

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, in reply to His Majesty's congratulatory cable to him on the occasion of assuming the reins of power in his country. In his cable, Shaikh Mishal expressed his utmost appreciation to His Majesty the Sultan's heartfelt sentiments. He lauded the historic and fraternal relations between Oman and Kuwait. The Emir of Kuwait also prayed to Allah the Almighty to grant His Majesty continuous good health and well-being and the Omani people further progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty.



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POTENTIAL FOR
COMMERCIALIZATION
OF OMAN 'GREEN
MINERAL' RESOURCES



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INJURY WORRIES
FOR DJOKOVIC,
TSITSIPAS AS SERBIA
SQUEEZE INTO QUARTERS



P20

10 NUTRITION
TIPS FOR A
HEALTHY NEW
YEAR



MUSCAT

CRUDE PRICE AT \$77.94 A BARREL

Oman oil price for March delivery on Tuesday reached \$77.94, comprising a rise by 74 cents. The average price of Oman oil for January delivery has stabilised at \$83.17 per barrel, thus \$6.62 per barrel lower than December delivery. Brent crude rose 2.4 per cent to \$78.85 a barrel while US West Texas Intermediate crude was at \$73.41 a barrel, up 2.4 per cent. Gold was up 0.6 per cent at \$2,074.89 an ounce.

NEW CENTRE FOR TOURISM GUIDANCE

In a remarkable stride to enhance tourist sites in the Sultanate of Oman, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism on Tuesday inaugurated a tourism hub at Muttrah Waterfront in the Governorate of Muscat. Oman has taken steps to boost the tourism sector as the country enjoys a lengthy coastline with clean beaches, lovely mountains, and some of the greatest deserts in the world with undulating dunes. **DETAILS ON P3**

BEIRUT

ISRAELI DRONE KILLS TOP HAMAS OFFICIAL



Senior Hamas official Saleh al Arouri was killed on Tuesday night in an Israeli drone strike on Beirut's southern suburbs of Dahiyeh, a stronghold of Hezbollah, three security sources said. In response to questions from Reuters, the Israeli military said it does not respond to reports in the foreign media. Mark Regev, an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told MSNBC that Israel had not taken responsibility for this attack, but "whoever did it, it must be clear: That this was not an attack on the Lebanese state." Arouri was a senior official in Hamas's politburo and was also one of the founders of its military wing, the Qassam Brigades.

Oman expresses sympathy with Japan in aftermath of quake

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman has expressed its sympathy and commiseration with the Government of Japan after the earthquake that hit Japan on Monday.

In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on Tuesday, Oman voiced its condolences to the families of deceased victims, along with its wishes of quick recovery for the injured.

Meanwhile, the powerful

earthquake that hit Japan on New Year's Day killed at least 55 people, with rescue teams struggling in freezing temperatures on Tuesday to reach coastal areas where many are feared trapped under possibly thousands of destroyed homes.

In Suzu, a town of just over 5,000 households near the quake's epicentre, 90 per cent of houses may have been destroyed, according to its mayor Masuhiro

Izumiya. "The situation is catastrophic," he said.

The quake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.6 struck on Monday afternoon, prompting people in western coastal areas to flee to higher ground as tsunami waves swept cars and houses into the water.

Around 200 tremors have been detected since the quake first hit on Monday, according to the Japan Meteorological Agency,

which warned that more strong shocks could hit in coming days.

A Coast Guard aircraft en route to deliver aid to the quake-hit region collided with a commercial airplane in Tokyo's Haneda airport on Tuesday, killing five Coast Guard members. All 379 on board the Japan Airlines flight escaped.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the extent of damage from the quake was becoming

"increasingly clear" more than 24 hours after it struck on the Noto peninsula in Ishikawa prefecture.

"The government has deployed emergency rescue teams from the Self-Defence Forces, police and fire departments to the area and is doing its utmost to save lives and rescue victims and survivors, but we have received reports that there are still many people waiting to be rescued under collapsed buildings."



The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth has handed over Oman's newly-built state-of-the-art hockey stadium "Hockey Oman" located in Al Amerat. The venue will host the inaugural edition of men's and women's FIH Hockey5s World Cup matches from January 24 to 31. Ahead of the World Cup, the new hockey arena will stage the FIH Men's Olympic Qualifier tournament from January 15 to 21. **DETAILS ON P10**

Gaza death toll passes 22,000

GAZA: Israeli forces attacked Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip with tank fire and air strikes on Tuesday, residents said, and Israeli ground troops also battled in other parts of the shattered Palestinian enclave.

Israel said its troops had killed dozens in Gaza's north in the past day. Residents said Israeli tanks had shelled parts of the Al Bureij refugee camp in the central area.

The Gaza health ministry said 207 people had been killed in the past 24 hours, bringing the total recorded Palestinian death toll to more than 22,000 in nearly three months of warfare in the enclave.

The latest fighting took place after Israel announced plans to pull back some troops, signalling a new phase in the war amid global concern over

the plight of Gaza residents.

Israeli bombardments have reduced much of the territory to rubble and engulfed its 2.3 million residents in a humanitarian disaster in which many thousands have been left destitute and threatened by famine due to a lack of food supplies. Israeli officials say the offensive has many months to run. **SEE ALSO P5**

No serious threat from JN.1 variant

OHOOOD AL JAILANIYAH
MUSCAT, JAN 2

The Ministry of Health confirmed that it is taking all necessary measures throughout the year against the new JN.1 Covid-19 strain, affirming that it does not pose a major threat to public health.

The ministry disclosed that a number of mild cases of the new Covid-19 variant have been detected in the Sultanate of Oman since October last year, all of whom have fully recovered indicating that the highest recorded prevalence of seasonal influenza viruses occurred last December representing 41 per cent of tested laboratory samples.

Regarding global concern of the spread of new Covid-19 variants and viruses causing acute respiratory diseases, Dr Fatima bint Mohammed al Yaqoubiyah, Head of the Department of Tuberculosis and Acute Respiratory Diseases Control, said: "The World



The World Health Organization (WHO) earlier announced that the JN.1 Covid-19 strain, first detected in the United States last September, has been recorded in over 41 countries

DR FATIMA AL YAOUBIYAH
Head of the Department

Health Organization (WHO) earlier announced that the JN.1 Covid-19 strain, first detected in the United States last September, has been recorded in over 41 countries. It originated from the mutated Covid-19 variant called BA.2.86 'Pirola' which emerged from the mutant Omicron strain that was prevalent in 2022 and later became responsible for 27 per cent of infections. **TURN TO P2**

→ INSIDE



DONATE TO SAVE LIVES

3,000

SPOTLIGHT

SEE P4

Expect cooler temperatures this weekend

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Temperatures are likely to fall further towards the weekend, according to Oman Met Office experts.

Jabal Shams has been recording temperatures as low as 1.5 degrees Celsius, while Saiq in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar has recorded 8 degrees Celsius. Even the temperature in Thamrait touched 15 degrees Celsius at night.

Yet in other parts people are of the opinion that the winter months have not approached yet.

There have been flow and formation of clouds over Musandam Governorate and parts of the governorates of North Al Batinah, South Al Batinah, Al Dakhiliyah, Muscat and North Al Sharqiyah, accompanied by scattered rain this week.



Saiq in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar recorded 8 degrees Celsius.

The weather forecaster at Oman Met Office said while the next three days are expected to be same, during the weekend the temperatures could dip by one or two degrees.

Along the Sea of Oman winds will be northeasterly light to moderate at day time becoming variable light at night, and over rest of the governorates winds will be northeasterly to easterly light to moderate occasionally fresh along the Arabian Sea coasts.

Oman Met Office also reported that there are chances of cloud development over Al Hajar Mountains. There are also chances of low clouds or fog patches at late night to early morning along parts of the coastal areas of the Arabian Sea and the Sea of Oman and parts of Al Dhahirah, Al Buraimi and Al Dakhiliyah governorates.



‘Budget 2024 is growth-oriented’

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Oman’s budget for 2024, aligned with his Majesty’s Vision 2040 strategy, has earned wide applause from different corners of the society considering it a highly pragmatic and growth-oriented.

Business experts living in the Sultanate of Oman hailed the five-year plan and the medium term fiscal plan as a futuristic economic plan as the budget provides three funds with a total outlay of RO 4.4 billion including RO 1.9 billion towards providing 60,000 housing loans, RO 2 billion towards strengthening the investment portfolio of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) in various sectors of the country, RO 500 million towards providing loans through the Development Bank to projects



The revenue projected in the budget is very conservative with the oil prices which will add value to the local economy.

“This is a commendable allocation to make the private sector part of the nation building exercise,” opined Davis Kallookkaran, Founding Managing Partner.

“Again the revenue projected in the budget is very conservative with the oil prices at \$60, the deficit of RO 640 million is very minimal

and we are hopeful that given the optimism in the economy, the 2024 budget will turn out to be a surplus one,” he added.

Commenting on the budget, Abdul Latif Uppala, first elected member of the Board of Directors of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry called it a ‘development-oriented budget that will give strength to the country’s progress’.

“The budget includes various projects to attract entrepreneurs and investors to involve citizens in the advancements made possible by the Sultanate of Oman in different sectors. It will help the country’s economy to achieve progress in line with Oman Vision 2040 and enjoy rapid growth. Also, many job opportunities will be created through this and Omani youth will be the beneficiaries,” said Abdul

Latif who is also the Managing Director of Badr Al Sama Group of Hospitals.

“The budget’s proposals to improve the business environment and widen the participation of the private sector in economic development are promising,” he added.

Entrepreneurs and investors in the country lauded the measures to improve the level of insurance coverage and social security for citizens as commendable.

The budget has also announced that the level of spending on basic services like education, health and housing will be maintained. Also, the people of Oman praised the other measures like the allocation for the 10th five-year plan which has been increased to RO 8 billion, and overall, the budget will help speed up the growth of Oman.



ROYAL OFFICE MINISTER RECEIVES AMBASSADOR OF PHILIPPINES

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received on Tuesday Raul Hernandez, Ambassador of the Republic of the Philippines to the Sultanate of Oman. During the meeting, Al Numani highlighted the march of bilateral relations between Oman and the Philippines. The two sides reviewed several areas of joint cooperation. They also discussed a number of matters of common interest. – ONA

ABM International alumni meet builds connections

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 2

In duo events, Ahmad Bin Majid (ABM) International Private School held the alumni meeting designed at fostering connections between the alumni and the school at the school’s multi-purpose hall recently.

Held under the theme ‘Building Connections’, the events are part of the school’s series of forthcoming chain of activities and developments in celebrating 33 years of excellence in academics and instilling values.

The event, named ‘alumni, to the alumni and by the alumni’, was also designed at establishing support systems at the ABM school to bond



Held under the theme ‘Building Connections’, the events are part of the school’s series of forthcoming chain of activities and developments in celebrating 33 years of excellence in academics and instilling values.

In his address, Najim bin Mohammad al Timami, Chairman, ABM International

Private School, said, “I stand before you today with immense pride and gratitude as we celebrate ABM International’s 33-year journey. Each year has been a testament to our collective dedication, resilience and vision. As alumni, you



have been the backbone of this institution, shaping its legacy and ensuring its continued success. We thank Allah for the memories we have created and the milestones yet to come.”

In a welcome address, Tasneem bint Said al Mufraji

and Amir bin Ahmad al Farsi, both former students of the ABM school, said: “We are thrilled to see so many familiar faces representing our diverse community of over 1,000 graduates from our school that spans more than 30 years.”

The agenda of programmes included an interactive networking session, an art exhibition, testimonials of the alumnus from abroad and an exclusive alumni business showcase and the alumnus community outreach initiatives such as the food distribution project in support of the needy people. There was also an initiative to donate a borehole in a school in Tanzania in favour of one of the deceased alumni of the 2019 batch.

Attractions also included an introduction of the first registered student three decades ago, a showcase of the latest registered twin students of the grade 12 students, and the youngest KG student of the current academic year.



جهاز الضرائب
TAX AUTHORITY

Tax Liability Settlement Initiative

► For taxpayers with outstanding tax liabilities due before **January 1st, 2020**.

In line with Oman Vision 2040 government’s strategy to encourage economic activity and entrepreneurship, Tax Authority announces as of **January 2nd, 2024**, the “Tax Liability Settlement Initiative”, for taxpayers with outstanding tax liabilities due before **January 1st, 2020**, for a 6-month run.

All settlement requests should be sent by email to the Tax Authority at mubadara@taxoman.gov.om by filling out the application form available online at the Tax Authority’s official website.

No serious threat from JN.1 variant

FROM P1

The following countries registered the highest cases of JN.1 Covid-19 strain: France, the USA, Singapore, Canada, the United Kingdom and Sweden.

“The Sultanate of Oman is working hard to increase vaccination coverage which recently reached 96 per cent for pregnant women and the older people. The influenza vaccine has also been introduced for children aged 24 months to reduce morbidity and hospitalisation rates among children,” she said.

Dr Al Yaqoubiyah stated that the Sultanate of Oman’s epidemiological investigation policy was updated in 2017 to include monitoring and controlling a number of viruses that cause acute respiratory infections by adopting electronic reporting. The policy was upgraded in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic through online reporting by all public and private establishments. The health institutions have also been activated to serve as focal points for monitoring the epidemiological situation throughout the year as an early warning system with the introduction of molecular tests to support the tracking of emerging viruses.

Regarding the significant increase in infections and hospitalisation rate among children, Dr Al Yaqoubiyah said that the respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a very common virus that most children under two years old are infected with. The symptoms which are usually mild, resembling those of a cold and include a runny or congested nose, dry cough, mild fever, sore throat, sneezing and headache. In certain cases the virus can cause severe symptoms such lung inflammation in some people including children 12 months old and younger especially those born prematurely as well as old people, people with heart and lung disease and those with a weak immune system. These segments are required to be admitted to the intensive care unit.



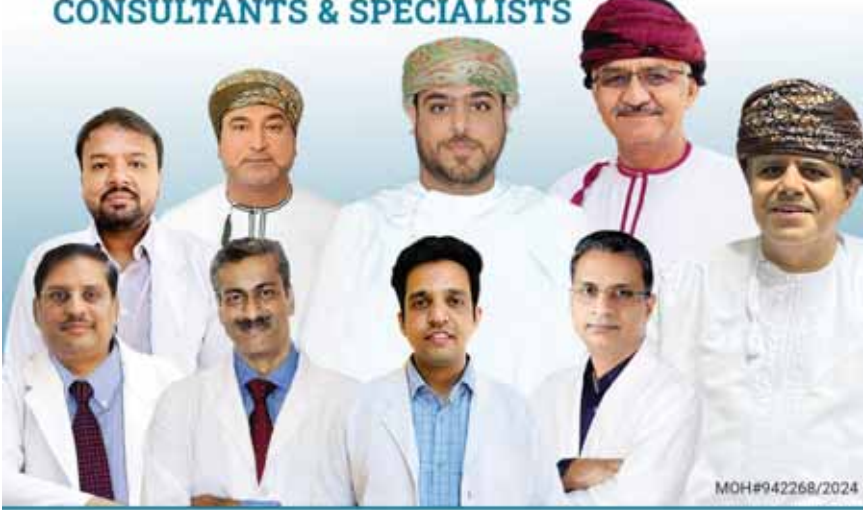
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Ash'shura office holds meeting

MUSCAT: The Majlis Ash'shura Office on Tuesday reviewed in its regular meeting the Majlis Ash'shura's decision of forming a temporary committee tasked with the file of job seekers in the Sultanate of Oman.

The meeting was held under the chairmanship of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Majlis Ash'shura.

Further, the meeting discussed a study regarding the future of the frankincense tree in the Governorate of Dhofar. It also highlighted a number of other topics, including the report of the delegation which participated in the training programme for youth parliamentarians, among other topics.

— ONA

Muscat Municipality, OPAL sign pact for safety upgrade

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 2

Muscat Municipality (MM) and Oman Energy Association (OPAL) have inked a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) on developing an occupational health and safety system.

The two parties have teamed up to set up a general policy for the Municipality's occupational safety.

The municipality will roll out a systematic plan to deal with worksites-related injuries and incidents.

By the aforementioned MoC, the municipality will set certain standards of occupational safety for the municipal work.

The two sides will join hands to



The two sides will join hands to activate safety measures for kids' recreational games, activate safety measures for kids' recreational games during festivities and events held by the municipality.

Eco-friendly innovative student project wins top prize

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, JAN 2

Students from Omama bint Hamza bin Abdul Muttalib School from Al Batinah North Governorate, Basmala al Saidi and Habiba Mohammed Abbas, secured the top place in the Sultanate of Oman in the 'Scientific Innovations Competition' in the field of science and mathematics for their innovation entitled 'Reducing the viscosity of crude oil using environmental raw materials'.

The project, aimed at reducing crude oil viscosity through the utilisation of environmentally friendly materials, was supervised by Hajar al Shahhi and focuses on revolutionising the transportation of crude oil through pipelines.

By incorporating local environmental waste, palm fibres and date palm kernels, the project aimed to enhance oil flow while minimising environmental pollution. Its objectives were multi-fold, encompassing a reduction in the viscosity of heavy oil in pipelines, recycling local environmental waste, minimising energy consumption in pumping, and decreasing the use of chemical additives in crude oil transportation pipelines.



