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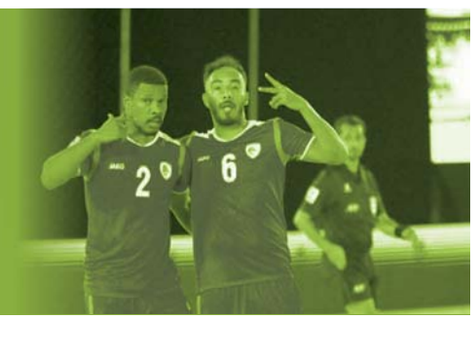
P10
OMAN TOP GROUP WITH THIRD STRAIGHT WIN



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SAID AL TOOBI – GUARDIAN OF SAQA AL SUFLA

First day of Ramadhan begins today

HIS MAJESTY EXCHANGES GREETINGS WITH ARAB, ISLAMIC LEADERS

MUSCAT: The Main Committee for the Sighting of Ramadhan Moon for 1444 AH announced that today (Thursday) marks the first day of the holy month of Ramadhan after receiving reports that confirmed the sighting of the moon.

This came in a statement issued by the committee on Wednesday during its meeting at the premises of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

The meeting was chaired by Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and attended by His Eminence Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili, the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, Dr Wail bin Saif al Harrasi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, Shaikh Mohammed bin Salim al Akhzami, Supreme Court Judge, Shaikh Abdulrahman bin Abdulsattar al Kamali, Supreme Court Judge, and Shaikh Mohammed bin Salim al Nahdi, Supreme Court Judge.

In its statement, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs extended greetings to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan, praying to Allah Almighty for the return of this blessed occasion while His Majesty enjoys good health and wellbeing. The ministry wished the Omani people and the entire Islamic world plentiful blessings and bounties.

Meanwhile, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has exchanged cables of greetings on the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan with Arab and Islamic leaders of the brotherly and friendly countries.

In his cables, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments along with his best wishes of good health, happiness and long life to them and their countries' people further progress, prosperity and welfare.

His Majesty also prayed to the Almighty Allah to bestow his blessings on all Muslims, wishing that it would be a month of security, peace and stability.

In their cables, the leaders expressed their sincere greetings along with their best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to His Majesty the Sultan. They also wished the Omani people to achieve all aspirations of progress, prosperity and welfare. They prayed to the Almighty Allah for the return of this occasion on His Majesty, the Omani people and Arab and Muslim nations with blessings, bounties and prosperity. — **ONA**

HM, Bahrain King exchange greetings

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday exchanged greetings over the phone on the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan with King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to King Hamad. His Majesty also prayed to Allah the Almighty for the return of this holy occasion on King Hamad while the people of Bahrain realise aspirations of further progress and prosperity, and the Arab and Islamic world blessings and welfare.

On his turn, King Hamad expressed his greetings to His Majesty, praying to Allah the Almighty to grant His Majesty continuous good health, happiness and long life. He also wished for the return of this occasion while the Omani people realise aspirations of further development and growth. — **ONA**

HM greets citizens and residents

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has addressed a message of greetings on the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan, said a statement issued by the Diwan of Royal Court to this effect reading as follows: "Upon the advent of the holy month of Ramadhan, as Muslims all over the globe revel over the blissful onset of the holy month - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has addressed a message of greetings to Omani citizens, residents in the Sultanate of Oman and the whole Islamic nation on the advent of the holy month, praying to Allah the Almighty to accept their fasting, prayers and good deeds. His Majesty also prayed for the return of this and similar occasions while all are enjoying good health and happiness.

"May the Almighty Allah bestow His plentiful bounties on His Majesty the Sultan and guard him as a treasured source of pride and inspiration to this nation, its citizens and residents!" — **ONA**

■ MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO PAKISTAN PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Arif Alvi of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Dr Arif Alvi. His Majesty also wished the people of Pakistan further development and growth. — **ONA**

HM GREETINGS TO PRESIDENT OF IRAN

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Ebrahim Raisi of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on the Iranian New Year (Nowruz). In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Dr Ebrahim Raisi. His Majesty also wished the people of Iran further progress and prosperity. — **ONA**

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WATER CRISIS A VITAL INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY | P9

Ahad Foundation supports Fak-Kurba

MUSCAT: Ahad Foundation rendered financial support to the initiative locally called 'Fak-Kurba' or 'ending financial crisis' which targets reliving those who are imprisoned for financial dues.

The support extended to the initiative aims to contribute to releasing a number of prisoners from all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

The 10th edition of the initiative, which is organised by the Omani Lawyers Association, comes under the theme "Because we believe that a person deserves a second chance".

It aims to collect financial donations to relieve the families of the imprisoned on financial dues arising from civil, commercial, legal or labour cases.

This edition will run till May 16, 2023. During the humanitarian journey of the initiative which began in 2012, the initiative contributed to the release of 4,969 insolvent people. It also helped to promote the values of solidarity among individuals and groups and activate the role of institutional partnership and social responsibility among establishments and companies. — **ONA**

SAYYID BILARAB VISITS OMANI START-UPS

HH Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said, Honorary President of the Omani Programme for Promising Omani Start-ups, paid field visits to a group of Omani start-ups. The visit reflects the programme's objectives by supporting innovation and technology-based start-ups, creating an enabling milieu for owners of start-ups and creative ideas. The visit also aims at viewing the work progress of start-ups and the challenges facing them. **DETAILS ON P2**

WEATHER MUSCAT: Max 28°C Min 23°C | SALALAH: Max 30°C Min 23°C | NIZWA: Max 32°C Min 20°C

PRAYER TIMINGS SUNRISE: 06:09 | FAJR: 04:53 | DHUHR: 12:19 | ASR: 15:45 | MAGHRIB: 18:24 | ISHA: 19:34

Ramadhan: Reap the benefits of moderation

The Main Committee for the Sighting of Ramadhan Moon for 1444 AH announced that Thursday marks the first day of the holy month. This came in a statement issued by the committee chaired by Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Sultanate of Oman is observing the first day of the holy month of Ramadhan on Thursday along with other GCC countries. The day is the beginning of the month-long fasting among Islamic believers.

Religious scholars urged all believers to observe fasting and to reap the benefits of the month both physical and mental while remaining moderate in action and engagement with material things.

Ali al Hattali, Head of Religious Preaching at the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA) said the blessed month of Ramadhan is considered one of the most important months in the life of a Muslim. Muslims need to recondition themselves to the lessons of Ramadhan, which is modesty.

However, people tend to accumulate food of all kinds and cook a large amount of food, wasting most of them.

"A believer should not focus only on eating in Ramadhan, but on acts of worship and alms and zakat, from which a Muslim gets a reward. Fasting, abstinence from wrong thoughts, evil speech and acts, recitation of Holy Quran,

giving zakat, helping each other and the like," Al Hattali said.

As to the health benefits, Dr Benny Panakkal, Senior Consultant Interventional Cardiologist and Medical Director, Badr al Samaa Group of Hospitals, shared his understanding that the month-long fasting has immense benefits to mankind and one shouldn't miss the golden opportunity but those who are on medication should take precautions.

Those who are on long-term medications are advised to consult a physician before making any adjustments in medication or dietary plans during Ramadhan because Muslims on long-term medications may need to adjust their medications, especially diabetic medications to avoid side effects and treatment failure due to improper use.

"Certain groups of people who have highly uncontrolled diabetes or severe organ failure are advised to abstain from fasting. Others who are taking twice daily medications can take their physician's opinion on converting it to a single daily dosage after iftar. All other medications which have to be taken twice can be taken during suhoor and iftar," says Dr Mohammed Mirvaz, a Specialist internist at Al Salama Polyclinic.

During Ramadhan, oral medicines like insulin injections, inhalers, suppositories, or eye/ear drops are usually not permitted. Diabetes patients have to be vigilant about hypoglycaemia which is a dangerous complication.

Bilarab visits start-ups

MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said, Honorary President of the Omani Program for Promising Omani Start-ups, paid field visits to a group of Omani start-ups.

The visit reflects the programme's objectives by supporting innovation and technology-based start-ups, creating an enabling milieu for owners of start-ups and creative ideas. The visit also aims at viewing the work progress of start-ups and the challenges facing them.

The visits also comes as part of the programme's plans for 2023, and one of the themes revealed by the first meeting of the supervisory committee of the Omani Program for Promising Omani Start-ups, which was held last February.

The programme of his tour included a visit to the headquarters of "ITHCA" Group at the Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM), during which HH Sayyid Bilarab viewed the investment file in start-ups, in addition to familiarising with the experience of the Group in investment in

other start-ups.

The visits also included viewing the experience of eMushrif. It is a company specialised in safe and smart school transportation by providing school buses with electronic devices linked to smart applications for parents and service providers to ensure the safety of students.

The visits also included Bviser "Ijtimaati", which is specialised in meeting governance, starting from preparing the agenda and attaching documents to distributing meeting minutes and following up on taking and implementing decisions in a faster and orderly manner.

This visit also included "OSOS" company, which is specialised in providing integrated business programmes and applications, technology and digital transformation services for institutions.

HH Sayyid Bilarab also got acquainted with "Otaxi" company, an Omani company for requesting taxi services through an application on smart phones. He also visited "Onsor Technologies" company, which is a leading Omani company in providing a variety of products and technical solutions. — **ONA**

مدائن madayn

Tender

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) announces the following Tender:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last date of Buying	Date of Submission	Type of Work	Register Degree	Fee (R.O)
5/2022/ PEIE/HQ-5 (RE-TENDER)	INDUSTRIAL SURVEY	06-04-2023	02-05-2023 (12:00 PM)	SPECIALIZED COMPANIES	ALL	30

Tender Documents can be obtained from Accounts Department at Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) **(Tel: 24159474/24159148)** during official working hours, against non-refundable fee as mentioned above.

Offers must be submitted in a closed envelopes sealed with red wax. The tender number and name shall be written on the top of the envelope containing the offer. Nothing should be written on the exterior of the envelope to display the identity of the tenderer.

Offers should be addressed to, The Chairman of Procurements Committee, Madayn, Post Box No. 2, Postal Code 124, Rusayl, Sultanate of Oman.

The completed Offer Document must be deposited in the Tender Box at Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM 1)

The Tenderer should enclose Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the Tender value validity for (90) days, and addressed to The Chairman of Procurements Committee.

Madayn is not bound to accept the lowest or any other Offer and has the right to cancel these tenders and the tenderers have no right to claim for any compensations.

For any Inquires: Tenders@madayn.om

@madaynoman

madayn.om

Slaughterhouses, fruit and vegetable markets ready for Ramadhan

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@Afrahalbalushia

Muscat Municipality has announced the readiness of slaughterhouses and the central market for vegetables and fruits for Ramadhan. There has been a schedule to receive individuals and companies during the holy month.

The municipality has noted the importance of slaughtering in slaughterhouses. The working hours in slaughterhouses during the month of Ramadhan will be in the morning period for seven hours divided into two periods, the first period for companies from six in the morning until eight in the morning, and the second period for individuals from eight in the morning until one in the evening.

Also, to speed up slaughtering operations, and to facilitate the public, Muscat Municipality indicated the possibility of using the livestock application, to obtain ready-made carcasses through reservation through the application, and it contains several options for choosing livestock, and carcasses can be reserved through it.

The civic body also confirmed the technical, health and supervisory readiness of the central market, vegetables and fruits,

and ensured the availability of local and imported crops and products.

The market is ready with plans to ensure food safety. The operators have been told to be careful with food storage and adherence to health requirements and preventive measures, as the working hours in the market were set to ensure smooth flow.

There is stress on the proper movement of vegetables and fruits safely and hygienically. Traders in the central market for vegetables and fruits have been urged to increase and intensify direct imports from the countries of origin and coordinate with the Omani Farmers Association to ensure the availability of local products such as watermelon and melons in quantities that meet the growing and expected demand for vegetables and fruits in particular and of all kinds, which consumers are usually keen to acquire and have on their tables during the holy month.

Sultan al Abri, Head of the Omani Agricultural Society, said that generally, prices were stable, but there was a slight increase in some items, due to the source of their import. The companies have begun their preparation for this season by increasing the number of shipments in the market to meet demand.

Between February 16 and March 16, some 1,005 trucks loaded with a total of 201,00 tonnes of vegetables and fruits entered the market.

Oman takes part in GCC ministerial meeting

RIYADH: The Sultanate of Oman took part in the 155th session of the GCC Ministerial Council held at the GCC Secretariat-General headquarters in Riyadh on Wednesday.

The Sultanate of Oman was represented in the meeting by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister. Present at the meeting were GCC foreign ministers and the GCC secretary-general.

In his speech, Sayyid Badr underlined the approach pursued by the GCC to support peace, security and stability in the region and the world in a bid to achieve comprehensive development and prosperity for all, as well as promoting the constructive cooperation and mutual benefits among different countries and peoples.

He also welcomed the tripartite joint statement issued by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China on resuming Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations. This agreement, Sayyid Badr said, constitutes a significant step within the context of GCC common goals.

The ministerial meeting reviewed the course of implementing the decisions issued by the GCC Supreme Council, which aim at enhancing the GCC joint action.

The participating ministers have taken the decisions necessary to promote cooperation among the members states, develop economic, cultural, educational and security ties in a manner that contributes in consolidating and sustaining stability and comprehensive development in the region, as well as enhancing cooperation and solidarity among the member states. — **ONA**

Omanis can avail UK's online entry scheme for smooth travel

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Omanis, along with citizens of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates, will need to apply for an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) when travelling to the UK from February 22, 2024, according to a statement issued by the British Embassy in Oman. They can apply in advance from February 1, 2024, but before February 22, 2024, and the nationals of these countries will still need to apply for Electronic Visa Waiver (EVW) to travel to the UK, as is currently the case.

However, Qatari visitors to the UK will need an ETA when travelling to the UK from November 15, 2023. Nonetheless, they can apply in advance from October 25, 2023, but before November 15, 2023, Qatari nationals will need to continue applying for Electronic Visa Waiver (EVW) to travel to the UK.

Jordanian visitors will need an ETA when travelling to the UK from February 22, 2024. However, they can apply in advance from February 1, 2024, but before February 22, 2024, the Jordanian nationals need to continue applying for a UK visa to travel to the UK.

This was announced after the United Kingdom unveiled plans for travel scheme to bolster the border, an electronic authorisation to travel to the UK which will be applicable to all travellers from around the world in 2024.

Accordingly, visitors from the GCC and Jordan will be the first to benefit from the scheme which is expected to enhance the border security and improve the travel experience of UK visitors to the UK.

"By applying to the UK's new Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) scheme ahead of a worldwide expansion of the scheme throughout 2024, visitors will benefit from smooth and efficient travel. Qatari visitors will be the first to be able to apply for an ETA in October 2023," a statement from the diplomatic mission said.

The application process will be quick, light touch and entirely digital with most visitors applying via a mobile app and receiving a swift decision on their application. The cost of an ETA will be in line with similar international schemes, and individuals can make multiple visits to the UK over a 2-year validity period, for up to 6 months at a time.

"The scheme will also further strengthen our border, by ensuring robust security checks are conducted on every visitor pre-travel," a spokesperson from the British Embassy told the Observer.

As part of the application process, individuals will need to provide biometric details and answer a set of suitability questions. This will ensure that the authorities have information on those seeking to come to the UK helping to prevent dangerous individuals, such as criminals, from entering the UK.

'Strengthening our border remains one of the government's top priorities. ETAs will enhance our border security by increasing our knowledge about those seeking to come to the UK and preventing the arrival of those who pose a threat," Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick said.

Mobile payments need further encouragement

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

While mobile banking has come of age, digital payments have still not taken off largely due to the reluctance on the part of the small retailers, who still prefer cash transactions, and the customers due to the absence of widespread availability of these methods.

Jomo Thomas, who was earlier associated with a leading money exchange said, "I remember until 2019, customers had to withdraw cash from the ATM machines and then come to the exchange for remittance. Now, most money exchanges accept card payments directly with or without extra cost. More importantly, customers can directly transfer from their respective account via mobile applications."

Many retailers were reluctant to accept cards for the extra two per cent charges levied by the banks on transactions and due to the time taken to deposit to be credited in their accounts by the respective bank.

Thawani, was one of the first e-payments solutions to be launched in the Sultanate of Oman.

The app was aimed at making payments for in-store purchases by scanning the retailer's QR code at the store and completing the payment process. If a retailer is located elsewhere, you can use their registered mobile number to pay regardless of where they may be located.

All leading banks in the Sultanate have their wallet payments, but they have been

hampered by the lack of cooperation from the retailers, especially smaller ones.

Last year, the CBO approved the licensing application of OM Pay to provide electronic payment services in Oman, which will offer mobile payment services to consumers and enable merchants to receive payments through its NFC, QR code, point of sale, bank transfer, and online payment gateway offerings.

