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OORT CLAIMS OPENING HONOURS



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COOLING CONCESSION TO TABREED OMAN



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BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE FORT



MUSCAT

THANKS CABLE FROM EMIR OF QATAR

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar in reply to His Majesty's condolences cable on the death of Shaikh Mohammed bin Khalid bin Hamad bin Abdullah al Thani. In the cable, Shaikh Tamim expressed his sincere appreciation for His Majesty's heartfelt sympathies, praying to the Almighty Allah to rest the deceased's soul in peace in paradise and to protect His Majesty and the Omani people against all harm. — ONA

HM RECEIVES MESSAGE FROM EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a written message from President Abdel Fattah el Sisi of the Arab Republic of Egypt. The message was delivered to HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, by Sameh Shoukry, Foreign Minister of Egypt and head of the Egyptian side in Oman-Egypt Joint Committee. **SEE P 2**

ASAAD BIDS FAREWELL TO PAK AMBASSADOR



On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office on Sunday K K Ahsan Wagan, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty. **SEE P 3**

INNOVATION ACADEMY LAUNCHED

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) formally launched its Industrial Innovation Academy in Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) on Sunday at a ceremony held under the auspices of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit. Commenting on the launch, Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, CEO of Madayn said the academy has been set up to explore and study value-adding investment opportunities in various sectors, and develop and incubate these opportunities. **SEE P13**

21 RESCUED



The Coast Guard Police boats of the Royal Oman Police, in coordination with the Maritime Security Centre, were able to transport the 21 crew members of the commercial vessel FOX, flying the flag of Togo, to the Port of Salalah. The vessel requested to stop at the ships waiting area in the Port of Salalah as sea water started leaking into the hull of the ship, which could cause it to sink. — ONA

STANDARD SET FOR OMANI KUMMAH

MUSCAT: Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has issued a decision (No 21/2022) determining the standard specification for Omani kummah (cap) and stating that a fine will be awarded to those who breach the specification.

Article (1) states that “Standard Specification No OS1646/2021” is set as the obligatory criteria for making Omani kummah.

Article (2) awards a fine of RO 1,000 to violators of the provisions of this decision and doubles the fine in case of repetition of the offence.

Article (3) states that this decision shall be enforced from the date of its publishing in the Official Gazette.

The decision is a guard against prejudicing Omani kummah industry and affirms its standard specifications. It also explains the materials and other requirements for making the cap and its stages of stitching and embroidering. — ONA



RO 1,000

FINE FOR NON-COMPLIANCE

INSIDE



IS, KURDISH FORCES KILLS OVER 120: MONITOR

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GERMANY UNDER FIRE OVER MIXED SIGNALS

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Such is life! Covid puts pause on wedding bells for Jacinda

WELLINGTON: The upcoming wedding of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has been called off due to new anti-coronavirus restrictions in the country.

Ardern called an unexpected press conference on Sunday, after the first cases of the Omicron variant were detected within the community. Until now, all cases of the variant had been detected at the country's border.

As a result, New Zealand will impose new restrictions to slow the spread of Covid-19, including more mask requirements and reduced gathering limits.

Ardern said she had to call off her wedding to fiancé Clarke Gayford.

“Such is life”, she told reporters in response to a question about how she was feeling about the wedding not going ahead.

“I’m no different to, dare I

say it, thousands of other New Zealanders who have had much more devastating impacts felt by the pandemic”, she said.

“The most gutting of which is the inability to be with a loved one sometimes they are gravely ill. That will far, far outstrip any sadness I experience.”

New Zealand, a country of about 5 million people, has detected about 15,000 cases of Covid-19 since the pandemic,

with 52 deaths. Its borders have been shut to foreigners since March 2020.

PANDEMIC ‘ENDGAME’

Meanwhile, in Europe, the Omicron variant has moved the Covid-19 pandemic into a new phase and could bring it to an end, the WHO Europe director said on Sunday.

“It’s plausible that the region is moving towards a kind of

pandemic endgame”, Hans Kluge said, adding that Omicron could infect 60 per cent of Europeans by March.

Once the current surge of Omicron subsides, “there will be for quite some weeks and months a global immunity, either thanks to the vaccine or because people have immunity due to the infection, and also lowering seasonality”, Kluge said.

— dpa/AFP



Oman and Egypt pledge to work together for progress

Oman's efforts to boost economy appreciated

MUSCAT: Dr Sameh Shoukry, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt, has lauded the efforts of the Sultanate of Oman, under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, to boost the country's economy and attract investments, which will in turn achieve progress and prosperity for the Sultanate in various spheres. This came during a joint press conference held with Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, at the Foreign Ministry's premises here on Sunday.

Shoukry affirmed that the meeting of the Oman-Egypt Joint Committee and the MoUs signed between both sides during the meeting, will contribute to promoting the march of development in the two countries and meet the aspirations of their peoples. Work is underway to explore more areas of cooperation that contribute to augmenting the volume of trade exchange between the two countries, affirmed the Egyptian Foreign Affairs Minister.

Shoukry added that Oman and Egypt have promising opportunities that require more efforts to bolster trade and investment cooperation. These advantages, the Egyptian minister affirmed, will enable Egypt to be a gateway for Omani products heading for African and European countries. They also enable Oman to be a gateway for the Egyptian products, said Shoukry. As for the negotiations on the Renaissance Dam, he pointed out that Egypt was not to blame for the impasse in negotiations, halted since the last negotiations were held under the supervision of the African Union. He affirmed that Egypt is always

ready to resume negotiations with Ethiopia if there is a political will to help reach an agreement.

The Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs underscored his country's keenness to reach consensus between the three countries and to forge a legally binding agreement in accordance with the rules of international law and practices to meet the needs of all parties, namely Ethiopia's right for development and the right of Egypt and Sudan to their share of the Nile waters. Regarding the return of Syria to the Arab League, the Egyptian Minister said, "We hope that favourable conditions will prevail so that Syria could return to the Arab League and play its role as a supporting element for the Arab national security. We will continue to communicate with Arab countries to achieve this purpose."

On his turn, Sayyid Badr affirmed Oman's support for the Renaissance Dam negotiations. He described the Egyptian stand as valid and reasonable, noting that Oman looks forward to the two sides' reaching an agreement that satisfies the interests of all countries that are party to the accord. Sayyid Badr added that the consultations held by the Sultanate of Oman and the Arab Republic of Egypt featured many common issues and focused on exchanging views about the way to maximize benefits from the deep-rooted political and historical relations.

Sayyid Badr added that, within the context of the 15th session of Oman-Egypt Joint Committee, a number of agreements were signed to spruce up cooperation in different economic, commercial, investment and cultural relations. — ONA



MUSCAT: The 15th session of the Oman-Egypt Joint Committee was held here on Sunday at the level of foreign ministers.

The Omani side was headed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister of the Sultanate of Oman, while Sameh Shoukry, Foreign Minister of the Arab Republic of Egypt, headed his country's side.

The two sides explored various aspects of cooperation and ways of developing them and followed up steps to realise the accomplishments of the next stage.

They affirmed their resolve to press ahead with means of consolidating integration in all economic, commercial and investment fields and all other areas that could open vistas for further collaboration so that they could keep pace with contemporary scientific progress and meet the aspirations of their peoples.

The two sides also discussed key regional and international issues of common concern. They expressed their satisfaction at the level of political consultation and coordination at various levels. They reiterated their keenness to work hand in hand within regional and international organisations



and events in a manner that meets the two countries' aspirations for the establishment of pillars of international security. They voiced their commitment towards consolidating the march of joint Arab action.

The two sides approved a number of memoranda of understanding and executive plans relevant to bilateral cooperation.

At the conclusion of the session, Sayyid Badr and Shoukry signed the joint communiqué of the 15th session of the Oman-Egypt Joint Committee.

The communiqué affirmed the depth of historical relations between the two countries and

solid bonds binding them under wise directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and President Abdel Fattah El Sisi.

In the communiqué, the two sides express their deep satisfaction with the lofty status of bilateral ties. They affirmed their resolve to press ahead with means of consolidating integration in all political, security, economic, commercial, industrial, judicial, developmental, educational, media, labour, social and all other areas that could open new vistas for the realisation of aspirations of their two leaderships and their peoples.

The communiqué stated that the two sides signed memoranda

of understanding and executive programmes between their respective foreign ministries for political consultation, a memorandum of understanding in the field of housing and urban development, a memorandum of understanding for cooperation in the media field, an executive programme to enforce the agreement on cooperation in the legal and judicial field, an executive programme in the field of tourism, an executive programme between the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman and the Ministry of Technical Education in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

The two sides discussed key regional and international issues of common concern and expressed their satisfaction at the level of political consultation and coordination at different levels with regard to those issues.

The two sides expressed their keenness to work together within regional and international organisations and events to achieve their joint interests, meet the aspirations of their peoples and help establish international security and peace. They also reaffirmed their commitment to diligently continue enhancing the march of joint Arab action. — ONA

Egyptian minister hails Oman's wise and balanced policy

Sameh Shoukry holds talks with chairmen of State Council and Majlis Ash'shura

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a written message from President Abdel Fattah El Sisi of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

The message was delivered to His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, by Sameh Shoukry, Foreign Minister of Egypt and head of the Egyptian side in Oman-Egypt Joint Committee.

During the meeting, the minister conveyed the greetings of the Egyptian President to His Majesty the Sultan.

HH Sayyid Fahd and the Egyptian minister reviewed bilateral relations between Oman and Egypt based on the strong bonds between the two peoples. Shoukry stressed the significance of consolidating cooperation between the two countries in various spheres.

The meeting dealt with ways of enhancing the tasks of Oman-Egypt committee and



State Council Chairman with the Egyptian minister

encouraged the parties concerned to play a greater role in promoting investments and accomplishing joint projects.

The two sides also reviewed issues on the regional and international arenas and joint action to support security and stability in the regional front.

The Egyptian minister commended the wise and balanced policy espoused by the Sultanate of Oman and the country's positive role in upgrading understanding and constructive dialogue among other countries in a bid to support

security and stability in the region. He expressed his country's keenness on promoting bilateral relations. He said that the talks he conducted with Omani officials will reflect positively on their bilateral relations.

The meeting was attended by Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, head of the Omani side at Oman-Egypt Joint Committee. It was also attended by Khalid Mohammed Abdulhaleem, Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt accredited to the Sultanate of Oman.

Also on Sunday, Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council, received Sameh Shoukry and his accompanying delegation.

REGIONAL ISSUES

The meeting came within the framework of the guest's official visit to the Sultanate of Oman.

During the meeting, the two sides reviewed the existing relations between Oman and Egypt and ways to boost them in various fields. They also discussed developments in the



Majlis Ash'shura Chairman receives the Egyptian guest

region, in addition to regional and international issues of mutual interest.

The meeting was attended by officials from both sides.

Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Majlis Ash'shura, also received Dr Sameh Shoukry.

During the meeting, Al Maawali briefed the Egyptian official on the development of the legislative work in the Majlis Ash'shura. He also highlighted the powers granted to the council within the law of the Council of Oman.

The two sides discussed aspects

of cooperation between the two countries in various fields, especially in legislation and means of developing them.

The meeting was attended by the Majlis Ash'shura's Vice-Chairman Said bin Hamad al Saadi, Secretary-General Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Nadabi, several members of the council and Ambassador of Egypt to the Sultanate of Oman. As part of his visit, the Egyptian Foreign Minister and his delegation toured the council's halls and facilities as they viewed its latest technologies. — ONA



Sayyid Asaad bids farewell to Pakistani Ambassador

MUSCAT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office on Sunday K K Ahsan Wagan, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty.

The ambassador expressed his thanks to His Majesty the Sultan for the support extended to him during his tour of duty in Oman from His Majesty, the government and Omanis, which had enabled him to carry out his

tasks.

He also expressed his best wishes of good health, happiness and long life to His Majesty the Sultan, wishing the Sultanate of Oman further progress and growth under the wise leadership of His Majesty.

On his turn, HH Sayyid Asaad expressed his utmost thanks to the ambassador for the efforts he exerted in serving relations between the two countries, wishing him permanent success, and the people of Pakistan further progress and prosperity.

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

— ONA

Military talks held with EU NAVFOR Commander



MUSCAT: Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), received in his office at Al Murtafaa Garrison on Sunday Commodore Joao Pereira, Commander of the EU NAVFOR Somalia — Operation ATALANTA Force.

The two sides exchanged views and discussed military matters of common interest.

The meeting was attended by Brigadier Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al Manthri, Assistant to

the Chief of Staff for Operations and Planning.

Rear Admiral Saif bin Nasser al Rahbi, Commander of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO), also received in his office at Al Murtafaa Garrison Commodore Joao Pereira.

They held cordial talks and discussed matters of mutual interest.

The meeting was attended by Jassim bin Mohammed al Balushi, Director of Operations and Plans at the RNO Command.

Omicron prevalent with over 4,000 new cases

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabalnasseri

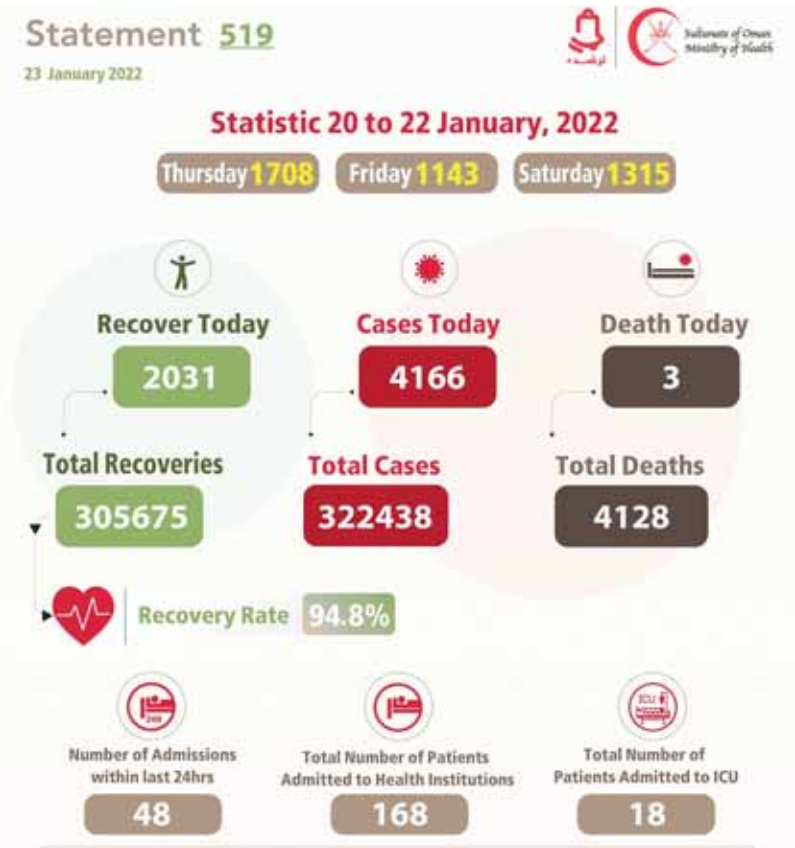
The authorities revealed that the 'Omicron' mutant of Covid-19 is currently prevalent in the country in conjunction with its widespread spread worldwide.

Dr Amal bint Saif al Ma'ani, Director of Prevention and Infection Control at the Ministry of Health, said the analysis of the numbers "confirm that the Omicron mutant is prevalent in the Sultanate of Oman with 99 per cent of the existing infections."

During a TV interview on Oman Channel on Saturday, she indicated that the epidemiological situation is escalating day by day, expecting "a further rise in infections during the coming period."

She added, "The doubling will take place within six days," pointing to the spread of this strain in all governorates at the same time and with the same numbers.

"Out of every 100 people who tested, 25 were infected with



Coronavirus," Al Ma'ani noted, expressing her fear that this spread would affect the health situation and health facilities in the country. She confirmed that the decisions of the Supreme

Committee to limit the spread of virus aim at preserving the policy of conducting business and occupational safety, besides providing healthcare for all citizens. Meanwhile, the

MOSQUES TO HOLD GROUP PRAYERS WITH RESTRICTIONS

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Heads of mosques in the country have been told to follow the Covid protocols issued by the Supreme Committee on Friday and to take part in the national campaign against the pandemic.

While Friday mass congregations from January 29 onwards stand suspended, the five-time obligatory prayers can be held with 50 per cent capacity within strict Covid precaution.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Abdulaziz al Ghafry, Assistant General Manager of Preaching and Guidance at the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, said strict vigil on safety should be observed in accordance with the pandemic protocols.

"Strict observance of precautions against the pandemic should be maintained for all five times obligatory prayers, and any violations should be reported," he said.

Accordingly, from the entry point, till people leave after the mass congregations, all five times of the day, volunteers should be vigilant and make sure individuals bring prayer mats and have made ablution at home. They should also make sure everyone wears masks properly, and no social convergence shall be allowed.

