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HM lays foundation stone

FOR OMAN CULTURAL COMPLEX



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Sunday presided over a ceremony to lay the foundation stone of Oman Cultural Complex project and the building of the National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA) at the Airport Heights in Muscat Governorate.

When His Majesty the Sultan arrived at the project's site, he was received by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, Chairman of the Founding Committee of Oman Cultural Complex Project, and Dr Hamad bin Mohammed al Dhoyani, NRAA Chairman.

Then, His Majesty the Sultan viewed Oman Cultural Complex building's designs, presented in showcases that highlighted the components of the project.

The project is considered an embodiment of the Royal vision of His Majesty to establish a state-of-the-art cultural designation, a civilisational accomplishment and a scholarly and institutional edifice of Oman's blessed renaissance.

Then, His Majesty the Sultan watched a visual presentation about the project and listened to a briefing about the building's innovative model. The project houses many institutions and facilities, including the National Library, the National Theatre, Children's Public Library, the House of Arts, the House of Cinema, the Literary Forum and the National Records and Archives Authority. It also comprises restaurants, cafeterias and a public park.

His Majesty the Sultan then laid the cornerstone marking the start of construction of Oman Cultural Complex - a building of about 80,200 square metres (sqm) that will be constructed on land plot of 400,000 sqm, to the tune of RO 147.8 million.

Oman Cultural Complex seeks to promote cultural, literary, theatrical and research activities through the enhancement of relevant programmes aimed to expand the scope of engagement in highlighting Oman's cultural heritage and exploring the country's accomplishments. The complex will provide services to scholars and researchers. It will help organise cultural events and programmes to develop vistas of cultural action that will focus on Oman's history and cultural identity. — ONA

SEE ALSO P2 & 3



COMPLEX TO COVER	TO BE BUILT ON LAND PLOT	PROJECT COST
80,200	400,000	RO 147.8
SQUARE METRES	SQUARE METRES	MILLION



RO 147.8m project to promote culture, heritage



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TO BE BUILT ON A PLOT OF
400,000 sqm

BUILDING AREA
80,200 sqm

COST OF THE PROJECT
RO 147.8 million

NATIONAL THEATRE
16,500 sqm

STATE-OF-THE ART CULTURAL DESTINATION



AUDITORIUM CAPACITY
1,000 seats

HOUSE OF ARTS
3,500 sqm

LITERARY FORUM BUILDING
3,500 sqm

NRAA
22,500 sqm



Oman Cultural Complex, a project whose construction was launched by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Sunday, will serve as a lively space allocated for the collection, conservation and presentation of arts and culture. – ONA

Oman Cultural Complex to be a civilisational edifice

MUSCAT: Oman Cultural Complex, a project whose construction was launched by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Sunday, will serve as an added civilisational accomplishment and a major institutional edifice of modern Oman.

This complex, which will comprise the buildings of three main institutions in one installation, will serve as a lively space allocated for the collection, conservation and presentation of arts and cultural, modern and historical components of the Sultanate of Oman.

The complex will house the buildings of the National Theatre, the National Library and the National Records and Archives Authority, in addition to eight other facilities.

The complex will be set up to the tune of RO 147.8 million on a land plot of 400,000 sqm, where the buildings will occupy an area of 80,200 sqm.

The complex will promote cultural, literary, theatrical and research activities. It will enhance the national memory of the

Sultanate of Oman's history and modern accomplishments.

The compound will include the National Theatre, the National Library, Children's Public Library, the House of Arts, the House of Cinema, the Literary Forum, the National Records and Archives Authority and galleries of modern arts, in addition to restaurants, cafeterias and a public park.

CULTURAL STRATEGY

The objectives of the complex include advancing cultural and literary action, expanding the scope of the ministry's plans and activities and facilitating the implementation of the cultural strategy on serving the community.

The complex will supervise and follow up government and private cultural centres and institutions. It will help build capacities and enable the institutions to perform their roles with efficiency and develop their plans and programmes in governorates and wilayats of the Sultanate of Oman. It will also provide services for researchers and students through two institutions:

the National Records and Archives Authority and the National Library.

The National Library at the Complex will be set up on an area of 23,500 sqm. It will accommodate literary and intellectual produce, devise specifications and criteria, collect data, gather about one million books and exchange information locally and internationally. The Library will also boost the capacity of privately-owned bookshops and provide them with expertise.

The National Theatre will be constructed on an area of 16,500 sqm and its auditorium will provide space for 1,000 seats. The Theatre will promote plans and programmes capable of bringing about a major shift in theatrical practice. It will enhance the role of theatre locally, regionally and internationally. It will also serve as a training institution for Omani youth.

The National Theatre will incorporate theatrical activity to cover student activities and study curricula. Acting in coordination with other departments concerned, the institution will contribute the

The complex will house the buildings of the National Theatre, the National Library and the National Records and Archives Authority, in addition to eight other facilities

follow-up of theatrical activities and make the theatre a useful instrument in serving government programmes and goals. This includes spreading public awareness and hosting local and international theatre festivals.

PROVIDING SUPPORT

The building of the House of Arts will occupy an area of 3,500 sqm. The institution will work to develop and improve the capabilities of young people, notably by studying the requirements for the advancement of folklore, developing the capabilities of young people in the field of modern arts, organising exhibitions and programme in the field of music and providing support to talents in this field.

The Literary Forum, whose building will come up on an area of 3,500 sqm, will contribute to the advancement of literary aspects, including holding of seminars, issuing books authored by member individual and organisations.

The National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA), whose building will occupy and area of 22,500 sqm, will focus

on demonstrating cultural and historical aspects of the Sultanate of Oman. This is envisaged through the encouragement of research and intellectual creativity and the documentation of achievements of ministries and other institutions of the State, as well as society's contribution to the national memory of Oman.

Among other objectives, the NRAA seeks to enrich educational curricula of general education and higher education. It will develop a modern system for the management of electronic records by implementing Oman's largest digital transition project code-named "Access" ("Wusool") system.

The NRAA will also lend support to historical research and studies through its own publications, which aim to foster national values and cultural identity. Towards this objective, the NRAA will draft plans and programmes, organise documentary exhibitions to showcase scholarly research, as well as to intellectual, cultural, economic, social and other publications. — ONA





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CROSSING THE RED LINE ONLINE

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

ROYAL OMAN POLICE recently arrested a resident for violating the Information Technology Law after publishing a video clip. The ROP statement on social media indicated that the video insulted some of the individuals with, “words contrary to what is acceptable.” Legal procedures were taken.

Up to what extent can an individual go when expressing oneself online? In this age of social media, the line is between public and private spheres.

Technically, lifestyle, tourism, travel videos would have wide shots, but how the subjects are portrayed are something all vloggers would have to bear in mind. They must be careful while taking videos where one breach other people’s privacy unknowingly.

The Cyber Crime Law in Oman was issued as Royal No 12 of 2011 and it seeks, “To address a wide array of illegal activities involving a computer device, computer system or network.” The formulation of this law began a new era of an e-enabled society that saw the evolution to the digital society.

A major milestone was the setting of the National IT strategy by the then Information Technology Authority, which is now part of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

In Oman, acts that are considered cyber crimes and violations attract penalties and fines.

PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Between March and October 2023, a total of 1,080 licenses were issued after the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) strongly emphasised the need to obtain a license before engaging in marketing and promotional activities on websites and social media platforms. Active use of social media with more and

more users partaking in producing videos, reels and vlogging has meant there is a need to understand the Cyber Law of Oman especially when it comes to the privacy of others who could be caught unaware on videos or photos.

Experts also warn that even when the social media sites are restricted to friends-only status, they are also in effect public because one cannot control what the friends will do with that information or content.

Sarah al Sharji, a lawyer, said, “People should be aware that how they act online should be the same as how they would act in person; if they wouldn’t do something in person they should not do it online.

Trespassing on someone’s property, for example, is something that most people would not dare do in person, but because online property is so much more accessible and is easier to access even from other countries, people find it morally easier to use someone else’s property because it doesn’t feel the same as physically stepping onto someone’s property.”

She pointed out that it is also easier to intentionally say things that are defamatory when one is writing anonymously or under a pseudonym than saying the same thing to someone in person.

Richard O Mason, in his article, “Four Ethical Issues of the Information Age,” published by Global Development Research Center, stated that privacy, accuracy, property and accessibility are the four major issues of ethics of the information age. He described Privacy: “What information about one’s self or one’s associations must a person reveal to others, under what conditions and with what safeguards? What things can people keep to themselves and not be forced to reveal to others? What is cyber ethics cyber law?”

In Oman the Royal Oman Police urged people who face online crimes by calling 80077444 or email to info@rop.gov.om.

 *THERE IS A NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE CYBER LAW OF OMAN ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO THE PRIVACY OF OTHERS WHO COULD BE CAUGHT UNAWARE ON VIDEOS OR PHOTOS*





MAJLIS ASH'SHURA CHAIRMAN RECEIVES OMAN-KOREA FRIENDSHIP HEAD

MUSCAT: Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Majlis Ash'Shura received on Sunday Jung Chun-soo, Head of the Oman-Korea Parliamentary Friendship Committee and her accompanying delegation, currently on an official visit to the Sultanate of Oman. During the meeting, Al Maawali underscored the bilateral relations in various fields, including the exchange of expertise in regulatory fields. The two sides highlighted the efforts exerted by the Oman-Korea Parliamentary Friendship Committee, its achievements and future plans. — ONA

Oman, Türkiye stress for de-escalation in Gaza

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, on Sunday held a telephonic conversation with Hakan Fidan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye.

The phone call focused on the development of regional and global attitudes towards Israel's brutal aggression and illegal siege on the Gaza Strip, as well as the risk escalation in the region as a result.

The two agreed on the importance of intensifying political efforts to achieve a de-escalation, a ceasefire and resumption of humanitarian action to provide relief to the population in the Gaza Strip, as well as efforts to provide the population there with living needs. They also looked into ways to support the voice of truth and achieve justice for the Palestinian people, in general, and to empower them with the right to self-determination.



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy

The two sides stressed that Israel's persistent violation of rules of the international humanitarian law and the United Nations Charter necessitate an immediate international response to address such violations — by all available means — and to hold Israel accountable for the breaches.

— ONA

Oman takes part in South Summit of G77+China

KAMPALA: Delegated by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council headed the Sultanate of Oman's delegation in the Third South Summit (G77+China), which kicked off on Sunday in Kampala, Uganda.

The summit was attended by President Yoweri Museveni of the Republic of Uganda, with the participation of 134 leaders, in addition to heads of international organisations.

During his speech, the Chairman of the State Council conveyed greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and his best wishes of success to the summit.

Al Khalili underscored Oman's keenness to reflect its obligations by achieving the sustainable development



goals 2030 (SDGs 2030). This can be achieved through the country's development plans and programmes which are based on the principles of the right to development for all, eradicating poverty and providing a decent life for all segments of society.

Further, Al Khalili said that the Social Protection System comes in harmony with Oman Vision 2040. The system is among Oman's



Shaikh Abdulmalik al Khalili

priorities which are implemented through policies and programmes of social collaboration aimed at ensuring the sustainability of

decent life and the stability of the family and society.

The Chairman of the State Council also noted that the G77 and China, which represent 80% of the world's population, should shoulder their responsibility by practicing political and legal pressure to stop the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip and supporting the Palestinian right to a safe and dignified life. — ONA

Winter festivals showcase tourism richness

AFRAH AL BALUSHI

@afrahbalushia

From January 20 to February 10, the Wilayats of Al Sharqiyah North Governorate will witness winter activities, coinciding with the activation of the winter tourism season in the Sultanate of Oman that will include various events to attract tourists.

In order to stimulate the winter tourism season in the Sultanate of Oman, which starts from October to April every year, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism supervises a group of programmes, events and festivals in various governorates, including the Al Sharqiyah North Winter events. The most prominent is the Oman Desert Marathon which is in its ninth edition, was launched in the Wilayat of Bidiya.

The events and activities include the heritage village with its various corners, challenge and motorcycle races, a



competition, children's games, small and medium enterprise exhibitions, prizes for fans including travel tickets, and much more.

What also distinguishes this season's events is the holding of bicycle races and motorcycle shows that will be held in the

Wilayat of Dima W'attayeen. The bicycle race is divided into three stages. The first is the children's category 6-12 years old, and the second is the 13-16 years old category for a distance of two kilometres, and the second stage is the challenge and excitement stage and was allocated for two categories, which are the youth category 17-39 years old and the category of 40 years and above for a distance of 61 kilometres, while the third stage was allocated to people of determination with disabilities and for a distance of 32 kilometres.

The event will be held with the participation of enthusiasts from inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman.

The Governorate Development System is moving forward by holding festivals in the various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman to strengthen local administration based on decentralisation and empowering the local community to manage its affairs.

Guidance for disabled persons' families and guardians begins

AHMED AL KAABI

MUSCAT, JAN 21

The Ministry of Social Development launched its inaugural Family Guidance and Counselling Programme on Sunday for the academic year 2023/2024. The launch was held under the auspices of Mohammed bin Ahmed al Mahrouqi, Director General of Persons with Disabilities Affairs at the ministry.

