

RO 170 million for digital transformation

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has unveiled the executive plan of government digital transformation for the period 2021-2025. The volume of investment is expected at RO 170 million over the five-year programme. This sum will go towards improving procedures, re-engineering government services, automating basic services, propagation of services via the Internet and the development of centralised digital solutions. **SEE P13**



P10

AL ATIYAH ON COURSE FOR CROWN, ADRIEN ON TOP IN BIKE



P13

WE DON'T WANT TO SEE \$100 A BARREL: DR RUMHY



P20

OMANI 'CREATIVE GIANTS' MAKE GLOBAL DEBUT



MUSCAT

ADAM, AL MUDHAIBI TO GET FISH MARKETS

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources on Wednesday signed two agreements with Al Qima Company for Projects to construct two fish markets in the wilayats of Adam and Al Mudhaibi. The two projects are funded by the Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). **SEE P4**

BRUSSELS

NATO OFFERS MISSILE TALKS WITH RUSSIA

Nato said on Wednesday it was willing to talk to Russia about arms control and missile deployments but would not allow Moscow to veto Ukraine's ambition to join the alliance, warning of a real risk of a new war in Europe. Moscow has forced the West to the negotiating table this week by massing some 100,000 troops near the border with Ukraine, a former Soviet republic that aspires to join Nato. **SEE P6**

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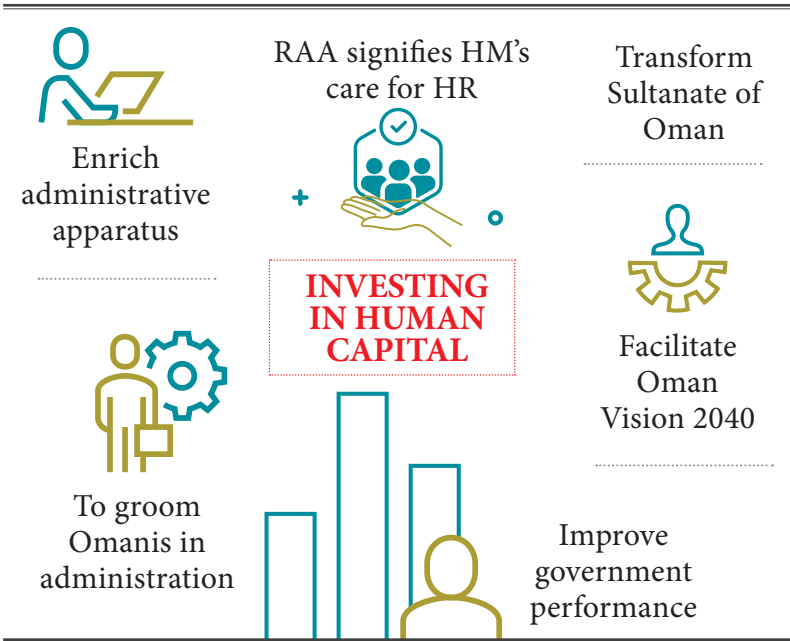
SWISS AMBASSADOR BIDS FAREWELL



On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office today Balz Abplanalp, Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to the Sultanate of Oman to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty. **SEE ALSO P3**

RAA TO SPEARHEAD OMAN VISION 2040

MUSCAT: The Royal Academy for Administration (RAA), which was set by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, constitutes a major step forward in boosting administrative training in the Sultanate of Oman, said specialists in administrative and academic affairs. Sayyid Zaki bin Hilal al Busaidy, CEO of the erstwhile Institute of Public Administration said the establishment of the RAA affirms the care and attention accorded to human resources by His Majesty the Sultan. He added that the Academy will upgrade the capabilities of the Omani human resources in the public and private sectors in a manner that aligns with the requirements of Oman Vision 2040. Yahya bin Khamis al Hussaini, CEO of Muscat Statistical Consulting centre, said the RAA will contribute to the



improvement of government performance by devising clear-cut plans for the development of leadership skills. Dr Obaid bin Said al Shaqsi, Associate Professor of Mass Communications at Sultan Qaboos University, said that the establishment of the RAA reflects the piercing vision of His Majesty the Sultan to meet the requirements of the next stage of

Classes 1-4 to be online for 4 weeks from Jan 16

MUSCAT: Students of Grade 1 to 4 in the Sultanate of Oman will go online from January 16 for four weeks, the country's Supreme Committee on Covid-19 said on Tuesday in the wake of rising coronavirus cases. The Supreme Committee also stressed the need for everyone to adhere to the precautionary controls, and called for the commitment from institutions including commercial complexes, exhibitions and conferences. The Supreme Committee studied updates about the pandemic and means of protection against the disease and curb its spread. The committee noted a considerable surge in cases of community-based infection with Covid-19 variant Omicron variant of Covid-19 as well as a rise in related hospitalisation cases. Primary healthcare centres registered an increase in respiratory inflammation cases in all governorates, notably in the 5-12 age-group. This is an indication of widespread respiratory inflammations among the unvaccinated segment. The committee stressed the need to stick to the 50 per cent occupancy rate in commercial complexes, exhibitions, conference, wedding and sports halls which are frequented by large numbers of people. The establishments are also required to seek vaccination proof from their visitors, observe physical distance and demand that the visitors wear face masks. — ONA

Job security benefit and subsidy to be given till June

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 12

The Council of Ministers extended the disbursement of the job security benefit and the monthly subsidy to Omanis who lost their jobs in the Sultanate of Oman and the GCC countries. It extended the subsidy payment for the Omanis have been terminated in GCC countries from May 26, 2021, and did not join any work in 2021. It also postponed the rule which stipulated that involvement in the system should be no less than 12 months to be entitled to get the benefit in November 2021.

Ministry of Information officially launches Ayn app

VINOD NAIR AND ZAKIYA AL HUSSAINI
MUSCAT, JAN 12

The Ministry of Information on Tuesday launched Ayn digital platform, which will stream a large collection of Omani audiovisual content on smart devices. The project was launched as part of the plans and efforts to keep pace with the developments in the media, especially with

the emergence of online or mobile streaming services that allow viewers to access the past, current, and live programmes anytime and anywhere. In a statement on Tuesday, the Ministry of Information invited people to use the platform by downloading the Ayn app on their smart devices or by visiting the website for giving their feedback to help improve the quality of services.



The beta version was launched on September 1 and the platform received positive feedback from inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman. The number of views on the platform since the trial launch was 4,700,000 from around 170 countries, while the total downloads of the application via smart devices and screens were 74,000. Suggestions received during the trial period help the technical

team to work on the improvement of the security features. Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, said that the launch of this platform coincides with Sultanate of Oman's celebrations of the 11th of January anniversary, the day when His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik assumed reins of power as the architect of Sultanate of Oman's Renewed Renaissance. **TURN TO P3**

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7kg assorted



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3 RIAL 990



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2 RIAL 230
1 RIAL 550



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Foreign minister meets honorary consuls

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, on Wednesday held a meeting with Honorary Consuls of the Sultanate of Oman to Denmark, Frankfurt, Cyprus, Ireland, Armenia and Hungary. The meeting came within the framework of the visit programme set by the Foreign Ministry for the Honorary Consuls of the Sultanate of Oman.

The meeting reviewed cooperation and means of utilising the investment opportunities between the Sultanate of Oman and their respective countries.

The meeting was attended by Khalid bin Hashel al Musalhi, Head of the Minister's Office Department, and a number of officials at the ministry.

It is worth mentioning that the honorary consuls visited the Sultanate of Oman's pavilion in the Expo 2020 Dubai and lauded its embodiment of the civil heritage and future vision of the Sultanate of Oman.

RECEIVES LITHUANIAN MINISTER

Meanwhile, Sayyid Badr also received Dr Mantas Adomenas, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Lithuania.

The two sides reviewed bilateral relations between the



two countries. They underscored their keenness to consolidate these ties in various fields.

The two sides also exchanged views on several regional and international matters of common concern.

The meeting was attended by

Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, the Foreign Ministry's Under-Secretary for Diplomatic Affairs, Renatas Norkus, Ambassador of Lithuania to the Sultanate of Oman, and officials from both sides.

— ONA

Asaad bids farewell to Swiss ambassador

MUSCAT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office on Wednesday Balz Abplanalp, Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty.

The ambassador expressed his thanks to His Majesty the Sultan for the support extended to him during his tour of duty from His Majesty, the Government and the Omani people, which has enabled him to carry out his duty.

He wished His Majesty good health, happiness and long life. He also wished the Sultanate of Oman further progress and growth under the wise leadership



of His Majesty.

On his turn, Sayyid Asaad expressed his utmost thanks to the ambassador for the efforts he exerted in serving relations between the Sultanate of Oman and his country. He wished him

permanent success and the Swiss people further progress and prosperity.

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

Ministry of Information officially launches Ayn platform

FROM PAGE 1

"This move comes to keep pace with the digital transformation within the goals of the country's Vision 2040." The Directorate-General of Electronic Media said that Ayn.om will be producing new programmes that will be launched in the coming days.

The platform shares a special content of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, at the forefront of the newly launched platform, including letters, official visits, and news. The content is constantly updated to keep the user of the "Ayn" platform constantly informed of the most prominent updates.

The platform also includes a special space for the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, including speeches, official visits, tours,

Apart from video blogs, the platform offers live streaming of radio and TV channels, in addition to the provisions to watch the programmes missed within 48 hours under the 'Do Not Miss' category



military events, national celebrations, and rare content that has not been broadcast before on Omani TV; with the aim of perpetuating the memory of the late Sultan.

"To enhance digital culture, the 'Ayn' platform will present a new qualitative addition to the platform, which is also one of

the first initiatives in the field of audiobooks in the Sultanate of Oman, which is read by a selection of Omani voices, most notably Muhammad al Marjibi, Ibrahim al Yahmadi, and other prominent media personalities. It includes a variety of fields between history, literature, biographies, travel literature, and others."

Royal address a great impetus to development initiatives

HM'S SPEECH IS A DIRECTION TO MOVE FORWARD WITH THE RENEWED RENAISSANCE, SAYS OCCI CHAIRMAN

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Royal address to the nation is a great impetus to the development initiatives and welfare of the peoples of the Sultanate of Oman, says the Chairman and Board of Directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI).

"The Royal speech is a direction to move forward with the Renewed Renaissance and achieve the objectives of comprehensive development," said Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman, OCCI.

He added that the Royal speech has touched upon almost all comprehensive development areas and is a clear road map for the future.

"The speech has foreseen the improvement of economic and financial performance along with the sustainability of the state's ability to meet its financial

The private sector is taken into confidence to intensify its performance on the next stage, based on its responsibilities as a key and effective partner in the development process

OCCI BOARD OF DIRECTORS

obligations which is encouraging to take more economic stimulus policies."

"The private sector is taken into confidence to intensify its performance on the next stage, based on its responsibilities as a key and effective partner in the

development process as it is the main engine of the economy," the OCCI Board of Directors said in a statement.

The board evaluated that the high interest shown by His Majesty in young entrepreneurs who wish to establish their projects represents an excellent precursor to the business sector. Both male and female entrepreneurs can look forward to receiving all support from the government, which will spare no effort to encourage entrepreneurship programmes and provide the necessary support and incentives.

The OCCI Chairman further said that the Royal speech identifies local investment as one of the important pillars for diversifying sources of national income which is a generous invitation from His Majesty to invest capital locally and seize the opportunities and advantages that the Sultanate of Oman enjoys, especially in sectors related to economic diversification.

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Oman, Lithuania review trade, investment opportunities

MUSCAT: Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) received here on Wednesday Dr Mantas Adomenas, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Lithuania and his accompanying delegation.

The meeting discussed several topics, mainly conducting bilateral meetings between the Omani businessmen and their Lithuanian counterparts, as well as creating a joint platform to present the investment opportunities in the Sultanate of Oman and Lithuania.

MEETING WITH MOCIIP OFFICIAL

Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, also received Dr Mantas Adomenas.

The meeting reviewed the astounding relations between the two countries. It also covered fields of trade and economic



cooperation.

The two sides discussed several matters of common interest and expressed their keenness to seize the investment opportunities and the available capabilities in the fields of trade, industry, tourism and energy.

The meeting touched on Oman Vision 2040 and the economic diversification sectors targeted by the Sultanate of Oman, namely transformative industries, tourism, mining, fisheries, transportation, logistic services and associated sectors.

CONSULTATION SESSION

Meanwhile, a session of political consultations was held between the Foreign Ministries of the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Lithuania.

The Omani side was headed by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary for Diplomatic Affairs. The Lithuanian was headed by Dr Mantas Adomenas Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The session discussed bilateral relations between the two countries. The two sides underlined their keenness to continue promoting joint cooperation in economic fields. They also stressed their willingness to exchange investments.

The session further touched on several regional and international matters of common interest.

It was attended by officials from the foreign ministries of the two countries.

— ONA

Chief of Bahrain Defence Force visits MTC, NDC



MUSCAT: Lt Gen Theyab Saqr al Nuaimi, Chief of Bahrain Defence Force (BDF) on Wednesday toured the Military Technological College (MTC).

Upon the guest's arrival, he was received by the college's Acting Commandant. Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the college's education and service facilities, in addition to its general curriculum, technical specialisations and the various educational levels. They also toured several departments and training workshops in the college.

The Air Vice Marshal Saleh bin Yahya al Maskari, Commandant of the National Defence College (NDC) also received Lt Gen Al Nuaimi.

The two sides exchanged views on several matters of common interest.

The guest and his delegation toured the NDC. They were briefed

on the college's facilities and its accredited academic programme in rehabilitating the candidates, as well as the most important exercises and seminars that come within the NDC's annual plans.

They were briefed on the college's environment which stimulates creativity, learning, research and development. The college contains diverse halls that are built based on the latest standards. The halls are also equipped with the best educational systems, training aids and electronic multi-purpose systems.

Later in the evening Lt Gen Theyab Saqr al Nuaimi left the Sultanate of Oman. The guest and his delegation were seen off at Al Seeb Air Base by Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis bin Abdullah al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces, and Ambassador of Bahrain to the Sultanate of Oman.

— ONA



Agreements signed to build two fish markets in Adam and Al Mudhaibi



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources on Wednesday signed two agreements with Al Qima Company for Projects to construct two fish markets in the wilayats of Adam and Al Mudhaibi. The two projects are funded by the Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). The agreements were signed by Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources,

Khalfan bin Mussalam al Habsi, Chairman of the Board of Al Qima Company for Projects, and Eng Abdulmir al Ajmi, PDO's External Affairs and Value Creation Director.

The two markets will be set up on a construction area of 920 square metres for each. The two markets will include 14 fish stalls, with a hall for cutting fish that comprises 7 stalls and waiting hall for the customers.