"I wish the Central Bank of Oman would launch the activate Apple Pay in the Sultanate of Oman and also promote retailers to shift to mobile payments, which will do away with the need for using debit and ATM cards after every purchase. I feel small businesses need cash for daily rolling, but wider use of this facility will do eliminate the use of cash," said Salim al Kharousi, a frequent traveller to neighbouring countries.

Banking experts argue that it is only a matter of time before the Sultanate joins the rest of the region with mobile payments with some active encouragement from the authorities.

First phase of digital transformation plan launched in Musandam

KHASAB: The Governorate of Musandam launched the first phase of the digital transformation plan (2021-2925), on Wednesday.

The plan encompasses four initiatives: the e-platform project, internal and external non-municipal services, unification of network telecommunications and provision of Internet services, upgrading network infrastructure and cybersecurity and cloud.

The launch of the first package of digital transformation is in line with Oman Vision 2040 and the technological orientation of the communications and information technology sector. It is also in line with the vision and mission of the governorate and its strategic objectives that aim to realise certain benefits for the governorate and to address the challenges it faces and develop its work environment.

Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Governor of Musandam, chief guest, delivered a speech in which he said: "Today, digital transformation is no longer

an option but an imperative as all countries are racing for it not for the sake of luxury but to upgrade services, productivity and communication among individuals. The digital transformation opened up new horizons for the private sector to participate with the government sector in creating smart applications that facilitate government transactions. Besides, digital transformation contributes to reducing the cost of paperwork and minimising environmental damage." — **ONA**

Sultanate of Oman
Consumer Protection Authority

Oman Trading Establishment L.L.C.

RECALL CAMPAIGN
For 2019-2020 Cadillac XT4 Model Vehicles

Date of Recall : 23/03/2023
Campaign Type : Safety Recall
Recall Segment : Rear Vision Camera
Product Description : Cadillac XT4 2019-2020

Model Year	Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle VIN Range	No. of Affected Vehicles in Oman
2019-2020	Cadillac	XT4	1GYFZ9R40KF125231 to 1GYFZ9R4XLF111497	7

Description:
In these vehicles, the rear-view camera (RVC) in these vehicles may fail or function intermittently. If the rear-view camera is not functioning properly, rear visibility is reduced, increasing the risk of a crash during a backing event.

Procedure:
Dealers will update Video Processing Module (VPM) software.

For More Information:
Customers of the above mentioned vehicles may please call Oman Trading Establishment LLC

Contact Details -
For OTE Toll free No 80050002 on all working days between 8.00am to 1.00pm and 2.00pm to 5.30pm

RAMADHAN IS FOR HOPE, PEACE, SOCIETY AND UNITY

On the move...

Sultanate of Oman
Consumer Protection Authority

OMAN TRADING ESTABLISHMENT LLC

RECALL CAMPAIGN

FOR 2020 – 2023 CADILLAC CT4/ CT5, CHEVROLET SILVERADO 1500, GMC SIERRA 1500 / YUKON/ YUKON XL MODEL VEHICLES

Date of Recall: 23.03.2023

Campaign Type: Non-compliance Recall

Recall Segment: Lighting System

Product Description: Cadillac CT4 2020 / Cadillac CT5 2020 / Chevrolet Silverado 1500 2022 – 2023/ GMC Sierra 1500 2022 – 2023 / GMC Yukon/Yukon XL 2022 – 2023

Model Year	Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle Vin Range	No. of Affected Vehicles in Oman
2020	Cadillac	CT4	1G6D95RK0L0135978 to 1G6D95RLXL0149718	4
2020	Cadillac	CT5	1G6D85RK0L0131769 to 1G6D85RWXL0137095	7
2022-2023	Chevrolet	Silverado LD	3GCND9ED0NG500320 to 3GCUD9ELXPG100030	33
2022-2023	GMC	Sierra LD	1GTPU9ED0NZ606842 to 1GTUU9ELXNZ609628 3GTNH9ED1NG539275 to 3GTUU9ELXNG667416	78
2022-2023	GMC	Yukon SLE	1GKS17ED0NR116767 to 1GKS27KLXPR217536	292
2022-2023	GMC	Yukon XL SLE	1GKS18ED0NR117813 to 1GKS28KLXPR217591	8

DESCRIPTION:
The daytime running lamps (DRLs) may not deactivate when the headlamps are on. If the DRLs do not deactivate when the headlamps are on, the resulting glare could increase the risk of a crash.

PROCEDURE:
Dealers will update the software in the vehicles' Body Control Module (BCM) to correct the condition.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Customers of the above mentioned vehicles may please call Oman Trading Establishment LLC for Chevrolet & Cadillac and Moosa Abdul Rahman Hassan & Co LLC for GMC.

CONTACT DETAILS:
For OTE, Call Toll free no. 80050002 on all working days between 8.00am to 1.00pm and 2.00pm to 5.30pm.
For MARH, Call Toll free no. 80076200 on all working days between 8.30am to 1.00pm and 4.00pm to 6.30pm.

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The dictionary meaning of hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen.

What is that hope that stays as a desire in people's minds as they take up the challenge of refraining from drinking water to quench thirst and food to silence hunger? Asked Saif al Raheili, lecturer on Islamic studies, about hope and its association with Ramadhan. He explained hope and said the objective is to accomplish "Taqwa."

"In chapter two verse 183 {O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may accomplish taqwa}, there is mention of accomplishment of "taqwa" — the state of a being getting connected with Allah, lord of the worlds. Such connection has been a goal throughout eras in the history of humanity."

So why is it important to seek this Taqwa this month? "Ramadhan is the particular month chosen by Allah to establish that connection in its ultimate form. The achievement of connection leads to a complete transformation of the person in terms of soul and body due to the rituals assigned with the month (i.e fasting and extra praying and recitation of verses from the Holy Quran).

"Moreover, seeing humans seeking higher values by giving up basic instincts sends a clear message that there is hope in humanity and there is always a gate of goodness in humans," he explained.

Ramadhan is also the month people hope to achieve peace. What is it that leads us to peace?" Al Raheili explains, "Fasting is the act of worship in the month of Ramadhan, where a person is commanded to take full control of his body and desires, as the first step to achieving internal peace is by taking complete self-control, for example, desires for food, desires to collect money and not spending, and desires of increasing self-ego. The more you control temptations and desires, the closer you get to internal peace." Ramadhan also has social elements to it and that is why one feels very much an integral part of society.

"Most of the rituals in Ramadhan are related to self-behaviours towards others. Keeping your fasting valid means following the dos and don'ts of Ramadhan. Giving charity, helping the poor, fixing relationships, visiting relatives, and preaching good messages are some examples of the dos you need to fulfil to prove your sincerity of fasting. While backbiting, stealing, cheating, envying and assaulting are some examples of the don'ts you have to avoid to keep your fasting valid. These behaviours have a significant contribution to improving society and the lives of people," explains Al Raheili.

As much as it is a personal journey, Ramadhan also brings unity.

"Fasting in the month of Ramadhan is a universal act of worship where you see blacks and whites, easterners and westerners, males and females, rich and poor despite all their traditional and cultural differences from all over the globe practising the same rituals on the same month, worshipping the same one God, according to the teaching of the same one holy book and following the teachings of the same one prophet — Muhammad, (peace be upon him).

This shows the world a form of spectacular unity that hardly ever existed in the history of humanity," notes Saif al Raheili.

MoHT restores 310 sites

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism continues to restore and maintain 310 historical and archaeological sites in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

The ministry lists and documents the historical and archaeological monuments and ancient lanes, targeting the largest possible number and protecting them from extinction, so that they remain a witness to the Omani civilisation throughout the ages.

Amjad bin Ahmed al Makhladi, Director of Restoration and Maintenance at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, said that the restoration process comes based on the original role played by the ministry to preserve the Omani architectural and archaeological heritage for its sustainability for future generations and to be an important tourist element.

He added that in 2022, about 83 castles, forts, walls, 145 towers, 80 mosques and two ancient houses had been restored, while the inventory process resulted in the registration of 3,423 archaeological sites.

Al Makhladi indicated that the restoration process depends primarily on studying the percentage of damages in the archaeological site and its historical importance, and aligning that with the ministry's budget allocated for restoration.

He pointed out that one of the most important aspects that are taken into account in the restoration of monuments and historical sites is the architectural and historical value of the archaeological landmark, its geographical location and the proposed use of the landmark, taking into account not changing its basic plan and protecting and preserving the original building material without tampering with artwork such as decorations.

He said the ministry was keen to pay attention to the archaeological monuments owned by the people, by supporting their efforts to restore and maintain these monuments, whether through technical supervision or by providing them with restoration materials according to the importance of the landmark, its condition, and the purpose of its restoration, in coordination with the owners of such requests.

Social responsibility projects are social investments

MUSCAT: The sixth edition of Oman Forum for Partnership and Social Responsibility 2023 began under the auspices of HH Sayyida Hujaija bint Jaifar al Said in Muscat on Monday.

The forum was held under the title "Towards an Integrated Framework for Planning and Responsibility".

Hatim bin Hamad al Ta'ei, Secretary-General of Oman Forum for Partnership and Social Responsibility, emphasised that the forum demonstrated the strategies and foundations of partnership between the public and private sectors, projects related to social responsibility, and the efforts made to maximise the returns of social investment, whether for companies or local communities.

Dr Ali bin Abdullah al Ibrahim, Vice-President of Regional Network for Social Responsibility, said in a speech that social responsibility projects and initiatives for companies and institutions are not charitable work that is undisciplined or undefined. Rather, he affirmed, it is a work that contributes to maximising the social impact, and it must be ethically and professionally disciplined.

The forum's activities included the launch of the fourth edition of the partnership signing platform and the signing of 3 social responsibility initiatives, namely an initiative to support the Al Wafa Centre in the Wilayat of Dima W'attayeen, an initiative to distribute 10,000 Ramadhan parcels to insolvent families, and the "Enrichment of Arabic Sign Content" initiative, which aims to review visual content rendered for persons with hearing impairment, development of trainers, and filming of sign subtitles, in addition to montage of video clips with sign subtitles.

The first theme of the forum was entitled "Socially Responsible Investment Governance", while the second theme was titled "Towards an Integrated Framework to Overcome Challenges and Meet Aspirations".

The forum explored mechanisms to enable the principles of governance in CSR in Oman. The step aims to create an integrated system in which higher levels of benefit from social investments are achieved, whether at the level of ensuring an effective framework for planning and responsibility, or transparency and fairness of distribution. **— ONA**

Oman and Romania hold political talks

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Romania held the third session of political talks in Muscat on Tuesday. During the session, the Omani side was headed by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs, while the Romanian side was headed by Traian Hristea, Secretary of State for Global Affairs and Diplomatic Strategies of Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They reviewed areas of bilateral cooperation in different fields. They also exchanged views on various regional and international matters of mutual interest. The session was attended by Florin Marius, Ambassador of Romania to Oman, Yousef bin Issa al Zedjali, Head of the East Europe Department, and several officials from both sides.

OHRC holds 4th meeting

MUSCAT: Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) held its fourth meeting of the fourth annual session, under the chairmanship of Shaikh Abdullah bin Shuwain al Hosni, Chairman, on Wednesday.

During the meeting, the committee hailed the Royal Decree No 16/2023 ratifying the Sultanate of Oman's joining the Arab Charter on Human Rights.

OHRC said the Royal Decree affirms the Sultanate of Oman's commitment to the United Nations' charter and principles and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as well as the provisions of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the regional and international treaties and conventions on human rights.

The meeting discussed several topics pertaining to the work and activities of the committee in both local and international domains. It debated ways of activating the commission's role to deal with human rights issues through monitoring and receiving reports and its role in reviewing the upcoming activities and programmes for the current year. **— ONA**

CENTRAL BANK OF OMAN
BANKS & MONEY CHANGERS CONTROL DEPARTMENT
Implementation & Follow - up Section

ME/FORM NO.5

SUMMARY OF ASSETS & LIABILITIES MUSANDAM EXCHANGE LLC (MONEY CHANGING ESTABLISHMENT)
AS OF 31.12.2022 (In RO 000' s)

ASSETS	31.12.2022	31.12.2021	LIABILITIES	31.12.2022	31.12.2022
1. Cash in hand	457	368	1. Capital & Reserves	1,157	1,103
2. Deposits with Central Bank of Oman	100	100	2. Borrowings from Banks	276	282
3. Precious Metals	-	-	3. Balances due to Branches	-	-
4. Balances due from Banks and Money Changers	1,248	1,081	4. Balances due to banks and Money changers	284	111
5. Balances due from Branches	-	-	5. Loans and Advances payable	-	-
6. Cheques and drafts purchased	-	-	6. Cheques and Drafts issued & outstanding	-	-
7. Loans and Advances	-	-			
8. Investments	-	-	7. Other Liabilities	322	274
9. Fixed Assets	57	76			
10. Other Assets	177	145			
TOTAL	2,039	1,770	TOTAL	2,039	1,770

Musandam Exchange, Managed by Canara Bank
P.O. Box 2155, Ruwi, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24834954/24831852, Fax: 24831154, E-mail: gm@musandamexchange.com

Scientific symposiums give boost to research activities

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

> The department of research in UTAS-Salalah conducted a series of joint international scientific symposiums in which a large group of researchers and specialists participated.

Academic scientific symposiums aimed at boosting knowledge among students and teaching faculty attracted national and international participants who attended a series of joint scientific symposiums, in cooperation with some prestigious international institutions at University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah.

The scientific symposiums are in line with the institution's vision and strategic plan, as the university seeks to build bridges of cooperation with universities, institutions and research centres with strong research profiles.

The department of research in UTAS-Salalah conducted a series of joint international scientific symposiums in which a large group of researchers and specialists participated.

The first international symposium was about choosing the topic of scientific research. Enhancing skills and providing guidance to researchers locally and internationally regarding research publishing mechanisms was also one of the objectives of this symposium.

The symposium was attended by several eminent names, including Professor Stanislav Ivanov, Vice-President of Varna Research, Director of the Singapore Research Institute in Bulgaria, and editor of two international journals, one of which is indexed in global databases (Scopus & WoS). There were a large numbers of attendees from Omani universities, as well as researchers and specialists from several countries, like Australia, Portugal, Ukraine, Poland, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Afghanistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Sudan, Yemen and Pakistan.

The second symposium of the series was related to the specifications of the theoretical framework of scientific research, how to prepare it, and the criteria for publishing research. The keynote speaker was Professor Noll Scott from the School of Business and Law at Edith Cowan University, Australia. He is one of the most reputed experts and academics, with more than 300 academic publications, including 17 books in his name.

More than 323 participants from the Sultanate of Oman and several countries such as Spain, Portugal, England, the United States, Italy, Poland, Russia, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Turkiye, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Kosovo, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Yemen, Pakistan and the Philippines attended this symposium.

Organising such symposiums puts the university on an international scale, enhancing its reputation and adding to the possibility of getting financial support for joint scientific research projects. This would also be helpful in boosting financial sustainability of the university, as per the strategic plan of UTAS, in line with Oman Vision 2040 in diversifying and enhancing various sources of income.

Sultanate of Oman سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التراث والسياحة
Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Tender No.	73/2022/MHT/ HQ-50	Tender Name	Construction of Dabba Archeological Visitor Center at Musandam Governorate
Fees of Tender Documents (Non-refundable)	120 O.R		
Tender Document Sales End Date	27/3/2023		
Last Date for Bid Submission	18/4/2023		
Grade	First		
E-Tendering Portal	https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om		

- Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E.Tendering website: **https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om**, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Bids are submitted that fulfill the technical conditions and specifications, accompanied by a tender bond from a local bank not less than (1%) of the bid value, valid for (90) days from the date of its submission.
  - Any bid that does not meet the required tender bond will not be considered
  - The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids
- The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering system, until the last date for submitting bids before (10:00 am, Oman time).

Support and inquiries	For more information, related to the tender, kindly communicate through the website of the e-tendering system: **https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om**
	For inquiries related to the technical support for the e-tendering system, kindly communicate through **etenderhd@ita.gov.om** or **24402200**
For further information	**Email : sotic@mht.gov.om** **Phones : 22088348 - 22088085**

Follow us on Youtube: omanobserver

Israel strike damages Syria's Aleppo airport

Aleppo International Airport has been attacked several times by Israeli air strikes. – **AFP**

DAMASCUS: An Israeli air strike hit Syria's Aleppo airport on Wednesday causing damage, the defence ministry said, without mentioning any casualties, in the second such attack on the facility this month.

It was the second such attack in a month on the airport in Syria's second city, which has been a major conduit for relief flights since a February 6 earthquake devastated swathes of southeastern Türkiye and neighbouring Syria.

"Around 3:55 am, the Israeli enemy carried out an air attack... targeting Aleppo international airport, leading to some material damage," a defence ministry statement said.

"A number of missiles" were fired from the Mediterranean west of the coastal city of Latakia, it added.

Transport ministry official Suleiman Khalil said technicians were assessing the damage.