The programme is tailored for families and guardians of individuals with disabilities enrolled in affiliated rehabilitation centres. These

The programme is tailored for families and guardians of individuals with disabilities enrolled in affiliated rehabilitation centres

centres include the National Autism Center, Al Aman Rehabilitation Center, and the Assessment and Vocational Rehabilitation Center. The week-long programme aims to strengthen communication with families, involve them in the rehabilitation process,

motivate them to engage and interact, provide guidance on undesirable behaviours and their treatment, and assist parents in monitoring behaviour and intervention methods to reduce its severity.

Additionally, it aims to familiarise them with activities and skills that can be implemented at home to utilise leisure time, helps parents acquire the necessary skills to support the child's rehabilitation plan and assess their child's progress through mid-year rehabilitation reports. This is alongside maintaining the level of

progress to ensure it does not regress due to the child being on vacation.

The opening day included honouring children enrolled in inclusive educational schools, with 46 individuals being integrated through partial, full, and vocational courses.

The programme seeks to enhance effective communication with families and empower them to support their children's rehabilitation plan by monitoring and evaluating the impact of improvement through mid-year evaluation.



The programme seeks to enhance effective communication with families





Sultanate of Oman سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التراث والسياحة
Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

Tenders Announcement

Tender No.	14/2024/MHT/HQ-3	Tender Name	Providing a labor supply service for the restoration projects of Bidbid fort and the rehabilitation of Azwa Fanja in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate		
	15/2024/MHT/HQ-4		Providing material supply service for the Bidbid Fort and the rehabilitation of Azwa Fanja in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate		
Fees of Tender Documents for SME		10 O.R			
Fees of Tender Documents		25 O.R			
Tender Document Sales End Date		11/2/2024			
Last Date for Bid Submission		5/3/2024			
Grade	14/2024/MHT/HQ-3	Third			
	15/2024/MHT/HQ-4	First			
E-Tendering Portal		https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om			
- Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. - The Tenderers must acknowledge commitment to the bid. - The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids. - The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering system, until the last date for submitting bids before (10:00 am, Oman time).					
Support and inquiries	For more information, related to the tender, kindly communicate through the website of the e-tendering system: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om				
	For inquiries related to the technical support for the e-tendering system, kindly communicate through etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om or 24402200				
For further information	Email : sotc@mht.gov.om Phones : 22088348 - 22088085				



UN’s Guterres
condemns Israel
for ‘heartbreaking’
killings in the
Palestinian
enclave



Antonio Guterres addresses the media following the opening session of the Third South Summit of the Group of 77 and China, in Kampala. – AFP

KAMPALA: United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Sunday denounced Israel for the “heartbreaking” deaths of Palestinian civilians in Gaza and called it unacceptable to resist statehood for the Palestinian people.

“Israel’s military operations have spread mass destruction and killed civilians on a scale unprecedented during my time as secretary-general,” Guterres said at the opening of a summit of the G77+China in the Ugandan capital Kampala.

“This is heartbreaking and utterly unacceptable. The Middle East is a tinder-box, we must do all we can to prevent conflict from igniting across the region.”

Israel’s military operations have spread mass destruction and killed civilians on a scale unprecedented during my time as secretary-general

ANTÓNIO GUTERRES

United Nations Secretary-General

Israel’s campaign has killed more than 25,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza health authorities on Sunday, and displaced most of the enclave’s 2.3 million people from their homes.

Over the course of the war, the Israeli military has expressed regret for civilian deaths but it accuses Hamas movement of operating in densely populated areas and using civilians as human shields, a charge the group denies. Guterres added that the refusal to accept the two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians is totally unacceptable, saying denying Palestinians the right to statehood “would indefinitely prolong a conflict that has become a major threat to global peace and security.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared on Saturday to push back against US President Joe Biden’s remarks about Palestinian statehood after the war ends.

— Reuters

Gaza deaths top 25,000 as Israel pushes offensive

GAZA: Gaza’s health ministry on Sunday said the death toll in the war-torn Palestinian territory breached 25,000 as Israel pushed its southward offensive and renewed bombardment in the north.

Israel is pressing its push in southern Gaza as it seeks to destroy the Palestinian groups responsible for the attack of October 7.

In early January, Israel’s military said the command structure in northern Gaza had been dismantled, leaving only isolated fighters.

But witnesses said that Israeli boats were bombarding Gaza City and other areas in the north early on Sunday. Hamas movement has also reported heavy combat in the north.

“Dozens are still under the rubble,” the government’s media office said, adding that the dead and injured “could not be transferred to hospitals due to the continued artillery shelling on... Khan Yunis and the Tal al-Hawa area in Gaza City and the north”.

The Israeli army said it “eliminated a number of fighters” in the main southern city of Khan Yunis and killed 15 in northern Gaza over the past day.

Thick plumes of smoke billowed above Khan Yunis on Sunday morning, journalists saw.

Israel’s relentless bombardment and ground offensive have killed at least 25,105 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Palestinian health ministry.



Displaced Palestinians leave a makeshift tent camp in Rafah in a truck loaded with their belongings heading to central areas of Gaza. – AFP

A ministry statement said some 62,681 people were also wounded in the fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants.

Over the past 24 hours, the ministry said 178 people had been killed across the Gaza Strip.

Among 250 captives, Israel

says around 132 remain in Gaza, of whom at least 27 are believed to have been killed, according to a tally based on Israeli figures.

In a briefing on Saturday evening, Israeli military spokesman Daniel Hagari said troops had found a tunnel in Khan Yunis where some captives

had previously been kept.

The UN agency for Palestinian refugees says about 1.7 million people have been displaced in Gaza, with about one million crowded into the Rafah area.

UN agencies have warned better aid access is needed urgently as famine and disease

loom.

Diplomatic efforts have sought to secure scaled-up aid deliveries for Gaza and a truce, after a week-long cessation of hostilities in November saw the release dozens of captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. — AFP

French warship treats around 1,000 injured Gazans

AL-ARISH: About 1,000 people from Gaza have been treated in a French field hospital aboard a ship off the coast of Egypt, its captain said, providing care for some as health infrastructure in the war-devastated enclave collapses.

The Dixmude, a French helicopter carrier, has been docked in the Egyptian port of al-Arish, 50 km west of the Gaza Strip, since November. The vessel is equipped with wards, operating theatres and 70 medical staff.

Nearly 120 injured people have been hospitalised on board, while hundreds more have been seen for outpatient consultations, including follow-ups on injuries and psychiatric issues, said Captain Alexandre Blonce, calling it an “unprecedented mission”.

Israeli forces launched all-out war to eliminate Gaza’s ruling Palestinian groups after its burst across the border into southern Israeli towns and bases on October 7.

Gazans have struggled to get medical care at home as tens of thousands have been wounded, with most of Gaza’s 36 hospitals no longer functioning, and



Palestinians meet onboard the French LHD Dixmude military ship, which serves as a hospital to treat wounded Palestinians, as it docks at the Egyptian port of Al-Arish. – AFP

those remaining operating at far over capacity, the World Health Organization says.

Those lucky enough to cross into Egypt, like 16-year-old Ahmed Abu Daqqa, who was injured on November 1, faced long waits for medical care.

Doctors in Gaza “took out the shrapnel and put in two rods, but a month later they discovered more shrapnel in my knee. They

told me they’ll handle it later because there were too many surgeries,” he said on board the Dixmude.

“I tried many times to get a transfer” before finally crossing into Egypt, he said. He was then able to undergo further surgery where the rods and shrapnel were removed and a resulting infection dealt with, as well as receiving physical therapy. — Reuters

UK slams Israel’s stand on Palestine state



People take part in a cross-faith peace march attempting to bridge divisions over the conflict between Israelis and the Palestinians, in London. – Reuters

LONDON: The UK said on Sunday that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s opposition to Palestinian sovereignty is “disappointing”.

“I think it’s disappointing actually, to hear that from the Israeli prime minister,” said Defence Secretary Grant Shapps on the Sky News channel.

On Saturday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Uganda that The right of the Palestinian people to build their own state “must be recognised by all.” “The

refusal to accept a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians, and the denial of the right to statehood for the Palestinian people, are unacceptable,” the UN leader insisted in the Ugandan capital Kampala.

Such a stance “would indefinitely prolong a conflict that has become a major threat to global peace and security; exacerbate polarisation; and embolden extremists everywhere,” Guterres warned.

“The right of the Palestinian people to build their own state must be recognised by all.” — AFP



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In brief

■ MUNICH



MUNICH PROTEST CALLED OFF DUE TO MASSIVE CROWDS

Organisers of a Munich demonstration against right-wing extremism have called off the event due to overcrowding, a police spokesman said.

Police had initially planned to accompany the demonstration with around 400 officers. Authorities had expected a crowd of about 25,000 at the Munich rally on Sunday.

German cities have been swept by large protests for over a week after the release of an investigative report which revealed that several far-right politicians had attended a meeting alongside far-right extremists where plans to forcibly deport millions of immigrants from Germany were discussed. — dpa

■ VATICAN CITY



POPE CALLS FOR RELEASE OF THE KIDNAPPED IN HAITI

Pope Francis on Sunday called for the release of hostages, including six nuns, who were kidnapped on a bus in Haiti, and said he was praying for social harmony.

Armed gunmen hijacked a bus in Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince with at least six nuns on board and passengers, Vatican News reported. "I have learned with sorrow of the kidnapping, in Haiti, of a group of people, including six religious sisters," Pope Francis said.

"In my heartfelt plea for their release, I pray for social concord in the country, and I invite everyone to bring an end to the violence, which is causing a great deal of suffering to that dear population," he added. — Reuters

■ ATHENS



MIGRANTS MISSING AFTER BOAT CAPSIZES OFF GREEK ISLAND

A refugee boat with more than 20 people on board has capsized in the Aegean Sea.

As Greek radio (ERT) reported on Sunday, citing the coastguard, at least four people have been missing since Saturday.

The rubber dinghy had set off from Türkiye and capsized off the small Greek island of Farmakonisi. The public broadcaster reported that the search for the missing was very difficult due to strong winds.

South of the Mediterranean island of Crete, the crews of passing ships and the coastguard have rescued 149 migrants in the past 48 hours. — dpa

Ukrainian strike on busy market kills 25 in Russian-held Donetsk



People remove debris at a food market following a Ukrainian military strike in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict in Donetsk. — Reuters

MOSCOW: A strike on a crowded market in the Russian-held city of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine left at least 25 people dead and 20 wounded on Sunday, Moscow-backed officials said.

Both Moscow and Kyiv have accused each other of a sharp escalation in attacks on civilian areas in the past two months.

Shattered storefronts and broken glass could be seen in videos shared by Russian state media, along with what appeared to be bodies lying on the ground nearby.

"At the moment, information about 25 dead has been confirmed. At least 20 more people have been injured," said Denis Pushilin, head of the region's Russian-controlled administration.

He blamed Ukraine for the strike, calling it a "horrific" attack on a civilian area.

Ukraine did not immediately comment, and it was not able

SHATTERED STOREFRONTS AND BROKEN GLASS COULD BE SEEN IN VIDEOS SHARED BY RUSSIAN STATE MEDIA, ALONG WITH WHAT APPEARED TO BE BODIES LYING ON THE GROUND NEARBY

to immediately verify the circumstances of the attack.

Officials said the strike hit a southwestern suburb of the city, less than 15 kilometres from the eastern front.

Local resident Tatiana said she heard an incoming projectile overhead, and hid under her market stall.

"I saw smoke, people screamed, a woman was crying," she told a local media outlet.

"Where is there anything military here? It's just a market," another resident named Tatiana told the same outlet. "This is one of the strongest blows in recent

times," she said.

The toll marks one of the deadliest in Donetsk since Moscow launched full-scale attack against Ukraine in February 2022.

Donetsk, occupied by Russia and its proxy forces since 2014, has been repeatedly targeted by what Moscow has called indiscriminate Ukrainian shelling.

Moscow called on Sunday's attack a "barbaric terrorist attack" that showed the need for its "special military operation" in Ukraine.

"Security threats and acts of terrorism should not be

committed from the territory of Ukraine," its foreign ministry said.

News of the attack came as Russia reported another blaze on its energy infrastructure, this time at a gas terminal in the Baltic Sea port of Ust-Luga.

Kyiv earlier this week claimed responsibility for two attacks on oil depots in Russia, including one in the same Leningrad region where Ust-Luga is located.

Operator Novatek said there were no victims and the fire was "currently localised" at the site, some 110 kilometres west of St Petersburg near the Estonian border.

Novatek said the fire was caused by an "external factor", without providing any further detail.

Ukraine, which has targeted Russian oil and gas infrastructure throughout the almost two-year conflict, did not immediately comment on the incident. — AFP



Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Poland's President Andrzej Duda take part in World Economic Forum session on "Restoring Security and Peace", in Davos, Switzerland. — Reuters file photo

Polish president criticises EU's executive for blocking funds

WARSAW: Polish President Andrzej Duda on Sunday criticised the European Commission for blocking EU funds in what he said had been "an attempt to force Poland to change" its government, adding he was open to negotiations over changes in the justice system.

Poland's last government led by the nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party was embroiled in a dispute with the European Union over Warsaw's judicial reforms and the rule of law, resulting in billions of EU funds for Poland being frozen.