— ONA

ROP to participate in Arabian Gulf Security 3 exercise in Saudi Arabia



MUSCAT: A force from the Royal Oman Police (ROP) left here on Wednesday to take part in the joint exercise Arabian Gulf Security 3 due to be conducted at end of January in Saudi Arabia in the presence of Brigadier Mohammed bin Nasser al Kindi, Director-General of Operations at ROP.

The exercise is aimed at boosting security cooperation and exchanging expertise between the security apparatuses of the GCC countries as well as joint planning to confront potential threats.





Emergency services at venues of first-class football matches

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

All first-division football matches played in the Sultanate of Oman will be transferred to sports complexes with well-equipped ambulances and qualified medical crews.

This decision was taken by the Oman Football Association (OFA) and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth following reports of lack of facilities to handle emergencies at some sports venues.

OFA said it will take all measures to ensure the safety and security of players and will ensure that all matches are played in safe conditions.

It added that procedure is a precautionary and temporary measure until permanent solutions are found to provide such service and facilities in all sports club groups in coordination with all concerned authorities.



The sudden demise of an Omani football player recently initiated a debate on the need for mechanisms to handle emergencies, like a heart stroke or cardiac arrest, at public events.

Muscat Football Club player Mukhallad al Raqadi fell during training and died at the hospital before the game began. He was 29 and a budding player for the national team.

Football fans in the Sultanate of

Oman expressed their shock at the death of Raqadi and highlighted the lack of facilities.

They urged the concerned authorities, including football clubs and associations, to corrective measures.

Dr Najeed bin Zahran al Rawahi, senior consultant of cardiology and electrocardiography at the Royal Hospital, and the first Omani electrophysiologist, has said that the heart is a muscle,

which can be affected by many factors that may lead to its failure.

Al Rawahi said cardiac arrest can be caused due to several factors, including ventricular fibrillation (irregular heartbeats), which leads to fainting, end in the event of a person's exhaustion, it will lead to death. It is necessary for everyone in the target groups to undergo periodic examination. One of the main causes of stenosis of the coronary artery (blockage is high cholesterol, which is common in people aged 40 years and above).

"Diabetes, high blood pressure and infections can also affect the functioning of the heart. It is also necessary to have automatic cardiac resuscitation devices (chest compression machines CPRS) at big gatherings or public events, with people trained in first aid, which will save everyone who may be exposed to heart attacks," Al Rawahi said.

Bait Al Zubair, CAS Nizwa sign MoU



MUSCAT: The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (College of Applied Sciences in Nizwa) and Bait Al Zubair Foundation signed a joint memorandum of understanding aimed at cooperation in several cultural, cognitive and skill fields.

It also aimed to exchange training and practical experiences between the university and the Bait Al Zubair Foundation and to encourage cultural projects, research, incubators and student companies.

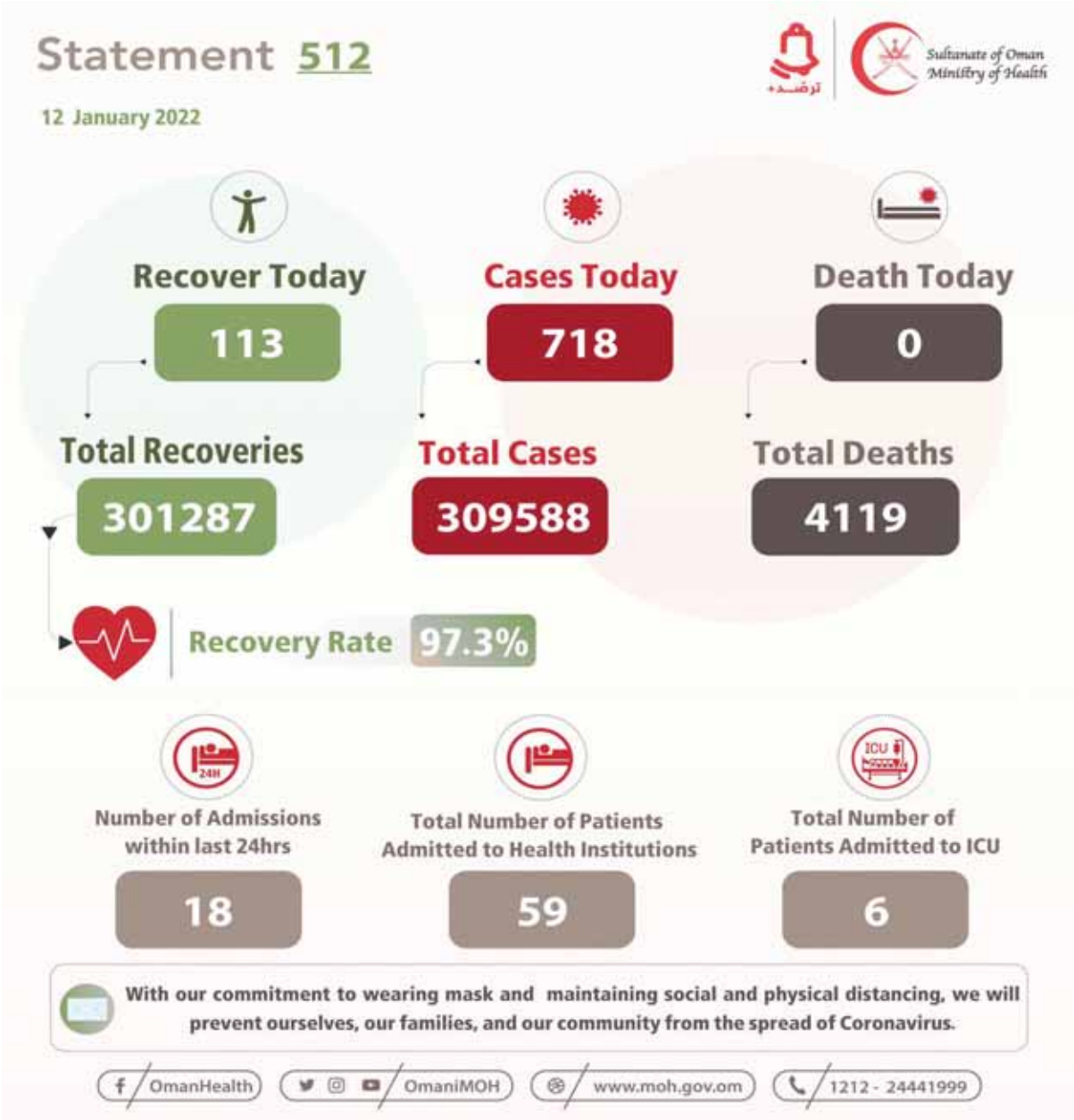
In addition to mutual sponsorship of events in the fields of exhibitions and scientific, research, training and cultural fields, and work to promote the culture of entrepreneurship through training courses and workshops, mutual visits, and

joint arbitration in competitions.

The signing of this MoU comes in implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik continuing to pay attention to education, training, care for heritage, and cultural and tourism components.

In addition to harnessing all possibilities to achieve sustainable development, and a desire to enhance integration between the public and private sectors in the field of cultural industries.

The memorandum was signed by Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Shibli, Director-General of the Colleges of Applied Sciences, and Al Zubair bin Muhammad al Zubair, Vice-Chairman of the Board of Directors of Al Zubair Foundation.



Primary school classes 1-4 to be online



As part of its ongoing convening, the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has decided to revert to the online education system for First Cycle of primary school (classes 1-4) for a period of four weeks with effect from January 16.

Honoured with 'Peace Commissioner' doctor remembers Oman connection

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Dr George Leslie, who was a Muscat-resident doctor for nearly 20 years, has been selected to be the 'Peace Commissioner' in the County of Wexford in Ireland, a coveted title that a resident can aspire for.

Dr Leslie is the first non-Irish citizen to be appointed to this position and he received the confirmation of his appointment from Helen McEntee, Minister for Justice.

Speaking to the *Observer* from Dublin, Dr George said the recognition is a privilege and "great honour" and is a commitment.

"It's a really huge honour for me and also for my family. Besides being the Peace Ambassador, I never fail to speak to my Irish colleagues about Sultanate of Oman, its people, their warmth and love," said Dr George.

Dr Leslie, having spent twenty years in the Sultanate of Oman with his family, keeps fond memories of the country.

"The Sultanate of Oman is where I worked as a doctor in General Practice, it is where my children schooled, and it is where I got many life-long friends. It is the place that taught me humanity and humbleness and I can never forget my close Omani friends there."



Dr Leslie

A renowned social worker and a doctor at the Slaney Medical Centre, Leslie is passionate about the history of the Sultanate of Oman as well as Ireland. He spends much time in understanding history and becoming the peace ambassador is the culmination

of his passion for society and humanity.

"I think I can give back to the people who have made me feel welcome over the last two decades and be a part of the change that we want to see in the world," he adds.

It was his love for Ireland during his family holidays there from the Sultanate of Oman that made him settle down in the Republic of Ireland. When he was living there in 1998 with an Irish host, a fatherly figure, he got to know much about the culture, tradition, struggles of the forefathers and heritage of the country.

"I met many good people everywhere around the world but here in particular. I talk at length

about the Sultanate of Oman and the touristic as well as investment opportunities. I'm pretty sure many of my Irish friends are going to visit the Sultanate of Oman once the pandemic is over."

Dr George said he values the appointment of peace commissioner because it enables him to contribute even more to his community outside of his role as a general practitioner.

"More than a medical doctor I can now do something for people in the community," he said. He said being a peace commissioner will assist him in organising initiatives for young people, especially with regard to drug or alcohol awareness events.

Doha Intl Book Fair opens today

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and the Ministry of Information, will take part in Doha International Book Fair 2022.

This cultural event will kick off on Thursday and last till January 22.

The participation aims at highlighting the cultural, civilisational, literary and historic aspects of the Sultanate of Oman, as well as underscoring the Omani intellectual production.

The Sultanate of Oman's pavilion in the book fair will include new and variant literary, artistic, historic, intellectual and scientific books for some government institutions, besides several publications for Omani private libraries. — ONA



Nato offers missile talks with Russia



Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg addresses a press conference following a meeting of the Nato-Russia Council in Brussels. – AFP



US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman holds a news conference at the Nato headquarters in Brussels. – Reuters

BRUSSELS: Nato said on Wednesday it was willing to talk to Russia about arms control and missile deployments but would not allow Moscow to veto Ukraine’s ambition to join the alliance, warning of a real risk of a new war in Europe.

Moscow has forced the West to the negotiating table this week by massing some 100,000 troops near the border with Ukraine, a former Soviet republic that aspires to join Nato.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said after four hours of talks between alliance ambassadors and a Russian delegation in Brussels that Nato would not let Moscow dictate security arrangements to other countries and create dangerous spheres of influence.

“There is a real risk for new armed conflict in Europe,” Stoltenberg told a news conference.

“There are significant differences between Nato allies and Russia,” he said. “Our differences will not be easy to bridge, but it is a positive sign that all Nato allies and Russia sat down around the same table and engaged on substantive topics.”

Russia denies planning to invade Ukraine but says it needs a series of guarantees for its own security, including a halt to any further Nato expansion and a withdrawal of alliance forces from central and eastern European nations that joined it after the Cold War.

Stoltenberg said any use of Russian force against Ukraine would be a serious political mis-

take for which Russia would pay a high price.

He said Nato might deploy additional troops to eastern allies should Russia again use force against Ukraine, from which it seized the Crimean peninsula in 2014.

He reiterated Nato’s position that only Ukraine and Nato can decide whether Ukraine becomes a member — a prospect Nato promised it, in principle, as far back as 2008.

However, Stoltenberg said Nato was ready for further talks with Moscow on issues including arms control, missile deployments and confidence-building measures. Russia had asked for time to come back with an answer on this, he added.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko, who headed Moscow’s delegation, was due to brief reporters later.

Stoltenberg’s remarks made clear there had been no breakthrough at the talks, which came two days after Russian and US diplomats met in Geneva and reported no narrowing of their differences.

Russia has accused the West of failing to appreciate the urgency of its demands, and said it is not prepared to allow negotiations to drag on indefinitely.

It says Nato’s expansion from 16 members at the end of the Cold War to 30 now — including a large group of ex-communist states in central and eastern Europe — poses a threat to its security and it needs to draw “red lines” now to protect itself. — AFP

Parts of Kenya suffer through second day of power cuts

NAIROBI: Kenya on Wednesday faced a second consecutive day of rolling power cuts after a damaged transmission line caused a nationwide outage in East Africa’s most dynamic economy.

The country of nearly 50 million suffered a nearly day-long blackout on Tuesday after four electricity pylons connecting Nairobi to a hydroelectric dam collapsed, state-run utility Kenya Power said.

By evening, Kenya Power had declared the problem resolved in most of the country but a second outage caused by another malfunctioning transmission line cut supply once again to many areas on Wednesday.

Kenya Power said Tuesday’s collapse had triggered “glitches” in other supply units and only a small portion of the country remained without electricity.

“If you have such a major outage, you will have

small issues here and there of the main system being unstable,” Kenya Power spokesman Gregory Ngahu said.

Kenya taps hydro, geothermal and wind to help generate energy but power costs remain high, in part because of a fuel surcharge for running diesel generators to cover peak demand times.

President Uhuru Kenyatta’s government last week announced a 15-per cent reduction in power tariffs to assist lower income households.

“Maybe it will be achieved by not supplying power 15 per cent of the time,” quipped a Twitter user following the blackouts.

In 2016, a monkey tripped a major power cut in Kenya after falling onto a transformer at a power station.

The primate survived its brush with death but large parts of the country were left without power for several hours. — AFP

UK PM Johnson apologises for attending lockdown party

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson offered his “heartfelt apologies” on Wednesday for attending a “bring your own booze” gathering at his official residence during the country’s first coronavirus lockdown as opponents said he must resign.

Johnson admitted for the first time that he had attended the party at 10 Downing Street on May 20, 2020, when Covid-19 rules limited social gatherings to a bare minimum, and said he understood the anger the revelations had caused.

“I know the rage they feel with me over the government I lead when they think that in Downing Street itself the rules are not being properly followed by the people who make the rules,” an ashen-faced Johnson told parliament.

Johnson, who won a landslide 2019 election victory on a promise to secure Britain’s exit from the European Union, said he regretted his action and had thought

the gathering was a work event — drawing jeers from opposition lawmakers.

“I went into that garden just after six on the 20th of May 2020 to thank groups of staff before going back into my office 25 minutes later to continue working,” he said. “With hindsight, I should have sent everyone back inside.”

Opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said Johnson must now resign and that the public thought him a liar.