> It was the second such attack in a month on the airport in Syria's second city, which has been a major conduit for relief flights since a February 6 earthquake devastated Syria

On March 7, three people were killed in an Israeli strike on the airport that brought air traffic, including relief flights, to a halt.

The airport reopened several days later.

More than 80 aid flights have landed in Aleppo with relief supplies following the earthquake, according to the transport ministry.

Since 2011, Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes against its neighbour, primarily targeting positions of the Syrian army and Hezbollah allies.

The Israeli military rarely comments on individual strikes against Syria, but has vowed repeatedly to keep up its air campaign.

Israel has attacked Aleppo and Damascus airports several times in recent years.

A strike on Aleppo airport last September put it out of service for a few days. That attack targeted a warehouse used by Hezbollah, the Observatory said at the time.

Earlier this month, Israeli air strikes in Syria killed an army officer the Observatory said.

Last month, an Israeli air strike killed 15 people in a Damascus district housing state security agencies.

The transport ministry said the strikes caused damage to the runway and to airport equipment, forcing all flights to be redirected to Damascus or to Latakia on the Mediterranean coast.

—AFP

At least 13 killed as quake hits Afghanistan-Pakistan border

JURM: At least 13 people were killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan by a strong earthquake felt across thousands of kilometres, but the region appeared on Wednesday to have dodged the mass casualties usually associated with a tremor of such scale.

The United States Geological Survey said the magnitude 6.5 quake was centred near Jurm in northeastern Afghanistan, but the depth of 187 kilometres mitigated extensive damage.

The quake, which struck around 09:30 pm Kabul time on Tuesday and lasted more than 30 seconds, was felt from central Asia to New Delhi in India — more than 2,000 kilometres away.

"It was a powerful earthquake and we feared maximum damage due to the intensity — that's why we issued an alert," Bilal Faizi, a spokesman for Pakistan's emergency Rescue said.

In Jurm district, near the epicentre, a resident of one village reported no casualties despite the proximity. "We are about 2,000 to 3,000 people in our village and we all spent the night outside under the sky," said Inamullah, reached by telephone. Some 50 houses had collapsed in the village located in the snow-capped mountains.

Panicked residents of cities and towns in Afghanistan and Pakistan also fled their homes to seek safety away from buildings — with many too scared to return.

Officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, north of Islamabad, said nine people had been killed in the quake. **— AFP**

Residents clear debris from a damaged a house at Sooch village in Jurm district of Badakhshan Province in Afghanistan. – **AFP**

SIGHTING OF THE NEW MOON OF RAMADAN

Silhouettes of Malaysia's Islamic Authority's officers and a telescope which they use to perform the sighting of the new moon which signals the start of the holy month of Ramadhan, in Putrajaya, Malaysia. – **Reuters**

China OKs its first mRNA vaccine, from drugmaker CSPC

BEIJING: China has approved its first domestically developed mRNA vaccine against Covid-19, CSPC Pharmaceutical Group Ltd said on Wednesday, a major achievement in a country that has declined to use Western Covid shots to support domestic research.

China has been racing to develop vaccines using messenger RNA (mRNA) technology since early 2020.

The long-awaited approval comes as infections have fallen sharply across China since it suddenly dropped its strict "zero-Covid" curbs in December, making the sales outlook for the newly approved vaccine moderate.

But it would give China an additional option to tackle future outbreaks and a base for development against newly emerging variants, scientists said.

The news of China's first successful mRNA vaccine did not generate much buzz in domestic social media on Wednesday, as the country has returned to normal and its borders have re-opened.

Its top leaders declared a "decisive victory" over Covid last month.

CSPC said its vaccine trials showed adverse effects were substantially lower in an elderly group compared with an adult group, which could be help China, which has stressed the need to focus on protecting its vulnerable elderly population.

In a study of 4,000 participants when China was experiencing a surge in infections, the vaccine showed efficacy of 85.3 per cent 14 to 28 days after a booster vaccination.

CSPC did not say how many doses it plans to produce. It said the vaccine could be stored at 2 degrees to 8 degrees C (35.6 degrees to 46.4 degrees F) for a long time.

World Health Organization officials have in the past described mRNA vaccines as a "very solid option" for countries including China, particularly for vulnerable populations and for use as boosters.

UN Agency can also assess the shot for use in international markets. **— Reuters**

A visitor stands near an image of Chinese President Xi Jinping during an exhibition on the fight against the coronavirus disease (Covid-19). – **Reuters**

SHORT TAKES

BEIRUT

Security forces fire tear gas at protesters

Lebanese security forces fired tear gas at protesters demonstrating in Beirut on Wednesday against deteriorating living conditions, as the currency plummeted to new lows against the dollar.

Lebanon's economic meltdown, described by the World Bank as one of the worst in recent global history, has plunged most of the population into poverty, according to the UN. Many of the hundreds protesting on Wednesday were retired servicemen and depositors locked out of their savings by cash-strapped banks. Security forces fired tear gas as some demonstrators tried to push through barriers to reach the compound.

ISTANBUL

Kingmaker party gives tacit backing

Türkiye's main pro-Kurdish party said on Wednesday it would not field a presidential candidate in May elections, giving tacit support to Recep Tayyip Erdogan's secular rival in the crucial vote.

The decision by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) reduces the possibility of a damaging split of the anti-Erdogan vote, boosting the chances of the opposition's joint candidate, Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

Winning more than 10 per cent of the vote in the past three national elections, the HDP was widely seen as a kingmaker in the tight race.

The HDP's decision is widely seen as historic elections

PHNOM PENH

Cambodian opposition activists charged

Two Cambodian opposition activists were charged with insulting the king and incitement on Wednesday following Facebook posts the authorities deemed disrespectful to the monarch, according to court warrants.

The two youth activists — Yim Sinorn and Hun Kosal — were arrested on Tuesday evening after posting allegedly insulting language against King Norodom Sihamoni on Facebook.

The activists wrote the posts after King Sihamoni, Prime Minister Hun Sen and senior government officials attended a live-televised ceremony at Angkor Wat temple on Tuesday morning.

In brief

EDINBURGH

25 HURT AFTER SHIP LURCHES IN DOCK

Fifteen were taken to hospital and 10 others treated for injuries on Wednesday after a ship tipped over in high winds at a dry dock in Edinburgh, prompting emergency services to declare a "major incident".

Research vessel the Petrel was left listing at a 45-degree angle at the Imperial Dock in the Leith district in the north of the Scottish capital. The Scottish Ambulance Service said it took 15 patients to hospital and treated and discharged a further 10 at the scene after dispatching five ambulances, an air ambulance, three trauma teams and other units.

LONDON

JOHNSON BEGINS UK PARLIAMENT GRILLING

Britain's parliament on Wednesday opened an inquisition of former prime minister Boris Johnson about "Partygate" that could decide his political future. Opening the crunch hearing by a House of Commons committee, the ex-Conservative leader swore an oath on the Bible to tell the "whole truth and nothing but the truth".

The former PM insisted that everything he had told the Commons regarding serial partying in 10 Downing Street, breaking the lockdown legislation he introduced, was done "in good faith and based on what I honestly believed at the time".

MADRID

SPAIN'S PM EASILY DEFEATS NO-TRUST MOTION

Spain's lower house of parliament on Wednesday rejected by a wide margin a motion of no confidence in the leftist government submitted by the far-right Vox party, as was widely expected.

Only one lawmaker from the centre-right Ciudadanos joined the 52 Vox representatives in supporting the motion, while 201 deputies voted against it in the 350-seat house, and 91, mainly from the conservative People's Party (PP) abstained.

Vox was aware its motion would fail but its leader Santiago Abascal went ahead with the vote, creating a deep rift in the party.

PRESIDENT ZELENSKIY VISITS TROOPS NEAR FRONTLINE CITY OF BAKHMUT

UKRAINE'S RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION NEEDS $411 BN

WASHINGTON: Rebuilding Ukraine's economy after Russia's war more than a year ago is now expected to cost $411 billion, 2.6 times Ukraine's expected 2022 gross domestic product, a new study by the World Bank, United Nations, European Commission and Ukraine found.

The estimate released on Wednesday covers the period spanning one year from Russia's war on February 24, 2022 and quantifies the direct physical damage to infrastructure and buildings, the impact on people's lives and livelihoods and the cost to "build back better," the World Bank said.

The amount is up sharply from an estimate of $349 billion released last September.

The new projection comes a day after the International Monetary Fund said its staff had reached agreement with Ukrainian authorities on a four-year $15.6 billion loan package that could leverage billions more in aid from other bodies, once approved by the IMF's executive board in coming weeks.

"Energy infrastructure, housing, critical infrastructure, economy and humanitarian demining are our five priorities for this year," Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said in a statement on the assessment.

He said the estimated damage and recovery needs did not include data on the loss of infrastructure, housing and businesses in territories now occupied by Russian forces.

According to the rapid needs assessment, Ukraine will need $14 billion for critical and priority reconstruction and recovery investments in 2023, which will require $11 billion in financing beyond that addressed in Ukraine's 2023 budget.

Some 22 per cent of the needs are in transport, while housing accounts for 17 per cent, energy 11 per cent and agriculture 7 per cent. The largest proportionate increase was in energy, where damage was more than five times the level seen in June 2022, the World Bank said.

The biggest jumps came in frontline regions such as Donetsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk and Kherson, which have been heavily targeted in Russian missile attacks since October.

The World Bank's vice president for Europe and Central Asia, Anna Bjerde, hailed Ukraine's resilience and determination in tackling the urgent recovery and reconstruction needs.

"Continued support for Ukraine is an investment in both the country and the global economy. Development partner support for public investment needs to be complemented by significant private investment to increase the available financing for reconstruction," she said.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy awards a service member at a position near a frontline in Donetsk region, Ukraine. – **Reuters**

VISITS TROOPS

President Volodymyr Zelenskiy visited Ukrainian troops on Wednesday near the frontline city of Bakhmut, and handed out medals to soldiers he said were heroically defending their country's sovereignty.

Ukrainian forces have held out for about eight months in Bakhmut, despite taking heavy casualties in one of the bloodiest battles since Russia's full-scale war 13 months ago.

Video footage posted on social media showed Zelenskiy, dressed in a dark sweatshirt and military khaki trousers, handing out awards to exhausted-looking soldiers in combat gear in what appeared to be a large warehouse.

"I am honoured to be here today to give awards to our heroes. To shake hands and thank them for protecting the sovereignty of our country," Zelenskiy wrote on the Telegram messaging app under the video footage.

"Your fate is so difficult, yet so historic. To defend our land and to return everything to Ukraine for our children," he said.

"I bow low before all the heroes, your close comrades you have lost in the east, and in general throughout this war." — **Agencies**

Macron says France needs pension changes, will enact new law by year-end

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday said a deeply unpopular new law that raises the retirement age was necessary and would enter into force by the end of the year.

Saying he had "no regrets," he however added that he wanted to improve a fraught relationship with labour unions and involve them more in future reforms, on topics including retraining for those in painful jobs.

"Do you think I enjoy doing this (pension) reform? No," Macron said in an interview with TF1 and France 2 TV. "But there are not a hundred ways to balance the accounts... this reform is necessary."

Until the government pushed the pension bill through without a vote, the protests against a bill extending the retirement age by two years to 64 had gathered huge, peaceful crowds in rallies organised by unions.

But since the government's decision to skip a vote in parliament last week, spontaneous protests in Paris and elsewhere have seen rubbish bins and barricades set ablaze every night amid scuffles with police.

Protesters on Wednesday also blocked train stations in the southern cities of Nice and Toulouse.

French President Emmanuel Macron speaks during an interview on national television in Paris on Wednesday. – **Reuters**

This, alongside with rolling strikes that affect oil depots, public transport and garbage collection, represent the most serious challenge to the centrist president's authority since the "Yellow Vest" revolt four years ago.

Labour unions have announced another nationwide day of strikes and demonstrations on Thursday.

"We don't want this law and we'll fight until it is withdrawn," pensioner Jacques Borensztejn said at a rally on Tuesday in Paris.

Macron said what he called "extreme violence" was not acceptable, while he respected the right to peaceful protests.

"We'll make sure a life that is as normal as possible can resume in the face of the few that block things," he said.

Neither a government reshuffle nor snap elections are on the cards, but rather an attempt to regain the initiative with measures to better involve citizens and unions in decision-making, political leaders in Macron's camp have said.

While the opposition has called for Macron to fire his prime minister Elisabeth Borne, who has been at the forefront of the pension reform, Macron backed her in the interview and said that he had tasked her with further widening the majority.

Macron's camp lost its majority in the lower house of parliament in elections last year.

"She (Borne) has my trust to lead this government team" and build a legislative programme to have "fewer laws, shorter, clearer texts", and "continue to widen this majority as much as it can"

Polls show a wide majority of French are opposed to the pension legislation, as well as the government's decision to push the bill through parliament last week without a vote. But Macron said he would stand firm.

"Between the short-term polls and the general interest of the country, I choose the general interest.... we will not tolerate any misbehaviour," he said. "We have no right to standstill or immobility," he said. — **Reuters**

Supporters of Donald Trump gather for a loyalty rally at a busy intersection in Laguna Hills, California, on Tuesday. – **Reuters**

Trump payments to star to resume in NY grand jury

NEW YORK: A New York grand jury was expected on Wednesday to resume its closed-door investigation of whether Donald Trump made illegal hush-money payments to a star, which could yield the first-ever criminal charges against any US president.

The panel has been meeting regularly on Mondays and Wednesdays to consider evidence in one of the many legal probes swirling around the former president as he mounts a comeback bid for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's office has been investigating $130,000 paid to Stormy Daniels in the final weeks of Trump's 2016 election campaign.

Trump's former fixer Michael Cohen has said he made the payments at Trump's direction to buy her silence about Trump's affair.

Trump has denied the affair took place, and others in his orbit have said Cohen acted on his own.

Security was high around the courthouse where the grand jury has been meeting, with court officers out early and barricades up around the building.

Tuesday, the day Trump had predicted he would be arrested, came and went without action.

About half of Americans believe the New York investigation is politically motivated, but a large majority find it believable that he paid hush money to a star, according to a Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll concluded on Tuesday.

Cohen went to prison after pleading guilty to federal charges stemming from the payoff, but prosecutors in that case did not charge Trump.

Manhattan has started and stopped its own investigation into the matter several times.

If charges were filed, Trump would have to travel to New York from his Florida home for a mug shot and fingerprinting.

— **Reuters**

The Arab reality as seen by El Hassan bin Talal

Badr al Abri

The writer is interested in rapprochement and understanding. He is the author of The Jurisprudence of Terrorism

His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth and general supervisor of the Cultural Club, extended a generous invitation to Prince El Hassan bin Talal to deliver a lecture last Thursday under the title 'The reality of the Arab world in light of international tensions and their impact on the region: A future vision'.

The lecture was held under the auspices of Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information.

I attended the lecture to listen to Prince El Hassan bin Talal as an intellectual rather than a politician, especially as he possesses a cultural project and founded the Humanitarian Forum in 1982.

He also founded the Forum of Arab Thought in 1981 and the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS) in 1994. I was full of hope that the cultural perspective would be highlighted and that the presenter would dig deep into the man's thoughts and cultural visions.

However, the post-lecture atmosphere switched to the political aspect because Prince El Hassan bin Talal was known in the collective mindset as a political rather than an intellectual personality.

As a lecture dealing with the reality of the Arab world, the revival rhetoric revolved around Arab people. However, the word Arab is not confined only to the Arab ethnicity nor to Muslims as the prince clarified that there are four significant races namely: Arabs, Turks, Persians and Kurds.

We should focus our attention on the region stretching from Morocco to central Turkiye which is home to the aforementioned ethnic groups. This region has a remarkable linguistic as well as religious diversity. Linguistically, various languages such as Hebrew, Shehri, Amazigh, Aramaic, Syriac, Hindi, Urdu, Balochi, Swahili and many more languages are spoken in this region.

> THE WORLD REVOLVES AROUND US BUT WE DO NOT NECESSARILY REVOLVE AROUND THE WORLD

In terms of the religions, the prince pointed that the Levant, for example, is inhabited by Muslims, Christians and Jews all of whom have had their influence on the cultural and the civilisational landscape since antiquity.

Besides, the Levant contains culturally influential groups such as the Druze and the Maronites.

The Coptic, Armenian, or Syriac Orthodox Church had been outweighed by the Arab or Abyssinian Orthodox Church.

In addition, the Arab world has a broader religious diversity that includes other religious groups such as Sabean-Mandaeans, Yazidis, and the Kakais, among others. Talal believes that this region has a natural and cultural diversity. It is home to the largest ports of the world but we are struggling over the terms Arabian Gulf or Persian Gulf and Gulf of Aqaba or Gulf of Aden while the world has shifted to alternative shipping lines.

Despite the underground wealth aplenty in the region, the people suffer from poverty, deprivation and shortage of electricity and water.