"Besides, each person entering

the mosque should produce the vaccination certificate as well as carry individual prayer mats with them.

Soon after the pandemic's spread, prayers at mosques and other prayer halls were suspended in March 2020. The restrictions were withdrawn with certain conditions on November 14, 2020, after eight months of closure.

Applicable from Sunday, mosques have been asked to open for 15 minutes from "call for prayers until the end of the prayer".

HOLY QURAN CLASSES

Holy Quran schools with a high student density can be operated with an attendance system, either hybrid or partial offline.

Students can attend classes on alternate days in a week to reduce the students gathering.

RELIGIOUS EVENTS

The official further said religious events already fixed can be held with strict adherence to preventive measures during gatherings.

"In any case, the duration of the activity shall not exceed 45 minutes and entry is allowed for those who have received at least one dose of the vaccination and the number of participants should not exceed 50 per cent of the capacity."

REPORT VIOLATIONS
Violations can be reported at a toll-free number 80008008

Dhofar Governorate 99292946
Al Buraimi Governorate 95138297
South Al Batinah 99211218
Duqm 99883996, 95950061
North East Governorate 92725322
South East Governorate 96695245
Al Dhahirah Governorate 99382539
Al Dakhiliyah Governorate 96331103
North Al Batinah Governorate 99263471
Souq Awqaf Office 99313323
24644180-24644181-99464396
99648814-97920094-97920095
Musandam Governorate:
Khasab Office 99335533
Dibba 99443337

SQUH team conducts rare paediatric surgery

MUSCAT: A medical team from the Paediatric Unit of Sultan Qaboos University Hospital has carried out an endoscope surgical operation using Neom physicam lapatascopic technique on a child who was suffering from defective discharge between the ureter and the bladder (left side).

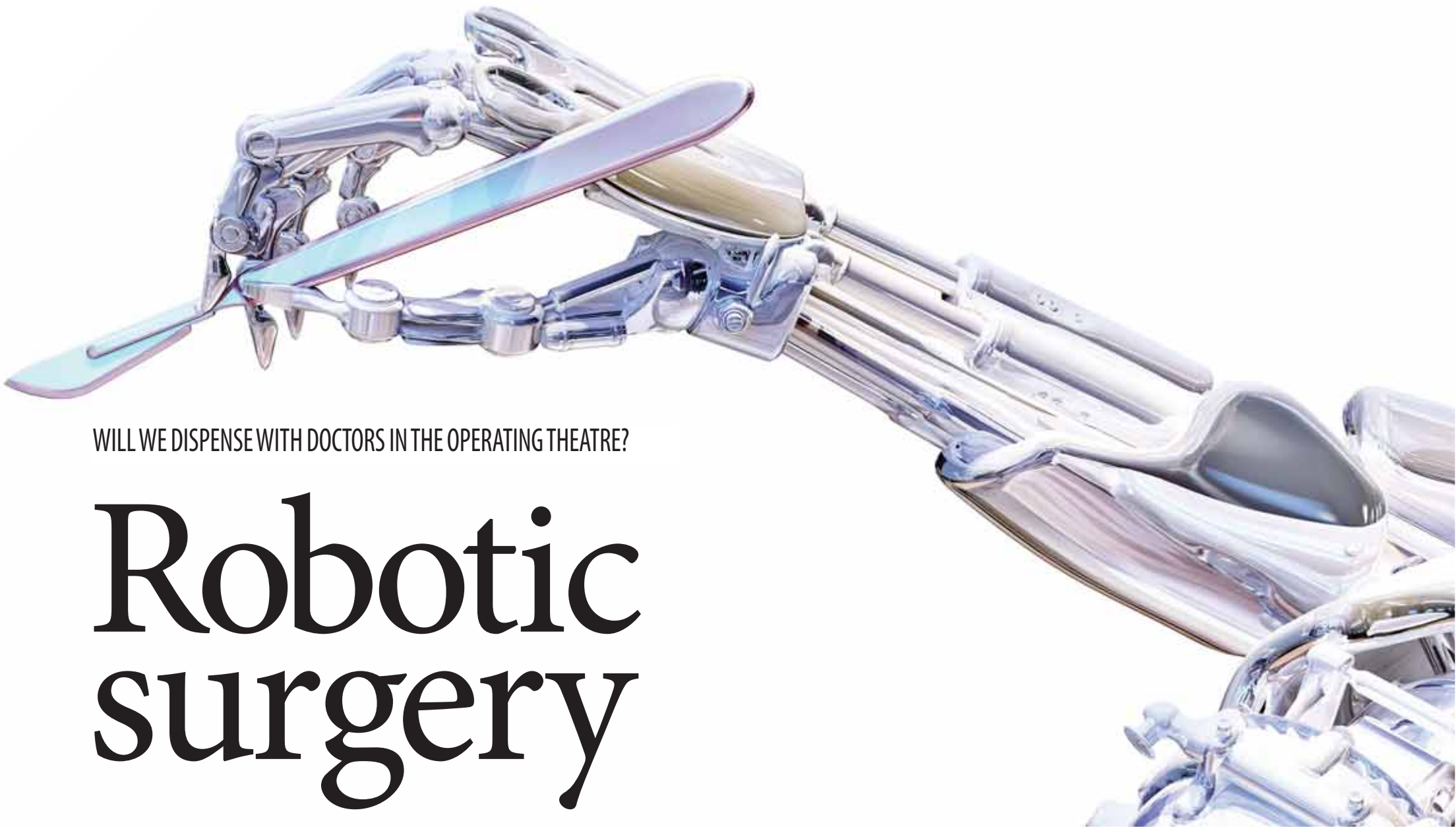
The girl, aged one year and five months, was experiencing recurring urinary infections. Diagnosis showed that the child was suffering from a duplex

kidney defect (with two ureters draining the same kidney). This is in addition to the presence of scars and reflux between the ureter and the bladder.

The medical team, led by Dr Zainab bint Nassir al Balushi, Senior Consultant, Head of the SQUH Paediatric Department, resorted to the Neom physicam lapatascopic technique, which proved to be a success in treating the defect.

— ONA





WILL WE DISPENSE WITH DOCTORS IN THE OPERATING THEATRE?

Robotic surgery

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The scene of a robot performing surgery on a patient lying on the operating table looks more like a science fiction movie, where the robot's arms pick up surgical tools to cut, repair or sew wounds in the patient's body.

Robots have been involved in surgeries for a long time, as they are used in automated operations, but experts agree that surgery in the future will have more technical dimension.

The first surgical robot (Hearthrob), developed in 1983 by British scientists and engineers, was used in an orthopaedic procedure on March 12, 1984, at the University of British Columbia Hospital in Vancouver.

The use of technology in operating rooms has expanded continuously until it has become an essential thing that cannot be abandoned, as robots have become an important assistant to the surgeon, performing tasks that the most skilled doctors cannot.

Orthopaedic surgeries in China, for example, have also entered a new stage of intelligence and extreme skill by unveiling a third generation of the most advanced medical robots in the world.

According to the Chinese press, an endoscopic surgical robot developed by a Chinese company has begun clinical trials in gynaecology in hospitals, marking a breakthrough in the domestic surgical robot industry. The robot, created by Shenzhen-

based Edge Medical Robotics Co, Ltd, allows specially trained doctors to perform procedures with more precision and control than conventional techniques. Robotic surgeries can also reduce surgical trauma and accelerate patients' recovery.

The robot can assist the surgeon, starting with simple surgical interventions like making tiny incisions in laparoscopic surgeries, as these operations usually need at least two doctors. But with the help of the robot, one doctor can perform this operation. The robot can install the endoscope without movement, and its movements can be controlled very precisely. Thus, it is possible to perform highly precise surgical interventions through minor cuts, which in the past required a high level of expertise and absolute focus to perform.

ACCORDING TO THE CHINESE PRESS

AN ENDOSCOPIC SURGICAL ROBOT

DEVELOPED BY A CHINESE COMPANY HAS BEGUN CLINICAL TRIALS IN GYNAECOLOGY IN HOSPITALS, MARKING A BREAKTHROUGH IN THE DOMESTIC SURGICAL ROBOT INDUSTRY

Dr Hamad al Hinai, an orthopaedic surgeon at Nizwa Hospital, agreed that robotic technology in orthopaedic surgery is considered one of the most modern and advanced technologies. He said it gives the surgeon an accurate and complete three-dimensional image during surgery and helps him perform professional operations. Dr Al Hinai pointed out that the surgeon is the leader of the robot, and he cannot be dispensed with, adding that the value of robotic surgery is very expensive.

Orthopaedic surgery witnesses unprecedented achievements today after robots entered this field from the widest of doors. Many companies specialised in the medical field have developed surgical robots that help in orthopaedic procedures during knee, hip, shoulder or spine surgeries and get satisfactory results for both the patient and the doctor. Robotic joint replacement has become a traditional operation worldwide, provided an experienced surgeon with extensive experience in his field.

Also, robotic orthopaedic surgery is beginning to prove its effectiveness and its great role in improving the efficiency of spine surgeries, which is one of the most accurate medical operations besides many others.

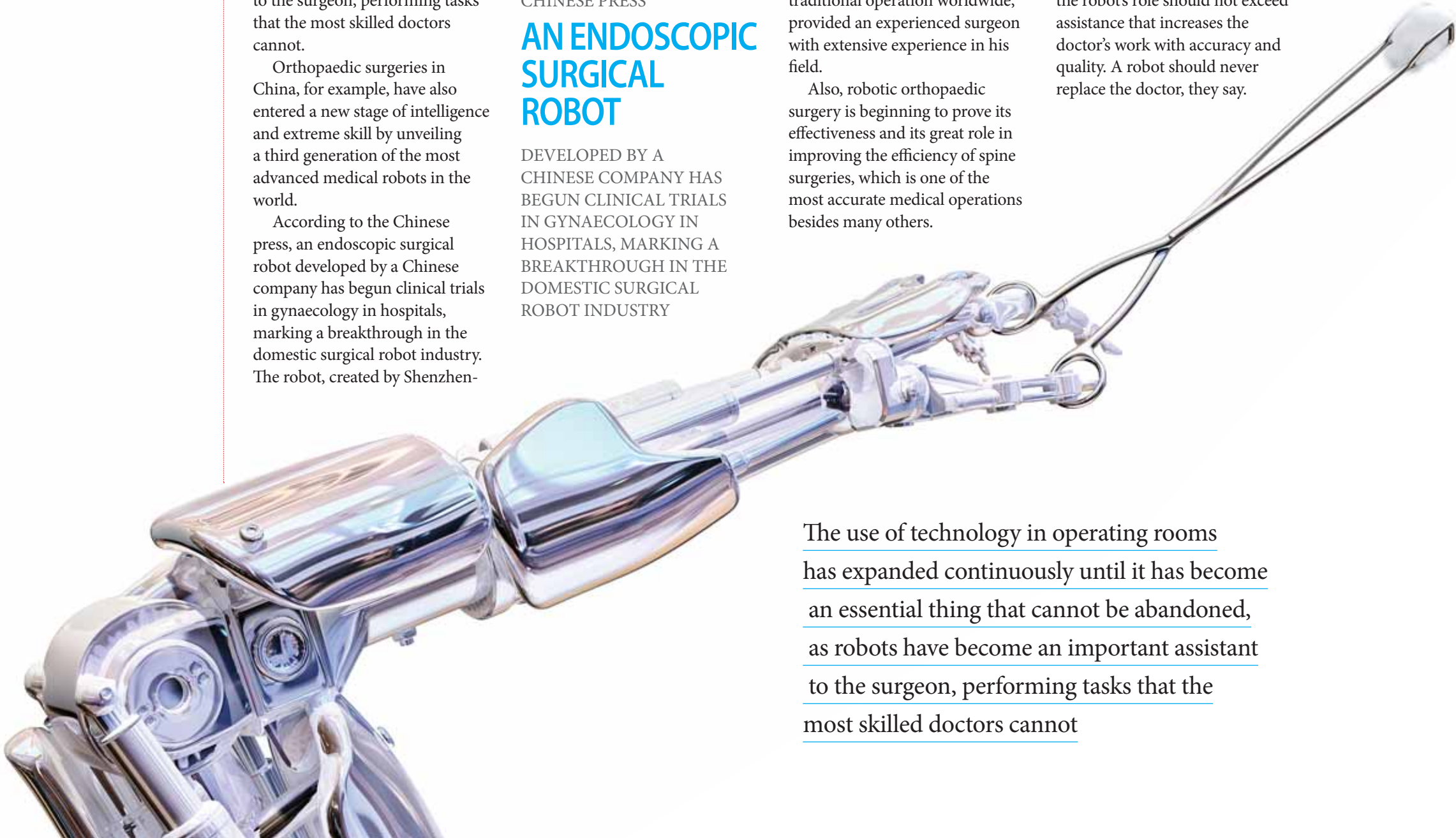
ORTHOPAEDIC SURGERIES

IN CHINA, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE ALSO ENTERED A NEW STAGE OF INTELLIGENCE AND EXTREME SKILL BY UNVEILING A THIRD GENERATION OF THE MOST ADVANCED MEDICAL ROBOTS IN THE WORLD

Robotic surgery enables the surgeon to easily perform precise operations, especially the operations of the spine, joints and other orthopaedic operations, which contributes to alleviating the suffering of patients, shortening the recovery period, and reducing bleeding.

All experts agree on the importance of the role of the future robot in the operations room and the inability to dispense with it, yet, they also agree that the robot's role should not exceed assistance that increases the doctor's work with accuracy and quality. A robot should never replace the doctor, they say.

The use of technology in operating rooms has expanded continuously until it has become an essential thing that cannot be abandoned, as robots have become an important assistant to the surgeon, performing tasks that the most skilled doctors cannot





Innovation on air-conditioning grabs attention

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

An Omani innovation in cooling technology is fast grabbing attention.

The study led by Dr Maryam bint Zuhair al Lawatiyah from the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation found a new and innovative way to apply advanced artificial intelligence (AI) techniques and adapt them in cooling buildings.

“My study is all about using renewable environmental energies through a smart system that integrates these technologies through a specific mechanism that will

result in cooling buildings and reducing dependency on traditional electricity,” said Dr Maryam al Lawati.

The volume and amount of cooling necessary for the building during summer and winter will be forecast using AI. Based on the predictions, the control system would operate the heat-conditioning system according to the needs of the building.

The 33rd issue of *Scientific Insights* magazine published by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) has conducted a detailed study on the new technology of applying AI in cooling buildings

using renewable energies.

“The very idea of the research is based on utilising renewable energy, which is abundant in the country,” adds Maryam.

Scientific Insights is a bilingual scientific journal published every three months by the MoHERI.

The research also aimed to solve the issues associated with cooling buildings during summer. It can be solved by using modern and advanced AI techniques to find a way that helps reduce costs in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way.

Dr Maryam chose solar energy as a type of renewable energy to cool buildings. This energy op-

The study led by Dr Maryam bint Zuhair al Lawatiyah from the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation found a new and innovative way to apply advanced artificial intelligence (AI) techniques and adapt them in cooling buildings

erates a thermal air conditioner, which provides energy to cool the building. An example of the technology is the Social Centre building in Innovation Park Muscat.

“The heat is reduced through transferring the energy to the earth and utilising the land and geothermal energy. This type of optimal energy use is an innovative method, and the AI and control system has been programmed to determine the working hours that are very suitable for this system.”

However, there are challenges associated with calculating this cooling load in the current worldwide AI system. Therefore,

through this research, Dr Maryam and her team devised a new method of using AI to calculate cooling loads to suit the relevant system.

Her study further reveals that the Sultanate of Oman relies on electrical energy to cool buildings. The study proved that the dependence on electrical energy might be reduced from 100 per cent per year to 23.6 per cent when thermal energy based on solar power is introduced.

The difference could be more remarkable, as the findings showed that the AI system could predict the amount of cooling for this hybrid system, with a high predictive accuracy of 98 per cent.



UTAS board discusses plan

MUSCAT: The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) here on Sunday held its 1st board meeting for 2022 under the chairmanship of Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, Chairman of the UTAS Board.

During the meeting, a presentation was given on the preliminary elements of the university's strategic plan. The board reviewed the suggestion regarding amending name of college, which comes within the context of merging colleges of

technology and colleges of applied sciences. The meeting also touched on a spectrum of topics related to the UTAS work, such as legislations, regulatory boards and electronic infrastructure, among other topics.

— ONA

Dhofar Municipal Council discusses measures to improve services

SALALAH: The Municipal Council of the Governorate of Dhofar on Sunday discussed ways to enhance services and municipal work in the governorate's various wilayats.

The meeting was chaired by Sayyid Mohammed bin Sultan al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Dhofar.

The meeting reviewed the procedures undertaken to implement the decisions and recommendations of the council in its previous meeting. It also discussed the outcomes of the meetings of specialised committees in the council.

The meeting touched on the recommendation of furnishing



sports facilities in residential neighbourhoods and their work mechanism.

