

Oil prices dive on China demand

Global oil prices plunged around five per cent on Wednesday over demand concerns in the world's biggest importer China, amid a steep rise in Covid infections in the country. At around 1600 GMT, a barrel of WTI for delivery in February was down 4.9 per cent at \$73.15 a barrel, and the main European contract, Brent for delivery in March, was 4.9 per cent lower at \$78.11.



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NEW FIH CHIEF TO ARRIVE IN MUSCAT TOMORROW

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OMAN FLOUR MILLS OPENS RO 21 MILLION GRAIN SILO COMPLEX IN SOHAR PORT

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THE WORLD IN MINIATURE

MUSCAT

HM ACCESSION DAY HOLIDAY ON JAN 12

Upon the Royal orders of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, it has been decided that January 12 (Thursday) will be an official holiday for employees in units of the State's Administrative Apparatus (public sector), other legal entities and private sector establishments on the occasion of His Majesty the Sultan's Accession Day. The Ministry of Labour said that employers may agree with their respective employees to continue working during the above-mentioned day if deemed necessary, provided the workers be compensated for that. — OMA

BEIJING

COVID SPREADS FAST IN CHINA

China's state media rallied citizens on Wednesday for a "final victory" over Covid-19 as health officials abroad tried to work out the scale of its raging outbreak and how to stop it spreading. Beijing's abrupt axing of "zero Covid" curbs last month has unleashed the virus on China's 1.4 billion people. SEE P6

MOSCOW

SOLDIERS' MOBILE USE BLAMED FOR STRIKE

Russia's defence ministry on Wednesday blamed the illegal use of mobile phones by its soldiers for a deadly Ukrainian missile strike that it said killed 89 servicemen, raising the reported death toll significantly. Moscow previously said 63 Russian soldiers were killed in the weekend strike. The ministry's reaction came amid mounting anger among some Russian commentators. SEE P6

INSIDE

PAKISTAN ORDERS EARLIER BUSINESS CLOSURE

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US CONGRESS FAILS TO ELECT SPEAKER

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A PEEK INTO CAMELS OF OMAN

In implementation of the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, a symposium and exhibition on the history of camels in Oman began in Riyadh on Wednesday. The symposium, held at the premises of Culture Palace in the diplomatic quarter in Riyadh, aims to introduce the participants and visitors to camels' history, origins and their role in economic, social and cultural life of Oman. SEE P2

Football fan festival returns at OCEC

MUSCAT: To mark the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup football tournament, Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran) on Wednesday announced the establishment of a Football Fans Square at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC).

The Iraqi city of Basra will host this year's Gulf Cup tournament, scheduled to be held from January 6 to 19, 2022. The square, which will be a destination for football fans and their families, will be venue to the tournament's accompanying activities and events. Gulf Cup matches will be broadcast live on giant screens at the Football Fans Square, which can accommodate up to 1,300 fans. It will be an ideal place for football fans to follow



the matches and encourage their national teams. The tournament will be held at the Basra International Stadium and the International Port, with the opening match between Oman and Iraq on Friday. Over 92,000 people thronged the Football Fan Festival, which was organised as part of the Qatar World Cup.

Halban and Amerat to get new RO 160mn townships

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning has signed agreements to support the development of two new integrated residential neighbourhoods (Souruh) at Halban and Al Amerat at a total cost of RO 160 million. The pacts are part of a raft of agreements signed by Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, here on Wednesday. A number of integrated service stations and a new electronic real estate platform will be established as well.

The first integrated residential neighbourhood will come up in the Wilayat of Al Amerat in the Governorate of Muscat on a total area of 445,823 square metres. Offering 1,050 housing units, the RO 60 million project will be constructed over seven years in 3 stages. The second Souruh project will come up at Halban in the Wilayat of Nakhl in the Governorate of South Al Batinah. Covering an area of 637,044, it will offer 1,350 housing units. It will be built with an investment of RO 100 million in four stages over eight years. Both projects have multiple housing options including

Integrated residential projects "Souruh"

Halban
South Al Batinah Governorate

Project implementation period
8 years, 4 phases

Area
637,044m²

Project implementation period
+1350 housing units

Al Amerat
Muscat Governorate

Project implementation period
7 years, 3 phases

Area
445,823m²

Project implementation period
+1050 housing units

Usufruct land is an investment opportunity for citizens and the private sector for an optimal government land investment, the achievement of sustainability, and maximisation of financial return from the sector

2Barka

Saham

Liwa

Al Seeb

The "Aqari" platform is a smart way to buy and sell land and real estate through digital means as an easy-to-use interactive application

detached villas, attached villas, semi-detached villas, and apartments. Other services will be available such as a mosque, a commercial area, and green spaces, in addition to infrastructure works related to basic public services. The Ministry has also offered several sites under the Souruh programme in each of the Governorate of South Al

Sharqiyah in the Wilayat of Sur (Nesma), in the Governorate of South Al Batinah in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq (Al Hazm), in the Governorate of North Al Batinah in the Wilayat of Suhar (Muwaileh), in the Governorate of Dhofar in the Wilayat of Salalah (North Sahalnoot) and in the Governorate of Musandam in the Wilayat of Khasab. MORE ON P13

SET FOR SNOW FEST

People walk next to a giant snow sculpture in Harbin, in China's northeastern Heilongjiang province on Wednesday, ahead of the 39th Harbin China International Ice and Snow Festival. — AFP



Nature prescriptions reduce stress, anxiety, depression

LONDON: Patients suffering from various health issues could be advised to connect with nature to improve their wellbeing in a first for England. Nature prescriptions could be given to patients in High Peak, Derbyshire, after a successful pilot in Scotland. They are being run by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), in collaboration with the Peak District National Park Authority, amid increasing

evidence that people who are connected with nature have improved mental wellbeing, are happier and are more satisfied with life. Users are given a calendar of ideas to inspire them to connect with nature, including searching for frost on leaves and listening to sounds outdoors, and can complete the programme on their own or with others. Patients will be referred by community mental health teams,



Users are given a calendar of ideas to inspire them to connect with nature, including searching for frost on leaves and listening to sounds outdoors

adult social care teams, other local support agencies and 13 GP surgeries in the area, to two social prescribing services. The prescribing services take a holistic approach to health and wellbeing and can signpost patients to a variety of support networks based on the individual, including help with financial management and personal training, with nature prescriptions aimed at reducing stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression. — dpa



■ MINISTER RECEIVES ALGERIAN AMBASSADOR



MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received on Wednesday Filali Ghouini, Ambassador of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria to the Sultanate of Oman. The ambassador expressed his appreciation to Oman for enhancing means of mutual cooperation. He also underscored Oman's firm and balanced political positions in international relations. During the meeting, the two sides also discussed several regional and international matters of common interest. — ONA

Winners of municipal completion in North Al Batinah feted



SUHAR: Al Batinah Municipality held a celebration to honour the winners of the Municipal Excellence Projects, under the auspices of Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of North Al Batinah, on Wednesday. Eng Sulaiman bin Hamad al Sunaidi, Director-General of North Al Batinah Municipality, said that the municipal services projects are witnessing significant development in all wilayats of the governorate. He noted that the departments of municipal affairs aim to achieve distinctiveness in the future projects which include development of industrial areas, slaughterhouses and beaches. A number of outstanding municipal projects that were executed in North Al Batinah Governorate were reviewed during the event. The department of municipal affairs in the Wilayat of Liwa won the first place of the municipal excellence competition while the walk track in the Wilayat of Saham came in first place as the best municipal project. In the category industrial areas development, Saham industrial area won first place. The municipal slaughterhouse in Liwa won first place in municipal slaughterhouse excellence and the department of municipal affairs in Al Khabourah won the first award for attention to beaches. — ONA

Municipal council members take oath of office

IBRA: Members of the Municipal Council of North Al Sharqiyah on Wednesday took the oath of office before Shaikh Ali bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Governor of North Al Sharqiyah and Chairman of the council, in implementation of Article 14 of the Municipal Councils Law.

During the meeting, a deputy chairman was elected electronically by the members using “Tanmia” app, which was recently launched by the Ministry of Interior.

The meeting also saw the formation of standing committees, which were the Legal Affairs Committee, the Social Affairs Committee, the Governorate's Development Committee and the Health and Environmental Affairs Committee.

SOUTH AL SHARQIYAH The Municipal Council of South Al Sharqiyah Governorate also held its first meeting of the 3rd term under the chairmanship of Dr Yahya bin Badr al Ma'awali,



Governor of South Al Sharqiyah and Chairman of the Council. Members of the Municipal Council of South Al Sharqiyah took the oath of office before the chairman of the council, in implementation of Article 14 of the Municipal Councils Law. During the meeting, a deputy chairman was elected electronically by the members using “Tanmia” app. The meeting also saw the formation of standing committees, which were the Legal Affairs Committee, the Social Affairs Committee, the Governorate's Development Committee and the Health and Environmental Affairs Committee. — ONA

Symposium, exhibition on history of Omani camels kick off in Riyadh

RIYADH: In implementation of the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, a symposium and exhibition on the history of Omani camels began in Riyadh.

The symposium, held at the premises of Culture Palace in the diplomatic quarter in Riyadh, aims to introduce the participants and visitors to Omani camels, their history, origins and their role in economic, social and cultural life.

The event also seeks to highlight the activities of the Royal Camel Corps and its role in preserving thoroughbred Omani camel breeds. It supports the ongoing cooperation between Oman and Saudi Arabia with regard to camels.

It covers various areas of relevance to camels, including investment opportunities in camel-based economies, scholarly and practical aspects of camels. The symposium targets: universities, educational and research



institutions, governmental and private institutions and individuals interested in arts that evolve around the theme of camels. The symposium includes a number of working papers presented by researchers and specialists in the field of camels and an exhibition focusing on four main themes: the first one features the history of Omani camels; the theme reviews the activities and events of the Royal Camel Corps and the services it renders to the community; the third theme highlights the scientific contributions of the Directorate-General of Veterinary Services, Royal Court Affairs, in the field of camel health. The fourth corner is dedicated to camel-related heritage arts. A photography and modern arts exhibition is organised as part of the event by Oman Society for Fine Arts and its works which focus on camels. The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Shaikh Fahd Falah Hathlin, Founder and President of the International Camel Organisation. It was also attended by HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and Humaid bin Ali al Zar'ee, Director-General of the Royal Camel Corps. — ONA

Jabal Akhdhar attracts over 208,000 visitors

AL JABAL AL AKHDHAR: As many as 208,423 people visited the Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar (the Green Mountain) in 2022, according to statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Due to its moderate summer and relatively very cold winter, the Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar stands out as a unique tourist destination that boasts a year-round turnout of visitors, who set out, from their accommodations in modern hotel facilities, to explore the adjoining mountains and practicing many types of related sports. Al Jabal Al Akhdhar is also unique in Oman in the sense that it is home to many agricultural crops like pomegranates, grapes, peaches, apricots, roses and other farming products. The villages of the wilayat house a number of ancient buildings that attract

large numbers of tourists from various Arab, Asian, European and American countries. NCSI statistics show that 112,619 Omani citizens visited Al Jabal Al Akhdhar in 2022, in addition to 13,428 tourists from Saudi Arabia, 1,543 from the United Arab Emirates, 1,236 from Kuwait, 746 from Qatar and 51 from Bahrain. As many as 6,041 tourists visited Al Jabal Al Akhdhar from other Arab countries, while 72,294 tourists are from foreign countries. Al Jabal Al Akhdhar is also famous for ecotourism and adventure tourism in Oman, in addition to outdoor activities such as walking in valleys, visiting caves and mountain climbing. These activities in turn contributes to the tourists' getting exposure to the local culture in the wilayat. — ONA





Internet promotion regulation 'aimed at regulating' social media influencers

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The recent regulation to regulate marketing and promotions on social media and on the Internet will only impact individuals, according to a legal expert.

As the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) recently issued a decision 619/2022 regulating the practice of marketing and promotion activity on social media, several individuals and organisations contacted the Observer for clarity on the matter.

"I have my page on social media, which I use to promote local news and updates. I am anxious to know these regulations will affect people like me," said a freelancer.

"The regulation appears to target influencers who promote goods and services on a for-profit basis. It does not apply to a person who has a home-made business, or who owns any business, who uses social media to promote their goods and services," said Riyadh al Balushi, co-founder of decree. om and a lawyer.

He clarified that if a person is on social media and does not promote goods and services by

other people for money, then they are not required to be licensed, and they do not need to take any legal action to continue their social media activities.

"If a person is an influencer who is paid to promote goods and services, then they are required to conduct their business through a company. They need to register their own company or have their activity fall under a company they are associated with, and they need to apply for a licence."

He added, "In my opinion, this regulation is necessary to protect consumers, and we will have to see if it will be effectively enforced."

MoCIIP regulation gives the concerned parties six months from its enforcement date to obtain a licence.

Those excluded from obtaining the licence are persons who practice non-profit activities such as charitable and voluntary work and the activities carried out by the merchant for the commodity or service that he sells or provides himself, provided that the merchant adheres to the other provisions contained in these regulations.

It also calls for not spreading malicious or misleading rumours and news, respecting the national identity of the Sultanate of



Oman, not broadcasting any data or information that offends individuals or any social groups and incites hatred and violence,

not infringing on intellectual property rights, and not to market and promote tobacco and smoke of all kinds and methods of

consumption.

The regulation specified the imposition of penalties for violators of its provisions, and

"If a person is an influencer who is paid to promote goods and services, then they are required to conduct their business through a company. They need to register their own company or have their activity fall under a company they are associated with, and they need to apply for a licence"

it includes several penalties - a warning, an administrative fine not exceeding RO 1,000, suspension of the licence for a period not exceeding one year, and complete licence revocation.

The decision stipulated an applicant's request may be finalised within 15 days from the date the authorised department receives the necessary documents. In case the licence application is approved, the authorised department issues a 3-year licence, renewable, to enable the applicant for e-marketing and promotion activities.

Media consumption: TV, radio, print still popular

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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A recent survey conducted by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) had a variable response from the respondents regarding their source of reliable media.

Most of the respondents were in favour of television, radio, newspapers, and other mainstream media for their reliability of news.

The Sultanate of Oman, like many other countries, is assessing the role of media in conveying the right message and emerging as the right choice of information while meeting the aspirations of the beneficiaries.

Within the framework of cooperation between the NCSI and the Ministry of Information, the former surveyed the quality of local media content and asked for suggestions to improve media content in general.

The survey sample size was 1,739 citizens and residents in the Sultanate of Oman in the age group of 18 years and over, who were selected according to the simple random sampling method.

The sample included males and females from all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, from different educational levels and age groups. The sample size allowed estimates of most of the indicators obtained from the survey at the overall level in the Sultanate of Oman.

The Sultanate of Oman's Oman TV witnessed a high percentage of viewers (70 per cent), of whom 86 per cent watched Oman TV channels through the TV set, and 27 per cent watched it through social media. The public channel of the Sultanate of Oman ranked as the most watched local TV channel by Omanis with a rate of 48 per cent of the total viewers of the Sultanate of Oman TV channels, followed by Oman Sports Channel with a rate of 15 per cent.



For radio, there was 74 per cent response in its favour of which 97 per cent listen on radio and 7 per cent through social media. 33 per cent listened to Youth Radio out of the total listeners of local radio channels, which is the most listened to a local radio channel by Omanis.

As for newspapers, 70 per cent of Omanis do not read newspapers at all, while only 30 per cent of them read newspapers. Among them, 13 per cent preferred to read Oman Daily Newspaper, which is the highest percentage compared to other newspapers, while 4 per cent chose to read hard copy newspapers, and 44 per cent electronic newspapers.

It has been observed during the past years that the social networks of media organisations are among the media outlets

that the Omani public is most exposed to and relies on to obtain information on societal issues and follow up on current events in the country.

The survey aimed to find out the opinions of Omanis about the media content provided by the local audio-visual and print media institutions, in addition to studying the rates of listening, viewing and reading among the public in what these institutions broadcast and publish.

Today, a number of media outlets from the Sultanate of Oman broadcast their various materials, whether they are visual, audio or print. This is an opportunity for the diversity of media outlets, which generates honest competition for media professionals in a manner that does not contradict the regulations and the law.

ORS targets NGOs to build CPR volunteers cadre

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The Oman Resuscitation Society (ORS) has stressed training NGOs to create a cadre of volunteers who can be helpful during any adverse situation in future.

The ORS is a body of experts in first aid training related to cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and was formed under the Omani Medical Association to save lives in emergencies.