This region suffers from a large number of displaced people and victims of natural calamities and wars.

He thinks that we should also surpass the language of war and trust in others rather than in ourselves. There is a law for war, but there is no law for peace. The question is: Have we ever thought about post-war outcomes and how do we deal with those outcomes in terms of human rights? For example, the Palestinians were not entitled to any rights after the Mandate, however the rights were granted to the Jewish and Palestinian state only.

Regarding trust in others rather than in ourselves, is manifested by our absolute trust in the Security Council. The prince believes that the International Security Council should be renamed 'International Council of Disorder'. That is because the whole world complies with the resolutions of the United Nations; however the resolutions that do justice to us are not enforced. This is how he summarised our reality: the world revolves around us but we do not necessarily revolve

Tunisian coppersmiths bring fresh shine to Ramadhan

KAOUTHER LARBI

The eve of Ramadhan is a frantic time for Tunisian coppersmith Chedli Maghraoui, who skilfully puts a new shine on families' favourite kitchenware before the Muslim holy month starts.

From couscous pots to beloved tea sets, the metalware gets a professional polish from the 69-year-old craftsman who labours away solo at his workshop in the old city of Tunis.

So great is the pre-Ramadhan rush that he has to politely tell customers he is just unable to work any faster: "I can't do it — I still have other orders and, as you can see, I'm working alone."

Maghraoui scrubs items and uses a method known as hot-dip tinning where he coats the copper with a thin layer of tin to stop metal oxidation — a process that makes pots gleam like new. As he reconditions one well-loved pewter piece, he fans an oven fire that heats a pot with the object inside, before brushing it and plunging it into a large bucket of water.

Maghraoui says he is proud to be among the few still practicing the time-honoured craft in the ancient North African city: "It's a tradition that has existed for centuries and it's still alive." Tunisian women often receive copper or white copper gifts when they get married, or inherit the items from their mothers. Many bring their beloved heirlooms to Maghraoui to protect them a little longer. "I get a special feeling when I use my shiny pot during Ramadhan", said Sana Boukhris, 49, an accountant. "The tradition reminds me of good times as a child, when my mother would prepare for the holy month.

"There is blessing in these things I inherited from my mother." Demand is so high that "we're not taking orders anymore," said Mabrouk Romdhane, who at the age of 82 owns three such stores in the market.

Abdejlil Ayari said he learnt the trade from his father and started before he was even a teenager, but he now worries that few young people want to follow in his footsteps.

Maghraoui, who bought his workshop 20 years ago from someone who had inherited it but didn't want it, agreed. "Each death among my colleagues is a loss for this profession and a step towards its disappearance," he said. Maghraoui held out the palms of his hands, the skin cracked and blackened from his trade, and said: "This generation wants an easy job and doesn't like having this." — AFP

Our new Promethean moment

Thomas L. Friedman

I had a most remarkable but unsettling experience last week. Craig Mundie, the former chief research and strategy officer for Microsoft, was giving me a demonstration of GPT-4, the most advanced version of the artificial intelligence chatbot ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI and launched in November.

Craig was preparing to brief the board of my wife's museum, Planet Word, of which he is a member, about the effect ChatGPT will have on words, language and innovation.

First, he asked GPT-4 to summarise Planet Word and its mission in 400 words. It did so perfectly — in a few seconds. Then he asked it to do the same in 200 words. Another few seconds.

Then he asked it to do the same in Arabic. Just as quickly. Then in Mandarin. Two more seconds. Then in English again — but in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet. A few more seconds.

I could barely sleep that night. To observe an AI system — its software, microchips and connectivity — produce that level of originality in multiple languages in just seconds each time, well, the first thing that came to mind was the observation by science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

The second thing that came to mind was a moment at the start of "The Wizard of Oz" — the tornado scene where everything and everyone are lifted into a swirling gyre, including Dorothy and Toto, and then swept away from mundane, black-and-white Kansas to the gleaming futuristic Land of Oz, where everything is in colour.

We are about to be hit by such a tornado. This is a Promethean moment we've entered — one of those moments in history when certain new tools, ways of thinking or energy sources are introduced that are such a departure and advance on what existed before that you can't just change one thing, you have to change everything.

That is, how you create, how you compete, how you collaborate, how you work, how you learn, how you govern and, yes, how you cheat, commit crimes and fight wars.

Only this Promethean moment is not driven by a single invention, like a printing press or a steam engine, but rather by a technology super-cycle. It is our ability to sense, digitise, process, learn, share and act, all increasingly with the help of AI.

That loop is being put into everything — from your car to your fridge to your smartphone to fighter jets — and it's driving more and more processes every day.

The potential to use these tools to solve seemingly impossible problems — from human biology to fusion energy to climate change — is awe-inspiring. Consider just one example that most people probably haven't even heard of — the way DeepMind, an AI lab owned by Google parent Alphabet, recently used its AlphaFold AI system to solve one of the most wicked problems in science — at a speed and scope that was stunning to the scientists who had spent their careers slowly, painstakingly creeping closer to a solution.

> NO ONE PLAYER IN THIS COALITION CAN FIX THE PROBLEM ALONE. IT REQUIRES A VERY DIFFERENT GOVERNING MODEL FROM TRADITIONAL LEFT-RIGHT POLITICS

The problem is known as "protein folding." Proteins are large complex molecules, made up of strings of amino acids.

But, Science News noted, it has taken "decades of slow-going experiments" to reveal "the structure of more than 194,000 proteins, all housed in the Protein Data Bank." In 2022, though, "the AlphaFold database exploded with predicted structures for more than 200 million proteins." For a human that would be worthy of a Nobel Prize. Maybe two.

And with that our understanding of the human body took a giant leap forward. As a 2021 scientific paper, "Unfolding AI's Potential," published by the Bipartisan Policy Center, put it, AlphaFold is a meta technology: "Meta technologies have the capacity to… help find patterns that aid discoveries in virtually every discipline."

ChatGPT is another such meta technology.

Like so many modern digital technologies based on software and chips, AI is "dual use" — it can be a tool or a weapon.

The last time we invented a technology this powerful we created nuclear energy — it could be used to light up your whole country or obliterate the whole planet. But the thing about nuclear energy is that it was developed by governments, which collectively created a system of controls to curb its proliferation to bad actors — not perfectly but not bad.

AI, by contrast, is being pioneered by private companies for profit. The question we have to ask, Craig argued, is how do we govern a country, and a world, where these AI technologies "can be weapons or tools in every domain," while they are controlled by private companies and are accelerating in power every day? And do it in a way that you don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

We are going to need to develop what I call "complex adaptive coalitions" — where business, government, social entrepreneurs, educators, competing superpowers and moral philosophers all come together to define how we get the best and cushion the worst of AI.

No one player in this coalition can fix the problem alone.

It requires a very different governing model from traditional left-right politics. And we will have to transition to it amid the worst great-power tensions since the end of the Cold War and culture wars breaking out inside virtually every democracy.

We better figure this out fast because, Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore. — **The New York Times**

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Flowering in the desert...

From desert rose, Abyssinian rose, or Arabian jasmine, the mountainous and valley areas of Oman are rich with colourful wildflowers. Lavender is one of my favourites for its intense yet delicate fragrance. Several varieties of flowers may be found in different parts of the country, each with a unique ability to endure.

Flowers are symbols of abstract concepts. The soft lacy petals, intricate symmetry, and delicate rugged rims are not just beautiful; they are used in decoration, courtship and ceremonies, and in nature, they play a role in the world's ecosystem.

From topics such as love, birth, remembrance, hope, and even rejection, there is communication in a science that encompasses one of the broadest varieties of field studies. When we give someone a floral arrangement, we are communicating information – either an expression of 'thank you', an apology, or a demonstration of appreciation. And please refrain from giving mixed plastic flower arrangements!

Better than any media designer or content creator, flowers are natural communicators. It draws attention due to its colour, shape, scent and texture. Timing is crucial in communication, and understanding when to be silent is just as crucial as knowing when to speak. We may learn from flower cultivation not only about the time of year flowers bloom, how long they flower for, and how they stop working once their purpose has been served, but also about their structures, behaviours and physiological characteristics.

Floriography, "the language of the flowers," has cultural connotations, as the classic red rose is one of the most obvious symbols of romantic love. In the same line, other values can be said, and one of them is represented in the song Flowers by pop star Miley Cyrus, which has been the most streamed song for weeks, representing independent women. In art and literature, the meaning of flowers is linked to cultural and social contexts.

Sonia Ambrosio

The writer is journalist, academic, researcher in media studies

WE CAN LEARN FROM FLOWER CULTIVATION NOT ONLY ABOUT THE TIME OF YEAR FLOWERS BLOOM, HOW LONG THEY FLOWER FOR

Buying fresh, locally cultivated flowers is one of the pleasures I have during the winter months; I wish they could be available all year round. The selection is excellent considering we are talking about a country classified as arid.

Each week, I like to buy a different kind of flower to decorate my house. On my way home from the street market — yes, occasionally, we do have a street market — I often give a rose or two to waitresses working in the nearby restaurants. The gesture makes them happy, and me too. Flowers are a powerful emotion 'inducer' according to the academic article An Environmental Approach to Positive Emotion: Flowers published in the journal Evolutionary Psychology. The article suggests that flowers have 'immediate and long-term effects on emotional reactions, mood, social behaviour, and memory for both males and females.'

The flower cultivation industry has mostly no other purpose than emotional and, therefore, commercial. There are flowers used for religious purposes, personal adornment, or for their essences, which are used in the form of perfumes, as well as in the cosmetic, health and food industries.

Another aspect of the flower's importance is its use in education, particularly for people with visual impairment, as seen in the Spanish short video The Colours of Flowers, also in the Iranian film The Colour of Paradise, and the Italian film Red Like The Sky – they are examples of 'seeing the world' as a life lesson.

The established commercial farming in the country, the millions of rials worth of imported flowers (including plastic ones), or the 'operation' of fresh vegetables and fruits are not part of the scope of this article. Though earning a living from the production of fresh flowers could be a possibility, as we have seen from the growing number of greenhouses throughout the country; on a small scale, the cultivation of flowers is picking up as a sideline process as the diverse climates across Oman make it possible. Say it with flowers.

WELCOMING NEW YEAR

A woman dressed in traditional attire and finery offers prayers while celebrating 'Gudi Padwa' or the Maharashtrian New Year, in Mumbai, India, on Wednesday. **– AFP**

Water crisis a vital investment opportunity

Together with air, water is arguably the planet's most important natural resource. Functioning water systems are one of the technological pillars of civilisation, which often makes a water crisis a matter of life or death.

Today, about two billion people lack access to safe drinking water, and roughly half the world's population experiences severe water scarcity for at least part of the year. Our limited freshwater resources are already overburdened by growing populations and water-thirsty economies. By 2030, global water demand will have exceeded the sustainable supply by 40 per cent. As demand for water grows and temperatures rise, water scarcity will threaten more lives and livelihoods – and thus the stability of societies around the world.

How can we turn the tide so that water empowers communities, secures our economies, and keeps the planet livable? As with global public goods such as a clean environment, there is a tendency to focus on the costs of improvement today, rather than on the greater long-term benefits of investing in the preservation of natural resources. The water sector today is underfinanced and chronically short of capacity to meet demand. But if we want to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of ensuring clean water and sanitation for everyone, we must increase current global spending on water fourfold, to more than $1 trillion per year (1.21 per cent of global GDP). We also must make up for the $470 billion we lose every year through flood damage and poor irrigation.

Ambroise Fayolle

The writer is Vice-President of the European Investment Bank

Henk Ovink

The writer is Special Envoy for International Water Affairs for the Kingdom of the Netherlands

By protecting the environment and the climate, every cent invested in the water sector boosts our economies, now and in the future. When the European Investment Bank provided a €200 million ($215 million) loan to Jordan last December to finance a desalination plant on the Red Sea and a pipeline to the capital, Amman, the country's planning and international cooperation minister, Zeina Toukan, described these projects as crucial for both water security and comprehensive economic development. We all need to adopt similar thinking about how we value and manage water.

As with many other challenges, the public sector cannot fill this large investment gap alone. Businesses have an important role to play. According to the CDP, a not-for-profit organisation that collects environmental-impact data, more than $300 billion of business value is at risk globally if no action is taken to address water scarcity. Yet it will cost only one-fifth of that total – $55 billion – to tackle the problem.

By 2030, global water demand will have exceeded the sustainable supply by 40 per cent.

If businesses deploy new technologies to reduce their water consumption and to exploit wastewater as a source of energy, heat, nutrients and materials, they can reduce their environmental footprint and free up more water for use by others. The CDP values such "water-related opportunities" at $711 billion, reflecting not just savings on water use, but also the growth of long-term potential markets in water-smart technology and the benefits of better community relations. Because water is cheap in most parts of the world, businesses often have little incentive to invest in saving water or in boosting the efficiency of water-intensive production processes.

To persuade the private sector to focus on water-system preservation, we first need to start thinking of money spent on water as a real investment, rather than as a cost that can never be recovered. Second, the right value must be assigned to this water in order to create the necessary incentives for users and businesses to use it more efficiently, and for preservation to be economically rewarding. In the case of water, this requires a delicate balancing act, because affordable access to drinkable water and sanitation is a recognised human right – which means it is non-negotiable. Third, global cooperation and new cross-border programmes to mobilise greater investments in water would overcome market failures and prevent water from being politicised and weaponised.

This week's United Nations 2023 Water Conference in New York, the first such gathering since 1977, is a unique opportunity to discuss water security and to tackle the crisis head-on and to acknowledge that water investment is as critical to a sustainable and just economy as is clean-energy investment. We can establish new guidelines for fixing the water cycle and ensuring a more holistic approach to sustainable development everywhere, from the Netherlands and Luxembourg to Nigeria and Laos. And we must find more ways to incentivise water financing from public and private sources that are willing to wait for their investments to bear fruit.

Water is what will carry the SDGs across the finish line. We must finally start recognising it as a fundamental part of our investment portfolios, and put it at the centre of our economic policies.

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Oman top group with third straight win

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

The Oman national beach soccer team claimed their third consecutive victory in the Asian Cup after thrashing Palestine 5-1 at Jamtim Arena in Pattaya, Thailand, on Tuesday. The match marked the third and final round of Group D competitions in the 2023 AFC Beach Soccer Cup.

The Red Warriors dominated the game and topped the group standings with nine full points from three matches. Kuwait took second place with four points, followed by Palestine with three points. Kyrgyzstan ended in last place with no points. The Omani and Kuwaiti teams qualified for the quarterfinals.

The Omani team scored 17 goals and conceded only two goals in the three matches, earning their well-deserved spot at the top of the group.

In the quarterfinals, Oman will face China, who were second in Group C, while Kuwait will compete against Japan, who topped Group C, on Thursday.

The Omani team entered the match with a squad consisting of goalkeeper Younis al Owaisi, Meshaal al Araimi, Khalid al Araimi, Yahya al Muraiki, and Abdullah al Souti.

The Omani team started the match with many attempts on the Palestinian goal but could not score. In the third minute of the first half, Palestinian goalkeeper Fadi Jaber surprised everyone by scoring the first goal. In the second half, the Omani team came back strong and scored their first goal in the 14th minute through striker Abdullah al Souti. The team quickly followed up by scoring the second goal in the 17th minute through Meshaal al Araimi via a corner kick taken by Khalid al Araimi. Munthir al Araimi scored the third goal in the 21st minute from a counter-attack. The fourth goal was scored by substitute Ahmed al Owaisi with a powerful shot from the middle of the pitch in the 22nd minute, while goalkeeper Younis al Owaisi scored the fifth and final goal in the 23rd minute.

TALIB POISED FOR QUARTERS

In a press interview after the match, Oman head coach Talib bin Hilal said that the players' performance was good. He also congratulated the players on their outstanding performance and mentioned that the team continues to improve from game to game, this will give them a sense of reassurance.

Looking ahead to the quarterfinal match against China, Talib said that the match would not be easy as every team will strive to win and qualify. He added that the team is ready, injury-free, and will fight to reach the semifinals. Talib also highlighted the importance of the crowd and how their presence encourages players to have fun and play great matches.

N Al Batinah Educational team lifts Omantel School League title

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAR 22

The North Al Batinah Educational team defeated their neighbours South Al Batinah Educational team 3-2 in penalties to lift the first edition title of Omantel Schools League 2022-23. The regulation time ended in a goalless draw in the thrilling final.

The title triumph was a reward for the team's impressive show during the six days league. Dhofar Educational team finished third.

In the concluding ceremony, Major General Khalifa bin Ali al Siyabi, Assistant Inspector General of Administrative and Financial Affairs at ROP Police and Customs, chief guest of the match, gave away the bronze medals and cash prize award to the Salalah-based team while South Al Batinah team received silver medals and the runners-up cash prize. The Suhar-based team captured the league crown, gold medals and the first place cash prize.