The new pro-EU government has pledged to regain access to the money by restoring the rule of law, but it faces resistance from supporters and allies of the former ruling party, including Duda and some high-profile judges.

"I have no doubts what the point was of blocking the money from the National Recovery Plan by the European Commission. It was a purely political action against the previous Polish authorities," Duda said during a press conference in Vilnius.

"An attempt to force Poland to change its authorities, and that's how I perceived it, that's how I perceive it, and the current events only confirm it," he added.

A European Commission spokesperson said that there was work to be done with Poland so that all the milestones under the Recovery and Resilience Facility are satisfied. — Reuters

Sisi says Egypt will not allow threats to Somalia

CAIRO: Egypt's president said on Sunday it will not allow any threat to Somalia, after Ethiopia said it would consider recognising an independence claim by Somaliland in a deal that would give it access to a sea port.

The remarks by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi were the strongest yet made on the issue by Egypt and were a sign that Cairo may get involved in a dispute that has raised fresh tensions in the volatile Horn of Africa.

Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but has not won recognition from any country. The port lease deal, which was agreed earlier this month but not yet finalised, would be a boon to landlocked Ethiopia and has enraged Somalia.

"Egypt will not allow anyone to threaten Somalia or affect its security," Sisi said, speaking at a news conference with visiting Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.

"Do not try Egypt, or try to



Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi

threaten its brothers especially if they ask it to intervene," he added.

In a Jan. 1 memorandum of understanding, Ethiopia said it would consider recognising Somaliland's independence in return for the port access. It would lease 20 km of coastland around the port of Berbera, on the Gulf of Aden, for 50 years for military and commercial purposes.

Ethiopia's current main port

Egypt will not allow anyone to threaten Somalia or affect its security. Do not try Egypt, or try to threaten its brothers especially if they ask it to intervene

ABDEL FATTAH AL-SISI

Egypt's President



A general view shows delegates at the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) 42nd Extraordinary Session, at the State House in Entebbe, Uganda January 18. — AFP

Egypt's foreign minister last week called Ethiopia a source of instability in the region, which the country's foreign ministry said was "irrelevant".

Meanwhile, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Sunday urged Addis Ababa and Mogadishu to open dialogue to settle their dispute over Ethiopia's maritime deal with the breakaway region of Somaliland.

"We are always guided by our principles and our principles are related to the unity, the sovereignty and territorial independence of countries, including Somalia," Guterres told a press conference at the G77 plus China summit in the Ugandan capital.

"We hope that through dialogue it will be possible to overcome the current situation," he said.

— Agencies

Non-fiction dominates the 2024 reading list



Sandhya Rao Mehta

The writer is Associate Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature Sultan Qaboos University

While fiction and poetry takes us to imaginative corners of our world and beyond, non-fiction like biographies and historical accounts reminds us of the realities around us.

There are some great books to look forward to this year. After Salman Rushdie was attacked in the Chautauqua Institution of New York state and lost an eye, he had recuperated enough to release one novel, ‘Victory City’. This year, he is releasing a biographical account of his attack and its aftermath, “Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder”.

Another writer who experienced life-changing events two years ago is South Asian-British author Hanif Kureishi.

Following an accident in Rome in late 2022, Kureishi found himself physically paralysed and dictated these travails to his family who posted on social media.

‘Shattered’ will be a compilation of his experiences as he struggled with survival and hope. As he says, “Deprived of newspapers, music, and all the rest of it, you will find yourself becoming very imaginative”.

The re-telling of history continues with authors

examining the complex realities that shaped imperialism.

Sathnam Sanghera’s landmark book ‘Empireland’ is now followed by “Empireworld: How British imperialism has shaped the globe”. This will be another rich study on what the consequences of imperialism were on the rest of the world, which continues to pay a price until today.

Globalisation is now being seen, not as a recent twenty-first century phenomenon but one that goes well into the past, in fact into the prehistoric past.

The Silk Road and trade across the Indian Ocean show how the world was well connected much before it got its current trademark name of globalisation. William Darlymple’s latest historical work “The golden road” will explore the ancient links between India and the Roman Empire, focusing on the sea route along the Red Sea.

A more inspirational and relaxed read is Chitra Divakaruni’s “An uncommon love: The early life of Sudha and Narayana Murthy”, exploring the life and early challenges faced by the well-known entrepreneur and founder of Infosys, India’s foremost technology company. His wife, Sudha

NON-FICTION
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Murthy is now widely known as a philanthropist and author in her own right.

For those who are more connected with current technological trends, there is a digital edition of “Effective social media marketing for nonprofits: Tactics, strategies, tools and homework to get more out of your social media marketing efforts’ by Raul Tiro. This book looks into the current phenomenon of affiliate marketing in social media, giving a step-by-step process of how to maximise profits from this platform.

Similarly, Erwin Lima’s “Is there life beyond the touch screen? — Understanding the true impact of smartphone addiction: Protect your mental health now and in the future” is a timely study into the true impact of this tiny device without which life cannot be imagined today. The book argues for the importance of awareness and suggests that the choice to use, or over-use technology, remains with us.

The world of fiction creates plots and characters in whose world we may shortly live, but other kinds of writing shows us the realities of our living world, and often points to ways in which we can cope with the pressures of our world.

France’s politicians woo the country’s angry farmers

France’s new Prime Minister Gabriel Attal paid tribute to the country’s agriculture sector last weekend, responding to the growing discontent of farm workers angry at red tape and high costs.

Another rising political star, Jordan Bardella of the far-right National Rally was also declaring his sympathy for the farmers, who he said were sick of the strictures imposed by “Macron’s Europe”.

Attal, speaking at a public meeting in the central town of Saint-Laurent-d’Agy on Saturday, insisted that agriculture was “an absolutely major subject... that I take very seriously”.

Praising the nation’s farmers, he promised to work to make life easier for them by reducing unnecessary red tape. At virtually the same time, Bardella was visiting a dairy farm at Queyrac, in the southwest, denouncing the policies of President Emmanuel Macron.

There is growing anger against “the European Union and the Europe of Macron”, who wanted “the death of our agriculture”, said Bardella, a member of the EU parliament.

French farmers are exposed to unfair competition from products from around the world that do not respect the strict standards they have to observe, he added.

Bardella will lead the National Rally into the European elections in June, where some political observers think it could pose a major challenge to France’s mainstream parties.

Across the country, France’s farmers have been voicing their anger in recent weeks — and they have a long list of grievances.

They are unhappy about rising costs, bans on pesticides cleared for use in other parts of the world, a sense of being crushed by the strict standards imposed on them, and what they see as unfair competition from Ukrainian imports.

The price of diesel is another sore point, an issue that helped spark the yellow vest protests that caused Macron so many problems during his first presidential term.

In the southern Occitanie region, one group of farm workers started a blockade of the A64 motorway late on Thursday at Carbonne, some 45 kilometres southwest of Toulouse.

On Saturday, dozens of tractors were still blocking access, with about a hundred protesters gathered around braziers at their makeshift camp.

“You get to a point when you can’t take any more,” said Benoit Fourcade, a 50-year-old cereal farmer.

If France ever banned the controversial weedkiller glyphosate, he would leave his fields fallow and sign up at the nearest factory, he vowed. — AFP



AHMED AL
MUKHAINI

The writer is a Muscat-based policy analyst and international interlocutor

Shifting power dynamics in the wake of global upheavals

In the course of human events, whereas power dynamics continue to shift, alliances evolve, and multilateral institutions adapt to a rapidly changing global scenario, the concept of international governance finds itself at a critical crossroads. The complex landscape of global politics has ushered in a new era, prompting nations to reevaluate their positions and redefine their roles. Against this backdrop, Oman, a nation renowned for its diplomacy and keen understanding of regional dynamics, offers a unique perspective on these global developments.

Recent events in the region have brought international governance to the forefront of discussions. The ongoing conflict in Gaza has shed light on the limitations of existing frameworks to address deep-rooted political disputes. As nations search for solutions to such complex conflicts, the need for international governance systems that ensure transparency, accountability, and justice is more evident than ever.

An impactful development has been the case brought forward by South Africa against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), highlighting the growing demand for accountability on the international stage. This case sets a precedent, revealing the determination of nations to seek legal channels and hold transgressors to account. It places the spotlight on the significance of international institutions and their role in shaping the global order.

Simultaneously, the expansion of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) brings newfound prominence to emerging economies. This evolving alliance seeks to redefine global economic governance, challenging traditional hegemonic structures and opening up avenues for greater representation. As BRICS nations strengthen their ties and consolidate their influence, they have the potential to reshape the geopolitical landscape and create a more multi-polar world order that is comprised of several uni-polar systems operating in relative hegemonic parallelism.

Within this evolving global milieu,



Global protests in support of Palestinians in Gaza. – Reuters

Oman has quietly but assertively positioned itself as a regional mediator and bridge-builder. Drawing on the nation’s diplomatic heritage, Oman has consistently advocated for dialogue and peaceful resolutions to conflicts. Its traditional non-alignment policy has allowed it to navigate complex power dynamics, fostering positive relationships with nations across the globe.

AN IMPACTFUL DEVELOPMENT HAS BEEN THE CASE BROUGHT FORWARD BY SOUTH AFRICA AGAINST ISRAEL IN THE INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE (ICJ), HIGHLIGHTING THE GROWING DEMAND FOR ACCOUNTABILITY ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Oman’s nuanced perspectives and approach to international governance have helped the nation carve a unique role in global affairs. Its engagement with regional powers showcases the country’s commitment to creating opportunities for dialogue, cooperation, and understanding. This diplomacy-driven approach makes Oman well poised to be at the forefront of efforts to reorient international governance towards peaceful resolutions and collaborative problem-solving. The

challenge is, since Oman’s foreign policy is pivoted on non-interference in internal affairs, Oman would only pursue this course of action if it got asked to do so by related parties or a competent international body. This does not seem imminent.

In navigating this changing world order, it is crucial for nations to adapt multilateral institutions to better reflect the emerging geopolitical realities. While international governance systems have proven relatively and contextually resilient over time, they must remain relevant by embracing inclusivity and addressing the concerns of all stakeholders. Empowering emerging economies and ensuring equitable representation will uphold the principles of justice and fairness, safeguarding the interests of developing as well as oppressed nations within the global framework.

As tumultuous global events continue to demand international governance reforms, Oman’s perspective serves as a valuable guidepost. By advocating for dialogue, leveraging regional dynamics, and upholding the principles of justice, accountability and rule of law, Oman highlights the immense potential of diplomacy in shaping a harmonious and inclusive global order. It is through nations like Oman that we can redefine international governance and successfully navigate the changing landscape of the world.

Have a fresh start...

As a year bade a farewell, another dawns with many people started making up their minds and setting up their aspiring plans for a promising year ahead. Thus, it is time to start fresh and begin a new chapter in life. Here comes the time to make plans, set goals and move forward towards the much desirable success, growth and change of your life.

Just remember that in order to accomplish great things, one must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe in the things you dream of. Never mind what it is! The future always belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. We all have a dream or an ambition longing to make it true someday; sooner or later!

This year, we shall gather our courage and leave no stone turned to achieve our goals. The world's greatest achievers have been those who have always stayed focused on their goals and have been consistent in their efforts. We should long for every single chance of hope in whatsoever we do. Hope is the last to be ever lost in life.

Bear in mind that only as high as we reach can we grow, only as far as we seek can we go; only as deep as we look can we see, only as much as we dream can we be. The decision is ours. It is just us who decide on who to be and what to do. Nobody is too old to wish upon a star!

Sometimes, it is our fear of failure that ceases us from pursuing our dreams and working to achieve our goals, but where there is a will there is a way. With faith, courage, and persistence nothing would be impossible to achieve. Albert Einstein said, "If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not to people or things." We start every year with the same



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

THE YEAR
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AND OBSTACLES
IN LIFE

story; making goals and plans. On the way of our journey towards achieving the goals, we get discouraged and disappointed. However, if you don't experience discouragement, even just a little during the journey, it might not be the right goal for you. Pursuing a goal is a worthwhile experience by which you could learn more about yourself and test your abilities to go beyond the boundaries of success.

As you said goodbye to one year, you look forward to the possibilities of another one. The year 2024 has just started with more potential opportunities to come on the way. However, with every new year, come greater challenges and obstacles in life. Therefore, it is time for all to recall the lessons we learned and experiences we have come across in the past year. Make sure that all the mistakes, failed attempts and hard practices we have made will certainly fire back for our own good.

Nothing in the year gone can be called bad even the unpleasant incidents have given us a lesson and added to our experiences. Someday, we will get the value behind all those challenges as with no pain there is no gain. You cannot build your brighter tomorrow without coming out from the ruins of the past. Promise yourself to make 2024 your best year, which will get you closer to achieving your personal and professional goals. Light your inner fire of enthusiasm and courage throughout the year to bring the best of you.

Let this year be better than the others. Whatever your goals for 2024 are, go forward, stay positive and work hard. You can't discover your potential if you don't push yourself to succeed, learn, and achieve.

Life is a challenge, meet it! Life is a dream, realise it! Life is love, enjoy it! Wishing you all and one a very successful and prosperous year.