Speaking to the Observer, Dr Mahmoud al Rahbi, Head of Emergencies at Al Nahda Hospital and President of the Society, said the Society will also raise awareness about the importance of learning cardiopulmonary resuscitation and spreading the culture of first aid to volunteers across the country and mould a society which is through with the life-saving skills.

"We are focusing on developing



a generation armed with life-saving skills by helping members of the association to learn cardiopulmonary resuscitation besides refining the skills of workers in the health sector with everything related to cardiopulmonary resuscitation and providing training, development and educational programmes and supervising them," said Al Rahbi, adding that NGOs in both local and expat societies are welcome to undergo the training. They can approach

the Society to get their volunteers trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

Efforts to catch up with the latest methods and means used at the local and global levels will be made on a continuous basis with the support of the Ministry of Health (MoH).

According to Dr Al Rahbi, the idea of establishing the Society was to reduce deaths due to a lack of cardiopulmonary resuscitation experts.

WE ARE MOVING

Management of **Larsen & Toubro (Oman) LLC** announces to all its respectful customers, vendors and stakeholders that we have moved our Head Office from Ruwi Street to the following address:

**Business Tower - One, Floor No: 3
Building No: 416/1, Way No: 5
Post Box: 425, Postal Code: 111
Airport Heights, Seeb**



L&T Oman



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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With the exams nearing for the students, they need proper nutrition. So, parents need to be careful while offering food to their children.

To be focused on studies, it is advisable to avoid fatty and hard-to-digest foods that make students lazy and delays the retention of knowledge.

Exams are one of the most stressful days for students. They tend to put on weight during exams because students neglect their health while focusing only on their studies.

Nutrition during exams helps with a good memory, while it is recommended to do some light daily exercises for refreshed blood circulation.

Some studies have confirmed that high-fibre and complex carbohydrates are needed to increase concentration and improve the brain's capabilities. They maintain the stability of blood sugar levels and provide the body

with energy regularly.

Shaima bint Hamad al Araiimi, Clinical Dietitian at the General Directorate of Health Services in Al Buraimi Governorate, spoke on Oman Youth Radio on students' nutrition during exams. Healthy food is essential during the exam period.

Students must also pay close attention to supplying their bodies with abundant amounts of vitamins, pointing out that they can be obtained through a balanced diet that contains fruits, vegetables and meat. This is in addition to the need for students not to dispense with eating sweets completely, as having a small piece of chocolate from time to time as a reward contributes to improving the mood significantly.

Exercise during difficult study periods and stressful exam days also stimulates the brain and reduces the stress the student is exposed to during these periods, which helps him pass the exams successfully and achieve the highest grades.

Drinking water throughout the day leads to the student's concentration in the study, and it also helps to increase the student's attention. And that water must also be drunk in winter in quantities so that the body does not become dehydrated, which affects the study.

A recent study found that students who bring water while taking exams may get good marks due to staying hydrated. The results showed that the students who drank water during the test presentation and consumed the prescribed amount during the test also had better achievement than those who did not drink water.

The researchers said that there were many physiological and psychological reasons that explain the value of consuming more water. The researchers suggested that drinking water may have a physiological effect on thinking functions, leading to an improvement in test performance. They also suggested that drinking water might reduce anxiety,

which is known to have negative effects on performance.

Moreover, since we are in the winter now, there are foods that contain vitamins and mineral salts, and they are among the most important foods for students, and they come from the important foods during the winter season, which are citrus fruits such as oranges, tangerines and grapefruits, as they contain a high percentage of vitamin C, which is an antioxidant. It strengthens the students' immune systems, which in turn helps them study.

Some students suffer during the examination period from some nervous system diseases, such as forgetfulness, insomnia, depression and headaches. This may be due to several factors, the most important of which is the lack of food culture. Therefore, proper nutrition during exams is very important, as it helps you stay alert, nourishes your mind and helps you improve your grades.



هيئة تنظيم الخدمات العامة
Authority for Public Services Regulation

NOTICE

The Authority for Public Services Regulation, Oman (The "Authority") in accordance with the powers conferred upon it by Article (109) of the Law for the Regulation and Privatisation of the Electricity and Related Water Sector promulgated by Royal Decree (No. 78/2004) (the "Sector Law"), proposes modifications to the Distribution and Supply licences granted to Muscat Electricity Distribution Company SAOC and Mazoon Electricity Company SAOC.

These modifications are necessary to implement the government's directives regarding restructuring some of the electricity sector activities; so that the electricity companies undertaking the activities of distribution and supply are merged into two companies (one undertaking Distribution and the other undertaking Supply) in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, except for Dhofar Governorate).

The Authority intends to amend the licences granted to the companies by separating Distribution of Electricity from Supply of Electricity, and including the conditions stipulated in Articles 110, 111 and 112 of the Sector Law – each in its field of competence- along with the conditions that the Authority deems appropriate in accordance with its powers as follows:

- Distribution Licence (to provide distribution services in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman except for Dhofar Governorate);
- Supply Licence (to provide supply services in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman except for Dhofar Governorate).

The draft licences modifications can be viewed at the Authority's headquarters at the address mentioned below.

Any person who has an objection to the proposed licences modifications shall submit details of the objection to the Authority within 28 days from the date of publication of this Notice. Any objection submitted after the period specified in this Notice will not be considered.

Objections shall be submitted to the following address:

The Authority for Public Services Regulation
Ominvest Business Center | Muscat Hills | Airport Heights |
Block No 9993 | Building No. 95 | First Floor.

Sultanate of Oman, Muscat, Al Khuwair | P.O. Box 954, Postal Code 133
email: enquiries@apsr.om



HEALTHY NUTRITION
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Dissent in Israel after minister’s Al Aqsa compound visit

JERUSALEM: Leading ultra-Orthodox Jewish figures supporting Israel’s coalition government on Wednesday criticised a visit by a far-right minister to a flashpoint holy site in Jerusalem, adding internal religious dissent to a cascade of foreign censure.

One lawmaker accused National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir of “goading the entire world”.

Ben-Gvir’s tour on Tuesday of the Al Aqsa Mosque compound, which Jews revere as the Temple Mount, stirred protests from across the Arab world and

Western concern about long-standing understandings on non-Muslim access.

The minister, himself religious, did not breach an Israeli-enforced ban on Jewish prayer at what is an icon of Palestinian nationalism. But his mere presence at the compound was anathema to more stringently pious and politically neutral Jews.

“It is forbidden to go up to the place of the Holy of Holies,” senior United Torah Judaism lawmaker Moshe Gafni said in parliament, referring to a part of Jewish temples that stood at the site in ancient times and was off-limits

to most people.

Gafni said he had advised Ben-Gvir of this.

“Besides the aspect of religious law, there is nothing to be gained from just goading the entire world,” he said.

Al Aqsa compound, known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, is Islam’s third holiest site. It is also Judaism’s most sacred site.

It is also a symbol for Palestinian hopes of securing a state, a goal that looks ever bleaker with Ben-Gvir and other far-right allies now in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government.

— Reuters

Turkey hosts Syria oppn after outreach to Assad

ISTANBUL: Turkey on Tuesday hosted the leaders of Syria’s opposition in a bid to assuage their concern following its overtures to Damascus.

Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu tweeted images of his meeting in Ankara with the opposition Syrian National Council chief Mahmut al Maslat and other leaders.

The talks came less than a week after the defence chiefs of Turkey and Syria held landmarks negotiations in Moscow — the first such meeting since 2011.

“We reiterated our support to the Syrian opposition and people in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254,” Cavusoglu said in reference to a 2015 United Nations call for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria.

Recently, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has opened up to the idea of meeting the Syrian President Bashar al Assad.

Erdogan has suggested that the talks between the defence chiefs be followed up by a meeting between the foreign ministers that could set up a potential presidential summit.

Cavusoglu said he expects to meet his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad in Moscow in the second half of January.

But Assad’s regime appears cool to Erdogan’s outreach efforts.



Syrian fighters stand in formation during a special operations training session in Al Bab in the northern rebel-held part of Aleppo. — AFP

EXTENDED HAND

Some analysts believe that Assad will not agree to meet

Erdogan before Turkey holds a general election — now scheduled for no later than June.

Erdogan’s foreign policy adviser Ibrahim Kalin said it was “too early to say right now” when the two presidents might meet.

“How all of this unfolds depends on the regime’s attitude,” Kalin told NTV television.

“Turkey has extended its hand. We do not think that they will leave this hand hanging.”

Erdogan’s hopes for talks with Assad follow calls from Turkey’s main opposition party for Ankara to pull back its troops from Syria and make peace with Damascus.

The opposition is pressing Erdogan to speed up the “voluntary” return of nearly four

million Syrians who fled the fighting to Turkey.

Anti-refugee sentiments are running high in Turkey ahead of the election and Erdogan has hardened his once-accepting stance towards people displaced by war. Kalin confirmed that Ankara was now pressing Damascus “to take steps for the return of refugees and the humane treatment of displaced Syrians”.

The mooted reconciliation has alarmed Syrian opposition leaders and supporters who reside mostly in parts of the war-torn country under Ankara’s indirect control.

The United States, Turkey’s Nato ally, made clear its opposition to improving relations with Assad.

— AFP

Between war and red tape, many Iraqis lack official papers

MOSUL: Married for over a decade, Alia Abdel-Razak is one of a million Iraqis deprived of crucial civil status documents, often caught in legal limbo in a country paralysed by bureaucracy and the ravages of war.

The 37-year-old has to overcome countless hurdles just to get her children into school, and she cannot register her family to obtain the food subsidies she and her husband so desperately need.

A mother of four, Abdel-Razak relies on a pro-bono lawyer from aid group the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to help her navigate



Alia Abdel-Razak, a woman deprived of crucial civil status documents, is pictured with three of her children in her home in Mosul. — AFP

the labyrinthine processes required to get her papers in order.

Like many others, she struggles with endless red tape — but also the fallout from the country’s gruelling battle to defeat the IS group — to obtain documents like marriage and birth certificates.

“I don’t have the means, lawyers want \$300-500. Where can I get this money when I don’t even have enough to eat?” she said.

Her dilapidated Mosul apartment bears witness to her daily struggle, with its bare concrete floors and

broken windows patched up with cardboard.

She was married in 2012 and gave birth to her first daughter a year later.

But in 2014, IS seized Mosul and declared it the capital of its “caliphate”, driving out local officials in favour of their own administration.

The absence of civil status documents obstructs access to basic services such as “education, healthcare, and social security benefits”, according to the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR.

— AFP

Pre-Qualification
TENDER NOTICE

One of the leading industrial companies intends to construct Corporate Club Centre within the industrial area of Madayan, Sur.

Specialized companies registered on the tender board with excellent grades and experience executing construction projects worth OMR 7 million and above are invited to send their interest to jason.v@ibrahimjaidah.com on or before **07th January 2023** to receive the Pre-qualification form.

Submission of Pre-qualification Documents must be received on or before **10th January 2023**.

Sultanate of Oman

Ministry of Defence

ENGINEERING SERVICES

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Ministry of Defence invites Contractors/consultant specialized in the under mentioned works and registered with the Govt. Tender Board and Ministry of Defence to participate in the following tender.

Tender No.	Tender Name	Contractors Grade	Last Date to Obtain Tender	Tender Submission Date	Tender Price (RO)
39/2022	Maintenance work - MOD CAMPS	Excellent	12 th January 2023	30 th January 2023	500/- RO

*For more information about the above Tenders please visit gate number (14)

- Tender Documents (Electronic Tender Document) can be obtained from the Tender office, Gate No: 14, Muaskar Al Murtafa'a after payment of the tender fee indicated above.
- The Payment should be made electronically by using SMART CARD, VISA CARD and VISA ELECTRON. Sunday to Thursday (0900 - 1300 Hours).
- The Bid to be accompanied by Tender Bond in the value of (1%) of the bid value in the form of a Bank Guarantee or Certified Cheque issued by a local bank and addressed to HE the Chairman of the Tender Committee.
- Bids are to be submitted in sealed envelopes addressed to HE the Chairman of Tender Committee and marked with Tender Number and Name. Name of Bidder or any other marks should not be printed on the envelopes.
- Bids to be deposited in the Tender office at Gate No: 14 Muaskar Al Murtafa'a before 1300 hours on the assigned day for submission of the Tender.
- We would like to draw your attention to the importance of adherence to the submission date, request and any queries related should not be submitted to MODES fourteen days prior to submission of offer & that queries must be on electronic (Microsoft word).
- You are requested to submit the following items within your tender submission, failure to submit the required information may result a disqualification of your offer without any further notification.
 - Percentage of Omaniisation within the company supported by an authenticated certificate from the Ministry of Labour (Updated Copy).
 - Detailed priced breakdown to be specified as per scope of works and drawings.
 - Full set of stamped drawings and documents, Tender Form and Tender Bonds to be submitted as hard copy and others documentation shall be as **SOFT COPY** (USB) in two separate files:
 - Financial.
 - Technical files.
 - Confirmation of site visit.
 - All addendums and circulars.
 - List of sub-contractors/suppliers and their acceptance letter to this project.
 - List of current and executed projects for the last Five years.
 - Valid Registration Certificates from Tender Board.
 - Financial Statement for the last Three years.

Car bombs kill over 15, level houses in central Somalia

MOGADISHU: Two car bombs detonated by Al Shabaab militants killed at least 15 people and flattened homes in central Somalia’s Hiraaan region on Wednesday, a resident involved in the rescue operations said.

It was the latest in a string of attacks launched by Al Shabaab since government forces and allied clan militias last year began pushing the insurgents out of territory they had long held.

“I have counted 15 dead people including soldiers, militiamen and civilians. Dozens were wounded,” said Abdullahi Osman, a shopkeeper in Mahas.

— Reuters

SULTANATE OF OMAN

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

ANNOUNCEMENT

Governorate invites specialized companies and authorized individuals to participate in the following The Ministry of Health Directorate of Health Service North Sharqiya tender:

Tender Ref.	Description	Last Date for Collection of Tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/ Date	Eligibility	Tender Free (Non-Refundable)	Office where Tenders are to be deposited (HQ)
1/2023	Supply drinkable water for institutions (Wadi Andam Center, Al-Jazaa Center, Ismaia Center, Miss Center, Dima' Center and Dima' and Al Taians Hospital)	Sunday 22/1/2023	Before 10 am on Monday 20/2/2023	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board and authorized individuals	R.O. 25/= Per set	Office of the directorate finance at the Directorate General of Health Service North Sharqiya Governorate

Take in your consideration:

- Copy of Registration Certificate issued by the tender Board or permission from Authority is to be submitted for collection of tender documents.
- Tender Documents can be purchased from the Office of the director of finance at the Directorate General of Health Service North Sharqiya Governorate between 8.00 A.m and 12.00 P.M on working days, on payment of Tender Fee mentioned above.
- Tenders should be submitted in plain sealed envelope, enclosing a bank guarantee or a certified Cheque issued by a local Bank for One percent not less than (1%) of the quoted value of the tender.
- Tender(s) submitted without Bank Guarantee or a Certified Cheque will not be considered.
- The ministry is not bound to accept the lowest or any other tender.



BEIJING SAYS TEST RULES UNREASONABLE, LACKED A SCIENTIFIC BASIS

Covid spreads fast in China after U-turn

BEIJING: China's state media rallied citizens on Wednesday for a "final victory" over Covid-19 as health officials abroad tried to work out the scale of its raging outbreak and how to stop it spreading.

Beijing's abrupt axing of "zero Covid curbs last month has unleashed the virus on China's 1.4 billion people who have little immunity after being shielded since the virus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan three years ago. The World Health Organization holds a briefing in Geneva on Wednesday, a day after WHO officials met Chinese scientists amid concern about the accuracy of China's data about the



A patient is treated on a bed in a corridor of the emergency department of a hospital in Beijing on Tuesday. – AFP

outbreak. The UN agency has yet to release details about its talks.

European Union health officials also meet on Wednesday to discuss a coordinated response to the China outbreak.

Many Chinese funeral homes and hospitals say they are overwhelmed, and international health experts predict at least 1 million deaths in China this year. China has reported five or fewer deaths a day since the policy U-turn. "That is totally ridiculous," a 66-year-old Zhang, a Beijing resident who only gave his last name, said of the official toll.

"Four of my close relatives died. That's only from one family. I hope the government will be honest with the people and the rest of the world about what's really happened here."

China's cabinet said on Wednesday it would step up medicine distribution and meet demand from medical institutions, nursing homes and rural areas amid the outbreak, state media reported.

Beijing has hit back against some countries demanding visitors from China show pre-departure Covid tests, saying the rules were unreasonable and lacked a scientific basis.

