

Oman Sustainability Week

Activities of Oman Sustainability Week kicked off at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre under the slogan "Sustainable Living in a Circular Society". The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Taimour bin Asaad al Said, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), and is aimed at boosting domestic development efforts towards a more sustainable future. **DETAILS ON P2**

SUNRISE - 05:34 AM
PRAYER TIMINGS
FAJR - 04:13 AM
DHUHR - 12:09 PM
ASR - 03:35 PM
MAGHRIB - 06:40 PM
ISHA - 07:55 PM



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OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om

P15

OMAN LNG OUTLINES VISION TO TRANSFORM WADI MIBAM



P11

OOC LAUNCHES TRAINING PROJECT TO PROMOTE OLYMPIC CULTURE



P20

FRENCH BIKERS ON AN ARABIAN MOTORCYCLE TOUR STOPOVER IN OMAN



Hopes rise for Gaza deal

GCC-US JOINT MEETING CALLS FOR PEACEFUL SOLUTION



GCC foreign ministers pose with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken for a group photo in Riyadh on Monday.

RIYADH: The Sultanate of Oman took part in the joint ministerial meeting between foreign ministers of GCC countries and Antony Blinken, US Secretary of State. The meeting was held at the headquarters of the General Secretariat of the GCC in Riyadh, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Oman's delegation at the meeting was headed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. The meeting reviewed GCC-US partnership relations and cooperation in political and economic fields.

Moreover, the two sides exchanged views on various regional and international issues of common interest. This move stems from the two sides keenness to support all efforts aimed towards achieving solutions and peaceful settlement of various issues and crises in a bid to have security and stability prevail in the region.

The two sides underscored the importance of concentrating on efforts aimed at achieving a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and to reach a peaceful and just solution to the Palestinian cause on the basis of the two-state solution, international resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Meanwhile, Sayyid Badr met separately with Prince Faisal Farhan al Saud, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the



Women react following Israeli bombardment in Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip on Monday. — AFP

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Dr Abdullahatif Rashid Alzayani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Meanwhile, hopes rose on Monday for a long-sought truce and hostage release deal after almost seven months of war.

Washington's top diplomat said he was "hopeful" Hamas would accept the offer, which his British counterpart said could see the release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners. Negotiators from Hamas were due in Egypt, a mediator in the process along with the United States and Qatar.

For months they have been trying to broker a new agreement between the combatants, the first since a one-week truce in November saw 80 Israeli captives exchanged for 240 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons. Diplomacy in the past few days appeared to suggest a new push to halt the fighting.

The war has brought Gaza to the brink of famine, United Nations and humanitarian aid groups say, while reducing much of the territory to rubble and raising fears of a wider regional conflict.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a World Economic Forum special meeting in Riyadh that the proposal before Hamas is "extraordinarily, extraordinarily generous on the part of Israel." — **Agencies**

Chairman of Hydrom, said: "Oman is strategically located between two key green hydrogen demand centres in Europe and Asia. This, in addition to, our Tier-1 infrastructure and logistics capabilities have enabled us to leverage our first mover advantage in the global hydrogen industry."

He went on to highlight that the availability of renewable natural resources in Oman coupled with the country's favourable geopolitical positioning, investor-friendly policies and progressive energy transition strategies make it one of the most suitable countries for green hydrogen production. As a result, Hydrom's second round of auctions attracted global interest with over 200 companies showing interest for a chance to bid on developing integrated green hydrogen projects in what is set to become one of the largest exporter countries of low carbon hydrogen by 2030. **DETAILS ON P13**

MUSCAT: Hydrom, Oman's green hydrogen orchestrator, announced signing two new green hydrogen projects in Dhofar worth \$11 billion. The signings follow the successful completion of Hydrom's second round of auctions bringing the total hydrogen production in Oman to 1.38 million tonnes per year (mtpa) by 2030.

The first agreement was signed with a consortium consisting of Electricité de France SA and its subsidiary EDF Renewables (EDF Group), Electric Power Development Co, Ltd (J-POWER) and YamnaCo Ltd (Yamna). The second agreement was signed with Actis, a leading global investor in sustainable infrastructure, and Fortescue, a global integrated green energy, metals and technology company.

Having presided over the signings, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and

RO 338 million to bolster urban landscape

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

In a move that promises to boost Oman's residential sector and urban development, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning unveiled a significant investment package valued at around RO 338.7 million.

The announcement, coinciding with the Third Oman Real Estate Expo (OREX) and Oman Design & Build Week (ODBW), detailed plans for new residential neighbourhoods and urban centres across various governorates.

The initiative incorporates both residential development and urban planning, aiming to address housing needs and create modern urban spaces.

The investment promises a wave of new residential projects across the country. Al Batinah South will see the rise of Al Laban Neighbourhood, offering 1,442 units developed by Al Badi Investment Group with an investment of RO 111 million. Al Batinah North will host the new Majd Neighbourhood with 1,057 new



The investment promises a wave of new projects.

homes undertaken by the Sohar Company for Development with an investment of RO 50 million. Moving on to Al Dakhiliyah, the Wilayat of Bidbid will be home to Al Zain Fort, a residential developing featuring 639 residential units, with Zain Real Estate Development at the helm of the RO 30 million project. At Al Amerat in Muscat Governorate, Al Madina Real Estate will invest around RO 53 million in the development of Al-Ahed Neighbourhood with 965 homes. **DETAILS ON P15**



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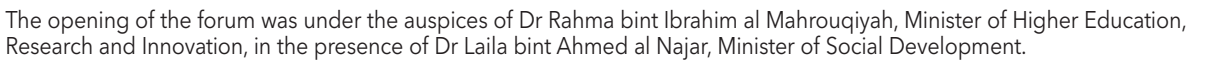
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Along Oman Sea coasts, winds are expected to be easterly to northeasterly light to moderate at day time becoming variable light at night, while over the rest of the governorates it will be southerly to southwesterly light to moderate occasionally fresh along Arabian Sea coasts and desert areas.



AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

Maani bint Abdullah al-Busaidiyah, General-Director of Family Development at the Ministry of Social Development, said in the ministry's speech that the Sultanate of Oman has been keen to activate the role of women in society and support them to achieve achievements in various development fields. "Oman has strengthened national policies, plans and programmes to reach a conscious, cohesive society that is socially and economically

During its two dialogue sessions, the forum witnessed the presentation of a number of working papers on the 'Creativity

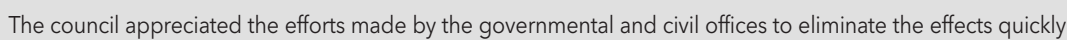
The third working paper, 'Women in Creativity and Culture', highlighted the role of Arab women in the field of creativity and culture through their contribution to literature, arts, and sciences, and highlighted the success stories of many female writers, artists, and intellectuals in enriching the Arab cultural heritage.

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

The council focused its discussions on the weather

The council appreciated the efforts made by the governmental and civil offices to eliminate the effects quickly and with high efficiency and cooperative efforts among all segments of society that

The members of the council expressed their opinions, visions and perceptions on various topics raised for discussion, and through them, the council made appropriate recommendations.

Board of Director Report For the Quarter ended March 31st, 2024.

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A SILENT ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER

MICROPLASTICS: THIS TICKING TIME BOMB POSES A SERIOUS THREAT TO ALL FORMS OF LIFE



AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

RECENT scientific studies have warned of a silent environmental disaster in the form of the accumulation of microplastics around the world, from oceans to soil and even air. This ticking time bomb poses a serious threat to all forms of life, including humans. These tiny particles pose a significant threat to living organisms. Animals and plants ingest them, and they move through the food chain, eventually reaching humans. The full extent of the health risks posed by this is still unknown.

Chams Boujrada, a young researcher interested in science and environmental issues for many years, said “Our environment has been affected by many problems that are rooted in human activities and behaviours. Perhaps the latest of these is the problem of the accumulation of small plastic particles known as microplastics.”

Microplastics have been found to pollute many environments, including almost all marine ecosystems.

She added studies have confirmed that the danger of microplastics in marine ecosystems is not limited to their ability to enter food chains and accumulate in them or transport toxic chemicals due to their association with them. They can also change the composition

of coastal areas, which negatively affects the species that depend on them.

Boujrada said, “Sea turtles are an excellent example of an affected species. During nesting, sea turtles reach sandy beaches to lay their eggs. The temperature of the nesting sand during egg incubation determines the sex of the turtle offspring. However, microplastic particles can affect the sand temperature, causing it to rise, especially if these particles are dark in colour. As a result, the sex ratio of turtles becomes unbalanced.”

In addition, when microplastics come into direct contact with eggs, harmful chemical pollutants that they absorb can seep into the eggs, which can affect fetal growth and reduce the reproductive success of nests (i.e., hatching success).

“Studies indicate that a 1 per cent increase in microplastics increases the temperature by 0.017 degrees Celsius. This may seem like a small increase, but it is significant for species like sea turtles that are sensitive to the slightest difference in temperature,” Boujrada said.

The causes of the microplastic pollution problem differ depending on the type of microplastic: primary and secondary.

Primary microplastics are intentionally manufactured and added to various products for industrial and commercial purposes. These materials can easily end up in the environment through sewage and water treatment systems due to their small size.

Examples include microbeads found in some cosmetics and personal care products, such as some detergents and toothpaste.

Microfibers used in textiles and clothing and fishing tools - nets and ropes - known as microfibers are another example of primary microplastics. These fibers break down (or shed) and end up in the environment mainly through wastewater discharged by household and industrial washing machines, either during production, use, or maintenance.

Secondary microplastics, on the other hand, are larger plastics (such as plastic bags and bottles) that break down into microplastics under the influence of environmental conditions such as waves, currents, and sunlight.

Boujrada explained many marine organisms have been found to contain microplastics within their bodies. In addition, traces of microplastics have been detected in our blood vessels, which is a cause for concern, especially since these materials contain toxic chemicals that can have negative effects on our organs and immune systems and interfere with the hormones secreted by our body’s glands.

SOLUTIONS

It is clear from that our daily use of primary and secondary microplastics is part of the large-scale pollution that occurs and its resulting effects on the

“Studies indicate that a 1 per cent increase in microplastics increases the temperature by 0.017 degrees Celsius. This may seem like a small increase, but it is significant for species like sea turtles that are sensitive to the slightest difference in temperature.”

CHAMS BOUJRADA
Researcher

environment and living organisms. Therefore, individuals can change their habits and help the environment.

Boujrada said in addition to buying clothes made from natural fibers (such as cotton, linen, and wool), people can adopt proper ways to handle textiles that contain plastic. “For example, in the washing process, less friction means fewer microfibers. Therefore, it is recommended to fill washing machines and set them to spin at a low number of cycles during the drying stage,” she said.

This type of clothing should be washed less frequently, for a shorter time, and at cold temperature settings. There are some products (such as washing bags and Cora balls) and filters that can be used to capture microfibers during the washing process. She said Microplastic pollution can also be reduced by purchasing sustainable health and beauty products made from natural alternatives or making them yourself.

Single-use plastics can be replaced with reusable materials made from metal, glass, and other materials.

Boujrada emphasises raising public awareness of the microplastic pollution problem is essential.

By increasing awareness, people will act more responsibly towards the environment and we can create sustainable families.



FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS FORUM FROM MAY 1

MUSCAT: The Royal Academy of Management (RAM), in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, is organising the Future of Higher Education Institutions forum.

The forum targets university presidents, deans of public

and private colleges, as well as representatives from the public and private sectors at local and regional levels. It will take place on May 1 and 2.

Dr Ali bin Qasim al Lawati, President of the Royal Academy of Management, stated that the forum is part of the academy's

programmes and initiatives that embody the noble vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. It will enhance administrative leadership at various levels through different knowledge domains, constructive discussions, executive education, and

institutional innovation.

He explained that the forum will address topics related to emerging global trends in higher education, such as national competitiveness, innovation and the future of work and business. It will also examine global indicators and rankings,

revolutionary technologies, artificial intelligence, and sustainable growth.

The forum will discuss the changes in the higher education sector, knowledge exchange, and shared challenges with the aim of enabling leadership to understand emerging

developments and trends that affect higher education institutions.

This will enhance partnerships between public and private educational institutions and build new visions that promote innovation and support economic growth.

Food Safety Week begins



The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Hilal Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health. – ONA

MUSCAT: Activities of the Food Safety Week 2024 began on Monday under the theme 'Food Risk Assessment: Partnership, Awareness and Commitment'.

The event focuses on relevant risks and means of raising awareness and knowledge among all segments of the society regarding food safety, food quality and protecting public health.

The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr

Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health.

Further, the Food Safety Week 2024 aims to augment the capabilities of human resources and to develop available resources to keep pace with developments in the field of food industry.

The first day activities of the event included discussion panels on various topics related to food regulation, fish farming and various risks in the food sector.

Several seminars are held on the sidelines of the event to explore ways of overcoming challenges in the food sector and to provide innovative solutions that contribute to economic development.

It is worth noting that Food Safety Week 2024 is held in various governorates in partnership with several establishments in the field of food safety and consumer health.

— ONA



OMAN, KSA EXPLORE COOPERATION IN JUDICIAL INSPECTION

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Supreme Judiciary Council and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represented by the Board of Grievances on Monday explored means of boosting cooperation in the field of judicial inspection. During the meeting, the experience of the Supreme Judiciary Council in the field of judicial inspection was highlighted. The two sides reviewed areas of cooperation and exchanged expertise. – ONA

‘University theatre festival adopts creative energies of young people’

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

The activities of the Seventh University Theatre Festival of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, which is hosted by the university's branch in Sur, continues to compete for 14 different awards during the period from April 28 until May 2, 2024, with the aim of creating a competitive forum for students' theatrical creativity, and developing different students' talents in various fields of theatre.

Nine teams representing the various branches of the university participating, along with an elite group of theatre stars and critics and the teams will compete for 14 different awards.

The Deanship of Student Affairs at the university began preparing and working for this festival by communicating with the branches, inviting arbitrators and critics, and preparing the general atmosphere for holding the festival.

Dr Huda bint Salim al Shueiliyah, Vice-President of the University for Student Affairs and Electronic Systems, said: "This festival comes as a continuation of the approach of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in adopting, supporting and highlighting the creative energies of young people



The theatrical performances and criticism sessions will be accompanied by specialised workshops in acting and directing

at the local and external levels. It is an extension of the paths of the Oman Vision 2040 in nurturing young talents and pushing them towards excellence."

She added that the seventh edition of the Theatrical Festival is exceptional and comes in a renewed form, with the strong participation of the various branches of the university, which are Muscat, Suhar, Salalah, Al Rustaq, Musandam, Ibri, Nizwa, Ibra, Shinas and Al Musannah, hosted by the Sur branch, and this coincides with the celebration of choosing Sur as the capital for Arab Tourism 2024.

Dr Rashid bin Nasser al Matani, Assistant President of the University of Sur and Chairman of the Festival Organising Committee, also

welcomed the festival's guests, including students, supervisors, arbitration and evaluation committees, literary criticism committees, and audiences appreciating the art of theatre. He stressed that this festival adopting the creative energies of young people and seeks to prepare a new generation to provide the Omani theatre with young talents eager to give, and to spread the theatrical spirit on the cultural and artistic map of the Sultanate of Oman.

