

Marine hot water spring found

A team comprising Omani and international researchers conducted a marine geological survey of a newly discovered hot water spring on the coast of the Wilayat of Dhalkout in Dhofar Governorate. Hot water springs constitute a rich source of scientific data being a rare geological phenomenon in the Sultanate of Oman. The hot water gushes out from small nozzles at a depth of 18 metres from the sea surface and the water appears on the surface in the form of non-stop water vortexes. **DETAILS ON P2**

SUNRISE - 05:20 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR - 03:54 AM

DHUHR - 12:09 PM

ASR - 03:29 PM

MAGHRIB - 06:54 PM

ISHA - 08:15 PM



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P11

COMEX A TRIUMPH IN GAMING AND ESPORTS



P18

EXQUISITE CALLIGRAPHY BY OMANI YOUTH SHINES AT ART EXHIBITION



Recognising State of Palestine is historic move: Irish ambassador



Gerry Cunningham

MUSCAT: Gerry Cunningham, Ambassador of the Republic of Ireland appointed to the Sultanate of Oman, underscored the firm relations between the two countries, especially in cultural and education fields.

This was stated in an interview with Oman News Agency (ONA) in which he said that he is keen to enhance bilateral relations. The two countries, he added, have many opportunities that can be developed in the trade field by utilising the two countries' components in areas of agriculture, energy, renewable energy and green hydrogen.

Oman, the ambassador said, is a "tremendous" destination for tourists from Ireland with its diverse tourist attractions, such as the Royal Opera House Muscat.

Moreover, the ambassador noted that the Republic of Ireland's recognition of the State of Palestine is considered a historic step for the people of Ireland.

Recognition of the State of Palestine was a matter of time, the ambassador affirmed.

— ONA

UN CHIEF SAYS 'THIS HORROR MUST STOP'



A man carries a child, as Palestinians travel on foot along with their belongings as they flee Rafah due to an Israeli military operation, in Rafah, on Wednesday. — Reuters

Oman denounces Israeli aggression on Rafah

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman has expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the persistent Israeli aggression targeting camps housing displaced Palestinians in the Gaza Strip's city of Rafah.

In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on Wednesday, the Sultanate of Oman urged the international community to assume its responsibilities, in an urgent manner, by taking necessary measures to stop the systematic and ongoing war crimes and genocide committed by Israeli forces against the Palestinian people.

Oman demanded the immediate implementation of UN resolutions calling for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. It also called for unhindered supply of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and the application of deterrent international sanctions on Israel in view of its criminal actions.

Meanwhile, street fighting and Israeli bombardment rocked Rafah in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday, residents and officials said, a day after Israeli tanks rolled into the centre of the city near the Egyptian border.

The Sultanate of Oman calls for immediate ceasefire in Gaza Strip and unhindered supply of humanitarian aid to people in Gaza

OFFICIAL

Foreign Ministry

The UN Security Council was set to meet for a second day of emergency talks after that strike ignited a fire that Gaza officials said killed 45 people and injured about 250.

UN chief Antonio Guterres was among the many leaders to voice revulsion at the bloodshed, demanding that "this horror must stop".

Israel's National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi said on Wednesday the war could go on until the year's end.

But US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Israel needed

a post-war plan "as quickly as possible".

"In the absence of a plan for the day after, there won't be a day after," he said.

Fighting has again flared in Rafah, an Israeli helicopter fired guns and missiles at targets in the city centre.

"The rockets fell directly on us. I was hurled three metres... I don't know how I managed to get up on my feet," said one who did not give his name.

The United States has been among the countries urging Israel to refrain from a full-scale offensive into Rafah, the last Gaza city to see ground fighting, because of the risk to civilians.

However, the White House said on Tuesday that so far it had not seen Israel cross President Joe Biden's "red lines", with National Security Council spokesman John Kirby saying: "We have not seen them smash into Rafah. We have not seen them go in with large units, large numbers of troops, in columns and formations in some sort of coordinated manoeuvre against multiple targets on the ground," Kirby told a media briefing. **SEE ALSO P6**

HM confers Al Nu'man Order on former Iranian ambassador



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has conferred Al Nu'man Order (First Class) on Ali Najafi, former ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Sultanate of Oman, in appreciation for his efforts and contributions in serving bilateral relations between the two countries. The Order was handed over to Najafi by Ibrahim bin Ahmed al Muaini, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Islamic Republic of Iran, when he received the former ambassador at the Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in Tehran. — ONA

Greetings conveyed to Bahrain King



Prince Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa, Deputy King and Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Bahrain, received on Wednesday Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information. Prince Salman welcomed Dr Abdullah al Harrasi when he received ministers who took part in the 54th session of the Arab Information Ministers Council in Manama. During the meeting, Dr Abdullah conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain, along with His Majesty the Sultan's wishes of good health and happiness for the monarch. He also conveyed His Majesty the Sultan's wishes of further prosperity for the people of Bahrain. **SEE ALSO P2**

Indian capital swelters as temperature hits 52.9 Celsius

NEW DELHI: Delhi recorded an all-time high temperature of 52.9 degrees Celsius on Wednesday as extreme heat conditions gripped the north and western parts of India, causing students to faint in schools and drinking water taps to dry up.

A heat wave alert has been in place for large parts of India since last week but on Wednesday the temperature in Mungeshpur, a densely packed corner of Delhi, crossed the 50 C mark, the weather office said.

The Indian capital has had temperatures of over 45 C in previous years but never gone as

high as 52.9 C.

Streets in Mungeshpur in northwest Delhi were deserted and most shops were shut as people stayed indoors to avoid the searing heat, while residents handed out free cold drinks in Narela after temperatures went up to 49.9 C on Tuesday. "When we go outside it seems like someone is slapping our faces. It has become difficult to live in Delhi," said resident Akash Nirmal.

India Meteorological Department (IMD) said it is examining the data and sensors to look into Mungeshpur's temperature which was an outlier



People walk with an umbrella on a hot summer afternoon in New Delhi on Wednesday. — AFP

compared to other stations.

"There is so much heat in Delhi that students are fainting, some are falling sick, some are facing dehydration. The students are facing a lot of trouble in this heat. The fans don't work in our institutions," said Nidhi, a student.

An unusual transition from El Nino to La Nina and the lack of winds bringing moisture, has resulted in prolonged heating, leading to record temperatures, Gufran Beig, chair professor at the Indian Institute of Science said.

El Nino is the warming of Pacific waters that is typically accompanied by drier conditions

over the Indian subcontinent while La Nina is characterised by unusually cold temperatures in the Pacific Ocean. "We suspect that it is all associated with climate change," he said.

A spot of light rain in other parts of Delhi later on Wednesday brought some respite and weather officials expect the heat to ease later this week over northwest and central India.

India declares a heatwave when the maximum temperature is 4.5 degrees C to 6.4 degrees C higher than usual and a severe heat wave when it is 6.5 degrees C higher than normal or more. — Reuters



Royal Office Minister receives Ambassadors of Iraq, Syria



The meetings reviewed current, regional and international issues. - ONA

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office received in his office on Wednesday Qais Saad al Amri, Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to the Sultanate of Oman.

The meeting reviewed a set of current regional and international issues. It also touched on paths of joint cooperation in a manner that achieves mutual benefits for the two countries. Emphasis was laid on the fraternal ties binding

the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Iraq. Gen Al Numani also received in his office Dr Idris Maya, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Sultanate of Oman.

Office reviewed the march of relations binding the Sultanate of Oman and the Syrian Arab Republic. The meeting explored means of promoting the joint cooperation between the two countries. — ONA

Marine hot spring found in Dhalkout

DHALKOUT: A team comprising Omani and international researchers conducted a marine geological survey of a newly discovered hot spring on the coast of the Wilayat of Dhalkout in Dhofar Governorate.

Hot water springs constitute a rich source of scientific data being a rare geological phenomenon in the Sultanate of Oman.

A joint team from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, the German GEOMAR Institute, the Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre, and the Dhofar Adventures Team, collected samples of water, soil and rocks surrounding the hot spring which has a temperature of up to 80 degrees Celsius. The team also developed a device for measuring the flow rate of water from the marine spring during different seasons in order to locate the source of the spring and identify the changes in water temperature throughout the year.

Engineer Mohammed bin Khalfan Shammass, head of the Department of Dams, Aflaj and Protection Walls at the Department of Water Resources, said that the joint team examined a group of springs in the mountains surrounding the sea in the Wilayat of Dhalkout to compare between the characteristics of the water in marine and land hot spring.



He pointed out that the preliminary results showed that the salinity of hot springs is approximately one-third of the salinity of seawater. He added that the scientific team will continue analysing samples to identify the characteristics of the water and

sediments. Dr Mohammed bin Hilal al Kindi, head of the Earth Sciences Consultancy Centre, said that the hot water gushes out from small nozzles at a depth of 18 metres from the sea surface and the water appears on the surface in the form

of non-stop water vortexes that are well-known by the residents of the Wilayat of Dhalkout. He explained that the main hot spring is located to the west of the Wilayat of Dhalkout 5 kilometres away from the sea port and just 250 metres from the seashore. — ONA

The preliminary results showed that the salinity of hot springs is approximately one-third of the salinity of seawater

Oman participates in Arab Information Ministers session

MANAMA: The Sultanate of Oman participated in the 54th session of the Council of Arab Information Ministers held in Manama, on Wednesday.

The Sultanate of Oman's delegation was headed by Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information.

The Council discussed several topics including media support for the Palestinian cause, the use of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence in the Arab media, the recommendations of the Arab Committee for E-Media, the implementation of the interim plan for the joint Arab media strategy to combat terrorism, the completion of the negotiation file with international media companies, the dissemination of environmental media culture and strengthening the role of Arab women in the media field.

The Council commended the efforts made by the Arab media outlets in covering the brutal Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip and in the Palestinian territories, and their documentation of the crimes committed by the occupation forces against the defenseless



Palestinian civilians including media and medical teams.

The Council approved a number of topics including the recommendations issued by the fifth meeting of the expert group concerned with evaluating and updating the Arab media action plan.

The Council also approved the implementation of a documentary entitled The Arab League's Journey and Destiny which was circulated to the Arab League's centres and missions abroad and uploaded to the Arab League's websites and social media platforms, and the naming of the 100th regular session of the Permanent Committee for Arab Media as the Martyrs of Gaza and the Palestinian Media Term. — ONA

Midday work ban enforced

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 29

The Ministry of Labour has mandated that all construction sites and open spaces cease operations during the noon hours throughout the summer months of June, July, and August. This directive aims to protect workers from extreme heat and potential sunstroke, aligning with humanitarian organisation recommendations.

Oman has been reeling under a scorching sun for the last few weeks, with temperatures nearing 50 degrees Celsius in many cities. On Tuesday, Barka recorded the highest temperature in the country at 47.3 degrees, followed closely by Wadi al Maawil at 47.2 degrees.

Effective immediately, work must stop between 12:30 pm and 3:30 pm as per Ministerial

Resolution No. 286. The ministry advises transferring heavy labour to cooler times of the day. Alternatives include providing air-conditioned rest areas and implementing a rotation system where workers operate for 45 minutes followed by a 15-minute break. The ministry also emphasises community awareness, particularly advising against refuelling vehicles during the afternoon unless absolutely necessary.

Violations of this regulation will result in stringent legal action under Article 118 bis of the Labour Law. A dedicated team will monitor compliance, and establishments found in violation will face fines starting from RO 500. Repeated offenses will result in further scrutiny and potentially more severe penalties.

Apple Pay few months away from launch in Oman

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The much-awaited Apple Pay digital payment service will be launched in the Sultanate of Oman in the next few months, probably this summer. Supported in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain, Apple Pay is a mobile payment service that allows users to make payments in person, in iOS apps, and on the web.

Sources from the banking industry told the Observer on the sidelines of COMEX 2024 that the service will be launched in the next couple of months. An executive from Central Bank of Oman (CBO) said that Apple is

in the final stages of preparations and will be launched in the next couple of months, which was also confirmed by other major banks. For iPhone users, Apple Pay can replace the current system of payments via credit or debit cards at cash counters. Last year, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) issued guidelines and instructions for banks and payment service providers to provide the Card Tokenization Service, which will replace the current method of card-based payments. The decision has to be enforced based on the readiness of banks and payment service providers. Customers can register payment cards on smart devices, and



It is anticipated that other global payment providers like Apple and Google will introduce their services in Oman in the upcoming months

perform contactless payment transactions at local and international electronic payment

applications on smart devices (such as Apple Pay, Samsung Pay, etc.) in the Sultanate of Oman.

Customers will not be charged any fees for activating and using the service. According to CBO, the latest decision will encourage innovation in electronic payments and be less cash-dependent. Card tokenization is a process of replacing sensitive information on a recipient's card (like the card number, expiration date, and security code) with a personalised and unique identifier, or a token, which acts as a stand-in for the actual card data and can be used for all transactions. In April this year, the National Bank of Oman (NBO), Sohar International, Bank Dhofar, and Ahli Bank launched Samsung Pay, the digital wallet in which

customers add their credit/debit cards and secure it all using a PIN or personal biometric data, allowing the tap to pay with the device only through NFC payments, a common technology used by tap-to-pay terminals. "Customers can use the services locally and internationally without issues. We anticipate that other global payment providers like Apple and Google will introduce their services in Oman in the upcoming months," said Mohammed Saif al Manji, TechOneFive, an initiative group founded by Omani youth to spread technological knowledge and build awareness of new technologies.



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3

14,000 Haj pilgrims from Oman set for travel to Mecca

KHALID AL BALUSHI
@khalid_albalushi94

14,000 pilgrims from Oman are all set to travel to Mecca and Madina. This includes 13,500 Omanis, 250 Arab residents, and 250 non-Arab residents. In a press conference, Sultan bin Said al Hinai, Head of the Oman Haj Mission, said, "The Oman Haj Mission has completed the procedures for the pilgrims of the Sultanate of Oman to travel to the holy sites. The majority of the pilgrims, approximately 99 per cent, are ready to travel. The mission is scheduled to depart on Sunday, 25th of Dhul Qa'da 1445 AH, heading to Jeddah and then to Mecca."

Regarding the readiness of the Mina and Arafat camps, he added, "The 2 camps will be handed over to us at the right time with the company responsible for providing services to the guests of the Sultanate of Oman." About the additions and improvements,

he said, "In Arafat camp, the issue of partition in the camp has been resolved by gathering all the pilgrims in one area or in one camp for all the pilgrims of the Sultanate of Oman. Additionally, the ground has been paved, gypsum boards installed, and air conditioning improved in the camp. As for Mina camp, water supply has been enhanced by adding 6 additional tanks with a capacity of 40,000 gallons, along with 50 new toilets and 70 shower rooms." The average cost of Haj by air is RO 2,134 in 2024, up from RO 2,054 in 2023, an increase of 3.9 per cent. The average cost by land is RO 1,313, down from RO 1,367, a decrease of 4.1 per cent.

A total of 700 opportunities were allocated for Haj and Umrah companies, representing 5 per cent of the number of pilgrims for each company, making a total of 15,000 citizens and residents travelling to the holy land. The overall quota was distributed



The Mission urged pilgrims to use the opportunity to learn about Haj rituals, prepare spiritually by sincerely repenting to Allah, refining their character and being accountable to themselves.

among the governorates based on the population aged 18 and above. Muscat Governorate topped the quota with 20.77 per cent, followed by Al Batinah North with 19.86 per cent, while Al Wusta had the lowest percentage at 0.9 per cent.

The entitlement is granted based on mathematical equations built on Sharia principles and jurisprudential considerations, taking into account religious, social, and other aspects. Each governorate's requests are

arranged separately based on its share of the overall Omani quota, considering factors such as age, family entitlement, guardians, companions, repeated requests for two or more seasons, type of Haj, the priority of the will, Haj on behalf of a deceased person, and seniority of residence for residents.