Basmala al Saidi and Habiba Mohammed Abbas, secured the top place in the Sultanate of Oman in the 'Scientific Innovations Competition'

Supported by various governmental and private institutions, the project's success was substantiated through rigorous analysis at OQ Laboratories, measuring viscosity and essential chemical properties of the crude oil.

Furthermore, collaboration with the University of Nizwa involved electron microscopy to study palm fibres, enabling a deeper understanding of surface area measurements.

The students were provided with essential tools and a

conducive environment within the school's laboratory to conduct experiments. Additionally, strong community support, from the Parents Council, ensured a steady supply of palm fibres and date palm kernels.

Practical applications of the project extended to both professional and daily life scenarios. In industries, the combination of local environmental waste with crude oil mechanically improved its flow properties,

thereby reducing viscosity and subsequently decreasing energy consumption during pumping a significant achievement of the project.

Moreover, in daily life, the project's focus on reusing local environmental waste countered the prevalent practice of burning such materials, which contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Through recycling palm fibres and date palm kernels into micrometre units, the project aligns with Oman's Zero Carbon Vision 2050, aiming to substantially reduce environmental gas emissions.

In an interview, the students expressed profound gratitude, emphasising the moment of win as unique feeling.

"Participation in such competitions enrich our knowledge and widen our scientific skills where we enjoyed working with the environment and with the support from different teams in the community believing in the scope of scientific research," said one of the students.

Students credited the continuous support of the school's administration, their guiding teacher, and their families for embracing the idea of participating in the competition and dedicated their win to the entire school community.

New centre for tourism guidance launched

ZAKIYA AL HUSSAINI
MUSCAT, JAN 2

In a remarkable stride to enhance tourist sites in the Sultanate of Oman, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) inaugurated on Tuesday a tourism hub at Muttrah Waterfront in the Governorate of Muscat.

Nonetheless, the Sultanate of Oman has taken steps to boost the tourist sector as the Sultanate features a lengthy coastline with clean beaches, lovely mountains, and some of the greatest deserts in the world with undulating dunes.

The initiative stems from the ministry's keenness to offer accessible and reachable information for foreign tourists, who would like to delve into unforgettable tours.

The newly-inaugurated centre is expected to contribute to introducing visitors to key heritage and tourist destinations, responding to tourism-related inquiries and highlighting services offered by the private sector, including hotels, tour operators and travel agencies.



The initiative stems from the ministry's keenness to offer accessible and reachable information





"Tender Announcement"
Supply of Food Parcels for the "Ramadan Iftar Program"
for the Year 1445 AH / 2024 AD for
Al Mahrah Governorate and Surrounding Areas
in the Republic of Yemen
Tender No. 1/2024

Oman Charitable Organization (O.C.O.) announces a tender for the supply of 27,900 (Twenty Seven Thousand and Nine Hundred) food parcels for the "Ramadan Iftar Program" for the year 1445 AH / 2024 AD, and distributing them to all the districts of Al Mahrah Governorate and the surrounding areas according to the attached list of locations (16 locations).

Specialized merchants and suppliers wishing to submit their bids for this tender can obtain the terms and conditions from the Financial Department of Oman Charitable Organization against payment of nominal fees, during the period from Monday 1 January 2024 to Thursday 04 January 2024. The last date for bid submission and acceptance shall be Wednesday 10 January 2024.

Bids shall be deposited in the tender box at the Financial Department, O.C.O. Headquarters Building at the Wilayat of Baushar, Muscat Governorate, Al Khuwair 33, Southern Street No. 47, near Sultan Said bin Taimur Mosque. Bids shall be placed in closed envelopes sealed with red wax and addressed to H.E. the Chairman of the Projects and Tenders Committee of O.C.O. before the specified date.

"O.C.O. is not obligated to award the tender in whole or in part or to consider the lowest price."



DONATE TO SAVE LIVES

ORGAN DONATION IS A HUMANITARIAN
MESSAGE TO SAVE HUMAN LIVES

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia



RGAN DONATION is a humanitarian message to save human lives, and a service provided by the donor to end the suffering of a patient who has been in pain for years and years.

The severe shortage of human organs is considered the most important challenge facing patients in need, as there is no source for human organs other than the person himself. These organs cannot be taken from the person except with his consent while he is alive, and the consent of his guardian after his death.

However, the laws of the Sultanate of Oman and international laws criminalise all types of trafficking in human organs in exchange of money but rather organ donation is carried out in accordance with controls and procedures determined by medicine law.

Community members must be aware of the importance of organ donation as a humanitarian act and a generous initiative that is the appropriate solution for treating organ failure such as kidney failure, liver failure among others from which millions of patients worldwide suffer.

Despite all the remarkable developments in the field of science and technology, the optimal treatment for patients with organ failure is to transplant a healthy organ instead of the affected organ. The only source of these human organs is humans, and the need for organs is greater than the supply.

The Ministry of Health in the Sultanate of Oman is making a lot of efforts to raise awareness of the culture of organ donation, as Dr Ahmed bin Said al Busaidi, supervisor of the National Organ Transplantation Programme in the Ministry of Health, stated.

“The Ministry of Health has activated the post-death organ donation programme through the Shifa application, and this will help in conducting more organ transplant operations for patients on the waiting list, especially those who do not have a donor,” he stated.

The Omani
Association for

Organ Transplantation also seeks to spread the culture of organ donation among members of society, by organising various community events. It also works in cooperation with the National Organ Transplantation Programme in the Ministry of Health to contribute to the qualification of medical personnel, by holding lectures and scientific seminars in the field of organ donation and transplantation.

There are misconceptions and misunderstandings about donating organs after death in the Omani society, including that it is not permissible to donate organs according to Islamic law, and that the desire to donate organs after death leads to the medical staff rushing to announce the death.

Also, donating organs after death greatly delays burial and condolence ceremonies, and leads to major distortions in the body of the deceased. However, these concepts and beliefs are all wrong and must be changed among members of society.

There are 3,000 patients in Oman and many children on dialysis who need help from the shackles of dialysis equipment. You can be the one who helps save a life, and your post-mortem organ donation can save the lives of 8 people suffering from organ failure, namely the lungs, kidneys, heart, liver, intestines, pancreas, in addition to tissues and corneas.

When donating tissues, the number increases to 50 people, while a living donor can save two people. A living person can donate one kidney, one lung, and part of the liver, pancreas and intestines.

The focus is on successful transplant operations in the Sultanate of Oman to enhance confidence, and the continuous emphasis on the importance of preserving human rights, not seeking commercial organ transplants, and using technology to provide correct and simplified information for both the donor and the patient.

3,000

PATIENTS IN OMAN AND MANY
CHILDREN ON DIALYSIS NEED
HELP FROM THE SHACKLES OF
DIALYSIS EQUIPMENT



Gaza fighting rages on, Palestinian death toll passes 22,000

GAZA: Israel said on Tuesday its troops had killed dozens in the north of the Gaza Strip in the past day, while a total of 22,185 Palestinians have been killed and 57,035 wounded in the strikes on since October 7, nearly three months of warfare in the enclave. Residents said heavy fighting was also raging in central areas, citing shelling by Israeli tanks of parts of the Al Bureij refugee camp.

Some 207 Palestinians were killed and 338 were wounded in the past 24 hours, the Gaza health ministry said. The latest fighting took place after Israel announced plans to pull back some troops, signalling a new phase in the war amid global concern over the plight of Gaza residents.

Israeli bombardments have reduced much of the territory to rubble and engulfed its 2.3 million residents in a humanitarian disaster in which many have been left destitute and threatened by famine due to a lack of food supplies.

In its daily briefing, the Israeli military said that in the past day its forces had targeted groups in Gaza City in the north of the enclave and in unspecified locations along the Mediterranean coast.

“In Jabaliya area, troops killed dozens, among them those who attempted to plant explosive devices, others who operated drones and those who were armed identified driving towards the forces,” the military said.

Troops also seized weapons and dismantled rocket launchers



Smoke billows over Khan Younis from Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip during Israeli bombardment. – AFP

in Khan Younis in the south and in a United Nations school in Al Bureij, Israel’s military said.

Gaza residents said Israeli war planes and tanks stepped up bombardments of the eastern and northern areas of Khan Younis, where tens of thousands of displaced Palestinians have sought refuge after being forced from their homes elsewhere in the densely-populated territory.

An Israeli official said the situation on the border with Lebanon, where Israeli forces and Lebanese fighters have exchanged artillery fire almost daily, would not be allowed to continue.

At a house in the centre of Khan Younis, medical teams retrieved the bodies of two women killed in an Israeli air strike on Tuesday morning, health officials said.

Palestinian groups said in separate statements they had fired mortar bombs and anti-tank rockets against Israeli forces in Khan Younis and were stopping them advancing to the western area. Tanks have been stationed east, north and at the centre.

15 Israeli soldiers have been killed after triggering an explosive minefield east of the Tuffah neighbourhood in Gaza City.

— Reuters



A Palestinian woman makes bread outside a tent at a makeshift camp housing displaced Palestinians, in Rafah. – AFP

New miseries as Israel army warns war will continue throughout 2024



An Israeli battle tank rolls onto a trailer truck at a position along the border with the Gaza Strip and southern Israel. – AFP

GAZA: Israeli forces battled Palestinians amid the ruins of the heavily-bombed Gaza Strip on Tuesday as the war raging for almost three months piled new miseries in the besieged territory.

In Gaza, where UN agencies have voiced alarm over a spiralling humanitarian crisis, 2.4 million Palestinians remained under siege and bombardment, most of them displaced and many huddling in shelters and tents amid dire food shortages.

“Living conditions... are just hopeless,” said 43-year-old Mostafa Shennar, who fled Gaza City, now a largely devastated urban combat zone, and has been living in the crowded southern border town of Rafah.

Israel has vowed to destroy Palestinian groups and warned the war may continue “throughout 2024”, as efforts towards a new ceasefire have so far yielded no results.

Israel, after suffering the worst

Israel has vowed to destroy Palestinian groups and warned the war may continue “throughout 2024”, as efforts towards a new ceasefire have so far yielded no results

attack in its history, has launched a withering offensive that has killed at least 22,185 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory’s health ministry.

The Israeli army says 173 of its soldiers have been killed inside Gaza in the battle.

The military said on Tuesday it was investigating a soldier suspected of shooting dead a Palestinian captured in the Gaza Strip.

“The detained was handed over to the supervision of a soldier, who, under suspicion, allegedly shot him,

resulting in his death,” the army said.

Throughout its bloodiest ever Gaza war, Israel has had the backing of its keystone ally the United States, which has however also urged greater restraint to spare civilian lives.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, which includes far-right and hardline nationalist groups, has said repeatedly it will keep fighting until groups are destroyed.

As 2024 started, a long-running political dispute flared again after setting off mass street protests last year against what is considered the most right-wing government in Israeli history.

The army said it would soon rotate out some of the more than 300,000 reservists called up after October 7, in part to prepare them for many more months of war ahead.

It said reservists from two brigades, which have some 4,000 troops each, will start returning home this week.

— AFP

Troops kill 4 Palestinians in West Bank raid

RAMALLAH: Israeli troops killed four Palestinians during a raid in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday, sources on both sides said.

“Four Palestinians were martyred by occupation bullets in the town of Azzun,” the Palestinian health ministry said.

The official Wafa news agency said the men were shot dead when clashes erupted as Israeli troops raided the town.

“Israeli occupation soldiers fired live ammunition, stun grenades and tear gas at residents during the raid,” the report said.

Israeli troops searched homes and businesses, and took surveillance footage from several shops, Wafa reported.

The army said troops had returned fire after militants shot at them and threw explosives.

“At the end of an exchange of fire, they killed four and confiscated three Carlo-type weapons locally produced

submachine guns that were used by them,” the army said in a statement.

A soldier was moderately wounded, it added.

In a separate exchange of fire, troops “neutralised” a Palestinian group who fired at them in the town of Qalqilya, the army said without elaborating.

Israeli forces made seven arrests in the West Bank overnight, the army said, adding that more than 2,550 people have been arrested in the territory since the Gaza war erupted.

Meanwhile, the prison service in a statement said the man from Nablus in the occupied West Bank had died in Meggido prison, in Israel’s north.

He was arrested in June 2022 and later sentenced to jail time for “security offences”, the statement said without naming the prisoner.

The Palestinian Authority’s detainees commission confirmed a prisoner had died but was unable to verify further information.

Last month, Israeli police said they have questioned 19 prison guards as part of an investigation into the death of another Palestinian inmate following allegations of torture.

Thaer Abu Assab, from Qalqilya in the West Bank, died in November after being beaten by Israeli prison guards.

Authorities said inmates can no longer leave their cells, there would not be allowed visits, or permitted to buy food from the canteen, nor would they have power in their electrical outlets.

The West Bank has been under Israeli military occupation since the Six-Day War of 1967 and tensions have escalated since the outbreak of fighting between Israel and Gazans.

Since October 7, at least 321 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank by Israeli troops or settlers, according to the Palestinian health ministry. More than 520 Palestinians were killed in the territory last year.

— AFP



A man inspects bullet holes outside a closed shop where Palestinians were shot in a confrontation during an Israeli military operation in the town of Azzun, east of Qalqilya in the occupied West Bank. – AFP



Japan quake toll rises to 55 with many feared trapped

WAJIMA: A powerful earthquake that hit Japan on New Year's Day killed at least 55 people, with rescue teams struggling in freezing temperatures on Tuesday to reach isolated areas where many people are feared trapped under toppled buildings.

In Suzu, a coastal town of just over 5,000 households near the quake's epicentre, 90 per cent of houses may have been destroyed, according to its mayor Masuhiro Izumiya.

"The situation is catastrophic," he said.

The quake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.6 struck on Monday afternoon, prompting people in western coastal areas to flee to higher ground as tsunami waves swept cars and houses into the water.

Around 200 tremors have been detected since the quake first hit on Monday, which warned more strong shocks could hit in the coming days.

A Coast Guard aircraft

Around 200 tremors have been detected since the quake first hit on Monday, which warned more strong shocks could hit in the coming days.

en route to deliver aid to the quake-hit region collided with a commercial airplane in Tokyo's Haneda airport on Tuesday, killing five Coast Guard crew while all 379 on board the Japan Airlines flight miraculously escaped a fire.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the extent of the quake damage was becoming "increasingly clear" more than 24 hours after the quake struck on the Noto peninsula in Ishikawa prefecture.

"The government has deployed emergency rescue teams from the Self-Defence Forces, police and fire departments to the area and is



A burnt-down residential and commercial area site following an earthquake is seen in Wajima, Ishikawa prefecture, Japan. — Reuters

doing its utmost to save lives and rescue victims and survivors, but we have received reports that there are still many people

waiting to be rescued under collapsed buildings." Kishida said some 3,000 rescuers were finding it difficult

to reach the northern tip of the peninsula where helicopter surveys had discovered many fires and widespread damage

to buildings and infrastructure. There are around 120 cases of people awaiting rescue, his government spokesperson said.

Situated on the "Ring of Fire" arc of volcanoes and oceanic trenches that partly encircles the Pacific Basin, Japan accounts for about 20 per cent of the world's earthquakes of magnitude 6 or greater, and each year experiences up to 2,000 quakes that can be felt.

Many rail services and flights into the area have been suspended. More than 500 people were stranded at Noto's airport which closed due to cracks in its runway and access road and damage to its terminal building. Many of those killed are in Suzu and Wajima, another city on the remote northern tip of the Noto peninsula.

Scores more have been injured and authorities were battling blazes in several cities on Tuesday and hauling people from collapsed buildings.

— Reuters

UN to boost food ration for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

DHAKA: The United Nations will increase the food ration for each Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh by \$2 a month, to \$10, from Jan. 1, the World Food Programme (WFP) said on Tuesday, as it thanked donors for coming to the rescue of a cash-strapped effort.

The United Nations had cut food aid last year to the refugees by a third, to \$8 each every month, as it had raised less than half of the \$876 million required to support them.

Nearly a million from Myanmar live in bamboo-and-plastic camps in Bangladesh's border district of Cox's Bazar, most of them having fled a military crackdown in 2017.

"The rapid deterioration of the food and nutrition situation in the camps is extremely worrying," Dom Scalpelli, the WFP's director in Bangladesh, said in a statement.

"Through all this, the donor community stood with the Rohingya - it's all thanks to its generous contributions we can now have this increase and also add locally fortified rice to WFP's food assistance package."

The WFP said a latest survey showed malnutrition in the



A Rohingya refugee carries her child as she stands at a temporary shelter at a government building in Banda Aceh. — AFP file photo

Rohingya camps in Bangladesh was at its highest since the 2017 influx and had exceeded the emergency threshold of 15 per cent, according to the World Health Organization's emergency classification.

Mohammed Mizanur Rahman, Bangladesh's refugee relief and repatriation commissioner in Cox's Bazar, said the target currently was to raise the ration to \$12.5 per person per month. — Reuters

Somalia vows to defend sovereignty after Ethiopia-Somaliland deal

MOQADISHUU: Somalia vowed on Tuesday to defend its territory by "any legal means" and recalled its ambassador to Ethiopia after Addis Ababa struck a controversial deal with the breakaway region of Somaliland.