“The party’s over, prime minister,” Starmer told him.

“After months of deceit and deception, the pathetic spectacle of a man who has run out of road. His defence that he didn’t realise he was at a party is so ridiculous that is actually offensive to the British public.”

Anger has grown since ITV News reported Johnson and partner Carrie mingled with about 40 staff in the Downing Street garden after his Principal Private Secre-



Demonstrators protest near the House of Commons, where Britain’s Prime Minister was taking part in the weekly session of Prime Minister Questions (PMQs) in central London. – AFP

tary Martin Reynolds sent an e-mail invitation asking attendees to “bring your own booze”.

Numerous people, including some lawmakers, have described how the rules kept them from the bedsides of dying loved ones last May in contrast to the events in Downing Street.

Some of Johnson’s own Conservative members of parliament (MPs) have said how he responded on Wednesday to the growing furore would determine his future.

“His survival is in the balance at the moment,” said one senior Conservative MP, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the situation.

Two snap opinion polls on Tuesday showed well over half of respondents thought Johnson should resign. But while parliament resounded with demands for his head, Johnson’s biographer Andrew Gimson said he was unlikely to quit unless forced out by his parliamentary colleagues. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

SOFIA

Bulgaria moves to abandon ‘golden passports’

Bulgaria’s new graft-fighting government moved to abolish a much criticised “golden passports” scheme, which offered Bulgarian citizenship in reward for large investments in the country. The practice, in place since 2013, has made it possible for foreigners to apply for a residence permit and then a passport if they invest a minimum of \$568,000 in Bulgaria.

The scheme, which also exists in Cyprus and Malta,



was repeatedly criticised by the European Commission, which urged countries to abolish it because it created an incentive for corruption and money laundering.

TUNIS

Tunisia reimposes night-time curfew

Tunisia announced a new night-time stay-at-home order for the next two weeks in order to tamp down surging coronavirus cases.

There will be “a curfew from 10 pm until 5 am”, following recommendations by the government’s scientific committee, the presidency said.

The presidency also ordered “the postponement or cancellation of all public gatherings or demonstrations, in closed or open spaces.”



The new measures take effect on Thursday, the day before the 11th anniversary of former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s flight into exile in a revolution that sparked the 2011 uprisings.

BANGKOK

Thailand to introduce \$9 visitor fee from April

Thailand will introduce a \$9-entry fee for foreign visitors from April, officials said, even as the kingdom seeks to lure travellers back and repair its Covid-battered tourism sector. Strict entry rules imposed to curb the pandemic hammered Thailand’s crucial tourism industry last year, contributing to the economy’s worst performance in more than 20 years.

The new 300 baht (\$9) charge will be incorporated into airfares, government spokesman Thana-



korn Wangboonkongchana said. Before the pandemic, nearly 40 million visitors a year flocked to Thailand, but the kingdom is hoping to revamp its tourism strategy with a greater focus on sustainability.

How the ‘Djokovic Affair’ came back to bite Australia’s premier

SYDNEY: Novak Djokovic received the bad news on Thursday at 7:42 am. His entry visa into Australia was cancelled and he was being detained, despite his arrival with a medical exemption from the country’s vaccine mandate for international visitors.

At 8:56 am, Prime Minister Scott Morrison jumped on Twitter to announce the tennis superstar’s comeuppance. “Rules are rules, especially when it comes to our borders”, Morrison wrote. “No one is above these rules.”

At first, the visa cancellation for a celebrity opponent of Covid vaccines must have looked like an obvious political winner. Australians respect mandates, from vaccinations to compulsory voting. Djokovic isn’t always a sympathetic character. And with an election on the way by May, Morrison was returning to a well-tested tactic: Stirring voter support with appeals to tough border enforcement.

But now that Djokovic has been released and his visa restored — after a blistering hearing before a federal judge on Monday — Morrison’s eagerness to portray him as an arrogant violator of Australia’s egalitarian ideals has started to look like an unforced error.

A nation preoccupied in recent weeks with an economy-crippling surge of omicron infections and a shortage of Covid tests is now debating the fairness and competence of its government and questioning the priorities of its top leader. The sudden turn has twisted Morrison’s conservative supporters in knots and angered critics who already see him as a smug opportunist who prefers performance to substance and struggles with taking responsibility.

The prime minister now faces a difficult choice: Whether to double down, or to fold and let Djokovic try to win his 10th title in the Australian Open, which starts on Monday.

The law allows Australia’s immigration minister to deport Djokovic or any other visa holder for even the smallest of violations: A slight risk to public health, an incorrect statement on immigration forms or a perceived deficit of character. Alex Hawke, 44, an ambitious party loyalist who took on the immigration portfolio about a year ago, said on Monday night that he was still considering whether to rescind the tennis star’s visa for a second time.

On Tuesday, immigration authorities said they were investigating whether Djokovic could be charged with a crime for apparently stating falsely on an entry form that he had not travelled internationally in the 14 days before his flight from Spain to Australia via Dubai. (Social media appeared to show him celebrating Christmas in his native Serbia.)

Djokovic had told government officials that Tennis Australia completed the form for him, but it was not clear whether that could save him.

His opponent in this case — Morrison — is a political combatant who came to power during the presidency of Donald Trump and relished their friendship. Letting Djokovic remain in the country would not just mean accepting legal defeat for the prime minister; it would also mean defying his own past and his political inclinations.

When Morrison served as immigration minister in 2013 and 2014, he was responsible for a military-led campaign called Operation Sovereign Borders, which took a zero-tolerance approach to any asylum seeker trying to reach Australia’s shores by boat.



Novak Djokovic after winning the Australian Open in Melbourne on February 21, 2021.

Thousands were turned back or detained, even as human rights activists deplored what they called an inhumane approach to immigration. Many of those refugees are still in Australian custody in offshore detention centers. About two dozen are at the Park Hotel in Melbourne, where Djokovic was held until Monday’s hearing.

That connection was made immediately by advocates for immigrants, many of whom camped out in front of the hotel with signs reminding voters of the harsh policies Morrison favours.

Elaine Pearson, the Australia Director of Human Rights Watch, said that Djokovic had accidentally shined “a much-needed spotlight on Australia’s cruel, inhumane system of mandatory detention.” She added that it had perhaps made the world and average Australians question Australia’s tendency to detain first and ask questions later.

That’s precisely the predilection that Monday’s hearing involving Djokovic confirmed. The celebrity athlete believed he had done everything he could to comply with the rules, the judge determined. It was the government officials who did not act fairly and reasonably, he said.

Djokovic had documents proving that he had obtained a medical exemption from Tennis Australia, the tournament organisers. The exemption, based on what Djokovic said was a Covid infection he had in December, had been endorsed by a doctor and an independent panel from the state of Victoria, where the Open is held.

As he was questioned for hours by border agents, Djokovic repeatedly offered to seek whatever else the government needed later that morning after he could call his agent and organisers from Tennis Australia.

The transcript of that airport interaction, shared by the court after Djokovic’s release, proved even more revealing than what the judge had paraphrased.

Just after midnight, the document shows, the border

official interviewing Djokovic sounded conciliatory.

“We want to give you every opportunity to provide as much information as you can”, the official said.

A few hours later, after the agent left the room — presumably to talk to bosses — and returned, the tone had changed. Djokovic was advised that the process of cancelling his visa had begun.

“I just really don’t understand what is the reason you don’t allow me to enter your country”, he said. “Just I mean, I have been waiting four hours and I still fail to, to understand what’s the main reason — like — lack of what papers? Lack of what information do you need?”

Eventually, the officer agreed to let Djokovic have more time, to call his agent after 8 am. Then, around 7:30 am, the government “reneged” on that promise, as the judge, Anthony Kelly, put it.

If rules are rules, Kelly concluded, the rules of procedure were not followed.

Whether that will alter voters’ views of Morrison may depend on where the “Djokovic affair” goes next.

Some of Morrison’s allies are nonetheless still calling for Djokovic to be deported, arguing that Australians have lined up for vaccines and endured quarantines, so he should too. But the prime minister is also confronting warnings from usually silent corners to stand down.

John Alexander, a member of Morrison’s centre-right Liberal Party and a former professional tennis player, broke ranks Monday night and said that it was in the “national interest” to let Djokovic stay.

The immigration minister’s “personal powers to cancel visas” are designed to prevent criminals otherwise walking our streets, or to prevent a contagious person otherwise walking our streets,” he said in a statement. “They’re not designed to assist in dealing with a potential political problem of the day.”

UN seeks aid increase to prevent Afghanistan ‘catastrophe’

GENEVA: The United Nations made what it described on Tuesday as its biggest appeal ever for a single country, asking international donors to give more than \$5 billion to Afghanistan to fend off a humanitarian disaster.

Five months after the Taliban seized power, a severe drought and the cumulative toll of decades of war have left more than half the country’s population needing humanitarian aid and plunged three-quarters of its 40 million people into acute poverty, the UN said.

“A full-blown humanitarian catastrophe looms”, Martin Griffiths, the UN’s emergency aid coordinator, said in a statement. “My message is urgent: Don’t shut the door on the people of Afghanistan.”

Without international aid, 1 million Afghan children face acute hunger and another 8 million people face “a march to starvation, and ultimately even possible famine”, Griffiths told reporters.

The appeal included \$4.4 billion for humanitarian relief within Afghanistan, half of it for food in a country where more than 700,000 people were forced from their homes by fighting last year, adding to the nearly 3 million people already displaced by war.

The UN sought another \$623 million to cope with around 2.5 million refugees in neighboring countries, mainly Iran and Pakistan.

Iran has said that about a half-million Afghans had fled there since the Taliban takeover. Filippo Grandi, the head of the UN refugee agency, did not confirm that figure, but underscored the danger of further huge flows of refugees if the international community failed to stabilise conditions in Afghanistan.

The United Nations raised hundreds of millions of dollars for Afghanistan in September after the Taliban takeover. The new appeal will test donors’ willingness to support a country that has carried out summary executions, severely curtailed the rights of women and suppressed independent media outlets.

Griffiths stressed the aid would support “direct delivery” assistance to humanitarian agencies and pledged that the money would not leak to Taliban-controlled agencies.

The environment for international aid agencies is more favourable than in 2021, he said.

The end of the fighting has improved security on the ground, and a decision by the UN Security Council

A full-blown humanitarian catastrophe looms. My message is urgent: Don’t shut the door on the people of Afghanistan

MARTIN GRIFFITHS
UN’s emergency aid coordinator

last month to exempt humanitarian aid from financial sanctions facilitated aid deliveries and security on the ground.

“The plan can work — the capacity of the agencies to make it happen is there”, Griffiths said. “The money needed is needed fast.”

But humanitarian aid was only “a stopgap measure”, Griffiths said, adding that far-reaching efforts are needed to revive the banking system, restore businesses and stabilise an economy that has collapsed under international sanctions and the freezing of Afghanistan’s international reserves.

Tuesday’s appeal was for three times the amount of assistance the UN requested in 2021, Griffiths noted.

But if the international donors do not respond and address Afghanistan’s economic crisis now, he added, the UN would be forced to request substantially more aid in a year.

“These appeals can provide some kind of hope that that region will no longer have the blight that it’s been suffering for 40 years, 40 years of insecurity”, Griffiths said. “It’s got to stop.”

How to manage stress during the pandemic



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Pandemic changed the lives of people throughout the world. As per the medico psychologists stress has increased in all spans of human lives.

Especially social media doctors spread many rumours on Covid-19 which made people worry a lot. Thanks to the print media which clarified the situations with numerical data.

As per Mark Flanagan, LMSW, MPH, MA, a social worker at Cancer Wellness at Piedmont, “Some common causes of stress during the coronavirus pandemic are uncertainty, lack of routine and reduced social support” really it’s a fact because people afraid with this virus even son is unable to attend father’s funeral from the distance

also. Man is a social animal and he needs society’s support to come out from stress.

Stress management is important for healthy life and it’s especially important these days as our world addresses the Covid-19 pandemic. This article tries to give some tips to come out from the stress.

1. Create a daily self-care habit

Self-care means to say that which stresses physical exercise, meditation, reading, painting, journalling and cooking or enjoying a favourite hobby. Select any one thing and do it at the same time each day. It will help anchor your day and provide a welcome from your inner body.

2. Try to limit news and media consumption

STRESS MANAGEMENT IS IMPORTANT FOR HEALTHY LIFE AND IT’S ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT THESE DAYS AS OUR WORLD ADDRESSES THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

“When we constantly check our newsfeeds and see bad news, it will activate our sympathetic nervous system and can send us into fight-or-flight mode”, says Flanagan. He

recommends limiting how often you check the news to once or twice a day (ideally not first thing in the morning or after dinner), turning off news alerts, and obtaining information from one or two reputable news outlets. This will control our mind to enter the negativity from outside

3. Try to set boundaries for social media

We should remember that “It’s important to practice social distance with social media too. We may not think we’re having any effect on our newsfeed, but we can take steps to reduce the negative effect of panic on social media.” But try to suggest your social media group to post positive messages.

4. Meditation

In the world it is proven that meditation brings relief from stress. Meditation can help us to restore our sense of control.

5. Confidence

We know many things but we don’t know what we are. Try to understand your own power. Think that the world experienced many disasters which are worse than these and medical support is too little. Now the world has developed in medicine. This is not permanent. Good days are coming. Try to be a part of needy people and try to see shining in the eyes of the poor.

History has proved that man has come out from many issues and developed better than the past. Read the stories which inspire you positively.

New species of deep water soft coral discovered

LUCINDA CAMERON

A new species of deep water soft coral has been discovered in seas west of Scotland by Scottish Government scientists.

Specimens were recovered from the continental slopes and plains of the Rockall Trough at depths of up to 2,000 metres over a period of almost a decade up to 2019.

They were preserved for analysis as coral or sea pens from the deep sea are known to be poorly understood and rarely encountered, and were initially thought to be part of a family of sea pens known as Umbellula.

The specimens were studied in collaboration with internationally renowned coral expert Dr Pablo Lopez-Gonzalez from the University of Seville, using a combination of traditional methods and cutting-edge genetic analysis.

Genetic results, backed by microscopic study of minute skeletal structures, revealed that the specimens are a new species and belong to a sea pen family completely new to science.

The new species has been formally named Pseudumbellula scotiae.

Mairi McAllan, Scottish Government Environment and Land Reform Minister, said:

“This is an important and exciting discovery made by combining traditional and modern scientific techniques and I would like to congratulate the teams involved.

“This work suggests that sub-sea biodiversity is far more diverse than previously believed and demonstrates that international co-operation is vital to increasing our understanding of the natural world. I am delighted that Scottish Government marine scientists are playing a key role in this across the global arena.