The indicators show that 12,487 individuals, representing 89.2 per cent of obligatory pilgrims, include 145 performing Haj on behalf of a deceased person and 281 on behalf



In Arafat camp, the issue of partition in the camp has been resolved by gathering all the pilgrims in one area or in one camp for all the pilgrims of the Sultanate of Oman

SULTAN AL HINAI
Head of the Oman Haj Mission

of someone incapacitated. There are 240 pilgrims performing Haj to fulfil a will for a deceased person, representing 1.7 per cent of Omani pilgrims. There are 1,273 voluntary

pilgrims, representing 9 per cent of this year's pilgrims, including 945 guardians of women and 145 companions. Women comprised 49.9 per cent of the pilgrims, while men constituted 50.1 per cent. The oldest pilgrim is 94 years old, and the youngest are two 18-year-olds.

The Mission said Haj without a permit is prohibited. The Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah has warned that unauthorised Haj attracts a 10-year ban from entering the Kingdom, a fine of 10,000 Saudi Riyals, imprisonment, and a ban on Haj. The Mission will coordinate with Saudi authorities to address reports of fake campaigns and unauthorised pilgrims.

Al Hinai said Haj is an act of worship. Therefore, it cannot be compared to leisure trips. Pilgrims should psychologically prepare to adapt to the available facilities and services, ensuring they perform their rituals with satisfaction and peace of mind.

Gaming hackathon explores models of electronic games that fit Omani culture



Winner ideas will be felicitated by the Ministry of Information. – ONA

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Information, represented by the Directorate-General for Electronic Media, on Wednesday launched 'Ayn Gaming Hackathon'.

The two-day hackathon, held within the framework of COMEX 2024, aims to explore ideas and models of electronic games that fit the Omani identity and culture.

During the hackathon, Ayn platform aims at presenting several lectures and holding workshops for participants to enhance their game development skills. These events are held in cooperation with Omani and Saudi experts.

Winner ideas will be felicitated by the Ministry of Information.

— ONA

Salalah court imposes strict penalties on wildlife offenders

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

The Court of Appeal in Salalah has issued a judicial ruling against four individuals found guilty of wildlife trespassing. Each defendant has been sentenced to one year in prison and fined RO 1,000. Additionally, the court ordered the confiscation of their vehicles, weapons, phones and binoculars.

The Environment Authority confirmed that the four citizens were convicted for illegally hunting and killing several Arabian gazelles, Nubian ibex and various wild birds. The ruling underscores the seriousness of the offense, with the court imposing a significant punishment on the offenders.

Talib al Abri, Acting Director-General of Environment in Dhofar Governorate, emphasised



Each defendant has been sentenced to one year in prison and fined RO 1,000

the importance of preserving natural environments and warned that legal action will be taken against those who violate wildlife protection laws. He highlighted that the Penal Code mandates severe penalties for anyone who intentionally kills, hunts, or smuggles wild animals, birds, or their genetic materials. Offenders



can face imprisonment from six months to five years and fines ranging from RO 1,000 to RO 5,000.

The Sultanate of Oman strictly regulates the ownership and use of hunting tools and devices, permitting their use only for regulatory, scientific and research purposes authorised by the



Environment Authority.

The Authority is dedicated to implementing and enforcing laws related to nature conservation and wildlife protection. It employs modern technologies to enhance surveillance and monitoring efforts in nature reserves, aiming to curb illegal hunting activities and ensure the preservation of wildlife.

RESIDENT CARD MUST FOR EXPAT CHILDREN ABOVE 10 YEARS

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Resident children above the age of 10 years must have a resident card made in their name, according to the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

"Every child above 10 years is supposed to have a resident card, the absence of which will attract fines on the sponsoring parent," said an official at the Passports and Residences Department of the ROP.

Most of the parents have been under the impression of the resident card being compulsory for children above 15 years of age but the reality is different from what many of the parents believed to be, an official from the department said.

Every expatriate who is resident in Oman must obtain a resident card within 30 days from the date of entry in Oman and the same is applicable to their children above the age of 10.

The process to be followed to avail a new resident card



Every expatriate who is resident in Oman must obtain a resident card within 30 days from the date of entry in Oman and the same is applicable to their children above the age of 10

for an adult expatriate is to visit the department with original passport, a letter from the company where he or she is working, and original and copies of the Ministry of Labour form after medical examination. And upon a payment of RO 6, one can get a resident card valid for one year; and RO 11 for two years. A fine of RO 10 will be charged for each month of delay in

application for the card.

The same fine can be applied to children who have not made a resident card within the stipulated period.

A resident card is made compulsory for children above the age of 10 for many reasons, according to the department.

"First of all, having a resident card eases entry and exit processes at the airports and it is mandatory for all other

Every expatriate who is resident in Oman must obtain a resident card within 30 days from the date of entry in Oman and the same is applicable to their children above the age of 10

official purposes," he said.

Additionally, the necessity of possessing the resident card has become more necessary after Oman stopped stamping visas on the passports in 2022 and all airports would ask for resident cards while travelling.

The ROP official further stated that these procedures are stipulated in the law and have been in effect for approximately two years, but many of the residents are not aware of the same and later, they find it difficult to understand that they have to pay a fine for not getting the resident card.

Connectivity, open borders will boost tourism in Oman: UN official

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

It is necessary to distinguish the tourism market of Oman from other destinations to increase the number of tourists while creating the roadmap on what's the type of nationality that Oman wants, according to a top UN official.

Speaking to the Observer on the sidelines of a regional tourism conference, Natalia Bayona, Executive Director, UN Tourism, said, "To increase the number of tourists, it is essential to have air connectivity, a roadmap on what's the type of nationality that you want and what are the next steps when it comes not only for air transportation, but also to attract luxury and sustainable cruises."

On the visa facilitation report, she said, "We mentioned it briefly. But it's true that the more open a country is, it is for the better because less bureaucracy at the end of the day is for the tourists. I feel it's a very good idea. See the European Union, that's a good example. Nearly 54 per cent of international tourism goes to the European Union."

"At the end of the day, the more open and the more coordinated you are which is much better. It's more efficient for the tourists," she added.

On sustainability in tourism, Natalia said, "Sustainability is



the way you assure economic growth, social impact and growth. And of course, environmental preservation. If you have the three of them, you go into sustainability. So, when you are talking about tourism, the good thing about tourism is that it's the most human economic sector."

"When you are creating a sustainability strategy, you need to think about the three things how tourism is helping your community to evolve in terms of employment, in terms of investments, in terms of social cohesion," she added.

She said that Oman had around 4.5 million tourism arrivals last year and it is not bad when you compare the population. "Compared to Saudi Arabia, which is booming with tourism, the uniqueness of Oman is that preservation of heritage and culture has been made a strategy that is focused on bringing people, but as well to go little by little in the way they get connected to other regions and at the end that can help on the preservation of all the routes that you have here."

Omantel's international and local strategic partnerships contribute to Oman's digital economy

Establishment of the first sovereign cloud services center in the Sultanate of Oman in cooperation with Amazon Web Services

MUSCAT, May 29, 2024: Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the Sultanate of Oman, has a packed calendar for COMEX, dominated by new signings with global technology giants, showcasing its diversified products and services portfolio and media interaction events. Omantel stands out with a slew of new signings, involving global and local companies.

Talal Al Mamari, Chief Executive Officer of Omantel said on the sidelines of the agreements signing ceremony that these agreements reflect Omantel's strategic transformation from a telco into a technology company. These agreements will also solidify our position as the enabler of digital transformation in the public and private sectors.

Localization of new technologies



Omantel signed a key strategic partnership with Amazon Web Services to establish a sovereign cloud services center and build and operate an integrated e-commerce platform in Oman. The partnership also includes the setting up of a center of cloud excellence and providing solutions in generative Artificial Intelligence.



Omantel also signed another strategic partnership with Google Global to set up the first-ever edge cloud computing services center in the region (Middle East, Africa, and Asia) and provide generative AI and data analytics services.



The third agreement was signed with MERP and Microsoft for a strategic framework. MERP is a leader in innovative technology solutions. This collaboration aims to revolutionize digital infrastructure and services by leveraging Microsoft's AI solutions to drive digital transformation across Omantel's departments and subsidiaries. The agreement marks a significant milestone in the partnership between MERP Systems and Omantel, focusing on enhancing operational efficiencies, improving customer service, and developing new digital products to meet the evolving needs of consumers and businesses in the Sultanate of Oman.

Emphasizing digital innovation, the agreement will utilize AI to create innovative solutions that enhance data analytics, cloud computing, and customer interface systems. It also aims to strengthen Omantel's digital infrastructure, supporting high-speed connectivity and advanced services for businesses and customers alike. Additionally, the partnership commits to developing local talent through training programs designed to equip Omani professionals with advanced AI technological skills, furthering the nation's digital transformation goals.

The agreement was signed by Talal bin Said Al Mamari, CEO of "Omantel" and Prem Nair, partner and co-founder of MERP, and Sheikh Saif bin Hilal Al Hosni, General Manager of Microsoft Oman.



Also, in the same field, Omantel announced its strategic consulting partnership with Virtusa, a global provider of digital strategy, digital engineering, and IT services and solutions, aimed at organizational

enablement and development, marked by the signing of an innovative IT Operating Model contract. This collaboration represents a significant advancement in Omantel's adoption of Agile/DevOps methodologies, ensuring a swift market presence and the highest standards of service delivery. Guided by Virtusa's Engineering First approach, the partnership will leverage advanced engineering practices to drive efficiency and innovation. The agreement encompasses a broad range of services, including the provision of commercial and organizational enablement applications, along with robust operational support for IT applications and infrastructure. The agreement was signed by Talal bin Said Al Mamari, CEO of "Omantel" and Vasudev Telikicherla - Senior Vice President | Head - Middle East.

Local Partnerships to boost digitization in Oman



Partnering with Omantel, the Ministry of Health is implementing an innovative asset management and IoT cybersecurity solution. This partnership comes to align with Oman Vision 2040, the Sultanate of Oman is transforming its healthcare sector through digitization and enhanced connectivity. The Ministry of Health, adopting advanced medical and IoT devices, robust infrastructure, and IT systems, aims to improve patient care and healthcare outcomes. This initiative will streamline operational insights, enhance care delivery, and fortify cybersecurity.

The agreement was signed by His Excellency Dr. Hilal Ali Al-Sabti, Minister of Health, and Talal Said Al Mamari, CEO of Omantel.



In local partnerships, and as part of enhancing digital transformation locally, the Supreme Judicial Council and Omantel have signed an agreement to provide telecommunications services and a digital switchboard for the Council. This will boost productivity and improve the efficiency of internal and external communications. Additionally, the agreement aims to offer an exceptional experience for reviewers and provide high levels of security through advanced digital systems. The agreement was signed by His Excellency Issa bin Hamad Al Azri, Secretary-General of the Supreme Judicial Council, and Talal Said Al Mamari, CEO of Omantel.



Moreover, Omantel announced its strategic agreement with Oman Housing Bank to provide Full Banking migration to cloud, making it the first bank in Sultanate of Oman to migrate its complete Data Center to Cloud. This agreement sets the stage for seamless and efficient access to cutting-edge cloud services aiming to strengthen and empower Oman Housing Bank in processing customer data with unprecedented speed and efficiency, while also delivering innovative solutions tailored to the banks and customers' needs. The agreement was signed by Aladdin Bait Fadhil, Chief Commercial Officer of Omantel and Arif Al Zaabi, general manager at Oman Housing Bank.



Omantel unveiled a digital cooperation agreement with Bank Dhofar to carry out First Islamic Core Banking migration to cloud. Bank Dhofar becomes the first major Bank in Oman to migrate its Islamic Core Banking platform to Cloud. The agreement was signed

by Aladdin Bait Fadhil, Chief Commercial Officer of "Omantel" and Dr. Tariq Taha, General Manager of IT at Bank Dhofar.



As part of the ongoing cooperation between Omantel and Bank Nizwa, Omantel being the digital partner of Bank Nizwa will provide the Bank with innovative cloud solutions that will enable the bank to save costs, optimize efficiency and enhance cyber security. The agreement also entails providing 5G, smart mobile app and IoT solutions.

The agreement was signed by Talal Said Al Mamari, CEO of Omantel and Khalid al Kayed, CEO at Bank Nizwa.



In relation to the gas sector, Omantel and OQ Gas Networks - the exclusive operator of Oman's Natural Gas Transmission Network, have penned an awarding ceremony to recognize the successful leverage of the satellite technology for surveillance purposes through Etco. Etco Space will provide satellite images from the Omani satellite "Aman-1" under its strategic partnership with Omantel. This collaboration will offer space imagery and related data analytics along with AI-powered monitoring and surveillance solutions.

The agreement was signed by Talal Said Al Mamari, CEO of Omantel and Mansoor Al Abdali, Managing director of OQGN.



Omantel and Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) have signed a project completion certificate, marking the start of a five-year contract to provide Dedicated Internet Access (DIA) and Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) Protection services. This agreement, featuring a managed, dedicated, high-availability service with a fully diverse FOC route, will enhance PDO's corporate communication and operational efficiency. This partnership significantly boosts Oman's economy and supports PDO in achieving its business objectives more effectively.

The agreement was signed by Eng. Aladdin Baitfadhil, Chief Commercial Officer at Omantel, and Hasan Al Barwani, General Manager of Information Technology at Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).



In addition, Oman Airports signed a partnership agreement with Omantel to provide "Wi-Fi 7" service at airports in the Sultanate of Oman, making it the first airport company in the world to use this advanced technology.

This agreement comes at a time when the Sultanate's airports are witnessing significant growth, necessitating the adoption of the latest technologies and modern services. It aims to develop the wireless network infrastructure in all Oman's airports with the latest global technologies, as part of the ongoing proactive steps by "Oman Airports" to enhance the digital infrastructure and provide advanced technological solutions that contribute to achieving Oman Vision 2040 for digital transformation and the development of the aviation sector.

The agreement was signed by Sheikh Aimen bin Ahmed Al Hosni, CEO of "Oman Airports", and Sheikh Talal bin Said Al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, in the presence of Huawei Global.



MoHERI committed to quality research through OMREN

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MAY 29

The Oman Network for Scientific Research and Education (OMREN), affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, participated in the COMEX 2024 exhibition in its 33rd edition.

OMREN team presented a group of electronic services that serve researchers and academic fields, and enhance support for the process of scientific research and innovation in Oman.

Among the services offered is the virtual library system (Masader), which provides access to millions of books, scientific journals, and research studies through an easy-to-use interface.

The educational roaming service (Eduroam) also allows researchers and students to stay connected to the Internet while they are in any educational institution where the service is available inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman.

The Omani Research Repository System (Shuaa) allows the publication of scientific research by Omani researchers, and enhances access to it by researchers and educational institutions.

Mirsal file transfer service allows large files to be transferred safely and quickly between



Among the services offered is the virtual library system which provides access to millions of books through an easy-to-use interface

researchers and educational institutions.

In her comments to Oman Observer, Fatima al Rashidi, Marketing Specialist at OMREN, said, “OMREN is keen to provide a unique experience to the visitors of the exhibition through its distinctive corner, which differs from its previous participations, as this edition relied on modern technologies and virtual reality to display the various services and explain their objectives in

an enjoyable way to the audience so that they cannot be delivered by traditional methods.” “We appreciate the importance of keeping up with modern technological developments, and their use in various fields of scientific research and education,” she said.

This participation is an embodiment of our commitment to this approach and our keenness to provide a distinctive experience for visitors that

contributes to enhancing awareness of the importance of digital transformation and its role in supporting the process of sustainable development in Oman, she added.

The corner, according to her, has been very popular among the visitors. “We are pleased with the positive feedback we have received. We affirm our commitment to providing innovative services that contribute to supporting the process of scientific research and education in the Sultanate of Oman.” Hisham al Araiimi, a senior marketing specialist, said: “We are keen on cooperation with institutions through which we provide the best services to the public through these partnerships, the Fixed Business Broadband service.” The Fixed Business Broadband provides fixed broadband with very high internet speed that can reach 1 Gbps.

OMREN, through its strategic partner, Omantel, provides fixed business broadband service to OMREN members with different packages to enhance performance, productivity and interaction. Members are provided with the highest possible download and upload speeds while making the best effort so that all communications are provided with the latest security and confidentiality solutions.