Japan, the United States, Australia and several European states are among countries requiring such tests. — AFP

Russia blames its soldiers' mobile phone use for deadly missile strike

MOSCOW: Russia's defence ministry on Wednesday blamed the illegal use of mobile phones by its soldiers for a deadly Ukrainian missile strike that it said killed 89 servicemen, raising the reported death toll significantly.

Moscow previously said 63 Russian soldiers were killed in the weekend strike. The ministry's reaction came amid mounting anger among some Russian commentators, who are increasingly vocal about what they see as a half-hearted campaign in Ukraine.

Most of the anger on social media was directed at military commanders rather than Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has not commented publicly on the attack which was another blow after major battlefield retreats in recent months. The Russian defence ministry said four Ukrainian missiles hit a temporary Russian barracks in a vocational college in Makiivka, twin city of the Russian-occupied regional capital of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine.

Although an official probe has been launched, the main reason for the attack was clearly the illegal mass use of mobile phones by servicemen, the ministry said. — Reuters

Pakistan orders earlier business closures to avert energy crisis

ISLAMABAD: Police across major cities in Pakistan on Wednesday began patrolling shopping malls and markets to implement a government order to shut businesses earlier in the evening in a bid to avert a looming energy crisis.

Pakistan's cabinet on Tuesday decided shopping malls and markets must close by 8:30 pm instead of around midnight as the country's economic worries were compounded by a steep rise in the cost of power generation.

A South Asian nuclear-capable nation, Pakistan is faced with an imminent default on its global obligations and is trying to reduce its energy bills as part of efforts to

revive a stalled bailout package with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

"We'll have to redesign the pattern of our business timing. We can't use electricity like that," Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said at a press conference on Tuesday. Markets worldwide and Europe close early in the evening, he said.

Shopping malls, markets, restaurant and wedding halls in Pakistan usually open in the evening and the businesses then remain open until the early hours of the following morning.

Trade unions and business councils justify these timings by arguing that opening markets

isn't possible during some parts of the day, especially during the hot summer when temperature in most cities jumps to around 45 degrees Celsius.

"Police will go and enforce the decision at any cost," Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah on Wednesday warned traders, who rejected the move and said they would defy the orders.

"This will ruin small businesses especially retail sector.

We will resist and not close early," said Ajmal Baloch, a trade union leader in the capital Islamabad. Several attempts by Pakistan's governments to force the early closure of businesses have failed in the past. — dpa



People walk outside shops at the Atrium Mall in Karachi on Tuesday. – Reuters

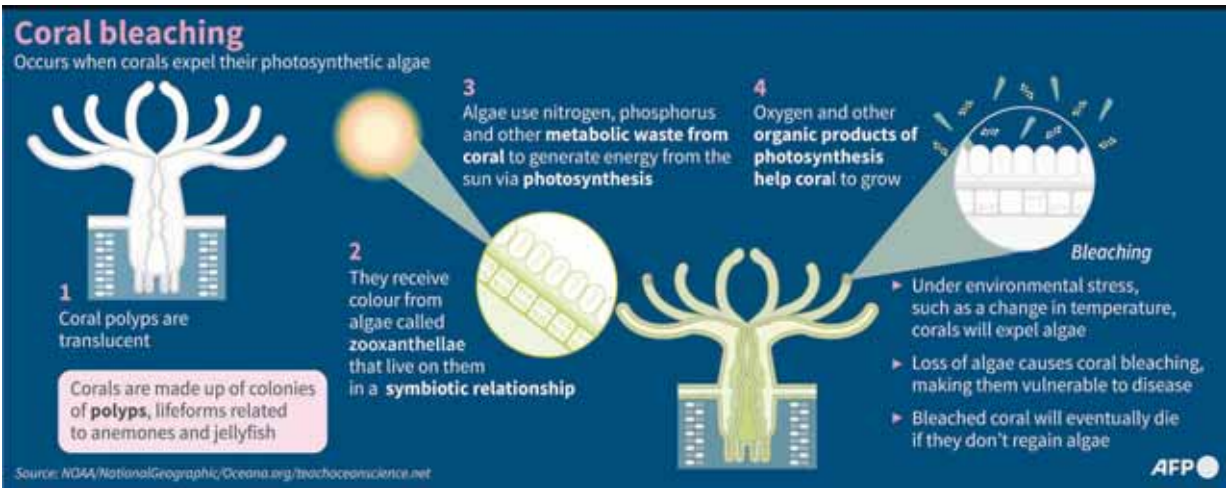
Coral bleaching causing 'unnecessary' fish fights

PARIS: Fish that have lost food due to mass coral bleaching are getting into more unnecessary fights, causing them to expend precious energy and potentially threatening their survival, new research said on Wednesday.

With the future of the world's coral reefs threatened by climate change, a team of researchers studied how a mass bleaching event affected 38 species of butterflyfish.

The colourfully patterned reef fish are the first to feel the effect of bleaching because they eat coral, so their "food source is hugely diminished really quickly", said Sally Keith, a marine ecologist at Britain's Lancaster University.

Keith and her colleagues had no idea a mass bleaching event



was coming when they first studied the fish at 17 reefs off Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Christmas Island.

But when one of history's worst global bleaching events struck in 2016, it offered "the perfect

opportunity" to study how it affected the fish's behaviour, Keith said. The researchers returned within a year and were "shocked" to see the devastation of the once beautiful reefs, she said.

Donning their snorkels or

scuba gear, the team watched the fish "swimming around looking for food that just isn't there anymore," she added.

"There was a bit of crying in our masks." The bleaching particularly affected Acropora coral, the main

food source for the butterflyfish.

That "changed the playing field of who's eating what," Keith said, putting different species of butterflyfish in increased competition for other types of coral.

When a butterflyfish wants to signal to a competitor that a particular bit of coral is theirs, they point their noses down and raise their spiny dorsal fins.

"It's almost like raising your hackles," Keith said.

If that fails, one fish will chase the other, usually until the other gives up.

"I followed one for about 50 metres (165 feet) once, that was quite tiring, they're very fast," Keith said. The team observed 3,700 encounters between butterflyfish.

Before the coral bleaching event, different species of butterflyfish were able to resolve disputes using signalling around 28 per cent of the time.

But that number fell to just 10 per cent after the bleaching, indicating many "unnecessary attacks," according to the new study in the journal Proceedings of the Royal Society B.

"Making poor decisions about who to fight, and where to invest their really valuable energy, could be that little bit that tips them over the edge towards actual starvation," said Keith, the study's lead author.

It is not clear if the fish will be able to adapt to the changes brought about by coral bleaching quickly enough, the researchers warned. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

PARIS

Activists spray-paint entrance to French PM's office

Two climate activists spray-painted the front entrance of the French prime minister's office on Wednesday in protest at what campaign group Derniere Renovation (Last Renovation) called "climate crimes" committed by the state.

Police arrested the two activists, who wore T-shirts with the slogan "Who is guilty?".

Derniere Renovation said the state had failed to meet commitments to help fight climate change.



France's highest administrative court last year ordered the state to pay two 10 million euro (\$10.6 million) fines for failing to improve air quality in major cities.

TEHRAN

'Women who don't wear full hijab are not irreligious'

Iran's supreme leader said women who do not wear a full hijab should not be accused of being irreligious or anti-revolutionary, state agency IRNA reported on Wednesday.

Women whose hijab does not fully cover their hair, as is required under Iran's Islamic dress code, should not be seen as opposed to religion and revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said while speaking to a group of Iranian women. "We all have defects that we must fix



as far as possible."

Women wearing the hijab incorrectly "are still our own daughters," he said, in remarks that can be seen as conciliatory after months of unrest.

TUNIS

Tunisia ex-minister jailed over waste scandal

A Tunisian former environment minister has been sentenced to three years in prison for his role in the illegal import of 280 containers of waste from Italy, local media reported on Wednesday. Mustapha Aroui and several ministry officials had been sacked and arrested in December 2020 as public anger mounted and authorities investigated how the waste had been imported.

A Tunis court sentenced Aroui and three others to three years each in prison late on Tuesday,



Tunisian media reported.

A former ministry staffer was handed a 10-year jail term, while another suspect who is on the run was sentenced in absentia to 15 years, they said.



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In brief

■ TOKYO



JAPAN'S PM TO MEET BIDEN IN WASHINGTON

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Wednesday he would hold talks with US President Joe Biden at the White House on January 13, and would also visit other G7 allies this month. The visit will be Kishida's first trip to the US capital since taking office in October 2021, though he has held talks with Biden several times, including in Japan. Japan is assuming the presidency of the G7 grouping and Kishida said he also planned to visit members France, Italy, Canada and Britain this month. He said the meeting with Biden would be "extremely important" and demonstrate "the strengthening Japan-US alliance".

■ HANOI



VIETNAM BOY TRAPPED IN PILLAR DECLARED DEAD

A 10-year-old Vietnamese boy trapped in a buried hollow concrete pillar at a construction site for four days was declared dead on Wednesday. Rescuers in Dong Thap province in the Mekong Delta had been trying to raise the pillar from its 35-metre-deep (115-feet) hole and cut out young Thai Ly Hao Nam.

The boy fell into the 25-centimetre-wide (12-inch) shaft of the pillar — sunk as part of a new bridge — on Saturday, apparently while looking for scrap metal.

Doan Tan Buu, deputy chief of the province, said on Wednesday that the boy had died.

■ BEIJING



MARCOS VOWS TO 'STRENGTHEN' CHINA TIES ON BEIJING TRIP

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos said on Wednesday he hoped to strengthen ties with Beijing on his first state visit to China since taking office.

China and the Philippines are at odds over the hotly disputed South China Sea, with Marcos expected to sign a deal in Beijing this week to establish direct communication on maritime issues.

Manila considers it "of primary importance to... strengthen the relationship between China and the Philippines", Marcos said in a meeting on Wednesday with top Chinese legislator Li Zhanshu.

REBEL REPUBLICANS BLOCK MCCARTHY'S RISE TO POWERFUL POST

First time in 100 years, US Congress fails to elect speaker in first ballot

WASHINGTON: Republican Kevin McCarthy's bruising quest to become speaker of the US House of Representatives entered a second day on Wednesday, with the party's new majority fractured by a revolt among hardline members of his party who oppose his candidacy.

McCarthy weathered three failed votes for speaker on Tuesday as about 20 hardliners representing less than 10 per cent of the caucus blocked his path to the powerful post that is second in line to the presidency. It was the first time in 100 years that the House has not elected a speaker on its first day.

The standoff has raised fears among party members of a longer-term rift that could hobble their ability to move forward on economic, energy, spending and immigration priorities in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election.

The slim 222-212 Republican majority gives greater clout to a small group of hard-right lawmakers, who want rule changes that would give them greater control over the speaker and more influence over the party's approach to spending and debt. Supporters



Kevin McCarthy at the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on Tuesday. — AFP

of McCarthy, who has served as House Republican leader since 2019, accuse some hardliners of conducting a "Never Kevin" campaign aimed solely at stopping him. A second day of voting was expected to get under way when the House meets at noon (17:00 GMT) on Wednesday.

McCarthy late on Tuesday vowed to stay in the race and said

he continued to have the backing of former President Donald Trump, who remains a powerful figure in the party.

Trump weighed in early on Wednesday, with a post on his social media site Truth Social urging Republicans to back McCarthy.

"It's now time for all of our GREAT Republican House

Members to VOTE FOR KEVIN," Trump wrote.

McCarthy said no other Republican was in a position to win a majority of votes and warned against letting chaos rule.

"It will turn out that either someone will make a mistake and elect a Democrat, or we're going to find a way to work together, to be able to govern," McCarthy said on

Tuesday. In contrast to intraparty brawl going on among House Republicans, the top Republican in the Senate, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, was due to appear with Democratic President Joe Biden in Kentucky on Wednesday to highlight infrastructure investments included in a bipartisan bill passed in 2021. The House hardliners blasted that deal and another one cut in late December to keep the government funded, vowing to block legislation backed by any Senate Republicans who voted in favour of the latter bill.

That has raised fears about Congress' ability to prevent default when the federal government approaches its debt ceiling later this year.

McCarthy's opponents selected conservative Representative Jim Jordan as their candidate, despite the fact that Jordan backs McCarthy and has not put himself forward in the speaker's race.

"Right now our candidate is Jim Jordan. He is a fighter. He is a leader. He may not want it right now, but George Washington did not want to be president," Representative Lauren Boebert told Fox News. — Reuters

Myanmar junta trumpets white elephant as sign of right to rule

NAYPYIDAW: Though it is a pariah on the world stage and battling fierce domestic opposition to its rule, Myanmar's junta has found grounds for optimism — the birth of a rare albino elephant.

Since seizing power, the junta has crushed democracy protests, jailed ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi and been accused of committing war crimes in its bid to quell dissent.

But the birth of the elephant — more milky-grey than white — in western Rahkine state last year is being portrayed by junta-controlled media as fortuitous.

Ancient rulers regarded white elephants as extremely auspicious, and their appearance was taken as a symbol of righteous political power. The pale pachyderm will feature on a special postage stamp released this week to mark the 75th anniversary of Myanmar's independence from Britain, state media said on Tuesday.

A set of gold commemorative coins bearing the animal's image is also already being cast for the occasion, another report said.

The tusker tot's highest-profile engagement so far was a meeting with junta chief Min Aung Hlaing in October, when the senior general bestowed it a name at a televised ceremony.

"Rattha Nandaka" comes from the ancient Pali words for "country" and "happiness."

To bolster the credentials of its newfound good omen, state media has insisted the beast has an almost impeccable pedigree.

According to the experts quoted, it possesses seven of the eight standard characteristics



A caretaker feeds a white elephant near the Kyaut Thaw Gyi Pagoda in Yangon. — AFP

for an albino elephant, including "pearl-coloured eyes" and a "plantain branch-shaped back".

In Myanmar, where astrological charts are drawn at birth and fortune-tellers consulted for both daily and political decisions -- the craze for white elephants goes back hundreds of years.

Traditional chronicles tell of kings in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar — then known as Burma — warring to capture the beasts from rivals.

The ruinous cost of keeping them in appropriately lavish style gave rise to the modern expression in which a "white elephant" is a useless, if beautiful, possession.

One creature inherited by a 19th century Burmese king was waited on by thirty servants and dressed in a "fine red cloth plentifully studded" with rubies and diamonds, according to a visiting British official.

The king, who had usurped his brother, "would gladly hail the

capture of a real white elephant in his own day as an assent from the Powers of Nature to his own legitimate royalty," the envoy added.

But the fortunes of the creatures are tied up with the ruler under whom they were captured.

Two elephants, once feted by a former junta, are now confined to a damp, out-of-the-way compound in commercial hub Yangon where they receive few visitors.

"Rattha Nandaka" will spend its days in a special compound for white elephants in military-built capital Naypyidaw.

But with swathes of the country still ravaged by fighting and the junta widely reviled, his birth has been met with public scepticism and scorn.

"It seems like they forgot to put sunscreen on," one social media user wrote about the baby elephant's more grey than albino appearance. — AFP

Water governance to cater India's vast rural population

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

The concept of water governance is an outcome of India's reality of providing proper tap water access to about four crore (40 million) rural households only since independence. The statistics are unbecoming of a country with a \$ 3 trillion economy, but the efforts in place reflect the seriousness of the government to cater to the water needs of a vast rural population.

Among the measures to offer its people essential humanitarian services like nutrition and water, there is a dedicated ministry for water resources. It launched schemes like Jal Jeevan Mission (2019), which claimed to have provided water connections to about five crore (50 million) households in the last two years — more than the number of households that obtained such connections in the last sixty-five years.

With its fast pace, the Jal Jeevan Mission has an ambitious target to provide safe and adequate drinking water through individual household tap connections to all rural households by the year 2024, said official sources in the ministry of water resources.

There is a move to create new water bodies and recharge older ones. For which there is a scheme called Amrit Sarovar Yojana. Launched in April

2022, the scheme has over 75 ponds constructed in every district of the country to ensure that there is no shortage of drinking water in future.

"More than 25,000 ponds have been constructed as part of the scheme, which aims at removing the water scarcity issues plaguing rural areas of India by the upcoming Independence Day in 2023," news agency ANI reported citing official sources.

Jal Shakti Abhiyaan is another interesting initiative to help conserve water rainwater, for which a campaign called 'Catch the Rain' is underway.

"The scheme is to promote awareness about a special action plan for rainwater conservation in the country; emphasis is put

on ensuring that arrangements are in place before the onset of monsoon. Tree plantation, cleaning, puddle construction, and other awareness-related drives are conducted as part of this campaign to create adequate awareness of the issue," the report said.