“Scotland has some of the most beautiful and diverse marine ecosystems on the planet and we are committed to protecting and safeguarding them for future generations.

“Marine Protected Area (MPA) status is an important way to ensure protection of some of the most vulnerable species and habitats.

“Our MPA network includes sites for the protection of biodiversity and demonstrates sustainable management and covers around 37 per cent of our seas — exceeding the new global target of 30 per cent by 2030.”

The first part of the name given to the new species has been chosen due to its overall physical similarity to Umbellula, while the second part honours the contributions to science and conservation in deep waters made by the Scottish Government’s marine research Vessel Scotia.

The scientists were from the Scottish Government’s Marine Scotland directorate. — dpa

Whatever happened to soft power?



JOSEPH S NYTE, JR
The writer is a professor at Harvard University and author, most recently, of ‘Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump’

As 2021 drew to a close, Russia had massed troops near its border with Ukraine; North Korea was still pursuing its nuclear-weapons programme; and Taliban fighters were patrolling the streets of Kabul. Seeing all this, friends asked me: “Whatever happened to soft power?”

One answer is that it can be found in other recent events, such as President Joe Biden’s virtual Summit for Democracy, which was attended by representatives from more than 100 countries. What we were seeing was a great-power competition over soft power, understood as the ability to influence others by attraction rather than by coercion or payment.

When I first wrote about soft power in 1990, I was seeking to overcome a deficiency in how analysts thought about power generally. But the concept gradually acquired more of a political resonance. In some respects, the underlying thought is not new; similar concepts can be traced back to ancient philosophers such as Lao Tse. Nor does soft power pertain only to international behaviour or to the US. Many small countries and organisations also possess the power to attract; and in democracies, at least, soft power is an essential component of leadership.

Still, the concept is now generally associated with international relations. As the European Union developed into its current form, European leaders increasingly made use of the term. Soft power is not the only or even the most important source of power, because its effects tend to be slow and indirect. But to ignore or neglect it is a serious strategic and analytic mistake. The Roman Empire’s power rested not only on its legions, but also on the attraction of Roman culture and law. Similarly, as a Norwegian analyst once described it, the American presence in Western Europe after World War II was “an empire by invitation”. No barrage of artillery brought down the Berlin Wall; it was removed by hammers and bulldozers wielded by people who had been touched by Western soft power.

Smart political leaders have long understood that values can create power. If I can get you to want what I want, I will not have to force you to do what you do not want to do. If a country represents values that others find attractive, it can economise on the use of sticks and carrots.

A country’s soft power comes primarily from three sources: its culture; its political values, such as democracy and human rights (when it upholds them); and its policies (when they are seen as legitimate because they are framed with an awareness of others’ interests). A government can influence others through the example of how it behaves at home (such as by protecting a free press and the right to protest), in international institutions (consulting others and fostering multilateralism), and through its foreign policy (such as by promoting development and human rights).

During the Covid-19 pandemic,

WITH THE NEWS DOMINATED BY DRAMATIC EXAMPLES OF COUNTRIES USING COERCION, INTIMIDATION, AND PAYOFFS TO ADVANCE THEIR INTERESTS, THE POWER OF ATTRACTION WOULD SEEM TO BE IRRELEVANT IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS. BUT IT STILL MATTERS, AND GOVERNMENTS IGNORE ITS POTENTIAL AT THEIR PERIL

China has tried to use so-called “vaccine diplomacy” to bolster its soft power, which had been damaged by its secretive handling of the initial outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan. The government’s efforts have been aimed at reinforcing its Belt and Road Initiative, which supports infrastructure projects in many parts of the world.

But international polls show that the results have been disappointing. One reason for China’s lower level of soft power is its heavy-handed use of hard power in pursuit of an increasingly nationalist foreign policy. This has

been on full display in its economic punishment of Australia and in its military operations on the Himalayan border with India.

China has a smart-power problem. After all, it is difficult to practice vaccine diplomacy and “wolf-warrior diplomacy” (aggressive, coercive browbeating of smaller countries) at the same time.

True, international polls showed that the US also suffered a decline in soft power during Donald Trump’s presidency. But, fortunately, America is more than its government. Unlike hard-power assets (such as armed forces), many soft-power resources are separate from the government and are only partly responsive to its purposes. For example, Hollywood movies showcasing independent women or protesting minorities inspire others around the world. So, too, does the charitable work of US foundations and the freedom of inquiry at American universities.

Firms, universities, foundations, churches, and protest movements develop soft power of their own. Sometimes their activities will reinforce official foreign-policy goals, and sometimes they will be at odds with them. Either way, these private sources of soft power are increasingly important in the age of social media.

The January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol certainly damaged US soft power. But those who would mourn the death of American democracy prematurely should bear in mind that the 2020 election drew an unprecedented turnout despite the pandemic. The American people are still able to unseat a demagogue in a free and fair election.

This is not to suggest that all is well with American democracy or its soft power. Trump eroded many democratic norms that now must be restored. Biden has made strengthening democracy at home and abroad a goal of his presidency, but the results remain to be seen.

No one can be certain about the future trajectory of any country’s soft power. But there is no doubt that influence through attraction will remain an important component of world politics. As Mark Twain famously quipped, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” The same is true of soft power.

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An experience worth replicating



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Muscat Municipality is working hard to support the efforts being made by various government organisations to provide self-employment to the Omani youths. It is doing this in coordination with the Ministry of Labour. This is helping in accommodating the local cadres in various professions related to traditional souqs. We all know that if such endeavours are made without a proper system or are not integrated they would go waste and fail in achieving the objective.

But what has been done in the traditional Seeb Souq to give employment to the Omanis is formidable and exemplary. The efforts made by the municipality became successful. However, if non-Omanis are also allowed to run such markets side by side, it would lead to the traditional market failures. Therefore, the Omani youth should get the opportunity to work in a way which is sustainable and where there is justified competition. If these aspects are not taken into account, it would cause multiple losses. Muscat Municipality can learn from traditional markets of other countries as well. The traditional items, goods and products of the places should be sold only in these souqs and not at other outlets. This is essential to get the desired results.

MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY'S EFFORTS IN PROVIDING JOBS TO OMANI YOUTHS IN SEEB SOUQ IS EXEMPLARY

Such traditional markets, if run entirely by the locals, would also emerge as a major tourist attraction. Imagine an Omani souq with entirely local manpower at the helm. Traditional products made by Omani hands and sold by Omani hands will have its own beauty. At such places, locals with prior experience can help others also to learn and experience the nitty gritty of this enterprise. If such experience is done, it should be supported by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, financed by the concerned organisations and should emerge as an opportunity for the small and medium enterprises to grow. Success of such markets requires a unique ecosystem.

Any efforts made to provide employment opportunities to the Omani youth should enjoy full support of government organisations, particularly that of the Ministry of Labour. It is the responsibility of all organisations and agencies. The souq which is organised and regulated by the municipality is a coordinated effort. In these traditional markets, only Omanis should be allowed to sell their products. It is the responsibility of the municipality to provide the required environment for them to develop and become successful in achieving the objective. The standards of these markets or souqs should be improved to emerge as tourist destinations. Every Omani traditional product and goods should be sold here and are not made available in other markets, such as hypermarkets. It would help in developing a complete image of the traditional market in the minds of the people as well as tourists.

Nizwa Souq is a wonderful example of the success of the Omanisation. A visitor finds Omani entrepreneurs active in the market. It develops national pride. It is an experience on which we can further build. It should enjoy the support of the government as well as the common people. Every organisation and individual in whatever capacity they are should extend their helping hand to make it a success. Giving opportunities for the Omani youth to get employment is an objective. But the achievement of this objective would be considered a success if these youths really become successful in their endeavours.

The ultimate objective of giving jobs or opportunities for self-employment to these youth is to make them evolve and develop. This can be successful under the souq models which need multi-pronged strategy and support.

We do not deny the fact that there are challenges. But there are also innovative ideas and creative minds in the country available everywhere. There is no dearth of this in Muscat Municipality. It has to be utilised in a proper manner. It would promote it as a 100-per cent Omani market, without allowing a parallel market to grow side by side.



SUMMER TRANSIT

Migratory birds on a tree in a lake in front of one of the palaces of Iraq's late deposed president, Saddam Hussein, near Baghdad airport. Flocks of birds fly over Iraq in winter as they search for warmer territories. — AFP

How about Biden-Cheney combo in 2024?



Thomas L. Friedman

As I've noted before, one reason I pay very close attention to the Israeli-Palestinian arena is that a lot of trends get perfected there first and then go global — airline hijacking, suicide bombing, building a wall, the challenges of pluralism and lots more. It's off-Broadway to Broadway, so what's playing there these days that might be a harbinger for politics in the US?

Answer: It's the most diverse national unity government in Israel's history, one that stretches from Jewish settlers on the right all the way to an Israeli-Arab Islamist party and super-liberals on the left. Most important, it's holding together, getting stuff done and muting the hyperpolarisation that was making Israel ungovernable.

Is that what America needs in 2024 — a ticket of Joe Biden and Liz Cheney? Or Joe Biden and Lisa Murkowski, or Kamala Harris and Mitt Romney, or Stacey Abrams and Liz Cheney, or Amy Klobuchar and Liz Cheney? Or any other such combination. Before you start to shout me down, hear me out.

In June, after an utterly wild period in which Israel held four national elections over two years and kept failing to produce a stable governing majority, the lambs there actually lay down with the lions.

Key Israeli politicians swallowed their pride, softened policy edges and came together for a four-year national unity government — led by rightist Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and left-of-centre Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid. (They are to switch places after two years.) And for the first time, an Israeli-Arab party, the Islamist organisation Raam, played a vital role in cementing an Israeli coalition.

What forced everyone's hand? A broad agreement that Israeli politics was being held hostage by then-prime minister Bibi Netanyahu, who resisted putting together any government that he would not lead, apparently because, if he didn't lead, he could lose his chance at some kind of immunity from prosecution on multiple corruption charges that could lead to prison.

Sound familiar?

Netanyahu was just a smarter Donald Trump, constantly delegitimising the mainstream media and the Israeli justice system and vigorously exploiting social/religious/ethnic fault lines to divide and rule. He eventually stressed out the system so much that several of his former allies broke away to forge a unity coalition with Israeli centre, left and Arab parties.

As Hebrew University of Jerusalem religious philosopher Moshe Halbertal put it to me: "What happened here is that there is still enough civic responsibility

— not everywhere, but enough — that the political class felt that the continued breakdown of the rule of law and more elections, which was leading nowhere, was an indulgence that Israel simply could not afford, given its highly diverse population and dangerous neighbourhood."

Could this play come to Broadway? I asked Steven Levitsky, a political scientist and co-author of *How Democracies Die*, after he presented some similar ideas last week to my colleague David Leonhardt.

America is facing an existential moment, Levitsky told me, noting that the Republican Party has shown that it isn't committed any longer to playing by democratic rules, leaving the United States uniquely threatened among Western democracies.

TO PUT IT DIFFERENTLY, THIS TRUMP-CULT VERSION OF THE GOP IS TRYING TO GAIN POWER THROUGH AN ELECTION, BUT IT'S TRYING TO INCREASE ITS ODDS OF WINNING BY GAMING THE SYSTEM IN BATTLEGROUND STATES. AMERICA'S SMALL-D DEMOCRATS NEED TO COUNTER THOSE MOVES AND INCREASE THEIR ODDS OF WINNING. THE BEST WAY TO DO THAT IS BY CREATING A BROAD NATIONAL UNITY VEHICLE THAT ENABLES MORE REPUBLICANS TO LEAVE THE TRUMP CULT — WITHOUT HAVING TO JUST BECOME BIG-D DEMOCRATS. WE ALL HAVE TO BE SMALL-D DEMOCRATS NOW, OR WE WON'T HAVE A SYSTEM TO BE BIG-D OR BIG-R ANYTHINGS

That all means two things, he continued. First, this Trump-cult version of the GOP must never be able to retake the White House. Since Trump has made embracing the Big Lie — that the 2020 election was a fraud — a prerequisite for being in the Trump GOP, his entire Cabinet most likely would be people who denied, or worked to overturn, Biden's election victory. There is no reason to believe they would cede power the next time.

"In a democracy," Levitsky said, "parties lose popularity and they lose elections. That is normal. But a democracy cannot

afford for this Republican Party to win again because they have demonstrated a ton of evidence that they are no longer committed to the democratic rules of the game."

So Biden-Cheney is not such a crazy idea? I asked.

"Not at all," said Levitsky. "We should be ready to talk about Liz Cheney as part of a blow-your-mind Israeli-style fusion coalition with Democrats. It is a coalition that says: 'There is only one overriding goal right now — that is saving our democratic system.'"

That brings us to the second point. Saving a democratic system requires huge political sacrifice, added Levitsky. "It means AOC campaigning for Liz Cheney" and it means Liz Cheney "putting on the shelf" many policy goals she and other Republicans cherish. "But that is what it takes, and if you don't do it, just look back and see why democracy collapsed in countries like Germany, Spain and Chile. The democratic forces there should have done it, but they didn't."

To put it differently, this Trump-cult version of the GOP is trying to gain power through an election, but it's trying to increase its odds of winning by gaming the system in battleground states. America's small-d democrats need to counter those moves and increase their odds of winning. The best way to do that is by creating a broad national unity vehicle that enables more Republicans to leave the Trump cult — without having to just become big-D Democrats. We all have to be small-d democrats now, or we won't have a system to be big-D or big-R anythings.

That is what civic-minded Israeli elites did when they created a broad national unity coalition whose main mission was to make the basic functions of government work again and safeguard the integrity of Israel's democracy.

Such a vehicle in America, said Levitsky, should "be able to shave a small but decisive fraction of Republican votes away from Trump." In a tight race, it would take only 5-10 per cent of Republicans leaving Trump to assure victory. And that is what matters.

This is the democratic way of defeating a threat to democracy. Not doing it is how democracies die. I am quite aware that it is highly unlikely; America does not have the flexibility of a parliamentary, proportional-representation system, like Israel's, and there is no modern precedent for such a cross-party ticket. And yet, I still think it is worth raising. There is no precedent for how close we're coming to an unraveling of our democracy, either.

— *The New York Times Services*

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AL ATTIYAH ON COURSE FOR CROWN, ADRIEN ON TOP IN BIKE SECTION



French driver Stephane Peterhansel and his co-driver Edouard Boulanger of France compete in their Audi's electric during the Stage 10 of the Dakar Rally 2022 between Wadi Ad Dawasir and Bisha in Saudi Arabia. – AFP

‘MR DAKAR’ STRIKES IN STAGE 10

BISHA, Saudi Arabia: The Dakar Rally's record 14-time champion Stephane Peterhansel powered to stage 10 success on Wednesday as only a mechanical meltdown appears now to stand between Nasser al Attiyah and the 2022 title. The Qatari three-time winner heads into Thursday's penultimate stage 32min 40sec clear of France's nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb.