At the individual awards, both sides of the final match grabbed most of the awards as Abdullah al Farsi from North Al Batinah Educational team claimed the top-scorer prize. Salim al Hashami from North Al Batinah Educational team became the most valuable player in the league. Goalkeeper Rashid al Ghafri from Al Dhahirah Educational team got the best goalkeeper award.

The first edition of Omantel Schools League resulted with many outstanding technical outputs including the potential faces from different participating teams in the league. Also, the league was attended and witnessed by the national coaching staff of the Under-17 national team besides a dedicated technical committee which was responsible for evaluating the players' performance during the league matches.

CRUCIAL TRIUMPH

Khalid al Shibli, the head coach of the winners, said: "I am delighted with this achievement by winning the first place award in the Omantel Schools League. The crucial triumph came after preparing for a long time and the boys delivered top performance during the group stage and then in the knockout stage. The team was nominated by majority after the solid show," he added.

"The tournament was not easy for all the teams, especially in the quarterfinals and semifinals. Majority of the teams have prepared very well for the league and went in different stages of technical preparations besides the internal tournaments for schools at the governorate level. In the final clash, the boys monitored the game strongly and managed to clinch the title," he ended.

As many as 12 teams representing 200 students and sports teachers took part in the Omantel School Football League. The event was organised under and run by Oman Schools Sports Association (OSSA). As sidelines of the league, many events took place including sports festivals for over 40 sports teachers from Muscat Education governorate. The first festival was held at Seeb Stadium on Thursday and then at Al Amerat Club on Saturday and the concluding festival at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher on Monday.

Muscat CT crowned Premier Division champions

MUSCAT: Muscat CT defeated Oman Stallions by three wickets in a thrilling final of the 2022-23 Oman Cricket Premier Division Super League, powered by Muscat Pharmacy, at the Oman Cricket Academy Grounds in Al Amerat recently.

It was a befitting finale to the top-flight league of the domestic cricket as the champions were decided after an engrossing battle on the field. The victory completed a grand double for Muscat CT, who had earlier claimed the Oman D10 crown.

Chasing a target of 202 for win, Muscat CT got off to a disastrous start as they lost three top-order batters in the first three overs as Oman Stallions' pace duo of Hemal Tandel and Bilal Khan struck.

It was left to Hashir Dafedar to shepherd the chase and the batter displayed great composure to slam an unbeaten 64 off 104 balls, which included five boundaries, to lead the team to a memorable victory. Crucial knocks from Ayaan Khan (35, 32b, 4x4, 1x6), Siddharth Prasad (28, 38b, 5x4) and Sandeep Goud (28, 60b, 3x4) provided the necessary support to Dafedar in their title triumph as they reached the target in 45.2 overs for the loss of seven wickets.

Earlier, put to bat first, Oman Stallions struggled to get off a decent start as pacer Munis Ansari and Sandeep Goud claimed three wickets in the powerplay for 33 runs.

Stallions fought back to post a total of 201/9, courtesy responsible knocks from Rafiullah (40, 69b, 1x4, 2x6), Sankata Prasad (32, 73b, 3x4) and Jay Odedra (36, 60b, 2x4). A quickfire innings of 27 off 31 balls that included two fours and two maximums saw the team cross the 200-mark. Experienced Ansari bagged 3/63 while Shoaib Khan picked 2/33 for Muscat CT.

Speaking after the title triumph, Muscat CT's coach, Hemal Mehta said: "We had an outstanding year claiming Premier Division and Oman D10 titles while finishing runners-up in Oman D20. All the hard work that the boys put in and the way they handled the match situations turned out to be the key to our success.

"Kashyap Prajapati's consistency with the bat and good support to him by Jatinder Singh and Shoaib Khan at the top was a big plus point. Experienced Munis Ansari led the fast-bowling attack with efficiency while spinner Samay Shrivastav, as usual, spun magic with his arm. Having said that, it is a team game and everyone had a role in our championship victory, including the support staff"

Mehta added: "The strong backing of team owners, Khimji Ramdas family, was another big reason for winning the championship. We hope to keep working hard with improve as a side in the future."

Muscat CT's manager Madhu Jesrani, said: "I am extremely delighted with the boys' performances. They have borne fruit to the hard yards they put through the season. The season was exemplary for us as we won a total of 11 out of 13 games on way to our Super League crown.

"The highlight of our season was Kashyap Prajapati's sparkling double hundred against a strong Oman Stallions side. It was one of the most remarkable individual achievements in the Premier Division in recent years."

Jesrani added: "With two titles and a second-place finish, this has been a successful season. I thank the players, coaching staff and Khimji Ramdas management for playing their roles to their best and we hope to grow stronger and stronger in the coming tournaments."

OBA approves Al Amerat membership, sets new plans

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

The General Assembly of the Oman Basketball Association has approved the membership of the Al Amerat Club and assigned Mohammed bin Nasser al Hassani to the position of Secretary-General. The meeting was held at the Wyndham Garden Hotel, Al Khuwair and was attended by the OBA chairman, vice-president, secretary-general, members and a representative of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

The General Assembly discussed the general budget and competition calendar and the Appeals Committee, headed by Rashid al Hashemi and Saeed al Busaidi, Ahmed al Habsi, Mahmoud al Maashri and Qais al Balushi as members.

OBA Chairman Eng Khalfan bin Saleh al Naabi praised the presence of the members and their efforts to support the association. He also noted that the Board of Directors implemented various competitions, training courses and activities in which the clubs' partnership with the OBA had an important role in the success of its programmes.

Al Naabi pointed out the importance of launching youth training centres in the clubs and said: "The launch represents a qualitative and quantitative leap in the number of centres and a real addition that contributes to motivating clubs to participate in the various competitions of the association, especially the competitions of the age groups."

He appreciated the continuous support of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth to launch these centres.

The General Assembly approved the minutes of the previous meeting and the Board of Director's report on the administrative and financial situation and various activities of the federation for the year 2022. The assembly also approved the draft activities and timetable for the year 2023, which includes the implementation of various competitions, championships, festivals and training courses for referees and trainers.

NEW LOGO

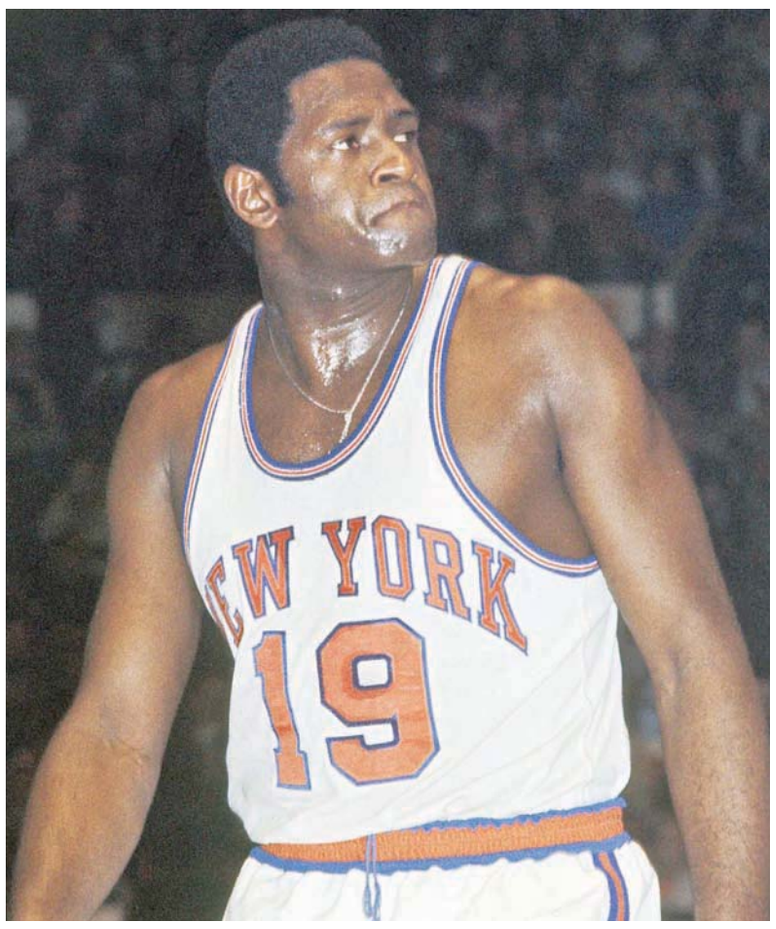
In addition, the assembly reviewed the budget and final accounts for the year ending on December 31, 2022, which revealed a financial surplus of RO 15,227. The council approved the report and the draft general budget for the year 2023.

OBA Vice-President Dr Ali bin Salam al Yarubi introduced the new logo of the association, which was approved by the General Assembly. The logo embodies the colours of the flag of the Sultanate of Oman, the name of the association and the symbol of the network within the first letter of basketball.

At the end of the meeting, a number of members of the General Assembly demanded an increase in the rewards for the general league competitions and the Ministry's shield, due to the contracts concluded by the clubs with coaches and professional players.

Lastly, the council unanimously approved the membership of the Al Amerat Club, which fulfilled all the conditions for membership in the OBA. Mohammed bin Nasser al Hassani was assigned the position of secretary-general until the next general meeting in March 2024.

KNICKS LEGEND WILLIS REED DIES AT 80: TEAM



NEW YORK: New York Knicks icon Willis Reed, who led the club to two NBA championships in the 1970s, has died, the team confirmed in a statement on Tuesday. He was 80.

Reed, who spent his entire professional playing career with the Knicks, helped the team win NBA titles in 1970 and 1973, and was named finals MVP on each occasion.

"The Knicks organisation is deeply saddened to announce the passing of our beloved Captain, Willis Reed," the Knicks said in a statement.

"As we mourn, we will always strive to uphold the standard he left behind - the unmatched leadership, sacrifice and work ethic that personified him as a champion among champions.

"His is a legacy that will live forever. We ask everyone to please respect the family's privacy during this difficult time."

During a decade as a player, between 1964 and 1974, Reed built a reputation as a ferociously physical competitor both on defence and offence.

He finished his career with 12,183 points at an average of 18.7 points per game, with 8,414 rebounds and 1,186 assists.

The signature moment of a storied career came during the 1970 NBA finals win over the Los Angeles Lakers.

Reed had suffered a torn thigh muscle in game five and was forced to sit out game six, when Wilt Chamberlain rattled in 45 points and 27 rebounds to help tie the series at 3-3.

Improbably, Reed returned for game seven at Madison Square Garden and scored his team's opening two field goals before turning his attention to snuffing out the threat posed by Chamberlain.

Reed eventually left that game just before half-time with the Knicks leading 61-37. The Knicks would go on to win 113-99 to clinch the championship.

Reed explained his determination to play in game seven in a postgame interview.

"I felt like I was going to play. I didn't know how effective I was going to be. I just said 'I hope I have a good ballgame, I hope the team plays well. And I hope we can win it,'" Reed said.

"I did everything I could because I didn't know whether we'd be back here again next year. We're here this year, let's win it this year."

Multiple injuries took their toll on the Knicks star.

Reed cut his playing career short with retirement after the 1973-1974 season before coaching stints with the Knicks, Atlanta Hawks, Sacramento Kings and the then New Jersey Nets.—AFP

CITY'S DE BRUYNE 'HONOURED' TO BE NAMED BELGIUM SKIPPER

TUBIZE, BELGIUM: Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne said on Tuesday he was "honoured" to be named Belgium captain following Eden Hazard's retirement from international football.

The Red Devils coach Domenico Tedesco chose playmaker De Bruyne for the position after Real Madrid's Hazard, who turned 32 in January, ended his Belgium career following last year's World Cup.

Tedesco, who took over from Roberto Martinez after the tournament, has called up 19-year-olds Zeno Debast and Romeo Lavia to what was an ageing squad.

"It's an honour for me to be named and represent the country in this way," De Bruyne told RTL-TVI television.

"I'm almost 32. I've never considered international retirement. I think I can still bring something to the table and help the youngsters," he added.

Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois and Chelsea attacker Romelu Lukaku will be De Bruyne's vice-captains.

De Bruyne was one of the players criticised after The Red Devils were knocked out in the group stage in Qatar.

De Bruyne has played 97 games for Belgium scoring 25 goals and will make his debut as skipper in Sweden on Friday in a Euro 2024 qualifier.

They will also face Austria, Azerbaijan and Estonia in the campaign for the tournament held in Germany next summer.

— AFP

Sixers into playoffs after Cavs down Nets

LOS ANGELES: Donovan Mitchell scored 31 points as the Cleveland Cavaliers defeated the Brooklyn Nets 115-109 on Tuesday to send the Philadelphia 76ers into the postseason.

Mitchell made 10-of-22 from the field including five three-pointers while Caris LeVert added 18 from the bench against his former club as Cleveland improved to 46-28 to tighten their grip on fourth in the Eastern Conference.

Cleveland's victory ensured that third-placed Philadelphia became the latest team to punch their ticket to the playoffs despite not playing on Tuesday.

While Cleveland are yet to clinch, it will take a monumental collapse in the final weeks of the season for them not to advance to the postseason.

Tuesday's game could well turn out to be a sneak preview for the playoffs, with Brooklyn still occupying the sixth automatic qualifying spot in the Eastern Conference.

Against Cleveland they started brightly, taking a 30-23 lead into the second quarter before being outscored 71-48 in the next two periods to effectively cede the game, even if they managed to reduce the deficit to single digits in the final stages.

Day'Ron Sharpe led Brooklyn's scoring with 20 points while Spencer Dinwiddie had 19 points with 11 assists and five rebounds.

Cavs coach J.B. Bickerstaff was unhappy that his team eased off late in the fourth quarter.

"We need to play a complete game," Bickerstaff said.

"We allowed the lead to dictate our emotions, we allowed a big play to dictate our emotions, instead of doing the job and finishing the game the way we need to finish the game," Bickerstaff added.

Nets coach Jacques Vaughn lamented his team's collapse in the second and third quarters.

"That's a big question for us," Vaughn said. "I think we got a little stagnant with the basketball. Tough second quarter for us.

"Along those lines of putting four quarters together, it all seems as if there's one quarter that punches us in the gut a little bit."

Elsewhere Tuesday, the Los Angeles Clippers' stumbled to a 101-100 defeat to the Oklahoma City Thunder in a game that saw Clippers ace Paul George exit with an apparent right leg injury in the fourth quarter.

George needed to be carried back to the locker room after his right knee buckled in a collision with the Thunder's Lu Dort in the fourth quarter.

There was no immediate word on the extent of George's injury, with Clippers coach saying the eight-time All-Star was still being evaluated.

BOSTON TOPPLE SOARING KINGS

In Sacramento, the Boston Celtics' gave the high-flying Kings a postseason reality check with a blowout 132-109 win.

Sacramento have been one of the surprise packages of the Western Conference this season, sitting third in the standings.

But the Kings were overpowered by a Celtics line-up that showed flashes of their dominant early season form as they cut loose in the second half to outscore Sacramento 72-55.

Jayson Tatum led the Celtics scoring with 36 points while Jaylen Brown added 27 points and Derrick White 20.

In other games on Tuesday, Trae Young finished with 30 points in Atlanta's 129-107 win over the lowly Detroit Pistons, who are propping up the East with a league-worst record of 16-57.

Atlanta improved to 36-36 with the victory and are on track for at least a spot in the play-in tournament.

In Orlando, Gary Harris finished with 22 points and Franz Wagner 20 as the Magic dented Washington's playoff aspirations with a 122-112 victory.

The Wizards are currently outside the play-in places in 12th spot in the East with a 32-40 record.—AFP

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Local firms invited to prequalify for Oman-UAE rail project

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

Oman & Etihad Rail Company (OERC), a joint venture partnership of Oman Rail and Etihad Rail, has invited local companies specialised in implementing infrastructure projects to submit prequalification bids to tender for the Oman-UAE railway network project by March 27, 2023.

This invitation paves the way for the Omani private sector to play a central role in the country's logistic development and contribute to the Sultanate of Oman's national economy. Interested companies can find prequalification documents available for purchase and download on the e-payment services portal.

Following the conclusion of the prequalification process, OERC plans to float tenders for the civil and construction works on the railway network, which will be divided into three packages.

The first package includes the design and construction of the railway itself, the second includes the construction of amenities and stations, while the third includes the construction of various project facilities in preparation for the main tender.

The mega-project follows through on the vision to connect Oman and the UAE via a state-of-the-art railway network, strengthening the historically close relations between the two nations and optimising the efficiency of cross-border land operations throughout the GCC.

THE MEGA-PROJECT FOLLOWS THROUGH ON THE VISION TO CONNECT OMAN AND THE UAE VIA A STATE-OF-THE-ART RAILWAY NETWORK, STRENGTHENING THE HISTORICALLY CLOSE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO NATIONS AND OPTIMISING THE EFFICIENCY OF CROSS-BORDER LAND OPERATIONS THROUGHOUT THE GCC.