A DOTTING MOTHER!



A gentoo (Pygoscelis papua) penguin feeds its breeding at the Paraiso island in the Gerlache Strait - which separates the Palmer Archipelago from the Antarctic Peninsula, on Sunday. Scientists and researchers from various countries are collaborating on projects during the X Antarctic Expedition aboard the Colombian research vessel 'ARC Simon Bolivar', designed exclusively to develop scientific projects. These initiatives involve analysing the current condition of the Antarctic sea, studying atmospheric pressure, and monitoring the species inhabiting this region of the planet. – AFP

Sri Lanka's debt restructuring is hurting older women

The World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law Index has documented a persistent gender pension gap in rich and poor countries alike. This is partly because of gender-based legal disparities, such as a lower mandatory retirement age for women and the lack of pension credit for periods of childcare. Because women have shorter working lives, earn less, and have higher life expectancy than men, they often receive lower benefits, which must last longer.

But the problem is most acute in low- and middle-income countries. Around two-thirds of the world's population aged 60 and older live in the developing world, and that share is projected to rise to 80 per cent by 2050. Many of these countries do not adequately index pensions to inflation; instead, they apply discretionary increases when fiscal space is available. And, as Sri Lanka's recent restructuring has shown, the mounting sovereign-debt crisis threatens to erode retirement savings further, pushing even more older women into poverty.

After defaulting on its foreign loans in early 2022, the Sri Lankan government agreed to restructure both its external and domestic debt, as required by its bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund. The adjustment has had dire consequences for the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), the country's largest superannuation fund, which is managed by the Central Bank of



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SRI LANKA'S
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Sri Lanka and covers nearly 60 per cent of the private-sector and semi-government workforce.

In September, the CBSL announced that the EPF had two options for its portfolio of treasury bonds under the domestic-debt restructuring plan. The first was to increase the tax rate applied to the EPF's investment income to 30 per cent – more than double the current rate of 14 per cent. The second was to exchange the treasury bonds for new ones with lower interest rates of 12 per cent per year until 2026 and 9 per cent after that, a sharp drop from the current average rate of more than 20 per cent. The CBSL's Monetary Board opted for the latter, although both scenarios would have shrunk retirement savings significantly.

While this is bad news for all elderly Sri Lankans, who are already the country's poorest group, it will disproportionately hurt older women. To be sure, they receive fewer benefits to begin with, given that the EPF caters to workers in formal employment, and women's participation in the labour market has consistently remained low, at 30-35 per cent, over the last few decades. But even women without direct access to these savings often rely on them indirectly, because they are financially dependent on men or collect their deceased spouse's benefits.

More importantly, the feminisation of aging has lengthened the retirement period for Sri Lanka's women, who not only live six years longer than the country's men, but are also eligible to claim their benefits under the EPF at age 50, whereas men must wait until age 55.

This matters because, as a defined-contribution plan, the EPF provides the mandatory contributions paid by employers and employees, together with accumulated interest, as a lump sum at retirement. In 2021, the EPF paid an average benefit of around \$2,000 – equivalent to only four years of average consumption per person, based on central-bank data. Women must therefore stretch this already inadequate amount over more years than

men. And with lower bond yields, workers will receive an even smaller lump sum.

This illustrates the threat that domestic-debt restructuring poses to women's income security and economic dependence in old age. It also highlights the importance of safeguarding pension funds to ensure the welfare of elderly people more generally.

Instead of treating all treasury bonds equally, Sri Lanka's restructuring plan targeted those held by retirement funds (as opposed to financial institutions or private stakeholders). Moreover, the EPF's beneficiaries had no way of pushing back against this policy, because neither employees nor employers have a say in the fund's management.

To improve transparency, the

EPF board must be restructured to ensure that member interests are represented in the decision-making process. After all, beneficiaries bear the risk of mismanagement. Employers and employees of both genders could hold the board accountable for its investment portfolio, 93.4 per cent of which was in rupee loans, treasury bonds, and treasury bills in 2020, and resist changes that reduce their retirement savings. For example, the policy to tax the EPF's investment income, which was originally tax-exempt, was implemented despite opposition from employees.

He law that established the EPF should be changed to make the retirement age the same for men and women, and to establish crediting mechanisms for periods of childcare. Following the lead of other countries, Sri Lanka should spur more competition in the retirement-fund market, which would give beneficiaries more choice and, in turn, encourage more service-oriented fund management. Finally, individuals should be given a greater say in the management of their pensions.

In the long term, ensuring the economic welfare of older women in Sri Lanka – and across the developing world – requires thoughtful and adequately financed measures to improve their access to formal-sector employment.

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A woman waits in a queue to buy kerosene for home use at a service station in Colombo. – AFP file photo

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Germany emerge champions in Olympic Qualifier



Action from England versus Germany match.

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 21

World champions Germany beat World No 4 England by a solitary goal to clinch the title in the FIH Men's Olympic Qualifier Oman 2024 at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat on Sunday night.

After a keen contest between the top-ranked teams, Martin Zwicker broke the deadlock for Germany in the 56th minute from a penalty corner.

Germany got one penalty corner each in the first three quarters but could not put them past the England goalkeeper.

England were able to get their first penalty corner in the fourth quarter but could not take advantage of it. Germany and England earned the Olympics spots with wins in the semifinals on Saturday. Germany beat Pakistan 4-0 while England



Action from New Zealand versus Pakistan match.

accounted for New Zealand 3-1.

NEW ZEALAND QUALIFY

New Zealand earned the third qualifying spot available at FIH Men's Qualifier Oman 2024 when they fought back to edge out Pakistan in a crucial third-place play-off earlier on Sunday.

In a keenly-fought match at Hockey Oman Stadium, Pakistan struck the opening goal in the 18th minute after a goalless first quarter. Abu Mahmood put Pakistan in the lead by scoring from a penalty corner.

Scott Boyde made the score level in the 24th minute for New

Zealand from a penalty corner. Abu Mahmood converted a penalty stroke in the same minute as Pakistan went ahead immediately at 2-1.

Pakistan kept their 2-1 lead at the half-time.

New Zealand kept attacking in the third quarter but Pakistan defended well to keep their lead.

The Black Caps continued their push for the equaliser in the final quarter. Hugo Inglis found the 2-2 goal for New Zealand with a brilliant strike.

Buoyed by the equaliser, New Zealand kept charging for the winner. After a quick move by the Black Caps, Scott Boyde netted the crucial winner with just two minutes to go.

Pakistan's last-gasp efforts were successfully defended by New Zealand and they emerged 3-2 winners and won the final ticket to Paris Olympics from Oman Qualifier.



Mohammed al Wahibi (right) and Said al Rahbi during the final moments of the race.

Mohammed, Abdulrahman claim titles in national cycling

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 21

Cycle KOM's Mohammed al Wahibi and Abdulrahman al Yaqoobi of Salalah Club claimed the titles of the Oman National Cycling Championship 2024 at the weekend.

On Friday, Abdulrahman al Yaqoobi won the Individual Time Trial, the first race of the national championship organised by the Oman Cycling Association (OCA). Abdulrahman topped the 24km race at Wadi Al Abyadh in 32 minutes 59.74 seconds.

Cycle KOM's Hashim al Farsi came second in 33:06.27 while Faisal al Maamari of Oman Club finished third in 33:16.12. Faisal's teammate Ahmed al Battashi (33:58.20) and Munther al Hasani of Salalah Club (34:19.49) claimed the fourth and fifth spots respectively.

Second-placed Hashim said it was a great moment for him.

"I'm happy with my performance in the ITT, which we at Cycle KOM always excel. The good experience with the team during the OCA League and other races in the event really helped me," Hashim told Oman Observer.

The second race of the national championship was a road race for 116km in Qurayat.

OCA League red jersey holder Mohammed al Wahibi edged out Said al Rahbi of Oman Royal Army to claim the road race title in a photo finish. Both the Omani youngsters finished the race in two hours 45 minutes and six seconds.

Oman Club's Faisal al Maamari took the third spot in 2:45:24.

Salalah Club's Mazin al Riyami (2:45:38) claimed fourth position while Oman Royal Army's Husam al Rawahi (2:45:38) finished fifth in the road race. Munther al Hasani topped the under-23 section with a timing of 2:46:23. His Salalah Club teammate Amjad al Toqi was second in 2:46:49 while Asad al Habsi of Al Ittifaq Club claimed third in 2:48:06. In the team category, Oman Royal Army were on top with an overall timing of 8:17:21. Salalah Club (8:18:11), Oman Club (8:22:20) and Cycle KOM (8:24:17) and Bahla Club (8:27:33) were in the second to fifth spots.

Izki Club and Al Ittifaq Club finished in sixth and seventh spots.

Sayyid Taimur to preside over annual horse race in Ibri

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 21

Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, His Highness Sayyid Taimur bin Asaad al Said will preside over the Annual Horse Race of Royal Cavalry on Monday in the Wilayat of Ibri in Al Dhahirah Governorate organised by the Royal Court Affairs and represented by the Royal Cavalry.

The race, which will feature five rounds for purebred Arabian horses will commence with the "Hisn Al Maamour Race" for female Royal Cavalry riders and for a distance of 1,200 metres. The second round will be under title of "Hisn Al Muneikh Race" for a distance of 1,200 metres while the third round will be the "Hisn Al Iraqi Race" for a distance of 1,600

metres. The fourth round will be the "Hosn Beit Al Marah Race" for the highest-ranked national horses in the 2023-2024 horse racing season for a distance of 1,600 metres while the horse riders will compete in the fifth round, the "Hosn Ibri Race", for a distance of 2,000 metres for the Cup of His Majesty the Sultan.

The race will be interspersed with several equestrian display segments, presented by the Sultanate of Oman's knights and horsewomen. These displays will showcase skills in horsemanship, including the art of handling reins, as well as the presentation of some Omani arts associated with horses, such as the art of equestrian display, hambal, and tahareeb, will be presented.

Eng Hilal bin Mohammed al Waili Head of Horses, Camels, Farms, and

Royal Gardens Affairs at the Royal Court Affairs, expressed that holding the annual horse race for the Royal Cavalry comes as an affirmation of the supreme keenness of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to support horse sports and their owners. Al Waili added It is considered one of the civilisational and cultural legacies of the Sultanate of Oman and enjoys great passion and interest from citizens.

Al Waili added that the Royal Cavalry has meticulously prepared for the event, taking place at Seih Al Masarat Square in the Wilayat of Ibri. He extended best wishes for success to all participants in the race, hoping they achieve the honour of being crowned with the Cup of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.





AC Milan's Noah Okafor celebrates scoring their third goal with Rafael Leao—Reuters

Milan secure last-gasp win at Udinese

UDINE A stoppage-time goal by striker Noah Okafor secured AC Milan a 3-2 win at lowly Udinese in Serie A on Saturday after the game was briefly suspended in the first half due to racist chants towards Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan.

Milan are third in the standings on 45 points from 21 games, six behind leaders Inter Milan and four adrift of second-placed Juventus, who both have a game in hand.

Midfielder Ruben Loftus-Cheek gave Milan the lead with a low first-time shot inside the post shortly before the match was interrupted in the 33rd minute.

Maignan alerted the referee before leaving the pitch due to repeated racist chants from the local fans, as reported by Italian media, and was followed by his teammates to the tunnel.

"These things have nothing to do with football and they hurt, there is no such thing as black or white. We are all the same," Okafor told DAZN.

The club and the league took to social media platform X, formerly Twitter, to express their disappointment.

"There is absolutely no place in our game for racism: we are appalled," Milan said.

"Lega Serie A condemns any form of racism," added the Italian league.

The game was restarted

after less than 10 minutes and midfielder Lazar Samardzic levelled for the hosts before the break before Florian Thauvin put Udinese in front in the 62nd minute.

But Milan managed to snatch victory when substitute Luka Jovic netted on a rebound in the 83rd minute, following up after Olivier Giroud hit the bar, and Okafor made it 3-2 in stoppage time from close range.

"In the first half hour we played well, we could have scored a few more goals," coach Stefano Pioli told a press conference.

"The (Maignan) episode then destabilised us a bit, but we recovered by returning to play our game and we managed to find the victory with great determination."

The result saw Pioli enjoy his 100th Serie A win with Milan after 166 matches played.

He joined the narrow circle of four managers who previously had led the Rossoneri to 100 league wins: Carlo Ancelotti, Nereo Rocco, Fabio Capello and Nils Liedholm.

Milan next host seventh-placed Bologna on January 27.

Udinese, who are 17th with 18 points, visit fifth-placed Atalanta on the same day

—Reuters

EASY DOES IT AS DJOKOVIC LEADS TOP SEEDS INTO MELBOURNE QUARTERFINALS



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates after winning his fourth round match against France's Adrian Mannarino—Reuters

MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic flirted with a rare "triple bagel" and Aryna Sabalenka produced yet another powerful performance as the defending champions swept into the quarterfinals of the Australian Open on Sunday.

American fourth seed Coco Gauff also rattled through her match in double quick time and while she was only on court for an hour, the US Open champion showed she has all the weapons to win a second Grand Slam title.

Jannik Sinner, the men's fourth seed, got through a tough fourth round clash in three sets to underline his title credentials but last year's losing finalist, Stefanos Tsitsipas, was ousted by Taylor Fritz.