Thesetheatricalperformances and criticism sessions will be accompanied by specialised workshops in acting and directing to develop the skills of the participating students to enable them to optimally employ their theatrical skills.



المتحدة للتمويل

United Finance

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE PERIOD ENDED 31ST MARCH 2024

REPORT ON MATERIAL EVENTS COVERING THE INTERIM FINANCIALS

OVERVIEW AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

The first quarter of 2024 has continued to build upon the resilience shown in the previous year. We are delighted to report a steadfast performance amid a global environment that remains challenging for the financial industry. Our total income for the quarter saw an increase of 11.5% to RO 2.6 million, with a significant leap in net profit by 70.6% to RO 438,389. Our balance sheet strength is evident, with total assets growing to RO 103.2 million.

Looking ahead, the economic indicators for Oman are encouraging, signalling a continuation of growth momentum. The Omani government's ongoing commitment to economic diversification and fiscal stability is poised to provide a supportive backdrop for our operations. As the nation capitalizes on its strategic initiatives, we foresee a promising uplift in the business environment. Our company is poised to further embrace the digital revolution in financial services while seeking new horizons in eco-friendly financing solutions.

We remain bullish on our prospects, underpinned by the favourable economic forecasts for Oman, which suggest a robust business cycle ahead. United Finance Company is strategically positioned to harness these emerging opportunities, steadfast in our commitment to generating enduring value for all our stakeholders and upholding the pinnacle of corporate governance and integrity.

PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

United Finance Company SAOG's net profit after tax has surged to RO 438,389, a remarkable increase of 70.6%. Our total income has risen to RO 2.6 million, an 11.5% growth. We observed an increase in operating income, reflecting the sound management of company resources, despite market fluctuations.

Our loan portfolio has shown robust growth and diversification, indicative of our prudent lending practices and the trust our clients place in our financial products. The capital adequacy ratio remains strong, signalling a well-capitalized position for future growth.

PROVISIONING POSITION

We have allocated RO 362,255 as provision in Q1 2024, ensuring our reserves remain fortified against potential non-performing loans, reflecting our conservative and proactive risk management approach.

FUNDING

Our funding position remains solid, with sufficient liquidity to support our strategic objectives. We have secured the renewal and enhancement of credit facilities, which along with prudent financial management, assure our stakeholders of our capacity to fulfill our business commitments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Our gratitude extends to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tank Al Said, may his vision continue to guide us, the Government of Oman, the Central Bank of Oman, the Financial Services Authority, and other regulatory bodies for their steadfast support. We also thank our banking partners, dealers, and customers for their continued trust and engagement. Our dedicated team at United Finance Company deserves special mention for their exceptional efforts and commitment.

Mohamed Abdulla Al Khonji

Chairman

STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2024

	2024 RO	2023 RO
Interest income on instalment finance income	2,284,632	2,043,279
Interest expense	(767,817)	(571,375)
Net instalment finance income	1,516,815	1,471,904
Fee commission and other income	339,012	310,580
Net operating income	1,855,827	1,782,484
Operating expenses	(947,084)	(1,012,371)
Depreciation	(30,736)	(24,476)
Allowance for expected credit losses	(362,255)	(443,247)
Profit before tax	515,752	302,390
Income tax expense	(77,363)	(45,358)
PROFIT FOR THE YEAR	438,389	257,032
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.005	0.003

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31 MARCH 2024

	2024 RO	2023 RO
ASSETS		
Cash and cash equivalents	852,933	137,769
Deposit with the Central Bank of Oman	250,000	250,000
Other assets	652,202	591,785
Instalment finance debtors - net	97,931,479	95,307,390
Investment securities	714,791	724,150
Deferred tax asset	16,923	16,923
Property and equipment	2,331,833	2,308,610
Assets held for sale	544,655	510,960
TOTAL ASSETS	103,294,816	99,847,587
EQUITY		
Share capital	35,612,729	35,612,729
Legal reserve	5,475,010	5,277,839
Special reserve	2,368,989	2,368,989
Impairment reserve	1,935,236	1,911,736
Investment revaluation reserve	160,641	170,000
Retained earnings	2,690,163	2,007,509
Total equity	48,242,768	47,348,802
Liabilities		
Creditors and other payables	6,984,463	5,409,228
Borrowings	35,511,400	43,358,891
Taxation	406,185	340,666
Corporate deposits	12,150,000	3,390,000
Total liabilities	55,052,048	52,498,785
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	103,294,816	99,847,587
NET ASSETS PER SHARE	0.135	0.133

The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests them, in either Arabic or English within 7 days of the receipt of such request addressed to:
Chief Executive Officer, United Finance Co. SAOG
P O Box 3652, PC 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.
Tel: 24577300 Fax 24581557
E-mail: ufc@ufcoman.com, Website: www.ufcoman.com

Products with inappropriate packaging seized

MUSCAT: The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has booked commercial establishments for selling children's sweets with inappropriate packaging such as depicting a pack of cigarettes.

The products were immediately withdrawn and investigated, and legal measures were taken against the offenders.

The supplier was also obligated to stop distributing the product and withdraw it from the market.

SALE OF VEHICLE / EQUIPMENT

Leading Construction Co. in Oman intends to dispose of their used vehicles and equipment, in 'as is where is' condition. The items identified are presently located at their Barka Khazaen and will be offered for inspection to the public on 5/5/2024, 6/5/2024 and 7/5/2024 between 08:00 am to 12:00 pm and 03:00 pm to 05:00 pm.

Last date for submission of closed tender is 7/5/2024 at 05:00 pm at our Khazaen office In Barka state.

Interested parties may contact at
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Mobile: (+968) 91354151



US, Egypt ‘hopeful’ of Gaza truce as envoys meet

CAIRO: US top diplomat Antony Blinken said on Monday he was “hopeful” Palestinian groups would accept the latest proposal for a long-sought Gaza truce and captives release deal as negotiators were due in Egypt.

Egypt, Qatar and the United States have been trying to mediate an agreement between Israel and Palestinians for months, and a recent flurry of diplomacy appeared to suggest a new push towards halting the fighting.

Talks “are taking place in Cairo today”, said Al-Qahera News, which is linked to Egyptian intelligence services.

It was not clear whether the Palestinian movement Hamas delegation had already arrived, but Qatari mediators were also in Cairo according to a source with knowledge of the talks.

A senior Hamas official said that the Palestinian group had no “major issues” with the most recent truce plan.

Blinken — on his seventh visit to the region since the October 7 — told a World Economic Forum meeting in Saudi Arabia he was “hopeful” Hamas would accept a truce.

“Hamas has before it a

proposal that is extraordinarily, extraordinarily generous on the part of Israel,” Blinken said, urging the group to “decide quickly”. “I’m hopeful that they will make the right decision.”

Speaking at the same meeting, Egypt’s Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said “the proposal has taken into account the positions of both sides.”

While there was no “final decision” yet, Shoukry said: “We are hopeful... I hope that all will rise to the occasion.”

The war has brought the besieged Gaza Strip to the brink of famine, UN and humanitarian aid groups say, reduced much of the territory to rubble and raised fears of a wider regional conflict.

In southern Gaza, a correspondent, witnesses and rescuers reported air strikes overnight on Rafah, where the majority of Gaza’s 2.4 million people have sought refuge near the border with Egypt.

As diplomatic efforts intensified, a State Department official said Blinken will also travel to Israel and neighbouring Jordan later this week.

His Saudi counterpart, Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, said on Sunday the



A man carries a child as he walks with other people fleeing following Israeli bombardment in Nuseirat. — AFP



A cloud of smoke erupts following Israeli bombardment on a position in the central Gaza Strip. — AFP

Egypt, Qatar and the US have been trying to mediate an agreement for months, and a recent flurry of diplomacy appeared to suggest a new push towards halting the fighting

international “political system” had failed in its response to the “catastrophe” in Gaza.

Prince Faisal told the WEF summit that only “a credible,

irreversible path to a Palestinian state” will prevent the world from confronting “this same situation” again in the future.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s hard-right government has rejected calls for Palestinian statehood.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas appealed at the WEF meeting for the United States to stop Israel from invading Rafah, which he said would be “the biggest disaster in the history of the Palestinian people”. — AFP

Israeli strikes kill at least 30 Palestinians in Rafah

GAZA: Israeli airstrikes on three houses in the southern Gaza city of Rafah killed at least 25 Palestinians and wounded many others, medics said on Monday.

In Gaza City, in the north of the Gaza Strip, Israeli warplanes struck two houses, killing at least four people and wounding several people, health officials said. The strike on the other house killed two brothers, they added.

The strikes on Rafah, where more than one million people have sought refuge from months of Israeli bombardment, took place hours before Egypt was expected to host delegates to discuss prospects for a ceasefire agreement with Israel. The Israeli military said it was checking the reports.

Israel has vowed to eradicate the Palestinian groups. Its six-month-long military operation has now killed 34,488 Palestinians, 34 of them in the past 24 hours, and wounded 77,643. The war has displaced most of the 2.3 million population and laid much of the enclave to waste.

The conflict was triggered by an attack on Israel on Oct. 7 in which 1,200 people were killed and 253 taken captives, according to Israeli tallies.

An assault on Rafah has been anticipated for weeks but foreign



Mourners react during the funeral of Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes, in Rafah. — Reuters

governments and the United Nations have expressed concern that such action could result in a humanitarian disaster given the number of displaced people crammed into the area.

At a hospital in Rafah, relatives of those killed by the Israeli strikes came to take the bodies away for burial. Women and men cried as they paid farewell to the slain relatives wrapped in white and black shrouds. “His name is Deif-Allah and he was indeed a guest. He came as a guest after his parents longed for him for so long, after 10 years,” said Abu Taha holding the body of his baby boy, wrapped in a white shroud, in his arms. “Ten people (were killed),

the mother, her daughter, her granddaughters, her grandson, her son-in-law, their daughters and relatives, everyone. They’re all gone, all 10 of them,” Abu Taha said.

Aid agencies, as well as Western allies of Israel, fear an attack there would magnify the humanitarian crisis in Gaza caused by the war, intensifying international pressure for a truce.

Continued fighting makes any effort to improve the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza far more difficult, with the World Food Programme saying last week that northern parts of the enclave were still heading towards famine. — Reuters

Gazans struggle with heat, garbage

RAFAH: As garbage piles up and the heat rises in war-torn Gaza, flies and mosquitoes proliferate in crowded Rafah city and life becomes even more grim for displaced people living in tents.

Last week, temperatures already topped 30 degrees Celsius, turning the makeshift shelters made from plastic tarps and sheets into sweltering ovens.

On a sliver of land on the outskirts of the far-southern city on the Egyptian border, about 20 of these tents have been erected, all shaded by a large sheet stretched above them.

But the thin, dark cloth is no match for the blazing sun that has sent temperatures rising fast in late April, making it harder to preserve scarce potable water and food.

“The water we drink is warm,” Ranine Aouni al-Arian, a Palestinian woman displaced from the devastated nearby city of Khan Yunis, said. “The children can’t bear the heat and the mosquito and fly bites anymore,” she added.

She was holding a baby whose face was covered in insect bites and said that she struggles to find “a treatment or a solution”.

“It’s the first time we see so many, because of the pollution and the waste discarded everywhere,” said

Aala Saleh, from Jabalia in the north of Gaza. He said sleeping has become nearly impossible inside his tent.

The World Health Organization warned in January of a leap in infectious diseases such as hepatitis A, blamed on unsanitary conditions in camps.

“Waste continues piling up & running water is scarce” in Gaza, warned UNRWA, the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, in a post on X last week. “As the weather gets warmer, the risk of disease spreading increases.”

Rafah hosts about 1.5 million displaced, according to the UN, more than half of the Gaza Strip’s population which has been besieged and bombarded by Israel for nearly seven months.

On the streets, garbage accumulates as large rubbish containers overflow after basic services broke down long ago amid Gaza’s worst ever war.

Israel’s military operation has killed at least 34,488 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory.

The war has also destroyed “waste collection vehicles, facilities and medical waste treatment centres”, leaving “municipalities scrambling to cope with the escalating crisis”, a UN report said late last month. — AFP



Palestinians walk in a camp for displaced people in Rafah. — AFP



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In brief

■ MAI MAHIU



FLOODS KILL AT LEAST 42 IN KENYA AFTER DAM BURSTS

At least 42 people have been killed in floods in central Kenya's Mai Mahiu area after a dam burst early on Monday, and the number of deaths could rise.

"We have so far recovered 42 bodies following the early morning incident where a dam burst its banks in Kijabe area and rescue and search operations are going on," Naivasha police commander Stephen Kirui said.

The Kenya Red Cross said it had taken several people to a health facility in Mai Mahiu due to flash flooding.

The latest deaths bring the toll from heavy rains and flooding since last month to more than 140. — **Reuters**

■ WARSAW

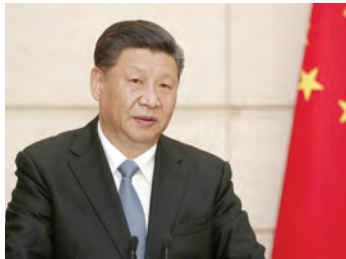


POLISH FARMERS LIFT BORDER BLOCKADES AT ALL UKRAINE CROSSINGS

Poland's border crossings with Ukraine were all open on Monday, after months of blockades by Polish truckers and farmers protesting what they called unfair competition from Ukrainians. "The traffic through all the border crossings with Ukraine is possible," Michal Derus, a spokesman for the tax administration chamber in Poland's Lublin region said after farmers ended the last blockade at the Hrebenne border crossing.

The end to all blockades comes after the government in Warsaw announced fresh aid to the farmers. "All trucks are allowed to pass as long as they are not carrying sanctioned goods," Derus added. — **AFP**

■ BEIJING



CHINA'S XI TO VISIT FRANCE, SERBIA AND HUNGARY IN MAY

Chinese President Xi Jinping will visit France, Serbia and Hungary from May 5-10, his first Europe trip in five years aimed at boosting EU ties as tensions mount with the world's second largest economy.

Bilateral relations with France have maintained sound growth momentum, and both countries have had strategic communications and practical cooperation, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said. "It is time to push the comprehensive strategic partnership to a new level and give new impetus to the healthy development of China-EU relations. — **Reuters**

Zelenskiy urges US to speed up weapons deliveries



Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskiy and Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg arrive for a press conference, in Kyiv. — **Reuters**

KYIV: President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said on Monday that vital US weapons were starting to arrive in Ukraine in small amounts and that the process needed to move faster as advancing Russian forces were trying to take advantage.

Zelenskiy told a joint press conference in Kyiv alongside visiting Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg that the situation on the battlefield directly depended on the speed of ammunition supplies to Ukraine.

"Timely support for our army. Today I don't see anything positive on this point yet. There are supplies, they have slightly begun, this process needs to be sped up," he said.