Oman sees jump of 12.2% in tourist arrivals in Q1

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 29

The number of visitors coming to the Sultanate of Oman increased by 12.2 per cent to 173,000 between January and March 2024 compared to the same period last year.

The number of guests received by three to five-star hotels increased by 12.1 per cent to 598,000 in the first quarter of 2024, while revenues increased by 8.3 per cent to RO 71,907,000, compared to the same period in 2023.

The occupancy rate of 3-5 star hotels was 55.6 per cent during the first quarter of 2024, an increase of 2.2 per cent compared to the same period in 2023.

According to UN Tourism, in 2023 international tourist arrivals recovered 89 per cent of 2019 levels and export revenues from tourism 96 per cent, while direct tourism GDP reached the same levels as in 2019.

UN Tourism’s projection for 2024 points to a full recovery of international tourism with arrivals growing two per cent above 2019 levels. The Middle East saw the strongest relative growth, with international arrivals exceeding by 36 per cent pre-pandemic levels in Q1 2024, or 4 per cent above Q1 2023.

This follows an extraordinary performance in 2023 when the Middle East became the first world region to recover pre-pandemic numbers (+22 per cent).



The number of guests received by three to five-star hotels increased by 12.1 per cent to 598,000 in the first quarter of 2024

INTERIOR MINISTRY GOES DIGITAL FOR PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

The Ministry of Interior is showcasing its range of electronic services at the COMEX 2024 exhibition, emphasising digital transformation and the ministry’s key applications. On the first day of the exhibition, the ministry unveiled the ‘Alathar’ application, which streamlines the management of personal and professional meetings, facilitating communication and enhancing productivity.

Majed al Sanani from the ministry’s IT Department highlighted the app’s importance and said: “Efficiently managing meetings and appointments is crucial for institutional productivity and goal achievement. The ‘Alathar’ app offers an intuitive interface for setting up meetings and their

details, along with interactive tools like voting and opinion polls to boost participation and decision-making.” Another application named ‘Tanmia’ aims to empower municipal councils with innovative tools, acting as a digital interface between Omani society and municipal authorities. This app enables citizens and residents to engage in local decision-making by providing feedback, evaluations and suggestions, thereby fostering communication, transparency and trust.

Zaher al Sabari, Assistant Director at the ministry, noted that the ‘Tanmia’ app, available on all major smartphone platforms, boasts a user-friendly design and high security. It supports various user roles, including governors, municipal council members, Ministry employees and tourists. Through ‘Tanmia’,



On the first day of the exhibition, the ministry unveiled the ‘Alathar’ application

citizens can submit development proposals, add and view tourist sites, address issues like illegal possessions, and monitor various projects and events across Oman.

The app also allows for the evaluation of municipal council members and their

proposals, fostering interactive communication among all stakeholders.

The Ministry of Interior

The Ministry of Interior is committed to introducing modern technologies to enhance its digital transformation efforts

is committed to introducing modern technologies to enhance its digital transformation efforts. Its participation in COMEX 2024 aims to spotlight technical advancements, introduce new electronic services and application updates, and encourage community involvement through feedback and suggestions. This initiative aligns with the Ministry’s goal of continuous improvement and development of its digital systems.

SalamAir announces flights to Delhi

MUSCAT: SalamAir has announced the launch of its newest destination: Delhi, India, starting from July 2, 2024.

SalamAir will operate twice-weekly flights to Delhi, with services on Tuesdays and Thursdays as it continues to expand its network to meet the growing demand for affordable and convenient travel options in the Sultanate of Oman.

This new route is expected to augment connections between Oman and India, enhance options for the expat community and support



The new route is expected to augment connections between Oman and India

convenience for business travel.

“We are thrilled to add Delhi to our growing list of destinations in India,” said Captain Ahmed al Shaithani, Acting CEO of SalamAir.

“Delhi is a city of great historical significance and economic vitality, making it an ideal addition to our network. We look forward to offering our passengers to and from the opportunity

to explore this dynamic city, and we will remain committed to providing a high-quality travel experience at competitive prices.”

“Delhi is a vibrant metropolis known for its rich history, diverse culture and modern infrastructure. As a key economic and political hub, Delhi offers a unique blend of ancient monuments, such as the Red Fort and Humayun’s Tomb, and contemporary attractions, including shopping malls, markets and a thriving culinary scene,” the airline said.

MOORE STEPHENS LLC NOTICE ON THE COMMENCEMENT OF LIQUIDATION OF TRACCS OMAN LLC (AS APPEARED IN OFFICIAL GAZETTE NO 1547)

Moore Stephens LLC, announces the liquidation process of Traccs Oman LLC, bearing commercial registration number 1015707, in accordance with the decision taken by the Company’s Member on 1 May 2024. The liquidator alone have the right to represent the Company under liquidation before third parties, and all parties are to confirm with the liquidator for all matters concerning the company’s business at the following address:

Office No. 41, 4th Floor, Building No. 1022, Way No. 1013;
Al Walaj Street, Al Qurum
P O Box 933, Ruwi, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24061000, Fax: 24061099, Email: liquidation@moore-oman.com

By this announcement, the liquidator calls the company’s creditors to submit their claims against the company, together with the supporting documents, to the above address within 180 days from the date of publishing this announcement for the first time, and any debtors should settle the company’s rights with the liquidator on the address above.

Moore Stephens LLC
Official Liquidators of Traccs Oman LLC
(Under voluntary liquidation)



Xi: China
‘deeply pained’
by ‘severe’
Gaza situation

BEIJING: President Xi Jinping told his Egyptian counterpart on Wednesday that China was “deeply pained” by the “extremely severe” situation in Gaza, as Beijing hosts Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and several other Arab leaders.

The talks between Xi, Sisi and other Arab dignitaries in China this week are aimed at building consensus between Beijing and the Arab nations, as well as presenting a “common voice” on the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

China has good relations with Israel but has supported the Palestinian cause for decades and has campaigned for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“The current round of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has caused a large number of innocent Palestinian civilian casualties and the humanitarian situation in Gaza is extremely severe. China is deeply pained,” Xi told Sisi in Beijing.

“The top priority task now is an immediate ceasefire, in order to avoid spillover of conflict, impact on regional peace and stability, and so as to prevent a more serious humanitarian crisis,” Xi said.

Egypt, along with Qatar and the United States, have been engaged for months in talks aimed at securing a lasting truce between Israel and Hamas, accompanied by the release of hostages kidnapped by the Palestinian group.

“China appreciates the important role played by Egypt in cooling down the situation and delivering humanitarian relief,” Xi said. He said China was ready to work with Egypt to continue to assist the people of Gaza “and push for an early, comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian issue”.

Xi met Sisi in a grand ceremony outside Beijing’s Great Hall of People on Wednesday afternoon, state media footage showed, with the national anthems of both countries blaring out. — Reuters

ISRAEL: WAR LIKELY TO LAST
ANOTHER SEVEN MONTHS

WASHINGTON SAID THE RAFAH ASSAULT WOULD NOT TRIGGER A CHANGE IN US POLICY



A woman sits with a child in Rafah on Wednesday. – Reuters

CAIRO: Israel sent tanks on raids into Rafah on Wednesday and said its war on Hamas in Gaza would likely continue all year, after Washington said the Rafah assault did not amount to a major ground operation that would trigger a change in US policy.

Israeli tanks moved into the heart of Rafah for the first time on Tuesday, despite an order from the International Court of Justice to end its attacks on the city, where many Palestinians had taken refuge from widespread bombardment.

Rafah residents said the tanks had pushed into Tel Al Sultan in western Rafah and Yibna and near Shaboura in the centre before retreating towards a buffer zone on the border with Egypt, rather than staying put as elsewhere. “We received distress calls from residents in Tel Al Sultan where drones targeted displaced citizens as they moved from areas where they were staying towards the safe areas,” the deputy director of ambulance and emergency services in Rafah, Haitham al Hams, said.

Israel said its military controlled three quarters of the



Palestinians fleeing with belongings in vehicles in Rafah on Wednesday. – AFP

buffer zone on the Egyptian border and aimed to control all of it to prevent Hamas smuggling in weapons. Palestinian Health Minister Majed Abu Ramadan said there was no indication the

Rafah border crossing would be reopened for aid any time soon.

Fighting in Gaza would continue throughout 2024 at least, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s National Security

Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi added, signalling that Israel was not ready to end the war as demanded by Hamas, as part of a deal that would see the exchange of hostages is holds for Palestinian prisoners.

“The fighting in Rafah is not a pointless war,” he said, reiterating that the aim was to end Hamas rule in Gaza and stop it and its allies attacking Israel.

The United States, Israel’s closest ally, reiterated its opposition to a major Israeli ground offensive in Rafah on Tuesday while saying it did not believe such an operation was under way.

Mediator Qatar was expected to pass on Israel’s latest ceasefire and hostage release proposal to Hamas on Tuesday, a person familiar with the issue said. There was no immediate word on Wednesday from Hamas, which has said talks are pointless unless Israel ends its offensive on Rafah.

The armed wing of Hamas and that of allies Islamic Jihad said they confronted invading forces in Rafah with anti-tank rockets and mortar bombs and blew up explosive devices they had planted. — AFP

Brazil recalls
ambassador
to Israel

BRASÍLIA: Brazil has recalled its ambassador to Israel and will not immediately appoint a replacement, a diplomatic source said on Wednesday, ratcheting up tensions between the two countries over Israel’s war in Gaza.

The nearly eight-month-old conflict has soured Israel’s diplomatic ties with several nations, including Brazil, whose President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in February accused the country’s government of “genocide.”

Israel reacted furiously, declaring the Brazilian leader “persona non grata.” Israel had previously summoned the South American country’s ambassador Frederico Meyer to a meeting at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial centre in Jerusalem, which the Brazilian source said “was a humiliation to which (Meyer) was subjected.” In response, Brazil recalled Meyer for consultations, and in turn, summoned Israel’s representative in Brasilia.

The source said conditions had not been met for Meyer “to return” to Israel. The Brazilian representation in Israel in the meantime will be led by diplomat Fabio Farias.

Lula, a prominent voice for the global south whose country currently holds the rotating presidency of the G20, has faced pushback at home from the far right over his comments.

However, he has received support elsewhere in Latin America, notably from Colombia’s President Gustavo Petro who has also severed ties with Israel. Both Brazil and Colombia have supported South Africa’s complaint against Israel to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, alleging the Gaza assault amounted to a breach of the Genocide Convention.

Before the Rafah offensive began on May 7, the UN had warned that up to 1.4 million people were sheltering in the city. Since then, one million have fled the area, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) has said. — AFP

World Central Kitchen stops work in Rafah after ‘attacks’

RAFAH: The World Central Kitchen nonprofit, which provides meals in war-torn Gaza, said it had stopped its operations in the Palestinian territory’s southern city of Rafah due to “ongoing attacks” in the area.

The US-based charity was founded by celebrity Spanish-American chef Jose Andres to provide food to communities facing humanitarian crises and disasters.

“In the face of Israeli operations in Rafah, countless families are being forced to flee once again,” the charity said on social media platform X late on Tuesday.

“Ongoing attacks have forced us to pause work at our main kitchen in Rafah and relocate many of our community kitchens further north.” The charity had recently resumed its work in Gaza after suspending operations in April following the killing of seven of its workers in three air strikes by an

Israeli drone. The deaths — of an Australian, three Britons, a North American, a Palestinian and a Pole — had triggered a global outrage over Israel’s military operations.

An internal Israeli military inquiry found that the drone team had made an “operational misjudgement” after spotting a suspected Hamas gunman shooting from the top of an aid truck. In recent weeks, fighting in Rafah has intensified after the Israeli military began its ground assault there on May 7 after seizing control of the crossing between Gaza and Egypt.

Gaza officials said an Israeli strike on Sunday set ablaze a crowded camp for displaced people in Rafah, killing 45 and wounding dozens.

Israel’s military said it has launched an investigation into the strike but insisted its munitions alone “could not” have caused the deadly blaze. — Reuters



The charity had recently resumed its work in Gaza after suspending operations in April following the killing of seven of its workers in three air strikes by an Israeli drone.



omanobserver.com/podcast

In brief

■ MADRID



COURT REFUSES TO CLOSE PROBE INTO PM'S WIFE

A Madrid court rejected on Wednesday a prosecutors' request to close a corruption probe into Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's wife, indicating there was "sufficient" evidence to justify continuing the investigation.

The decision was taken despite a recent police report which said it found no evidence of any criminal offence and runs against the recommendation of the public prosecutors' office which on April 25 requested that "the case be closed". The request came a day after the court confirmed it had opened a probe into Sanchez's wife Begona Gomez for suspected influence peddling and corruption.

■ KWAMASHU



SOUTH AFRICANS VOTE IN MOST COMPETITIVE ELECTION

South Africans voted on Wednesday in the most competitive election since the end of apartheid, with opinion polls suggesting the African National Congress could lose its parliamentary majority after 30 years in government.

Queues formed in the main cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban as polling got underway, with lines also seen in the morning cold in townships on the outskirts of cities and in rural areas. "I grew up loving the ANC because of how they fought for the freedom we have today," said business owner Skhumbuzo Mnyandu, 48, who came out to vote in KwaMashu, a township close to Durban.

■ BERLIN



FRENCH PRESIDENT HEADS TO GERMANY FOR RARE STATE VISIT

Emmanuel Macron begins the first state visit to Germany by a French president in 24 years on Sunday, a pomp-filled three-day trip that is described as a tribute to the Franco-German friendship.

Macron is due to arrive in Berlin at 2 pm (1200 GMT). He will head first to the government district, where the "Democracy Festival"celebrating 75 years of Germany's Basic Law — the democratic constitution adopted in West Germany after World War II — will beheld. Macron and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will engage in an on-onstage discussion at the festival.

Rapid altitude drop threw unbelted passengers on Singapore flight



Singapore Airlines said in a statement on Wednesday that 42 passengers from the flight were still in Bangkok, including 26 in hospital.

SINGAPORE: A sudden 54-metre altitude drop caused unbelted passengers on a Singapore Airlines flight hit by deadly turbulence to be thrown violently inside the cabin, causing injuries, the transport ministry said on Wednesday.

One person died and several other passengers and crew onboard flight SQ321 from London suffered skull, brain and spine injuries during last week's terrifying high-altitude ordeal.

The pilots diverted the Singapore-bound Boeing 777-300ER carrying 211 passengers and 18 crew to Bangkok, where the injured were taken to

hospitals.

The transport ministry said in a statement on Wednesday that the aircraft experienced a "rapid change" in gravitational force, or G-force, while the plane was passing over the south of Myanmar, citing a preliminary report by Singapore's Transport Safety Investigation Bureau (TSIB).

The ministry said that "vertical acceleration" decreased from positive 1.35G to negative 1.5G within 0.6 seconds, likely resulting "in the occupants who were not belted up to become airborne".

Vertical acceleration again

changed from negative 1.5G to positive 1.5G within 4.0 seconds and "this likely resulted in the occupants who were airborne to fall back down", it added.

"The rapid changes in G over the 4.6 sec duration resulted in an altitude drop of 178 ft, from 37,362 ft to 37,184 ft," according to the statement.

"This sequence of events likely caused the injuries to the crew and passengers."

The transport ministry said the early report was based on data taken from the plane's flight data recorder and cockpit voice recorder.

The investigation team

included experts from the TSIB, the US National Transportation Safety Board, the US Federal Aviation Administration and the plane's manufacturer Boeing.

The plane initially experienced slight vibration which resulted in an "uncommanded increase in aircraft altitude" from 37,000 feet to 37,362 feet before the autopilot pitched the plane downward to its original altitude.

The pilots also observed an "uncommanded increase in airspeed" which they slowed.

While managing the speed, a pilot was heard calling out that the fasten-seat-belt sign had

been turned on, according to the ministry.

The "uncommanded" increases in altitude and airspeed were most likely caused by an "updraft", or the upward movement of air, it said.

The ministry statement did not mention the plane plunging 1,800 metres (6,000 feet) in just a few minutes which was shown on flight tracking data.