Moreover, the council took

note of a number of proposals, particularly those related to the National Urban Development Strategy in the governorate.

Online registration for admission to Indian schools

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

The online registration for admission to Indian Schools in the capital area for the next academic year (2022-2023) will start on January 26 for Classes KG I to IX.

The centralised admission system with online registration introduced by the Board of Directors, Indian Schools in the Sultanate of Oman has facilitated the entire admission process, making it convenient for parents and schools to manage the rush for admissions.

Online registration for admissions is applicable to seven Indian Schools in the capital area – Indian School Bausher, Indian School Muscat, Indian School Darsait, Indian School Al Wadi Al Kabir, Indian School Ghubra, Indian School Seeb and Indian School Maabala.

Admission is open to children

of Indian and other expatriate communities with valid resident visa. Children who have completed three years as on April 1, are eligible for kindergarten admission.

Admissions for children with special needs are open at Care and Special Education (CSE) which is located at the Indian School Muscat premises. Parents can approach the CSE administration directly for admission (www.cseoman.com).

Considering the Covid-19 pandemic situation, admission procedures have been made completely online; parents, therefore, do not have to visit the schools for submission of documents or the remittance of admission processing fee.

The closing date of online registration is February 28. More details on the admission process are available at <http://indianschoolsoman.com/our-services/admission-2022-23/>

GCC financial panel holds meeting



MUSCAT: The GCC Financial and Economic Cooperation Committee held on Sunday its 115th extraordinary meeting in Riyadh, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The online meeting discussed recommendations on the comprehensive implementation of the GCC common market.

It also discussed the outcomes of the GCC Customs Union Authority, which was held on 9 January 2022, among other topics. — ONA

OHRC charts out action plan

MUSCAT: Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) on Sunday held its first meeting in 2022, under the chairmanship of Shaikh Abdullah bin Shuwain al Hosni, OHR Chairman.

The meeting discussed topics submitted by the sub-committees, OHRC annual plan for 2022 and the schedule of field visits to Royal Oman Police (ROP) detention centres.

During the meeting, the commission reviewed the programme of awareness and educational lectures to protect children from negligence and



abuse which is implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development and Omani Women's Associations.

The meeting also discussed a number of other issues related to human rights in the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

Farming systems and nature conservation discussed



MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, on Sunday hosted the annual meeting of the project “Enhancing Agricultural Production Systems and Conserving Natural Resources in the Countries of the Arabian Peninsula”.

Dr Saif bin Ali al Khamisi, Director of Date Palm and Plant Production Research

at the Ministry and technical coordinator of the project, said: “The Arabian Peninsula Programme ‘Baycarda’ has contributed to implementing many research programmes, technology transfer and exchange of experiences between the member states since it started”.

It also introduced modern technologies such as protected agriculture using soilless production systems and the

application of integrated management of production and prevention, Dr Saif added.

He pointed out that hosting this 3-day event confirms the commitment of the Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, to work with those in charge of the Arabian Peninsula Programme ‘Baycarda’.

It also underscores the efforts

to utilise the Omani capabilities in applying innovations and transferring modern technologies that contribute to enhancing the production of high value agricultural crops.

The meeting was attended by a number of experts and participants from the GCC countries, the Republic of Yemen and the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA). — ONA



IS, Kurdish forces kill over 120: monitor

SYRIA BATTLE

HASAKEH: A fierce battle raged in Syria for a fourth day on Sunday between US-backed Kurdish forces and IS group fighters who have attacked a prison, killing at least 120 people including seven civilians, a war monitor said.

More than 100 insurgents late on Thursday attacked the Kurdish-run Ghwayran jail in Hasakeh city to free fellow fighters, in the most significant IS operation since its self-declared caliphate was defeated in Syria nearly three years ago.

Intense fighting since then has seen the fighters free detainees and seize weapons stored at the jail, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, in what experts see as a bold IS attempt to regroup.

“At least 77 IS members and 39 Kurdish fighters, including internal security forces, prison guards

and counter-terrorism forces, have been killed” inside and outside the prison since the start of the attack, the Observatory said.

At least seven civilians are among those who died in the fighting in the northeastern city, said the monitor.

The battles continued for a fourth consecutive day on Sunday as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by coalition strikes, closed in on fighter targets inside and outside the facility.

“Fierce clashes broke out overnight Sunday... as part of an ongoing attempt by Kurdish forces to restore control over the prison and neutralise IS fighters deployed in surrounding areas,” said the Observatory, which relies on a network of sources inside Syria.

A correspondent in Ghwayran neighbourhood reported the sound of heavy clashes in areas



Kurdish security forces deploy in Syria's northern city of Hasakeh amid ongoing fighting for a third day with the IS group. — AFP

immediately surrounding the jail, which houses at least 3,500 suspected IS members.

The SDF deployed heavily in areas around the prison where they carried out combing operations and used loudspeakers to call on

infant wrapped in a wool blanket. “The situation is still very bad. After four days, violent clashes are still ongoing”

Hamsha Sweidan, 80, who had been trapped in her neighbourhood near the jail, said civilians were left without bread or water as the battle raged.

“We have been dying of hunger and of thirst,” she said as she crossed into SDF-held areas in Hasakeh city. “Now, we don't know where to go.”

IS has carried out regular attacks against Kurdish and government targets in Syria since the rump of its once-sprawling proto-state was overrun in March 2019. Most of their guerrilla attacks have been against military targets and oil installations in remote areas, but the Hasakeh prison break could mark a new phase in the group's resurgence.

The Observatory said that

Kurdish forces had managed to recapture more than 100 IS detainees who had tried to escape, but that many more were still on the run. Their exact numbers remained unclear.

IS, in a statement released on its Amaq news agency overnight, claimed that it took over a weapons storage room in the prison and freed hundreds of fellow fighters since the operation began with a double suicide bombing.

A video it released on Amaq purported to show IS fighters carrying the group's black flag as they launched the attack on the facility and surrounded what appears to be a group of prison guards.

A second video released on Saturday showed nearly 25 men whom IS said it had abducted as part of the attack, including some dressed in military fatigues. AFP could not independently verify the authenticity of the footage. — AFP



A veterinarian volunteering at the Baghdad Animal Rescue treats an injured cat at the shelter, west of Baghdad. — AFP

Stray animals find solace at Iraq animal shelter

BAGHDAD: Bella the dog can barely stand after being abused, but she is now receiving care from a Baghdad refuge that hopes to become Iraq's first veterinary clinic for stray animals.

The Baghdad Animal Rescue opened around a week ago, and Bella, a nervous fox-like dog who raises her muzzle for strokes while still shaking in fear, seems in caring hands.

“We are going to care for all kinds of animals and release them when they're well,” said Nazik, 37, who is among the volunteers.

Having a pet is unusual in Iraq, and many of the cats and dogs that roam Baghdad's streets are often mistreated.

More than a decade ago, thousands of stray dogs were

gunned down with automatic weapons after municipalities including Baghdad decided that their numbers were too high.

For now, the shelter is home to just a handful of animals, including a black cat named Zaatara — “thyme” in Arabic — who was blinded in a car accident.

Volunteers do their best to provide care, comfort and solace to the distressed creatures. “People report injured animals to us after accidents. We bring them here and treat them,” said Sally Faysal, 27, another volunteer.

If the animals need more specialised care, they are taken to a veterinarian.

“The team members share the cost of the treatment,” Faysal said. — AFP

Yemen rescuers comb rubble

SAADA: Yemeni rescue workers searched through rubble for survivors on Sunday, two days after an attack on a prison killed at least 70 people, as an aid group said the coalition has “no way to deny” it hit the facility in an air strike.

Digging through the debris with their bare hands, the rescue teams combed the destroyed prison in Saada, with nearby hospitals already overwhelmed by more than 200 killed or wounded.

“Rescue operations are still ongoing,” International Committee of the Red Cross spokesman Basheer Omar said, adding they were still looking for “missing and dead people”.

The coalition that has been fighting the fighters since 2015 has denied carrying out the attack, which coincided with another strike further south that knocked out the country's Internet. The network was still down on Sunday, a web monitor said.

The night-time attacks on Friday marked a dramatic escalation in the seven-year-old war, five days after the Ansar Allah fighters claimed a drone-and-missile assault that killed three people in the UAE. Witnesses in Yemen described hearing fighter jets and three loud explosions as the prison, in the fighters' home base of Saada, was hit.

“There is no way to deny that this is an air strike, everyone in Saada City heard it,” an unnamed member of aid group Doctors



Yemenis search for survivors following a reported airstrike targeting a prison in the Ansar Allah stronghold of Saada in northern Yemen. — AFP

Without Borders, known by its French initials MSF, was quoted as saying in a statement late on Saturday.

“I live one kilometre from the prison and my house was shaking from the explosions.”

The Ansar Allah health ministry announced a higher toll, of 82 people killed and 266 wounded, the agency said. There was no independent confirmation of the figures.

“This is the latest in a long line of unjustifiable air strikes carried out by the coalition on places like schools, hospitals, markets, wedding parties and prisons,”

said Ahmed Mahat, MSF head of mission in Yemen.

“Since the beginning of the war we have frequently witnessed the terrible effects of indiscriminate coalition bombing on Yemen, including when our own hospitals have been attacked.”

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the attack, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for restraint on all sides.

The UAE had threatened reprisals after the Abu Dhabi assault last week.

After the Yemen prison attack, the Ansar Allah issued a warning

by telling foreign companies to leave the “unsafe” Gulf country.

Yemen remained without Internet on Sunday, according to web monitor NetBlocks, which said “the blackout continues to hinder human rights monitoring and independent media”.

MSF said its staff had confirmed the prison in Saada, the northern home base, was destroyed, and that a nearby hospital had run out of beds to treat the wounded.

“The hospital is facing a very difficult situation... with casualties lying on the floor,” a staff member was quoted as saying. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

KHARTOUM

Sudanese women's rights activist detained in raid

Armed men detained prominent Sudanese women's rights campaigner Amira Osman in a nighttime raid on her home in Sudan's capital Khartoum, her sister said. Osman's detention comes after what activists say has been a campaign of arrests of civil society and pro-democracy figures since a military takeover in October.

The United Nations mission in Sudan said on Twitter it was outraged by Osman's arrest, citing a “pattern of



violence against women's rights activists” that risked reducing their participation in politics. Sudanese security officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

BEIRUT

Lebanon keen on maintaining 'best ties' with Gulf

Lebanon is keen to maintain “the best relations” with the Gulf Arab states, President Michel Aoun said in a tweet.

Aoun also said a proposal by the Kuwaiti foreign minister on building confidence with the Gulf states would be discussed before an appropriate position was announced.

Lebanon must not be a platform for hostile acts or words, Kuwait's foreign minister said on Sunday while visiting Beirut. Kuwaiti Foreign Minister



Shaikh Ahmad Nasser al Mohammad al Sabah spoke after meeting President Michel Aoun in Beirut, during the first visit by a senior Gulf Arab official since a diplomatic rift last year.

ISTANBUL

Several dead, injured as heavy snowfall hits Turkey

Heavy snowfall has caused traffic chaos in Turkey, with at least three people killed in a bus accident in Istanbul on Sunday, the state news agency Anadolu reported. At least 18 people were injured when the coach driver lost control over the vehicle which then crashed into a ditch, according to the report.

The passage through the Bosphorus strait in Istanbul was temporarily closed on both sides due to poor visibility, it said. In the northern Black Sea province



of Tokat, where it was also snowing heavily, a coach skidded and overturned, according to Anadolu. One person was killed and at least 18 others were injured in the accident. The bad weather also affected public life in south-eastern Turkey.



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In brief

■ BUDAPEST



ONE DEAD, THREE HURT IN HUNGARY HOSPITAL FIRE

A fire at one of Hungary's largest hospitals in Budapest killed one person and injured three on Sunday, according to Hungarian emergency services. The blaze began in a ground floor detoxification unit at the Szent Imre Hospital, police spokeswoman Angelika Molnar told the Hungarian news agency MTI.

The cause of the fire, which spread to an adjacent room, covering the surroundings with soot, is under investigation, she said.

Staff moved 56 patients in nearby wards out of danger, but firefighters who put out the blaze later found the victim, a young female, emergency services spokesman Mate Kisdi said.

■ OSLO



TALIBAN, AFGHAN CIVIL SOCIETY BEGIN OSLO TALKS

Representatives of the Taliban travelled to the Norwegian capital Oslo to begin their talks on the situation in Afghanistan.

The delegation arrived at a conference hotel in the north-west of the city, Norwegian broadcaster NRK reported on Sunday.

At the talks, which are scheduled to last until Tuesday, the Taliban were also expected to meet Afghans, including women, journalists and human rights activists. It is the first time the fighters have travelled to a Western country with a delegation since seizing power in Afghanistan last year.

■ BRUSSELS



THOUSANDS PROTEST IN BELGIUM AGAINST COVID RULES

Thousands of demonstrators marched through Brussels on Sunday to protest anti-coronavirus rules as the Omicron wave causes infections to reach record highs. Reporters said the sprawling crowd appeared far larger than previous demonstrations that have paraded through the Belgian capital to the seat of the European Union and seen clashes with the police.

Protesters carried signs slamming Belgium Prime Minister Alexander De Croo and the Covid Safe pass proving you are vaccinated or have tested negative that is required for entry into numerous venues.

Germany under fire over mixed signals

UKRAINE CRISIS

FRANKFURT: Germany's new government is facing pressure to get tough on Russia, after a German navy chief's pro-Moscow remarks angered Kyiv and exasperation grows with Berlin's fence-sitting in the Ukraine crisis.

After a week of frantic diplomacy that included a visit to Berlin by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government found itself scrambling at the weekend to reassure Kyiv of its support amid fears of a Russian invasion.

The spat was triggered by German navy chief Kay-Achim Schoenbach's musings that it was "nonsense" to think Russia was about to march on Ukraine and that President Vladimir Putin deserves respect.

Schoenbach resigned late Saturday, but the damage was done.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba summoned the German ambassador and accused Germany of "encouraging" Putin to attack Ukraine.

Scholz on Sunday warned again of "high costs" should Russia attack, in an interview with the *Sued-deutsche* newspaper.

But with trademark caution, he also called for "wisdom" in considering sanctions and "the consequences they would have for us".

The Ukraine crisis is the first major test for Social Democrat Scholz, who took over from veteran leader Angela Merkel last month. His coalition government of the centre-left SPD, the Greens



An Ukrainian Military Forces serviceman stands in a trench on the frontline with the Russia-backed separatists near Zolote village, in the eastern Lugansk region. — AFP

and the pro-business FDP, has vowed "dialogue and toughness" with Russia.

But it has struggled to overcome internal divisions and craft a unified response on how to deal with an emboldened Moscow.

The *Handelsblatt* financial daily, noting that German politicians' tendency to "understand Russia" remains alive and well, asked: "Where is the line between a willingness to engage in dialogue, and strategic naivete?"

Scholz's knack for dodging difficult questions was on display again

on Sunday, when he was asked about Russian demands for a guarantee that Nato will not expand eastward. Such an expansion "is not at all on the agenda right now", Scholz replied.

A key bone of contention between Germany and Western allies is Berlin's refusal to send weapons to Ukraine. The United States, Britain and Baltic states have already agreed to send weapons, including anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles.

Germany is traditionally reluctant to get involved in military conflict, traumatised by its past as

an instigator of two World Wars, and Scholz's government claims arming Ukraine would only inflame tensions.

But Ukraine's Kuleba said Germany's stance does not match "the current security situation", and urged Berlin to "stop undermining unity" among Kyiv's allies. Even in Germany, some have called for a rethink.

Henning Otte, a lawmaker from the centre-right CDU opposition party, told the *Bild* daily last week that if Ukraine is asking for weapons to fend off a possible attack,

"we must not reject this request".

Another sore point in the Ukraine crisis is the contentious Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which has split the new cabinet in Berlin.

The completed pipeline, currently awaiting German regulatory approval, is set to double Russian gas supplies to Germany.

The previous Merkel-led government always insisted the pipeline was a purely commercial project — irritating allies who fear the pipeline will give Russia too much leverage over European energy. — AFP

Portugal begins early voting in snap polls

LISBON: Early voting began in Portugal on Sunday for a snap general election, with polls showing the incumbent Socialists still ahead though with their lead over the nearest centre-right rivals narrowing.

Over 300,000 voters have signed up to vote a week early, with polls opening at 8 am (0800 GMT).

The early voting option was provided this year to reduce crowding on election day, next Sunday, due to the pandemic.

"I preferred to vote

today as today I'm fine — next Sunday, I don't know", proffered one early voter, Elisa Fialho, a woman in her 70s who turned out to cast her ballot with her husband in the capital Lisbon.

Prime Minister Antonio Costa, who has led two consecutive minority Socialist governments since 2015, was expected to cast his ballot in the northern city of Porto at around 0930 GMT.