The United States passed a \$61 billion aid package last week, ending months of congressional deadlock and raising hopes in Kyiv that its critically low stocks of artillery shells would soon be replenished.

Ukraine's top commander said on Sunday his troops had pulled back from three villages in the east where Russian forces are on the offensive and gradually taking ground.

“Today I don’t see anything positive on this point yet. There are supplies, they have slightly begun, this process needs to be sped up

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKIY

Ukrainian President

"The Russian army is now trying to take advantage of a situation when we are waiting for supplies from our partners... and that is exactly why the speed of deliveries means stabilising the front," Zelenskiy said. "Russia is preparing for offensive actions," he added.

The Ukrainian leader also singled out the need for supplies of sophisticated Patriot air defence launch systems that Kyiv wants to obtain from its allies to counter Russia's long-range missile and drone strikes. He said

Kyiv had made some progress in obtaining supplies of missiles for the Patriot system, but that it was still working on the question of obtaining new launchers that fire the missiles.

Nato boss Jens Stoltenberg told Ukrainians on Monday that his alliance's members had failed to live up to their promises of military aid in recent months, but said the flow of arms and ammunition would now increase.

In an unannounced visit to Ukraine, the secretary-general of the transatlantic military alliance held talks with President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and was due to address Ukraine's parliament, the Rada. His visit comes at a difficult time on the battlefield for Ukraine. After a failed Ukrainian counter-offensive last year, Russian forces have gained the initiative — at least in part due to a dearth of arms and ammunition from Kyiv's Western partners.

"I will also be very honest with President Zelenskiy and also with the Rada that Nato allies have not delivered what we have promised over the last months," Stoltenberg said on the train taking him into Kyiv on Monday. — **Reuters**

Togo votes in parliament ballot after key reform

LOME: Togolese voted in legislative elections on Monday after a divisive constitutional reform that opponents say allows President Faure Gnassingbe to extend his family's decades-long grip on power.

The ballot comes after lawmakers this month approved the reform creating a new prime minister-style post opponents believe is tailored for Gnassingbe to avoid presidential term limits and stay in office.

In power for nearly 20 years, Gnassingbe succeeded his father Gnassingbe Eyadema, who ruled for almost four decades himself in the small coastal West African state wedged between Benin and Ghana.

"This is the first time I am voting, because I lived in a neighbouring country before. I came out early to avoid crowds," said Koffi Ohini, a farm technician, 24, who cast his ballot in the capital Lome. "I want to vote because these elections are important."

Early turnout at polling stations in the capital was slow but the streets were calm.

Monday's vote will elect 113 lawmakers and also for the first time 179 regional deputies from the country's five districts

who along with municipal councillors will elect a newly created Senate. For Gnassingbe's ruling UNIR party this makes Togo more representative, but opposition parties have mobilised supporters to vote against what they say is an "institutional coup".

With a population of nearly nine million, more than half under the age of 25, Togo's economy is mainly agrarian. But Lome has one of the busiest deep sea ports in West Africa, helping Togo weather the fallout of the Ukraine war and the pandemic. According to the new constitution adopted by lawmakers on April 19, Togo's president becomes a mostly ceremonial role elected by parliament, and not the people, for a four-year term.

Togo's shift from a presidential to a parliamentary system means power now resides with the new president of the council of ministers, a sort of super-Prime Minister, who automatically will be the leader of the majority party in the new assembly. Gnassingbe's Union for the Republic, or UNIR party, already dominates parliament. If the ruling party wins, he can assume that new post. Results from the ballot are expected to be released within six days. — **AFP**



Brigitte Adjamagbo-Johnson, coordinator of Dynamique Pour la Majorité du Peuple (DMP) casts her ballot at public primary school in Lome. — **AFP**

Sanchez stays on as Spain's PM after weighing exit

MADRID: Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said on Monday he had decided to stay in office after days of publicly weighing his future, generating relief amongst leftist allies, exasperation among the public and ridicule from his opponents.

Shouting could be heard on Madrid streets when Sanchez made his announcement in a televised address, bringing an abrupt close to a five-day drama since he said last week that he was retreating from public duty to decide whether to quit.

"I have decided to go on, if possible even stronger as prime minister. This is not business as usual, things are going to be different," he said.

Sanchez, 52, had announced last Wednesday that he might quit in response to a corruption investigation into his wife, which he said was baseless and orchestrated by his right-wing political opponents.

Adding to the melodrama, he began Monday morning by meeting King Felipe VI — a step that would have been necessary should he have decided to resign.



People march to show support for Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, in Madrid. — **Reuters**

In his subsequent address he said he had informed the monarch of his decision to stay, after having been encouraged by widespread expressions of support over the weekend.

The furore over his future had caused turmoil in Spanish politics,

where a fractious parliament has struggled to form coalition governments after close elections.

The decision to stay generated intense relief among Sanchez's followers, but the episode drew fierce mockery from opponents.

"Thank you for your bravery,

your determination and also thank you for your humanity, prime minister," Deputy Prime Minister Maria Jesus Montero wrote on X. The first measure of how the incident has affected Sanchez's standing will come with regional elections in Catalonia

Sanchez had announced last Wednesday that he might quit in response to a corruption investigation into his wife

on May 12 in which his Socialist party is projected to win the most seats as they attempt to wrest control from separatist parties.

On Madrid's streets, passersby were irritated by the drama, even if they were happy Sanchez was remaining. "I'm glad he's continuing, the country doesn't need new elections or a change of government now," Eva Aladro, 60, a university professor, said.

Sanchez said he and his wife Begona Gomez were braced for further attacks but that he had decided to continue regardless. He said his personal situation had wider implications and argued that women should be allowed to pursue their own careers, and victims should not be forced to defend their innocence.

— **Reuters**

Oman shapes a crystal image of solidarity with Palestinians



Recent course of events has revealed the Sultanate of Oman’s utmost stand with Palestinians facing the brutal invasion on Gaza Strip.

At all levels of social, political and even individual matters, Oman has chosen to retain the firm values and subjective rationales in making significant remarks on the Palestinian cause.

It is extremely distressing to observe the brutal actions by Israeli occupation forces on the defenceless Palestinian civilians including children, women and elderly. Infrastructure facilities are now piles of rubble, and people can find no safer place under the indiscriminate Israeli strikes.

In the political stream, Oman’s position has been stated evidently to support the Palestinian demands to live with full freedom granted by international law and human rights.

Diplomats have exerted a great deal of efforts

to fulfil Oman’s noble message in keeping peace the ultimate priority in calling for a ceasefire and pushing humanitarian aid into the Palestinian enclave.

Therefore, leading a team to the UN Security Council and express strongly what the world needs to hear were all of Oman’s concerned mission on the global stage.

Statements were made to the international community not to fail Palestine’s vicious misery.

Witnessing the pain with death and famine surging all over the poor Gaza has been identified as war crimes by global organisations including officials in the Palestinian areas.

Israeli forces have no morals when they drop bombs on innocents, siege food and medical aid and threaten to invade carelessly the densely-populated Rafah of displaced Palestinians.

Videos and pictures shared on different

OMAN’S POSITION HAS BEEN STATED EVIDENTLY TO SUPPORT THE PALESTINIAN DEMANDS TO LIVE WITH FULL FREEDOM GRANTED BY INTERNATIONAL LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

platforms made it hard enough to spare a reaction in the Omani community.

Just when the aggressive attacks started, Omanis have conveyed their responsible role to stand by Palestinians rejecting the injustice meted out to them.

People have said expressed their anguish through rallies, and with all available means to show their solidarity with Palestinians.

Some Omani doctors have even travelled to Gaza to serve the injured and offer needful help to them. With no doubt, Oman calls for an end to the collective punishment Israel is inflicting on Palestine, urging Israel to stop the genocidal pounds on Gaza.

The world has now seen that there is no solution but peace to the Palestinian cause. It is a turning point to ask for a Palestinian state with full rights and dignity saved for the land and for the man.

Global AI safety summit faces tough questions

MARTIN COULTER

LAST YEAR, a who’s who of world leaders, corporate executives and academic experts gathered at Britain’s Bletchley Park for the world’s first global AI Safety Summit, hoping to reach consensus on the regulation of a technology some warned posed a threat to humanity.

Tesla mogul Elon Musk and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman rubbed shoulders with some of their fiercest critics, while China co-signed the “Bletchley Declaration” alongside the United States and others, signalling a willingness to cooperate despite mounting tensions with the West.

Six months later, the second AI Safety Summit, a primarily virtual event co-hosted by Britain and South Korea, will take place as hype around artificial intelligence’s potential gives way to questions over its limitations.

“There are some radically different approaches... it will be difficult to move beyond what was agreed at Bletchley Park,” said Martha Bennett, a senior analyst at research and advisory firm Forrester, referring to the historic but necessarily broad agreement on AI safety. Thornier questions around the use of copyright material, data scarcity and environmental impact also look unlikely to attract such a star-studded congregation.

While organisers have trailered an event comparable to Bletchley, a number of its key attendees have turned down invitations to Seoul.

As the first summit closed in November, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak promised subsequent events would be held every six months so governments could keep tabs on the rapidly-developing technology.

Since then, attention has turned from existential risk to the resources needed to fuel AI’s development, such as the vast amount of data required to train large language models, and the electricity powering a growing number of data centres. “The policy discourse around AI has expanded to include other important concerns, such as market concentration and environmental impacts,” said Francine Bennett, interim director of the data and AI-focused Ada Lovelace Institute.

OpenAI CEO Altman has suggested the future of AI depends on an energy breakthrough. In February, the Wall Street Journal reported he was also seeking to raise as much as \$7 trillion to boost the production of computer chips, a component currently in short supply.

But pinning the future of AI on scientific breakthroughs and lucrative financing efforts may not be the best move, experts warn. “The failure of the technology to live up to the hype is inevitable,” said Professor Jack Stilgoe, an expert in technology policy at University College London.

“People will find surprising and creative uses for this technology, but that doesn’t mean the future is going to look how Elon Musk or Sam Altman imagine it.” — **Reuters**



Dr Saji Uthuppan

The writer is Lecturer on English

Is every meeting productive?

MEETINGS, the quintessential element of modern work culture, often walk a tightrope between productivity and time-wasting. In the corporate world, meetings are seen as vital tools for collaboration, decision-making, and brainstorming.

However, not all meetings are created equal, and their effectiveness can vary greatly. The question arises: Is every meeting productive?

The short answer is no. While meetings have their place in fostering communication and alignment within teams, many factors can hinder their productivity.

Let’s delve into some of these factors and explore ways to make meetings more efficient. It has been noticed several times that after Covid-19 outbreak, schools and colleges spend too much time in meetings.

It feels like meetings consume the day. Some meetings we arrange, others we just attend. Regardless, we’re likely to think of much of that time as unproductive. Let’s discuss ways to make any meeting we plan or attend more productive and effective.

First, one caveat. Only schedule, or hold, a meeting that is thoughtfully planned and implemented.

If there is no need for a meeting, or if there is nothing of substance on the agenda, give people the gift of time and cancel the meeting. Nothing is worse than a meeting that lacks purpose or for which there is no need.

Obviously, a crucial part of an effective meeting is having a set of meeting standards or operational norms.

This includes basic decisions such as seating arrangements. Moreover, we have to set firm start and end times, and stick to them.

This shows that we respect the participants’ time. If the meeting is lengthy, plan for a break, but again, we need to set a time and adhere to that.

Let us be sure that any speaker knows his or her allocated time and stays within those parameters.

Let us ask ourselves before the beginning, how will we maintain our group memory about our discussion and decisions?

Do you want to use charts posted visibly in the room, or will you have someone record notes? Consider using technology to facilitate meeting discussion or decisions, and post links for participants.

Moreover, we can develop guidelines for discussion. It’s important to embrace



A crucial part of an effective meeting is having a set of meeting standards or operational norms.

BY SETTING CLEAR OBJECTIVES, STREAMLINING ATTENDEE LISTS, FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT, AND FACILITATING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION, ORGANISATIONS CAN MAXIMISE THE VALUE OF THEIR MEETINGS

a collaborative model for discussion.

Allowing adequate wait time in response to questions, asking open-ended questions, and giving everyone a chance to speak are critical elements of a collaborative discussion. We often use a “parking lot,” which is simply a poster in the room.

Participants are given sticky notes, and if there is a question or discussion item that is off the topic, they write it on a note and post it in the parking lot.

You can revisit those items at the end of the meeting if there is time, or you can discuss them individually or at another time. Another point to note is to make sure that we are conducting a meeting to discuss and identify options and alternatives for a problem, or to make a decision as an end result.

Is this a regularly scheduled meeting like a staff meeting or school improvement team meeting? Are there issues that need discussions and resolutions, or is this a meeting to update people on issues?

If we want to bring a group of stakeholders together to gather input, that is appropriate, but if they believe they are meeting to make a decision, then our meeting begins with a conflict, and it is less likely to be productive.

At this juncture, once the purpose is clear, plan the specific agenda. It’s important for participants to have a clear idea of what will be discussed.

If the agenda is to be developed collaboratively, plan for that in

advance. Indeed, an agenda can also help budget time appropriately, so each item is addressed.

We can also consider whether our agenda allows for adequate discussion to inform the decision.

Most importantly, prior to the meeting, we have to determine the role of the group in terms of decision making.

Is the task of the group to make a decision? Perhaps it is to make a recommendation or to study the issue. Is the decision-making body clear?

For example, will the decision be made by the principal alone or by the principal with input? Possibly the goal is for the decision to be made by the administrator with staff consensus or by the staff with administrative input.

Or the decision may be made by the staff by consensus or by the staff by a majority vote.

Each of these strategies is appropriate for certain situations. Lack of clarity about decision making leads to misunderstanding and mistrust.

As we determine who will make the decision, we also have to consider the timeline for the decision, and make that clear to participants.

Eventually not every meeting is productive, but with careful planning and execution, their efficiency can be significantly improved.

By setting clear objectives, streamlining attendee lists, fostering engagement, and facilitating effective communication, organisations can maximise the value of their meetings.

Moreover, a culture of accountability and follow-up ensures that decisions made during meetings translate into tangible results.

Remember, the goal is not just to have meetings but to make them count. Thus good meetings are always interactive and provide for balanced participation.

The music in the soul...

A mother narrated her challenges raising her daughter who has been diagnosed with autism. She had been attending a special education school. One of main focuses of this mother was her daughter to develop the ability to button a shirt. She was never successful in getting the button through the button hole.

The daughter joining the Different Art Centre took her to another space where art played key role. She enjoyed her painting class, but her ears were glued on the notes from the next door music class.

Untrained in music she began to play the notes by listening to them on the keyboard. With this new interest her mother noticed her daughter’s anger and tantrums were almost forgotten. And yesterday we had an opportunity to watch Christie perform on her keyboard. In few minutes time she was joined by her friend, another student from the centre, on violin, and together the duo performed a medley of popular Bollywood songs. Couldn’t help but hum along with their songs.