"The gap is too big and the race is no longer in our hands, but we're still hanging in there," shrugged Loeb after the 375km drive from Wadi Ad Dawasir to Bisha. Despite his runaway lead, Al Attiyah was retaining the caution required for an event where victory can disappear as easily as a mirage in the Saudi Arabian desert.

"We're getting there, little by little," said the multi-faceted

sportsman who took skeet shooting bronze at the 2012 London Olympics.

"It's not over yet, there are still two days to go and even a podium spot will be hard to get."

Peterhansel, known as 'Mr Dakar', won last year, three decades after his first victory on two wheels in 1991.

The only competitor to win the famed rally in Africa, South America and Asia, Peterhansel was thrilled to land a stage in his Audi hybrid.

"I'm not necessarily a stage hunter, but each Audi driver has now won a stage, and that's fantastic," the Frenchman said.

"When Carlos (Sainz) became the first driver to win a Dakar stage in an electric car, it was a milestone, now we confirmed that performance."

With Sainz taking second



French biker Adrien Van Beveren powers his Yamaha during the Stage 10 of the Dakar Rally 2022 between Wadi Ad Dawasir and Bisha in Saudi Arabia. – AFP

there was double reason for Audi to celebrate. "This is good for morale, not least because it comes after a complicated start to the rally," said Peterhansel.

"We need to win in 2023.

Failure is not an option."

BROTHERS-IN-LAW

In the bike category, France's Adrien Van Beveren moved to the top of the rankings after a day

The gap is too big and the race is no longer in our hands, but we're still hanging in there

SEBASTIEN LOEB
French champion

marked by the premature end of Kevin Benavides' title defence.

Argentina's 2021 champion came unstuck 133km into the stage when his KTM suffered a terminal breakdown. Benavides had started the day in fifth, 10min 22sec adrift.

Another KTM rider, Matthias Walkner, also had a difficult day, losing the overall lead after going off course with a navigational

error to finish quarter of an hour behind Australian stage winner Toby Price.

Van Beveren, on a Yamaha, gave his chances of succeeding Benavides a massive boost by finishing fourth, at three and a half minutes, to reclaim the bike rankings' summit after briefly holding sway at the weekend.

With only two days to go, he is almost six minutes clear of Briton's 2017 champion Sam Sunderland, his brother-in-law.

Sunderland reflected: "All in all, I'm happy, I prepared well this year and I think it shows. I've led the race for seven days. Now we just need to go flat out again tomorrow."

Thursday's 11th stage is a 346km special and the last day in the dunes ahead of the closing short drive to the finish in Jeddah on Friday. — AFP



South Africa's Keegan Petersen (2nd L) walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal by India's Jasprit Bumrah (3rd L) during the second day of the third Test at Newlands stadium in Cape Town. — AFP

Bumrah puts India in narrow lead

PETERSEN SCORES CAREER-BEST 72 FOR HOSTS

CAPE TOWN: Jasprit Bumrah took 5-42 as India bowled hosts South Africa out for 210 after tea to claim a narrow 13-run first innings lead on the second day of the decisive third and final Test at Newlands on Wednesday. All of India's pace bowlers were excellent with Bumrah leading the way with his movement off the surface and

ability to extract bounce on the seaming wicket. Mohammed Shami (2-39), Umesh Yadav (2-64) and Shardul Thakur (1-37) were also among the wicket-takers. Keegan Petersen scored a career-best 72 for the home side and stood almost alone before he became the fourth victim for Bumrah, with the next highest

score 28 by Temba Bavuma. The home side resumed the session on 100 for three, but lost Rassie van der Dussen (21) after he had put on 67 for the fourth wicket with Petersen. He was caught by Virat Kohli off Umesh Yadav (2-50). In-form Temba Bavuma played a bright innings of 28 but was another catch for Kohli

at second slip, this time off the bowling of Mohammed Shami (2-39). Shami then bagged a second wicket in three balls when Kyle Verreynne edged to wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant for a duck. The Indian seamers had regularly beaten the bat in the morning session and when they

did find the edge, the ball fell agonisingly short of the slips on numerous occasions. They seemed to step up a few paces after lunch, though all the catches were taken very low down. The series is level at 1-1 after India won the first Test before South Africa bounced back to claim the second. — **Reuters**

Jayant replaces Sundar for SA ODIs



NEW DELHI: India all-rounder Jayant Yadav will replace Washington Sundar — ruled out by Covid infection — ahead of the three-match One Day International series against South Africa, selectors announced on Wednesday. Off-spinner Sundar was scheduled to join the 19-member white-ball squad in Cape Town but tested positive in Bangalore. Yadav is part of the Indian Test squad currently touring South Africa. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) also called up fast bowler Navdeep Saini as a reserve for pacer Mohammed Siraj, who is recovering from a hamstring injury. Opener KL Rahul last week replaced newly-appointed captain Rohit Sharma to lead the team for the series beginning on January 19. Sharma failed to recover from his own hamstring injury. — **AFP**

Squad: KL Rahul (Captain), Jasprit Bumrah (vice-captain), Shikhar Dhawan, Ruturaj Gaikwad, Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, Shreyas Iyer, Venkatesh Iyer, Rishabh Pant (wicket-keeper), Ishan Kishan (wicket-keeper), Yuzvendra Chahal, R Ashwin, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Deepak Chahar, Prasidh Krishna, Shardul Thakur, Md Siraj, Jayant Yadav, Navdeep Saini.



Vaishali to lead Oman against Wanstead CC of UK

SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT, JAN 12

Women's cricket is on the rise and Wanstead Cricket Club, one of the top women's teams in UK, will be touring the Sultanate of Oman for a nine-day tour, starting on January 15. Vaishali Jesrani will be leading the Oman side whereas Fiza Javed will be her deputy for the series. Oman Cricket has picked an exciting bunch of experienced and budding cricketers who will be in action against Wanstead CC

for one 30-over game and three T20 matches at the picturesque Al Amerat Cricket Stadium. The tour opens with a 30-over day-night clash starting at 2.30 pm on January 16 followed by T20 games on January 18, 20 and 21 starting at 10.30 am. With a strong girls team, Wanstead CC is likely to pose a strong challenge to Oman Women's team and Oman captain is fully alive to the task ahead. "While the girls are all geared up to compete against a quality side, the series offers an excellent

opportunity for the youngsters in Oman team to come forward and showcase their talent," said Vaishali, who is also Women's Coordinator at Oman Cricket. **Oman squad:** Vaishali Jesrani (captain), Fiza Javed (vice-captain), Amanda D'costa, Nikhita Jagadish, Sameera Khan, Hina Javed, Afida Aftab, Suhanthika Sahiva, Priyanka Mendonca, Snehal Nair, Nayan Anil, Shreya Prabhhu, Bhakti Shetty, Sakshi Shetty. **Reserves:** Alifia Sayed, Clarita Saldana, Nitya Joshi, Sani-e Zehra. **Team officials:** Haider Ali (manager/head coach), Desmond Berhardt, Amir Kaleem (assistant coaches), Vijay Kaliswaran (physio).

Oman Cricket staff benefit from ICC workshop

MUSCAT: Two of Oman Cricket's most capable ground staff recently completed the ICC Curator Training Workshop online and came out richer in knowledge and experience required to create playing conditions conducive to international cricket games. Anoop C Kandy and Muhammed Ehtesham ud Din attended the 10-week extensive workshop conducted by Andrew Atkinson, ICC Pitch Consultant, and Iqbal Sikander, ICC Development Officer, Asia Region. The topics covered during the workshop included preparation of pitches for T20, ODI and Test matches, post-match and pre-season preparation, irrigation and rolling techniques, drainage and equipment, and ICC tournament preparation. "The workshop aimed at developing a sense of belonging and relating to every second of the experience to bring the best out of the participants. We are grateful to the ICC officials Andrew and Iqbal for every thought and experience shared with us," said Anoop, who heads the ground staff at Oman Cricket Academy. "Their earnest effort in sharing the knowledge was not just to



enhance the skills but to highlight the challenges one can experience during the match. The experiences and thoughts gathered over the years through different seminars and workshops we had attended mostly focused on ground rules and norms and dos and don'ts. However, we always felt the need for learning in the light of practical experiences so that we have the skills and knowledge to move from the domestic mode to the international method of preparation; something we experienced during this ICC workshop," Anoop added. "The participants admired the simplicity in collating the learning and practical experience and combining it in such a way that kept every participant involved and thinking. The workshop really helped them to correct and reorganise themselves to be able to know how to view and react to instances encountered during the game. It just kept everyone on their toes and wondering what would come next," said Ehtesham. They thanked Madhu Jesrani, OC Secretary, and Duleep Mendis, Chief Development Officer, for giving them the opportunity to participate in the workshop.

Novak Djokovic Australia row timeline

"We are living in challenging times in a global pandemic and sometimes these mistakes can occur," the unvaccinated 34-year-old world tennis No.1 said in a statement on January 12



Djokovic admits 'errors,' fights to avoid deportation

MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic on Wednesday admitted "errors" in his travel papers and for not isolating after a claimed coronavirus infection, as he battled to stay in Australia and fight for a record 21st Grand Slam.

The world number one said his team had offered fresh information to the Australian government, which is pondering whether to cancel his visa, again, and throw him out of the country.

"We are living in challenging times in a global pandemic and sometimes these mistakes can occur", the unvaccinated 34-year-old said in a statement released as he practised on the courts of the Australian Open, which starts on Monday.

The Serbian star flew into Melbourne a week ago claiming a vaccine exemption because of a positive PCR test result on December 16.

Border agents rejected his exemption saying a recent infection did not qualify, tore up his visa and placed him in a detention centre.

But the vaccine-sceptic Djokovic's high-powered legal

team dramatically overturned the visa decision in court on Monday on a procedural matter related to his airport interview.

Now, Immigration Minister Alex Hawke says he is considering cancelling the visa another time, as fresh doubts emerge.

In an update to Australian media, his spokesman acknowledged receiving "lengthy further submissions" from the player's lawyers.

"Naturally, this will affect the time-frame for a decision", he said.

'ERROR OF JUDGEMENT'

Djokovic, a nine-time Australian Open champion, described reports about his post-infection outings in Serbia as "misinformation".

On the day of his claimed positive test in Serbia, he appeared at a ceremony to honour him with stamps bearing his image. The following day he attended a youth tennis event. He appeared at both apparently without a mask.

Djokovic, who made no mention of the stamp ceremony, said he only received the PCR

On reflection, this was an error of judgement and I accept that I should have rescheduled this commitment

NOVAK DJOKOVIC
Serbian world number one

test result after attending the children's tennis event.

But he admitted that he also went ahead with an interview and photo-shoot with French sports newspaper *L'Equipe* on December 18.

"I felt obliged to go ahead and conduct the *L'Equipe* interview as I didn't want to let the journalist down but did ensure I socially distanced and wore a mask except when my photograph was being taken", he said.

"On reflection, this was an error of judgement and I accept that I should have rescheduled

this commitment."

The player said he also had two rapid antigen tests, which both returned negative results: One on December 16 when he first suspected being infected and one on December 17 before attending the children's tennis event.

The tennis ace also admitted a mistake on his Australian travel declaration, in which a box was ticked indicating that he had not, or would not, travel in the 14 days before taking his flight to Melbourne.

In fact, social media posts and reports show he flew from Serbia to Spain during that period.

"This was submitted by my support team on my behalf", Djokovic said.

"My agent sincerely apologises for the administrative mistake in ticking the incorrect box about my previous travel before coming to Australia. This was a human error and certainly not deliberate."

In another twist, Australian media on Wednesday seized on reporting by Germany's *Der Spiegel* newspaper that cast doubt over the tennis star's positive test.

— AFP

Muguruza 'manages anxiety' to make winning start



SYDNEY: Australian Open third seed Garbine Muguruza made a confident start to her season with a straight-sets win over battling Ekaterina Alexandrova on Wednesday at the Sydney Classic.

The Spanish world number three, who had a first-round bye in Sydney, withstood a fightback from the 40th-ranked Russian in the second set to win 6-1, 7-6 (7/4).

Muguruza will now play another Russian, Daria Kasatkina, in the quarterfinals after she upset Belgian Elise Mertens 6-3, 6-4.

Muguruza, a former world number one and two-time Grand Slam champion, will be one of the main contenders for next week's Australian Open.

Her best result at Melbourne Park was in 2020, when she finished runner-up to surprise winner Sofia Kenin.

Playing her first match since winning the WTA Finals in November, the 28-year-old Muguruza said she was encouraged by the way she had stayed strong when facing five set points in the second set.

"I was most pleased that I stood very calmly in the second set when I was, you know, 5-4 down and serving and having all those set points, where you can get a little bit upset", she said.

"So to manage the

anxiety, playing the first match of the year and you want to win and you want to start on the right foot.

"The last match was two months ago so it's been a while."

Tunisia's Ons Jabeur warmed up for the first Grand Slam of the year by defeating two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova 6-4, 6-4.

The 27-year-old Jabeur had a breakthrough 2021, winning her maiden WTA singles title and surging into the top 10 for the first time.

Seeded seventh this week in Sydney, Jabeur came from behind in both sets to defeat Kvitova for the first time in four attempts to set up a quarterfinal against Estonia's Anett Kontaveit.

The fourth-seeded Kontaveit had a comfortable 6-3, 6-1 win over Romanian qualifier Elena-Gabriela Ruse.

In the men's draw four of the top-five seeded players progressed without too many problems.

Top-ranked Russian Aslan Karatsev beat Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic 7-5, 6-4, while third-seeded Briton Dan Evans crushed Spaniard Pedro Martinez 6-2, 6-3.

Second seed Nikoloz Basilashvili plays former world number one Andy Murray later on Wednesday.

The Australian Open starts on Monday.

— AFP

Gauff beats Kostyuk, five Americans in Adelaide quarters

ADELAIDE: Coco Gauff battled to a 6-3, 5-7, 6-3 win over unseeded Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk at the Adelaide International 2 WTA tournament on Wednesday to join four other Americans in the quarterfinals.

Madison Keys, Alison Riske, Madison Brengle and Lauren Davis also won their respective matches in the round of 16 earlier in the day to book their spots in the quarterfinals which will take place on Thursday.

Gauff, who pushed world number one Ash Barty before losing their second-round meeting in the Adelaide International 1 event last week,

raced ahead 4-1 in the opening set against Kostyuk before grabbing the early lead in the match.