"All the conditions are there for everybody to go out and vote in security", said Costa after voting. — AFP

SELFIE BEFORE PARADE



Women police personnel take selfie pictures during a rehearsal for the upcoming Republic Day parade in Amritsar. — AFP

Burkina Faso denies coup amid barracks revolt

OUAGADOUGOU: Gunfire broke out at several army barracks in Burkina Faso on Sunday and Internet connections were disrupted, prompting fears of a coup in the notoriously volatile west African state which the government quickly denied.

The unrest comes a little over week after 12 people, including a senior army officer, were arrested on suspicion of planning to "destabilise institutions" the country, which has been rocked by a seven-year militant insurgency.

Residents in the Gounghin district in the west of the capital Ouagadougou reported heavy gunfire at the Sangoule Lamizana camp and military prison where an



People gather in downtown Ouagadougou to show support for the military in Burkina Faso. — Reuters

ousted army general is being held.

"Since 1 am, gunfire has been heard here in Gounghin coming from the Sangoule Lamizana

camp", a soldier in the area.

Local inhabitants said soldiers had come out of the barracks firing in the air and sealed off the

area around it.

Shots were heard at the Baby Sy barracks in the south of the capital as well as at an air base near the airport, which was also sealed off by soldiers in balaclavas, according to local residents. There was also gunfire at barracks in the northern towns of Kaya and Ouahigouya, residents there said. Meanwhile, mobile Internet services were down on Sunday.

President Roch Marc Kaboré's government swiftly denied that there had been a coup.

"Information on social media would have people believe there was an army takeover", government spokesman Alkassoum Maiga said in a statement. "The

government, while acknowledging that there was gunfire in some barracks, denies this information and calls on the public to remain calm."

Defence Minister General Barthelemy Simpore said on nationwide TV that "none of the Republic's institutions has been troubled at the present moment".

He added that there were "localised, limited" incidents "in a few barracks", and that he was investigating.

Police fired tear gas to break up a rally by around 100 people who gathered at a square in central Ouagadougou to show support for the soldiers' revolt, a correspondent at the scene reported. — AFP

Living on shifting sands: new realities



SONIA AMBROSIO
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The little things that used to be a part of life are now sorely missed. Changes and uncertainties have become the norm. One never knows what to expect the next day. There are no significant plans ahead without the risk of flights being cancelled, countries closing borders and large odds of losing down payments on tickets or vacation reservations.

It feels as if time has stood still while waiting for the pandemic to pass, but as the days go by, further social, health, and security adjustments are implemented.

Life has been put on a hold. And now, health experts warn, get ready: Covid is here to stay. Anxiety and stress appear to be here to stay as well. The effects of Covid-19 on mental health have yet to be seen.

Social changes were already being noticed before the pandemic, but they were assimilated at a slower pace. A new norm is evolving

rapidly. It seems the future is being restructured with the seeds of a collective revolution presenting the end of systems and the beginning of new ones.

Labelling everything as pre-Covid or during lockdowns is a huge characterisation. It is disturbing though, that the coronavirus pandemic has reached the point where it defines our entire lives.

Will everything return to normal or will they never be the same?

Several people have been asked what they miss the most about their pre-Covid lives. Personal feelings swung from powerlessness to excessive information consumption, including conspiracy theories. Anger, mistrust, isolation, grief, were just some of the sentiments echoed.

The loss of mental and bodily energy became excruciating for many people. Others expressed their pain at seeing decades of

IT SEEMS THE FUTURE IS BEING RESTRUCTURED WITH THE SEEDS OF A COLLECTIVE REVOLUTION PRESENTING THE END OF SYSTEMS AND THE BEGINNING OF NEW ONES

hard work being ripped away by opportunists. The feeling of freedom had vanished. Going where you want, when you want, and not caring about whether or not someone has Covid is a thing of the past. Physical interaction is another significant component in the answers.

Hugging and shaking hands used to be so commonplace. This emotional stabiliser is currently restricted. Physical touch has been shown to reduce sickness and strengthen the immune system, as

research studies point out. We were much happier and didn't know!

Travelling without restrictions, no tests. It was such a pleasure.

Furthermore, it now has a long list of requirements that must be met and paid for! Have you thought how natural and effortless it was to breathe freely? That has changed with the need to wear masks - aggravated by acne caused by the friction of wearing them. Masks probably will stay for a long time, like some other peculiarities of the pandemic.

What about being sick and not having to worry about it? The little flu with no repercussions? Now there's the worry of whether it's the flu, a simple cough, or Covid. Is it Omicron or Deltacron?

From so many replies to the question, what do you miss the most from pre-Covid, several young people expressed their difficulties in processing anxiety

and uncertainty regarding their future. Their career plans no longer stand.

The pandemic has shaken any sense of control people previously had. Fair enough, there was always the possibility that things would not go as expected, but that was unusual. Now, the unusual is the norm. The need to improvise, adapt, and overcome a 'new normal' can be draining. It seems people are being pushed and shoved into new adjustments.

Choppy and bumpy changes will continue to happen here and there, but the widespread of double standards highlights deep inequalities, and that is disturbing.

The reality we were familiar with is being transformed and it could be the beginning of a social, economic, scientific and technological revolution. So, it is important to look at the changes and try to understand them.

Why not live in an old office?

CHRIS STEIN

WASHINGTON: Blocks from the White House, an unassuming edifice in downtown Washington that once held offices used by the US Department of Justice is set to be converted into homes for hundreds of people.

The transformation of the vacant office space is among a surge of "adaptive reuse" projects that swept the US property market in 2021, where developers bought hotels and offices that were struggling to get business and announced plans to turn them into apartments.

"The market spoke, and it said the value was greater for a conversion than for it continuing as office space," said Michael Abrams, managing director of Foulger-Pratt, the property development firm that is turning the 14-story building on New York Avenue into 255 apartments.

A survey by apartment listing service RentCafe found about 20,100 apartments were built out of converted properties in the United States last year, almost double the number converted in the year prior.

Such conversions could offer a way forward for US downtowns, which haven't been the same since office workers fled as Covid-19 broke out nearly two years ago, leaving landlords and local businesses struggling.

"The slow office market recovery is just going to make it that much more expensive to carry vacant office buildings," Abrams said.

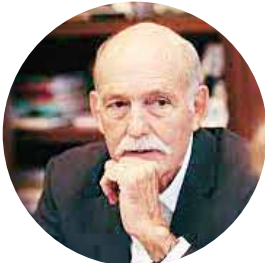
Conversions may also play a role in easing a shortage of affordable housing, particularly in cities like Washington, where notoriously high rents are a feature of life.

"From the overall perspective, we just need increased supply. By having more supply, both the home price growth will come down and the rents will come down," said Lawrence Yun, chief economist of the National Association of Realtors.

Despite the downturn caused by Covid-19, the median price of existing homes climbed 15.8 per cent over the course of 2021, and by last month supply had hit an all-time low, according to NAR data, likely exacerbating a crisis of affordable housing that predated the pandemic.

— AFP

‘Why was I born a girl?’ An Afghan poem inspires US students



DAVID ZUCCHINO

The writer is an American journalist and author. He was a foreign and national correspondent for the LA Times from 2001 to 2016, focusing on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya

KABUL: When Fariba Mohebi, an 11th grader, learned in September that most Afghan girls would not join boys returning to school under Taliban rule, she shut the door and windows to her room. Then she broke down and sobbed.

From her despair, a poem emerged: "Why Was I Born a Girl?"

"I wish I was a boy because being a girl has no value," Mohebi wrote. Afghan men "shout and scream: Why should a girl study? Why should a girl work? Why should a girl live free?"

Mohebi's poem found its way to Timothy Stiven's Advanced Placement history class at Canyon Crest Academy, a public high school 8,000 miles away in San Diego. It was relayed via Zoom calls between Canyon Crest and Mawoud, a tutoring centre that Mohebi attends in Kabul, where girls sit in class with boys and men teach girls — testing the limits of Taliban forbearance.

Periodic Zoom sessions between the Afghan and American students have opened a window to the world for girls at Mawoud, hardening their resolve to pursue their educations against daunting odds. The calls have also revealed the harsh contours of Taliban rule for the California students, opening their eyes to the repression of fellow high schoolers halfway around the world.

"If I was a 10th as courageous as these girls are, I would be a lion. They are my heroes," Diana Reid, a Canyon Crest student, wrote after a Zoom call this month in which Afghan girls described navigating bombing threats and Taliban interference.

For the Afghans, the Zoom sessions have been a fun novelty, and a reminder that some Americans still care about Afghans five months after US troops withdrew in chaos and the US-backed government and military collapsed.

"We are so happy we are not alone in this world," Najibullah Yousefi, Mawoud's principal, told the San Diego students via Zoom. "There are some beautiful minds on the other side of the world who are concerned about us."

The Zoom calls were arranged in April by Stiven and Yousefi. An early topic of discussion was Mohebi's poetry, translated by Emily Khosravia, a Canyon Crest student and published in the



Students at the Mawoud tutoring centre in Kabul.

school magazine. "Why Was I Born a Girl?" prompted an in-depth education in Afghan realities for the American students.

The class has learned that Afghan students risk their lives just by walking through the tutoring centre's fortified gates. Mawoud's previous location was levelled by a suicide bombing that killed 40 students in 2018. The school's new building, tucked into a tight bend in a narrow alleyway, is protected by armed guards, high walls and concertina wire.

Most of Mawoud's 300 students are Hazara, a predominantly minority group ruthlessly attacked by the IS group in Afghanistan, ISIS-K. Hazara schools, protests, mosques, a New Year's celebration and even a wrestling club have been bombed by ISIS-K since 2016, killing hundreds.

Two mosques attended by Hazaras were bombed a week apart in October, killing more than 90 people. ISIS considers Hazaras apostates.

Since the Taliban takeover, several commuter minibuses used by Hazaras have been bombed in the Hazara district of west Kabul known as Dasht-e-Barchi. At least 11 people have been killed and up to 18 wounded, most of them Hazaras, the Afghan Analysts Network reported. The Taliban, who persecuted Hazaras in the past, are now responsible for their security.

The analysts' independent research

agency described the Taliban government response as tepid, saying it downplayed the strength of ISIS-K, which claimed responsibility for most of the attacks. On January 14, Afghan media reported that a young Hazara woman, Zainab Abdullahi, was fatally shot at a Taliban checkpoint just five minutes from the Mawoud center.

The San Diego students have learned, too, that attending class is a leap of faith for Mohebi and her female classmates, who make up 70 per cent of Mawoud's student body.

Mawoud prepares students for Afghanistan's rigorous university entrance exams. But there is no guarantee that girls will be permitted to take the annual exams — or to return to high school, attend a university or pursue a career in a country where the Taliban have begun erasing most women from public life.

The Taliban have said they hope older girls will return to schools and universities, under guidelines, by late March. Except for some schools in northern Afghanistan, most Afghan girls above the sixth grade have not attended school since August.

Yousefi said that Taliban officials who have visited the tutoring centre have not laid down specific rules, as they had at some public schools. He said they have merely stressed adherence to "values," interpreted as separating boys and girls and requiring girls to cover their hair and faces.

— *The New York Times*

A life slump to lift you up



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An author, columnist, creative writer, translator and a communications professional

Everyday in life is a different experience that comes in various forms, either positive or negative, but all mark an opportunity to make a certain decision. Each of those experiences undoubtedly require taking the right decision at the right time. However, this becomes

a challenge that not everybody can wisely overcome! In fact, every obstacle in our life emerges to make us bitter or better and either to break or make us.

However, the way in which we all perceive and look at things that happen to us really counts to get the best decision taken at the right time. If our eyesight first hocks the positive side, then we will never feel we are lost. Rather, the impact of what happens to us could be easily accepted.

There is nothing called a dead end or unsolved problem! One has to think positively and believe in the possibility to get things fixed the way you like.

Actually, the choice is ours whether we become a victim or a victor of the challenges we come across. Sometime, we only need to be more confident and roll the dice to make things come the way we wish.

The first feeling that one must perceive is that problems are only opportunities with thorns on them, so they do not come with values stamped upon them. Then, one has to remember that there is a lesson behind every challenge, which would be discovered eventually.

ONE HAS TO REMEMBER THAT THERE IS A LESSON BEHIND EVERY CHALLENGE, WHICH WOULD BE DISCOVERED EVENTUALLY

In view of this, taking a decision comes among the key challenges that we all face in life. This process is always difficult regardless how important the matter is. Sometimes we make a decision, which we might regret later on. It is of course frustrating and hard to feel that you made a wrong or unlikable decision. To tell the truth, it is most irritating when it comes to making your mind up on money making or jobs selection.

However, do not worry at all; this is just a very normal feeling and thought that we all get, especially when not sure about the decision to make. Likewise, as we regret a decision we had taken earlier, this marks a learning experience. Whenever we don't give ourselves enough time to make our mind, we definitely get such kind of feelings or self-blame. Those very unpleasant thoughts and emotions remain itching in our minds and boiling in our hearts.

However, it helps us recall things we have made or review a decision have been taken sometimes back. With this critically distressing thinking and brainstorming, we get to discover our slips and mistakes, which are learning points. Though it might be hard and intolerable experience.

We learn things from our reoccurring mistakes, so we can get things right in the next time while taking a decision. Hence, never blame yourself for making a mistake or undesirable decision for it could be the right one and you might realise that someday afterward.

On the other hand, the Almighty Allah tests our patience and believe on Him through different challenges. He is always there with us as life is getting harder and complicated. Trust that Allah is bestowing people things for their own good on certain times throughout their lifespan.

Thus, we should have faith that whatever happens comes as a blessing of different forms. Our beliefs and confidence are behind our attitudes, perception of life and ultimately the decisions we make.

Simply, one has to live the moment and have some hope that challenges bring better opportunities. As Helen Keller, an American lecturer and creative author, said, "Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence."



TONGA TSUNAMI AFTERMATH

An aerial view of cleaning crews working to remove oil from a beach annexed to the summer resort town of Ancon, northern Lima, on Sunday after a spill which occurred during the offloading process of the Italian-flagged tanker 'Mare Doricum' at La Pampilla refinery caused by the abnormal waves recorded after the volcanic eruption in Tonga. – AFP

We're all in the uncanny now

LILI LOOFBOUROW

It's simultaneously true that the Omicron wave of Covid-19 seems to have peaked or be peaking — promising some relief — and that good news of this kind is unusually hard to take in during what can only be described as a horribly scrambled time for Americans trying to navigate these choppy waters.

The issue isn't just that messaging about the pandemic has been egregiously mixed; there is a very real sense that different parts of the country are occupying entirely different realities. This is clearest in online medical forums, which make for harrowing but instructive reading even at the best of times.

But what's struck me recently, as I've lurked these spaces where medical professionals, from doctors to nursing assistants, gather to discuss their jobs, is less the medical insight (or the usual venting about the profession) than the psychological record they jointly create of this particular and peculiar moment when the pandemic is simultaneously resurging and being treated as largely over.

Like a canary in the coal mine, the forums are registering the most intense and high-stakes version of a dissonance much of the country is feeling too on some level. People are grappling with a fundamental gap between what should be happening and what it feels like actually is. "Does anyone else feel like they are living in an alternate reality recently?" one Reddit post in /r/medicine from a couple of weeks ago reads.

Professionally, I am seeing cases rise in a way I've never seen or could even imagine before. ... There are very few, if any, ICU beds open in my city right now. I talk to the CMOs from the hospitals in my jurisdiction. They tell me they are in a dire situation. They've never been so overwhelmed. They currently have over 1,000 staff out. They are rescheduling elective procedures and closing their outpatient clinics 1 day a week to pull doctors and nurses.

But none of this matches what I am seeing when I leave the office. I go to the grocery store and maybe half of people are wearing masks. I drive past the bars downtown and it is business as usual. My friends ask me, what am I doing for holidays?

The replies confirm that this feeling isn't unusual. "Honestly, I felt the same way when I came home from spending a year in Afghanistan looking for road side bombs," one user replies. "It's like I'm reliving that same paradox."

It's true that medical professionals are experiencing an unprecedented level of alienation from their communities. They're being called murderers or monsters by sick patients who claim

that the nurses and doctors are part of a huge conspiracy to control or misinform or harm the public. Hospitals are badly understaffed and it's getting worse; people are burning out and leaving. Those who remain are being subjected to conditions that are increasingly untenable.

But what the medical community is experiencing is an extreme version of what might be recognisable to many of us: the sense that competing realities are simultaneously asserting themselves. This makes existing right now an exercise in the uncanny. It is easier to agree that things are bad than it is to acknowledge that matters are in some respects improving. That no one is quite sure how or on what scale those are improvements are taking place has generated a moment of unusual ambiguity in which no account of the present quite adds up or makes sense.

This is particularly true of the pandemic: The Omicron variant of the coronavirus was characterised by many experts as "mild" compared with delta even as thousands of flights were cancelled across the country during the holiday season due because of how wide and how quickly the variant was spreading. These are not contradictory facts, but they feel like they're in conflict; the optimism of the experts clashes with startling realities on the ground.