Additionally, the project unlocks limitless growth opportunities for private sector companies, showcasing OERC's commitment to expanding the role of the private sector in the logistics industry by building strong domestic partnerships, fostering homegrown talents and creating jobs, thereby increasing in-country value and supporting the national economy.

OERC's multiphase railway project promises a major boost to the industrial, tourism, transportation and logistics sectors. Phase one will be the construction and operation of the Sohar-Abu Dhabi Line, connecting vibrant cities and ports, as well as vital industrial hubs in Oman and the UAE.

The line is set to transport passengers and goods across 303 km and slash the journey time, which will maximise efficiencies in transportation and logistics and increase market competitiveness by reducing supply chain costs and attracting investment.

In addition to the far-reaching economic impacts of the project, OERC's landmark railway network will provide safe, reliable and sustainable means of transportation, strengthening the familial and communal bonds between the Omani and Emirati people and promoting comprehensive development in the two neighbouring nations.

Oman & Etihad Rail Company (OERC) was established in September 2022 as a joint venture equally owned by Etihad Rail and Oman Rail, the developers and operators of the national railway networks of the UAE and Oman, respectively.

The Company was created to design, develop, and operate a state-of-the-art railway network that connects Sohar Port in Oman to the UAE's national railroad network via a project valued at $3 billion.

OERC will lay out the project's foundations and implementation action plan, including the timetable and financing mechanisms. Then, OERC will supervise the design, execution, and operation of the railway connecting Sohar and Abu Dhabi, ensuring compliance with all relevant standards and regulations adopted by the two countries.

Oman-Singapore partnership to develop major aquaculture projects in Oman

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

Oman's Bahwan Services and Trading LLC (BSTL) and Muscat Investment House (MIH) have entered into a strategic partnership with Singapore-based Blue Aqua International with the goal to "support the sustainable growth of the aquaculture industry and address food security concerns globally".

The partnership plans to develop Oman's first state-of-the-art aquafeed mill with a production capacity upwards of 30,000 tonnes of feed, a trout farm capable of producing 3,000 tonnes and a super-intensive shrimp farm using Blue Aqua's patented 'Mixotrophic System' to produce 1,000 tonnes of shrimp annually.

With this partnership, BSTL, MIH and Blue Aqua International aim to support Oman's Vision 2040 and contribute to the economic diversification and growth of Oman, while also addressing the increasing demand for sustainable seafood products globally, Blue Aqua International revealed yesterday.

Sujit Naha, Group Finance Director and COO of BSTL said, "We are thrilled to announce our new aquaculture project partnership. By combining our expertise and resources, we are poised to make a significant impact in sustainable seafood production. Our shared commitment to responsible aquaculture practices will not only benefit the environment but also provide high-quality, nutritious seafood to consumers in Oman and around the world. We are confident that this partnership will drive innovation and growth, and we look forward to the positive impact we will make together."

"We are excited to announce our new partnership in the aquaculture industry. Our mission is to provide sustainable and responsible seafood to meet the growing demand while preserving our oceans' delicate ecosystems. With this partnership, we are committed to leveraging our collective expertise to drive innovation and efficiency in our operations, delivering top-quality products that meet the highest standards.

Together, we will create a brighter, more sustainable future for both our business and the environment," said Basem al Kayyali, CEO of MIH.

TURN TO PAGE 14

Sohar Port throughput climbs to 77m tonnes

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

Cargo throughput at Sohar Port and Freezone rose 11.3 per cent to 77 million tonnes in 2022, port authorities announced yesterday. Revealing its 2022 results, the port and free zone recorded impressive growth in all key areas.

Compared to 2021, Dry Bulk and Liquid Bulk increased by 9.6 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. Vessel calls enjoyed a slight increase to 3,192 while containers remained steady at 725,000 TEU.

Also in 2022, the port and free zone attracted $366 million in new investments, taking the aggregate to $27 billion. Total investment within the Freezone grew by 17 per cent. Land occupancy grew 3.5 per cent to 77 per cent, with 14 new contracts awarded during the year.

At year end, 52 countries are now represented within the freezone, an increase of three from 2021 as SOHAR Freezone cements its position as an engine of economic diversification.

In addition, Q1 2023, two land lease agreements were signed in the Freezone, which highlights its competitiveness and ability to attract more investors.

Emile Hoogsteden, CEO of SOHAR Port and Freezone, said, "Progress in key areas throughout SOHAR Port and Freezone is extremely positive and proof that the initiatives we have put in place are delivering results. Our long-term goal is for SOHAR to become an integrated industrial, logistics and port complex that hosts complete value chains in manufacturing, food production and energy.

By exploring investment and attracting key anchor tenants in diverse and new sectors, including green and renewable energy as well as a recycling cluster, we will make the Port and Freezone more efficient and environmentally fit-for-the-future as well as a regional hub for many of Oman's major national industries".

French-Korean JV wins bid for Oman's $460 million solar project in Manah

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

The partnership of EDF Renewables, a global leader in clean energy development, and Korea Western Power Co Ltd (KOWEPO), a key player in South Korea's power sector, has won an award to construct and operate a major solar PV-based Independent Power Project (IPP) in the Wilayat of Manah in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

The client is state-owned Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP), the sole buyer of electricity and water output, and a member of Nama Group – part of Oman Investment Authority (OIA).

The project, dubbed 'Manah I Solar IPP', is one of two grid-connected solar projects each of around 500 MW, that will be built side-by-side at Manah.

Last week, the consortium of Singapore's Sembcorp Industries Ltd and China-headquartered Jinko Power Technology Co Ltd, announced that it had secured the award for Manah II Solar IPP, a similar-sized venture.

Slated for launch in 2025, the twin schemes will boost Oman's renewable energy capacity by roughly 200 per cent to around 1550 MW, up from around 550 MW presently. Oman is targeting a roughly 40 per cent contribution from renewables to its electricity requirements by 2040.

With the latest award, EDF Renewables is set to add the Sultanate of Oman to its expanding geographical footprint in the Middle East. The company – a subsidiary of French based energy giant EDF – has sizable low-carbon energy investments in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, among other countries in the region.

Consortium partner Korea Western Power Co (KOWEPO) said the Manah I award would enable the Korean utility's maiden foray into Oman's power industry.

In a statement, KOWEPO said construction work on Manah 1 would commence in the second half of this year, with the project slated to come into operation in March 2025. Total investment in Manah I is $459 million, it stated.

"This project is an example showing the global competitiveness of domestic power generation companies in new and renewable energy," KOWEPO CEO Park Hyung-duck said. "We will continue doing our best to win additional projects such as those of solar power and green hydrogen in Middle Eastern countries and the African region."

KOWEPO will supervise the project's operations and maintenance after completion, it said, adding that OPWP will offtake electricity output from the scheme for a period of 20 years.

State-run procurer OPWP is prepping at least two more solar IPP ventures in addition to a string of wind farms to help achieve the 40 per cent target from renewables by 2040.

Recently, it launched preliminary work on a 500 MW solar scheme, dubbed Ibri III Solar IPP, planned for implementation alongside Ibri II Solar IPP, which came into operation in November 2021. The latter is Oman's first large-scale grid-connected solar power project.

Another large solar project is also envisioned at a yet-unspecified location in north Oman to serve the Main Interconnected System. Supplementing this contribution will be a series of wind power projects, ranging in capacity from 100 – 200 MW, and distributed in the South Sharqiyah, Al Wusta and Dhofar governorates.

Lulu hands over prizes to World Food promo winners

MUSCAT: Lulu Hypermarket concluded World Food 2023 by handing over prizes and gift coupons to the winners of the campaign. The two-week long event, which was held from February 22 till March 4, 2023, saw customers win prizes and gift coupons.

As part of the promotion, more than 100 customers took home amazing gifts on purchase of their favourite food products worth RO 10 from any of the Lulu Hypermarkets in Oman and LuLu online stores.

The winners included customers of all nationalities, with 10 Omanis winning the Apple iPhone 14 PRO 128 GB.

Other winners, including Omanis, Indians, Filipinos, Pakistanis, Yemenis, Egyptians and South Africans, took home

amazing gift products such as Samsung Microwave Ovens, Gigilli Granite Cookware sets, as well as Lulu Shoppingift Cards worth RO 50. Shabeer K A, Regional Director – Oman stated, "I congratulate all the winners of our World Food 2023 promotion. As always, the positive feedback and support from our customers has given us the encouragement and motivation to come up with many more such events to reward our customers generously, especially during Ramadhan. Through this food fest, we have succeeded in our goal to create family-focused entertainment and experiences that customers can always cherish.

Additionally, it was a perfect occasion for our shoppers to enjoy the ambience, excellent food, and entertainment with friends and family," he added.

Unimoni Exchange partners with Banque Du Caire of Egypt

MUSCAT: Unimoni Exchange, a leading money transfer and foreign exchange brand in the Sultanate of Oman is pleased to announce the remittance tie-up with Banque Du Caire, one of the oldest and largest Egyptian banks, providing its clients with an integrated and diversified package of banking services for the last six decades.

This partnership will enable both companies to leverage each other's strengths and capabilities, creating new opportunities for growth and innovation.

The partnership will enable the customers in Oman to send money to Egypt, conveniently and cost-effectively, through the wide network of close to 60 Unimoni branches spread across Oman and can receive the money within minutes through the network of 250 branches and 1640 ATMs of Banque Du Carie spread in Egypt.

Both companies are committed to delivering high-quality products and services to their customers, and this partnership will allow them to do so more effectively.

With this arrangement, Unimoni customers can send cash pick up & bank transfers both in USD & EGP, Credit to all E-Wallets in EGP, Cash pickup from Fawry plus & Egypt Post branches, Credit to Meeza BDC remittance cards in EGP.

"We are thrilled to be partnering with Banque Du Carie as this prestigious partnership will bring convenience to our customers along with a variety of services," said Boban MP, CEO Unimoni, Oman, "Their expertise and capabilities complement our own, and we believe that by working together, we can achieve even greater success in our respective markets."

Malabar Gold & Diamonds sets aside RO 170,000 for CSR activities during Ramadhan 2023

MUSCAT: Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the 6th largest jewellery retail chain in the world with 309 showrooms across 10 countries, has announced its CSR programmes in the GCC and Far East regions for the Ramadhan month.

These initiatives are planned in addition to the ESG initiatives conducted by the group throughout the year in the 10 countries of operation. The brand will associate with embassies, NGOs and like-minded organisations to carry out philanthropic activities throughout the holy month, including the distribution of Iftar meals and food provision kits to deserving labourers and families. The generous initiatives, which Malabar Gold & Diamonds carries out without fail every year, is expected to be a boon for the under privileged sections of our society. Around 125,000 Iftar meals will be distributed as part of this year's Ramadhan CSR initiatives across the UAE, KSA, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Malaysia, Singapore and the USA.

In Oman, the Iftar meal distribution will be mainly focused in the Ruwi area.

"At Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the philanthropic activities that we have carried out over the years has resulted in the betterment of numerous lives and this is a fact that we are extremely proud of the creation of a hunger free world is one of the key components of our ESG goals and the Ramadhan initiative is in line with our larger objective. As Malabar Gold & Diamonds celebrates its 30th anniversary, we sincerely hope that our actions will leave a lasting impression and motivate other organisations to carry out similar activities", commented Shamlal Ahamed, Managing Director – International Operations, Malabar Gold & Diamonds.

"The CSR activities that Malabar Gold & Diamonds carries out every year is a testament to our commitment towards making a significant change in the society. Spearheaded by the goodwill of our entire team and like-minded organisations, the month-long charitable activities that we have planned for Ramadhan is sure to support those of us in our society who needs it the most.

As we approach another holy month of piousness, generosity, and reflections, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude towards our partnering organisation for their wholehearted support in this noble venture", commented Abdul Salam K P, Vice-Chairman of Malabar Group.

Oman-Singapore partnership to develop major aquaculture projects in Oman

FROM PAGE 13

Dr Farshad Shishehchian, CEO of Blue Aqua International, said, "This partnership is a significant step towards the development of Oman's aquaculture sector and underscores the potential of the country to become a major player in the global seafood market. With our cutting-edge technology and BSTL's expertise in project management and execution, we are confident that we can create a sustainable and profitable aquaculture project in Oman."

In addition to BSTL's stake in Blue Aqua Singapore, MIH owns a 10 per cent stake in the same entity established under Blue Aqua International.

Daily returns on account balance with ahlibank's Wafra Plus account

MUSCAT: As part of ahlibank's commitment to offering innovative products and services to its customers which support their saving goals in a sustainable manner, the "Wafra Plus" account was introduced as a daily return account which offers many benefits such as competitive rates, debit cards, and more, as it enables new and existing customers to develop their financial resources and grow their account balance on a daily basis.

The 'Wafra Plus' Daily Growth Account is a savings account that pays up to 1.75% interest per year on the daily balance in the account.

At the end of each day, the benefit is compounded and credited to the clients' accounts.

Key benefits for Wafra Plus account holders include up to 1.75% interest p.a. in competitive benefits, compounded advantages on a daily basis, unlimited transactions on the account, and benefits being credited to the account everyday.

As per the scheme, ahlibank will offer interest rates ranging from 1.00% (for deposits up to RO 9,999) to 1.75% (for deposits of RO 100,000 and more), depending on the deposit amounts.

"The "Wafra Plus" account comes in line with the comprehensive growth strategy of ahlibank. We at ahlibank are always keen to encourage smart and sustainable money management in all our operations, and the "Wafra Plus" account comes as a good example of that, as it supports our customers' efforts to save in a simple and effective way that meets their goals and aspirations.

By enhancing our existing suite of products and services, we are always looking to develop solutions that suit the lifestyles of our customers" said Muneer al Balushi, AGM – Head of Retail Distribution

National Finance set for a new era of growth

MUSCAT: National Finance, the top financing and leasing company, has recently announced its renewed business direction and commitment to expansion, as part of its strategic plans for organisational transformation and enhanced customer experience.

The company unveiled its new branding at a high-profile event held at the W Muscat, which reflects its unmatched strengths and fresh identity.

These adjustments align with the company's evolution towards a new identity and are part of its ongoing efforts to stay at the forefront of the industry.

"We are excited to be entering into a new phase of structured growth. A new National Finance, while staying true to our tradition of being fast, easy and flexible, represents our vision for the future,

as we continue to improve and grow. At the heart of everything we do remains our unwavering commitment to our customers, employees and partners. With our new branding, we are taking the entire look and feel of our brand to the next level. The company is evolving and we view this as a perfect opportunity to enhance our brand position in the market," said Tariq al Farsi, Chief Executive Officer of National Finance.

"Our renewed sense of purpose across the company embraces change and progress. This year marks a significant milestone for National Finance, as we continue to accelerate our vision to become a "Partner for Growth," he added.

The finance company's vision is to be the provider of choice for comprehensive financial and leasing solutions in its markets of operation. The company's mission is to deliver the right financial solutions on time, exceed customer expectations through partnership and continuous improvement and provide an inspiring workplace for hard-working and dedicated people who believe in the company.

"A focus on the youth of Oman is an essential component of our improved strategy. The young population of Oman is increasing at a rapid pace and National Finance recognises the need to cater to their financial needs.

As such, National Finance aims to provide innovative financial products and services that are customised to meet the specific requirements of the younger generation. The second key focus area going forward is technology.

With technology transforming the financial sector globally, the company aims to leverage technological advancements to deliver innovative financial solutions to its customers. By investing in cutting-edge technologies, National Finance plans to create a seamless and personalised customer experience, enhance operational efficiency and improve risk management," said Al Farsi.

National Finance also acknowledges the importance of its partners in achieving its goals. The company recognises the contribution of the board of directors, management, stakeholders, partners, regulators and employees as part of the company's success.

Oman harnesses its soft power to expand its foreign relations

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

Many describe Oman's foreign policy as representative of the country's soft power characteristic of its hospitable culture and tolerance towards everyone.

Over the past decades, the country's foreign policy has been able to achieve many goals, because of the insightful vision that characterizes it in international relations, premised on the advocacy of peace and reconciliation, as opposed to force, oppression and coercion, in the achievement of national interests. Such policies fall within the framework of the soft power that many countries of the world seek to achieve.

As is well known, the distinguishing feature of soft power is that it is not coercive. Rather, it means the opposite of using hard power against others, whether in international politics or economic fields, such as economic sanctions or boycotts.

This is indicated by the researcher Joseph Nye of Harvard University in his book "Binding to Leadership" in 1990. Soft power includes cultural, religious, political, social, sports, foreign policies – factors that eschew the use of war and coercion to achieve certain goals.

What we would like to present here today are the statements made by some senior officials of the Sultanate of Oman, such as Sayyid Badr al-Busaidi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Qais al-Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, that attest to Oman's soft power.

The statement refer to Oman's experience in attracting dozens of athletes to a golf tournament organized by the Oman Golf Association in Muscat recently.