Kostyuk raced to 5-3 in the second set and wasted three set points to allow Gauff to draw level, but dragged the clash into a decider when the third seed sent a forehand wide.

A decisive break in the seventh game of the third set gave Gauff the upper hand again and she held her nerve to prevail.

Earlier, former US Open runner-up Keys hardly broke sweat in her 6-1, 6-3 demolition of Czech Tereza Martincova while Riske was equally ruthless



as she powered past Anhelina Kalinina of Ukraine by a similar scoreline.

Brengle downed Swede Rebecca Peterson 6-3, 6-2 while

Davis was made to work hard by Jasmine Paolini before coming away with a 4-6, 6-4, 6-4 win.

Former French Open runner-up Marketa Vondrousova

surrendered a match point against unseeded Croatian Ana Konjuh who completed a 4-6, 6-2, 7-6(3) victory in an epic Centre Court battle that lasted two hours and 21 minutes.

In the men's event, Brazilian lucky loser Thiago Monteiro advanced to the quarterfinals after top seed Gael Monfils of France retired while 7-6(2), 3-6, 0-1 down. Monteiro will play Corentin Moutet in his next match.

Tournament organisers said later that Monfils retired due to a neck injury.

Earlier, local hope Thanasi Kokkinakis withstood a barrage

that included 23 aces from American John Isner before sealing a 6-7(5), 7-6(5), 7-6(4) victory over the second seed to set up an all-Australian clash with Aleksandar Vukic in the last eight.

Russian third seed Karen Khachanov saw off Italian Gianluca Mager 7-5, 6-3, while fourth seed Marin Cilic defeated Spain's Jaume Munar 7-6(6), 6-2.

Cilic will next face the in-form Tommy Paul, who has won 12 of his past 14 matches, while Khachanov will play France's Arthur Rinderknech for a place in the semifinals.

— Reuters

business

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RO 170 million investment planned in Digital Transformation programme



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has unveiled the executive plan of government digital transformation for the period 2021-2025.

The volume of investment is expected at RO 170 million over the five-year programme.

This sum will go towards improving procedures, reengineering government services, automating basic services, propagation of services via the Internet, the development of centralised digital solutions, the improvement of the digital infrastructure and the empowerment of national teams.

The programme sets a roadmap for utilising modern techniques to develop public sector functioning, notably by creating digital platforms for services, as well as a legal and regulatory climate that empowers digital transformation.

The government digital transformation programme stems from the National Digital Economy Programme, which constitutes one of the main pillars of Oman Vision 2040. It envisages developing a future-oriented, flexible and innovative system based on principles of governance that delivers innovative performance and offers high-quality smart services.

The programme comprises a number of basic pillars that constitute the main components of digital transformation, including smart services, proactive measures, innovative digital solutions and applications, open data and opportunities for electronic community participation.

The digital transformation programme comprises a number of elements, including: data unification, digital integration among government units, Hoint management of platforms and solutions, revision and calibration of legislations based on the rapid change of technical updates, and cybersecurity and protection of digital channels during access to cyber space.

(With inputs from ONA)

Sultanate of Oman and United Kingdom sign Sovereign Investment Partnership

LANDMARK PACT: UK companies have a long history of investment in the Sultanate of Oman, with Foreign Direct Investments from the UK accounting for nearly 50 per cent of the foreign investment into the country in recent years

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 12

The Sultanate of Oman and the UK have signed a Sovereign Investment Partnership (SIP), agreeing to work closer together on increasing high value investment into both countries.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the UK's Office for Investment (OFI) and the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) was signed in London by the UK's Minister for Investment, Lord Gerry Grimstone, and President of the Oman Investment Authority, Abdulsalam al Murshidi.

The new partnership will strengthen the economic ties between the UK and the Sultanate of Oman and identify and support commercial investments in areas such as clean energy and technology, which are already an important part of our £1 billion-a year trading relationship.

Tuesday's signing follows UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's meeting with the Sultan of Oman, His Majesty Haitham bin Tarik,



at Downing Street in December, where they discussed enhancing the bilateral relationship between the UK and the Sultanate of Oman.

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, said: "The signing of the MoU is in line with the aspirations of both the Sultanate of Oman and the UK as set in the Comprehensive Agreement on Enduring

Friendship and Bilateral Cooperation.

"We truly believe that by focusing our efforts on strategic joint investments, we will be able to reach further fruitful and tangible outcomes, in support of our mutual desire to continue developing a dynamic and stronger partnership."

UK Minister for Investment Lord Gerry Grimstone said: "The

Sultanate of Oman is a long-standing and strategic partner in the Middle East and I am pleased that the UK is further deepening our investment relationship. Our two countries share a vision for a sustainable and prosperous future.

"This Sovereign Investment Partnership ensures our respective private sectors and international investors are part of that journey."

Abdulsalam al Murshidi, President of Oman Investment Authority, added: "This partnership is a perfect embodiment of OIA's mandate under Oman Vision 2040, especially for financial sustainability and attracting foreign investors who consider OIA their partner in potential investment."

UK companies have a long history of investment in the Sultanate of Oman, with Foreign

Direct Investments from the UK accounting for nearly 50 per cent of the foreign investment into the country in recent years.

As a sign of this growing partnership, UK waste-to-energy pioneer Greenfuels has partnered with 44:01 and other local stakeholders to form Wakud International, a joint venture which has invested around \$2 million into its Omani-based operations since breaking ground last year.

Wakud's biorefinery at Khazaen Economic City is the first solar-powered biodiesel plant in the world.

It will eventually process 20 tonnes per day of used cooking oil collected from restaurants and food processing establishments into European-standard biodiesel, for local consumption as road fuel and for export to the UK and EU.

Expansion out of the Sultanate of Oman into the wider GCC will begin this year, and the partnership has already created new jobs in the region. It comes as the UK and the Gulf Cooperation Council, of which the Sultanate of Oman is a member, prepare to formally launch talks over a new Free Trade Agreement.

Negotiations are expected to commence this year, with a future deal set to boost links in areas like investment and services. The signing of the MoU coincided with a meeting of the UK-Oman Strategic Advisory Group, chaired by Minister for Investment Lord Gerry Grimstone.

We don't want to see \$100 a barrel: Dr Rumhy

RESURGENT PRICES: Oman crude soars to \$82.27 per barrel

LONDON: Oil prices that rallied 50 per cent in 2021 will power further ahead this year, analysts predict, saying a lack of production capacity and limited investment in the sector could lift crude above \$100 a barrel.

Though the Omicron coronavirus variant has pushed Covid-19 cases far above peaks hit last year, analysts say oil prices will be supported by the reluctance of many governments to restore the strict restrictions that hammered the global economy when the pandemic took hold in 2020.

Oman crude (for March 2022 delivery) gained \$2.30 a barrel in



value to settle at \$82.27 in trading on Wednesday, up from the previous day's value of \$79.97 per barrel.

The average price of Omani crude (for January 2022 delivery) has stabilised at \$80.26, which is

\$1.32 per barrel lower than the December 2021 delivery average. Brent crude futures traded above \$84 on Wednesday, hitting two-month highs.

The Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

(Opec) and its allies, a group known as Opec+, are gradually relaxing the output cuts implemented when demand collapsed in 2020.

However, many smaller producers can't raise supply and others have been wary of pumping too much oil in case of renewed Covid-19 setbacks.

"We don't want to see \$100 a barrel. The world is not ready for that," Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Ministry of Energy and Minerals, was quoted as saying by Bloomberg on Tuesday.

"Assuming China doesn't suffer a sharp slowdown, that Omicron actually becomes Omi-gone, and with Opec+'s ability to raise production clearly limited, I see no reason why Brent crude cannot move towards \$100 in Q1, possibly sooner," said Jeffrey Halley, senior

market analyst at OANDA.

Morgan Stanley predicts that Brent crude will hit \$90 a barrel in the third quarter of this year. With the prospect of depleting crude inventories and low spare capacity by the second half of 2022, and limited investments in the oil and gas sector, the market will have little margin of safety, the bank said.

Standard Chartered, meanwhile, has raised its 2022 Brent forecast by \$8 to \$75 a barrel and its 2023 Brent forecast by \$17 to \$77. J P Morgan also expects oil prices to rise as high as \$90 by the end of the year. Current demand strength is acting as a near-term tailwind, having proved largely immune to surging coronavirus infections, the bank said. — Reuters

Bank Nizwa wins Best Wholesale Banking Service Provider – Oman 2021

MUSCAT: As the Sultanate’s first Islamic bank, Bank Nizwa has played a pivotal role in creating a strong Islamic finance ecosystem in the country. Its wholesale banking group, in particular, has achieved significant milestones in the past years and has been a vital contributor to the bank’s success.

Recognising the bank’s initiatives and the role its wholesale banking group has played in effectively contributing to the economic growth in the Sultanate, the Global Business Outlook (GBO) awarded Bank Nizwa the coveted title of the Best Wholesale Banking Service Provider – Oman 2021. The winners of the annual awards were announced on GBO’s official website.

On receiving the award, R Narasimhan, GM Wholesale at Bank Nizwa said, “The Global Business Outlook Awards seeks to recognise and reward excellence in businesses around the world and we are extremely honoured to have received this prestigious award. Over the years, Bank Nizwa has established its leading position in the wholesale banking segment with a strong suite of innovative products, a wide range of world-class services and a keen emphasis on



customer satisfaction.

At the same time, we have been at the forefront of encouraging individuals to opt for Islamic finance products while organising several seminars to promote its benefits amongst our clients. Today, we are not only a bank for our customers, we are their financial advisors and partners.”

Aligning itself to the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, Bank Nizwa played an active role in promoting government initiatives by offering Sharia-compliant financing solutions as well as by extending resources to support projects of national

importance.

Considering SMEs as the engines of economic growth, Bank Nizwa has been committed to promoting its development by offering tailor-made solutions to SMEs. The bank’s notable increase in its SME customer base and business volume is a testament to the trust placed in the bank’s services.

R Narasimhan added: “To enable us to better serve our wholesale banking customers, our well-diversified portfolio has been segmented into government and public sector entities, financial institutions and private-sector clients.

The Wholesale Banking group at Bank Nizwa is working on a Universal Banking model approach which consists of 10 vertical business units. Our main objective is to provide a 360-degree solution to our clients, offering them unparalleled services and contribute to the development of each sector while simultaneously also helping the bank achieve steady growth.”

Adhering to industry best practices, observing utmost transparency in all its proceedings and demonstrating the highest levels of operational efficiency, Bank Nizwa’s

wholesale banking unit, in the last five years, has achieved an average growth of 36 per cent in both asset and liabilities. Its portfolio has grown exponentially from \$650 million in 2015 to \$4.25 billion by the end of November 2021.

The Bank has a diversified its corporate finance portfolio in 23 major industry segments across the Sultanate of Oman, covering clientele requirements in both tier 1 and tier 2 cities.

The Bank undertook a new approach by providing financing to green projects, PPP model, major logistics conglomerate, core industries like steel, cement as well as manufacturing of chemicals, components to PDO, construction and contracting companies as well as the first dry port of the Sultanate.

Bank Nizwa is committed to offering a comprehensive array of Shariah-compliant financing solutions to cater to the varying needs of its multi-industry client portfolio. The bank offers wide range of product & services including but not limited to working capital finance, import and export finance, long-term finance, documentary credit requirements, treasury services, Investment Advisory and project-based financing for its clients.

Sohar International wins at Infosys Finacle Innovation Awards 2021



MUSCAT: Driven by its digital transformation strategy, Sohar International has earned commendable recognition for its stance on innovation and its journey towards digitalisation, ensuring that it continues to play a vital role in economic development whilst supporting customers and the community at large.

As a testament to its dedication and commitment towards this journey, Sohar International recently earned two prestigious accolades at the Infosys Finacle Client Innovation Awards 2021. Ensuring an uninterrupted, convenient and safe banking experience throughout the pandemic, the bank emerged a winner in the “Covid Response Innovation” category while bagging the runner-up award in the “Process Innovation” category.

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MUSCAT: The stylish, powerful and spacious Kia Telluride SUV offers ample opportunities to make the most of every journey along with your family. Equipped with ample space, powerful performance and advanced technologies the Telluride SUV does more than you expect, making it a popular choice among Kia enthusiasts.

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The Telluride’s stylish exterior highlights its every arrival, encouraging more than just second stares. Contributing to this are the Bi-Function Projection Headlamps, LED Daytime Running Lights, 20” Alloy Wheels, LED Rear Combination Lamps and more. Arming you with the advantage of having great start to your days is the Remote Engine Start.

Ooredoo adds Majan Lounge as new partner

MUSCAT: Continuing to reward loyal customers, Ooredoo’s popular Nojoom programme has added Majan Lounge at Muscat International Airports to its ever-growing partner list.

All new and existing Nojoom members can redeem their points through the award-winning app, and new members start earning points after just three months of joining. Enjoy luxury VIP access to the lounge while waiting for flights without spending a dime! Start your journey in style with Ooredoo.

Ooredoo continues to connect with their customers’ favourite



outlets and service partners in the Sultanate of Oman.

This partnership is a great opportunity to reward loyal customers as the company aims

to deliver better quality, more benefits and amazing value. Nojoom members now have even more of a reason to visit their much-loved outlets with their

family and friends.

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This is one of many ways Ooredoo gives thanks to its customers. For further information, please visit www.ooredoo.om or any of the 68 Ooredoo stores located across country.

Ford unveils exciting new year delights across the range

MUSCAT: Ford has recently announced a range of exclusive benefits across the range to add to a delightful start to the new year. Customers owning a brand new Ford can benefit with service 3 years / 60,000 kms, petrol card worth RO 100 and registration 1 year. (Conditions apply. For details visit a Ford showroom.) The offer is valid until March 9, 2022.

Ford’s range in the Sultanate of Oman, includes the all-new F-150 XLT. This powerful truck raises the standard for all light-duty trucks. It boasts best-in-class towing and payload capability, introduces all-new features to increase customer productivity.

The Ford Explorer comes



standard with a 2.3L i-4 Ecoboost engine.

The Ford Explorer now sports abundant new features; better cargo space behind the third row and a quiet highway ride, Intelligent 4WD Terrain

Management System, BLIS with Cross Traffic Alert, Individual Tyre Pressure Monitoring System, 360-Degree Camera, Tri-Zone Electronic Temperature Control and more.

The Expedition is the most

powerful and fuel-efficient Ford SUV till now, offering customers a full-size utility vehicle with a 3.5L V6 EcoBoost Engine producing 400 HP, stylish design and fresh interiors.