Rates of death have not kept pace with record-breaking hospitalisations, which is good news, but try to tell that to overwhelmed staff, or to patients stuck with 36-hour wait times in emergency rooms across the country. And while the president's comments about the unvaccinated being at higher risk are undoubtedly true, it confused people that vaccination and boosting — while still significantly reducing the risk of

severe disease and hospitalisation — did not prevent infection or transmission as many hoped it would, and as occurred did with previous variants. These apparent contradictions are destabilising to conventional wisdom (and what little there is of that does not mutate with the same facility as a virus).

And so, conclusions that seemed obviously correct before — in favour of masking, lockdowns, quarantines, school closures, or keeping workers sick with Covid away from workplaces — are being hotly debated now in ways they weren't then, because we're in a moment when things are almost incomprehensibly better and worse.

The highest infection rates of all time are coinciding with the greatest availability of medicines to combat Covid, from vaccines to boosters to new treatment pills. That has people arguing that it makes sense to behave as if the pandemic is over, or has at least become endemic, even as overwhelmed hospitals are truly on the brink of collapse. Americans are told that frequent testing is crucial to being able to do normal things, but the administration until recently scoffed at its role in providing them, and their availability didn't allow places like the UK to avoid the Omicron surge.

This strain of confusion isn't confined to public health. The United States' economic recovery in 2021 was correctly hailed as stronger and faster than almost anywhere in the world, and the stock market rose 27 per cent despite the pandemic even as the unemployment rate fell. The historic pandemic stimulus made a big dent in the US poverty level. On paper, these indicators of prosperity have made meaningful differences in people's lives.

— The New York Times Service



Nurses at New York's Langone Hospital. Hospitals are in crisis once more, but the pandemic is in a very different stage.

sport

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The top three drifters pose with their trophies on the podium of the first round of Oman International Drift Championship 2022 in Muscat. – Pics by Faisal al Balushi

Oort claims opening honours

C I R B A F I N I S H E S S E C O N D , A H M E D A L A M R I T O P S M E N A S E C T I O N

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 23

The Netherlands drifter Clint Oort edged Benekditas Cirba of Lithuania to clinch the top honours in the first round of the Oman International Drift Championship (OIDC) 2022 at the Muscat Drift Arena on Friday night.

A full-capacity crowd welcomed back the international drift event in Muscat, hosted by the Oman Automobile Association (OAA) after a gap of two years due to the Covid-19 related situation.

The fourth edition of the much-followed motor-sports event saw 52 top drifters in action.

Steph Babbsey of the United Kingdom finished third after beating Oman's Ahmed al Amri in the play-off for third place.

In the semifinals, Oort overcame the challenge of Babbsey while Cirba ended the campaign of Ahmed al Amri.

The preliminary qualification was held on Thursday, January 20.

In the concluding ceremony, chief guest Basil bin Ahmed al Rowas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth, gave away the prizes for the top-placed drifters in various categories. OAA Chairman Brigadier (Retd) Salim bin Ali bin Khalifa al Maskary congratulated the winners.

"Many congratulations to the winners and all the participants. We are delighted to organise our

premier events after two years of uncertainty. Our team is fully prepared to stage the international events complying with the medical protocols and other safety measures," Al Maskary said.

The event was sponsored by Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Redbull Mobile and Zestino.

AHMED TOPS MENA SECTION

In the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) section, Ahmed al Amri emerged top followed by Ali Makhseed of Kuwait and Haitham al Hadidi of Oman. Ahmed also topped the national drifters' category. Haitham was second and Tariq al Shihani finished third.

Last edition runner-up Sebastian Peter Fontijn had to retire from the first-round action after his car met with an accident during the opening practice.

Fontijn, one of the favourites this season, missed the qualifying due to the accident.

The Dutchman hopes to take part in the second round on February 10 and 11. The third and final round is slated for February 17 and 18. OAA Managing Director Suleiman al Rawahi said the huge turnout showed the passion of the fans for drifting.

"Fans are our real strength. We have managed to permit the crowd after following the medical protocols. However, there was a good turnout of fans as international drifting returned after two years," Al Rawahi said.





JAPAN STUN DEFENDING CHAMPIONS INDIA

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, JAN 23

Japan stunned defending champions India 2-0 in their Pool A match of the Asia Cup women's hockey tournament, at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, on Sunday.

Goals from Yuri Nagai in the first quarter and Tanaka Saki in the third quarter sealed the deal for Japan against an Indian team that looked out of sorts.

India could not replicate the form from their first game against Malaysia where they drubbed them 9-0.

JAPAN BEGIN WITH A BANG
Japan shocked India with a goal early from Yuri Nagai in the second minute in the first quarter

as they took a 1-0 lead. The Indian players were struggling to get their rhythm right.

The defending champions failed to convert a couple of penalty corners in the first quarter as well as they failed to equalise and get back into the game.

The Japanese goalkeeper and defence stood strong despite repeated penetrations from Indian strikers. The Indian players could not hold onto possession for longer periods of time and struggled with breaking the shackles.

In the opening stages of the second quarter, Japan appeared the more confident team with a great deal of fluency and ease in their passes and movements.

The likes of Gurjit Kaur were lacking in creating some flair and

Japan kept their stranglehold over the match with some imaginative moves through midfield and stout defending

magic in the Japanese defence as India searched for the elusive equaliser.

India saved a Japanese penalty corner after Savita dived towards her left and averted any further damage in the second quarter.

A lot of work had to be done by India to bounce back in the match.

India came close to scoring

in the initial stages of the third quarter but were thwarted by the Japanese goalkeeper.

Japan kept their stranglehold over the match with some imaginative moves through midfield and stout defending.

Gurjit Kaur was unable to bring her A game to the table as she missed another penalty corner for India with time ticking away.

Japan then took a firm grip in the match when Tanaka Saki slotted home late in the third quarter to double their lead.

In the fourth and final quarter, India were desperate to make a comeback while the Japanese wanted to inflict further misery.

However, both teams were unable to sound the board as Japan claimed the honours and three points.

Crucial games at Asia Cup hockey today

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 23

Four crucial fixtures on Monday will define the qualified teams for the semifinal of 2022 Women's Asia Cup which is underway in Muscat at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

In the first game, China will meet Indonesia and the match will kick off at 13:00. In the following match, the topper Korea will take on Thailand and the game will begin at 15:00.

Asian heavyweight, Japan, will clash with Malaysia in the third match and the game will kick off at 17:00. The last game of the day will be between the title holders India and Singapore and the match will start at 19:00.

Chinese women will chase for the second spot as they possess three points only from one victory against Thailand in the opening game while they suffered a 4-0 loss against Korea.

Indonesian team players have been defeated in the first two matches by Korea and Thailand. They are entering this tournament to gain experience for the forthcoming events.

Thailand will fight for the second spot as they will face Korea. They have three points from one triumph against Indonesia while they suffered a loss against China in the opener. Korean women secured their spot for the semis after they registered two victories

against China and Indonesia.

In loop A, defending champion India will aim for another victory against Singapore to advance to the semifinals and defend the title. Japan will meet Malaysia.

The semifinal round games will take place on Wednesday and the first match will begin at 16:30. The 5th to 8th place matches will be held in the same day and will start from 11:30 am.

Training programme

The training programme of preparation for ladies in hockey took place on Sunday as apart of the Asian event.

As many as 25 participants attended the programme which will last for six days. The official opening of the training function was held in presence of Dr Marwan al Juma, the Oman Hockey Association (OHA) chairman and the other officials.

The first day of the training featured three workshops including brief introduction on hockey.

Then, the ladies learners learned about the hockey related equipment and the mechanism of holding the hockey stick. The third workshop was for the practical side on some tactical ways in hockey.

The national coaches Ahmed al Darmaki, Mohammed al Darmaki and Khamis al Balushi delivered the workshops. The participants attended the analysis session for some top Asian games in the event.



Monfils marches into Australian Open quarterfinals

MELBOURNE: Gael Monfils's blistering start to the season continued on Sunday as he eased past Serbian Miomir Kecmanovic 7-5 7-6(4) 6-3 to reach his second Australian Open quarter-finals.

With wife and top women's player Elina Svitolina beaming in the crowd, the flamboyant Frenchman lit up the Margaret Court Arena with sparkling shot-making to reach the last eight at Melbourne Park for the first time since 2016.

"It was really tough, he played extremely fast on both sides," said 17th seed Monfils. "I tried to be very aggressive today ... It was just battling, battling, hanging in there."

Monfils wrapped up the match with trademark panache, leaping high to thump a backhand crosscourt winner and end Kecmanovic's dream run since the Serb avoided a first-round clash against the deported world number one Novak Djokovic.

At 35 and recently married, Monfils has a new lease on life, and wants to go even further in the tournament.

"I want to do better We are not quite finished yet," he said.



France's Gael Monfils in action during his fourth round match against Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic. – Reuters

Monfils will take on world number seven Matteo Berrettini for a semi-final spot after the Italian defeated Pablo Carreno Busta in straight sets.

Monfils suffered a defeat in a five-set contest against Berrettini in their last Grand Slam meeting at the 2019 US Open quarter-finals.

"Matteo, a lot of confidence for last two years," Monfils said of Berrettini, who is nicknamed "The Hammer" on the tour for his thumping forehands.

"He played extremely aggressive, big serve, flashy tennis with the forehand.

"Last time I played him, I was a little bit, whatever you call it, unlucky or not. It was very tight, five-setter in quarters in a slam."

NADAL SURVIVES SCARE

Earlier, Rafael Nadal survived an epic 28-minute tiebreak to seal his spot in the quarter-finals of the Australian Open and top seed Ashleigh Barty joined him with



Australia's Ashleigh Barty in action during her fourth round match against Amanda Anisimova of the US. – Reuters

victory over giant-killer Amanda Anisimova on Sunday.

Nadal will now face Canada's 14th seed Denis Shapovalov after he stunned third seed and Olympic champion Alexander Zverev — who said "everything" went wrong.

Nadal, who is chasing a men's record 21st Grand Slam title, was pushed all the way by Adrian Mannarino in an 81-minute set before breaking the Frenchman's resolve in a 7-6 (16/14), 6-2,

6-2 victory.

"First set was very emotional," said the 35-year-old Nadal, the 2009 Australian Open champion, who pumped his fists after emerging victorious from a marathon first-set tiebreak on a steamy day in Melbourne.

Barty powers on

In the women's draw, home hope and world number one Barty thrilled the crowd by defeating 60th-ranked Anisimova 6-4, 6-3. The Australian faces another

“It was really tough, he played extremely fast on both sides. I tried to be very aggressive today ... It was just battling, battling, hanging in there

GAEL MONFILS
French player

American, Jessica Pegula, in the last eight.

The 20-year-old Anisimova beat Olympic champion Belinda Bencic and was fresh from knocking out defending champion Naomi Osaka. But she came up against a Barty who looks in irresistible form as she chases her first Australian Open crown.

Reminded that last year's Australian Open went behind closed doors mid-tournament because of Covid, Barty told an adoring Rod Laver Arena crowd that playing in front of them was "a lot more fun".

— Reuters/AFP

Tahir pulls back World Giants to thrilling win

OJHA SMASHES 69-BALL 140 AS INDIA MAHARAJAS
POST 209-3

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 23

Imran Tahir's sensational batting instilled a lifeline to the World Giants in the Legends League cricket at the Amerat Stadium on Saturday night.

The former South African spinner's 19-ball 52 helped World Giants to cross the line in the tense game against India Maharajas after setting a mammoth total of 210 to win.

"Nobody was expecting me to do this. I am very happy to play a special innings for the team. I backed myself and in the end I was able to finish the game for the Giants", an elated Tahir told reporters after the match.

Tahir who started off with boundaries belted five sixers and three boundaries in his match-winning innings.

World Giants had a shaky start to the chase when they lost last-match hero Kevin O'Brien (9) and Corey Anderson (0) very early.

Jonathan Trott had a retire hurt to make things more worse

However, Giants were kept in the game at the other end by Kevin Pietersen, who smashed a 27-ball 53. KP dealt mainly with sixers, hitting six over the ropes and two to the fence.

Pietersen got out trying to hit Stuart Binny for a six as the skied up shot was safely caught by Maharajas captain Mohammed Kaif. Fall of Pietersen put brakes on Giants scoring as they lost Albie Morkel (4) and Brad Haddin (21), who tried to raise the run-rate.

Mornie Morkel (21) put up a fight along with skipper Darren Sammy (28) but Binny and Munaf Patel sent them back to turn the momentum back to India Maharajas. But Tahir had a different idea and Ryan Sidebottom played a wise innings (8) to shore

the Giants to victory.

Maharajas captain Kaif said the injury to RP Singh early on had put their bowling on back-foot.

"We had to fill in the three overs by part-timers which eventually proved costly. Tahir had played a great knock which we never anticipated."

RP Singh had to retire after he suffered a calf muscle injury, bowling one over giving away two runs.

Giants skipper Sammy said it was a special innings from Tahir.

OJHA HITS CENTURY

Batting first, Maharajas were propelled by a tournament-best innings of 140 runs by the man-of-the-match Naman Ojha. It was also the first century of the tournament.

Ojha almost single-handedly carried the Indian batting ably supported by captain Mohammad Kaif with a solid 53.

The wicketkeeper batsman opened the innings and hit 15 fours and nine sixers in his whirlwind 69-ball knock.

"This is one of my best knocks in twenty20. I backed myself and I started playing my shots which I was not doing in the last match."

"I would like to play in all the leagues around the world. So there are chances for the players after retirement", the 38-year-old said.

"I love to open innings. I had not got enough chances earlier before my retirement. But I don't have any regrets. I had performed well whenever I got a chance", Ojha, who happened to be in the same period as Mahendra Singh Dhoni played for India, added.

BRIEF SCORES

India Maharajas 209-3 in 20 overs (Naman Ojha 140 (69 balls, 15x4, 9x6), Mohammed Kaif 53; Ryan Sidebottom 2-20, Mornie Morkel 1-24) lost to World Giants 210-7 in 19.3 overs (Kevin Pietersen 53, Imran Tahir 52, Darren Sammy 28; Stuart Binny 2-22, Munaf Patel 2-51)



Imran Tahir of World Giants reacts after winning the Legends League 2022 match against the India Maharajas at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground in Al Amerat. – LLC

Zeeshan thrilled to be ICC Associate Cricketer of 2021



Oman captain Zeeshan Maqsood (right) with team-mate Khawar Ali.

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 23

Oman team captain Zeeshan Maqsood was named as the International Cricket Council (ICC) Men's Associate Cricketer of the Year 2021 on Sunday after a memorable outing last year which included the T20 World Cup in Muscat.

"It is a great honour from the ICC to start the year. I thank the Oman Cricket board and management, my team-mates, support staff, my family and my organisation for their crucial support over the years", Maqsood told *Observer*.

Zeeshan led Oman in the ICC T20 World Cup 2021 recently in Muscat where he had a match-winning performance in the opening match against Papua New Guinea.

The Oman skipper took four wickets to earn the man-of-the-match award.

Oman, who missed the Super 12 stage of the T20 World Cup narrowly, are gearing up for the one-day internationals and T20s

against the UAE next month and later meet Ireland in World Cup 2023 qualifiers.

"This award is a great encouragement for the cricket in the Sultanate of Oman and will inspire many youngsters to follow their dream to become the national cricketers."

CONSISTENT SHOW

The left-arm spinner was consistent with his performance across both ODI and T20I and aided his team to several victories throughout the year. Leading his side with aplomb, Maqsood also flourished in both batting and bowling roles for Oman in 2021. He played a crucial role as a middle order batter and picked up wickets consistently.

Maqsood made fifties against the USA and Namibia, and was at his consistent best as a bowler, controlling the flow of runs in the middle overs and picking up vital wickets.

Commenting on the ongoing Legends League cricket, Zeeshan said it was exciting to watch the former superstars of the game once again.

"It was great to watch the legends in action again. We can still learn many things from these stars."

GLOBAL CRICKET VENUE

Al Amerat Stadium has etched its place among the global cricket venues after the T20 World Cup.

"Al Amerat Stadium has got approval to host Test and ODIs and it serves the local cricketers well. The Oman Cricket and the ground staff has done very good job to live up to the expectations while hosting the big tournaments."

Zeeshan said the good structure of Oman Cricket League with several lower divisions gives a budding player to come up systematically according to his performance in the game.

"Our League structure is a good platform for youngsters and upcoming players. The players can choose the suitable division before coming to the Premier or A divisions. They can earn the proper experience while competing in the lower divisions and come up strong to the top divisions."

ZEPEDA BEST WOMEN'S PLAYER

In the women's category, Austrian all-rounder Andrea-Mae Zepeda was voted as the ICC Women's Associate Cricketer of the Year for her stellar performance in 2021. Zepeda was consistent at the top of the order for Austria while scoring her runs at a brisk rate. Out of the eight T20Is she played in 2021, three were against Belgium, while the other five came against Italy. Zepeda was impressive in the series against the Belgians in particular, as she scored over fifty runs, including a century, in all three matches against them.

