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OIA HIGHLIGHTS SUPPORT TO STATE GENERAL BUDGET AND DEBT REDUCTION

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BAGNAIA BAGS AUSTRIAN MOTOGP TO TAKE LEAD

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A SUN-SOAKED JOURNEY IN WADI HARIMA

MUSCAT

‘LOCAL CONTENT OFFICE’ SET UP

Represented by the Secretariat-General of the Tender Board, the Sultanate of Oman has embarked on measures to enhance the local content, which is deeply rooted in the national workforce, local products, fixed assets, small and medium enterprises and other resources. The keenness to develop these resources stems from the fact that they play a significant role in supporting the national economy and augmenting the gross domestic product (GDP). Eng Badr bin Salim al Maamari, Secretary-General of the Tender Board, said that the Tender Board focuses on raising the percentage of local content in government procurement contracts and projects, with emphasis on efficient implementation.

DETAILS ON P13

MUSCAT

50,000 FLY TO SALALAH IN JULY

As part of its long-standing commitment to promote Khareef Dhofar and support national interests, Oman Air has implemented several strategic measures to boost connectivity to Salalah. Deploying maximum capacity with as many as 11 flights per day during peak times, the airline has also upgraded a number of flights to wide-body aircraft, leading to an addition of nearly 4,500 seats over the season. In July alone, the national airline Oman Air flew almost 50,000 guests into the city, with over 70 per cent using fixed national fare tickets.

THE SUPER MOON

The Super Moon rises behind the Dome of the Rock mosque in Old Jerusalem's Al Aqsa mosque compound on Monday. – AFP



FAREWELL TO CYPRUS AMBASSADOR

At the behest of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received at his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Monday Andreas Nicolaides, Ambassador of the Republic of Cyprus to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty. HH Sayyid Shihab thanked the ambassador for the efforts he exerted to enhance relations between Oman and Algeria, wishing him success in his future assignments. On his turn, the ambassador lauded the advanced relations binding the two countries. He expressed his appreciation for the cooperation he received during his mission in Oman. – ONA

Blinken says ‘last chance’ to end Gaza war, calls for truce talks

CAIRO: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned on Monday that the latest push for a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal was probably the best and possibly last opportunity, urging Israel and Hamas towards an elusive agreement.

However, with Hamas announcing a resumption of bombing inside Israel after many years, and with Israeli air strikes still pounding Gaza, there was little sign of conciliation.

Hamas and another group, Islamic Jihad, said they were behind a blast near a synagogue in Tel Aviv on Sunday that killed the bomber and wounded one other person.

The talks in Qatar last week paused without a breakthrough, but the negotiations are to resume this week based on a US “bridging proposal”.

Blinken met Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday morning.



presence inside Gaza, particularly along the border with Egypt, over the free movement of Palestinians inside the territory and over the identity and number of prisoners to be freed in a swap.

Despite US expressions of optimism, both Israel and Hamas have signalled that a deal will be difficult. **SEE ALSO P6**

“This is a decisive moment, probably the best, maybe the last opportunity to get the hostages home, to get a ceasefire and to put everyone on a better path to enduring peace and security,” Blinken told reporters before meeting Herzog.

There are disagreements over Israel’s continued military

REVENUES AT RO 6.19 BILLION

Public debt falls from RO 16.3 bn to RO 14.4 bn

MUSCAT: At the end of the second quarter of 2024, the public revenue fell by 2 per cent to RO 6,197 million compared to RO 6,342 million registered over the same period of 2023. This is mainly attributed to the decrease in net gas revenue and current revenue.

By the end of Q2-2024, the Ministry of Finance paid more than RO 558 million to the private sector. This reflects the payment vouchers received through the e-financial system that completed their documentary cycle.

During the Q2-2024, the government was able to repay a number of outstanding financial obligations, leading public debt to stand at RO 14.4 billion, compared to RO 16.3 billion recorded at the end of Q2-2023.

According to the fiscal performance bulletin issued by the Ministry of Finance, the following are the main items of public revenue: Net oil revenue: At the end of Q2, net oil revenue increased by 3 per cent to RO 3,362 million, compared to RO 3,257 million registered over the same period in 2023. The average realised oil price amounted to \$82 per barrel and the average volume of oil production reached 1,003 thousand barrels per day. This is attributed to the methodology of Energy Development Oman (EDO) for collecting oil revenue and managing cash flow.

Net gas revenue: At the end of Q2, net gas revenue amounted to RO 943 million, decreasing by 15 per cent compared to RO 1,115 million registered over the same

1.5% increase in rate of inflation

The rate of inflation in the Sultanate of Oman rose 1.5 per cent by the end of July 2024, according to data on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) which was issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The data indicated an increase in the prices of food and non-alcoholic beverages groups by 4.5 per cent, miscellaneous goods and services by 3.1 per cent, health by 2.4 per cent, housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels by 1.7 per cent, culture and entertainment by 0.8 per cent, restaurants and hotels by 0.6 per cent, clothing and footwear by 0.3 per cent, furniture, household equipment and routine home maintenance by 0.3 per cent. **SEE P2**

period in 2023 due to the change in the methodology for collecting gas revenue. Current revenue: At the end of Q2, the current revenue amounted to RO 1,882 million, down by RO 80 million when compared to RO 1,962 million registered in the same period of 2023. Meanwhile, at the end of Q2, the public spending amounted to RO 5,806 million, up by RO 120 million, i.e. 2 per cent when compared to the same period in 2023.

According to the bulletin, the following are the main items of public spending: Current expenditure: At the end of Q2, the current expenses of the civil ministries amounted to about RO 4,065 million, a decrease by RO 13 million compared to RO 4,078 million at the end of Q2-2023.

Heart transplants soon in Oman

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Health (MoH) has initiated preparations to localise the ‘heart transplant services’ as part of the National Organ Transplant Programme from 2023 to 2025.

In this context, the technical committee for heart transplantation in the National Organ Transplant Programme on Monday held its first meeting under the chairmanship of Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health.

The meeting was aimed at

preparing for the initiation of heart transplant operations in Oman. It also discussed the necessary medical and surgical equipment and human resources required for these procedures and started to create national waiting lists for patients with heart failure.

Dr Ahmed bin Said al Busaidy, Director of the National Organ Transplant Programme, said that the preparation to localise heart transplant services is part of the country’s efforts to enhance and

develop the healthcare services provided to citizens.

This initiative aims to provide all available means and solutions to save the lives of patients suffering from organ failure, thereby improving community health, individual well-being and overall quality of life.

It is worth mentioning that the National Organ Transplant Programme has activated the option for heart donation after death through the Ministry of Health’s Shifa application.

— ONA

FOODCOIN PODCAST

WELCOME TO THE FIRST EPISODE OF THE FoodCoin podcast, where we embark on a unique journey with one of the pioneers of the fisheries sector in the Sultanate of Oman, Mohammed Amin, GM of Sea Pride Company. A pioneer in Oman’s seafood industry, Amin shares his inspiring story of transforming a bountiful resource into a global success.

From humble beginnings to conquering international markets, he demonstrates the power of innovation and determination.

FOODCOIN

EPISODE 01

AUG 19, 2024

MOHAMMED AMIN

GM OF SEA PRIDE COMPANY

HOSTED BY

DR. ABEER AL KALBANI





ABDULAZIZ AL RAWAS, FORMER MINISTER, ADVISER PASSES AWAY

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUGUST 19

Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al Rawas, former minister of information and former adviser for cultural affairs to the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said,

passed away on Sunday. The Ministry of Information in a statement mourned the death of Al Rawas, who passed away on Sunday, August 18, and extended its condolences and sympathy to his family. On January 1, 1976, Al Rawas



was appointed under-secretary of the ministry of information for media affairs, and on May 22, 1979, he was appointed minister of information and youth. In 2001, he was appointed adviser for cultural affairs. Al Rawas retired on April

1, 2020, leaving behind a great legacy of public service and dedication to his country. He devoted his life to preserving the cultural and historical heritage of the Sultanate of Oman. He chaired the national committee for the preservation

of antiquities in Dhofar Governorate and carried out restoration and development works of historical sites that contributed to the inclusion of many of them on the list of World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

Inflation rate in Oman rises 1.5%

MUSCAT: The inflation rate in the Sultanate of Oman rose 1.5 per cent by the end of July 2024, according to data on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) which was issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). The data indicated an increase in the prices of food and non-alcoholic beverages groups by 4.5 per cent, miscellaneous goods and services by 3.1 per cent, health by 2.4 per cent, housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels by 1.7 per cent, culture and entertainment by 0.8 per cent, restaurants and hotels by 0.6 per cent, clothing and footwear by 0.3 per cent, furniture, household equipment and routine home maintenance by 0.3 per cent. In contrast, the prices of transportation groups decreased by 1.7 per cent and education by 0.4 per cent. The prices of the tobacco and communications groups stabilised. In the food and non-alcoholic beverages group, the prices of vegetables rose by 20 per cent, fruits by 7.6 per cent, milk, cheese and eggs by 4.7 per cent, meat by 2.2 per cent, sugar, jam, honey and sweets by 2 per cent, fish and seafood by 1.8 per cent, foodstuff



The data indicated an increase in the prices of food and non-alcoholic beverages groups by 4.5 per cent. — ONA

In the food and non-alcoholic beverages group, the prices of vegetables rose by 20 per cent, fruits by 7.6 per cent, milk, cheese and eggs by 4.7 per cent

by 1.6 per cent, oils by 1.3 per cent, non-alcoholic beverages by 1 per cent and bread and grains by 0.7 per cent. Al Sharqiyah North Governorate recorded the highest inflation rate at the end of July 2024 compared to the same period of the previous year, as the index rose by 2.3 per cent. It also rose by 2.2 per cent in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate and by 2.1 per cent in Musandam and Al Wusta governorates. The rate rose by 2 per cent in Al Batinah North Governorate, 1.7 per cent in Dhofar Governorate, 1.6 per cent in Al Batinah South and Al Buraimi governorates, 1.5 per cent in Al Dhahirah Governorate, 1.3 per cent in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate and 1.2 per cent in the Governorate of Muscat. — ONA

Public debt falls to RO 14.4 bn

FROM PAGE 1 Contributions and other expenses: At the end of Q2, the total contributions and other expenses amounted to RO 1,088 million, up by 40 per cent compared to RO 775 million registered over the same period in 2023. This is mainly due to the implementation of the social protection system. The subsidies of social protection system, electricity and oil products amounted to RO 280 million, RO 259 million, and RO 153 million, respectively. Furthermore, an amount of RO 200 million was transferred to future debt obligations budget-item. Development expenditure: At the end of Q2-2024, development expenditure of civil ministries and units amounted to RO 502 million, representing 56 per cent of the total development spending, i.e. RO 900 million, allocated for 2024. — ONA



SAF CHIEF OF STAFF RECEIVES OFFICIAL FROM COMOROS

MUSCAT: Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), on Monday received General Youssouf Idjihadi, Chief of Defence Staff of the Union of the Comoros. During the meeting, the two sides exchanged views about matters of common interest. — ONA

Genetic skin diseases in focus at dermatology conference

KABEER YOUSUF @kabeeryousef Genetic skin diseases will be the main focus at the 8th Oman International Dermatology Conference and Exhibition, taking place at the Millennium Resort in Salalah on August 23 and 24. The event is being organised by the Omani Dermatology Association in collaboration with the Directorate-General of Health Services in Dhofar Governorate. The conference will be held under the auspices of Dr Siham bint Salim al Sinaniyah, CEO of the University Medical City. Specialists from Oman, the GCC countries, the United States and the Middle East Dermatology Organization will participate. The conference will cover a variety of topics including genetic skin diseases, recent articles from the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology, psychodermatological disorders, cutaneous manifestations of internal diseases and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, the role of gut microbiota in skin diseases and controversies in dermatologic cosmetic medicine. The goal is to provide insight into skin diseases and treatment methods, as well as promote early and accurate diagnosis. Dr Faiza al Raai, Chairperson

of the Conference, mentioned that the scientific programme includes nine comprehensive sessions covering various specialised and emerging topics. The conference aims to attract a wide range of medical and paramedical professionals, including dermatologists, family physicians, cosmetic surgeons, allergists, immunologists, paediatricians, pharmacists, residents and medical students worldwide. Expert speakers lined up for the conference include Dr Aisha al Ali, Dr Asma bint Nasser al Numaniyah, Dr Abeer bint Ateeq al Balushiya, Dr Amira Elsayed Bayumi, Dr Fatma bint Mohamed al Balushiya, Dr Waleed al Maharbi, Dr Saffiya bint Ahmed al Shaithaniyah and Dr Zeyana bint Abdallah al Bahriyah. They will deliver sessions on various aspects of dermatology, providing valuable knowledge and expertise to all attendees. The Oman Dermatology Society, established in 2006, has been dedicated to improving education and training in dermatology and cosmetic dermatology. They have organised numerous international and national conferences, as well as general and specialised workshops. By combining major dermatology and aesthetic medicine conferences, this event promises to be engaging and informative for participants from Oman and beyond.

DOCUMENTATION OF PERENNIAL WILD TREES BEGINS IN BAHLA

BAHLA: The Environment Authority, represented by the Directorate of Environment in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, in cooperation with the Municipality Department in the Wilayat of Bahla, on Monday launched the third and final phase of the documentation of perennial wild trees in the Wilayat of Bahla. The project will continue until next November and the current phase focuses on installing metal plates on some perennial wild trees to specify their locations. The project also aims to raise awareness among the local community and visitors about the environmental and economic significance of perennial wild trees.



The project aims to disseminate the culture of planting local trees. — ONA



The project aims to disseminate the culture of planting local trees and preserving existing ones. Perennial wild trees are also an important source of seeds for several local trees as part of the project to plant 10 million trees. Wild trees are known for their ability to absorb carbon dioxide, reduce dust and provide food and shelter for animals. — ONA

‘Sur Marine Sports Festival’ from August 25: MHT

AFRAH AL BALUSHIA @Afrahalbalushia The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) is inviting participants to register for the swimming races set to take place during the ‘Sur Marine Sports Festival.’ This event is part of the executive programme for Sur, designated as the Arab Tourism Capital 2024, and will be held at ‘Mokha’ Beach in the Wilayat of Sur. The festival aims to showcase the tourism significance of Sur and Al Sharqiyah South Governorate,

drawing upon Sur’s historical role as a hub of civilisational and cultural exchange, rooted in its rich maritime heritage. According to the ministry, the marine races will run from August 25 to 28, with daily events from 9 am to 12 pm. Prizes for the top three winners in both the men’s and women’s categories are set at RO 300 for first place, RO 200 for second place and RO 100 for third place. Interested participants can register by emailing surfestival@omansail.com. Organised by Oman Sail, the



The festival aims to showcase the tourism significance of Sur and Al Sharqiyah South Governorate

festival will feature the Oman Sailing Championship 2024, with competitions in four categories: professionals, juniors, Elka 4 and Elka 6 boats. The event will also include parasailing races, swimming races and traditional rowing boat races, along with the opportunity for festival-goers to experience sailing aboard ‘Diam’ boats, offering thrilling sailing experiences. Last year’s Omani Maritime Heritage Festival also held in Sur, attracted approximately 72,267 visitors over eight days, demonstrating the festival’s success

in highlighting Sur’s distinguished maritime heritage and cultural significance. The current festival continues this tradition, aiming to promote adventure tourism in Oman and develop sailing skills among the youth. The festival plays a crucial role in boosting the local economy and positioning Oman as a premier global destination for sailing sports. By featuring international races, the festival seeks to place Oman firmly on the global sailing map, enhancing the country’s reputation as a favoured destination for maritime activities.



Escape to Salalah: Embrace the cool charms of khareef

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, AUG 18

While the rest of the region grapples with extreme heat, Salalah in the Dhofar Governorate offers a refreshing retreat. With just a few weeks remaining to enjoy the cooler climes of Salalah, it's an ideal time to escape the scorching sun and experience this serene destination.

The must include in your travel itinerary are, hiking in the lush green mountains, visiting beautiful waterfalls exploring traditional markets for local crafts and products, enjoying the cool weather and fresh air, trying out delicious local cuisine while taking scenic drives along the picturesque coastal roads.

Wondering what activities to include in your Salalah itinerary during khareef? Here are some must-do experiences:

Majestic waterfalls and mesmerising vistas

Dhofar's breathtaking waterfalls, such as those near Alila Hinu Bay, create a spectacular display of nature's power and tranquillity against the lush, green landscape. Notable experiences include "The Journey to Springs and Waterfalls," a curated adventure that traverses from Alila Hinu Bay to Wadi Darbat and culminates at the stunning Jabal Samhan piedmont, 1,800 metres above sea level.