Singapore Airlines said in a statement on Wednesday that 42 passengers from the flight were still in Bangkok, including 26 in hospital. The airline also said it was cooperating in the investigation. — AFP

Euclid discovers seven more 'rogue' planets

PARIS: The Euclid space telescope has discovered seven more rogue planets, shining a light on the dark and lonely worlds floating freely through the universe untethered to any star.

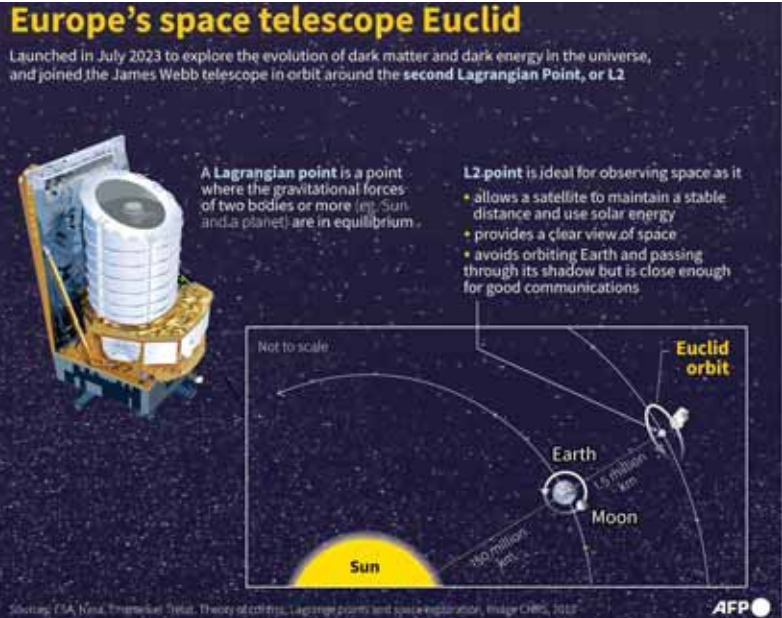
Without being bound to a star, as the Earth is to the Sun, there are no days or years on these planets, which languish in perpetual night.

Yet scientists believe there is a chance they could be able to host life — and estimate there may be trillions dotted throughout the Milky Way.

Last week the European Space Agency released the Euclid telescope's first scientific results since the mission launched in July. Among the discoveries were seven new free-floating planets, gas giants at least four times the mass of Jupiter.

They were spotted in the Orion Nebula, the nearest star-forming region to Earth, roughly 1,500 light years away. Euclid also confirmed the existence of dozens of other previously detected rogue planets.

Spanish astronomer Eduardo Martin, the lead author of a pre-print study published on arXiv.org Friday, said this was likely



just the "tip of the iceberg".

Because they do not reflect the light of a star, spotting rogue planets is like "finding a needle in a haystack", Martin said.

Younger planets, such as those discovered by Euclid, are hotter, making them a little easier to see.

Some research has suggested there are around 20 rogue planets for every star, which could put their number in the trillions in our home galaxy alone.

Given there are thought to be hundreds of billions of galaxies across the universe, the potential number of free-floating worlds

becomes difficult to fathom.

When NASA's Roman space telescope launches in 2027 it is expected find many more rogue planets, possibly offering clarity about how many could be out there.

But not all rogue planets wander alone. Four of the more than 20 confirmed by Euclid are believed to be binaries — two planets orbiting each other in a single system.

If rogue planets are habitable, they could be a key target in humanity's search for extraterrestrial life. — AFP

World's first wooden satellite built by Japan

TOKYO: The world's first wooden satellite has been built by Japanese researchers who said their tiny cuboid craft will be blasted off on a SpaceX rocket in September.

Each side of the experimental satellite developed by scientists at Kyoto University and logging company Sumitomo Forestry measures just 10 centimetres (four inches).

The creators expect the wooden material will burn up completely when the device re-enters the atmosphere — potentially providing a way to avoid the generation of metal particles when a retired satellite returns to Earth.

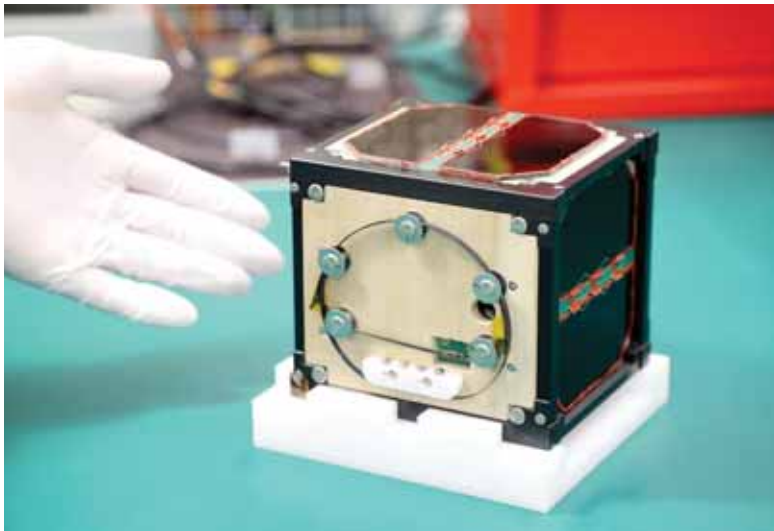
These metal particles

could have a negative impact on the environment and telecommunications, the developers said as they announced the satellite's completion on Tuesday.

"Satellites that are not made of metal should become mainstream," Takao Doi, an astronaut and special professor at Kyoto University, told a press conference.

It will be sent into space on a SpaceX rocket from the Kennedy Space Center in September, bound for the International Space Station (ISS), they said.

From there, the satellite will be released from the Japanese ISS experiment module to test its strength and durability. — AFP



LignoSat is shown during a press conference at Kyoto University in Kyoto on Tuesday. — AFP

The struggles of feeling like an imposter



Hyesha Barrett
@coach_hyesha

Hyesha is a certified Master Life Coach and NLP Practitioner based in Muscat. She is affiliated with the Whispers of Serenity Clinic

Imposter syndrome is a psychological state that the majority of us have faced at some point throughout our lives. It occurs when we doubt our abilities or accomplishments and have a fear of being “found out” to be fraudulent.

This limiting belief, whereby we don’t experience success internally despite external evidence of our competence, can make us shy away in our shadows of self-doubt rendering our low self-worth to lead the show instead of our prowess.

The term “imposter syndrome” was invented by two psychologists in 1978 who narrowed down the syndrome into various identifiable types.

Often characterised by a need to be flawless in every endeavour, the “perfectionist” sets excessively high goals for themselves, which often leads to chronic stress and burnout.

As their underlying fear is losing control, in order to move through this type, it is necessary to delegate more and allow others to cope regardless.

“The superperson” wants to succeed in every role they take on, whether it be at work, in relationships or at home – which results in overworking and

overcommitting.

Their underlying fear is spending too much free time on personal matters, whereas work is much more validating.

As this type is addicted to external validation, it is wise to focus more on internal validation and to take feedback constructively rather than personally.

“The natural genius” judges their competence based on ease and speed as opposed to their efforts. This type feels that if they need to work hard to achieve something, they assume they are incompetent.

They hold shame around failing, so the best way to move through this pattern is see oneself as a work in progress and a life-long learner.

“The soloist” feels vulnerable to ask for help. This proves to them they are incapable and incompetent, hence prefer to act alone. This type can learn to ask more and it would be beneficial for them to gain a mentor.

“The expert” wants to have all the skills and knowledge before attempting a task. Their fear is of inadequacy, as they believe they will never know enough and worry about being exposed as

THROUGH SELF-AWARENESS, COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING, EMPLOYING COPING STRATEGIES AND SECURING SUPPORTIVE SYSTEMS, THESE COMPONENTS WILL ULTIMATELY LEAD US TO A HEALTHIER UNDERSTANDING OF SELF AND A MORE FULFILLING PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIFE.

inexperienced or unknowledgeable. Baby steps in continuously “putting themselves out there” irrespective of the mistakes and pitfalls will help this type to gain the necessary muscles needed.

Imposter syndrome is a widespread issue which affects all ages and demographics. If left unattended can have detrimental effects on our mental health, confidence, professional performance and overall growth.

To gain better perspective, ensure you acknowledge your feelings and know that this is a common experience — even Einstein had it! Reframe your thoughts and focus on facts every time the feelings of dread creep in. Set yourself realistic goals all the while celebrating your wins each and every day.

Through self-awareness, cognitive restructuring, employing coping strategies and securing supportive systems, these components will ultimately lead us to a healthier understanding of self and a more fulfilling professional and personal life.

Small steps each and every day will eventually lead us a long way and put the dreaded imposter syndrome at bay.

Ex-security boss Dick Schoof tapped for Dutch PM

JAN HENNOP

Dick Schoof is a veteran spy chief known for running tight ships within the Netherlands’ immigration and secret service communities — roles that now landed him the nomination for the country’s top job.

On Tuesday, four right-wing coalition parties tapped Schoof, currently the justice ministry’s top official, to follow outgoing Mark Rutte as the country’s next prime minister.

At a press conference where he was formally introduced, Schoof said he aimed to “decisively” carry out the policies decided on two weeks ago by the coalition partners in a draft government agreement. The draft, which experts said needed substantial fleshing out, included the “toughest” immigration policies yet seen in the small country of around 17.6 million people.

Observers said Schoof, who is supposed to retire this year but opted for three more years in the corridors of power in The Hague, is a veteran and sensible choice.

“The top official knows all the nooks and crannies of The Hague and is an expert in the field of immigration and security,” the popular Dutch news weekly Elsevier Weekblad said.

“He believes in a healthy relationship between civil service and politics,” while always respecting that politicians had the last say, the magazine added.

As a civil servant you “have to guarantee your neutrality”, Schoof told De Groene Amsterdammer magazine in a recent interview.

Schoof’s main role until now was mainly within the Dutch security sector, and observers say he has played a “major part” over the last decade during crisis situations in the Netherlands.

It was especially after the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in July 2014 over war-torn Ukraine that Schoof took the lead in a Dutch crisis team investigating the crash.

But Schoof later came in for criticism in a report on the government’s handling of the probe, saying his counter-terror agency (NCTV) “was too internally focused and had little focus on cooperation”. He also came under fire when the authoritative NRC newspaper reported in 2021 that the NCTV followed various politically active citizens by using fake accounts.

Schoof is a “loyal and committed civil servant”, GreenLeft-Labour opposition leader Frans Timmermans said.

Schoof was a member of the Labour Party (PvdA) but resigned for undisclosed reasons in 2021.

— AFP



Badr al Abri

The author is a writer and scholar

Raisi and the wilayat Al Faqeeh



The coffin of late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi during burial ceremony in the holy shrine of Imam Reza in Mashha. – Reuters file photo

In a tragic incident that drew international sympathy, a helicopter crash resulted in the deaths of President Ibrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Amir Hossein Abdullahian, the Friday Imam of Tabriz Ayatollah Al Hashem, East Azerbaijan Governor Malek Rahmati, and several members of the Revolutionary Guard. The helicopter crashed in South Azerbaijan while the officials were travelling from Azerbaijan to Tabriz.

Although the crash did not occur recently, its causes remain a topic of debate. Some attribute it to external factors, while others cite internal power struggles. This incident underscores the broader context of political dynamics within Iran.

Historically, nations around the world have varied forms of governance—absolute monarchies, constitutional monarchies, or democratic presidencies. Iran itself transitioned from an absolute monarchy during the Qajar era to a constitutional monarchy before evolving into a republic post-revolution. Under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran experienced significant political changes, culminating in the Islamic Revolution, which sought to replace the Shah’s regime with a system that preserved elements of constitutional monarchy while embracing revolutionary ideals.

The shift from the Shah’s rule to the Islamic Republic required internal stability to avoid civil unrest.

The previous regime’s intelligence efforts to maintain control through repression failed, leading to the rise of Imam Khomeini as a unifying figure. Khomeini’s concept of Wilayat Al Faqeeh (Guardianship of the Jurist) was intended to provide a framework for democratic governance under religious guidance, though it evolved into a system where the jurist held substantial power.

KHOMEINI’S CONCEPT OF WILAYAT AL FAQEEH (GUARDIANSHIP OF THE JURIST) WAS INTENDED TO PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE UNDER RELIGIOUS GUIDANCE, THOUGH IT EVOLVED INTO A SYSTEM WHERE THE JURIST HELD SUBSTANTIAL POWER.

The theory of Wilayat Al Faqeeh is rooted in Twelver Shiite jurisprudence, where the absence of the hidden Imam Mahdi necessitated a representative to lead the community. This role has historically been contentious, with debates over the extent of the jurist’s authority.

By the late 19th century, calls for constitutional reform in Iran brought together various national movements, including religious figures like Shaikh Al-Naini, who advocated for the jurist’s

involvement in politics. The 1979 revolution further entrenched the role of the Guardian Jurist, a position solidified by Khomeini’s writings and teachings.

Post-revolution, the selection and powers of the Guardian Jurist became subjects of debate. Should the jurist be appointed or elected by the Council of Experts? Should the position be held by an individual or a consultative body? These questions were partially resolved by the new constitution, which granted extensive powers to the Guardian Jurist, overshadowing the president’s role.

In contemporary Iran, the political landscape has shifted towards conservatism. The Guardian Jurist, with significant influence over state matters, is a focal point of both domestic and international concern. Speculations about succession, particularly following Raisi’s death, highlight the uncertainties surrounding the future of Iranian leadership.

The helicopter crash that killed Ibrahim Raisi has intensified these concerns. With Iran playing an active role in global affairs and facing internal economic and political challenges, the nation’s stability remains precarious. The international community continues to watch closely as Iran navigates this complex and turbulent period.

Translated by Badr al Dahafri. The original version of the article was published in Arabic in Oman newspaper on May 28.

Preparing now for the next disease X

On December 12, 2019, a group of patients in Wuhan, China, started showing symptoms of an atypical pneumonia-like illness that did not respond well to standard treatments. Ninety days later, with more than 118,000 cases reported in 114 countries and 4,291 deaths, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic.

While Covid-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions brought the world to a standstill, decision-makers’ response to the evolving crisis, including in high-income countries, betrayed serious information gaps and institutional shortcomings that prevented them from taking decisive action. Thousands, if not millions, of deaths, and much economic devastation, could have been averted.

As early as 2007, researchers at the University of Hong Kong discovered that “horseshoe bats are the natural reservoir for Sars-CoV-like virus” and that “civets are the amplification host.” The authors warned that human-wildlife interactions in farms and wet markets could act as sources and amplification centres for emerging pathogens.

And yet public-health systems were caught unprepared by Covid-19, which brutally exposed the inadequacy of existing pandemic-response capabilities. The crisis overwhelmed supply chains and procurement mechanisms for essential medicines and supplies, straining many national health systems beyond their limits.

Meanwhile, many richer industrialised countries embraced vaccine nationalism and hoarding, leaving many regions without access to life-saving treatments and calling into question established principles like global solidarity and multilateral cooperation. By challenging long-held assumptions regarding localised viral epidemics such as Ebola and yellow fever, especially in Africa, Covid-19 also underscored the need for a nuanced understanding of pandemics’ potential impact on different regions. To address these challenges, governments must adopt a more thoughtful and proactive approach to pandemic preparedness.



Tom Achoki

The writer is a former Sloan fellow at MIT, is an adjunct faculty member at Baylor University and Co-Founder of the Africa Institute for Health Policy in Nairobi, Kenya



Lawrence Were

The writer is an assistant professor in the Department of Health Sciences at Boston University

In 2018, the WHO warned that an unknown pathogen (“Disease X”) could trigger a global pandemic, urging global policymakers to invest in vaccine research and development. While Covid-19 marked the world’s first encounter with a “Disease X” scenario, the accelerating pace of climate change and human encroachment on wildlife habitats significantly increase the risk of exposure to more deadly pathogens.