Zepeda said: "I really enjoyed playing cricket last season despite being surrounded by Covid-19 and working full-time as a medical doctor. Nevertheless, we played some very good cricket, and I was able to perform well. My best innings was probably against Belgium in our home ground when I scored my first century ever. Looking forward, I will try my best to continue my journey and to contribute to my team as much as I can."



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New regulations issued for SME financing



MUSCAT: Qais bin Mohammed al Yousuf, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has a Ministerial Decision regulating the financing of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and artisans.

Decision 19/2022 provides a nurturing environment for the growth and development of businesses. Its 23 articles delineate the respective roles of the two overarching bodies, namely the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) and Oman Development Bank (ODB), in enabling this growth.

It also sets out the terms and conditions that an applicant (be it an SME or artisan) should meet to be entitled for financing.

— ONA

Industrial Innovation Academy to drive value creation across manufacturing sector

KEY GOALS: Pacts signed to support supply chain localisation, Omanisation

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) formally launched its Industrial Innovation Academy in Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) on Sunday at a ceremony held under the auspices of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit.

The event was attended by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Commerce and Industry Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) and Chairman of Madayn's Board of Directors; and Asila bint Salim al Samsamiyah, Under-Secretary of Investment Promotion at MoCIIP.

Commenting on the launch, Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, CEO of Madayn said the Academy has been set up to explore and study value-adding investment opportunities in various sectors, and develop and incubate these opportunities to enhance the local content.

“The academy aims at boosting the performance of factories in Madayn's industrial cities, enhancing their operations through incorporating innovation components, as well as developing the skills of the national cadres. Besides, the Industrial



Innovation Academy focalises on keeping abreast of current and future phases, unifying efforts, enhancing performance, reducing costs and achieving sustainable and added value to the factories in Madayn's industrial cities,” Al Hasani stated.

Dr Hussain bin Suleiman al

umbrella to accelerate identifying challenges, finding solutions and exploring innovations while linking them directly to the academic sector in the Sultanate,” Al Salmi added.

SIX PILLARS

According to Dr Ayman bin Abdullah al Fudhaili, Acting CEO of the Industrial Innovation Academy, stated that the Academy is a key part of Madayn's Vision 2040 strategy to create world-class business cities. “Acting as an innovation arm of Madayn to ensure the realisation of its 2040 vision, the Industrial Innovation Academy revolves around achieving six strategic programmes that present a roadmap to enhance the objectives of Madayn,” Al Fudhaili pointed out.

The academy aims at boosting the performance of factories in Madayn's industrial cities, enhancing their operations through incorporating innovation components, as well as developing the skills of the national cadres

HILAL BIN HAMAD AL HASANI
CEO, Madayn

Al Mouj Muscat awards cooling concession to Tabreed Oman

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

Al Mouj Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman's premium lifestyle destination, has signed an agreement with Tabreed Oman, subsidiary of Tabreed — the world's leading district cooling company, to acquire and professionally own and operate its district cooling plant.

The agreement signing took place on Sunday under the auspices of Eng Salim bin Nasser al Afi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Situated within Al Mouj Muscat, the plant provides district cooling infrastructure to the integrated tourism complex's extensive mix of buildings which includes over 6,000 homes, multiple offices, a mall, iconic hotels, Masjid Al

Mouj and Community Hub, golf club and over 85 shops and restaurants.

This agreement presents an opportunity to both continue and enhance Al Mouj Muscat's provision of high-quality, energy efficient cooling to residents, staff and visitors, helping ensure optimum temperatures and comfort at all times.

Al Mouj Muscat's CEO Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani said: “It is with great pride that we welcome this forward-looking partnership. Tabreed Oman is an Omani success story, an innovator of environmentally friendly cooling solutions that consistently reduce emissions, which aligns with our commitment to long-term sustainability. It will provide our community with the highest level of service and ensure our



community will continue to benefit from pleasant living and working environments at all times.”

Tabreed Oman's investment in the Al Mouj plant is its largest project to date and brings its

Eng Abdullah bin Said al Hinai, Tabreed Oman's Chief Executive Officer, says: “We are delighted to have entered into a truly promising partnership which as well as representing a significant increase in our presence in the Sultanate, particularly when it comes to residential cooling, allows us to continue operating Al Mouj Muscat's established cooling infrastructure. Our portfolio includes educational institutions, hotels, shopping malls and other businesses and this agreement is a natural progression for the company, helping us get closer to end users.” The partnership entails an exclusive cooling concession for 30,000 refrigeration tonnes (RT), with over 19,000 RTs already connected and operational. This transaction increases Tabreed Oman's total contract capacity

from 32,000 RT to 62,000 RT, nearly doubling the size of its operation.

Tabreed Oman was set up in 2007 and is a partly owned subsidiary of National Central Cooling Company PJSC (DFM: Tabreed). Tabreed UAE is the leading investor with partners such as Ministry of Defence Pension Fund, ISS Pension Fund, Diwan of Royal Court Pension Fund, Private Projects Development, and PMA International.

Its first project was the 2,411 RT plant at Knowledge Oasis Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman's flagship technology park in 2010. This was followed by Oman Avenues Mall, Landmark in Bausher, Mall of Muscat, Hilton Garden Inn Hotel and Al Araiimi Boulevard Mall, the region's first eco-friendly retail destination.

OOMCO, Riyada sign pact to empower local SMEs

MUSCAT: Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Riyada) to provide 20 retail stores to support Omani startups.

The agreement, which was signed by Hussain bin Jama Bait Ishaq, Acting Chief Executive Officer at OOMCO and Abdulaziz al Raisi, Vice-President of the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development, allows Riyada card holders to apply to rent out specially equipped retail spaces at OOMCO Ahlain stations in various locations throughout the country.

Entrepreneurs who meet the



criteria for registration will be offered several benefits, including having their products displayed and marketed in Ahlain stores, as well as being promoted on OOMCO and its partners' social media pages.

Business owners will also be provided with basic utilities and

exempted from registration fees for the first four months of the contract.

"Our priority is to support up-and-coming SMEs to grow and make a success of their businesses. This agreement with the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development is a clear testament of our commitment to such endeavours, and, as we align ourselves with Oman's Vision 2040, it's one of many 'In-Country Value' initiatives that we are conducting to encourage entrepreneurship and support the socio-economic development of the nation," said Hussain bin Jama Bait Ishaq.

Abdulaziz al Raisi also commented, "In line with our strategy to develop SMEs and aid their integration into the public, this memorandum provides a unique opportunity for budding business-owners, giving them an affordable facility from which to grow. We appreciate the incentives provided by Oman Oil Marketing Company and its wider efforts in serving as a catalyst for the success of the SMEs."

SME development is one of the main pillars of OOMCO's rigorous CSR strategy, which also includes projects such as scholarships, vehicle safety awareness, and education on renewable energy. The partnership underscores the company's long-term strategy to provide services "beyond the pump" while enhancing the quality of life of the communities it serves.

Alizz Islamic Bank launches special car, home financing offers



MUSCAT: Alizz Islamic Bank is making customer's dreams come true! The bank has launched several Sharia compliant banking products and services that help customers fulfil their aspirations.

As per the offer it is now possible to purchase or build a house, with real estate financing at a percentage starting from 4.85 %. In addition, special offers are being extended to those wanting to transfer their financing to Alizz Islamic Bank from other Islamic and commercial banks at a reduced financing rate starting from 4.75% per cent for customers who transfer their financing to Alizz Islamic Bank.

Likewise, the option of car and commodity financing has become flexible and accessible as the customer can choose the car model and complete his transactions in no time, with a financing ratio rate starting from 4.95 %.

Mohammed Juma al Ghassani, AGM and Acting Chief Consumer Banking officer at Alizz Islamic Bank, said: "Your home and your car are waiting for you at Alizz Islamic Bank. In fact, these offers make it easier for customers, whether new or existing, to purchase or build a small house, a car or finance commodities through easy and flexible procedures. Such diversity of options meets various expectations and requirements of different customers. Our team is aware that customers' interest must be given the highest priority, as serving our customers, satisfying their needs and giving them advice is of utmost importance to us.

Customers from all segments of the society who are willing to apply for such finances can visit our branches across the governorates and wilayats.

OAB announces winners of December Hasaad Savings Scheme

MUSCAT: Oman Arab Bank (OAB) recently announced the names of the winners of its Hasaad Savings Scheme for December 2021.

The draw witnessed 108 customers winning prizes of RO 500 each and two winners of RO 10,000 as part of the Big Prize Draw. As for the Elite account holders, one customer was the winner of the Elite Grand Prize of RO 25,000 from the Al Buraimi branch.

Commenting on the result of the last scheme of 2021, Rashad al Shaikh, Head of the Retail Banking Division at OAB, said, "We are delighted to see the huge turnout and the number of savings as we bid adieu to the last year. We are proud of our valued customers for their efforts to save, aligning with our objective of the Hasaad Savings scheme.

As always, we ensure that they are well rewarded and appreciated for their savings. Alongside encouraging savings culture for unforeseen circumstances, it is our responsibility to be more than just another financial



institution and support them in maintaining sound financial management practices."

The Hasaad Savings Scheme 2021 saw 101 lucky winners from 54 branches win RO 500 each per month, as well as five winners of RO 1,000 each. This is in addition to a Big Prize draw, which will see two winners of RO 10,000 each every quarter.

The Elite Draws saw two winners every month of RO 10,000 each. This is replaced by an Elite grand prize draw conducted every three months with one lucky winner of RO 25,000.

"On behalf of Oman Arab Bank, I extend my warmest congratulations to all the

winners of the December draw. I thank each and every one of our customers for being a part of all the draws for 2021 and making the scheme a huge success," Rashad added.

Oman Arab Bank has a rich and proud history as one of the first financial institutions to be established in the Sultanate.

Today, the Oman Arab Bank Group operates a nationwide network of 51 conventional branches, 15 Islamic branches, 150 conventional ATMs and 15 Islamic ATMs in high footfall locations across the Sultanate.

OAB provides a complete range of financial products and services through its OAB Online App.

NBO appoints new head of talent and performance management

MUSCAT: National Bank of Oman (NBO) has announced the appointment of Aliya al Balushi (pictured) as its new Head of Talent and Performance Management.

Aliya has over 16 years' experience in the banking industry with previous senior roles in compliance, internal audit and corporate communications. Bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience to her new role, she is anticipated to steer the bank's roadmap for talent acquisition, people development, and performance management, as it seeks to strengthen its position as a future-ready, world-class institution.

"At NBO, we are proud to have a market-leading workforce and Aliya will be a tremendous asset to the team. As we strengthen our endeavours to create and sustain a strong performance-based culture, and nurture a leadership



pipeline, her role will be integral to supporting our business performance and ultimately, providing our customers with a first-rate banking experience," said Abdullah al Hina, Chief Executive Officer, CEO of NBO.

Among her most recent roles, Aliya served as the Finance and Administration Director, AGM Compliance and AGM Internal Audit. She has a wealth of experience in diverse fields from Compliance and Audit to Human Resources, Finance and Procurement, and is credited for implementing a number of transformational strategies.

Aliya's educational attainments include a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) in Finance from the University of Durham, UK, and a Bachelors of Arts (BA) in Finance, Accounting and Management from the University of Nottingham, UK.

Maisarah announces new attractive profit rates on personal, home & auto finance

MUSCAT: Central to its efforts to enhance its customers' experience through convenient products and tailored financial solutions, Maisarah Islamic Banking Services recently announced new profit rates on its personal finance, home finance and auto finance.

The new rates have been introduced to make it easier and more attainable for customers to acquire financing for personal use, build or purchase the house of their dreams, and own the automobile of their choice.

Nasser bin Said al Bahantah, DGM & Chief Retail Banking Officer at Maisarah, reaffirmed BankDhofar's Islamic banking window's commitment to offer specifically designed financial solutions to meet the specific needs of every individual customer.



"Following the positive response to our diverse bundle of financing options, we have introduced revised profit rates to enable our customers to achieve their goals and have access to easy and convenient home, auto and personal finance options.

We have introduced revised profit rates to enable our customers to achieve their goals and have access to easy and convenient home, auto and personal finance options

NASSER BIN SAID AL BAHANTAH
DGM & Chief Retail Banking Officer at Maisarah

We expect to see a high demand on these finances that come with competitive rates, simple steps, fast

approval and easy documentation," he noted.

As per terms and conditions of the revised finance profit rates, the starting profit rate for Personal Finance is 4.99% and it is applicable for all new, additional and take-over of finances from other banks.

Meanwhile, 4.95% is the starting profit rate for Home Finance and Auto Finance, and it is applicable for all new, additional and take-over of home and auto finances from other banks.

Customers can avail these exclusive finance options at any of Maisarah's branches in Al Athaiba, Al Hail, Salalah, Suhar, Birkat Al Mouz, Greater Muttrah, Al Khuwair, Sur, New Salalah and Araqi.

To learn more, visit the nearest Maisarah Islamic Banking Services

branch, check out the official page www.maisarah-oman.com or call 24775777 for further inquiries.

Showing an impressive growth since the launch of its operations in 2013, Maisarah Islamic Banking Services has demonstrated a high degree of product innovation with an extensive range of Shariah-compliant financial solutions that cater to the needs of its retail and corporate customers in different parts of the Sultanate of Oman.

As part of its future growth plan, Maisarah will continue to distinguish itself by focusing on outstanding service quality, developing and launching new innovative products, and investing in technology to provide the best customer experience through its expanding network of branches, ATM and CDM facilities.



Hutchison Ports Sohar receives mega containership

NEW MILESTONE: 17K TEU class container ship *APL Raffles* makes maiden call at Port of Sohar

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

Hutchison Ports Sohar received CMA CGM's *APL Raffles*, which is the biggest container vessel to ever call Port of Sohar, on January 23, 2022. *APL Raffles* is deployed by CMA CGM under its China India Middle East Express 1 (CIMEX1) service. It is a 17K TEU class container vessel with an overall length of 398.50 metres and width of 51 metres.

Commenting on the call, Anacin Kum, Chief Executive Officer of Hutchison Ports Sohar, said, "At the time when the world is facing crisis due to Covid-19 which created a major impact on

the logistics industry, the call of the 17K TEU class container vessel is a significant milestone and pride for us.

We are continuing to expand our facilities and increase the number of automated equipment's to handle the largest container vessels afloat, at the time to reinforce our commitment to create a sustainable future.

Together with our unrivalled skills and experience of our dedicated workforce enables us to turn around even the biggest container ships as quickly and efficiently as possible, providing world-class service to our customers."

Mark Geilenkirchen, Chief Executive Officer, SOHAR Port and Freezone, stated: "Our capabilities have grown at a staggering rate over almost 20 years, from the first vessel call we ever welcomed, the *MV Gaia Triumph*, which at 100 metres in



length, is a just a quarter of the size of the *MV APL Raffles*.

The arrival of this vessel marks an exciting milestone as we continue to make way for

bigger ships. It also opens up new opportunities for our customers to ship more products and make global connections that were previously not possible, while

keeping SOHAR competitive and ready for growth.

Today's maiden call bears witness to the steady growth in both our handling capacity and

our efficiency at SOHAR Port. The continued smooth operations at Hutchison Ports Sohar have brought us new lines and more connections."

In 2021, the terminal recorded an increase of 200 per cent in domestic movements compared to 2020 while the export full volume recorded a year-on-year growth of 9 per cent.

The terminal not only fared well in terms of operations but also added two new direct services to its portfolio with Milaha's NDX service connection Sohar to India and Qatar and Aladin Express' new service connecting Sohar to Far East & India.

With the completion of handling 6 million TEUs, Hutchison Ports Sohar also marked its 15th year of operations in the Sultanate of Oman in 2021. In 2022, the company is vigorously working towards launching autonomous truck technology at the terminal.

EU in touch with partners to boost gas supplies: Commissioner

PARIS: The European Union is talking with partners about the potential for increasing gas supplies to the bloc, Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson (pictured) said after a meeting with European energy ministers in France on Saturday.

A gas supply crunch in Europe, widely blamed on a dearth of gas flows from Russia, has caused energy prices to soar. Moscow denies manipulating supplies.

Simson said she would attend conferences in Azerbaijan and Washington in February to discuss ways for increasing gas deliveries to Europe. "The gas storage levels in the EU are significantly lower than



usual at this time of the year", she told reporters.

Ministers meeting in the city of Amiens had discussed uncertainty in the market caused by the Ukraine crisis and significant falls in flows from Russia in recent months.

"My message is that Europe has a robust, well diversified and

resilient gas infrastructure and clear procedures of solidarity in case of emergencies", Simson said.