Adventures in Wadi Darbat

Wadi Darbat, renowned as one of Oman's most beautiful wadis, offers an opportunity to explore the natural beauty of Dhofar. Enjoy hiking trails, connect



Picture by Aji George

with nature, and swim beneath picturesque waterfalls. Be mindful of safety warnings near beaches and ponds.

Experience Oman's own frankincense

Hotels and properties under Omran provide authentic spa experiences featuring frankincense, a local treasure. Indulge in a frankincense massage with heated stones and locally sourced oil, celebrated for its aromatic heritage in Salalah, the perfume capital of Arabia.

Kayaking through lagoons

Salalah's lesser-known feature is its kayaking opportunities. Embark on a peaceful kayaking or fishing excursion through tranquil waters, where you might spot flamingos, passing camels, and enjoy serene glides across the lagoon.

Visit the coastal town of Mirbat

Explore Mirbat, a coastal town near major activities. Witness traditional fishermen at work, discover ancient Bedouin rock art from the 3rd millennium BC, and share an evening with desert nomads. The town offers unique experiences, including traversing the historic Frankincense route and enjoying the mystic ambiance of khareef.

In summary, a visit to the historic city of Salalah in the Dhofar Governorate during khareef promises an unforgettable experience. It's a chance to leave behind daily routines and embark on a journey of harmony and natural splendour, reconnecting with oneself in a land where nature's grandeur is abundant.

Omani crafts take centre-stage at Salalah exhibition

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, AUGUST 19

Salalah is set to become the epicentre of Omani craftsmanship with launch yesterday, August 18, of the "Authenticity and Modernity" Craft Heritage Exhibition under the auspices of Dr Ahmed bin Mohsin al Ghassani, Chairman of the Dhofar Municipality.

Running from August 18 to 22 at the Gardens Mall, the exhibition showcases the intricate details and innovative designs of Omani crafts. From the delicate artistry of silver jewellery to the intricate patterns of woven textiles, visitors can immerse themselves in a world of heritage and creativity.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) aims to highlight the economic potential of these traditional crafts, in addition to their cultural significance. By bringing together artisans, businesses, and tourism stakeholders, the event hopes to stimulate investment and job creation in the sector.

"This exhibition is more than just a showcase; it's a platform for artisans to connect with the public and for the public to appreciate the rich tapestry of Omani culture," said a

spokesperson for the Ministry. Abdullah al-Aamri, Head of the Temporary Exhibitions Department at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, said: "The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, represented by the Directorate General of Heritage and Tourism in Dhofar Governorate, has organized the 'Authenticity and Modernity' Craft Heritage Exhibition. The exhibition aims to highlight the cultural, economic, and social significance of this heritage and demonstrates the cultural depth of various elements. It also aims to connect relevant stakeholders and showcase successful experiences in integrating these heritage elements to enrich tourism.

Additionally, it empowers artisans to display, market, and sell their products during various seasons."The exhibition features the participation of 10 traditional artisans from Dhofar and Al Wusta Governorates, as well as several leading companies that have incorporated traditional crafts into various fields.

"This exhibition is a collaborative effort with the Small and Medium Enterprises Authority, and includes the participation of some hotel companies, owners of traditional lodges, and private museums," he added



Khareef Dhofar Season delights, say visiting international media

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, AUGUST 19

Oman is hosting a select group of international media professionals during the Khareef Dhofar Season 2024, an initiative aimed at elevating the nation's global profile. Shaikha bint Ahmed al Mahrouqiyah, Director General of External Media, spoke to the *Observer* about the strategic objectives and significance of this programme in promoting Oman on the world stage.

Al Mahrouqiyah outlined that the programme is structured into two groups, each visiting a range of tourist, cultural, historical, and archaeological sites across the Dhofar Governorate.

Notable locations include the ancient city of Samharam, Khor Ruri, the Land of Frankincense Museum, Wadi Dawka, as well as economic hubs like the Port of Salalah and the Salalah Free Zone. The media delegates are also set to experience the various events aligned with the Khareef Dhofar Season 2024.

"This comprehensive programme spans multiple sectors, including economics and culture, to provide media professionals with an authentic understanding of Omani culture, particularly through visits to the countryside and interactions



with the local lifestyle," said Al Mahrouqiyah.

The primary goal, according to Al Mahrouqiyah, is to solidify Oman's presence in the global cultural and tourism arena and to amplify its media exposure.

The programme has attracted participation from esteemed international media outlets, such as Reuters, the Foreign Press Association, National Geographic, television networks from China and Türkiye, and prominent newspapers from Spain and Germany, alongside independent journalists. The visiting media professionals are divided into two groups, each arriving in Oman at different times throughout August. Al Mahrouqiyah emphasised the ongoing collaboration among all stakeholders involved in promoting and marketing Oman,

highlighting that each entity has its own objectives, yet all share a common goal: to reach a global audience and establish enduring relationships with diverse media entities. She concluded by stressing the importance of cultivating friendships and building trust with media partners, noting that capitalising on different seasons, such as the Khareef Dhofar Season, is crucial for enhancing Oman's international media presence.

The *Observer* caught up with a number of the visiting journalists for their impressions of Dhofar during this holiday season.

Deborah Bonetti, Director of Foreign Press Association, said, "I had read up about the monsoon weather but it was still a surprise to see the tropical abundance of fruit and plants that can be found in and around Salalah.

A real exception in the GCC. I was struck by how concentrated it is. The moment you go out of Salalah, you find sun, heat and desert again. That was incredible to see." "This weather is an attraction for people who live in very hot countries but for tourists from Western Europe it would not be very palatable. In the UK we enjoy cool and wet weather very often, so people are looking for some sun. And in Italy, rain is rarely seen as a bonus," she added.

Danielle Gusmaroli, a journalist for News Corp, an Australian newspaper, said, "I was unexpectedly surprised by the lush landscape of Dhofar and expected a dryer terrain. The khareef, whilst pleasantly refreshing, was a hindrance to what we could see whilst holidaying in the region. However, it is a pleasant refreshing change

from the desert if you're visiting the desert. A holiday in Salalah would appeal to tourists from the UK, however not during the khareef season when vision is impaired (because of the mist)." For Alexander Seale from *La Post* newspaper, he knew there was a monsoon season but didn't anticipate the rain and fog everyday. "I wanted to test the pool at the hotel but with this type of weather it was impossible. Salalah is a great holiday destination. I think tourists should come after the khareef season to get good weather. It has a lot of investment with the port of Salalah and other locations. I enjoyed the frankincense trees, the Frankincense Museum and the desert at Ubar and Rub Al Khali (Empty Quarter). I already bought frankincense for myself and my mother as well as Omani halwa! I would come back again definitely. So many other places to explore!," he said.

Max Hayward Stanton, Social Media Influencer, said, "After living in the Middle East for more than 25 years, I am used to the dry and arid climate but have been exposed to content and stories from social media and friends who have visited Dhofar during the khareef. Despite thinking I knew what I was getting myself into, nothing could have prepared me

for the lush natural beauty that is one of the reasons Salalah is world famous. The extent of the wadis, the overall greenness, the thick fog, steady rain, and the overall tropical feeling was an amazing break from the hot and humid." For Mustafa Oguz — TRT, Khareef Dhofar Season is truly captivating. "The transformation of the landscape into a verdant paradise, coupled with the cool mist and gentle rains, creates a magical atmosphere that feels like stepping into a different world. The unique experience of the khareef season would definitely appeal to tourists from my country. The cool weather and stunning scenery offer a refreshing change from the norm and provide an unforgettable escape," he said. Natascha Plankermann, German freelance journalist, said, "It was an incredible experience to drive out of khareef to the Rub Al Khali (Empty Quarter) and back again. You wouldn't believe how the weather changes completely within a few kilometres. In fact, I am convinced that the Salalah seaport is becoming increasingly interesting for German investors — and there are already some initial projects that I am excited about. I will definitely be back and will certainly report enthusiastically on my experiences — as soon as I return to Germany."



NUTRITION KEY TO LEARNING SUCCESS



AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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As the holiday season wraps up and students return to school, it is crucial to ensure that their meals are packed with the right nutrients to sustain both mental and physical energy throughout the school day. Proper nutrition is a key factor that significantly impacts academic performance, providing the essential nutrients needed for brain and body development, while also supporting overall health, focus, and learning ability.

Numerous studies underscore the importance of a nutritious breakfast for children, highlighting its role in improving school performance, attention, and concentration. Malnourished children face risks of lower intelligence, and research shows that addressing iron deficiencies can lead to enhanced memory.

The food choices made for children can set the tone for their lifelong health and eating habits, with optimal nutrition playing a vital role in improving their ability to learn and excel academically. Given that students spend approximately 50 per cent of their day in school, the importance of proper nutrition becomes even more pronounced, making it an ideal opportunity to instil healthy lifestyle habits.

However, high consumption of sugars and processed foods, such as sweets and fast food, during childhood can impair cognitive functions later in life. These foods contribute to inflammation and increase oxidative stress in the brain, which can hinder mental development.

For the brain to function efficiently, it requires a balanced diet rich in carbohydrates, proteins, healthy fats, vitamins, minerals, water, and antioxidants. Such a diet enhances a child's focus, intelligence, and learning capabilities. Encouraging children, particularly students, to eat breakfast is essential. After fasting overnight, students need a balanced morning meal to provide sustained energy, maintain focus, and reduce the urge to snack on unhealthy options later in the day.

Some students may experience fatigue, exhaustion, or anaemia due to a lack of healthy, nutrient-rich foods. It is important to recognise that the mid-morning snack is not a substitute for breakfast; each meal has its distinct role in providing the necessary nutrients at different stages of the day.

An ideal breakfast before school should be a balanced meal consisting of complex carbohydrates, proteins, and unsaturated vegetable fats. Dairy products are particularly important, as they supply essential nutrients like protein, vitamin D, and calcium, all of which are crucial for growth and bone health. To ensure the quality of school meals, it is recommended that they be prepared at home.

Key components of a school meal that supports mental abilities and academic achievement include:

Healthy Sandwich: Whole wheat bread filled with nutritious options like low-fat dairy products.

Vegetable Box: A variety of colourful vegetable salads should be consumed throughout the day, providing essential vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants that strengthen the immune system and protect against infections.

Fruits: Encourage children to eat 2-3 servings of fruit daily, focusing on those rich in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits, berries, and kiwi, which help bolster the immune system.

Water Bottle: Encourage water consumption while avoiding energy drinks, soft drinks, and juices, as these can lead to health issues like obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and more.

It's advisable to steer clear of giving children sweets and salty snacks, as these can lead to hunger and thirst shortly after consumption, reducing concentration levels. A healthy school meal should also avoid fried foods and low-quality processed items like sausages and falafel, which are high in salts and saturated fats, contributing to unhealthy weight gain and impeding a child's growth.

Memory and learning are fundamental to a student's life, directly influencing their academic success. The nutrients provided by proper nutrition are crucial in enhancing memory and boosting a student's capacity to learn and succeed in school.



Al Dhahirah Summer Forum for staff kids begins

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 19

Al Dhahirah Governorate launched its inaugural summer forum for the children of its employees. The programme will continue till Thursday (August 22) under the theme ‘Our Summer... Creativity and Excellence.’ The forum aims to make the most of the summer

break by engaging children in a variety of meaningful and entertaining programs. A total of 75 children, both boys and girls, have joined the forum, divided into two age groups.

This initiative seeks to strengthen social bonds, foster institutional loyalty, and nurture a generation of creative, thoughtful, and socially engaged youth. The forum also



This year's programme offers a wide range of activities, including sessions on creative thinking, national culture, and technical skills

emphasises the importance of instilling authentic values, encouraging knowledge and insight, and inspiring creativity and brilliance in the younger generation.

This year's programme offers a wide range of activities, including sessions on creative thinking, national culture, and technical skills, as well as physical activities to develop

talents and promote positive values and behaviours.

Key features of the forum include training in social and artificial intelligence skills, a technological robotics workshop, and the use of 3D virtual reality glasses. Additionally, participants will engage in handicrafts, various competitions, and will be rewarded with prizes and certificates.

Omanis to get visa-on-arrival in Pakistan

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUGUST 19

As part of its Independence Day celebrations, Pakistan introduced a new visa policy to attract more tourists and foreign investment.

Under the new policy, residents from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries — UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia — can now obtain a visa-on-arrival in Pakistan.

This visa is valid for three months and can be renewed quickly.

For travellers from 126 other countries, the visa process has also been simplified.

Applicants can now get their visa within 10 minutes of submitting an online application, which includes just 30 questions.

Additionally, there are no application fees for these visas.

The visa will be issued free of charge for either tourism or business purposes, and a 90-day visa will be granted within 24 hours.

Educationist wins ‘Indian of the Year 2024’ award

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Renowned educationist and social worker in Muscat, Rayees Ahmed, was awarded the ‘Indian of the Year 2024’ award by the Indian Social Club (ISC), a platform for Indians in Oman. The award was presented at a gala Indian Independence Day event organised by the ISC at Al Bustan hotel recently.

The award, which included a plaque, citation, and ceremonial shawl, was presented by the Indian Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman, Amit Narang. Present at the ceremony were Babu Rajendran, President of ISC, Shakeel KM, General Secretary, Suhail Khan, Entertainment and Cultural Secretary, Govind Negi, Treasurer, Shameer PTK, Community Welfare, Mariam Cheriyan, Lady Coordinator, Sanjit Kanojia, and other executive committee members.

Ahmed serves as the CEO of a private firm, the



The award was presented at a gala Indian Independence Day event organised by the ISC at Al Bustan hotel recently

president of the Indian School Al Ghubra, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Indian Schools in Oman. He holds various honorary positions aimed at improving private education standards in Oman and supporting the less fortunate. Rayees was also the founder convener of the Malabar Wing under the ISC.

According to Shakeel, Ahmed's exceptional services during the Covid pandemic, including distributing food kits, medicines, and

organising repatriation flights for stranded individuals in Oman, have brought smiles to many faces and earned him recognition from local and expatriate authorities.

Throughout his career, Ahmed has been actively involved in education, playing a pivotal role in establishing the Indian School Al Ghubra and serving as its president. He is also the executive president of the E Ahmed Model United Nations and leads various social and charitable movements.

MUSCAT GOVERNORATE
MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY
Advertisement No. (22/2024)

Muscat Municipality invites interested companies to the following bidding :

Serial	Bidding No.	Bidding Description	Document Fee	Deadline for obtaining bidding docs.	Deadline for inquires submission	Deadline for submission
1	Re - 1/2024	Investing of Plot No. (2939) at Wilayat Al-Amerat	150/- OMR	05/09/2024	08/09/2024	28/09/2024
2	Re - 5/2024	Constructing, Managing & Operating of Sports fields in Wadi Kabir Garden - Matrah	150/- OMR	05/09/2024	08/09/2024	28/09/2024
3	Re - 6/2024	Managing & Operating of Sports Fields (Football, Basketball, Volleyball) at Al - Mabella - Al Seeb	150/- OMR	05/09/2024	08/09/2024	28/09/2024
4	Re - 8/2024	Managing & Operating of Skating Field at Al - Mabella - Seeb	150/- OMR	05/09/2024	08/09/2024	28/09/2024
5	12/2024	Design, construct and operate slaughter house in plot no. (185) at Quriyat	400/- OMR	05/09/2024	08/09/2024	28/09/2024

Registered companies with Muscat Municipality which are Specialized in above bids are invited to participate as per the following procedures:

- Company registration with Muscat Municipality must be valid to obtain the bid document.
- Pay the specified document fee for the requested bid via bank deposit to Muscat Municipality's Bank account as follows:

Bank Muscat **0423010702710024**
- A copy of the transaction's receipt MUST be sent to the following e-mail (**SQ.OS@mm.gov.om**), provided with the company data (name and bid number, delegate name, office phone number, mobile number, email address approved by the company and commercial registration number of the company).
- The tender document will be provided to the company via email.
- 2:00 PM** on the above mentioned dates, is the last timing for obtaining Bidding Documents.
- Submitted offers must be accompanied with a bond mentioned in the tender document valid for a period not less than (90) days issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. Bidding that do not meet the required bond **will not be accepted**.
- Documents must be enclosed in a plain closed envelope (without any company information) and place in the box located in bulding (A) in Muscat Municipality, Head Office, Darsait.