The idea is to create mass awareness for water conservation.

The focus is there also to maintain existing dams to conserve water, which is crucial to life and property in rural areas. A Dam Safety Act has been put into motion, which can be implemented after deliberations and scrutiny.



Ditching concrete for earth to build a cleaner future

ISABEL MALSANG

It was used to build the Great Wall of China and Spain's mediaeval Alhambra Palace -- and now earth is back in vogue as a building material.

Climate change has spurred renewed interest in the ancient technique which sees polluting concrete swapped where possible for earth.

For centuries, mud and clay were an abundantly available way to put a roof over one's head, but earth's environmental credentials are behind its modern-day resurgence.

"A kilo of cement emits a kilo of CO2. Whereas a kilo of earth emits none," Xavier Chateau of the Navier Laboratory at the French National Centre for Scientific Research said.

"If we could reduce by 25 per cent the volume of cement consumed

globally it would be equivalent to negating the impact on the climate of all air transport," he estimated.

Known as rammed earth construction, the practice dates at least as far back as the Neolithic era.

It involves compacting certain soils into a mould, of sorts, to make building blocks or build up whole walls, layer by layer.

More than two billion people across some 150 countries live in buildings made of earth, according to a 2006 guide on earth building by French authors Hugo Houben and Hubert Guillaud.

Advocates say it can help reduce reliance on concrete, which accounts for about eight per cent of global CO2 emissions.

Earth also has a high thermal capacity by self-regulating its humidity, is fireproof, non-toxic and can be completely recycled.

EARTH ALSO HAS A HIGH THERMAL CAPACITY BY SELF-REGULATING ITS HUMIDITY, IS FIREPROOF, NON-TOXIC AND CAN BE COMPLETELY RECYCLED

But it has downsides too, not least the cost, given the need to find builders qualified in ancient techniques.

Confronted with flooding, earth-constructed buildings need protection, as earth also has its weaknesses.

A four-storey rammed earth building crumpled in France's southeastern Rhone region in November, while a house collapsed in the nearby department of Isere on December 22, according to local

press reports. Often substances such as lime or straw can be added to the earth to stabilise it and bolster its durability.

French building material firm Saint-Gobain is experimenting with a hybrid system of "earth concrete", combining excavated earth from construction sites, steel industry waste and hemp.

But purists see it as verging on heresy, in a country due to complete a 9,000-seat concert coliseum north of Paris next year using recycled excavated earth.

"It's not the same material at all," complains architect Paul-Emmanuel Loiret, who manages La Fabrique outside Paris where blocks and bricks of compressed earth are made from construction rubble. Urging a "complete and rapid decarbonisation" of construction, he complained that

EU laws "impose on us materials 10 to 20 times more durable than those which we need."

But, said Chateau: "In Africa, in Burkina Faso or Malawi, it's become a kind of artisanal savoir-faire to stabilise raw earth with cement at the foot of the building to solve the problem of water" encroachment.

Austria has Europe's only factory to date making low-energy prefab homes using rammed earth methods.

The site, in the western village of Schlins on the Liechtenstein border, creates foundations, floors and walls using chalk, clay, chopped straw, lime or gravel.

A machine pounds the earth which is compacted into a vast casing to produce 40-metre (130-foot) long walls. Once dried and cut to size, the blocks are sent off to be assembled. — AFP

New chapter for Pope Francis after death of Benedict

CLEMENT MELKI

With the death of Benedict XVI, Pope Francis enters a new phase of his papacy free from the constraints of co-existing with a predecessor, but conservative criticism of his reforms may not end.

For the first time since his 2013 election, the Argentine pontiff is squarely at the helm of the Catholic Church and its 1.3 billion faithful without another man in white — former pope Benedict XVI — also at the Vatican.

From Benedict's surprise resignation a decade ago until his death on Saturday at the age of 95, the German theologian's lingering presence at the Vatican had caused confusion within the Church, fuelling a "two popes" dynamic sometimes exploited by Francis's critics. Benedict's death "ends a misunderstanding, a situation of ambiguity, in which (Joseph) Ratzinger could be used as a standard by Francis's opponents", Vatican expert Marco Politi told AFP, using the former pope's birth name. Although promising to carry out a post-papacy life of quiet contemplation and study following his resignation, Benedict XVI later weighed in on the explosive issues of clerical sex abuse and the possibility of married priests.

His contribution to a book in January 2020 on celibacy was viewed as a bid to boost the cause of the Church's ultra-conservative wing.

"The presence of a pope emeritus like Ratzinger, with his doctrinally conservative vision of the Church and intellectual stature, actually created a pole of tension with the pontificate of Francis, who had a pastorally very open line," Politi said.

He added, however, that the two men enjoyed amicable relations on a personal level.

Despite the complications posed by the presence of a living ex-pope at the Vatican, the former Jorge Bergoglio succeeded in carrying out a slew of reforms.

These included a recent reorganisation of the Roman Curia, the government of the Holy See, bringing more transparency to Church finances and other measures. But Benedict's death will not end criticisms of Francis's policy, experts caution, especially given the ongoing world synod that acts as a forum to discuss major issues within the Church such as the place of women, the ongoing sexual abuse scandal and other issues.

Conservative Catholic forces will continue to use petitions and manifestos — such as the May 2020 open letter that blasted anti-Covid health precautions as impeding citizen freedoms — as a mouthpiece, Politi said.

"There is a civil war within the Catholic Church that's continuing," Politi said. — AFP



Paul Krugman

The football game theory of inflation

If you don't think of economists as party animals, you're right. Or at least that's the conclusion one might draw from the fact that several prominent economists carried on a thoughtful, earnest online debate about inflation over the past weekend — that is, on New Year's Eve and the day after, when I thought we were supposed to be drinking Champagne and then nursing hangovers.

But it really was a good discussion — the kind of thing I was looking for all those years ago when I chose economics as a profession, relatively free of politicisation and nastiness. That is not to say that it was without political implications.

The discussion was kicked off by Olivier Blanchard, former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund (a towering figure in the profession, who happens to be one of the economists who has gotten recent inflation more or less right).

He started off by making a point that he said is "often lost in discussions of inflation and central bank policy."

He went on: "Inflation is fundamentally the outcome of the distributional conflict, between firms, workers and taxpayers. It stops only when the various players are forced to accept the outcome."

Although Blanchard is nobody's idea of a leftist (OK, Republicans seem to consider anyone more liberal than Attila the Hun a Marxist, but still), he nonetheless got immediate pushback from economists who insisted that inflation is always the result of excessive demand, of too much money chasing too few goods or, what is roughly the same thing, the consequence of an excessively hot economy.

Others rose to Blanchard's defence, notably MIT's Ivan Werning, who has been doing research on wage-price spirals. Jared Bernstein, a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, also weighed in, praising Blanchard for bringing the role of economic power into the inflation discussion.

So what was all this about? To some extent it involved people talking past each other, emphasising different aspects of the same story.

EVERYONE STANDS UP TO GET A BETTER VIEW, BUT THIS IS COLLECTIVELY SELF-DEFEATING — YOUR VIEW DOESN'T IMPROVE BECAUSE THE PEOPLE IN FRONT OF YOU ARE ALSO STANDING, AND YOU'RE LESS COMFORTABLE BESIDES

But there are also some real policy issues that, as Blanchard suggested, tend to get lost when we think of inflation merely as a question for the Federal Reserve and its counterparts abroad.

At one level, of course Blanchard is right. Companies that charge higher prices and workers who demand higher wages aren't doing so because the money supply has increased; they're trying to increase their incomes (or offset declines in their incomes caused by, say, rising energy prices).

And inflation happens when the attempts of firms and workers to claim a bigger share of the economic pie are inconsistent, when the additional purchasing power being demanded exceeds what the economy can deliver.

Reading the discussion, I found myself remembering a remark made in the 1970s by William Nordhaus, another eminent economist (and Nobel laureate) who happens to have been my first mentor in the field.

Nordhaus compared inflation to what happens in a football stadium when the action on the field is especially exciting.

(If you don't find American football exciting, think of it as a soccer match.) Everyone stands up to get a better view, but this is collectively self-defeating — your view doesn't improve because

the people in front of you are also standing, and you're less comfortable besides.

Now, what people who claim that inflation is caused by a hot economy are saying is, in effect, that while the immediate source of stadium discomfort is that people are trying to get a better view of the action at others' expense, the root cause of the problem is that the game has gotten too exciting.

Companies would always like to raise prices and workers would always like to negotiate higher wages, but they only go for it when sales are high and jobs are abundant.

Cool things down: Make the game less interesting — that is, push the economy into a slowdown or even a recession — and people will return to their seats — that is, inflation will slow.

And that is, in fact, basically the policy major economies are pursuing to control inflation.

The Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank are raising interest rates in a deliberate effort to slow their economies and risk recession, precisely to convince companies that they no longer have "pricing power" and convince workers that they can't demand such big wage increases.

But is that really the best we can do?

We want football games to be exciting; must they remain boring to keep spectators in their seats? Correspondingly, there are many good aspects to a hot economy — among other things, tight labour markets seem to be leading to a welcome fall in wage inequality, which had been rising for many years.

Must we forsake these gains to control inflation?

Back in the 1970s, there was widespread talk of "incomes policy" — some combination of incentives and moral suasion that might reconcile low inflation with a hot economy.

Such talk faded away partly, I think, because of a bad experience with Richard Nixon's price controls, and partly because of a general loss of faith in government competence.

— *The New York Times*

Tourism’s positive indicators

There are ample indications that the tourism sector of the Sultanate of Oman is growing and recovering from the impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The period between January and November 2022 shows remarkable progress.

The growth being witnessed now is the result of the efforts made by the authorities.

Many have thought that it was beyond recovery. But this impression was proved wrong by the policies and planning in the country.

It is the farsightedness of the leadership which has brought success to the efforts made under the auspices of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism to get rid of the consequences of the pandemic.

Nobody can ever forget what the world as well as this country has experienced due to the pandemic.

The recent official figures indicate an increase in the number of visitors and tourists.

There was a 438.3 per cent growth in the number of visitors in November 2022 compared with the same period in the previous year.

With this, the number of those who arrived here jumped to a whopping 2.5 million.

This figure, by all accounts, represents a qualitative achievement for this vital sector and shows that it is moving forward steadily and confidently.

It is also an important stride towards achievement of the objectives set under Oman Vision 2040.

Tourism is one of the most reliable sectors in the economic diversification plans.

This is a matter of pride that there are positive developments in the area. This will certainly bolster the economic activity of the country and serve the interests of all.

These numbers are significant as they show that the sector is promising.

We count on the kind of the



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THE STATISTICS
SPEAK LOUDER
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BUILD UPON IT.

policies, strategies and plannings it enjoys currently.

It has shown its potential as one of the major means of the economic diversification efforts.

It is going to contribute to the gross domestic product of the country significantly. It can ensure fastest growth of the national economy and better reputation for the country which will be ultimately beneficial for the people.

The increase in the number of visitors and tourists means more goodwill in other countries and its markets.

This indicator will further encourage foreign tourists to rush to Oman for holidaying.

We describe this sector as the most developed area of the national economy.

It can participate in the strongly competitive market of the world of tourism and emerge as a winner.

It has survived the most devastating challenge and is now growing steadily.

The revenue of hotels until November 2022 was RO 161 million, which is an increase of 91.7 per cent compared to the same period in 2021.

Certainly, the increase in the number of tourists will lead to a growth in the revenues of all other sectors related to this strategic industry.

The statistics speak louder about the pace of the recovery of the sector. The only thing required is efforts to build upon it.

The number of tourists from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries was highest.

It reached 1.4 million to be followed by the tourists and visitors from India with 292,000. There were also 98,000 Yemenis who visited Oman followed by 65,000 Pakistanis, 57,000 Germans and 54,000 Britons.

We are confident that the efforts of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and all others who are related to the industry will be successful.

The concerted efforts made under the auspices of the ministry will achieve the goal.

YEAR OF RABBIT



Rabbit-themed stuffed toys are displayed at a street stall ahead of the Lunar New Year in the Chinatown district of Singapore on Wednesday. – AFP

Why is Xi Jinping taking a cautious approach on the Ukraine war?

Putin seems to be desperate to find ways to break the shackles of diplomatic isolation that have gradually stifled the Russian economy to the stage of extreme suffocation despite continuous manipulation of the open and unregulated energy market through the price lever.

In his unusual year-end virtual meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping through video link on December 30, he appeared to be abnormally infatuated towards Xi Jinping and went much against his trademark arrogance to appease his Chinese counterpart. “We are expecting you, dear Mr Chairman, dear friend, we are expecting you next spring on a state visit to Moscow.

This will demonstrate to the whole world the strength of Russian-Chinese ties on key issues,” is how Putin tried to exhibit his “extraordinary fondness” for Xi Jinping. This is in stark contrast to the signature superciliousness of Putin, who is infamous for bullying the world leaders during the diplomatic interactions through his verbal and non-verbal communication.

However, it appears the Ukraine war and its economic and political



Dr Imran Khalid
The writer is freelance columnist on international affairs

RUSSIA'S
VICTORY WILL
CERTAINLY
EMBOLDEN
PUTIN TO
RECLAIM THE
ASSERTIVE
ROLE IN THE
GLOBAL POWER
STRUCTURE

implications have compelled him to go the extra mile to lure Xi Jinping.

But Xi Jinping’s response was rather lukewarm – if not dreary – to such a conviviality of Putin. President Xi rather bluntly told his Russian counterpart that the road to peace talks on Ukraine would not be smooth and that China would continue to uphold its “objective and fair stance” on the issue.

Yes, Xi showed willingness for close coordination between Beijing and Moscow in international affairs and offered to facilitate Russia’s willingness to engage in negotiations over Ukraine, but he desisted from backing Putin in his Ukraine misadventure in clear terms. Indubitably, China is perceived as the most crucial ally of Russia in the Ukraine war.

However, during the last 10 months of the Ukraine war, we have witnessed many confusing and rather contradictory adjustments in China’s stance.

Instead of voting in favour of Russia, China preferred to abstain from the UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions in March last



Vladimir Putin with Xi Jinping. – Reuters file photo

year. Similarly, with regard to sanctions on Russia, China has been showing reasonable compliance with the rest of the world.

Rumours are rife that China was aware of the impending Ukraine invasion in February 2022 because Russia waited for the culmination of the Beijing winter Olympics before sending troops across the border.

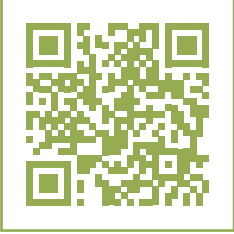
From the very onset of the Ukraine invasion, China has been verbally pledging support

structure.

In this case, Russia would eventually emerge as considerably stronger than it was before launching the intrusion, and such a transformation would lure Putin to think about converting Russia into a neo-Soviet Union.

A stronger Russian federation – and Putin- will certainly reduce the chances to cooperate with China and work as second lead. In that case, Putin would prefer to pursue his own high-octane power agenda and project Russia as an equal player – to the US and China - in a new tri-polar power setup, rather than keep posing as the ally of China.

Nonetheless, the recent virtual meeting between Putin and Xi reflects growing anxiety on both sides: Putin is certainly on the back-foot after series of military fiascos in Ukraine and wants to bolster his position by projecting “closeness” with Beijing, while Xi Jinping is also facing a tough time on the home front after abandoning his stringent zero Covid policy that has resulted in massive resurgence of the pandemic and an unprecedented wave of protests against his Covid policy.



TAYYAB IKRAM TO REVIEW PREPARATION FOR HOCKEY 5S WORLD CUP

NEW FIH CHIEF TO ARRIVE IN MUSCAT TOMORROW

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 4

International Hockey Federation's (FIH) new president Tayyab Ikram will arrive in Muscat on January 6 for meetings regarding the FIH Hockey5s World Cup to be hosted by the Sultanate of Oman.

Ikram, in his first visit to Oman after getting elected as FIH president in November 2022, will hold talks with the top leadership of Oman regarding the hosting of the first edition of FIH Hockey5s World Cup.

Oman is poised to host the inaugural edition of the FIH Hockey5s World Cup, the quadrennial world championship for men's and women's hockey 5s teams in January

2024. The FIH chief's visit also coincides with the opening day of Men's Junior AHF Cup tournament being hosted by Muscat from January 6 to 12.

Ikram's visit gains significance as the FIH president is expected to hold discussions with top leadership of the Omani Government, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MCSY), Oman Olympic Committee Chairman Shaikh Khalid al Zubair, and the Oman Hockey Association office-bearers.