They said the young violinist is also challenged. Feel hesitant to describe them with others because how can we say they lack anything when they are able to master the melodies and musical instruments and coordinate with each other? They are able to generate happiness in others through their music. And the other three students have mastered their moves as magicians. While Vishnu, a young magician who has been travelling internationally as a performer has become an earning member. They have been under training for more than four years. The two girls who also perform magic shows have silent conversations even if they choose to speak with each other because they talk in sign language.

Is it not sad that the majority of us have not learnt sign language yet? I sat watching them not being able to join in their conversation and still they managed to sound out that they were happy to be in Muscat.

Today they are creating waves because professionals in special education are intrigued at the way their lives have been enhanced, evolved and the changes in their development is almost unbelievable. Within days of her getting involved



Lakshmi Kothaneth
@lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

THE SEA WAVES HAVE A PARTICULAR RHYTHM, BUT WE TEND TO TUNE FROM OUR INNER RHYTHM

in music, Christie’s mum saw a huge transformation in her level of self esteem and confidence and saw her buttoning up on her own without any help from her mother. That was the biggest achievement for the mother, today the same mother who felt almost helpless, is a performer’s mother. She stood by the side and watched with pride while her daughter performed on the keyboard.

After the girls finished the medley her mother asked her what were the songs and Christie listed them out.

She was jubilant and was excited to go out for the rehearsal session. In contrast, the violinist is quiet until her violin takes off. She seems to be a quiet girl who let the violin voice her emotions.

Violin is one of the most difficult musical instruments and we all know it can be noisy until we learn to make the strings sing. And she does that with ease maintaining the right scale and pitch. To perform solo maybe still easier but to perform as a duo needs coordination as the two individuals are actually communicating in harmony.

We all have rhythm in us because of our heart beat. The sea waves have a particular rhythm, but we tend to tune from our inner rhythm and surrounding as there is so much noise in our head and so many thoughts. I would not be surprised if these two soul sisters begin to compose music of their own. There were two other people who were looking at their performance with immense satisfaction - Gopinath Muthukadu a renowned magician who has performed worldwide, whose dream project is the Different Art Project and Dr Mohammed Asheel who is an expert on abilities and disabilities and he explained about the tests on human intelligence.

He explained about the theory that suggests human intelligence can be differentiated into various modalities such as visual-spatial, verbal - linguistic, musical- rhythmic, logical - mathematical, interpersonal, interpersonal, naturalistic and bodily - kinesthetic.

So we are all different just like our unique fingerprints, and art in various forms could have the ability to connect us. But what is most important is to embrace the difference in ability and have the grace to accept others.

COOLING OFF!



A child takes a dip in a lake to get respite from the heat on a summer afternoon in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on Monday. – AFP

Challenges and solutions in distance learning

Recent climatic events and unfortunate incidents in some governorates of the Sultanate of Oman have led us to discuss the importance of distance learning.

The exceptional circumstances brought on us by the coronavirus pandemic a few years ago had necessitated the use of digital technologies for remote working and learning.

Some countries, communities and institutions managed to adapt to and accept these new conditions despite the challenges associated with unfamiliar changes.

The Sultanate of Oman was among those nations that embraced remote working and learning systems through various technological means and platforms.

The experience, which lasted for about two years during the pandemic, was largely successful, despite some challenges considered part of the transition process in any society moving from a traditional industrial to a more digital society.

This transition aligned with industry and education needs, allowing for cost reductions while maintaining quality.

Many government and private institutions continued to adopt these



Dr Muamar bin Ali Al Tob

The writer is an Omani academic and researcher

DISTANCE LEARNING BECOMES CRUCIAL WITH EVERY EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCE LIKE CLIMATIC EVENTS AND PANDEMICS TO ENSURE CONTINUITY OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

digital practices even after the pandemic had subsided, based on the successful outcomes demonstrated after a clear trial of remote work and education practices.

In this article, we focus on distance learning, which becomes crucial with every exceptional circumstance like climatic events and pandemics to ensure continuity of educational progress.

This can only be achieved by creating digital awareness and leveraging digital efforts and tools to translate and sustain digital practices into reality in the education sector at both school and university levels.

At the onset of transitioning to digital education (distance learning) in Oman, whether through partial or comprehensive application, the community was divided between supporters and opponents. Supporters endorsed this shift due to the necessity imposed by the pandemic to continue education, while opponents argued against it, claiming lack of readiness among some community members for digital transformation.

This transition from traditional

to digital education posed challenges due to insufficient digital skills among some teachers, students and parents, as well as lack of adequate digital tools like Internet connectivity and computers.

The government exerted efforts to overcome many of these challenges by providing technical support to families under social security and limited income and encouraging telecommunications companies to expand and strengthen their networks.

Many of these efforts were fruitful in overcoming some of these challenges, although some still pose obstacles in achieving widespread, sustainable digital education, which is part of Oman Vision 2040 to achieve digital transformation across all sectors.

It is clear from the narrative that the challenges facing the progress of distance learning primarily lie in the weak community awareness of digital transformation and its tools and importance, exacerbated by the limited spread of digital systems like computers and support systems like Internet and telecommunication networks.

Some areas, especially those

with challenging geographies like mountainous regions, lack complete or partial Internet and telecommunication networks, including homes and schools.

Alongside these main challenges, there are issues related to educational platforms, particularly those for school education, which lack important features like automatic student attendance recording, avoiding traditional error-prone methods, and ensuring education quality.

There is also an absence of a digital assessment system that allows platforms to evaluate student performance instead of traditional methods, which undermines the effectiveness of education.

Moreover, some educational curricula and teaching methods, especially those with practical aspects, whether in schools or universities, have difficulty adapting to digital education, which struggles to achieve an appropriate educational level despite some individual efforts by teachers to overcome these difficulties by exploring digital laboratories that simulate real scientific laboratories and presenting them to students.

Thus, some practical curricula, especially at the university level requiring practical learning in laboratories and workshops, were temporarily suspended until return to traditional education system, causing loss of important educational elements and opening calls for investment in supporting digital educational platforms and linking them with virtual laboratories that can simulate reality, with many digital options available. Experiences from countries with advanced digital transformation show that success requires a partnership between the public and private sectors.

These collaborations enhance community involvement and sustain development in areas like education, benefiting all involved, including the private sector’s role in supporting education and boosting local expertise.

For digital practices like distance learning to thrive, they need regular integration into weekly routines, ensuring continuity rather than being restricted by short-term needs.

It’s crucial to maintain momentum in digital initiatives to avoid the setbacks seen post-Covid-19 pandemic.

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OMAN BAG 8 MEDALS IN FENCING

SWIMMERS CLAIM TWO BRONZE AT GCC YOUTH GAMES

WALEED AL JAHWARI
DUBAI, APRIL 29

Oman fencing team made a great start by winning eight medals on Monday in the first GCC Youth Games in the UAE, which will continue until May 2. The Omani fencers bagged two gold, two silver and four bronze.

The swimmers snatched two bronze on Monday as Oman's medal tally rose to 53 medals. Oman athletes were able to collect 16 gold, 12 silver and 25 bronze medals from 15 sports, including sailing, football, golf, taekwondo, water sports, athletics, handball, volleyball, basketball, chess, fencing, table tennis, billiard, snooker and equestrian.

In fencing, Ahmed bin Anwar Kaskas won the gold, while Saeed bin Khaled al Shuaibi claimed the bronze in cadet men's epee. Ahmed bin Anwar Kaskas claimed silver in cadet men's foil competition, while Saeed bin Khaled al Shuaibi and Ali bin Hamad al Busaidy earned a bronze each.

Jana bint Mohammed al Sharjiyyah won the gold in cadet women's epee event and her team-mate Salma bint Saeed al Daghishiyah won the bronze in the same category. Israa bint Saif al

Siyabiyah grabbed silver medal in cadet women's foil.

Oman swimming team continued the competition for the third day in Abu Dhabi Club. Oman's Hilal bin Sulieman al Mashari snatched the bronze medal in the 200m backstroke race. Mishal bin Salim al Kelabi won the bronze in 100m freestyle, and finished fourth place in 50m butterfly for ages 16 and 17.

Ali bin Adil al Hesani finished sixth in the 400m freestyle race. Mohammed bin Khamis al Wahaibi came fourth in the 50m butterfly race. Mohammed Abdulrahman came eighth in the 200m backstroke race. Moath bin Khamis al Shebani won fifth place in the 100m freestyle race.

Taha bin Sulaiman al Kishri, Secretary-General of Oman Olympic Committee, commented on the competitions in the UAE. "Our attendance in the Games is positive. The sports committees vision was agreed to achieve certain medals, there was a technical team that met the teams and sports committees. There were more than 15 teams that wanted to participate, but the executive office worked on the recommendations of the technical committee to choose teams according to their

performance and preparations, also some teams were given the opportunity to be present in the GCC event for the first time."

"The Oman national teams until day 13th have achieved 53 medals in addition to the para athletes, this is the purpose of selecting the sports that have the greatest chance of being crowned. It is also an opportunity and a good preparatory station for these age groups for upcoming competitions," he added.

"The Omani athletes were supposed to win more medals. So, we will have a dialogue session with all participant teams, to research ways to improve the performance in different events. The teams must go beyond the observations in order to increase their chances of being selected for foreign participation."

"We thank the organising committee and everyone who cooperated and helped us. We all are part of one Gulf, we complement each other and cover all lapses, if any. We cannot fail to thank all members of the Oman delegation who were present, especially during the first days, where they facilitated what they could do for the national teams," he concluded.



Swimmer Hilal bin Suleiman al Mashari with his bronze medal.

Al Nasr crush Dhofar, Al Wahda stun Ibri in OL



Al Nasr and Dhofar players fight for the ball during the Round 19 of Omantel League.

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

Al Nasr routed Dhofar 4-0 in a one-sided match at the Al Saada Sports Complex Stadium on Sunday evening in Round 19 of the Omantel League.

The game began with cautious attacks from both teams, with Al Nasr enjoying better possession. Soon, the play was confined to midfield with scattered attacks posing no direct threat to either goal. In the fifth minute, Al Nasr came close to scoring when Walid al Musalmi unleashed a shot, saved by goalkeeper Mazen al Kasbi, deflecting it for a corner.

Al Nasr continued their attacks, with Walid al Musalmi missing a chance to score after

his shot went over the opponent's goal. In the 27th minute, Dhofar almost scored when their young player Ahmed al Shanfari's shot was saved by goalkeeper Hassan al Breiki. Al Nasr kept pressing, but their forwards failed to capitalise, with Mazen al Kasbi leaving the field due to injury in the 33rd minute, replaced by Abdullah al Aufi. Both teams exchanged attacks until the first half ended in a goalless draw.

In the second half, Al Nasr took the lead with a goal by Abu Bakr Masalli in the 46th minute. In the 59th minute, Al Nasr extended their lead through Walid al Musalmi after an organised attack into the penalty area, which he converted past goalkeeper Abdullah al Aufi. The

two sides continued to exchange attacks until the 77th minute when Al Nasr scored their third goal through Walid al Musalmi.

Al Nasr kept the pressure on Dhofar's goal, and in the 85th minute, Bahraini player Mahdi al Humaidan scored the fourth goal after receiving a good pass from his team-mate Fahd Adel and sending it straight into the net past Abdullah al Aufi. The match ended with a comprehensive victory for Al Nasr over Dhofar at 4-0.

With this win, Al Nasr raised their tally to 25 points in sixth place, while Dhofar remained at 20 points, dropping to 10th place.

AL WAHDA OVERCOME IBRI
In an exciting match at the Ibri



Al Wahda and Ibri players in action at the Ibri Sports Complex.

Sports Complex, the Al Wahda team defeated Ibri 2-1.

The game started with relative dominance from Ibri, who made several attempts to score, but goalkeeper Ibrahim al Rajhi thwarted their efforts. Ibri's Emmanuel Mahop scored in the sixth minute.

On the other hand, Al Wahda became more active after conceding a goal and managed to equalise in the 43rd minute through Diyab al Shahmi with a brilliant header, ending the first half in a 1-1 draw.

In the second half, Al Wahda continued their attacks and scored the winning goal in the 55th minute through Mohammed al Aufi with a remarkable header. Ibri

attempted to respond but in vain, as the match ended with Al Wahda's victory, raising their points to 13, placing them at the bottom of the table. Ibri remained at 24 points, dropping to seventh place.

SUR EDGE AL SHABAB

On Sunday evening, Sur achieved an exciting 2-1 victory over their rivals Al Shabab at the Al Rustaq Sports Complex.

The game started with Sur's dominance, who made several attempts to score, but Al Shabab were more effective, with Hatem al Hamhami scoring in the 23rd minute from outside the penalty area. In the 38th minute, Al Shabab's Juliusson received a direct red card for rough play.

Despite Sur's attempts to equalise, Al Shabab ended the first half leading 1-0.

In the second half, both teams intensified their efforts, and despite Sur's offensive play, Al Shabab took advantage of their numerical superiority due to the red card. However, Sur managed to equalise in the 60th minute through Abdulhafiz al Mukhaini. Not content with the draw, Sur scored the winning goal in the 77th minute through Yousef al Mukhaini, exploiting Al Shabab's defensive lapse.

With this victory, Sur raised their tally to 21 points, occupying ninth place in the overall standings, while Al Shabab remained at 23 points, dropping to eighth place.

Victory, second spot for Al Faisal and Grenier in Portugal

PORTIMAO, Portugal: Oman's Al Faisal al Zubair and Canadian team-mate Mikael Grenier finished second in the Pro category (fourth overall) and first overall in the two races that constituted the opening round of the 2024 International GT Open at the Autodromo Internacional Algarve in Portimao at the weekend.

In tricky weather conditions and after an early collision, the Al Manar Racing by Getspeed Mercedes AMG GT3 duo drove superbly to snatch second place in the Pro category in the first of the races on Saturday afternoon and then claimed victory under a yellow flag in the second one-hour race on Sunday. Despite not planning to contest the whole series, Al Zubair and Grenier now lead the 2024 International GT Open by four points after round one.

Al Zubair said: "It was a great race weekend. If we look at it as a whole, yesterday's race didn't go according to plan, as we were hit by a Lamborghini in turn one and we lost all positions and went back to last and finished the race in fourth with great pace that we had. Despite the spin, we should be very happy with that result.

"Then, today, we got to show how it is with no real issues. We just got our heads down and made a good getaway with Mick going into the lead. I managed the safety car restart and finished it off. We are very happy with everything as a whole and, hopefully, there will be more wins to come this season."

Al Zubair and Grenier topped the Pro category times in the first of the free practice sessions with a fastest lap of 1min 49.639sec on a damp track. They finished fifth in the second stint in drier conditions but, when the two sessions were combined, they were classified in third behind Getspeed colleagues Anthony Bartone and Fabian Schiller and the Spirit of Race Ferrari duo of Morten Strömsted and Thomas Ikin.

Al Zubair qualified the Al Manar Racing car in sixth place in the Pro category for the first 70-minute race on Saturday afternoon. The Omani carded a best lap of 1min 59.676sec in tricky wet track conditions



Al Faisal al Zubair and Canadian team-mate Mikael Grenier finished first overall in the opening two races in Portimao.

and finished the stint behind Getspeed's Schiller, a pair of Team Motopark Mercedes, the Car Collection Motorsport Porsche and the Spirit of Race Ferrari.