Djokovic, playing a rare daytime match, blanked Frenchman Adrian Mannarino in the opening two sets and threatened to become only the sixth player to win 6-0 6-0 6-0 in the main draw of a Grand Slam.

To the Serbian's relief,

Mannarino snatched three games to save some face in the third set and Djokovic's 32nd straight win at his favourite stomping ground came by the margin of 6-0 6-0 6-3.

"The tension was growing as the match progressed without him winning a game," Djokovic told reporters.

Djokovic will meet Fritz in his 58th Grand Slam quarterfinal -- a record the world number one now shares with Roger Federer -- as he seeks a record 25th major singles title.

The American played an excellent match to beat Greek seventh seed Tsitsipas 7-6(3) 5-7 6-3 6-3 but will take an 0-8 record into his first Australian Open quarterfinal.

"As far as playing me, (Djokovic) hasn't ever had a reason to change up what he's doing or change strategy because it's always gone his way," said Fritz.

'PRETTY EASY'

While Djokovic is seeking

an 11th Australian Open title, Sabalenka is a defending major champion for the first time and the second seed was brimming with confidence after thrashing Amanda Anisimova 6-3 6-2.

"I think I feel stronger than last year," said Sabalenka, who is yet to drop a set and has lost only 11 games in four matches. "So far I feel good. Hopefully I can keep it up."

Reigning US Open champion Gauff outclassed Magdalena Frech 6-1 6-2 in only 63 minutes for her ninth straight victory but was not at all concerned that she might be undercooked for the business end of the tournament.

"I would love for every match to go pretty easy," said the 19-year-old American, who will next play Marta Kostyuk after the Ukrainian beat Russian Maria Timofeeva 6-2 6-1.

"At the US Open, every match I won was like pretty much a dogfight. I don't know if that's the ideal way to win a slam because you have to last seven matches."

Barbora Krejickova is the only other top 10 seed left in the women's draw and the Czech is certainly battle-hardened after giving up the opening set in three of her four matches this year

The ninth seed battled back again on Sunday to beat 16-year-old Russian Mirra Andreeva 4-6 6-3 6-2 and set up a daunting contest against Sabalenka.

"I'm fighting," said Krejickova. "I'm just trying to give my best and go for every single ball."

Sinner, tipped as a title contender after a red-hot finish to last season, beat Russian Karen Khachanov 6-4 7-5 6-3 to reach the last eight without dropping a set but the match was tougher than the scoreline would suggest.

Next up for Sinner is Andrey Rublev, who ended Australia's interest in the singles draws with victory over Alex de Minaur in a five-set evening thriller on Rod Laver Arena.

for more than four hours before Rublev got over the line 6-4 6-7(5). — Reuters

Tunisia draw with Mali to pick up first Cup of Nations point

KORHOGO: Tunisia picked up their first point at the Africa Cup of Nations, coming from behind to draw 1-1 with Mali on Saturday in their second Group E game.

Mali took an early lead through Lassine Sinayoko but Hamza Rafia equalised for Tunisia within 10 minutes at the Amadou Gon Coulibaly Stadium.

Tunisia had suffered an upset defeat in their opening game against Namibia while Mali beat South Africa the same evening and now top the standings with four points.

Namibia and South Africa play their second group game in Korhogo on Sunday.

Mali were ahead in the 10th minute as Sinayoko scored a second goal at the tournament, striking home from the left with his shot going in off the inside of the post.

But in the 20th minute, Tunisia levelled as sweeping passing move was completed by fullback Ali Abdi pulling the ball back into the path of Rafia, who fired it home to level matters.

The match struggled to match the excitement of Saturday's earlier games in nearby Bouake where the two Group D games featured nine goals in a blitz of entertainment.

Korhogo's proximity to the Mali border meant plenty of



Tunisia's midfielder #8 Hamza Rafia fights for the ball with Mali's midfielder #4 Amadou Haidara during the Africa Cup of Nations. - AFP

support but not too much for the supporters to enthuse over. Sinayoko had a half chance 11 minutes from time to restore Mali's lead and qualify them early for the next round, but his effort was smothered by the Tunisian defence.

With the top two teams in each group, plus the four best third placed finishers, advancing to last 16, Mali's four-point haul is almost certain to secure them a place in the next round.

But Tunisia, who beat France at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, will likely need a win in their last game on Wednesday against South Africa in Korhogo to stand any chance of advancing.

— Reuters



Oman play out goalless draw with Thailand

WALEED AL LAHWARI
DOHA, JAN 21

Oman national football team ended their second match at the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 with a goalless draw against Thailand on Sunday.

At Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium in Al Duhail Club, victory eluded Red Warriors after they finished their opening match with a 2-1 loss against Saudi Arabia. The draw gave Oman their first point in group F while Thailand raised their tally to four points after 2-0 win over Kyrgyzstan in the opener.

The meet started with clear pressure from Thailand team while Omani midfielder Abdullah Fawaz saved Oman net from a goal in the 16th minute. Oman's goalie Ibrahim al Mukhaini saved many direct shots from Thailand strikers, most notably in the 41st and 44th minutes.

The first half ended goalless with Oman's 61 per cent possession and one direct shot. Thailand had 39 per cent possession of the ball and three direct shots.

The deciding half began with great enthusiasm as Abdullah Fawaz created an amazing head kick in the 55th minute while Ahmed al Khamisi confronted the attack from Thailand player Suphanat Mueanta in the 53rd minute.

Thailand player Theerathon Bunmathan got a yellow card in the 55th minute.

Oman missed many scoring attempts and the strongest was from a direct kick in 72nd minute.



Despite the goalless draw, Oman's hopes to move into the second round are still alive as the next match against Kyrgyzstan on Thursday will determine the entry to the next level. Saudi Arabia will face Thailand in a tight clash at the same time.

Omani midfield player, Harib al Saadi was declared player of the match as he showed top technical performance during the game.

Thailand appeared content with a draw, which leaves them top of Group F on four points after two games and with a good chance of progressing to the last 16.

Saudi Arabia are second on three points but have a game in hand, against Kyrgyzstan later on Sunday.

The top two are guaranteed to reach the next phase, but third place could also be enough.

Oman and Thailand match was officiated by Iranian referee Moaz Fanadifar, with Saeed Qassemi as assistant. Ali Reza Eldrum was the second assistant and the fourth referee was Ali Reza Faghani. Muhammad Abdullah Hassan from UAE was assigned as the VAR referee.

Oman's outstanding umpiring in Bahrain vs Malaysia clash

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 21

Oman's international umpiring team led by referee Ahmed al Kaaf produced an outstanding officiating in AFC cup's Group E match between Bahrain and Malaysia at the Jassim bin Hamad Stadium on Saturday. The match ended with Bahrain's Ali Madan scoring an important goal in the dying minutes to revive Bahrain's hopes of advancing to the knockout stage.

Al Kaaf was the main field referee while Abu Baker al Amri served as assistant referee and Rashid al Ghaithi as second assistant referee. Iraq's Muhannad Qasim was the fourth referee umpire while UAE's Omar al Ali was VAR referee.

Al Kaaf managed to lead the match on a bright note without any faults and complaints from both teams despite the critical encounter. Bahrain's Komail al Aswad and Malaysia's Shahrul Saad and Syamer Kutty Abba got yellow

cards from the Omani referee. There were neither red cards nor any VAR decisions.

It was the second successful match for Oman's international umpiring team after the first fixture between Syria and Uzbekistan in the opening Group B match. The match ended in a goalless draw and both teams shared one point each.

It was the fourth Asian match for Oman's international referee Al Kaaf as he had officiated two matches in the previous edition of the AFC Asian Cup in UAE in 2019. The two matches were Jordan against Australia while the second match was between Vietnam and Yemen.

This edition of the Asian Cup featured participation of Japan's Yoshimi Yamashita as first women referee when she officiated the match between Australia and India. She was among the six women officials who were selected for the Fifa World Cup Qatar 2022.



Referee Ahmed Abu Bakar Said Al Kaf. – REUTERS



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Oman-Saudi Business Forum discusses economic and investment cooperation

MUSCAT: The Omani-Saudi Business Forum, organised by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), was held in Muscat yesterday, discussing the enhancement of mutual cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the economic and investment sectors.

The forum aimed to activate agreements and strategic partnerships between Omani and Saudi companies.

Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Board of Directors of OCCI, said the forum explored ways to strengthen mutual cooperation, develop trade and investment relations, and accelerate the launch of joint Omani-Saudi projects that align with the diversification of the two countries' economies.

Mohammed bin Abdullah al Murshed, First Deputy Chairman of the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce, expressed his expectations for the forum to enhance economic and trade links between the business sectors of both countries.

He emphasised the importance of tangible outcomes that can support the optimal utilisation of promising opportunities in their economies, based on their



Several memoranda of understanding were signed between private sector companies from both countries.

diverse resources and investment prospects.

Badr bin Ibrahim al Badr, Deputy Minister of Investment in Saudi Arabia, affirmed the shared aspirations of both countries to support business growth, promote investments, and harness their capabilities.

He highlighted the noticeable development in bilateral trade and joint projects, including the inauguration of the land road linking the two countries.

He added that the coordination committee in the fields of energy, investment, environment, and infrastructure, established by the Saudi-Omani Coordination

Council, has solidified the consensus between the two countries in these areas.

The committee works on unified visions and implementable initiatives that support business growth, stimulate investments, create more investment opportunities, overcome challenges, and enable active private sector participation in these sectors.

He noted that in the committee's first session, 17 initiatives were introduced in various fields, including investment promotion and enhancement between the two countries, the establishment of a Saudi-Omani company, the



Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas
Chairman, OCCI Board of Directors

laying of a pipeline for the storage and export of Saudi petroleum from the Ras Markaz region in Duqm, collaboration and knowledge exchange in the field

of clean hydrogen and derivatives, and the preliminary study of railway connectivity between Saudi Arabia and the Sultanate of Oman.

On the sidelines of the forum, several memoranda of understanding were signed between private sector companies from both countries, relating to cooperation in the construction sector and the provision of legal consultations.

The forum presented opportunities and investment incentives in Oman and Saudi Arabia, as well as the investment potential in special economic zones, free zones, housing, and the real estate sector. — ONA

TRA grants licence to establish ground station in Oman

MUSCAT: The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) issued a third-class licence to Oman Lens Company to establish a ground station connected to a satellite network.

Oman Lens will work to establish a ground station connected to the satellite network to monitor, track, and control Star Vision Aerospace Group Limited's satellites, according to TRA's post.

This permit is viewed as the first of its kind in Oman.

The license will aid in the provision of space-based imaging services for the collection and analysis of satellite image data for use in mapping, environmental monitoring, resource management, agriculture, and disaster management, among other fields.

Oman among the best performing destinations in MEA region

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 21

In a recent report by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), it has been projected that international tourism is set to make a full recovery to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2024.

The report highlights the resilience and rapid recovery of the tourism industry, with positive impacts seen on economies, job growth, and opportunities worldwide.

While several destinations have shown remarkable progress, Oman has emerged as among the best performing destinations in the Middle East and Africa (MEA) for the period of January to December 2023.

According to the UNWTO's data, international tourist arrivals in Oman from January to December 2023 showed a significant increase of 14 per cent compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019. This represents a noteworthy achievement for the Sultanate of Oman as it witnessed positive growth in an otherwise challenging period for the global tourism industry.

The report further states that the strong performance of Oman can be attributed to various factors, including the successful containment of the pandemic and the implementation of effective tourism recovery strategies.

Apart from Oman, other countries in Africa and the Middle East have also made commendable progress in attracting international tourists. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Tanzania also demonstrated substantial growth in their international tourists arrivals in 2023 compared to 2019 levels.

This positive trend in tourist arrivals is a testament to the recovery efforts made by these countries through various initiatives, such as improving air connectivity, enhancing marketing campaigns, and implementing measures to ensure the safety and well-being of travellers.

Oman, in particular, has witnessed a surge in interest from international tourists due to its rich cultural



Tourists watch dolphins in Musandam.

heritage, stunning landscapes, and warm hospitality. The country's proactive approach in implementing safety measures has instilled confidence in travellers, making it an attractive destination for those seeking unique experiences.

Furthermore, Oman's strategic location as a gateway to the Arabian Peninsula and its diverse range of attractions, including ancient forts, bustling souks, and pristine beaches, have contributed to its ability to draw in visitors.

The Sultanate of Oman's commitment to sustainable tourism practices and its emphasis on preserving its natural and cultural assets have also played a significant role in its appeal to travellers seeking responsible travel options.

While the report highlights the positive outlook for international tourism, it cautions that economic and geopolitical factors may pose challenges to the sustained recovery of the industry.

However, the UNWTO remains optimistic, noting that the reopening of several source markets and destinations, as well as the implementation of visa facilitation measures, will contribute to the recovery process.



TENDER NOTICE

The Development Bank is the leading player in financing projects that add value to national development and providing facilities for micro, SMEs and major ventures.

The Development Bank seeks tenders for the following services from reputed vendors which specialized in providing Insurance Services

Tender No	Description of service	Tender Fee (RO)	Last Date for Purchasing Tender	Last Date of Submission of Tender
01/24	Insurance Services	525 OMR Non-Refundable	25/1/2024	6/2/2024

◆ Interested vendors may obtain tender documents from the Head Office of the bank (**Third Floor- Human Resource Department**) located in MBD Area near the Ministry of Commerce & Industry and Investment Promotion on any working day (Sunday to Thursday) between 8 AM and 2 PM on payment of non-refundable tender fee. Vendors should enclose scan copy of bank guarantee submitted.

◆ The Tender enclosed in a sealed envelope addressed **Human Resource team, Development Bank SAOC**, should be submitted to the Human Resource Department - Third Floor by **02:00 PM** on or before **6/2/2024**.

◆ Interested vendors should remit the stated tenders fees as per as the below bank details.

Bank Name: Development Bank
Bank Account: 000-10121129300-45
Bank Name: Bank Muscat
Branch: Corporate Branch
Swift Code: BMUSOMRXXXX

The Development Bank SAOC reserves the right to accept or reject any or all of the offers, extend the tender closing date, modify tender document(s) or cancel the tender without assigning any reason. Tender Committee's decision shall be final and binding.

For any inquiries, kindly contact us at:





Earn higher profit rates with NBO Muzn Islamic Banking Flexi Wakala Saving Account

MUSCAT: In its ongoing commitment to elevate customer satisfaction, NBO Muzn Islamic Banking encourages everyone to embrace financial prosperity this year by opening the Flexi Wakala Saving Account. By opting to transfer their salary to this account, customers not only unlock the opportunity to deposit more but also increase their potential for higher earnings.

This advanced solution is designed to cater to the diverse financial needs of all valued customers of Muzn.

Salima al Marzooqi, Chief Islamic Banking Officer of NBO Muzn Islamic Banking, conveyed her enthusiasm for the product and said, “The Flexi Wakala Saving Account is a testament to our commitment to providing innovative and Sharia-compliant financial solutions. Customers can deposit more and earn more with the Flexi Wakala Saving Account.

We are confident that this product will empower individuals to take control of their financial future and achieve their long-term goals. We welcome both existing Muzn customers and new-to-bank customers to seize this opportunity and embark on a year of prosperity.”

The Flexi Wakala Saving Account, is available to all individuals enabling them

to safeguard their financial future and embark on a journey to financial well-being through this account.

This account offers tier-based profit rates, with higher deposited amounts corresponding to greater profit rates for customers to enjoy.

With an expected profit rate of up to 3%, the Flexi Wakala Saving Account ensures a superior return on investment compared to a regular Flexi Wakala account. This feature empowers customers to maximise their savings and earnings.

Moreover, customers have the flexibility to transfer their salary to the Flexi Wakala Saving Account, which is accessible through branches and digital channels.

This opportunity is open to both new and existing Muzn customers, providing a platform for individuals to not only save for their future but also secure funds for their retirement.

Muzn Islamic Banking provides individuals with the freedom to plan for their financial future while upholding their principles.

For more information on the Flexi Wakala Saving Account and to open an account, please visit www.muzn.om or contact our customer service at 24770001.

Bank Muscat awarded the best private bank award 2024

MUSCAT: In recognition of its excellence in providing diversified and outstanding wealth management services, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has been awarded the Best Private Bank in Oman for 2024 by Global Finance, a well-known publication specialised in reporting financial and banking developments.

The award sheds light on the high professional standards achieved by the bank, in accordance with international standards and practices. It is an acknowledgment of the effective role of the bank in providing unique services and enriching wealth management solutions, catering to diverse needs of Private Banking customers.

The selection results came after extensive consultations with corporate financial executives and bankers, banking consultants and analysts across the world.

Expressing his pride on this achievement, Abdulnasir al Raisi, General Manager, Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, delivered his thanks to Global Finance for recognising the bank as the Best Private Bank in Oman. The continuous and consecutive recognition of Bank Muscat reflects its leadership position in delivering the best banking services and facilities to its customers.

Bank Muscat Private Banking



Bank Muscat headquarters.

customers enjoy an exclusive banking experience through a suite of diversified banking and investment solutions including dedicated Private Banking centres, dedicated relationship managers for banking as well as wealth management, catering to their expectations with an endeavour to deliver excellence in all aspects. The bank's efforts to maintain highest standards of professionalism, when servicing the Private Banking customers, especially for their wealth management needs, have been regularly applauded by pioneering institutions around the globe. Al Raisi took this recognition as an opportunity to thank Bank Muscat's customers for their continuous confidence in the bank's services and facilities that satisfy their various banking needs and enhance their banking experience.

The recognition further

solidifies Bank Muscat's position as a leader in the banking sector in the Sultanate of Oman and adds to its long-standing success.

Over the years, the bank has remained committed to its strategy of providing the best services and banking products to suit all segments of society and meet their aspirations.

With a wide range of retail, corporate, wholesale and investment banking services in addition to asset management and Private Banking offerings, Bank Muscat provides its customers with reliable, dynamic and innovative banking services and products, aiming to uphold market leadership and to maintain a high level of commitment to offering customers developed services that cater to their various present and future banking needs.

Bank Muscat has an independent Private Banking branch at the Head Office and

Private Customer Service Lounge in Bank Muscat MSQ Branch, backed by a team of experienced and dedicated Relationship Managers and a strong product team, which offers its customers global investment options across assess classes.

Furthermore, Bank Muscat offers Private Banking customers a complete suite of investment options in global asset classes through its wealth management platform and through tie-ups with international counter parties.

Its robust execution platform is backed by a team of experienced and dedicated Relationship Managers providing options to customers based on their individual preferences and market conditions. The range of solutions offered to customers includes stocks, bonds, ETFs and mutual funds across global markets, along with other customised investment options.

Bank Muscat Private Banking also offers selective exposure to Private Equity Funds, Real Estate Funds and Commodity ETFs, Offshore Banking and Portfolio Management through globally reputed counterparties. Private Banking customers also receive regular research reports and briefings covering investment ideas, global macroeconomic outlook and updates on key economic and geographic events impacting the performance of various asset classes.

Ooredoo continues to lead the future of Internet of Things

MUSCAT: Ooredoo has rolled out Narrowband Internet of Things (NB-IoT) technology to power various IoT-enabled applications that can result in energy savings and supply chain management optimisation. IoT is an umbrella term for devices connected to and communicating with the Internet and each other, merging the digital and physical worlds.

From the smartwatch we wear, to the metres that allow for remote readings of our water and gas usage, to the solutions that allow us to track the delivery of our packages, IoT has entered the mainstream, and Ooredoo is making this happen.

“The Internet of Things technology drives the digital transformation of businesses and the economy. It has become embedded in our daily lives and



the operations of entities in the private and Government sectors.

Companies and consumers are employing these smart solutions to streamline operations, manage physical assets, and improve their health and well-being,” said Saoud al Riyami (pictured), Chief Business and Wholesale Officer at Ooredoo.

“As a leading connectivity and infrastructure provider, boosted by

the roll-out of our NB-IoT network, we ensure Internet of Things-enabled devices stay connected and functional.”

Ooredoo has been at the forefront of adopting the latest IoT technology and knowing how IoT devices can benefit its customers. The company has also stepped up the future-proofing of IoT-enabled devices which currently rely on mobile 3G connectivity.

In August 2023, Ooredoo Group became the first telecommunications operator in the GCC region to join the IoT World Alliance, the world's largest Mobile Network Operator cooperative, to drive connectivity to the next level.

The company also entered the LoRa Alliance, a nonprofit association of members that believes the IoT era is 'now'.

Maserati adds new overseas region to global business structure



MUSCAT: Maserati kicks off 2024 by announcing the creation of the new Overseas Region, expected to give the Italian luxury manufacturer's markets a new business configuration. Hamdy Elshantoury (pictured) is appointed as the new head of the region, starting from January 1, 2024.

With this latest addition, Maserati's new market organisation now consists of five regions, namely: US & Canada (North America), Europe, China, Japan & Korea, and the newly created Overseas.

With the new Overseas Region, Maserati is reshaping the borders of its worldwide organisation. It is redistributing some of markets that were previously part of the former regions and has merged them into a completely new one, with a relevant marketing team ready to act as a gateway for partners and the dealer network in everyday activities and initiatives.

Alongside with the new head of the Overseas Region, Hamdy Elshantoury – who is also maintaining ad interim responsibility for MEA – Wong Yi Mui Wallace has been appointed responsible for SEAP & India markets and Marco Spadaro has taken responsibility for the East Europe and Latin American markets.

The decision to add the new Overseas Region was made as a result of Maserati's commitment to serving every market, with the intention of implementing focus, growth, and expanding relationships with the relevant players; the aim is to seize every opportunity and meet the differing requirements of the various business structures.

Saud Bahwan Automotive receives award from PDO

MUSCAT: Recently Saud Bahwan Automotive was honoured with the prestigious Health Safety and Environment (HSE) Milestone Award from Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

The award recognised Saud Bahwan Automotive's 30 years in service, across three PDO locations in Oman, clocking 2.2 million man hours without any Loss Time incident (LTI).

Receiving the award from PDO officials was Abdullah Mohamed Bahwan, Managing Director — Corporate, Saud Bahwan Group.

This award is a testament to Saud Bahwan Automotive's unwavering



Abdullah Mohamed Bahwan receiving the award.

THE AWARD RECOGNISED SAUD BAHWAN AUTOMOTIVE'S 30 YEARS IN SERVICE, ACROSS THREE PDO LOCATIONS IN OMAN, CLOCKING 2.2 MILLION MAN HOURS WITHOUT ANY LOSS TIME INCIDENT (LTI).

passion and commitment to employee well-being and its continuous efforts to upholding high levels of safety standards and excellence by fostering a deep sense of responsibility among its workforce. Sharing his thoughts on this milestone award, Abdullah Mohamed Bahwan, said, “This recognition holds profound significance for us as it recognises our unwavering passion and

commitment to the highest levels of safety standards and excellence across PDO locations for 30 years.

This milestone achievement highlights the resilience and dedication of our staff in tirelessly fostering a culture of safety and responsibility across our operations.

We strongly believe that for all our participants across PDO locations, safety is paramount and each one should responsibly follow the safety measures to ultimately contribute to the greater goal of achieving an environment free of any incident. This award celebrates the success of that commitment.”



Immigration inspection officers check a tanker carrying imported crude oil at the port in Qingdao, Shandong, China. — Reuters

China defies sanctions to make Russia its biggest oil supplier in 2023

BEIJING: Russia leapfrogged Saudi Arabia to become China's top crude oil supplier in 2023, data showed on Saturday, as the world's biggest crude importer defied Western sanctions to purchase vast quantities of discounted oil for its processing plants.

Russia shipped a record 107.02 million metric tonnes of crude oil to China last year, equivalent to 2.14 million barrels per day (bpd), the Chinese customs data showed, far more than other major oil exporters such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Imports from Saudi Arabia, previously China's largest supplier, fell 1.8 per cent to 85.96 million tonnes, as the Middle

East oil giant lost market share to cheaper Russian crude.

Shunned by many international buyers following Western sanctions over the Kremlin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian crude oil traded at significant discounts to international benchmarks for much of last year amid a Western-imposed price cap.

Accelerating demand from Chinese and Indian refiners for the discounted oil boosted the price of Russian ESPO crude through 2023, pushing past the Group of Seven's \$60 a barrel price cap imposed in December 2022 as alternative shipping and insurance options to circumvent the sanctions proliferated.

— Reuters

CMA Fund caps aid for traffic accident victims at RO 30,000

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 21

The Capital Market Authority (CMA), which regulates the insurance sector in the Sultanate of Oman, has shed new light on a special fund instituted by the Authority to support compensatory assistance to third party victims of traffic mishaps.

The 'Guarantee Fund for Assistance of Bodily Injured Persons, Heirs of Deceased and Compensation For Physical Damage in Motor Vehicles Accidents' was first unveiled in 2018 via an Executive Decision (E/3/2018) of the CMA and amended four years later via Decision (E/24/2022).

Shedding details about the salient features of the Guarantee Fund, the Authority recently explained that compensatory assistance to survivors suffering permanent disability is calculated as follows: 'The percentage of permanent disability multiplied by RO 30,000'.

Not included in this payout is the following additional assistance: Ambulance costs (maximum limit of RO 400), Treatment costs (maximum limit of RO 5,000, Vehicle damage in the event of a total loss (50% at



The CMA-regulated fund has been instituted to help third party victims of road mishaps.

a maximum of RO 5000; and Vehicle damage in case of partial loss (50% at a maximum of RO 5000).

In the event of death, the heirs of the deceased are entitled to 'diya' (blood money) per existing laws of Oman.

However, certain conditions must be met when seeking compensation from the Guarantee Fund, according to the regulator. Survivors can seek assistance if (i) they are involved in a 'hit-and-run' incident where the wrongdoer has not been identified, or (ii) the vehicle involved in the mishap does not have insurance coverage at the

time.

Moreover, an application for compensation will be considered under the following specific circumstances: (i) In the event of the death of a third party victim of a vehicle crash, (ii) Costs of first aid and treatment rendered to the survivor amount to at least RO 500, (iii) Applicant suffers permanent disability, and (iv) Damage to third party's vehicle is at least RO 500.

According to the CMA, requests for compensatory assistance from the Fund will be considered only if the application is received within two years from the date of the accident. Claims

against damaged vehicles will be accepted within six months of the accident.

For its part, the CMA as regulator of the Fund, says it will exercise its prerogative to recover any payout if its legitimate rights have been breached.

For example, a full refund will be sought if foul play is found to be involved, or if the applicant has received compensation from the owner or driver of the vehicle involved in the crash.

Likewise, recovery measures may be initiated if it is found belatedly that a valid insurance policy covering these payouts was in existence at the time.

Significantly, several types of mishaps are ineligible for compensation, according to the Authority. They include cases where the driver of the offending vehicle (or any of his family members) is hurt.

Similarly, vehicles owned by the government, corporate organisation and institution, are not entitled to compensation from the Fund.

Damage to other objects or property at the scene of a crash is also not covered by the Fund. So is damage to a vehicle involved in a crash with an animal or attempting to avert such a crash.

Winning Omani research evaluates energy consumption for liquefied renewable methane and hydrogen

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 21

Among the many various innovative research projects in the 10th National Research Award organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, 'Liquefied hydrogen vs liquefied renewable methane: Evaluating energy consumption and infrastructure for sustainable fuels' by principal investigator Mohammed bin Abdullah al Breiki, PhD Candidate in Sustainable Energy at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar, was awarded in the Energy and Industry field in the Young Researcher's category.

According to Mohammed al Breiki, the research project revealed that the production of both green liquefied hydrogen and liquefied renewable methane consumed approximately 0.52 and 0.63 kWh/MJ of fuel, respectively.

The results indicated positive aspects in terms of the readiness

of the infrastructure and the existence of necessary laws and regulations for the use of liquefied renewable methane as a fuel.

However, it was found that the infrastructure for green liquefied hydrogen still needs development, along with the issuance of relevant laws and regulations for its use as a fuel. The study concluded that the use of green liquefied hydrogen and liquefied renewable methane as fuels will contribute to reducing carbon emissions and achieving sustainable economic development goals.

Al Breiki stated that the study aimed to explore and analyse different types of clean fuels, with a special focus on liquefied renewable methane and green liquefied hydrogen. This research included a comprehensive evaluation of the amount of energy consumed in the production, storage, and transportation of these types of fuels, with an emphasis on carbon capture and improving the efficiency of these



processes.

He added: "One of the most important goals of the project is to compare clean fuels in terms of the following elements: the technologies used, the necessary infrastructure, scalability, and the existence of laws and regulations governing their use.

Through this comparison, we can identify the most effective and environmentally friendly fuel in the context of the economic market and the legislative environment."

Regarding the importance of the study, Al Breiki mentioned that the significance of this study

was demonstrated in several areas, including its contribution to the development of sustainable energy sources, which was an important step towards reducing reliance on fossil fuels and enhancing the use of clean energy.

Additionally, the study evaluated the efficiency and environmental impact by analysing the energy consumption efficiency and environmental impact of each type of clean fuel. This helped in identifying the most environmentally sustainable options. The researcher further elaborated that the research project

supported policies and legislation by providing accurate information about the infrastructure, laws, and regulations for using these types of fuels. It also emphasised the importance of transitioning to clean energy sources as a fundamental step towards achieving sustainable economic development goals, especially in the context of global efforts to combat climate change.

The study also presented several important recommendations aimed at supporting and improving the use of clean energy and enhancing sustainable development, such as emphasising the importance of supporting research and development in the field of clean energy, especially in carbon capture technologies and improving the efficiency of clean fuel production, as well as investing in developing the necessary infrastructure for green liquefied hydrogen to achieve greater efficiency in the production, storage, and

transportation of this type of fuel.

Other notable recommendations included updating laws and regulations to encourage the use of liquefied renewable methane and green liquefied hydrogen, launching awareness and educational programmes to raise awareness about the importance of clean energy and its role in combating climate change and achieving sustainable development, and promoting international cooperation for the exchange of knowledge and expertise in the field of clean energy, in order to develop innovative and effective solutions that meet local and global needs.

The research project was published in the monthly peer-reviewed scientific journal Fuel. The research team was composed of Mohammed al Breiki and Dr Yusuf Bicer, an Associate Professor with extensive experience in clean energy technologies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University.

SHORT TAKES

WASHINGTON

Costly deposits to weaken interest income in 2024

Four US banks warned of lower interest income for this year on Friday, capping a week of dour commentary from the industry that has been under pressure from high deposit costs.

After more than a year of booking strong profits on the back of the high interest they were able to charge on loans, banks are contending with a



string of challenges heading into 2024, including weaker loan growth and potentially tougher capital rules. — Reuters

BRUSSELS

Amazon's iRobot deal faces EU antitrust veto

Amazon's \$1.4 billion acquisition of robot vacuum maker iRobot will be blocked by EU antitrust regulators, three people familiar with the matter said on Friday, as enforcers beef up scrutiny of Big Tech deals.

The United States online retail giant defied a European Commission's warning that the deal could restrict competition



in the market for robot vacuum cleaners by declining to offer remedies to address such concerns last week. — Reuters

NEW YORK

S&P 500 confirms bull market with record close

The S&P 500, confirmed that it has been in a bull market since October 2022, as it notched a record high close for the first time in two years.

The session's gains were fuelled by chipmakers surging on AI optimism and investor bets that the Federal Reserve will cut interest rates in 2024.

The benchmark's new record



high close confirms that the S&P 500 ended a bear market when it closed on October, and remained in bull market since then. — AFP

What does Red Sea disruption mean for Europe’s economy?

WEEKS of attacks by fighters on vessels in the Red Sea have disrupted shipping in the Suez Canal, the fastest sea route between Asia and Europe carrying 12 per cent of global container traffic.

For the European economy, already skirting a mild recession as it tries to shake off high inflation, prolonged disruption would be a new risk to its outlook and could derail plans by central banks to start cutting interest rates this year.

Here are some factors that policymakers are considering as they assess the situation and its implications.

In macroeconomic terms, small to negligible. While Germany’s Economy Ministry stressed it was monitoring the situation, it said this week that the only noticeable impact on output so far had been a few cases of stretched delivery times.

Bank of England chief Andrew Bailey concurred, telling a parliamentary hearing it “hasn’t actually had the effect that I sort of feared it might”, while acknowledging the uncertainties remained real. No impact from



MARK JOHN

The writer is Reuters Economics Editor, Europe

NO IMPACT FROM THE ATTACKS HAS YET TURNED UP IN EUROPE’S MAIN ECONOMIC INDICATORS - INCLUDING DECEMBER INFLATION NUMBERS, WHICH TICKED UP SLIGHTLY

the attacks has yet turned up in Europe’s main economic indicators - including December inflation numbers, which ticked up slightly across the region on a mix of largely expected statistical effects, some one-offs and some pressure on prices for services.

That might change - watch preliminary PMI readings for activity in European economies in January, and February 1’s first estimate of euro zone inflation for the same month. ECB President Christine Lagarde may well broach the subject in her news conference after next Thursday’s rate-setting meeting.

The main reason is probably that the global economy as a whole is still performing below par, which means there is plenty of slack in the system. Take oil prices, the most obvious channel through which Middle East troubles could hit economies in Europe and beyond.

They haven’t taken off yet because, as International Energy Agency executive director Fatih Birol said this week, supplies are solid and demand growth is slowing.

“I don’t expect a major change in the oil price because we have an ample amount of oil coming in the



The Galaxy Leader cargo ship is escorted by boats in the Red Sea. – Reuters File

market,” he said.

German logistics giant DHL said it still had available air freight capacity - not an option for everyone - because the global economy was “not really pumping yet” This subdued economic picture also makes it harder for companies to pass onto consumers any increases in costs they are encountering, for example by having to re-route around Africa. Many of them have rebuilt margins in the past year and accept they might simply have to suck this one up.

“Our best forecast at the minute is we’re able to absorb the

incremental cost that we estimate will come through and still achieve ... gross margin improvement,” Poundland owner Pepco Group’s executive chairman Andy Bond said.

Furniture retailer IKEA even said it would stick to planned price cuts and had the stocks to absorb any supply chain shocks. As long as that remains the case for enough companies, the disruption will not move the dial on consumer price inflation.

No - because the longer the disruption goes on for, the more likely it is to take a toll on the wider economic picture, even if gradually.

Using an IMF estimate of the impact of freight cost rises, Oxford Economics in a January 4 note estimated gains in container transport prices would add 0.6 percentage points to inflation in a year’s time.

The ECB is expecting euro zone inflation to fall from 5.4 per cent in 2023 to 2.7 per cent this year.

“While this suggests that a sustained closure of the Red Sea wouldn’t prevent inflation from falling, it would slow the speed at which it returns to normal,” Oxford Economics concluded. It did not see this preventing an expected pivot to lower interest rates, however. At the margins, the attacks and wider troubles in the Middle East represent one of the “geopolitical risks” that get referred to in the minutes of central bankers’ monetary policy discussions. The fear is of escalation - and that fear itself may feed into the decisions that emerge.

Finally - and we may still be some way off this - there is the possibility the situation will encourage companies to advance plans drawn up after the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted trade for alternative, more predictable supply routes. — Reuters

A progressive green growth narrative

With voters in 76 countries heading to the polls in 2024,

this year breaks records for democracy. However, it coincides with an alarming rise in right-wing populism, which increasingly attributes voters’ economic hardships to policies addressing climate change. Despite the clear potential of green initiatives to boost incomes, productivity, and economic growth, the progressive left struggles to articulate a compelling counternarrative. If the false dichotomy between economic prosperity and environmental sustainability persists, the green transition will lack the political support it needs to succeed.

Consider the debate in the United Kingdom over the Labour Party’s £28 billion (\$35.5 billion) Green Prosperity Plan, presented as a key instrument to “make Britain a clean energy superpower.” Instead of focusing on the sums being spent, the conversation should centre on what it will take to complete the stated mission. The point is not to throw money at the problem and hope for the best; it is to offer a strategy for mobilising massive private- and public-sector investment towards a collective goal.

To make clean energy the engine of its industrial, financial, and innovation strategies, Labour needs a new narrative. It needs to demonstrate that a mission-oriented government working with businesses to invest and innovate in an outcomes-oriented way will result in new skills, jobs, productivity gains, and higher wages. Labour can bolster its case with six arguments.

First, there need not be any tradeoff between climate action and economic growth. The UK has a huge green industry and



MARIANA MAZZUCATO

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ALTHOUGH MANY COUNTRIES HAVE THE MEANS TO DIRECT NEW INVESTMENT TOWARDS DECARBONISATION AND OTHER SOCIALLY AND ENVIRONMENTALLY BENEFICIAL OUTCOMES, MANY VOTERS STILL REGARD SUCH EFFORTS AS ECONOMICALLY HARMFUL. FOR THE GREEN TRANSITION TO GET OFF THE GROUND, IT WILL NEED A MORE COMPELLING NARRATIVE

capital markets it can tap into with mission-oriented public-sector investment. Green industries will be worth more than \$10 trillion globally by 2050, and in the UK, they are growing four times faster than the rest of the economy. When public investment is guided by a clear mission, it can create new markets, crowd in private investment, and increase long-term competitiveness. Germany’s green steel sector is a good example. It owes its growth to the German public bank’s (KfW) green loans programme, which helped create an entirely new market for carbon-efficient steel.

Second, climate finance represents an investment, not a cost. Mission-oriented policies can generate private-sector investment by increasing firms’ productive capacity and spurring cross-sectoral economic activity that will have positive spillovers now and in the future. Nasa’s Apollo mission and moon landing required research and development not only in aerospace technology but also in nutrition, materials, electronics, and software. Camera phones, foil blankets, baby formula, and software are just a few of the hundreds of innovations that still benefit us today.

Strategies to address climate change can recreate this pattern with investments in infrastructure, transportation, agriculture, energy, and digital innovation. Countries getting a head start on energy-efficient ways to produce steel and cement and cleaner ways to extract key minerals will become more competitive as green standards are normalised.

And a digital economy that helps sectors go green will attract global investment. Likewise, a school-meal programme that ensures access to healthy, tasty, and sustainable lunches for all children would require outcomes-oriented public



Ed Miliband, Shadow Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero since 2021 in UK, speaks at the Green Alliance think-tank, in this file photo. – AFP

procurement and cooperation with local green companies across the food supply chain.

Third, missions require patient, long-term, risk-tolerant finance that can crowd in other forms of finance and drive transformational changes at different stages of the innovation and business cycle. If structured well, public finance can shape and even create markets by channelling loans, grants, guarantees, and debt- and equity-based instruments towards companies that are willing to invest in solving specific problems. While often presented as a form of “de-risking,” this term misses the point. These cases call for risk-taking, and hence mechanisms for sharing both risks and rewards. In the case of renewable energy, national development banks around the world have often invested in portfolios with higher-risk technologies that are working their way towards scalable commercialisation. By leading on early-stage, high-risk, and capital-intensive projects,

public finance can function as an investor of first resort, not a lender of last resort, playing a critical role in creating and shaping new green markets.

Fourth, public-sector capabilities matter. An ambitious national clean-energy mission requires confident, competent, and well-equipped national, regional, and local governments that work together to deploy tools like outcomes-oriented procurement and investment.

To deploy and operationalise a £28 billion climate plan effectively, the UK needs appropriate skills both in green industries and in public-sector organisations. Yet many governments, including in the UK, have become over-reliant on big consultancies with extractive business models, resulting in a stunting of state capacity. With Labour having quadrupled its own reliance on consultants, a change of thinking is clearly in order.

Fifth, a green, just transition requires a new social contract, redefining the typical partnership

between government and business. While profit rates are high globally, investment rates are not, owing to the increasing financialisation of both finance and business. In the United States and the UK, only 20% of finance goes into the productive economy; the rest flows into the more speculative finance, insurance, and real-estate domain.

In addition to redistributive policies (like a progressive wealth tax), putting public purpose at the heart of the economy requires pre-distributive measures.

For example, Labour should embed conditionalities in the Green Prosperity Plan to ensure access to goods and services for consumers or to share profits resulting from public support with a wider range of stakeholders, including workers.

Companies receiving government support must commit to reinvesting profits in green innovation and better working conditions and pay.

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Africa in debt spiral as restructuring efforts drag on

PARIS: While the explosion of debt is throwing a shadow over global economic growth, experts warn that sub-Saharan Africa, where several countries are already in default, is experiencing its worst-ever crisis.

The rise in interest rates and over-indebtedness is already crimping the ability of countries to finance their development, as a number of African leaders emphasised at appearances at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The origins of the crisis

Following the 2007-2009 global economic crisis central banks in industrialised countries have generally kept interest rates low and countries from the Global South, which had mostly been borrowing bilaterally or from international financial institutions, gained unprecedented access to financial markets.

"Many developing countries in a desperate need for cash injection in their economies rushed to these low-cost loans, in markets with no rules or regulation," said Kenyan economist Attiya Waris, who also serves as an independent expert for the United Nations.

She added that the International

Monetary Fund had encouraged them to do so.

The money helped provide a much-needed boost to many African economies, but countries dependent upon the export of raw materials such as oil, minerals and wood came under intense pressure when commodity prices began falling in 2015.

The Covid pandemic further aggravated the situation.

The fall in commodity prices squeezed the foreign currency revenues they needed to service their loans.

Several countries took out new loans to repay their existing debt, creating a debt spiral that is preventing investment in vital infrastructure, health systems and education.

The World Bank last year estimated that 22 countries are a heightened risk of over-indebtedness, including Ghana and Zambia, which has defaulted on its foreign debt.

Also on the list were Malawi and Chad, which has an IMF assistance programme.

Ethiopia, which Fitch Ratings put on partial default in December, is also negotiating a

rescue package.

Private lenders blocking deals

In 2022, African public debt stood at \$1.8 trillion, a 183 per cent jump from 2010, having grown at around four times as fast as economic output, according to UN figures.

Gathering under the aegis of the G20, Western public creditors and several partners including China — which has often been accused of laying debt traps with easy loans for infrastructure projects — have been trying to work out a debt restructuring for 40 African countries.

These debt deals are built on the principal of equal treatment — all the creditors must participate.

But the deals for African nations have been tough to conclude as private lenders are often baulking at the terms.

Private investors — including investment funds and pension funds — have in recent years risen to become the top lender to African nations.

In 2022, they held 42 per cent of African foreign public debt, compared to 38 per cent for multilateral institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, and 20



Participants check messages on electronic devices at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos. — (Credit: AFP)

per cent was held by other nations.

Of the 20 per cent held by other nations, China was the biggest lender to Africa, alone holding 11 per cent.

"China is often presented as the 'big bad guy', but it has understood the importance of giving a bit of air to states in deep trouble and is now participating in the efforts, even if this is taking some time," said Mathieu Paris, coordinator of the French Platform for Debt and Development, which brings

together more than two dozen civic groups to push for sustainable debt restructuring.

The case of Zambia is instructive. After two years of tough negotiations, the country in June 2023 reached what was presented as an "historic" debt restructuring deal.

But it only concerned \$6.3 billion of its \$18.6 billion foreign debt.

Worse, it only would go into effect if private lenders agreed to

take a similar hit, and the US asset manager BlackRock — one of the major private holders of Zambian debt — balked.

"BlackRock blocked the whole negotiations" for Zambia, said the economist Waris.

Inflation and poverty

With higher interest rates adding more pain to the already crushing debt, "African countries are experiencing dangerous currency fluctuations and inflation is increasing all the time," said Ghanaian economist Charles Abugre.

"The daily impact is dramatic for poor people: we're seeing an explosion in the cost of transport, food, housing, while real wages have stagnated," he added.

For Amine Idriss Adoum, a senior director at the African Union Development Agency, "the real question today isn't to know how to get out from under the debt, but how to borrow intelligently".

While restructuring the debt is important, it "shouldn't be done at the detriment of investments in infrastructure, health and energy" to support the development of economies and societies. — AFP

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GCC journalists get glimpse of India's vibrant landscape



QASIM AL MAASHANI

MUMBAI: From the marble majesty of the Taj Mahal to the bustling heart of the Bombay Stock Exchange, a recent visit by journalists and editors from Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Oman offered a kaleidoscope of India's vibrant landscape. Organised by the Ministry of External Affairs of the government of India, this week-long familiarisation programme was more than just a whirlwind tour – it was a deliberate bridge-building exercise, forging connections between India and the Gulf region through the power of shared narratives.

Stepping into the timeless elegance of the Mughal era, the delegation's journey began at the Taj Mahal. This iconic symbol of love resonated deeply, transcending borders and sparking conversations about India's rich cultural tapestry. The Red Fort, a testament to architectural brilliance and historical significance, further enriched their understanding of the nation's past.

Beyond monuments, the program delved into the contemporary pulse of India. A session with Union



Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Prakash Javadekar, provided insights into the country's media landscape and its dynamic role in shaping public discourse. Meetings with industry leaders at FICCI and Shapoorji Pallonji offered a glimpse into India's economic engine, showcasing its entrepreneurial spirit and diverse sectors.

The delegation witnessed India's commitment to sustainability firsthand at the International Solar Alliance headquarters. As the world grapples with climate change, this joint initiative with France highlighted India's leadership in promoting renewable energy solutions.

A visit to the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation, a marvel of urban

infrastructure, showcased India's rapid strides in modernisation. Meanwhile, the Bombay Stock Exchange pulsed with the rhythm of financial dynamism, offering a window into the country's economic ambitions.

Beyond official engagements, the programme also embraced India's cultural kaleidoscope. A visit to Dilli Haat INA, a vibrant tapestry of crafts and cuisines, allowed the delegation to savour the richness of Indian diversity. The serene beauty of Haji Ali Dargah, a monument to interfaith harmony, resonated with the spirit of inclusivity at the heart of Indian society.

The programme culminated in the vibrant chaos of Film City

Mumbai, a melting pot of creativity and storytelling. This immersion into India's cinematic universe showcased the nation's soft power on the global stage, leaving a lasting impression on the visiting journalists.

More than just a sightseeing tour, this programme fostered dialogue and understanding. Conversations flowed in boardrooms and bustling streets, over chai and biryani, and amidst the grandeur of historical sites. As the journalists return to their home countries, they carry not just memories of iconic sights, but also a deeper appreciation for India's multifaceted reality.

This familiarisation tour represents a step towards stronger ties between India and the Gulf. By forging connections through shared stories and experiences, it paves the way for future collaborations and a deeper understanding of each other's cultures. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, such initiatives serve as vital bridges, reminding us that despite geographical boundaries, human connection thrives on shared narratives and mutual respect.



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Solidarity with Palestinians through art

BUTHAINA AL RIYAMIYA

THROUGH ART, we can transmit pain from the depths of the subconscious to the page, canvas, or installation or any other media.

In an exhibition of SQU graduates' artworks, an installation grabs visitors' attention to the plight of Palestinians in Gaza.

Nehad al Harassiya, who created this artwork, was inspired by Motaz Azaiza, a Palestinian journalist, who said, "We are a people who are killed."

Carefully selected components and colours, together with a pleasant touch and precise details represent the suffering of Palestine under the occupation. On closer inspection, each item and colour serve in delivering Al Harassiya's reflection of the current issue.

The artwork is composed of human components, buildings, and sand; each of them poses the issue from a different angle. The human components represent Palestinians of different ages who want to exercise their right to their own land. They are painted white to give a sense of inner peace and purity of Palestinians and have Keffiyeh wrapped around their necks, symbolising the people's endurance and attachment to their culture and land.

The installation succeeds in reflecting the complex psychology of Palestinians who despite their inner peace and purity, press on steadily with greater intent and purpose to protect their rights and homeland.



The sand is utilised to underline deep attachment between Palestinians and their land. The wooden building-like structures illustrate the social and architectural systems that were brutally ruined by the war.

The colours have their own fair share in alluding to Al Harassiya's judgment and perspective of the Palestinians under occupation. White reflects Palestinians' inner peace and purity, black is a declaration of mourning for martyrs. The dominant colour, dark red, dominates in the artworks to create an eerie poignant atmosphere simulating the civilians under the barbaric rule of Israel. Earthy or dark grey colours foreshadow the demolition of buildings and homes, which are bombed to dust.



Microsoft Makes Copilot AI Assistant More Widely Available

MICROSOFT IS MAKING its Copilot AI assistant more freely available to more users, including launching a free mobile app for Android and iOS.

Copilot is the tech giant's generative AI chatbot and assistant, which can be used to create content as well as

help users with productivity tasks.

In addition, the US tech firm said it was also introducing Copilot GPTs, smaller versions of the chatbot which users can customise to focus on a single topic of interest, for example travel or cooking. — **ONA**



Archaeologists Unearth Ancient Artifacts Dating 8,000 Years in Brazil

ARCHAEOLOGISTS IN Brazil's Amazon rainforest have unearthed ancient artefacts and skeletons dating back 8,000 to 10,000 years near the Tapajos River.

Belonging to an unknown civilisation, these findings challenge previous beliefs about the region's pre-European population.

The discovery includes ceramic urns, stone tools, and figurines, indicating advanced agriculture and a sophisticated society.

Dr Eduardo Neves, the lead archaeologist, stated this could reshape our understanding of pre-Columbian America.

The skeletons, with distinct features from current indigenous groups, suggest potential migration patterns.

This discovery offers a transformative glimpse into the Amazon's ancient civilisations, promising more mysteries to uncover. — **ONA**



Linking artists and society

RUQAYA AL KINDI

FIFTY-SEVEN ARTWORKS by 30 male and female artists were displayed in the "Tajasur" exhibition at the Omani Cultural Club. These works spotlights the culture and customs of Oman. These artists have used the methods of realism, surrealism, expressionism, and impressionism to tell their stories.

Sara al Loughani's 'Al Muaserat,' illustrates a social custom of women gathering in the neighbourhood in the afternoon. It indicates the interconnectedness and solidarity of society.



Fawziya al Hooti, who painted 'My mother's threads', says, "They are the threads of identity, as they are about me, my identity, and my sewing skill that I acquired from my mother."

Mustafa al Kamiani illustrated various silver collectibles that fill the Omani Mandoos (a traditional wooden chest used to store items) and added details in the painting indicating the Omani markets and old coins. The painting is generally filled with

Islamic motifs.

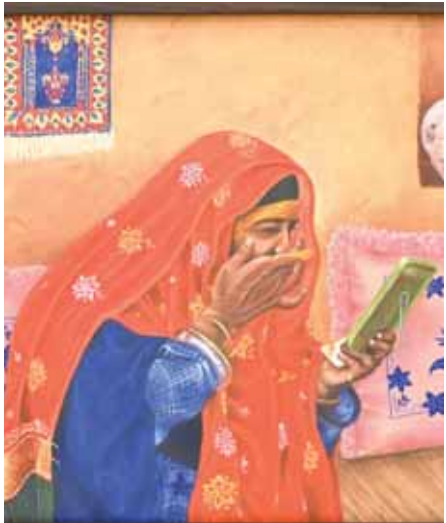
In 'Symbol of Arabism', Asma al Habsi expressed the most important symbol of Arabism, which is the purebred Arabian horse. It was drawn standing as an expression of the distinctive features of Arabs that have been passed down through generations such as strength and courage.

Meditation and contemplation for self-discovery were part of the artists' paintings. In 'Birth', Muzna al Aufi, used the eye with the crow symbolising divine messages. "The crow is

an intelligent bird attracted by precious things, so it was painted close to the eye because it is a precious thing through which we can contemplate the universe around us to explore ourselves," she said.

"Tajasur" refers to connecting or bridging two different things. The exhibition's curator said, "We use this meaning in the symbolic form of a bridge or link between things, regardless of the relationship between them."

This exhibition comes after



eight months of training by the Cultural Club under the Drawing and Colouring Clinic. "The Cultural Club decided to attract artists and beginners as well, so that everyone who has the desire to address a certain deficiency or gain new knowledge can take part," the curator said.

The exhibition also hosted academics, writers, and intellectuals to discuss the exhibition's artistic works. This way, the curator said, the expo lived up to its name of bridging and linking the artist and society.