WORLD CUP PREPARATION

The FIH chief's agenda also includes receiving a detailed progress update of the FIH Hockey 5s World Cup and having

personal interaction with the hockey community in Oman.

In his remarks, Ikram said: "I am looking forward to having fruitful discussions with the top leadership in Oman to ensure that the inaugural edition of the Hockey 5s World Cup is organised in the best possible manner."

A senior OHA official said that the visit of the FIH president will help further strengthen the Sultanate of Oman's relationship with the world body and help all stakeholders gain valuable guidance for best preparations and successful delivery of the FIH Hockey 5s World Cup.

In his previous interaction with Oman Observer, the FIH president had promised

efforts to strengthen the reach of hockey in the global scene.

"I am committed to furthering the development of hockey within the countries that are not as prominent on the international stage," the top hockey administrator from Macau, had said after winning the election to the FIH post.

Ikram said he would streamline the FIH efforts to improve hockey infrastructure in countries lacking it.

"The FIH will require more finances to turn these aspects into reality. So we need to market the sport more effectively and find various revenue options to back the developmental goals," the Pakistan-born official said.

Ikram in his capacity as the CEO of Asian Hockey Federation (AHF) had a major role in bringing the Asian Champions Trophy for the first time to Oman in 2018.

Tayyab had opined that the five-a-side format of hockey will be the next big thing for the game in the coming years.

"The five-a-side hockey will be an exciting format of the game that will earn a lot of fans across the world with its eye-catching style."

"It is a new project of FIH. It was only played in the Youth Olympics. I think it is not only Oman, but the GCC and Asia are also honoured to host this exciting format of hockey," he said.

Dominant Shiffrin quickest on first slalom run in Zagreb

ZAGREB: Mikaela Shiffrin took another step towards matching Lindsey Vonn's women's record of 82 World Cup wins when she nailed the fastest time on the first run of Wednesday's slalom in Zagreb.

The 27-year-old American, who won all three events at last week's meeting in Semmering to move to 80 World Cup

victories, was 0.23 seconds quicker than the Swede Anna Swenn Larsson with Olympic champion Petra Vlhova 0.55sec behind in third.

Apart from having Vonn's record in her sights, Shiffrin, who now has 50 slalom wins, is also closing in on the overall record of 86 World Cup victories set by Ingemar Stenmark, who

retired back in 1989.

She leads Vlhova in the overall rankings with 875 points to the Slovakian's 506 -- Italy's Sofia Goggia is third on 470.

In the slalom rankings, Shiffrin also leads with 425 points to Wendy Holdener's 370. Vlhova is third with 280.

The second run is set for 15:30 GMT.



Nortje’s double strike leaves Australia at 147-2

SYDNEY: South Africa strike bowler Anrich Nortje claimed the key wickets of David Warner and Marnus Labuschagne on Wednesday to prise Australia’s grip on the third Test in Sydney as rain plagued the opening day.

Nortje was the Proteas’ star man as he removed Warner cheaply for 10 and late in the day denied Labuschagne (79) his 11th Test hundred.

As bad light and rain conspired to prematurely end the first day, Australia were 147 for two with Usman Khawaja, who averages 98 in Sydney Tests, unbeaten on 54 and Steven Smith yet to score.

Nortje got the big breakthrough with a ripper, taking the edge of Labuschagne’s bat to get him caught behind and end his 151-ball stay.

“I was trying to hit good areas, not trying to be fancy, just trying to keep it simple and try to hit the wicket as hard as I could,” Nortje said of the crucial dismissal.

“Luckily I got something out of it. It wasn’t really a big set-up, just more to try and stay consistent and luckily we got some nip and bounce there.”

The pacer earlier struck in his second over of the day when he had Melbourne Test double-centurion Warner caught at slip by Marco Jansen for 10.

No sooner had Smith arrived at the wicket after Labuschagne’s departure that the players left the field for bad light for the final time.

“Definitely very frustrated. Obviously, it always makes you



very angry as a batter when you get out and then everyone walks with you off the field,” Labuschagne said of his dismissal.

“But at the end of the day he bowled a really good set there and that one obviously just kicked.”

It is the sixth bedevilled Sydney Test out of the past seven to be affected by rain.

“Thought it was out”

There was controversy earlier in Labuschagne’s innings when on 70 he edged Jansen to Simon Harmer

at slip.

The on-field umpires referred the decision with a soft signal of out, only for third umpire Richard Kettleborough to rule that the ball had touched the ground between the fingers of Harmer.

Nortje said of the decision: “All of us thought it was out. Simon was convinced that it went straight in and from the angles, to us it looked as though he got his fingers underneath it... so unfortunately we didn’t get that one.”

Khawaja also survived a review straight after lunch on 25 as he reverse-swept Harmer and was given out leg before wicket, but replays showed the ball touching the glove.

The opening day was also marked by Matt Renshaw, recalled for his first Test for Australia since April 2018, returning a positive Covid-19 test after the toss was taken and the team composition confirmed.

But team officials said he would continue to play in the match with his symptoms only described as mild.

Renshaw was transferred to a separate dressing room from his teammates where he will prepare for the rest of the match, and spent most of play sitting away from the team runners near the Australian dug-out.

Skipper Pat Cummins won his fifth successive toss and decided to play an extra spinner with left-armer Ashton Agar, and Renshaw coming in to bolster the batting, squeezing out in-form paceman Scott Boland on a dry cracking Sydney Cricket Ground pitch.

South Africa did likewise, with off-spinner Harmer ousting Lungi Ngidi while Heinrich Klaasen replaced Theunis de Bruyn at number three.

The Australians have already wrapped up the three-match series after hammering the Proteas by an innings and 182 runs in Melbourne following a six-wicket rout in the opener in Brisbane inside two days. — AFP

AC Milan win 2-1 at Salernitana as Serie A returns after 7 weeks



AC Milan’s Sandro Tonali celebrates scoring their second goal with Davide Calabria and Brahim. — Reuters

SALERNO: Sandro Tonali scored a goal and set up another to guide AC Milan to a 2-1 victory at Salernitana on Wednesday as Serie A returned after a seven-week break for the World Cup and the festive season.

Rafael Leao and Tonali struck in the first half as second-placed Milan moved to 36 points, five behind league leaders Napoli who play away to Inter Milan later.

Forward Leao gave Milan

a 1-0 lead in the 10th minute when he picked up a clever pass from midfielder Tonali and went around goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa for a brilliant finish.

Striker Olivier Giroud then sent his header wide but it did not prove to be a huge miss for the visitors as Tonali doubled their lead within five minutes with a long-range strike into the bottom corner after his first attempt was blocked.

Brahim Diaz, who twice came

close in the first half, finally found the net around the hour-mark following a set piece but the goal was disallowed because he was offside. Milan could have added more goals but they missed chances, including from Giroud.

Salernitana substitute Federico Bonazzoli got a consolation goal for the hosts in the 83rd minute after he connected with a cross at the back post and beat goalkeeper Ciprian Tatarusanu. — Reuters

Kiwis fight back after Shakeel’s maiden century in second Test

KARACHI: Left-hander Saud Shakeel hit a maiden century on Wednesday before New Zealand hit back to keep Pakistan to 407-9 at the close of the third day of the second Test in Karachi.

Shakeel was unbeaten on 124 and Abrar Ahmed yet to score after New Zealand took four wickets in the final session for 70 runs, leaving the hosts 42 runs shy of the tourists’ first innings total of 449.

Shakeel has kept his end intact for 488 minutes — batting all day on Wednesday, and adding 83 for the fourth wicket with Imam-ul-Haq (83) and 150 for the fifth with Sarfaraz Ahmed (78).

But New Zealand spinner Ajaz Patel dismissed Agha Salman (41) and Hasan Ali (four) as Pakistan slumped from 385-5 to 397-9, losing four wickets for just 12 runs off 27 balls.

Leg-spinner Ish Sodhi took two wickets in as many balls, dismissing Naseem Shah for four and Mir Hamza without scoring before last-man Ahmed saw out the day.

Shakeel, who has hit 17 boundaries, was lucky to get a life off pacer Tim Southee when Tom Latham grassed a simple catch at short cover when the batter was on 102.

With wickets falling at the other end, Shakeel went into a shell, scoring just 23 runs in the final session.

He completed his century before tea when he swept spinner Michael Bracewell for a boundary and then took a sharp single to reach three figures in 319 minutes of stoic batting.

Sarfaraz was stumped on 78



in the penultimate over before the break, having scored his third consecutive half-century of the series.

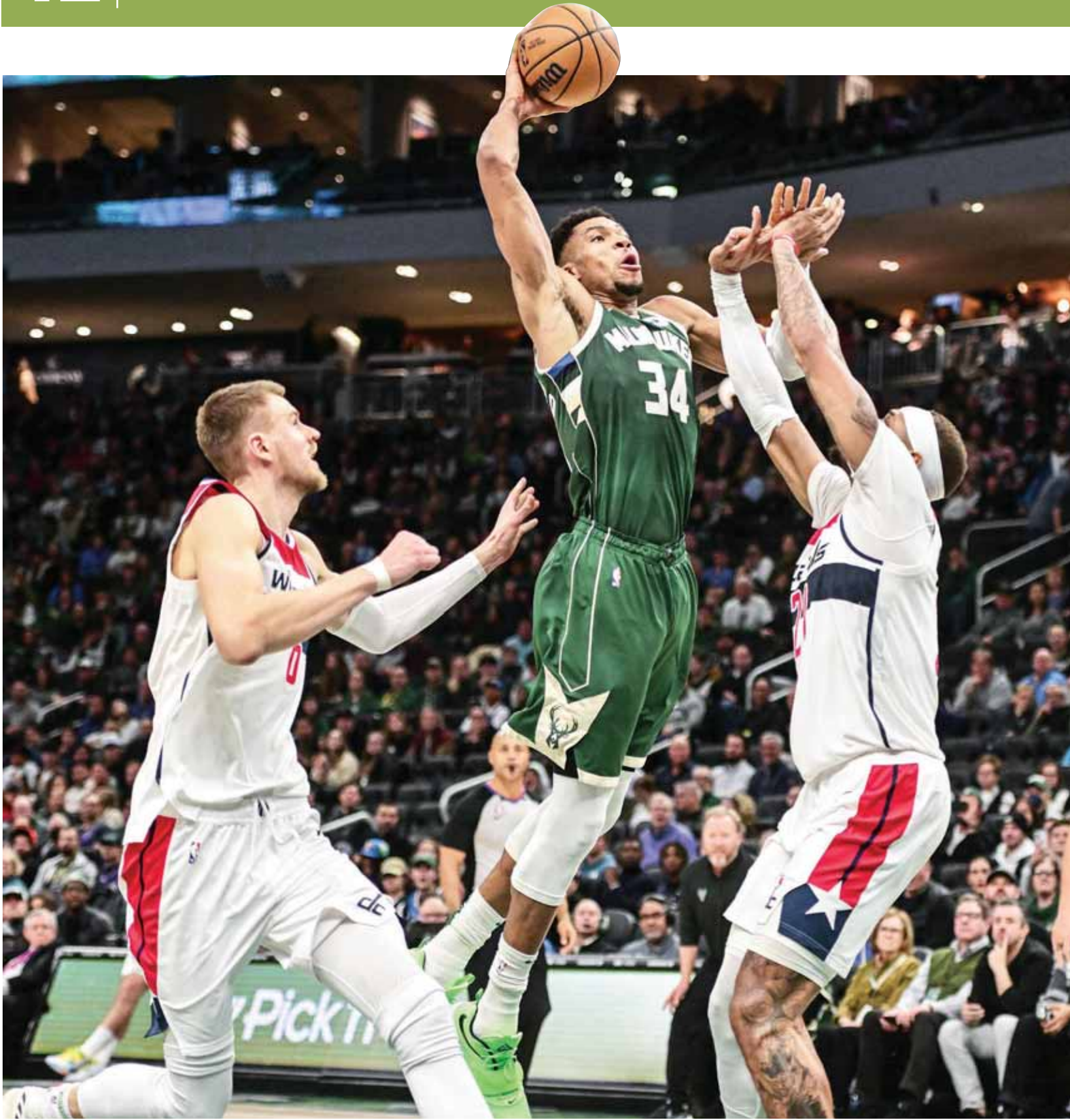
Earlier, Haq was snapped-up by wicketkeeper Tom Blundell off fast-bowler Southee after Pakistan resumed on 154-3.

On 74 overnight, Haq rebuilt the innings after being involved in skipper Babar Azam’s run-out

on Tuesday, but fell in the second hour of the session.

He edged a drive to Blundell, but was only given out after New Zealand challenged the turned-down appeal.

Haq hit 10 boundaries and a six in his 244-minute knock. The two-match series is tied after the first Test — also in Karachi — ended in a draw. — AFP



GIANNIS

SCORES CAREER-HIGH 55

TO IGNITE BUCKS OVER

WIZARDS

WASHINGTON: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored a career-high 55 points to spark the Milwaukee Bucks in a revenge victory over Washington 123-113 on Tuesday while NBA-best Boston was upset at Oklahoma City.

Greek star forward Antetokounmpo, who missed a 118-95 loss on Sunday to Washington with knee soreness, added 10 rebounds and seven assists in the triumph, scoring 19 points in the fourth quarter to stomp the Wizards.

Antetokounmpo, who made 20-of-33 from the floor and 15 of 16 free throws, scored 12 straight Bucks points late to snuff a Washington rally attempt.

“I’m just trying to make good decisions, try to be aggressive throughout the whole game and at the end of the day, we try to win games,” Antetokounmpo said.

“We’re playing good basketball. We defended really well. And I’m just trying to do whatever I can for the team to get a W”

Antetokounmpo became only the fourth player in NBA history with three consecutive games of

at least 40 points, 10 rebounds and five assists, joining Russell Westbrook, Elgin Baylor and Wilt Chamberlain.

Antetokounmpo credited extra work on his free throw accuracy with a boost in his recent scoring.

“That’s what I do, I work,” said Antetokounmpo. “A lot of people think my game is boring but I’m just trying to do better, trying to do whatever it takes to help my team win.”

“At the end of the day I’ve got to get better at the free throw line and I’m just trying to put some extra work there, find my teammates, create some open threes and try to attack in the paint as much as I can.”

Milwaukee’s Brook Lopez added 21 points and 12 rebounds while reserve Bobby Portis had 17 points and 13 rebounds for the Bucks, several of whom poured water on Antetokounmpo after the game in celebration.

“This is what basketball is about,” Antetokounmpo said. “This is what winning is about. We have a great team. We play together. We do it on the floor

together. That’s what Milwaukee is about and I’m glad to be on a team like that.”

Latvian Kristaps Porzingis scored 22 points to lead the visiting Wizards, who had a five-game win streak snapped.

At Oklahoma City, Josh Giddey scored 25 points and Canadian backcourt partner Luguentz Dort added 23 to lead the host Thunder over Boston 150-117.

Jalen Williams and reserves Tre Mann and Isaiah Joe each added 21 points for the Thunder (16-21), who outscored Boston in every quarter.

The Celtics saw the NBA’s best record drop to 26-12, trimming their lead in the Eastern Conference to a half-game over Brooklyn (25-12) and 1.5 games over Milwaukee (24-13).

Jaylen Brown led Boston with 29 points and Jayson Tatum had 27 for the Celtics.

The night’s thriller came in Salt Lake City, where Sacramento’s De’Aaron Fox made a driving layup with less than a second remaining to give the Sacramento Kings a 117-115 triumph at Utah.

Fox finished with a game-

high 37 points, including his career-best fourth quarter with 20 points, and Domantas Sabonis added 21 points, 14 rebounds and eight assists for the Kings.

Finnish forward Lauri Markkanen, who led Utah with 28 points, sank a 3-pointer off a three-quarter-court pass at the finish, but officials ruled the shot left his hand just after the final buzzer and thus was no good.

- Zion out three weeks -

The three-team fight for the Western Conference lead had big news on Tuesday as well as New Orleans star Zion Williamson learned he will be sidelined for at least three weeks.

Williamson, averaging 26.0 points and 7.0 rebounds a game, underwent an MRI exam on Tuesday that confirmed he suffered a right hamstring strain in a 120-111 loss at Philadelphia on Monday and he will be re-evaluated in three weeks, the Pelicans said.

The setback comes with New Orleans at 23-14 and in a fight with Denver and Memphis for the Western Conference lead. — AFP



Swiatek wins to keep Poland’s United Cup hopes alive

BRISBANE: World number one Iga Swiatek outlasted Martina Trevisan to level Poland’s United Cup city final on Wednesday after rising star Lorenzo Musetti produced an almost flawless display of serving to put Italy in front.

