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Tehran short film fest opens, with shot at Oscars for first time

TEHRAN'S INTERNATIONAL Short Film Festival opened this week, for the first time as an Oscar-qualifying event, giving winning entries a shot at an Academy Award.

The festival jury has members from the Islamic republic as well as Italy, Japan, France and Austria.

The festival, now in its 38th edition and running until Sunday, earned qualification this year as a gateway to Hollywood's annual awards showcase.

The event "was added as a qualifying festival in the Short Films categories this year," the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences confirmed. "And it is the only current qualifying festival in Iran."

The designation came despite high tensions between Washington and Tehran, which have had no diplomatic relations

since 1979, before the festival began.

This year's showcase also coincides with efforts to resume negotiations on reviving Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with the United States and other world powers, with the goal of ending a punishing sanctions regime.

"I am both happy and proud of the qualification of our festival," the event's president Sadegh Moussavi said.

"It's a big success of cultural diplomacy," he said with a smile. "We think that culture and art can have a status more prestigious than politics."

Tehran's festival has been a springboard for the big names of Iranian cinema, including Asghar Farhadi, a two-time Oscar winner, Bahman Ghobadi and Reza Mirkarimi, said festival spokesman Mansour Jahani.

- Censorship accusation -



Moussavi said Tehran's application to the Academy was initially rejected because its entrants are not required to pay fees.

"We replied that our country was under sanctions and therefore it is impossible for those who want to present their films to pay registration fees," he said.

Tehran is the only short film festival without such fees among about 130 in the world which are Oscar eligible, Moussavi said.

Following recognition by the Academy, this year's festival competition received more than 6,400 entries from 128 countries — 2,000 more than last year.

Five Iranian films and 58 from abroad were selected for the grand prize and the winner will be presented to the Academy for possible Oscar nomination.

The selections upset some young Iranian directors whose

films were not accepted, and led to accusations of censorship, including from film-maker Farnoush Samadi.

"It is my duty to write to the Academy to protest this censorship, injustice and non-professional actions of the Tehran Festival," Samadi said on Instagram.

On the same social media platform, Ali Asgari, a director, said that as a member of the Academy he "will not vote for a film pre-selected by the Tehran Short Film Festival in order to support all the film-makers whose films were rejected."

Moussavi denied the accusations, saying that "there was no censorship on our part. We received 1,500 films from Iranian film-makers. We have to make a choice using as criteria the themes and quality of the film." — **AFP**

CHANGING WORLD

Beauty salon a women's haven in the Taliban's Kabul



IT IS ONE OF THE last places in Kabul where women can meet outside their households, a bubble of freedom and even frivolity away from the gaze of men.

Mohadessa has kept her beauty salon open despite threats from Afghanistan's new rulers.

Since the Taliban seized Kabul in mid-August, many women have disappeared from public spaces, driven into private areas out of fear and sometimes very real threats.

But Mohadessa's beauty salon has, for now, remained a place where women can relax among themselves outside the household and share their woes — or forget them in favour of fun and fashion.

The oasis of feminine industry provides income for the staff and moments of indulgence for the clients, but its days may be numbered.

"We don't want to give up and stop working," the 32-year-old entrepreneur said.

"We love that we have a job, and it is necessary for women to work in Afghan society — many of them are the breadwinners for their family."

Customers are dropped off outside and whisked past posters advertising fashion and beauty brands that are now blotted out with white paint.

They quickly disappear into the shop through a heavy curtain.

Once inside, the women shed their headscarves and outer garments and their excited voices compete with the hum of hair-dryers as they choose their new looks.

- **SCREAMING MOB** -

The last time the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, between 1996 and the US-led intervention of 2001, women were obliged to wear the all-covering burqa. Under the Taliban's interpretation of law, beauty salons were banned outright. Just having painted nails meant a woman could risk having her fingers cut off.

But since the Taliban returned to the capital, the movement has been at pains to present a more liberal face to the world.

Keen to secure international finance to head off economic disaster that could undermine their war gains, they have not rushed to reimpose restrictions on daily life.

That is not to say Mohadessa has not received threats.

A Taliban mob has shouted abuse outside her shop, but she has made use of the legal limbo to continue.

"I can say that the women at this salon are courageous

because they come to work with fear," she said.

"Every day they open the salon, they come in, and they continue to work, despite this fear."

- **MESSAGE OF 'RESISTANCE'** -

On the day AFP visited, around 30 women had braved the climate of fear to come to the shop and prepare for a wedding, where the sexes are traditionally segregated during celebrations.