"But we need to remain extremely vigilant, improve our risk-preparedness and reinforce solidarity between the member states." Chancellor Olaf Scholz signalled this week that Germany may be ready to discuss halting the Nord Stream 2 pipeline — which is to transport Russian gas to Germany bypassing Ukraine — should Russia attack Ukraine.

Simson highlighted a proposal presented, designed to revise gas supply regulations to improve coordination among member states over gas storage.

— Reuters

Germany's Lufthansa in talks to buy 40% stake in Italy's ITA Airways

BERLIN: Germany's flagship carrier Lufthansa is in talks to buy a 40% stake in state-owned Alitalia's successor ITA Airways, two people familiar with the negotiations said on Sunday.

The talks about a tie-up between Germany's partly state-owned Lufthansa and ITA Airways are still ongoing with all outcomes possible, one of the sources said on condition of anonymity, adding the stake price was still under negotiation.

The second source said Lufthansa and ITA were in talks over a 40% stake sale, but it could take longer than a few days to reach a comprehensive deal.

A Lufthansa spokesperson declined to comment, but reiterated an earlier statement that the German carrier was open



ITA Airways Chairman Alfredo Altavilla poses with the image of the new livery for the carrier's jets, in Italy. — Reuters

to the possibility of a partnership with ITA.

An ITA spokesperson did not mention Lufthansa but said that

the airline's top management would present a strategic plan to the company's board on January 31.

— Reuters

Visit Oman – SalamAir partnership to boost travel trade sector

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 23

With their recently signed partnership with SalamAir, Visit Oman — the country's dynamic B2B travel booking gateway — further enhances its capability to connect international travel trade markets with tourism suppliers in the Sultanate of Oman.

Signed in Muscat in early January 2022, this latest partnership with SalamAir benefits Visit Oman's international travel trade partners by providing more flight/holiday package options to the Sultanate of Oman via the VisitOman.om platform.

The partnership will facilitate an increase in the number of agencies around the world selling Omani tourism, which will serve as a boost to the local travel industry in the country.

Established in 2016, SalamAir is the first low-cost carrier based in the Sultanate of Oman and currently flies destinations around the Middle East, Africa and South



Asia.

Capt Mohamed Ahmed, CEO of SalamAir, stated, "We are pleased to have partnered with Visit Oman; this is another step in contributing to the Oman Vision 2040, and generating opportunities to foster the leisure travel by offering bespoke travel solutions that can attract different market segments and increase the inbound tourism movement. We do not doubt that our partnership will be successful in further

enabling tourism in Oman."

Speaking about this latest partnership, Shabib al Maamari, Managing Director — Visit Oman, stated: "For Visit Oman, SalamAir represents a valuable partner in terms of their provision of safe, reliable and affordable travel, combined with service excellence.

Furthermore, SalamAir represents the soul and spirit of Oman and its people — and this aligns with our own aim to connect the global travel-trade

to unlimited discovery in Oman. Through SalamAir, Visit Oman can further promote Beautiful Oman to key source markets connected to the airline's diverse international network."

This latest collaboration with SalamAir follows a number of recent developments for Visit Oman, including a signed agreement in late 2021 with the internationally renowned Sabre Travel Solutions as the online travel-trade gateway's strategic technology partner.

International travel trade welcome VisitOman.om as a dynamic, all-encompassing resource which seamlessly connects the entire accredited Omani tourism supply chain to the travel-trade sector in key international markets.

The Visit Oman initiative falls within the broader, existing Oman Tourism Vision 2030 strategy, which acts as a driving force in the Sultanate of Oman's move to a more diversified and developed economy.

Industrial Innovation Academy to drive value creation across manufacturing sector

FROM PAGE 13

The fifth programme, titled 'Innovation', works in sync with the previous four initiatives to create innovative products that can compete in the local markets.

Finally, the sixth programme, called 'Omanisation', pays attention to qualifying and training the national cadres to ensure the provision of job opportunities at the middle and senior levels.

These programmes have been developed after conducting in-depth studies to get familiar with the needs of the local market and taking into consideration that Oman Vision 2040 focuses on achieving a diversified and sustainable economy that is centred around technology, knowledge and innovation.

COOPERATION PACTS

On the sidelines of the launch, a Memorandum of Cooperation was signed between the Industrial Innovation Academy and Oman Vision 2040

Implementation Follow-up Unit to enhance joint cooperation between the two sides.

It was signed by Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit, and Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, CEO of Madayn.

Another Memorandum of Cooperation was signed with the National Employment Programme, with the Academy serving as the strategic partner and operational arm of the 'Supply' programme.

The programme aims at identifying priority sectors, analysing the supply chains of these sectors, and benefiting from the investment and employment opportunities emanating from the analysis of these chains.

The second MoC was signed by Dr Ayman bin Abdullah al Fudhaili, Acting CEO of Industrial Innovation Academy, and Eng Al Azhar bin Ahmed al Kindi, Technical Director of the National Employment Programme.

Serbia’s Rio smash dents EU electric car dream

Novak Djokovic has clawed one back against Australia. A week after authorities in Canberra deported the Serbian tennis ace, Belgrade nixed a \$2.4 billion lithium project run by Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto.

The decision puts Serbia’s reputation as an investment destination on the line, along with Europe’s dream of securing local supplies of raw materials for electric-vehicle batteries.

The battle over the Jadar lithium mine in western Serbia has been brewing for months, with green groups and communities complaining about potential contamination of local rivers.

Djokovic sided with the protesters in an Instagram post in December, raising the stakes for Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, who faces an election in April.

The cost to Serbia of leaving Jadar’s 2.3 million tonnes of lithium carbonate in the ground forever is probably too great

The volleys of bad-tempered rhetoric between Serbia and Australia over the star’s Covid-19 vaccination status further reduced her room for manoeuvre.

Rio should be able to smooth things over with the government after the election while addressing local concerns with plans for more rigorous treatment of mining waste.

The cost to Serbia of leaving Jadar’s 2.3 million tonnes of lithium carbonate in the ground forever is probably too great. Rio reckons the project would deliver a 4 per cent bump to the Balkan country’s \$60 billion economy.

Still, the spat is a setback for Rio Chief Executive Jakob Stausholm, who is desperate to shift the company away from the iron ore that currently accounts for two-thirds of its revenue, towards metals like copper, cobalt and lithium that are central to a decarbonised global economy.

Based on current lithium prices, Jadar’s 58,000 tonnes of projected annual production would have yielded \$2.2 billion of revenue. That’s around 5 per cent of Rio’s long-term forecast top line. Even though Australia and Chile are the world’s top producers of lithium ore, Chinese companies control 80 per cent of supply of the refined metal.

Jadar would loosen that grip by producing enough to power a million cars a year from the 119 billion euro auto giant’s doorstep. The six-fold jump in lithium prices since mid-2021 points to a serious supply crunch.

For Europe’s auto industry, Djokovic may have made matters worse. — **Reuters**



A DAY’S CATCH

Fishermen bring in their catch of the day at a fishing village in Lhokseumawe, Aceh, Indonesia on Sunday. — **AFP**

Who is winning the trade war?



PINELOU KOUJIANOU GOLDBERG

The writer is Professor of Economics at Yale University

BILATERAL TRADE BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES HAS TANKED. AND BECAUSE THE US AND CHINA ARE THE WORLD’S TWO LARGEST ECONOMIES, MANY REGARD THIS DEVELOPMENT AS A HARBINGER OF THE END OF GLOBALISATION.

The United States-China trade war started in 2018 and has never officially ended. So, which side has been “winning” it? Recent research offers an unambiguous answer: neither.

US tariffs on Chinese goods led to higher import prices in the US in the affected product categories, and China’s retaliatory tariffs on US goods ended up hurting Chinese importers.

Bilateral trade between the two countries has tanked. And because the US and China are the world’s two largest economies, many regard this development as a harbinger of the end of globalisation.

Yet the “deglobalisation” argument ignores the many “bystander” countries that were not directly targeted by the US or China.

In a new paper investigating the effects of the trade war on these countries, my co-authors and I come to an unexpected conclusion: Many, but not all, of these bystander countries have benefited from the trade war in the form of higher exports.

To be sure, one would expect exports from third countries (Mexico, Vietnam, Malaysia, etc.) to take the place of Chinese exports to the US.

But what is surprising is that these countries increased their exports not only to the US but also to the rest of the world.

In fact, global trade in the products affected by the trade war seems to have

increased by 3 per cent relative to global trade in the products not targeted by tariffs.

That means the trade war did not just lead to a reallocation of third-country exports to the US (or China); it also resulted in net trade creation.

Given that trade wars are not generally associated with this outcome, what accounts for it? One potential explanation is that some bystander countries saw the trade war as an opportunity to increase their presence in world markets.

By investing in additional trade capacity or mobilising existing idle capacity, they could increase their exports without increasing their prices.

Another explanation is that as bystander countries started exporting more to the US or China, their unit costs of production declined because economies of scale allowed them to offer more at lower prices.

Consistent with these explanations, our paper finds that the countries with the largest increases in global exports are those in which export prices are declining.

While the net effect of the trade war on the world economy was an increase in trade, there was enormous variation across countries.

Some countries increased their exports significantly; some increased their exports to the US at the expense of their exports elsewhere (they reallocated trade); and some countries simply lost exports by selling less to the US and to the rest of the

world.

What accounts for these differences, and what could countries have done to ensure larger gains from the trade war? Again, the answers are somewhat surprising. One might have guessed that the most important factor explaining countries’ differing experiences would be pre-trade-war specialisation patterns.

Countries such as Malaysia and Vietnam, for example, were lucky to be producing a heavily affected product category like machinery.

Yet specialisation patterns appear to have mattered little, judging by the big export winners of the trade war: South Africa, Turkey, Egypt, Romania, Mexico, Singapore, the Netherlands, Belgium, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

What mattered instead were two key country characteristics: participation in “deep” trade agreements (defined as regimes covering not only tariffs but also other measures of behind-the-border protection); and accumulated foreign direct investment. Countries that had a high pre-existing degree of international trade integration benefited the most.

Trade agreements tend to reduce the fixed costs of expanding in foreign markets, and existing arrangements may have partly offset the uncertainty generated by the trade war. © **Project Syndicate, 2022**

‘Heating or eating’: Britons struggle with rising costs

CHARLES ONIANS

Nestled amid superstores at a retail park, the Colchester Foodbank in eastern England last year gave out a total of 165 tonnes of food — enough to feed 17,000 people.

But that could be surpassed this year, as British annual inflation hits a 30-year high of 5.4 per cent in December, as real wages fall, and food and energy costs rise. “We think we’re likely to feed 20,000 people in 2022,” said foodbank manager Mike Beckett.

“If there is a slowdown, and things get worse, it might be as many as 25,000 people. “That is certainly a bit of a nightmare. Our worst case scenario is maybe 30,000 people.”

About 95 per cent of the produce

at the foodbank, run by the Trussell Trust charity, comes from members of the public donating at collection points at local supermarkets.

But the current economic climate has forced many who wouldn’t normally need food parcels to seek assistance.

“I normally put something in the foodbank trolley but now it’s my turn to have some help,” said Heidi, 45, who said she was struggling with price rises on “just everything”.

The Trust says the number of people receiving three days worth of emergency food from its centres across Britain has risen from some 26,000 in 2009 to over 2.5 million in 2021.

British food writer and anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe noted after the latest inflation rise this week that the actual cost of many food staples has gone up by

much more.

The cheapest pasta at her local supermarket a year ago cost £0.29 for 500 grams (around one pound) while today it is £0.70 — a hike of 141 per cent.

The cheapest rice was £0.45 for one kilogram but now costs £1.00 for 500g. “That’s a 344 per cent price increase as it hits the poorest and most vulnerable households,” she wrote in a viral Twitter thread read by millions.

“The system by which we measure the impact of inflation is fundamentally flawed — it completely ignores the reality and the REAL price rises for people on minimum wages, zero hour contracts, food bank clients, and millions more.”

Manager Beckett agrees that “however you measure inflation doesn’t really account for the cheap

food going up, and it’s going up by hundreds of per cent.”

Low-income families are under extra pressure after the government returned welfare benefit payments to pre-pandemic levels, having increased them temporarily during lockdowns.

Beckett says that in — “a bumper year” — 42 per cent of the food bank’s clients were children.

In a report published this month, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation noted that “for children, severe food insecurity has been linked to chronic health conditions like asthma and depression”.

A poor diet “will impede a child’s physical, cognitive and emotional development. Adults in food-insecure households have higher rate of developing chronic diseases such as arthritis, asthma, diabetes and mental health issues,” said the report on UK poverty in

2022.

The anti-poverty charity noted “key design features of the social security system that directly lead to higher food insecurity and have contributed to the rise in food bank use”.

They include having to wait a minimum of five weeks before getting initial benefit payments such as Universal Credit.

Others point to the fact that child benefits are capped at two children. The cost of living in Britain is forecast to soar even higher in April owing to a tax hike and further planned increases of around 50 per cent to domestic energy bills.

More painful tax increases are expected to foot the vast bill for Covid. As a result, even more households across Britain will face fuel poverty, spending more than 10 per cent of their total income on fuel. — **AFP**

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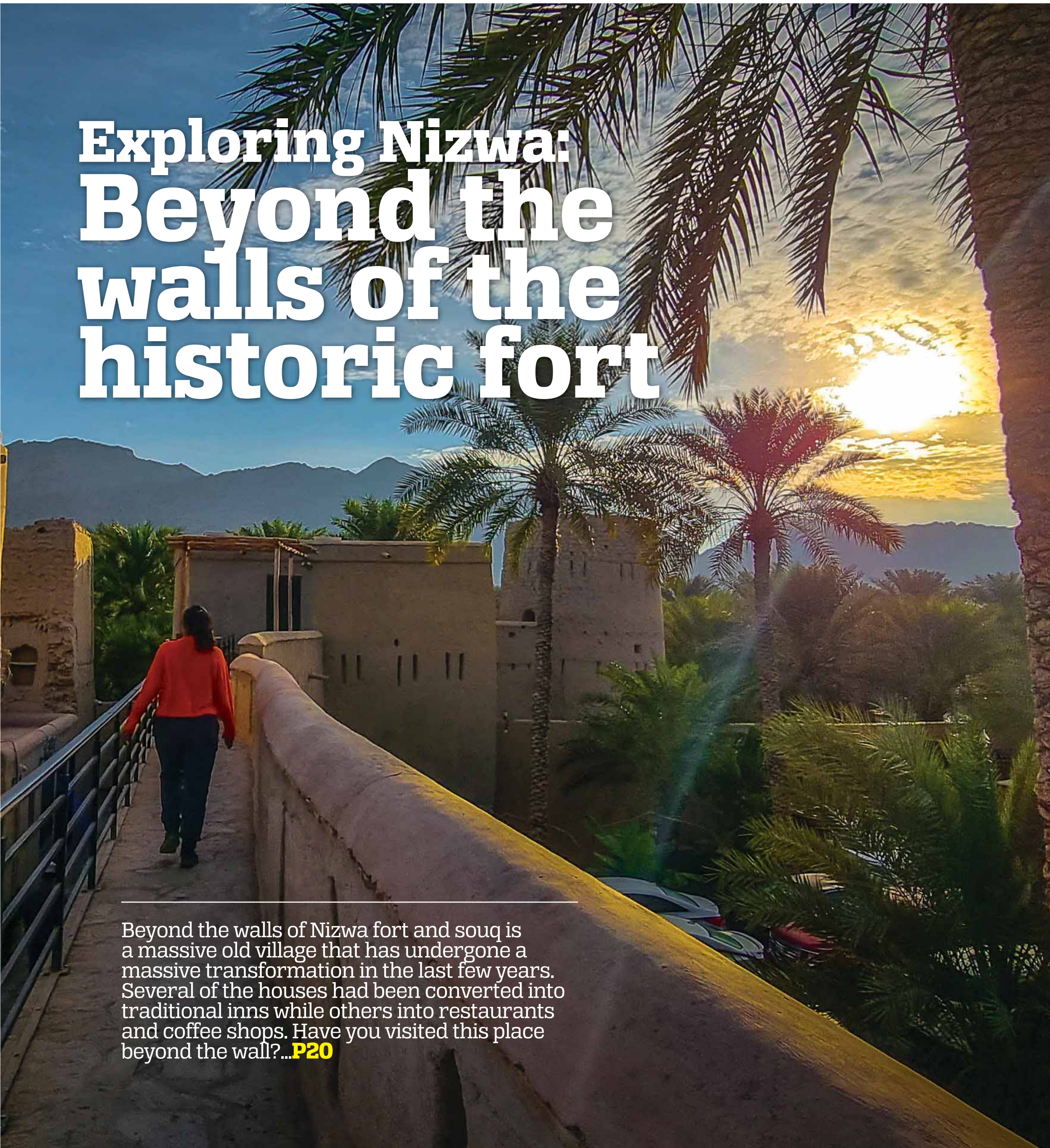
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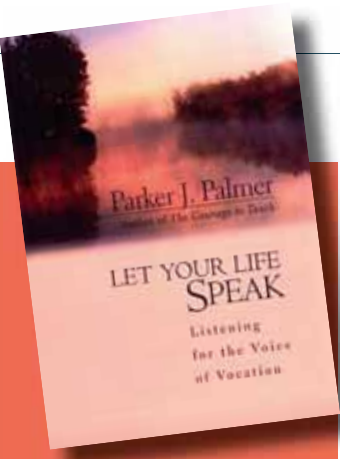
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Exploring Nizwa: Beyond the walls of the historic fort

Beyond the walls of Nizwa fort and souq is a massive old village that has undergone a massive transformation in the last few years. Several of the houses had been converted into traditional inns while others into restaurants and coffee shops. Have you visited this place beyond the wall?...**P20**

READ



LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK
BY PARKER PALMER

Palmer shares his winding career journey, which includes wrong turns to fit into roles not meant for him. He shares his search for his ideal vocation, which turns into the ultimate existential crisis: "Who am I?"