That is why leading experts, believing that it is only a matter of time before the world faces another pandemic, emphasise the importance of strategic planning and decisive action. But how can health systems in resource-constrained countries and regions prepare for and respond to a potential “Disease X” scenario?

Strengthening disease-surveillance systems is crucial to detecting and responding effectively to emerging epidemics. Given that human interactions and movements facilitate the rapid spread of viruses, governments must establish agile and integrated tracing systems capable of processing numerous data streams and offering actionable insights.

Policymakers can take several steps to improve disease surveillance. First, they could bolster predictive models by harnessing emerging technologies such as machine-learning algorithms and artificial intelligence for data capture and analysis. Second, investing in training programmes that develop analytical, communication and advocacy skills could help increase capacity. Third, governments could facilitate integration of surveillance systems covering areas like veterinary health, weather forecasts and border control. Lastly, establishing robust and resilient response systems requires well-defined public-health contingency plans and dedicated resources.

It is no less important to foster global solidarity and coordination within and between established multilateral organisations such as the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the European Union, and the WHO, and the World Bank is crucial for resource mobilisation.

RESTORED MOSQUE SET TO OPEN



A view of the Mosque of Amir al Maridani, dating from 1340 CE from the era of the Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo, as Egypt’s Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities is to inaugurate the second phase of the restoration project on it, in Darb al Ahmar, in Cairo, Egypt, on Wednesday. – Reuters

Once ostracised, Italy’s Meloni is now centre stage in Europe

When Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni took power in 2022, far-right parties across Europe hailed her victory, expecting the fiery new leader in Rome to pursue a nationalist agenda and battle the Brussels bureaucracy.

But rather than clash with the European Union elites, Meloni surprised friend and foe alike by working closely with them, presenting herself as a bridge between the mainstream centre-right and her own arch-conservative camp, which was previously shunned.

Her influence might grow in the wake of next month’s EU elections, if, as she has hinted, she backs centre-right Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for a second term.

That would give her leverage over the new EU executive, boost her chances of winning an important portfolio for Italy in the next commission and strengthen her role as a power broker.

“Meloni is the best person to act as a bridge between the different factions of the right and centre-right in Europe, where she is a respected and recognised leader,” said Carlo Fidanza, the head of Meloni’s Brothers of Italy party in Europe.

While her ruling coalition in Rome unites various strands of Italy’s



Crispian Balmer

The writer is Reuters’ chief correspondent, Italy, based in Rome



Angelo Amante

The writer is political and general news correspondent at Reuters in Rome

multifaceted right-wing, Meloni’s chance of replicating that within the next EU parliament looks impossible.

Von der Leyen and her allies have already said they would not work with more extreme elements, including Meloni’s Italian ally, Matteo Salvini, who heads the anti-immigrant League party, and Marine Le Pen’s National Rally in France.

The distaste is mutual, with these parties also rebuffing Von der Leyen.

However, the Commission president has expressed no qualms about Meloni, brushing aside concerns in some EU capitals over the Brothers of Italy party, which has neo-fascist roots.

“I have been working very well with Giorgia Meloni,” Von der Leyen told a presidential debate in Brussels on May 23, adding that Meloni was “clearly pro-European”.

Meloni’s first foreign trip as prime minister in 2022 was to Brussels to meet the EU leadership. She made a positive impression.

In the following months, Meloni engaged with the Commission, proving instrumental in securing a deal on the reform of the EU’s asylum rules after nearly 10 years of

failed attempts.

She also travelled with Von der Leyen on three occasions to North Africa, signing deals with Egypt and Tunisia that included provisions to stem migrant departures — accords that have helped see a 58-per cent fall in new arrivals to Italy so far this year.

Crucially, Meloni has also offered constant support for Ukraine and unabated criticism of Russia, marking her out from the likes of Le Pen and Salvini, who traditionally have had close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin. “Meloni has been clever,” said Daniele Albertazzi, politics professor at Britain’s Surrey



Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni welcomes European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at Chigi Palace, in Rome, Italy. – Reuters file photo

University. “What she’s done is to say: ‘Look, let’s be mainstream and responsible on the international stage because I need these guys.’”

One senior EU leader, speaking strictly off the record, said Meloni remained a “radical right-winger” but had adopted a pro-European attitude because Italy was heavily indebted and could not antagonise nations that provided Rome with financial cover. Whatever her motivations, Meloni has proved invaluable in recent summits, helping to persuade the often recalcitrant Hungarian nationalist leader, Viktor Orban, to let through a funding package for Ukraine and to back the EU migration pact.

One EU official, who declined to be named, said the Commission largely communicated with the Hungarian leader via Meloni, earning her the nickname “the Orban whisperer”.

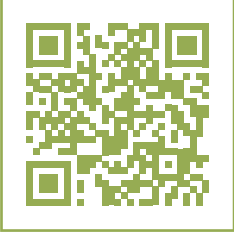
Europe’s far-right and nationalist parties often share similar policy platforms, but are divided into two distinct blocs within the EU parliament. Meloni is head of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, which includes Poland’s Law and Justice (PiS) party. Salvini and Le Pen are in the Identity and Democracy (ID) bloc, while Orban’s Fidesz party is homeless for now.

Von der Leyen comes from the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) — the largest single EU political grouping.

Meloni ruled out supporting Von der Leyen in 2019, but has not been drawn this time around. Party officials said that Italy might support her reappointment in June as part of a deal that included a top job for Italy in the new Commission. Although Meloni is the leading force in the ECR, she would be unlikely to bring the whole group into line, underscoring the intersecting rivalries that criss-cross European politics.

sport

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OOC TAKES PART IN GCC MEETING IN DOHA

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 29

The Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) took part in the 36th meeting of the heads of the GCC Olympic Committees in Doha on Wednesday.

The OOC was represented by its chairman Khalid bin Mohammed al Zubair, Taha bin Sulaiman al Kushari, Secretary-General, Lujaina bint Mohsen al Zaabiyah, member of the OOC Board, and Dr Mansour bin Sultan al Touqi, member of the Board.

During the meeting, they reviewed the recommendations of the executive office and general secretariat on developing sports in GCC. They also discussed steps to enhance the capabilities of the GCC Olympic Committee.

The GCC panel will organise 43 sports events this year. The general secretariat has been asked to provide the timetable for 2025,



which includes training courses, conferences and workshops.

The formation of the Planning, Coordination and Follow-up Committee was approved, and it consists of candidates from GCC countries with experience and competence in the sports field. The tasks and responsibilities of the committee were also approved. The Executive Office will follow up, supervise and

approve the results of the outputs of the committees.

They reviewed the executive office recommendation on international cooperation and partnerships with international organisations.

Recommendation of the Executive Office regarding the results of the working group on regulation of Gulf Sports Games was reviewed. The committee approved the change of organisational norms to GCC Games and Regulations.

The committee thanked the UAE for its successful hosting of the first GCC Youth Games, which was held from April 16 to May 2.

All members approved the request of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee to cancel the first edition of the indoor Gulf Games, which was scheduled to be held at the end this year, due to the busy schedule of regional and international sports events.

Red Warriors gear up for Chinese Taipei tie on June 6

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAY 29

After an impressive and outstanding show against Malaysia in the previous rounds, Red Warriors turned their attention to the forthcoming clash against Chinese Taipei which will take place on June 6, in an away game for the joint Asian qualifiers for the 2026 Fifa World Cup and the 2027 Asian Cup.

Oman national team players, under supervision of the Czech coach Jaroslav Silhavy switched gears on Tuesday at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex to overcome their Taipei rivals.

Silhavy will be aiming to secure their third consecutive victory in the qualifiers and continue in moving at the winning path to



ensure team's topping in the group and progressing to the next round of the qualifiers. The training sessions in Muscat began on Tuesday and the team's delegation will travel to Chinese Taipei on Monday. Upon arrival in Taipei, the team will report back to the training sessions which will include

few training practices ahead of the clash on Thursday. Oman had managed to win Chinese Taipei in Muscat by 3-0 on November 16, 2023. Following the Chinese Taipei encounter, the Red Warriors will fly back to Muscat for their last group match in the qualifiers at group D against Kyrgyzstan on June 11.

All the 25 selected players for the camp commenced their internal training camp by comprised stretching and warm-up exercises. Then, it is followed by focusing on some special technical and tactical training sessions. The coaching staff worked hard to boost the players' physical fitness, technical proficiency, and overall team cohesion ahead of the forthcoming matches in the qualifiers.

The topper of group D is Kyrgyzstan team currently by

nine points with goal difference than the national team who are positioned in the second place with the same amount of points. Then, the Malaysian team are third with six points and then Chinese Taipei with no points.

Oman Squad: Ibrahim al Mukhaini, Faiz al Rushaidi, Ahmed al Rawahi, Ahmed al Khamisi, Khalid al Buraiki, Mohammed al Musallami, Ghanim al Habsi, Abdulaziz al Shammosi, Amjad al Harthi, Ali al Busaidy, Ahmed al Kaabi, Arshad al Alawi, Abdullah Fawaz, Harib al Saadi, Hatim al Rushdi, Omar al Malki, Salah al Yahyaei, Zahir al Aghbari, Issam al Subhi, Jameel al Yahmadi, Abdulrahman al Mushifri, Musab al Maamari, Mohsin al Ghassani, Mohammed al Ghafri and Waleed al Musallami.

COMEX a triumph in gaming and esports



AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MAY 29

The COMEX Global Technology Exhibition 33 witnessed a massive turnout of visitors who flocked to enjoy a wide range of activities and events, including the Innovatech Games and Esports Competition (IGE).

The competition, the largest gaming and esports contest in Oman, attracted over 700 participants from across the country. Over four days, they

battled it out in four different games (Tekken 8, Street Fighter, FC24, Rocket League) vying for a grand prize pool of \$10,000.

The IGE festivities encompassed an interactive museum zone chronicling the gaming industry's evolution over the past two decades, alongside two gaming areas. The PC zone boasted over 20 gaming computers, allowing visitors to experience the latest releases. Meanwhile, the PlayStation zone featured booths equipped with

PlayStation chairs, enabling visitors to engage in captivating gameplay on 32-inch screens.

For the first time at IGE 2024, the Gaming Esports Hackathon (Hackathon Ain) took centre stage, bringing together gaming enthusiasts tasked with designing an Oman-themed game within a 48-hour time frame. Participants had the opportunity to learn from industry experts, forge new connections within the field, and showcase their creative prowess.

"We are thrilled with the tremendous success of this year's competition," expressed IGE event director Munif al Masahli. "We witnessed record-breaking participation from players across Oman, with over 700 competitors registering for the tournament and more than 250 advancing to the finals, set to battle it out on the Innovatech Gaming and Esports Tournament stage."

Al Masahli further highlighted the keen interest

generated by the events among exhibition visitors. "Through IGE, we aim to bolster the role of digital sports and gaming in Oman, unearth fresh talent and provide a platform for gaming enthusiasts to connect and compete," he remarked. "All participants hailed from Oman, with both male and female representation. We anticipate witnessing participation from fellow GCC countries in the coming years."

Suleiman al Balushi, one of

the tournament's participants, emphasised the significance of such competitions in fostering Oman's gaming culture. "These tournaments offer a platform for youth to showcase their skills and compete against players from diverse backgrounds," he explained. "They also help attract more individuals to the world of gaming and contribute to the industry's growth in Oman. Events like IGE play a pivotal role in elevating Oman's standing on the global gaming map."

LOS ANGELES: Anthony Edwards scored 29 points and Karl-Anthony Towns produced a crucial late burst of long-range shooting as the Minnesota Timberwolves defeated the Dallas Mavericks 105-100 On Tuesday to keep their NBA Western Conference finals series alive.

The Timberwolves, trailing 3-0 in the best-of-seven series heading into game four, held off a furious late rally to close out a battling victory at the Mavericks' home arena.

Edwards led the Minnesota scoring but the decisive contribution came from Towns, who drained a trio of three-pointers to help the Timberwolves take a 98-92 lead with less than two minutes remaining.

"Game four, down 3-0, this ain't no time to have any doubts," Towns said of his flurry of scoring. "I just wanted to go out and be aggressive, shoot my shot and be confident with every shot I shoot."

After Towns put Minnesota six points clear, Edwards extended the cushion to 100-92 via a jump shot with 1min 47sec left on the clock to leave the visitors in control.

But there was still time for Dallas to give the third seeds a nervous finale, closing to within three at 100-97 before Edwards' sublime pull-up jumper from 21 feet put the Timberwolves five points clear with 40 seconds left.

The visitors held that advantage through to the buzzer and now have a slender lifeline to cling to as they head to game five back in Minneapolis on Thursday.

Edwards said he had been determined to prevent Dallas clinching a clean sweep.

"I've never been swept in my



Anthony Edwards (5) shoots a layup against Luka Doncic (77) and Kyrie Irving (11). – USA TODAY Sports

Edwards, Towns keep Timberwolves alive as Mavs downed

career, even though I've been to the playoffs three times," Edwards told TNT television. "I took it personally."

"I definitely didn't want to get swept, especially here on their home court, hearing the fans talking trash all day. I think we came out and competed at a high level today."

"I think I was aggressive. I didn't shy away from the ball and they kept giving it to me and trusting me," added Edwards.

DONCIC DEMANDS BETTER

Dallas were left frustrated after losing despite another triple double from Luka Doncic, who finished with 28 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists.

Doncic however had an off-night from long range, making just four-of-11 from three-point distance. As a team, Dallas went

14-from-40 outside the arc.

"This one's on me," Doncic said. "We got to do better. They've won one game, we've just got to focus on the next one."

"It was close in the end but we couldn't finish. So they won and now we just have to focus on the next one."

Towns finished with 25 points, with Mike Conley adding 14 and Rudy Gobert 13.

Mavericks coach Jason Kidd saluted the contribution of Timberwolves talisman Edwards. "He's been playing at a high level all season," Kidd said.

"He's one of the best young players — in fact you can take the 'young' part off — he's one of the best players in this league."

"Give Minnesota credit. They fought and they found a way to extend the series, and now it goes back to Minnesota." — AFP



Mane Al Kituri bags second victory in Dubai tourney

MUSCAT: Omani chess player Mane al Kituri achieved her second victory in the third round of the 24th Dubai Open Chess Championship, organised by the Dubai Chess and Culture Club from May 24 to June 3, with the participation of more than 160 players from 40 countries.

Al Kituri achieved an important victory over Filipino player Rodolfo in her second victory in the championship, bringing total points to two. Two female players also achieved their first victories in the championship Annah al Aisi defeated Emirati player Shama al Suwaidi, and Yumna al Nudabi achieved an important victory over Indian player Krishnan. However, national team player Maria al Balushi lost to Emirati player Bashir Khalil.

The Oman Chess Committee is looking forward to this participation to present an honourable level to raise the international ranking of the players and gain more experience and strong friction in this championship, which is witnessing the participation of several world-ranked players. The Dubai Open Chess Championship is held according to the Swiss system of 9 rounds, with a match time of 90 minutes with an additional 30 seconds for each move.

Barcelona appoint Hansi Flick as new head coach



MADRID: Barcelona have appointed former German national team and Bayern Munich manager Hansi Flick as head coach on a two-year contract, the LaLiga club said on Wednesday.

Flick, who has not managed a club since being sacked by Germany in September 2023, will be tasked with reviving Barcelona's fortunes after the

Catalan side failed to win any trophies this season under Xavi Hernandez, who was dismissed on Friday.

In a statement, the club said it had "chosen a man well known for his teams' high pressing, intense and daring style of play which has brought him great success at club level and international level, winning pretty much all there is to win in the world of football".

Barcelona highlighted the 59-year-old's success during the 2019-20 season at the helm of Bayern, with whom he won six trophies - the Bundesliga, the German Cup, the Champions League, the German Super Cup, the UEFA Super Cup and the Club World Cup.

Xavi was sacked last week after a trophy-less season in which Barca finished 10 points behind

champions Real Madrid, lost the Spanish Super Cup final to their arch-rivals and were knocked out of the Champions League by Paris St Germain in the last eight.

The German filling Xavi's shoes faces a tough challenge ahead with fixing Barca's on-field struggles amid turmoil off the pitch, including deepening financial problems and a refereeing scandal that could

drag on for years.