The women were clearly enjoying the rare chance to dress up and pamper themselves, with elaborate hair and eyelash decorations complementing a colourful make-up palette.

The bride's sister, English teacher Farkhunda, gazes at the results of an hour-long makeover.

"Yes, it's nice. It's beautiful. It's my first real day out since the end of August," she said cheerfully.

But under the splash of glittery eye-shadow, one of her pupils is immobile, taken during a gun and bomb attack when she was a teenager.

"You see my eye? I lost it on my way to school when the Taliban attacked us. But I am not scared of them. I don't want to talk about them. Today is for celebration," she said.

The light-hearted mood is as fragile as the delicate bejewelled hair bands. At every movement of the curtain hiding the door to the outside world, the women stiffen and briefly fall silent.

But none of the clients want to tone down their look, a stylised, ultra-feminine rebuke to the Taliban's looming curbs on free expression: dense foundation, long false lashes, dazzling colours and a China doll finish.

And 22-year-old Marwa, not her real name, with her asymmetric haircut exposing an ear dotted with piercings and decorative chains, sees a message of "resistance" in the stylings.

"We are not people with blue burkas. We are not people with black burkas. That's not who we are," she said.

- **'KNIFE TO MY THROAT'** -

Some of the women dream of leaving, others of change.

Farkhunda hopes she can get back to work while Mohadessa, determined to stay open, fears for her life. She showed AFP a letter she believes comes from the Taliban's new Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, warning her to close down.

Her response: "Until they come and put a knife to my throat, I'm staying here." — **AFP**



Popularising Oud for the modern music lovers

BY JADE TAMPEPE

For some people, oud is an old instrument that time has nearly forgotten and don't have a place in modern music making except maybe just in the Middle East. To musician and oud player Azoz al Hajri, this is a disappointing misconception and just proves that more efforts had to be made to bring back the instrument into modern consciousness.

"As an oud performer, oud can definitely be used even for modern music and can be a great addition to any modern band. I have composed modern and western music using it and these compositions, which I normally play in some of the soirees I attend, give a taste of the possibilities. People always find it fascinating", he said.

But to play the instrument well, you need to master how it works. Unlike the guitar, oud is more sensitive and there are lots of nuances that give you a variety of sounds.

"Oud has this amazing feature where there are no frets. The slightest movement of your fingers gives a different sound and scale. Once you fully master it, it opens a lot of windows for innovation, unlike most

instruments. For me, Oud is as flexible as water and will take the shape and form you prefer", Azoz said.

Azoz has been playing the Oud for about 10 years now. Growing up in the Middle East and especially in Oman, it is a very popular instrument that gives out warm music.

"I have always enjoyed listening to music. I just woke up one day and realised, why am I not making it?" he said.

"I have an odd attachment to this instrument. Even before picking it up, I was already impressed by what it can do as it is prominently used in the Arabic region and is very famous. The sound it makes always made that warm feeling both in my ears and soul," he said.

As a musician, Azoz also has to learn other instruments. He eventually learned how to play the piano, moved to guitar and focused on that instrument for some time but eventually found his way back to playing the oud. To become a professional in Oud playing, he has to obtain an academic certificate from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

"As an oud performer, I always like to present new colour of music to my audience. Even when I'm doing a cover or rendition of a song or piece of music, I always find a way to give it my own

touch to make it a totally different experience both for me and my listeners", he said.

Azoz has varied interests when it comes to music and loves switching between classical, modern, eastern and western music. He has performed in different venues in Oman, was part of a musical feature presented for the National TV channel of Oman and before Covid-19, had different gigs in small intimate venues.

"I also compose music and lyrics. One of my compositions using oud was an ode to Oman's Renaissance Day called "Goodness of Oman", he said.

Currently an instructor for the Music Palace at Al Mouj, he said that there are no special tricks on how to play the instrument well except putting the hours to practise.

"There are no shortcuts. For those who had started playing the instrument, to become a good oud performer, you really have to work hard to give your soul to it. When you put in the hours to practice, you'd advance in learning", he said.

Azoz is working on a few arrangements which he will perform soon in a gallery that is opening in Muttrah.

To find out more about Azoz and his performance, you can follow him through his Instagram [@Aze93zo](#).

"Oud has this amazing feature where there are no frets. The slightest movement of your fingers gives a different sound and scale. Once you fully master it, it opens a lot of windows for innovation, unlike most instruments. For me, Oud is as flexible as water and will take the shape and form you prefer"