But the opening race delivered a much more positive display and the Al Manar Racing car clocked the fastest lap of the entire race – a run of 1min 42.459sec – as Al Zubair and Grenier stormed through the field to finish in second place behind Bartone and Schiller in the Getspeed Mercedes after several incidents occurred in the early stages of the race that started in wet conditions after a thunder storm.

Team Motopark's Lukas Dunner and Charles Bateman confirmed a Mercedes 1-2-3 on the podium.

Grenier placed the Al Manar Racing Mercedes in third on the grid for the second race

on Sunday afternoon. The Canadian ran for 12 laps in the second qualifying session and posted a best run of 1min 40.788sec on his ninth tour of the Portuguese circuit. That put the Mercedes duo on the grid behind Dominik Baumann and Mikael Pitamber in the SPS Automotive Performance Mercedes and the Car Collection Motorsport Porsche in the hands of Gustav Bergström and Nico Menzel.

Grenier made a solid start to the second one-hour race and moved up to second place before handing over to Al Zubair. The duo held station through the driver change and Al Zubair headed Pitamber by 6.5 seconds after 21 laps with a little over 20 minutes of the race remaining.

Al Zubair continued to pull away from his rivals and was running nine seconds ahead of Pitamber when the yellow flag

was raised and the safety car was deployed with less than a quarter of an hour to run. Al Zubair then had to keep his concentration and

stay ahead of the hard-challenging Mercedes when racing resumed with 11 minutes on the clock.

The safety car was deployed again four minutes later after an incident involving two Pro Am cars and an Amateur entrant, as Al Zubair continued to lead under the yellow flag with the clock ticking down.

The race eventually finished under the yellow flag with Al Zubair and Grenier claiming a memorable victory. Pole-sitters Pitamber and Baumann came home second and the Team Motopark Mercedes crew of Diego Mancheca and Marcos Siebert rounded off an all-Mercedes podium.

OOC launches training project to promote Olympic culture

MUSCAT: The Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) represented by Oman Olympic Academy (OOA) in collaboration with International Olympic Solidarity launched a training project on Monday to promote Olympic culture and values.

The first session of the project, 'Training of Trainers in Olympic Values Education' was held at the headquarters of OOC and will conclude on Tuesday. It will also be held at the Directorate of Culture, Sports, and Youth in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate starting from Tuesday for two consecutive days, and at the Directorate of Culture, Sports and Youth in Al Dhahirah Governorate on Sunday and Monday of the following week. This programme aims to support Oman Olympic movement across various segments of society, including athletes, coaches, students, and teachers, by enhancing awareness of Olympic philosophy and its importance in shaping Omani Olympic champions.

This programme is part of the project to promote Olympic culture and values, which is one of the important projects adopted and supported by International Olympic Committee (IOC). It involves the use of educational materials and guides on Olympic values education issued by the International Olympic Solidarity. It contributes to reinforcing Olympic values and principles among young athletes, students, and children of various ages and educational stages through sports activities based on learning and applying behavioural and educational values endorsed by the IOC.

The programme is being presented by Hisham bin Salem al Adwani, project manager accredited by IOC, along with Dr Ali bin Abdulrahman al Bakri as the main lecturer of the programme, and Abdullah bin Khalfan al Hina as the assistant lecturer. The programme includes a wide range of national personnel working in sports institutions and bodies in the Sultanate of Oman, including clubs, sports academies, and private teams.

The project to promote Olympic culture and values in Oman is divided into two programmes: the Training of Trainers in Olympic Values Education programme and the Olympic Culture and Values Initiatives programme. The project will be implemented in all governorates of Oman gradually over two years (2024-2025) as a



first phase, with an evaluation before starting subsequent phases. The first phase includes Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah and Al Dhahirah, while the second phase includes the governorates of Al Batinah South and Al Batinah North and Musandam during the last quarter of 2024.

The project idea revolves around training a group of trainers (future trainers) selected based on a mechanism aligned with the Olympic Values Education Programme over two consecutive days of theoretical and practical lectures. They are introduced to the programme applications and taught how to utilise its resources and curriculum, tailored to the general direction of IOC, considering the Omani society environment. Additionally, some local initiatives are introduced to enhance Olympic education in Oman.

Regarding the programme, Hisham bin Salem al Adwani, project manager, stated: "The project to promote Olympic culture and values in Oman has been designed to align with the formation of the Omani society and the committee's goals to support the Olympic movement in Oman. It meets the IOC's direction in instilling Olympic values and principles among society's segments, especially athletes, making sports a platform for enjoyment through training efforts, competitions, excellence, forming friendships, and respecting laws, colleagues, coaches, referees, and everyone."

He added: "The project's importance lies in expanding the fields and segments targeted by OOC to support the Olympic movement in the Sultanate of Oman, by reaching out to schools, clubs, academies, sports centres, and even private teams, where athletes are initially trained. It establishes a strong relationship between OOC and the sports community."



Oman rank fourth in AlUla Camel Cup 2024

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APR 29

The Sultanate of Oman have won fourth place out of 11 countries participating in the recently held AlUla Camel Cup 2024 held under the auspices of Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Crown Prince, Prime Minister and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Royal Commission for AlUla Governorate in Saudi Arabia.

Oman bagged SAR 1.75 million from among 7 countries on the list of financial prizes out of 11 countries which participated in the coveted race of camels which is an annual event of the mighty camels from across the world.

Camel owners from Qatar topped the list of financial prizes in the AlUla Camel Cup after the conclusion of its 16 rounds on



Saturday, on the grounds of the AlUla Camel Arena.

Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef bin Abdulaziz, Minister of Interior, crowned the winners at the conclusion of the competitions of the second edition of the Al Ula Camel Cup, in the Mughira Heritage Sports Village in AlUla Governorate, organised by the

Royal Commission for Al Ula Governorate and the Saudi Camel Federation.

The activities of the second edition of the championship kicked off last Wednesday at the AlUla Camel Track, where the total prize money for the 16 rounds amounted to 80,960,000 Saudi riyals, according to the schedule of



the 'Hump of Racing.'

Qatar won first place in the AlUla Camel Cup 2024 and collected SAR 37.95 million, followed by the United Arab Emirates, where they collected SAR 26.32 million and then Saudi Arabia, the hosts of the sporting event, which collected SAR 13.39 million.

As for the fourth place, the

Sultanate of Oman won with about 15 camels that participated in the AlUla Camel Cup 2024, where they won SAR 1.75 million, followed by the United States of America with SAR 800,000. As for sixth place, Iran came, followed by Bahrain with SAR 70,000 and SAR 50,000, respectively.

The AlUla Camel Cup aims to

develop camel sports as a symbol of the Kingdom's heritage and culture, highlighting the authenticity of AlUla and its natural cultural environment, and the culmination of a busy season of multiple camel races in the Kingdom and the region.

"The Cup also reflects its position in camel racing in the world, and to that distinction is added the declaration of this year as the Year of the Camel," the organisers said.

This came as celebrating its cultural importance and its close connection to the heritage of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the AlUla Camel Cup honours this ancient heritage and provides the public with the opportunity to learn about the culture of the Kingdom in a distinctive sporting atmosphere.

CITY WIN KEEPS PRESSURE ON TITLE RACE

ANDY JALEEL
NOTTINGHAM, APRIL 29

Despite looking a little sluggish and not at their best against Nottingham Forest who were full of energy and ambition, City, scoring a goal in each half, registered a 2-0 win and with a game in hand are just a point behind Premier League leaders Arsenal. They still look a good bet for a fourth consecutive league title having extended their unbeaten run in the league to 19 games.

City manager, Pep Guardiola said: "I don't think Arsenal will drop any more points. We have four games left and it's like climbing a big mountain. If we draw a game we are not going to win the league. The performance here was not particularly good."

Reflecting on the win, which marked his 300th Premier League game, Guardiola added: "It was more than hard, but we knew that. It's always difficult to come here. We suffered a lot, in the end, we'll take it. The pressure is about how you play. If you play well and control the game, then people say you don't feel the pressure. If you play badly, they say you feel the pressure."

Forest could have taken at least a point from this game but for missed chances two of which fell to striker Chris Wood. City, however, went into the lead in the 32nd minute with defender Josko Gvardiol breaking free to meet the corner kick taken by Kevin De Bruyne and putting in a powerful header into the net. It was the 23rd time this season that Forest had conceded from a set-piece, more than any side in the Premier League.

The first glaring miss by Wood came soon after, in the 38th minute when a cut-back from Gonzalo Montiel went through Wood's legs when it seemed certain he would equalise if only he had just stopped

the ball. Forest could even have taken the lead two minutes into the second half after Anthony Elanga beat Kyle Walker at the byline and gave a back-pass inside from which a left-footed shot by Wood lacked power and was blocked by Gvardiol. Had he not done so, City's substitute goalkeeper Ortega, replacing the injured Ederson, was in position to save the weak shot.

City brought on Erling Haaland, who had missed the two previous games with injury, to replace Jack Grealish on the hour. The Norwegian didn't take long to put his team two up with his 32nd goal of the season.

It came with 19 minutes of normal time remaining. De Bruyne passed to Haaland on the right and the striker made space for himself going past and round Murillo before placing a right-footed shot into the bottom corner inside the far post.

Forest have had four points deducted for breach of profitability and sustainability rules of the league and have appealed against it. Their manager, Nuno Espirito Santo said: "We're waiting on that decision. We're hoping it's very soon so we can deal with the reality. We don't know exactly how many points we're on - 26, 28 or 30. It will make a big difference. Not just for us but for all the league."



Musannah Sailing School selected as high performance centre

MUSCAT: Oman Sail's Musannah Sailing School has been selected by the Asian Sailing Federation (Asaf) to become a Category A High Performance Centre. The facility, host venue for several high-profile international events including the 2021 Youth Sailing World Championships, was universally praised by Asaf for its facilities and ability to host international events and Olympic class sailboats.

As a high performance centre, the Musannah Sailing School will be the site of training and development programmes for sailors and coaches across Asia and host clinics from beginner through to elite level. Musannah will also organise local, regional and national sailing events to grow sailing in Oman, and create partnerships with local schools, sailing clubs and organisations to introduce the community to sailing.

Dr Khamis al Jabri, Oman Sail CEO, said, "The sporting legacy of the Musannah Sailing School makes it the ideal choice for a



Oman Sail's Musannah Sailing School has been selected by the Asian Sailing Federation to become a Category A High Performance Centre.

high performance centre that will benefit the entire continent. Oman Sail's teams and young sailors have been training and racing here in the pristine waters and weather conditions with impressive results and we have already hosted a vast range of events from windsurfing to optimist to major world championships here. This next step in the development of sailing in Oman and across Asia has the potential to develop talent to perform at the very highest levels

and we are delighted to be able to play a key role in realising that goal."

Ahmed al Qasbi, In Charge of Sailing Department, said: "The impact of the Musannah Sailing School on Omani sailing has already been felt at all levels. From high performing youth to the national Olympic squad, our best sailors have had the opportunity to hone their skills here and prepare for competition. We are excited to be able to give back to Asian sailing and help to shape the future



Dr Malav Shroff

of sailing on the continent while also creating opportunities for our sailors to learn from their peers, rivals and friends."

Dr Malav Shroff, President of the Asian Sailing Federation, added, "Oman has a rich maritime history dating back centuries and Oman Sail has embraced this heritage to create a thriving sailing programme with roots all along the coastline. We have been privileged to have visited Musannah a number of times for events and have always



Dr Khamis al Jabri

been impressed with the high-quality facilities, the location and accessibility, and the attention to detail of the complex. Everything is in place for Musannah to be an incubator of talent across Asia and is the perfect location for a high performance centre."

The Musannah Sailing School was originally built as part of the Al Musannah Sports City complex for the 2010 Asian Beach Games. Since then, Oman Sail and its partners the Barcelo Musannah

Resort have developed the venue into a world class sailing and watersports hub capable of hosting the world's largest events. An on-site marina, accommodation, media facilities, and direct access to the water has made Musannah the venue of choice for sailing events in Oman, and the year-round weather conditions allow training to continue uninterrupted.

In the past two years alone, the Musannah Sailing School has hosted the 2021 Asian Windsurfing Championships, 2021 49er & 49er FX Asian Championships, 2021 49er, 49er FX & Nacra 17 World Championships 2021 ILCA 6 World Championships, 2021 Youth Sailing World Championships, Arab Sailing Championships 2022, and the 2022 RS Venture Connect World Championships - the first exclusively para world sailing event to be held in Oman. The venue has also been the regular home venue for the Musannah Race Week and an important stop on Oman Sail's own Sailing Arabia - The Tour.





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OMAN SIGNS PACTS WORTH \$11 BILLION FOR TWO NEW GREEN HYDROGEN PROJECTS

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

Hydrom, the green hydrogen orchestrator of the Sultanate of Oman, announced signing two new green hydrogen projects in Dhofar worth \$11 billion. The signings follow the successful completion of Hydrom's second round of auctions bringing the total hydrogen production in Oman to 1.38 million tonnes per year (mtpa) by 2030.

The first agreement was signed with a consortium consisting of Electricité de France SA and its subsidiary EDF Renewables (EDF Group), Electric Power Development Co., Ltd.



Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and Chairman of Hydrom, with executives representing the two project consortiums.

(J-POWER) and YamnaCo Ltd (Yamna).

The second agreement was signed with Actis, a leading global investor in sustainable infrastructure, and Fortescue, a global integrated green energy, metals and technology company.

Having presided over the signings, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and Chairman of Hydrom said, "Oman is strategically located between two key green hydrogen demand centres in Europe and Asia.

This, in addition to, our tier-1 infrastructure and logistics capabilities have enabled us to leverage our first mover advantage in the global hydrogen industry."

He went on to highlight that the availability of renewable natural resources in Oman coupled with the country's favourable geopolitical positioning, investor-friendly policies and progressive energy transition strategies make it one of the most suitable countries for green hydrogen production.

As a result, Hydrom's second round of auctions attracted global interest with over 200 companies showing interest for a chance to bid on developing integrated green hydrogen projects in what is set to become one of the largest exporter countries of low carbon hydrogen by 2030. **TURN TO P15**

BGP Oman MoC Signing Ceremony with German University of Technologies

Memorandum of Cooperation Signing Ceremony – An ICV Promotion

BGP Oman has signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) with German University of Technologies (GUT) on 27th of March 2024. The MoC was signed by BGP Oman General Manager, Mr. Zhao Jie and GUT Deputy Rector for Administration and Finances Dr. Hussain Al Salmi. MoC signing ceremony was held at the GUT premises in Muscat. MOC will help provide technical training to university students at their academic level.