Flick made his name assisting Germany manager Joachim Low during their 2014 World Cup winning campaign. In 2019, he joined Bayern as head coach, securing seven trophies in his two seasons in charge.

He guided Bayern to a treble in 2020, when they beat Barca 8-2 on course to winning the Champions League, before

leaving the Bundesliga giants in 2021 to manage the German national team.

Flick was criticised for the four-times world champions' poor run in the 2022 World Cup, where they were eliminated in the group stage, and was eventually sacked in September 2023 after a heavy home defeat by Japan in a friendly match.

— Reuters

ALCARAZ SURVIVES SCARE AT FRENCH OPEN



PARIS: World number three Carlos Alcaraz survived a huge scare at the hands of 176th-ranked Dutch qualifier Jesper de Jong to reach the third round after a four-set triumph on Wednesday.

Wimbledon champion Alcaraz, who made the semi-finals at Roland Garros last year, scrambled to a 6-3, 6-4, 2-6, 6-2 second round victory over a player taking part in only his second Grand Slam main draw.

The 21-year-old Spaniard was broken five times and hit 47 unforced errors before De Jong, playing his fifth match at the tournament, eventually wilted under the roof of Court Philippe Chatrier.

"Every player can cause you trouble," said Alcaraz.

"You have to be focussed in every round, have to play at your best, it doesn't matter what the ranking is. Jesper has the work and level to break into the top 100."

Alcaraz goes on to face either American 27th seed Sebastian Korda or South Korea's Kwon Soon-woo for a place in the last 16.

Despite being broken in the second game of the opening set, Alcaraz broke three times himself to grab the advantage.

The battling Dutchman then saved eight break points over the course of the second set before the Spaniard found the killer blow.

However, Alcaraz, who arrived at the tournament under an injury cloud after sitting out the Rome Open with a right arm problem, went off the boil in the third set.

He committed 15 unforced errors to the Dutchman's five as the qualifier cut the deficit.

Alcaraz then twice had to come back from breaks early in the fourth set before running away with the last four games to triumph. — AFP

Carlos Alcaraz Garfia plays a forehand return to Dutch Jesper. — AFP

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Industrial sector to drive economic growth and innovation in Oman

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has affirmed that the royal endorsement by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for the adoption of the Industrial Strategy 2040 and the launch of the incentive programme. It includes several initiatives such as the transformation of limited liability companies into closed joint-stock companies.

Additionally, it highlights the significant role of the manufacturing sector as the second largest contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) after the oil and gas sector.

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, stated that the industrial sector forms one of the main pillars in the economic diversification strategies in the Sultanate of Oman, contributing 9% to the GDP at current prices by the end of 2023.

He added that the Industrial Strategy 2040 was prepared in partnership with the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (Unido) to align with the latest global economic developments and conform with Oman Vision 2040.

He explained that the strategy aims to enhance economic diversification by establishing a developed manufacturing base that relies on modern technology by 2040.

This will be achieved through the optimal utilisation of Omani creative capacities and innovative production technologies, with a focus on raising the quality of Omani industrial products.

He outlined that the



The Industrial Strategy 2040 highlights the significant role of the manufacturing sector as the second largest contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) after the oil and gas sector.

THE INDUSTRIAL SECTOR FORMS ONE OF THE MAIN PILLARS IN THE ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGIES IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN, CONTRIBUTING 9% TO THE GDP AT CURRENT PRICES BY THE END OF 2023.

strategy includes five main objectives: diversifying the manufacturing sector to include activities based on advanced technology and knowledge, developing distinctive products that contribute to improving the health and well-being of individuals, entering new regional markets, modernising the industrial sector to adopt the latest advanced technologies, and establishing a culture of innovation in the industrial sector. Dr Saleh bin Saeed Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry

and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, clarified that the strategy was formulated in two phases.

The first phase involved a detailed diagnosis of the manufacturing sector in the Sultanate of Oman, evaluating its performance since 1970, and identifying the fundamental factors that contributed to the sector's development.

It also included regional and international comparisons, resulting in the definition of the vision, goals, programmes and target performance indicators.

The second phase involved preparing the necessary policy tools, procedures and a timeline for implementation to achieve the strategy's objectives identified in the first phase.

He said that due to global events from late 2019 to 2022, the Manufacturing Industries Strategy 2040 was reviewed and the target performance indicators were updated in 2023 to align

with the latest global economic developments and changes. He also touched on the promising industries identified by the strategy to be focused on during its implementation period.

These industries were selected based on several economic criteria and include 30 promising sectors classified into three main groups: industries based on natural resources, capital-intensive industries, and knowledge-based industries.

Masan highlighted that the stages of preparing the strategy were conducted in collaboration with several entities from both the public and private sectors.

He also referred to the key target indicators in the Industrial Strategy, which revolve around achieving threefold growth in the contribution of the manufacturing sector to the GDP by 2040, reaching RO 11 billion, and achieving growth in non-oil commodity exports to RO 24.9 billion.

TURN TO P15

Oman's first dropshipping startup enables entrepreneurs to launch online businesses

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, MAY 29

The first dropshipping company in Oman, M5azn (pronounced Makhazen), aims to offer entrepreneurs with low cost and low risk solutions to start their enterprises.

Speaking to the Observer during COMEX 2024, owner Ibrahim bin Sinan al Hadhrami said: "The electronic M5azn platform serves both traders and suppliers simultaneously; we enable owners of online businesses to enter the market with minimal risk."

The company, launched in 2021, boasts a deck of over 5,000 products from all categories at cost price, according to administrator Moza al Shukaili.

She explained that individuals can pick a category of products they are interested in, such as care products, beauty or electronics, and start their businesses.

They can then market these products through various outlets such as online stores, social media accounts, or sell them among their social networks directly.

According to Al Shukaili, M5azn then facilitates the payment getaway and handles the logistics aspects, including packaging and shipping.

The company currently operates from three warehouse locations in Muscat, in collaboration with local logistics firms, including Asyad Express backed by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), and Empower Muscat.



Ibrahim bin Sinan al Hadhrami, Owner of M5azn.

According to al Shukaili, the company boasts over 4,000 users with more than 300 active subscribers generating an average of 500 sales per month.

Additionally, the company provides sellers with various subscription models including a free one that includes various perks such as integrated links and customised packaging.

In regards to dropshipping awareness, Al Hadhrami, revealed that it still remains low in Oman. However, he believes that M5azn's local logistics model can help boost awareness of this service.

"Dropshipping awareness remains limited due to past misinterpretations of the term. However, our focus is on local dropshipping rather than global, as globally, logistics control is lacking, whereas locally, you have the capability to manage logistics."

M5azn has been established in partnership with Saudi M5azn, which originally launched dropshipping services in the region in 2020 and currently operates in the UAE as well.

Earlier this year, M5azn signed an agreement with Alibaba to provide access to over 250,000 products.

Oman among frontrunners in fuelling regional solar power growth

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MAY 29

The Sultanate of Oman, together with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, will account for the lion's share of the estimated 100 gigawatts (GW) of solar capacity expected to be developed across the Middle East by 2030, according to a leading energy think-tank.

Rystad Energy, a Norwegian based independent research and energy intelligence company, named Oman among a tiny handful of regional players that are tipped to fuel the growth of solar-based renewables in the region.

Reviewing projections in

renewable energy development across the Middle East, Rystad Energy highlighted the region's exceptional solar energy potential. In particular, Oman, Saudi Arabia and UAE – endowed with solar irradiation of more than 2,000 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per square meter annually - are well-placed to harness this potential, it noted in a new report published on Tuesday.

Given this potential, solar capacity in the Middle East is expected to reach 23 GW by the end of 2024, up from over 16 GW at the end of 2023.

"Projections indicate that by 2030, the capacity will surpass 100 GW, with green hydrogen projects contributing to an annual growth rate of 30%," said Rystad



Solar power to dominant renewables capacity in the Middle East.

Energy, noting that Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are on track to collectively account for nearly two-thirds of the region's total solar capacity by the end of the decade.

According to the report, Oman is anticipated to witness a dramatic increase in its renewables capacity, from around 700 MW presently to almost 3 GW in 2025, rising to 4.5 GW by 2030. As a result,

renewable energy will have a 30% share of overall generation capacity by the end of this decade, up from 3% presently.

Five new onshore wind power projects currently under procurement will contribute around 1 GW of capacity.

While all of this new capacity is primarily aimed at enabling the country's transition away from gas-fired generation, massive new investments in upstream solar and wind farms are anticipated as a new green hydrogen sector begins to take shape in the coming years.

"(Oman) envisions becoming the largest exporter of green hydrogen by 2030 – with production of up to 1.15 million metric tonnes per annum – and

has dedicated 50,000 square kilometres of land for hydrogen project development," Rystad Energy stated in its report.

The international think-tank sees solar capacity accounting for more than half of total power supply in the Middle East by 2050, up from a mere 2% as of the end of 2023.

"By 2050, renewable energy sources, including hydro in addition to solar and wind, are expected to constitute a staggering 70% of the Middle East's power generation mix. This marks a monumental leap from the mere 5% recorded at the end of 2023, signalling a transformative shift in the region's energy landscape," it added.

Bank Muscat wins ‘Best Places to Work’ award for 2024

MUSCAT: In recognition of its pioneering role in the field of developing human resources and cultivating an ideal work environment, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, was honoured with the global prestigious award “Best Places to Work for 2024” presented from “Best Places to Work”, a prestigious global institution in the United Kingdom.

This distinguished award was given to the Bank based on the results of an evaluation assessing work culture and employee satisfaction, as well as a thorough review of HR policy and processes.

The Bank scored highly on the majority of the award parameters, qualifying for this award, which recognises international organisations that play an important role in areas that encompass continuous work environment development, enhancing employee experience, employee engagement and workplace culture.

On this occasion, Shaikha Yousuf al Farsi, Chief Operating Officer, Bank Muscat, said: “We are proud of this recognition, as it reflects the tremendous effort dedicated to developing human resources and establishing an inclusive and collaborative working environment in which the Bank’s employees are empowered and



supported. The Bank is developing specialised plans for employment and training processes in order to stay up with current and future changes while also improving the institutional culture in the Bank’s several connected business areas.

Employees at Bank Muscat form a basic core that contributes significantly to the Bank’s continuing growth and development.

To preserve this development, we are keen to improve transparency and governance while working with a clear vision and values.” Shaikha al Farsi commented: “I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Bank’s employees; whose

dedication and passion enabled this recognition. To achieve our common goal, we always work together to maintain an innovative working atmosphere in which every employee feels respected and empowered to succeed.”

Said bin Salim al Aufi, General Manager – Human Resources and Administration, Bank Muscat, stated: “We are honoured to be named the Best Place to Work, which demonstrates our dedication to strengthening the Bank’s leading position by attracting talent and cultivating an outstanding work environment that provides the resources needed to assist individuals and support their career growth.

The Bank’s work approach is underpinned by a set of principles that enhances its vision “To Serve You Better, Everyday,” which is expressed equally for customers as well as employees.

We are proud of the contribution played by Omani human resources, who demonstrated their capacity to take on responsibility and strengthen the Bank’s pioneering position in the country.

This achievement reflects the efforts of all of our employees; their cooperation and dedication to translating the Bank’s vision and values are significant factors for establishing a healthy work environment.”



NBO launches first Eid note dispensing machine in Oman

MUSCAT: The National Bank of Oman (NBO) launched the trial version of its Eid note dispensing machine.

Taher bin Salim al Amri, Executive President of the Central Bank of Oman, unveiled the machine in the presence of Abdullah bin Zahran al Hinai, Chief Executive Officer of NBO, at the bank’s booth in COMEX 2024 at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC).

This initiative reflects NBO’s commitment to enhancing its customers’ experience by providing innovative services that facilitate their banking transactions. Through this innovative machine, the bank’s customers can seamlessly obtain their Eid notes.

Moreover, marking a significant step forward in encouraging innovation and collaboration in the financial sector, NBO signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) at COMEX 2024.

The MoU signing ceremony, featuring prominent entities including Vodafone Oman, Zumar, and Al Jabr, led by NBO Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Zahran al Hinai, highlights NBO’s commitment to delivering exceptional banking services.

NBO reached an agreement with Vodafone Oman to streamline electronic payments for Vodafone’s customers, vendors, staff and beneficiaries both locally and globally. This partnership enhances NBO’s B2B services to provide efficient and secure payment solutions, ensuring effortless transactions and improved financial management.

Additionally, the agreement with Zumar aims to collaborate in providing banking services to enhance financial inclusion for various segments of society.

This partnership represents a significant step in NBO’s efforts to enhance the digital banking experience for its corporate customers.

These advanced technologies are secure and scalable, enabling real-time data exchange and transaction processing.

Moreover, NBO signed an MoU with Al Jabr, marking the launch of the ‘NBO Fintech Accelerator’.

This initiative is designed to nurture startups and build sustainable business growth in Oman.

It aims to inspire and support the nation’s youth, transforming new business ideas into successful enterprises with robust strategies, essential resources, mentorship and networking opportunities.

These strategic partnerships underscore NBO’s unwavering commitment to fostering innovation, enhancing digital capabilities and supporting economic development in Oman.

By collaborating with leading companies like Vodafone Oman, Zumar, and Al Jabr, NBO is not only advancing its service offerings but also contributing to a more integrated and dynamic financial ecosystem.

The initiatives launched at COMEX 2024 represent a significant step toward a more connected and future-ready banking experience, reflecting NBO’s vision of leading the way in financial innovation and excellence.

Sohar International showcases innovative digital solutions

MUSCAT: Oman’s Best Bank, is excited to announce its participation in COMEX 2024 – Global Technology Show, taking place at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC). Running until May 30, 2024 attendees are invited to visit our interactive stall where the bank will showcase its latest financial and beyond financial digital solutions, designed to enhance customer experience and drive innovation.

In addition to showcasing digital innovations, the bank has planned a series of exciting activities and attractions where attendees can engage with the technology through live demonstrations and hands-on experiences, attend insightful sessions with our experts who will share their vision on the future of banking and digital transformation, and participate in on-site competitions for a chance to win exciting prizes.

On the bank’s participation at COMEX 2024, Ahmed al Musalmi, Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International, said, “As a leading digital bank within the local banking landscape, Sohar International has embarked on a digital



transformation journey.

As we continue to innovate and enhance our digital offerings, Sohar International remains steadfast in its commitment to providing exceptional value to both our retail and corporate clients.

Our initiatives are designed to align seamlessly with Oman Vision 2040, driving forward the nation’s digital transformation agenda. COMEX 2024 serves as a pivotal platform for us to showcase these advancements, demonstrating our dedication

to pioneering solutions that contribute to the economic and technological growth of Oman.”

With several milestones in the digital sphere, visitors to Sohar International’s booth have the opportunity to firsthand experience the myriad of innovative digital services offered by the bank. A key highlight is the bank’s mobile banking apps, which integrate an ecosystem of financial and non-financial services under the ‘My Life’ and ‘My Goals’ features.

These features allow users to book travel, make hotel reservations, purchase gift vouchers and more, demonstrating Sohar International’s commitment to delivering comprehensive and convenient digital banking solutions to its individual customers.

For business clients, Sohar International’s booth will showcase its Unified Transaction Banking Platform, designed for Wholesale Banking clients. This platform provides a convenient one-stop solution with services such as auto reconciliation, supply chain finance, liquidity management, receivables management, digital trade finance and payment processing.

Malabar Group scales up ‘Hunger-Free World’ programme

MUSCAT: ‘Hunger-Free World’, the ongoing social welfare programme by Malabar Group to provide nutritious daily meals to the needy, will be expanded to cover more people and cities. At present, as many as 31,000 food packets are distributed under the ambitious programme, initiated to support the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 2 - Zero Hunger.

As part of scaling up, 51,000 nutritious food packets will now be distributed on a daily basis.

The expansion plan was officially flagged off by P S Sreedharan Pillai, Honourable Governor of Goa, at the World Hunger Day observance event held on May 28, at Malabar Group Headquarters (MHQ) in Kerala,

India. M P Ahammed, Malabar Group Chairman, presided over the function. P T A Rahim, MLA from Kozhikode, Kerala, unveiled the Hunger-Free World donation gateway.

Dr Basith Vadakkayil, Project Head - IPRH Daya Rehabilitation Trust, briefed about the programme and Thottathil Raveendran launched a the official newsletter. P K Ahammed, PK Group Chairman, and P V Chandran, Mathrubhumi Managing Editor, offered felicitations. K P Veeran Kutty, Executive Director of Malabar Group graced the occasion with his presence.

The attendees including the chief guest took an oath, pledging their commitment to creating



a hunger free world. O Asher, Malabar Gold & Diamonds Managing Director (India Operations), welcomed the guests and Nishad A K, Malabar Group Executive Director, proposed the

vote of thanks.

At present the programme is implemented in 37 cities spread across 16 states including Union Territories, apart from a few centres in the Gulf countries. As part of

the expansion, the programme will now cover 70 cities in 16 States.

Besides, the Group also plans to launch the same programme for school children in the African nation of Zambia known for the

largest level of gold mining in the world.

“There are still plenty of people around us who are struggling to secure at least one square meal a day. We launched this programme as a small hand of help to those governments and agencies working hard to eliminate hunger from our world,” said M P Ahammed, Chairman of Malabar Group.

As part of the Hunger Free World initiative, modern kitchens have been set up in different places to prepare nutritious food in a hygienic environment by skilled chefs. The volunteers of Malabar Group identify the needy people in the streets and urban suburbs and bring the food packets to their doorsteps.

Omantel signs strategic partnerships to support Oman's digital economy

MUSCAT: Omantel yesterday signed 11 strategic partnership agreements with major international technology companies to attract the latest technologies and innovations to enhance the digital transformation system and support the digital economy in the Sultanate of Oman, on the sidelines of its participation in the COMEX 2024 exhibition.

Talal bin Saeed al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, said on the sidelines of the announcement of these partnerships that Omantel maintains its leadership as a major enabler of digital transformation for government institutions and the private sector by possessing a solid infrastructure of communications services and digital technologies, as the company sought to consolidate its leadership in the local market by shifting from

A communications services provider to an integrated provider of digital solutions and services.

The partnerships included a partnership with Amazon Cloud Services with the aim of establishing the first sovereign cloud services centre that will provide this type of cloud services through local Omantel data centres.

This service will provide technical solutions available within the Sultanate of Oman instead of its current hosting outside the Sultanate of Oman, and includes: This partnership also operates an integrated e-commerce platform in the Sultanate of Oman, builds



Omantel signed an agreement with OQ Gas Networks yesterday at the COMEX 2024.

a centre of cloud excellence and provides solutions in generative artificial intelligence, as well as its strategic partnership with Google to establish the first centre for edge cloud computing services as the first centre in the Middle East and North Africa region and also to provide generative artificial intelligence services and solutions.

Modern in the field of data analysis and its partnership with MERB, which aims to benefit from Microsoft's artificial intelligence solutions to drive digital transformation at Omantel, its subsidiaries and the local market.

It was also represented by its partnership with Virtusa for Managed Services for empowerment and institutional development, through the signing of a major contract for the IT operating model.

This partnership represents an important addition to the efforts undertaken by Omantel regarding the application of Agile/DevOps methodologies, which contributes to enhancing the company's presence in the market and enhancing the standards of service provision, including providing empowerment applications to companies and institutions, in addition to operational support for IT applications and IT infrastructure.

In the context of promoting digital transformation locally, the Supreme Judicial Council and Omantel signed an agreement to provide communications services and digital exchange for the Council, which would enhance productivity and improve the efficiency of internal and external communications.

In addition, this agreement aims to provide a distinguished experience for auditors and provide high levels of security through advanced digital systems.

This agreement is an essential step towards more advanced technical solutions. It also signed an agreement with the Oman Housing Bank related to supporting the transfer of the bank's entire data to cloud computing systems, which makes it the first bank in the Sultanate of Oman to take this important step for digital transformation, and this agreement paves the way for the bank's employees to reach smoothly and efficiently access advanced cloud services.

The agreement will enable Oman Housing Bank to enhance its ability to process customer data with unprecedented speed

and efficiency, while providing innovative solutions specifically designed to meet the needs of banks and customers.

It also signed an agreement with Bank Dhofar to transfer its core Islamic banking services to cloud computing systems, which makes Bank Dhofar the first major bank in the Sultanate of Oman to migrate its core Islamic banking platform to cloud computing.

The agreement was signed by Engineer Aladdin bin Abdullah Bait Fadel, Chief Commercial Officer at Omantel, and Tariq Taha, Chief Information Technology Officer at Bank Dhofar.

It also signed an agreement with Bank Nizwa, in order to provide innovative technical solutions such as cloud computing technologies to rationalise spending, improve efficiency, enhance cybersecurity aspects, and provide the bank with smart solutions that are compatible with modern banking services.

Omantel signed an agreement with OQ Gas Networks, the exclusive operator of the natural gas transportation network in the Sultanate of Oman, for their cooperation to benefit from the services of ETCO Space (the strategic partner of Omantel) to provide satellite images, as this cooperation will provide satellite images from the Omani satellite.

AMAN-1 and related data analytics along with AI-powered monitoring solutions enable OQ Gas Networks to manage its projects with high efficiency.

— ONA

Pact signed to develop renewable energy projects in GCC



BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAY 29

Three Eight Six Holdings Ltd, a Solar IPP operating in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region with a focus on Commercial & Industrial (C&I) customers, announced yesterday a strategically significant partnership with B Grimm Power Public Company Limited, a key player in the South-East Asian region for sustainable energy solutions, with an extensive international track record.

B Grimm Power Public Company Limited, Minas Investments, and Green Synergy Consulting FZCO have acquired a 49 per cent equity stake in Three Eight Six Holdings Ltd. Three Eight Six Holdings Ltd has subsidiaries in the United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. It will be poised to leverage B Grimm Power's experience and capabilities to jointly develop solar energy projects in the GCC region.

"We want to be the front runner in renewable energy developments in the GCC to make a strongly positive and sustainable impact in the region. With our new partnership, we have a clear ambition to develop and operate 100 MW of C&I solar projects by 2025," said Ahmad al Khayyat, Chairman of Three Eight Six Group.

"This marks the beginning of a cleaner and greener future for the Middle East, thereby finally putting it on the world map for energy transformation," said Dr Harald Link, President of B Grimm Power Public Company Limited.

Industrial sector to drive economic growth and innovation in Oman

FROM PAGE 13

Additionally, the strategy aims to attract investments in the manufacturing sector at a rate of RO 2 billion annually, reaching a total of RO 40 billion by 2040.

The Industrial Strategy 2040 serves as a general guide for the industrial sector, comprising four main programmes: the New Industrial Companies Attraction and Industrial Complexes Establishment Programme, which focuses on preparing new priority activities and advanced technology industries through investment attraction; the Industrial Entrepreneurship and Innovation Programme, which aims to encourage the establishment of new and innovative local companies and an Omani innovative environment; the Industry Development and Modernization Programme, which aims to transform Omani industry into a technologically advanced, internationally competitive, and environmentally sustainable force; and the Industrial Development Governance and Management Programme, which ensures effective and efficient governance and management of the implementation of the strategy's programmes and initiatives.

The strategy's goals are aligned with the key target performance indicators and are consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals and Oman Vision 2040. The launch of these initiatives is part of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion's continuous efforts to enhance the national economy in the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

SMEDA showcases AR technology at COMEX

AFRAH AL BALUSHI

MUSCAT, MAY 29

The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA) showcased its investment map initiative using augmented reality (AR) technology at COMEX 2024.

Khalfan al Khatiri, Assistant Director of the Marketing and Events Department, said, "The Authority continues its support for promising Omani startups at COMEX 2024, as 16 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and tech startups participate in this event.

The Authority continues its efforts to accelerate digital transformation by providing advanced digital services that make it easier for entrepreneurs to manage their projects and expand their businesses."

He also noted that the exhibition includes a special corner for the promising Omani startups to display their initiatives such as the educational electronic game (Little Pioneer) and entrepreneurial stories (start-up stories).

SMEDA's participation at COMEX 2024 highlights its various experiences and initiatives in several areas, including digital transformation, smart cities and reviewing a number of electronic services.



SMEDA continues its efforts to accelerate digital transformation by providing advanced digital services.

This participation aims to review a group of projects and applications that reflect the Authority's progress in these areas.

Through its participation in the COMEX exhibition under the slogan "Empowerment and Sustainable Growth," the Authority continues the journey of empowering promising Omani startups to pave their way towards success, excellence, and expansion.

SMEDA appreciated the royal directives to support SMEs and emerging companies in Oman by launching an incentive programme that includes establishing a sub-market on the Muscat Stock Exchange under promising companies market initiative. This initiative comes from the Council of Ministers'

keenness to develop the capital market sector in Oman.

Reda al Lawati, a digital transformation expert and one of the participants in the Authority's pavilion, said: "The Authority is participating in the COMEX exhibition with several initiatives that serve entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs, including a technical investment map based on artificial intelligence that was launched on the first day of the exhibition.

It helps the entrepreneur make a quick decision to start his business by choosing the appropriate location through the entrepreneur entering a set of data and information related to the activity, through which the application shows the suitable location for the business activity."

Dhofar Municipality to unveil upgraded 'Dhofar Seasons' app

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAY 29

Dhofar Municipality will launch today, May 30, 2024, an updated version of its tourism app aimed at enhancing the visitor experience for tourists during the upcoming 2024 Khareef tourism season. The launch will take place at COMEX 2024 underway at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Speaking to the Observer, Salim al Maalim, a software developer at the Municipality, shared that the updated app will include several new features.

"After the success of the past version of the app with a total of over 50,000 downloads last year, we are coming up with many more features that can ease the experience for visitors." One such update will allow for all kinds of bookings to be made on the app.

Previously, visitors could only buy tickets for concerts, but the revised app will make it possible for other events to be incorporated into the platform.

"Responding to user demand, we expanded the scope of online ticket purchases. This feature allows visitors to book tickets online and avoid waiting in lines," said Al Maalim, noting that around 47,000 tickets were sold through the application.

Additionally, the app will



Screenshots of the revamped 'Dhofar Seasons' app.

include a live-stream of locations which will allow users to better plan their visits to these attractions.

Highlighting the benefits of the live-streaming feature, Al Maalim said: "With this feature, visitors – local and international – can get an idea of the place they plan to visit before actually travelling there."

Significantly, the live-streaming feature is integrated with the Salalah Smart City initiative, supported by modern technologies and cameras that cover key parts of the city. Furthermore, the app now features an interactive map with places and events near the user's location. The app also allows users to create itineraries, recommend attractions to visit and notify users about traffic jams, while suggesting alternative routes or places.

Why labour dispute settlements can enhance workplace productivity



HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

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

The concerned authorities in the Sultanate of Oman are continuously striving to enhance worker productivity in private institutions through various means. One crucial method is the settlement of labour disputes, which helps preserve the rights of all parties involved in the production process.

Recently, a symposium was organised to address labour disputes, with officials from the Ministry of Labour, judges, lawyers, business owners and workers in attendance.

The symposium aimed to identify the challenges facing

commercial and industrial businesses.

Key topics included the mechanisms for settling labour disputes under Omani Labour Law, the implementation of decisions and reconciliations between parties and the potential benefits of learning from other countries' experiences in this field.

Globally, many countries have already advanced in resolving issues between employers and workers, focusing on productivity, efficiency and respect for internal laws.

However, it is crucial to consider the social contexts of countries dealing with these

issues, such as those in our region, to ensure that material concerns do not overshadow the broader national interests.

The symposium resulted in several recommendations to help resolve disputes between business owners and workers across various sectors.

These recommendations aim to identify both positive and negative influences within each sector, addressing conflicts before workers resort to formal complaints.

Educating everyone about their rights is essential for achieving greater stability and enhancing productivity and sustainability in the workplace.

Moreover, both parties should have the freedom to agree on mutually beneficial terms.

A noteworthy recommendation from the symposium is the use of artificial intelligence to guide workers if mediation efforts fail.

This innovation aims to protect the rights of both institutions and workers by conducting thorough investigations, collecting evidence, interviewing witnesses and assessing compliance with labour laws before referring cases to the courts.

As the Omani economy expands, further studies are needed to understand the

causes of labour disputes and the behavioural and productivity-related issues across different age groups and educational levels.

Oman Vision 2040 aims to build a diversified and dynamic economy capable of regional and global competition.

It emphasises the role of the private sector and the importance of a robust justice system to ensure swift and fair resolution of disputes.

Achieving this vision requires efficient and high-quality resolution of litigation procedures, as some disputes currently languish in the courts for years.

China gears up to make a deal with Europe as EV tariffs loom



PHILIP BLENKINSOP

The writer is a Senior Correspondent at Reuters



SARAH WU

The writer is a Reuters correspondent based in Beijing

The European Commission's expected move to hike tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles is set to kick off a round of talks that Chinese executives hope will soften the blow for the world's biggest EV industry.

The provisional tariffs, expected to be announced by June 5, will be a sticker shock representing billions of dollars in new costs for Chinese electric car makers. But both Europe and China have reasons for wanting to strike a deal.

China's EV industry needs profitable exports to the world's third-largest economy to counter falling margins at home, while German automakers want access to China's auto market and EV partnerships to drive costs down.

Every additional 10% in European Union tariffs on top of the existing 10% levy would cost China's EV exporters about \$1 billion based on 2023 trade data. That cost will grow this year as Chinese EV makers expand exports to Europe.

Past EU subsidy investigations on imports from China of other products have resulted in extra duties ranging from about 9% to 26% for companies cooperating with the investigation. Analysts see EV tariffs broadly in that range. The duties would be imposed from early July but could apply retroactively for the three prior months.

China has signalled it is readying alternatives for the bargaining ahead.

The EU provisional duties could be challenged, or even dropped if a large enough share of EU governments oppose them after four months.

The China Chamber of Commerce to the EU, a trade group, said last week Beijing was considering hiking tariffs on large-engine car imports to 25%. China has also floated the idea of lowering tariffs on EU auto imports to 10% from 15%, two people with knowledge of the matter said.

The European Commission has warned BYD, SAIC and Geely they did not provide

EVERY ADDITIONAL 10% IN EUROPEAN UNION TARIFFS ON TOP OF THE EXISTING 10% LEVY WOULD COST CHINA'S EV EXPORTERS ABOUT \$1 BILLION BASED ON 2023 TRADE DATA. THAT COST WILL GROW THIS YEAR AS CHINESE EV MAKERS EXPAND EXPORTS TO EUROPE.



All-electric battery cars sit parked at a parking lot operated by General Motors Co and its local joint-venture partners in Liuzho, China. – Reuters

enough information in response to its investigation of subsidies. That could clear the way for higher tariffs on those companies, a reference that will be used to set levies for the rest of the industry in China.

The trade group said the investigation was flawed from the start and had demanded information Chinese automakers could not provide. That included details on suppliers, including CATL, who were not part of the investigation, one person with knowledge of the investigation said. CATL did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In a statement to Reuters, the trade group said there could be an opening to negotiate. "The ball may be on the European side," it said. Analysts expect both sides to look for a deal. "I expect the Chinese side to, and we're already seeing this, use a combination of carrots and sticks to convince some key member states to push back against the Commission," said Noah Barkin, a Rhodium Group senior adviser.

The European decision would come after the United States quadrupled tariffs on Chinese EVs to 100% - a move Tesla's Elon Musk denounced after previously warning Chinese automakers were on track to "demolish most other car companies". Tesla, the largest EV exporter from China, also faces the threat of higher EU tariffs.

TRADE WARS AND TRANSFORMATION

European automakers have teamed with newer Chinese EV makers to bring EVs to market more cheaply and quickly.

Volkswagen and BMW in April pledged more than \$5 billion to expand research and production in China.

In 2023, almost 29% of cars made by German automakers were sold in China, trade data shows.