The Ford Taurus has been redesigned with a focus on safety and practicality. The Taurus has the effortless power to match its sporty appearance.

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Oil prices shrug off Omicron slump, soar to 2-month highs



The sun sets behind an oil pump in Saint-Fiacre, France. — Reuters

LONDON: Oil prices hit two-month highs on Wednesday on tight supply and easing concerns about the potential hit to demand from the Omicron coronavirus variant.

US Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Tuesday the economy of the United States, the world's biggest oil consumer, should weather the current Covid-19 surge with only "short-lived" impacts and was ready for the start of tighter monetary policy.

Brent crude futures were up 34 cents, or 0.4 per cent, at \$84.06 a barrel at 0918 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures were up 49 cents, or 0.6 per cent, to \$81.71 a barrel.

Both contracts are set for their sixth session of gains out of eight.

The Brent contract is showing growing backwardation with front-month delivery around \$4.20 more expensive than delivery in six months' time, indicating tight supply currently.

Opec+ producers continue to hold back more than 3 million barrels per day in output, while sanctions on Iran pin back its exports.

And though Opec+ producers are raising their output targets each month, technical difficulties have prevented several countries from hitting their quotas.

"Assuming China doesn't suffer a sharp slowdown, that Omicron actually becomes omi-gone, and with Opec+'s ability to raise production clearly limited, I see no reason why Brent crude cannot move towards \$100.00 in first quarter of 2022, possibly sooner", said Oanda analyst Jeffrey Halley.

— Reuters

Inflation sets the stage for 2022: Report

KEY TREND: Global growth for 2022 will slow to a more normal state

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 12

Following the aggressive monetary and fiscal policy moves of the last two years to counter the effects of the Covid-driven pandemic, 2022 looks to be a year of transition towards a more normal state.

However, the economic and market environment will likely be defined by inflation and how policymakers react to it, according to global strategists of independent investment management firm Invesco.

The strategists have worked on a 2022 base model whereby growth will slow from the elevated levels seen over the last year as countries emerge from the pandemic. In this higher probability model, expectations for markets and economies include a transition to more normal growth and a peaking of inflation. Invesco anticipates inflation to peak in mid-2022, then moderate towards target rates towards the middle of the year and into 2023.

As part of its outlook for 2022, the Invesco team has also worked on two tail scenarios: An upside scenario in which growth is buoyant and inflationary pressures prove temporary, as well as an alternate scenario where inflation remains elevated and growth erodes, giving rise to



defensive measures.

Despite the rise in Covid cases causing a headwind to growth, the team believes the impact may not be as negative as it was early on in the pandemic when most economies went under lockdown considering markets have largely adapted to stimulus policies, changes in the work environment and the rollout of vaccination programmes.

"Our base case is that next year will be a year of transition back to a more normal, typical economic environment", said Rob Waldner, Chief Strategist and Head of Macro Research for Fixed Income at Invesco.

Inflation may remain an issue, at least in the short-term due to continuing supply chain issues and increased demand, according to Invesco.

"During the pandemic, consumers spent more on tradeable goods and less on services, which contributed to supply chain issues and impacted inflation. While we expect inflation to decline as these issues are worked through, we anticipate a rate hike by the Federal Reserve Bank in response to elevated inflation", said Waldner.

The investment firm foresees some volatility as markets move through the transition period. Arnab Das, Global Market Strategist at Invesco said, "Growth has been the bright spot over the last year.

As economies re-opened, we had a big rebound with economic growth and increased productivity. There has been a lot of support and stimulus that

can't be taken away quickly. We have seen issues with supply shortages, last-mile logistic issues, and a want of workers, which is putting significant upward pressure on prices and inflation in general. The economy needs time to adjust to the pandemic's extraordinary policy actions."

2021 was a favourable year overall for stock market investors, with the S&P 500 up over 21 per cent on a year-to-date basis (S&P as of November 30) and MSCI World up 16.82 per cent (MSCI as of November 30), as investors regained an appetite for riskier assets over safer assets on the back of the quick recovery in global economies.

Looking forward to 2022, the anticipated transition toward a slowdown in global growth and

policy tightening may affect valuations in the early stages, according to Invesco. Given slowing growth expectations and peaking inflation, Invesco's base case expectations lead to reducing risk posture, with a slight tilt towards equities in the defensive sector.

"Central banks will try to deal with inflation through rate hikes, which will push bond yields higher in the short and medium term, but we expect long term yields to cap", said Das.

"Considering this flattening of the yield curve, we think it's appropriate to increase portfolio duration. Overall, we expect higher volatility and greater convergence in returns across asset classes and believe a more diversified and balanced approach to risk is pertinent."

CMA organises training on medical coding for health insurance

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 12

Around 280 representatives of various government and private health institutions, insurance companies and health insurance third party administrators are taking part in a 'Train the Trainer' programme organised by the Capital Market Authority (CMA) to acquaint them with the operation of the Dhamani electronic platform for mandatory health insurance coverage.



The participants, attending virtually and in-person, are being introduced to medical coding systems and their role in ensuring

quality health services and data accuracy.

These coding systems are based on the CPT methodology licensed

by the CMA from the American Medical Association (AMA).

The Dhamani platform link insurance companies with private health institutions and the institutions will operate on the basis of the classification and diagnosis of diseases as specified in the CPT licence, thereby curbing the potential for misuse and abuse. The participants are being trained in the use of MapME for medical coding, Health Data Records (HDR), and Main Data Records (MDR).

A number of tests were conducted for the trainees especially in medical coding systems to ensure their understanding of the topics in addition to questions and discussion session.

The CMA continues its endeavours to empower the Omani youth to work in the various technical fields related to health insurance including medical coding which would provide jobs related to medical coding in insurance companies and private health institutions

Bee'ah now a holding group with diverse business verticals

MUSCAT: Bee'ah, the Middle East's sustainability pioneer, has now become BEEAH Group, adopting the structure of an investment holding company and assuming a new visual identity.

As BEEAH Group, the organisation is unifying its growing businesses across industries and countries, including operations in UAE, KSA, Egypt and global joint ventures.

Since its founding over a decade ago, BEEAH has been driven by national, regional and global sustainability agendas.

The company has established itself as a leader in the waste management industry, its first core business, while diversifying into new industries such as clean energy, environmental consulting, technology and green mobility.

As a sustainability pioneer, BEEAH has already achieved historic milestones, including ground-breaking firsts for the UAE and wider region.

Its waste management businesses have achieved a 76 per cent waste diversion rate in the emirate of Sharjah alone, the highest in the Middle East.

Soon, BEEAH will launch its first clean energy project, the Sharjah Waste to Energy plant, which will realise the target of 100 per cent waste diversion for the emirate and make it the first zero-waste city in the Middle East.

The plant is an initiative of the Emirates Waste to Energy company, BEEAH's joint venture with Masdar.

Salim bin Mohamed al Owais, Chairman of the Board

BEEAH



of Directors at BEEAH Group, said: "This new structure and identity highlights our journey as an organisation over the past decade, while ushering in the next future-ready chapter. We have now evolved from a business with operations across future-critical industries, into a holding group of businesses that are shaping the future of these industries in the Middle East and beyond."

Under the holding structure and new visual identity, BEEAH Group aims to grow its businesses across the region and globally, working as an organisation to fulfil its vision of pioneering a sustainable quality of life for all.

BEEAH Group is now the parent company for several key businesses including: BEEAH Tandeef for waste collection and city cleaning, BEEAH

Under the holding structure and new visual identity, BEEAH Group aims to grow its businesses across the region and globally, working as an organisation to fulfil its vision of pioneering a sustainable quality of life for all

Recycling for waste processing and material recovery, BEEAH Energy for clean and renewable energy, BEEAH Environment Services for consulting, research and innovation, BEEAH Digital for future technologies and digital ventures, and BEEAH Transport for green mobility and

autonomous transportation.

Khaled al Huraimel, Group CEO of BEEAH Group, said: "With the new holding structure and identity, our businesses will deliver further value to our clients with solutions that are smart, scalable and resolve sustainability challenges in a more holistic way."

"By specifying each of our industries of operation, we are giving our businesses the room they need to grow within their industries and areas of operation. At the same time, these verticals and businesses also benefit from the collective experience of BEEAH Group. Our organisation will continue to forge partnerships and invest in ventures that contribute to our overall purpose — to pioneer a sustainable quality of life", he added.

Gloomy outlook for global recovery

Only one in 10 World Economic Forum members expects the global recovery to accelerate over the next three years, a poll of nearly 1,000 business, government and academic leaders found, with only one in six optimistic about the world outlook.

Climate change was seen as the number one danger by respondents in the WEF's annual risks report on Tuesday, while erosion of social cohesion, livelihood crises and mental health deterioration were identified as risks which had increased the most since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Global leaders must come together and adopt a coordinated multi-stakeholder approach to tackle unrelenting global challenges and build resilience ahead of the next crisis," Saadia Zahidi, WEF managing director, said.

Extreme weather was considered the world's biggest risk in the short term and a failure of climate action in the medium and long term — two to 10 years, the survey showed.

Agreement at the UN COP26 climate conference in November last year was widely applauded for keeping alive prospects of capping global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius, but many of the nearly 200 nations had wanted to leave the conference in Glasgow with more.

Climate change is already seen contributing to more extreme weather patterns.

"Failure to act on climate change could shrink global GDP by one-sixth and the commitments taken at COP26 are still not enough to achieve the 1.5 (degrees Celsius) goal," Peter Giger, group chief risk officer at Zurich Insurance, which helped to compile the report, said.

The WEF's report also highlights four areas of emerging risk — cybersecurity, a disorderly climate transition, migration pressures and competition in space.

The prospect of 70,000 satellite launches in coming decades, in addition to space tourism, raises risks of collisions and increasing debris in space, amid a lack of regulation.

"Who governs space?" said Carolina Klint, risk management leader for continental Europe at insurance broker Marsh which also helped produce the report.

The report is published each year ahead of the annual WEF meeting in Davos. — AFP

Global leaders must come together and adopt a coordinated multi-stakeholder approach to tackle unrelenting global challenges and build resilience ahead of the next crisis

SAADIA ZAHIDI
Managing Director, WEF



FEE FOR A WALK

Tourists visit the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Thailand is planning to collect a 300 baht (\$9) fee from foreign tourist from April to develop attractions and cover accident insurance for foreigners unable to pay costs themselves, senior officials said on Wednesday.

Thailand, one of Asia's most popular travel destinations, has been badly hit by a pandemic-induced tourism slump, with about 200,000 arrivals last year, compared to nearly 40 million in 2019. — AFP

Economic diversification is vital to the region's long-term growth



HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

A RECOVERY IS INDEED UNDER WAY IN THE REGION FOLLOWING A PROLONGED SPELL OF ECONOMIC STAGNATION IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19 IMPACTS

Our region is expected to witness growth during the coming period on the back of rising oil prices and an improving global economic environment.

Many governments are now busy working on long-term plans in order to achieve economic diversification and modernisation. Last October, a report published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said the Middle East region in general is forecast to witness a growth of 2.7 per cent.

A recovery is indeed under way in the region following a prolonged spell of economic stagnation in the wake of Covid-19 impacts.

Within the Gulf Cooperation Council, the IMF projects mixed growth: 3.5 per cent in Bahrain, 3 per cent in Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman, 2.7 per cent in the United Arab Emirates, 2.4 per cent in Saudi Arabia, and 2 per cent in the State of Kuwait.

The main factor driving this growth is the increase in international oil prices

during recent months – by around 50 per cent since the beginning of 2021.

At one point, buoyant oil prices neared the \$85 a barrel mark. However, the outbreak of the new mutagen Omicron led to a decline in demand for oil, closing the price at \$77 a barrel at the end of 2021.

Resurgent prices have indeed helped the countries of the region to boost revenues amid measures to rationalise spending and support fiscal sustainability.

According to a report by Oxford Business Group, four Gulf countries have introduced value-added tax (VAT) to help bolster non-oil revenues.

The most recent was the Sultanate of Oman with a 5 per cent tax rate. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain had earlier implemented VAT at rates from 5 to 15 per cent, while both the states of Kuwait and Qatar have yet to adopt the new tax.

The new levy is expected to generate about RO 400 million (over \$1 billion) annually to the Omani government's revenue, which is equivalent to 1.5 per cent of the country's GDP.

In the same context, Bahrain announced

its intention to double the value-added tax rate to reach 10 per cent during this year, while Saudi Arabia had previously raised this tax to 15 per cent in 2020.

The ongoing pandemic has disrupted the development strategies of countries in the region. The impact is particularly significant for countries dependent on oil exports as the main source of revenues. The fiscal positions of these countries were severely impacted as a result.

However, with the current oil price trend being sustained, prospects for the region's economic recovery are brightening.

Nevertheless, it is imperative for countries of the region to continue to reform their economies to attract more foreign direct investment, stimulate foreign investment inflows, and enhance their competitiveness, in addition to launching initiatives to accelerate the economic diversification process.

The latter goal requires amendments to laws to allow foreigners to work in specialised technical fields, and efforts to attract domestic and foreign investments at the same time.

China's next debt crisis will be municipal

BY YAHWEN CHEN

On the southern bank of the Amur river that runs along the Russian border is one of the most affordable property markets in China. Where the average two-bedroom flat in Beijing can cost \$1 million, investors can snap one up in the city of Hegang for \$10,000. Dependent almost entirely on coal mining, Hegang's economy has been on the ropes for years.

The pandemic appeared to push it over the edge. On December 23, local officials announced the city has frozen hiring and begun fiscal restructuring. That may be a first for China, but it's unlikely the last.

While coastal provinces with strong export sectors have weathered the Covid-19 outbreak relatively well, local governments in the interior have been under heavy economic stress.

That was only aggravated by Beijing's decision to rein in the real estate market.

Not only has it driven homebuilders like Evergrande to log spectacular defaults, it has depressed the land sales that contribute an estimated one-third of cities' fiscal revenue on average.

This means that even as developers default on bonds and trade credit, and leave projects half-finished, China's infamous army of local government finance vehicles could start going belly up next.

An April document from the state cabinet suggested dysfunctional ones should be allowed to go bankrupt. Their outstanding debt amounted to \$8 trillion at the end of 2020, Goldman Sachs estimated, equivalent to around half of China's gross domestic product; last year they also replaced property developers as the biggest Chinese debt issuers offshore, with \$31 billion of dollar bonds coming due in 2022.

LGFVs are a policy oddity. They were invented, more or less, during the global financial crisis of 2008 to let officials get around a central ban on direct borrowing by local governments, allowing localities to quickly raise debt for stimulus.

Today they exist in a policy grey area, created by and for official use but not technically guaranteed. Many of them hold assets of dubious quality: roads to nowhere, empty airports.