BGP Oil & Gas Services LLC is one of the world's leading geophysical services company, delivering a wide range of exploration services and equipment to the oil and gas industry. BGP Oil & Gas Services LLC (BGP Oman) has been established and working in the Sultanate of Oman since 2003 and has been in the core of Oil & Gas Exploration surveys carried out for major Oil & Gas Companies operating in many hydrocarbon blocks from the North to the South of the Sultanate. BGP Oman has successfully and safely executed mainly seismic and few Non-Seismic Projects. BGP, is engaged in seismic data acquisition, processing, interpretation, reservoir geophysics, borehole seismic, micro-seismic, GME and multi-client surveys, equipment manufacturing and software R&D (related with Oil & Gas Exploration). BGP is committed to fulfilling its responsibility in returning to the Sultanate of Oman in terms of



economic growth, occupational training, and development of local youth.

German University of Technology in Oman (GUtech), a private university owned and operated by Oman Educational Services LLC, registered in the Sultanate of Oman. GUtech, is committed to establishing and promoting education, innovation and technology best practices and entities in Oman and the wider region, thus defining the highest standards in education, research and innovation.

The MoC deal will support BGP's effort to boost In-Country Value by advancing academic and vocational development and increasing the share of the oil and gas industry's wealth retained in Oman. The MoC will also pave the way for students to develop

their technical expertise through placements with the company and the university will collaborate on sharing best practices in Knowledge Management. The two organizations will also work together to encourage Omani students to carry out their basic technological research, help develop conceptual and innovative ideas. GUT has highlighted for BGP to advise on any changes or developments in the university teaching programs in line with the current Oil & Gas Industry needs. BGP will provide practical training for GUtech students according to an annual program approved by the both Parties, provides long-term on-the-job training and will organize training workshops for GUtech students.

Mr. Zhao Jie highlighted that BGP is willing to support GUT students



at their academic level and both parties can help address some of our key challenges in the industry. These collaborations not only give access to innovative solutions and the best technology and tools but also enable students to learn more about the needs of the Sultanate's economy and their potential employers. "This partnership is a win-win for the national oil and gas sector and Omani academia."

Dr. Hussain added, this agreement reflects Muscat University's commitment to delivering a high-quality educational provision that is research basis, informed and industry led. "Having close links with the industry ensures the relevance of our programs in the long-term and a positive contribution from our graduates to meeting some of the challenges in the industry.

The Parties shall consult each other with a view to finding possible ways and means to develop appropriate mechanisms for the implementation of the provisions of this MoC. Representatives of the Parties shall meet, whenever necessary, to assess progress in the implementation of the objectives of the MoC and to consider ways to ensure the optimal and most effective application of its provisions. The MoU will run for one year and has the option of extension year after.

The General Manager of BGP, Mr. Zhao Jie stated that this is only the commencement of new ventures and looks forward to further cooperation with the GUT and to enhance the In Country resources to a sustainable economic growth of the Sultanate of Oman.

OSW Awards 2024 celebrates achievements in sustainability

MUSCAT: The highly anticipated Oman Sustainability Week (OSW) Awards 2024, jointly organised by the Oman Environmental Services Holding Company, be'ah, and CONNECT (Oman Exhibitions Organising Company LLC), spotlighted the multifaceted achievements of diverse organisations within the realm of sustainability.

Marking the commencement of Oman Sustainability Week 2024, this prestigious event was held on April 28, 2024, at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) under the auspices of Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals.

The event also witnessed the attendance of numerous delegates from various ministries, C-suite executives of prominent enterprises, and change-makers influential in the Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) domain.

Developed in collaboration with the Center for Sustainability and Excellence (CSE) in Chicago, Illinois, the framework governing the OSW Awards follows the GRI standard.

In addition to recognising companies for their alignment with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors, the visionary goals set forth by Oman Vision 2040, the United Nations



The OSW Awards 2024 shined the spotlight on achievements in sustainability across various sectors.

Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), and the national Net-Zero by 2050 commitments, it also serves as a catalyst propelling the nation's sustainability agenda forward.

This year's event witnessed the introduction of a new category, 'Eco-Mobility,' alongside the 'Environment, Social and Governance' category.

To ensure transparency and relevance, the evaluation process for the 'Eco-Mobility' category adhered to a specialised framework crafted by the Ministry of Transport, Communications,

and Information Technology.

The incorporation of the 'Eco-Mobility' category further complements the comprehensive spectrum of ESG award submission categories, which already includes Government, Academia, Small Businesses, and Medium to Large Businesses.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr Mohab bin Ali al Hinai, VP of Sustainability and Circular Economy, be'ah, said, that "The Oman Sustainability Week Awards are a prominent recognition for institutions and companies demonstrating

leadership in sustainability and the circular economy, acknowledging their outstanding efforts in implementing the best global sustainability and ESG standards.

This evaluation comes from recognised institutions that use precise methodologies to ensure continuous and effective improvement in work environments that align with the goals of Oman Vision 2040 and Net-Zero targets 2050, according to the framework adopted by the Center for Sustainability and Excellence in Chicago, USA."

Ooredoo supports Oman Cybersecurity Conference 2024

MUSCAT: Committed to prioritising cybersecurity practices to future-proof its network and the digital ecosystems of other entities in an increasingly interconnected world, Ooredoo supported the 4th edition of the Oman Cybersecurity Conference.

The aim of the event was to discuss cybersecurity opportunities and concerns faced in a digital era, which is, of course, integral to the telecom sector.

Titled 'Defending the Digital World: The Cybersecurity Revolution in the Communications Sector', the event was held under the auspices of Shaikh Ghosn bin Hilal al Alawi, Chairman of the State Financial & Administrative Audit Institution.

Ooredoo's Chief Technology and Information Officer, Dr Ahmed bin Abdullah al Abri, and the technology team, as well as other



telco providers, took part in a simulation drill, focusing on withstanding a potential cyberattack in the future. Ooredoo also took place in insightful panel discussions, where their leading best practices were shared. Commenting on the conference, Dr Ahmed

said, "corporate and government entities need to protect themselves against the increasing sophistication of cyberattacks.

Ooredoo is at the forefront of digital transformation, which includes investing in robust technological defences. In doing so, we can minimise vulnerabilities and ensure we are ready to act if an actual cyberattack takes place. This secures the digital experience for customers and businesses countrywide, which is all part of our mindset around providing an unrivalled customer journey."

To further optimise and secure the digital experience for customers across Oman, Ooredoo also has a number of strategic partnerships with leading technology providers and third-party service partners from within the country and around the world.



Oxy Oman highlights innovations for achieving net-zero

MUSCAT: Oxy Oman served as the exclusive Sustainability Host at the Oman Petroleum and Energy Show (OPES), where company representatives displayed achievements and innovations in the energy sector.

The three-day event was held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre and was inaugurated by Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals. Steven Lauver, President and General Manager of Oxy Oman attended the opening event along with other senior representatives of the company.

Company representatives at the Oxy Oman booth briefed visitors on the company's latest innovations and achievements, including its CO2 Injection pilot programme at Safah Field; a virtual reality experience simulating Oxy Oman's Drilling collaboration room; and presentations on Omanisation and the role of Carbon Capture Utilisation and Storage (CCUS) technology in Oman's path to Net-Zero.

In the technical conference, company representatives discussed Oxy's global technological innovations, including its Direct Air Capture (DAC) technology, as well as its long-term investments to achieve net-zero emissions.

In addition, Oxy Oman employees presented on operational efficiency and achievements in steam technology at Mukhaizna field. "We're pleased to continue Oxy Oman's presence and support at the OPES conference as we highlight our industry's leading operations and technologies. OPES is an important platform for knowledge exchange and facilitating discussion and collaboration within the industry.

As a Sustainability Host, we are proud to showcase the company's leading Carbon Capture technology to the global energy industry, and our support for the Oman government's roadmap to Net-Zero," said Lauver.

As part of the conference, Oxy Oman also exclusively sponsored the Energy4Me student workshop, a global educational programme developed by the Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE) to promote energy knowledge and education among school students. The day-long workshop comprised of sessions and hands-on activities detailing key concepts in exploration and production in the oil & gas industry.

Abraj Energy Services showcases sustainability and innovation

MUSCAT: Abraj Energy Services, Oman's leading oil and gas services provider, engaged with key decision-makers, industry leaders, and innovators in the petroleum and energy sector.

The company highlighted its latest competitive solutions and strategic partnerships in the oil and gas sector at the Oman Petroleum and Energy Show in Muscat from April 22 to 24, 2024.

The event, inaugurated by Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, featured an exhibit that showcased the company's commitment to developing and enhancing the sector's efficiency.

Abraj Energy Services, with its cutting-edge technologies and innovative solutions, has significantly improved operational and sustainable efficiency in the petroleum and gas sector.

This has not only affirmed its leading position in the drilling services market with a 29 per cent market share in drilling services

and over 15 per cent in well maintenance services in Oman but also left a lasting impact on the industry.

Abraj's booth was a hub of activity, attracting significant attention from industry decision-makers and pioneers.

Through interactive screens and virtual reality technologies, visitors were able to experience firsthand the effectiveness of the solutions provided, enhancing their understanding and engagement with the company's offerings.

On this occasion, Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services, stated: "Abraj Energy Services' sponsorship of the Oman Petroleum and Energy Show and our active participation reflect our steadfast commitment to contributing to the sector's development and sustainability.

We hold the largest share in the drilling services market in Oman, capturing 29% of the drilling services and more than 15% of well maintenance services."



He added, "Our participation aims to share our experiences in developing sustainable solutions and adopting global best practices to reduce carbon emissions and enhance environmental performance, confirming that sustainability at Abraj is a

deep-rooted culture through which we strive to offer the best practices and effective, innovative solutions for operational and environmental sustainability."

Abraj, in a move that signals promising future prospects, announced the signing of

two important cooperation memorandums. The first, with Sonatrach, the Algerian state oil and gas company, opens new horizons for collaborative business opportunities and integrated project management.

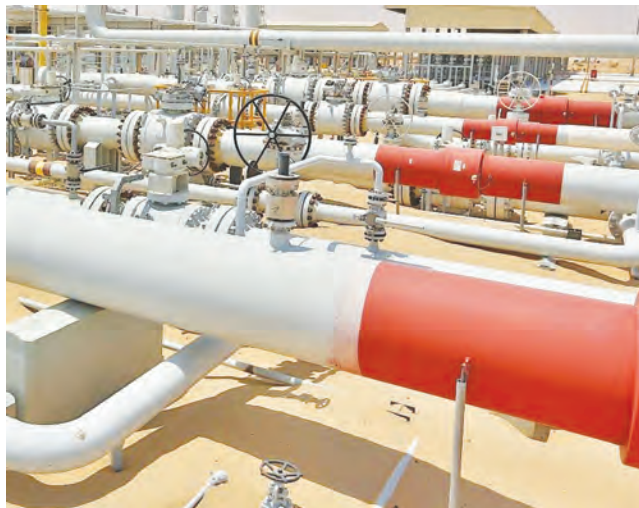
The second, a local partnership

with Omantel, the Omani telecommunications company, is a strategic agreement to enhance talent and performance management within the company, setting the stage for a bright future.

Abraj Energy Services also presented a series of workshops that embodied the company's commitment to sharing its managerial and technical expertise to improve the quality and efficiency of services in the sector.

The workshops began with Eng Zainab al Nudhairi discussing "Innovative Solutions for Operational Excellence." This was followed by Abdullah al Busaidy presenting "Effective Marketing Communications: Competitive Positioning in Oman's Oil and Gas Industry." On the final day of the exhibition, Mohammed al Habsi explored "Future Skills for the Workforce," and Saud al Ghafri presented "Enhanced Control Systems in Drilling Platforms."

OQGN's maiden dividend payouts since MSX listing total RO 44m for 2023



Around 10.13 bcm of gas was transported across OQGN's 4,000 km long national gas pipeline network during Q1 2024.

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

OQ Gas Networks (OQGN), the owner and operator of Oman's gas transportation system, declared dividends totalling around RO 44 million (\$114 million) for 2023, its first since the majority state-owned company successfully listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) last October following a record-breaking Initial Public Offering (IPO).

OQGN, a subsidiary of OQ Group, declared dividends of RO 33 million in January 2024 for the first nine months of 2023, and an additional RO 11 million in March 2024, for the last three months of 2023, the company announced in its Q1 financial results for the current year.

Reflecting its sound fundamentals, OQGN recorded a 17% improvement in EBIDTA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation), which rose to reach a value of RO 22.2 million in Q1 2024, up from RO 18.9 million in Q1 2023.

Net profit climbed 18% to RO 13.6 million in Q1 2024 vs. RO 11.5 million

for the corresponding quarter of 2023.

"OQGN started 2024 with the implementation of Price Control 3 (PC3), for a period of four years.

PC3 set an increased return on capital (weighted average cost of capital) at 7.79% (7.30% in 2023)," the company stated.

Around 10.13 billion cubic metres (bcm) of natural gas was transported across its 4,000 km long gas pipeline network during the first quarter of this year.

Earlier, in February, the monopoly operator of the country's gas networks reported revenues of RO 174 million in 2023, up from RO 160.4 million a year earlier.

EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation) climbed to RO 84 million, up from RO 71 million a year earlier. Profit was also up at RO 55.5 million, from RO 45.6 million in 2022.

Concession receivable and contract assets were also up 4.5% to reach RO 1.042 billion as of end-2023. Publicly-traded OQGN is majority-owned by OQ, the integrated energy group of Oman.

Oman injects over RO 338m in drive to bolster residential landscape

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

In a move that promises to boost Oman's residential sector and urban development, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP) unveiled a significant investment package valued at around RO 338.7 million.

The announcement, coinciding with the 3rd Oman Real Estate Expo (OREX) and Oman Design & Build Week (ODBW), detailed plans for new residential neighbourhoods and urban centres across various governorates.

The initiative incorporates both residential development and urban planning, aiming to address housing needs and create modern urban spaces.

The investment promises a wave of new residential projects across the country. Al Batinah South will see the rise of Al Laban Neighborhood, offering 1,442 units developed by Al Badi Investment Group with an investment of RO 111 million.

Al Batinah North will host the new Majd Neighborhood with 1,057 new homes undertaken by the Sohar Company for Development with an investment of RO 50 million.

Moving on to Al Dakhiliyah, the Wilayat of Bidbid will be home to Al Zain Fort, a residential developing featuring 639 residential units, with Zain Real Estate Development at the helm of the RO 30 million project.



Dignitaries attending the opening of the Oman Design & Build Week and Oman Real Estate Expo events.

At Al Amerat in Muscat Governorate, Al Madina Real Estate will invest around RO 53 million in the development of Al-Ahed Neighborhood with 965 homes.

At Khasab in Musandam Governorate, Musandam International Investment Company is developing the Palm Hills project featuring 535 housing units at a cost of RO 55 million.

In Dhofar's Wilayat of Salalah, Al Dhahab Real Estate will invest RO 35 million in establishing Al-Shorouk, a residential neighbourhood featuring 558 new housing units.

The investment plan extends beyond residential development, prioritising urban planning initiatives.

Agreements were signed to create

comprehensive urban plans for three governorates with a combined investment of RO 5.7 million. Al-Masah Real Estate will develop the plan for Al-Rustaq in South Al Batinah for RO 2.2 million.

A dedicated plan for Nizwa in Al Dakhiliyah will be developed with an investment of RO 1.5 million. Finally, the North al Sharqiyah Plan in the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi will be developed by Al Daham Real Estate for RO 2 million.