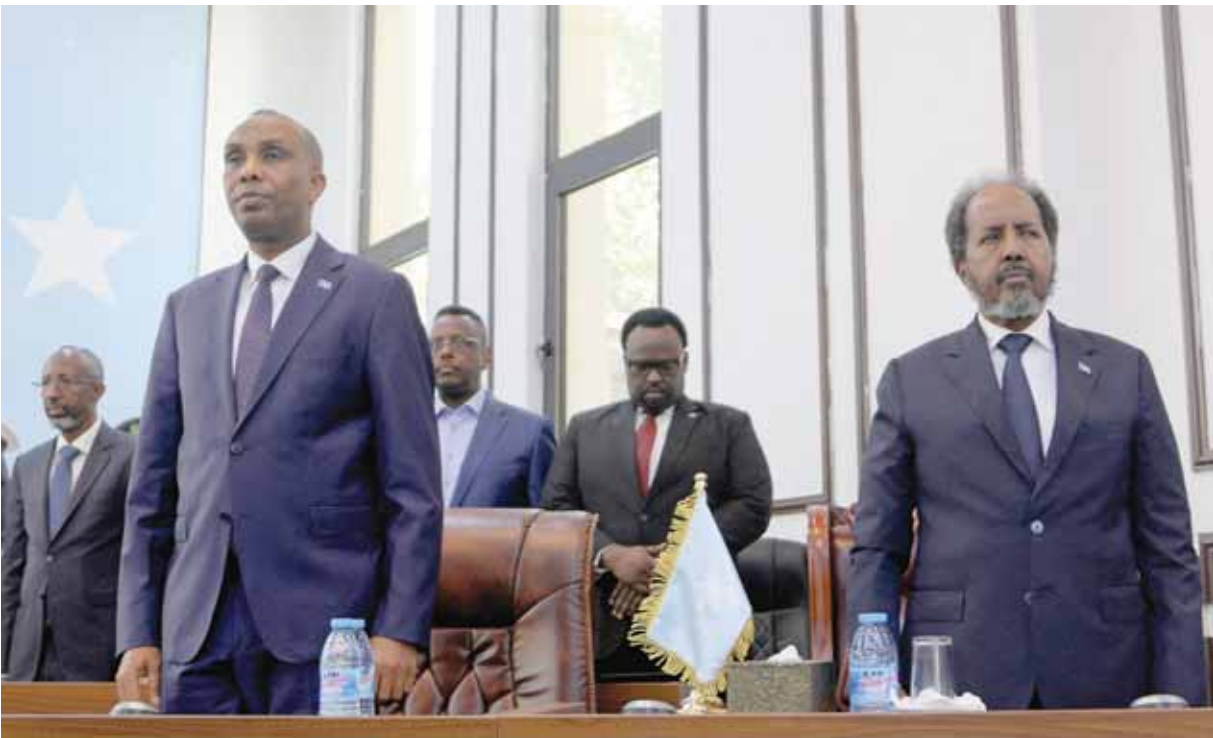
The Addis Ababa deal was announced only days after Somalia's central government agreed to resume dialogue with the separatist northern region after years of stalemate.

The "historic" memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somaliland leader Muse Bihi Abdi gives Ethiopia access to the Red Sea port of Berbera and a leased military base.

Abdi said in a statement that in return, Ethiopia would formally recognise Somaliland, becoming the first nation to do so.

The Somali cabinet insisted Somaliland remained a part of Somalia under the constitution "so Somalia finds this step to be a clear violation against its sovereignty and unity".

It said in a statement that the agreement was "null and void with no legal basis" and announced that it has recalled its ambassador to Ethiopia for



Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Somalia's Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre stand after addressing the Parliament regarding the Ethiopia-Somaliland port deal, in Mogadishu, Somalia. — Reuters

consultations.

The government also said it was calling for urgent meetings of the UN Security Council and the African Union to discuss "Ethiopia's aggression and interference against the sovereignty of our country".

In an address to the nation, Prime Minister Hamza Barre called for the people of Somalia to stay calm.

"I want to assure you that we

are committed to defending the country, we will not allow an inch of land, sea and skies to be violated," he said.

"We will defend our land with any legal means possible... We must unite and forget about our differences to defend our land, integrity and sovereignty."

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud made a similar declaration to parliament, rejecting the deal as a violation

of international laws but insisting Somalia bore the people of Somaliland no animosity.

There was no immediate comment from the Ethiopian government to Somalia's reaction.

The deal comes months after Abiy said his country, Africa's second most populous with about 120 million people, would assert its right to access the Red Sea, sparking concerns among its neighbours. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

MAUMERE

Thousands evacuated following volcano eruption

More than 2,000 residents have been evacuated to temporary shelters amid heightened volcanic activities in a volcano in eastern Indonesia, a local official said on Tuesday.

Mount Lewotobi Laki-Laki in East Nusa Tenggara province has erupted several times in recent weeks, including an eruption on Monday that spewed volcanic ash 1.5 kilometres above its peak, according to the Center for Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation (PVMBG).



The agency recorded another eruption from Lewotobi Laki-Laki on Tuesday but ash clouds from the volcano were not observed, it said in a statement.

— AFP

ISTANBUL

Türkiye detains 33 accused of spying for Israel

Türkiye announced on Tuesday it had detained 33 people suspected of planning abductions and spying on behalf of Israel's Mossad intelligence service.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said the suspects were rounded up in raids across Istanbul and seven other provinces.

Yerlikaya's office released video footage showing armed security service agents breaking down doors and handcuffing suspects in their homes.



The raids came weeks after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned of "serious consequences" should Israel attempt to target figures from Palestinian groups. — AFP

BANGKOK

Thailand to extend visa-free entry for tourists

Thailand will extend visa-free entry for Chinese visitors, Thai officials said on Tuesday, ensuring access to a key market that could boost the nation's battered tourism economy.

Bangkok granted Chinese tourists visa exemptions last year under a temporary scheme that was due to expire February 29.

Government spokesperson Chai Watcharong said the programme would be extended, after talks with Beijing which could also see Thais permitted to travel visa-free to China.



"We have reached an informal consensus that we would allow tourists from two countries to travel to one another permanently," he said in a press conference.

— AFP



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In brief

■ BERLIN



GERMANY EXTENDS DETENTION OF 2 IN COLOGNE PLOT

German authorities extended the detention of two suspects over an alleged New Year's plot to attack the cathedral in Cologne, which prompted heightened security at the site. One suspect is a 25-year-old from Tajikistan who was arrested before Christmas, and the other a suspected accomplice detained on Sunday. They can now be held for up to 14 more days for questioning, Cologne police said. Three other suspects arrested have been released. According to media reports, the suspects allegedly wanted to carry out strikes not only in Germany, but also in Vienna or Madrid. — AFP

■ WARSAW



POLAND SENDS F-16 FIGHTER JETS TO EASTERN BORDER

Poland said it had dispatched four F-16 fighter jets to its eastern border on Tuesday to protect its airspace after a barrage of Russian missile attacks on neighbouring Ukraine. "In order to ensure the safety of Polish airspace, two pairs of F-16 fighters and an allied air tanker were put into action," the Polish army said. During the last wave of deadly attacks on Ukraine on Friday, Poland said a Russian missile had passed through its airspace. According to the Polish army, data from the radar systems indicated that the missile was in Polish airspace for three minutes. — AFP

■ PARIS



EMBASSY IN NIGER CLOSED 'UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE'

France has closed down its embassy in Niger until further notice, the foreign ministry said on Tuesday, barely two weeks after the last French troops left the country in the wake of a coup that ousted a key Paris ally. "The French Embassy in Niger is now closed until further notice," the foreign ministry said in a statement, adding the mission would continue activities from Paris. It said that for the five months since the coup "our embassy has suffered serious obstacles making it impossible to carry out its missions" including a blockade around the mission. — AFP



The sign of Beijing Stock Exchange is seen at its entrance during an organised media tour, in Beijing, China. — Reuters file photo

China removes official after video games rules spark turmoil

BEIJING: China removed an official at a government body overseeing its press and publications regulator, five sources who were briefed on the matter said, days after Chinese gaming stocks were hit by proposed rules to curb spending on video games. Feng Shixin was removed last week from his position as head of the publishing unit of the Communist Party's Publicity Department, the sources said. The department oversees the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) which in turn regulates China's vast video games sector. China's State Council Information Office, which handles media queries on behalf of the Chinese government, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The sources said Feng's removal was linked to rules the NPPA announced last month that sent stocks in the world's largest video games sector, including industry giant Tencent, plunging. The sources declined to be identified as authorities had yet to officially announce Feng's departure. Feng has in recent years represented the Chinese

government at events to discuss authorities' efforts to regulate the industry, including game approvals and real-name verification requirements for gamers. Reuters was not able to establish how long he had served in his current role. The NPPA's proposed measures, which seek to curb spending and the use of rewards that encourage the playing of video games, triggered fears that authorities were once again cracking down heavily on the sector and wiped nearly \$80 billion off the market value of China's two biggest gaming companies. Analysts also said the plans brought the risks of potential regulatory changes back to the fore in the minds of investors, hurting confidence at a time when Beijing has been trying to boost private sector investment to spur a slowing economy. The NPPA struck a more conciliatory tone, saying it would improve them by "earnestly studying" public views. Beijing cracked down heavily on its video gaming sector in 2021, setting strict playtime limits for under 18s and suspending approvals of new video games for about eight months, citing gaming addiction concerns. — Reuters

Ukraine says downed all Russian Kinzhal missiles with Patriots



Rescuers evacuate a local resident from a residential building heavily damaged during a Russian missile attack, in Kyiv, Ukraine. — Reuters

KYIV: Ukraine said that US-supplied Patriot surface-to-air missile systems downed all 10 Kinzhal ballistic missiles Russia fired at the country in its large-scale attack on Tuesday. Kyiv earlier said Russia fired 99 missiles of different types on Ukraine -- aimed at the capital Kyiv and northeastern Kharkiv -- and that its air force shot down 72 of them. Kinzhal missiles make up part of an arsenal of weapons that Putin has claimed were indestructible because of the speed at which they travel. The attack prompted Ukraine to urge its Western allies to accelerate weapons deliveries. "Today, the Ukrainian air force downed 10 out of 10 Russian 'Kinzhal'... aeroballistic missiles with the help of the Patriot AD system," the Ukrainian army's commander-in-chief Valery Zaluzhny said on social media. "This is a record. If the missiles hit their targets, the consequences would be catastrophic." He thanked Ukraine's Western allies for supplying the weapons, adding: "There is no reason to

Kyiv has urged for more Western military support, worrying about war fatigue in some countries as the conflict drags on for almost two years

believe that the enemy will stop here. Therefore, we need more systems and munition for them." Ukraine has repeatedly said the Patriot air defence system is vital to defending the country from Russia. Kyiv has urged for more Western military support, worrying about war fatigue in some countries as the conflict drags on for almost two years. Russia's missile attack on Ukraine on Tuesday killed at least five people and wounded dozens in Kyiv and Kharkiv. The attack came the day after Russian leader Vladimir Putin vowed to intensify strikes on Ukraine and amid a sharp escalation from both sides in recent days. Meanwhile, deadly strikes hit residential buildings in Ukraine

and a Russian border region on Tuesday as an escalation of aerial attacks also wounded dozens and prompted Kyiv to urge speedier Western weapons shipments. The bombardment of Kyiv and northeastern Kharkiv came less than 24 hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed to step up strikes following an unprecedented Ukrainian attack on the Russian city of Belgorod. A fresh Ukrainian strike on Russia's border Belgorod region killed at least one person on Tuesday and wounded five, the local governor said. Moscow claimed to have struck only targeted military installations, but Ukraine's Defence Minister Rustem Umerov said Russia is deliberately hitting critical infrastructure and residential neighbourhoods. Tuesday's attacks came after an escalation in the war in recent days. Moscow attacked Ukraine with a barrage of drones on New Year's Eve. Ukraine is seeking assurances from its backers that military aid will continue as any new budget for support is stalled. — AFP

S Korean opposition leader recovers in intensive care after stabbing



South Korean opposition party leader Lee Jae-myung gets off from a helicopter on a stretcher to be transported to Seoul National University Hospital. — AFP

SEOUL: South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung was recovering in intensive care after he was stabbed in the neck on Tuesday by a man who pushed through a crowd pretending to be his supporter, his party said. Lee was surrounded by journalists when a man lunged and struck him on the left side of his neck, Busan police official Son Je-han said at a press briefing. Lee was first taken to hospital in Busan, then flown to the capital Seoul where he underwent a two-hour surgery, Kwon Chil-seung of Lee's Democratic Party told reporters. "Damage to the internal jugular vein was confirmed," Kwon said. Lee was conscious after the surgery and is "currently

admitted to the intensive care unit and is recovering", Kwon added. The attacker was arrested at

the scene. Police official Son told reporters that he was a man in his 60s who "used an 18-centimetre

knife -- its blade is 13 centimetres long -- which he purchased online". In footage aired on South Korean television stations, police were seen wrestling the suspect, who displayed a pro-Lee slogan, to the ground. South Korean authorities plan to bring attempted murder charges against the assailant, the Yonhap news agency reported. The attacker told the police, according to Yonhap, that his intention was to kill Lee. The 59-year-old politician was "walking to his car while talking to reporters when the attacker asked for his autograph", a witness told local broadcaster YTN. In TV footage, Lee was seen collapsing to the ground as people rushed to help him.

Yonhap earlier reported, citing fire department officials, that Lee suffered a one-centimetre laceration in the attack. Lee lost in 2022 to conservative Yoon Suk Yeol in the tightest presidential race in South Korea's history. Yoon expressed "deep concern" for Lee's safety after hearing of the attack, the president's spokeswoman Kim Soo-kyung said. "Yoon emphasised our society should never tolerate this kind of act of violence under any circumstances." A former child factory worker who suffered an industrial accident as a teenage school drop-out, Lee rose to political stardom partly by playing up his rags-to-riches tale. — AFP

Oman-Singapore relations scale greater heights



Ali Al Matani
alimatani2@gmail.com

The recent state visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to Singapore has great significance at political and economic levels, and embodies an elevation of the historical relations with Singapore, which date back to more than 115 years. Such historical relations have been practically reflected in naming the most important street of Singapore’s capital in 1909, after Muscat - the capital of the Sultanate of Oman - out of respect and appreciation for the development in bilateral relations over the past 114 years. This is a clear evidence of the authenticity of the two countries and their historical heritage.

The presence of a street named ‘Muscat’ in the heart of Singapore carries a considerable significance for the high status and importance of Oman. The street, which is decorated with frescoes that embody many of the cultural features and natural components of Oman, expresses the gratitude of the Singaporean government and people to Oman and its people.

Also the presence of the ‘Jewel of Muscat’ ship in the Sentosa Island Museum, which sailed from Muscat to the ports of Singapore carrying the flags of amenity and love for the friendly Singaporean people, carries the same considerable significance of the strong relations between the two countries.

This ship was a gift from the late Sultan Qaboos to Singapore after the historic journey it made to explore the Maritime Silk Road, which is a symbol of the authentic trading history. This gift represents a documentation of these historical relations and their

steady development in the political and economic fields, as Singapore is the fifth trading partner of Oman.

The value of Omani exports reached RO 576 million, according to data recorded at the end of September last year. The visit has contributed in strengthening the relations between the two friendly countries to enhance cooperation, and push them forward, in line with the national developments aimed at pursuing efforts to build bridges of cooperation and open broader horizons with world countries.

The efforts to elevate the relations between the two countries also come in response to the current regional and international developments that require more understanding as part of efforts to consolidate the foundations of global and regional peace, and in a way that benefits the world’s peoples. These Omani efforts to expand cooperation relations with the world countries are commendable and conform with the humanitarian and international principles and values through joint work to end conflicts so that nations could devote themselves to achieving development and prosperity.

The visit of His Majesty to Singapore was preceded by many positive developments that took place over the past years in bilateral fields since February 1985. There have been successive developments to strengthen these relations and the diplomatic representation was elevated to the level of embassies in December 2022.

The two countries share commonalities represented in mutual respect and faith based on the principle

THE PRESENCE OF THE ‘JEWEL OF MUSCAT’ IN THE SENTOSA ISLAND MUSEUM CARRIES CONSIDERABLE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STRONG RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES

of non-interference in the internal affairs of others, and support of just international issues, as they both have taken honourable stand at various international fora in the service of human aspirations on issues of environment, heritage and civilisation, and to promote and extend bridges of amenity between nations.

Moreover, they also seek to consolidate human values in all aspects of life all over the world, out of the belief of the leadership of the two countries that humanity must be proved by actions, and not by mere speeches and promises, as well as exerting necessary efforts to ensure the welfare of nations and attain progress and prosperity.

At the economic level, the Sultanate of Oman and Singapore together have a long history of solid economic cooperation. This was positively reflected in increase in rates of economic transactions to significant levels, as the Sultanate of Oman is Singapore’s seventh trading partner in the Middle East and Africa and ranked 55th in the world as the largest trading partner.

The size of trade exchange between the two countries reached 1.36 billion Singapore dollars. The commercial dealings are focused on export of oil, gas and petrochemical products, while importing spare parts, motor oils and other products, while the number of Singaporean companies registered in Oman stand at 24, with total investments amounting to RO 55.8 million.

At the cultural level, Omani-Singaporean relations have a large wealth of cultural heritage and there is historical evidence that confirms such deep-rooted relations between the two nations.

Who is Vivek Ramaswamy, 2024 US presidential candidate?

TIM REID

Vivek Ramaswamy, a multimillionaire former biotech executive, hopes to jump-start his ebbing 2024 Republican presidential bid with a stronger-than-expected showing on January 15 in the Iowa caucus, the first state Republican nominating contest.