Europe is the most important overseas market for Chinese EV makers. With cut-throat competition squeezing margins in China, EV makers such as BYD can sell cars in Europe for

more than twice the China price.

That leaves some room to absorb additional tariffs, analysts say. Chinese EV makers and suppliers are also investing in Europe. Xpeng entered the French market this month. At the opening of Nio's Amsterdam showroom last week, founder William Li said the Chinese EV maker would forge ahead in Europe.

BYD is building an EV plant in Hungary and eyeing a second European plant. Chery Auto, China's largest automaker by export volume, is partnering with Spain's EV Motors to open its first European plant in Catalonia. State-owned SAIC, China's second-largest auto exporter, is searching for its first Europe plant.

CATL, the world's largest battery maker, has ramped up production in Europe. Other Chinese battery suppliers are helping France build its "battery valley".

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said during his visit to China in April that it would be

better for Europeans to press China on lowering its auto import tariffs than to start a trade dispute.

Accompanying Scholz on his China trip were the CEOs of Mercedes-Benz and BMW, both of whom spoke against trade barriers and argued German automakers can handle Chinese competition.

A joint venture between Stellantis and Leapmotor - through which the Franco-Italian automaker will sell the Chinese EV maker's cars abroad - shows how established automakers can pivot on whether China represents a threat or an opportunity.

Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares, who previously called for higher tariffs on Chinese EVs before partnering with Leapmotor, said this month that tariffs were "a major trap". "We will try to be Chinese ourselves," Tavares said in Munich. "Instead of being purely defensive vis-à-vis the Chinese offensive, we want to be part of the Chinese offensive."

— Reuters

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MUSIC

Actor and musician Braeden Lemasters of Wallows performs on NBC's 'Today' show in Rockefeller Plaza in New York City. — Reuters



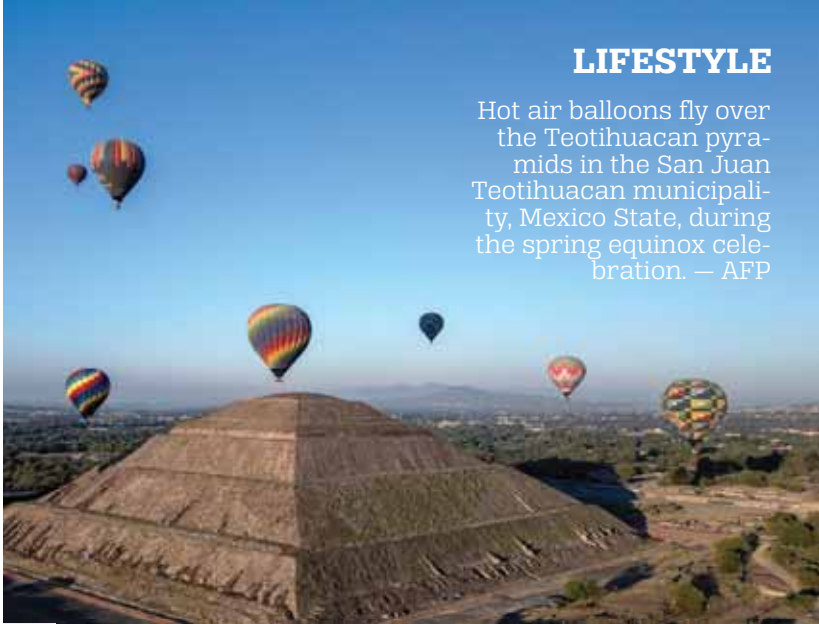
ENTERTAINMENT

Winter of South Korean K-pop girl group aespa looks on during a media showcase in Seoul prior to the release of their album "Armageddon". — AFP



CULTURE

View of pottery for sale within the framework of the Day of the Pottery Craftsman celebration in Aregua, Paraguay. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

Hot air balloons fly over the Teotihuacan pyramids in the San Juan Teotihuacan municipality, Mexico State, during the spring equinox celebration. — AFP



FOOD

A worker processes food waste at ReLoop, a food waste processing company, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. — Reuters

art & life

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EXQUISITE CALLIGRAPHY BY OMANI YOUTH SHINES AT ART EXHIBITION

BY KHALID AL BALUSHI

Beauty and authenticity unite in the paintings, both large and small, created by the talented youth of Oman at the "Arabic Calligraphy and Islamic Ornamentation Exhibition" hosted by the Omani Society of Arts in Ghala. This exhibition highlighted the artistic brilliance of young Omani artists through their exquisite calligraphy, which often forms intricate drawings. The exhibition aimed to promote the culture of Arabic calligraphy, introduce the various styles of Arabic scripts, and highlight emerging talents in this field. It sought to empower young calligraphers by providing a platform to display their works and present their artistic creations to the public. Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation, rooted in pre-Islamic Arabia, evolved significantly after the advent of Islam in the 7th century. Early scripts, like Kufic, were pivotal, with Naskh emerging later. The Abbasid era refined these scripts, integrating them into art and architecture. Islamic ornamentation, characterised by

geometric patterns and arabesques, flourished under the Umayyads, Abbasids, and later empires like the Ottomans and Safavids. The 19th and 20th centuries saw a revival, blending traditional and contemporary styles. Today, these art forms enjoy global recognition, influencing modern design and continuing to captivate audiences worldwide. Awatif al Fazari, head of the drawing section at the society, stated, "The exhibition featured 68 artworks by 48 calligraphers and ornamentation artists. On the sidelines, a diverse array of tools and materials specific to Arabic calligraphy was displayed, with explanations of their usage, offering visitors a deeper understanding of this art form." This exhibition provided a significant opportunity for artists to showcase their work, engage with the audience, learn from others, and develop their skills in calligraphy and ornamentation by observing the experiences of their peers. Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports



and Youth for Sports and Youth, expressed his admiration, stating, "We have discovered unique Omani talents in this field, with exceptional and beautiful works that deserve to be displayed in public places across Oman, such as mosques and landmark corridors. I have witnessed stunning creations by Omani youth in various calligraphy styles, and I hope these works will be shared both locally and internationally for people to appreciate this beauty. Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation face challenges such as declining traditional skills, limited patronage, and the influence of digital media. To preserve these arts, Middle Eastern artists are revitalising interest through education, workshops and exhibitions. Institutions and cultural organisations are offering training programmes to nurture

young talent. Additionally, artists are integrating traditional techniques with modern design, creating contemporary works that appeal to broader audiences. Governments and private patrons are also investing in initiatives to document and protect this cultural heritage, ensuring that these intricate art forms continue to thrive in the modern era. Calligrapher Badr al Ghafri shared his thoughts on his work, saying, "I wanted to break away from the ordinary and move beyond writing on paper. So, I decided to write on other materials like leather, bones and wood. For this exhibition, I presented two works on wood, specifically using Al Attam wood and Omani Lamis wood, both of which are rare in Oman. Owning them is like possessing a treasure. I always choose dark wood, and Al Attam wood is naturally dark.

The piece I wrote could be priced at around RO 300. Imagine its value when adorned with calligraphy to become an art piece – it would be very precious." He explained his method of obtaining wood: "I source the wood from sculptors who always seek the highest quality types. I work with them to refine the wood by sanding it to achieve a smooth and beautiful texture for writing. I then varnish it and use gilding to make the calligraphy shine and the writing clear and beautiful." Calligrapher Aziza al Yousfi said, "I participated with two pieces: one with Islamic ornamentation using 23-carat Italian gold, and the other in Arabic calligraphy using the Diwani font. I am proud of my participation in the exhibition to highlight the art of Arabic calligraphy and Islamic ornamentation."

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



IN DARWIN'S FOOTSTEPS: SCIENTISTS RECREATE HISTORIC 1830S EXPEDITION

LIKE THE NATURALIST Charles Darwin did in 1831, a group of scientists and environmentalists last year set sail from the English port of Plymouth, headed for the Galapagos islands off the coast of Ecuador. But what they found on their arrival last month differed vastly from what Darwin saw while visiting the archipelago in 1835, in a trip key to developing his world-changing theory on natural selection.

The Galapagos today is under protection, part of a marine reserve and classified a World Heritage Site. Yet the area faces more threats than ever, from pollution and illegal fishing to climate change.

There to observe the challenges, with a well-thumbed copy of her great-great-grandfather's "On the Origin of Species" in hand, was botanist Sarah Darwin.

"I think probably the main difference is that, you know, there are people working now to protect the islands," the 60-year-old told AFP onboard the "Oosterschelde," a refurbished, three-mast schooner built more than 100 years ago.

The ship has been on a scientific and awareness-raising expedition since last August, stopping so far in the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, Brazil and Chile among other locales.

- DARWIN'S 'HEIRS' -

In colonial times, the islands — located in one of the world's most biodiverse regions — served as a pit stop for pirates who caught and ate the giant turtles that call it home.

During World War II, the archipelago hosted a US military base.

"I think if (Darwin) were able to come back now and see the efforts that everybody is making, both locally and globally, to protect these extraordinary islands and that biodiversity — I think he'd be really, really excited and impressed," the naturalist's descendant told AFP.

Sarah Darwin first visited the Galapagos in 1995, where she illustrated a guide to endemic plants. She then devoted herself to studying native tomatoes.

She also mentors young people as part of a project to create a group of 200 Darwin "heirs" to raise the alarm about environmental and climate threats to the planet.

Calling at several ports on the journey from Plymouth to the Galapagos, the Oosterschelde took on new groups of young scientists and activists at every stop, and dropped off others.

One of them, Indian-born Laya Pothunuri, who joined the mission from Singapore, told AFP the Galapagos "has a very important place in scientific terms".

She was there, she said, to improve the irrigation systems in the islands' coffee-growing regions.

"I plan to do it using recycled plastic, which also, again, is a big problem over here," she said, noting that plastic waste ends up being consumed by wildlife.

- PLASTIC PERIL -

In the Galapagos, the expedition members worked with researchers from the private Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ), the Charles Darwin Foundation and the NGO Conservation International on both confronting invasive species and protecting endemic ones.

Last year, a study by the Charles Darwin Foundation found that giant turtles in the area were ingesting harmful materials due to human pollution.

Samples revealed that nearly 90 per cent of the waste consumed was plastic, eight per cent was fabric and the rest metal, paper, cardboard, construction materials and glass.

From Galapagos, the Oosterschelde then set sail to continue its world tour, with stops expected in Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. — AFP

MUSIC

Taylor Swift Prevails Over Billie Eilish for a Fifth Week at No. 1

TAYLOR SWIFT HELD the No. 1 spot on Billboard's latest album chart for a fifth consecutive week, after an intense contest with Billie Eilish in which both stars released a blizzard of "versions" of their LPs to lure fans.

Eilish fought for "Hit Me Hard and Soft,"

her third album, with release-week arena listening events in New York and Los Angeles. In an era of supersized track lists as a strategy to maximise streaming yield, the LP had just 10 songs. But fans were given a long menu of options to buy it, including nine coloured vinyl editions. There were also four CDs, among them a "splatter" variant for which Eilish herself decorated the covers with splashed paint ("each one is unique," her website said).

But Swift may have fought harder, or at least hurled more product at the marketplace. Since "The Tortured Poets Department" was released last month, it has come out in more than 20 iterations, according to Billboard, with enough track list variations, media pigments, bonus tracks and collectible goodies like autographs and magnets to keep fans coming back.

Over the past week, both artists' camps launched new items like cannonballs. On the day Eilish released "Hit Me Hard and Soft," Swift put out three limited digital editions of "Tortured Poets" featuring "first-draft phone memo" bonus tracks; then came a remix of her hit "Fortnight"; then, on Thursday, with just hours left in the tracking week, three additional digital versions of the album arrived with live tracks from



her recent Eras Tour performances in Paris.

Eilish, for her part, released three "deluxe" digital albums, adding versions of her LP's songs featuring isolated vocals or in sped-up or slowed-down form. The day after Swift's "Fortnight" remix, Eilish put out

a remix of "L'Amour de Ma Vie."

Fans acted as foot soldiers in this war, clicking for streams or buying up as many album variations as they could. Many also complained on social media, accusing Swift of ruthlessly raining on another star's parade, or taking Eilish to task for com-

ments in a recent interview in which she criticised "some of the biggest artists in the world" for excessive vinyl production.

In the end, Swift won the week with the equivalent of 378,000 album sales in the United States, while Eilish opened at No. 2 with 339,000, her biggest one-week total to date, according to the tracking service Luminate.

A postmortem examination of those numbers shows that the contest was close, but Swift still triumphed by a safe margin. For traditional album sales — meaning copies bought as CDs, vinyl LPs or digital downloads — Swift had 210,000, and Eilish had 191,000. "Tortured Poets" garnered 217 million streams, and "Hit Me" had 194 million streams, though in this format Swift was helped by volume; the 31 tracks on "Tortured Poets" had an average of about 7 million streams apiece, while the 10 tracks on "Hit Me" averaged 19 million.

Both albums were released by label divisions of Universal Music Group, the world's largest record company, so Universal succeeded no matter which woman won.

Also this week, Morgan Wallen's "One Thing at a Time" held at No. 3, Gunna's "One of Wun" was No. 4, and Future and Metro Boomin's "We Don't Trust You" was No. 5. — NYT

SCULPTURE CONVEYS MESSAGE OF MENTAL HEALTH

BY LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

In conjunction with Mental Health Awareness Month in May, ceramic artist and sculptor Shima Amia is showcasing her collection titled "Monsters are Beautiful" at Stal Gallery. The exhibition runs until June 2, 2024.

Amia's message is clear: while people often focus on their superficial appearance, they tend to overlook the crucial aspect of mental health. Creating this collection, which took almost a year, was not only a reflection of her personal experiences, but also a significant part of her healing process.

"In today's world, the narrative of beauty mirrors the tragic tale of Echo and the self-destructive obsession of Narcissus," explained Amia. "Society places immense emphasis on superficial appearances, diminishing the importance of deeper qualities and fostering a culture where outward appearance reigns supreme."

The exhibition "Monsters Are Beautiful" voices the pain, defeat, and suffering of those ensnared by their own narcissism, lies and hypocrisy. Yet, from this pain emerged knowledge, creativity and awareness. Amia has chosen clay as her medium of expression, reflecting her passion for ceramic art and pottery, which she finds deeply connected to nature.

"Earth is one of the four natural elements, or clay as it is described in pottery. It is a fundamental material and deserves to be glorified. This artwork fascinates me because it integrates earth, hands and emotions," she explained.

Her focus lays on the delicate intricacies of human psychology, a realm often veiled until expressed. With careful molding and shaping, she brought forth characters to narrate her tale.

"I was unfamiliar with narcissism initially. But upon learning of it, I felt compelled to delve deeper, conducting thorough research into the personality disorder. Recognising the importance of seeking professional guidance to navigate such challenges, I observed many suffer in silence," explained the sculptor, whose art gave voice to countless victims impacted by narcissists, exemplified by her installation of 53 faces reflecting a myriad of emotions.

In her view, "Narcissus, shaped by his surroundings, not only precipitates his own decline, but also disregards the inherent worth of humanity and

nature, dragging others into his abyss like eternal voids. Perceiving himself as the universe's axis, he dismisses anything beyond his own desires and fantasies. Yet, this monstrous facade presents itself as beautiful, masking its true inner turmoil."

She elaborates on a reality where bodies collapse, faces wrinkle, and voices resonate with anxiety, where surfaces dry and colours fade into a matte gray. Her inquiry is poignant: "Have we, too, become monsters, our self-absorption blinding us to the world?" Are we, in turn, victims of these monsters? She emphasises the necessity for seeking help to mend internal wounds, alongside the external scars, advocating for the discovery of inner tranquility.

"Rediscovering and reshaping beauty demands attentive observation and contemplation," Shima asserts, "facilitating the restoration and amplification of what teeters on the brink of collapse, uncovering and enhancing the inherent beauties within."

Originally from Tehran, Shima Amia has been a full-time ceramicist and art instructor in Oman since 2013. In 2016, she founded her own art studio in Muscat, where she imparts her artistic wisdom to individuals of all ages.