This substantial investment by MoHUP is expected to significantly impact Oman's residential sector.

By creating more housing options for citizens and fostering the development of modern, well-planned urban centres, the initiative promises a brighter future for

Oman's residential landscape and urban development.

Earlier, Abdulsalam al Murshidi, President of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), presided over the opening of the forum at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) on Monday.

It was organised by CONNECT, in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, and Oman Real Estate Association. Also present was Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning.

OREX, co-located with ODBW, also showcased leading urban projects, such as Sultan Haitham City, Al Jabal Al Akhdar, and Model Residential Neighborhoods Projects 'Sorouh'.

Oman signs pacts worth \$11 billion for two new green hydrogen projects

FROM PAGE 13

The project with EDF Group, J-POWER and Yamna will aim to produce approximately 178,000 tpa of green hydrogen by 2030, using approximately 4.5 GW of wind and solar energy coupled with battery storage and an approximately 2.5 GW state-of-art electrolyser. The produced hydrogen will be supplied to an ammonia plant to be built in the Salalah Free Zone and set to produce 1 mtpa of green ammonia.

The project with Actis and Fortescue will involve construction of up to 4.5GW of wind and solar renewable energy resources that will power electrolyzers with the potential to produce up to 200,000 tonnes of green hydrogen per year.

This will then be sold to local industrial off-takers as well as processed into derivatives (such as green ammonia) for export via Port of

Salalah.

By leveraging the latest advancements in green hydrogen technology, the projects will harness shared resources and expertise to facilitate a sustainable and localised green hydrogen economy for Oman.

"The rapid pace at which Oman is advancing its green hydrogen sector is remarkable, moving from land identification to international auctions and signing agreements in just two years, and we are proud to be leading it," said Eng Abdulaziz bin Said al Shaitani, Managing Director of Hydrom.

"Today, we are marking yet another milestone in this journey by awarding two projects to our new partners. Together with the first wave of green hydrogen projects announced, Oman is taking a confident step forward towards achieving its ambitious goal to produce 1 to 1.5 million tonnes per annum of green hydrogen by 2030."

The new hydrogen signings cover a 682 km² area of land in total where average wind speeds range from 6.8m/s to 8.3m/s and solar irradiance levels of 2410 w/m². Together with the six previously awarded projects in 2023, Hydrom is on target to achieve Oman's 2030 production targets, further amplifying Oman's potential as a key global producer of low carbon hydrogen.

Commenting on this success, Luc Koehlin, CEO Middle East of EDF said: "The EDF Group and its subsidiary EDF Renewables, J-POWER and Yamna are honoured to embark on this exciting journey. We are eager to contribute to the development of the green hydrogen sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

We would like to thank Hydrom for their trust in our ability to deliver such a transformational project for Oman's sustainability strategy and the global energy transition."

Moataz Kandil, MENA President at Fortescue and James Mittell Director, Energy Infrastructure at Actis added, "Actis and Fortescue are in sync with our ambitions to decarbonise and create a new green energy industry globally. We share a common vision for the pivotal role that green hydrogen and green ammonia will play in forging a sustainable future.

Oman not only has great natural resources, it is also one of the most attractive locations for low-cost green ammonia due to its land availability, port infrastructure and the regulatory support needed to allow this green industry to flourish.

This strategic partnership between Hydrom, Actis and Fortescue will help to drive the development of a large-scale green hydrogen project in Oman. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with the Omani government and local community on this project."

Oman plans campaign to promote public transport use

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology is currently in the process of launching a campaign to encourage the adoption of public transport, according to the Director of Transport Modelling Department, Iman bin Hassan al Lawatiyah.

Speaking to the Observer, Al Lawati shared that a tender in support of this initiative is currently being drafted by the ministry. "Behavioural change is a big challenge, because in Oman especially we are used to using motorised vehicles," she said, adding that the campaign will also aim to tackle public perceptions of public transport.



A strong public transport system can help support the decarbonisation of the transportation sector.

According to Al Lawati, the preference for motorised

vehicles can be attributed to the current layout of the cities, and

due to negative connotations surrounding public transport.

Additionally, she believes that weather conditions also pose a significant challenge. However, she shared that a workaround is the use of public transport during evening hours for the four months of summer.

Furthermore, the Director pointed out that there are several other challenges that are currently facing the establishment of a strong public transport system in Oman including land use and planning, policy alignment, and infrastructure investment.

Significantly, the ministry is currently in the process of implementing public transport system in the upcoming new smart cities in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, said Al Lawati. Public transport has been identified

as a tool for decarbonising the transport sector, which accounts for 18 per cent of total greenhouse gas emissions in Oman.

Initially, the ministry is expected to utilise combustion engine buses in its public transport system, then switch to biofuels in the short term, while opting for electric buses for short distance travel, and hydrogen fuel cell powered buses in the long term as part of its green mobility plan.

According to officials, the introduction of a metro-system in the country must be first preceded by a strong public transport system that can support the metro's routes. Public transport is expected to cover 45 per cent of urban areas in the country according to goals of the National Spatial Strategy.

GISEC 2024 debrief



TARIQ AL BARWANI

The author is Knowledge
Oman Founder
knowledgeoman.com

I'm back in Muscat after the 3-days jam packed cyber security regional event in Dubai, the GISEC 2024. The event was hosted by the UAE Cyber Security Council and officially supported by the Dubai Electronic Security Center, Ministry of Interior (UAE), Telecommunications and Digital Regulatory Authority (TDRA), and Dubai Police.

Over 20k people attended from about 130 countries, out of which over 1000 of them were cyber security professionals.

There were about 350 speakers who led sessions comprising of presentations, workshops and training via conference, speaking booths and private exhibition rooms.

750 international brands from around the world showcased their cyber security solutions in the form of product and services.

Top cybersecurity enterprises, influential CISOs, government dignitaries, and global experts were part of the event. I was honoured to be invited by the organisers to experience the event, and my article this week is a debrief on GISEC 2024 in a nutshell.

Cyber Security solutions (in the form of product and services), tools, trends and capabilities were the showcase of the event.

Global state of scams, smart cities and artificial intelligence was at the heart of the conversations during the event.

The event primarily focused on key trends such as AI, cloud, and operational technology, as well as bridging the skills gap.

Activities (or features per se) in the form of programmes at the event included the CyberDrill, Escape Room, Excellence Awards, Armory, Startup Pitch Competition, Women in Security, CISO Circle and Executive Board Rooms.

Starting with the CyberDrill, it was an initiative launched at the event by The International Telecommunication Union and UAE's government CSC.

The aim of the initiative is to bring together National Cyber Security Authorities, National Cyber Security agencies, as well as National CERTs/CIRTs/CSIRT from around the world to foster global cooperation and partnership in mitigating cyber threats.

The Cyber Security Excellence awards on the other hand was created to highlight the brightest stars in cybersecurity and the aim is to bring attention to the exceptional talent in the Middle East.

It is designed to inspire, encourage, and highlight the hard work that cybersecurity professionals are doing every day to keep us safe and secure in our digital landscape.

A CyberSecurityEscapeRoom was also one of the interesting yet also immersive and interactive game designed to simulate

real-world cybersecurity threat scenarios, where the participants found themselves locked in a room filled with puzzles, clues, and cryptic codes, all centred around cybersecurity challenges.

Another interesting feature at the event was the GISEC Armory where this exclusive area showcased open-source cybersecurity projects, tools, and solutions, allowing developers, security experts, and enthusiasts to display their projects, gain recognition, and foster collaboration within the global cybersecurity community.

Startup Pitch Competition was also another interesting activity where entrepreneurs were given a platform to showcase their ideas in a pitching style for getting necessary support in the form of funding.

Senior Cyber Security leaders had a special room (aka GISEC circle) to discuss innovation and lastly women too had a special event that celebrated their contribution and impact in cyber security world.

Companies that participated include but is not limited to conglomerates such as Microsoft, Google, Cisco, Huawei, Nokia, Commvault, OPSWAT, TrendMicro, ManageEngine, Tenable, Cloudfare, Amazon, HoneyWell, Kasperski, CheckPoint, to name a few.

Huawei showcased its full-stack, cloud-native security system, empowered by AI and built upon the collaboration between a security operations centre (SOC).

Microsoft showcased its Copilot for Security, its first generative AI solution designed to help security and IT professionals protect their organisations at the speed and scale of AI while remaining compliant to responsible AI principles.

Trend Micro showcased its state-of-the-art security offerings, including the groundbreaking Trend Vision One, a unified platform that goes beyond conventional cybersecurity measures, reinforcing cyber resilience with Advanced XDR and AI Capabilities.

Google was also present to showcase its cloud platform and data security and storage offerings for organisations.

Most of the companies primarily focused on showcasing technologies like AI, networks, and cloud (on cyber security as a theme).

How these technologies help business design, boost productivity, and redefine their business models were the objective of the same.

In conclusion, undeniably, GISEC remains one of the largest cybersecurity expo and conference, featuring top cyber brands and gathers many information security professionals under one roof.

Regional events like this significantly help to raise the necessary awareness on the progress, status and development of transformation in the cyber security industry so as the positive and negative impact of the Artificial Intelligence as a whole.

Artificial Intelligence continues to transform industries across the globe but it also remains a double-edged sword in cybersecurity. Stay tuned as I dive into all you need to know about AI next week. Remain positive meanwhile.

Oman LNG outlines vision to transform Wadi Mibam



Mohammed al Mukhaini, Senior Manager of Communications and Community Affairs at Oman LNG, presented a forward-looking vision for Wadi Mibam.

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 30

Oman LNG has unveiled plans to transform Wadi Mibam near Sur, into a model for sustainable development as part of its social investment strategy. Mohammed al Mukhaini, Senior Manager of Communications and Community Affairs at Oman LNG, presented a forward-looking vision for Wadi Mibam's transformation during the Oman Sustainability Week (OSW), which opened here on Monday, April 29.

Emphasizing the need for a holistic approach, Al Mukhaini highlighted Mibam's natural beauty, nestled amidst mountains and boasting serene lakes and picturesque landscapes.

He stressed the importance of preserving these environmental treasures while catering to diverse

visitor interests, ranging from tranquil retreats to adventurous hikes.

Speaking exclusively to the *Observer*, Al Mukhaini emphasised the multifaceted nature of sustainability underscoring the significance of learning from diverse experiences and highlighted that sustainability extends beyond technological advancements.

He emphasized the importance of community development in achieving sustainability goals, stating that it encompasses environmental conservation, economic prosperity, and societal well-being.

During the interview, Al Mukhaini highlighted the role of companies like Oman LNG, PDO, and OQ in social investment and performance. He stressed the importance of

showcasing the positive impact of these companies on communities and how sustainability initiatives can benefit society as a whole.

His insights contribute to the broader conversation on sustainability, highlighting the importance of collaboration and community engagement in driving positive change.

The initiative, according to al Mukhaini, goes beyond conventional infrastructure projects. It aims to create a blueprint for sustainable development that can be replicated globally.

Collaborating with an innovation academy, the project integrates academic expertise to ensure comprehensive planning and execution.

Central to the project is the preservation of Mibam's cultural heritage and the empowerment of its local community.

Al Mukhaini emphasized the importance of protecting the unique environment and managing tourism sustainably to avoid over-tourism.

The initiative involves extensive stakeholder engagement and environmental impact assessments to ensure a balanced approach. Al Mukhaini underscored the significance of local participation, with plans for community training and skill development programs.

At the core of Oman LNG's vision is the desire to prevent gentrification and migration from Mibam, thereby safeguarding its status as a vibrant, sustainable community.

It reflects a comprehensive understanding of sustainability, encompassing environmental conservation, economic development, and community engagement.

Efforts underway to attract hard-to-abate industries

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

Having clinched a further two green hydrogen project signings – taking the total to eight to date, the Sultanate of Oman is now focused on attracting downstream investments that will utilize this green energy resource to power the growth of low carbon industries, according to a high-level official of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Dr Firas al Abduwani, Director General of Renewable Energy and Hydrogen, said the effort also encompasses hard-to-abate industries, referencing sectors such as steel, cement and aluminium that are particularly challenging to decarbonise.

Speaking to journalists on the sidelines of the green hydrogen signings on Monday, Dr Al Abduwani said: "Current projections estimate a green hydrogen production of 1.4 million tonnes.

The focus now lies on ensuring project completion to deliver a minimum of 1 million tonnes by 2030.

Additionally, efforts are underway to attract hard-to-abate industries that can utilize green or low-carbon hydrogen,



Dr Firas al Abduwani, Director General of Renewable Energy and Hydrogen.

potentially including white and blue hydrogen.

This strategic move aims to establish Oman as a net-zero friendly industrial hub, create job opportunities, and position the country as a global innovation centre."

Earlier, Dr Al Abduwani stressed the high standards of Hydrom's auction process, governing the award of land blocks to successful developers.

"This process involves a rigorous and competitive approach that attracts investors, with clear criteria outlined in Requests for Qualification (RFQs) and Requests for Proposals (RFPs).

Pre-qualified companies

form consortiums and submit proposals, which are then evaluated based on technical and financial strength.

Metrics such as in-country value, innovation, and capability development are also considered in assessing consortiums."

The system incorporates checks and balances, including a board, an approval committee, and a regulator, ensuring transparency and accountability, he said, adding that other countries are now adopting this model.

This stands as a testament to the hard work of the Omani team in advancing the hydrogen sector and fostering sustainable economic growth, he added.

OPAZ delegation visits South Korea

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 29

Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), met with Jeong In-kyo, Trade Minister of South Korea, in Seoul on Monday, April 29, 2024.

Also present was Zakariya al Saadi, Oman's ambassador to the Republic of Korea.

During the meeting, they discussed how to leverage Korean technologies to manage smart industrial cities and how to enhance cooperation between the two countries, specifically in the manufacturing, logistics, and storage sectors.

Dr Al Sunaidy and his delegation are also due to meet with officials of Korean companies that specialize in wind and solar energy, automotive manufacturing, equipment, and spare parts, as well as reviewing the incentives and facilities provided by Oman through economic zones, free zones and industrial cities, notably in the chemical, medical, and pharmaceutical sectors.

The delegation is also due to visit Incheon Free Zone.