Ramaswamy, 38, was born in Ohio to immigrant parents from southern India. He was raised in the Hindu faith of his parents, but went to a Roman Catholic high school. He earned a biology degree at Harvard University before attending Yale Law School.

Ramaswamy worked as a hedge fund investor and says he had already made several million dollars before graduating from Yale. In 2014, he founded his own biotech company, Roivant Sciences, which bought patents from larger companies for drugs that had yet to be fully developed and marketed. He resigned as CEO in 2021. In 2023, the business magazine *Forbes* estimated Ramaswamy’s wealth at \$630 million.

Ramaswamy says he was a libertarian during college. While at Harvard, he would perform libertarian-themed rap songs under the stage name Da Vek. He has reprised some of his rap skills on the campaign trail this year. His performance of Eminem’s “Lose Yourself” at the Iowa State Fair in August went viral on social media.

Ramaswamy says he voted for a libertarian in the 2004 presidential election, but did not vote in 2008, 2012 or 2016. He has contributed to Republican and Democratic candidates. He says he voted in 2020 for then-president Donald Trump, the overwhelming frontrunner for the party nomination in 2024.

In recent years Ramaswamy has become a fierce conservative. In his 2021 bestseller “Woke, Inc.,” Ramaswamy decries decisions by some big companies to base business strategy around social justice and climate change concerns and assails “wokeism” as an insidious influence on hard work, capitalism, religious faith and patriotism. The book raised his profile among conservatives, and he began his rapid ascent as a right-wing star. — **Reuters**

Tshisekedi fights poll fraud accusations with ‘spirit of openness’



Ange Kasongo

The writer is Reuters correspondent in DRC

When Democratic Republic of Congo’s President Felix Tshisekedi was declared the winner of another disputed election on Sunday, he pledged to be a leader for all its 100 million people.

However, accusations by opposition leaders of electoral fraud and political repression will likely cloud his second term as it did the first. His main rivals rejected Sunday’s outcome before it was announced and called for a rerun.

Speaking to supporters at his campaign headquarters in the capital, Kinshasa, Tshisekedi appealed for unity.

“It is with a spirit of openness that I’ll govern during this second term,” Tshisekedi told a jubilant crowd, adding that he would focus on creating jobs, security and a more diversified and competitive economy.

The result sets the stage for a tense political standoff with the potential for the kind of violence that followed contested polls in 2018, 2011 and 2006.

There could also be international ramifications. Congo is the world’s top supplier of cobalt, used in making batteries for electric vehicles and cell phones, and its third-biggest copper producer.

Tshisekedi, 60, son of longtime opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi, inherited his father’s substantial support base on his death in 2017 after years in the shadows.

However, vote tallies reviewed by Reuters at the time from Congo’s Roman Catholic Church, which had a 40,000-strong team of observers, showed second-placed opposition candidate Martin Fayulu as the victor in 2018.

Fayulu suspected that Tshisekedi had struck a deal with outgoing president Joseph Kabila, who was prevented from running by term limits. Fayulu denounced the result as a “constitutional coup d’etat”, which Tshisekedi and



President Felix Tshisekedi (C) delivers speech in front of supporters after the announcement of the election results in Gombe, Kinshasa, on Saturday. – **Reuters**

Kabila both dismissed. With Kabila’s help, Tshisekedi was able to garner much-needed support in parliament and security institutions in his first years in office. But the alliance quickly fell apart as he moved to strengthen his hand by placing supporters in key positions.

When he launched his campaign for re-election, Tshisekedi told supporters he

TSHISEKEDI, SON OF LONGTIME OPPOSITION LEADER ETIENNE TSHISEKEDI, INHERITED HIS FATHER’S SUBSTANTIAL SUPPORT BASE ON HIS DEATH IN 2017 AFTER YEARS IN THE SHADOWS

needed more time to consolidate gains and deliver on promises to roll back decades of authoritarian rule, root out corruption, rebuild the economy, tackle inequalities and deal with a prolonged security crisis in Congo’s east.

“In just two years we have been able to do all of these actions that you have seen, but we can do better,” Tshisekedi told a

packed Kinshasa stadium on November 19, adding that his first two years in office were constrained by the power-sharing arrangement with Kabila.

Critics, however, said Tshisekedi had fallen short and accused him of stifling dissent, as his predecessors had done.

A group of nine rival presidential candidates, including Fayulu and opposition frontrunner Moise Katumbi, asked supporters on Sunday to take to the streets to protest what they called a “sham election”.

While economic growth rose sharply under Tshisekedi’s watch, largely due to demand for key minerals, little of the proceeds reached the around 62 per cent of Congo’s population who live on less than a dollar a day.

The cost of living soared as the Congolese franc depreciated, with annual inflation running at over 30 per cent in December, according to the country’s statistics institute.

Although Tshisekedi declared a state of siege in two eastern provinces in May 2021 and increased defence spending, his administration struggled to contain the numerous armed groups behind attacks that have killed thousands of people and displaced nearly 7 million in the east.

Violence against children must end

We're in 2024 after a sad and happy, good and bad, 12-month season. We look forward with more optimism that the year ahead will be better than the year that just ended!

However, even when sparklers and fireworks lit up skies across the world to welcome 2024, experiences from the past few years still haunt many of us. It reminds us that unexpected developments like the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine, or the war in Gaza can wreck the most optimistic forecasts!

Although we could survive the threat of the coronavirus, efforts to end conflicts and wars are failing. On some battlefields, peace-making is non-existent or going nowhere!

On the contrary, more people around the world are dying in fighting, being forced from their homes, or in need of life-saving aid than in decades. Only a few places in those war-torn territories were left to mark the New Year, and there were fewer loved ones to celebrate with.

Israel has already warned its war will continue throughout 2024, as unrelenting strikes killed two dozen people in Gaza and the Palestinian group fired a rocket barrage at the stroke of midnight.

What the warring leaderships forget to acknowledge is that children living in war-affected countries live in constant fear, experiencing grave violations of their rights with serious impacts on their mental health.

Today, as we witness, the nature of conflict and its impact on children have evolved. There have been deliberate campaigns of violence against civilians, including the targeting of schools, the abduction and enslavement of girls, and deliberate starvation.

Many children living in lethal war zones are already at risk of climate change and are facing unprecedented levels of hunger as well. Heavy bombardment and destruction led to the denial of their basic rights to education.

Throughout the year, as Unicef pointed out, children around the world have faced rampant violations and denials of their rights.



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyvp

The writer is a senior journalist, author and columnist

"In the entirety of my more than 25-year career, it is hard to recall a year in which the situation facing children affected by conflict and disaster has been as dire as the one we are currently witnessing. The horrendous situation in Gaza, which shakes us to the core of our humanity, exemplifies this," Unicef Deputy Executive Director Ted Chaiban said at a press briefing in Geneva on December 15.

In a report, the UN body said that at least a thousand children in Gaza have had their limbs amputated without anesthesia since the war began on October 7. It added that the continued shelling of Gaza would mean green lighting and the killing of more children.

The Gaza Strip, according to a report, is gradually being erased, along with its families, its people, its children, and their smiles and laughter. This has been happening despite repeated appeals by the UN for a ceasefire, saying there are no safe areas within the strip.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in November that "Gaza is becoming a graveyard for children." According to the UN, there was no way to get out for civilians who have been displaced multiple times since October and are running out of food, water, and medical supplies.

In a recent social media report, UNRWA , another UN agency, said that over 150,000 people, including young children, women carrying babies, people with disabilities, and the elderly, have nowhere to go.

Half of the displaced are children who are now struggling with dehydration, malnutrition, respiratory and skin diseases, and extreme cold, the statement added. Some 50,000 pregnant women, meanwhile, are suffering from thirst and malnutrition.

Yet even as wars continue, we must never accept attacks on children. We must hold warring parties to their obligation to protect children and hold those who disregard international laws and standards to account.

Otherwise, it is children, their families, and their communities who will continue to suffer the devastating consequences, for now and for years to come.

WE MUST NEVER ACCEPT ATTACKS ON CHILDREN. WE MUST HOLD WARRING PARTIES TO THEIR OBLIGATION TO PROTECT CHILDREN AND HOLD THOSE WHO DISREGARD LAWS AND STANDARDS TO ACCOUNT

ILLUMINATING THE SKY



A reindeer is seen in front of the northern lights (aurora borealis) illuminating the sky above a Sami camp outside the village of Breivikeidet near Tromso, Norway, beyond the Arctic Circle on Tuesday. – AFP

Japan earthquake shatters New Year calm

Waiting in the cold, hundreds of residents of the earthquake-hit Japanese town of Shika stood in a queue to get rations of a suddenly scarce, but vital, commodity: drinking water.

The line snaked out the door and around the town hall building, past paving stones jutting out of the ground that were forced upwards by the powerful series of tremors on New Year's Day.

Taps ran dry in many homes as dozens of aftershocks rocked Shika and other towns in the central Ishikawa region following a 7.5-magnitude earthquake.

Among those waiting for their six allocated litres of water on Tuesday was Tsugumasa Mihara, who said that the huge jolt was unlike anything he had experienced before.

The 73-year-old had just given his grandchildren a traditional New Year's Day gift of pocket money and was taking a nap when he was rattled awake by the quake.

"I was just helpless," he said. "All I could do at the time was pray that it would end soon."

The earthquake left broken dishes scattered in his kitchen, but no one was hurt in Mihara's family and his



Tomohiro Osaki

The writer is Japan Correspondent for AFP

AFTER THE MAIN SHOCKWAVE ON MONDAY PEOPLE IN THE WORST-HIT AREAS WERE URGED TO EVACUATE AS AUTHORITIES WARNED OF THE POSSIBILITY OF LARGE TSUNAMI WAVES

home still has electricity. Now, "the problem is water".

Yuko, a 58-year-old resident, was also waiting for water, handed out in small plastic packets by a masked official in a blue jacket. "I was on the second floor watching TV when the quake struck," she said, adding that she had to hold on to the screen to stop it from toppling over.

"I feared for my life of course, but I couldn't just run away, because I live with my family."

The spate of earthquakes toppled large buildings, triggered a tsunami of more than a metre and saw a huge fire sparked in the city of Wajima, razing part of a market area.

By Tuesday, at least 48 people had been confirmed dead in the disaster, which left deep cracks in concrete and brought down entire wooden homes so only their tiled roofs lay on the ground.

After the main shockwave on Monday -- a public holiday in Japan, when loved ones gather to ring in the New Year -- people in the worst-hit areas were urged to evacuate as authorities warned of the

possibility of large tsunami waves.

There was an eerie quiet in a no-go area for vehicles near Shika, where journalists saw an abandoned car stuck in a crack in the road. Residents queued outside supermarkets to stock up on supplies, but some convenience stores were closed because there had been

no product deliveries. A sign at one store told customers: "We're closed today. We're evacuating."

Relief efforts were under way, with construction workers trying to mend road cracks with heavy machinery as rescue, army and police vehicles rushed to the scene.

A family, including

grandparents and children, stood outside a tilted traditional wooden home in Wajima.

The children's mother Akiko, 46, described the earthquake as "long and violent" and said they could not return to their home because the roads were blocked.

"Even if we do manage to return home, I don't think we can go back to normal any time soon" because of the scarcity of basic necessities such as water, she said.

The family and their neighbours go to a nearby evacuation centre to relieve themselves, using plastic bags placed in toilets, with the bags changed out manually by residents when full.

"I'm worried about potential infections," Akiko said.

The start of 2024 would, she said, "be etched into my memory forever".

"I was reminded of how precious leading a normal life is," she added.

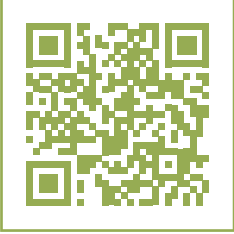
"We've experienced the absolute worst, so... now I will just move forwards, trying to get our life back".



Residents clean up debris in Wajima, Ishikawa prefecture on Tuesday, a day after a major 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck the Noto region in Ishikawa prefecture in the afternoon. – AFP

sport

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Best venue for domestic, regional
and international hockey events: Al Rawas

Significant step in Oman’s
hockey history: Dr Marwan

Oman’s new hockey stadium set for mega events

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 2

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth has handed over the Oman’s newly-built state-of-the-art hockey stadium located in Al Amerat. The venue is in best shape and full readiness to host the inaugural edition of men’s and women’s FIH Hockey5s World Cup matches from January 24 to 31.

Ahead of world class hockey event start, the new hockey arena will be under good rehearsal for FIH Men’s Olympic Qualifier tournament from January 15 to 21. As many as eight teams including Germany, New Zealand, Canada, Chile, England, Malaysia, Pakistan and China will vie for the three direct spots to the Paris Olympics 2024 in the same venue that will host the Hockey World Cup. The first official match that will be played in the new stadium will be between Germany and Canada on January 15. The match will start at 2 pm (Oman time).

The hockey stadium is an outdoor sporting arena comprised from a main stadium for hockey sport. It has other facilities including a warm-up pitch and the stadium was built as per the approved standards of FIH. The provided facilities in the stadium are: administration offices, players changing rooms, first aid area, rooms for referees and judges, special access for security people, main platform designated for VIPs and the fans’ stands, as well as a special platform for television broadcasting and other facilities

in the complex.

The arena can accommodate more than 5,000 spectators and the construction has just been completed. The seating area for spectators are removable and could be used in other stadiums as well for any future events and tournaments. The venue was designed and built according to the international rules and standards of FIH and based to the accumulative expertise of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

GREAT VENUE

Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary for Sports and Youth at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, said that the hockey facility is fully ready for top events. “The newly-built stadium will act as great venue for the domestic hockey competitions and tournaments besides its capability to host the regional and international levels of hockey events. The project was delivered within five months since its beginning of the construction works by the contractor. The closest event that will be hosted in this venue will be FIH Men’s Olympic Qualifier tournament and will be followed by the men’s and women’s FIH Hockey5s World Cup,” Al Rawas said.

The chairman of Organising Committee of Men’s and Women’s FIH Hockey5s World Cup affirmed that availability of strong sports infrastructure will boost hockey sport in the Sultanate of Oman. “This new stadium will be added as an



The newly built hockey arena in Al Amerat. – Hussein al Muqballi



The Main Organising Committee meeting of Hockey5s World Cup in progress.

additional accomplishment to the sports development projects. Furthermore, the ministry is busy currently in converting His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s directions to begin steps to carry out a project for establishing an integrated Sports City capable of hosting regional and international events,” he added.

Dr Marwan bin Juma al Juma, Chairman of Oman Hockey Association (OHA), said that the facility acts as a significant step in

Oman’s sports history in general and hockey sport in special. “This huge project will serve a lot to the domestic hockey through developing the national hockey competitions and championships besides boosting the technical performance of the national teams. Furthermore, this project will provide special attention to the junior category players through establishing an academy for hockey to accommodate the potential players,” he signed out.

Oman to host ITF Asia U14 qualifiers from Jan 8

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 2

The Oman Tennis Association will host the West and Central Asia regional qualifying tournaments for the International Tennis Federation (ITF) Asia 14 and Under Development Championships 2024 at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex tennis courts from January 8 to 16.

Unveiling the details of the tournament at the Oman Olympic Committee headquarters on Tuesday, tournament director Mohammed al Balushi said players from eight countries would compete in the two tournaments for boys and girls that will have ranking points.

Apart from hosts Oman, players from Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen are expected to take part in the event. “The invited countries can send two boys and three girls for the tournaments that will have singles and doubles competitions,” Al Balushi said.

The Sultanate of Oman is hosting international tennis events after a gap of nearly six



The OTA officials and players during the press conference to unveil the details of the ITF U14 West and Central Asia regional qualifiers. – Abdulwahid al Hamadani

years. Oman last hosted Davis Cup Asia Group 4 Championships which Oman emerged champions in 2018.

The qualifying event will consist of two tournaments from January 8 to 11 and January 13 to 16 respectively.

An ITF team will be selected

from the West and Central Asia qualifying event that include two top boys and two top girls plus one coach.

All singles matches will be the best of three tie-break sets. In doubles, a 10-point match tie-break will be played at one set. Two nations from the qualifiers will be

promoted to the finals of 2025. The four lowest-ranked nations based on the standings at the finals in 2024 will be relegated to the regional qualifying events of 2025.

OMAN TEAM

Oman’s 11-year-old girl’s player Talya al Busaidi and 12-year-old

boy’s player Motaz al Mazroui attended the press conference.

The players expressed confidence to make an impact at the regional qualifying event. “This will be a good opportunity for us to improve our rankings and gain international experience,” the players said. Oman boys

coach Sofiane Doub from Algeria announced the team list for the event.

Abdul Rahman al Rahbi and Motaz al Mazroui will compete in the boys section, while Areen al Azkawi, Talya al Busaidi and Salma al Riyami are in fray for the girl’s category.

Regarding the team’s preparations, the coach said the team continues its daily training on the tennis courts at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

“The training programme included daily exercises and an internal camp that lasted for several days, during which the players were well prepared, and this programme will continue until the start of the tournament,” Doub said.

Oman girls coach Sergey Pershian from Russia enthused that it will be a great opportunity for the budding players from Oman.

“We hope to make the most of it as the girls are excited to give their best performance in the ITF qualifiers,” Pershian told the Observer. “This event will give a welcome encouragement to the junior tennis scene in the country as well,” he added.

NADAL BACK WITH KEY WIN OVER THIEM

BRISBANE, Australia: Rafael Nadal won his first match back from a year-long injury layoff when he beat former US Open champion Dominic Thiem at the Brisbane International on Tuesday, calling it an “emotional and important day”.

The 22-time Grand Slam winner looked in superb touch with a clinical 7-5, 6-1 victory over the Austrian in front of a full house at Pat Rafter Arena.

He will now play Jason Kubler in the second round after the Australian wildcard progressed when Aslan Karatsev was forced to withdraw injured with the scores locked at one set apiece.

The 37-year-old Spaniard had not played singles since a second-round loss at the Australian Open last year, undergoing two rounds of hip surgery.

“Today, honestly, is an emotional and important day for me after probably one of the toughest years of my tennis career, without a doubt,” he said. “To have the chance to come back after a year and play in front of an amazing crowd, and play I think at a very positive level for the first day is something that makes us feel proud.”

The former world number one did concede the result could have been very different.

“I know I have been practising okay in the last week, practising I think at a positive level,” Nadal said. “I’m talking with my hand on my heart and being very honest with all of you. You really at the end hope that you’re going to play at this level, but inside yourself you know that it can be a disaster, and that, of course, worried me.”

The long layoff raised fears that his career could be over, but Nadal said this week he was always



determined to make it back for the 2024 season.

He conceded before the match there was “a high percentage” that it would be his last season, but left the door open to play on should his body hold up. “I missed being healthy, I missed feeling competitive and to play in front of full crowds like this,” he said courtside after beating Thiem in 89 minutes.

Nadal spent time at his academy in Kuwait to prepare for the

Australian summer and trained there with fast-rising French teen Arthur Fils. He looked like he had never been away as he lost only six points on serve throughout the match and made few unforced errors in an almost perfect display against a quality opponent.

HARD TIMES

Former world number three Thiem, who has had injury concerns of his own, came through qualifying to make the main draw

and matched Nadal throughout the first set.

But at 6-5 and with the set looking certain to go to a tie-break, Nadal stepped up the pressure on Thiem’s serve, forcing a series of errors and eventually winning the set when a Thiem forehand sailed long.

Nadal then seized the advantage, holding his serve to love and then breaking Thiem to take a 2-0 lead in the second set.

The Austrian’s head then seemed

to drop as Nadal lifted even further, wrapping up the match easily.

“I think the first set was very equal, both of us serving well and then I was able to have that break for 6-5,” he said. “I know Dominic has been going through hard times with injuries too, so happy to see him on court, wish him all the very best for the season.”

Earlier, fifth-seeded American Sebastian Korda and Argentinian sixth seed Sebastian Baez both crashed out.

Germany’s Yannick Hanfmann downed Korda 7-5, 6-4 while Baez lost to Lukas Klein, with the Slovakian qualifier winning 4-6, 6-3, 6-4.

In the women’s draw, former world number one Victoria Azarenka came back from second set jitters to see off Russia’s Anna Kalinskaya 6-1, 7-6 (10/8), while Sofia Kenin, a former Australian Open winner, was stunned by Australian wildcard Arina Rodionova 7-5, 7-6 (9/7). — AFP

Rooney hit hard by ‘setback’ after Birmingham sacking

LONDON: Wayne Rooney said it would “take some time to get over this setback” after he was sacked as manager of Championship side Birmingham City on Tuesday following a disastrous spell in charge.

The 38-year-old former Manchester United and England star was appointed in October but oversaw just two wins in 15 matches with Monday’s 3-0 thumping by Leeds, their ninth defeat under him, proving the final straw.

Birmingham — who have NFL legend Tom Brady as a minority shareholder — are embroiled in a battle against relegation, slumping to 20th from sixth since Rooney took over. “Despite their best efforts, results have not met the expectations that were made clear at the outset,” read a statement from the club.

“Therefore, the board feels that a change in management is in the best interests of the football club.”

Rooney replaced John Eustace, who was sacked just after he had guided Birmingham to two successive wins which propelled them into the play-off places.

“Football is a results business — and I recognise they have not been at the level I wanted them to be,” said Rooney.

“However, time is the most precious commodity a manager requires and I do not believe 13 weeks was sufficient to oversee the changes that were needed.

“Personally, it will take me some time to get over this setback.

“I have been involved in professional football, as either a player or manager, since I was 16.

“Now, I plan to take some



time with my family as I prepare for the next opportunity in my journey as a manager.”

Rooney’s chequered managerial career is in stark contrast to his stellar playing days. He was credited with doing a decent job at Derby in tricky circumstances.

He saved them from relegation in 2021 — by a point — after four months in the role.

However, his first full season in charge (2021/22) the club was penalised 21 points for being in administration and English Football League breaches, while they were barred from dealing in the transfer market.

Although they made a decent fight of it they were relegated to the third tier League One and Rooney left in June 2022 with the club still in administration.

His next destination was the MLS club DC United in July 2022.

They finished bottom of the Eastern Conference, but they improved in the 2023 campaign, finishing 12th.

His overall record, though, as a manager is unimpressive with just 41 victories and 73 defeats in 152 matches. — AFP

Injury worries for Djokovic, Tsitsipas as Serbia advance

PERTH, Australia: Novak Djokovic insisted on Tuesday a sore right wrist which required on-court treatment was “not a major concern” as he led Serbia into the quarterfinals of the United Cup.

The world number one dropped a set in grinding past the Czech Republic’s Jiri Lehecka 6-1, 6-7 (3/7), 6-1 and required several visits from the trainer.

He did not take part in the deciding mixed doubles, instead watching from the team bench as Olga Danilovic and Hamad Medjedovic defeated Czech pair Miriam Kolodziejova and Petr Nouza 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 10-8. It put Serbia into a last-eight clash with Australia on Wednesday.

The result means that defending champions the United States are out, with one more day of quarterfinal play in Perth to go before the event shifts to a weekend finish in Sydney.

“It happened in the warm-up today before the match,” said Djokovic of the wrist issue, which comes barely a week ahead of his defence of the Australian Open.

“I basically got constant treatment before the match, during the match, after the match, you know, trying to address the issue that I’m facing today in the best possible way.

“I know professional sport in general, these things happen. I think it’s not a major concern, because I still managed to finish the match and managed to play well, even though I maybe wasn’t feeling 100 per cent.



Novak Djokovic of Serbia during the United Cup match against Czech Republic’s Jiri Lehecka.

“Hopefully I’ll have enough time to recover for tomorrow’s tie against Australia,” added the 24-time Grand Slam champion.

Czech Wimbledon winner Marketa Vondrousova started the tie by defeating Danilovic 6-1, 3-6, 6-3, handing Djokovic a comeback assignment as he took on Lehecka to take it to the deciding doubles.

“It was amazing, I didn’t have luck in singles but thank God we have Novak with us,” Danilovic said after sending Serbia through in the doubles.

The 113th-ranked Medjedovic added: “I know how tired Olga was, she gave everything she could, and did it for us.”

Poland will face China in the other Perth quarterfinal on Wednesday.

LOWER BACK PAIN

In Sydney, Stefanos Tsitsipas, beaten by Djokovic in the Australian Open final last year, also struggled with an injury, to the lower back. The Greek world number six was expected to meet Chilean number one Nicolas Jarry, but sat it out, leaving teammate Stefanos Sakellaris to step up.

Sakellaris, just 19 years old and ranked 416, put up an outstanding fight against the 19th-ranked Jarry, but fell short 6-3, 3-6, 7-5.

Greek world number eight Maria Sakkari had earlier earned a commanding 6-0, 6-1 victory over Chile’s outclassed Daniela Seguel.

Tsitsipas returned for the crucial mixed doubles decider with Sakkari, but they lost 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 10-6 to Seguel and Marcelo Tomas

Barrios Vera.

“It’s amazing, amazing,” Barrios Vera said. “It’s our second match as a team, so we’re super happy.”

Tsitsipas, who reached the Australian Open final last year, losing to Djokovic, was clearly struggling on serve late in the match, grimacing as he held his back. While watching Sakkari’s singles, he told the host broadcaster “there are a few chances I might not play and there are a few chances that I might” against Chile. “I’m kinda 50-50 so far. We’ll wait and see.”

In the other Sydney tie, Donna Vekic and Borna Coric overcame Arantxa Rus and Tallon Griekspoor respectively to give Croatia an unassailable 2-0 lead over the Netherlands. — AFP

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 2

The Oman Desert Marathon is set to make a return for its ninth edition, taking place from January 20 to 23 in the sands of Al Sharqiyah North Governorate in the northeast region.

Organisers have officially opened registration, inviting participants to engage in one of the world’s most challenging running events.

This annual marathon, known for its extreme conditions and breathtaking landscapes, spans a distance of 165 kilometres, demanding exceptional endurance from each participant. The race unfolds against the backdrop of the Omani desert, offering a truly unique and immersive experience as runners navigate their way through golden dunes and enchanting terrains.

In addition to the main 165 km Classic Desert Race, the event offers a range of race categories catering to diverse preferences and abilities. Participants can choose from the 2 km Children’s Race, 5 km Family Race, 10 km Suburb Penetration Race, Half Marathon 21 km, and Marathon 42 km. The event is sponsored by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, with collaborative support from various government and private entities.

The race gains great fame year after year by attracting more than 700 runners from various countries of the world. To embark on an unparalleled adventure in the embrace of the picturesque terrain of the Omani desert, allowing them to experience an unforgettable physical experience amidst a vast expanse of enchanting surrounding scenery extending between the golden sand.

The marathon, starting from Al Wasil in the Wilayat of Bidiyah, is divided into four stages, each spanning distances of 42 km, 55 km, 47 km (Night Stage), and 21 km respectively. The course offers a picturesque

OMAN DESERT MARATHON GEARS UP FOR NINTH EDITION



route, passing historical forts and castles in the village of Al Wasil, navigating through towering sand dunes, and providing runners with an immersive desert experience.

The night stage adds a magical touch, with the desert’s enchanting charm and a sky adorned with glittering stars serving as the perfect conclusion. Then, the participants will rest at the Jowhar Bidiyah Resort at the finish line.

Saeed bin Mohammed al Hajri, head of the organising committee, said: “The Oman Desert Marathon course is uniquely designed to provide an unparalleled and realistic desert experience. The Sultanate of Oman’s stunning landscapes, from breathtaking mountains to desert dunes and magnificent valleys, offer marathon runners a perfect and unprecedented adventure.”

During the ODM, the participants must rely entirely on themselves, carrying all the race equipment except for water distributed at checkpoint locations, which are spaced 10 kilometres apart. This represents a real challenge for the runner, who will carry provisions sufficient for four days and cover a distance of 165 km. However, it is an adventure that is worth the effort and allows participants to immerse themselves in an authentic desert experience.

‘Sapa’ claims dagger in RCC camel race

‘AWON’, ‘BASHAYER’, AND ‘SHOWAHEAN’, WERE PURCHASED BY ROYAL CAMEL CORPS

WALEED AL JAHWARI
BARKA, JAN 2

‘Sapa’, owned by Hijan Al Bashayer, snatched the dagger on the opening day of the general camel race in Barka on Tuesday. ‘Awon’, owned by Naseer al Darei, ‘Bashayer’, owned by Saleh al Jenaibi and ‘Showahean’, owned by Waleed al Rushidi, were purchased by Royal Camel Corps (RCC).

The general race competitions will continue till January 4 at Al Fulaij Race field in Barka, supported by the Royal Court Affairs represented by Royal Camel Corps (RCC) and organised by Oman Camel Racing Federation (OCRFF).

As many as 75 races will be held over three days and a number of camels will qualify to the final race (HM cups), which will be held in March to conclude camel racing season 2023-24.

The first day witnessed 25 races dedicated to ‘Hagayeg’ category, two years old over a distance of 4 km, the top two winners qualified to HM Cup Festival from the first 11 races. The RCC purchased three camels that achieved the best record in

the category. ‘Sapa’ won the race title, owned by Hijan Al Bashayer, coached by Khalifa al Wahibi. In the second race, ‘Shawaheen’ came first, owned by Waleed al Rashidi. The third race was won by ‘Al Hazba’, owned by Said al Jadaili. The fourth race was won by ‘Marmoqa’, owned by Saud al Jabri, the fifth race was won

by ‘Shawaheen’, owned by Saif al Omari. ‘Al Bashayer’, owned by Mahmoud al Junaibi, won the sixth race.

In the seventh race, ‘Qyadah’, owned by Hamad al Wahibi, bagged the top place, ‘Al Hada’, owned by Hamad al Bartmani, won the eighth race, ‘Harba’, owned by Hamad al Omari, came

first in the ninth race and the tenth race award was snatched by ‘Razan’, owned by Ahmed al Darei.

In the 11th race, ‘Legend’, owned by Masoud al Saadi, was the winner, ‘Mawari’, owned by Hamad al Maliki, came top in the 12th race, ‘Fayda’, owned by Abdullah al Jahafi claimed

the 13th race honours, the 14th race was won by ‘Ather’, owned by Nasser al Dohani, the 15th race prize was snatched by ‘Al Nashmiya’, owned by Salem al Rashidi, the 16th race was won by ‘Elag’, owned by Ahmed al Mughairi and the 17th race top spot was claimed by ‘Khareamah’, owned by Mubarak al Jadaili.

‘Kaifan’, owned by Mubarak al Jadaili won the 18th race, ‘Skillful’, owned by Ali al Ghailani came top in the 19th race, ‘Shaheen’, owned by Abdullah al Rashidi, finished first in the 20th race, ‘Hamalul’, owned by Mohammed al Omari, took the top spot in the 21st race, ‘Hajam’, owned by Ahmed al Ghufaili, came first in 22nd race, ‘Hamalul’, owned by Shihab al Mubihisi, claimed the 23rd race honours, ‘Al Hanish’, owned by Hamid al Jahafi, bagged the 24th race prize, and ‘Adham’, owned by Nasser al Harthy, won the 25th and concluding race.

Abdullah bin Amer al Hajri, Assistant Director-General of RCC, said, “We have completed the first day’s competitions with great participation and the number of participating camels exceeded a thousand.”





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Two major initial public offerings (IPOs), improved non-oil activity, and increased foreign investor participation offered glimmers of hope for the future.

MSX30 index declines 7.1 per cent in 2023

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 2

Oman's benchmark stock market index, the MSX30, ended 2023 with a 7.1-per cent decline, largely burdened by the global oil price slump. However, two major initial public offerings (IPOs), improved non-oil activity, and increased foreign investor participation offered glimmers of hope for the future.

The MSX30 index closed 2023 down by 7.1 per cent year-on-year (YoY) at 4514.07, while the MSX total return index was down 3 per cent to close the year at 5,950.08. The index closed the year in negative territory breaking the trend of the last two years.

The oil price downside was the main culprit behind the MSX30's lackluster performance. The index had scaled impressive heights, reaching a 43-per cent high in March compared to its March 2020 low, but the oil slide sent it on a downward spiral for the rest of the year.

Financial and industrial sectors bore the brunt of the downturn. The financial index, despite improved financial records from major banks, dipped by 6.5 per cent due to lingering uncertainties in the global financial landscape.

The industrials index, grappling with supply chain disruptions and rising input costs, plummeted by a significant 14.8 per cent.

In contrast, the services sector emerged as a beacon of relative resilience, dipping only 3.2 per cent. Notably, Omantel and Abraj Energy, with their strong performances, were the standout performers in this sector.

Beyond the headline index, encouraging developments emerged. Real GDP growth, while expected to be lower than previous years at 1.2 per cent, showcased signs of progress in non-oil activity.

MSX30 index closed 2023 down by 7.1 per cent year-on-year (YoY) at 4514.07, while the MSX total return index was down 3 per cent to close the year at 5,950.08

Oman's credit rating upgrade by Fitch to BB+ further bolstered investor confidence.

Market activity also painted a somewhat optimistic picture. Turnover on the MSX surged by 20.5 per cent to RO 1.13 billion, driven by equity trades, IPOs, and increased daily and monthly average volumes.

Additionally, the MSX's proactive initiatives to enhance market liquidity and attract foreign investors, including international roadshows and conferences, contributed to this positive trend.

Furthermore, analysts remain optimistic about the Omani market's long-term prospects due to its attractive valuations.

The low price-to-earnings (PE) ratio, high dividend yield (4.9 per cent, making it one of the highest in the GCC region), and low price-to-book (PB) ratio all suggest potential for future growth.

"Going into 2024, the Omani stock exchange is expected to move in an upward trajectory, given the expectations that the country's economy will improve further, supported by Government reform initiatives under the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (MFTP) as well as elevated hydrocarbon prices.

"The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has forecasted Oman's real GDP to grow by 2.7 per cent in 2024 vs 1.3 per cent in 2023 and 3.1 per cent in 2022," Ubhar Capital said in a report on the bourse's performance.

2023 fiscal surplus redirected towards social sectors, 10th Plan projects

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 2

Preliminary data from the Ministry of Finance indicates that the Sultanate Oman achieved a budgetary surplus of approximately RO 931 million in 2023.

Commenting on the surplus, Minister of Finance Sultan bin Salim al Habsi shed insight on how the government utilised this surplus amount. "The General State Budget for the fiscal year 2023 achieved additional financial revenues that were directed towards enhancing social spending and stimulating economic growth.

"This was reflected in various aspects, including raising the commitments of projects in the tenth five-year plan from RO 5 billion to over RO 8 billion by the end of 2023."

Al Habsi emphasised that social projects were prioritised. "Priority was given to projects with a social dimension, such as those in the education, health and housing sectors."

According to the data, RO 261 million was allocated for oil subsidies, RO 46 million for power, water, sanitation, and waste management sector subsidies, and RO 17 million for housing and developmental loans subsidies.

Schedules of the State's General Budget

for Fiscal Year
2024



The Sultanate Oman achieved a budgetary surplus of approximately RO 931 million in 2023.

Furthermore, an amount of RO 51 million was allocated to enhance the health and education sector budgets to expand their scope of services, while RO 19 million was utilised to increase social security and low-income citizen benefits.

Part of the surplus was used in repaying the public debt, he said.

Some of the financial surpluses were also directed towards reducing public debt and managing financial risks.

These measures were met with an improvement in Oman's credit rating by credit rating agencies, alleviating the impact of the expected rise in interest rates on loans.

Additionally, direct savings in the public debt service amounted to approximately RO 140 million.

Speaking at the annual State Budget briefing on Monday, Under-Secretary of Finance Abdullah bin Salim al Harthy added that financial allowances

for students studying abroad were increased by an average of 25 per cent to cope with global inflation and 150 external scholarships were added.

Moreover, he shared that a total of 306 loans provided to small and medium-sized enterprises were waived. The 2024 State Budget projects a total revenue of RO 11.010 billion and a public expenditure of RO 11.650 billion, resulting in a total deficit of RO 640 million for the year.

Some subsidy allocations pared in Oman's 2024 State Budget

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 2

Modest cuts have been announced in subsidy allocations across a range of utilities and essential services in the 2024 State Budget of the Sultanate of Oman.

This is in line with the government's commitment to gradually rolling back subsidies — part of its longstanding bid to reduce the budget deficit.

Subsidy allocations have been pared by about 5-10 per cent this year in comparison with corresponding figures for fiscal 2023.

The electricity sector, typically the biggest beneficiary of government grants, saw allocations decline slightly to RO 460 million this year, down from an allocated RO 485 million in 2023.

In contrast, however, the waste and wastewater sector posted a higher allocation of RO 184



Subsidy allocation to the power sector has been marginally reduced for 2024.

million in subsidy this year, up from RO 135 million a year earlier.

Allocations for other utilities and services are as follows: transport sector: RO 84 million (on par with last year's allocation

of RO 84m), solid waste sector: RO 59m (RO 45m in 2023), food sector: RO 25m (similar to 2023), and oil products: RO 35m (RO 39 million in 2023).

On the flipside however,

allocations towards Development & Housing Loan Interest climbed to RO 55 million this year, up from RO 23 million in 2023.

A substantial allocation of RO 560 million was also announced towards the significantly expanded Social Protection System this year, up from RO 384 million towards the Social Protection Net in 2023.

Contributions towards domestic, regional and international institutions soared to RO 40 million this year, up from RO 10 million a year ago.

Allocations towards 'Future Debt Obligations' were stable at RO 400 million this year as well, but grants towards developmental initiatives were pegged at RO 240 million this year, up from RO 200 million in 2023.

Total Contributions & Expenses, a key budgetary head that includes subsidies, soared to RO 2.177 billion this year, up from RO 1.830 billion in 2023, according to the Ministry of Finance.

Exclusive benefits on Lexus range ending soon

MUSCAT: The time to own a luxury Lexus is now. With exclusive benefits that will end on 10th January, 2024. Own a Lexus and get Service 5 Years / 50,000 kms (Whichever is earlier) and 1 Year Free Registration (Conditions apply. For details visit any Saud Bahwan Automotive showroom).

The powerful, capable, flagship LX is available with a choice of two powertrain options, including two newly developed V6 twin-turbo engines. The V6 twin-turbo 3.5-litre petrol engine achieves class-leading performance that surpasses that of a conventional V8, producing 409 hp and up to 66.28 Kg.m torque. Meanwhile, the V6 twin-turbo engine 3.3-litre diesel variant is capable of 302 hp and up to 71.38 Kg.m torque. Both versions are mated to a 10-speed automatic transmission.

The Lexus GX460 with its impressive capability and thoughtful luxury features is a perfect companion for lasting experiences. The GX is equipped with a 4.6L engine that provides outstanding power and responsive performance. The GX is also equipped with an impressive



Lexus has a thrilling range of vehicles in Oman including the LX, GX, RX, NX, UX, LS, ES and IS.

interior that make every journey remarkable.

The RX with its sleek design and impressive performance always has a growing base of enthusiasts. The RX delivers greater style, comfort, and performance with a choice of three powertrains, two of which are electrified. A newly developed inline 4-cylinder, 2.4-litre turbocharged engine

that produces 275 hp and 430 nm of torque is paired to a new 8-speed Direct-Shift automatic transmission (8AT).

Meanwhile, the new hybrid-electric system combines a 2.5-litre petrol engine and electric motor to produce a total of 247 hp, which is paired to an electronically-controlled continuously variable transmission (E-CVT) to provide

excellent fuel efficiencies.

A hybrid-electric system pairing a 2.4-litre turbocharged engine with an electric motor is also available, which provides a combined power of 366 hp mated to a 6-speed automatic transmission.

The Lexus NX is good choice for those looking to enjoy luxury experiences on their routine

journeys. The NX is powered with two powertrain options. An inline 4-cylinder, 2.4 L turbocharged engine that produces 275 hp and 6000 RPM and is paired to an 8-speed Direct-Shift automatic transmission (8AT).

The NX is also available with hybrid-electric system that combines two power sources consisting of a 2.5-litre petrol engine and two electric motors producing 240 hp. The hybrid-electric system is paired to a Direct Shift Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT).

The exciting and luxurious Lexus UX reflects the “Yet Philosophy,” in many ways, but especially in terms of design, performance and utility.

The front wheel drive Lexus UX is powered by a high-efficiency 2.0 litre, four-cylinder engine, which is coupled with a Direct Shift Continuously Variable Transmission (DCVT).

For those interested in owning a Lexus sedan, the range include the flagship LS which is an inspiring luxury sedan, available with 3.5-litre V6 Multi Stage Hybrid System producing 354 hp, a 3.5-litre V6 naturally aspirated

Atkinson-cycle producing 311 hp and 38.7 Kg.M Torque, and a 3.5-litre twin-turbo V6 engine producing 415 hp and 61.2 Kg.M of Torque.

The popular and classy Lexus ES is equipped with two powertrain options. ES350 is powered by a 3.5 litre, 24 valve, V6 engine that produces 298 hp and 36.3 kg.m. of torque. While the ES250 is powered by high efficiency 2.5 litre, 16-valve DOHC engine that produces 204 hp and 24.8 kg.m of torque.

The IS has been a choice of those looking to move up to luxury sedan experiences.

The IS350 is a sleek and stylish powerful sedan which is equipped with a 3.5-litre engine that's paired to an 8-speed automatic transmission.

The turbocharged IS300 features a 2.0-litre twin-scroll turbocharged inline four-cylinder engine with intercooler that generates 241 Hp.

In Oman, every Lexus vehicle comes with special benefits and privileges such as Manufacturer's Warranty of 4 years/100,000 Kms (whichever is earlier) and 24 hours on-road assistance from AAA.

Bank Muscat transforms trade finance with digiTrade portal

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat's digital services have marked a significant success, elevating the range of corporate banking facilities offered. Designed for easy access and convenience, these services enable customers to conduct seamless transactions at any time and from anywhere.

The DigiTrade portal, the bank's trade services digital platform, is gaining traction among corporate and institutional customers, contributing to the digital transformation strategy aligned with Oman Vision 2040.

The advanced DigiTrade Portal offers business entities seeking fast, efficient trade finance solutions numerous features. These include a single log-in using Corporate Online Banking credentials, a secure paperless channel for transactions, multi-level privileges for thorough review and approval, and a customisable dashboard with a search tool.



BM - Trade Portal

Customers can initiate various trade finance transactions online, from letters of credit to loans against trust receipts, with the portal providing close monitoring through auto notifications, email alerts, and a calendar for timely transactions.

Accessing Bank Muscat's DigiTrade solutions requires

existing corporate customers with online banking access to fill the application form.

Customers without online banking must submit forms to their branch or relationship manager. The application form can be accessed [here](https://www.bankmuscat.com/en/about/Documents/bmforms/Trade_

Portal_Application_Form_EN.pdf).

Bank Muscat, a leader in regional trade finance, has seen a notable rise in e-channel usage. Offering tailor-made global trade products with a competitive pricing structure, the bank provides various trade financing solutions, including forfaiting and receivable financing, leveraging a network of over 500 correspondent banks globally. Global Trade Services are available at Corporate Banking branches and the Head Office. Customers can contact the Global Trade Services Help Desk at [gtshelpdesk@bankmuscat.com] (mailto:gtshelpdesk@bankmuscat.com) for assistance.

As Oman's leading financial services provider, Bank Muscat actively supports the national economy, achieving milestones across sectors. Committed to a customer-centric vision, the bank adapts to global trends to meet current and future goals.

Dollar starts 2024 with gains on yen and euro, bitcoin above \$45,000

SINGAPORE/LONDON: The dollar rose on the first trading day of the year, as attention turned to US jobs data and European inflation numbers this week, which may provide clues on central banks' next moves, while bitcoin rallied.

The dollar index, which measures the US currency against six rivals, was last at 101.55, up 0.17%. It fell 2% in 2023, snapping two years of gains as investors weighed the prospect of the Fed cutting rates this year.

On the other side of the dollar's ascent was the euro, which dipped 0.17% as traders digested data showing euro zone factory activity contracted in December for an 18th straight month.

The Japanese yen also struggled, with the dollar up 0.43% at 141.4 yen.

A slew of economic data is due this week, including European inflation data and US data on job



The image of United States President George Washington is seen on an engraving plate for a US one dollar bill at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington. — Reuters

openings and non-farm payrolls, which will help shape market expectations regarding monetary policy moves from the Fed and European Central Bank.

Markets are now pricing in an 86% chance of interest rate cuts from the Fed to start from March, according to the CME FedWatch

tool, with over 150 basis points (bps) of easing anticipated this year.

Minutes from the last Fed meeting in December are scheduled for release on Thursday and will provide further insight into the central bankers' thinking.

“The positive sentiment from

end-2023 may roll over into this week as all eyes turn to the US jobs report on Friday,” said Nicholas Chia, macro strategist at Standard Chartered.

That sentiment was boosting commodities and stocks on Tuesday, and rippling across into currencies.

“2024 starts in a positive mood in FX,” said Kenneth Broux, senior strategist FX and rates at Societe Generale, pointing to commodity and stocks-associated gains in the Australian dollar - up 0.22% at \$0.6825 - the Norwegian crown - slightly firmer at 10.16 per dollar - and, in emerging markets, the Mexican peso.

Rescue teams in Japan on Tuesday struggled to reach isolated areas hit by a powerful earthquake on New Year's Day, with reports of almost 50 people dead in a disaster that toppled buildings and knocked out power to thousands of homes. — Reuters

Bank Nizwa achieves RO 76.3 Million success with sovereign Sukuk series 7 for Oman

MUSCAT: Bank Nizwa, Oman's leading Islamic bank, demonstrated its commitment to financial innovation by serving as the issue manager for Sovereign Sukuk Series 7 on behalf of the Government of the Sultanate of Oman.

The issuance, concluded on December 7, 2023, involved Bank Nizwa's dual role as the issue manager and collecting bank, showcasing its dedication to seamless and efficient transaction management for national initiatives.

The Sukuk Series 7, part of the Omani Rial Sukuk Issuance Programme, comprised RO 50 Million Trust Certificates, expandable to RO 100 Million through the Greenshoe option.

Structured as Sukuk Al Ijarah, the certificates offer a competitive profit rate over a 7-year period, with semi-annual profit payouts.

Listed on the Bond and Sukuk Market of Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), the Sukuk garnered substantial success, raising RO 143.6 million, nearly three times oversubscribed, resulting in an allotment of RO 76.3 million.

Saif al Rawahi, AGM – Investment, Treasury, Government Relationship, and Project Finance at Bank Nizwa, emphasised the bank's prowess in Islamic finance, effective risk management, and navigating capital market intricacies.

The Sukuk issuance, aligned with the rising demand for Sharia-compliant



Bank Nizwa achieves RO 76.3 Million success with sovereign Sukuk series 7 for Oman

financial instruments, reflects Bank Nizwa's commitment to delivering innovative and lucrative investment opportunities.

Highlighting the economic benefits, Al Rawahi stated, “The successful Sukuk issuance injects RO 76.3 million into critical sectors, fostering economic growth and stability.”

The diverse investor participation, including financial institutions, pension funds, and insurance companies, underscores the offering's overall success and inclusivity.

Bank Nizwa's role as an issue manager signifies its proficiency in Islamic finance and dedication to facilitating strategic financial transactions for the nation's sustainable growth.

This milestone solidifies the bank's position as a trusted partner in the Islamic financial landscape, capable of leading complex transactions.



In brief

■ PARIS

**TOTALENERGIES STARTS 2ND PHASE OF CRUDE OIL PRODUCTION**

Total Energies SE (TTE) said on Tuesday that it has started the second development phase of an oil field off the coast of Brazil.

The company announced the start of crude oil production at the Mero field on the Libra block located over 180 kilometres off the coast of Rio de Janeiro in the pre-salt area of the Santos Basin.

Sanctioned in 2019, Mero-2, the second development phase, includes the Sepetiba Floating Production, Storage and Off loading unit or FPSO with a production capacity of 180,000 barrels of oil per day or barrels per day (b/d).

With Mero-2, the Mero field will reach a production capacity of 410,000 b/d. — **dpa**

■ OSLO

**TESLA EXTENDS IN NORWAY AS EVS TAKE RECORD 82% MARKET SHARE**

Tesla topped Norway's car sales statistic for a third consecutive year in 2023, extending its lead over rivals despite an ongoing conflict between the US electric vehicle maker and the Nordic region's powerful labour unions.

Almost five out of six new cars sold in Norway last year were powered by battery only, with Tesla's share of the overall market rising to 20.0% from 12.2% in 2022, registration data showed on Tuesday.

Overall, the market share of new electric vehicles in Norway rose to 82.4% in 2023 from 79.3% in 2022, the Norwegian Road Federation (OFV) said.

— **Reuters**

■ LONDON

**UK MANUFACTURING DOWNTURN INTENSIFIES IN DECEMBER**

British manufacturing activity contracted at a faster pace in December as output fell sharply amid weaker demand conditions both domestically and internationally, survey results from S&P Global revealed on Tuesday.

The Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index, or PMI, dropped to 46.2 in December from a seven-month high of 47.2 in November. The flash score was 46.4.

Any reading below 50 indicates contraction in the sector.

New orders fell for the ninth straight month, linked to a weak economic backdrop.

— **dpa**

Potential for commercialisation of Oman 'green mineral' resources

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT, JAN 2

Mineral ores at the heart of modern technologies driving the global energy transition can be found in abundance in the Sultanate of Oman, says the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Sustainable commercialisation of these ores can help unlock substantial deposits of nickel, lithium, cobalt, rare earth minerals, Platinum Group Metals (PGMs), copper, and silicon, according to the Ministry Under-Secretary Eng Mohsin al Hadhrami.

"The rich geological structure of natural resources in the Sultanate of Oman provides primary resources for these technologies, ultimately contributing to the production of green energy through renewable resources. This abundance creates a connected opportunity for investing in local supply chains and industries, hence supporting sustainable development," Al Hadhrami stated in an interview featured in the latest newsletter of the Ministry.

The official noted the potential for such "green minerals" in the



A round seven sets of minerals of strategic significance to the energy transition can be found in Oman

manufacture of solar panels, energy storage systems, wind power turbines and other green technologies.

Notable among these strategic minerals found in Oman are rare earth elements (REEs), which are an integral part of technologies driving energy efficiency and technology.

REEs are typically associated with alkaline igneous rocks and carbonatite deposits mapped in Sal (Al Dhahirah Governorate) and Khawr Jirama (Al Sharqiyah South Governorate), according to the Ministry.

"They are crucial in the development of strong, lightweight permanent magnets for wind

turbines and electric vehicles, enhancing energy conversion and storage. REEs also contribute to energy-efficient lighting, serve as catalysts for hydrogen production, and find applications in advanced batteries and certain types of solar panels," the Under-Secretary said.

Equally promising are Platinum Group Metals (PGMs) - : Platinum (Pt), Palladium (Pd), Rhodium (Rh), Osmium (Os), Iridium (Ir) and Ruthenium (Ru) - which are associated with chromite ores distributed in multiple locations across northern parts of Oman.

Various renewable energy technologies, including solar cells and photo-detectors, use PGMs in their constituent components,

according to the Ministry. PGMs like Platinum, Palladium, and Rhodium are used in catalytic converters to reduce emissions from internal combustion engines.

Likewise, Platinum and Palladium serve as catalysts in hydrogen fuel cells, making them efficient and clean sources of energy.

Iridium and Ruthenium find application as catalysts in electrolyzers to produce green hydrogen from water using electricity.

Ruthenium-based catalysts have potential application in Carbon Capture and Storage technologies.

Ruthenium compounds also enhance the performance of advanced LEDs.

Lithium, increasingly a strategic mineral linked to clean energy technologies, is associated with extensive potash deposits found in the Umm al Samim salt basin.

The mineral is widely used in the production of lithium-ion batteries for electric vehicles, renewable energy storage, grid energy storage, and various portable electronic devices.

Also of significance is copper, a commercially valuable commodity found associated with Volcanogenic Massive Sulphide (VMS) deposits in Oman.

Copper is widely used in electrical grids, renewable energy systems, and electric vehicles, ensuring efficient energy transmission and conversion. Copper is also employed in energy storage, heat exchangers for geothermal and solar thermal systems, and conductive coatings for solar panels.

Furthermore, Oman holds significant promise in the development of its prodigious silica resources for the production of silicon, a pivotal mineral in driving clean energy technologies. Massive deposits of quartzite and silica sand - both sources of high quality silicon - have been identified in Mahout and Qurayat, according to the Ministry.

Rounding off the list of strategic minerals awaiting commercialisation in Oman is cobalt, a metal commonly used in Electric Vehicles and renewable energy storage systems. Cobalt, along with nickel, is found associated with laterite in Ibra, Al Kamil W'al Wafi and Sur.

'Made in Oman' drive boosts awareness of 10,000 locally manufactured products



'Made in Oman' roadshow in Dhofar

NASRULAH AL AJMI

MUSCAT, JAN 2

The 'Made in Oman' campaign, initiated by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), is unlocking opportunities to support the marketing of an estimated 10,000 locally manufactured products, say officials associated with this initiative.

Also supporting this landmark endeavour, as it covers the different governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, are the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and the Omani Products Exhibition (OPEX).

The core objective of the 'Made in Oman' initiative is to underscore the importance of purchasing Omani products, with a special emphasis on the astounding diversity of over 10,000 locally manufactured goods, ranging from food and electricity to pharmaceuticals, metals, textiles, perfumes, cleaning products, jewellery, petrochemicals, and furniture.

The campaign, instrumental in fostering societal awareness, highlights the superior quality and adherence to standard specifications that make Omani

products competitive in both domestic and global markets.

Supporting Omani producers and exporters through the patronage of local goods is a pivotal means of bolstering the national economy, according to MoCIIP. The campaign has garnered positive responses, attributing its success to the rigorous implementation of standard specifications, technical regulations, and best practices, safeguarding the national industry against unfair competition.

'Made in Oman' has not only succeeded in creating awareness but has also played a crucial role in establishing a strong national identity for Omani products. This, in turn, contributes to increased economic returns for the Sultanate of Oman and enhances global recognition of the quality of Omani products.

Mazin bin Humaid al Siyabi, the Assistant Director-General of Industry at the MoCIIP, affirmed that the campaign aligns seamlessly with the ministry's industrial strategy. It aims to create an investment-friendly climate, addressing challenges faced by existing industries and facilitating the establishment of new ones.

European stocks hit 23-month highs, oil gains

LONDON: European stock markets opened higher on Tuesday as traders bet on central banks cutting rates in 2024. Oil prices gained after a naval clash in the Red Sea, and Chinese stocks were weighed down by mixed economic data.

Global stock markets rose overall in 2023, having gained particularly in the last two months of the year, while bond yields fell. This upbeat market sentiment continued on Tuesday as traders returned from end-of-year holidays.

The pan-European STOXX 600 rose in early European trading, hitting its highest in nearly two years, up 0.5% on the day at 0829 GMT.

Euro zone bank stocks rose to their highest since 2018. London's FTSE 100 was up 0.2%, and Germany's DAX was up 0.8%.

The MSCI World Equity index was steady, down by less than 0.1% on the day.

"There is a feeling that (monetary) easing is coming, and it seems like there is more to go in the rally in the short term," said Nordea chief analyst Jan von Gerich.

"I think there's a risk to the downside for stocks, but the momentum is strong right now," he said.

Data pointing to subdued business confidence in China for 2024 weighed on Chinese assets during Asian trading.

China's manufacturing sector came under pressure from weak demand in 2023, with a property downturn, geopolitical factors, and tight-fisted consumers all weighing on the post-pandemic recovery.

China's onshore blue-chip index was down 1.3%, and Hong



German share price index DAX graph is pictured at the stock exchange in Frankfurt

Kong's Hang Seng index fell 1.5%.

The US dollar index was up around 0.1% at 101.44, holding relatively steady after it lost roughly 2% last year on bets that US rates will come down.

The US 10-year Treasury yield, which gained overall in 2023, rose to 3.9425%.

Market attention is now focused on economic data due later in the week, including the US non-farm payrolls report on Friday, which could provide clues as to the US Federal Reserve's next move. Minutes from the last Fed meeting in December are also expected to give insight into central bankers' thinking regarding rate cuts.

At its December policy meeting, the Fed adopted an unexpectedly dovish tone and forecasted 75 basis points in rate reductions for 2024.

Other major central banks, including the European Central Bank (ECB) and Bank of England (BoE), have indicated that they will hold rates higher for longer.

In Europe, flash inflation figures for the euro zone are due on Friday, which RBC Capital Markets analysts said in a note are "likely to be the most significant additional data point prior to the January ECB meeting".

"Anything barring a large increase in inflation would represent a significant surprise," the analysts said.

The euro against the dollar was down around 0.1% at \$1.10315.

Euro zone government bond yields rose, with the benchmark 10-year German yield up 8 basis points on the day at 2.106%.

German manufacturing activity continued to contract in December, but expectations for future business turned positive for the first time since April, survey data showed on Tuesday.

Oil prices rose, in a move analysts said was due to an escalation in tensions in the Red Sea as well as hopes for strong demand from China, where investors are expecting fresh stimulus measures. — **Reuters**

UK’s fine start-ups struggle for big league success

A concern exists at the centre of Britain's economy that explains to some extent its recent poor performance. Despite the country being a welcoming place to start a business, it seems to offer a difficult environment in which to grow one. That short-coming raises a threat to future success and the government will do well to focus on overcoming it.

Britain remains a big attraction for ambitious start-up companies and London in particular, is regularly rated as one of the best places to set up a new firm. Global tech entrepreneurs come across continents to exploit Britain's favourable environment for start-ups.

However, as researcher at the Social Market Foundation, John Asthana Gibson points out, those entrepreneurs often



ANDY JALIL

The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK

IMMIGRATION RULES COMPOUND THE PROBLEM OF GETTING TALENTED SPECIALISTS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES THAT HIGH GROWTH FIRMS NEED

struggle to scale their businesses to become highly productive and sizeable companies. This should give policymakers cause for concern as a vibrant start-up culture is of little benefit to the wider economy if start-ups fail to grow, or if successful ones go elsewhere to expand.

There has been no shortage of reviews and reforms over the past decade seeking to help businesses to grow. Yet all too often, their focus has been all too narrow, prioritising access to capital above all else.

Without a broader approach, throwing money at firm will not do the job. They need support across a whole range of ideas to ensure they can use that finance effectively. Although access to finance is certainly important, it is not always the most pressing issue. What ranks higher for many businesses are availability of

suitable premises, bad taxes and regulation.

Greatest problem for growing companies in many cases is proper manpower. UK scale-ups have to compete with international rivals in an increasingly competitive race for global talent. Issues with availability of suitable domestic skilled workers as well as non-skilled due to lack of proper training, made worse by a housing crisis that prevents skilled workers to move to be near good jobs.

Immigration rules compound the problem of getting talented specialists from other countries that high growth firms need. Although there are strict criteria for these rules to be relaxed to allow such staff into the country.

There are areas where the government can help more. Chancellor Jeremy Hunt has been

reticent to use levers such as tax cuts to any great extent while inflation remains high, so one needs to look at more regulation-driven solutions which can be easily implemented.

Intervention in education, housing, infrastructure and immigration will be key to resolving the 'skills problem'. As Gibson points out, there shouldn't be a risk of repeating the same mistakes of the past decade with an equally narrow focus on skills alone. The government needs a thoroughly considered and coordinated approach across the different arms of the state.

To make this a reality, a 'scale-ups unit' should be established and placed at the centre of government, with the charge of identifying the areas where British firms have the potential to be genuinely world-leading.

It should coordinate

government interventions, from planning reform to training improvements, that will enable scale-ups in these industries to truly reach their potential. Such interventions should be carried out with a place-based focus, developing clusters of world-class industries in cities up and down the country. The benefit from this will be huge. Despite making up just one per cent of SME firms, their combined turnover is already equivalent to two annual NHS budgets (nearly £400bn).

All of government, in fact all political parties, should get behind efforts to help these companies succeed.

This issue of business growth is too important, too intertwined with the future of the country, to be ignored. Innovative scale-ups already do so much for the UK, they should be given the help they want to do more.

The Energy Trilemma: Exploring the narrative of our dynamic energy landscape

Energy is the heartbeat of our civilisation. It transcends every sector as the life force that moves world economies forward; maintaining and expanding civilisations, and evolving the very structure of our existence.

The ease of access to energy, in its availability and its affordability, alongside its environmental sustainability is crucial to the development of our countries and our world.

Today, in the pursuit towards a sustainable energy future, policymakers and experts navigate the challenge of balancing these fundamental aspects of energy - that is, its security, its affordability and its environmental sustainability, in what is known as the Energy Trilemma.

The Annual Energy Trilemma Index was developed in collaboration between the World Energy Council, Oliver Wyman and Marsh McLennan. Now in its 12th edition, it presents a comparative ranking of 127 countries' energy systems.

The trilemma index assesses countries' performance in managing these systems to assign them a ranking, grade and score, providing a benchmark to global standards and keeping track of its progress, promoting accountability, and offering valuable insight that will help shape future energy policies in our collective steps towards a carbonfree and energy balanced tomorrow.



NAJAH AL RIYAMI

The author is a Media and Communication Master's graduate skilled in diverse writing formats, specialising in storytelling, branding, and in-depth journalism

TOP PERFORMERS IN ENERGY SECURITY ARE TYPICALLY RESOURCE-RICH COUNTRIES SUCH AS THOSE IN THE ORGANIZATION FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD), WITH THEIR HIGHLY DIVERSIFIED AND INNOVATIVE MIXES OF ENERGY AND THE FAST ADOPTION OF RENEWABLES



Electrical engineer on solar farm with large structure Check maintain rehearse damaged parts from use in order to produce electricity with maximum efficiency throughout its service life professionally

This is due to its positive performance in providing reliable access to affordable electricity - as is the trend in energy exporting countries such as the Middle East.

Oman's Energy Security has a grade of (C) and a score of 52.2/100 because of its reliance on oil and the lack of diversification of the energy mix.

However, this is expected to improve as it continues to diversify; unlocking its potential in the abundance of natural

and water resources available, alongside expansive areas of land to be utilised for large scale solar projects that will help realise its hydrogen economy. Top performers in Energy Security are typically resource-rich countries such as those in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), with their highly diversified and innovative mixes of energy and the fast adoption of renewables.

Last but not least, the

final pillar- Environmental Sustainability, leaves Oman with a score of 46.1/100 and a grade of (D), reflecting the challenge of striking a balance between economic growth and environmental preservation and the efforts to manage the environmental impact of energy production and consumption; combating climate change, reducing pollution, and promoting renewable, low-carbon energy sources.

In conclusion, striking the right balance between energy security, environmental sustainability, and affordability is essential for a sustainable and resilient energy future.

Through collaborative efforts and innovative solutions, it assists our course towards a more balanced and sustainable energy landscape, serving as a critical framework for navigating the complexities of energy policy in the 21st century.

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Mohammed al Rashdi: 99841230
m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com

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

Saada al Rashdi
95919344

94501166
24649593
24649595

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M.COM graduate with Oman driving licence, residing in Muscat with 1 year and 4 months work experience as Media Finance Executive in India, seeking for Accounts Assistant or other related eligible jobs. Contact: 71755901, E-mail: krishnanmahesh02@gmail.com

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NAME CHANGE

We, SHISHIR KUMAR SINGH (name of father as per the passport, holder of Indian Passport No. N8149552) and SHAILJA SINGH (name of mother as per the passport, holder of Indian Passport No. S0553835) having permanent address in Vill. Amgilia Post Sukhipur, Ahraula, Azamgarh, UP, India Presently residing at the following address Wadi Kabir, Muscat PO Box 54, PC 100 Sultanate of Oman, hereby solemnly affirm and declare to change the name of our Child/ Master **SHASHWAT** (name as per the passport) holder of Indian Passport No. T3959100 date of issue 06/05/2019 issued at Muscat. The name of our child will be henceforth known as **SHASHWAT SINGH** (new name) for all purposes.

Any objection towards the change of name of our minor child may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al Khuwair, PO Box No. 1727, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.



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Please Contact with our Team:

Head Office

Mohd Al Rashdi
99841230
m.alrahdi86@yahoo.com

Ali Al Maashari
99639264
wadialmeeh@yahoo.com

Salalah Office

Bakhit Al Shihri
92998577
bakhit.omandaily@gmail.com

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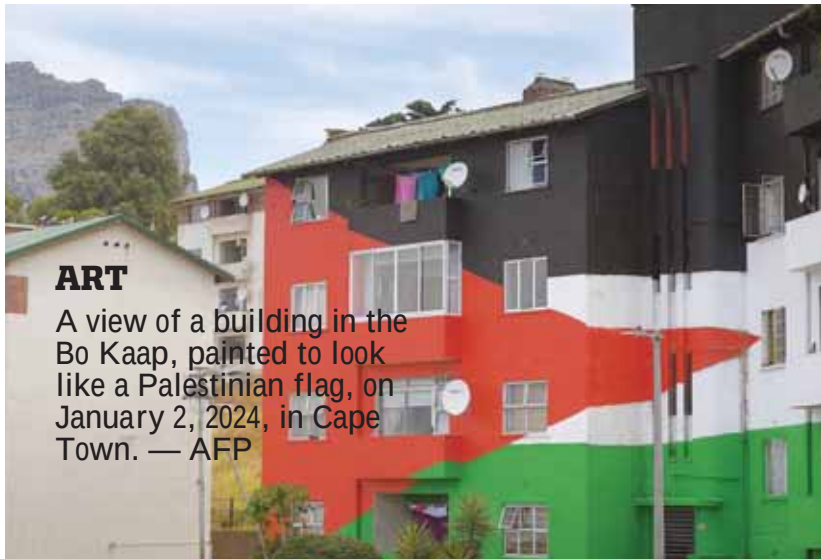
Abdullah Al Abri
99429094
nizwaofc@omandaily.net.om

Suhar Office

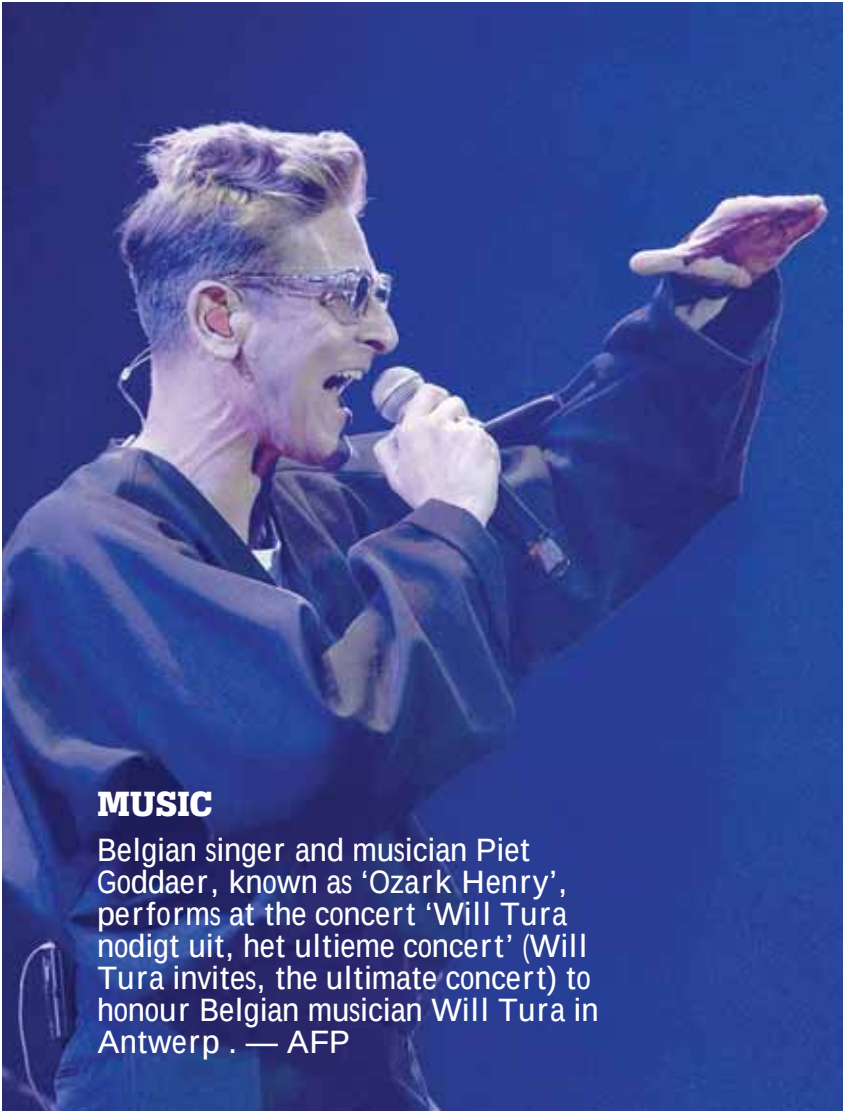
Musalam Al Saidi
99429192
sohardaily@outlook.com