MOVIES

Next two 'Mission: Impossible' movies delayed until 2023, 2024

THE SEVENTH AND eighth movies in the "Mission: Impossible" franchise starring Tom Cruise have been delayed until 2023 and 2024 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, producers Paramount Pictures and Skydance said in a statement on Friday.

"Mission: Impossible 7" had been scheduled to debut in movie theaters in September 2022, followed by "Mission: Impossible 8"

in July 2023. The new dates for the films are July 14, 2023, for the seventh installment, and June 28, 2024, for the eighth movie in the series. "After thoughtful consideration, Paramount Pictures and Skydance have decided to postpone the release dates for Mission: Impossible 7 & 8 in response to delays due to the ongoing pandemic," the companies said in a statement. Theater chains, including AMC Entertainment (AMC.N) and Cinemark Holdings Inc (CNK.N), are still trying to recover from extended closures during the pandemic. — Reuters





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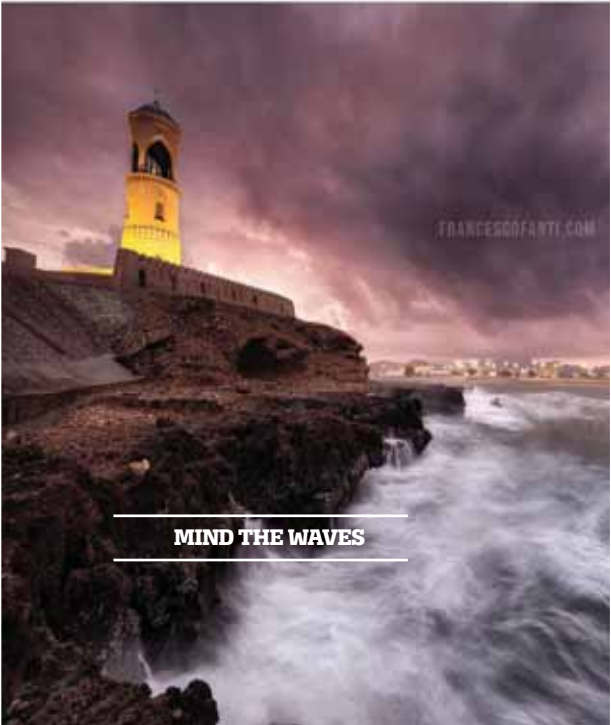


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AROUND THE WORLD

FASHION

The Designer Bringing a New Kind of Cool to Kenzo



THERE WAS A MOMENT, about six years ago, when Nigo realised he felt old.

This is not a particularly unusual feeling for someone in his mid-40s, as he was then. But this was Nigo, one of the most influential figures in streetwear, who helped turn a subculture into culture-culture, who practically pioneered the concept of selling \$400 hoodies to lines of hungry, hungry hypebeasts.

Nigo had been tapping into youth culture since 1993, when he founded A Bathing Ape (or Bape). Often seen wearing Bape's signature camouflage pattern, along with diamond-encrusted necklaces, the mononymous designer and music producer had become a cool guys' cool guy, a hero-collaborator to men such as Pharrell Williams, Kanye West and Virgil Abloh.

But as he approached middle age, Nigo found himself dressing more conservatively, he said. After 20 years with Bape, he had sold and left the brand, focusing instead on his other labels (such as Human Made, founded in 2010) and other roles (such as creative director of the Uniqlo UT collection, appointed in 2014). He began to think, "Maybe it's not my time anymore," as he recalled in an interview, speaking through a Japanese translator.

Then Williams intervened.

"I was like, 'What are you doing?'" said Williams, a longtime friend and business partner through their Billionaire Boys Club label. "Now is not the time for that. Now is the time for you to really hunker down, put your head down low and do what you do best. You are one of the greatest curators of taste and purveyors of what's next."

"(Everything was just changing really rapidly," Williams said of Nigo's quasi-midlife crisis. "And Nigo's a Capricorn. Capricorn's an earth sign, so they're into certainty.")

Nigo took the advice seriously, realising it was part of his job, he said, to not "succumb to those kinds of tendencies" of feeling old or out of touch.

Now, a few years removed from his intervention, Williams sees this moment in Nigo's life as necessary, "so that he could make room for this" — this being Nigo's newest role as artistic director of Kenzo. On Sunday in Paris, the 51-year-old designer will present his first collection for the brand, which is owned by LVMH.

When the announcement of Nigo's appointment was made in September, it emphasised that he was the first Japanese designer of the house since Kenzo Takada, its founder. Takada left the brand in 1999, a few years after selling to LVMH for about \$80 million. He died in 2020 at age 81 of complications from Covid-19.

Nigo never met Takada, he said, although Takada had occasionally visited the campus of Nigo's alma mater, Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo, while Nigo was a student. Still, Kenzo's early work was a big influence on Nigo as a teenager.

The brand "had a particularly interesting way of using powerful colours together," Nigo said, which differed from the dark, somber, cool use of colour dominating Japanese fashion at the time. Takada's collections highlighted Asian textiles but also borrowed elements from European folk dress, theater costumes, military uniforms and more. — **NYT**

MUSIC

Arabic oud icon seeks to 'change soul' of Iraq with music



LONG UPROOTED from his native Iraq, Naseer Shamma, an icon of the Arabic oud, has returned home to help rekindle the flame of Iraqi music, snuffed out by decades of conflict.

"When you are in your own country, you feel very high emotions with the audience," the master string player said.

At nearly 60, the virtuoso who studied under late Iraqi oud legend Munir Bashir still appears in awe of his instrument, as well as those that accompany it.

"All those instruments are Iraqi — you have the santur for example. Each one is from 2000 BC," he said at the national theatre orchestra packed with Iraqi instruments.

"They are very historic instruments and the sound is a very special sound."

Speaking between rehearsals, he added: "There is nostalgia here, with friends. I studied in Baghdad for six years and I always feel more comfort-

able when I play here."

But such nights in Baghdad have become more of an exception than the rule for Shamma, a native of Kut, in the country's southeast.

Exiled in 1993 under dictator Saddam Hussein, he only returned to Iraq for the first time in 2012.

In the interim, he spent time in Cairo, as well as launching schools of Arabic oud across the Middle East, before settling in Berlin, where he lives now.

EDUCATION FIRST

Aside from his musical mission, his latest Baghdad performances come with another purpose.

"Now we're playing to help education. My new project is called 'education first'. We need to help Iraqi schools," Shamma said.

As UNICEF has pointed out, "decades of conflict and under-investment in Iraq have destroyed what used to be the best education system in the region and severely curtailed

Iraqi children's access to quality learning".

From the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s to the subsequent international embargoes, the 2003 US-led invasion and the later Islamic State group takeover, Iraq has struggled to emerge from bloody turmoil.

"And of course, three or four generations paid the price of this," Shamma said.

Despite the sluggish pace of Iraq's recovery and the political disputes that always threaten to erupt into new violence, the musician is hopeful for change.

"We hope that music... will change the soul of people," he said.

While Iraq is still far from its cultural heyday of the 1970s and 80s, it has recently seen a fledgling renaissance, with art galleries opening and book fairs and festivals being held.

"We need to close the bad past and start again a new life with a new memory and a new vision for the future," Shamma said.

PODCAST — GREENMENT



Lakshmi Kothaneth

Challenges of retirement



IN THIS EDITION of GreenMent, we explore with Dr Hamed al Sinawi, Senior Psychiatrist, about the challenge people face in taking up retirement and why others can successfully celebrate this crucial change in life.

How often do we think that far ahead?

In some cases, people seem to be tackling retirement, while others are busy doing what they like best. Basically doing everything they wanted to do before but could not because of the time constraints and work commitments.

What is the actual transformation one goes through while entering retirement?

According to Dr Hamed, it is the loss of purpose that is often the problem.

Imagine how the day changes from how it used to be during the working days and now in retirement. Could it be true that women handle retirement better than men?

Whether men or women, Dr Hamed explains that a bit of planning can make all the difference. There is a difference in the lifestyle and one is at home for many more hours.

What about friends?

Most of the friends were from the work-

place? Now you have so much time in hand while others are too busy.

Is there nothing common between you and your old friends anymore?

Some people, according to Dr Hamed, realise that some of the friends were there only because of their position.

There are lot more concerns that people may not bring it up in conversations but suffer silently. In some situations, retirees also fall into ill health, which again proves the importance of proper planning the days.

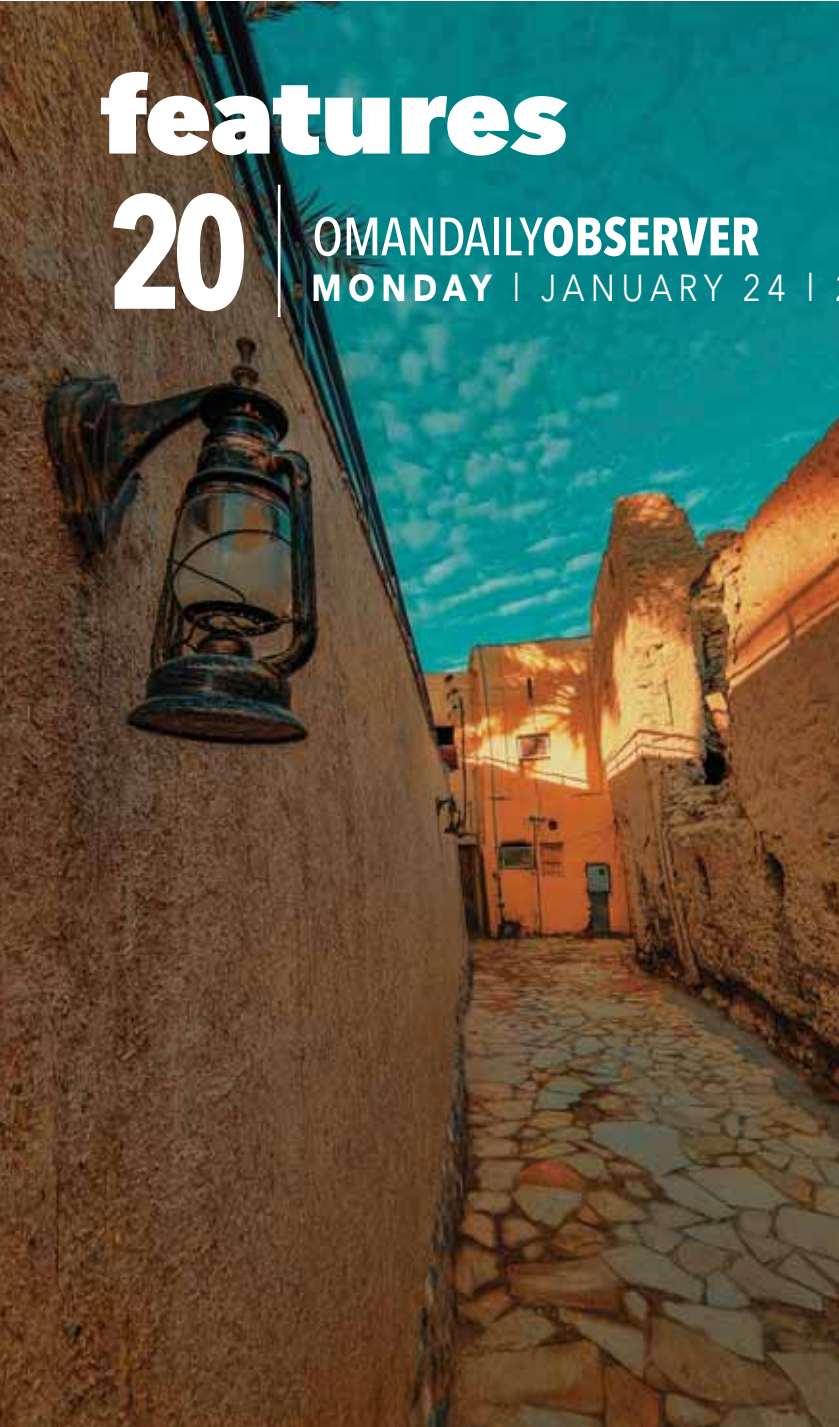
So it is not just mental health that becomes a concern but also physical health.

Another factor is age, Dr Hamed says there could be some activities which one could do before that is not very comfortable as one ages.

What seems to be important is adaptability along with knowing oneself. Maybe it is a new beginning.

To find out more do join us on our podcast-GreenMent.

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Exploring Nizwa: Beyond the walls of the historic fort

By Yeru Ebuen

About 10 years ago, the surrounding villages in Nizwa Fort were on their way to abandonment and ruin. Steep with history, a visit before felt like you are witness-

and fort numerous times within the last three years, I haven't explored what was going on outside the walls of the fort. For an expat living in Oman, it felt like there was nothing to see. Fast forward to last week, a friend and I found ourselves with nothing to do except drive

traditional houses on both sides. It is when it began to dawn on us that many of the abandoned houses were developed and had been transformed into heritage inns. These inns were unfamiliar to me and my companion. A lot of us who work and live in the

traditional breakfast included. Further exploration of the backside of Nizwa Fort yielded rows and rows of renovated old houses. Several of the old mud walls were replaced with the more sturdy concrete but painted the same brown that emulates the organic feel of the whole complex. We counted almost a dozen inns all boasting different traditional Omani attractions. One inn has a beautiful majlis filled with different Arabic lanterns with floor layered with soft carpets and walls decorated with earthenwares. We passed through Shiwatnah mosque, the ornamental tablet on its wall claiming it's the second mosque built in Oman after the Mithmar mosque in Samayil. It dawned on us that beautiful historic mosque together with the surrounding houses were all inside the Al Aqur wall — one of Oman's ancient walls considered as an architectural masterpiece due to its characteristics.

Inn. A small crowd started to gather at around 10 in the morning in one of the tight alleyways. We discovered that one of the walls had been fully converted into a coffee shop with patrons having the option to choose between the street view sitting, the indoor sitting or the wall sitting. What took our breath away is the genius of how the new was built on top of the old. There was a long pathway on top of the wall, on one side, we can see the beauty of the old village with some of its crumbling old houses and on the other side, the beautiful garden filled with date palms. There were a lot of developments planned for the rest of the village outside the Nizwa Fort. We can see how it has the potential to become a bigger attraction, much bigger than it is now. It took us nearly two hours going around and passing through the old alleys of the old village. We saw a few restau-



ing the end of a powerful city-state, the crumbling houses a disappointing proof that it is destined for decay. Back then, unless you take an intentional walk outside the walls of the fort, you would barely notice this decay. From the top of the tower, you will see the old and new merging perfectly well together but it was easy to tell which was the old village and which are the new additions. While I've visited Nizwa souq

to Nizwa Fort at five in the morning and agreed to explore the surrounding village. Taking the narrow road between the fort and the mosque, it was easy to see from the outside how truly massive the fort and its walls are. Walking further down, it was our first time to notice date gardens and a thriving community hidden beyond the wall. After a 10 minute walk, we find ourselves in a beautiful empty pathway with renovated

Sultanate of Oman usually just recognize Nizwa for the fort and the usually lively souq that interest of what goes beyond never really occurred to many of us. Entering some of these inns opened our eyes to the massive transformation sweeping Nizwa villages. Unsurprisingly, this part of Oman continues to be a tourist draw because of the authentic experiences one can experience while staying in one of the inns, hefty Omani

Some historical data showed that there were 15 towers attached to the wall, all of them given their respective names: Al Mudhaba, Mubarza, Ballag, Alalya, Ghuwaur, Aqur garden tower among others. Had we known about this information before, we would have traced them. That would have taken us the full day. But we reserved it for the next time. Our final exploration of the area led us to the walls surrounding the Al Bustan Garden

rants offering some delicious Omani meals. It was a far cry from the village we saw the first time we visited it years back. Today, that portion of Nizwa, especially during the weekend, has become a destination for families. And seeing some of the plans and what would happen in the area, we can't wait for it to become a destination worthy of fame that it no longer will be referred to as the village beyond the wall.