NOTES:

- Companies which are not registered in Muscat Municipality or their registration has been expired shall register through the municipality's website (**www.mm.gov.om**).
- For technical support, please contact Muscat Municipality through this email (**crm@mm.gov.om**).
- If the bidders have any inquiries regarding the scope of the work, they have to sent their inquiries through the following e-mail (**mais.h.alnofli@mm.gov.om**).
- 10:00 AM** on the above submission mentioned dates, is the last timing for receiving bids. Offers submitted after the above mentioned date & time shall not be accepted for any reason.
- Muscat Municipality has the right to accept or reject any offer without assigning any reason.

Website: www.mm.gov.om

Sultanate of Oman
The Supreme Judicial Council
Tender Announcement

The Supreme Judiciary Council announces its desire to submit the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Vendor Grade	Tender Document Fee
19/2024	Inheritance Application Development	29/08/2024	23/09/2024	First	RO 25/-
20/2024	Maintenance & Agriculture Services for Buildings Belong to The Supreme Judicial Council for year 2025	29/08/2024	23/09/2024	Excellent	RO 25/-
21/2024	Tender for Building Cleanliness of the Supreme Judicial Council at Governorates Musandam & Dhofar for the year 2025	29/08/2024	23/09/2024	Excellent	RO 25/-
22/2024	Maintenance & Agriculture Services for The Supreme Court Building for the year 2025	29/08/2024	23/09/2024	Excellent	RO 25/-
24/2024	Tender for Building Cleanliness & of The Supreme Court The Supreme Judicial Council & Building in AL-Ghubra The Secretariat General of The Supreme Judicial Council Building in Madinat AL-Irfan	29/08/2024	23/09/2024	Excellent	RO 25/-

Where you can buy the more detailed tender documents electronically via the link below website:
(<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

Bidders must submit a letter of commitment to the bid, addressed to the Chairman of the Internal Tenders Committee of the Supreme Judicial Council, based on directives from the General Secretariat of the Tenders Council and the latest updates to the electronic bidding system. Based on Circular No. (1/2024) issued by the General Secretariat of the Tender Board.

- For inquiries and clarifications on the tender:**
Submit inquiries related to the project electronically through the website of the electronic tender system (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>).
- For inquiries and clarifications on the electronic bidding system:**
Submit inquiries regarding technical support for the electronic bidding system via e-mail and the phone number shown below:
Phone: +968 24402200
Email: etenderhd@gstb.gov.om

TENDER

Nama Shared Service invites the specialized companies to participate and submit their best offers for the tender below:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last Date for Collection of Tender Documents	Last Date for Proposal Submission	Tender Fee (OMR)
NSS/2024/003	IT Consultancy and PMO Resources	25 August 2024	02 September 2024	OMR 50/- (Plus VAT amount: 52.5 OMR)

- Interested party may purchase the tender through the company website (www.nama.om). Supplier user guide is available to be downloaded on the same page.
- Payment of the tender fees to be done online through the link available on the website. The deposit at the last day of purchasing should be made before 3.00 pm.
- Bids shall be submitted online through I-supplier portal before 3.00 pm time of the Sultanate on Monday 2nd September 2024.
- Each bid should be accompanied with a temporary insurance, in the form of a bank guarantee from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate, covering OMR (1,200) and valid for a period of (90) days from the last date for submission of offers. Tenders that do not include the required temporary insurance will not be considered. The original hard copy of the bid bond should be dropped in the tender box at Nama Holding reception area.
- Nama Shared Services is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid.
- In the event of receipt of the tender document on behalf of another company, the interested purchasers in the above tender document should provide details of the person's name and the company details.

Nama Holding
Muscat, Shatti Al Qurum, In Beach One Building
3rd Floor, Units 305 & 307
P.O Box 850, Post Code 116, Sultanate of Oman.
Phone Number: +968 24559200 / 211
E-Mail: Nawahel.AJunaibi@Holding.nama.om

TO ENSURE A SMOOTH OPERATION, UPDATE YOUR DETAILS



GAZA TRUCE TALKS AT ‘DECISIVE MOMENT’

TEL AVIV: Top US diplomat Antony Blinken on Monday urged Israel and Palestinian groups not to derail negotiations that he said may be a “last opportunity” to secure a Gaza truce and captives release deal. Blinken, on his ninth regional tour since October 7 attack triggered the war, said he was back in Israel “to get this agreement to the line and ultimately over the line”.

“This is a decisive moment — probably the best, maybe the last, opportunity to get the captives home, to get a ceasefire and to put everyone on a better path to enduring peace and security,” Blinken said as he met Israeli President Isaac Herzog in Tel Aviv.

The US secretary of state later met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem, and is due to travel on Tuesday to Cairo where ceasefire talks are expected to resume this week.

Israel and Hamas blamed each other for delays in reaching a truce accord, which diplomats say could help avert a wider conflagration in the Middle East. “We’re working to make sure that there is no escalation, that there are no provocations, that there are no actions that in any way could move us away from getting this deal over the line, or, for that matter, escalating the conflict to other places, and to greater intensity,” Blinken said. “It is time for it to get done. It’s also time to make sure that no one takes any steps that could derail this process.”

Ahead of talks in Qatar last week, Hamas had called on mediators, rather than holding more negotiations, to implement a

framework outlined in late May by US President Joe Biden. Biden said on Sunday that a ceasefire was “still possible” and that the United States was “not giving up,” in brief comments to reporters.

After the Qatar meeting, the United States had submitted what mediators called a “bridging proposal”, which Hamas on Sunday said “responds to Netanyahu’s conditions” and includes terms that the Palestinian group would not accept.

Hamas insisted on “a permanent ceasefire and a comprehensive



We’re working to make sure that there is no escalation, ... that there are no actions that in any way could move us away from getting this deal over the line

ANTONY BLINKEN
US Secretary of State

withdrawal from the Gaza Strip”, saying Netanyahu wanted to keep Israeli forces at several strategic locations. Netanyahu was “fully responsible for thwarting the efforts of the mediators”, the Palestinian movement said in a statement. — AFP



People look on outside their tent at a makeshift camp for displaced Palestinians in Deir al-Balah. — AFP

China’s Xi meets Vietnam’s new leader

BEIJING: China’s President Xi Jinping praised Vietnam on Monday during talks with Vietnam’s new leader To Lam in Beijing on his first state visit since he took office, Chinese official media Xinhua said. The meeting signals the close ties between the two neighbours, which have well-developed economic and trade relations.

“China has always regarded Vietnam as a priority in its neighbourhood diplomacy, and supports Vietnam in adhering to the Party leadership, taking the socialist path suited to its national conditions, and deepening the cause of reforms and socialist modernisation,” Xi said at the meeting. “I believe that our road will expand wider as we walk further,” Xinhua cited the Chinese leader as saying. He underscored establishing good working relations and personal friendship with Lam. China said last week it “fully



Chinese President Xi Jinping walks next to Vietnam’s President To Lam as they pass by the honour guard, in Beijing. — Reuters

reflects the great importance he attaches to the development of ties between both parties and countries”.

Lam arrived in China’s southern province Guangzhou on Sunday for a three-day visit that would include meetings with Chinese Premier Li Qiang and other Chinese top officials. While in Guangzhou, he visited some Chinese locations where former President Ho Chi Minh conducted

revolutionary activities. China and Vietnam signed 14 documents spanning cross-border railways to crocodile exports. Lam during the meeting asked China for soft loans and technology to develop his country’s transport infrastructure and agreed with Xi Jinping to boost defence and security ties. The two also agreed to enhance railways and highway connectivity between the two communist-ruled

neighbours and Xi pledged to import more Vietnamese farm produce, the statement said. China and Vietnam signed documents on planning and feasibility studies for standardised railway routes after preliminary deals were signed in December during Xi’s state visit to Hanoi. Lam described the bilateral ties as a “top priority in Vietnam’s external policy” and called his trip to China “the affirmation of the Party and the Vietnamese government to value the relation with China”. Other documents signed covered cooperation between central banks, media, health and the quarantine and inspection of coconuts, crocodiles and durians. After the signing, Xi and Lam continued talks on important issues of common concern over tea in a “cordial and friendly atmosphere”, Chinese official media Xinhua said. — Reuters

Indonesia’s Widodo reshuffles cabinet

JAKARTA: Indonesian President Joko Widodo reshuffled his cabinet on Monday just weeks before he steps down in an effort to ease the transition to his successor, Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto, his office said. Widodo will hand over the reins in October, departing with sky-high approval ratings over an economic track record that delivered consistent growth coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic. Jokowi swore in new ministers for law and human rights, energy and mineral resources, and investment, as well as a new head of the food and drug agency and chief of the newly created national nutrition agency. Former investment minister Bahlil Lahadalia, a close aide and vocal supporter of Jokowi, was appointed energy and mineral resources minister as the Indonesian leader focuses on a drive to boost nickel output. Rosan Roeslani, who was head of Prabowo’s presidential campaign, replaced Bahlil as the country’s new investment minister while Supratman Andi Agtas, a member of Prabowo’s Gerindra party, became Minister of Law and Human Rights. “The appointments of these



Indonesia President Joko Widodo signs during the swearing-in ceremony, in Jakarta. — AFP

ministers... and agency heads are necessary to facilitate a smooth, orderly, and effective government transition,” coordinator of the president’s special staff, Ari Dwipayana, said in a statement. The national nutrition agency has been created to help Prabowo’s key campaign pledge — a multibillion-dollar pledge to give schoolchildren free meals. Yunarto Wijaya, executive director at research institute Charta Politika, said the new ministers were “Prabowo’s people”, approved by Jokowi. “There are likely political undertones, besides the transition purpose,” he said. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

ISLAMABAD

Pakistan confirms mpox case not new strain

A case of mpox in Pakistan announced last week was not the new strain spreading through Africa, health officials. “The virus has been classified as Clade 2b,” the health ministry said in a statement. “Currently, the ongoing outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is primarily associated with Clade 1b. Notably, as of now, there have been no reported cases of Clade 1b in Pakistan.” The World Health Organiza-



tion declared last week the rapid spread of the new Clade 1b strain in Africa a public health emergency of international concern -- the highest alarm it can sound. — AFP

NEW DELHI

India’s Modi to visit Ukraine, Poland this week

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Ukraine on Friday, officials said. New Delhi’s foreign ministry said on Monday Modi will visit Poland on Thursday before travelling on to Ukraine the next day. The “landmark” visit by Modi will discuss “the ongoing conflict in Ukraine”, Indian foreign ministry official Tanmaya Lal said. “India has consistently advocated for diplomacy and dialogue to reach a negotiated settlement,” he said.



President Volodymyr Zelensky, who will meet Modi, said this would be the Indian leader’s first trip to Ukraine and that “a number of documents are also expected to be signed”. — AFP

TOKYO

Japan to begin trial removal of nuclear debris

The operator of Japan’s stricken Fukushima nuclear power plant said on Monday it will send a probe inside a battered reactor this week for a trial removal of radioactive debris. Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) aims to retrieve a tiny sample of the estimated 880 tons of radioactive debris that is believed to sit inside reactors at the tsunami-hit nuclear plant. “We will proceed carefully by putting safety as our highest priority,” a Tepco official said



on Monday. The debris has radiation levels so high that Tepco has had to develop specialised robots that can withstand them to function inside. — AFP



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In brief

■ MARSEILLE



FRANCE WILDFIRES FORCE THOUSANDS TO FLEE

Two wildfires in southern France forced several thousand people to flee before the blazes were brought under control. Some 3,000 holiday makers were evacuated from a camping site to a municipal building in the coastal town of Canet-en-Roussillon, near the city of Perpignan, in the face of a fire fanned by strong winds, rescue services said.

“The fire has been under control for two and a half hours now,” Jerome Bonnafoux said, a spokesman for the regional firefighters.

“We’re still working on it because there are several hot spots where the risk of it flaring is high,” he added. — AFP

■ LONDON



UK TYCOON MIKE LYNCH MISSING AFTER YACHT SINKS

UK businessman Mike Lynch is among those missing on Monday after a superyacht sank off southern Italy, according to the head of the Civil Protection Agency.

The 56-metre-long luxury yacht, The Bayesian, had been moored off Porticello, east of Palermo, when the storm swept suddenly up the coast before dawn, tearing through beach clubs and little fishing ports.

Lynch’s wife was among 15 people rescued after the luxury yacht sank amid violent winds and rains off the Sicily coast, leaving six others missing. Italian authorities have opened a probe as the emergency response continued. — AFP

■ BREMEN



SCHOLZ PRAISES NEW NATURALIZATION LAW FOR IMMIGRATION

Germany’s new immigration law, which allows for German citizenship in five instead of eight years and also generally permits applicants to keep their country of origin citizenship, was long overdue, according to Chancellor Olaf Scholz. “Being a successful country of immigration gives Germany a historic opportunity,” Scholz said.

The reform would enable Germany to attract sufficient labour and remain a growing country in future, he said. The law allows citizenship after just three years if the applicant can show exceptional integration achievements. — dpa

Russia rules out peace talks with Ukraine



Servicemen fire towards Russian troops at a front line, near the town of Chasiv Yar in Donetsk region, Ukraine. — Reuters

KYIV: The Kremlin on Monday ruled out entering peace talks with Ukraine over Kyiv’s surprise offensive into Russian territory, which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said was meeting its goals. Ukraine sent troops over the border on August 6 and has since held onto a part of the western Kursk region, in the biggest attack on Russian soil since Moscow attacked in February 2022. The move has rattled Moscow and taken Ukraine’s Western allies by surprise.

Kyiv has said the offensive is aimed at stretching Russian forces, creating a “buffer zone” and bringing the conflict “closer” to an end on “fair” terms.

Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov said on Monday that it had pushed the prospect of peace talks further away. “At the current stage, given this escapade, we will not talk.”

He called entering a negotiating process “completely inappropriate” and said future talks “depend on the situation on the battlefield, including in the Kursk region.”

Moscow, intent on not letting

Kyiv has said the offensive is aimed at stretching Russian forces, creating a “buffer zone” and bringing the conflict “closer” to an end on “fair” terms

the offensive affect its own advance in eastern Ukraine, claimed another village in the war-battered Donetsk region on Monday.

Bracing for a further assault, Ukraine ordered the evacuation of families from the key city of Pokrovsk as Moscow’s forces inched closer to the logistics hub.

Zelensky, meanwhile, said his troops in Kursk — who have set up administrative offices and published previously unthinkable footage of Ukrainian soldiers patrolling Russian streets — are meeting their targets.

“We are achieving our goals. This morning we have another replenishment of the prisoner of war exchange fund for our country,” Zelensky said, referring to more Russian troops being

taken prisoner.

The prospect of peace talks appeared distant even before Ukraine launched its incursion into Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had demanded Ukraine cede swathes of territory if it wanted a ceasefire.

Zelensky, who has ruled out direct talks with the Kremlin, demands Russia’s full withdrawal from Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, and reparations.

In recent days, Ukraine has destroyed two key bridges over the Seym river inside Russia, seeking to disrupt Moscow’s supply routes to the combat zone.

A third bridge over the river was hit over the weekend, a Russian military investigator said in a video published by high-profile pro-Kremlin TV commentator Vladimir Solov'yev.

The attacks on the bridges have left Russia with limited options, according to Russian military bloggers. Moscow’s defence ministry said on Monday Russia had thwarted Ukrainian attacks on three more villages in the Kursk region. — AFP

United States and South Korea kick off major joint military drills

SEOUL: The United States and South Korea kicked off their major annual joint military drills on Monday, Seoul said, with new exercises aimed at containing the nuclear-armed North, including fighting cyberattacks.

The Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise runs until August 29, with drills this year set to “reflect realistic threats across all domains”, including from North Korean missiles and GPS jamming, Seoul’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said. The exercises will boost the allies’ “capability and posture to deter and defend against weapons of mass destruction”, the military added.

This year’s drills will involve about 19,000 South Korean troops participating by land, sea and air, as well as in the cyber and space domains.

Pyongyang has floated thousands of trash-carrying balloons across the border in recent months, and sought to jam South Korean GPS signals as part of its protest against balloons carrying anti-regime propaganda sent northwards by activists in the South.

In Seoul, the city government will be simultaneously conducting civil defence exercises designed to better prepare for any future trash balloons, as well as North Korean drone attacks.

“We are currently facing the most reckless and irrational North Korean provocations and threats in the world,” South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said at a cabinet meeting Monday, according to his office.

“In recent years, they have not hesitated to launch GPS jamming attacks and make low-grade provocations such as launching trash balloons.”

US-South Korea drills typically infuriate the North, which views them as rehearsals for attack and has frequently conducted weapons tests in retaliation.

Last year, North Korean state media warned the drills could trigger a “thermonuclear war”, launching a number of cruise missiles and ballistic missiles in protest.