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ENTERTAINMENT

Steven Tyler of Aerosmith performs during the 62nd Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, California, US. — Reuters



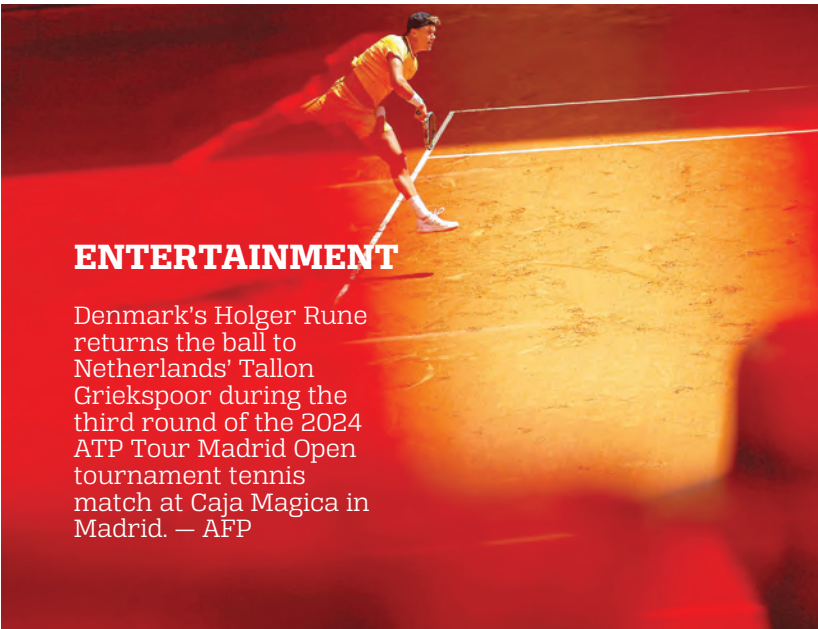
FASHION

Grace Gummer poses before the Gucci Fall/Winter 2024 collection during Fashion Week in Milan, Italy. — Reuters



BOLLYWOOD

Bollywood actor Varun Dhawan celebrates his 37th birthday at his residence in Mumbai. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

Denmark's Holger Rune returns the ball to Netherlands' Tallon Griekspoor during the third round of the 2024 ATP Tour Madrid Open tournament tennis match at Caja Magica in Madrid. — AFP



CULTURE

Dancers perform on vestiges of World War II during the video shooting of the clip of Afghan rapper and militant Sonita Alizada on the beach of Arromanches-les-Bains, north-western France. — AFP

art & life

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FRENCH BIKERS ON AN ARABIAN MOTORCYCLE TOUR STOPOVER IN OMAN

35 adventurous bikers from France embarked on a thrilling ride across the Arabian Peninsula. Spanning 5,000 kilometres, they cross Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, until finally making a stop in Oman. The journey is a blend of adrenaline, camaraderie, and discovery... **P20**

FILM

‘Planet of the Apes’ franchise looks to the future with new film ‘Kingdom’

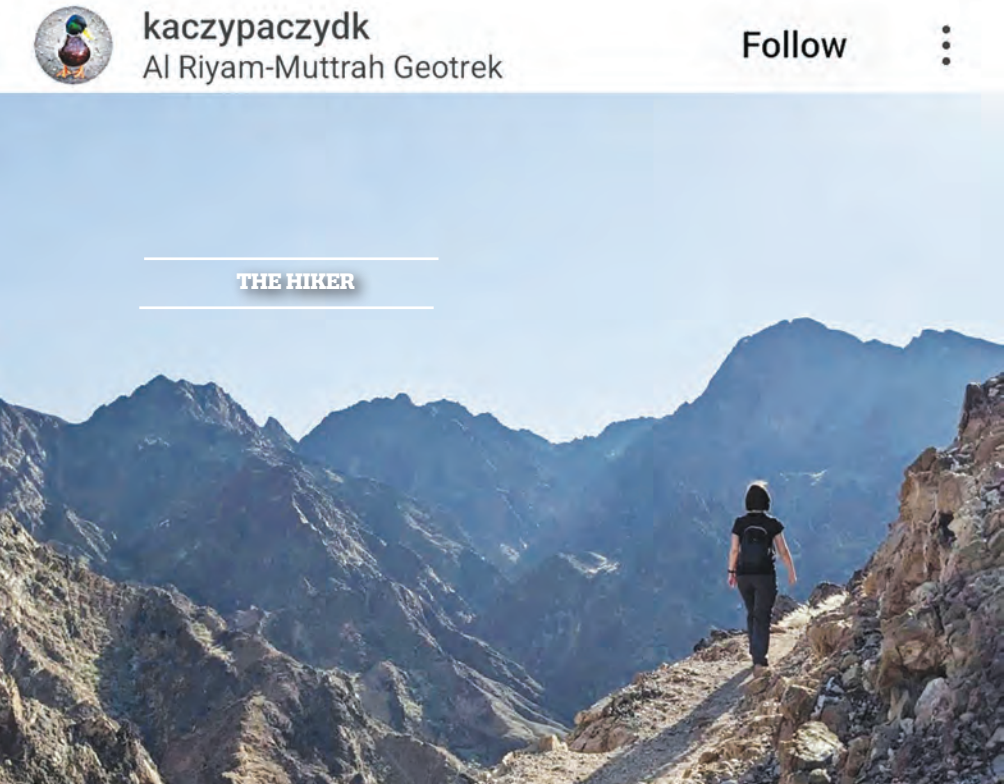
“KINGDOM OF THE PLANET of the Apes”, the latest instalment in the sci-fi franchise, is both a sequel and a prequel, its director, Wes Ball, says. The action-adventure is the tenth “Planet of the Apes” movie and follows

the reboot trilogy, which debuted in 2011 with “Rise of the Planet of the Apes” and includes the 2014 film “Dawn of the Planet of the Apes” and 2017’s “War for the Planet of the Apes”. “It’s certainly big shoes to fill,” Ball, known for the “Maze Runner” movies, said at the new film’s London launch on Thursday. “We had to really decide if we had something good here. And I think we do. We have a reason to exist, we’re not just a part four, we’re kind of our own thing. We try to honour what came before, with the previous trilogy, but also the original 1968 movie,” he said. “Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes” is set several generations after the events of the 2017 film and centres on a young and naive but brave ape Noa (Owen Teague). When his peaceful eagle-raising clan is attacked and his family taken away, Noa sets off to find them. Encounters with an elderly orangutan and the first human he has met, Nova/ Mae (Freya Allan), along the way teach Noa difficult truths about the past and bear consequences on his, and the



planet’s future. “It’s unique characters this time, it’s younger characters. There’s a kind of a youthful spirit. It’s a bit more of an adventure. It’s a road movie as we kind of travel across this landscape that’s slowly disappearing, the ruins of our world,” said Ball. Like its predecessors, “Kingdom” uses motion-capture technology to bring the non-human characters to life. The cast spent six weeks in “ape school”, studying under movement coach Alain Gauthier, a former Cirque du Soleil performer and project director. Actor Andy Serkis, who played lead chimpanzee Caesar in the previous three films, was hired as a special consultant to help the actors approach their characters. “I’m very proud to, in a tiny way, be associated with its journey and sort of passing on the baton to the next generation and watching them create such an incredible movie,” Serkis, 60, said. The global cinematic rollout for “Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes” begins on May 8. —Reuters

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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Students deliver amazing performance at the 9th School Theatre Festival

BY KHALID AL BALUSHI
PHOTO BY MOHAMMED AL ANBOURI

IT'S ONE OF the liveliest events organised for students by the Ministry of Education and this excitement can be felt as students hurried toward the stage of Dohat Al Adab Theatre in Muscat.

To promote purposeful theatrical presentations that tackle national and social issues, the ministry also looked into enhancing students' cultur-

al and intellectual awareness highlighting the importance of theatre as a platform for artistic expression and social commentary, particularly within the educational context.

The 9th edition of the School Theatre Festival was participated by several schools from the seven different governorates and on the day of the event itself, they were eager to

share the fun and excitement with their peers, exchanging conversations and laughter as the show progressed.

The event was attended by Mohammed bin Said al Balushi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Information, in the presence of Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education, and Ismail Abdullah, Secretary-General of the Arab Theatre Organization. Several dignitaries, artists, and media personalities were also in attendance and were delighted by the children's performances.

Raiya al Jabri, Director of the Educational Activities Department at the Ministry of Education, shared, "The festival targets theatre activity groups to compete with purposeful theatrical presentations, addressing a range of national and social issues, and enhancing students' cultural and intellectual awareness."

The organising committee also announced during the opening ceremony the participation of the Omani Theatre Association in the competition for the Best Integrated Theatrical Production Award at the end of this festival.

The opening commenced with a dazzling performance by student Bilsan bint Ayman, who called upon the Omani screen star and veteran theatre actress Amina Abdul Rasool to join her in a welcoming theatrical sketch for the guests. Abdul Rasool shared her beginnings on the school theatre stage in a pleasant and encouraging dialogue with the students.

Following this, the play "Bint Al Sayyad" (The Fisherman's Daughter) was presented as the first performance in the festival by the Education Directorate of Muscat Governorate, written by Abdul Razzaq al Rubai.

Osman bin Adnan al Saidi from Abdullah bin Salam School, who played the role of the fisherman, commented on the story of the play, saying, "I played the role of the fisherman in the play, and I have a daughter named Jawhara who possesses supernatural powers. When she cries, it rains, and



when she is happy, she produces a pearl from her mouth. The prince heard about her talent and wanted to marry her, but her father's wife got rid of her by contacting the witch who turned Jawhara into a dove and married the prince to her other daughter, Malikah, only for the prince to discover that Malikah was not the intended one, and that the fisherman cheated him."

Reflecting on this experience, he added, "This is my second theatrical appearance. I previously presented a play at the governorate level, which gave me the courage and confidence to appear in front of people and deliver my lines. And here I am today presenting my second play and participating at the national level, it was a beautiful and enriching experience, and I was delighted by the presence of many people who came to watch us."

Israa al Habsi, who played the role of the supporting character in the play, said, "I felt a great sense of pride being on the stage, and I am very proud of the work and proud of my colleagues who participated in the play. I was happy to have my family and friends in the audience."



She added, "We spent more than three months practising, during which we discovered our hidden talents that we did not know about."

Ten-year-old Lana Abdullah Hamouda from Al Safwa School said, "I enjoyed watching the play 'Bint Al Sayyad' and admired the role of the witch, her laughter was powerful. But I was sad when she turned Jawhara into a dove, and I was happy when she was freed from the spell. I also liked the other characters, the prince, the minister, the fisherman, Jawhara, and everyone. It was a beautiful performance."

SCIENCE

Bioluminescence first evolved in animals some 540m years ago —study

BIOLUMINESCENCE FIRST EVOLVED in animals at least 540 million years ago, new research suggests. The study, which focused on an ancient group of marine invertebrates called octocorals, that includes soft corals, pushes back the previous oldest dated example of the trait by nearly 300 million years.

Bioluminescence is the ability of living things to produce light via chemical reactions. Until now, the earliest dated origin of the phenomenon was thought to be around 267 million years ago in small marine crustaceans called ostracods.

Experts say it has independently evolved

at least 94 times in nature and is involved in a huge range of behavior including camouflage, courtship, communication, and hunting.

Andrea Quattrini, curator of corals at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in the US, and senior author on the study, said: "Nobody quite knows why it first evolved in animals."

Lead author Danielle DeLeo, a museum research associate and former postdoctoral fellow, said: "We wanted to figure out the timing of the origin of bioluminescence, and octocorals are one of the oldest groups of animals on the planet known to bioluminesce. "So, the question was when did they



develop this ability?"

Along with Catherine McFadden, of Harvey Mudd College, Dr. Quattrini had completed an extremely detailed, well-supported evolutionary tree of the octocorals in 2022, using data from 185 species.

Researchers were able to use fossil ages and their respective positions in the octocoral evolutionary tree to figure out roughly when the lineages split apart to become two or more branches.

With the evolutionary tree dated and the branches that contained luminous species labeled, the team then used a series of statistical techniques to perform an analysis called ancestral state reconstruction.

The data suggest that 540 million years ago the common ancestor of all octocorals was very likely bioluminescent. That is 273 million years earlier than the glowing ostracod crustaceans that previously held the title of earliest evolution of bioluminescence in animals.

Dr. DeLeo and Dr. Quattrini suggest that the octocorals' thousands of living representatives and relatively high incidence of bioluminescence suggest the trait has played a role in the group's evolutionary success. The findings are published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B Biological Sciences journal. — PA Media/dpa



FRENCH BIKERS ON AN ARABIAN MOTORCYCLE TOUR STOPOVER IN OMAN

BY KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

As many as 35 bikers from France are on an adventurous ride across the Arabian Peninsula and are currently in the Sultanate of Oman, exploring the unexplored as well as the known secrets of the touristic places for a few days, thanks to the Raid Orion Revival, which organised the expedition in collaboration with TLB Destinations and ORIAMA, along with the combined expertise of Pascal Rostagny, Reza Hanai, Kathleen Bimson and Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

With over 25 years of experience in orchestrating exceptional events and motorsport spectacles including Formula 1, 24 Hours of Le Mans, motorbike Grand Prix, off-road rallies, and more, the Raid Orion Revival stands out from the rest in its immaculate way of conducting.

The maiden visit of the Raid Orion Revival to the Sultanate of Oman marks a significant milestone as the first motorcycle tour of its kind across the Arabian Peninsula, spanning an impressive 5,000 kilometres through four captivating countries, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, besides the Sultanate of Oman.

The Raid Orion Revival is the perfect group of crazy bikers who are madly in love with biking and the roads. Their love for the roaring engines doesn't limit them to the asphalt and the paved roads, they ride on roads without classification or challenge, where the participants only focus on the pleasure of driving in fantastic landscapes and discovering the countries crossed.

Here, everyone rides at their own pace, aptly guided by the electronic road book provided, in groups or alone, according to their wishes, but always well supervised by the organisation team and followed by the tracking system, which ensures perfect safety.

"We are greatly honoured to announce the presence of such a pioneering endeavour in the Middle East, especially in the Sultanate of Oman," said Dani Nader, Managing Director (Président) of Orient Encounters Oman.

"The Raid Orion is open to everyone, solo or duo, regardless of experience and level of driving. You just need to be in good physical shape to be able to ride every day, with a temperature that can be hot on some stages and a motorcycle in perfect condition.

As part of the culmination of such an adventurous journey, we have curated an exquisite dining experience in collaboration with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism which will also be attended by 35 esteemed European participants," adds Nader.

The team travelling between 350 and 500 km per day for three weeks - with a day off every 6 days - remains a personal challenge and a real sporting adventure. Each evening, the selected hotels offered optimum comfort to participants for quality rest. Luggage transport by the organisation, technical assistance, transport of motorcycles by container, everything is designed so that each raider can fully enjoy this adventure without constraint.

ITINERARY IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

The team will explore the mountains of the Sultanate of Oman with a stop in Ibri at the foot of the Western Hajar, the last town before the desert immensity nicknamed 'The Great Empty' which will be followed with the crossing of Jabal Shams and its extraordinary Grand Canyon, the old town of Al Hamra and Nizwa. To end on a high note, the stage will end in a camp at the foot of the immense dunes of the Rimal Al Sharqiya where we can enjoy a second rest day.

Starting from Al Wasil, a long loop will allow the team to measure the immensity of the desert plateaus of central Oman before heading north along the superb coastal road that runs along the Arabian Sea, offering beautiful landscapes between cliffs, rocky promontories, white beaches and turquoise sea. The small fishing port of Al Ashkharah will be the location of the penultimate stage. The next day, the last stage, between sea and mountain, the team will reach Muscat, the final point of this magnificent raid on the tracks of the Incense Road. Later that day, the participants will fly to Jordan and will pick up their motorcycles at the port of Aqaba on the Red Sea.