Oman used golf as a vehicle to attract dozens of players from Europe to organize the exceptional tournament. The event was also an opportunity to showcase Oman's investment and commercial potential.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs believes that this event worked to link the Italian and European athletes with the Omanis, stressing the nation's keenness to host such events to explore opportunities for partnerships and exchange with everyone in the world.

This message was echoed by the Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion who referred to the appeal of golf to promote Oman as an attractive destination for investment. In the world of sports and other investment fields, we find tourism, sports, hospitality and culture are welcomed as elements of soft power in today's world.

The Sultanate of Oman is indeed a land of peace, tolerance, neutrality and hospitality. All of these principles are compatible with the spirit of sport that unites the world.

Together with its distinctive tourism potential, and promising investment and business opportunities, Oman has use elements of its soft power to expand its political and economic relations.

This is what we must focus on in the coming years by exploiting the elements of soft power in attracting investments, commercial and industrial projects that we look forward to in order to diversify the sources of income as part of Oman Vision 2040.

Dar Global kicks off sales in Omran-backed AIDA development

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

Dar Global, the renowned international luxury real estate developer, has officially launched the sales of AIDA, one of Oman's most significant premium mixed-use real estate projects directly by the sea, located just 10 minutes from Downtown Muscat.

AIDA is set to redefine luxury living, offering a unique landscape with stunning elevated sea views of over 130 meters above sea level. The 3.5 million square kilometre property, perched atop a hilltop, provides breathtaking views, immersive experiences, enchanting residences, facilities, and spectacular outdoor landscapes.

AIDA's master plan was designed to ensure innovative standards by adopting architectural foundations and utilising rich natural surroundings. Most importantly, AIDA is being developed sustainably, fully respecting, and preserving the area's topography and unique environmental features, with homes integrating seamlessly within the cliffs.

Designed to reimagine the concept of place creation and built in unison with its natural surroundings, AIDA represents one of Oman's largest urban developments. The project is a ground-breaking initiative that will set a new standard in the region, further elevating Oman's stand globally as a sought-after tourist, residential, and investment destination.

Ziad El Chaar, CEO of Dar Global, commented on the sales launch: "AIDA builds on our strategic aspiration of regional and global expansion through unique, high-quality developments that cater to a discerning clientele of global citizens. With the sales launch of this master project, we anticipate a strong response from the community of international investors, creating an even stronger resonance around Oman's persona as a world-class destination."

Dar Global's AIDA project is a joint venture with Omran Group, the Sultanate's executive arm for tourism development, to advance Oman's real estate market in line with the country's Vision 2040.

The project is part of Dar Global's collaboration with the Trump Organization and is poised to offer an unmatched luxury experience to both tourists and residents.

This ambitious project is expected to drive tourism in Oman and bolster the country's property market, supporting the goals of Vision 2040.

By combining the expertise of Dar Global, Omran Group, and the Trump Organization, AIDA promises to set a new standard for luxury living in Oman and beyond.

Dar Global is the international real estate arm of Dar Al Arkan, a 28-year-old real estate development company operating across the entire industry's value chain with innovation and technology at its core.

MEDRC announces winners of Eco-School Prize

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 22

Sultan Turki bin Said School in South Al Sharqiyah have been announced as the overall winners of the MEDRC Eco School Prize at a ceremony held at MEDRC's headquarters.

Sponsored by Oman LNG Development Foundation, the inaugural inter-school competition was launched by MEDRC in November of 2022. The prize is designed to build greater water and energy awareness among school students in Oman by teaching them of the importance of both and why conservation of natural resources is vital for sustainable development.

MEDRC's Centre Director Ciarán Ó Cuinn said, "We congratulate the students and teachers of Sultan Turki bin Said School in South Al Sharqiyah for their great achievement. MEDRC is proud to work with Oman LNG on this fantastic initiative."

Five schools (Sultan Turki bin Said School, Qalhat School, Al Wafi School, Blad Bani Bu Hasan and Sultan bin Murshid School) were nominated by the South Al Sharqiyah office of the Directorate General of Education to compete for the prize.

Each school appointed a student steering committee to draft and enact a school conservation policy, measure and record improvements in usage and to help spread a message of conservation throughout the schools and their communities. Students implemented awareness campaigns through social media campaigns and by mounting posters at water and energy points of use throughout the school, urging students to be proactive and to adopt simple but effective measures such as; reporting water leaks, turning off dripping taps, turning off the lights and AC in unused rooms and setting AC thermostat to an optimum temperature. To showcase the learning and understanding developed by the students throughout the competition, they worked on creating engaging short videos for social media distribution.

The pupils/students were solely responsible for ideation, planning, storyboard, recording and editing of the projects. Rawnaq Al Rajhi, a student of Bilad Bani Bu Hassan School, won the award for best video for her work on a thoughtful and educational video clip.

How SMEs can adapt during Ramadhan

SALIM AL RIYAMI
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The author is a guest contributor

As the holy month of Ramadhan starts, here are some of the tips on how small and medium enterprises in Oman can adapt.

Reduced working hours:

One of the most significant impacts of Ramadhan on SMEs is the reduced working hours. Muslims observe fasting from sunrise to sunset, which means that they may have limited energy and productivity during the day.

As a result, many businesses may choose to reduce their working hours to accommodate their employees' religious practices. SMEs can adapt to this change by adjusting their schedules and prioritising their most important tasks during the early hours of the day.

They can also consider hiring temporary staff or outsourcing some of their work to ensure that their operations continue to run smoothly.

Change in consumer behaviour:

During Ramadhan, Muslims often change their daily routine, including their shopping habits. Many people prefer to shop after breaking their fast at sunset, which means that businesses may experience a drop in sales during the day and a surge in sales during the evening.

SMEs can adapt to this change by adjusting their marketing strategies and targeting their promotions and advertisements towards the evening hours. They can also offer special discounts and packages for their customers during Ramadhan, such as iftar (breaking of the fast) deals or Eid al-Fitr gift bundles.

Increased charitable giving:

Ramadhan is also known as the month of giving and charity. Muslims are encouraged to donate to the less fortunate and engage in acts of kindness and generosity.

This can have a positive impact on SMEs that are involved in charitable activities or have a social mission.

SMEs can adapt to this change by incorporating charitable giving into their business model and marketing it to their customers.

For example, they can donate a percentage of their sales to a charity organisation or launch a fundraising campaign for a specific cause.

Cultural sensitivity:

Finally, SMEs need to be culturally sensitive during Ramadhan. This month is a time of spiritual reflection and devotion for Muslims, and businesses need to respect their religious practices and traditions.

SMEs can adapt to this change by being aware of the local customs and practices during Ramadhan and respecting their employees' religious beliefs.

They can also consider hosting iftar events for their employees and customers as a way to promote cultural understanding and inclusivity.

In conclusion, Ramadhan can have a significant impact on SMEs, but with careful planning and adaptation, businesses can thrive during this holy month.

By adjusting their schedules, marketing strategies, and business practices, SMEs can take advantage of the opportunities that Ramadhan brings and contribute to their communities' well-being.

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Said al Toobi — Guardian of Saqa Al Sufla

It may take hours to explore Al Saqa in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar but for this explorer, it was an area worth checking out especially because of its sublime waterfall and the few remaining villagers who still own farms in this remote village... **P20**

How to enhance your family's nutrition during Ramadhan

By Lakshmi Kothaneth

Ramadhan is usually the best opportunity to do a reset whether it's in lifestyle or spiritual life. At times, however, wrong habits can keep you away from the benefits of the holy month. While almost everyone is well versed in the way of fasting, it is equally important to break the fast right and prepare for the fast in the right manner.

Clinical Dietician and Diabetes Educator at Apollo Sugar-IMC, Sumaira Fatima Mirza explained the right and healthy way to break the fast at Iftar.

"The healthy way to break the fast is with dates water and a few pieces of fruits. Dates provide instant energy and vital nutrients like vitamins, minerals and fibre. People with diabetes should restrict themselves to one to three dates as excess consumption can cause an increase in blood glucose levels," she explained.

When choosing fruits, think colours says the clinical dietitian. Eat a variety of colourful fruits and vegetables as you like. She highly encourages using mixed fruits at iftaar and vegetables during suhoor. She also noted that whole fruit is better than juice as it provides fibre.

While Iftar has been discussed a lot, she said that the timing of suhoor and what's on the plate plays a significant role in keeping a healthy lifestyle.

"Suhoor is a blessing, meaning it provides strength for the day's fast. It prevents hunger, low blood sugar, headaches and cravings during the day," she noted. Most importantly, according to her, it prevents excessive eating at iftaar.

"Proper suhoor meal comprising of whole grains, proteins with some healthy fats and water is needed to provide energy, satiety and to overcome hunger. In some cases where you are late or cannot have a proper meal then dates, milk and water can be preferred," she advised.

Some people habitually refer to eating Suhoor meal at night, for instance, two hours post-Taraweeh and then proceed to sleep.

To this, Sumaira said, "Suhoor meal is sunnah it should be eaten in the second half of the night close to fajr prayers. It is a source of nourishment to the body during fasting. Eating a meal post Taraweeh does not help as suhoor increases hours of fasting which can result in fatigue and hunger during the day. It increases the risk of hypoglycaemia among people with diabetes. And that brings into focus people with diabetes who fast during Ramadhan.

Do they require a different diet?

"People with diabetes do not need a special diet. They need to eat healthily. The key is portion control, eating the right portions at the right time. A few things to keep in mind is to encourage the consumption of whole grains while avoiding refined cereals. Instead, add up proteins like eggs, nuts, low-fat cheese, low-fat milk, lentils, sprouts or lean meats like chicken fish in iftar and suhoor meals, choose whole fruit and avoid juices with added sugars and shakes. Cut down desserts and sweets with added sugars which causes a spike in blood sugars levels," she advised.

A common concern is how insulin users should break their fast.

"Insulin users should break their fast with water, one to three dates and a few pieces of fruits as they provide instant energy. Proceed with salah Maghrib, inject insulin and take the full balanced meal avoiding white bread, savouries and sweets. If needed evening meals can be divided into main meal and post-Taraweeh snack."

So how can we make meals of Ramadhan nourishing?

Sumaira said Ramadan is the month of worship and fasting with a small window period for eating.

"During Ramadan combination meals makes work easier, save time and enhance nutrition like oats meal with milk nuts and fruit, whole wheat sandwich with low-fat cheese or eggs and vegetables.

"Some of the widely known and healthy options are Shourbah — a dish made with either lentils or lean meats with vegetables. It is commonly eaten with bread like chapathi or whole wheat pita bread which is widely preferred and eaten among many nationalities. It can be used either at suhoor or iftaar meals. Harees, a dish made with cracked wheat, or harees cereal and lean meats. Thareed a dish made with lean meats cooked with a variety of vegetables. Harira, a Moroccon dish cooked with lean meats, vegetables and lentils or fava beans. Easy and commonly available bread like whole-grain breads, Chapathi, whole pita bread (lebnani qubz), bran cereals, Omani qubz raqaq and some salads like a chicken with vegetable salad, sprouts salad, tabouleh, fattoush etc makes meals convenient and healthy."

To top it all is the need to maintain a healthy sleeping pattern during Ramadhan.

Time management is the key to achieving a good amount of rest and night sleep during Ramadan, according to Sumaira. What is needed is to keep meals simple and easy to cook and stomach-friendly.

"Try to finish the main meal at the earliest in order to get 4-5 hours of night sleep. Avoid eating heavy meals and junk foods late at night which can cause indigestion. Prepare ahead of your suhoor meal. People can cover up their night's sleep by taking a nap during the day. Night sleep is essential to avoid stress and to perform better during the day."

QURAN
VERSE OF THE DAY

Say, "O disbelievers. I do not worship what you worship. Nor do you worship what I worship. Nor do I serve what you serve. Nor do you serve what I serve. You have your way, and I have my way.

al Kafirun

HEALTH TIPS

HYDRATE BEFORE EATING.

Drink plenty of liquids prior to breaking your fast to avoid being dehydrated. The best hydration source is water. Milk and juice also work, but steer clear of drinks with a lot of sugar and calories.

HADITH
A GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Sahl b. Sa'd (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger as saying:

In Paradise there is a gate which is called Rayyan through which only the people who fast would enter on the Day on Resurrection. None else would enter along with them. It would be proclaimed: Where are the people who fast that they should be admitted into it? And when the last of them would enter, it would be closed and no one would enter it.

The First Crime

ALLAH THE ALMIGHTY SAYS:

[And (O Muhammad (Peace be upon him) recite to them the story of the two sons of Adam (Habil and Qabil) in truth; when each offered a sacrifice (to Allah), it was accepted from the one but not from the other. The latter said to the former: "I will surely kill you." The former said: "Verily, Allah accepts only from those who are Al-Muttaqun (the pious)." "If you do stretch your hand against me to kill me, I shall never stretch my hand against you to kill you: for I fear Allah, the Lord of the `Alamin (mankind, jinn, and all that exists)." "Verily, I intend to let you draw my sin on yourself as well as yours, then you will be one of the dwellers of the Fire; and that is the recompense of the alim-in (polytheists and wrong-doers);" So the Nafs (self) of the other (latter one) encouraged him and made fair-seeming to him the murder of his brother; he murdered him and became one of the losers; Then Allah sent a crow who scratched the ground to show him to hide the dead body of his brother; He (the murderer) said: "Woe to me! Am I not even able to be as this crow and to hide the dead body of my brother?" Then he became one of those who regretted}. (Al-Ma'idah, 27-31).

THE FIRST CRIME ON EARTH

Of Adam's first children, Cain was the elder son while Abel was the younger. Each of them presented a sacrifice to God but it was accepted only by Abel, because of the latter's righteous attitude and his faith and firm belief in God. After the offering of their sacrifices, Cain, the wicked sibling, taunted Abel out of envy and told him that he would surely slay him. Abel justly warned Cain that God only accepted the sacrifice of those that are righteous in their doings. He further went on to tell Cain that if Cain did indeed try to slay him, Abel would not retaliate and slay him because the God-fearing would never murder for the sake of envy. Abel then told Cain that in murdering him, he would carry the weight not only of his sin but also of the sins of his victim. The victim, as a result, of suffering the injustice, would be forgiven his own sins, and the murderer, while being warned, would consequently increase his own sin. Abel preached powerfully and reminded Cain that the punishment for murder would be that he would spend the afterlife in the fires of Hell.

The innocent pleading and preaching of Abel had no effect upon Cain, for he was full of arrogance, pride, and jealousy. He subsequently slew the righteous Abel, but in doing so, he ruined himself and became of those who remain lost. This would be the earliest example of the murder of a righteous man-taking place on earth. In the future, many other evildoers would slay the wise and pious believers.

After the murder, Allah sent a crow searching in the ground to show Cain how to hide the disgrace of his brother. Cain, in his shame, began to curse himself and he became full of guilt. The thought of the crime, at last, came to the murderer, as he realised indeed, how dreadful it was to slay anyone, the more so as the victim was an innocent and righteous man. Full of regrets, Cain was marked with deep sorrow. The Qur'an states, "And he became of the regretful." 5:31 (Chapter 5, verse 31).

THE MORALS FROM THE STORY:

The lesson that modern generation, especially the children, should learn from the story of 'Sons of Adam' is simple, according to scholars.

"The lessons taught by this Sura al Maida where the story of Sons of Adam was mentioned is a simple one, first of all, to obey, and secondly, to attain knowledge, in particular of good and evil and this is the greatest lesson that our generation should comprehend," says Abdullah al Faisi, an Islamic scholar.

"The other messages, as far as the sura is concerned, are to have patience with each other, to be tolerant and to accept your brother with all his or her shortcomings and to have respect for each other's feelings. In today's world, what we are lacking is all these virtues with which the world would have been a better place to live in," adds Abdullah.

RECIPE

Recipe of the most popular Ramadhan dish in Indonesia

ONE OF THE MOST popular Ramadan dishes in Indonesia is called "Soto Ayam." It is a chicken soup dish that is commonly served during the holy month of Ramadan. Here is a recipe for Soto Ayam:

INGREDIENTS:
1 whole chicken, cut into pieces
2 litres of water
2 stalks of lemongrass, bruised
4 kaffir lime leaves
2 bay leaves
4 cloves of garlic, minced
4 shallots, minced
1 inch of ginger, minced
2 teaspoons of ground coriander
1 teaspoon of ground cumin
1 teaspoon of turmeric powder
Salt and pepper to taste
100 grammes of glass noodles, soaked in hot water until softened
100 grammes of bean sprouts, blanched
2 hard-boiled eggs, sliced
Fried shallots for garnish
Lime wedges for serving
Sambal (chili paste) for serving

INSTRUCTIONS
In a large pot, bring the water to a boil. Add the chicken, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and bay leaves. Reduce the heat and let it simmer until the chicken is cooked through and tender, about 30-45 minutes.
Remove the chicken from the pot and let it cool. Strain the broth and set aside.
Shred the chicken into small pieces.
In a small pan, sauté the garlic, shallots, and ginger until fragrant.
Add the ground coriander, cumin, and turmeric powder to the pan and stir well.
Add the sautéed spices to the chicken broth and bring it to a boil.
Add the shredded chicken to the broth and let it simmer for a few minutes.
Season with salt and pepper to taste.
To serve, place some glass noodles and bean sprouts in a bowl.
Ladle the hot soup over the noodles and sprouts.
Garnish with sliced hard-boiled eggs and fried shallots.
Serve with lime wedges and sambal on the side.