Musetti lost only three points on serve to beat Poland’s Daniel Michalski 6-1, 6-1 in just 57 minutes in the best-of-five-match Brisbane city final.

The winners of the city finals in Brisbane, Sydney and Perth progress to the semi-finals of the inaugural mixed teams tournament along with the best-performing losing finalist.

The 20-year-old Musetti, who climbed to 23 in the world in 2022, had far too much firepower for his opponent, blasting 17 winners past the 260th-ranked Michalski.

“I was so focused today on the match and the serve was really good,” he said. “But with every shot I had a great feeling for the ball so I think I played the best match so far.”

However, Poland struck back when Swiatek battled past Trevisan 6-2, 6-4.

The three-time Grand Slam winner raced through the first set but was forced into a fight in the second, finally claiming victory in 1hr 51mins.

“It became tight at the end and I felt like she had her chances as well,” Swiatek said. “My goal is to be more consistent and keep the same level of tennis right to the end.”

In Sydney, a tenacious Madison Keys gave the United States an early lead over Britain before Cameron Norrie struck back when he won a high quality match against Taylor Fritz in their city final.

World number 11 Keys lost the first set to Katie Swan before recovering to win a gruelling match 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 in 2hrs 18mins.

“I actually practised with Katie a few days before the tournament and I said to my coach she’s playing absolutely great tennis,” Keys said.

“So I knew I would have to play well and I think she played a phenomenal first set and I knew I had to raise my level.”

Norrie and Fritz played an enthralling encounter which was in the balance until the Briton broke at 4-4 in the final set then served it out to claim a 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 victory.

“All credit to Taylor, we’ve played so many times and always had a battle so I was definitely ready for three sets,” Norrie said.

Croatia took the first point in Perth when Donna Vekic downed Greece’s Despina Papamichail 6-2, 6-0.

Stefanos Tsitsipas takes on Borna Coric in the second singles rubber. — AFP





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Galfar wins RO 9 million SQU contract



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Leading Omani construction firm Galfar Engineering & Contracting says it has been awarded a contract valued at around RO 9 million for the maintenance and operation of the electrical and mechanical equipment at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), as well as overall civil maintenance work for a period of two years. The announcement came in a filing to the Capital Market Authority on Wednesday. The award is the latest in a string of contracts won by the publicly traded company over the course of 2022, buoying its order-book. “The company’s financial position continued to be positive supported by a robust order backlog with stable operating profit but impacted by some margin pressure,” commented Majid bin Salim al Fannah al Araimi, Chairman, in the Directors’ Report for Q3 2022.

“The parent company can sustain a positive margin due to various initiatives taken by the company as part of its turnaround strategy to re-organise, improve projects performance and implement stringent cost controls.

“The positive bottom-line results came despite various challenges, such as a drop in revenues by approximately 20 per cent compared to the same period last year, a reduction in the scope of work, and delay in commencement of new orders,” he stated.

For the period ended in September 2022, Galfar maintained a significant projects pipeline of RO 498 million supported by new project awards worth RO 189 million, the company said.

Agreements signed for two integrated residential projects worth RO 160 million

New growth: Housing Ministry signs agreements related real estate development, Integrated Service Stations and e-platform

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning has signed agreements to support the development of two new integrated residential neighbourhoods (Souroh) at Halban and Al Amerat at a total cost of RO 160 million. The pacts are part of a raft of agreements signed by Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, here on Wednesday.

A number of integrated service stations and a new electronic real estate platform will be established as well.

The first integrated residential neighbourhood will come up in the Wilayat of Al Amerat in the Governorate of Muscat on a total area of 445,823 square metres. Offering 1,050 housing units, the RO 60 million project will be constructed over seven years in 3 stages.

The second Souroh project will come up at Halban in the Wilayat of Nakhl in the Governorate of South Al Batinah. Covering an area of 637,044, it will offer 1,350 housing units. It will be built with an investment of RO 100 million in four stages over eight years. Both projects have multiple housing options including detached villas, attached villas, semi-detached villas, and



apartments. Other services will be available such as a mosque, a commercial area, and green spaces, in addition to infrastructure works related to basic public services.

The Ministry has also offered several sites under the Souroh programme in each of the Governorate of South Al Sharqiyah in the Wilayat of Sur (Nesma), in the Governorate of South Al Batinah in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq (Al Hazm), in the Governorate of North Al Batinah in the Wilayat of Suhar (Muwaileh), in the Governorate of Dhofar in the Wilayat of Salalah

(North Sahanout) and in the Governorate of Musandam in the Wilayat of Khasab.

Al Shueili also signed 4 new agreements to expand the network of integrated service fuel stations in the governorates of Muscat, North and South Al Batinah under the usufruct system for residential, commercial and tourist lands.

Agreements to establish two integrated service stations were signed concerning two locations, in North Al Batinah Governorate, one of which is to the right of Al Tayeb city in the Wilayat of Liwa at a cost of RO 2 million.

Another station will be located in Al Rawdah in the Wilayat of Saham. Total investment is around RO 2.6 million. Two other integrated service stations will be located in the Governorate of South Al Batinah — at Al Uqdah in the Wilayat of Barka.

The integrated survive stations include fuel filling facilities, air-conditioned main building that houses various restaurants, shops, a park, a prayer area for men and another for women, ATMs, automotive maintenance and service centre, separate parking

spaces for buses and trucks, and other public parking spaces to be provided as a basic service for road users and to revitalise the economic and tourism movement along the highway.

Further, to enable real estate transactions electronically, the Ministry signed a memorandum of understanding to set up the Aqari platform based on blockchain.

The agreement was signed with Frontech, affiliated with ITHCA Group. Eng Said bin Abdullah al Mandhari, CEO of ITHCA Group, signed on behalf of ITHCA.

‘Aqari’ platform is intended to provide a smart way to buy and sell lands and real estates through digital means as an easy-to-use interactive system that allows the purchase and sale of land and property through an application compatible with a mobile phone, tablet or computer.

It is concerned with the trade of agricultural, residential, commercial and industrial lands and properties.

The application will be developed using the latest technologies such as NET Core for API, Native android and IOS for mobile applications. It allows users to deal with ease and confidence in buying and selling real estate, communicating with each other, and bidding on available lands.

Among the application’s features are user interface, land registration, access to land available for sale, as well as the full approval processes required for the transfer of land ownership. The app is associated directly with Google Maps, which helps in locating lands.

Oman Flour Mills opens RO 21 million grain silo complex in Sohar Port

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Sohar Flour Mills Company, a subsidiary of Oman Flour Mills (OFM), opened a grain silo complex in Sohar Port yesterday.

High-level representatives of Oman Flour Mills were joined by officials from other stakeholders in the formal opening of the project under the auspices of Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

Strategically located in Sohar Port, the 12-grain silo complex is considered as one of the major projects of Oman Flour Mills that will help create stockpiles of grain to meet the country’s



requirements. The project stems from the company’s commitment to enhancing food security and securing strategic stockpiles of

grain.

Eng Ibrahim al Amri, Chief Operating Officer at Oman Flour Mills, said in an interview with

Oman TV, “The opening of the RO 21 million silos in Sohar Port aims to support the infrastructure in the field of agricultural resources

output in the Sultanate of Oman.

“The storage capacity of the silos is 160,000 tonnes, and is considered one of the strategic national projects. It will help increase the storage capacity of the food grains to ensure that there are sufficient quantities to cover the consumption in the Sultanate for longer periods.”

According to Al Amri, the project stems from the responsibility of OFM in enhancing food security and securing a strategic stock of grains. This project is considered one of the pillars of Oman Vision 2040 since food security sector is among the targeted sectors to contribute to achieving economic diversification.

Treasury Single Account, National Asset Register to be expanded in 2023: Ministry of Finance

Effective management: Ministry of Finance outlines newly launched systems to improve Oman's fiscal performance

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 4

The Treasury Single Account (TSA), an initiative to establish a unified structure for government bank accounts, is proposed to be expanded in scope during the current year, according to Oman's Ministry of Finance. Launched early last year as a pilot initiative, the TSA groups all government account balances to show the movement of net revenues and expenses at any given time.

When fully rolled out, encompassing a total of 57 government entity, it will contribute to the optimal use

of government cash resources. Overall, the TSA aims to improve financial control process, improve treasury management and enhance monetary outlook, the Ministry noted.

Significantly, the TSA is one of several initiatives rolled out by the Ministry to help improve Oman's overall fiscal performance.

At least four of these initiatives, centring on the deployment of effective systems to manage, among other things, public finance, public debt, and national assets, are set to make headway in their implementation during Fiscal 2023, according to the Ministry.

Phase 1 of the TSA initiative, currently focused on the Tax Authority and Ministry of Labour, is close to completion. It will pave the way for the start of Phase 2, covering the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Royal Oman Police.

Also set to make further headway this year is the Ministry's National Assets Register (NAR).



Unveiled for the first time last year, the register is essentially an integrated central system that inventories government assets and

helps draft a strategy to ensure centralised management of the assets, as well as to maximise their efficiency and returns.

"This can be achieved through the optimal use of such assets in a way that generate more financial resources for the State budget. The NAR aims to establish a comprehensive central register for all assets owned and supervised by the government. In addition, it aims to show the real value of assets, and centralise the management of government assets," the Ministry noted in its 2023 General Budget Statement on Sunday.

Targeted for listing and evaluation in the first phase of the NAR project are the assets of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, and Muscat Municipality. Other ministries and government agencies are proposed to be covered in subsequent phases.

Also slated for implementation this year is a Debt Management System (DMS). It is described as a system that promotes effective and

proactive management of public debt by recording, reporting and analysing debt portfolios, and providing tools to organise and track debts, prioritising payments, and developing a plan to repay debts in a timely and effective manner.

The DMS is currently being user-tested before it is made operational during the year. Rounding off the list of financial management systems identified for implementation during 2023 is Maliyah – a modern IT system for managing public finance.

"Maliyah will be used for planning, implementing, controlling, and reporting on the State's General Budget. It will also help manage the public finance in line with Oman Vision 2040. The system aims to develop public financial management and improve the efficiency in-line with global developments," the Ministry explained, adding that a contract is set to be awarded for its deployment.

Business community in Oman lauds 2023 Budget

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Members of Oman's business community have lauded the 2023 budget, calling it a budget 'based on a prudent study'. They expressed their hopes for stronger economic growth, citing the recent upgrade by S&P Global of Oman's credit rating to BB, from BB-, based on improvements in the country's fiscal performance and reduced public debt.

Speaking to the Observer, Davis Kallukaran, Managing Partner of Crowe Oman said that the recovery witnessed in the Omani economy, lowering debt-to-GDP ratio, and focusing on investment spending are all promising and commendable at the face of a tumultuous year gone by which has been a year of transitioning towards stronger growth for Oman.

"The proposed budget deficit of 3 per cent of GDP is quite commendable considering the fact that Oman's key focus has been debt management, which saw public debt reduced from RO 20.8 billion to RO 17.7 billion by the end of 2022 and the economy ended up with a surplus of RO 1.146 billion against the estimated

budget deficit of RO 1.5 billion.

The introduction of the VAT has positively contributed to revenues. This talks volumes on the prudent measures taken by the Government coupled with the increase in oil prices," said Davis, who is also a Founder Director of Indo Gulf Middle East Chamber of Commerce.

The Tenth Five-year Development Plan 2021-25 aims at strengthening the social protection system to protect low-income earners by maintaining the level of spending on basic services such as education, health, housing and social security and welfare. The plan also emphasises on strengthening sustainable human development and safeguarding human capital to enhance the competitiveness of Omani youth in the local and global markets by equipping them for the job market.

"As high as 38 per cent of the public spending amounting to RO 4.3 billion is towards social and basic sectors and it is quite a remarkable move with 44 per cent of this going to the education sector and 22 per cent each to social security welfare and health sector and the remaining 12 per cent going to the housing sector.

The government continues

to press forward with a broad array of structural reforms under Oman Vision 2040, with the goal to achieve the sustainable private sector-led growth needed to offer opportunities to job seekers and ensure higher living standards for future generations," adds Kallukaran.

For Abdul Latheef Uppala, the newly elected member of the Board of Director of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), the revenues in last year budget was boosted by the higher oil prices to 14.234 billion rials, and was based on a forecast price of \$50 per barrel but the fact that the government now estimates the average price in 2022 to be \$55 is a good sign.

"What is soothing news to the business community in Oman is that the 2023 budget sees revenues of RO 10.05 billion, which is 5 per cent lower than 2022, and expenditures of RO 11.35 billion, 6.4 per cent lower than the previous year.

Another reason for joy for the business communities is that there wouldn't be any personal income tax introduced in 2023 and no increase in the rate of VAT which gives a great relief to the Omani citizens," said Abdul Latheef.

Bank Muscat extends special highly competitive rates to first time borrowers till March 31

MUSCAT: In line with its vision "To serve you better, everyday" and commitment to provide the best offers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, extended the discounted offers on Baituna and Personal Finance loans for first time borrowers till March 31, 2023.

In line with its customer-centric strategy of developing and offering the best services and facilities possible for its customers, the special offer features highly-competitive interest rates starting at just 4.25 per cent for Baituna home loans and 4.5 per cent on Personal Loans. It is available to Omani employees of government and quasi-government institutions as well as Tier 1 companies with salaries of RO 500 or more. Also, the bank offers reduced interest rates on short term personal loans starting at just 4 per cent for 12 months.

On this occasion, Abdullah bin Tamman al Maashani, General Manager – Products, Bank Muscat, said: "We are pleased with the positive feedback on the reduced rates on financing products. These offers are designed to give first time borrowers the opportunity to benefit from the financing facilities that best suit their needs.

Bank Muscat is keen to follow up on the latest developments in the sector to meet our valued customers' needs and address their feedback on the services currently provided. Based on the feedback, the bank decided to extend these special offers to give more customers the chance to benefit from these services. Bank Muscat is delighted with their strong support and confidence in the bank and will continue to be responsive to customer needs and global financial trends."

Both first time borrowers and existing customers can easily apply for home finance by visiting any of the



Bank's Baituna Sales Centres in Qurum, Maabelah, Barka, Suhar, Saham, Sur, Ibra, Nizwa, Ibri, Al Buraimi and Salalah or any Bank Muscat branch in Oman. Financing up to RO 500,000 and for a period up to 25 years is available to customers to construct or purchase new homes as well as to buy land for residential construction. Baituna is one of the best home finance options in Oman thanks to its fast processing, documentation and prompt disbursal of financing.

Customers who would like to apply for personal loans can visit their nearest Bank Muscat branch with the required documents including a salary transfer letter from their employer and their ID cards. Financing up to RO 200,000 is available to customers based on fulfilment of the eligibility criteria and the bank is well known for its speedy processing of applications.

Please go to <https://www.bankmuscat.com/en/Pages/Loan-Calculator.aspx> or call 24795555 to get more details about the loan options available to customers. As the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman for the last four decades, Bank Muscat has the largest banking network in Oman with 146 retail banking branches.

Drive out to fun moments in the popular Toyota Corolla

MUSCAT: Toyota Corolla has been encouraging some of the finest journeys for passengers since its introductions decades ago. The Corolla with its size, space, driving dynamics, style and fuel efficiency has made it a popular model for owners across the world.

The Corolla has an attractive exterior that gives it a distinctive look. Powering it to offer amazing driving experiences is a 2.0-litre four-cylinder Dynamic Force

engine which produces 168 hp and 20.39 kg-m of torque.

For more immersive driving experiences, the engine is paired to a Direct Shift CVT transmission. Customers looking for a more fuel-efficient option can choose the 1.6-litre four-cylinder engine Corolla that produces 121 hp and 15.7 kg-m of torque. This is paired with a CVT transmission.

The Corolla's interior is impressive and contributes



to making every journey comfortable.

The interior design adopts a simple yet appealing style, with impressive space and integrated functional parts that combine to create a refined elegance.

The ergonomically designed seats feature new cushion material, while the armrest and ample legroom offer superior comfort for the rear-seat passengers. Offering enhanced experiences on

every drive are a range of features, which vary based on the trim level.

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Cyber-security is a top priority for nations and corporations



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

International agencies continue to raise warnings about the risk of cyber-attacks by rogue states and terror organisations against the infrastructure of governmental and private institutions around the world.

Most vulnerable are projects that lack adequate safeguards, which require sizable investments in cybersecurity programmes, hardware, policies and personnel. Basic services such as electricity, water, communications, banking and finance and news organisations, among other

utilities necessary for day-to-day living, have become dependent on cyber capabilities to deter hostile elements from disrupting their operations.

According to a recent report by a Western corporation specialising in security, public safety and business data services, 36 per cent of information technology and security officials around the world are looking to invest in advanced tools and cyber security technologies to secure their organisations.

These investments are intended to cover not only new

THE GOAL IS TO FORTIFY THE ORGANISATIONS AGAINST CYBERATTACKS AND MAINTAIN OPERATIONAL RESILIENCE WITHOUT ANY DISRUPTION OF SERVICES IN THE EVENT OF AN ATTACK.

technological solutions, but also new programmes and hardware

to strengthen the security architecture of organisations.

The goal is to fortify the organisations against cyberattacks and maintain operational resilience without any disruption of services in the event of an attack.

The report, based on a survey of a large number of companies and their executives from around the world, also pointed out that 67 per cent of the respondents plan to modernise their security and control systems during the year.

Security issues are also carefully studied and technologies

evaluated by official institutions, to face risks and search for the best solutions to withstand potential breaches and attacks.

Modern cyber security must go hand in hand with automation to ensure business continuity in the unlikely event of a cyber attack.

Today, countries are devoting a great deal of resources to secure their infrastructure through investments in, for example, hybrid cloud technologies, developing human resources, enhancing competency skills, and promoting innovation in this field.

Oman’s intensive efforts in the race to achieve Net Zero Emissions by 2050



MARYAM AL NOFLI

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In accordance with the Paris Climate Agreement, several governments have officially decided that they will achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, and this commitment came at the twenty-sixth summit of the Conference of the Parties (COP26), which was held in Glasgow, Scotland, on October 31 to November 12, 2021.

In this event, all the participating countries meet annually to take decisions on the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. In line with other Gulf countries, the Sultanate of Oman announced on October 11, 2022, that it will work hard to speed up the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to as close to zero as possible toward achieving carbon neutrality.

This will be done by balancing these emissions so that they are equal to or less than those removed by the natural absorption of the planet.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik announced the adoption of 2050 as a deadline for achieving carbon neutrality. It is further emphasised that an integrated national plan will be developed to achieve the goal of a green future as an extension of Oman Vision 2040.

In addition, Oman Sustainability Centre based on the outputs of the Carbon Management Lab will be established to ensure the implementation of the nation’s plan for carbon neutrality and follow various activities toward achieving the set targets.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik also directed the cooperation of all units of the state’s administrative apparatuses

with the concerned departments to ensure the success of efforts to implement the national plan.

To accelerate the activities, a clear strategic and executive plan for zero neutrality must be developed, and it must be managed by a number of distinguished Omani cadres from various sectors.

Furthermore, to develop systematic work mechanisms, the creation of national institutions, committees with trained and technically qualified members, and legislation regarding carbon emissions are essential.

To tackle negative effects at the national level, in line with local, regional, and international environmental commitments, green initiatives will be developed to deal with the crisis and find solutions to the challenges, with the involvement of both the governmental and private sectors.

Developing other concepts with the aim of effectively reaching a certain degree of the energy transition will enable the country to have a clear vision for a smooth transition from planning to actual implementation.

Achieving net zero emissions (NZE) will help to diversify income sources, create opportunities for sustainable economic and social growth, balance sustainable development, mitigate the effects of climate

ACHIEVING NET ZERO EMISSIONS (NZE) WILL HELP TO DIVERSIFY INCOME SOURCES, CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL GROWTH, BALANCE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE, BUILD A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY, BENEFIT FROM THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF CLEAN TECHNOLOGY AND CREATE A DIVERSE MIX OF ENERGY SOURCES.

change, build a knowledge economy, benefit from the sustainable development of clean technology and create a diverse mix of energy sources.

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals announced the launch of investment opportunities and incentives in the green hydrogen sector during the official launch of the Oman Hydrogen Company. The goal of this project is to make a million metric tonnes of hydrogen by 2030.

Moreover, the procedures for allocating investment sites, the preparation of a national plant and the establishment of the Oman Sustainability Centre based on the outputs of the Carbon Management Laboratory are important steps taken by the Sultanate of Oman to reap the benefits of NZE.

The Oman Sustainability Centre is in charge of making sure that opportunities are made available in the many targeted sectors so that the implementation plan can be put into action. It is also in charge of keeping track

of changes in the local or global scene during the implementation period.

In order to be ready for the shift, the Sultanate of Oman strives to develop and implement studies, plans and policies to achieve the optimal use of energy and to pay attention to the development of renewable energy projects in various regions.

A large, utility-scale solar photovoltaic independent power project in Oman, ‘Ibri 2’, began commercial operations in January 2022.

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), based in Beijing, provided a \$60 million loan to the project after the Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP) selected a consortium of Saudi and Kuwaiti businesses as the winner. Other projects in accordance with 2030 plans include a wind farm in Dhofar, two solar IPPs in Manah, and 11 solar-diesel hybrid facilities.

Furthermore, small-scale solar panels are installed on residential

and commercial structures through the ‘Sahim’ (contribute) initiative. The OPWP started the process for the development of Oman’s first waste-to-energy plant in April 2022.

In the development of hydrogen energy, Oman intends to go for 30 GW of green and blue hydrogen by 2040. In this regard, new projects have been announced by the government, including a 14 GW plant fueled by 25 GW of wind and solar energy. According to MEED research, Oman plans to invest around \$45 billion in green hydrogen and ammonia projects.

The Carbon Management Laboratory, implemented from September 25 to October 13, has taken 49 initiatives and projects for various sectors such as electricity and renewable energy, oil and gas, industrial development, transportation, urban development, and buildings, with a clear roadmap for achieving the desired targets.

The execution is focused on improving the efficiency of land transport for light and heavy vehicles, encouraging the use of electric vehicles, reducing emissions from ports and ships, reducing emissions in the aviation sector, and exploring the use of biofuels and hydrogen.

Sustainable smart cities, building standards, smart

electrical appliances, district cooling, the implementation of renewable energy and energy efficiency are among the projects in the cities and buildings sector. In the renewable energy sector, projects related to wind, green hydrogen, electrical interconnection, energy from biofuels, waste recycling, an efficient electricity supply chain and energy efficiency in the electric energy sector are given priority.

In the industrial sector, emphasis is given to energy efficiency, emission control, waste recycling and consumption reduction.

Despite the Sultanate of Oman’s strategies, national initiatives and plans to achieve zero neutrality, a continuous follow-up is needed to reformulate and develop the policy of innovation and creativity in general and green innovation in particular to support climate protection plans towards a clean and sustainable environment. We are key partners in building the milestones of a green future for us and future generations, God willing.

The formulation of these climate change goals is a global challenge and the Sultanate of Oman is very keen to cooperate with brotherly and friendly countries to build a green future that is safe for human habitation.

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The seventh hole: The baby Majlis Al Jinn

Located in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate, one of the four sink holes draining the rain water into Selma plateau cave system is known as The Seventh hole or Aqabat Khashal for the locals living in this area... **P20**

You’ve got mail — Masters invite sent to the wrong Scott Stallings

American golfer Scott Stallings' invite to compete at this year's Masters took a little longer than expected to arrive after it was sent to another man by the same name. Stallings said he had been checking his mailbox "five times a day" in anticipation of receiving the coveted green

envelope when he received a message via social media from the other Stallings. "Hi Scott. My name is Scott Stallings as well and I'm from Georgia," the man wrote. "My wife's name is Jennifer too! I received a FedEx today from the Masters inviting me to play in the Masters Tournament April 6-9, 2023. I'm 100 per cent sure this is NOT for

me. I play but wow! Nowhere near your level. "It's a very nice package complete with everything needed to attend," he added. "I think we have some confusion because of our names, our wife's names and geographical location." The man later posted a video showing him mailing the invitation on to the pro golfer while feigning

disappointment. The 37-year-old Stallings is ranked 54th in the world. He is a three-time winner on the PGA Tour, his most recent victory came at the Farmers Insurance Open in 2014. His best result at Augusta National came in 2012 when he tied for 27th. —Reuters



READ

ALL THE DANGEROUS THINGS

BY STACY WILLINGHAM

The narrator is struggling with overwhelming grief and guilt a year after her toddler son, Mason, disappeared one night from their Savannah, Ga., home.



SPECIES

Sweden's largest wolf hunt since the reintroduction of licensed hunting in 2010 began on Monday. According to the Swedish television station SVT, 75 animals may be killed this year. —DPA



PLACES

This aerial view taken on December 31, 2022 shows the Amsterdam Island, part of the five administrative districts of the French Southern and Antarctic Territories —AFP





The world in miniature

WE HAD AN all-encompassing view of Rio de Janeiro and its surroundings: Sugarloaf Mountain, the Christ the Redeemer statue, Copacabana Beach. Architectural novelties like the Niterói Contemporary Art Museum and the Metropolitan Cathedral stood out among the sea of buildings, as trains and streetcars passed by, and thousands of dancers swayed and strutted during the city's Carnival celebration.

Yet Rio was more than 6,000 miles away, while my husband, son and I stood in a building in the Speicherstadt, the historic warehouse district in Hamburg, Germany.

The scene we admired is one of more than a dozen sprawling exhibits at Miniatur Wunderland, home to the world's largest model railway and largest miniature airport. The meticulous replica of Rio came on line as Wunderland's newest exhibit in December 2021, constructed over four years in partnership with a family-owned model-making company out of Argentina.

"Mind-blowing," my husband said several times during our five hours of marveling at reproductions of Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, the United States and other sites, complete with tiny hand-painted figures participating in the myriad activities of daily life. Through all of the landscapes, trains continually chugged along a total of 16,138 metres (almost 53,000 feet) of track.

The project started in 2000 when twin brothers Frederik and Gerrit Braun, then 32, dreamed of creating the largest model railroad in the world. The siblings, who grew up as train buffs, wound up running a Hamburg nightclub and record label in the 1990s, but eventually they wanted a lifestyle change. With help from friends and family, the Brauns opened Miniatur Wunderland's life-size doors in 2001.

In the 21 years since, the

attraction has drawn more than 21 million visitors from around the world, becoming one of Germany's top tourist draws. Yet in the United States, Miniatur Wunderland is primarily known among railroad buffs and other hobbyists.

Count us lucky to have a son, now 15, who has been obsessed with planes, trains, cars and anything else that moves mechanically since he was old enough to point. Lucky because I hadn't known about Miniatur Wunderland, despite having made numerous trips to Germany, as the daughter of

our son, an only child, but what we didn't anticipate was our own enchantment with this tiny world, full of painstaking detail and technological wizardry, sure, but also bursting with whimsy and humour.

Take the diorama of Italy, for instance. Among the faithful reproductions of St. Peter's Basilica, the Colosseum and Mount Vesuvius (complete with regular eruptions), there are little moving vignettes, activated by pressing a button (200 such buttons exist throughout Wunderland). In one, Pinocchio's nose grows 6 inches across

sense of humour," Cerny added, while sharing with a chuckle that the 100 or so statues of saints on the colonnades in St. Peter's Square wear clothing made of paper napkins from the Wunderland bistro.

As we moved from exhibit to exhibit, directing each other this way and that to point out some new captivating feature, we appreciated that the landscapes were anything but static. In addition to the trains, cars and boats that travel about (in the Scandinavia section, ships navigate tides in real water), most of the almost inch-high figures are doing something, animated in their depiction if not through actual movement. "As time went on, the model railway became less important, and the storytelling and the creativity became much more important."

On the fourth floor, we passed by the central command for all of the exhibits, filled with large screens and electronics. It was like an open kitchen. Not only do the systems that control the trains, vehicles and lighting originate here, but video cameras let staff members monitor things such as train derailments and other glitches that can occur with so many moving parts.

We discovered that it's not always sunny in Miniatur Wunderland, either. Every 12 minutes, the exhibits shift from day to a three-minute-long night, and the real rooms darken as almost half a million LED lights twinkle within the dioramas. Each of those lights is programmed to turn on in sequence rather than all at once, creating a condensed simulation of nightfall. "The brothers are perfectionists," Cerny said of the founders.

Indeed, as our son took close-up photos and videos of his favourite scenes, he commented that it would be hard to tell the difference between the real world and his iPhone images of this faithfully rendered diminutive one. —**NYT**



two German-born parents. My son, on the other hand, had been talking about Wunderland for years, ever since he discovered some YouTube videos of it. He was particularly interested in the working airport, which averages 500 takeoffs and landings a day, displayed on a flight monitor (the difference: these model planes are always on time).

So when we planned a trip back to Germany in August to see family in Munich, we added a detour to Hamburg to visit Miniatur Wunderland (and bought tickets online a month in advance for the timed entry). My husband and I wanted to indulge

the room of a tiny cottage. Elsewhere, a small Michelangelo bounces on a trampoline to reach the Sistine Chapel ceiling with his paintbrush. Creative license? Absolutely.

"That was the model builder saying, 'I could have put Michelangelo on scaffolding, but nobody would see it. What could I use instead to show him painting?'" said Thomas Cerny, a software developer and spokesperson for Miniatur Wunderland, in a recent phone interview. "The model builders are what make the whole exhibition special. If you know them, you can even tell who built what, as each one has their own

LIFESTYLE

Carnival of trumpets and colour returns to Cape Town



DRESSED IN A GREEN shirt with yellow and white polka dots, a blue pacifier in his mouth, two-year-old Thaakir Buzic on Monday led a colourful musical band through the streets of Cape Town, in South Africa — from the safety of his grandfather's arms.

About 20,000 performers divided into dozens of troupes marched in the city centre while playing music and dancing for the annual Cape Town Minstrel carnival.

Returning after a two-year Covid-induced break, the celebration, also known as "Tweede Nuwe Jaar" ("Second New Year"), is a family affair for Buzic's relatives.

The boy is the youngest of 13 family members — led by his 68-year-old great aunt — to take part in the parade as dancers for the 1,000-strong Playaz Inc troupe.

"We are very, very excited! Today, everything is fine," said Buzic's grandfather, Ridewaan Daniels, 47.

A tambourin in hand, Buzic bounced from one leg to the other as brass players rehearsed outdoors at a school in Mitchells Plain, near Cape Town, on New Year's Eve.

"It's in the troupes that my parents met. I was born into it, the same goes with my kids and my grand-kids," said his grandmother, Sadia Daniels, 40, who has not missed a parade since she was born.

"Only the lockdown could keep us away from it... this year we're back on track."

Tens of thousands of people flocked to see the march on Monday.

Minstrels stuck out their tongues and wiggled their hips under the blazing sun to the sound of trumpets and whistles.

"We've been camping on this spot since 28 December," said Ruzia Fry, 39, as she sat under one of four marquees set up on the side of a road to accommodate her about 50 family members.

"It's a tradition for us to come here every year."

The festivity has its roots in colonial times, when slaves — some of whom were forcibly brought to Africa's southern tip from Southeast Asia — were allowed to relax on the day after New Year's Day.

They used the time off to dress up, dance and sing.

It's now seen as a celebration of the Cape's diverse culture and marks the start of a weeks-long competition where minstrels battle it out for the title of best troupe.

Crime and Covid — In impoverished, crime-ridden communities with high unemployment rates, joining a band offers some a way out.

"The biggest thing for us is to keep the youngsters occupied. It takes them away from all the ills from our neighbourhoods," said Raeed Gallant, 35, co-director of Playaz Inc.

Siraaj Allen, 30, said music kept him from taking a more dangerous path, when as a teenager he started hanging around with "the wrong guys".

"I chose music. And that saved me from being a bad person," he said.

Now a professional musician, he coaches the Playaz Inc band's 150 trombone, sousaphone, trumpet and saxophone players.

"Music taught me discipline and now I give it over to the younger guys, to make sure they don't go the same path that I almost went."

With 27 troupes confirmed, organisers said the parade would be back with a bang after the two-year hiatus.