ENTERTAINMENT
A man handwalks across the beach as the sun sets at the Kerobokan district in Indonesia's resort island of Bali. — AFP



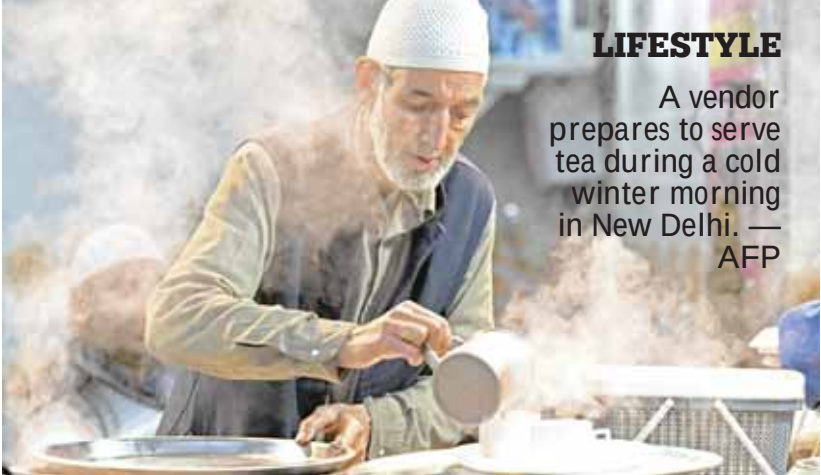
ART
A view of a building in the Bo Kaap, painted to look like a Palestinian flag, on January 2, 2024, in Cape Town. — AFP



MUSIC
Belgian singer and musician Piet Goddaer, known as 'Ozark Henry', performs at the concert 'Will Tura nodigt uit, het ultieme concert' (Will Tura invites, the ultimate concert) to honour Belgian musician Will Tura in Antwerp. — AFP



ACTOR
South Korean actor Lee Sun-kyun poses during a photocall for the film "Parasite (Gisaengchung)" at the 72nd edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France.— AFP



LIFESTYLE
A vendor prepares to serve tea during a cold winter morning in New Delhi. — AFP

art & life

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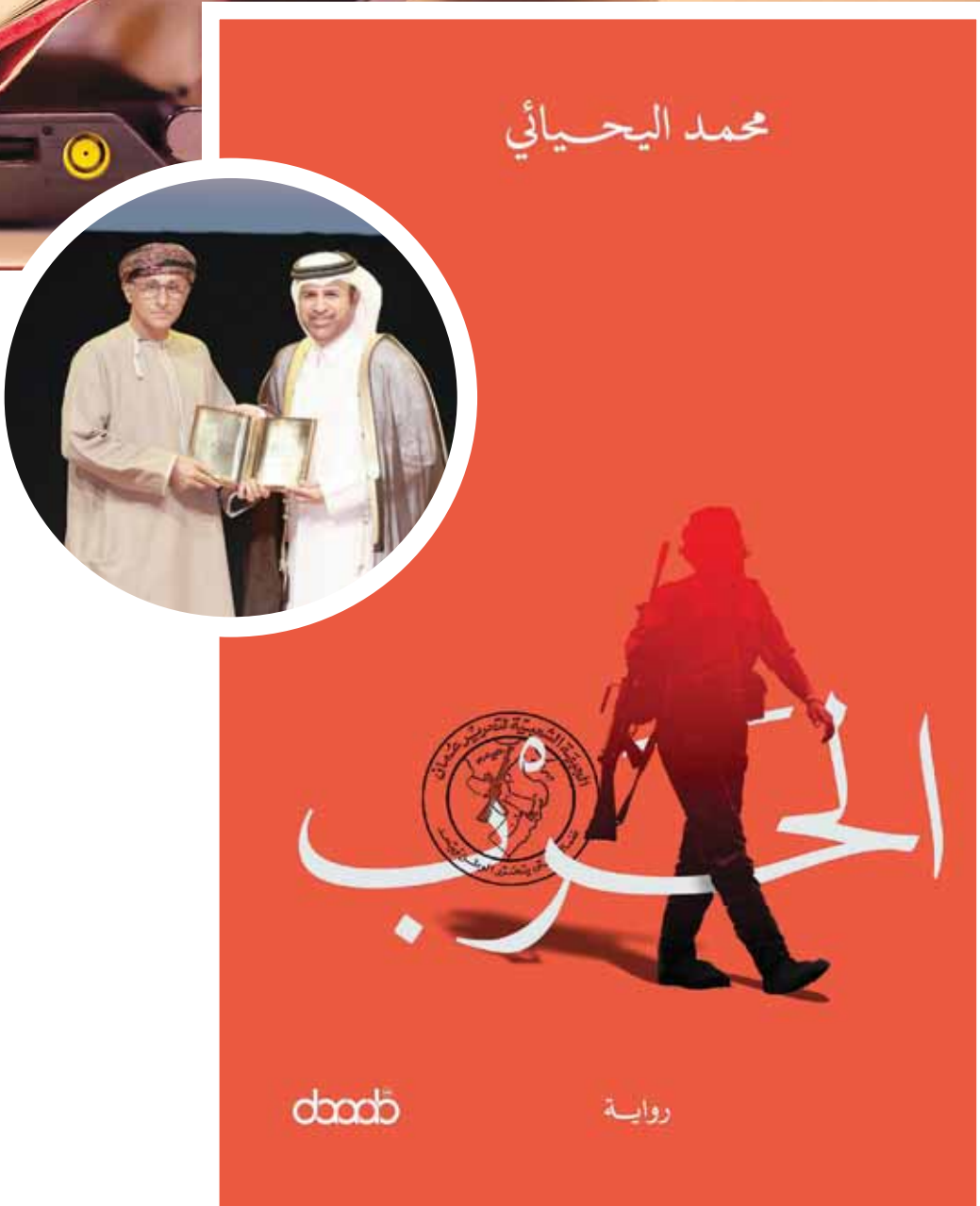
Omani author's 'The War' wins Katara prize

BY ARWA AL HASHIMI

Muhammad al Yahyai's 'The War' stands as a compelling testament to Oman's unyielding spirit and its quest for stability amidst the tumultuous chapters of its history. The author skilfully navigated through the intricate issues weaving together a narrative that spans generations, ideologies, and the profound impact of war on the human psyche. In this masterfully crafted novel, Al Yahyai delves into the documents exposing the reader to the myriad facets of a ten-year struggle. The pages come alive with the vivid descriptions of battles, explosions, and the haunting images of bodies strewn across mountain peaks. The author paints a vivid picture of the aspirations, obsessions, and nightmares that fuelled the rev-

olutionaries, giving readers an intimate look into the complexities of war. The novel seamlessly oscillates between the past and present, with a keen focus on historical conflicts. Al Yahyai captures the disarray of the present, marked by diseases and shattered dreams for a generation that found itself in exile within its homeland. The characters mirror the societal disorientation, embodying the various responses to the chaos - from those lost in the illusions of war to others who abandoned ideals for the allure of power. The strength of "The War" lies in its rich tapestry of characters, leaving readers in a deliberate state of confusion as they grapple with the elusive notion of a main protagonist. The war transcends individual identities, car-

rying ideas and principles that stretch beyond the boundaries of reality, ultimately becoming a force that shatters under the weight of political change, violent reactions, and internal weaknesses. Recognising the novel's profound impact, 'The War' was honoured with the Katara Award for Arabic Fiction in the published novels category. Al Yahyai, expressed his joy at the recognition. He emphasised the significance of the Omani novelistic experience as an advanced and enduring literary tradition. In his exploration of Oman's tumultuous history, Al Yahyai provides readers with a nuanced understanding of the human condition in times of conflict, making 'The War' a poignant and thought-provoking literary achievement.



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AROUND THE WORLD



Takanakuy, the Andean ‘fight club’ that clears the air for a new year

THE FIGHTING begins and ends with a hug, part of a singular ritual that has residents of the Peruvian Andes punching and kicking in a year-end fight competition known as Takanakuy.

Before the duelling starts in an open-air arena, male fighters remove their elaborate headgear — stuffed birds, foxes or even goat heads worn as symbols of strength or to bring good luck.

Many participants in the holiday tradition come from the town of San Juan de Lurigancho in Chumbivilcas province, part of the Cusco department southeast of Peruvian capital Lima.

The atmosphere is more celebratory than grim. Wearing traditional costumes or leather jackets and boots, men and women join to do the Huaylia, a traditional Andean dance.

The party, however, will end in a fight.

SETTLING NEIGHBORLY DISPUTES

It's all part of the Takanakuy, a Quechua-language word that means "to hit each other."

The tradition, which dates to Spanish colonial times, evolved over the centuries to become a means of settling accounts between neighbours in areas where there was no authority.

Before, the fights were "about land disputes, and this was the way

to resolve problems between families, between neighbours," 33-year-old hairdresser and fighter Froilan Rosas said.

Some people fight to defend personal or family honour.

The Takanakuy takes place every December 25 in the Peruvian regions of Cusco, Apurimac, Huancavelica and Arequipa, as well as in the Bolivian Andes. Some regions stage a variation: the women-only Warimi Takanakuy.

The goal is to end the year in peace, residents say.

ENDS WITH A HUG

The party pauses, and the fighting begins.

A fighter challenges another by calling out his or her first and last name. The person challenged is free to refuse, and may offer a substitute.

Before stepping into the ring, male fighters — some shirtless — bind their hands with cloth and swap their shoes for boots.

In this club, duels are brief, lasting no more than a minute, with only punching and kicking allowed.

A referee presides over the fight, and four judges decide the winner.

"This is a ritual," said Julio Boza, a burly 72-year-old and one of the organisers. "It starts with a fight and, after fighting, ends with a hug."

Above all, Boza added, "It is a



way to resolve everything that we have had in the year. This is the time to resolve it."

On this day there were 10 fights before dozens of fans. Anyone, even foreigners, can join in.

One enthusiastic Romanian challenged a local resident. Wearing a Peruvian soccer T-shirt bearing the name of his idol Paolo Guerrero, he won his bout.



Although Takanakuy once was based largely on existing rivalries, today it is more a sport for the young.

"We're boys, so we want to measure our strength, to know how we're doing," said Omar Huachaca, 30, a merchant from Cusco.

"More than anything, the blood in our veins brings us to the party."

—AFP

In Colombia, illegally felled timber repurposed to help bees



IN NORTHEAST Colombia, police guard warehouses stacked high with confiscated timber with a noble new destiny: transformation into homes for bees beleaguered by pesticides and climate change.

The illegally harvested wood is used in the Santander department's "Timber Returns Home" initiative, building hives since 2021 to house the little pollinators so critical to human survival.

So far, the project has seen about 200 cubic meters (7,060 cubic feet) of wood transformed into 1,000 bee hives, with another 10,000 planned for the next phase, according to the Santander environmental authority.

Previously, confiscated timber was turned into sawdust, donated to municipalities for projects... and sometimes just left to rot.

Now it is being repurposed to help address the "extremely serious problem" of possible bee extinction, said biologist German Perilla, director of the Honey Bee Impact Foundation.

About three quarters of crops producing fruits or seeds for human consumption depend on pollination, but the UN has warned that 40 per cent of invertebrate pollinators — particularly bees and butterflies — risk global extinction.

"The main threat is that we will run out of trees and there will be no flowers, because without flowers there are no bees, without bees there are no humans, and we will run out of food," said beekeeper Maria Acevedo, one of the beneficiaries of the project.

In 2023 alone, she said, she lost more than half of her hives. She blames pesticides used in nearby production of crops such as coffee.

MULTIPLE THREATS

According to official data, some 3,000 hives, each able to house around 50,000 bees, die off in Colombia each year. Laboratory tests found traces of the insecticide fipronil in most of the dead insects.

Colombia has issued a ban on fipronil — already banned in Europe and restricted in the United States and China — starting February 2024.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, higher temperatures, droughts, floods and other extreme events caused by climate change reduces nectar-bearing flowers that bees feed on, and studies have also linked bee infertility to heat stress.

The Santander environmental authority seizes some 1,000 cubic meters of illegally felled timber in anti-trafficking operations in Santander every year.

The country lost 123,517 hectares (305,200 acres) of trees in 2022, mainly in the Amazon — the world's largest rainforest.

Nearly half of all timber traded in Colombia is of illegal origin, according to the environment ministry. —AFP



LIFESTYLE

10 Nutrition Tips for a Healthy New Year

AS A HEALTH reporter who has been following nutrition news for decades, I've seen a lot of trends that made a splash — and then sank. Remember olestra, the Paleo diet and celery juice?

Watch enough food fads come and go, and you realise that the most valuable nutrition guidance is built on decades of research, in which scientists have looked at a question from multiple perspectives and arrived at something like a consensus. Here are 10 science-backed pearls to carry you into the new year.

1. THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET REALLY IS THAT GOOD FOR YOU.

Decades of research support the Mediterranean diet — which is centred on fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, olive oil, nuts, herbs and spices — as one of the healthiest ways you can eat. Its heart-health benefits are numerous, and it has been linked to a lower risk of Type 2 diabetes, cognitive decline and certain types of cancer.

2. IT'S OK TO DRINK COFFEE ON AN EMPTY STOMACH.

Some people may experience heartburn, but there's no evidence that drinking coffee on an empty stomach can damage your gastric lining or otherwise harm your digestive system, experts say. And there are reasons to feel good about your morning brew: Drinking coffee has been linked to a longer life and a lower risk of heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

3. START YOUR DAY WITH A HEALTHY BREAKFAST.

Mornings can be hectic, and it may be tempting to grab a quick muffin or skip breakfast altogether. But nutrition experts say it's worth prioritising that morning meal — especially if it contains a balanced mix of protein, fibre and healthy fats. It will fuel your day, and studies have found that those who eat breakfast tend to enjoy a range of health benefits, including a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and obesity.

4. TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR GUT.

Keeping your digestive system healthy and running smoothly can protect you from life's discomforts — such as heartburn, bloating and



constipation — as well as lead to better overall health. Unsurprisingly, the best way to care for your gut is to feed yourself (and by extension, your gut microbes) well, by prioritising fibre and consuming a variety of plant-based and fermented foods.

5. YOU PROBABLY DON'T NEED PROTEIN BARS.

They're often marketed as a health food or as essential fuel for athletic performance, but most protein bars are loaded with sugar. You're better off meeting your protein needs with whole foods such as yogurt, nuts, beans or eggs, experts say.

6. GO EASY ON THE DARK CHOCOLATE.

File this as one of the saddest nutrition news stories of 2023. Dark chocolate has some of the highest levels of lead and cadmium (heavy metals that can harm the body) when compared with other foods. Fortunately, you don't have to give up your dark chocolate habit entirely. Enjoying it in moderation — no more than about 1 ounce per day, experts say — will keep your risk low.

7. BLENDING FRUITS AND VEGGIES WON'T DESTROY THEIR NUTRIENTS.

Pureeing fruits and vegetables in a blender won't strip them of their vitamins, minerals or fibre. And, somewhat surprisingly, several small studies suggest that sipping



your fruit in blended form won't spike your blood sugar any more than when you eat it whole. So go ahead and enjoy your smoothie.

8. COTTAGE CHEESE IS BACK.

You might associate cottage cheese with fad diets from the 1970s, but it's a food that has stood the test of time. Cottage cheese was a breakout hit on TikTok last summer, and for

good reason. You can eat it plain or use it as a versatile ingredient in both sweet and savoury snacks, and it offers an impressive array of nutrients including protein, calcium, selenium and more.

9. TOFU REALLY IS GOOD FOR YOU, TOO.

In past decades, people have worried that tofu and other soy foods might be linked with cancer or fertility problems because they contain estrogenlike compounds. But studies have put those fears to bed, scientists say. In fact, research suggests that eating soy-based foods may reduce your risk of heart disease and even some types of cancer.

10. IT'S CHALLENGING TO SEPARATE NUTRITION MYTHS FROM FACTS.

Myths about nutrition tend to linger in American culture and in our minds, leaving us confused and sometimes even anxious about our eating decisions. — NYT

Omani short film bags Best Screenplay Award at Tunisia Film Festival



BY BALQEES ALORAIMI

OMANI DIRECTOR Dr Humaid bin Saeed al Amri achieved a remarkable feat with his short fiction film 'Al Darooj' which clinched the Best Screenplay Award at the fourth edition of the Cinemakna Days of Poetic Films Festival. The festival, held from December 20 to 23 in Tunisia, showcased an array of artistic talent, making the jury's selection challenging due to the high level of competition among the participating films.



Expressing gratitude, Dr Hamid al Amiri commended the dedication of the Ayyam Cinemana Poetry Film Festival management, the Mekneen Cinema Society, and the discerning jury for their efforts in evaluating the outstanding entries. The recognition of 'Al-Darooj' at the festival underscores the film's excellence in storytelling and screenplay.



Earlier, Dr Hamid bin Saeed Al Ameri's acclaimed short narrative film, 'The Drawers' marked historic milestones in 2022. It became the first Omani short narrative film to grace the screens of the Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center in the United States of America. The film also made its debut at the Arab Film Festival in Korea and garnered attention at the Egyptian Opera House's Hangar Cinema.



'The Drawers' continued its global journey by participating in over 40 festivals worldwide, where it not only captivated audiences but also earned numerous international accolades. Dr Hamid bin Saeed al Ameri's work stands as a testament to the burgeoning success of Omani cinema on the international stage, showcasing the country's storytelling prowess and artistic finesse.