Kim Myung-soo, head of Seoul’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last week that Pyongyang was “likely to use the exercise as a pretext to conduct deceitful and blitz provocations”.

Kim ordered troops to “closely monitor and analyse the activities of the DMZ” and “retaliate immediately if the enemy provokes”.

Washington is Seoul’s key security ally and stations about 28,500 troops in South Korea to protect it from its nuclear-armed neighbour. — AFP



The South Korean and American flags fly next to each other at Yongin, South Korea. — Reuters file photo

Democrats and protesters gather in Chicago

CHICAGO: Democrats gathered in Chicago on Monday to celebrate Vice-President Kamala Harris’ campaign for the White House against Republican Donald Trump and to honour President Joe Biden, whose exit from the race turned his party’s fortunes around.

Monday’s kickoff of the four-day Democratic National Convention is expected also to draw tens of thousands of protesters, many of them opposed to the Biden administration’s support for Israel’s Gaza offensive, who will march on a mile-long route through the city outside the security perimeter.

Biden, 81, who reluctantly ended his reelection campaign a month ago under pressure from top Democrats worried that he was too old to win or govern for another four years, is due to speak to make the case for electing Harris and defeating former president Trump, 78.

As Democrats seek to project a sense of unity after the



Police stand guard with cycles on the eve of the Democratic National Convention (DNC), in Chicago. — Reuters

unprecedented change-up in candidates, Harris, 59, is likely to join Biden on stage.

Harris will formally accept the nomination on Thursday night with a highly anticipated speech. If elected on November 5, Harris would make US history as the first female president.

A coalition of some 200 social justice organisations, many from

pro-Palestinian groups, will gather outside the convention. Some pro-Palestinian delegates to the convention are pushing for the party to change its platform to limit weapons to Israel. The party is due to vote on Monday on a 92-page policy platform that does not call for an arms embargo against Israel.

Harris is heading into the

convention riding a historic whirlwind: her campaign has broken records for fundraising, packed arenas with supporters, and turned opinion polls in some battleground states in Democrats’ favour.

Biden abandoned his reelection bid after his disastrous debate against Trump on June 27 prompted longtime allies,

Harris will formally accept the nomination on Thursday night. If elected on November 5, Harris would make US history as the first female president

major donors and other party supporters to demand he step aside.

Polls a month ago showed Trump with a clear lead over Biden, but Harris has closed the gap both nationally and in many of the highly competitive states, including Pennsylvania, that will play a decisive role in the election.

Harris went on a bus tour in western Pennsylvania on Sunday with her vice presidential running mate, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

During the tour, she suggested Trump was a coward whose politics focused on putting down rivals. — Reuters

Gaza war negotiations... A complex landscape



The ongoing conflict in Gaza has seen numerous attempts at negotiation, with the latest discussions taking place in Doha, facilitated by the United States and Egypt.

These negotiations came against a backdrop of previous failed agreements, raising questions about the efficacy of diplomatic efforts in resolving one of the most protracted conflicts in modern history.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been marked by cycles of violence and intermittent peace talks since the mid-20th century.

Previous attempts at brokering peace have often faltered due to deep-seated mistrust, differing objectives among stakeholders, and external influences that complicate the situation.

In recent years, various ceasefires and peace initiatives have been proposed, including those mediated by regional powers like Egypt and international actors such as the United States.

However, these efforts have frequently collapsed due to factors such as continued hostilities by Israel and lack of trust on Israel by Hamas.

At the recent 3rd Voice of the Global South

Summit, Oman highlighted the plight of Palestinians.

HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, called on the Global South to adopt “a just and fair stance” in support of the Palestinian people’s rights.

He also urged the international community to prioritise the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination and establishment of an independent state as essential steps towards peace and stability in the region.

In his speech, HH Sayyid Asaad emphasised the long-standing suffering of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation, which began in 1967.

He criticised Israel’s violations of United Nations resolutions, international law and human rights standards.

The recent round of negotiations in Doha represented a renewed effort to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza while seeking a sustainable resolution to hostilities. The involvement of both US and Egyptian officials underscores a

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS AT BROKERING PEACE HAVE OFTEN FALTERED DUE TO DEEP-SEATED MISTRUST, DIFFERING OBJECTIVES AMONG STAKEHOLDERS, AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES THAT COMPLICATE THE SITUATION

collaborative approach aimed at leveraging their respective influences over Israel and Palestinian factions. Despite the optimism expressed by US regarding progress in negotiations, significant challenges remain.

While Hamas has indicated that it will only agree to terms that include a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and substantial concessions regarding prisoner exchanges, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has emphasised that military operations will continue until Israel achieves its objectives. This stance complicates negotiations as both sides accuse each other of introducing new demands or conditions that could derail progress.

The upcoming meetings in Cairo are crucial for solidifying the terms of any agreement reached thus far.

Mediators will work on technical details related to implementation mechanisms, including humanitarian provisions and specifics concerning the hostages and detainees.

In summary, while there is cautious optimism, numerous hurdles must be overcome before an agreement can be finalised.

Fire dispatchers burning out as flames ravage US

DAVID SHERFINSKI

When Eric Wiersma moved to working in a dispatch centre coordinating often-complex firefighting field operations after working on an engine for about 20 years, he swiftly learned the job was much more than simply answering radio calls.

“We’re kind of running it and in command of that incident until someone gets there on the ground,” said Wiersma. “At the end of the day ... we make sure that everybody else gets home safe before we close up shop and go home.

“And when you get some of these people that are able to come into dispatch and spend some time, it’s always fun to hear them say man, dispatch is so much different than what I thought - and what an eye-opener it was for them.”

As fire season ramps up and threatens broad swathes of the western United States, wildland fire dispatchers like Wiersma, the oft-overlooked but vital people helping battle blazes, are hurting.

Dispatchers had higher incidence of anxiety and depression than those reported in other emergency responder studies, according to a groundbreaking study published this year.

And dispatchers, along with other federal wildland firefighters, are again staring at a potential pay cut that has many pondering whether to leave the job entirely. The profession already faces broader recruitment and retention issues at a time of more frequent and destructive blazes.

“In a lot of cases, they’re closing down (dispatch centres) and being consolidated because we can’t fill (them),” said Luke Mayfield, president of the advocacy group Grassroots Wildland Firefighters.

Mayfield said dispatchers were “absolutely integral and a part of any kind of suppression or prescribed fire operation ... they’re the catch-all ... When something bad goes on in the field, they’re part of the fire family.”

A group of academics and those with experience in the field published a study this year, one of the first to comprehensively look at the mental health of wildland fire dispatchers specifically. It found that roughly three-quarters of respondents to depression screening questions exhibited at least mild depression, with 25 per cent of the study population screening positive for severe depression. Wildland fire dispatchers had a higher incidence of alcohol abuse, anxiety, binge and restrictive eating, and depression than those reported in other emergency responder studies, but lower rates of ADHD and mental health service utilisation, the authors found.

— Thomson Reuters Foundation

As polio reemerges in Gaza, a mother fears for her child’s health

RAMADAN ABED

In Gaza, a mother worries that her month-old son, Mohammed, could be infected with polio after the Palestinian health ministry confirmed the first case in the enclave on Friday, ending a 25 year period in which the Strip was polio-free.

Just three days after his birth, Ghada al Ghandour’s son Mohammed started developing skin rashes.

“He had skin rashes as if he was burnt,” she said.

A doctor told her there were no creams to treat her child.

She later brought him to Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir Al Balah in central Gaza to seek a diagnosis and treatment.

The rash fuelled his mother’s fears that other symptoms and diseases could follow due to a lack of hygiene and medical supplies in Gaza after more than 10 months of conflict.

In a statement, the Palestinian health ministry confirmed the first case of polio in the city of Deir Al Balah had been detected in a 10-month-old baby who had not been vaccinated.

Likewise, Mohammed has not received a polio vaccine.

“My son was deprived of the first vaccine in his first month,” his mother said.

Polio was detected in sewage in Gaza’s Deir Al Balah and Khan Yunis governorates, Dr Hamid Jafari, a polio specialist at the World Health Organization (WHO), said on August 7, adding it was possible the virus had been circulating since September.

Poliomyelitis, which is spread mainly through the faecal-oral route, is a highly infectious virus that can invade the nervous system and cause paralysis.

Children under 5 are most at risk from the viral disease, and especially infants under 2 since normal vaccination regimens have been disrupted by the war.

“If the occupation (Israeli forces) continues to close the (border) crossing and denies access to vaccines, it will lead to a health disaster,” said Khalil



A man holds a child suffering from a rash next to raw sewage at a makeshift camp for displaced Palestinians in Deir Al Balah in the central Gaza Strip. – AFP

al Daqran, spokesperson of Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital.

Israel announced on Sunday that it would facilitate the transfer into Gaza of polio vaccines for around one million children.

THE PALESTINIAN HEALTH MINISTRY CONFIRMED THE FIRST CASE OF POLIO IN THE CITY OF DEIR AL BALAH HAD BEEN DETECTED IN A 10-MONTH-OLD BABY WHO HAD NOT BEEN VACCINATED

More than 43,000 vials of the vaccine were expected to arrive in Israel in the coming weeks and would be sent to Gaza, according to

a statement from COGAT, the Israeli defence agency that coordinated civilian matters with the Palestinians. This would be enough for two rounds of doses for over a million children, it said.

But Al Daqran of Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital said a vaccination campaign could not happen without a pause in fighting. The reemergence of polio “represents yet another threat to the children in the Gaza Strip and neighbouring countries,” the WHO said on August 16.

Nearly half of Gaza’s 2.3 million population are under the age of 18 and around 15 per cent are children under the age of 5, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Aside from the resurgence of polio and the threat of other diseases, Palestinians face a humanitarian crisis with shortages of food, fuel and water inflicting suffering everyday.

The war in Gaza started after Hamas attacked southern Israel. The death toll of Palestinians killed by the Israeli military campaign has exceeded 40,000, according to Gaza authorities.

Learn from the best...

It takes a while to realise that life has moved on while you have been busy tackling happenings in life.

It was just 1993 when a fresh graduate was eager to apply everything she had learned in Mass Media Education.

Radio Oman and Television studios were exciting but it was no easy task. Mastering the pronunciation of Omani names as authentically as possible was not a smooth ride initially. To fall was only natural, but I had senior colleagues who made all efforts to get the right pronunciations varying from Q, Kh, G, Gh etc. They would hold their breath as I surfed through the names while reading news. Reading news is like surfing because the names are like the big waves and if we tripped over we could crash into the wave, then it is important to quickly recover the balance on the surfboard.

One of the biggest chapters of Mass Media in my career was going through the guidelines set by His Excellency Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al Rowas, then Minister of Information.

Whether it was etiquette or mass media law, the importance of news was stressed and that too on responsible journalism.

Professor Dr Sidney Hill Jr, Communications Expert and mentor had said to me knowledge is not enough, you have to learn to adapt to the policies of the organisation and represent them well. These were words of strength and nothing was going to stop this graduate.

His Excellency Rowas believed in the importance of culture and heritage and it was important to know the roots and the latest developments in a nation. Words that have stayed throughout the years have been, no matter where you are from, once you are on air, you are the voice of Oman.

The policies for broadcasters have always been clear - not to use slang and bring in English words while speaking Arabic. This discipline mattered.

The 90s were bearing the fruits of the initiatives of the Renaissance and seeing developments far and wide and equal importance was given to all the sectors when it came to news



Lakshmi Kothaneth
@lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

INFORMATION IS
FACTS PROVIDED
ABOUT
SOMETHING
OR SOMEBODY.
NEWS HAS THE
POWER TO
INFORM BUT IT
CAN BE DONE
WITH DIGNITY
AND RESPECT
AND AS A
MATTER OF FACT

coverage. This is where I also learnt about responsible journalism.

Still remember the time when the minister, while addressing a press conference said that times have changed and it is time for satellite television, and now it is time for parents to control what children watch.

Today, of course, the mass media has evolved and social media has stepped in with the attitude that anything goes as long as it is viral or gets views. So some of the videos are marked by the platforms warning that the content is sensitive. And many people forget that there are consequences to what you post and one of the biggest impacts is on the image.

Organisations can search online about a person and all the details appear including the posts giving a deep insight into the mentality of a person. This is an era where attitude holds great importance in analysis and judgement can be done even before the person enters the room for the interview. An ancient saying goes as you are what you eat and I say you are what you watch. One way or the other you reflect what you watch - in behaviour or in thought.

Information is facts provided about something or somebody. News has the power to inform but it can be done with dignity and respect and as a matter of fact. The rush for breaking news has brought us to ensure that the information is right in the first place. Is it to create a sensation or be part of the conversation?

Today there are more news channels and international news is at everyone's fingertips. The individual can be his or her own news editor as they scroll through the net.

The national policies on information exist and the individual also has their choice to create what they want to know. They do seep into the mind and have an influence.

The thought of course is to the content creators - do we need a clear thought before we post?

It was a great education to learn from the best. His Excellency Rowas is remembered for his various distinguished roles, most importantly he defined responsible and quality journalism.

BEFORE GOING INTO WATER!



Bayesian, a 56-metre-long sailboat, which later sank off the Sicilian capital Palermo, is seen in Santa Flavia, Italy in this picture obtained from social media. – Reuters

How financial markets can drive climate action

Climate change is on the ballot in November's US presidential election. A second Donald Trump presidency could lead to an additional four billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions by 2030, erasing the progress made under President Joe Biden. Conversely, Vice President Kamala Harris, the presumptive Democratic nominee, established a record of being tough on polluters during her tenure as California's attorney general.

Meanwhile, Europe's rightward shift and complicated coalition politics are slowing global climate action. As Western democracies grapple with rising political uncertainty, it may be up to capital markets to save the planet.

Alas, our financial system is caught in a classic prisoner's dilemma: it is costly for any single institution to decarbonise on its own while others continue to profit from carbon-intensive portfolios. But if all asset owners and managers committed to reducing CO2 emissions and supporting a just climate transition that protects workers, communities, and consumers, they could create long-term value and deliver prosperity for all.

The inconvenient truth is that without robust climate policies – such as carbon pricing and elimination of fossil-fuel subsidies to reallocate



Lynn Forester de Rothschild

The writer is CEO of E L Rothschild, is Founder and CEO of the Council for Inclusive Capitalism

AS WESTERN
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CHANGE

capital toward clean energy – there is little incentive for collective action. In a world where it pays to pollute, investors will be tempted to support companies with unsustainable practices, shifting the burden of the energy transition to others and ultimately leaving everyone worse off.

Contrary to activists' hopes, climate action is not necessarily a win for everyone. A once-in-a-generation transition carries financial and political risks, as well as opportunities, creating winners and losers throughout the investment value chain. The question, then, is whether major asset owners and managers can steer markets toward achieving climate goals and generate sufficient financial returns.

The answer is yes, but achieving this requires three major strategic shifts. First, investors must engage with high-emitting companies rather than simply divesting from them. Divestment campaigns often trigger partisan efforts to protect the fossil-fuel industry, whereas engaging with high-emitting companies and tracking their progress offers tangible climate benefits beyond portfolio decarbonisation.

In a 2023 study, for example,

economists Kelly Shue and Samuel Hartzmark analysed nearly two decades of emissions data from more than 3,000 companies, finding that high-emitting “brown” companies produce, on average, 261 times the emissions of climate-friendly “green” firms. This suggests that a 1 per cent reduction in the emissions of an oil or gas company has a far greater environmental impact than a tech company or a bank achieving Net-Zero emissions. As geopolitical tensions rise and national fossil-fuel production becomes increasingly vital for energy security and affordability,

policymakers should keep these findings in mind.

Second, investors must actively seek emissions reductions instead of passively investing in low-carbon industries. As recent years have shown, exchange-traded funds focused on environmental, social, and governance investments not only underperform the market but also fail to accelerate climate action.

Moreover, it has become abundantly clear that Big Tech companies like Meta (Facebook), Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Alphabet (Google) tend to dominate sustainable equity funds.

Although these funds may seem environmentally friendly at first glance, research shows that by directing capital away from high-emitting companies, they have inadvertently deprived critical sectors of the resources they need to invest in the clean-energy transition.

By contrast, active funds that focus on encouraging carbon-intensive companies to decarbonise can drive climate action by channelling investments into sectors like renewable energy and waste management. A prime example of this approach is the \$100 Billion Climate Action Plan launched by the California Public Employees' Retirement System, which aims to improve cement production and retrofit fossil-fuel facilities. Importantly, there is little evidence that merely decarbonising a portfolio translates into reduced greenhouse-gas emissions. To support the clean-energy transition, institutional investors must engage with both high- and low-emitting industries, incentivising carbon-intensive companies to provide emissions disclosures to mitigate the negative impact of high emissions on their stock-market valuations.

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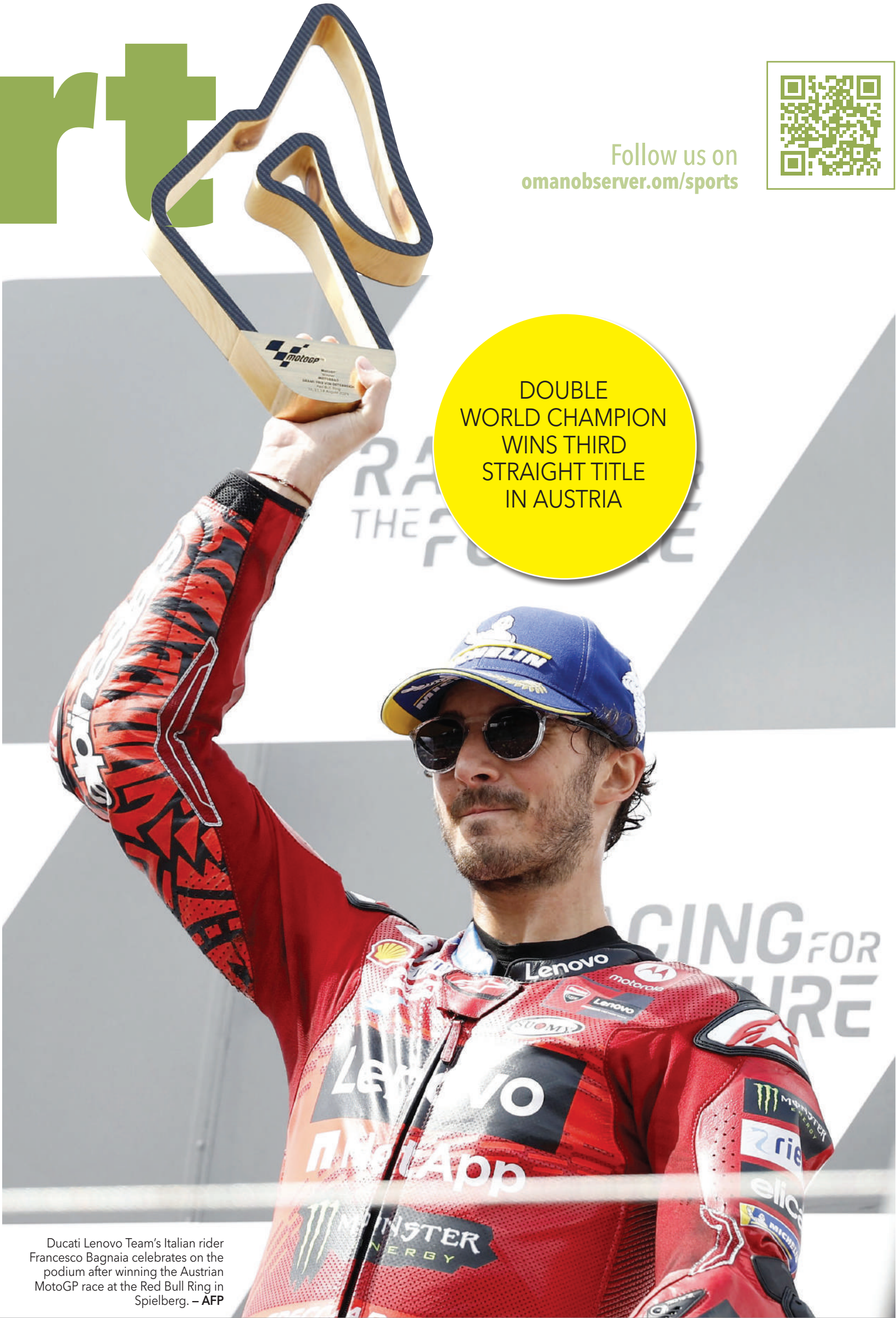
Contrary to activists' hopes, climate action is not necessarily a win for everyone.

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BAGNAIA BAGS AUSTRIAN MOTOGP TO TAKE LEAD



DOUBLE
WORLD CHAMPION
WINS THIRD
STRAIGHT TITLE
IN AUSTRIA

Ducati Lenovo Team's Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia celebrates on the podium after winning the Austrian MotoGP race at the Red Bull Ring in Spielberg. — AFP

SPIELBERG BEI KNITTSELFELD, AUSTRIA: Double world champion Francesco Bagnaia won a third successive Austrian MotoGP to complete a dream sprint-race weekend double and take the outright lead in the world championship on Sunday.

Jorge Martin, who went into the weekend atop the riders' standings, had to settle for second with Enea Bastianini completing the podium at the Red Bull Ring circuit. This was the Turin-born Bagnaia's seventh race success of the season to match his tally from last season with still nine races remaining.

That is a sobering thought for Martin who has a better sprint record than Bagnaia but when it comes to the main event it is Bagnaia who invariably comes out on top. "Our pace was incredible," said the race winner. "I knew over the last laps anything could happen so I'm very happy to win three times here," added Bagnaia, referring to the circuit that is KTM's home, but Ducati's backyard with the Italian team winning here in eight of the past nine years.

Martin said: "I would have preferred a better start, but we were super close. He (Bagnaia) pulled away but at the end of the race, I tried again to push. Second was not what I expected."

Martin had no complaints unlike 24 hours later when a long lap penalty severely compromised his chances of denying Bagnaia the top of the podium with the gap between them less than five seconds.

MARQUEZ NIGHTMARE

There was no similar hard luck story in this 11th round of the season.

Martin had secured pole but second-placed Bagnaia had quickly moved into the lead as his new teammate next season,



AUSTRIAN MOTOGP RESULTS

1. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 42min 11.173sec,
2. Jorge Martin (ESP/Ducati-Pramac) at 3.232sec,
3. Enea Bastianini (ITA/Ducati) 7.357,
4. Marc Marquez (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 13.836,
5. Brad Binder (RSA/KTM) 18.620,
6. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 21.206,
7. Maverick Vinales (ESP/Aprilia) 24.322,
8. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/Ducati-Pramac) 27.677,
9. Aleix Espargaro (ESP/Aprilia) 28.829,
10. Alex Marquez (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 30.268,
11. Pol Espargaro (ESP/KTM) 30.526,
12. Miguel Oliveira (POR/Aprilia-Trackhouse) 30.702,
13. Pedro Acosta (ESP/GasGas-Tech3) 33.736,
14. Takaaki Nakagami (JPN/Honda-LCR) 36.310,
15. Augusto Fernandez (ESP/GasGas-Tech3) 36.522

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP STANDINGS

1. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 275 pts,
2. Jorge Martin (ESP/Ducati-Pramac) 270,
3. Enea Bastianini (ITA/Ducati) 214,
4. Marc Marquez (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 192,
5. Maverick Vinales (ESP/Aprilia) 139,
6. Brad Binder (RSA/KTM) 128,
7. Pedro Acosta (ESP/GasGas-Tech3) 125,
8. Aleix Espargaro (ESP/Aprilia) 113,
9. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 104,
10. Alex Marquez (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 98,
11. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 73,
12. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/Ducati-Pramac) 73,
13. Miguel Oliveira (POR/Aprilia-Trackhouse) 55,
14. Fabio Quartararo (FRA/Yamaha) 49

Marc Marquez suffered a nightmare grid getaway.

Setting off on the front row in third the six-time former MotoGP champion had plummeted to 13th by the first corner after a tangle with Franco Morbidelli.

Up front, Martin kept close tabs with Bagnaia on the factory Ducati in the early laps, at one point briefly regaining command.

But this circuit plays into the hands of a rider like Bagnaia who is renowned for his fearless late-breaking going into corners at speeds of 300kmh plus and he soon had the measure of the luckless Spaniard riding a Ducati-satellite Pramac bike.

The front three - Bagnaia, Martin and Bastianini - were pulling clear of the chasing pack led by Jack Miller.

Miller's chance of one of his highest finishes of the season disappeared on lap six when the Australian hit the deck.

By lap 15 Bagnaia was turning on the gas with the gap back to Martin nudging one second.

Marquez had been quietly picking off the bikes in front of him and making his way up the field to be placed fourth after the midway point in the 26-lap race.

With rain clouds moving inexorably towards the circuit as per the forecasters' prediction Bagnaia's cushion over Martin had grown towards the double-second mark with nine laps remaining.

And he never looked like relinquishing his advantage to duly secure his eighth podium on the trot. That left Martin scratching his head as to just what he needs to do to foil Bagnaia getting his hands on a third straight world title come the final race of the season in Valencia in November. Next up though is the Aragon MotoGP in Spain in a fortnight's time which returns to the MotoGP calendar after a one-year absence. — AFP



Seeb meet Al Shabab, Al Nahda take on Ibri



Sur play Al Khabourah in Omantel League second round today

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 19

The excitement continues in the Omantel Football League with the start of the second round, as all eyes turn to the anticipated confrontations between Ibri and Al Nahda, Sur and Al Khabourah and Seeb and Al Shabab. The confrontations come after an exciting first round that witnessed 13 goals being scored, which foretells strong matches and fierce competition between the teams.

The Ibri team will host Al Nahda, the league runners-up last season, at their home stadium in the Ibri Sports Complex on Tuesday evening.

Al Nahda eye a second consecutive victory after their victory in the opening round. Al Nahda aspire to continue their superiority over Ibri, the team that suffered a defeat in the round. For their part, Ibri will seek to regain their balance by achieving a positive result that satisfies their fans.



At 7 pm, Sur Sports Complex will witness a strong confrontation between Sur and Al Khabourah. Sur entered the match relying on the fans' support to achieve an ideal start in their first appearance this season after their first match against Dhofar was postponed. In contrast, Al Khabourah seek to follow up on their 2-1 victory over Al Shabab in the first round,

trying to come out with a positive result against a veteran team on its home ground.

AL SHABAB LOOK TO BOUNCE BACK
In the third match at the Al Rustaq Sports Complex, defending champion Seeb seek to continue their winning streak after the big win over Ibri in the first round. In contrast, Al

Shabab are looking to overcome the shock of the sudden loss to Al Khabourah and achieve a positive result against Seeb.

The matches of the second week of the Omantel League will be completed on Wednesday evening with two matches. Al Nasr will host Sohar team at Al Saada Sports Complex in a match in which Al Nasr will try to achieve positive results after suffering a loss in the first round, while Sohar Club will enter the match to win and not lose points. Al Rustaq meet Oman Club at Al Rustaq Sports Complex in the second match.

Meanwhile, the Oman Football Association has decided to postpone Dhofar's matches in the first three rounds of the league, until the issue of local/Asian licenses currently being heard in the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). The CAS held a hearing last Monday, after all Omani clubs had completed the cases in which rulings were issued suspending their player registrations.

Henry leaves coaching role with France youth side after Olympic silver

PARIS: Thierry Henry has decided to step down from his role as coach of the France under-21 football team, the French Football Federation (FFF) announced on Monday.

Former France international Henry made the decision after guiding the under-23 side to a silver medal at the 2024 Paris Olympics. The all-time leading goalscorer for Premier League giants Arsenal took over as coach of the French youth side last summer and was under contract until June 2025 but decided to step away for "personal reasons", according to the FFF. Henry oversaw Les Bleuets' first run to the final of an Olympics men's tournament since winning gold in the 1984 Games in Los Angeles.

His young side eventually went down 5-3 after extra time against Spain to end a promising run that had started inauspiciously after Henry was obliged to make several changes to his squad pre-tournament due to the refusal of certain clubs to release their players for the Games.

"I would like to thank the FFF and President Philippe Diallo for giving me this incredible opportunity," said Henry, 47, in an FFF statement.

"Winning an Olympic silver medal for my country will remain



French football Olympics 2024 coach Thierry Henry takes part in a training session at the National Football Centre in Clairefontaine-en-Yvelines, outside Paris, on June 17. — AFP

“Winning an Olympic silver medal for my country will remain one of the proudest moments of my life. I’m incredibly grateful to the federation, the players, the staff and the fans.”

THIERRY HENRY
Former France international

one of the proudest moments of my life. I'm incredibly grateful to the federation, the players, the staff and the fans for giving me this magical experience."

Federation boss Diallo thanked the 1998 World Cup winner for "all the work he accomplished as coach of the Espoirs (under-21s) and Olympic sides. We obviously regret this decision, as Thierry Henry was able to achieve the objectives set for him by winning a silver medal at the Olympic Games in Paris," he added. "Having followed him throughout this campaign, I witnessed first-hand his great professionalism, his rigour and his love for the blue jersey." — AFP

Sinner edges past Zverev to meet Tiafoe in Cincinnati final



Frances Tiafoe of the USA returns a shot during his match against Holger Rune of Denmark on day seven of the Cincinnati Open. — USA Today Sports

CINCINNATI: Jannik Sinner ended his losing streak against Alexander Zverev with a 7-6 (11/9), 5-7, 7-6 (7/4) win on Sunday to set up a Cincinnati Open final against American Frances Tiafoe.

The world number one had lost four consecutive matches to Zverev, with his only previous win over the German coming at Roland Garros four years ago.

The semifinal lasted more than three hours, not including a rain interruption.

The match was paused midway through the first-set tie-break for nearly 30 minutes while a shower passed over the area — another episode of the poor weather which has plagued the event in recent days.

Sinner saved two Zverev set points and won the opener on his own third chance, only to drop the second set after he lost an early break and was broken again in the 12th game as he sent an overhead into the net.

The third set went into a tie-break, with Sinner taking a 5-2 lead and triumphing on his second match point. "It was a tough match, a very exciting match," the Italian said. "We played in different conditions: sunny, rain and then night."

"There was a lot of tension for both of us. I'm very happy with my performance and happy to be in the final."

Sinner is chasing his first title since triumphing on grass in

Halle two months ago. "I had to play with my gut, I feel that is my strength," the 23-year-old said. "We had some ups and downs over three hours."

"I couldn't have played a better match than this to prepare," he added, looking ahead to the start of the US Open in eight days.

Sinner, who has suffered recently with a hip problem, illness and the tonsillitis which forced him to skip the Olympics, said he needs to keep up his fitness. Sinner will be playing in his fifth career Masters 1000 final.

CRAZY

Tiafoe came from 5-2 down in the final set and claimed a deciding tie-break for a 4-6, 6-1, 7-6 (7/4) defeat of Danish 15th seed Holger Rune.

Tiafoe is the first American man to reach the final since John Isner in 2013 and he saved two match points in his come-from-behind win.

He will move into world's top 20, joining four compatriots in the strongest US showing since 1997. "It was crazy, that last set was nuts," Tiafoe said. "It got breezy at the end, but you just had to play the percentages."

"I got lucky with a couple of net cords, which made a huge difference. I battled in the tie-breaker and he got a little tight. One thing led to another and here we are." — AFP



Jannik Sinner of Italy celebrates winning his match against Alexander Zverev of Germany on day seven of the Cincinnati Open. — USA Today Sports

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, AUGUST 19

Having won four consecutive Premier League titles, Manchester City opened their defence of the champion's title with a 2-0 win over Chelsea. Setting them on their path to victory was Erling Haaland with his 91st Premier League goal in his 100th appearance for the club.

Praising Haaland, City manager, Pep Guardiola, who signed Haaland from Borussia Dortmund in 2022, said: "That is a number for Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. In terms of numbers, it is at that level. I don't know how he does it to score 91 goals in 100 games. In the Premier League, in this country it is unbelievable."

He added: "It seems to me that he feels better than last season at this stage — after the treble he felt tired. This season with Norway not in the Euros, it is more rest. He feels good and the goal was magnificent."

In must be said Chelsea did play well in new manager Enzo Maresca's first match — the fifth manager under the reign of Todd Boehly. They were very much in the game until City's late second goal. They squandered several fine chances to score, they had more of them than City.

Several City top players did not get a start in this match, instead they included the new signing, the Brazilian Savinho who was impressive but left the field at the end of the first half with a knock on the knee.

City opened the scoring in the 18th minute when Jeremy Daku switched over to the left after being kept under pressure by Chelsea's Marc Cucurella. He played a fine pass inside to Bernardo Silva from whom the ball went to Haaland in the box. The strong and determined

Norwegian then, despite the close presence of Cucurella and Levi Colwill, wriggled past them taking control and beating Robert Sanchez in the Chelsea goal.

Shortly after City had taken the lead a shout from Chelsea for a penalty was ignored when Enzo Fernandez was pushed inside the area and then a minute before the break Chelsea did find the net only for the goal to be disallowed for offside by Nicolas Jackson.

There were further lapses by Chelsea in the second half. Just after Sanchez had made a fine diving save from a shot by Haaland, Jackson was not in position to meet an excellent cross from the right which would have given the home side an equaliser. Two minutes later, Jackson again failed to get a touch to a cross which would have beaten Ederson. That was an excellent chance missed.

A shout from Chelsea players for a handball inside the box went unchecked and despite late pressure on the City goal from Chelsea they seemed unable to beat the City defence which was quick to intercept shots.

With six minutes remaining City wrapped up the result with their second goal. Former Chelsea player, Mateo Kovacic picked up the ball from a poor clearance and went past Wesley Fofana and Moises Caicedo before unleashing a 25-yard drive which went into the net with a slight touch of the left post.



Manchester City's Mateo Kovacic scores their second goal during the English Premier League match against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge, London. — Reuters



Manchester City's Erling Haaland scores their first goal against Chelsea during the English Premier League match at Stamford Bridge, London. — Reuters

CITY

ease into new campaign with win

Niewiadoma wins Women's Tour de France by 4 seconds

L'ALPE D'HUEZ, FRANCE: Poland's Katarzyna Niewiadoma won her first women's Tour de France title by just four seconds on Sunday as she dug in during the race's gruelling final Alpine ascent.

The 29-year-old Canyon SRAM rider summited the daunting Alpe d'Huez mountain one minute one second behind stage winner Demi Vollering to maintain her grip on the yellow jersey.

"It's so crazy to be honest, the whole stage was such a crazy rollercoaster," said a visibly emotional Niewiadoma.

"I've gone through such a terrible time on this climb, like I hated everything, then to arriving at the finish line and learning that I won Tour de France, which is insane! It's so mind-blowing."

The Tour was turned upside down on Thursday during the fifth stage when Vollering was caught up in a huge crash six

kilometres from the finish in Amneville, losing 1min 47sec on the leader.

But the Dutchwomen fought her way back and going into the final stage, she had cut that gap down to one minute 15 seconds.

Reigning Tour champion Vollering then produced a barnstorming performance in Sunday's 150 km slog from Le Grand-Bornand to Alpe d'Huez, outsprinting compatriot Pauliena Rooijakkers to the line to claim the stage win.

Niewiadoma struggled on the Glandon ascent and seemed set to throw away her lead as her rival surged ahead and provisionally took the lead in the general ranking at several stages.

But the Polish rider managed to regroup and fought back in the final 5 km to claw back precious seconds.

Both Vollering and Niewiadoma faced a nerve-



Canyon//SRAM Racing team's Polish rider Katarzyna Niewiadoma celebrates after crossing the finish line and winning the third edition of the Women's Tour de France cycling race, after the 8th and last stage of the Tour de France, a 149.9 km between Le Grand Bornand and the Alpe d'Huez, in south-eastern France. — AFP

wracking wait once across the line for the official confirmation of who was to be the last to hold the yellow jersey in the third edition of the women's Tour.

The duo dissolved into tears of drastically varying emotions when the news filtered through that the Pole had claimed a historic win by the narrowest of margins.

After third-placed finishes in the previous two Tours and a

disappointing eighth-place finish at the 2024 Olympic Games road race, the victory tasted even sweeter for Niewiadoma.

"I think last year's third place was there to reward me with this victory and same as two weeks ago I was so disappointed getting stuck behind a crash during the Olympics," said the Limanowa-native.

"I feel like during this week, all the stars aligned for my team and for myself."

Niewiadoma completed the eight-stage tour in 24 hours 36min 07sec, a mere four seconds in front of second-placed Vollering with Rooijakkers completing the podium just a further six seconds behind.

"This is one of the greatest achievements in Polish sport. Bad luck at the Olympics, now a bit of luck, but above all skill," wrote Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk on X. — AFP



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OIA highlights support to State General Budget and debt reduction

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 19

The Oman Investment Authority (OIA) has made substantial contributions to the State's General Budget and effectively managed its subsidiaries' corporate debt. In 2023, the OIA contributed RO 800 million to the General Budget, bringing its total contributions to over RO 6 billion since 2016. This financial boost underscores the OIA's commitment to supporting the state's fiscal health and economic stability.

The Authority has also made notable progress in reducing its debt. Over the past year, the OIA achieved a remarkable 24 per cent reduction in debt, amounting to RO 2.4 billion. This reduction is part of a broader strategy to enhance financial sustainability.

Additionally, the OIA prepaid RO 300 million in debt in 2023, further strengthening its financial position. Since 2020, the debt of OIA's subsidiaries has decreased from RO 10.135 billion to RO 7.681 billion by 2023, reflecting ongoing efforts to streamline and consolidate financial obligations.

The OIA's post highlights the Authority's continued commitment to financial prudence, stating, "Continuing our journey towards financial sustainability, #OIA reduced its companies' debt by 24 per cent and increased its contribution to the State's General Budget, exceeding RO 6 billion from 2016 to 2023."

Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance and Chairman of the OIA's Board



Over the past year, OIA achieved a remarkable 24 per cent reduction in debt, amounting to RO 2.4 billion.

of Directors, commended the government's efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of global economic challenges through various programmes and reforms. He noted that despite these challenges, the Omani economy has continued to perform robustly, with oil prices surpassing projections in the State's General Budget. The recovery of non-oil sectors from the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside increased foreign investment and reduced government debt, highlights the resilience and strategic direction of Oman's economic policy.

According to an evaluation by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the OIA's National Development Fund (NDF) significantly contributed to the country's gross domestic product (GDP), reaching RO 6.20 billion or 14.4 per cent in 2022, compared to RO 4.46 billion in 2021. Furthermore, investment spending by OIA companies in local sectors totalled RO 2.1 billion, marking an 8.4-per cent increase and surpassing the annual target of RO 1.9 billion.

OMAN SETS UP NATIONAL OFFICE FOR LOCAL CONTENT

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the General Secretariat of the Tender Board, aims to enhance local content, including the workforce, national and local products, fixed assets, and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. This initiative plays a significant role in supporting the national economy, advancing economic sectors, improving efficiency and increasing the gross domestic product.

Eng Bader bin Salim al Maamari, Secretary-General of the Tender Board, confirmed that the General Secretariat's focus has been on increasing the contribution of local content in procurement contracts and government projects. This aims to enhance implementation efficiency, operational performance, and raise awareness of the importance of local content.

In a statement to Oman News Agency, he said that this will positively impact the introduction of various initiatives aimed at improving the efficiency of economic sectors and enhancing the trade balance by substituting imports and boosting exports.

It will also lead to increased direct investment resulting from the localisation of industries, contribute to creating job opportunities for national workforce and raise Omanisation rates across different sectors.

He also highlighted that the General Secretariat of the Tender Board is currently working on establishing a National Office for Local Content.

This office will focus on several responsibilities aimed



The National Office for Local Content will develop national policies and strategies related to local content in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, create plans, programmes and incentives for local content development.

at improving project execution efficiency across various sectors and achieving national benefits that stimulate the national economy.

The office will develop national policies and strategies related to local content in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, create plans, programmes and incentives for local content development, and work with different sectors and legislators to establish enabling legislation and laws.

Additionally, it will conduct market analysis to identify opportunities related to local content, address gaps and enhance local content potential.

Eng Al Maamari explained that the office will establish a unified and comprehensive database to support strategic decision-making.

It will set up mechanisms, standards and indicators to measure the effectiveness of local content in achieving development and financial goals.

The office will also focus on creating opportunities for small

and medium-sized enterprises and local companies, enhancing their competitiveness and role in the national economy. Additionally, it will contribute to job creation, increase Omanisation rates, support national products and localise industries.

The office aims to ensure coordination among implementing sectors to maximise the benefits of local content at the national level and facilitate the transfer of knowledge, experiences and lessons learned across various sectors in Oman.

Local content Oman is based on four key pillars. The first pillar is supply chains, which encompasses all activities and processes from the delivery of raw materials to the manufacturer to the delivery of the final product to the end consumer.

The local content system will enable investors to establish new facilities, enhance local industrial capabilities, and build effective partnerships between local

and international companies in goods and services. It will also support local opportunities from identifying them to the final product's operation and encourage the export of local products and industries.

The second pillar focuses on developing the local workforce. The local content system will play a crucial role in providing job opportunities and training programs aimed at skill development.

It will work to enhance the participation of the local workforce in key economic sectors of the Sultanate of Oman, offering appropriate support and empowerment to freelancers and independent professionals by allocating certain tasks to them within various projects.

The third pillar focuses on fostering innovation and technology transfer. It aims to provide advantages and incentives to create an attractive environment for innovation and technology, encouraging the transfer of technology, research, development, and innovation through effective partnerships between local and international companies.

This pillar also seeks to enhance the use of advanced technologies and best practices, and support development programmes for start-ups.

The fourth pillar relates to nurturing entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

This includes prioritising local SMEs in project contracts and procurement through mandatory lists, and implementing programmes to develop suppliers and support incubators. — ONA

Omani Promising Startups Programme launches SMEs accelerator

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 19

The Omani Promising Startups Programme announced the launch of an accelerator in cooperation with Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA) and The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn).

The accelerator will accept both individuals and SMEs through two distinct tracks. The first, the idea phase track, will accept individuals with innovative ideas and entrepreneurs looking to turn their ideas into products or services in all sectors.

The pre-seed phase track, on



The first meeting of the Omani Promising Startups Programme, which took place in April.

the other hand, will target SMEs in the health, food security, tourism and real estate sectors.

According to the programme, the accelerator aims to support the growth and expansion of

startups focused on innovation and technology in the industrial sector.

This is in addition to providing funding opportunities, integrated training, guidance, and

consultancy to ensure the success and growth of startups.

Furthermore, the programme cites empowering innovators and supporting the establishment of effective startups, linking

them to business accelerators and investors to support their expansion locally, regionally and globally as another goal of the accelerator.

In addition, it supports the employment of advanced innovation and technologies in various sectors and industries through the opportunities provided by the accelerator.

Other services which will be provided by the accelerator include access to venture capital and angel investors, network building opportunities, the opportunity to participate in international exhibitions, specialised training and consultancy services and access to office spaces.

The programme will target 40 startups and will take course over a period of four months starting from September of this year to December, at Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) in Muscat. The last date for registration is August 28, 2024.

Applicants will go through three phases: a registration phase, initial sorting phase and an interview and evaluation phase.

Earlier this year, the Omani Promising Startups Programme, which was launched under the auspices of HH Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said, announced that it is in the process of launching a venture capital fund under the Oman Future Fund, in an effort to support technology startups.

BYD recently announced exciting debut at Goodwood Festival of Speed 2024

MUSCAT: BYD, the world's leading manufacturer of new energy vehicles was thrilled to announce their partnership with the prestigious Goodwood Festival of Speed, which took place from 11 to 14 July 2024. This collaboration witnessed BYD's impressive stand, where visitors explored the latest pioneering technology from the brands.

BYD showcased its brand-new BYD SEAL U DM-i, a plug-in hybrid five-seater SUV.

This is BYD's first plug-in hybrid vehicle (PHEV) model with BYD's Super DM (Dual Mode) Technology in Europe.

The D-segment family SUV is designed as a spacious, practical, safe and comfortable family car, full of advanced intelligent PHEV technology that prioritises electric power benefiting energy efficiency, ultra-low fuel consumption and overall driving performance.



The all new BYD SEAL U DM-i makes its UK debut in autumn this year, with an ultra-low fuel consumption bringing all the benefits of electric driving to eco-conscious customers who enjoy long-range journeys.

The all new BYD SEAL U DM-i makes its UK debut in autumn this year, with an ultra-low fuel consumption bringing all the benefits of electric driving to eco-conscious customers who enjoy long-range journeys.

Alongside this, the popular BYD ATTO 3, BYD DOLPHIN and BYD SEAL models were displayed, highlighting BYD's

diverse range of sustainable and innovative vehicles.

BYD also presented the DENZA D9, a premium MPV that offers unparalleled comfort and cutting-edge features.

The premium DENZA D9, the ultimate all-electric people carrier with a 7-seat capacity (2+2+3 configuration), makes its debut in the UK, adding another

dimension of electric innovation to the BYD stand.

Attendees got the opportunity to discover the DENZA D9's spacious interior and state-of-the-art technology, making it a standout vehicle in the MPV market. In 2023, DENZA D9 was the largest selling MPV in China, selling over 119,000 units.

Michael Shu, Managing

Director, BYD Europe, said: "The Goodwood Festival of Speed is one of the most significant automotive events in the world.

"We are excited to partner with the Goodwood Festival of Speed and showcase our latest innovations to a passionate automotive audience."

This event is the perfect platform to present our unprecedented new energy vehicle technologies and introduce our pioneering vehicles from BYD.

Our goal is to bring visitors an experience beyond imagination, highlighting how our leading technology and pioneering products are driving the future of the automotive industry.

We look forward to engaging with visitors and demonstrating our commitment to sustainability and cutting-edge technology." In Oman BYD range of electrifying vehicles will soon be distributed by Saud Bahwan Group.

The 'Back-to-School' initiative achieved success



Over two days, a large number of kids engaged in a variety of fun games, activities and competitions in the Meethaq area.

MUSCAT: The "Back-to-School" initiative, recently organised by Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat at Muscat City Centre, witnessed strong participation from customers and visitors. All attendees enjoyed a fun and enriching time, with children actively participating in a variety of activities alongside their parents.

The event celebrated the start of the new school year with children, bringing excitement and joy to all involved.

Over two days, a large number of kids engaged in a variety of fun games, activities, and competitions in the Meethaq area.

Special activities focused on mathematics and science were included, and participants received a range of gifts.

Additionally, the Meethaq area attracted many customers and visitors who explored the diverse banking services, products and facilities offered by Meethaq Islamic Banking.

These offerings, designed to meet their needs and aspirations, included various banking accounts, financing products and credit cards.

Furthermore, Meethaq offers a children's savings account, which customers can open for their kids to instil the habit of saving, which can be beneficial for significant life occasions in the future.

Mamun crowdfunding crosses key milestone

MUSCAT: Mamun has announced a significant milestone in its journey of supporting Oman's diverse business landscape and wealth creation for retail investors. Since the launch in October 2023, Mamun has successfully crossed RO 1 million in Sharia-compliant supply chain financing, empowering various businesses of different sizes across Oman in less than a year.

Mamun has provided vital financial support across several key sectors, including: Construction and Contracting (Financing contractor receivables and purchase orders for construction-related projects); Trade and Import/Export (Facilitating trade finance transactions, including the financing of the shipping of goods and raw materials across borders); Manufacturing (Supporting manufacturers by providing working capital tied up in purchase orders and receivables); Logistics and Transportation (Financing the movement of goods, including the shipping of truckloads and containers); Retail and Wholesale (Providing financing for retail and wholesale businesses to manage their supply chain and inventory); Food and Beverage (Financing businesses in the food and beverage sector, including suppliers and distributors); and Services Sector (Financing businesses that provide various services, including those in the professional services, healthcare and education sectors).

"Crossing RO 1 million in less than a year is a testament to our unwavering commitment to empowering businesses across Oman with ethical, Sharia-compliant financial solutions," said Saleh al Tamami, Co-Founder and CEO, Mamun. "At Mamun, we are pioneering circular finance and investments powered by crowdfunding, fully aligning with His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's Vision 2040 for alternative and sustainable finance."

Sohar Islamic announces new call centre number backed by advanced IVR for enhanced customer service

MUSCAT: With a keen focus on customer-centricity, Sohar Islamic — Sohar International's Islamic window — has announced a new, dedicated call centre number: +968 2473 0037, available 24/7 to serve our customers.

This initiative is complemented by an upgraded Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system designed to enhance the customer experience.

The new IVR system offers intuitive and efficient navigation, ensuring that callers are seamlessly connected to the appropriate contact.

This development underscores our commitment to delivering exceptional service and personalised digital



The new IVR system offers intuitive and efficient navigation, ensuring that callers are seamlessly connected to the appropriate contact.

experiences to our valued customers.

Commenting on the new developments, Abdul Wahid al Murshidi, Chief Islamic

Banking Officer, said, "Through our new call centre number and advanced IVR system, Sohar Islamic demonstrates its commitment to service

excellence and personalised offerings.

"By integrating state-of-the-art technology, the enhancements to our IVR system not only streamline transactions, but also fortify security measures, accelerate service delivery and enhance overall convenience.

"This initiative represents a significant leap forward in the realm of digital customer engagement within the Islamic banking sector."

In addition to phone support, customers can now access the bank's call center through various communication channels ensuring assistance is always just a click or call away, no matter where customers are.

BankDhofar offers exclusive benefits for Al Riadah Priority Banking customers

MUSCAT: Dedicated to providing an unparalleled banking experience, BankDhofar provides personalised products and services to serve priority segment customers of Al Riadah Priority Banking. Al Riadah provides a unique range of banking products and services that are tailored to suit the unique lifestyle of priority customers, ranging from personalised cheque book, exclusive Al Riadah debit and credit cards, including: Visa Infinite Debit Card, Visa Signature Debit Card, Visa Infinite Credit Card, and MasterCard World Credit Card.

Customers can enjoy exceptional times at restaurants, shops, as well as procurement protection, extended warranty, access to airport lounges around the world, travel insurance for cardholders and their families, in addition to other exclusive services. BankDhofar has tailor-



Al Riadah provides a unique range of banking products and services that are tailored to suit the unique lifestyle of priority customers.

made financing solutions to meet the needs of its priority banking customers with low insurance fees and simple and fast

procedures.

The bank also provides deposit accounts at competitive interest rates. Al Riadah customers may

benefit from the distinct monthly interest rate of the High Yield Savings Account. Al Riadah Priority Banking customers have

highly competent relationship managers to ensure the utmost convenience to this segment of customers.

As part of continuous improvement, the bank solicits regular feedback on the products, services and digital platforms from its customers. As of July 2024, more than 84 per cent of the customers expressed their satisfaction with Relationship managers and the special treatment they receive at the branches.

With the Rewards Programme, which is an exclusive and comprehensive loyalty programme, credit card holders, may enjoy a variety of privileges and benefits. Reward points can be viewed through BankDhofar's flagship Mobile Banking Application. The App enables customers to conduct their banking transactions at their convenience 24/7.

Strategic alliance signed to propel Oman’s green hydrogen vision

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, AUGUST 19

A key player in Oman’s oil and gas sector, Seven Seas Petroleum LLC, in a landmark move towards a sustainable future, has officially partnered with Chinese electrolyser maker Sungrow Hydrogen to advance Oman’s green hydrogen capacity.

The partnership was formalised in a ceremonial signing in Beijing by Harith al Suleimani, Executive Director of Seven Seas Petroleum, and Chaocai Peng, Chairman of Sungrow Hydrogen, and attended by Nasser bin Mohammed al Busaidi, Oman’s Ambassador to China.

Seven Seas Petroleum has been instrumental in providing vital services to the oil and gas industry in Oman and the broader MENA region. This new collaboration with Sungrow Hydrogen marks a significant expansion of their commitment to innovative solutions and sustainability.

In an exclusive interview with the *Observer*, Harith al Suleimani expressed his enthusiasm for the partnership, stating, “Seven years ago, I questioned if green hydrogen could be the answer for Oman.

“Today, with Sungrow’s advanced technologies, we are poised to make that vision a reality.”

His foresight and dedication to sustainable energy have been pivotal in positioning Seven Seas Petroleum as a leader in the green hydrogen market.

“This collaboration aims to



The partnership agreement was signed by Harith al Suleimani, Executive Director of Seven Seas Petroleum, and Chaocai Peng, Chairman of Sungrow Hydrogen, and attended by Nasser bin Mohammed al Busaidi, Oman’s Ambassador to China.

leverage Oman’s abundant solar and wind resources, combined with Sungrow’s cutting-edge technologies, to establish a cost-effective and sustainable green hydrogen supply chain in the region,” he said.

Sungrow Hydrogen, known for its impressive research and development programme, brings state-of-the-art manufacturing and innovative solutions to the partnership.

The company has been at the forefront of electrolyser technologies and other renewable energy solutions.

“With Sungrow’s technical excellence, we are integrating these solutions locally and regionally.

“This integration is expected to contribute significantly to in-country value, technology transfer and job creation, ultimately strengthening the local hydrogen supply chain,” Al Suleimani said.

“With time and growth in adoption, the cost of green

hydrogen will become more attractive.”

By utilising Sungrow’s diverse range of electrolysers and solutions, the partnership aims to make green hydrogen production more affordable and accessible.

The strategic partnership also promises to bolster Oman’s position as a leader in the global green hydrogen market.

“Under the guidance of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Oman Vision 2040 is rapidly transforming from a vision into reality,” he added.

Green hydrogen is set to play a vital role in future markets, and by being early adopters, Oman is strategically positioning itself as a reliable provider of green hydrogen and fuels.

Seven Seas Petroleum plans to mimic the government’s strategy from a supply chain perspective.

The company is committed to supporting Oman’s strategic

plans by implementing robust green hydrogen ecosystems.

“Our partnership with Sungrow will support our government’s strategic plans by contributing to a robust green hydrogen ecosystem,” Al Suleimani emphasised.

He highlighted the broader impact of the collaboration, stating, “By leveraging cutting-edge technology and local resources, we are creating a sustainable model that benefits the economy and the environment.”

The focus on technology transfer and job creation is expected to stimulate local industries and provide new opportunities for skilled workers in Oman.

Moreover, the partnership with Sungrow Hydrogen is strategically designed to enhance Oman’s ability to export green hydrogen, tapping into growing international demand.

This positions Oman as a key player in the global transition to cleaner energy sources, aligning with international climate goals and sustainability standards.

The integration of Sungrow’s advanced R&D capabilities, with centres in China and Germany, ensures that the latest innovations in hydrogen production are brought to Oman.

“This not only improves efficiency, but also reduces the levelised cost of hydrogen, making it a more viable energy source for various applications, from industrial use to transportation,” Al Suleimani concluded.



Hamed bin Ali Bait Said, Director of the Investor Services Department, Raysut Industrial City, speaking at the 2nd Dhofar Annual Forum.

Investment surge at Raysut Industrial City in H1 2024

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, AUGUST 19

Raysut Industrial City, in Dhofar Governorate, has experienced a significant surge in investment during the first half of 2024, with land utilisation reaching an impressive 98 per cent, according to Hamed bin Ali Bait Said, Director of the Investor Services Department.

Speaking at the Dhofar Forum 2024, Bait Said revealed that 27 investment applications were received, resulting in eight new projects with a combined investment exceeding RO 43 million. The industrial city, strategically positioned near the Port of Salalah and Salalah International Airport, has become a magnet for diverse projects spanning food, pharmaceuticals, cement products, steel, wood, plastics, cables, organic fertilisers and petrochemicals.

The total investment in Raysut Industrial City now surpasses RO 500 million,

covering approximately 200 projects in various stages, including operational, under construction and planned ventures. Raysut Industrial City’s advantageous location enhances its appeal to investors, given its proximity to key global markets such as the Horn of Africa, Asia, India and Yemen.

The Port of Salalah plays a pivotal role in driving economic activity and attracting investments to the Dhofar Governorate and beyond, reinforcing the city’s status as a premier investment hub in the region.

Since its establishment in 1992 under the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), Raysut Industrial City has leveraged its strategic location just 4 kilometres from the Port of Salalah and 15 kilometres from Salalah International Airport to attract a wide range of investments, particularly in the food and pharmaceutical sectors, while continuing to expand across other industries.

Oman-backed fund invests in Spanish digital acceleration firm

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, AUGUST 19

The Spain Oman Private Equity Fund (SOPEF), a joint venture between the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and Spanish state-owned trading company Cofides, has announced plans to fund the growth of a subsidiary of Making Science Group, a leading Spanish-based digital marketing and technology company.

The beneficiary is Making Science Marketing & AdTech which, together with parent group Making Science, is set to receive up to 40 million euros in investments over the next two years. Making Science Marketing & Adtech specialises in providing advanced solutions in data analytics, ad campaign optimisation and user experience personalisation.

The SOPEF fund, set up by Oman and Spain last October, seeks to promote investment in Spanish companies with high growth potential. Its remit is to foster economic cooperation and strengthen ties between the two countries. José Manuel Bartolomé, Director of the SOPEF fund, said:

“Making Science meets all the requirements we are looking for in SOPEF, since it is a growth project with a mission to lead and an international outlook.

It is also a sector of great attractiveness and growth, due to the digitalisation and transformation component that digital marketing is bringing to the industry and that presents great opportunities in the coming years.”

José Antonio Martínez Aguilar, Founder and CEO of Making Science, welcomed the Omani sovereign wealth fund’s backing for the transaction.

“The entry of a fund with the support of a sovereign wealth fund indicates on the one hand the strength of the Making Science project and on the other hand gives us access to an investment capacity that allows us to compete with large global groups. MCH (which manages the SOPEF Fund) is a firm with extensive experience in helping Spanish companies to grow abroad and the investment of a sovereign wealth fund such as Oman Investment Authority, besides showing the strength of the Making Science project, will facilitate our growth in the Middle East.”

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, AUGUST 19

The Dhofar Annual Forum, now in its second edition, has emerged as a critical platform for discussing the economic development of the Dhofar Governorate, reflecting a concerted effort to align with Oman’s broader national strategies, including Oman Vision 2040.

Held at the Millennium Salalah Hotel, this year’s forum, organised by *Alam Al Iqtisad* magazine, was inaugurated under the theme “Economic Development Prospects in Dhofar Governorate: A Phase of Integration and Partnership”.

The event was graced by the presence of HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, alongside ministers, dignitaries and business leaders, demonstrating the forum’s significance in shaping the governorate’s economic future.

The forum’s agenda was meticulously crafted to emphasise the importance of strategic integration across various sectors, highlighting the need for multi-sector partnerships to enhance Dhofar’s competitiveness as a prime investment destination.

The discussions were firmly



Dignitaries at the opening of the 2nd Dhofar Annual Forum.

rooted in the idea that Dhofar’s unique environment and climate are key assets that, if leveraged effectively, could significantly contribute to sustainable development and align with the ambitious goals of Oman Vision 2040. Central to the forum’s discourse was the exploration of strategies and programmes aimed at capitalising on Dhofar’s comparative advantages.

Participants agreed that achieving sustainable economic growth would require a concerted effort to foster integration across different sectors, with the private sector playing a pivotal role in supporting government initiatives.

In his keynote speech, Dr

Ahmed bin Mohsin al Ghassani, Chairman of Dhofar Municipality, presented a detailed overview of ongoing developmental projects in the governorate. His address underscored the significance of these initiatives in laying the groundwork for Dhofar’s future economic prosperity.

The forum featured a series of keynote addresses, working papers and visual presentations.

A central panel discussion titled “The Importance of Partnership and Integration in Supporting Economic Development in Dhofar Governorate” provided a platform for experts to share insights on the roles of industrial cities, logistics,

renewable energy and the transition to an innovation-driven economy.

Prominent figures in the discussions included Eng Said al Mandhari, CEO of ITHCA Group; Dr Hilal al Dhamri, CEO of Raysut Cement Company; and Shaikh Khalil al Harthi, CEO of Credit Oman, among others.

One of the most significant contributions came from Abdullah bin Mohammed al Abri, Director-General of the Partnership and Privatisation Unit at the Ministry of Finance.

In his working paper titled “Economic Development Prospects in Dhofar Governorate: A Phase of Integration and Partnership,” Al Abri emphasised the crucial role of strategic cooperation between the government, private sector and civil society in driving economic growth.

In a separate seminar during the forum, Dr Al Ghassani addressed the critical issue of tourism development in the Dhofar Governorate. His presentation provided a comprehensive analysis of the tourism sector. Looking ahead, he proposed several forward-looking projects designed to foster greater integration across various sectors.

Global markets hold breath as Federal Reserve weighs interest rate moves



RAJESH BANSAL

The author is the Chief Financial Officer at the Muscat Finance SAOG

The world is paying close attention to every word Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell utters after each Fed meeting. Global markets respond to his comments, with investors and traders adjusting their positions based on the Fed's guidance. Trillions of dollars can shift in response to the central bank's actions. Historically, the Federal Reserve has used "forward guidance" as a tool to shape market expectations regarding the future path of the federal funds rate. On July 31, 2024, when Powell announced that the federal funds rate would remain unchanged at 5.25 to 5.50 per cent, the world's focus turned to the Fed's next steps.

Powell's statement that there has been "further progress toward the committee's 2 per cent inflation objective," and a shift in language from saying inflation "remains elevated" to "is somewhat elevated," suggested growing confidence in achieving the inflation target. Powell also noted that job gains had moderated, and the unemployment rate had increased, though he still described the job market as "solid". The Fed emphasised its dual mandate of low inflation and full employment, signalling a departure from the aggressive rate hikes of the past two years. This was enough to buoy the markets, with equities and fixed-income assets rallying immediately after the Fed's announcement. However, just days later, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a July unemployment rate of 4.3 per cent — the highest since October 2021 — and a lower-than-expected payroll gain of 114,000 jobs, compared to economists' forecasts of 175,000. This data sparked fears that the US economy might be weakening, leading to a market correction as concerns about a potential recession grew. It's worth noting that market reactions can be volatile and mood-dependent; the similarly weak April 2024 job



The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a July unemployment rate of 4.3 per cent, the highest since October 2021, with a payroll gain of 114,000 jobs, below the forecast of 175,000.

creation numbers did not trigger such a response. Adding to the uncertainty, the Bank of Japan (BoJ) raised interest rates for the second time in 2024 in August, following a March hike — the first in 17 years — as it sought to combat inflation driven by the weakening yen. This move sent the Nikkei into a bear market and reignited concerns about the yen carry trade, where investors borrow in yen to capitalise on low interest rates in Japan and invest elsewhere for higher returns. If

these trades unwind, it could lead to significant capital outflows from global markets, raising fears of a repeat financial disruption. A key question on everyone's mind is why the Fed has not yet reduced rates, and why the next move might not come until September 2024. Powell explained that the Fed wants to see more evidence that inflation is sustainably moving towards 2 per cent before adjusting policy. The Fed is cautious, remembering the aftermath of

Covid-19, when it mistakenly believed inflation was transient. The Fed is keen to avoid repeating this policy error and potentially reigniting inflation. While it's uncertain whether inflation will continue to decline to 2 per cent or settle at a higher level, what is clear is that if interest rates remain elevated for an extended period, the risk of recession increases. Economies and corporations with high debt levels could struggle to borrow and service their obligations, raising the possibility of defaults. In such circumstances, central banks, including the Fed, may need to cut rates more aggressively to prevent a severe economic downturn. Since mid-2022, both the Fed and the European Central Bank (ECB) have raised interest rates by 525 and 450 basis points, respectively. Given the typical 18–24-month lag between rate hikes and their full impact on economic growth, there is a significant risk that waiting too long to cut rates could lead to a slowdown, increased unemployment, and a potential recession. Powell has acknowledged that the current policy stance is restrictive enough to negatively affect economic activity, with the unemployment

rate rising from 3.4 per cent in April 2023 to 4.3 per cent in July 2024. The risks now appear to be skewed towards a weaker economy. As inflation shows signs of improvement and other economic indicators weaken, the time to cut rates is approaching. Many analysts from major global banks predict multiple rate cuts in 2024, with some even forecasting two 50-basis-point cuts. They estimate a terminal rate of 3.00 per cent to 3.25 per cent by mid-2025, a significant decrease from current levels. However, the economic data will ultimately determine the pace and extent of these cuts. We must remember that Stock market is not just the economy, and the Fed responds to inflation and growth, not the level or volatility of share prices unless it threatens financial stability. Further, the Fed does not respond to pressure from politicians and shall always move cautiously and incrementally avoiding any overdoses of rate cuts. For months, US economic data has been inconsistent, keeping markets on edge as they await the Fed's next move. The challenge for central banks globally will be to navigate this transition carefully to avoid shocks to the global economy.