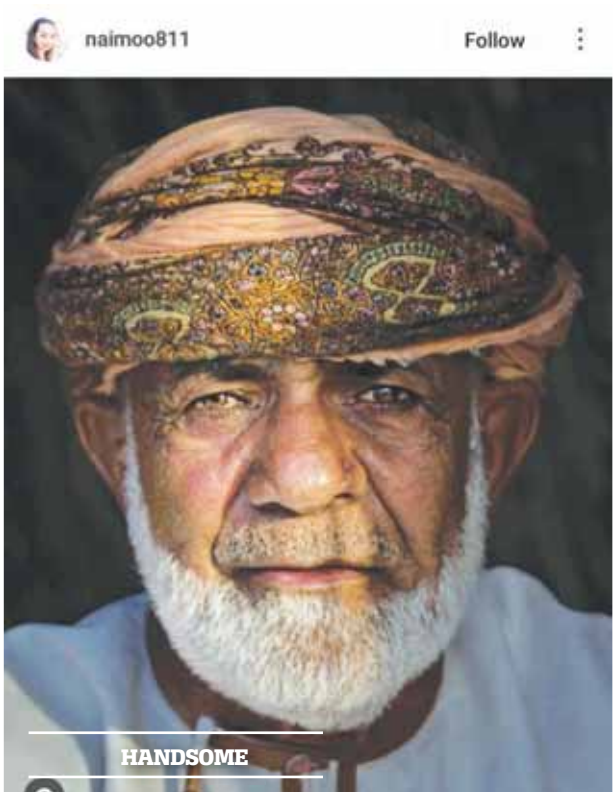
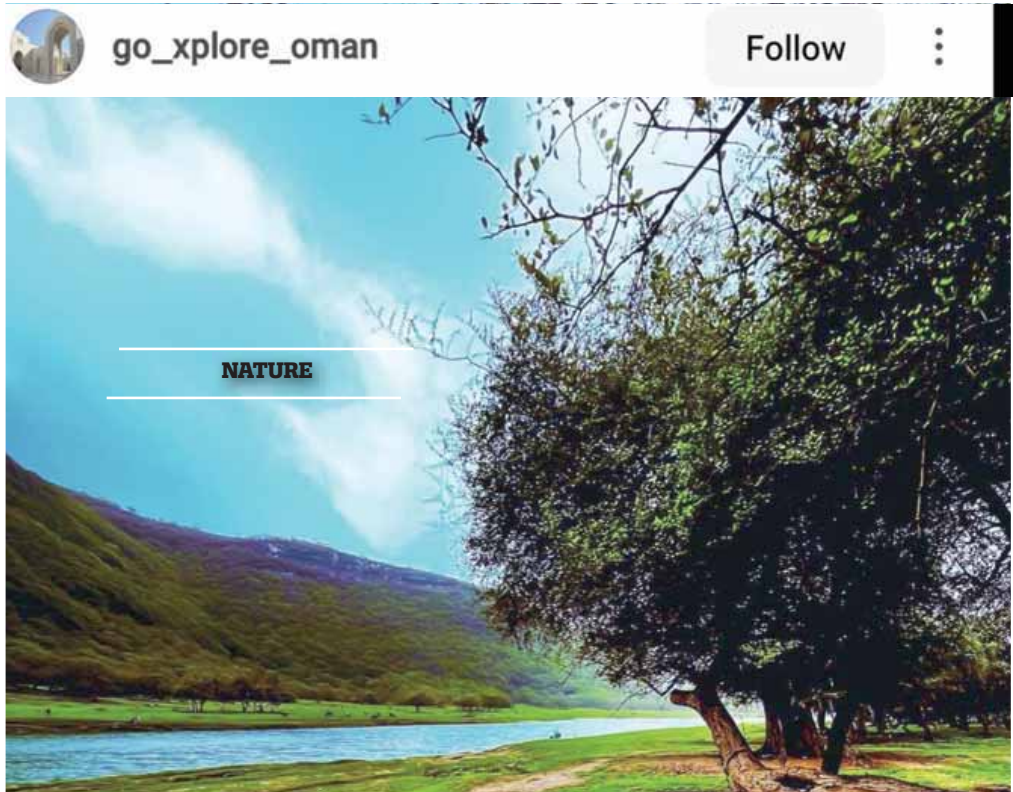
"There was something missing during Covid, if you understand the cultural significance of this event," deputy mayor Eddie Andrews said, dressed in a bright white and yellow costume.

"It's very important for us, this event is part of Cape Town," he added, outside city hall as the parade was about to kick off.



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AROUND THE WORLD

MUSIC

Musician's app helps Kenyan creatives sell music and merchandise



IN PINK TROUSERS and a matching puffer jacket, Grammy-nominated Kenyan musician Bien-Aime Alusa gyrates on stage as he sings to a bank of swaying fans, many capturing the moment on their mobile phones.

When the curtain drops on the concert in Nairobi, Alusa keeps making connections and profit through a digital streaming and payment platform, HustleSasa, which he co-founded to help artists recover from revenues lost to the coronavirus lockdown.

HustleSasa, which officially launched in November 2021, allows the singer-songwriter and fellow creatives to stream music or sell branded merchandise, concert tickets, food, fashion and other services in one mobile phone application.

Artists or vendors sell their products directly to the market, with no set-up costs or monthly fees, and receive payment instantly via bank card or mobile money, avoiding expensive commissions charged by some apps.

"Our region has one of the lowest payout rates in the world from other streaming platforms, but on HustleSasa you are getting value for money in real time," Alusa said.

Glena Jiwani, who owns the fashion boutique Pink Savannah in the capital Nairobi, said it has allowed her to expand her business online, and keep tabs on stock and sales. "I did not even have a website but now it's so easy," she said.

Yaba, another Kenyan musician, said the app's streaming service allows him to make more money and to connect directly to his audience. "As a musician who is fighting his way to the top, when it comes to streaming it's not like the other platforms," he said at his studio in Rongai, western Kenya.

Alusa said he is in talks to spread operations across the continent, from Ghana to South Africa.

"It's the future of ticketing, it's the future of selling merch, it's the future where we are going to have the power and future in our hands."

— Reuters

LIFESTYLE

In Uruguay, an effort to save horses from foreign plates



Among a motley collection of rescued farm animals, four horses graze peacefully on a farm outside the Uruguayan capital Montevideo, blissfully unaware they had narrowly escaped the chopping block.

Uruguay, a country where horses are not considered food but companions, has seen a rise in equine meat exports, prompting efforts to rescue horses destined for slaughter.

In 2020, the small South American nation was the seventh-largest exporter of horse meat, according to the OEC economic data site, with Belgium, Russia, France and Japan among the top importers.

Most of Uruguay's tens of thousands of race, sports and work horses end up on someone's plate somewhere else in the world after they become injured, old, or their owners simply cannot care for them anymore.

Uruguayan horses are not bred for meat, but used in racing or dressage and on farms — often by cattle-breeding gauchos who prefer to travel the grassy plains on horseback rather than by car.

In Pan de Azucar, some 115 kilometres (71 miles) east of Montevideo, horses destined for slaughter are finding a second chance on the farm of Juan Pablo Pio.

For now, he is playing host to four horses that were bought by the NGO Santuarios Primitivo, who took the animals from a truck headed for one of Uruguay's three equine

slaughterhouses, and them brought to his farm.

"They have come to live what is left of their lives here," said Pio, who described his mission as "doing things because they are right and not because they are profitable."

"Their only mission... is to exist," he added of the four-footed newcomers.

Pio also has a rescued chicken, a donkey, a pig and a cow.

FATTENED UP

Santuarios Primitivo was created three years ago by Pablo Amorin y Martin Erro, friends with ties to the equestrian world.

Since then, they have saved some 250 horses and found new homes for them on dozens of farms across the small South American nation.

Amorin said that his team contacts herders who gather unwanted horses from around Uruguay to be fattened up and sold for slaughter.

"We tried to go to the slaughterhouses, but they wouldn't open their doors for us to buy (horses) from them," he said.

"So, we turned our attention to... the tropilleros." When we have money or space to buy and adopt horses, we talk to the herders and tell them: "When the next shipment comes in, we want five horses for ourselves."

Many of the herders are happy to help, said Amorin, and sometimes even ask the rescuers to take a particular horse that they had grown

fond of from among the condemned.

NOBLE ANIMAL

Uruguay is cattle country: beef is its main export commodity and there are more than three cows for each of the country's 3.5 million inhabitants — the highest number per capita in the world.

As for horses, there is one for every seven inhabitants, according to the Uruguayan Equine Veterinary Association — about half-a-million.

In 2021, the country slaughtered 58,152 horses, according to Uruguay's INAC national meat institute — up 61 per cent from 2020 and the highest number by far in a decade.

Uruguay's horse meat export volume rose per cent in 2021, valued at some \$28.8 million, said the INAC. In 2022, exports rose further still.

Beef is cheap in Uruguay, and for an Uruguayan to eat horse meat would be sacrilege. But the fact that their horses are being eaten abroad is an uncomfortable open secret.

"The horse carries symbolic value in our culture," anthropologist Gustavo Laborde said.

In Uruguay, it is said that "the country was made on horseback," he added.

Yet as much as the horse is regarded as a "noble animal," there was an element of "hypocrisy" in balking at horse meat while turning a blind eye to the animals' often tough working lives after which "the vast majority of horses end up in the refrigerator" anyway, said Laborde. — AFP

SPECIES

Cambodian leader orders Mekong safe zones to save rare dolphins



CAMBODIAN PREMIER Hun Sen on Monday ordered the creation of conservation zones on the Mekong river to protect critically endangered dolphins, after three were killed by fishing nets and lines last month.

The Irrawaddy dolphins, known for their bulging foreheads and short beaks, once swam through much of the mighty Mekong but in recent decades have been limited to a 190-km (118-mile) stretch from northeast Kratie province to the border with Laos.

Their population has been in steady decline since the first census was taken in 1997, dropping from 200 that year to around 90 currently due to habitat loss and destructive fishing practices.

Speaking at a ceremony in Kratie, Hun Sen ordered authorities to set up floating markers around designated protection zones, in which there will be an "absolute ban" on all fishing.

"The Mekong river, which is home to near-extinct dolphins and fish species, must be well managed so that dolphins will not die from entanglement in gillnets," he said. Gillnets are nets strung across parts of the river to snare fish.

"The dolphin areas must be protected completely," he said, adding that the animals' presence contributed to local tourism.

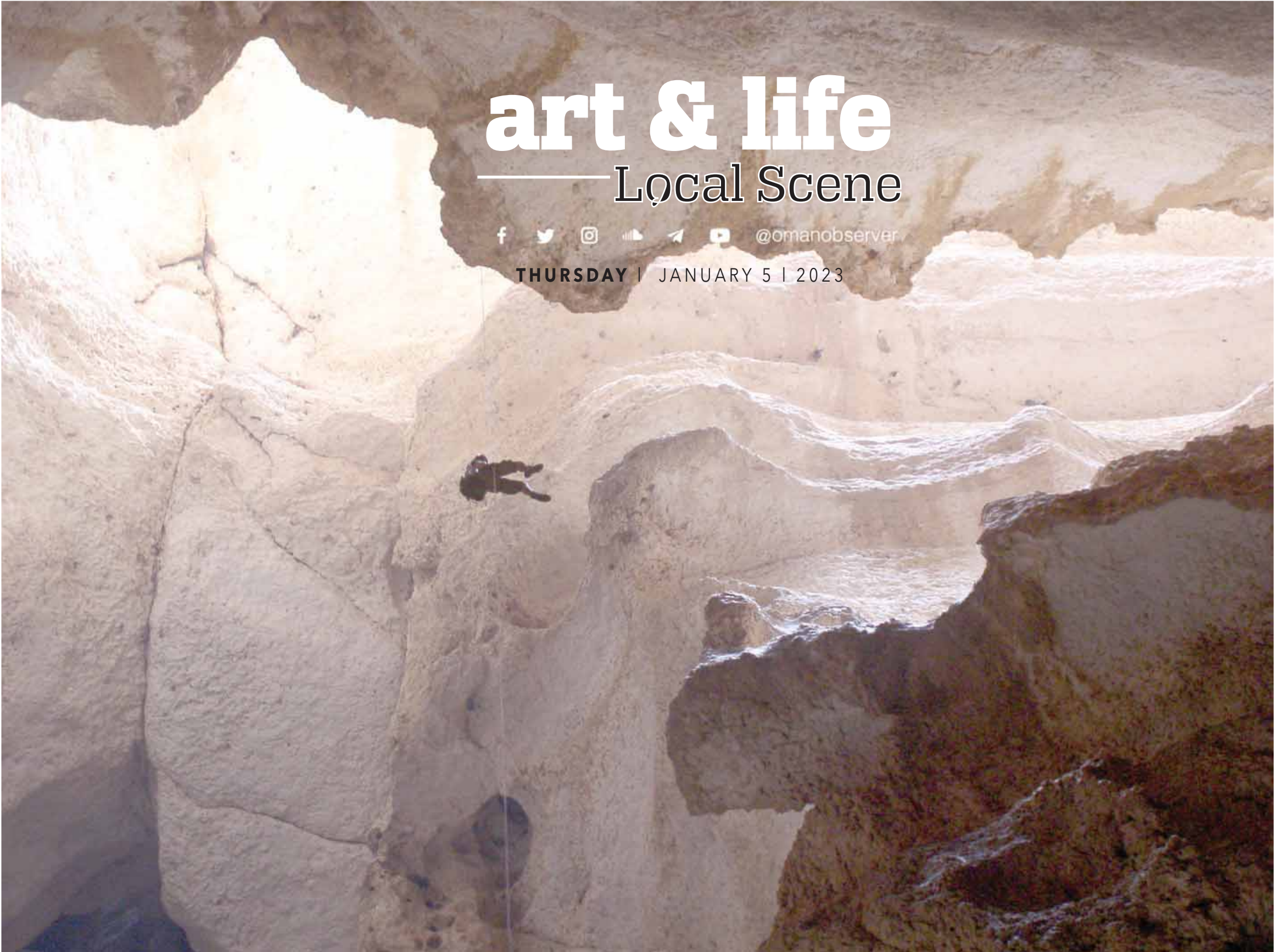
Three healthy breeding-age dolphins died within a week of each other last month. The deaths alarmed conservationists, who called for both day- and night-patrols in order to protect the remaining dolphins from being killed by illegal fishing.

Eleven dolphins died in 2022, bringing the total number of dead dolphins to 29 in the last three years, according to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

In a statement, WWF called on all relevant authorities "to enact and roll-out appropriate measures to urgently address the mortality" caused by the threats of gillnets and electro-fishing that take place in the dolphin conservation areas.

Cambodia is home to the largest population of Irrawaddy dolphins, which are also found in rivers and lakes in Myanmar, Indonesia, India and Thailand.

— AFP



The seventh hole: The baby Majlis Al Jinn



Khalid Abdulmalik

LOCATED in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate one of the four sink holes draining the rain water into Selma plateau cave system is known as The Seventh hole or Aaqabat Khashal for the locals living in this area. Around 2.5 hours drive from Muscat it is at 1,300 metre altitude above sea level. From Muscat take the coastal road to Sur and leave the highway at the exit for Fins. Then take the road to the mountain direction Taab and Harima. Keep driving uphill until you reach the plateau of Selma. Once you reach the top and after a few kilometres the road splits in two (if you take right you can visit the entrance of the famous Majlis al Jinn) , continue straight leaving a road to your left. After passing a village on the right side of the road, take left at 22° 51.188'N 59° 6.088'E (just before the road starts going uphill) . Drive through an old airfield and at 22° 51.377'N 59° 6.369'E follow the track until you reach the sinkhole at 22° 51.565'N 59° 6.979'E Careful don't dive into the hole ! A massive opening in the ground measuring around 50 metre in length and 8 metre minimum in width is the start of a 120 metre abseil into a magnificent natural cathedral carved by the water in the lime stone for millions of years , probably through a fault. It joins underground 3 other sink holes forming with 12 kilometres the longest cave system in the Middle east.



My first trip to Aaqabat Khashal was on the 3rd of October 2004 with my masters in climbing Patrick Cabiro and Nathalie Henriot along with Alun Davis an English journalist visiting Oman. Since that time I went back there with my family and many friends to share the beauty of this amazing site. Inside , the walls of that chamber are either white at the places where the water flows or light brown becoming golden at a certain time of the day where the walls are not exposed to erosion. The descent starts on the wall of the opening for around 10 metre after which you slide down the rope in a free fall of 108 metre to reach the ground lit naturally by day light. From here you can climb out using the same rope or use another climbing route to reach a wadi plunging in the cave east of the main entrance in the plateau. Otherwise you can continue further dropping another first pit of 50 metre followed by another 100 metre drop to reach the lowest part of the sink hole. Once you reach the bottom your journey begins in an underground canyon for around 3 kilometres to reach the resurgence with the name of Tahri cave, an impressive opening measuring 80 metre in height and across ! On the way to Tahri cave one has to climb some walls and drop a few abseils in order to progress. After rains swimming is a must to cross many pools that are normally empty. Abseiling into these remote sinkholes is not something that should be done without adequate training. In case of accident be prepared to wait for a very long time before rescue can be organised and reach you.