Reforms to the provincial bond market in 2015 were supposed to make them unnecessary, yet they are still around, and many are heavily involved in primary land development before parcels are sold to developers, making them direct victims of stalled bids and cooling prices.

A lot of their debt got repackaged into wealth management products sold to ordinary people. They are also big borrowers from small banks.

Now land sales are forecast to fall

another 20 per cent this year after a bruising 2021, according to S&P Global Ratings.

Yet despite Beijing's recent tolerance of defaults by state-owned enterprises, and despite many LGFVs' obvious lack of profitability and dubious governance, some investors remain convinced they will be protected.

Local ratings agencies have awarded investment grades to those with very weak credit profiles, a November analysis by CreditSights showed.

As with property developer Shimao Group, which was rated investment grade until it suddenly started to default in January, the risk is less that high-yielding, junk-rated LGFV bonds fall over, but that lower-yield issues from wealthy regions are mispriced too. It's getting harder, after all, to kick the can down the road as renewed Covid-19 outbreaks flare up from Xi'an to Tianjin.

In Lanzhou, capital of Gansu

province, 14 billion yuan (\$2.2 billion) of LGFV bonds are coming due this year, equivalent to almost half of the city's 2021 fiscal revenue, per S&P. Regulators are capping LGFV domestic bond issuance and preventing those from poorer regions from participating, Chinese media have reported, which will make rolling over existing debt harder. Some will try to dump assets, but might not be easy.

As with real estate, there is a question about how tough Beijing can be on the poorest parts of the country as the wider economy wobbles. If the central government wants to stimulate growth, it must rely on cities and towns to do their part.

Some do have the ability to raise funds via targeted bonds specifically for infrastructure spending, but others will need a lifeline just to stay afloat. Either way, investors and lenders will have to watch their step.

— Reuters

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcement of Capital Reduction

IN accordance with the provisions of Article 150 of the Commercial Companies Law. The company **Khoor Al Siabi United LLC ENT**, which is registered with the Commercial Registration No **1099145**, hereby announces that it is going to reduce its capital from **RO 250,000 to 50,000**. Whoever has any objection to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion within 30 days from the date hereof.

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- Prepare daily meals for the family (Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner).
- Be able to cook for events and formal dinner parties.
- Be able to take full responsibility for the running of the kitchen and have good communication skills.
- Be able to work alongside a team of household staff and as a kitchen assistant that provides highest level of service for the family.
- Ensure all kitchen equipment's and appliances are kept clean and in proper working condition.
- Be creative, hardworking & have exceptional standards for cleanliness, health & safety.

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features



An acclaimed London-based publication uncovers the Sultanate's of Oman blossoming creative art scene by focussing on the works of six Omani artists and photographers... **P20**

Omani 'creative giants' make global debut

– Image courtesy of Israa Al Balushi

THEATRE

READ



PEOPLE WE MEET ON VACATION
BY EMILY HENRY SUMMARY

Poppy has everything she should want, but she's stuck in a rut. When someone asks when she was last truly happy, she knows, without a doubt, it was on that ill-fated, final trip with Alex. And so, she decides to convince her best friend to take one more vacation together—lay everything on the table, make it all right.

Kanye Trilogy set to hit theatres and Netflix next month

A DOCUMENTARY ON the artist formerly known as Kanye West is coming to theatres next month. The official trailer, released on Monday, shows a young Kanye in 2002 upset at rapper Rhymefest for doubting his self-proclaimed genius status, alluding to the doc's title. "Who are you to call your-

Netflix over the course of three weeks, according to Rolling Stone. The official trailer, released on Monday, shows a young Kanye in 2002 upset at rapper Rhymefest for doubting his self-proclaimed genius status, alluding to the doc's title. "Who are you to call your-



self a genius?" Rhymefest asks Ye in the clip. West answers by flashing a grin at the camera. Directors Coodie & Chike shot the documentary foot-

age over 20 years, capturing everything from Kanye with his late mother Donda West to behind-the-scenes coverage of his failed 2020 presidential campaign.

"Jeen-yuhs: A Kanye Trilogy" follows a dominant year for music documentaries. Quest love's "Summer of Soul," highlighting the previously unheralded story of the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival, won multiple awards at the Sundance Film Festival and has been nominated for a Grammy. Other stars who received the documentary treatment last year include the Beatles, Britney Spears, DMX and Billie Eilish. Ye is set to close April's Coachella festival on consecutive weekends, including an Easter Sunday gospel set. In December, he and Drake co-headlined a "Free Larry Hoover" benefit concert at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. — **dpa**



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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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We select three photos daily for our Instagram Top Picks of the Day. The rules are simple. Follow us on Instagram. Upload your photos. Tag us and use #OmanObserver and #BeAnObserver.



LIFESTYLE

Beauty is only skin deep in China 'micro-procedure' craze



MIDDAY QUEUES SNAKE out to the street in an upmarket Shanghai neighbourhood, but it's not lunch at the city's hottest restaurant that people are lining up for — it's cosmetic "micro-procedures", which are surging in popularity in China.

The "lunchtime facelift" and other "medical aesthetics" procedures are booming as a new generation of Chinese consumers grapple with the pressure to look good on social media as well as in person.

Kayla Zhang has never actually gone under the knife for cosmetic reasons, but she's had laser treatments, injections and a thread lift — a barbed string inserted under the skin and pulled up to "lift" the face.

"I'm not changing my nose or my eyes, which would be an extreme change in my looks," the 27-year-old said, adding that she's seeking a "better version" of herself rather than "a totally new face."

Already popular in the West because they are less invasive and more affordable than traditional cosmetic surgery, micro-procedures — from laser facials and fillers to thread lifts — are fast becoming the norm in China's cities where disposable incomes have jumped in the past decade.

The Chinese Association of Plastics and Aesthetics estimates, overall, the cosmetic industry will grow to \$46 billion this year compared to around \$6.5 billion in 2013.

Micro-procedures are now an expanding segment of that market, while traditional surgery's growth rates slow, according to data from consulting firm Frost and Sullivan.

CHANGING VALUES

But a government crackdown looms over the boom.

The ruling Communist Party is pushing a broad campaign to "purify" social values, which includes taking aim at mounting youth pressure to go under the knife.

The government has banned industry advertising practices that contribute to "appearance anxiety" such as before-and-after images, and has levied tens of millions of dollars in fines this year over various infractions.

Model Li Li already gets monthly laser treatments to correct skin blemishes but admits she feels social pressure to continually fix her appearance. After friends said her face was out of proportion she opted for a "chin filler," which makes the chin more prominent.

"I went to get it immediately," the 27-year-old confessed.

But Li and Zhang insist that micro-procedures — which can cost on average a third of the price of cosmetic surgery, according to research by Deloitte — are a less-invasive alternative to traditional surgery and are being unfairly stigmatised.

"Everyone had the same standard of beauty before, but now it feels like this norm is being tipped over," added Zhang, who likens micro-procedures to skincare, but faster.

A decade ago, cosmetic doctor Yang Kaiyuan said customers often came to him with a picture of a celebrity, telling him: "I want to look like this."

"Nowadays, people just hope to make slight improvements on what they already have," Yang explained. — AFP

CELEBRATIONS



Puddings and pageantry for Queen's Platinum Jubilee

THE UK WILL celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee this year with a pudding contest, pageantry and public holidays, Buckingham Palace said on Monday.

Elizabeth was proclaimed Queen on February 6, 1952, after the death of her father, George VI, although her coronation was in 1953. At 95, she will become the only UK monarch to have ruled for 70 years and she has called for Jubilee celebrations to promote a mood of unity.

In her Christmas Day message, the Queen said she hoped her Jubilee "will be an opportunity for people everywhere to enjoy a sense of togetherness".

Events reflecting Britain's national passions include a nationwide competition to create a new pudding for the Jubilee, with a panel of judges picking the winner, among them the head chef at Buckingham Palace and veteran television presenter Mary Berry.

There is also an ongoing drive to "plant a tree for the Jubilee", with the Queen to receive a digital map showing them all.

The main celebrations will be held over a four-day long weekend, kicking off with public holidays on Thursday June 2 and Friday June 3.

On Thursday June 2, the Queen's Birthday Parade will see



more than a thousand soldiers, horses and Army musicians perform a Trooping of the Colour ceremony in central London, marking the Queen's official birthday (her actual birthday is in April with "military pageantry").

Continuing a tradition dating back hundreds of years, people will light beacons in over 1,500 towns, cities and villages, across the country that evening.

On Friday June 3, there will be a service of thanksgiving for the Queen's reign at St Paul's Cathedral in London.

On Saturday June 4, the BBC is to host a live concert called Platinum at the Palace, promising "some of the world's biggest

entertainment stars".

On Sunday June 5, people can apply to hold neighbourhood parties as part of a nationwide "Big Jubilee Lunch". Over 200,000 such events are expected.

There will also be a street pageant in London billed as an "awe-inspiring festival of creativity", including performers from the Commonwealth countries.

After these main events, the Queen's Coronation dress and robe will be on display at Windsor Castle.

The programme of mass events makes no mention of Covid restrictions.

Previously the 1977 Silver Jubilee saw nationwide street parties and the Queen processing through London in her carriage, as well as the release of the Sex Pistols' punk anthem "God Save The Queen". The Golden Jubilee in 2002 saw the public revive the tradition of street parties, while the 2012 Diamond Jubilee, ahead of the London Olympics, featured a flotilla of 1,000 boats on the River Thames. The royal family has faced unwelcome publicity recently, with US legal action targeting Prince Andrew, the Queen's second son, over alleged sex with a minor, as well as the Queen's grandson Harry and his wife Meghan airing racism claims.

— AFP

VOICES - PODCAST



Lakshmi Kothaneth

Entrepreneurship guarantees freedom of time

ON OUR FIRST episode of the Voices podcast, Ahmed bin Yahya al Kindi, founder of Smart Work, commented on entrepreneurship.

His story is interesting because he did not wait for college to try his hands in the business. He had some time between school graduation and university and decided to experiment with an online business. Since the venture kept him too busy, he decided to take a break from the online business while in college.

When we met Ahmed, he was a conference speaker and just had a few more days to graduate. He was participating in the event as a young entrepreneur.

Even while in college, he founded his company Smart Work that focuses on learning and training.

"Our main focus is e-learning. We provide workshops, training and coaching. The major emphasis is on business, financial education and personal development," Ahmed explained

quickly as we came to know he also gives free public speaking classes every Wednesday and employs students so they can also gain experience by the time they graduate.

"We provide hands-on experience. For example, we teach how to use the tools in digital marketing and engage the trainees with the speakers to have interactions.

He has an interesting outlook on jobs. "If you are stuck with a 9 to 5 job, I am sorry to say, you are not inspired. The monthly salary you receive is the price you pay for your freedom. Freedom is not about money it is about time."

So what would he say to the individuals struggling to secure a job?

"Actually the main problem is that they have not acquired enough skills."

Exciting and inspiring to talk to people like Ahmed:

Join us on our podcast Voices @ omanpodcast, Anchor - Oman Observer as well as on our website omanobserver.om on January 13, 2022.





– Image courtesy of Alia Al Farsi

Omani ‘creative giants’ make global debut



– Image courtesy of Hassan Meer



– Image courtesy of Alia Al Farsi



– Image courtesy of Mohammed Alattar

By Ruqaya Al Kindi

The latest issue of London-based magazine features the Sultanate's of Oman blossoming creative art scene, which is unknown in international circles. Sekka spotlights the nation's emerging and established artists, photographers, writers, poets, fashion designers and more, who, as Sekka's founders Manar and Sharifah al Hinai describe, as "creative giants".

Sekka, is devoted to art, culture, literature and opinions from the Arab world, with a focus on the Arab Gulf States.

On the cover page is a colourful illustration of Abdulaziz Al Hosni, Israa al Balushi, Mohammed al Attar, Mahmood al Zadjali, and Majeda al Hinai. It was done by Omani illustrator Widad al Harthy, who is also featured on the cover alongside her counterparts.

"It was really important to us when we were putting together the issue that the artwork on the cover honours Omani creatives, reflects the vibrant creative scene made by an Omani artist to ensure representation," explained Sekka's Managing Storyteller, Sharifah.

The decision has left a long lasting impact on the cover stars, who are collectively making their global debut through the issue. "It's a big honour [to be featured on the cover] a dream I had as a kid that has come true," describes 30-year-old multidisciplinary artist Al Attar, whose digital illustrations, which challenge preconceptions about masculinity, are featured inside the issue in a visual spread.

"The fact that I was chosen among many beautiful talents is a motivation for me to keep on growing. We need the creative field to be taken more seriously. This is a big step forward to take the creative scene to a higher level," he added.

Al Balushi, a conceptual photographer who discusses the landscape of conceptual photography in Oman in the pages of the issue, said, "As a creative, you put your work out for the public and it automatically becomes an extension of you. It's refreshing to be recog-

nised as one of the "Creative Giants" of the industry and it's been a pleasure being part of a well-knit and renowned community throughout Sekka's earliest online publications."

The loyal Sekka reader added, "For Sekka's team to focus solely on Oman's creative scene, speaks volumes, it's the first stepping stone for all of us."

Hassan Meer and Alia al Farsi, who have been inspirational to younger, emerging artist, appear in a joint feature in the issue. "I was very happy to be a part of Sekka's edition about Oman," said Meer, one of Oman's most iconic artists and the founder of Muscat's prestigious Stal Gallery.

"Oman's art scene is very dynamic and very young and it deserves a lot of attention. I'm happy that Sekka is featuring art in Oman. It will add a lot of attention to the movement of contemporary art in Oman," he said.

Likewise, Al Farsi, one of Oman's leading female artists and the founder of Alia Gallery states, "Sekka Magazine has done an exceptional job with introducing Omani artists to the world. This issue is akin to a mini encyclopedia about the art movement in the Sultanate, and it will have a special place in our library at Alia Gallery. I am grateful to the Sekka team for producing this special issue, and I'm elated to be a part of it."

She added, "When the work and story of any artist is published in a publication of this magnitude, this not only promotes the work of the artist, but it also increases the material and sentimental value of the artists' work in art circles."

The issue also honours numerous other Omanis creatives, including fashion designers Amal al Raisi, Nawal al Hooti and Aisha al Kharusi, as well as novelist Bushra Khalfan and poet Aisha al Saifi, whose poem "Son of the Mountains, Daughter of the Prairies" was translated into English for the issue.

"There are so many more creatives we wanted to include. There are so many brilliant people to cover in Oman, but, unfortunately the pages of our magazine are limited," said Manar, who serves as Sekka's Storyteller-In-Chief.