A pressing global crisis-climate change: the disappearing cities



DR MYTHLI KOLLURU

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pre-industrial times, there has been a sharp 50 per cent increase in atmospheric Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) levels. This has been unprecedented over the last several million years. Climate change has also caused the melting of polar ice caps and glaciers, hurricanes, drought, heat waves and heavy rainfall. Yields of major crops like maize, wheat and soya have reduced. This will put another 183 million people on the verge of starvation. Various regions worldwide are already experiencing water issues, which will only worsen as water availability is vital for drinking, agriculture and industrial processes. Ecosystems, biodiversity and natural habitats will slowly die with increased species extinction rates. Deltas behave like a two-edged sword. Historically, they played a vital role in the prosperity of early settlements, but with time, they became an environmental constraint as settlements began to grow and prosper. Land subsidence is the biggest challenge facing many of the delta cities of the world. Land subsidence is the gradual or sudden sinking of the earth's surface due to the removal of subsurface earth materials. One such delta city is Jakarta, Indonesia's most populous mega-capital city, which is sinking due to a tsunami of human activities. These activities have resulted in land subsidence and alarming rates of rising Java sea waters. Jakarta is sinking faster than any other big city in the world. 40 per cent of Jakarta is now underwater, and sea levels rise at 3.6 mm per year, so the city's future looks grave. This disaster was primarily

caused by the over-extraction of groundwater, which caused the land to sink. There is an increased risk of damage due to the effects of climate change. Three glaciers are melting, raising sea levels: Antarctica in the Southern polar region, Greenland in the North and the Himalayan mountains. This has resulted in the expansion of the sea, putting the coastal areas in danger of submerging. In addition to this, Jakarta routinely experiences floods due to heavy rainfall upstream. The Indonesian government is considering shifting the capital city to Nusantara, which is being developed in East Kalimantan in Borneo, which is in the rainforests. The government is also constructing the extra high coastal wall, a quasi-temporary barrier to hold back the rising sea and compensate for subsidence. With subsidence at the current rate, the Coastal Wall itself may be underwater by 2030.

Jakarta is not alone in facing the threat of sinking due to climate change. Cities across the globe, from Bangkok, Thailand; Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; New Orleans, USA; Venice, Italy; and Mexico City, Mexico, are all grappling with the challenges posed by climate change and human activities like groundwater extraction, construction and urbanisation. Bangkok was built on flat, low-lying, soft and compressed clay land. According to a 2024 study, the mean Line-of-Sight (LOS) velocity of subsidence was found to be approximately -7.0 mm/year, with some areas, such as Ayutthaya, experiencing rates as high as -53.5 mm/year. Excessive groundwater extraction has resulted in significant land subsidence. It is also threatened



Though climate change has been happening for a long time, extreme changes to the global climate are caused by human activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, industrial practices and the increased concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. – Reuters

Climate change, a global crisis, is the long-term shift in temperatures and weather patterns caused by natural factors and many human activities. Though climate change has been happening for a long time, extreme changes to the global climate are caused by human activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, industrial practices and the increased concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Since the mid-20th century, global temperatures have risen with increased carbon dioxide and methane levels. In March 2024, the global average concentration of Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) was 4.8ppm higher than in March 2023; this marks the highest ever recorded. Since

by floods annually. Ho Chi Minh City is also one of the fastest-sinking coastal cities in the world. Subsidence rates average 8 mm per year. With these rates and the city's low elevation, it faces significant flooding. High tides exceed 1.5m, leading to extensive flooding of low-lying areas. The frequency of rainfall has also increased, creating challenges for the city's drainage system. New Orleans, USA, was founded along the Mississippi River. Initially, the town was above sea level, surrounded by swamps and marshland. Over time, urban expansion required draining these wetlands, which inadvertently led to land subsidence. Since much of New Orleans is below sea level, flooding from storms and rising sea levels are significant threats. The city is a "bowl" with water all around it, and some parts are up to 10 feet below sea level. Venice is built on 120 small

islands in a shallow lagoon, making it more vulnerable to rising sea levels and natural subsidence. High water events have become severe and frequent in Venice. In November 2019, the city experienced its second-worst flood, with water levels rising to 187 cm and drowning over 80 per cent of the town. Because of the city's low elevation and sinking foundations, storm surges and high tides have a more significant impact and worsen the floods. Mexico City, built on a former lakebed, is sinking alarmingly quickly; subsidence is up to 50 centimetres yearly in certain places. The primary cause of this is the compaction of the soft clay soil brought on by excessive groundwater withdrawal. The sinking has caused widespread infrastructure damage, such as broken buildings and roads, raising the danger of flooding. The city's drainage systems are also in poor

condition, challenging flood management. Mexico City faces significant challenges in urban planning and infrastructure development. The World Health Organization predicts climate change will lead to around 250,000 deaths annually from 2030 to 2050. By 2100, 50 per cent to 75 per cent of the world population will face life-threatening circumstances due to extreme heat and humidity. This is not a problem that minor adjustments can solve; it demands profound lifestyle and behavioural changes. The future is not a far-off point. It comes in daily doses; it must be noticed and understood. If we ignore the rising sea levels and the effects of global warming today, we will face a bleak tomorrow. The human race must take responsibility and take actionable climate-save steps to ensure a sustainable future for generations.

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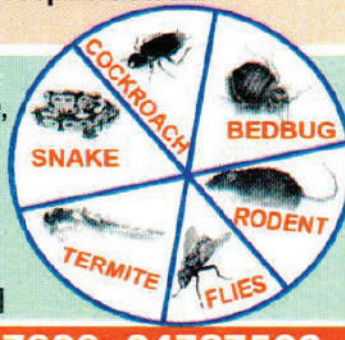
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IZDIYAR_INFO

BOLLYWOOD

Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor Khan (Owners of Defending Champions, Tigers of Kolkata) during the launch of India's pioneering tennis ball T10 cricket tournament Season 2 in Mumbai. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

Mexican singer Marco Antonio Solis performs onstage during the Eternamente Agradecido World Tour 2024 at the Intuit Center in Inglewood, California. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

A Sudanese refugee prepares a meal of super cereals for her family to eat in their tent in Korsi refugee camp, Birao. — AFP



CULTURE

A woman burns offerings for her dead ancestors on a street during the Hungry Ghost Festival in Beijing. — AFP



FESTIVAL

A Taoist priest takes part in a ritual during the Hungry Ghost Festival at Tai Shing temple in Hong Kong. — AFP



art & life

TUESDAY | AUGUST 20, 2024 | SAFAR 15, 1446 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om



A SUN-SOAKED JOURNEY IN WADI HARIMA

Have you explored the wadis and canyons near Fins? If so, have you heard of Wadi Harima? In this feature, this adventurer shared the thrill as they immerse themselves in the natural beauty and serene isolation of Oman's wilderness... **P20**

ENTERTAINMENT

'Alien: Romulus' Solidifies Disney's Box Office Rebound

"ALIEN: ROMULUS" was on pace to collect at least \$40 million at theatres in the United States and Canada over the weekend, a strong total that solidified a turnaround at Disney's movie division.

Disney's seven movie factories — Marvel, Lucasfilm, Pixar, 20th Century, Searchlight Pictures, Disney Animation and Walt Disney

Pictures — began to break down in 2021. They had been pushed too hard to make content for Disney's streaming service. The pandemic added difficulties, resulting in a string of failures including "Jungle Cruise," "Strange World," "Lightyear," "Haunted Mansion," "Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny," "Nightmare Alley," "The Marvels" and "Wish."

Investors grew increasingly agitated, putting Disney CEO Bob Iger and Alan Bergman, Disney's top movie executive, under extreme pressure to deliver improved results. Movies carry unusual weight at The Walt Disney Co., which relies on them for much more than ticket revenue. At Disney, movies also power a vast consumer products division and underpin theme park attractions.

It appears that Disney has regained its box office footing. So far this summer (from May 1 to Sunday), Disney films have accounted for 42 per cent of total ticket sales in the United States and Canada, according to Box Office Mojo, a film database. Last summer, Disney had about a 27-per cent market share.

With the successful release of "Alien: Romulus" (20th Century), the company has now delivered four consecutive hits. In May, Disney rolled out "Kingdom of the



Planet of the Apes," a 20th Century movie that cost about \$160 million to make and collected nearly \$400 million worldwide. "Inside Out 2" (Pixar) arrived in June and has taken in \$1.6 billion worldwide. In July, "Deadpool & Wolverine" (Marvel) set a

record for the largest R-rated opening in Hollywood history and has gone on to sell \$1.1 billion in tickets.

"Moana 2" (Disney Animation) is expected to expand Disney's run of hits to five when it arrives this fall. Analysts say that

"Mufasa: The Lion King" (Walt Disney Pictures), scheduled for release in December, could be a sixth, followed by "Captain America: Brave New World" (Marvel) in February.

"Though it remains to be seen whether this summer's successes mark a true and lasting return to form, looking ahead to the rest of this year and beyond sees a theatrical slate filled with highly dependable intellectual property," Robert Fishman, an analyst at MoffettNathanson, a research firm, wrote in a report.

The R-rated "Alien: Romulus," which received mostly positive reviews, cost an estimated \$80 million to make. An expansive ad campaign added tens of millions to the price. Overseas, "Romulus" was on pace to collect an additional \$35 million, according to box office analysts. The movie focuses on a group of young space colonists who discover a derelict space station infested with a carnivorous.

To squeeze more dollars from the 45-year-old "Alien" franchise — "Romulus" was the seventh entry — producers turned to a new generation of talent. Fede Alvarez ("Don't Breathe") directed "Romulus" from a script he wrote with Rodo Sayagues. The cast was led by Cailee Spaeny "Civil War". — **NYT**

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PRIORITISING
YOUR WELL-BEING
THIS AUGUST

BY NAJAH AL RIYAMI

Life often demands more from us than we realise, pulling us in different directions as we juggle daily priorities. With deadlines looming, calendars filling up, and schedules packed, it's easy to lose sight of our own needs. Amidst the responsibilities of careers, families, education and countless other commitments, self-care can often be neglected.

Each year, August serves as a timely reminder to focus on our well-being, with National Wellness Month encouraging us to prioritise self-care. This reminder is crucial, especially as our routines grow busier, and we tend to overlook our health and happiness. Let August be a moment to refocus on yourself, ensuring you're on a path to becoming your healthiest and best self.

National Wellness Month is celebrated differently across the globe, reflecting diverse cultural approaches to well-being. In the United States, the focus is often on personal health challenges, with individuals adopting new fitness routines, mindfulness prac-

tices and healthier eating habits. Wellness workshops, yoga classes and community events are common, encouraging group participation in well-being activities. In Europe, the month might emphasise mental health, with companies offering workplace wellness programmes and stress reduction initiatives. In Asia, holistic practices such as meditation, traditional medicine and nature retreats are highlighted, aligning with cultural values of balance and harmony. Meanwhile, in regions like Australia and New Zealand, outdoor activities and nature-based wellness practices are popular, reflecting their strong connection to the environment. Across all these regions, National Wellness Month serves as a unifying theme, encouraging people to prioritise their health and well-being in ways that resonate with their local cultures.

Reflecting on the importance of self-care, Bassem Zein, a media consultant and enthusiastic photographer, shares his experience: "Ten years ago, I was solely focused on others — their comfort, lifestyle and sense of belonging. I became someone I didn't

recognise, losing interest in my hobbies and habits just to please others. When I decided it was time to prioritise myself, everything changed for the better. I learned to love myself more, and that positivity transformed my life."

This serves as a gentle reminder that your well-being matters. Prioritising your needs is not selfish; you need to be your best self. Take a moment to consider what you need and make meaningful changes to incorporate those needs into your routine. Whether it's waking up five minutes earlier for a quiet coffee before the day begins, or sleeping in a little longer to recharge, self-care comes in many forms. It could mean drinking more water, eating healthier, taking a walk, practising yoga, or simply pausing to reflect on your journey and achievements.

Choosing yourself might involve meeting up with friends for coffee or, conversely, saying no to social engagements to enjoy some solitude. The key is to identify your needs and honour them.

So take that moment, create that space and commit to your wellness. Take a deep breath and step forward with your best foot.



LIFESTYLE



Mourners
bid adieu to
French film
star Alain Delon

EMOTIONAL MOURNERS gathered outside the countryside chateau in Douchy-Montcorbon, south of Paris, where French film legend Alain Delon died early on Sunday at the age of 88.

Admirers left flowers as tokens of their appreciation for the movie star, best known for his roles in classics "Purple Noon" (1960) and "Le Samourai" (1967), outside his central French home.

"I was the first one here to put down a rose," said Marc as he bade adieu to his idol.

"What more can I say? French cinema has lost its greatest figure."

"I am very sad," Jean-Pierre Lecluse, who worked as a projectionist at Delon's property for 22 years, said.

"I will never forget all of our memories and the first time I met him.

It was memorable," said Lecluse, tearful and calling the actor a "wonderful man, a sacred monster of cinema".

The divisive film star had been suffering with lymphoma.

Abel Martin, the mayor of the small village of Douchy-Montcorbon, said "an icon has gone".

The local flower shop, which usually shuts its doors on Sundays, stayed open.

"The phone has been ringing all day, sometimes from very far away," florist Agnes Bourgoïn said, who said she got a call from a customer in the south of France.

Bourgoïn's retired husband has stepped in to give her a hand with what will likely be a busy week.

An accordion player, who goes by "Titi the accordionist", came to pay a musical tribute to Delon and saluted the "immense actor" — as he had requested Titi does on the day of his death, the artist told reporters.

- 'VERY PROTECTED' -

"We hadn't seen him in two years, but he has always been a notable figure in the village," said the mayor, who came to inspect security protocols on site, where dozens of police officers were deployed.

"We used to run into him in shops and restaurants. But everyone has always respected his privacy," Martin added, although he expected fans to flock to Douchy on the day of his passing.

"He was cordial. But he was very protected here, no one would say anything," said Sophie Angevin, a neighbour who cycled to the property to spare a thought for the figure.

"We would sometimes even forget he lived near us," she said.

Sisters Marie and Michele Arnold picked up the phone as soon as they heard the news to drive together a few minutes to drop off white flowers.

"Our brains tend to think that these icons are eternal," said Marie of Delon, whose death fellow 1960s star Brigitte Bardot said left "a huge void that nothing and no one will be able to fill". "We are bidding goodbye to part of our youth — it's very sad," added Michele. — **AFP**



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TUESDAY | AUGUST 20 | 2024

A SUN-SOAKED JOURNEY IN WADI HARIMA

BY DR KHALED ABDUL MALAK

Last Friday, after a relatively short night, I was ready, waiting for Rami and Jenny, two friends canyoneers, to pick me up and go to cross a pretty easy and short canyon close to Fins.

After about an hour and a half of driving on the coastal highway of Sur, we took the dirt road that goes up to Selma plateau and reached our start line. The sun was beating down, it was a pretty hot day, and the humidity was high.

We parked our car in Al Marfas, a small village where Yusuf al Ghadani, an old friend, lived in the past.

First, we had to hike and abseil down the mountain to reach the bottom of the canyon. This part was the toughest; I don't recall ever cursing the sun as much as I did that day. Eventually, after a couple of hours of mumbling to myself that I should have stayed in bed instead of joining that ride down to what I could only refer to as hell, we reached the third abseil of the wadi, the one I was impatiently waiting for because it dropped right into the first of many pools.

Oman's wadis are thrilling to explore due to their stunning natural beauty, where dramatic cliffs meet lush greenery and turquoise pools. These wadis offer adventurous activities like hiking, swimming and canyoning, making them ideal for all levels of explorers. Rich in cultural and historical significance, they glimpse traditional Omani life. The wadis' unique biodiversity adds ecological interest, while their remote locations offer a peaceful escape from urban life. Accessible year-round, these secluded natural retreats offer a perfect blend of adventure, tranquillity and cultural richness, making them a must-visit for any nature enthusiast.



Back to our adventure, the drop in front of us was around 40m and was superb. The limestone carved by the water over thousands of years is white and the rock is very smooth.

From the top of that drop, we could already see the beautiful waterfall sliding down the rocks into a clear turquoise-blue pool some 40 metres below our feet. I could hear the water flowing, calling me to hurry up and dip in it; and so, I did. Once I had reached the bottom, I got rid of my backpack and harness and jumped into the water. As I was sitting there, soaking and watching the rest of the group abseil down that vertical white slide, the first phrase that came to mind was, "I am much better here than locked indoors in my house in Muscat."

We were so happy to cool down our overheated bodies, and after a short break, we carried on our crossing, swimming through pools and climbing up and down boulders till we reached the place where Rami had to climb back to Al Marfas to get the car and drive to Harima, while Jenny and I continued crossing the wadi to meet Rami downstream. It was already midday when we stopped to have a snack.

After enjoying our food and the breathtaking landscape, it was time to get back to our hike, for we still had about an hour and a half to walk down the canyon to reach the village of Harima and meet Rami.

Further downstream, the wadi was changed following the last heavy rains that the region had received in the past few months.

Many of the pools were filled with gravel. We were progressing quicker because we were walking in places where we used to swim in the past.

It took us around one hour to reach the aflaj of Harima and another 15 minutes to get to our meeting point with Rami.

Shortly after we arrived, we heard the engine of Rami's truck echoing in the wadi. A couple of minutes later, we were in the car, driving back to Muscat.

Looking back at that day, as hard as it felt for me to get out of bed at 6 am and walk under the burning sun, it felt good to enjoy mother nature and have the opportunity to, once again, explore the beauty that Oman has to offer.