Enjoy your delicious Soto Ayam, a popular Ramadan dish in Indonesia!

The history of Islam in Indonesia — the country with the largest Muslim population in the world

ISLAM IS THE predominant religion in Indonesia, with approximately 87 per cent of the population identifying as Muslim. The country is home to the largest Muslim population in the world, making it a significant centre of Islamic culture and tradition. The history of Islam in Indonesia dates back to the 13th century, when traders from the Middle East and India first brought the religion to the archipelago.

EARLY HISTORY OF ISLAM IN INDONESIA

The spread of Islam in Indonesia was a gradual process, with traders and scholars playing a significant role in introducing the religion to local communities. The first Muslims in Indonesia were believed to be merchants from the Arabian Peninsula and India, who arrived in the port cities of Sumatra and Java in the 13th century.

The spread of Islam in Indonesia was not without resistance, as many local rulers were initially hesitant to accept the new faith. However, the influence of Islamic traders and scholars led to the gradual conversion of local communities, and by the 16th century, Islam had become the dominant religion in Java and Sumatra.

ISLAMIC EMPIRES IN INDONESIA

The spread of Islam in Indonesia coincided with the rise of several Islamic empires, including the Sultanate of Demak, which was established in the 15th century in Java. The Demak Sultanate was a major centre of Islamic learning and played a crucial role in spreading Islam throughout Indonesia.

Other significant Islamic empires in Indonesia included the Sultanate of Banten and the Mataram Sultanate, both of which were located in Java. These empires played a crucial role in shaping Islamic culture and tradition in Indonesia, and their legacy can still be seen in the customs and practices of Indonesian Muslims today.

ISLAMIC CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS IN INDONESIA

Indonesia has a rich Islamic culture, with a diverse range of customs and traditions that vary depending on the region and ethnic group. One of the most significant Islamic customs in Indonesia is the observance of Ramadan, a month-long period of fasting, prayer, and reflection that takes place every year.

Eid Al Fitr: At the end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate Eid Al Fitr, a festival of breaking the fast. Indonesians celebrate Eid Al Fitr with feasts, prayers, and exchanging gifts.

Hajj: Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, that all able-bodied and financially able Muslims are expected to perform at least once in their lifetime. Indonesians who perform Hajj often wear traditional clothing and bring gifts back for their families.

Friday prayers: Friday prayers are an important part of Islamic worship in Indonesia. Muslims gather at mosques for midday prayers and a sermon by an imam.

Halal food: Halal food is food that is prepared and consumed in accordance with Islamic law. In Indonesia, many restaurants and food vendors serve halal food.

Islamic dress: Many Muslim women in Indonesia wear hijab or other forms of Islamic dress as a symbol of their faith.

Popular Mosques in Indonesia

Istiqlal Mosque - Located in Jakarta, Istiqlal Mosque is the largest mosque in Indonesia and the third largest in the world. It can accommodate up to 120,000 worshippers and is an important symbol of the nation's religious diversity and unity.

Masjid Raya Bandung - Also known as the Grand Mosque of Bandung, this mosque is located in West Java and is one of the most iconic landmarks of the city. With its unique combination of traditional and modern architecture, it has become a popular tourist destination as well as a place of worship.

Masjid Agung Demak - Located in Central Java, Masjid Agung Demak is one of the oldest mosques in Indonesia and is considered to be the birthplace of Islam in the region. It was built in the 15th century and is a classic example of Javanese Islamic architecture, with its distinctive multi-tiered roof and intricate carvings.

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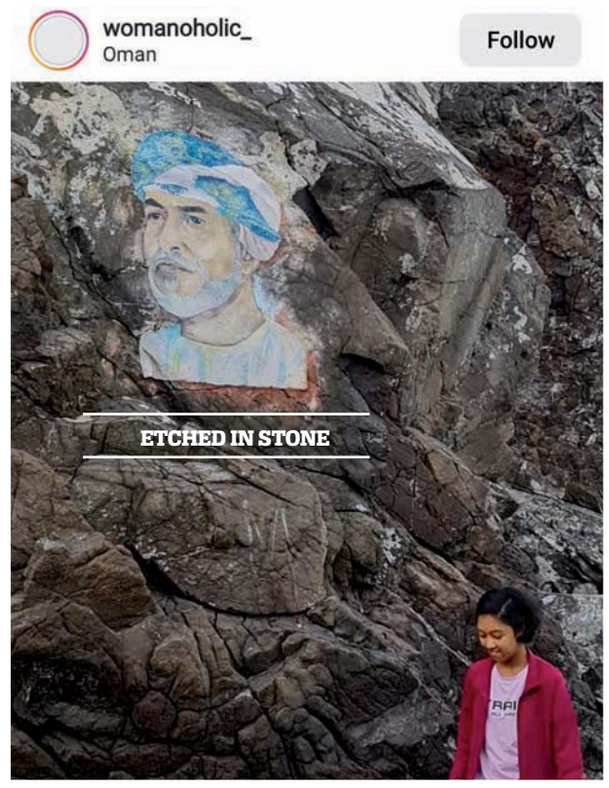

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AROUND THE WORLD

LIFESTYLE

French Bulldogs topple Labradors as most popular US breed: AKC

THE LOVABLE LABRADOR Retriever is no longer the most popular dog breed in the United States, as French Bulldogs take over the top spot, the American Kennel Club (AKC) announced on Wednesday.

Labs, which the New York-based registry describes as "famously friendly" and "an enthusiastic athlete," had been the most popular dog breed for 31 years prior to 2022.

But Frenchies had "been quietly climbing the charts for many years," the AKC said in a statement.

The small-dog breed, which like Labs are considered great pets for families, are described by AKC as "one-of-a-kind," with their trademark feature being their "large bat ears."

"They get on well with other animals and enjoy making new friends of the human variety," the AKC says, adding "it is no wonder that city folk from Paris to Peoria swear by this vastly amusing and companionable breed."

After Frenchies and Labs, rounding out the top five breeds for 2022 were the Golden Retriever, German Shepherd, and Poodle.

French Bulldogs — like their English cousins and squish-faced pugs — have a short snout, which can lead to trouble breathing and other health complications.

The Dutch agriculture minister in January said he would seek to ban ownership of animals which "suffer from his or her appearance."

The Netherlands banned the breeding of pets that are affected by their appearance in 2014, but some animals were still being traded illegally or bought from abroad.

Frenchies also made headlines in 2021, when pop star Lady Gaga had two French Bulldogs stolen while a dog-walker was taking them for a stroll.

They were later returned, while the three robbers were later caught and jailed for the incident, during which the dog-walker was shot. **— AFP**

TRAVEL TALES

Rome hopes to reverse decline and relive La Dolce Vita

ROMANS HOPE THAT an alignment of the stars will halt a generations-long decay of the Eternal City that is as beautiful as it is disorganised.

After years of declining investments, billions of euros of European Union, state and private funds are pouring into the coffers of Italy's capital ahead of a series of major events that could overwhelm the city without swift intervention.

Rome's economic health is relevant not only for its 2.8 million residents, but also for Italy as a whole, as the city's metropolitan area generates more than 9 per cent of national output.

The first big draw tees off in September when the Ryder Cup, pitting Europe's best golfers against their US counterparts, is staged near Rome, attracting well-heeled visitors.

Their numbers will be dwarfed in 2025 when the city welcomes an anticipated 30 million tourists for a Holy Year, when Roman Catholics traditionally flock in to gain indulgences, which, they believe, might speed their passage to heaven.

An extraordinary Holy Year is also scheduled for 2033 to mark the 2,000th anniversary of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rome is praying that in the meantime its bid to stage the EXPO world fair in 2030 proves successful, drawing inspiration from the country's financial capital Milan which used the 2015 EXPO to reinvigorate itself.

"Rome has all this pent-up energy that has been wasted for years but that can finally be released," Lorenzo Tagliavanti, president of Rome's Chamber of Commerce, said.

Italy's capital is already one of the most visited cities in the world with more than 15 million tourists coming here in 2022. However, flailing public services can make La Dolce Vita seem a remote dream, for both visitors and residents alike.

Marco Di Tillo, owner of a family-run hotel in the heart of Rome, had to dispose of the garbage himself last year because the rubbish company failed to provide a regular service.

"I couldn't keep it outside my hotel as it was stinking. So, every night I put the organic rubbish in the boot of my car and threw them in a dumpster," he said.

EXTRAORDINARY OPPORTUNITY

The capital's glory faded following the 2008 financial crisis that triggered a drastic drop in public investment. A corruption scandal that broke in 2014 brought much of the local administration to a standstill for years making the city unattractive for business investors.

National statistics office ISTAT says Rome's output stagnated at around 138 billion euros ($147 billion) between 2007 and 2020 while Milan's rose to 156 billion from 125 billion.

Roberto Gualtieri, a former economy minister who became mayor in 2021, said Rome had an "extraordinary opportunity" to become more beautiful and modern.

He has drawn up a 13-billion euro plan for public and private investment over the next five years, on the top of 5.8 billion earmarked if the EXPO 2030 project takes off.

"It is the biggest investment plan Rome has ever had," Gualtieri said.

Ahead of the 2025 Jubilee, the city has unveiled 87 projects, including making the area in front of the Vatican fully pedestrianised, resurfacing cracked pavements and opening new parks along the Tiber River.

With money from the EU post-pandemic recovery fund, the city plans to develop its research and innovation centres, renew its ageing bus fleet, improve the metro and expand cycle paths.

On Thursday, Gualtieri unveiled a 100-million euro project to install 5G infrastructure across the city. Multinational group BAI Communications will cover 80 per cent of the investment.

"Milan was turned around by the EXPO and has become a city capable of attracting capital from all over the world. Rome is an incredible place and second to none," Luca Luciani, head of BAI Communications Italia, said.

In a further sign of investor confidence, big hotel brands including Bulgari, Rosewood and Four Seasons are turning historic buildings into 5-star hotels, with at least seven major luxury refurbishments under way.

GATEWAY TO EUROPE

With the support of Rome-born Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Gualtieri is campaigning hard for the EXPO bid.

Rome is up against Saudi Arabia's Riyadh, South Korea's Busan and Ukraine's Odesa. A decision is due in November.

The last time the event was held in Europe was in Milan, and the Rome committee argues that it is the continent's turn to host it again.

Gualtieri wants to use EXPO to develop the largely neglected eastern suburbs, creating a 20-km green path leading back into the ancient heart of Rome.

The centrepiece of the proposed EXPO site is a huge building called Le Vele ("Sails") by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. It was originally designed for the 2009 World Aquatics Championships, but was never finished and has come to symbolise Italy's difficulty in completing major projects.

But officials are confident they won't drop the ball this time.

"The number of projects put in place means that the city is alive and there is a collective will for change," LUISS Business School professor Marco Simoni said. "It will take time, but the outlook is positive." **— Reuters**

ENTERTAINMENT

Bat hat, wooden leg, coffin bed: Sarah Bernhardt's wild life offstage

FRENCH 19TH-CENTURY stage legend Sarah Bernhardt, who died 100 years ago, was an institution in her country, who achieved superstardom playing tragic heroines in productions that toured the world. As the centenary of her death on March 26, 1923, approaches, AFP recalls some of the most astonishing details of the life of an extravagant and talented performer and style icon, who was also known for her eccentric life offstage.

- FIRST GLOBAL SUPERSTAR -

"She was the first global star...To match her today, you would have to combine Madonna, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Beyonce and Michael Jackson," historian and private collector Pierre-Andre Helene said.

As the face of France overseas, she became a living myth, captivating audiences from Europe, North and South America, Russia and Australia as Cleopatra, Cordelia or a cross-dressing Hamlet. Men in New York would throw their coats to the ground in the hope she would walk on them, while in Australia, "there were scenes of hysteria with tens of thousands of women who wanted to see her, to touch her," Helene said.

- A COFFIN FOR A BED -

Bernhardt, famous as an actress for her death scenes, sometimes slept in a coffin in her bedroom, which she also took on tour. A widely circulated photograph shows her lying in the satin coffin looking peaceful, eyes closed, draped with flowers.

- A ZOO FOR A HOME -

She wore a stuffed bat on her hat, kept cheetahs, a tiger, lion cubs, a monkey and an alligator called Ali-Gaga that died of a milk and champagne overdose. She also owned a boa constrictor, which choked on a cushion.

- BUBBLY BALLOON RIDE -

She got into trouble in 1878 for taking a hot-air balloon ride over Paris during the Exposition Universelle, sipping champagne as she sailed over the fairgrounds, the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre.

- MUSE AND LOVER TO MANY -

Bernhardt was the muse of several authors and playwrights, including Victor Hugo and Edmond de Rostand, who wrote "Cyrano de Bergerac". Her many reported dalliances included Napoleon III, Edward Prince of Wales, who became King Edward VIII, and the Czech artist Alfons Mucha, behind the famous Art Nouveau poster for Bernhardt's production of "Gismonda".

- TURNED THEATRE INTO HOSPITAL -

During the siege of Paris in 1870 during the Franco-German war, the deeply patriotic Bernhardt turned the Left Bank theatre, the Odeon, into a military hospital and personally tended to the wounded.

- INCURABLE FABULIST -

Whether it was about her date or place of birth, the identity of her father, or the man who was the father of her son, Bernhardt was known for "obfuscations, avoidances, lapses of memory, disingenuous revelations, and just plain lies", according to biographer Robert Gottlieb.

"Dull accuracy wasn't Bernhardt's strong point: She was a complete realist when dealing with her life but a relentless fabulist when recounting it. Why settle for anything else than the best story? " he wrote in "Sarah" (2010).

- ONE LEG -

In 1915, aged 71, Bernhardt had her right leg amputated above the knee, following a fall onstage after jumping off a parapet while playing Tosca.

After surgery she was carried about by two porters in a Louis XV-style sedan chair. Undaunted, she insisted on performing for French soldiers on the frontlines during World War I and in 1916 toured the United States for the last time, performing with a wooden leg. **— AFP**

Said al Toobi — Guardian of Saqa Al Sufla

By Dr Khaled Abdul Malak

Last summer I planned to go to Saqa in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar to explore the possibility of reaching the village of Saqa Al Sufla without using any climbing material.

The last time I visited this magical place with my son, I spotted a wadi that can possibly be reached at the bottom of a 140m waterfall without using any ropes.

No one wanted to wake up early that day so I decided to go on my own to check out the canyon. I reached the village of Al Manakhir, near Saqa, around 9 am. When I stepped out of my car I saw Said whom I met around three years ago in Saqa with his brother, Masood.

"Long time no see Khaled. Where have you been all this time?" asked the young man.

When he saw that I was alone, he offered to accompany me to visit his "domain". We agreed to meet at Saqa after one hour. I took the donkey trail and reached Saqa in 45 minutes. Said was already there as he took a short cut in the cliff!

I wouldn't believe that there was a way to cross this cliff without ropes until I saw Said do it ! These guys are just Super Men!

From the abandoned village, I followed my guide, climbing down the wadi until we reached a pool the locals call "Al Gaba Al Sawda" (The black pool). It lies at the bottom of a "sublime", extremely beautiful, 140m waterfall fed by the stream of Wadi Aswad. There, Said offered me some luscious black grapes from his garden.

After a short break, we started climbing back to Saqa, taking another route. My friend wanted to show me a 500 kg, unexploded aerial bomb, a remnant of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar war in the 1950's. The shell penetrated halfway into the ground but did not explode. It is huge and still has a copper plate describing this terrible weapon!

We hiked up to Al Saqa where we stopped under a tree to have some snacks. While eating, Said told me many old stories about the life in his village, where his family lived until 1979 before moving to Al Manakhir.

His parents used to grow wheat and garlic, and trade garlic for dates. It took them three days to reach the market in Samayil and return to Saqa. Said's uncle got married to a woman from Wakan in Wadi Mistal. He brought his bride to Saqa on donkey back. Once we finished eating, we started hiking on the old donkey trail to Al Manakhir. Along the way, Said told me the names of the places we passed through. "I learned everything from my father. He knew every single stone in the whole area. During the war my parents used to travel through the mountains at night, taking routes that only they knew existed. Even today, the elderly won't tell anybody about the location of these routes".

On the way back, my guide called his wife to ask her to prepare lunch for us !

We were served a delicious meal composed of rice, meat and vegetables. After Qahwa, my hosts wished me "Maa'l Salamah".

I arrived back home in Muscat late afternoon, ending one of my best adventures in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar.